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Algernon Blackwood

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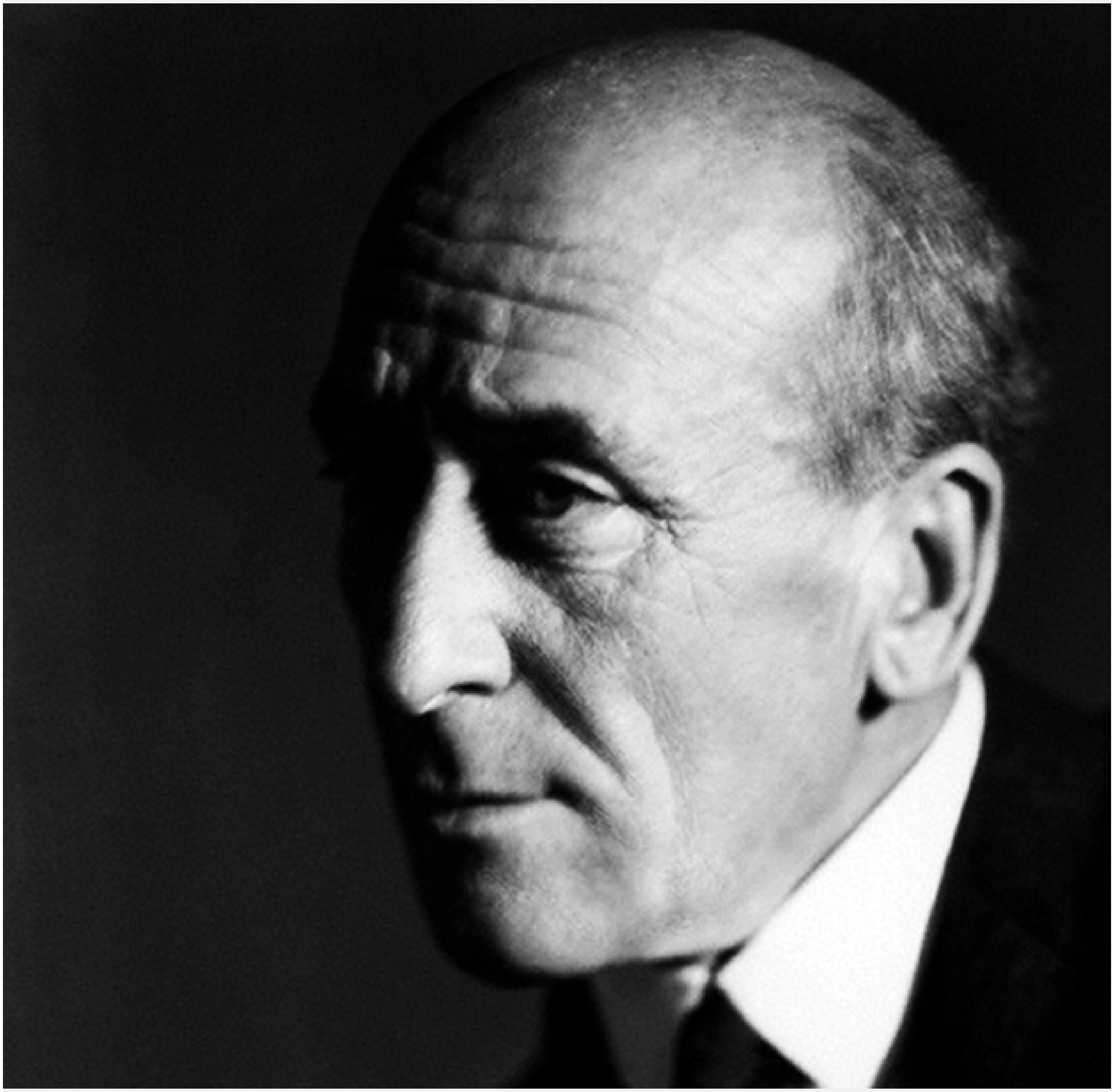

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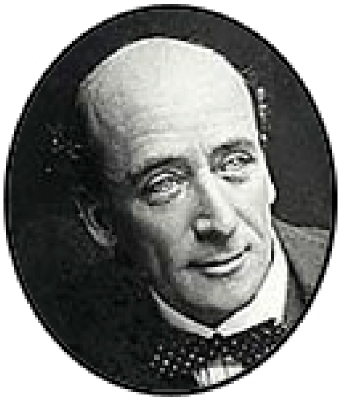

Contents

The Novels

Jimbo (1909)

The Education of Uncle Paul (1909)

The Human Chord (1910)

The Centaur (1911)

A Prisoner in Fairyland (1913)

Julius Le Vallon (1916)

The Wave (1916)

The Promise of Air (1918)

The Garden of Survival (1918)

The Bright Messenger (1921)

Dudley & Gilderoy (1929)

The Children's Novels

The Extra Day (1915)

Sambo and Snitch (1927)
The Fruit Stoners (1934)
The Short Story Collections
The Empty House and Other Ghost Stories (1906)
The Listener and Other Stories (1907)
John Silence (1908)
The Lost Valley and Other Stories (1910)
Pan's Garden (1912)
Ten Minute Stories (1914)
Incredible Adventures (1914)
Day and Night Stories (1917)
Wolves of God, and Other Fey Stories (1921)
Tongues of Fire and Other Sketches (1924)
Shocks (1935)
The Doll and One Other (1946)
Miscellaneous Stories
The Short Stories
List of Short Stories in Chronological Order
List of Short Stories in Alphabetical Order
The Play
Karma (1918)
The Autobiography
Episodes before Thirty (1923)
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Algernon Blackwood

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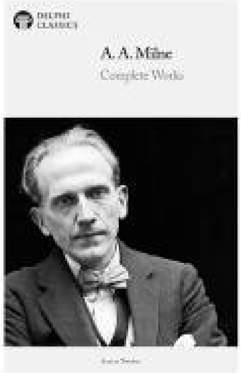
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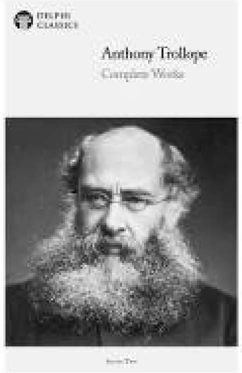
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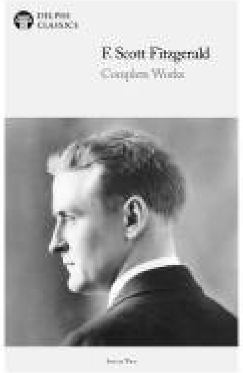
Complete Works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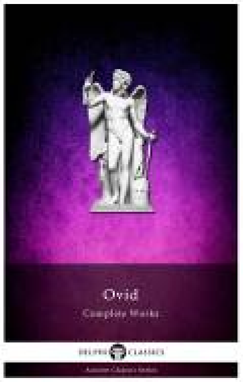
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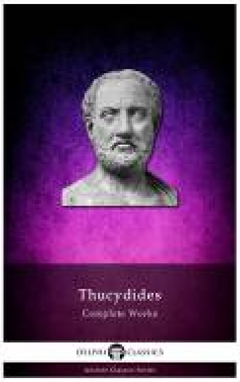
Complete Works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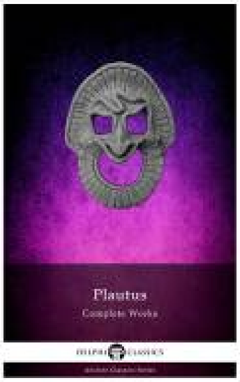
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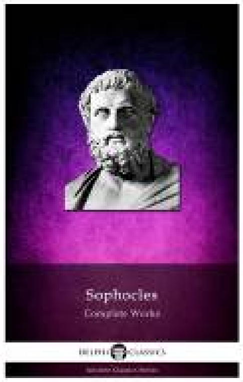
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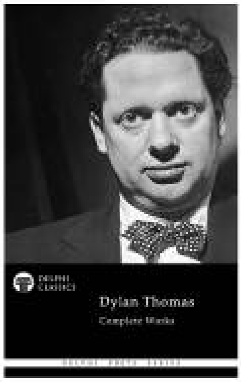
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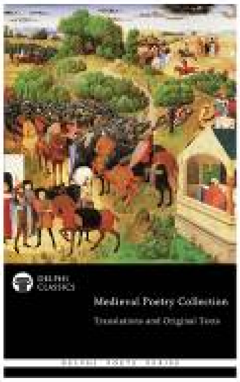
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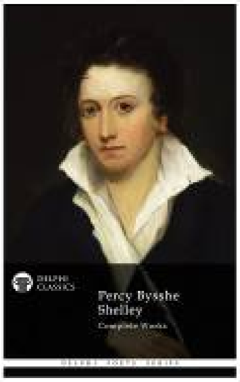
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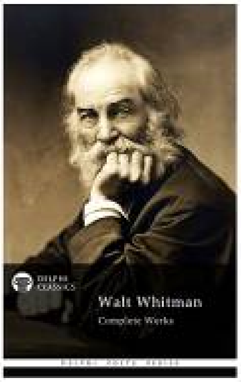
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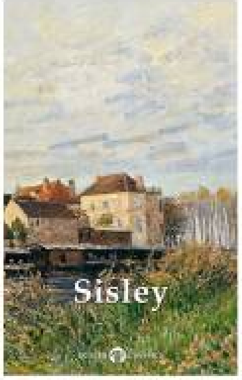

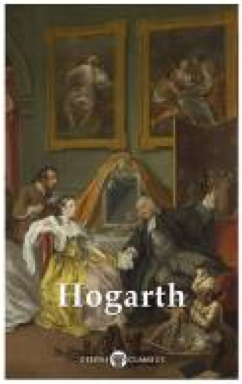

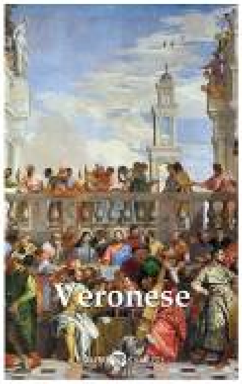

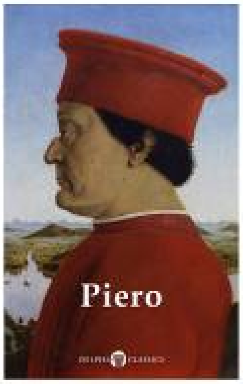

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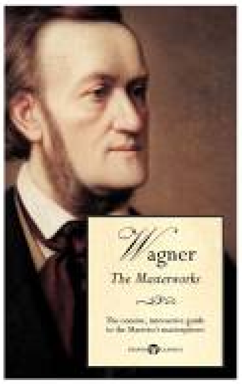
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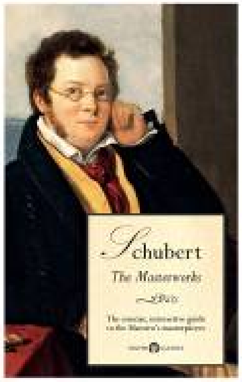
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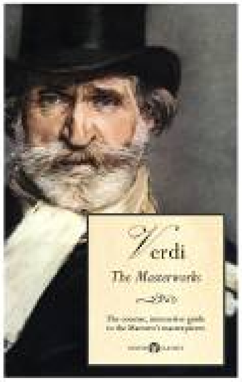
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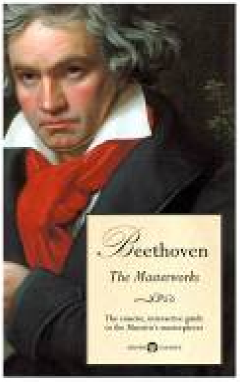
The Masterworks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DELPHI CLASSICS

The Complete Works of

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

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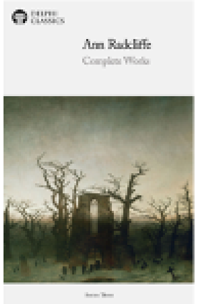
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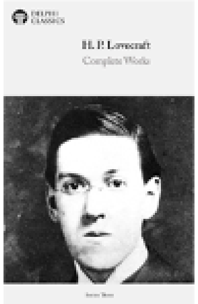
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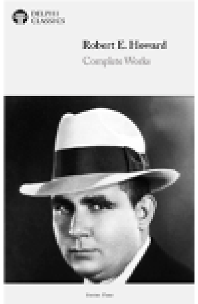
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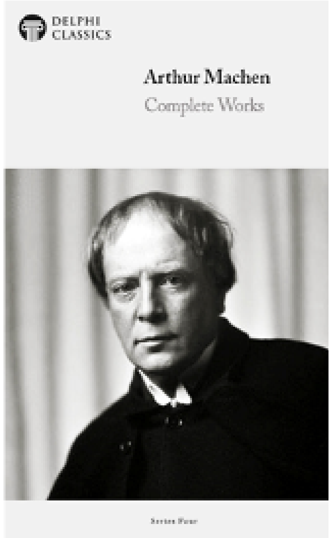
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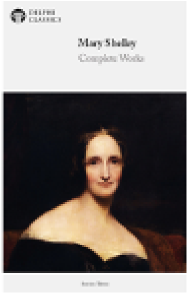
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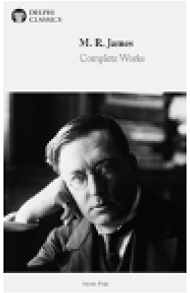
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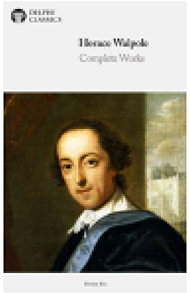
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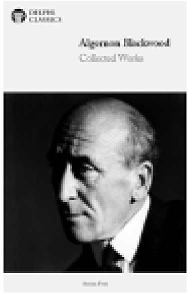
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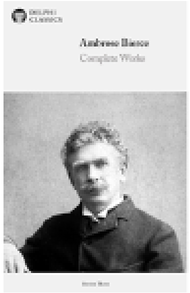
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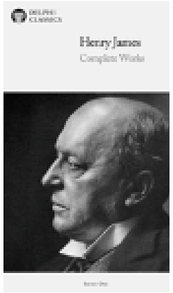
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The Novels

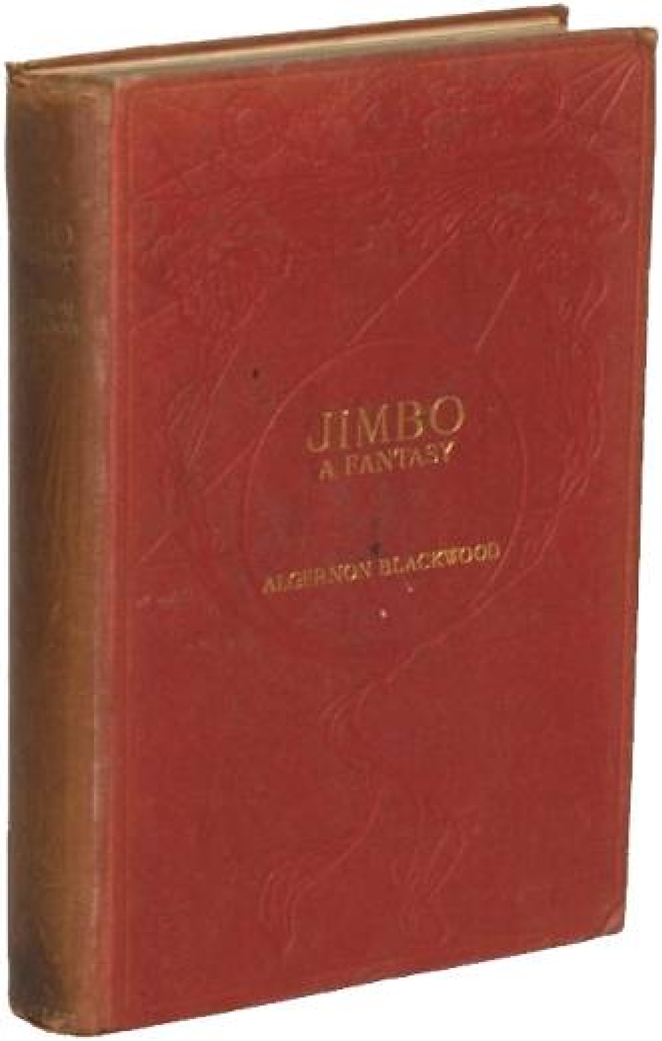
Shooter's Hill, a district in South East London within the Royal Borough of Greenwich — the birthplace of Algernon Blackwood

West Lodge, Shooter's Hill, formerly Kent – where Blackwood was born on 14 March, 1869

Jimbo (1909)

A FANTASY

Blackwood was already well-known for his short fiction when his first novel, *Jimbo: A Fantasy,* was published by Macmillan in 1909. Although a novel about childhood, it is by no means a children's book, using disturbing imagery and ideas in its depiction of a boy's out of body experience, which he undergoes after a serious injury. During his unconscious wanderings, Jimbo is forced to overcome his fears as he wanders through a twilight world, which takes the form of an old empty house, presided over by Fear and peopled with the souls of lost children.


JIMBO
A FANTASY
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

The first edition

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. “RABBITS”
CHAPTER II. MISS LAKE COMES — AND GOES
CHAPTER III. THE SHOCK
CHAPTER IV. ON THE EDGE OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS
CHAPTER V. INTO THE EMPTY HOUSE
CHAPTER VI. HIS COMPANION IN PRISON
CHAPTER VII. THE SPELL OF THE EMPTY HOUSE
CHAPTER VIII. THE GALLERY OF ANCIENT MEMORIES
CHAPTER IX. THE MEANS OF ESCAPE
CHAPTER X. THE PLUNGE
CHAPTER XI. THE FIRST FLIGHT
CHAPTER XII. THE FOUR WINDS
CHAPTER XIII. PLEASURES OF FLIGHT
CHAPTER XIV. AN ADVENTURE
CHAPTER XV. THE CALL OF THE BODY
CHAPTER XVI. PREPARATION
CHAPTER XVII. OFF!
CHAPTER XVIII. HOME

CHAPTER I. “RABBITS”

JIMBO’S GOVERNESS OUGHT to have known better — but she didn’t. If she had, Jimbo would never have met with the adventures that subsequently came to him. Thus, in a roundabout sort of way, the child ought to have been thankful to the governess; and perhaps, in a roundabout sort of way, he was. But that comes at the far end of the story, and is doubtful at best; and in the meanwhile the child had gone through his suffering, and the governess had in some measure expiated her fault; so that at this stage it is only necessary to note that the whole business began because the Empty House happened to be really an Empty House — not the one Jimbo’s family lived in, but another of which more will be known in due course.

Jimbo’s father was a retired Colonel, who had married late in life, and now lived all the year round in the country; and Jimbo was the youngest child but one. The Colonel, lean in body as he was sincere in mind, an excellent soldier but a poor diplomatist, loved dogs, horses, guns and riding-whips. He also really understood them. His neighbours, had they been asked, would have called him hard-headed, and so far as a soft-hearted man may deserve the title, he probably was. He rode two horses a day to hounds with the best of them, and the stiffer the country the better he liked it. Besides his guns, dogs and horses, he was also very fond of his children. It was his hobby that he understood them far better than his wife did, or than any one else did, for that matter. The proper evolution of their differing temperaments had no difficulties for him. The delicate problems of child-nature, which defy solution by nine parents out of ten, ceased to exist the moment he spread out his muscular hand in a favourite omnipotent gesture and uttered some extraordinarily foolish generality in that thunderous, good-natured voice of his. The difficulty for himself vanished when he ended up with the words, “Leave that to me, my dear; believe me, I know best!” But for all else concerned, and especially for the child under discussion, this was when the difficulty really began.

Since, however, the Colonel, after this chapter, mounts his best hunter and disappears over a high hedge into space so far as our story is concerned, any further delineation of his wholesome but very ordinary type is unnecessary.

One winter's evening, not very long after Christmas, the Colonel made a discovery. It alarmed him a little; for it suggested to his cocksure mind that he did not understand *all* his children as comprehensively as he imagined.

Between five o'clock tea and dinner — that magic hour when lessons were over and the big house was full of shadows and mystery — there came a timid knock at the study door.

"Come in," growled the soldier in his deepest voice, and a little girl's face, wreathed in tumbling brown hair, poked itself hesitatingly through the opening.

The Colonel did not like being disturbed at this hour, and everybody in the house knew it; but the spell of Christmas holidays was still somehow in the air, and the customary order was not yet fully re-established. Moreover, when he saw who the intruder was, his growl modified itself into a sort of common sternness that yet was not cleverly enough simulated to deceive the really intuitive little person who now stood inside the room.

"Well, Nixie, child, what do you want now?"

"Please, father, will you — we wondered if — —"

A chorus of whispers issued from the other side of the door:

"Go on, silly!"

"Out with it!"

"You promised you would, Nixie."

"... if you would come and play Rabbits with us?" came the words in a desperate rush, with laughter not far behind.

The big man with the fierce white moustaches glared over the top of his glasses at the intruders as if amazed beyond belief at the audacity of the request.

"Rabbits!" he exclaimed, as though the mere word ought to have caused an instant explosion. "Rabbits!"

“Oh, *please* do.”

“Rabbits at this time of night!” he repeated. “I never heard of such a thing. Why, all good rabbits are asleep in their holes by now. And you ought to be in yours too by rights, I’m sure.”

“We don’t sleep in holes, father,” said the owner of the brown hair, who was acting as leader.

“And there’s still a nour before bedtime, *really*,” added a voice in the rear.

The big man slowly put his glasses down and looked at his watch. He looked very savage, but of course it was all pretence, and the children knew it. “If he was *really* cross he’d pretend to be nice,” they whispered to each other, with merciless perception.

“Well—” he began. But he who hesitates, with children, is lost. The door flung open wide, and the troop poured into the room in a medley of long black legs, flying hair and outstretched hands. They surrounded the table, swarmed upon his big knees, shut his stupid old book, tried on his glasses, kissed him, and fell to discussing the game breathlessly all at once, as though it had already begun.

This, of course, ended the battle, and the big man had to play the part of the Monster Rabbit in a wonderful game of his own invention. But when, at length, it was all over, and they were gathered panting round the fire of blazing logs in the hall, the Monster Rabbit — the only one with any breath at his command — looked up and spoke.

“Where’s Jimbo?” he asked.

“Upstairs.”

“Why didn’t he come and play too?”

“He didn’t want to.”

“Why? What’s he doing?”

Several answers were forthcoming.

“Nothing in p’tickler.”

“Talking to the furniture when I last saw him.”

“Just thinking, as usual, or staring in the fire.”

None of the answers seemed to satisfy the Monster Rabbit, for when he kissed them a little later and said good-night, he gave orders, with a graver face, for Jimbo to be sent down to the study before he went to bed. Moreover, he called him "James," which was a sure sign of parental displeasure.

"James, why didn't you come and play with your brothers and sisters just now?" asked the Colonel, as a dreamy-eyed boy of about eight, with a mop of dark hair and a wistful expression, came slowly forward into the room.

"I was in the middle of making pictures."

"Where — what — making pictures?"

"In the fire."

"James," said the Colonel in a serious tone, "don't you know that you are getting too old now for that sort of thing? If you dream so much, you'll fall asleep altogether some fine day, and never wake up again. Just think what that means!"

The child smiled faintly and moved up confidingly between his father's knees, staring into his eyes without the least sign of fear. But he said nothing in reply. His thoughts were far away, and it seemed as if the effort to bring them back into the study and to a consideration of his father's words was almost beyond his power.

"You must run about more," pursued the soldier, rubbing his big hands together briskly, "and join your brothers and sisters in their games. Lie about in the summer and dream a bit if you like, but now it's winter, you must be more active, and make your blood circulate healthily, — er — and all that sort of thing."

The words were kindly spoken, but the voice and manner rather deliberate. Jimbo began to look a little troubled, as his father watched him.

"Come now, little man," he said more gently, "what's the matter, eh?" He drew the boy close to him. "Tell me all about it, and what it is you're always thinking about so much."

Jimbo brought back his mind with a tremendous effort, and said, “I don’t like the winter. It’s so dark and full of horrid things. It’s all ice and shadows, so — so I go away and think of what I like, and other places — —”

“Nonsense!” interrupted his father briskly; “winter’s a capital time for boys. What in the world d’ye mean, I wonder?”

He lifted the child on to his knee and stroked his hair, as though he were patting the flank of a horse. Jimbo took no notice of the interruption or of the caress, but went on saying what he had to say, though with eyes a little more clouded.

“Winter’s like going into a long black tunnel, you see. It’s downhill to Christmas, of course, and then uphill all the way to the summer holidays. But the uphill part’s so slow that — —”

“Tut, tut!” laughed the Colonel in spite of himself; “you mustn’t have such thoughts. Those are a baby’s notions. They’re silly, silly, silly.”

“Do you *really* think so, father?” continued the boy, as if politeness demanded some recognition of his father’s remarks, but otherwise anxious only to say what was in his mind. “You wouldn’t think them silly if you really knew. But, of course, there’s no one to tell you in the stable, so you *can’t* know. You’ve never seen the funny big people rushing past you and laughing through their long hair when the wind blows so loud. *I* know several of them almost to speak to, but you hear only wind. And the other things with tiny legs that skate up and down the slippery moonbeams, without ever tumbling off — they aren’t silly a bit, only they don’t like dogs and noise. And I’ve seen the furniture” — he pronounced it furchinur— “dancing about in the day-nursery when it thought it was alone, and I’ve heard it talking at night. I know the big cupboard’s voice quite well. It’s just like a drum, only rougher....”

The Colonel shook his head and frowned severely, staring hard at his son. But though their eyes met, the boy hardly saw him. Far away at the other end of the dark Tunnel of the Months he saw the white summer sunshine lying over gardens full of nodding flowers. Butterflies were flitting across meadows yellow with buttercups, and he saw the fascinating rings upon the lawn where the Fairy People held their dances in the moonlight; he heard the wind call to him as it ran on along by the hedgerows, and saw the gentle pressure of its swift feet upon the standing hay; streams were murmuring under shady trees; birds were singing; and there were echoes of sweeter music still that he could not understand, but loved all the more perhaps on that account....

“Yes,” announced the Colonel later that evening to his wife, spreading his hands out as he spoke. “Yes, my dear, I *have* made a discovery, and an alarming one. You know, I’m rarely at fault where the children are concerned — and I’ve noted all the symptoms with unusual care. James, my dear, is an imaginative boy.”

He paused to note the effect of his words, but seeing none, continued:

“I regret to be obliged to say it, but it’s a fact beyond dispute. His head is simply full of things, and he talked to me this evening about tunnels and slippery moonlight till I very nearly lost my temper altogether. Now, the boy will never make a man unless we take him in hand properly at once. We must get him a governess, or something, without delay. Just fancy, if he grew up into a poet or one of these — these — —”

In his distress the soldier could only think of horse-terms, which did not seem quite the right language. He stuck altogether, and kept repeating the favourite gesture with his open hand, staring at his wife over his glasses as he did so.

But the mother never argued.

“He’s very young still,” she observed quietly, “and, as you have always said, he’s not a bit like other boys, remember.”

“Exactly what I say. Now that your eyes are opened to the actual state of affairs, I’m satisfied.”

“We’ll get a sensible nursery-governess at once,” added the mother.

“A practical one?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Hard-headed?”

“Yes.”

“And well educated?”

“Yes.”

“And — er — firm with children. She’ll do for the lot, then.”

“If possible.”

“And a young woman who doesn’t go in for poetry, and dreaming, and all that kind of flummery.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Capital. I felt sure you would agree with me,” he went on. “It’d be no end of a pity if Jimbo grew up an ass. At present he hardly knows the difference between a roadster and a racer. He’s going into the army, too,” he added by way of climax, “and you know, my dear, the army would never stand *that*!”

“Never,” said the mother quietly, and the conversation came to an end.

Meanwhile, the subject of these remarks was lying wide awake upstairs in the bed with the yellow iron railing round it. His elder brother was asleep in the opposite corner of the room, snoring peacefully. He could just see the brass knobs of the bedstead as the dying firelight quivered and shone on them. The walls and ceiling were draped in shadows that altered their shapes from time to time as the coals dropped softly into the grate. Gradually the fire sank, and the room darkened. A feeling of delight and awe stole into his heart.

Jimbo loved these early hours of the night before sleep came. He felt no fear of the dark; its mystery thrilled his soul; but he liked the summer dark, with its soft, warm silences better than the chill winter shadows. Presently the firelight sprang up into a brief flame and then died away altogether with an odd little gulp. He knew the sound well; he often watched the fire out, and now, as he lay in bed waiting for he knew not what, the moonlight filtered in through the baize curtains and gradually gave to the room a wholly new character.

Jimbo sat up in bed and listened. The house was very still. He slipped into his red dressing-gown and crept noiselessly over to the window. For a moment he paused by his brother’s bed to make sure that he really was asleep; then, evidently satisfied, he drew aside a corner of the curtain and peered out.

“Oh!” he said, drawing in his breath with delight, and again “oh!”

It was difficult to understand why the sea of white moonlight that covered the lawn should fill him with such joy, and at the same time bring a lump into his throat. It made him feel as if he were swelling out into something very much greater than the actual limits of his little person. And the sensation was one of mingled pain and delight, too intense for him to feel for very long. The unhappiness passed gradually away, he always noticed, and the happiness merged after a while into a sort of dreamy ecstasy in which he neither thought nor wished much, but was conscious only of one single unmanageable yearning.

The huge cedars on the lawn reared themselves up like giants in silver cloaks, and the horse-chestnut — the Umbrella Tree, as the children called it — loomed with motionless branches that were frosted and shining. Beyond it, in a blue mist of moonlight and distance, lay the kitchen-garden; he could just make out the line of the high wall where the fruit-trees grew. Immediately below him the gravel of the carriage drive sparkled with frost.

The bars of the windows were cold to his hands, yet he stood there for a long time with his nose flattened against the pane and his bare feet on the cane chair. He felt both happy and sad; his heart longed dreadfully for something he had not got, something that seemed out of his reach because he could not name it. No one seemed to believe all the things he *knew* in quite the same way as he did. His brothers and sisters played up to a certain point, and then put the things aside as if they had only been assumed for the time and were not real. To him they were always real. His father’s words, too, that evening had sorely puzzled him when he came to think over them afterwards: “They’re a baby’s notions.... They’re silly, silly, silly.” Were these things real or were they not? And, as he pondered, yearning dumbly, as only these little souls can yearn, the wistfulness in his heart went out to meet the moonlight in the air. Together they wove a spell that seemed to summon before him a fairy of the night, who whispered an answer into his heart: “We are real so long as you believe in us. It is your imagination that makes us real and gives us life. Please, never, never stop believing.”

Jimbo was not quite sure that he understood the message, but he liked it all the same, and felt comforted. So long as they believed in one another, the rest did not matter very much after all. And when at last, shivering with cold, he crept back to bed, it was only to find through the Gates of Sleep a more direct way to the things he had been thinking about, and to wander for the rest of the night, unwatched and free, through the wonders of an Enchanted Land.

Jimbo, as his father had said, was an imaginative child. Most children are — more or less; and he was "more," at least, "more" than his brothers and sisters. The Colonel thought he had made a penetrating discovery, but his wife had known it always. His head, indeed, was "full of things," — things that, unless trained into a channel where they could be controlled and properly schooled, would certainly interfere with his success in a practical world, and be a source of mingled pain and joy to him all through life. To have trained these forces, ever bursting out towards creation, in his little soul, — to have explained, interpreted, and dealt fairly by them, would perhaps have been the best and wisest way; to have suppressed them altogether, cleaned them out by the process of substitution, this might have succeeded too in less measure; but to turn them into a veritable rout of horror by the common method of "frightening the nonsense out of the boy," this was surely the very worst way of dealing with such a case, and the most cruel. Yet, this was the method adopted by the Colonel in the robust good-nature of his heart, and the utter ignorance of his soul.

So it came about that three months later, when May was melting into June, Miss Ethel Lake arrived upon the scene as a result of the Colonel's blundering good intentions. She brought with her a kind disposition, a supreme ignorance of unordinary children, a large store of self-confidence — and a corded yellow tin box.

CHAPTER II. MISS LAKE COMES — AND GOES

THE CONVERSATION TOOK place suddenly one afternoon, and no one knew anything about it except the two who took part in it: the Colonel asked the governess to try and knock the nonsense out of Jimbo's head, and the governess promised eagerly to do her very best. It was her first "place"; and by "nonsense" they both understood imagination. True enough, Jimbo's mother had given her rather different instructions as to the treatment of the boy, but she mistook the soldier's bluster for authority, and deemed it best to obey him. This was her first mistake.

In reality she was not devoid of imaginative insight; it was simply that her anxiety to prove a success permitted her better judgment to be overborne by the Colonel's boisterous manner.

The wisdom of the mother was greater than that of her husband. For the safe development of that tender and imaginative little boy of hers, she had been at great pains to engage a girl — a clergyman's daughter — who possessed sufficient sympathy with the poetic and dreamy nature to be of real help to him; for true help, she knew, can only come from true understanding. And Miss Lake was a good girl. She was entirely well-meaning — which is the beginning of well-doing, and her principal weakness lay in her judgment, which led her to obey the Colonel too literally.

"She seems most sensible," he declared to his wife.

"Yes, dear."

"And practical."

"I think so."

"And firm and — er — wise with children."

"I hope so."

"Just the sort for young Jimbo," added the Colonel with decision.

"I trust so; she's a little young, perhaps."

"Possibly, but one can't get everything," said her husband, in his horse-and-dog voice. "A year with her should clean out that fanciful brain of his, and prepare him for school with other boys. He'll be all right once he gets to school. My dear," he added, spreading out his right hand, fingers extended, "you've made a most wise selection. I congratulate you. I'm delighted."

"I'm so glad."

"Capital, I repeat, capital. You're a clever little woman. I knew you'd find the right party, once I showed you how the land lay."

* * *

The Empty House, that stood in its neglected garden not far from the Park gates, was built on a point of land that entered wedgewise into the Colonel's estate. Though something of an eyesore, therefore, he could do nothing with it.

To the children it had always been an object of peculiar, though not unwholesome, mystery. None of them cared to pass it on a stormy day — the wind made such odd noises in its empty corridors and rooms — and they refused point-blank to go within hailing distance of it after dark. But in Jimbo's imagination it was especially haunted, and if he had ceased to reveal to the others what he *knew* went on under its roof, it was only because they were unable to follow him, and were inclined to greet his extravagant recitals with "Now, Jimbo, you know *perfectly* well you're only making up."

The House had been empty for many years; but, to the children, it had been empty since the beginning of the world, since what they called the "*very* beginning." They believed — well, each child believed according to his own mind and powers, but there was at least one belief they all held in common: for it was generally accepted as an article of faith that the Indians, encamped among the shrubberies on the back lawn, secretly buried their dead behind the crumbling walls of its weedy garden — the "dead" provided by the children's battles, be it understood. Wakeful ears in the night-nursery had heard strange sounds coming from that direction when the windows were open on hot summer nights; and the gardener, supreme authority on all that happened in the night (since they believed that he sat up to watch the vegetables and fruit-trees ripen, and never went to bed at all), was evidently of the same persuasion.

When appealed to for an explanation of the mournful wind-voices, he knew what was expected of him, and rose manfully to the occasion.

“It’s either them Redskins aburyin’ wot you killed of ’em yesterday,” he declared, pointing towards the Empty House with a bit of broken flower-pot, “or else it’s the ones you killed last week, and who was always astealin’ of my strorbriz.” He looked very wise as he said this, and his wand of office — a dirty trowel — which he held in his hand, gave him tremendous dignity.

“That’s just what *we* thought, and of course if you say so too, that settles it,” said Nixie.

“It’s more’n likely, missie, leastways from wot you describes, which it is a hempty house all the same, though I can’t say as I’ve heard no sounds, not very distinct that is, myself.”

The gardener may have been anxious to hedge a bit, for fear of a scolding from headquarters, but his cryptic remarks pleased the children greatly, because it showed, they thought, that they knew more than the gardener did.

Thus the Empty House remained an object of somewhat dreadful delight, lending a touch of wonderland to that part of the lane where it stood, and forming the background for many an enchanting story over the nursery fire in winter-time. It appealed vividly to their imaginations, especially to Jimbo’s. Its dark windows, without blinds, were sometimes full of faces that retreated the moment they were looked at. That tangled ivy did not grow over the roof so thickly for nothing; and those high elms on the western side had not been planted years ago in a semicircle without a reason. Thus, at least, the children argued, not knowing exactly what they meant, nor caring much, so long as they proved to their own satisfaction that the place was properly haunted, and therefore worthy of their attention.

It was natural they should lead Miss Lake in that direction on one of their first walks together, and it was natural, too, that she should at once discover from their manner that the place was of some importance to them.

"What a queer-looking old house," she remarked, when they turned the corner of the lane and it came into view. "Almost a ruin, isn't it?"

The children exchanged glances. A "ruin" did not seem the right sort of word at all; and, besides, was a little disrespectful. Also, they were not sure whether the new governess ought to be told everything so soon. She had not really won their confidence yet. After a slight pause — and a children's pause is the most eloquent imaginable — Nixie, being the eldest, said in a stiff little voice: "It's the Empty House, Miss Lake. *We* know it very well indeed."

"It looks empty," observed Miss Lake briskly.

"But it's not a ruin, of course," added the child, with the cold dignity of chosen spokesman.

"Oh!" said the governess, quite missing the point. She was talking lightly on the surface of things, wholly ignorant of the depths beneath her feet, intuition with her having always been sternly repressed.

"It's a gamekeeper's cottage, or something like that, I suppose," she said.

"Oh, no; it isn't a bit."

"Doesn't it belong to your father, then?"

"No. It's somebody else's, you see."

"Then you can't have it pulled down?"

"Rather not! Of course not!" exclaimed several indignant voices at once.

Miss Lake perceived for the first time that it held more than ordinary importance in their mind.

"Tell me about it," she said. "What is its history, and who used to live in it?"

There came another pause. The children looked into each others' faces. They gazed at the blue sky overhead; then they stared at the dusty road at their feet. But no one volunteered an answer. Miss Lake, they felt, was approaching the subject in an offensive manner.

“Why are you all so mysterious about it?” she went on. “It’s only a tumble-down old place, and must be very draughty to live in, even for a gamekeeper.”

Silence.

“Come, children, don’t you hear me? I’m asking you a question.”

A couple of startled birds flew out of the ivy with a great whirring of wings. This was followed by a faint sound of rumbling, that seemed to come from the interior of the house. Outside all was still, and the hot sunshine lay over everything. The sound was repeated. The children looked at each other with large, expectant eyes. Something in the house was moving — was coming nearer.

“Have you *all* lost your tongues?” asked the governess impatiently.

“But you see,” Nixie said at length, “somebody *does* live in it now.”

“And who is he?”

“I didn’t say it was a *man*.”

“Whoever it is — tell me about the person,” persisted Miss Lake.

“There’s really nothing to tell,” replied the child, without looking up.

“Oh, but there must be something,” declared the logical young governess, “or you wouldn’t object so much to its being pulled down.”

Nixie looked puzzled, but Jimbo came to the rescue at once.

“But *you* wouldn’t understand if we did tell you,” he said, in a slow, respectful voice. His tone held a touch of that indescribable scorn heard sometimes in a child’s tone — the utter contempt for the stupid grown-up creature. Miss Lake noticed, and felt annoyed. She recognised that she was not getting on well with the children, and it piqued her. She remembered the Colonel’s words about “knocking the nonsense out” of James’ head, and she saw that her first opportunity, in fact her first real test, was at hand.

“And why, pray, should I not understand?” she asked, with some sharpness. “Is the mystery so *very* great?”

For some reason the duty of spokesman now devolved unmistakably upon Jimbo; and very seriously too, he accepted the task, standing with his feet firmly planted in the road and his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"You see, Miss Lake," he began gravely, "we know such a lot of Things in there, that they might not like us to tell you about them. They don't know you yet. If they did it might be different. But — but — you see, it isn't."

This was rather crushing to the aspiring educator, and the Colonel's instructions gained additional point in the light of the boy's explanation.

"Fiddlesticks!" she laughed, "there's probably nothing at all in there, except rats and cobwebs. 'Things,' indeed!"

"I knew you wouldn't understand," said Jimbo coolly, with no sign of being offended. "How could you?" He glanced at his sisters, gaining so much support from their enigmatical faces that he added, for their especial benefit, "How could she?"

"The gard'ner said so too," chimed in a younger sister, with a vague notion that their precious Empty House was being robbed of its glory.

"Yes; but, James, dear, I do understand perfectly," continued Miss Lake more gently, and wisely ignoring the reference to the authority of the kitchen-garden. "Only, you see, I cannot really encourage you in such nonsense — —"

"It isn't nonsense," interrupted Jimbo, with heat.

"But, believe me, children, it *is* nonsense. How do you know that there's anything inside? You've never been there!"

"You can know perfectly well what's inside a thing without having gone there," replied Jimbo with scorn. "At least, *we* can."

Miss Lake changed her tack a little — fatally, as it appeared afterwards.

"I know at any rate," she said with decision, "that there's nothing good in there. Whatever there may be is bad, thoroughly bad, and not fit for you to play with."

The other children moved away, but Jimbo stood his ground. They were all angry, disappointed, sore hurt and offended. But Jimbo suddenly began to feel something else besides anger and vexation. It was a new point of view to him that the Empty House might contain bad things as well as good, or perhaps, only bad things. His imagination seized upon the point at once and set to work vigorously to develop it. This was his way with all such things, and he could not prevent it.

“Bad Things?” he repeated, looking up at the governess. “You mean Things that could hurt?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, noting the effect of her words and thinking how pleased the Colonel would be later, when he heard it. “Things that might run out and catch you some day when you’re passing here alone, and take you back a prisoner. Then you’d be a prisoner in the Empty House all your life. Think of that!”

Miss Lake mistook the boy’s silence as proof that she was taking the right line. She enlarged upon this view of the matter, now she was so successfully launched, and described the *Inmate of the House* with such wealth of detail that she felt sure her listener would never have anything to do with the place again, and that she had “knocked out” this particular bit of “nonsense” for ever and a day.

But to Jimbo it was a new and horrible idea that the Empty House, haunted hitherto only by rather jolly and wonderful Red Indians, contained a Monster who might take him prisoner, and the thought made him feel afraid. The mischief had, of course, been done, and the terror in his eyes was unmistakable, when the foolish governess saw her mistake. Retreat was impossible: the boy was shaking with fear; and not all Miss Lake’s genuine sympathy, or Nixie’s explanations and soothings, were able to relieve his mind of its new burden.

Hitherto Jimbo’s imagination had loved to dwell upon the pleasant side of things invisible; but now he had been severely frightened, and his imagination took a new turn. Not only the Empty House, but all his inner world, to which it was in some sense the key, underwent a distressing change. His sense of horror had been vividly aroused.

The governess would willingly have corrected her mistake, but was, of course, powerless to do so. Bitterly she regretted her tactlessness and folly. But she could do nothing, and to add to her distress, she saw that Jimbo shrank from her in a way that could not long escape the watchful eye of the mother. But, if the boy shed tears of fear that night in his bed, it must in justice be told that she, for her part, cried bitterly in her own room, not that she had endangered her “place,” but that she had done a cruel injury to a child, and that she was helpless to undo it. For she loved children, though she was quite unsuited to take care of them. Her just reward, however, came swiftly upon her.

A few nights later, when Jimbo and Nixie were allowed to come down to dessert, the wind was heard to make a queer moaning sound in the ivy branches that hung over the dining-room windows. Jimbo heard it too. He held his breath for a minute; then he looked round the table in a frightened way, and the next minute gave a scream and burst into tears. He ran round and buried his face in his father’s arms.

After the tears came the truth. It was a bad thing for Miss Ethel Lake, this little sighing of the wind and the ivy leaves, for the Djin of terror she had thoughtlessly evoked swept into the room and introduced himself to the parents without her leave.

“What new nonsense is this now?” growled the soldier, leaving his walnuts and lifting the boy on to his knee. “He shouldn’t come down till he’s a little older, and knows how to behave.”

“What’s the matter, darling child?” asked the mother, drying his eyes tenderly.

“I heard the bad Things crying in the Empty House.”

“The Empty House is a mile away from here!” snorted the Colonel.

“Then it’s come nearer,” declared the frightened boy.

“Who told you there were bad things in the Empty House?” asked the mother.

“Yes, who told you, indeed, I should like to know!” demanded the Colonel.

And then it all came out. The Colonel’s wife was very quiet, but very determined. Miss Lake went back to the clerical family whence she had come, and the children knew her no more.

“I’m glad,” said Nixie, expressing the verdict of the nursery. “I thought she was awfully stupid.”

“She wasn’t a real lake at all,” declared another, “she was only a sort of puddle.”

Jimbo, however, said little, and the Colonel likewise held his peace.

But the governess, whether she was a lake or only a puddle, left her mark behind her. The Empty House was no longer harmless. It had a new lease of life. It was tenanted by some one who could never have friendly relations with children. The weeds in the old garden took on fantastic shapes; figures hid behind the doors and crept about the passages; the rooks in the high elms became birds of ill-omen; the ivy bristled upon the walls, and the trivial explanations of the gardener were no longer satisfactory.

Even in bright sunshine a Shadow lay crouching upon the broken roof. At any moment it might leap into life, and with immense striding legs chase the children down to the very Park gates.

There was no need to enforce the decree that the Empty House was a forbidden land. The children of their own accord declared it out of bounds, and avoided it as carefully as if all the wild animals from the Zoo were roaming its gardens, hungry and unchained.

CHAPTER III. THE SHOCK

ONE IMMEDIATE RESULT of Miss Lake's indiscretion was that the children preferred to play on the other side of the garden, the side farthest from the Empty House. A spiked railing here divided them from a field in which cows disported themselves, and as bulls also sometimes were admitted to the cows, the field was strictly out of bounds.

In this spiked railing, not far from the great shrubberies where the Indians increased and multiplied, there was a swinging gate. The children swung on it whenever they could. They called it Express Trains, and the fact that it was forbidden only added to their pleasure. When opened at its widest it would swing them with a rush through the air, past the pillars with a click, out into the field, and then back again into the garden. It was bad for the hinges, and it was also bad for the garden, because it was frequently left open after these carnivals, and the cows got in and trod the flowers down. The children were not afraid of the cows, but they held the bull in great horror. And these trivial things have been mentioned here because of the part they played in Jimbo's subsequent adventures.

It was only ten days or so after Miss Lake's sudden departure when Jimbo managed one evening to elude the vigilance of his lawful guardians, and wandered off unnoticed among the laburnums on the front lawn. From the laburnums he passed successfully to the first laurel shrubbery, and thence he executed a clever flank movement and entered the carriage drive in the rear. The rest was easy, and he soon found himself at the Lodge gate.

For some moments he peered through the iron grating, and pondered on the seductiveness of the dusty road and of the ditch beyond. To his surprise he found, presently, that the gate was moving outwards; it was yielding to his weight. One thing leads easily to another sometimes, and the open gate led easily on to the seductive road. The result was that a minute later Jimbo was chasing butterflies along the green lane, and throwing stones into the water of the ditch.

It was the evening of a hot summer's day, and the butterflies were still out in force. Jimbo's delight was intense. The joy of finding himself alone where he had no right to be put everything else out of his head, and for some time he wandered on, oblivious of all but the intoxicating sense of freedom and the difficulty of choosing between so many butterflies and such a magnificently dirty ditch.

At first he yielded to the seductions of the ditch. He caught a big, sleepy beetle and put it on a violet leaf, and sent it sailing out to sea; and when it landed on the farther shore he found a still bigger leaf, and sent it forth on a voyage in another direction, with a cargo of daisy petals, and a hairy caterpillar for a bo'sun's mate. But, just as the vessel was getting under way, a butterfly of amazing brilliance floated past insolently under his very nose. Leaving the beetle and the caterpillar to navigate the currents as best they could, he at once gave chase. Cap in hand, he flew after the butterfly down the lane, and a dozen times when his cap was just upon it, it sailed away sideways without the least effort and escaped him.

Then, suddenly, the lane took a familiar turning; the ditch stopped abruptly; the hedge on his right fell away altogether; the butterfly danced out of sight into a field, and Jimbo found himself face to face with the one thing in the whole world that could, at that time, fill him with abject terror — the Empty House.

He came to a full stop in the middle of the road and stared up at the windows. He realised for the first time that he was alone, and that it was possible for brilliant sunshine, even on a cloudless day, to become somehow lustreless and dull. The walls showed a deep red in the sunset light. The house was still as the grave. His feet were rooted to the ground, and it seemed as if he could not move a single muscle; and as he stood there, the blood ebbing quickly from his heart, the words of the governess a few days before rushed back into his mind, and turned his fear into a dreadful, all-possessing horror. In another minute the battered door would slowly open and the horrible Inmate come out to seize him. Already there was a sound of something moving within, and as he gazed, fascinated with terror, a shuddering movement ran over the ivy leaves hanging down from the roof. Then they parted in the middle, and something — he could not in his agony see what — flew out with a whirring sound into his face, and then vanished over his shoulder towards the fields.

Jimbo did not pause a single second to find out what it was, or to reflect that any ordinary thrush would have made just the same sound. The shock it gave to his heart immediately loosened the muscles of his little legs, and he ran for his very life. But before he actually began to run he gave one piercing scream for help, and the person he screamed to was the very person who was unwittingly the cause of his distress. It was as though he knew instinctively that the person who had created for him the terror of the Empty House, with its horrible Inmate, was also the person who could properly banish it, and undo the mischief before it was too late. He shrieked for help to the governess, Miss Ethel Lake.

Of course, there was no answer but the noise of the air whistling in his ears as his feet flew over the road in a cloud of dust; there was no friendly butcher's cart, no baker's boy, or farmer with his dog and gun; the road was deserted. There was not even the beetle or the caterpillar; he was beyond reach of help.

Jimbo ran for his life, but unfortunately he ran in the wrong direction. Instead of going the way he had come, where the Lodge gates were ready to receive him not a quarter of a mile away, he fled in the opposite direction.

It so happened that the lane flanked the field where the cows lived; but cows were nothing compared to a Creature from the Empty House, and even bulls seemed friendly. The boy was over the five-barred gate in a twinkling and half-way across the field before he heard a heavy, thunderous sound behind him. Either the Thing had followed him into the field, or it was the bull. As he raced, he managed to throw a glance over his shoulder and saw a huge, dark mass bearing down upon him at terrific speed. It must be the bull, he reflected — the bull grown to the size of an elephant. And it appeared to him to have two immense black wings that flapped at its sides and helped it forward, making a whirring noise like the arms of a great windmill.

This sight added to his speed, but he could not last very much longer. Already his body ached all over, and the frantic effort to get breath nearly choked him.

There, before him, not so very far away now, was the swinging gate. If only he could get there in time to scramble over into the garden, he would be safe. It seemed almost impossible, and behind him, meanwhile, the sound of the following creature came closer and closer; the ground seemed to tremble; he could almost feel the breath on his neck.

The swinging gate was only twenty yards off; now ten; now only five. Now he had reached it — at last. He stretched out his hands to seize the top bar, and in another moment he would have been safe in the garden and within easy reach of the house. But, before he actually touched the iron rail, a sharp, stinging pain shot across his back; — he drew one final breath as he felt himself being lifted, lifted up into the air. The horns had caught him just behind the shoulders!

There seemed to be no pain after the first shock. He rose high into the air, while the bushes and spiked railing he knew so well sank out of sight beneath him, dwindling curiously in size. At first he thought his head must bump against the sky, but suddenly he stopped rising, and the green earth rushed up as if it would strike him in the face. This meant he was sinking again. The gate and railing flew by underneath him, and the next second he fell with a crash upon the soft grass of the lawn — upon the other side. He had been tossed over the gate into the garden, and the bull could no longer reach him.

Before he became wholly unconscious, a composite picture, vivid in its detail, engraved itself deeply, with exceeding swiftness, line by line, upon the waxen tablets of his mind. In this picture the thrush that had flown out of the ivy, the Empty House itself, and its horrible, pursuing Inmate were all somehow curiously mingled together with the black wings of the bull, and with his own sensation of rushing — flying headlong — through space, as he rose and fell in a curve from the creature’s horns.

And behind it he was conscious that the real author of it all was somewhere in the shadowy background, looking on as though to watch the result of her unfortunate mistake. Miss Lake, surely, was not very far away. He associated her with the horror of the Empty House as inevitably as taste and smell join together in the memory of a certain food; and the very last thought in his mind, as he sank away into the blackness of unconsciousness, was a sort of bitter surprise that the governess had not turned up to save him before it was actually too late.

Moreover, a certain sense of disappointment mingled with the terror of the shock; for he was dimly aware that Miss Lake had not acted as worthily as she might have done, and had not played the game as well as might have been expected of her. And, somehow, it didn’t all seem quite fair.

CHAPTER IV. ON THE EDGE OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS

JIMBO HAD FALLEN on his head. Inside that head lay the mass of highly sensitive matter called the brain, on which were recorded, of course, the impressions of everything that had yet come to him in life. A severe shock, such as he had just sustained, was bound to throw these impressions into confusion and disorder, jumbling them up into new and strange combinations, obliterating some, and exaggerating others. Jimbo himself was helpless in the matter; he could exercise no control over their antics until the doctors had once again reduced them to order; he would have to wander, lost and lonely, through the comparative chaos of disproportioned visions, generally known as the region of delirium, until the doctor, assisted by mother nature, restored him once more to normal consciousness.

For a time everything was a blank, but presently he stirred uneasily in the grass, and the pictures graven on the tablets of his mind began to come back to him line by line.

Yet, with certain changes: the bull, for instance, had so far vanished into the background of his thoughts that it had practically disappeared altogether, and he recalled nothing of it but the wings — the huge, flapping wings. Of the creature to whom the wings belonged he had no recollection beyond that it was very large, and that it was chasing him from the Empty House. The pain in his shoulders had also gone; but what remained with undiminished vividness were the sensations of flight without escape, the breathless race up into the sky, and the swift, tumbling drop again through the air on to the lawn.

This impression of rushing through space — short though the actual distance had been — was the dominating memory. All else was apparently oblivion. He forgot where he came from, and he forgot what he had been doing. The events leading up to the catastrophe, indeed everything connected with his existence previously as “Master James,” had entirely vanished; and the slate of memory had been wiped so clean that he had forgotten even his own name!

Jimbo was lying, so to speak, on the edge of unconsciousness, and for a time it seemed uncertain whether he would cross the line into the region of delirium and dreams, or fall back again into his natural world. Terror, assisted by the horns of the black bull, had tossed him into the borderland.

His last scream, however, had reached the ears of the ubiquitous gardener, and help was near at hand. He heard voices that seemed to come from beyond the stars, and was aware that shadowy forms were standing over him and talking in whispers. But it was all very unreal; one minute the voices sounded up in the sky, and the next in his very ears, while the figures moved about, sometimes bending over him, sometimes retreating and melting away like shadows on a shifting screen.

Suddenly a blaze of light flashed upon him, and his eyes flew open; he tumbled back for a moment into his normal world. He wasn't on the grass at all, but was lying upon his own bed in the night nursery. His mother was bending over him with a very white face, and a tall man dressed in black stood beside her, holding some kind of shining instrument in his fingers. A little behind them he saw Nixie, shading a lamp with her hand. Then the white face came close over the pillow, and a voice full of tenderness whispered, "My darling boy, don't you know me? It's mother! No one will hurt you. Speak to me, if you can, dear."

She stretched out her hands, and Jimbo knew her and made an effort to answer. But it seemed to him as if his whole body had suddenly become a solid mass of iron, and he could control no part of it; his lips and his hands both refused to move. Before he could make a sign that he had understood and was trying to reply, a fierce flame rushed between them and blinded him, his eyes closed, and he dropped back again into utter darkness. The walls flew asunder and the ceiling melted into air, while the bed sank away beneath him, down, down, down into an abyss of shadows. The lamp in Nixie's hands dwindled into a star, and his mother's anxious face became a tiny patch of white in the distance, blurred out of all semblance of a human countenance. For a time the man in black seemed to hover over the bed as it sank, as though he were trying to follow it down; but it, too, presently joined the general enveloping blackness and lost its outline. The pain had blotted out everything, and the return to consciousness had been only momentary.

Not all the doctors in the world could have made things otherwise. Jimbo was off on his travels at last — travels in which the chief incidents were directly traceable to the causes and details of his accident: the terror of the Empty House, the pursuit of its Inmate, the pain of the bull's horns, and, above all, the flight through the air.

For everything in his subsequent adventures found its inspiration in the events described, and a singular parallel ran ever between the Jimbo upon the bed in the night-nursery and the other emancipated Jimbo wandering in the regions of unconsciousness and delirium.

CHAPTER V. INTO THE EMPTY HOUSE

THE DARKNESS LASTED a long time without a break, and when it lifted all recollection of the bedroom scene had vanished.

Jimbo found himself back again on the grass. The swinging gate was just in front of him, but he did not recognise it; no suggestion of “Express Trains” came back to him as his eyes rested without remembrance upon the bars where he had so often swung, in defiance of orders, with his brothers and sisters. Recollection of his home, family, and previous life he had absolutely none; or at least, it was buried so deeply in his inner consciousness that it amounted to the same thing, and he looked out upon the garden, the gate, and the field beyond as upon an entirely new piece of the world.

The stars, he saw, were nearly all gone, and a very faint light was beginning to spread from the woods beyond the field. The eastern horizon was slowly brightening, and soon the night would be gone. Jimbo was glad of this. He began to be conscious of little thrills of expectation, for with the light surely help would also come. The light always brought relief, and he already felt that strange excitement that comes with the first signs of dawn. In the distance cocks were crowing, horses began to stamp in the barns not far away, and a hundred little stirrings of life ran over the surface of the earth as the light crept slowly up the sky and dropped down again upon the world with its message of coming day.

Of course, help would come by the time the sun was really up, and it was partly this certainty, and partly because he was a little too dazed to realise the seriousness of the situation, that prevented his giving way to a fit of fear and weeping. Yet a feeling of vague terror lay only a little way below the surface, and when, a few moments later, he saw that he was no longer alone, and that an odd-looking figure was creeping towards him from the shrubberies, he sprang to his feet, prepared to run unless it at once showed the most friendly intentions.

This figure seemed to have come from nowhere. Apparently it had risen out of the earth. It was too large to have been concealed by the low shrubberies; yet he had not been aware of its approach, and it had appeared without making any noise. Probably it was friendly, he felt, in spite of its curious shape and the stealthy way it had come. At least, he hoped so; and if he could only have told whether it was a man or an animal he would easily have made up his mind. But the uncertain light, and the way it crouched half-hidden behind the bushes, prevented this. So he stood, poised ready to run, and yet waiting, hoping, indeed expecting every minute a sign of friendliness and help.

In this way the two faced each other silently for some time, until the feeling of terror gradually stole deeper into the boy's heart and began to rob him of full power over his muscles. He wondered if he would be able to run when the time came, and whether he could run fast enough. This was how it first showed itself, this suggestion of insidious fear. Would he be able to keep up the start he had? Would it chase him? Would it run like a man or like an animal, on four legs or on two? He wished he could see more clearly what it was. He still stood his ground pluckily, facing it and waiting, but the fear, once admitted to his mind, was gaining strength, and he began to feel cold and shivery. Then suddenly the tension came to an end. In two strides the figure came up close to his side, and the same second Jimbo was lifted off his feet and borne swiftly away across the field.

He felt quite unable to offer the least resistance, and at the same time he felt a sense of relief that something had happened at last. He was still not sure that the figure was unkind; only its shape filled him with a feeling that was certainly the beginning of real horror. It was the shape of a man, he thought, but of a very large and ill-constructed man; for it certainly had moved on two legs and had caught him up in a pair of tremendously strong arms. But there was something else it had besides arms, for a kind of soft cloak hung all round it and wrapped the boy from head to foot, preventing him seeing his captor properly, and at the same time filling his body with a kind of warm drowsiness that mitigated his active fear and made him rather like the sensation of being carried along so easily and so fast.

But was he being carried? The pace they were going was amazing, and he moved as easily as a sailing boat, and with the same swinging motion. Could it be some animal like a horse after all? Jimbo tried to see more, but found it impossible to free himself from the folds of the enveloping substance, and meanwhile they were swinging forward at what seemed a tremendous pace over fields and ditches, through hedges, and down long lanes.

The odours of earth, and dew-drenched grass, and opening flowers came to him. He heard the birds singing, and felt the cool morning air sting his cheeks as they raced along. There was no jolting or jarring, and the figure seemed to cover the ground as lightly as though it hardly touched the earth. It was certainly not a dream, he was sure of that; but the longer they went on the drowsier he became, and the less he wondered whether the figure was going to help him or to do something dreadful to him. He was now thoroughly afraid, and yet, strange contradiction, he didn't care a bit. Let the figure do what it liked; it was only a sort of nightmare person after all, and might vanish as suddenly as it had arrived.

For a long time they raced forward at this great speed, and then with a bump and a crash they stopped suddenly short, and Jimbo felt himself let down upon the solid earth. He tried to free himself at once from the folds of the clinging substance that enveloped him, but, before he could do so and see what his captor was really like, he heard a door slam and felt himself pushed along what seemed to be the hallways of a house. His eyes were clear now and he could see, but the darkness had come down again so thickly that all he could discover was that the figure was urging him along the floor of a large empty hall, and that they were in a dark and empty building.

Jimbo tried hard to see his captor, but the figure, dim enough in the uncertain light, always managed to hide its face and keep itself bunched up in such a way that he could never see more than a great, dark mass of a body, from which long legs and arms shot out like telescopes, draped in a sort of clinging cloak. Now that the rapid motion through the air had ceased, the boy's drowsiness passed a little, and he began to shiver with fear and to feel that the tears could not be kept back much longer.

Probably in another minute he would have started to run for his life, when a new sound caught his ears and made him listen intently, while a feeling of wonder and delight caught his heart, and made him momentarily forget the figure pushing him forward from behind.

Was it the wind he heard? Or was it the voices of children all singing together very low? It was a gentle, sighing sound that rose and fell with mournful modulations and seemed to come from the very centre of the building; it held, too, a strange, far-away murmur, like the surge of a faint breeze moving in the tree-tops. It might be the wind playing round the walls of the building, or it might be children singing in hushed voices. One minute he thought it was outside the house, and the next he was certain it came from somewhere in the upper part of the building. He glanced up, and fancied for one moment that he saw in the darkness a crowd of little faces peering down at him over the banisters, and that as they disappeared he heard the sound of many little feet moving, and then a door hurriedly closing. But a push from the figure behind that nearly sent him sprawling at the foot of the stairs, prevented his hearing very clearly, and the light was far too dim to let him feel sure of what he had seen.

They passed quickly along deserted corridors and through winding passages. No one seemed about. The interior of the house was chilly, and the keen air nipped. After going up several flights of stairs they stopped at last in front of a door, and before Jimbo had a moment to turn and dash downstairs again past the figure, as he had meant to do, he was pushed violently forward into a room.

The door slammed after him, and he heard the heavy tread of the figure as it went down the staircase again into the bottom of the house. Then he saw that the room was full of light and of small moving beings.

Curiosity and astonishment now for a moment took the place of fear, and Jimbo, with a thumping heart and clenched fists, stood and stared at the scene before him. He stiffened his little legs and leaned against the wall for support, but he felt full of fight in case anything happened, and with wide-open eyes he tried to take in the whole scene at once and be ready for whatever might come.

But there seemed no immediate cause for alarm, and when he realised that the beings in the room were apparently children, and only children, his rather mixed sensations of astonishment and fear gave place to an emotion of overpowering shyness. He became exceedingly embarrassed, for he was surrounded by children of all ages and sizes, staring at him just as hard as he was staring at them.

The children, he began to take in, were all dressed in black; they looked frightened and unhappy; their bodies were thin and their faces very white. There was something else about them he could not quite name, but it inspired him with the same sense of horror that he had felt in the arms of the Figure who had trapped him. For he now realised definitely that he had been trapped; and he also began to realise for the first time that, though he still had the body of a little boy, his way of thinking and judging was sometimes more like that of a grown-up person. The two alternated, and the result was an odd confusion; for sometimes he felt like a child and thought like a man, while at others he felt like a man and thought like a child. Something had gone wrong, very much wrong; and, as he watched this group of silent children facing him, he knew suddenly that what was just beginning to happen to him *had happened to them long, long ago*.

For they looked as if they had been a long, long time in the world, yet their bodies had not kept pace with their minds. Something had happened to stop the growth of the body, while allowing the mind to go on developing. The bodies were not stunted or deformed; they were well-formed, nice little children's bodies, but the minds within them were grown-up, and the incongruity was distressing. All this he suddenly realised in a flash, intuitively, just as though it had been most elaborately explained to him; yet he could not have put the least part of it into words or have explained what he saw and felt to another.

He saw that they had the hands and figures of children, the heads of children, the unlined faces and smooth foreheads of children, but their gestures, and something in their movements, belonged to grown-up people, and the expression of their eyes in meaning and intelligence was the expression of old people and not of children. And the expression in the eyes of every one of them he saw was the expression of terror and of pain. The effect was so singular that he seemed face to face with an entirely new order of creatures: a child’s features with a man’s eyes; a child’s figure with a woman’s movements; full-grown souls cramped and cribbed in absurdly inadequate bodies and little, puny frames; the old trying uncouthly to express itself in the young.

The grown-up, old portion of him had been uppermost as he stared and received these impressions, but now suddenly it passed away, and he felt as a little boy again. He glanced quickly down at his own little body in the alpaca knickerbockers and sailor blouse, and then, with a sigh of relief, looked up again at the strange group facing him. So far, at any rate, he had not changed, and there was nothing yet to suggest that he was becoming like them in appearance at least.

With his back against the door he faced the roomful of children who stood there motionless and staring; and as he looked, wild feelings rushed over him and made him tremble. Who was he? Where had he come from? Where in the world had he spent the other years of his life, the forgotten years? There seemed to be no one to whom he could go for comfort, no one to answer questions; and there was such a lot he wanted to ask. He seemed to be so much older, and to know so much more than he ought to have known, and yet to have forgotten so much that he ought not to have forgotten.

His loss of memory, however, was of course only partial. He had forgotten his own identity, and all the people with whom he had so far in life had to do; yet at the same time he was dimly conscious that he had just left all these people, and that some day he would find them again. It was only the surface-layers of memory that had vanished, and these had not vanished for ever, but only sunk down a little below the horizon.

Then, presently, the children began to range themselves in rows between him and the opposite wall, without once taking their horrible, intelligent eyes off him as they moved. He watched them with growing dread, but at last his curiosity became so strong that it overcame everything else, and in a voice that he meant to be very brave, but that sounded hardly above a whisper, he said:

“Who are you? And what’s been done to you?”

The answer came at once in a whisper as low as his own, though he could not distinguish who spoke:

“Listen and you shall know. You, too, are now one of us.”

Immediately the children began a slow, impish sort of dance before him, moving almost with silent feet over the boards, yet with a sedateness and formality that had none of the unconscious grace of children. And, as they danced, they sang, but in voices so low, that it was more like the mournful sighing of wind among branches than human voices. It was the sound he had already heard outside the building.

“We are the children of the whispering night, Who live eternally in dreadful fright Of stories told us in the grey twilight By — *nurserymaids*!

We are the children of a winter’s day; Under our breath we chant this mournful lay; We dance with phantoms and with shadows play, And have no rest.

We have no joy in any children’s game, For happiness to us is but a name, Since Terror kissed us with his lips of flame In wicked jest.

We hear the little voices in the wind Singing of freedom we may never find, Victims of fate so cruelly unkind, We are unblest.

We hear the little footsteps in the rain Running to help us, though they run in vain, Tapping in hundreds on the window-pane In vain behest.

We are the children of the whispering night, Who dwell unrescued in eternal fright Of stories told us in the dim twilight By — *nurserymaids*!”

The plaintive song and the dance ceased together, and before Jimbo could find any words to clothe even one of the thoughts that crowded through his mind, he saw them moving towards a door he had not hitherto noticed on the other side of the room. A moment later they had opened it and passed out, sedate, mournful, unhurried; and the boy found that in some way he could not understand the light had gone with them, and he was standing with his back against the wall in almost total darkness.

Once out of the room, no sound followed them, and he crossed over and tried the handle of the door. It was locked. Then he went back and tried the other door; that, too, was locked. He was shut in. There was no longer any doubt as to the Figure’s intentions; he was a prisoner, trapped like an animal in a cage.

The only thought in his mind just then was an intense desire for freedom. Whatever happened he must escape. He crossed the floor to the only window in the room; it was without blinds, and he looked out. But instantly he recoiled with a fresh and overpowering sense of helplessness, for it was three storeys from the ground, and down below in the shadows he saw a paved courtyard that rendered jumping utterly out of the question.

He stood for a long time, fighting down the tears, and staring as if his heart would break at the field and trees beyond. A high wall enclosed the yard, but beyond that was freedom and open space. Feelings of loneliness and helplessness, terror and dismay overwhelmed him. His eyes burned and smarted, yet, strange to say, the tears now refused to come and bring him relief. He could only stand there with his elbows on the window-sill, and watch the outline of the trees and hedges grow clearer and clearer as the light drew across the sky, and the moment of sunrise came close.

But when at last he turned back into the room, he saw that he was no longer alone. Crouching against the opposite wall there was a hooded figure steadily watching him.

CHAPTER VI. HIS COMPANION IN PRISON

SHOCKS OF TERROR, as they increase in number, apparently lessen in effect; the repeated calls made upon Jimbo's soul by the emotions of fear and astonishment had numbed it; otherwise the knowledge that he was locked in the room with this mysterious creature beyond all possibility of escape must have frightened him, as the saying is, out of his skin.

As it was, however, he kept his head in a wonderful manner, and simply stared at the silent intruder as hard as ever he could stare. How in the world it got in was the principal thought in his mind, and after that: what in the world was it?

The dawn must have come very swiftly, or else he had been staring longer than he knew, for just then the sun topped the edge of the world and the window-sill simultaneously, and sent a welcome ray of sunshine into the dingy room. It turned the grey light to silver, and fell full upon the huddled figure crouching against the opposite wall. Jimbo caught his breath, and stared harder than ever.

It was a human figure, the figure, apparently, of a man, sitting crumpled up in a very uncomfortable sort of position on his haunches. It sat perfectly still. A black cloak, with loose sleeves, and a cowl or hood that completely concealed the face, covered it from head to foot. The material of the cloak could not have been very thick, for inside the hood he caught the gleam of eyes as they roamed about the room and followed his movements. But for this glitter of the moving eyes it might have been a figure carved in wood. Was it going to sit there for ever watching him? At first he was afraid it was going to speak; then he was afraid it wasn't. It might rise suddenly and come towards him; yet the thought that it would not move at all was worse still.

In this way the two faced each other for several minutes until, just as the position was becoming simply unbearable, a low whisper ran round the room: "At last! Oh! I've found him at last!" Jimbo was not quite sure of the words, though it was certainly a human voice that had spoken; but, the suspense once broken, the boy could not stand it any longer, and with a rush of desperate courage he found his voice — a very husky one — and moved a step forward.

“Who are you, please, and how *did* you get in?” he ventured with a great effort.

Then he fell back against the wall, amazed at his own daring, and waited with tightly-clenched fists for an answer. But he had not to wait very long, for almost immediately the figure rose awkwardly to its feet, and came over to where he stood. Its manner of moving may best be described as shuffling; and it stretched in front of it a long cloaked arm, on which the sleeve hung, he thought, like clothes on a washing line.

He breathed hard, and waited. Like many other people with strong wills and sensitive nerves, Jimbo was both brave and a coward: he hoped nothing horrid was going to happen, but he was quite ready if it should. Yet, now that the actual moment had come, he had no particular fear, and when he felt the touch of the hand on his shoulder, the words sprang naturally to his lips with a little trembling laugh, more of wonder perhaps than anything else.

“You do look a horrid ... *brute*,” he was going to say, but at the last moment he changed it to “*thing*,” for, with the true intuition of a child, he recognised that the creature inside the cloak was a kind creature and well disposed towards him. “But how did you get in?” he added, looking up bravely into the black visage, “because the doors are both locked on the outside, and I couldn’t get out?”

By way of reply the figure shuffled to one side, and, taking the hand from his shoulder, pointed silently to a trap-door in the floor behind him. As he looked, he saw it was being shut down stealthily by some one beneath.

“Hush!” whispered the figure, almost inaudibly. “He’s watching!”

“Who’s watching?” he cried, curiosity taking the place of every other emotion. “I want to see.” He ran forward to the spot where the trap-door now lay flush with the floor, but, before he had gone two steps, the black arms shot out and caught him. He turned, struggling, and in the scuffle that followed the cloak shrouding the figure became disarranged; the hood dropped from the face, and he found himself looking straight into the eyes, not of a man, but of a woman!

“It’s you!” he cried, “*YOU — !*”

A shock ran right through his body from his head to his feet, like a current of electricity, and he caught his breath as though he had been struck. For one brief instant the sinister face of some one who had terrified him in the past came back vividly to his mind, and he shrank away in terror. But it was only for an instant, the twentieth part of an instant. Immediately, before he could even remember the name, recognition passed into darkness and his memory shut down with a snap. He was staring into the face of an utter stranger, about whom he knew nothing and had no feelings particularly one way or another.

“I thought I knew you,” he gasped, “but I’ve forgotten you again — and I thought you were going to be a man, too.”

“Jimbo!” cried the other, and in her voice was such unmistakable tenderness and yearning that the boy knew at once beyond doubt that she was his friend, “Jimbo!”

She knelt down on the floor beside him, so that her face was on a level with his, and then opened both her arms to him. But though Jimbo was glad to have found a friend who was going to help him, he felt no particular desire to be embraced, and he stood obstinately where he was with his back to the window.

The morning sunshine fell upon her features and touched the thick coils of her hair with glory. It was not, strictly speaking, a pretty face, but the look of real human tenderness there was very welcome and comforting, and in the kind brown eyes there shone a strange light that was not merely the reflection of the sunlight. The boy felt his heart warm to her as he looked, but her expression puzzled him, and he would not accept the invitation of her arms.

“Won’t you come to me?” she said, her arms still outstretched.

“I want to know who you are, and what I’m doing here,” he said. “I feel so funny — so old and so young — and all mixed up. I can’t make out who I am a bit. What’s that funny name you call me?”

“Jimbo is your name,” she said softly.

“Then what’s *your* name?” he asked quickly.

“My name,” she repeated slowly after a pause, “is not — as nice as yours. Besides, you need not know my name — you might dislike it.”

“But I must have something to call you,” he persisted.

“But if I told you, and you disliked the name, you might dislike *me* too,” she said, still hesitating.

Jimbo saw the expression of sadness in her eyes, and it won his confidence though he hardly knew why. He came up closer to her and put his puzzled little face next to hers.

“I like you very much already,” he whispered, “and if your name is a horrid one I’ll change it for you at once. Please tell me what it is.”

She drew the boy to her and gave him a little hug, and he did not resist. For a long time she did not answer. He felt vaguely that something of dreadful importance hung about this revelation of her name. He repeated his question, and at length she replied, speaking in a very low voice, and with her eyes fixed intently upon his face.

“My name,” she said, “is Ethel Lake.”

“Ethel Lake,” he repeated after her. The words sounded somehow familiar to him; surely he had heard that name before. Were not the words associated with something in his past that had been unpleasant? A curious sinking sensation came over him as he heard them.

His companion watched him intently while he repeated the words over to himself several times, as if to make sure he had got them right. There was a moment’s hesitation as he slowly went over them once again. Then he turned to her, laughing.

“I like your name, Ethel Lake,” he said. “It’s a nice name — Miss — Miss — —” Again he hesitated, while a little warning tremor ran through his mind, and he wondered for an instant why he said “Miss.” But it passed as suddenly as it had come, and he finished the sentence— "Miss Lake, I shall call you." He stared into her eyes as he said it.

"Then you don't remember me at all?" she cried, with a sigh of intense relief. "You've quite forgotten?"

"I never saw you before, did I? How can I remember you? I don't remember any of the things I've forgotten. Are you one of them?"

For reply she caught him to her breast and kissed him. "You precious little boy!" she said. "I'm so glad, oh, so glad!"

"But do you remember *me*?" he asked, sorely puzzled. "Who am I? Haven't I been born yet, or something funny like that?"

"If you don't remember *me*," said the other, her face happy with smiles that had evidently come only just in time to prevent tears, "there's not much good telling you who *you* are. But your name, if you really want to know, is — —" She hesitated a moment.

"Be quick, Eth — Miss Lake, or you'll forget it again."

She laughed rather bitterly. "Oh, I never forget. I can't!" she said. "I wish I could. Your name is James Stone, and Jimbo is 'short' for James. Now you know."

She might just as well have said Bill Sykes for all the boy knew or remembered.

"What a silly name!" he laughed. "But it can't be my real name, or I should know it. I never heard it before." After a moment he added, "Am I an old man? I feel just like one. I suppose I'm grown up — grown up so fast that I've forgotten what came before — —"

"You're not grown up, dear, at least, not exactly — —" She glanced down at his alpaca knickerbockers and brown stockings; and as he followed her eyes and saw the dirty buttoned-boots there came into his mind some dim memory of where he had last put them on, and of some one who had helped him. But it all passed like a swift meteor across the dark night of his forgetfulness and was lost in mist.

"You mustn't judge by these silly clothes," he laughed. "I shall change them as soon as I get — as soon as I can find — —" He stopped short. No words came. A feeling of utter loneliness and despair swept suddenly over him, drenching him from head to foot. He felt lost and friendless, naked, homeless, cold. He was ever on the brink of regaining a whole lot of knowledge and experience that he had known once long ago, ever so long ago, but it always kept just out of his reach. He glanced at Miss Lake, feeling that she was his only possible comfort in a terrible situation. She met his look and drew him tenderly towards her.

“Now, listen to me,” she said gently, “I’ve something to tell you — about myself.”

He was all attention in a minute.

“I am a discharged governess,” she began, holding her breath when once the words were out.

“Discharged!” he repeated vaguely. “What’s that? What for?”

“For frightening a child. I told a little boy awful stories that weren’t true. They terrified him so much that I was sent away. That’s why I’m here now. It’s my punishment. I am a prisoner here until I can find him — and help him to escape — —”

“Oh, I say!” he exclaimed quickly, as though remembering something. But it passed, and he looked up at her half-bored, half-politely. “Escape from what?” he asked.

“From here. This is the Empty House I told the stories about; *and you are the little boy I frightened*. Now, at last, I’ve found you, and am going to save you.” She paused, watching him with eyes that never left his face for an instant.

Jimbo was delighted to hear he was going to be rescued, but he felt no interest at all in her story of having frightened a little boy, who was himself. He thought it was very nice of her to take so much trouble, and he told her so, and when he went up and kissed her and thanked her, he saw to his surprise that she was crying. For the life of him he could not understand why a discharged governess whom he met, apparently, for the first time in the Empty House, should weep over him and show him so much affection. But he could think of nothing to say, so he just waited till she had finished.

“You see, if I can save you,” she said between her sobs, “it will be all right again, and I shall be forgiven, and shall be able to escape with you. I want you to escape, so that you can get back to life again.”

“Oh, then I’m dead, am I?”

“Not exactly dead,” she said, drying her eyes with the corner of her black hood. “You’ve had a funny accident, you know. If your body gets all right, so that you can go back and live in it again, then you’re not dead. But if it’s so badly injured that you can’t work in it any more, then you are dead, and will have to stay dead. You’re still joined to the body in a fashion, you see.”

He stared and listened, not understanding much. It all bored him. She talked without explaining, he thought. An immense sponge had passed over the slate of the past and wiped it clean beyond recall. He was utterly perplexed.

“How funny you are!” he said vaguely, thinking more of her tears than her explanations.

“Water won’t stay in a cracked bottle,” she went on, “and you can’t stay in a broken body. But they’re trying to mend it now, and if we can escape in time you can be an ordinary, happy little boy in the world again.”

“Then are you dead, too?” he asked, “or nearly dead?”

“I am out of my body, like you,” she answered evasively, after a moment’s pause.

He was still looking at her in a dazed sort of way, when she suddenly sprang to her feet and let the hood drop back over her face.

“Hush!” she whispered, “he’s listening again.”

At the same moment a sound came from beneath the floor on the other side of the room, and Jimbo saw the trap-door being slowly raised above the level of the floor.

“Your number is 102,” said a voice that sounded like the rushing of a river.

Instantly the trap-door dropped again, and he heard heavy steps rumbling away into the interior of the house. He looked at his companion and saw her terrified face as she lifted her hood.

“He always blunders along like that,” she whispered, bending her head on one side to listen. “He can’t see properly in the daylight. He hates sunshine, and usually only goes out after dark.” She was white and trembling.

“Is that the person who brought me in here this morning at such a frightful pace?” he asked, bewildered.

She nodded. “He wanted to get in before it was light, so that you couldn’t see his face.”

“Is he such a fright?” asked the boy, beginning to share her evident feeling of horror.

“He *is* Fright!” she said in an awed whisper. “But never talk about him again unless you can’t help it; he always knows when he’s being talked about, and he likes it, because it gives him more power.”

Jimbo only stared at her without comprehending. Then his mind jumped to something else he wanted badly to have explained, and he asked her about his number, and why he was called No. 102.

“Oh, that’s easier,” she said, “102 is your number among the Frightened Children; there are 101 of them, and you are the last arrival. Haven’t you seen them yet? It is also the temperature of your broken little body lying on the bed in the night nursery at home,” she added, though he hardly caught her words, so low were they spoken.

Jimbo then described how the children had sung and danced to him, and went on to ask a hundred questions about them. But Miss Lake would give him very little information, and said he would not have very much to do with them. Most of them had been in the House for years and years — so long that they could probably never escape at all.

“They are all frightened children,” she said. “Little ones scared out of their wits by silly people who meant to amuse them with stories, or to frighten them into being well behaved — nursery-maids, elder sisters, and even governesses!”

“And they can never escape?”

“Not unless the people who frightened them come to their rescue and *run the risk of being caught themselves*.”

As she spoke there rose from the depths of the house the sound of muffled voices, children’s voices singing faintly together; it rose and fell exactly like the wind, and with as little tune; it was weird and magical, but so utterly mournful that the boy felt the tears start to his eyes. It drifted away, too, just as the wind does over the tops of the trees, dying into the distance; and all became still again.

“It’s just like the wind,” he said, “and I do love the wind. It makes me feel so sad and so happy. Why is it?”

The governess did not answer.

“How old am I *really*?” he went on. “How can I be so old and so ignorant? I’ve forgotten such an awful lot of knowledge.”

“The fact is — well, perhaps, you won’t quite understand — but you’re really two ages at once. Sometimes you feel as old as your body, and sometimes as old as your soul. You’re still connected with your body; so you get the sensations of both mixed up.”

“Then is the body younger than the soul?”

“The soul — that is yourself,” she answered, “is, oh, so old, awfully old, as old as the stars, and older. But the body is no older than itself — of course, how could it be?”

“Of course,” repeated the boy, who was not listening to a word she said. “How could it be?”

“But it doesn’t matter how old you are or how young you feel, as long as you don’t hate me for having frightened you,” she said after a pause. “That’s the chief thing.”

He was very, very puzzled. He could not help feeling it had been rather unkind of her to frighten him so badly that he had literally been frightened out of his skin; but he couldn’t remember anything about it, and she was taking so much trouble to save him now that he quite forgave her. He nestled up against her, and said of course he liked her, and she stroked his curly head and mumbled a lot of things to herself that he couldn’t understand a bit.

But in spite of his new-found friend the feeling of over-mastering loneliness would suddenly rush over him. She might be a protector, but she was not a *real* companion; and he knew that somewhere or other he had left a lot of other *real* companions whom he now missed dreadfully. He longed more than he could say for freedom; he wanted to be able to come and go as he pleased; to play about in a garden somewhere as of old; to wander over soft green lawns among laburnums and sweet-smelling lilac trees, and to be up to all his old tricks and mischief — though he could not remember in detail what they were.

In a word, he wanted to escape; his whole being yearned to escape and be free again; yet here he was a wretched prisoner in a room like a prison-cell, with a sort of monster for a keeper, and a troop of horrible frightened children somewhere else in the house to keep him company. And outside there was only a hard, narrow, paved courtyard with a high wall round it. Oh, it was too terrible to think of, and his heart sank down within him till he felt as if he could do nothing else but cry.

"I shall save you in time," whispered the governess, as though she read his thoughts. "You must be patient, and do what I tell you, and I promise to get you out. Only be brave, and don't ask too many questions. We shall win in the end and escape."

Suddenly he looked up, with quite a new expression in his face. "But I say, Miss Cake, I'm frightfully hungry. I've had nothing to eat since — I can't remember when, but ever so long ago."

"You needn't call me Miss Cake, though," she laughed.

"I suppose it's because I'm so hungry."

"Then you'll call me Miss Lake when you're thirsty, perhaps," she said. "But, anyhow, I'll see what I can get you. Only, you must eat as little as possible. I want you to get very thin. What you feel is not really hunger — it's only a memory of hunger, and you'll soon get used to it."

He stared at her with a very distressful little face as she crossed the room making this new announcement; and just as she disappeared through the trap-door, only her head being visible, she added with great emphasis, "The thinner you get the better; because the thinner you are the lighter you are, and the lighter you are the easier it will be to escape. Remember, the thinner the better — the lighter the better — and don’t ask a lot of questions about it.”

With that the trap-door closed over her, and Jimbo was left alone with her last strange words ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER VII. THE SPELL OF THE EMPTY HOUSE

IT WAS NOT long before Jimbo realised that the House, and everything connected with it, spelt for him one message, and one only — a message of fear. From the first day of his imprisonment the forces of his whole being shaped themselves without further ado into one intense, single, concentrated desire to *escape*.

Freedom, escape into the world beyond that terrible high wall, was his only object, and Miss Lake, the governess, as its symbol, was his only hope. He asked a lot of questions and listened to a lot of answers, but all he really cared about was how he was going to escape, and when. All her other explanations were tedious, and he only half-listened to them. His faith in her was absolute, his patience unbounded; she had come to save him, and he knew that before long she would accomplish her end. He felt a blind and perfect confidence. But, meanwhile, his fear of the House, and his horror for the secret Being who meant to keep him prisoner till at length he became one of the troop of Frightened Children, increased by leaps and bounds.

Presently the trap-door creaked again, and the governess reappeared; in her hand was a small white jug and a soup plate.

“Thin gruel and skim milk,” she explained, pouring out a substance like paste into the soup plate, and handing him a big wooden spoon.

But Jimbo’s hunger had somehow vanished.

“It wasn’t real hunger,” she told him, “but only a sort of memory of being hungry. They’re trying to feed your broken body now in the night-nursery, and so you feel a sort of ghostly hunger here even though you’re out of the body.”

“It’s easily satisfied, at any rate,” he said, looking at the paste in the soup plate.

“No one actually eats or drinks here — —”

"But I'm solid," he said, "am I not?"

"People always think they're solid everywhere," she laughed. "It's only a question of degree; solidity *here* means a different thing to solidity *there*."

"I can get thinner though, can't I?" he asked, thinking of her remark about escape being easier the lighter he grew.

She assured him there would be no difficulty about that, and after replying evasively to a lot more questions, she gathered up the dishes and once more disappeared through the trap-door.

Jimbo watched her going down the ladder into the black gulf below, and wondered greatly where she went to and what she did down there; but on these points the governess had refused to satisfy his curiosity, and every time she appeared or disappeared the atmosphere of mystery came and went with her.

As he stared, wondering, a sound suddenly made itself heard behind him, and on turning quickly round he saw to his great surprise that the door into the passage was open. This was more than he could resist, and in another minute, with mingled feelings of dread and delight, he was out in the passage.

When he was first brought to the house, two hours before, it had been too dark to see properly, but now the sun was high in the heavens, and the light still increasing. He crept cautiously to the head of the stairs and peered over into the well of the house. It was still too dark to make things out clearly; but, as he looked, he thought something moved among the shadows below, and for a moment his heart stood still with fear. A large grey face seemed to be staring up at him out of the gloom. He clutched the banisters and felt as if he hardly had strength enough in his legs to get back to the room he had just left; but almost immediately the terror passed, for he saw that the face resolved itself into the mingling of light and shadow, and the features, after all, were of his own creation. He went on slowly and stealthily down the staircase.

It was certainly an empty house. There were no carpets; the passages were cold and draughty; the paper curled from the damp walls, leaving ugly discoloured patches about; cobwebs hung in many places from the ceiling, the windows were more or less broken, and all were coated so thickly with dirt that the rain had traced little furrows from top to bottom. Shadows hung about everywhere, and Jimbo thought every minute he saw moving figures; but the figures always resolved themselves into nothing when he looked closely.

He began to wonder how far it was safe to go, and why the governess had arranged for the door to be opened — for he felt sure it was she who had done this, and that it was all right for him to come out. Fright, she had said, was never about in the daylight. But, at the same time, something warned him to be ready at a moment's notice to turn and dash up the stairs again to the room where he was at least comparatively safe.

So he moved along very quietly and very cautiously. He passed many rooms with the doors open — all empty and silent; some of them had tables and chairs, but no sign of occupation; the grates were black and empty, the walls blank, the windows unshuttered. Everywhere was only silence and shadows; there was no sign of the frightened children, or of where they lived; no trace of another staircase leading to the region where the governess went when she disappeared down the ladder through the trap-door — only hushed, listening, cold silence, and shadows that seemed for ever shifting from place to place as he moved past them. This illusion of people peering at him from corners, and behind doors just ajar, was very strong; yet whenever he turned his head to face them, lo, they were gone, and the shadows rushed in to fill their places.

The spell of the Empty House was weaving itself slowly and surely about his heart.

Yet he went on pluckily, full of a dreadful curiosity, continuing his search, and at length, after passing through another gloomy passage, he was in the act of crossing the threshold of an open door leading out into the courtyard, when he stopped short and clutched the door-posts with both hands.

Some one had laughed!

He turned, trying to look in every direction at once, but there was no sign of any living being. Yet the sound was close beside him; he could still hear it ringing in his ears — a mocking sort of laugh, in a harsh, guttural voice.

The blood froze in his veins, and he hardly knew which way to turn, when another voice sounded, and his terror disappeared as if by magic.

It was Miss Lake’s voice calling to him over the banisters at the top of the house, and its tone was so cheerful that all his courage came back in a twinkling.

“Go out into the yard,” she called, “and play in the sunshine. But don’t stay too long.”

Jimbo answered “All right” in a rather feeble little voice, and went on down the passage and out into the yard.

The June sunshine lay hot and still over the paved court, and he looked up into the blue sky overhead. As he looked at the high wall that closed it in on three sides, he realised more than ever that he was caught in a monstrous trap from which there could be no ordinary means of escape. He could never climb over such a wall even with a ladder. He walked out a little way and noticed the rank weeds growing in patches in the corners; decay and neglect left everywhere their dismal signs; the yard, in spite of the sunlight, seemed as gloomy and cheerless as the house itself.

In one corner stood several little white upright stones, each about three feet high; there seemed to be some writing on them, and he was in the act of going nearer to inspect, when a window opened and he heard some one calling to him in a loud, excited whisper:

“Hst! Come in, Jimbo, at once. Quick! Run for your life!”

He glanced up, quaking with fear, and saw the governess leaning out of the open window. At another window, a little beyond her, he thought a number of white little faces pressed against the glass, but he had no time to look more closely, for something in Miss Lake’s voice made him turn and run into the house and up the stairs as though Fright himself were close at his heels. He flew up the three flights, and found the governess coming out on the top landing to meet him. She caught him in her arms and dashed back into the room, as if there was not a moment to be lost, slamming the door behind her.

“How in the world did you get out?” she gasped, breathless as himself almost, and pale with alarm. “Another second and He’d have had you ——!”

“I found the door open — —”

“He opened it on purpose,” she whispered, looking quickly round the room. “He meant you to go out.”

“But you called to me to play in the yard,” he said. “I heard you. So of course I thought it was safe.”

“No,” she declared, “I never called to you. That wasn’t my voice. That was one of his tricks. I only this minute found the door open and you gone. Oh, Jimbo, that was a narrow escape; you must never go out of this room till — till I tell you. And never believe any of these voices you hear — you’ll hear lots of them, saying all sorts of things — but unless you *see* me, don’t believe it’s my voice.”

Jimbo promised. He was very frightened; but she would not tell him any more, saying it would only make it more difficult to escape if he knew too much in advance. He told her about the laugh, and the gravestones, and the faces at the other window, but she would not tell him what he wanted to know, and at last he gave up asking. A very deep impression had been made on his mind, however, and he began to realise, more than he had hitherto done, the horror of his prison and the power of his dreadful keeper.

But when he began to look about him again, he noticed that there was a new thing in the room. The governess had left him, and was bending over it. She was doing something very busily indeed. He asked her what it was.

“I’m making your bed,” she said.

It was, indeed, a bed, and he felt as he looked at it that there was something very familiar and friendly about the yellow framework and the little brass knobs.

“I brought it up just now,” she explained. “But it’s not for sleeping in. It’s only for you to lie down on, and also partly to deceive Him.”

“Why not for sleeping?”

"There's no sleeping at all here," she went on calmly.

"Why not?"

"You can't sleep out of your body," she laughed.

"Why not?" he asked again.

"Your body goes to sleep, but *you* don't," she explained.

"Oh, I see." His head was whirling. "And my body — my real body — —"

"Is lying asleep — unconscious they call it — in the night-nursery at home. It's sound asleep. That's why you're here. It can't wake up till you go back to it, and you can't go back to it till you escape — even if it's ready for you before then. The bed is only for you to rest on, for you can *rest* though you can't *sleep*."

Jimbo stared blankly at the governess for some minutes. He was debating something in his mind, something very important, and just then it was his Older Self, and not the child, that was uppermost. Apparently it was soon decided, for he walked sedately up to her and said very gravely, with her serious eyes fixed on his face, "Miss Lake, are you *really* Miss Lake?"

"Of course I am."

"You're not a trick of His, like the voices, I mean?"

"No, Jimbo, I am really Miss Lake, the discharged governess who frightened you." There was profound anxiety in every word.

Jimbo waited a minute, still looking steadily into her eyes. Then he put out his hand cautiously and touched her. He rose a little on tiptoe to be on a level with her face, taking a fold of her cloak in each hand. The soul-knowledge was in his eyes just then, not the mere curiosity of the child.

"And are you — *dead*?" he asked, sinking his voice to a whisper.

For a moment the woman's eyes wavered. She turned white and tried to move away; but the boy seized her hand and peered more closely into her face.

"I mean, if we escape and I get back into my body," he whispered, "will you get back into yours too?"

The governess made no reply, and shifted uneasily on her feet. But the boy would not let her go.

“Please answer,” he urged, still in a whisper.

“Jimbo, what funny questions you ask!” she said at last, in a husky voice, but trying to smile.

“But I want to know,” he said. “I must know. I believe you are giving up everything just to save me — *everything*; and I don’t want to be saved unless you come too. Tell me!”

The colour came back to her cheeks a little, and her eyes grew moist. Again she tried to slip past him, but he prevented her.

“You must tell me,” he urged; “I would rather stay here with you than escape back into my body and leave you behind.”

Jimbo knew it was his Older Self speaking — the freed spirit rather than the broken body — but he felt the strain was very great; he could not keep it up much longer; any minute he might slip back into the child again, and lose interest, and be unequal to the task he now saw so clearly before him.

“Quick!” he cried in a louder voice. “Tell me! You are giving up everything to save me, aren’t you? And if I escape you will be left alone —— quick, answer me! Oh, be quick, I’m slipping back — —”

Already he felt his thoughts becoming confused again, as the spirit merged back into the child; in another minute the boy would usurp the older self.

“You see,” began the governess at length, speaking very gently and sadly, “I am bound to make amends whatever happens. I must atone — —”

But already he found it hard to follow.

“Atone,” he asked, “what does ‘*atone*’ mean?” He moved back a step, and glanced about the room. The moment of concentration had passed without bearing fruit; his thoughts began to wander again like a child’s. “Anyhow, we shall escape together when the chance comes, shan’t we?” he said.

“Yes, darling, we shall,” she said in a broken voice. “And if you do what I tell you, it will come very soon, I hope.” She drew him towards her and kissed him, and though he didn’t respond very heartily, he felt he liked it, and was sure that she was good, and meant to do the best possible for him.

Jimbo asked nothing more for some time; he turned to the bed where he found a mattress and a blanket, but no sheets, and sat down on the edge and waited. The governess was standing by the window looking out; her back was turned to him. He heard an occasional deep sigh come from her, but he was too busy now with his own sensations to trouble much about her. Looking past her he saw the sea of green leaves dancing lazily in the sunshine. Something seemed to beckon him from beyond the high wall, and he longed to go out and play in the shade of the elms and hawthorns; for the horror of the Empty House was closing in upon him steadily but surely, and he longed for escape into a bright, unhaunted atmosphere, more than anything else in the whole world.

His thoughts ran on and on in this vein, till presently he noticed that the governess was moving about the room. She crossed over and tried first one door and then the other; both were fastened. Next she lifted the trap-door and peered down into the black hole below. That, too, apparently was satisfactory. Then she came over to the bedside on tiptoe.

“Jimbo, I’ve got something very important to ask you,” she began.

“All right,” he said, full of curiosity.

“You must answer me very exactly. Everything depends on it.”

“I will.”

She took another long look round the room, and then, in a still lower whisper, bent over him, and asked:

“Have you any pain?”

“Where?” he asked, remembering to be exact.

“Anywhere.”

He thought a moment.

“None, thank you.”

“None at all — anywhere?” she insisted.

“None at all — anywhere,” he said with decision.

She seemed disappointed.

“Never mind; it’s a little soon yet, perhaps,” she said. “We must have patience. It will come in time.”

“But I don’t want any pain,” he said, rather ruefully.

“You can’t escape till it comes.”

“I don’t understand a bit what you mean.” He began to feel alarmed at the notion of escape and pain going together.

“You’ll understand later, though,” she said soothingly, “and it won’t hurt *very* much. The sooner the pain comes, the sooner we can try to escape. Nowhere can there be escape without it.”

And with that she left him, disappearing without another word into the hole below the trap, and leaving him, disconsolate yet excited, alone in the room.

CHAPTER VIII. THE GALLERY OF ANCIENT MEMORIES

WITH EVERY ONE, of course, the measurement of time depends largely upon the state of the emotions, but in Jimbo's case it was curiously exaggerated. This may have been because he had no standard of memory by which to test the succession of minutes; but, whatever it was, the hours passed very quickly, and the evening shadows were already darkening the room when at length he got up from the mattress and went over to the window.

Outside the high elms were growing dim; soon the stars would be out in the sky. The afternoon had passed away like magic, and the governess still left him alone; he could not quite understand why she went away for such long periods.

The darkness came down very swiftly, and it was night almost before he knew it. Yet he felt no drowsiness, no desire to yawn and get under sheets and blankets; sleep was evidently out of the question, and the hours slipped away so rapidly that it made little difference whether he sat up all night or whether he slept.

It was his first night in the Empty House, and he wondered how many more he would spend there before escape came. He stood at the window, peering out into the growing darkness and thinking long, long thoughts. Below him yawned the black gulf of the yard, and the outline of the enclosing wall was only just visible, but beyond the elms rose far into the sky, and he could hear the wind singing softly in their branches. The sound was very sweet; it suggested freedom, and the flight of birds, and all that was wild and unrestrained. The wind could never really be a prisoner; its voice sang of open spaces and unbounded distances, of flying clouds and mountains, of mighty woods and dancing waves; above all, of wings — free, swift, and unconquerable wings.

But this rushing song of wind among the leaves made him feel too sad to listen long, and he lay down upon the bed again, still thinking, thinking.

The house was utterly still. Not a thing stirred within its walls. He felt lonely, and began to long for the companionship of the governess; he would have called aloud for her to come only he was afraid to break the appalling silence. He wondered where she was all this time and how she spent the long, dark hours of the sleepless nights. Were all these things really true that she told him? Was he actually out of his body, and was his name really Jimbo? His thoughts kept groping backwards, ever seeking the other companions he had lost; but, like a piece of stretched elastic too short to reach its object, they always came back with a snap just when he seemed on the point of finding them. He wanted these companions very badly indeed, but the struggling of his memory was painful, and he could not keep the effort up for very long at one time.

The effort once relaxed, however, his thoughts wandered freely where they would; and there rose before his mind's eye dim suggestions of memories far more distant — ghostly scenes and faces that passed before him in endless succession, but always faded away before he could properly seize and name them.

This memory, so stubborn as regards quite recent events, began to play strange tricks with him. It carried him away into a Past so remote that he could not connect it with himself at all, and it was like dreaming of scenes and events that had happened to some one else; yet, all the time, he knew quite well those things had happened to him, and to none else. It was the memory of the soul asserting itself now that the clamour of the body was low. It was an underground river coming to the surface, for odd minutes, here and there, showing its waters to the stars just long enough to catch their ghostly reflections before it rolled away underground again.

Yet, swift and transitory as they were, these glimpses brought in their train sensations that were too powerful ever to have troubled his child-mind in its present body. They stirred in him the strong emotions, the ecstasies, the terrors, the yearnings of a much more distant past; whispering to him, could he but have understood, of an infinitely deeper layer of memories and experiences which, now released from the burden of the immediate years, strove to awaken into life again. The soul in that little body covered with alpaca knickerbockers and a sailor blouse seemed suddenly to have access to a storehouse of knowledge that must have taken centuries, rather than a few short years, to acquire.

It was all very queer. The feeling of tremendous age grew mysteriously over him. He realised that he had been wandering for ages. He had been to the stars and also to the deeps; he had roamed over strange mountains far away from cities or inhabited places of the earth, and had lived by streams whose waves were silvered by moonlight dropping softly through whispering palm branches....

Some of these ghostly memories brought him sensations of keenest happiness — icy, silver, radiant; others swept through his heart like a cold wave, leaving behind a feeling of unutterable woe, and a sense of loneliness that almost made him cry aloud. And there came Voices too — Voices that had slept so long in the inner kingdoms of silence that they failed to rouse in him the very slightest emotion of recognition....

Worn out at length with the surging of these strange hosts through him, he got up and went to the open window again. The night was very dark and warm, but the stars had disappeared, and there was the hush and the faint odour of coming rain in the air. He smelt leaves and the earth and the moist things of the ground, the wonderful perfume of the life of the soil.

The wind had dropped; all was silent as the grave; the leaves of the elm trees were motionless; no bird or insect raised its voice; everything slept; he alone was watchful, awake. Leaning over the window-sill, his thoughts searched for the governess, and he wondered anew where she was spending the dark hours. She, too, he felt sure, was wakeful somewhere, watching with him, plotting their escape together, and always mindful of his safety....

His reverie was suddenly interrupted by the flight of an immense night-bird dropping through the air just above his head. He sprang back into the room with a startled cry, as it rushed past in the darkness with a great swishing of wings. The size of the creature filled him with awe; it was so close that the wind it made lifted the hair on his forehead, and he could almost feel the feathers brush his cheeks. He strained his eyes to try and follow it, but the shadows were too deep and he could see nothing; only in the distance, growing every moment fainter, he could hear the noise of big wings threshing the air. He waited a little, wondering if another bird would follow it, or if it would presently return to its perch on the roof; and then his thoughts passed on to uncertain memories of other big birds — hawks, owls, eagles — that he had seen somewhere in places now beyond the reach of distinct recollections....

Soon the light began to dawn in the east, and he made out the shape of the elm trees and the dreadful prison wall; and with the first real touch of morning light he heard a familiar creaking sound in the room behind him, and saw the black hood of the governess rising through the trap-door in the floor.

"But you've left me alone all night!" he said at once reproachfully, as she kissed him.

"On purpose," she answered. "He'd get suspicious if I stayed too much with you. It's different in the daytime, when he can't see properly."

"Where's he been all night, then?" asked the boy.

"Last night he was out most of the time — hunting — —"

"Hunting!" he repeated, with excitement. "Hunting what?"

"Children — frightened children," she replied, lowering her voice. "That's how he found you."

It was a horrible thought — Fright hunting for victims to bring to his dreadful prison — and Jimbo shivered as he heard it.

"And how did you get on all this time?" she asked, hurriedly changing the subject.

"I've been remembering, that is half-remembering, an awful lot of things, and feeling, oh, so old. I never want to remember anything again," he said wearily.

"You'll forget quick enough when you get back into your body, and have only the body-memories," she said, with a sigh that he did not understand. "But, now tell me," she added, in a more serious voice, "have you had any pain yet?"

He shook his head. She stepped up beside him.

"None *there*?" she asked, touching him lightly just behind the shoulder blades.

Jimbo jumped as if he had been shot, and uttered a piercing yell.

"That hurts!" he screamed.

"I'm so glad," cried the governess. "That's the pains coming at last." Her face was beaming.

"Coming!" he echoed, "I think they've *come*. But if they hurt as much as that, I think I'd rather not escape," he added ruefully.

"The pain won't last more than a minute," she said calmly. "You must be brave and stand it. There's no escape without pain — from anything."

"If there's no other way," he said pluckily, "I'll try, — but — —"

"You see," she went on, rather absently, "at this very moment the doctor is probing the wounds in your back where the horns went in — —"

But he was not listening. Her explanations always made him want either to cry or to laugh. This time he laughed, and the governess joined him, while they sat on the edge of the bed together talking of many things. He did not understand all her explanations, but it comforted him to hear them. So long as somebody understood, no matter who, he felt it was all right.

In this way several days and nights passed quickly away. The pains were apparently no nearer, but as Miss Lake showed no particular anxiety about their non-arrival, he waited patiently too, dreading the moment, yet also looking forward to it exceedingly.

During the day the governess spent most of the time in the room with him; but at night, when he was alone, the darkness became enchanted, the room haunted, and he passed into the long, long Gallery of Ancient Memories.

CHAPTER IX. THE MEANS OF ESCAPE

A WEEK PASSED, and Jimbo began to wonder if the pains he so much dreaded, yet so eagerly longed for, were ever coming at all. The imprisonment was telling upon him, and he grew very thin, and consequently very light.

The nights, though he spent them alone, were easily borne, for he was then intensely occupied, and the time passed swiftly; the moment it was dark he stepped into the Gallery of Memories, and in a little while passed into a new world of wonder and delight. But the daytime seemed always long. He stood for hours by the window watching the trees and the sky, and what he saw always set painful currents running through his blood — unsatisfied longings, yearnings, and immense desires he never could understand.

The white clouds on their swift journeys took with them something from his heart every time he looked upon them; they melted into air and blue sky, and lo! that “something” came back to him charged with all the wild freedom and magic of open spaces, distance, and rushing winds.

But the change was close at hand.

One night, as he was standing by the open window listening to the drip of the rain, he felt a deadly weakness steal over him; the strength went out of his legs. First he turned hot, and then he turned cold; clammy perspiration broke out all over him, and it was all he could do to crawl across the room and throw himself on to the bed. But no sooner was he stretched out on the mattress than the feelings passed entirely, and left behind them an intoxicating sense of strength and lightness. His muscles became like steel springs; his bones were strong as iron and light as cork; a wonderful vigour had suddenly come into him, and he felt as if he had just stepped from a dungeon into fresh air. He was ready to face anything in the world.

But, before he had time to realise the full enjoyment of these new sensations, a stinging, blinding pain shot suddenly through his right shoulder as if a red-hot iron had pierced to the very bone. He screamed out in agony; though, even while he screamed, the pain passed. Then the same thing happened in his other shoulder. It shot through his back with equal swiftness, and was gone, leaving him lying on the bed trembling with pain. But the instant it was gone the delightful sensations of strength and lightness returned, and he felt as if his whole body were charged with some new and potent force.

The pains had come at last! Jimbo had no notion how they could possibly be connected with escape, but Miss Lake — his kind and faithful friend, Miss Lake — had said that no escape was possible without them; and had promised that they should be brief. And this was true, for the entire episode had not taken a minute of time.

"*ESCAPE, ESCAPE!*" — the words rushed through him like a flame of fire. Out of this dreadful Empty House, into the open spaces; beyond the prison wall; out where the wind and the rain could touch him; where he could feel the grass beneath his feet, and could see the whole sky at once, instead of this narrow strip through the window. His thoughts flew to the stars and the clouds....

But a strange humming of voices interrupted his flight of imagination, and he saw that the room was suddenly full of moving figures. They were passing before him with silent footsteps, across the window from door to door. How they had come in, or how they went out, he never knew; but his heart stood still for an instant as he recognised the mournful figures of the Frightened Children filing before him in a slow procession. They were singing — though it sounded more like a chorus of whispering than actual singing — and as they moved past with the measured steps of their sorrowful dance, he caught the words of the song he had heard them sing when he first came into the house: —

"We hear the little voices in the wind Singing of freedom we may never find."

Jimbo put his fingers into his ears, but still the sound came through. He heard the words almost as if they were inside himself — his own thoughts singing: —

"We hear the little footsteps in the rain Running to help us, though they run in vain, Tapping in hundreds on the window-pane."

The horrible procession filed past and melted away near the door. They were gone as mysteriously as they had come, and almost before he realised it.

He sprang from the bed and tried the doors; both were locked. How in the world had the children got in and out? The whispering voices rose again on the night air, and this time he was sure they came from outside. He ran to the open window and thrust his head out cautiously. Sure enough, the procession was moving slowly, still with the steps of that impish dance across the courtyard stones. He could just make out the slow waving arms, the thin bodies, and the white little faces as they passed on silent feet through the darkness, and again a fragment of the song rose to his ears as he watched, and filled him with an overpowering sadness: —

"We have no joy in any children's game, For happiness to us is but a name, Since Terror kissed us with his lips of flame."

Then he noticed that the group was growing smaller. Already the numbers were less. Somewhere, over there in the dark corner of the yard, the children disappeared, though it was too dark to see precisely how or where.

"We dance with phantoms, and with shadows play," rose to his ears.

Suddenly he remembered the little white upright stones he had seen in that corner of the yard, and understood. One by one they vanished just behind those stones.

Jimbo shivered, and drew his head in. He did not like those upright stones; they made him uncomfortable and afraid. Now, however, the last child had disappeared and the song had ceased. He realised what his fate would be if the escape were not successful; he would become one of this band of Frightened Children; dwelling somewhere behind the upright stones; a terrified shadow, waiting in vain to be rescued, waiting perhaps for ever and ever. The thought brought the tears to his eyes, but he somehow managed to choke them down. He knew it was the young portion of him only that felt afraid — the body; the older self could not feel fear, and had nothing to do with tears.

He lay down again upon the hard mattress and waited; and soon afterwards the first crimson streaks of sunrise appeared behind the high elms, and rooks began to caw and shake their wings in the upper branches. A little later the governess came in.

Before he could move out of the way — for he disliked being embraced — she had her arms round his neck, and was covering him with kisses. He saw tears in her eyes.

“You darling Jimbo!” she cried, “they’ve come at last.”

“How do you know?” he asked, surprised at her knowledge and puzzled by her display of emotion.

“I heard you scream to begin with. Besides, I’ve been watching.”

“Watching?”

“Yes, and listening too, every night, every single night. You’ve hardly been a minute out of my sight,” she added.

“I think it’s awfully good of you,” he said doubtfully, “but — —”

A flood of questions followed — about the upright stones, the shadowy children, where she spent the night “watching him,” and a hundred other things besides. But he got little satisfaction out of her. He never did when it was Jimbo, the child, that asked; and he remained Jimbo, the child, all that day. She only told him that all was going well. The pains had come; he had grown nice and thin, and light; the children had come into his room as a hint that he belonged to their band, and other things had happened about which she would tell him later. The crisis was close at hand. That was all he could get out of her.

“It won’t be long now,” she said excitedly. “They’ll come to-night, I expect.”

“What will come to-night?” he asked, with querulous wonder.

“Wait and see!” was all the answer he got. “Wait and see!”

She told him to lie quietly on the bed and to have patience.

With asking questions, and thinking, and wondering, the day passed very quickly. With the lengthening shadows his excitement began to grow.

Presently Miss Lake took her departure and went off to her unknown and mysterious abode; he watched her disappear through the floor with mingled feelings, wondering what would have happened before he saw her again. She gave him a long, last look as she sank away below the boards, but it was a look that brought him fresh courage, and her eyes were happy and smiling.

Tingling already with expectancy he got into the bed and lay down, his brain alive with one word — *ESCAPE*.

From where he lay he saw the stars in the narrow strip of sky; he heard the wind whispering in the branches; he even smelt the perfume of the fields and hedges — grass, flowers, dew, and the sweet earth — the odours of freedom.

The governess had, for some reason she refused to explain, taken his blouse away with her. For a long time he puzzled over this, seeking reasons and finding none. But, while in the act of stroking his bare arms, the pains of the night before suddenly returned to both shoulders at once. Fire seemed to run down his back, splitting his bones apart, and then passed even more quickly than before, leaving him with the same wonderful sensations of lightness and strength. He felt inclined to shout and run and jump, and it was only the memory of the governess's earnest caution to "lie quietly" that prevented his new emotions passing into acts.

With very great effort he lay still all night long; and it was only when the room at last began to get light again that he turned on his side, preparatory to getting up.

But there was something new — something different! He rested on his elbow, waiting. Something had happened to him. Cautiously he sat on the edge of the bed, and stretched out one foot and touched the floor. Excitement ran through him like a wave. There was a great change, a tremendous change; for as he stepped out gingerly on to the floor *something followed him from the bed*. It clung to his back; it touched both shoulders at once; it stroked his ribs, and tickled the skin of his arms.

Half frightened, he brought the other leg over, and stood boldly upright on both feet. But the weight still clung to his back. He looked over his shoulder. Yes! it was trailing after him from the bed; it was fan-shaped, and brilliant in colour. He put out a hand and touched it; it was soft and glossy; then he took it deliberately between his fingers; it was smooth as velvet, and had numerous tiny ribs running along it.

Seizing it at last with all his courage, he pulled it forward in front of him for a better view, only to discover that it would not come out beyond a certain distance, and seemed to have got caught somehow between his shoulders — just where the pains had been. A second pull, more vigorous than the first, showed that it was not caught, but *fastened* to his skin; it divided itself, moreover, into two portions, one half coming from each shoulder.

“I do believe they’re feathers!” he exclaimed, his eyes almost popping out of his head.

Then, with a sudden flash of comprehension, he saw it all, and understood. They were, indeed, feathers; but they were something more than feathers merely. *They were wings!*

Jimbo caught his breath and stared in silence. He felt dazed. Then bit by bit the fragments of the weird mosaic fell into their proper places, and he began to understand. Escape was to be by flight. It filled him with such a whirlwind of delight and excitement that he could scarcely keep from screaming aloud.

Lost in wonder, he took a step forward, and watched with bulging eyes how the wings followed him, their tips trailing along the floor. They were a beautiful deep red, and hung down close and warm beside his body; glossy, sleek, magical. And when, later, the sun burst into the room and turned their colour into living flame, he could not resist the temptation to kiss them. He seized them, and rubbed their soft surfaces over his face. Such colours he had never seen before, and he wanted to be sure that they really belonged to him and were intended for actual use.

Slowly, without using his hands, he raised them into the air. The effort was a perfectly easy muscular effort from the shoulders that came naturally, though he did not quite understand how he accomplished it. The wings rose in a fine, graceful sweep, curving over his head till the tips of the feathers met, touching the walls as they rose, and almost reaching to the ceiling.

He gave a howl of delight, for this sight was more than he could manage without some outlet for his pent-up emotion; and at the same moment the trap-door shot open, and the governess came into the room with such a bang and a clatter that Jimbo knew at once her excitement was as great as his own. In her hands she carried the blouse she had taken away the night before. She held it out to him without a word. Her eyes were shining like electric lamps. In less than a second he had slipped his wings through the neatly-made slits, but before he could practise them again, Miss Lake rushed over to him, her face radiant with happiness.

“Jimbo! My darling Jimbo!” she cried — and then stopped short, apparently unable to express her emotion.

The next instant he was enveloped, wings and all, in a warm confusion of kisses, congratulations and folds of hood.

When they became disentangled again the governess went down on her knees and made a careful examination; she pulled the wings out to their full extent and found that they stretched about four feet and a half from tip to tip.

“They *are* beauties!” she exclaimed enthusiastically, “and full grown and strong. I’m not surprised they took so long coming.”

“Long!” he echoed, “I thought they came awfully quickly.”

“Not half so quickly as they’ll go,” she interrupted; adding, when she saw his expression of dismay, “I mean, you’ll fly like the wind with them.”

Jimbo was simply breathless with excitement. He wanted to jump out of the window and escape at once. The blue sky and the sunshine and the white flying clouds sent him an irresistible invitation. He could not wait a minute longer.

“Quick,” he cried, “I can’t wait! They may go again. Show me how to use them. Oh! do show me.”

“I’ll show you everything in time,” she answered. There was something in her voice that made him pause in his excitement. He looked at her in silence for some minutes.

“But how are *you* going to escape?” he asked at length. “You haven’t got” —— he stopped short.

The governess stepped back a few paces from him. She threw back the hood from her face. Then she lifted the long black cloak that hung like a cassock almost to her ankles and had always enveloped her hitherto.

Jimbo stared. Falling from her shoulders, and folding over her hips, he saw long red feathers clinging to her; and when he dashed forward to touch them with his hands, he found they were just as sleek and smooth and glossy as his own.

“And you never told me all this time?” he gasped.

“It was safer not,” she said. “You’d have been stroking and feeling your shoulders the whole time, and the wings might never have come at all.”

She spread out her wings as she spoke to their full extent; they were nearly six feet across, and the deep crimson on the under side was so exquisite, gleaming in the sunlight, that Jimbo ran in and nestled beneath the feathers, tickling his cheeks with the fluffy surface and running his fingers with childish delight along the slender red quills.

“You precious child,” she said, tenderly folding her wings round him and kissing the top of his head. “Always remember that I really love you; no matter what happens, remember that, and I’ll save you.”

“And we shall escape together?” he asked, submitting for once to the caresses with a good grace.

“We shall escape from the Empty House together,” she replied evasively. “How far we can go after that depends — on you.”

“On me?”

“If you love me enough — as I love you, Jimbo — we can never separate again, because love ties us together for ever. Only,” she added, “it must be mutual.”

“I love you very much,” he said, puzzled a little. “Of course I do.”

"If you've really forgiven me for being the cause of your coming here," she said, "we can always be together, but — —"

"I don't remember, but I've forgiven you — that *other you* — long ago," he said simply. "If you hadn't brought me here, I should never have met you."

"That's not real forgiveness — quite," she sighed, half to herself.

But Jimbo could not follow this sort of conversation for long; he was too anxious to try his wings for one thing.

"Is it *very* difficult to use them?" he asked.

"Try," she said.

He stood in the centre of the floor and raised them again and again. They swept up easily, meeting over his head, and the air whistled musically through them. Evidently, they had their proper muscles, for it was no great effort, and when he folded them again by his side they fell into natural curves over his arms as if they had been there all his life. The sound of the feathers threshing the air filled him with delight and made him think of the big night-bird that had flown past the window during the night. He told the governess about it, and she burst out laughing.

"I was that big bird!" she said.

"You!"

"I perched on the roof every night to watch over you. I flew down that time because I was afraid you were trying to climb out of the window."

This was indeed a proof of devotion, and Jimbo felt that he could never doubt her again; and when she went on to tell him about his wings and how to use them he listened with his very best attention and tried hard to learn and understand.

"The great difficulty is that you can't practise properly," she explained. "There's no room in here, and yet you can't get out till you *fly* out. It's the first swoop that decides all. You have to drop straight out of this window, and if you use the wings properly they will carry you in a single swoop over the wall and right up into the sky."

"But if I miss —— ?"

"You can't miss," she said with decision, "but, if you did, you would be a prisoner here for ever. *HE* would catch you in the yard and tear your wings off. It is just as well that you should know this at once."

Jimbo shuddered as he heard her.

"When can we try?" he asked anxiously.

"Very soon now. The muscles must harden first, and that takes a little time. You must practise flapping your wings until you can do it easily four hundred times a minute. When you can do that it will be time for the first start. You must keep your head steady and not get giddy; the novelty of the motion — the ground rushing up into your face and the whistling of the wind — are apt to confuse at first, but it soon passes, and you must have confidence. I can only help you up to a certain point; the rest depends on you."

"And the first jump?"

"You'll have to make that by yourself," she said; "but you'll do it all right. You're very light, and won't go too near the ground. You see, we're like bats, and cannot rise from the earth. We can only fly by dropping from a height, and that's what makes the first plunge rather trying. But you won't fall," she added, "and remember, I shall always be within reach."

"You're awfully kind to me," said Jimbo, feeling his little soul more than ever invaded by the force of her unselfish care. "I promise you I'll do my best." He climbed on to her knee and stared into her anxious face.

"Then you are beginning to love me a little, aren't you?" she asked softly, putting her arms round him.

"Yes," he said decidedly. "I love you very much already."

Four hundred times a minute sounded a very great deal of wing-flapping; but Jimbo practised eagerly, and though at first he could only manage about twice a second, or one hundred and twenty times a minute, he found this increased very soon to a great deal more, and before long he was able to do the full four hundred, though only for a few minutes at a time.

He stuck to it pluckily, getting stronger every day. The governess encouraged him as much as possible, but there was very little room for her while he was at work, and he found the best way to practise was at night when she was out of the way. She told him that a large bird moved its wings about four times a second, two up-strokes and two down-strokes; but a small bird like a partridge moved its wings so rapidly it was impossible for the eye to distinguish or count the strokes. A middle course of four hundred suited his own case best, and he bent all his energies to acquire it.

He also learned that the convex outside curve of wings allowed the wind to escape over them, while the under side, being concave, held every breath. Thus the upward stroke did not simply counterbalance the downward and keep him stationary. Moreover, she showed him how the feathers underlapped each other so that the downward stroke pressed them closely together to hold the wind, whereas in the upward stroke they opened and separated, letting the air slip easily through them, thus offering less resistance to the atmosphere.

By the end of a week Jimbo had practised so hard that he could keep himself off the floor in mid-air for half an hour at a time, and even then without feeling any great fatigue. His excitement became intense; and, meanwhile, in his body on the nursery bed, though he did not know it, the fever was reaching its crisis. He could think of nothing else but the joys of flying, and what the first, awful plunge would be like, and when Miss Lake came up to him one afternoon and whispered something in his ear, he was so wildly happy that he hugged her for several minutes without the slightest coaxing.

“It’s bright and clear,” she explained, “and Fright will not come after us, for he fears the light, and can only fly on dark and gloomy nights.”

“So we can start —— ?” he stammered joyfully.

“To-night,” she answered, “for our first practice-flight.”

CHAPTER X. THE PLUNGE

TO ENTER THE world of wings is to enter a new state of existence. The apparent loss of weight; the ability to attain full speed in a few seconds, and to stop suddenly in a headlong rush without fear of collapse; the power to steer instantly in any direction by merely changing the angle of the body; the altered and enormous view of the green world below — looking down upon forests, seas and clouds; the easy voluptuous rhythm of rising and falling in long, swinging undulations; and a hundred other things that simply defy description and can be appreciated only by actual experience, these are some of the delights of the new world of wings and flying. And the fearful joy of very high speed, especially when the exhilaration of escape is added to it, means a condition little short of real ecstasy.

Yet Jimbo's first flight, the governess had been careful to tell him, could not be the flight of final escape; for, even if the wings proved equal to a prolonged effort, escape was impossible until there was somewhere safe to escape to. So it was understood that the practice flights might be long, or might be short; the important thing, meanwhile, was to learn to fly as well as possible. For skilled flying is very different to mere headlong rushing, and both courage and perseverance are necessary to acquire it.

With rare common sense Miss Lake had said very little about the possibility of failure. Having warned him about the importance of not falling, she had then stopped, and the power of suggestion had been allowed to work only in the right direction of certain success. While the boy knew that the first plunge from the window would be a moment fraught with the highest danger, his mind only recognised the mere off-chance of falling and being caught. He felt confidence in himself, and by so much, therefore, were the chances of disaster lessened.

For the rest of the afternoon Jimbo saw nothing of his faithful companion; he spent the time practising and resting, and when weary of everything else, he went to the window and indulged in thrilling calculations about the exact height from the ground. A drop of three storeys into a paved courtyard with a monster waiting to catch him, and a high wall too close to allow a proper swing, was an alarming matter from any point of view. Fortunately, his mind dwelt more on the delight of prospective flight and freedom than on the chances of being caught.

The yard lay hot and naked in the afternoon glare and the enclosing wall had never looked more formidable; but from his lofty perch Jimbo could see beyond into soft hayfields and smiling meadows, yellow with cowslips and buttercups. Everything that flew he watched with absorbing interest: swift blackbirds, whistling as they went, and crows, their wings purple in the sunshine. The song of the larks, invisible in the sea of blue air sent a thrill of happiness through him — he, too, might soon know something of that glad music — and even the stately flight of the butterflies, which occasionally ventured over into the yard, stirred anticipations in him of joys to come.

The day waned slowly. The butterflies vanished; the rooks sailed homewards through the sunset; the wind dropped away, and the shadows of the high elms lengthened gradually and fell across the window.

The mysterious hour of the dusk, when the standard of reality changes and other worlds come close and listen, began to work its subtle spell upon his soul. Imperceptibly the shadows deepened as the veil of night drew silently across the sky. A gentle breathing filled the air; trees and fields were composing themselves to sleep; stars were peeping; wings were being folded.

But the boy’s wings, trembling with life to the very tips of their long feathers, these were not being folded. Charged with excitement, like himself, they were gathering all their forces for the supreme effort of their first journey out into the open spaces where they might touch the secret sources of their own magical life.

For a long, long time he waited; but at last the trap-door lifted and Miss Lake appeared above the floor. The moment she stood in the room he noticed that her wings came through two little slits in her gown and folded down close to the body. They almost touched the ground.

“Hush!” she whispered, holding up a warning finger.

She came over on tiptoe and they began to talk in low whispers.

“He’s on the watch; we must speak very quietly. We couldn’t have a better night for it. The wind’s in the south and the moon won’t be up till we’re well on our way.”

Now that the actual moment was so near the boy felt something of fear steal over him. The night seemed so vast and terrible all of a sudden — like an immense black ocean with no friendly islands where they could fold their wings and rest.

“Don’t waste your strength thinking,” whispered the governess. “When the time comes, act quickly, that’s all!”

She went over to the window and peered out cautiously, after a while beckoning the child to join her.

“He is there,” she murmured in his ear. Jimbo could only make out an indistinct shadowy object crouching under the wall, and he was not even positive of that.

“Does he know we’re going?” he asked in an awed whisper.

“He’s there on the chance,” she muttered, drawing back into the room. “When there’s a possibility of any one getting frightened he’s bound to be lurking about somewhere near. That’s Fright all over. But he can’t hurt you,” she added, “because you’re not going to get frightened. Besides, he can only fly when it’s dark; and to-night we shall have the moon.”

“I’m not afraid,” declared the boy in spite of a rather fluttering heart.

“Are you ready?” was all she said.

At last, then, the moment had come. It was actually beside him, waiting, full of mystery and wonder, with alarm not far behind. The sun was buried below the horizon of the world, and the dusk had deepened into night. Stars were shining overhead; the leaves were motionless; not a breath stirred; the earth was silent and waiting.

“Yes, I’m ready,” he whispered, almost inaudibly.

“Then listen,” she said, “and I’ll tell you exactly what to do: Jump upwards from the window ledge as high as you can, and the moment you begin to drop, open your wings and strike with all your might. You’ll rise at once.

The thing to remember is to *rise as quickly as possible*, because the wall prevents a long, easy, sweeping rise; and, whatever happens, you must clear that wall!"

"I shan't touch the ground then?" asked a faint little voice.

"Of course not! You'll get near it, but the moment you use your wings you'll stop sinking, and rise up, up, up, ever so quickly."

"And where to?"

"To me. You'll see me waiting for you above the trees. Steering will come naturally; it's quite easy."

Jimbo was already shaking with excitement. He could not help it. And he knew, in spite of all Miss Lake's care, that Fright was waiting in the yard to catch him if he fell, or sank too near the ground.

"I'll go first," added the governess, "and the moment you see that I've cleared the wall you must jump after me. Only do not keep me waiting!"

The girl stood for a minute in silence, arranging her wings. Her fingers were trembling a little. Suddenly she drew the boy to her and kissed him passionately.

"Be brave!" she whispered, looking searchingly into his eyes, "and strike hard — you can't possibly fail."

In another minute she was climbing out of the window. For one second he saw her standing on the narrow ledge with black space at her feet; the next, without even a cry, she sprang out into the darkness, and was gone.

Jimbo caught his breath and ran up to see. She dropped like a stone, turning over sideways in the air, and then at once her wings opened on both sides and she righted. The darkness swallowed her up for a moment so that he could not see clearly, and only heard the threshing of the huge feathers; but it was easy to tell from the sound that she was rising.

Then suddenly a black form cleared the wall and rose swiftly in a magnificent sweep into the sky, and he saw her outlined darkly against the stars above the high elm tree. She was safe. Now it was his turn.

"Act quickly! Don't think!" rang in his ears. If only he could do it all as quickly as she had done it. But insidious fear had been working all the time below the surface, and his refusal to recognise it could not prevent it weakening his muscles and checking his power of decision. Fortunately something of his Older Self came to the rescue. The emotions of fear, excitement, and intense anticipation combined to call up the powers of his deeper being: the boy trembled horribly, but the old, experienced part of him sang with joy.

Cautiously he began to climb out on to the window-sill; first one foot and then the other hung over the edge. He sat there, staring down into black space beneath.

For a minute he hesitated; despair rushed over him in a wave; he could never take that awful jump into emptiness and darkness. It was impossible. Better be a prisoner for ever than risk so fearful a plunge. He felt cold, weak, frightened, and made a half-movement back into the room. The wings caught somehow between his legs and nearly flung him headlong into the yard.

"Jimbo! I'm waiting for you!" came at that moment in a faint cry from the stars, and the sound gave him just the impetus he needed before it was too late. He could not disappoint her — his faithful friend. Such a thing was impossible.

He stood upright on the ledge, his hands clutching the window-sash behind, balancing as best he could. He clenched his fists, drew a deep, long breath, and jumped upwards and forwards into the air.

Up rushed the darkness with a shriek; the air whistled in his ears; he dropped at fearful speed into nothingness.

At first everything was forgotten — wings, instructions, warnings, and all. He even forgot to open his wings at all, and in another second he would have been dashed upon the hard paving-stones of the courtyard where his great enemy lay waiting to seize him.

But just in the nick of time he remembered, and the long hours of practice bore fruit. Out flew the great red wings in a tremendous sweep on both sides of him, and he began to strike with every atom of strength he possessed. He had dropped to within six feet of the ground; but at once the strokes began to tell, and oh, magical sensation! he felt himself rising easily, lightly, swiftly.

A very slight effort of those big wings would have been sufficient to lift him out of danger, but in his terror and excitement he quite miscalculated their power, and in a single moment he was far out of reach of the dangerous yard and anything it contained. But the mad rush of it all made his head swim; he felt dizzy and confused, and, instead of clearing the wall, he landed on the top of it and clung to the crumbling coping with hands and feet, panting and breathless.

The dizziness was only momentary, however. In less than a minute he was on his feet and in the act of taking his second leap into space. This time it came more easily. He dropped, and the field swung up to meet him. Soon the powerful strokes of his wings drove him at great speed upwards, and he bounded ever higher towards the stars.

Overhead, the governess hovered like an immense bird, and as he rose up he caught the sound of her wings beating the air, while far beneath him, he heard with a shudder a voice like the rushing of a great river. It made him increase his pace, and in another minute he found himself among the little whirlwinds that raced about from the beating of Miss Lake's great wings.

"Well done!" cried the delighted governess. "Safe at last! Now we can fly to our heart's content!"

Jimbo flew up alongside, and together they dashed forward into the night.

CHAPTER XI. THE FIRST FLIGHT

THERE WAS NOT much talking at first. The stress of conflicting emotions was so fierce that the words choked themselves in his throat, and the desire for utterance found its only vent in hard breathing.

The intoxication of rapid motion carried him away headlong in more senses than one. At first he felt as if he never would be able to keep up; then it seemed as if he never would get down again. For with wings it is almost easier to rise than to fall, and a first flight is, before anything else, a series of vivid and audacious surprises.

For a long time Jimbo was so dizzy with excitement and the novelty of the sensation that he forgot his deliverer altogether.

And what a flight it was! Instead of the steady race of the carrier pigeon, or of the rooks homeward bound at evening, it was the see-saw motion of the wren's swinging journey across the lawn; only heavier, faster, and with more terrific impetus. Up and down, each time with a rise and fall of twenty feet, he careered, whistling through the summer night; at the drop of each curve, so low that the scents of dewy grass rose into his face; at the crest of it, so high that the trees and hedges often became mere blots upon the dark surface of the earth.

The fields rushed by beneath him; the white roads flashed past like streaks of snow. Sometimes he shot across sheets of water and felt the cooler air strike his cheeks; sometimes over sheltered meadows, where the sunshine had slept all day and the air was still soft and warm; on and on, as easily as rain dropping from the sky, or wind rushing earthwards from between the clouds. Everything flew past him at an astonishing rate — everything but the bright stars that gazed calmly down overhead; and when he looked up and saw their steadfastness it helped to keep within bounds the fine alarm of this first excursion into the great vault of the sky.

"Gently, child!" gasped Miss Lake behind him. "We shall never keep it up at this rate."

“Oh! but it’s so wonderful,” he cried, drawing in the air loudly between his teeth, and shaking his wings rapidly like a hawk before it drops.

The pace slackened a little and the girl drew up alongside. For some time they flew forward together in silence.

They had been skirting the edge of a wood, when suddenly the trees fell away and Jimbo gave a scream and rose fifty feet into the air with a single bound. Straight in front of him loomed an immense, glaring disc that seemed to swim suddenly up into the sky above the trees. It hung there before his eyes and dazzled him.

“It’s only the moon,” cried Miss Lake from below.

Jimbo dropped through the air to her side again with a gasp.

“I thought it was a big hole in the sky with fire rushing through,” he explained breathlessly.

The boy stared, full of wonder and delight, at the huge flaming circle that seemed to fill half the heavens in front of him.

“Look out!” cried the governess, seizing his hand.

Whish! whew! whirr! A large bird whipped past them like some winged imp of darkness, vanishing among the trees far below. There would certainly have been a collision but for the girl’s energetic interference.

“You must be on the look-out for these night-birds,” she said. “They fly so unexpectedly, and, of course, they don’t see us properly. Telegraph wires and church steeples are bad too, but then we shan’t fly over cities much. Keep a good height, it’s safer.”

They altered their course a little, flying at a different angle, so that the moon no longer dazzled them. Steering came quite easily by turning the body, and Jimbo still led the way, the governess following heavily and with a mighty business of wings and flapping.

It was something to remember, the glory of that first journey through the air. Sixty miles an hour, and scarcely an effort! Skimming the long ridges of the hills and rushing through the pure air of mountain tops; threading the star-beams; bathing themselves from head to foot in an ocean of cool, clean wind; swimming on the waves of viewless currents — currents warmed only by the magic of the stars, and kissed by the burning lips of flying meteors.

Far below them the moonlight touched the fields with silver and the murmur of the world rose faintly to their ears, trembling, as it were, with the inarticulate dreams of millions. Everywhere about them thrilled and sang the unspeakable power of the night. The mystery of its great heart seemed laid bare before them.

It was like a wonder-journey in some Eastern fairy tale. Sometimes they passed through zones of sweeter air, perfumed with the scents of hay and wild flowers; at others, the fresh, damp odour of ploughed fields rose up to them; or, again, they went spinning over leagues of forest where the tree-tops stretched beneath them like the surface of a wide, green sea, sleeping in the moonlight. And, when they crossed open water, the stars shone reflected in their faces; and all the while the wings, whirring and purring softly through the darkness, made pleasant music in their ears.

“I’m tired,” declared Jimbo presently.

“Then we’ll go down and rest,” said his breathless companion with obvious relief.

She showed him how to spread his wings, sloping them towards the ground at an angle that enabled him to shoot rapidly downwards, at the same time regulating his speed by the least upward tilt. It was a glorious motion, without effort or difficulty, though the pace made it hard to keep the eyes open, and breathing became almost impossible. They dropped to within ten feet of the ground and then shot forward again.

But, while the boy was watching his companion’s movements, and paying too little attention to his own, there rose suddenly before him out of the ground a huge, bulky form of something — and crash — he flew headlong into it.

Fortunately it was only a haystack; but the speed at which he was going lodged his head several inches under the thatch, whence he projected horizontally into space, feet, arms, and wings gyrating furiously. The governess, however, soon released him with much laughter, and they dropped down into the fallen hay upon the ground with no worse result than a shaking.

“Oh, what a lark!” he cried, shaking the hay out of his feathers, and rubbing his head rather ruefully.

“Except that larks are hardly night-birds,” she laughed, helping him.

They settled with folded wings in the shadow of the haystack; and the big moon, peeping over the edge at them, must have surely wondered to see such a funny couple, in such a place, and at such an hour.

“Mushrooms!” suddenly cried the governess, springing to her feet. “There must be lots in this field. I’ll go and pick some while you rest a bit.”

Off she went, trapesing over the field in the moonlight, her wings folded behind her, her body bent a little forward as she searched, and in ten minutes she came back with her hands full. That was undoubtedly the time to enjoy mushrooms at their best, with the dew still on their tight little jackets, and the sweet odour of the earth caught under their umbrellas.

Soon they were all eaten, and Jimbo was lying back on a pile of hay, his shoulders against the wall of the stack, and his wings gathered round him like a warm cloak of feathers. He felt cosy and dozy, full of mushrooms inside and covered with hay and feathers outside. The governess had once told him that a sort of open-air sleep sometimes came after a long flight. It was, of course, not a real sleep, but a state in which everything about oneself is forgotten; no dreams, no movement, no falling asleep and waking up in the ordinary sense, but a condition of deep repose in which recuperation is very great.

Jimbo would have been greatly interested, no doubt, to know that his real body on the bed had also just been receiving nourishment, and was now passing into a quieter and less feverish condition. The parallel always held true between himself and his body in the nursery, but he could not know anything about this, and only supposed that it was this open-air sleep that he felt gently stealing over him.

It brought at first strange thoughts that carried him far away to other woods and other fields. While Miss Lake sat beside him eating her mushrooms, his mind was drawn off to some other little folk. But it was always stopped just short of them. He never could quite see their faces. Yet his thoughts continued their search, groping in the darkness; he felt sure he ought to be sharing his adventures with these other little persons, whoever they were; they ought to have been sitting beside him at that very moment, eating mushrooms, combing their wings, comparing the length of their feathers, and snuggling with him into the warm hay.

But they obstinately hovered just outside his memory, and refused to come in and surrender themselves. He could not remember who they were, and his yearnings went unsatisfied up to the stars, as yearnings generally do, while his thoughts returned weary from their search and he yielded to the seductions of the soothing open-air sleep.

The moon, meanwhile, rose higher and higher, drawing a silver veil over the stars. Upon the field the dews of midnight fell silently. A faint mist rose from the ground and covered the flowers in their dim seclusion under the hedgerows. The hours slipped away swiftly.

“Come on, Jimbo, boy!” cried the governess at length. “The moon’s below the hills, and we must be off!”

The boy turned and stared sleepily at her from his nest in the hay.

“We’ve got miles to go. Remember the speed we came at!” she explained, getting up and arranging her wings.

Jimbo got up slowly and shook himself.

“I’ve been miles away,” he said dreamily, “miles and miles. But I’m ready to start at once.”

They looked about for a raised place to jump from. A ladder stood against the other side of the haystack. The governess climbed up it and Jimbo followed her drowsily. Hand in hand they sprang into the air from the edge of the thatched roof, and their wings spread out like sails to catch the wind. It smote their faces pleasantly as they plunged downwards and forwards, and the exhilarating rush of cool air banished from the boy’s head the last vestige of the open-air sleep.

“We must keep up a good pace,” cried the governess, taking a stream and the hedge beyond in a single sweep. “There’s a light in the east already.”

As she spoke a dog howled in a farmyard beneath them, and she shot upwards as though lifted by a sudden gust of wind.

“We’re too low,” she shouted from above. “That dog felt us near. Come up higher. It’s easier flying, and we’ve got a long way to go.”

Jimbo followed her up till they were several hundred feet above the earth and the keen air stung their cheeks. Then she led him still higher, till the meadows looked like the squares on a chess-board and the trees were like little toy shrubs. Here they rushed along at a tremendous speed, too fast to speak, their wings churning the air into little whirlwinds and eddies as they passed, whizzing, whistling, tearing through space.

The fields, however, were still dim in the shadows that precede the dawn, and the stars only just beginning to fade, when they saw the dark outline of the Empty House below them, and began carefully to descend. Soon they topped the high elms, startling the rooks into noisy cawing, and then, skimming the wall, sailed stealthily on outspread wings across the yard.

Cautiously dropping down to the level of the window, they crawled over the sill into the dark little room, and folded their wings.

CHAPTER XII. THE FOUR WINDS

THE GOVERNESS LEFT the boy to his own reflections almost immediately. He spent the hours thinking and resting; going over again in his mind every incident of the great flight and wondering when the real, final escape would come, and what it would be like. Thus, between the two states of excitement he forgot for a while that he was still a prisoner, and the spell of horror was lifted temporarily from his heart.

The day passed quickly, and when Miss Lake appeared in the evening, she announced that there could be no flying again that night, and that she wished instead to give him important instruction for the future. There were rules, and signs, and times which he must learn carefully. The time might come when he would have to fly alone, and he must be prepared for everything.

“And the first thing I have to tell you,” she said, exactly as though it was a schoolroom, “is: *Never fly over the sea.* Our kind of wings quickly absorb the finer particles of water and get clogged and heavy over the sea. You finally cannot resist the drawing power of the water, and you will be dragged down and drowned. So be very careful! When you are flying high it is often difficult to know where the land ends and the sea begins, especially on moonless nights. But you can always be certain of one thing: if there are no sounds below you — hoofs, voices, wheels, wind in trees — you are over the sea.”

“Yes,” said the child, listening with great attention. “And what else?”

“The next thing is: *Don’t fly too high.* Though we fly like birds, remember we are not birds, and we can fly where they can’t. We can fly in the ether — —”

“Where’s that?” he interrupted, half afraid of the sound.

She stooped and kissed him, laughing at his fear.

“There is nothing to be frightened about,” she explained. “The air gets lighter and lighter as you go higher, till at last it stops altogether. Then there’s only ether left. Birds can’t fly in ether because it’s too thin. We can, because — —”

“Is that why it was good for me to get lighter and thinner?” he interrupted again in a puzzled voice.

“Partly, yes.”

“And what happens in the ether, please?” It still frightened him a little.

“Nothing — except that if you fly too high you reach a point where the earth ceases to hold you, and you dash off into space. Weight leaves you then, and the wings move without effort. Faster and faster you rush upwards, till you lose all control of your movements, and then — —”

Miss Lake hesitated a moment.

“And then —— ?” asked the fascinated child.

“You may never come down again,” she said slowly. “You may be sucked into anything that happens to come your way — a comet, or a shooting star, or the moon.”

“I should like a shooting star best,” observed the boy, deeply interested. “The moon frightens me, I think. It looks so dreadfully clean.”

“You won’t like any of them when the time comes,” she laughed. “No one ever gets out again who once gets in. But you’ll never be caught that way after what I’ve told you,” she added, with decision.

“I shall never want to fly as high as that, I’m sure,” said Jimbo. “And now, please, what comes next?”

The next thing, she went on to explain, was the *weather*, which, to all flying creatures, was of the utmost importance. Before starting for a flight he must always carefully consider the state of the sky, and the direction in which he wished to go. For this purpose he must master the meaning and character of the Four Winds and be able to recognise them in a moment.

“Once you know these,” she said, “you cannot possibly go wrong. To make it easier, I’ve put each Wind into a little simple rhyme, for you.”

“I’m listening,” he said eagerly.

“The North Wind is one of the worst and most dangerous, because it blows so much faster than you think. It’s taken you ten miles before you think you’ve gone two. In starting with a North Wind, always fly *against* it; then it will bring you home easily. If you fly *with* it, you may be swept so far that the day will catch you before you can get home; and then you’re as good as lost. Even birds fly warily when this wind is about. It has no lulls or resting-places in it; it blows steadily on and on, and conquers everything it comes against — everything except the mountains.”

“And its rhyme?” asked Jimbo, all ears.

“It will show you the joy of the birds, my child, You shall know their terrible bliss; It will teach you to hide, when the night is wild, From the storm’s too passionate kiss. For the Wind of the North Is a volleying forth That will lift you with springs In the heart of your wings, And may sweep you away To the edge of the day. So, beware of the Wind of the North, my child, Fly not with the Wind of the North!”

“I think I like him all the same,” said Jimbo. “But I’ll remember always to fly against him.”

“The East Wind is worse still, for it hurts,” continued the governess. “It stings and cuts. It’s like the breath of an ice-creature; it brings hail and sleet and cold rain that beat down wings and blind the eyes. Like the North Wind, too, it is dreadfully swift and full of little whirlwinds, and may easily carry you into the light of day that would prove your destruction. Avoid it always; no hiding-place is safe from it. This is the rhyme:

“It will teach you the secrets the eagles know Of the tempests’ and whirlwinds’ birth; And the magical weaving of rain and snow As they fall from the sky to the earth. But an Easterly wind Is for ever unkind; It will torture and twist you And never assist you, But will drive you with might To the verge of the night. So, beware of the Wind of the East, my child, Fly not with the Wind of the East.”

“The West Wind is really a very nice and jolly wind in itself,” she went on, “but it’s dangerous for a special reason: *it will carry you out to sea*. The Empty House is only a few miles from the coast, and a strong West Wind would take you there almost before you had time to get down to earth again.

And there’s no use struggling against a really steady West Wind, for it’s simply tireless. Luckily, it rarely blows at night, but goes down with the sun. Often, too, it blows hard to the coast, and then drops suddenly, leaving you among the fogs and mists of the sea.”

“Rather a nice, exciting sort of wind though,” remarked Jimbo, waiting for the rhyme.

“So, at last, you shall know from their lightest breath To which heaven each wind belongs; And shall master their meaning for life or death By the shout of their splendid songs. Yet the Wind of the West Is a wind unblest; It is lifted and kissed By the spirits of mist; It will clasp you and flee To the wastes of the sea. So, beware of the Wind of the West, my child, Fly not with the Wind of the West!”

“A jolly wind,” observed Jimbo again. “But that doesn’t leave much over to fly with,” he added sadly. “They all seem dangerous or cruel.”

“Yes,” she laughed, “and so they are till you can master them — then they’re kind, only one that’s really always safe and kind is the Wind of the South. It’s a sweet, gentle wind, beloved of all that flies, and you can’t possibly mistake it. You can tell it at once by the murmuring way it stirs the grasses and the tops of the trees. Its taste is soft and sweet in the mouth like wine, and there’s always a faint perfume about it like gardens in summer. It is the joy of this wind that makes all flying things sing. With a South Wind you can go anywhere and no harm can come to you.”

“Dear old South Wind,” cried Jimbo, rubbing his hands with delight. “I hope it will blow soon.”

“Its rhyme is very easy, too, though you will always be able to tell it without that,” she added.

“For this is the favourite Wind of all, Beloved of the stars and night; In the rustle of leaves you shall hear it call To the passionate joys of flight. It will carry you forth in its wonderful hair To the far-away courts of the sky, And the breath of its lips is a murmuring prayer For the safety of all who fly. For the Wind of the South Is like wine in the mouth, With its whispering showers And perfume of flowers, When it falls like a sigh From the heart of the sky.”

“Oh!” interrupted Jimbo, rubbing his hands, “that *is* nice. That’s *my* wind!”

“It will bear you aloft With a pressure so soft That you hardly shall guess Whose the gentle caress.”

“Hooray!” he cried again.

“It’s the kindest of weathers For our red feathers, And blows open the way To the Gardens of Play. So, fly out with the Wind of the South, my child, With the wonderful Wind of the South.”

“Oh, I love the South Wind already,” he shouted, clapping his hands again. “I hope it will blow very, *very* soon.”

“It may be rising even now,” answered the governess, leading him to the window. But, as they gazed at the summer landscape lying in the fading light of the sunset, all was still and resting. The air was hushed, the leaves motionless. There was no call just then to flight from among the tree-tops, and he went back into the room disappointed.

“But why can’t we escape at once?” he asked again, after he had given his promise to remember all she had told him, and to be extra careful if he ever went out flying alone.

“Jimbo, dear, I’ve told you before, it’s because your body isn’t ready for you yet,” she answered patiently. “There’s hardly any circulation in it, and if you forced your way back now the shock might stop your heart beating altogether. Then you’d be really dead, and escape would be impossible.”

The boy sat on the edge of the bed staring intently at her while she spoke. Something clutched at his heart. He felt his Older Self, with its greater knowledge, rising up out of the depths within him. The child struggled with the old soul for possession.

“Have *you* got any circulation?” he asked abruptly at length. “I mean, has *your* heart stopped beating?”

But the smile called up by his words froze on her lips. She crossed to the window and stood with her back to the fading light, avoiding his eyes.

“My case, Jimbo, is a little different from yours,” she said presently. “The important thing is to make certain about your escape. Never mind about me.”

“But escape without you is nothing,” he said, the Older Self now wholly in possession. “I simply wouldn’t go. I’d rather stay here — with you.”

The governess made no reply, but she turned her back to the room and leaned out of the window. Jimbo fancied he heard a sob. He felt a great big heart swelling up within his little body, and he crossed over beside her. For some minutes they stood there in silence, watching the stars that were already shining faintly in the sky.

“Whatever happens,” he said, nestling against her, “I shan’t go from here without you. Remember that!”

He was going to say a lot more, but somehow or other, when she stooped over to kiss his head — he hardly came up to her shoulder — it all ran suddenly out of his mind, and the little child dropped back into possession again. The tide of his thoughts that seemed about to rise, fast and furious, sank away completely, leaving his mind a clean-washed slate without a single image; and presently, without any more words, the governess left him and went through the trap-door into the silence and mystery of the house below.

Several hours later, about the middle of the night, there came over him a most disagreeable sensation of nausea and dizziness. The ground rose and fell beneath his feet, the walls swam about sideways, and the ceiling slid off into the air. It only lasted a few minutes, however, and Jimbo knew from what she had told him that it was the Flying Sickness which always followed the first long flight.

But, about the same time, another little body, lying in a night-nursery bed, was being convulsed with a similar attack; and the sickness of the little prisoner in the Empty House had its parallel, strangely enough, in the half-tenanted body miles away in a different world.

CHAPTER XIII. PLEASURES OF FLIGHT

SINCE THE NIGHT when Jimbo had nearly fallen into the yard and risked capture, Fright, the horrible owner of the house, had kept himself well out of the way, and had allowed himself to be neither seen nor heard.

But the boy was not foolish enough to fall into the other trap, and imagine, therefore, that He did not know what was going on. Jimbo felt quite sure that He was only waiting his chance; and the governess's avoidance of the subject tended to confirm this supposition.

"He's disappeared somewhere and taken the children with him," she declared when he questioned her. "And now you know almost as much as I do."

"But not quite!" he laughed mischievously.

"Enough, though," she replied. "We want all our energy for escape when it comes. Don't bother about anything else for the moment."

During the day, when he was alone, his thoughts and fancies often terrified him; but at night, when he was rushing through the heavens, the intense delight of flying drove all minor emotions out of his consciousness, and he even forgot his one great desire — to escape. One night, however, something happened that brought it back more keenly than ever.

He had been out flying alone, but had not gone far when he noticed that an easterly wind had begun to rise and was blowing steadily behind him. With the recent instructions fresh in his head, he thought it wiser to turn homewards rather than fight his way back later against a really strong wind from this quarter. Flying low along the surface of the fields so as to avoid its full force, he suddenly rose up with a good sweep and settled on the top of the wall enclosing the yard.

The moonlight lay bright over everything. His approach had been very quiet. He was just about to sail across to the window when something caught his eye, and he hesitated a moment, and stared.

Something was moving at the other end of the courtyard.

It seemed to him that the moonlight suddenly grew pale and ghastly; the night air turned chilly; shivers began to run up and down his back.

He folded his wings and watched.

At the end of the yard he saw several figures moving busily to and fro in the shadow of the wall. They were very small; but close beside them all the time stood a much larger figure which seemed to be directing their movements. There was no need to look twice; it was impossible to mistake these terrible little people and their hideous overseer. Horror rushed over the boy, and a wild scream was out in the night before he could possibly prevent it. At the same moment a cloud passed over the face of the moon and the yard was shrouded in darkness.

A minute later the cloud passed off; but while it was still too dark to see clearly, Jimbo was conscious of a rushing, whispering sound in the air, and something went past him at a tremendous pace into the sky. The wind stirred his hair as it passed, and a moment later he heard voices far away in the distance — up in the sky or within the house he could not tell — singing mournfully the song he now knew so well: —

We dance with phantoms and with shadows play.

But when he looked down at the yard he saw that it was deserted, and the corner by the little upright stones lay in the clear moonlight, empty of figures, large or small.

Shivering with fright, he flew across to the window ledge, and almost tumbled into the arms of the governess who was standing close inside.

“What’s the matter, child?” she asked in a voice that trembled a little.

And, still shuddering, he told her how he thought he had seen the children working by the gravestones. All her efforts to calm him at first failed, but after a bit she drew his thoughts to pleasanter things, and he was not so certain after all that he had not been deceived by the cunning of the moonlight and the shadows.

A long interval passed, and no further sign was given by the owner of the house or his band of frightened children. Jimbo soon lost himself again in the delights of flying and the joy of his increasing powers.

Most of all he enjoyed the quiet, starlit nights before the moon was up; for the moon dazzled the eyes in the rarefied air where they flew, whereas the stars gave just enough light to steer by without making it uncomfortable.

Moreover, the moon often filled him with a kind of faint terror, as of death; he could never gaze at her white face for long without feeling that something entered his heart with those silver rays — something that boded him no good. He never spoke of this to the governess; indeed, he only recognised it himself when the moon was near the full; but it lay always in the depths of his being, and he felt dimly that it would have to be reckoned with before he could really escape for good. He took no liberties when the moon was at the full.

He loved to hover — for he had learned by this time that most difficult of all flying feats; to hold the body vertical and whirr the wings without rising or advancing — he loved to hover on windless nights over ponds and rivers and see the stars reflected in their still pools. Indeed, sometimes he hovered till he dropped, and only saved himself from a wetting by sweeping up in a tremendous curve along the surface of the water, and thus up into the branches of the trees where the governess sat waiting for him. And then, after a little rest, they would launch forth again and fly over fields and woods, sometimes even as far as the hills that ran down the coast of the sea itself.

They usually flew at a height of about a thousand feet, and the earth passed beneath them like a great streaked shadow. But as soon as the moon was up the whole country turned into a fairyland of wonder. Her light touched the woods with a softened magic, and the fields and hedges became frosted most delicately. Beneath a thin transparency of mist the water shone with a silvery brilliance that always enabled them to distinguish it from the land at any height; while the farms and country houses were swathed in tender grey shadows through which the trees and chimneys pierced in slender lines of black. It was wonderful to watch the shadows everywhere spinning their blue veil of distance that lent even to the commonest objects something of enchantment and mystery.

Those were wonderful journeys they made together into the pathways of the silent night, along the unknown courses, into that hushed centre where they could almost hear the beatings of her great heart — like winged thoughts searching the huge vault, till the boy ached with the sensations of speed and distance, and the old yellow moon seemed to stagger across the sky.

Sometimes they rose very high into freezing air, so high that the earth became a dull shadow specked with light. They saw the trains running in all directions with thin threads of smoke shining in the glare of the open fire-boxes. But they seemed very tiny trains indeed, and stirred in him no recollections of the semi-annual visits to London town when he went to the dentist, and lunched with the dreaded grandmother or the stiff and fashionable aunts.

And when they came down again from these perilous heights, the scents of the earth rose to meet them, the perfume of woods and fields, and the smells of the open country.

There was, too, the delight, the curious delight of windy nights, when the wind smote and buffeted them, knocking them suddenly sideways, whistling through their feathers as if it wanted to tear them from their sockets; rushing furiously up underneath their wings with repeated blows; turning them round, and backwards and forwards, washing them from head to foot in a tempestuous sea of rapid and unexpected motion.

It was, of course, far easier to fly with a wind than without one. The difficulty with a violent wind was to get down — not to keep up. The gusts drove up against the under-surfaces of their wings and kept them afloat, so that by merely spreading them like sails they could sweep and circle without a single stroke. Jimbo soon learned to manœuvre so that he could turn the strength of a great wind to his own purposes, and revel in its boisterous waves and currents like a strong swimmer in a rough sea.

And to listen to the wind as it swept backwards and forwards over the surface of the earth below was another pleasure; for everything it touched gave out a definite note. He soon got to know the long sad cry from the willows, and the little whispering in the tops of the poplar trees; the crisp, silvery rattle of the birches, and the deep roar from oaks and beech woods. The sound of a forest was like the shouting of the sea.

But far more lovely, when they descended a little, and the wind was more gentle, were the low pipings among the reeds and the little wayward murmurs under the hedgerows.

The pine trees, however, drew them most, with their weird voices, now far away, now near, rising upwards with a wind of sighs.

There was a grove of these trees that trooped down to the waters of a little lake in the hills, and to this spot they often flew when the wind was low and the music likely, therefore, to be to their taste. For, even when there was no perceptible wind, these trees seemed always full of mysterious, mournful whisperings; their branches held soft music that never quite died away, even when all other trees were silent and motionless.

Besides these special expeditions, they flew everywhere and anywhere. They visited the birds in their nests in lofty trees, and exchanged the time of night with wise-eyed owls staring out upon them from the ivy. They hovered up the face of great cliffs, and passed the hawks asleep on perilous ledges; skimmed over lonely marshes, frightening the water-birds paddling in and out among the reeds. They followed the windings of streams, singing among the meadows, and flew along the wet sands as they watched the moon rise out of the sea.

These flights were unadulterated pleasure, and Jimbo thought he could never have enough of them.

He soon began to notice, too, that the trees emanated something that affected his own condition. When he sat in their branches this was very noticeable. Currents of force passed from them into himself. And even when he flew over their crests he was aware that some woods exhaled vigorous, life-giving forces, while others tired and depleted him. Nothing was visible actually, but fine waves seemed to beat up against his eyes and thoughts, making him stronger or weaker, happy or melancholy, full of hope and courage, or listless and indifferent.

These emanations of the trees — this giving-forth of their own personal forces — were, of course, very varied in strength and character. Oaks and pines were the best combination, he found, before the stress of a long flight, the former giving him steadiness, and the latter steely endurance and the power to steer in sinuous, swift curves, without taking thought or trouble.

Other trees gave other powers. All gave something. It was impossible to sit among their branches without absorbing some of the subtle and exhilarating tree-life. He soon learned how to gather it all into himself, and turn it to account in his own being.

“Sit quietly,” the governess said. “Let the forces creep in and stir about. Do nothing yourself. Give them time to become part of yourself and mix properly with your own currents. Effort on your part prevents this, and you weaken them without gaining anything yourself.”

Jimbo made all sorts of experiments with trees and rocks and water and fields, learning gradually the different qualities of force they gave forth, and how to use them for himself. Nothing, he found, was really dead. And sometimes he got himself into strange difficulties in the beginning of his attempts to master and absorb these nature-forces.

“Remember,” the governess warned him more than once, when he was inclined to play tricks, “they are in quite a different world to ours. You cannot take liberties with them. Even a sympathetic soul like yourself only touches the fringe of their world. You exchange surface-messages with them, nothing more. Some trees have terrible forces just below the surface. They could extinguish you altogether — absorb you into themselves. Others are naturally hostile. Some are mere tricksters. Others are shifty and treacherous, like the hollies, that move about too much. The oak and the pine and the elm are friendly, and you can always trust them absolutely. But there are others —— !”

She held up a warning finger, and Jimbo’s eyes nearly dropped out of his head.

“No,” she added, in reply to his questions, “you can’t learn all this at once. Perhaps — —” She hesitated a little. “Perhaps, if you don’t escape, we should have time for all manner of adventures among the trees and other things — but then, we *are* going to escape, so there’s no good wasting time over *that*!”

CHAPTER XIV. AN ADVENTURE

BUT MISS LAKE did not always accompany him on these excursions into the night; sometimes he took long flights by himself, and she rather encouraged him in this, saying it would give him confidence in case he ever lost her and was obliged to find his way about alone.

“But I couldn’t get really lost,” he said once to her. “I know the winds perfectly now and the country round for miles, and I never go out in fog ——”

“But these are only practice flights,” she replied. “The flight of escape is a very different matter. I want you to learn all you possibly can so as to be prepared for anything.”

Jimbo felt vaguely uncomfortable when she talked like this.

“But you’ll be with me in the Escape Flight — the final one of all,” he said; “and nothing ever goes wrong when you’re with me.”

“I should like to be always with you,” she answered tenderly, “but it’s well to be prepared for anything, just the same.”

And more than this the boy could never get out of her.

On one of these lonely flights, however, he made the unpleasant discovery that he was being followed.

At first he only imagined there was somebody after him because of the curious vibrations of the very rarefied air in which he flew. Every time his flight slackened and the noise of his own wings grew less, there reached him from some other corner of the sky a sound like the vibrations of large wings beating the air. It seemed behind, and generally below him, but the swishing of his own feathers made it difficult to hear with distinctness, or to be certain of the direction.

Evidently it was a long way off; but now and again, when he took a spurt and then sailed silently for several minutes on outstretched wings, the beating of distant, following feathers seemed unmistakably clear, and he raced on again at full speed more than terrified. Other times, however, when he tried to listen, there was no trace of this other flyer, and then his fear would disappear, and he would persuade himself that it had been imagination. So much on these flights he knew to be imagination — the sentences, voices, and laughter, for instance, that filled the air and sounded so real, yet were actually caused by the wind rushing past his ears, the rhythm of the wing-beats, and the tips of the feathers occasionally rubbing against the sides of his body.

But at last one night the suspicion that he was followed became a certainty.

He was flying far up in the sky, passing over some big city, when the sound rose to his ears, and he paused, sailing on stretched wings, to listen. Looking down into the immense space below, he saw, plainly outlined against the luminous patch above the city, the form of a large flying creature moving by with rapid strokes. The pulsations of its great wings made the air tremble so that he both heard and felt them. It may have been that the vapours of the city distorted the thing, just as the earth's atmosphere magnifies the rising or setting of the moon; but, even so, it was easy to see that it was something a good deal larger than himself, and with a much more powerful flight.

Fortunately, it did not seem this time to be actually on his trail, for it swept by at a great pace, and was soon lost in the darkness far ahead. Perhaps it was only searching for him, and his great height had proved his safety. But in any case he was exceedingly terrified, and at once turned round, pointed his head for the earth, and shot downwards in the direction of the Empty House as fast as ever he could.

But when he spoke to the governess she made light of it, and told him there was nothing to be afraid of. It might have been a flock of hurrying night-birds, she said, or an owl distorted by the city's light, or even his own reflection magnified in water. Anyhow, she felt sure it was not chasing him, and he need pay no attention to it.

Jimbo felt reassured, but not quite satisfied. He knew a flying monster when he saw one; and it was only when he had been for many more flights alone, without its reappearance, that his confidence was fully restored, and he began to forget about it.

Certainly these lonely flights were very much to his taste. His Older Self, with its dim hauntings of a great memory somewhere behind him, took possession then, and he was able to commune with nature in a way that the presence of the governess made impossible. With her his Older Self rarely showed itself above the surface for long; he was always the child. But, when alone, Nature became alive; he drew force from the trees and flowers, and felt that they all shared a common life together. Had he been imprisoned by some wizard of old in a tree-form, knowing of the sunset and the dawn only by the sweet messages that rustled in his branches, the wind could hardly have spoken to him with a more intimate meaning; or the life of the fields, eternally patient, have touched him more nearly with their joys and sorrows. It seemed almost as if, from his leafy cell, he had gazed before this into the shining pools with which the summer rains jewelled the meadows, sending his soul in a stream of unsatisfied yearning up to the stars. It all came back dimly when he heard the wind among the leaves, and carried him off to the woods and fields of an existence far antedating this one ——

And on gentle nights, when the wind itself was half asleep and dreaming, the pine trees drew him most of all, for theirs was the song he loved above all others. He would fly round and round the little grove by the mountain lake, listening for hours together to their sighing voices. But the governess was never told of this, whatever she may have guessed; for it seemed to him a joy too deep for words, the pains and sweetness being mingled too mysteriously for him ever to express in awkward sentences. Moreover, it all passed away and was forgotten the moment the child took possession and usurped the older memory.

One night, when the moon was high and the air was cool and fragrant after the heat of the day, Jimbo felt a strong desire to get off by himself for a long flight. He was full of energy, and the space-craving cried to be satisfied. For several days he had been content with slow, stupid expeditions with the governess.

“I’m off alone to-night,” he cried, balancing on the window ledge, “but I’ll be back before dawn. Good-bye!”

She kissed him, as she always did now, and with her good-bye ringing in his ears, he dropped from the window and rose rapidly over the elms and away from earth.

This night, for some reason, the stars and the moon seemed to draw him, and with tireless wings he mounted up, up, up, to a height he had never reached before. The intoxication of the strong night air rose into his brain and he dashed forward ever faster, with a mad delight, into the endless space before him.

Mile upon mile lay behind him as he rushed onwards, always pointing a little on the upward slope, drunk with speed. The earth faded away to a dark expanse of shadow beneath him, and he no longer was conscious of the deep murmur that usually flowed steadily upwards from its surface. He had often before risen out of reach of the earth noises, but never so far that this dull reverberating sound, combined of all the voices of the world merged together, failed to make itself heard. To-night, however, he heard nothing. The stars above his head changed from yellow to diamond white, and the cold air stung his cheeks and brought the water to his eyes.

But at length the governess's warning, as he explored these forbidden regions, came back to him, and in a series of gigantic bounds that took his breath away completely, he dropped nearer to the earth again and kept on at a much lower level.

The hours passed and the position of the moon began to alter noticeably. Some of the constellations that were overhead when he started were now dipping below the horizon. Never before had he ventured so far from home, and he began to realise that he had been flying much longer than he knew or intended. The speed had been terrific.

The change came imperceptibly. With the discovery that his wings were not moving quite so easily as before, he became suddenly aware that this had really been the case for some little time. He was flying with greater effort, and for a long time this effort had been increasing gradually before he actually recognised the fact.

Although no longer pointing towards the earth he seemed to be sinking. It became increasingly difficult to fly upwards. His wings did not seem to fail or weaken, nor was he conscious of feeling tired; but something was ever persuading him to fly lower, almost as if a million tiny threads were coaxing him downwards, drawing him gradually nearer to the world again. Whatever it was, the earth had come much closer to him in the last hour, and its familiar voices were pleasant to hear after the boundless heights he had just left.

But for some reason his speed grew insensibly less and less. His wings moved apparently as fast as before, but it was harder to keep up. In spite of himself he kept sinking. The sensation was quite new, and he could not understand it. It almost seemed as though he were being *pulled* downwards.

Jimbo began to feel uneasy. He had not lost his bearings, but he was a very long way from home, and quite beyond reach of the help he was so accustomed to. With a great effort he mounted several hundred feet into the air, and tried hard to stay there. For a short time he succeeded, but he soon felt himself sinking gradually downwards again. The force drawing him was a constant force without rise or fall; and with a deadly feeling of fear the boy began to realise that he would soon have to yield to it altogether. His heart beat faster and his thoughts turned to the friend who was then far away, but who alone could save him.

She, at least, could have explained it and told him what best to do. But the governess was beyond his reach. This problem he must face alone.

Something, however, had to be done quickly, and Jimbo, acting more as the man than as the boy, turned and flew hurriedly forward in another direction. He hoped this might somehow counteract the force that still drew him downwards; and for a time it apparently did so, and he flew level. But the strain increased every minute, and he looked down with something of a shudder as he realised that before very long he would be obliged to yield to this deadly force — and drop!

It was then for the first time he noticed a change had come over the surface of the earth below. Instead of the patchwork of field and wood and road, he saw a vast cloud stretching out, white and smooth in the moonlight. The world was hidden beneath a snowy fog, dense and impenetrable. It was no longer even possible to tell in what direction he was flying, for there was nothing to steer by. This was a new and unexpected complication, and the boy could not understand how the change had come about so quickly; the last time he had glanced down for indications to steer by, everything had been clear and easily visible.

It was very beautiful, this carpet of white mist with the silver moon shining upon it, but it thrilled him now with an unpleasant sense of dread. And, still more unpleasant, was a new sound which suddenly broke in upon the stillness and turned his blood into ice. He was certain that he heard wings behind him. He was being followed, and this meant that it was impossible to turn and fly back.

There was nothing now to do but fly forwards and hope to distance the huge wings; but if he was being followed by the powerful flyer he had seen a few nights before, the boy knew that he stood little chance of success, and he only did it because it seemed the one thing possible.

The cloud was dense and chill as he entered it; its moisture clung to his wings and made them heavy; his muscles seemed to stiffen, and motion became more and more difficult. The wings behind him meanwhile came closer.

He was flying along the surface of the mist now, his body and wings hidden, and his head just above the level. He could see along its white, even top. If he sank a few more inches it would be impossible to see at all, or even to judge where he was going. Soon it rose level with his lips, and at the same time he noticed a new smell in the air, faint at first, but growing every moment stronger. It was a fresh, sweet odour, yet it somehow added to his alarm, and stirred in him new centres of uneasiness. He tried vainly to increase his speed and distance the wings which continued to gain so steadily upon him from behind.

The cloud, apparently, was not everywhere of the same density, for here and there he saw the tops of green hills below him as he flew. But he could not understand why each green hill seemed to have a little lake on its summit — a little lake in which the reflected moon stared straight up into his face. Nor could he quite make out what the sounds were which rose to his ears through the muffling of the cloud — sounds of tumultuous rushing, hissing, and tumbling. They were continuous, these sounds, and once or twice he thought he heard with them a deep, thunderous roar that almost made his heart stop beating as he listened.

Was he, perhaps, over a range of high mountains, and was this the sound of the tumbling torrents?

Then, suddenly, it came to him with a shock that the ordinary sounds of the earth had wholly ceased.

Jimbo felt his head beginning to whirl. He grew weaker every minute; less able to offer resistance to the remorseless forces that were sucking him down. Now the mist had closed over his head, and he could no longer see the moonlight. He turned again, shaking with terror, and drove forward headlong through the clinging vapour. A sensation of choking rose in his throat; he was tired out, ready to drop with exhaustion. The wings of the following creature were now so close that he thought every minute he would be seized from behind and plunged into the abyss to his death.

It was just then that he made the awful discovery that the world below him was not stationary: the *green hills were moving*. They were sweeping past with a rushing, thundering sound in regular procession; and their huge sides were streaked with white. The reflection of the moon leaped up into his face as each hill rolled hissing and gurgling by, and he knew at last with a shock of unutterable horror that it was *THE SEA*!

He was flying over the sea, and the waters were drawing him down. The immense, green waves that rolled along through the sea fog, carrying the moon's face on their crests, foaming and gurgling as they went, were already leaping up to seize him by the feet and drag him into their depths.

He dropped several feet deeper into the mist, and towards the sea, terror-stricken and blinded. Then, turning frantically, not knowing what else to do, he struck out, with his last strength, for the upper surface and the moonlight. But as he did so, turning his face towards the sky he saw a dark form hovering just above him, covering his retreat with huge outstretched wings. It was too late; he was hemmed in on all sides.

At that moment a huge, rolling wave, bigger than all the rest, swept past and wet him to the knees. His heart failed him. The next wave would cover him. Already it was rushing towards him with foaming crest. He was in its shadow; he heard its thunder. Darkness rushed over him — he saw the vast sides streaked with grey and white — when suddenly, the owner of the wings plucked him in the back, mid-way between the shoulders, and lifted him bodily out of the fog, so that the wave swept by without even wetting his feet.

The next minute he saw a dim, white sheet of silvery mist at his feet, and found himself far above it in the sweet, clean moonlight; and when he turned, almost dead with terror, to look upon his captor, he found himself looking straight into the eyes of — the governess.

The sense of relief was so great that Jimbo simply closed his wings, and hung, a dead weight, in the air.

“Use your wings!” cried the governess sharply; and, still holding him, while he began to flap feebly, she turned and flew in the direction of the land.

“You!” he gasped at last. “It was you following me!”

“Of course it was me! I never let you out of my sight. I’ve always followed you — every time you’ve been out alone.”

Jimbo was still conscious of the drawing power of the sea, but he felt that his companion was too strong for it. After fifteen minutes of fierce flight he heard the sounds of earth again, and knew that they were safe.

Then the governess loosened her hold, and they flew along side by side in the direction of home.

“I won’t scold you, Jimbo,” she said presently, “for you’ve suffered enough already.” She was the first to break the silence, and her voice trembled a little. “But remember, the sea draws you down, just as surely as the moon draws you up. Nothing would please Him better than to see you destroyed by one or the other.”

Jimbo said nothing. But, when once they were safe inside the room again, he went up and cried his eyes out on her arm, while she folded him in to her heart as if he were the only thing in the whole world she had to love.

CHAPTER XV. THE CALL OF THE BODY

ONE NIGHT, TOWARDS the end of the practice flights, a strange thing happened, which showed that the time for the final flight of escape was drawing near.

They had been out for several hours flying through a rainstorm, the thousand little drops of which stung their faces like tiny gun-shot. About two in the morning the wind shifted and drove the clouds away as by magic; the stars came out, at first like the eyes of children still dim with crying, but later with a clear brilliance that filled Jimbo and the governess with keen pleasure. The air was washed and perfumed; the night luminous, alive, singing. All its tenderness and passion entered their hearts and filled them with the wonder of its glory.

“Come down, Jimbo,” said the governess, “and we’ll lie in the trees and smell the air after the rain.”

“Yes,” added the boy, whose Older Self had been whispering mysterious things to him, “and watch the stars and hear them singing.”

He led the way to some beech trees that lined a secluded lane, and settled himself comfortably in the top branches of the largest, while the governess soon found a resting-place beside him. It was a deserted spot, far from human habitation. Here and there through the foliage they could see little pools of rain-water reflecting the sky. The group of trees swung in the wind, dreaming great woodland dreams, and overhead the stars looked like a thousand orchards in the sky, filling the air with the radiance of their blossoms.

“How brilliant they are to-night,” said the governess, after watching the boy attentively for some minutes as they lay side by side in the great forked branch. “I never saw the constellations so clear.”

“But they have so little shape,” he answered dreamily; “if we wore lights when we flew about we should make much better constellations than they do.”

“The Big and Little Child instead of the Big and Little Bear,” she laughed, still watching him.

“I’m slipping away — —” he began, and then stopped suddenly. He saw the expression of his companion’s eyes, which were looking him through and through with the most poignant love and yearning mingled in their gaze, and something clutched at his heart that he could not understand.

“ —— not slipping out of the tree,” he went on vaguely, “but slipping into some new place or condition. I don’t understand it. Am I — going off somewhere — where you can’t follow? I thought suddenly — I was losing you.”

The governess smiled at him sadly and said nothing. She stroked his wings and then raised them to her lips and kissed them. Jimbo watched her, and folded his other wing across into her hands; he felt unhappy, and his heart began to swell within him; but he didn’t know what to say, and the Older Self began slowly to fade away again.

“But the stars,” he went on, “have they got things they send out too — forces, I mean, like the trees? Do they send out something that makes us feel sad, or happy, or strong, or weak?”

She did not answer for some time; she lay watching his face and fondling his smooth red wings; and, presently, when she did begin to explain, Jimbo found that the child in him was then paramount again, and he could not quite follow what she said.

He tried to answer properly and seem interested, but her words were very long and hard to understand, and after a time he thought she was talking to herself more than to him, and he gave up all serious effort to follow. Then he became aware that her voice had changed. The words seemed to drop down upon him from a great height. He imagined she was standing on one of those far stars he had been asking about, and was shouting at him through an immense tube of sky and darkness. The words pricked his ears like needle-points, only he no longer heard them as words, but as tiny explosions of sound, meaningless and distant. Swift flashes of light began to dance before his eyes, and suddenly from underneath the tree, a wind rose up and rushed, laughing, across his face. Darkness in a mass dropped over his eyes, and he sank backwards somewhere into another corner of space altogether.

The governess, meanwhile, lay quite still, watching the limp form in the branches beside her and still holding the tips of his red wings. Presently tears stole into her eyes, and began to run down her cheeks. One deep sigh after another escaped from her lips; but the little boy, or the old soul, who was the cause of all her emotion, apparently was far away and knew nothing of it. For a long time she lay in silence, and then leaned a little nearer to him, so as to see his full face. The eyes were wide open and staring, but they were looking at nothing she could see, for the consciousness cannot be in two places at the same time, and Jimbo just then was off on a little journey of his own, a journey that was but preliminary to the great final one of all.

“Jimbo,” whispered the girl between her tears and sighs, “Jimbo! Where have you gone to? Tell me, are they getting ready for you at last, and am I to lose you after all? Is this the only way I can save you — by losing you?”

There was no answer, no sign of movement; and the governess hid her face in her hands and cried quietly to herself, while her tears dropped down through the branches of the tree and fell into the rain-pools beneath.

For Jimbo’s state of oblivion in the tree was in reality a momentary return to consciousness in his body on the bed, and the repaired mechanism of the brain and muscles had summoned him back on a sort of trial visit. He remembered nothing of it afterwards, any more than one remembers the experiences of deep sleep; but the fact was that, with the descent of the darkness upon him in the branches, he had opened his eyes once again on the scene in the night-nursery bedroom where his body lay.

He saw figures standing round the bed and about the room; his mother with the same white face as before, was still bending over the bed asking him if he knew her; a tall man in a long black coat moved noiselessly to and fro; and he saw a shaded lamp on a table a little to the right of the bed. Nothing seemed to have changed very much, though there had probably been time enough since he last opened his eyes for the black-coated doctor to have gone and come again for a second visit. He held an instrument in his hands that shone brightly in the lamplight. Jimbo saw this plainly and wondered what it was. He felt as if he were just waking out of a nice, deep sleep —

dreamless and undisturbed. The Empty House, the Governess, Fright and the Children had all vanished from his memory, and he knew no more about wings and feathers than he did about the science of meteorology.

But the bedroom scene was a mere glimpse after all; his eyes were already beginning to close again. First they shut out the figure of the doctor; then the bed-curtains; and then the nurse moved her arm, making the whole scene quiver for an instant, like some huge jelly-shape, before it dipped into profound darkness and disappeared altogether. His mother's voice ran off into a thin trickle of sound, miles and miles away, and the light from the lamp followed him with its glare for less than half a second. All had vanished.

"Jimbo, dear, where have you been? Can you remember anything?" asked the soft voice beside him, as he looked first at the stars overhead, and then from the tracery of branches and leaves beneath him to the great sea of tree-tops and open country all round.

But he could tell her nothing; he seemed dreamy and absent-minded, lying and staring at her as if he hardly knew who she was or what she was saying. His mind was still hovering near the border-line of the two states of consciousness, like the region between sleeping and waking, where both worlds seem unreal and wholly wonderful.

He could not answer her questions, but he evidently caught some reflex of her emotions, for he leaned towards her across the branches, and said he was happy and never wanted to leave her. Then he crawled to the end of the big bough and sprang out into the air with a shout of delight. He was the child again — the flying child, wild with the excitement of tearing through the night air at fifty miles an hour.

The governess soon followed him and they flew home together, taking a long turn by the sea and past the great chalk cliffs, where the sea sang loud beneath them.

These lapses became with time more frequent, as well as of longer duration; and with them the boy noticed that the longing to escape became once again intense. He wanted *to get home*, wherever home was; he experienced a sort of nostalgia for the body, though he could not remember where that body lay. But when he asked the governess what this feeling meant, she only mystified him by her answers, saying that every one, in the body or out of it, felt a deep longing for their final *home*, though they might not have the least idea where it lay, or even to be able to recognise, much less to label, their longing.

His normal feelings, too, were slowly returning to him. The Older Self became more and more submerged. As he approached the state of ordinary, superficial consciousness, the characteristics of that state reflected themselves more and more in his thoughts and feelings. His memory still remained a complete blank; but he somehow felt that the things, places, and people he wanted to remember, had moved much nearer to him than before. Every day brought them more within his reach.

“All these forgotten things will come back to me soon, I know,” he said one day to the governess, “and then I’ll tell you all about them.”

“Perhaps you’ll remember me too then,” she answered, a shadow passing across her face.

Jimbo clapped his hands with delight.

“Oh,” he cried, “I should like to remember you, because that would make you a sort of two-people governess, and I should love you twice as much.”

But with the gradual return to former conditions the feelings of age and experience grew dim and indefinite, his knowledge lessened, becoming obscure and confused, showing itself only in vague impressions and impulses, until at last it became quite the exception for the child-consciousness to be broken through by flashes of intuition and inspiration from the more deeply hidden memories.

For one thing, the deep horror of the Empty House and its owner now returned to him with full force. Fear settled down again over the room, and lurked in the shadows over the yard. A vivid dread seized him of the *other door* in the room — the door through which the Frightened Children had disappeared, but which had never opened since. It gradually became for him a personality in the room, a staring, silent, listening thing, always watching, always waiting. One day it would open and he would be caught! In a dozen ways like this the horror of the house entered his heart and made him long for escape with all the force of his being.

But the governess, too, seemed changing; she was becoming more vague and more mysterious. Her face was always sad now, and her eyes wistful; her manner became restless and uneasy, and in many little ways the child could not fail to notice that her mind was intent upon other things. He begged her to name the day for the final flight, but she always seemed to have some good excuse for putting it off.

“I feel frightened when you don’t tell me what’s going on,” he said to her.

“It’s the preparations for the last flight,” she answered, “the flight of escape. He’ll try to prevent us going together so that you should get lost. But it’s better you shouldn’t know too much,” she added. “Trust me and have patience.”

“Oh, that’s what you’re so afraid of,” he said, “*separation*!” He was very proud indeed of the long word, and said it over several times to himself.

And the governess, looking out of the window at the fading sunlight, repeated to herself more than to him the word he was so proud of.

“Yes, that’s what I’m so afraid of — separation; but if it means your salvation — —” and her sentence remained unfinished as her eyes wandered far above the tops of the trees into the shadows of the sky.

And Jimbo, drawn by the sadness of her voice, turned towards the window and noticed to his utter amazement that he could *see right through her*. He could see the branches of the trees *beyond* her body.

But the next instant she turned and was no longer transparent, and before the boy could say a word, she crossed the floor and disappeared from the room.

CHAPTER XVI. PREPARATION

NOW THAT HE was preparing to leave it, Jimbo began to realise more fully how things in this world of delirium — so the governess sometimes called it — were all terribly out of order and confused. So long as he was wholly in it and of it, everything had seemed all right; but, as he approached his normal condition again, the disorder became more and more apparent.

And the next few hours brought it home with startling clearness, and increased to fever heat the desire for final escape.

It was not so much a nonsense-world — it was too alarming for that — as a world of nightmare, wherein everything was distorted. Events in it were all out of proportion; effects no longer sprang from adequate causes; things happened in a dislocated sort of way, and there was no sequence in the order of their happening. Tiny occurrences filled him with disproportionate, inconceivable horror; and great events, on the other hand, passed him scathless. The spirit of disorder — monstrous, uncouth, terrifying — reigned supreme; and Jimbo's whole desire, though inarticulate, was to escape back into order and harmony again.

In contrast to all this dreadful uncertainty, the conduct of the governess stood out alone as the one thing he could count upon: she was sure and unfailing; he felt absolute confidence in her plans for his safety, and when he thought of her his mind was at rest. Come what might, she would always be there in time to help. The adventure over the sea had proved that; but, childlike, he thought chiefly of his own safety, and had ceased to care very much whether she escaped with him or not. It was the older Jimbo that preferred captivity to escape without her, whereas every minute now he was sinking deeper into the normal child state in which the intuitive flashes from the buried soul became more and more rare.

Meanwhile, there was preparation going on, secret and mysterious. He could feel it. Some one else besides the governess was making plans, and the boy began to dread the moment of escape almost as much as he desired it. The alternative appalled him — to live for ever in the horror of this house, bounded by the narrow yard, watched by Fright listening ever at his elbow, and visited by the horrible Frightened Children. Even the governess herself began to inspire him with something akin to fear, as her personality grew more and more mysterious. He thought of her as she stood by the window, with the branches of the tree visible through her body, and the thought filled him with a dreadful and haunting distress.

But this was only when she was absent; the moment she came into the room, and he looked into her kind eyes, the old feeling of security returned, and he felt safe and happy.

Once, during the day, she came up to see him, and this time with final instructions. Jimbo listened with rapt attention.

“To-night, or to-morrow night we start,” she said in a quiet voice. “You must wait till you hear me calling — —”

“But sha’n’t we start together?” he interrupted.

“Not exactly,” she replied. “I’m doing everything possible to put him off the scent, but it’s not easy, for once Fright knows you he’s always on the watch. Even if he can’t prevent your escape, he’ll try to send you home to your body with such a shock that you’ll be only ‘half there’ for the rest of your life.”

Jimbo did not quite understand what she meant by this, and returned at once to the main point.

“Then the moment you call I’m to start?”

“Yes. I shall be outside somewhere. It depends on the wind and weather a little, but probably I shall be hovering above the trees. You must dash out of the window and join me the moment you hear me call. Clear the wall without sinking into the yard, and mind he doesn’t tear your wings off as you fly by.”

“What will happen, though, if I don’t find you?” he asked.

“You might get lost. If he succeeds in getting me out of the way first, you’re sure to get lost — —”

“But I’ve had long flights without getting lost,” he objected.

“Nothing to this one,” she replied. “It will be tremendous. You see, Jimbo, it’s not only distance; it’s change of condition as well.”

“I don’t mind what it is so long as we escape together,” he said, puzzled by her words.

He kept his eyes fixed on her face. It seemed to him she was changing even as he looked at her. A sort of veil lifted from her features. He fancied he could see the shape of the door through her body.

“Oh, please, Miss Lake — —” he began in a frightened voice, taking a step towards her. “What is the matter? You look so different!”

“Nothing, dearest boy, is the matter,” she replied faintly. “I feel sad at the thought of your — of our going, that’s all. But that’s nothing,” she added more briskly, “and remember, I’ve told you exactly what to do; so you can’t make any mistake. Now good-bye for the present.”

There was a smile on her face that he had never seen there before, and an expression of tenderness and love that he could not fail to understand. But even as he looked she seemed to fade away into a delicate, thin shadow as she moved slowly towards the trap-door. Jimbo stretched out his arms to touch her, for the moment of dread had passed, and he wanted to kiss her.

“No!” she cried sharply. “Don’t touch me, child; don’t touch me!”

But he was already close beside her, and in another second would have had his arms round her, when his foot stumbled over something, and he fell forward into her with his full weight. Instead of saving himself against her body, however, he fell *clean through her*! Nothing stopped him; there was no resistance; he met nothing more solid than air, and fell full length upon the floor. Before he could recover from his surprise and pick himself up, something touched him on the lips, and he heard a voice that was faint as a whisper saying, “Good-bye, darling child, and bless you.” The next moment he was on his feet again and the room was empty. The governess had gone through the trap-door, and he was alone.

It was all very strange and confusing, and he could not understand what was happening to her. He never for a moment realised that the change was in himself, and that as the tie between himself and his body became closer, the things of this other world he had been living in for so long must fade gradually away into shadows and emptiness.

But Jimbo was a brave boy; there was nothing of the coward in him, though his sensitive temperament made him sometimes hesitate where an ordinary child with less imagination would have acted promptly. The desire to cry he thrust down and repressed, fighting his depression by the thought that within a few hours the voice might sound that should call him to the excitement of the last flight — and freedom.

The rest of the daylight slipped away very quickly, and the room was full of shadows almost before he knew it. Then came the darkness. Outside, the wind rose and fell fitfully, booming in the chimney with hollow music, and sighing round the walls of the house. A few stars peeped between the branches of the elms, but masses of cloud hid most of the sky, and the air felt heavy with coming rain.

He lay down on the bed and waited. At the least sound he started, thinking it might be the call from the governess. But the few sounds he did hear always resolved themselves into the moaning of the wind, and no voice came. With his eyes on the open window, trying to pierce the gloom and find the stars, he lay motionless for hours, while the night wore on and the shadows deepened.

And during those long hours of darkness and silence he was conscious that a change was going on within him. Name it he could not, but somehow it made him feel that living people like himself were standing near, trying to speak, beckoning, anxious to bring him back into their own particular world. The darkness was so great that he could see only the square outline of the open window, but he felt sure that any sudden flash of light would have revealed a group of persons round his bed with arms outstretched, trying to reach him. The emotion they roused in him was not fear, for he felt sure they were kind, and eager only to help him; and the more he realised their presence, the less he thought about the governess who had been doing so much to make his escape possible.

Then, too, voices began to sound somewhere in the air, but he could not tell whether they were actually in the room, or outside in the night, or only within himself — in his own head: — strange, faint voices, whispering, laughing, shouting, crying; fragments of stories, rhymes, riddles, odd names of people and places jostled one another with varying degrees of clearness, now loud, now soft, till he wondered what it all meant, and longed for the light to come.

But besides all this, something else, too, was abroad that night — something he could not name or even think about without shaking with terror down at the very roots of his being. And when he thought of this, his heart called loudly for the governess, and the people hidden in the shadows of the room seemed quite useless and unable to help.

Thus he hovered between the two worlds and the two memories, phantoms and realities shifting and changing places every few minutes.

A little light would have saved him much suffering. If only the moon were up! Moonlight would have made all the difference. Even a moon half hidden and misty would have put the shadows farther away from him.

“Dear old misty moon!” he cried half aloud to himself upon the bed, “why aren’t you here to-night? My last night!”

Misty Moon, Misty Moon! The words kept ringing in his head. Misty Moon, Misty Moon! They swam round in his blood in an odd, tumultuous rhythm. Every time the current of blood passed through his brain in the course of its circulation it brought the words with it, altered a little, and singing like a voice.

Like a voice! Suddenly he made the discovery that it actually *was* a voice — and not his own. It was no longer the blood singing in his veins, it was some one singing outside the window. The sound began faintly and far away, up above the trees; then it came gradually nearer, only to die away again almost to a whisper.

If it was not the voice of the governess, he could only say it was a very good imitation of it.

The words forming out of the empty air rose and fell with the wind, and, taking his thoughts, flung them in a stream through the dark sky towards the hidden, misty moon:

“O misty moon, Dear, misty moon, The nights are long without thee; The shadows creep Across my sleep, And fold their wings about me!”

And another silvery voice, that might have been the voice of a star, took it up faintly, evidently from a much greater distance:

"O misty moon, Sweet, misty moon, The stars are dim behind thee; And, lo, thy beams Spin through my dreams And weave a veil to blind me!"

The sound of this beautiful voice so delighted Jimbo that he sprang from his bed and rushed to the window, hoping that he might be able to hear it more clearly. But, before he got half-way across the room, he stopped short, trembling with terror. Underneath his very feet, in the depths of the house, he heard the awful voice he dreaded more than anything else. It roared out the lines with a sound like the rushing of a great river:

"O misty moon, Pale misty moon, Thy songs are nightly driven, Eternally, From sky to sky, O'er the old, grey Hills of Heaven!"

And after the verse Jimbo heard a great peal of laughter that seemed to shake the walls of the house, and rooted his feet to the floor. It rolled away with thundering echoes into the very bowels of the earth. He just managed to crawl back to his mattress and lie down, when another voice took up the song, but this time in accents so tender, that the child felt something within him melt into tears of joy, and he was on the verge of recognising, for the first time since his accident, the voice of his mother:

"O misty moon, Shy, misty moon, Whence comes the blush that trembles In sweet disgrace O'er half thy face When Night her stars assembles?"

But his memory, of course, failed him just as he seemed about to grasp it, and he was left wondering why the sound of that one voice had brought him a moment of radiant happiness in the midst of so much horror and pain. Meanwhile the answering voices went on, each time different, and in new directions.

But the next verse somehow brought back to him all the terror he had felt in his flight over the sea, when the sound of the hissing waters had reached his ears through the carpet of fog:

"O misty moon, Persuasive moon, Earth's tides are ever rising; By the awful grace Of thy weird white face Leap the seas to thy enticing!"

Then followed the voice that had started the horrid song. This time he was sure it was not Miss Lake’s voice, but only a very clever imitation of it. Moreover, it again ended in a shriek of laughter that froze his blood:

“O misty moon, Deceiving moon, Thy silvery glance brings sadness; Who flies to thee, From land or sea, Shall end — his — days — in — *MADNESS*!”

Other voices began to laugh and sing, but Jimbo stopped his ears, for he simply could not bear any more. He felt certain, too, that these strange words to the moon had all been part of a trap — a device to draw him to the window. He shuddered to think how nearly he had fallen into it, and determined to lie on the bed and wait till he heard his companion calling, and knew beyond all doubt that it was she.

But the night passed away and the dawn came, and no voice had called him forth to the last flight.

Hitherto, in all his experiences, there had been only one absolute certainty: the appearance of the governess with the morning light. But this time sunrise came and the clouds cleared away, and the sweet smells of field and air stole into the little room, yet without any sign of the governess. The hours passed, and she did not come, till finally he realised that she was not coming at all, and he would have to spend the whole day alone. Something had happened to prevent her, or else it was all part of her mysterious “plan.” He did not know, and all he could do was to wait, and wonder, and hope.

All day long he lay and waited, and all day long he was alone. The trap-door never once moved; the courtyard remained empty and deserted; there was no sound on the landing or on the stairs; no wind stirred the leaves outside, and the hot sun poured down out of a cloudless sky. He stood by the open window for hours watching the motionless branches. Everything seemed dead; not even a bird crossed his field of vision. The loneliness, the awful silence, and above all, the dread of the approaching night, were sometimes more than he seemed able to bear; and he wanted to put his head out of the window and scream, or lie down on the bed and cry his heart out. But he yielded to neither impulse; he kept a brave heart, knowing that this would be his last night in prison, and that in a few hours’ time he would hear his name called out of the sky, and would dash through the window to liberty and the last wild flight. This thought gave him courage, and he kept all his energy for the great effort.

Gradually, once more, the sunlight faded, and the darkness began to creep over the land. Never before had the shadows under the elms looked so fantastic, nor the bushes in the field beyond assumed such sinister shapes. The Empty House was being gradually invested; the enemy was masquerading already under cover of these very shadows.

Very soon, he felt, the attack would begin, and he must be ready to act.

The night came down at last with a strange suddenness, and with it the warning of the governess came back to him; he thought quakingly of the stricken children who had been caught and deprived of their wings; and then he pulled out his long red feathers and tried their strength, and gained thus fresh confidence in their power to save him when the time came.

CHAPTER XVII. OFF!

WITH THE FULL darkness a whole army of horrors crept nearer. He felt sure of this, though he could actually see nothing. The house was surrounded, the courtyard crowded. Outside, on the stairs, in the other rooms, even on the roof itself, waited dreadful things ready to catch him, to tear off his wings, to make him prisoner for ever and ever.

The possibility that something had happened to the governess now became a probability. Imperceptibly the change was wrought; he could not say how or when exactly; but he now felt almost certain that the effort to keep her out of the way had succeeded. If this were true, the boy's only hope lay in his wings, and he pulled them out to their full length and kissed them passionately, speaking to the strong red feathers as if they were living little persons.

"You must save me! You will save me, won't you?" he cried in his anguish. And every time he did this and looked at them he gained fresh hope and courage.

The problem *where he was to fly to* had not yet insisted on a solution, though it lay always at the back of his mind; for the final flight of escape without a guide had never been even a possibility before.

Lying there alone in the darkness, waiting for the sound of the voice so longed-for, he found his thoughts turning again to the moon, and the strange words of the song that had puzzled him the night before. What in the world did it all mean? Why all this about the moon? Why was it a cruel moon, and why should it attract and persuade and entice him? He felt sure, the more he thought of it, that this had all been a device to draw him to the window — and perhaps even farther.

The darkness began to terrify him; he dreaded more and more the waiting, listening things that it concealed. Oh, when would the governess call to him? When would he be able to dash through the open window and join her in the sky?

He thought of the sunlight that had flooded the yard all day — so bright it seemed to have come from a sun fresh made and shining for the first time. He thought of the exquisite flowers that grew in the fields just beyond the high wall, and the night smells of the earth reached him through the window, wafted in upon a wind heavy with secrets of woods and fields. They all came from a Land of Magic that after to-night might be for ever beyond his reach, and they went straight to his heart and immediately turned something solid there into tears. But the tears did not find their natural expression, and Jimbo lay there fighting with his pain, keeping all his strength for the one great effort, and waiting for the voice that at any minute now might sound above the tree-tops.

But the hours passed and the voice did not come.

How he loathed the room and everything in it. The ceiling stretched like a white, staring countenance above him; the walls watched and listened; and even the mantelpiece grew into the semblance of a creature with drawn-up shoulders bending over him. The whole room, indeed, seemed to his frightened soul to run into the shape of a monstrous person whose arms were outstretched in all directions to prevent his escape.

His hands never left his wings now. He stroked and fondled them, arranging the feathers smoothly and speaking to them under his breath just as though they were living things. To him they were indeed alive, and he knew when the time came they would not fail him. The fierce passion for the open spaces took possession of his soul, and his whole being began to cry out for freedom, rushing wind, the stars, and a pathless sky.

Slowly the power of the great, open Night entered his heart, bringing with it a courage that enabled him to keep the terrors of the House at a distance.

So far, the boy’s strength had been equal to the task, but a moment was approaching when the tension would be too great to bear, and the long pent-up force would rush forth into an act. Jimbo realised this quite clearly; though he could not exactly express it in words, he felt that his real hope of escape lay in the success of that act. Meanwhile, with more than a child’s wisdom, he stored up every particle of strength he had for the great moment when it should come.

A light wind had risen soon after sunset, but as the night wore on it began to fail, dropping away into little silences that grew each time longer. In the heart of one of these spells of silence Jimbo presently noticed a new sound — a sound that he recognised.

Far away at first, but growing in distinctness with every dropping of the wind, this new sound rose from the interior of the house below and came gradually upon him. It was voices faintly singing, and the tread of stealthy footsteps.

Nearer and nearer came the sound, till at length they reached the door, and there passed into the room a wave of fine, gentle sound that woke no echo and scarcely seemed to stir the air into vibration at all. The door had opened, and a number of voices were singing softly under their breath.

And after the sounds, creeping slowly like some timid animal, there came into the room a small black figure just visible in the faint starlight. It peered round the edge of the door, hesitated a moment, and then advanced with an odd rhythmical sort of motion. And after the first figure came a second, and after the second a third; and then several entered together, till a whole group of them stood on the floor between Jimbo and the open window.

Then he recognised the Frightened Children and his heart sank. Even they, he saw, were arrayed against him, and took it for granted that he already belonged to them.

Oh, why did not the governess come for him? Why was there no voice in the sky? He glanced with longing towards the heavens, and as the children moved past, he was almost certain that he saw the stars *through* their bodies too.

Slowly they shuffled across the floor till they formed a semicircle round the bed; and then they began a silent, impish dance that made the flesh creep. Their thin forms were dressed in black gowns like shrouds, and as they moved through the steps of the bizarre measure he saw that their legs were little more than mere skin and bone. Their faces — what he could see of them when he dared to open his eyes — were pale as ashes, and their beady little eyes shone like the facets of cut stones, flashing in all directions. And while they danced in and out amongst each other, never breaking the semicircle round the bed, they sang a low, mournful song that sounded like the wind whispering through a leafless wood.

And the words stirred in him that vague yet terrible fear known to all children who have been frightened and made to feel afraid of the dark. Evidently his sensations were being merged very rapidly now into those of the little boy in the night-nursery bed.

“There is Someone in the Nursery Whom we never saw before; — Why hangs the moon so red? — And he came not by the passage, Or the window, or the door; — Why hangs the moon so red? — And he stands there in the darkness, In the centre of the floor. — See, where the moon hangs red! —

Someone’s hiding in the passage Where the door begins to swing; — Why drive the clouds so fast? — In the corner by the staircase There’s a dreadful waiting thing: — Why drive the clouds so fast? — Past the curtain creeps a monster With a black and fluttering wing; — See, where the clouds drive fast! —

In the chilly dusk of evening; In the hush before the dawn; — Why drips the rain so cold? — In the twilight of the garden, In the mist upon the lawn, — Why drips the rain so cold? — Faces stare, and mouth upon us, Faces white and weird and drawn; — See, how the rain drips cold! —

Close beside us in the night-time, Waiting for us in the gloom, — O! Why sings the wind so shrill? — In the shadows by the cupboard, In the corners of the room, — O! Why sings the wind so shrill? — From the corridors and landings Voices call us to our doom. — O! how the wind sings shrill!” —

By this time the dreadful dancers had come much closer to him, shifting stealthily nearer to the bed under cover of their dancing, and always *between him and the window*.

Suddenly their intention flashed upon him; they meant to prevent his escape!

With a tremendous effort he sprang from the bed. As he did so a dozen pairs of thin, shadowy arms shot out towards him as though to seize his wings; but with an agility born of fright he dodged them, and ran swiftly into the corner by the mantelpiece. Standing with his back against the wall he faced the children, and strove to call out for help to the governess; but this time there was an entirely new difficulty in the way, for he found to his utter dismay that his voice refused to make itself heard. His mouth was dry and his tongue would hardly stir.

Not a sound issued from his lips, but the children instantly moved forwards and hemmed him in between them and the wall; and to reach the window he would have to break through this semicircle of whispering, shadowy forms. Above their heads he could see the stars shining, and any moment he might hear Miss Lake's voice calling to him to come out. His heart rose with passionate longing within him, and he gathered his wings tightly about him ready for the final dash. It would take more than the Frightened Children to hold him prisoner when once he heard that voice, or even without it!

Whether they were astonished at his boldness, or merely waiting their opportunity later, he could not tell; but anyhow they kept their distance for a time and made no further attempt to seize his feathers. Whispering together under their breath, sometimes singing their mournful, sighing songs, sometimes sinking their voices to a confused murmur, they moved in and out amongst each other with soundless feet like the shadows of branches swaying in the wind.

Then, suddenly, they moved closer and stretched out their arms towards him, their bodies swaying rhythmically together, while their combined voices, raised just above a whisper, sang to him —

"Dare you fly out to-night, When the Moon is so strong? Though the stars are so bright, There is death in their song; You're a hostage to Fright, And to us you belong!

Dare you fly out alone Through the shadows that wave, When the course is unknown And there's no one to save? You are bone of our bone, And for ever His slave!"

And, following these words, came from somewhere in the air that voice like the thunder of a river. Jimbo knew only too well to whom it belonged as he listened to the rhyme of the West Wind —

"For the Wind of the West Is a wind unblest, And its dangerous breath Will entice you to death! Fly not with the Wind of the West, O child, With the terrible Wind of the West!"

But the boy knew perfectly well that these efforts to stop him were all part of a trap. They were lying to him. It was not the Wind of the West at all; *it was the South Wind*! That at least he knew by the odours that were wafted in through the window. Again he tried to call to the governess, but his tongue lay stiff in his mouth and no sound came.

Meanwhile the children began to draw closer, hemming him in. They moved almost imperceptibly, but he saw plainly that the circle was growing smaller and smaller. His legs began to tremble, and he felt that soon he would collapse and drop at their feet, for his strength was failing and the power to act and move was slowly leaving him.

The little shadowy figures were almost touching him, when suddenly a new sound broke the stillness and set every nerve tingling in his body.

Something was shuffling along the landing. He heard it outside, pushing against the door. The handle turned with a rattle, and a moment later the door slowly opened.

For a second Jimbo's breath failed him, and he nearly fell in a heap upon the floor. Round the edge of the door he saw a dim huge figure come crawling into the room — creeping along the floor — and trailing behind it a pair of immense black wings that stretched along the boards. For one brief second he stared, horror-stricken, and wondering what it was. But before the whole length of the creature was in, he knew. It was Fright himself! *And he was making steadily for the window!*

The shock instantly galvanised the boy into a state of activity again. He recovered the use of all his muscles and all his faculties. His voice, released by terror, rang out in a wild shriek for help to the governess, and he dashed forward across the room in a mad rush for the window. Unless he could reach it before the other, he would be a prisoner for the rest of his life. It was now or never.

The instant he moved, the children came straight at him with hands outstretched to stop him; but he passed through them as if they were smoke, and with almost a single bound sprang upon the narrow window-sill. To do this he had to clear the head and shoulders of the creature on the floor, and though he accomplished it successfully, he felt himself clutched from behind. For a second he balanced doubtfully on the window ledge. He felt himself being pulled back into the room, and he combined all his forces into one tremendous effort to rush forward.

There was a ripping, tearing sound as he sprang into the air with a yell of mingled terror and exultation. His prompt action and the fierce impetus had saved him. He was free. But in the awful hand that seized him he had left behind the end feathers of his right wing. A few inches more and it would have been not merely the feathers, but the entire wing itself.

He dropped to within three feet of the stones in the yard, and then, borne aloft by the kind, rushing Wind of the South, he rose in a tremendous sweep far over the tops of the high elms and out into the heart of the night.

Only there was no governess's voice to guide him; and behind him, a little lower down, a black pursuing figure with huge wings flapped heavily as it followed with laborious flight through the darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII. HOME

BUT IT WAS the sound of something crashing heavily through the top branches of the elms that made the boy realise he was actually being followed; and all his efforts became concentrated into the desire to put as much distance as possible between himself and the horror of the Empty House.

He heard the noise of big wings far beneath him, and his one idea was to out-distance his pursuer and then come down again to earth and rest his wings in the branches of a tree till he could devise some plan how to find the governess. So at first he raced at full speed through the air, taking no thought of direction.

When he looked down, all he could see was that something vague and shadowy, shaking out a pair of enormous wings between him and the earth, move along with him. Its path was parallel with his own, but apparently it made no effort to rise up to his higher level. It thundered along far beneath him, and instinctively he raised his head and steered more and more upwards and away from the world.

The gap at the end of his right wing where the feathers had been torn out seemed to make no difference in his power of flight or steering, and he went tearing through the night at a pace he had never dared to try before, and at a height he had never yet reached in any of the practice flights. He soared higher even than he knew; and perhaps this was fortunate, for the friction of the lower atmosphere might have heated him to the point of igniting, and some watcher at one of earth's windows might have suddenly seen a brilliant little meteor flash through the night and vanish into dust.

At first the joy of escape was the only idea his mind seemed able to grasp; he revelled in a passionate sense of freedom, and all his energies poured themselves into one concentrated effort to fly faster, faster, faster. But after a time, when the pursuer had been apparently outflown, and he realised that escape was an accomplished fact, he began to search for the governess, calling to her, rising and falling, darting in all directions, and then hovering on outstretched wings to try and catch some sound of a friendly voice.

But no answer came, either from the stars that crowded the vault above, or from the dark surface of the world below; only silence answered his cries, and his voice was swallowed up and lost in the immensity of space almost the moment it left his lips.

Presently he began to realise to what an appalling distance he had risen above the world, and with anxious eyes he tried to pierce the gaping emptiness beneath him and on all sides. But this vast sea of air had nothing to reveal. The stars shone like pinholes of gold pricked in a deep black curtain; and the moon, now rising slowly, spread a veil of silver between him and the upper regions. There was not a cloud anywhere and the winds were all asleep. He was alone in space. Yet, as the swishing of his feathers slackened and the roar in his ears died away, he heard in the short pause the ominous beating of great wings somewhere in the depths beneath him, and knew that the great pursuer was still on his track.

The glare of the moon now made it impossible to distinguish anything properly, and in these huge spaces, with nothing to guide the eye, it was difficult to know exactly from what direction the sound came. He was only sure of one thing — that it was far below him, and that for the present it did not seem to come much nearer. The cry for help that kept rising to his lips he suppressed, for it would only have served to guide his pursuer; and, moreover, a cry — a little thin, despairing cry — was instantly lost in these great heavens. It was less than a drop in an ocean.

On and on he flew, always pointing away from the earth, and trying hard to think where he would find safety. Would this awful creature hunt him all night long into the daylight, or would he be forced back into the Empty House in sheer exhaustion? The thought gave him new impetus, and with powerful strokes he dashed onwards and upwards through the wilderness of space in which the only pathways were the little golden tracks of the starbeams. The governess would turn up somewhere; he was positive of that. She had never failed him yet.

So, alone and breathless, he pursued his flight, and the higher he went the more the tremendous vault opened up into inconceivable and untold distances. His speed kept increasing; he thought he had never found flying so easy before; and the thunder of the following wings that held persistently on his track made it dangerous for him to slacken up for more than a minute here and there. The earth became a dark blot beneath him, while the moon, rising higher and higher, grew weirdly bright and close. How black the sky was; how piercing the points of starlight; how stimulating the strong, new odours of these lofty regions! He realised with a thrill of genuine awe that he had flown over the very edge of the world, and the moment the thought entered his mind it was flung back at him by a voice that seemed close to his ear one moment, and the next was miles away in the space overhead. Light thoughts, born of the stars and the moon and of his great speed, danced before his mind in fanciful array. Once he laughed aloud at them, but once only. The sound of his voice in these echoless spaces made him afraid.

The speed, too, affected his vision, for at one moment thin clouds stretched across his face, and the next he was whirling through perfectly clear air again with no vestige of a cloud in sight. The same reason doubtless explained the sudden presence of sheets of light in the air that reflected the moonlight like particles of glittering ice, and then suddenly disappeared again. The terrific speed would explain a good many things, but certainly it was curious how creatures formed out of the hollow darkness, like foam before a steamer's bows, and moved noiselessly away on either side to join the army of dim life that crowded everywhere and watched his passage. For, in front and on both sides, there gathered a vast assembly of silent forms more than shadows, less than bodily shapes, that opened up a pathway as he rushed through them, and then immediately closed up their ranks again when he had passed. The air seemed packed with living creatures. Space was filled with them. They surrounded him on all sides. Yet his passage through them was like the passage of a hand through smoke; it was easy to make a pathway, but the pathway left no traces behind it. More smoke rushed in and filled the void.

He could never see these things properly, face to face; they always kept just out of the line of vision, like shadows that follow a lonely walker in a wood and vanish the moment he turns to look at them over his shoulder. But ever by his side, with a steady, effortless motion, he knew they kept up with him — strange inhabitants of the airless heights, immense and misty-winged, with veiled, flaming eyes and silent feathers. He was not afraid of them; for they were neither friendly nor hostile; they were simply the beings of another world, alien and unknown.

But what puzzled him more was that the light and the darkness seemed separate things, each distinctly visible. After each stroke of his wings he *saw the darkness* sift downwards past him through the air like dust. It floated all round him in thinnest diaphanous texture — visible, not because the moonlight made it so, but because in its inmost soul it was itself luminous. It rose and fell in eddies, swirling wreaths, and undulations; inwoven with starbeams, as with golden thread, it clothed him about in circles of some magical primordial substance.

Even the stars, looking down upon him from terrifying heights, seemed now draped, now undraped, as if by the sweeping of enormous wings that stirred these sheets of visible darkness into a vast system of circulation through the heavens. Everything in these oceans of upper space apparently made use of wings, or the idea of wings. Perhaps even the great earth itself, rolling from star to star, was moved by the power of gigantic, invisible wings!...

Jimbo realised he had entered a forbidden region. He began to feel afraid.

But the only possible expression of his fear, and its only possible relief, lay in his own wings — and he used them with redoubled energy. He dashed forward so fast that his face begun to burn, and he kept turning his head in every direction for a sign of the governess, or for some indication of where he could *escape to*. In the pauses of the wild flight he heard the thunder of the following wings below. They were still on his trail, and it seemed that they were gaining on him.

He took a new angle, realising that his only chance was to fly high; and the new course took him perpendicularly away from the earth and straight towards the moon. Later, when he had out-distanced the other creature, he would drop down again to safer levels.

Yet the hours passed and it never overtook him. A measured distance was steadily kept up between them as though with calculated purpose.

Curious distant voices shouted from time to time all manner of sentences and rhymes in his ears, but he could neither understand nor remember them. More and more the awful stillness of the vast regions that lie between the world and the moon appalled him.

Then, suddenly, a new sound reached him that at first he could not in the least understand. It reached him, however, not through the ears, but by a steady trembling of the whole surface of his body. It set him in vibration all over, and for some time he had no idea what it meant. The trembling ran deeper and deeper into his body, till at last a single, powerful, regular vibration took complete possession of his whole being, and he felt as though he was being wrapped round and absorbed by this vast and gigantic sound. He had always thought that the voice of Fright, like the roar of a river, was the loudest and deepest sound he had ever heard. Even that set his soul a-trembling. But this new, tremendous, rolling-ocean of a voice came not that way, and could not be compared to it. The voice of the other was a mere tickling of the ear compared to this awful crashing of seas and mountains and falling worlds. It must break him to pieces, he felt.

Suddenly he knew what it was, — and for a second his wings failed him: — he had reached such a height that he could hear the roar of the world as it thundered along its journey through space! That was the meaning of this voice of majesty that set him all a-trembling. And before long he would probably hear, too, the voices of the planets, and the singing of the great moon. The governess had warned him about this. At the first sound of these awful voices she told him to turn instantly and drop back to the earth as fast as ever he could drop.

Jimbo turned instinctively and began to fall. But, before he had dropped half a mile, he met once again the ascending sound of the wings that had followed him from the Empty House.

It was no good flying straight into destruction. He summoned all his courage and turned once more towards the stars. Anything was better than being caught and held for ever by Fright, and with a wild cry for help that fell dead in the empty spaces, he renewed his unending flight towards the stars.

But, meanwhile, the pursuer had distinctly gained. Appalled by the mighty thunder of the stars’ voices above, and by the prospect of immediate capture if he turned back, Jimbo flew blindly on towards the moon, regardless of consequences. And below him the Pursuer came closer and closer. The strokes of its wings were no longer mere distant thuds that he heard when he paused in his own flight to listen; they were the audible swishing of feathers. It was near enough for that.

Jimbo could never properly see what was following him. A shadow between him and the earth was all he could distinguish, but in the centre of that shadow there seemed to burn two glowing eyes. Two brilliant lights flashed whenever he looked down, like the lamps of a revolving lighthouse. But other things he saw, too, when he looked down, and once the earth rose close to his face so that he could have touched it with his hands. The same instant it dropped away again with a rush of whirlwinds, and became a distant shadow miles and miles below him. But before it went, he had time to see the Empty House standing within its gloomy yard, and the horror of it gave him fresh impetus.

Another time when the world raced up close to his eyes he saw a scene of a different kind that stirred a passionately deep yearning within him — a house overgrown with ivy and standing among trees and gardens, with laburnums and lilacs flowering on smooth green lawns, and a clean gravel drive leading down to a big pair of iron gates. Oh, it all seemed so familiar! Perhaps in another minute the well-known figures would have appeared and spoken to him. Already he heard their voices behind the bushes. But, just before they appeared, the earth dropped back with a roar of a thousand winds, and Jimbo saw instead the shadow of the Pursuer mounting, mounting, mounting towards him. Up he shot again with terror in his heart, and all trembling with the thunder of the great star-voices above. He felt like a leaf in a hurricane, "lost, dizzy, shelterless."

Voices, too, now began to be heard more frequently. They dropped upon him out of the reaches of this endless void; and with them sometimes came forms that shot past him with amazing swiftness, racing into the empty Beyond as though sucked into a vast vacuum. The very stars seemed to move. He became part of some much larger movement in which he was engulfed and merged. He could no longer think of himself as Jimbo. When he uttered his own name he saw merely a mass of wind and colour through which the great pulses of space and the planets beat tumultuously, lapping him round with the currents of a terrific motion that seemed to swallow up his own little personality entirely, while giving him something infinitely greater....

But surely these small voices, shrill and trumpet-like, did not come from the stars! these deep whispers that ran round the immense vault overhead and sounded almost familiarly in his ears —

“Give it him the moment he wakes.”

“Bring the ice-bag ... quick!”

“Put the hot bottle to his feet *IMMEDIATELY*!”

The voices shrieked all round him, turning suddenly into soft whispers that died away somewhere among his feathers. The soles of his feet began to glow, and he felt a gigantic hand laid upon his throat and head. Almost it seemed as if he were lying somewhere on his back, and people were bending over him, shouting and whispering.

“Why hangs the moon so red?” cried a voice that was instantly drowned in a chorus of unintelligible whispering.

“The black cow must be killed,” whispered some one deep within the sky.

“Why drips the rain so cold?” yelled one of the hideous children close behind him. And a third called with a distant laughter from behind a star —

“Why sings the wind so shrill?”

“*Quiet!*” roared an appalling voice below, as if all the rivers of the world had suddenly turned loose into the sky. “*Quiet!*”

Instantly a star, that had been hovering for some time on the edge of a fantastic dance, dropped down close in front of his face. It had a glaring disc, with mouth and eyes. An icy hand seemed laid on his head, and the star rushed back into its place in the sky, leaving a trail of red flame behind it. A little voice seemed to go with it, growing fainter and fainter in the distance —

“We dance with phantoms and with shadows play.”

But, regardless of everything, Jimbo flew onwards and upwards, terrified and helpless though he was. His thoughts turned without ceasing to the governess, and he felt sure that she would yet turn up in time to save him from being caught by the Fright that pursued, or lost among the fearful spaces that lay beyond the stars.

For a long time, however, his wings had been growing more and more tired, and the prospect of being destroyed from sheer exhaustion now presented itself to the boy vaguely as a possible alternative — vaguely only, because he was no longer able to think, properly speaking, and things came to him more by way of dull feeling than anything else.

It was all the more with something of a positive shock, therefore, that he realised the change. For a change had come. He was now sudden by conscious of an influx of new power — greater than anything he had ever known before in any of his flights. His wings now suddenly worked as if by magic. Never had the motion been so easy, and it became every minute easier and easier. He simply flashed along without apparent effort. An immense driving power had entered into him. He realised that he could fly for ever without getting tired. His pace increased tenfold — increased alarmingly. The possibility of exhaustion vanished utterly. Jimbo knew now that something was wrong. This new driving power was something wholly outside himself. His wings were working far too easily. Then, suddenly, he understood: *His wings were not working at all!*

He was not being driven forward from behind; he was being drawn forward from in front.

He saw it all in a flash: Miss Lake's warning long ago about the danger of flying too high; the last song of the Frightened Children, "Dare you fly out alone through the shadows that wave, when the course is unknown and there's no one to save?" the strange words sung to him about the "relentless misty moon," and the object of the dreadful Pursuer in steadily forcing him upwards and away from the earth. It all flashed across his poor little dazed mind. He understood at last.

He had soared too high and had entered the sphere of the moon's attraction.

"The moon is too strong, and there's death in the stars!" a voice bellowed below him like the roar of a falling mountain, shaking the sky.

The child flew screaming on. There was nothing else he could do. But hardly had the roar died away when another voice was heard, a tender voice, a whispering, sympathetic voice, though from what part of the sky it came he could not tell —

"Arrange the pillows for his little head."

But below him the wings of the Pursuer were mounting closer and closer. He could almost feel the mighty wind from their feathers, and hear the rush of the great body between them. It was impossible to slacken his speed even had he wished; no strength on earth could have resisted that terrible power drawing upwards towards the moon. Instinctively, however, he realised that he would rather have gone forwards than backwards. He never could have faced capture by that dreadful creature behind. All the efforts of the past weeks to escape from Fright, the owner of the Empty House, now acted upon him with a cumulative effect, and added to the suction of the moon-life. He shot forward at a pace that increased with every second.

At the back of his mind, too, lay some kind of faint perception that the governess would, after all, be there to help him. She had always turned up before when he was in danger, and she would not fail him now. But this was a mere ghost of a thought that brought little comfort, and merely added its quota of force to the speed that whipped him on, ever faster, into the huge white moon-world in front.

For this, then, he had escaped from the horror of the Empty House! To be sucked up into the moon, the "relentless, misty moon" — to be drawn into its cruel, silver web, and destroyed. The Song to the Misty Moon outside the window came back in snatches and added to his terror; only it seemed now weeks ago since he had heard it. Something of its real meaning, too, filtered down into his heart, and he trembled anew to think that the moon could be a great, vast, moving Being, alive and with a purpose....

But why, oh, why did they keep shouting these horrid snatches of the song through the sky? Trapped! Trapped! The word haunted him through the night:

Thy songs are nightly driven, From sky to sky, Eternally, O'er the old, grey hills of heaven!

Caught! Caught at last! The moon's prisoner, a captive in her airless caves; alone on her dead white plains; searching for ever in vain for the governess; wandering alone and terrified.

By the awful grace Of thy weird white face.

The thought crazed him, and he struggled like a bird caught in a net. But he might as well have struggled to push the worlds out of their courses. The power against him was the power of the universe in which he was nothing but a little, lost, whirling atom. It was all of no avail, and the moon did not even smile at his feeble efforts. He was too light to revolve round her, too impalpable to create his own orbit; he had not even the consistency of a comet; he had reached the point of stagnation, as it were — the dead level — the neutral zone where the attractions of the earth and moon meet and counterbalance one another — where bodies have no weight and existence no meaning.

Now the moon was close upon him; he could see nothing else. There lay the vast, shining sea of light in front of him. Behind, the roar of the following creature grew fainter and fainter, as he outdistanced it in the awful swiftness of the huge drop down upon the moon mountains.

Already he was close enough to its surface to hear nothing of its great singing but a deep, confused murmur. And, as the distance increased, he realised that the change in his own condition increased. He felt as if he were flying off into a million tiny particles — breaking up under the effects of the deadly speed and the action of the new moon-forces. Immense, invisible arms, half-silver and half-shadow, grew out of the white disc and drew him downwards upon her surface. He was being merged into the life of the moon.

There was a pause. For a moment his wings stopped dead. Their vain fluttering was all but over....

Hark! Was that a voice borne on the wings of some lost wind? Why should his heart beat so tumultuously all at once?

He turned and stared into the ocean of black air overhead till it turned him dizzy. A violent trembling ran through his tired being from head to foot. He had heard a voice — a voice that he knew and loved — a voice of help and deliverance. It rang in shrill syllables up the empty spaces, and it reached new centres of force within him that touched his last store of courage and strength.

“Jimbo, hold on!” it cried, like a faint, thin, pricking current of sound almost unable to reach him through the seas of distance. “I’m coming; hold on a little longer!”

It was the governess. She was true to the end. Jimbo felt his heart swell within him. She was mounting, mounting behind him with incredible swiftness. The sound of his own name in these terrible regions recalled to him some degree of concentration, and he strove hard to fight against the drawing power that was seeking his destruction.

He struggled frantically with his wings. But between him and the governess there was still the power of Fright to be overcome — the very Power she had long ago invoked. It was following him still, preventing his turning back, and driving him ever forward to his death.

Again the voice sounded in the night; and this time it was closer. He could not quite distinguish the words. They buzzed oddly in his ears ... other voices mingled with them ... the hideous children began to shriek somewhere underneath him ... wings with eyes among their burning feathers flashed past him.

His own wings folded close over his little body, drooping like dead things. His eyes closed, and he turned on his side. A huge face that was one-half the governess and the other half the head gardener at home, thrust itself close against his own, and blew upon his eyelids till he opened them. Already he was falling, sinking, tumbling headlong through a space that offered no resistance.

“Jimbo!” shrieked a voice that instantly died away into a wail behind him.

He opened his eyes once more — for it was that loved voice again — but the glare from the moon so dazzled him that he could only fancy he saw the figure of the governess, not a hundred feet away, struggling and floundering in the clutch of a black creature that beat the air with enormous wings all round her. He saw her hair streaming out into the night, and one wing seemed to hang broken and useless at her side.

He was turning over and over, like a piece of wood in the waves of the sea, and the governess, caught by Fright, the monster of her own creation, drifted away from his consciousness as a dream melts away in the light of the morning.... From the gleaming mountains and treeless plains below Jimbo thought there rose a hollow roar like the mocking laughter of an immense multitude of people, shaking with mirth. The Moon had got him at last, and her laughter ran through the heavens like a wave. Revolving upon his own little axis so swiftly that he neither saw nor heard anything more, he dropped straight down upon the great satellite.

The light of the moon flamed up into his eyes and dazzled him.

But what in the world was this?

How could the moon dwindle so suddenly to the size of a mere lamp flame?

How could the whole expanse of the heavens shrink in an instant to the limits of a little, cramped room?

In a single second, before he had time to realise that he felt surprise, the entire memory of his recent experiences vanished from his mind. The past became an utter blank. Like a wreath of smoke everything melted away as if it had never been at all. The functions of the brain resumed their normal course. The delirium of the past few hours was over.

Jimbo was lying at home on his bed in the night-nursery, and his mother was bending over him. At the foot of the bed stood the doctor in black. The nurse held a lamp, only half shaded by her hand, as she approached the bedside.

This lamp was the moon of his delirium — only he had quite forgotten now that there had ever been any moon at all.

The little thermometer, thrust into his teeth among the stars, was still in his mouth. A hot-water bottle made his feet glow and burn. And from the walls of the sick-room came as it were the echoes of recently-uttered sentences: “Take his temperature! Give him the medicine the moment he wakes! Put the hot bottle to his feet.... Fetch the ice-bag.... Quick!”

“Where am I, mother?” he asked in a whisper.

“You’re in bed, darling, and must keep quite quiet. You’ll soon be all right again. It was the old black cow that tossed you. The gardener found you by the swinging gate and carried you in.... You’ve been unconscious!”

“How long have I been uncon —— ?” Jimbo could not manage the whole word.

“About three hours, darling.”

Then he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, and when he woke long after it was early morning, and there was no one in the room but the old family nurse, who sat watching beside the bed. Something — some dim memory — that had stirred his brain in sleep, immediately rushed to his lips in the form of an inconsequent question. But before he could even frame the sentence, the thought that prompted it had slipped back into the deeper consciousness he had just left behind with the trance of deep sleep.

But the old nurse, watching every movement, waiting upon the child’s very breath, had caught the question, and she answered soothingly in a whisper —

“Oh, Miss Lake died a few days after she left here,” she said in a very low voice. “But don’t think about her any more, dearie! She’ll never frighten children again with her silly stories.”

“*DIED!*”

Jimbo sat up in bed and stared into the shadows behind her, as though his eyes saw something she could not see. But his voice seemed almost to belong to some one else.

“She was really dead all the time, then,” he said below his breath.

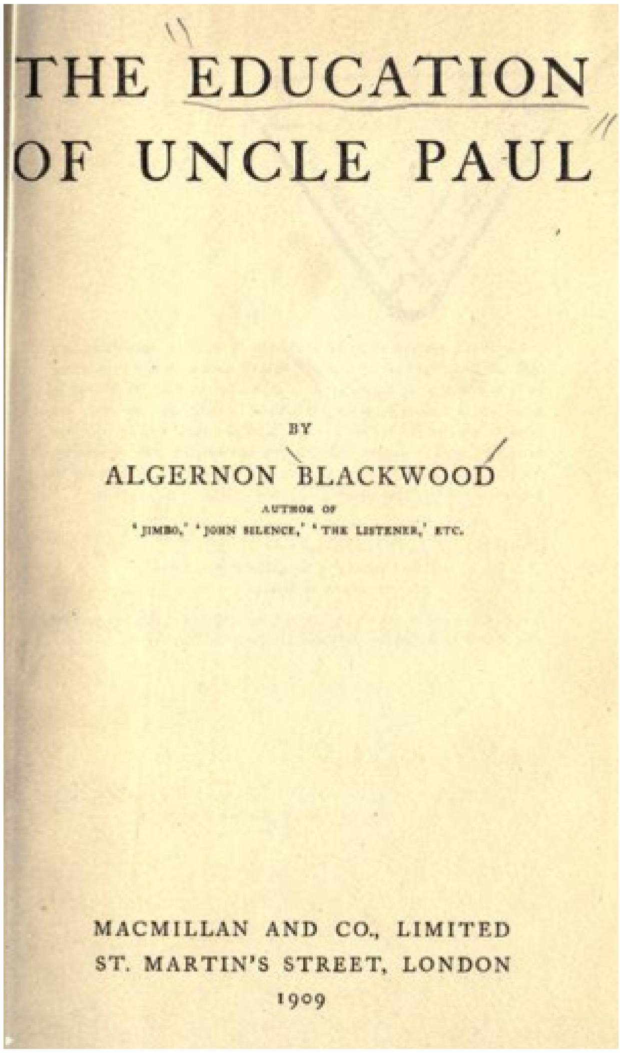
Then the child fell back without another word, and dropped off into the sleep which was the first step to final recovery.

THE END

The Education of Uncle Paul (1909)

The Education of Uncle Paul ponders the different attitudes to the world entertained by adults and children. The title character returns home to England after a long stay in the American wilderness in order to manage his sister's affairs, upon the death of her husband. Having spent so long in isolation, Paul feels he is still a child, and that his return to civilised society has forced him into a maturity he does not really feel. His nephew and nieces help him find a sense of contentment between the practical outlook of the adult world and the more innocent wonderment of the child's perspective. The supernatural element of the novel comes in the form of Paul's vivid imagination, which allows him to give visible forms to invisible natural forces such as the wind. But are these forms really the product of Paul's imagination?

In 1913, Blackwood published a sequel, *A Prisoner in Fairyland*. In 1920, he revisited the novel again when he adapted it into the play *Through the Crack*, which he co-authored with Violet Pearn. The play blended the narrative of this novel with that of his later work, *The Extra Day* (1915).



THE EDUCATION
OF UNCLE PAUL

BY
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD
AUTHOR OF
'JIMBO,' 'JOHN SILENCE,' 'THE LISTENER,' ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX
CHAPTER XX
CHAPTER XXI
CHAPTER XXII
CHAPTER XXIII
CHAPTER XXIV

CHAPTER XXV
CHAPTER XXVI
CHAPTER XXVII
CHAPTER XXVIII
CHAPTER XXIX

THE EDUCATION OF UNCLE PAUL

Know you what it is to be a child? It is to be something very different from the man of to-day. It is to have a spirit jet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child has its fairy godmother in its own soul; it is to live in a nutshell and to count yourself the king of infinite space; it is

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour;

It *is* to know not as yet that you are under sentence of life, nor petition chat it is to be commuted into death. — Francis Thompson.

TO
ALL THOSE CHILDREN
BETWEEN THE AGES OF EIGHT AND EIGHTY
WHO LED ME TO ‘THE CRACK’;
AND HAVE SINCE JOURNEYED WITH ME THROUGH IT
INTO
THE LAND ‘BETWEEN YESTERDAY AND TO-MORROW’

CHAPTER I

… I STAND as mute
As one with full strong music in his heart
Whose fingers stray upon a shattered lute.
ALICE MEYNELL.

ALL night the big liner had been plunging heavily, but towards morning she entered quieter water, and when the passengers woke, her rising and falling over the great swells was so easy that even the sea-sick women admitted the relief.

‘Land in sight, sir! We shall see Liverpool within twenty hours now, barring fog.’

The friendly bathroom steward passed the open door of Stateroom No. 28, and the big, brown-bearded man in the blue serge suit who was sitting, already dressed, on the edge of the port-hole berth, started as though he had been shot, and ran up on deck without waiting to finish tying the laces of his india-rubber shoes.

‘By Jove!’ he said, as he thundered along the stuffy passages of the rolling vessel, and ‘By Gad!’ He emerged on the upper deck in the sunlight, having nearly injured several persons in his impetuous journey, and, taking a great gulp of the salt air with keen satisfaction, he crossed to the side in a couple of strides, the shoe-laces clicking against the deck as he went.

‘Twenty years ago,’ he muttered, ‘when I was barely out of my teens. And now — !’

The big man was distinctly excited, though ‘moved’ perhaps is the better word, seeing that the emotion was a little too searching, too tinged with sadness, to include elation. He plunged both hands into his coat pockets with a violence that threatened to tear the bottoms out, and leaned over the railing.

Far away a faint blue line, tinged delicately with green, rose out of the sea. He saw it instantly, and his throat tightened unexpectedly, almost like a reflex action. For, about that simple little blue line on the distant horizon there was something strangely seizing something absolutely arresting. The sight of it was a hundred times more poignant than he had imagined it would be; it touched a thousand springs of secret life in him, and a mist rose faintly before his eyes.

Paul Rivers had not realised that his emotion would be so intense; but from that instant everything on the ship, otherwise familiar and rather boring, looked different. A new sense of locality came to him. The steamer became strange and new; he ‘recognised’ bits of it as though he had just come aboard a ship known aforetime. It was no longer the steamer that was merely crossing the Atlantic; it was the boat that was bringing him home. And there, trimming the horizon in a thin ribbon of most arresting beauty, was the coast-line of the first Island.

‘But it seems so much more solid — and so much more real than I expected!’

Though it was barely seven o’clock a few early passengers were already astir, and he made his way back again to the lower deck and thence climbed up into the bows. He wished to be alone. Another man, apparently from the steerage, was there before him, leaning over the rail and peering fixedly under one hand at the horizon. The saloon passenger took up his position a few feet farther on and stared hard. He, too, stared with the eyes of memory, now grown a little dim. The air was fresh and sweet, fragrant of long sea distances; there was a soft warmth in it too, for it was late April and the spring made its presence known even on the great waters where there was nothing to hang its fairy banners on.

‘So that’s land! That’s the Old Country!’

The words dropped out of their own accord; he could not help himself. The sky seemed to come down a little closer, with a more familiar and friendly touch; the very air, he fancied, had a new taste in it, — a whiff of his boyhood days — a smell of childhood and the things of childhood — ages ago, it seemed, in another life.

The huge ship rose and fell on the regular, sweeping swells, and sea-birds from the land already came out to meet her. He easily imagined that the thrills in the depths of his own being somehow communicated themselves to the mighty vessel that tore the seas asunder in her great desire to reach the land.

‘Twenty years,’ he repeated aloud, oblivious of his neighbour, ‘twenty years since I last saw it!’

‘And it’s gol-darned nearer fifty since *I* seen it,’ exclaimed a harsh voice just behind him.

He turned with a start. The steerage passenger beside him, he saw, was an old man with a rough, grey face, and hair turning white; the hand that shaded his eyes was thick and worn; there was a heavy gold ring on the little finger, and the dirty cuff of a dark flannel shirt tumbled, loosely and unbuttoned, over the very solid wrist. The face, he noticed, at a second glance, was rugged, beaten, scored, the face of a man who had tumbled terribly about life, battered from pillar to post; and it was only the light in the hard blue eyes — eyes still fixed unwaveringly on the distant line of the land — that redeemed it from a kind of grim savagery. Beaten and battered, yes! Yet at the same time triumphant. The atmosphere of the man proclaimed in some vibrant fashion beyond analysis that he had failed in all he undertook — failed from stupidity rather than character, and always doggedly beginning over again with the same lack of intelligence — but yet had never given in, and never would give in.

It was not difficult to reconstruct his history from his appearance; or to realise his feelings as he saw the Old Country after fifty years — a returned failure. Although the voice had vibrated with emotion, the face remained expressionless and unmoved; but down both cheeks large tears ran slowly, in sudden jerks, to drop with a splash upon the railing. And Paul Rivers, after his intuitive fashion, grasped the whole drama of the man with a sudden completeness that touched him with swift sympathy. At the same time he could not help thinking of rain-drops running down the face of a statue. He recognised with shame that he was conscious of a desire to laugh.

‘Fifty years! That’s a long time indeed,’ he said kindly. ‘It’s half-a-century.’

‘That’s so, Boss,’ returned the other in a dead voice that betrayed Ireland overlaid with acquired American twang and intonation; ‘and I guess now I’ll never be able to stick it over here. Jest see it — and then git back again.’

He kept his eyes fixed on the horizon, and never once turned his head towards the man he was speaking to; only his lips moved; he did not even lift a finger to brush off the great tears that fell one by one from his checks to the deck. He seemed unconscious of them; as though it was so long since those hard eyes had melted that they had forgotten how to do it properly and the skin no longer registered the sensation of the trickling. The tears continued to fall at intervals; Paul Rivers actually heard them splash.

‘I went out steerage,’ the man continued to himself, or to the sea, or to any one else who cared to listen, ‘and I come back steerage. That’s my trouble. And now’ — his eye shifted for a fraction of a second and watched a huge wave go thundering by—’ I’m grave-huntin’, I guess. And that’s about the size of it. Jest see it and — git back again!’

The first-class passenger made some kind and appropriate reply — words with genuine sympathy in them — and then, getting no further answer, found it difficult to continue the conversation. The man, he realised, had only wanted a peg to hang his emotion on. It had to be a living peg, but any other living peg would do equally well, and before long he would find some one in the steerage who would listen with delight to the flood that was bound to come. And, presently, he took his departure to his own quarters where the sailors, with bare feet, were still swabbing the slippery decks.

A couple of hours later, after breakfast, he leaned over the rail and again saw the man on the steerage deck, and heard him talking volubly. The tears were gone, but the smudges were still visible on the cheeks, where they had traced a zigzag pattern. He was telling the history of his fifty years’ disappointments and failures to one and all who cared to listen.

And, apparently, many cared to listen. The man’s emotion was real; it found vigorous expression. The sight of the old, loved shore, not seen for half-a-century, but the subject of ten thousand yearnings, had been too much for him. He told in detail the substance of these ten thousand dreams — ever one and the same dream, of course — and in the telling of it he found the relief his soul sought. He got it all out; it did him a world of good, saving his inner being from a whole army of severe mental fevers and spiritual pains. The man revelled in a delirium of self-expression, and in so doing found sanity and health for his overburdened soul.

And the picture of that hard-faced old man crying accompanied Paul Rivers to the upper decks, and remained insistently with him for a long time. It portrayed with such neat emphasis precisely what was so deplorably lacking in his own character. There, in concrete form, though not precisely his own case, still near enough to be extremely illuminating, he had seen a grown-up man finding abundant and natural expression for his emotion. The man was not ashamed of his tears, and would doubtless have let them splash on the deck before a hundred passengers, whereas he, Paul Rivers, was, it seemed, constitutionally unable to reveal himself, to tell his deep longings, to find expression through any sensible medium for the ten thousand dreams that choked his life to the brim. He was unable, perhaps ashamed, to splash on the deck.

It was not that the big, bronzed Englishman wanted to cry, or to wash his soul in sentiment, but that the sight of this old man's passion, and its frank and easy utterance, touched with dramatic intensity the crying need of his whole temperament. The need of the steerage passenger was the need of a moment; his own was the need of an existence.

'Lucky devil!' he exclaimed, half laughing, half sighing, as he went to his cabin for the field-glasses; 'he knows how to get it out — and does get it out! while I — with my impossible yearnings and my absurd diffidence in speaking of them to others — I haven't got a single safety-valve of any sort or kind. I can't get it out of me — all this ocean in my heart and soul — not a drop, not even a blessed tear!'

He laughed again and, stooping to pick up the glasses, he caught a glimpse of his sunburned, bearded face in the cabin mirror.

'Even my appearance is against me,' he went on with mournful humour; 'I look like a healthy lumberman more than anything else in God's world!' He bent forward and examined himself carefully in detail.

'What has such a face as that to do with beauty, and the stars, and the moon sinking over a summer sea, or those night-winds I know rising faintly from their hiding-places in the dim forests and stealing on soft tiptoe about the sleeping world until the dawn gives them leave to run and sing? Yet *I* know

— though I can never tell it to another — what so many do not know! Who could ever believe that *that* man' — he pointed to himself in the glass, laughing—' wants above all else in life, above wealth, fame, success, the knowledge of spiritual things, which is Reality — which is God?'

A flash of light from nowhere ran over his face, making it for one instant like the face of a boy, shining, wonderful, radiantly young.

'I know, for instance,' he went on, the strange flush of enthusiasm rising into his eyes, 'that the pine-trees hold wind in their arms as cups hold rare wine, and that when it spills I hear the exquisite trickling of its music — but I can't tell any one *that!* And I can't even put the wild magic of it into verse or music. Or even into conduct,' he concluded with a laugh, 'conduct that's sane, that is. For, if I could, I should find what I'm for ever seeking behind all life and behind all expressions of beauty — I should find the Reality I seek!'

'I've no safety-valves,' he added, swinging the glasses round by their strap to the imminent danger of various articles of furniture, 'that's the long and short of it. Like a giraffe that can't make any sound at all although it has the longest throat in all creation. Everything in me accumulates and accumulates. If only' — and the strange light came back for a second to his brown eyes—' I could write, or sing, or pray — live as the saints did, or do something to — to express adequately the sense of beauty and wonder and delight that lives, like the presence of a God, in my soul!'

The lamp in his eyes faded slowly and he sat back on the little cabin sofa, screwing and unscrewing his glasses till it was surprising that the thread didn't wear out. And as he screwed, a hundred fugitive pictures passed thronging through his mind; moments of yearning and of pain, of sudden happiness and of equally sudden despondency, vivid moods of all kinds provoked by the smallest imaginable fancies, as the way ever was with him. For the moods of the sky were his moods; the swift, coloured changes of sea and cloud were mirrored in his heart as with all too impressionable people, and he was for ever trying to seize the secret of their loveliness and to give it form — in vain. Like many another mystical soul he saw the invisible foundations of the visible world — longed to communicate it to others — found he couldn't — then suffered all the pain and fever of repression that seeks in vain for adequate utterance. Too shy to stammer his profound yearnings to ears that would not hear, and, never having known the blessed relief of a sympathetic audience, he perforce remained choked and dumb, the only mitigation he knew being that loss of self which follows prolonged contemplation. In his contemplation of Nature, for instance, he would gaze upon the landscape, the sky, a tree or flower, until their essential beauty passed into his own nature. For the moment he *felt with* these things. He *was* them. He took their qualities literally into himself. He lost his ordinary personality by changing its centre, merging it into those remoter phases of consciousness which extended from himself mysteriously to include the landscape, the sky, the tree, the flower.

For him everywhere in Nature there was psychic energy. And it was difficult to say which was with him the master passion: to find Reality — God — through Nature, or to explain Nature through God.

Then the busy faces of America, now left behind after twenty years, gradually receded, and others, dimly seen through mist, rose above the horizon of his thoughts. And among them he saw that two stood forth with more clearness than the rest. One of these was Dick Messenger, the friend of his boyhood, now dead but a few years; and the other, the face of his sister, Margaret, whom Dick had left a widow, and whose children he would now see for the first time at their country home in the South of England.

The 'Old Country!' He repeated the words softly to himself, weaving it like a coloured thread through all his reverie. He had lived away long long enough to understand the poignant magic that lies in the little phrase, and to appreciate the seizing and pathetic beauty lying along that faint blue line of sea and sky.

And presently he took his field-glasses again and went up on deck and hid himself in the bows alone. Leaning over the bulwarks he took the scented wind of spring full in the face, and watched with a curious exhilaration the huge rollers, charging and bellowing like wild bulls of the sea as the ship drew nearer and nearer to the coast, plunging, leaping, and thundering as she moved.

CHAPTER II

JUSTICE IS NOT done to the versatility and the unplumbed childishness of man's imagination. His life from without may seem but a rude mound of mud, there will be some golden chamber at the heart of it, in which he dwells delighted; and for as dark as his pathway seems to the observer, he will have some kind of a bull's-eye at his belt. — R. L. S.

THE case of Paul Rivers after all was very simple, though perhaps in some respects uncommon. Circumstances — to sum it up roughly — had so conspired that the most impressionable portion of his character — half of his mind and most of his soul, that is — had never found utterance. He had never discovered the medium that could carry forth into the relief of expression all the inner turmoil and delight of a soul that was very much alive and singularly in touch with the simple and primitive forces of the world.

It was not, as with the returned emigrant, grief that he felt, but something far more troublesome: Joy. For the beauty of the world, of character as of nature, laid a spell upon him that set his heart in the glow and fever of an inner furnace, while the play of his imagination among the 'common' things of life which the rest of the world apparently thought dull set him often upon the borders of an ecstasy whereof he found himself unable to communicate one single letter to his fellow - beings. Thus, in later years, and out of due season, he was afflicted and perplexed by a luxuriant growth that by rights should have been harvested before he was twenty-five; and a great part of him had neglected to grow up at all.

This result was due to no fault — no neglect, that is — of his own, but to circumstances and temperament combined. It explains, however, why, after twenty years in the backwoods of America, he saw the coast of the Old Country with a deep emotion that was not all delight, but held something also of dismay.

Left an orphan, with his younger sister, at an early age, the blundering of trustees had forced him out into the world before his first term at Cambridge was over, and after various vicissitudes he had found his way to America and had been drawn into the lumber trade. Here his knowledge and love of trees — it was a veritable passion with him — soon resulted in a transfer from the Minneapolis office to the woods, and after an interesting apprenticeship, he came to hold an important post in which he was strangely at home. He was appointed to the post of 'Wood Cruiser' — forest-traveller, *commis voyageur* of the primeval woods. His duties, well paid too, were to survey, judge, mark, and report upon the qualities and values of the immense timber limits owned by his Company. And he loved the work. It was a life of solitude, but a life close to Nature; borne in his canoe down swift wilderness streams; meeting the wild animals in their secret haunts; becoming intimate with dawns and sunsets, great winds, the magic of storms and stars, and being initiated into the profound mysteries of the clean and haunted regions of the world.

And the effect of this kind of life upon him — especially at an age when most men are busy learning more common values in the strife of cities — was of course significant. For here, in this solitary existence, the beauty of the world, virgin and glorious, struck the eyes of his soul and nearly blinded them.

His whole being threw itself inwards upon his thoughts, and outwards upon what fed his thoughts — the wonder of Nature. Even as a boy he had been mystically minded, a poet if ever there was one, though a poet without a lyre; but at school he had chanced to come under the influence of masters who had sought to curb the exuberance of his imagination, so that he started into life with the rooted idea that it was something of a disgrace for a man to be too sensitive to beauty, and to possess a vivid and coloured imagination was almost a thing to be ashamed of.

This view of his only 'silver talent,' moreover, was never permitted by the nature of his life to alter. His early American experiences stiffened it into a conviction which he yet despised. The fires ran hidden, if unchecked. Had he dwelt in cities, they might have suffered total extinction perhaps, but here, in the heart of the free woods, they speedily rose to the surface again and flamed. He grew up singularly unspoilt, the shyness of the original nature utterly uncorrected, the stores of a poetic imagination accumulating steadily, but always unuttered.

For his sole companions all these years when he had any at all were the ‘Bosses’ of the lumber camps he inspected, the ‘Cookee’ who looked after his stew-pot in the ‘home-shack,’ and the half-breed Indian who accompanied him in the stern-seat of the bark canoe during the month-long trips about the wilderness: these — with the animals, winds, stars, and the forms of beauty his imagination for ever conjured out of them.

For twenty years he lived thus, knowing all the secrets of the woods and streams. In the summer he never slept under cover at all, so that even in sleep he understood, through closed eyelids, the motions of the stars behind the tangled network of branches overhead. In winter his snow-shoes carried him into the heart of the most dazzling scenes imaginable — the forest lying under many feet of snow with a cloudless sun lifting it all into an appearance of magic that took the breath away. Moreover, the fierce spring, when the streams became impassable floods, and the autumn, with a flaming glory of gold and scarlet unknown anywhere else in the world, he knew as intimately as the dryads themselves.

And all these moods became the intimate companions of his life, taking the place of men and women. He came to personify Nature as a matter of course.

Without knowing it, too, the place of children was taken somehow by the wild animals. He knew them all. He surprised them in their haunts in the course of his silent journeys into the heart of their playgrounds; and his headquarters — a one-story shanty on the height of land between his two chief ‘limits’ — was never without a tamed baby bear, a young moose to draw him on his snow-shoes with the manners of a well-bred pony, and a dozen other animals reclaimed from savagery and turned by some mysterious system of his own into real companions and confidants.

And the only books he read in the long winter nights, besides a few modern American novels that puzzled and vaguely distressed him, were Blake, his loved Greek plays, and the Bible.

He rarely saw a woman. Sides of his nature that ought to have developed under the influences of normal life at home lay dormant altogether, or were filled as best might be by his intercourse with Nature. He wrote few letters. After Dick Messenger died, the formal correspondence he kept up at long intervals with his sister — Dick's widow — hardly deserved the name of letters. Great slabs of him, so to speak, stopped growing up, sinking down into the subconscious region to await conditions favourable for calling them to the surface again, and eventually coming to life — this was his tragic little secret — at a time when they were long overdue.

To the end of life he remained shy, shy in the sense that most of his thoughts and emotions he was afraid to reveal to others; with the shyness, too, of the utterly modest soul that cannot believe the world will give it the very things it has most right to claim, yet never dares to claim. And to the end Nature never lifted the spell laid upon him during those twenty years of initiation in her solitudes. To see the new moon tilting her silver horns in the west; to hear the wind rustling in high trees, like old Indians telling one another secrets of the early world; and to see the first stars looking down from the height of sky through spaces of watery blue — these, and a hundred other things that the majority seemed to ignore, were to him a more moving and terrible delight than anything he could imagine. For him such things could never be explained away, but remained living and uncorrected to the end.

Thus when, at forty-five, he inherited the fortune of his aunt (which he had always known must one day come to him), he returned to England with the shy, bursting, dream-laden heart of a boy, young as only those are young whom life has kept clean and sweet in the wilderness; and the question that sprang to life in his heart when he saw the blue line of coast was a vague wonder as to what would become of his full-blooded dreams when tested by the conventional English life that he remembered as a boy. To whom could he speak of his child-like yearning after God; of his swift divinations, his passionate intuitions into the very things that the majority put away with childhood? What modern priest — so he felt, at least — what befuddled mystic, could possibly enter into the essential nature of these cravings as he did, or understand, without a sneer, the unspoilt passions of a man who had never 'grown up'?

'I shall be out of touch with it all,' he thought as he stood there in the bows and watched the blue line grow nearer, 'utterly out of touch. What shall I find to say to the men of my own age — I, who stopped growing up twenty years ago? How shall I ever link on with them? Children are the only things I can talk to, and children!' — he shrugged his shoulders and laughed—' children will find me out at once and give me away to the others.'

'Dick's children, though, may be different!' came the sudden reflection. 'Only — I've had nothing to do with children for such ages. Dick had real imagination. By George,' — and his eyes glowed a moment—' what if they took after him!"

And for the fiftieth time, as he pictured the meeting with his stranger sister, his heart sank, and he found refuge in the knowledge that he had not altogether burned his boats behind him. For he had been wise in his generation. He had arranged with his Company, who were only too glad of the chance of keeping his services, that he should go to England on a year's leave, and that if in the end he decided to return he should have a share in the business, while still continuing the work of forest-inspection that he loved.

'I'm nothing but a wood-cruiser. I shall go back. In the big world I might lose all my vision!'

And, having lived so long out of the world, he now came back to it with this simple, innocent, imaginative heart of a great boy, a boy still dreaming, for all his five-and-forty years. Fully realising that something was wrong with him, that he ought to be more sedate, more cynical, more prosaic and sober, he yet could not quite explain to himself wherein lay the source of his disability. His thoughts stumbled and blundered when he tried to lay his finger on it, with the only result that he felt he would be 'out of touch' with his new world, not knowing exactly how or why.

'It's a regular log-jam,' he said, using the phraseology he was accustomed to, 'and I'm sorry for the chap that breaks it.'

It never occurred to him that in this simple thrill that Nature still gave him he possessed one of the greatest secrets for the preservation of genuine youth; indeed, had he understood this, it would have meant that he was already old. For with the majority such dreams die young, brushed rudely from the soul by the iron hand of experience, whereas in his case it was their persistent survival that lent such a childlike quality to his shyness, and made him secretly ashamed of not feeling as grown-up as he realised he ought to feel.

Paul Rivers, in a word, belonged to a comprehensible though perhaps not over common type, and one not often recognised owing to the elaborate care with which its ‘specimens’ conceal themselves from the world under all manner of brave disguises.

He was destitute of that nameless quality that constitutes a human being, not mature necessarily, but grown up. Sources of inner enthusiasm that most men lose when life brings to them the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, had kept alive; and though on the one hand he was secretly ashamed of the very simplicity of his great delights, on the other hand he longed intensely for some means by which he could express them and relieve his burdened soul.

He envied the emigrant who could let fall hot tears on the deck without further ado, while at the same time he dreaded the laughter of the world into which he was about to move when they learned the cause of the emotions that produced them. A boy at forty-five! A dreamer of children’s dreams with fifty in sight — and no practical results!

These were some of the thoughts still tumbling vaguely about his mind when the tug brought letters aboard at Queenstown, and on the dining-room table where they were spread out he found one for himself in a handwriting that he both welcomed and dreaded.

CHAPTER III

HE WELCOMED IT, because for years it had been the one remaining link with the life of his old home — these formal epistles that reached him at long intervals; and he dreaded it, because he knew it would contain a definite invitation of an embarrassing description.

'She's bound to ask me,' he reflected as he opened it in his cabin; 'she can't help herself. And I am bound to accept, for I can't help myself either.' He was far too honest to think of inventing elaborate excuses. 'I've got to go and spend a month with her right away whether I like it or not.'

It was not by any means that he disliked his sister, for indeed he hardly knew her; after all these years he barely remembered what she looked like, the slim girl of eighteen he had left behind. It was simply that in his mind she stood for the conventional life, so alien to his vision, to which he had returned.

He would try to like her, certainly. Very warm impulses stirred in his heart as he thought of her — his only near relative in the world, and the widow of his old school and Cambridge friend, Dick Messenger. It was in her handwriting that he first learned of Dick's love for her, as it was in hers that the news of his friend's death reached him — after his long tour — two months old. The handwriting was a symbol of the deepest human emotions he had known. And for that reason, too, he dreaded it.

He never realised quite what kind of woman she had become; in his thoughts she had always remained simply the girl of eighteen — grown up — married. Her letters had been very kind and gentle, if in the nature of the case more and more formal. She became shadowy and vague in his mind as the years passed, and more and more he had come to think of her as wholly out of his own world. Reading between the lines it was not difficult to see that she attached importance to much in life that seemed to him unreal and trivial, whereas the things that he thought vital she never referred to at all. It might, of course, be merely restraint concealing great depths. He could not tell. The letters, after a few years, had become like formal government reports. He had written fully, however, to announce his home-coming, and her reply had been full of genuine pleasure.

‘I don’t think she’ll make very much of me,’ was the thought in his mind whenever he dwelt upon it. ‘I’m afraid my world must seem foreign: — unreal to her; the things I know rubbish.’

So, in the privacy of his cabin, his heart already strangely astir by the emotion of that blue line on the horizon, he read his sister’s invitation and found it charming. There was spontaneous affection in it.

‘We shall fix things up between us so that no one would ever know.’ He did not explain what it was ‘no one would ever know,’ but went on to finish the letter. He was to make his home with her in the country, he read, until he decided what to do with himself. The tone of the letter made his heart bound. It was a real welcome, and he responded to it instantly like a boy. Only one thing in it seriously disturbed his equanimity. Absurd as it may seem, the fact that his sister’s welcome included also that of the children, had a subtly disquieting effect upon him.

... for they are dying to see you and to find out for themselves what the big old uncle they have heard so much about is really like. All their animals are being cleaned and swept so as to be ready for your arrival, and, in anticipation of your stories of the backwoods, no other tales find favour with them any more.

An expression of perplexity puckered his face.

‘I declare, I’m afraid of those children — Dick’s children!’ he thought, holding the open letter to his mouth and squinting down the page, while his eyebrows rose and his forehead broke into lines ‘They’ll find out what I am. They’ll betray me.

I shall never be able to hold out against them.’ He knew only too well how searching was the appeal that all growing and immature life made to him. It touched the very centre of him that had refused to grow up and that made him young with itself.

‘I can no more resist them than I could resist the baby bears, or that little lynx that used to eat out of my hand.’ He shrugged his big shoulders, looking genuinely distressed. ‘And then every one will know what I am —

an overgrown boy — a dumb poet — a dreamer of dreams that bear no fruit!’

He was not morbidly introspective. He was merely trying to face the little problem squarely. He got up and staggered across the cabin, steadying himself against the rolling of the ship in front of the looking-glass.

‘Big Old Uncle!’

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and surveyed himself critically. Big he certainly was, but that other adjective brought with it a sensation of weariness that had never yet troubled him in his wilderness existence. He was only a little, just a very little, on the shady side of forty-five, but to the children he might seem really old, *aged*, and to his sister, who was considerably his junior, as elderly,’ and perhaps in need of the comforts of the elderly.

He squared his shoulders and looked more closely into the glass. There, opposite to him, stood a tall, dignified man in a blue suit, with a spotless linen collar and a neat tie passing through a gold ring, instead of the unkempt fellow he was accustomed to in a flannel shirt, red handkerchief and big sombrero hat pulled over his eyes; a man weighing the best part of fifteen stones, lean, well-knit, vigorous, and nearly six feet three in his socks. A pair of brown eyes, kindly brown eyes he thought, met his own questioningly, and a brown beard — yes, it was still brown — covered the lower part of the face. He put up a hand to stroke it, and noticed that it was a strong, muscular hand, sunburnt but well kept, with neat finger-nails, and a heavy signet ring on one finger. It brushed across the rather deep lines on the bronzed forehead, without brushing them away, however, and then travelled higher to the rough parting in the dark-brown hair, and the hair, he noticed, was brushed in a particular way evidently, a way he thought no one would notice but himself and the lumber-camp barber who first taught him, so as to cover up a few places where the wind made little chilly feelings in winter-time under his fur cap.

Old? No, not old yet — but “getting on” was a gentler phrase he could not deny, and there were certainly odd traces where the crows had walked on his skin while he slept in the forest, and had hopped up even to the corners of his eyes to see if he were really asleep. There were other lines, too — lines of exposure, traced by wind and sun, and one or two queer marks that are said only to come from prolonged hardship and severest want. For he had known both sides of the wilderness life, and on his long journeys Nature had not always been kind to him.

He stared for a long time at his reflection in the glass, lost in reverie. This coming back to England after so many years was like looking at a picture of himself as he was when he had left; it furnished him with a ready standard of comparison; the changes of the years stood out very sharply, as though they had come about in a single night.

Yes, his face and figure had aged a good deal. He admitted it. And when he frowned he had distinctly an appearance of middle age. This, of course, was the absurd part of it, for in spirit he had remained as young as he was at twenty, as enthusiastic, hopeful, spontaneous as ever, just as much in love with the world, and just as full of boyhood's dreams as when he went to Cambridge. And in his eyes still burned the strange flames that sought to pierce behind the veil of appearances.

'And those children will find it out and make me look ridiculous before I've been there a week!' he exclaimed again, sitting down on his bunk with a crash as the steamer gave a sudden lurch; 'and then where shall I be, I'd like to know?'

He lay on his back for an hour thinking out a plan of action. For, of course, he decided that he must go; only — he must go *disguised.* And he spent hours inventing the disguise, and more hours perfecting it. For the first time in his life he would adopt a distinct attitude, and, having carefully thought out the attitude he intended to adopt by way of disguise, he buckled it on like armour and fastened it very securely indeed to his large person.

He would be kind; he would even meet the children half-way, kiss them if necessary at stated times, in a stated way, and perhaps occasionally unbend a little as opportunity served and circumstances permitted. But never must he forget, or allow them to forget, that he was a stiff and elderly man, a little grim and gruff, sometimes even severe and short-tempered, and never to be trifled with at any time, or under any conditions.

Over the tenderer emotions he must keep especial watch; these were a direct channel to his secrets, and once the old unsatisfied enthusiasms escaped, there was no saying what might happen. The thought frightened him, for the pain involved might be very great indeed.

With people of his own age, he realised, the danger would be less. Silence and reserve cover a multitude of shortcomings. But children, he knew, had a simple audacity, a merciless penetration, that no mere pose could ever withstand. And this he felt intuitively, knowing nothing of children, but being taught by these very qualities in himself. Like little animals they would soon find the direct channel to his heart unless well guarded, and come tumbling along it without delay. And then — !

So Paul Rivers left London the very next day, glad in many ways to think that he had this haven of refuge to go to from the noisy horror of the huge strange city; yet with a sinking of his heart lest his true self should be discovered, and held up to scorn.

Moreover, the strange part of it was that as he sped down through the smiling green country that spring afternoon, armed from head to foot in the rigid steel casings of his disguise, he seemed to hear a faint singing deep within him, a singing that belonged to the youngest part of him and yet sprang from that which was vastly ancient, but as to the cause of which he was so puzzled that, in his efforts to analyse it, he forgot about his journey altogether, and was nearly carried past the station where he had to get out.

CHAPTER IV

NO MAN WORTH his spiritual salt can ever become really entangled in locality. — A. H. L.

THE house, like the description of himself in the letter, was big and old. It consisted of three rambling wings, each added at a different period to an original farmhouse, and was thus full of unexpected staircases, sudden rising passages, and rooms of queer shapes. It resembled, indeed, the structure of a mind that has grown by chance and not by system, and was just as difficult for a stranger to find his way in.

It stood among pine-woods, at the foot of hills that ran on another five miles to drop their chalk cliffs abruptly into the sea. Where the lawns stopped on one side and the kitchen-garden on the other began an expanse of undulating heather-land, dotted with pools of brown water and yellow with patches of gorse and broom. Here rabbits increased and multiplied; sea-gulls screamed and flew, using some of the more secluded ponds for their annual breeding places; foxes lived happily, unhunted and very bold; and the dainty hoof-marks of deer were sometimes found in the sandy margins of the freshwater springs.

It was beautiful country, a bit of wild England, out of the world as very few parts of it now are, and haunted by a loveliness that laid its spell on the heart of the returned exile the moment he topped the hill in the dog-cart and saw it spread out before him like a softly coloured map. The scenery from the train window had somehow disheartened him a little, producing a curious sense of confinement, almost of imprisonment, in his mind: the neat meadows holding wooden cattle; the careful boundaries of ditch and hedge; the five-barred gates, strong to enclose, the countless notices to warn trespassers, and the universal network of barbed wire. Accustomed as he was to the vast, unhedged landscapes of a primitive country, it all looked to him, with its precise divisions, like a toy garden, combed, washed, swept — exquisitely cared for, but a little too sweet and perfumed to be quite wholesome. Only tame things, he felt, could enjoy so gentle a playground, and the call of his own forests — for this really was what worked in him — sang out to him with a sterner cry.

But this view from the ridge pleased him more: there were but few hedges visible; the eye was led to an open horizon and the sea; an impression of space and freedom rose from the hills and moorlands. Here his thoughts, accustomed to deal with leagues rather than acres, could at least find room to turn about in. And although the perfume that rose to his nostrils was like the perfume of flowers preserved by some artificial process rather than the great clean smells of a virgin world such as he was used to, it was nevertheless the smell of his boyhood, and it moved him powerfully. Odour is the one thing that is impossible to recall in exile. Sights and sounds the imagination can always reconstruct after a fashion, but odour is too elusive. It rose now to his nostrils as something long forgotten, and swept him with a wave of memory that was extraordinarily keen.

‘That’s a smell to take me back twenty-five years,’ he thought, inhaling the scent of the heather. He caught his breath sharply, uncertain whether it was pain or pleasure that predominated. A profound yearning, too fugitive to be seized, too vague to be definitely labelled, stirred in the depths of him as his eye roamed over the miles of sunlight and blue shadow at his feet; again something sang within him as he gazed over the long ridges of heath land sprinkled with silvery pools, and bearing soft purple masses of pine-woods on their sides as they melted away through haze to the summer sea beyond.

Only when his gaze fell upon the smoke rising from the grey stone roof of the house nestling far below did the joy of his emotion chill a little. A vague sense of alarm and nervousness touched him as he wondered what that grey old building might hold in store for him.

‘It’s silly, I know,’ his thought ran, ‘but I feel like a lost sheep here. It’s Nature that calls me, not people. I don’t know how I shall get on in this chess-board sort of a country. They’ll never care for the things that I care for.’

For a moment a sort of panic came over him. He could almost have turned and run. Vaguely he felt that he was an unfinished, uncouth article in a shop of dainty china. He sent the dog-cart on ahead, and walked down the hill-side towards the house, thinking, thinking — wondering almost why he had ever consented to come, and already conscious of a sense of imprisonment.

He was still impressionable as a boy, with sharp, fleeting moods like a boy’s.

Then, quite suddenly it seemed, he had walked up the drive and passed through the house, and a figure moved across a lawn to meet him. The first sight of his sister he had known for twenty years was a tall woman in white serge, with a prim, still girlish figure and a quiet, smiling face, moving graciously through patches of sunshine between flower-beds of formal outline. There was no spontaneous rush of welcome, no gush, or flood of questions. He felt relieved. With a flash, too, he realised that her dominant note was still grief for her lost husband. It was written all over her.

Instantly, however, shyness descended upon him like a cloud. The scene he had rehearsed so often in imagination vanished before the reality. He slipped down inside himself, as his habit sometimes was, and watched the performance curiously, as though he were a spectator of it instead of an actor.

He saw himself, hot and rather red in the face, walking awkwardly across the lawn with both hands out, offering his bearded face clumsily to be kissed. And it was kissed, first on one cheek, then on the other, calmly, soberly, delicately. He felt the tingling of it for a long time afterwards. That kiss confused him ridiculously.

At first he could think of nothing to say except the form of address he always used to the Bosses of the lumber camps—’ How’s everything up your way?’ — which he felt was not quite the most suitable phrase for the occasion. Then his sister spoke, and quickly set him more at his ease.

‘But you don’t look one little bit like an American, Paul!’

He gazed at her in admiration, just as he might have gazed at a complete stranger. The soft intonation of her voice was a keen delight to him. And her matter-of-fact speech put his shyness to flight.

‘Of course not,’ he replied, leaving out her name after a second’s hesitation, ‘but my voice, I guess—”

‘Not a bit either,’ she repeated, surveying him very critically. ‘You look like a sailor home from the sea more than anything else.’

She wore a wide garden hat of Panama straw, charmingly trimmed with flowers. Her face beneath it, Paul thought, was the most refined and exquisitely I delicate he had ever seen. It was like chiselled porcelain. He thought of Hank Davis's woman at Deep Bay Camp — whose face he used to think wonderful rather — and it suddenly seemed by comparison to have been chopped with a blunt axe out of wood.

They moved to the long chairs upon the lawn, and her brother realised for the first time that his boots were enormous, and that his Minneapolis clothes did not sit upon him quite as they might have done. He trod on a corner of a geranium bed as they went, crushing an entire plant with one foot. But his sister appeared not to notice it.

'It's an awful long time, M — Margaret,' he stammered as they went.

They both sat down and turned to stare at each other. It was, of course, idle to pretend that after so long an absence they could feel any very profound affection. Dick, he realised quickly with a flash of intuition, was the truer link. And, on the whole, it was all much easier than he had expected. His mind began to work very quickly in several directions at once. The beauty of the English garden in its quiet way touched him keenly, stirring in him little whirls of inner delight, fugitive but wonderful. Only a portion of him, after all, went out to his sister.

'I believe you expected a Red Indian, or a bear,' he said at length.

She laughed gently, returning his stare of genuine admiration. 'One couldn't help wondering a little, Paul dear, — after so many years — could one?' She always said 'one' instead of the obvious personal pronoun. 'You had no beard, for instance, when you left?'

'And more hair, perhaps!'

'You look splendid. I *shall* be proud of you!'

Paul blushed furiously. It was the first compliment ever paid to him by a woman.

'Oh, I feel all right,' he stammered. 'The healthy life in the woods, open air, and constant moving keep a fellow "fixed-up" to concert pitch all the time. I've never once — consulted a doctor in my life.' He was careful to keep the slang out. He felt he managed it admirably. He said 'consulted.'

‘And you wrote such nice letters, Paul. It *was* dear of you.’

‘I was lonely,’ he said bluntly. And after a pause he added, ‘I got all yours.’

‘I’m so glad.’ And then another pause. In which fashion they talked on for half an hour, each secretly estimating the other — wondering a little why they did not feel all kind of poignant emotions they had rather expected to feel.

It was a perfectly natural scene between a brother and sister who had grown up entirely apart, who were quite honest, who were utterly different types, and who yet wished to hold to one another as the nearest blood ties they possessed. They skimmed pleasantly and, so far as he was concerned, more and more easily, over the surface of things. Her talk, like her letters, was sincere, simple, shallow; it concealed no hidden depths, he felt at once. And by degrees, even in this first conversation, crept a shadow of other things, so that he realised they were in reality leagues apart, and could never have anything much in common below the pleasant surface relations of life.

Yet, even while he sheered off, as oil declines from its very nature to mingle with water, he felt genuinely drawn to her in another way. She was his own sister; she was his nearest tie; and she was Dick’s widow. They would get along together all right; they would be good friends.

‘Twenty years, Margaret.’

‘Twenty years, Paul.’

And then another pause of several minutes during which something that was too vague to be a real thought passed like a shadow through his mind. What could his friend Dick have seen in her that was necessary to his life and happiness — Dick Messenger, who was scholar, poet, thinker — who sought the everlasting things — God? He instantly suppressed it as unworthy, something of which he was ashamed, but not before it had left a definite little trace in his imagination.

‘So at last, Paul, you’ve really come home,’ she resumed; ‘I can hardly believe it, — and are going to settle down. You are a rich man.’

‘Aunt Alice did her duty,’ he laughed. He ignored the reference to settling down. It vaguely displeased him. ‘It’s for you as well as me,’ he added, meaning the money. ‘I want to share with you whatever you need.’

‘Not a penny,’ she said quickly; ‘I have all I need. I live with my memories, you know. I am only so glad for your sake, — after all your hard life out there.’

‘The life wasn’t hard; it was rather wonderful,’ he said simply. ‘I liked it.’

‘For a time perhaps; but you must have had curious experiences and lived with very rough people in those — lumber camp places you wrote about.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Simple kind of men, but very decent, very genuine. Few signs of city polish, I admit, but then you know I never cared for frills, Margaret.’

‘Frills!’ she exclaimed, without any expression on her face. ‘Of course not. Still, I am very glad you have left it all. The life must often have been unsuitable and lonely; one always felt that for you.

You can’t have had any of the society that one’s accustomed to.’

‘Not of that kind,’ he put in hurriedly with a short laugh, ‘but of other kinds. I struck a pretty good crowd of men on the whole.’

She turned her face slightly away from him; her eyes, he divined, had been fixed for a moment on his hands. For the first time in his life he realised that they were large and rough and brown. Her own were so pale and dainty — like china hands, glossy and smooth — and the gold bangle on her thin wrist looked as though every second it must slip over her fingers. His own hands disappeared swiftly into the pockets of his coat.

She turned to him with a gentle smile. ‘Anyhow,’ she said, ‘it is simply too delightful to know that you really are here at last. It must seem strange to you at first, and there are so many things to talk over — such a lot to tell. I want to hear all your plans. You’ll get used to us after a bit, and there are lots of nice people in the neighbourhood who are dying to meet you.’

Her brother felt inclined to explain that he had no wish to interfere with their ‘dying’; but, instead, he returned her smile. ‘I’m a poor hand at meeting people, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘I’m not as sociable as I might be.’

‘But you’ll get over that. Of course, living so long in the backwoods makes one unsociable.

But we’ll try and make you happy and comfortable. You have no idea how very, very glad I am that you’ve come home.’

Paul believed her. He leaned over and patted her hand, and she smiled frankly and sweetly in his face. She was a very shadowy sort of personality, he felt. If he blew hard she might blow away altogether, or disappear like a soap-bubble.

‘I’m glad too, of course,’ he replied. ‘Only at my age, you know, it’s not easy to tackle new habits.’

‘No one could take you for a day more than thirty-five,’ she said with truth; ‘so that shall be our own little private secret. You look quite absurdly young.’

They laughed together easily and naturally. Paul felt more at home and soothed than he had thought possible. It had not been in the least formidable after all, and for the first time in his life he knew a little of that enervating kind of happiness that comes from being made a fuss of. As there was still a considerable interval before tea, they left their chairs and strolled through the garden, and as they went, the talk turned upon the past, and his sister spoke of Dick and of all he had meant to do in the world, had he lived. Paul heard the details of his sudden death for the first time. Her voice and manner were evidence of the melancholy she still felt, but her brother’s heart was deeply stirred; he asked for all the particulars he had so often wondered about, and in her quiet, soothing tone, tinged now with tender sadness, she supplied the information. Clearly she had never arisen from the blow. She had worshipped Dick without understanding him.

‘Death always frightens me, I think,’ she said with a faint smile. ‘I try not to think about it.’

She passed on to speak of the children, and told him how difficult she found it to cope with them — she suffered from frequent headaches and could not endure noise — and how she hoped when they were a little older to be more with them. Mademoiselle Fleury, meanwhile, was such an excellent woman and was teaching them all they should know.

‘Though, of course, I keep a close eye on them so far as I am able,’ she explained, ‘and only wish I were stronger.’

They sauntered through the rose-garden and down the neat gravel paths that led to the wilder parts of the grounds where the rhododendron bushes stood in rounded domes and masses. It was very peaceful, very beautiful. He trod softly and carefully. The hush of centuries of cultivation lay over it all. Even the butterflies flew gently, as to the measure of a leisurely dance that deprecated undue animation. Paul caught his thoughts wandering to the open spaces of untamed moorland he had seen from the hill-top. More and more, as his sister's personality revealed itself, he got the impression that she lived enclosed like the wooden cows he had seen from the train, in a little green field, with precise and neatly trimmed borders. Strong emotions, as all other symptoms of plain and vigorous life, she shrank from. There were notice-boards set about her to warn trespassers, stating clearly that she did not wish to be let out. Yet in her way she was true, loving, and sweet — only it was such a conventional way, he felt.

Leaving the world of rhododendron bushes behind them, they came to the beginning of a pine-wood leading to the heather-land beyond. There was a touch of primitive wildness here. The trees grew straight and tall, filling the glade, and a stream ran brawling among their roots.

'This is the Gwyle,' she said, as they entered the shade, 'it was Dick's favourite part of the whole grounds. I rarely come here; it's dark even in summer, and rather damp and draughty, I always think.'

Paul looked about him and drew a long breath. The air was strong with open-air scents of earth and bark and branches. Far overhead the tufted pines swayed, murmuring to the sky; the ground ran away downhill, becoming broken up and uneven; nothing but dark, slender stems rose everywhere about him, like giant seaweeds, he thought, rising from the pools of a deep sea. And the soft wind, moving mysteriously between the shadows and the sunlight, completed the spell. He passed suddenly — willy-nilly, as his nature would have it — into that mood when the simplest things about him turned their faces upwards so that he caught their eyes and their meaning; when the well-known and common things of the world shone out and revealed the infinite. Something in this quiet pine-wood that was mighty, and utterly wonderful, entered his soul, linking him on at a single stroke with the majesty of the great spirit of the earth. What lay behind it? What was its informing spirit? How and where could it link on so intimately with his soul? And could it not be a channel, as he always felt it must be, to the God behind it? Beauty seized him by the throat and made him tremble.

This sudden rush came over him, sea-like. His moods were ever like the sea, some strange touch of colour shifting the entire key. Something, too, made him feel lonely and oppressed. He, who was accustomed to space in bulk — the space the stars and winds live in — had come to this little, parcelled-out place. He felt clipped already. He turned to the shadowy personality beside him, the boyish impulse bursting its way out. After all, she was his own sister; he could reveal himself to no one if not to her.

‘By Gosh, Margaret,’ he cried, ‘this is the real thing. This wood must be alive and haunted just as the James Bay forests are. It’s simply full of wonder.’

‘It’s the Gwyle wood,’ she said quietly. ‘It’s usually rather damp. But Dick loved it.’

Her brother hardly heard what she said. ‘Listen,’ he said in a hushed tone; ‘do you hear the wind up there aloft? The trees are talking. The wood is full of whispers. There’s no sound in the world like that murmur of a soft breeze in pine branches. It’s like the old gods sighing, which only their true worshippers hear! Isn’t it fine and melancholy? Margaret, d’you know, it goes through me like a fever.’

His sister stopped and stared at him. She wore a little frightened expression. His sudden enthusiasm puzzled her evidently.

‘It’s the Gwyle wood,’ she repeated mechanically. ‘It’s very pretty, I think. Dick always thought so too.’

Her brother, surprised at his own rush of ready words, and already ashamed of the impulse that had prompted him to reveal himself, fell into silence.

‘Nature excites me sometimes,’ he said presently. ‘I suppose it’s because I’ve known nothing else.’

‘That’s quite natural, I’m sure, Paul dear,’ she rejoined, turning to lead the way back to the sunshine of the open garden; ‘it’s very pretty; I love it too. But it rather alarms me, I think, sometimes.’

‘Perhaps the natural tendency in solitude is to personify nature, and make it take the place of men and women. It has become a profound need of my being certainly.’ He spoke more quietly, chilled by her utter absence of comprehension.

‘In its place I think it is ever so nice. But, Paul, you surprise me. I had no idea you were clever like that.’ She was perfectly sincere in what she said.

Her brother blushed like a boy. ‘It’s my foolishness, I suppose, Margaret,’ he said with a shy laugh. ‘I am certainly not clever.’

‘Anyhow, you can be foolish or clever here to your heart’s content. You must use the place as though it were your own exactly.’

‘Thank you, Margaret.’

‘Only I don’t think I quite understand all those things,’ she added vaguely after a pause. ‘Nixie talks rather like that. She has all poor Dick’s ideas and strange fancies. I really can’t keep up with her at all.’

Paul stiffened at the reference to the children; he remembered his attitude. Already he had been guilty of a serious lapse from his good intentions.

‘She comes down to this wood far too much, and I’m sure it’s not quite healthy for her. I always forget to speak to Mlle. Fleury.’ Then she turned to him and smiled. ‘But they are all so excited about your coming. They will simply devour you.’

‘I’m a poor hand at children, I’m afraid,’ he said, falling back upon his usual formula, ‘but, of course, I shall be delighted to see them.’

She gathered up her white skirts about her trim ankles and led the way out of the wood, her brother following and thinking how slim and graceful she was, and what a charming figure she made among the rose-trees. He got the impression of her as something unreal and shadowy, a creature but half alive. It would hardly have surprised him to see her suddenly flit off into mist and sunshine and disappear from view, leaving him with the certainty that he had been talking with a phantasm of a dream. Between himself and her, however, he realised now, there was a gulf fixed. They looked at one another as it were down the large end of a telescope, and talked down a long-distance telephone that changed all their words and made the sense unintelligible and meaningless. The scale of values between them had no common denominator. Yet he could love her, and he meant to.

They crossed the lawns and went through the French window into the cool of the drawing-room, and while he was sipping his first cup of afternoon English tea, struggling with a dozen complex emotions that stirred within him, there suddenly darted across the lawn a vision of flying children, with a string of animals at their heels. They swept out of some laurel shrubberies into the slanting evening sunlight, and came to a dead stop on the gravel path in front of the window.

Their eyes met. They had seen him.

There they stood, figures of suddenly arrested motion, staring at him through the glass. ‘So that’s Uncle Paul!’ was the thought in the mind of each. He was being inspected, weighed, labelled. The meeting with his sister was nothing compared to this critical examination, conducted though it was from a distance.

But it lasted only a moment. With a sudden quietness the children passed away from the window towards another door round the corner, and so out of sight.

‘They’ve gone up to get tidy before coming to see you,’ explained his sister; and Paul used the short respite to the best possible advantage by collecting his thoughts, remembering his ‘attitude and disguise,’ and seeing to it that his armour was properly fastened on, leaving no loopholes for sudden attack. He retired cautiously to the only place in a room where a shy man feels really safe — the mat before the fireplace. He almost wished for his gun and hunting-knife. The idea made him laugh.

‘They already love you,’ he heard his sister’s gentle whispering voice, ‘and I know you’ll love them too. You must never let them annoy you, of course.’

‘They’re your children — and Dick’s,’ he answered quietly. ‘I shall get on with them famously, I’m sure.’

CHAPTER V

I KISS YOU and the world begins to fade.

Land of Heart's Desire. — Yeats.

A FEW minutes later the door opened softly, and a procession, solemn of face and silent of foot, marched slowly into the room. The moment had come at last for his introduction, and, by a single stroke of unintentional diplomacy, his sister did more to winning her brother's shy heart than by anything else she could possibly have devised. She went out.

'They will prefer to make your acquaintance by themselves,' she said in her gentle way, 'and without any assistance from me.'

The procession advanced to the middle of the room and then stopped short. Evidently, for them, the departure of their mother somewhat complicated matters. They had depended upon her to explain them to their uncle. There they stood, overcome by shyness, moving from one foot to another, with flushed and rosy faces, hair brushed, skin shining, and eyes all prepared to laugh as soon as somebody gave the signal, but not the least knowing how to begin.

And their uncle faced them in similar plight, as, for the second time that afternoon, shyness descended upon him like a cloud, and he could think of nothing to say. His size overwhelmed him; he felt like an elephant. With a sudden rush all his self-possession deserted him. He almost wished that his sister might return so that they should be brought up to him *seriatim*, named just as Adam named the beasts, and dismissed — which Adam did not do — with a kiss. It was really, of course — and he knew it to his secret mortification — a meeting on both sides of children; they all felt the shyness and self-consciousness of children, he as much as they, and at any moment might take the sudden plunge into careless intimacy, as the way with children ever is.

Meanwhile, however, he took rapid and careful note of them as they stood in that silent, fidgety group before him, with solemn, wide-open eyes fixed upon his face.

The youngest, being in his view little more than a baby, needs no description beyond the fact that it stared quite unintelligently without winking an eye. Its eyes, in fact, looked as though they were not made to close at all. And this is its one and only appearance.

Standing next to the baby, holding its hand, was a boy in a striped suit of knickerbockers, with a big brown curl like a breaking wave on the top of his forehead; he was between eight and nine years old, and his names — for, of course, he had two — were Richard Jonathan, shortened, as Paul learned later, into Jonah. He balanced himself with the utmost care in the centre of a particular square of carpet as though half an inch to either side would send him tumbling into a bottomless abyss. The fingers not claimed by the baby travelled slowly to and fro along the sticky line of his lower lip.

Close behind him, treating similarly another square of carpet, stood a rotund little girl, slightly younger than himself, named Arabella Lucy. There was a touch of audacity in her eyes, and an expression about the mouth that indicated the imminent approach of laughter. She had been distinctly washed and brushed-up for the occasion. Her face shone like a polished onion skin. She had the same sort of brown hair that Jonah considered fashionable, and her name for all common daily purposes was Toby.

The eldest and most formidable of his tormentors, standing a little in advance of the rest, was Margaret Christina, shortened by her father (who, indeed, had been responsible for all the nicknames) into Nixie. And the name fitted her like a skin, for she was the true figure of a sprite, and looked as if she had just stepped out of the water and her hair had stolen the yellow of the sand. Her eyes ran about the room like sunshine from the surface of a stream, and her movements instantly made Paul think of water gliding over pebbles or ribbed sand with easy and gentle undulations. Flashlike he saw her in a clearing of his lonely woods, a creature of the elements. Her big blue eyes, too, were full of wonder and pensive intelligence, and she stood there in a motherly and protective manner as though she were quite equal to the occasion and would presently know how to act with both courage and wisdom.

And Nixie, indeed, it was, after this prolonged and critical pause, who commenced operations. There was a sudden movement in the group, and the next minute Paul was aware that she had left it and was walking slowly towards him. He noticed her graceful, flowing way of moving, and saw a sunburnt arm and hand extended in his direction. The next second she kissed him. And that kiss acted like an electric shock. Something in her that was magical met its kind in his own soul and, flamelike, leaped towards it. A little tide of hot life poured into him, troubling the deeps with a momentary sense of delicious bewilderment.

‘How do you do, Uncle Paul,’ she said; ‘we are *very* glad you have come — at last.’

The blood ran ridiculously to his head. He found his tongue, and pulled himself sharply together.

‘So am I, dear. Of course, it’s a long way to come — America.’ He stooped and bestowed the necessary kisses upon the others, who had followed their leader and now stood close beside him, staring like little owls in a row.

‘I know,’ she replied gravely. ‘It takes weeks, doesn’t it? And mother has told us such a lot about you. We’ve been waiting a very long time, I think,’ she added as though stating a grievance.

‘I suppose it is rather a long time to wait,’ he said sheepishly. He stroked his beard and waited.

‘All of us,’ she went on. She included the others in this last observation by bending her head at them, and into her uncle’s memory leaped the vision of a slender silver birch-tree that grew on the edge of the Big Beaver Pond near the Canadian border. She moved just as that silver birch moved when the breeze caught it.

Her manner was very demure, but she looked so piercingly into the very middle of his eyes that Paul felt as though she had already discovered everything about him. They all stood quite close to him now, touching his knees; ready, there and then, to take him wholly into their confidence.

An impulse that he only just managed to control stirred in him and a curious pang accompanied it. He remembered his ‘attitude,’ however, and stiffened slightly.

‘No, it only takes ten days roughly from where I’ve come,’ he said, leaving the mat and dropping into a deep arm-chair a little farther off. ‘The big steamers go very fast, you know, nowadays.’

Their eyes remained simply glued to his face. They switched round a few points to follow his movement, but did not leave their squares of carpet..

‘Madmerzelle said’ — it was Toby, *née* Arabella Lucy, speaking for the first time—’ you knew lots of stories about deers and wolves and things, and would look like a Polar bear for us sometimes.’

‘Oh yes, and beavers and Indians in snowstorms, and the roarer boryalis,’ chimed in Jonah, giving a little hop of excitement that brought him still closer. ‘And the songs they sing in canoes when there are rapids,’ he added with intense excitement.

‘Madmizelle sings them sometimes, but they’re not a bit the real thing, because she hasn’t enough bass in her voice.’

Paul bit his lip and looked at the carpet. Something in the atmosphere of the room seemed to have changed in the last few minutes. Jolly thrills ran through him such as he knew in the woods with his animals sometimes.

‘I’m afraid I can’t sing much,’ he said, ‘but I can tell you a bear story sometimes — if you’re good.’ He added the condition as an afterthought.

‘We *are* good,’ Jonah said disappointedly, ‘almost always.’

Again that curious pang shot through him. He did not wish to be unkind to them. He pulled back his coat-sleeve suddenly and showed them a scar on his arm.

‘That was made by a bear,’ he said, ‘years ago.’

‘Oh, look at the fur!’ cried Toby.

‘Don’t be silly! All proper men have hair on their arms,’ put in Jonah. ‘Does it still hurt, Uncle Paul?’ he asked, examining the place with intense interest.

‘Not now. We rolled down a hill together head over heels. Such a big brute, too, he was, and growled like a thunderstorm; it’s a wonder he didn’t squash me. I’ve got his claws upstairs. I think, really, he was more frightened than I was.’

They clapped their hands. ‘Tell us, oh, do tell us!’

But Nixie intervened in her stately fashion, leaning over a little and stroking the scar with fingers that were like the touch of leaves.

‘Uncle Paul’s tired after coming such a long way,’ she said gravely with sympathy. ‘He hasn’t even unpacked his luggage yet, have you, Uncle?’

Paul admitted that this was the case. He made the least possible motion to push them off and clear a space round his chair.

‘Are you tired? Oh, I’m *so* sorry,’ said Jonah.

‘Then he ought to see the animals at once,’ decided Toby, ‘before they go to bed,’ — she seemed to have a vague idea that the whole world must go to bed earlier than usual if Uncle Paul was tired —

‘or they’ll be awfully disappointed.’ Her face expressed the disappointment of the animals as well as her own; her uncle’s fatigue had already taken a second place. ‘Oughtn’t he?’ she added, turning to the others.

Paul remembered his intention to remain stiffly grown up.

He made a great effort. Oh, but why did they tug and tear at his heart so, these little fatherless children? And why did he feel at once that he was in their own world, comfortably ‘at home’ in it? Did this world of children, then, link on so easily and naturally with the poet’s region of imagination and wonder in which he himself still dwelt for all his many years, bringing him close to his main passion — to know Reality?

‘Of course, I’ll come and say good-night to them before they turn in,’ he decided kindly, letting Nixie and Toby take his hands, while Jonah followed in the rear to show that he considered this a girl’s affair yet did not wholly disapprove.

‘Hadn’t we better tell your mother where we’re going?’ he asked as they started.

‘Oh, mother won’t mind,’ came the answer in chorus. ‘She hardly ever comes up to the nursery, and, besides, she doesn’t care for the animals, you see.’

‘They’re rather ‘noying for mother,’ Nixie added by way of explanation. She decapitated many of her long words in this way, and invariably omitted difficult consonants.

It was a long journey, and the explanations about the animals, their characteristics, names, and habits, occupied every minute of the way. He gathered that they were chiefly cats and kittens, to what number he dared not calculate, and that puppies, at least one parrot, a squirrel, a multitude of white mice, and various larger beasts of a parental and aged description, were indiscriminately all mixed up together. Evidently it was a private menagerie that he was invited to say good-night to, and the torrent of outlandish names that poured into his ears produced a feeling of confusion in his mind that made him wonder if he was not turning into some sort of animal himself, and thus becoming free of their language.

It was the beginning of a very trying ordeal for him, this being half pulled, half shoved along the intricate passages of the old house; now down a couple of unexpected steps that made him stumble; now up another which made him trip; through narrow doorways, where Jonah had the audacity to push him from behind lest he should stick half-way; and, finally, at full speed, the girls tugging at his arms in front, down a long corridor which proved to be the home-stretch to the nursery.

‘I was afraid we’d lost the trail,’ he gasped. ‘It’s poorly blazed.’

‘Oh, but we haven’t got any tails to lose,’ laughed Toby, misunderstanding him. ‘And they wouldn’t blaze if we had.’

‘Look out, Nixie! Not so fast! Uncle Paul’s losing his wind as well as his trail,’ shouted Jonah from the rear. And at that moment they reached the door of the nursery and came to an abrupt halt, Paul puffing like a lumberman.

It was impossible for him to remain sedate, but he did the next best thing — he remained silent.

Then Jonah, pushing past him, turned the handle, and he was ushered, still panting, into so typical a nursery-schoolroom that the scenes of his forgotten boyhood rushed back to him with a vividness that seemed to destroy the passage of time at a single stroke. The past stood reconstructed. The actual, living mood of his own childhood rose out of the depths of blurred memories and caused a mist to rise before his eyes. An emotion he was utterly unable to define shook his heart.

The room was filled with the slanting rays of the setting sun, and the air from the open windows smelt of garden trees, lawns, and flower-beds. Sea and heather, too, added their own sharper perfumes. It caught him away for a moment — oh, that strange power of old perfumes — to the earliest scenes of his own life, the boyhood in the gardens of Kent before America had claimed him. And then the details of the room itself became so insistent that he almost lost his head and turned back without more ado into a boy of fifteen.

He looked swiftly about him. There was the old-fashioned upright piano against the wall, the highly coloured pictures hanging crooked on the wall, the cane chairs, the crowded mantelpiece, the high wire fender before the empty grate, the general atmosphere of toys, untidiness and broken articles of every sort and kind — and, above all, the figures of these excited children all bustling recklessly about him with their glowing and expectant faces.

There was Toby, her blue sash all awry, running busily about the room; and Nixie, now in sunshine, now in shadow, with her hair of yellow sand and her blue dreaming eyes that saw into the Beyond; and little Jonah, moving about somewhat pompously to prepare the performance that was to follow. It all combined to produce a sudden shock that swept down upon him so savagely, that he was within an ace of bolting through the door and making his escape into safer quarters.

The False Paul, that is, was within an ace of running away with all his elaborate armour, and leaving the True Paul dancing on the floor, a child among children, a spirit of impulse, enthusiasm and imagination, laughing with the sheer happiness of his perpetual youth.

It was a dangerous moment; he was within measurable distance of revealing himself. For a moment his clothes felt far too large for him; and only just in time did he remember his ‘attitude,’ and the danger of being young when he really was old, and the absurdity of being anything else than a large, sedate man of forty-five. Only he wished that Nixie would not watch him so appealingly with those starry eyes of hers... and look so strangely like the forms that haunted his own wild forests and streams on the other side of the Atlantic.

He stiffened quickly, drew himself up, and turned to give his elderly attention to the chorus of explanation and introduction that was already rising about him with the sound and murmur of the sea.

Something was happening.

For the floor of the room, he now perceived, had become suddenly full of movement, as though the carpet had turned alive. He felt a rubbing against his legs and ankles; with a soft thud something leaped upon the table and covered his hand with smooth, warm fur, uttering little sounds of pleasure at the same time. On the top of the piano, a thing he had taken for a heap of toys rose and stretched itself into an odd shape of straight lines and arching curves. From the window-sill, where the sun poured in, a round grey substance dropped noiselessly down upon the carpet and advanced with measured and calculated step towards him; while, from holes and hiding-places undivined, three or four little fluffy things, with padded feet and stiff pointing tails, shot out like shadows and headed straight for a row of saucers that he now noticed for the first time against the farther wall. The whole room seemed to fill with soft and graceful movement; and, mingled with the voices of the children, he caught a fine composite murmur that was soothing as the sound of flowing wind and water.

It was the sound and the movement of many animals.

‘Here they are,’ said a voice—’ some of them. The others are lost, or out hunting.’

For the moment Paul did not stop to ask how many ‘others’ there were. He stood rigidly still for fear that if he moved he might tread on something living.

There came a scratching sound at the door, and Toby dashed forward to open it.

‘Silly, naughty babies!’ she cried, nearly tumbling over the fender in her attempt to seize two round bouncing things that came tearing into the room like a couple of yellow puddings. ‘Uncle Paul has come to see you all the way from America! And then you’re late like this! For shame!’

With a series of thuds and bangs that must have bruised anything not unusually well padded, the new arrivals, who looked for all the world like small fat bears, or sable muffs on short brown legs with feet of black velvet, dashed round the room in a mad chase after nothing at all. A hissing and spitting issued from dark corners and from beneath various pieces of furniture, but the two balls confined their attentions almost at once to the honoured guest. They charged up against his legs as though determined to upset his balance — this mountain of a man — and then careered clumsily round the room, knocking over anything small enough that came in their way, and behaving generally as though they wanted to clear the whole place in the shortest possible time for their own particular and immediate benefit.

Next, lifting his eyes for a moment from this impetuous attack, he saw a brilliantly coloured thing behind bars, standing apparently on its head and looking upside-down at him with an expression of undisguised and scornful amusement; while not far from it, in a cage hanging by the cuckoo clock, some one with a tail as large as his body, shot round and round on a swinging trapeze that made Paul think of a midget practising in a miniature gymnasium.

‘These are our animals, you see, Uncle Paul,’ Jonah announced proudly from his position by the door. There was a trace of condescension in his tone.

‘We have lots of out-of-door animals as well, though,’ Toby hastened to explain, lest her uncle should be disappointed.

‘I suppose they’re out of doors?’ said Paul lamely.

‘Of course they are,’ replied Jonah; ‘in the stables and all about.’ He turned to Nixie, who stood quietly by her uncle’s side in a protective way, superintending. Nixie nodded corroboration.

‘Now, we’ll introduce you — gradgilly,’ announced Toby, stooping down and lifting with immense effort the large grey Persian that had been sleeping on the window-sill when they came in. She held it with great difficulty in her arms and hands, but in spite of her best efforts only a portion of it found actual support, the rest straggling away like a loosely stuffed bolster she could not encompass.

It was evidently accustomed to being dealt with thus in sections, for it continued to purr sleepily, blinking its large eyes with the usual cat-smile, and letting its head fall backwards as though it suddenly desired to examine the ceiling from an entirely fresh point of view. None of its real attention, of course, was given to the actual proceeding. It merely suffered the absurd affair — absent-mindedly and with condescension. Its whiskers moved gently.

‘What’s its name?’ he asked kindly.

‘*Her* name,’ whispered Nixie.

‘We call her Mrs. Tompkyns, because it’s old now,’ Toby explained, ignoring genders.

‘After the head-gardener’s gra’mother,’ Nixie explained hastily in his ear; ‘but we might change it to Uncle Paul in honour of you now, mightn’t we?’

‘Mrs. Uncle Paul,’ corrected Jonah, looking on with slight disapproval, and anxious to get to the white mice and the squirrel.

‘It would be a pity to change the name, I think,’ Paul said, straightening himself up dizzily from the introduction, and watching the splendid creature fall upon its head from Toby’s weakening grasp, and then march away with unperturbed dignity to its former throne upon the window-sill. ‘I feel rather afraid of Mrs. Tompkyns,’ he added; ‘she’s so very majestic.’

‘Oh, you needn’t be,’ they cried in chorus. ‘It’s all put on, you know, that sort of grand manner. *We* knew her when she was a kitten.’

The object-lesson was not lost upon him. Of all creatures in the world, he reflected as he watched her, cats have the truest dignity. They absolutely refuse to be laughed at. No cat would ever betray its real self, yet here was he, a grown-up, intelligent man, vacillating, and on the verge already of hopeless capitulation.

‘And what’s the name of *these* persons?’ he asked quickly, turning for safety to Nixie, who had her arms full of a writhing heap she had been diligently collecting from the corners of the room.

‘Oh, that’s only Mrs. Tompkyns’ family,’ exclaimed Jonah impatiently; ‘the last family, I mean. She’s had lots of others.’

‘The last family before this was only two,’

Nixie told him. ‘We called them Ping and Pong. They live in the stables now. But these we call Pouf, Sambo, Spritey, Zezette, and Dumps—’

‘And the next ones,’ Toby broke in excitedly, ‘we’re going to call with the names on the engines when we go up to London to see the dentist.’

‘Or the names of the Atlantic steamers wouldn’t be bad,’ said Paul.

‘Not bad,’ Jonah said, with lukewarm approval; ‘only the engines would be much better.’

‘There may not be any next ones,’ opined Toby, emerging from beneath a sofa after a frantic, but vain, attempt to catch something alive.

Jonah snorted with contempt. ‘Of course there will. They come in bunches all the time, just like grapes and chestnuts and things. Madmizelle told me so. There’s no end to them. Don’t they, Uncle Paul?’

‘I believe so,’ said the authority appealed to, extracting his finger with difficulty from the teeth and claws of several kittens.

There came a lull in the proceedings, the majority of the animals having escaped, and successfully concealed themselves among what Toby called ‘the furchinur.’ Paul was still following a prior train of reflection.

‘Yes, cats are really rather wonderful creatures,’ he mused aloud in spite of himself, turning instinctively in the direction of Nixie. ‘They possess a mysterious and superior kind of intelligence.’

For a moment it was exactly as if he had tapped his armour and said, ‘Look! It’s all sham!’

The child peered sharply up in his face. There was a sudden light in her eyes, and her lips were parted. He had not exactly expected her to answer, but somehow or other he was not surprised when she did. And the answer she made was just the kind of thing he knew she would say. He was annoyed with himself for having said so much.

‘And they lead secret little lives somewhere else, and only let us see what they want us to see. I knew you understood *really*.’ She said it with an elfin smile that was certainly borrowed from moonlight on a mountain stream. With one fell swoop it caught him away into a world where age simply did not exist. His mind wavered deliciously. The singing in his heart was almost loud enough to be audible.

But he just saved himself. With a sudden movement he leaned forward and buried his face in the pie of kittens that nestled in her arms, letting them lose their paws for a moment in his beard. The kittens might understand, but at least they could not betray him by putting it into words. It was a narrower escape than he cared for.

‘And these are the Chow puppies,’ cried Jonah, breathless from a long chase after the sable muffs.

‘We call them China and Japan.’

Paul welcomed the diversion. Their teeth were not nearly so sharp as the kittens’, and they burrowed with their black noses into his sleeves. So thick was their fur that they seemed to have no bones at all; their dark eyes literally dripped laughter.

With an effort he put on a more sedate manner.

‘You *have* got a lot of beasts,’ he said.

‘Animals,’ Nixie corrected him. ‘Only toads, rats, and hedgehogs are beasts. And, remember, if you’re rude to an animal, as Mademoiselle Fleury was once, it only ‘spises you — and then—’

‘I beg their pardon,’ he put in hurriedly; ‘I quite understand, of course.’

‘You see it’s rather important, as they want to like you, and unless you respect them they can’t, can they?’ she finished earnestly.

‘I do respect them, believe me, Nixie, and I appreciate their affection. Affection and respect must always go together.’

The children were wholly delighted. Paul had completely won their hearts from the very beginning. The parrot, the squirrel, and the white mice were all introduced in turn to him, and he heard sundry mysterious allusions to ‘the owl in the stables,’

‘Juliet and her two kids,’ to say nothing of dogs, ponies, pigeons, and peacocks, that apparently dwelt in the regions of outer space, and were to be reserved for the morrow.

The performance was coming to an end. Paul was already congratulating himself upon having passed safely, if not with full credit, through a severe ordeal, when the door opened and a woman of about twenty-five, with a pleasant face full of character and intelligence, stood in the doorway. A torrent of French instantly broke loose on all sides. The woman started a little when she perceived that the children were not alone.

‘Oh, Mademoiselle, this is Uncle Paul,’ they cried, each in a different fashion. ‘This is *our* Uncle Paul! He’s just been introduced to the animals, and now he must be introduced to you.’

Paul shook hands with her, and the introduction passed off easily enough; the woman was charming, he saw at the first glimpse, and possessed of tact. She at once took his side and pretended to scold her charges for having plagued and bothered him so long. Evidently she was something more to them than a mere governess. The lassitude of his sister, no doubt, gave her rights and responsibilities.

But what impressed Paul when he was alone — for her simple remark that it was past bedtime was followed by sudden kisses and disappearance — was the remarkable change that her arrival had brought about in the room. It came to him with a definite little shock. It was more than significant, he felt.

And it was this: that the children, though obviously they loved her, treated her as some one grown up and to be obeyed, whereas himself, he now realised, they had all along treated as one of themselves to whom they could be quite open and natural. His ‘attitude’ they had treated with respect, just as he had treated the attitude of the animals with respect, but at the same time he had been made to feel one of themselves, in their world, part and parcel of their own peculiar region. There had been nothing forced about it whatever. Whether he liked it or not they accepted him. His ‘attitude’ was not regarded seriously. It was not regarded at all. And this was grave.

He was so simple that he would never have thought of this but for the entrance of the governess. Her arrival threw it all into sharp relief. Clearly the children recognised no barrier between themselves and him; he had been taken without parley straight into their holy of holies. Nixie, as leader and judge, had carried him off at once.

And this was a very subtle and powerful compliment that made him think a great deal. He would either have to drop his armour altogether or make it very much more effective.

Indeed, it was the immediate problem in his mind as he slowly made his way downstairs to find his sister on the lawn, and satisfy her rather vague curiosity by telling her that the children had introduced him to the animals, and that he had got on famously with them all.

CHAPTER VI

Oh! Fairies, take me out of this dull world

For I would ride with you upon the wind,

Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,

And dance upon the mountains like a flame!

Land of Heart's Desire. — Yeats.

Paul went early to bed that night. It was his first night in an English country home for many years; strange forces were at work in him. His introduction to the children, his meeting with Nixie especially, had let loose powers in his soul that called for sober reflection; and he felt the need of being alone.

Another thing, too, urged him to seek the solitude of his chamber, for after dinner he had sat for a couple of hours with his sister, talking over the events and changes of the long interval since they had met, — the details that cannot be told in letters, the feelings that no one writes. And he came upstairs with his first impression of her character slightly modified. She had more in her than he first divined. Beneath that shadowy and silken manner he had caught traces of distinct purpose. For one thing she was determined to keep him in England.

He had told her frankly about his arrangement with the lumber Company, explaining that he regarded his present visit in the light of a holiday. 'I suppose that is — er — wise of you,' she said, but she had not been able to conceal her disappointment. She asked him presently if he really wanted to live all his life in such a place, and what it was in English life, or civilised, conventional life, that he so disliked, and Paul, feeling distinctly uncomfortable — for he loathed, giving pain — had answered evasively, with more skill than he knew, '"Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also." I suppose my treasure — the only kind I know — is out there in the great woods, Margaret.'

‘Paul, are you married, then?’ she asked with a start; and when he laughed and assured her most emphatically that he was not, she looked exceedingly puzzled and a little shocked too. ‘Are you so very fond of this — er — treasure, then?’ she asked point blank in her softest manner, ‘and is she so — I mean, can’t you bring her home and acknowledge her?’ And after his first surprise when he had gathered her meaning, it took him a long time to explain that there was no woman concerned at all, and that it was entirely a matter of his temperament.

‘Everybody makes his own world, remember,’ he laughed, ‘and its size depends, I suppose, upon the power of the imagination.’

‘Then I fear one’s imagination is a very poor one,’ she said solemnly, ‘or else I have none at all. I cannot pretend to understand your tastes for trees and woods and things; but you’re exactly like poor Dick in that way, and I suppose one must be really clever to be like that.’

‘A year is a long time, Margaret,’ he said after a pause, to comfort her. ‘Much may happen before it’s over.’

‘I hope so,’ she had answered, standing behind his chair and stroking his head. ‘By that time you may have met some one who will reconcile you to — to staying here — a little longer.’ She patted his head as though he were a Newfoundland dog, he thought. It made him laugh.

‘Perhaps,’ he said.

And, now in his room, before the candles were lighted, he was standing by the open window, thinking it all over. Of women, of course, he knew little or nothing; to him they were all charming, some of them wonderful; and he was not conscious that his point of view might be considered by a man of the world — of the world that is little, sordid, matter-of-fact — distinctly humorous. At forty-five he believed in women just as he had believed in them at twenty, only more so, for nothing had ever entered his experience to trouble an exquisite picture in his mind. They stood nearer to God than men did, he felt, and the depravity of really bad women he explained by the fact that when they did fall they fell farther. The sex-fever, so far as he was concerned, had never mounted to his brain to obscure his vision.

He only knew — and knew it with a sacred wonder that was akin to worship — that women, like the angels, were beyond his reach and beyond his understanding. Comely they all were to him. He looked up to them in his thoughts, not for their reason or strength, but for the subtlety of their intuition, their power of sacrifice, and last but not least, for the beauty and grace of their mere presence in a world that was so often ugly and unclean.

‘The flame — the lamp — the glory — whatever it may be called — keeps alight in their faces,’ he loved to say to himself, ‘almost to the end. With men it is gone at thirty — often at twenty.’

And his sister, for all her light hold on life, and the strain in her that in his simplicity he regarded as rather ‘worldly,’ was no exception to the rule. He thought her entirely good and wonderful, and, perhaps, so far as she went, he was not too egregiously mistaken. He looked for the best in everybody, and so, of course, found it.

‘Only she will never make much of me, or I of her, I’m afraid,’ he thought as he leaned out of the window, watching the scented darkness. ‘We shall get along best by leaving each other alone and being affectionate, so to speak, from a distance.’

And, indeed, so far he had escaped the manifold seductions by which Nature seeks to attain her great object of perpetuating the race. As a potential father of many sons he was of course an object of legitimate prey; but his forest life had obviated all that; his whole forces had turned inwards for the creation of the poet’s visions, and Nature in this respect, he believed, had passed him by. So far as he was aware there was no desire in him to come forth and perform a belated duty to the world by increasing its population. It was the first time any one had even suggested to him that he should consider such a matter, and the mere idea made him smile.

Gradually, however, these thoughts cleared away, and he turned to other things he deemed more important.

The night was still as imaginable; odours of earth and woods were wafted into the room with the scent of roses. Overhead, as he leaned on his elbow and gazed, the stars shone thickly, like points of gold pricked in a velvet curtain. A lost wind stirred the branches; he could distinguish their solemn dance against the constellations. Orion, slanting and immense, tilted across the sky, the two stars at the base resting upon the shoulder of the hill, and far off, in the deeps of the night, the murmur of the pines sounded like the breaking of invisible surf.

Something indescribably fresh and wild in the taste of the air carried him back again across the ocean. The ancient woods he knew so well rose before the horizon’s rim, swimming with purple shadows and alive with a continuous great murmur that stretched for a hundred leagues. The picture of those desolate places, lying in lonely grandeur beneath the glitter of the Northern Lights, with a thousand lakes echoing the laughter of the loons, came seductively before his inner eye. The thought of it all stirred emotions profound and primitive, emotions too closely married to instincts, perhaps, to be analysed; something in him that was ancestral, possibly pre-natal. There was nothing in this little England that could move him so in the same fashion. His thoughts carried him far, far away....

The faint sound of a church clock striking the hour — a sound utterly alien to the trend of his thoughts — brought him back again to the present. He heard it across many fields, fields that had been tilled for centuries, and there could have been no more vivid or eloquent reminder that he was no longer in a land where hedges, church bells, notice-boards, and so forth were not. He came back with a start, and a sensation almost akin to pain. He felt cramped, caught, caged. The tinkling church bells annoyed him.

His thoughts turned, with a sudden jerk, as it were, to the undeniable fact that he had been trying to go about in a disguise, with a clumsy mask over his face, so that he might appear decently grown up in his new surroundings.

A pair of owls began to hoot softly in the woods, answering one another like voices in a dream, and just then the lost wind left the pine branches and died away into the sky with a swift rush as of many small wings. In the sudden pool of silence that followed, he fancied he could hear across the dark miles of heathland the continuous low murmur of the sea.

The beauty of night, as ever, entered his soul, but with a joy that was too solemn, too moving, to be felt as pleasure. It touched something in him beyond the tears of either pain or delight: something that held in it a mysterious wonder so searching, so poignant, as to be almost terrible.

He caught his breath and waited.... The great woods of the world, mountains, the sea, stars, and the crying winds were always for him symbols of the gateways into a mightier and ideal region, a Beyond-world where he found rest for his yearnings and a strange peace. They were his means of losing himself in a temporary heaven.

And to-night it was the beauty of an English scene that carried him away; and this in spite of his having summoned the wilder vision from across the seas. Already the forces of his own country were insensibly at work upon an impressionable mind and temperament. The very air, so sweetly scented as he drew it in between his lips, was charged with the subtly - working influences of the 'Old Country.' A new web, soft but mighty, was being woven about his spirit. Even now his heart was conscious of its gossamer touch, as his dreams yielded imperceptibly to a new colour.

He followed vaguely, curiously, the leadings of delicate emotions that had been stirred in him by the events of the day. Symbols, fast - shifting, protean, passed in suggestive procession before his mind's eye, in the way that symbols ever will — in a poet's heart. He thought of children, of *the* children, and of the extraordinarily fresh appeal they had made to him. Children: how near they, too, stood to the great things of life, and all the nearer, perhaps, for not being aware of it. How their far-seeing eyes and their simple, unlined souls pointed the way, like Nature, to the ideal region of which he was always dreaming: to Reality, to God.

All real children knew and understood; were ready to offer their timid yet unhesitating guidance, and without question or explanation.

Had, then, Nixie and her troupe already taken him prisoner? And were the soft chains already twined about his neck?...

Paul hardly acknowledged the question definitely to himself. He was merely dreaming, and his dreams, rising and falling like the tides of a sea, bore him to and fro among the shoals and inlands of the day's events. The spell of the English June night was very strong upon him, no doubt, for presently a door opened somewhere behind him, and the very children he was thinking about danced softly into the room. Nixie came up close and gazed into his very eyes, and again there began that odd singing in his heart that he had twice noticed during the day. An atmosphere of magic, shot with gold and silver, came with the child into the room.

For the fact was — though he realised it only dimly — the Fates were now making him a deliberate offer. Had he not been so absorbed, he would have perceived and appreciated the delicacy of their action. As a rule they command, whereas now they were only suggesting.

It was really his own heart asking. Here, in this rambling country house under the hills, was an opportunity of entering the region to which all that was best and truest in him naturally belonged. The experience might prove a stepping-stone to a final readjustment of his peculiar being with the normal busy world of common things. Here was a safety-valve, as he called it, a channel through which he might express much, if not all, of his accumulated stores. The guides, now fast asleep in their beds, had sent out their little dream-bodies to bring the invitation; they were ready and waiting.

And he, thinking there under the stars his queer, long thoughts, bred in years of solitude, dallied with the invitation, and — hesitated. The inevitable pain frightened him — the pain of being young when the world cries that you are old; the pang of the eternal contrast when the world would laugh at what seemed to it a foolish fantasy of youth — a pose, a dream that must bring a bitter awakening! He heard the voices but too plainly, and shrank quickly from the sound.

But Nixie, standing there beside him with such gentle persistence, certainly made him waver.... The temptation to yield was strong and seductive.... Yet, when the faint splendour of the summer moonrise dimmed the stars near the horizon, and the pines shone tipped with silver, he found himself borne down by the sense of caution that urged no revolutionary change, and advised him to keep his armour tightly buckled on in the disguise he had adopted.

He would wait and see — a little longer, at any rate; and meanwhile he must be firm and stern and dull; master of himself, and apparently normal.

He walked to the dressing-table and lit his candles, and, as he did so, caught a picture of himself in the glass. There was a gleam of subdued fire in his eyes, he thought, that was not naturally there. Something about him looked a little wild; it made him laugh.

He laughed to think how utterly absurd it was that a man of his size and age, and — But the idea refused to frame himself in language — He did not know exactly why he laughed, for at the same time he felt sad. With him, as with all other children, tears and laughter are never far apart. It would have been just as intelligible if he had cried.

But when the candles were out and he was in bed, and the stars were peeping into the darkened room, the memory of his laughter seemed unreal, and the sound of it oddly remote.

For, after all, that laughter was rather mysterious. It was not the Outer Paul laughing at the Inner Paul. It was the Inner Paul laughing with himself.

CHAPTER VII

THE IMAGINATIVE PROCESS may be likened to the state of reverie. — ALISON.

THE psychology of sleep being apparently beyond all intelligible explanation, it was not surprising that he woke up next morning as though he had gone to bed without a single perplexity. He remembered none of the thoughts that had thronged his brain a few short hours before; perhaps they had all slipped down into the region of submerged consciousness, to crop out later in natural, and apparently spontaneous, action.

At any rate he remembered little enough of his troubles when he woke and saw the fair English sun streaming in through the open windows. Odours of woods and dew-drenched lawns came into the room, and the birds were singing with noise enough to waken all the country-side. It was impossible to lie in bed. He was up and dressed long before any servant came to call him.

Downstairs he found the house in darkness; doors barred and windows heavily shuttered as though the house had expected an attack. Not a soul was stirring. The air was close and musty. The idea of having to strike a match in a ‘country’ house at 6 A.M. somehow oppressed him. Not knowing his way about very well yet, he stumbled across the hall to find a door, and as he did so something soft came rubbing against his legs. He put his hand down in the darkness and felt a furry, warm body and a stiff upright tail that reached almost to his knees. The thing began to purr.

‘I declare!’ he exclaimed; ‘Mrs. Tompkyns!’! and he struck a match and followed her to the drawing-room door. A moment later they had unfastened the shutters of the French window — Mrs. Tompkyns assisting by standing on her hind legs and tapping the swinging bell — and made their way out on to the lawn.

The sunshine came slanting between the cedars and lay in shining strips on the grass. Everything glistened with dew. The air was sweet and fresh as it only is in the early hours after the dawn. Very faintly, as though its mind was not yet made up, the air stirred among the bushes.

Paul's first impulse was to waken the entire household so that they might share with him this first glory of the morning. 'Probably they don't know how splendid it is!' The thought of the sleeping family, many of them perhaps with closed windows, missing all the wonder, was a positive pain to him. But, fortunately for himself, he decided it might be better not to begin his visit in this way.

'I guess you and I, Mrs. Tompkyns, are the only people about,' he said, looking down at the beautiful grey creature that sniffed the air calmly at his feet. 'Come on, then. Let's make a raid together on the woods!'

He threw a disdainful glance at the sleeping house; no smoke came from the chimneys; most of the upper windows were closed. A delicious fragrance stole out of the woods to meet him as he strolled across the wet lawn. He felt like a schoolboy doing something out of bounds.

'You lead and I follow,' he said, addressing his companion in mischief.

And at once his attention became absorbed in the animal's characteristic behaviour. Obviously it was delighted to be with him; yet it did not wish him to think so, or, if he did think so, to give any sign of the fact. Nothing could have been plainer. First it crept along by the stone wall delicately, with its body very close to the ground as though the weight of the atmosphere oppressed it; and when he spoke, it turned its head with an affectation of genuine surprise as though it would say, 'You here! I thought I was alone.' Then it sat down on the gravel path and began to wash its face and paws till he had passed, after which — when he was not looking, of course — it followed him condescendingly, sniffing at blades of grass *en route* without actually ' touching them, and flicking its tail upwards with sudden, electric jerks.

Paul understood in a general way what was expected of him. He watched it surreptitiously, pretending to examine the flowers. For this, he knew, was the great Cat Game of elaborate pretence. And Mrs. Tompkyns, true adept in the art, played up wonderfully, and incidentally taught him much about the ways and methods of simple disguise; it advanced stealthily when he wasn't looking; it stopped to wash, or gaze into the air, the moment he turned. It was very shy, and very affected, and very self-conscious. Inimitable was the way it kept to all the little rules of the game. It walked daintily down the path after him, shaking the dew from its paws with a rapid, quivering motion. Then, suddenly arching its back as though momentarily offended — at nothing — it stared up at him with an expression that seemed to question his very existence.

‘I guess I ought to fade away when you look at me like that!’ was his thought.

‘I’m here. I’m coming, Mrs. Tompkyns,’ he felt constrained to remark aloud before going forward again. ‘The grand morning excites my blood just as much as it excites your own.’

It seemed necessary to assert his presence. No intelligent person can be conceited long in the presence of a cat. No living creature can so sublimely ‘ignore.’ But Paul was not conceited. He continued to watch it with delight.

One very important rule of the game appeared to be that plenty of bushes were necessary by way of cover, so that it could pretend it was not really coming farther than the particular bush where it was hiding at the moment. Instinctively, he never made the grave mistake of calling it to follow; and though it never trotted alongside, being always either behind or in front of him, the presence of the cat in his immediate neighbourhood provided all sorts of company imaginable. It had also provided him with an opportunity to play the hero.

Then, suddenly, the calm and peace of the morning was disturbed by a scene of strange violence. Mrs. Tompkyns, with spread legs, dashed past him at a surprising speed and flew up the trunk of a big tree as though all the dogs in the county were at her heels. From this position of vantage she looked back over her shoulder with hysterical and frightened eyes. There was a great show of terror, a vast noise of claws upon the bark. No actress could have created better the atmosphere of immediate danger and alarm.

Paul had an instinctive *flair* for this move of the game. He made a great pretence of running up to save the cat from its awful position, but of course long before he got there she had dropped laughingly to earth again, having thus impressed upon him the value of her life.

‘A question of life or death that time, I think, Mrs. Tompkyns,’ he said soothingly, trying to stroke her back. ‘I wonder if the head-gardener’s grandmother after whom you were named ever did this sort of thing. I doubt it!’

But the creature escaped from him easily. For no one is ever caught in the true Cat Game. It scuttled down the path at full speed in a sort of canter, but sideways, as though a violent wind blew! it and desperate resistance was necessary to keep on its feet at all. After that its self-consciousness seemed to disappear a little. It behaved normally. It stalked birds that showed, however, no fear of its approach.

It sniffed the tips of leaves. It played baby-fashion with various invisible companions; and finally it vanished in a thick jungle of laurels to hunt in savage earnest, and left Paul to his own devices. Like all its kind, it only wished to prove how charming it could be, in order to emphasise later its utter independence of human sympathy and companionship.

‘If you *must* go, I suppose you must,’ he laughed, ‘and I shall try to enjoy myself without you.’

He strolled on alone and lost himself in the pine-wood that flanked the back lawn, stopping finally by a gate that led to the world of gorse and heather beyond. The brilliant patches of yellow wafted perfumes to his nostrils. Far in the distance a blue line hinted where the sea lay; and over all lay the radiance of the early morning. The old spell was there that never failed to make his heart leap. And, as he stood still, the cuckoo flitted, invisible and mischievous, from tree to tree, calling with its flutelike notes, —

Sung beyond memory,
When golden to the winds this world of ours
Waved wild with boundless flowers;
Sung in some past where wildernesses were, —

and his thoughts went roaming back to the great woods he had left behind, woods where the naked streams ran shouting and lawless, where the trees had not learned self-consciousness, and where no little tame folk trotted on velvet feet through trim and scented gardens.

And the virgin glory of the morning entered into him with that searching sweetness which is almost suffering, just as a few hours before the Night had bewitched him with the mystery of her haunted caverns. For the beauty of Nature that comes to most softly, with hints, came to him with an exquisite fierce fever that was pain, — with something of the full-fledged glory that burst upon Shelley — and to bear it, unrelieved by expression, was a perpetual torment to him.

But, after long musing that led he scarcely knew where, Paul came back to himself — and laughed. Laughter was better than sighing, and he was too much of a child to go long without the sense of happiness coming uppermost. He lit his pipe — that most delicious of all, the pipe before breakfast — and wandered out into the sea of yellow gorse, thinking aloud, laughing, talking to himself.

Something in the performance of Mrs. Tompkyns awakened the train of thought of the night before. The sublime acting of the animal — he dared not call it 'beast' — linked him on to the children's world. They, too, had a magnificent condescension for the mere grown-up person. But he — he was *not* grown up. It made him sigh and laugh to think of it. He was a great, over-grown child, playing with gorgeously coloured dreams while the world of ordinary life passed him by.

The animals and the children linked on again, of course, with the region of fantasy and make-believe, the world of creation, the world of eternity, the world where thoughts were alive, and strong belief was a creative act.

'That's where I still belong,' he said aloud, picking his way among the waves of yellow sea, 'and I shall never get out till I die, my visions unexpressed, my singing dumb.' He laughed and threw a stone at a bush that had no blossoms. 'Oh, if only I knew how to link on with the normal world of fact *without losing the other!* To turn all these seething dreams within me to some account. To show them to others!'

He ran and cleared a low gorse-bush with a flying jump.

'That would be worth living for,' he continued, panting; 'to make these things real to all the people who live in little cages. By Jove, it would open doors and windows in thousands of cages all over the world, besides providing me with the outlet I must find some day or—' he sprang over a ditch, slipped, and landed head first into prickles—' or explode!' he concluded with a shout of laughter that no one heard but the cuckoos and the yellow-hammers. Then he fell into a reverie, and his thoughts travelled farther still — into the Beyond.

Quickly recovering himself, and picking up his pipe, he went on towards the house; and, as he emerged from the pine copse again, the sound of a gong, ringing faintly in the distance, brought him back to earth with a shock almost as abrupt as the ditch. Mrs. Tompkyns appeared simultaneously, wearing an aspect of pristine innocence, admirably assumed the instant she caught sight of him.

'Fancy your being out here!' was the expression of her whole person, 'and coming, too, in just as the gong sounds!'

'Breakfast, I suppose!' he observed. And she trotted behind him like a dog. For all her affectations of superiority she wanted her milk just as much as he wanted his coffee.

He walked into the dining-room, through the window, stiffening as he did so with the resolution of the night before. His armour fitted him tightly. Little animals, children, the too searching calls of Nature, occult, symbolic, magical — all these must be sternly resisted and suppressed in the company of others. The danger of letting his imagination loose was too alarming. The ridicule would overwhelm him. In the eyes of the world he now lived in he would seem simply mad. The risk was impossible.

Like the Christian Scientists, he felt the need of vigorous affirmation: 'I am Paul Rivers. I am a grown-up man. I am an official in a lumber Company. I am forty-five. I have a beard. I am important and sedate.'

Thus he fortified himself; and thus, like the persuasive Mrs. Tompkyns on the lawn, he imagined that he was deceiving both himself — and those who were *on the watch*!

CHAPTER VIII

And a little child shall lead them.

A WEEK PASSED quickly away and found Paul still in his sister's house. The country air agreed with him, and he went for long walks over the heathery hills and down to the sea. The little private study provided for him, — remembering Mrs. Tompkyns' example, he made a brave pretence of having reports to write to his lumber Company — was admirable for his work. As a place of retreat when he felt temptation too strong upon him, or danger was near at hand, he used it constantly. He scented conditions in advance very often, though no one probably would have suspected it of him.

Once or twice he lunched out with neighbours, and sometimes people motored over to tea; companionship and society were at hand if he wanted them. And books of the kind he loved stood in precious rows upon the shelves of Dick's well-stored library. Here he browsed voraciously.

His sister, meanwhile, showed tact hardly to be expected of her. She tried him tentatively with many things to see if he liked them, but she made no conspicuous plans for him, and took good care that he was left entirely to his own devices. A kind of intelligent truce had established itself between them — these two persons who lived in different worlds and stared at one another with something like astonishment over the top of a high wall. Moreover, her languid interest in life made no claims upon him; there was pleasant companionship, gentle talks, and genuine, if thinly coloured, affection. He felt absolutely free, yet was conscious of being looked after with kindness and discretion. She managed him so well, in fact, that he hardly realised he was being managed at all.

He fell more easily than he had thought possible into the routine of the uneventful country life. From feeling 'caged' he came to feel 'comfortable.' June, and the soft forces of the summer, purred about him, and almost without knowing it he began to purr with them.

For his superabundant energy he found relief in huge walks, early and late, and in all manner of unnecessary and invented labours of Hercules about the place. Thus, he dammed up the little stream that trickled harmlessly through the Gwyle pine-wood, making a series of deep pools in which he bathed when the spirit moved him; he erected a gigantic and very dangerous see-saw for the children (and himself) across a fallen trunk; and, by means of canvas, boards, and steps, he constructed a series of rooms and staircases in a spreading ilex-tree, with rope railings and bells at each 'floor' for visitors, so that even the gardeners admitted it was ' the most wonderful thing they had ever set eyes upon in a tree.

With the children he was, however, careful to play the part he had decided to play. He was kind and good-natured; he spent a good deal of time with them daily; he even submitted periodically to be introduced all over again to the out-of-door animals, but he went through it all soberly and deliberately, and flattered himself that he was quite successful in presenting to them the 'Uncle Paul' whom it was best for his safety they should know.

Heart-searchings and temptations he had in plenty, but came through the ordeal with flying colours, and by the end of the first week he was satisfied that they accepted him as he wished — sedate, stolid, dull, and 'grown up.'

Yet, all the time, there was something that puzzled him. Under the leadership of Nixie the children played up almost too admirably. It was almost as though he had called them and explained everything in detail. In spite of himself, they seemed somehow or other to have got into his confidence, so that he felt his pretence was after all not so effective as he meant it to be.

Even — nay, especially — the way he was 'accepted' by the animals was suspicious — for nothing can be more eloquent of the true relations between children and a grown-up than the terms they permit their animals to have towards him — and this easy acceptance of himself as he pretended to be constituted the most wearing and subtle kind of attack he could possibly conceive. He felt as if the steel casings of his armour were changing into cardboard; soon they would become mere tissue-paper, and then turn transparent and melt away altogether.

'They seem to think it's all put on, this stiffness of mine,' he thought more than once. 'Perhaps they're playing a sort of game with me. If once they find out I'm only acting — whew!' he whistled low—' the: game is up at once! I must keep an eye peeled!' Consequently he kept that eye peeled; he made more use of his private study, and so often gave the excuse of having reports to write that, had it been true, his lumber Company would have been obliged to double its staff in order to read them.

Yet, even in the study, he was not absolutely safe. The children penetrated there too. They knocked elaborately — always; but with the knock he invariably realised a roguish pair of eyes and a sly laugh on the other side of the door. It was like knocking on his heart direct. He always said — in a bored, unnatural tone:

'Oh, come in, whoever it is!' knowing quite well who it was. And, then, in they would come — one or the other of them.

They slipped in softly as shadows, like the coming of dusk, like stray puffs of wind, fragrant and summery, or like unexpected rays of light as the sun walked round the house in the afternoon. And when they were gone — swiftly, like the sun dipping behind a cloud — lo, the room seemed cold and empty again.

'Oh, they're up to something, they're up to something,' he said wisely to himself with a sigh.

'They're laying traps for me, bless their little insolences!'

And the more he thought about it, the more certain he felt that Nixie, Jonah, and Toby were simply playing the Cat Game — pretending to accept his attitude because they saw he wished it. Only, less occult and intelligent than the cat, they sometimes made odd little slips that betrayed them.

For instance, one evening Jonah penetrated into the study to say good-night, and brought the Chow puppies, China and Japan, with him. Their tails curled over their backs like wire brushes; their vigorous round bodies, for ever on the move, were all he could manage. Having been duly kissed, the child waited, however, for something else, and at length, receiving no assistance from his uncle, he lifted each puppy in turn on to the table.

'You, Uncle, please hold them; I can't,' he explained.

And, rather grimly, Paul tried to keep the two wriggling bodies still, while Jonah then came up a little closer to his chair.

‘*They* have reports to write too, to their lumber-kings,’ he said, his face solemn as a gong — using a phrase culled heaven knows where. ‘So will you please see that they don’t make blots either.’

‘But how did you know there were such things as lumber-kings?’ Paul asked, surprised.

‘I didn’t know. They knew,’ with a jerk of his head toward the struggling puppies, who hated the elevation of the table and the proximity of Paul’s bearded face. ‘They said you told them.’

There was no trace of a smile in his eyes; nothing but the earnest expression of the child taking part in the ponderous make-believe of the grown-up. Paul felt that by this simple expedient his reports and the safety they represented had been reduced in a single moment to the level of a paltry pretence.

He blushed. ‘Well, tell them to run after their tails more, and think less,’ he said.

‘All right, Uncle Paul,’ and the boy was gone, grave as any judge.

And Toby, her small round face still shining like an onion skin, had a different but equally effective method of showing him that he belonged to their world in spite of his clumsy pretence. She gave him lessons in Natural History. One afternoon when a brightly-coloured creature darted across the page of his book, and he referred to it as a ‘beetle,’ she very smartly rebuked him.

‘Not beetle, but beetle, *that* one,’ she corrected him.

He thought at first this was merely a child’s abbreviation, but she went on to instruct him fully, and he discovered that the ordinary coleopterist has a great deal yet to learn in the proper classification of his species.

‘There are beetles, and beedles, and beeties,’ she explained standing by his chair on the lawn, and twiddling with his watch-chain. ‘Beeties are all bright-coloured and little and very pretty — like ladybirds.’

‘And beedles?’

‘Oh, b-e-e-e-d-d-dles,’ pronouncing the word heavily and slowly, ‘are the stupid fat ones in the road that always get run over. They’re always sleepy, you see, but quite nice, oh, quite nice;' she hastened to add lest Paul should dislike them from her description.

'And all the rest are beetles, I suppose, just ordinary beetles?' he asked.

'Beetles,' she said, with the calmness of superior knowledge, 'are fast, black things that scuttle about kitchens. Horrid and crawly! *Now* you know them all!'

She ran off with a burst of laughter upon that face of polished onion skin, and left her uncle to reflect deeply upon this new world of beetles.

The lesson was instructive and symbolic, though the choice of subject was not as poetic as might have been. With this new classification as a starting-point, the child, no doubt, had erected a vast superstructure of wonder, fun, beauty, and — why not? — truth! For children, he mused, are ever the true idealists. In their games of make-believe they create the world anew — in six minutes. They scorn measurements, and deal directly with the eternal principles behind things. With a little mud on the end of a stick they trace the course of the angels, and with the wooden-blocks of their building-boxes they erect the towering palaces of a universe that shall never pass away.

Yet what they did, surely he also did! His world of imagination was identical with theirs of make-believe. Was, then, the difference between them one of expression merely?...

Toby came thundering up and fell upon him from nowhere.

'Uncle Paul,' she said rather breathlessly.

'Yes, dear,' he made answer, still thinking upon beedles and beeties.

'On the path down there by the rosydandrums there's a beedle now — a big one with horns — if you'd like to see it.'

'Oh! By the rhododendrons, you mean?'

'Yes, by the rosydandrums,' she repeated. 'Only we must be quick or he'll get home before we come.'

He was far more keen to see that "beedle" than she was. Yet for the immediate safety of his soul he refused.

Nixie it was, however, who penetrated furthest into the fortress. She came with a fearless audacity that fairly made him tremble. She had only to approach for him to become aware how poorly his suit of armour fitted.

But she was so gentle and polite about it that she was harder to withstand than all the others put together. She was slim and insinuating in body, mind and soul. Often, before he realised what she was talking about, her slender little fingers were between the cracks of his breast-plate. For instance, after leaving Toby and her “beedle,” he strolled down to the pinewood and stood upon the rustic bridge watching the play of sunlight and shadow, when suddenly, out of the very water it seemed, up rose a veritable water-sprite — hatless and stockingless — Nixie, the ubiquitous.

She scrambled lightly along the steep bank to his side, and leaned over the railing with him, staring at their reflections in the stream.

‘I declare you startled me, child!’ Paul exclaimed.

Her eyes met his in the running reflection beneath them. Of course, it may have been merely the trick of the glancing water, but to him it seemed that her expression was elfin and mischievous.

‘Did I — *really*, Uncle Paul?’ she said after a long silence, and without looking up. But woven through the simple words, as sunlight is woven through clearing mist, he divined all the other meanings of the child’s subtle and curious personality. It amounted to this — she at once invited, nay included, him in her own particular tree and water world: included him because he belonged there with her, and she simply couldn’t help herself. There was no favour about it one way or the other.

The compliment — the temptation — was overwhelming. Paul shivered a little, actually shivered, as he stood beside her in the sunshine. For several minutes they leaned there in silence, gazing at the flowing water.

‘The woods are *very* busy — this evening,’ she said at length.

‘I’m sure they are,’ he answered, before he quite realised what he was saying. Then he pulled himself together with an effort.

‘But does Mile. Fleury know, and approve — ?’ he asked a little stiffly, glancing down at her bare legs and splashed white frock.

‘Oh, no,’ she laughed wickedly, ‘but then Mile, only understands what she sees with her eyes! She is much too mixed-up and educated to know all *this* kind of thing!’ She made a gesture to include the woods about them. ‘Her sort of knowledge is so stuffing, you know.’

‘Rather,’ he exclaimed. ‘I would far sooner know the trees themselves than know their Latin names.’

It slipped out in spite of himself. The next minute he could have bitten his tongue off. But Nixie took no advantage of him. She let his words pass as something taken for granted.

‘I mean — it’s better to learn useful things while you can,’ he said hurriedly, blushing in his confusion like a child.

Nixie peered steadily down into the water for several minutes before she said anything more.

‘Either she’s found me out and knows everything,’ thought Paul; ‘or she hasn’t found me out and knows nothing.’ But which it was, for the life of him, he couldn’t be certain.

‘Oh,’ she cried suddenly, looking up into his face, her eyes, to Paul’s utter amazement, wet with tears, ‘Oh! how Daddy must have loved you!’

And, before he could think of a word to say, she was gone! Gone into the woods with a fluttering as of white wings.

‘So apparently I am not too mixed-up and educated for their exquisite little world,’ he reflected, as soon as the emotion caused by her last words had subsided a little; ‘and the things I know are not of the “stuffing” kind!’

It all made him think a good deal — this attitude the children adopted towards *his* attitude, this unhesitating acceptance of him in spite of all his pretence. But he still valiantly maintained his studied aloofness of manner, and never allowed himself to overstep the danger line. He never forgot himself when he played with them, and the stories he told were just what they called “ornary” stories, and not tales of pure imagination and fantasy. The rules of the game, finely balanced, were observed between them just as between himself and Mrs. Tompkyns.

Yet somehow, by unregistered degrees and secretly, they loosened the joints of his armour day by day and hour by hour.

CHAPTER IX

ALL THE POWERS that vivify nature must be children, for all the fairies, and gnomes, the goblins, yes, and the great giants too, are only different sizes and shapes and characters of children. — GEORGE MACDONALD.

IT was a week later, and Paul was smoking his evening pipe on the lawn before dinner. His sister was in London for a couple of days. Mlle. Fleury had gone to the dentist in the neighbouring town and had not yet returned. The children, consequently, had been running rather wild.

The sun had barely disappeared, when the full moon, rising huge and faint in the east, cast a silvery veil over the gardens and the wood. The night came treading softly down the sky, passing with an almost visible presence from the hills to the motionless trees in the valley, and then sinking gently and mysteriously down into the very roots of the grass and flowers.

During the day there had been rain — warm showers alternating with dazzling sunshine as in April — and now the earth, before going to sleep, was sending out great wafts of incense. Paul sniffed it in with keen enjoyment.

The odour of burning wood floated to him over the tree tops, hanging a little heavily in the moist atmosphere; he thought of a hundred fires of his own making — elsewhere, far away! ‘And grey dawns saw his camp-fires in the rain,’ he murmured.

He wandered down to the Larch Gate, so called by the children because the larches stood there about the entrance of the wood like the porch of some forest temple. He halted, listening to the faint drip-drip of the trees, and as he listened, he thought; and his thoughts, like stones falling through a deep sea, sank down into the depths of him where so little light was that no words came to give them form or substance.

Overhead, the blue lanes of the sky down which the sunlight had poured all day were slowly softening for the coming of the stars; and in himself the plastic depths, he felt, were a-stirring, as though some great change that he could not alter or control were about to take place in him. He was aware of an unwonted undercurrent of excitement in his blood. It seemed to him that there was 'something afoot,' although he had no evidence to warrant the suspicion.

'Something's up to-night,' he murmured between the puffs of his pipe. 'There's something in the air!'

He blew a long whiff of smoke and watched it melt away over a bed of mignonette among the blue shadows where the dusk gathered beneath the ilex trees. There, for a moment, his eye followed it, and just as it sifted off into transparency he became aware with a start of surprise that behind the bushes something was moving. He looked closer.

'It's stopped,' he muttered; 'but only a second ago it was moving — moving parallel with myself.' Paul was well accustomed to watching the motions of wild creatures in the forest; his eye was trained like the eye of an Indian. The gloom at first was too dense for anything to differentiate itself from their general mass, but after a short inspection his sight detected little bits of shadow that were lighter or darker than other little bits. The moving thing began to assume outline.

'It's a person!' he decided. 'It's somebody watching — watching *me*!'

He took a step forward, and the figure likewise advanced, keeping even pace with him. He went faster, and the figure also went faster; it moved very silently, very softly, 'like an Indian,' he thought with admiration. Behind the Blue Summer-house, where they sometimes had tea on wet days, it disappeared.

'There are no cattle-stealers, or timber-sneaks in this country,' he reflected, 'but there are burglars. Perhaps this is a burglar who knows Margaret is away and thinks—'

He had not time to finish what the burglar thought, for at that moment, at the top of the Long Walk, where the moonlight already lay in a patch, the figure suddenly dashed out at full speed from the cover of the bushes, and he beheld, not a burglar, but — a little girl in a blue frock with a broad white collar, and long, black spindle legs.

‘Nixie, my dear child!’ he exclaimed. ‘But aren’t you in bed?’

It was a stupid question of course, and she did not attempt to answer it, but came up close to him, picking her way neatly between the flower-beds. The moon gleamed on her shiny black shoes and on her shiny yellow hair; over her summer dress she wore a red cloak, but it was open and only held to her by two thin bands about the neck. Under the hood he saw her elf-like face, the expression grave, but the eyes bright with excitement, and she moved softly over the grass like a shadow, timidly, yet without hesitation. A small, warm hand stole into his.

Paul put his pipe, still alight, into his pocket like a naughty boy caught smoking, and turned to face her.

‘ ‘Pon my soul, Nixie, I believe you really *are* a sprite!’

She let go his hand and sprang away lightly over the lawn, laughing silently, her hood dropping *off* so that her hair flew out in a net to catch the moonlight, and for an instant he imagined he was looking at running water, swift and dancing; but the very next second she was back at his side again, the red hood replaced, the cloak gathered tightly about her slim person, feeling for his big hand again with both of her own.

‘At night I *am* a sprite,’ she whispered laughing, ‘and mind I don’t bewitch you altogether!’

She drew him gently across the lawn, choosing the direction with evident purpose, and he, curiously and suddenly bereft of all initiative, allowed her to do as she would.

‘But, please, Uncle Paul,’ she went on with vast gravity, ‘I want you to be serious now. I’ve something to say to you, and that’s why I’m not in bed when I ought to be. All the other Sprites are about too, you know, so be very careful how you answer.’

The big man allowed himself to be led away. He felt his armour dropping off in great flakes as he went. No light is so magical as in that mingled hour of sun and moon when the west is still burning and the east just a-glimmer with the glory that is to come. Paul felt it strongly. He was half with the sun and half with the moon, and the gates of fantasy seemed somewhere close at hand. Curtains were being drawn aside, veils lifting, doors softly opening. He almost heard the rush of the wind behind, and tasted the keen, sweet excitement of another world.

He turned sharply to look at his companion.

But first he put the hood back, for she seemed more human that way.

‘Well, child!’ he said, as gruffly as he could manage, ‘and what is it you have stayed up so late to ask me?’

‘It’s something I have to *say* to you, not to *ask*,’ she replied at once demurely. There was a delicious severity about her.

After a pause of twenty seconds she tripped round in front of him and stared full into his face. He felt as though she cried ‘Hands up’ and held a six-shooter to his head. She pulled the trigger that same moment.

‘Isn’t it time now to stop writing all those Reports, and to take off your dressing-up things?’ she asked with decision.

Paul stopped abruptly and tried to disengage his hand, but she held him so tightly that he could not escape without violence.

‘What dressing-up things are you talking about?’ he asked, forcing a laugh which, he admitted himself, sounded quite absurd.

‘All this pretending that you’re so old, and don’t know about things — I mean *real* things — *our* things.’

He searched as in a fever for the right words — words that should be true and wise, and safe — but before he could pick them out of the torrent of sentences that streamed through his mind, she had gone on again. She spoke calmly, but very gravely ‘We are *so* tired of helping to pretend with you; and we’ve been waiting patiently *so* long. Even Toby knows it’s only ‘sguise you put on to tease us.’

‘Even Toby?’ he repeated foolishly, avoiding her brilliant eyes.

‘And it really isn’t quite fair, you know. There are so very few that care — and understand—’

There came a little quaver in her voice. She hardly came up to his shoulder. He felt as though a whole bathful of happiness had suddenly been upset inside him, and was running about deliciously through his whole being — as though he wanted to run and dance and sing. It was like the reaction after tight boots — collars — or tight armour — and the blood was beginning to flow again mightily. Nothing could stop it. Some keystone in the fabric of his being dropped or shifted. His whole inner world fell into a new pattern. Resistance was no longer possible or desirable. He had done his best. Now he would give in and enjoy himself at last.

‘But, my dear child — my dear little Nixie—’

‘No, really, Uncle, there’s no good talking like that,’ she interrupted, her voice under command again, though still aggrieved, ‘because you know quite well we’re all waiting for you to join us properly — our Society, I mean — and have our a’ventures with us—’

She called it ‘aventures.’ She left out all consonants when excited. The word caught him sharply. Nixie had wounded him better than she knew.

‘Er — then do you have adventures?’ he asked.

‘Of course — wonderful.’

‘But not — er — the sort — er — I could join in?’

‘Of course; very wonderfulindeedaventures. That’s what Daddy used to call them — before he went away.’

It was Dick himself speaking. Paul imagined he could hear the very voice. Another, and deeper, emotion surged through him, making all the heartstrings quiver.

He turned and looked about him, still holding the child tightly by the hand....

Behind him he heard the air moving in the larches, combing out their long green hair; the pampas grass rustled faintly on the lawn just beyond; and from the wood, now darkening, came the murmur of the brook. On his right, the old house looked shadowy and unreal. There stood the chimneys, like draped figures watching him, with the first stars peeping over their hunched shoulders. Dew glistened on the slates of the roof; beyond them he saw the clean outline of the hill, darkly sweeping up into the pallor of the sunset. There, too, past the wall of the house, he saw the great distances of heathland moving down through crowds of shadows to the sea. And the moon was higher.

‘There’s seats in the Blue Summer-house,’ the voice beside him said, with insinuation as well as command.

He found it impossible to resist; indeed, the very desire to resist had been spirited away. Slowly they made their way across the silvery patchwork of the lawn to the door of the Blue Summer-house. This was a tumble-down structure with a thatched roof; it had once been blue, but was now no colour at all. Low seats ran round the inside walls, and as Paul stood at the dark entrance he perceived that these seats were already occupied; and he hesitated. But Nixie pulled him gently in.

‘This is a regular Meeting,’ she said, as naturally as though she had been wholly innocent of a part in the plot. ‘They’ve only been waiting for us. Please come in.’ She even pushed him.

‘It may be regular, but it is most unexpected,’ he said, breathless rather, and curiously shy as he crossed the threshold and peered round at the silent faces about him. Eyes, he saw, were big and round and serious, shining with excitement. Clearly it was a very important occasion. He wondered what an ‘irregular’ meeting would be like.

‘We waited till mother was away,’ explained a candid voice, speaking with solemnity from the recesses.

‘And till Madmerzelle had to go to the dentist and stay to tea,’ added another.

‘So that it would be easier for *you* to come,’ concluded Nixie, lest he should think all these excuses were only on their own account.

She led him across the cobbled floor to a wooden arm-chair with crooked and shattered legs, and persuaded him to sit down. He did so.

‘There was some sense in that, at any rate,’ he remarked irrelevantly, not quite sure whether he referred to the children, or Mademoiselle, or the chair, and landing at the same instant with a crash upon the rickety support which was much lower than he thought it was. The joints and angles of the wood entered his ribs. He lost all memory of how to be sedate after that. He began to enjoy himself absurdly.

Silvery laughter was heard, followed immediately by the sound of rushing little feet as a dozen small shadows shot out into the moonlight and tore across the lawn at top speed. China and Japan he recognised, and a cohort of furry creatures in their rear.

‘Now you’ve frightened them *all* away,’ exclaimed the voice that had spoken first.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ replied the other, who evidently spoke with authority; ‘Uncle Paul was in before they left. They saw the introduction. That’s enough. So now,’ it added with decision, ‘if you’re quite ready we’d better begin.’

Paul grasped by this time that he was the central figure in some secret ceremony of the children, that it was of vital importance to them, as well as a profound compliment to himself. The animals formed part of it so long as they could be persuaded to stay. Their own rituals, however, were so vastly more wonderful and dignified — especially the Ritual of the Cats — that they were somewhat contemptuous, and had escaped at the earliest opportunity. It was, of course, his formal initiation into their world of make-believe and imagination. He stood before them on the floor of this tumbled - down Blue Summer-house in the capacity of the Candidate. Strange chills began to chase one another down his long spine. A shy happiness swept through him and made him shiver. ‘Can they possibly guess,’ he wondered, ‘how far more important this is to me than to them?’

‘Are you ready then?’ Nixie asked again.

‘Quite ready,’ he replied in a deep and tremulous voice.

‘Go ahead then,’ said the voice of decision.

A little bell rang, manipulated by some invisible hand in the darkness, and Nixie darted forward and drew a curtain that bore a close resemblance to a carriage rug across the doorway, so that only the faintest gleam of moonlight filtered through the cracks on either side. Then the owner of the voice of authority left his throne on the back wall and stepped solemnly forward in the direction of the candidate. Paul recognised Jonah with some difficulty. He tripped twice on the way.

The stumbling was comprehensible. On his head he wore a sort of mitre that on ordinary occasions was evidently used to keep the tea hot on the schoolroom table; for it was beyond question a tea-cosy. A garment of variegated colours wrapped his figure down to the heels and trailed away some distance, behind him. It was either a table-cloth or a housemaid's Sunday dress, and it invested him with a peculiar air of quaint majesty. He might have been King of the Gnomes. On his hands were large leathern gauntlets — very large indeed; and with loose fingers whose movements were clearly difficult to control, he grasped a stick that once may have been a hunting crop, but now was certainly a wand of office.

In front of Paul he came to a full stop, gathering his robes about him.

He made a little bow, during which the mitre shifted dangerously to one side, and then tapped the candidate lightly with the wand on the head, shoulders, and breast.

'Please answer now,' he said in a low tone, and then went backwards to his seat against the wall. His robe of office so impeded him that he was obliged to use the wand as a common walking-stick. Once or twice, too, he hopped.

'But you've forgotten to ask it,' whispered Nixie from the door where she was holding up the curtains with both hands. 'He's got nothing to answer.'

Quickly correcting his mistake, Jonah then stood up on his seat and said, rather shyly, the following lines, evidently learned by heart with a good deal of trouble: —

You've applied to our Secret Society,
Which is full of unusual variety,
And, in spite of your past,
We admit you at last,
But — we hope you'll behave with propriety.

'Now, stand up and answer, please,' whispered Nixie. 'Daddy made all this up, you know. It's your turn to answer now.'

Paul rose with difficulty. At first it seemed as if the chair meant to rise with him, so tightly did it fit; but in the end he stood erect without it, and bowing to the President, he said in solemn tones — and the words came genuinely from his heart:

‘I appreciate the honour done to me. I am very grateful indeed.’

‘That’s very good, I think,’ Nixie whispered under her breath to him.

Then Toby advanced, climbing down laboriously from her perch on the broken bench, and stalked up to the spot just vacated by her brother. She, too, was suitably dressed for the occasion, but owing to her diminutive size, and the fact that she did not reach up to the patch of moonlight, it was not possible to distinguish more than the white cap pinned on to her hair. It looked like a housekeeper’s cap. She, too, carried a wand of office. Was it a hunting crop or poker, Paul wondered?

Toby, then, with much more effort than Jonah, repeated the formula of admission. She got the lines a little mixed, however: —

You’ve applied to our Secret Society,
Which is full of unusual propriety,
And, in spite of your past,
We admit you at last,
But we hope you’ll *behave with variety.*

‘I will endeavour to do so,’ said Paul, replying with a low bow.

When he rose again to an upright position, Nixie was standing close in front of him. One arm still held up the curtains, but the other pointed directly into his face.

‘Your ‘ficial position in the Society,’ she said in her thin, musical little voice, also repeating words learned by heart, ‘will be that of Recording Secretary, and your principal duties to keep a record of all the Aventures and to read them aloud at Regular Meetings. Any Meeting anywhere is a Regular Meeting. You must further promise on your living oath not to reveal the existence of the Society, or any detail of its proceedings, to any person not approved of by the Society as a whole.'

She paused for his reply.

'I promise,' he said. c He promises,' repeated three voices together. There was a general clatter and movement in the summer-house. He was forced down again into the rickety chair and the three little officials were clambering upon his knees before he knew where he was. All talked breathlessly at once.

'Now you're in properly — at last!'

'You needn't pretend any more—'

'But we knew all along you were really trying hard to get in?'

'I really believe I was,' said he, getting in a chance remark.

They covered him with kisses.

'We never thought you were as important as you pretended,' Jonah said; 'and your being so big made no difference.'

'Or your beard, Uncle Paul,' added Toby.

'And we never think people old till they're married,' Jonah explained, putting the mitre on his uncle's head.

'So now we can have our aventures all together,' exclaimed Nixie, kissing him swiftly, and leaping off his knee. The other two followed her example, and suddenly — he never quite understood how it happened so quickly — the summer-house was empty, and he was alone with the moonlight. A flash of white petticoats and slender black legs on the lawn, and lo, they were gone!

On the gravel path outside sounded a quick step. Paul started with surprise. The very next minute Mlle. Fleury, in her town clothes and hat, appeared round the corner.

''Ow then!' she exclaimed sharply, 'the little ones zey are no more 'ere? Mr. Rivairs....!' She shook her finger at him.

Paul tried to look dignified. For the moment, however, he quite forgot the tea-cosy still balanced on his head.

‘Mademoiselle Fleury,’ he said politely, ‘the children have gone to bed.’

‘It is ‘igh time that they are already in bed, only I hear their voices now this minute,’ she went on excitedly. ‘They ‘ide here, do they not?’

‘I assure you, Mademoiselle, they have gone to bed,’ Paul said. The woman stared at him with amazement in her eyes. He wondered why. Then, with a crash, something fell from the skies, hitting his nose on the way down, and bounding on to the ground.

‘Oh, the mitre!’ he cried with a laugh, ‘I clean forgot it was there.’ He kicked it aside and stared with confusion at his companion. She looked very neat and trim in her smart town frock. He understood now why she stared so, and his cheeks flamed crimson, though it was too dark for them to be seen.

‘Meester Reevairs,’ she said at length, the desire to laugh and the desire to scold having fought themselves to a standstill, so that her face betrayed no expression at all, ‘you lead zem astray, I think.’

‘On the contrary, it is they who lead me,’ he said self-consciously. ‘In fact, they have just deprived me of my very best armour—’

‘Armour!’ she interrupted, ‘*Armoire*! Ah! They ‘ide upstairs in the cupboard,’ — and she turned to run.

‘Do not be harsh with them,’ he cried after her, ‘it is all my fault really. I am to blame, not they.’

“Arsh! Oh no!’ she called back to him. ‘Only, you know, if your seester find them at this hour not in bed—’

Paul lost the end of the sentence as she turned the corner of the house. He gathered up the remnants of the ceremony and followed slowly in her footsteps.

‘Now, really,’ he thought, ‘what a simple and charming woman! How her eyes twinkled! And how awfully nice her voice was!’ He flung down the rugs and wands and tea-cosy in the hall. ‘Out there,’ with a jerk in the direction of the Atlantic Ocean, ‘the whole camp would make her a Queen.’ Altogether the excitement of the last hour had been considerable. He felt that something must happen to him unless he could calm down a bit.

‘I know,’ he exclaimed aloud, ‘I’ll go and have a hot bath. There’s just time before dinner. That’ll take it out of me.’ And he went up the front stairs, singing like a boy.

CHAPTER X

Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth. — Blake.

FOR SOME DAYS after that Paul walked on air. Incredible as it may seem to normally constituted persons, he was so delighted to have found a medium in which he could in some measure express himself without fear of ridicule, that the entire world was made anew for him. He thought about it a great deal. He even argued in his muddled fashion, but he got no farther that way. The only thing he really understood was the plain fact that he had found a region where his companions were about his own age, with his own tastes, ready to consider things that were *real*, and to let the trivial and vulgar world go by.

This was the fact that stared him in the face and made him happy. For the first time in his life he could play with others. Hitherto he had played alone.

‘It’s a safety-valve at last,’ he exclaimed, using his favourite word. ‘Now I can let myself go a bit.

They will never laugh; on the contrary, they’ll understand and love it. Hooray!’

‘And, remember,’ Nixie had again explained to him, ‘you have to write down all the aventures. That’s what keeping the records means. And you must read them out to us at the Meetings.’

And he chuckled as he thought about it, for it meant having real Reports to write at last, reports that others would read and appreciate.

The aventures, moreover, began very quickly; they came thick and fast; and he lived in them so intensely that he carried them over into his other dull world, and sometimes hardly knew which world he was in at all. His imagination, hungry and untamed, had escaped, and was seeking all it could devour.

It was a hot afternoon in mid-June, and Paul was lying with his pipe upon the lawn. His sister was out driving. He was alone with the children and the smaller portion of the menagerie, — smaller in size, that is, not in numbers;

cats, kittens, and puppies were either asleep, or on the hunt, all about them. And from an open window a parrot was talking ridiculously in mixed French and English.

The giant cedars spread their branches; in the limes the bees hummed drowsily; the world lay a scented garden around him, and a very soft wind stole to and fro, stirring the bushes with sleepy murmurs and making the flowers nod.

China and Japan lay panting in the shade behind him, and not far off reposed the big grey Persian, Mrs. Tompkyns. Regardless of the heat, Pouf, Zezette, and Dumps flitted here and there as though the whole lawn was specially made for their games; and Smoke, the black cat, dignified and mysterious, lay with eyes half-closed just near enough for Paul to stroke his sleek, hot sides when he felt so disposed. He — Smoke that is — blinked indifferently at passing butterflies, or twitched his great tail at the very tip when a bird settled in the branches overhead; but for the most part he was intent upon other matters — matters of genuine importance that concerned none but himself.

A few yards off Jonah and Toby were doing something with daisies — what it was Paul could not see; and on his other side Nixie lay flat upon the grass and gazed into the sky. The governess was — where all governesses should be out of lesson-time — elsewhere.

‘Nixie, you’re sleeping. Wake up.’

She rolled over towards him. ‘No, Uncle Paul, I’m not. I was only thinking.’

‘Thinking of what?’

‘Oh, clouds and things; chiefly clouds, I think.’ She pointed to the white battlements of summer that were passing very slowly over the heavens. ‘It’s so funny that you can see them move, yet can’t see the thing that pushes them along.’

‘Wind, you mean?’

‘H’mmmmm.’

They lay flat on their backs and watched. Nixie made a screen of her hair and peered through it. Paul did the same with his fingers.

‘You can touch it, and smell it, and hear it,’ she went on, half to herself, ‘but you can’t *see* it.’

‘I suspect there are creatures that can see the wind, though,’ he remarked sleepily.

‘I ‘spect so too,’ she said softly. ‘I think I could, if I really tried hard enough. If I was very, oh very kind and gentle and polite to it, I think—’

‘Come and tell me quietly,’ Paul said with excitement. ‘I believe you’re right.’

He scented a delightful adventure. The child turned over on the grass twice, roller fashion, and landed against him, lying on her face with her chin in her hands and her heels clicking softly in the air.

She began to explain what she meant. ‘You must listen properly because it’s rather difficult to explain, you know’; he heard her breathing into his ear, and then her voice grew softer and fainter as she went on. Lower and lower it grew, murmuring like a distant mill-wheel, softer and softer; wonderful sentences and words all running gently into each other without pause, somewhere below ground. It began to sound far away, and it melted into the humming of the bees in the lime trees.... Once or twice it stopped altogether, Paul thought, so that he missed whole sentences.... Gaps came, gaps filled with no definite words, but only the inarticulate murmur of summer and summer life....

Then, without warning, he became conscious of a curious sinking sensation, as though the solid lawn beneath him had begun to undulate. The turf grew soft like air, and swam up over him in green waves till his head was covered. His ears became muffled; Nixie’s voice no longer reached him as something outside himself; it was within — curiously running, so to speak, with his blood. He sank deeper and deeper into a delicious, soothing medium that both covered and penetrated him.

The child had him by the hand, that was all he knew, then — a long sliding motion, and forgetfulness.

‘I’m off,’ he remembered thinking, ‘off at last into a real adventure!’

Down they sank, down, down; through soft darkness, and long, shadowy places, passing through endless scented caverns, and along dim avenues that stretched, for ever and ever it seemed, beneath the gloom of mighty trees. The air was cool and perfumed with earth. They were in some underworld, strangely muted, soundless, mysterious. It grew very dark.

‘Where are we, Nixie?’ He did not feel alarm; but a sense of wonder, touched delightfully by awe, had begun to send thrills along his nerves.

Her reply in his ear was like a voice in a tiny trumpet, far away, very soft. ‘Come along! Follow me!’

‘I’m coming. But it’s so dark.’

‘Hush,’ she whispered. ‘We’re in a dream together. I’m not sure where exactly. Keep close to me.’

‘I’m coming,’ he repeated, blundering over the roots beside her; ‘but where are we? I can’t see a bit.’

‘Tread softly. We’re in a lost forest — just before the dawn,’ he heard her voice answer faintly.

‘A forest underground — ? You mean a coal measure?’ he asked in amazement.

She made no answer. ‘I think we’re going to see the wind,’ she added presently.

Her words thrilled him inexplicably. It was as if — in that other world of gross values — some one had said, ‘You’re going to make a million!’ It was all hushed and soft and subdued. Everything had a coating of plush.

‘We’ve gone backwards somewhere — a great many years. But it’s all right. There’s no time in dreams.’

‘It’s dreadfully dark,’ he whispered, tripping again.

The persuasion of her little hand led him along over roots and through places of deep moss. Great spaces, he felt, were about him. Shadows coated everything with silence. It was like the vast primeval forests of his country across the seas. The map of the world had somehow shifted, and here, in little England, he found the freedom of those splendid scenes of desolation that he craved. Millions of huge trees reared up about them through the gloom, and he felt their presence, though invisible.

‘The sun isn’t up yet,’ she added after a bit. He held her hand tightly, as they stumbled slowly forward together side by side. He began to feel extraordinarily alive. Exhilaration seized him. He could have shouted with excitement.

‘Hush!’ whispered his guide, ‘*do* be careful. You’ll upset us both.’ The trembling of his hand betrayed him. ‘You stumble like an om’ibus!’

‘I’m all right. Go ahead!’ he replied under his breath. ‘I can see better now!’

‘Now look,’ she said, stopping in front of him and turning round.

The darkness lifted somewhat as he bent down to follow the direction of her gaze. On every side, dim and thronging, he saw the stems of immense trees rising upwards into obscurity. There were hundreds upon hundreds of them. His eyes followed their outline till the endless number bewildered him. Overhead, the stars were shining faintly through the tangled network of their branches. Odours of earth and moss and leaves, cool and delicate, rose about them; vast depths of silence stretched away in every direction. Great ferns stood motionless, with all the magic of frosted window-panes, among their roots. All was still and dark and silent. It was the heart of a great forest before the dawn — prehistoric, unknown to man.

‘Oh, I wonder — I wonder—’ began Paul, groping about him clumsily with his hands to feel the way.

‘Oh, please don’t talk so loud,’ Nixie whispered, pinching his arm; ‘we shall wake up if you do. Only people in dreams come to places like this.’

‘You know the place?’ he exclaimed with increasing excitement. ‘So do I almost. I’m sure this has all happened before, only I can’t remember—’

‘We must keep as still as mice.’

‘We are — still as mice.’

‘This is where the winds sleep when they’re not blowing. It’s their resting-place.’

He looked about him, drawing a deep breath.

‘Look out; you’ll wake them if you breathe like *that* whispered the child.

‘Are they asleep now?’

‘Of course. Can’t you see?’

‘Not much — yet!’

‘Move like a cat, and speak in whispers. We may see them when they wake.’

‘How soon?’

‘Dawn. The wind always wakes with the sun. It’s getting closer now.’

It was very wonderful. No words can describe adequately the still splendour of that vast forest as they stood there, waiting for the sunrise. Nothing stirred. The trees were carved out of some marvellous dream-stuff, motionless, yet conveying the impression of life. Paul knew it and recognised it. All primeval woods possess that quality — trees that know nothing of men and have never heard the ringing of the axe. The silence was of death, yet a sense of life that is far beyond death pulsed through it. Cisterns of quiet, gigantic, primitive life lay somewhere hidden in these shadowed glades. It seemed the counterpart of a man’s soul before rude passion and power have stirred it into activity. Here all slept potentially, as in a human soul. The huge, sombre pines rose from their beds of golden moss to shake their crests faintly to the stars, awaiting the coming of the true passion — the great Sun of life, that should call them to splendour, to reality, and to the struggle of a bigger life than they yet knew, when they might even try to shake free from their roots in the hard, confining earth, and fly to the source of their existence — the sun.

And the sun was coming now. The dawn was at hand. The trees moved gently together, it seemed. The wood grew lighter. An almost imperceptible shudder ran through it as through a vast spider’s web.

‘Look!’ cried Nixie. His simple, intuitive little guide was nearer, after all, to reality than he was, for all his subtle vision. ‘Look, Uncle Paul!’

His attempt to analyse wonder had prevented his seeing it sooner, but as she spoke he became aware that something very unusual was going forward about them. His skin began to tickle, and a strange sense of excitement took possession of him.

A pale, semi-transparent substance he saw hung everywhere in the air about them, clinging in spirals and circles to the trunks, and hanging down from the branches in long slender ribbons that reached almost to the ground. The colour was a delicate pearl-grey. It covered everything as with the softest of filtered light, and hung motionless in the air in painted streamers of thinnest possible vapour.

The silken threads of these gossamer ribbons dropped from the sky in millions upon millions. They wrapped themselves round the very star-beams, and lay in sheets upon the ground; they curled themselves round the stones and crept in among the tiniest crevices of moss and bark; they clothed the ferns with their fairy gauze. Paul could even feel them coiling about his hair and beard and eyelashes. They pervaded the entire scene as light does. The colour was uniform; whether in sheets or ribbons, it did not vary in shade or in degree of transparency. The entire atmosphere was pervaded by it, frozen into absolute stillness.

'That's the winds — all that stuff,' Nixie whispered, her voice trembling with excitement. 'They're asleep still. Aren't they awful and wonderful?'

As she spoke a faint vibration ran everywhere through the ribbons. Involuntarily he tightened his grasp on the child's hand.

'That's their beginning to wake,' she said, drawing closer to him, 'like people moving in sleep.'

The vibration ran through the air again. It quivered as reflections in the surface of a pool quiver to a ghost of passing wind. They seated themselves on a fallen trunk and waited. The trees waited too; as gigantic notes in a set piece, Paul thought, that the coming sun would presently play upon like a hand upon a vast instrument. Then something 'moved a few feet away, and he jumped in spite of himself.

'Only Jonah,' explained his guide. 'He's asleep like us. Don't wake him; he's having a dream too.'

It was indeed Jonah, wandering vaguely this way and that, disappearing and reappearing, wholly unaware, it seemed, of their presence. He looked like a gnome. His feet made no sound as he moved about, and after a few minutes he lost himself behind a big trunk and they saw him no more. But almost at once behind him the round figures of China and Japan emerged into view. They came, moving fast and busily, blundering against the trees, tumbling down, and butting into everything that came in their path as though they could not see properly. Paul watched them with astonishment.

‘They’re only half asleep, and that’s why they see so badly,’ Nixie told him. ‘Aren’t they silly and happy?’

Before he could answer, something else moved into their limited field of vision, and he was aware that a silent grey shadow was stalking solemnly by. All dignity and self - confidence it was; stately, proud, sure of itself, in a region where it was at home, conscious of its power to see and move better than any one else. Two wide-open and brilliant eyes, shining like dropped stars, were turned for a moment towards them where they sat on the log and watched. Then, silent and beautiful, it passed on into the darkness beyond, and vanished from their sight.

‘Mrs. Tompkyns!’ whispered Nixie. ‘*She* saw us all right!’

‘Splendid!’ he exclaimed under his breath, full of admiration.

Nixie pinched his arm. A change had come about in the last few minutes, and into this dense forest the light of approaching dawn began to steal most wonderfully. A universal murmuring filled the air.

‘The sun’s coming. They’re going to wake now!’ The child gave a little shiver of delight. Paul sat up. A general, indefinable motion, he saw, was beginning everywhere to run to and fro among the hanging streamers. More light penetrated every minute, and the tree stems began to turn from black to purple, and then from purple to faint grey. Vistas of shadowy glades began to open up on all sides; every instant the trees stood out more distinctly. The myriad threads and ribbons were astir.

‘Look!’ cried the child aloud; ‘they’re uncurling as they wake.’

He looked. The sense of wonder and beauty moved profoundly in his heart. Where, oh where, in all the dreams of his solitary years had he seen anything to equal this unearthly vision of the awakening winds?

The winds moved in their sleep, and awoke.

In loops, folds, and spirals of indescribable grace they slowly began to unwrap themselves from the tree stems with a million little delicate undulations; like thin mist trembling, and then smoothing out the ruffled surface of their thousand serpentine eddies, they slid swiftly upwards from the moss and ferns, disentangled themselves without effort from roots and stones and bark, and then, reinforced by countless thousands from the lower branches, they rose up slowly in vast coloured sheets towards the region of the tree tops.

And, as they rose, the silence of the forest passed into sound — trembling and murmuring at first, and then rapidly increasing in volume as the distant glades sent their voices to swell it, and the note of every hollow and dell joined in with its contributory note. From all the shadowy recesses of the wood they heard it come, louder and louder, leaping to the centre like running great arpeggios, and finally merging all lesser notes in the wave of a single dominant chord — the song of the awakened winds to the dawn.

‘They’re singing to the sun,’ Nixie whispered. Her voice caught in her throat a little and she tightened her grasp on his big hand.

‘They’re changing colour too,’ he answered breathlessly. They stood up on their log to see.

‘It’s the rate they go does that,’ she tried to explain. She stood on tiptoe.

He understood what she meant, for he now saw that as the wind rose in ribbons, streams and spirals, the original pearl-grey changed chromatically into every shade of colour under the sun.

‘Same as metals getting hot,’ she said. ‘Their colour comes ‘cording to their speed.’

Many of the tints he found it impossible to name, for they were such as he had never dreamed of. Crimsons, purples, soft yellows, exquisite greens and pinks ran to and fro in a perfect deluge of colour, as though a hundred sunsets had been let loose and were hunting wildly for the West to set in. And there were shades of opal and mother-of-pearl so delicate that he could only perceive them in his bewildered mind by translating them into the world of sound, and imagining it was the colour of their own singing.

Far too rapidly for description they changed their protean dress, moving faster and faster, glowing fiercely one minute and fading away the next, passing swiftly into new and dazzling brilliancies as the distant winds came to join them, and at length rushing upwards in one huge central draught through the trees, shouting their song with a roar like the sea.

Suddenly they swept up into the sky — sound, colour and all — and silence once more descended upon the forest. The winds were off and about their business of the day. The woods were empty. And the sun was at the very edge of the world.

‘Watch the tops of the trees now,’ cried Nixie, still trembling from the strange wonder of the scene. ‘The Little Winds will wake the moment the sun touches them — the little winds in the tops of the trees.’

As she spoke, the sun came up and his first rays touched the pointed crests above them with gold; and Paul noticed that there were thousands of tiny, slender ribbons streaming out like elastic threads from the tips of all the pines, and that these had only just begun to move. As at a word of command they trooped out to meet the sunshine, undulating like wee coloured serpents, and uttering their weird and gentle music at the same time. And Paul, as he listened, understood at last why the wind in the tree-tops is always more delicately sweet than any other kind, and why it touches so poignantly the heart of him who hears, and calls wonder from her deepest lair.

‘The young winds, you see,’ Nixie said, peering up beneath her joined hands and finding it difficult to keep her balance as she did so. ‘They sleep longer than the others. And they’re not loose either; they’re fastened on, and can only go out and come back.’

And, as he watched, he saw these young winds fly out miles into the brightening sky, making lines of flashing colour, and then tear back with a whirring rush of music to curl up again round the twigs and pine needles.

‘Though sometimes they *do* manage to get loose, and make funny storms and hurricanes and things that no one expects at all in the sky.’

Paul was on the point of replying to this explanation when something struck against his legs, and he only just saved himself from falling by seizing Nixie and risking a flying leap with her from the log.

‘It’s that wicked Japan again,’ she laughed, clambering back on to the tree.

The puppy was vigorously chasing its own tail, bumping as it did so into everything within reach. Paul stooped to catch it. At the same instant it rose up past his very nose, and floated off through the trees and was lost to view in the sky.

Nixie laughed merrily. ‘It woke in the middle of its silly little dream,’ she said. ‘It was only half-asleep really, and playing. It won’t come back now.’

‘All puppies are absurd like that—’

But he did not finish his profound observation about puppies, for his voice at that moment was drowned in a new and terrible noise that seemed to come from the heart of the wood. It happened just as in a children’s fairy tale. It bore no resemblance to the roar the winds made; there was no music in it; it was crude in quality — angry; a sound from another place.

It came swiftly nearer and nearer, increasing in volume as it came. A veil seemed to spread suddenly over the scene; the trees grew shadowy and dim; the glades melted off into mistiness; and ever the mass of sound came pouring up towards them. Paul realised that the frontiers of consciousness were shifting again in a most extraordinary fashion, so that the whole forest slipped off into the background and became a dim map in his memory, faint and unreal — and, with it, went both Nixie and himself. The ground rose and fell under their feet. Her hand melted into something fluid and slippery as he tried to keep his hold upon it. The child whispered words he could not catch. Then, like the puppy, they both began to rise.

The roar came out to meet them and enveloped them furiously in mid air.

‘At any rate, we’ve seen the wind!’ he heard the child’s voice murmuring in his beard. She rose away from him, being lighter, and vanished through the tops of the trees.

And then the roar drowned him and swept him away in a whirling tempest, so that he lost all consciousness of self and forgot everything he had ever known....

The noise resolved itself gradually into the crunching sounds of the carriage wheels and the clatter of horses’ hoofs coming up the gravel drive.

Paul looked about him with a sigh that was half a yawn. China and Japan were still romping on the lawn, Mrs. Tompkyns and Smoke were curled up in hot, soft circles precisely where they had been before, Toby and Jonah were still busily engaged doing ‘something with daisies’ in the full blaze of the sunshine, and Nixie lay beside him, all innocence and peace, still gazing through the tangle of her yellow hair at the slow-sailing clouds overhead.

And the clouds, he noticed, had hardly altered a line of their shape and position since he saw them last.

He turned with a jump of excitement.

‘Nixie,’ he exclaimed, ‘I’ve seen the wind!’

She rolled over lazily on her side and fixed her great blue eyes on his own, between two strands of her hair. From the expression of her brown face it was possible to surmise that she knew nothing — and everything.

‘Have you?’ she said very quietly. ‘I thought you might.’

‘Yes, but did I dream it, or imagine it, or just think it and make it up?’ He still felt a little bewildered; the memory of that strangely beautiful picture-gallery still haunted him. Yonder, before the porch, the steaming horses and the smart coachman on the box, and his sister coming across the lawn from the carriage all belonged to another world, while he himself and Nixie and the other children still stayed with him, floating in a golden atmosphere where Wind was singing and alive.

‘That doesn’t matter a bit,’ she replied, peering at him gravely before she pulled her hair over both eyes. ‘The point is that it’s really true! Now,’ she added, her face completely hidden by the yellow web, ‘all you have to do is to write it for our next Meeting — write the record of your Adventure—’

‘And read it out?’ he said, beginning to understand.

The yellow head nodded. He felt utterly and delightfully bewitched.

‘All right,’ he said; ‘I will.’

‘And make it a verywonderfulindeed Adventure,’ she added, springing to her feet. ‘Hush! Here’s mother!’

Paul rose dizzily to greet his sister, while the children ran off with their animals to other things.

‘You’ve had a pleasant afternoon, Paul, dear?’ she asked.

‘Oh, very nice indeed—’ His thoughts were still entangled with the wind and with the story he meant to write about it for the next Meeting.

She opened her parasol and held it over her head. ‘Now, come indoors,’ he went on, collecting himself with an effort, ‘or into the shade. This heat is not good for you, Margaret.’ He looked at her pale, delicate face. ‘You’re tired too.’

‘I enjoyed the drive,’ she replied, letting him take her arm and lead her towards the house. ‘I met the Burdons in their motor. They’re coming over to luncheon one day, they said. You’ll like *him,* I think.’

‘That’s very nice,’ he remarked again, ‘very nice. Margaret,’ he exclaimed suddenly, ashamed of his utter want of interest in all she was planning for him, ‘I think you ought to have a motor too. I’m going to give you one.’

‘That is sweet of you, Paul,’ she smiled at him.

‘But really, you know, one likes horses best. They’re much quieter. Motors do shake one so.’

‘I don’t think that matters; the point is that it’s really true,’ he muttered to himself, thinking of Nixie’s judgment of his Adventure.

His sister looked at him with her expression of faint amusement.

‘You mustn’t mind me,’ he laughed, planting her in a deck-chair by the shade of the house; ‘but the truth is, my mind is full just now of some work I’ve got to do — a report, in fact, I’ve got to write.’ He went off into the house, humming a song. She followed him with her eyes.

‘He is so strange. I do wish he would see more people and be a little more normal.’

And in Paul’s mind, as he raced along the passage to his private study in search of pen and paper, there ran a thought of very different kind in the shape of a sentence from the favourite of all his books:

‘Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth.’

CHAPTER XI

IT IS SAID that a poet has died young in the breast of the most stolid. It may be contended, rather, that this (somewhat minor bard) in almost every case survives, and is the spice of life to his possessor. — R. L. S.

Now that his first Adventure was an accomplished fact, and that he was writing it out for the Meeting, Paul carried about with him a kind of secret joy. At last he had found an audience, and an audience is unquestionably a very profound need of every human heart. Nixie was helping him to expression.

‘I’ll write them such an Adventure out of that Wind - Vision,’ he exclaimed, ‘that they’ll fairly shiver with delight. And if *they* shiver, why shouldn’t all the children in the world shiver too?’

He no longer made the mistake of thinking it trivial; if he could find an audience of children all about the world, children known or unknown, to whom he could show his little gallery of pictures, what could be more reasonable or delightful? What could be more useful and worth doing than to show the adventuring mind some meaning in all the beauty that filled his heart? And the Wind-Vision might be a small — a very small, beginning. It might be the first of a series of modern fairy tales. The idea thrilled him with pleasure. ‘A safety-valve at last!’ he cried. ‘An audience that won’t laugh!’ For, in reality, there was also a queer motherly quality in him which he had always tried more or less successfully to hide, and of which, perhaps, he was secretly half ashamed — a feeling that made him long to give of his strength and sympathy to all that was helpless, weary, immature.

He went about the house like a new man, for in proportion as he allowed his imagination to use its wings, life became extraordinarily alive. He sang, and the world sang with him. Everything turned up little smiling faces to him, whispering fairy contributions to his tale.

‘The more I give out, the more I get in,’ he laughed. ‘I declare it’s quite wonderful,’ as though he had really discovered a new truth all for himself.

New forces began to course through his veins like fire. As in a great cistern tapped for the first time, this new outlet produced other little cross-currents everywhere throughout his being. Paul began to find a new confidence. Another stone had shifted in the fabric of his soul. He moved one stage nearer to the final pattern that it had been intended from the beginning of time he should assume.

A world within a world began to grow up in the old grey house under the hill, one consisting of Nixie and her troupe, with Paul trailing heavily in the rear, very eager; and the other, of the grownup members of the household, with Mlle. Fleury belonging to neither, yet in a sense belonging to both. The cats and animals again were in the former — an inner division of it, so that it was like a series of Chinese boxes, each fitting within the next in size.

And this admission of Paul into the innermost circle produced a change in the household, as well as in himself. After all, the children had not betrayed him; they had only divined his secret and put him right with himself. But this was everything; and who is there with a vestige of youth in his spirit that will not understand the cause of his mysterious exhilaration?

Outwardly, of course, no definite change was visible in the doings of the little household. The children said little; they made no direct reference to his conversion; but the change, though not easily described, was felt by all. Paul recognised it in every fibre of his being. Every one, he noticed, understood by some strange freemasonry that he had been initiated, for every one, he fancied, treated him a little differently. It was natural that the children should give signs of increased admiration and affection for their huge new member, but there was no obvious reason why his sister, and the servants, and the very animals into the bargain, should regard him with a strain of something that hesitated between tolerance and tenderness.

If truth were told, they probably did nothing of the sort; it was his own point of view that had changed. His imagination was responsible for the rest; yet he felt as though he had been caught into the heart of a great conspiracy, and the silent, unobtrusive way every one played his, her, or its part contrived to make him think it was all very real indeed.

The cats, furry and tender magicians that they are, perhaps interpreted the change more skilfully and easily than any one else. Without the least fuss or ceremony they made him instantly free of their world, and the way their protection and encouragement were extended to him in a hundred gentle ways gave him an extraordinarily vivid impression that they, too, had their plans and conferences just as much as the children had. They made everything seem alive and intelligent, from the bushes where they hunted to the furniture where they slept. They brought the whole world, animate and inanimate, into his scheme of existence. Everything had life, though not the same degree of life. It was all very subtle and wonderful. He, and the children, and the cats, all had imagination according to their kind and degree, and all equally used it to make the world haunted and splendid.

Formerly, for instance, he had often surprised Mrs. Tompkyns going about in the passages on secret business of her own, perhaps not altogether good, yet looking up with an assumption of innocence that made it quite impossible to chide or interfere. (It was, of course, only an *assumption* of innocence. A cat's eyes are too intent and purposeful for genuine innocence; they are a mask, a concealment of a thousand plans.) But now, when he met her, she at once stopped and sent her tail aloft by way of signal, and came to rub against his legs. Her eyes smiled — that pregnant, significant smile of the feline, shown by mere blinking of the lids — and she walked slowly by his side with arched back, as an invitation that he might — nay, that he should — accompany her.

On her great, dark journeys he might not of course yet go, but on the smaller, less important expeditions he was welcome, and she showed it plainly every time they met. He was led politely to numerous cupboards, corners, attics, and cellars, whose existence he had not hitherto suspected. There were wonderful and terrible places among the book - shelves and under massive pieces of furniture which she showed to him when no one was about; and she further taught him how to sit and stare for long periods until out of vacancy there issued a series of fascinating figures and scenes of strange loveliness. And he, laughing, obeyed.

All this, and much else besides, they taught him cleverly.

Some of them, too, came to visit him in his own quarters. They came into his study, and into his bedroom, and one of them — that black, thick-haired fellow called Smoke — the one with the ghostly eyes and very furry trousers — even took to tapping at his door late at night (by standing on tiptoe he could just reach the knob), and thus established the right to sleep on the sofa or even to curl up on the foot of the bed.

And all that the kittens, the puppies, and the out-of-door animals did to teach him as an equal is better left untold, since this is a story and not a work on natural history.

Mlle. Fleury, the little French governess, alone seemed curiously out of the picture. She made difficulties here and there, though not insuperable ones. The fact was, he saw, that she was not properly in either of the two worlds. She wanted to be in both at once, but, from the very nature of her position, succeeded in getting into neither; and to fall between two worlds is far more perplexing than to fall between two stools. Paul made allowances for her just as he might have made allowances for an over-trained animal that had learned too many human-taught tricks to make its presence quite acceptable to its own four-footed circle. The charming little person — he, at least, always thought her voice and her manners and her grace charming after a life where these were unknown — had to justify herself to the grown-up world where his sister belonged, as well as to the world of the children whom she taught. And, consequently, she was often compelled to scold when, perhaps, her soul cried out that she should bless.

His heart always hammered, if ever so slightly, when he made his way, as he now did more and more frequently, to the schoolroom or the nursery. Schoolroom-tea became a pleasure of almost irresistible attractions, and when it was over and the governess was legitimately out of the way, Nixie sometimes had a trick of announcing a Regular Meeting to which Paul was called upon to read out his latest ‘Adventure.’

‘Hulloa! Having tea, are you?’ he exclaimed, looking in at the door one afternoon shortly after the wind episode. This feigned surprise, which deceived nobody, he felt was admirable. It was exactly the way Mrs. Tompkyns did it.

‘Come in, Uncle Paul. *Do* stay. You *must* stay,’ came the chorus, while Mlle. Fleury half smiled, half frowned at him across the table.; ‘Here’s just the stodgy kind of cake you like, with jam *and* honey!’

‘Well,’ he said hesitatingly, as though he scorned such things, while Mademoiselle poured out a cup, and the children piled up a plate for him.

He stayed, as it were, by chance, and a minute later was as earnestly engaged with the cake and tea as if he had come with that special purpose.

‘It’s all very well done,’ was his secret thought. ‘It’s exactly the way Mrs. Tompkyns manages all her most important affairs.’

‘Nous avons réunion après,’ Jonah informed the governess presently with a very grave face. The young woman glanced interrogatively at Paul.

‘Oui, oui,’ he said in his Canadian French, ‘c’est vrai. Réunion régulaire.’

‘Mais qu’elle idée, donc!’

‘Il est le président,’ said Toby indignantly, pointing with a jam sandwich.

‘Voilà vous êtes!’ he exclaimed. ‘There you are! Je suis le président!’ and he helped himself to more cake as though by accident.

For five seconds Mlle. Fleury kept her face. Then, in spite of herself, her lips parted and a row of white teeth appeared.

‘Meester Reevairs, you spoil them,’ she said, ‘and I approve it not. Mais, voyons donc! Quelles manières!’ she added as Sambo and Pouf passed from Toby’s lap on to the table and began to sniff at the water cress.... ‘Non, ça c’est *trop* fort!’ She leaned across to smack them back into propriety. ‘Abominable,’ Paul cried, ‘abominable tout à fait.’

‘Alwaze when you come such things ‘appen.’

‘Pas mon faute,’ he said, helping to catch Pouf.

‘They are deeficult enough without that you make them more,’ she said.

‘Uncle Paul doesn’t know his genders,’ cried Jonah; ‘hooray!’

‘Ma faute,’ he corrected himself, pronouncing it ‘fote.’

Then Toby, struggling with Smoke, whose nose she was trying to force into a saucer of milk which he did not want, upset the saucer all over her dress and the table, splashing one and all. Jonah sprang up and knocked his chair over backwards in the excitement. Mrs. Tompkyns, wakening from her sleep upon the piano stool, leaped on to the notes of the open keyboard with a horrible crash. A pandemonium reigned, all talking, laughing, shouting at once, and the governess scolding. Then Paul trod on a kitten’s tail under the table and extraordinary shrieks were heard, whereupon Jonah, stooping to discover their cause, bumped his head and began to cry. Moving forward to comfort him, Paul's sleeve caught in the spout of the teapot and it fell with a clatter among the cups and plates, sending the sugar-tongs spinning into the air, and knocking the milk-jug sideways so that a white sea flooded the whole tray and splashed up with white spots on to Paul's cheeks.

The cumulative effect of these disasters reached a culminating point, and a sudden hush fell upon the room. The children looked a trifle scared. Paul, with milk drops trickling down his nose, blushed and looked solemn. Very guilty and awkward he felt. Mlle. Fleury in fluent, rattling French explained her view of the situation, at first, however, without effect. At such moments mere sound and fury are vain; subtle, latent influences of the personality alone can calm a panic, and these the little person did not, of course, possess.

To Paul the whole picture appeared in very vivid detail. With the simplicity of the child and the larger vision of the man he perceived how closely tears and laughter moved before them; and it really pained him to see her confused and rather helpless amid all the debris. She was pretty, slim, and graceful; futile anger did not sit well upon her.

There she stood, little more than a girl herself, staring at him for a moment speechless, the dainty ruffles of her neat grey dress sticking up about her pretty throat, he thought, like the bristles of an enraged kitten. The hair, too, by her ears and neck suddenly seemed to project untidily and increased the effect. The sunlight from the window behind her spread through it, making it cloud-like.

'C'est tout mon — ma fote,' he said, stretching out both hands impulsively, 'tout!' in his villainous Quebec French. 'Scold *me* first, please.'

There was milk on his left eyebrow, and a crumb of cake in his beard as well. The governess stared at him, her eyes still blazing ominously. Her lips quivered. Then, fortunately, she laughed; no one really could have done otherwise. And that laugh saved the situation. The children, who had been standing motionless as statues awaiting their doom, sprang again into life. In a trice the milk had been moped up, the tongs replaced, and the tea-pot put to bed under its ornamented cosy.

'I forgeeve — this time,' she said. 'But you are vairy troublesome.'

In future, none the less, she forgave always; her hostility, never quite sure of itself, vanished from that moment.

‘Blue Summer’ouse,’ whispered Jonah in his ear, ‘and bring your Wind-Vision to read to us at the Meeting.’

‘But not too much Wind-Vision, please, Meester Reevairs,’ she said, overhearing the whisper. ‘They think of nothing else.’

Paul stared at her. The thought in his mind was that she ought to come too, only he knew the children would not approve.

‘Then I must moderate their enthusiasm,’ he said gravely at last.

Mlle. Fleury laughed in his face. ‘Y*ou* are worst of ze lot, I know — worst of all. Your Aventures and plays trouble all their lesson time.’

‘It is my education,’ he said, as Jonah tugged at his coat from behind to get him out of the room.

‘You educate *them*; they educate *me*; I improve slowly. Voilà!’

‘But vairy slowly, n’est-ce pas? And you make up all such *expériences* like ze Wind-Vision to fill their minds.’

Nixie had told him that all their aventures filtered through to her, and that she kept a special *cahier* in her own room, where she wrote them all out in her own language. ‘Another soul, perhaps, looking about for a safety-valve,’ he thought swiftly.

‘But, Mademoiselle, why not translate them into French? That’s a good idea, and excellent practice for them.’

‘Per’aps,’ she laughed, ‘per’aps we do that. C’est une idée au moins.’

She wanted so much, it was clear, to come into their happy little world of imagination and adventure. He realised suddenly how lonely her life might be in such a household.

‘You write them, and I will correct them for you,’ he said.

‘Come on, *do* come on, Uncle,’ cried the voices urgently from the door. The children were already in the passage. The little governess looked rather wistfully after them, and on a sudden impulse Paul did a thing he had never before done in his life. He took her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, but so boyishly, and with such simple politeness and sincerity that there was hardly more in the act than if Jonah had done the same to Nixie in an adventure of another sort.

‘Au revoir then,’ he said laughingly; ‘chacun a son devoir, don’t they? And now I go to do mine.’

His sentence was somewhat mixed. He just had time to notice the pretty blush of confusion that spread over her face, and to hear her laugh ‘You are weecked children — vairy weecked — and you, Meester Reevairs, the biggest of all,’ when Nixie and Jonah had him by the hand and they were off out of the house to their Meeting in the Blue Summer-house.

Thus Mlle. Fleury ceased to be a difficulty in the household so far as his proceedings with the children were concerned. On the contrary, she became a helpful force, and often acted as a sort of sentry, or outpost, between one world and the other. Herself, she never came into their own private region, but hovered only along the borders of it. For though little over twenty years of age, she was French, and she understood exactly how much interest she might allow herself to take in the Society without endangering her own position, — or theirs — or his. She knew that she could not enter their world freely and still maintain authority in the other; but, meanwhile, she managed Paul precisely as though he were one of her own charges, and saw to it that he did nothing which could really be injurious to the responsibilities for which she was answerable.

Thus Paul, thundering along with his belated youth, enjoyed himself more and more, while he enjoyed, also learned, marked, and read.

CHAPTER XII

IT HAUNTED HIM a good deal, this Vision of the Winds. Now he never heard the stirring of the woods without thinking of those delicately brilliant streamers flying across the sky.

The satisfaction of spinning a fairy tale out of it for the children's Society was only equalled by the pleasure of the original inspiration. Here, too, was a means of expressing himself he had never dreamed of; the relief was great. Moreover, it brought him into close touch with the inexhaustible reservoirs which children draw upon for their endless world of Make-Believe, and he understood that the child and the poet live in the same region. His feet were now set upon that secret path trodden by the feet of children since the world began; and, for all his burden of years, there was no telling where it might lead him. For the springs of perennial youth have their sources in that region — the youth of the spirit, with the constant flow of enthusiasm, the touch of simple, ever-living beauty, and the whole magic of vision. No one with imagination can ever become *blasé,* perhaps need ever grow old in the true sense.

By this means he might at last turn his accumulated stores to some useful account. The great geysers of imagination that dry up too soon with the majority might keep bubbling for ever; and provided the pipes kept open for smaller visions, they might with time become channels for inspiration of a still higher order. His audience might grow too.

'I'm getting on,' he observed to Nixie a few days later; 'getting on pretty well for an old man!'

'I knew you would,' she replied approvingly. 'Only you wasted a lot of time over it. When you came you were so old that Toby thought you were going to die, you know.'

'So bad as all that, was it?'

'H'mmmmm,' she nodded, her blue eyes faintly troubled; 'quite!'

Paul took her on his knee and stared at her. The world of elemental wonder came quite close. There was something of magic about the atmosphere of this child's presence that made it possible to believe anything and everything. She embodied exquisitely so many of his dreams — those dreams of God and Nature he had lived with all those lonely years in Canadian solitudes.

'You know, *I* think,' he said slowly as he watched with delight the look of tender affection upon her face, 'that, without knowing it, you're something of a little magician, Nixie. What do *you* think?'

But she only laughed and wriggled on his knee.

'Am I really?' she said presently. 'Then what are you, I wonder?'

'I used to be a Wood Cruiser,' he replied gravely; 'but what I am now it's rather difficult to say. You ought to know,' he added, 'as you're the magician who's changing me.'

'I've not changed you,' she laughed. 'I only found you out. The day you came I saw you were simply full of our things — and that you'd be a sort of Daddy to us. And we shall want a lot more Aventures, please, as soon as ever you can write them out—'

She was off his knee and half-way to the house the same second, for the voice of Mlle. Fleury was heard in the land. He watched her flitting through the patches of sunshine across the lawn, and caught the mischievous glance she turned to throw at him as she disappeared through the open French window — a vision of white dress, black legs, and flying hair. And only when she was gone did his heavier machinery get to work with the crop of questions he always thought of too late.

'A beginning, at any rate!' he said to himself, thinking of all the things he was going to write for them. 'Only I wish we were all in camp out there among the cedars and hemlocks on Beaver Creek, instead of boxed up in this toy garden where there are no wild animals, and you mayn't cut down trees for a big fire, and there are silly little Notice Boards all over the place about trespassers being prosecuted...'

The thought touched something in the centre of his being. He travelled; laughing and sighing as he went. 'My wig!' he thought aloud, 'but it's really extraordinary how that child brings those big places over here for me, and makes them seem alive with all kinds of things *I* could never have dreamed of — alone!'

'Paul, dear, what *are* you thinking about, here all by yourself — and without a hat on too, as usual? If the gardeners hear you talking aloud like this they will think — ! Well, I hardly know quite what they *will* think!'

'Something Blake said — to be honest,' he laughed, turning to his sister who had come silently down the path, dressed, as on the day he had first seen her, in white serge with a big flower-hat. Languid she looked, but delicate and wholly charming; she wore brown garden gauntlets over hands and wrists, and a red parasol she held aloft, shed a becoming pink glow upon her face.

'*Maurice* Blake!' she exclaimed. 'Joan's cousin with the big farm on the Downs? But you don't know him!'

'Not that Blake,' he laughed again; 'and Joan, if you mean Joan Nicholson, Dick's niece who took up that rescue work, or something, in London, I have never seen in my life.'

'Then it's a book you mean — one of those books you are always poring over in the library,' she murmured half reproachfully.

'One of Dick's books, yes,' he replied gently, linking his arm through hers and leading the way in the direction of the cedars. 'One of my "treasures,"' he added slyly, 'that you once shamelessly imagined to be in petticoats.'

She rather liked his teasing. The interests they shared were uncommonly small, perhaps, and the coinage of available words still smaller. Yet their differences never took on the slightest 'edge.' A genuine affection smoothed all their little talks.

'You do read such funny old books, Paul,' she observed, as though somewhere in her heart lurked a vague desire to make him more modern. 'Don't you ever try books of the day — novels, for instance?' She had one under her arm at the moment. He took it to carry for her.

'I have tried,' he admitted, a little ashamed of his backwardness, 'but I never can make out what they're driving at — half the time. What they described has never happened to me, or come into my world. I don't recognise it all as true, I mean—' He stopped abruptly for fear he might say something to wound her.

'One can always learn, though, and widen one's world, can't one? After all, we *are* all in the same world, aren't we?'

He realised the impossibility of correcting her; the invitation to be sententious could not catch him; his nature was too profound to contain the prig.

'Are we?' he said gently.

'Oh, I think so — more or less, Paul. There's only one *nice* world, at least.' She arranged her hat and parasol to keep the sun off, for she was afraid of the sun, even the shy sun of England.

He pulled out the deck chair for her, and opened it.

'Here,' she said pointing, 'if you don't mind, dear; or perhaps over *there* where it looks drier; or just *there* under that tree, perhaps, is better still. It's more sheltered, and there's less sun, isn't there?'

'I think there is, yes,' he replied, obeying her. The phrase 'there's less sun' seemed to him so neatly descriptive of the mental state of persons without imagination.

'She'll come here for her summer holidays soon,' his sister resumed, going back to Joan. 'She works very hard at that "Home" place in town, and Dick always liked her to use us here as if the place were her own. I promised that.' She dropped gracefully into the wicker chair, and Paul sat down for a moment beside her on the grass. 'He spent a lot of capital, you know, in the thing and made her superintendent or something. She has a sort of passion for this rescuing of slum children, and, I believe, works herself to death over it, though she has means of her own. So you will be nice to her when she comes, won't you, and look after her a bit? I do what I can, but I always feel I'm rather a failure. I never know what to talk to her about. She's so dreadfully in earnest about everything.'

Paul promised. Joan sounded rather attractive, to tell the truth. He remembered something, too, of the big organisation his old friend had founded in London for the rescue and education of waif-boys. A thrill of pride ran through him, and close at its heels a secret sense of shame, that he himself did nothing in the great world of action — that his own life was a mass of selfish dreaming and refined selfseeking, that all his yearning for God and beauty was after all, perhaps, but a spiritual egoism. It was not the first time this thought had come to trouble and perplex. Of late — especially since he had begun to find these safety-valves of self-expression, and so a measure of relief — his mind had turned in the direction of some bigger field to work in outside self, perhaps more than he quite knew or realised.

‘Paul,’ his sister interrupted his reflections, after a prolonged fidgeting to make herself comfortable so that the parasol should shade her, the hat not tickle her, and the novel open easily for reading; ‘you are happy here, aren’t you? You’re not too dull with us, I mean?’

‘It’s quite delightful, Margaret,’ he answered at once. ‘In one sense I have never been so happy in my life.’ He looked straight at her, the sun catching his brown beard and face. ‘And I love the children; they’re just the kind of companions I need.’

‘I’m so glad, so glad,’ she said genuinely. ‘And it’s very kind and good-natured of you to be with them such a lot. You really almost fill Dick’s place for them.’ She sighed and half closed her eyes. ‘Some day you may have children of your own; only you would spoil them quite atrociously, I’m sure.’

‘Am I spoiling yours?’ he asked solemnly.

‘Dreadfully,’ she laughed; ‘and turning little Mademoiselle’s head into the bargain.’

It was his turn to burst out laughing. ‘I think that young lady can take care of herself without difficulty,’ he exclaimed; ‘and as for my spoiling! the children, I think it’s they who are spoiling me!’ And, presently, with some easy excuse, he left her side and went off into the woods. Margaret watched him charge across the lawn. A perplexed expression came into her face as she picked up her novel and settled down into the cushions, balancing the red parasol over her head at a very careful angle.

Admiration was in her glance, too, as she saw him go. Evidently she was proud of her brother — proud that he was so different from other people, yet puzzled to the verge of annoyance that he should be so.

‘What a strange creature he is,’ was her somewhat indefinite reflection; ‘I thought but one Dick could exist in the world! He’s still a boy — not a day over twenty-five. I wonder if he’s ever been in love, or ever will be? I think — I hope he won’t; he’s rather nice as he is after all.’

She sighed faintly. Then she dipped again into her novel, wherein the emotions, from love downwards, were turned on thick and violent as from; so many taps in a factory; got bored with it; looked on to the last chapter to see what happened, to everybody; and, finally — fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

TO ME ALONE there came a thought of griefs
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
        And I again am strong:

.....

I hear the echoes through the mountains throng,
  The winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
          And all the earth is gay....

Ode, W. W.

For the rest of the day Paul was in peculiarly good spirits; he went about the place full of bedevilment of all kinds, to the astonishment of the household in general and of his sister in particular. The oppressive heat seemed to have no effect upon him. There was something in the air that excited him, and he was very busy getting rid of the excitement.

With bedtime came no desire to sleep. ‘I feel all worked-up, Margaret,’ he said as he lit her candle in the hall. ‘I think it must be an “adventure” coming,’ — though, of course, she had no idea what he meant.

‘There’s thunder about,’ she replied. ‘It’s been so very close all day.’

‘Sleep well,’ Paul said when he left her at the top of the stairs; and the last thing he heard as he went down the long winding passage to his bedroom in the west wing was her voice faintly assuring him ‘One always does here, I’m glad to say.’

Once inside, and the door shut, he gave himself up to his mood. It was a mood apparently that came from nowhere. A soft and mysterious excitement, all delicious, stirred in the depths of his being, rising slowly to the surface. Perhaps it was growing-pains somewhere in the structure of his personality, engineered subconsciously by his imagination; perhaps only ‘weather.’ He always followed the barometer like a strip of dried seaweed.

But on this particular night something more than mere ‘weather’ was abroad; his nerves sent a succession of swift faint warnings to his brain. To begin with, the night herself claimed definite attention. Some nights are just ordinary nights; others touch the soul and whisper ‘I am the night. Look at me. Listen!’

He obeyed the summons and went to the window, leaning out as his habit was. The darkness pressed up in a solid wall, charged to the brim with mysteries waiting to reveal themselves. No trees were visible, no outline of moor or hill or garden. The sky was pinned down to the horizon more tightly than usual — keeping back all manner of things. Very little air crept beneath the edges, so that the atmosphere was oppressive. The day had been cloudless, but with the sunset whole continents of vapour had climbed upon the hills of the evening wind, driven slowly by high currents that had not yet come near enough the earth to be heard and felt.

He coughed — gently. The least noise, he felt, would shatter some soft and delicate structure that rose everywhere through the darkness — some web-like shadow-scaffolding that reared upwards, supporting the night.

‘Something’s going to happen,’ he said low to himself. ‘I can feel it coming.’

He became very imaginative, enjoying his mood enormously, letting it act as a mental purge. Aventures that he would discover for the next Meeting swept through him. The stress and fever of creative fancy, stirred by the deep travailing of the elements behind that curtain of night, was upon him. Then, sleep being far away, he went to the writing-table, where Nixie’s deft hands had everything prepared, lit a second candle, and began to write.

‘I’ll write “How I climbed the Scaffolding of the Night,”’ he murmured; ‘for I feel it true within me. I feel as if I were part of the night — part of all this beautiful soft darkness.’

But, before he had written a dozen lines, he stopped and fell to listening again, staring past the steady candle-flames out into the open. The stillness was profound. A single ivy-leaf rattled sharply all by itself on the wall outside his window. He felt as if that leaf tapped faintly upon his own brain. By a curious process known only to the poetic temperament, he passed on to *feel with* everything about him — as though some portion of himself actually merged in with the silence, with the perfumes of trees and garden, with the voice of that little tapping leaf. And, in proportion as he realised this, he transferred the magic of it to his tale. He found the words that fitted his conception like a natural skin. He knew in some measure the satisfaction and relief of expression.

‘A year ago — a month ago,’ he thought with delight, ‘this would have been impossible to me. Nixie has taught me so much already!’

What he really wanted, of course, were the living, flaming words of poetry. But this he knew was denied him; perhaps the fire of inspiration did not burn steadily enough; perhaps the intellectual foundation was not there. At any rate, he could only do his best and struggle with the prose, and this he did with intense pleasure.

After a time he laid his pen down and fell to thinking again — the kind of reverie that dramatises a mood before the inner vision. And another inspiration came upon him with its sudden little glory; he realised vividly that *within* himself a region existed where all that he desired might find fulfilment; where yearnings, dreams, desires might come true. There existed this inner place within where he might visualise all he most wished for into a state of reality. The workshop of the creative imagination was its vestibule....

Whether or not he could put it into words for others to realise was merely a question of craft....

He must have sat thinking in this way much longer than he knew, for the candles had burnt down quite low when at length he bestirred himself with a mighty yawn and rose to go to bed. But hardly had he begun to unfasten his crumpled black tie when something made him pause.

Far away, through the hush that covered the world, that ‘something’ was astir — coming swiftly nearer. He stepped back into the middle of the room and waited. Smoke, the sleeping black cat on the sofa, sat up and waited too. Looking about it with brilliant green eyes, wide open, and whiskers twitching backwards and forwards, it understood even better than he did that a change in all that world of darkness had come to pass. The animal stared alternately at the window and the door.

For another minute the stillness held supreme. Then, from the silent reaches beyond, this new sound came suddenly close, dropping down through leagues of night. It began with a faint roar in the chimney; a tree outside uttered a soft, rushing cry; a thousand leaves, instead of one, rattled on the wall.

A Messenger, running headlong through the darkness, was calling aloud a warning as it ran, for all to understand who could. And, among the few who were awake and understood, 'Paul and his fourfooted companion were certainly the first.

A sudden movement of the vast fabric of darkness came next. That scaffolding of shadows trembled, as though the same moment it would fall and let in — Light. In front of the bow window the muslin curtain that so long had hung motionless, now bellied out slowly into the room. The movement, mysterious and suggestive, claimed attention significantly. Paul and Smoke, watching it, exchanged glances. Then, with a long, sighing sound, it floated back again to its original position. It hung down straight and still as before.

But in that moment something had entered the room. Borne by this messenger of the coming storm, this stray Wind had left its warning — and was gone!

Smoke leapt softly down and padded over to sniff the curtain, and having done so, blinked up at Paul with eloquent eyes, and sat back to wait and — wash! No apparatus of speech ever said more plainly 'Look out! Something's coming! Better be prepared as I am!'

And something did come — almost the same minute. The forces that had so long been trying to upset the tent of darkness, did upset it, and from one uplifted corner there rushed down upon the world a blue-white sheet of light that was utterly gorgeous. For one instant trees, moor, hill leaped into vivid outline. The hands that held the sheet of brilliance shook it from the four corners, and all the sky shook with it; and, immediately after, the scaffolding of night fell with a prodigious crash, as the true storm, following upon its herald, descended with a hundred thunders and the roar of ten hundred trumpets.

The true wind rushed headlong into the room and extinguished both candles. Smoke rubbed against Paul's feet in the darkness, thoroughly aroused; but Paul himself stood still, as the thrill and splendour of it all entered his heart and filled him with delight. Thunder, lightning, wind — all passed mysteriously into his blood till he was almost conscious of a desire to add the sound of his own voice and shout aloud. The excitement of the elemental forces swept into himself. He understood now the signs of preparation that had been going forward in him during the day.

Splendid sensations, the most splendid he ever knew, raced to and fro in his being, till it almost seemed as if his consciousness transferred itself to the tempest. Surely, that great wind tore out of his heart, that lightning sprang from his brain, that river of rain washed, not merely out of the sky, but out of himself. The edges of his personality became fluid and melted off into the very nature of the elements....

'Now,' he exclaimed aloud, pacing to and fro while Smoke followed him in the darkness and tried to play with the bows on his pumps, 'had I but the means of expression, what a message I could give to the world, of beauty, splendour, power!' He laughed in his excitement. 'If only the strings of my poor instrument had been tuned — !'

Sighing a little to himself at the thought, he went to the window. The first fury of the storm had passed; there was a sudden deep lull broken only by the rushing drip of rain; he smelt the wet foliage and soaking grass. Close to the window, it chanced, there was a dead tree, and in its leafless branches, outlined sharply by the lightning against the black sky, he traced what seemed the huge letters of some elemental alphabet; and at that moment, the returning wind passed through them like a hand on giant strings. It drew forth a wonderful sound in response, a sound that pierced as a two-edged sword to the centre of his being. It was a true singing wind — a Wind of Inspiration.

And, as he heard it, the great wave that fought for utterance rose within him and began to force and tear its way out in spite of everything. Words came pouring through him — like the stammering of torn strings upon a fiddle — clipped wings trying to fly — sparks streaming towards flame yet never achieving it. Similes and metaphors rushed, mixed and headlong, through his mind. In a moment he had dashed across the floor; the candles were again alight; and Paul, pencil in hand, was sitting at the table before a sheet of blank foolscap, the storm crashing about him, and Smoke watching him calmly with eyes full of expectant wonder.

And then was enacted a little drama — tragedy if ever there was one — that must often enough take place in the secret places of the world's houses, where the dumb poet seeks to transfer his genuine passion into the measure of halting and inadequate verse. Poignantly dramatic the spectacle must be, though never witnessed mercifully by an audience of more than one. Paul wrote fast, setting the words down almost as they came. It was that little passionate Wind of Inspiration that was the cause of all the trouble. Smoke jumped up on the table to watch the motion of the pencil across the paper. For some reason he hardly thought it worth while to play with it:

The Winds of Inspiration blow,
   Yet pass me ever by;
And songs God taught me long ago,
   Unuttered burn and — die.

He read the verse over, and with an impatient motion altered 'burn' into 'fade.' Then he shook his head and continued:

From all the far blue hills of heaven
   The dews of beauty rain;
Yet unto me no drops are given
   To quench the ancient pain.

He scratched out 'ancient' and wrote over the top 'undying.' Then he scratched out 'undying' and put 'ancient' back in its place. This time Smoke stretched out a long black paw with a velvet end to it and gave the pencil a deliberate dab. Paul either ignored, or did not notice it; but Smoke left the paw thrust forward upon the paper so as to be ready for the next dab.

I know the passion of the night,
Full of all days unborn, —
Full of the yearning of the light
For one undying Morn.

Smoke caught the tip of the pencil with a swift and accurate stroke, and the ‘M’ of ‘Morn’ was provided with an irregular tail Paul had not intended. Very quickly, however, without further interruption, he wrote on to the end.

Above the embers of my heart,
Waiting the Living Breath;
The sparks fly listlessly apart —
Then circle to their death.

Dead sparks that gathered ne’er to flame,
Nor felt the kiss of fire!
Dead thoughts that never found the name
To spell their deep desire!

Is then this instrument so poor
That it may never sound
Songs that must pass for evermore
Unuttered and uncrowned?

O soul that fain would'st steal heaven's fire,
Who clipped thy golden wings?
Who made so passionate a lyre,
Then never tuned the strings?

The Winds of Inspiration blow,
Yet pass me ever by;
And songs God taught me long ago,
Lost in the silence — die.

He rose from the table with a gesture of abrupt impatience and read the entire effusion through from beginning to end. First he laughed, then he sighed.

He wondered for a moment how it was that so little of his passion had crept into the poor words. He crumpled up the paper and tossed it into the drawer; and then, blowing out the candles, moved over to the big arm-chair and dropped down into it. Again, as he sat there, his thoughts fell to dramatising his mood. He imagined that region within himself where all might come true, and all yearnings find adequate expression. The idea got more and more mingled with the storm. He pictured it to himself with extraordinarily vivid detail.

'There *is* such a place, such a state,' he murmured, 'and it is, it must be accessible.'

He heard the clock in the stables — or was it the church — strike the quarter before midnight.

As he sat in the big chair, Smoke left the table and curled up again on the mat at his feet.

CHAPTER XIV

VISION OR IMAGINATION is a representation of what actually exists, really and unchangeably. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light, than his *perishing* mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all. — W. B.

It was Smoke who first drew his attention to something near the door by ‘padding’ slowly across the carpet and staring up at the handle. Paul’s eyes, following him, perceived next that the brass knob! was silently turning. Then the door opened quickly I and on the threshold stood — Nixie. The open door made such a draught that the twenty winds tearing about inside the room almost lifted the mat at his feet. Behind her he saw the shadowy outline of a second figure, which he recognised as Jonah.

‘Shut the door — quick!’ he said, but they had j done so and were already beside him almost before the words were out of his mouth. In spite of the darkness a very faint radiance came with them so that he could distinguish their faces plainly; and his amazement on seeing them at all at this late hour was instantly doubled when he perceived further that they were fully dressed for going out. At the same time, however, so deep had he been in his reverie, and so strongly did the excitement of it yet linger in his blood, that he hardly realised how wicked they were to be parading the house at such a time of the night, and that his obvious duty was to bundle them back to bed. In a strange, queer way they almost seemed part of his dream, part of his dramatised mood, part of the region of wonder into which his thoughts had been leading him. Moreover, he felt in some dim fashion that they had come with a purpose of great importance.

‘It’s awfully late, you know,’ he exclaimed under his breath, peering into their faces through the darkness.

‘But not too late, if we start at once,’ Jonah whispered. For a moment Paul had almost thought that they would melt away and disappear as soon as he spoke to them, or that they would not answer at all. But now this settled it;

these were no figures in a dream. He felt their hands upon his arms and neck; the very perfume of Nixie's hair and breath was about him. She was dressed, he noticed, in her red cloak with the hood over her head, and her eyes were popping with excitement. The expression on her face was earnest, almost grave. He saw the faint gleam of the gold buckle where the shiny black belt enclosed her little waist.

'If we start *at once*, I said,' repeated Jonah in a nervous whisper, pulling at his hand.

Paul started to his feet and began fumbling with his black tie, feeling vaguely that either he ought to tie it properly or take it off altogether, and that it was a sort of indecent tinsel to wear at such a time. But he only succeeded in pricking his finger with the pin sticking out of the collar. He felt more than a little bewildered, if the truth were told.

'I'll do that for you,' Nixie said under her breath; and in a twinkling her deft fingers had whipped the strip of satin from his neck.

'You don't want a tie where we're going," she laughed softly.

'Or a hat either,' added Jonah. 'But I wish you'd hurry, please.'

'I'd better put on another coat or a dressing-gown, or something,' he stammered.

'Coat's best,' Jonah told him, and in a moment he had changed into a tweed Norfolk jacket that lay upon the chair.

They pulled him towards the door, Nixie holding one hand, Jonah the other, and Smoke following so closely at his heels that he almost seemed to be prodding him gently forward with his velvet padded boots. Paul understood that tremendous forces, elemental in character like the wind and rain and lightning, somehow added their immense suasion to the little hands that pulled his own. He made no resistance, but just allowed himself to go; and he went with a wild and boyish delight tearing through his mind.

'Are we going out then?' he asked, 'out of doors?'

'What's the exact time, the *very* exact time?' Nixie asked hurriedly, ignoring his question; and though Paul had looked a few minutes before they came in, he had quite forgotten by now. She helped herself to his watch, burrowing under his coat to find it, and peering closely to read the position of the hands.

‘Five minutes to twelve!’ she exclaimed, addressing Jonah in excited whispers. ‘Oh, I say! We must be off at once, or we shall miss the crack altogether. Come on, Uncle, or your life won’t be safe a minute.’

‘Then what will it be a month, I should like to know?’ he laughed as he was swept along through the darkness, not knowing what to say or think.

‘The crack! The crack! Quick, or we shall miss it!’ cried the children in the same sentence, urging him heavily forward.

‘What crack? Where are we going to? What does it all mean?’ he asked breathlessly, trying to avoid treading on their toes and the toes of Smoke who flew beside them with tail held swiftly aloft as though to guide them.

They brought him up with a sudden bump just outside the door, and Nixie turned up a serious face to explain, while Jonah waited impatiently in front of them.

‘Quick!’ she whispered, ‘listen and I’ll tell you. We’re going to find the crack between Yesterday and To-morrow, and then — slip through it.’

His heart leaped with excitement as he heard.

‘Go on,’ he cried. ‘Tell me more!’

‘You see, Yesterday really begins just after Midnight when To-day ends’; she said, ‘and Tomorrow begins there too.’

‘Of course.’

‘After Midnight, To-morrow jumps away again a whole day, and is as far off as ever. That’s the nearest you can get to To-morrow.’

‘I see.’

‘And Yesterday, which has been a whole day away, suddenly jumps up close behind again. So that Yesterday and To-morrow,’ she went on, eager with excitement, ‘meet at Midnight for a single second before flying off to their new places. Daddy told us that long ago.’

‘Exactly. They must.’

: But now the world is old and worn. There’s a tiny little crack between Yesterday and To-morrow. They don’t join as they once did, and, if we’re *very* quick, we can find the crack and slip through—’

‘Bless my Timber Limits!’ he exclaimed; ‘what a glorious notion!’

‘And, once inside there, there’s no time, of course,’ she went on, more and more hurriedly. ‘*Anything* may happen, and *everything* come true.’

‘The very region I was thinking about just now!’ thought Paul. ‘The very place! I’ve found it!’

‘*Do* hurry up, oh *do*!’ put in Jonah with a loud whisper that echoed down the corridor, for his patience was at length exhausted by all this explanation. ‘You *are* so slow getting started.’

‘Ready!’ cried Paul and Nixie in the same breath.

They were off! Down the dark and silent stairs on tiptoe, through the empty halls, past the hat-racks and the stuffed deer heads that grinned down upon them from the walls, along the stone passage to the kitchen region, where the row of red fire-buckets gleamed upon the shelves, and so, past the ghostly pantry, to the back door. This they found open, for Jonah had already run ahead and unlocked it. Another minute and they had crossed the yard by the stables, where the pump stood watching them like a figure with an outstretched arm, and soon were well out on to the lawn at the back of the house. The rain had ceased, but the wind caught them here with such tremendous blows and shouting that they could hardly hear themselves speak, and had to keep closely together in a bunch to make their way at all. It was pitch dark and the stars were hidden. Paul stumbled and floundered, treading incessantly on the toes of the more nimble children. Smoke ran like a black shadow, now in front, now behind.

‘We’re nearly there,’ Nixie cried encouragingly, as he made a false step and landed with a crash in the middle of some low laurel bushes. ‘But *do* be more careful, Uncle, please,’ she added, helping him out again.

‘There’s the clock striking!’ Jonah called, a little in front of them. ‘We’re only just in time!’

Paul recovered himself and pulled up beside them under the shadows of the big twin cedars that stood like immense sentries at the end of the lawn. He came rolling in, swaying like a ship in a heavy sea. And, as he did so, the sound of a church bell striking the hour came to their ears through the terrific uproar of the elements, blown this way and that by the wind.

. It was midnight striking.

At the same instant he heard a peculiar sharp sound like whistling — the noise wind makes tearing through a narrow opening.

‘The crack, the crack!’ cried his guides together. ‘That’s the air rushing. It’s coming. Look out!’ They seized him by the hands.

‘But I shall never get through,’ shouted Paul, thinking of his size for the first time.

‘Yes you will,’ Nixie screamed back at him above the roar. ‘Between the sixth and seventh strokes, remember.’

The fifth stroke had already sounded. The wind caught it and went shrieking into the sky.

Six! boomed the distant bell through the night. They held his hands in a vice.

There was a sound like an express train tearing through the air. A quick flash of brilliance followed, and a long slit seemed to open suddenly in the sky before them, and then flash past like lightning. Nixie tugged at one hand, and Jonah tugged at the other. Smoke scampered madly past his feet.

A wild rush of wind swept him along, whistling in his ears; there was a breathless and giddy sensation of dropping through empty space that seemed as though it could never end — and then Paul suddenly found himself sitting on a grassy bank beside a river, Nixie and Jonah on either side of him, and Smoke washing his face in front of them as though nothing in the whole world had ever happened to disturb his equanimity. And a bright, soft light, like the light of the sun, shone warmly over everything.

‘Only just managed it,’ Nixie observed to Jonah. ‘He *is* rather wide, isn’t he?’

‘Everybody’s thin somewhere,’ was the reply.

‘And the crack is very stretchy’ — she added,—’ luckily.’

Paul drew a long breath and stretched himself.

‘Well,’ he said, still a little breathless and dizzy, ‘such things were never done in my day.’

‘But this isn’t your day any more,’ explained Nixie, her blue eyes popping with laughter and mischief, ‘it’s your night. And, anyhow, as I told you, there’s no time here at all. There’s no hurry now.’

CHAPTER XV

The imagination is not a state; it is the human existence itself. — W B.

PAUL, LOOKING ROUND, felt utterly at peace with himself and the world; at rest, he felt. That was his first sensation in the mass. He recovered in a moment from his breathless entrance, and a subtle pleasure began to steal through his veins. It seemed as if every yearning he had ever known was being ministered to by competent unseen Presences; and, obviously, the children and the cats — Mrs. Tompkyns had somehow managed to join Smoke — felt likewise, for their countenances beamed and blinked supreme contentment.

‘Ah!’ observed Jonah, sitting contentedly on the grass beside him. ‘This is the place.’ He heaved a happy little sigh, as though the statement were incontrovertible.

‘It is,’ echoed Paul. And Nixie’s eyes shone like blue flowers in a field of spring.

‘The crack’s smaller than it used to be though,’ he heard her murmuring to herself. ‘Every year it’s harder to get through. I suppose something’s happening to the world — or to people; some change going on—’

‘Or we’re getting older,’ Jonah put in with profounder wisdom than he knew.

Paul congratulated himself upon his successful entrance. He felt something of a dog! The bank on which he lay sloped down towards a river fledged with reeds and flowers; its waters, blue as the sky, flowed rippling by, and a soft wind, warm and scented, sighed over it from the heart of the summer. On the opposite shore, not fifty yards across, a grove of larches swayed their slender branches lazily in the sun, and a little farther down the banks he saw a line of willows drooping down to moisten their tongue-like leaves. The air hummed pleasantly with insects; birds flashed to and fro, singing as they flew; and, in the distance, across miles of blue meadowlands, hills rose in shadowy outline to the sky. He feasted on the beauty of it all, absorbing it through every sense.

‘But where are we?’ he asked at length, ‘because a moment ago we were in a storm somewhere?’ He turned to Nixie who still lay talking to herself contentedly at his side. ‘And what really happens here?’ he added with a blush. ‘I feel so extraordinarily happy.’

They lay half-buried among the sweet-scented grasses. Jonah burrowed along the shore at some game of his own close by, and the cats made a busy pretence of hunting wild game in a dozen places at once, and then suddenly basking in the sun and washing each other’s necks and backs as though wild-game hunting were a bore.

‘Nothing ‘xactly — *happens,* she answered, and ‘her voice sounded curiously like wind in rushes—’ but everything — *is.’*

It seemed to him as though he listened to some spirit of the ages, very wise with the wisdom of eternal youth, that spoke to him through the pretty little mouth of this rosy-faced child.

‘It’s like that river,’ she went on, pointing to the blue streak winding far away in a ribbon through the landscape, ‘which flows on for ever in a circle, and never comes to an end. Everything here goes on always, and then always begins again.’

For the river, as Paul afterwards found, out, ran on for miles and miles, in the curves of an immense circle, of which the sea itself was apparently nothing but a widening of certain portions.

‘So here,’ continued the child, making a pattern with daisies on his sleeve as she talked, ‘you can go over anything you like again and again, and it need never come to an end at all. Only,’ she added, looking up gravely into his face, ‘you must really, *really* want it to start with.’

‘Without getting tired?’ he asked, wonderingly. ‘Of course; because *you* begin over and over again with it.’

‘Delightful!’ he exclaimed, ‘that means a place of eternal youth, where emotions continually renew themselves.’

‘It’s the place where you find lost things,’ she explained, with a little puzzled laugh at his foolish long words, ‘and where things that came to no proper sort of end — things that didn’t come true, I mean, in the world, all happen and enjoy themselves—’

He sat up with a jerk, forgetting the carefully arranged daisies on his coat, and scattering them all over the grass.

‘But this is too splendid!’ he cried. ‘This is what I’ve always been looking for. It’s what I was thinking about just now when I tried to write a poem and couldn’t.’

‘*We* found it long ago,’ said the child, pointing to Jonah and Mrs. Tompkyns, Smoke having mysteriously disappeared for the moment. ‘We live here really most of the time. Daddy brought us here first.’

‘Things life promised, but never gave, here come to full fruition,’ Paul murmured to himself. ‘You mean,’ he added aloud, ‘this is where ideals that have gone astray among the years may be found again, and actually realised? A kingdom of heaven within the heart?’ He was very excited, and forgot for the moment he was speaking to a child.

‘I don’t know about all that,’ she answered, with a puzzled look. ‘But it is life. We live-happily-ever-after here. That’s what I mean.’

‘It all comes true here?’

‘All, all, all. All broken things and all lost things come here and are happy again,’ she went on eagerly; ‘and if you look hard enough you can find ‘xactly what you want and ‘xactly what you lost. And once you’ve found it, nothing can break it or lose it again.’

Paul stared, understanding that the voice speaking through her was greater than she knew.

‘And some things are lost, *we* think,’ she added, ‘simply because they were wanted — wanted very much indeed, but never got.’

‘Yet these are certainly the words of a child,’ he reflected, wonder and delight equally mingled, ‘and of a child tumbling about among great spiritual things in a simple, intuitive fashion without knowing it.’

‘All the things that ought to happen, but never do happen,’ she went on, picking up the scattered daisies and making the pattern anew on a different part of his coat. ‘They all are found here.’

‘Wishes, dreams, ideals?’ he asked, more to see what answer she would make than because he didn’t understand.

‘I suppose that’s the same thing,’ she replied. ‘But, now *please,* Uncle Paul, keep still a minute or I can’t possibly finish this crown the daisies want me to make for them.’

Paul stared into her eyes and saw through them to the blue of the sky and the blue of the winding river beyond; through to the hills on the horizon, a deeper blue still; and thence into the softer blue shadows that lay over the timeless land buried in the distances of his own heart, where things might indeed come true beyond all reach of misadventure or decay. For this, of course, was the real land of wonder and imagination, where everything might happen and nothing need grow old. The vision of the poet saw... far — far...

All this he realised through the blue eyes of the child at his side, who was playing with daisies and talking about the make-believe of children. His being swam out into the sunshine of great distances, of endless possibilities, all of which he might be able afterwards to interpret to others who did not see so far, or so clearly, as himself. He began to realise that his spirit, like the endless river at his feet, was without end or beginning. Thrills of new life poured into him from all sides.

‘And when we go back,’ he heard the musical little voice saying beside him, ‘that church will be striking exactly where we left it — the sixth stroke, I mean.’

‘Of course; *I* see!’ cried Paul, beginning to realise the full value of his discovery, ‘for there’s no time here, is there? Nothing grows old.’

‘That’s it,’ she laughed, clapping her hands, ‘and you can find all the lost and broken things you want, if you look hard and — really want them.’

‘I want a lot,’ he mused, still staring into the little wells of blue opposite; ‘the kind that are lost because they’ve never been “got,”’ he added with a smile, using her own word.

‘For instance,’ Nixie continued, hanging the daisies now in a string from his beard, ‘all my broken things come here and live happily — if I broke them by accident; but if I broke them in a temper, they are still angry and frighten me, and sometimes even chase me out again. Only Jonah has more of these than I have, and they are all on the other side of the river, so we’re quite safe here. Now watch,' she added in a lower voice, 'Look hard under the trees and you'll see what I mean perhaps. And wish hard, too.'

Paul's eyes followed the direction of her finger across the river, and almost at once dim shapes began to move to and fro among the larches, starting into life where the shadows were deepest. At first he could distinguish no very definite forms, but gradually the outlines grew clearer as the forms approached the edges of the wood, coming out into the sunshine.

'The ghosts! The ghosts of broken things!' cried Jonah, running up the bank for protection. 'Look! They're coming out. Some one's thinking about them, you see!'

Paul, as he gazed, thought he had never seen such an odd collection of shapes in his life. They stalked about awkwardly like huge insects with legs of unequal length, and with a lop-sided motion that made it impossible to tell in which direction they meant to go. They had brilliant little eyes that flashed this way and that, making a delicate network of rays all through the wood like the shafts of a hundred miniature search-lights. Their legs, too, were able to bend both forwards and backwards and even sideways, so that when they appeared to be coming towards him they really were going away; and the strange tumbling motion of their bodies, due to the unequal legs, gave them an appearance that was weirdly grotesque rather than terrifying.

It was, indeed, a curious and delightful assortment of goblins. There were dolls without heads, and heads without dolls; milk jugs without handles, china teapots without spouts, and spouts without china teapots; clocks without hands, or with cracked and wounded faces; bottles without necks; broken cups, mugs, plates, and dishes, all with gaping slits and cracks in their anatomy, with half their faces missing, or without heads at all; every sort of vase imaginable with every sort of handle unimaginable; tin soldiers without swords or helmets, china puppies without tails, broken cages, knives without handles; and a collection of basins of all sizes that would have been sufficient to equip an entire fleet of cross-channel steamers: altogether a formidable and pathetic army of broken creatures.

'What in the world are they trying to do?' he asked, after watching their antics for some minutes with amazement.

‘Looking for the broken parts,’ explained Jonah, who was half amused, half alarmed. ‘They get out of shape like that because they pick up the first pieces they find.’

‘And *you* broke all these things?’

The boy nodded his head proudly. ‘I reckernise most of them,’ he said, ‘but they’re nearly all accidents. I said “sorry” for each one.’

‘That, you see,’ Nixie interrupted, ‘makes all the difference. If you break a thing on purpose in a temper, you murder it; but the accidents come down here and feel nothing. They hardly know who broke them. In the end they all find their pieces. It’s the heaven of broken things, we call it. But now let’s send them away.’

‘How?’ asked Paul.

‘By forgetting them,’ cried Jonah.

They turned their faces away and began to think of other things, and at once the figures began to fade and grow dim. The lights went out one by one. The grotesque shapes melted into the trees, and a minute later there was nothing to be seen but the slender larch stems and the play of sunlight and shadow beneath their branches.

‘You see how it works, at any rate,’ Nixie said. ‘Anything you’ve lost or broken will come back if you think hard enough — nice things as well as nasty things — but they must be real, real things, and you must want them in a real, real way.’

It was, indeed, he saw, the region where thoughts come true.

‘Then do broken people come here too?’ Paul asked gravely after a considerable pause, during which his thoughts went profoundly wandering.

‘Yes; only we don’t happen to know any. But all our dead animals are here, all the kittens that had to be drowned, and the puppies that died, and the collie the Burdons’ motor killed, and Birthday, our old horse that had to be shot. They’re all here, and all happy.’

‘Let’s go and see them then,’ he cried, delighted with this idea of a heaven of broken animals.

In a moment they were on their feet and away over the springy turf, singing and laughing in the sunshine, picking flowers, jumping the little brooks that ran like crystal ribbons among the grass, Nixie and Jonah dancing by his side as though they had springs in their feet and wings on their shoulders. More and more the country spread before them like a great garden run wild, and Paul thought he had never seen such fields of flowers or smelt such perfumes in the wind.

‘What’s the matter now?’ he exclaimed, as Jonah stopped and began to stare hard at an acre of lilies of the valley by the way.

‘He’s calling some things of his own,’ Nixie answered. ‘Stare and think — and they’ll all come. But we needn’t bother about him. Come along!’ And he only had time to see the lilies open in an avenue to make way for a variety of furry, four-legged creatures, when the child pulled him by the hand and they were off again at full speed across the fields.

A sound of neighing made him turn round, and before he could move aside, a large grey horse with a flowing tail and a face full of gentle beneficence came trotting over the turf and stopped just behind him, nuzzling softly into his shoulder.

‘Nice, silly-faced old thing,’ said Nixie, running up to speak to it, while a brown collie trotted quietly at her heels. A little further off, peeping up through a tangled growth of pinks and meadow-sweet, he saw the faces of innumerable kittens, watching him with large and inquisitive eyes, their ears just topping the flowers like leaves of fur. Such a family of animals Paul thought he had never even dreamed of.

‘This is the heaven of the lost animals,’ Nixie cried from her seat on the back of the grey horse, having climbed up by means of a big stone. On her shoulder perched a small brown owl, blinking in the light like the instantaneous shutter of a photographic camera. It had fluffy feathers down to its ankles like trousers, and was very tame, ‘And they are always happy here and have plenty to eat and drink. They play with us far better here than outside, and are never frightened. Of course, too, they get no older.’

Paul climbed up behind her on the horse’s back.

‘Now we’re off!’ he cried; and with Jonah and a dozen animals at their heels, they raced off across the open country, holding on as best they could to mane and tail, laughing, shouting, singing, while the wind whistled in their ears and the hot sun poured down upon their bare heads.

Then, suddenly, the horse stopped with a jerk that sent them sprawling forward upon his neck. He turned his head round to look at them with a comical expression in his big, brown eyes. Paul slid off behind, and Nixie saved herself by springing sideways into a bed of forget-me-nots. The owl fluttered away, blinking its eyes more rapidly than ever in a kind of surprised fury, shaking out its fluffy trousers, and Jonah arrived panting with his dogs and rabbits and puppies.

‘Come,’ exclaimed Nixie breathlessly, ‘he’s had enough by now. No animal wants people too long. Let’s get something to eat.’

‘And I’ll cook it,’ cried the boy, busying himself with sticks and twigs upon the ground. ‘We’ll have stodgy-pudding and cake and jam and oyster-patties, and then more stodgy-pudding again to finish up with.’

Paul glanced round him and saw that all the animals had disappeared — gone like thoughts forgotten. In their place he soon saw a column of blue smoke rising up among the fir trees close behind him, and the children flitting to and fro through it looking like miniature gypsies. The odour of the burning wood was incense in his nostrils.

‘But can’t I see something too — something of my own?’ he asked in an aggrieved tone.

Nixie and Jonah looked up at him with surprise.

‘Of course you can,’ they exclaimed together. ‘Just stare into space as the cats do, and think, and wish, and wait. Anything you want will come — with practice. People you’ve lost, or people you’ve wanted to find, or anything that’s never come true anywhere else.’

They went on busily with their cooking again, and Paul, lying on his back in the grass some distance away, sent his thoughts roaming, searching, deeply calling, far into the region of unsatisfied dreams and desires within his heart....

For what seemed hours and hours they wandered together through the byways of this vast, enchanted garden, finding everything they wished to find, forgetting everything they wished to forget, amusing themselves to their heart's content; till, at last, they stood together on a big boulder in the river where the spray rose about them in a cloud and painted a rainbow above their heads.

'Get ready! Quick!' cried Jonah. 'The Crack's coming!'

'It's coming!' repeated Nixie, seizing Paul's hand and urging him to hold very tight.

He had no time to reply. There was a rushing sound of air tearing through a narrow opening. The sky grew dark, with a roaring in his ears and a sense of great things flying past him. Again came the sensation of dropping giddily through space, and the next minute he found himself standing with the two children upon the lawn, darkness about them, and the storm howling and crashing over their heads through the branches of the twin cedars.

'There's the clock still striking,' Nixie cried. 'It's only been a few seconds altogether.'

He heard the church clock strike the last six strokes of midnight.

For some minutes he realised little more than that he felt rather stiff and uncomfortable in his bedroom chair, and that he was chilly about the legs. Outside the wind still roared and whistled, making the windows rattle, while gusts of rain fell volleying against the panes as though trying to get in. A roll of distant thunder came faintly to his ear. He stretched himself and began to undress by the light of a single candle.

On the table lay a sheet of paper headed 'How I climbed the Scaffolding of the Night,' and he read down the page and then took his pen and wrote the heading of something else on another sheet: 'Adventure in the Land between Yesterday and To-morrow.' With a mighty yawn he then blew out his candle and tumbled into bed.

And with him, for all the howling of the elements, came a strange sense of peace and happiness. Out of the depths rose gradually before his inner eye in a series of delightful pictures the scenes he had just left, and he understood that the pathway to that country of dreams fulfilled and emotions that never die, lay buried far within his own being.

‘Between Yesterday and To-morrow’ was to be the children’s counterpart of that timeless, deathless region where the spirit may always go when hunted by the world, fretted by the passion of unsatisfied yearnings, plagued by the remorseless tribes of sorrow and disaster. There none could follow him, just as none — none but himself — could bring about its destruction. For he had found the mystical haven where all lost or broken things eternally reconstruct themselves.

The ‘Crack,’ of course, may be found by all who have the genuine yearning to recreate their world more sweetly, provided they possess at the start enough imagination to repay the trouble of training — also that *Wanderlust* of the spirit which seeks ever for a resting-place in the great beyond that reaches up to God.

Paul as yet had but discovered the entrance, led by little children who dreamed not how wondrous was the journey; but the rest would follow. For it is a region mapped gradually out of a thousand impulses, out of ten thousand dreams, out of the eternal desires of the soul. It is not discovered in a day, nor do the ways of entrance always remain the same. A thousand joys contribute to its fashioning, a thousand frustrated hopes describe its boundaries, and ten thousand griefs bring slowly, piece by piece, the material for its construction, while every new experience of the soul, successful or disastrous, adds something to its uncharted geography. Slowly it gathers into existence, becoming with every sojourn more real and more satisfying, till at length from the pain of all possible disillusionment the way opens to the heart of relief, to the peaceful place of hopes renewed, of purposes made fruitful and complete.

And from this deathless region, too, flow all the forces of the soul that make for hope, enthusiasm, courage, and delight. The children might call it ‘Between Yesterday and To-morrow,’ and find their little broken dreams brought back to life; but Paul understood that its rewards might vary immensely according to the courage and the need of the soul that sought it.

CHAPTER XVI

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you. YEATS.

THUS, LED DELICATELY by the animals and the children, and guided to a certain extent, too, by the curious poesy of his own soul, Paul Rivers came gradually into his own. Once made free of their world, he would learn next that the process automatically made him free of his own. This simple expedient of having found an audience did wonders for him, for it not only loosened his tongue and his pen, but set all the deeper parts of him running into speech, and the natural love and poetry of the man began to produce a delightful, if somewhat extraordinary, harvest.

He understood — none better — that fantasy, unless rooted in reality, leads away from action and tends to weakness and insipidity; but that, grounded in the common facts of life, and content with idealising the actual, it might become an important factor for good, lending wings to the feet and lifting the soul over difficult places. His education advanced by leaps and bounds.

And in some respects he showed himself possessed of a wisdom that could only have belonged to him because at heart he was still a child, and the ordinary 'knowledge of the world' had not come to spoil him in his life of solitude among the trees.

For instance, that Between Yesterday and Tomorrow' bore some curious relation to reverie and dreams, he dimly discerned, yet, with this simple and profound wisdom of his, he refused to pry too closely into the nature of such relationship. He did not seek to reduce the delightful experience to the little hard pellet of an exact fact. For that, he felt, would be to lose it. Exact knowledge, he knew, was often merely a great treachery, and 'fact' a dangerous weapon that deceived, and might even destroy, its owner. If he analysed too carefully, he might analyse the whole thing out of existence altogether, and such a contingency was not to be thought of for a single moment.

Moreover, the attitude of the children confirmed his own. They never referred to their adventures until he had given them form and substance in his reports as recording secretary of the society. No word passed their lips until they had heard them read out, and *then* they talked of nothing else. During the day they maintained a sublime ignorance of his aventures of the night,' as though nothing of the kind had ever happened; and this tended still further to relegate it all to a region untouched by time, beyond the reach of chance, beyond the destruction of mere talk, eternal and real in the great sense.

Meanwhile, as this hidden country he had discovered yielded to exploration, becoming more and more mapped out, and its springs of water tapped, Paul was conscious that the power from these vital sources began to modify his character, and to enlarge his outlook upon life. Imagination, released and singing, provides the greatest of all magics — belief in one's self. The rivers of feeling carve their own channels, which are ever the shortest way to the ocean of fulfilment. The effects spread gradually to the remotest corner of his being.

One rainy day he found himself alone in the schoolroom with Nixie, for it was Saturday afternoon, and Mlle. Fleury had carried off Jonah and Toby in their best clothes, and to their acute dismay, to have tea with the children — they were dull children — at the vicarage.

Dressed in blue serge, with a broad white collar over her shoulders and a band of gold about her waist that matched the colour of her hair, she darted about the room with her usual effect of brightness, so that he found himself continually thinking the sun had burst through the clouds. She was busily arranging cats and kittens in various positions in which they showed no inclination to remain, till the performance had somewhat the air of the old-fashioned game of 'general post.' Paul sat lazily at the ink-stained table, dividing his attentions between watching the child's fascinating movements and pecking idly into the soft wood with his little gold penknife.

'Aren't you *very* glad we found you out so soon, Uncle Paul?' she asked suddenly, looking up at him over a back of glossy and wriggling yellow fur. 'Aren't you very glad *indeed*, I mean?'

He went on picking at the soft ditches between the ridges of dirty brown without answering for a moment.

‘Yes,’ he said presently, in the slow manner of a man who weighs his words; ‘very glad indeed. It’s increased my interest in life. It’s made me happier, and healthier, and wealthier, and all the rest of it — and wiser too.’ He bent, frowning, over the ditches.

‘It was all your own fault, you know, that we didn’t get you sooner. Oh, years ago — ever so many.’

‘But I was in the backwoods, Nixie.’

‘That made no difference,’ she answered promptly. ‘If you had written to us, as mother often asked, we should have noticed at once what you were.’

‘How could that possibly be?’ he objected, still without looking up.

‘Of course!’ was the overwhelming reply.

‘Oh, come now,’ he said, staring at her solemnly over the table; ‘I admit your penetration is pretty keen, but I doubt *that.’*

She returned his gaze with an expression of grave, almost contemptuous surprise, tossing her hair back impatiently with a jerk from her face. She had finally established the kittens, Zezette and Sambo, in a sleepy heap just where she wanted them on the top of the squirrel’s cage.

‘But, Uncle,’ she exclaimed, ‘between yesserdayantomorrow you can meet people even after they’ve gone altogether. So America wouldn’t have been difficult. How can you think such things?’

Not knowing exactly how it was he could think such things, Paul made no immediate reply.

‘Anyhow,’ she resumed, ‘it didn’t take long once you were here. We saw in a second in the drawingroom what you were — the day you arrived.’

‘But I acted so well! I’m sure now I behaved—’

‘You behaved just like Jonah,’ she interrupted him with swift decision, ‘ — only bigger!’

Paul laughed to himself. His inquisitor shot across the room to establish Pouf, another kitten, on the piano top. She moved lightly, with a dancing motion that flung her hair behind her through the air, again producing the effect of a sunlight gleam. Paul continued to destroy the table with his blunt penknife, chuckling inwardly at the figure he must have cut that summer afternoon in the ‘drawinroom’ I before these mercilessly observant eyes.

‘You stood about shyly just like him and Toby — in lumps,’ she went on presently, ‘saying things in a sudden, jerky way—’

‘In lumps!’ cried Paul. ‘That’s a nice way to talk to your Uncle!’

Nixie burst out laughing. ‘Oh, I don’t mean that quite,’ she explained; ‘but you stood about as if you found it hard to balance, and were afraid to move off the mat. Just as Jonah does at a party when he’s shy. I copied you *exactly* when I got upstairs.’

‘Did I indeed? Did you indeed, I mean?’ said he, wondering whether he ought to feel offended or pleased at the picture.

‘Yes, rather,’ declared the child emphatically, darting up with Pouf who had definitely rejected the top of the piano, and planting it on the table under his nose, where it immediately sat down, purring loudly and staring into his face. ‘I should think you did! You see, Pouf says so too; he’s purring his agreement. Listen to him! That’s fur language.’

He listened as he was bid, gazing first into the green eyes of the kitten that opened so wide they seemed to have no lids at all, and then into the mischievous blue eyes of his other tormentor. He decided that on the whole he felt pleased.

‘Then I wasted a lot of time,’ he observed presently, ‘about joining, I mean — coming into your world.’

‘H’mmmrn, you did.’

‘Only, remember, you were all very young when I was in America, weren’t you?’ he added by way of excuse.

Nixie nodded her head approvingly.

‘And you, I expect,’ she replied thoughtfully, ‘were too hard then. I hadn’t thought of that. You might never have squeezed through the Crack, mightn’t you? You’re much softer now,’ she decided after a second’s reflection, ‘ever so much softer!’

‘I *have* improved, I think,’ he admitted, blushing like a pleased schoolboy. ‘I am decidedly softer!’

He made a violent dig with his penknife, breaking down the hard barrier between two ditches, whereupon Pouf, thinking the resultant splinter was a plaything specially contrived for its happiness, opened its eyes wider than ever, and stretched out a paw that looked huge compared with the splinter and the penknife. Paul put the weapon away, and Pouf fixed its eyes intently on the pocket where it had vanished, leaving its paw absent-mindedly lying on the splinter which it had already wholly forgotten. It purred louder than ever, trying to give the impression that it was really a big cat.

Outside the rain fell softly. A blue-bottle buzzed noisily about the room, banging the ceiling and the walls as though it were exceedingly angry. Through the open window floated the smell of the English garden soaked in rain, odours of soused trees and lawns, and wet air — exquisitely fragrant.

A hush fell over the room; only the purring of the kittens broke it. Paul thought it was the most soothing sound in the whole world; something began to purr within himself. His head, and Nixie's head, and little Pouf's head — all lay very close together over that schoolroom table, each full of its own busy dreams. These queer, gentle talks with the child were very delightful to him, all his shyness and self-consciousness gone, and the spirit of true wonder, simple and profound, awake in his heart.

Together, for a long time, they listened in silence to these sounds of purring and breathing and the murmur of rain falling outside: deep, velvety breathing it was, almost inaudible. Everything in, life, Paul caught himself reflecting, tragedy or comedy, goes on against a background of this deep, hidden, purring sound of life. Breathing is the first manifestation of life; it is the music of the world, the soft, continuous hum of existence. His thoughts travelled far....

'Yes, on the whole,' he muttered at length inconsequently, 'I think I may consider myself softer than before — kinder, gentler, more alive!'

But neither Nixie, nor Pouf, nor, for that matter, Sambo and Zezette either, paid the smallest attention to his remark; he was soon lost again in further reflections.

It was the child's voice that presently recalled him.

'Uncle Paul,' she said very softly, her mind still busy with thoughts of her own, 'do you know that sometimes I have heard the earth breathing too —

akchilly breathing?'

Paul, coming back from a long journey, turned and gazed at the eager little face beside him in silence.

'The earth is alive, I'm sure,' she went on with an air of great mystery. 'It breathes and whispers, and even purrs; sometimes it cries. It's a great body, alive — just like you and the other stars—'

'Nixie!'

'They are all bodies, though; heavenly bodies, Daddy called them. Only we, I suppose, are too small to see it that way perhaps.'

Paul listened, stroking Pouf slowly. The child's voice was low and somewhat breathless with the excitement of what she was saying. She believed every word of it intensely. Only a very small part of what she was thinking found expression in her words. Her ideas beckoned her beyond; and mere words could not overtake them at her age.

'The earth,' she went on, seeing that he did not laugh, 'is somebody's big round body rolling down the sky. It simply must be. Daddy always said that a fly settling on our bodies didn't know we were alive, so we can't understand that the earth is alive either. Only *I know it.* Oh!' she cried out with sudden enthusiasm, 'how I would love to hear its real out-loud voice. What a t'riffic roar it must be.

I only wish my ears were further—'

'Sharper, you mean.' — .

'But, all the same, I *have* heard it breathing,' she added more quietly, lifting Pouf suddenly and wrapping its sleeping body round her neck like a boa, 'just like this.' She put her head on one side, so that her cheek was against the kitten's lips, and the faint stream of its breathing tickled her ear. 'Only the breathing of the earth is much, ever so much, longer and deeper. It's whole months long.' Paul was listening now with his undivided attention. He was being admitted to the very heart of an imaginative child's world, and the knowledge of it charmed him inexpressibly. His eyes were almost as bright, his cheeks as pink with excitement, as her own. Only he must be very careful indeed. The least mistake on his part would close the door.

'Months, Nixie?'

‘Oh, yes, a single breath is months long,’ she whispered, her eyes growing in size, and darkening with wonder and awe. ‘Pouf lies on me and breathes twice to my once, but I breathe millions of times — ever so many millions — as I lie on the earth’s body.

And it breathes in and out just as Pouf and I do. Winter is breathing in, and summer is breathing out, you see.’

‘So the equinoctial gales are the changes from one breath to the other?’ he put in gravely.

‘I hadn’t thought about the — the gales,’ she said, putting her face closer and lowering her voice, ‘but I know that in the summer I often hear the earth breathing out— ‘specially on still warm nights when everything lies awake and listens for it.’

‘Then do “Things” really listen as we do?’ he asked gently.

‘Not ‘xactly as we do. We only listen in one place — our ears. They listen all over. But they’re alive just the same, though so much quieter. Oh, Uncle Paul, everything is alive; everything, I know it!’ She fixed a searching look on him. ‘You knew *that*, didn’t you?’

There was a trace of real surprise and disappointment in her voice.

‘Well,’ he answered truthfully, ‘I had often and often thought about it, and wondered sometimes — whether—’

But the child interrupted him almost imperiously. He realised sharply how the knowledge that the years bring — little, exact, precise knowledge — may kill the dreams of the naked soul, yet give nothing in their place but dust and ashes. And, by the same token, he recognised that his own heart was still untouched, unspoiled. The blood leaped and ran within him at the thought.

‘The winds, too, are alive,’ — she spoke with a solemn excitement that made her delicate face flush as though a white fire glowed suddenly beneath the skin and behind the charming eyes—’ they run about, and sleep, and sing, and are full of voices. The wind has hundreds of voices — just like insects with such a lot of eyes.’ (Even her strange simile did not make him smile, so real was the belief and enthusiasm of her words.) ‘*We* (with scorn) have only one voice; but the wind can laugh and cry at the same time!'

'I've heard it,' he put in, secretly thrilled.

'I know its angry voice as well as its pretended-angry voice, when it's very loud but means nothing in particular. Its baby-voice, when it comes through the keyhole at night, or down the chimney, or just outside the window in the early morning, and tells me all its little very-wonderful-indeed aventures, makes me so happy I want to cry and laugh at once.'

She paused a moment for breath, dimly conscious, perhaps, that her description was somewhat confused. Her excitement somehow communicated itself to Pouf at the same time, for the kitten suddenly rose up with an arched back and indulged in a yawn that would have cracked the jaws of any self-respecting creature. After a prolonged stare at Paul, it proceeded inconsequently to wash itself with an air that plainly said, 'You won't catch me napping again. I want to hear this too.'

Paul, meanwhile, stared at the child beside him, thinking that the gold-dust on her hair must surely come from her tumbling journeys among the stars, and wondering if she understood how deeply she saw into the heart of things with those dreamy blue eyes of hers.

'Listen, Nixie, you fairy-child, and I'll tell you something,' he said gently, 'something you will like very much'; and, while she waited and held her breath, he whispered softly in her ear:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises in us, our life's star
  Hath had elsewhere its setting,
  And cometh from afar:

  Not in entire forgetfulness,
  And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God who is our home:

CHAPTER XVII

AND SNATCHES OF thee everywhere
Make little heavens throughout a day.

ALICE METNELL.

‘That’s very pretty, I think,’ she said politely, staring at him, with a little smile, half puzzled. The music of the words had touched her, but she evidently did not grasp why he should have said it. She waited a minute to see if he had really finished, and then went on again with her own vein of thought.

‘Then please tell me, Uncle,’ she asked gravely, with deep earnestness, ‘what is it people lose when they grow up?’

And he answered her with equal gravity, speaking seriously as though the little body at his side were habited by an old, discriminating soul.

‘Simplicity, I think, principally — and vision,’ he said. ‘They get wise with so many little details called facts that they lose the great view.’

The child watched his face, trying to understand. After a pause she came back to her own thinking — the sphere where she felt sure of herself.

‘They never see things properly once they’re grown up,’ she said sadly. ‘They all walk into a fog, *I* believe, that hides all the things *we* know, and stuffs up their eyes and ears. Daddy called it the cotton-wool of age, you know. Oh, Uncle, I do hope,’ she cried with the sudden passion of the child, ‘I *do* hope I shall never, never get into that horrid fog. *You* haven’t, and I won’t, won’t, won’t!’ Her voice rose to a genuine cry. Then she added with a touch of child-wonder that followed quite naturally upon the outburst, ‘How did you ever stop yourself, I wonder!’

‘I lived with the fairies in the backwoods,’ he answered, laughing softly.

She stared at him with complete admiration in her blue eyes.

‘Then I shall grow up ‘xactly like you,’ she said, ‘so that I can always get out of the cage just as you do, even if my body is big.’

‘Every one’s thin somewhere,’ Paul said, remembering her own explanation. ‘And the Crack into Yesterday and To-morrow is always close by when it’s wanted. That’s the real way of escape.’ She clapped her hands and danced, shaking her hair out in a cloud and laughing with happiness. Paul took her in his arms and kissed her. With a gesture of exquisite dignity, such as animals show when they resent human interference, the child tumbled back into her chair by the table, an expression of polite boredom — though the faintest imaginable — in her eyes. Many a time had he seen the kittens behave exactly in the same way.

‘But how do you know all these things, Nixie, and where do all your ideas come from?’ he asked.

‘They just come to me when I’m thinking of nothing in particular. They float into my head of their own accord like ships, little fairy ships, I suppose. And I think,’ she added dreamily after a moment’s pause, ‘some of them are trees and flowers whispering to me.’ She put her face close to his own across the table, staring, into his very brain with her shining eyes. ‘Don’t you think so too, Uncle?’

‘I think I do,’ he answered honestly.

‘Though some of the things I hear,’ she went on, ‘I don’t understand till a long time afterwards.’

‘What kind of things, for instance?’

She hesitated, answering slowly after a pause: ‘Things like streams, and the dripping of rain, and the rustling of wet leaves, perhaps. At the time I only hear the noise they make, but afterwards, when I’m alone, doing nothing, it all falls into words and stories — all sorts of lovely things, but *very* hard to remember, of course.’

She broke off and smiled up into his face with a charm that he could never have put into words.

‘You’ll grow up a poet, Nixie,’ he said.

‘Shall I *really*? But I could never find the rhymes — simply never.’

‘Some never do,’ he answered; ‘and some — the majority, I think — never find the words even!’

‘Oh, how dreadful!’ she exclaimed, her face clouding with a pain she could fully understand. ‘Poets who can’t talk at all. I should think they would burst.’

‘Some of them nearly do,’ he exclaimed, hiding a smile; ‘they get very queer indeed, these poor poets who cannot express themselves. I have known one or two.’

‘Have you? Oh, Uncle Paul!’ Her tone expressed all the solemn sympathy the world could hold.

He nodded his head mysteriously.

The child suddenly sat up very erect. An idea of importance had come into her head.

‘Then I wonder if Pouf and Smoke, and Zezette and Mrs. Tompkyns are like that,’ she cried, her face grave as a hanging judge—’ poets who can’t express themselves, and may burst and get queer! Because they understand all that sort of thing — scuttling leaves and dew falling, and tickling grasses and the dreams of beeties, and things we never hear at all. P’raps that’s why they lie and listen and think for such ages and ages. I never thought of that before.’

‘It’s quite likely,’ he replied with equal solemnity.

Nixie sprang to her feet and flew round the room from chair to chair, hugging in turn each kitten, and asking it with a passionate earnestness that was very disturbing to its immediate comfort in life: ‘Tell me, Pouf, Smoke, Sambo, this instant! Are you all furry little poets who can’t tell all your little furry poems? Are you, *are you*, ARE YOU?’

She kissed each one in turn. ‘Are you going to burst and get queer?’ She shook them all till, mightily offended, they left their thrones and took cover sedately under tables and sofas well out of reach of this intimate and public cross-examination. And there they sat, looking straight before them, as though no one else existed in the entire world.

‘I believe they are, Uncle.’

A silence fell between them. Under the furniture, safe in their dark corners, the cats began to purr again. Paul got up and strolled to the open window that looked out across lawns and shrubberies to the fringe of oaks and elms that marked the distant hayfields. The rain still fell gently, silently — a fine, scented, melancholy rain; the rain of a minor key. Tinged with a hundred delicate odours from fields and trees — ghostly perfumes far more subtle than the perfumes of flowers — the air seemed to brush the surface of his soul, dropping its fragrance down into his heart like the close presence of remembered friends.

The evening mode invaded him softly, soothingly; and out of it, in some way he scarcely understood, crept something that brought a vague disquiet in its train. A little timid thought stole to the threshold of his heart and knocked gently upon the door of its very inmost chamber. And the sound of the knocking, faint and muffled though it was, woke echoes in this secret chamber that proclaimed in a tone of reproach, if not almost of warning, that it was still empty and unfurnished. A deep, infinite yearning, and a yearning that was *new*, stirred within him, then suddenly rose to the surface of his mind like a voice calling to him from far away out of mist and darkness.

‘If only I had children of my own...!’ it called; and the echo whispered afterwards ‘of my very own, made out of my very thoughts....!’

He turned to Nixie who had followed, and now leaned beside him on the window-sill.

‘So the language of wind and trees and water you translate afterwards into stories, do you?’ he asked, taking up the conversation where they had left it. It was hardly a question; he was musing aloud as he gazed out into the mists that gathered with the dusk. ‘It’s all silent enough now, at any rate there’s not a breath of air moving. The trees are dreaming — dreaming perhaps of the Dance of the Winds, or of the love-making of the snow when their leaves are gone and the flakes settle softly on the bare twigs; or perhaps dreaming of the humming of the sap that brings their new clothes with such ‘a rush of glory and wonder in the spring—’

Again the child looked up into his face with shining eyes. The magic of her little treasured beliefs had touched the depths of him, and she felt that they were in the same world together, without pretence and without the barriers of age. She was radiantly happy, and rather wonderful into the bargain, a fairy if ever there was one.

‘They’re just thinking,’ she said softly.

‘So trees think too?’

She nodded her head, leaning her chin on her hands as she gazed with him into the misty air.

‘I wonder what their thoughts are like,’ he said musingly, so that she could take it for a question or not as she chose.

‘Like ours — in a way,’ she answered, as though speaking of something she knew beyond all question, ‘only not so small, not so sharp. Our thoughts prick, I think, but theirs stroke, all running quite smoothly into each other. Very big and wonderful-indeed thoughts — big as wind, I mean, and wonderful as sky or distance. And the streams — the streams have long, winding thoughts that run down their whole length under water—’

‘And the trees, you were saying,’ he said, seeing that her thought was wandering.

‘Yes, the trees,’ she repeated, ‘oh! yes, the trees are different a little, I think. A wood, you see, may have one big huge thought all at once—’

‘All at once!’

‘I mean all at the same time, every tree thinking the same thought for miles. Because, if you lie in a wood, and don’t think yourself, but just wait and wait and wait, you gradgilly get its great thought and know what it’s thinking about exactly. You feel it all over instead of — of—’

‘Instead of getting a single little sharp picture in your mind,’ Paul helped her, grasping the wonder of her mystical idea.

‘I think that’s what I mean,’ she went on. ‘And j it’s exactly the same with everything else — the sea, and the fields, and the sky — oh! and everything in I the whole world.’ She made a sweeping gesture with her arm to indicate the universe.

‘Oh, Nixie child!’ he cried, with a sudden enthusiasm pouring over him from the strange region where she had unknowingly led him, ‘if only I could take you out to the big woods I know across the sea, where the trees stretch for hundreds of miles, and the moss is everywhere a foot thick, and the whole forest is such a conspiracy of wonder and beauty that it catches your heart away and makes you breathless with delight! Oh, my child, if only you could hear the thoughts and stories of woods like that — woods untouched since the beginning of the world — !’

‘Take me! Take me! Uncle Paul, oh! take me!’ she cried as though it were possible to start next day. ‘These woods are such *little* woods, and I know all their stories.’ She danced round him with a wild and eager delight.

‘Such stories, yes, such stories,’ Paul continued, his face shining almost as much as hers as he thought of his mighty and beloved forests.

‘Please tell me, take me, tell me!’ she cried. ‘All, all, all! Quick!’

‘I can’t. I never understood them properly; only the old Indians know them now,’ he said sadly, leaning out of the window again with her. ‘They are tales that few people in this part of the world could understand; in a language old as the wind, too, and nearly forgotten. You see, the trees are different there. They stand in thousands — pine, hemlock, spruce, and cedar — mighty, very tall, very straight, very dark, pouring day and night their great balsam perfumes into the air so that their stories and their thoughts are sweet as incense and very mysterious.’ Nixie took the lapels of his coat in her hands and stared up into his face as though her eyes would pop out. She looked *through* his eyes. She saw these very woods he was speaking of standing in dim shadows behind him.

‘No one ever comes to disturb their lives, and few of them have ever heard the ringing of the axe. Only giant moose and caribou steal silently beneath their shade, and Indians, dark and soft-footed as things of their own world, make camp-fires among their roots. They know nothing of men and cities and trains, and the wind that sings through their branches is a wind that has never tasted chimney-pots, and hot crowds, and pretty, fancy gardens. It is a wind that flies five hundred miles without taking breath, with nothing to stop its flight but feathery tree-tops, brushing the heavens, and clean mountain ridges thrusting great shoulders to the stars. Their thoughts and stories are difficult to understand, but *you* might understand them, I think, for the life of the elements is strong in your veins, you fairy daughter of wind and water. And some day, when you are stronger in body — not older though, mind, not older — I shall take you out there so that you may be able to learn their wonder and interpret it to all the world.'

The words tore through him in such curious, impersonal fashion, that he hardly realised he was giving utterance to a longing that had once been his own, and that he was now seeking to realise vicariously in the person of this little poet-girl beside him. He stroked her hair as she nestled up to him, breathing hard, her eyes glistening like stars, speechless with the torrent of wonder with which her big uncle had enveloped her.

'Some day,' she murmured presently, 'some day, remember. You promise?'

'I promise.'

'And — and will you write that all out for me, please?'

'All what?'

'About the too-big woods and the too-old language and the winds that fly without stopping, and the stories—'

'Oh, oh!' he laughed; 'that's another matter!'

'Yes, oh you must, Uncle! Make a story of it — an adventure. Write it out as a verywonerfulindeedaventure, and put you and me in it!' She forgot the touch of sadness and clapped her hands with delight. 'And then read it out at a Meeting, don't you see?'

And in the end Paul promised that too, making I a great fuss about it, but in his heart secretly pleased! and happy.

'I'll try,' he said, with portentous gravity.

The child stared up at him with the sure knowledge in her eyes that between them they held the key to all that was really worth knowing.

He stooped to kiss her hair, but before he could do so, with a laugh and a dancing step he scarcely heard, she was gone from his side and half-way down the passage, so that he kissed the empty air.

‘Bless her mighty little heart!’ he exclaimed, straightening himself up again. ‘Was there ever such a teacher in the world before?’

He became aware that the world held powers, gentle yet immense, that were urging him in directions hitherto undreamed of. With such a fairy guide, he might find — he was already finding — not merely safety-valves of expression, but an outlet into the bargain for his creative imagination.

‘And a little child shall lead them,’ he murmured in his beard, as he went slowly down the passage to his room to dress for dinner. Again he felt like singing.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TREE WHICH moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing standing in the way. — W. B.

THUS, gradually, the grey house under the hills changed into a palace; the garden stretched to include the stars; and Paul, the retired Wood Cruiser, walked in a world all new and brilliant. For to find the means of self-expression is to build the foundations of spiritual health, and an ideal companionship, unvexed by limitations of sense, holds potentialities that can change earth into heaven. His accumulated stores of imagination found wings, and he wrote a series of Aventures that delighted his audience while they healed his own soul.

‘I wish they’d go on for ever and ever,’ observed Toby solemnly to her brother. ‘Perhaps they do really, only—’

‘Of course they do,’ Jonah said decisively, ‘but Uncle Paul only tells bits of them to us — bits that *you* can understand.’

Toby was too much in earnest to notice the masculine scorn.

‘He does know a lot, doesn’t he?’ she said. ‘Do you think he sees up into heaven? They’re not a bit like made-up aventures.’ She paused, deeply puzzled; very grave indeed.

‘He’s a man, of course,’ replied Jonah. ‘Men know big things like that.’

‘The Aventures are true,’ Nixie put in gently. ‘That’s why they’re so big, and go on for ever and ever.

‘It’s jolly when he puts us in them too, isn’t it?’ said Jonah, forgetting the masculine pose in his interest. ‘He puts me in most,’ the boy added proudly.

‘But *I* do the funniest things,’ declared Toby, slightly aggrieved. ‘It was me that rode on the moose over the tree-tops to the North Pole, and understood all it said—’

‘That’s nothing,’ cried her brother, making a huge blot across his copy-book. ‘He had to get me to turn on the roarer boryalis.’

‘Nixie’s always leader, anyhow,’ replied the child, losing herself for a moment in the delight of that tremendous blot. She often borrowed Nixie in this way to obliterate Jonah when her own strength was insufficient.

‘Of course she is,’ was the manly verdict. ‘She knows all those things almost as well as Uncle Paul. Don’t you, Nixie?’

But Nixie was too busy cleaning up his blot with bits of torn blotting-paper to reply, and the arrival of Mlle. Fleury put an end to the discussion for the moment.

And Paul himself, as the big child leading the littler children, or following their guidance when such guidance was clear, accepted his new duties with a happy heart. His friendship with them all grew delightfully, but especially, of course, his friendship with Nixie. This elemental child slipped into his life everywhere, into his play, as into his work; she assumed the right to look after him; with charming gravity she positively mothered him; and Paul, whose life hitherto had known little enough of such sympathy and care, simply loved it.

If her native poesy won his imagination, her practical interest in his welfare and comfort equally won his heart. The way she ferreted about in his room and study, so serious, so thoughtful, attending to so many little details that no one else ever thought of, — all this came into his life with a seductive charm as of something entirely new and strange to him. It was Nixie who always saw to it that his ink-pot was full and his quill pens trimmed; that flowers had no time to fade upon his table; and that matches for his pipes never failed in the glass match-stands. He used up matches, it seemed, almost by the handful.

‘You’re far worse than Daddy used to be,’ she reproved him. ‘I believe you eat them.’ And when he assured her that he did nothing of the sort, she only shook her head darkly, and said she couldn’t understand then what he did with them all.

A hundred services of love and kindness she did for him that no one else would have thought of. On his mantelpiece she put mysterious little bottles of medicine.

‘For nettle-stings and scratches,’ she explained. ‘Your poor hands are always covered with them both when you’ve been out with us.’ And it was she, too, who bound up his fingers when wounds were more serious, and saw to it that he had a clean rag each day till the sore was healed. She put the new red riband on his straw hat after it fell (himself with it) into the Gull Pond; and one service especially that earned her his eternal respect was to fasten his evening black tie for dinner. This she did every night for him. Such tasks were for magical fingers only. He had never yet compassed it himself. He would run to the nursery to say good-night, and Nixie, looking almost unreal and changeling in her white nightgown, with her yellow hair top-knotted quaintly for sleep, would deftly trim and arrange the strip of satin that he never could manage properly himself. It was a regular little ritual, Toby watching eagerly from the bed across the room.

‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Uncle Paul,’ she said another time, holding up a mysterious garment, ‘I never saw such holes — never!’

And then she darned the said socks with results that were picturesque if not always entirely satisfactory. And once she sewed the toes so tightly across with her darning that he could not get his foot into them. She allowed no one else to touch them, however. Little the child guessed that while she patched his clothes, she wove his life afresh at the same time.

And with all the children he took Dick’s place more and more. His existence widened, filled up; he felt in touch with real things as of old in the woods; the children replaced the trees.

But it was Nixie in particular who crept close to his unsatisfied heart and tied him to her inner life with the gossamer threads of her sand-coloured hair. This elfin little being, with her imagination and tenderness, brought to him something he had never known before, never dreamed of even; a perfect companionship; a companionship utterly unclouded.

And the other children understood it; there was no jealousy; it was not felt by them as favouritism. Natural and right it seemed, and was.

‘You must ask Nixie,’ Jonah would say in reply to any question concerning his uncle’s welfare or habits. ‘She’s his little mother, you know.’

For, truth to tell, they were born, these two, in the same corner of the world of fantasy, bred under the same stars, and fathered by the same elemental forces. But for the trick of the years and the accident of blood, they seemed made for one another ideally, eternally.

Things he could speak of to no one else found in her a natural and easy listener. To grown-ups he had never been able to talk about his mystic longings; the very way they listened made such things instantly seem foolish. But Nixie understood in her child-way, not because she was sympathetic, but because she was *in and of* them. He was merely talking the language of her own world. He no longer felt ashamed to 'think aloud.' Most people were in pursuit of such stupid, clumsy things — fame, money, and other complicated and ugly things — but this child seemed to understand that he cared about Realities only; for, in her own simple way, this was what she cared about too.

To talk with her cleared his own mind, too, in a way it had never been cleared before. He came to understand himself better, and in so doing swept away a great deal of accumulated rubbish; for he found that when his thought was too confused to make clear to her, it was usually false, wrong — not real.

'I can't make that out,' she would say, with a troubled face. 'I suppose, I'm not old enough yet.' And afterwards Paul would realise that it was himself who was at fault, not the child. Her instinct was unerring; whereas he, with those years of solitude behind him, sometimes lost himself in a region where imagination, self-devouring, ran the risk of becoming untrue, possibly morbid. Her wholesome little judgments brought sanity and laughter.

For, like other mystical temperaments, what he sought, presumably, was escape from himself, yet not — and herein he differed healthily from most of his kidney — so much from his Real Inner Self, as from its outer pettiness and limitations. True, he sought union with something larger and more perfect, and in so far was a mystic; but this larger 'something,' he dimly understood, was the star of his own soul not yet emancipated, and in so far he remained a man of action. His was the true, wholesome mysticism; hysteria was not — as with most — its chief ingredient. Moreover, this other, eternal part of him touched Eternity. To be identified with it meant to be identified with God, but never for one instant to lose his own individuality.

And to express himself through the creative imagination, to lose his own smallness by interpreting beauty, he had always felt must be a halfway house to the end in view. His inability, therefore, to find such means of expression had always meant something incalculably grave, something that hindered growth. But now this child Nixie, in some extraordinary yet utterly simple fashion, had come to show him the way. It was wonderful past finding out. He hardly knew himself how it had come about. Yet, there she was, ever by his side, pointing to ways that led him out into expression.

No woman could have done it. His two longings, he came to realise, were actually one: the desire to express his yearnings grew out of the desire to find God.

And so it was that the thought of her growing up was horrid to him. He could not bear to think of her as a ‘young woman’ moving in a modern world where she would lose all touch with the elemental forces of vision and simplicity whence she drew half her grace and wonder. Already for him, in some mystical fashion of spiritual alchemy, she had become the eternal feminine, exquisitely focussed in the little child. With the advance of years this must inevitably pass from her, as she increased the distance from her source of inspiration.

‘Nixie, you must promise never to grow up,’ he would say, laughing.

‘Because Aventures stop then, don’t they?’ she asked.

‘Partly that,’ he answered.

‘And I should get tired, like mother; or stupid, like the head gardener,’ she added. ‘I know. But I don’t think I ever shall, somehow. I think I am meant to be always like this.’

The serious way she said this last phrase escaped him at the time. He remembered it afterwards, however.

It was so delightful, too, to read out his stories and aventures to her; they laughed over them, and her criticisms often improved them vastly. He even read her his first poem without shyness, and they discussed each verse and talked about ‘stealing Heaven’s fire,’ and the poor ‘sparks’ that never grew into flames. The ‘kiss of fire’ she thought must be wonderful. She also asked what a ‘lyre’ was. They made up other verses together too. But though they laughed and she asked odd questions, on the whole she grasped the sadness of the poem perfectly.

‘Let’s go and cry a bit somewhere,’ she remarked quietly, her eyes very wistful. ‘It helps it out awfully, you know.’

He reminded her, however, of a sage remark of Toby’s, to the effect that when men grew beards they lost the power to cry. Quick as a flash, then, she turned with one of her exquisite little bits of unconscious poetry.

‘Let’s go to the Gwyle then, and make the stream cry for us instead,’ she said gravely, with a profound sympathy, ‘because everybody’s tears must get into the water some time — and so to the sea, mustn’t they?’ And on their way, what with jumping ditches and flower-beds, they forgot all about the crying. On the edge of the woods, however, she raced up again to his side, her blue eyes full of a new wonder.

‘I know that wind of inspiration that your poetry said never blew for you,’ she cried. ‘I know where it blows. Quick! I’ll show you!’ The pace made him pant a bit; he almost regretted he had mentioned it. ‘I know where it blows, we’ll catch it, and you shall see. Then you can always, always get it when you want it.’

And a little farther on, after wading through deep bracken, they stopped, and Nixie took his hand. ‘Come on tiptoe now,’ she whispered mysteriously. ‘Don’t crack the twigs with your feet.’ And, smiling at this counsel of perfection, he obeyed to the best of his ability, while she pretended not to notice the series of explosions that followed his tread.

It was a curve in the skirts of the wood where they found themselves; a small inlet where the tide of daylight flowed against the dark cliffs of the firs, and then fell back. The thick trees held it at bay so that only the spray of light penetrated beyond, as from advancing waves. ‘Thus far and no farther,’ very plainly said the pine trees, and the sunshine lay there collected in the little hollow with the delicious heat of all the summer. It was a corner hitherto undiscovered by Paul; he saw it with the pleasure of a discovery.

And there, set brightly against the sombre background, stood the slender figure of a silver birch tree, all sweet and shining, its branches sifting the sunshine and the wind; while behind it, standing forth somewhat from the main body of the wood, a pine, shaggy and formidable, grew close as though to guard it. The picture, with its striking contrast, needed no imagination to make it more appealing. It was patent to any eye.

‘That’s *my* tree,’ said Nixie softly, with both arms linked about his elbow and her cheek laid against the sleeve of his coat. ‘My fav’rite tree. And that’s where your winds of inspiration blow that you said you couldn’t catch. So now you can always come and hear them, you see.’

Paul entered instantly into the spirit of her dream. The way her child’s imagination seized upon inanimate objects and incorporated them into the substance of her own life delighted him, for it was also his own way, and he understood it.

‘Then that old pine,’ he answered, pointing to the other, ‘is my tree. See! It’s come out of the wood to protect the little birch.’

The child ran from his side and stood close to them. ‘Yes, and don’t you see,’ she cried, her eyes popping with excitement, ‘this is me, and that’s you!’ She patted the two trunks, first the birch and then the pine. ‘It’s us! I never thought of that before, never! It’s you looking after me and taking care of me, and me dancing and laughing round you all the time!’ She ran back to his side and hopped up to plant a kiss in his beard. He quite forgot to correct her a’venturous grammar.

‘Of course,’ he cried, ‘so it is. Look! The branches touch too. Your little leaves run up among my old needles!’

Nixie clapped her hands and ran to and fro, laughing and talking, on errands of further discovery, while Paul sat down to watch the scene and think his own thoughts. It was just the picture to appeal strongly to him. At any time the beauty of the: tree would have seized him, but with no one else could he have enjoyed it in the same way, or spoken of his enjoyment. While Nixie flitted here and there in the sunshine, the little birch behind her bent down and then released itself with a graceful rush of branches as the pressure of the wind passed. Against the blue sky she tossed her leafy hands; then, with a passing shiver, stood still.

‘I wonder,’ ran his thought, ‘why poets need invent Dryads when such an incomparable revelation lies plain in one of the commonest of trees like this?’ And, at the same moment, he saw Nixie dart past between the fir trees and the birch, as though the very Dryad he was slighting had slipped out to chide him. Her hair spread in the sunshine like leaves. In the world of trees here, surely, was the very essence of what is feminine caught and imprisoned. Whatever of grace and wonder emanate from the face and figure of a young girl to enchant and bewitch here found expression in the silver stem and branches, in the running limbs so slender, in the twigs that bent with their cataracts of flying hair. Seen against the dark pinewood, this little birch tree laughed and danced; over that silver skin ran, positively, smiles; from the facets of those dainty leaves twinkled mischief and the joys of innocence. Here, in a word, was Nixie herself in the terms of treedom; and, as he watched, the wind swept out the branches towards him in a cluster of rustling leaves, — and at the same instant Nixie shot laughing to his side.

For a second he hardly knew whether it was the child or the silver birch that nestled down beside him and began to murmur in his ear.

‘This is it, you see,’ she was saying; ‘and there’s your wind of inspiration blowing now.’

‘We shall have to alter the first verse then,’ he said gravely:

‘The winds of inspiration blow,
Yet *never* pass me by.’

‘Of course, of course,’ she whispered, listening half to her uncle, half to the rustle in the branches. ‘And now,’ she added presently, ‘you can always come and write your poetry here, and it will be verywonderfulindeed poetry, you see. And if you leave a bit of paper on the tree you’ll find it in the morning covered with all sorts of things in very fine writing — oh, but *very very* fine writing, so small that no one can see it except you and me. One of the Little Winds we saw, you know, will twine round it and leave marks. And the big pine is you and the birch is me, isn’t it?’ she ended with sudden conviction.

The game, of course, was after her own heart. Up she sprang then suddenly again, picked a spray of leaves from a hanging branch, and brought it back to him.

‘And here’s a bit of me for a present, so that you can’t ever forget,’ she said with a gravity that held no smile. And she fastened it with much tugging and arranging in his buttonhole. ‘A bit of my tree, and so of me.’

‘Then I might leave a bit of paper in the water too,’ he remarked slyly on their way home, ‘so as to get the thoughts of the stream.’

‘Easily,’ she said, ‘only it must be wrapped up in something. I’ll get Jonah’s sponge-bag and lend it you. Only you must promise faithfully to return it in case we go to the seaside in the summer.’

‘And perhaps some of those tears we were talking about will stick on it and leave their marks before they go on to the sea,’ he suggested.

‘Oh, but they’d be too sad,’ she answered quickly. ‘They’re much better lost in the sea, aren’t they?’

* * * *

Thus the poetry in his soul that he could not utter, he lived.

Without any conscious effort of the imagination, the instant Nixie, or the thought of her, stood beside him — lo, he was in Fairyland. It was so real that it was positively bewildering.

And the rest of that quiet household, without knowing it, contributed to its reality. For, to begin with, the place was delightfully ‘out of the world’; and, after that, the gradations between the two regions seemed so easy and natural: the shadowy personality of his sister; the dainty little French governess flitting everywhere with her plaintive voice in the wake of the elusive children; then the children themselves — Jonah, the mischievous; Toby with her shining face of onion-skin; and, last of all, the host of tumbling animals, the mysterious cats, the kittens, all fluff and wonder; and the whole of it set amid the scenery of flowers, hills, and sea. It was impossible to tell exactly where the actual threshold lay, this shifting, fluid threshold dividing the two worlds; but there can be no question that Paul passed it day by day without the least difficulty, and that it was Nixie who knew all the quickest short-cuts.

And to all who — since childhood — have lived in Fairyland and tasted of its sweet innocence and loveliness, comes sooner or later the desire to transfer something of these qualities to the outer world. Paul felt this more and more as the days passed. The wish to beautify the lives of others grew in him with a sudden completeness that proved it to have been there latent all the time. Through the voices of Nixie, Jonah, and Toby, as it were, he heard the voices — those myriad, faint, unhappy voices — of the world's neglected children a-calling to him: 'Tell us the Aventures too!'— 'Take us with you through that Crack!'— 'Show us the Wind, and let us climb with you the Scaffolding of Night.'

And Paul, listening in his deep heart, began to understand that Nixie's education of himself was but a beginning: all unconsciously that elfin child was surely becoming also his inspiration. This first lesson in self-expression she had taught him was like the trickle that would lead to the bursting of the dam. The waters of his enthusiasms would presently pour out with the rush of genuine power behind them. What he had to say, do, and live — all forms of self-expression — were to find a larger field of usefulness than the mere gratification of his personal sense of beauty.

As yet, however, the thought only played dimly to and fro at the back of his mind, seeking a way of escape. The greater outlet could not come all at once. The germ of the desire lay there in secret development, but the thing he should do had not yet appeared.

So, for the time being, he continued to live in Fairyland and write Aventures.

It was really incalculable the effect of enchantment this little yellow-haired girl cast upon him — hard to believe, hard to realise. So true, so exquisite was it, however, that he almost came to forget her age, and that she was actually but a child. To him she seemed more and more an intimate companion of the soul who had existed always, and that both he and she were ageless. It was their souls that played, talked, caressed, not merely their minds or bodies. In her flower - like little figure dwelt assuredly an old and ripened soul; one, too, it seemed to him sometimes, that hardly belonged to this world at all.

There was that about their relationship which made it eternal — it always had been somewhere, it always would be — somewhere. No confinings of flesh, no limitations of mind and sense, no conditions of mere time and space, could lay their burden upon it for long. It belonged most sweetly to the real things which are conditionless.

Moreover, one of the chief effects of the world of Faery, experts say, is that Time is done away with; emotions are inexhaustible and last for ever, continually renewing themselves; the Fairies dance for years instead of only for a night; their minds and bodies grow not old; their desires, and the objects of their desires, pass not away.

‘So, unquestionably,’ said Paul to himself from time to time as he reflected upon the situation, ‘I am bewitched. I must see what there is that I can do in the matter to protect myself from further depredations!’

Yet all he did immediately, so far as can be ascertained among the sources of this veracious history, was to collect the ‘Aventures’ already ‘written and journey with them one fine day to London, where he had an interview of some length with a publisher — Dick’s publisher. The result, at any rate, was — the records prove it — that some time afterwards he received a letter in which it was plainly stated that ‘the success of such a book is hard to predict, but it has qualities, both literary and imaginative, which entitle it to a hearing’; and thus that in due course the said ‘Aventures of a Prisoner in Fairyland’ appeared upon the bookstalls. For the publishers, being the foremost in the land, took the high view that seemed almost independent of mercenary calculations; and it is interesting to note that the years justified their judgment, and that the ‘Aventures’ may now be found upon the table of every house in England where there dwells a true child, be that child seven or seventy.

And any profits that Paul collected from the sale went, not into his own pocket, but were put aside, as the sequel shall show, for a secret purpose that lay hidden at this particular stage of the story among the very roots of his heart and being.

The summer, meanwhile, passed quickly away, and August melted into September, finding him still undecided about his return to America.

For the rest, there was no hurry. There was another six months in which to make up his mind. Meanwhile, also, he made frequent use of the ‘Crack,’ and the changes in his soul went rapidly forward.

CHAPTER XIX

THERE WAS A Being whom my spirit oft
Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,
In the clear golden prime of my youth's dawn,
Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn,
Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves
Of divine sleep, and on the air-like waves
Of wonder-level dream, whose tremulous floor
Paved her light steps; — on an imagined shore
Under the grey beak of some promontory
She met me, robed in such exceeding glory,
That I beheld her not
Epipsychidion

ONE afternoon in late September he made his way alone across the hills. Clouds blew thinly over a sky of watery blue, driven by an idle wind the roses had left behind. It seemed a day strayed from out the summer that now found itself, thrilled and a little confused, in the path of autumn — and summer had sent forth this soft wind to bring it back to the fold.

The 'Crack' was always near at hand on such a day, and Paul slipped in without the least difficulty. He found himself in a valley of the Blue Mountains hitherto unknown, and, so wandering, came presently to a bend of the river where the sand stretched smooth and inviting.

For a moment he stopped to watch the slanting waves and listen, when to his sudden amazement he saw upon the shore, half concealed by the reeds near the bank — a human figure. A second glance showed him that it was the figure of a young girl, lying there in the sun, her bare feet just beyond reach of the waves, and her yellow hair strewn about the face so as to screen it almost entirely from view. A white dress covered her body; she was slim, he saw, as a child. She was asleep.

Paul stood and stared.

‘Shall I wake her?’ was his first thought. But his second thought was truer: ‘Can I help waking her?’ And then a third came to him, subtle and inexplicable, yet scarcely shaping itself in actual language: ‘Is she after all *a stranger*?’

Flying memories, half-formed, half-caught, ran curiously through his brain. What was it in the turn of the slender neck, in the lines of the little mouth, just visible where he stood, that seemed familiar? Did he not detect upon that graceful figure lying motionless in repose some indefinable signature that recalled his outer life? Or was it merely that fancy played tricks, and that he reconstructed a composite picture from the galleries of memory, with the myriad expression and fugitive magic of dream or picture — ideal figures he had conjured with in the past and set alive in some inner frame of his deepest thoughts? He was conscious of a delicious bewilderment. A singular emotion stirred in his heart. Yet the face and figure he sought utterly evaded him.

Then, the first sharp instinct to turn aside passed. He accepted the adventure. Stooping down for a stone, he flung it with a noisy splash into the river. The girl opened her eyes, threw her hair back in a cloud, and sat up.

At once a wave of invincible shyness descended upon Paul, rendering words or action impossible; he felt ridiculously embarrassed, and sought hurriedly in his mind for ways of escape. But, before any feasible plan for undoing what was already done suggested itself, he became aware of a very singular thing — the face of the girl was covered! He could not see it clearly. Something, veil-like and misty, hung before it so that his eyes could not focus properly upon the features. The recognition he had half anticipated, therefore, did not come.

And this helped to restore his composure. It was, in any case, futile to pretend he did not see her. For one thing, he realised that she was staring at him just as hard as he was staring at her. The very next instant she rose and came across the hot sand towards him, her hair flying loose, and both hands outstretched by way of greeting. Again, the half recognition that refused to complete itself swept confusingly over him.

But this spontaneous and unexpected action had an immediate effect upon him of another kind. His embarrassment vanished. What she did seemed altogether right and natural, and the beauty of the girl drove all minor emotions from his mind. His whole being rose in a wave of unaffected delight, and almost before he was aware of it, he had stepped forward and caught both her hands in his own.

This strange golden happiness at first troubled his speech.

‘But surely I know you!’ he cried. ‘If only I could see your face — !’

‘You ought to know me,’ she replied at once with a laugh as of old acquaintance, ‘for you have called for me often enough, I’m sure!’ Her voice was soft; curiously familiar accents rang in it; yet, as with the face, he knew not whose it was.

She looked up at him, and though he could not make out the features, he discerned the expression they wore — an expression of peace and confidence. The girl trusted him delightfully.

‘Then what hides you from me?’ he insisted.

She answered him so low that he hardly caught the words. Certainly, at the moment he did not understand them, for happiness still confused him. ‘The body,’ she murmured; ‘the veil of the body.’

She returned the firm and equal pressure of his hands, and allowed him to draw her close. Their faces approached, and he looked searchingly down upon her, trying to pierce the veil in vain. The hot sunshine fell in a blaze upon their uncovered heads. The next moment the girl raised her lips to his, and almost before he knew it they had kissed.

Yet that kiss seemed the most natural thing in the world; at a stroke it killed the last vestige of shyness. Youth ran in his veins like fire.

‘Now, tell me exactly who you are, please,’ he cried, standing back a little for an inspection, but still holding her hands. They swung out at arm’s length like children.

‘I think first you should tell me who you are,’ she laughed. ‘I want to be a mystery a little longer. It’s so much more interesting!’

Leaning backwards with her hair tumbling down her neck, she looked at him out of eyes that he half imagined, half knew. Laughter and gentleness played over her like sunlight. Standing there, framed against the reeds of the river bank, with the blue waters behind and the wind and sky about her head, Paul thought that never till this moment had he understood the whole magic of a woman’s beauty. Yet at the same time he somehow divined that she was as much child as woman, and that something of eternal youthfulness mingled exquisitely with her suggestion of maturity.

‘Of course,’ he laughed in return, like a boy in mid-mischief, ‘that’s your privilege, isn’t it? My name, then, is—’

But there he stuck fast. It seemed so foolish to give the name he owned in that other tinsel world; it was merely a disguise like a frock-coat or evening dress, or the absurd uniform he had once assumed to deceive the children with. He almost felt ashamed of the name he was known by in that world!

‘Well?’ she asked slyly, ‘and have you forgotten it quite?’

‘I’m the *Man who saw the Wind*, for one thing,’ he said at length; ‘and, after that, well — I suppose I’m the man who’s been looking for you without knowing it all his life! Now do you know me?’ he concluded triumphantly.

‘You foolish creature! Of course *I* know you!’ She came closer; the sunshine and the odour of the flowers seemed to come with her. ‘It’s *you* who couldn’t find *me*! I’ve been waiting for you to claim me ever since — either of us can remember.’

A queer, faint rush of memory rose upon him from the depths — and was gone. For an instant it seemed that her face half cleared.

‘Then, in the name of beauty,’ he cried, starting forward, ‘why can’t I see your face and eyes? Why do I only see you partly — ?’

She hesitated an instant and drew back; she lowered her eyes — he felt that — and the voice dropped very low again as she answered:

‘Because, as yet, you only know me — partly.’

‘As through a glass, darkly, you mean?’ he said, half grave, half laughing.

The girl took both his hands and pressed them silently for a moment.

‘When you know me as I know you,’ she whispered softly, ‘then — we shall know one another — see one another — face to face. But even now, in these few minutes, you have come to know me better than you ever did before. And that is something, isn’t it?’

She moved quite close, passing her hands down his bronzed cheeks and shaking his head playfully as one might do to a loved child.

‘You take my breath away!’ gasped the delighted man, too bewildered in his new happiness to let the strangeness of her words perplex him long. ‘But, tell me again,’ he added, slowly releasing himself, ‘how it is that you know me so well? Tell me again and again!’

She replied demurely, standing before him like a teacher before a backward pupil. ‘Because I have always watched, studied, and loved you — from within yourself. It was not my fault that you failed to know me when I spoke. Perhaps, even now, you would not have found me unless — in certain ways — through the children — you had begun to come into your own — —’

Paul interrupted her, taking her in his arms, while she made no effort to escape, but only laughed. ‘And I’ll take good care I never lose you again after this!’ he cried.

‘You know, I wasn’t really asleep just now on the sand,’ she told him a little later. ‘I heard you coming all the time; only I wanted to see if you would pass me by as you always did before.’

‘It’s very odd and very wonderful,’ he said, ‘but I never noticed you till to-day.’

‘And very natural,’ she added under her breath, so low that he did not hear.

And Paul, moving beside her, murmured in his beard, ‘If she’s not my Ideal, set mysteriously somehow into the framework of one I already love — I swear I don’t know who she is!’

They made their way along the sandy shores of the river, the waves breaking at their feet, the wind singing among the reeds; never had the sunlight seemed so brilliant, the day so wonderful and kind. All nature helped them; playing their great game as if it was the only game worth playing in the whole world — the game loved from one eternity to another.

‘So the children have told you about me, have they?’ he whispered into the ear that came just level with his lips.

‘And all you love, as well. Your dreams and thoughts more than anything else — especially your thoughts. You must be very careful with those; they mould me; they make me what I am. If you didn’t think nicely of me — verynicelyindeed—’

‘But I shall always think nicely, beautifully, of you,’ he broke in eagerly, not noticing the familiar touch of language.

‘You have so far, at any rate,’ she replied, ‘for the yearning and desire of your imagination have created me afresh.’ And he discerned the smile upon her veiled face as one may see the sun only through troubled glass, yet know its warmth and brilliance.

‘Then it is because you are part and parcel of my inner self that you seem so real and intimate and — true?’ he asked passionately.

‘Of course. I am in your very blood; I beat in your heart; I understand your every passion and emotion, because I am present at their birth. The most fleeting of your dreams finds its reflection in me; your spirit’s faintest aspiration runs through me like a trumpet call; and, now that you have found me, we need never, we *can* never, separate!’

The passion of her words broke over his heart like a wave. He felt himself trembling.

‘But it is all so swift and wonderful that it makes me almost afraid — afraid it cannot last,’ he objected, knowing all the time that his words were but a common device to make his pleasure the more real.

‘If only, oh, if only I could carry you away with me into that outer world — !’

She laughed deliciously in his face. ‘It is from that very “outer world” that you have carried me *in here*,’ she told him softly, ‘for I am always with you.’ And with the words came that fugitive trick of voice and gesture that made him certain he knew her — then was gone again. ‘In the house with your sister and the children,' she continued; 'when you write your Aventures and your verses; in your daily round of duties, small and great; and when you lie down at night — ah! especially then — I curl up beside you in your heart, and fly with you through all your funny dreamland, and wake your dear eyes with a kiss so soft you never know it. In your early morning rambles, as in your reveries of the dusk, I never leave you — because I cannot. All day long I am beside you, though you little realise my presence. I share half your pleasures and all your pains. And in return you hand over to me half that soul whose unuttered prayers have thus created me afresh for your salvation.'

'But it must be my own voice speaking,' he cried inwardly, satisfied and happy beyond belief. 'It is the words of my own thoughts that I hear!'

'Because I am your own thoughts speaking,' she replied instantly, as though he had uttered aloud. 'I lie, you see, behind your inmost thoughts!'

They walked through sunny meadows, picking their way among islands of wild flowers. There was no sound but the murmur of wind and river, and the singing of birds. Fleecy clouds, here and there in the blue, hung cool and white, watching them. The whole world, Paul felt, listened without shyness.

'And so it is that you love me without shyness,' she went on, marvellously linking in with his thought; 'I am intimate with you as your own soul, and our relations are pure with the purity that was before man. There can be no secrets between us, or possibility of secrets, for your most hidden dreams are also mine. So mingled with your ultimate being am I, in fact, that sometimes you dare not recognise me as separate, and all that appears on the surface of your dear mind must first filter through myself. Why!' she cried, with a sudden rush of mischievous laughter, 'I even know what you are made of; why your queer heart has never been able to satisfy itself — to "grow-up," as you call it; and all about this endless desire you have to find God, which is really nothing but the search to find your true inner Self.'

'Tell me! tell me!' he cried.

'Besides the sun,' she went on with a strange swiftness of words, 'there's the wind and the rain in you; yes, and moon and stars as well. That's why the fire and restlessness of the imagination for ever tear you. No mere form of expression can ever satisfy *that*, but only increase it; for it means your desire to know reality, to know beauty, to know your own soul; to know — God! Your blood has kinship with those tides that flow through all space, even to the gates of the stars; dawns and sunsets, moonrise and meteors haunt your thoughts with their magic lights; wild flowers of the fields and hillside nod beside you while you sleep; and the winds, laughing and sighing, lift your dreams upon vast wings and flash with them beyond the edges of the universe!'

'Stop,' he cried with passion, 'you are telling all my secrets.'

'I am telling them only to myself,' she laughed, 'and therefore to you. For I know all the fevers of your soul. The wilderness calls you and the great woods. You are haunted by the faces of the world's forgotten places. Your imagination plays with the lightning about the mountain tops, and seeks primeval forests and the shores of desolate seas....'

Paul listened spellbound while she put some of the most intangible of his fancies into the language of poetry. Yet she spoke with the quiet simplicity of true things. The man felt his soul shake with delight to hear her. Again and again, while she spoke, the feeling came to him that in another moment her face must clear and he would know her; yet the actual second of recognition never appeared. The girl's true identity continued to evade him. The enticing uncertainty added enormously to her charm. It evoked in him even the sense of worship.

'And this shall be the earnest of our ideal companionship,' she whispered, holding up a spray of leaves which she proceeded to fasten into the buttonhole of his coat; 'the symbol by which you shall always know me — the sign of my presence in your heart.'

The top of her head, as she bent over the task, was on a level with his lips, and when he stooped to kiss it the perfumes of the earth — flowers, trees, wind, water — rose about her like a cloud. Her hair was hot with sunshine, all silken with the air of summer. They were one being, growing out of the earth that he loved — the old, magical, beautiful earth that fed so great a part of his secret life from perennial springs.

As she drew away again from his caress he glanced down and saw that what she had pinned into his coat was a little cluster of leaves from the branch of a silver birch tree.

‘Then I, too, shall give you a sign,’ he said, ‘that shall mean the same as yours.’ And he picked a twig of pine needles from a tree beside them and twined it through a coil of her hair. Then, seizing her hands, he swung her round in a dance till they fell upon the river bank at last, tired out, and slept the sleep of children.

And after that, for a whole day it seemed, they wandered through this summer landscape, following the river to its source in the mountains, and then descending on the farther side to the shores of a blue-rimmed sea.

‘There are the ships,’ she cried, pointing to the shining expanse of water; ‘and, see, there is *our* ship coming for us.’

And as she stood there, laughing with excitement like a child, a barque with painted figure-head and brown sails yielding to the wind, came towards them over the waves, the bales of fruit upon her decks scenting the air, the smell of rope and tar and salty wood enticing them to distance and adventure. Through the cordage the very sound of the wind called to them to be off.

‘So at last we start upon our long, long voyage together,’ she said mysteriously, blushing with pleasure, and leading him down towards the ship.

‘And where are we to sail to?’ he asked; for the flap of the sails and the waves beating against the sides made resistance impossible. The sea-smells were in his nostrils. He glanced down at the veiled face beside him.

‘First to the Islands of the Night,’ she whispered so low that not even the wind could carry it away; ‘for there we shall be alone.’

‘And then — ?’

‘And then to the Islands of Delight,’ she murmured more softly still; ‘for there we shall find the lost children of the world — *our* children, and so be happy with them ever after, like the people in the fairy tales.’

With something like a shock he realised that some one else was walking beside him, talking of things that were real in a very different sense. He had been out walking longer than he knew, and had reached the house again. The autumnal mist already drew its gauze curtains about the old building. The smoke rose in straight lines from the chimneys, melting into dusk. That other place of sunshine land flowers had faded — sea, ship, islands, had all sunk beneath the depths within him. And this other person had been saying things for some minutes....

‘I don’t believe you’ve been listening to a single word, Paul. You stand there with your eyes fixed on vacancy, and only nod your head and grunt.’

‘I assure you, Margaret, dear,’ he stammered, coming to the surface as from a long swim under water, ‘I rarely miss anything you say. Only the Crack came so very suddenly. You were saying that Dick’s niece was coming to us — Joan — er — Thingumybob, and—’

‘So you heard some of it,’ she laughed quietly, relenting. ‘And I hope the Crack you speak about is in your head, not in mine.’

‘It’s everywhere,’ he said with his grave humour.

‘That’s the trouble, you see; one never knows—’

Then, seeing that she was looking anxiously at the walls of the house and at the roof, he dropped his teasing and came back to solid earth again. ‘And how soon do you expect her?’ he asked in his most practical voice. ‘When does she arrive upon the scene?’

‘Why, Paul, I’ve already told you twice! You really are getting more absent-minded every day. Joan comes to-morrow, or the day after — she’s to telegraph which — and stays here for as long as she can manage — a fortnight or so, I expect. She works herself to death, I believe, in town with those poor children, and I want her to get a real rest before she goes back.’

‘Waifs, aren’t they?’ he asked, picking up the thread of the discourse like a thing heard in a dream, ‘lost children of the slums?’

‘Yes. You’ll see them for yourself probably, as she has some of them down usually for a day in the country. One can be of use in that way — and it’s so nice to help. Dick, you know, was absorbed in the scheme. You will help, won’t you, when the time comes?’

He promised; and they went in together to tea.

CHAPTER XX

‘THIS IS HIM,’ cried Jonah breathlessly, pointing with a hand that wore ink like a funeral glove. ‘I’ve got him this time. Look!’ And he waved a half-sheet of paper in his uncle’s face.

‘I’ve made one too — oh, a beauty!’ echoed Toby; ‘and I haven’t made half such a mess as you.’ Three of her fingers were in mourning. A crape-like line running from the nose to the corner of the mouth, lent her a certain distinction. She, too, waved a bit of paper in the air.

‘Mine’s the real Jack-of-the-Inkpot though, isn’t he, Uncle Paul?’ exclaimed the boy, leaving the schoolroom table, and running up to show it.

‘They’re all real — as real as your awful fingers,’ decreed Paul.

He had been explaining how to make the figure of the Ink Sprite that leaves blots wherever he goes, blackens penholders and fingers, and leaves his crawly marks across even the neatest page of writing. Two blots and a line — then fold the paper. Open it again and the ink has run into the semblance of an outlandish figure with countless legs and arms, and a fantastic head; something between a spider, a centipede, and a sprite.

‘It’s Jack-of-the-Inkpot,’ he told them. ‘Half the time he does his dirty work invisibly, and if he touches blotting paper — he vanishes altogether.’ Jonah skipped about the room, waving his hideous creation in the air. Toby, in her efforts to make a still better one, almost climbed into the inkstand. Nixie sat on the window-sill, dangling her legs and looking on.

‘Very little ink does it,’ explained Paul, frightened at the results of his instruction. ‘You needn’t pour it on! He works with the smallest possible material, remember!’ His own fingers were no longer as spotless as they might have been.

‘Look!’ shouted Jonah, standing on a chair and ignoring the rebuke. ‘There he goes — just like a black spider flying!’ He let his half-sheet drop through the air, ink running down its side as it fell, while Toby watched with the envy of despair. Paul pounced upon the wriggling figure just in time to prevent further funeral trappings. He turned it face downwards upon the blotting paper.

‘Oh, oh!’ cried the children in the same breath; ‘it’s drank him up!’

‘Drunk him up,’ corrected Paul, relieved by the success of his manoeuvre. ‘His feet touched the blotting-paper, you see.’

A pause followed.

‘You promised to tell us his song, please,’ observed Nixie from her perch on the window-sill.

‘This is it, then,’ he answered, looking round at the smudged and solemn faces, instantly grown still. ‘To judge by appearances you know this Sprite better than I do!

I dance on your paper,
I hide in your pen,
I make in your ink-stand
My black little den;
And when you’re not looking
I hop on your nose,
And leave on your forehead
The marks of my toes.

When you’re trying to finish
Your “i” with a dot,
I slip down your finger
And make it a blot;
And when you’re so busy
To cross a big “T,”

I make on the paper
A little Black Sea.

I drink blotting-paper,
Eat penwiper-pie,
You never can catch me,
You never need try!
I hop *any* distance,
I use *any* ink!
I'm on to your fingers
Before you can wink.'

Paul's back was to the door. He was in the act of making up a new verse, and declaiming it, when he was aware that a change had come suddenly over the room. It was manifest from the faces of the children. Their attention had wandered; they were looking past him — beyond him.

And when he turned to discover the cause of the distraction he looked straight into the grey eyes of a woman — grave-faced, with an expression of strength and sweetness. As he did so the opening words of verse four slipped out in spite of themselves: —

'I'm the blackest of goblins,
I revel in smears—'

He smothered the accusing statement with a cough that was too late to disguise it, while the grey eyes looked steadily into his with a twinkle their owner made no attempt to conceal. The same (instant the children rushed past him to welcome [her.

‘It’s Cousin Joan!’ they cried with one voice, and dragged her into the room.

‘And this is Uncle Paul from America—’ began Nixie.

‘And he’s crammed full of sprites and things, and sees the wind and gets through our Crack, and — and climbs up the rigging of the Night—’ cried Jonah, striving to say everything at once before his sisters.

‘And writes the aventures of our Secret S’iety,’ Toby managed to interpolate by speaking very fast indeed.

‘He’s Recording Secre’ry, you see,’ explained Nixie in a tone of gentle authority that brought order into the scene. ‘Cousin Joan, you know,’ she added, turning gravely to her uncle, ‘is Visiting I’spector.’

‘Whose visits, however, are somewhat rare, I fear,’ said the new arrival, with a smile. Her voice was quiet and very pleasant. ‘I hope, Mr. Rivers, you are able to keep the Society in better order than I ever could.’

The introduction seemed adequate. They shook hands. Paul somehow forgot the signs of mourning he wore in common with the rest.

‘Cousin Joan has a *real* Society in London, of course,’ Nixie explained gravely, ‘a Society that picks up *real* lost children.’

‘A-filleted with ours, though,’ cried Jonah proudly.

‘‘ffiliated, he means,’ explained Nixie, while everybody laughed, and the boy looked uncertain whether to be proud, hurt, or puzzled, but in the end laughing louder than the rest.

When Paul was alone a few minutes later, the children having been carried off shouting to receive the presents their ‘Cousin’ always brought them on her rare visits from London, he was conscious first of a curious sense of disappointment. That strong-faced woman, grave of expression, with the low voice and the rather sad grey eyes, he divined was the cause; though, for the moment, he could not trace the feeling to any definite detail. In his mind he still saw her standing in the doorway — a woman no longer in her first youth, yet comely with a delicate, strong beauty that bore the indefinable touch of high living. It was peculiar to his intuitive temperament to note the spirit before he became aware of physical details; and this woman had left something of her personality behind her. She had spoken little, and that little ordinary; had done nothing in act or gesture that was striking. He did not even remember how she was dressed, beyond that she looked neat, soft, effective. Yet, there it was; something was in the room with him that had not been there before she came.

At first he felt vaguely that his sense of disappointment had to do with herself. Not that he had expected anything dazzling, or indeed had given her consciously any thought at all. The male creature, of course, hearing the name of a girl he is about to meet, instinctively conjures up a picture to suit her name. He cannot help himself. And Joan Nicholson, apart from any deliberate process of thought or desire on his part, hardly suited the picture that had thus spontaneously formed in his mind. The woman seemed too big for the picture. He had seen her, perhaps, hitherto, only through his sister's eyes. It puzzled him. About her, mysteriously as an invisible garment, was the atmosphere of things bigger, grander, finer than he had expected; nobler than he quite understood.

Ah, now, at last, he was getting at it. The vague sense of disappointment was not with her; it was *with himself.* Tested by some new standard her mere presence had subtly introduced into the room — into his intuitive mind — he had become suddenly dissatisfied with himself. His play with the children, he remembered feeling, had seemed all at once insignificant, unreal, almost unworthy — compared to another larger order of things her presence had suggested, if not actually revealed. Thus, in a flash of vision, the truth came to him.

It was with himself and not with her that he was disappointed. He recalled scraps of the conversation. It was, after all, nothing Joan Nicholson had said; it was something Nixie had said. Nixie, his little blue-eyed guide and teacher, had been up to her wizard tricks again, all unconsciously.

'Cousin Joan has a *real* Society in London, you know — *a Society that picks up real lost children'*

That was the sentence that had done it. He felt certain. Combined with the spiritual presentment of the woman, this apparently stray remark had dropped down into his heart with almost startling effect — like the grain of powder a chemist adds to his test tube that suddenly changes the colour and nature of its contents. As yet he could not determine quite what the change meant; he felt only that it was there — disappointment, dissatisfaction with himself.

‘Cousin Joan has a *real* Society.’ She was in earnest.

‘*Real* lost children’ — perhaps potential Nixies, Jonahs, Tobys, all waiting to be ‘picked up.’

The thoughts ran to and fro in him like some one with a little torch, lighting up corners and recesses of his soul he had so far never visited. For thus it sometimes is with the chemistry of growth. The changes are prepared subconsciously for a long while, and then comes some trivial little incident — a chance remark, a casual action — and a match is set to the bonfire. It flames out with a sudden rush. The character develops with a leap; the soul has become wiser, advanced, possessed of longer, clearer sight.

Paul was certainly aware of a new standard by which he must judge himself; and, for all the apparent slightness of its cause, a little reflection will persuade of its truth. Real, inner crises of a soul are often produced by causes even more negligible.

The desire, always latent in him, to be of some use in the world, and to find the things he sought by losing himself in some Cause bigger than personal ends, had been definitely touched. It now rose to the surface and claimed deliberate attention.

What in the world did it matter — thus he reflected while dressing for dinner — whether his own personal sense of beauty found expression or not? Of what account was it to the world at large, the world, for instance, that included those ‘lost children’ who needed to be ‘picked up’? To what use did he put it, except to his own gratification, and the passing pleasure of the children he played with? Were there no bigger uses, then, for his imagination, uses nobler and less personal?...

The thoughts chased one another through his mind in some confusion. He felt more and more dissatisfied with himself. He must set his house in order. He really must get to work at something *real*!

Other thoughts, too, played with him while he struggled with his studs and tie. For he noticed suddenly with surprise that he was taking more trouble with his appearance than usual. That black tie always bothered him when he could not get the help of Nixie’s fingers, and usually he appeared at the table with the results of carelessness and despair plainly visible in its outlandish shape. But to-night he tied and re-tied, determined to get it right. He meant to look his best.

Yet this process of beautifying himself was instinctive, not deliberate. It was unconscious; he did not realise what he had been about until he was half-way downstairs. And then came another of those swift, subtle flashes by which the soul reveals herself — to herself. This ‘dressing-up,’ what was it for? For whom? Certainly, he did not care a button what Joan Nicholson thought of his personal appearance. That was positive. Then, for whom, and for what, was it? Was it for some one else? Had the arrival of this ‘woman’ upon the scene somehow brought the truth into sudden relief?...

A delightful, fairy thought sped across his mind with wings of gold, waving through the dusk of his soul a spray of leaves from a silver birch-tree that he knew, and disappearing into those depths of consciousness where feelings never clothe themselves in precise language. A line of poetry swam up and took its place mysteriously —

My heart has thoughts, which, though thine eyes hold mine,
Flit to the silent world and other summers,
With wings that dip beyond the silver seas.

Could it be, then, that he had given his heart so utterly, so exquisitely, into the keeping of a little child?...

At any rate, before he reached the drawing-room, he understood that what he had been so busy dressing up was not anything half so trumpery as his mere external body and appearance. It was his interior person. That black tie, properly made for once, was an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; only, having forgotten, or possibly never heard the phrase, he could not make use of it!

‘It’s that little, sandy-haired witch after all!’ he thought to himself. ‘Joan’s coming — a woman’s coming — has made me realise it. I must behave my best, and look my best. It’s my soul dressing up for Nixie, I do declare!’

CHAPTER XXI

PERSONS WITH REAL force of purpose carry about with them something that charges unconsciously the atmosphere of others. Paul ‘felt’ this woman. The first impact of her presence, as has been seen, came almost as a shock. The ‘shocks,’ however, did not continue — as such. Her influence worked in him underground, as it were.

She slipped easily and naturally into the quiet routine of the little household in the Grey House under the hill, till it seemed as if she had been there always. Margaret had insisted at once that there could be no ‘Missing’ and ‘Mistering’; Dick’s niece must be Joan, and her brother Paul; and the more familiar terms of address were adopted without effort on both sides.

The children helped, too. They were all in the same Society, and before a week had passed she had heard all the ‘aventures,’ and entered into the discovery of new ones, even contributing some herself with a zest that delighted. Paul, and made him feel wholly at his ease with her. It was all real to her; she could not otherwise have shown an interest; for sham had no part in her nature, and her love for these fatherless children was as great as his own, and similar in kind.

‘You have given their “Society” a new lease of life,’ she told him; ‘you are an enormous addition to it.’

‘Enormous — yes!’ he laughed.

‘Enormously useful at the same time,’ she laughed in return, ‘because you not only increase their imagination; you train it, and show them how to Use it.’

‘To say nothing of the indirect benefits I receive myself,’ he added.

And, after a pause, she said: ‘For myself, too, it’s the best kind of holiday I could possibly have. To come down here into all this, straight from my waifs in London, is like coming into that Crackland you have shown them. I wish — I wish I could introduce it all to my big sad world of unwashed urchins. They have so few chances.’ A sudden flash of enthusiasm ran over her face like sunlight. ‘Perhaps, when they come down here next week for a day’s outing, we might try! — if you will help me, that is?’ She looked up. Something in the simple words touched him; her singleness of aim stirred the depths in him.

He promised eagerly.

‘When it’s out,’ she added presently, ‘I’m going to give copies of your book of aventures to some of them. A good many will understand—’

‘You shall have as many as you can use,’ he put in quickly, with a thrill of pleasure he hardly understood. ‘I’m only too delighted to think they could be of any use — any *real* use, I mean.’

There was something in the simple earnestness of this woman, in the devotion of her life to an unselfish Cause, that increased daily his dissatisfaction with himself. She never said a word that suggested selfsacrifice. A call had come to her, turning her entire life into an instrument for helping others — others who might never realise enough to say, ‘Thank you’ — and she had accepted it. Now she lived it, that was all. The Scheme that had provided the call, too, was Dick’s. It was all conceived originally in that big practical, imaginative heart of the one intimate friendship he had known. Moreover, it concerned children, lost children. The appeal to the deepest in himself was thus reinforced in several ways. More and more, beside this quiet, determined woman, with her singleness of aim and her practical idealism, his own life seemed trivial, cheap, selfish. She had found a medium of expression, selfexpression, compared to which his own mind was insignificant.

From the ‘Man who splashed on the Deck’ to Joan Nicholson was a far cry; as far almost as from the amoeba to the dog — yet both the man and the woman knew the relief of Outlet. And, now, he too was learning in his own time and place the same truth. Nixie had brought him far. Joan, perhaps, was to bring him farther still.

Yet there was nothing about her that was very unusual. There are scores and scores of unmarried women like her sprinkled all along the quiet ways of life, noble, unselfish, unrecognised, often, no doubt, utterly unappreciated, turning the whole current of their lives into work for others — the best they can find. The ordinary man who, for the mother of his children seeks first of all physical beauty, or perhaps some worldly standard of attractiveness, passes them by. Their great force, thus apparently neglected by Nature for her more obvious purposes, runs along through more hidden channels, achieving great things with but little glory or reward. To Paul, who knew nothing of modern types, and whose knowledge of women was abstract rather than concrete, she appeared, of course, simply normal. For all women he conceived as noble and unselfish, capable naturally of sacrifice and devotion. To him they were all saints, more or less, and Joan Nicholson came upon the scene of his life merely as an ordinarily presentable specimen of the great species he had always dreamt about.

But it was the first time he had come into close contact with a living example of the type he had always believed in. Here was a woman whose interests were all outside herself. The fact thrilled and electrified him, just as the peculiar nature of her work made a powerful and intimate appeal to his heart.

As the days passed, and they came to know one another better, she told him frankly about the small beginnings of her work, and then how Dick's idea had caught her up and carried her away to where she now was.

'There was so much to be done, and so much help needed, that at first,' she admitted, 'my own little efforts seemed absurd; and then he showed me that if everybody talked like that nothing would ever be accomplished. So I got up and tried. It was something definite and practical. I let my bigger dreams go—'

'Well done,' he interrupted, wondering for a moment what those 'bigger dreams' could have been.

' — and chose the certainty. And I have never regretted it, though sometimes, of course, I am still tempted'

'That was fine of you,' he said. He realised vaguely that she would gladly, perhaps, have spoken to him of those 'other dreams,' but it was not quite clear to him that his sympathy could be of any avail, and he did not know how to offer it either. To ask direct questions of such a woman savoured to his delicate mind of impertinence.

'There was nothing "fine" about it,' she laughed, after an imperceptible pause; 'it was natural, that's all. I couldn't help myself really. Human suffering has always called to me very searchingly. *Au fond*, you see, it was almost selfishness.'

He suddenly felt unaccountably small with this slip of a woman at his side, tired, overworked, giving all her best years so gladly away, and even in her 'holidays' thinking of her work more than of herself. He noticed, too, the passing flames that lit fires in her eyes and illumined her entire face sometimes when she spoke of her London waifs. Pity and admiration ran together in his thoughts, the latter easily predominating.

'But you must make the most of your holiday,' he said presently; 'you will use up your forces too soon—'

'Perhaps,' she laughed, 'perhaps. Only I get restless with the feeling that I'm wanted elsewhere. There's so little time to do anything. The years pass so quickly — after thirty; and if you always wait till you're "quite fit," you wait for ever, and nothing gets done.'

Paul turned and looked steadily at her for a moment. A sudden beauty, like a white and shining fire, leaped into her face, flashed about the eyes and mouth, and was gone. Paul never forgot that look to the end of his days.

'By Jove,' he said, 'you *are* in earnest!'

'Not more than others,' she said simply; 'not as much as many, even, I'm afraid. A good soldier goes on fighting whether he's "fit" or not, doesn't he?'

'He ought to,' said Paul — humbly, for some reason he could hardly explain.

They had many similar talks. She told him a great deal about her rescue work in London, and he, for his part, became more and more interested. From a distance, meanwhile, his sister observed them curiously, — though nothing that was in Margaret's thoughts ever for a single instant found its way either into his mind or Joan's. It was natural, of course, that Margaret, the reader of modern novels, should have formed certain conclusions, and perhaps it would have been the obvious and natural thing for Joan and Paul to have fallen in love and been happy ever afterwards with children of their own. It would also, no doubt, have been 'artistic,' and the way things are made to happen in novels.

But in real life things are not cut always so neatly to measure, and whether real life is artistic or not as a whole cannot be judged until the true, far end is known. For the perspective is wanting; the scale is on a vaster loom; and of the threads that weave into the pattern and out again, neither end nor beginning are open to inspection.

The novels Margaret delighted in, with their hotch-potch of duchesses and valets, Ministers of State and footmen, libertines and snobs, while doubtless portraying certain phases of modern life with accuracy, could in no way prepare her for the Pattern that was being woven beneath her eyes by the few and simple characters in this entirely veracious history. And it may be assumed, therefore, that Joan had come into the scenery of Paul's life with no such commonplace motive — since the high Gods held the threads and wove them to their own satisfaction — as merely to marry off the hero.

And if Paul did not fall in love with Joan Nicholson, as he might, or ought, to have done, he at least did the next best thing to it. He fell head over ears in love with her work. And since love seeks ever to imitate and to possess, he cast about in his heart for means by which he might accomplish these ends. Already he possessed her secret. Now he had only to imitate her methods.

He was finding his way to a bigger and better means of self-expression than he had yet dreamed of; while Nixie, the *dea ex machina*, for ever flitted on ahead and showed the way.

It remained a fairy-tale of the most delightful kind. *That*, at least, he realised clearly.

CHAPTER XXII

AMONG THE BRANCHES of the ilex tree, whose thick foliage rose like a giant swarm of bees at the end of the lawn, there were three dark spots visible that might have puzzled the most expert botanist until he came close enough to examine them in detail. The fact that the birds avoided the tree at this particular hour of the evening, when they might otherwise have loved to perch and sing, hidden among the dense shiny leaves, would very likely have furnished a clue, and have suggested to him — if he were a really intelligent man of science — that these dark spots were of human origin.

In the order in which they rose from the ground towards the top they were, in fact, Toby, Joan Nicholson, Paul, Nixie and, highest of all, Jonah. Paul felt safer in the big fork, Joan in the wide seat with the back. In the upper branches Jonah perched, singing and chattering. Toby hummed to herself happily nearer the ground, and Nixie, her legs swinging dizzily over a serpentine branch immediately above Paul's head, was really the safest of the lot, though she looked ready to drop at any moment.

They were all at rest, these wingless human birds, in the tree where Paul had long ago made seats and staircases and bell-ropes.

'I wish the wind would come,' said Nixie. 'It would make us all swing about.'

'And Jonah would lose his balance and bring the lot of us down like ripe fruit,' said Paul.

'On the top of Toby at the bottom,' added Joan. 'But my house is well built,' Paul objected, 'or it would never have held such a lot of visitors as it did yesterday.'

'Look out! I'm slipping!' cried Jonah suddenly overhead. 'No! I'm all right again now,' he added a second later, having thoroughly alarmed the lodgers on the lower floors, and sent down a shower of bark and twigs.

‘It’s certainly more solid than your “Scaffolding of Night,”’ Joan observed mischievously as soon as the shower was past; ‘though, perhaps, not quite as beautiful.’ And presently she added, ‘I think I never saw boys enjoy themselves so much in my life. They’ll remember it as long as they live.’

‘It was your idea,’ he said.

‘But you carried it out for me!’

They were resting after prolonged labours that had been, at the same time, a prolonged delight. At three o’clock that afternoon, after twenty-four hours of sunshine among woods and fields, the party of twenty urchins had been seen safely off the premises into the London train. Two large brakes had carried them to the station, and the gardens of the grey house under the hill were dropping back again into their wonted peace and quiet.

There is nothing unusual — happily — in the sight of poor town-children enjoying an afternoon in the country; but there was something about this particular outing that singled it out from the majority of its kind. Paul had entered heart and soul into it, and the combination of woods, fields, and running water had made possible certain details that are not usually feasible.

Margaret had given Paul and her cousin *carte blanche.* They had planned the whole affair as generals plan a battle. The children had proved able lieutenants; and the weather had furnished the sun by day and the moon by night, to show that it thoroughly approved. For it was Paul’s idea that the entire company of boys should camp out, cook their meals over wood fires in the open, bathe in the pools he had contrived long ago by damming up the stream, and that not a single minute of the twenty-four hours should they be indoors or under cover.

With a big barn close at hand in case of necessity, and with four tents large enough to hold five apiece, erected at the far end of the Gwyle woods, where the stream ran wide and full, he had no difficulty in providing for all contingencies. Each boy had brought a little parcel with his things for the night; and blankets, bedding of hay and pillows of selected pine branches — oh, he knew all the tricks for making comfortable sleeping-quarters in the woods! — were ready and waiting when the party of urchins came upon the scene.

And every astonished ragamuffin had a number pinned on to his coat the moment he arrived, and the same number was to be found at the head of his place in the tent. Each tent, moreover, was under the care of a particular boy who was responsible for order; while, midway in the camp, by the ashes of the fire where they had roasted potatoes and told stories till the moonlight shamed them into sleep, Paul himself lay all night in his sleeping-bag, the happiest of the lot, sentinel and guardian of the troop.

The place for the main fire, where meals were cooked, had been carefully chosen beforehand, and wood collected by the busy hands of Nixie & Co. The boys sat round it in a large ring; and Paul in the middle, stirring the stew he had learned to make most deliciously in his backwoods life, ladled it out into the tin plates of each in turn, while Joan saw to the bread and cake, and watched the huge kettle of boiling water for tea that swung slowly from the iron tripod near by.

And that circle of happy urchin faces, seen through the blue smoke against the background of crowding tree stems, flushed with the hours of sunshine, the mystery of happiness in all their eyes, remained a picture in Paul's memory to the end of his life. The boys, certainly, were not all good, but they were at least all merry. They forgot for the time the heat of airless brick lanes and the clatter of noisy traffic. The perfumes of the wood banished the odour of ill-ventilated rooms. Dark shadows of the streets gave place to veils of a very different kind, as the rising moon dropped upon their faces the tracery of pine branches. And, instead of the roar of a city that for them meant hardship, often cruelty, they heard the singing of birds, the rustle of trees, and the murmur of the stream at their very feet.

And Paul, as he paced to and fro softly between the sleeping crew, the tents all ghostly among the trees, had long, long thoughts that went with him into his sleeping-bag later and mingled with dreams that were more inspired than he knew, and destined to bear a great harvest in due course....

The branches of big forest trees shifted noiselessly forwards from the scenery that lay ever in the background of his mind, and pressed his eyelids gently into sleep. With feathery dark fingers they brushed the surface of his thoughts, leaving the perfume of their own large dreams about his pillow.

The shadowy figures that haunt all ancient woods peered at him from behind a million stems and, while they peered, beckoned; whispering to his soul the secrets of the wilderness, and renewing in him the sources of strength, simplicity, and joy they had erstwhile taught him.

All that afternoon he had spent with the romping boys, organising their play, seeing to it that they enjoyed utter freedom, yet did no mischief. Joan seconded him everywhere, and Nixie flitted constantly between the camp and the source of supplies in the kitchen. And, to see their play, came as a revelation to him in many ways. While the majority were content to shout and tumble headlong with excess of animal spirits let loose, here and there he watched one or two apart, all aghast at the beauty they saw at close quarters for the first time; dreaming; apparently stunned; drinking it all in with eyes and ears and lips; feeling the moss and branches as others feel jewels and costly lace; and on some of the little faces an expression of grave wonder, and of joy too deep for laughter.

'This ain't always 'ere, is it, Guv'nor?' one had asked. And another, whom Paul watched fingering a common fern for a long time, looked up presently and inquired if it was real—' because it isn't 'arf as pretty as what *we* use!' He was the son of a scene-shifter at an East End theatre.

And a detail that made peculiarly keen appeal to his heart, a detail not witnessed by Joan or the children, was the morning ablutions in the stream, when the occupants of each tent in turn, went into the water soon after sunrise, their pinched bodies streaked by the shadow and sunlight of the dawn, their laughter and splashing filling the wood with unwonted sounds. Soap, towels, and water in plenty! Water perfumed from the hills! Faces flushed and almost rosy after the sleep in the open, and the inexhaustible draughts of air to fan them dry again!

And then the eager circle for breakfast, hatless, eyes all fixed upon the great stew-pot where he mixed the jorum of porridge! And the noise — for noise, it must be confessed, there was — as they smothered it in their tin plates with quarts of milk hot from the cow, and busily swallowed it.

'You took them straight into the Crack, you know,' Joan said from her seat below.

'Everything came true,' Nixie's voice was heard overhead among the branches.

Jonah clattered down past them and scampered across the lawn with Toby at his heels, for their bedtime was close at hand. The other three lay there, half hidden, a little longer, while the shadows crept down from the hills and gathered underneath. They could no longer see each other properly. For a time there was silence, stirred only by the faint rustle of the ilex leaves. Each was thinking long, deep thoughts.

‘Next week,’ said Joan quietly, as though to herself, ‘the other lot will come. Your sister’s as good as gold about it all.’

Then, after a pause, Nixie’s voice dropped down to them again:

‘And had some of them really never seen a wood before?’ she asked. ‘Fancy that! When I grow up I shall have a big wood made specially for them — the “Wood for Lost Children” I shall call it. And you’ll see about the tents and cooking, won’t you, Uncle Paul? Or, perhaps,’ she added, ‘by that time I shall know how to make a real proper stew and porridge, and be able to tell them stories round the fire as you did. Don’t you think so?’

‘I think you know most of it already,’ he answered gently. ‘It seems to me somehow that you have always known all the important things like that.’

‘Oh, do you really? How splendid if I really did!’

There was a slight break in her voice — ever so slight. ‘I should so dreadfully like to help — if I could. It’s so slow getting old enough to do anything.’ Paul turned his head up to her. It was too dim to see her body lying along the bough, but he could just make out her eyes peering down between the dark of the leaves, a yellow mist where her hair was, and all the rest hidden. Very eerie, very suggestive it was, to hear this little voice amid the dusk of the branches, putting his own thoughts into words. Were those tears that glistened in the round pools of blue, or was it the reflection of sunset and the coming stars that filtered past her through the thinning tree-top? Again he thought of that silver birch standing under the protection of the shaggy pine.

‘Sing us something, Nixie,’ rose the voice of Joan from below.

‘What shall I sing?’

‘That thing about the two trees Uncle Paul made up.’

‘But he hasn’t given me the tune yet!’

‘The tune’s still lost,’ murmured the deep voice from the shadows of the big fork. ‘I must go into the Crack and find it. That’s where I found the words, at least—’ The sound of his voice melted away.

‘Of course,’ Joan was heard to say faintly, ‘ail lost things are in there, aren’t they?’

And then something queer happened that was never explained. Perhaps they all slipped through the Crack together; or perhaps Nixie’s funny little singing voice floated down to them through such a filter of listening leaves that both words and tune were changed on the way into something sweeter than they actually were in themselves.

Who told the Silver Birch tree
The stories that we made?
And how can she remember
The very games we played?

Who told her heart of silver
That, almost from her birth,
The roots of that old Pine tree
Had sought hers under earth?

For always when the wind blows
Her hair about the wood,
It blows across my eyes too
Her pictured solitude.

And then Aventures gather
On little hidden feet,

And mystery and laughter
The magic things repeat.

For, O my Silver Birch tree,
Full half the ‘things’ we do,
We did — or e’er you sweetened
The starlight and the dew!

They stood there, all in order,
Ready and waiting even,
Before the sunlight kissed you,
Or you, the winds of heaven.

Who told you, then, O Birch Tree,
The’Ventures that we play?
And how can you remember
The wonder — and the Way?

CHAPTER XXIII

PANTHEA. LOOK, SISTER, where a troop of spirits gather
Like flocks of cloud in spring's delightful weather,
Thronging in the blue air!

IONE — And see! More come.
Like fountain-vapours when the winds are dumb,
That climb up the ravines in scattered lines.
And hark! Is it the music of the pines?
Is it the lake? Is it the waterfall?

PANTHEA. 'Tis something sadder, sweeter far than all.

Prometheus Unbound.

'IT'S all very well for you two to play at being trees,' the voice of Joan was heard to object, 'but I should like to know what part I'

'Hush! Hush! I hear them coming,' Nixie said quickly with a new excitement.

She had apparently floated up higher into the ilex to the place vacated by Jonah. Her voice had a ring of the sky in it.

'Come up to where I am, and we can *all* see.

They're rising already—'

'Who — what's rising?' called Joan from below; 'I'm not!'

‘There’s something up, I expect,’ said Paul quickly. ‘I’ll help you.’ He knew by the child’s voice there was adventure afoot. ‘Give me your hand, Joan. And put your feet where I tell you. We’re all in the Crack, remember, so everything’s possible.’

‘Undoubtedly something’s up, but it’s not *me*, I’m afraid,’ she laughed.

‘Hush! Hush! Hush!’ Nixie’s voice reached them from the higher branches. ‘Talk in whispers, please, or you’ll frighten them. And be quick. They’re rising everywhere. Any minute now they may be off and you’ll miss them —’

Joan and Paul obeyed; though in his record of the adventure he never described the details of their ascent. A few minutes later they were perched beside the child near the rounded top of the ilex.

‘It’s fearfully rickety,’ Joan said breathlessly.

‘But there’s no danger,’ whispered Nixie, ‘because this is an evergreen tree, and it doesn’t go with the others.’

‘How— “Go with the others?”’ asked the two in the same breath.

‘Trees,’ answered the child. ‘They’re emigrating. Look! Listen!’

‘Migrating,’ suggested Paul.

‘Of course,’ Nixie said, poking her head higher to see into the sky. ‘Trees go away south in the autumn just like birds — the real trees; their insides, I mean—’

‘Their spirits,’ Paul explained in his lowest whisper to Joan.

‘That’s why they lose their leaves. And in the spring they come back with all their new blossoms and things. If they find nicer places in the south, they stay, that’s all. They — die. Listen — you can hear them going!’

High up in that still autumn sky there ran a sweet and curious sound, difficult to describe. Joan thought it was like the rustle of countless leaves falling: the tiny tapping noise made by a dying leaf as it settles on the ground — multiplied enormously; but to Paul it seemed that sudden, dream-like whirr of a host of birds when they wheel sharply in mid-air — heard at a distance. There was no question about the distance at any rate.

‘Are they just the trees of our woods, then?’ asked Joan in a whisper that held delight and awe, ‘or — ?’

The child laughed under her breath. ‘Oh, no,’ was the reply, ‘all the South of England below a certain line meets here. This is one of the great starting-places. It’s just like swallows collecting on the wires. Some big tree, higher than the rest, gives a sign one night — and then all the other woods flock in by thousands. Uncle Paul knew *that*!’ There was a touch in her voice of something between scorn and surprise.

‘Did you, Uncle Paul?’ Joan asked.

He fidgeted in his precarious perch. ‘I write the Record of it all, so I ought to,’ he answered evasively.

And high up in the autumn sky, now darkening, ran on that curious sweet sound. Across the heavens, silvery in the coming moonlight, they saw long feathery clouds drawn thinly from north to south, known commonly as mares’ tails.

‘Those are the tracks they follow,’ whispered Nixie. ‘Look! Now you can see them — some of them!’

Her voice was so thrilled that it startled them. But for the fact that they were in the Crack where nothing can be ever ‘lost,’ both Paul and Joan might have lost their hold and their seats — to say nothing of their lives — and crashed downwards through the branches of that astonished ilex tree. Instead, they turned their eyes upwards and stared.

They looked out over the world of tree-tops. On all sides rose Something in a silent tempest, almost too delicate for words — something that touched the air with a Presence, swift and wonderful — then was gone. With it went the faint music as of myriad wheeling birds, too small for sight. And through the sky ran a vast fluttering of green. They saw the coming stars, as it were, through immense transparencies of green, stained here and there with the washed splendours of wet and dying leaves — the greens, yellows, aye, and the reds too, of autumn.

For a few passing seconds the night was positively robed with the spirit-hues of the dying year, rising rapidly in the sheets of their dim glory.

‘They’re off!’ murmured Nixie. ‘It’s the first flight. We *are* lucky!’

Far overhead the pathways of fleecy cloud were tinged with pale yellow as when the moon looks sometimes mistily upon the earth — tinged, then suddenly white and silvery as before.

They collect — Paul drew upon the child’s account for his Record — far over-seas upon some lonely strand or headland, and then swarm inland, sometimes following their companions, the birds, sometimes leading them. In countless thousands they go, yet for all their numbers never causing more than a passing tremble of the air. Their armies add, perhaps, a shadow to the night, a new tint to the clouds that veil the moon; or, if owing to stress of autumn weather, they start with the daylight, then the sunset gains a strange new wonder that puzzles the heart with its beauty, and makes unimaginative people write foolish letters to the newspapers. Their speed makes it difficult to catch even the slightest indication of their flight; the sky is touched with glory, there is a reflection in the river or the sea — and they are gone! Or, perhaps, from the evergreens that stay behind, often fringing the coast, the wind bears a message of farewell, wondrous sweet; or some late birds, delaying their own departure, wake in the branches and sing in little bursts of passion the joy of their own approaching escape.

And when they return, each tree in the order of its leaving, and according to its times and needs, they bring with them all the essential glory of southern climes, and the magic of spring is due as much to the tales and memories they have collected to talk about, as to the clear brilliance of the new dresses with which they come to clothe their old bodies at home.

The Record of the Adventure, as Paul wrote it faithfully from the child’s description, makes curious and instructive reading, and the loneliness of the stalwart evergreens who remain behind to face the winter brought a pathos into the tale that all lovers of trees will readily appreciate, and may be read by them in the published account.

Yet to Paul and Joan, to each according to temperament and cast of mind, the little Adventure brought thoughts of a more practical bearing. To him, especially, in the escape of the tree-spirits — of their ‘insides,’ as Nixie intuitively phrased it — he divined an allegory of the temporary escape of the little army of city waifs. Those boys, old in face as they were cramped in body, had enjoyed, too, a migration that clothed them for a time, outwardly and inwardly, with some passing beauty which they could take back to London with them just as the trees come back with the freshness of the spring.

And this thought led necessarily to others. The little migration of their bodies from town was important enough; but what of their minds and souls? What chance of escape was there for these?

The conclusions are obvious enough; they need no elaboration. He had already learned from Joan of their sufferings. His heart burned within him. It was all mixed up in his queer poetic mind with the swift vision of the Tree Spirits, and with the picture of Joan, Nixie, and the other children perched like big berries in that astonished ilex tree. In due season both berries and dreams must ripen. He was beginning to see the way.

‘They’re gone already,’ Nixie interrupted his long reverie in a whisper; ‘and to-night there’ll be great rains to wash away all the signs. To-morrow morning, you’ll see, half the trees will be bare.’

And high in the heavens, incredibly high and faint it seemed, ran the curious sweet sound, driven farther and farther into the reaches of the night, till at last it died away altogether.

‘Gone,’ murmured Joan, ‘gone!’ The beauty of it touched her voice with sadness. ‘I wish we could go like that — as beautifully, as quietly, as easily!’

‘Perhaps we do,’ Paul thought to himself.

‘I think we do,’ Nixie said aloud. ‘Daddy did, I’m sure. I shall, too, I think — and then come back in the spring, p’rhaps.’

CHAPTER XXIV

SEE WHERE THE child of heaven, with wingéd feet,
Runs down the slanted sunlight of the dawn.

Prometheus Unbound.

VERY often in life, when the way seems all prepared for joy, there comes instead an unexpected time of sadness that makes all the preparation seem useless and of no purpose. Those coloured threads, whose ends and beginnings are not seen, weave this unexpected twist in the pattern, and one knows the bitterness that asks secretly, What can be the use of efforts thus rendered apparently null and void at a single stroke? forgetting the roots of faith that are thereby strengthened, and shutting the eyes to the glory of the whole pattern, which it is always the endeavour of the imagination to body forth.

And so it seemed to Paul a few weeks later when he returned to England from America, where he had been to settle up his affairs. For he had decided to sever his connection with the Lumber Company, and to devote his life henceforward to battling against the wrongs and sufferings of childhood. The call had come to him with no uncertain voice. Nixie had unintentionally sown the seeds; Joan had deliberately watered them; his own liberated imagination girded its loins to go forth as a labourer to the harvest.

Then, coming back with the joy of this approaching labour in his heart, the veil of great sadness descended upon his newly-opening life and set him in the midst of a dreadful void, a blank of pain and loneliness that nothing seemed able to fill. Nixie went from him. The Hand that gilds the stars, and touched her hair with the yellow of the sands, drew her also away. Just when her gentle companionship had justified itself for him as something ideally charming that should last always, a breath of wintry wind passed down upon that grey house under the hill, and, lo, she was gone — gone like the spirit of her little birch tree from the cruelties of December.

He was in time to say good-bye — nothing more; in time to see the awful shadow fall silently upon the wasted little face, and to feel the cold of eternal winter creep into the thin hand that lay to the last within his own. Not a single word did he utter as he sat there beside the bed, choked to the brim with feelings that never yet have known the words to clothe them. That cold entered his own heart too, and numbed it.

Nixie it was that spoke, though she, too, said little enough. The lips moved feebly. He lowered his head to catch the last breath.

‘I shall come back,’ he heard faintly, ‘just as the trees do in the spring!’

The voice was in his ear. It sank down inside him, entering his very soul. For a moment it sang there — then ceased for ever. With eyes dry and burning, he buried his head in the tangle of yellow hair upon the pillow, and when a moment later he raised them again to speak the words of comfort to his weeping sister, Nixie was no longer there to hear him or to see.

‘I shall come back in the spring — just as the trees do.’

And so she died, leaving Paul behind in that sea of loneliness whose waves drown year by year their thousands and tens of thousands — the vast army that know not Faith. Her blue eyes, so swiftly fading, were on his to the last. It seemed to him that for a moment he had seen God. And perhaps he had; for Nixie assuredly was close to divine things, and he most certainly was pure.

* * * *

Sad things are best faced squarely, very squarely indeed; dealt with; and then — deliberately forgotten. In this way their strength, and the beauty that invariably lies within like a hidden kernel, may be appropriated and their bitterness destroyed. But such platitudes are easily said or written, and at first, when Nixie left him, Paul felt as though the world lay for ever broken at his feet.

What this elfin child had done for him must appear to some exaggerated, to many, incredible; for the relationship between them had somehow been touched with the splendour and tenderness of a world unknown to the majority. The delicate intimacy between their souls, as between souls of a like age, is difficult to realise outside the region of fantasy. Yet it had existed: in her with a simple, childlike joy that asked no questions; in him, with an attempt at analysis that only made it closer and more dear. What Paul had been to her was a secret she had taken away with her; what she had been to him, however, was to remain a most precious memory, and at the same time a source of strength and happiness that was to prove eternal.

Not, however, in the manner that actually came about — and, at first, not realised by him in any manner whatsoever.

For, at first, he found himself alone, horribly alone. What her little mystical heart of poetry had taught him is hard to name. Expression, of course, in its simpler form, and the joy of a sympathetic audience; but more than that. In all fine women lies hidden ‘the child’ — the simple vision that pierces — and perhaps in Nixie he had divined, and ideally reconstructed for himself, the ‘fine woman’! Who can say? A dream so rich and tender can never be caught in a mere net of words. The truth lay buried in the depths of his being, to strengthen and to bless; and some few others may divine its presence there as well as himself perhaps. The only thing he understood clearly at the moment was that he had been robbed of an intimate little friend who had crept into every corner of his heart, and that — he was most terribly alone.

CHAPTER XXV

DONNEZ VOS YEUX, donnez vos mains,
Donnez vos mains magiciennes;
Pour me guider par ‘es chemins
Donnez vos yeux, donnez vos mains,
Vos mains d’infante dans les miennes.

From *Les Unes et les Autres.*

THERE is nothing to be gained by dwelling upon sadness; the details of Paul’s suffering may be left to the imagination. It was characteristic of him that he sought instinctively, and without cant, for the Reality that lay behind his pain; and Reality — though seas of grief may first be plunged through to find it — is always Joy. For love is joy, and joy is strength, and both are aspects of the great central Reality of the life of the soul. The child was so woven into the strands of his inmost being that her going seemed, as it were, to draw out with her these very strands — drew them out away from himself towards — towards what? He hardly knew how to name it. The word ‘God’ rarely passed his lips: towards ‘Reality,’ then; towards the deep things he had sought all his life.

Part of himself, however, the child had taken away with her. He passed more and more away from the things of the world, though these had never yet held him with any security in their mesh. Nixie had gone ahead, that was all. Before long, as years measure time at least, he would follow her. She might even come back, ‘like the trees in the spring,’ to tell him of the way.

His great longing, unexpressed, had always been to know something of the Beyond — to see into the heart of things; not by the uninspired methods of an unsavoury spiritualism, or the artificial forcing-house of an audacious Magic; but by some inner, as yet undetermined, way in his own heart. For he had always clung to the secret belief that there must be some interior way of finding ‘Reality,’ some process, simple, piercing, profound, that would have authority for himself, if not for all the world. In the heart of all true mystics some such Faith is ingrained. They are born with it. It is ineradicable — lived, but rarely spoken.

And the root of this belief it was that Nixie had unknowingly watered and fed. Her going seemed suddenly to have coaxed it almost into flower. His need of the great, satisfying Companion that knows no shadow of turning was incalculably quickened thereby. Love and Nature were the veils that screened the Beyond so thinly that he could almost see through them; and to both these mysteries the child had led him better than she knew.

The energy of his mystical yearnings suddenly increased a hundredfold. Whether these remain within to poison, or go out to bless, depends, of course, upon the nature of the heart that feels them. Paul, fortunately for himself, had found ways of expression; he was always provided now with the safety of an outlet. And, for the immediate moment, the path was clear enough, and very simple. He was to comfort the mother that mourned her; himself that mourned her; the puzzled little brother and sister, and even the army of more or less disconsolate fourfooted friends that missed her presence vaguely, and haunted the door of her room with the strange instinct that there must still be caresses for them within, and that for the moment she was merely hiding.

It was Smoke, the furry black fellow, however, always her favourite and his own, participant in all their old Aventures, who brought him a strange comfort by secret ways that no man understands. For Smoke asked no questions. He knew; and though he missed her in all their games, and meals, and undertakings of every kind, in house or garden, he showed no obvious symptoms of grief as a dog might have shown. And sometimes he was positively uncanny: he behaved almost as though he still saw her.

The others, however, — ! With most of them out of sight was out of mind. The kittens, now growing up, purred and played as of old in the schoolroom, and the Chow puppies, China and Japan, more like yellow puddings than ever, tore about the house, tumbling and thudding, as though they had never known their little two-legged elfin playmate. The household dropped back into the old routine; Margaret, sadder, less alive than before, pressed down by her new grief into the semblance of a vision; and the children, hushed and pale, but gradually yielding to the stress of bursting life which at that age has no long acquaintance with grief.

It was winter, and the woods and gardens were so altered that the usual corners of play and mischief were unrecognisable. ‘Out-ov-doors’ was dead, the sunshine unreal, the darkness hovering close even on the clearest day. The haunts that Paul and Nixie knew were too much changed, mercifully for him, who often sought them none the less, to remind him keenly. The little silver birch tree that danced in summer before the skirts of the fir wood was bare and shivering in the winds. Behind it, however, unchanged and shaggy, still stood the dark sheltering pine, steady among the blasts.

And Paul, meanwhile, beyond the smaller sphere of his immediate duties in the grey house under the hill, took up with all the enthusiasm he could spare from sorrow the work among the lost waifs. As has been seen, he found the complete organisation ready to hand. And, to his great satisfaction, he found, as he became familiar with the detail, that it was work suited to the best that was in him. He was the right man in the right place.

Moreover, it was Dick’s scheme, and to lose himself in it was to get into touch again delightfully with the great friendship of his youth. Nixie, too, who had meant when she grew up to provide a Wood for Lost Children, seemed ever pushing him forward from behind. Thus his zeal never lessened, and he lost himself in others to some purpose.

The test of time, of course, proved this. At the moment, however, it can only be known by the trick of ‘looking at the last chapter’ — which is unlawful, as well as logically impossible. And, before he got so far, he had first learned another profound truth: that only he who carries in his heart a great sorrow, borne alone, can know the mystery of interior Vision, inspiring and truly marvellous, which comes from a blessing so singularly disguised as pain.

CHAPTER XXVI

I feel, I see
Those eyes which burn through smiles that fade in tears,
Like stars half quenched in mists of silver dew.

Prometheus Unbound.

THE readjustment of self — the renewal — that follows upon great bereavement having thus been faced courageously, Paul threw himself into his work with energy. Every Friday night he came down to the house under the hill, and every Monday morning he returned to London. But the details of the work, beyond the fact that their fulfilment blessed both himself and those for whom he laboured, are not essential to the story of what followed. For the history of Paul's education is more than anything else a history of Aventures of the inner life. Outwardly, his existence was quiet and uneventful.

Almost immediately with the disappearance of his little friend, for instance, he discovered that the region through the Crack — the land betweenyesserdayandtomorrow — became more real, more extraordinarily real, than ever before. The entrances now seemed everywhere and always close; it was the ways of exit that were difficult to find. He lived in it. Even in London he moved among those fields of flowers, and the winter gloom that depressed the majority only enhanced the bright sunshine that lay about his path. His thoughts were continually following the windings of the river to the far horizon; and the horizon, too, was wider, more enticing and mysterious, more suggestive than ever of that blue sea beyond where he had sailed with that other Companion.

The land became mapped out and known with an intimacy that must seem little short of marvellous to those who have never even dreamed of the existence of so fair a country. For, the truth was, his Companion, who was now his guide and leader, had suddenly revealed herself.

It came about a few days after the funeral — when the emptiness and hush of sorrow that lay over the house found its exact spiritual correspondence in the silence and sense of desolation that filled his own heart. He was in his bedroom, battling with that loneliness in loneliness which at the first had threatened to overwhelm him. He had just left his sister's side, having soothed her with what comfort he could into the sleep of weariness and exhaustion. By the open window, as so often before, he stood, staring into the damp winter night. Smoke moved restlessly to and fro behind him, sometimes sitting down to wash, sometimes jumping on the bed and sofa as though to search for something it could never find. Mrs. Tompkyns, who had scratched at the door a few minutes before, for the first time in her life, and for reasons known to none but herself and her black companion, lay at last curled up before the fire.

The room was filled with a soft presence, once silvery and fragrant, but now draped with the newly woven shadows that rendered it invisible. The invasion was irresistible. His heart ached. He knew quite well that his own soul, too, was being measured for its garment of shadow — garment that, unlike ordinary clothes, fits better and closer with every year. He was in that dangerous mood when such measurements are made only too easily, and the lassitude of grief accepts the trying-on with a kind of soft, almost pleasurable, acquiescence — when, sharply and suddenly, a sound was audible outside the window that instantly galvanised him into a state of resistance. The night, hitherto still as the grave, sighed in response to a rising wind. And through his being at the same moment ran the answering little Wind of Inspiration some one had taught him to find always when he sought it.

And the sound brought comfort. It was as though an invisible hand had reached down inside him and touched the source of joy!

Paul turned quickly. Mrs. Tompkyns was awake on the mat. Smoke rubbed against his legs. On the table, where he had spread them a few minutes before, were the black tie, the mended socks, the unused bottle for nettle stings and scratches, and beside them the faded spray of birch leaves, now withered and shrivelled. And, as he looked, the wind entered the room behind him, and he saw that the brown branch turned half over towards him. It rattled faintly as it moved. He was just in time to rescue it from Smoke, who saw in the sound and movement an invitation to play. He pinned it out of reach upon the wall over the mantelpiece.

And it was just as he finished, that this sound of wind sighing through the dripping and leafless trees outside was followed by another sound — one that he recognised.... There was a rush and a leap, a swift, whistling roar — and the next second he found himself among the sunny fields of flowers that he knew, and heard the water lapping at his feet... through the Crack!

‘Everybody’s thin *somewhere*,’ was what he almost expected to hear; but what he did hear was another sentence, followed by merry and delicious laughter:

‘Everybody can be happy somewhere!’

And close in front of him, rising, it seemed, out of the reeds and waves and yellow sands, stood — that veiled Companion whom he knew to be a part of himself.

She was turned away from him so that he could not see her face, yet he instantly divined a movement of her whole body towards him. Something within himself rushed out to meet her halfway. His life stirred mightily. The thrill of discovery came close. The next second his arms were about her and she was looking straight into his eyes.

But her own eyes were no longer veiled; her laughing face was clear as the day; the figure that he held so close was Nixie, child and woman. If ever it can be possible for two beings to melt into one, it was possible then. Each possessed the other; each slipped into the other.

‘Face to face at last!’ he heard himself cry. ‘Bless your little fairy heart! Why in the world didn’t I guess you sooner?’

A flame of happiness sped through him, and grief ran away utterly. The sense of loss that had numbed his soul vanished. And when she only answered him by the old mischievous laughter, he asked again: ‘But how did you disguise yourself so well — your voice, and everything — ?

Even if your face *was* veiled I ought to have recognised you! It’s too wonderful!’

‘It was you who disguised me!’ she replied, standing up close in front of him, and playing with his waistcoat buttons as of old. ‘Your thoughts about me got twisted — sometimes. You thought too much. You should have *felt* only.’

‘They never shall again,’ he exclaimed.

‘They never can. We are face to face now.’

Paul turned to look again more closely. He saw her with extraordinary detail and vividness. It was indeed Nixie, but Nixie exactly as he had always wanted her, without quite knowing it himself; at least, without acknowledging it. No gulf of age was there to separate them now. She was the perfect Companion, for he had made her so. He smoothed her hair as they turned to walk by the river, and he caught the old childish perfume of it as it spread untidily over his shoulder, her eyes like dropped stars shining through it.

‘Isn’t it awfully jolly?’ she whispered: ‘we can have twice as many aventures now, and you can go on writing them for Jonah and Toby just the same as before, only faster.’

He felt her hand steal into his; his heart became most strangely merged with hers. He had known a similar experience in Canadian forests, when the beauty of Nature had sometimes caught him up till he scarcely felt himself distinct enough from it to realise that he was separate. He now knew himself as close to her as that. It was exquisite and yet so simple that a little child might have felt it — without perplexity. Perhaps it was precisely what children always *did* feel towards what they loved, animate or inanimate.

‘But how is it you can come so close?’ he asked, though he fancied that he thought, rather than spoke, the question.

‘Because, in the important sense, you are still a child,’ he caught the answer, ‘and always have been, and always will be.’

The whole world belonged to him. In the midst of the sea of sorrow he had discovered the little island of happiness.

‘We never can lose each other — *now*!’ he said.

‘As long as you think about me,’ she answered. ‘Please always think hard, veryhardindeed thoughts. Through the Crack you can find everything that’s lost — .'

' And we're through the Crack now.'

'Rather!'

CHAPTER XXVII

…. STRAIGHTWAY I was ‘ware,

So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move

Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;

And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,

‘Guess now who holds thee?’— ‘Death,’ I said.

But there The silver answer rang— ‘Not Death, but Love.’

E. B. B.

.... It was only when the sky grew dark and the shadow of clouds fell over that sunny landscape that he realised he was still standing half dressed beside a dying fire, and that through the open window behind him the cold night air brought discomfort that made him shiver. He drew the curtains, lit a candle, spoke a soft word or two to the curled-up forms of Mrs. Tompkyns and Smoke, who were far too busy in their own Crack-land to trouble about replying, and so finally got into bed.

He felt happier, strangely comforted. The wings of memory and phantasy, withdrawing softly, left a soothed feeling in his heart. In that region of creative imagination known as the ‘Crack’ he always found peace and at least a measure of joy. Until sleep should come to captain his forces, he deliberately turned the current of his thoughts to the work he was about to take up in London. Nixie, Joan, Dick — all helped him. His will erected an iron barrier against the insidious attacks of sadness — the disease which strikes at the roots of effort. He would dream his dreams, but also, he would do his work....

The shadows thickened about the house, crowding from the heart of winter. The fire died down. The room lay still. It was between one and two o’clock in the morning, when silence in the country is a real silence, and the darkness weighs. Chasing Smoke and Mrs. Tompkyns down the winding corridors of dream — Paul slept.

A faint sound in the room a little later made him stir in his sleep and smile. His lips moved, as though in that land of dreams where he wandered some one spoke to him and he answered. Then the sound was repeated, and he woke with a start, sat up in bed, and stared hard into the darkness.

The fire was quite out; nothing was visible but the dim frame of the window on his right where he had forgotten to draw the curtains. A glimmer of light revealed the sash. Thinking it must be the winter dawn, he was about to lie down again and resume his slumbers, when the sound that had first wakened him again made itself audible.

A slight shiver ran down his spine, for the sound seemed to bring over some of the wonder of his dreams into that dark and empty room. Then, with a tiny revelation of certainty, the knowledge came that he was wide awake, and that the sound was close in front of him. Moreover, he knew at once that it was neither Smoke nor Mrs. Tompkyns. It was a sound, deliberately produced, with conscious intelligence behind it. And it shot through him with the sweetness of music. It was like a breath of wind that rustled through a swinging branch — of a birch tree; as though such a branch waved to and fro softly above his head.

His first idea was that some one was in the room, and had taken down the spray of withered leaves from the wall; and he strained his eyes in the direction of the mantelpiece, trying to pierce the darkness. In vain, of course. All he could distinguish was that something moved gently to and fro like a spot of light — almost like a fire-fly, yet white — about the room.

From some deep region of sleep where he had just been, the atmosphere of dream was still, perhaps, about him. Yet this was no dream. There *was* somebody in the room with him, somebody alive, somebody who wished to claim his attention — who had already spoken to him before he woke. He knew it unmistakably; he even remembered what had been said to him while yet asleep! ‘How *can* you go on sleeping when I am here, trying to get at you?’

It was just as if the words still trembled on the air. Confusedly, scarcely aware what he did, yet already thrilling with happiness, his lips formed an answer:

‘Who are you? What is it you want?’

There was a pause of intense silence, during which his heart hammered in his temples. Then a very faint whisper gathered through the darkness:

‘I promised....’

The point of light wavered a little in the air, then came low and seemed to settle on the end of the bed. Into the clear and silent spaces of his lonely soul there swam with it the presence of some one who had never died, and who could never die.

‘Is that *you* — ?’ The name seemed incredible, for this was no Adventure through the Crack, yet he uttered it after an imperceptible moment of hesitation— ‘*Nixie*?’

Even then he could not believe an answer would be forthcoming. The light, however, moved slightly, and again came the faint tones of a voice, a singing voice:

‘Of course it is!’ There was a curious suggestion of huge distance about it, as though it travelled like an echo across vast spaces. ‘I’m here, close beside you; closer than ever before.’

He heard the words with what can only be described as a spiritual sensation — the peace and gratitude that follow the passion of strong prayer, of prayer that believes it will be heard and answered.

‘You know *now* — don’t you?’ continued the tiny singing voice, ‘because I’ve told you.’

‘Yes,’ he answered, also very low, ‘I know now.’ For at first he could think of nothing else to say. A huge excitement moved in him. Those invisible links of pure aspiration by which the soul knits herself inwardly to God seemed suddenly tightened in the depths of his being. He understood that this was a true thing, and possible.

‘You’ve come back — like the trees in the spring,’ he whispered stammeringly, after another pause, gazing as steadily as he could at the point of clear light so close in front of him.

‘The real part of me,’ she explained; ‘the real part of me has come back.’

‘The real part,’ he echoed in his bewilderment. He began to understand.

But even then it all seemed too utterly strange and wonderful to be true; and a subtle confirmation of the child’s presence that followed immediately only added at first to his increasing amazement. For both Smoke and Mrs. Tompkyns, he became aware, had jumped up softly upon the foot of the bed, and were sitting there, purring loudly with pleasure, close beneath the fleck of light. And their action made him seek the further confirmation of his own senses. He leaned forwards, hesitating in his bewilderment between the desire to find the matches and the desire to touch the speaker with his hands.

But even in that darkness his intention was divined instantly. The light slid away like a wee torch carried on wings.

‘No, Uncle Paul,’ whispered the voice farther off, ‘not the matches. Light makes it more difficult for me.’ He sank back against the pillows, frightened at the reality of it all. The old familiar name, too, ‘Uncle Paul,’ was almost more than he could bear.

‘Nixie — !’ he stammered, and then found it impossible to finish the sentence.

Then she laughed. He heard her silvery laughter in the room, exactly as he had heard it a hundred times before, spontaneous, mischievous, and absolutely natural. She was amused at his perplexity, at his want of faith; at the absurd difficulty he found in believing. He lay quite still, breathing hard, wondering what would come next; still trying to persuade himself it was all a dream, yet growing gradually convinced in spite of himself that it was not.

‘And don’t come too near me,’ he heard her voice across the room. ‘Never try and touch me, I mean. *Think of me at your centre.* That’s the real way to get near.’

Very slowly then, after that, he began to accept the Supreme Adventure. He talked. He asked questions, though never the obvious and detailed sort of questions it might have been expected he would ask. For it was now borne in upon him, as she said, that only her *real* part had come back, and that only *his* real part, therefore, was in touch with her. It was, so to speak, a colloquy of souls in which physical and material things had no interest. His very first question brought the truth of this home to him with singular directness. He asked her what the tiny light was that he saw moving to and fro like a little torch.

‘But I didn’t know there was a light,’ she answered. ‘Where I am it is all light! I see you perfectly. Only — you look so young, Uncle Paul! Just like a boy! About my own age, I mean.’

And it is impossible to describe the delight, the mystical rapture that came to him as he heard her. The words, ‘Where I am it is all light,’ brought with them a sudden sense of reality that was too convincing for him to doubt any longer. From her simple description he recognised a place that he knew. But, at the same time, he understood that it was no *place* in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather a *state* and a *condition.* He himself in his deepest dreams had been there too. That light had sometimes in brief moments of aspiration shone for him. And the curious sense of immense distance that came so curiously with her tiny voice came because there was really no distance at all. She was no longer conditioned by space or time. Those were limitations of life in the body, temporary scales of measurement adopted by the soul when dealing with temporary things. Whereas Nixie was free.

A sense of happiness deep as the sea, of peace, bliss, and perfect rest that could never know hurry or alarm, surged through him in a tide. He thought, with a thrill of anticipation, of the time when his own eyes would be opened, and he should see as clearly as she did. But instantly the rebuke came.

‘Oh! You must not think about that,’ she said with a laugh; ‘you have a lot to do first, a lot more adventures to go through!’

As she spoke the light slid nearer again and settled upon the foot of the bed. His thoughts were evidently the same as spoken words to her. She knew all that passed in his mind, the very feelings of his heart as well. This was indeed companionship and intimacy. He remembered how she had told him all about it in the Crack weeks ago, before he realised who she was, and before he knew her face to face. And at the same moment he noticed another curious detail of her presence, namely, that the little torch — for so he now called it to himself — in passing before the mirror produced no reflection in the glass. Yet, if his eyes could perceive it, there ought to have been a refraction from the mirror as well — a reflection! Did he then only perceive it with his interior vision? Was his spiritual sight already partially opened?

‘That’s your ‘terpretation of me — inside yourself,’ he caught her swift whisper in reply, for again she *heard* his thought; and he almost laughed out aloud with pleasure to notice the long word decapitated as her habit always was on earth. ‘In your thoughts I’m a sort of light, you see.’

The explanation was delightful. He understood perfectly. The thought of Nixie had always come to him, even in earthly life, in the terms of brightness. And his love marvelled to notice, too, that she still had the old piercing vision into the heart of things, and the characteristically graphic way of expressing her meaning.

The purring of the cats made itself audible. They were both ‘kneading’ the bed-clothes by his feet, as happy as though being stroked.

‘No, they don’t see,’ she explained the moment the thought entered his mind; ‘they only feel that I’m here. Lots of animals are like that. It’s the way dogs know ‘sti’ctively if a person’s good or bad.’ Oh, how the animals after this would knit him to her presence! No wonder he had already found comfort with them that no human being could give.... The thought of his sister flashed next into his brain — the difficulty of helping her —

‘I tried to get at her before I came here to you,’ he heard, ‘but her room was all dark. It was like trying to get inside a cloud. She’s cold and shadowy — and ever such a long way off. It’s diff’cult to explain.’

‘I think I understand,’ he whispered.

‘You can get closer than I can.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Of course. You must.’

It was Nixie’s happiness that seemed so wonderful and splendid to him. Her voice almost sang; and laughter slipped in between the shortest sentences even. Brightness, music, and pure joy were about her like an atmosphere.

He was breathing a rarefied air, cool, scented, and exhilarating. He had already known it when playing with the children and enjoying their very-wonderful-indeed aventures; only now it was raised to a still higher power. In its very essence he knew it.

‘Toby and Jonah are with me the moment they sleep,’ she continued, ever following his least thought. ‘The instant their bodies fold up they shoot across here to me. Toby comes easiest. She’s a girl, you see. And Daddy’s here too—’

‘Dick?’ he cried, memory and affection surging through him with a sudden passion.

‘Of course. You’ve thought about him so much.

He says you’ve always been close to each other—’

The voice broke off suddenly, and the torch of light moved to and fro as though agitated. Paul heard no sound, and saw no sign, but again, into the clear and silent spaces of his soul, now opened so marvellously, so blessedly to receive, there swam the consciousness of another Presence...

There was a long pause, while memory annihilated all the intervening years at a single stroke....

His mind was growing slightly confused with it all. His mortal intelligence wearied and faltered a little with the effort to understand how time and distance could be thus destroyed. He was not yet free as these others were free.

‘How is it, then, that you can stay?’ he asked presently, when the light held steady again. By ‘you’ he meant ‘both of you.’ Yet he did not say it. This was what seemed so wonderful in their perfect communion; words really were not necessary. Afterwards, indeed, he sometimes wondered whether he actually spoke at all.

‘I was going on — at first,’ came the soft answer, ‘when I heard something calling me, and found I couldn’t. I had something to do here.’

‘What?’ he ventured under his breath.

‘*You!*’ She laughed in his face, so to speak. ‘You, of course. Part of you is in me, so I couldn’t go on without you. But when you are ready, and have done your work, we'll go on together. Daddy is waiting, too. Oh, it's simply splendid — a very-splendid-indeed adventure, you see!' Again she laughed through that darkened room till it seemed filled with white light, and the light flooded his very soul as he heard her.

'You *will* wait, Nixie?' he asked.

'I *must* wait. Both of us must wait. We are all together, you see.'

And, after another long pause, he asked another question:

'This work, then, that keeps me here — ?'

'Your London boys, of course. There's no one in the whole world who can do it so well. You've been picked out for it; that's what really brought you home from America!' And she burst out into such a peal of laughter that Paul laughed with her. He simply couldn't help himself. He felt like singing at the same time. It was all so happy and reasonable and perfect.

'You've got the money and the time and the 'thusiasm,' she went on; 'and over here there are thousands and millions of children all watching you and clapping their hands and dancing for joy. I've told them all the Aventures you wrote, but they think this is the best of all — the London-Boys-Adventure!"

He felt his heart swell within him. It seemed that the child's hair was again about his eyes, her slender arms clasping his neck, and her blue eyes peering into his as when she begged him of old in the nursery or schoolroom for an adventure, a story.

'So you'll never give it up, will you, Uncle Paul?' she sang, in that tiny soft voice through the darkness.

'Never,' he said.

'Promise?'

'Promise,' he replied.

The thought of those 'thousands and millions' of children watching his work from the other side of death was one that would come back to strengthen him in the future hours of discouragement that he was sure to know.

And much more she told him besides. They talked, it seemed, for ever — yet said so little. Into mere moments — such was the swift and concentrated nature of their intimacy — they compressed hours of earthly conversation; for his thoughts were heard and answered as soon as born within him, and a whole train of ideas that the lips ordinarily stammer over in difficult detail crowded easily into a single expression — a thought, a desire, a question half uttered, and then a reply that comprehended all. There was no labour or weariness, no sense of effort.

Moreover, when at length he heard her faint whisper, ‘Now I must go,’ it conveyed no sense of departure or loss. She did not leave him. It was more as though he closed a much-loved book and replaced it in his pocket. The pictures evoked do not leave the mind because the cover is closed; they remain, on the contrary, to be absorbed by the heart Nixie’s silvery presence was *in him*; he would always feel her now, even when his thoughts seemed busy with outer activities.

The little torch flickered and was gone; but as Paul gazed into the darkness of the room he knew that the light had merely slipped down deep into himself to burn as an unfailing beacon at the centre of his soul. And then it was that he realised other curious details for the first time. Some of the more ordinary faculties of his mind, it seemed, had been in suspension during the amazing experience, while others had been exalted as in trance. For it now came to him that he had actually *seen* her — with a clearness that he had never known before. That torch lit up her little form as a lantern lights up a person holding it in darkness. Just as he had felt all the sweet and essential points of her personality, so also he had been vividly aware of her figure in the terms of sight — eyes, hair, sunburned little hands, and twinkling feet. Her very breath and perfume even!

If the working of his ordinary senses had been in abeyance so that he hardly knew the hunger for common sight and touch, he now realised that it was because they had been replaced by these higher senses with their keener, closer satisfaction. And this intimate knowledge of her was as superior to the ordinary methods as flying is to crawling — or, better still, as a draught of water in the throat is to dipping the fingers in the cup.

For who, indeed, shall define the standard of reality? And who, when the senses are such sorry reporters, shall declare with authority that one thing is false and could not happen, and another is true and actually did happen?

Experiences of the transcendental order are, perhaps, beyond the power of precise words to describe, for they are not common enough to have become incorporated into the language of a race. And words are clumsy and inadequate symbols at best. The deepest thoughts, as the deepest experiences, ever evade them. It is difficult to convey the sense of fierce reality the presence of Nixie brought to him. It flooded and covered him; spread through and over him like light; entered into his essential being to cherish and to feed, just as the body assimilates earthly nourishment. He absorbed her. She nourished while she blessed him.

She had told him the secret: *to think centrally.* He now began to understand how much nearer he could be to others by thinking strongly of them than by walking at their side. Physical touch is distant compared to the subtle intimacy of the desiring mind. The mystical conception of union with God came home to him as something practically possible.

Yet when he got up a few minutes later to write down the conversation as he remembered it, the mere lighting of the candle, the noise of the match, the dipping of his pen in the ink — all contrived somehow to bring him down to a lower order of things that dimmed most strangely the memory of what had just passed. Most of what he had heard escaped him. He could not frame it into words. All he could recapture is what has been here set down so briefly and baldly.

It then seemed to him — the thought laboured to and fro in his mind as he got back into bed and sleep came over him — that it was only the Higher Self in him that had been in communication with the child. The eternal part of him had talked with the eternal part of her. In the body, however, this was commonly submerged. Her presence had temporarily evoked it. It now had returned to its Throne at the core of his being.

All that he remembered of the colloquy was the little portion that, as it were, had filtered through into his normal self. The rest, the main part, however, was not lost. He had absorbed it. If he could not recall the actual words and language, he understood — it was his last thought before sleep caught him — that its *results* would remain for ever.

And those who have known similar experiences will understand without more words. The rest will never understand. Perhaps, after all, the best and purest form of memory is — *results*.

CHAPTER XXVIII

…. NE SON già morto; e ben ch'albergo cangi, resto in te vivo, ch' or mi ved i e piangi, se l'un neir altro amante si trasforma.

AND one of the clearest impressions that remained next morning when he woke was that he had actually *seen* her. The reality of it increased with the daylight instead of faded. While he dressed he sang to himself, until it occurred to him that his signs of joy might be misunderstood by any of the household who heard; and then he stopped singing and moved about the room, smiling and contented.

Something of the radiance of that little white torch still seemed in the air. The heavy gloom of the chill December morning could not smother it. Something of it remained too about him all day like a halo; looking out of his eyes; communicable, as it were, from the very surface of his skin to all with whom he came in contact. His sister, especially, and the children felt the comfort of his presence. They followed him about from room to room; they clung close; they were instinctively aware that peace and strength emanated from him, though little guessing the real source of his serene and tranquil atmosphere.

For, of course, he told no one of what had happened. During the day, indeed, it lay in him submerged and unassertive, like the presence of some great glowing secret, feeding the sources of energy for all his little outward duties and activities, yet never claiming individual attention itself. Only with the fall of night, when the doings of the day were instinctively laid aside like a garment no longer required, did it again swim up upon him out of the depths, and speak.

'Now!' he heard the tiny singing voice, 'we can be alone. Your body's tired. I can get closer to you.'

'I've felt you by me all day, though,' he said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

‘Of course,’ came the answering whisper, soft as moonlight, ‘because I never left you for a single moment. I was in everything you did — in your very words. Once or twice, I even got into mother too, *through you*, and made her feel better. Wasn’t that splendid?’

Paul longed to give the child one of his old hugs — to feel her little warm and sunny body pressed against his own. Instead, her laughter echoed suddenly all about the room.

‘That’s impossible now!’ he heard. ‘I’m ever so much closer this way. You’ll soon get used to it, you know!’

This spontaneous laughter was the music to which all their talks were set. He laughed too, and blew the candles out.

‘I tried very hard to say the true things,’ he murmured, referring to her remark about comforting his sister.

‘I know you did. That’s how I got into her — through you. You must go on and on trying. In the end we’ll get her all soft and happy again. She’ll feel me without knowing it.’

Suddenly it struck him that, although the room was dark, he did not see the light of the little torch as before. He missed it. He was just going to ask why it was absent when the child caught his thought and replied of her own accord:

‘Because it’s spread all over now, instead of being just a point. You are in it, I mean. There’s light everywhere about you now, and I see you much clearer than last time.’

The explanation described exactly what he felt himself.

‘Let them in, please,’ Nixie suddenly interrupted his thoughts again. ‘They’re both coming up the stairs. It was very naughty of you to forget them, you know.’

After a moment of puzzled hesitation he understood what she meant, and was out of bed and across the floor. He did not wait to light a candle, but opened the door and stood there waiting in the darkness. Almost at once two soft, furry things brushed past his feet as Smoke, followed by Mrs. Tompkyns, marched into the room, uttering that curious sharp sound of pleasure which is something between a purr and a cry. They disappeared among the shadows beyond the fireplace, and Paul sprang back into bed again pleased that they were there, yet annoyed with himself for having forgotten them.

‘But it was my fault *really*,’ she laughed. ‘I’ve been with them out in the garden, and they’ve only just got in through the pantry window. My presence excites them awfully. Oh, it’s all right,’ she added quickly, in reply to his further thought; ‘Barker’s very late to-night doing the silver. But he’ll shut the window before he goes.’

It was his turn to laugh. She had caught his thought about the window almost before it reached the surface of his mind. Moreover, he found that both Mrs. Tompkyns and Smoke had very cold wet soles under their padded little feet.

In this way, most strangely, sweetly, naturally, even the trivial details of their daily life as they had always known it together, intermingled with the talk that was often very earnest, mystical, and pregnant with meanings. It was in every sense a continuation of their former relationship, touched on her side with a greater knowledge — almost as though she had suddenly developed to the point she might have reached in time upon the earth; on his side, with a delicate sense of accepting guidance from some one with greater privileges than himself, who had come back on purpose to help and inspire him.

For more and more it seemed to partake of the nature of genuine inspiration. Speech came direct and swift as thought, without hesitation or stammering as in the flesh. She told him many things, often quaintly enough expressed, but that yet seemed to hold the kernel of deep truths. There had never been the least break in their companionship, it seemed.

‘I knew all this before,’ she said, after a singular exchange of questions and answers about the nature of communion with invisible sources of mood and feeling, ‘only I suppose my brain had not got big enough, or whatever it was, to tell it. Like your poets you used to tell me about who couldn’t find their rhymes, perhaps.’

And her laughter flowed about him in a rippling flood that instantly woke his own. They always laughed. They felt so happy. It was a communion between old souls that surely had bathed deeply in the experiences of life before they had become imprisoned in the particular bodies known as Paul Rivers and Margaret Christina Messenger.

He became convinced, too, more and more that she really did not speak at all — that no actual sound set the waves of air in motion — but that she put her words into him in the form of thoughts, and that he it was, in order to grasp them clearly, who clothed them with the symbols of sound and language. It was essentially of the nature of inspiration. She *blew* the ideas into his heart and mind.

And many things that he asked her were undoubtedly little more than his own thoughts, halfformed and vague, lying in the depths of him.

'Then, over there, where you now are, is it — more real? Are you, as it were, one stage nearer to the great Reality? What's it like — ?'

'It's through the real "Crack," I think,' she answered. 'Everything is here that I imagined — but *really* imagined — on earth. And people who imagined nothing, or wanted only the world, find very little here.'

'Then is the change very great — ?'

'It doesn't seem to me like a change at all. I've been here before for visits. Now I've come to stay, that's all!'

'You yourself have not changed?'

She roared with laughter, till he felt that his question was really absurd.

'Of course not! How can I change? I'm always Nixie, wherever I am!'

'But you feel different — ?' he insisted.

'I feel better,' she answered, still laughing. 'I feel awfully jolly.'

Then after a long pause he asked another question. It was really a question he was always asking in one form or another, only he had never yet put it so directly perhaps. He whispered it from a grave and solemn heart:

'Are you nearer to — God, do you think?'

It was a word he rarely used. In his conversations with the child on earth he had never once used it. She waited a long time before replying. Instinctively, very subtly, it came to him that she did not know exactly what he meant.

‘I’m *in* and *with* Everything there is — Everywhere,’ she said softly. ‘And I couldn’t possibly be nearer to anything than I am.’

More than that she could not explain, and Paul never asked similar questions again. He understood that they were really unanswerable.

And it was the same with other thoughts, thoughts referring to the fundamental conditions of temporal existence, that is. Nothing, for instance, made time and space seem less real than the way she answered questions involving one or other. Out of curiosity he had gone to the trouble of reading up other records of spirit communion — the literature (saving the mark) of Spiritualism brims over with them — and he had asked her some question with regard to the detailed geography there given.

‘But there’s no *place* at all where I am,’ the child laughed. ‘I am just *here.* There was no place really in our Aventures, was there? Place is only with you on earth!’

And another time, talking of the ‘future’ when he should come to join herself and Dick at the close of his earthly pilgrimage, she said between bursts of the merriest laughter he had ever known: ‘But that’s now! already! You come; you join us; we *are* all together — always!’

And when he insisted that he could not possibly be in two places at once, and reminded her that she had already told him she was ‘waiting’ for his arrival, the only reply he could get was this jolly laughter, and the assurance that he was ‘awfully muddled and c’fused’ and would ‘never understand it *that* way!’

The main thing these ‘silent’ conversations taught him seemed to be that Death brings no revolutionary change as regards character; the soul does not leap into a state much better or much worse than it knew before; the opportunities for discipline and development continue gradually just as they did in the body, only under different conditions; and there is no abrupt change into perfection on the one hand, or into desolation on the other. He gathered, too, that these ‘conditions’ depended very largely upon the kind of life — especially the kind of thought — that the personality had indulged on earth. The things that Nixie ‘imagined’ and yearned for, she found. His communion with her became, as time passed, more frequent and more real, and soon ceased to confine itself only to the quiet night hours. She was with him all day long, whenever he needed her. She guided him in a thousand unimportant details of his life, as well as in the bigger interests of his work in London with his waifs. And in murky London she was just as close to him as in the perfumed stillness of the Dorsetshire garden, or in the retirement of his own chamber....

And one singular feature of their alliance was that it continued even in sleep. For, sometimes, he would wake in the morning after what had been apparently a dreamless night, yet later in the day there would steal over him the memory of a long talk he had enjoyed with the child during the hours of so-called unconsciousness. Dreams, forgotten in the morning, often, of course, return in this fashion during the day. There is nothing new or unusual in it. Only with him it became so frequent that he now rose to the day's work with a delightful sense of anticipation: 'Perhaps later in the day I shall remember! Perhaps we have been together all night!'

And in this connection he came to notice two things: first, that after these nights together, at first forgotten, he woke wonderfully refreshed, blessed, peaceful in mind and body; and secondly, that what recalled the conversation later was always contact with some object or other that had been associated with the child. Thus — the picturesquely-mended socks, the medicine bottle for scratches, or the spray of birch leaves, now preserved between the pages of his Blake, never failed in this latter respect.

It was curious, too, how the alliance persisted and fortified itself during the repose of the body; as though, during sleep, the eternal portion of himself with which the child communed, enjoyed a greater measure of freedom. It recalled the closing lines of a sonnet he had always admired, though his own experience was true in a literal sense hardly contained, probably, in the heart of the poetess:

But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,
  When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,
    And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,
Must doff my will as raiment laid away —

With the first dream that comes with the first sleep
  I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.

He filled a book with these talks as the years passed, though to give them in more detail could serve little purpose but to satisfy a possible curiosity. They had value and authority for himself, but for the majority might seem to contain little sense, or even coherence. They expressed, of course, his own personal interpretation of life and the universe. And this was quite possibly poetic, queer, fantastic — for others. Yet it was his own. He had learned his own values in his own way, and was now engaged in sorting them out with Nixie's fairy help to guide him.

And all souls that find themselves probably do likewise. The strength and blessing they shed about them as a result is beneficial, but the close details of the process by which they have 'arrived' can only seem to the world at large unintelligible, possibly even ridiculous; and this late interior blossoming of Uncle Paul, though it actually happened, must seem to many a tissue of dreams knit together with a strange fantastic nonsense.

CHAPTER XXIX

DONNEZ VOS YEUX, donnez vos mains,
   Donnez vos mains surnaturelles;
Pour me conduire aux lendemains
Donnez vos yeux, donnez vos mains,
   Vos mains comme deux roses frôles.

AND thus, as the region where he met and held communion with the freed child seemed to draw deeper and deeper into his interior being, the reality and value of the experience increased.

That there was some kind of definite external link, however, was equally true; for the cats, as well as certain other of the animals, most certainly were aware sometimes of her presence. They showed it in many and curious ways. But it was distinctly a shock to Paul to learn one day from his sister that queer stories were afoot concerning himself; that some of the simple country folk declared they had seen ‘Mr Rivers walking with a young lady that was jest like Miss Nixie, only taller,’ who disappeared, however, the moment the observer approached. And the way the household felt her presence was, perhaps, not less remarkable, for more than one of the servants gave notice because the house had become ‘haunted,’ and there had been seen a ‘smallish white figure, all shiny and dancing,’ in his bedroom, or going down the corridor towards his study.

Perhaps the glamour of his vivid creative thought had cast its effect upon these untrained imaginations, so that his vision was temporarily communicated to them too. Or, perhaps, they had actually seen what they described. But, whatever the explanation may be, the effect upon himself was to increase, if that were possible, the reality of the whole occurrence....

And when the spring came round again with its charged memories of perfume, and sight, and the singing of its happy winds; when the tree-spirits returned to their garden haunts, all flaming with the beauty of new dresses gathered over-seas; when the silver birch tree combed out her glittering hair to the sun and shook her leaves in the very face of that old pine tree — then Paul felt in himself, too, the rejuvenation that was going forward in all the world around him. He tasted in his heart all the regenerative forces that were bursting into form and energy with the spring, and knew that the pain and desolation he had felt temporarily in the winter were only spiritual growing-pains and the passing distress of a soul forging its way outwards through development to the best possible Expression it could achieve.

For Nixie came back, too, gay and glorious like the rest of the world — sometimes dressed in blossoms of lilac or laburnum, sometimes with skirts of daisies and feet resting upon the Little Winds, sometimes with the soft hood of darkness over her head, the cloak of night about her shoulders, the stars caught all shivering in her hair, and dusk in the deeps of her eyes....

His life became ‘inner’ in the best sense — a Life within a Life; not given over to useless dreaming, but ever drawing from the inner one the sustenance that provided the driving force for the outer one: the mystic as man of action!

The Wind of Inspiration blew for him now always, and steadily; but it was no longer the little wind that stirred the measure of his personal emotion into stammering verse, but the big, eternal wind that ‘blew the stars to flame,’ and at the same time impelled him irresistibly along the path of High A’venture to the loss of Self in work for others...

‘Then why is it we are in the body — and spend so much time there?’ he asked in one of those intimate and mysterious conversations he held with the child to the very end of his life. ‘Why need the soul descend to such clumsy confinings?’

For their talk was very close now about ‘real things,’ and neither found any difficulty in the words of question or answer.

‘To get experience that can only be got through the pains of limitation,’ the answer sang within him, as he lay there upon the lawn beneath the cedars, absorbing the spring beauty. ‘Everything is doing the same thing everywhere — from Smoke, Mrs. Tompkyns and Madmerzelle, right up to you, me, Daddy, and the waifs! They all have a bit of Reality in them working upwards to God. Even stones and plants and trees are learning experiences they could learn only in those particular forms—'

'I know it! Of course, I know it!' Paul interrupted, with a rush of joy in his heart he could not restrain; 'but go on and tell me more, for I love to hear your little voice say it all.'

'It's only, perhaps, that the stones are learning patience and endurance; the flowers sweetness; the trees strength and comfort; and the rivers joy. Later they change about, so that in the end each 'Bit of Reality' has gathered all possible experiences in nature before it passes on into men and women.

'Think, Uncle Paul, of the joy of a stone, who after centuries of patience and endurance, cramped and pressed down, knows suddenly the freedom of wind and sea! Of the restlessness of flame that, after ages of leaping unsatisfied to the sky, learns the repose of a tree, moved only by the outside forces of wind and rain! And think of the delight of all these when they pass still further upwards and reach the stage of consciousness in animals and men — and in time enter the region of development where I — where you and I, and all we knew and loved, continue together, ever climbing, fighting, learning—'

It was curious. Afterwards he could never remember the way she ended the sentence. For the life of him he could not write it down. Definite recollection failed him, together with the loss of the actual words. Only the general sense remained in such a way as to open to his inner eye a huge vista of spiritual endeavour and advance that left him breathless and dizzy when he contemplated it, but at the same time charged most splendidly with courage and with hope.

'Then the pains of limitation,' he remembered asking, 'the anguish of impossible yearnings that vainly seek expression — these are symptoms of growth that in the end may produce something higher and nobler?'

Must!' he heard the answer amid a burst of happy laughter, as though from where she stood it were possible to look back upon earthly pangs and see them in the terms of joy; 'just like any other suffering! Like the stress of heat and pressure that turns common clay into gems—'

He interrupted her swiftly, high hopes crowding through his spirit like the rush of an army.

‘Then the life in us all — the “Bits of Reality” in you and me — have passed through all possible forms in their huge upward journey to reach our present stage — ?’ He stammered amid a multitude of golden memories, half captured.

‘Of course. Uncle Paul, of course!’ he caught deep, deep within him the silvery faint reply. ‘And your love and sympathy with trees, winds, hills, with all Nature, even with animals’ — again her laughter ran out to him like a song—’ is because you passed long ago through them all, and *half remember*. You still *feel with* them, and your imagination for ever strives to reconstruct the various beauty known in each stage. You remember in the depths of you the longings of every particular degree — even of the time when your soul was less advanced, and groping upwards as your London waifs grope even now. This is why your sympathy with them, too, is deep and true. You *half remember*.’

‘And Death,’ he whispered, trembling with the joy of infinite spiritual desire.

The answer sank down into him with the Little Wind that stirred the cedars overhead, or else rose singing up from the uttermost depths of his listening heart — to the end of his days he never could tell which.

‘What you call Death is only slipping through the Crack to a great deal more memory, and a great deal more power of seeing and telling — towards the greatest Expression that ever can be known. It is, I promise you faithfully, Uncle Paul, nothing but a verywonderfulindeed Adventure, after all!’

The Human Chord (1910)

First published in 1910, this horror novel introduces the protagonist Spinrobin, who answers an advertisement placed by the Rev. Philip Skale for a new secretary. Skale lives in a house in a remote corner of Wales, where he indulges his conviction that all physical matter is a manifestation of sound waves and that the right sounds could manipulate reality itself. To this end, Skale is conducting occult experiments into sound in the hope that he will be able to gain tremendous power by uncovering the ‘true name’ of all beings and things – even of the gods themselves…

The Welsh setting and the central theme of a man of learning using occult practices to discover an underlying truth about ancient cosmic forces reflect the influence of Arthur Machen – another writer of weird fiction, whom Blackwood greatly admired.

CONTENTS

Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV

To those who hear.

Chapter I

I

AS A BOY he constructed so vividly in imagination that he came to believe in the living reality of his creations: for everybody and everything he found names — real names. Inside him somewhere stretched immense playgrounds, compared to which the hay-fields and lawns of his father's estate seemed trivial: plains without horizon, seas deep enough to float the planets like corks, and "such tremendous forests" with "trees like tall pointed hilltops." He had only to close his eyes, drop his thoughts inwards, sink after them himself, call aloud and — see.

His imagination conceived and bore — worlds; but nothing in these worlds became alive until he discovered its true and living name. The name was the breath of life; and, sooner or later, he invariably found it.

Once, having terrified his sister by affirming that a little man he had created would come through her window at night and weave a peaked cap for himself by pulling out all her hairs "that hadn't gone to sleep with the rest of her body," he took characteristic measures to protect her from the said depredations. He sat up the entire night on the lawn beneath her window to watch, believing firmly that what his imagination had made alive would come to pass.

She did not know this. On the contrary, he told her that the little man had died suddenly; only, he sat up to make sure. And, for a boy of eight, those cold and haunted hours must have seemed endless from ten o'clock to four in the morning, when he crept back to his own corner of the night nursery. He possessed, you see, courage as well as faith and imagination.

Yet the name of the little man was nothing more formidable than "Winky!"

"You might have known he wouldn't hurt you, Teresa," he said. "Any one with that name would be light as a fly and awf'ly gentle — a regular dicky sort of chap!"

"But he'd have pincers," she protested, "or he couldn't pull the hairs out. Like an earwig he'd be. Ugh!"

"Not Winky! Never!" he explained scornfully, jealous of his offspring's reputation. "He'd do it with his rummy little fingers."

"Then his fingers would have claws at the ends!" she insisted; for no amount of explanation could persuade her that a person named Winky could be nice and gentle, even though he were "quicker than a second." She added that his death rejoiced her.

"But I can easily make another — such a nippy little beggar, and twice as hoppy as the first. Only I won't do it," he added magnanimously, "because it frightens you."

For to name with him was to create. He had only to run out some distance into his big mental prairie, call aloud a name in a certain commanding way, and instantly its owner would run up to claim it. Names described souls. To learn the name of a thing or person was to know all about them and make them subservient to his will; and "Winky" could only have been a very soft and furry little person, swift as a shadow, nimble as a mouse — just the sort of fellow who *would* make a conical cap out of a girl's fluffy hair … and love the mischief of doing it.

And so with all things: names were vital and important. To address beings by their intimate first names, beings of the opposite sex especially, was a miniature sacrament; and the story of that premature audacity of Elsa with Lohengrin never failed to touch his sense of awe. "What's in a name?" for him, was a significant question — a question of life or death. For to mispronounce a name was a bad blunder, but to name it wrongly was to miss it altogether. Such a thing had no real life, or at best a vitality that would soon fade. Adam knew that! And he pondered much in his childhood over the difficulty Adam must have had "discovering" the correct appellations for some of the queerer animals….

As he grew older, of course, all this faded a good deal, but he never quite lost the sense of reality in names — the significance of a true name, the absurdity of a false one, the cruelty of mispronunciation. One day in the far future, he knew, some wonderful girl would come into his life, singing her own true name like music, her whole personality expressing it just as her lips framed the consonants and vowels — and he would love her. His own name, ridiculous and hateful though it was, would sing in reply. They would be in harmony together in the literal sense, as necessary to one another as two notes in the same chord….

So he also possessed the mystical vision of the poet. What he lacked — such temperaments always do — was the sense of proportion and the careful balance that adjusts cause and effect. And this it is, no doubt, that makes his adventures such “hard sayings.” It becomes difficult to disentangle what actually did happen from what conceivably might have happened; what he thinks he saw from what positively *was*.

His early life — to the disgust of his Father, a poor country squire — was a distressing failure. He missed all examinations, muddled all chances, and finally, with £50 a year of his own, and no one to care much what happened to him, settled in London and took any odd job of a secretarial nature that offered itself. He kept to nothing for long, being easily dissatisfied, and ever on the look out for the “job” that might conceal the kind of adventure he wanted. Once the work of the moment proved barren of this possibility, he wearied of it and sought another. And the search seemed prolonged and hopeless, for the adventure he sought was not a common kind, but something that should provide him with a means of escape from a vulgar and noisy world that bored him very much indeed. He sought an adventure that should announce to him a new heaven and a new earth; something that should confirm, if not actually replace, that inner region of wonder and delight he reveled in as a boy, but which education and conflict with a prosaic age had swept away from his nearer consciousness. He sought, that is, an authoritative adventure of the soul.

To look at, one could have believed that until the age of twenty-five he had been nameless, and that a committee had then sat upon the subject and selected the sound best suited to describe him: Spinrobin — Robert. For, had he never seen himself, but run into that inner prairie of his and called aloud “Robert Spinrobin,” an individual exactly resembling him would surely have pattered up to claim the name.

He was slight, graceful, quick on his feet and generally alert; took little steps that were almost hopping, and when he was in a hurry gave him the appearance of “spinning” down the pavement or up the stairs; always wore clothes of some fluffy material, with a low collar and bright red tie; had soft pink cheeks, dancing grey eyes and loosely scattered hair, prematurely thin and unquestionably like feathers. His hands and feet were small and nimble. When he stood in his favorite attitude with hands plunged deep in his pockets, coat-tails slightly spread and flapping, head on one side and hair disordered, talking in that high, twittering, yet very agreeable voice of his, it was impossible to avoid the conclusion that here was — well — Spinrobin, Bobby Spinrobin, "on the job."

For he took on any "job" that promised adventure of the kind he sought, and the queerer the better. As soon as he found that his present occupation led to nothing, he looked about for something new — chiefly in the newspaper advertisements. Numbers of strange people advertised in the newspapers, he knew, just as numbers of strange people wrote letters to them; and Spinny — so he was called by those who loved him — was a diligent student of the columns known as "Agony" and "Help wanted." Whereupon it came about that he was aged twenty-eight, and out of a job, when the threads of the following occurrence wove into the pattern of his life, and "led to something" of a kind that may well be cause for question and amazement.

The advertisement that formed the bait read as follows: —

"WANTED, by Retired Clergyman, Secretarial Assistant with courage and imagination. Tenor voice and some knowledge of Hebrew essential; single; *unworldly*. Apply Philip Skale," — and the address.

Spinrobin swallowed the bait whole. "Unworldly" put the match, and he flamed up. He possessed, it seemed, the other necessary qualifications; for a thin tenor voice, not unmusical, was his, and also a smattering of Hebrew which he had picked up at Cambridge because he liked the fine, high-sounding names of deities and angels to be found in that language. Courage and imagination he lumped in, so to speak, with the rest, and in the gilt-edged diary he affected he wrote: "Have taken on Skale's odd advertisement. I like the man's name. The experience may prove an adventure. While there's change, there's hope." For he was very fond of turning proverbs to his own use by altering them, and the said diary was packed with absurd misquotations of a similar kind.

II

A singular correspondence followed, in which the advertiser explained with reserve that he wanted an assistant to aid him in certain experiments in sound, that a particular pitch and quality of voice was necessary (which he could not decide until, of course, he had heard it), and that the successful applicant must have sufficient courage and imagination to follow a philosophical speculation “wheresoever it may lead,” and also be “so far indifferent to worldly success as to consider it of small account compared to spiritual knowledge — especially if such knowledge appeared within reach and involved worldly sacrifices.” He further added that a life of loneliness in the country would have to be faced, and that the man who suited him and worked faithfully should find compensation by inheriting his own “rather considerable property when the time came.” For the rest he asked no references and gave none. In a question of spiritual values references were mere foolishness. Each must judge intuitively for himself.

Spinrobin, as has been said, bit. The letters, written in a fine scholarly handwriting, excited his interest extraordinarily. He imagined some dreamer-priest possessed by a singular hobby, searching for things of the spirit by those devious ways he had heard about from time to time, a little mad probably into the bargain. The name Skale sounded to him big, yet he somehow pictured to himself an ascetic-faced man of small stature pursuing in solitude some impossible ideal. It all attracted him hugely with its promise of out-of-the-way adventure. In his own phrase it “might lead to something,” and the hints about “experiments in sound” set chords trembling in him that had not vibrated since the days of his boyhood’s belief in names and the significance of names. The salary, besides, was good. He was accordingly thrilled and delighted to receive in reply to his last letter a telegram which read: “Engage you month’s trial both sides. Take single ticket. Skale.”

“I like that ‘take single ticket,’” he said to himself as he sped westwards into Wales, dressed in his usual fluffy tweed suit and anarchist tie. Upon his knees lay a brand new Hebrew grammar which he studied diligently all the way to Cardiff, and still carried in his hands when he changed into the local train that carried him laboriously into the desolation of the Pontwaun Mountains. “It looks as though he approved of me already. My name apparently hasn’t put him off as it does most people. Perhaps, through it, he divines the real me!”

He smoothed down his rebellious hair as he neared the station in the dusk; but he was surprised to find only a rickety little cart drawn by a donkey sent to meet him (the house being five miles distant in the hills), and still more surprised when a huge figure of a man, hatless, dressed in knickerbockers, and with a large, floating grey beard, strode down the platform as he gave up his ticket to the station-master and announced himself as Mr. Philip Skale. He had expected the small, foxy-faced individual of his imagination, and the shock momentarily deprived him of speech.

“Mr. Spinrobin, of course? I am Mr. Skale — Mr. Philip Skale.”

The voice can only be described as booming, it was so deep and vibrating; but the smile of welcome, where it escaped with difficulty from the network of beard and moustaches, was winning and almost gentle in contradistinction to the volume of that authoritative voice. Spinrobin felt slightly bewildered — caught up into a whirlwind that drove too many impressions through his brain for any particular one to be seized and mastered. He found himself shaking hands — Mr. Skale, rather, shaking his, in a capacious grasp as though it were some small indiarubber ball to be squeezed and flung away. Mr. Skale flung it away, he felt the shock up the whole length of his arm to the shoulder. His first impressions, he declares, he cannot remember — they were too tumultuous — beyond that he liked both smile and voice, the former making him feel at home, the latter filling him to the brim with a peculiar sense of well-being. Never before had he heard his name pronounced in quite the same way; it sounded dignified, even splendid, the way Mr. Skale spoke it. Beyond this general impression, however, he can only say that his thoughts and feelings “whirled.” Something emanated from this giant clergyman that was somewhat enveloping and took him off his feet. The keynote of the man had been struck at once.

“How do you do, sir? This *is* the train you mentioned, I think?” Spinrobin heard his own thin voice speaking, by way, as it were, of instinctive apology that he should have put such a man to the trouble of coming to meet him. He said “sir,” it seemed unavoidable; for there was nothing of the clergyman about him — bishop, perhaps, or archbishop, but no suggestion of vicar or parish priest. Somewhere, too, in his presentment he felt dimly, even at the first, there was an element of the incongruous, a meeting of things not usually found together. The vigorous open-air life of the mountaineer spoke in the great muscular body with the broad shoulders and clean, straight limbs; but behind the brusqueness of manner lay the true gentleness of fine breeding.

And even here, on this platform of the lonely mountain station, Spinrobin detected the atmosphere of the scholar, almost of the recluse, shot through with the strange fires that dropped from the large, lambent, blue eyes. All these things rushed over the thrilled little secretary with an effect, as already described, of a certain bewilderment, that left no single, dominant impression. What remained with him, perhaps, most vividly, he says, was the quality of the big blue eyes, their luminosity, their far-seeing expression, their kindliness. They were the eyes of the true visionary, but in such a personality they proclaimed the mystic who had retained his health of soul and body. Mr. Skale was surely a visionary, but just as surely a wholesome man of action — probably of terrific action. Spinrobin felt irresistibly drawn to him.

“It is not unpleasant, I trust,” the other was saying in his deep tones, “to find some one to meet you, and,” he added with a genial laugh, “to counteract the first impression of this somewhat melancholy and inhospitable scenery.” His arm swept out to indicate the dreary little station and the bleak and lowering landscape of treeless hills in the dusk.

The new secretary made some appropriate reply, his sense of loneliness already dissipated in part by the unexpected welcome. And they fell to arrangements about the luggage. “You won’t mind walking,” said Mr. Skale, with a finality that anticipated only agreement. “It’s a short five miles. The donkey-cart will take the portmanteau.” Upon which they started off at a pace that made the little man wonder whether he could possibly keep it up. “We shall get in before dark,” explained the other, striding along with ease, “and Mrs. Mawle, my housekeeper, will have tea ready and waiting for us.” Spinrobin followed, panting, thinking vaguely of the other employers he had known — philanthropists, bankers, ambitious members of Parliament, and all the rest — commonplace individuals to a man; and then of the immense and towering figure striding just ahead, shedding about him this vibrating atmosphere of power and whirlwind, touched so oddly here and there with a vein of gentleness that was almost sweetness. Never before had he known any human being who radiated such vigor, such big and beneficent fatherliness, yet for all the air of kindliness something, too, that touched in him the sense of awe. Mr. Skale, he felt, was a very unusual man.

They went on in the gathering dusk, talking little but easily. Spinrobin felt "taken care of." Usually he was shy with a new employer, but this man inspired much too large a sensation in him to include shyness, or any other form of petty self-consciousness. He felt more like a son than a secretary. He remembered the wording of the advertisement, the phrases of the singular correspondence — and wondered. "A remarkable personality," he thought to himself as he stumbled through the dark after the object of his reflections; "simple — yet tremendous! A giant in all sorts of ways probably—" Then his thought hesitated, floundered. There was something else he divined yet could not name. He felt out of his depth in some entirely new way, in touch with an order of possibilities larger, more vast, more remote than any dreams his imagination even had yet envisaged. All this, and more, the mere presence of this retired clergyman poured into his receptive and eager little soul.

And very soon it was that these nameless qualities began to assert themselves, completing the rout of Spinrobin's moderate powers of judgment. No practical word as to the work before them, or the duties of the new secretary, had yet passed between them. They walked along together, chatting as equals, acquaintances, almost two friends might have done. And on the top of the hill, after a four-mile trudge, they rested for the first time, Spinrobin panting and perspiring, trousers tucked up and splashed yellow with mud; Mr. Skale, legs apart, beard flattened by the wind about his throat, and thumbs in the slits of his waistcoat as he looked keenly about him over the darkening landscape. Treeless and desolate hills rose on all sides. A few tumbled-down cottages of grey stone lay scattered upon the lower slopes among patches of shabby and forlorn cultivation. Here and there an outcrop of rock ran skywards into somber and precipitous ridges. The October wind passed to and fro over it all, mournfully singing, and driving loose clouds that seemed to drop weighted shadows among the peaks.

III

And it was here that Mr. Skale stopped abruptly, looked about him, and then down at his companion.

“Bleak and lonely — this great spread of bare mountain and falling cliff,” he observed half to himself, half to the other; “but fine, very, very fine.” He exhaled deeply, then inhaled as though the great draught of air was profoundly satisfying. He turned to catch his companion’s eye. “There’s a savage and desolate beauty here that uplifts. It helps the mind to dwell upon the full sweep of life instead of getting dwarfed and lost among its petty details. Pretty scenery is not good for the soul.” And again he inhaled a prodigious breastful of the mountain air. “This is.”

“But an element of terror in it, perhaps, sir,” suggested the secretary who, truth to tell, preferred his scenery more smiling, and who, further, had been made suddenly aware that in this somber setting of bleak and elemental nature the great figure of his future employer assumed a certain air of grandeur that was a little too awe-inspiring to be pleasant.

“In all profound beauty there must be that,” the clergyman was saying; “fine terror, I mean, of course — just enough to bring out the littleness of man by comparison.”

“Perhaps, yes,” agreed Spinrobin. His own insignificance seemed peculiarly apparent at that moment in contrast to Mr. Skale who had become part and parcel of the rugged landscape. Spinrobin was a lost atom whirling somewhere outside on his own account, whereas the other seemed oddly in touch with it, almost merged and incorporated into it. With those deep breaths the clergyman absorbed something of this latent power about them — then gave it out again. It broke over his companion like a wave. Elemental force of some kind emanated from that massive human figure beside him.

The wind came tearing up the valley and swept past them with a rush as of mighty wings. Mr. Skale drew attention to it. “And listen to that!” he said. “How it leaps, singing, from the woods in the valley up to those gaunt old cliffs yonder!” He pointed. His beard blew suddenly across his face. With his bare head and shaggy flying hair, his big eyes and bold aquiline nose, he presented an impressive figure. Spinrobin watched him with growing amazement, aware that an enthusiasm scarcely warranted by the wind and scenery had passed into his manner. In his own person, too, he thought he experienced a birth of something similar — a little wild rush of delight he was unable to account for. The voice of his companion, pointing out the house in the valley below, again interrupted his thoughts.

“How the mountains positively eat it up. It lies in their very jaws,” and the secretary’s eyes, traveling into the depths, made out a cluster of grey stone chimneys and a clearing in the woods that evidently represented lawns. The phrase “courage and imagination” flashed unbidden into his mind as he realized the loneliness of the situation, and for the hundredth time he wondered what in the world could be the experiments with sound that this extraordinary man pursued in this isolated old mansion among the hills.

“Buried, sir, rather,” he suggested. “I can only just see it—”

“And inaccessible,” Mr. Skale interrupted him. “Hard to get at. No one comes to disturb; an ideal place for work. In the hollows of these hills a man may indeed seek truth and pursue it, for the world does not enter here.” He paused a moment. “I hope, Mr. Spinrobin,” he added, turning towards him with that gentle smile his shaggy visage sometimes wore, “I hope you will not find it too lonely. We have no visitors, I mean; nothing but our own little household of four.”

Spinrobin smiled back. Even at this stage he admits he was exceedingly anxious to suit. Mr. Skale, in spite of his marked peculiarities, inspired him with confidence. His personal attraction was growing every minute; that vague awe he roused probably only increased it. He wondered who the “four” might be.

“There’s nothing like solitude for serious work, sir,” replied the younger man, stifling a passing uneasiness.

And with that they plunged down the hillside into the valley, Mr. Skale leading the way at a terrific pace, shouting out instructions and warnings from time to time that echoed from the rocks as though voices followed them down from the mountains. The darkness swallowed them, they left the wind behind; the silence that dwells in the folded hills fell about their steps; the air grew less keen; the trees multiplied, gathering them in with fingers of mist and shadow. Only the clatter of their boots on the rocky path, and the heavy bass of the clergyman’s voice shouting instructions from time to time, broke the stillness. Spinrobin followed the big dark outline in front of him as best he could, stumbling frequently. With countless little hopping steps he dodged along from point to point, a certain lucky nimbleness in his twinkling feet saving him from many a tumble.

“All right behind there?” Mr. Skale would thunder.

“All right, thanks, Mr. Skale,” he would reply in his thin tenor,
“I’m coming.”

“Come along, then!” And on they would go faster than before, till in due course they emerged from the encircling woods and reached the more open ground about the house. Somehow, in the jostling relations of the walk, a freedom of intercourse had been established that no amount of formal talk between four walls could have accomplished. They scraped their dirty boots vigorously on the iron mat.

“Tired?” asked the clergyman, kindly.

“Winded, Mr. Skale, thank you — nothing more,” was the reply. He looked up at the square mass of the house looming dark against the sky, and the noise his companion made opening the door — the actual rattle of the iron knob did it — suddenly brought to him a clear realization of two things: First, he understood that the whole way from the station Mr. Skale had been watching him closely, weighing, testing, proving him, though by ways and methods so subtle that they had escaped his observation at the time; secondly, that he was already so caught in the network of this personality, vaster and more powerful than his own, that escape if he desired it would be exceedingly difficult. Like a man in a boat upon the upper Niagara river, he already felt the tug and suction of the current below — the lust of a great adventure drawing him forward. Mr. Skale’s hand upon his shoulder as they entered the house was the symbol of *that*. The noise of the door closing behind him was the passing of the last bit of quiet water across which a landing to the bank might still have been possible.

Faint streamers from the dark, inscrutable house of fear reached him even then and left their vague, undecipherable signatures upon the surface of his soul. The forces that vibrated so strangely in the atmosphere of Mr. Skale were already playing about his own person, gathering him in like a garment. Yet while he shuddered, he liked it. Was he not already losing something of his own insignificant and diminutive self?

IV

The clergyman, meanwhile, had closed the heavy door, shutting out the darkness, and now led the way across a large, flagged hall into a room, ablaze with lamp and fire, the walls lined thickly with books, furnished cozily if plainly. The laden tea table, and a kettle hissing merrily on the hob, were pleasant to look upon, but what instantly arrested the gaze of the secretary was the face of the old woman in cap and apron — evidently the housekeeper already referred to as “Mrs.” Mawle — who stood waiting to pour out tea. For about her worn and wrinkled countenance there lay an indefinable touch of something that hitherto he had seen only in pictures of the saints by the old masters. What attracted his attention, and held it so arrestingly, was this singular expression of happiness, aye, of more than mere happiness — of joy and peace and blessed surety, rarely, if ever, seen upon a human face alive, and only here and there suggested behind that mask of repose which death leaves so tenderly upon the features of those few who have lived their lives to noblest advantage.

Spinrobin caught his breath a little, and stared. Aged and lined as it unquestionably was, he caught that ineffable suggestion of radiance about it which proclaimed an inner life that had found itself and was in perfect harmony with outer things: a life based upon certain knowledge and certain hope. It wore a gentle whiteness he could find only one word to describe — glory. And the moment he saw it there flashed across him the recognition that this was what Mr. Skale also possessed. That giant, athletic, vigorous man, and this bent, worn old woman both had it. He wondered with a rush of sudden joy what produced it; — whether it might perhaps one day be his too. The flame of his own spirit leapt within him.

And, so wondering, he turned to look at the clergyman. In the softer light of fire and lamp his face had the appearance of forty rather than sixty as he had first judged; the eyes, always luminous, shone with health and enthusiasm; a great air of youth and vitality glowed about him. It was a fine head with that dominating nose and the shaggy tangle of hair and beard; very big, fatherly and protective he looked, a quite inexpressible air of tenderness mingled in everywhere with the strength. Spinrobin felt immensely drawn to him as he looked. With such a leader he could go anywhere, do anything. There, surely, was a man whose heart was set not upon the things of this world.

An introduction to the housekeeper interrupted his reflections; it did not strike him as at all out of the way; doubtless she was more mother than domestic to the household. At the name of "Mrs." Mawle (courtesy-title, obviously), he rose and bowed, and the old woman, looking from one to the other, smiled becomingly, curtseyed, put her cap straight, and turned to the teapot again. She said nothing.

"The only servant I have, practically," explained the clergyman, "cook, butler, housekeeper and tyrant all in one; and, with her niece, the only other persons in the house besides ourselves. A very simple *ménage*, you see, Mr. Spinrobin. I ought to warn you, too, by-the-by," he added, "that she is almost stone deaf, and has only got the use of one arm, as perhaps you noticed. Her left arm is" — he hesitated for a fraction of a second— "withered."

A passing wonder as to what the niece would be like accompanied the swallowing of his buttered toast and tea, but the personalities of Mr. Skale and his housekeeper had already produced emotions that prevented this curiosity acquiring much strength. He could deal with nothing more just yet. Bewilderment obstructed the way, and in his room before dinner he tried in vain to sort out the impressions that so thickly flooded him, though without any conspicuous degree of success. The walls of his bedroom, like those of corridor and hall, were bare; the furniture solid and old-fashioned; scanty, perhaps, yet more than he was accustomed to; and the spaciousness was very pleasant after the cramped quarters of stuffy London lodgings. He unpacked his few things, arranged them with neat precision in the drawers of the tallboy, counted his shirts, socks, and ties, to see that all was right, and then drew up an armchair and toasted his toes before the comforting fire. He tried to think of many things, and to decide numerous little questions roused by the events of the last few hours; but the only thing, it seems, that really occupied his mind, was the rather overpowering fact that he was — with Mr. Skale and in Mr. Skale's house; that he was there on a month's trial; that the nature of the work in which he was to assist was unknown, immense, singular; and that he was already being weighed in the balances by his uncommon and gigantic employer. In his mind he used this very adjective. There was something about the big clergyman — titanic.

He was in the middle of a somewhat jumbled consideration about "Knowledge of Hebrew — tenor voice — courage and imagination —

unworldly," and so forth, when a knock at the door announced Mrs. Mawle who came to inform him that dinner was ready. She stood there, a motherly and pleasant figure in black, and she addressed him in the third person. "If Mr. Spinrobin will please to come down," she said, "Mr. Skale is waiting. Mr. Skale is always *quite* punctual." She always spoke thus, in the third person; she never used the personal pronoun if it could be avoided. She preferred the name direct, it seemed. And as Spinrobin passed her on the way out, she observed further, looking straight into his eyes as she said it: "and should Mr. Spinrobin have need of anything, *that*," indicating it, "is the bell that rings in the housekeeper's room. Mrs. Mawle can see it wag, though she can't hear it. Day or night," she added with a faint curtsey, "and no trouble at all, just as with the other gentlemen—"

So there had been other gentlemen, other secretaries! He thanked her with a nod and a smile, and hurried pattering downstairs in a neat blue suit, black silk socks and a pair of bright new pumps, Mr. Skale having told him not to dress. The phrase "day or night," meanwhile, struck him as significant and peculiar. He remembered it later. At the moment he merely noted that it added one more to the puzzling items that caused his bewilderment.

V

Before he had gone very far, however, there came another — crowningly perplexing. For he was halfway down the darkened passage, making for the hall that glimmered beyond like the mouth of a cave, when, without the smallest warning, he became suddenly conscious that something attractive and utterly delicious had invaded the stream of his being. It came from nowhere — inexplicably, and at first it took the form of a naked sensation of delight, keen as a thrill of boyhood days. There passed into him very swiftly something that satisfied. "I mean, whatever it was," he says, "I couldn't have asked or wanted more of it. It was all there, complete, supreme, sufficient." And the same instant he saw close beside him, in the comparative gloom of the narrow corridor, a vivid, vibrating picture of a girl's face, pale as marble, of flower-like beauty, with dark voluminous hair and large grey eyes that met his own from behind a wavering net of eyelashes. Down to the shoulders he saw her.

Erect and motionless she stood against the wall to let him pass — this slim young girl whose sudden and unexpected presence had so electrified him.

Her eyes followed him like those of a picture, but she neither bowed nor curtseyed, and the only movement she made was the slight turning of the head and eyes as he went by. It was extraordinarily effective, this silent and delightful introduction, for swift as lightning, and with lightning's terrific and incalculable surety of aim, she leapt into his heart with the effect of a blinding and complete possession.

It was, of course, he realized, the niece — the fourth member of the household, and the first clear thought to disentangle itself from the resultant jumble of emotions was his instinctive wonder what her name might be. How was this delightful apparition called? This was the question that ran and danced in his blood. In another minute he felt sure he would discover it. It must begin (he felt sure of that) with an M.

He did not pause, or alter his pace. He made no sign of recognition. Their eyes swallowed each other for a brief moment as he passed — and then he was pattering with quick, excited steps down the passage beyond, and the girl was left out of sight in the shadows behind him. He did not even turn back to look, for in some amazing sense she seemed to move on beside him, as though some portion of her had merged into his being. He carried her on with him. Some sweet and marvelous interchange they had undergone together. He felt strangely blessed, soothed inwardly, made complete, and more than twice on the way down the name he knew must belong to her almost sprang up and revealed itself — yet never quite. He knew it began with M, even with Mir — but could get nothing more. The rest evaded him. He divined only a portion of the name. He had seen only a portion of her form.

The first syllable, however, sang in him with an exquisitely sweet authority. He was aware of some glorious new thing in the penetralia of his little spirit, vibrating with happiness. Some portion of himself sang with it. "For it really did vibrate," he said, "and no other word describes it. It vibrated like music, like a string; as though when I passed her she had taken a bow and drawn it across the strings of my inmost being to make them sing…."

"Come," broke in the sonorous voice of the clergyman whom he found standing in the hall; "I've been waiting for you."

It was said, not complainingly nor with any idea of fault-finding, but rather — both tone and manner betrayed it — as a prelude to something of importance about to follow. Somewhat impatiently Mr. Skale took his companion by the arm and led him forwards; on the stone floor Spinrobin's footsteps sounded light and dancing, like a child's. The clergyman strode. At the dining room door he stopped, turning abruptly, and at the same instant the figure of the young girl glided noiselessly towards them from the mouth of the dark corridor where she had been waiting.

Her entry, again, was curiously effective; like a beautiful thought in a dream she moved into the hall, and into Spinrobin's life. Moreover, as she came wholly into view in the light, he felt, as positively as though he heard it uttered, that he knew her name complete. The first syllable had come to him in the passageway when he saw her partly, and the feeling of dread that "Mir—" might prove to be part of "Miranda," "Myrtle," or some other enormity, passed instantly. These would only have been gross and cruel misnomers. Her right name — the only one that described her soul — must end, as it began, with M. It flashed into his mind, and at the same moment Mr. Skale picked it off his very lips.

"Miriam," he said in deep tones, rolling the name along his mouth so as to extract every shade of sound belonging to it, "this is Mr. Spinrobin about whom I told you. He is coming, I hope, to help us."

VI

At first Spinrobin was only aware of the keen delight produced in him by the manner of Skale's uttering her name, for it entered his consciousness with a murmuring, singing sound that continued on in his thoughts like a melody. His racing blood carried it to every portion of his body. He heard her name, not with his ears alone but with his whole person — a melodious, haunting phrase of music that thrilled him exquisitely. Next, he knew that she stood close before him, shaking his hand, and looking straight into his eyes with an expression of the most complete trust and sympathy imaginable, and that he felt a well-nigh irresistible desire to draw her yet closer to him and kiss her little shining face. Thirdly — though the three impressions were as a matter of fact almost simultaneous — that the huge figure of the clergyman stood behind them, watching with the utmost intentness and interest, like a keen and alert detective eager for some betrayal of evidence, inspired, however, not by mistrust, but by a very zealous sympathy.

He understood that this meeting was of paramount importance in Mr. Skale's purpose.

"How do you do, Mr. Spinrobin," he heard a soft voice saying, and the commonplace phrase served to bring him back to a more normal standard of things. But the tone in which she said it caused him a second thrill almost more delightful than the first, for the quality was low and fluty, like the gentle note of some mellow wind instrument, and the caressing way she pronounced his name was a revelation. Mr. Skale had known how to make it sound dignified, but this girl did more — she made it sound alive. "I will give thee a new name" flashed into his thoughts, as some memory-cell of boyhood discharged its little burden most opportunely and proceeded to refill itself.

The smile of happiness that broke over Spinrobin's face was certainly reflected in the eyes that gazed so searchingly into his own, without the smallest sign of immodesty, yet without the least inclination to drop the eyelids. The two natures ran out to meet each other as naturally as two notes of music run to take their places in a chord. This slight, blue-eyed youth, light of hair and sensitive of spirit, and this slim, dark-skinned little maiden, with the voice of music and the wide-open grey eyes, understood one another from the very first instant their atmospheres touched and mingled; and the big Skale, looking on intently over their very shoulders, saw that it was good and smiled down upon them, too, in his turn.

"The harmony of souls and voices is complete," he said, but in so low a tone that the secretary did not hear it. Then, with a hand on a shoulder of each, he half pushed them before him into the dining room, his whole face running, as it were, into a single big smile of contentment. The important event had turned out to his entire satisfaction. He looked like some beneficent father, well pleased with his two children.

But Spinrobin, as he moved beside the girl and heard the rustle of her dress that almost touched him, felt as though he stood upon a sliding platform that was moving ever quicker, and that the adventure upon which he was embarked had now acquired a momentum that nothing he could do would ever stop. And he liked it. It would carry him out of himself into something very big….

And at dinner, where he sat opposite to the girl and studied her face closely, Mr. Skale, he was soon aware, was occupied in studying the two of them even more closely. He appeared always to be listening to their voices. They spoke little enough, however, only their eyes met continually, and when they did so there was no evidence of a desire to withdraw. Their gaze remained fastened on one another, on her part without shyness, without impudence on his. That Mr. Skale wished for them an intimate and even affectionate understanding was evident, and the secretary warmed to him on that account more than ever, if on no other.

It surprised him too — when he thought of it, which was rarely — that a girl who was perforce of humble origin could carry herself with an air of such complete and natural distinction, and prove herself so absolutely "the lady." For there was something about her of greater value than any mere earthly rank or class could confer; her spirit was in its very essence distinguished, perfectly simple, yet strong with a great and natural pride. It never occurred to her soul to doubt its own great value — or to question that of others. She somehow or other made the little secretary feel of great account. He had never quite realized his own value before. Her presence, her eyes, her voice served to bring it out. And a very curious detail that he always mentions just at this point is the fact that it never occurred to him to wonder what her surname might be, or whether, indeed, she had one at all. Her name, Miriam, seemed sufficient. The rest of her — if there was any other part of her not described by those three syllables — lay safely and naturally included somewhere in *his own* name. "Spinrobin" described her as well as himself. But "Miriam" completed his own personality and at the same time extended it. He felt all wrapped up and at peace with her. With Philip Skale, Mrs. Mawle and Miriam, he, Robert Spinrobin, felt that he naturally belonged as "one of the family." They were like the four notes in the chord: Skale, the great bass; Mawle, the mellow alto; himself and Miriam, respectively, the echoing tenor and the singing soprano. The imagery by which, in the depths of his mind, he sought to interpret to himself the whole singular business ran, it seems, even then to music and the analogies of music.

The meal was short and very simple. Mrs. Mawle carved the joint at the end of the table, handed the vegetables and looked after their wants with the precision of long habit. Her skill, in spite of the withered arm, was noteworthy. They talked little, Mr. Skale hardly at all. Miriam spoke from time to time across the table to the secretary. She did not ask questions, she stated facts, as though she already knew all about his feelings and tastes. She may have been twenty years of age, perhaps, but in some way she took him back to childhood. And she said things with the simple audacity of a child, ignoring Mr. Skale's presence. It seemed to the secretary as if he had always known her.

"I knew just how you would look," she said, without a trace of shyness, "the moment I heard your name. And you got my name very quickly, too?"

"Only part of it, at first—"

"Oh yes; but when you saw me completely you got it all," she interrupted. "And I like your name," she added, looking him full in the eye with her soft grey orbs; "it tells everything."

"So does yours, you know."

"Oh, of course," she laughed; "Mr. Skale gave it to me the day I was born."

"I *heard* it," put in the clergyman, speaking almost for the first time.
And the talk dropped again, the secretary's head fairly whirling.

"You used it all, of course, as a little boy," she said presently again; "names, I mean?"

"Rather," he replied without hesitation; "only I've rather lost it since—"

"It will come back to you here. It's so splendid, all this world of sound, and makes everything seem worth while. But you lose your way at first, of course; especially if you are out of practice, as you must be."

Spinrobin did not know what to say. To hear this young girl make use of such language took his breath away. He became aware that she was talking with a purpose, seconding Mr. Skale in the secret examination to which the clergyman was all the time subjecting him. Yet there was no element of alarm in it all. In the room with these two, and with the motherly figure of the housekeeper busying about to and fro, he felt at home, comforted, looked after — more even, he felt at his best; as though the stream of his little life were mingling in with a much bigger and worthier river, a river, moreover, in flood. But it was the imagery of music again that most readily occurred to him. He felt that the note of his own little personality had been caught up into the comforting bosom of a complete chord….

VII

“Mr. Spinrobin,” suddenly sounded soft and low across the table, and, thrilled to hear the girl speak his name, he looked up quickly and found her very wide-opened eyes peering into his. Her face was thrust forward a little as she leaned over the table in his direction.

As he gazed she repeated his name, leisurely, quietly, and even more softly than before: “Mr. Spinrobin.” But this time, as their eyes met and the syllables issued from her lips, he noticed that a singular after-sound — an exceedingly soft yet vibrant overtone — accompanied it. The syllables set something quivering within him, something that sang, running of its own accord into a melody to which his rising pulses beat time and tune.

“Now, please, speak my name,” she added. “Please look straight at me, straight into my eyes, and pronounce *my* name.”

His lips trembled, if ever so slightly, as he obeyed.

“Miriam …” he said.

“Pronounce each syllable very distinctly and very slowly,” she said, her grey eyes all over his burning face.

“Mir … i … am,” he repeated, looking in the center of the eyes without flinching, and becoming instantly aware that his utterance of the name produced in himself a development and extension of the original overtones awakened by her speaking of his own name. It was wonderful … exquisite … delicious. He uttered it again, and then heard that she, too, was uttering his at the same moment. Each spoke the other’s name. He could have sworn he heard the music within him leap across the intervening space and transfer itself to her … and that he heard his own name singing, too, in *her* blood.

For the names were true. By this soft intoning utterance they seemed to pass mutually into the secret rhythm of that Eternal Principle of Speech which exists behind the spoken sound and is independent of its means of manifestation. Their central beings, screened and limited behind their names, knew an instant of synchronous rhythmical vibration. It was their introduction absolute to one another, for it was an instant of naked revelation.

“Spinrobin….”

“Miriam….”

VIII

… A great volume of sound suddenly enveloped and caught away the two singing names, and the spell was broken. Miriam dropped her eyes; Spinrobin looked up. It was Mr. Skale’s voice upon them with a shout.

“Splendid! splendid!” he cried; “your voices, like your names, are made for one another, in quality, pitch, accent, everything.” He was enthusiastic rather than excited; but to Spinrobin, taking part in this astonishing performance, to which the other two alone held the key, it all seemed too perplexing for words. The great bass crashed and boomed for a moment about his ears; then came silence. The test, or whatever it was, was over. It had been successful.

Mr. Skale, his face still shining with enthusiasm, turned towards him. Miriam, equally happy, watched, her hands folded in her lap.

“My dear fellow,” exclaimed the clergyman, half rising in his chair, “how mad you must think us! How mad you must think us! I can only assure you that when you know more, as you soon shall, you will understand the importance of what has just taken place….”

He said a good deal more that Spinrobin did not apparently quite take in. He was too bewildered. His eyes sought the girl where she sat opposite, gazing at him. For all its pallor, her face was tenderly soft and beautiful; more pure and undefiled, he thought, than any human countenance he had ever seen, and sweet as the face of a child. Utterly unstained it was. A similar light shone in the faces of Skale and Mrs. Mawle. In their case it had forged its way through the more or less defiling garment of a worn and experienced flesh. But the light in Miriam’s eyes and skin was there because it had never been extinguished. She had retained her pristine brilliance of soul. Through the little spirit of the perplexed secretary ran a thrill of genuine worship and adoration.

“Mr. Skale’s coffee is served in the library,” announced the voice of the housekeeper abruptly behind them; and when Spinrobin turned again he discovered that Miriam had slipped from the room unobserved and was gone.

Mr. Skale took his companion’s arm and led the way towards the hall.

“I am glad you love her,” was his astonishing remark. “It is the first and most essential condition of your suiting me.”

“She is delightful, wonderful, charming, sir—”

“Not ‘sir,’ if you please,” replied the clergyman, standing aside at the threshold for his guest to pass; “I prefer the use of the name, you know. I think it is important.”

And he closed the library door behind them.

Chapter II

I

FOR SOME MINUTES they sat in front of the fire and sipped their coffee in silence. The secretary felt that the sliding platform on which he was traveling into this extraordinary adventure had been going a little too fast for him. Events had crowded past before he had time to look squarely at them. He had lost his bearings rather, routed by Miriam's beauty and by the amazing way she talked to him. Had she lived always inside his thoughts she could not have chosen words better calculated to convince him that they were utterly in sympathy one with the other. Mr. Skale, moreover, approved heartily. The one thing Spinrobin saw clearly through it all was that himself and Miriam — their voices, rather — were necessary for the success of the clergyman's mysterious experiments. Only, while Miriam, little witch, knew all about it, he, candidate on trial, knew as yet — nothing.

And now, as they sat opposite one another in the privacy of the library, Spinrobin, full of confidence and for once proud of his name and personality, looked forward to being taken more into the heart of the affair. Things advanced, however, more slowly than he desired. Mr. Skale's scheme was too big to be hurried.

The clergyman did not smoke, but his companion, with the other's ready permission, puffed gently at a small cigarette. Short, rapid puffs he took, as though the smoke was afraid to enter beyond the front teeth, and with one finger he incessantly knocked off the ashes into his saucer, even when none were there to fall. On the table behind them gurgled the shaded lamp, lighting their faces from the eyes downwards.

"Now," said Mr. Skale, evidently not aware that he thundered, "we can talk quietly and undisturbed." He caught his beard in a capacious hand, in such a way that the square outline of his chin showed through the hair. His voice boomed musically, filling the room. Spinrobin listened acutely, afraid even to cross his legs. A genuine pronouncement, he felt, was coming.

“A good many years ago, Mr. Spinrobin,” he said simply, “when I was a curate of a country parish in Norfolk, I made a discovery — of a revolutionary description — a discovery in the world of real things, that is, of spiritual things.”

He gazed fixedly over the clutched beard at his companion, apparently searching for brief, intelligible phrases. “But a discovery, the development of which I was obliged to put on one side until I inherited with this property the means and leisure which enabled me to continue my terrific — I say purposely terrific — researches. For some years now I have been quietly at work here absorbed in my immense pursuit.” And again he stopped. “I have reached a point, Mr. Spinrobin—”

“Yes,” interjected the secretary, as though the mention of his name touched a button and produced a sound. “A point — ?”

“Where I need the assistance of some one with a definite quality of voice — a man who emits a certain note — a certain tenor note.” He released his beard, so that it flew out with a spring, at the same moment thrusting his head forward to drive home the announcement effectively.

Spinrobin crossed his legs with a fluttering motion, hastily. “As you advertised,” he suggested.

The clergyman bowed.

“My efforts to find the right man,” continued the enthusiast, leaning back in his chair, “have now lasted a year. I have had a dozen men down here, each on a month’s trial. None of them suited. None had the requisite quality of voice. With a single exception, none of them could stand the loneliness, the seclusion; and without exception, all of them were too worldly to make sacrifices. It was the salary they wanted. The majority, moreover, confused imagination with fancy, and courage with mere audacity. And, most serious of all, not one of them passed the test of — Miriam. She harmonized with none of them. They were discords one and all. You, Mr. Spinrobin, are the first to win acceptance. The instant she heard your name she cried for you. And she knows. She sings the soprano. She took you into the chord.”

“I hope indeed—” stammered the flustered and puzzled secretary, and then stopped, blushing absurdly. “You claim for me far more than I should dare to claim for myself,” he added. The reference to Miriam delighted him, and utterly destroyed his judgment. He longed to thank the girl for having approved him. “I’m glad my voice — er — suits your — chord.” In his heart of hearts he understood something of what Mr. Skale was driving at, yet was half-ashamed to admit it even to himself. In this twentieth century it all seemed so romantic, mystical, and absurd. He felt it was all half-true. If only he could have run back into that great “mental prairie” of his boyhood days it might all have been *quite* true.

“Precisely,” continued Mr. Skale, bringing him back to reality, “precisely. And now, before I tell you more, you will forgive my asking you one or two personal questions, I’m sure. We must build securely as we go, leaving nothing to chance. The grandeur and importance of my experiments demand it. Afterwards,” and his expression changed to a sudden softness in a way that was characteristic of the man, “you must feel free to put similar questions to me, as personal and direct as you please. I wish to establish a perfect frankness between us at the start.”

“Thank you, Mr. Skale. Of course — er — should anything occur to me to ask—” A momentary bewilderment, caused by the great visage so close to his own, prevented the completion of the sentence.

“As to your beliefs, for instance,” the clergyman resumed abruptly, “your religious beliefs, I mean. I must be sure of you on that ground. What are you?”

“Nothing — I think,” Spinrobin replied without hesitation, remembering how his soul had bounced its way among the various creeds since Cambridge, and arrived at its present state of Belief in Everything, yet without any definite label. “Nothing in particular. Nominally, though — a Christian.”

“You believe in a God?”

“A Supreme Intelligence, most certainly,” was the emphatic reply.

“And spirits?”

Spinrobin hesitated. He was a very honest soul.

“Other life, let me put it,” the clergyman helped him; “other beings besides ourselves?”

"I have often felt — wondered, rather," he answered carefully, "whether there might not be other systems of evolution besides humanity. Such extraordinary Forces come blundering into one's life sometimes, and one can't help wondering where they come from. I have never formulated any definite beliefs, however—"

"Your world is not a blind chaos, I mean?" Mr. Skale put gravely to him, as though questioning a child.

"No, no, indeed. There's order and system—"

"In which you personally count for something of value?" asked the other quickly.

"I like to think so," was the apologetic reply. "There's something that includes me somewhere in a purpose of very great importance — only, of course, I've got to do my part, and—"

"Good," Mr. Skale interrupted him. "And now," he asked softly, after a moment's pause, leaning forward, "what about death? Are you afraid of death?"

Spinrobin started visibly. He began to wonder where this extraordinary catechism was going to lead. But he answered at once: he had thought out these things and knew where he stood.

"Only of its possible pain," he said, smiling into the bearded visage before him. "And an immense curiosity, of course—"

"It does not mean extinction for you — going out like the flame of a candle, for instance?"

"I have never been able to believe *that*, Mr. Skale. I continue somewhere and somehow — forever."

The cross-examination puzzled him more and more, and through it, for the first time, he began to feel dimly, ran a certain strain of something not quite right, not permissible in the biggest sense. It was not the questions themselves that produced this odd and rather disquieting impression, but the fact that Mr. Skale was preparing the ground with such extraordinary thoroughness. This conversation was the first swell, as it were, rolling mysteriously in upon him from the ocean in whose deeps the great Experiment lay buried. Forces, tidal in strength, oceanic in volume, shrouded it just now, but he already felt them. They reached him through the person of the clergyman. It was these forces playing through his personality that Spinrobin had been aware of the first moment they met on the station platform, and had "sensed" even more strongly during the walk home across the mountains.

Behind the play of these darker impressions, as yet only vague and ambiguous, there ran in and out among his thoughts the vein of something much sweeter. Miriam, with her large grey eyes and silvery voice, was continually peeping in upon his mind. He wondered where she was and what she was doing in the big, lonely house. He wished she could have been in the room to hear his answers and approve them. He felt incomplete without her. Already he thought of her as the melody to which he was the accompaniment, two things that ought not to be separated.

"My point is," Mr. Skale continued, "that, apart from ordinary human ties, and so forth, you have no intrinsic terror of death — of losing your present body?"

"No, no," was the reply, more faintly given than the rest. "I love my life, but — but—" he looked about him in some confusion for the right words, still thinking of Miriam— "but I look forward, Mr. Skale; I look forward." He dropped back into the depths of his armchair and puffed swiftly at the end of his extinguished cigarette, oblivious of the fact that no smoke came.

"The attitude of a brave man," said the clergyman with approval. Then, looking straight into the secretary's blue eyes, he added with increased gravity: "And therefore it would not be immoral of me to expose you to an experiment in which the penalty of a slip would be — death? Or you would not shrink from it yourself, provided the knowledge to be obtained seemed worth while?"

"That's right, sir — Mr. Skale, I mean; that's right," came the answer after an imperceptible pause.

The result of the talk seemed to satisfy the clergyman. "You must think my questions *very* peculiar," he said, the sternness of his face relaxing a little, "but it was necessary to understand your exact position before proceeding further. The gravity of my undertaking demands it. However, you must not let my words alarm you." He waited a moment, reflecting deeply. "You must regard them, if you will, as a kind of test," he resumed, searching his companion's face with eagle eyes, "the beginning of a series of tests in which your attitude to Miriam and hers to you, so far as that goes, was the first."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Skale," was his inadequate rejoinder; for the moment the name of the girl was introduced his thoughts instantly wandered out to find her. The way the clergyman pronounced it increased its power, too, for no name he uttered sounded ordinary. There seemed a curious mingling in the resonant cavity of his great mouth of the fundamental note and the overtones.

"Yes, you have the kind of courage that is necessary," Mr. Skale was saying, half to himself, "the modesty that forgets self, and the unworldly attitude that is essential. With your help I may encompass success; and I consider myself wonderfully fortunate to have found you, wonderfully fortunate…."

"I'm glad," murmured Spinrobin, thinking that so far he had not learned anything very definite about his duties, or what it was he had to do to earn so substantial a salary. Truth to tell, he did not bother much about that part of it. He was conscious only of three main desires: to pass the unknown tests, to learn the nature of Mr. Skale's discovery, with the experiment involved, and — to be with Miriam as much as possible. The whole affair was so unusual that he had already lost the common standards of judging. He let the sliding platform take him where it would, and he flattered himself that he was not fool enough to mistake originality for insanity. The clergyman, dreamer and enthusiast though he might be, was as sane as other men, saner than most.

"I hope to lead you little by little to what I have in view," Mr. Skale went on, "so that at the end of our trial month you will have learned enough to enable you to form a decision, yet not enough to — to use my knowledge should you choose to return to the world."

It was very frank, but the secretary did not feel offended. He accepted the explanation as perfectly reasonable. In his mind he knew full well what his choice would be. This was the supreme adventure he had been so long a-seeking. No ordinary obstacle could prevent his accepting it.

II

There came a pause of some length, in which Spinrobin found nothing particular to say. The lamp gurgled; the coals fell softly into the fender. Then suddenly Mr. Skale rose and stood with his back to the grate. He gazed down upon the small figure in the chair. He towered there, a kindly giant, enthusiasm burning in his eyes like lamps. His voice was very deep, his manner more solemn than before when he spoke.

“So far, so good,” he said, “and now, with your permission, Mr. Spinrobin, I should like to go a step further. I should like to take — your note.”

“My note?” exclaimed the other, thinking he had not heard correctly.

“Your sound, yes,” repeated the clergyman.

“My sound!” piped the little man, vastly puzzled, his voice shrill with excitement. He dodged about in the depths of his big leather chair, as though movement might bring explanation.

Mr. Skale watched him calmly. “I want to get the vibrations of your voice, and then see what pattern they produce in the sand,” he said.

“Oh, in the sand, yes; quite so,” replied the secretary. He remembered how the vibrations of an elastic membrane can throw dry sand, loosely scattered upon its surface, into various floral and geometrical figures. Chladni’s figures, he seemed to remember, they were called after their discoverer. But Mr. Skale’s purpose in the main, of course, escaped him.

“You don’t object?”

“On the contrary, I am greatly interested.” He stood up on the mat beside his employer.

“I wish to make *quite* sure,” the clergyman added gravely, “that your voice, your note, is what I think it is — accurately in harmony with mine and Miriam’s and Mrs. Mawle’s. The pattern it makes will help to prove this.”

The secretary bowed in perplexed silence, while Mr. Skale crossed the room and took a violin from its case. The golden varnish of its ribs and back gleamed in the lamplight, and when the clergyman drew the bow across the strings to tune it, smooth, mellow sounds, soft and resonant as bells, filled the room. Evidently he knew how to handle the instrument. The notes died away in a murmur.

“A Guarnerius,” he explained, “and a perfect pedigree specimen; it has the most sensitive structure imaginable, and carries vibrations almost like a human nerve. For instance, while I speak,” he added, laying the violin upon his companion’s hand, “you will feel the vibrations of my voice run through the wood into your palm.”

“I do,” said Spinrobin. It trembled like a living thing.

“Now,” continued Mr. Skale, after a pause, “what I first want is to receive the vibrations of your own voice in the same way — into my very pulses. Kindly read aloud steadily while I hold it. Stop reading when I make a sign. I’ll nod, so that the vibrations of my voice won’t interfere.” And he handed a notebook to him with quotations entered neatly in his own handwriting, selected evidently with a purpose, and all dealing with sound, music, as organized sound, and names. Spinrobin read aloud; the first quotation from Meredith he recognized, but the others, and the last one, discussing names, were new to him: —

“But *listen in the thought*; so may there come
Conception of a newly-added chord,
Commanding space beyond where ear has home.

“Everything that the sun shines upon sings or can be made to sing, and can be heard to sing. Gases, impalpable powders, and woolen stuffs, in common with other non-conductors of sound, give forth notes of different pitches when played upon by an intermittent beam of white light. Colored stuffs will sing in lights of different colors, but refuse to sing in others. The polarization of light being now accomplished, light and sound are known to be alike. Flames have a modulated voice and can be made to sing a definite melody. Wood, stone, metal, skins, fibers, membranes, every rapidly vibrating substance, *all have in them the potentialities of musical sound*.

“Radium receives its energy from, and responds to, radiations which traverse all space — as piano strings respond to sounds in unison with their notes. Space is all a-quiver with waves of radiant energy. We vibrate in sympathy with a few strings here and there — with the tiny X-rays, actinic rays, light waves, heat waves, and the huge electromagnetic waves of Hertz and Marconi; but there are great spaces, numberless radiations, to which we are stone deaf. Some day, a thousand years hence, we shall know the full sweep of this magnificent harmony.

“Everything in nature has its name, and he who has the power to call a thing by its proper name can make it subservient to his will; for its proper name is not the arbitrary name given to it by man, but the expression of the totality of its powers and attributes, because the powers and attributes of each Being are intimately connected with its means of expression, and between both exists the most exact proportion in regard to measure, time, and condition.”

The meaning of the four quotations, as he read them, plunged down into him and touched inner chords very close to his own beliefs. Something of his own soul, therefore, passed into his voice as he read. He read, that is to say, with authority.

A nod from Mr. Skale stopped him just as he was beginning a fifth passage. Raising the vibrating instrument to his ear, the clergyman first listened a moment intently. Then he quickly had it under his chin, beard flowing over it like water, and the bow singing across the strings. The note he played — he drew it out with that whipping motion of the bow only possible to a loving expert — was soft and beautiful, long drawn out with a sweet singing quality. He took it on the G string with the second finger — in the “fourth position.” It thrilled through him, Spinrobin declares, most curiously and delightfully. It made him happy to hear it. It was very similar to the singing vibrations he had experienced when Miriam gazed into his eyes and spoke his name.

“Thank you,” said Mr. Skale, and laid the violin down again. “I’ve got the note. You’re E flat.”

“E flat!” gasped Spinrobin, not sure whether he was pleased or disappointed.

“That’s your sound, yes. You’re E flat — just as I thought, just as I hoped. You fit in exactly. It seems too good to be true!” His voice began to boom again, as it always did when he was moved. He was striding about, very alert, very masterful, pushing the furniture out of his way, his eyes more luminous than ever. “It’s magnificent.” He stopped abruptly and looked at the secretary with a gaze so enveloping that Spinrobin for an instant lost his bearings altogether. “It means, my dear Spinrobin,” he said slowly, with a touch of solemnity that woke an involuntary shiver deep in his listener’s being, “that you are destined to play a part, and an important part, in one of the grandest experiments ever dreamed of by the heart of man. For the first time since my researches began twenty years ago I now see the end in sight."

"Mr. Skale — that *is* something — indeed," was all the little man could find to say.

There was no reason he could point to why the words should have produced a sense of chill about his heart. It was only that he felt again the huge groundswell of this vast unknown experiment surging against him, lifting him from his feet — as a man might feel the Atlantic swells rise with him towards the stars before they engulfed him forever. It seemed getting a trifle out of hand, this adventure. Yet it was what he had always longed for, and his courage must hold firm. Besides, Miriam was involved in it with him. What could he ask better than to risk his insignificant personality in some gigantic, mad attempt to plumb the Unknown, with that slender, little pale-faced Beauty by his side? The wave of Mr. Skale's enthusiasm swept him away deliciously.

"And now," he cried, "we'll get your Pattern too. I no longer have any doubts, but none the less it will be a satisfaction to us both to see it. It must, I'm sure, harmonies with ours; it must!"

He opened a cupboard drawer and produced a thin sheet of glass, upon which he next poured some finely powdered sand out of a paper bag. It rattled, dry and faint, upon the smooth, hard surface. And while he did this, he talked rapidly, boomingly, with immense enthusiasm.

"All sounds," he said, half to himself, half to the astonished secretary, "create their own patterns. Sound builds; sound destroys; and invisible sound-vibrations affect concrete matter. For all sounds produce forms — the forms that correspond to them, as you shall now see. Within every form lies the silent sound that first called it into view — into visible shape — into being. Forms, shapes, bodies are the vibratory activities of *sound made visible*."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Spinrobin, who was listening like a man in a dream, but who caught the violence of the clergyman's idea none the less.

"Forms and bodies are — *solidified Sound*," cried the clergyman in italics.

“You say something extraordinary,” exclaimed the commonplace Spinrobin in his shrill voice. “Marvelous!” Vaguely he seemed to remember that Schelling had called architecture “frozen music.”

Mr. Skale turned and looked at him as a god might look at an insect — that he loved.

“Sound, Mr. Spinrobin,” he said, with a sudden and effective lowering of his booming voice, “is the original divine impulsion behind nature — communicated to language. It is — creative!”

Then, leaving the secretary with this nut of condensed knowledge to crack as best he could, the clergyman went to the end of the room in three strides. He busied himself for a moment with something upon the wall; then he suddenly turned, his great face aglow, his huge form erect, fixing his burning eyes upon his distracted companion.

“In the Beginning,” he boomed solemnly, in tones of profound conviction, “was — the *Word*.” He paused a moment, and then continued, his voice filling the room to the very ceiling. “At the Word of God — at the thunder of the Voice of God, worlds leaped into being!” Again he paused. “Sound,” he went on, the whole force of his great personality in the phrase, “was the primordial, creative energy. A sound can call a form into existence. Forms are the Sound-Figures of archetypal forces — the Word made Flesh.” He stopped, and moved with great soft strides about the room.

Spinrobin caught the words full in the face. For a space he could not measure — considerably less than a second, probably — the consciousness of something unutterably immense, unutterably flaming, rushed tumultuously through his mind, with wings that bore his imagination to a place where light was — dazzling, white beyond words. He felt himself tossed up to Heaven on the waves of a great sea, as the body of strange belief behind the clergyman’s words poured through him…. For somewhere, behind the incoherence of the passionate language, burned the blaze of a true thought at white heat — could he but grasp it through the stammering utterance.

Then, with equal swiftness, it passed. His present surroundings came back. He dropped with a dizzy rush from awful spaces … and was aware that he was merely — standing on the black, woolly mat before the fire watching the movements of his new employer, that his pumps were bright and pointed, his head just level with a dark marble mantelpiece. Dazed, and a trifle breathless he felt; and at the back of his disordered mind stirred a schoolboy's memory that the Pythagoreans believed the universe to have been called out of chaos by Sound, Number, and Harmony — or something to that effect…. But these huge, fugitive thoughts that tore through him refused to be seized and dealt with. He staggered a little, mentally; then, with a prodigious effort, controlled himself — and watched.

III

Mr. Skale, he saw, had fastened the little sheet of glass by its four corners to silken strings hanging from the ceiling. The glass plate hung, motionless and horizontal, in the air with its freight of sand. For several minutes the clergyman played a series of beautiful modulations in double-stopping upon the violin. In these the dominating influence was E flat. Spinrobin was not musical enough to describe it more accurately than this. Only, with greater skill than he knows, he mentions how Skale drew out of that fiddle the peculiarly intimate and searching tones by which strings can reach the spiritual center of a man and make him respond to delicate vibrations of thoughts beyond his normal gamut….

Spinrobin, listening, understood that he was a greater man than he knew….

And the sand on the glass sheet, he next became aware, was shifting, moving, dancing. He heard the tiny hissing and rattling of the dry grains. It was uncommonly weird. This visible and practical result made the clergyman's astonishing words seem true and convincing. That moving sand brought sanity, yet a certain curious terror of the unknown into it all.

A minute later Mr. Skale stopped playing and beckoned to him.

"See," he said quietly, pointing to the arrangement the particles of sand had assumed under the influence of the vibrations. "There's your pattern — your sound made visible. That's your utterance — the Note you substantially represent and body forth in terms of matter."

The secretary stared. It was a charming but very simple pattern the lines of sand had assumed, not unlike the fronds of a delicate fern growing out of several small circles round the base.

"So that's my note — made visible!" he exclaimed under his breath. "It's delightful; it's quite exquisite."

"That's E flat," returned Mr. Skale in a whisper, so as not to disturb the pattern; "if I altered the note, the pattern would alter too. E natural, for instance, would be different. Only, luckily, you are E flat — just the note we want. And now," he continued, straightening himself up to his full height, "come over and see mine and Miriam's and Mrs. Mawle's, and you'll understand what I meant when I said that yours would harmonize." And in a glass case across the room they examined a number of square sheets of glass with sand upon them in various patterns, all rendered permanent by a thin coating of a glue-like transparent substance that held the particles in position.

"There you see mine and Miriam's and Mrs. Mawle's," he said, stooping to look. "They harmonize most beautifully, you observe, with your own."

It was, indeed, a singular and remarkable thing. The patterns, though all different, yet combined in some subtle fashion impossible of analysis to form a complete and well-proportioned Whole — a design — a picture. The patterns of the clergyman and the housekeeper provided the base and foreground, those of Miriam and the secretary the delicate superstructure. The girl's pattern, he noted with a subtle pleasure, was curiously similar to his own, but far more delicate and waving. Yet, whereas his was floral, hers was stellar in character; that of the housekeeper was spiral, and Mr. Skale's he could only describe as a miniature whirlwind of very exquisite design rising out of apparently three separate centers of motion.

"If I could paint over them the color each shade of sound represents," Mr. Skale resumed, "the tint of each *timbre*, or *Klangfarbe*, as the Germans call it, you would see better still how we are all grouped together there into a complete and harmonious whole."

Spinrobin looked from the patterns to his companion's great face bending there beside him. Then he looked back again at the patterns. He could think of nothing quite intelligible to say. He noticed more clearly every minute that these dainty shapes of sand, stellar, spiral, and floral, stood to one another in certain definite proportions, in a rising and calculated ratio of singular beauty.

"There, before you, lies a true and perfect chord made visible," the clergyman said in tones thrilling with satisfaction, " — three notes in harmony with the fundamental sound, myself, and with each other. My dear fellow, I congratulate you, I congratulate you."

"Thank you very much, indeed," murmured Spinrobin. "I don't quite understand it all yet, but it's — it's extraordinarily fascinating and wonderful."

Mr. Skale said nothing, and Spinrobin drifted back to his big armchair. A deep silence pervaded the room for the space of several minutes. In the heart of that silence lay the mass of direct and vital questions the secretary burned, yet was afraid, to ask. For such was the plain truth; he yearned to know, yet feared to hear. The Discovery and the Experiment of this singular man loomed already somewhat vast and terrible; the adjective that had suggested itself before returned to him— "not permissible." … Of Mr. Skale himself he had no sort of fear, though a growing and uncommon respect, but of the purpose Mr. Skale had in view he caught himself thinking more and more, yet without obvious reason, with a distinct shrinking almost amounting to dismay. But for the fact that so sweet and gentle a creature as Miriam was traveling the same path with him, this increased sense of caution would have revealed itself plainly for what it was — Fear….

"I am deeply interested, Mr. Skale," he said at length, breaking first the silence, "and sympathetic too, I assure you; only — you will forgive me for saying it — I am, as yet, still rather in the dark as to where all this is to lead —" The clergyman's eyes, fixed straight upon his own, again made it difficult to finish the sentence as he wished.

"Necessarily so, because I can only lead you to my discovery step by step," replied the other steadily. "I wish you to be thoroughly prepared for anything that may happen, so that you can deal intelligently with results that might otherwise overwhelm you."

"Overwhelm — ?" faltered his listener.

"*Might*, I said. Note carefully my use of words, for they are accurately chosen. Before I can tell you all I must submit you, for your own sake, to certain tests — chiefly to the test of Alteration of Form by Sound. It is somewhat — er — alarming, I believe, the first time. You must be thoroughly accustomed to these astonishing results before we dare to approach the final Experiment; so that you will not tremble. For there can be no rehearsal. The great Experiment can only be made once … and I must be as sure as possible that you will feel no terror in the face of the Unknown.”

IV

Spinrobin listened breathlessly. He hesitated a moment after the other stopped speaking, then slewed round on his slippery chair and faced him.

“I can understand,” he began, “why you want imagination, but you spoke of courage too? I mean, — is there any immediate cause for alarm? Any personal danger, for instance, *now*?” For the clergyman’s weighty sentences had made him realize in a new sense the loneliness of his situation here among these desolate hills. He would appreciate some assurance that his life was not to be trifled with before he lost the power to withdraw if he wished to do so.

“None whatever,” replied Mr. Skale with decision, “there is no question at all of physical personal injury. You must trust me and have a little patience.” His tone and manner were exceedingly grave, yet at the same time inspired confidence.

“I do,” said Spinrobin honestly.

Another pause fell between them, longer than the rest; it was broken by the clergyman. He spoke emphatically, evidently weighing his words with the utmost care.

“This Chord,” he said simply — yet, for all the simplicity, there ran to and fro behind his words the sense of unlawful and immense forces impending — “I need for a stupendous experiment with sound, an experiment which will lead in turn towards a yet greater and final one. There is no harm in your knowing that. To produce a certain transcendent result I want a complex sound — a chord, but a complete and perfect chord in which each note is sure of itself and absolutely accurate.”

He waited a moment. There was utter silence about them in the room. Spinrobin held his breath.

"No instrument can help me; the notes must be human," he resumed in a lower voice, "and the utterers — pure. For the human voice can produce sounds 'possessing in some degree the characteristics not only of all musical instruments, but of all sounds of whatever description.' By means of this chord I hope to utter a certain sound, a certain *name*, of which you shall know more hereafter. But a name, as you surely know, need not be composed of one or two syllables only; a whole symphony may be a name, and a whole orchestra playing for days, or an entire nation chanting for years, may be required to pronounce the beginning merely of — of certain names. Yours, Robert Spinrobin, for instance, I can pronounce in a quarter of a second; but there may be names so vast, so mighty, that minutes, days, years even, may be necessary for their full utterance. There may be names, indeed, which can never be known, for they could never be uttered — *in time*. For the moment I am content simply to drop this thought into your consciousness; later you shall understand more. I only wish you to take in now that I need this perfect chord for the utterance in due course of a certain complex and stupendous name — the invocation, that is, of a certain complex and stupendous Force!"

"I think I understand," whispered the other, afraid to interrupt more.

"And the difficulty I have experienced in finding the three notes has been immense. I found Mrs. Mawle — alto; then Miriam I found at birth and trained her — soprano; and now I have found you, Mr. Spinrobin, and my chord, with myself as bass, is complete. Your note and Miriam's, soprano and tenor, are closer than the relations between the other notes, and a tenor has accordingly been most difficult to find. You can now understand the importance of your being sympathetic to each other."

Spinrobin's heart burned within him as he listened. He began to grasp some sweet mystical meaning in the sense of perfect companionship the mere presence of the girl inspired. They were the upper notes in the same chord together, linked in a singing and harmonious relation, the one necessary to the other. Moreover, in the presence of Mr. Skale and the housekeeper, bass and alto in the full chord, their completeness was still more emphasized, and they knew their fullest life. The adventure promised to be amazingly seductive. He would learn practically the strange truth that to know the highest life Self must be lost and merged in something bigger. And was this not precisely what he had so long been seeking — escape from his own insignificance?

“And — er — the Hebrew that you require of me, Mr. Skale?” he asked, returning to practical considerations.

“Our purposes require a certain knowledge of Hebrew,” he answered without hesitation or demur, “because that ancient language and the magical resources of sound are profoundly linked. In the actual sounds of many of the Hebrew letters lies a singular power, unguessed by the majority, undivined especially, of course, by the mere scholar, but available for the pure in heart who may discover how to use their extraordinary values. They constitute, in my view at least, a remnant of the original Chaldaean mysteries, the lore of that magic which is older than religion. The secret of this knowledge lies in the *psychic values of sound*; for Hebrew, the Hebrew of the Bahir, remains in the hierarchy of languages a direct channel to the unknown and inscrutable forces; and the knowledge of mighty and supersensual things lies locked up in the correct utterance of many of its words, letters and phrases. Its correct utterance, mark well. For knowledge of the most amazing and terrible kind is there, waiting release by him who knows, and who greatly dares.

“And you shall later learn that sound is power. The Hebrew alphabet you must know intimately, and the intricate association of its letters with number, color, harmony and geometrical form, all of which are but symbols of the Realities at the very roots of life. The Hebrew alphabet, Mr. Spinrobin, is a ‘discourse in methods of manifestation, of formation.’ In its correct pronunciation lies a way to direct knowledge of divine powers, and to conditions beyond this physical existence.”

The clergyman’s voice grew lower and lower as he proceeded, and the conviction was unavoidable that he referred to things whereof he had practical knowledge. To Spinrobin it was like the lifting of a great veil. As a boy he had divined something of these values of sound and name, but with the years this knowledge had come to seem fantastic and unreal. It now returned upon him with the force of a terrific certainty. That immense old inner playground of his youth, without boundaries or horizon, rolled up before his mental vision, inviting further and detailed discovery.

“With the language, qua language,” he continued, “you need not trouble, but the ‘Names’ of many things you must know accurately, and especially the names of the so-called ‘Angels’; for these are in reality Forces of immense potency, vast spiritual Powers, Qualities, and the like, all evocable by correct utterance of their names. This language, as you will see, is *alive* and divine in the true sense; its letters are the vehicles of activities; its words, terrific formulae; and the true pronunciation of them remains today a direct channel to divine knowledge. In time you shall see; in time you shall know; in time you shall hear. Mr. Spinrobin,” and he thrust his great head forwards and dropped his voice to a hushed whisper, “in time we shall all together make this Experiment in sound which shall redeem us and make us as Gods!”

“Thank you!” gasped the secretary, swept off his feet by this torrent of uncommon and mystical language, and passing a moist hand through his feathery hair. He was not entirely ignorant, of course, of the alleged use of sound in the various systems of so-called magic that have influenced the minds of imaginative men during the history of the world. He had heard, more or less vaguely, perhaps, but still with understanding, about “Words of Power”; but hitherto he had merely regarded such things as picturesque superstitions, or half-truths that lie midway between science and imagination. Here, however, was a man in the twentieth century, the days of radium, flying machines, wireless telegraphy, and other invitations towards materialism, who apparently had practical belief in the effective use of sound and in its psychic and divine possibilities, and who was devoting all of his not inconsiderable powers of heart and mind to their actual demonstration. It was astonishing. It was delightful. It was incredible! And, but for the currents of a strange and formidable fear that this conception of Skale’s audacious Experiment set stirring in his soul, Spinrobin’s enthusiasm would have been possibly as great as his own.

As it was he went up to the big clergyman and held out his hand, utterly carried away by the strangeness of it all, caught up in a vague splendor he did not quite understand, prepared to abandon himself utterly.

“I gather something of what you mean,” he said earnestly, “if not all; and I hope most sincerely I may prove suitable for your purpose when the time comes. As a boy, you know, curiously enough, I always believed in the efficacy of names and the importance of naming true. I think,” he added somewhat diffidently, looking up straight into the luminous eyes above him, “if you will allow me to say so, I would follow you anywhere, Mr. Skale — anywhere you cared to lead.”

“‘Upon him that overcometh,’” said the clergyman in that gentle voice he sometimes used, soft as the voice of woman, “‘will I write my new name….’”

He gazed down very searchingly into the other’s eyes for a minute or two, then shook the proffered hand without another word. And so they separated and went to bed, for it was long past midnight.

Chapter III

I

IN HIS BEDROOM, though excitement banished sleep in spite of the lateness of the hour, he was too exhausted to make any effective attempt to reduce the confusion of his mind to order. For the first time in his life the diary-page for the day remained blank. For a long time he sat before it with his pencil — then sighed and put it away. A volume he might have written, but not a page, much less a line or two. And though it was but eight hours since he had made the acquaintance of the Rev. Philip Skale, it seemed to him more like eight days.

Moreover, all that he had heard and seen, fantastic and strained as he felt it to be, possibly even the product of religious mania, was nevertheless profoundly disquieting, for mixed up with it somewhere or other was — truth. Mr. Skale *had* made a discovery — a giant one; it was not all merely talk and hypnotism, the glamour of words. His great Experiment would prove to be real and terrible. He *had* discovered certain uses of sound, occult yet scientific, and if he, Spinrobin, elected to stay on, he would be obliged to play his part in the dénouement. And this thought from the very beginning appalled while it fascinated him. It filled him with a kind of horrible amazement. For the object the clergyman sought, though not yet disclosed, already cast its monstrous shadow across his path. He somehow discerned that it would deal directly with knowledge the saner judgment of a commonplace world had always deemed undesirable, unlawful, unsafe, dangerous to the souls that dared attempt it, failure involving a pitiless and terrible Nemesis.

He lay in bed watching the play of the firelight upon the high ceiling, and thinking in confused fashion of the huge clergyman with his thundering voice, his great lambent eyes and his seductive gentleness; of his singular speculations and his hints, half menacing, half splendid, of things to come. Then he thought of the housekeeper with her deafness and her withered arm, and that white peace about her face; and, lastly, of Miriam, soft, pale beneath her dark skin, her gem-like eyes ever finding his own, and of the intimate personal relations so swiftly established between them….

It was, indeed, a singular household thus buried away in the heart of these lonely mountains. The stately old mansion was just the right setting for — for —

Unbidden into his mind a queer, new thought shot suddenly, interrupting the flow of ideas. He never understood how or whence it came, but with the picture of all the empty rooms in the corridor about him, he received the sharp unwelcome impression that when Mr. Skale described the house as empty it was really nothing of the sort. Utterly unannounced, the uneasy conviction took possession of him that the building was actually — populated. It was an extraordinary idea to have. There was absolutely nothing in the way of evidence to support it. And with it flashed across his memory echoes of that unusual catechism he had been subjected to — in particular the questions whether he believed in spirits,— "other life," as Skale termed it. Sinister suspicions flashed through his imagination as he lay there listening to the ashes dropping in the grate and watching the shadows cloak the room. Was it possible that there were occupants of these rooms that the man had somehow evoked from the interstellar spaces and crystallized by means of sound into form and shape — *created?*

Something freezing swept into him from a region far beyond the world. He shivered. These cold terrors that grip the soul suddenly without apparent cause, whence do they come? Why, out of these rather extravagant and baseless speculations, should have emerged this sense of throttling dread that appalled him? And why, once again, should he have felt convinced that the ultimate nature of the clergyman's great experiment was impious, fraught with a kind of heavenly danger, "unpermissible?"

Spinrobin, lying there shivering in his big bed, could not guess. He only knew that by way of relief his mind instinctively sought out Miriam, and so found peace. Curled up in a ball between the sheets his body presently slept, while his mind, intensely active, traveled off into that vast inner prairie of his childhood days and called her name aloud. And presumably she came to him at once, for his sleep was undisturbed and his dreams uncommonly sweet, and he woke thoroughly refreshed eight hours later, to find Mrs.

Mawle standing beside his bed with thin bread and butter and a cup of steaming tea.

II

For the rest, the new secretary fell quickly and easily into the routine of this odd little household, for he had great powers of adaptability. At first the promise of excitement faded. The mornings were spent in the study of Hebrew, Mr. Skale taking great pains to instruct him in the vibratory pronunciation (for so he termed it) of certain words, and especially of the divine, or angelic, names. The correct utterance, involving a kind of prolonged and sonorous vibration of the vowels, appeared to be of supreme importance. He further taught him curious correspondences between Sound and Number, and the attribution to these again of certain colors. The vibrations of sound and light, as air and ether, had intrinsic importance, it seemed, in the uttering of certain names; all of which, however, Spinrobin learnt by rote, making neither head nor tail of it.

That there were definite results, though, he could not deny — psychic results; for a name uttered correctly produced one effect, and uttered wrongly produced another … just as a wrong note in a chord afflicts the hearer whereas the right one blesses….

The afternoons, wet or fine, they went for long walks together about the desolate hills, Miriam sometimes accompanying them. Their talk and laughter echoed all over the mountains, but there was no one to hear them, the nearest village being several miles away and the railway station — nothing but a railway station. The isolation was severe; there were no callers but the bi-weekly provision carts; letters had to be fetched and newspapers were neglected.

Arrayed in fluffy tweeds, with baggy knickerbockers and heavily-nailed boots, he trotted beside his giant companion over the moors, somewhat like a child who expected its hand to be taken over difficult places. His confidence had been completely won. The sense of shyness left him. He felt that he already stood to the visionary clergyman in a relationship that was more than secretarial. He still panted, but with enthusiasm instead of with regret. In the background loomed always the dim sense of the Discovery and Experiment approaching inevitably, just as in childhood the idea of Heaven and Hell had stood waiting to catch him — real only when he thought carefully about them. Skale was just the kind of man, he felt, who would make a discovery, so simple that the rest of the world had overlooked it, so tremendous that it struck at the roots of human knowledge. He had the simple originality of genius, and a good deal of its inspirational quality as well.

Before ten days had passed he was following him about like a dog, hanging upon his lightest word. New currents ran through him mentally and spiritually as the fires of Mr. Skale's vivid personality quickened his own, and the impetus of his inner life lifted him with its more violent momentum. The world of an ordinary man is so circumscribed, so conventionally molded, that he can scarcely conceive of things that may dwell normally in the mind of an extraordinary man. Adumbrations of these, however, may throw their shadow across his field of vision. Spinrobin was ordinary in most ways, while Mr. Skale was un-ordinary in nearly all; and thus, living together in this intimate solitude, the secretary got peeps into his companion's region that gradually convinced him. With cleaned nerves and vision he began to think in ways and terms that were new to him. Skale, like some big figure in story or legend, moved forward into his life and waved a wand. His own smaller personality began to expand; thoughts entered unannounced that hitherto had not even knocked at the door, and the frontiers of his mind first wavered, then unfolded to admit them.

The clergyman's world, whether he himself were mad or sane, was a real world, alive, vibrating, shortly to produce practical results. Spinrobin would have staked his very life upon it….

And, meanwhile, he made love openly — under any other conditions, outrageously — to Miriam, whose figure of soft beauty moving silently about the house helped to redeem it. She rendered him quiet little services of her own accord that pleased him immensely, for occasionally he detected her delicate perfume about his room, and he was sure it was not Mrs. Mawle who put the fresh heather in the glass jars upon his table, or arranged his papers with such neat precision on the desk.

Her delicate, shining little face with its wreath of dark hair, went with him everywhere, hauntingly, possessingly; and when he kissed her, as he did now every morning and every evening under Mr. Skale's very eyes, it was like plunging his lips into a bed of wild flowers that no artificial process had ever touched. Something in him sang when she was near. She had, too, what he used to call as a boy “night eyes” — changing after dusk into such shadowy depths that to look *at* them was to look beyond and through them. The sight could never rest only upon their surface. Through her eyes, then, stretched all the delight of that old immense play-ground … where names clothed, described, and summoned living realities.

His attitude towards her was odd yet comprehensible; for though his desire was unquestionably great, it was not particularly active, probably because he knew that he held her and that no aggressive effort was necessary. Secure in the feeling that she belonged to him, and he to her, he also found that he had little enough to say to her, never anything to ask. She knew and understood it all beforehand; expression was uncalled for. As well might the brimming kettle sing to the water “I contain you,” or the water reply “I fill you!”

Only this was not the simile he used. In his own thoughts from the very beginning he had used the analogy of sound — of the chord. As well might one note feel called upon to cry to another in the same chord, “Hark! I’m sounding with you!” as that Spinrobin should say to Miriam, “My heart responds and sings to yours.”

After a period of separation, however, he became charged with things he wanted to say to her, all of which vanished utterly the moment they came together. Words instantly then became unnecessary, foolish. He heard that faint internal singing, and his own resonant response; and they merely stayed there side by side, completely happy, everything told without speech. This sense of blissful union enwrapped his soul. In the language of his boyhood he had found her name; he knew her; she was his.

Yet sometimes they did talk; and their conversations, in any other setting but this amazing one provided by the wizardry of Skale’s enthusiasm, must have seemed exquisitely ludicrous. In the room, often with the clergyman a few feet away, reading by the fire, they would sit in the window niche, gazing into one another’s eyes, perhaps even holding hands. Then, after a long interval of silence Mr. Skale would hear Spinrobin’s thin accents:

“You brilliant little sound! I hear you everywhere within me, chanting a song of life!”

And Miriam's reply, thrilled and gentle:

"I'm but your perfect echo! My whole life sings with yours!"

Whereupon, kissing softly, they would separate, and Mr. Skale would cover them mentally with his blessing.

Sometimes, too, he would send for the housekeeper and, with the aid of the violin, would lead the four voices, his own bass included, through the changes of various chords, for the vibratory utterance of certain names; and the beauty of these sounds, singing the "divine names," would make the secretary swell to twice his normal value and importance (thus he puts it), as the forces awakened by the music poured and surged into the atmosphere about them. Whereupon the clergyman would explain with burning words that many a symphony of Beethoven's, a sonata of Schumann's, or a suite of Tschaikovsky's were the Names, peaceful, romantic or melancholy, of great spiritual Potencies, heard partially by these masters in their moments of inspirational ecstasy. The powers of these Beings were just as characteristic, their existence just as real, as the simpler names of the Hebrew angels, and their psychic influence upon the soul that heard them uttered just as sure and individual.

"For the power of music, my dear Spinrobin, has never yet by science or philosophy been adequately explained, and never can be until the occult nature of sound, and its correlations with color, form, and number is once again understood. 'Rhythm is the first law of the physical creation,' says one, 'and music is a breaking into sound of the fundamental rhythm of universal being.' 'Rhythm and harmony,' declares Plato, 'find their way into the secret places of the soul.' 'It is the manifestation,' whispers the deaf Beethoven, 'of the inner essential nature of all that is,' or in the hint of Leibnitz, 'it is a calculation which the soul makes unconsciously in secret.' It is 'love in search of a name,' sang George Eliot, nearer in her intuition to the truth than all the philosophers, since love is the dynamic of pure spirit. But I," he continued after a pause for breath, and smiling amid the glow of his great enthusiasm, "go beyond and behind them all into the very heart of the secret; for you shall learn that to know the sounds of the Great Names and to utter their music correctly shall merge yourself into the heart of their deific natures and make you 'as the gods themselves…!'"

And Spinrobin, as he listened, noticed that a slight trembling ran across the fabric of his normal world, as though it were about to vanish and give place to another — a new world of divine things made utterly simple. For many things that Skale said in this easy natural way, he felt, were in the nature of clues and passwords, whose effect he carefully noted upon his secretary, being intended to urge him, with a certain violence even, into the desired region. Skale was testing him all the time.

III

And it was about this time, more than half way through the trial month, that the clergyman took Spinrobin, now become far more than merely secretary, into his fuller confidence. In a series of singular conversations, which the bewildered little fellow has reported to the best of his ability, he explained to him something of the science of true names. And to prove it he made two singular experiments: first he uttered the true name of Mrs. Mawle, secondly of Spinrobin himself, with results that shall presently be told.

These things it was necessary for him to know and understand before they made the great Experiment. Otherwise, if unprepared, he might witness results that would involve the loss of self-control and the failure, therefore, of the experiment — a disaster too formidable to contemplate.

By way of leading up to this, however, he gave him some account first of the original discovery. Spinrobin asked few questions, made few comments; he took notes, however, of all he heard and at night wrote them up as best he could in his diary. At times the clergyman rose and interrupted the strange recital by moving about the room with his soft and giant stride, talking even while his back was turned; and at times the astonished secretary wrote so furiously that he broke his pencil with a snap, and Mr. Skale had to wait while he sharpened it again. His inner excitement was so great that he almost felt he emitted sparks.

The clue, it appears, came to the clergyman by mere chance, though he admits his belief that the habits of asceticism and meditation he had practiced for years may have made him in some way receptive to the vision, for as a vision, it seems, the thing first presented itself — a vision made possible by a moment of very rapid hypnosis.

An Anglican priest at the time, in charge of a small Norfolk parish, he was a great believer in the value of ceremonial — in the use, that is, of color, odor and sound to induce mental states of worship and adoration — more especially, however, of sound as uttered by the voice, the human voice being unique among instruments in that it combined the characteristics of all other sounds. Intoning, therefore, was to him a matter of psychic importance, and it was one summer evening, intoning, in the chancel, that he noticed suddenly certain very curious results. The faces of two individuals in the congregation underwent a charming and singular change, a change which he would not describe more particularly at the moment, since Spinrobin should presently witness it for himself.

It all happened in a flash — in less than a second, and it is probable, he holds, that his own voice induced an instant of swift and passing hypnosis upon himself; for as he stood there at the lectern there came upon him a moment of keen interior lucidity in which he realized beyond doubt or question what had happened. The use of voice, bell, or gong, has long been known as a means of inducing the hypnotic state, and during this almost instantaneous trance of his there came a sudden revelation of the magical possibilities of sound-vibration. By some chance rhythm of his intoning voice he had hit upon the exact pitch, quality and accent which constituted the "Note" of more than one member of the congregation before him. Those particular individuals, without being aware of the fact, had at once responded, automatically and inevitably. For a second he had heard, he knew, their true names! He had unwittingly "called" them.

Spinrobin's heart leaped with excitement as he listened, for this idea of "Naming True" carried him back to the haunted days of his childhood clairvoyance when he had known Winky.

"I don't *quite* understand, Mr. Skale," he put in, desirous to hear a more detailed explanation.

"But presently you shall," was all the clergyman vouchsafed.

The clue thus provided by chance he had followed up, but by methods hard to describe apparently. A corner of the veil, momentarily lifted, had betrayed the value that lies in the repetition of certain sounds — the rhythmic reiteration of syllables — in a word, of chanting or incantation. By diving down into his subconscious region, already prepared by long spiritual training, he gradually succeeded in drawing out further details piece by piece, and finally by infinite practice and prayer welding them together into an intelligible system. The science of true-naming slowly, with the efforts of years, revealed itself. His mind slipped past the deceit of mere sensible appearances. Clair-audiently he heard the true inner names of things and persons….

Mr. Skale rose from his chair. With thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and fingers drumming loudly on his breast he stood over the secretary, who continued making frantic notes.

“That chance discovery, then, made during a moment’s inner vision,” he continued with a grave excitement, “gave me the key to a whole world of new knowledge, and since then I have made incredible developments. Listen closely, Mr. Spinrobin, while I explain. And take in what you can.”

The secretary laid down his pencil and notebook. He sat forward in an attitude of intense eagerness upon the edge of his chair. He was trembling. This strange modern confirmation of his early Heaven of wonder before the senses had thickened and concealed it, laid bare again his earliest world of far-off pristine glory.

“The ordinary name of a person, understand then, is merely a sound attached to their physical appearance at birth by the parents — a meaningless sound. It is not their true name. That, however, exists behind it in the spiritual world, and is the accurate description of the soul. It is the sound you express visibly before me. The Word is the Life.”

Spinrobin surreptitiously picked up his pencil; but the clergyman spied the movement. “Never mind the notes,” he said; “listen closely to me.” Spinrobin obeyed meekly.

“Your ordinary outer name, however,” continued Mr. Skale, speaking with profound conviction, “may be made a conductor to your true, inner one. The connection between the two by a series of subtle interior links forms gradually with the years. For even the ordinary name, if you reflect a moment, becomes in time a sound of singular authority — inwoven with the finest threads of your psychical being, so that in a sense you *become* it. To hear it suddenly called aloud in the night — in a room full of people, in the street unexpectedly — is to know a shock, however small, of increased vitality. It touches the imagination. It calls upon the soul built up around it."

He paused a moment. His voice boomed musically about the room, even after he ceased speaking. Bewildered, wondering, delighted, Spinrobin drank in every word. How well he knew it all.

"Now," resumed the clergyman, lowering his tone unconsciously, "the first part of my discovery lies in this: that I have learned to pronounce the ordinary names of things and people in such a way as to lead me to their true, inner ones—"

"But," interrupted Spinrobin irrepressibly, "how in the name of — ?"

"Hush!" cried Skale quickly. "Never again call upon a mighty name — in vain. It is dangerous. Concentrate your mind upon what I now tell you, and you shall understand a part, at least, of my discovery. As I was saying, I have learned how to find the true name by means of the false; and understand, if you can, that to pronounce a true name correctly means to participate in its very life, to vibrate with its essential nature, to learn the ultimate secret of its inmost being. For our true names are the sounds originally uttered by the 'Word' of God when He created us, or 'called' us into Being out of the void of infinite silence, and to repeat them correctly means literally — to — speak — with — His — Voice. It is to speak the truth." The clergyman dropped his tone to an awed whisper. "Words are the veils of Being; to speak them truly is to lift a corner of the veil."

"What a glory! What a thing!" exclaimed the other under his breath, trying to keep his mind steady, but losing control of language in the attempt. The great sentences seemed to change the little room into a temple where sacred things were about to reveal themselves. Spinrobin now understood in a measure why Mr. Skale's utterance of his own name and that of Miriam had sounded grand. Behind each he had touched the true name and made it echo.

The clergyman's voice brought his thoughts back from distances in that inner prairie of his youth where they had lost themselves.

"For all of us," he was repeating with rapt expression in his shining eyes, "are Sounds in the mighty music the universe sings to God, whose Voice it was that first produced us, and of whose awful resonance we are echoes therefore in harmony or disharmony." A look of power passed into his great visage. Spinrobin's imagination, in spite of the efforts that he made, fluttered with broken wings behind the swift words. A flash of the former terror stirred in the depths of him. The man was at the heels of knowledge it is not safe for humanity to seek….

"Yes," he continued, directing his gaze again upon the other, "that is a part of my discovery, though only a part, mind. By repeating your outer name in a certain way until it disappears in the mind, I can arrive at the real name within. And to utter it is to call upon the secret soul — to summon it from its lair. 'I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by name.' You remember the texts? '*I know thee by name*,' said Jehovah to the great Hebrew magician, '*and thou art mine*.' By certain rhythms and vibratory modulations of the voice it is possible to produce harmonics of sound which awaken the inner name into life — and then to spell it out. Note well, to *spell* it, — spell — incantation — the magical use of sound — the meaning of the Word of Power, used with such terrific effect in the old forgotten Hebrew magic. Utter correctly the names of their Forces, or Angels, I am teaching you daily now," he went on reverently, with glowing eyes and intense conviction; "pronounce them with full vibratory power that awakens all their harmonics, and you awaken also their counterpart in yourself; you summon their strength or characteristic quality to your aid; you introduce their powers actively into your own psychical being. Had Jacob succeeded in discovering the 'Name' of that 'Angel' with whom he wrestled, he would have become one with its superior power and have thus conquered it. Only, he asked instead of commanded, and he found it not…"

"Magnificent! Splendid!" cried Spinrobin, starting from his chair, seizing with his imagination potently stirred, this possibility of developing character and rousing the forces of the soul.

"We shall yet call upon the Names, and see," replied Skale, placing a great hand upon his companion's shoulder, "not aloud necessarily, but by an inner effort of intense will which sets in vibration the finer harmonics heard only by the poet and magician, those harmonics and overtones which embody the psychical element in music. For the methods of poet and magician, I tell you, my dear Spinrobin, are identical, and all the faiths of the world are at the heels of that thought. Provided you have faith you can — move mountains! You can call upon the very gods!"

“A most wonderful idea, Mr. Skale,” faltered the other breathlessly, “quite wonderful!” The huge sentences deafened him a little with their mental thunder.

“And utterly simple,” was the reply, “for all truth is simple.”

He paced the floor like a great caged animal. He went down and leaned against the dark bookcase, with his legs wide apart, and hands in his coat pockets. “To name truly, you see, is to evoke, to create!” he roared from the end of the room. “To utter as it should be uttered any one of the Ten Words, or Creative Powers of the Deity in the old Hebrew system, is to become master of the ‘world’ to which it corresponds. For these names are still in living contact with the realities behind. It means to vibrate with the powers that called the universe into being and — into form.”

A sort of shadowy majesty draped his huge figure, Spinrobin thought, as he stood in semi-darkness at the end of the room and thundered forth these extraordinary sentences with a conviction that, for the moment at least, swept away all doubt in the mind of his listener. Dreadful ideas, huge-footed and threatening, rushed to and fro in the secretary’s mind. He was torn away from all known anchorage, staggered, dizzy and dismayed; yet at the same time, owing to his adventure-loving temperament, a prey to some secret and delightful exaltation of the spirit. He was out of his depth in great waters….

Then, quite suddenly, Mr. Skale came swiftly over to his side and whispered in accents that were soothing in comparison:

“And think for a moment how beautiful, the huge Words by which God called into being the worlds, and sent the perfect, rounded bodies of the spheres spinning and singing, blazing their eternal trails of glory through the void! How sweet the whisper that crystallized in flowers! How tender the note that fashioned the eyes and face, say, of Miriam….”

At the name of Miriam he felt caught up and glorified, in some delightful and inexplicable way that brought with it — peace. The power of all these strange and glowing thoughts poured their full tide into his own rather arid and thirsty world, frightening him with their terrific force. But the mere utterance of that delightful name — in the way Skale uttered it — brought confidence and peace.

“… Could we but hear them!” Skale continued, half to himself, half to his probationer; “for the sad thing is that today the world has ears yet cannot hear. As light is distorted by passing through a gross atmosphere, so sound reaches us but indistinctly now, and few true names can bring their wondrous messages of power correctly. Men, coarsening with the materialism of the ages, have grown thick and gross with the luxury of inventions and the diseases of modern life that develop intellect at the expense of soul. They have lost the old inner hearing of divine sound, and but one here and there can still catch the faint, far-off and ineffable music.”

He lifted his eyes, and his voice became low and even gentle as the glowing words fell from his heart of longing.

“None hear now the morning stars when they sing together to the sun; none know the chanting of the spheres! The ears of the world are stopped with lust, and the old divine science of true-naming seems lost forever amid the crash of engines and the noisy thunder of machinery!… Only among flowers and certain gems are the accurate old true names still to be found!… But we are on the track, my dear Spinrobin, we are on the ancient trail to Power.”

The clergyman closed his eyes and clasped his hands, lifting his face upwards with a rapt expression while he murmured under his breath the description of the Rider on the White Horse from the Book of the Revelations, as though it held some inner meaning that his heart knew yet dared not divulge: “And he had a Name written, that no man knew but he himself. And he was clothed in a vesture dipped in blood: and his Name is called The Word of God … and he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written,— ‘King of Kings and Lord of Lords….’”

And for an instant Spinrobin, listening to the rolling sound but not to the actual words, fancied that a faintly colored atmosphere of deep scarlet accompanied the vibrations of his resonant whisper and produced in the depths of his mind this momentary effect of colored audition.

It was all very strange and puzzling. He tried, however, to keep an open mind and struggle as best he might with these big swells that rolled into his little pool of life and threatened to merge it in a vaster tide than he had yet dreamed of. Knowing how limited is the world which the senses report, he saw nothing too inconceivable in the idea that certain persons might possess a peculiar inner structure of the spirit by which supersensuous things can be perceived. And what more likely than that a man of Mr. Skale’s unusual caliber should belong to them? Indeed, that the clergyman possessed certain practical powers of an extraordinary description he was as certain as that the house was not empty as he had at first supposed. Of neither had he proof as yet; but proof was not long in forthcoming.

Chapter IV

I

“THEN IF THERE is so much sound about in all objects and forms — if the whole universe, in fact, is sounding,” asked Spinrobin with a naïve impertinence not intended, but due to the reaction of his simple mind from all this vague splendor, “why don’t we hear it more?”

Mr. Skale came upon him like a boomerang from the end of the room. He was smiling. He approved the question.

“With us the question of hearing is merely the question of wavelengths in the air,” he replied; “the lowest audible sound having a wavelength of sixteen feet, the highest less than an inch. Some people can’t hear the squeak of a bat, others the rumble of an earthquake. I merely affirm that in every form sleeps the creative sound that is its life and being. The ear is a miserable organ at best, and the majority are far too gross to know clair-audience. What about sounds, for instance, that have a wavelength of a hundred, a thousand miles on the one hand, or a millionth part of an inch on the other?”

“A thousand miles! A millionth of an inch?” gasped the other, gazing at his interlocutor as though he was some great archangel of sound.

“Sound for most of us lies between, say, thirty and many thousand vibrations per second — the cry of the earthquake and the cricket; it is our limitation that renders the voice of the dewdrop and the voice of the planet alike inaudible. We even mistake a measure of noise — like a continuous millwheel or a river, say — for silence, when in reality there is no such thing as perfect silence. Other life is all the time singing and thundering about us,” he added, holding up a giant finger as though to listen. “To the imperfection of our ears you may ascribe the fact that we do not hear the morning stars shouting together.”

“Thank you, yes, I quite see now,” said the secretary. “To name truly is to hear truly.” The clergyman’s words seemed to hold a lamp to a vast interior map in his mind that was growing light. A new dawn was breaking over the great mental prairie where he wandered as a child. “To find the true name of anything,” he added, “you mean, is to hear its sound, its individual note as it were?” Incredible perspectives swam into his ken, hitherto undreamed of.

“Not ‘as it were,’” boomed the other, “You *do* hear it. After which the next step is to utter it, and so absorb its force into your own being by synchronous vibration — union mystical and actual. Only, you must be sure you utter it correctly. To pronounce incorrectly is to call it incompletely into life and form — to distort and injure it, and yourself with it. To make it untrue — a lie.”

They were standing in the dusk by the library window, watching the veil of night that slowly covered the hills. The flying horizons of the moors had slipped away into the darkness.

The stars were whispering together their thoughts of flame and speed. At the back of the room sat Miriam among the shadows, like some melody hovering in a musician’s mind till he should call her forth. It was close upon the tea hour. Behind them Mrs. Mawle was busying herself with lamps and fire. Mr. Skale, turning at the sound of the housekeeper, motioned to the secretary to approach, then stooped down and spoke low in his ear:

“With many names I had great difficulty,” he whispered. “With hers, for instance,” indicating the housekeeper behind them. “It took me five years’ continuous research to establish her general voice-outline, and even then I at first only derived a portion of her name. And in uttering it I made such errors of omission and pronunciation that her physical form suffered, and she emerged from the ordeal in disorder. You have, of course, noticed her disabilities…. But, later, though only in stammering fashion, I called upon her all complete, and she has since known a serene blessedness and a sense of her great value in the music of life that she never knew before.” His face lit up as he spoke of it. “For in that moment she found herself. She heard her true name, God’s creative sound, thunder through her being.”

Spinrobin, feeling the clergyman’s forces pouring through him like a tide at such close proximity, bowed his head. His lips were too dry to frame words. He was thinking of the possible effects upon his own soul and body when his name too should be “uttered.” He remembered the withered arm and the deafness. He thought, too, of that slender, ghostly figure that haunted the house with its soft movements and tender singing. Lastly, he remembered his strange conviction that somewhere in the great building, possibly in his own corridor, there were other occupants, other life, Beings of unearthly scale waiting the given moment to appear, summoned by utterance.

"And you will understand now why it is I want a man of high courage to help me," Skale resumed in a louder tone, standing sharply upright; "a man careless of physical existence, and with a faith wholly beyond the things of this world!"

"I do indeed," he managed to reply aloud, while in his thoughts he was saying, "I will, I *must* see it through. I won't give in!" With all his might he resisted the invading tide of terror. Even if sad results came later, it was something to have been sacrificed in so big a conception.

In his excitement he slipped from the edge of the windowsill, where he was perched, and Mr. Skale, standing close in front of him, caught his two wrists and set him upon his feet. A shock, like a rush of electricity, ran through him. He took his courage boldly in both hands and asked the question ever burning at the back of his mind.

"Then, this great Experiment you — we have in view," he stammered, "is to do with the correct uttering of the names of some of the great Forces, or Angels, and — and the assimilating of their powers into ourselves — ?"

Skale rose up gigantically beside him. "No, sir," he cried, "it is greater — infinitely greater than that. Names of mere Angels I can call alone without the help of any one; but for the name I wish to utter a whole chord is necessary even to compass the utterance of the opening syllable; as I have told you already, a chord in which you share the incalculable privilege of being the tenor note. But for the completed syllables — the full name — !" He closed his eyes and shrugged his massive shoulders— "I may need the massed orchestras of half the world, the chorused voices of the entire nation — or in their place a still small voice of utter purity crying in the wilderness! In time you shall know fully — know, see and hear. For the present, hold your soul with what patience and courage you may."

The words thundered about the room, so that Miriam, too, heard them. Spinrobin trembled inwardly, as though a cold air passed him. The suggestion of immense possibilities, vague yet terrible, overwhelmed him again suddenly. Had not the girl at that moment moved up beside him and put her exquisite pale face over his shoulder, with her hand upon his arm, it is probable he would then and there have informed Mr. Skale that he withdrew from the whole affair.

“Whatever happens,” murmured Miriam, gazing into his eyes, “we go on singing and sounding together, you and I.” Then, as Spinrobin bent down and kissed her hair, Mr. Skale put an arm round each of them and drew them over to the tea table.

“Come, Mr. Spinrobin,” he said, with his winning smile, “you must not be alarmed, you know. You must not desert me. You are necessary to us all, and when my Experiment is complete we shall all be as gods together. Do not falter. There is nothing in life, remember, but to lose oneself; and I have found a better way of doing so than any one else — by merging ourselves into the Voice of—”

“Mr. Skale’s tea has been standing more than ten minutes,” interrupted the old housekeeper, coming up behind them; “if Mr. Spinrobin will please to let him come—” as though it was Spinrobin’s fault that there had been delay.

Mr. Skale laughed good-humouredly, as the two men, suddenly in the region of teacups and buttered toast, looked one another in the face with a certain confusion. Miriam, sipping her tea, laughed too, curiously. Spinrobin felt restored to some measure of safety and sanity again. Only the strange emotion of a few moments before still moved there unseen among them.

“Listen, and you shall presently hear her name,” the clergyman whispered, glancing up at the other over his teacup, but Spinrobin was crunching his toast too noisily to notice the meaning of the words fully.

II

The Stage Manager who stands behind all the scenes of life, both great and small, had prepared the scene well for what was to follow. The sentences about the world of inaudible sound had dropped the right kind of suggestion into the secretary’s heart. His mind still whirred with a litter of half-digested sentences and ideas, however, and he was vividly haunted by the actuality of truth behind them all. His whole inner being at that moment cried “Hark!” through a hush of expectant wonder.

There they sat at tea, this singular group of human beings: Mr. Skale, bigger than ever in his loose housesuit of black, swallowing his liquid with noisy gulps; Spinrobin, nibbling slippery morsels of hot toast, on the edge of his chair; Miriam, quiet and mysterious, in her corner; and Mrs. Mawle, sedate, respectful in cap and apron, presiding over the teapot, the whole scene cozily lit by lamp and fire — when this remarkable new thing happened. Spinrobin declares always that it came upon him like a drowning wave, frightening him not with any idea of injury to himself, but with a dreadful sense of being lost and shelterless among the immensities of a transcendent new world. Something passed into the room that made his soul shake and flutter at the center.

His attention was first roused by a sound that he took, perhaps, to be the wind coming down from the hills in those draughts and gusts he sometimes heard, only to his imagination now it was a peopled wind crying round the walls, behind whose voice he detected the great fluid form of it — running and colored. But, with the noise, a terror that was no ordinary terror invaded the recesses of his soul. It was the fear of the Unknown, dreadfully multiplied.

He glanced up quickly from his teacup, and chancing to meet Miriam's eye, he saw that she was smiling as she watched him. This sound, then, had some special significance. At the same instant he perceived that it was not outside but in the room, close beside him, that Mr. Skale, in fact, was talking to the deaf housekeeper in a low and carefully modulated tone — a tone she could not possibly have heard, however. Then he discovered that the clergyman was not speaking actually, but repeating her name. He was intoning it. It grew into a kind of singing chant, an incantation.

"Sarah Mawle … Sarah Mawle … Sarah Mawle …" ran through the room like water. And, in Skale's mouth, it sounded as his own name had sounded — different. It became in some significant way — thus Spinrobin expresses it always — stately, important, nay, even august. It became real. The syllables led his ear away from their normal signification — away from the outer toward the inner. His ordinary mental picture of the mere letters SARAHMAWLE disappeared and became merged in something else — into something alive that pulsed and moved with vibrations of its own. For, with the outer sound there grew up another interior one, that finally became separate and distinct.

Now Spinrobin was well aware that the continued repetition of one’s own name can induce self-hypnotism; and he also knew that the reiteration of the name of an object ends by making that object disappear from the mind. “Mustard,” repeated indefinitely, comes to have no meaning at all. The mind drops behind the mere symbol of the sound into something that is unintelligible, if not meaningless. But here it was altogether another matter, and from the torrent of words and similes he uses to describe it, this — a curious mixture of vividness and confusion — is apparently what he witnessed:

For, as the clergyman’s resonant voice continued quietly to utter the name, something passed gradually into the appearance of the motherly old housekeeper that certainly was not there before, not visible, at least, to the secretary’s eyes. Behind the fleshly covering of the body, within the very skin and bones it seemed, there flowed with steady splendor an effect of charging new vitality that had an air of radiating from her face and figure with the glow and rush of increased life. A suggestion of grandeur, genuine and convincing, began to express itself through the humble domestic exterior of her everyday self; at first, as though some greater personage towered shadowy behind her, but presently with a growing definiteness that showed it to be herself and nothing separate. The two, if two they were, merged.

Her mien, he saw, first softened astonishingly, then grew firm with an aspect of dignity that was unbelievably beautiful. An air of peace and joy her face had always possessed, but this was something beyond either. It was something imposing, majestic. So perilously adjusted is the ludicrous to the sublime, that while the secretary wondered dumbly whether the word “housekeeper” might also in Skale’s new world connote “angel,” he could have laughed aloud, had not the nobility of the spectacle hinted at the same time that he should have wept. For the tears of a positive worship started to his eyes at the sight.

“Sarahmawle … Sarahmawle….” The name continued to pour itself about him in a steady ripple, neither rising nor falling, and certainly not audible to those deaf old ears that flanked the vigorous and unwrinkled face. “Youth” is not the word to describe this appearance of ardent intensity that flamed out of the form and features of the housekeeper, for it was something utterly apart from either youth or age. Nor was it any mere idealization of her worn and crumpled self. It was independent of physical conditions, as it was independent of the limitations of time and space; superb as sunshine, simple as the glory that had sometimes touched his soul of boyhood in sleep — the white fires of an utter transfiguration.

It was, in a word, as if the name Skale uttered had summoned to the front, through all disguising barriers of flesh, her true and naked spirit, that which neither ages nor dies, that which the eyes, when they rest upon a human countenance, can never see — the Soul itself!

For the first time in his life Spinrobin, abashed and trembling, gazed upon something in human guise that was genuinely sublime — perfect with a stainless purity. The mere sight produced in him an exaltation of the spirit such as he had never before experienced … swallowing up his first terror. In his heart of hearts, he declares, he prayed; for this was the natural expression for an emotion of the volume and intensity that surged within him….

How long he sat there gazing seems uncertain; perhaps minutes, perhaps seconds only. The sense of time's passage was temporarily annihilated. It might well have been a thousand years, for the sight somehow swept him into eternity…. In that tearoom of Skale's lonely house among the mountains, the warmth of an earthly fire upon his back, the light of an earthly oil-lamp in his eyes, holding buttered toast in exceedingly earthly fingers, he sat face to face with something that yet was not of this earth, something majestic, spiritual and eternal … visible evidence of transfiguration and of "earth growing heaven…."

* * * * *

It was, of course, stupid and clumsy of Spinrobin to drop his teacup and let it smash noisily against the leg of the table; yet it was natural enough, for in his ecstasy and amazement he apparently lost control of certain muscles in his trembling fingers…. Though the change came gradually it seemed very quick. The volume of the clergyman's voice grew less, and as the tide of sound ebbed the countenance of the housekeeper also slowly altered. The flames that a moment before had burned so whitely there flickered faintly and were gone; the glory faded; the splendor withdrew. She even seemed to dwindle in size…. She resumed her normal appearance. Skale's voice ceased.

The incident apparently had occupied but a few moments, for Mrs. Mawle, he realized, was gathering the plates together and fitting them into the spaces of the crowded tea-tray with difficulty — an operation, he remembered, she had just begun when the clergyman first began to call upon her name.

She, clearly, had been conscious of nothing unusual. A moment later, with her customary combination of curtsey and bow, she was gone from the room, and Spinrobin, acting upon a strange impulse, found himself standing upright by the table, looking wildly about him, passing his hand through his scattered hair, and trying in vain to utter words that should relieve his overcharged soul of the burden of glory and mystery that oppressed it.

A pain, profoundly searching, pierced his heart. He thought of the splendors he had just witnessed, and of the joy and peace upon those features even when the greater wonder withdrew. He thought of the power in the countenance of Skale, and of the shining loveliness in the face of Miriam. Then, with a blast of bitterest disappointment, he realized the insignificance of his own self — the earthiness of his own personality, the dead, dull ordinariness of his own appearance. Why, oh, why, could not all faces let the soul shine through? Why could not all identify themselves with their eternal part, and thus learn happiness and joy? A sense of the futile agony of life led him with an impassioned eagerness again to the thought of Skale's tremendous visions, and of the great Experiment that beckoned beyond. Only, once more the terror of its possible meaning dropped upon him, and the little black serpents of fear shot warningly across this brighter background of his hopes.

Then he was aware that Miriam had crossed the room and stood beside him, for her delicate and natural perfume announced her even before he turned and saw. Her soft eyes shining conveyed an irresistible appeal, and with her came the sense of peace she always brought. She was the one thing at that moment that could comfort and he opened his arms to her and let her come nestling in against him, both hands finding their way up under the lapels of his coat, all the exquisite confidence of the innocent child in her look. Her hair came over his lips and face like flowers, but he did not kiss her, nor could he find any words to say. To hold her there was enough, for the touch of her healed and blessed him.

“So now you have seen her as she really is,” he heard her voice against his shoulder; “you have heard her true name, and seen a little of its form and color!”

“I never guessed that in this world—” he stammered; then, instead of completing the sentence, held her more tightly to him and let his face sink deeper into the garden of her hair.

“Oh yes,” she answered, and then peered up with unflinching look into his eyes, “for that is just how I see you too — bright, splendid and eternal.”

“Miriam!” It was as unexpected as a ghost and as incredible. “Me …?”

“Of course! You see I know your true name. I see you as you are within!”

Something came to steady his swimming brain, but it was only after a distinct effort that he realized it was the voice of Mr. Skale addressing him. Then, gradually, as he listened, gently releasing the girl in order to turn towards him, he understood that what he had witnessed had been in the nature of a “test” — one of those tests he had been warned would come — and that his attitude to it was regarded by the clergyman with approval.

“It was a test more subtle than you know, perhaps, Mr. Spinrobin,” he was saying, “and the feelings it has roused in you are an adequate proof that you have come well through it. As I knew you would, as I knew you would,” he added, with evident satisfaction. “They do infinite credit both to yourself and to our judgment in — er — accepting you.”

A wave of singular emotion seemed to pass across the room from one to the other that, catching the breathless secretary in its tide, filled him with a high pride that he had been weighed and found worthy, then left him cold with a sudden reaction as he realized after some delay the import of the words Mr. Skale was next saying to him.

Chapter V

"AND NOW YOU shall hear your own name called," boomed the clergyman with enthusiasm, "and realize the beauty and importance of your own note in the music of life."

And while Spinrobin trembled from head to toe Mr. Skale bore down upon him and laid a hand upon his shoulder. He looked up into the clergyman's luminous eyes. His glance next wandered down the ridge of that masterful nose and lost itself among the flowing strands of the tangled beard. At that moment it would hardly have surprised him to see the big visage disappear, and to hear the Sound, of which it was the visible form, slip into his ears with a roar.

But side by side with the vague terror of the unknown he was conscious also of a smaller and more personal pang. For a man may envy other forms, yet keenly resent the possible loss or alteration of his own. And he remembered the withered arm and the deafness.

"But," he faltered, yet ashamed of his want of courage, "I don't want to lose my present shape, or — come back — without—"

"Have no fear," exclaimed the other with decision. "Miriam and myself have not been experimenting in vain these three weeks. We have found your name. We know it accurately. For we are all one chord, and as I promised you, there is no risk." He stopped, lowering his voice; and, taking the secretary by the arm with a fatherly and possessive gesture, "Spinrobin," he whispered solemnly, "you shall learn the value and splendor of your Self in the melody of the Universe — that burst of divine music! You shall understand how closely linked you are to myself and Mrs. Mawle, but, closest of all, to Miriam. For Miriam herself shall call your name, and you shall hear!"

So little Miriam was to prove his executioner, or his redeemer. That was somehow another matter. The awe with which these experiments of Mr. Skale's inspired him ebbed considerably as he turned and saw the appealing, wistful expression of his other examiner. Brave as a lion he felt, yet timid as a hare; there was no idea of real resistance in him any longer.

“I’m ready, then,” he said faintly, and the girl came up softly to his side and sought his face with a frank innocence of gaze that made no attempt to hide her eagerness and joy. She accepted the duty with delight, proudly conscious of its importance.

“I know thee by name and thou art mine,” she murmured, taking his hand.

“It makes me happy, yet afraid,” he replied in her ear, returning the caress; and at that moment the clergyman who had gone to fetch his violin, returned into the room with a suddenness that made them both start — for the first time. Very slightly, with the first sign of that modesty which comes with knowledge he had yet noticed in her, or felt conscious of in himself, she withdrew, a wonderful flush tinging her pale skin, then passing instantly away.

“To make you feel absolutely safe from possible disaster,” Mr. Skale was saying with a smile, “you shall have the assistance of the violin. The pitch and rhythm shall be thus assured. There is nothing to fear.”

And Miriam, equally smiling with confidence, led her friend, perplexed and entangled as he was by the whole dream-like and confusing puzzle — led him to the armchair she had just vacated, and then seated herself at his feet upon a high footstool and stared into his eyes with a sweet and irresistible directness of gaze that at once increased both his sense of bewilderment and his confidence.

“First, you must speak my name,” she said gently, yet with a note of authority, “so that I may get the note of your voice into myself. Once or twice will do.”

He obeyed. “Miriam … Miriam … Miriam,” he said, and watched the tiny reflection of his own face in her eyes, her “night-eyes.” The same moment he began to lose himself. The girl’s lips were moving. She had picked up his voice and merged her own with it, so that when he ceased speaking her tones took up the note continuously. There was no break. She carried on the sound that he had started.

And at the same moment, out of the corner of his eye, he perceived that the violin had left its case and was under the clergyman’s beard. The bow undulated like a silver snake, drawing forth long, low notes that flowed about the room and set the air into rhythmical vibrations. These vibrations, too, carried on the same sound. Spinrobin gave a little uncontrollable jump; he felt as if he had uttered his own death-warrant and that this instrument proclaimed the sentence. Then the feeling of dread lessened as he heard Mr. Skale's voice mingling with the violin, combining exquisitely with the double-stopping he was playing on the two lower strings; for the music, as the saying is, "went through him" with thrills of power that plunged into unknown depths of his soul and lifted him with a delightful sense of inner expansion to a state where fear was merged in joy.

For some minutes the voice of Miriam, murmuring so close before him that he could feel her very breath, was caught in the greater volume of the violin and bass. Then, suddenly, both Skale and violin ceased together, and he heard her voice emerge alone. With a little rush like that of a singing flame, it dropped down on to the syllables of his name — his ugly and ridiculous outer and ordinary name:

"ROBERTSPINROBIN … ROBERTSPINROBIN …" he heard; and the sound flowed and poured about his ears like the murmur of a stream through summer fields. And, almost immediately, with it there came over him a sense of profound peace and security. Very soon, too, he lost the sound itself — did not hear it, as sound, for it grew too vast and enveloping. The sight of Miriam's face also he lost. He grew too close to her to see her, as object. Both hearing and sight merged into something more intimate than either. He and the girl were together — one consciousness, yet two aspects of that one consciousness.

They were two notes singing together in the same chord, and he had lost his little personality, only to find it again, increased and redeemed, in an existence that was larger.

It seemed to Spinrobin — for there is only his limited phraseology to draw from — that the incantation of her singing tones inserted itself between the particles of his flesh and separated them, ran with his blood, covered his skin with velvet, flowed and purred in the very texture of his mind and thoughts. Something in him swam, melted, fused. His inner kingdom became most gloriously extended….

His soul loosened, then began to soar, while something at the heart of him that had hitherto been congealed now turned fluid and alive. He was light as air, swift as fire. His thoughts, too, underwent a change: rose and fell with the larger rhythm of new life as the sound played upon them, somewhat as wind may rouse the leaves of a tree, or call upon the surface of a deep sea to follow it in waves. Terror was nowhere in his sensations; but wonder, beauty and delight ran calling to one another from one wave to the next, as this tide of sound moved potently in the depths of his awakening higher consciousness. The little reactions of ordinary life spun away from him into nothingness as he listened to a volume of sound that was oceanic in power and of an infinite splendor: the creative sound by which God first called him into form and being — the true inner name of his soul.

…Yet he no longer consciously listened… no longer, perhaps, consciously heard. The name of the soul can sound only in the soul, where no speech is, nor any need for such stammering symbols. Spinrobin for the first time knew his true name, and that was enough.

It is impossible to translate into precise language this torrent of exquisite sensation that the girl's voice awakened. In the secret chambers of his imagination Spinrobin found the *thoughts*, perhaps, that clothed it with intelligible description for himself, but in speaking of it to others he becomes simply semi-hysterical, and talks a kind of hearty nonsense. For the truth probably is that only poetry or music can convey any portion of a mystical illumination, otherwise hopelessly incommunicable. The outer name had acted as a conductor to the inner name beyond. It filled the room, and filled some far vaster space that opened out above the room, about the house, above the earth, yet at the same time was deep, deep down within his own self. He passed beyond the confines of the world into those sweet, haunted gardens where Cherubim and Seraphim — vast Forces — continually do sing. It floated him off his feet as a rising tide overtakes the little shore-pools and floats them into its own greatness, and on the tranquil bosom of these giant swells he rose into a state that was too calm to be ecstasy, yet too glorious to be mere exaltation.

And as his own little note of personal aspiration soared with this vaster music to which it belonged, he felt mounting out of himself into a condition where at last he was alive, complete and splendidly important. His sense of insignificance fled. His ordinary petty and unvalued self dropped away flake by flake, and he realized something of the essential majesty of his own real Being as part of an eternal and wonderful Whole. The little painful throb of his own limited personality slipped into the giant pulse-beat of a universal vibration.

In his normal daily life, of course, he lost sight of this Whole, blinded by the details seen without perspective, mistaking his little personality for all there was of him; but now, as he rose, whirling, soaring, singing in the body of this stupendous music, he understood with a rush of indescribable glory that he was part and parcel of this great chord — this particular chord in which Skale, Mrs. Mawle and Miriam also sang their harmonious existences — that this chord, again, was part of a vaster music still, and that all, in the last resort, was a single note in the divine Utterance of God.

That is, the little secretary, for the first time in his existence, saw life as a whole, and interpreted the vision so wondrous sweet and simple, with the analogies of sound communicated to his subliminal mind by the mighty Skale. Whatever the cause, however, the fine thing was that he saw, heard, knew. He was of value in the scheme. In future he could pipe his little lay without despair.

Moreover, with a merciless clarity of vision, he perceived an even deeper side of truth, and understood that the temporary discords were necessary, just as evil, so-called, is necessary for the greater final perfection of the Whole. For it came to him with the clear simplicity of a child's vision that the process of attuning his being to the right note must inevitably involve suffering and pain: the awful stretching of the string, the strain of the lifting vibrations, the stress at first of sounding in harmony with all the others, and the apparent loss of one's own little note in order to do so…

This point he reached, it seems, and grasped. Afterwards, however, he entered a state where he heard things no man can utter because no language can touch transcendental things without confining or destroying them. In attempting a version of them he merely becomes unintelligible, as has been said. Yet the mere memory of it brings tears to his blue eyes when he tries to speak of it, and Miriam, who became, of course, his chief confidant, invariably took it upon herself to stop his futile efforts with a kiss.

* * * * *

So at length the tide of sound began to ebb, the volume lessened and grew distant, and he found himself, regretfully, abruptly, sinking back into what by comparison was mere noise. First, he became conscious that he listened — heard — saw; then, that Miriam's voice still uttered his name softly, but his ordinary, outer name, Robertspinrobin; that he noticed her big grey eyes gazing into his own, and her lips moving to frame the syllables, and, finally, that he was sitting in the armchair, trembling. Joy, peace, wonder still coursed through him like flames, but dying flames. Mr. Skale's voice next reached him from the end of the room. He saw the fireplace, his own bright and pointed pumps, the tea table where they had drunk tea, and then, as the clergyman strode towards him over the carpet, he looked up, faint with the farewell of the awful excitement, into his face. The great passion of the experience still glowed and shone in him like a furnace.

And there, in that masterful bearded visage, he surprised an expression so tender, so winning, so comprehending, that Spinrobin rose to his feet, and taking Miriam by the hand, went to meet him. There the three of them stood upon the mat before the fire. He felt overwhelmingly drawn to the personality of the man who had revealed to him such splendid things, and in his mind stirred a keen and poignant regret that such knowledge could not be permanent and universal, instead of merely a heavenly dream in the mind of each separate percipient. Gratitude and love, unknown to him before, rose in his soul. Spinrobin, his heart bursting as with flames, had cried aloud, "You have called me by my name and I am free!… You have named me truly and I am redeemed!…" And all manner of speech, semi-inspirational, was about to follow, when Mr. Skale suddenly moved to one side and raised his arm. He pointed to the mirror.

Spinrobin was just tall enough to see his own face in the glass, but the glimpse he caught made him stand instantly on tiptoe to see more. For his round little countenance, flushed as it was beneath its fringe of disordered feathery hair, was literally — transfigured. A glory, similar to the glory he had seen that same evening upon the face of the housekeeper, still shone and flickered about the eyes and forehead. The signature of the soul, brilliant in purity, lay there, transforming the insignificance of the features with the grandeur and nobility of its own power.

"I am honored, — too gloriously honored!" was the singular cry that escaped his lips, vainly seeking words to express an emotion of the unknown, “I am honored as the sun… and as the stars…!”

And so fierce was the tide of emotion that rose within him at the sight, so strong the sense of gratitude to the man and girl who had shown him how his true Self might contain so great a glory, that he turned with a cry like that of a child bewildered by the loss of some incomprehensible happiness — turned and flung himself first upon the breast of the big clergyman, and then into the open arms of the radiant Miriam, with sobs and tears of wonder that absolutely refused to be restrained.

Chapter VI

I

THE SITUATION AT this point of his amazing adventure seems to have been that the fear Spinrobin felt about the nature of the final Experiment was met and equalized by his passionate curiosity regarding it. Had these been the only two forces at work, the lightest pressure in either direction would have brought him to a decision. He would have accepted the challenge and stayed; or he would have hesitated, shirked, and left.

There was, however, another force at work upon which he had hardly calculated at the beginning, and that force now came into full operation and controlled his decision with margin and to spare. He loved Miriam; and even had he not loved her, it is probable that her own calm courage would have put him to shame and made him "face the music." He could no more have deserted her than he could have deserted himself. The die was cast.

Moreover, if the certainty that Mr. Skale was trafficking in dangerous and unlawful knowledge was formidable enough to terrify him, for Miriam, at least, it held nothing alarming. She had no qualms, knew no uneasiness. She looked forward to the end with calmness, even with joy, just as ordinary good folk look forward to a heaven beyond death. For she had never known any other ideal. Mr. Skale to her was father, mother and God. He had brought her up during all the twenty years of her life in this solitude among the mountains, choosing her reading, providing her companionship, training her with the one end in view of carrying out his immense and fire-stealing purpose.

She had never dreamed of any other end, and had been so drilled with the idea that this life was but a tedious training-place for a worthier state to come, that she looked forward, naturally enough, with confidence and relief to the great Experiment that should bring her release. She knew vaguely that there was a certain awful danger involved, but it never for one instant occurred to her that Mr. Skale could fail. And, so far, Spinrobin had let no breath of his own terror reach her, or attempted ever to put into her calm mind the least suggestion that the experiment might fail and call down upon them the implacable and destructive forces that could ruin them body and soul forever. For this, plainly expressed, was the form in which his terror attacked him when he thought about it. Skale was tempting the Olympian powers to crush him.

It was about this time, however, as has been seen from a slight incident in the last chapter, that a change began to steal, at first imperceptibly, then obviously, over their relations together. Spinrobin had been in the house three weeks — far longer, no doubt, than any of the other candidates. There only remained now the final big tests. The preliminary ones were successfully passed. Miriam knew that very soon the moment would come for him to stay — or go. And it was in all probability this reflection that helped her to make certain discoveries in herself that at first she did not in the least understand.

Spinrobin, however, understood perfectly. His own heart made him intuitive enough for that. And the first signs thrilled and moved him prodigiously. His account of it all is like no love story that has ever been heard, for in the first place this singular girl hardly breathed about her the reality of an actual world. She had known nothing beyond the simple life in this hollow of the hills on the one hand, and on the other the portentous conceptions that peopled the region of dream revealed by the clergyman. And in the second place she had no standards but her own instincts to judge by, for Mrs. Mawle, in spite of her devotion to the girl, suffered under too great disabilities to fill the place of a mother, while Mr. Skale was too lost in his vast speculations to guide her except in a few general matters, and too sure of her at the same time to reflect that she might ever need detailed guidance. Her exceedingly natural and wholesome bringing-up on the one hand, and her own native purity and good sense on the other, however, led her fairly straight; while the fact that Spinrobin, with his modesty and his fine aspirations, was a “little gentleman” into the bargain, ensured that no unlawful temptation should be placed in her way, or undue pressure, based upon her ignorance, employed.

II

They were coming down one afternoon from the mountains soon after the test of calling his name, and they were alone, the clergyman being engaged upon some mysterious business that had kept him out of sight all day. They did not talk much, but they were happy in each other's company, Spinrobin more than happy. Much of the time, when the ground allowed, they went along hand in hand like children.

"Miriam," he had asked on the top of the moors, "did I ever tell you about Winky — my little friend Winky?" And she had looked up with a smile and shaken her head. "But I like the name," she added; "I should like to hear, please." And he told her how as a boy he had invoked various folk to tease his sister, of whom Winky was chief, but in telling the story he somehow or other always referred to the little person by name, and never once revealed his sex. He told, too, how he sat all night on the lawn outside his sister's window to intercept the expected visit.

"Winky," she said, speaking rather low, "is a true name, of course. You really created Winky — called Winky into being." For to her now this seemed as true and possible as it had seemed to himself at the age of ten.

"Oh, I really loved Winky," he replied enthusiastically, and was at the same moment surprised to feel her draw away her hand. "Winky lived for years in my very heart."

And the next thing he knew, after a brief silence between them, was that he heard a sob, and no attempt to smother it either. In less than a second he was beside her and had both her hands in his. He understood in a flash.

"You precious baby," he cried, "but Winky was a little man. He wasn't a girl!"

She looked up through her tears — oh, but how wonderful her grey eyes were through tears! — and made him stand still before her and repeat his sentence. And she said, "I know it's true, but I like to hear you say it, and that's why I asked you to repeat it."

"Miriam," he said to her softly, kneeling down on the heather at her feet, "there's only one name in my heart, I can tell you that. I heard it sing and sing the moment I came into this house, the very instant I first saw you in that dark passage. I knew perfectly well, ages and ages ago, that one day a girl with your name would come singing into my life to make me complete and happy, but I never believed that she would look as beautiful as you are." He kissed the two hands he held. "Or that she — would — would think of me as you do," he stammered in his passion.

And then Miriam, smiling down on him through her tears, bent and kissed his feathery hair, and immediately after was on her knees in front of him among the heather.

“I own you,” she said quite simply. “I know your name, and you know mine. Whatever happens—” But Spinrobin was too happy to hear any more, and putting both arms round her neck, he kissed the rest of her words away into silence.

And in the very middle of this it was that the girl gently, but very firmly, pushed him from her, and Spinrobin in the delicacy of his mind understood that for the first time in her curious, buried life the primitive instincts had awakened, so that she knew herself a woman, and a woman, moreover, who loved.

* * * * *

Thus caught in a bewildering network of curiosity, fear, wonder, and — love, Spinrobin stayed on, and decided further that should the clergyman approve him he would not leave. Yet his intimate relations now with Miriam, instead of making it easier for him to learn the facts, made it on the other hand more difficult. For he could not, of course, make use of her affection to learn secrets that Mr. Skale did not yet wish him to know. And, further, he had no desire to be disloyal either to him. None the less he was sorely tempted to ask her what the final experiment was, and what the ‘empty’ rooms contained. And most of all what the great name was they were finally to utter by means of the human chord.

The emotions playing about him at this time, however, were too complicated and too violent to enable him to form a proper judgment of the whole affair. It seems, indeed, that this calmer adjudication never came to him at all, for even to this day the mere mention of the clergyman’s name brings to his round cheeks a flush of that enthusiasm and wonder which are the enemies of all sober discrimination. Skale still remains the great battering force of his life that carried him off his feet towards the stars, and sent his imagination with wings of fire tearing through the Unknown to a goal that once attained should make them all four as gods.

Chapter VII

I

AND THUS THE affair moved nearer to its close. The theory and practice of molding form by means of sound was the next bang at his mind — delivered in the clergyman's most convincing manner, and, in view of the proofs that soon followed, an experience that seemed to dislocate the very foundations of his visible world, deemed hitherto secure enough at least to stand on.

Had it all consisted merely of talk on Mr. Skale's part the secretary would have known better what to think. It was the interludes of practical proof that sent his judgment so awry. These definite, sensible results, sandwiched in between all the visionary explanation, left him utterly at sea. He could not reconcile them altogether with hypnotism. He could only, as an ordinary man, already with a bias in the mystical direction, come to the one conclusion that this overwhelming and hierophantic man was actually in touch with cisterns of force so terrific as to be dangerous to what he had hitherto understood to be — life. It was easy enough for the clergyman, in his optimistic enthusiasm, to talk about their leading to a larger life. But what if the experiment failed, and these colossal powers ran amok upon the world — and upon the invokers?

Moreover — chief anxiety of all — what was this name to be experimented with? What was the nature of this force that Skale hoped to invoke — so mighty that it should make them "as gods," so terrible that a chord alone could compass even the first of its stupendous syllables?

And, further, he was still haunted with the feeling that other "beings" occupied certain portions of the rambling mansion, and more than once recently he had wakened in the night with an idea, carried over from dreams possibly, that the corridor outside his bedroom was moving and alive with footsteps. "From dreams possibly," for when he went and peered shivering through the narrow crack of the half-opened door, he saw nothing unusual. And another time — he was awake beyond question at the moment, for he had been reading till two o'clock and had but just extinguished the candle

— he had heard a sound that he found impossible to describe, but that sent all the blood with a swift rush from the region of his heart. It was not wind; it was not the wood cracking with the frost; it was not snow sliding from the slates outside. It was something that simultaneously filled the entire building, yet sounded particularly loud just outside his door; and it came with the abrupt suddenness of a report. It made him think of all the air in the rooms and halls and passages being withdrawn by immense suction, as though a gigantic dome had been dropped over the building in order to produce a vacuum. And just after it he heard, unmistakably, the long soft stride of Skale going past his door and down the whole length of the corridor — stealthily, very quickly, with the hurry of anxiety or alarm in his silence and his speed.

This, moreover, had now happened twice, so that imagination seemed a far-fetched explanation. And on both occasions the clergyman had remained invisible on the day following until the evening, and had then reappeared, quiet and as usual, but with an atmosphere of immense vibratory force somehow about his person, and a glow in his face and eyes that at moments seemed positively colored.

No word of explanation, however, had as yet been forthcoming of these omens, and Spinrobin waited with what patience he could, meanwhile, for the final test which he knew to be close upon him. And in his diary, the pages usually left blank now because words failed him, he wrote a portion of Anone's cry that had caught his memory and expressed a little of what he felt:

… for fiery thoughts Do shape themselves within me, more and more, Whereof I catch the issue, as I hear Dead sounds at night come from the inmost hills, *Like footsteps upon wool*….

II

It was within three days of the expiration of his trial month that he then had this conversation with the clergyman, which he understood quite well was offered by way of preparation for the bigger tests about to come. He has reported what he could of it; it seemed to him at the time both plausible and absurd; it was of a piece, that is, with the rest of the whole fabulous adventure.

Mr. Skale, as they walked over the snowy moors in the semi-darkness between tea and dinner, had been speaking to him about the practical results obtainable by sound-vibrations (what he already knew for that matter), and how it is possible by fiddling long enough upon a certain note to fiddle down a bridge and split it asunder. From that he passed on to the scientific fact that the ultimate molecules of matter are not only in constant whirring motion, but that also they do not actually touch one another. The atoms composing the point of a pin, for instance, shift and change without ceasing, and — there is space between them.

Then, suddenly taking Spinrobin's arm, he came closer, his booming tone dropping to a whisper:

"To change the form of anything," he said in his ear, "is merely to change the arrangement of those dancing molecules, to alter their rate of vibration." His eyes, even in the obscurity of the dusk, went across the other's face like flames.

"By means of sound?" asked the other, already beginning to feel eerie.

The clergyman nodded his great head in acquiescence.

"Just as the vibrations of heat-waves," he said after a pause, "can alter the form of a metal by melting it, so the vibrations of sound can alter the form of a thing by inserting themselves between those whirling molecules and changing their speed and arrangement — change the outline, that is."

The idea seemed fairly to buffet the little secretary in the face, but Mr. Skale's proximity was too overpowering to permit of very clear thinking. Feeling that a remark was expected from him, he managed to ejaculate an obvious objection in his mind.

"But is there any sound that can produce vibrations fine and rapid enough — to — er — accomplish such a result?"

Mr. Skale appeared almost to leap for pleasure as he heard it. In reality he merely straightened himself up.

"That," he cried aloud, to the further astonishment and even alarm of his companion, "is another part of my discovery — an essential particular of it: the production of sound-vibrations fine and rapid enough to alter shapes! Listen and I will tell you!" He lowered his voice again. "I have found out that by uttering the true inner name of anything I can set in motion harmonics — harmonics, note well, half the wave length and twice the frequency! — that are delicate and swift enough to insert themselves between the whirling molecules of any reasonable object — any object, I mean, not too closely or coherently packed. By then swelling or lowering my voice I can alter the scale, size or shape of that object almost indefinitely, its parts nevertheless retaining their normal relative proportions. I can scatter it to a huge scale by separating its molecules indefinitely, or bring them so closely together that the size of the object would be reduced to a practical invisibility!"

"Re-create the world, in fact!" gasped Spinrobin, feeling the earth he knew slipping away under his feet.

Mr. Skale turned upon him and stood still a moment. The huge moors, glimmering pale and unreal beneath their snow, ran past them into the sky — silent forms corresponding to who knows what pedal notes? The wind sighed — audible expression of who shall say what mighty shapes?… Something of the passion of sound, with all its mystery and splendor, entered his heart in that windy sigh. Was anything real? Was anything permanent?… Were Sound and Form merely interchangeable symbols of some deeper uncataloged Reality? And was the visible cohesion after all the illusory thing?

"Re-mold the whole universe, sir!" he roared through the darkness, in a way that made the other wish for the touch of Miriam's hand to steady him. "I could make you, my dear Spinrobin, immense, tiny, invisible, or by a partial utterance of your name, permanently crooked. I could overwhelm your own vibrations and withdraw their force, as by suction of a vacuum, absorbing yourself into my own being. By uttering the name of this old earth, if I knew it, I could alter its face, toss the forests like green dust into the sea, and lift the pebbles of the seashore to the magnitude of moons! Or, did I know the true name of the sun, I could utter it in such a way as to identify myself with its very being, and so escape the pitiful terrors of a limited personal existence!"

He seized his companion's arm and began to stride down the mountainside at a terrific pace, almost lifting Spinrobin from his feet as he did so. About the ears of the panting secretary the wild words tore like bullets, whistling a new and dreadful music.

“My dear fellow,” he shouted through the night, “at the Word of Power of a true man the nations would rush into war, or sink suddenly into eternal peace; the mountains be moved into the sea, and the dead arise. To know the sounds behind the manifestations of Nature, the names of mechanical as well as of psychical Forces, of Hebrew angels, as of Christian virtues, is to know Powers that you can call upon at will — and use! Utter them in the true vibratory way and you waken their counterpart in yourself and stir thus mighty psychic powers into activity in your Soul.”

He rained the words down upon the other’s head like a tempest.

“Can you wonder that the walls of Jericho fell flat before a ‘Sound,’ or that the raging waves of the sea lay still before a voice that called their Name? My discovery, Mr. Spinrobin, will run through the world like a purifying fire. For to utter the true names of individuals, families, tribes and nations, will be to call them to the knowledge of their highest Selves, and to lift them into tune with the music of the Voice of God.”

They reached the front door, where the gleam of lamps shone with a homely welcome through the glass panels. The clergyman released his companion’s arm; then bent down towards him and added in a tone that held in it for the first time something of the gravity of death:

“Only remember — that to utter falsely, to pronounce incorrectly, to call a name incompletely, is the beginning of all evil. For it is to lie with the very soul. It is also to evoke forces without the adequate corresponding shape that covers and controls them, and to attract upon yourself the destructive qualities of these Powers — to your own final disintegration and annihilation.”

Spinrobin entered the house, filled with a sense of awe that was cold and terrible, and greater than all his other sensations combined. The winds of fear and ruin blew shrill about his naked soul. None the less he was steadfast. He would remain to bless. Mr. Skale might be violent in mind, unbalanced, possibly mad; but his madness thundered at the doors of heaven, and the sound of that thundering completed the conquest of his admiration. He really believed that when the end came those mighty doors would actually open. And the thought woke a kind of elemental terror in him that was not of this world — yet marvelously attractive.

III

That night the singular rushing sound again disturbed him. It seemed as before to pass through the entire building, but this time it included a greater space in its operations, for he fancied he could hear it outside the house as well, traveling far up into the recesses of the dark mountains. Like the sweep of immense draughts of air it went down the passage and rolled on into the sky, making him think of the clergyman's suggestion that some sounds might require airwaves of a hundred miles instead of a few inches, too vast to be heard as sound. And shortly after it followed the great gliding stride of Mr. Skale himself down the corridor. That, at least, was unmistakable.

During the following day, moreover, Mr. Skale remained invisible. Spinrobin, of course, had never permitted himself to search the house, or even to examine the other rooms in his own corridor. The quarters where Miriam slept were equally unknown to him. But he was quite certain that these prolonged periods of absence were spent by the clergyman in some remote part of the rambling building where there existed isolated, if not actually secret, rooms in which he practiced the rituals of some dangerous and intrepid worship. And these intimidating and mysterious sounds at night were, of course, something to do with the forces he conjured….

The day was still and windless, the house silent as the grave. He walked about the hills during the afternoon, practicing his Hebrew "Names" and "Words" like a schoolboy learning a lesson. And all about him the slopes of mountain watched him, listening. So did the sheet of snow, shining in the wintry sunlight. The clergyman seemed to have put all sound in his pocket and taken it away with him. The absence of anything approaching noise became almost oppressive. It was a Silence that prepares. Spinrobin went about on tiptoe, spoke to Miriam in whispers, practiced his Names in hushed, expectant tones. He almost expected to see the moors and mountains open their deep sides and let the Sounds of which they were the visible shape escape awfully about him….

In these hours of solitude, all that Skale had told him, and more still that he divined himself, haunted him with a sense of disquieting reality. Inaudible sounds of fearful volume, invisible forms of monstrous character, combinations of both even, impended everywhere about him. He became afraid lest he might stumble, as Skale had done, on the very note that should release them and bring them howling, leaping, crashing about his ears. Therefore, he tried to make himself as small as possible; he muffled steps and voice and personality. If he could, he would have completely disappeared.

He looked forward to Skale's return, but when evening came he was still alone, and he dined *tête-à-tête* with Miriam for the first time. And she, too, he noticed, was unusually quiet. Almost they seemed to have entered the world of Mrs. Mawle, the silent regions of the deaf. But for the most part it is probable that these queer impressions were due to the unusual state of Spinrobin's imagination. He knew that it was his last night in the place — unless the clergyman accepted him; he knew also that Mr. Skale had absented himself with a purpose, and that the said purpose had to do with the test of Alteration of Forms by Sound, which would surely be upon him before the sun rose. So that, one way and another, it was natural enough that his nerves should have been somewhat overtaxed.

The presence of Miriam and Mrs. Mawle, however, did much to soothe him. The latter, indeed, mothered the pair of them quite absurdly, smiling all the time while she moved about softly with the dishes, and doing her best to make them eat enough for four. Between courses she sat at the end of the room, waiting in the shadows till Miriam beckoned to her, and once or twice going so far as to put her hand upon Spinrobin's shoulder protectively.

His own mind, however, all the time was full of charging visions. He kept thinking of the month just past and of the amazing changes it had brought into his thoughts. He realized, too, now that Mr. Skale was away, something of the lonely and splendid courage of the man, following this terrific, perhaps mad, ideal, day in day out, week in week out, for twenty years and more, his faith never weakening, his belief undaunted. Waves of pity, too, invaded him for the first time — pity for this sweet girl, brought up in ignorance of any other possible world; pity for the deaf old housekeeper, already partially broken, and both sacrificed to the dominant idea of this single, heaven-climbing enthusiast; pity last of all for himself, swept headlong before he had time to reflect, into the audacious purpose of this violent and headstrong super-man.

All manner of emotions stirred now this last evening in his perplexed breast; yet out of the general turmoil one stood forth more clearly than the rest — his proud consciousness that he was taking an important part in something really big at last. Behind the screen of thought and emotion which veiled so puzzlingly the truth, he divined for the first time in his career a golden splendor. If it also terrified him, that was only his cowardice…. In the same way it might be splendid to jump into Niagara just above the falls to snatch a passing flower that seemed more wonderful than any he had seen before, but — !

"Miriam, tomorrow is my last day," he said suddenly, catching her grey eyes upon him in the middle of his strange reflections. "Tonight may be my last night in this house with you."

The girl made no reply, merely looking up and smiling at him. But the singing sensation that usually accompanied her gaze was not present.

"That was very nearly — a discord," she observed presently, referring to his remark. "It was out of tune!" And he realized with a touch of shame what she meant. For it was not true that this was his last evening; he knew really that he would stay on and that Mr. Skale would accept him. Quick as a flash, with her simple intuition, she felt that he had said this merely to coax from her some sign of sympathy or love. And the girl was not to be drawn. She knew quite well that she held him and that their fate, whatever it might be, lay together.

The gentle rebuke made him silent again. They sat there smiling at one another across the table, and old Mrs. Mawle, sitting among the shadows at the far end of the room, her hands crossed in front of her, her white evening cap shining like a halo above her patient face, watched them, also smiling. The rest of the strange meal passed without conversation, for the great silence that all day had wrapped the hills seemed to have invaded the house as well and laid its spell upon every room. A deep hush, listening and expectant, dropped more and more about the building and about themselves.

After dinner they sat for twenty minutes together before the library fire, their toes upon the fender, for, contrary to her habit, Miriam had not vanished at once to her own quarters.

“We’re not alone here,” remarked Spinrobin presently, in a low voice, and she nodded her head to signify agreement. The presence of Mr. Skale when he was in the house but invisible, was often more real and tremendous than when he stood beside them and thundered. Some part of him, some emanation, some potent psychic messenger from his personality, kept them closely company, and tonight the secretary felt it very vividly. His remark was really another effort to keep in close touch with Miriam, even in thought. He needed her more than ever in this sea of silence that was gathering everywhere about him. Gulf upon gulf it rose and folded over him. His anxiety became every moment more acute, and those black serpents of fear that he dreaded were not very far away. By every fiber in his being he felt certain that a test which should shake the very foundations of his psychical life was slowly and remorselessly approaching him.

Yet, though he longed to speak outright and demand of Miriam what she knew, and especially that she should reveal the place of the clergyman’s concealment and what portent it was that required all this dread and muted atmosphere for its preparation, he kept a seal upon his lips, realizing that loyalty forbade, and that the knowledge of her contempt would be even worse than the knowledge of the truth.

And so in due course she rose to go, and as he opened the door for her into the hall, she paused a moment and turned towards him. A sudden inexplicable thrill flashed through him as she turned her eyes upon his face, for he thought at first she was about to speak. He has never forgotten the picture as she stood there so close to his side, the lamplight on her slim figure in its white silk blouse and neat dark skirt, the gloom of the unlit hall and staircase beyond — stood there an instant, then put both her arms about his neck, drew him down to her, and kissed him gently on both cheeks. Twice she kissed him, then was gone into the darkness, so softly that he scarcely heard her steps, and he stood between the shadows and the light, her perfume still lingering, and with it the sweet and magical blessing that she left behind. For that caress, he understood, was the innocent childlike caress of their first days, and with all the power of her loving little soul in it she had given him the message that he craved: “Courage! And keep a brave heart, dear Spinny, *tonight*!”

Chapter VIII

I

SPINROBIN LINGERED A while in the library after Miriam was gone, then feeling slightly ill at ease in the room now that her presence was withdrawn, put the lights out, saw that the windows were properly barred and fastened, and went into the hall on his way to bed.

He looked at the front door, tried the chain, and made sure that both top and bottom bolts were thrown. Why he should have taken these somewhat unusual precautions was not far to seek, though at the moment he could not probably have explained. The desire for protection was awake in his being, and he took these measures of security and defense because it sought to express itself, as it were, even automatically. Spinrobin was afraid.

Up the broad staircase he went softly with his lighted candle, leaving the great hall behind him full to the brim with shadows — shadows that moved and took shape. His own head and shoulders in monstrous outline poured over the walls and upper landings, and thence leaped to the skylight overhead. As he passed the turn in the stairs, the dark contents of the hall below rushed past in a single mass, like an immense extended wing, and settled abruptly at his back, following him thence to the landing.

Once there, he went more quickly, moving on tiptoe, and so reached his own room halfway down. He passed two doors to get there; another two lay beyond; all four, as he believed, being always locked. It was these four rooms that conjured mightily with his imagination always, for these were the rooms he pictured to himself, though without a vestige of proof, as being occupied. It was from the further ones — one or other of them — he believed Mr. Skale came when he had passed down the corridor at two in the morning, stealthily, hurriedly, on the heels of that rush of sound that made him shake in his bed as he heard it.

In his own room, however, surrounded by the familiar and personal objects that reminded him of normal life, he felt more at home. He undressed quickly, all his candles alight, and then sat before the fire in the armchair to read a little before getting into bed.

And he read for choice Hebrew — Hebrew poetry, and on this particular occasion, the books of Job and Ezekiel. For nothing had so soothing and calming an effect upon him as the mighty yet simple imagery of these sonorous stanzas; they invariably took him “out of himself,” or at any rate out of the region of small personal alarms. And thus, letting his fancy roam, it seems, he was delighted to find that gradually the fears which had dominated him during the day and evening disappeared. He passed with the poetry into that region of high adventure which his nature in real life denied him. The verses uplifted him in a way that made his recent timidity seem the mere mood of a moment, or at least negligible. His memory, as one thing suggested another, began to give up its dead, and some of Blake’s drawings, seen recently in London with prodigious effect, began to pass vividly before his mental vision.

The symbolism of what he was reading doubtless suggested the memory. He felt himself caught in the great invisible nets of wonder that forever swept the world. The littleness of modern life, compared to that ancient and profound spirit which sought the permanent things of the soul, haunted him with curious insistence. He suffered a keen, though somewhat mixed realization of his actual insignificance, yet of his potential sublimity could he but identify himself with his ultimate Self in the region of vision…. His soul was aware of finding itself alternately ruffled and exalted as he read … and pondered … as he visualized to some degree the giant Splendors, the wonderful Wheels, the spirit Wings and Faces and all the other symbols of potent imagery evoked by the imagination of that old Hebrew world….

So that when, an hour later, pacified and sleepy, he rose to go to bed, this poetry seems to have left a very marked effect upon his mind — mingled, naturally enough, with the thought of Mr. Skale. For on his way across the floor, having adjusted the fire-screen, he distinctly remembered thinking what a splendid “study” the clergyman would have made for one of Blake’s representations of the Deity — the flowing beard, the great nose, the imposing head and shoulders, the potentialities of the massive striding figure, surrounded by a pictorial suggestion of all the sound-forces he was forever talking about….

This thought was his last, and it was without fear of any kind. Merely, he insists, that his imagination was touched, and in a manner perfectly accountable, considering the ingredients of its contents at the time.

And so he hopped nimbly into bed. On the little table beside him stood the candle and the copy of the Hebrew text he had been reading, with its parallel columns in the two languages. His Jaeger slippers were beneath the chair, his clothes, carefully folded, on the sofa, his collar, studs and necktie in a row on the top of the mahogany chest of drawers. On the mantelpiece stood the glass jar of heather, filled that very day by Miriam. He saw it just as he blew out the candle, and Miriam, accordingly, was the last vision that journeyed with him into the country of dreams and sweet forgetfulness.

The night was perfectly still. Winter, black and hard, lay about the house like an iron wall. No wind stirred. Snow covered the world of mountain and moor outside, and Silence, supreme at midnight, poured all her softest forces upon the ancient building and its occupants. Spinrobin, curled up in the middle of the big four-poster, slept like a tired baby.

II

It was a good deal later when somewhere out of that mass of silence rose the faint beginnings of a sound that stirred first cautiously about the very foundations of the house, and then, mounting inch by inch, through the hall, up the staircase, along the corridor, reached the floor where the secretary slept so peacefully, and finally entered his room. Its muffled tide poured most softly over all. At first only this murmur was audible, as of "footsteps upon wool," of wind or drifting snow, a mere ghost of sound; but gradually it grew, though still gentle and subdued, until it filled the space from ceiling unto floor, pressing in like water dripping into a cistern with ever-deepening note as its volume increased. The trembling of air in a big belfry where bells have been a-ringing represents best the effect, only it was a trifle sharper in quality — keener, more alive.

But, also, there was something more in it — something gong-like and metallic, yet at the same time oddly and suspiciously human. It held a temper, too, that somehow woke the "panic sense," as does the hurried note of a drum — some quick emotional timbre that stirs the sleeping outposts of apprehension and alarm. On the other hand, it was constant, neither rising nor falling, and thus ordinarily, it need not have stirred any emotion at all

— least of all the emotion of consternation. Yet, there was that in it which struck at the root of security and life. It was a revolutionary sound.

And as it took possession of the room, covering everything with its garment of vibration, it slipped in also, so to speak, between the crevices of the sleeping, unprotected Spinrobin, coloring his dreams — his innocent dreams — with the suggestion of nightmare dread. Of course, he was too deeply wrapped in slumber to receive the faintest intimation of this waking analysis. Otherwise he might, perhaps, have recognized the kind of primitive, ancestral dread his remote forefathers knew when the inexplicable horror of a tidal wave or an eclipse of the sun overwhelmed them with the threatened alteration of their entire known universe.

The sleeping figure in that big four-poster moved a little as the tide of sound played upon it, fidgeting this way and that. The human ball uncoiled, lengthened, straightened out. The head, half hidden by folds of sheet and pillowcase, emerged.

Spinrobin unfolded, then opened his eyes and stared about him, bewildered, in the darkness.

“Who’s there? Is that you — anybody?” he asked in a whisper, the confusion of sleep still about him.

His voice seemed dead and smothered, as though the other sound overwhelmed it. The same instant, more widely awake, he realized that his bedroom was *humming*.

“What’s that? What’s the matter?” he whispered again, wondering uneasily at the noise.

There was no answer. The vague dread transferred itself adroitly from his dream-consciousness to his now thoroughly awakened mind. It began to dawn upon him that something was wrong. He noticed that the fire was out, and the room dark and heavy. He realized dimly the passage of time — a considerable interval of time — and that he must have been asleep several hours. Where was he? *Who* was he? What, in the name of mystery and night, had been going on during the interval? He began to shake all over — feverishly. Whence came this noise that made everything in the darkness tremble?

As he fumbled hurriedly for the matchbox, his fingers caught in the folds of pillowcase and sheet, and he struggled violently to get them clear again. It was while doing this that the impression first reached him that the room was no longer quite the same. It had changed while he slept. Even in the darkness he felt this, and shuddering pulled the blankets over his head and shoulders, for this idea of the changed room plucked at the center of his heart, where terror lay waiting to leap out upon him.

After what seemed five minutes he found the matchbox and struck a light, and all the time the torrent of sound poured about his ears with such an effect of bewilderment that he hardly realized what he was doing. A strange terror poured into him that *he* would change with the room. At length the match flared, and while he lit the candle with shaking fingers, he looked wildly, quickly about him. At once the sounds rushed upon him from all directions, burying him, so to speak, beneath vehement vibrations of the air that rained in upon him…. Yes, the room had indeed changed, actually changed … but before he could decide where the difference lay the candle died down to a mere spark, waiting for the wick to absorb the grease. It seemed like half an hour before the yellow tongue grew again, so that he finally saw clearly.

But — saw what? Saw that the room had horribly altered while he slept, yes! But how altered? What in the name of all the world’s deities was the matter with it? The torrent of sound, now growing louder and louder, so confused him at first, and the dancing patchwork of light and shadow the candle threw so increased his bewilderment, that for some minutes he sought in vain to steady his mind to the point of accurate observation.

“God of my Fathers!” cried Spinrobin at last under his breath, and hardly knowing what he said, “if it’s not moving!”

For this, indeed, was what he saw while the candle flame burned steadily upon a room that was no longer quite recognizable.

At first, with the natural exaggeration due to shock, he thought the whole room moved, but as his powers of sight came with time to report more truly, he perceived that this was only true of certain things in it. It was not the ceiling that poured down in fluid form to meet a floor ever gliding and shifting forward into outlandish proportions, but it was certain objects — one here, another there — midway between the two that, having assumed new and unaccustomed outlines, lent to the rest of the chamber a general appearance of movement and an entirely altered expression. And these objects, he perceived, holding tightly to the bedclothes with both hands as he stared, were two: the dark, old-fashioned cupboard on his left, and the plush curtains that draped the window on his right. He himself, and the bed and the rest of the furniture were stationary. The room as a whole stood still, while these two common and familiar articles of household furnishing took on a form and an expression utterly foreign to what he had always known as a cupboard and a curtain. This outline, this expression, moreover, if not actually sinister, was grotesque to the verge of the sinister: monstrous.

The difficulty of making any accurate observation at all was further increased by the perplexity of having to observe two objects, not even on the same side of the room. Their outlines, however, Spinrobin claims, altered very slowly, wavering like the distorted reflections seen in moving water, and unquestionably obeying in some way the pitch and volume of the sound that continued to pour its resonant tide about the room. The sound manipulated the shape; the connection between the two was evident. That, at least, he grasped. Somebody hidden elsewhere in the house — Mr. Skale probably, of course, in one of his secret chambers — was experimenting with the "true names" of these two "common objects," altering their normal forms by inserting the vibrations of sound between their ultimate molecules.

Only, this simple statement that his clearing mind made to itself in no way accounted for the fascination of horror that accompanied the manifestation. For he recognized it as the joy of horror and not alone the torment. His blood ran swiftly to the rhythm of these humming vibrations that filled the space about him; and his terror, his bewilderment, his curious sense of elation seemed to him as messengers of far more terrific sensations that communicated to him dimly the rushing wonder of some aspect of the Unknown in its ultimate nature essentially beautiful.

This, however, only dawned upon him later, when the experiment was complete and he had time to reflect upon it all next day; for, meanwhile, to see the proportions he had known since childhood alter thus before his eyes was unbelievably dreadful. To see your friend sufficiently himself still to be recognizable, yet in essentials, at the same time, grotesquely altered, would doubtless touch a climax of distress and horror for you. The changing of these two things, so homely and well-known in themselves, into something that was not themselves, involved an idea of destruction that was worse than even death, for it meant that the idea in the mind no longer corresponded to the visible object there before the eyes. The correspondence was no longer a true one. The result was a lie.

To describe the actual forms assumed by these shifting and wavering bodies is not possible, for when Spinrobin gives the details one simply fails to recognize either cupboard or curtain. To say that the dark, lumbering cupboard, standing normally against the wall down there in the shadows, loomed suddenly forward and upward, bent, twisted, and stretched out the whole of one side towards him like a misshapen arm, can convey nothing of the world of new sensations that the little secretary felt while actually watching it in progress in that haunted chamber of Skale's mansion among the hills. Nor can one be thrilled with the extraordinary sense of wonder that thrilled Spinrobin when he saw the faded plush curtain hang across the window in such a way that it might well have wrapped the whole of Wales into a single fold, yet without extending its skirts beyond the actual walls of the room. For what he saw apparently involved contradictions in words, and the fact is that no description of what he saw is really possible at all.

“Hark! By thunder!” he exclaimed, creeping out of bed with sheer stress of excitement, while the sounds poured up through the floor as though from cellars and tunnels where they lay stored beneath the house. They sang and trembled about him with the menaces of a really exquisite alarm. He moved cautiously out into the center of the room, not daring to approach too close to the affected objects, yet furiously anxious to discover how it was all done. For he was uncommonly “game” through it all, and had himself well in hand from beginning to end. He was really too excited, probably, to feel ordinary fear; it all swept him away too mightily for that; he did not even notice the sting of the hot candle-grease as it fell upon his bare feet.

There he stood, plucky little Spinny, steady amid this shifting world, master of his soul amid dissolution, his hair pointing out like ruffled feathers, his blue eyes wide open and charged with a speechless wonder, his face pale as chalk, lips apart, jaw a trifle dropped, one hand in the pocket of his dressing-gown, and the other holding the candle at an angle that showered grease upon the carpet of the Rev. Philip Skale as well as upon his own ankles. There he stood, face to face with the grotesque horror of familiar outlines gone wrong, the altered panorama of his known world moving about him in a strange riot of sound and form. It was, he understood, an amazing exhibition of the transforming power of sound — of sound playing tricks with the impermanence and the illusion of Form. Skale was making his words good.

And behind the scenes he divined, with a shudder of genuine admiration, the figure of the master of the ceremonies, somehow or other grown colossal, as he had thought of him just before going to sleep — Philip Skale, hidden in the secret places of the building, directing the operations of this dreadful aspect of his revolutionary Discovery…. And yet the thought brought a measure of comfort in its train, for was he not also himself now included in the mighty scheme?… In his mind he saw this giant Skale, with his great limbs and shoulders, his flowing, shaggy beard, his voice of thunder and his portentous speculations, and, so doing, felt himself merged in a larger world that made his own little terrors and anxieties of but small account. Once again the sense of his own insignificance disappeared as he realized that at last he was in the full flood of an adventure that was providing the kind of escape he had always longed for.

Inevitably, then, his thought flew to Miriam, and as he remembered her final word to him a few short hours ago in the hall below, he already felt ashamed of the fear with which he had met the beginning of the "test." He instantly felt steeped instead in the wonder and power of the whole thing. His mind, though still trembling and shaken, came to rest. He drew, that is, upon the larger powers of the Chord.

And the interesting thing was that the moment this happened he noticed a change begin to come over the room. With extraordinary swiftness the tide of vibration lessened and the sound withdrew; the humming seemed to sink back into the depths of the house; the thrill and delight of his recent terrors fled with it. The air gradually ceased to shake and tremble; the furniture, with a curious final shiver as of spinning coins about to settle, resumed its normal shape. Once more the room, and with it the world, became commonplace and dull. The test apparently was over. He had met it with success.

Spinrobin, holding the candle straight for the first time, turned back towards the bed. He caught a passing glimpse of himself in the mirror as he went — white and scattered he describes his appearance…. He climbed again into bed, blew the candle out, put the matchbox under his pillow within easy reach, and so once more curled himself up into a ball and composed himself to sleep.

Chapter IX

I

BUT HE WAS hardly settled — there had not even been time to warm the sheets again — when he was aware that the test, instead of being over, was, indeed, but just beginning; and the detail that conveyed this unwelcome knowledge to him, though small enough in itself, was yet fraught with a crowded cargo of new alarms. It was a step upon the staircase, approaching his room.

He heard it the instant he lay still in bed after the shuffling process known generally as "cuddling down." And he knew that it was approaching because of the assistance the hall clock brought to his bewildered ears. For the hall clock — a big, dignified piece of furniture with a deep note — happened just then to strike the hour of two in the morning, and there was a considerable interval between the two notes. He first heard the step far below in the act of leaving the flagged hall for the staircase; then the clock drowned it with its first stroke, and perhaps a dozen seconds later, when the second stroke had died away, he heard the step again, as it passed from the top of the staircase on to the polished boards of the landing. The owner of the step, meanwhile, had passed up the whole length of the staircase in the interval, and was now coming across the landing in a direct line towards his bedroom door.

"It *is* a step, I suppose," it seems he muttered to himself, as with head partially raised above the blankets he listened intently. "It's a *step*, I mean…?" For the sound was more like a light tapping of a little hammer than an actual step — some hard substance drumming automatically upon the floor, while yet moving in advance. He recognized, however, that there was intelligence behind its movements, because of the sense of direction it displayed, and by the fact that it had turned the sharp corner of the stairs; but the idea presented itself in fugitive fashion to his mind — Heaven alone knows why — that it might be some mechanical contrivance that was worked from the hall by a hand. For the sound was too light to be the tread of a person, yet too "conscious" to be merely a sound of the night operating mechanically. And it was unlike the noise that the feet of any animal would make, any animal that he could think of, that is. A four-footed creature suggested itself to his mind, but without approval.

The puzzling characteristics of the sound, therefore, contradictory as they were, left him utterly perplexed, so that for some little time he could not make up his mind whether to be frightened, interested or merely curious.

This uncertainty, however, lasted but a moment or two at the most, for an appreciable pause outside his door was next followed by a noise of scratching upon the panels, as of hands or paws, and then by the shuffling of some living body that was flattening itself in an attempt to squeeze through the considerable crack between door and flooring, and so to enter the room.

And, hearing it, Spinrobin this time was so petrified with an instantaneous rush of terror, that at first he dared not even move to find the matches again under his pillow.

The pause was dreadful. He longed for brilliant light that should reveal all parts of the room equally, or else for a thick darkness that should conceal him from everything in the world. The uncertain flicker of a single candle playing miserably between the two was the last thing in the world to appeal to him.

And then events crowded too thick and fast for him to recognize any one emotion in particular from all the fire of them passing so swiftly in and out among his hopelessly disorganized thoughts. Terror flashed, but with it flashed also wonder and delight — the audacity of unreflecting courage — and more — even a breathless worship of the powers, knowledge and forces that lifted for him in that little bedroom the vast Transparency that hides from men the Unknown.

It is soon told. For a moment there was silence, and then he knew that the invader had effected an entrance. There was barely time to marvel at the snake-like thinness of the living creature that could avail itself of so narrow a space, when to his amazement he heard the quick patter of feet across the space of boarded flooring next the wall, and then the silence that muffled them as they reached the carpet proper.

Almost at the same second something leaped upon his bed, and there shot swiftly across him a living thing with light, firm tread — a creature, so far as he could form any judgment at all, about the size of a rabbit or a cat. He felt the feet pushing through sheets and blankets upon his body. They were little feet; how many, at that stage, he could not guess. Then he heard the thud as it dropped to the floor upon the other side.

The panic terror that in the dark it would run upon his bare exposed face thus passed; and in that moment of intense relief Spinrobin gripped his soul, so to speak, with both hands and made the effort of his life. Whatever happened now he must have a light, be it only the light of a single miserable candle. In that moment he felt that he would have sacrificed all his hopes of the hereafter to have turned on a flood of searching and brilliant sunshine into every corner of the room — instantaneously. The thought that the creature might jump again upon the bed and touch him before he could see, gave him energy to act.

With dashes of terror shooting through him like spears of ice, he grabbed the matchbox, and after a frenzied entanglement again with sheets and pillow-case, succeeded in breaking four matches in quick succession. They cracked, it seemed to him, like pistol shots, till he half expected that this creature, waiting there in the darkness, must leap out in the direction of the sound to attack him. The fifth lit, and a moment later the candle was burning dimly, but with its usual exasperating leisure and delay. As the flare died down, then gradually rose again, he fairly swallowed the room with a single look, wishing there were eyes all over his body. It was a very faint light. At first he saw nothing, heard nothing — nothing alive, that is.

“I must act! I must do something — at once!” he remembered thinking. For, to wait meant to leave the choice and moment of attack to this other….

Cautiously, and very slowly, therefore, he wriggled to the edge of the bed and slid over, searching with his feet for slippers, but finding none, yet not daring to lower his eyes to look; then stood upright with a sudden rush, shading the candle from his eyes with one hand and peering over it.

As a rule, in moments of overwhelming emotion, the eyes search too eagerly, too furiously, to see properly at all; but this does not seem to have been the case with Spinrobin. The shadows ran about like water and the flickering of the candle-flame dazzled, but there, opposite to him, over by the darkness of the dead fireplace, he saw instantly the small black object that was the immediate cause of his terror. Its actual shape was merged too much in the dark background to be clearly ascertainable, but near the top of it, where presumably the head was, the candle-flame shone reflected in two brilliant points of light that were directed straight upon his face, and he knew that he was looking into the eyes of a living creature that was not the very least on the defensive. It was a living creature, aggressive and unafraid.

For perhaps a couple of minutes — or was it seconds only? — these two beings with the breath of life in them faced one another. Then Spinrobin made a step cautiously in advance; lowering his candle he moved towards it. This he did, partly to see better, partly to protect his bare legs. The idea of protection, however, seems to have been merely instinct, for at once this notion that it might dash forward to attack him was merged in the unaccountable realization of a far grander emotion, as he perceived that this "living creature" facing him was, for all its diminutive size, both dignified and imposing. Something in its atmosphere, something about its mysterious presentment there upon the floor in its dark corner, something, perhaps, that flashed from its brilliant and almost terrible eyes, managed to convey to him that it was clothed with an importance and a significance not attached normally to the animal world. It had "an air." It bore itself with power, with value, almost with pride.

This incongruous impression bereft him of the sensations of ordinary fear, while it increased the sources of his confusion. Yet it convinced. He knew himself face to face with some form of life that was considerable in the true sense — spiritually. It exercised a fascination over him that was at the moment beyond either explanation or belief.

As he moved, moreover, the little dark object also moved — away from him, as though resenting closer inspection. With action — again unlike the action of any animal he could think of, and essentially dignified — both rapid and nicely calculated, it ran towards the curtains behind. This appearance of something stately that went with it was indefinable and beyond everything impressive; for how in the world could such small proportions and diminutive movements convey grandeur? And again Spinrobin found it impossible to decide precisely how it moved — whether on four legs or on two.

Keeping the two points of light always turned upon him, it shot across the floor, leaped easily upon a chair, passed with a nimble spring from this to a table by the wall, still too much in obscurity to permit a proper view; and then, while the amazed secretary approached cautiously to follow its movements better, it crawled to the edge of the table, and in so doing passed for the first time full across the pale zone of flickering candlelight.

Spinrobin, in that quick second, caught a glimpse of flying hair, and saw that it moved either as a human being or as a bird — on two legs.

The same moment it sprang deftly from the high table to the mantelpiece, turned, stood erect, and looked at him with the whole glare of the light upon its face; and Spinrobin, bereft of all power of intelligible sensation whatever, saw to his unutterable distress that it was — a man. The dignity of its movements had already stirred vaguely his sense of awe, but now the realization beyond doubt of its diminutive *human* shape added a singularly acute touch of horror; and it was the combination of the two emotions, possibly, that were responsible also for the two remarkable impulses of which he was first conscious: first, a mad desire to strike and kill; secondly, an imperious feeling that he must hide his eyes in some act or other of worship!

And it was then he realized that the man was — Philip Skale!

Mr. Skale, scarcely a foot high, dressed as usual in black, flowing beard, hooked nose, lambent, flashing eyes and all, stood there upon the mantelpiece level with his secretary's face, not three feet separating them, and — smiled at him. He was small as a Tanagra figure, and in perfect proportion.

It was unspeakably terrible.

II

"Of course — I'm dreaming," cried Spinrobin, half aloud, half to the figure before him. He searched behind him with one hand for solid support. "You're a dream thing. It's some awful trick — God will protect me — !"

Mr. Skale's tiny lips moved. "No, no," his voice said, and it sounded as from a great distance. "I'm no dream thing at all, and you are wide awake. Look at me well. I am the man you know — Philip Skale. Look straight into my eyes and be convinced." Again he smiled his kindly, winning smile.

“What you now see is nothing but a result of sounding my true name in a certain way — very softly — to increase the cohesion of my physical molecules and reduce my visible expression. Listen, and watch!”

And Spinrobin, half stupefied, obeyed, feeling that his weakening knees must in another moment give way and precipitate him to the floor. He was utterly unnerved. The onslaught of terror and amazement was overwhelming. For something dreadful beyond all words lay in the sight of this man, whom he was accustomed to reverence in his gigantic everyday shape, here reduced to the stature of a pygmy, yet compelling as ever, terrific even when thus dwarfed. And to hear the voice of thunder that he knew so well come to him disguised within this thin and almost wailing tone, passed equally beyond the limits of what he could feel as emotion or translate into any intelligible words or gesture.

While, therefore, the secretary stood in awful wonder, doing as he was told simply because he could do nothing else, the figure of the clergyman moved with tiny steps to the edge of the mantelpiece, until it seemed as though he meant in another moment to leap on to his companion’s shoulder, or into his arms. At the edge, however, he stopped — the brink of a precipice, to him! — and Spinrobin then became aware that from his moving lips, doll-like though bearded, his voice was issuing with an ever-growing volume of sound and power.

Vibrations of swiftly-increasing depth and wave-length were spreading through the air about him, filling the room from floor to ceiling. What the syllables actually uttered may have been he was too dazed to realize, for no degree of concentration was possible to his mind at all; he only knew that, before his smarting eyes, with this rising of the voice to its old dominant inflexion, the figure of Mr. Philip Skale grew likewise, indescribably; swelled, rose, spread upwards and outwards, but with the parts ever passing slowly in consistent inter-relation, from minute to minute. He became, always in perfect proportion, magnified and extended. The growing form, moreover, kept pace exactly, and most beautifully, with the increasing tide of sonorous vibration that flooded himself, its utterer and the whole room.

Spinrobin, it seems, had just sufficient self-control left to realize that this sound was similar in quality to that which had first awakened him and caused the outlines of the furniture to alter, when the sight of Mr. Skale’s form changing thus terribly before his eyes, and within the touch of his very hand, became too much for him altogether….

What precisely happened he never knew. The sounds first enveloped him, then drove him backwards with a sense of immense applied resistance. He collapsed upon the sofa a few feet behind him, as though irresistibly pushed. The power that impelled him charged vehemently through the little room till it seemed the walls must burst asunder to give it scope, while the sounds rose to such a volume that he figured himself drowned and overpowered by their mighty vibrations as by the storm swells of the Atlantic. Before he lost them as sound he seems thus to have been aware of them as moving waves of air…. The next thing he took in was that amid the waste of silence that now followed his inability to hear, the figure of Philip Skale towered aloft towards the ceiling, till it seemed positively to occupy all the available space in the room about him.

Had he dropped upon the floor instead of upon the sofa it is probable that at this point Spinrobin would have lost consciousness, at any rate for a period; but that sofa, which luckily for his bones was so close behind, galvanized him sharply back into some measure of self-control again. Being provided with powerful springs, it shot him up into the air, whence he relapsed with a series of smaller bounds into a normal sitting posture. Still holding the lighted candle as best he could, the little secretary bounced upon that sofa like a tennis ball. And the violent motion shook him into himself, as it were. His tottering universe struggled back into shape once more. He remembered vaguely that all this was somehow a test of his courage and fitness. And this thought, strengthened by a law of his temperament which forced him to welcome the sweet, mad terror of the whole adventure, helped to call out the reserves of his failing courage.

He bounced upon his feet again — those bare feet plastered with candle grease — and, turning his head, saw the clergyman, of incredible stature, yet still apparently increasing, already over by the door. He was turning the key with a hand the size — O horror! — of Spinrobin’s breast. The next moment his vast stooping body filled the entire entrance, blotting out whole portions of the walls on either side, then was gone from the room.

Leaving the candlestick on the sofa, his heart aflame with a fearful ecstasy of curiosity, he dashed across the floor in pursuit, but Mr. Skale, silently and with the swiftness of a river, was already down the stairs before he had covered half the distance.

Through the framework of the door Spinrobin saw this picture:

Skale, like some awful Cyclops, stood upon the floor of the hall some twenty feet below, yet rearing terrifically up through the well of the building till his head and shoulders alone seemed to fill the entire space beneath the skylight. Though his feet rested unquestionably upon the ground, his face, huge as a planet in the sky, rose looming and half lighted above the banisters of this second storey, his tangled locks sweeping the ceiling, and his beard, like some dark river of hair, flowing downwards through the night. And this spreading countenance of cloud it was, hanging in the semi-darkness, that Spinrobin saw turn slowly towards him across the faint flicker of the candlelight, look straight down into his face, and smile. The great mouth and eyes unquestionably smiled. And that smile, for all its vast terror, was beyond words enchanting — like the spread laughter of a summer landscape.

Among the spaces of the immense visage — reminding him curiously of his boyhood's conception of the Creator — Spinrobin lost himself and grew dizzy with a deadly yet delicious faintness. The mighty tenderness, the compassion, the splendor of that giant smile overpowered him and swallowed him up.

For one second, in dreadful silence, he gazed. Then, rising to meet the test with a courage that he felt might somehow involve the alteration if not the actual destruction of his own little personality, but that also proved his supreme gameness at the same time, he tried to smile in return…. The strange and pitiful attempt upon his own face perhaps, in the semi-obscurity, was not seen. He only remembers that he somehow found strength to crawl forward and close the door with a bang, though not the strength to turn the key and lock it, and that two seconds later, having kicked the candle over and out in his flying leap, he was in the middle of the bed under a confused pile of sheets and blankets, weeping with muffled sobs in the darkness as though his heart must burst with the wonder and terror of all he had witnessed.

For, to the simple in heart, at the end of all possible stress and strain of emotion, comes mercifully the blinding relief of tears….

And then, although too overcome to be able to prove it even to himself, it was significant that, lying there smothered among the bedclothes, he became aware of the presence of something astonishingly sweet and comforting in his consciousness. It came quite suddenly upon him; the reaction he experienced, he says, was very wonderful, for with it the sense of absolute safety and security returned to him. Like a terrified child in the darkness who suddenly knows that its mother stands by the bed, all-powerful to soothe, he felt certain that some one had moved into the room, was close beside him, and was even trying to smooth his pillow and arrange the twisted bedclothes.

He did not dare uncover his face to see, for he was still dominated by the memory of Mr. Skale's portentous visage; but his ears were not so easily denied, and he was positive that he heard a voice that called his name as though it were the opening phrase of some sweet, childhood lullaby. There was a touch about him somewhere, it seemed, of delicate cool hands that brought with them the fragrance as of a scented summer wind; and the last thing he remembered before he sank away into welcome unconsciousness was an impression, fugitive and dreamlike, of a gentle face, unstained and pale as marble, that bent above his pillow, and, singing, called him away to forgetfulness and peace.

III

And several hours later, when he woke after a refreshing sleep to find Mrs. Mawle smiling down upon him over a tray of steaming coffee, he recalled the events of the night with a sense of vivid reality that if possible increased his conviction of their truth, but without the smallest symptom of terror or dismay. For the blessing of the presence that had soothed him into sleep lay still upon him like a garment to protect. The test had come and he had not wholly failed.

With something approaching amusement, he watched the housekeeper pick up a candlestick from the middle of the floor and put his Jaeger slippers beneath the chair, having found one by the cupboard and the other over by the fireplace.

"Mr. Skale's compliments and Mr. Spinrobin is not to hurry himself," he heard her saying, as she put the tray beside the bed and went out of the room. He looked at his watch and saw that it was after ten o'clock.

Half an hour later he was dressed and on his way downstairs, conscious only of an overwhelming desire to see Mr. Skale, but to see him in his normal and fatherly aspect again. For a strain of worship mingled oddly with his devouring curiosity, and he was thirsty now for the rest of the adventure, for the complete revelation of the Discovery in all its bearings. And the moment he saw the clergyman in the hall he ran towards him, scarcely realizing what it was he meant to say or do. Mr. Skale stretched out both hands to meet him. His face was alight with pleasure.

But, before they could meet and touch, a door opened and in slipped Miriam between them; she, too, was radiant, and her hands outstretched.

“Me first, please! Me first!” she cried with happy laughter, and before Spinrobin realized what was happening, she had flung her arms about his neck and kissed him. “You were splendid!” she whispered in his ear, “and I *am* proud of you — ever so proud!”

The next minute Skale had him by the hands.

“Well done! well done!” his voice boomed, while he gazed down into his face with enthusiastic and unqualified approval. “It was all magnificent. My dear little fellow, you’ve got the heart of a god, and, by Heavens, you shall become as a god too! For you are worthy!” He shook him violently by both hands, while Miriam looked eagerly on with admiration in her wide grey eyes.

“I’m so glad, so awfully glad—” stammered the secretary, remembering with shame his moments of vivid terror. He hardly knew what he said at the moment.

“The properties of things,” thundered the clergyman, “as you have now learned, are merely the ‘muffled utterances of the Sounds that made them.’ The thing itself is its name.”

He spoke rapidly, with intense ardor and with reverence. “You have seen with your own eyes a scientific proof of my Discovery on its humblest level — how the physical properties of objects can be manipulated by the vibratory utterance of their true names — can be extended, reduced, glorified. Next you shall learn that spiritual qualities — the attributes of higher states of being — can be similarly dealt with and harnessed — exalted, intensified, *invoked* — and that the correct utterance of mighty

Names can seduce their specific qualities into your own soul to make you mighty and eternal as themselves, and that to call upon the Great Names is no idle phrase…. When the time comes, Spinrobin, you shall not shrink, you shall not shrink….” He flung his arms out with a great gesture of delight.

“No,” repeated Spinrobin, yet aware that he felt mentally battered at the prospect, “I shall not shrink. I think — now — I can manage — anything!”

And then, watching Miriam with lingering glance as she vanished laughing up the staircase, he followed Mr. Skale into the library, his thoughts tearing wildly to and fro, swelling with delight and pride, thrilling with the wonder of what was yet to come. There, with fewest possible sentences, the clergyman announced that he now accepted him and would, therefore, carry out the promise with regard to the bequeathal of his property to him in the event of any untoward circumstances arising later. He also handed to him in cash the salary for the “trial month,” together with a check for the first quarter in advance. He was beaming with the satisfaction he felt at having found at last a really qualified helper. Spinrobin looked into his face as they shook hands over the bargain. He was thinking of other aspects he had seen of this amazing being but a few hours before — the minute, the colossal, the changing-between-the-two Skales….

“I’m game, Mr. Skale,” he said simply, forgetting all his recent doubts and terrors.

“I know you are,” the clergyman replied. “I knew it all along.”

Chapter X

I

THE FIRST THING Spinrobin knew when he ran upstairs to lock away the money in his desk was that his whole being, without his directing it, asked a question of momentous import. He did not himself ask it deliberately. He surprised his sub-consciousness asking it:

“WHAT IS THIS NAME THAT PHILIP SKALE FOREVER SEEKS?”

It was no longer mere curiosity that asked it, but that sense of responsibility which in all men of principle and character lies at the root of action and of life. And Spinrobin, for all his little weaknesses, was a man of character and principle. There came a point when he could no longer follow blindly where others led, even though the leader were so grand an individual as Philip Skale. This point is reached at varying degrees of the moral thermometer, and but for the love that Miriam had wakened in his heart, it might have taken much longer to send the mercury of his will so high in so short a time. He now felt responsibility for two, and in the depths of his queer, confused, little mind stirred the thought that possibly after all the great adventure he sought was only the supreme adventure of a very wonderful Love.

He records these two questions at this point, and it is only just to himself, therefore, to set them down here. To neither was the answer yet forthcoming.

For some days the routine of this singular household followed its normal course, the only change being that while the secretary practiced his Hebrew names and studied the relations between sound, color, form and the rest, he kept himself a little better in hand, for Love is a mighty humanizer and holds down the nose upon the grindstone of the wholesome and practical values of existence. He turned, so to speak, and tried to face the matter squarely; to see the adventure as a whole; to get all round it and judge. It seems, however, that he was too much in the thick of it to get that bird’s-eye view which reduces details to the right proportion. Skale’s personality was too close, and flooded him too violently. Spinrobin remained confused and bewildered; but also unbelievably happy.

“Coming out all right,” he wrote shakily in that gilt-edged diary. “Beginning to understand why I’m in the world. Am just as important as anybody else — *really*. Impossible explain more.” His entries were very like telegrams, in which a man attempts to express in a lucid shorthand all manner of things that the actual words hardly compass. And life itself is not unlike some mighty telegram that seeks vainly to express, between the extremes of silence and excess, all that the soul would say….

“Skale is going too far,” perhaps best expresses the daily burden of his accumulating apprehension. “He is leading up to something that makes me shrink — something not quite legitimate. Playing with an Olympian fire that may consume us both.” And there his telegram stopped; for how in the world could he put into mere language the pain and distress involved in the thought that it might at the same time consume Miriam? It all touched appalling depths of awe in his soul. It made his heart shake. The girl had become a part of his very self.

Vivid reactions he suffered, alternating with equally vivid enthusiasms. He realized how visionary the clergyman’s poetical talk was, but the next minute the practical results staggered him again, as it were, back into a state of conviction. For the poetry obscured his judgment and fired his imagination so that he could not follow calmly. The feeling that it was not only illogical but insane troubled him; yet the physical effects stared him in the face, and to argue with physical results is waste of time. One must act.

Yet how “act?” The only way that offered he accepted: he fell back upon the habits of his boyhood, read his Bible, and at night dropped humbly upon his knees and prayed.

“Keep me straight and pure and simple, and bless … Miriam. Grant that I may love and strengthen her … and that my love may bring her peace … and joy …and guide me through all this terror, I beseech Thee, into Truth….”

For, in the beauty of his selfless love, he dared not even admit that it was love; feeling only the highest, he could not quite correlate his sweet and elevated passion with the common standards of what the World called love. The humility of a great love is ever amazing.

And then followed in his prayers the more cowardly cry for ordinary protection from the possible results of Skale's audacity. The Love of God he could understand, but the Wrath of God was a conception he was still unemancipated enough to dread; and a dark, portentous terror that Skale might incur it, and that he might be dragged at its heels into some hideous catastrophe, chased him through the days and nights. It all seemed so unlawful, impious, blasphemous….

"… And preserve us from vain presumptions of the heart and brain, I pray Thee, lest we be consumed…. Please, O God, forgive the insolence of our wills … and the ignorant daring of our spirit…. Permit not the innocent to suffer for the guilty … and especially bless … Miriam…."

Yet through it all ran that exquisite memory of the calling of his true name in the spaces of his soul. The beauty of far-off unattainable things hovered like a star above his head, so that he went about the house with an insatiable yearning in his heart, a perpetual smile of wonder upon his face, and in his eyes a gleam that was sometimes terror, sometimes delight.

It was almost as if some great voice called to him from the mountaintops, and the little chap was forever answering in his heart, "I'm coming! I'm coming!" and then losing his way purposely, or hiding behind bushes on the way for fear of meeting the great invisible Caller face to face.

II

And, meanwhile, the house became for him a kind of Sound-Temple as it were, protected from desecration by the hills and desolate spaces that surrounded it. From dawn to darkness its halls and corridors echoed with the singing violin, Skale's booming voice, Miriam's gentle tones, and his own plaintive yet excited note, while outside the old grey walls the air was ever alive with the sighing of the winds and the ceaseless murmur of falling water. Even at night the place was not silent. He understood at last what the clergyman had told him — that perfect silence does not exist. The universe, down to its smallest detail, sings through every second of time.

The sounds of nature especially haunted him. He never heard the wind now without thinking of lost whispers from the voice of God that had strayed down upon the world to sweeten and bewilder the hearts of men — whispers a-search for listeners simple enough to understand. And when their walks took them as far as the sea, the dirge of the waves troubled his soul with a kind of distressing exaltation that afflicted the very deeps of his being. It was with a new comprehension he understood his employer's dictum that the keynote of external nature was middle F — this employer who himself possessed that psychic sense of absolute pitch — and that the roar of a city, wind in forest trees, the cry of trains, the rushing of rivers and falling water, Niagara itself, all produced this single utterance; and he loved to sing it on the moors, Miriam laughing by his side, and to realize that the world, literally, sang with them.

Behind all sounds he divined for the first time a majesty that appalled; his imagination, glorified by Skale, instantly fell to constructing the forms they bodied forth. Out of doors the flutes of Pan cried to him to dance: indoors the echoes of yet greater music whispered in the penetralia of his spirit that he should cry. In this extraordinary new world of Philip Skale's revelation he fairly spun.

It was one thing when the protective presence of the clergyman was about him, or when he was sustained by the excitement of enthusiasm, but when he was alone, at his normal level, timid, yet adventurous, the too vivid sense of these new things made him tremble. The terrifying beauty of Skale's ideas; the realization in cold blood that all forms in the world about him were silently a-singing, and might any moment vanish and release their huge bodies into primal sounds; that the stones in the road, the peaked hills, the very earth herself might alter in shape before his eyes: on the other hand, that the viewless forces of life and death might leap into visibility and form with the calling of their names; that himself, and Skale, and Mrs. Mawle, and that pale fairy girl-figure were all enmeshed in the same scheme with plants, insects, animals and planets; and that God's voice was everywhere too sublimely close — all this, when he was alone, oppressed him with a sense of things that were too intimate and too mighty for daily life.

In these moments — so frequent now as to be almost continuous — he preferred the safety of his ordinary and normal existence, dull though it might be; the limited personality he had been so anxious to escape from seemed wondrous sweet and comforting. The Terror of the approaching Experiment with this mighty name appalled him.

The forces, thus battling within his soul, became more and more contradictory and confused. The outcome for himself seemed to be the result of the least little pressure this way or that — possibly at the very last moment, too. Which way the waiting Climax might draw him was a question impossible to decide.

III

And then, suddenly, the whole portentous business moved a sharp stage nearer that hidden climax, when one afternoon Mr. Skale came up unexpectedly behind him and laid a great hand upon his shoulder in a way that made him positively jump.

“Spinrobin,” he said, in those masterful, resonant tones that shamed his timidity and cowardice, “are you ready?”

“For anything and everything,” was the immediate reply, given almost automatically as he felt the clergyman’s forces flood into his soul and lift him.

“The time is at hand, then,” continued the other, leading his companion by the arm to a deep leather sofa, “for you to know certain things that for your own safety and ours, I was obliged to keep hidden till now — first among which is the fact that this house is not, as you supposed, empty.”

Prepared as he was for some surprising announcement, Spinrobin nevertheless started. It was so abrupt.

“Not empty!” he repeated, eager to hear more, yet quaking. He had never forgotten the nightly sounds and steps in his own passage.

“The rooms beyond your own,” said Skale, with a solemnity that amounted to reverence, “are occupied—”

“By—” gasped the secretary.

“Captured Sounds — gigantic,” was the reply, uttered almost below the breath.

The two men looked steadily at one another for the space of several seconds, Spinrobin charged to the brim with anxious questions pressing somehow upon the fringe of life and death, Skale obviously calculating how much he might reveal or how little.

“Mr. Spinrobin,” he said presently, holding him firmly with his eyes, “you are aware by this time that what I seek is the correct pronunciation of certain names — of a certain name, let us say, and that so complex is the nature of this name that no single voice can utter it. I need a chord, a human chord of four voices.”

Spinrobin bowed.

“After years of research and experiment,” resumed the clergyman, “I have found the first three notes, and now, in your own person, has come my supreme happiness in the discovery of the fourth. What I now wish you to know, though I cannot expect you to understand it all at first, is that the name I seek is broken up into four great divisions of sound, and that to each of these separate divisions the four notes of our chord form introductory channels. When the time comes to utter it, each one of us will call the syllable or sound that awakens the mighty response in one of these immense and terrific divisions, so that the whole name will vibrate as a single chord sung perfectly in tune.”

Mr. Skale paused and drew deep breaths. This approach to his great experiment, even in speech, seemed to exhaust him so that he was obliged to call upon reserves of force that lay beneath. His whole manner betrayed the gravity, the reverence, the mingled respect and excitement of — death.

And the simple truth is that at the moment Spinrobin could not find in himself sufficient courage to ask what this fearful and prodigious name might be. Even to put ordinary questions about the four rooms was a little beyond him, for his heart beat like a hammer against his ribs, and he heard its ominous drum sounding through both his temples.

“And in each of the rooms in your corridor, ready to leap forth when called, lie the sounds or voices I have captured and imprisoned, these separate chambers being sheeted and prepared — huge wax receptacles, in fact, akin to the cylinders of the phonograph. Together with the form or pattern belonging to them, and the color, there they lie at present in silence and invisibility, just as the universe lay in silence and invisibility before the word of God called it into objective being. But — *know them and they are mine*.”

“All these weeks — so close to me,” whispered Spinrobin, too low for Skale to notice.

Then the clergyman leaned over towards him. “These captured sounds are as yet by no means complete,” he said through his beard, as though afraid to admit it; “for all I have of them really is their initial letters, of their forms the merest faint outlines, and of their colors but a first suggestion. And we must be careful, we must be absolutely wise. To utter them correctly will mean to transfer to us the qualities of Gods, whereas to utter falsely may mean to release upon the surface of the world forces that—” He shrugged his great shoulders and an ashen pallor spread downwards over the face to the very lips. The sentence remained unfinished; and its very incompleteness left Spinrobin with the most grievous agony of apprehension he had yet experienced.

“So that, if you are ready, our next step shall be to show you the room in which your own particular sound lies,” added Mr. Skale after a long pause; “the sound in the chord it will be your privilege to utter when the time comes. For each of us will utter his or her particular letter, the four together making up the first syllable in the name I seek.”

Mr. Skale looked steadily down into the wide blue eyes of his companion, and for some minutes neither of them spoke.

“The letter I am to utter,” repeated the secretary at length; “the letter in some great name?”

Mr. Skale smiled upon him with the mighty triumph of the Promethean idea in his eyes.

“The room,” he muttered deeply and softly, “in which it lies waiting for you to claim it at the appointed time … the room where you shall learn its color, become attuned to its great vibratory activity, see its form, and *know* its power in your own person.”

Again they looked long into one another’s eyes.

“I’m game,” murmured Spinrobin almost inaudibly; “I’m game, Mr. Skale.” But, as he said it, something in his round head turned dizzy, while his thoughts flew to Miriam and to the clergyman's significant phrase of a few minutes ago— "we must be careful, we must be absolutely wise."

IV

And the preparation the clergyman insisted upon — detailed, thorough and scrupulous — certainly did not lessen in Spinrobin's eyes the gravity of the approaching ordeal. They spent two days and nights in the very precise and punctilious study, and utterance, of the Hebrew names of the "angels" — that is, forces — whose qualities were essential to their safety.

Also, at the same time, they fasted.

But when the time came for the formal visit to those closed rooms, of which the locked doors were like veils in a temple, Spinrobin declares it made him think of some solemn procession down ancient passageways of crypt or pyramid to the hidden places where inscrutable secrets lay. It was certainly thrilling and impressive. Skale went first, moving slowly with big strides, grave as death, and so profoundly convinced of the momentous nature of their errand that an air of dignity, and of dark adventure almost majestic, hung about his figure. The long corridor, that dreary December morning, stretched into a world of shadows, and about half-way down it he halted in front of a door next but one to Spinrobin's room and turned towards his companion.

Spinrobin, in a mood to see anything, yet striving to hide behind one of those "bushes," as it were, kept his distance a little, but Mr. Skale took him by the arm and drew him forward to his side. Slowly he stooped, till the great bearded lips were level with his ear, and whispered solemnly:

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see — and *hear* God."

Then he turned the key and led the way inside.

But apparently there were double doors, for they found themselves at first in a cupboard-like space that formed a tiny vestibule to the room itself; and here there was light enough to see that the clergyman was taking from nails on the wall two long garments like surplices, colored, so far as Spinrobin could make out, a deep red and a deep violet.

"For our protection," whispered Skale, enveloping himself in the red one, while he handed the other to his companion and helped him into it. "Wear it closely about your body until we come out.” And while the secretary struggled among the folds of this cassock-like garment, that was several feet too long for his diminutive stature, the clergyman added, still with a gravity and earnestness that impressed the imagination beyond all reach of the ludicrous:

“For sound and color are intimately associated, and there are combinations of the two that can throw the spiritual body into a condition of safe receptivity, without which we should be deaf and blind even in the great Presences themselves.”

Trivial details, presenting themselves in really dramatic moments, may impress the mind with extraordinary aptness. At this very moment Spinrobin’s eyes noticed in the corner of wall and door a tiny spider’s web, with the spider itself hanging in the center of its little net — shaking. And he has never forgotten it. It expressed pictorially exactly what he felt himself. He, too, felt that he was shaking in midair — as in the center of a web whose strands hung suspended from the very stars.

And the words, spoken in that slow deep whisper, filled the little space in which the two men stood, and somehow completed for Spinrobin the sense of stupendous things adequately approached.

Then Mr. Skale closed the outer door, shutting out the last feeble glimmer of day, at the same moment turning the handle of the portal beyond. And as they entered the darkness, Spinrobin, holding up his violet robe with one hand to prevent tripping, with the other caught hold of the tail of the flowing garment in front of him. For a second or two he stopped breathing altogether.

V

On the very threshold a soft murmur of beauty met them; and, as plainly as though the darkness had lifted into a blaze of light, the secretary at once realized that he stood in the presence of something greater than all he had hitherto known in this world. He had managed to find the clergyman’s big hand, and he held it tightly through a twisted corner of his voluminous robe. The inner door next closed behind them. Skale, he was aware, had again stooped in the darkness to the level of his ear.

“I’ll give you the sound — the note,” he heard him whisper. “Utter it inwardly — in your thoughts only. Its vibrations correspond to the color, and will protect us.”

“Protect us?” gasped Spinrobin with dry lips.

“From being shattered and destroyed — owing to the intense activity of the vibrations conveyed to our ultimate physical atoms,” was the whispered reply, as the clergyman proceeded to give him under his breath a one-syllable sound that was unlike any word he knew, and that for the life of him he has never been able to reproduce since.

Mr. Skale straightened himself up again and Spinrobin pictured him standing there twice his natural size, a huge and impressive figure as he had once before seen him, clothed now with the double dignity of his strange knowledge. Then, advancing slowly to the center of the room, they stood still, each uttering silently in his thoughts the syllable that attuned their inner beings to safety.

Almost immediately, as the seconds passed, the secretary became aware that the room was beginning to shake with a powerful but regular movement. All about him had become alive. Vitality, like the vitality of youth upon mountain tops, pulsed and whirled about them, pouring into them the currents of a rushing glorious life, undiluted, straight from the source. In his little person he felt both the keenness of sharp steel and the vast momentum of a whole ocean. Thus he describes it. And the more clearly he uttered in his thoughts the sound given to him by his leader, the greater seemed the influx of strength and glory into his heart.

The darkness, meanwhile, began to lift. It moved upwards in spirals that, as they rose, hummed and sang. A soft blaze of violet like the color of the robe he wore became faintly visible in the air. The chamber, he perceived, was about the same size as his own bedroom, and empty of all furniture, while walls, floor, and ceiling were draped in the same shade of violet that covered his shoulders; and the sound he uttered, *and thought*, called forth the color and made it swim into visibility. The walls and ceiling sheeted with wax opened, so to speak, their giant lips.

Mr. Skale made a movement and drew him closer. He raised one arm into the air, and Spinrobin, following the motion, saw what at first he imagined to be vast round faces glimmering overhead, outlined darkly against the violet atmosphere. Mr. Skale, with what seemed a horrible audacity, was reaching up to touch them, and as he did so there issued a low, soft, metallic sound, humming and melodious, that dropped sweetly about his ears. Then the secretary saw that they were discs of metal — immense gongs swinging in midair, suspended in some way from the ceiling, and each one as Skale touched it emitted its beautiful note till all combined together at length into a single chord.

And this chord, though Spinrobin talks whole pages in describing it, apparently brought in its train the swell and thunder of something beyond, — the far sweetness of exquisite harmonics, thousands upon thousands, inwoven with the strands of deeper notes that boomed with colossal vibrations about them. And, in some fashion that musical people will understand, its gentler notes caught up the sound that Spinrobin was uttering in his mind, and took possession of it. They merged. An extraordinary volume, suggesting a huge aggregation of sound behind it — in the same way that a murmur of wind may suggest the roar of tempests — rose and fell through the room, lifted them up, bore them away, sang majestically over their heads, under their feet, and through their very minds. The vibrations of their own physical atoms fell into pace with these other spiritual activities by a kind of sympathetic resonance.

The combination of power and simplicity was what impressed him most, it seems, for it resembled — resembled only — the great spiritual simplicity in Beethoven that rouses and at the same time satisfies the profoundest yearnings of the soul. It swept him into utter bliss, into something for once complete. And Spinrobin, at the center of his glorified yet quaking little heart, understood vaguely that the sound he uttered, and the sound he heard, were directly connected with the presence of some august and awful Name….

VI

Suddenly Mr. Skale, he was aware, became rigid beside him. Spinrobin pressed closer, seeking the protective warmth of his body, and realizing from the gesture that something new was about to happen. And something did happen, though not precisely in the sense that things happen in the streets and in the markets of men. In the sphere of his mind, perhaps, it happened, but was none the less real for that.

For the Presence he had been aware of in the room from the moment of entrance became then suddenly almost concrete. It came closer — sheeted in wonder inscrutable. The form and body of the sounds that filled the air pressed forward into partial visibility. Spinrobin's powers of interior sight, he dimly realized, increased at the same time. Vast as a mountain, as a whole range of mountains; beautiful as a star, as a whole heaven of stars; yet simple as a flower of the field; and singing this little song of pure glory and joy that he felt was the inmost message of the chord — this Presence in the room sought to push forward into objective reality. And behind it, he knew, lay the stupendous urgency and drive of some power that held the entire universe in its pulses as easily as the ocean holds a shoal of minnows….

But the limits of realization for him were almost reached. Spinrobin wanted to close his eyes, yet could not. He was driven along with the wave of sound thus awakened and forced to see what was to be seen. This time there was no bush behind which he could screen himself. And there, dimly sketched out of the rhythmical vibrations of the seething violet obscurity, rose that looming Outline of wonder and majesty that clothed itself about them with a garment as of visible sound. The Unknown, suggesting incredible dimensions, stood at his elbow, tremendously draped in these dim, voluminous folds of music and color — very fearful, very seductive, yet so supremely simple at the same time that a little child could have understood without fear.

But only partially there, only partially revealed. The ineffable glory was never quite told. Spinrobin, amid all the torrent of words in which he sought later to describe the experience, could only falter out a single comprehensible sentence: "I felt like stammering in intoxication over the first letter of a name I loved — loved to the point of ecstasy — to the point even of giving up my life for it."

And meanwhile, breathless and shaking, he clung to Skale, still murmuring in his heart the magic syllable, but swept into some region of glory where pain and joy both ceased, where terror and delight merged into some perfectly simple form of love, and where he became in an instant of time an entirely new and emancipated Spinrobin, driving at full speed towards the ultimate sound and secret of the universe — God.

* * * * *

He never remembered exactly how he got out of the room, but it always seemed as though he dropped with a crash from some enormous height. The sounds ceased; the gongs died into silence; the violet faded; the quivering wax lay still…. Mr. Skale was moving beside him, and the next minute they were in the narrow vestibule between the doors, hanging up ordinary colored surplices upon ordinary iron nails.

Spinrobin stumbled. Skale caught him. They were in the corridor again — cold, cheerless, full of December murk and shadows — and the secretary was leaning against the clergyman's shoulder breathless and trembling as though he had run a mile.

Chapter XI

I

"AND THE COLOR of *my* sound is a pale green," he heard behind him in tones as sweet as a muted violin string, "while the form of my note fits into yours just like a glove. Dear Spinny, don't tremble so. We shall always be together, remember, you and I…."

And when, turning, he saw Miriam at his side, radiant with her shining little smile of welcome, the relief was so great that he took her in his arms and would not let her go. She drew him tenderly away downstairs, for the clergyman, it seemed, was still busy with something in the room, and had left them….

"*I* know, *I* know," she said softly, making him sit down beside her on the sofa, "I know the rush of pain and happiness it brings. It shifts the whole key of your life, doesn't it? When I first went into my 'room' and learned the letter I was to utter in the Name, I felt as if I could never come back to ordinary things again, or—"

"What name?" interrupted Spinrobin, drawing sharply away from her, and the same second amazed at the recklessness that had prompted the one question he dreaded.

The inevitable reaction had come. He realized for the first time that there *was* an alternative. All the passion of battle was upon him. The terrific splendors of Skale's possible achievement dazzled the very windows of his soul, but at the same time the sweet uses of normal human life called searchingly to him from within. He had been circling about this fight for days; at last it was unexpectedly upon him. He might climb to Skale's impossible Heaven, Skale's outrageous Heaven … on the wings of this portentous experience, or — he might sink back into the stream of wholesome and commonplace life, with a delicious little human love to companion him across the years, the unsoiled love of an embryonic soul that he could train practically from birth. Miriam was beside him, soft and yielding, ready, doubtless, to be molded for either path.

"What name?" he repeated, holding his breath once the words were out.

"*The* name, of course," she answered gently, smiling up into his eyes. "The name I have lived to know and that you came here to learn, so that when our voices sing and utter it together in the chord we shall both become—"

Spinrobin set his mouth against her own to stop her speech. She yielded to him with her whole little body. Her eyes smiled the great human welcome as she stared so closely into his.

"Shall become — what we are not now," he cried fiercely, drawing his face back, but holding her body yet more closely to him. "Lose each other, don't you see? Don't you realize that?"

"No, no," she said faintly, "find each other — you mean—"

"Yes — if all goes well!" He spoke the words very low. For perhaps thirty seconds they stared most searchingly into each other's eyes, drawing slightly apart. Very slowly her face, then, went exceedingly pale.

"*If — all goes well*" she repeated, horrified. Then, after a pause, she added: "You mean — that he might make a mistake — or — ?"

And Spinrobin, drinking in the sweet breath that bore the words so softly from her lips, answered, measuring his words with ponderous gravity as though each conveyed a sentence of life or death, "*If — all — goes — well*."

She watched him with something of that utter clinging mother-love in her eyes that claims any degree of suffering gladly rather than the loss of her own — passionately welcoming misery in preference to loss. She, too, had divined the alternative.

Then, kissing his cheeks and eyes and lips, she untied his arms from about her neck and ran, blushing furiously, from the room. And with her went doubt, for the first time — doubt as to the success of the great experiment — doubt as to their Leader's power.

II

And while Spinrobin still sat there, trembling with the two passions that tore his soul in twain — the passion to climb forbidden skies with Skale, and the passion to know sweet human love with Miriam — there came thundering into the room no less a personage than the giant clergyman, straight from those haunted rooms. Pallor hung about his face, but there was a light radiating through it — a high, luminous whiteness — that made the secretary think of his childhood's pictures of the Hebrew prophet descending from Mount Sinai, the glory of internal spheres still reflected upon the skin and eyes. Skale, like a flame and a wind, came pouring into the room. The thing he had remained upstairs to complete had clearly proved successful. The experiment had moved another stage — almost the final one — nearer accomplishment.

The reaction was genuinely terrific. Spinrobin felt himself swept away beyond all power of redemption. Miriam and the delicious human life faded into insignificance again. What, in the name of the eternal fires, were a girl's lips and love compared to the possibilities of Olympian achievement promised by Skale's golden audacities? Earth faded before the lights of heaven. The whole tide of human emotion was nothing compared to a drop of this terrible salt brine from seas in unknown stars…. As usual Skale's personality caught him up into some seventh heaven of the soaring imagination.

"Spinrobin, my glorious companion in adventure," thundered the clergyman, "your note suits perfectly the chord! I am delighted beyond all words. You chime with amazing precision and accuracy into the complex Master-Tone I need for the proper pronunciation of the Name! Your coming has been an inspiration permitted of Him who owns it." His excitement was profoundly moving. The man was in earnest if ever man was. "We shall succeed!" And he caught him in his arms. "For the Name manifests the essential attributes of the Being it describes, and in uttering it we shall know mystical union with it…. We shall be as Gods!"

"Splendid! Splendid!" exclaimed Spinrobin, utterly carried away by this spiritual enthusiasm. "I will follow you to the end—"

III

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when framed in the doorway, delicate and seductive as a witch, again stood Miriam, then moved softly forward into the room. Her face was pale as the grave. Her little, delicate mouth was set with resolution. Clearly she had overheard, but clearly also she had used the interval for serious reflection.

“We cannot possibly — *fail*, can we?” she asked, gliding up like a frightened fawn to the clergyman’s side.

He turned upon her, stern, even terrible. So relentless was his swift appearance, so implacable in purpose, that Spinrobin felt the sudden impulse to fly to her assistance. But instantly his great visage broke into a smile like the smile of thunderous clouds when unexpectedly the sun breaks through, then quickly hides itself again.

“Everywhere,” he roared, “true things are great and clean…. Have faith… have faith….” And he looked upon them both as though his eyes would sweep from their petty souls all vestige of what was afraid and immature. “We all are — pure … we all are true … each calls his note in singleness of heart … we cannot fail!”

And just here Spinrobin, a little beyond himself with excitement probably, pattered across the room to his giant leader’s side and peered up into his visage. He stood on tiptoe, craning his neck forwards, then spoke very low:

“I have the right, *we* have the right — for I have earned it — to be taken now fully into confidence, and to know everything — *everything*,” came the words; and the reply, simple and immediate, that dropped back upon him through all that tangle of ragged beard was brief and to the point:

“You have. Listen, then—” And he led them both by the hand like two children towards the sofa, and then, standing over them, began to speak.

IV

“I seek,” he said slowly and gravely, “the correct utterance of a certain mighty and ineffable name, and in each of those four rooms lies a letter of its first syllable. For all these years of research” — his voice dropped suddenly— “have only brought me to that — the first syllable. And the name itself is composed of four, each more mighty than the last.”

A violent trembling ran over both listeners. Spinrobin, holding a cold little hand in his, dreaded unuttered sentences. For if mere letters could spell so vast a message, what must be the meaning of a whole syllable, and what the dire content of the completed name itself!

“Yes,” Skale went on with a reverence born of profoundest awe, “the captured sounds I hold are but the opening vibrations of this tremendous name, and the task is of such magnitude that absolute courage and absolute faith are essential. For the sounds are themselves creative sounds, and the consequences in case of faulty utterance might be too appalling to contemplate—"

"Creative!" fell from the little man on the sofa, aghast at the possibility. Yet the one burning question that lay trembling just behind his lips dared not frame itself in words, for there was something in Mr. Skale's face and manner that rendered the asking of it not yet possible. The revelation of the name must wait.

"Even singly, as you saw, their power is terrific," he went on, ignoring the pathetic interruption, "but united — as we shall unite them while each of us utters his letter and summons forth the entire syllable by means of the chord — they will constitute a Word of Power which shall make us as Gods if uttered correctly; if incorrectly, shall pour from this house to consume and alter the surface of the entire world with the destructive tempest due to mispronunciation and a lie."

Miriam nestled closer into her companion's side. There was otherwise no sign outwardly of the emotions that surged through the two little figures upon the sofa.

"And now — now that you have this first syllable complete?" faltered a high and sharing tenor voice.

"We must transfer it to a home where it shall wait in silence and in safety until we have also captured the other remaining three." Skale came forward and lowered his mouth to his companions' ears. "We shall transfer it, as you now understand, by chanting the four letters. Our living chord will summon forth that first syllable into visible form and shape. Our four voices, thus trained and purified, each singing a mighty letter, shall create the astounding pattern of the name's first syllable—"

"But the home," stammered Spinrobin; "this home where it shall await the rest?"

"My rooms," was the reply, "can contain letters only, for a whole syllable I need a larger space. In the crypt-like cellars beneath this house I have the necessary space all ready and prepared to hold this first syllable while we work upon the second. Come, and you shall see!"

They crossed the hall and went down the long stone passage beyond the dining room till they reached a swinging baize door, and so came to the dark stairs that plunged below ground. Skale strode first, Spinrobin following with beating heart; he held Miriam by the hand; his steps, though firm enough, made him think of his efforts as a boy when treading water for solid ground out of his depth.

V

Cold air met them, yet it was neither dank nor unpleasant as air usually is that has never tasted sunlight. There was a touch of vitality about it wholly remarkable. Miriam pressed closer. Every detail, every little incident that brought them nearer to the climax was now interpreted by these two loving children as something that might eventually spell for them separation. Yet neither referred to it directly. The pain of the ultimate choice possessed them deep within.

“Here,” exclaimed the clergyman in a hushed tone that yet woke echoes on all sides, while he lit a candle and held it aloft, “you see the cellar vaults all ready for the first great syllable when our chord shall bring it leaping down from the rooms upstairs. Here will reside the pattern of the name’s opening syllable till we shall have accomplished the construction of the others.”

And like some august master of forbidden ceremonies, looking twice his natural size as the shadows played tricks with his arms and shoulders, merging his outline into walls and ceiling, Skale stood and looked about him.

Spaces stretched away on all sides as in the crypt of a cathedral, most beautifully and harmoniously draped with the separate colors of the four rooms, red, yellow, violet and green; immense gongs, connected apparently with some intricate network of shining wires, hung suspended in midair beneath the arches; rising from the floor were gigantic tuning forks, erect and silent, immediately behind which gaped artificial air-cavities placed to increase the intensity of the respective notes when caught; and in the dim background the clergyman pointed out an elaborate apparatus for quickly altering the temperature of the air, and another for the rapid production of carbonic acid gas, since by means of a lens of carbonic acid gas sound can be refracted like light, and by changing the temperature of the air that conveys it, sound can be bent, also like a ray of light, in any desired direction. The whole cellar seemed in some way to sum up and synthesize the distinctive characteristics of the four rooms. Over it all, sheeting ceiling and walls, lay the living and receptive wax. Singularly suggestive, too, was the appearance of those huge metal discs, like lifeless, dark faces waiting the signal to open their bronze lips and cry aloud, ready for the advent of the Sound that should give them birth and force them to proclaim their mighty secret. Spinrobin stared, silent and fascinated, almost expecting them to begin there and then their dreadful and appalling music.

Yet the place was undeniably empty; no ghost of a sound stirred the gorgeous draperies; nothing but a faint metallic whispering seemed to breathe out from the big discs and forks and wires as Skale's voice, modulated and hushed though it was, vibrated gently against them. Nothing moved, nothing uttered, nothing lived — as yet.

"Destitute of all presence, you see it now," whispered the clergyman, shading the candle with one huge hand; "though before long, when we transfer our great captured syllable down here, you shall know it alive and singing with a thousand thunders. The Letters shall not escape me. The gongs and colors correspond exactly. They will retain both the sounds and the outlines … and the wax is sensitive as the heart of a child." And his big face shone quite dreadfully as the whole pomp and splendor of his dream come true set fire to his thoughts.

But Spinrobin was glad when at length they turned and moved slowly again up the stone steps and emerged into the pale December daylight. That dark cellar, wired, draped, waxed and be-gonged, awaiting its mighty occupant, filled his mind with too vast a sensation of wonder and anticipation for peace.

"And for the syllables to follow," Skale resumed when they were once more in the library, "we shall want spaces larger still. There are great holes in these hills" — stretching out an arm to indicate the mountains above the house— "and down yonder in the heart of those cliffs by the sounding sea there are caverns. They are far, but the distance is of no consequence. They will serve us well. I know them. I have marked them. They are ready."

He swept his beard to and fro with one hand. Spinrobin already saw those holes and caverns in the terms of sound and color.

“And — for the entire name — when completed?” he asked, knowing that the question was but a feeble substitute for that other one he burned to ask, yet dared not allow his lips to utter. Skale turned and looked at him. He raised his hands aloft. His voice boomed again as of old.

“The open sky!” he cried with enthusiasm; “the vault of heaven itself! For no solid structure exists in the world, not even the ribs of these old hills, that could withstand the power of that — of that eternal and terrific—”

Spinrobin leapt to his feet. The question swept from his lips at last like a flame. Miriam clung to his arm, trying in vain to stop him.

“Then tell me,” he cried aloud, “tell me, you great blasphemer, whose is the Name that you seek to utter under heaven … and tell me why it is my soul faints and is so fearfully afraid?”

Mr. Skale looked at him for a moment as a man might look at some trifling phenomenon of life that puzzled yet interested him. But there was love in his eyes — love, and the forgiveness of a great soul. Spinrobin, afraid at his own audacity, met his eyes recklessly, while Miriam peered from one to the other, perplexed and questioning.

“Spinrobin,” said the clergyman at length, in a voice turned soft and tender with compassion, “the name I seek — this awful name we may all eventually utter together, completely formed — is one that no living man has spoken for nigh two thousand years, though all this time the search has been kept alive by a few men in every age and every country of the world. Some few, they say — ah, yes, ‘*they say*’ — have found it, then instantly forgotten it again; for once pronounced it may not be retained, but goes utterly lost to the memory on the instant. Only once, so far as we may know” — he lowered his voice to a hushed and reverent whisper that thrilled about them in the air like the throbbing of a string— “has it been preserved: the Prophet of Nazareth, purer and simpler than all other men, recovered the correct utterance of the first two syllables, and swiftly — very swiftly — phonetically, too, of necessity, — wrote them down before the wondrous memory had time to fade; then sewed the piece of parchment into his thigh, and hence ‘had Power’ all his life.

“It is a name,” he continued, his tone rising to something of its old thunder, “that sounds like the voice of many waters, that piles the ocean into standing heaps and makes the high hills to skip like little lambs. It is a name the ancient Hebrews concealed, as Tetragrammaton, beneath a thousand devices, the name, they said, that ‘rusheth through the universe,’ to call upon which — that is, to utter correctly — is to call upon that name which is far above all others that can be named—”

He paused midway in the growing torrent of his speech and lifted his companion out of the sofa. He set him upon his feet, holding both his hands and peering deep into his eyes — those bewildered yet unflinching blue eyes of the little man who sought terrific adventure as an escape from insignificance —

“ — to know which,” he added, in a sudden awed whisper, “is to know the ultimate secrets of life and death, and to read the riddle of the world and the soul — to become even as itself — Gods.”

He stopped abruptly, and again that awful, flaming smile ran over his face, flushing it from chin to forehead with the power of his burning and tremendous belief.

Spinrobin was already weeping inwardly, without sound. He understood at last, only too well, what was coming. Skale’s expression held the whole wild glory, and the whole impious audacity of what seemed his blasphemous spiritual discovery. The fires were alight in his eyes. He stooped down lower and opened wide his capacious arms. The next second, Spinrobin, Miriam, and Mrs. Mawle, who had unexpectedly come upon them from behind, were gathered all together against his breast. His voice then dropped suddenly to a tiny whisper of awful joy that seemed to creep from his lips like some message too mighty to be fully known, and half lost itself among the strands of his beard.

“My wonderful redeemed children, notes in my human chord,” he whispered over their heads, “it is the Name that shall make us as God, for it is none other than the Name that rusheth through the universe” — his breath failed him most curiously for an instant— “the NAME OF THE ALMIGHTY!”

Chapter XII

I

A CERTAIN STRUGGLING incoherence is manifest in Spinrobin's report of it all, as of a man striving to express violent thoughts in a language he has not yet mastered. It is evident, for instance, as those few familiar with the "magical" use of sound in ceremonial and the power that resides in "true naming" will realize, that he never fully understood Skale's intended use of the chord, or why this complex sound was necessary for the utterance of the complex "Name."

Moreover, the powers concealed in the mere letters, while they laid hold upon his imagination, never fully entered his understanding. Few minds, it seems, can conceive of any deity as other than some anthropomorphic extension of themselves, for the idea is too greatly blinding to admit human thought within a measurable distance even of a faintest conception. The true, stupendous nature of the forces these letters in the opening syllable clothed, Spinrobin unquestionably never apprehended. Miriam, with her naked and undefiled intuitions, due to utter ignorance of worldly things from birth, came nearer to the reality; but then Miriam was now daily more and more caught up into the vortex of a sweet and compelling human love, and in proportion as this grew she feared the great experiment that might — so Spinrobin had suggested — spell Loss. Gradually dread closed the avenues of her spirit that led so fearfully to Heaven; and in their place she saw the dear yet thorny paths that lay with Spinny upon the earth.

They no longer, these two bewildered loving children, spoke of one another in the far-fetched terminology of sound and music. He no longer called her his "brilliant little sound," nor did she respond with "you perfect echo"; they fell back — sign of a gradual concession to more human things — upon the gentler terminology, if the phrase may be allowed, of Winky. They shared Winky between them … though neither one nor other of them divined yet what Winky actually meant in their just-opening lives.

"Winky is yours," she would say, "because you made him, but he belongs to me too, because he simply can't live without me!"

“Or I without you, Little Magic,” he whispered, laughing tenderly. “So, you see, we are all three together.”

Her face grew slightly troubled.

“He only pays me visits, though. Sometimes I think you hide him, or tell him not to come.” And far down in her deep grey eyes swam the first moisture of rising tears. “Don’t you, my wonderful Spinny?”

“Sometimes I forget him, perhaps,” he replied gravely, “but that is only when I think of what may be coming if — the experiment succeeds—”

“Succeeds?” she exclaimed. “You mean if it fails!” Her voice dropped instinctively, and they looked over their shoulders to make sure they were alone.

He came up very close to her and spoke in her small pink ear. “If it succeeds,” he whispered, “we go to Heaven, I suppose; if it fails we stay upon the earth.” Then he stood off, holding her hands at arm’s length and gazing down upon her. “Do you want to go to Heaven?” he asked very deliberately, “or to stay here upon the earth with me and Winky — ?”

She was in his arms the same second, laughing and crying with the strange conflict of new and inexplicable emotions.

“I want to be with you here, and forever. Heaven frightens me now. But — oh, Spinny, dear protecting thing, I want — I also want—” She broke off abruptly, and Spinrobin, unable to see her face buried against his shoulder, could not guess whether she was laughing or weeping. He only divined that something in her heart, profound as life itself, something she had never been warned to conceal, was clamoring for comprehension and satisfaction.

“Miriam, tell me exactly. I’m sure I shall understand—”

“I want Winky to be with us always — not only sometimes — on little visits,” he heard between the broken breathing.

“I’ll tell him—”

“But there’s no good telling *him*,” she interrupted almost fiercely, “it is *me* you must tell….”

Spinrobin’s heart sank within him. She was in pain and he could not quite understand. He pressed her hard against him, keeping silence.

Presently she lifted her face from his coat, and he saw the tears of mingled pain and happiness in her eyes — the eyes of this girl-woman who knew not the common ugly standards of life because no woman had ever told them to her.

“You see, Winky is not really mine unless I have some share in making him too,” she said very softly. “When I have made him too, then he will stay forever with us, I think.”

And Spinrobin, beginning to understand, knowing within him that singular exultation of triumphant love which comes to a pure man when he meets the mother-to-be of his firstborn, lowered his own face very reverently to hers, and kissed her on the cheeks and eyes — saying nothing, and vaguely wondering whether the awful name that Skale sought with so much thunder and lightning, did not lie at that very moment, sweetly singing its divinest message, between the contact of this pair of youthful lips, the lips of himself and Miriam.

II

And Philip Skale, meanwhile, splendid and independent of all common obstacles, thundered along his tempestuous mad way, regardless and ignorant of all signs of disaffection. The rest of that week — a week of haunting wonder and beauty — was devoted to the carrying out of the strange program. It is not possible to tell in detail the experience of each separate room. Spinrobin does it, yet only succeeds in repeating himself; and, as has been seen, his powers failed even in that first chamber of awe. The language does not exist in which adventures so remote from normal experience can be clothed without straining the mind to the verge of the unintelligible. It appears, however, that each room possessed its color, note and form, which later were to issue forth and combine in the even vaster pattern, chord and outline which should include them all.

Even the thought of it strained the possibilities of belief and the resources of the imagination…. His soul fluttered and shrank.

They continued the processes of prayer and fasting Skale had ordained as the time for the experiment drew near, and the careful vibratory utterance of the “word” belonging to each room, the vibrations of which threw their inner selves into a condition of safe — or comparatively safe — receptivity.

But Spinrobin no longer said his prayers, for the thought that soon he was to call upon the divine and mighty name in reality prevented his doing so in the old way of childhood — nominally. He feared there might come an answer.

He literally walked the dizzy edge of precipices that dropped over the edge of the world. The incoherence of all this traffic with sound and name had always bewildered him, even to the point of darkness, whereas now it did more, it appalled him in some sense that was monstrous and terrifying. Yet, while weak with terror when he tried to face the possible results, and fevered with the notion of entering some new condition (even though one of glory) where Miriam might no longer be as he now knew her, it was the savage curiosity he felt that prevented his coming to a definite decision and telling Mr. Skale that he withdrew from the whole affair.

Then the idea grew in his mind that the clergyman was obsessed by some perverted spiritual force, some "Devil" who deceived him, and that the name he sought to pronounce was after all not good — not God. His thoughts, fears, hopes, all became hopelessly entangled, through them one thing alone holding clear and steady — the passionate desire to keep Miriam as she was now, and to be with her forever. His mind played tricks with him too. Day and night the house echoed with new sounds; the very walls grew resonant; the entire building, buried away among these desolate hills, trembled as though he were imprisoned within the belly of some monstrous and gigantic fiddle.

Mr. Skale, too, began to change, it seemed. While physically he increased, as it were, with the power of his burning enthusiasm, his beard longer and more ragged, his eyes more luminous, and his voice shaking through the atmosphere almost like wind, his personality, in some curious fashion, seemed at the same time to retire and become oddly tinged with a certain remoteness from reality. Spinrobin once or twice caught himself wondering if he were not after all some legendary or pagan figure, some mighty character of dream or story, and that presently he, Spinrobin, would awake and write down the most wonderful vision the world had ever known. His imagination, it will be seen, was affected in more ways than one….

With a tremendous earnestness the clergyman went about the building, down the long dark corridors and across the halls, his long soft strides took him swiftly everywhere; his mere presence charged with some potent force that betrayed itself in the fire of his eyes and the flush of his cheeks.

Spinrobin thought of him as some daring blasphemer, knocking at a door in the sky. The sound of that knocking ran all about the universe. And when the door opened, the heavens would roll back like an enormous, flat curtain….

“Any moment almost,” Skale whispered to him, smiling, “the day may be upon us. Keep yourself ready — and — in tune.”

And Spinrobin, expecting a thunderclap in his sleep, but ever plucky, answered in his high-pitched voice, “I’m ready, Mr. Philip Skale, I’m ready! I’m game too!” when, truthfully speaking, perhaps, he was neither one nor other.

He would start up from sleep in the nighttime at the least sound, and the roar of the December gales about the house became voices of portent that conveyed far more than the mere rushing of inarticulate winds….

“When the hour comes — and it is close at hand — we shall not fail to know it,” said Skale, pallid with excitement. “The Letters will be out upon us. They will live! But with an intense degree of exuberant life far beyond what we know as life — we, in our puny, sense-limited bodies!” And the scorn in his voice came from the center of his heart. “For what we hear as sound is only a section,” he cried, “only a section of sound-vibrations — as they exist.”

“The vibrations our ears can take are *very* small, I know,” interpolated Spinrobin, cold at heart, while Miriam, hiding behind chairs and tables that offered handy protection, watched with mingled anxiety and confidence, knowing that in the last resort her adorable and “wonderful Spinny” would guide her aright. Love filled her heart, ousting that other portentous Heaven!

III

And then Skale announced that the time was ready for rehearsals.

“Let us practice the chord,” he said, “so that when the moment comes suddenly upon us, in the twinkling of an eye, in the daytime or in the night, we shall be prepared, and each shall fly to his appointed place and utter his appointed note.”

The reasons for these definite arrangements he did not pretend to explain, for they belonged to a part of his discovery that he kept rigidly to himself; and why Spinrobin and Miriam were to call their notes from the corridor itself, while Skale boomed his great bass in the prepared cellar, Mrs. Mawle chanting her alto midway in the hall, acting as a connecting channel in some way, was apparently never made fully clear. In Spinrobin’s imagination it was very like a practical illustration of the written chord, the notes rising from the bass clef to the high soprano — the cellar to the attic, so to speak. But, whatever the meaning behind it, Skale was exceedingly careful to teach to each of them his and her appointed place.

“When the Letters move of themselves, and make the first sign,” he repeated, “we shall know it beyond all doubt or question. At any moment of the day or night it may come. Each of you then hasten to your appointed place and wait for the sound of my bass in the cellar. There will be no mistake about it; you will hear it rising through the building. Then, each in turn, as it reaches you, lift your voices and call your notes. The chord thus rising through the building will gather in the flying Letters: it will unite them; it will summon them down to the fundamental master-tone I utter in the cellar. The moment the Letter summoned by each particular voice reaches the cellar, that voice must cease its utterance. Thus, one by one, the four mighty Letters will come to rest below. The gongs will vibrate in sympathetic resonance; the colors will tremble and respond; the finely drawn wires will link the two, and the lens of gas will lead them to the wax, and the record of the august and terrible syllable will be completely chained. At any desired moment afterwards I shall be able to reawaken it. Its phonetic utterance, its correct pronunciation, captured thus in the two media of air and ether, sound and light, will be in my safe possession, ready for use.

“But” — and he looked down upon his listeners with a dreadful and impressive gravity that yet only just concealed the bursting exultation the thought caused him to feel— “remember that once you have uttered your note, you will have sucked out from the Letter a portion of its own terrific life and force, which will immediately pass into yourself. You will instantly absorb this, for you will have called upon a mighty name — the mightiest

— and your prayer will have been answered.” He stooped and whispered as in an act of earnest prayer, “*We shall be as Gods*!”

Something of cold splendor, terribly possessing, came close to them as he spoke the words; for this was no empty phrase. Behind it lay the great drive of a relentless reality. And it struck at the very root of the fear that grew every moment more insistent in the hearts of the two lovers. They did not want to become as gods. They desired to remain quietly human and to *love*!

But before either of them could utter speech, even had they dared, the awful clergyman continued; and nothing brought home to them more vividly the horrible responsibility of the experiment, and the results of possible failure, than the few words with which he concluded.

“And to mispronounce, to utter falsely, to call inaccurately, will mean to summon into life upon the world — and into the heart of the utterer — that which is incomplete, that which is not God — Devils! — devils of that subtle Alteration which is destruction — the devils of a Lie.”

* * * * *

And so for hours at a time they rehearsed the sounds of the chord, but very softly, lest the sound should rise and reach the four rooms and invite the escape of the waiting Letters prematurely.

Mrs. Mawle, holding the bit of paper on which her instructions were clearly written, was as eager almost as her master, and as the note she had to utter was practically the only one left in the register of her voice, her deafness provided little difficulty.

“Though when the letters awake into life and cry aloud,” said Skale, beaming upon her dear old apple-skinned face, “it will be in tones that even the deaf shall hear. For they will spell a measure of redemption that shall destroy in a second of time all physical disabilities whatsoever….”

It was at this moment Spinrobin asked a question that for days had been hovering about his lips. He asked it gravely, hesitatingly, even solemnly, while Miriam hung upon the answer with an anxiety as great as his own.

“And if any one of us fails,” he said, “and pronounces falsely, will the result affect all of us, or only the utterer?”

“The utterer only,” replied the clergyman. “For it is his own spirit that must absorb the forces and powers invoked by the sound he utters.”

He took the question lightly, it seemed. The possibility of failure was too remote to be practical.

Chapter XIII

I

BUT SPINROBIN WAS hardly prepared for the suddenness of the denouement. He had looked for a longer period of preparation, with the paraphernalia of a considerable, even an august ceremony. Instead, the announcement came with an abrupt simplicity that caught him with a horrid shock of surprise. He was taken wholly unawares.

“The only thing I fear,” Mr. Skale had confided to them, “is that the vibrations of our chord may have already risen to the rooms and cause a premature escape. But, even so, we shall have ample warning. For the deaf, being protected from the coarser sounds of earth, are swift to hear the lightest whispers from Heaven. Mrs. Mawle will know. Mrs. Mawle will instantly warn us….”

And this, apparently, was what happened, though not precisely as Mr. Skale had intended, nor with the margin for preparation he had hoped. It was all so swift and brief and shattering, that to hear Spinrobin tell it makes one think of a mass of fireworks that some stray spark has sent with blazing explosion into the air, to the complete loss of the calculated effect had they gone off seriatim as intended.

And in the awful stress of excitement there can be no question that Spinny acted out of that subconscious region of the mind which considers and weighs deeds before passing them on to the surface mind, translating them into physical expression and thinking itself responsible for the whole operation. The course he adopted was thus instinctive, and, since he had no time to judge, blameless.

Neither he nor Miriam had any idea really that their minds, subconsciously, were already made up. Yet only that morning he had been talking with her, skirting round the subject as they always did, ashamed of his doubts about success, and trying to persuade her, and, therefore, himself, that the path of duty lay in following their leader blindly to the very end.

He had seen her on the stairs ahead of him, and had overtaken her quickly. He drew her down beside him, and they sat like two children perched on the soft-carpeted steps.

“It’s coming, you know,” he said abruptly, “the moment’s getting very close.”

He felt the light shudder that passed through her into himself. She turned her face to him and he saw the flush of excitement painted in the center of the usually pale cheeks. He thought of some rare flower, delicately exotic, that had sprung suddenly into blossom from the heart of the bleak December day, out of the very boards whereon they sat.

“We shall then be as gods,” he added, “filled with the huge power of those terrific Letters. And that is only the beginning.” In himself he was striving to coax a fading enthusiasm, and to pour it into her. Her little hand stole into his. “We shall be a sort of angel together, I suppose. Just think of it…!” His voice was not as thrilling as it ought to have been, for very human notes vibrated down below in the part he tried to keep back. He saw the flush fade from her cheeks, and the pallor spread. “You and I, Miriam — something tremendous together, greater than any other man and woman in the whole world. Think of it, dear baby; just think of it…!”

A tiny frown gathered upon her forehead, darkening the grey eyes with shadows.

“But — lose our Winky!” she said, nestling against his coat, her voice singularly soft, her fingers scratching gently the palm of his hand where they lay.

“Hush, hush!” he answered, kissing her into silence. “We must have more faith. I think everything will be all right. And there is no reason why we should lose our Winky,” he added, very tenderly, smothering the doubt as best he could, “although we may find his name changed. Like the rest of us, he will get a ‘new name’ I suppose.”

“Then he won’t be *our* Winky any longer,” she objected, with a touch of obstinacy that was very seductive. “We shall all be different. Perhaps we shall be too wonderful to need each other any more…. Oh, Spinny, you precious thing my life needs, think of that! We may be too wonderful even to care!”

Spinrobin turned and faced her. He tried to speak with authority and conviction, but he was a bad actor always. He met her soft grey eyes, already moist and shining with a tenderness of love beyond belief, and gazed into them with what degree of sternness he could.

“Miriam,” he said solemnly, “is it possible that you do not want us to be as gods?”

Her answer came this time without hesitation. His pretended severity only made her happy, for nothing could intimidate by a hair’s breadth this exquisite first love of her awakening soul.

“Some day, perhaps, oh, my sweet Master,” she whispered with trembling lips, “but not now. I want to be on earth first with you — and with our Winky.”

To hear that precious little voice call him “sweet Master” was almost more than he could bear. He made an effort, however, to insist upon this fancied idea of “duty” to Skale; though everything, of course, betrayed him — eyes, voice, gestures.

“But we owe it to Mr. Skale to become as gods,” he faltered, trying to make the volume of his voice atone for its lack of conviction.

And it was then she uttered the simple phrase that utterly confounded him, and showed him the new heaven and new earth wherein he and she and Winky already lived.

“I am as God *now*,” she said simply, the whole passion of a clean, strong little soul behind the words. “You have made me so! You love me!”

II

The same moment, before they could speak or act, Skale was upon them from behind with a roar.

“Practicing your splendid notes together!” he cried, thundering down the steps past them, three at a time, clothed for the first time in the flowing scarlet robe he usually wore only in the particular room where his own “note” lived. “That’s capital! Sing it together in your hearts and in your souls and in your minds; and the more the better!”

He swept by them like a storm, vanishing through the hall below like some living flame of fire. They both understood that he wore that robe for protection, and that throughout the house the heralds of the approaching powers of the imprisoned Letters were therefore already astir. His steps echoed below them in the depths of the building as he descended to the cellar, intent upon some detail of the appalling consummation that drew every minute nearer.

They turned and faced one another, breathless a little. Tenderness and terror shone plainly in their eyes, but Spinrobin, ever an ineffectual little man, and with nothing of the "Master" really in his composition anywhere, found no word to speak. That sudden irruption of the terrific clergyman into their intimate world had come with an effect of dramatic and incalculable authority. Like a blast of air that drives the furnace to new heat and turns the metal white, his mind now suddenly saw clear and sure. The effect of the incident was too explosive, however, for him to find expression. Action he found in a measure, but no words. He took Miriam passionately into his arms as they stood there in the gathering dusk upon the staircase of that haunted and terrible building, and Miriam it was who found the words upon which they separated and went quietly away to the solitude each needed for the soul.

"We'll leave the gods alone," she said with gentle decision, yet making it seem as though she appealed to his greater strength and wisdom to decide; "I want nothing but you — you and Winky. And all you really want is me."

But in his room he heard the vibrations of the clergyman's voice rising up through the floor and walls as he practiced in the cellar the sounds with which the ancient Hebrews concealed the Tetragrammaton: YOD — HE — VAU — HE: JEHOVAH — JAHVE — of which the approaching great experiment, however, concerned itself only with the opening vibrations of the first letter — YOD….

And, as he listened, he hesitated again … wondering after all whether Miriam was right.

III

It was towards the end of their short silent dinner that very night — the silence due to the fact that everybody was intently listening — when

Spinrobin caught the whisper of a singular faint sound that he took first to be the rising of wind. The wind sometimes came down that way with curious gulps from the terraces of the surrounding moors. Yet in this sound was none of that rush and sigh that the hills breed. It did not drop across the curves of the world; it rose from the center.

He looked up sharply, then at once realized that the sound was not outside at all, but inside — inside the very room where he sat facing Skale and Miriam. Then something in his soul recognized it. It was the first wave in an immense vibration.

Something stretched within him as foam stretches on the elastic side of a heaped Atlantic roller, retreated, then came on again with a second gigantic crest. The rhythm of the huge sound had caught him. The life in him expanded awfully, rose to far summits, dropped to utter depths. A sense of glowing exaltation swept through him as though wings of power lifted his heart with enormous ascendancy. The biggest passions of his soul stirred — the sweetest dreams, yearnings, aspirations he had ever known were blown to fever heat. Above all, his passion for Miriam waxed tumultuous and possessed him.

Mr. Skale dropped his fruit knife and uttered a cry, but a cry of so peculiar a character that Spinrobin thought for a moment he was about to burst into song. At the same instant he stood up, and his chair fell backwards with a crash upon the floor. Spinrobin stood up too. He asserts always that he was lifted up. He recognized no conscious effort of his own. It was at this point, moreover, that Miriam, pale as linen, yet uttering no sound and fully mistress of herself, left her side of the table and ran round swiftly to the protection of her lover.

She came close up. “Spinny,” she said, “it’s come!”

Thus all three were standing round that dinner table on the verge of some very vigorous action not yet disclosed, as people, vigilant and alert, stand up at a cry of fire, when the door from the passage opened noisily and in rushed Mrs. Mawle, surrounded by an atmosphere of light such as might come from a furnace door suddenly thrown wide in some dark foundry. Only the light was not steady; it was whirling.

She ran across the floor as though dancing — the dancing of a child — propelled, it seemed, by an irresistible drive of force behind; while with her through the opened door came a roaring volume of sound that was terrible as Niagara let loose, yet at the same time exquisitely sweet, as birds or children singing. Upon these two incongruous qualities Spinrobin always insists.

“The deaf shall hear — !” came sharply from the clergyman’s lips, the sentence uncompleted, for the housekeeper cut him short.

“They’re out!” she cried with a loud, half-frightened jubilance; “Mr. Skale’s prisoners are bursting their way about the house. And one of them,” she added with a scream of joy and terror mingled, “is in my throat…!”

If the odd phrase she made use of stuck vividly in Spinrobin’s memory, the appearance she presented impressed him even more. For her face was shining and alight, radiant as when Skale had called her true name weeks before. Flashes of flame-like beauty ran about the eyes and mouth; and she looked eighteen — eternally eighteen — with a youth that was permanent and unchanging. Moreover, not only was hearing restored to her, but her left arm, withered for years, was in the act of pointing to the ceiling, instinct with vigorous muscular life. Her whole presentment was splendid, intense — redeemed.

“The deaf hear!” repeated Skale in a shout, and was across the room with the impetus of a released projectile. “The Letters are out and alive! To your appointed places! The syllable has caught us! Quick, quick! If you love your soul and truth … fly!”

Deafening thunders rushed and crashed and blew about the room, interpenetrated everywhere at the same time by that searching strain of sweetness Spinrobin had first noticed. The sense of life, running free and abundant, was very remarkable. The same moment he found his hand clasped, and felt himself torn along by the side of the rushing clergyman into the hall. Behind them “danced” Mrs. Mawle, her cap awry, her apron flying, her elastic-side boots taking the light, dancing step of youth. With quick, gliding tread Miriam, still silent, was at his heels. He remembers her delicate, strange perfume reaching him faintly through all the incredible turmoil of that impetuous exit.

In the hall the roar increased terrifically about his ears. Skale, in his biggest booming voice, was uttering the names of Hebrew “angels” — invoking forces, that is, to his help; and behind him Mrs. Mawle was singing — singing fragments apparently of the “note” she had to utter, as well as fragments of her own “true name” thus magically recovered. Her restored arm gyrated furiously, her tripping youth spelt witchery. Yet the whole madness of the scene came to Spinrobin with a freezing wind of terror; for about it was a lawless, audacious blasphemy, that must surely win for itself a quite appalling punishment….

Yet nothing happened at once — nothing destructive, at least. Skale and the housekeeper, he saw, were hurriedly robing themselves in the red and yellow surplices that hung from nails in the hall, and the instinct to laugh at the sight was utterly overwhelmed when he remembered that these were the colors which were used for safety in their respective “rooms.” … It was a scene of wild confusion and bewilderment which the memory refuses to reproduce coherently. In his own throat already began a passionate rising of sound that he knew was the “note” he had to utter attempting to escape, summoned forth automatically by these terrible vibrating Letters in the air. A cataract of sound seemed to fill the building and made it shake to its very foundations.

But the hall, he saw, was not only alive with “music,” it was ablaze with light — a white and brilliant glory that at first dazzled him to the point of temporary blindness.

The same second Mr. Skale’s voice, storming its way somehow above the tumult, made itself heard:

“To the rooms upstairs, Spinrobin! To the corridor with Miriam! And when you hear my voice from the cellar — *utter*! We may yet be in time to unite the Letters…!”

He released the secretary’s hand, flinging it from him, and was off with a bounding, leaping motion like an escaped animal towards the stone passage that led to the cellar steps; and Spinrobin, turning about himself like a top in a perfect frenzy of bewilderment, heard his great voice as he disappeared round the corner:

“It has come upon me like a thief in the night! Before I am fully prepared it has called me! May the powers of the Name have mercy upon my soul…!” And he was gone. For the last time had Spinrobin set his eyes upon the towering earthly form of the Rev. Philip Skale.

IV

Then, at first, it seems, the old enthusiasm caught him, and with him, therefore, caught Miriam, too. That savage and dominant curiosity to know clutched him, overpowering even the assaults of a terror that fairly battered him. Through all the chaos and welter of his dazed mind he sought feverishly for the “note” he had to utter, yet found it not, for he was too horribly confused. Fiddles, sand-patterns, colored robes, gongs, giant tuning-forks, wax-sheeted walls, aged-faces-turned-young and caverns-by-the-sea jostled one another in his memory with a jumble of disproportion quite inextricable.

Next, impelled by that driving sense of duty to Skale, he turned to the girl at his side: “Can you do it?” he cried.

Unable to make her voice heard above the clamor she nodded quickly in acquiescence. Spinrobin noticed that her little mouth was set rather firmly, though there was a radiance about her eyes and features that made her sweetly beautiful. He remembers that her loveliness and her pluck uplifted him above all former littlenesses of hesitation; and, seizing her outstretched hand, they flew up the main staircase and in less than a minute reached the opening of the long corridor where the rooms were.

Here, however, they stopped with a gasp, for a hurricane of moving air met them in the face like the draught from some immense furnace. Again the crest of a wave in the colossal sound-vibration had caught them. Staggering against the wall, they tried again and again to face the tempest of sound and light, but the space beyond them was lit with the same unearthly brilliance as the hall, and out of the whole long throat of that haunted corridor issued such a passion of music and such a torrent of gorgeous color, that it seemed impossible for any aggregation of physical particles — least of all poor human bodies — to remain coherent for a single instant before the concentrated onslaught.

Yet, game to the inmost core of his little personality, and raised far above his normal powers by the evidence of Miriam’s courage and fidelity, he struggled with all his might and searched through the chambers of his being for the note he was ordained to utter in the chord. The ignominy of failure, now that the great experiment was full upon him — failure in Miriam’s eyes, too — was simply impossible to contemplate. Yet, in spite of every effort, the memory of that all-important note escaped him utterly, for the forces of his soul floundered, helpless and disheveled, before the too mighty splendors that were upon him at such close quarters. The sounds he actually succeeded in emitting between dry and quivering lips were pitiful and feeble beyond words.

Down that living corridor, meanwhile, he saw the doors of the four rooms were gone, consumed like tissue paper; and through the narrow portals there shouldered forward, bathed in light ineffable, the separate outlines of the Letters so long imprisoned in inactivity. And with their appearance the sounds instantly ceased, having overpassed the limits of what is audible to human ears. A great stillness dropped about them with an abrupt crash of utter silence. For a “crash” of silence it was — all-shattering.

And then, from the categories of the incomprehensible and unmanifest, “something” loomed forth towards them where, limp and shaking, they leaned against the wall, and they witnessed the indescribable operation by which the four Letters, whirling and alive, ran together and melted into a single terrific semblance of a FORM … the sight of which entered the heart of Spinrobin and threatened to split it asunder with the joy of the most sublime terror and adoration a human soul has ever known.

And the whole gigantic glory of Skale’s purpose came upon him like a tempest. The magnificent effrontery by which the man sought to storm his way to heaven again laid its spell upon him. The reaction was of amazing swiftness. It almost seemed as though time ceased to operate, so instantaneously did his mood pass from terror to elation — wild, ecstatic elation that could dare anything and everything to share in the awful delight and wonder of Skale’s transcendent experiment.

And so, forgetting himself and his little disabilities of terror and shrinking, he sought once again for the note he was to utter in the chord. And this time he found it.

V

Very faintly, yet distinctly audible in the deep stillness, it sounded far away down in the deeps of his being. And, with a splendid spiritual exultation tearing and swelling in his heart, he turned at once triumphantly to Miriam beside him.

“Utter your note too!” he cried. “Utter it with mine, for any moment now we shall hear the command from the cellar…. Be ready…!”

And the FORM, meanwhile, limned in the wonder of an undecipherable or at least untranslatable geometry, silently roaring, enthroned in the undiscoverable colors beyond the spectrum, swept towards them as he spoke.

At the same instant Miriam answered him, her exquisite little face set like a rock, her marble pallor painted with the glory of the approaching splendors. Just when the moment of success was upon them; when the flying Letters were abroad; when all the difficult weeks of preparation were face to face with the consummation; and when any moment Skale’s booming bass might rise from the bowels of the building as the signal to utter the great chord and unite the fragments of the first divine syllable; when Spinrobin had at last conquered his weakness and recovered his note — then, at this decisive and supreme moment, Miriam asserted herself and took the reins of command.

“No,” she said, looking with sudden authority straight into his eyes, “no! I will not utter the note. Nor shall you utter yours!” And she clapped her little hand tight upon his mouth.

In that instant of unutterable surprise the two great forces of his life and personality met together with an explosive violence wholly beyond his power to control. For on the one hand lay the fierce enticement of Skale’s heaven, with all that it portended, and on the other the deep though temporarily submerged human passion of his love for the girl. Miriam’s sudden action revealed the truth to him better than any argument. In a flash he realized that her choice was made, and that she was in entire and final revolt against the whole elaborate experiment and all that it involved. The risk of losing her Spinny, or finding him changed in some condition of redemption where he would no longer be the little human thing she so dearly loved, had helped her to this final, swift conclusion.

With her hand tight over his lips, and her face of white decision before him, he understood. She called him with those big grey eyes to the sweet and common uses of life, instead of to the heights of some audacious heaven where they might be as gods with Philip Skale. She clung to humanity. And Spinrobin, seeing her at last with spiritual eyes fully opened, knew finally that she was right.

“But oh,” he always cries, “in that moment I knew the most terrible choice I have ever had to make, for it was not a choice between life and death, but a choice between two lives, each of infinite promised wonder. And what do you think it was that decided me, and made me choose the wholesome, humble life with little Miriam in preference to the grandeur of Skale’s vast dream? What *do* you think?” And his face always turns pink and then flame-colored as he asks it, hesitating absurdly before giving the answer. “I’ll tell you, because you’d never guess in this world.” And then he lowers his voice and says, “It was the delicious little sweet perfume of her fingers as she held them over my lips….!”

That delicate, faint smell was the symbol of human happiness, and through all the whirlwind of sound and color about him, it somehow managed to convey its poignant, searching message of the girl’s utter love straight into his heart. Thus curiously out of proportion and insignificant, indeed, are sometimes the decisive details that in moments of overwhelming experience turn the course of life’s river this way or that….

With a single wild cry in his soul that found no audible expression, he gave up the unequal struggle. He turned, and with Miriam by his side, flew down the corridor from the advent of the Immensity that was upon them — from the approach of the escaping Letters.

VI

How Spinrobin found his way out of that sound-stricken house remains an unsolved mystery. He never understood it himself; he remembers only that when they reached the ground floor the vibrations of Skale’s opening bass note had already begun. Its effect, too, was immediately noticeable. For the roar of the escaping Letters, which upstairs had reached so immense a volume as to be recognized only in terms of silence, now suddenly grew in a measure harnessed and restrained. Their vibration became reduced — down closer to the sixteen-foot wavelength which is the limit of human audition. They were being leashed in by the summoning master-tone. They grew once more audible.

On the rising swirl of sound the two humans were swept down passages and across halls, as two leaves are borne by a tempest, and after frantic efforts, in which Spinrobin bruised his body against doors and walls without number, he found himself at last in the open air, and at a considerable distance from the house of terror. Stars shone overhead. He saw the outline of hills. Breaths of cool wind fanned his burning skin and eyes.

But he dared not turn to look or listen. The music of that opening note, now rising through the building from the cellar, might catch him and win him back. The chord in which himself and Miriam were to have uttered their appointed tones, even half-told, was still mighty to overwhelm. Its effect upon the Letters themselves had been immediate.

The feeling that he had proved faithless to Skale, unworthy of the great experiment, never properly attuned to this fearful music of the gods — this was forgotten in the overmastering desire to escape from it all into the safety of common human things with Miriam. Setting his course ever up the hills, he ran on and on, till breath failed him utterly and he was obliged to stop for lack of strength. And it was only then he realized that the whole time the girl had been in his arms. He had been carrying her.

Placing her on the ground, he caught a glimpse of her eyes in the darkness, and saw that they were still charged with the one devouring passion that had made the sacrifice of Skale and of all her training since birth inevitable. Soft and glowing with her first knowledge of love, her grey eyes shone like stars newly risen.

“Come, come!” he whispered hoarsely; “we must get as far as possible — away from it all. Across the hills we shall find safety. Once the splendors overtake us we are lost….”

Seizing her by the hand, they pressed on again, the ocean of sound rising and thundering behind them and below.

Without knowing it, he had taken the path by which the clergyman had brought him from the station weeks ago on the day of his first arrival. With a confused memory, as of a dream, he recognized it. The ground was slippery with dead leaves whose odor penetrated sharply the air of night. Everywhere about him, as they paused from time to time in the little open spaces, the trees pressed up thickly; and ever from the valley they had just left the increasing tide of sound came pouring up after them like the roar of the sea escaping through doors upon the surface of the world.

And even now the marvelous, enticing wonder of it caught him more than once and made him hesitate. The sense of what he was giving up sickened him with a great sudden yearning of regret. The mightiness of that loved leader, lonely and unafraid, trafficking with the principalities and powers of sound, and reckoning without misgiving upon the cooperation of his other "notes" — this plucked fearfully at his heartstrings. But only in great tearing gusts, so to speak, which passed the instant he realized the little breathless, grey-eyed girl at his side, charged with her beautiful love for him and the wholesome ambition for human things.

"Oh! but the heaven we're losing…!" he cried once aloud, unable to contain himself. "Oh, Miriam … and I have proved unworthy … small…!"

"Small enough to stay with me forever and ever … here on the earth," she replied passionately, seizing his hand and drawing him further up the hill. Then she stopped suddenly and gathered a handful of dead leaves, moss, twigs and earth. The exquisite familiar perfume as she held it to his face pierced through him with a singular power of conviction.

"We should lose *this*," she exclaimed; "there's none of this … in heaven! The earth, the earth, the dear, beautiful earth, with you … and Winky … is what I want!"

And when he stopped her outburst with a kiss, fully understanding the profound truth she so quaintly expressed, he smelt the trees and mountains in her hair, and her fragrance was mingled there with the fragrance of that old earth on which they stood.

VII

The rising flood of sound sent them charging ahead the same minute, for it seemed upon them with a rush; and it was only after much stumbling and floundering among trees and boulders that they emerged into the open space of the hills beyond the woods. Actually, perhaps, they had been running for twenty minutes, but to them it seemed that they had been running for days. They stood still and looked about them.

“You shall never regret, never, never,” Miriam whispered quickly. “I can make you happier than all this ever could,” and she waved her arm towards the house below. “And you know it, my little Master.”

But before he could reply, or do more than place an arm about her waist to support her, something came to pass that communicated its message to their souls with an incalculable certainty neither could explain. Perhaps it was that distance enabled them to distinguish between the sounds more clearly, or perhaps their beings were still so intimately connected with Skale that some psychic warning traveled up to them across the night; but at any rate there then came about this sharp and sudden change in the quality of the sound-tempest round them that proclaimed the arrival of an exceedingly dramatic moment. The nature of the rushing, flying vibrations underwent alteration. And, looking one another in the eyes, they realized what it meant.

“He’s beginning …” faltered Spinrobin in some skeleton of a voice. “Skale has begun to *utter*…!” He said it beneath his breath.

Down in the cellar of that awful house the giant clergyman, alone and undismayed, had begun to call the opening vibration of the living chord which was to gather in this torrent of escaping Letters and unite them in temporary safety in the crypts of the prepared vault. For the first time in eighteen hundred years the initial sound of the “Name that rusheth through the universe” — the first sound of its opening syllable, that is — was about to thunder its incalculable message over the earth.

Crouching close against each other they stood there on the edge of the woods, the night darkly smothering about them, the bare, open hills lying beyond in the still sky, waiting for the long-apprehended climax — the utterance of the first great syllable.

“It will make him … as God,” crashed the thought through Spinrobin’s brain as he experienced the pangs of the fiercest remorse he had ever known. “Even without our two notes the power will be sublime…!”

But, through Miriam’s swiftly-beating heart, as she pressed closer and closer: “I know your true name … and you are mine. What else in heaven or earth can ever matter…?”

Chapter XIV

I

SKALE HAD INDEED begun to utter. And to these two bewildered children standing there alone with their love upon the mountain, it seemed that the whole world knew.

Those desolate hills that rolled away like waves beneath the stars; the whispering woods about them; the distant sea, eternally singing its own note of sadness; the boulders at their feet; the very stars themselves, listening in the heart of night — one and all were somehow aware that a portion of the great Name which first called them into being was about to issue from the sleep of ages once again into manifestation….Perhaps to quicken them into vaster life, perhaps to change their forms, perhaps to merge them all back into the depths of the original “word” of creation … with the roar of a dissolving universe….

Through everything, from the heart of the hidden primroses below the soil to the center of the huge moors above, there ran some swift thrill of life as the sounds of which they were the visible expression trembled in sympathetic resonance with the opening vibrations of the great syllable.

Philip Skale had begun to utter. Alone in the cellar of that tempest-stricken house, already aware probably that the upper notes of his chord had failed him, he was at last in the act of calling upon the Name that Rusheth through the Universe … the syllable whose powers should pass into his own being and make him as the gods….

And, first of all, to the infinite surprise of these two listening, shaking lovers, the roaring thunders that had been battling all about them, grew faint and small, and then dropped away into mere trickles of sound, retreating swiftly down into the dark valley where the house stood, as though immense and invisible leashes drew them irresistibly back. One by one the Letters fled away, leaving only a murmur of incredibly sweet echoes behind them in the hills, as the master-sound, spoken by this fearless and audacious man, gathered them into their appointed places in the cellar.

But if they expected stupendous things to follow they were at first singularly disappointed. For, instead of woe and terror, instead of the foundering of the visible universe, there fell about the listening world a cloak of the most profound silence they had ever known, soft beyond conception. The Name was not in the whirlwind. Out of the heart of that deathly stillness it came — a small, sweet voice, that was undeniably the voice of Philip Skale, its awful thunders all smoothed away. With it, too, like a faint overtone, came the yet gentler music of another voice. The bass and alto were uttering their appointed notes in harmony and without dismay.

Everywhere the sound rose up through the darkness of great distance, yet at the same time ran most penetratingly sweet, close beside them in their very ears. So magically intimate indeed was it, yet so potentially huge for all its soft beginning, that Spinrobin declares that what he heard was probably not the actual voices, but only some high liberated harmonics of them.

The sounds, moreover, were not distinguishable as consonants and vowels in the ordinary sense, and to this day remain for him beyond all reach of possible reproduction. He did not hear them as "word" or "syllable," but as some incalculably splendid Message that was too mighty to be taken in, yet at the same time was sweeter than all imagined music, simple as a little melody "sweetly sung in tune," artless as wind through rustling branches.

And, moreover, as this small, sweet voice ran singing everywhere about them in the darkness of hills and woods, Spinrobin realized, with a whole revolution of wonder sweeping through him, that the sound, for all its gentleness, was at work vehemently upon the surface of the landscape, altering and shifting the pattern of the solid earth, just as the sand had wreathed into outlines at the sound of his own voice weeks ago, and as the form of the clergyman had changed at the vibrations of the test night.

The first letters of the opening syllable of this divine and magical name were passing over the world … shifting the myriad molecules that composed it by the stress and stir of its vast harmonics … changing the pattern.

But this time the change was not dreadful; the new outline, even before he actually perceived it, was beautiful above all known forms of beauty. The outer semblance of the old earth appeared to melt away and reveal that heart of clean and dazzling wonder which burns ever at its inmost core — the naked spirit divined by poets and mystics since the beginning of time. It was a new heaven and a new earth that pulsed below them in response to the majesty of this small sweet voice. All nature knew, from the birds that started out of sleep into passionate singing, to the fish that stirred in the depths of the sea, and the wild deer that sprang alert in their wintry coverts, scenting an eternal spring. For the earth rolled up as a scroll, shaking the outworn skin of centuries from her face, and suffering all her rocky structure to drop away and disclose the soft and glowing loveliness of an actual being — a being most tenderly and exquisitely alive. It was the beginning of spiritual vision in their own hearts. The name had set them free. The blind saw — a part of God….

II

And then, in Spinrobin's heart, the realization of failure — that he was not in his appointed place, following his great leader to the stars, clashed together with the splendor of his deep and simple love for this trembling slip of a girl beside him.

The thought that God, as it were, had called him and he had been afraid to run and answer to his name overpowered his timid, aching soul with such a flood of emotion that he found himself struggling with a glorious temptation to tear down the mountainside again to the house and play his appointed part — utter his note in the chord even thus late. For the essential bitterness and pain that lies at the heart of all transitory earthly things — the gnawing sense of incompleteness and vanity that touches the section of transitory existence men call "life," met face to face with this passing glimpse of reality, timeless and unconditioned, which the sound of the splendid name flashed so terrifically before his awakened soul-vision, — and threatened to overwhelm him.

In another instant he would have yielded and gone; forgotten even Miriam, and all the promised sweetness of life with her half-planned, when something came to pass abruptly that threw his will and all his little calculations into a dark chaos of amazement where, by a kind of electrically swift reaction, he realized that the one true, possible and right thing for him was this very love he was about to cast aside. His highest destiny was upon the unchanged old earth … with Miriam … and Winky….

She turned and flung her arms round his neck in a passion of tears as though she had divined his unspoken temptation … and at the same time this awful new thing was upon them both. It caught them like a tempest. For a disharmony — a discord — a lying sound was loose upon the air from those two voices far below.

“Call me by my true name,” she cried quickly, in an anguish of terror; “for my soul is afraid…. Oh, love me most utterly, utterly, utterly … and save me!”

Unnerved and shaking like a leaf, Spinrobin pressed her against his heart.

“I know you by name and you are mine,” he tried to say, but the words never left his lips. It was the love surging up in his tortured heart that alone held him to sanity and prevented — as it seemed to him in that appalling moment — the dissolution of his very being and hers.

For Philip Skale had somewhere *uttered falsely*.

A darting zigzag crack, as of lightning, ran over the giant fabric of vibrations that covered the altering world as with a flood … and sounds that no man may hear and not die leaped awfully into being. The suddenness and immensity of the catastrophe blinded these two listening children-souls. Awe and terror usurped all other feelings … but one. Their love, being born of the spirit, held supreme, insulating them, so to speak, from all invading disasters.

Philip Skale had made a mistake in the pronunciation of the Name.

The results were dreadful and immediate, and from all the surface of the wakening world rose anguished voices. Spinrobin started up, lifting Miriam into his arms. He spun dizzily for a moment between boulders and trees, giving out a great wailing cry, unearthly enough had there been any to hear it. Then he began to run wildly through the thick darkness. In his ear — for her head lay close — he heard her dear voice, between the sobs of collapse, calling his inner name most sweetly; and the sound summoned to the front all in him that was best and manly.

“My sweet Master, my sweet Master!”

But he did not run far. About him on every side the night lifted as though it were suddenly day. He saw the summits of the bleak mountains agleam with the reflection of some great light that rushed upon them from the valley. All the desolate landscape, hesitating like some hovering ocean between the old pattern and the new, seemed to hang suspended amid the desolation of the winter skies. Everything roared. It seemed the ground shook. The very bones of the woods went shuddering together; the hills toppled; and overhead, in some incredible depths of space, boomed sounds as though the heavens split off into fragments and hurled the constellations about the vault to swell these shattering thunders of a collapsing world.

The Letters of that terrible and august Name were passing over the face of the universe — distorted because mispronounced — creative sounds, disheveled and monstrous, because incompletely and incorrectly uttered.

“Put me down,” he heard Miriam cry where she lay smothered in his arms, “and we can face everything together, and be safe. Our love is bigger than it all and will protect us….”

“Because it is complete,” he cried incoherently in reply, seizing the truth of her thought, and setting her upon the ground; “it includes even this. It is a part of … the Name … correctly uttered … for it is true and pure.”

He heard her calling his inner name, and he began forthwith to call her own as they stood there clinging to one another, mingling arms and hair and lips in such a tumult of passion that it seemed as though all this outer convulsion of the world was a small matter compared to the commotion in their own hearts, revolutionized by the influx of a divine love that sought to melt them into a single being.

And as they looked down into the valley at their feet, too bewildered to resist these mighty forces that stole the breath from their throats and the strength from their muscles, they saw with a clearness as of day that the House of Awe in which their love had wakened and matured was passing away and being utterly consumed.

In a flame of white fire, tongued and sheeted, streaked with gulfs of black, and most terribly roaring, it rose with a prodigious crackling of walls and roof towards the sky. Volumes of colored smoke, like hills moving, went with it; and with it, too, went the forms — the substance of their forms, at least, of their “sounds” released — of Philip Skale, Mrs. Mawle, and all the paraphernalia of gongs, drapery, wires, sheeted walls, sand-patterns, and the preparations of a quarter of a century of labor and audacious research. For nothing could possibly survive in such a furnace. The heat of it struck their faces where they stood even here high upon the hills, and the currents of rising wind blew the girl’s tresses across his eyes and moved his own feathery hair upon his head. The notes of those leaping flames were like thunder.

“Watch now!” cried Miriam, though he divined the meaning from the gesture of her free hand rather than actually heard the words.

And, leaning their trembling bodies against a great boulder behind them, they then saw in the midst of the conflagration, or hovering dimly above it rather, the vast outlines of the captured sounds — the Letters — escaping back again into the womb of eternal silence from which they had been with such appalling courage evoked. In forms of dazzling blackness they passed upwards in their chariots of flame, yet at the same time passed *inwards* in some amazing kind of spiral motion upon their own axes, vanishing away with incredible swiftness and beauty deep down into themselves … and were gone.

Realizing in some long-forgotten fashion of childhood the fearful majesty of the wrath of Jehovah, yet secretly undismayed because each felt so gloriously lost in their wonderful love, the bodies of Miriam and Spinrobin dropped instinctively upon their knees, and, still tightly clasped in one another’s arms, bowed their foreheads to the ground, touching the earth and leaves.

But how long they rested thus upon the heart of the old earth, or whether they slept, or whether, possibly, the inevitable reaction to all the overstrain of the past hours led them through a period of unconsciousness, neither of them quite knew. Nor was it possible for them to have known, perhaps, that the lonely valley sheltering the House of Awe, running tongue-like into these desolate hills, had the unenviable reputation of trembling a little in sympathy with any considerable shock of earthquake that came to move that portion of the round globe from her sleep. Of this they knew as little, no doubt, as they did of the ill-defined line of demarcation between experiences that are objective, capable of being weighed and measured, and those that are subjective, taking place — though with convincing authority — only in the sphere of the mind….

All they do know, and Spinrobin tells it with an expression of supreme happiness upon his shining round face, is that at length they stirred as they lay, opened their eyes, turned and looked at one another, then stood up. On Miriam's hair and lashes lay the message of the dew, and in her clear eyes all the soft beauty of the stars that had watched over them.

But the stars themselves had gone. Over the hills ran the colored feet of the dawn, swift and rosy, touching the spread of heathery miles with the tints of approaching sunrise. The tops of the leafless trees stirred gently with a whisper of wind that stole up from the distant sea. The birds were singing. Over the surface of the old earth flew the magical thrill of life. It caught these two children-lovers, sweeping them into each other's arms as with wings.

Out of all the amazing tempest of their recent experiences emerged this ever-growing splendor of their deep and simple love. The kindly earth they had chosen beckoned them down into the valley; the awful heaven they had rejected smiled upon them approvingly, as the old sun topped the hills and peeped upon them with his glorious eye.

"Come, Miriam," breathed Spinrobin softly into her little ear; "we'll go down into another valley … and live happily together forever and ever…."

"Yes," she murmured, blushing with the rosiness of that exquisite winter's dawn; "… you and I … and … and …"

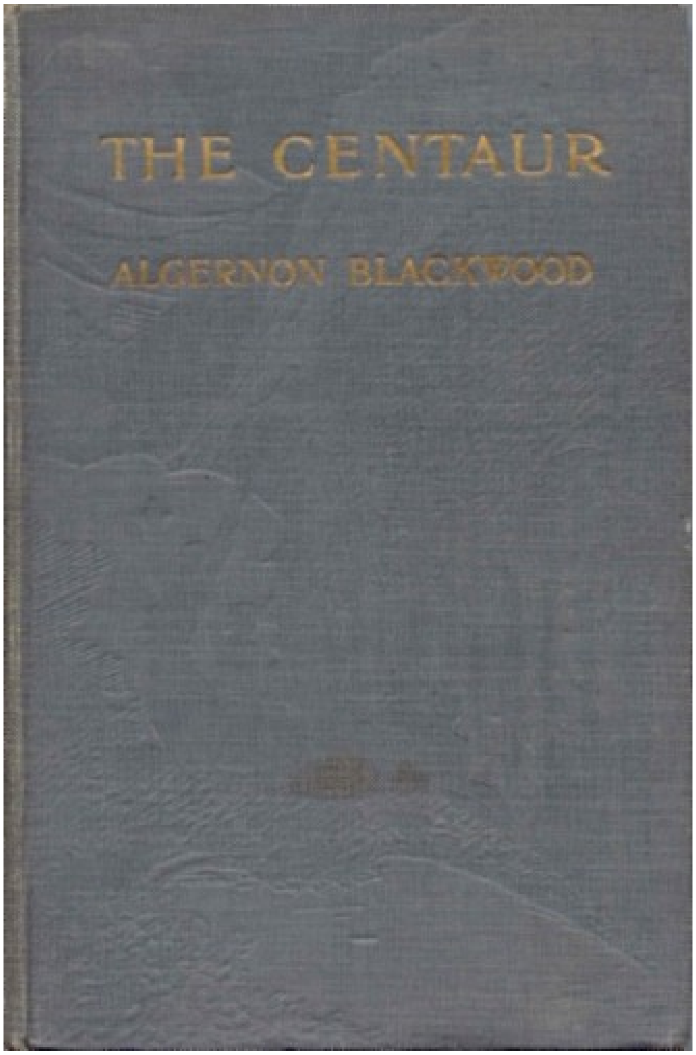
But Spinrobin kissed the unborn name from her lips. "Hush!" he whispered, "hush!"

For the little "word" between these two was not yet made flesh. But the dawn-wind caught up that "hush" and carried it to the trees and undergrowth about them, and then ran thousand-footed before them to whisper it to the valley where they were going.

And Miriam, knowing the worship and protection in his delicate caress, looked up into his face and smiled — and the smile in her grey eyes was that ancient mother-smile which is coeval with life. For the word of creation flamed in these two hearts, waiting only to be uttered.

The Centaur (1911)

First published in 1911, *The Centaur* is an esoteric novel that continues Blackwood's obsession with spiritual enlightenment and a world beyond the merely physical. On a surface level, the novel tells the story of a journalist in search of spiritual contentment. On a sea voyage, he meets a man that appears to have achieved this goal and is inspired to follow him to a strange country peopled by an ancient race, appearing to offer him the contentment he seeks. This summary fails to do justice, however, to the richness of Blackwood's writing, the philosophical sweep of the novel and the poetic richness of the prose with which its ideas are expressed; all of which have led critics to place it as amongst the most significant and characteristic of Blackwood's writing.

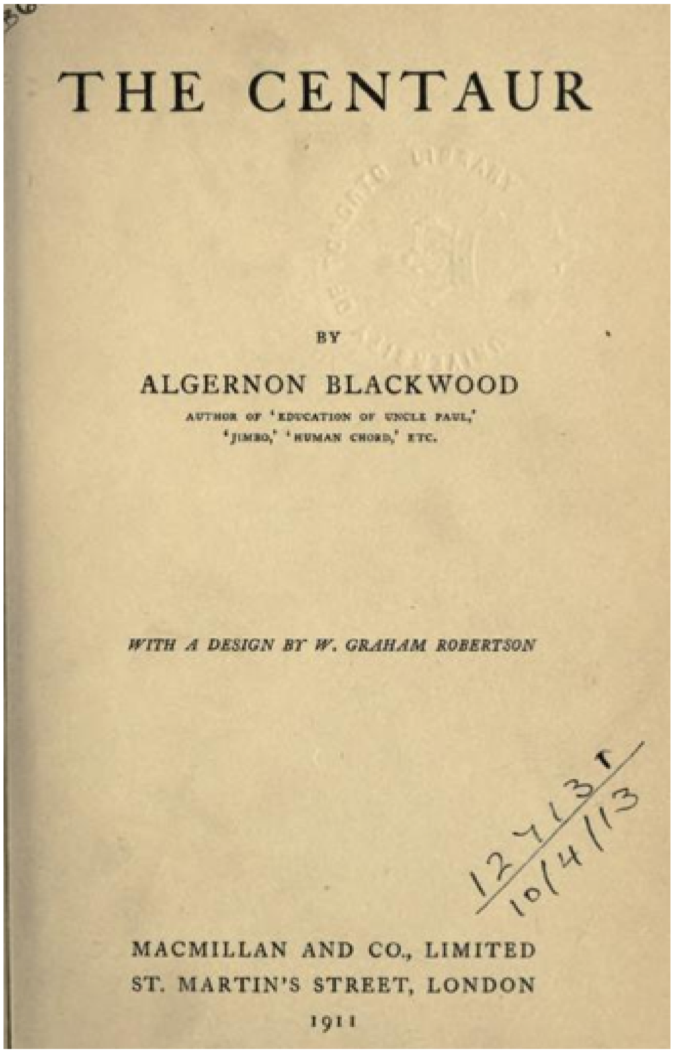

THE CENTAUR
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

Cover of the first edition

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX
CHAPTER XX
CHAPTER XXI
CHAPTER XXII
CHAPTER XXIII
CHAPTER XXIV

CHAPTER XXV
CHAPTER XXVI
CHAPTER XXVII
CHAPTER XXVIII
CHAPTER XXIX
CHAPTER XXX
CHAPTER XXXI
CHAPTER XXXII
CHAPTER XXXIII
CHAPTER XXXIV
CHAPTER XXXV
CHAPTER XXXVI
CHAPTER XXXVII
CHAPTER XXXVIII
CHAPTER XXXIX
CHAPTER XL
CHAPTER XLI
CHAPTER XLII
CHAPTER XLIII
CHAPTER XLIV
CHAPTER XLV
CHAPTER XLVI



THE CENTAUR

BY

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

AUTHOR OF 'EDUCATION OF UNCLE PAUL,'
'JIMBO,' 'HUMAN CHORD,' ETC.

WITH A DESIGN BY W. GRAHAM ROBERTSON

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Title page of the first edition

The Caucasus Mountains in Eurasia — the basis for the land of the Centaurs in the novel

TO

M. S.-K.

RARE TYPE OF BEING:

AN INTELLECTUAL MYSTIC.

CHAPTER I

"WE MAY BE in the Universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all."

— WILLIAM JAMES, *A Pluralistic Universe*

"… A man's vision is the great fact about him. Who cares for Carlyle's reasons, or Schopenhauer's, or Spencer's? A philosophy is the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the Universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it."

— Ibid

There are certain persons who, independently of sex or comeliness, arouse an instant curiosity concerning themselves. The tribe is small, but its members unmistakable. They may possess neither fortune, good looks, nor that adroitness of advance-vision which the stupid name good luck; yet there is about them this inciting quality which proclaims that they have overtaken Fate, set a harness about its neck of violence, and hold bit and bridle in steady hands.

"Most of us, arrested a moment by their presence to snatch the definition their peculiarity exacts, are aware that on the heels of curiosity follows — envy. They know the very things that we forever seek in vain. And this diagnosis, achieved as it were *en passant*, comes near to the truth, for the hallmark of such persons is that they have found, and come into, their own. There is a sign upon the face and in the eyes. Having somehow discovered the 'piece' that makes them free of the whole amazing puzzle, they know where they belong and, therefore, whither they are bound: more, they are definitely *en route*. The littlenesses of existence that plague the majority pass them by.

"For this reason, if for no other," continued O'Malley, "I count my experience with that man as memorable beyond ordinary. 'If for no other,' because from the very beginning there was another. Indeed, it was probably his air of unusual bigness, massiveness rather, — head, face, eyes, shoulders, especially back and shoulders, — that struck me first when I caught sight of him lounging there hugely upon my steamer deck at Marseilles, winning my instant attention before he turned and the expression on his great face woke more — woke curiosity, interest, envy. He wore this very look of certainty that knows, yet with a tinge of mild surprise as though he had only recently known. It was less than perplexity. A faint astonishment as of a happy child — almost of an animal — shone in the large brown eyes—"

"You mean that the physical quality caught you first, then the psychical?" I asked, keeping him to the point, for his Irish imagination was ever apt to race away at a tangent.

He laughed good-naturedly, acknowledging the check. "I believe that to be the truth," he replied, his face instantly grave again. "It was the impression of uncommon bulk that heated my intuition — blessed if I know how — leading me to the other. The size of his body did not smother, as so often is the case with big people: rather, it revealed. At the moment I could conceive no possible connection, of course. Only this overwhelming attraction of the man's personality caught me and I longed to make friends. That's the way with me, as you know," he added, tossing the hair back from his forehead impatiently," — pretty often. First impressions. Old man, I tell you, it was like a possession."

"I believe you," I said. For Terence O'Malley all his life had never understood half measures.

CHAPTER II

"THE FRIENDLY AND flowing savage, who is he? Is he waiting for civilization, or is he past it, and mastering it?" — WHITMAN

"We find ourselves today in the midst of a somewhat peculiar state of society, which we call Civilization, but which even to the most optimistic among us does not seem altogether desirable. Some of us, indeed, are inclined to think that it is a kind of disease which the various races of man have to pass through….

"While History tells us of many nations that have been attacked by it, of many that have succumbed to it, and of some that are still in the throes of it, we know of no single case in which a nation has fairly recovered from and passed through it to a more normal and healthy condition. In other words, the development of human society has never yet (that we know of) passed beyond a certain definite and apparently final stage in the process we call Civilization; at that stage it has always succumbed or been arrested."

— EDWARD CARPENTER, *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure*

O'Malley himself is an individuality that invites consideration from the ruck of commonplace men. Of mingled Irish, Scotch, and English blood, the first predominated, and the Celtic element in him was strong. A man of vigorous health, careless of gain, a wanderer, and by his own choice something of an outcast, he led to the end the existence of a rolling stone. He lived from hand to mouth, never quite growing up. It seemed, indeed, that he never could grow up in the accepted sense of the term, for his motto was the reverse of *nil admirari*, and he found himself in a state of perpetual astonishment at the mystery of things. He was forever deciphering the huge horoscope of Life, yet getting no further than the House of Wonder, on whose cusp surely he had been born. Civilization, he loved to say, had blinded the eyes of men, filling them with dust instead of vision.

An ardent lover of wild outdoor life, he knew at times a high, passionate searching for things of the spirit, when the outer world fell away like dross and he seemed to pass into a state resembling ecstasy. Never in cities or among his fellow men, struggling and herded, did these times come to him, but when he was abroad with the winds and stars in desolate places. Then, sometimes, he would be rapt away, caught up to see the tail-end of the great procession of the gods that had come near. He surprised Eternity in a running Moment.

For the moods of Nature flamed through him — *in* him — like presences, potently evocative as the presences of persons, and with meanings equally various: the woods with love and tenderness; the sea with reverence and magic; plains and wide horizons with the melancholy peace and silence as of wise and old companions; and mountains with a splendid terror due to some want of comprehension in himself, caused probably by a spiritual remoteness from their mood.

The Cosmos, in a word, for him was psychical, and Nature's moods were transcendental cosmic activities that induced in him these singular states of exaltation and expansion. She pushed wide the gateways of his deeper life. She entered, took possession, dipped his smaller self into her own enormous and enveloping personality.

He possessed a full experience, and at times a keen judgment, of modern life; while underneath, all the time, lay the moving sea of curiously wild primitive instincts. An insatiable longing for the wilderness was in his blood, a craving vehement, unappeasable. Yet for something far greater than the wilderness alone — the wilderness was merely a symbol, a first step, indication of a way of escape. The hurry and invention of modern life were to him a fever and a torment. He loathed the million tricks of civilization. At the same time, being a man of some discrimination at least, he rarely let himself go completely. Of these wilder, simpler instincts he was afraid. They might flood all else. If he yielded entirely, something he dreaded, without being able to define, would happen; the structure of his being would suffer a nameless violence, so that he would have to break with the world. These cravings stood for that loot of the soul which he must deny himself. Complete surrender would involve somehow a disintegration, a dissociation of his personality that carried with it the loss of personal identity.

When the feeling of revolt became sometimes so urgent in him that it threatened to become unmanageable, he would go out into solitude, calling it to heel; but this attempt to restore order, while easing his nature, was never radical; the accumulation merely increased on the rebound; the yearnings grew and multiplied, and the point of saturation was often dangerously near. “Some day,” his friends would say, “there’ll be a bursting of the dam.” And, though their meaning might be variously interpreted, they spoke the truth. O’Malley knew it, too.

A man he was, in a word, of deep and ever-shifting moods, and with more difficulty than most in recognizing the underlying self of which these outer aspects were projections masquerading as complete personalities.

The underlying ego that unified these projections was of the type touched with so sure a hand in the opening pages of an inspired little book: *The Plea of Pan*. O’Malley was useless as a citizen and knew it. Sometimes — he was ashamed of it as well.

Occasionally, and at the time of this particular “memorable adventure,” aged thirty, he acted as foreign correspondent; but even as such he was the kind of newspaper man that not merely collects news, but discovers, reveals, creates it. Wise in their generation, the editors who commissioned him remembered when his copy came in that they were editors. A roving commission among the tribes of the Caucasus was his assignment at the moment, and a better man for the purpose would have been hard to find, since he knew beauty, had a keen eye for human nature, divined what was vital and picturesque, and had, further, the power to set it down in brief terms born directly of his vivid emotions.

When first I knew him he lived — nowhere, being always on the move. He kept, however, a dingy little room near Paddington where his books and papers accumulated, undusted but safe, and where the manuscripts of his adventures were found when his death made me the executor of his few belongings. The key was in his pocket, carefully ticketed with a bone label. And this, the only evidence of practical forethought I ever discovered in him, was proof that something in that room was deemed by him of value — to others. It certainly was not the heterogeneous collection of second-hand books, nor the hundreds of unlabeled photographs and sketches. Can it have been the MSS. of stories, notes, and episodes I found, almost carefully piled and tabulated with titles, in a dirty kitbag of green Willesden canvas?

Some of these he had told me (with a greater vividness than he could command by pen); others were new; many unfinished. All were unusual, to say the least. All, too, had obviously happened to himself at some period of his roving career, though here and there he had disguised his own part in them by Hoffmann's device of throwing the action into the third person. Those told to me by word of mouth I could only feel were true, true for himself at least. In no sense were they mere inventions, but arose in moments of vision upon a structure of solid events. Ten men will describe in as many different ways a snake crossing their path; but, besides these, there exists an eleventh man who sees more than the snake, the path, the movement. O'Malley was some such eleventh man. He saw the thing whole, from some kind of inner bird's-eye view, while the ten saw only limited aspects of it from various angles. He was accused of adding details, therefore, because he had divined their presence while still below the horizon. Before they emerged the others had already left.

By which I mean that he saw in commonplace events the movement of greater tides than others saw. At one remove of time or distance — a minute or a mile — he perceived *all*. While the ten chattered volubly about the name of the snake, he was caught beyond by the beauty of the path, the glory of the running glide, the nature of the forces that drove, hindered, modified.

The others reasoned where the snake was going, its length in inches and its speed per second, while he, ignoring such superficial details, plunged as it were into the very nature of the creature's being. And in this idiosyncrasy, which he shared with all persons of mystical temperament, is exemplified a certain curious contempt for Reason that he had. For him mere intellectuality, by which the modern world sets such store, was a valley of dry bones. Its worship was a worship of the form. It missed the essential inner truth because such inner truth could be known only by being it, feeling it. The intellectual attitude of mind, in a word, was critical, not creative, and to be unimaginative seemed to him, therefore, the worst form of unintelligence.

“The arid, sterile minds!” he would cry in a burst of his Celtic enthusiasm. “Where, I ask ye, did the philosophies and sciences of the world assist the progress of any single soul a blessed inch?”

Any little Dreamer in his top-floor back, spinning by rushlight his web of beauty, was greater than the finest critical intelligence that ever lived. The one, for all his poor technique, was stammering over something God had whispered to him, the other merely destroying thoughts invented by the brain of man.

And this attitude of mind, because of its interpretative effect upon what follows, justifies mention. For to O’Malley, in some way difficult to explain, Reason and Intellect, as such, had come to be worshipped by men today out of all proportion to their real value. Consciousness, focused too exclusively upon them, had exalted them out of due proportion in the spiritual economy. To make a god of them was to make an empty and inadequate god. Reason should be the guardian of the soul’s advance, but not the object. Its function was that of a great sandpaper which should clear the way of excrescences, but its worship was to allow a detail to assume a disproportionate importance.

Not that he was fool enough to despise Reason in what he called its proper place, but that he was “wise” enough — not that he was “intellectual” enough! — to recognize its futility in measuring the things of the soul. For him there existed a more fundamental understanding than Reason, and it was, apparently, an inner and natural understanding.

“The greatest Teacher we ever had,” I once heard him say, “ignored the intellect, and who, will ye tell me, can by searching find out God? And yet what else is worth finding out…? Isn’t it only by becoming as a little child — a child that feels and never reasons things — that any one shall enter the kingdom…? Where will the giant intellects be before the Great White Throne when a simple man with the heart of a child will top the lot of ‘em?”

“Nature, I’m convinced,” he said another time, though he said it with puzzled eyes and a mind obviously groping, “is our next step. Reason has done its best for centuries, and gets no further. It *can* get no further, for it can do nothing for the inner life which is the sole reality. We must return to Nature and a purified intuition, to a greater reliance upon what is now subconscious, back to that sweet, grave guidance of the Universe which we've discarded with the primitive state — a spiritual intelligence, really, divorced from mere intellectuality."

And by Nature he did not mean a return to savagery. There was no idea of going backwards in his wild words. Rather he looked forwards, in some way hard to understand, to a state when Man, with the best results of Reason in his pocket, might return to the instinctive life — to feeling *with* — to the sinking down of the modern, exaggerated intellectual personality into its rightful place as guide instead of leader. He called it a Return to Nature, but what he meant, I always felt, was back to a sense of kinship with the Universe which men, through worshipping the intellect alone, had lost. Men today prided themselves upon their superiority to Nature as beings separate and apart. O'Malley sought, on the contrary, a development, if not a revival, of some faultless instinct, due to kinship with her, which — to take extremes — shall direct alike the animal and the inspired man, guiding the wild bee and the homing pigeon, and — the soul toward its God.

This clue, as he called it, crystallized so neatly and so conclusively his own mental struggles, that he had called a halt, as it were, to his own intellectual development.… The name and family of the snake, hence, meant to him the least important things about it. He caught, wildly yet consistently, at the psychic links that bound the snake and Nature and himself together with all creation. Troops of adventurous thoughts had all his life "gone west" to colonize this land of speculative dream. True to his idea, he "thought" with his emotions as much as with his brain, and in the broken record of the adventure that this book relates, this strange passion of his temperament remains the vital clue. For it happened *in*, as well as to, himself. His Being could include the Earth by feeling with her, whereas his intellect could merely criticize, and so belittle, the details of such inclusion.

Many a time, while he stretched credulity to a point, I have heard him apologize in some such way for his method. It was the splendor of his belief that made the thing so convincing in the telling, for later when I found the same tale written down it seemed somehow to have failed of an equal achievement. The truth was that no one language would convey the extraordinary freight that was carried so easily by his instinctive choice of gestures, tone, and glance. With him these were consummately interpretative.

* * * * *

Before the age of thirty he had written and published a volume or two of curious tales, all dealing with extensions of the personality, a subject that interested him deeply, and one he understood because he drew the material largely from himself. Psychology he simply devoured, even in its most fantastic and speculative forms; and though perhaps his vision was incalculably greater than his power of technique, these strange books had a certain value and formed a genuine contribution to the thought on that particular subject. In England naturally they fell dead, but their translation into German brought him a wider and more intelligent circle. The common public unfamiliar with Sally Beauchamp No. 4, with Hélène Smith, or with Dr. Hanna, found in these studies of divided personality, and these singular extensions of the human consciousness, only extravagance and imagination run to wildness. Yet, none the less, the substratum of truth upon which O'Malley had built them, lay actually within his own personal experience. The books had brought him here and there acquaintances of value; and among these latter was a German doctor, Heinrich Stahl. With Dr. Stahl the Irishman crossed swords through months of somewhat irregular correspondence, until at length the two had met on board a steamer where the German held the position of ship's doctor. The acquaintanceship had grown into something approaching friendship, although the two men stood apparently at the opposite poles of thought. From time to time they still met.

In appearance there was nothing unusual about O'Malley, unless it was the contrast of the light blue eyes with the dark hair. Never, I think, did I see him in anything but that old grey flannel suit, with the low collar and shabby glistening tie. He was of medium height, delicately built, his hands more like a girl's than a man's. In towns he shaved and looked fairly presentable, but once upon his travels he grew beard and moustache and would forget for weeks to have his hair cut, so that it fell in a tangle over forehead and eyes.

His manner changed with the abruptness of his moods. Sometimes active and alert, at others for days together he would become absent, dreamy, absorbed, half oblivious of the outer world, his movements and actions dictated by subconscious instinct rather than regulated by volition. And one cause of that loneliness of spirit which was undoubtedly a chief pain in life to him, was the fact that ordinary folk were puzzled how to take him, or to know which of these many extreme moods was the man himself. Uncomfortable, unsatisfactory, elusive, not to be counted upon, they deemed him: and from their point of view they were undoubtedly right. The sympathy and above all the companionship he needed, genuinely craved too, were thus denied to him by the faults of his own temperament. With women his intercourse was of the slightest; in a sense he did not know the need of them much. For one thing, the feminine element in his own nature was too strong, and he was not conscious, as most men are, of the great gap of incompleteness women may so exquisitely fill; and, for another, its obvious corollary perhaps, when they did come into his life, they gave him more than he could comfortably deal with. They offered him more than he needed.

In this way, while he perhaps had never fallen in love, as the saying has it, he had certainly known that high splendor of devotion which means the losing of oneself in others, that exalted love which seeks not any reward of possession because it is itself so utterly possessed. He was pure, too; in the sense that it never occurred to him to be otherwise.

Chief cause of his loneliness — so far as I could judge his complex personality at all — seemed that he never found a sympathetic, truly understanding ear for those deeply primitive longings that fairly ravaged his heart. And this very isolation made him often afraid; it proved that the rest of the world, the sane majority at any rate, said No to them. I, who loved him and listened, yet never quite apprehended his full meaning. Far more than the common Call of the Wild, it was. He yearned, not so much for a world savage, uncivilized, as for a perfectly natural one that had never known, perhaps never needed civilization — a state of freedom in a life unstained.

He never wholly understood, I think, the reason why he found himself in such stern protest against the modern state of things, why people produced in him a state of death so that he turned from men to Nature — to find life. The things the nations exclusively troubled themselves about all seemed to him so obviously vain and worthless, and, though he never even in his highest moments felt the claims of sainthood, it puzzled and perplexed him deeply that the conquest over Nature in all its multifarious forms today should seem to them so infinitely more important than the conquest over self. What the world with common consent called Reality, seemed ever to him the most crude and obvious, the most transient, the most blatant un-Reality. His love of Nature was more than the mere joy of tumultuous pagan instincts. It was, in the kind of simple life he craved, the first step toward the recovery of noble, dignified, enfranchised living. In the denial of all this external flummery he hated, it would leave the soul disengaged and free, able to turn her activities within for spiritual development. Civilization now suffocated, smothered, killed the soul. Being in the hopeless minority, he felt he must be somewhere wrong, at fault, deceived. For all men, from a statesman to an engine-driver, agreed that the accumulation of external possessions had value, and that the importance of material gain was real…. Yet, for himself, he always turned for comfort to the Earth. The wise and wonderful Earth opened her mind and her deep heart to him in a way few other men seemed to know. Through Nature he could move blind-folded along, yet find his way to strength and sympathy. A noble, gracious life stirred in him then which the pettier human world denied. He often would compare the thin help or fellowship he gained from ordinary social intercourse, or from what had seemed at the time quite a successful gathering of his kind, with the power he gained from a visit to the woods or mountains. The former, as a rule, evaporated in a single day; the other stayed, with ever growing power, to bless whole weeks and months.

And hence it was, whether owing to the truth or ignorance of his attitude, that a sense of bleak loneliness spread through all his life, and more and more he turned from men to Nature.

Moreover, foolish as it must sound, I was sometimes aware that deep down in him hid some nameless, indefinable quality that proclaimed him fitted to live in conditions that had never known the restraints of modern conventions — a very different thing to doing without them once known. A kind of childlike, transcendental innocence he certainly possessed, *naïf*, most engaging, and — utterly impossible. It showed itself indirectly, I think, in this distress under modern conditions. The multifarious apparatus of the spirit of Today oppressed him; its rush and luxury and artificiality harassed him beyond belief. The terror of cities ran in his very blood.

When I describe him as something of an outcast, therefore, it will be seen that he was such both voluntarily and involuntarily.

“What the world has gained by brains is simply nothing to what it has lost by them—”

“A dream, my dear fellow, a mere dream,” I stopped him, yet with sympathy because I knew he found relief this way. “Your constructive imagination is too active.”

“By Gad,” he replied warmly, “but there is a place somewhere, or a state of mind — the same thing — where it’s more than a dream. And, what’s more, bless your stodgy old heart, some day I’ll get there.”

“Not in England, at any rate,” I suggested.

He stared at me a moment, his eyes suddenly charged with dreams. Then, characteristically, he snorted. He flung his hand out with a gesture that should push the present further from him.

“I’ve always liked the Eastern theory — old theory anyhow if not Eastern — that intense yearnings end by creating a place where they are fulfilled—”

“Subjectively—”

“Of course; objectively means incompletely. I mean a Heaven built up by desire and intense longing all your life. Your own thought makes it. Living idea, that!”

“Another dream, Terence O’Malley,” I laughed, “but beautiful and seductive.”

To argue bored him. He loved to state his matter, fill it with detail, blow the heated breath of life into it, and then leave it. Argument belittled without clarifying; criticism destroyed, sealing up the sources of life. Any fool could argue; the small, denying minds were always critics.

“A dream, but a damned foine one, let me tell you,” he exclaimed, recovering his brogue in his enthusiasm. He glared at me a second, then burst out laughing. “Tis better to have dhreamed and waked,” he added, “than never to have dhreamed at all.”

And then he poured out O’Shaughnessy’s passionate ode to the Dreamers of the world:

We are the music-makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams;
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world forever, it seems.

With wonderful deathless ditties
We build up the world's great cities,
And out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory;
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a new song's measure
Can trample an empire down.

We, in the ages lying
In the buried past of the earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing,
And Babel itself with our mirth;
And o'erthrew them with prophesying
To the old of the new world's worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.

For this passion for some simple old-world innocence and beauty lay in his soul like a lust — self-feeding and voracious.

CHAPTER III

"LONELY! WHY SHOULD I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?" — THOREAU

March had passed shouting away, and April was whispering deliciously among her scented showers when O'Malley went on board the coasting steamer at Marseilles for the Levant and the Black Sea. The *mistral* made the land unbearable, but herds of white horses ran galloping over the bay beneath a sky of childhood's blue. The ship started punctually — he came on board as usual with a bare minute's margin — and from his rapid survey of the thronged upper deck, it seems, he singled out on the instant this man and boy, wondering first vaguely at their uncommon air of bulk, secondly at the absence of detail which should confirm it. They appeared so much bigger than they actually were. The laughter, rising in his heart, however, did not get as far as his lips.

For this appearance of massive bulk, and of shoulders comely yet almost humped, was not borne out by a direct inspection. It was a mental impression. The man, though broad and well-proportioned, with heavy back and neck and uncommonly sturdy torso, was in no sense monstrous. It was upon the corner of the eye that the bulk and hugeness dawned, a false report that melted under direct vision. O'Malley took him in with attention merging in respect, searching in vain for the detail of back and limbs and neck that suggested so curiously the sense of the gigantic. The boy beside him, obviously son, possessed the same elusive attributes — felt yet never positively seen.

Passing down to his cabin, wondering vaguely to what nationality they might belong, he was immediately behind them, elbowing French and German tourists, when the father abruptly turned and faced him. Their gaze met. O'Malley started.

"Whew…!" ran some silent expression like fire through his brain.

Out of a massive visage, placid for all its ruggedness, shone eyes large and timid as those of an animal or child bewildered among so many people.

There was an expression in them not so much cowed or dismayed as "unrefuged" — the eyes of the hunted creature. That, at least, was the first thing they betrayed; for the same second the quick-blooded Celt caught another look: the look of a hunted creature that at last knows shelter and has found it. The first expression had emerged, then withdrawn again swiftly like an animal into its hole where safety lay. Before disappearing, it had flashed a wireless message of warning, of welcome, of explanation — he knew not what term to use — to another of its own kind, to *himself*.

O'Malley, utterly arrested, stood and stared. He would have spoken, for the invitation seemed obvious enough, but there came an odd catch in his breath, and words failed altogether. The boy, peering at him sideways, clung to his great parent's side. For perhaps ten seconds there was this interchange of staring, intimate staring, between the three of them … and then the Irishman, confused, more than a little agitated, ended the silent introduction with an imperceptible bow and passed on slowly, knocking absent-mindedly through the crowd, down to his cabin on the lower deck.

In his heart, deep down, stirred an indescribable sympathy with something he divined in these two that was akin to himself, but that as yet he could not name. On the surface he felt an emotion he knew not whether to call uneasiness or surprise, but crowding past it, half smothering it, rose this other more profound emotion. Something enormously winning in the atmosphere of father and son called to him in the silence: it was significant, oddly buried; not yet had it emerged enough to be confessed and labeled. But each had recognized it in the other. Each knew. Each waited. And it was extraordinarily disturbing.

Before unpacking, he sat for a long time on his berth, thinking….trying in vain to catch through a thunder of surprising emotions the word that might bring explanation. That strange impression of giant bulk, unsupported by actual measurements; that look of startled security seeking shelter; that other look of being sure, of knowing where to go and being actually *en route*, — all these, he felt, grew from the same hidden cause whereof they were symptoms. It was this hidden thing in the man that had reached out invisibly and fired his own consciousness as their gaze met in that brief instant. And it had disturbed him so profoundly because the very same lost thing lay buried in himself. The man knew, whereas he anticipated merely — as yet. What was it? Why came there with it both happiness and fear?

The word that kept chasing itself in a circle like a kitten after its own tail, yet bringing no explanation, was Loneliness — a loneliness that must be whispered. For it was loneliness on the verge of finding relief. And if proclaimed too loud, there might come those who would interfere and prevent relief. The man, and the boy too for that matter, were escaping. They had found the way back, were ready and eager, moreover, to show it to other prisoners.

And this was as near as O'Malley could come to explanation. He began to understand dimly — and with an extraordinary excitement of happiness.

"Well — and the bigness?" I asked, seizing on a practical point after listening to his dreaming, "what do you make of that? It must have had some definite cause surely?"

He turned and fixed his light blue eyes on mine as we paced beside the Serpentine that summer afternoon when I first heard the story told.
He was half grave, half laughing.

"The size, the bulk, the bigness," he replied, "must have been in reality the expression of some mental quality that reached me psychically, producing its effect directly on my mind and not upon the eyes at all." In telling the story he used a simile omitted in the writing of it, because his sense of humor perceived that no possible turn of phrase could save it from grotesqueness when actually it was far from grotesque — extraordinarily pathetic rather: "As though," he said, "the great back and shoulders carried beneath the loose black cape — humps, projections at least; but projections not ugly in themselves, comely even in some perfectly natural way, that lent to his person this idea of giant size. His body, though large, was normal so far as its proportions were concerned. In his spirit, though, there hid another shape. An aspect of that other shape somehow reached my mind."

Then, seeing that I found nothing at the moment to reply, he added:

"As an angry man you may picture to yourself as red, or a jealous man as green!" He laughed aloud. "D'ye see, now? It was not really a physical business at all!"

CHAPTER IV

"WE THINK WITH only a small part of the past, but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will, and act." — HENRI BERGSON

The balance of his fellow-passengers were not distinguished. There was a company of French tourists gong to Naples, and another lot of Germans bound for Athens, some business folk for Smyrna and Constantinople, and a sprinkling of Russians going home via Odessa, Batoum, or Novorossisk.

In his own stateroom, occupying the upper berth, was a little round-bodied, red-faced Canadian drummer, "traveling" in harvest-machines. The name of the machine, its price, and the terms of purchase were his universe; he knew them in several languages; beyond them, nothing. He was good-natured, conceding anything to save trouble. "D'ye mind the light for a bit while I read in bed?" asked O'Malley. "Don't mind anything much," was the cheery reply. "I'm not particular; I'm easy-going and you needn't bother." He turned over to sleep. "Old traveler," he added, his voice muffled by sheets and blankets, "and take things as they come." And the only objection O'Malley found in him was that he took things as they came to the point of not taking baths at all, and not even taking all his garments off when he went to bed.

The Captain, whom he knew from previous voyages, a genial, rough-voiced sailor from Sassnitz, chided him for so nearly missing the boat— "as usual."

"You're too late for a seat at my taple," he said with his laughing growl; "it's a pidy. You should have led me know py telegram, and I then kepd your place. Now you find room at the doctor's taple howefer berhaps…!"

"Steamer's very crowded this time," O'Malley replied, shrugging his shoulders; "but you'll let me come up sometimes for a smoke with you on the bridge?"

"Of course, of course."

"Anybody interesting on board?" he asked after a moment's pause.

The jolly Captain laughed. "'Pout the zame as usual, you know. Nothing to stop ze ship! Ask ze doctor; he knows zooner than me. But, anyway, the nice ones, they get zeazick always and dizappear. Going Trebizond this time?" he added.

"No; Batoum."

"Ach! Oil?"

"Caucasus generally — up in the mountains a bit."

"God blenty veapons then, I hope. They shoot you for two pfennig up there!" And he was off with his hearty deep laugh and rather ponderous briskness toward the bridge.

Thus O'Malley found himself placed for meals at the right hand of Dr. Stahl; opposite him, on the doctor's left, a talkative Moscow fur-merchant who, having come to definite conclusions of his own about things n general, was persuaded the rest of the world must share them, and who delivered verbose commonplaces with a kind of pontifical utterance sometimes amusing, but usually boring; on his right a gentle-eyed, brown-bearded Armenian priest from the Venice monastery that had sheltered Byron, a man who ate everything except soup with his knife, yet with a daintiness that made one marvel, and with hands so graceful they might almost have replaced the knife without off offence. Beyond the priest sat the rotund Canadian drummer. He kept silence, watched the dishes carefully lest anything should escape him, and — ate. Lower down on the opposite side, one or two nondescripts between, sat the big, blond, bearded stranger with his son. Diagonally across from himself and the doctor, they were in full view.

O'Malley talked to all and sundry whom his voice could reach, being easily forthcoming to people whom he was not likely to see again. But he was particularly pleased to find himself next to the ship's doctor, Dr. Heinrich Stahl, for the man both attracted and antagonized him, and they had crossed swords pleasantly on more voyages than one. There was a fundamental contradiction in his character due — O'Malley divined — to the fact that his experiences did not tally as he wished them to do with his beliefs, or vice versa. Affecting to believe in nothing, he occasionally dropped remarks that betrayed a belief in all kinds of things, unorthodox things. Then, having led the Irishman into confessions of his own fairy faith, he would abruptly rule the whole subject out of order with some cynical phrase that closed discussion. In this sarcastic attitude O'Malley detected a pose assumed for his own protection. "No man of sense can possibly accept such a thing; it is incredible and foolish." Yet, the biting way he said the words betrayed him; the very thing his reason rejected, his soul believed….

These vivid impressions the Irishman had of people, one wonders how accurate they were! In this case, perhaps, he was not far from the truth. That a man with Dr. Stahl's knowledge and ability could be content to hide his light under the bushel of a mere *Schiffsarzt* required explanation. His own explanation was that he wanted leisure for thinking and writing. Bald-headed, slovenly, prematurely old, his beard stained with tobacco and snuff, under-sized, scientific in the imaginative sense that made him speculative beyond mere formulae, his was an individuality that inspired a respect one could never quite account for. He had keen dark eyes that twinkled, sometimes mockingly, sometimes, if the word may be allowed, bitterly, yet often too with a good-humored amusement which sympathy with human weaknesses could alone have caused. A warm heart he certainly had, as more than one forlorn passenger could testify.

Conversation at their table was slow at first. It began at the lower end where the French tourists chattered briskly over the soup, then crept upwards like a slow fire o'erleaping various individuals who would not catch. For instance, it passed the harvest-machine man; it passed the nondescripts; it also passed the big light-haired stranger and his son.

At the table behind, there was a steady roar and buzz of voices; the Captain was easy and genial, prophesying to the ladies on either side Of him a calm voyage. In the shelter of his big voice even the shy found it easy to make remarks to their neighbors. Listening to fragments of the talk O'Malley found that his own eyes kept wandering down the table — diagonally across — to the two strangers. Once or twice he intercepted the doctor's glance traveling in the same direction, and on these occasions it was on the tip of his tongue to make a remark about them, or to ask a question. Yet the words did not come. Dr. Stahl, he felt, knew a similar hesitation. Each, wanting to speak, yet kept silence, waiting for the other to break the ice.

“This *mistral* is tiresome,” observed the doctor, as the tide of talk flowed up to his end and made a remark necessary. “It tries the nerves of some.” He glanced at O’Malley, but it was the fur-merchant who replied, spreading a be-ringed hand over his plate to feel the warmth.

“I know it well,” he said pompously in a tone of finality; “it lasts three, six, or nine days. But once across the Golfe de Lyons we shall be free of it.”

“You think so? Ah, I am glad,” ventured the priest with a timid smile while he adroitly balanced meat and bullet-like green peas upon his knife-blade. Tone, smile, and gesture were so gentle that the use of steel in any form seemed incongruous.

The voice of the fur-merchant came in domineeringly.

“Of course. I have made this trip so often, I *know*. St. Petersburg to Paris, a few weeks on the Riviera, then back by Constantinople and the Crimea. It is nothing. I remember last year—” He pushed a large pearl pin more deeply into his speckled tie and began a story that proved chiefly how luxuriously he traveled. His eyes tried to draw the whole end of the table into his circle, but while the Armenian listened politely, with smiles and bows, Dr. Stahl turned to the Irishman again. It Vas the year of Halley’s comet and he began talking interestingly about it.

“… Three o’clock in the morning — any morning, yes — is the best time,” the doctor concluded, “and I’ll have you called. You must see it through my telescope. End of this week, say, after we leave Catania and turn eastwards…”

And at this instant, following a roar of laughter from the Captain’s table, came one of those abrupt pauses that sometimes catch an entire room at once. All voices hushed. Even the merchant, setting down his champagne glass, fell silent. One heard only the beating of the steamer’s screw, the rush of water below the port-holes, the soft scuffle of the stewards’ feet. The conclusion of the doctor’s inconsiderable sentence was sharply audible all over the room —

“… crossing the Ionian Sea toward the Isles of Greece.”

It rang across the pause, and at the same moment O’Malley caught the eyes of the big stranger lifted suddenly and fixed upon the speaker’s face as though the words had summoned him.

They shifted the same instant to his own, then dropped again to his plate. Again the clatter of conversation drowned the room as before; the merchant resumed his self-description in terms of gold; the doctor discussed the gases of the comet's tail. But the swift-blooded Irishman felt himself caught away strangely and suddenly into another world. Out of the abyss of the subconscious there rose a gesture prophetic and immense. The trivial phrase and that intercepted look opened a great door of wonder in his heart. In a second he grew "absent-minded." Or, rather, something touched a button and the whole machinery of his personality shifted round noiselessly and instantaneously, presenting an immediate new facet to the world. His normal, puny self-consciousness slipped a moment into the majestic calm of some far larger state that the stranger also knew. The Universe lies in every human heart, and he plunged into that archetypal world that stands so close behind all sensible appearances. He could neither explain nor attempt to explain, but he sailed away into some giant swimming mood of beauty wherein steamer, passengers, talk, faded utterly, the stranger and his son remaining alone real and vital. He had seen; he could never forget. Chance prepared the setting, but immense powers had rushed in and availed themselves of it. Something deeply buried had flamed from the stranger's eyes and beckoned to him. The fire ran from the big man to himself and was gone.

"The Isles of Greece—" The words were simple enough, yet it seemed to O'Malley that the look they summoned to the stranger's eyes ensouled them, transfiguring them with the significance of vital clues. They touched the fringe of a mystery, magnificent and remote — some transcendent psychical drama in the 'life of this man whose "bigness" and whose "loneliness that must be whispered" were also in their way other vital clues. Moreover, remembering his first sight of these two upon the upper deck a few hours before, he understood that his own spirit, by virtue of its peculiar and primitive yearnings, was involved in the same mystery and included in the same hidden passion.

The little incident illustrates admirably O'Malley's idiosyncrasy of "seeing whole." In a lightning flash his inner sense had associated the words and the glance, divining that the one had caused the other. That pause provided the opportunity…. If Imagination, then it was creative imagination; if true, it was assuredly spiritual insight of a rare quality.

He became aware that the twinkling eyes of his neighbor were observing him keenly. For some moments evidently he had been absent-mindedly staring down the table. He turned quickly and looked at the doctor with frankness. This time it was impossible to avoid speech of some kind.

“Following those lights that do mislead the morn?” asked Dr. Stahl slyly. “Your thoughts have been traveling. You’ve heard none of my last remarks!”

Under the clamor of the merchant’s voice O’Malley replied in a lowered tone:

“I was watching those two half-way down the table opposite. They interest you as well, I see.” It was not a challenge exactly; if the tone was aggressive, it was merely that he felt the subject was one on which they would differ, and he scented an approaching discussion. The doctor’s reply, indicating agreement, surprised him a good deal.

“They do; they interest me greatly.” There was no trace of fight in the voice. “That should cause *you* no surprise.”

“Me — they simply fascinate,” said O’Malley, always easily drawn. “What is it? What do you see about them that is unusual? Do you, too, see them ‘big’?” The doctor did not answer at once, and O’Malley added, “The father’s a tremendous fellow, but it’s not that—”

“Partly, though,” said the other, “partly, I think.”

“What else, then?” The fur-merchant, still talking, prevented their being overheard. “What is it marks them off so from the rest?”

“Of all people *you* should see,” smiled the doctor quietly. “If a man of your imagination sees nothing, what shall a poor exact mind like myself see?” He eyed him keenly a moment. “You really mean that you detect nothing?”

“A certain distinction, yes; a certain aloofness from others. Isolated, they seem in a way; rather a splendid isolation I should call it—”

And then he stopped abruptly. It was most curious, but he was aware that unwittingly in this way he had stumbled upon the truth, aware at the same time that he resented discussing it with his companion — because it meant at the same time discussing himself or something in himself he wished to hide. His entire mood shifted again with completeness and rapidity. He could not help it. It seemed suddenly as though he had been telling the doctor secrets about himself, secrets moreover he would not treat sympathetically. The doctor had been "at him," so to speak, searching the depths of him with a probing acuteness the casual language had disguised.

"What are they, do you suppose: Finns, Russians, Norwegians, or what?" the doctor asked. And the other replied briefly that he guessed they might be Russians perhaps, South Russians. His tone was different. He wished to avoid further discussion. At the first opportunity he neatly changed the conversation.

It was curious, the way proof came to him. Something in himself, wild as the desert, something to do with that love of primitive life he discussed only with the few who were intimately sympathetic toward it, this something in his soul was so akin to a similar passion in these strangers that to talk of it was to betray himself as well as them.

Further, he resented Dr. Stahl's interest in them, because he felt it was critical and scientific. Not far behind hid the analysis that would lay them bare, leading to their destruction. A profound instinctive sense of self-preservation had been stirred within him.

Already, mysteriously guided by secret affinities, he had ranged himself on the side of the strangers.

CHAPTER V

“Mythology contains the history of the archetypal world. It comprehends Past, Present, and Future.” — NOVALIS, Flower Pollen, Translated by U.C.B.

In this way there came between these two the slight barrier of a forbidden subject that grew because neither destroyed it. O’Malley had erected it; Dr. Stahl respected it. Neither referred again for a time to the big Russian and his son.

In his written account O’Malley, who was certainly no constructive literary craftsman, left out apparently countless little confirmatory details. By word of mouth he made me feel at once that this mystery existed, however; and to weld the two together is a difficult task. There nevertheless was this something about the Russian and his boy that excited deep curiosity, accompanied by an aversion on the part of the other passengers that isolated them; also, there was this competition on the part of the two friends to solve it, from opposing motives.

Had either of the strangers fallen seasick, the advantage would have been easily with Dr. Stahl — professionally, but since they remained well, and the doctor was in constant demand by the other passengers, it was the Irishman who won the first move and came to close quarters by making a personal acquaintance. His strong desire helped matters of course; for he noticed with indignation that these two, quiet and inoffensive as they were and with no salient cause of offence, were yet rejected by the main body of passengers. They seemed to possess a quality that somehow insulated them from approach, sending them effectually “to Coventry,” and in a small steamer where the travelers settle down into a kind of big family life, this isolation was unpleasantly noticeable.

It stood out in numerous little details that only a keen observer closely watching could have taken into account. Small advances, travelers’ courtesies, and the like that ordinarily should have led to conversation, in their case led to nothing. The other passengers invariably moved away after a few moments, politely excusing themselves, as it were, from further intercourse. And although at first the sight of this stirred in him an instinct of revolt that was almost anger, he soon felt that the couple not merely failed to invite, but even emanated some definite atmosphere that repelled. And each time he witnessed these little scenes, there grew more strongly in him the original picture he had formed of them as beings rejected and alone, hunted by humanity as a whole, seeking escape from loneliness into a place of refuge that they knew of, definitely at last *en route*.

Only an imaginative mind, thus concentrated upon them, could have divined all this; yet to O'Malley it seemed plain as the day. With the certitude, moreover, came the feeling, ever stronger, that the refuge they sought would prove to be also the refuge he himself sought, the difference being that whereas they knew, he still hesitated.

Yet, in spite of this secret sympathy, imagined or discovered, he found it no easy matter to approach the big man for speech. For a day and a half he merely watched; attraction so strong excited caution; he paused, waiting. His attention, however, was so keen that he seemed always to know where they were and what they were doing. By instinct he was aware in what part of the ship they would be found — for the most part leaning over the rail alone in the bows, staring down at the churned water together by the screws, pacing the after-deck in the dusk or early morning when no one was about, or hidden away in some corner of the upper deck, side by side, gazing at sea and sky. Their method of walking, too, made it easy to single them out from the rest — a free, swaying movement of the limbs, a swing of the shoulders, a gait that was lumbering, almost clumsy, half defiant, yet at the same time graceful, and curiously rapid. The body moved along swiftly for all its air of blundering — a motion which was a counterpart of that elusive appearance of great bulk, and equally difficult of exact determination. An air went with them of being ridiculously confined by the narrow little decks.

Thus it was that Genoa had been made and the ship was already half way on to Naples before the opportunity for closer acquaintance presented itself. Rather, O'Malley, unable longer to resist, forced it. It seemed, too, inevitable as sunrise.

Rain had followed the *mistral* and the sea was rough. A rich land-taste came about the ship like the smell of wet oaks when wind sweeps their leaves after a sousing shower. In the hour before dinner, the decks slippery with moisture, only one or two wrapped-up passengers in deck-chairs below the awning, O’Malley, following a sure inner lead, came out of the stuffy smoking-room into the air. It was already dark and the drive of mist-like rain somewhat obscured his vision after the glare. Only for a moment though — for almost the first thing he saw was the Russian and his boy moving in front of him toward the aft compasses. Like a single figure, huge and shadowy, they passed into the darkness beyond with a speed that seemed as usual out of proportion to their actual stride. They lumbered rapidly away. O’Malley caught that final swing of the man’s great shoulders as they disappeared, and, leaving the covered deck, he made straight after them. And though neither gave any sign that they had seen him, he felt that they were aware of his coming — and even invited him.

As he drew close a roll of the vessel brought them almost into each other’s arms, and the boy, half hidden beneath his parent’s flowing cloak, looked up at once and smiled. The saloon light fell dimly upon his face. The Irishman saw that friendly smile of welcome, and lurched forward with the roll of the deck. They brought up against the bulwarks, and the big man put out an arm to steady him. They all three laughed together. At close quarters, as usual again, the impression of bulk had disappeared.

And then, at first, utterly unlike real life, they said — nothing. The boy moved round and stood close to his side so that he found himself placed between them, all three leaning forward over the rails watching the phosphorescence of the foam-streaked Mediterranean.

Dusk lay over the sea; the shores of Italy not near enough to be visible; the mist, the hour, the loneliness of the deserted decks, and something else that was nameless, shut them in, these three, in a little world of their own. A sentence or two rose in O’Malley’s mind, but without finding utterance, for he felt that no spoken words were necessary. He was accepted without more ado. A deep natural sympathy existed between them, recognized intuitively from that moment of first mutual inspection at Marseilles. It was instinctive, almost as with animals. The action of the boy in coming round to his side, unhindered by the father, was the symbol of utter confidence and welcome.

There came, then, one of those splendid and significant moments that occasionally, for some, burst into life, flooding all barriers, breaking down as with a flaming light the thousand erections of shadow that close one in. Something imprisoned in himself swept outwards, rising like a wave, bringing an expansion of life that “explained.” It vanished, of course, instantly again, but not before he had caught a flying remnant that lit the broken puzzles of his heart and left things clearer. Before thought, and therefore words, could overtake, it was gone; but there remained at least this glimpse. The fire had flashed a light down subterranean passages of his being and made visible for a passing second some clue to his buried primitive yearnings. He partly understood.

Standing there between these two this thing came over him with a degree of intelligibility scarcely captured by his words. The man’s qualities — his quietness, peace, slowness, silence — betrayed somehow that his inner life dwelt in a region vast and simple, shaping even his exterior presentment with its own huge characteristics, a region wherein the distress of the modern world’s vulgar, futile strife could not exist — more, could never *have* existed. The Irishman, who had never realized exactly why the life of Today to him was dreadful, now understood it in the presence of this simple being with his atmosphere of stately power. He was like a child, but a child of some pre-existence utterly primitive and utterly forgotten; of no particular age, but of some state that antedates all ages; simple in some noble, concentrated sense that was prodigious, almost terrific. To stand thus beside him was to stand beside a mighty silent fire, steadily glowing, a fire that fed all lesser flames, because itself close to the central source of fire. He felt warmed, lighted, vivified — made whole. The presence of this stranger took him at a single gulp, as it were, straight into Nature — a Nature that was alive. The man was part of her. Never before had he stood so close and intimate. Cities and civilization fled away like transient dreams, ashamed. The sun and moon and stars moved up and touched him.

This word of lightning explanation, at least, came to him as he breathed the other’s atmosphere and presence. The region where this man’s spirit fed was at the center, whereas today men were active with a scattered, superficial cleverness, at the periphery. He even understood that his giant gait and movements were small outer evidences of this inner fact, wholly in keeping. That blundering stupidity, half glorious, half pathetic, with which he moved among his fellows was a physical expression of this psychic fact that his spirit had never learned the skilful tricks taught by civilization to lesser men. It was, in a way, awe-inspiring, for he was now at last driving back full speed for his own region and — escape.

O'Malley knew himself caught, swept off his feet, momentarily driving with him….

The singular deep satisfaction of it, standing there with these two in the first moment, he describes as an entirely new sensation in his life — an awareness that he was "complete." The boy touched his side and he let an arm steal round to shelter him. The huge, bearded parent rose in his massiveness against his other shoulder, hemming him in. For a second he knew a swift and curious alarm, passing however almost at once into the thrill of a rare happiness. In that moment, it was not the passengers or the temper of Today who rejected them; it was they who rejected the world: because they knew another and superior one — more, they were in it.

Then, without turning, the big man spoke, the words in heavy accented English coming out laboriously and with slow, exceeding difficulty as though utterance was a supreme effort.

"You … come … with … us?" It was like stammering almost. Still more was it like essential inarticulateness struggling into an utterance foreign to it — unsuited. The voice was a deep and windy bass, merging with the noise of the sea below.

"I'm going to the Caucasus," O'Malley replied; "up into the old, old mountains, to — see things — to look about — to search—" He really wanted to say much more, but the words lay dead or beyond reach.

The big man nodded slowly. The boy listened.

"And yourself — ?" asked the Irishman, hardly knowing why he faltered and trembled.

The other smiled; a beauty that was beyond all language passed with that smile across the great face in the dusk.

"Some of us … of ours …" he spoke very slowly, very brokenly, quarrying out the words with real labor, "… still survive… out there…. We … now go back. So very … few … remain…. And you — come with us …"

CHAPTER VI

"IN THE SPIRITUAL Nature-Kingdom, man must everywhere seek his peculiar territory and climate, his best occupation, his particular neighborhood, in order to cultivate a Paradise in idea; this is the right system…. Paradise is scattered over the whole earth, and that is why it has become so unrecognizable."

— NOVALIS, Translated by U.C.B.

"Man began in instinct and will end in instinct. Instinct is genius in Paradise, before the period of self-abstraction (self-knowledge)."

— Ibid

"Look here, old man," he said to me, "I'll just tell you what it was, because I know you won't laugh."

We were lying under the big trees behind the Round Pond when he reached this point, and his direct speech was so much more graphic than the written account that I use it. He was in one of his rare moments of confidence, excited, hat off, his shabby tie escaping from the shabbier grey waistcoat. One sock lay untidily over his boot, showing bare leg.

Children's voices floated to us from the waterside as though from very far away, the nursemaids and perambulators seemed tinged with unreality, the London towers were clouds, its roar the roar of waves. I saw only the ship's deck, the grey and misty sea, the uncouth figures of the two who leaned with him over the bulwarks.

"Go on," I said encouragingly; "out with it!"

"It must seem incredible to most men, but, by Gad, I swear to you, it lifted me off my feet, and I've never known anything like it. The mind of that great fellow got hold of me, included me. He made the inanimate world — sea, stars, wind, woods, and mountains — seem all alive. The entire blessed universe was conscious — and he came straight out of it to get me. I understood things about myself I've never understood before — and always funked rather; — especially that feeling of being out of touch with my kind, of finding no one in the world today who speaks my language quite — that, and the utter, God-forsaken loneliness it makes me suffer—"

"You always have been a lonely beggar really," I said, noting the hesitation that thus on the very threshold checked his enthusiasm, quenching the fire in those light-blue eyes. "Tell me. I shall understand right enough — or try to."

"God bless you," he answered, leaping to the sympathy, "I believe you will. There's always been this primitive, savage thing in me that keeps others away — puts them off, and so on. I've tried to smother it a bit sometimes —"

"Have you?" I laughed.

"'Tried to,' I said, because I've always been afraid of its getting out too much and bustin' my life all to pieces: — something lonely and untamed and sort of outcast from cities and money and all the thick suffocating civilization of today; and I've only saved myself by getting off into wildernesses and free places where I could give it a breathin' chance without running the risk of being locked up as a crazy man." He laughed as he said it, but his heart was in the words. "You know all that; haven't I told you often enough? It's not a morbid egoism, or what their precious academic books so stupidly call 'degenerate,' for in me it's damned vital and terrific, and moves always to action. It's made me an alien and — and —"

"Something far stronger than the Call of the Wild, isn't it?"

He fairly snorted. "Sure as we're both alive here sittin' on this sooty London grass," he cried. "This Call of the Wild they prate about is just the call a fellow hears to go on 'the bust' when he's had too much town and's got bored — a call to a little bit of license and excess to safety-valve him down. What I feel," his voice turned grave and quiet again, "is quite a different affair. It's the call of real hunger — the call of food. They want to let off steam, but I want to take in stuff to prevent — starvation." He whispered the word, putting his lips close to my face.

A pause fell between us, which I was the first to break.

“This is not your century! That’s what you really mean,” I suggested patiently.

“Not my century!” he caught me up, flinging handfuls of faded grass in the air between us and watching it fall; “why, it’s not even my world! And I loathe, loathe the spirit of today with its cheap-jack inventions, and smother of sham universal culture, its murderous superfluities and sordid vulgarity, without enough real sense of beauty left to see that a daisy is nearer heaven than an airship—”

“Especially when the airship falls,” I laughed. “Steady, steady, old boy; don’t spoil your righteous case by overstatement.”

“Well, well, you know what I mean,” he laughed with me, though his face at once turned earnest again, “and all that, and all that, and all that…. And so this savagery that has burned in me all these years unexplained, these Russian strangers made clear. I can’t tell you how because I don’t know myself. The father did it — his proximity, his silence stuffed with sympathy, his great vital personality unclipped by contact with these little folk who left him alone. His presence alone made me long for the earth and Nature. He seemed a living part of it all. He was magnificent and enormous, but the devil take me if I know how.”

“He said nothing — that referred to it directly?”

“Nothing but what I’ve told you, — blundering awkwardly with those few modern words. But he had it in him a thousand to my one. He made me feel I was right and natural, untrue to myself to suppress it and a coward to fear it. The speech-center in the brain, you know, is anyhow a comparatively recent thing in evolution. They say that—”

“It wasn’t his century either,” I checked him again.

“No, and he didn’t pretend it was, as I’ve tried to,” he cried, sitting bolt upright beside me. “The fellow was genuine, never dreamed of compromise. D’ye see what I mean? Only somehow he’d found out where his world and century were, and was off to take possession. And that’s what caught me. I felt it by some instinct in me stronger than all else; only we couldn’t talk about it definitely because — because — I hardly know how to put it — for the same reason,” he added suddenly, “that I can’t talk about it to you *now!* There are no words…. What we both sought was a state that passed away before words came into use, and is therefore beyond intelligible description. No one spoke to them on the ship for the same reason, I felt sure, that no one spoke to them in the whole world — because no one could manage even the alphabet of their language.

“And this was so strange and beautiful,” he went on, “that standing there beside him, in his splendid atmosphere, the currents of wind and sea reached *me through him first*, filtered by his spirit so that I assimilated them and they fed me, because he somehow stood in such close and direct relation to Nature. I slipped into my own region, made happy and alive, knowing at last what I wanted, though still unable to phrase it. This modern world I’ve so long tried to adjust myself to became a thing of pale remembrance and a dream….”

“All in your mind and imagination, of course, this,” I ventured, seeing that his poetry was luring him beyond where I could follow.

“Of course,” he answered without impatience, grown suddenly thoughtful, less excited again, “and that’s why it was true. No chance of clumsy senses deceiving one. It was direct vision. What is Reality, in the last resort,” he asked, “but the thing a man’s vision brings to him — to believe? There’s no other criterion. The criticism of opposite types of mind is merely a confession of their own limitations.”

Being myself of the “opposite type of mind,” I naturally did not argue, but suffered myself to accept his half-truth for the whole — temporarily. I checked him from time to time merely lest he should go too fast for me to follow what seemed a very wonderful tale of faerie.

“So this wild thing in me the world today has beggared and denied,” he went on, swept by his Celtic enthusiasm, “woke in its full strength. Calling to me like some flying spirit in a storm, it claimed me. The man’s being summoned me back to the earth and Nature, as it were, automatically. I understood that look on his face, that sign in his eyes. The ‘Isles of Greece’ furnished some faint clue, but as yet I knew no more — only that he and I were in the same region and that I meant to go with him and that he accepted me with delight that was joy. It drew me as empty space draws a giddy man to the precipice’s edge. Thoughts from another’s mind,” he added by way of explanation, turning round, “come far more completely to me when I stand in a man’s atmosphere, silent and receptive, than when by speech he tries to place them there. Ah! And that helps me to get at what I mean, perhaps. The man, you see, hardly thought; he *felt*."

"As an animal, you mean? Instinctively — ?"

"In a sense, yes," he replied after a momentary hesitation. "Like some very early, very primitive form of life."

"With the best will in the world, Terence, I don't quite follow you—"

"I don't quite follow myself," he cried, "because I'm trying to lead and follow at the same time. You know that idea — I came across it somewhere — that in ancient peoples the senses were much less specialized than they are now; that perception came to them in general, massive sensations rather than divided up neatly into five channels: — that they felt all over so to speak, and that all the senses, as in an overdose of hashish, become one single sense? The centralizing of perception in the brain is a recent thing, and it might equally well have occurred in any other nervous headquarters of the body, say, the solar plexus; or, perhaps, never have been localized at all! In hysteria patients have been known to read with the finger-tips and smell with the heel. Touch is still all over; it's only the other four that have got fixed in definite organs. There are systems of thought today that still would make the solar plexus the main center, and not the brain. The word 'brain,' you know, never once occurs in the ancient Scriptures of the world. You will not find it in the Bible — the reins, the heart, and so forth were what men felt with then. They felt all over — well," he concluded abruptly, "I think this fellow was like that. D'ye see now?"

I stared at him, greatly wondering. A nursemaid passed close, balancing a child in a spring-perambulator, saying in a foolish voice, "Wupsey up, wupsey down! Wupsey there!" O'Malley, in the full stream of his mood, waited impatiently till she had gone by. Then, rolling over on his side, he came closer, talking in a lowered tone. I think I never saw him so deeply stirred, nor understood, perhaps, so little of the extreme passion working in him. Yet it was incredible that he could have caught so much from mere interviews with a semi-articulate stranger, unless what he said was strictly true, and this Russian had positively touched latent fires in his soul by a kind of sympathetic magic.

“You know,” he went on almost under his breath, “every man who thinks for himself and feels vividly finds he lives in a world of his own, apart, and believes that one day he’ll come across, either in a book or in a person, the Priest who shall make it clear to him. Well — I’d found mine, that’s all. I can’t prove it to you with a pair of scales or a butcher’s meat-axe, but it’s true.”

“And you mean his mere presence conveyed all this without speech almost?”

“Because there *was* no speech possible,” he replied, dropping his voice to a whisper and thrusting his face yet closer into mine. “We were solitary survivors of a world whose language was either uncreated or” — he italicized the word— “*forgotten*….”

“An elaborate and detailed thought-transference, then?”

“Why not?” he murmured. “It’s one of the commonest facts of daily life.”

“And you had never fully realized it before, this loneliness and its possible explanation — that there might exist, I mean, a way of satisfying it — till you met this stranger?”

He answered with deep earnestness. “Always, old man, always, but suffered under it atrociously because I’d never understood it. I had been afraid to face it. This man, a far bigger and less diluted example of it than myself, made it all clear and right and natural. We belonged to the same forgotten place and time. Under his lead and guidance I could find my own — return….”

I whistled a long soft whistle, looking up into the sky. Then, sitting upright like himself, we stared hard at one another, straight in the eye. He was too grave, too serious to trifle with. It would have been unfair too. Besides, I loved to hear him. The way he reared such fabulous superstructures upon slight incidents, interpreting thus his complex being to himself, was uncommonly interesting. It was observing the creative imagination actually at work, and the process in a sense seemed sacred. Only the truth and actuality with which he clothed it all made me a little uncomfortable sometimes.

“I’ll put it to you quite simply,” he cried suddenly.

"Yes, and 'quite simply' it was — ?"

"That he knew the awful spiritual loneliness of living in a world whose tastes and interests were not his own, a world to which he was essentially foreign, and at whose hands he suffered continual rebuff and rejection. Advances from either side were mutually and necessarily repelled because oil and water cannot mix. Rejected, moreover, not merely by a family, tribe, or nation, but by a race and time — by the whole World of Today; an outcast and an alien, a desolate survival."

"An appalling picture!"

"I understood it," he went on, holding up both hands by way of emphasis, "because in miniature I had suffered the same: he was a supreme case of what lay so deeply in myself. He was a survival of other life the modern mind has long since agreed to exile and deny. Humanity stared at him over a barrier, never dreaming of asking him in. Even had it done so he could not by the law of his being have accepted. Outcast myself in some small way, I understood his terrible loneliness, a soul without a country, visible and external country that is. A passion of tenderness and sympathy for him, and so also for myself, awoke. I saw him as chieftain of all the lonely, exiled souls of life."

Breathless a moment, he lay on his back staring at the summer clouds — those thoughts of wind that change and pass before their meanings can be quite seized. Similarly protean was the thought his phrases tried to clothe. The terror, pathos, sadness of this big idea he strove to express touched me deeply, yet never quite with the clarity of his own conviction.

"There *are* such souls, *dépaysées* and in exile," he said suddenly again, turning over on the grass. "They *do* exist. They walk the earth today here and there in the bodies of ordinary men … and their loneliness is a loneliness that must be whispered."

"You formed any idea what kind of — of survival?" I asked gently, for the notion grew in me that after all these two would prove to be mere revolutionaries in escape, political refugees, or something quite ordinary.

O'Malley buried his face in his hands for a moment without replying. Presently he looked up. I remember that a streak of London black ran from the corner of his mouth across the cheek. He pushed the hair back from his forehead, answering in a manner grown abruptly calm and dispassionate.

“Don’t ye see what a foolish question that is,” he said quietly, “and how impossible to satisfy, inviting that leap of invention which can be only an imaginative lie…? I can only tell you,” and the breeze brought to us the voices of children from the Round Pond where they sailed their ships of equally wonderful adventure, “that my own longing became this: to go with him, to know what he knew, to live where he lived — forever.”

“And the alarm you said you felt?”

He hesitated.

“That,” he added, “was a kind of mistake. To go involved, I felt, an inner catastrophe that might be Death — that it would be out of the body, I mean, or a going backwards. In reality, it was a going forwards and a way to Life.”

CHAPTER VII

AND IT WAS just before the steamer made Naples that the jolly Captain unwittingly helped matters forward a good deal. For it was his ambition to include in the safe-conduct of his vessel the happy-conduct also of his passengers. He liked to see them contented and of one accord, a big family, and he noted — or had word brought to him perhaps — that there were one or two whom the attitude of the majority left out in the cold.

It may have been — O'Malley wondered without actually asking — that the man who shared the cabin with the strangers made some appeal for re-arrangement, but in any case Captain Burgenfelder approached the Irishman that afternoon on the bridge and asked if he would object to having them in his stateroom for the balance of the voyage.

"Your present gompanion geds off at Naples," he said. "Berhaps you would not object. I think — they seem lonely. You are friendly with them. They go alzo to Batoum?"

This proposal for close quarters gave him pause. He knew a moment or two of grave hesitation, yet without time to analyze it. Then, driven by a sudden decision of the heart that knew no revision of reason, he agreed.

"I had better, perhaps, suggest it to see if they are willing," he said the next minute, hedging.

"I already ask him dat."

"Oh, you have! And he would like it — not object, I mean?" he added, aware of a subtle sense of half-frightened pleasure.

"Pleased and flattered on the contrary," was the reply, as he handed him the glasses to look at Ischia rising blue from the sea.

O'Malley felt as though his decision was somehow an act of self-committal, almost grave. It meant that impulsively he accepted a friendship which concealed in its immense attraction — danger. He had taken the plunge.

The rush of it broke over him like a wave, setting free a tumult of very deep emotion. He raised the glasses automatically to his eyes, but looking through them he saw not Ischia nor the opening the Captain explained the ship would make, heading that evening for Sicily. He saw quite another picture that drew itself up out of himself — was thrown up, rather, somewhat with violence, as upon a landscape of dream-scenery. The lens of passionate yearning in himself, ever unsatisfied, focused it against a background far, far away, in some faint distance that was neither of space nor time, and might equally have been past as future. Large figures he saw, shadowy yet splendid, that ran free-moving as clouds over mighty hills, vital with the abundant strong life of a younger world…. Yet never quite saw them, never quite overtook them, for their speed and the manner of their motion bewildered the sight….

Moreover, though they evaded him in terms of physical definition he knew a sense of curious, half-remembered familiarity. Some portion of his hidden self, uncaught, unharnessed by anything in modern life, rose with a passionate rush of joy and made after them — something in him untamed as wind. His mind stood up, as it were, and shouted "I am coming." For he saw himself not far behind, as a man, racing with great leaps to join them … yet never overtaking, never drawing close enough to see quite clearly. The roar of their tramping shook the very blood in his ears….

His decision to accept the strangers had set free in his being something that thus for the first time in his life — escaped…. Symbolically in his mind this Escape had taken picture form….

The Captain's voice was asking for the glasses; with a wrench that caused almost actual physical pain he tore himself away, letting this herd of Flying Thoughts sink back into the shadows and disappear. With sharp regret he saw them go — a regret for long, long, far-off things….

Turning, he placed the field-glasses carefully in that fat open hand stretched out to receive them, and noted as he did so the thick, pink fingers that closed about the strap, the heavy ring of gold, the band of gilt about the sleeve. That wrought gold, those fleshy fingers, the genial gutteral voice saying "T'anks" were symbols of an existence tamed and artificial that caged him in again….

Then he went below and found that the lazy “drummer” who talked harvest-machines to puzzled peasants had landed, and in his place an assortment of indiscriminate clothing belonging to the big Russian and his son lay scattered over the upper berth and upon the sofa-bed beneath the port-hole.

CHAPTER VIII

“FOR MY OWN part I find in some of these abnormal or supernormal facts the strongest suggestions in favor of a superior consciousness being possible. I doubt whether we shall ever understand some of them without using the very letter of Fechner’s conception of a great reservoir in which the memories of earth’s inhabitants are pooled and preserved, and from which, when the threshold lowers or the valve opens, information ordinarily shut out leaks into the mind of exceptional individuals among us.” — WILLIAM JAMES, *A Pluralistic Universe*

And it was some hours later, while the ship made for the open sea, that he told Dr. Stahl casually of the new arrangement and saw the change come so suddenly across his face. Stahl stood back from the compass-box whereon they leaned, and putting a hand upon his companion’s shoulder, looked a moment into his eyes. With surprise O’Malley noted that the pose of cynical disbelief was gone; in its place was sympathy, interest, kindness. The words he spoke came from his heart.

“Is that true?” he asked, as though the news disturbed him.

“Of course. Why not? Is there anything wrong?” He felt uneasy. The doctor’s manner confirmed the sense that he had done a rash thing. Instantly the barrier between the two crumbled and he lost the first feeling of resentment that his friends should be analyzed. The men thus came together in unhindered sincerity.

“Only,” said the doctor thoughtfully, half gravely, “that — I may have done you a wrong, placed you, that is, in a position of—” he hesitated an instant, — “of difficulty. It was I who suggested the change.”

O’Malley stared at him.

“I don’t understand you quite.”

“It is this,” continued the other, still holding him with his eyes. He said it deliberately. “I have known you for some time, formed-er — an opinion of your type of mind and being — a very rare and curious one, interesting me deeply—"

"I wasn't aware you'd had me under the microscope," O'Malley laughed, but restlessly.

"Though you felt it and resented it — justly, I may say — to the point of sometimes avoiding me—"

"As doctor, scientist," put in O'Malley, while the other, ignoring the interruption, continued in German: —

"I always had the secret hope, as 'doctor and scientist,' let us put it then, that I might one day see you in circumstances that should bring out certain latent characteristics I thought I divined in you. I wished to observe you — your psychical being — under the stress of certain temptations, favorable to these characteristics. Our brief voyages together, though they have so kindly ripened our acquaintance into friendship" — he put his hand again on the other's shoulder smiling, while O'Malley replied with a little nod of agreement— "have, of course, never provided the opportunity I refer to—"

"Ah — !"

"Until now!" the doctor added. "Until now."

Puzzled and interested the Irishman waited for him to go on, but the man of science, who was now a ship's doctor, hesitated. He found it difficult, apparently, to say what was in his thoughts.

"You refer, of course, though I hardly follow you quite — to our big friends?" O'Malley helped him.

The adjective slipped out before he was aware of it. His companion's expression admitted the accuracy of the remark. "You also see them — big, then?" he said, quickly taking him up. He was not cross-questioning; out of keen sympathetic interest he asked it.

"Sometimes, yes," the Irishman answered, more astonished. "Sometimes only—"

"Exactly. Bigger than they really are; as though at times they gave out — emanated — something that extended their appearance. Is that it?"

O’Malley, his confidence wholly won, more surprised, too, than he quite understood, seized Stahl by the arm and drew him toward the rails. They leaned over, watching the sea. A passenger, pacing the decks before dinner, passed close behind them.

“But, doctor,” he said in a hushed tone as soon as the steps had died away, “you are saying things that I thought were half in my imagination only, not true in the ordinary sense quite — your sense, I mean?”

For some moments the doctor made no reply. In his eyes a curious steady gaze replaced the usual twinkle. When at length he spoke it was evidently following a train of thought of his own, playing round a subject he seemed half ashamed of and yet desired to state with direct language.

“A being akin to yourself,” he said in low tones, “only developed, enormously developed; a Master in your own peculiar region, and a man whose influence acting upon you at close quarters could not fail to arouse the latent mind-storms” — he chose the word hesitatingly, as though seeking for a better he could not find on the moment,— “always brewing in you just below the horizon.”

He turned and watched his companion’s face keenly. O’Malley was too impressed to feel annoyance.

“Well — ?” he asked, feeling the adventure closing round him with quite a new sense of reality. “Well?” he repeated louder. “Please go on. I’m not offended, only uncommonly interested. You leave me in a fog, so far. I think you owe me more than hints.”

“I do,” said the other simply. “About that man is a singular quality too rare for language to have yet coined its precise description: something that is essentially” — they had lapsed into German now, and he used the German word— “*unheimlich*.”

The Irishman started. He recognized this for truth. At the same time the old resentment stirred a little in him, creeping into his reply.

“You have studied him closely then — had him, too, under the microscope? In this short time?”

This time the answer did not surprise him, however.

“My friend,” he heard, while the other turned from him and gazed out over the misty sea, “I have not been a ship’s doctor — always. I am one now only because the leisure and quiet give me the opportunity to finish certain work, recording work. For years I was in the H — —” — he mentioned the German equivalent for the Salpêtrière— “years of research and investigation into the astonishing vagaries of the human mind and spirit — with certain results, followed later privately, that it is now my work to record. And among many cases that might well seem — er — beyond either credence or explanation,” — he hesitated again slightly— “I came across one, one in a million, let us admit, that an entire section of my work deals with under the generic term of *Urmenschen*.”

“Primitive men,” O’Malley snapped him up, translating. Through his growing bewilderment ran also a growing uneasiness shot strangely with delight. Intuitively he divined what was coming.

“Beings,” the doctor corrected him, “not men. The prefix *Ur-*, moreover, I use in a deeper sense than is usually attached to it as in *Urwald*, *Urwelt,* and the like. An *Urmensch* in the world today must suggest a survival of an almost incredible kind — a kind, too, utterly inadmissible and inexplicable to the materialist perhaps—”

“Paganistic?” interrupted the other sharply, joy and fright rising over him.

“Older, older by far,” was the rejoinder, given with a curious hush and a lowering of the voice.

The suggestion rushed into full possession of O’Malley’s mind. There rose in him something that claimed for his companions the sea, the wind, the stars — tumultuous and terrific. But he said nothing. The conception, blown into him thus for the first time at full strength, took all his life into its keeping. No energy was left over for mere words. The doctor, he was aware, was looking at him, the passion of discovery and belief in his eyes. His manner kindled. It was the hidden Stahl emerging.

“… a type, let me put it,” he went on in a voice whose very steadiness thrilled his listener afresh, “that in its strongest development would experience in the world today the loneliness of a complete and absolute exile. A return to humanity, you see, of some unexpended power of mythological values….”

“Doctor…!”

The shudder passed through him and away almost as soon as it came. Again the sea grew splendid, the thunder of the waves held voices calling, and the foam framed shapes and faces, wildly seductive, though fugitive as dreams. The words he had heard moved him profoundly. He remembered how the presence of the stranger had turned the world alive.

He knew what was coming, too, and gave the lead direct, while yet half afraid to ask the question.

“So my friend — this big ‘Russian’ — ?”

“I have known before, yes, and carefully studied.”

CHAPTER IX

"IS IT NOT just possible that there is a mode of being as much transcending Intelligence and Will as these transcend mechanical motion?"

— HERBERT SPENCER, *First Principles*

The two men left the rail and walked arm in arm along the deserted deck, speaking in lowered voices.

"He came first to us, brought by the keeper of an obscure hotel where he was staying, as a case of lapse of memory — loss of memory, I should say, for it was complete. He was unable to say who he was, whence he came, or to whom he belonged. Of his land or people we could learn nothing. His antecedents were an utter blank. Speech he had practically none of his own — nothing but the merest smattering of many tongues, a word here, a word there. Utterance, indeed, of any kind was exceedingly difficult to him. For years, evidently, he had wandered over the world, companionless among men, seeking his own, finding no place where to lay his head. People, it seemed, both men and women, kept him at arm's-length, feeling afraid; the keeper of the little hotel was clearly terrified. This quality he had that I mentioned just now, repelled human beings — even in the Hospital it was noticeable — and placed him in the midst of humanity thus absolutely alone. It is a quality more rare than" — hesitating, searching for a word— "purity, one almost extinct today, one that I have never before or since come across in any other being — hardly ever, that is to say," he qualified the sentence, glancing significantly at his companion.

"And the boy?" O'Malley asked quickly, anxious to avoid any discussion of himself.

"There was no boy then. He has found him since. He may find others too — possibly!" The Irishman drew his arm out, edging away imperceptibly. That shiver of joy reached him from the air and sea, perhaps.

“And two years ago,” continued Dr. Stahl, as if nothing had happened, “he was discharged, harmless” — he lingered a moment on the word, “if not cured. He was to report to us every six months. He has never done so.”

“You think he remembers you?”

“No. It is quite clear that he has lapsed back completely again into the — er — state whence he came to us, that unknown world where he passed his youth with others of his kind, but of which he has been able to reveal no single detail to us, nor we to trace the slightest clue.”

They stopped beneath the covered portion of the deck, for the mist had now turned to rain. They leaned against the smoking-room outer wall. In O’Malley’s mind the thoughts and feelings plunged and reared. Only with difficulty did he control himself.

“And this man, you think,” he asked with outward calmness, “is of — of my kind?”

“‘Akin,’ I said. I suggest—” But O’Malley cut him short.

“So that you engineered our sharing a cabin with a view to putting him again — putting us both — under the microscope?”

“My scientific interest was very strong,” Dr. Stahl replied carefully. “But it is not too late to change. I offer you a bed in my own roomy cabin on the promenade deck. Also, I ask your forgiveness.”

The Irishman, large though his imaginative creed was, felt oddly checked, baffled, stupefied by what he had heard. He knew perfectly well what Stahl was driving at, and that revelations of another kind were yet to follow. What bereft him of very definite speech was this new fact slowly awakening in his consciousness which hypnotized him, as it were, with its grandeur. It seemed to portend that his own primitive yearnings, so-called, grew out of far deeper foundations than he had yet dreamed of even. Stahl, should he choose to listen, meant to give him explanation, quasi-scientific explanation. This talk about a survival of “unexpended mythological values” carried him off his feet. He knew it was true. Veiled behind that carefully chosen phrase was something more — a truth brilliantly discovered. He knew, too, that it bit at the platform-boards upon which his personality, his sanity, his very life, perhaps, rested — his modern life.

"I forgive you, Dr. Stahl," he heard himself saying with a deceptive calmness of voice as they stood shoulder to shoulder in that dark corner, "for there is really nothing to forgive. The characteristics of these *Urmenschen* you describe attract me very greatly. Your words merely give my imagination a letter of introduction to my reason. They burrow among the foundations of my life and being. At least — you have done me no wrong…." He knew the words were wild, impulsive, yet he could find no better. Above all things he wished to conceal his rising, grand delight.

"I thank you," Stahl said simply, yet with a certain confusion. "I — felt I owed you this explanation — er — this confession."

"You wished to warn me?"

"I wished to say 'Be careful' rather. I say it now — Be careful! I give you this invitation to share my cabin for the remainder of the voyage, and I urge you to accept it." The offer was from the heart, while the scientific interest in the man obviously half hoped for a refusal.

"You think harm might come to me?"

"Not physically. The man is gentle and safe in every way."

"But there *is* danger — in your opinion?" insisted the other.

"There *is* danger—"

"That his influence may make me as himself — an *Urmensch*?"

"That he may — get you," was the curious answer, given steadily after a moment's pause.

Again the words thrilled O'Malley to the core of his delighted, half-frightened soul. "You really mean that?" he asked again; "as 'doctor and scientist,' you mean it?"

Stahl replied with a solemn anxiety in eyes and voice. "I mean that you have in yourself that 'quality' which makes the proximity of this 'being' dangerous: in a word that he may take you — er — with him."

"Conversion?"

"Appropriation."

They moved further up the deck together for some minutes in silence, but the Irishman's feelings, irritated by the man's prolonged evasion, reached a degree of impatience that was almost anger. "Let us be more definite," he exclaimed at length a trifle hotly. "You mean that I might go insane?"

"Not in the ordinary sense," came the answer without a sign of annoyance or hesitation; "but that something might happen to you — something that science could not recognize and medical science could not treat—"

Then O'Malley interrupted him with the vital question that rushed out before he could consider its wisdom or legitimacy.

"Then what really is he — this man, this 'being' whom you call a 'survival,' and who makes you fear for my safety. Tell me *exactly* what he is?"

They found themselves just then by the doctor's cabin, and Stahl, pushing the door open, led him in. Taking the sofa for himself, he pointed to an armchair opposite.

CHAPTER X

"SUPERSTITION IS OUTSIDE reason; so is revelation." — OLD SAYING

And O'Malley understood that he had pressed the doctor to the verge of confessing some belief that he was ashamed to utter or to hold, something forced upon him by his out-of-the-way experience of life to which his scientific training said peremptorily "No." Further, that he watched him keenly all the time, noting the effect his words produced.

"He is not a human being at all," he continued with a queer thin whisper that conveyed a gravity of conviction singularly impressive, "in the sense in which you and I are accustomed to use the term. His inner being is not shaped, as his outer body, upon quite — human lines. He is a Cosmic Being — a direct expression of cosmic life. A little bit, a fragment, of the Soul of the World, and in that sense a survival — a survival of her youth."

The Irishman, as he listened to these utterly unexpected words, felt something rise within him that threatened to tear him asunder. Whether it was joy or terror, or compounded strangely of the two, he could not tell. It seemed as if he stood upon the edge of hearing something — spoken by a man who was no mere dreamer like himself — that would explain the world, himself, and all his wildest cravings. He both longed and feared to hear it. In his hidden and most secret thoughts, those thoughts he never uttered to another, this deep belief in the Earth as a conscious, sentient, living Being had persisted in spite of all the forces education and modern life had turned against it. It seemed in him an undying instinct, an unmovable conviction, though he hardly dared acknowledge it even to himself.

He had always "dreamed" the Earth alive, a mothering organism to humanity; and himself, *via* his love of Nature, in some sweet close relation to her that other men had forgotten or ignored. Now, therefore, to hear Stahl talk of Cosmic Beings, fragments of the Soul of the World, and "survivals of her early life" was like hearing a great shout of command to his soul to come forth and share it in complete acknowledgment.

He bit his lips, pinched himself, stared. Then he took the black cigar he was aware was being handed to him, lit it with fingers that trembled absurdly, and smoked as hard as though his sanity depended on his finishing it in a prescribed time. Great clouds rose before his face. But his soul within him came up with a flaming rush of speed, shouting, singing….

There was enough ash to knock off into the bronze tray beside him before either said a word. He watched the little operation as closely as though he were aiming a rifle. The ash, he saw, broke firmly. "This must be a really good cigar," he thought to himself, for as yet he had not been conscious of tasting it. The ash-tray, he also saw, was a kind of nymph, her spread drapery forming the receptacle. "I must get one of those," he thought. "I wonder what they cost." Then he puffed violently again. The doctor had risen and was pacing the cabin floor slowly over by the red curtain that concealed the bunk. O'Malley absent-mindedly watched him, and as he did so the words he had heard kept on roaring at the back of his mind.

And then, while silence still held the room, — swift, too, as a second although it takes time to write — flashed through him a memory of Fechner, the German philosopher who held that the Universe was everywhere consciously alive, and that the Earth was the body of a living Entity, and that the World-Soul or Cosmic Consciousness is something more than a picturesque dream of the ancients….

The doctor came to anchor again on the sofa opposite. To his great relief he was the first to break the silence, for O'Malley simply did not know how or where to begin.

"We know today — *you* certainly know for I've read it accurately described in your books — that the human personality can extend itself under certain conditions called abnormal. It can project portions of itself, show itself even at a distance, operate away from the central covering body. In exactly similar fashion may the Being of the Earth have projected portions of herself in the past. Of such great powers or beings there may be conceivably a survival … a survival of a hugely remote period when her Consciousness was manifested, perhaps, in shapes and forms long since withdrawn before the tide of advancing humanity … forms of which poetry and legend alone have caught a flying memory and called them gods, monsters, mythical beings of all sorts and kinds….”

And then, suddenly, as though he had been deliberately giving his imagination rein yet now regretted it, his voice altered, his manner assumed a shade of something colder. He shifted the key, as though to another aspect of his belief. The man was talking swiftly of his experiences in the big and private hospitals. He was describing *the* very belief to which he had first found himself driven — the belief that had opened the door to so much more. So far as O’Malley could follow it in his curiously excited condition of mind, it was little more or less than a belief he himself had often played lovingly with — the theory that a man has a fluid or etheric counterpart of himself which is obedient to strong desire and can, under certain conditions, be detached — projected in a shape dictated by that desire.

He only realized this fully later perhaps, for the doctor used a phraseology of his own. Stahl was telling calmly how he had been driven to some such belief by the facts that had come under his notice both in the asylums and in his private practice.

“…That in the amazingly complex personality of a human being,” he went on, “there does exist some vital constituent, a part of consciousness, that can leave the body for a short time without involving death; that it is something occasionally visible to others; something malleable by thought and desire — especially by intense and prolonged yearning; and that it can even bring relief to its owner by satisfying in some subjective fashion the very yearnings that drew it forth.”

“Doctor! You mean the ‘astral’?”

“There is no name I know of. I can give it none. I mean in other words that it can create the conditions for such satisfaction — dream-like, perhaps, yet intense and seemingly very real at the time. Great emotion, for instance, drives it forth, explaining thus appearances at a distance, and a hundred other phenomena that my investigations of abnormal personality have forced me to recognize as true. And nostalgia often is the means of egress, the channel along which all the inner forces and desires of the heart stream elsewhere toward their fulfillment in some person, place, or *dream*.”

Stahl was giving himself his head, talking freely of beliefs that rarely found utterance. Clearly it was a relief to him to do so — to let himself be carried away. There was, after all, the poet in him side by side with the observer and analyst, and the fundamental contradiction in his character stood most interestingly revealed. O'Malley listened, half in a dream, wondering what this had to do with the Cosmic Life just mentioned.

"Moreover, the appearance, the aspect of this etheric Double, molded thus by thought, longing, and desire, corresponds to such thought, longing, and desire. Its shape, when visible shape is assumed, may be various — very various. The form might conceivably be *felt*, discerned clairvoyantly as an emanation rather than actually seen," he continued.

Then he added, looking closely at his companion, "and in your own case this Double — it has always seemed to me — may be peculiarly easy of detachment from the rest of you."

"I certainly create my own world and slip into it — to some extent," murmured the Irishman, absorbingly interested; " — reverie and so forth; partially, at any rate."

"'Partially,' yes, in your reveries of waking consciousness," Stahl took him up, "but in sleep — in the trance consciousness — completely! And therein lies your danger," he added gravely; "for to pass out completely in *waking* consciousness, is the next step — an easy one; and it constitutes, not so much a disorder of your being, as a readjustment, but a readjustment difficult of sane control." He paused again. "You pass out while fully awake — a waking delusion. It is usually labeled — though in my opinion wrongly so — insanity."

"I'm not afraid of that," O'Malley laughed, almost nettled. "I can manage myself all right — have done so far, at any rate."

It was curious how the rôles had shifted. O'Malley it was now who checked and criticized.

"I suggest caution," was the reply, made earnestly. "I suggest caution."

"I should keep your warnings for mediums, clairvoyants, and the like," said the other tartly. He was half amazed, half alarmed even while he said it. It was the personal application that annoyed him. "They are rather apt to go off their heads, I believe."

Dr. Stahl rose and stood before him as though the words had given him a cue he wanted. “From that very medium-class,” he said, “my most suggestive ‘cases’ have come, though not for one moment do I think of including you with them. Yet these very ‘cases’ have been due one and all to the same cause — the singular disorder I have just mentioned.”

They stared at one another a moment in silence. Stahl, whether O’Malley liked it or no, was impressive. He gazed at the little figure in front of him, the ragged untidy beard, the light shining on the bald skull, wondering what was coming next and what all this bewildering confession of unorthodox belief was leading up to. He longed to hear more about that hinted Cosmic Life … and how yearning might lead to its realization.

“For any phenomena of the séance-room that may be genuine,” he heard him saying, “are produced by this fluid, detachable portion of the personality, the very thing we have been speaking about. They are projections of the personality — automatic projections of the consciousness.”

And then, like a clap of thunder upon his bewildered mind, came this man’s amazing ultimatum, linking together all the points touched upon and bringing them to a head. He repeated it emphatically.

“And in similar fashion,” concluded the calm, dispassionate voice beside him, “there have been projections of the Earth’s great consciousness — direct expressions of her cosmic life — Cosmic Beings. And of these distant and primitive manifestations, it is conceivable that one or two may still — here and there in places humanity has never stained — actually survive. This man is one of them.”

He turned on the two electric lights behind him with an admirable air of finality. The extraordinary talk was at an end. He moved about the cabin, putting chairs straight and toying with the papers on his desk. Occasionally he threw a swift and searching glance at his companion, like a man who wished to note the effect of an attack.

For, indeed, this was the impression that his listener retained above all else. This flood of wild, unorthodox, speculative ideas had been poured upon him helter-skelter with a purpose. And the abruptness of the climax was cleverly planned to induce impulsive, hot confession.

But O’Malley found no words. He sat there in his armchair, passing his fingers through his tumbled hair. His inner turmoil was too much for speech or questions … and presently, when the gong for dinner rang noisily outside the cabin door, he rose abruptly and went out without a single word. Stahl turned to see him go. He merely nodded with a little smile.

But he did not go to his stateroom. He walked the deck alone for a time, and when he reached the dining room, Stahl, he saw, had already come and gone. Halfway down the table, diagonally across, the face of the big Russian looked up occasionally at him and smiled, and every time he did so the Irishman felt a sense of mingled alarm and wonder greater than anything he had ever known in his life before. One of the great doors of life again had opened. The barriers of his heart broke away. He was no longer caged and manacled within the prison of a puny individuality. The world that so distressed him faded. The people in it were dolls. The fur-merchant, the Armenian priest, the tourists and the rest were mere automatic puppets, all made to scale — petty scale, amazingly dull, all exactly alike — tiny, unreal, half alive.

The ship, meanwhile, he reflected with a joy that was passion, was being borne over the blue sea, and this sea lay spread upon the curved breast of the round and spinning earth. He, too, and the big Russian lay upon her breast, held close by gravity so-called, caught closer still, though, by something else besides. And his longings increased with his understanding. Stahl, wittingly or unwittingly, had given them an immense push forwards.

CHAPTER XI

"IN SCIENTIFIC TERMS one can say: Consciousness is everywhere; it is awake when and wherever the bodily energy underlying the spiritual exceeds that degree of strength which we call the threshold. According to this, consciousness can be localized in time and space." — FECHNER, *Buchlein vom Leben nach dem Tode*

The offer of the cabin, meanwhile, remained open. In the solitude that O'Malley found necessary that evening he toyed with it, though knowing that he would never really accept.

Like a true Celt his imagination took the main body of Stahl's words and ensouled them with his own vivid temperament. There stirred in him this nameless and disquieting joy that wrought for itself a Body from material just beyond his thoughts — that region of enormous experience that ever fringes the consciousness of imaginative men. He took the picture at its face value, took it inside with his own thoughts, delighted in it, raised it, of course, very soon to a still higher scale. If he criticized at all it was with phrases like "The man's a poet after all! Why, he's got creative imagination!" To find his own intuitions endorsed, even half explained, by a mind of opposite type was a new experience. It emphasized amazingly the reality of that inner world he lived in.

This explanation of the big Russian's effect upon himself was terrific, and that a "doctor" should have conceived it, glorious. That some portion of a man's spirit might assume the shape of his thoughts and project itself visibly seemed likely enough. Indeed, to him, it seemed already a "fact," and his temperament did not linger over it. But that other suggestion fairly savaged him with its strange grandeur. He played lovingly with it.

That the Earth was a living being was a conception divine in size as in simplicity, and that the Gods and mythological figures had been projections of her consciousness — this thought ran with a magnificent new thunder about his mind. It was overwhelming, beautiful as Heaven and as gracious. He saw the ancient shapes of myth and legend still alive in some gorgeous garden of the primal world, a corner too remote for humanity to have yet stained it with their trail of uglier life. He understood in quite a new way, at last, those deep primitive longings that hitherto had vainly craved their full acknowledgment. It meant that he lay so close to the Earth that he felt her pulses as his own. The idea stormed his belief.

It was the Soul of the Earth herself that all these years had been calling to him.

And while he let his imagination play with the soaring beauty of the idea, he remembered certain odd little facts. He marshaled them before him in a row and questioned them: The picture he had seen with the Captain's glasses — those speeding shapes of beauty; the new aspect of a living Nature that the Russian's presence stirred in him; the man's broken words as they had leaned above the sea in the dusk; the curious passion that leaped to his eyes when certain chance words had touched him at the dinner-table. And, lastly, the singular impression of giant bulk he produced sometimes upon the mind, almost as though a portion of him — this detachable portion molded by the quality of his spirit as he felt himself to be — emerged visibly to cause it.

Vaguely, in this way, O'Malley divined how inevitable was the apparent isolation of these two, and why others instinctively avoided them. They seemed by themselves in an enclosure where the parent lumberingly, and the boy defiantly, disported themselves with a kind of lonely majesty that forbade approach.

And it was later that same night, as the steamer approached the Lipari Islands, that the drive forward he had received from the doctor's words was increased by a succession of singular occurrences. At the same time, Stahl's deliberate and as he deemed it unjustifiable interference, helped him to make up his mind decisively on certain other points.

The first "occurrence" was of the same order as the "bigness" — extraordinarily difficult, that is, to confirm by actual measurement.

It was ten o'clock, Stahl still apparently in his cabin by himself, and most of the passengers below at an impromptu concert, when the Irishman, coming down from his long solitude, caught sight of the Russian and his boy moving about the dark after-deck with a speed and vigor that instantly arrested his attention. The suggestion of size, and of rapidity of movement, had never been more marked. It was as though a cloud of the summer darkness moved beside them.

Then, going cautiously nearer, he saw that they were neither walking quickly, nor running, as he had first supposed, but — to his amazement — were standing side by side upon the deck — stock still. The appearance of motion, however, was not entirely a delusion, for he next saw that, while standing there steady as the mast and life-boats behind them, something emanated shadow-like from both their persons and seemed to hover and play about them — something that was only approximately of their own outer shapes, and very considerably larger. Now it veiled them, now left them clear. He thought of smoke-clouds moving to and fro about dark statues.

So far as he could focus his sight upon them, these "shadows," without any light to cast them, moved in distorted guise there on the deck with a motion that was somehow rhythmical — a great movement as of dance or gambol.

As with the appearance of "bigness," he perceived it first out of the corner of his eye. When he looked again he saw only two dark figures, motionless.

He experienced the sensation a man sometimes knows on entering a deserted chamber in the nighttime, and is aware that the things in it have just that instant — stopped. His arrival puts abrupt end to some busy activity they were engaged in, which begins again the moment he goes. Chairs, tables, cupboards, the very spots and patterns of the wall have just flown back to their usual places whence they watch impatiently for his departure — with the candle.

This time, on a deck instead of in a room, O'Malley with his candle had surprised them in the act: people, moreover, not furniture. And this shadowy gambol, this silent Dance of the Emanations, immense yet graceful, made him think of Winds flying, visible and uncloaked, somewhere across long hills, or of Clouds passing to a stately, elemental measure over the blue dancing-halls of an open sky. His imagery was confused and gigantic, yet very splendid. Again he recalled the pictured shapes seen with his mind's eye through the Captain's glasses. And as he watched, he felt in himself what he called "the wild, tearing instinct to run and join them," more even — that by rights he ought to have been there from the beginning — dancing with them — indulging a natural and instinctive and rhythmical movement that he had somehow forgotten.

The passion in him was very strong, very urgent, it seems, for he took a step forward, a call of some kind rose in his throat, and in another second he would have been similarly cavorting upon the deck, when he felt his arm clutched suddenly with vigor from behind. Some one seized him and held him back. A German voice spoke with a guttural whisper in his ear.

Dr. Stahl, crouching and visibly excited, drew him forward a little. “Hold up!” he heard whispered — for their India rubber soles slithered on the wet decks. “We shall see from here, eh? See something at last?” He still whispered. O’Malley’s sudden anger died down. He could not give vent to it without making noise, for one thing, and above all else he wished to — see. He merely felt a vague wonder how long Stahl had been watching.

They crouched behind the lee of a boat. The outline of the ship rose, distinctly visible against the starry sky, masts, spars, and cordage. A faint gleam came through the glass below the compass-box. The wheel and the heaps of coiled rope beyond rose and fell with the motion of the vessel, now against the stars, now black against the phosphorescent foam that trailed along the sea like shining lace. But the human figures, he next saw, were now doing nothing, not even pacing the deck; they were no longer of unusual size either. Quietly leaning over the rail, father and son side by side, they were guiltless of anything more uncommon than gazing into the sea. Like the furniture, they had just — stopped!

Dr. Stahl and his companion waited motionless for several minutes in silence. There was no sound but the dull thunder of the screws, and a faint windy whistle the ship’s speed made in the rigging. The passengers were all below. Then, suddenly, a burst of music came up as some one opened a saloon port-hole and as quickly closed it again — a tenor voice singing to the piano some trivial modern song with a trashy sentimental lilt. It was — in this setting of sea and sky — painful; O’Malley caught himself thinking of a barrel-organ in a Greek temple.

The same instant father and son, as though startled, moved slowly away down the deck into the further darkness, and Dr. Stahl tightened his grip of the Irishman’s arm with a force that almost made him cry out. A gleam of light from the opened port-hole had fallen about them before they moved.

Quite clearly it revealed them bending busily over, heads close together, necks and shoulders thrust forward and down a little.

“Look, by God!” whispered Stahl hoarsely as they moved off. “There’s a third!”

He pointed. Where the two had been standing something, indeed, still remained. Concealed hitherto by their bulk, this other figure had been left. They saw its large, dim outline. It moved. Apparently it began to climb over the rails, or to move in some way just outside them, hanging half above the sea. There was a free, swaying movement about it, not ungainly so much as big — very big.

“Now, quick!” whispered the doctor excited, in English; “this time I find out, sure!”

He made a violent movement forward, a pocket electric lamp in his hand, then turned angrily, furiously, to find that O’Malley held him fast. There was a most unseemly struggle — for a minute, and it was caused by the younger man’s sudden passionate instinct to protect his own from discovery, if not from actual capture and destruction.

Stahl fought in vain, being easily overmatched; he swore vehement German oaths under his breath; and the pocket-lamp, of course unlighted, fell and rattled over the deck, sliding with the gentle roll of the steamer to leeward. But O’Malley’s eyes, even while he struggled, never for one instant left the spot where the figure and the “movement” had been; and it seemed to him that when the bulwarks dipped against the dark of the sea, the moving thing completed its efforts and passed into the waves with a swift leap. When the vessel righted herself again the outline of the rail was clear.

Dr. Stahl, he then saw, had picked up the lamp and was bending over some mark upon the deck, examining a wide splash of wet upon which he directed the electric flash. The sense of revived antagonism between the men for the moment was strong, too strong for speech. O’Malley feeling half ashamed, yet realized that his action had been instinctive, and that another time he would do just the same. He would fight to the death any too close inspection, since such inspection included also now — himself.

The doctor presently looked up. His eyes shone keenly in the gleam of the lamp, but he was no longer agitated.

“There is too much water,” he said calmly, as though diagnosing a case; “too much to permit of definite traces.” He glanced round, flashing the beam about the decks. The other two had disappeared. They were alone. “It was outside the rail all the time, you see,” he added, “and never quite reached the decks.” He stooped down and examined the splash once more. It looked as though a wave had topped the scuppers and left a running line of foam and water. “Nothing to indicate its exact nature,” he said in a whisper that conveyed something between uneasiness and awe, again turning the light sharply in every direction and peering about him. “It came to them — er — from the sea, though; it came from the sea right enough. That, at least, is positive.” And in his manner was perhaps just a touch to indicate relief.

“And it returned into the sea,” exclaimed O’Malley triumphantly. It was as though he related his own escape.

The two men were now standing upright, facing one another. Dr. Stahl, betraying no sign of resentment, looked him steadily in the eye. He put the lamp back into his pocket. When he spoke at length in the darkness, the words were not precisely what the Irishman had expected. Under them his own vexation and excitement faded instantly. He felt almost sheepish when he remembered his violence.

“I forgive your behavior, of course,” Stahl said, “for it is consistent — splendidly consistent — with my theory of you; and of value, therefore. I only now urge you again” — he moved closer, speaking almost solemnly— “to accept the offer of a berth in my cabin. Take it, my friend, take it — tonight.”

“Because you wish to watch me at close quarters.”

“No,” was the reply, and there was sympathy in the voice, “but because you are in danger — especially in sleep.”

There was a moment’s pause before O’Malley said anything.

“It is kind of you, Dr. Stahl, very kind,” he answered slowly, and this time with grave politeness; “but I am not afraid, and I see no reason to make the change. And as it’s now late,” he added somewhat abruptly, almost as though he feared he might be persuaded to alter his mind, “I will say good-night and turn in — if you will forgive me — at once.”

Dr. Stahl said no further word. He watched him, the other was aware, as he moved down the deck toward the saloon staircase, and then turned once more with his lamp to stoop over the splashed portion of the boards. He examined the place apparently for a long time.

But O’Malley, as he went slowly down the hot and stuffy stairs, realized with a wild and rushing tumult of joy that the “third” he had seen was of a splendor surpassing the little figures of men, and that something deep within his own soul was most gloriously akin with it. A link with the Universe had been subconsciously established, tightened up, adjusted. From all this living Nature breathing about him in the night, a message had reached the strangers and himself — a message shaped in beauty and in power. Nature had become at last aware of his presence close against her ancient face. Henceforth would every sight of Beauty take him direct to the place where Beauty comes from. No middleman, no Art was necessary. The gates were opening. Already he had caught a glimpse.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE STATEROOM he found, without surprise somehow, that his new companions had already retired for the night. The curtain of the upper berth was drawn, and on the sofa-bed below the opened port-hole the boy already slept. Standing a moment in the little room with these two close, he felt that he had come into a new existence almost. Deep within him this sense of new life thrilled and glowed. He was shaking a little all over, not with the mere tremor of excitement, however, but with the tide of a vast and rising exultation he could scarce contain. For his normal self was too small to hold it. It demanded expansion, and the expansion it claimed had already begun. The boundaries of his personality were enormously extending.

In words this change escaped him wholly. He only knew that something in him of an old unrest lay down at length and slept. Less acute grew those pangs of starvation his life had ever felt — the ache of that inappeasable hunger for the beauty and innocence of some primal state before thick human crowds had stained the world with all their strife and clamor. The glory of it burned white within him.

And the way he described it to himself was significant of its true nature. For it vans the analogy of childhood. The passion of a boy's longing swept over him. He knew again the feelings of those early days when —

A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts,

— when all the world smells sweet and golden as a summer's day, and a village street is endless as the sky….

This it was, raised to its highest power, that dropped a hint of explanation into that queer heart of his wherein had ever burned the strange desire for primitive existence. It was the Call, though, not of his own youth alone, but of the youth of the world. A mood of the Earth's consciousness — some giant expression of her cosmic emotion — caught him. And it was the big Russian who acted as channel and interpreter.

Before getting into bed, he drew aside the little red curtain that screened his companion, and peered cautiously through the narrow slit. The big occupant of the bunk also slept, his mane-like hair spread about him over the pillow, and on his great, placid face a look of peace that seemed to deepen with every day the steamer neared her destination. O'Malley gazed for a full minute and more. Then the sleeper felt the gaze, for suddenly the eyelids quivered, moved, and lifted. The large brown eyes peered straight into his own. The Irishman, unable to turn away in time, stood fixed and staring in return. The gentleness and power of the look passed straight down into his heart, filled him to the brim with things their owner knew, and confirmed that appeasement of his own hunger, already begun.

"I tried — to prevent the — interference," he stammered in a low voice. "I held him back. You saw me?"

A huge hand stretched forth from the bunk to stop him. Impulsively he seized it with both his own. At the first contact he started — a little frightened. It felt so wonderful, so mighty. Thus might a gust of wind or a billow of the sea have thrust against him.

"A messenger — came," said the man with that laborious slow utterance, and deep as thunder, "from — the — sea."

"From — the — sea, yes," repeated O'Malley beneath his breath, yet conscious rather that he wanted to shout and sing it. He saw the big man smile. His own small hands were crushed in the grasp of power. "I — understand," he added in a whisper. He found himself speaking with a similar clogged utterance. Somehow, it seemed, the language they ought to have used was either forgotten or unborn. Yet whereas his friend was inarticulate perhaps, he himself was — dumb. These little modern words were all wrong and inadequate. Modern speech could only deal with modern smaller things.

The giant half rose in his bed, as though at first to leap forward and away from it. He tightened an instant the grasp upon his companion's hands, then suddenly released them and pointed across the cabin. That smile of happiness spread upon his face. O'Malley turned. There the boy lay, deeply slumbering, the clothes flung back so that the air from the port-hole played over the bare neck and chest; upon his face, too, shone the look of peace and rest his father wore, the hunted expression all gone, as though the spirit had escaped in sleep. The parent pointed, first to the boy, then to himself, then to this new friend standing beside his bed. The gesture including the three of them was of singular authority — invitation, welcome, and command lay in it. More — in some incomprehensible way it was majestic. O'Malley's thought flashed upon him the limb of some great oak tree, swaying in the wind.

Next, placing a finger on his lips, his eyes once more swept O'Malley and the boy, and he turned again into the little bunk that so difficultly held him, and lay back. The hair flowed down and mingled with the beard, over pillow and neck, almost to the shoulders. And something that was enormous and magnificent lay back with him, carrying with it again that sudden atmosphere of greater bulk. With a deep sound in his throat that was certainly no actual word and yet more expressive than any speech, he turned hugely over among the little, scanty sheets, drew the curtain again before his face, and returned into the world of — sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

"IT MAY HAPPEN that the earthly body falls asleep in one direction deeply enough to allow it in others to awaken far beyond its usual limits, and yet not so deeply and completely as to awaken no more. Or, to the subjective vision there comes a flash so unusually vivid as to bring to the earthly sense an impression rising above the threshold from an otherwise inaccessible distance. Here begin the wonders of clairvoyance, of presentiments, and premonitions in dreams; — pure fables, if the future body and the future life are fables; otherwise signs of the one and predictions of the other; but what has signs exists, and what has prophecies will come." — FECHNER, *Buchlein vom Leben nach dem Tode*

But O'Malley rolled into his own berth below without undressing, sleep far from his eyes. He had heard the Gates of ivory and horn swing softly upon their opening hinges, and the glimpse he caught of the garden beyond made any question of slumber impossible. Again he saw those shapes of cloud and wind flying over the long hills, while the name that should describe them ran, hauntingly splendid, along the mysterious passages of his being, though never coming quite to the surface for capture.

Perhaps, too, he was glad that the revelation was only partial. The size of the vision thus invoked awed him a little, so that he lay there half wondering at the complete surrender he had made to this guidance of another soul.

Stahl's warnings ran far away and laughed. The idea even came to him that Stahl was playing with him: that his portentous words had been carefully chosen for their heightening effect upon his own imagination so that the doctor might study an uncommon and extreme "case." The notion passed through him merely, without lingering.

In any event it was idle to put the brakes on now. He was internally committed and must go wherever it might lead. And the thought rejoiced him. He had climbed upon a pendulum that swung into an immense past; but its return swing would bring him safely back. It was rushing now into that nameless place of freedom that the primitive portion of his being had hitherto sought in vain, and a fundamental, starved craving of his life would know satisfaction at last. Already life had grown all glorious without. It was not steel engines but a speeding sense of beauty that drove the ship over the sea with feet of winged blue darkness. The stars fled with them across the sky, dropping golden leashes to draw him faster and faster forwards — yet within — to the dim days when this old world yet was young. He took his fire of youth and spread it, as it were, all over life till it covered the entire world, far, far away. Then he stepped back into it, and the world herself, he found, stepped with him.

He lay listening to the noises of the ship, the thump and bumble of the engines, the distant droning of the screws under water. From time to time stewards moved down the corridor outside, and the footsteps of some late passenger still paced the decks overhead. He heard voices, too, and occasionally the clattering of doors. Once or twice he fancied some one moved stealthily to the cabin door and lingered there, but the matter never drew him to investigate, for the sound each time resolved itself naturally into the music of the ship's noises.

And everything, meanwhile, heard or thought, fed the central concern upon which his mind was busy. These superficial sounds, for instance, had nothing to do with the real business of the ship; *that* lay below with the buried engines and the invisible screws that worked like demons to bring her into port. And with himself and his slumbering companions the case was similar. Their respective power-stations, working in the subconscious, had urged them toward one another inevitably. How long, he wondered, had the spirit of that lonely, alien "being" flashed messages into the void that reached no receiving-station tuned to their acceptance? Their accumulated power was great, the currents they generated immense. He knew. For had they not charged full into himself the instant he came on board, bringing an intimacy that was immediate and full-fledged?

The untamed longings that always tore him when he felt the great winds, moved through forests, or found himself in desolate places, were at last on the high road to satisfaction — to some "state" where all that they represented would be explained and fulfilled. And whether such "state" should prove to be upon the solid surface of the earth, objective; or in the fluid regions of his inner being, subjective — was of no account whatever. It would be true. The great figure that filled the berth above him, now deeply slumbering, had in him subterraneans that gave access not only to Greece, but far beyond that haunted land, to a state of existence symbolized in the legends of the early world by Eden and the Golden Age….

“You are in danger,” that wise old speculative doctor had whispered, “and especially in sleep!” But he did not sleep. He lay there thinking, thinking, thinking, a rising exaltation of desire paving busily the path along which eventually he might escape.

As the night advanced and the lesser noises retired, leaving only the deep sound of the steamer talking to the sea, he became aware, too, that a change, at first imperceptibly, then swiftly, was stealing over the cabin. It came with a riot of silent Beauty. At a loss to describe it with precision, he nevertheless divined that it proceeded from the sleeping figure overhead and in a lesser pleasure, too, from the boy upon the sofa opposite. It emanated from these two, he felt, in proportion as their bodies passed into deeper and deeper slumber, as though what occurred sometimes upon the decks by an act of direct volition, took place now automatically and with a fuller measure of release. Their spirits, free of that other world in sleep, were alert and potently discharging. Unconsciously, their vital, underlying essence escaped into activity.

Growing about his own person, next, it softly folded him in, casing his inner being with glory and this crowding sense of beauty. This increased manifestation of psychic activity reached down into the very core of himself, like invisible fingers playing upon an instrument. Notes — powers — in his soul, hitherto silent because none had known how to sound them, rose singing to the surface. For it seemed at length that forms of some intenser life, busily operating, moved to and fro within the painted white walls of that little cabin, working subtly to bring about a transformation of himself. A singular change was fast and cleverly at work in his own being. It was, he puts it, a silent and irresistible Evocation.

No one of his senses was directly affected; certainly he neither saw, felt, nor heard anything in the usual acceptance of the terms; but any instant surely, it seemed that all his senses must awake and report to the mind things that were splendid beyond the common order. In the crudest aspect of it, he felt as though he extended and grew large — that he dreaded to see himself in the mirror lest he might witness an external appearance of bigness which corresponded to this interior expansion.

For a long time he lay unresisting, letting the currents of this subjective tempest play through and round him. Entrancing sensations of beauty and rapture came with it. The outer world seemed remote and trivial, the passengers unreal — the priest, the voluble merchant, the jovial Captain, all spun like dead things at the periphery of life; whereas he was moving toward the Center. Stahl — ! the thought of Dr. Stahl, alone intruded with a certain unwelcome air of hindrance, almost as though he sought to end it, or call a halt. But Stahl, too, himself presently spun off like a leaf before the rising wind…

And then it was that an external sense was tapped, and he did hear something. From the berth overhead came a faint sound that made his heart stand still, though not with common fear. He listened intently. The blood tearing through his ears at first concealed its actual nature. It was far, far away; then came closer, as a waft of wind brings near and carries off again a sound of bells in mountains. It fled over vales and hills, to return a moment after with suddenness — a little louder, a little nearer. And with it came an increase of this sense of beauty that stretched his heart, as it were, to some deep ancient scale of joy once known, but long forgotten…

Across the cabin, the boy moved uneasily in his sleep.

“Oh, that I could be with him where he now is!” he cried, “in that place of eternal youth and eternal companionship!” The cry was instinctive utterly; his whole being, condensed in the single yearning, pressed through it — drove behind it. The place, the companionship, the youth — all, he knew, would prove in some strange way enormous, vast, ultimately satisfying forever and ever, far out of this little modern world that imprisoned him…

Again, most unwelcome and unexplained, the face of Stahl flashed suddenly before him to hinder and interrupt. He banished it with an effort, for it brought a smaller comprehension that somehow involved — fear.

“Curse the man!” flamed in anger across his world of beauty, and the violence of the contrast broke something in his mind like a globe of colored glass that had focused the exquisiteness of the vision…. The sound continued as before, but its power of evocation lessened. The thought of Stahl — Stahl in his denying aspect — dimmed it.

Glancing up at the frosted electric light, O’Malley felt vaguely that if he turned it out he would somehow yet see better, hear better, understand more; and it was this practical consideration, introduced indirectly by the thought of Stahl, that made him realize now for the first time that he actually and definitely was — afraid. For, to leave his bunk with its comparative, protective dark, and step into the middle of a cabin he knew to be alive with a seethe of invisible charging forces, made him realize that distinct effort was necessary — effort of will. If he yielded he would be caught up and away, swept from his known moorings, borne through high space out of himself. And Stahl with his cowardly warnings and belittlements set fear, thus, in the place of free acceptance. Otherwise he might even have come to these long blue hills where danced and raced the giant shapes of cloud, singing while….

“Singing!” Ah! There was the clue! The sound he heard was singing — faint, low singing; close beside him too. It was the big man, singing softly in his sleep.

This ordinary explanation of the “wonder-sound” brought him down to earth, and so to a more normal feeling of security again. He stepped cautiously from the bed, careful not to let the rings rattle on the rod of brass, and slowly raised himself upright. And then, through a slit of the curtain, he — saw. The lips of the big sleeper moved gently, the beard rising and falling very slightly with them, and this murmur that he had thought so far away, came out and sang deliriously and faint before his very face. It most curiously — flowed. Easily, naturally, almost automatically, it poured softly forth, and the Irishman at once understood why he had first mistaken it for an echo of wind from distant hills. The imagery was entirely accurate. For it was precisely the singing cry that wind makes in a keyhole, in a chimney, or passing idly over the sweep of grassy hills. Exactly thus had he often listened to it swishing through the crannies of high rocks, tuneless yet searching. In it, too, there lay some accent of a secret, dim sublimity, deeper far than any other human sound could touch. The terror of a great freedom caught him, a freedom most awfully remote from the smaller personal existence he knew Today … for it suggested, with awe and wonder, the kind of primitive utterance that was before speech or the development of language; when emotions were still too vague and mighty to be caught by little words, but when beings, close to the heart of their great Mother, expressed the feelings, enormous and uncomplex, of the greater life they shared as portions of her — projections of the Earth herself.

With a crash in his brain, O'Malley stopped. These thoughts, he suddenly realized, were not his own. An attack of unwonted sensations stung and scattered his mind with a rush of giant splendor that threatened to overwhelm him. He was in the very act of being carried away; his sense of personal identity menaced; surrender well-nigh already complete.

Another moment, especially if those eyes opened and caught him, and he would be beyond recall in the region of these other two. The narrow space of that little cabin was charged already to the brim, filled with some overpowering loveliness of wild and simple things, the beauty of stars and winds and flowers, the terror of seas and mountains; strange radiant forms of gods and heroes, nymphs, fauns and satyrs; the fierce sunshine of some Golden Age unspoiled, of a stainless region now long forgotten and denied — that world of splendor his heart had ever craved in vain, and beside which the life of Today faded to a wretched dream.

It was the *Urwelt* calling….

With a violent internal effort, he tore his gaze from those eyelids that fortunately opened not. At the same moment, though he did not hear them, steps came close in the corridor, and there was a rattling of the knob. Behind him, a movement from the berth below the port-hole warned him that he was but just in time. The Vision he was afraid as yet to acknowledge drew with such awful speed toward the climax.

Quickly he turned away, lifted the hook of the cabin door, and passed into the passage, strangely faint. A great commotion followed him out: father and son both, it seemed, suddenly upon their feet. And at the same time the sound of "singing" rolled into the body of a great hushed chorus, as it were of galloping winds that filled big valleys far away with a gust of splendor, faintly roaring in some incredible distance where no cities were, nor habitations of men; with a freedom, too, that was majestic and sublime. Oh! the terrific gait of that life in an open world! — Golden to the winds! — uncrowded! — The cosmic life — !

O’Malley shivered as he heard. For an instant, the true grain of his inner life, picked out in flame and silver, flashed clear. Almost — he knew himself caught back.

And there, in the dimly-lighted corridor, against the paneling of the cabin wall, crouched Dr. Stahl — listening. The pain of the contrast was vivid beyond words. It seemed as if he had passed from the thunder of organs to hear the rattling of tin cans. Instantly he understood the force that all along had held him back: the positive, denying aspect of this man’s mind — afraid.

“*You!*” he exclaimed in a high whisper. “What are *you* doing here?” He hardly remembers what he said. The doctor straightened up and came on tiptoe to his side. He moved hurriedly.

“Come away,” he said vehemently under his breath. “Come with me to my cabin — to the decks — anywhere away from this — before it’s too late.”

And the Irishman then realized that his face was white and that his voice shook. The hand that gripped him by the arm shook too.

They went quickly along the deserted corridor and up the stairs, O’Malley making no resistance, moving in a kind of dream. He has a fleeting recollection of an odor, sweet and slightly pungent as of horses, in his nostrils. The wind of the open decks revived him, and he saw to his amazement that the East was brightening. In that cabin, then, hours had been compressed into minutes.

The steamer had already slipped by the Straits of Messina. To the right he saw the cones of Etna, shadowy in the sky, calling across the dawn to Stromboli their smoking brother of the Lipari. To the left over the blue Ionian Sea the lights of a cloudless sunrise rose softly above the world.

And the hour of enchantment seized and shook him anew. Somewhere, across those faint blue waves, lay the things that he so passionately sought. It was the very essence of their loveliness and wonder that had charged down between the walls of that stuffy cabin below. For every morning still, at dawn, the tired world knows again the splendors of her youth; and the Irishman, shuddering a little in his sacred joy, felt that he must burst his bonds and fly to join the sunrise and the sea. The yearning, he was aware, had now increased a thousandfold: its fulfillment was merely delayed.

He passed along the decks all slippery with dew into Dr. Stahl’s cabin, and flung himself on the broad sofa to sleep. Sleep, too, came at once; he was profoundly exhausted; and, while he slept, Stahl watched over him, covering his body with a thick blanket.

CHAPTER XIV

"IT IS A lovely imagination responding to the deepest desires, instincts, cravings of spiritual man, that spiritual rapture should find an echo in the material world; that in mental communion with God we should find sensible communion with nature; and that, when the faithful rejoice together, bird and beast, hill and forest, should be not felt only, but seen to rejoice along with them. It is not the truth; between us and our environment, whatever links there are, this link is wanting. But the yearning for it, the passion which made Wordsworth cry out for something, even were it the imagination of a pagan which would make him 'less forlorn,' is natural to man; and simplicity leaps at the lovely fiction of a response. Just here is the opportunity for such alliances between spiritualism and superstition as are the daily despair of seekers after truth." — Dr. VERRALL

And though he slept for hours the doctor never once left his side, but sat there with pencil and notebook, striving to catch, yet in vain, some accurate record of the strange fragmentary words that fell from his lips at intervals. His own face was aflame with an interest that amounted to excitement. The very hand that held the pencil trembled. One would have said that thus somewhat a man might behave who found himself faced with confirmation of some vast, speculative theory his mind had played with hitherto from a distance only.

Toward noon the Irishman awoke. The steamer, still loading oranges and sacks of sulfur in the Catania harbor, was dusty and noisy. Most of the passengers were ashore, hurrying with guidebooks and field-glasses to see the statue of the dead Bellini or watch the lava flow. A blazing, suffocating heat lay over the oily sea, and the summit of the volcano, with its tiny, ever-changing puff of smoke, soared through blue haze.

To Stahl's remark, "You've slept eight hours," he replied, "But I feel as though I'd slept eight centuries away." He took the coffee and rolls provided, and then smoked. The doctor lit a cigar. The red curtains over the port-holes shut out the fierce sun, leaving the cabin cool and dim. The shouting of the lightermen and officers mingled with the roar and scuttle of the donkey-engine. And O'Malley knew perfectly well that while the other moved about carelessly, playing with books and papers on his desk, he was all the time keeping him under close observation.

"Yes," he continued, half to himself, "I feel as if I'd fallen asleep in one world and awakened into another where life is trivial and insignificant, where men work like devils for things of no value in order to accumulate them in great ugly houses; always collecting and collecting, like mad children, possessions that they never really possess — things external to themselves, valueless and unreal—"

Dr. Stahl came up quietly and sat down beside him. He spoke gently, his manner kind and grave rather. He put a hand upon his shoulder.

"But, my dear boy," he said, the critical mood all melted away, "do not let yourself go too completely. That is vicious thinking, believe me. All details are important — here and now — spiritually important, if you prefer the term. The symbols change with the ages, that is all." Then, as the other did not reply, he added: "Keep yourself well in hand. Your experience is of extraordinary interest — may even be of value, to yourself as well as to — er — others. And what happened to you last night is worthy of record — if you can use it without surrendering your soul to it altogether. Perhaps, later, you will feel able to speak of it — to tell me in detail a little — ?"

His keen desire to know more evidently fought with his desire to protect, to heal, possibly even to prevent.

"If I felt sure that your control were sufficient, I could tell you in return some results of my own study of — certain cases in the hospitals, you see, that might throw light upon — upon your own curious experience."

O'Malley turned with such abruptness that the cigar ash fell down over his clothes. The bait was strong, but the man's sympathy was not sufficiently of a piece, he felt, to win his entire confidence.

"I cannot discuss beliefs," he said shortly, "in the speculative way you do. They are too real. A man doesn't argue about his love, does he?" He spoke passionately. "Today everybody argues, discusses, speculates: no one believes. If you had your way, you'd take away my beliefs and put in their place some wretched little formula of science that the next generation will prove all wrong again. It's like the N rays one of you discovered: they never really existed at all." He laughed. Then his flushed face turned grave again. "Beliefs are deeper than discoveries. They are eternal."

Stahl looked at him a moment with admiration. He moved across the cabin toward his desk.

"I am more with you than perhaps you understand," he said quietly, yet without too obviously humoring him. "I am more — divided, that's all."

"Modern!" exclaimed the other, noticing the ashes on his coat for the first time and brushing them off impatiently. "Everything in you expresses itself in terms of matter, forgetting that matter being in continual state of flux is the least real of all things—"

"Our training has been different," observed Stahl simply, interrupting him. "I use another phraseology. Fundamentally, we are not so far apart as you think. Our conversation of yesterday proves it, if you have not forgotten. It is people like yourself who supply the material that teaches people like me — helps me to advance — to speculate, though you dislike the term."

The Irishman was mollified, though for some time he continued in the same strain. And the doctor let him talk, realizing that his emotion needed the relief of this safety-valve. He used words loosely, but Stahl did not check him; it was merely that the effort to express himself — this self that could believe so much — found difficulty in doing so coherently in modern language. He went very far. For the fact that while Stahl criticized and denied, he yet understood, was a strong incentive to talk. O'Malley plunged repeatedly over his depth, and each time the doctor helped him in to shore.

"Perhaps," said Stahl at length in a pause, "the greatest difference between us is merely that whereas you jump headlong, ignoring details by the way, I climb slowly, counting the steps and making them secure. I deny at first because if the steps survive such denial, I know that they are permanent. I build scaffolding. You fly."

"Flight is quicker," put in the Irishman.

"It is for the few," was the reply; "scaffolding is for all."

“You spoke a few days ago of strange things,” O’Malley said presently with abruptness, “and spoke seriously too. Tell me more about that, if you will.” He sought to lead the talk away from himself, since he did not intend to be fully drawn. “You said something about the theory that the Earth is alive, a living being, and that the early legendary forms of life may have been emanations — projections of herself — detached portions of her consciousness — or something of the sort. Tell me about that theory. Can there be really men who are thus children of the earth, fruit of pure passion — Cosmic Beings as you hinted? It interests me deeply.”

Dr. Stahl appeared to hesitate.

“It is not new to me, of course,” pursued the other, “but I should like to know more.”

Stahl still seemed irresolute. “It is true,” he replied at length slowly, “that in an unguarded moment I let drop certain observations. It is better you should consider them unsaid perhaps: forget them.”

“And why, pray?”

The answer was well calculated to whet his appetite.

“Because,” answered the doctor, bending over to him as he crossed over to his side, “they are dangerous thoughts to play with, dangerous to the interests of humanity in its present state today, unsettling to the soul, shaking the foundations of sane consciousness.” He looked hard at him. “Your own mind,” he added softly, “appears to me to be already on their track. Whether you are aware of it or not, you have in you that kind of very passionate desire — of yearning — which might reconstruct them and make them come true — for yourself — if you get out.”

O’Malley, his eyes shining, looked up into his face.

“‘Reconstruct — make them come true — if I get out’!” he repeated stammeringly, fearful that if he appeared too eager the other would stop. “You mean, of course, that this Double in me would escape and build its own heaven?”

Stahl nodded darkly. “Driven forth by your intense desire.” After a pause he added, “The process already begun in you would complete itself.”

Ah! So obviously what the doctor wanted was a description of his sensations in that haunted cabin.

“Temporarily?” asked the Irishman under his breath.

The other did not answer for a moment. O’Malley repeated the question.

“Temporarily,” said Stahl, turning away again toward his desk, “unless — the yearning were too strong.”

“In which case — ?”

“Permanently. For it would draw the entire personality with it….”

“The soul?”

Stahl was bending over his books and papers. The answer was barely audible.

“Death,” was the whispered word that floated across the heavy air of that little sun-baked cabin.

The word if spoken at all was so softly spoken that the Irishman scarcely knew whether he actually heard it, or whether it was uttered by his own thought. He only realized — catching some vivid current from the other man’s mind — that this separation of a vital portion of himself that Stahl hinted at might involve a kind of nameless inner catastrophe which should mean the loss of his personality as it existed today — an idea, however, that held no terror for him if it meant at the same time the recovery of what he so passionately sought.

And another intuition flashed upon its heels — namely, that this extraordinary doctor spoke of something he knew as a certainty; that his amazing belief, though paraded as theory, was to him more than theory. Had he himself undergone some experience that he dared not speak of, and were his words based upon a personal experience instead of, as he pretended, merely upon the observation of others? Was this a result of his study of the big man two years ago? Was this the true explanation of his being no longer an assistant at the H — hospital, but only a ship’s doctor? Had this “modern” man, after all, a flaming volcano of ancient and splendid belief in him, akin to what was in himself, yet ever fighting it?

Thoughts raced and thundered through his mind as he watched him across the cigar smoke. The rattling of that donkey-engine, the shouts of the lightermen, the thuds of the sulfur-sacks — how ridiculous they all sounded, the clatter of a futile, meaningless existence where men gathered — rubbish, for mere bodies that lived amid dust a few years, then returned to dust forever.

He sprang from his sofa and crossed over to the doctor's side. Stahl was still bending over a littered desk.

"You, too," he cried, and though trying to say it loud, his voice could only whisper, "you, too, must have the *Urmensch* in your heart and blood, for how else, by my soul, could you *know* it all? Tell me, doctor, tell me!" And he was on the very verge of adding, "Join us! Come and join us!" when the little German turned his bald head slowly round and fixed upon the excited Irishman such a cool and quenching stare that instantly he felt himself convicted of foolishness, almost of impertinence.

He dropped backwards into an armchair, and the doctor at the same moment let himself down upon the revolving stool that was nailed to the floor in front of the desk. His hands smoothed out papers. Then he leaned forward, still holding his companion's eyes with that steady stare which forbade familiarity.

"My friend," he said quietly in German, "you asked me just now to tell you of the theory — Fechner's theory — that the Earth is a living, conscious Being. If you care to listen, I will do so. We have time." He glanced round at the shady cabin, took down a book from the shelf before him, puffed his black cigar and began to read.

"It is from one of your own people — William James; what you call a 'Hibbert Lecture' at Manchester College. It gives you an idea, at least, of what Fechner saw. It is better than my own words."

So Stahl, in his turn, refused to be "drawn." O'Malley, as soon as he recovered from the abruptness of the change from that other conversation, gave all his attention. The uneasy feeling that he was being played with, coaxed as a specimen to the best possible point for the microscope, passed away as the splendor of the vast and beautiful conception dawned upon him, and shaped those nameless yearnings of his life in glowing language.

CHAPTER XV

THE SHADOWS OF the September afternoon were lengthening toward us from the Round Pond by the time O'Malley reached this stage of his curious and fascinating story. It was chilly under the trees, and the "wupsey-up, wupsey-down" babies, as he termed them, had long since gone in to their teas, or whatever it is that London babies take at six o'clock.

We strolled home together, and he welcomed the idea of sharing a dinner we should cook ourselves in the tiny Knightsbridge flat. "Stewpot evenings," he called these occasions. They reminded us of camping trips together, although it must be confessed that in the cage-like room the "stew" never tasted quite as it did beside running water on the skirts of the forest when the dews were gathering on the little gleaming tent, and the wood-smoke mingled with the scents of earth and leaves.

Passing that grotesque erection opposite the Albert Hall, gaudy in the last touch of sunset, I saw him shudder. The spell of the ship and sea and the blazing Sicilian sunshine lay still upon us, Etna's cones towering beyond those gilded spikes of the tawdry Memorial. I stole a glance at my companion. His light blue eyes shone, but with the reflection of another sunset — the sunset of forgotten, ancient, far-off scenes when the world was young.

His personality held something of magic in that silent stroll homewards, for no word fell from either one of us to break its charm. The untidy hair escaped from beneath the broad-brimmed old hat, and his faded coat of grey flannel seemed touched with the shadows that the dusk brings beneath wild-olive trees. I noticed the set of his ears, and how the upper points of them ran so sharply into the hair. His walk was springy, light, very quiet, suggesting that he moved on open turf where a sudden running jump would land him, not into a motor-bus, but into a mossy covert where ferns grew. There was a certain fling of the shoulders that had an air of rejecting streets and houses. Some fancy, wild and sweet, caught me of a faun passing down through underbrush of woodland glades to drink at a forest pool; and, chance giving back to me a little verse of Alice Corbin's, I turned and murmured it while watching him:

What dim Arcadian pastures
  Have I known,
That suddenly, out of nothing,
  A wind is blown,
Lifting a veil and a darkness,
  Showing a purple sea —
And under your hair, the faun's eyes
  Look out on me?

It was, of course, that whereas his body marched along Hill Street and through Montpelier Square, his thoughts and spirit flitted through the haunted, old-time garden he forever craved. I thought of the morrow — of my desk in the Life Insurance Office, of the clerks with oiled hair brushed back from the forehead, all exactly alike, trousers neatly turned up to show fancy colored socks from bargain sales, their pockets full of cheap cigarettes, their minds busy with painted actresses and the names of horses! A Life Insurance Office! All London paying yearly sums to protect themselves against — against the most interesting moment of life. Premiums upon escape and freedom!

Again, it was the spell of my companion's personality that turned all this paraphernalia of the busy, modern existence into the counters in some grotesque and rather sordid game. Tomorrow, of course, it would all turn real and earnest again, O'Malley's story a mere poetic fancy. But for the moment I lived it with him, and found it magnificent.

And the talk we had that evening when the stew-pot was empty and we were smoking on the narrow-ledged roof of the prison-house — for he always begged for open air, and with cushions we often sat beneath the stars and against the grimy chimney-pots — that talk I shall never forget. Life became constructed all anew. The power of the greatest fairy tale this world can ever know lay about me, raised to its highest expression. I caught at least some touch of reality — of awful reality — in the idea that this splendid globe whereon we perched like insects peeping timidly from tiny cells, might be the body of a glorious Being — the mighty frame to which some immense Collective Consciousness, vaster than that of men, and wholly different in kind, might be attached.

In the story, as I found it later in the dusty little Paddington room, O’Malley reported, somewhat heavily, it seemed to me, the excerpts chosen by Dr. Stahl. As an imaginative essay, they were interesting, of course, and vitally suggestive, but in a tale of adventure such as this they overweight the barque of fancy. Yet, in order to appreciate what followed, it seems necessary for the mind to steep itself in something of his ideas. The reader who dreads to think, and likes his imagination to soar unsupported, may perhaps dispense with the balance of this section; but to be faithful to the scaffolding whereon this Irishman built his amazing dream, I must attempt as best I can some précis of that conversation.

CHAPTER XVI

"EVERY FRAGMENT OF visible Nature might, as far as is known, serve as part in some organism unlike our bodies…. As to that which can, and that which cannot, play the part of an organism, we know very little. A sameness greater or less with our own bodies is the basis from which we conclude to other bodies and souls…. A certain likeness of outward form, and again some amount of similarity in action, are what we stand on when we argue to psychical life. But our failure, on the other side, to discover these symptoms is no sufficient warrant for positive denial. It is natural in this connection to refer to Fechner's vigorous advocacy." — F.H. BRADLEY, *Appearance and Reality*

It was with an innate resistance — at least a stubborn prejudice — that I heard him begin. The earth, of course, was but a bubble of dried fire, a huge round clod, dead as mutton. How could it be, in any permissible sense of the word — alive?

Then, gradually, as he talked there among the chimney-pots of old smoky London, there stole over me this new and disquieting sense of reality — a strange, vast splendor, too mighty to lie in the mind with comfort. Laughter fled away, ashamed. A new beauty, as of some amazing dawn, flashed and broke upon the world. The autumn sky overhead, thick-sown with its myriad stars, came down close, sifting gold and fire about my life's dull ways. That desk in the Insurance Office of Cornhill gleamed beyond as an altar or a possible throne.

The glory of Fechner's immense speculation flamed about us both, majestic yet divinely simple. Only a dim suggestion of it, of course, lay caught in the words the Irishman used — words, as I found later, that were a mixture of Professor James and Dr. Stahl, flavored strongly with Terence O'Malley — but a suggestion potent enough to have haunted me ever since and to have instilled meanings of stupendous divinity into all the commonest things of daily existence. Mountains, seas, wide landscapes, forests, — all I see now with emotions of wonder, delight, and awe unknown to me before. Flowers, rain, wind, even a London fog, have come to hold new meanings.

I never realized before that the mere *size* of our old planet could have hindered the perception of so fair a vision, or her mere quantitative bulk have killed automatically in the mind the possible idea of her being in some sense living. A microbe, endowed with our powers of consciousness, might similarly deny life to the body of the elephant on which it rode; or some wee arguing atom, endowed with mind and senses, persuade itself that the monster upon whose flesh it dwelt were similarly a "heavenly body" of dead, inert matter; the bulk of the "world" that carried them obstructing their perception of its Life.

And Fechner, as it seems, was no mere dreamer, playing with a huge poetical conception. Professor of Physics in Leipsic University, he found time amid voluminous labors in chemistry to study electrical science with the result that his measurements in galvanism are classic to this day. His philosophical work was more than considerable. "A book on the atomic theory, classic also; four elaborate mathematical and experimental volumes on what he called psychophysics (many persons consider Fechner to have practically founded scientific psychology in the first of these books); a volume on organic evolution, and two works on experimental æsthetics, in which again Fechner is thought by some judges to have laid the foundations of a new science," are among his other performances…. "All Leipsic mourned him when he died, for he was the pattern of the ideal German scholar, as daringly original in his thought as he was homely in his life, a modest, genial, laborious slave to truth and learning…. His mind was indeed one of those multitudinously organized crossroads of truth which are occupied only at rare intervals by children of men, and from which nothing is either too far or too near to be seen in due perspective. Patientest observation, exactest mathematics, shrewdest discrimination, humanest feeling, flourished in him on the largest scale, with no apparent detriment to one another. He was in fact a philosopher in the 'great' sense."

"Yes," said O'Malley softly in my ear as we leaned against the chimneys and watched the tobacco curl up to the stars, "and it was this man's imagination that had evidently caught old Stahl and bowled him over. I never fathomed the doctor quite. His critical and imaginative apparatus got a bit mixed up, I suspect, for one moment he cursed me for asking ‘suspicious questions,’ and the next sneered sarcastically at me for boiling over with a sudden inspirational fancy of my own. He never gave himself away completely, and left me to guess that he made that Hospital place too hot to hold him. He was a wonderful bird. But every time I aimed at him I shot wide and hit a cloud. Meantime he peppered me all over — one minute urging me into closer intimacy with my Russian — his cosmic being, his *Urmensch* type — so that he might study my destruction, and half an hour later doing his utmost apparently to protect me from him and keep me sane and balanced.” His laugh rang out over the roofs.

“The net result,” he added, his face tilted toward the stars as though he said it to the open sky rather than to me, “was that he pushed me forwards into the greatest adventure life has ever brought to me. I believe, I verily believe that sometimes, there were moments of unconsciousness — semi-consciousness perhaps — when I really did leave my body — caught away as Moses, or was it Job or Paul? — into a Third Heaven, where I touched a bit of Reality that fairly made me reel with happiness and wonder.”

“Well, but Fechner — and his great idea?” I brought him back.

He tossed his cigarette down into the back-garden that fringed the Park, leaning over to watch its zigzag flight of flame.

“Is simply this,” he replied, “— ‘that not alone the earth but the whole Universe in its different spans and wave-lengths, is everywhere alive and conscious.’ He regards the spiritual as the rule in Nature, not the exception. The professorial philosophers have no vision. Fechner towers above them as a man of vision. He dared to imagine. He made discoveries — whew!!” he whistled, “and such discoveries!”

“To which the scholars and professors of today,” I suggested, “would think reply not even called for?”

“Ah,” he laughed, “the solemn-faced Intellectuals with their narrow outlook, their atrophied vision, and their long words! Perhaps! But in Fechner’s universe there is room for every grade of spiritual being between man and God. The vaster orders of mind go with the vaster orders of body. He believes passionately in the Earth Soul, he treats her as our special guardian angel; we can pray to the Earth as men pray to their saints. The Earth has a Collective Consciousness. We rise upon the Earth as wavelets rise upon the ocean. We grow out of her soil as leaves grow from a tree. Sometimes we find our bigger life and realize that we are parts of her bigger collective consciousness, but as a rule we are aware only of our separateness, as individuals. These moments of cosmic consciousness are rare. They come with love, sometimes with pain, music may bring them too, but above all — landscape and the beauty of Nature! Men are too petty, conceited, egoistic to welcome them, clinging for dear life to their precious individualities.”

He drew breath and then went on: “‘Fechner likens our individual persons on the earth to so many sense-organs of her soul, adding to her perceptive life so long as our own life lasts. She absorbs our perceptions, just as they occur, into her larger sphere of knowledge. When one of us dies, it is as if an eye of the world were closed, for all perceptive contributions from that particular quarter cease.’”

“Go on,” I exclaimed, realizing that he was obviously quoting verbatim fragments from James that he had since pondered over till they had become his own, “Tell me more. It is delightful and very splendid.”

“Yes,” he said, “I’ll go on quick enough, provided you promise me one thing: and that is — to understand that Fechner does not regard the Earth as a sort of big human being. If a being at all, she is a being utterly different from us in kind, as of course we know she is in structure. Planetary beings, as a class, would be totally different from any other beings that we know. He merely protests at the presumption of our insignificant human knowledge in denying some kind of life and consciousness to a form so beautifully and marvelously organized as that of the earth! The heavenly bodies, he holds, are beings superior to men in the scale of life — a vaster order of intelligence altogether. A little two-legged man with his cocksure reason strutting on its tiny brain as the apex of attainment he ridicules. D’ye see, now?”

I gasped, I lit a big pipe — and listened. He went on. This time it was clearly a page from that Hibbert Lecture Stahl had mentioned — the one in which Professor James tries to give some idea of Fechner’s aim and scope, while admitting that he “inevitably does him miserable injustice by summarizing and abridging him.”

“Ages ago the earth was called an animal,” I ventured. “We all know that.”

"But Fechner," he replied, "insists that a planet is a higher class of being than either man or animal— 'a being whose enormous size requires an altogether different plan of life.'"

"An inhabitant of the ether — ?"

"You've hit it," he replied eagerly. "Every element has its own living denizens. Ether, then, also has hers — the globes. 'The ocean of ether, whose waves are light, has also her denizens — higher by as much as their element is higher, swimming without fins, flying without wings, moving, immense and tranquil, as by a half-spiritual force through the half-spiritual sea which they inhabit,' sensitive to the slightest pull of one another's attraction: beings in every way superior to us. Any imagination, you know," he added, "can play with the idea. It is old as the hills. But this chap showed how and why it could be actually true."

"This superiority, though?" I queried. "I should have guessed their stage of development lower than ours, rather than higher."

"Different," he answered, "different. That's the point."

"Ah!" I watched a shooting star dive across our thick, wet atmosphere, and caught myself wondering whether the flash and heat of that hurrying little visitor produced any reaction in this Collective Consciousness of the huge Body whereon we perched and chattered, and upon which later it would fall in finest dust.

"It is by insisting on the differences as well as on the resemblances," rushed on the excited O'Malley, "that he makes the picture of the earth's life so concrete. Think a moment. For instance, our animal organization comes from our inferiority. Our need of moving to and fro, of stretching our limbs and bending our bodies, shows only our defect."

"Defect!" I cried. "But we're so proud of it!"

'"What are our legs,'" he laughed, "'but crutches, by means of which, with restless efforts, we go hunting after the things we have not inside ourselves? The Earth is no such cripple; why should she who already possesses within herself the things we so painfully pursue, have limbs analogous to ours? What need has she of arms, with nothing to reach for? Of a neck with no head to carry? Of eyes or nose, when she finds her way through space without either, and has the millions of eyes of all her animals to guide their movements on her surface, and all their noses to smell the flowers she grows?'"

"We are literally a part of her, then — projections of her immense life, as it were — one of the projections, at least?"

"Exactly. And just as we are ourselves a part of the earth," he continued, taking up my thought at once, "so are our organs her organs. 'She is, as it were, eye and ear over her whole extent — all that we see and hear in separation she sees and hears at once.'" He stood up beside me and spread his hands out to the stars and over the trees and paths of the Park at our feet, where the throngs of men and women walked and talked together in the cool of the evening. His enthusiasm grew as the idea of this German's towering imagination possessed him.

"'She brings forth living beings of countless kinds upon her surface, and their multitudinous conscious relations with each other she takes up into her higher and more general conscious life.'"

He leaned over the parapet and drew me to his side. I stared with him at the reflection of London town in the sky, thinking of the glow and heat and restless stir of the great city and of the frantic strivings of its millions for success — money, power, fame, a few, here and there, for spiritual success. The roar of its huge trafficking beat across the night in ugly thunder to our ears. I thought of the other cities of the world; of its villages; of shepherds among the lonely hills; of its myriad wild creatures in forest, plain, and mountain…

"All this she takes up into her great heart as part of herself!" I murmured.

"All this," he replied softly, as the sound of the Band beyond the Serpentine floated over to us on our roof; " — the separate little consciousnesses of all the cities, all the tribes, all the nations of men, animals, flowers, insects — everything." He again opened his arms to the sky. He drew in deep breaths of the night air. The dew glistened on the slates behind us. Far across the towers of Westminster a yellow moon rose slowly, dimming the stars. Big Ben, deeply booming, trembled on the air nine of her stupendous vibrations. Automatically, I counted them — subconsciously.

"And all our subconscious sensations are also hers," he added, catching my thought again; "our dreams but half divined, our aspirations half confessed, our tears, our yearnings, and our — prayers."

At the moment it almost seemed to me as if our two minds joined, each knowing the currents of the other's thought, and both caught up, gathered ill, folded comfortably away into the stream of a Consciousness far bigger than either. It was like a momentary, specific proof of what he urged — a faint pulse-beat we heard of the soul of the earth; and it was amazingly uplifting.

"Every form of life, then, is of importance," I heard myself thinking, or saying, for I hardly knew which. "The tiniest efforts of value — even the unrecognized ones, and those that seem futile."

"Even the failures," he whispered, " — the moments when we do not trust her."

We stood for some moments in silence. Presently, with a hand upon my shoulder, he drew me down again among our rugs against the chimney-stack.

"And there are some of us," he said gently, yet with a voice that held the trembling of an immense joy, "who know a more intimate relationship with their great Mother than the rest, perhaps. By the so-called Love of Nature, or by some artless simplicity of soul, wholly unmodern of course, perhaps felt by children or poets mostly, they lie caught close to her own deep life, knowing the immense sweet guidance of her mighty soul, divinely mothered, strangers to all the strife for material gain — to that 'unrest which men miscall delight,' — primitive children of her potent youth … offspring of pure passion … each individual conscious of her weight and drive behind him—" His words faded away into a whisper that became unintelligible, then inaudible; but his thought somehow continued itself in my own mind.

"The simple life," I said in a low tone; "the Call of the Wild, raised to its highest power?"

But he changed my sentence a little.

"The call," he answered, without turning to look at me, speaking it into the night about us, "the call to childhood, the true, pure, vital childhood of the Earth — the Golden Age — before men tasted of the Tree and knew themselves separate; when the lion and the lamb lay down together and a little child could lead them. A time and state, that is, of which such phrases can be symbolical."

"And of which there may be here and there some fearful exquisite survival?" I suggested, remembering Stahl's words.

His eyes shone with the fire of his passion. "Of which on that little tourist steamer I found one!"

The wind that fanned our faces came perhaps across the arid wastes of Bayswater and the North-West. It also came from the mountains and gardens of this lost Arcadia, vanished for most beyond recovery….

"The Hebrew poets called it Before the Fall," he went on, "and later poets the Golden Age; today it shines through phrases like the Land of Heart's Desire, the Promised Land, Paradise, and what not; while the minds of saint and mystic have ever dreamed of it as union with their deity. For it is possible and open to all, to every heart, that is, not blinded by the cloaking horror of materialism which blocks the doorways of escape and prisons self behind the drab illusion that the outer form is the reality and riot the inner thought…."

The hoarse shouting of a couple of drunken men floated to us from the pavements, and crossing over, we peered down toward the opening of Sloane Street, watching a moment the stream of broughams, motors, and pedestrians. The two men with the rage of an artificial stimulant in their brains reeled out of sight. A big policeman followed slowly. The night-life of the great glaring city poured on unceasingly — the stream of souls all hurrying by divers routes and means toward a state where they sought to lose themselves — to forget the pressure of the bars that held them — to escape the fret and worry of their harassing personalities, and touch some fringe of happiness! All so sure they knew the way — yet hurrying really in the wrong direction — outwards instead of inwards; afraid to be — simple….

We moved back to our rugs. For a long time neither of us found anything to say. Soon I led the way down the creaking ladder indoors again, and we entered the stuffy little sitting-room of the tiny flat he temporarily occupied. I turned up an electric light, but O'Malley begged me to lower it. I only had time to see that his eyes were still aglow. We sat by the open window. He drew a worn notebook from his still more worn coat; but it was too dark for him to read. He knew it all by heart.

CHAPTER XVII

SOME OF FECHNER'S reasons for thinking the Earth a being superior in the scale to ourselves, he gave, but it was another passage that lingered chiefly in my heart, the description of the daring German's joy in dwelling upon her perfections — later, too, of his first simple vision. Though myself wholly of the earth, earthy in the ordinary sense, the beauty of the thoughts live in my spirit to this day, transfiguring even that dingy Insurance Office, streaming through all my dullest, hardest daily tasks with the inspiration of a simple delight that helps me over many a difficult weary time of work and duty.

"'To carry her precious freight through the hours and seasons what form could be more excellent than hers — being as it is horse, wheels, and wagon all in one. Think of her beauty — a shining ball, sky-blue and sunlit over one half, the other bathed in starry night, reflecting the heavens from all her waters, myriads of lights and shadows in the folds of her mountains and windings of her valleys she would be a spectacle of rainbow glory, could one only see her from afar as we see parts of her from her own mountain tops. Every quality of landscape that has a name would then be visible in her all at once — all that is delicate or graceful, all that is quiet, or wild, or romantic, or desolate, or cheerful, or luxuriant, or fresh. *That landscape is her face* — a peopled landscape, too, for men's eyes would appear in it like diamonds among the dew-drops. Green would be the dominant color, but the blue atmosphere and the clouds would enfold her as a bride is shrouded in her veil — a veil the vapory, transparent folds of which the earth, through her ministers the winds, never tires of laying and folding about herself anew.'

"She needs, as a sentient organism," he continued, pointing into the curtain of blue night beyond the window, "no heart or brain or lungs as we do, for she is — different. 'Their functions she performs *through us*! She has no proper muscles or limbs of her own, and the only objects external to her are the other stars. To these her whole mass reacts by the most exquisite alterations in its total gait and by the still more exquisite vibratory responses in its substance. Her ocean reflects the lights of heaven as in a mighty mirror, her atmosphere refracts them like a monstrous lens, the clouds and snowfields combine them into white, the woods and flowers disperse them into colors…. Men have always made fables about angels, dwelling in the light, needing no earthly food or drink, messengers between ourselves and God. Here are actually existent beings, dwelling in the light and moving through the sky, needing neither food nor drink, intermediaries between God and us, obeying His commands. So, if the heavens really are the home of angels, the heavenly bodies must be those very angels, for other creatures there are none. Yes! the Earth is our great common guardian angel, who watches over all our interests combined.'

"And then," whispered the Irishman, seeing that I still eagerly listened, "give your ear to one of his moments of direct vision. Note its simplicity, and the authority of its conviction:

"'On a certain spring morning I went out to walk. The fields were green, the birds sang, the dew glistened, the smoke was rising, here and there a man appeared; a light as of transfiguration lay on all things. It was only a little bit of the earth; it was only a moment of her existence; and yet as my look embraced her more and more it seemed to me not only so beautiful an idea, but so true and clear a fact, that she is an angel, an angel so rich and fresh and flower-like, and yet going her round in the skies so firmly and so at one with herself, turning her whole living face to Heaven, and carrying me along with her into that Heaven, that I asked myself how the opinions of men could ever have so spun themselves away from life as to deem the earth only a dry clod, and to seek for angels above it or about it in the emptiness of the sky, — only to find them nowhere.'"

Fire-engines, clanging as with a hurrying anger through the night, broke in upon his impassioned sentences; the shouts of the men drowned his last words….

Life became very wonderful inside those tight, confining walls, for the spell and grandeur of the whole conception lifted the heart. Even if belief failed, in the sense of believing — a shilling, it succeeded in the sense of believing — a symphony. The invading beauty swept about us both. Here was a glory that was also a driving power upon which any but a man half dead could draw for practical use. For the big conceptions fan the will. The little pains of life, they make one feel, need not kill true joy, nor deaden effort.

“Come,” said O’Malley softly, interrupting my dream of hope and splendor, “let us walk together through the Park to your place. It is late, and you, I know, have to be up early in the morning … earlier than I.”

And presently we passed the statue of Achilles and got our feet upon the turf beyond — a little bit of living planet in the middle of the heavy smothering London town. About us, over us, within us, stirred the awe of that immense idea. Upon that bit of living, growing turf we passed toward the Marble Arch, treading, as it were, the skin of a huge Body — the physical expression of a grand angelic Being, alive, sentient, conscious. Conscious, moreover, of our little separate individual selves who walked … a Being who cared; who felt us; who knew, understood, and — loved us as a mother her own offspring…. “To whom men could pray as they pray to their saints.”

The conception, even thus dimly and confusedly adumbrated, brought a new sense of life — terrific and eternal. All living things upon the earth’s surface were emanations of her mighty central soul; all — from the gods and fairies of olden time who knew it, to the men and women of Today who have forgotten it.

The gods — !

Were these then projections of her personality — aspects and facets of her divided self — emanations now withdrawn? Latent in her did they still exist as moods or Powers — true, alive, everlasting, but unmanifest? Still knowable to simple men and to Children of Nature?

Was this the giant truth that Stahl had built on Fechner?

Everything about us seemed to draw together into an immense and towering configuration that included trees and air and the sweep of open park — the looming and overwhelming beauty of one of these very gods survived — Pan, the eternal and the splendid … a mood of the Earth-life, a projection clothed with the light of stars, the cloudy air, the passion of the night, the thrill of an august, extended Mood.

And the others were not so very far behind — those other little parcels of Earth’s Consciousness the Greeks and early races, the simple, primitive, childlike peoples of the dawn, divined the existence of, and labeled “gods” … and worshipped … so as to draw their powers into themselves by ecstasy and vision …

Could, then, worship now still recall them? Was the attitude of even one true worshipper’s heart the force necessary to touch that particular aspect of the mighty total Consciousness of Earth, and call forth those ancient forms of beauty? Could it be that this idea — the idea of “the gods” — was thus forever true and vital…? And might they be known and felt in the heart if not actually in some suggested form?

I only know that as we walked home past the doors of that dingy Paddington house where Terence O’Malley kept his dusty books and papers and so to my own quarters, these things he talked about dropped into my mind with a bewildering splendor to stay forever. His words I have forgotten, or how he made such speculations worth listening to at all. Yet, I hear them singing in my blood as though of yesterday; and often when that conflict comes ‘twixt duty and desire that makes life sometimes so vain and bitter, the memory comes to lift with strength far greater than my own. The Earth can heal and bless.

CHAPTER XVIII

SLOWLY, TAKING LIFE easily, the little steamer puffed its way across the Ionian Sea. The pyramid of Etna, bluer even than the sky, dominated the western horizon long after the heel of Italy had faded, then melted in its turn into the haze of cloud and distance. No other sails were visible.

With the passing of Calabria spring had leaped into the softness of full summer, and the breezes were gentle as those that long ago fanned the cheeks and hair of Io, beloved of Zeus, as she flew southwards toward the Nile. The passengers, less lovely than that fair daughter of Argos, and with the unrest of thinner adventure in their blood, basked lazily in the sun; but the sea was not less haunted for those among them whose hearts could travel. The Irishman at any rate slipped beyond the confines of the body, viewing that ancient scene as she had done, from above. His widening consciousness expanded to include it.

Cachalots spouted; dolphins danced, as though still to those wild flutes of Dionysus; porpoises rolled beneath the surface of the transparent waves, diving below the vessel's sides but just in time to save their shiny noses; and all day long, ignoring the chart upon the stairway walls, the tourists turned their glasses eastwards, searching for a first sight of Greece.

O'Malley, meanwhile, trod the decks of a new ship. For him now sea and sky were doubly peopled. The wind brought messages of some divine deliverance approaching slowly, the heat of that pearly, shining sun warmed centers of his being that hitherto the world kept chill. The land toward which the busy steamer moved he knew, of course, was but the shell from which the inner spirit of beauty once vivifying it had long since passed away. Yet it remained a clue. That ancient loveliness, as a mood of the earth's early consciousness, was buried, not destroyed. Eternally it still flamed somewhere. And, long before the days of Greece, he knew, it had existed in yet fuller and more complete manifestation: that earliest, vastly splendid Mood of the earth's soul, too mighty for any existence that the history of humanity can recall, and too remote for any but the most daringly imaginative minds even to conceive. The *Urwelt* Mood, as Stahl himself admitted, even while it called to him, was a reconstruction that to men today could only seem — dangerous.

And his own little Self, guided by the inarticulate stranger, was being led at last toward its complete recapture.

Yet, while he crawled slowly with the steamer over a tiny portion of the spinning globe, feeling that at the same time he crawled toward a spot upon it where access would be somehow possible to this huge expression of her first Life — what was it, phrased timidly as men phrase big thoughts today, that he really believed? Even in our London talks, intimate as they were, interpreted too by gesture, facial expression, and — silence, his full meaning evaded precise definition. "There are no words, there are no words," he kept saying, shrugging his shoulders and stroking his untidy hair. "In me, deep down, it all lies clear and plain and strong; but language cannot seize a mode of life that throve before language existed. If you cannot catch the picture from my thoughts, I give up the whole dream in despair." And in his written account, owing to its strange formlessness, the result was not a little bewildering.

Briefly stated, however — that remnant, at least, which I discover in my own mind when attempting to tell the story to others — what he felt, believed, *lived*, at any rate while the adventure lasted, was this: —

That the Earth, as a living, conscious Being, had known visible projections of her consciousness similar to those projections of our own personality which the advanced psychologists of today now envisage as possible; that the simple savagery of his own nature, and the poignant yearnings derived from it, were in reality due to his intimate closeness to the life of the Earth; that, whereas in the body the fulfillment of these longings was impossible, in the spirit he might yet know contact with the soul of the planet, and thus experience their complete satisfaction. Further, that the portion of his personality which could thus enter this heaven of its own subjective construction, was that detachable portion Stahl had spoken of as being "malleable by desire and longing," leaving the body partially and temporarily sometimes in sleep, and, at death, completely. More, — that the state thus entered would mean a quasi-merging back into the life of the Earth herself, of which he was a partial expression.

This closeness to Nature was today so rare as to be almost unrecognized as possible. Its possession constituted its owner what the doctor called a “Cosmic Being” — a being scarcely differentiated from the life of the Earth Spirit herself — a direct expression of her life, a survival of a time before such expressions had separated away from her and become individualized as human creatures. Moreover, certain of these earliest manifestations or projections of her consciousness, knowing in their huge shapes of fearful yet simple beauty a glory of her own being, still also survived. The generic term of “gods” might describe their status as interpreted to the little human power called Imagination.

This call to the simple life of primal innocence and wonder that had ever brimmed the heart of the Irishman, acknowledged while not understood, might have slumbered itself away with the years among modern conditions into atrophy and denial, had he not chanced to encounter a more direct and vital instance of it even than himself. The powerfully-charged being of this Russian stranger had summoned it forth. The mere presence of this man quickened and evoked this faintly-stirring center in his psychic being that opened the channel of return. Speech, as any other explanation, was unnecessary. To resist was still within his power. To accept and go was also open to him. The “inner catastrophe” he feared need not perhaps be insuperable or permanent.

“Remember,” the doctor had said to him at the end of that last significant conversation, “this berth in my stateroom is freely at your disposal till Batoum.” And O’Malley, thanking him, had shaken off that restraining hand upon his arm, knowing that he would never make use of it again.

For the Russian stranger and his son had somehow made him free.

Between that cabin and the decks he spent his day. Occasionally he would go below to report progress, as it were, by little sentences which he divined would be acceptable, and at the same time gave expression to his own growing delight. The boy, meanwhile, was everywhere, playing alone like a wild thing; one minute in the bows, hat off, gazing across the sea beneath a shading hand, and the next leaning over the stern-rails to watch the churning foam that drove them forwards. At regular intervals he, too, rushed to the cabin and brought communications to his parent.

“Tomorrow at dawn,” observed the Irishman, “we shall see Cape Mattapan rising from the sea. After that, Athens for a few hours; then coasting through the Cyclades, close to the mainland often.” And glancing over to the berth, while pretending to be busy with his steamer-trunk, he saw the great smile of happiness break over the other’s face like a sunrise….

For it was clear to him that with the approach to Greece, a change began to come over his companions. It was noticeable chiefly in the father. The joy that filled the man, too fine and large to be named excitement, passed from him in radiations that positively seemed to carry with them a physical extension. This, of course, was purely a clairvoyant effect upon the mind — O’Malley’s divining faculty visualized the spiritual traits of the man’s dilating Self. But, nevertheless, the truth remained that — somehow he increased. He grew; became interiorly more active, alive, potent; and of this singular waxing of the inner spirit something passed outwards and stood with rare dignity about his very figure.

And this manifestation of themselves was due to that expansion of the inner life caused by happiness. The little point of their personalities they showed normally to the world was but a single facet, a tip as it were of their whole selves. More lay within, beyond. As with the rest of the world, a great emotion stimulated and summoned it forth into activity nearer the surface. Clearly, for these two Greece symbolized a point of departure of a great hidden passion. Something they expected lay waiting for them there. Guidance would come thence.

And, by reflection perhaps as much as by direct stimulation, the same change made itself felt in himself. Joy caught him — the joy of a home-coming, long deferred….

At the same time, the warning of Dr. Stahl worked in him, if subconsciously only. He showed this by mixing more with the other passengers. He chatted with the Captain, who was as pleased with his big family as though he had personally provided the weather that made them happy; with the Armenian priest, who was eager to show that he had read “a much of T’ackeray and Keeplin”; and especially with the boasting Moscow merchant, who by this time “owned” the smoking-room and imposed his verbose commonplaces upon one and all with authoritative self-confidence in six languages — a provincial mind in full display. The latter in particular held him to a normal humanity; his atmosphere breathed the wholesome thickness of the majority of humankind — ordinary, egoistic, with the simplicity of the uninspiring sort. The merchant acted upon him as a sedative, and that day the Irishman took him in large doses, allopathically, for his talk formed an admirable antidote to the stress of that other burning excitement that, according to Stahl, threatened to disintegrate his personality.

Though hardly in the sense he intended, the fur-merchant was entirely delightful — engaging as a child; for, among other marked qualities, he possessed the unerring instinct of the snob which made him select for his friends those whose names or position might glorify his banal insignificance — and his stories were vivid pictorial illustrations of this useful worldly faculty. O'Malley listened with secret delight, keeping a grave face and dropping in occasional innocent questions to heighten the color or increase the output. Others in the circle responded in kind, feeling the same chord vibrating in themselves. Even the priest, like a repeating-gun, continually discharged his little secret pride that Byron had occupied a room in that Venetian monastery where he lived; and at last O'Malley himself was conscious of an inclination to report his own immense and recently discovered kinship with a greater soul and consciousness than his own. After all, he reflected with a deep thrill while he listened, the desire of the snob was but a crude and simple form of the desire of the mystic: — to lose one's little self in a Self which is greater!

Then, weary of them all and their minute personal interests, he left the smoking-room and joined the boy again, running absurd races with him from stern to bow, playing hide-and-seek among the decks, even playing shuffle-board together. They sweated in the blazing sun and watched the dance of the sea; caught the wind in their faces with a shout of joy, or with pointing fingers followed the changing outlines of the rare, soft clouds that sailed the world of blue above them. There was no speech between them, and both felt that other things, invisible, swift, and spirit-footed, whose home is just beyond the edge of life as the senses report life, played wildly with them. The smoking-room then, with its occupants so greedy for the things that money connotes — the furs, champagne, cigars, and heavy possessions that were symbols of the personal aggrandizement they sought and valued — seemed to the Irishman like a charnel-house where those about to die sat making inventories in blind pride of the things they must leave behind.

It was, indeed, a contrast of Death and Life. For beside him, with that playing, silent boy, coursed the power of transforming loveliness which had breathed over the world before her surface knew this swarming race of men. The life of the Earth knew no need of outward acquisition, possessing all things so completely in herself. And he — he was her child — O glory! Joy passing belief!

“Oh!” he cried once with passion, turning to the fair-haired figure of youth who stood with him in the bows, meeting the soft wind,— “Oh, to have heard the trees whispering together in the youth of the world, and felt one of the earliest winds that ever blew across the cooling seas!”

And the boy, not understanding the words, but responding with a perfect naturalness to the emotion that drove them forth, seized his hand and with an extraordinarily free motion as of flying, raced with him down the decks, happy, laughing, hair loose over his face, and with a singular action of the shoulders as though he somehow — cantered. O’Malley remembered his vision of the Flying Shapes….

Toward the evening, however, the boy disappeared, keeping close to his father’s side, and after dinner both retired early to their cabin.

And the ship, meanwhile, drew ever nearer to the haunted land.

CHAPTER XIX

"PRIVACY IS IGNORANCE." — JOSIAH ROYCE

Somewhat after the manner of things suffered in vivid dreams, where surprise is numbed and wonder becomes the perfect password, the Irishman remembers the sequence of little events that filled the following day.

Yet his excitement held nothing of the vicious fling of fever; it was spread over the entire being rather than located hotly in the brain and blood alone; and it "derived," as it were, from tracts of his personality usually unstirred, atrophied indeed in most men, that connected him as by a delicate network of feelers with Nature and the Earth. He came gradually to feel them, as a man in certain abnormal conditions becomes conscious of the bodily processes that customarily go on in himself without definite recognition.

Stahl could have told him, had he cared to seek the information, that this fringe of wider consciousness, stretching to the stars and winds and earth, was the very part that had caused his long unrest and yearning — the part that knew the Earth as mother and sought the sweet and savage freedom of what he called with the poverty of modern terms — primitive. The channels leading toward a state of Cosmic Consciousness, one with the Earth Life, were being now flushed and sluiced by the forces emanating from the persons of his new companions.

And as this new state slowly usurped command, the readjustment of his spiritual economy thus involved, caused other portions of himself to sink into temporary abeyance. While it alarmed him, it was too delicious to resist. He made no real attempt to resist. Yet he knew full well that the portion sinking thus out of sight was what folk with such high pride call Reason, Judgment, Common Sense!

In common with animal, bird, and insect life, all intimately close to Nature, he began to feel as realities those subtle currents of the Earth's personality by which the seals know direction in the depths of a thousand-mile sea, by which the homing pigeons blaze trails through space, birds fly south, the wild bees know their pathways, and all simple life, from the Red Indian to the Red Ant, acknowledges the viewless guidance of the mother's enveloping heart. The cosmic life ran through his being, lighting signals, offering service, more — claiming leadership.

With it, however, came no loss of individuality, but rather a powerful increase of life by means of which for the first time he dreamed of a fuller existence which should eventually harmonize and combine the ancient simplicity of soul that claimed the Earth, with the modern complexity which, indulged alone, rendered the world so ugly and insignificant…! He experienced an immense, driving push upon what Bergson has called the *élan vital* of his being.

The opening charge of his new discovery, however, was more than disconcerting, and it is not surprising that he lost his balance. Its attack and rush were overwhelming. Thus, it was a kind of exalted speculative wonder lying behind his inner joy that caused his mistakes. He had imagined, for instance, that the first sight of Greece would bring some climax of revelation, making clear to what particular type of early life the spirits of his companions conformed; more, that they would then betray themselves to one and all for what they were in some effort to escape, in some act of unrestraint, something, in a word, that would explain themselves to the world of passengers, and focus them upon the doctor's microscope forever.

Yet when Greece showed her first fair rim of outline, his companions still slept peacefully in their bunks. The anticipated *dénouement* did not appear. Nothing happened. It was not the mere sight of so much land lying upon the sea's cool cheek that could prove vital in an adventure of such a kind. For the adventure remained spiritual. O'Malley had merely confused two planes of consciousness. As usual, he saw the thing "whole" in that extraordinary way to which his imagination alone held the key; and hence his error.

Yet the moment has ever remained for him one of vital, stirring splendor, significant as life or death. He remembers that he was early on deck and saw the dawn blow up softly from behind the islands with a fresh, salt wind that blew at the same time like music into his very heart. Golden clear it rose; and just below, like the petals of some vast, archetypal flower that gave it birth, the low blue hills of coast and island opened magically into blossom. The rocky cliffs of Mattapan slipped past; the smooth, bare slopes of the ancient shore-line followed; treeless peaks and shoulders, abrupt precipices, summits and ridges all exquisitely rosy and alive. He had seen Greece before, yet never thus, and the emotion that invaded every corner of his larger consciousness lay infinitely deeper than any mere pseudo-classical thrill he had known in previous years. He saw it, felt it, knew it from within, instead of as a spectator from without. This dawn-mood of the Earth was also his own; and upon his spirit, as upon her blue-crowned hills, lay the tide of high light with its delicate swift blush. He saw it with her — through one of her opened eyes.

The hot hours the steamer lay in the Piraeus Harbor were wearisome, the noise of loading and unloading cargo worse even than at Catania. While the tourist passengers hurried fussily ashore, carrying guidebooks and cameras, to chatter among the ruined temples, he walked the decks alone, dreaming his great dream, conscious that he spun through leagues of space with the great Being who more and more possessed him. Beyond the shipping and the masts collected there from all the ports of the Mediterranean and the Levant, he watched the train puffing slowly to the station that lay in the shadow of Theseus' Temple, but his eyes at the same tune strained across the haze toward Eleusis Bay, and while his ears caught the tramping feet of the long Torchlight Procession, some power of his remoter consciousness divined the forms of hovering gods, expressions of his vast Mother's personality with which, in worship, this ancient people had believed it possible to merge themselves. The significant truths that lay behind the higher Mysteries, degraded since because forgotten and misinterpreted, trooped powerfully down into his mind. For the supreme act of this profound cult, denied by a grosser age that seeks to telephone to heaven, deeming itself thereby "advanced," lay in the union of the disciple with his god, the god he worshipped all his life, and into whose Person he slipped finally at death by a kind of marriage rite.

"The gods!" ran again through his mind with passion and delight, as the letter of his early studies returned upon him, accompanied now for the first time by the in-living spirit that interpreted them. "The gods! — Moods of her giant life, manifestations of her spreading Consciousness pushed outwards, Powers of life and truth and beauty…!"

* * * * *

And, meanwhile, Dr. Stahl, sometimes from a distance, sometimes coming close, kept over him a kind of half-paternal, half-professional attendance, the Irishman accepting his ministrations without resentment, almost with indifference.

“I shall be on deck between two and three in the morning to see the comet,” the German observed to him casually toward evening as they met on the bridge. “We may meet perhaps—”

“All right, doctor; it’s more than possible,” replied O’Malley, realizing how closely he was being watched.

In his mind at the moment another sentence ran, the thought growing stronger and stronger within him as the day declined:

“It will come tonight — come as an inner catastrophe not unlike that of death! I shall hear the call — to escape….”

For he knew, as well as if it had been told to him in so many words, that the sleep of his two companions all day was in the nature of a preparation. The fluid projections of themselves were all the time active elsewhere. Their bodies heavily slumbered; their spirits were out and alert. Summoned forth by those strange and radiant evocative forces that even in the dullest minds “Greece” stirs into life, they had temporarily escaped. Again he saw those shapes of cloud and wind moving with swift freedom over the long, bare hills. Again and again the image returned. With the night a similar separation of the personality might come to himself too. Stahl’s warning passed in letters of fire across his inner sight. With a relief that yet contained uneasiness he watched his shambling figure disappear down the stairway. He was alone.

CHAPTER XX

"TO EVERYTHING THAT a man does he must give his undivided attention or his Ego. When he has done this, thoughts soon arise in him, or else a new method of apprehension miraculously appears….

"Very remarkable it is that through this play of his personality man first becomes aware of his specific freedom, and that it seems to him as though he awaked out of a deep sleep as though he were only now at home in the world, and as if the light of day were breaking now over his interior life for the first time…. The substance of these impressions which affect us we call Nature, and thus Nature stands in an immediate relationship to those functions of our bodies which we call senses. Unknown and mysterious relations of our body allow us to surmise unknown and mysterious correlations with Nature, and therefore Nature is that wondrous fellowship into which our bodies introduce us, and which we learn to know through the mode of its constitutions and abilities."

— NOVALIS, *Disciples at Saïs*. Translated by U.C.B.

And so, at last, the darkness came, a starry darkness of soft blue shadows and phosphorescent sea out of which the hills of the Cyclades rose faint as pictures of floating smoke a wind might waft away like flowers to the sky.

The plains of Marathon lay far astern, blushing faintly with their scarlet tamarisk blossoms. The strange purple glow of sunset upon Hymettus had long since faded. A hush grew over the sea, now a marvelous cobalt blue. The earth, gently sleeping, manifested dreamily. Into the subconscious state passed one half of her huge, gentle life.

The Irishman, responding to the eternal spell of her dream-state, experienced in quite a new way the magic of her Night-Mood. He found it more difficult than ever to realize as separate entities the little things that moved about through the upper surface of her darkness. Wings of silver, powerfully whirring, swept his soul onwards to another place — toward Home.

And the two worlds intermingled oddly. These little separate “outer things” going to and fro so busily became as symbols more or less vital, more or less transparent. They varied according to their simplicity. Some of them were channels that led directly where he was going; others, again, had lost all connection with their vital source and center of existence. To the former belonged the sailors, children, the tired birds that rested on the ship as they journeyed northwards, swallows, doves, and little travelers with breasts of spotted yellow that nested in the rigging; even, in a measure, the gentle, brown-eyed priest; but to the latter, the noisy, vulgar, beer-drinking tourists, and, especially, the fur-merchant…. Stahl, interpreter and intermediary, hovered between — incarnate compromise.

Escaping from everybody, at length, he made his way into the bows; there, covered by the stars, he waited. And the thing he waited for — he felt it coming over him with a kind of massive sensation as little local as heat or cold — was that disentanglement of a part of his personality from the rest against which Stahl had warned him. That portion of his complex personality in which resided desire and longing, matured during these many years of poignant nostalgia, was now slowly and deliberately loosening out from the parent center. It was the vehicle of his *Urwelt* yearnings; and the *Urwelt* was about to draw it forth. The Call was on its way.

Hereabouts, then, near the Isles of Greece, lay a channel to the Earth’s far youth, a channel for some reason still unclosed. His companions knew it; he, too, had half divined it. The increased psychic activity of all three as they approached Greece seemed explained. The sign — would it be through hearing, sight, or touch? — would shortly come that should convince.

That very afternoon Stahl had said— “Greece will betray them,” and he had asked: “Their true form and type?” And for answer the old man did an expressive thing, far more convincing than words: he bent forwards and downwards. He made as though to move a moment on all fours.

O’Malley remembered the brief and vital scene now. The word, however, persistently refused to come into his mind. Because the word was really inadequate, describing but partially a form and outline symbolical of far more, — a measure of Nature and Deity alike.

And so, as a man dreading the entrance to a great adventure that he yet desires, the Irishman waited there alone beneath the cloud of night…. Soft threads of star-gold, trailing the sea, wove with the darkness a veil that hid from his eyes the world of crude effects. All memory of the casual realities of modern life that so distressed his soul, fled far away. The archetypal world, soul of the Earth, swam close about him, enormous and utterly simple. He seemed alone in some hollow of the night which Time had overlooked, and where the powers of sea and air held him in the stretch of their gigantic, changeless hands. In this hollow lay the entrance to the channel down which he presently might flash back to that primal Garden of the Earth's first beauty — her Golden Age… down which, at any rate, the authoritative Call he awaited was to come…. "Oh! what a power has white simplicity!"

Wings from the past, serene and tranquil, bore him toward this ancient peace where echoes of life's brazen clash today could never enter. Ages before Greece, of course, it had flourished, yet Greece had caught some flying remnant ere it left the world of men, and for a period had striven to renew its life, though by poetry but half believed. Over the vales and hills of Hellas this mood had lingered bravely for a while, then passed away forever … and those who dreamed of its remembrance remain homeless and lonely, seeking it ever again in vain, lost citizens, rejected by the cycles of vainer life and action that succeeded.

The Spirit of the Earth, yes, whispered in his ears as he waited covered by the night and stars. She called him, as though across all the forests on her breast the long sweet winds went whispering his name. Lying there upon the coils of thick and tarry rope, the *Urwelt* caught him back with her splendid passion. Currents of Earth life, quasi-deific, gentle as the hands of little children, tugged softly at this loosening portion of his Self, urging his very lips, as it were, once more to the mighty Mother's breasts. Again he saw those cloud-like shapes careering over long, bare hills … and almost knew himself among them as they raced with streaming winds … free, ancient comrades among whom he was no longer alien and outcast, including his two companions of the steamer. The early memory of the Earth became his own; as a part of her, he shared it too.

The *Urwelt* closed magnificently about him. Vast shapes of power and beauty, other than human, once his comrades thus, but since withdrawn because denied by a pettier age, moved up, huge and dim, across the sham barriers of time and space, singing the great Earth-Song of welcome in his ears. The whisper grew awfully…. The Spirit of the Earth flew close and called upon him with a shout…!

Then, out of this amazing reverie, he woke abruptly to the consciousness that some one was approaching him stealthily, yet with speed, through the darkness. With a start he sat up, peering about him. There was dew on his clothes and hair. The stars, he saw, had shifted their positions.

He heard the surge of the water from the vessel's bows below. The line of the shore lay close on either side. Overhead he saw the black threads of rigging, quivering with the movement of the ship; the swaying mast-head light; the dim, round funnels; the confused shadows where the boats swung — and nearer, moving between the ropes and windlasses, this hurrying figure whose approach had disturbed him in his gorgeous dream.

And O'Malley divined at once that, though in one sense a portion of his dream, it belonged outwardly to the same world as this long dark steamer that trailed after him across the sea. A piece of his vision, as it were, had broken off and remained in the cruder world wherein his body lay upon these tarry ropes. The boy came up and stood a moment by his side in silence, then, stooping to the level of his head, he spoke: —

"Come," he said in low tones of joy; "come! We wait long for you already!"

The words, like music, floated over the sea, as O'Malley took the outstretched hand and suffered himself to be led quickly toward the lower deck. He walked at first as in a dream continued after waking; more than once it seemed as though they stepped together from the boards and moved through space toward the line of peaked hills that fringed the steamer's course so close. For through the salt night air ran a perfume that suggested flowers, earth, and woods, and there seemed no break in the platforms of darkness that knit sea and shore to the very substance of the vessel.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LIGHTS IN the saloon were out, the smoking-room empty, the passengers in bed. The ship seemed entirely deserted. Only, on the bridge, the shadow of the first officer paced quietly to and fro. Then, suddenly, as they approached the stern, O'Malley discerned anther figure, huge and motionless, against the background of phosphorescent foam; and at the first glance it was exactly as though he had detached from the background of his mind one of those Flying Outlines upon the hills — and caught it there, arrested visibly at last.

He moved along, fairly sure of himself, yet with a tumult of confused sensations, as if consciousness were transferring itself now more rapidly to that portion of him which sought to escape.

Leaning forward, in a stooping posture over the bulwarks, wrapped in the flowing cape he sometimes wore, the man's back and shoulders married so intimately with the night that it was hard to determine the dividing line between the two. So much more of the deck behind him, and of the sky immediately beyond his neck, was obliterated than by any possible human outline. Whether owing to obliquity of disturbed vision, tricks of shadow, or movement of the vessel between the stars and foam, the Irishman saw these singular emanations spread about him into space. He saw them this time directly. And more than ever before they seemed in some way right and comely — true. They were in no sense monstrous; they reported beauty, though a beauty cloaked in power.

And, watching him, O'Malley felt that this loosening portion of himself, as once before in the little cabin, likewise began to grow and spread. Within some ancient fold of the Earth's dream-consciousness they both lay caught. In some mighty Dream of her planetary Spirit, dim, immense, slow-moving, they played their parts of wonder. Already they lay close enough to share the currents of her subconscious activities. And the dream, as she turned in her vast, spatial sleep, was a dream of a time long gone.

Here, amid the loneliness of deserted deck and night, this illusion of bulk was more than ever before outwardly impressive, and as he yielded to the persuasion of the boy’s hand, he was conscious of a sudden wild inclination to use his own arms and legs in a way he had never before known or dreamed of, yet that seemed curiously familiar. The balance and adjustment of his physical frame sought to shift and alter; neck and shoulders, as it were, urged forward; there came a singular pricking in the loins, a rising of the back, a thrusting up and outwards of the chest. He felt that something grew behind him with a power that sought to impel or drive him in advance and out across the world at a terrific gait; and the hearing of his ears became of a sudden intensely acute. While his body moved ordinarily, he knew that a part of him that was not body moved — otherwise, that he neither walked, ran, nor stepped upon two feet, but — galloped. The motion proclaimed him kin with the flying shapes upon the hills. At the heart of this portion which sought to detach itself from his central personality — which, indeed, seemed already half escaped — he cantered.

The experience lasted but a second — this swift, free motion of the escaping Double — then passed away like those flashes of memory that rise and vanish again before they can be seized for examination. He shook himself free of the unaccountable obsession, and with the effort of returning to the actual present, the passing-outwards was temporarily checked. And it was then, just as he held himself in hand again, that glancing sideways, he became aware that the boy beside him had, like his parent, also changed — grown large and shadowy with a similar suggestion of another splendid outline. The extension already half accomplished in himself and fully accomplished in the father, was in process of accomplishment in the smaller figure of the son. Clothed in the emerged true shape of their inner being they slowly revealed themselves. It was as bewildering as watching death, and as stern and beautiful.

For the boy, still holding his hand, loped along beside him as though the projection that emanated from him, grown almost physical, were somehow difficult to manage.

In the moment of nearer, smaller consciousness that yet remained to him, O’Malley recalled the significant pantomime of Dr. Stahl two days before in the cabin. It came with a rush of fire. The warning operated; his caution instantly worked. He dropped the hand, let the clinging fingers slip from his own, overcome by something that appalled. For this, surely, was the inner catastrophe that he dreaded, the radical internal dislocation of his personality that involved — death. The thing that had happened, or was happening to these other two, was on the edge of fulfillment in himself — before he was either ready or had decided to accept it.

At any rate he hesitated; and the hesitation, shifting his center of consciousness back into his brain, checked and saved him. A confused sense of forces settling back within himself followed; a kind of rush and scuttle of moods and powers: and he remained temporarily master of his being, recovering balance and command. Twice already — in that cabin-scene, as also on the deck when Stahl had seized him — the moment had come close. Now, again, had he kept hold of the boy's grasp, that inner transformation, which should later become externalized, must have completed itself.

"No, no!" he tried to cry aloud, "for I'm not yet ready!" But his voice rose scarcely above a whisper. The decision of his will, however, had produced the desired result. The "illusion," so strangely born, had passed, at any rate for the time. He knew once more the glory of the steadfast stars, realized that he walked normally upon a steamer's deck, heard with welcome the surge of the sea below, and felt the peace of this calm southern night as they coasted with two hundred sleeping tourists between the islands and the Grecian mainland…. He remembered the fur-merchant, the Armenian priest, the Canadian drummer….

It seemed his feet half tripped, or at least that he put out a hand to steady himself against the ship's long roll, for the pair of them moved up to the big man's side with a curious, rushing motion that brought them all together with a mild collision. And the boy laughed merrily, his laughter like singing half completed. O'Malley remembers the little detail, because it serves to show that he was yet still in a state of intensified consciousness, far above the normal level. It was still "like walking in my sleep or acting out some splendid dream," as he put it in his written version. "Half out of my body, if you like, though in no sense of the words at all half out of my mind!"

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT FOLLOWED HE relates with passion, half confused. Without speaking the big Russian turned his head by way of welcome, and O'Malley saw that the proportions of it were magnificent like a fragment of the night and sky. Though too dark to read the actual expression in the eyes, he detected their gleam of joy and splendor. The whole presentment of the man was impressive beyond any words that he could find. Massive, yet charged with swift and alert vitality, he reared there through the night, his inner self now toweringly manifested. At any other time, and without the preparation already undergone, the sight might almost have terrified; now it only uplifted. For in similar fashion, though lesser in degree, because the mold was smaller, and hesitation checked it, this very transformation had been going forward within himself.

The three of them leaned there upon the rails, rails oddly dwindled now to the size of a toy steamer, while thus the spirit of the dreaming Earth swam round and through them, awful in power, yet at the same time gentle, winning, seductive as wild flowers in the spring. And it was this delicate, hair-like touch of delight, magical with a supreme and utterly simple innocence, that made the grandeur of the whole experience still easily manageable, and terror in it all unknown.

The Irishman stood on the outside, toward the vessel's stern, next him the father, beyond, the boy. They touched. A current like a river in flood swept through all three.

He, too, was caught within those visible extensions of their personalities; all again, caught within the consciousness of the Earth. Across the sea they gazed together in silence — waiting.

It was the Oro passage, where the mainland hills on the west and the Isle of Tenos on the east draw close together, and the steamer passes for several miles so near to Greece that the boom of surf upon the shore is audible. That night, however, the sea lay too still for surf; it whispered softly in its sleep; and in its sleep, too, listened. They heard its multitudinous rush of voices as the surge below raced by — a giant frieze in which the phosphorescence painted dancing forms and palely luminous faces. Unsubstantial shapes of foam held hands in continuous array below the waves, lit by soft-sea-lanterns strung together along the steamer's sides.

Yet it was not these glimmering shapes the three of them watched, thus intently silent. The lens of yearning focused not in sight. Down the great channel at whose opening they stood, leading straight to the Earth's old central heart, the message of communion would not be a visual one. The sensitive fringe of their stretched personalities, contacting thus actually the consciousness of the planet-soul, would quiver to a reaction of another kind. This point of union, already affected, would presently report itself, unmistakably, yet not to the eyes. The increased acuteness of the Irishman's hearing — a kind of interior hearing — quickly supplied the key. It was that all three — listened.

Some primitive sound of Earth would presently vibrate through their extended beings with an authoritative sweet thunder not to be denied. By a Voice, a Call, the Earth would tell them that she heard; that lovingly she was aware of their presence in her heart. She would call them, with the voice of *one of their own kind*.

How strange it all was! Enormous in conception, enormous in distance, scope, stretch! Yet so tiny, intimate, sweet! And this vast splendor was to report itself by one of the insignificant little channels by which men, locked in cramped physical bodies, interpret the giant universe — a trivial sense-impression! That so terrible a communication could reach the soul via the quivering of a wee material nerve was on a par with that other grave splendor — that God can exist in the heart of a child.

Thus, dimly, yet with an authority that shakes the soul, may little human hearts divine the Immensities that travel with a thunder of great glory close about their daily life. Through regions of their subliminal consciousness, which transcends the restricted physical expression of it called personality as the moisture of the world transcends a drop of water, deific presences pass grandly to and fro.

For here, to this wild-hearted Irishman with the forbidden strain of the *Urmensch* in his blood, came the sharp and instant revelation that the Consciousness is not contained skin-tight around the body. It spread enormously about him, remote, extended; and in some distant tract of it this strange occurrence took place. The idea of distance and extension, of course, were merely intellectual concepts, like that of Time. For what happened, happened near and close, beside, *within* his actual physical person. That physical person, with its brain, however, he realized, was but a fragment of his total Self. A broken piece of the occurrence filtered through from beyond and fell upon the deck at his feet. The rest he divined, seeing it whole. Only the little bit, however, has he found the language to describe.

And that for which all three listened was already on the way. Forever it had been "happening," yet only reached them now because they were ready and open to it. Events upon the physical plane, he grasped, represented the last feeble expression of things that had happened interiorly with a vaster power long ago — and are ever happening still. This Sound they listened for, coming from the Spirit of the Earth, lay ever close to men's ears, divinely sweet and splendid. It seemed born somewhere in the heart of the blue gloom that draped the hills of Greece. Thence, across the peaked mountains, stretched the immense pipe of starry darkness that carried it toward them as along a channel. Made possible of approach by the ancient passion of beauty that Greece once knew, it ran down upon the world into their hearts, direct from the Being of the Earth.

With a sudden rush, it grew nearer, swelling with a draught of sound that sucked whole spaces of sky and sea and stars with it. It emerged. They heard, all three.

Above the pulse and tremble of the steamer's engines, above the surge and gurgle of the sea, a cry swept toward them from the shore. Long-drawn, sweetly-penetrating, yet with some strident accent of power and command, this voice of Earth rushed upon them over the quiet water — then died away again among the mountains and the night. Its passage through the sky was torrential. The whole pouring flood of it dipped back with abrupt swiftness into silence. The Irishman understood that but an echo of its main volume had come through.

A deep, convulsive movement ran over the great body at his side, and at once communicated itself to the boy beyond. Father and son straightened up abruptly as though the same force lifted both; then stretched down and forwards over the bulwarks. They seemed to shake themselves free of something. Neither spoke. Something utterly overwhelming lay in that moment. For the cry was at once of enchanting sweetness, yet with a deep and dreadful authority that overpowered. It invited the very soul.

A moment of silence followed, and the cry was then repeated, thinner, fainter, already further away. It seemed withdrawn, sunk more deeply into the night, higher up, too, floating away northwards into remoter vales and glens that lay beyond the shore-line. Though still a single cry, there were distinct breaks of utterance in it this time, as of words. It was, of a kind — speech: a Message, a Summons, a Command that somehow held entreaty at its heart.

And this time the appeal in it was irresistible. Father and son started forwards as though deliberately pulled; while from himself shot outwards that loosening portion of his being that all the evening had sought release. The vehicle of his yearnings, passionately summoned, leaped to the ancient call of the Earth's eternally young life. This vital essence of his personality, volatile as air and fierce as lightning, flashed outwards from its hidden prison where it lay choked and smothered by the weights and measures of modern life. For the beauty and splendor of that far voice wrung his very heart and set it free. He knew a quasi-physical wrench of detachment. A wild and tameless glory fused the fastenings of ages.

Only the motionless solidity of the great figure beside him prevented somehow the complete escape, and made him understand that the Call just then was not for all three of them, especially not for himself. The parent rose beside him, massive and stable, secure as the hills which were his true home, and the boy broke suddenly into happy speech which was wild and singing.

He looked up swiftly into his parent's steady visage.

"Father!" he cried in tones that merged half with the wind, half with the sea, "it is his voice! Chiron calls — !" His eyes shone like stars, his young face was alight with joy and passion.— "Go, father, *you*, or—"

He stopped an instant, catching the Irishman's eyes upon his own across the form between them.

" — or you!" he added with a laughter of delight; "*you* go!"

The big figure straightened up, standing back a pace from the rails. A low sound rolled from him that was like an echo of thunder among hills. With slow, laborious distinctness it broke off into fragments that were words, with great difficulty uttered, but with a final authority that rendered them command.

“No,” O’Malley heard, “you — first. And — carry word — that we — are — on the way.” Staring out across the sea and sky he boomed it deeply. “You — first. We — follow — !” And the speech seemed to flow from the entire surface of his body rather than from the lips alone. The sea and air mothered the syllables. Thus might the Night herself have spoken.

Chiron! The word, with its clue of explanation, flamed about him with a roar. Was this, then, the type of cosmic life to which his companions, and himself with them, inwardly approximated…?

The same instant, before O’Malley could move a muscle to prevent it, the boy climbed the rails with an easy, vaulting motion that was swift yet oddly spread, and dropped straight down into the sea. He fell; and as he fell it was as if the passage through the air drew out a part of him again like smoke. Whether it was due to the flying cloak, or to some dim wizardry of the shadows, there grew over him an instantaneous transformation of outline that was far more marked than anything before. For as the steamer drew onwards, and the body thus passed in its downward flight close beneath O’Malley’s eyes, he saw that the boy was making the first preparatory motions of swimming, — movements, however, that were not the horizontal sweep of a pair of human arms, but rather the vertical strokes of a swimming animal. He pawed the air.

The surprise of the whole unexpected thing came upon him with a crash that brought him back effectually again into himself. That part of him, already half emerged in similar escape, now flashed back sheath-like within him. The inner catastrophe he dreaded while desiring it, had not yet completed itself.

He heard no splash, for the ship was high out of the water, and the place where the body met the sea already lay far astern; but when the momentary arrest of his faculties had passed and he found his voice to cry for help, the father turned upon him like a lion and clapped a great, encompassing hand upon his mouth.

“Quiet!” his deep voice boomed. “It is well — and he — is — safe.”

And across the huge and simple visage ran an expression of such supreme happiness, while in his act and gesture lay such convincing power, that the Irishman felt himself overborne and forced to acknowledge another standard of authority that somehow made the whole thing right. To cry "man overboard," to stop the ship, throw life-buoys and the rest, was not only unnecessary, but foolish. The boy was safe; it was well with him; he was not "lost"…

"See," said the parent's deep voice, breaking in upon his thoughts as he drew him to one side with a certain vehemence, "See!"

He pointed downwards. And there, between them, half in the scuppers, against their very feet, lay the huddled body upon the deck, the arms outstretched, the face turned upwards to the stars.

* * * * *

The bewilderment that followed was like the confusion which exists between two states of consciousness when the mind passes from sleep to waking, or *vice versa*. O'Malley lost that power of attention which enables a man to concentrate on details sufficiently to recall their exact sequence afterwards with certainty.

Two things, however, stood out and he tells them briefly enough: first, that the joy upon the father's face rendered an offer of sympathy ludicrous; secondly, that Dr. Stahl was again upon the scene with a promptness which proved him to have been close at hand all the time.

It was between two and three in the morning, the rest of the passengers asleep still, but Captain Burgenfelder and the first officer appeared soon after and an orderly record of the affair was drawn up formally. The depositions of the father and of himself were duly taken down in writing, witnessed, and all the rest.

The scene in the doctor's cabin remains vividly in his mind: the huge Russian standing by the door — for he refused a seat — incongruously smiling in contrast to the general gravity, his mind obviously brought by an effort of concentration to each question; the others seated round the desk some distance away, leaving him in a space by himself; the scratching of the doctor's pointed pen; the still, young outline underneath the canvas all through the long pantomime, lying upon a couch at the back where the shadows gathered thickly. And then the gust of fresh wind that came in with a little song as they opened the door at the end, and saw the crimson dawn reflected in the dewy, shining boards of the deck. The father, throwing the Irishman a significant and curious glance, was out to join it on the instant.

Syncope, produced by excitement, cause unknown, was the scientific verdict, and an immediate burial at sea the parent's wish. As the sun rose over the highlands of Asia Minor it was carried into effect.

But the father's eyes followed not the drop. They gazed with rapt, intent expression in another direction where the shafts of sunrise sped across the sea toward the glens and dales of distant Pelion. At the sound of the plunge he did not even turn his eyes. He pointed, gathering O'Malley somehow into the gesture, across the Ægean Sea to where the shores of north-western Arcadia lay below the horizon, raised his arms with a huge sweep of welcome to the brightening sky, then turned and went below without a single word.

For a few minutes, puzzled and perhaps a little awed, the group of sailors and ship's officers remained standing with bared heads, then disappeared silently in their turn, leaving the decks to the sunrise and the wind.

CHAPTER XXIII

BUT O'MALLEY DID not immediately return to his own cabin; he yielded to Dr. Stahl's persuasion and dropped into the armchair he had already occupied more than once, watching his companion's preparations with the lamp and coffeepot.

With his eyes, that is, he watched, staring, as men say, absent-mindedly; for the fact was, only a little bit of him hovered there about his weary physical frame. The rest of him was off somewhere else across the threshold — subliminal: below, with the Russian, beyond with the traveling spirit of the boy; but the major portion, out deep in space, reclaimed by the Earth.

So, at least, it felt; for the circulation of blood in his brain ran low and physical sensation there was almost none. The driving impulse upon the outlying tracts of consciousness usually submerged had been tremendous.

"That time," he heard Stahl saying in an oddly distant voice from across the cabin, "you were nearly — out—"

"You heard? You saw it all?" he murmured as in half-sleep. For it was an effort to focus his mind even upon simple words.

The reply he hardly caught, though he felt the significant stare of the man's eye upon him and divined the shaking of his head. His life still pulsed and throbbed far away outside his normal self. Complete return was difficult. He felt all over: with the wind and hills and sea, all his little personal sensations tucked away and absorbed into Nature. In the Earth he lay, pervading her whole surface, still sharing her vaster life. With her he moved, as with a greater, higher, and more harmonious creation than himself. In large measure the cosmic instincts still swept these quickened fringes of his deep subconscious personality.

"You know them now for what they are," he heard the doctor saying at the end of much else he had entirely missed. "The father will be the next to go, and then — yourself. I warn you before it is too late. Beware! And — resist!"

His thoughts, and with them those subtle energies of the soul that are the vehicles of thought, followed where the boy had gone. Deep streams of longing swept him. The journey of that spirit, so singularly released, drew half his forces after it. Thither the bereaved parent and himself were also bound; and the lonely incompleteness of his life lay wholly now explained. That cry within the dawn, though actually it had been calling always, had at last reached him; hitherto he had caught only misinterpreted echoes of it. From the narrow body it had called him forth. Another moment and he would have known complete emancipation; and never could he forget that glorious sensation as the vital essence tasted half release. Next time the process should complete itself, and he would — go!

“Drink this,” he heard abruptly in Stahl’s grating voice, and saw him cross the cabin with a cup of steaming coffee. “Concentrate your mind now upon the things about you here. Return to the present. And tell me, too, if you can bring yourself to do so,” he added, stooping over him with the cup, “a little of what you experienced. The return, I know, is pain. But try — try—”

“Like a little bit of death, yes,” murmured the Irishman. “I feel caught again and caged — small.” He could have wept. This ugly little life!

“Because you’ve tasted a moment of genuine cosmic consciousness and now you feel the limitations of normal personality,” Stahl added, more soothingly. He sat down beside him and sipped his own coffee.

“Dispersed about the whole earth I felt, deliciously extended and alive,” O’Malley whispered with a faint shiver as he glanced about the little cabin, noticing the small windows and shut door. “Upholstery” oppressed him. “Now I’m back in prison again.”

There was silence for a moment. Then presently the doctor spoke, as though he thought aloud, expecting no reply.

“All great emotions,” he said in lowered tones, “tap the extensions of the personality we now call subconscious, and a man in anger, in love, in ecstasy of any kind is greater than he knows. But to you has come, perhaps, the greatest form of all — a definite and instant merging with the being of the Earth herself. You reached the point where you *felt* the spirit of the planet’s life. You almost crossed the threshold — your extension edged into her own. She bruised you, and you knew—”

“‘Bruised’?” he asked, startled at the singular expression into closer hearing.

“We are not ‘aware’ of our interior,” he answered, smiling a little, “until something goes wrong and the attention is focused. A keen sensation — pain — and you become aware. Subconscious processes then become consciously recognized. I bruise your lung for instance; you become conscious of that lung for the first time, and feel it. You gather it up from the general subconscious background into acute personal consciousness. Similarly, a word or mood may sting and stimulate some phase of your consciousness usually too remote to be recognized. Last night — regions of your extended Self, too distant for most men to realize their existence at all, contacted the consciousness of the Earth herself. She bruised you, and *via* that bruise caught you up into her greater Self. You experienced a genuine cosmic reaction.”

O’Malley listened, though hardly to the actual words. Behind the speech, which was in difficult German for one thing, his mind heard the rushing past of this man’s ideas. They moved together along the same stream of thought, and the Irishman knew that what he thus heard was true, at any rate, for himself. And at the same time he recognized with admiration the skill with which this scientific mystic of a *Schiffsarzt* sought to lead him back into the safer regions of his normal state. Stahl did not now oppose or deny. Catching the wave of the Celt’s experience, he let his thought run sympathetically with it, alongside, as it were, guiding gently and insinuatingly down to earth again.

And the result justified this cunning wisdom; O’Malley returned to the common world by degrees. For it was enchanting to find his amazing adventure explained even in this partial, speculative way. Who else among his acquaintances would have listened at all, much less admitted its possibility?

“But, why in particular *me*?” he asked. “Can’t everybody know these cosmic reactions you speak of?” It was his intellect that asked the foolish question. His whole Self knew the answer beforehand.

“Because,” replied the doctor, tapping his saucer to emphasize each word, “in some way you have retained an almost unbelievable simplicity of heart — an innocence singularly undefiled — a sort of primal, spontaneous innocence that has kept you clean and open. I venture even to suggest that shame, as most men know it, has never come to you at all.”

The words sank down into him. Passing the intellect that would have criticized, they nested deep within where the intuition knew them true. Behind the clumsy language that is, he caught the thought.

“As if I were a saint!” he laughed faintly.

Stahl shook his head. “Rather, because you live detached,” he replied, “and have never identified your Self with the rubbish of life. The channels in you are still open to these tides of larger existence. I wish I had your courage.”

“While others — ?”

The German hesitated a moment. “Most men,” he said, choosing his words with evident care, “are too grossly organized to be aware that these reactions of a wider consciousness can be possible at all. Their minute normal Self they mistake for the whole, hence denying even the experiences of others. ‘Our actual personality may be something considerably unlike that conception of it which is based on our present terrestrial consciousness — a form of consciousness suited to, and developed by, our temporary existence here, *but not necessarily more than a fraction of our total self*. It is quite credible that our entire personality is never terrestrially manifest.’” Obviously he quoted. The Irishman had read the words somewhere. He came back more and more into the world — correlated, that is, the subconscious with the conscious.

“Yet consciousness apart from the brain is inconceivable,” he interposed, more to hear the reply than to express a conviction.

Whether Stahl divined his intention or not, he gave no sign.

“‘We cannot say with any security that the stuff called brain is the only conceivable machinery which mind and consciousness are able to utilize: though it is true that we know no other.’” The last phrase he repeated: “‘though it is true that we know no other.’”

O’Malley sank deeper into his chair, making no reply. His mind clutched at the words “too grossly organized,” and his thoughts ran back for a moment to his daily life in London. He pictured his friends and acquaintances there; the men at his club, at dinner parties, in the parks, at theatres; he heard their talk — shooting — destruction of exquisite life; horses, politics, women, and the rest; yet good, honest, lovable fellows all. But how did they breathe in so small a world at all? Practical-minded specimens of the greatest civilization ever known! He recalled the heavy, dazed expression on the faces of one or two to whom he had sometimes dared to speak of those wider realms that were so familiar to himself….

"'Though it is true that we know no other,'" he heard Stahl repeating slowly as he looked down into his cup and stirred the dregs.

Then, suddenly, the doctor rose and came over to his side. His eyes twinkled, and he rubbed his hands vigorously together as he spoke. He laughed.

"For instance, I have no longer now the consciousness of that coffee I have just swallowed," he exclaimed, "yet, if it disagreed with me, my consciousness of it would return."

"The abnormal states you mean are a symptom of disorder then?" the Irishman asked, following the analogy.

"At present, yes," was the reply, "and will remain so until their correlation with the smaller conscious Self is better understood. These belligerent Powers of the larger Consciousness are apt to overwhelm as yet. That time, perhaps, is coming. Already a few here and there have guessed that the states we call hysteria and insanity, conditions of trance, hypnotism, and the like, are not too satisfactorily explained." He peered down at his companion. "If I could study your Self at close quarters for a few years," he added significantly, "and under various conditions, I might teach the world!"

"Thank you!" cried the Irishman, now wholly returned into his ordinary self. He could think of nothing else to say, yet he meant the words and gave them vital meaning. He moved across to another chair. Lighting a cigarette, he puffed out clouds of smoke. He did not desire to be caught again beneath this man's microscope. And in his mind he had a sudden picture of the speculative and experimenting doctor being "requested to sever his connection" with the great Hospital for the sake of the latter's reputation. But Stahl, in no way offended, was following his own thoughts aloud, half speaking to himself.

"… For a being organized as you are, more active in the outlying tracts of consciousness than in the centers lying nearer home, — a being like yourself, I say, might become aware of Other Life and other personalities even more advanced and highly organized than that of the Earth."

A strange excitement came upon him, making his eyes shine. He walked to and fro, O'Malley watching him, a touch of alarm mingled with his interest.

"And to think of the great majority that denies because they are — dead!" he cried. "Smothered! Undivining! Living in that uninspired fragment which they deem the whole! Ah, my friend," — and he came abruptly nearer— "the pathos, the comedy, the pert self-sufficiency of their dull pride, the crass stupidity and littleness of their denials, in the eyes of those like ourselves who have actually known the passion of the larger experience — ! For all this modern talk about a Subliminal Self is woven round a profoundly significant truth, a truth newly discovered and only just beginning to be understood. We are much greater than we know, and there is a vast subconscious part of us. But, what is more important still, there is a super-consciousness as well. The former represents what the race has discarded; it is past; but the latter stands for what it reaches out to in the future. The perfect man you dream of perhaps is he who shall eventually combine the two, for there is, I think, a vast amount the race has discarded unwisely and prematurely. It is of value and will have to be recovered. In the subconsciousness it lies secure and waiting. But it is the super-consciousness that you should aim for, not the other, for there lie those greater powers which so mysteriously wait upon the call of genius, inspiration, hypnotism, and the rest."

"One leads, though, to the other," interrupted O'Malley quickly. "It is merely a question of the swing of the pendulum?"

"Possibly," was the laconic reply.

"They join hands, I mean, behind my back, as it were."

"Possibly."

"This stranger, then, may really lead me forward and not back?"

"Possibly," again was all the answer that he got.

For Stahl had stopped short, as though suddenly aware that he had said too much, betraying himself in the sudden rush of interest and excitement. The face for a moment had seemed quite young, but now the flush faded, and the light died out from his eyes. O'Malley never understood how the change came about so quickly, for in a moment, it seemed, the doctor was calm again, quietly lighting one of his black cigars over by the desk, peering at him half quizzingly, half mockingly through the smoke.

"So I urge you again," he was saying, as though the rest had been some interlude that the Irishman had half imagined, "to proceed with the caution of this sane majority, the caution that makes for safety. Your friend, as I have already suggested to you, is a direct expression of the cosmic life of the earth. Perhaps, you have guessed by now, the particular type and form. Do not submit your inner life too completely to his guidance. Contain your Self — and resist — while it is yet possible."

And while he sat on there, sipping hot coffee, half listening to the words that warned of danger while at the same time they cunningly urged him forwards, it seemed that the dreams of childhood revived in him with a power that obliterated this present day — the childhood, however, not of his mere body, but of his spirit, when the world herself was young…. He, too, had dwelt in Arcady, known the free life of splendor and simplicity in some Saturnian Reign; for now this dream, but half remembered, half believed, though eternally yearned for — dream of a Golden Age untouched by Time, still there, still accessible, still inhabited, was actually coming true.

It surely was that old Garden of innocence and joy where the soul, while all unvexed by a sham and superficial civilization of the mind, might yet know growth — a realm half divined by saints and poets, but to the gross majority forgotten or denied.

The Simple Life! This new interpretation of it at first overwhelmed. The eyes of his soul turned wild with glory; the passion that o'er-runs the world in desolate places was his; his, too, the strength of rushing rivers that coursed their parent's being. He shared the terror of the mountains and the singing of the sweet Spring rains. The spread wonder of the woods of the world lay imprisoned and explained in the daily hurry of his very blood. He understood, because he felt, the power of the ocean tides; and, flitting to and fro through the tenderer regions of his extended Self, danced the fragrance of all the wild flowers that ever blew. That strange allegory of man, the microcosm, and earth, the macrocosm, became a sudden blazing reality. The feverish distress, unrest, and vanity of modern life was due to the distance men had traveled from the soul of the world, away from large simplicity into the pettier state they deemed so proudly progress.

Out of the transliminal depths of this newly awakened Consciousness rose the pelt and thunder of these magical and enormous cosmic sensations — the pulse and throb of the planetary life where his little Self had fringed her own. Those untamed profundities in himself that walked alone, companionless among modern men, suffering an eternal nostalgia, at last knew the approach to satisfaction. For when the "inner catastrophe" completed itself and escape should come — that transfer of the conscious center across the threshold into this vaster region stimulated by the Earth — all his longings would be housed at last like homing birds, nested in the gentle places his yearnings all these years had lovingly built for them — in a living Nature! The fever of modern life, the torture and unrest of a false, external civilization that trained the brain while it still left wars and baseness in the heart, would drop from him like the symptoms of some fierce disease. The god of speed and mechanism that ruled the world today, urging men at ninety miles an hour to enter a Heaven where material gain was only a little sublimated and not utterly denied, would pass for the nightmare that it really was. In its place the cosmic life of undifferentiated simplicity, clean and sweet and big, would hold his soul in the truly everlasting arms.

And that little German doctor, sitting yonder, enlightened yet afraid, seeking an impossible compromise — Stahl could no more stop his going than a fly could stop the rising of the Atlantic tides.

Out of all this tumult of confused thought and feeling there rose then the silver face of some forgotten and passionate loveliness. Apparently it reached his lips, for he heard his own voice murmuring outside him somewhere across the cabin: —

"The gods of Greece — and of the world—"

Yet the instant words clothed it, the flashing glory went. The idea plunged back out of sight — untranslatable in language. Thrilled and sad, he lay back in his chair, watching the doctor and trying to focus his mind upon what he was saying. But the lost idea still dived and reared within him like a shining form, yet never showing more than this radiant point above the surface. The passion and beauty of it…! He tried no more to tie a label of modern words about its neck. He let it swim and dive and leap within him uncaught. Only he understood better why, close to Greece, his friends had betrayed their inner selves, and why for the lesser of the two, whose bodily cage was not yet fully clamped and barred by physical maturity, escape, or return rather, had been possible, nay, had been inevitable.

CHAPTER XXIV

STAHL, HE REMEMBERS, had been talking for a long time. The general sense of what he said reached him, perhaps, but certainly not many of the words. The doctor, it was clear, wished to coax from him the most intimate description possible of his experience. He put things crudely in order to challenge criticism, and thus to make his companion's reason sit in judgment on his heart. If this visionary Celt would let his intellect pass soberly and dissectingly upon these flaming states of wider consciousness he had touched, the doctor would have data of real value for his own purposes.

But this discriminating analysis was precisely what the Irishman found impossible. His soul was too "dispersed" to concentrate upon modern terms and phrases. These in any case dealt only with the fragments of Self that manifested through brain and body. The rest could be felt only, never truly described. Since the beginning of the world such transcendental experiences had never been translatable in the language of "common" sense; and today, even, when a few daring minds sought a laborious classification, straining the resources of psychology, the results were little better than a rather enticing and suggestive confusion.

In his written account, indeed, he gives no proper report of what Stahl tried to say. A gaping hiatus appears in the manuscript, with only asterisks and numbers that referred to pages of his tumbled notebooks. Following these indications I came across the skeletons of ideas which perhaps were the raw material, so to say, of these crude and speculative statements that the German poured out at him across that cabin — blocks of exaggeration he flung at him, in the hope of winning some critical and intelligible response. Like the structure of some giant fairy-tale they read — some toppling scaffolding that needed reduction in scale before it could be focused for normal human sight.

"Nature" was really alive for those who believed — and worshipped; for worship was that state of consciousness which opens the sense and provides the channel for this singular interior realization. In very desolate and lonely places, unsmothered and unstained by men as they exist today, such expressions of the Earth's stupendous, central vitality were still possible…. The "Russian" himself was some such fragment, some such cosmic being, strayed down among men in a form outwardly human, and the Irishman had in his own wild, untamed heart those same very tender and primitive possibilities which enabled him to know and feel it.

In the body, however, he was fenced off — without. Only by the disentanglement of his primitive self from the modern development which caged it, could he recover this strange lost Eden and taste in its fullness the mother-life of the planetary consciousness which called him back. This dissociation might be experienced temporarily as a subliminal adventure; or permanently — in death.

Here, it seemed, was a version of the profound mystical idea that a man must lose his life to find it, and that the personal self must be merged in a larger one to know peace — the incessant, burning nostalgia that dwells in the heart of every religion known to men: escape from the endless pain of futile personal ambitions and desires for external things that are unquenchable because never possible of satisfaction. It had never occurred to him before in so literal and simple a form. It explained his sense of kinship with the earth and nature rather than with men….

There followed, then, another note which the Irishman had also omitted from his complete story as I found it — in this MS. that lay among the dust and dinginess of the Paddington back-room like some flaming gem in a refuse heap. It was brief but pregnant — the block of another idea, Fechner's apparently, hurled at him by the little doctor.

That, just as the body takes up the fact of the bruised lung into its own general consciousness, lifting it thereby from the submerged, unrealized state; and just as our human consciousness can be caught up again as a part of the earth's; so, in turn, the Planet's own vast personality is included in the collective consciousness of the entire Universe — all steps and stages of advance to that final and august Consciousnss of which they are fragments, projections, manifestations in Time — GOD.

And the immense conception, at any rate, gave him a curious, flashing clue to that passionate inclusion which a higher form of consciousness may feel for the countless lesser manifestations below it; and so to that love for humanity as a whole that saviors feel….

Yet, out of all this deep flood of ideas and suggestions that somehow poured about him from the mind of this self-contradictory German, alternately scientist and mystic, O'Malley emerged with his own smaller and vivid personal delight that he would presently himself — escape: escape under the guidance of the big Russian into some remote corner of his own extended Being, where he would enjoy a quasi-merging with the Earth-life, and know subjectively at least the fruition of all his yearnings.

The doctor had phrased it once that a part of him fluid, etheric or astral, malleable by desire, would escape and attain to this result. But, after all, the separation of one portion of himself from the main personality could only mean being conscious it: another part of it — in a division usually submerged.

As Stahl so crudely put it, the Earth had bruised him. He would know in some little measure the tides of her own huge life, his longings, loneliness, and nostalgia explained and satisfied. He would find that fair old Garden. He might even know the lesser gods.

* * * * *

That afternoon at Smyrna the matter was officially reported, and so officially done with. It caused little enough comment on the steamer. The majority of the passengers had hardly noticed the boy at all, much less his disappearance; and while many of them landed there for Ephesus, still more left the ship next day at Constantinople.

The big Russian, though he kept mostly to his own cabin, was closely watched by the ship's officers, and O'Malley, too, realized that he was under observation. But nothing happened; the emptied steamer pursued her quiet way, and the Earth, unrealized by her teeming freight so busy with their tiny personal aims, rushed forwards upon her glorious journey through space.

O'Malley alone realized her presence, aware that he rushed with her amid a living universe. But he kept his new sensations to himself. The remainder of the voyage, indeed, across the Black Sea *via* Samsoun and Trebizond, is hazy in his mind so far as practical details are concerned, for he found himself in a dreamy state of deep peace and would sometimes sit for hours in reverie, only reminded of the present by certain pricks of annoyance from the outer world. He had returned, of course, to his own stateroom, yet felt in such close sympathy with his companion that no outward expression by way of confidence or explanation was necessary. In their Subconsciousness they were together and at one.

The pricks of annoyance came, as may be expected, chiefly from Dr. Stahl, and took the form of variations of “I told you so.” The man was in a state of almost anger, caused half by disappointment, half by unsatisfied curiosity. His cargo of oil and water would not mix, yet he knew not which to throw overboard; here was another instance where facts refused to tally with the beliefs dictated by sane reason; where the dazzling speculations he played with threatened to win the day and destroy the compromise his soul loved.

The Irishman, however, did not resent his curiosity, though he made no attempt to satisfy it. He allowed him to become authoritative and professional, to treat him somewhat as a patient. What could it matter to him, who in a few hours would land at Batoum and go off with his guide and comrade to some place where — ? The thought he could never see completed in words, for he only knew that the fulfillment of the adventure would take place — somewhere, somehow, somewhen — in that space within the soul of which external space is but an image and a figure. What takes place in the mind and heart are alone the true events; their outward expression in the shifting and impermanent shapes of matter is the least real thing in all the world. For him the experience would be true, real, authoritative — fact in the deepest sense of the word. Already he saw it “whole.”

Faith asks no travelers’ questions — exact height of mountains, length of rivers, distance from the sea, precise spelling of names, and so forth. He felt — the quaint and striking simile is in the written account — like a man hunting for a pillar-box in a strange city — absurdly difficult to find, as though purposely concealed by the authorities amid details of street and houses to which the eye is unaccustomed, yet really close at hand all the time….

But at Trebizond, a few hours before Batoum, Dr. Stahl in his zealous attentions went too far; for that evening he gave his “patient” a sleeping-draught in his coffee that caused him to lie for twelve hours on the cabin sofa, and when at length he woke toward noon, the Customs officers had been aboard since nine o’clock, and most of the passengers had already landed.

Among them, leaving no message, the big Russian had also gone ashore. And, though Stahl may have been actuated by the wisest and kindest motives, he was not quite prepared for the novel experience with which it provided him — namely, of hearing an angry Irishman saying rapidly what he thought of him in a stream of eloquent language that lasted nearly a quarter of an hour without a break!

CHAPTER XXV

ALTHOUGH BATOUM IS a small place, and the trains that leave it during the day are few enough, O'Malley knew that to search for his friend by the methods of the ordinary detective was useless. It would have been also wrong. The man had gone deliberately, without attempting to say good-bye — because, having come together in the real and inner sense, real separation was not possible. The vital portion of their beings, thought, feeling, and desire, were close and always would be. Their bodies, busy at different points of the map among the casual realities of external life, could make no change in that. And at the right moment they would assuredly meet again to begin the promised journey.

Thus, at least, in some fashion peculiarly his own, was the way the Irishman felt; and this was why, after the first anger with his German friend, he resigned himself patiently to the practical business he had in hand.

The little incident was characteristically revealing, and shows how firmly rooted in his imaginative temperament was the belief, the unalterable conviction rather, that his life operated upon an outer and an inner plane simultaneously, the one ever reacting upon the other. It was as if he were aware of two separate sets of faculties, subtly linked, one carrying on the affairs of the physical man in the "practical" world, the other dealing with the spiritual economy in the subconscious. To attend to the latter alone was to be a useless dreamer among men, unpractical, unbalanced; to neglect it wholly for the former was to be crassly limited, but half alive; to combine the two in effective co-operation was to achieve that high level of a successful personality, which some perhaps term genius, some prophet, and others, saint. It meant, at any rate, to have sources of inspiration within oneself.

Thus he spent the day completing what was necessary for his simple outfit, and put up for the night at one of the little hotels that spread their tables invitingly upon the pavement, so that dinner may be enjoyed in full view of one of the most picturesque streams of traffic it is possible to see.

The sultry, enervating heat of the day had passed and a cool breeze came shorewards over the Black Sea. With a box of thin Russian cigarettes before him he lingered over the golden Kakhetian wine and watched the crowded street. Knowing enough of the language to bargain smartly for his room, his pillows, sheets, and samovar, he yet could scarcely compass conversation with the strangers about him. Of Russian proper, besides, he heard little; there was a Babel of many tongues, Armenian, Turkish, Georgian, explosive phrases of Swanetian, soft gliding Persian words, and the sharp or guttural exclamations of the big-voiced, giant fellows, all heavily armed, who belonged to the bewildering tribes that dwelt among the mountains beyond. Occasionally came a broken bit of French or German; but they strayed in, lost and bizarre, as fragments from some distant or forgotten world.

Down the pavement, jostling his elbows, strode the constant, gorgeous procession of curious, wild, barbaric faces, bearded, with hooked noses, flashing eyes, burkas flowing; cartridge-belts of silver and ivory gleaming across chests in the glare of the electric light; bashliks of white, black, and yellow wool upon the head, increasing the stature; evil-looking Black Sea knives stuck in most belts, rifles swung across great supple shoulders, long swords trailing; Turkish gypsies, dark and furtive-eyed, walking softly in leather slippers — of endless and fascinating variety, many colored and splendid, it all was. From time to time a droschky with two horses, or a private carriage with three, rattled noisily over the cobbles at a reckless pace, stopping with the abruptness of a practiced skater; and officers with narrow belted waists like those of women, their full-skirted cloaks reaching half-way down high boots of shining leather, sprang out to pay the driver and take a vacant table at his side; and once or twice a body of soldiers, several hundred strong, singing the national songs with a full-throated vigor, hoarse, wild, somehow half terrible, passed at a swinging gait away into the darkness at the end of the street, the roar of their barbaric singing dying away in the distance by the sea where the boom of waves just caught it.

And O’Malley loved it all, and “thrilled” as he watched and listened. From his hidden self within something passed out and joined it. He felt the wild pulse of energetic life that drove along with the tumult of it. The savage, untamed soul in him leaped as he saw; the blood ran faster. Sitting thus upon the bank of the hurrying stream, he knew himself akin to the main body of the invisible current further out; it drew him with it, and he experienced a quickening of all his impulses toward some wild freedom that was mighty — clean — simple.

Civilian dress was rare, and noticeable when it came. The shipping agents wore black alpaca coats, white trousers, and modern hats of straw. A few ship's officers in blue, with official caps gold-braided, passed in and out like men without a wedding garment, as distressingly out of the picture as tourists in check knickerbockers and nailed boots moving through some dim cathedral aisle. O'Malley recognized one or two from his own steamer, and turned his head the other way. It hurt. He caught himself thinking, as he saw them, of Stock Exchanges, two-penny-tubes, Belgravia dinner parties, private views, "small and earlies," musical comedy, and all the rest of the dismal and meager program. These harmless little modern uniforms were worse than ludicrous, for they formed links with the glare and noise of the civilization he had left behind, the smeared vulgarity of the big cities where men and women live in their possessions, wasting life in that worship of external detail they call "progress"…

A well-known German voice crashed through his dream.

"Already at the wine! These Caucasian vintages are good; they really taste of grapes and earth and flowers. Yes, thanks, I'll join you for a moment if I may. We only lie three days in port and are glad to get ashore."

O'Malley called for a second glass, and passed the cigarettes.

"I prefer my black cigars, thank you," was the reply, lighting one. "You push on tomorrow, I suppose? Kars, Tiflis, Erzerum, or somewhere a little wilder in the mountains, eh?"

"Toward the mountains, yes," the Irishman said. Dr. Stahl was the only person he could possibly have allowed to sit next him at such a time. He had quite forgiven him now, and though at first he felt no positive welcome, the strange link between the two men quickly asserted itself and welded them together in that odd harmony they knew in spite of all differences. They could be silent together, too, without distress or awkwardness, sure test that at least some portion of their personalities fused.

And for a long time they remained silent, watching the surge and movement of the old, old types about them. They sipped the yellow wine and smoked.

The stars came out; the carriages grew less; from far away floated a deep sonorous echo now and then of the soldiers singing by their barracks. Sometimes a steamer hooted. Cossacks swung by. Often some wild cry rang out from a side street. There were heavy, unfamiliar perfumes in the air. Presently Stahl began talking about the Revolution of a few years before and the scenes of violence he had witnessed in these little streets, the shooting, barricades, bombs thrown into passing carriages, Cossacks charging down the pavements with swords drawn, shouting and howling. O'Malley listened with a part of his mind at any rate. The rest of him was much further away…. He was up among the mountain fastnesses. Already, it seemed, he knew the secret places of the mist, the lair of every running wind….

Two tall mountain tribesmen swaggered past close to their table; the thick grey burkas almost swept their glasses. They walked magnificently with easy, flowing stride, straight from the hips.

"The earth here," said O'Malley, taking advantage of a pause in the other's chatter, "produces some splendid types. Look at those two; they make one think of trees walking — blown along bodily before a wind." He watched them with admiration as they swung off and disappeared among the crowd.

Dr. Stahl, glancing keenly at him, laughed a little.

"Yes," he said; "brave, generous fellows too as a rule, who will shoot you for a pistol that excites their envy, yet give their life to save one of their savage dogs. They're still — natural," he added after a moment's hesitation; "still unspoiled. They live close to Nature with a vengeance. Up among the Ossetians on the high saddles you'll find true Pagans who worship trees, sacrifice blood, and offer bread and salt to the nature-deities."

"Still?" asked O'Malley, sipping his wine.

"Still," replied Stahl, following his example.

Over the glasses' rims their eyes met. Both smiled, though neither quite knew why. The Irishman, perhaps, was thinking of the little city clerks he knew at home, pigeon-breasted, pale-faced, under-sized. One of these big men, so full of rushing, vigorous life, would eat a dozen at a sitting.

"There's something here the rest of the world has lost," he murmured to himself. But the doctor heard him.

“You feel it?” he asked quickly, his eyes brightening. “The awful, primitive beauty — ?”

“I feel — something, certainly,” was the cautious answer. He could not possibly have said more just then; yet it seemed as though he heard far echoes of that voice that had been first borne to his ears across the blue Ægean. In the gorges of these terrible mountains it surely sounded still. These men must know it too.

“The spell of this strange land will never leave you once you’ve felt it,” pursued the other quietly, his voice deepening. “Even in the towns here — Tiflis, Kutais — I have felt it. Hereabouts is the cradle of the human race, they say, and the people have not changed for thousands of years. Some of them you’ll find” — he hunted for a word, then said with a curious, shrugging gesture, “terrific.”

“Ah—” said the Irishman, lighting a fresh cigarette from the dying stump so clumsily that the trembling of the hand was noticeable.

“And akin most likely,” said Stahl, thrusting his face across the table with a whispering tone, “to that — man — who — tempted you.”

O’Malley did not answer. He drank the liquid golden sunshine in his glass; his eyes lifted to the stars that watched above the sea; between the surge of human figures came a little wind from the grim, mysterious Caucasus beyond. He turned all tender as a child, receiving as with a shock of sudden strength and sweetness a thousand intimate messages from the splendid mood of old Mother-Earth who here expressed herself in such a potent breed of men and mountains.

He heard the doctor’s voice still speaking, as from a distance though: —

“For here they all grow with her. They do not fight her and resist. She pours freely through them; there is no opposition. The channels still lie open; … and they share her life and power.”

“That beauty which the modern world has lost,” repeated the other to himself, lingering over the words, and wondering why they expressed so little of what he really meant.

“But which will never — *can* never come again,” Stahl completed the sentence. There was a wistful, genuine sadness in his voice and eyes, and the sympathy touched the inflammable Celt with fire. It was ever thus with him. The little man opposite, with the ragged beard, and the bald, domed head gleaming in the electric light, had laid a card upon the table, showing a bit of his burning heart. The generous Irishman responded like a child, laying himself bare. So hungry was he for comprehension.

“Men have everywhere else clothed her fair body with their smothering, ugly clothing and their herded cities,” he burst out, so loud that the Armenian waiter sidled up, thinking he called for wine. “But here she lies naked and unashamed, sweet in divinity made simple. By Jove! I tell you, doctor, it burns and sweeps me with a kind of splendid passion that drowns my little shame-faced personality of the twentieth century. I could run out and worship — fall down and kiss the grass and soil and sea — !”

He drew back suddenly like a wounded animal; his face turned scarlet, as though he knew himself convicted of an hysterical outburst. Stahl’s eyes had changed even as he spoke the flaming words that struggled so awkwardly to seize his mood of rapture — a thought the Earth poured through him for a moment. The bitter, half-mocking smile lay in them, and on the lips the cold and critical expression of the other Stahl, skeptic and science-man. A revulsion of feeling caught them both. But to O’Malley came the thought that once again he had been drawn — was being coaxed for examination beneath the microscope.

“The material here,” Stahl said presently, with the calm tones of a dispassionate diagnosis, “is magnificent as you say, uncivilized without being merely savage, untamed, yet far from crude barbarism. When the progress of the age gets into this land the transformation will be grand. When Russia lets in culture, when modern improvements have developed her resources and trained the wild human forces into useful channels….”

He went on calmly by the yard, till it was all the Irishman could do not to dash the wine-glass in his face.

“Remember my words when you are up in the lonely mountains,” he concluded at length, smiling his queer sardonic smile, “and keep yourself in hand. Put on the brakes when possible. Your experience will thus have far more value.”

“And you,” replied O’Malley bluntly, so bluntly it was almost rudeness, “go back to Fechner, and try to save your compromising soul before it is too late —”

“Still following those lights that do mislead the morn,” Stahl added gently, breaking into English for a phrase he apparently loved. They laughed and raised their glasses.

A long pause came which neither cared to break. The streets were growing empty, the personality of the mysterious little Black Sea port folding away into the darkness. The wilder element had withdrawn behind the shuttered windows. There came a murmur of the waves, but the soldiers no longer sang. The droschkys ceased to rattle past. The night flowed down more thickly from the mountains, and the air, moist with that malarial miasma which makes the climate of this reclaimed marsh whereon Batoum is built so unhealthy, closed unpleasantly about them. The stars died in it.

“Another glass?” suggested Stahl. “A drink to the gods of the Future, and till we meet again, on your return journey, eh?”

“I’ll walk with you to the steamer,” was the reply. “I never care for much wine. And the gods of the Future will prefer my usual offering, I think — imaginative faith.”

The doctor did not ask him to explain. They walked down the middle of the narrow streets. No one was about, nor were there lights in many windows. Once or twice from an upper story came the faint twanging of a balalaika against the drone of voices, and occasionally they passed a little garden where figures outlined themselves among the trees, with the clink of glasses, laughter of men and girls, and the glowing tips of cigarettes.

They turned down toward the harbor where the spars and funnels of the big steamers were just visible against the sky, and opposite the unshuttered window of a shop — one of those modern shops that oddly mar the town with assorted German tinware, Paris hats, and oleographs indiscriminately mingled — Stahl stopped a moment and pointed. They moved up idly and looked in. From the shadows of the other side, well hidden, an armed patrol eyed them suspiciously, though they were not aware of it.

“It was before a window like this,” remarked Stahl, apparently casually, “that I once in Tiflis overheard two mountain Georgians talking together as they examined a reproduction of a modern picture — Böcklin's 'Centaur.' They spoke in half whispers, but I caught the trend of what they said. You know the picture, perhaps?"

"I've seen it somewhere, yes," was the short reply. "But what were they saying?" He strove to keep his voice commonplace and casual like his companion's.

"Oh, just discussing it together, but with a curious stretched interest," Stahl went on. "One asked, 'What does it say?' and pointed to the inscription underneath. They could not read. For a long time they stared in silence, their faces grave and half afraid. 'What is it?' repeated the first one, and the other, a much older man, heavily bearded and of giant build, replied low, 'It's what I told you about'; there was awe in his tone and manner; 'they still live in the big valley of the rhododendrons beyond—' mentioning some lonely uninhabited region toward Daghestan; 'they come in the spring, and are very swift and roaring….You must always hide. To see them is to die. But they cannot die; they are of the mountains. They are older, older than the stones. And the dogs will warn you, or the horses, or sometimes a great sudden wind, though you must never shoot.' They stood gazing in solemn wonder for minutes…till at last, realizing that their silence was final, I moved away. There were manifestations of life in the mountains, you see, that they had seen and knew about — old forms akin to that picture apparently."

The patrol came out of his shadows, and Stahl quickly drew his companion along the pavement.

"You have your passport with you?" he asked, noticing the man behind them.

"It went to the police this afternoon. I haven't got it back yet." O'Malley spoke thickly, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. How much he welcomed that casual interruption of the practical world he could never explain or tell. For the moment he had felt like wax in the other's hands. He had dreaded searching questions, and felt unspeakably relieved. A minute more and he would have burst into confession.

"You should never be without it," the doctor added. "The police here are perfect fiends, and can cause you endless inconvenience."

O’Malley knew it all, but gladly seized the talk and spun it out, asking innocent questions while scarcely listening to the answers. They distanced the patrol and neared the quays and shipping. In the darkness of the sky a great line showed where the spurs of the Lesser Caucasus gloomed huge and solemn to the East and West. At the gangway of the steamer they said good-bye. Stahl held the Irishman’s hand a moment in his own.

“Remember, when you know temptation strong,” he said gravely, though a smile was in the eyes, “the passwords that I now give you: Humanity and Civilization.”

“I’ll try.”

They shook hands warmly enough.

“Come home by this steamer if you can,” he called down from the deck. “And keep to the middle of the road on your way back to the hotel. It’s safer in a town like this.” O’Malley divined the twinkle in his eyes as he said it. “Forgive my many sins,” he heard finally, “and when we meet again, tell me your own….” The darkness took the sentence. But the word the Irishman took home with him to the little hotel was the single one — Civilization: and this, owing to the peculiar significance of intonation and accent with which this bewildering and self-contradictory being had uttered it.

CHAPTER XXVI

HE WALKED ALONG the middle of the street as Stahl had advised. He would have done so in any case, unconsciously, for he knew these towns quite as well as the German did. Yet he did not walk alone. The entire Earth walked with him, and personal danger was an impossibility. A dozen ruffians might attack him, but none could "take" his life.

How simple it all seemed, yet how utterly beyond the reach of intelligible description to those who have never felt it — this sudden surge upwards, downwards, all around and about of the vaster consciousness amid which the sense of normal individuality seemed but a tiny focused point. That loss of personality he first dreaded as an "inner catastrophe" appeared to him now for what it actually was — merely an extinction of some phantasmal illusion of self into the only true life. Here, upon the fringe of this wonder-region of the Caucasus, the spirit of the Earth still manifested as of old, reached out lovingly to those of her children who were simple enough to respond, ready to fold them in and heal them of the modern, racking fevers which must otherwise destroy them…. The entire sky of soft darkness became a hand that covered him, and stroked him into peace; the perfume that wafted down that narrow street beside him was the single, enveloping fragrance of the whole wide Earth herself; he caught the very murmur of her splendid journey through the stars. The certitude of some state of boundless being flamed, roaring and immense, about his soul….

And when he reached his room, a little cell that shut out light and air, he met that sinister denial of the simple life which, for him at least, was the true Dweller on the Threshold. Crashing in to it he choked, as it were, and could have cried aloud. It gripped and caught him by the throat — the word that Stahl — Stahl who understood even while he warned and mocked and hesitated himself — had flung so tauntingly upon him from the decks — Civilization.

Upon his table lay by chance — the Armenian hotel-keeper had evidently unearthed it for his benefit — a copy of a London halfpenny paper, a paper that feeds the public with the ugliest details of all the least important facts of life by the yard, inventing others when the supply is poor. He read it over vaguely, with a sense of cold distress that was half pain, half nausea. Somehow it stirred his sense of humor; he returned slowly to his normal, littler state. But it was not the contrast which made him smile; rather was it the chance juxtaposition of certain of the contents; for on the page facing the accounts of railway accidents, of people burned alive, explosions, giant strikes, crumpled air-men and other countless horrors which modern inventions offered upon the altar of feverish Progress, he read a complacently boastful leader that extolled the conquest of Nature men had learned *by speed*. The ability to pass from one point to another across the skin of the globe in the least possible time was sign of the development of the human soul.

The pompous flatulence of the language touched bathos. He thought of the thousands who had read both columns and preened themselves upon that leader. He thought how they would pride themselves upon the latest contrivance for speeding their inert bodies from one point to another "annihilating distance"; upon being able to get from suburbia to the huge shops that created artificial wants, then filled them; from the pokey villas with their wee sham gardens to the dingy offices; from dark airless East End rooms to countless factories that pour out semifraudulent, unnecessary wares upon the world, explosives and weapons to destroy another nation, or cheapjack goods to poison their own — all in a few minutes less than they could do it the week before.

And then he thought of the leisure of the country folk and of those who knew how to be content without external possessions, to watch the sunset and the dawn with hearts that sought realities; sharing the noble slowness of the seasons, the gradual growth of flowers, trees, and crops, the unhurried dignity of Nature's grand procession, the repose-in-progress of the Mother-Earth.

The calmness of the unhastening Earth once more possessed his soul in peace. He hid the paper, watching the quiet way the night beyond his window buried it from sight…

And through that open window came the perfume and the mighty hand of darkness slowly. It seemed to this imaginative Irishman that he caught a sound of awful laughter from the mountains and the sea, a laughter that brought, too, a wave of sighing — of deep and old-world sighing.

And before he went to sleep he took an antidote in the form of a page from that book that accompanied all his travels, a book which was written wholly in the open air because its message refused to come to the heart of the inspired writer within doors, try as he would, the "sky especially containing for me the key, the inspiration—"

And the fragment that he read expressed a little bit of his own thought and feeling. The seer who wrote it looked ahead, naming it "After Civilization," whereas he looked back. But they saw the same vision; the confusion of time was nothing: —

In the first soft winds of spring, while snow yet lay on the ground —
Forth from the city into the great woods wandering,
Into the great silent white woods where they waited in their beauty and
  majesty
For man their companion to come:
There, in vision, out of the wreck of cities and civilizations,
Slowly out of the ruins of the past

Out of the litter and muck of a decaying world,
Lo! even so
I saw a new life arise.
O sound of waters, jubilant, pouring, pouring — O hidden song in the
  hollows!
Secret of the Earth, swelling, sobbing to divulge itself!
Slowly, building, lifting itself up atom by atom,
Gathering itself round a new center — or rather round the world old
  center once more revealed —
I saw a new life, a new society, arise.
Man I saw arising once more to dwell with Nature;
(The old old story — the prodigal son returning, so loved,
The long estrangement, the long entanglement in vain things) —
The child returning to its home — companion of the winter woods once
  more —
Companion of the stars and waters — hearing their words at first-hand
  (more than all science ever taught) —

The near contact, the dear dear mother so close — the twilight sky
  and the young tree-tops against it;
The few needs, the exhilarated radiant life — the food and population
  question giving no more trouble;
No hurry more, no striving one to over-ride the other:
  … man the companion of Nature.
Civilization behind him now — the wonderful stretch of the past;
Continents, empires, religions, wars, migrations — all gathered up in him;
The immense knowledge, the vast winged powers — to use or not to use —
…

And as he fell asleep at length it seemed there came a sound of hushed huge trampling underneath his window, and that when he rose to listen, his big friend from the steamer led him forth into the darkness, that those shapes of Cloud and Wind he now so often saw, companioned them across the heights of the night toward some place in the distant mountains where light and flowers were, and all his dream of years most exquisitely fulfilled….

He slept. And through his sleep there dropped the words of that old tribesman from the wilderness: “They come in the spring… and are very swift and roaring. They are older, older than the stones. They cannot die… they are of the mountains, and you must hide.”

But the dream-consciousness knows no hiding; and though memory failed to report with detail in the morning, O’Malley woke refreshed and blessed, knowing that companionship awaited him, and that once he found the courage to escape completely, the Simple Life of Earth would claim him in full consciousness.

Stahl with his little modern “Intellect” was no longer there to hinder and prevent.

CHAPTER XXVII

“Far, very far, steer by my star,
Leaving the loud world’s hurry and clamor,
In the mid-sea waits you, maybe,
The Isles of Glamour, where Beauty reigns.
From coasts of commerce and myriad-marted
Towns of traffic by wide seas parted,
Past shoals unmapped and by reefs uncharted,
The single-hearted my isle attains.

“Each soul may find faith to her mind,
Seek you the peace of the groves Elysian,
Or the ivy twine and the wands of vine,
The Dionysian, Orphic rite?
To share the joy of the Maenad’s leaping
In frenzied train thro’ the dusk glen sweeping,
The dew-drench’d dance and the star-watch’d sleeping,
Or temple keeping in vestal white?

“Ye who regret suns that have set,
Lo, each god of the ages golden,
Here is enshrined, ageless and kind,
Unbeholden the dark years through.
Their faithful oracles yet bestowing,
By laurels whisper and clear streams flowing,
Or the leafy stir of the Gods’ own going,
In oak trees blowing, may answer you!” — From PEREGRINA’S SONG

For the next month Terence O’Malley possessed his soul in patience; he worked, and the work saved him. That is to say it enabled him to keep what men call “balanced.” Stahl had — whether intentionally or not he was never quite certain — raised a tempest in him. More accurately, perhaps, he had called it to the top, for it had been raging deep down ever since he could remember, or had begun to think.

That the earth might be a living, sentient organism, though too vast to be envisaged as such by normal human consciousness, had always been a tenet of his imagination's creed. Now he knew it true, as a dinner-gong is true. That deep yearnings, impossible of satisfaction in the external conditions of ordinary life, could know subjective fulfillment in the mind, had always been for him poetically true, as for any other poet: now he realized that it was literally true for some outlying tract of consciousness usually inactive, termed by some transliminal. Spiritual nostalgia provided the channel, and the transfer of consciousness to this outlying tract, involving, of course, a trance condition of the usual self, indicated the way — that was all.

Again, his mystical temperament had always seen objects as forces which from some invisible center push outwards into visible shape — as bodies: bodies of trees, stones, flowers, men, women, animals; and others but partially pushed outwards, still invisible to limited physical sight at least, either too huge, too small, or too attenuated for vision. Whereas now, as a result of Stahl and Fechner combined, it flamed into him that this was positively true; more — that there was a point in his transliminal consciousness where he might "contact" these forces before they reached their cruder external expression as bodies. Nature, in this sense, had always been for him alive, though he had allowed himself the term by a long stretch of poetic sympathy; but now he knew that it was actually true, because objects, landscapes, humans, and the rest, were verily aspects of the collective consciousness of the Earth, moods of her spirit, phases of her being, expressions of her deep, pure, passionate "heart" — projections of herself.

He pondered lingeringly over this. Common words revealed their open faces to him. He saw the ideas behind language, saw them naked. Repetition had robbed them of so much that now became vital, like Bible phrases that too great familiarity in childhood kills for all subsequent life as meaningless. His eyes were opened perhaps. He took a flower into his mind and thought about it; really thought; meditated lovingly. A flower was literally projected by the earth so far as its form was concerned. Its roots gathered soil and earth-matter, changing them into leaves and blossoms; its leaves again, took of the atmosphere, also a part of the earth. It was projected by the earth, born of her, fed by her, and at "death" returned into her. But this was its outward and visible form only. The flower, for his imaginative mind, was a force made visible as literally as a house was a force the mind of the architect made visible. In the mind, or consciousness of the Earth this flower first lay latent as a dream. Perhaps, in her consciousness, it nested as that which in us corresponds to a little thought…. And from this he leaped, as the way ever was with him, to bigger "projections" — trees, atmosphere, clouds, winds, some visible, some invisible, and so to a deeper yet simpler comprehension of Fechner's thundering conception of human beings as projections. Was he, then, literally, a child of the Earth, mothered by the whole magnificent planet…? All the world akin — that seeking for an eternal home in every human heart explained…? And were there — had there been rather — these other, vaster projections Stahl had adumbrated with his sudden borrowed stretch of vision — forces, thoughts, moods of her hidden life invisible to sight, yet able to be felt and known interiorly?

That "the gods" were definitely knowable Powers, accessible to any genuine worshipper, had ever haunted his mind, thinly separated only from definite belief: now he understood that this also had been true, though only partially divined before. For now he saw them as the rare expressions of the Earth's in the morning of her life. That he might ever come to know them close made him tremble with a fearful joy, the idea flaming across his being with a dazzling brilliance that brought him close to that state of consciousness termed ecstasy. And that in certain unique beings, outwardly human like his friend, there might still survive some primitive expression of the Earth-Soul, lesser than the gods, and intermediate as it were, became for him now a fact — wondrous, awe-inspiring, even holy, but still a fact that he could grasp.

He had found one such; and Stahl, by warnings that fought with urging invitation at the same time, had confirmed it.

It was singular, he reflected, how worship had ever turned for him a landscape or a scene enchantingly alive. Worship, he now understood, of course invited "the gods," and was the channel through which their manifestation became possible to the soul. All the gods, then, were accessible in this interior way, but Pan especially — in desolate places and secret corners of a wood…. He remembered dimly the Greek idea of worship in the Mysteries: that the worshipper knew actual temporary union with his deity in ecstasy, and at death went permanently into his sphere of being. He understood that worship was au fond a desire for loss of personal life — hence its subtle joy; and a fear lest it be actually accomplished — whence its awe and wonder.

Some glorious, winged thing moved now beside him; it held him by the hand. The Earth possessed him; and the whole adventure, so far as he can make it plain, was an authoritative summons to the natural, Simple Life.

For the next month, therefore, O'Malley, unhurrying, blessed with a deeper sense of happiness than he had ever known before, dismissed the "tempest" from his surface consciousness, and set to work to gather the picturesque impressions of strange places and strange peoples that the public liked to read about in occasional letters of travel. And by the time May had passed into June he had moved up and down the Caucasus, observing, learning, expanding, and gathering in the process through every sense — through the very pores of his skin almost — draughts of a new and abundant life that is to be had there merely for the asking.

That modification of the personality which comes even in cities to all but the utterly hidebound — so that a man in Rome finds himself not quite the same as he was in London or in Paris a few days before — went forward in him on a profounder scale than anything he had known hitherto. Nature fed, stimulated and called him with a passionate intimacy that destroyed all sense of loneliness, and with a vehement directness of attack that simply charged him to the brim with a new joy of living. His vitality, powers, even his physical health, stood at their best and highest. The country laid its spell upon him, in a word; and if he expresses it thus with some intensity it was because life came to him so. His record is the measure of his vision. Those who find exaggeration in it merely confess thereby their own smaller capacity of living.

Here, as he wandered to and fro among these proud, immense, secluded valleys, through remote and untamed forests, and by the banks of wild rivers that shook their flying foam across untrodden banks, he wandered at the same time deeper and ever deeper into himself, toward a point where he lost touch with all that constituted him "modern," or held him captive in the spirit of today. Nearer and ever nearer he moved into some tremendous freedom, some state of innocence and simplicity that, while gloriously unrestrained, yet knew no touch of license. Dreams had whispered of it;

childhood had fringed its frontiers; longings had even mapped it faintly to his mind. But now he breathed its very air and knew it face to face. The Earth surged wonderfully about him.

With his sleeping-bag upon a small Caucasian horse, a sack to hold his cooking things, a pistol in his belt, he wandered thus for days, sleeping beneath the stars, seeing the sunset and the dawn, drenched in new strength and wonder all the time. Here he touched deeper reaches of the Earth that spoke of old, old things, that yet were still young because they knew not change. He walked in the morning of the world, through her primal fire and dew, when all was a first and giant garden.

The advertised splendors of other lands, even of India, Egypt, and the East, seemed almost vulgar beside this country that had somehow held itself aloof, unstained and clean. The civilization of its little towns seemed but a coated varnish that an hour's sun would melt away; the railway, crawling along the flanks of the great range, but a ribbon of old iron pinned on that, with the first shiver of those giant sides, would split and vanish.

Here, where the Argonauts once landed, the Golden Fleece still shone o' nights in the depths of the rustling beech woods; along the shores of that old Phasis their figures might still be seen, tall Jason in the lead, erect and silvery, passing o'er the shining, flowered fields upon their quest of ancient beauty. Further north from this sunny Colchian strand rose the peak of Kasbek, gaunt and desolate pyramid of iron, "sloping through five great zones of climate," whence the ghost of Prometheus still gazed down from his "vast frozen precipice" upon a world his courage would redeem. For somewhere here was the cradle of the human race, fair garden of some Edened life before the "Fall," when the Earth sang for joy in her first, golden youth, and her soul expressed itself in mighty forms that remain for lesser days but a faded hierarchy of visioned gods.

A living Earth went with him everywhere, with love that never breathed alarm. It seemed he felt her very thoughts within himself — thoughts, however, that now no longer married with a visible expression as shapes.

Among these old-world tribes and peoples with their babble of difficult tongues, wonder and beauty, terror and worship, still lay too deeply buried to have as yet externalized themselves in mental forms as legend, myth, and story. In the blood ran all their richness undiluted. Life was simple, full charged with an immense delight. At home little cocksure writers in little cocksure journals, pertly modern and enlightened, might dictate how far imaginative vision and belief could go before they overstepped the limits of an artificial schedule; but here “everything possible to be believed was still an image of truth,” and the stream of life flowed deeper than all mere intellectual denials.

A little out of sight, but thinly veiled, the powers that in this haunted corner of the earth, too strangely neglected, pushed outwards into men and trees, into mountains, flowers, and the rest, were unenslaved and intensely vital. In his blood O’Malley knew the primal pulses of the world.

It was irresistibly seductive. Whether he slept with the Aryan Ossetians upon the high ridges of the central range, or shared the stone huts of the mountain Jews, unchanged since Bible days, beyond the Suram heights, there came to all his senses the message of that Golden Age his longings ever sought — the rush and murmur of the *Urwelt* calling.

And so it was, about the first week in June that lean, bronzed, and in perfect physical condition, this wandering Irishman found himself in a little Swanetian hamlet beyond Alighir, preparing with a Georgian peasant-guide to penetrate yet deeper into the mountain recesses and feed his heart with what he found of loneliness and beauty.

This region of Imerethia, bordering on Mingrelia, is smothered beneath an exuberance of vegetation almost tropical, blue and golden with enormous flowers, tangled with wild vines, rich with towering soft beech woods, and finally, in the upper sections, ablaze with leagues of huge rhododendron trees in blossom that give whole mountain-sides the aspect of a giant garden, flowering amid peaks that even dwarf the Alps. For here the original garden of the world survives, run wild with pristine loveliness. The prodigality of Nature is bewildering, almost troubling. There are valleys, rarely entered by the foot of man, where monstrous lilies, topping a man on foot and even reaching to his shoulder on horseback, have suggested to botanists in their lavish luxuriance a survival of the original flora of the world. A thousand flowers he found whose names he had never heard of, their hues and forms as strangely lovely as those of another planet. The grasses alone in scale and mass were magnificent. While, in and out of all this splendor, less dense and voluminous only than the rhododendron forests, ran scattered lines of blazing yellow — the crowding clusters of azalea bushes that scented the winds beyond belief.

Beyond this region of extravagance in size and color, there ran immense bare open slopes of smooth turf that led to the foot of the eternal snowfields, with, far below, valleys of prodigious scale and steepness that touched somehow with disdain all memory of other mountain ranges he had ever known.

And here it was this warm June evening — June 15th it was — while packing his sack with cheese and maize-flour in the dirty yard of a so-called “post-house,” more hindered than helped by his Georgian guide, that he realized the approach of a familiar, bearded figure. The figure emerged. There was a sudden clutch and lift of the heart … then a rush of wild delight. There stood his Russian steamer-friend, part of the scale and splendor, as though grown out of the very soil. He occupied in a flash the middle of the picture. He gave it meaning. He was part of it, exactly as a tree or big grey boulder were part of it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"SEASONS AND TIMES; Life and Fate — all are remarkably rhythmic, metric, regular throughout. In all crafts and arts, in all machines, in organic bodies, in our daily occupations everywhere there is rhythm, meter, accent, melody. All that we do with a certain skill unnoticed, we do rhythmically. There is rhythm everywhere; it insinuates itself everywhere. All mechanism is metric, rhythmic. There must be more in it than this. Is it merely the influence of inertia?" — NOVALIS, Translated by U.C.B.

Notwithstanding the extent and loneliness of this wild country, coincidence seemed in no way stretched by the abrupt appearance; for in a sense it was not wholly unexpected. There had been certain indications that the meeting again of these two was imminent. The Irishman had never doubted they would meet. But something more than mere hints or warnings, it seemed, had prepared him.

The nature of these warnings, however, O'Malley never fully disclosed. Two of them he told to me by word of mouth, but there were others he could not bring himself to speak about at all. Even the two he mentioned do not appear in his written account. His hesitation is not easy to explain, unless it be that language collapsed in the attempt to describe occurrences so remote from common experience. This may be so, although he grappled not unsuccessfully with the rest of the amazing adventure. At any rate I could never coax from him more than the confession that there *were* other things that had brought him hints. Then came a laugh, a shrug of the shoulders, an expression of confused bewilderment in eyes and manner and — silence.

The two he spoke of I report as best I can. On the roof of that London apartment-house where so many of our talks took place beneath the stars and to the tune of bustling modern traffic, he told them to me. Both were consistent with his theory that he was becoming daily more active in some outlying portion of his personality — knowing experiences in a region of extended consciousness stimulated so powerfully by his strange new friend.

Both, moreover, brought him one and the same conviction that he was no longer — alone. For some days past he had realized this. More than his peasant guide accompanied him. He was both companioned and — observed.

“A dozen times,” he said, “I thought I saw him, and a dozen times I was mistaken. But my mind looked for him. I knew that he was somewhere close.” He compared the feeling to that common experience of the streets when a friend, not known to be near, or even expected, comes abruptly into the thoughts, so that numberless individuals may trick the sight with his appearance before he himself comes suddenly down the pavement. His approach has reached the mind before his mere body turns the corner. “Something in me was aware of his approach,” he added, “as though his being were sending out feelers in advance to find me. They reached me first, I think” — he hesitated briefly, hunting for a more accurate term he could not find— “in dream.”

“You dreamed that he was coming, then?”

“It came first in dream,” he answered; “only when I woke the dream did not fade; it passed over into waking consciousness, so that I could hardly tell where the threshold lay between the two. And, meanwhile, I was always expecting to see him at every turn of the trail almost; a little higher up the mountain, behind a rock, or standing beside a tree, just as in the end I actually did see him. Long before he emerged in this way, he had been close about me, guiding, waiting, watching.”

He told it as a true thing he did not quite expect me to believe. Yet, in a sense, *his* sense, I could and did believe it. It was so wholly consistent with the tenor of his adventure and the condition of abnormal receptivity of mind. For his stretched consciousness was in a state of white sensitiveness whereon the tenderest mental force of another’s thought might well record its signature. Acutely impressionable he was all over. Physical distance was of as little, or even of less, account to such forces as it is to electricity.

“But it was more than the Russian who was close,” he added quietly with one of those sentences that startled me into keen attention. “He was there — with others — of his kind.”

And then, hardly pausing to take breath, he plunged, as his manner was, full tilt into the details of this first experience that thrilled my hedging soul with an astonishing power of conviction. As always when his heart was in the words, the scenery about us faded and I lived the adventure with him. The cowled and hooded chimneys turned to trees, the stretch of dim star-lit London Park became a deep Caucasian vale, the thunder of the traffic was the roaring of the snow-fed torrents. The very perfume of strange flowers floated in the air.

They had been in their blankets, he and his peasant guide, for hours, and a moon approaching the full still concealed all signs of dawn, when he woke out of deep sleep with the odd sensation that it was only a part of him that woke. One portion of him was in the body, while another portion was elsewhere, manifesting with ease and freedom in some state or region whither he had traveled in his sleep — where, moreover, he had not been alone.

And close about him in the trees was — movement. Yes! Through and between the scattered trunks he saw it still.

With eyes a little dazed, the active portion of his brain perceived this processing movement passing to and fro across the glades of moonlight beneath the steady trees. For there was no wind. The shadows of the branches did not stir. He saw swift running shapes, vigorous yet silent, hurrying across the network of splashed silver and pools of black in some kind of organized movement that was circular and seemed not due to chance. Arranged it seemed and ordered; like the regulated revolutions of a set and whirling measure.

Perhaps twenty feet from where he lay was the outer fringe of what he discerned to be this fragment of some grand gamboling dance or frolic; yet discerned but dimly, for the darkness combined with his uncertain vision to obscure it.

And the shapes, as they sped across the silvery patchwork of the moon, seemed curiously familiar. Beyond question he recognized and knew them. For they were akin to those shadowy emanations seen weeks ago upon the steamer’s after-deck, to that “messenger” who climbed from out the sea and sky, and to that form the spirit of the boy assumed, set free in death. They were the flying outlines of Wind and Cloud he had so often glimpsed in vision, racing over the long, bare, open hills — at last come near.

In the moment of first waking, when he saw them clearest, he declares with emphasis that he *knew* the father and the boy were among them. Not so much that he saw them actually for recognition, but rather that he felt their rushing presences; for the first sensation on opening his eyes was the conviction that both had passed him close, had almost touched and called him. Afterwards he searched in vain among the flying forms that swept in the swift succession of their leaping dance across the silvery pathways. While varying in size all were so similar.

His description of them is confused a little, for he admits that he could never properly focus them in steady sight. They slipped with a melting swiftness under the eye; the moment one seemed caught in vision it passed on further and the next was in its place. It was like following a running wave-form on the sea. He says, moreover, that while erect and splendid, their backs and shoulders seemed prolonged in hugeness as though they often crouched to spring; they seemed to paw the air; and that a faint delicious sound to which they kept obedient time and rhythm, held that same sweetness which had issued from the hills of Greece, blown down now among the trees from very far away. And when he says "blown down among the trees," he qualifies this phrase as well, because at the same time it came to him that the sound also rose up from underneath the earth, as if the very surface of the ground ran shaking with a soft vibration of its own. Some marvelous dream it might have been in which the forms, the movement, and the sound were all thrown up and outwards from the quivering surface of the Earth itself.

Yet, almost simultaneously with the first instant of waking, the body issued its call of warning. For, while he gazed, and before time for the least reflection came, the Irishman experienced this dislocating conviction that he himself was taking part in the whirling gambol even while he lay and watched it, and that in this way the sense of division in his personality was explained. The fragment of himself within the brain watched some other more vital fragment — some projection of his consciousness detached and separate — playing yonder with its kind beneath the moon.

This sense of a divided self was not new to him, but never before had he known it so distinct and overwhelming. The definiteness of the division, as well as the importance and vitality of the separated portion, were arrestingly novel. It felt as though he were completely out, or to such a degree, at least, that the fraction left behind with the brain was at first only just sufficient for him to recognize his body at all.

Yonder with these others he felt the wind of movement pass along his back, he saw the trees slip by, and knew the very contact of the ground between the leaps. His movements were natural and easy, light as air and fast as wind; they seemed automatic, impelled by something mighty that directed and contained them. He knew, too, the sensation that others pressed behind him and passed before, slipped in and out, and that through the whole wild urgency of it he yet could never make an error. More — he knew that these shifting forms had been close and dancing about him for a time not measurable merely by the hours of a single night, that in a sense they were always there though he had but just discovered them. His earlier glimpses had been a very partial divination of a truth, immense and beautiful, that now dawned quite gorgeously upon him all complete.

The whole world danced. The Universe was rhythmical as well as metrical.

For this amazing splendor showed itself in a flash-like revelation to the freed portion of his consciousness, and he knew it irresistibly because he himself shared it. Here was an infinite joy, naked and unashamed, born of the mighty Mother’s heart and life, a joy which, in its feebler, lesser manifestations, trickles down into human conditions, though still spontaneously even then, so pure its primal urgency, as — dancing.

The entire experience, the entire revelation, he thinks, can have occupied but a fraction of a second, but it seemed to smite the whole of his being at once with the conviction of a supreme authority. And close behind it came, too, that other sister expression of a spontaneous and natural expression, equally rhythmical — the impulse to sing. He could have sung aloud. For this puissant and mysterious rhythm to which all moved was greater than any little measure of their own. Surging through them, it came from outside and beyond, infinitely greater than themselves, springing from something of which they were, nevertheless, a living portion. From the body of the Earth it came direct — it was in fact a manifestation of her own vibrating life. The currents of the Earth pulsed through them.

“And then,” he says, “I caught this flaming thought of wonder, though so much of it faded instantly upon my full awakening that I can only give you the merest suggestion of what it was.”

He stood up beside me as he said it, spreading his arms, as so often when he was excited, to the sky. I caught the glow of his eyes, and in his voice was passion. He spoke unquestionably of something he had intimately known, not as men speak of even the vividest dreams, but of realities that have burned the heart and left their trails of glory.

“Science has guessed some inkling of the truth,” he cried, “when it declares that the ultimate molecules of matter are in constant vibratory movement one about another, even upon the point of a needle. But I saw — *knew*, rather, as if I had always known it, sweet as summer rain, and close in me as love — that the whole Earth with all her myriad expressions of life moved to this primal rhythm as of some divine dancing.”

“Dancing?” I asked, puzzled.

“Rhythmical movement call it then,” he replied. “To share the life of the Earth is to dance and sing in a huge abundant joy! And the nearer to her great heart, the more natural and spontaneous the impulse — the instinctive dancing of primitive races, of savages and children, still artless and untamed; the gamboling of animals, of rabbits in the meadows and of deer unwatched in forest clearings — you know naturalists have sometimes seen it; of birds in the air — rooks, gulls, and swallows; of the life within the sea; even of gnats in the haze of summer afternoons. All life simple enough to touch and share the enormous happiness of her deep, streaming, personal Being, dances instinctively for very joy — obedient to a greater measure than they know…. The natural movement of the great Earth-Soul is rhythmical. The very winds, the swaying of trees and flowers and grasses, the movement of the sea, of water running through the fields with silver feet, of the clouds and edges of the mist, even the trembling of the earthquakes, — all, all respond in sympathetic motions to this huge vibratory movement of her great central pulse. Ay, and the mountains too, though so vastly scaled their measure that perhaps we only know the pauses in between, and think them motionless…. The mountains rise and fall and change; our very breathing, first sign of stirring life, even the circulation of our blood, bring testimony; our speech as well — inspired words are ever rhythmical, language that pours into the poet’s mind from something greater than himself. And not unwisely, but in obedience to a deep instinctive knowledge was dancing once — in earlier, simpler days — a form of worship. You know, at least, how rhythm in music and ceremonial uplifts and cleans and simplifies the heart toward the greater life…. You know, perhaps, the Dance of Jesus….”

The words poured from him with passion, yet always uttered gently with a smile of joy upon the face. I saw his figure standing over me, outlined against the starry sky; and, deeply stirred, I listened with delight and wonder. Rhythm surely lies behind all expression of life. He was on the heels of some simple, dazzling verity though he phrased it wildly. But not a tenth part of all he said could I recapture afterwards for writing down. The steady, gentle swaying of his body I remember clearly, and that somewhere or other in the stream of language, he made apt reference to the rhythmical swaying of those who speak in trance, or know some strange, possessing gust of inspiration.

The first and natural expression of the Earth’s vitality lies in a dancing movement of purest joy and happiness — that for me is the gist of what remains. Those near enough to Nature feel it. I myself remembered days in spring … my thoughts, borne upon some sweet emotion, traveled far….

“And not of the Earth alone,” he interrupted my dreaming in a voice like singing, “but of the entire Universe. The spheres and constellations weave across the fields of ether the immense old rhythm of their divine, eternal dance…!”

Then, with a disconcerting abruptness, and a strange little wayward laugh as of apology for having let himself so freely go, he sat down beside me with his back against the chimney-stack. He resumed more quietly the account of this particular adventure that lay ‘twixt dream and waking:

All that he described had happened in a few seconds. It flashed, complete, authoritative and vivid, then passed away. He knew again the call and warning of his body — to return. For this consciousness of being in two places at once, divided as it were against himself, brought with it the necessity for decision. With which portion should he identify himself? By an act of will, it seemed, a choice was possible.

And with it, then, came the knowledge that to remain “out” was easier than to return. This time, to come back into himself would be difficult.

The very possibility seemed to provide the shock of energy necessary for overcoming it; the experience alarmed him; it was like holding an option upon living — like a foretaste of death. Automatically, as it were, these loosened forces in him answered to the body’s summons. The result was immediate and singular; one of these Dancing outlines separated itself from the main herd, approached with a sudden silent rush, enveloped him for a second of darkness and confusion, losing its shape completely on the way, and then merged into his being as smoke slips in and merges with the structure of a tree.

The projected portion of his personality had returned. The sense of division was gone. There remained behind only the little terror of the weak flesh whose summons had thus brought it back.

The same instant he was fully awake — the night about him empty of all but the silver dreaming of the moon among the shadows. Beside him lay the sleeping figure of his companion, the bashlik of lamb’s wool drawn closely down about the ears and neck, and the voluminous black burka shrouding him from feet to shoulders. A little distance away the horse stood, munching grass. Again he noted that there was no wind, and the shadows of the trees lay motionless upon the ground. The air smelt sweet of forest, soil, and dew.

The experience — it seemed now — belonged to dreaming rather than to waking consciousness, for there was nothing about him to confirm it outwardly. Only the memory remained — that, and a vast, deep-coursing, subtle happiness. The smaller terror that he felt was of the flesh alone, for the flesh ever instinctively fought against such separation. The happiness, though, contained and overwhelmed the fear.

Yes, only the memory remained, and even that fast fading. But the substance of what had been, passed into his inmost being: the splendor of that would remain forever, incorporated with his life. He had shared in this brief moment of extended consciousness some measure of the Mother’s cosmic being, simple as sunshine, unrestrained as wind, complete and satisfying. Its natural expression was rhythmical, a deep, pure joy that drove outwards even into little human conditions as dancing and singing. He had known it, too, with companions of his kind…

Moreover, though no longer visible or audible, it still continued somewhere close. He was blessedly companioned all the time — and watched. *They* knew him one of themselves — these brother expressions of her cosmic life — these *Urwelt* beings that Today had no external, bodily forms. They waited, knowing well that he would come. Fulfillment beckoned surely just beyond…

CHAPTER XXIX

"… And then suddenly, —
 While perhaps twice my heart was dutiful
 To send my blood upon its little race —
 I was exalted above surety,
 And out of Time did fall."

— LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE, *Poems and Interludes*

This, then, was one of the "hints" by which O'Malley knew that he was not alone and that the mind of his companion was stretched out to find him. He became aware after it of a distinct guidance, even of direction as to his route of travel. The "impulse came," as one says, to turn northwards, and he obeyed it without more ado. For this "dream" had come to him when camped upon the slopes of Ararat, further south toward the Turkish frontier, and though all prepared to climb the sixteen-thousand foot summit, he changed his plans, dismissed the local guide, and turned back for Tiflis and the Central Range. In the wilder, lonelier mountains, he felt strongly, was where he ought to be.

Another man, of course, would have dismissed the dream or forgotten it while cooking his morning coffee; but, rightly or wrongly, this divining Celt accepted it as real. He held an instinctive belief, that in dreams of a certain order the forces that drive behind the soul at a given moment, may reveal themselves to the subconscious self, becoming authoritative in proportion as they are sanely encouraged and interpreted. They dramatize themselves in scenes that are open to intuitive interpretation. And O'Malley, it seems, possessed, like the Hebrew prophets of old, just that measure of judgment and divination which go to the making of a true clear-vision.

Packing up kit and dunnage, he crossed the Georgian Military Route on foot to Vladikavkaz, and thence with another horse and a Mohammedan Georgian as guide, Rostom by name, journeyed *via* Alighir and Oni up a side valley of unforgettable splendor toward an Imerethian hamlet where they meant to lay-in supplies for a prolonged expedition into the uninhabited wilderness.

And here, the second occurrence he told me of took place. It was more direct than the first, yet equally strange; also it brought a similar authority — coming first along the deep mysterious underpaths of sleep — sleep, that short cut into the subconscious.

They were camped among low boxwood trees, a hot dry night, wind soft and stars very brilliant, when the Irishman turned in his sleeping-bag and abruptly woke. This time there was no dream — only the certainty that something had wakened him deliberately. He sat up, almost with a cry. It was exactly as though he heard himself called by name and recognized the voice that spoke it. He looked quickly round. Nothing but the crowding army of the box-trees was visible, some bushy and round, others straggling in their outline, all whispering gently together in the night. Beyond ran the immense slopes, and far overhead he saw the gleaming snow on peaks that brushed the stars.

No one was visible. This time no flying figures danced beneath the moon. There was, indeed, no moon. Something, however, he knew had come up close and touched him, calling him from the depths of a profound and tired slumber. It had withdrawn again, vanished into the night. The strong certainty remained, though, that it lingered near about him still, trying to press forwards and outwards into some kind of objective visible expression that *included himself*. He had responded with an effort in his sleep, but the effort had been unsuccessful. He had merely waked … and lost it.

The horse, tethered a few feet away, was astir and troubled, straining at the rope, whinnying faintly, and Rostom, the Georgian peasant, he saw, was already up to quiet it. A curious perfume passed him through the air — once, then vanished; unforgettable, however, for he had known it already weeks ago upon the steamer. And before the gardened woods about him smothered it with their richer smells of a million flowers and weeds, he recognized in it that peculiar pungent whiff of horse that had reached him from the haunted cabin. This time it was less fleeting — a fine, clean odor that he liked even while it strangely troubled him.

Kicking out of his blankets, he joined the man and helped to straighten out the tangled rope. Rostom spoke little Russian, and O'Malley's knowledge of Georgian lay in a single phrase, "Look sharp!" but with the aid of French the man had learned from shooting-parties, he gathered that some one had approached during the night and camped, it seemed, not far away above them.

Though unusual enough in so unfrequented a region, this was not necessarily alarming, and the first proof O'Malley had that the man experienced no ordinary physical fear was the fact that he had left both knife and rifle in his blankets. Hitherto, at the least sign of danger, he changed into a perfect arsenal; he invariably slept "in his weapons"; but now, even in the darkness, the other noted that he was unarmed, and therefore it was no attempt at horse-stealing or of assault upon themselves he feared.

"Who is it? What is it?" he asked, stumbling over the tangle of string-like roots that netted the ground. "Natives, travelers like ourselves, or — something else?" He spoke very low, as though aware that what had waked him still hovered close enough to overhear. "Why do you fear?"

And Rostom looked up a moment from stooping over the rope. He stepped a little nearer, avoiding the animal's hoofs. In a confused whisper of French and Russian, making at the same time the protective signs of his religion, he muttered a sentence of which the other caught little more than the unassuring word that something was about them close — something "*méchant*." This curious, significant word he used.

The whispered utterance, the manner that went with it, surely the dark and lonely setting of the little scene as well, served to convey the full suggestion of the adjective with a force the man himself could scarcely have intended. Something had passed by, not so much evil, wicked, or malign as strange and alien — uncanny. Rostom, a man utterly careless of physical danger, rising to it, rather, with delight, was frightened — in his soul.

"What do you mean?" O'Malley asked louder, with an air of impatience assumed. The man was on his knees, but whether praying, or merely struggling with the rope, was hard to see. "What is it you're talking about so foolishly?" He spoke with a confidence he hardly felt himself.

And the involved reply, spoken with lips against the earth, the head but slightly turned as he knelt, again smothered the words. Only the curious phrase came to him— "*de l'ancien monde — quelque-chose*—"

The Irishman took him by the shoulders. Not meaning actually to shake him, he yet must have used some violence, for the fact was that he did not like the answers and sought to deny some strong emotion in himself. The man stood up abruptly with a kind of sudden spring. The expression of his face was not easily divined in the darkness, but a gleam of the eyes was clearly visible. It may have been anger, it may have been terror; vivid excitement it certainly was.

"Something — old as the stones, old as the stones," he whispered, thrusting his dark bearded face unpleasantly close. "Such things are in these mountains…. *Mais oui! C'est moi qui vous le dis!* Old as the stones, I tell you. And sometimes they come out close — with sudden wind. *We* know!"

He stepped back again sharply and dropped upon his knees, bowing to the ground with flattened palms. He made a repelling gesture as though it was O'Malley's presence that brought the experience.

"And to see them is — to die!" he heard, muttered against the ground thickly. "To see them is to die!"

The Irishman went back to his sleeping-bag. Some strange passion of the man was deeply stirred; he did not wish to offend his violent beliefs and turn it against himself in a stupid, scrambling fight. He lay and waited. He heard the muttering of the deep voice behind him in the darkness. Presently it ceased. Rostom came softly back to bed.

"*He* knows; *he* warned me!" he whispered, jerking one hand toward the horse significantly, as they at length lay again side by side in their blankets and the stars shone down upon them from a deep black sky. "But, for the moment, they have passed, not finding us. No wind has come."

"Another — horse?" asked O'Malley suggestively, with a sympathy meant to quiet him.

But the peasant shook his head; and this time it was not difficult to divine the expression on his face even in the darkness. At the same moment the tethered animal again uttered a long whinnying cry, plaintive, yet of pleasure rather than alarm it seemed, which instantly brought the man again with a leap from the blankets to his knees. O'Malley did not go to help him; he stuffed the clothes against his ears and waited; he did not wish to hear the peasant's sentences.

And this pantomime went on at intervals for an hour or more, when at length the horse grew quiet and O'Malley snatched moments of unrefreshing sleep. The night lay thick about them with a silence like the silence of the sky. The boxwood bushes ran together into a single sheet of black, the far peaks faded out of sight, the air grew keen and sharp toward the dawn on the wave of wind the sunrise drives before it round the world. But to and fro across the Irishman's mind as he lay between sleep and dozing ran the feeling that his friends were close, and that those dancing forms of cosmic life to which all three approximated had come near once more to summon him. He also knew that what the horse had felt was something far from terror. The animal instinctively had divined the presence of something to which it, too, was remotely kin.

Rostom, however, remained keenly on the alert, much of the time apparently praying. Not once did he touch the weapons that lay ready to hand upon the folded burka … and when at last the dawn came, pale and yellow, through the trees, showing the outlines of the individual box and azalea bushes, he got up earlier than usual and began to make the fire for coffee. In the fuller light which soon poured swiftly over the eastern summits and dropped gold and silver into the tremendous valley at their feet, the men made a systematic search of the immediate surroundings, and then of the clearings and more open stretches beyond. In silence they made it. They found, however, no traces of another camping-party. And it was clear from the way they went about the search that neither expected to find anything. The ground was unbroken, the bushes undisturbed.

Yet still, both knew. That "something" which the night had brought and kept concealed, still hovered close about them.

And it was at this scattered hamlet, consisting of little more than a farm of sorts and a few shepherds' huts of stone, where they stopped two hours later for provisions, that O'Malley looked up thus suddenly and recognized the figure of his friend. He stood among the trees a hundred yards away. At first the other thought he was a tree — his stalwart form the stem, his hair and beard the branches — so big and motionless he stood between the other trunks. O'Malley saw him for a full minute before he understood. The man seemed so absolutely a part of the landscape, a giant detail in keeping with the rest — a detail that had suddenly emerged.

The same moment a great draught of wind, rising from depths of the valley below, swept overhead with a roaring sound, shaking the beech and box trees and setting all the golden azalea heads in a sudden agitation. It passed as swiftly as it came. The peace of the June morning again descended on the mountains.

It was broken by a wild, half-smothered cry, — a cry of genuine terror.

For O'Malley had turned to Rostom with some word that here, in this figure, lay the explanation of the animal's excitement in the night, when he saw that the peasant, white as chalk beneath the tangle of black hair that covered his face, had stopped dead in his tracks. His mouth was open, his arms upraised to shield; he was staring fixedly in the same direction as himself. The next instant he was on his knees, bowing and scraping toward Mecca, groaning, hiding his eyes with both hands. The sack he held had toppled over; the cheese and flour rolled upon the ground; and from the horse came that long-drawn whinnying of the night.

There was a momentary impression — entirely in the Irishman's mind, of course, — that the whole landscape veiled a giant, rushing movement that passed across it like a wave. The surface of the earth, it seemed, ran softly quivering, as though that wind had stirred response together with the trembling of the million leaves … before it settled back again to stillness. It passed in the flash of an eyelid. The earth lay tranquil in repose.

But, though the suddenness of the stranger's arrival might conceivably have startled the ignorant peasant, with nerves already overwrought from the occurrence of the night, O'Malley was not prepared for the violence of the man's terror as shown by the immediate sequel. For after several moments' prayer and prostration, with groans half smothered against the very ground, he sprang impetuously to his feet again, turned to his employer with eyes that gleamed wildly in that face of chalk, cried out — the voice thick with the confusion of his fear— "It is the Wind! *They* come; from the mountains *they* come! Older than the stones they are. Save yourself…. Hide your eyes … fly…!" — and was gone. Like a deer he went. He waited neither for food nor payment, but flung the great black burka round his face — and ran.

And to O'Malley, bereft of all power of movement as he watched in complete bewilderment, one thing seemed clear: the man went in this extraordinary fashion because he was afraid of something he had *felt*, not seen. For as he ran with wild and leaping strides, he did not run away from the figure. He took the direction straight toward the spot where the stranger still stood motionless as a tree. So close he passed him that he must almost have brushed his very shoulder. He did not see him.

The last thing the Irishman noted was that in his violence the man had dropped the yellow bashlik from his head. O'Malley saw him stoop with a flying rush to pick it up. He seemed to catch it as it fell.

And then the big figure moved. He came slowly forward from among the trees, his hands outstretched in greeting, on his great visage a shining smile of welcome that seemed to share the sunrise. In that moment for the Irishman all was forgotten as though unknown, unseen, save the feelings of extraordinary happiness that filled him to the brim.

CHAPTER XXX

"THE POETS ARE thus liberating gods. The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, 'Those who are free throughout the world.' They are free, and they make free. An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author. I think nothing is of any value in books, excepting the transcendental and extraordinary. If a man is inflamed and carried away by his thought, to that degree that he forgets the authors and the public, and heeds only this one dream, which holds him like an insanity, let me read his paper, and you may have all the arguments and histories and criticism." — EMERSON

To criticize, deny, perhaps to sneer, is no very difficult or uncommon function of the mind, and the story as I first heard him tell it, lying there in the grass beyond the Serpentine that summer evening, roused in me, I must confess, all of these very ordinary faculties. Yet, as I listened to his voice that mingled with the rustle of the poplars overhead, and watched his eager face and gestures, it came to me dimly that a man's mistakes may be due to his attempting bigger things than his little critic ever dreamed perhaps. And gradually I shared the vision that this unrhyming poet by my side had somehow lived out in action.

Inner experience for him was ever the reality — not the mere forms or deeds that clothe it in partial physical expression.

There was no question, of course, that he had actually met this big, inarticulate Russian on the steamer; that Stahl's part in the account was unvarnished; that the boy had fallen on the deck from heart disease; and that, after an interval, chance had brought O'Malley and the father together again in this valley of the Central Caucasus. All that was as literal as the superstitious terror of the Georgian peasant. Further, that the Russian possessed precisely those qualities of powerful sympathy with the other's hidden longings which the subtle-minded Celt had been so quick to appropriate — this, too, was literal enough. Here, doubtless, was the springboard whence he leaped into the stream of this quasi-spiritual adventure with an eagerness of fine, whole-hearted belief which must make this dull world a very wonderful place indeed to those who know it; for it is the visioned faculty of correlating the commonest event with the procession of august Powers that pass ever to and fro behind life's swaying curtain, and of divining in the most ordinary of yellow buttercups the golden fires of a dropped star.

Again, for Terence O'Malley there seemed no definite line that marked off one state of consciousness from another, just as there seems no given instant when a man passes actually from sleep to waking, from pleasure to pain, from joy to grief. There is, indeed, no fixed threshold between the states of normal and abnormal consciousness. In this stranger he imagined a sense of companionship that by some magic of alchemy transformed his deep loneliness into joy, and satisfied his passionate yearnings by bringing their subjective fulfillment within range. To have found acceptance in his sight was thus a revolutionary fact in his existence. While a part of my mind may have labeled it all as creative imagination, another part recognized it as plainly true — because his being lived it out without the least denial.

He, at any rate, was not inventing; nor ever knew an instant's doubt. He simply told me what had happened. The discrepancies — the omissions in his written account especially — were simply due, I feel, to the fact that his skill in words was not equal to the depth and brilliance of the emotions that he experienced. But the fact remains: he did experience them. His fairy tale convinced.

His faith had made him whole — one with the Earth. The sense of disunion between his outer and his inner self was gone.

And now, as these two began their journey together into the wilder region of these stupendous mountains, O'Malley says he realized clearly that the change he had dreaded as an "inner catastrophe" simply would mean the complete and final transfer of his consciousness from the "without" to the "within." It would involve the loss only of what constituted him a person among the external activities of the world today. He would lose his life to find it. The deeper self thus quickened by the stranger must finally assert its authority over the rest. To join these Urwelt beings and share their eternal life of beauty close to the Earth herself, he must shift the center. Only thus could he enter the state before the “Fall” — that ancient Garden of the World-Soul, walled-in so close behind his daily life — and know deliverance from the discontent of modern conditions that so distressed him.

To do this temporarily, perhaps, had long been possible to him — in dream, in reverie, in those imaginative trances when he almost seemed to leave his body altogether; but to achieve it permanently was something more than any such passing disablement of the normal self. It involved, he now saw clearly, that which he had already witnessed in the boy: the final release of his Double in so-called death.

Thus, as they made their way northwards, nominally toward the mighty Elbruz and the borders of Swanetia, the Irishman knew in his heart that they in reality came nearer to the Garden long desired, and to those lofty Gates of horn and ivory that hitherto he had never found — because he feared to let himself go. Often he had camped beneath the walls, had smelt the flowers, heard the songs, and even caught glimpses of the life that moved so gorgeously within. But the Gates themselves had never shone for him, even against the sky of dream, because his vision had been clouded by alarm. They swung, it had seemed to him before, in only one direction — for those who enter: he had always hesitated, lost his way, returned…. And many, like him, make the same mistake. Once in, there need be no return, for in reality the walls spread outwards and — enclose the entire world.

Civilization and Humanity, the man of smaller vision had called out to him as passwords to safety. Simplicity and Love, he now discovered, were the truer clues. His big friend in silence taught him. Now he knew.

For in that little hamlet their meeting had taken place — in silence. No actual speech had passed. “You go — so?” the Russian conveyed by a look and by a movement of his whole figure, indicating the direction; and to the Irishman’s assenting inclination of the head he made an answering gesture that merely signified compliance with a plan already known to both. “We go, together then.” And, there and then, they started, side by side.

The suddenness of this concerted departure only seemed strange afterwards when O’Malley looked back upon it, for at the time it seemed as inevitable as being obliged to swim once the dive is taken. He stood upon a pinnacle whence lesser details were invisible; he knew a kind of exaltation — of loftier vision. Small facts that ordinarily might fill the day with trouble sank below the horizon then. He did not even notice that they went without food, horse, or blankets. It was reckless, unrestrained, and utterly unhindered, this free setting-forth together. Thus might he have gone upon a journey with the wind, the sunshine, or the rain. Departure with a thought, a dream, a fancy could not have been less unhampered.

The only detail of his outer world that lingered — and that, already sinking out of sight like a stone into deep water — was the image of the running peasant. For a moment he recalled the picture. He saw the man in the act of stooping after the fallen bashlik. He saw him seize it, lift it to his head again. But the picture was small — already very far away. Before the bashlik actually reached the head, the detail dipped into mist and vanished….

CHAPTER XXXI

IT WAS SPRING — and the flutes of Pan played everywhere. The radiance of the world's first morning shone undimmed. Life flowed and sang and danced, abundant and untamed. It bathed the mountains and that sky of stainless blue. It bathed him too. Dipped, washed, and shining in it, he walked the Earth as she lay radiant in her early youth. The crystal presence of her everlasting Spring flew laughing through a world of light and flowers — flowers that none could ever pluck to die, light that could never fade to darkness within walls and roofs.

All day they wound easily, as though on winged feet, through the steep belt of box and beech woods, and in sparkling brilliant heat across open spaces where the azaleas shone; a cooling wind, fresh as the dawn, seemed ever to urge them forwards. The country, for all its huge scale and wildness, was park-like; the giant, bushy trees wore an air of being tended by the big winds that ran with rustling music among their waving foliage. Between the rhododendrons were avenues of turf, broad-gladed pathways, yet older than the moon, from which a thousand gardeners of wind and dew had gone but a moment before to care for others further on. Over all brimmed up some primal, old-world beauty of a simple life — some immemorial soft glory of the dawn.

Closer and closer, deeper and deeper, ever swifter, ever more direct, O'Malley passed down toward the heart of his mother's being. Along the tenderest pathways of his inner being, so wee, so soft, so simple that for most men they lie ignored or overgrown, he slipped with joy a little nearer — one stage perhaps — toward Reality.

Pan "blew in power" across these Caucasian heights and valleys.

Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan!
  Piercing sweet by the river!
Blinding sweet, O great god Pan!
The sun on the hill forgot to die,
And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly
  Came back to dream on the river

In front his big leader, no longer blundering clumsily as on that toy steamer with the awkward and lesser motion known to men, pressed forward with a kind of giant sure supremacy along paths he knew, or rather over a trackless, pathless world which the great planet had charted lovingly for his splendid feet. That wind, blowing from the depths of valleys left long since behind, accompanied them wisely. They heard, not the faint horns of Elfland faintly blowing, but the blasts of the *Urwelt* trumpets growing out of the still distance, nearer, ever nearer. For leagues below the beech woods poured over the enormous slopes in a sea of soft green foam, and through the meadow spaces they saw the sweet nakedness of running water, and listened to its song. At noon they rested in the greater heat, sleeping beneath the shadow of big rocks; and sometimes traveled late into the night, when the stars guided them and they knew the pointing of the winds. The very moonlight then, that washed this lonely world with silver, sheeting the heights of snow beyond, was friendly, half divine … and it seemed to O'Malley that while they slept they were watched and cared for — as though Others who awaited had already come halfway out to meet them.

And ever, more and more, the passion of his happiness increased; he knew himself complete, fulfilled, made whole. It was as though his Self were passing outwards into hundreds of thousands, and becoming countless as the sand. He was everywhere; in everything; shining, singing, dancing…. With the ancient woods he breathed; slipped with the streams down the still darkened valleys; called from each towering summit to the Sun; and flew with all the winds across the immense, untrodden slopes. About him lay this whole spread being of the flowered Caucasus, huge and quiet, drinking in the sunshine at its leisure. But it lay also *within* himself, for his expanding consciousness included and contained it. Through it — this early potent Mood of Nature — he passed toward the Soul of the Earth within, even as a child, caught by a mood of winning tenderness in its mother, passes closer to the heart that gave it birth. Some central love enwrapped him. He knew the surrounding power of everlasting arms.

CHAPTER XXXII

“Inward, ay, deeper far than love or scorn,
Deeper than bloom of virtue, stain of sin,
Rend thou the veil and pass alone within,
Stand naked there and know thyself forlorn.
Nay! in what world, then, spirit, vast thou born?
Or to what World-Soul art thou entered in?
Feel the Self fade, feel the great life begin.
With Love re-rising in the cosmic morn.
The Inward ardor yearns to the inmost goal;
The endless goal is one with the endless way;
From every gulf the tides of Being roll,
From every zenith burns the indwelling day,
And life in Life has drowned thee and soul in Soul;
And these are God and thou thyself art they.”

— F.W.H. MYERS. From “A Cosmic Outlook”

The account of what followed simply swept me into fairyland, yet a Fairyland that is true because it lives in every imaginative heart that does not dream itself shut off from the Universe in some wee compartment all alone.

If O’Malley’s written account, and especially his tumbled notebooks, left me bewildered and confused, the fragments that he told me brought this sense of an immense, sweet picture that actually existed. I caught small scenes of it, set in some wild high light. Their very incoherence conveyed the gorgeous splendor of the whole better than any neat ordered sequence could possibly have done.

Climax, in the story-book meaning, there was none. The thing flowed round and round forever. A sense of something eternal wrapped me as I listened; for his imagination set the whole adventure out of time and space, and I caught myself dreaming too. “A thousand years in His sight” — I understood the old words as refreshingly new — might be a day. Thus felt that monk, perhaps, for whose heart a hundred years had passed while he listened to the singing of a little bird.

My practical questions — it was only at the beginning that I was dull enough to ask them — he did not satisfy, because he could not. There was never the least suggestion of the artist's mere invention.

"You really felt the Earth about and in you," I had asked, "much as one feels the presence of a friend and living person?"

"Drowned in her, yes, as in the thoughts and atmosphere of some one awfully loved." His voice a little trembled as he said it.

"So speech unnecessary?"

"Impossible — fatal," was the laconic, comprehensive reply, "limiting: destructive even."

That, at least, I grasped: the pitifulness of words before that love by which self goes wholly lost in the being of another, adrift yet cared for, gathered all wonderfully in.

"And your Russian friend — your leader?" I ventured, haltingly.

His reply was curiously illuminating: —

"Like some great guiding Thought within her mind — some flaming *motif* — interpreting her love and splendor — leading me straight."

"As you felt at Marseilles, a clue — a vital clue?" For I remembered the singular phrase he had used in the notebook.

"Not a bad word," he laughed; "certainly, as far as it goes, not a wrong one. For he — *it* — was at the same time within myself. We merged, as our life grew and spread. We swept things along with us from the banks. We were in flood together," he cried. "We drew the landscape with us!"

The last words baffled me; I found no immediate response. He pushed away the plates on the table before us, where we had been lunching in the back room of a dingy Soho restaurant. We now had the place to ourselves. He drew his chair a little nearer.

"Don't ye see — our journey also was *within*," he added abruptly.

The pale London sunlight came through the window across chimneys, dreary roofs, courtyards. Yet where it touched his face it seemed at once to shine. His voice was warm and eager. I caught from him, as it were, both heat and light.

“You moved actually, though, over country — ?”

“While at the same time we moved within, advanced, sank deeper,” he returned; “call it what you will. Our condition moved. There was this correspondence between the two. Over her face we walked, yet into her as well. We ‘traveled’ with One greater than ourselves, both caught and merged in her, in utter sympathy with one another as with herself…”

This stopped me dead. I could not pretend more than a vague sympathetic understanding with such descriptions of a mystical experience. Nor, it was clear, did he expect it of me. Even his own heart was troubled, and he knew he spoke of things that only few may deal with sanely, still fewer hear with patience.

But, oh, that little room in Greek Street smelt of forests, dew, and dawn as he told it, — that dear wayward Child of Earth! For “his voice fell, like music that makes giddy the dim brain, faint with intoxication of keen joy.” I watched those delicate hands he spread about him through the air; the tender, sensitive lips, the light blue eyes that glowed. I noted the real strength in the face, — a sort of nobility it was — his shabby suit of grey, his tie never caught properly in the collar, the frayed cuffs, and the enormous boots he wore even in London— “policeman boots” as we used to call them with a laugh.

So vivid was the picture that he painted! Almost, it seemed, I knew myself the pulse of that eternal Spring beneath our feet, beating in vain against the suffocating weight of London’s bricks and pavements laid by civilization — the Earth’s delight striving to push outwards into visible form as flowers. She flashed some scrap of meaning thus into me, though blunted on the way, I fear, and crudely paraphrased.

Yes, as he talked across the airless gloom of that little back room, in some small way I caught the splendor of his vision. Behind the words, I caught it here and there. My own wee world extended. My being stretched to understand him and to net in fugitive fragments the scenes of wonder that he knew complete.

Perhaps his larger consciousness fringed my own to “bruise” it, as he claimed the Earth had done to him, so that I glimpsed in tinier measure an experience that in himself blazed whole and thundering. It was, I must admit, exalting and invigorating, if a little breathless; and the return to streets and omnibuses painful — a descent to ugliness and disappointment. For things I can hardly understand now, even in my own descriptions of them, seemed at the time quite clear — or clear-ish at any rate. Whereas normally I could never have compassed them at all.

It taught me: that, at least, I know. In some spiritual way I quickened to the view that all great teaching really comes in some such curious fashion — via a temporary stretching or extension of the “heart” to receive it. The little normal self is pushed aside to make room, even to the point of loss, in order to contain it. Later, the consciousness contracts again. But it has expanded — and there has been growth. Was this, I wondered, perhaps what mystics speak of when they say the personal life must slip aside, be trampled on, submerged, before there can be room for the divine Presences…?

At any rate, as he talked there over coffee that grew cold and cigarette smoke that made the air yet thicker than it naturally was, his words conveyed with almost grandeur of conviction this reality of a profound inner experience. I shared in some faint way its truth and beauty, so that when I saw it in his written form I marveled to find the thing so thin and cold and dwindled. The key his personal presence supplied, of guidance and interpretation, of course was gone.

CHAPTER XXXIII

“Why, what is this patient entrance into Nature’s deep resources
But the child’s most gradual learning to walk upright without bane?
When we drive out, from the cloud of steam, majestical white horses,
Are we greater than the first men who led black ones by the mane?” — E. B. BROWNING

The “Russian” led.

O’Malley styled him thus to the end for want of a larger word, perhaps — a word to phrase the inner and the outer. Although the mountains were devoid of trails, he seemed always certain of his way. An absolute sense of orientation possessed him; or, rather, the whole earth became a single pathway. Her being, in and about their hearts, concealed no secrets; he knew the fresh, cool water-springs as surely as the corners where the wild honey gathered. It seemed as natural that the bees should leave them unmolested, giving them freely of their store, as that the savage dogs in the aouls, or villages, they passed so rarely now, should refrain from attack. Even the peasants shared with them some common, splendid life. Occasionally they passed an Ossetian on horseback, a rifle swung across his saddle, a covering burka draping his shoulders and the animal’s haunches in a single form that seemed a very outgrowth of the mountains. But not even a greeting was exchanged. They passed in silence; often very close, as though they did not see these two on foot. And once or twice the horses reared and whinnied, while their riders made the signs of their religion…. Sentries they seemed. But for the password known to both they would have stopped the travelers. In these forsaken fastnesses mere unprotected wandering means death. Yet to the happy Irishman there never came a thought of danger or alarm. All was a portion of himself, and no man can be afraid of his own hands or feet. Their convoy was immense, invisible, a guaranteed security of the vast Earth herself. No little personal injury could pass so huge defense. Others, armed with a lesser security of knives and guns and guides, would assuredly have been turned back, or had they shown resistance, would never have been heard to tell the tale. Dr. Stahl and the fur-merchant, for instance —

But such bothering little thoughts with their hard edges no longer touched reality; they spun away and found no lodgment; they were — untrue; false items of some lesser world unrealized.

For, in proportion as he fixed his thoughts successfully on outward and physical things, the world wherein he now walked grew dim: he missed the path, stumbled, saw trees and flowers indistinctly, failed to hear properly the call of birds and wind, to feel the touch of sun; and, most unwelcome of all, — was aware that his leader left him, dwindling in size, dropping away somehow among shadows far behind or far ahead.

The inversion was strangely complete: what men called solid, real, and permanent he now knew as the veriest shadows of existence, fleeting, unsatisfactory, false.

Their dreary make-believe had all his life oppressed him. He now knew why. Men, driving their forces outwards for external possessions had lost the way so utterly. It truly was amazing. He no longer quite understood how such feverish strife was possible to intelligent beings: the fur-merchant, the tourists, his London friends, the great majority of men and women he had known, pain in their hearts and weariness in their eyes, the sad strained faces, the furious rush to catch a little pleasure they deemed joy. It seemed like some wild senseless game that madness plays. He found it difficult to endow them, one and all, with any sense of life. He saw them groping in thick darkness, snatching with hands of shadow at things of even thinner shadow, all moving in a wild and frantic circle of artificial desires, while just beyond, absurdly close to many, blazed this great living sunshine of Reality and Peace and Beauty. If only they would turn — and look *within* — !

In fleeting moments these sordid glimpses of that dark and shadow-world still afflicted his outer sight — the nightmare he had left behind. It played like some gloomy memory through a corner of consciousness not yet wholly disentangled from it. Already he burned to share his story with the world…! A few he saw who here and there half turned, touched by a flashing ray — then rushed away into the old blackness as though frightened, not daring to escape. False images thrown outward by the intellect prevented. Stahl he saw … groping; a soft light of yearning in his eyes … a hand outstretched to push the shadows from him, yet ever gathering them instead…. Men he saw by the million, youth still in their hearts, yet slaving in darkened trap-like cages not merely to earn a competency but to pile more gold for things not really wanted; faces of greed round gambling-tables; the pandemonium of Exchanges; even fair women, playing Bridge through all a summer afternoon — the strife and lust and passion for possessions degrading every heart, choking the channels of simplicity…. Over the cities of the world he heard the demon Civilization sing its song of terror and desolation. Its music of destruction shook the nations. He saw the millions dance. And mid the bewildering ugly thunder of that sound few could catch the small sweet voice played by the Earth upon the little Pipes of Pan… the fluting call of Nature to the Simple Life — which is the Inner.

For now, as he moved closer to the Earth, deeper ever deeper into the enfolding moods of her vast collective consciousness, he drew nearer to the Reality that satisfies. He approached that center where outward activity is less, yet energy and vitality far greater — because it is at rest. Here he met things halfway, as it were, *en route* for the outer physical world where they would appear later as "events," but not yet emerged, still alive and breaking with their undischarged and natural potencies. Modern life, he discerned, dealt only with these forces when they had emerged, masquerading at the outer rim of life as complete embodiments, whereas actually they are but partial and symbolical expressions of their eternal prototypes behind. And men today were busy at this periphery only, touch with the center lost, madly consumed with the unimportant details that concealed the inner glory. It was the spirit of the age to mistake the outer shell for the inner reality. He at last understood the reason of his starved loneliness amid the stupid uproar of latter-day life, why he distrusted "Civilization," and stood apart. His yearnings were explained. His heart dwelt ever in the Golden Age of the Earth's first youth, and at last — he was coming home.

Like mud settling in dirty water, the casual realities of that outer life all sank away. He grew clear within, one with the primitive splendor, beauty, grace of a fresh world. Over his inner self, flooding slowly the passages and cellars, those subterranean ways that honeycomb the dim-lit foundations of personality, this tide of power rose. Filling chamber after chamber, melting down walls and ceiling, eating away divisions softly and irresistibly, it climbed in silence, merging all moods and disunion of his separate Selves into the single thing that made him comprehensible to himself and able to know the Earth as Mother. He saw himself whole; he knew himself divine. A strange tumult as of some ecstasy of old remembrance invaded him. He dropped back into a more spacious scale of time, long long ago when a month might be a moment, or a thousand years pass round him as a single day….

The qualities of all the Earth lay too, so easily contained, within himself. He understood that old legend by which man the microcosm represents and sums up Earth, the macrocosm in himself, so that Nature becomes the symbol and interpreter of his inner being. The strength and dignity of the trees he drew into himself; the power of the wind was his; with his unwearied feet ran all the sweet and facile swiftness of the rivulets, and in his thoughts the graciousness of flowers, the wavy softness of the grass, the peace of open spaces and the calm of that vast sky. The murmur of the *Urwelt* was in his blood, and in his heart the exaltation of her golden Mood of Spring.

How, then, could speech be possible, since both shared this common life? The communion with his friend and leader was too profound and perfect for any stammering utterance in the broken, partial symbols known as language. This was done for them: the singing of the birds, the wind-voices, the rippling of water, the very humming of the myriad insects even, and rustling of the grass and leaves, shaped all they felt in some articulate expression that was right, complete, and adequate. The passion of the larks set all the sky to music, and songs far sweeter than the nightingales' made every dusk divine.

He understood now that laborious utterance of his friend upon the steamer, and why his difficulty with words was more than he could overcome.

Like a current in the sea he still preserved identity, yet knew the freedom of a boundless being. And meanwhile the tide was ever rising. With this singular companion he neared that inner realization which should reveal them as they were — Thoughts in the Earth's old Consciousness too primitive, too far away, too vital and terrific to be confined in any outward physical expression of the "civilized" world today…. The earth shone, glittered, sang, holding them close to the rhythm of her gigantic heart. Her glory was their own. In the blazing summer of the inner life they floated, happy, caught away, at peace … emanations of her living Self.

* * * * *

The valleys far below were filled with mist, cutting them off literally from the world of men, but the beauty of the upper mountains grew more and more bewilderingly enticing. The scale was so immense, while the brilliant clearness of the air brought distance close before the eyes, altered perspective, and robbed "remote" and "near" of any definite meaning. Space fled away. It shifted here and there at pleasure, according as they felt. It was within them, not without. They passed, dispersed and swift about the entire landscape, a very part of it, diffused in terms of light and air and color, scattered in radiance, distributed through flowers, spread through the sky and grass and forests. Space is a form of thought. But they no longer "thought": they felt…. O, that prodigious, clean, and simple Feeling of the Earth! Love that redeems and satisfies! Power that fills and blesses! Electric strength that kills the germ of separateness, making whole! The medicine of the world!

For days and nights it was thus — or was it years and minutes? — while they skirted the slopes and towers of the huge Dykh-Taou, and Elbrous, supreme and lonely in the heavens, beckoned solemnly. The snowy Kochtan-Taou rolled past, yet through, them; Kasbek superbly thundered; hosts of lesser summits sang in the dawn and whispered to the stars. And longing sank away — impossible.

"My boy, my boy, could you only have been with me…!" broke his voice across the splendid dream, bringing me back to the choking, dingy room I had forgotten. It was like a cry — a cry of passionate yearning.

"I'm with you now," I murmured, some similar rising joy half breaking in my breast. "That's something—"

He sighed in answer. "Something, perhaps. But I have got it always; it's all still part of me. Oh, oh! that I could give it to the world and lift the ache of all humanity…!" His voice trembled. I saw the moisture of immense compassion in his eyes. I felt myself swim out into universal being.

“Perhaps,” I stammered half beneath my breath, “perhaps some day you may…!”

He shook his head. His face turned very sad.

“How should they listen, much less understand? Their energies drive outwards, and separation is their God. There is no ‘money in it’…!”

CHAPTER XXXIV

"OH! WHOSE HEART is not stirred with tumultuous joy when the intimate Life of Nature enters into his soul with all its plenitude, … when that mighty sentiment for which language has no other name than Love is diffused in him, like some powerful all-dissolving vapor; when he, shivering with sweet terror, sinks into the dusky, enticing bosom of Nature; when the meager personality loses itself in the overpowering waves of passion, and nothing remains but the focal point of the incommensurable generative Force, an engulfing vortex in the ocean?"

— NOVALIS, *Disciples at Saïs.* Translated by U.C.B.

Early in the afternoon they left the bigger trees behind, and passed into that more open country where the shoulders of the mountains were strewn with rhododendrons. These formed no continuous forest, but stood about in groups some twenty-five feet high, their rounded masses lighted on the surface with fires of mauve and pink and purple. When the wind stirred them, and the rattling of their stiff leaves was heard, it seemed as if the skin of the mountains trembled to shake out colored flames. The air turned radiant through a mist of running tints.

Still climbing, they passed along broad glades of turfy grass between the groups. More rapidly now, O'Malley says, went forward that inner change of being which accompanied the progress of their outer selves. So intimate henceforth was this subtle correspondence that the very landscape took the semblance of their feelings. They moved as "emanations" of the landscape. Each melted in the other, dividing lines all vanished.

Their union with the Earth approached this strange and sweet fulfillment.

And so it was that, though at this height the vestiges of bird and animal life were wholly gone, there grew more and more strongly the sense that, in their further depths and shadows, these ancient bushes screened Activities even more ancient than themselves. Life, only concealed because they had not reached its plane of being, pulsed everywhere about their pathway, immense in power, moving swiftly, very grand and very simple, and sometimes surging close, seeking to draw them in. More than once, as they moved through glade and clearing, the Irishman knew thrills of an intoxicating happiness, as this abundant, driving life brushed past him. It came so close, it glided before his eyes, yet still was viewless. It strode behind him and before, peered down through space upon him, lapped him about with the stir of mighty currents. The deep suction of its invitation caught his soul, urging the change within himself more quickly forward. Huge and delightful, he describes it, awful, yet bringing no alarm.

He was always on the point of seeing. Surely the next turning would reveal; beyond the next dense, tangled group would come — disclosure; behind that clustered mass of purple blossoms, shaking there mysteriously in the wind, some half-veiled countenance of splendor watched and welcomed! Before his face passed swift, deific figures, tall, erect, compelling, charged with this ancient, golden life that could never wholly pass away. And only just beyond the fringe of vision. Vision already strained upon the edge. His consciousness stretched more and more to reach them, while They came crowding near to let him know inclusion.

These projections of the Earth's old consciousness moved thick and soft about them, eternal in their giant beauty. Soon he would know, perhaps, the very forms in which she had projected them — dear portions of her streaming life the earliest races half divined and worshipped, and never quite withdrawn. Worship could still entice them out. A single worshipper sufficed. For worship meant retreat into the heart where still they dwelt. And he had loved and worshipped all his life.

And always with him, now at his side or now a little in advance, his leader moved in power, with vigorous, springing gestures like to dancing, singing that old tuneless song of the wind, happier even than himself.

The splendor of the *Urwelt* closed about them. They drew nearer to the Gates of that old Garden, the first Time ever knew, whose frontiers were not less than the horizons of the entire world. For this lost Eden of a Golden Age when "first God dawned on chaos" still shone within the soul as in those days of innocence before the "Fall," when men first separated themselves from their great Mother.

A little before sunset they halted. A hundred yards above the rhododendron forest, in a clear wide space of turf that ran for leagues among grey boulders to the lips of the eternal snowfields, they waited. Through a gap of sky, with others but slightly lower than himself, the pyramid of Kasbek, grim and towering, stared down upon them, dreadfully close though really miles away. At their feet yawned the profound valley they had climbed. Halfway into it, unable to reach the depths, the sun's last rays dropped shafts like rivers slanting. Already in soft troops the shadows crept downwards from the eastern-facing summits overhead.

Out of these very shadows Night drew swiftly down about the world, building with her masses of silvery architecture a barrier that rose to heaven. These two lay down beside it. Beyond it spread that shining Garden…only the shadow-barrier between.

With the rising of the moon this barrier softened marvelously, letting the starbeams in. It trembled like a line of wavering music in the wind of night. It settled downwards, shaking a little, toward the ground, while just above them came a curving inwards like a bay of darkness, with overhead two stately towers, their outline fringed with stars.

"The Gateway…!" whispered something through the mountains.

It may have been the leader's voice; it may have been the Irishman's own leaping thought; it may have been merely a murmur from the rhododendron leaves below. It came sifting gently through the shadows. O'Malley knew. He followed his leader higher. Just beneath this semblance of an old-world portal which Time could neither fashion nor destroy, they lay upon the earth — and waited. Beside them shone the world, dressed by the moon in silver. The wind stood still to watch. The peak of Kasbek from his cloudy distance listened too.

For, floating upwards across the spaces came a sound of simple, old-time piping — the fluting music of a little reed. It drew near, stopped for a moment as though the player watched them; then, with a plunging swiftness, passed off through starry distance up among the darker mountains. The lost, forsaken Asian valley covered them. Nowhere were they extraneous to it. They slept. And while they slept, they moved across the frontiers of fulfillment.

The moon-blanched Gate of horn and ivory swung open. The consciousness of the Earth possessed them. They passed within.

CHAPTER XXXV

"For of old the Sun, our sire,
  Came wooing the mother of men,
  Earth, that was virginal then,
Vestal fire to his fire.
Silent her bosom and coy,
  But the strong god sued and press'd;
And born of their starry nuptial joy
  Are all that drink of her breast.

"And the triumph of him that begot,
  And the travail of her that bore,
  Behold they are evermore
As warp and weft in our lot.
We are children of splendor and flame,
  Of shuddering, also, and tears.
Magnificent out of the dust we came,
  And abject from the spheres.

"O bright irresistible lord!
  We are fruit of Earth's womb, each one,
  And fruit of thy loins, O Sun,
Whence first was the seed outpour'd.
To thee as our Father we bow,
  Forbidden thy Father to see,
Who is older and greater than thou, as thou
  Art greater and older than we."

— WILLIAM WATSON, "Ode in May"

Very slowly the dawn came. The sky blushed rose, trembled, flamed. A breath of wind stirred the vapors that far below sheeted the surface of the Black Sea. But it was still in that gentle twilight before the actual color comes that O'Malley found he was lying with his eyes wide open, watching the rhododendrons. He may have slept meanwhile, though “sleep,” he says, involving loss of consciousness, seemed no right description. A sense of interval there was at any rate, a “transition-blank,” — whatever that may mean — he phrased it in the writing.

And, watching the rhododendron forest a hundred yards below, he saw it move. Through the dim light this movement passed and ran, here, there, and everywhere. A curious soft sound accompanied it that made him remember the Bible phrase of wind “going in the tops of the mulberry trees.” Hushed, swift, elusive murmur, it passed about him through the dusk. He caught it next behind him and, turning, noticed groups upon the slopes, — groups that he had not seen the night before. These groups seemed also now to move; the isolated scattered clusters came together, merged, ran to the parent forest below, or melted just beyond the line of vision above.

The wind sprang up and rattled all the million leaves. That rattling filled the air, and with it came another, deeper sound like to a sound of tramping that seemed to shake the earth. Confusion caught him then completely, for it was as if the mountain-side awoke, rose up, and shook itself into a wild and multitudinous wave of life.

At first he thought the wind had somehow torn the rhododendrons loose from their roots and was strewing them with that tramping sound about the slopes. But the groups passed too swiftly over the turf for that, swept completely from their fastenings, while the tramping grew to a roaring as of cries and voices. That roaring had the quality of the voice that reached him weeks ago across the Ægean Sea. A strange, keen odor, too, that was not wholly unfamiliar, moved upon the wind.

And then he knew that what he had been watching all along were not rhododendrons at all, but living, splendid creatures. A host of others, moreover, large ones and small together, stood shadowy in the background, stamping their feet upon the turf, manes tossing in the early wind, in their entire mass awful as in their individual outline somehow noble.

The light spread upwards from the east. With a fire of terrible joy and wonder in his heart, O’Malley held his breath and stared. The luster of their glorious bodies, golden bronze in the sunlight, dazed the sight. He saw the splendor of ten hundred velvet flanks in movement, with here and there the uprising whiteness of a female outline that flashed and broke above the general mass like foam upon a great wave's crest — figures of incomparable grace and power; the sovereign, upright carriage; the rippling muscles upon massive limbs, and shoulders that held defiant strength and softness in exquisite combination. And then he heard huge murmurs of their voices that filled the dawn, aged by lost thousand years, and sonorous as the booming of the sea. A cry that was like singing escaped him. He saw them rise and sweep away. There was a rush of magnificence. They cantered — wonderfully. They were gone.

The roar of their curious commotion traveled over the mountains, dying into distance very swiftly. The rhododendron forest that had concealed their approach resumed its normal aspect, but burning now with colors innumerable as the sunrise caught its thousand blossoms. And O'Malley understood that during "sleep" he had passed with his companion through the gates of ivory and horn, and stood now within the first Garden of the early world. All frontiers crossed, all barriers behind, he stood within the paradise of his heart's desire. The Consciousness of the Earth included him. These were early forms of life she had projected — some of the living prototypes of legend, myth, and fable — embodiments of her first manifestations of consciousness, and eternal, accessible to every heart that holds a true and passionate worship. All his life this love of Nature, which was worship, had been his. It now fulfilled itself. Merged by love into the consciousness of the Being loved, he *felt* her thoughts, her powers, and manifestations of life as his own.

In a flash, of course, this all passed clearly before him; but there was no time to dwell upon it. For the activity of his companion had likewise become suddenly tremendous. He had risen into complete revelation at last. His own had called him. He was off to join his kind.

The transformation came upon both of them, it seems, at once, but in that moment of bewilderment, the Irishman only realized it first in his leader.

For on the edge of the advancing sunlight first this Cosmic Being crouched, then rose with alert and springing movement, leaping to his feet in a single bound that propelled him with a stride of more than a man's two limbs. His great sides quivered as he shook himself. A roar, similar to that sound the distance already swallowed, rolled forth into the air. With head thrown back, chest forward, too, for all the backward slant of the mighty shoulders, he stood there, grandly outlined, pushing the wind before him. The great brown eyes shone with the joy of freedom and escape — a superb and regal transformation.

Urged by the audacity of his strange excitement, the Irishman obeyed an impulse that came he knew not whence. The single word sprang to his lips before he could guess its meaning, much less hold it back.

“Lapithae…!” he cried aloud; “Lapithae…!”

The stalwart figure turned with an awful spring as though it would trample him to the ground. A moment the brown eyes flamed with a light of battle. Then, with another roar, and a gesture that was somehow both huge and simple, he seemed to rise and paw the air. The next second this figure of the *Urwelt*, come once more into its own, bent down and forward, leaped wonderfully — then, cantering, raced away across the slopes to join his kind. He went like a shape of wind and cloud. The heritage of racial memory was his, and certain words remained still vividly evocative. That old battle with the Lapithae was but one item of the scenes of ancient splendor lying pigeon-holed in his mighty Mother’s consciousness. The instant he had called, the Irishman himself lay caught in lost memory’s tumultuous whirl. The lonely world about him seemed of a sudden magnificently peopled — sky, woods, and torrents.

He watched a moment the fierce rapidity with which he sped toward the mountains, the sound of his feet already merged in that other, vaster tramping, and then he turned — to watch himself. For a similar transformation was going forward in himself, and with the happiness of wild amazement he saw it. Already, indeed, it was accomplished. All white and shining lay the sunlight over his own extended form. Power was in his limbs; he rose above the ground in some new way; the usual little stream of breath became a river of rushing air he drew into stronger, more capacious lungs; likewise his bust grew strangely deepened, pushed the wind before it; and the sunshine glowed on shaggy flanks agleam with dew that powerfully drove the ground behind him while he ran.

He ran, yet only partly as a man runs; he found himself shot forwards through the air, upright, yet at the same time upon all fours brandishing his arms he flew with a free, unfettered motion, traversing the surface of the mother’s mind and body. Free of the entire Earth he was.

And as he raced to join the others, there passed again across his memory faintly — it was like the little memory of some physical pain almost — the picture of the boy who swam so strangely in the sea, the picture of the parent’s curious emanations on the deck, and, lastly, of those flying shapes of cloud and wind his inner vision brought so often speeding over long, bare hills. This was the final fragment of the outer world that reached him….

He tore along the mountains in the dawn, the awful speed at last explained. His going made a sound upon the wind, and like the wind he raced. Far beyond him in the distance, he saw the shadow of that disappearing host spreading upon the valleys like a mist. Faintly still he caught their sound of roaring; but it was his own feet now that made that trampling as of hoofs upon the turf. The landscape moved and opened, gathering him in….

And, hardly had he gone, when there stole upon the place where he had stood, a sweet and simple sound of music — the little piping of a reed. It dropped down through the air, perhaps, or came from the forest edge, or possibly the sunrise brought it — this ancient little sound of fluting on those Pipes men call the Pipes of Pan….

CHAPTER XXXVI

“Here we but peak and dwindle
  The clank of chain and crane,
The whirr of crank and spindle
  Bewilder heart and brain;
The ends of our endeavor
  Are wealth and fame,
Yet in the still Forever
  We’re one and all the same;

“Yet beautiful and spacious
  The wise, old world appears.
Yet frank and fair and gracious
  Outlaugh the jocund years.
Our arguments disputing,
  The universal Pan
Still wanders fluting — fluting —
  Fluting to maid and man.
Our weary well-a-waying
  His music cannot still:
Come! let us go a-maying,
  And pipe with him our fill.” — W.E. HENLEY

In a detailed description, radiant with a wild loveliness of some forgotten beauty, and of necessity often incoherent, the Irishman conveyed to me, sitting in that dreary Soho restaurant, the passion of his vision. With an astonishing vitality and a wealth of deep conviction it all poured from his lips. There was no halting and no hesitation. Like a man in trance he talked, and like a man in trance he lived it over again while imparting it to me. None came to disturb us in our dingy corner. Indeed there is no quieter place in all London town than the back room of these eating-houses of the French Quarter between the hours of lunch and dinner. The waiters vanish, the “patron” disappears; no customers come in. But I know surely that its burning splendor came not from the actual words he used, but was due to definite complete transference of the vision itself into my own heart. I caught the fire from his very thought. His heat inflamed my mind. Words, both in the uttered and the written version, dimmed it all distressingly.

And the completeness of the transference is proved for me by the fact that I never once had need to ask a question. I saw and understood it all as he did. And hours must have passed during the strange recital, for toward the close people came in and took the vacant tables, the lights were up, and grimy waiters clattered noisily about with plates and knives and forks, thrusting an inky carte du jour beneath our very faces.

Yet how to set it down I swear I know not. Nor he, indeed. The notebooks that I found in that old sack of Willesden canvas were a disgrace to any man who bid for sanity, — a disgrace to paper and pencil too!

All memory of his former life, it seems, at first, had fallen utterly away; nothing survived to remind him of it; and thus he lost all standard of comparison. The state he moved in was too complete to admit of standards or of critical judgment. For these confine, imprison, and belittle, whereas he was free. His escape was unconditioned. From the thirty years of his previous living, no single fragment broke through. The absorption was absolute.

“I really do believe and know myself,” he said to me across that spotted table-cloth, “that for the time I was merged into the being of another, a being immensely greater than myself. Perhaps old Stahl was right, perhaps old crazy Fechner; and it actually was the consciousness of the Earth. I can only tell you that the whole experience left no room in me for other memories; all I had previously known was gone, wiped clean away. Yet much of what came in its place is beyond me to describe; and for a curious reason. It’s not the size or splendor that prevent the telling, but rather the sublime simplicity of it all. I know no language today simple enough to utter it. Far behind words it lies, as difficult of full recovery as the dreams of deep sleep, as the ecstasy of the religious, elusive as the mystery of Kubla Khan or the Patmos visions of St. John. Full recapture, I am convinced, is not possible at all in words.

“And at the time it did not seem like vision; it was so natural; unstudied, unprepared, and ever there; spontaneous too and artless as a drop of water or a baby’s toy. The natural is ever the unchanging. My God! I tell you, man, it was divine!”

He made about him a vehement sweeping gesture with his arm which emphasized more poignantly than speech the contrast he felt here where we sat — tight, confining walls, small stifling windows, chairs to rest the body, smothering roof and curtains, doors of narrow entrance and exit, floors to lift above the sweet surface of the soil, — all of them artificial barriers to shut out light and separate away from the Earth. “See what we’ve come to!” it said plainly. And it included even his clothes and boots and collar, the ridiculous hat upon the peg, the unsightly “brolly” in the dingy corner. Had there been room in me for laughter, I could well have laughed aloud.

* * * * *

For as he raced across that stretch of splendid mountainous Earth, watching the sunrise kiss the valleys and the woods, shaking the dew from his feet and swallowing the very wind for breath, he realized that other forms of life similar to his own were everywhere about him — also moving.

“They were a part of the Earth even as I was. Here she was crammed to the brim with them — projections of her actual self and being, crowded with this incomparable ancient beauty that was strong as her hills, swift as her running streams, radiant as her wild flowers. Whether to call them forms or thoughts or feelings, or Powers perhaps, I swear, old man, I know not. Her Consciousness through which I sped, drowned, lost, and happy, wrapped us all in together as a mood contains its own thoughts and feelings. For she *was* a Being — of sorts. And I *was* in her mind, mood, consciousness, call it what you best can. These other thoughts and presences I felt were the raw material of forms, perhaps — Forces that when they reach the minds of men must clothe themselves in form in order to be known, whether they be Dreams, or Gods, or any other kind of inspiration. Closer than that I cannot get…. I knew myself within her being like a child, and I felt the deep, eternal pull — to simple things.”

* * * * *

And thus the beauty of the early world companioned him, and all the forgotten gods moved forward into life. They hovered everywhere, immense and stately. The rocks and trees and peaks that half concealed them, betrayed at the same time great hints of their mighty gestures. Near him, they were; he moved toward their region. If definite sight refused to focus on them the fault was not their own but his. He never doubted that they could be seen. Yet, even thus partially, they manifested — terrifically. He was aware of their overshadowing presences. Sight, after all, was an incomplete form of knowing — a thing he had left behind — elsewhere. It belonged, with the other limited sense-channels, to some attenuated dream now all forgotten. Now he knew *all over*. He himself was of them.

“I am home!” it seems he cried as he ran cantering across the sunny slopes. “At last I have found you! Home…!” and the stones shot wildly from his thundering tread.

A roar of windy power filled the sky, and far away that echoing tramping paused to listen.

“We have called you! Come…!”

And the forms moved down slowly from their mountainous pedestals; the woods breathed out a sigh; the running water sang; the slopes all murmured through their grass and flowers. For a worshipper, strayed from the outer world of the dead, stood within the precincts of their ancient temple. He had passed the Angel with the flaming sword those very dead had set there long ago. The Garden now enclosed him. He had found the heart of the Earth, his mother. Self-realization in the perfect union with Nature was fulfilled. He knew the Great At-onement.

* * * * *

The quiet of the dawn still lay upon the world; dew sparkled; the air was keen and fresh. Yet, in spite of all this vast sense of energy, this vigor and delight, O’Malley no longer felt the least goading of excitement. There was this animation and this fine delight; but craving for sensation of any kind, was gone. Excitement, as it tortured men in that outer world he had left, could not exist in this larger state of being; for excitement is the appetite for something not possessed, magnified artificially till it has become a condition of disease. All that he needed was now contained within himself; he was at-ease; and, literally, that unrest which men miscall delight could touch him not nor torture him again.

If this were death — how exquisite!

And Time was not a passing thing, for it lay, he says, somehow in an ocean everywhere, heaped up in gulfs and spaces. It was as though he could help himself and take it. That morning, had he so wished, could last forever; he could go backwards and taste the shadows of the night again, or forward and bask in the glory of hot noon. There were no parts of things, and so no restlessness, no sense of incompleteness, no divisions.

This quiet of the dawn lay in himself, and, since he loved it, lay there, cool and sweet and sparkling for — years; almost — forever.

* * * * *

Moreover, while this giant form of *Urwelt*-life his inner self had assumed was new, it yet seemed somehow familiar. The speed and weight and power caused him no distress, there was no detail that he could not manage easily. To race thus o’er the world, keeping pace with an eternal dawn, was as simple as for the Earth herself to spin through space. His union with her was as complete as that. In every item of her being lay the wonder of her perfect form — a sphere. It was complete. Nothing could add to it.

Yet, while all recollection of his former, pettier self was gone, he began presently to remember — men. Though never in relation to himself, he retained dimly a picture of that outer world of strife and terror. As a memory of illness he recalled it — dreadfully, a nightmare fever from which he had recovered, its horror already fading out. Cities and crowds, poverty, illness, pain and all the various terror of Civilization, robbed of the power to afflict, yet still hung hovering about the surface of his consciousness, though powerless to break his peace.

For the power to understand it vanished; no part of him knew sympathy with it; so clearly he now saw himself sharing the Earth, that a vague wonder filled him when he recalled the mad desires of men to possess external forms of things. It was amazing and perplexing. How could they ever have devised such wild and childish efforts — all in the wrong direction?

If that outer life were the real one how could any intelligent being think it worth while to live? How could any thinking man hold up his head and walk along the street with dignity if that was what he believed? Was a man satisfied with it worth keeping alive at all? What bigger scheme could ever use him? The direction of modern life today was diametrically away from happiness and truth.

Peace was the word he knew, peace and a singing joy.

* * * * *

He played with the Earth’s great dawn and raced along these mountains through her mind. *Of course>* the hills could dance and sing and clap their hands. He saw it clear. How could it be otherwise? They were expressions of her giant moods — what in himself were thoughts — phases of her ample, surging Consciousness….

He passed with the sunlight down the laughing valleys, spread with the morning wind above the woods, shone on the snowy peaks, and leaped with rushing laughter among the crystal streams. These were his swift and darting signs of joy, words of his singing as it were. His main and central being swung with the pulse of the Earth, too great for any telling.

He read the book of Nature all about him, yes, but read it singing. He understood how this patient Mother hungered for her myriad lost children, how in the passion of her summers she longed to bless them, to wake their high yearnings with the sweetness of her springs, and to whisper through her autumns how she prayed for their return…!

Instinctively he read the giant Page before him. For “every form in nature is a symbol of an idea and represents a sign or letter. A succession of such symbols forms a language; and he who is a true child of nature may understand this language and know the character of everything. His mind, becomes a mirror wherein the attributes of natural things are reflected and enter the field of his consciousness…. For man himself is but a thought pervading the ocean of mind.”

Whether or not lie remembered these stammering yet pregnant words from the outer world now left behind, the truth they shadowed forth rose up and took him … and so he flowed across the mountains like a thing of wind and cloud, and so at length came up with the stragglers of that mighty herd of *Urwelt* life. He joined them in a river-bed of those ancient valleys. They welcomed him and took him to themselves.

* * * * *

For the particular stratum, as it were, of the Earth's enormous Collective Consciousness to which he belonged, or rather that part and corner in which he was first at home, lay with these lesser ancient forms. Although aware of far mightier expressions of her life, he could not yet readily perceive or join them. And this was easily comprehensible by the analogy of his own smaller consciousness. Did not his own mind hold thoughts of various kinds that could not readily mingle? His thoughts of play and frolic, for instance, could not combine with the august and graver sentiments of awe and worship, though both could dwell together in the same heart. And here apparently, as yet, he only touched that frolicsome fringe of consciousness that knew these wild and playful lesser forms. Thus, while he was aware of other more powerful figures of wonder all about him, he never quite achieved their full recognition. The ordered, deeper strata of her Consciousness to which they belonged still lay beyond him.

Yet everywhere he fringed them. They haunted the entire world. They brooded hugely with a kind of deep magnificence that was like the slow brooding of the Seasons; they rose, looming and splendid, through the air and sky, proud, strong, and tragic. For, standing aloof from all the rest, in isolation, like dreams in a poet's mind, too potent for expression, they thus knew tragedy — the tragedy of long neglect and loneliness.

Seated on peak and ridge, rising beyond the summits in the clouds, filling the valleys, spread over watercourse and forest, they passed their life of lonely majesty — apart, their splendor too remote for him as yet to share. Long since had Earth withdrawn them from the hearts of men. Her lesser children knew them no more. But still through the deep recesses of her further consciousness they thundered and were glad… though few might hear that thunder, share that awful joy….

Even the Irishman — who in ordinary life had felt instinctively that worship which is close to love, and so to the union that love brings — even he, in this new-found freedom, only partially discerned their presences. He felt them now, these stately Powers men once called the gods, but felt them from a distance; and from a distance, too, they saw and watched him come. He knew their gorgeous forms half dimmed by a remote and veiled enchantment; knew that they reared aloft like ancient towers, ruined by neglect and ignorance, starved and lonely, but still hauntingly splendid and engaging, still terrifically alive. And it seemed to him that sometimes their awful eyes flashed with the sunshine over slope and valley, and that wherever they rested flowers sprang to life.

Their nearness sometimes swept him like a storm, and then the entire herd with which he mingled would stand abruptly still, caught by a wave of awe and wonder. The host of them stood still upon the grass, their frolic held a moment, their voices hushed, only deep panting audible and the soft shuffling of their hoofs among the flowers. They bowed their splendid heads and waited — while a god went past them…. And through himself, as witness of the passage, a soft, majestic power also swept. With the lift of a hurricane, yet with the gentleness of dew, he felt the noblest in himself irresistibly evoked. It was gone again as soon as come. It passed. But it left him charged with a regal confidence and joy. As in the mountains a shower of snow picks out the highest peaks in white, tracing its course and pattern over the entire range, so in himself he knew the highest powers — aspirations, yearnings, hopes — raised into shining, white activity, and by these quickened splendors of his soul could recognize the nature of the god who came so close.

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And, keeping mostly to the river-beds, they splashed in the torrents, played and leaped and cantered. From the openings of many a moist cave others came to join them. Below a certain level, though, they never went; the forests knew them not; they loved the open, windy heights. They turned and circulated as by a common consent, wheeling suddenly together as if a single desire actuated the entire mass. One instinct spread, as it were, among the lot, shared instantly, conveying to each at once the general impulse. Their movements in this were like those of birds whose flight in coveys obeys the order of a collective consciousness of which each single one is an item — expressions of one single Bird-Idea behind, distributed through all.

And O'Malley without questioning or hesitation obeyed, while yet he was free to do as he wished alone. To do as they did was the greatest pleasure, that was all.

For sometimes with two of them, one fully-formed, the other of lesser mold — he flew on little journeys of his own. These two seemed nearer to him than the rest. He felt he knew them and had been with them before. Their big brown eyes continually sought his own with pleasure. It almost seemed as if they had all three been separated long away from one another, and had at last returned. No definite memory of the interval came back, however; the sea, the steamer, and the journey's incidents all had faded — part of that world of lesser insignificant dream where they had happened. But these two kept close to him; they ran and danced together….

The time that passed included many dawns and nights and also many noons of splendor. It all seemed endless, perfect, and serene. That anything could finish here did not once occur to him. Complete things cannot finish. He passed through seas and gulfs of glorious existence. For the strange thing was that while he only remembered afterwards the motion, play, and laughter, he yet had these other glimpses here and there of some ordered and progressive life existing just beyond. It lay hidden deeper within. He skimmed its surface; but something prevented his knowing it fully. And the limitation that held him back belonged, it seemed, to that thin world of trivial dreaming he had left behind. He had not shaken it off entirely. It still obscured his sight.

The scale and manner of this greater life faintly reached him, nothing more. It may be that he only failed to bring back recollection, or it may be that he did not penetrate deeply enough to know. At any rate, he recognized that this sudden occasional passing by of vast deific figures had to do with it, and that all this ocean of Earth's deeper Consciousness was peopled with forms of life that obeyed some splendid system of progressive ordered existence. To be gathered up in this one greater consciousness was not the end…. Rather was it merely the beginning….

Meantime he learned that here, among these lesser thoughts of the great Mother, all the Pantheons of the world had first their origin — the Greek, the Eastern, and the Northern too. Here all the gods that men have ever half divined, still ranged the moods of Her timeless consciousness. Their train of beauty, too, accompanied them.

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I cannot half recall the streams of passionate description with which his words clothed these glowing memories of his vision. Great pictures of it haunt the background of my mind, pictures that lie in early mists, framed by the stars and glimmering through some golden, flowered dawn. Besides the huge outlines that stood breathing in the background like dark mountains, there flitted here and there strange dreamy forms of almost impossible beauty, slender as lilies, eyes soft and starry shining through the dusk, hair flying past them like a rain of summer flowers. Nymph-like they moved down all the pathways of the Earth's young mind, singing and radiant, spring blossoms in the Garden of her Consciousness…. And other forms, more vehement and rude, urged to and fro across the pictures; crowding the movement; some playful and protean; some clothed as with trees, or air, or water; and others dark, remote, and silent, ranging her deeper layers of thought and dream, known rarely to the outer world at all.

The rush and glory of it all is more than my mind can deal with. I gather, though, O'Malley saw no definite forms, but rather knew "forces," powers, aspects of this Soul of Earth, facets she showed in long-forgotten days to men. Certainly the very infusoria of his imagination were kindled and aflame when he spoke of them. Through the tangled thicket of his ordinary mind there shone this passion of an uncommon loveliness and splendour.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"THE HOURS WHEN the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live, so that the longer we can stay among these things, so much the more is snatched from inevitable time." — RICHARD JEFFERIES

In the relationship that his everyday mind bore to his present state there lay, moreover, a wealth of pregnant suggestion. The bridge connecting his former "civilized" condition with this cosmic experience was a curious one. That outer, lesser state, it seemed, had known a foretaste sometimes of the greater. And it was hence had come those dreams of a Golden Age that used to haunt him. For he began now to recall the existence of that outer world of men and women, though by means of certain indefinite channels only. And the things he remembered were not what the world calls important. They were moments when he had known — beauty; beauty, however, not of the grandiose sort that holds the crowd, but of so simple and unadvertised a kind that most men overlook it altogether.

He understood now why the thrill had been so wonderful. He saw clearly why those moments of ecstasy he had often felt in Nature used to torture him with an inexpressible yearning that was rather pain than joy. For they were precisely what he now experienced when the viewless figure of a god passed by him. Down there, out there, below — in that cabined lesser state — they had been partial, but were now complete. Those moments of worship he had known in woods, among mountains, by the shores of desolate seas, even in a London street, perhaps at the sight of a tree in spring or of a pathway of blue sky between the summer clouds, — these had been, one and all, tentative, partial revelations of the Consciousness of the Soul of Earth he now knew face to face.

These were his only memories of that outer world. Of people, cities, or of civilization apart from these, he had no single remembrance.

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Certain of these little partial foretastes now came back to him, like fragments of dream that trouble the waking day.

He remembered, for instance, one definite picture: a hot autumn sun upon a field of stubble where the folded corn-sheaves stood; thistles waving by the hedges; a yellow field of mustard rising up the slope against the sky-line, and beyond a row of peering elms that rustled in the wind. The beauty of the little scene was somehow poignant. He recalled it vividly. It had flamed about him, transfiguring the world; he had trembled, yearning to see more, for just behind it he divined with an exulting passionate worship this gorgeous, splendid Earth-Being with whom at last he now actually moved. In that instant of a simple loveliness her consciousness had fringed his own — had bruised it. He had known it only by the partial channels of sight and smell and hearing, but had felt the greater thing beyond, without being able to explain it. And a portion of what he felt had burst in speech from his lips.

He was there, he remembered, with two persons, a man and woman whose name and face, however, he could not summon, and he recalled that the woman smiled incredulously when he spoke of the exquisite perfume of those folded corn-sheaves in the air. She told him he imagined it. He saw again the pretty woman’s smile of incomprehension; he saw the puzzled expression in the eyes of the man; he heard him murmur something prosaic about the soul, about birds, too, and the prospects of killing hundreds later — sport! He even saw the woman picking her way with caution as though the touch of earth could stain or injure her. He especially recalled the silence that had followed on his words that sought to show them — Beauty…. He remembered, too, above all, the sense of loneliness among men that it induced in himself.

But the memory brought him a curious, sharp pain; and turning to that couple who were now his playmates in this Garden of the Earth, he called them with a singing cry and cantered over leagues of flowers, wind, and sunshine before he stopped again. They leaped and danced together, exulting in their spacious *Urwelt* freedom … want of comprehension no longer possible.

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The memory fled away. He shook himself free of it. Then others came in its place, another and another, not all with people, blind, deaf, and unreceptive, yet all of “common,” simple scenes of beauty when something vast had surged upon him and broken through the barriers that stand between the heart and Nature. Such curious little scenes they were. In most of them he had evidently been alone. But one and all had touched his soul with a foretaste of this same nameless ecstasy that now he knew complete. In every one the Consciousness of the Earth had “bruised” his own.

Utterly simple they had been, one and all, these partial moments of blinding beauty in that lesser, outer world: — A big, brown, clumsy bee he saw, blundering into the petals of a wild flower on which the dew lay sparkling…. A wisp of colored cloud driving loosely across the hills, dropping a purple shadow…. Deep, waving grass, plunging and shaking in the wind that drew out its underworld of blue and silver over the whole spread surface of a field…. A daisy closed for the night upon the lawn, eyes tightly shut, hands folded…. A south wind whispering through larches…. The pattering of summer rain upon young oak leaves in the dawn…. Fingers of long blue distance upon dreamy woods…. Anemones shaking their pale and starry little faces in the wind…. The columned stillness of a pine-wood in the dusk…. Young birch trees mid the velvet gloom of firs…. The new moon setting in a cloud of stars…. The hush of stars in many a summer night…. Sheep grazing idly down a sun-baked hill…. A path of moonlight on a lake…. A little wind through bare and wintry woods…. Oh! he recalled the wonder, loveliness, and passion of a thousand more!

They thronged and passed, and thronged again, crowding one another: — all golden moments of revelation when he had caught glimpses of the Earth, and her greater Moods had swept him up into herself. Moments in which a god had passed….

These were his only memories of that outer world he had left behind: flashes of simple beauty.

Was thus the thrill of beauty then explained? Was loveliness, as men know it, a revelation of the Earth-Soul behind? And were the blinding flash, the dazzling wonder, and the dream men seek to render permanent in music, color, line and language, a vision of her nakedness? Down there, the poets and those simple enough of heart to stand close to Nature, could catch these whispered fragments of the enormous message, told as in secret; but now, against her very heart he heard the thunder of the thing complete. Now, in the glory of all naked bodily forms, — of women, men and children, of swift animals, of flowers, trees, and running water, of mountains and of seas, — he understood these partial revelations of the great Earth-Soul that bore them, gave them life. For one and all were channels for her loveliness. He saw the beauty of the “natural” instincts, the passion of motherhood and fatherhood — Earth’s seeking to project herself in endless forms and variety. He understood why love increased the heart and made it feel at one with all the world.

* * * * *

Moreover in some amazing fashion he was aware that others from that outer world beside himself had access here, and that from this Garden of the Earth’s deep central personality came all the inspiration known to men. He divined that others were even now drawing upon it like himself. The thoughts of the poets went past him like thin flames; the dreams of millions — mute, inexpressible yearnings like those he had himself once known — streamed by in pale white light, to shoot forward with a little nesting rush into some great Figure … and then return in double volume to the dreaming heart whence first they issued. Shadows, too, he saw, by myriads — faint, feeble gropings of men and women seeking it eagerly, yet hardly knowing what they sought; but, above all, long, singing, beautiful tongues of colored flame that were the instincts of divining children and of the pure in heart. These came in rippling floods unerringly to their goal, lingered for long periods before returning. And all, he knew, were currents of the great Earth Life, moods, thoughts, dreams — expressions of her various Consciousness with which she mothered, fed, and blessed all whom it was possible to reach. Their passionate yearning, their worship, made access possible. Along the tenderest portions of her personality these latter came, as by a spread network of infinitely delicate filaments that extended from herself, deliciously inviting….

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The thing, however, that remained with him long after his return to the normal state of lesser consciousness was the memory of those blinding moments when a god went past him, or, as he phrased it in another way, when he caught glimpses of the Earth — naked. For these were instantaneous flashes of a gleaming whiteness, a dazzling and supreme loveliness that staggered thought and arrested feeling, while yet of a radiant simplicity that brought — for a second at least — a measure of comprehension.

He then knew not mere partial projections. He saw beyond — deep down into the flaming center that gave them birth. The blending of his being with the Cosmic Consciousness was complete enough for this. He describes it as a spectacle of sheer glory, stupendous, even terrifying. The refulgent majesty of it utterly possessed him. The shock of its magnificence came, moreover, upon his entire being, and was not really of course a "sight" at all. The message came not through any small division of a single sense. With a massed yet soaring power it shook him free of all known categories. He then fringed a region of yet greater being wherein he tasted for a moment some secret comprehension of a true "divinity." The deliverance into ecstasy was complete.

In these flashing moments, when a second seemed a thousand years, he further *understood* the splendor of the stage beyond. Earth in her turn was but a Mood in the Consciousness of the Universe, that Universe again was mothered by another vaster one … and the total that included them all was not the gods — but God.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE LITTER OF disordered notebooks filled to the covers with fragments of such beauty that they almost seem to burn with a light of their own, lies at this moment before me on my desk. I still hear the rushing torrent of his language across the spotted table-cloth in that dark restaurant corner. But the incoherence seems only to increase with my best efforts to combine the two.

"Go home and dream it," as he said at last when I ventured a question here and there toward the end of the recital. "You'll see it best that way — in sleep. Get clear away from *me*, and my surface physical consciousness. Perhaps it will come to you then."

There remains, however, to record the manner of his exit from that great Garden of the Earth's fair youth. And he tells it more simply. Or, perhaps, it is that I understand it better.

For suddenly, in the midst of all the joy and splendor that he tasted, there came unbidden a strengthening of the tie that held him to his "outer," lesser state. A wave of pity and compassion surged in upon him from the depths. He saw the struggling millions in the prisons and cages civilization builds. He felt *with* them. No happiness, he understood, could be complete that did not also include them all; and — he longed to tell them. The thought and the desire tore across him burningly.

"If only I can get this back to them!" passed through him, like a flame. "I'll save the world by bringing it again to simple things! I've only got to tell it and all will understand at once — and follow!"

And with the birth of the desire there ran a deep convulsive sound like music through the greater Consciousness that held him close. Those Moods that were the gods, thronged gloriously about him, almost pressing forwards into actual sight…. He might have lingered where he was for centuries, or forever; but this thought pulled him back — the desire to share his knowledge with the world, the passion to heal and save and rescue.

And instantly, in the twinkling of an eyelid, the Urwelt closed its gates of horn and ivory behind him. An immense dark shutter dropped noiselessly with a speed of lightning across his mind. He stood without….

He found himself near the tumbled-down stone huts of a hamlet that he recognized. He staggered, rubbed his eyes, and stared. A forest of beech trees shook below him in a violent wind. He saw the branches tossing. A Caucasian saddle-horse beside him nosed a sack that spilt its flour on the ground at his feet, he heard the animal's noisy breathing; he noted the sliding movement of the spilt flour before it finally settled; and some fifty yards beyond him, down the slopes, he saw a human figure — running.

It was his Georgian guide. The man, half stooping, caught the woolen bashlik that had fallen from his head.

O'Malley watched the man complete the gesture. Still running, he replaced the cap upon his head.

And coming up to his ears upon the wind were the words of a broken French sentence that he also recognized. Disjointed by terror, it completed an interrupted phrase: —

"… one of them is close upon us. Hide your eyes! Save yourself!. They come from the mountains. They are old as the stones … run…!"

No other living being was in sight.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE EXTRAORDINARY ABRUPTNESS of the transition produced no bewilderment, it seems. Realizing that without Rostom he would be in a position of helplessness that might be serious, the Irishman put his hands to his lips and called out with authority to the running figure of his frightened guide. He shouted to him to stop.

“There is nothing to fear. Come back! Are you afraid of a gust of wind?”

And in his face and voice, perhaps too in his manner, was something he had brought back from the vision, for the man stopped at once in his headlong course, paused a moment to stare and question, and then, though still looking over his shoulder and making occasional signs of his religion, came slowly back to his employer’s side again.

“It has passed,” said O’Malley in a voice that seemed to crumble in his mouth. “It is gone again into the mountains whence it came. We are safe. With me,” he added, not without a secret sense of humor stirring in him, “you will always be safe. I can protect us both.” He felt as normal as a British officer giving orders to his soldiers. And the Georgian slowly recovered his composure, yet for a long time keeping close to the other’s side.

The transition, thus, had been as sudden and complete as anything well could be. O’Malley described it as the instantaneous dropping of a shutter across his mind. The entire vision had lasted but a fraction of a second, and in a fraction of a second, too, he had returned to his state of everyday lesser consciousness. That blending with the Earth’s great Consciousness was but a flashing glimpse after all. The extension of personality had been momentary.

So absolute, moreover, was the return that at first, remembering nothing, he took up life again exactly where he had left it. The guide completed the gesture and the sentence which the vision had interrupted, and O’Malley, similarly, resumed his own thread of thought and action.

Only a hint remained. That, and a curious sense of interval, alone were left to witness this flash of an immense vision, — of cosmic consciousness — that apparently had filled so many days and nights.

“It was like waking suddenly in the night out of deep sleep,” he said; “not of one’s own accord, or gradually, but as when someone shakes you out of slumber and you are wide awake at once. You have been dreaming vigorously — thick, lively, crowded dreams, and they all vanish on the instant. You catch the tail-end of the procession just as it’s diving out of sight. In less than a second all is gone.”

For this was the hint that remained. He caught the flying tail-end of the vision. He knew he *had* seen something. But, for the moment, that was all.

Then, by degrees and afterwards, the details re-emerged. In the days that followed, while with Rostom he completed the journey already planned, the deeper consciousness gave back its memory piece by piece; and piece by piece he set it down in notebooks as best he could. The memory was on deposit deep within him, and at intervals he tapped it. Hence, of course, is due the confused and fragmentary character of those bewildering entries; hence, at the same time, too, their truth and value. For here was no imaginative dream concocted in a mood of high invention. The parts were disjointed, incomplete, just as they came. The lesser consciousness, it seems, could not contain the thing complete; nor to the last, I judge, did he ever know complete recapture.

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They wandered for two weeks and more about the mountains, meeting various adventure by the way, reported duly in his letters of travel. But these concerned the outer man and have no proper place in this strange record … and by the middle of July he found himself once more in — civilization. At Michaelevo he said good-bye to Rostom and took the train.

And it was with the return to the conditions of modern life that the reaction set in and stirred the deeper layers of consciousness to reproduce their store of magic. For this return to what seemed the paltry activities of an age of machinery, physical luxury, and superficial contrivances brought him a sense of pain that was acute and trenchant, more — a deep and poignant sense of loss. The yearnings, no longer satisfied, began again to reassert themselves. It was not the actual things the world seemed so busy about that pained him, but rather the point of view from which the world approached them — those that it deemed with one consent “important,” and those, with rare exceptions, it obviously deemed worth no consideration at all, and ignored. For himself these values stood exactly reversed.

The Vision then came back to him, rose from the depths, blinded his eyes with maddening beauty, sang in his ears, possessed his heart and mind. He burned to tell it. The world of tired, restless men, he felt, must equally burn to hear it. Some vision of a simple life lived close to Nature came before his inner eye as the remedy for the vast disease of restless self-seeking of the age, the medicine that should cure the entire world. A return to Nature was the first step toward the great Deliverance men sought. And, most of all, he yearned to tell it first to Heinrich Stahl.

To hear him talk about it, as he talked perhaps to me alone, was genuinely pathetic, for here, in Terence O’Malley, I thought to see the essential futility of all dreamers nakedly revealed. His vision was so fine, sincere, and noble; his difficulty in imparting it so painful; and its marriage with practical action so ludicrously impracticable. At any rate that combination of vision and action, called sometimes genius, which can shake the world, assuredly was not his. For his was no constructive mind; he was not “intellectual”; he *saw*, but with the heart; he could not build. To plan a new Utopia was as impossible to him as to shape even in words the splendor he had known and lived. Bricks and straw could only smother him before he laid what most would deem foundations.

At first, too, in those days while waiting for the steamer in Batoum, he kept strangely silent. Even in his own thoughts was silence. He could not speak of what he knew. Even paper refused it. But all the time this glorious winged thing, that yet was simple as the sunlight or the rain, went by his side, while his soul knew the relief of some divine, proud utterance that, he felt, could never know complete confession in speech or writing. Later he stammered over it — to his notebooks and to me, and partially also to Dr. Stahl. But at first it dwelt alone and hidden, contained in this deep silence.

The days of waiting he filled with walks about the streets, watching the world with new eyes. He took the Russian steamer to Poti, and tramped with a knapsack up the Tchourokh gorge beyond Bourtchka, regardless of the Turkish gypsies and encampments of wild peoples on the banks. The sense of personal danger was impossible; he felt the whole world kin. That sense protected him. Pistol and cartridges lay in his bag, forgotten at the hotel.

Delight and pain lay oddly mingled in him. The pain he recognized of old, but this great radiant happiness was new. The nightmare of modern cheap-jack life was all explained; unjustified, of course, as he had always dimly felt, symptom of deep disorder; all due, this feverish, external business, to an odd misunderstanding with the Earth. Humanity had somehow quarreled with her, claiming an independence that could not really last. For her the centuries of this estrangement were but a little thing perhaps — a moment or two in that huge life which counted a million years to lay a narrow bed of chalk. They would come back in time. Meanwhile she ever called. A few, perhaps, already dreamed of return. Movements, he had heard, were afoot — a tentative endeavor here and there. They heard, these few, the splendid whisper that, sweetly calling, ever passed about the world.

For her voice in the last resort was more potent than all others — an enchantment that never wholly faded; men had but temporarily left her mighty sides and gone astray, eating of trees of knowledge that brought them deceptive illusions of a mad self-intoxication; fallen away into the pains of separateness and death. Loss of direction and central control was the result; the Babel of many tongues so clumsily invented, by which all turned one against another. Insubordinate, artificial centers had assumed disastrous command. Each struggled for himself against his neighbors. Even religions fought to the blood. A single sect could damn the rest of humanity, yet in the same breath sing complaisantly of its own Heaven.

Meanwhile She smiled in love and patience, letting them learn their lesson; meanwhile She watched and waited while, like foolish children, they toiled and sweated after futile transient things that brought no single letter of content. She let them coin their millions from her fairest thoughts, the gold and silver in her veins; and let them turn it into engines of destruction, knowing that each “life lost,” returned into her arms and heart, crying with the pain of its wayward foolishness, the lesson learned; She watched their tears and struggling just outside the open nursery door, knowing they must at length return for food; and while thus waiting, watching, She heard all prayers that reached her; She answered them with love and forgiveness ever ready; and to the few who realized their folly — naughtiness, perhaps, at worst it was — this side of “death,” She brought full measure of peace and joy and beauty.

Not permanently could they hurt themselves, for evil was but distance from her side, the ignorance of those who had wandered furthest into the little dark labyrinth of a separated self. The “intellect” they were so proud of had misled them.

And sometimes, here and there across the ages, with a glory that refused utterly to be denied, She thundered forth her old sweet message of deliverance. Through poet, priest, or child she called her children home. The summons rang like magic across the wastes of this dreary separated existence. Some heard and listened, some turned back, some wondered and were strangely thrilled; some, thinking it too simple to be true, were puzzled by the yearning and the tears and went back to seek for a more difficult way; while most, denying the secret glory in their hearts, sought to persuade themselves they loved the strife and hurrying fever best.

At other times, again, she chose quite different ways, and sent the amazing message in a flower, a breath of evening air, a shell upon the shore; though oftenest, perhaps, it hid in a strain of music, a patch of color on the sea or hills, a rustle of branches in a little twilight wind, a whisper in the dusk or in the dawn. He remembered his own first visions of it….

Only never could the summons come to her children through the intellect, for this it was that led them first away. Her message enters ever by the heart.

The simple life! He smiled as he thought of the bald Utopias here and there devised by men, for he had seen a truth whose brilliance smote his eyes too dazzlingly to permit of the smallest corner of darkness. Remote, no doubt, in time that day when the lion shall lie down with the lamb and men shall live together in peace and gentleness; when the inner life shall be admitted as the Reality, strife, gain, and loss unknown because possessions undesired, and petty selfhood merged in the larger life — remote, of course, yet surely not impossible. He had seen the Face of Nature, heard her Call, tasted her joy and peace; and the rest of the tired world might do the same. It only waited to be shown the way. The truth he now saw so dazzling was that all who heard the call might know it for themselves at once, cuirassed with shining love that makes the whole world kin, the Earth a mother literally divine. Each soul might thus provide a channel along which the summons home should pass across the world. To live with Nature and share her greater consciousness, *en route* for states yet greater, nearer to the eternal home — this was the beginning of the truth, the life, the way.

He saw "religion" all explained: and those hard sayings that make men turn away: — the imagined dread of losing life to find it; the counsel of perfection that the neighbor shall be loved as self; the fancied injury and outrage that made it hard for rich men to enter the kingdom. Of these, as of a hundred other sayings, he saw the necessary truth. It all seemed easy now. The world would see it with him; it must; it could not help itself. Simplicity as of a little child, and selflessness as of the mystic — these were the splendid clues.

Death and the grave, indeed, had lost their victory. For in the stages of wider consciousness beyond this transient physical phase he saw all loved ones joined and safe, as separate words upgathered each to each in the parent sentence that explains them, the sentence in the paragraph, the paragraph in the whole grand story all achieved — and so at length into the eternal library of God that consummates the whole.

He saw the glorious series, timeless and serene, advancing to the climax, and somehow understood that individuality at each stage was never lost but rather extended and magnified. Love of the Earth, life close to Nature, and denial of so-called civilization was the first step upwards. In the Simple Life, in this return to Nature, lay the opening of the little path that climbed to the stars and heaven.

CHAPTER XL

AT THE END of the week the little steamer dropped her anchor in the harbor and the Irishman booked his passage home. He was standing on the wharf to watch the unloading when a hand tapped him on the shoulder and he heard a well-known voice. His heart leaped with pleasure. There were no preliminaries between these two.

“I am glad to see you safe. You did not find your friend, then?”

O’Malley looked at the bronzed face beside him, noted the ragged tobacco-stained beard, and saw the look of genuine welcome in the twinkling brown eyes. He watched him lift his cap and mop that familiar dome of bald head.

“I’m safe,” was all he answered, “because I found him.”

For a moment Dr. Stahl looked puzzled. He dropped the hand he held so tightly and led him down the wharf.

“We’ll get out of this devilish sun,” he said, leading the way among the tangle of merchandise and bales, “it’s enough to boil our brains.” They passed through the crowd of swarthy, dripping Turks, Georgians, Persians, and Armenians who labored half naked in the heat, and moved toward the town. A Russian gunboat lay in the Bay, side by side with freight and passenger vessels. An oil-tank steamer took on cargo. The scene was drenched in sunshine. The Black Sea gleamed like molten metal. Beyond, the wooded spurs of the Caucasus climbed through haze into cloudless blue.

“It’s beautiful,” remarked the German, pointing to the distant coastline, “but hardly with the beauty of those Grecian Isles we passed together. Eh?” He watched him closely. “You’re coming back on our steamer?” he asked in the same breath.

“It’s beautiful,” O’Malley answered ignoring the question, “because it lives. But there is dust upon its outer loveliness, dust that has gathered through long ages of neglect, dust that I would sweep away — I’ve learnt how to do it. He taught me.”

Stahl did not even look at him, though the words were wild enough. He walked at his side in silence. Perhaps he partly understood. For this first link with the outer world of appearances was difficult for him to pick up. The person of Stahl, thick-coated with the civilization whence he came, had brought it, and out of the ocean of glorious vision in his soul, O'Malley took at random the first phrases he could find.

"Yes, I've booked a passage on your steamer," he added presently, remembering the question. It did not seem strange to him that his companion ignored both clues he offered. He knew the man too well for that. It was only that he waited for more before he spoke.

They went to the little table outside the hotel pavement where several weeks ago they had drunk Kakhetian wine together and talked of deeper things. The German called for a bottle, mineral water, ice, and cigarettes. And while they sipped the cooling golden liquid, hats off and coats on the backs of their chairs, Stahl gave him the news of the world of men and events that had transpired meanwhile. O'Malley listened vaguely as he smoked. It seemed remote, unreal, almost fantastic, this long string of ugly, frantic happenings, all symptoms of some disordered state that was like illness. The scream of politics, the roar and rattle of flying-machines, financial crashes, furious labor upheavals, rumors of war, the death of kings and magnates, awful accidents and strange turmoil in enormous cities. Details of some sad prison life, it almost seemed, pain and distress and strife the note that bound them all together. Men were mastered by these things instead of mastering them. These unimportant things they thought would make them free only imprisoned them.

They lunched there at the little table in the shade, and in turn the Irishman gave an outline of his travels. Stahl had asked for it and listened attentively. The pictures interested him.

"You've done your letters for the papers," he questioned him, "and now, perhaps, you'll write a book as well?"

"Something may force its way out — come blundering, thundering out in fragments, yes."

"You mean you'd rather not — ?"

"I mean it's all too big and overwhelming. He showed me such blinding splendors. I might tell it, but as to writing — !" He shrugged his shoulders.

And this time Dr. Stahl ignored no longer. He took him up. But not with any expected words or questions. He merely said, "My friend, there's something that I have to tell you — or, rather, I should say, to show you." He looked most keenly at him, and in the old familiar way he placed a hand upon his shoulder. His voice grew soft. "It may upset you; it may unsettle — prove a shock perhaps. But if you are prepared, we'll go—"

"What kind of shock?" O'Malley asked, startled a moment by the gravity of manner.

"The shock of death," was the answer, gently spoken.

The Irishman only knew a swift rush of joy and wonder as he heard it.

"But there is no such thing!" he cried, almost with laughter. "He taught me that above all else. There is no death!"

"There is 'going away,' though," came the rejoinder, spoken low; "there is earth to earth and dust to dust—"

"That's of the body — !"

"That's of the body, yes," the older man repeated darkly.

"There is only 'going home,' escape and freedom. I tell you there's only that. It's nothing but joy and splendor when you really understand."

But Dr. Stahl made no immediate answer, nor any comment. He paid the bill and led him down the street. They took the shady side. Passing beyond the skirts of the town they walked in silence. The barracks where the soldiers sang, the railway line to Tiflis and Baku, the dome and minarets of the church, were left behind in turn, and presently they reached the hot, straight dusty road that fringed the sea. They heard the crashing of the little waves and saw the foam creamily white against the dark grey pebbles of the beach.

And when they reached a small enclosure where thin trees were planted among sparse grass all brown and withered by the sun, they paused, and Stahl pointed to a mound, marked at either end by rough stone boulder. A date was on it, but no name. O’Malley calculated the difference between the Russian Calendar and the one he was accustomed to. Stahl checked him.

“The fifteenth of June,” the German said.

“The fifteenth of June, yes,” said O’Malley very slowly, but with wonder and excitement in his heart. “That was the day that Rostom tried to run away — the day I saw him come to me from the trees — the day we started off together … to the Garden….”

He turned to his companion questioningly. For a moment the rush of memory was quite bewildering.

“He never left Batoum at all, you see,” Stahl continued, without looking up. “He went straight to the hospital the day we came into port. I was summoned to him in the night — that last night while you slept so deeply. His old strange fever was upon him then, and I took him ashore before the other passengers were astir. I brought him to the hospital myself. And he never left his bed.” He pointed down to the little nameless grave at their feet where a wandering wind from the sea just stirred the grasses. “That was the date on which he died.”

“He went away in the early morning,” he added in a low voice that held both sadness and sympathy.

“He went home,” said the Irishman, a tide of joy rising tumultuously through his heart as he remembered. The secret of that complete and absolute Leadership was out. He understood it all. It had been a spiritual adventure to the last.

Then followed a pause.

In silence they stood there for some minutes. There grew no flowers on that grave, but O’Malley stooped down and picked a strand of the withered grass. He put it carefully between the pages of his notebook; and then, lying flat against the ground where the sunshine fell in a patch of white and burning glory, he pressed his lips to the crumbling soil. He kissed the Earth. Oblivious of Stahl’s presence, or at least ignoring it, he worshipped.

And while he did so he heard that little sound he loved so well — which more than any words or music brought peace and joy, because it told his Passion all complete. With his ears close to the earth he heard it, yet at the same time heard it everywhere. For it came with the falling of the waves upon the shore, through the murmur of the rustling branches overhead, and even across the whispering of the withered grass about him. Deep down in the center of the mothering Earth he heard it too in faintly rising pulse. It was the exquisite little piping on a reed — the ancient fluting of the everlasting Pan….

And when he rose he found that Stahl had turned away and was gazing at the sea, as though he had not noticed.

“Doctor,” he cried, yet so softly it was a whisper rather than a call, “I heard it then again; it’s everywhere! Oh, tell me that you hear it too!”

Stahl turned and looked at him in silence. There was a moisture in his eyes, and on his face a look of softness that a woman might have worn.

“I’ve brought it back, you see, I’ve brought it back. For that’s the message — that’s the sound and music I must give to all the world. No words, no book can tell it.” His hat was off, his eyes were shining, his voice broke with the passion of joy he yearned to share yet knew so little how to impart. “If I can pipe upon the flutes of Pan the millions all will listen, will understand, and — follow. Tell me, oh, tell me, that *you* heard it too!”

“My friend, my dear young friend,” the German murmured in a voice of real tenderness, “you heard it truly — but you heard it in your heart. Few hear the Pipes of Pan as you do. Few care to listen. Today the world is full of other sounds that drown it. And even of those who hear,” he shrugged his shoulders as he led him away toward the sea,— “how few will care to follow — how fewer still will *dare.*”

And while they lay upon the beach and watched the line of foam against their feet and saw the seagulls curving idly in the blue and shining air, he added underneath his breath — O’Malley hardly caught the murmur of his words so low he murmured them: —

“The simple life is lost forever. It lies asleep in the Golden Age, and only those who sleep and dream can ever find it. If you would keep your joy, dream on, my friend! Dream on, but dream alone!”

CHAPTER XLI

SUMMER BLAZED EVERYWHERE and the sea lay like a blue pool of melted sky and sunshine. The summits of the Caucasus soon faded to the east and north, and to the south the wooded hills of the Black Sea coast accompanied the ship in a line of wavy blue that joined the water and the sky indistinguishably.

The first-class passengers were few; O'Malley hardly noticed their existence even. An American engineer, building a railway in Turkey, came on board at Trebizond; there were one or two light women on their way home from Baku, and the attaché of a foreign embassy from Teheran. But the Irishman felt more in touch with the hundred peasant-folk who joined the ship at Ineboli from the interior of Asia Minor and were bound as third-class emigrants for Marseilles and far America. Dark-skinned, wild-eyed, ragged, very dirty, they had never seen the sea before, and the sight of a porpoise held them spellbound. They lived on the after-deck, mostly cooking their own food, the women and children sleeping beneath a large tarpaulin that the sailors stretched for them across the width of deck. At night they played their pipes and danced, singing, shouting, and waving their arms — always the same tune over and over again.

O'Malley watched them for hours together. He also watched the engineer, the over-dressed women, the attaché. He understood the difference between them as he had never understood it before. He understood the difficulty of his task as well. How in the world could he ever explain a single syllable of his message to these latter, or waken in them the faintest echo of desire to know and listen. The peasants, though all unconscious of the blinding glory at their elbows, stood far nearer to the truth.

"Been further east, I suppose?" the engineer observed, one afternoon as the steamer lay off Broussa, taking on a little extra cargo of walnut logs. He looked admiringly at the Irishman's bronzed skin. "Take a better sun than this to put that on!"

He laughed in his breezy, vigorous way, and the other laughed with him. Previous conversations had already paved the way to a traveler's friendship, and the American had taken to him.

“Up in the mountains,” he replied, “camping out and sleeping in the sun did it.”

“The Caucasus! Ah, I’d like to get up there myself a bit. I’m told they’re a wonderful thing in the mountain line.”

Scenery for him was evidently a commercial commodity, or it was nothing. It was the most up-to-date nation in the world that spoke — in the van of civilization — representing the last word in progress due to triumph over Nature.

O’Malley said he had never seen anything like them. He described the trees, the flowers, the tribes, the scenery in general; he dwelt upon the vast uncultivated spaces, the amazing fruitfulness of the soil, the gorgeous beauty above all. “I’d like to get the overcrowded cities of England and Europe spread all over it,” he said with enthusiasm. “There is room for thousands there to lead a simple life close to Nature, in health and peace and happiness. Even your tired millionaires could escape their restless, feverish worries, lay down their weary burden of possessions, and enjoy the earth at last. The poor would cease to be with us; life become true and beautiful again—” He let it pour out of him, building the scaffolding of his dream before him in the air and filling it in with beauty.

The American listened in patience, watching the walnut logs being towed through the water to the side of the ship. From time to time he spat on them, or into the sea. He let the beauty go completely past him.

“Great idea, that!” he interrupted at length. “You’re interested, I see, in socialism and communistic schemes. There’s money in them somewhere right enough, if a man only could hit the right note at the first go off. Take a bit of doing, though!”

One of the women from Baku came up and leaned upon the rails a little beyond them. The sickly odor of artificial scent wafted down. The attaché strolled along the deck and ogled her.

“Get a few of that sort to draw the millionaires in, eh?” he added vulgarly.

“Even those would come, yes,” said the Irishman softly, realizing for the first time within his memory that his gorge did not rise, “for they too would change, grow clean and sweet and beautiful."

The engineer looked sharply into his face, uncertain whether he had not missed a clever witticism of his own kind. But O'Malley did not meet his glance. His eyes were far away upon the snowy summit of Olympus where a flock of fleecy clouds hung hovering like the hair of the eternal gods.

"They say there's timber going to waste that you could get to the coast merely for the cost of drawing it — Caucasian walnut, too, to burn," the other continued, getting on to safer ground, "and labor's dirt cheap. There's every sort of mineral too God ever made. You could build light railways and run the show by electricity. And water-power for the asking. You'd have to get a Concession from Russia first though," he added, spitting down upon a huge floating log in the clear sea underneath, "and Russia's got palms that want a lot of greasing. I guess the natives, too, would take a bit of managing."

The woman beyond had shifted several feet nearer, and after a pause the Irishman found no words to fill, his companion turned to address a remark to her. O'Malley took the opening and moved away.

"Here's my card, anyway," the American added, handing him an over-printed bit of large pasteboard from a fat pocket-book that bore his name and address in silver on the outside. "If you develop the scheme and want a bit of money, count me in."

He went to the other side of the vessel and watched the peasants on the lower deck. Their dirt seemed nothing by comparison. It was only on their clothes and bodies. The odor of this unwashed humanity was almost sweet and wholesome. It cleansed the sickly taint of that other scent from his palate; it washed his mind of thoughts as well.

He stood there long in dreaming silence, while the sunlight on Olympus turned from gold to rose, and the sea took on the colors of the fading sky. He watched a dark Kurd baby sliding down the tarpaulin. A kitten was playing with a loose end of rope too heavy for it to move. Further off a huge fellow with bared chest and the hands of a colossus sat on a pile of canvas playing softly on his wooden pipes. The dark hair fell across his eyes, and a group of women listened idly while they busied themselves with the cooking of the evening meal. Immediately beneath him a splendid-eyed young woman crammed a baby to her naked breast. The kitten left the rope and played with the tassel of her scarlet shawl.

And as he heard those pipes and watched the grave, untamed, strong faces of those wild peasant men and women, he understood that, low though they might be in scale of evolution, there was yet absent from them the touch of that deteriorating *something* which civilization painted into those other countenances. But whether the word he sought was degradation or whether it was shame, he could not tell. In all they did, the way they moved, their dignity and independence, there was this something, he felt, that bordered on being impressive. Their wants were few, their worldly possessions in a bundle, yet they had this thing that set them in a place apart, if not above, these others: — beyond that simpering attaché for all his worldly diplomacy, that engineer with brains and skill, those painted women with their clever playing upon the feelings and desires of their kind. There *was* this difference that set the ragged dirty crew in a proud and quiet atmosphere that made them seem almost distinguished by comparison, and certainly more desirable. Rough and untutored though they doubtless were, they still possessed unspoiled that deeper and more elemental nature that bound them closer to the Earth. It needed training, guidance, purifying; yes; but, in the last resort, was it not of greater spiritual significance and value than the mode of comparatively recently-developed reason by which Civilization had produced these other types?

He watched them long. The sun sank out of sight, the sea turned dark, ten thousand stars shone softly in the sky, and while the steamer swung about and made for peaked Andros and the coast of Greece, he still stood on in reverie and wonder. The wings of his great Dream stirred mightily … and he saw pale millions of men and women trooping through the gates of horn and ivory into that Garden where they should find peace and happiness in clean simplicity close to the Earth….

CHAPTER XLII

THERE FOLLOWED FOUR days then of sea, Greece left behind, Messina and the Lipari Islands past; and the blue outline of Sardinia and Corsica began to keep pace with them as they neared the narrow straits of Bonifacio between them. The passengers came up to watch the rocky desolate shores slip by so close, and Captain Burgenfelder was on the bridge.

Grey-headed rocks rose everywhere close about the ship; overhead the seagulls cried and circled; no vegetation was visible on either shore, no houses, no abode of man — nothing but the lighthouses, then miles of deserted rock dressed in those splendors of the sun's good-night. The dinner-gong had sounded but the sight was too magnificent to leave, for the setting sun floated on an emblazoned sea and stared straight against them in level glory down the narrow passage. Unimaginable colors painted sky and wave. The ruddy cliffs of bleak loneliness rose from a bed of flame. Soft airs fanned the cheeks with welcome coolness after the fierce heat of the day. There was a scent of wild honey in the air borne from the purple uplands far, far away.

"I wonder, oh, I wonder, if they realized that a god is passing close…!" the Irishman murmured with a rising of the heart, "and that here is a great mood of the Earth-Consciousness inviting them to peace! Or do they merely see a yellow sun that dips beneath a violet sea…?"

The washing of the water past the steamer's sides caught away the rest of the half-whispered words. He remembered that host of many thousand heads that bowed in silence while a god swept by…. It was almost a shock to hear a voice replying close beside him: —

"Come to my cabin when you're ready. My windows open to the west. We can be alone together. We can have there what food we need. You would prefer it perhaps?"

He felt the touch of that sympathetic hand upon his shoulder, and bent his head to signify agreement.

For a moment, face to face with that superb sunset, he had known a deep and utter peace in the vast bosom of this greater soul about him. Her consciousness again had bruised and fringed his own. Across that delicately divided threshold the beauty and the power of the gods had poured in a flood into his being. And only there was peace, only there was joy, only there was the death of those ancient yearnings that tortured his little personal and separate existence. The return to the world was aching pain again. The old loneliness that seemed more than he could bear swept icily through him, contracting life and freezing every spring of joy. For in that single instant of return he felt pass into him a loneliness of the whole travailing world, the loneliness of countless centuries, the loneliness of all the races of the Earth who were exiled and had lost the way.

Too deep it lay for words or tears or sighs. The doctor's invitation came most opportunely. And presently in silence he turned his back upon that opal sky of dream from which the sun had gone, and walked slowly down the deck toward Stahl's cabin.

"If only I can share it with them," he thought as he went; "if only men will listen, if only they will come. To keep it all to myself, to dream alone, will kill me."

And as he stood before the door it seemed he heard wild rushing through the sky, the tramping of a thousand hoofs, a roaring of the wind, the joy of that free, torrential passage with the Earth. He turned the handle and entered the cozy room where weeks before they held the inquest on the little empty tenement of flesh, remembering how that other figure had once stood where he now stood — part of the sunrise, part of the sea, part of the morning winds.

* * * * *

They had their meal almost in silence, while the glow of sunset filled the cabin through the western row of port-holes, and when it was over Stahl made the coffee as of old and lit the familiar black cigar. Slowly O'Malley's pain and restlessness gave way before the other's soothing quiet. He had never known him before so calm and gentle, so sympathetic, almost tender. The usual sarcasm seemed veiled in sadness; there was no irony in the voice, nor mockery in the eyes.

Then to the Irishman it came suddenly that all these days while he had been lost in dreaming the doctor had kept him as of old under close observation. The completeness of his reverie had concealed from him this steady scrutiny. He had been oblivious to the fact that Stahl had all the time been watching, investigating, keenly examining. Abruptly he now realized it.

And then Stahl spoke. His tone was winning, his manner frank and inviting. But it was the sadness about him that won O'Malley's confidence so wholly.

"I can guess," he said, "something of the dream you've brought with you from those mountains. I can understand — more, perhaps, than you imagine, and I can sympathize — more than you think possible. Tell me about it fully — if you can. I see your heart is very full, and in the telling you will find relief. I am not hostile, as you sometimes feel. Tell me, my dear, young clear-eyed friend. Tell me your vision and your hope. Perhaps I might even help … for there may be things that I could also tell to you in return."

Something in the choice of words, none of which offended; in the atmosphere and setting, no detail of which jarred; and in the degree of balance between utterance and silence his world of inner forces just then knew, combined to make the invitation irresistible. Moreover, he had wanted to tell it all these days. Stahl was already half convinced. Stahl would surely understand and help him. It was the psychological moment for confession. The two men rose in the same moment, Stahl to lock the cabin doors against interruption, O'Malley to set their chairs more closely side by side so that talking should be easiest.

And then without demur or hesitation he opened his heart to this other and let the floodgates of his soul swing wide. He told the vision and he told the dream; he told his hope as well. And the story of his passion, filled in with pages from those notebooks he ever carried in his pocket, still lasted when the western glow had faded from the sky and the thick-sown stars shone down upon the gliding steamer. The hush of night lay soft upon the world before he finished.

He told the thing complete, much, I imagine, as he told it all to me upon the roof of that apartment building and in the dingy Soho restaurant. He told it without reservations — his life-long yearnings: the explanation brought by the presence of the silent stranger upon the outward voyage: the journey to the Garden: the vision that all life — from gods to flowers, from men to mountains — lay contained in the conscious Being of the Earth, that Beauty was but glimpses of her essential nakedness; and that salvation of the world's disease of modern life was to be found in a general return to the simplicity of Nature close against her mothering heart. He told it all — in words that his passionate joy chose faultlessly.

And Heinrich Stahl in silence listened. He asked no single question. He made no movement in his chair. His black cigar went out before the half of it was smoked. The darkness hid his face impenetrably.

And no one came to interrupt. The murmur of the speeding steamer, and occasional footsteps on the deck as passengers passed to and fro in the cool of the night, were the only sounds that broke the music of that incurable idealist's impassioned story.

CHAPTER XLIII

AND THEN AT length there came a change of voice across the cabin. The Irishman had finished. He sank back in the deep leather chair, exhausted physically, but with the exultation of his mighty hope still pouring at full strength through his heart. For he had ventured further than ever before and had spoken of a possible crusade — a crusade that should preach peace and happiness to every living creature.

And Dr. Stahl, in a voice that showed how deeply he was moved, asked quietly: —

“By leading the nations back to Nature you think they shall advance to Truth at last?”

“With time,” was the reply. “The first step lies there: — in changing the direction of the world’s activities, changing it from the transient Outer to the eternal Inner. In the simple life, external possessions unnecessary and recognized as vain, the soul would turn within and seek Reality. Only a tiny section of humanity has time to do it now. There is no leisure. Civilization means acquirement for the body: it ought to mean development for the soul. Once sweep aside the trash and rubbish men seek outside themselves today, and the wings of their smothered souls would stir again. Consciousness would expand. Nature would draw them first. They would come to feel the Earth as I did. Self would disappear, and with it this false sense of separateness. The greater consciousness would waken in them. The peace and joy and blessedness of inner growth would fill their lives. But, first, this childish battling to the death for external things must cease, and Civilization stand revealed for the bleak and empty desolate thing it really is. It leads away from God and from the things that are eternal.”

The German made no answer; O’Malley ceased to speak; a long silence fell between them. Then, presently, Stahl relighted his cigar, and lapsing into his native tongue — always a sign with him of deepest seriousness — he began to talk.

"You've honored me," he said, "with a great confidence; and I am deeply, deeply grateful. You have told your inmost dream — the thing men find it hardest of all to speak about." He felt in the darkness for his companion's hand and held it tightly for a moment. He made no other comment upon what he had heard. "And in return — in some small way of return," he continued, "I may ask you to listen to something of my own, something of possible interest. No one has ever known it from my lips. Only, in our earlier conversations on the outward voyage, I hinted at it once or twice. I sometimes warned you—"

"I remember. You said he'd 'get' me, 'win' me over— 'appropriation' was the word you used."

"I suggested caution, yes; urged you not to let yourself go too completely; told you he represented danger to yourself, and to humanity as it is organized today—"

"And all the rest," put in O'Malley a shade impatiently. "I remember perfectly."

"Because I knew what I was talking about." The doctor's voice came across the darkness somewhat ominously. And then he added in a louder tone, evidently sitting forward as he said it: "For the thing that has happened to yourself as I foresaw it would, had already *almost* happened to me too!"

"To you, doctor, too?" exclaimed the Irishman in the moment's pause that followed.

"I saved myself just in time — by getting rid of the cause."

"You discharged him from the hospital, because you were afraid!" He said it sharply as though are instant of the old resentment had flashed up.

By way of answer Stahl rose from his chair and abruptly turned up the electric lamp upon the desk that faced them across the cabin. Evidently he preferred the light. O'Malley saw that his face was white and very grave. He grasped for the first time that the man was speaking professionally. The truth came driving next behind it — that Stahl regarded him as a patient.

* * * * *

"Please go on, doctor," he said, keenly on the watch. "I'm deeply interested." The wings of his great dream still bore him too far aloft for him to feel more than the merest passing annoyance at his discovery. Resentment had gone too. Sadness and disappointment for an instant touched him perhaps, but momentarily. In the end he felt sure that Stahl would stand at his side, completely won over and convinced.

“You had a similar experience to my own, you say,” he urged him. “I am all eagerness and sympathy to hear.”

“We’ll talk in the open air,” the doctor answered, and ringing the bell for the steward to clear away, he drew his companion out to the deserted decks. They moved toward the bows, past the sleeping peasants. The stars were mirrored in a glassy sea and toward the north the hills of Corsica stood faintly outlined in the sky. It was already long after midnight.

“Yes, a similar thing nearly happened to me,” he resumed as they settled themselves against a coil of rope where only the murmur of the washing sea could reach them, “and might have happened to others too. Inmates of that big *Krankenhaus* were variously affected. My action, tardy I must admit, saved myself and them.”

And the German then told his story as a man might tell of his escape from some grave disaster. In the emphatic sentences of his native language he told it, congratulating himself all through. The Russian had almost won him over, gained possession of his heart and mind, persuaded him, but in the end had failed — because the other ran away. It was like hearing a man describe an attempt to draw him into Heaven, then boast of his escape. His caution and his judgment, as he put it, saved him, but to the listening Celt it rather seemed that his compromise it was that damned him. The Kingdom of Heaven is hard to enter, for Stahl had possessions not of the wood and metal order, but possessions of the brain and reason he was too proud to forego completely. They kept him out.

With increasing sadness, too, he heard it; for here he realized was the mental attitude of an educated, highly civilized man today — a representative type regarded by the world as highest. It was this he had to face. Moreover Stahl was more than merely educated, he was understandingly sympathetic, meeting the great dream halfway; seeing in it possibilities; admitting its high beauty, and even sometimes speaking of it with hope and a touch of enthusiasm. Its originator none the less he regarded as a reactionary dreamer, an unsettling and disordered influence, a patient, if not even something worse!

Stahl's voice and manner were singular while he told it all, revealing one moment the critical mind that analyzed and judged, and the next an enthusiasm almost of the mystic. Alternately, like the man and woman of those quaint old weather-glasses, each peered out and showed a face, the reins of compromise yet ever seeking to hold them well in leash and drive them together.

Hardly, it seems, had the strange Russian been under his care a week before he passed beneath the sway of his curious personality and experienced the attack of singular emotions upon his heart and mind.

He described at first the man's arrival, telling it with the calm and balanced phrases a doctor uses when speaking merely of a patient who had stirred his interest. He first detailed the method of suggestion he had used to revive the lapsed memory — and its utter failure. Then he passed on to speak of him more generally: but briefly and condensed.

"The man," he said, "was so engaging, so docile, his personality altogether so attractive and mysterious, that I took the case myself instead of delegating it to my assistants. All efforts to trace his past collapsed. It was as if he had drifted into that little hotel out of the night of time. Of madness there was no evidence whatever. The association of ideas in his mind, though limited, was logical and rigid. His health was perfect, barring strange, sudden fever; his vitality tremendous; yet he ate most sparingly and the only food he touched was fruit and milk and vegetables. Meat made him sick, the huge frame shuddered when he saw it. And from all the human beings in the place with whom he came in contact he shrank with a kind of puzzled dismay. With animals, most oddly it seemed, he sought companionship; he would run to the window if a dog barked, or to hear a horse's hoofs; a Persian cat belonging to one of the nurses never left his side, and I have seen the trees in the yard outside his window thick with birds, and even found them in the room and on the sill, flitting about his very person, unafraid and singing.

"With me, as with the attendants, his speech was almost nil — laconic words in various languages, clipped phrases that sometimes combined Russian, French, or German, other tongues as well.

“But, strangest of all, with animal life he seemed to hold this kind of communication that was Intelligible both to himself and them. Animals certainly were ‘aware’ of him. It was not speech. It ran in a deep, continuous murmur like a droning, humming sound of wind. I took the hint thus faintly offered. I gave him his freedom in the yards and gardens. The open air and intercourse with natural life was what he craved. The sadness and the air of puzzled fretting then left his face, his eyes grew bright, his whole presentment happier; he ran and laughed and even sang. The fever that had troubled him all vanished. Often myself I took the place of nurse or orderly to watch him, for the man’s presence more than interested me: it gave me a renewed sense of life that was exhilarating, invigorating, delightful. And in his appearance, meanwhile, something that was not size or physical measurement, turned — tremendous.

“A part of me that was not mind — a sort of forgotten instinct blindly groping — came of its own accord to regard him as some loose fragment of a natural, cosmic life that had somehow blundered down into a human organism it sought to use….

“And then it was for the first time I recognized the spell he had cast upon me; for, when the Committee decided there was no reason to keep him longer, I urged that he should stay. Making a special plea, I took him as a private patient of my own. I kept him under closer personal observation than ever before. I needed him. Something deep within me, something undivined hitherto, called out into life by his presence, could not do without him. This new craving, breakingly wild and sweet, awoke in my blood and cried for him. His presence nourished it in me. Most insidiously it attacked me. It stirred deep down among the roots of my being. It ‘threatened my personality’ seems the best way I can put it; for, turning a critical analysis upon it, I discovered that it was an undermining and revolutionary change going steadily forward in my character. Its growth had hitherto been secret. When I first recognized its presence, the thing was already strong. For a long time, it had been building.

“And the change in a word — you will grasp my meaning from the shortest description of essentials — was this: that ambition left me, ordinary desire crumbled, the outer world men value so began to fade.”

"And in their place?" cried O'Malley breathlessly, interrupting for the first time.

"Came a rushing, passionate desire to escape from cities and live for beauty and simplicity 'in the wilderness'; to taste the life *he* seemed to know; to go out blindly with him into woods and desolate places, and be mixed and blended with the loveliness of Earth and Nature. This was the first thing I knew. It was like an expansion of my normal world — almost an extension of consciousness. It somehow threatened my sense of personal identity. And — it made me hesitate."

O'Malley caught the tremor in his voice. Even in the telling of it the passion plucked at him, for here, as ever, he stood on the border-line of compromise, his heart tempting him toward salvation, his brain and reason tugging at the brakes.

"The sham and emptiness or modern life, its drab vulgarity, the unworthiness of its very ideals stood appallingly revealed before some inner eye just opening. I felt shaken to the core of what had seemed hitherto my very solid and estimable self. How the man thus so powerfully affected me lies beyond all intelligible explanation. To use the obvious catchword 'hypnotism' is to use a toy and stop a leak with paper. For his influence was *unconsciously* exerted. He cast no net of clever, persuasive words about my thought. Out of that deep, strange silence of the man it somehow came. His actions and his simple happiness of face and manner — both in some sense the raw material of speech perhaps — may have operated as potently suggestive agents; but no adequate causes to justify the result, apart from the fantastic theories I have mentioned, have ever yet come within the range of my understanding. I can only give you the undeniable effects."

"Your sense of extended consciousness," asked his listener, "was this continuous, once it had begun?"

"It came in patches," Stahl continued. "My normal, everyday self was thus able to check it. While it derided, commiserated this everyday self, the latter stood in dread of it and even awe. My training, you see, regarded it as symptom of disorder, a beginning of unbalance that might end in insanity, the thin wedge of a dissociation of the personality Morton Prince and others have described."

His speech grew more and more jerky, even incoherent; evidently the material had not even now been fully reduced to order in his mind.

“Among other curious symptoms I soon established that this subtle spreading of my consciousness grew upon me especially during sleep. The business of the day distracted, scattered it. On waking in the morning, as with the physical fatigue that comes toward the closing of the day, it was strongest.

“And so, in order to examine it closely when in fullest manifestation, I came to spend the nights with him. I would creep in while he slept and stay till morning, alternately sleeping and waking myself. I watched the two of us together. I also watched the ‘two’ in me. And thus it was I made the further strange discovery that the influence *he* exerted on me was strongest while he slept. It is best described by saying that in his sleep I was conscious that he sought to draw me with him — away somewhere into his own wonderful world — the state or region, that is, where he manifested completely instead of partially as I knew him here. His personality was a channel somewhere out into a living, conscious Nature….”

“Only,” interrupted O’Malley, “you felt that to yield and go involved some nameless inner catastrophe, and so resisted?” He chose his phrase with purpose.

“Because I discovered,” was the pregnant answer, given steadily while he watched his listener closely through the darkness, “that this desire for escape the man had wakened in me was nothing more or less than the desire to leave the world, to leave the conditions that prevented — in fact to leave the body. My discontent with modern life had gone as far as that. It was the birth of the suicidal mania.”

* * * * *

The pause that followed the words, on the part of Dr. Stahl at any rate, was intentional. O’Malley held his peace. The men shifted their places oil the coil of rope, for both were cramped and stiff with the lengthy session. For a minute or two they leaned over the bulwarks and watched the phosphorescent foam in silence. The blue mountainous shores slipped past in shadowy line against the stars. But when they sat down again their relative positions were not what they had been before. Dr. Stahl had placed himself between his listener and the sea. And O'Malley did not let the manoeuvre escape him. Smiling to himself he noticed it. Just as surely he noticed, too, that the whole recital was being told him with a purpose.

"You really need not be afraid," he could not resist saying. "The idea of escape *that* way has never even come to me at all. And, anyhow, I've far too much on hand first in telling the world my message." He laughed in the silence that took his words, for Stahl said nothing and made as though he had not heard. But the Irishman understood that it was in the spirit of feeble compromise that danger lay — if danger there was at all, and he himself was far beyond such weakness. His eye was single and his body full of light, and the faith that plays with mountains had made him whole. Return to Nature for him involved no denial of human life, nor depreciation of human interests, but only a revolutionary shifting of values.

"And it was one night while he slept and I watched him in the little room," resumed the German as though there had been no interruption, "I noticed first so decisively this growing of a singular size about him I have already mentioned, and grasped its meaning. For the bulk of the man while growing — emerging, rather, I should say — assumed another shape than his own. It was not my eyes that saw it. I saw him as *he felt himself to be*. The creature's personality, his essential inner being, was acting directly upon my own. His influence was at me from another point or angle. First the emotions, then the senses you see. It was a finely organized attack.

"I definitely understood at last that my mind was affected — and proved it too, for the instant effort I made at recovery resulted in my seeing him normal again. The size and shape retreated the moment I denied them."

O'Malley noticed how the speaker's voice lingered over the phrase. Again he knew the intention of the pause that followed. He held his peace, however, and waited.

"Nor was sight the only sense affected," Stahl continued, "for smell and hearing also brought their testimony. Through all but touch, indeed, the hallucination attacked me. For sometimes at night while I sat up watching in the little room, there rose outside the open window in the yards and gardens a sound of tramping, a distant roaring as of voices in a rising wind, a rushing, hollow murmur, confused and deep like that of forests, or the swift passage of a host of big birds across the sky. I heard it, both in the air and on the ground — this tramping on the lawns, this curious shaking of the atmosphere. And with it at the same time a sharp and mingled perfume that made me think of earth and leaves, of flowers after rain, of plains and open spaces, most singular of all — of animals and horses.

"Before the firm denial of my mind, they vanished, just as the change of form had vanished. But both left me weaker than they found me, more tender to attack. Moreover, I understood most plainly, that they emanated all from him. These 'emanations' came, too, chiefly, as I mentioned, whilst he slept. In sleep, it seemed, he set them free. The slumber of the body disengaged them. And then the instinct came to warn me — presenting itself with the authority of an unanswerable intuition — the realization, namely, that if, for a single moment in his presence, I slept, the changes would leap forward in my own being, and I should join him."

"Escape! Know freedom in a larger consciousness!" cried the other.

"And for a man of my point of view and training to have permitted such a conviction at all," he went on, the interruption utterly ignored again, "proves how far along the road I had already traveled without knowing it. Only at the time I was not aware of this. It was the shock of full discovery later that brought me to my senses, when, seeking to withdraw, — I found I could not."

"And so you ran away." It came out bluntly enough, with a touch of scorn but ill concealed.

"We discharged him. But before that came there was more I have to tell you — if you still care to hear it."

"I'm not tired, if that's what you mean. I could listen all night, as far as that goes."

He rose to stretch his legs a moment, and Stahl rose too — instantly. Together they leaned over the bulwarks. The German's hat was off and the air made by the steamer's passage drew his beard out. The warm soft wind brought odors of sea and shore. It caressed their faces, then passed on across those sleeping peasants on the lower deck. The masts and rigging swung steadily against the host of stars.

"Before I thus knew myself half caught," continued the doctor, standing now close enough beside him for actual contact, "and found it difficult to get away, other things had happened, things that confirmed the change so singularly begun in me. They happened everywhere; confirmation came from many quarters; though slight enough, they filled in all the gaps and crevices, strengthened the joints, and built the huge illusion round me all complete until it held me like a prison.

“And they are difficult to tell. Only, indeed, to yourself who underwent a similar experience up there in the mountains, could they bring much meaning. You had the same temptation and you — weathered the same storm.” He caught O’Malley’s arm a moment and held it. “You escaped this madness just as I did, and you will realize what I mean when I say that the sensation of losing my sense of personal identity became so dangerously, so seductively strong. The feeling of extended consciousness became delicious — too delicious to resist. A kind of pagan joy and exultation known to some in early youth, but put away with the things of youth, possessed me. In the presence of this other’s soul, so strangely powerful in its silence and simplicity, I felt as though I touched new sources of life. I tapped them. They poured down and flooded me — with dreams — dreams that could really haunt — with unsettling thoughts of glory and delight *beyond the body*. I got clean away into Nature. I felt as though some portion of me just awakening reached out across him into rain and sunshine, far up into the sweet and starry sky — as a tree growing out of a thicket that chokes its lower part finds light and freedom at the top.”

“It caught you badly, doctor,” O’Malley murmured. “The gods came close!”

“So badly that I loathed the prisoned darkness that held me so thickly in the body. I longed to know my being all dispersed through Nature, scattered with dew and wind, shining with the star-light and the sun. And the manner of escape I hinted to you a little while ago came to seem right and necessary. Lawful it seemed, and obvious. The mania literally obsessed me, though still I tried to hide it even from myself … and struggled in resistance.”

“You spoke just now of other things that came to confirm it,” the Irishman said while the other paused to take breath. All this he knew. He grew weary of Stahl’s clever laboring the point that it was madness. A little knowledge is ever dangerous, and he saw so clearly why the hesitation of the merely intellectual man had led him into error. “Did you mean that others acknowledged this influence as well as yourself?”

“You shall read that for yourself tomorrow,” came the answer, “in the detailed report I drew up afterwards; it is far too long to tell you now. But, I may mention something of it. That breaking out of patients was a curious thing, their trying to escape, their dreams and singing, their efforts sometimes to approach his room, their longing for the open and the gardens; the deep, prolonged entrancing of a few; the sounds of rushing, tramping that they, too, heard, the violence of some, the silent ecstasy of others. The thing may find its parallel, perhaps, in the collective mania that sometimes afflicts religious communities, in monasteries or convents. Only here there was no preacher and eloquent leader to induce hysteria — nothing but that silent dynamo of power, gentle and winning as a little child, a being who could not put a phrase together, exerting his potent spell unconsciously, and chiefly while he slept.

“For the phenomena almost without exception came in the night, and often at their fullest strength, as afterwards reported to me, while I dozed in his room and watched beside his motionless and slumbering form. Oh, and there was more as well, much more, as you shall read. The stories my assistants brought me, the tales of frightened nurse and warder, the amazing yarns the porter stammered out, of strangers who had rung the bell at dawn, trying to push past him through the door, saying they were messengers and had been summoned, sent for, had to come, — large, curious, windy figures, or, as he sometimes called them with unconscious humor, ‘like creatures out of fairy books or circuses’ that always vanished as suddenly as they came. Making every allowance for excitement and exaggeration, the tales were strange enough, I can assure you, and the way many of the patients knew their visions intensified, their illusions doubly strengthened, their efforts even to destroy themselves in many cases almost more than the staff could deal with — all this brought the matter to a climax and made my duty very plain at last.”

“And the effect upon yourself — at its worst?” asked his listener quietly.

Stahl sighed wearily a little as he answered with a new-found sadness in his tone.

"I've told you briefly that," he said; "repetition cannot strengthen it. The worthlessness of the majority of human aims today expresses it Best — what you have called yourself the 'horror of civilization.' The vanity of all life's modern, so-called up-to-date tendencies for outer, mechanical developments. A wild, mad beauty streaming from that man's personality overran the whole place and caught the lot of us, myself especially, with a lust for simple, natural things, and with a passion for spiritual beauty to accompany them. Fame, wealth, position seemed the shadows then, and something else it's hard to name announced itself as the substance…. I wanted to clear out and live with Nature, to know simplicity, unselfish purposes, a golden state of childlike existence close to dawns and dew and running water, cared for by woods and blessed by all the winds…." He paused again for breath, then added: —

"And that's just where the mania caught at me so cunningly — till I saw it and called a halt."

"Ah!"

"For the thing I sought, the thing *he* knew, and perhaps remembered, was not possible *in the body*. It was a spiritual state—"

"Or to be known subjectively!" O'Malley checked him.

"I am no lotus-eater by nature," he went on with energy, "and so I fought and conquered it. But first, I tell you, it came upon me like a tempest — a hurricane of wonder and delight. I've always held, like yourself perhaps, that civilization brings its own army of diseases, and that the few illnesses known to ruder savage races can be cured by simple means the earth herself supplies. And along this line of thought the thing swept into me — the line of my own head-learning. This was natural enough; natural enough, too, that it thus at first deceived me.

"For the quack cures of history come to this — herb simples and the rest; only we know them now as sun-cure, water-cure, open-air cure, old Kneipp, sea-water, and a hundred others. Doctors have never swarmed before as they do now, and these artificial diseases civilization brings in such quantity seemed all at once to mean the abeyance of some central life or power men ought to share with — Nature…. You shall read it all in my written report. I merely wish to show you now how the insidious thing got at me along the line of my special knowledge. I saw the truth that priests and doctors are the only possible and necessary ‘professions’ in the world, and — that they should be really but a single profession….”

CHAPTER XLIV

HE DREW SUDDENLY back with a kind of jerk. It was as though he realized abruptly that he had said too much — had overdone it. He took his companion by the arm and led him down the decks.

As they passed the bridge the Captain called out a word of welcome to them; and his jolly, boisterous laugh ran down the wind. The American engineer came from behind a dark corner, almost running into them; his face was flushed. “It’s like a furnace below,” he said in his nasal familiar manner; “too hot to sleep. I’ve run up for a gulp of air.” He made as though he would join them.

“The wind’s behind us, yes,” replied the doctor in a different tone, “and there’s no draught.” With a gesture, half bow, half dismissal, he made even this thick-skinned member of “the greatest civilization on earth” understand he was not wanted. And they turned at the cabin door, O’Malley a moment wondering at the admirable dignity with which the “little” man had managed the polite dismissal.

Himself, perhaps, he would not have minded the diversion. He was a little weary of the German’s long recital. The confession had not been complete, he felt. Much had been held back. It was not altogether straightforward. The dishonesty which hides in compromise peeped through it everywhere.

And the incoherence of the latter part had almost bored him. For it was, he easily divined, a studied incoherence. It was meant to touch a similar weakness in himself — if there. But it was *not* there. He saw through the whole manoeuvre. Stahl wished to warn and save him by showing that the experience they had partly shared was nothing but a strange mental disorder. He wished to force in this subtle way his own interpretation of it upon his friend. Yet at the same time the intuitive Irishman discerned that other tendency in the man which would so gladly perhaps have welcomed a different explanation, and even in some fashion did actually accept it.

O’Malley smiled inwardly as he watched him prepare the coffee as of old. And patiently he waited for the rest that was to come. In a certain sense it all was useful. It would be helpful later. This was an attitude he would often have to face when he returned to civilized life and tried to tell his Message to the thinking, educated men of today — the men he must win over somehow to his dream — the men, without whose backing, no Movement could hope to meet with even a measure of success.

“So, like myself,” said Stahl, as he carefully tended the flame of the spirit-lamp between them, “you have escaped by the skin of your teeth, as it were. And I congratulate you — heartily.”

“I thank you,” said the other dryly.

“You write your version now, and I’ll write mine — indeed it is already almost finished — then we’ll compare notes. Perhaps we might even publish them together.”

He poured out the fragrant coffee. They faced each other across the little table. But O’Malley did not take the bait. He wished to hear the balance his companion still might tell.

And presently he asked for it.

“With the discharge of your patient the trouble ceased at once, then?”

“Comparatively soon. It gradually subsided, yes.”

“And as regards yourself?”

“I came back to my senses. I recovered my control. The insubordinate impulses I had known retired.” He smiled as he sipped his coffee. “You see me now,” he added, looking his companion steadily in the eyes, “a sane and commonplace ship’s doctor.”

“I congratulate you—”

“*Vielen Dank.*” He bowed.

“On what you missed, yet almost accomplished,” the other finished. “You might have known, like me, the cosmic consciousness! You might have met the gods!”

“In a strait-waistcoat,” the doctor added with a snap.

They laughed at one another across their coffee cups as once before they had laughed across their glasses of Kakhetian wine — two eternally antagonistic types that will exist as long as life itself.

But, contrary to his expectations, the German had little more to tell. He mentioned how the experience had led his mind into strange and novel reading in his desire to know what other minds might have to offer by way of explanation, even the most fanciful and far-fetched. He told, though very briefly, how he had picked up Fechner among others, and carefully studied his “poetic theories,” and read besides the best accounts of “spiritistic” phenomena, as also of the rarer states of hysteria, double-consciousness, multiple personality, and even those looser theories which suggest that a portion of the human constitution called “astral” or “etheric” may escape from the parent center and, carrying with it the subtler forces of desire and yearning, construct a vivid subjective state of mind which is practically its Heaven of hope and longing all fulfilled.

He did not, however, betray the results upon himself of all this curious reading and study, nor mention what he found of truth or probability in it all. He merely quoted books and authors, in at least three languages, that stretched in a singular and catholic array from Plato and the Neo-Platonists across the ages to Myers, Du Prel, Flournoy, Lodge, and Morton Prince.

Out of the lot, perhaps, — O’Malley gathered it by inference rather than from actual statement, from fragments of their talks upon the outward voyage more than from anything let fall just then — Fechner had proved the most persuasive to this man’s contradictory and original mind. It certainly seemed, at least, as if he knew some secret sympathetic leaning toward the idea that consciousness and matter were inseparable, and that a Cosmic Consciousness “of sorts” might pertain to the Earth as, equally, to all the other stars and planets. The *Urwelt* idea he so often referred to had seized a part of his imagination — that, at least, was clear.

The Irishman drank it all in, but he was too exhausted now to argue, and too full besides to ask questions. His natural volubility forsook him. He let the doctor have his say without interruptions. He took the warnings with the rest of it. Nothing the other said had changed him.

It was not the first sunrise they had watched together, and as they took the morning air on deck once more, Corsica rising like a dream the night had left behind her on the sea, he listened with fainter interest to the German’s concluding sentences.

"At any rate you now understand why on that other voyage I was so eager to watch you with your friend, so keen to separate you, to prevent your sleeping with him, and at the same time so desirous to see his influence upon you at close quarters; and also — why I always understood so well what was going on both outwardly and within."

O'Malley quietly reiterated the belief he still held in the power of his own dream.

"I shall go home and give my message to the world," was what he said quietly. "I think it's true."

"It's better to keep silent," was the answer, "for, even if true, the world is not ready yet to listen. It will evaporate, you'll find, in the telling. You'll find there's nothing to tell. Besides, a dream like yours must dawn on all at once, and not on merely one. No one will understand you."

"I can but try."

"You will reach no men of action; and few of intellect. You will merely stuff the dreamers who are already stuffed enough. What is the use, I ask you? What is the use?"

"It will set the world on fire for simplicity," the other murmured, knowing the great sweet passion flame within him as he watched the sun come slowly out of the rosy sea. "All the use in the world."

"None," was the laconic answer.

"They might know the gods!" cried O'Malley, using the phrase that symbolized for him the entire Vision.

Stahl looked at him for some time before he spoke. Again that expression of wistful, almost longing admiration shone in the brown eyes.

"My friend," he answered gravely, "men do not want to know the gods. They prefer their delights less subtle. They crave the cruder physical sensations that bang them toward excitement—"

"Of disease, of pain, of separateness," put in the other.

The German shrugged his shoulders. "It's the stage they're at," he said. "You, if you have success, will merely make a few uncomfortable. The majority will hardly turn their heads. To one in a million you may bring peace and happiness.”

“It’s worth it,” cried the Irishman, “even for that one!”

Stahl answered very gently, smiling with his new expression of tenderness and sympathy. “Dream your great dream if you will, but dream it, my friend, alone — in peace and silence. That ‘one’ I speak of is yourself.”

The doctor pressed his hand and turned toward his cabin. O’Malley stood a little longer to share the sunrise. Neither spoke another word. He heard the door shut softly behind him. The unspoken answer in his mind was in two words — two common little adjectives: “Coward and selfish!”

But Stahl, once in the privacy of his cabin, judging by the glance visible on his face ere he closed the door, may probably have known a very different thought. And possibly he uttered it below his breath. A sigh most certainly escaped his lips, a sigh half sadness, half relief. For O’Malley remembered it afterwards.

“Beautiful, foolish dreamer among men! But, thank God, harmless — to others and — himself.”

And soon afterwards O’Malley also went to his cabin. Before sleep took him he lay deep in a mood of sadness — almost as though he had heard his friend’s unspoken thought. He realized the insuperable difficulties that lay before him. The world would think him “mad but harmless.”

Then, with full sleep, he slipped across that sunrise and found the old-world Garden. He held the eternal password.

“I can but try…!”

CHAPTER XLV

AND HERE THE crowded, muddled notebooks come to an end. The rest was action — and inevitable disaster.

The brief history of O'Malley's mad campaign may be imagined. To a writer who found interest in the study of forlorn hopes and their leaders, a detailed record of this particular one might seem worth while. For me personally it is too sad and too pathetic. I cannot bring myself to tell, much less to analyze the story of a broken heart, when that heart and story are those of a close and deeply admired intimate, a man who gave me genuine love and held my own.

Besides, although a curious chapter in uncommon human nature, it is not by any means a new one. It is the true story of many a poet and dreamer since the world began, though perhaps not often told nor even guessed. And only the poets themselves, especially the little poets who cannot utter half the fire that consumes them, may know the searing pain and passion and the true inwardness of it all.

Most of those months it chanced I was away, and only fragments of the foolish enterprise could reach me. But nothing, I think, could have stopped him, nor any worldly selfish wisdom made him even pause. The thing possessed him utterly; it had to flame its way out as best it could. To high and low, he preached by every means in his power the Simple Life; he preached the mystical life as well — that the true knowledge and the true progress are within, that they both pertain to the inner being and have no chief concern with external things. He preached it wildly, lopsidedly, in or out of season, knowing no half measures. His enthusiasm obscured his sense of proportion and the extravagance hid the germ of truth that undeniably lay in his message.

To put the movement on its feet at first he realized every possession that he had. It left him penniless, if he was not almost so already, and in the end it left him smothered beneath the glory of his blinding and unutterable Dream. He never understood that suggestion is more effective than a sledge-hammer. His faith was no mere little seed of mustard, but a full-fledged forest singing its message in a wind of thunder. He shouted it aloud to the world.

I think the acid disappointment that lies beneath that trite old phrase "a broken heart" was never really his; for indeed it seemed that his cruel, ludicrous failure merely served to strengthen hope and purpose by making him seek for a better method of imparting what he had to say. In the end he learned the bitter lesson to the full. But faith never trailed a single feather. Those jeering audiences in the Park; those empty benches in many a public hall, those brief, ignoring paragraphs in the few newspapers that filled a vacant corner by labeling him crank and long-haired prophet; even the silence that greeted his pamphlets, his letters to the Press, and all the rest, hurt him for others rather than for himself. His pain was altruistic, never personal. His dream and motive, his huge, unwieldy compassion, his genuine love for humanity, all were big enough for that.

And so, I think, he missed the personal mortification that disappointment so deep might bring to dreamers with an aim less unadulteratedly pure. His eye was single to the end. He attributed only the highest motives to all who offered help. The very quacks and fools who flocked to his banner, eager to exploit their smaller fads by joining them to his own, he welcomed, only regretting that, as Stahl had warned him, he could not attract a better class of mind. He did not even see through the manoeuvres of the occasional women of wealth and title who sought to conceal their own mediocrity by advertising in their drawing-rooms the eccentricities of men like himself. And to the end he had the courage of his glorious convictions.

The change of method that he learned at last, moreover, was characteristic of this faith and courage.

"I've begun at the wrong end," he said; "I shall never reach men through their intellects. Their brains today are occupied by the machine-made gods of civilization. I cannot change the direction of their thoughts and lusts from outside; the momentum is too great to stop that way. I must get at them from within. To reach their hearts, the new ideas must rise up *from within*. I see the truer way. I must do it *from the other side*. It must come to them — in Beauty."

For he was to the last convinced that death would merge him in the being of the Earth's Collective Consciousness, and that, lost in her deep eternal beauty, he thus might reach the hearts of men in some stray glimpse of nature’s loveliness, and register his flaming message. He loved to quote from Adonais:

“He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night’s sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
Spreading itself where’er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own.
He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely: he doth bear
His part, while the one Spirit’s plastic stress
Sweeps through the dull dense world…”

And this thought, phrased in a dozen different ways, was always on his lips. To dream was right and useful, even to dream alone, because the beauty of the dream must add to the beauty of the Whole of which it is a part and an interpretation. It was not really lost or vain. All must come back in time to feed the world. He had known gracious thoughts of Earth too big to utter, almost too big to hold. Such thoughts could not ever be really told; they were incommunicable. For the mystical revelation is incommunicable. It has authority only for him who feels it. A corporate revelation is impossible. Only those among men could know, in whose hearts it rose intuitively and made its presence felt as innate ideas. Inspiration brings it, and beauty is the vehicle. Their hearts must change before their minds could be reached.

“I can work it better from the other side — from that old, old Garden which is the Mother’s heart. In this way I can help at any rate…!”

CHAPTER XLVI

IT WAS AT the close of a wet and foggy autumn that we met again, winter in the air, all London desolate; and his wasted, forlorn appearance told me the truth at once. Only the passionate eagerness of voice and manner were there to prove that the spirit had not weakened. There glowed within a fire that showed itself in the translucent shining of the eyes and face.

“I’ve made one great discovery, old man,” he exclaimed with old, familiar, high enthusiasm, “one great discovery at least.”

“You’ve made so many,” I answered cheerfully, while my real thoughts were busy with his bodily state of health. For his appearance shocked me. He stood among a litter of papers, books, neckties, nailed boots, knapsacks, maps and what-not, that rolled upon the floor from the mouth of the Willesden canvas sack. His old grey flannel suit hung literally upon a bag of bones; all the life there was seemed concentrated in his face and eyes — those far-seeing, light blue eyes. They were darker than usual now, eyes like the sea, I thought. His hair, long and disordered, tumbled over his forehead. He was pale, and at the same time flushed. It was almost a disembodied spirit that I saw.

“You’ve made so many. I love to hear them. Is this one finer than the others?”

He looked a moment at me through and through, almost uncannily. He looked in reality beyond me. It was something else he saw, and in the dusk I turned involuntarily.

“Simpler,” he said quickly, “much simpler.”

He moved up close beside me, whispering. Was it all imagination that a breath of flowers came with him? There was certainly a curious fragrance in the air, wild and sweet like orchards in the spring.

“And it is — ?”

"That the Garden's *everywhere!* You needn't go to the distant Caucasus to find it. It's all about this old London town, and in these foggy streets and dingy pavements. It's even in this cramped, undusted room. Now at this moment, while that lamp flickers and the thousands go to sleep. The gates of horn and ivory are here," he tapped his breast. "And here the flowers, the long, clean open hills, the giant herd, the nymphs, the sunshine and the gods!"

So attached was he now to that little room in Paddington where his books and papers lay, that when the curious illness that had caught him grew so much worse, and the attacks of the nameless fever that afflicted him turned serious, I hired a bedroom for him in the same house. And it was in that poky, cage-like den he breathed his last.

His illness I called curious, his fever nameless, because they really were so and puzzled every one. He simply faded out of life, it seemed; there was no pain, no sleeplessness, no suffering of any physical kind. He uttered no complaint, nor were there symptoms of any known disorder.

"Your friend is sound organically," the doctor told me when I pressed him for the truth there on the stairs, "sound as a bell. He wants the open air and plenty of wholesome food, that's all. His body is ill-nourished. His trouble is mental — some deep and heavy disappointment doubtless. If you can change the current of his thoughts, awaken interest in common things, and give him change of scene, perhaps—" He shrugged his shoulders and looked very grave.

"You think he's dying?"

"I think, yes, he is dying."

"From — ?"

"From lack of living pure and simple," was the answer. "He has lost all hold on life."

"He has abundant vitality still."

"Full of it. But it all goes — elsewhere. The physical organism gets none of it."

"Yet mentally," I asked, "there's nothing actually wrong?"

"Not in the ordinary sense. The mind is clear and active. So far as I can test it, the process of thought is healthy and undamaged. It seems to me—"

He hesitated a moment on the doorstep while the driver wound the motor handle. I waited with a sinking heart for the rest of the sentence.

"…like certain cases of nostalgia I have known — very rare and very difficult to deal with. Acute and vehement nostalgia, yes, sometimes called a broken heart," he added, pausing another instant at the carriage door, "in which the entire stream of a man's inner life flows to some distant place, or person, or — or to some imagined yearning that he craves to satisfy."

"To a dream?"

"It *might* be even that," he answered slowly, stepping in. "It might be spiritual. The religious and poetic temperament are most open to it, *and* the most difficult to deal with when afflicted." He emphasized the little word as though the doubt he felt was far less strong than the conviction he only half concealed. "If you would save him, try to change the direction of his thoughts. There is nothing — in all honesty I must say it — nothing that I can do to help."

And then, pulling at the grey tuft on his chin and looking keenly at me a moment over his glasses,— "Those flowers," he said hesitatingly, "you might move those flowers from the room, perhaps. Their perfume is a trifle strong … It might be better." Again he looked sharply at me. There was an odd expression in his eyes. And in my heart there was an odd sensation too, so odd that I found myself bereft a moment of any speech at all, and when my tongue became untied, the carriage was already disappearing down the street. For in that dingy sick-room there were no flowers at all, yet the perfume of woods and fields and open spaces had reached the doctor too, and obviously perplexed him.

"Change the direction of his thoughts!" I went indoors, wondering how any honest and even half-unselfish friend, knowing what I knew, could follow such advice. With what but the lowest motive, of keeping him alive for my own happiness, could I seek to change his thoughts of some imagined joy and peace to the pain and sordid facts of an earthly existence that he loathed?

But when I turned I saw the tousled yellow-headed landlady standing in the breach. Mrs. Heath stopped me in the hall to inquire whether I could say “anythink abart the rent per’aps?” Her manner was defiant. I found three months were owing.

“It’s no good arsking ‘im,” she said, though not unkindly on the whole. “I’m sick an’ tired of always being put off. He talks about the gawds and a Mr. Pan, or some such gentleman who he says will look after it all. But I never sees ‘im — not this Mr. Pan. And his stuff up there,” jerking her head toward the little room, “ain’t worth a Sankey-moody ‘ymn-book, take the lot of it at cost!”

I reassured her. It was impossible to help smiling. For some minds, I reflected, a Sankey hymn-book might hold dreams that were every bit as potent as his own, and far less troublesome. But that “Mr. Pan, or some such gentleman” should serve as a “reference” between lodger and landlady was an unwitting comment on the modern point of view that made me want to cry rather than to laugh. O’Malley and Mrs. Heath between them had made a profounder criticism than they knew.

* * * * *

And so by slow degrees he went, leaving the outer fury for the inner peace. The center of consciousness gradually shifted from the transient form which is the true ghost, to the deeper, permanent state which is the eternal reality. For this was how he phrased it to me in one of our last, strange talks. He watched his own withdrawal.

In bed he would lie for hours with fixed and happy eyes, staring apparently at nothing, the expression on his face quite radiant. The pulse sank often dangerously low; he scarcely seemed to breathe; yet it was never complete unconsciousness or trance. My voice, when I found the heart to try and coax his own for speech, would win him back. The eyes would then grow dimmer, losing their happier light, as he turned to the outer world to look at me.

“The pull is so tremendous now,” he whispered; “I was far, so far away, in the deep life of Earth. Why do you bring me back to all these little pains? I can do nothing here; *there* I am of use…”

He spoke so low I had to bend my head to catch the words. It was very late at night and for hours I had been watching by his side. Outside an ugly yellow fog oppressed the town, but about him like an atmosphere I caught again that fragrance as of trees and flowers. It was too faint for any name — that fugitive, mild perfume one meets upon bare hills and round the skirts of forests. It was somehow, I fancied, in the very breath.

“Each time the effort to return is greater. In there I am complete and full of power. I can work and send my message back so splendidly. Here,” he glanced down at his wasted body with a curious smile, “I am only on the fringe — it’s pain and failure. All so ineffective.”

That other look came back into the eyes, more swiftly than before.

“I thought you might like to speak, to tell me — something,” I said, keeping the tears with difficulty from my voice. “Is there no one you would like to see?”

He shook his head slowly, and gave the peculiar answer:

“They’re all in there.”

“But Stahl, perhaps — if I could get him here?”

An expression of gentle disapproval crossed his face, then melted softly into a wistful tenderness as of a child.

“He’s not there — yet,” he whispered, “but he will come too in the end. In sleep, I think, he goes there even now.”

“Where are you *really* then?” I ventured, “And where is it you go to?”

The answer came unhesitatingly; there was no doubt or searching.

“Into myself, my real and deeper self, and so beyond it into her — the Earth. Where all the others are — all, all, all.”

And then he frightened me by sitting up in bed abruptly. His eyes stared past me — out beyond the close confining walls. The movement was so startling with its suddenness and vigor that I shrank back a moment. The head was sideways. He was intently listening.

“Hark!” he whispered. “They are calling me! Do you hear…?”

The look of joy that broke over the face like sunshine made me hold my breath. Something in his low voice thrilled me beyond all I have ever known. I listened too. Only the rumble of the traffic down the distant main street broke the silence, the rattle of a nearer cart, and the footsteps of a few pedestrians. No other noises came across the night. There was no wind. Thick yellow fog muffled everything.

“I hear nothing,” I answered softly. “What is it that *you* hear?”

And, making no reply, he presently lay down again among the pillows, that look of joy and glory still upon his face. It lay there to the end like sunrise.

The fog came in so thickly through the window that I rose to close it. He never closed that window, and I hoped he would not notice. For a sound of wretched street-music was coming nearer — some beggar playing dismally upon a penny whistle — and I feared it would disturb him. But in a flash he was up again.

“No, no!” he cried, raising his voice for the first time that night. “Do not shut it. I shan’t be able to hear then. Let all the air come in. Open it wider… wider! I love that sound!”

“The fog—”

“There is no fog. It’s only sun and flowers and music. Let them in. Don’t you hear it now?” he added. And, more to bring him peace than anything else, I bowed my head to signify agreement. For the last confusion of the mind, I saw, was upon him, and he made the outer world confirm some imagined detail of his inner dream. I drew the sash down lower, covering his body closely with the blankets. He flung them off impatiently at once. The damp and freezing night rushed in upon us like a presence. It made me shudder, but O’Malley only raised himself upon one elbow to taste it better, and — to listen.

Then, waiting patiently for the return of the quiet, trance-like state when I might cover him again, I moved toward the window and looked out. The street was empty, save for that beggar playing vilely on his penny whistle. The wretch came to a standstill immediately before the house. The lamplight fell from the room upon his tattered, broken figure. I could not see his face. He groped and felt his way.

Outside that homeless wanderer played his penny pipe in the night of cold and darkness.

Inside the Dreamer listened, dreaming of his gods and garden, his great Earth Mother, his visioned life of peace and simple things with a living Nature…

And I felt somehow that player watched us. I made an angry sign to him to go. But it was the sudden touch upon my arm that made me turn round with such a sudden start that I almost cried aloud. O’Malley in his night-clothes stood close against me on the floor, slight as a spirit, eyes a-shine, lips moving faintly into speech through the most wonderful smile a human face has ever shown me.

“Do not send him away,” he whispered, joy breaking from him like a light, “but tell him that I love it. Go out and thank him. Tell him I hear and understand, and say that I am coming. Will you…?”

Something within me whirled. It seemed that I was lifted from my feet a moment. Some tide of power rushed from his person to my own. The room was filled with blinding light. But in my heart there rose a great emotion that combined tears and joy and laughter all at once.

“The moment you are back in bed,” I heard my voice like one speaking from a distance, “I’ll go—”

The momentary, wild confusion passed as suddenly as it came. I remember he obeyed at once. As I bent down to tuck the clothes about him, that fragrance as of flowers and open spaces rose about my bending face like incense — bewilderingly sweet.

And the next second I was standing in the street. The man who played upon the pipe, I saw, was blind. His hand and fingers were curiously large.

I was already close, ready to press all that my pockets held into his hand — ay, and far more than merely pockets held because O’Malley said he loved the music — when something made me turn my head away. I cannot say precisely what it was, for first it seemed a tapping at the window of his room behind me, and then a little noise within the room itself, and next — more curious than either, — a feeling that something came out rushing past me through the air. It whirled and shouted as it went…

I only remember clearly that in the very act of turning, and while my look still held that beggar's face within the field of vision, I saw the sightless eyes turn bright a moment as though he opened them and saw. He did most certainly smile; to that I swear.

But when I turned again the street immediately about me was empty.

The beggar-man was gone.

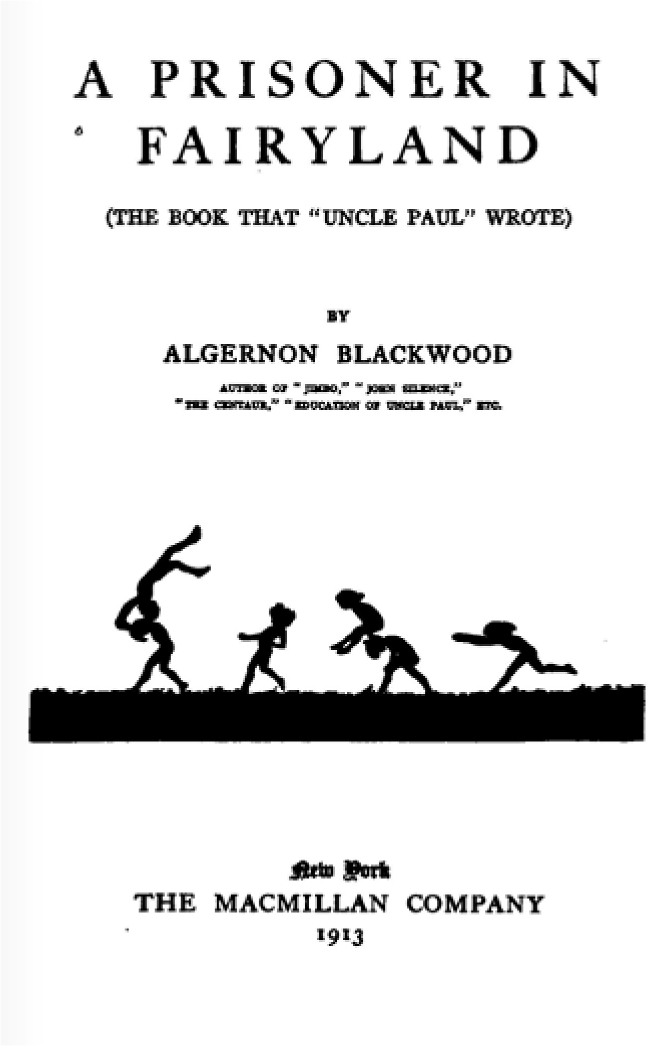
And down the pavement, moving swiftly through the curtain of fog, saw his vanishing figure. It was large and spreading. In the fringe of ight the lamp-post gave, its upper edges seemed far above the ground. Someone else was with him. There were two figures.

I heard that sound of piping far away. It sounded faint and almost flute-like in the air. And in the mud at my feet the money lay — spurned utterly. I heard the last coins ring upon the pavement as they settled. But in the room, when I got back, the body of Terence O'Malley had ceased to breathe.

A Prisoner in Fairyland (1913)

This metaphysical novel was first published in 1913. It is subtitled ‘The Book “Uncle Paul” Wrote’ and is a semi-sequel to Blackwood’s earlier novel, *The Education of Uncle Paul* (1909). The novel foreshadows the ‘magic realist’ fiction of the later twentieth century in its presentation of a man in search of true altruism and a meaningful existence beyond mere financial success; although Blackwood is ultimately ambiguous about any final solution to this mystery.

The story concerns Henry Rogers, a successful businessman, now retired. On a visit to his boyhood home, Rogers recalls the many schemes for the betterment of humanity that he abandoned as he grew older — along with his youthful lust for imagination and the unknown. His musings on how best to regain and fulfil these early ambitions continue as he visits his cousin in Switzerland and embarks on a series of fantastic adventures with his nephews and nieces. Finally, returning to London, Rogers realises that his search for fulfilment has been undertaken in all the wrong places…



A PRISONER IN
FAIRYLAND

(THE BOOK THAT "UNCLE PAUL" WROTE)

BY
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD
AUTHOR OF "JIMBO," "JOHN SILENCE,"
"THE CENTAUR," "EDUCATION OF UNCLE PAUL," ETC.

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1913

Title page of the first edition

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII

CHAPTER XXII

CHAPTER XXIV

CHAPTER XXV

CHAPTER XXVI

CHAPTER XXVII

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHAPTER XXIX

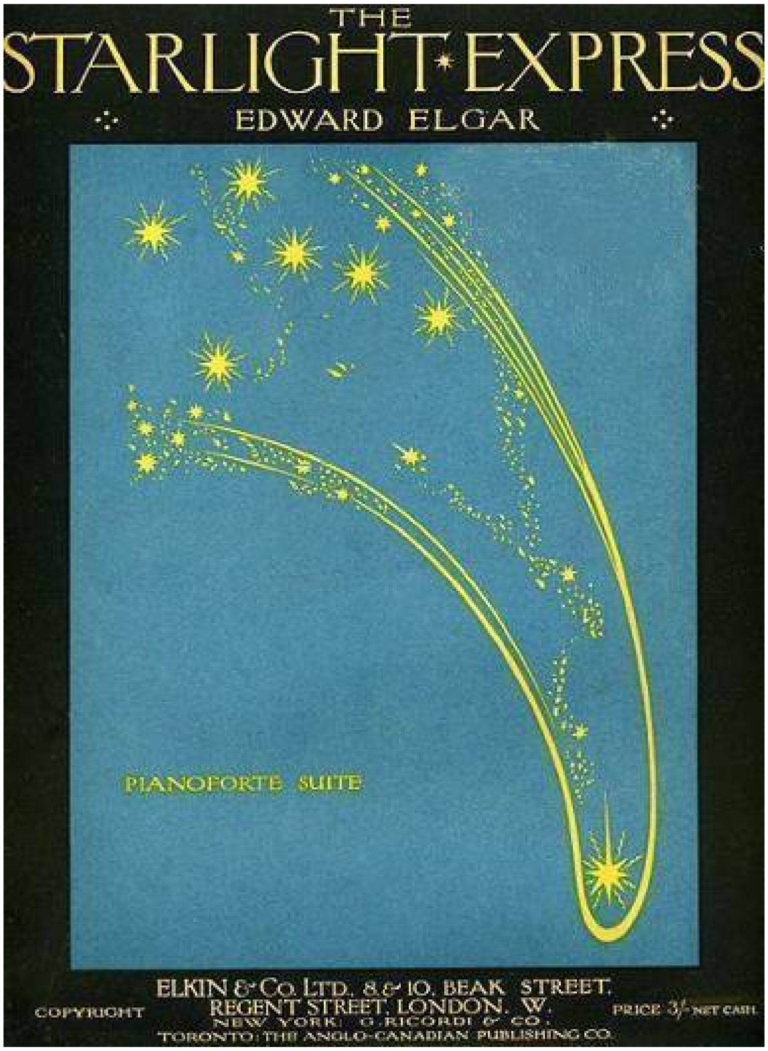
CHAPTER XXX

CHAPTER XXXI

CHAPTER XXXII

CHAPTER XXXIII

CHAPTER XXXIV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Cover of a piano selection from Edward Elgar's incidental music from the play, 'The Starlight Express' (1915), which is based on 'A Prisoner in Fairyland' and which Blackwood co-wrote with Violet Pearn. Andrew Lloyd Webber used the title of the play for his 1984 musical, although that production is otherwise unrelated to either the play or Blackwood's novel

TO

M. S.-K.

‘LITTLE MOUSE THAT, LOST IN WONDER, FLICKS ITS WHISKERS AT THE THUNDER!’

“Les Pensees!
O leurs essors fougueux, leurs flammes dispersees,
Leur rouge acharnement ou leur accord vermeil!
Comme la-haut les etoiles criblaient la nue,
Elles se constellaient sur la plaine inconnue;
Elles roulaient dans l’espace, telles des feux,
Gravissaient la montagne, illuminaient la fleuve
Et jetaient leur parure universelle et neuve
De mer en mer, sur les pays silencieux.”

Le Monde, EMILE VERHAEREN

CHAPTER I

Man is his own star; and the soul that can
Render an honest and a perfect man
Commands all light, all influence, all fate,
Nothing to him falls early, or too late.
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,

Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.
BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

Minks — Herbert Montmorency — was now something more than secretary, even than private secretary: he was confidential-private-secretary, adviser, friend; and this, more because he was a safe receptacle for his employer's enthusiasms than because his advice or judgment had any exceptional value. So many men need an audience. Herbert Minks was a fine audience, attentive, delicately responsive, sympathetic, understanding, and above all — silent. He did not leak. Also, his applause was wise without being noisy. Another rare quality he possessed was that he was honest as the sun. To prevaricate, even by gesture, or by saying nothing, which is the commonest form of untruth, was impossible to his transparent nature. He might hedge, but he could never lie. And he was 'friend,' so far as this was possible between employer and employed, because a pleasant relationship of years' standing had established a bond of mutual respect under conditions of business intimacy which often tend to destroy it.

Just now he was very important into the bargain, for he had a secret from his wife that he meant to divulge only at the proper moment. He had known it himself but a few hours. The leap from being secretary in one of Henry Rogers's companies to being that prominent gentleman's confidential private secretary was, of course, a very big one. He hugged it secretly at first alone. On the journey back from the City to the suburb where he lived, Minks made a sonnet on it. For his emotions invariably sought the safety valve of verse. It was a wiser safety valve for high spirits than horse-racing or betting on the football results, because he always stood to win, and never to lose. Occasionally he sold these bits of joy for half a guinea, his wife pasting the results neatly in a big press album from which he often read aloud on Sunday nights when the children were in bed. They were signed ‘Montmorency Minks’; and bore evidence of occasional pencil corrections on the margin with a view to publication later in a volume. And sometimes there were little lyrical fragments too, in a wild, original metre, influenced by Shelley and yet entirely his own. These had special pages to themselves at the end of the big book. But usually he preferred the sonnet form; it was more sober, more dignified. And just now the bumping of the Tube train shaped his emotion into something that began with

Success that poisons many a baser mind
With thoughts of self, may lift —

but stopped there because, when he changed into another train, the jerkier movement altered the rhythm into something more lyrical, and he got somewhat confused between the two and ended by losing both.

He walked up the hill towards his tiny villa, hugging his secret and anticipating with endless detail how he would break it to his wife. He felt very proud and very happy. The half-mile trudge seemed like a few yards.

He was a slim, rather insignificant figure of a man, neatly dressed, the City clerk stamped plainly over all his person. He envied his employer’s burly six-foot stature, but comforted himself always with the thought that he possessed in its place a certain delicacy that was more becoming to a man of letters whom an adverse fate prevented from being a regular minor poet. There was that touch of melancholy in his fastidious appearance that suggested the atmosphere of frustrated dreams. Only the firmness of his character and judgment decreed against the luxury of longish hair; and he prided himself upon remembering that although a poet at heart, he was outwardly a City clerk and, as a strong man, must permit no foolish compromise.

His face on the whole was pleasing, and rather soft, yet, owing to this warring of opposing inner forces, it was at the same time curiously deceptive. Out of that dreamy, vague expression shot, when least expected, the hard and practical judgment of the City — or vice versa. But the whole was gentle — admirable quality for an audience, since it invited confession and assured a gentle hearing. No harshness lay there. Herbert Minks might have been a fine, successful mother perhaps. The one drawback to the physiognomy was that the mild blue eyes were never quite united in their frank gaze. He squinted pleasantly, though his wife told him it was a fascinating cast rather than an actual squint. The chin, too, ran away a little from the mouth, and the lips were usually parted. There was, at any rate, this air of incompatibility of temperament between the features which, made all claim to good looks out of the question.

That runaway chin, however, was again deceptive. It did, indeed run off, but the want of decision it gave to the countenance seemed contradicted by the prominent forehead and straight eyebrows, heavily marked. Minks knew his mind. If sometimes evasive rather than outspoken, he could on occasion be surprisingly firm. He saw life very clearly. He could certainly claim the good judgment stupid people sometimes have, due perhaps to their inability to see alternatives — just as some men's claim to greatness is born of an audacity due to their total lack of humour.

Minks was one of those rare beings who may be counted on — a quality better than mere brains, being of the heart. And Henry Rogers understood him and read him like an open book. Preferring the steady devotion to the brilliance a high salary may buy, he had watched him for many years in every sort of circumstance. He had, by degrees, here and there, shown an interest in his life. He had chosen his private secretary well. With Herbert Minks at his side he might accomplish many things his heart was set upon. And while Minks bumped down in his third-class crowded carriage to Sydenham, hunting his evasive sonnet, Henry Rogers glided swiftly in a taxi-cab to his rooms in St. James's Street, hard on the trail of another dream that seemed, equally, to keep just beyond his actual reach.

It would certainly seem that thought can travel across space between minds sympathetically in tune, for just as the secretary put his latch-key into his shiny blue door the idea flashed through him, 'I wonder what Mr. Rogers will do, now that he's got his leisure, with a fortune and — me!' And at the same moment Rogers, in his deep arm-chair before the fire, was saying to himself, 'I'm glad Minks has come to me; he's just the man I want for my big Scheme!' And then— 'Pity he's such a lugubrious looking fellow, and wears those dreadful fancy waistcoats. But he's very open to suggestion. We can change all that. I must look after Minks a bit. He's rather sacrificed his career for me, I fancy. He's got high aims. Poor little Minks!'

‘I’ll stand by him whatever happens,’ was the thought the slamming of the blue door interrupted. ‘To be secretary to such a man is already success.’ And again he hugged his secret and himself.

As already said, the new-fledged secretary was married and wrote poetry on the sly. He had four children. He would make an ideal helpmate, worshipping his employer with that rare quality of being interested in his ideas and aims beyond the mere earning of a salary; seeing, too, in that employer more than he, the latter, supposed. For, while he wrote verses on the sly, ‘my chief,’ as he now preferred to call him, lived poetry in his life.

‘He’s got it, you know, my dear,’ he announced to his wife, as he kissed her and arranged his tie in the gilt mirror over the plush mantelpiece in the ‘parlour’; ‘he’s got the divine thing in him right enough; got it, too, as strong as hunger or any other natural instinct. It’s almost functional with him, if I may say so’ — which meant ‘if you can understand me’— ‘only, he’s deliberately smothered it all these years. He thinks it wouldn’t go down with other business men. And he’s been in business, you see, from the word go. He meant to make money, and he couldn’t do both exactly. Just like myself—’

Minks wandered on. His wife noticed the new enthusiasm in his manner, and was puzzled by it. Something was up, she divined.

‘Do you think he’ll raise your salary again soon?’ she asked practically, helping him draw off the paper cuffs that protected his shirt from ink stains, and throwing them in the fire. ‘That seems to be the real point.’

But Herbert evaded the immediate issue. It was so delightful to watch her and keep his secret a little longer.

‘And you *do* deserve success, dear,’ she added; ‘you’ve been as faithful as a horse.’ She came closer, and stroked his thick, light hair a moment.

He turned quickly. Had he betrayed himself already? Had she read it from his eyes or manner?

‘That’s nothing,’ he answered lightly. ‘Duty is duty.’

‘Of course, dear,’ and she brought him his slippers. He would not let her put them on for him. It was not gallant to permit menial services to a woman.

‘Success,’ he murmured, ‘that poisons many a baser mind—’ and then stopped short. ‘I’ve got a new sonnet,’ he told her quickly, determined to prolong his pleasure, ‘got it in the train coming home. Wait a moment, and I’ll give you the rest. It’s a beauty, with real passion in it, only I want to keep it cold and splendid if I can. Don’t interrupt a moment.’ He put the slippers on the wrong feet and stared hard into the fire.

Then Mrs. Minks knew for a certainty that something had happened. He had not even asked after the children.

‘Herbert,’ she said, with a growing excitement, ‘why are you so full of poetry to-night? And what’s this about success and poison all of a sudden?’ She knew he never drank. ‘I believe Mr. Rogers has raised your salary, or done one of those fine things you always say he’s going to do. Tell me, dear, please tell me.’ There were new, unpaid bills in her pocket, and she almost felt tempted to show them. She poked the fire fussily.

‘Albinia,’ he answered importantly, with an expression that brought the chin up closer to the lips, and made the eyebrows almost stern, ‘Mr. Rogers will do the right thing always — when the right time comes. As a matter of fact’ — here he reverted to the former train of thought— ‘both he and I are misfits in a practical, sordid age. We should have been born in Greece—’

‘I simply love your poems, Herbert,’ she interrupted gently, wondering how she managed to conceal her growing impatience so well, ‘but there’s not the money in them that there ought to be, and they don’t pay for coals or for Ronald’s flannels—’

‘Albinia,’ he put in softly, ‘they relieve the heart, and so make me a happier and a better man. But — I should say he would,’ he added, answering her distant question about the salary.

The secret was almost out. It hung on the edge of his lips. A moment longer he hugged it deliciously. He loved these little conversations with his wife. Never a shade of asperity entered into them. And this one in particular afforded him a peculiar delight.

‘Both of us are made for higher things than mere money-making,’ he went on, lighting his calabash pipe and puffing the smoke carefully above her head from one corner of his mouth, ‘and that’s what first attracted us to each other, as I have often mentioned to you. But now’ — his bursting heart breaking through all control— ‘that he has sold his interests to a company and retired into private life — er — my own existence should be easier and less exacting. I shall have less routine, be more my own master, and also, I trust, find time perhaps for—’

‘Then something *has* happened!’ cried Mrs. Minks, springing to her feet.

‘It has, my dear,’ he answered with forced calmness, though his voice was near the trembling point.

She stood in front of him, waiting. But he himself did not rise, nor show more feeling than he could help. His poems were full of scenes like this in which the men — strong, silent fellows — were fine and quiet. Yet his instinct was to act quite otherwise. One eye certainly betrayed it.

‘It has,’ he repeated, full of delicious emotion.

‘Oh, but Herbert — !’

‘And I am no longer that impersonal factor in City life, mere secretary to the Board of a company—’

‘Oh, Bertie, dear!’

‘But private secretary to Mr. Henry Rogers — private and confidential secretary at—’

‘Bert, darling — !’

‘At 300 pounds a year, paid quarterly, with expenses extra, and long, regular holidays,’ he concluded with admirable dignity and self-possession.

There was a moment’s silence.

‘You splendour!’ She gave a little gasp of admiration that went straight to his heart, and set big fires alight there. ‘Your reward has come at last! My hero!’

This was as it should be. The beginning of an epic poem flashed with tumult through his blood. Yet outwardly he kept his admirable calm.

‘My dear, we must take success, like disaster, quietly.’ He said it gently, as when he played with the children. It was mostly put on, of course, this false grandiloquence of the prig. His eyes already twinkled more than he could quite disguise.

‘Then we can manage the other school, perhaps, for Frank?’ she cried, and was about to open various flood-gates when he stopped her with a look of proud happiness that broke down all barriers of further pretended secrecy.

‘Mr. Rogers,’ was the low reply, ‘has offered to do that for us — as a start.’ The words were leisurely spoken between great puffs of smoke. ‘That’s what I meant just now by saying that he lived poetry in his life, you see. Another time you will allow judgment to wait on knowledge—’

‘You dear old humbug,’ she cried, cutting short the sentence that neither of them quite understood, ‘I believe you’ve known this for weeks—’

‘Two hours ago exactly,’ he corrected her, and would willingly have prolonged the scene indefinitely had not his practical better half prevented him. For she came over, dropped upon her knees beside his chair, and, putting both arms about his neck, she kissed his foolish sentences away with all the pride and tenderness that filled her to the brim. And it pleased Minks hugely. It made him feel, for the moment at any rate, that he was the hero, not Mr. Henry Rogers.

But he did not show his emotion much. He did not even take his pipe out. It slipped down sideways into another corner of his wandering lips. And, while he returned the kiss with equal tenderness and pleasure, one mild blue eye looked down upon her soft brown hair, and the other glanced sideways, without a trace of meaning in it, at the oleograph of Napoleon on Elba that hung upon the wall. …

Soon afterwards the little Sydenham villa was barred and shuttered, the four children were sound asleep, Herbert and Albinia Minks both lost in the world of happy dreams that sometimes visit honest, simple folk whose consciences are clean and whose aims in life are commonplace but worthy.

CHAPTER II

WHEN THE CREATION was new and all the stars shone in their first splendour, the gods held their assembly in the sky and sang 'Oh, the picture of perfection! the joy unalloyed!'

But one cried of a sudden— 'It seems that somewhere there is a break in the chain of light and one of the stars has been lost.'

The golden string of their harp snapped, their song stopped, and they cried in dismay— 'Yes, that lost star was the best, she was the glory of all heavens!'

From that day the search is unceasing for her, and the cry goes on from one to the other that in her the world has lost its one joy!

Only in the deepest silence of night the stars smile and whisper among themselves— 'Vain is this seeking! Unbroken perfection is over all!'

RABINDRANATH TAGORE. (Prose translation by Author from his original
Bengali.)

It was April 30th and Henry Rogers sat in his rooms after breakfast, listening to the rumble of the traffic down St. James's Street, and found the morning dull. A pile of letters lay unopened upon the table, waiting the arrival of the discriminating Mr. Minks with his shorthand note-book and his mild blue eyes. It was half-past nine, and the secretary was due at ten o'clock.

He smiled as he thought of this excellent fellow's first morning in the promoted capacity of private secretary. He would come in very softly, one eye looking more intelligent than the other; the air of the City clerk discarded, and in its place the bearing that belonged to new robes of office worn for the first time. He would bow, say 'Good morning, Mr. Rogers,' glance round with one eye on his employer and another on a possible chair, seat himself with a sigh that meant 'I have written a new poem in the night, and would love to read it to you if I dared,' then flatten out his oblong notebook and look up, expectant and receptive. Rogers would say 'Good morning, Mr. Minks. We've got a busy day before us. Now, let me see—' and would meet his glance with welcome. He would look quickly from one eye to the other- to this day he did not know which one was right to meet- and would wonder for the thousandth time how such an insignificant face could go with such an honest, capable mind. Then he smiled again as he remembered Frank, the little boy whose schooling he was paying for, and realised that Minks would bring a message of gratitude from Mrs. Minks, perhaps would hand him, with a gesture combining dignity and humbleness, a little note of thanks in a long narrow envelope of pale mauve, bearing a flourishing monogram on its back.

And Rogers scowled a little as he thought of the air of gruffness he would assume while accepting it, saying as pleasantly as he could manage, 'Oh, Mr. Minks, that's nothing at all; I'm only too delighted to be of service to the lad.' For he abhorred the expression of emotion, and his delicate sense of tact would make pretence of helping the boy himself, rather than the struggling parents.

Au fond he had a genuine admiration for Minks, and there was something lofty in the queer personality that he both envied and respected. It made him rely upon his judgment in certain ways he could not quite define. Minks seemed devoid of personal ambition in a sense that was not weakness. He was not insensible to the importance of money, nor neglectful of chances that enabled him to do well by his wife and family, but — he was after other things as well, if not chiefly. With a childlike sense of honesty he had once refused a position in a company that was not all it should have been, and the high pay thus rejected pointed to a scrupulous nicety of view that the City, of course, deemed foolishness. And Rogers, aware of this, had taken to him, seeking as it were to make this loss good to him in legitimate ways. Also the fellow belonged to leagues and armies and 'things,' quixotic some of them, that tried to lift humanity. That is, he gave of his spare time, as also of his spare money, to help. His Saturday evenings, sometimes a whole bank holiday, he devoted to the welfare of others, even though the devotion Rogers thought misdirected.

For Minks hung upon the fringe of that very modern, new-fashioned, but almost freakish army that worships old, old ideals, yet insists upon new-fangled names for them. Christ, doubtless, was his model, but it must be a

Christ properly and freshly labelled; his Christianity must somewhere include the prefix ‘neo,’ and the word ‘scientific’ must also be dragged in if possible before he was satisfied. Minks, indeed, took so long explaining to himself the wonderful title that he was sometimes in danger of forgetting the brilliant truths it so vulgarly concealed. Yet never quite concealed. He must be up-to-date, that was all. His attitude to the world scraped acquaintance with nobility somewhere. His gift was a rare one. Out of so little, he gave his mite, and gave it simply, unaware that he was doing anything unusual.

This attitude of mind had made him valuable, even endeared him, to the successful business man, and in his secret heart Rogers had once or twice felt ashamed of himself. Minks, as it were, knew actual achievement because he was, forcedly, content with little, whereas he, Rogers, dreamed of so much, yet took twenty years to come within reach of what he dreamed. He was always waiting for the right moment to begin.

His reflections were interrupted by the sunlight, which, pouring in a flood across the opposite roof, just then dropped a patch of soft April glory upon the black and yellow check of his carpet slippers. Rogers got up and, opening the window wider than before, put out his head. The sunshine caught him full in the face. He tasted the fresh morning air. Tinged with the sharp sweetness of the north it had a fragrance as of fields and gardens. Even St. James’s Street could not smother its vitality and perfume. He drew it with delight into his lungs, making such a to-do about it that a passer-by looked up to see what was the matter, and noticing the hanging tassel of a flamboyant dressing-gown, at once modestly lowered his eyes again.

But Henry Rogers did not see the passer-by in whose delicate mind a point of taste had thus vanquished curiosity, for his thoughts had flown far across the pale-blue sky, behind the cannon-ball clouds, up into that scented space and distance where summer was already winging her radiant way towards the earth. Visions of June obscured his sight, and something in the morning splendour brought back his youth and boyhood. He saw a new world spread about him — a world of sunlight, butterflies, and flowers, of smooth soft lawns and shaded gravel paths, and of children playing round a pond where rushes whispered in a wind of long ago. He saw hayfields, orchards, tea-things spread upon a bank of flowers underneath a hedge, and a collie dog leaping and tumbling shoulder high among the standing grass…. It was all curiously vivid, and with a sense of something about it unfading and delightfully eternal. It could never pass, for instance, whereas….

‘Ain’t yer forgotten the nightcap?’ sang out a shrill voice from below, as a boy with a basket on his arm went down the street. He drew back from the window, realising that he was a sight for all admirers. Tossing the end of his cigarette in the direction of the cheeky urchin, he settled himself again in the arm-chair before the glowing grate-fire.

But the fresh world he had tasted came back with him. For Henry Rogers stood this fine spring morning upon the edge of a new life. A long chapter had just closed behind him. He was on the threshold of another. The time to begin had come. And the thrill of his freedom now at hand was very stimulating to his imagination. He was forty, and a rich man. Twenty years of incessant and intelligent labour had brought him worldly success. He admitted he had been lucky, where so many toil on and on till the gates of death stand up and block their way, fortunate if they have earned a competency through years where hope and disappointment wage their incessant weary battle. But he, for some reason known only to the silent Fates, had crested the difficult hill and now stood firm upon the top to see the sunrise, the dreadful gates not even yet in sight. At yesterday’s Board meeting, Minks had handed him the papers for his signature; the patents had been transferred to the new company; the cheque had been paid over; and he was now a gentleman of leisure with a handsome fortune lying in his bank to await investment. He was a director in the parent, as well as the subsidiary companies, with fees that in themselves alone were more than sufficient for his simple needs.

For all his tastes *were* simple, and he had no expensive hobbies or desires; he preferred two rooms and a bath to any house that he had ever seen; pictures he liked best in galleries; horses he could hire without the trouble of owning; the few books worth reading would go into a couple of shelves; motors afflicted, even confused him — he was old-fashioned enough to love country and walk through it slowly on two vigorous legs; marriage had been put aside with a searing disappointment years ago, not forgotten, but accepted; and of travel he had enjoyed enough to realise now that its pleasures could be found reasonably near home and for very moderate expenditure indeed. And the very idea of servants was to him an affliction; he loathed their prying closeness to his intimate life and habits, destroying the privacy he loved. Confirmed old bachelor his friends might call him if they chose; he knew what he wanted. Now at last he had it. The ambition of his life was within reach.

For, from boyhood up, a single big ambition had ever thundered through his being — the desire to be of use to others. To help his fellow-kind was to be his profession and career. It had burned and glowed in him ever since he could remember, and what first revealed it in him was the sight — common enough, alas — of a boy with one leg hobbling along on crutches down the village street. Some deep power in his youthful heart, akin to the wondrous sympathy of women, had been touched. Like a shock of fire it came home to him. He, too, might lose his dearest possession thus, and be unable to climb trees, jump ditches, risk his neck along the edge of the haystack or the roof. '*That might happen to me too!*' was the terrible thing he realised, and had burst into tears….

Crutches at twelve! And the family hungry, as he later learned! Something in the world was wrong; he thought every one had enough to eat, at least, and only the old used crutches. 'The Poor was a sort of composite wretch, half criminal, who deserved to be dirty, suffering, punished; but this boy belonged to a family that worked and did its best. Something in the world-machinery had surely broken loose and caused violent disorder. For no one cared particularly. The ''thorities,' he heard, looked after the Poor —''thorities in law,' as he used to call the mysterious Person he never actually saw, stern, but kindly in a grave impersonal way; and asked once if some relation- in-law or other, who was mentioned often but never seen, had, therefore, anything to do with the poor.

Dropping into his heart from who knows what far, happy star, this passion had grown instead of faded: to give himself for others, to help afflicted folk, to make the world go round a little more easily. And he had never forgotten the deep thrill with which he heard his father tell him of some wealthy man who during his lifetime had given away a million pounds — anonymously. … His own pocket-money just then was five shillings a week, and his expectations just exactly — nothing.

But before his dreams could know accomplishment, he must have means. To be of use to anybody at all he must make himself effective. The process must be reversed, for no man could fight without weapons, and weapons were only to be had as the result of steady, concentrated effort — selfish effort. A man must fashion himself before he can be effective for others. Self-effacement, he learned, was rather a futile virtue after all.

As the years passed he saw his chances. He cut short a promising University career and entered business. His talents lay that way, as his friends declared, and unquestionably he had a certain genius for invention; for, while scores of futile processes he first discovered remained mere clever solutions of interesting problems, he at length devised improvements in the greater industries, and, patenting them wisely, made his way to practical results.

But the process had been a dangerous one, and during the long business experience the iron had entered his soul, and he had witnessed at close quarters the degrading influence of the lust of acquisition. The self-advertising humbug of most philanthropy had clouded something in him that he felt could never again grow clear and limpid as before, and a portion of his original zest had faded. For the City hardly encouraged it. One bit of gilt after another had been knocked off his brilliant dream, one jet of flame upon another quenched. The single eye that fills the body full of light was a thing so rare that its possession woke suspicion. Even of money generously given, so little reached its object; gaping pockets and grasping fingers everywhere lined the way of safe delivery. It sickened him. So few, moreover, were willing to give without acknowledgment in at least one morning paper. ‘Bring back the receipt’ was the first maxim even of the office-boys; and between the right hand and the left of every one were special ‘private wires’ that flashed the news as quickly as possible about the entire world.

Yet, while inevitable disillusion had dulled his youthful dreams, its glory was never quite destroyed. It still glowed within. At times, indeed, it ran into flame, and knew something of its original splendour. Women, in particular, had helped to keep it alive, fanning its embers bravely. For many women, he found, dreamed his own dream, and dreamed it far more sweetly. They were closer to essential realities than men were. While men bothered with fuss and fury about empires, tariffs, street-cars, and marvellous engines for destroying one another, women, keeping close to the sources of life, knew, like children, more of its sweet, mysterious secrets — the things of value no one yet has ever put completely into words. He wondered, a little sadly, to see them battling now to scuffle with the men in managing the gross machinery, cleaning the pens and regulating ink-pots. Did they really think that by helping to decide whether rates should rise or fall, or how many buttons a factory-inspector should wear upon his uniform, they more nobly helped the world go round? Did they never pause to reflect who would fill the places they thus vacated? With something like melancholy he saw them stepping down from their thrones of high authority, for it seemed to him a prostitution of their sweet prerogatives that damaged the entire sex.

‘Old-fashioned bachelor, no doubt, I am,’ he smiled quietly to himself, coming back to the first reflection whence his thoughts had travelled so far — the reflection, namely, that now at last he possessed the freedom he had longed and toiled for.

And then he paused and looked about him, confronted with a difficulty. To him it seemed unusual, but really it was very common.

For, having it, he knew not at first what use to make of it. This dawned upon him suddenly when the sunlight splashed his tawdry slippers with its gold. The movement to the open window was really instinctive beginning of a search, as though in the free, wonderful spaces out of doors he would find the thing he sought to do. Now, settled back in the deep arm-chair, he realised that he had not found it. The memories of childhood had flashed into him instead. He renewed the search before the dying fire, waiting for the sound of Minks’ ascending footsteps on the stairs. …

And this revival of the childhood mood was curious, he felt, almost significant, for it was symbolical of so much that he had deliberately, yet with difficulty, suppressed and put aside. During these years of concentrated toil for money, his strong will had neglected of set purpose the call of a robust imagination. He had stifled poetry just as he had stifled play. Yet really that imagination had merely gone into other channels — scientific invention. It was a higher form, married at least with action that produced poetry in steel and stone instead of in verse. Invention has ever imagination and poetry at its heart.

The acquirement of wealth demanded his entire strength, and all lighter considerations he had consistently refused to recognise, until he thought them dead. This sudden flaming mood rushed up and showed him otherwise. He reflected on it, but clumsily, as with a mind too long trained in the rigid values of stocks and shares, buying and selling, hard figures that knew not elasticity. This softer subject led him to no conclusion, leaving him stranded among misty woods and fields of flowers that had no outlet. He realised, however, clearly that this side of him was not atrophied as he thought. Its unused powers had merely been accumulating — underground.

He got no further than that just now. He poked the fire and lit another cigarette. Then, glancing idly at the paper, his eye fell upon the list of births, and by merest chance picked out the name of Crayfield. Some nonentity had been 'safely delivered of a son' at Crayfield, the village where he had passed his youth and childhood. He saw the Manor House where he was born, the bars across the night- nursery windows, the cedars on the lawn, the haystacks just beyond the stables, and the fields where the rabbits sometimes fell asleep as they sat after enormous meals too stuffed to move. He saw the old gravel-pit that led, the gardener told him, to the centre of the earth. A whiff of perfume from the laurustinus in the drive came back, the scent of hay, and with it the sound of the mowing-machine going over the lawn. He saw the pony in loose flat leather shoes. The bees were humming in the lime trees. The rooks were cawing. A blackbird whistled from the shrubberies where he once passed an entire day in hiding, after emptying an ink-bottle down the German governess's dress. He heard the old family butler in his wheezy voice calling in vain for 'Mr. 'Enery' to come in. The tone was respectful, seductive as the man could make it, yet reproachful. He remembered throwing a little stone that caught him just where the Newgate fringe met the black collar of his coat, so that his cry of delight betrayed his hiding-place. The whacking that followed he remembered too, and how his brother emerged suddenly from behind the curtain with, 'Father, may I have it instead of Henry, please?' That spontaneous offer of sacrifice, of willingness to suffer for another, had remained in his mind for a long time as a fiery, incomprehensible picture.

More dimly, then, somewhere in mist behind, he saw other figures moving — the Dustman and the Lamplighter, the Demon Chimneysweep in black, the Woman of the Haystack — outposts and sentries of a larger fascinating host that gathered waiting in the shadows just beyond. The creations of his boy's imagination swarmed up from their temporary graves, and made him smile and wonder. After twenty years of strenuous business life, how pale and thin they seemed. Yet at the same time how extraordinarily alive and active! He saw, too, the huge Net of Stars he once had made to catch them with from that night-nursery window, fastened by long golden nails made out of meteors to the tops of the cedars. … There had been, too, a train — the Starlight Express. It almost seemed as if *they* knew, too, that a new chapter had begun, and that they called him to come back and play again. …

Then, with a violent jump, his thoughts flew to other things, and he considered one by one the various philanthropic schemes he had cherished against the day when he could realise them. That day had come. But the schemes seemed one and all wild now, impracticable, already accomplished by others better than he could hope to accomplish them, and none of them fulfilling the first essential his practical mind demanded — knowing his money spent precisely as he wished. Dreams, long cherished, seemed to collapse one by one before him just when he at last came up with them. He thought of the woman who was to have helped him, now married to another who had money without working for it. He put the thought back firmly in its place. He knew now a greater love than that — the love for many. …

He was embarking upon other novel schemes when there was a ring at the bell, and the charwoman, who passed with him for servant, ushered in his private secretary, Mr. Minks. Quickly readjusting the machinery of his mind, Rogers came back to the present,

‘Good morning, Mr. Rogers. I trust I am punctual.’

‘Good morning, Minks; yes, on the stroke of ten. We’ve got a busy day. Let’s see now. How are you, by the by?’ he added, as an afterthought, catching first one eye, then the other, and looking finally between the two.

‘Very well, indeed, thank you, Mr. Rogers.’ He was dressed in a black tail-coat, with a green tie neatly knotted into a spotless turn-down collar. He glanced round him for a chair, one hand already in his pocket for the note-book.

‘Good,’ said Rogers, indicating where he might seat himself, and reaching for the heap of letters.

The other sighed a little and began to look expectant and receptive.

‘If I might give you this first, please, Mr. Rogers,’ he said, suddenly pretending to remember something in his breast-pocket and handing across the table, with a slight flush upon his cheeks, a long, narrow, mauve envelope with a flourishing address. ‘It was a red- letter day for Mrs. Minks when I told her of your kindness. She wished to thank you in person, but — I thought a note — I knew,’ he stammered, ‘you would prefer a letter. It is a tremendous help to both of us, if I may say so again.’

‘Yes, yes, quite so,’ said Rogers, quickly; ‘and I’m glad to be of service to the lad. You must let me know from time to time how he’s getting on.’

Minks subsided, flattening out his oblong notebook and examining the points of his pencil sharpened at both ends as though the fate of Empires depended on it. They attacked the pile of correspondence heartily, while the sun, watching them through the open window, danced gorgeously upon the walls and secretly put the fire out.

In this way several hours passed, for besides letters to be dictated, there were careful instructions to be given about many things. Minks was kept very busy. He was now not merely shorthand clerk, and he had to be initiated into the inner history of various enterprises in which his chief was interested. All Mr. Rogers’s London interests, indeed, were to be in his charge, and, obviously aware of this, he bore himself proudly with an air of importance that had no connection with a common office. To watch him, you would never have dreamed that Herbert Minks had ever contemplated City life, much less known ten years of drudgery in its least poetic stages. For him, too, as for his employer, anew chapter of existence had begun— ‘commenced’ he would have phrased it — and, as confidential adviser to a man of fortune whose character he admired almost to the point of worship, he was now a person whose importance it was right the world should recognise. And he meant the world to take this attitude without delay. He dressed accordingly, knowing that of every ten people nine judge value from clothes, and hat, and boots — especially boots. His patent leather, buttoned boots were dazzling, with upper parts of soft grey leather. And his shiny ‘topper’ wore a band of black. Minks, so far as he knew, was not actually in mourning, but somebody for whom he ought to be in mourning might die any day, and meanwhile, he felt, the band conveyed distinction. It suited a man of letters. It also protected the hat.

‘Thank’ee,’ said his chief as luncheon time drew near; ‘and now, if you’ll get those letters typed, you might leave ’em here for me on your way home to sign. That’s all we have to-day, isn’t it?’

‘You wanted, I think, to draft your Scheme for Disabled—’ began the secretary, when the other cut him short.

‘Yes, yes, but that must wait. I haven’t got it clear yet in my own mind. You might think it out a bit yourself, perhaps, meanwhile, and give me your ideas, eh? Look up what others have done in the same line, for instance, and tell me where they failed. What the weakness of their schemes was, you know — and — er — so forth.’

A faint smile, that held the merest ghost of merriment, passed across the face of Minks, leaping, unobserved by his chief, from one eye to the other. There was pity and admiration in it; a hint of pathos visited those wayward lips. For the suggestion revealed the weakness the secretary had long ago divined — that the practical root of the matter did not really lie in him at all, and Henry Rogers forever dreamed of ‘Schemes’ he was utterly unable and unsuited to carry out. Improvements in a silk machine was one thing, but improvements in humanity was another. Like the poetry in his soul they could never know fulfilment. He had inspiration, but no constructive talent. For the thousandth time Minks wondered, glancing at his employer’s face, how such calm and gentle features, such dreamy eyes and a Vandyke beard so neatly trimmed, could go with ambitions so lofty and so unusual. This sentence he had heard before, and was destined often to hear again, while achievement came no nearer.

‘I will do so at the first opportunity.’ He put the oblong note-book carefully in his pocket, and stood by the table in an attitude of ‘any further instructions, please?’ while one eye wandered to the unopened letter that was signed ‘Albinia Minks, with heartfelt gratitude.’

‘And, by the by, Minks,’ said his master, turning as though a new idea had suddenly struck him and he had formed a hasty plan, ‘you might kindly look up an afternoon train to Crayfield. Loop line from Charing Cross, you know. Somewhere about two o’clock or so. I have to — er — I think I’ll run down that way after luncheon.’

Whereupon, having done this last commission, and written it down upon a sheet of paper which he placed with care against the clock, beside the unopened letter, the session closed, and Minks, in his mourning hat and lavender gloves, walked up St. James's Street apparently *en route* for the Ritz, but suddenly, as with careless unconsciousness, turning into an A.B.C. Depot for luncheon, well pleased with himself and with the world, but especially with his considerate employer.

Ten minutes later Mr. Rogers followed him on his way to the club, and just when Minks was reflecting with pride of the well-turned phrases he had dictated to his wife for her letter of thanks, it passed across the mind of its recipient that he had forgotten to read it altogether. And, truth to tell, he never yet has read it; for, returning late that evening from his sentimental journey down to Crayfield, it stood no longer where he had left it beside the clock, and nothing occurred to remind him of its existence. Apart from its joint composers, no one can ever know its contents but the charwoman, who, noticing the feminine writing, took it back to Lambeth and pored over it with a candle for full half an hour, greatly disappointed. 'Things like that,' she grumbled to her husband, whose appearance suggested that he went for bigger game, 'ain't worth the trouble of taking at all, whichever way you looks at it.' And probably she was right.

CHAPTER III

And what if All of animated nature
Be but as Instruments diversely framed
That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps
One infinite and intellectual Breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?
The AEolian Harp, S. T. COLERIDGE.

In the train, even before St. John’s was passed, a touch of inevitable reaction had set in, and Rogers asked himself why he was going. For a sentimental journey was hardly in his line, it seemed. But no satisfactory answer was forthcoming — none, at least, that a Board or a Shareholders’ Meeting would have considered satisfactory.

There was an answer in him somewhere, but he couldn’t quite get down to it. The spring glory had enticed him back to childhood. The journey was symbolical of escape. That was the truth. But the part of him that knew it had lain so long in abeyance that only a whisper flitted across his mind as he sat looking out of the carriage window at the fields round Lee and Eltham. The landscape seemed hauntingly familiar, but what surprised him was the number of known faces that rose and smiled at him. A kind of dream confusion blurred his outer sight;

At Bexley, as he hurried past, he caught dimly a glimpse of an old nurse whom he remembered trying to break into bits with a hop-pole he could barely lift; and, most singular thing, on the Sidcup platform, a group of noisy schoolboys, with smudged faces and ridiculously small caps stuck on the back of their heads, had scrambled viciously to get into his compartment. They carried brown canvas satchels full of crumpled books and papers, and though the names had mostly escaped him, he remembered every single face. There was Barlow — big, bony chap who stammered, bringing his words out with a kind of whistling sneeze. Barlow had given him his first thrashing for copying his stammer. There was young Watson, who funked at football and sneaked to a master about a midnight supper. He stole pocket-money, too, and was expelled. Then he caught a glimpse of another fellow with sly face and laughing eyes; the name had vanished, but he was the boy who put jalap in the music-master's coffee, and received a penny from five or six others who thus escaped a lesson. All waved their hands to him as the train hurried away, and the last thing he saw was the station lamp where he had lit the cigar that made three of them, himself included, deadly sick. Familiar woods and a little blue-eyed stream then hid the vision … and a moment later he was standing on the platform of his childhood's station, giving up his first-class ticket (secretly ashamed that it was not third) to a station-master-ticket-collector person who simply was not real at all.

For he had no beard. He was small, too, and insignificant. The way he had dwindled, with the enormous station that used to be a mile or so in length, was severely disappointing. That STATION-MASTER with the beard ought to have lived for ever. His niche in the Temple of Fame was sure. One evening he had called in full uniform at the house and asked to see Master Henry Rogers, the boy who had got out 'WHILE-THE- TRAIN-WAS-STILL-IN-MOTION,' and had lectured him gravely with a face like death. Never again had he left a train 'whilestillinmotion,' though it was years before he discovered how his father had engineered that awful, salutary visit.

He asked casually, in a voice that hardly seemed his own, about the service back to town, and received the answer with a kind of wonder. It was so respectful. The porters had not found him out yet; but the moment they did so, he would have to run. He did not run, however. He walked slowly down the Station Road, swinging the silver-knobbed cane the office clerks had given him when he left the City. Leisurely, without a touch of fear, he passed the Water Works, where the huge iron crank of the shaft rose and fell with ominous thunder against the sky. It had once been part of that awful hidden Engine which moved the world. To go near it was instant death, and he always crossed the road to avoid it; but this afternoon he went down the cinder pathway so close that he could touch it with his stick. It was incredible that so terrible a thing could dwindle in a few years to the dimensions of a motor piston. The crank that moved up and down like a bending, gigantic knee looked almost flimsy now. …

Then the village street came into view and he suddenly smelt the fields and gardens that topped the hill beyond. The world turned gold and amber, shining beneath a turquoise sky. There was a rush of flaming sunsets, one upon another, followed by great green moons, and hosts of stars that came twinkling across barred windows to his very bedside … that grand old Net of Stars he made so cunningly. Cornhill and Lombard Street flashed back upon him for a second, then dived away and hid their faces for ever, as he passed the low grey wall beside the church where first he had seen the lame boy hobbling, and had realised that the whole world suffered.

A moment he stood here, thinking. He heard the wind sighing in the yew trees beside the dark brown porch. Rooks were cawing among the elms across the churchyard, and pigeons wheeled and fluttered about the grey square tower. The wind, the tower, the weather-stained old porch — these had not changed. This sunshine and this turquoise sky were still the same.

The village stopped at the churchyard — significant boundary. No single building ventured farther; the houses ran the other way instead, pouring down the steep hill in a cataract of bricks and roofs towards the station. The hill, once topped, and the churchyard left behind, he entered the world of fields and little copses. It was just like going through a gateway. It was a Gateway. The road sloped gently down for half-a-mile towards the pair of big iron gates that barred the drive up to the square grey house upon whose lawns he once had chased butterflies, but from whose upper windows he once had netted — stars.

The spell came over him very strongly then as he went slowly down that road. The altered scale of distance confused him; the road had telescoped absurdly; the hayfields were so small. At the turn lay the pond with yellow duckweed and a bent iron railing that divided it to keep the cows from crossing. Formerly, of course, that railing had been put to prevent children drowning in its bottomless depths; all ponds had been bottomless then, and the weeds had spread to entice the children to a watery death. But now he could have jumped across it, weed and railing too, without a run, and he looked in vain for the shores that once had been so seductively far away. They were mere dirty, muddy edges.

This general shrinkage in space was very curious. But a similar contraction, he realised, had taken place in time as well, for, looking back upon his forty years, they seemed such a little thing compared to the enormous stretch they offered when he had stood beside this very pond and looked ahead. He wondered vaguely which was the reality and which the dream. But his effort was not particularly successful, and he came to no conclusion. Those years of strenuous business life were like a few weeks, yet their golden results were in his pockets. Those years of childhood had condensed into a jumble of sunny hours, yet their golden harvest was equally in his heart. Time and space were mere bits of elastic that could stretch or shrink as thought directed, feeling chose. And now both thought and feeling chose emphatically. He stepped back swiftly. His mind seemed filled with stars and butterflies and childhood's figures of wonder. Childhood took him prisoner.

It was curious at first, though, how the acquired nature made a struggle to assert itself, and the practical side of him, developed in the busy markets of the world, protested. It was automatic rather, and at best not very persistent; it soon died away. But, seeing the gravel everywhere, he wondered if there might not be valuable clay about, what labour cost, and what the nearest stations were for haulage; and, seeing the hop-poles, he caught himself speculating what wood they were made of, and what varnish would best prevent their buried points from going rotten in this particular soil. There was a surge of practical considerations, but quickly fading. The last one was stirred by the dust of a leisurely butcher's cart. He had visions of a paste for motor-roads, or something to lay dust … but, before the dust had settled again through the sunshine about his feet, or the rumble of the cart died away into distance, the thought vanished like a nightmare in the dawn. It ran away over the switchback of the years, uphill to Midsummer, downhill to Christmas, jumping a ditch at Easter, and a hedge at that terrible thing known as ‘‘Clipse of the Moon.’ The leaves of the elm trees whispered overhead. He was moving through an avenue that led towards big iron gates beside a little porter's lodge. He saw the hollies, and smelt the laurustinus. There lay the triangle of uncut grass at the cross-roads, the long, grey, wooden palings built upon moss-grown bricks; and against the sky he just caught a glimpse of the feathery, velvet cedar crests, crests that once held nails of golden meteors for his Net of Stars.

Determined to enjoy his cake and eat it at the same time as long as possible, he walked down the road a little distance, eyeing the lawns and windows of the house through narrow gaps between the boarding of the fence. He prolonged the pleasures of anticipation thus, and, besides, he wished to see if the place was occupied or empty. It looked unkempt rather, the gardens somewhat neglected, and yet there hung an air of occupancy about it all. He had heard the house had changed hands several times. But it was difficult to see clearly; the sunshine dazzled; the lilac and laburnum scattered sheets of colour through which the shadows wove themselves an obscuring veil, He kept seeing butterflies and chasing them with his sight.

‘Can you tell me if this house is occupied?’ he asked abruptly of an old gentleman who coughed suddenly behind him.

It was an explanation as well as a question, for the passer-by had surprised him in a remarkable attitude. He was standing on tiptoe upon the parapet of brick, pulling himself up above the fence by his hands, and his hat had fallen into the road.

‘The shrubberies are so dense I can’t see through them,’ he added, landing upon his feet with a jump, a little breathless. He felt rather foolish. He was glad the stranger was not Minks or one of his fellow directors. ‘The fact is I lived here as a boy. I’m not a burglar.’

But the old gentleman — a clergyman apparently — stood there smiling without a word as he handed him the fallen hat. He was staring rather intently into his eyes.

‘Ahem!’ coughed Mr. Rogers, to fill an awkward gap. ‘You’re very kind, sir,’ and he took the hat and brushed the dust off. Something brushed off his sight and memory at the same time.

‘Ahem’ coughed the other, still staring. ‘Please do not mention it—’ adding after a second’s pause, to the complete amazement of his listener, ‘Mr. Rogers.’

And then it dawned upon him. Something in the charming, peace-lit face was strangely familiar.

‘I say,’ he exclaimed eagerly, ‘this is a pleasure,’ and then repeated with even greater emphasis, ‘but this is a pleasure, indeed. Who ever would have thought it?’ he added with delicious ambiguity. He seized the outstretched hand and shook it warmly — the hand of the old vicar who had once been his tutor too.

‘You’ve come back to your boyhood, then. Is that it? And to see the old place and — your old friends?’ asked the other with his beautiful, kindly smile that even false quantities had never been able to spoil. ‘We’ve not forgotten you as you’ve forgotten us, you see,’ he added; ‘and the place, though empty now for years, has not forgotten you either, I’ll be bound.’

They stood there in the sunshine on the dusty road talking of a hundred half-forgotten things, as the haze of memory lifted, and scenes and pictures, names and faces, details of fun and mischief rained upon him like flowers in a sudden wind of spring. The voice and face of his old tutor bridged the years like magic. Time had stood still here in this fair Kentish garden. The little man in black who came every Saturday morning with his dingy bag had forgotten to wind the clocks, perhaps. …

‘But you will like to go inside and see it all for yourself — alone,’ the Vicar said at length. ‘My housekeeper has the keys. I’ll send a boy with them to the lodge. It won’t take five minutes. And then you must come up to the Vicarage for tea — or dinner if you’re kept — and stay the night. My married daughter-you remember Joan and May, of course? — is with us just now; she’ll be so very glad to see you. You know the way.’

And he moved off down the country road, still vigorous at seventy, with his black straw hat and big square-toed boots, his shoulders hardly more bent than when his mischievous pupil had called every morning with Vergil and Todhunter underneath one arm, and in his heart a lust to hurry after sleepy rabbits in the field.

‘My married daughter — you remember May?’

The blue-eyed girl of his boyhood passion flitted beside his disappearing figure. He remembered the last time he saw her — refusing to help her from a place of danger in the cedar branches — when he put his love into a single eloquent phrase: ‘You silly ass!’ then cast her adrift for ever because she said ‘Thanks awfully,’ and gave him a great wet kiss. But he thought a lot of her all the same, and the thoughts had continued until the uproar in the City drowned them.

Thoughts crowded thick and fast.

How vital thinking was after all! Nothing seemed able to kill its eternal pictures. The coincidence of meeting his old tutor again was like a story-book, though in reality likely enough; for his own face was not so greatly altered by the close brown beard perhaps; and the Vicar had grown smaller, that was all. Like everything else, he had shrunk, of course-like road and station-master and water-works. He had almost said, ‘You, too, have shrunk’ — but otherwise was the same old fluffy personality that no doubt still got sadly muddled in his sermons, gave out wrong hymns, and spent his entire worldly substance on his scattered parish. His voice was softer too. It rang in his ears still, as though there had been no break of over two decades. The hum of bees and scythes was in it just as when it came through the open study window while he construed the *Georgics*. … But, most clearly of all, he heard two sentences —

‘You have come back to your boyhood,’ and ‘The empty place has not forgotten you, I’ll be bound.’ Both seemed significant. They hummed and murmured through his mind. That old net of starlight somehow caught them in its golden meshes.

CHAPTER IV

A Spirit gripped him by the hair and carried him far away,
Till he heard as the roar of a rain-fed ford the roar of the
Milky Way:
Till he heard the roar of the Milky Way die down and drone and
cease.
Tomlinson, R. KIPLING.

The boy presently came up in a cloud of dust with the key, and ran off again with a shilling in his pocket, while Henry Rogers, budding philanthropist and re-awakening dreamer, went down the hill of memories at high speed that a doctor would have said was dangerous, a philosopher morbid, and the City decreed unanimously as waste of time.

He went over the house from cellar to ceiling…

And finally he passed through a back door in the scullery and came out upon the lawn. With a shock he realised that a long time had intervened. The dusk was falling. The rustle of its wings was already in the shrubberies. He had missed the tea hour altogether. And, as he walked there, so softly that he hardly disturbed the thrushes that busily tapped the dewy grass for supper, he knew suddenly that he was not alone, but that shadowy figures hid everywhere, watching, waiting, wondering like himself. They trooped after him, invisible and silent, as he went about the old familiar garden, finding nothing changed. They were so real that once he stopped beneath the lime trees, where afternoon tea was served in summer, and where the Long Walk began its haunted, shadowy existence — stood still a moment and called to them —

‘Is any one there? Come out and show yourselves….!’

And though his voice fell dead among the foliage, winning echoes from spots whence no echoes possibly could come, and rushing back upon him like a boomerang, he got the curious impression that it had penetrated into certain corners of the shrubberies where it had been heard and understood. Answers did not come. They were no more audible than the tapping of the thrushes, or the little feet of darkness that ran towards him from the eastern sky. But they were there. The troop of Presences drew closer. They had been creeping on all fours. They now stood up. The entire garden was inhabited and alive.

'He has come back!'

It ran in a muted whisper like a hush of wind. The thrill of it passed across the lawn in the dusk. The dark tunnel of the Long Walk filled suddenly to the brim. The thrushes raised their heads, peeping sideways to listen, on their guard. Then the leaves opened a little and the troop ventured nearer. The doors and windows of the silent, staring house had also opened. From the high nursery windows especially, queer shapes of shadow flitted down to join the others. For the sun was far away behind the cedars now, and that Net of Starlight dropped downwards through the air. So carefully had he woven it years ago that hardly a mesh was torn….

'He has come back again…!' the whisper ran a second time, and he looked about him for a place where he could hide.

But there was no place. Escape from the golden net was now impossible….

Then suddenly, looming against the field that held the Gravel-Pit and the sleeping rabbits, he saw the outline of the Third Class Railway Carriage his father bought as a Christmas present, still standing on the stone supports that were borrowed from a haystack.

That Railway Carriage had filled whole years with joy and wonder. They had called it the Starlight Express. It had four doors, real lamps in the roof, windows that opened and shut, and big round buffers. It started without warning. It went at full speed in a moment. It was never really still. The footboards were endless and very dangerous.

He saw the carriage with its four compartments still standing there in the hay field. It looked mysterious, old, and enormous as ever. There it still stood as in his boyhood days, but stood neglected and unused.

The memory of the thrilling journeys he had made in this Starlight Express completed his recapture, for he knew now who the troop of Presences all about him really were. The passengers, still waiting after twenty years' delay, thinking perhaps the train would never start again, were now impatient. They had caught their engine-driver again at last. Steam was up.

Already the blackbirds whistled. And something utterly wild and reckless in him passionately broke its bonds with a flood of longings that no amount of years or ‘Cities’ could ever subdue again. He stepped out from the dozing lime trees and held his hat up like a flag.

‘Take your seats,’ he cried as of old, ‘for the Starlight Express. Take your seats! No luggage allowed! Animals free! Passengers with special tickets may drive the engine in their turn! First stop the Milky Way for hot refreshments! Take your seats, or stay at home for ever!’

It was the old cry, still remembered accurately; and the response was immediate. The rush of travellers from the Long Walk nearly took him off his feet. From the house came streams of silent figures, families from the shrubberies, tourists from the laurels by the scullery windows, and throngs of breathless oddities from the kitchen-garden. The lawn was littered with discarded luggage; umbrellas dropped on flower-beds, where they instantly took root and grew; animals ran scuttling among them — birds, ponies, dogs, kittens, donkeys, and white mice in trailing swarms. There was not a minute to spare. One big Newfoundland brought several Persian kittens on his back, their tails behind them in the air like signals; a dignified black retriever held a baby in his mouth; and fat children by the score, with unfastened clothes and smudged faces, many of them in their nightclothes, poured along in hurrying, silent crowds, softer than clouds that hide a crescent moon in summer.

‘But this is impossible,’ he cried to himself. ‘The multiplication tables have gone wrong. The City has driven me mad. No shareholder would stand such a thing for a minute!’

While, at the same time, that other voice in him kept shouting, ever more loudly —

‘Take your seats! Take your seats! The Starlight Express is off to Fairyland! Show your tickets! Show your tickets!’

He laughed with happiness.

The throng and rush were at first so great that he recognised hardly any of the passengers; but, the first press over, he saw several bringing up the rear who were as familiar as of yesterday. They nodded kindly to him as they passed, no sign of reproach for the long delay in their friendly eyes. He had left his place beside the lime trees, and now stood at the carriage door, taking careful note of each one as he showed his ticket to the Guard. And the Guard was the blue-eyed girl. She did not clip the tickets, but merely looked at them. She looked, first at the ticket, then into the face of the passenger. The glance of the blue eyes was the passport. Of course, he remembered now — both guard and engine-driver were obliged to have blue eyes. Blue eyes furnished the motor-power and scenery and everything. It was the spell that managed the whole business — the Spell of the Big Blue eyes — blue, the colour of youth and distance, of sky and summer flowers, of childhood.

He watched these last passengers come up one by one, and as they filed past him he exchanged a word with each. How pleased they were to see him! But how ashamed he felt for having been so long away. Not one, however, reminded him of it, and — what touched him most of all — not one suspected he had nearly gone for good. All knew he would come back.

What looked like a rag-and-bone man blundered up first, his face a perfect tangle of beard and hair, and the eyebrows like bits of tow stuck on with sealing-wax. It was The Tramp — Traveller of the World, the Eternal Wanderer, homeless as the wind; his vivid personality had haunted all the lanes of childhood. And, as Rogers nodded kindly to him, the figure waited for something more.

‘Ain’t forgot the rhyme, ‘ave yer?’ he asked in a husky voice that seemed to issue from the ground beneath his broken boots. ‘The rhyme we used to sing together in the Noight-Nursery when I put my faice agin’ the bars, after climbin’ along ‘arf a mile of slippery slaites to git there.’

And Rogers, smiling, found himself saying it, while the pretty Guard fixed her blue eyes on his face and waited patiently: —

I travel far and wide,
But in my own inside!
Such places
And queer races!
I never go to them, you see,
Because they always come to me!

‘Take your seat, please,’ cried the Guard. ‘No luggage, you know!’ She pushed him in sideways, first making him drop his dirty bundle.

With a quick, light step a very thin man hurried up. He had no luggage, but carried on his shoulder a long stick with a point of gold at its tip.

‘Light the lamps,’ said the Guard impatiently, ‘and then sit on the back buffers and hold your pole out to warn the shooting stars.’

He hopped in, though not before Rogers had passed the time of night with him first: —

I stand behind the sky, and light the stars, —
Except on cloudy nights;
And then my head
Remains in bed,
And takes along the ceiling — easier flights!

Others followed quickly then, too quickly for complete recognition. Besides, the Guard was getting more and more impatient.

‘You’ve clean forgotten *me*,’ said one who had an awful air of darkness about him; ‘and no wonder, because you never saw me properly. On Sundays, when I was nicely washed up you couldn’t ‘ardly reckernise me. Nachural ‘nuff, too!’

He shot by like a shadow, then pulled up a window with a rattle, popped his dirty head out, and called back thickly as if his mouth was full of smoke or pudding: —

The darkness suits *me* best,
For my old face
Is out of place,
Except in chimney stacks!
Upon my crown
The soot comes down
Filling my eyes with blacks.
Don’t light the fire,
Or I’d — .

‘Stop it!’ cried the Guard, shutting the window with a snap, so that Rogers never knew whether the missing word used to be ‘expire’ or ‘perspire’; ‘and go on to your proper place on the tender.' Then she turned quickly to fix her big blue eyes upon the next comer. And how they did come, to be sure! There was the Gypsy, the Creature of the Gravel-Pit, the long-legged, long-armed thing from the Long Walk — she could make her arm stretch the whole length like elastic — the enormous Woman of the Haystack, who lived beneath the huge tarpaulin cover, the owner of the Big Cedar, and the owner of the Little Cedar, all treading fast upon one another's heels.

From the Blue Summer-house came the Laugher. Rogers remembered pretending once that he was going to faint. He had thrown himself upon the summer-house floor and kicked, and the blue-eyed girl, instead of being thrilled as both anticipated, had laughed abominably.

'Painters don't kick!' she had said with scorn, while he had answered, though without conviction, 'Men-fainters do — kick dreadfully.' And she had simply laughed till her sides ached, while he lay there kicking till his muscles were sore, in the vain hope of winning her belief.

He exchanged a glance with her now, as the Laugher slipped in past them. The eyes of the Guard were very soft. He was found out and forgiven at the same time.

Then came the very mysterious figure of authority — the Head Gardener, a composite being who included all the lesser under-gardeners as well. His sunburned face presented a resume of them all. He was the man who burned the hills of dead leaves in autumn.

'Give me of your fire, please,' whispered Rogers, something between joy and sadness in his heart, 'for there are hills of leaves that I would burn up quickly—' but the man hurried on, tossing his trowel over the Guard's head, and nearly hitting another passenger who followed too close. This was the Woman of the Haystack, an enormous, spreading traveller who utterly refused to be hurried, and only squeezed through the door because Rogers, the Guard, and several others pushed behind with all their might, while the Sweep, the Tramp, and those already in tugged breathlessly at the same time….

Last of all, just as the train was starting, came a hurrying shadowy thing with dreamy eyes, long hair like waving grass, and open hands that he spread like wings, as though he were sowing something through the air.

And he was singing softly as he came fumbling along the byeways of the dusk.

‘Oh, but I know *you* well,’ cried Rogers, watching him come with a thrill of secret wonder, ‘and I love you better than all the rest together.’

The face was hidden as he wafted silently past them. A delicious odour followed him. And something, fine as star-dust, as he scattered it all about him, sifted down before the other’s sight. The Dustman entered like a ghost.

‘Oh, give me of your dust!’ cried Rogers again, ‘for there are eyes that I would blind with it — eyes in the world that I would blind with it — your dust of dreams and beauty…!’

The man waved a shadowy hand towards him, and his own eyes filled. He closed the lids a moment; and when he opened them again he saw two monster meteors in the sky. They crossed in two big lines of glory above the house, dropping towards the cedars. The Net of Stars was being fastened. He remembered then his old Star Cave — cave where lost starlight was stored up by these sprites for future use.

He just had time to seize the little hand the Guard held out, and to drop into a seat beside her, when the train began to move. It rose soundlessly with lightning speed. It shot up to a tremendous height, then paused, hovering in the night.

The Guard turned her big blue eyes upon him.

‘Where to?’ she whispered. And he suddenly remembered that it was always he who decided the destination, and that this time he was at a loss what to say.

‘The Star Cave, of course,’ he cried, ‘the cave where the lost starlight gathers.’

‘Which direction?’ she asked, with the yellow whistle to her lips ready to signal the driver.

‘Oh, out there — to the north-west,’ he answered, ‘to the mountains of — across the Channel.’

But this was not precise enough. Formerly he had always given very precise directions.

‘Name, please,’ she urged, ‘but quickly. The Interfering Sun, you know — there’s no time to lose. We shall be meeting the Morning Spiders soon.’

The Morning Spiders! How it all came back! The Morning Spiders that fly over the fields in the dawn upon their private threads of gossamer and fairy cotton.

He remembered that, as children, they had never actually found this Star Cave, for the Interfering Sun had always come too soon and spoilt it all.

‘Name, please, and do hurry up. We can’t hover here all night,’ rang in his ears.

And he made a plunge. He suddenly thought of Bourcelles, the little village in the Jura mountains, where he and his cousin had spent a year learning French. The idea flashed into him probably because it contained mountains, caves, and children. His cousin lived there now to educate his children and write his books. Only that morning he had got a letter from him.

‘Bourcelles, of course, Bourcelles!’ he cried, ‘and steer for the slopes of Boudry where the forests dip towards the precipices of the Areuse. I’ll send word to the children to meet us.’

‘Splendid!’ cried the Guard, and kissed him with delight. The whistle shrieked, the train turned swiftly in a tremendous sweeping curve, and vanished along the intricate star-rails into space, humming and booming as it went. It flew a mane of stars behind it through the sky.

CHAPTER V

Oh! thou art fairer than the evening air
 Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars.
  Doctor Famtus, CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE.

The plop of a water-rat in the pond that occupied the rock-garden in the middle of the lawn brought him back to earth, and the Vicar’s invitation to tea flashed across his mind.

‘Stock Exchange and typewriters!’ he exclaimed, ‘how rude he’ll think me!’ And he rubbed something out of his eyes. He gave one long, yearning glance at the spangled sky where an inquisitive bat darted zigzag several times between himself and the Pleiades, that bunch of star-babies as yet unborn, as the blue-eyed guard used to call them.

‘And I shall miss my supper and bed into the bargain!’

He turned reluctantly from his place beside the lime trees, and crossed the lawn now wet with dew. The whole house seemed to turn its hooded head and watch him go, staring with amusement in its many lidless eyes. On the front lawn there was more light, for it faced the dying sunset. The Big and Little Cedar rose from their pools of shadow, beautifully poised. Like stately dowagers in voluminous skirts of velvet they seemed to curtsey to him as he passed. Stars like clusters of sprinkled blossoms hung upon their dignified old heads. The whole place seemed aware of him. Glancing a moment at the upper nursery windows, he could just distinguish the bars through which his little hands once netted stars, and as he did so a meteor shot across the sky its flashing light of wonder. Behind the Little Cedar it dived into the sunset afterglow. And, hardly had it dipped away, when another, coming crosswise from the south, drove its length of molten, shining wire straight against the shoulder of the Big Cedar.

The whole performance seemed arranged expressly for his benefit. The Net was loosed — this Net of Stars and Thoughts — perhaps to go elsewhere. For this was taking out the golden nails, surely. It would hardly have surprised him next to see the Starlight Express he had been dreaming about dart across the heavens overhead. That cool air stealing towards him from the kitchen-garden might well have been the wind of its going. He could almost hear the distant rush and murmur of its flying mass.

‘How extraordinarily vivid it all was!’ he thought to himself, as he hurried down the drive. ‘What detail! What a sense of reality! How carefully I must have *thought* these creatures as a boy! How thoroughly! And what a good idea to go out and see Jack’s children at Bourcelles. They’ve never known these English sprites. I’ll introduce ‘em!’

He thought it out in detail, very vividly indeed. His imagination lingered over it and gave it singular reality.

Up the road he fairly ran. For Henry Rogers was a punctual man; these last twenty years he had never once been late for anything. It had been part of the exact training he had schooled himself with, and the Vicar’s invitation was not one he desired to trifle with. He made his peace, indeed, easily enough, although the excuses sounded a little thin. It was something of a shock, too, to find that the married daughter after all was not the blue-eyed girl of his boyhood’s passion. For it was Joan, not May, who came down the gravel path between the roses to greet him.

On the way up he had felt puzzled. Yet ‘bemused,’ perhaps, is the word that Herbert Minks would have chosen for one of his poems, to describe a state of mind he, however, had never experienced himself. And he would have chosen it instinctively — for onomatopoeic reasons — because it hums and drones and murmurs dreamily. ‘Puzzled’ was too sharp a word.

Yet Henry Rogers, who felt it, said ‘puzzled’ without more ado, although mind, imagination, memory all hummed and buzzed pleasantly about his ears even while he did so.

‘A dream is a dream,’ he reflected as he raced along the familiar dusty road in the twilight, ‘and a reverie is a reverie; but that, I’d swear, went a bit further than either one or t’other. It puzzles me. Does vivid thinking, I wonder, make pictures everywhere?… And — can they last?’

For the detailed reality of the experience had been remarkable, and the actuality of those childhood’s creations scarcely belonged to dream or reverie. They were certainly quite as real as the sleek Directors who sat round the long Board Room table, fidgeting with fat quill pens and pewter ink-pots; more alive even than the Leading Shareholder who rose so pompously at Annual Meetings to second the resolution that the 'Report and Balance Sheet be adopted without criticism.'

And he was conscious that in himself rose, too, a deep, passionate willingness to accept the whole experience, also 'without criticism.' Those picturesque passengers in the Starlight Express he knew so intimately, so affectionately, that he actually missed them. He felt that he had said good-bye to genuine people. He regretted their departure, and was keenly sorry he had not gone off with them — such a merry, wild, adventurous crew! He must find them again, whatever happened. There was a yearning in him to travel with that blue-eyed guard among the star-fields. He would go out to Bourcelles and tell the story to the children. He thought very hard indeed about it all.

And now, in the Vicarage drawing-room after dinner, his bemusement increased rather than grew less. His mind had already confused a face and name. The blue-eyed May was not, after all, the girl of his boyhood's dream. His memory had been accurate enough with the passengers in the train. There was no confusion there. But this gentle married woman, who sang to her own accompaniment at her father's request, was not the mischievous, wilful creature who had teased and tortured his heart in years gone by, and had helped him construct the sprites and train and star-trips. It was, surely, the other daughter who had played that delicious role. Yet, either his memory was at fault, or the Vicar had mixed the names up. The years had played this little unimportant trick upon him anyhow. And that was clear.

But if with so-called real people such an error was possible, how could he be sure of anything? Which after all, he asked himself, was real? It was the Vicar's mistake, he learned later, for May was now a teacher in London; but the trivial incident served to point this confusion in his mind between an outer and an inner world — to the disadvantage, if anything, of the former.

And over the glass of port together, while they talked pleasantly of vanished days, Rogers was conscious that a queer, secret amusement sheltered in his heart, due to some faint, superior knowledge that this Past they spoke of had not moved away at all, but listened with fun and laughter just behind his shoulder, watching them. The old gentleman seemed never tired of remembering his escapades. He told them one after another, like some affectionate nurse or mother, Rogers thought, whose children were — to her — unique and wonderful. For he had really loved this good-for-nothing pupil, loved him the more, as mothers and nurses do, because of the trouble he had given, and because of his busy and fertile imagination. It made Rogers feel ridiculously young again as he listened. He could almost have played a trick upon him then and there, merely to justify the tales. And once or twice he actually called him 'Sir.' So that even the conversation helped to deepen this bemusement that gathered somewhat tenderly about his mind. He cracked his walnuts and watched the genial, peace-lit eyes across the table. He chuckled. Both chuckled. They spoke of his worldly success too — it seemed unimportant somehow now, although he was conscious that something in him expected, nay demanded tribute — but the former tutor kept reverting to the earlier days before achievement.

'You were indeed a boy of mischief, wonder, and mystery,' he said, his eyes twinkling and his tone almost affectionate; 'you made the whole place alive with those creatures of your imagination. How Joan helped you too — or was it May? I used to wonder sometimes—' he glanced up rather searchingly at his companion a moment—' whether the people who took the Manor House after your family left did not encounter them sometimes upon the lawn or among the shrubberies in the dusk — those sprites of yours. Eh?' He passed a neatly pared walnut across the table to his guest. 'These ghosts that people nowadays explain scientifically — what are they but thoughts visualised by vivid thinking such as yours was — creative thinking? They may be just pictures created in moments of strong passionate feeling that persist for centuries and reach other minds direct They're not seen with the outer eye; that's certain, for no two people ever see them together. But I'm sure these pictures flame up through the mind sometimes just as clearly as some folk see Grey Ladies and the rest flit down the stairs at midnight.'

They munched their walnuts a moment in silence. Rogers listened very keenly. How curious, he reflected, that the talk should lie this way. But he said nothing, hoping that the other would go on.

'And if you really believed in your things,' the older man continued presently, 'as I am sure you did believe, then your old Dustman and Sweep and Lamplighter, your Woman of the Haystack and your Net of Stars and

Star Train — all these, for instance, must still be living, where you left them, waiting perhaps for your return to lead their fresh adventures.'

Rogers stared at him, choking a little over a nut he had swallowed too hurriedly.

'Yet,' mused on the other, 'it's hardly likely the family that succeeded you met them. There were no children!'

'Ah,' exclaimed the pupil impulsively, 'that's significant, yes — no children.' He looked up quickly, questioningly.

'Very, I admit.'

'Besides, the chief Magician had gone away into the City. They wouldn't answer to anybody's call, you know.'

'True again. But the Magician never forgot them quite, I'll be bound,' he added. 'They're only in hiding till his return, perhaps!' And his bright eyes twinkled knowingly.

'But, Vicar, really, you know, that is an extraordinary idea you have there-a wonderful idea. Do you really think — ?'

'I only mean,' the other replied more gravely, 'that what a man thinks, and makes with thinking, is the real thing. It's in the heart that sin is first real. The act is the least important end of it — grave only because it is the inevitable result of the thinking. Action is merely delayed thinking, after all. Don't think ghosts and bogeys, I always say to children, or you'll surely see them.'

'Ah, in *that* sense — !'

'In any sense your mind and intuition can grasp. The thought that leaves your brain, provided it be a real thought strongly fashioned, goes all over the world, and may reach any other brain tuned to its acceptance. *You* should understand that!' he laughed significantly.

'I do,' said Rogers hastily, as though he felt ashamed of himself or were acknowledging a fault in his construing of Homer. 'I understand it perfectly. Only I put all those things — imaginative things — aside when I went into business. I had to concentrate my energies upon making money.'

‘You did, yes. Ah!’ was the rejoinder, as though he would fain have added, ‘And was that wise?’

‘And I made it, Vicar; you see, I’ve made it.’ He was not exactly nettled, but he wanted a word of recognition for his success. ‘But you know why, don’t you?’ he added, ashamed the same moment. There was a pause, during which both looked closely at their broken nuts. From one of the men came a sigh.

‘Yes,’ resumed the older man presently, ‘I remember your great dream perfectly well, and a noble one it was too. Its fulfilment now, I suppose, lies well within your reach? You have the means to carry it out, eh? You have indeed been truly blessed.’ He eyed him again with uncommon keenness, though a smile ran from the eyes and mouth even up to the forehead and silvery hair. ‘The world, I see, has not yet poisoned you. To carry it out as you once explained it to me would be indeed success. If I remember rightly,’ he added, ‘it was a — er — a Scheme for Disabled—’

Rogers interrupted him quickly. ‘And I am full of the same big dream still,’ he repeated almost shyly. ‘The money I have made I regard as lent to me for investment. I wish to use it, to give it away as one gives flowers. I feel sure —’

He stopped abruptly, caught by the glow of enthusiasm that had leaped into the other’s face with a strangely beautiful expression.

‘You never did anything by halves, I remember,’ the Vicar said, looking at him proudly. ‘You were always in earnest, even in your play, and I don’t mind telling you that I’ve often prayed for something of that zeal of yours — that zeal for others. It’s a remarkable gift. You will never bury it, will you?’ He spoke eagerly, passionately, leaning forward a little across the table. ‘Few have it nowadays; it grows rarer with the luxury and self-seeking of the age. It struck me so in you as a boy, that even your sprites worked not for themselves but for others — your Dustman, your Sweep, your absurd Lamplighter, all were busy doing wonderful things to help their neighbours, all, too, without reward.’

Rogers flushed like a boy. But he felt the thrill of his dream course through him like great fires. Wherein was any single thing in the world worth doing, any object of life worth following, unless as means to an end, and that end helping some one else. One’s own little personal dreams became exhausted in a few years, endeavours for self smothered beneath the rain of disappointments; but others, and work for others, this was endless and inexhaustible.

‘I’ve sometimes thought,’ he heard the older man going on, ‘that in the dusk I saw’ — his voice lowered and he glanced towards the windows where the rose trees stood like little figures, cloaked and bonneted with beauty beneath the stars— ‘that I saw your Dustman scattering his golden powder as he came softly up the path, and that some of it reached my own eyes, too; or that your swift Lamplighter lent me a moment his gold-tipped rod of office so that I might light fires of hope in suffering hearts here in this tiny world of my own parish. Your dreadful Head Gardener, too! And your Song of the Blue-Eyes Fairy,’ he added slyly, almost mischievously, ‘you remember that, I wonder?’

‘H’m — a little, yes — something,’ replied Rogers confusedly. ‘It was a dreadful doggerel. But I’ve got a secretary now,’ he continued hurriedly and in rather a louder voice,’ a fellow named Minks, a jewel really of a secretary he is — and he, I believe, can write real—’

‘It was charming enough for us all to have remembered it, anyhow,’ the Vicar stopped him, smiling at his blushes,’ and for May — or was it Joan? dear me, how I do forget names! — to have set it to music. She had a little gift that way, you may remember; and, before she took up teaching she wrote one or two little things like that.’

‘Ah, did she really?’ murmured the other. He scarcely knew what he was saying, for a mist of blue had risen before his eyes, and in it he was seeing pictures. ‘The Spell of Blue, wasn’t it, or something like that?’ he said a moment later, ‘blue, the colour of beauty in flowers, sea, sky, distance — the childhood colour par excellence?’

‘But chiefly in the eyes of children, yes,’ the Vicar helped him, rising at the same time from the table. ‘It was the spell, the passport, the open sesame to most of your adventures. Come now, if you won’t have another glass of port, and we’ll go into the drawing-room, and Joan, May I mean — no, Joan, of course, shall sing it to you. For this is a very special occasion for us, you know,’ he added as they passed across the threshold side by side. ‘To see you is to go back with you to Fairyland.’

The piano was being idly strummed as they went in, and the player was easily persuaded to sing the little song. It floated through the open windows and across the lawn as the two men in their corners listened. She knew it by heart, as though she often played it. The candles were not lit. Dusk caught the sound and muted it enchantingly. And somehow the simple melody helped to conceal the meagreness of the childish words. Everywhere, from sky and lawn and solemn trees, the Past came softly in and listened too.

There's a Fairy that hides in the beautiful eyes
 Of children who treat her well;
 In the little round hole where the eyeball lies
 She weaves her magical spell.

Oh, tell it to me,
 Oh, how can it be,
 This Spell of the Blue-Eyes Fairy.

Well, — the eyes must be blue,
 And the heart must be true,
 And the child must be *better* than gold;
 And then, if you'll let her,
 The quicker the better,
 She'll make you forget that you're old,
 That you're heavy and stupid, and — old!

So, if such a child you should chance to see,
 Or with such a child to play,
 No matter how weary and dull you be,
 Nor how many tons you weigh;
 You will suddenly find that you're young again,
 And your movements are light and airy,
 And you'll try to be solemn and stiff in vain —
 It's the Spell of the Blue-Eyes Fairy!

Now I've told it to you,
 And you *know* it is true —
 It's the Spell of the Blue-Eyes Fairy!

'And it's the same spell,' said the old man in his corner as the last notes died away, and they sat on some minutes longer in the fragrant darkness, ‘that you cast about us as a boy, Henry Rogers, when you made that wonderful Net of Stars and fastened it with your comets’ nails to the big and little cedars. The one catches your heart, you see, while the other gets your feet and head and arms till you’re a hopeless prisoner — a prisoner in Fairyland.’

‘Only the world to-day no longer believes in Fairyland,’ was the reply, ‘and even the children have become scientific. Perhaps it’s only buried though. The two ought to run in harness really — opposite interpretations of the universe. One might revive it — here and there perhaps. Without it, all the tenderness seems leaking out of life—’

Joan presently said good-night, but the other two waited on a little longer; and before going to bed they took a turn outside among the flower-beds and fruit-trees that formed the tangled Vicarage garden at the back. It was uncommonly warm for a night in early spring. The lilacs were in bud, and the air most exquisitely scented.

Rogers felt himself swept back wonderfully among his early years. It seemed almost naughty to be out at such an hour instead of asleep in bed. It was quite ridiculous — but he loved the feeling and let himself go with happy willingness. The story of ‘Vice Versa,’ where a man really became a boy again, passed through his mind and made him laugh.

And the old Vicar kept on feeding the semi-serious mood with what seemed almost intentional sly digs. Yet the digs were not intentional, really; it was merely that his listener, already prepared by his experience with the Starlight Express, read into them these searching meanings of his own. Something in him was deeply moved.

‘You might make a great teacher, you know,’ suggested his companion, stooping to sniff a lilac branch as they paused a moment. ‘I thought so years ago; I think so still. You’ve kept yourself so simple.’

‘How not to do most things,’ laughed the other, glad of the darkness.

‘How to do the big and simple things,’ was the rejoinder; ‘and do them well, without applause. You have Belief.’

‘Too much, perhaps. I simply can’t get rid of it.’

‘Don’t try to. It’s belief that moves the world; people want teachers — that’s my experience in the pulpit and the parish; a world in miniature, after all — but they won’t listen to a teacher who hasn’t got it. There are no great poets to-day, only great discoverers. The poets, the interpreters of discovery, are gone — starved out of life by ridicule, and by questions to which exact answers are impossible. With your imagination and belief you might help a world far larger than this parish of mine at any rate. I envy you.’

Goodness! how the kind eyes searched his own in this darkness. Though little susceptible to flattery, he was aware of something huge the words stirred in the depths of him, something far bigger than he yet had dreamed of even in his boyhood, something that made his cherished Scheme seem a little pale and faded.

‘Take the whole world with you into fairyland,’ he heard the low voice come murmuring in his ear across the lilacs. And there was starlight in it — that gentle, steady brilliance that steals into people while they sleep and dream, tracing patterns of glory they may recognise when they wake, yet marvelling whence it came. ‘The world wants its fairyland back again, and won’t be happy till it gets it.’

A bird listening to them in the stillness sang a little burst of song, then paused again to listen.

‘Once give them of your magic, and each may shape his fairyland as he chooses…’ the musical voice ran on.

The flowers seemed alive and walking. This was a voice of beauty. Some lilac bud was singing in its sleep. Sirius had dropped a ray across its lips of blue and coaxed it out to dance. There was a murmur and a stir among the fruit-trees too. The apple blossoms painted the darkness with their tiny fluttering dresses, while old Aldebaran trimmed them silently with gold, and partners from the Milky Way swept rustling down to lead the violets out. Oh, there was revelry to-night, and the fairy spell of the blue-eyed Spring was irresistible….

‘But the world will never dance,’ he whispered sadly, half to himself perhaps; ‘it’s far too weary.’

‘It will follow a leader,’ came the soft reply, ‘who dances well and pipes the true old music so that it can hear. Belief inspires it always. And that Belief you have.' There was a curious vibration in his voice; he spoke from his heart, and his heart was evidently moved.

'I wonder when it came to me, then, and how?'

The Vicar turned and faced him where they stood beneath the lime trees. Their scent was pouring out as from phials uncorked by the stars.

'It came,' he caught the answer that thrilled with earnestness, 'when you saw the lame boy on the village hill and cried. As long ago as that it came.'

His mind, as he listened, became a plot of fresh-turned earth the Head Gardener filled with flowers. A mass of covering stuff the years had laid ever thicker and thicker was being shovelled away. The flowers he saw being planted there were very tiny ones. But they would grow. A leaf from some far-off rocky mount of olive trees dropped fluttering through the air and marvellously took root and grew. He felt for a moment the breath of night air that has been tamed by an eastern sun. He saw a group of men, bare-headed, standing on the slopes, and in front of them a figure of glory teaching little, simple things they found it hard to understand….

'You have the big and simple things alive in you,' the voice carried on his pictured thought among the flowers. 'In your heart they lie all waiting to be used. Nothing can smother them. Only-you must give them out.'

'If only I knew how — !'

'Keep close to the children,' sifted the strange answer through the fruit-trees; 'the world is a big child. And catch it when it lies asleep — not thinking of itself,' he whispered.

'The time is so short—'

'At forty you stand upon the threshold of life, with values learned and rubbish cleared away. So many by that time are already dead — in heart. I envy your opportunities ahead. You have learned already one foundation truth — the grandeur of toil and the insignificance of acquisition. The other foundation thing is even simpler — you have a neighbour. Now, with your money to give as flowers, and your Belief to steer you straight, you have the world before you. And — keep close to the children.'

'Before there are none left,' added Rogers under his breath. But the other heard the words and instantly corrected him —

‘Children of any age, and wherever you may find them.’

And they turned slowly and made their way in silence across the soaking lawn, entering the house by the drawing-room window.

‘Good-night,’ the old man said, as he lit his candle and led him to his room; ‘and pleasant, happy, inspiring dreams.’

He seemed to say it with some curious, heartfelt meaning in the common words. He disappeared slowly down the passage, shading the candle with one hand to pick his way, and Rogers watched him out of sight, then turned and entered his own room, closing the door as softly as possible behind him.

It had been an astonishing conversation. All his old enthusiasm was stirred. Embers leaped to flame. No woman ever had done as much. This old fellow, once merely respected tutor, had given him back his first original fire and zeal, yet somehow cleansed and purified. And it humbled him at the same time. Dead leaves, dropped year by year in his City life, were cleared away as though a mighty wind had swept him. The Gardener was burning up dead leaves; the Sweep was cleaning out the flues; the Lamplighter waving his golden signal in the sky — far ahead, it is true, but gleaming like a torch and beacon. The Starlight Express was travelling at top speed among the constellations. He stood at the beginning of the important part of life….

And now, as he lay in bed and heard the owls hooting in the woods, and smelt the flowers through the open window, his thoughts followed strongly after that old Star Train that he used to drive about the sky. He was both engine-driver and passenger. He fell asleep to dream of it.

And all the vital and enchanting thoughts of his boyhood flowed back upon him with a rush, as though they had never been laid aside. He remembered particularly one singular thing about them — that they had never seemed quite his own, but that he had either read or heard them somewhere else. As a child the feeling was always strong that these ‘jolly thoughts,’ as he called them, were put into him by some one else — some one who whispered to him — some one who lived close behind his ears. He had to listen very hard to catch them. It was *not* dreams, yet all night long, especially when he slept tightly, as he phrased it, this fairy whispering continued, and in the daytime he remembered what he could and made up his stories accordingly. He stole these ideas about a Star Net and a Starlight Express. One day he would be caught and punished for it. It was trespassing upon the preserves of some one else.

Yet he could never discover who this some one else was, except that it was a ‘she’ and lived among the stars, only coming out at night. He imagined she hid behind that little dusty constellation called the Pleiades, and that was why the Pleiades wore a veil and were so dim — lest he should find her out. And once, behind the blue gaze of the guard-girl, who was out of his heart by this time, he had known a moment of thrilling wonder that was close to awe. He saw another pair of eyes gazing out at him They were ambery eyes, as he called them — just what was to be expected from a star. And, so great was the shock, that at first he stood dead still and gasped, then dashed up suddenly close to her and stared into her face, frightening her so much that she fell backwards, and the amber eyes vanished instantly. It was the ‘some one else’ who whispered fairy stories to him and lived behind his ear. For a second she had been marvellously close. And he had lost her!

From that moment, however, his belief in her increased enormously, and he never saw a pair of brown-ambery eyes without feeling sure that she was somewhere close about him. The lame boy, for instance, had the same delicate tint in his sad, long, questioning gaze. His own collie had it too! For years it was an obsession with him, haunting and wonderful — the knowledge that some one who watched close beside him, filling his mind with fairy thoughts, might any moment gaze into his face through a pair of ordinary familiar eyes. And he was certain that all his star-imagination about the Net, the Starlight Express, and the Cave of Lost Starlight came first into him from this hidden ‘some one else’ who brought the Milky Way down into his boy’s world of fantasy.

‘If ever I meet her in real life,’ he used to say, ‘I’m done for. She is my Star Princess!’

And now, as he fell asleep, the old atmosphere of that Kentish garden drew thickly over him, shaking out clusters of stars about his bed. Dreams usually are determined by something more remote than the talk that has just preceded going to bed, but to-night it was otherwise. And two things the old Vicar had let fall — two things sufficiently singular, it seemed, when he came to think about them — influenced his night adventures. ‘Catch the world when it’s asleep,’ and ‘Keep close to the children’ — these somehow indicated the route his dream should follow. For he headed the great engine straight for the village in the Jura pine woods where his cousin’s children lived. He did not know these children, and had seen his cousin but rarely in recent years; yet, it seemed, they came to meet the train up among the mountain forests somewhere. For in this village, where he had gone to study French, the moods of his own childhood had somehow known continuation and development. The place had once been very dear to him, and he had known delightful adventures there, many of them with this cousin. Now he took all his own childhood’s sprites out in this Starlight Express and introduced them to these transplanted children who had never made acquaintance with the English breed. They had surprising, wild adventures all together, yet in the morning he could remember very little of it all. The interfering sun melted them all down in dew. The adventures had some object, however; that was clear; though what the object was, except that it did good somewhere to. some one, was gone, lost in the deeps of sleep behind him. They scurried about the world. The sprites were very active indeed — quite fussily energetic. And his Scheme for Disabled Something-or other was not anywhere discoverable in these escapades. That seemed forgotten rather, as though they found bigger, more important things to do, and nearer home too. Perhaps the Vicar’s hint about the ‘Neighbour’ was responsible for that. Anyhow, the dream was very vivid, even though the morning sun melted it away so quickly and completely. It seemed continuous too. It filled the entire night.

Yet the thing that Rogers took off with him to town next morning was, more than any other detail, the memory of what the old tutor had said about the living reality and persistence of figures that passionate thinking has created — that, and the value of Belief.

CHAPTER VI

Be thou my star, and thou in me be seen
To show what source divine is, and prevails.
I mark thee planting joy in constant fire.
To Sirius, G. MEREDITH.

And he rather astonished the imperturbable Minks next day by the announcement that he was thinking of going abroad for a little holiday. ‘When I return, it will be time enough to take up the Scheme in earnest,’ he said. For Minks had brought a sheaf of notes embodying the results of many hours’ labour, showing what others had already done in that particular line of philanthropy.

‘Very good indeed, Minks, very good. I’ll take ’em with me and make a careful study of the lot. I shall be only gone a week or so,’ he added, noticing the other’s disappointment. For the secretary had hoped to expound these notes himself at length. ‘Take a week’s holiday yourself,’ he added. ‘Mrs. Minks might like to get to the sea, perhaps. There’ll only be my letters to forward. I’ll give you a little cheque.’ And he explained briefly that he was going out to Bourcelles to enjoy a few days’ rest before they attacked great problems together. After so many years of application to business he had earned it. Crayfield, it seemed, had given him a taste for sentimental journeys. But the fact was, too, the Tramp, the Dustman, the Lamplighter, and the Starlight Express were all in his thoughts still.

And it was spring. He felt this sudden desire to see his cousin again, and make the acquaintance of his cousin’s children. He remembered how the two of them had tramped the Jura forests as boys. They had met in London at intervals since. He dictated a letter to him then and there — Minks taking it down like lightning — and added a postscript in his own handwriting: —

‘I feel a longing,’ he wrote, ‘to come out and see the little haven of rest you have chosen, and to know your children. Our ways have gone very far apart — too far — since the old days when we climbed out of the windows of *la cure* with a sheet, and tramped the mountains all night long. Do you remember? I’ve had my nose on the grindstone ever since, and you’ve worked hard too, judging by your name in publishers' lists. I hope your books are a great success. I'm ashamed I've never any time to read now. But I'm "retired" from business at last and hope to do great things. I'll tell you about a great Scheme I have in hand when we meet. I should like your advice too.

'Any room will do — sunny aspect if possible. And please give my love to your children in advance. Tell them I shall come out in the Starlight Express. Let me have a line to say if it's all right.'

In due course the line — a warm-hearted one — arrived. Minks came to Charing Cross to see him off, the gleam of the sea already in his pale-blue eyes.

'The Weather Report says "calm," Mr. Rogers,' he kept repeating. 'You'll have a good crossing, I hope and trust. I'm taking Mrs. Minks myself—'

'Yes, yes, that's good,' was the quick reply. 'Capital. And — let me see-I've got your notes with me, haven't I? I'll draft out a general plan and send it to you as soon as I get a moment. You think over it too, will you, while I'm away. And enjoy yourself at the same time. Put your children in the sea — nothing like the sea for children — sea and sun and sand and all that sort of thing.'

'Thank you very much, Mr. Rogers, and I trust—'

Somebody bumped against him, cutting short a carefully balanced sentence that was intended to be one-third good wishes, one-third weather remark, and the last third Mrs. Minks. Her letter of thanks had never been referred to. It rankled, though very slightly.

'What an absurd-looking person!' exclaimed the secretary to himself, following the aggressor with one eye, and trying to recapture the lost sentence at the same time. 'They really should not allow such people in a railway terminus,' he added aloud. The man was ragged and unkempt to the last degree — a sort of tramp; and as he bought a ticket at the third-class wicket, just beyond, he kept looking up slyly at Minks and his companion. 'The way he knocked against me almost seemed intentional,' Minks thought. The idea of pickpockets and cleverly disguised detectives ran confusedly in his mind. He felt a little flustered for some reason.

‘I beg your pardon,’ Mr. Rogers was saying to a man who tried to push in front of him. ‘But we *must* each take our turn, you know.’ The throng of people was considerable. This man looked like a dustman. He, too, was eagerly buying a ticket, but had evidently mistaken the window. ‘Third-class is lower down I think,’ Mr. Rogers suggested with a touch of authority.

‘What a lot of foreigners there are about,’ remarked Minks. ‘These stations are full of suspicious characters.’ The notice about loitering flashed across him.

He took the ticket Mr. Rogers handed to him, and went off to register the luggage, and when later he joined his chief at the carriage door he saw him talking to a couple of strangers who seemed anxious to get in.

‘I took *this* corner seat for you, Mr. Rogers,’ he explained, both to prove his careful forethought and to let the strangers know that his master was a person of some importance. They were such an extraordinary couple too! Had there been hop-pickers about he could have understood it. They were almost figures of masquerade; for while one resembled more than anything else a chimney-sweep who had forgotten to wash his face below the level of the eyes, the other carried a dirty sack across his shoulders, which apparently he had just been trying to squeeze into the rack.

They moved off when they saw Minks, but the man with the sack made a gesture with one hand, as though he scattered something into the carriage through the open door.

The secretary threw a reproachful look at a passing guard, but there was nothing he could do. People with tickets had a right to travel. Still, he resented these crowding, pushing folk. ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Rogers,’ he said, as though he had chosen a poor train for his honoured chief; ‘there must be an excursion somewhere. There’s a big fete of Vegetarians, I know, at Surbiton to-day, but I can hardly think these people—’

‘Don’t wait, Minks,’ said the other, who had taken his seat. ‘I’ll let you hear from me, you know, about the Scheme and — other things. Don’t wait.’ He seemed curiously unobservant of these strange folk, almost absent-minded.

The guard was whistling. Minks shut the door and gave the travelling- rug a last tuck-in about his feet. He felt as though he were packing off a child. The mother in him became active. Mr. Rogers needed looking after.

Another minute and he would have patted him and told him what to eat and wear. But instead he raised his hat and smiled. The train moved slowly out, making a deep purring sound like flowing water. The platform had magically thinned. Officials stood lonely among the scattered wavers of hats and handkerchiefs. As he stepped backwards to keep the carriage window in sight until the last possible moment, Minks was nearly knocked over by a man who hurried along the platform as if he still had hopes of catching the train.

'Really, sir!' gasped the secretary, stooping to pick up his newspaper and lavender glove — he wore one glove and carried the other — the collision had sent flying. But the man was already far beyond the reach of his voice. 'He must be an escaped lamplighter, or something,' he laughed good-naturedly, as he saw the long legs vanish down the platform. He leaped on to the line. Evidently he was a railway employe. He seemed to be vainly trying to catch the departing buffers. An absurd and reckless fellow, thought Minks.

But what caught the secretary's attention last, and made him wonder a little if anything unusual was happening to the world, was the curious fact that, as the last carriage glided smoothly past, he recognised four figures seated comfortably inside. Their feet were on the cushions — disgracefully. They were talking together, heads forward, laughing, even — singing. And he could have sworn that they were the two men who had watched himself and Mr. Rogers at the ticket window, and the strangers who had tried to force their way into Mr. Rogers's carriage when he came up just in time to interfere.

'They got in somehow after all, then,' he said to himself. 'Of course, I had forgotten. The Company runs third-class carriages on the continental trains now. Odd!' He mentally rubbed his eyes.

The train swept round the corner out of sight, leaving a streaming cloud of smoke and sparks behind it. It went out with a kind of rush of delight, glad to be off, and conscious of its passengers' pleasure.

'Odd.' This was the word that filled his mind as he walked home. 'Perhaps — our minds are in such intimate sympathy together — perhaps he was thinking of — of that kind of thing — er — and some of his thoughts got into my own imagination. Odd, though, very, *very* odd.'

He had once read somewhere in one of his new-fangled books that 'thoughts are things.' It had made a great impression on him. He had read about Marconi too. Later he made a more thorough study of this 'thinking business.'

And soon afterwards, having put his chief's papers in order at the flat, he went home to Mrs. Minks and the children with this other thought — that he had possibly been overworking himself, and that it was a good thing he was going to have a holiday by the sea.

He liked to picture himself as an original thinker, not afraid of new ideas, but in reality he preferred his world sober, ordinary, logical. It was merely big-sounding names he liked. And this little incident was somewhere out of joint. It was — odd.

Success that poisons many a baser mind
 May lift —

But the sonnet had never known completion. In the space it had occupied in his mind another one abruptly sprouted. The first subject after all was banal. A better one had come to him —

Strong thoughts that rise in a creative mind
 May flash about the world, and carry joy —

Then it stuck. He changed 'may' to 'shall,' but a moment later decided that 'do' was better, truer than either. After that inspiration failed him. He retired gracefully upon prose again.

'Odd,' he thought, 'very odd!'

And he relieved his mind by writing a letter to a newspaper. He did not send it in the end, for his better judgment prevented, but he had to do something by way of protest, and the only alternative was to tell his wife about it, when she would look half puzzled, half pained, and probably reply with some remark about the general cost of living. So he wrote the letter instead.

For Herbert Minks regarded himself as a man with the larger view of citizenship, a critic of public affairs, and, in a measure, therefore, an item of that public opinion which moulded governments. Hence he had a finger, though but a little finger, in the destiny of nations and in the polity — a grand word that! — of national councils. He wrote frequent letters, thus, to the lesser weekly journals; these letters were sometimes printed; occasionally — oh, joy! — they were answered by others like himself, who referred to him as ‘your esteemed correspondent.’ As yet, however, his following letter had never got into print, nor had he experienced the importance of that editorial decision, appended between square brackets: ‘This correspondence must now cease’ — so vital, that is, that the editor and the entire office staff might change their opinions unless it *did* cease.

Having drafted his letter, therefore, and carried it about with him for several hours in his breast pocket, he finally decided not to send it after all, for the explanation of his ‘odd’ experience, he well knew, was hardly one that a newspaper office could supply, or that public correspondence could illuminate. His better judgment always won the day in the end. Thinking *was* creative, after all.

CHAPTER VII

… The sun,
Closing his benediction,
Sinks, and the darkening air
Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night-
Night with her train of stars
And her great gift of sleep.
W. E. HENLEY.

In a southern-facing room on the first floor of La Citadelle the English family sat after tea. The father, a spare, mild-eyed man, his thatch of brown hair well sprinkled with grey above the temples, was lighting his pipe for the tenth time-the tenth match, but the same pipeful of tobacco; and his wife, an ample, motherly woman, slightly younger than himself, was knitting on the other side of the open fireplace, in which still glowed a mass of peat ashes. From time to time she stirred them with a rickety pair of tongs, or with her foot kicked into the grate the matches he invariably threw short upon the floor. But these were adventures ill-suited to her. Knitting was her natural talent. She was always knitting.

By the open window stood two children, a boy and a girl of ten and twelve respectively, gazing out into the sunshine. It was the end of April, and though the sun was already hot, there was a sharpness in the air that told of snow still lying on the mountain heights behind the village. Across vineyard slopes and patches of agricultural land, the Lake of Neuchatel lay blue as a southern sea, while beyond it, in a line of white that the sunset soon would turn to pink and gold, stretched the whole range of Alps, from Mont Blanc to where the Eiger and the Weisshorn signalled in the east. They filled the entire horizon, already cloud-like in the haze of coming summer.

The door into the corridor opened, and a taller child came in. A mass of dark hair, caught by a big red bow, tumbled untidily down her back. She was sixteen and very earnest, but her eyes, brown like her father’s, held a curious puzzled look, as though life still confused her so much that while she did her duties bravely she did not quite understand why it should be so.

‘Excuse me, Mother, shall I wash up?’ she said at once. She always did wash up. And ‘excuse me’ usually prefaced her questions.

‘Please, Jane Anne,’ said Mother. The entire family called her Jane Anne, although her baptismal names were rather fine. Sometimes she answered, too, to Jinny, but when it was a question of household duties it was Jane Anne, or even ‘Ria.’

She set about her duties promptly, though not with any special deftness. And first she stooped and picked up the last match her father had dropped upon the strip of carpet that covered the linoleum.

‘Daddy,’ she said reprovingly, ‘you do make such a mess.’ She brushed tobacco ashes from his coat. Mother, without looking up, went on talking to him about the bills-washing, school-books, boots, blouses, oil, and peat. And as she did so a puzzled expression was visible in his eyes akin to the expression in Jane Anne’s. Both enjoyed a similar mental confusion sometimes as to words and meanings and the import of practical life generally.

‘We shan’t want any more now, thank goodness,’ he said vaguely, referring to the peat, though Mother was already far ahead, wading among boots and shirts and blouses.

‘But if we get a load in now, you see, it’s *cheaper*,’ she said with emphasis on every alternate word, slowing up the pace to suit him.

‘Mother, where *did* you put the washing-up rag?’ came the voice of Jinny in plaintive accents from the tiny kitchen that lay beyond the adjoining bedroom. ‘I can’t find it anywhere,’ she added, poking her head round the door suddenly.

‘Pet lamb,’ was Mother’s answer, still bending over her knitting-she was prodigal of terms like this and applied them indiscriminately, for Jane Anne resembled the animal in question even less than did her father— ‘I saw it last on the geranium shelf — you know, where the fuchsias and the-’ She hesitated, she was not sure herself. ‘I’ll get it, my duckie, for you,’ she added, and began to rise. She was a voluminous, very stately woman. The operation took time.

‘Let me,’ said Daddy, drawing his mind with difficulty from the peat, and rising too. They rose together.

‘It’s all right, I’ve got it,’ cried the child, who had disappeared again. ‘It was in the sink. That’s Jimbo; he washed up yesterday.’

‘Pas vrai!’ piped a little voice beside the open window, overhearing his name, ‘because I only dried. It was Monkey who washed up.’ They talked French and English all mixed up together.

But Monkey was too busy looking at the Alps through an old pair of opera-glasses, relic of her father’s London days that served for telescope, to think reply worth while. Her baptismal names were also rather wonderful, though neither of her parents could have supplied them without a moment’s reflection first. There was commotion by that window for a moment but it soon subsided again, for things that Jinny said never provoked dissension, and Jimbo and Monkey just then were busy with a Magic Horse who had wings of snow, and was making fearful leaps from the peaks of the Dent du Midi across the Blumlisalp to the Jungfrau.

‘Will you please carry the samovar for me?’ exclaimed Jane Anne, addressing both her parents, as though uncertain which of them would help her. ‘You filled it so awfully full to-day, I can’t lift it. I advertise for help.’

Her father slowly rose. ‘I’ll do it, child,’ he said kindly, but with a patience, almost resignation, in his tone suggesting that it was absurd to expect such a thing of him. ‘Then do exactly as you think best,’ he let fall to his wife as he went, referring to the chaos of expenses she had been discussing with him. ‘That’ll be all right.’ For his mind had not yet sorted the jumble of peat, oil, boots, school- books, and the rest. ‘We can manage THAT at any rate; you see it’s francs, not shillings,’ he added, as Jane Anne pulled him by the sleeve towards the steaming samovar. He held the strings of an ever empty purse.

‘Daddy, but you’ve *always* got a crumb in your beard,’ she was saying, ‘and if it isn’t a crumb, it’s ashes on your coat or a match on the floor.’ She brushed the crumb away. He gave her a kiss. And between them they nearly upset the old nickel-plated samovar that was a present from a Tiflis Armenian to whom the mother once taught English. They looked round anxiously as though afraid of a scolding; but Mother had not noticed. And she was accustomed to the noise and laughter. The scene then finished, as it usually did, by the mother washing up, Jane Anne drying, and Daddy hovering to and fro in the background making remarks in his beard about the geraniums, the China tea, the indigestible new bread, the outrageous cost of the necessaries of life, or the book he was at work on at the moment. He often enough gave his uncertain assistance in the little menial duties connected with the preparation or removal of the tea-things, and had even been known to dry. Only washing-up he never did. Somehow his vocation rendered him immune from that. He might bring the peat in, fill the lamps, arrange and dust the scanty furniture, but washing-up was not a possibility even. As an author it was considered beneath his dignity altogether, almost improper — it would have shocked the children. Mother could do anything; it was right and natural that she should — poor soul I But Daddy's profession set him in an enclosure apart, and there were certain things in this servantless menage he could not have done without disgracing the entire family. Washing-up was one; carrying back the empty basket of tea-things to the Pension was another. Daddy wrote books. As Jane Anne put it forcibly and finally once, 'Shakespeare never washed up or carried a tea-basket in the street!' — which the others accepted as a conclusive statement of authority.

And, meantime, the two younger children, who knew how to amuse each other for hours together unaided, had left the Magic Horse in its stables for the night — an enormous snow-drift — and were sitting side by side upon the sofa conning a number of *Punch* some English aunt had sent them. The girl read out the jokes, and her brother pointed with a very dirty finger to the pictures. None of the jokes were seized by either, but Jimbo announced each one with, 'Oh! I say!' and their faces were grave and sometimes awed; and when Jimbo asked, 'But what does THAT mean?' his sister would answer, 'Don't you see, I suppose the cabman meant—' finishing with some explanation very far from truth, whereupon Jimbo, accepting it doubtfully, said nothing, and they turned another page with keen anticipation. They never appealed for outside aid, but enjoyed it in their own dark, mysterious way. And, presently, when the washing-up was finished, and the dusk began to dim the landscape and conceal the ghostly-looking Alps, they retired to the inner bedroom — for this was Saturday and there were no school tasks to be prepared — and there, seated on the big bed in the corner, they opened a book of *cantiques* used in school, and sang one hymn and song after another, interrupting one another with jokes and laughter and French and English sentences oddly mixed together. Jimbo sang the tune, and Monkey the alto. It was by no means unpleasant to listen to. And, upon the whole, it was a very grave business altogether, graver even than their attitude to "Punch." Jane Anne considered it a foolish waste of time, but she never actually said so. She smiled her grave smile and went her own puzzled way alone.

Usually at this hour the Den presented a very different appearance, the children, with slates and *cahiers*, working laboriously round the table, Jane Anne and mother knitting or mending furiously, Mere Riquette, the old cat, asleep before the fire, and a general schoolroom air pervading the place. The father, too, tea once finished, would depart for the little room he slept in and used as work-place over at the carpenter's house among the vineyards. He kept his books there, his rows of pipes and towering little heap of half- filled match-boxes, and there he wrote his clever studies that yet were unproductive of much gold and brought him little more than pleasant notices and occasional letters from enthusiastic strangers. It seemed very unremunerative labour indeed, and the family had done well to migrate from Essex into Switzerland, where, besides the excellent schools which cost barely two pounds annually per head, the children learned the language and enjoyed the air of forest and mountain into the bargain. Life, for all that, was a severe problem to them, and the difficulty of making both ends come in sight of each other, let alone meeting, was an ever-present one. That they jogged along so well was due more than the others realised to the untiring and selfless zeal of the Irish mother, a plucky, practical woman, and a noble one if ever such existed on this earth. The way she contrived would fill a book; her economies, so clever they hardly betrayed themselves, would supply a comic annual with material for years, though their comedy involved a pathos of self-denial and sleepless nights that only those similarly placed could have divined. Herself a silent, even inarticulate, woman, she never spoke of them, least of all to her husband, whose mind it was her brave desire to keep free from unnecessary worries for his work. His studies she did not understand, but his stories she read aloud with patient resignation to the children. She marked the place when the reading was interrupted with a crimson paper-knife, and often Jimbo would move it several pages farther on without any of them discovering the gap. Jane Anne, however, who made no pretence of listening to 'Daddy's muddle- stories,' was beginning to realise what went on in Mother's mind underground. She hardly seized the pathos, but she saw and understood enough to help. And she was in many ways a little second edition — a phrase the muddle-stories never knew, alas! — of her mother, with the same unselfishness that held a touch of grandeur, the same clever domestic instinct for contrivance, and the same careful ways that yet sat ill upon a boundless generosity of heart beneath. She loved to be thought older than she was, and she used the longest, biggest, grandest words she could possibly invent or find.

And the village life suited them all in all respects, for, while there was no degrading poverty anywhere, all the inhabitants, from the pasteur to the carpenter, knew the exact value of a centime; there was no question of keeping up impossible appearances, but a general frankness with regard to the fundamental values of clothing, food, and education that all shared alike and made no pretence about. Any faintest sign of snobbery, for instance, would have been drummed out of the little mountain hamlet at once by Gygi, the gendarme, who spent more time in his fields and vineyards than in his uniform. And, while every one knew that a title and large estates were a not impossible future for the famille anglaise, it made no slightest difference in the treatment of them, and indeed hardly lent them the flavour of a faintest cachet. They were the English family in La Citadelle, and that was all there was about it.

The peasants, however, rather pitied the hard-working author who ‘had to write all those books,’ than paid him honourable tribute for his work. It seemed so unnecessary. Vineyards produced wine a man could drink and pay for, but books — ! Well, results spoke for themselves, and no one who lived in La Citadelle was millionaire.

Yet the reputation of John Frederic Campden stood high enough, for all his meagre earnings, and he was an ineffective author chiefly, perhaps, because he missed his audience. Somewhere, somehow, he fell between two stools. And his chagrin was undeniable; for though the poet’s heart in him kept all its splendid fires alight, his failure chilled a little the intellect that should fashion them along effective moulds. Now, with advancing years, the increasing cost of the children’s growing-up, and the failing of his wife’s health a little, the burdens of life were heavier than he cared to think about.

But this evening, as the group sat round the wide peat fire, cheerful and jolly in the lamplight, there was certainly no sign of sadness. They were like a party of children in which the grave humour of the ever-knitting mother kept the balance true between fun and foolishness.

‘Please, Daddy, a story at once,’ Jane Anne demanded, ‘but a told one, not a read-aloud one. I like a romantic effort best.’

He fumbled in his pocket for a light, and Jimbo gravely produced a box he had secretly filled with matches already used, collected laboriously from the floor during the week. Then Monkey, full of mischief, came over from the window where she had been watching them with gasps of astonishment no one had heeded through the small end of the opera-glasses. There was a dancing brilliance in her movements, and her eyes, brown like her mother’s, sparkled with fun and wickedness. Taking the knee Jimbo left unoccupied, and waiting till the diversion caused by the match-box had subsided, she solemnly placed a bread-crumb in his rather tangled beard.

‘Now you’re full-dress,’ she said, falling instantly so close against him that he could not tickle her, while Mother glanced up a second uncertain whether to criticise the impertinence or let it pass. She let it pass. None of the children had the faintest idea what it meant to be afraid of their father.

‘People who waste bread,’ he began, ‘end by getting so thin themselves that they double up like paper and disappear.’

‘But *how* thin, Daddy?’ asked Jane Anne, ever literal to the death. ‘And is it romantic or just silly?’

He was puzzled for a moment what to reply.

‘He doesn’t know. He’s making up,’ piped Jimbo.

‘I *do* know,’ came the belated explanation, as he put the crumb into the bowl of his extinguished pipe with a solemnity that delighted them, but puzzled Jane Anne, who suggested it would taste ‘like toast smelt.’ ‘People who take bread that doesn’t belong to them end by having no dinner—’

‘But that isn’t anything about thinness,’ interrupted Jinny, still uncomforted. Some one wasted by love was in her mind perhaps.

‘It is, child, because they get so frightfully thin,’ he went on, ‘that they end by getting thinner than the thin end of a wedge.’

The eyes of Mother twinkled, but the children still stared, waiting. They had never heard of this phrase about the wedge. Indeed Jane Anne shared with Jimbo total ignorance of the word at all. Like the audience who read his books, or rather ought to have read them, they expected something different, yet still hoped.

‘It’s a rhyme, and not a story though,’ he added, anticipating perhaps their possible disappointment. For the recent talk about expenses had chilled his imagination too much for an instantaneous story, whereas rhymes came ever to him easily.

‘All right! Let’s have it anyhow,’ came the verdict in sentences of French and English. And in the breathless pause that followed, even Mother looking up expectantly from her busy fingers, was heard this strange fate of the Thin Child who stole another’s bread-crumb: —

He then grew thinner than the thin,
The thin end of the wedge;
He grew so pitifully thin
It set his teeth on edge;
But the edge it set his teeth upon
Was worse than getting thinner,
For it was the edge of appetite,
And his teeth were in no dinner!

There was a deep silence. Mother looked as though she expected more, — the good part yet to come. The rhyme fell flat as a pancake, for of course the children did not understand it. Its nonsense, clever enough, escaped them. True nonsense is for grown-ups only. Jane Anne stared steadily at him with a puzzled frown. Her face wore an expression like a moth.

‘Thank you, Daddy, *very* much,’ she said, certain as ever that the fault if any was her own, since all that Daddy said and did was simply splendid. Whereupon the others fairly screamed with delight, turning attention thereby from the dismal failure.

‘She doesn’t understand it, but she’s always so polite!’ cried Monkey.

Her mother quickly intervened. ‘Never mind, Jane Anne,’ she soothed her, lest her feelings should be ruffled; ‘you shall never want a dinner, lovey;

and when all Monkey's teeth are gone you'll still be able to munch away at something.'

But Jinny's feelings were never ruffled exactly, only confused and puzzled. She was puzzled now. Her confidence in her father's splendour was unshakable.

'And, anyhow, Mother, you'll never be a thin wedge,' she answered, meaning to show her gratitude by a compliment. She joined herself as loudly as anybody in the roar that followed this sally. Obviously, she had said a clever and amusing thing, though it was not clear to her why it was so. Her flushed face was very happy; it even wore a touch of proud superiority. Her talents were domestic rather than intellectual.

'Excuse me, Daddy,' she said gravely, in a pause that followed presently. 'But what is a wedge, exactly? And I think I'd like to copy that poetry in my book, please.' For she kept a book in which his efforts were neatly inscribed in a round copy-book handwriting, and called by Monkey 'The Muddle Book.' There his unappreciated doggerels found fame, though misunderstood most of all by the affectionate child who copied them so proudly.

The book was brought at once. Her father wrote out the nonsense verse on his knee and made a funny little illustration in the margin. 'Oh, I say!' said Jimbo, watching him, while Monkey, lapsing into French, contributed with her usual impudence, 'Pas tant mal!' They all loved the illustrations.

The general interest, then, as the way is with children, puppies, and other young Inconsistencies, centred upon the contents of the book. They eagerly turned the pages, as though they did not know its contents by heart already. They praised for the hundredth time the drawing of the Muddle Animal who

Hung its hopes upon a nail
Or laid them on the shelf;
Then pricked its conscience with its tail,
And sat upon itself.

They looked also with considerable approval upon the drawings and descriptions of the Muddle Man whose manners towards the rest of the world were cool; because

He saw things with his naked eye,
That's why his glance was chilly.

But the explanation of the disasters he caused everywhere by his disagreeable sharpness of speech and behaviour did *not* amuse them. They observed as usual that it was 'too impossible'; the drawings, moreover, did not quite convince: —

So cutting was his speaking tone
Each phrase snipped off a button,
So sharp his words, they have been known
To carve a leg of mutton;
He shaved himself with sentences,
And when he went to dances,
He made — Oh shocking tendencies!-
Deep holes with piercing glances.

But on the last page the Muddle Man behaved so badly, was so positively indecent in his conduct, that he was persuaded to disappear altogether; and his manner of extinguishing himself in the illustration delighted the children far more than the verse whose fun again escaped them: —

They observed he was indecent,
But he said it wasn't true,
For *he* pronounced it 'in descent' —
Then disappeared from view!

Mother's alleged 'second sight' was also attributed to the fact that she 'looked twice before she leaped' — and the drawing of that leap never failed to produce high spirits. For her calm and steady way of walking — sailing — had earned her the name of the frigate — and this was also illustrated, with various winds, all coloured, driving her along.

The time passed happily; some one turned the lamp out, and Daddy, regardless of expense — he had been grumbling about it ten minutes before — heaped on the bricks of peat. Riquette, a bit of movable furniture without which the room seemed incomplete, deftly slipped in between the circle of legs and feet, and curled up upon Jinny's lap. Her snoring, a wheezy noise that made Jimbo wonder 'why it didn't scrape her,' was as familiar as the ticking of the clock. Old Mere Riquette knew her rights. And she exacted them. Jinny’s lap was one of these. She had a face like an old peasant woman, with a curious snub nose and irregular whiskers that betrayed recklessly the advance of age. Her snores and gentle purring filled the room now. A hush came over the whole party. At seven o’clock they must all troop over to the Pension des Glycines for supper, but there was still an hour left. And it was a magic hour. Sighs were audible here and there, as the exhausted children settled deeper into their chairs.

A change came over the atmosphere. Would nothing exciting ever happen?

‘The stars are out,’ said Jimbo in his soft, gentle little voice, turning his head towards the windows. The others looked too — all except Mother, whose attitude suggested suspiciously that she slept, and Riquette, who most certainly did sleep. Above the rampart of the darkened Alps swung up the army of the stars. The brighter ones were reflected in the lake. The sky was crowded. Tiny, golden pathways slid down the purple walls of the night. ‘Some one in heaven is letting down the star-ladders…’ he whispered.

Jimbo’s sentence had marked the change of key. Enchantment was abroad — the Saturday evening spell was in the room.

And suddenly a new enormous thing stirred in their father’s heart. Whence it came, or why, he knew not. Like a fire it rose in him deep down, from very far away, delightful. Was it an inspiration coming, he wondered? And why did Jimbo use that phrase of beauty about star- ladders? How did it come into the mind of a little boy? The phrase opened a new channel in the very depths of him, thence climbing up and outwards, towards the brain…. And, with a thrill of curious high wonder, he let it come. It was large and very splendid. It came with a rush — as of numerous whispering voices that flocked about him, urging some exquisite, distant sweetness in him to unaccustomed delivery. A softness of ten thousand stars trooped down into his blood. Some constellation like the Pleiades had flung their fiery tackle across the dusk upon his mind. His thought turned golden….

CHAPTER VIII

We are the stars which sing.
We sing with our light.
We are the birds of fire.
We fly across the heaven.
Our light is a star.
We make a road for Spirits,
A road for the Great Spirit.
Among us are three hunters
Who chase a bear:
There never was a time
When they were not hunting;
We look down on the mountains.
This is the Song of the Mountains.

Red Indian (*Algonquin*) *Lyric*.
Translator, J. D. PRINCE.

‘A star-story, please,’ the boy repeated, cuddling up. They all drew, where possible, nearer. Their belief in their father’s powers, rarely justified, was pathetic. Each time they felt sure he would make the adventures seem real, yet somehow he never quite did. They were aware that it was invention only. These things he told about he had not experienced himself. For they badly needed a leader, these children; and Daddy just missed filling the position. He was too ‘clever,’ his imagination neither wild nor silly enough, for children. And he felt it. He threw off rhymes and stories for them in a spirit of bravado rather — an expression of disappointment. Yet there was passion in them too — concealed. The public missed the heart he showed them in his books in the same way.

‘The stars are listening….’ Jimbo’s voice sounded far away, almost outside the window. Mother now snored audibly. Daddy took his courage in both hands and made the plunge.

‘You know about the Star Cavern, I suppose — ?’ he began. It was the sudden idea that had shot into him, he knew not whence.

‘No.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Where is it, please?’

‘Don’t interrupt. That wasn’t a *real* question. Stories always begin like that.’ It was Jane Anne who thus finally commanded order.

‘It’s not a story exactly, but a sort of adventure,’ he continued, hesitating yet undaunted. ‘Star Caverns are places where the unused starlight gathers. There are numbers of them about the world, and one I know of is up here in our mountains,’ he pointed through the north wall towards the pine-clad Jura, ‘not far from the slopes of Boudry where the forests dip towards the precipices of the Areuse—’ The phrase ran oddly through him like an inspiration, or the beginning of a song he once had heard somewhere.

‘Ah, beyond le Vallon Vert? I know,’ whispered Jimbo, his blue eyes big already with wonder.

‘Towards the precipices on the farther side,’ came the explanation, ‘where there are those little open spaces among the trees.’

‘Tell us more exactly, please.’

‘Star-rays, you see,’ he evaded them, ‘are visible in the sky on their way to us, but once they touch the earth they disappear and go out like a candle. Unless a chance puddle, or a pair of eyes happens to be about to catch them, you can’t tell where they’ve gone to. They go really into these Star Caverns.’

‘But in a puddle or a pair of eyes they’d be lost just the same,’ came the objection.

‘On the contrary,’ he said; ‘changed a little — increased by reflection — but not lost.’

There was a pause; the children stared, expectantly. Here was mystery.

‘See how they mirror themselves whenever possible,’ he went on, ‘doubling their light and beauty by giving themselves away! What is a puddle worth until a Star’s wee golden face shines out of it? And then — what gold can buy it? And what are your eyes worth until a star has flitted in and made a nest there?’

‘Oh, like that, you mean — !’ exclaimed Jane Anne, remembering that the wonderful women in the newspaper stories always had ‘starry eyes.’

‘Like that, yes.’ Daddy continued. ‘Their light puts sympathy in you, and only sympathy makes you lovely and — and—’

He stopped abruptly. He hesitated a moment. He was again most suddenly aware that this strange idea that was born in him came from somewhere else, almost from *some one* else. It was not his own idea, nor had he captured it completely yet. Like a wandering little inspiration from another mind it seemed passing through him on uncertain, feathery feet. He had suddenly lost it again. Thought wandered. He stared at Jimbo, for Jimbo somehow seemed the channel.

The children waited, then talked among themselves. Daddy so often got muddled and inattentive in this way. They were accustomed to it, expected it even.

‘I always love being out at night,’ said Monkey, her eyes very bright; ‘it sort of excites and makes me soft and happy.’

‘Excuse me, Daddy, but have you been inside one? What’s it like? The Cave, I mean?’ Jinny stuck to the point. She had not yet travelled beyond it.

‘It all collects in there and rises to the top like cream,’ he went on, ‘and has a little tiny perfume like wild violets, and by walking through it you get clothed and covered with it, and come out again all soft-shiny—’

‘What’s soft-shiny, please?’

‘Something half-primrose and half-moon. You’re like a star—’

‘But how — like a star?’

‘Why,’ he explained gently, yet a little disappointed that his adventure was not instantly accepted, ‘you shine, and your eyes twinkle, and everybody likes you and thinks you beautiful—’

‘Even if you’re not?’ inquired Jinny.

‘But you *are*—’

‘Couldn’t we go there now? Mother’s fast asleep!’ suggested Jimbo in a mysterious whisper. He felt a curious excitement. This, he felt, was more real than usual. He glanced at Monkey's eyes a moment.

'Another time,' said Daddy, already half believing in the truth of his adventure, yet not quite sure of himself. 'It collects, and collects, and collects. Sometimes, here and there, a little escapes and creeps out into yellow flowers like dandelions and buttercups. A little, too, slips below the ground and fills up empty cracks between the rocks. Then it hardens, gets dirty, and men dig it out again and call it gold. And some slips out by the roof — though very, very little — and you see it flashing back to find the star it belongs to, and people with telescopes call it a shooting star, and—' It came pouring through him again.

'But when you're in it — in the Cavern,' asked Monkey impatiently; 'what happens then?'

'Well,' he answered with conviction, 'it sticks to you. It sticks to the eyes most, but a little also to the hair and voice, and nobody loves you unless you've got a bit of it somewhere on you. A girl, before any one falls in love with her, has always been there, and people who write stories and music and things — all have got some on their fingers or else nobody cares for what they write—'

'Oh, Daddy, then why don't you go there and get sticky all over with it?' Jinny burst out with sudden eagerness, ever thinking of others before herself. 'I'll go and get some for you — lots and lots.'

'I *have* been there,' he answered slowly, 'once long, long ago. But it didn't stick very well with me. It wipes off so quickly in the day- time. The sunlight kills it.'

'But you got *some*!' the child insisted. 'And you've got it still, I mean?'

'A little, perhaps, a very little.'

All felt the sadness in his voice without understanding it. There was a moment's pause. Then the three of them spoke in a single breath —

'Please show it to us — *now*,' they cried.

'I'll try,' he said, after a slight hesitation, 'but — er — it's only a rhyme, you see'; and then began to murmur very low for fear of waking Mother: he almost sang it to them. The flock of tiny voices whispered it to his blood. He merely uttered what he heard: —

Starlight
Runs along my mind
And rolls into a ball of golden silk —
A little skein
Of tangled glory;
And when I want to get it out again
To weave the pattern of a verse or story,
It must unwind.

It then gets knotted, looped, and all up-jumbled,
And long before I get it straight again, unwumbled,
To make my verse or story,
The interfering sun has risen
And burst with passion through my silky prison
To melt it down in dew,
Like so much spider-gossamer or fairy-cotton.
Don’t you?
I call it rotten!

A hushed silence followed. Eyes sought the fire. No one spoke for several minutes. There was a faint laughter, quickly over, but containing sighs. Only Jinny stared straight into her father’s face, expecting more, though prepared at any stage to explode with unfeigned admiration.

‘But that “don’t you” comes in the wrong place,’ she objected anxiously. ‘It ought to come after “I call it rotten”—’ She was determined to make it seem all right.

‘No, Jinny,’ he answered gravely, ‘you must always put others before yourself. It’s the first rule in life and literature.’

She dropped her eyes to the fire like the others. ‘Ah,’ she said, ‘I see; of course.’ The long word blocked her mind like an avalanche, even while she loved it.

‘*I* call it rotten,’ murmured Monkey under her breath. Jimbo made no audible remark. He crossed his little legs and folded his arms. He was not going to express an opinion until he understood better what it was all about. He began to whisper to his sister. Another longish pause intervened. It was Jinny again who broke it.

‘And “wumbled,”’ she asked solemnly as though the future of everybody depended on it, ‘what *is* wumbled, really? There’s no such thing, is there? — In life, I mean?’ She meant to add ‘and literature,’ but the word stopped her like a hedge.

‘It’s what happens to a verse or story I lose in that way,’ he explained, while Jimbo and Monkey whispered more busily still among themselves about something else. ‘The bit of starlight that gets lost and doesn’t stick, you see — ineffective.’

‘But there *is* no such word, really,’ she urged, determined to clear up all she could. ‘It rhymes — that’s all.’

‘And there *is* no verse or story,’ he replied with a sigh. ‘There *was* — that’s all.’

There was another pause. Jimbo and Monkey looked round suspiciously. They ceased their mysterious whispering. They clearly did not wish the others to know what their confabulation was about.

‘That’s why your books are wumbled, is it?’ she inquired, proud of an explanation that excused him, yet left his glory somehow unimpaired. Her face was a map of puzzled wrinkles.

‘Precisely, Jinny. You see, the starlight never gets through properly into my mind. It lies there in a knot. My plot is wumbled. I can’t disentangle it quite, though the beauty lies there right enough—’

‘Oh, yes,’ she interrupted, ‘the beauty lies there still.’ She got up suddenly and gave him a kiss.

‘Never mind, Daddy,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll get it straight for you one day. I’ll unwumble it. I’ll do it like a company promoter, I will.’ She used words culled from newspapers.

‘Thank you, child,’ he smiled, returning her kiss; ‘I’m sure you will. Only, you’d better let me know when you’re coming. It might be dangerous to my health otherwise.’

She took it with perfect seriousness. ‘Oh, but, excuse me, I’ll come when you’re asleep,’ she told him, so low that the others could not hear. ‘I’ll come to you when I’m dreaming. I dream all night like a busy Highlander.’

‘That’s right,’ he whispered, giving her a hug. ‘Come when I’m asleep and all the stars are out; and bring a comb and a pair of scissors—’

‘And a hay-rake,’ added Monkey, overhearing.

Everybody laughed. The children cuddled up closer to him. They pitied him. He had failed again, though his failure was as much a pleasure as his complete success. They sat on his knees and played with him to make up for it, repeating bits of the rhyme they could remember. Then Mother and Riquette woke up together, and the spell was broken. The party scattered. Only Jimbo and his younger sister, retiring into a corner by themselves, continued their mysterious confabulation. Their faces were flushed with excitement. There was a curious animation in their eyes — though this may have been borrowed from the embers of the peat. Or, it may have been the stars, for they were close to the open window. Both seemed soft-shiny somehow. *They*, certainly, were not wumbled.

And several hours later, when they had returned from supper at the Pension and lay in bed, exchanging their last mysterious whispers across the darkness, Monkey said in French —

‘Jimbo, I’m going to find that Cavern where the star stuff lies,’ and Jimbo answered audaciously, ‘I’ve already been there.’

‘Will you show me the way, then?’ she asked eagerly, and rather humbly.

‘Perhaps,’ he answered from beneath the bedclothes, then added, ‘Of course I will.’ He merely wished to emphasise the fact that he was leader.

‘Sleep quickly, then, and join me — over there.’ It was their game to believe they joined in one another’s dreams.

They slept. And the last thing that reached them from the outer world was their mother’s voice calling to them her customary warning: that the *ramoneur* was already in the chimney and that unless they were asleep in five minutes he would come and catch them by the tail. For the Sweep they looked upon with genuine awe. His visits to the village — once in the autumn and once in the spring — were times of shivery excitement.

Presently Mother rose and sailed on tiptoe round the door to peep. And a smile spread softly over her face as she noted the characteristic evidences of the children beside each bed. Monkey’s clothes lay in a scattered heap of confusion, half upon the floor, but Jimbo's garments were folded in a precise, neat pile upon the chair. They looked ready to be packed into a parcel. His habits were so orderly. His school blouse hung on the back, the knickerbockers were carefully folded, and the black belt lay coiled in a circle on his coat and what he termed his 'westkit.' Beneath the chair the little pair of very dirty boots stood side by side. Mother stooped and kissed the round plush-covered head that just emerged from below the mountainous *duvet*. He looked like a tiny radish lying in a big ploughed field.

Then, hunting for a full five minutes before she discovered the shoes of Monkey, one beneath the bed and the other inside her petticoat, she passed on into the little kitchen where she cleaned and polished both pairs, and then replaced them by their respective owners. This done, she laid the table in the outer room for their breakfast at half-past six, saw that their school-books and satchels were in order, gave them each a little more unnecessary tucking-up and a kiss so soft it could not have waked a butterfly, and then returned to her chair before the fire where she resumed the mending of a pile of socks and shirts, blouses and stockings, to say nothing of other indescribable garments, that lay in a formidable heap upon the big round table.

This was her nightly routine. Sometimes her husband joined her. Then they talked the children over until midnight, discussed expenses that threatened to swamp them, yet turned out each month 'just manageable somehow' and finally made a cup of cocoa before retiring, she to her self-made bed upon the sofa, and he to his room in the carpenter's house outside the village. But sometimes he did not come. He remained in the Pension to smoke and chat with the Russian and Armenian students, who attended daily lectures in the town, or else went over to his own quarters to work at the book he was engaged on at the moment. To-night he did not come. A light in an attic window, just visible above the vineyards, showed that he was working.

The room was very still; only the click of the knitting needles or the soft noise of the collapsing peat ashes broke the stillness. Riquette snored before the fire less noisily than usual.

'He's working very late to-night,' thought Mother, noticing the lighted window. She sighed audibly; mentally she shrugged her shoulders. Daddy had long ago left that inner preserve of her heart where she completely understood him. Sympathy between them, in the true sense of the word, had worn rather thin.

‘I hope he won’t overtire himself,’ she added, but this was the habit of perfunctory sympathy. She might equally have said, ‘I wish he would do something to bring in a little money instead of earning next to nothing and always complaining about the expenses.’

Outside the stars shone brightly through the fresh spring night, where April turned in her sleep, dreaming that May was on the way to wake her.

CHAPTER IX

Wrap thy form in a mantle gray,
Star-inwrought!
Blind with thine hair the eyes of Day;
Kiss her until she be wearied out,
Then wander o'er city, and sea, and land,
Touching all with thine opiate wand-
Come, long sought!
To *Night*, SHELLEY.

Now, cats are curious creatures, and not without reason, perhaps, are they adored by some, yet regarded with suspicious aversion by others. They know so much they never dare to tell, while affecting that they know nothing and are innocent. For it is beyond question that several hours later, when the village and the Citadelle were lost in slumber, Mere Riquette stirred stealthily where she lay upon the hearth, opened her big green eyes, and — began to wash.

But this toilette was pretence in case any one was watching. Really, she looked about her all the time. Her sleep also had been that sham sleep of cats behind which various plots and plans mature — a questionable business altogether. The washing, as soon as she made certain no one saw her, gave place to another manoeuvre. She stretched as though her bones were of the very best elastic. Gathering herself together, she arched her round body till it resembled a toy balloon straining to rise against the pull of four thin ropes that held it tightly to the ground. Then, unable to float off through the air, as she had expected, she slowly again subsided. The balloon deflated. She licked her chops, twitched her whiskers, curled her tail neatly round her two front paws — and grinned complacently. She waited before that extinguished fire of peat as though she had never harboured a single evil purpose in all her days. 'A saucer of milk,' she gave the world to understand, c is the only thing *I* care about.' Her smile of innocence and her attitude of meek simplicity proclaimed this to the universe at large. 'That's me,' she told the darkness, 'and I don't care a bit who knows it.' She looked so sleek and modest that a mouse need not have feared her. But she did not add, ‘That’s what I mean the world to think,’ for this belonged to the secret life cats never talk about. Those among humans might divine it who could, and welcome. They would be admitted. But the rest of the world were regarded with mere tolerant disdain. They bored.

Then, satisfied that she was unobserved, Mere Riquette abandoned all further pretence, and stalked silently about the room. The starlight just made visible her gliding shadow, as first she visited the made-up sofa-bed where the exhausted mother snored mildly beneath the book- shelves, and then, after a moment’s keen inspection, turned back and went at a quicker pace into the bedroom where the children slept. There the night-light made her movements easily visible. The cat was excited. Something bigger than any mouse was coming into her life just now.

Riquette then witnessed a wonderful and beautiful thing, yet witnessed it obviously not for the first time. Her manner suggested no surprise. ‘It’s like a mouse, only bigger,’ her expression said. And by this she meant that it was natural. She accepted it as right and proper.

For Monkey got out of herself as out of a case. She slipped from her body as a sword slips from its sheath, yet the body went on breathing in the bed just as before; the turned-up nose with the little platform at its tip did not cease from snoring, and the lids remained fastened tightly over the brilliant brown eyes, buttoned down so securely for the night. Two plaits of hair lay on the pillow; another rose and fell with the regular breathing of her little bosom. But Monkey herself stood softly shining on the floor within a paw’s length.

Riquette blinked her eyes and smiled complacently. Jimbo was close behind her, even brighter than his sister, with eyes like stars.

The visions of cats are curious things, no doubt, and few may guess their furry, silent pathways as they go winding along their length of inconsequent development. For, softer than any mouse, the children glided swiftly into the next room where Mother slept beneath the book- shelves — two shining little radiant figures, hand in hand. They tried for a moment to pull out Mother too, but found her difficult to move. Somewhere on the way she stuck. They gave it up.

Turning towards the window that stood open beyond the head of the sofa-bed, they rose up lightly and floated through it out into the starry night. Riquette leaped like a silent shadow after them, but before she reached the roof of red-brown tiles that sloped down to the yard, Jimbo and Monkey were already far away. She strained her big green eyes in vain, seeing nothing but the tops of the plane trees, thick with tiny coming leaves, the sweep of vines and sky, and the tender, mothering night beyond. She pattered softly back again, gave a contemptuous glance at Mother in passing, and jumped up at once into the warm nest of sheets that gaped invitingly between the shoulder of Jimbo's body and the pillow. She shaped the opening to her taste, kneading it with both front paws, turned three times round, and then lay down. Curled in a ball, her nose buried between her back feet, she was asleep in a single moment. Her whiskers ceased to quiver.

The children were tugging at Daddy now over in the carpenter's house. His bed was short, and his body lay in a kind of knot. On the chair beside it were books and papers, and a candle that had burnt itself out. A pencil poked its nose out among the sheets, and it was clear he had fallen asleep while working.

'Wumbled!' sighed Jimbo, pointing to the scribbled notes. But Monkey was busy pulling him out, and did not answer. Then Jimbo helped her. And Daddy came out magnificently — as far as the head — then stuck like Mother. They pulled in vain. Something in his head prevented complete release.

'En voila un!' laughed Monkey. 'Quel homme!' It was her natural speech, the way she talked at school. 'It's a pity,' said Jimbo with a little sigh. They gave it up, watching him slide slowly back again. The moment he was all in they turned towards the open window. Hand in hand they sailed out over the sleeping village. And from almost every house they heard a sound of weeping. There were sighs and prayers and pleadings. All slept and dreamed — dreamed of their difficulties and daily troubles. Released in sleep, their longings rose to heaven unconsciously, automatically as it were. Even the cheerful and the happy yearned a little, even the well-to-do whom the world judged so secure — these, too, had their burdens that found release, and so perhaps relief in sleep.

‘Come, and we’ll help them,’ Jimbo said eagerly. ‘We can change all that a little. Oh, I say, what a lot we’ve got to do to-night.’

‘Je crois bien,’ laughed Monkey, turning somersaults for joy as she followed him. Her tendency to somersaults in this condition was irresistible, and a source of worry to Jimbo, who classed it among the foolish habits of what he called ‘womans and things like that!’

And the sound came loudest from the huddled little building by the Church, the Pension where they had their meals, and where Jinny had her bedroom. But Jinny, they found, was already out, off upon adventures of her own. A solitary child, she always went her independent way in everything. They dived down into the first floor, and there, in a narrow bedroom whose windows stood open upon the wistaria branches, they found Madame Jequier— ‘Tante Jeanne,’ as they knew the sympathetic, generous creature best, sister-in-law of the Postmaster — not sleeping like the others, but wide awake and praying vehemently in a wicker-chair that creaked with every nervous movement that she made. All about her were bits of paper covered with figures, bills, calculations, and the rest.

‘We can’t get at her,’ said Monkey, her laughter hushed for a moment. ‘There’s too much sadness. Come on! Let’s go somewhere else.’

But Jimbo held her tight. ‘Let’s have a try. Listen, you silly, can’t you!’

They stood for several minutes, listening together, while the brightness of their near approach seemed to change the woman’s face a little. She looked up and listened as though aware of something near her.

‘She’s praying for others as well as herself,’ explained Jimbo.

‘Ca vaut la peine alors,’ said Monkey. And they drew cautiously nearer…. But, soon desisting, the children were far away, hovering about the mountains. They had no steadiness as yet.

‘Starlight,’ Jimbo was singing to himself, ‘runs along my mind.’

‘You’re all up-jumbled,’ Monkey interrupted him with a laugh, turning repeated somersaults till she looked like a catherine wheel of brightness.

‘… the pattern of my verse or story…’ continued Jimbo half aloud, ‘… a little ball of tangled glory….’

‘You must unwind!’ cried Monkey. ‘Look out, it’s the sun! It’ll melt us into dew!’

But it was not the sun. Out there beyond them, towards the purple woods still sleeping, appeared a draught of starbeams like a broad, deep river of gold. The rays, coming from all corners of the sky, wove a pattern like a network.

‘Jimbo!’ gasped the girl, ‘it’s like a fishing-net. We’ve never noticed it before.’

‘It *is* a net,’ he answered, standing still as a stone, though he had not thought of it himself until she said so. He instantly dressed himself, as he always translated *il se dressait* in his funny Franco- English. *Deja* and *comme ca*, too, appeared everywhere. ‘It is a net like that. I saw it already before, once.’

‘Monkey,’ he added, ‘do you know what it really is? Oh, I say!’

‘Of course I do.’ She waited nevertheless for him to tell her, and he was too gallant just then in his proud excitement for personal exultation.

‘It’s the Star Cave — it’s Daddy’s Star Cave. He said it was up here “where the Boudry forests dip below the cliffs towards the Areuse.” …’ He remembered the very words.

His sister forgot to turn her usual somersaults. Wonder caught them both. ‘A pair of eyes, then, or a puddle! Quick!’ she cried in a delighted whisper. She looked about her everywhere at once, making confused and rushing little movements of helplessness. ‘Quick, quick!’

‘No,’ said Jimbo, with a man’s calm decision, ‘it’s when they *can’t* find eyes or puddles that they go in there. Don’t interfere.’

She admitted her mistake. This was no time to press a petty advantage.

‘I’ll shut my eyes while you sponge up the puddles with a wedge of moss,’ she began. But her brother cut her short. He was very sure of himself. He was leader beyond all question.

‘You follow me,’ he commanded firmly, ‘and you’ll get in somehow. We’ll get all sticky with it. Then we’ll come out again and help those crying people like Tante Jeanne and….' A list of names poured out. 'They'll think us wonderful—'

'We shall be wonderful,' whispered Monkey, obeying, yet peeping with one big brown eye.

The cataract of starbeams rushed past them in a flood of gold.

They moved towards an opening in the trees where the limestone cliffs ran into rugged shapes with pinnacles and towers. They found the entrance in the rocks. Water dripped over it, making little splashes. The lime had run into hanging pillars and a fringe of pointed fingers. Past this the river of starlight poured its brilliant golden stream. Its soft brightness shone yellow as a shower of primrose dust.

'Look out! The Interfering Sun!' gasped Monkey again, awed and confused with wonder. 'We shall melt in dew or fairy cotton. Don't you? … I call it rotten …!'

'You'll unwind all right,' he told her, trying hard to keep his head and justify his leadership. He, too, remembered phrases here and there. 'I'm a bit knotted, looped, and all up-jumbled too, inside. But the sun is miles away still. We're both soft-shiny still.'

They stooped to enter, plunging their bodies to the neck in the silent flood of sparkling amber.

Then happened a strange thing. For how could they know, these two adventurous, dreaming children, that Thought makes images which, regardless of space, may flash about the world, and reach minds anywhere that are sweetly tuned to their acceptance?

'What's that? Look out! *Gare!* Hold tight!' In his sudden excitement Jimbo mixed questions with commands. He had caught her by the hand. There was a new sound in the heavens above them — a roaring, rushing sound. Like the thunder of a train, it swept headlong through the sky. Voices were audible too.

'There's something enormous caught in the star-net,' he whispered.

'It's Mother, then,' said Monkey.

They both looked up, trembling with anticipation. They saw a big, dark body like a thundercloud hovering above their heads. It had a line of brilliant eyes. From one end issued a column of white smoke. It settled slowly downwards, moving softly yet with a great air of bustle and importance. Was this the arrival of a dragon, or Mother coming after them? The blood thumped in their ears, their hands felt icy. The thing dipped slowly through the trees. It settled, stopped, began to purr.

‘It’s a railway train,’ announced Jimbo finally with authority that only just disguised amazement. ‘And the passengers are getting out.’ With a sigh of immense relief he said it. ‘You’re not in any danger, Monkey,’ he added.

He drew his sister back quickly a dozen steps, and they hid behind a giant spruce to watch. The scene that followed was like the holiday spectacle in a London Terminus, except that the passengers had no luggage. The other difference was that they seemed intent upon some purpose not wholly for their own advantage. It seemed, too, they had expected somebody to meet them, and were accordingly rather confused and disappointed. They looked about them anxiously.

‘Last stop; all get out here!’ a Guard was crying in a kind of pleasant singing voice. ‘Return journey begins five minutes before the Interfering Sun has risen.’

Jimbo pinched his sister’s arm till she nearly screamed. ‘Hear that?’ he whispered. But Monkey was too absorbed in the doings of the busy passengers to listen or reply. For the first passenger that hurried past her was no less a person than — Jane Anne! Her face was not puzzled now. It was like a little sun. She looked utterly happy and contented, as though she had found the place and duties that belonged to her.

‘Jinny!’ whispered the two in chorus. But Jane Anne did not so much as turn her head. She slipped past them like a shaft of light. Her hair fell loose to her waist. She went towards the entrance. The flood rose to her neck.

‘Oh! there she is!’ cried a voice. ‘She travelled with us instead of coming to meet us.’ Monkey smiled. She knew her sister’s alien, unaccountable ways only too well.

The train had settled down comfortably enough between the trees, and lay there breathing out a peaceable column of white smoke, panting a little as it did so. The Guard went down the length of it, turning out the lamps; and from the line of open doors descended the stream of passengers, all hurrying to the entrance of the cave. Each one stopped a moment in front of the Guard, as though to get a ticket clipped, but instead of producing a piece of pasteboard, or the Guard a punching instrument, they seemed to exchange a look together. Each one stared into his face, nodded, and passed on.

‘What blue eyes they’ve got,’ thought Monkey to herself, as she peered into each separate face as closely as she dared. ‘I wish mine were like that!’ The wind, sighing through the tree-tops, sent a shower of dew about their feet. The children started. ‘What a lovely row!’ Jimbo whispered. It was like footsteps of a multitude on the needles. The fact that it was so clearly audible showed how softly all these passengers moved about their business.

The Guard, they noticed then, called out the names of some of them; perhaps of all, only in the first excitement they did not catch them properly. And each one went on at once towards the entrance of the cave and disappeared in the pouring river of gold.

The light-footed way they moved, their swiftness as of shadows, the way they tossed their heads and flung their arms about — all this made the children think it was a dance. Monkey felt her own legs twitch to join them, but her little brother’s will restrained her.

‘If you turn a somersault here,’ he said solemnly, ‘we’re simply lost.’ He said it in French; the long word had not yet dawned upon his English consciousness. They watched with growing wonder then, and something like terror seized them as they saw a man go past them with a very familiar look about him. He went in a cloud of sparkling, black dust that turned instantly into shining gold when it reached the yellow river from the stars. His face was very dirty.

‘It’s *not* the *ramoneur*,’ whispered Jimbo, uncertain whether the shiver he felt was his sister’s or his own. ‘He’s much too springy.’ Sweeps always had a limp.

For the figure shot along with a running, dancing leap as though he moved on wires. He carried long things over his shoulders. He flashed into the stream like a shadow swallowed by a flame. And as he went, they caught such merry words, half sung, half chanted: — ,

‘I’ll mix their smoke with hope and mystery till they see dreams and faces in their fires—’ and he was gone.

Behind him came a couple arm in arm, their movements equally light and springy, but the one behind dragging a little, as though lazily. They wore rags and torn old hats and had no collars to their shirts. The lazy one had broken boots through which his toes showed plainly. The other who dragged him had a swarthy face like the gypsies who once had camped near their house in Essex long, oh, ever so long ago.

‘I’ll get some too,’ the slow one sang huskily as he stumbled along with difficulty ‘but there’s never any hurry. I’ll fill their journeys with desire and make adventure call to them with love—’

‘And I,’ the first one answered, ‘will sprinkle all their days with the sweetness of the moors and open fields, till houses choke their lungs and they come out to learn the stars by name. Ho, ho!’

They dipped, with a flying leap, into the rushing flood. Their rags and filthy slouched hats flashed radiant as they went, all bathed and cleaned in glory.

Others came after them in a continuous stream, some too outlandish to be named or recognised, others half familiar, very quick and earnest, but merry at the same time, and all intent upon bringing back something for the world. It was not for themselves alone, or for their own enjoyment that they hurried in so eagerly.

‘How splendid! What a crew!’ gasped Monkey. ‘*Quel spectacle*!’ And she began a somersault.

‘Be quiet, will you?’ was the rejoinder, as a figure who seemed to have a number of lesser faces within his own big one of sunburned brown, tumbled by them somewhat heavily and left a smell of earth and leaves and potting-sheds about the trees behind him. ‘Won’t my flowers just shine and dazzle ‘em? And won’t the dead leaves crackle as I burn ’em up!’ he chuckled as he disappeared from view. There was a rush of light as an eddy of the star-stream caught him, and something certainly went up in flame. A faint odour reached the children that was like the odour of burning leaves.

Then, with a rush, came a woman whose immensely long thin arms reached out in front of her and vanished through the entrance a whole minute before the rest of her. But they could not see the face. Some one with high ringing laughter followed, though they could not see the outline at all. It went so fast, they only heard the patter of light footsteps on the moss and needles. Jimbo and Monkey felt slightly uncomfortable as they watched and listened, and the feeling became positive uneasiness the next minute as a sound of cries and banging reached them from the woods behind. There was a great commotion going on somewhere in the train.

‘I can’t get out, I can’t get out!’ called a voice unhappily. ‘And if I do, how shall I ever get in again? The entrance is so ridiculously small. I shall only stick and fill it up. Why did I ever come? Oh, why did I come at all?’

‘Better stay where you are, lady,’ the Guard was saying. ‘You’re good ballast. You can keep the train down. That’s something. Steady thinking’s always best, you know.’

Turning, the children saw a group of figures pushing and tugging at a dark mass that appeared to have stuck halfway in the carriage door. The pressure of many willing hands gave it a different outline every minute. It was like a thing of india-rubber or elastic. The roof strained outwards with ominous cracking sounds; the windows threatened to smash; the foot-board, supporting the part of her that had emerged, groaned with the weight already.

‘Oh, what’s the good of *me*?’ cried the queer deep voice with petulance. ‘You couldn’t get a wisp of hay in there, much less all of me. I should block the whole cave up!’

‘Come out a bit!’ a voice cried.

‘I can’t.’

‘Go back then!’ suggested the Guard.

‘But I can’t. Besides I’m upside down!’

‘You haven’t got any upside down,’ was the answer; ‘so that’s impossible.’

‘Well, anyhow, I’m in a mess and muddle like this,’ came the smothered voice, as the figures pulled and pushed with increasing energy.’ And my tarpaulin skirt is all askew. The winds are at it as usual.’

‘Nothing short of a gale can help you now,’ was somebody’s verdict, while Monkey whispered beneath her breath to Jimbo. ‘She’s even bigger than Mother. Quelle masse!’

Then came a thing of mystery and wonder from the sky. A flying figure, scattering points of light through the darkness like grains of shining sand, swooped down and stood beside the group.

‘Oh, Dustman,’ cried the guard, ‘give her of your dust and put her to sleep, please. She’s making noise enough to bring the Interfering Sun above the horizon before his time.’

Without a word the new arrival passed one hand above the part of her that presumably was the face. Something sifted downwards. There was a sound of gentle sprinkling through the air; a noise followed that was half a groan and half a sigh. Her struggles grew gradually less, then ceased. They pushed the bulk of her backwards through the door. Spread over many seats the Woman of the Haystack slept.

‘Thank you,’ said several voices with relief. ‘She’ll dream she’s been in. That’s just as good.’

‘Every bit,’ the others answered, resuming their interrupted journey towards the cavern’s mouth.

‘And when I come out she shall have some more,’ answered the Dustman in a soft, thick voice; ‘as much as ever she can use.’

He flitted in his turn towards the stream of gold. His feet were already in it when he paused a moment to shift from one shoulder to the other a great sack he carried. And in that moment was heard a low voice singing dreamily the Dustman’s curious little song. It seemed to come from the direction of the train where the Guard stood talking to a man the children had not noticed before. Presumably he was the engine-driver, since all the passengers were out now. But it may have been the old Dustman himself who sang it. They could not tell exactly. The voice made them quite drowsy as they listened: —

The busy Dustman flutters down the lanes,
He's off to gather star-dust for our dreams.

He dusts the Constellations for his sack,
Finding it thickest on the Zodiac,
But sweetest in the careless meteor's track;
That he keeps only
For the old and lonely,
(And is very strict about it!)
Who sleep so little that they need the best;
The rest, —
The common stuff, —
Is good enough

For Fraulein, or for Baby, or for Mother,
Or any other
Who likes a bit of dust,
But yet can do without it
If they *must*!

The busy Dustman hurries through the sky
The kind old Dustman's coming to *your* eye!

By the time the song was over he had disappeared through the opening.

'I'll show 'em the real stuff!' came back a voice — this time certainly his own — far inside now.

'I simply love that man,' exclaimed Monkey. 'Songs are usually such twiddly things, but that was real.' She looked as though a somersault were imminent. 'If only Daddy knew him, he'd learn how to write unwumbled stories. Oh! we *must* get Daddy out.'

'It's only the head that sticks,' was her brother's reply. 'We'll grease it.'

They remained silent a moment, not knowing what to do next, when they became aware that the big man who had been talking to the Guard was coming towards them.

'They've seen us!' she whispered in alarm. '*He's* seen us.' An inexplicable thrill ran over her.

‘They saw us long ago,’ her brother added contemptuously. His voice quavered.

Jimbo turned to face them, getting in front of his sister for protection, although she towered above him by a head at least. The Guard, who led the way, they saw now, was a girl — a girl not much older than Monkey, with big blue eyes. ‘There they are,’ the Guard said loudly, pointing; and the big man, looking about him as though he did not see very clearly, stretched out his hands towards him. ‘But you must be very quick,’ she added, ‘the Interfering Sun—’

‘I’m glad you came to meet us. I hoped you might. Jane Anne’s gone in ages ago. Now we’ll all go in together,’ he said in a deep voice, ‘and gather star-dust for our dreams…’ He groped to find them. His hands grew shadowy. He felt the empty air.

His voice died away even as he said it, and the difficulty he had in seeing seemed to affect their own eyes as well. A mist rose. It turned to darkness. The river of starlight faded. The net had suddenly big holes in it. They were slipping through. Wind whispered in the trees. There was a sharp, odd sound like the plop of a water-rat in a pond….

‘We must be quick,’ his voice came faintly from far away. They just had time to see his smile, and noticed the gleam of two gold teeth…. Then the darkness rushed up and covered them. The stream of tangled, pouring beams became a narrow line, so far away it was almost like the streak of a meteor in the sky…. Night hid the world and everything in it….

Two radiant little forms slipped past Riquette and slid feet first into the sleeping bodies on the beds.

There came soon after a curious sound from the outer room, as Mother turned upon her sofa-bed and woke. The sun was high above the Blumlisalp, spreading a sheet of gold and silver on the lake. Birds were singing in the plane trees. The roof below the open windows shone with dew, and draughts of morning air, sweet and fresh, poured into the room. With it came the scent of flowers and forests, of fields and peaty smoke from cottage chimneys….

But there was another perfume too. Far down the sky swept some fleet and sparkling thing that made the world look different. It was delicate and many-tinted, soft as a swallow's wing, and full of butterflies and tiny winds.

For, with the last stroke of midnight from the old church tower, May had waked April; and April had run off into the mountains with the dawn. Her final shower of tears still shone upon the ground. Already May was busy drying them.

That afternoon, when school was over, Monkey and Jimbo found themselves in the attics underneath the roof together. They had abstracted their father's opera-glasses from the case that hung upon the door, and were using them as a telescope.

'What can you see?' asked Jimbo, waiting for his turn, as they looked towards the hazy mountains behind the village.

'Nothing.'

'That must be the opening, then,' he suggested, 'just air.'

His sister lowered the glasses and stared at him. 'But it can't be a real place?' she said, the doubt in her tone making her words a question. 'Daddy's never been there himself, I'm sure — from the way he told it. You only dreamed it.' 'Well, anyhow,' was the reply with conviction, 'it's there, so there must be *somebody* who believes in it.' And he was evidently going to add that he had been there, when Mother's voice was heard calling from the yard below, 'Come down from that draughty place. It's dirty, and there are dead rats in it. Come out and play in the sunshine. Try and be sensible like Jinny.'

They smuggled the glasses into their case again, and went off to the woods to play. Though their union seemed based on disagreements chiefly they were always quite happy together like this, living in a world entirely their own. Jinny went her own way apart always — ever busy with pots and pans and sewing. She was far too practical and domestic for their tastes to amalgamate; yet, though they looked down upon her a little, no one in their presence could say a word against her. For they recognised the child's unusual selflessness, and rather stood in awe of it.

And this afternoon in the woods they kept coming across places that seemed oddly familiar, although they had never visited them before. They had one of their curious conversations about the matter — queer talks they indulged in sometimes when quite alone. Mother would have squelched such talk, and Daddy muddled them with long words, while Jane Anne would have looked puzzled to the point of tears.

‘I’m *sure* I’ve been here before,’ said Monkey, looking across the trees to a place where the limestone cliffs dropped in fantastic shapes of pointed rock. ‘Have you got that feeling too?’

Jimbo, with his hands in the pockets of his blue reefer overcoat and his feet stuck wide apart, stared hard at her a moment. His little mind was searching too.

‘It’s natural enough, I suppose,’ he answered, too honest to pretend, too proud, though, to admit he had not got it.

They were rather breathless with their climb, and sat down on a boulder in the shade.

‘I know all this awfully well,’ Monkey presently resumed, looking about her. ‘But certainly we’ve never come as far as this. I think my underneath escapes and comes to places by itself. I feel like that. Does yours?’

He looked up from a bundle of moss he was fingering. This was rather beyond him.

‘Oh, I feel all right,’ he said, ‘just ordinary.’ He would have given his ten francs in the savings bank, the collection of a year, to have answered otherwise. ‘You’re always getting tummy-aches and things,’ he added kindly. ‘Girls do.’ It was pride that made the sharp addition. But Monkey was not hurt; she did not even notice what he said. The insult thus ignored might seem almost a compliment Jimbo thought with quick penitence.

‘Then, perhaps,’ she continued, more than a little thrilled by her own audacity, ‘it’s somebody else’s thinking. Thinking skips about the world like anything, you know. I read it once in one of Daddy’s books.’

‘Oh, yes — like that—’

‘Thinking hard *does* make things true, of course,’ she insisted.

‘But you can’t exactly see them,’ he put in, to explain his own inexperience. He felt jealous of these privileges she claimed. ‘They can’t last, I mean.’

‘But they can’t be wiped out either,’ she said decidedly. ‘I’m sure of that.’

Presently they scrambled higher and found among the rocks an opening to a new cave. The Jura mountains are riddled with caves which the stalactites turn into palaces and castles. The entrance was rather small, and they made no attempt to crawl in, for they knew that coming out again was often very difficult. But there was great excitement about it, and while Monkey kept repeating that she knew it already, or else had seen a picture of it somewhere, Jimbo went so far as to admit that they had certainly found it *very* easily, while suggesting that the rare good fortune was due rather to his own leadership and skill.

But when they came home to tea, full of the glory of their discovery, they found that a new excitement made the announcement fall a little flat. For in the Den, Daddy read a telegram he had just received from England to say that Cousin Henry was coming out to visit them for a bit. His room had already been engaged at the carpenter's house. He would arrive at the end of the week.

It was the first of May!

CHAPTER X

ONE OF THE great facts of the world I hold to be the registration in the Universe of every past scene and thought. F. W. M.

No place worth knowing yields itself at sight, and those the least inviting on first view may leave the most haunting pictures upon the walls of memory.

This little village, that Henry Rogers was thus to revisit after so long an interval, can boast no particular outstanding beauty to lure the common traveller. Its single street winds below the pine forest; its tiny church gathers close a few brown-roofed houses; orchards guard it round about; the music of many fountains tinkle summer and winter through its cobbled yards; and its feet are washed by a tumbling stream that paints the fields with the radiance of countless wild-flowers in the spring. But tourists never come to see them. There is no hotel, for one thing, and ticket agents, even at the railway stations, look puzzled a moment before they realise where this place with the twinkling name can hide…. Some consult books. Yet, once you get there, it is not easy to get away again. Something catches the feet and ears and eyes. People have been known to go with all their luggage on Gygi's handcart to the station — then turn aside at the last moment, caught back by the purple woods.

A traveller, glancing up at the little three-storey house with 'Poste et Telegraphe' above the door, could never guess how busy the world that came and went beneath its red-tiled roof. In spring the wistaria tree (whence the Pension borrowed its brave name, Les Glycines) hangs its blossoms between 'Poste' and 'Telegraphe,' and the perfume of invisible lilacs drenches the street from the garden at the back. Beyond, the road dips past the bee-hives of *la cure*; and Boudry towers with his five thousand feet of blue pine woods over the horizon. The tinkling of several big stone fountains fills the street.

But the traveller would not linger, unless he chanced to pass at twelve o'clock and caught the stream of people going into their mid- day dinner at the Pension. And even then he probably would not see the presiding genius, Madame Jequier, for as often as not she would be in her garden, busy with eternal bulbs, and so strangely garbed that if she showed herself at all, it would be with a shrill, plaintive explanation— 'Mais il ne faut pas me regarder. Je suis invisible!' Whereupon, consistently, she would not speak again, but flit in silence to and fro, as though she were one of those spirits she so firmly believed in, and sometimes talked to by means of an old Planchette.

And on this particular morning the Widow Jequier was 'invisible' in her garden clothes as Gygi, the gendarme, came down the street to ring the *midi* bell. Her mind was black with anxiety. She was not thinking of the troop that came to *dejeuner*, their principal meal of the day, paying a franc for it, but rather of the violent scenes with unpaid tradesmen that had filled the morning-tradesmen who were friends as well (which made it doubly awkward) and often dropped in socially for an evening's music and conversation. Her pain darkened the sunshine, and she found relief in the garden which was her passion. For in three weeks the interest on the mortgages was due, and she had nothing saved to meet it. The official notice had come that morning from the Bank. Her mind was black with confused pictures of bulbs, departed *pensionnaires*, hostile bankers, and — the ghastly *charite de la Commune* which awaited her. Yet her husband, before he went into the wine-business so disastrously, had been pasteur here. He had preached from this very church whose bells now rang out the mid-day hour. The spirit of her daughter, she firmly believed, still haunted the garden, the narrow passages, and the dilapidated little salon where the ivy trailed along the ceiling.

Twelve o'clock, striking from the church-tower clock, and the voice of her sister from the kitchen window, then brought the Widow Jequier down the garden in a flying rush. The table was laid and the soup was almost ready. The people were coming in. She was late as usual; there was no time to change. She flung her garden hat aside and scrambled into more presentable garments, while footsteps already sounded on the wooden stairs that led up from the village street.

One by one the retired governesses entered, hung their cloaks upon the pegs in the small, dark hallway, and took their places at the table. They began talking among themselves, exchanging the little gossip of the village, speaking of their books and clothes and sewing, of the rooms in which they lived, scattered down the street, of the heating, of barking dogs that disturbed their sleep, the behaviour of the postman, the fine spring weather, and the views from their respective windows across the lake and distant Alps. Each extolled her own position: one had a garden; another a balcony; a third was on the top floor and so had no noisy tenant overhead; a fourth was on the ground, and had no stairs to climb. Each had her secret romance, and her secret method of cheap feeding at home. There were five or six of them, and this was their principal meal in the day; they meant to make the most of it; they always did; they went home to light suppers of tea and coffee, made in their own *appartements*. Invitations were issued and accepted. There were some who would not speak to each other. Cliques, divisions, *societes a part*, existed in the little band. And they talked many languages, learned in many lands — Russian, German, Italian, even Armenian — for all had laboured far from their country, spending the best of their years teaching children of foreign families, many of them in important houses. They lived upon their savings. Two, at least, had less than thirty pounds a year between them and starvation, and all were of necessity careful of every centime. They wore the same dresses from one year's end to another. They had come home to die.

The Postmaster entered with the cash-box underneath one arm. He bowed gravely to the assembled ladies, and silently took his seat at the table. He never spoke; at meals his sole remarks were statements: 'Je n'ai pas de pain,' 'Il me manque une serviette,' and the like, while his black eyes glared resentfully at every one as though they had done him an injury. But his fierceness was only in the eyes. He was a meek and solemn fellow really. Nature had dressed him in black, and he respected her taste by repeating it in his clothes. Even his expression was funereal, though his black eyes twinkled.

The servant-girl at once brought in his plate of soup, and he tucked the napkin beneath his chin and began to eat. From twelve to two the post was closed; his recreation time was precious, and no minute must be lost. After dinner he took his coat off and did the heavy work of the garden, under the merciless oversight of the Widow Jequier, his sister-in-law, the cash-box ever by his side. He chatted with his tame *corbeau*, but he never smiled. In the winter he did fretwork. On the stroke of two he went downstairs again and disappeared into the cramped and stuffy bureau, whose window on the street was framed by the hanging wistaria blossoms; and at eight o'clock his day of labour ended. He carried the cash-box up to bed at 8.15. At 8.30 his wife followed him. From nine to five he slept.

Alone of all the little household the Widow Jequier scorned routine. She came and went with the uncertainty of wind. Her entrances and exits, too, were like the wind. With a scattering rush she scurried through the years — noisy, ineffective, yet somewhere fine. Her brother had finished his plate of soup, wiped his black moustaches elaborately, and turned his head towards the kitchen door with the solemn statement 'Je n'ai pas de viande,' when she descended upon the scene like a shrill-voiced little tempest.

'Bonjour Mesdames, bonjour Mademoiselle, bonjour, bonjour,' she bowed and smiled, washing her hands in the air; 'et comment allez-vous ce matin?' as the little band of hungry governesses rose with one accord and moved to take their places. Some smiled in answer; others merely bowed. She made enemies as well as friends, the Widow Jequier. With only one of them she shook hands warmly-the one whose payments were long overdue. But Madame Jequier never asked for her money; she knew the old body's tiny income; she would pay her when she could. Only last week she had sent her food and clothing under the guise of a belated little Easter present. Her heart was bigger than her body.

'La famille Anglaise n'est pas encore ici,' announced the Postmaster as though it were a funeral to come. He did not even look up. His protests passed ever unobserved.

'But I hear them coming,' said a governess, swallowing her soup with a sound of many waters. And, true enough, they came. There was a thunder on the stairs, the door into the hall flew open, voices and laughter filled the place, and Jimbo and Monkey raced in to take their places, breathless, rosy, voluble, and very hungry. Jane Anne followed sedately, bowing to every one in turn. She had a little sentence for all who cared for one. Smiles appeared on every face. Mother, like a frigate coming to anchor with a favourable wind, sailed into her chair; and behind her stumbled Daddy, looking absent-minded and pre- occupied. Money was uncommonly scarce just then — the usual Bourcelles complaint.

Conversation in many tongues, unmusically high-pitched, then at once broke loose, led ever by *la patronne* at the head of the table. The big dishes of meat and vegetables were handed round; plates were piled and smothered; knives and forks were laid between mouthfuls upon plate-edges, forming a kind of frieze all round the cloth; the gossip of the village was retailed with harmless gusto. *Dejeuner* at Les Glycines was in full swing. When the apples and oranges came round, most of the governesses took two apiece, slipping one or other into little black velvet bags they carried on their laps below the table.

Some, it was whispered, put bread there too to keep them company. But this was probably a libel. Madame Jequier, at any rate, never saw it done. She looked the other way. 'We all must live,' was her invariable answer to such foolish stories. 'One cannot sleep if one's supper is too light.' Like her body, her soul was a bit untidy — careless, that is, with loose ends. Who would have guessed, for instance, the anxiety that just now gnawed her very entrails? She was a mixture of shameless egotism, and of burning zeal for others. There was a touch of grandeur in her.

At the end of the table, just where the ivy leaves dropped rather low from their trailing journey across the ceiling, sat Miss Waghorn, her vigorous old face wrapped, apparently, in many apple skins. She was well past seventy, thin, erect, and active, with restless eyes, and hooked nose, the poor old hands knotted with rheumatism, yet the voice somehow retaining the energy of forty. Her manners were charming and old-fashioned, and she came of Quaker stock. Seven years before she arrived at the Pension for the summer, and had forgotten to leave. For she forgot most things within ten minutes of their happening. Her memory was gone; she remembered a face, as most other things as well, about twenty minutes; introductions had to be repeated every day, and sometimes at supper she would say with her gentle smile, 'We haven't met before, I think,' to some one she had held daily intercourse with for many months. 'I was born in '37,' she loved to add, 'the year of Queen Victoria's accession'; and five minutes later you might hear her ask, 'Now, guess how old I am; I don't mind a bit.' She was as proud of her load of years as an old gentleman of his thick hair. 'Say exactly what you think. And don't guess too low, mind.' Her numerous stories were self-repeaters.

Miss Waghorn's memory was a source of worry and anxiety to all except the children, who mercilessly teased her. She loved the teasing, though but half aware of it. It was their evil game to extract as many of her familiar stories as possible, one after another. They knew all the clues. There was the Cornishman — she came from Cornwall — who had seen a fairy; his adventure never failed to thrill them, though she used the same words every time and they knew precisely what was coming. She was particularly strong on family reminiscences: — her father was bald at thirty, her brother's beard was so long that he tied it round his neck when playing cricket; her sister 'had the shortest arms you ever saw.' Always of youth she spoke; it was pathetic, so determined was she to be young at seventy. Her family seemed distinguished in this matter of extremes.

But the superiority of Cornish over Devonshire cream was her *piece de resistance*. Monkey need merely whisper — Miss Waghorn's acuteness of hearing was positively uncanny— 'Devonshire cream is what *I* like,' to produce a spurt of explanation and defence that lasted a good ten minutes and must be listened to until the bitter end.

Jimbo would gravely inquire in a pause — of a stranger, if possible, if not, of the table in general —

'Have you ever seen a fairy?'

'No, but I've eaten Cornish cream — it's poison, you know,' Monkey would reply. And up would shoot the keen old face, preened for the fray.

'We haven't been introduced, I think' — forgetting the formal introduction of ten minutes ago— 'but I overheard, if you'll forgive my interrupting, and I can tell you all about Cornish cream. I was born in '37' — with her eager smile— 'and for years it was on our table. I have made quantities of it. The art was brought first by the Phoenicians — —'

'Venetians,' said Monkey.

'No, Phoenicians, dear, when they came to Cornwall for tin — —'

'To put the cream in,' from the same source.

'No, you silly child, to get tin from the mines, of course, and — —'

Then Mother or Daddy, noting the drift of things, would interfere, and the youngsters would be obliterated — until next time. Miss Waghorn would finish her recital for the hundredth time, firmly believing it to be the first. She was a favourite with everybody, in spite of the anxiety she caused. She would go into town to pay her bill at the bootmaker's, and order another pair of boots instead, forgetting why she came. Her income was sixty pounds a year. She forgot in the afternoon the money she had received in the morning, till at last the Widow Jequier seized it for her the moment it arrived. And at night she would doze in her chair over the paper novel she had been "at" for a year and more, beginning it every night afresh, and rarely getting beyond the opening chapter. For it was ever new. All were anxious, though, what she would do next. She was so full of battle.

Everybody talked at once, but forced conversation did not flourish. Bourcelles was not fashionable; no one ever had appendicitis there. Yet ailments of a milder order were the staple, inexhaustible subjects at meals. Instead of the weather, *mon estomac* was the inexhaustible tale. The girl brought in the little Cantonal newspaper, and the widow read out selections in a high, shrill voice, regardless who listened. Misfortunes and accidents were her preference. *Grand ciel* and *quelle horreur* punctuated the selections. 'There's Tante Jeanne grand-cieling as usual,' Mother would say to her husband, who, being a little deaf, would answer, 'What?' and Tante Jeanne, overhearing him, would re-read the accident for his especial benefit, while the governesses recounted personal experiences among themselves, and Miss Waghorn made eager efforts to take part in it all, or tell her little tales of fairies and Cornish cream….

One by one the governesses rose to leave; each made a comprehensive bow that included the entire company. Daddy lit a cigarette or let Jimbo light it for him, too wumbled with his thoughts of afternoon work to notice the puff stolen surreptitiously on the way. Jane Anne folded her napkin carefully, talking with Mother in a low voice about the packing of the basket with provisions for tea. Tea was included in the Pension terms; in a small clothes-basket she carried bread, milk, sugar, and butter daily across to La Citadelle, except on Sundays when she wore gloves and left the duty to the younger children who were less particular.

The governesses, charged with life for another twenty-four hours at least, flocked down the creaking stairs. They nodded as they passed the Bureau window where the Postmaster pored over his collection of stamps, or examined a fretwork pattern of a boy on a bicycle — there was no heavy garden work that day — and went out into the street. They stood in knots a moment, discussing unfavourably the food just eaten, and declaring they would stand it no longer. 'Only where else can we go?' said one, feeling automatically at her velvet bag to make sure the orange was safely in it.

Upstairs, at the open window, Madame Jequier overheard them as she filled the walnut shells with butter for the birds. She only smiled.

‘I wish we could help her,’ Mother was saying to her husband, as they watched her from the sofa in the room behind. ‘A more generous creature never lived.’ It was a daily statement that lacked force owing to repetition, yet the emotion prompting it was ever new and real.

‘Or a more feckless,’ was his reply. ‘But if we ever come into our estates, we will. It shall be the first thing.’ His mind always hovered after those distant estates when it was perplexed by immediate financial difficulty, and just now he was thinking of various bills and payments falling due. It was his own sympathetic link with the widow — ways and means, and the remorseless nature of sheets of paper with columns of figures underneath the horrible word *doit.*

‘So Monsieur ‘Enry Rogairs is coming,’ she said excitedly, turning to them a moment on her way to the garden. ‘And after all these years! He will find the house the same, and the garden better — oh, wonderfully improved. But us, *helas!* he will find old, oh, how old!’ She did not really mean herself, however.

She began a long ‘reminiscent’ chapter, full of details of the days when he and Daddy had been boys together, but in the middle of it Daddy just got up and walked out, saying, ‘I must get over to my work, you know.’ There was no artificiality of manners at Bourcelles. Mother followed him, with a trifle more ceremony. ‘Ah, c’est partir a l’anglaise!’ sighed the widow, watching them go. She was accustomed to it. She went out into her garden, full of excitement at the prospect of the new arrival. Every arrival for her meant a possible chance of help. She was as young as her latest bulb really. Courage, hope, and generosity invariably go together.

CHAPTER XI

Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun!
Romeo and Juliet.

The announcement of Henry Rogers’s coming was received — variously, for any new arrival into the Den circle was subjected to rigorous criticism. This criticism was not intentional; it was the instinctive judgment that children pass upon everything, object or person, likely to affect themselves. And there is no severer bar of judgment in the world.

‘Who *is* Cousinenry? What a name! Is he stiff, I wonder?’ came from Monkey, almost before the announcement had left her father’s lips. ‘What will he think of Tante Jeanne?’ Her little torrent of questions that prejudged him thus never called for accurate answers as a rule, but this time she meant to have an answer. ‘What is he exaccurately?’ she added, using her own invention made up of ‘exact’ and ‘accurate.’

Mother looked up from the typewritten letter to reply, but before she could say, ‘He’s your father’s cousin, dear; they were here as boys twenty years ago to learn French,’ Jinny burst in with an explosive interrogation. She had been reading *La Bonne Menagere* in a corner. Her eyes, dark with conjecture, searched the faces of both parents alternately. ‘Excuse me, Mother, but is he a clergyman?’ she asked with a touch of alarm.

‘Whatever makes you think that, child?’

‘Clergymen are always called the reverundhenry. He’ll wear black and have socks that want mending.’

‘He shouldn’t punt his letters,’ declared Monkey. ‘He’s not an author, is he?’

Jimbo, busy over school tasks, with a huge slate-pencil his crumpled fingers held like a walking-stick, watched and listened in silence. He was ever fearful, perhaps, lest his superior man's knowledge might be called upon and found wanting. Questions poured and crackled like grapeshot, while the truth slowly emerged from the explanations the parents were occasionally permitted to interject. The personality of Cousin Henry Rogers grew into life about them — gradually. The result was a curious one that Minks would certainly have resented with indignation. For Cousinenry was, apparently, a business man with pockets full of sovereigns; stern, clever, and important; the sort of man that gets into Governments and things, yet somewhere with the flavour of the clergyman about him. This clerical touch was Jane Anne's contribution to the picture; and she was certain that he wore silk socks of the most expensive description — a detail she had read probably in some chance fragments of a newspaper. For Jinny selected phrases in this way from anywhere, and repeated them on all occasions without the slightest relevancy. She practised them. She had a way of giving abrupt information and making startling statements *a propos* of nothing at all. Certain phrases stuck in her mind, it seemed, for no comprehensible reason. When excited she picked out the one that first presented itself and fired it off like a gun, the more inapt the better. And 'busy' was her favourite adjective always.

'It's like a communication from a company,' Mother was saying, as she handed back the typewritten letter.

'Is he a company promoter then?' asked Jinny like a flash, certainly ignorant what that article of modern life could mean.

'Oh, I say!' came reproachfully from Jimbo, thus committing himself for the first time to speech. He glanced up into several faces round him, and then continued the picture of Cousin Henry he was drawing on his slate. He listened all the time. Occasionally he cocked an eye or ear up. He took in everything, saying little. His opinions matured slowly. The talk continued for a long time, questions and answers.

'I think he's nice,' he announced at length in French. For intimate things, he always used that language; his English, being uncertain, was kept for matters of unimportance. 'A gentle man.'

And it was Jimbo's verdict that the children then finally adopted. Cousin Henry was *gentil.* They laughed loudly at him, yet agreed. His influence on their little conclaves, though never volubly expressed — because of that very fact, perhaps — was usually accepted. Jimbo was so decided. And he never committed himself to impulsive judgments that later had to be revised. He listened in silence to the end, then went plump for one side or the other. 'I think he'll be a nice man,' was the label, therefore, then and there attached to Mr. Henry Rogers in advance of delivery. Further than that, however, they would not go. It would have been childish to commit themselves more deeply till they saw him.

The conversation then slipped beyond their comprehension, or rather their parents used long words and circumventing phrases that made it difficult to follow. Owing to lack of space, matters of importance often had to be discussed in this way under the children's eyes, unless at night, when all were safe in bed; for French, of course, was of no avail for purposes of concealment. Long words were then made use of, dark, wumbled sentences spoken very quickly, with suggestive gestures and expressions of the eyes labelled by Monkey with, 'Look, Mother and Daddy are making faces — something's up!'

But, none the less, all listened, and Monkey, whose intuitive intelligence soaked up hidden meanings like a sponge, certainly caught the trend of what was said. She detailed it later to the others, when Jinny checked her exposition with a puzzled 'but Mother could never have said *that*,' while Jimbo looked wise and grave, as though he had understood it all along, and was even in his parents' councils.

On this occasion, however, there was nothing very vital to retail. Cousin Henry was to arrive to-morrow by the express from Paris. He was a little younger than Daddy, and would have the room above him in the carpenter's house. His meals he would take at the Pension just as they did, and for tea he would always come over to the Den. And this latter fact implied that he was to be admitted into intimacy at once, for only intimates used the Den regularly for tea, of course.

It was serious. It involved a change in all their lives. Jinny wondered if it 'would cost Daddy any more money,' or whether 'Cousinenry would bring a lot of things with him,' though not explaining whether by 'things' she meant food or presents or clothes. He was not married, so he couldn't be very old; and Monkey, suggesting that he might 'get to love' one of the retired governesses who came to the Pension for their mid-day dinner, was squelched by Jimbo with ‘old governesses *never* marry; they come back to settle, and then they just die off.’

Thus was Henry Rogers predigested. But at any rate he was accepted. And this was fortunate; for a new arrival whom the children did not ‘pass’ had been known to have a time that may best be described as not conducive to repose of body, mind, or spirit.

The arrival of Mr. Henry Rogers in the village — in La Citadelle, that is — was a red-letter day. This, however, seems a thin description of its glory. For a more adequate description a well-worn phrase must be borrowed from the poems of Montmorency Minks — a ‘Day of Festival,’ for which ‘coronal’ invariably lay in waiting for rhyming purposes a little further down the sonnet.

Monkey that afternoon managed to get home earlier than usual from Neuchatel, a somewhat suspicious explanation as her passport. Her eyes were popping. Jimbo was always out of the village school at three. He carried a time-table in his pocket; but it was mere pretence, since he was a little walking Bradshaw, and knew every train by heart — the Geneva Express, the Paris Rapide, the ‘omnibus’ trains, and the mountain ones that climbed the forest heights towards La Chaux de Fonds and Le Locle. Of these latter only the white puffing smoke was visible from the village, but he knew with accuracy their times of departure, their arrival, and the names of every station where they stopped. In the omnibus trains he even knew some of the guards personally, the engine-drivers too. He might be seen any day after school standing in the field beside the station, waiting for them to pass; *mecanicien* and *conducteur* were the commonest words in his whole vocabulary. When possible he passed the time of day with both of these important personages, or from the field he waved his hand and took his cap off. All engines, moreover, were ‘powerful locomotives.’ The phrase was stolen from his father — a magnificent sound it had, taking several seconds to pronounce. No day was wholly lived in vain which enabled him to turn to some one with, ‘There’s the Paris Rapide; it’s five minutes late’; or ‘That’s the Geneva omnibus. You see, it has to have a very’ — here a deep breath— ‘powerful locomotive.’

So upon this day of festival it was quite useless to talk of common things, and even the holidays acquired a very remote importance. Everybody in the village knew it. From Gygi, the solitary gendarme, to Henri Beguin, who mended boots, but had the greater distinction that he was the only man Gygi ever arrested, for periodical wild behaviour — all knew that 'Cousin Henry, father's cousin, you know,' was expected to arrive in the evening, that he was an important person in the life of London, and that he was not exactly a *pasteur*, yet shared something of a clergyman's grave splendour. Clothed in a sacerdotal atmosphere he certainly was, though it was the gravity of Jane Anne's negative description that fastened this wild ecclesiastical idea upon him.

'He's not *exactly* a clergyman,' she told the dressmaker, who for two francs every Monday afternoon sat in the kitchen and helped with the pile of indiscriminate mending,' because he has to do with rather big companies and things. But he is a serious man all the same — and most fearfully busy always.'

'We're going to meet him in the town,' said Jimbo carelessly. 'You see, the Paris Rapide doesn't stop here. We shall come back with him by the 6.20. It gets here at 6.50, so he'll be in time for supper, if it's punctual. It usually is.'

And accordingly they went to Neuchatel and met the Paris train. They met their Cousin Henry, too. Powerful locomotives and everything else were instantly forgotten when they saw their father go up to a tall thin man who jumped — yes, jumped — down the high steps on to the level platform and at once began to laugh. He had a beard like their father. 'How *will* they know which is which?' thought Jinny. They stood in everybody's way and stared. He was so tall. Daddy looked no bigger than little Beguin beside him. He had a large, hooked nose, brown skin, and keen blue eyes that took in everything at a single glance. They twinkled absurdly for so big a man. He wore rough brown tweeds and a soft felt travelling hat. He wore also square-toed English boots. He carried in one hand a shiny brown leather bag with his initials on it like a member of the Government.

The clergyman idea was destroyed in a fraction of a second, never to revive. The company promoter followed suit. Jinny experienced an entirely new sensation in her life — something none but herself had ever felt before — something romantic. 'He's like a soldier — a General,' she said to anybody who cared to listen, and she said it so loudly that many did listen. But she did not care. She stood apart from the others, staring as though it were a railway accident. This tall figure of a cousin she could fit nowhere as yet into her limited scheme of life. She admired him intensely. Yet Daddy laughed and chatted with him as if he were nothing at all! She kept outside the circle, wondering about his socks and underclothes. His beard was much neater and better trimmed than her father's. At least no crumb or bit of cotton was in it.

But Jimbo felt no awe. After a moment's hesitation, during which the passers-by butted him this way and that, he marched straight up and looked him in the face. He reached to his watch-chain only.

'I'll be your sekrity, too,' he announced, interrupting Daddy's foolishness about 'this is my youngest lad, Rogers.' Youngest lad indeed!

And Henry Rogers then stooped and kissed the lot of them. One after the other he put his big arms round them and gave them a hug that was like the hug of a bear standing on its hind legs. They took it, each in his own way, differently. Jimbo proudly; Monkey, with a smacking return kiss that somehow conveyed the note of her personality — impudence; but Jane Anne, with a grave and outraged dignity, as though in a public railway station this kind of behaviour was slightly inappropriate. She wondered for days afterwards whether she had been quite correct. He was a cousin, but still he was — a man. And she wondered what she ought to call him. 'Mr. Rogers' was not quite right, yet 'Mr. Cousin Henry' was equally ill-chosen. She decided upon a combination of her own, a kind of code-word that was affectionate yet distant: 'Cousinenry.' And she used it with an explosive directness that was almost challenge — he could accept which half he chose.

But all accepted him at once without fear. They felt, moreover, a secret and very tender thing; there was something in this big, important man that made them know he would love them for themselves; and more — that something in him had need of them. Here lay the explanation of their instant confidence and acceptance.

'What a jolly bunch you are, to be sure!' he exclaimed. 'And you're to be my secretary, are you?' he added, taking Jimbo by the shoulders. 'How splendid!'

‘*I’m* not,’ said Monkey, with a rush of laughter already too long restrained. Her manner suggested a somersault, only prevented by engines and officials.

But Jimbo was a little shocked. This sort of thing disgraced them.

‘Oh, I say!’ he exclaimed reproachfully.

‘Daddy, isn’t she awful?’ added Jane Anne under her breath, a sentence of disapproval in daily use. Her life seemed made up of apologising for her impudent sister.

‘The 6.20 starts at 6.20, you know,’ Jimbo announced. ‘The Lausanne Express has gone. Are your “baggages” registered?’ And the party moved off in a scattered and uncertain manner to buy tickets and register the luggage. They went back second class — for the first time in their lives. It was Cousin Henry who paid the difference. That sealed his position finally in their eyes. He was a millionaire. All London people went first or second class.

But Jimbo and his younger sister had noticed something else about the new arrival besides his nose and eyes and length. Even his luxurious habit of travelling second class did not impress them half as much as this other detail in his appearance. They referred to it in a whispered talk behind the shelter of the *conducteur’s* back while tickets were being punched.

‘You know,’ whispered Monkey, her eyes popping, ‘I’ve seen Cousin Henry before somewhere. I’m certain.’ She gave a little gasp.

Jimbo stared, only half believing, yet undeniably moved. Even his friend, the Guard, was temporarily neglected. ‘Where?’ he asked; ‘do you mean in a picture?’

‘No,’ she answered with decision, ‘out here, I think. In the woods or somewhere.’ She seemed vague. But her very vagueness helped him to believe. She was not inventing; he was sure of that.

The *conducteur* at that moment passed away along the train, and Cousin Henry looked straight at the pair of them. Through the open window dusk fluttered down the sky with spots of gold already on its wings.

‘What jolly stars you’ve got here,’ he said, pointing. ‘They’re like diamonds. Look, it’s a perfect network far above the Alps. By gum — what beauties!’

And as he said it he smiled. Monkey gave her brother a nudge that nearly made him cry out. He wondered what she meant, but all the same he returned the nudge significantly. For Cousin Henry, when he smiled, had plainly shown — two teeth of gold.

The children had never seen gold-capped teeth.

‘I’d like one for my collection,’ thought Jimbo, meaning a drawer that included all his loose possessions of small size. But another thing stirred in him too, vague, indefinite, far away, something he had, as it were, forgotten.

CHAPTER XII

O star benignant and serene,
  I take the good to-morrow,
That fills from verge to verge my dream,
  With all its joy and sorrow!
The old sweet spell is unforgot
  That turns to June December;
And, though the world remember not,
  Love, we would remember.
      Life and Death, W. E. HENLEY.

And Rogers went over to unpack. It was soon done. He sat at his window in the carpenter's house and enjoyed the peace. The spell of evening stole down from the woods. London and all his strenuous life seemed very far away. Bourcelles drew up beside him, opened her robe, let down her forest hair, and whispered to him with her voice of many fountains….

She lies just now within the fringe of an enormous shadow, for the sun has dipped behind the blue-domed mountains that keep back France. Small hands of scattered mist creep from the forest, fingering the vineyards that troop down towards the lake. A dog barks. Gygi, the gendarme, leaves the fields and goes home to take his uniform from its peg. Pere Langel walks among his beehives. There is a distant tinkling of cow-bells from the heights, where isolated pastures gleam like a patchwork quilt between the spread of forest; and farther down a train from Paris or Geneva, booming softly, leaves a trail of smoke against the background of the Alps where still the sunshine lingers.

But trains, somehow, do not touch the village; they merely pass it. Busy with vines, washed by its hill-fed stream, swept by the mountain winds, it lies unchallenged by the noisy world, remote, un-noticed, half forgotten. And on its outskirts stands the giant poplar that guards it — *la sentinelle* the peasants call it, because its lofty crest, rising to every wind, sends down the street first warning of any coming change. They see it bend or hear the rattle of its leaves. The *coup de Joran*, most sudden and devastating of mountain winds, is on the way from the precipice of the Creux du Van. It comes howling like artillery down the deep Gorges de l'Areuse. They run to fasten windows, collect the washing from roof and garden, drive the cattle into shelter, and close the big doors of the barns. The children clap their hands and cry to Gygi, 'Plus vite! Plus vite!' The lake turns dark. Ten minutes later it is raging with an army of white horses like the sea.

Darkness drapes the village. It comes from the whole long line of Jura, riding its troop of purple shadows — slowly curtaining out the world. For the carpenter's house stands by itself, apart. Perched upon a knoll beside his little patch of vineyard, it commands perspective. From his upper window Rogers saw and remembered….

High up against the fading sky ridges of limestone cliff shine out here and there, and upon the vast slopes of Boudry — *l'immense geant de Boudry* — lies a flung cloak of forest that knows no single seam. The smoke from *bucheron* fires, joining the scarves of mist, weaves across its shoulder a veil of lace-like pattern, and at its feet, like some great fastening button, hides the village of the same name, where Marat passed his brooding youth. Its evening lights are already twinkling. They signal across the vines to the towers of Colombier, rising with its columns of smoke and its poplars against the sheet of darkening water — Colombier, in whose castle *milord marechal Keith* had his headquarters as Governor of the Principality of Neuchatel under the King of Prussia. And, higher up, upon the flank of wooded mountains, is just visible still the great red-roofed farm of Cotendard, built by his friend Lord Wemyss, another Jacobite refugee, who had strange parties there and entertained Jean Jacques Rousseau in his exile. La Citadelle in the village was the wing of another castle he began to build, but left unfinished.

White in the gathering dusk, Rogers saw the strip of roadway where passed the gorgeous coach — *cette fameuse diligence du milord marshal Keith* — or more recent, but grimmer memory, where General Bourbaki's division of the French army, 80,000 strong, trailed in unspeakable anguish, hurrying from the Prussians. At Les Verrieres, upon the frontier, they laid down their arms, and for three consecutive days and nights the pitiful destitute procession passed down that strip of mountain road in the terrible winter of 1870-71.

Some among the peasants still hear that awful tramping in their sleep: the kindly old *vigneron* who stood in front of his chalet from dawn to sunset, giving each man bread and wine; and the woman who nursed three soldiers through black small-pox, while neighbours left food upon the wall before the house…. Memories of his boyhood crowded thick and fast. The spell of the place deepened about him with the darkness. He recalled the village postman — fragment of another romance, though a tattered and discredited one. For this postman was the descendant of that audacious pale-frenier who married Lord Wemyss' daughter, to live the life of peasants with her in a yet tinier hamlet higher up the slopes. If you asked him, he would proudly tell you, with his bullet-shaped, close-cropped head cocked impertinently on one side, how his brother, now assistant in a Paris shop, still owned the title of baron by means of which his reconciliated lordship sought eventually to cover up the unfortunate escapade. He would hand you English letters — and Scotch ones too! — with an air of covert insolence that was the joy of half the village. And on Sundays he was to be seen, garbed in knickerbockers, gaudy stockings, and sometimes high, yellowish spats, walking with his peasant girl along the very road his more spirited forbear covered in his runaway match….

The night stepped down more quickly every minute from the heights. Deep-noted bells floated upwards to him from Colombier, bringing upon the evening wind some fragrance of these faded boyhood memories. The stars began to peep above the peaks and ridges, and the mountains of the Past moved nearer. A veil of gossamer rose above the tree-tops, hiding more and more of the landscape; he just could see the slim new moon dip down to drink from her own silver cup within the darkening lake. Workmen, in twos and threes, came past the little house from their toil among the vines, and fragments of the Dalcroze songs rose to his ear — songs that the children loved, and that he had not heard for nearly a quarter of a century. Their haunting refrains completed then the spell, for all genuine spells are set to some peculiar music of their own. These Dalcroze melodies were exactly right…. The figures melted away into the single shadow of the village street. The houses swallowed them, voices, footsteps, and all.

And his eye, wandering down among the lights that twinkled against the wall of mountains, picked out the little ancient house, nestling so close beside the church that they shared a wall in common. Twenty-five years had passed since first he bowed his head beneath the wistaria that still crowned the Pension doorway. He remembered bounding up the creaking stairs. He felt he could still bound as swiftly and with as sure a step, only — he would expect less at the top now. More truly put, perhaps, he would expect less for himself. That ambition of his life was over and done with. It was for others now that his desires flowed so strongly. Mere personal aims lay behind him in a faded heap, their seductiveness exhausted…. He was a man with a Big Scheme now — a Scheme to help the world….

The village seemed a dull enough place in those days, for the big Alps beckoned beyond, and day and night he longed to climb them instead of reading dull French grammar. But now all was different. It dislocated his sense of time to find the place so curiously unchanged. The years had played some trick upon him. While he himself had altered, developed, and the rest, this village had remained identically the same, till it seemed as if no progress of the outer world need ever change it. The very people were so little altered — hair grown a little whiter, shoulders more rounded, steps here and there a trifle slower, but one and all following the old routine he knew so well as a boy.

Tante Jeanne, in particular, but for wrinkles that looked as though a night of good sound sleep would smooth them all away, was the same brave woman, still 'running' that Wistaria Pension against the burden of inherited debts and mortgages. 'We're still alive,' she had said to him, after greetings delayed a quarter of a century, 'and if we haven't got ahead much, at least we haven't gone back!' There was no more hint of complaint than this. It stirred in him a very poignant sense of admiration for the high courage that drove the ageing fighter forward still with hope and faith. No doubt she still turned the kitchen saucer that did duty for planchette, unconsciously pushing its blunted pencil towards the letters that should spell out coming help. No doubt she still wore that marvellous tea-gown garment that did duty for so many different toilettes, even wearing it when she went with goloshes and umbrella to practise Sunday's hymns every Saturday night on the wheezy church harmonium. And most likely she still made underskirts from the silk of discarded umbrellas because she loved the sound of frou-frou thus obtained, while the shape of the silk exactly adapted itself to the garment mentioned. And doubtless, too, she still gave away a whole week's profits at the slightest call of sickness in the village, and then wondered how it was the Pension did not pay…!

A voice from below interrupted his long reverie.

‘Ready for supper, Henry?’ cried his cousin up the stairs. ‘It’s past seven. The children have already left the Citadelle.’

And as the two middle-aged dreamers made their way along the winding street of darkness through the vines, one of them noticed that the stars drew down their grand old network, fastening it to the heights of Boudry and La Tourne. He did not mention it to his companion, who was wumbling away in his beard about some difficult details of his book, but the thought slipped through his mind like the trail of a flying comet: ‘I’d like to stay a long time in this village and get the people straight a bit,’ — which, had he known it, was another thought carefully paraphrased so that he should not notice it and feel alarm: ‘It will be difficult to get away from here. My feet are in that net of stars. It’s catching about my heart.’

Low in the sky a pale, witched moon of yellow watched them go….

‘The Starlight Express is making this way, I do believe,’ he thought. But perhaps he spoke the words aloud instead of thinking them.

‘Eh! What’s that you said, Henry?’ asked the other, taking it for a comment of value upon the plot of a story he had referred to.

‘Oh, nothing particular,’ was the reply. ‘But just look at those stars above La Tourne. They shine like beacons burning on the trees.’ Minks would have called them ‘braziers.’

‘They are rather bright, yes,’ said the other, disappointed. ‘The air here is so very clear.’ And they went up the creaking wooden stairs to supper in the Wistaria Pension as naturally as though the years had lifted them behind the mountains of the past in a single bound — twenty-five years ago.

CHAPTER XIII

Near where yonder evening star
  Makes a glory in the air,
Lies a land dream — found and far
  Where it is light always.
There those lovely ghosts repair
  Who in sleep's enchantment are,
In Cockayne dwell all things fair —
  (But it is far away).
Cockayne Country, Agnes Duclaux.

The first stage in Cousinenry's introduction took place, as has been seen, at a railway station; but further stages were accomplished later. For real introductions are not completed by merely repeating names and shaking hands, still less by a hurried kiss. The ceremony had many branches too — departments, as it were. It spread itself, with various degrees, over many days as opportunity offered, and included Gygi, the gendarme, as well as the little troop of retired governesses who came to the Pension for their mid-day dinner. Before two days were passed he could not go down the village street without lifting his cap at least a dozen times. Bourcelles was so very friendly; no room for strangers there; a new-comer might remain a mystery, but he could not be unknown. Rogers found his halting French becoming rapidly fluent again. And every one knew so much about him — more almost than he knew himself.

At the Den next day, on the occasion of their first tea together, he realised fully that introduction — to the children at any rate — involved a kind of initiation.

It seemed to him that the room was full of children, crowds of them, an intricate and ever shifting maze. For years he had known no dealings with the breed, and their movements now were so light and rapid that it rather bewildered him. They were in and out between the kitchen, corridor, and bedroom like bits of a fluid puzzle. One moment a child was beside him, and the next, just as he had a suitable sentence ready to discharge at it, the place was vacant. A minute later ‘it’ appeared through another door, carrying the samovar, or was on the roof outside struggling with Riquette.

‘Oh, there you are!’ he exclaimed. ‘How you do dart about, to be sure!’

And the answer, if any, was invariably of the cheeky order —

‘One can’t keep still here; there’s not room enough.’

Or, worse still —

‘I must get past you somehow!’ This, needless to say, from Monkey, who first made sure her parents were out of earshot.

But he liked it, for he recognised this proof that he was accepted and made one of the circle. These were tentative invitations to play. It made him feel quite larky, though at first he found his machinery of larking rather stiff. The wheels required oiling. And his first attempt to chase Miss Impudence resulted in a collision with Jane Anne carrying a great brown pot of home-made jam for the table. There was a dreadful sound. He had stepped on the cat at the same time.

His introduction to the cat was the immediate result, performed solemnly by Jimbo, and watched by Jinny, still balancing the jar of jam, with an expression of countenance that was half amazement and half shock. Collisions with creatures of his size and splendour were a new event to her.

‘I must advertise for help if it occurs again!’ she exclaimed.

‘That’s Mere Riquette, you know,’ announced Jimbo formally to his cousin, standing between them in his village school blouse, hands tucked into his belt.

‘I heard her, yes.’ From a distance the cat favoured him with a single comprehensive glance, then turned away and disappeared beneath the sofa. She, of course, reserved her opinion.

‘It didn’t REALLY hurt her. She always squeals like that.’

‘Perhaps she likes it,’ suggested Rogers.

‘She likes better tickling behind the ear,’ Jimbo thought, anxious to make him feel all right, and then plunged into a description of her general habits — how she jumped at the door handles when she wanted to come in, slept on his bed at night, and looked for a saucer in a particular corner of the kitchen floor. This last detail was a compliment. He meant to imply that Cousin Henry might like to see to it himself sometimes, although it had always been his own special prerogative hitherto.

‘I shall know in future, then,’ said Rogers earnestly, showing, by taking the information seriously, that he possessed the correct instinct.

‘Oh yes, it’s quite easy. You’ll soon learn it,’ spoken with feet wide apart and an expression of careless importance, as who should say, ‘What a sensible man you are! Still, these *are* little things one has to be careful about, you know.’

Mother poured out tea, somewhat laboriously, as though the exact proportions of milk, hot water, and sugar each child took were difficult to remember. Each had a special cup, moreover. Her mind, ever crammed with a thousand domestic details which she seemed to carry all at once upon the surface, ready for any sudden question, found it difficult to concentrate upon the teapot. Her mind was ever worrying over these. Her husband was too vague to be of practical help. When any one spoke to her, she would pause in the middle of the operation, balancing a cup in one hand and a milk jug in the other, until the question was properly answered, every t crossed and every i dotted. There was no mistaking what Mother meant — provided you had the time to listen. She had that careful thoroughness which was no friend of speed. The result was that hands were stretched out for second cups long before she had completed the first round. Her own tea began usually when everybody else had finished — and lasted — well, some time.

‘Here’s a letter I got,’ announced Jimbo, pulling a very dirty scrap of paper from a pocket hidden beneath many folds of blouse. ‘You’d like to see it.’ He handed it across the round table, and Rogers took it politely. ‘Thank you very much; it came by this morning’s post, did it?’

‘Oh, no,’ was the reply, as though a big correspondence made the date of little importance. ‘Not by *that* post.’ But Monkey blurted out with the jolly laughter that was her characteristic sound, ‘It came ages ago. He’s had it in his pocket for weeks.’

Jimbo, ignoring the foolish interruption, watched his cousin's face, while Jinny gave her sister a secret nudge that every one could see.

'Darling Jimbo,' was what Rogers read, 'I have been to school, and did strokes and prickings and marched round. I am like you now. A fat kiss and a hug, your loving—' The signature was illegible, lost amid several scratchy lines in a blot that looked as if a beetle had expired after violent efforts in a pool of ink.

'Very nice indeed, very well put,' said Rogers, handing it gravely back again, while some one explained that the writer, aged five, had just gone to a kindergarten school in Geneva. 'And have you answered it?'

'Oh, yes. I answered it the same day, you see.' It was, perhaps, a foolish letter for a man to have in his pocket. Still — it was a letter.

'Good! What a capital secretary you'll make me.' And the boy's flush of pleasure almost made the dish of butter rosy.

'Oh, take another; take a lot, please,' Jimbo said, handing the cakes that Rogers divined were a special purchase in his honour; and while he did so, managed to slip one later on to the plates of Monkey and her sister, who sat on either side of him. The former gobbled it up at once, barely keeping back her laughter, but Jinny, with a little bow, put hers carefully aside on the edge of her plate, not knowing quite the 'nice' thing to do with it. Something in the transaction seemed a trifle too familiar perhaps. She stole a glance at mother, but mother was filling the cups and did not notice. Daddy could have helped her, only he would say 'What?' in a loud voice, and she would have to repeat her question for all to hear. Later, she ate the cake in very small morsels, a little uncomfortably.

It was a jolly, merry, cosy tea, as teas in the Den always were. Daddy wumbled a number of things in his beard to which no one need reply unless they felt like it. The usual sentences were not heard to-day: 'Monkey, what a mouthful! You *must* not shovel in your food like that!' or, 'Don't *gurgle* your tea down; swallow it quietly, like a little lady'; or, 'How often have you been told *not* to drink with your mouth full; this is not the servants' hall, remember!' There were no signs of contretemps of any kind, nothing was upset or broken, and the cakes went easily round, though not a crumb was left over.

But the entire time Mr. Rogers was subjected to the keenest scrutiny imaginable. Nothing he did escaped two pairs of eyes at least. Signals were flashed below as well as above the table. These signals were of the kind birds know perhaps — others might be aware of their existence if they listened very attentively, yet might not interpret them. No Comanche ever sent more deft communications unobserved to his brother across a camp fire.

Yet nothing was done visibly; no crumb was flicked; and the table hid the pressure of the toe which, fortunately, no one intercepted. Monkey, at any rate, had eyes in both her feet, and Jimbo knew how to keep his counsel without betrayal. But inflections of the voice did most of the work — this, with flashes of brown and blue lights, conveyed the swift despatches.

'My underneath goes out to him,' Monkey telegraphed to her brother while she asked innocently for 'jam, please, Jimbo'; and he replied, 'Oh, he's all right, I think, but better not go too fast,' as he wiped the same article from his chin and caught her big brown eye upon him. 'He'll be our Leader,' she conveyed later by the way she stirred her cup of tea-hot-water-milk, 'when once we've got him "out" and taught him'; and Jimbo offered and accepted his own resignation of the coveted, long-held post by the way he let his eyelid twiddle in answer to her well-directed toe-nudge out of sight.

This, in a brief resume, was the purport of the give and take of numerous despatches between them during tea, while outwardly Mother — and Father, too, when he thought about it — were delighted with their perfect company manners.

Jane Anne, outside all this flummery, went her own way upon an even keel. She watched him closely too, but not covertly. She stared him in the face, and imitated his delicate way of eating. Once or twice she called him 'Mr. Rogers,' for this had a grown-up flavour about it that appealed to her, and 'Cousin Henry' did not come easily to her at first. She could not forget that she had left the *ecole secondaire* and was on her way to a Geneva Pension where she would attend an *ecole menagere*. And the bursts of laughter that greeted her polite 'Mr. Rogers, did you have a nice journey, and do you like Bourcelles?' — in a sudden pause that caught Mother balancing cup and teapot in mid-air — puzzled her a good deal. She liked his quiet answer though— 'Thank you, Miss Campden, I think both quite charming.' He did not laugh. He understood, whatever the others might think. She had wished to correct the levity of the younger brother and sister, and he evidently appreciated her intentions. He seemed a nice man, a very nice man.

Tea once over, she carried off the loaded tray to the kitchen to do the washing-up. Jimbo and Monkey had disappeared. They always vanished about this time, but once the unenvied operation was safely under way, they emerged from their hiding-places again. No one ever saw them go. They were gone before the order, 'Now, children, help your sister take the things away,' was even issued. By the time they re-appeared Jinny was halfway through it and did not want to be disturbed.

'Never mind, Mother,' she said, 'they're chronic. They're only little busy Highlanders!' For 'chronic' was another catch-word at the moment, and sometimes by chance she used it appropriately. The source of 'busy Highlanders' was a mystery known only to herself. And resentment, like jealousy, was a human passion she never felt and did not understand. Jane Anne was the spirit of unselfishness incarnate. It was to her honour, but made her ineffective as a personality.

Daddy lit his big old meerschaum — the 'squelcher' Jinny called it, because of its noise — and mooned about the room, making remarks on literature or politics, while Mother picked a work-basket cleverly from a dangerously overloaded shelf, and prepared to mend and sew. The windows were wide open, and framed the picture of snowy Alps, now turning many-tinted in the slanting sunshine. (Riquette, gorged with milk, appeared from the scullery and inspected knees and chairs and cushions that seemed available, selecting finally the best arm-chair and curling up to sleep. Rogers smoked a cigarette, pleased and satisfied like the cat.) A hush fell on the room. It was the hour of peace between tea and the noisy Pension supper that later broke the spell. So quiet was it that the mouse began to nibble in the bedroom walls, and even peeped through the cracks it knew between the boards. It came out, flicked its whiskers, and then darted in again like lightning. Jane Anne, rinsing out the big teapot in the scullery, frightened it. Presently she came in softly, put the lamp ready for her mother's needle, in case of need later, gave a shy queer look at 'Mr. Rogers' and her father, both of whom nodded absent-mindedly to her, and then went on tip-toe out of the room. She was bound for the village shop to buy methylated spirits, sugar, blotting-paper, and — a 'plaque' of Suchard chocolate for her Cousinenry.

The forty centimes for this latter was a large item in her savings; but she gave no thought to that. What sorely perplexed her as she hurried down the street was whether he would like it 'milk' or 'plain.' In the end she bought both.

Down the dark corridor of the Citadelle, before she left, she did not hear the muffled laughter among the shadows, nor see the movement of two figures that emerged together from the farther end.

'He'll be on the sofa by now. Shall we go for him?' It was the voice of Monkey.

'Leave it to me.' Jimbo still meant to be leader so far as these two were concerned at any rate. Let come later what might.

'Better get Mother out of the way first, though.'

'Mother's nothing. She's sewing and things,' was the reply. He understood the conditions thoroughly. He needed no foolish advice.

'He's awfully easy. You saw the two gold teeth. It's him, I'm sure.'

'Of course he's easy, only a person doesn't want to be pulled about after tea,' in the tone of a man who meant to feel his way a bit.

Clearly they had talked together more than once since the arrival at the station. Jimbo made up for ignorance by decision and sublime self-confidence. He answered no silly questions, but listened, made up his mind, and acted. He was primed to the brim — a born leader.

'Better tell him that we'll come for him to-night,' the girl insisted. 'He'll be less astonished then. You can tell he dreams a lot by his manner. Even now he's only half awake.'

The conversation was in French — school and village French. Her brother ignored the question with 'va te cacher!' He had no doubts himself.

'Just wait a moment while I tighten my belt,' he observed. 'You can tell it by his eyes,' he added, as Monkey urged him forward to the door. 'I know a good dreamer when I see one.'

Then fate helped them. The door against their noses opened and Daddy came out, followed by his cousin. All four collided.

‘Oh, is the washing-up finished?’ asked Monkey innocently, quick as a flash.

‘How you startled me!’ exclaimed Daddy. ‘You really must try to be less impetuous. You’d better ask Mother about the washing,’ he repeated, ‘she’s in there sewing.’ His thoughts, it seemed, were just a trifle confused. Plates and linen both meant washing, and sometimes hair and other stuff as well.

‘There’s no light, you see, yet,’ whispered Jimbo. A small lamp usually hung upon the wall. Jane Anne at that moment came out carrying it and asking for a match.

‘No starlight, either,’ added Monkey quickly, giving her cousin a little nudge. ‘It’s all upwumbled, or whatever Daddy calls it.’

The look he gave her might well have suppressed a grown-up person— ‘grande personne,’ as Jimbo termed it, translating literally — but on Monkey it had only slight effect. Her irrepressible little spirit concealed springs few could regulate. Even avoirdupois increased their resiliency the moment it was removed. But Jimbo checked her better than most. She did look a trifle ashamed — for a second.

‘Can’t you wait?’ he whispered. ‘Daddy’ll spoil it if you begin it here. How you do fidget!’

They passed all together out into the yard, the men in front, the two children just behind, walking warily.

Then came the separation, yet none could say exactly how it was accomplished. For separations are curious things at the best of times, the forces that effect them as mysterious as wind that blows a pair of butterflies across a field. Something equally delicate was at work. One minute all four stood together by the fountain, and the next Daddy was walking downhill towards the carpenter’s house alone, while the other three were already twenty metres up the street that led to the belt of forest.

Jimbo, perhaps, was responsible for the deft manoeuvring. At any rate, he walked beside his big cousin with the air of a successful aide-de- camp. But Monkey, too, seemed flushed with victory, rolling along — her rotundity ever suggested rolling rather than the taking of actual steps — as if she led a prisoner.

‘Don’t bother your cousin, children,’ their father’s voice was heard again faintly in the distance. Then the big shoulder of La Citadelle hid him from view and hearing.

And so the sight was seen of these three, arm in arm, passing along the village street in the twilight. Gygi saw them go and raised his blue, peaked cap; and so did Henri Favre, standing in the doorway of his little shop, as he weighed the possible value of the new customer for matches, chocolate, and string — the articles English chiefly bought; and likewise Alfred Sandoz, looking a moment through the window of his cabaret, the Guillaume Tell, saw them go past like shadows towards the woods, and observed to his carter friend across the table, ‘They choose queer times for expeditions, these English, *ouah!*’

‘It’s their climate makes them like that,’ put in his wife, a touch of pity in her voice. Her daughter swept the Den and lit the *fourneau* for *la famille anglaise* in the mornings, and the mother, knowing a little English, spelt out the weather reports in the *Daily Surprise* she sometimes brought.

Meanwhile the three travellers had crossed the railway line, where Jimbo detained them for a moment’s general explanation, and passed the shadow of the sentinel poplar. The cluster of spring leaves rustled faintly on its crest. The village lay behind them now. They turned a moment to look back upon the stretch of vines and fields that spread towards the lake. From the pool of shadow where the houses nestled rose the spire of the church, a strong dark line against the fading sunset. Thin columns of smoke tried to draw it after them. Lights already twinkled on the farther shore, five miles across, and beyond these rose dim white forms of the tremendous ghostly Alps. Dusk slowly brought on darkness.

Jimbo began to hum the song of the village he had learned in school —

P’tit Bourcelles sur sa colline
De partout a gentille mine;
On y pratique avec success
L’exploitation du francais,

and the moment it was over, his sister burst out with the question that had been buzzing inside her head the whole time —

‘How long are you going to stay?’ she said, as they climbed higher along the dusty road.

‘Oh, about a week,’ he told her, giving the answer already used a dozen times. ‘I’ve just come out for a holiday — first holiday I’ve had for twenty years. Fancy that! Pretty long time, eh?’

They simply didn’t believe that; they let it pass — politely.

‘London’s stuffy, you know, just now,’ he added, aware that he was convicted of exaggeration. ‘Besides, it’s spring.’

‘There are millions of flowers here,’ Jimbo covered his mistake kindly, ‘millions and millions. Aren’t there, Monkey?’

‘Oh, billions.’

‘Of course,’ he agreed.

‘And more than anywhere else in the whole world.’

‘It looks like that,’ said Cousin Henry, as proudly as they said it themselves. And they told him how they picked clothes-baskets full of the wild lily of the valley that grew upon the Boudry slopes, hepaticas, periwinkles, jonquils, blue and white violets, as well as countless anemones, and later, the big yellow marguerites.

‘Then how long are you going to stay — *really*?’ inquired Monkey once again, as though the polite interlude were over. It was a delicate way of suggesting that he had told an untruth. She looked up straight into his face. And, meeting her big brown eyes, he wondered a little — for the first time — how he should reply.

‘Daddy came here meaning to stay only six months — first.’

‘When I was littler,’ Jimbo put in.

‘ —— and stayed here all this time — four years.’

‘I hope to stay a week or so — just a little holiday, you know,’ he said at length, giving the answer purposely. But he said it without conviction, haltingly. He felt that they divined the doubt in him. They guessed his thought along the hands upon his arm, as a horse finds out its rider from the touch upon the reins. On either side big eyes watched and judged him; but the brown ones put a positive enchantment in his blood. They shone so wonderfully in the dusk.

‘Longer than that, I think,’ she told him, her own mind quite made up. ‘It’s not so easy to get away from.’

‘You mean it?’ he asked seriously. ‘It makes one quite nervous.’

‘There’s such a lot to do here,’ she said, still keeping her eyes fixed upon his face till he felt the wonder in him become a little unmanageable. ‘You’ll never get finished in a week.’

‘My secretary,’ he stammered, ‘will help me,’ and Jimbo nodded, fastening both hands upon his arm, while Monkey indulged in a little gust of curious laughter, as who should say ‘He who laughs last, laughs best.’

They entered the edge of the forest. Hepaticas watched them with their eyes of blue. Violets marked their tread. The frontiers of the daylight softly closed behind them. A thousand trees opened a way to let them pass, and moss twelve inches thick took their footsteps silently as birds. They came presently to a little clearing where the pines stood in a circle and let in a space of sky. Looking up, all three saw the first small stars in it. A wild faint scent of coming rain was in the air — those warm spring rains that wash the way for summer. And a signal flashed unseen from the blue eyes to the brown.

‘This way,’ said Jimbo firmly. ‘There’s an armchair rock where you can rest and get your wind a bit,’ and, though Rogers had not lost his wind, he let himself be led, and took the great grey boulder for his chair. Instantly, before he had arranged his weight among the points and angles, both his knees were occupied.

‘By Jove,’ flashed through his mind. ‘They’ve brought me here on purpose. I’m caught!’

A tiny pause followed.

‘Now, look here, you little Schemers, I want to know what — —’

But the sentence was never finished. The hand of Monkey was already pointing upwards to the space of sky. He saw the fringe of pine tops fencing it about with their feathery, crested ring, and in the centre shone faint, scattered stars. Over the fence of mystery that surrounds common objects wonder peeped with one eye like a star.

‘Cousinenry,’ he heard close to his ear, so soft it almost might have been those tree-tops whispering to the night, ‘do you know anything about a Star Cave — a place where the starlight goes when there are no eyes or puddles about to catch it?’

A Star Cave! How odd! His own boyhood’s idea. He must have mentioned it to his cousin perhaps, and *he* had told the children. And all that was in him of nonsense, poetry, love rose at a bound as he heard it. He felt them settle themselves more comfortably upon his knees. He forgot to think about the points and angles. Here surely a gateway was opening before his very feet, a gateway into that world of fairyland the old clergyman had spoken about. A great wave of tenderness swept him — a flood strong and deep, as he had felt it long ago upon the hill of that Kentish village. The golden boyhood’s mood rushed over him once more with all its original splendour. It took a slightly different form, however. He knew better how to direct it for one thing. He pressed the children closer to his side.

‘A what?’ he asked, speaking low as they did. ‘Do I know a what?’

‘A cave where lost starlight collects,’ Monkey repeated, ‘a Star Cave.’

And Jimbo said aloud the verses he had already learned by heart. While his small voice gave the words, more than a little mixed, a bird high up among the boughs woke from its beauty sleep and sang. The two sounds mingled. But the singing of the bird brought back the scenery of the Vicarage garden, and with it the strange, passionate things the old clergyman had said. The two scenes met in his mind, passed in and out of one another like rings of smoke, interchanged, and finally formed a new picture all their own, where flowers danced upon a carpet of star-dust that glittered in mid-air.

He knew some sudden, deep enchantment of the spirit. The Fairyland the world had lost spread all about him, and — he had the children close. The imaginative faculty that for years had invented ingenious patents, woke in force, and ran headlong down far sweeter channels — channels that fastened mind, heart, and soul together in a single intricate network of soft belief. He remembered the dusk upon the Crayfield lawns.

‘Of course I know a Star Cave,’ he said at length, when Jimbo had finished his recitation, and Monkey had added the details their father had told them. ‘I know the very one your Daddy spoke about. It’s not far from where we’re sitting. It’s over there.’ He pointed up to the mountain heights behind them, but Jimbo guided his hand in the right direction — towards the Boudry slopes where the forests dip upon the precipices of the Areuse.

‘Yes, that’s it — exactly,’ he said, accepting the correction instantly; ‘only *I* go to the top of the mountains first so as to slide down with the river of starlight.’

‘We go straight,’ they told him in one breath.

‘Because you’ve got more star-stuff in your eyes than I have, and find the way better,’ he explained.

That touched their sense of pity. ‘But you can have ours,’ they cried, ‘we’ll share it.’

‘No,’ he answered softly, ‘better keep your own. I can get plenty now. Indeed, to tell the truth — though it’s a secret between ourselves, remember — that’s the real reason I’ve come out here. I want to get a fresh supply to take back to London with me. One needs a fearful lot in London — —’

‘But there’s no sun in London to melt it,’ objected Monkey instantly.

‘There’s fog though, and it gets lost in fog like ink in blotting- paper. There’s never enough to go round. I’ve got to collect an awful lot before I go back.’

‘That’ll take more than a week,’ she said triumphantly.

They fastened themselves closer against him, like limpets on a rock.

‘I told you there was lots to do here,’ whispered Monkey again.
‘You’ll never get it done in a week.’

‘And how will you take it back?’ asked Jimbo in the same breath. The answer went straight to the boy’s heart.

‘In a train, of course. I’ve got an express train here on purpose — —’

‘The “Rapide”?’ he interrupted, his blue eyes starting like flowers from the earth.

‘Quicker far than that. I’ve got — —’

They stared so hard and so expectantly, it was almost like an interruption. The bird paused in its rushing song to listen too.

‘ —— a Starlight Express,’ he finished, caught now in the full tide of fairyland. ‘It came here several nights ago. It’s being loaded up as full as ever it can carry. I’m to drive it back again when once it’s ready.’

‘Where is it now?’

‘Who’s loading it?’

‘How fast does it go? Are there accidents and collisions?’

‘How do you find the way?’

‘May I drive it with you?’

‘Tell us exactly everything in the world about it — at once!’

Questions poured in a flood about him, and his imagination leaped to their answering. Above them the curtain of the Night shook out her million stars while they lay there talking with bated breath together. On every single point he satisfied them, and himself as well. He told them all — his visit to the Manor House, the sprites he found there still alive and waiting as he had made them in his boyhood, their songs and characters, the Dustman, Sweep, and Lamplighter, the Laugher, and the Woman of the Haystack, the blue-eyed Guard ——

‘But now her eyes are brown, aren’t they?’ Monkey asked, peering very close into his face. At the same moment she took his heart and hid it deep away among her tumbling hair.

‘I was coming to that. They’re brown now, of course, because in this different atmosphere brown eyes see better than blue in the dark. The colours of signals vary in different countries.

‘And I’m the *mecanicien*,’ cried Jimbo. ‘I drive the engine.’

‘And I’m your stoker,’ he agreed, ‘because here we burn wood instead of coal, and I’m director in a wood-paving company and so know all about it.’

They did not pause to dissect his logic — but just tore about full speed with busy plans and questionings. He began to wonder how in the world he would satisfy them — and satisfy himself as well! — when the time should come to introduce them to Express and Cave and Passengers. For if he failed in that, the reality of the entire business must fall to the ground. Yet the direct question did not come. He wondered more and more. Neither child luckily insisted on immediate tangible acquaintance. They did not even hint about it. So far the whole thing had gone splendidly and easily, like floating a new company with the rosiest prospectus in the world; but the moment must arrive when profits and dividends would have to justify mere talk. Concrete results would be demanded. If not forthcoming, where would his position be?

Yet, still the flood of questions, answers, explanations flowed on without the critical sentence making its appearance. He had led them well — so far. How in the world, though, was he to keep it up, and provide definite result at the end?

Then suddenly the truth dawned upon him. It was not he who led after all; it was they. He was being led. They knew. They understood. The reins of management lay in their small capable hands, and he had never really held them at all. Most cleverly, with utmost delicacy, they had concealed from him his real position. They were Directors, he the merest shareholder, useful only for 'calls.' The awkward question that he feared would never come, but instead he would receive instructions. 'Keep close to the children; they will guide you.' The words flashed back. He was a helpless prisoner; but had only just discovered the fact. He supplied the funds; they did the construction. Their plans and schemes netted his feet in fairyland just as surely as the weight of their little warm, soft bodies fastened him to the boulder where he sat. He could not move. He could not go further without their will and leadership.

But his captivity was utterly delightful to him….

The sound of a deep bell from the Colombier towers floated in to them between the trees. The children sprang from his knees. He rose slowly, a little cramped and stiff.

'Half-past six,' said Jimbo. 'We must go back for supper.'

He stood there a moment, stretching, while the others waited, staring up at him as though he were a tree. And he felt like a big tree; they were two wild-flowers his great roots sheltered down below.

And at that moment, in the little pause before they linked up arms and started home again, the Question of Importance came, though not in the way he had expected it would come.

‘Cousinenry, do you sleep very tightly at night, please?’ Monkey asked it, but Jimbo stepped up nearer to watch the reply.

‘Like a top,’ he said, wondering.

Signals he tried vainly to intercept flashed between the pair of them.

‘Why do you ask?’ as nothing further seemed forthcoming.

‘Oh, just to know,’ she explained. ‘It’s all right.’

‘Yes, it’s quite all right like that,’ added Jimbo. And without more ado they took his arms and pulled him out of the forest.

And Henry Rogers heard something deep, deep down within himself echo the verdict.

‘I think it is all right.’

On the way home there were no puddles, but there were three pairs of eyes — and the stars were uncommonly thick overhead. The children asked him almost as many questions as there were clusters of them between the summits of Boudry and La Tourne. All three went floundering in that giant Net. It was so different, too, from anything they had been accustomed to. Their father’s stories, answers, explanations, and the like, were ineffective because they always felt he did not quite believe them himself even while he gave them. He did not think he believed them, that is. But Cousin Henry talked of stars and star- stuff as though he had some in his pocket at the moment. And, of course, he had. For otherwise they would not have listened. He could not have held their attention.

They especially liked the huge, ridiculous words he used, because such words concealed great mysteries that pulsed with wonder and exquisitely wound them up. Daddy made things too clear. The bones of impossibility were visible. They saw thin nakedness behind the explanations, till the sense of wonder faded. They were not babies to be fed with a string of one-syllable words!

Jimbo kept silence mostly, his instinct ever being to conceal his ignorance; but Monkey talked fifteen to the dozen, filling the pauses with long ‘ohs’ and bursts of laughter and impudent observations. Yet her cheeky insolence never crossed the frontier where it could be resented. Her audacity stopped short of impertinence.

‘There’s a point beyond which—’ her cousin would say gravely, when she grew more daring than usual; and, while answering ‘It’ll stick into you, then, not into me,’ she yet withdrew from the borders of impertinence at once.

‘What is star-stuff really then?’ she asked.

‘The primordial substance of the universe,’ he answered solemnly, no whit ashamed of his inaccuracy.

‘Ah yes!’ piped Jimbo, quietly. *Ecole primaire* he understood. This must be something similar.

‘But what does it do, I mean, and why is it good for people to have it in them — on them — whatever it is?’ she inquired.

‘It gives sympathy and insight; it’s so awfully subtle and delicate,’ he answered. ‘A little of it travels down on every ray and soaks down into you. It makes you feel inclined to stick to other people and understand them. That’s sympathy.’

‘*Sympathie*,’ said Jimbo for his sister’s benefit apparently, but in reality because he himself was barely treading water.

‘But sympathy,’ the other went on, ‘is no good without insight — which means seeing things as others see them — from inside. That’s insight—’

‘Inside sight,’ she corrected him.

‘That’s it. You see, the first stuff that existed in the universe was this star-stuff — nebulae. Having nothing else to stick to, it stuck to itself, and so got thicker. It whirled in vortices. It grew together in sympathy, for sympathy brings together. It whirled and twirled round itself till it got at last into solid round bodies — worlds — stars. It passed, that is, from mere dreaming into action. And when the rays soak into you, they change your dreaming into action. You feel the desire to do things — for others.’

‘Ah! yes,’ repeated Jimbo, ‘like that.’

‘You must be full of vorty seas, then, because you’re so long,’ said Monkey, ‘but you’ll never grow into a solid round body — —’

He took a handful of her hair and smothered the remainder of the sentence.

‘The instant a sweet thought is born in your mind,’ he continued, ‘the heavenly stables send their starry messengers to harness it for use. A ray, perhaps, from mighty Sirius picks it out of your heart at birth.’

‘Serious!’ exclaimed Jimbo, as though the sun were listening.

‘Sirius — another sun, that is, far bigger than our own — a perfect giant, yet so far away you hardly notice him.’

The boy clasped his dirty fingers and stared hard. The sun *was* listening.

‘Then what I *think* is known — like that — all over the place?’ he asked. He held himself very straight indeed.

‘Everywhere,’ replied Cousinenry gravely. ‘The stars flash your thoughts over the whole universe. None are ever lost. Sooner or later they appear in visible shape. Some one, for instance, must have thought this flower long ago’ — he stooped and picked a blue hepatica at their feet— ‘or it couldn’t be growing here now.’

Jimbo accepted the statement with his usual gravity.

‘Then I shall always think enormous and tremendous things — powerful locomotives, like that and — and — —’

‘The best is to think kind little sweet things about other people,’ suggested the other. ‘You see the results quicker then.’

‘Mais oui,’ was the reply, ‘je pourrai faire ca au meme temps, n’est- ce pas?’

‘Parfaitemong,’ agreed his big cousin.

‘There’s no room in her for inside sight,’ observed Monkey as a portly dame rolled by into the darkness. ‘You can’t tell her front from her back.’ It was one of the governesses.

‘We’ll get her into the cave and change all that,’ her cousin said reprovingly. ‘You must never judge by outside alone. Puddings should teach you that.’

But no one could reprove Monkey without running a certain risk.

‘We don’t have puddings here,’ she said, ‘we have dessert — sour oranges and apples.’

She flew from his side and vanished down the street and into the Citadelle courtyard before he could think of anything to say. A shooting star flashed at the same moment behind the church tower, vanishing into the gulf of Boudry’s shadow. They seemed to go at the same pace together.

‘Oh, I say!’ said Jimbo sedately, ‘you must punish her for that, you know. Shall I come with you to the carpenter’s?’ he added, as they stood a moment by the fountain. ‘There’s just ten minutes to wash and brush your hair for supper.’

‘I think I can find my way alone,’ he answered, ‘thank you all the same.’

‘It’s nothing,’ he said, lifting his cap as the village fashion was, and watching his cousin’s lengthy figure vanish down the street.

‘We’ll meet at the Pension later,’ the voice came back, ‘and in the morning I shall have a lot of correspondence to attend to. Bring your shorthand book and lots of pencils, mind.’

‘How many?’

‘Oh, half a dozen will do.’

The boy turned in and hurried after his sister. But he was so busy collecting all the pencils and paper he could find that he forgot to brush his hair, and consequently appeared at the supper table with a head like a tangled blackberry bush. His eyes were bright as stars.

CHAPTER XIV

O pure one, take thy seat in the barque of the Sun,
And sail thou over the sky.
Sail thou with the imperishable stars,
Sail thou with the unwearied stars.
Pyramid Texts, Dynasty VI.

But Henry Rogers ran the whole two hundred yards to his lodgings in the carpenter's house. He ran as though the entire field of brilliant stars were at his heels. There was bewilderment, happiness, exhilaration in his blood. He had never felt so light-hearted in his life. He felt exactly fifteen years of age — and a half. The half was added to ensure a good, safe margin over the other two.

But he was late for supper too — later than the children, for first he jotted down some notes upon the back of an envelope. He wrote them at high speed, meaning to correct them later, but the corrections were never made. Later, when he came to bed, the envelope had been tidied away by the careful housewife into the dustbin. And he was ashamed to ask for them. The carpenter's wife read English.

'Pity,' he said to himself. 'I don't believe Minks could have done it better!'

The energy that went to the making of those 'notes' would have run down different channels a few years ago. It would have gone into some ingenious patent. The patent, however, might equally have gone into the dustbin. There is an enormous quantity of misdirected energy pouring loose about the world!

The notes had run something like this —

O children, open your arms to me,
Let your hair fall over my eyes;
Let me sleep a moment — and then awake
In your Gardens of sweet Surprise!
For the grown-up folk
Are a wearisome folk,

And they laugh my fancies to scorn,
My fun and my fancies to scorn.

O children, open your hearts to me,
And tell me your wonder-thoughts;
Who lives in the palace inside your brain?
Who plays in its outer courts?
Who hides in the hours To-morrow holds?
Who sleeps in your yesterdays?
Who tiptoes along past the curtained folds
Of the shadow that twilight lays?

O children, open your eyes to me,
And tell me your visions too;
Who squeezes the sponge when the salt tears flow
To dim their magical blue?
Who draws up their blinds when the sun peeps in?
Who fastens them down at night?
Who brushes the fringe of their lace-veined lids?
Who trims their innocent light?

Then, children, I beg you, sing low to me,
And cover my eyes with your hands;
O kiss me again till I sleep and dream
That I'm lost in your fairylands;
For the grown-up folk
Are a troublesome folk,
And the book of their childhood is torn,
Is blotted, and crumpled, and torn!

Supper at the Pension dissipated effectively the odd sense of enchantment to which he had fallen a victim, but it revived again with a sudden rush when Jimbo and his sister came up at half-past eight to say good-night. It began when the little fellow climbed up to plant a resounding kiss upon his lips, and it caught him fullest when Monkey's arms were round his neck, and he heard her whisper in his ear —

'Sleep as tightly as you can, remember, and don't resist. We'll come later to find you.' Her brown eyes were straight in front of his own. Goodness, how they shone! Old Sirius and Aldebaran had certainly left a ray in each.

‘Hope you don’t get any longer when you’re asleep!’ she added, giving him a sly dig in the ribs — then was gone before he could return it, or ask her what she meant by ‘we’ll find you later.’

‘And don’t say a word to Mother,’ was the last thing he heard as she vanished down the stairs.

Slightly confused, he glanced down at the aged pumps he happened to have on, and noticed that one bow was all awry and loose. He stooped to fidget with it, and Mother caught him in the act.

‘I’ll stitch it on for you,’ she said at once. ‘It won’t take a minute. One of the children can fetch it in the morning.’

But he was ashamed to add to her endless sewing. Like some female Sisyphus, she seemed always pushing an enormous needle through a mountain of clothes that grew higher each time she reached the top.

‘I always wear it like that,’ he assured her gravely, his thoughts still busy with two other phrases—’ find you’ and ‘sleep tightly.’ What in the world could they mean? Did the children really intend to visit him at night? They seemed so earnest about it. Of course it was all nonsense. And yet —— !

‘You mustn’t let them bother you too much,’ he heard their mother saying, her voice sounding a long way off. ‘They’re so wildly happy to have some one to play with.’

‘That’s how I like them,’ he answered vaguely, referring half to the pumps and half to the children. ‘They’re no trouble at all, believe me.’

‘I’m afraid we’ve spoilt them rather — —’

‘But — not at all,’ he murmured, still confused. ‘They’re only a little loose — er — lively, I mean. That’s how they should be.’

And outside all heard their laughing voices dying down the street as they raced along to the Citadelle for bed. It was Monkey’s duty to see her brother safely in. Ten minutes later Mother would follow to tell them tuck-up stories and hear their prayers.

‘Excuse me! Have you got a hot-water bottle?’ asked a sudden jerky voice, and he turned with a start to see Jane Anne towering beside him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he answered, ‘but I don’t carry such things about with me.’ He imagined she was joking, then saw that it was very serious.

She looked puzzled a moment. ‘I meant — would you like one? Everybody uses them here.’ She thought all grown-ups used hot-water bottles.

He hesitated a second. The child looked as though she would produce one from her blouse like any conjurer. As yet, however, the article in question had not entered his scheme of life. He declined it with many thanks.

‘I can get you a big one,’ she urged. But even that did not tempt him.

‘Will you have a cold-water bandage then — for your head — or anything?’

She seemed so afflicted with a desire to do something for him that he almost said ‘Yes’; only the fear that she might offer next a beehive or a gramophone restrained him.

‘Thank you *so* much, but really I can manage without it — to-night.’

Jane Anne made no attempt to conceal her disappointment. What a man he was, to be sure! And what a funny place the world was!

‘It’s Jinny’s panacea,’ said Mother, helping herself with reckless uncertainty to a long word. ‘She’s never happy unless she’s doing for somebody,’ she added ambiguously. ‘It’s her *metier* in life.’

‘Mother, what *are* you saying?’ said the child’s expression. Then she made one last attempt. She remembered, perhaps, the admiring way he had watched her brother and sister’s antics in the Den before. She was not clever on her feet, but at least she could try.

‘Shall I turn head over heels for you, then?’

He caught her mother’s grave expression just in time to keep his laughter back. The offer of gymnastics clearly involved sacrifice somewhere.

‘To-morrow,’ he answered quickly. ‘Always put off till to-morrow what you’re too old to do to-day.’

‘Of course; I see — yes.’ She was more perplexed than ever, as he meant that she should be. His words were meaningless, but they helped the poignant situation neatly. She could not understand why all her offers were refused like this. There must be something wrong with her selection, perhaps. She would think of better ones in future. But, oh, what a funny place the world was!

‘Good-night, then, Mr. — Cousin Rogers,’ she said jerkily with resignation. ‘Perhaps to-morrow — when I’m older — —’

‘If it comes.’ He gravely shook the hand she held out primly, keeping a certain distance from him lest he should attempt to kiss her.

‘It always comes; it’s a chronic monster,’ she laughed, saying the first thing that came into her queer head. They all laughed. Jane Anne went out, feeling happier. At least, she had amused him. She marched off with the air of a grenadier going to some stern and difficult duty. From the door she flung back at him a look of speechless admiration, then broke into a run, afraid she might have been immodest or too forward. They heard her thumping overhead.

And presently he followed her example. The Pension sitting-room emptied. Unless there was something special on hand — a dance, a romp, a game, or some neighbours who dropped in for talk and music — it was rarely occupied after nine o’clock. Daddy had already slipped home — he had this mysterious way of disappearing when no one saw him go. At this moment, doubtless, a wumbled book absorbed him over at the carpenter’s. Old Miss Waghorn sat in a corner nodding over her novel, and the Pension cat, Borelle, was curled up in her sloping, inadequate lap.

The big, worn velvet sofa in the opposite corner was also empty. On romping nights it was the *train de Moscou*, where Jimbo sold tickets to crowded passengers for any part of the world. To-night it was a mere dead sofa, uninviting, dull.

He went across the darkened room, his head scraping acquaintance with the ivy leaves that trailed across the ceiling. He slipped through the little hall. In the kitchen he heard the shrill voice of Mme. Jequier talking very loudly about a dozen things at once to the servant-girl, or to any one else who was near enough to listen. Luckily she did not see him. Otherwise he would never have escaped without another offer of a hot-water bottle, a pot of home-made marmalade, or a rug and pillow for his bed. He made his way downstairs into the street unnoticed; but just as he reached the bottom his thundering tread betrayed him. The door flew open at the top.

‘Bon soir, bonne nuit,’ screamed the voice; ‘wait a moment and I’ll get the lamp. You’ll break your neck. Is there anything you want — a hot-water bottle, or a box of matches, or some of my marmalade for your breakfast? Wait, and I’ll get it in a moment — —’ She would have given the blouse off her back had he needed, or could have used it.

She flew back to the kitchen to search and shout. It sounded like a quarrel; but, pretending not to hear, he made good his escape and passed out into the street. The heavy door of the Post Office banged behind him, cutting short a stream of excited sentences. The peace and quiet of the night closed instantly about his steps.

By the fountain opposite the Citadelle he paused to drink from the pipe of gushing mountain water. The open courtyard looked inviting, but he did not go in, for, truth to tell, there was a curious excitement in him — an urgent, keen desire to get to sleep as soon as possible. Not that he felt sleepy — quite the reverse in fact, but that he looked forward to his bed and to ‘sleeping tightly.’

The village was already lost in slumber. No lights showed in any houses. Yet it was barely half-past nine. Everywhere was peace and stillness. Far across the lake he saw the twinkling villages. Behind him dreamed the forests. A deep calm brooded over the mountains; but within the calm, and just below the surface in himself, hid the excitement as of some lively anticipation. He expected something. Something was going to happen. And it was connected with the children. Jimbo and Monkey were at the bottom of it. They had said they would come for him — to ‘find him later.’ He wondered — quite absurdly he wondered.

He passed his cousin’s room on tiptoe, and noticed a light beneath the door. But, before getting into bed, he stood a moment at the open window and drew in deep draughts of the fresh night air. The world of forest swayed across his sight. The outline of the Citadelle merged into it. A point of light showed the window where the children already slept. But, far beyond, the moon was loading stars upon the trees, and a rising wind drove them in glittering flocks along the heights….

Blowing out the candle, he turned over on his side to sleep, his mind charged to the brim with wonder and curious under-thrills of this anticipation. He half expected — what? Reality lay somewhere in the whole strange business; it was not merely imaginative nonsense. Fairyland was close.

And the moment he slept and began to dream, the thing took a lively and dramatic shape. A thousand tiny fingers, soft and invisible, drew him away into the heart of fairyland. There was a terror in him lest he should — stick. But he came out beautifully and smoothly, like a thread of summer grass from its covering sheath.

‘I *am* slippery after all, then — slippery enough,’ he remembered saying with surprised delight, and then ——

CHAPTER XV

Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.
There’s not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims.
Merchant of Venice.

—— there came to him a vivid impression of sudden light in the room, and he knew that something very familiar was happening to him, yet something that had not happened consciously for thirty years and more — since his early childhood in the night-nursery with the bars across the windows.

He was both asleep and awake at the same time. Some part of him, rather, that never slept was disengaging itself — with difficulty. He was getting free. Stimulated by his intercourse with the children, this part of him that in boyhood used to be so easily detached, light as air, was getting loose. The years had fastened it in very tightly. Jimbo and Monkey had got at it. And Jimbo and Monkey were in the room at this moment. They were pulling him out.

It was very wonderful; a glory of youth and careless joy rushed through him like a river. Some sheath or vesture melted off. It seemed to tear him loose. How in the world could he ever have forgotten it — let it go out of his life? What on earth could have seemed good enough to take its place? He felt like an eagle some wizard spell had imprisoned in a stone, now released and shaking out its crumpled wings. A mightier spell had set him free. The children stood beside his bed!

‘I can manage it alone,’ he said firmly. ‘You needn’t try to help me.’

No sound was audible, but they instantly desisted. This thought, that took a dozen words to express ordinarily, shot from him into them the instant it was born. A gentle pulsing, like the flicker of a flame, ran over their shining little forms of radiance as they received it. They shifted to one side silently to give him room. Thus had he seen a searchlight pass like lightning from point to point across the sea.

Yet, at first, there was difficulty; here and there, in places, he could not get quite loose and free.

‘He sticks like Daddy,’ he heard them think. ‘In the head it seems, too.’

There was no pain in the sensation, but a certain straining as of unaccustomed muscles being stretched. He felt uncomfortable, then embarrassed, then — exhilarated. But there were other exquisite sensations too. Happiness, as of flooding summer sunshine, poured through him.

‘He’ll come with a rush. Look out!’ felt Jimbo— ‘felt’ expressing ‘thought’ and ‘said’ together, for no single word can convey the double operation thus combined in ordinary life.

The reality of it caught him by the throat.

‘This,’ he exclaimed, ‘is real and actual. It is happening to me now!’

He looked from the pile of clothes taken off two hours ago — goodness, what a mass! — to the children’s figures in the middle of the room. And one was as real as the other. The moods of the day and evening, their play and nonsense, had all passed away. He had crossed a gulf that stood between this moment and those good-nights in the Pension. This was as real as anything in life; more real than death. Reality — he caught the obvious thought pass thickly through the body on the bed — is what has been experienced. Death, for that reason, is not real, not realised; dinner is. And this was real because he had been through it, though long forgotten it. Jimbo stood aside and ‘felt’ directions.

‘Don’t push,’ he said.

‘Just think and wish,’ added Monkey with a laugh.

It was her laugh, and perhaps the beauty of her big brown eyes as well, that got him finally loose. For the laughter urged some queer, deep yearning in him towards a rush of exquisite accomplishment. He began to slip more easily and freely. The brain upon the bed, oddly enough, remembered a tradition of old Egypt — that Thoth created the world by bursting into seven peals of laughter. It touched forgotten springs of imagination and belief. In some tenuous, racy vehicle his thought flashed forth. With a gliding spring, like a swooping bird across a valley, he was suddenly — out.

‘I’m out!’ he cried.

‘All out!’ echoed the answering voices.

And then he understood that first vivid impression of light. It was everywhere, an evenly distributed light. He saw the darkness of the night as well, the deep old shadows that draped the village, woods, and mountains. But in themselves was light, a light that somehow enabled them to see everything quite clearly. Solid things were all transparent.

Light even radiated from objects in the room. Two much-loved books upon the table shone beautifully — his Bible and a volume of poems; and, fairer still, more delicate than either, there was a lustre on the table that had so brilliant a halo it almost corruscated. The sparkle in it was like the sparkle in the children’s eyes. It came from the bunch of violets, gentians, and hepaticas, already faded, that Mother had placed there days ago on his arrival. And overhead, through plaster, tiles, and rafters he saw — the stars.

‘We’ve already been for Jinny,’ Jimbo informed him; ‘but she’s gone as usual. She goes the moment she falls asleep. We never can catch her up or find her.’

‘Come on,’ cried Monkey. ‘How slow you both are! We shan’t get anywhere at this rate.’ And she made a wheel of coloured fire in the air. ‘I’m ready,’ he answered, happier than either. ‘Let’s be off at once.’

Through his mind flashed this explanation of their elder sister’s day-expression — that expression of a moth she had, puzzled, distressed, only half there, as the saying is. For if she went out so easily at night in this way, some part of her probably stayed out altogether. She never wholly came back. She was always dreaming. The entire instinct of the child, he remembered, was for others, and she thought of herself as little as did the sun — old tireless star that shines for all.

‘She’s soaked in starlight,’ he cried, as they went off headlong. ‘We shall find her in the Cave. Come on, you pair of lazy meteors.’

He was already far beyond the village, and the murmur of the woods rose up to them. They entered the meshes of the Star Net that spun its golden threads everywhere about them, linking up the Universe with their very hearts.

‘There are no eyes or puddles to-night. Everybody sleeps. Hooray, hooray!’ they cried together.

There were cross-currents, though. The main, broad, shining stream poured downwards in front of them towards the opening of the Cave, a mile or two beyond, where the forests dipped down among the precipices of the Areuse; but from behind — from some house in the slumbering village — came a golden tributary too, that had a peculiar and astonishing brightness of its own. It came, so far as they could make out, from the humped outline of La Citadelle, and from a particular room there, as though some one in that building had a special source of supply. Moreover, it scattered itself over the village in separate swift rivulets that dived and dipped towards particular houses here and there. There seemed a constant coming and going, one stream driving straight into the Cave, and another pouring out again, yet neither mingling. One stream brought supplies, while the other directed their distribution. Some one, asleep or awake — they could not tell — was thinking golden thoughts of love and sympathy for the world.

‘It’s Mlle. Lemaire,’ said Jimbo. ‘She’s been in bed for thirty years—’ His voice was very soft.

‘The Spine, you know,’ exclaimed Monkey, a little in the rear.

‘ —— and even in the daytime she looks white and shiny,’ added the boy. ‘I often go and talk with her and tell her things.’ He said it proudly. ‘She understands everything — better even than Mother.’ Jimbo had told most. It was all right. His leadership was maintained and justified. They entered the main stream and plunged downwards with it towards the earth — three flitting figures dipped in this store of golden brilliance.

A delicious and wonderful thing then happened. All three remembered.

‘This was where we met you first,’ they told him, settling down among the trees together side by side. ‘We saw your teeth of gold. You came in that train — —’

‘I was thinking about it — in England,’ he exclaimed, ‘and about coming out to find you here.’

‘The Starlight Express,’ put in Jimbo.

‘ —— and you were just coming up to speak to us when we woke, or you woke, or somebody woke — and it all went,’ said Monkey.

‘That was when I stopped thinking about it,’ he explained.

‘It all vanished anyhow. And the next time was’ — she paused a moment— ‘you — we saw your two gold teeth again somewhere, and half recognised you — —’

It was the daylight world that seemed vague and dreamlike now, hard to remember clearly.

‘In another train—’ Jimbo helped her, ‘the Geneva omnibus that starts at — at — —’ But even Jimbo could not recall further details.

‘You’re wumbled,’ said Rogers, helping himself and the others at the same time. ‘You want some starlight to put you in touch again. Come on; let’s go in. We shall find all the others inside, I suspect, hard at it.’

‘At what?’ asked two breathless voices.

‘Collecting, of course — for others. Did you think they ate the stuff, just to amuse themselves?’

‘They glided towards the opening, cutting through the little tributary stream that was pouring out on its way down the sky to that room in La Citadelle. It was brighter than the main river, they saw, and shone with a peculiar brilliance of its own, whiter and swifter than the rest. Designs, moreover, like crystals floated on the crest of every wave.

‘That’s the best quality,’ he told them, as their faces shone a moment in its glory. ‘The person who deserves it must live entirely for others. That he keeps only for the sad and lonely. The rest, the common stuff, is good enough for Fraulein or for baby, or for mother, or any other — —’ The words rose in him like flowers that he knew.

‘Look out, *mon vieux*! ‘It was Monkey’s voice. They just had time to stand aside as a figure shot past them and disappeared into the darkness above the trees. A big bundle, dripping golden dust, hung down his back.

‘The Dustman!’ they cried with excitement, easily recognising his energetic yet stooping figure; and Jimbo added, ‘the dear old Dustman!’ while

Monkey somersaulted after him, returning breathless a minute later with, ‘He’s gone; I couldn’t get near him. He went straight to La Citadelle — —’

And then collided violently with the Lamplighter, whose pole of office caught her fairly in the middle and sent her spinning like a conjurer’s plate till they feared she would never stop. She kept on laughing the whole time she spun — like a catherine wheel that laughs instead of splutters. The place where the pole caught her, however — it was its lighted end — shines and glows to this day: the centre of her little heart.

‘Do let’s be careful,’ pleaded Jimbo, hardly approving of these wild gyrations. He really did prefer his world a trifle more dignified. He was ever the grave little gentleman.

They stooped to enter by the narrow opening, but were stopped again — this time by some one pushing rudely past them to get in. From the three points of the compass to which the impact scattered them, they saw a shape of darkness squeeze itself, sack and all, to enter. An ordinary man would have broken every bone in his body, judging by the portion that projected into the air behind. But he managed it somehow, though the discomfort must have been intolerable, they all thought. The darkness dropped off behind him in flakes like discarded clothing; he turned to gold as he went in; and the contents of his sack — he poured it out like water — shone as though he squeezed a sponge just dipped in the Milky Way.

‘What a lot he’s collected,’ cried Rogers from his point of vantage where he could see inside. ‘It all gets purified and clean in there. Wait a moment. He’s coming out again — off to make another collection.’

And then they knew the man for what he was. He shot past them into the night, carrying this time a flat and emptied sack, and singing like a blackbird as he went: —

Sweeping chimneys and cleaning flues,
 That is the work I love;
 Brushing away the blacks and the blues,
 And letting in light from above!
 I twirl my broom in your tired brain
 When you’re tight in sleep up-curled,

Then scatter the stuff in a soot-like rain
Over the edge of the world.

The voice grew fainter and fainter in the distance —

For I'm a tremendously busy Sweep,
Catching the folk when they're all asleep,
And tossing the blacks on the Rubbish Heap
Over the edge of the world…!

The voice died away into the wind among the high branches, and they heard it no more.

'There's a Sweep worth knowing,' murmured Rogers, strong yearning in him.

'There are no blacks or blues in *my* brain,' exclaimed Monkey, 'but Jimbo's always got some on his face.'

The impudence passed ignored. Jimbo took his cousin's hand and led him to the opening. The 'men' went in first together; the other sex might follow as best it could. Yet somehow or other Monkey slipped between their legs and got in before them. They stood up side by side in the most wonderful place they had ever dreamed of.

And the first thing they saw was — Jane Anne.

'I'm collecting for Mother. Her needles want such a chronic lot, you see.' Her face seemed full of stars; there was no puzzled expression in the eyes now. She looked beautiful. And the younger children stared in sheer amazement and admiration.

'I have no time to waste,' she said, moving past them with a load in her spread apron that was like molten gold; 'I have to be up and awake at six to make your porridge before you go to school. I'm a busy monster, I can tell you!' She went by them like a flash, and out into the night.

Monkey felt tears in her somewhere, but they did not fall. Something in her turned ashamed — for a moment. Jimbo stared in silence. 'What a girl!' he thought. 'I'd like to be like that!' Already the light was sticking to him.

'So this is where she always comes,' said Monkey, soon recovering from the temporary attack of emotion. 'She's better out than in; she's safest when asleep! No wonder she’s so funny in the daytime.’

Then they turned to look about them, breathing low as wild-flowers that watch a rising moon.

The place was so big for one thing — far bigger than they had expected. The storage of lost starlight must be a serious affair indeed if it required all this space to hold it. The entire mountain range was surely hollow. Another thing that struck them was the comparative dimness of this huge interior compared with the brilliance of the river outside. But, of course, lost things are ever dim, and those worth looking for dare not be too easily found.

A million tiny lines of light, they saw, wove living, moving patterns, very intricate and very exquisite. These lines and patterns the three drew in with their very breath. They swallowed light — the tenderest light the world can know. A scent of flowers — something between a violet and a wild rose — floated over all. And they understood these patterns while they breathed them in. They read them. Patterns in Nature, of course, are fairy script. Here lay all their secrets sweetly explained in golden writing, all mysteries made clear. The three understood beyond their years; and inside-sight, instead of glimmering, shone. For, somehow or other, the needs of other people blazed everywhere, obliterating their own. It was most singular.

Monkey ceased from somersaulting and stared at Jimbo.

‘You’ve got two stars in your face instead of eyes. They’ll never set!’ she whispered. ‘I love you because I understand every bit of you.’

‘And you,’ he replied, as though he were a grande personne, ‘have got hair like a mist of fire. It will never go out!’

‘Every one will love me now,’ she cried, ‘my underneath is gold.’

But her brother reproved her neatly: —

‘Let’s get a lot — simply an awful lot’ — he made a grimace to signify quantity— ‘and pour it over Daddy’s head till it runs from his eyes and beard. He’ll write real fairy stories then and make a fortune.’

And Cousin Henry moved past them like a burning torch. They held their breath to see him. Jane Anne, their busy sister, alone excelled him in brightness. Her perfume, too, was sweeter.

‘He’s an old hand at this game,’ Monkey said in French.

‘But Jinny’s never done anything else since she was born,’ replied her brother proudly.

And they all three fell to collecting, for it seemed the law of the place, a kind of gravity none could disobey. They stooped — three semi- circles of tender brilliance. Each lost the least desire to gather for himself; the needs of others drove them, filled them, made them eager and energetic.

‘Riquette would like a bit,’ cried Jimbo, almost balancing on his head in his efforts to get it all at once, while Monkey’s shining fingers stuffed her blouse and skirts with sheaves of golden gossamer that later she meant to spread in a sheet upon the pillow of Mademoiselle Lemaire.

‘She sleeps so little that she needs the best,’ she sang, realising for once that her own amusement was not the end of life. ‘I’ll make her nights all wonder.’

Cousinenry, meanwhile, worked steadily like a man who knows his time is short. He piled the stuff in heaps and pyramids, and then compressed it into what seemed solid blocks that made his pockets bulge like small balloons. Already a load was on his back that bent him double.

‘Such a tiny bit is useful,’ he explained, ‘if you know exactly how and where to put it. This compression is my own patent.’

‘Of course,’ they echoed, trying in vain to pack it up as cleverly as he did.

Nor were these three the only gatherers. The place was full of movement. Jane Anne was always coming back for more, deigning no explanations. She never told where she had spent her former loads. She gathered an apron full, sped off to spend and scatter it in places she knew of, and then came bustling in again for more. And they always knew her whereabouts because of the whiter glory that she radiated into the dim yellow world about them.

And other figures, hosts of them, were everywhere — stooping, picking, loading one another’s backs and shoulders. To and fro they shot and glided, like Leonids in autumn round the Earth. All were collecting, though the supply seemed never to grow less. An inexhaustible stream poured in through the narrow opening, and scattered itself at once in all directions as though driven by a wind. How could the world let so much escape it, when it was what the world most needed every day. It ran naturally into patterns, patterns that could be folded and rolled up like silken tablecloths. In silence, too. There was no sound of drops falling. Sparks fly on noiseless feet. Sympathy makes no bustle.

‘Even on the thickest nights it falls,’ a voice issued from a robust patch of light beside them that stooped with huge brown hands all knotted into muscles; ‘and it’s a mistake to think different.’ His voice rolled on into a ridiculous bit of singing: —

It comes down with the rain drops,
It comes down with the dew,
There’s always ‘eaps for every one —
For ‘im and me and you.

They recognised his big face, bronzed by the sun, and his great neck where lines drove into the skin like the rivers they drew with blunt pencils on their tedious maps of Europe. It was several faces in one. The Head Gardener was no stranger to their imaginations, for they remembered him of old somewhere, though not quite sure exactly where. He worked incessantly for others, though these ‘others’ were only flowers and cabbages and fruit-trees. He did his share in the world, he and his army of queer assistants, the under-gardeners.

Peals of laughter, too, sounded from time to time in a far away corner of the cavern, and the laughter sent all the stuff it reached into very delicate, embroidered patterns. For it was merry and infectious laughter, joy somewhere in it like a lamp. It bordered upon singing; another touch would send it rippling into song. And to that far corner, attracted by the sound, ran numberless rivulets of light, weaving a lustrous atmosphere about the Laugher that, even while it glowed, concealed the actual gatherer from sight. The children only saw that the patterns were even more sweet and dainty than their own. And they understood. Inside-sight explained the funny little mystery. Laughter is magical — brings light and help and courage. They laughed themselves then, and instantly saw their own patterns wave and tremble into tiny outlines that they could squeeze later even into the darkest, thickest head.

Cousinenry, meanwhile, they saw, stopped for nothing. He was singing all the time as he bent over his long, outstretched arms. And it was the singing after all that made the best patterns — better even than the laughing. He knew all the best tricks of this Star Cave. He remained their leader.

And the stuff no hands picked up ran on and on, seeking a way of escape for itself. Some sank into the ground to sweeten the body of the old labouring earth, colouring the roots of myriad flowers; some soaked into the rocky walls, tinting the raw materials of hills and woods and mountain tops. Some escaped into the air in tiny drops that, meeting in moonlight or in sunshine, instantly formed wings. And people saw a brimstone butterfly — all wings and hardly any body. All went somewhere for some useful purpose. It was not in the nature of star-stuff to keep still. Like water that must go down-hill, the law of its tender being forced it to find a place where it could fasten on and shine. It never could get wholly lost; though, if the place it settled on was poor, it might lose something of its radiance. But human beings were obviously what most attracted it. Sympathy must find an outlet; thoughts are bound to settle somewhere.

And the gatherers all sang softly— 'Collect for others, never mind yourself!'

Some of it, too, shot out by secret ways in the enormous roof. The children recognised the exit of the separate brilliant stream they had encountered in the sky — the one especially that went to the room of pain and sickness in La Citadelle. Again they understood. That unselfish thinker of golden thoughts knew special sources of supply. No wonder that her atmosphere radiated sweetness and uplifting influence. Her patience, smiles, and courage were explained. Passing through the furnace of her pain, the light was cleansed and purified. Hence the delicate, invariable radiation from her presence, voice, and eyes. From the bed of suffering she had not left for thirty years she helped the world go round more sweetly and more easily, though few divined those sudden moments of beauty they caught flashing from her halting words, nor guessed their source of strength.

'Of course,' thought Jimbo, laughing, 'I see now why I like to go and tell her everything. She understands all before I've said it. She's simply stuffed with starlight — bursting with inside-sight.'

'That's sympathy,' his cousin added, hearing the vivid thought. And he worked away like an entire ant-heap. But he was growing rather breathless now. 'There's too much for me,' he laughed as though his mouth were full.

‘I can’t manage it all!’ He was wading to the waist, and his coat and trousers streamed with runnels of orange-coloured light.

‘Swallow it then!’ cried Monkey, her hair so soaked that she kept squeezing it like a sponge, both eyes dripping too.

It was their first real experience of the joy of helping others, and they hardly knew where to begin or end. They romped and played in the stuff like children in sand or snow — diving, smothering themselves, plunging, choking, turning somersaults, upsetting each other’s carefully reared loads, and leaping over little pyramids of gold. Then, in a flash, their laughter turned the destroyed heaps into wonderful new patterns again; and once more they turned sober and began to work.

But their cousin was more practical. ‘I’ve got all I can carry comfortably,’ he sang out at length. ‘Let’s go out now and sow it among the sleepers. Come on!’

A field of stars seemed to follow him from the roof as he moved with difficulty towards the opening of the cave.

Some one shot out just in front of him. ‘My last trip!’ The words reached them from outside. His bulging figure squeezed somehow through the hole, layers of light scraping off against the sides. The children followed him. But no one stuck. All were beautifully elastic; the starlight oiled and greased their daring, subtle star-bodies. Laden to the eyes, they sped across the woods that still slept heavily. The tips of the pines, however, were already opening a million eyes. There was a faint red glimmer in the east. Hours had passed while they were collecting.

‘The Interfering Sun is on the way. Look out!’ cried some one, shooting past them like an unleashed star. ‘I must get just a little more — my seventeenth journey to-night!’ And Jane Anne, the puzzled look already come back a little into her face, darted down towards the opening. The waking of the body was approaching.

‘What a girl!’ thought Jimbo again, as they hurried after their grown- up cousin towards the village.

And here, but for the leadership of Cousin Henry, they must have gone astray and wasted half their stores in ineffective fashion. Besides, the east was growing brighter, and there was a touch of confusion in their little star-bodies as sleep grew lighter and the moment of the body's waking drew nearer.

Ah! the exquisite adjustment that exists between the night and day bodies of children! It is little wonder that with the process of growing-up there comes a coarsening that congeals the fluid passages of exit, and finally seals the memory centres too. Only in a few can this delicate adjustment be preserved, and the sources of inspiration known to children be kept available and sweet — in the poets, dreamers, and artists of this practical, steel-girdled age.

'This way,' called Cousinenry. 'Follow me.' They settled down in a group among Madame Jequier's lilacs. 'We'll begin with the Pension des Glycines. Jinny is already busy with La Citadelle.'

They perched among the opening blossoms. Overhead flashed by the Sweep, the Dustman, and the Laugher, bound for distant ports, perhaps as far as England. The Head Gardener lumbered heavily after them to find his flowers and trees. Starlight, they grasped, could be no separate thing. The rays started, indeed, from separate points, but all met later in the sky to weave this enormous fairy network in which the currents and cross-currents and criss-cross-currents were so utterly bewildering. Alone, the children certainly must have got lost in the first five minutes.

Their cousin gathered up the threads from Monkey's hair and Jimbo's eyes, and held them in one hand like reins. He sang to them a moment while they recovered their breath and forces: —

The stars in their courses
 Are runaway horses
 That gallop with Thoughts from the Earth;
 They collect them, and race
 Back through wireless space,
 Bringing word of the tiniest birth;
 Past old Saturn and Mars,
 And the hosts of big stars,
 Who strain at their leashes for joy.
 Kind thoughts, like fine weather,
  Bind sweetly together
  God's suns — with the heart of a boy.

So, beware what you think;
It is written in ink
That is golden, and read by His Stars!

‘Hadn’t we better get on?’ cried Monkey, pulling impatiently at the reins he held.

‘Yes,’ echoed Jimbo. ‘Look at the sky. The “rapide” from Paris comes past at six o’clock.’

CHAPTER XVI

Aus den Himmelsaugen droben
Fallen zitternd goldne Funken
Durch die Nacht, und meine Seele
Dehnt sich liebeweit und weiter.

O ihr Himmelsaugen droben,
Weint euch aus in meine Seele,
Dass von lichten Sternentranen
Uberfliesset meine Seele!
Heine.

They rose, fluttered a moment above the lilac bushes, and then shot forward like the curve of a rainbow into the sleeping house. The next second they stood beside the bed of the Widow Jequier.

She lay there, so like a bundle of untidy sticks that, but for the sadness upon the weary face, they could have burst out laughing. The perfume of the wistaria outside the open window came in sweetly, yet could not lighten the air of heavy gloom that clothed her like a garment. Her atmosphere was dull, all streaked with greys and black, for her mind, steeped in anxiety even while she slept, gave forth cloudy vapours of depression and disquietude that made impossible the approach of — light. Starlight, certainly, could not force an entrance, and even sunlight would spill half its radiance before it reached her heart. The help she needed she thus deliberately shut out. Before going to bed her mood had been one of anxious care and searching worry. It continued, of course, in sleep.

‘Now,’ thought their leader briskly, ‘we must deal with this at once’; and the children, understanding his unspoken message, approached closer to the bed. How brilliant their little figures were — Jimbo, a soft, pure blue, and Monkey tinged faintly here and there with delicate clear orange. Thus do the little clouds of sunset gather round to see the sun get into bed. And in utter silence; all their intercourse was silent — thought, felt, but never spoken.

For a moment there was hesitation. Cousinenry was uncertain exactly how to begin. Tante Jeanne's atmosphere was so very thick he hardly knew the best way to penetrate it. Her mood had been so utterly black and rayless. But his hesitation operated like a call for help that flew instantly about the world and was communicated to the golden threads that patterned the outside sky. They quivered, flashed the message automatically; the enormous network repeated it as far as England, and the answer came. For thought is instantaneous, and desire is prayer. Quick as lightning came the telegram. Beside them stood a burly figure of gleaming gold.

'I'll do it,' said the earthy voice. 'I'll show you 'ow. For she loves 'er garden. Her sympathy with trees and flowers lets me in. Always send for *me* when she's in a mess, or needs a bit of trimmin' and cleanin' up.'

The Head Gardener pushed past them with his odour of soil and burning leaves, his great sunburned face and his browned, stained hands. These muscular, big hands he spread above her troubled face; he touched her heart; he blew his windy breath of flowers upon her untidy hair; he called the names of lilac, wistaria, roses, and laburnum….

The room filled with the little rushing music of wind in leaves; and, as he said 'laburnum,' there came at last a sudden opening channel through the fog that covered her so thickly. Starlight, that was like a rivulet of laburnum blossoms melted into running dew, flowed down it. The Widow Jequier stirred in her sleep and smiled. Other channels opened. Light trickled down these, too, drawn in and absorbed from the store the Gardener carried. Then, with a rush of scattering fire, he was gone again. Out into the enormous sky he flew, trailing golden flame behind him. They heard him singing as he dived into the Network — singing of buttercups and cowslips, of primroses and marigolds and dandelions, all yellow flowers that have stored up starlight.

And the atmosphere of Tante Jeanne first glowed, then shone; it changed slowly from gloom to glory. Golden channels opened everywhere, making a miniature network of their own. Light flashed and corruscated through it, passing from the children and their leader along the tiny pipes of sympathy the Gardener had cleared of rubbish and decay. Along the very lines of her face ran tiny shining rivers; flooding across her weary eyelids, gilding her untidy hair, and pouring down into her heavy heart. She ceased fidgeting;

she smiled in her sleep; peace settled on her face; her fingers on the coverlet lost their touch of strain. Finally she turned over, stretched her old fighting body into a more comfortable position, sighed a moment, then settled down into a deep and restful slumber. Her atmosphere was everywhere ‘soft-shiny’ when they left her to shoot next into the attic chamber above, where Miss Waghorn lay among her fragments of broken memory, and the litter of disordered images that passed with her for ‘thinking.’

And here, again, although their task was easier, they needed help to show the right way to begin. Before they reached the room Jimbo had wondered how they would ‘get at’ her. That wonder summoned help. The tall, thin figure was already operating beside the bed as they entered. His length seemed everywhere at once, and his slender pole, a star hanging from the end, was busy touching articles on walls and floor and furniture. The disorder everywhere was the expression of her dishevelled mind, and though he could not build the ruins up again, at least he could trace the outlines of an ordered plan that she might use when she left her body finally and escaped from the rebellious instrument in death. And now that escape was not so very far away. Obviously she was already loose. She was breaking up, as the world expresses it.

And the children, watching with happy delight, soon understood his method. Each object that he touched emitted a tiny light. In her mind he touched the jumble of wandering images as well. On waking she would find both one and the other better assorted. Some of the lost things her memory ever groped for she would find more readily. She would see the starlight on them.

‘See,’ said their leader softly, as the long thin figure of the Lamplighter shot away into the night, ‘she sleeps so lightly because she is so old — fastened so delicately to the brain and heart. The fastenings are worn and loose now. Already she is partly out!’

‘That’s why she’s so muddled in the daytime,’ explained Jimbo, for his sister’s benefit.

‘Exaccurately, I knew it already!’ was the reply, turning a somersault like a wheel of twirling meteors close to the old lady’s nose.

‘Carefully, now!’ said their leader. ‘And hurry up! There’s not much we can do here, and there’s heaps to do elsewhere. We must remember Mother and Daddy — before the Interfering Sun is up, you know.’

They flashed about the attic chamber, tipping everything with light, from the bundle of clothes that strewed the floor to the confused interior of the black basket-trunk where she kept her money and papers. There were no shelves in this attic chamber; no room for cupboards either; it was the cheapest room in the house. And the old woman in the bed sometimes opened her eyes and peered curiously, expectantly, about her. Even in her sleep she looked for things. Almost, they felt, she seemed aware of their presence near her, she knew that they were there; she smiled.

A moment later they were in mid-air on their way to the Citadelle, singing as they went: —

He keeps that only
For the old and lonely,
Who sleep so little that they need the best.
The rest —
The common stuff —
Is good enough
For Fraulein, or for baby, or for mother,
Or any other
Who likes a bit of dust,
And yet can do without it —
If they must…

Already something of the Dawn’s faint magic painting lay upon the world. Roofs shone with dew. The woods were singing, and the flowers were awake. Birds piped and whistled shrilly from the orchards. They heard the Mer Dasson murmuring along her rocky bed. The rampart of the Alps stood out more clearly against the sky.

‘We must be *very* quick,’ Cousin Henry flashed across to them, ‘quicker than an express train.’

‘That’s impossible,’ cried Jimbo, who already felt the call of waking into his daily world. ‘Hark! There’s whistling already….’

The next second, in a twinkling, he was gone. He had left them. His body had been waked up by the birds that sang and whistled so loudly in the plane tree outside his window. Monkey and her guide raced on alone into the very room where he now sat up and rubbed his eyes in the Citadelle. He was telling his mother that he had just been 'dreaming extraordinary.' But Mother, sleeping like a fossil monster in the Tertiary strata, heard him not.

'He often goes like that,' whispered Monkey in a tone of proud superiority. 'He's only a little boy really, you see.'

But the sight they then witnessed was not what they expected.

For Mademoiselle Lemaire herself was working over Mother like an engine, and Mother was still sleeping like the dead. The radiance that emanated from the night-body of this suffering woman, compared to their own, was as sunlight is to candle-light. Its soft glory was indescribable, its purity quite unearthly, and the patterns that it wove lovely beyond all telling. Here they surprised her in the act, busy with her ceaseless activities for others, working for the world by *thinking* beauty. While her pain-racked body lay asleep in the bed it had not left for thirty years, nor would ever leave again this side of death, she found her real life in loving sympathy for the pain of others everywhere. For thought is prayer, and prayer is the only true effective action that leaves no detail incomplete. She *thought* light and glory into others. Was it any wonder that she drew a special, brilliant supply from the Starlight Cavern, when she had so much to give? For giving-out involved drawing-in to fill the emptied spaces. Her pure and endless sources of supply were all explained.

'I've been working on her for years,' she said gently, looking round at their approach, 'for her life is so thickly overlaid with care, and the care she never quite knows how to interpret. We were friends, you see, in childhood…. You'd better hurry on to the carpenter's house. You'll find Jinny there doing something for her father.' She did not cease her working while she said it, this practical mind so familiar with the methods of useful thinking, this loving heart so versed in prayer while her broken body, deemed useless by the world, lay in the bed that was its earthly prison-house. '*He* can give me all the help I need,' she added.

She pointed, and they saw the figure of the Sweep standing in the corner of the room among a pile of brimming sacks. His dirty face was beaming.

They heard him singing quietly to himself under his breath, while his feet and sooty hands marked time with a gesture of quaintest dancing: —

Such a tremendously busy Sweep,
Catching the world when it's all asleep,
And tossing the blacks on the Rubbish Heap
Over the edge of the world!

'Come,' whispered Cousin Henry, catching at Monkey's hair, 'we can do something, but we can't do *that*. She needs no help from us!'

They sped across to the carpenter's house among the vineyards.

'What a splendour!' gasped the child as they went. 'My starlight seems quite dim beside hers.'

'She's an old hand at the game,' he replied, noticing the tinge of disappointment in her thought. 'With practice, you know — —'

'And Mummy must be pretty tough,' she interrupted with a laugh, her elastic nature recovering instantly.

' —— with practice, I was going to say, your atmosphere will get whiter too until it simply shines. That's why the saints have halos.'

But Monkey did not hear this last remark, she was already in her father's bedroom, helping Jinny.

Here there were no complications, no need for assistance from a Sweep, or Gardener, or Lamplighter. It was a case for pulling, pure and simple. Daddy was wumbled, nothing more. Body, mind, and heart were all up-jumbled. In making up the verse about the starlight he had merely told the truth — about himself. The poem was instinctive and inspirational confession. His atmosphere, as he lay there, gently snoring in his beauty sleep, was clear and sweet and bright, no darkness in it of grey or ugliness; but its pattern was a muddle, or rather there were several patterns that scrambled among each other for supremacy. Lovely patterns hovered just outside him, but none of them got really in. And the result was chaos. Daddy was not clear-headed; there was no concentration. Something of the perplexed confusion that afflicted his elder daughter in the daytime mixed up the patterns inextricably. There was no main pathway through his inner world.

And the picture proved it. It explained why Jinny pulled in vain. His night-body came out easily as far as the head, then stuck hopelessly. He looked like a knotted skein of coloured wools. Upon the paper where he had been making notes before going to sleep — for personal atmosphere is communicated to all its owner touches — lay the same confusion. Scraps of muddle, odds and ends of different patterns, hovered in thick blots of colour over the paragraphs and sentences. His own uncertainty was thus imparted to what he wrote, and his stories brought no conviction to his readers. He was too much the Dreamer, or too much the Thinker, which of the two was not quite clear. Harmony was lacking.

‘That’s probably what I’M like, too,’ thought his friend, but so softly that the children did not hear it. That Scheme of his passed vaguely through his mind.

Then he cried louder — a definite thought: —

‘There’s no good tugging like that, my dears. Let him slip in again. You’ll only make him restless, and give him distorted dreams.’

‘I’ve tugged like this every night for months,’ said Jinny, ‘but the moment I let go he flies back like elastic.’

‘Of course. We must first untie the knots and weave the patterns into one. Let go!’

Daddy’s night-body flashed back like a sword into its sheath. They stood and watched him. He turned a little in his sleep, while above him the lines twined and wriggled like phosphorus on moving water, yet never shaped themselves into anything complete. They saw suggestions of pure beauty in them here and there that yet never joined together into a single outline; it was like watching the foam against a steamer’s sides in moonlight — just failing of coherent form.

‘They want combing out,’ declared Jane Anne with a brilliant touch of truth. ‘A rake would be best.’

‘Assorting, sifting, separating,’ added Cousinenry, ‘but it’s not easy.’ He thought deeply for a moment. ‘Suppose you two attend to the other things,’ he said presently, ‘while I take charge of the combing- out.’

They knew at once his meaning; it was begun as soon as thought, only they could never have thought of it alone; none but a leader with real sympathy in his heart could have discovered the way.

Like Fairies, lit internally with shining lanterns, they flew about their business. Monkey picked up his pencils and dipped their points into her store of starlight, while Jinny drew the cork out of his ink- pot and blew in soft-shiny radiance of her own. They soaked his books in it, and smoothed his paper out with their fingers of clean gold. His note-books, chair, and slippers, his smoking-coat and pipes and tobacco-tins, his sponge, his tooth-brush and his soap — everything from dressing-gown to dictionary, they spread thickly with their starlight, and continued until the various objects had drunk in enough to make them shine alone.

Then they attacked the walls and floor and ceiling, sheets and bed- clothes. They filled the tin-bath full to the very brim, painted as well the windows, door-handles, and the wicker chair in which they knew he dozed after dejeuner. But with the pencils, pens, and ink-pots they took most trouble, doing them very thoroughly indeed. And his enormous mountain-boots received generous treatment too, for in these he went for his long lonely walks when he thought out his stories among the woods and valleys, coming home with joy upon his face— ‘I got a splendid idea to-day — a magnificent story — if only I can get it on to paper before it’s gone…!’ They understood his difficulty now: the ‘idea’ was wumbled before he could fashion it. He could not get the pattern through complete.

And his older friend, working among the disjointed patterns, saw his trouble clearly too. It was not that he lacked this sympathy that starlight brings, but that he applied it without discernment. The receiving instrument was out of order, some parts moving faster than others. Reason and imagination were not exaccurately adjusted. He gathered plenty in, but no clear stream issued forth again; there was confusion in delivery. The rays were twisted, the golden lines caught into knots and tangles. Yet, ever just outside him, waiting to be taken in, hovered these patterns of loveliness that might bring joy to thousands. They floated in beauty round the edges of his atmosphere, but the moment they sank in to reach his mind, there began the distortion that tore their exquisite proportions and made designs mere disarrangement. Inspiration, without steady thought to fashion it, was of no value.

He worked with infinite pains to disentangle the mass of complicated lines, and one knot after another yielded and slipped off into rivulets of gold, all pouring inwards to reach heart and brain. It was exhilarating, yet disappointing labour. New knots formed themselves so easily, yet in the end much surely had been accomplished. Channels had been cleared; repetition would at length establish habit.

But the line of light along the eastern horizon had been swiftly growing broader meanwhile. It was brightening into delicate crimson. Already the room was clearer, and the radiance of their bodies fading into a paler glory. Jane Anne grew clumsier, tumbling over things, and butting against her more agile sister. Her thoughts became more muddled. She said things from time to time that showed it — hints that waking was not far away.

'Daddy's a wumbled Laplander, you know, after all. Hurry up!' The foolish daylight speech came closer.

'Give his ink-pot one more blow,' cried Monkey. Her body always slept at least an hour longer than the others. She had more time for work.

Jane Anne bumped into the washhand-stand. She no longer saw quite clearly.

'I'm a plenipotentiary, that's what I am. I'm afraid of nothing. But the porridge has to be made. I must get back….'

She vanished like a flash, just as her brother had vanished half an hour before.

'We'll go on with it to-morrow night,' signalled Cousin Henry to his last remaining helper. 'Meet me here, remember, when…the moon…is high enough to…cast…a…shadow….'

The opening and shutting of a door sounded through his sleep. He turned over heavily. Surely it was not time to get up yet. That could not be hot water coming! He had only just fallen asleep. He plunged back again into slumber.

But Monkey had disappeared.

'What a spanking dream I've had…!' Her eyes opened, and she saw her school-books on the chair beside the bed. Mother was gently shaking her out of sleep. ‘Six o’clock, darling. The bath is ready, and Jinny’s nearly got the porridge done. It’s a lovely morning!’

‘Oh, Mummy, I — —’

But Mummy lifted her bodily out of bed, kissed her sleepy eyes awake, and half carried her over to the bath. ‘You can tell me all about that later,’ she said with practical decision; ‘when the cold water’s cleared your head. You’re always fuzzy when you wake.’

Another day had begun. The sun was blazing high above the Blumlisalp. The birds sang in chorus. Dew shone still on the fields, but the men were already busy in the vineyards.

And presently Cousin Henry woke too and stared lazily about his room. He looked at his watch.

‘By Jove,’ he murmured. ‘How one does sleep in this place! And what a dream to be sure — I who never dream!’

He remembered nothing more. From the moment he closed his eyes, eight hours before, until this second, all was a delicious blank. He felt refreshed and wondrously light-hearted, at peace with all the world. There was music in his head. He began to whistle as he lay among the blankets for half an hour longer. And later, while he breakfasted alone downstairs, he remembered that he ought to write to Minks. He owed Minks a letter. And before going out into the woods he wrote it. ‘I’m staying on a bit,’ he mentioned at the end. ‘I find so much to do here, and it’s such a rest. Meanwhile I can leave everything safely in your hands. But as soon as I get a leisure moment I’ll send you the promised draft of my Scheme for Disabled, etc., etc.’

But the Scheme got no further somehow. New objections, for one thing, kept cropping up in his mind. It would take so long to build the place, and find the site, satisfy County Councils, and all the rest. The Disabled, moreover, were everywhere; it was invidious to select one group and leave the others out. Help the world, yes — but what was ‘the world’? There were so many worlds. He touched a new one every day and every hour. Which needed his help most? Bourcelles was quite as important, quite as big and hungry as any of the others. ‘That old Vicar knew a thing or two,’ he reflected later in the forest, while he gathered a bunch of hepaticas and anemones to take to Mlle. Lemaire. ‘There are “neighbours” everywhere, the world’s simply chock full of ‘em. But what a pity that we die just when we’re getting fit and ready to begin. Perhaps we go on afterwards, though. I wonder…!’

CHAPTER XVII

The stars ran loose about the sky,
 Wasting their beauty recklessly,
  Singing and dancing,
  Shooting and prancing,
 Until the Pole Star took command,
 Changing each wild, disordered band
 Into a lamp to guide the land —
   A constellation.

And so, about my mind and yours,
 Thought dances, shoots, and wastes its powers,
  Coming and going,
  Aimlessly flowing,
 Until the Pole Star of the Will
 Captains them wisely, strong, and still,
 Some dream for others to fulfil
   With consecration.
      Selected Poems, Montmorency Minke.

There was a certain air of unreality somewhere in the life at Bourcelles that ministered to fantasy. Rogers had felt it steal over him from the beginning. It was like watching a children's play in which the scenes were laid alternately in the Den, the Pension, and the Forest. Side by side with the grim stern facts of existence ran the coloured spell of fairy make-believe. It was the way they mingled, perhaps, that ministered to this spirit of fantasy.

There were several heroines for instance — Tante Jeanne, Mademoiselle Lemaire, and Mother; each played her role quite admirably. There were the worthy sterling men who did their duty dumbly, regardless of consequences — Daddy, the Postmaster, and the picturesque old clergyman with failing powers. There was the dark, uncertain male character, who might be villain, yet who might prove extra hero — the strutting postman of baronial ancestry; there was the role of quaint pathetic humour Miss Waghorn so excellently filled, and there were the honest rough-and-tumble comedians

— half mischievous, half malicious — the retired governesses. Behind them all, brought on chiefly in scenes of dusk and moonlight, were the Forest Elves who, led by Puck, were responsible for the temporary confusion that threatened disaster, yet was bound to have a happy ending — the children. It was all a children's play set in the lovely scenery of mountain, forest, lake, and old-world garden.

Numerous other characters also flitted in and out. There was the cat, the bird, the donkey as in pantomime; goblin caves and haunted valleys and talking flowers; and the queer shadowy folk who came to the Pension in the summer months, then vanished into space again. Links with the outside world were by no means lacking. As in the theatre, one caught now and again the rumble of street traffic and the roar of everyday concerns. But these fell in by chance during quiet intervals, and served to heighten contrast only.

And so many of the principal roles were almost obviously assumed, interchangeable almost; any day the players might drop their wigs, rub off the paint, and appear otherwise, as they were in private life. The Widow Jequier's husband, for instance, had been a *pasteur* who had gone later into the business of a wine-merchant. She herself was not really the keeper of a Pension for Jeune Filles, but had drifted into it owing to her husband's disastrous descent from pulpit into cellar — understudy for some one who had forgotten to come on. The Postmaster, too, had originally been a photographer, whose funereal aspect had sealed his failure in that line. His customers could never smile and look pleasant. The postman, again, was a baron in disguise — in private life he had a castle and retainers; and even Gygi, the gendarme, was a make-believe official who behind the scenes was a *vigneron* and farmer in a very humble way. Daddy, too, seemed sometimes but a tinsel author dressed up for the occasion, and absurdly busy over books that no one ever saw on railway bookstalls. While Mademoiselle Lemaire was not in fact and verity a suffering, patient, bed-ridden lady, but a princess who escaped from her disguise at night into glory and great beneficent splendour.

Mother alone was more real than the other players. There was no make-believe about Mother. She thundered across the stage and stood before the footlights, interrupting many a performance with her stubborn common-sense and her grip upon difficult grave issues. 'This performance will finish at such and such an hour,' was her cry. 'Get your wraps ready. It will be cold when you go out. And see that you have money handy for your 'bus fares home!' Yes, Mother was real. She knew some facts of life at least. She knitted the children's stockings and did the family mending.

Yet Rogers felt, even with her, that she was merely waiting. She knew the cast was not complete as yet. She waited. They all waited — for some one. These were rehearsals; Rogers himself had dropped in also merely as an understudy. Another role was vacant, and it was the principal role. There was no one in the company who could play it, none who could understudy it even. Neither Rogers nor Daddy could learn the lines or do the 'business.' The part was a very important one, calling for a touch of genius to be filled adequately. And it was a feminine role. For here was a Fairy Play without a Fairy Queen. There was not even a Fairy Princess!

This idea of a representation, all prepared specially for himself, induced a very happy state of mind; he felt restful, calm, at peace with all the world. He had only to sit in his stall and enjoy. But it brought, too, this sense of delicate bewilderment that was continually propounding questions to which he found no immediate answer. With the rest of the village, he stood still while Time flowed past him. Later, with Minks, he would run after it and catch it up again. Minks would pick out the lost clues. Minks stood on the banks — in London — noting the questions floating by and landing them sometimes with a rod and net. His master would deal with them by and by; but just now he could well afford to wait and enjoy himself. It was a holiday; there was no hurry; Minks held the fort meanwhile and sent in reports at intervals.

And the sweet spring weather continued; days were bright and warm; the nights were thick with stars. Rogers postponed departure on the flimsiest reasons. It was no easy thing to leave Bourcelles. 'Next week the muguet will be over in the vallon vert. We must pick it quickly together for Tante Anna.' Jinny brought every spring flower to Mademoiselle Lemaire in this way the moment they appeared. Her room was a record of their sequence from week to week. And Jimbo knew exactly where to find them first; his mind was a time-table of flowers as well as of trains, dates of arrival, and stations where they grew. He knew it all exaccurately. This kind of fact with him was never wumbled. 'Soon the sabot de Venus will be in flower at the Creux du Van, but it takes time to find it. It's most awfully rare, you see.

You'll have to climb beyond the fontaine froide. That's past the Ferme Robert, between Champ du Moulin and Noiraigue. The snow ought to be gone by now. We'll go and hunt for it. I'll take you in — oh, in about deux semaines — comme ca.' Alone, those dangerous cliffs were out of bounds for him, but if he went with Cousinenry, permission could not be refused. Jimbo knew what he was about. And he took for granted that his employer would never leave Bourcelles again. 'Thursday and Saturday would be the best days,' he added. They were his half- holidays, but he did not say so. Secretaries, he knew, did not have half-holidays comme ca. 'Je suis son vrai secretaire,' he had told Mademoiselle Lemaire, who had confirmed it with a grave mais oui. No one but Mother heard the puzzled question one night when he was being tucked into bed; it was asked with just a hint of shame upon a very puckered little face— 'But, Mummy, what really *is* a sekrity?'

And so Rogers, from day to day, stayed on, enjoying himself and resting. The City would have called it loafing, but in the City the schedule of values was a different one. Meanwhile the bewilderment he felt at first gradually disappeared. He no longer realised it, that is. While still outside, attacked by it, he had realised the soft entanglement. Now he was in it, caught utterly, a prisoner. He was no longer mere observer. He was part and parcel of it. 'What does a few weeks matter out of a whole strenuous life?' he argued. 'It's all to the good, this holiday. I'm storing up strength and energy for future use. My Scheme can wait a little. I'm thinking things out meanwhile.'

He often went into the forest alone to think his things out, and 'things' always meant his Scheme … but the more he thought about it the more distant and impracticable seemed that wondrous Scheme. He had the means, the love, the yearning, all in good condition, waiting to be put to practical account. In his mind, littered more and more now with details that Minks not infrequently sent in, this great Scheme by which he had meant to help the world ran into the confusion of new issues that were continually cropping up. Most of these were caused by the difficulty of knowing his money spent exactly as he wished, not wasted, no pound of it used for adornment, whether salaries, uniforms, fancy stationery, or unnecessary appearances, whatever they might be. Whichever way he faced it, and no matter how carefully thought out were the plans that Minks devised, these leakages cropped up and mocked him. Among a dozen propositions his original clear idea went lost, and floundered. It came perilously near to wumbling itself away altogether.

For one thing, there were rivals on the scene — his cousin's family, the education of these growing children, the difficulties of the Widow Jequier, some kind of security he might ensure to old Miss Waghorn, the best expert medical attendance for Mademoiselle Lemaire … and his fortune was after all a small one as fortunes go. Only his simple scale of personal living could make these things possible at all. Yet here, at least, he would know that every penny went exaccurately where it was meant to go, and accomplished the precise purpose it was intended to accomplish.

And the more he thought about it, the more insistent grew the claims of little Bourcelles, and the more that portentous Scheme for Disabled Thingumabobs faded into dimness. The old Vicar's words kept singing in his head: 'The world is full of Neighbours. Bring them all back to Fairyland.' He thought things out in his own way and at his leisure. He loved to wander alone among the mountains… thinking in this way. His thoughts turned to his cousin's family, their expenses, their difficulties, the curious want of harmony somewhere. For the conditions in which the *famille anglaise* existed, he had soon discovered, were those of muddle pure and simple, yet of muddle on so large a scale that it was fascinating and even exhilarating. It must be lovely, he reflected, to live so carelessly. They drifted. Chance forces blew them hither and thither as gusts of wind blow autumn leaves. Five years in a place and then — a gust that blew them elsewhere. Thus they had lived five years in a London suburb, thinking it permanent; five years in a lonely Essex farm, certain they would never abandon country life; and five years, finally, in the Jura forests.

Neither parent, though each was estimable, worthy, and entirely of good repute, had the smallest faculty for seeing life whole; each studied closely a small fragment of it, the fragment limited by the Monday and the Saturday of next week, or, in moments of optimistic health, the fragment that lies between the first and thirty-first of a single month. Of what lay beyond, they talked; oh, yes, they talked voluminously and with detail that sounded impressive to a listener, but somehow in circles that carried them no further than the starting- point, or in spirals that rose higher with each sentence and finally lifted them bodily above the solid ground. It was merely talk — ineffective — yet the kind that makes one feel it has accomplished something and so brings the false security of carelessness again. Neither one nor other was head of the house. They took it in turns, each slipping by chance into that onerous position, supported but uncoveted by the other. Mother fed the children, mended everything, sent them to the dentist when their teeth ached badly, but never before as a preventative, and — trusted to luck.

‘Daddy,’ she would say in her slow gentle way, ‘I do wish we could be more practical sometimes. Life is such a business, isn’t it?’ And they would examine in detail the grain of the stable door now that the horse had escaped, then close it very carefully.

‘I really must keep books,’ he would answer, ‘so that we can see exactly how we stand,’ having discovered at the end of laborious calculation concerning the cost of the proposed Geneva schooling for Jinny that they had reckoned in shillings instead of francs. And then, with heads together, they selected for their eldest boy a profession utterly unsuited to his capacities, with coaching expenses far beyond their purses, and with the comforting consideration that ‘there’s a pension attached to it, you see, for when he’s old.’

Similarly, having planned minutely, and with personal sacrifice, to save five francs in one direction, they would spend that amount unnecessarily in another. They felt they had it to spend, as though it had been just earned and already jingled in their pockets. Daddy would announce he was walking into Neuchatel to buy tobacco. ‘Better take the tram,’ suggested Mother, ‘it’s going to rain. You save shoe leather, too,’ she added laughingly. ‘Will you be back to tea?’ He thought not; he would get a cup of tea in town. ‘May I come, too?’ from Jimbo. ‘Why not?’ thought Mother. ‘Take him with you, he’ll enjoy the trip.’ Monkey and Jane Ann, of course, went too. They *all* had tea in a shop, and bought chocolate into the bargain. The five francs melted into — nothing, for tea at home was included in their Pension terms. Saving is in the mind. There was no system in their life.

‘It would be jolly, yes, if you could earn a little something regular besides your work,’ agreed Mother, when he thought of learning a typewriter to copy his own books, and taking in work to copy for others too.

‘I’ll do it,’ he decided with enthusiasm that was forgotten before he left the room ten minutes later.

It was the same with the suggestion of teaching English. He had much spare time, and could easily have earned a pound a week by giving lessons, and a pound a week is fifty pounds a year — enough to dress the younger children easily. The plan was elaborated laboriously. 'Of course,' agreed Daddy, with genuine interest. 'It's easily done. I wonder we never thought of it before.' Every few months they talked about it, but it never grew an inch nearer to accomplishment. They drifted along, ever in difficulty, each secretly blaming the other, yet never putting their thoughts into speech. They did not quite understand each other's point of view.

'Mother really might have foreseen *that*!' when Jimbo, growing like a fairy beanstalk, rendered his recent clothes entirely useless. 'Boys must grow. Why didn't she buy the things a size or two larger?'

'It's rather thoughtless, almost selfish, of Daddy to go on writing these books that bring in praise without money. He could write anything if he chose. At least, he might put his shoulder to the wheel and teach, or something!'

And so, not outwardly in spoken words or quarrels, but inwardly, owing to that deadliest of cancers, want of sympathy, these two excellent grown-up children had moved with the years further and further apart. Love had not died, but want of understanding, not attended to in time, had frayed the edges so that they no longer fitted well together. They have blown in here, thought Rogers as he watched them, like seeds the wind has brought. They have taken root and grown a bit. They think they're here for ever, but presently a wind will rise and blow them off again elsewhere. And thinking it is their own act, they will look wisely at each other, as children do, and say, 'Yes, it *is* time now to make a move. The children are getting big. Our health, too, needs a change.' He wondered, smiling a little, in what vale or mountain top the wind would let them down. And a big decision blazed up in his heart. 'I'm not very strong in the domestic line,' he exclaimed, 'but I think I can help them a bit. They're neighbours at any rate. They're all children too. Daddy's no older than Jimbo, or Mother than Jane Anne!'

* * *

In the spaces of the forest there was moss and sunshine. It was very still. The primroses and anemones had followed the hepaticas and periwinkles. Patches of lily of the valley filled the air with fragrance. Through openings of the trees he caught glimpses of the lake, deep as the Italian blue of the sky above his head. White Alps hung in the air beyond its farther shore line. Below him, already far away, the village followed slowly, bringing its fields and vineyards with it, until the tired old church called halt. And then it lay back, nestling down to sleep, very small, very cosy, mere handful of brown roofs among the orchards. Only the blue smoke of occasional peat fires moved here and there, betraying human occupation.

The peace and beauty sank into his heart, as he wandered higher across Mont Racine's velvet shoulder. And the contrast stirred memories of his recent London life. He thought of the scurrying busy-bodies in the 'City,' and he thought of the Widow Jequier attacking life so restlessly in her garden at that very minute. That other sentence of the old Vicar floated though his mind: 'the grandeur of toil and the insignificance of acquisition.'… Far overhead two giant buzzards circled quietly, ceaselessly watching from the blue. A brimstone butterfly danced in random flight before his face. Two cuckoos answered one another in the denser forest somewhere above him. Bells from distant village churches boomed softly through the air, voices from a world forgotten.

And the contrast brought back London. He thought of the long busy chapter of his life just finished. The transition had been so abrupt. As a rule periods fade into one another gradually in life, easily, divisions blurred; it is difficult on looking back to say where the change began. One is well into the new before the old is realised as left behind. 'How did I come to this?' the mind asks itself. 'I don't remember any definite decision. Where was the boundary crossed?' It has been imperceptibly accomplished.

But here the change had been sudden and complete, no shading anywhere. He had leaped a wall. Turmoil and confusion lay on that side; on this lay peace, rest and beauty. Strain and ugliness were left behind, and with them so much that now seemed false, unnecessary, vain. The grandeur of toil, and the insignificance of acquisition — the phrase ran through his mind with the sighing of the pine trees; it was like the first line of a song. The Vicar knew the song complete. Even Minks, perhaps, could pipe it too. Rogers was learning it. 'I must help them somehow,' he thought again. 'It's not a question of money merely. It's that they want welding together more — more harmony — more sympathy. They're separate bits of a puzzle now, whereas they might be a rather big and lovely pattern. …'

He lay down upon the moss and flung his hat away. He felt that Life stood still within him, watching, waiting, asking beautiful, deep, searching questions. It made him slightly uncomfortable. Henry Rogers, late of Threadneedle Street, took stock of himself, not of set intention, yet somehow deliberately. He reviewed another Henry Rogers who had been unable to leap that wall. The two peered at one another gravely.

The review, however, took no definite form; precise language hardly came to help with definite orders. A vague procession of feelings, half sad, half pleasurable, floated past his closing eyes. … Perhaps he slept a moment in the sunshine upon that bed of moss and pine needles. …

Such curious thoughts flowed up and out and round about, dancing like the brimstone butterflies out of reach before he could seize them, calling with voices like the cuckoos, themselves all the time just out of sight. Who ever saw a cuckoo when it's talking? Who ever foretold the instant when a butterfly would shoot upwards and away? Such darting, fragile thoughts they were, like hints, suggestions. Still, they *were* thoughts.

Minks, dragging behind him an enormous Scheme, emerged from the dark vaults of a Bank where gold lay piled in heaps. Minks was looking for him, yet smiling a little, almost pityingly, as he strained beneath the load. It was like a comic opera. Minks was going down the noisy, crowded Strand. Then, suddenly, he paused, uncertain of the way. From an upper window a shining face popped out and issued clear directions — as from a pulpit. 'That way — towards the river,' sang the voice — and far down the narrow side street flashed a gleam of flowing water with orchards on the farther bank. Minks instantly turned and went down it with his load so fast that the scenery changed before the heavy traffic could get out of the way. Everything got muddled up with fields and fruit-trees; the Scheme changed into a mass of wild- flowers; a lame boy knocked it over with his crutch; gold fell in a brilliant, singing shower, and where each sovereign fell there sprang up a buttercup or dandelion. Rogers rubbed his eyes … and realised that the sun was rather hot upon his face. A dragon fly was perched upon his hat three feet away. …

The tea hour at the Den was close, and Jimbo, no doubt, was already looking for him at the carpenter's house. Rogers hurried home among the silent forest ways that were sweet with running shadows and slanting sunshine. Oh, how fragrant was the evening air! And how the lily of the valley laughed up in his face! Normally, at this time, he would be sitting in a taxi, hurrying noisily towards his Club, thoughts full of figures, politics, philanthropy cut to line and measure — a big Scheme standing in squares across the avenue of the future. Now, moss and flowers and little children took up all the available space. … How curiously out of the world Bourcelles was, to be sure. Newspapers had no meaning any longer. Picture-papers and smart weekly Reviews, so necessary and important in St. James's Street, here seemed vulgar, almost impertinent — ridiculous even. Big books, yes; but not pert, topical comments issued with an absurd omnipotence upon things merely ephemeral. How the mind accumulated rubbish in a city! It seemed incredible. He surely had climbed a wall and dropped down into a world far bigger, though a world the 'city' would deem insignificant and trivial. Yet only because it had less detail probably! A loved verse flashed to him across the years: —

'O to dream, O to awake and wander
 There, and with delight to take and render,
  Through the trance of silence,
   Quiet breath!

Lo! for there among the flowers and grasses,
 Only the mightier movement sounds and passes;
  Only winds and rivers,
   Life and death.'

Bourcelles was important as London, yes, while simple as the nursery. The same big questions of life and death, of battle, duty, love, ruled the peaceful inhabitants. Only the noisy shouting, the clatter of superfluous chattering and feverish striving had dropped away. Hearts and minds wore fewer clothes among these woods and vineyards. There was no nakedness though … there were flowers and moss, blue sky and peace and beauty. … Thought ran into confused, vague pictures. He could not give them coherence, shape, form. …

He crossed the meadows and entered the village through the Pension garden. The Widow Jequier gave him a spray of her Persian lilac on the way. 'It's been growing twenty-five years for you,' she said, 'only do not look at *me*. I'm in my garden things — invisible.' He remembered with a smile Jane Anne's description — that 'the front part of the house was all at the back.'

Tumbling down the wooden stairs, he crossed the street and made for the Citadelle, where the children opened the door for him even before he rang. Jimbo and Monkey, just home from school, pulled him by both arms towards the tea-table. They had watched for his coming.

'The samovar's just boiling,' Mother welcomed him. Daddy was on the sofa by the open window, reading manuscript over to himself in a mumbling voice; and Jane Anne, apron on, sleeves tucked up, face flushed, poked her head in from the kitchen:

'Excuse me, Mother, the cupboard's all in distress. I can't find the marmalade anywhere.'

'But it's already on the table, child.'

She saw her Cousin and popped swiftly back again from view. One heard fragments of her sentences— 'wumbled … chronic … busy monster. … 'And two minutes later *la famille anglaise* was seriously at tea.

CHAPTER XVIII

What art thou, then? I cannot guess;
But tho' I seem in star and flower
To feel thee some diffusive power,
I do not therefore love thee less.
Love and Death, TENNYSON.

In the act of waking up on the morning of the Star Cave experience, Henry Rogers caught the face of a vivid dream close against his own — but in rapid motion, already passing. He tried to seize it. There was a happy, delightful atmosphere about it. Examination, however, was impossible; the effort to recover the haunting dream dispersed it. He saw the tip, like an express train flying round a corner; it flashed and disappeared, fading into dimness. Only the delightful atmosphere remained and the sense that he had been somewhere far away in very happy conditions. People he knew quite well, had been there with him; Jimbo and Monkey; Daddy too, as he had known him in his boyhood. More than this was mere vague surmise; he could not recover details. Others had been also of the merry company, familiar yet unrecognisable. Who in the world were they? It all seemed oddly real.

'How I do dream in this place, to be sure,' he thought; 'I, who normally dream so little! It was like a scene of my childhood — Crayfield or somewhere.' And he reflected how easily one might be persuaded that the spirit escaped in sleep and knew another order of experience. The sense of actuality was so vivid.

He lay half dozing for a little longer, hoping to recover the adventures. The flying train showed itself once or twice again, but smaller, and much, much farther away. It curved off into the distance. A deep cutting quickly swallowed it. It emerged for the last time, tiny as a snake upon a chess-board of far-off fields. Then it dipped into mist; the snake shot into its hole. It was gone. He sighed. It had been so lovely. Why must it vanish so entirely? Once or twice during the day it returned, touched him swiftly on the heart and was gone again. But the waking impression of a dream is never the dream itself. Sunshine destroys the sense of enormous wonder.

‘I believe I’ve been dreaming all night long, and going through all kinds of wild adventures.’

He dressed leisurely, still hunting subconsciously for fragments of that happy dreamland. Its aroma still clung about him. The sunshine poured into the room. He went out on to the balcony and looked at the Alps through his Zeiss field-glasses. The brilliant snow upon the Diablerets danced and sang into his blood; across the broken teeth of the Dent du Midi trailed thin strips of early cloud. Behind him rose great Boudry’s massive shoulders, a pyramid of incredible deep blue. And the limestone precipices of La Tourne stood dazzlingly white, catching the morning sunlight full in their face.

The air had the freshness of the sea. Men were singing at their work among the vineyards. The tinkle of cow-bells floated to him from the upper pastures upon Mont Racine. Little sails like sea-gulls dipped across the lake. Goodness, how happy the world was at Bourcelles! Singing, radiant, careless of pain and death. And, goodness, how he longed to make it happier still!

Every day now this morning mood had been the same. Desire to do something for others ran races with little practical schemes for carrying it out. Selfish considerations seemed to have taken flight, all washed away while he slept. Moreover, the thought of his Scheme had begun to oppress him; a touch of shame came with it, almost as though an unworthy personal motive were somewhere in it. Perhaps after all — he wondered more and more now — there had been an admixture of personal ambition in the plan. The idea that it would bring him honour in the eyes of the world had possibly lain there hidden all along. If so, he had not realised it; the depravity had been unconscious. Before the Bourcelles standard of simplicity, artificial elements dropped off automatically, ashamed. … And a profound truth, fished somehow out of that vanished dreamland, spun its trail of glory through his heart. Kindness that is thanked-for surely brings degradation — a degradation almost as mean as the subscription acknowledged in a newspaper, or the anonymous contribution kept secret temporarily in order that its later advertisement may excite the more applause. Out flashed this blazing truth: kind acts must be instinctive, natural, thoughtless. One hand must be in absolute ignorance of the other's high adventures. … And when the carpenter's wife brought up his breakfast tray, with the bunch of forest flowers standing in a tumbler of water, she caught him pondering over another boyhood's memory — that friend of his father's who had given away a million anonymously.

… In his heart plans shaped themselves with soft, shy eyes and hidden faces…. He longed to get *la famille anglaise* straight … for one thing. …

It was an hour later, while he still sat dreaming in the sunshine by the open window, that a gentle tap came at the door, and Daddy entered. The visit was a surprise. Usually, until time for *dejeuner*, he kept his room, busily unwumbling stories. This was unusual. And something had happened to him; he looked different. What was it that had changed? Some veil had cleared away; his eyes were shining. They greeted one another, and Rogers fell shyly to commonplaces, while wondering what the change exactly was.

But the other was not to be put off. He was bursting with something. Rogers had never seen him like this before.

'You've stopped work earlier than usual,' he said, providing the opening. He understood his diffidence, his shyness in speaking of himself. Long disappointments lay so thinly screened behind his unfulfilled enthusiasm.

But this time the enthusiasm swept diffidence to the winds. It had been vitally stirred.

'Early indeed,' he cried. 'I've been working four hours without a break, man. Why, what do you think? — I woke at sunrise, a thing I never do, with — with a brilliant idea in my head. Brilliant, I tell you. By Jove, if only I can carry it out as I see it —— !'

'You've begun it already?'

'Been at it since six o'clock, I tell you. It was in me when I woke — idea, treatment, everything complete, all in a perfect pattern of Beauty.'

There was a glow upon his face, his hair was untidy; a white muffler with blue spots was round his neck instead of collar. One end stuck up against his chin. The safety pin was open.

'By Jove! I am delighted!' Rogers had seen him excited before over a 'brilliant idea,' but the telling of it always left him cold. It touched the intellect, yet not the heart. It was merely clever. This time, however, there was a new thing in his manner. ‘How did you get it?’ he repeated. Methods of literary production beyond his own doggerels were a mystery to him. ‘Sort of inspiration, eh?’

‘Woke with it, I tell you,’ continued his cousin, twisting the muffler so that it tickled his ear now instead of his chin. ‘It must have come to me in sleep — —’ ‘In sleep,’ exclaimed the other; ‘you dreamt it, then?’

‘Kind of inspiration business. I’ve heard of that sort of thing, but never experienced it — —’ The author paused for breath.

‘What is it? Tell me.’ He remembered how ingenious details of his patents had sometimes found themselves cleared up in the morning after refreshing slumber. This might be something similar. ‘Let’s hear it,’ he added; ‘I’m interested.’

His cousin’s recitals usually ended in sad confusion, so that all he could answer by way of praise was—’ You ought to make something good out of that. I shall like to read it when you’ve finished it.’ But this time, he felt, there was distinctly a difference. There were new conditions.

The older man leaned closer, his face alight, his manner shyly, eagerly confidential. The morning sunshine blazed upon his untidy hair. A bread crumb from breakfast still balanced in his beard.

‘It’s difficult to tell in a few words, you see,’ he began, the enthusiasm of a boy in his manner, ‘but — I woke with the odd idea that this little village might be an epitome of the world. All the emotions of London, you see, are here in essence — the courage and cowardice, the fear and hope, the greed and sacrifice, the love and hate and passion — everything. It’s the big world in miniature. Only — with one difference.’

‘That’s good,’ said Rogers, trying to remember when it was he had told his cousin this very thing. Or had he only *thought* it? ‘And what *is* the difference?’

‘The difference,’ continued the other, eyes sparkling, face alight, ‘that here the woods, the mountains and the stars are close. They pour themselves in upon the village life from every side — above, below, all round. Flowers surround it; it dances to the mountain winds; at night it lies entangled in the starlight. Along a thousand imperceptible channels an ideal simplicity from

Nature pours down into it, modifying the human passions, chastening, purifying, uplifting. Don't you see? And these sweet, viewless channels — who keeps them clean and open? Why, God bless you —— . The children! *My* children!'

'By Jingo, yes; *your* children.'

Rogers said it with emphasis. But there was a sudden catch at his heart; he was conscious of a queer sensation he could not name. This was exactly what he had felt himself — with the difference that his own thought had been, perhaps, emotion rather than a reasoned-out idea. His cousin put it into words and gave it form. A picture — had he seen it in a book perhaps? — flashed across his mind. A child, suspiciously like Monkey, held a pen and dipped it into something bright and flowing. A little boy with big blue eyes gathered this shining stuff in both hands and poured it in a golden cataract upon the eyelids of a sleeping figure. And the figure had a beard. It was a man … familiar. … A touch of odd excitement trembled through his undermind … thrilled … vanished. …

All dived out of sight again with the swiftness of a darting swallow. His cousin was talking at high speed. Rogers had lost a great deal of what he had been saying.

'… it may, of course, have come from something you said the other night as we walked up the hill to supper — you remember? — something about the brilliance of our stars here and how they formed a shining network that hung from Boudry and La Tourne. It's impossible to say. The germ of a true inspiration is never discoverable. Only, I remember, it struck me as an odd thing for *you* to say. I was telling you about my idea of the scientist who married — no, no, it wasn't that, it was my story of the materialist doctor whom circumstances compelled to accept a position in the Community of Shakers, and how the contrast produced an effect upon his mind of — of — you remember, perhaps? It was one or the other; I forget exactly,' — then suddenly— 'No, no, I've got it — it was the analysis of the father's mind when he found — —'

'Yes, yes,' interrupted Rogers. 'We were just passing the Citadelle fountain. I saw the big star upon the top of Boudry, and made a remark about it.' His cousin was getting sadly wumbled. He tried to put severity and concentration into his voice.

‘That’s it,’ the other cried, head on one side and holding up a finger, ‘because I remember that my own thought wandered for a moment — thought will, you know, in spite of one’s best effort sometimes — and you said a thing that sent a little shiver of pleasure through me for an instant — something about a Starlight Train — and made me wonder where you got the idea. That’s it. I do believe you’ve hit the nail on the head. Isn’t it curious sometimes how a practical mind may suggest valuable material to the artist? I remember, several years ago — —’

‘Starlight Express, wasn’t it?’ said his friend with decision in his voice. He thumped the table vigorously with one fist. ‘Keep to the point, old man. Follow it out. Your idea is splendid.’

‘Yes, I do believe it is.’ Something in his voice trembled.

One sentence in particular Rogers heard, for it seemed plucked out of the talk he had with the children in the forest that day two weeks ago.

‘You see, all light meets somewhere. It’s all one, I mean. And so with minds. They all have a common meeting-place. Sympathy is the name for that place — that state — they feel with each other, see flash-like from the same point of view for a moment. And children are the conduits. They do not think things out. They feel them, eh?’ He paused an instant.

‘For you see, along these little channels that the children — my children, as I think I mentioned — keep sweet and open, there might troop back into the village — Fairyland. Not merely a foolish fairyland of make-believe and dragons and princesses imprisoned in animals, but a fairyland the whole world needs — the sympathy of sweet endeavour, love, gentleness and sacrifice for others. The stars would bring it — starlight don’t you see? One might weave starlight in and out everywhere — use it as the symbol of sympathy — and — er — so on—’

Rogers again lost the clue. Another strangely familiar picture, and then another, flashed gorgeously before his inner vision; his mind raced after them, yet never caught them up. They were most curiously familiar. Then, suddenly, he came back and heard his cousin still talking. It was like a subtle plagiarism. Too subtle altogether, indeed, it was for him. He could only stare and listen in amazement.

But the recital grew more and more involved. Perhaps, alone in his workroom, Daddy could unwumble it consistently. He certainly could not tell it. The thread went lost among a dozen other things. The interfering sun had melted it all down in dew and spider gossamer and fairy cotton. …

‘I must go down and work,’ he said at length, rising and fumbling with the door handle. He seemed disappointed a little. He had given out his ideas so freely, perhaps too freely. Rogers divined he had not sympathised enough. His manner had been shamefully absent-minded. The absent-mindedness was really the highest possible praise, but the author did not seem to realise it.

‘It’s glorious, my dear fellow, glorious,’ Rogers added emphatically. ‘You’ve got a big idea, and you can write it too. You will.’ He said it with conviction. ‘You touch my heart as you tell it. I congratulate you. Really I do.’

There was no mistaking the sincerity of his words and tone. The other came back a step into the room again. He stroked his beard and felt the crisp, hard crumb. He picked it out, examining it without surprise. It was no unfamiliar thing, perhaps; at any rate, it was an excuse to lower his eyes. Shyness returned upon him.

‘Thank you,’ he said gently; ‘I’m glad you think so. You see, I sometimes feel — perhaps — my work has rather suffered from — been a little deficient in — the human touch. One must reach people’s hearts if one wants big sales. So few have brains. Not that I care for money, or could ever write for money, for that brings its own punishment in loss of inspiration. But of course, with a family to support. … I *have* a family, you see.’ He raised his eyes and looked out into the sunshine. ‘Well, anyhow, I’ve begun this thing. I shall send it in short form to the *X. Review*. It may attract attention there. And later I can expand it into a volume.’ He hesitated, examined the crumb closely again, tossed it away, and looked up at his cousin suddenly full in the face. The high enthusiasm flamed back into his eyes again. ‘Bring the world back to Fairyland, you see!’ he concluded with vehemence, ‘eh?’

‘Glorious!’ Surely thought ran about the world like coloured flame, if this was true.

The author turned towards the door. He opened it, then stopped on the threshold and looked round like a person who has lost his way.

‘I forgot,’ he added, ‘I forgot another thing, one of the chief almost. It’s this: there must be a Leader — who shall bring it back. Without the Guide, Interpreter, Pioneer, how shall the world listen or understand, even the little world of Bourcelles?’

‘Of course, yes — some big figure — like a priest or prophet, you mean? A sort of Chairman, President, eh?’

‘Yes,’ was the reply, while the eyes flashed fires that almost recaptured forgotten dreams, ‘but hardly in the way you mean, perhaps. A very simple figure, *I* mean, unconscious of its mighty role. Some one with endless stores of love and sympathy and compassion that have never found an outlet yet, but gone on accumulating and accumulating unexpressed.’

‘I see, yes.’ Though he really did not ‘see’ a bit. ‘But who is there like that here? You’ll have to invent him.’ He remembered his own thought that some principal role was vacant in his Children’s Fairy Play. How queer it all was! He stared. ‘Who is there?’ he repeated.

‘No one — now. I shall bring her, though.’

‘*Her*!’ exclaimed Rogers with surprise. ‘You mean a woman?’

‘A childless woman,’ came the soft reply. ‘A woman with a million children — all unborn.’ But Rogers did not see the expression of the face. His cousin was on the landing. The door closed softly on the words. The steps went fumbling down the stairs, and presently he heard the door below close too. The key was turned in it.

‘A childless woman!’ The phrase rang on long after he had gone. What an extraordinary idea! ‘Bring her here’ indeed! Could his cousin mean that some such woman might read his story and come to claim the position, play the vacant role? No, nothing so literal surely. The idea was preposterous. He had heard it said that imaginative folk, writers, painters, musicians, all had a touch of lunacy in them somewhere. He shrugged his shoulders. And what a job it must be, too, the writing of a book! He had never realised it before. A real book, then, meant putting one’s heart into sentences, telling one’s inmost secrets, confessing one’s own ideals with fire and lust and passion. That was the difference perhaps between literature and mere facile invention. His cousin had never dared do this before; shyness prevented; his intellect wove pretty patterns that had no heat of life in them. But now he had discovered a big idea, true as the sun, and able, like the sun, to warm thousands of readers, all ready for it without knowing it. …

Rogers sat on thinking in the bright spring sunshine, smoking one cigarette after another. For the idea his cousin had wumbled over so fubsily had touched his heart, and for a long time he was puzzled to find the reason. But at length he found it. In that startling phrase ‘a childless woman’ lay the clue. A childless woman was like a vessel with a cargo of exquisite flowers that could never make a port. Sweetening every wind, she yet never comes to land. No harbour welcomes her. She sails endless seas, charged with her freight of undelivered beauty; the waves devour her glory, her pain, her lovely secret all unconfessed. To bring such a woman into port, even imaginatively in a story, or subconsciously in an inner life, was fulfilment of a big, fine, wholesome yearning, sacred in a way, too.

‘By George!’ he said aloud. He felt strange, great life pour through him. He had made a discovery … in his heart … deep, deep down.

Something in himself, so long buried it was scarcely recognisable, stirred out of sight and tried to rise. Some flower of his youth that time had hardened, dried, yet never killed, moved gently towards blossoming. It shone. It was still hard a little, like a crystal, glistening down there among shadows that had gathered with the years. And then it suddenly melted, running in a tiny thread of gold among his thoughts into that quiet sea which so rarely in a man may dare the relief of tears. It was a tiny yellow flower, like a daisy that had forgotten to close at night, so that some stray starbeam changed its whiteness into gold.

Forgotten passion, and yearning long denied, stirred in him with that phrase. His cousin’s children doubtless had prepared the way. A faded Dream peered softly into his eyes across the barriers of the years. For every woman in the world was a mother, and a childless woman was the grandest, biggest mother of them all. And he had longed for children of his own; he, too, had remained a childless father. A vanished face gazed up into his own. Two vessels, making the same fair harbour, had lost their way, yet still sailed, perhaps, the empty seas. Yet the face he did not quite recognise. The eyes, instead of blue, were amber. …

And did this explain a little the spell that caught him in this Jura village, perhaps? Were these children, weaving a network so cunningly about his feet, merely scouts and pilots? Was his love for the world of suffering folk, after all, but his love for a wife and children of his own transmuted into wider channels? Denied the little garden he once had planned for it, did it seek to turn the whole big world into a garden? Suppression was impossible; like murder, it must out. A bit of it had even flamed a passage into work and patents and 'City' life. For love is life, and life is ever and everywhere one. He thought and thought and thought. A man begins by loving himself; then, losing himself, he loves a woman; next, that love spreads itself over a still bigger field, and he loves his family, his wife and children, and their families again in turn. But, that expression denied, his love inevitably, irrepressibly seeking an outlet, finds it in a Cause, a Race, a Nation, perhaps in the entire world. The world becomes his 'neighbour.' It was a great Fairy Story. …

Again his thoughts returned to that one singular sentence … and he realised what his cousin meant. Only a childless Mother, some woman charged to the brim with this power of loving to which ordinary expression had been denied, could fill the vacant role in his great Children's Play. No man could do it. He and his cousin were mere 'supers' on this stage. His cousin would invent her for his story. He would make her come. His passion would create her. That was what he meant.

Rogers smiled to himself, moving away from the window where the sunshine grew too fierce for comfort. What a funny business it all was, to be sure! And how curiously every one's thinking had intermingled! The children had somehow divined his own imaginings in that Crayfield garden; their father had stolen the lot for his story. It was most extraordinary. And then he remembered Minks, and all his lunatic theories about thought and thought-pictures. The garden scene at Crayfield came back vividly, the one at Charing Cross, in the orchard, too, with the old Vicar, when they had talked beneath the stars. Who among them all was the original sponsor? And which of them had set the ball a-rolling? It was stranger than the story of creation. … It *was* the story of creation.

Yet he did not puzzle very long. Actors in a play are never puzzled; it is the bewildered audience who ask questions. And Henry Rogers was on the stage. The gauzy curtain hung between him and the outside point of view.

He was already deeply involved in Fairyland. … His feet were in the Net of Stars. … He was a prisoner.

And that woman he had once dreamed might mother his own children — where was she? Until a few years ago he had still expected, hoped to meet her. One day they would come together. She waited somewhere. It was only recently he had let the dream slip finally from him, abandoned with many another personal ambition.

Idly he picked up a pencil, and before he was aware of it the words ran into lines. It seemed as though his cousin's mood, thought, inspiration, worked through him.

Upon what flowering shore,
'Neath what blue skies
She stands and waits,
It is not mine to know;
Only I know that shore is fair,
Those skies are blue.

Her voice I may not hear,
Nor see her eyes,
Yet there are times
When in the wind she speaks.
When stars and flowers
Tell me of her eyes.
When rivers chant her name.

If ever signs were sure,
I know she waits;
If not, what means this sweetness in the wind,
The singing in the rain, the love in flowers?
What mean these whispers in the air,
This calling from the hills and from the sea?
These tendernesses of the Day and Night?
Unless she waits!

What in the world was this absurd sweetness running in his veins?

He laughed a little. A slight flush, too, came and went its way. The tip of the pencil snapped as he pressed too heavily on it. He had drawn it through the doggerel with impatience, for he suddenly realised that he had told a deep, deep secret to the paper. It had stammered its way out before he was aware of it. This was youth and boyhood strong upon him, the moods of Crayfield that he had set long ago on one side — deliberately. The mood that wrote the Song of the Blue Eyes had returned, waking after a sleep of a quarter of a century.

‘What rubbish!’ he exclaimed; ‘I shall be an author next!’ He tore it up and, rolling the pieces into a ball, played catch with it. ‘What waste of energy! Six months ago that energy would have gone into something useful, a patent — perhaps an improvement in the mechanism of — of—’ he hesitated, then finished the sentence with a sigh of yearning and another passing flush— ‘a perambulator!’

He tossed it out of the window and, laughing, leaned out to watch it fall. It bounced upon a head of tousled hair beneath, then flew off sideways in the wind and rattled away faintly among the vines. The head was his cousin’s.

‘What are you up to?’ cried the author, looking up. ‘I’m not a waste- paper basket.’ There was a cigarette ash in his beard.

‘Sending you ideas, he answered. ‘I’m coming myself now. Look out!’ He was in high spirits again. He believed in that Fairy Princess.

‘All right; I’ve put you in already. Everybody will wonder who Cousinenry is. …’ The untidy head of hair popped in again.

‘Hark!’ cried Rogers, trying to look round the corner of the house. He edged himself out at a dangerous angle. His ears had caught another sound. There was music in the air.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SWEET SPRING winds came laughing down the street, bearing a voice that mingled with their music.

Daddy! Daddy! vite; il y a un paquet!' sounded in a child's excited cry. 'It arrives this afternoon. It's got the Edinburgh postmark. Here is the notice. *C'est enorme!'*

The figure of Jimbo shot round the corner, dancing into view. He waved a bit of yellow paper in his hand. A curious pang tore its way into the big man's heart as he saw him — a curious, deep, searching pain that yet left joy all along its trail. Positively moisture dimmed his eyes a second.

But Jimbo belonged to some one else.

Daddy's wumbled head projected instantly again from the window beneath.

'A box?' he asked, equally excited. 'A box from Scotland? Why, we had one only last month. Bless their hearts! How little they know what help and happiness. … 'The rest of the sentence disappeared with the head; and a moment later Jimbo was heard scampering up the stairs. Both men went out to meet him.

The little boy was breathless with excitement, yet the spirit of the man of affairs worked strongly in him. He deliberately suppressed hysterics. He spoke calmly as might be, both hands in his trouser- pockets beneath the blouse of blue cotton that stuck out like a ballet skirt all round. The belt had slipped down. His eyes were never still. He pulled one hand out, holding the crumpled paper up for inspection.

'It's a *paquet*,' he said, '*comme ca.*' He used French and English mixed, putting the latter in for his cousin's benefit. He had little considerate ways like that. It's coming from Scotland, *et puis ca pese soixante-quinze kilos*. Oh, it's big. It's enormous. The last one weighed,' he hesitated, forgetful, 'much, much less,' he finished. He paused, looking like a man who has solved a problem by stating it.

‘One hundred and fifty pounds,’ exclaimed his father, just as eager as the boy. ‘Let me look,’ and he held his hand out for the advice from the railway. ‘What *can* be in it?’

‘Something for everybody,’ said Jimbo decidedly. ‘All the village knows it. It will come by the two o’clock train from Bale, you know.’ He gave up the paper unwillingly. It was his badge of office. ‘That’s the paper about it,’ he added again.

Daddy read out slowly the advice of consignment, with dates and weights and address of sender and recipient, while Jimbo corrected the least mistake. He knew it absolutely by heart.

‘There’ll be dresses and boots for the girls this time,’ he announced, ‘and something big enough for Mother to wear, too. You can tell—’

‘How can you tell?’ asked Daddy, laughing slyly, immensely pleased about it all.

‘Oh, by the weight of the *paquet, comme ca*,’ was the reply. ‘It weighs 75 kilos. That means there must be something for Mummy in it.’

The author turned towards his cousin, hiding his smile. ‘It’s a box of clothes,’ he explained, ‘from my cousins in Scotland, Lady X you know, and her family. Things they give away — usually to their maids and what-not. Awfully good of them, isn’t it? They pay the carriage too,’ he added. It was an immense relief to him.

‘Things they can’t wear,’ put in Jimbo, ‘but *very* good things — suits, blouses, shirts, collars, boots, gloves, and — oh, *toute sorte de choses comme ca*.’

‘Isn’t it nice of ‘em,’ repeated Daddy. It made life easier for him — ever so much easier. ‘A family like that has such heaps of things. And they always pay the freight. It saves me a pretty penny I can tell you. Why, I haven’t bought the girls a dress for two years or more. And Edward’s dressed like a lord, I tell you,’ referring to his eldest boy now at an expensive tutor’s. ‘You can understand the excitement when a box arrives. We call it the Magic Box.’

Rogers understood. It had puzzled him before why the children’s clothes, Daddy’s and Mummy’s as well for that matter, were such an incongruous assortment of village or peasant wear, and smart, well-cut garments that bore so obviously the London mark.

‘They’re very rich indeed,’ said Jimbo. ‘They have a motor car. These are the only things that don’t fit them. There’s not much for me usually; I’m too little yet. But there’s lots for the girls and the others.’ And ‘the others,’ it appeared, included the Widow Jequier, the Postmaster and his wife, the carpenter’s family, and more than one household in the village who knew the use and value of every centimetre of ribbon. Even the retired governesses got their share. No shred or patch was ever thrown away as useless. The assortment of cast-off clothing furnished Sunday Bests to half the village for weeks to come. A consignment of bullion could not have given half the pleasure and delight that the arrival of a box produced.

But *midi* was ringing, and *dejeuner* had to be eaten first. Like a meal upon the stage, no one ate sincerely; they made a brave pretence, but the excitement was too great for hunger. Every one was in the secret — the Postmaster (he might get another hat out of it for himself) had let it out with a characteristic phrase: ‘Il y a un paquet pour la famille anglaise!’ Yet all feigned ignorance. The children exchanged mysterious glances, and afterwards the governesses hung about the Post Office, simulating the purchase of stamps at two o’clock. But every one watched Daddy’s movements, for he it was who would say the significant words.

And at length he said them. ‘Now, we had better go down to the station,’ he observed casually, ‘and see if there is anything for us.’ His tone conveyed the impression that things often arrived in this way; it was an everyday affair. If there was nothing, it didn’t matter much. His position demanded calmness.

‘Very well,’ said Jimbo. ‘I’ll come with you.’ He strutted off, leading the way.

‘And I, and I,’ cried Monkey and Jane Anne, for it was a half-holiday and all were free. Jimbo would not have appeared to hurry for a kingdom.

‘I think I’ll join you, too,’ remarked Mother, biting her lips, ‘only please go slowly.’ There were hills to negotiate.

They went off together in a party, and the governesses watched them go. The Widow Jequier put her head out of the window, pretending she was feeding the birds. Her sister popped out opportunely to post a letter. The Postmaster opened his *guichet* window and threw a bit of string into the gutter; and old Miss Waghorn, just then appearing for her daily fifteen minutes' constitutional, saw the procession and asked him, 'Who in the world all those people were?' She had completely forgotten them. 'Le barometre a monte,' he replied, knowing no word of English, and thinking it was her usual question about the weather. He reported daily the state of the barometer. 'Vous n'aurez pas besoin d'un parapluie.' 'Mercy,' she said, meaning *merci*.

The train arrived, and with it came the box. They brought it up themselves upon the little hand-cart — *le char*. It might have weighed a ton and contained priceless jewels, the way they tugged and pushed, and the care they lavished on it. Mother puffed behind, hoping there would be something to fit Jimbo this time.

'Shall we rest a moment?' came at intervals on the hill, till at last Monkey said, 'Sit on the top, Mummy, and we'll pull you too.' And during the rests they examined the exterior, smelt it, tapped it, tried to see between the cracks, and ventured endless and confused conjectures as to its probable contents.

They dragged the hand-cart over the cobbles of the courtyard, and heaved the box up the long stone staircase. It was planted at length on the floor beside the bed of Mlle. Lemaire, that she might witness the scene from her prison windows. Daddy had the greatest difficulty in keeping order, for tempers grow short when excitement is too long protracted. The furniture was moved about to make room. Orders flew about like grape-shot. Everybody got in everybody else's way. But finally the unwieldy packing-case was in position, and a silence fell upon the company.

'My gum, we've put it upside down,' said Daddy, red in the face with his exertions. It was the merest chance that there was no wisp of straw yet in his beard.

'Then the clothes will all be inside out,' cried Monkey, 'and we shall have to stand on our heads.'

'You silly,' Jane Anne rebuked her, yet half believing it was true, while Jimbo, holding hammer and chisel ready, looked unutterable contempt.

‘Can’t you be serious for a moment?’ said his staring blue eyes.

The giant chest was laboriously turned over, the two men straining every muscle in the attempt. Then, after a moment’s close inspection again to make quite sure, Daddy spoke gravely. Goodness, how calm he was!

‘Jimbo, boy, pass me the hammer and the chisel, will you?’

In breathless silence the lid was slowly forced open and the splintered pieces gingerly removed. Sheets of dirty brown paper and bundles of odorous sacking came into view.

‘Perhaps that’s all there is,’ suggested Jinny.

‘Ugh! What a whiff!’ said Monkey.

‘Fold them up carefully and put them in a corner,’ ordered Mother.
Jane Anne religiously obeyed. Oh dear, how slow she was about it!

Then everybody came up very close, heads bent over, hands began to stretch and poke. You heard breathing — nothing more.

‘Now, wait your turn,’ commanded Mother in a dreadful voice, ‘and let your Father try on everything first.’ And a roar of laughter made the room echo while Daddy extracted wonder after wonder that were packed in endless layers one upon another.

Perhaps what would have struck an observer most of all would have been the strange seriousness against which the comedy was set. The laughter was incessant, but it was a weighty matter for all that. The bed- ridden woman, who was sole audience, understood that; the parents understood it too. Every article of clothing that could be worn meant a saving, and the economy of a franc was of real importance. The struggles of *la famille anglaise* to clothe and feed and educate themselves were no light affair. The eldest boy, now studying for the consular service, absorbed a third of their entire income. The sacrifices involved for his sake affected each one in countless ways. And for two years now these magic boxes had supplied all his suits and shirts and boots. The Scotch cousins luckily included a boy of his own size who had extravagant taste in clothes. A box sometimes held as many as four excellent suits. Daddy contented himself with one a year — ordered ready-made from the place they called Chasbakerinhighholborn.’ Mother’s clothes were ‘wropp in mystery’ ever. No one ever discovered where they came from or how she made them. She did. It seemed always the same black dress and velvet blouse.

Gravity and laughter, therefore, mingled in Daddy’s face as he drew out one paper parcel after another, opened it, tried the article on himself, and handed it next to be tried on similarly by every one in turn.

And the first extraction from the magic box was a curious looking thing that no one recognised. Daddy unfolded it and placed it solemnly on his head. He longed for things for himself, but rarely found them. He tried on everything, hoping it might ‘just do,’ but in the end yielded it with pleasure to the others. He rarely got more than a pair of gloves or a couple of neckties for himself. The coveted suits just missed his size.

Grave as a judge he balanced the erection on his head. It made a towering heap. Every one was puzzled. ‘It’s a motor cap,’ ventured some one at length in a moment of intuition.

‘It’s several!’ cried Monkey. She snatched the bundle and handed it to Mother. There were four motor caps, neatly packed together. Mother put on each in turn. They were in shades of grey. They became her well.

‘You look like a duchess,’ said Daddy proudly. ‘You’d better keep them all.’

‘I think perhaps they’ll do,’ she said, moving to the glass, ‘if no one else can wear them.’ She flushed a little and looked self- conscious.

‘They want long pins,’ suggested Jinny. ‘They’ll keep the rain off too, like an umbrella.’ She laughed and clapped her hands. Mother pinned one on and left it there for the remainder of the afternoon. The unpacking of the case continued.

The next discovery was gloves. The lid of the box looked like a counter in a glove shop. There were gloves of leather and chamois, gauntlets, driving-gloves, and gloves of suede, yellow, brown, and grey. All had been used a little, but all were good. ‘They’ll wash,’ said Jane Anne. They were set aside in a little heap apart. No one coveted them. It was not worth while. In the forests of Bourcelles gloves were at a discount, and driving a pleasure yet unknown. Jinny, however a little later put on a pair of ladies’ suede that caught her fancy, and wore them faithfully to the end of the performance, just to keep her mother’s motor cap in countenance.

The main contents of the box were as yet unbroached, however, and when next an overcoat appeared, with velvet collar and smart, turned-up cuffs, Daddy beamed like a boy and was into it before any one could prevent. He went behind a screen. The coat obviously did not fit him, but he tugged and pulled and wriggled his shoulders with an air of ‘things that won’t fit must be made to fit.’

‘You’ll bust the seams! You’ll split the buttons! See what’s in the pockets!’ cried several voices, while he shifted to and fro like a man about to fight.

‘It may stretch,’ he said hopefully. ‘I think I can use it. It’s just what I want.’ He glanced up at his wife whose face, however, was relentless.

‘Maybe,’ replied the practical mother, ‘but it’s more Edward’s build, perhaps.’ He looked fearfully disappointed, but kept it on. Edward got the best of every box. He went on with the unpacking, giving the coat sly twitches from time to time, as he pulled out blouses, skirts, belts, queer female garments, boots, soft felt hats — the green Homburg he put on at once, as who should dare to take it from him — black and brown Trilbys, shooting-caps, gaiters, flannel shirts, pyjamas, and heaven knows what else besides.

The excitement was prodigious, and the floor looked like a bargain sale. Everybody talked at once; there was no more pretence of keeping order Mlle. Lemaire lay propped against her pillows, watching the scene with feelings between tears and laughter. Each member of the family tried on everything in turn, but yielded the treasures instantly at a word from Mother — ‘That will do for so and so; this will fit Monkey; Jimbo, you take this,’ and so on.

The door into the adjoining bedroom was for ever opening and shutting, as the children disappeared with armfuls and reappeared five minutes later, marvellously apparelled. There was no attempt at sorting yet. Blouses and flannel trousers lay upon the floor with boots and motor veils. Every one had something, and the pile set aside for Edward grew apace. Only Jimbo was disconsolate. He was too small for everything; even the ladies’ boots were too narrow and too pointed for his little feet. From time to time he rummaged with the hammer and chisel (still held *very* tightly) among the mass of paper at the bottom. But, as usual, there was nothing but gaudy neckties that he could use. And these he did not care about. He said no word, but stood there watching the others and trying to laugh, only keeping the tears back with the greatest difficulty.

From his position in the background Rogers took it all in. He moved up and slipped a ten-franc piece into the boy’s hand. ‘Secretaries don’t wear clothes like this,’ he whispered. ‘We’ll go into town to-morrow and get the sort of thing you want.’

Jimbo looked up and stared. He stood on tip-toe to kiss him. ‘Oh, thank you so much,’ he said, fearful lest the others should see; and tucked the coin away into a pocket underneath his cotton blouse. A moment later he came back from the corner where he had hid himself to examine it. ‘But, Cousin Henry,’ he whispered, utterly astonished, ‘it’s gold.’ He had thought the coin was a ten-centime piece such as Daddy sometimes gave him. He could not believe it. He had never seen gold before. He ran up and told his parents. His sisters were too excited to be told just then. After that he vanished into the passage without being noticed, and when he returned five minutes later his eyes were suspiciously red. But no one heard him say a word about getting nothing out of the box. He stood aside, with a superior manner and looked quietly on. ‘It’s very nice for the girls,’ his expression said. His interest in the box had grown decidedly less. He could buy an entire shop for himself now.

‘Mother, Daddy, everybody,’ cried an excited voice, ‘will you look at me a minute, please! It all fits me perfectly,’ and Jinny emerged from the bedroom door. She had been trying on. A rough brown dress of Harris tweed became her well; she wore a motor veil about her head, and another was tied round her neck; a white silk blouse, at least one size too large for her, bulged voluminously from beneath the neat tweed jacket. She wore her suede gloves still. ‘And there’s an outside pocket in the skirt, you see.’ She pulled it up and showed a very pointed pair of brown boots; they were much too long; they looked ridiculous after her square village boots. ‘I can waggle my toes in them,’ she explained, strutting to and fro to be admired. ‘I’m a fashionable monster now!’

But she only held the centre of the stage a minute, for Monkey entered at her heels, bursting with delight in a long green macintosh thrown over another tweed skirt that hid her feet and even trailed behind. A pair of yellow spats were visible sometimes that spread fan-shaped over her boots and climbed half-way up the fat legs.

‘It all fits me exaccurately,’ was her opinion. The sisters went arm in arm about the room, dancing and laughing.

‘We’re busy blackmailers,’ cried Jinny, using her latest acquisition which she practised on all possible occasions. ‘We’re in Piccadilly, going to see the Queen for tea.’

They tripped over Monkey’s train and one of the spats came off in the struggle for recovery. Daddy, in his Homburg hat, looked round and told them sternly to make less noise. Behind a screen he was getting surreptitiously into a suit that Mother had put aside for Edward. He tried on several in this way, hopeful to the last.

‘I think this will fit me all right,’ he said presently, emerging with a grave expression on his puckered face. He seemed uncertain about it. He was solemn as a judge. ‘You could alter the buttons here and there, you know,’ and he looked anxiously at his wife. The coat ran up behind, the waistcoat creased badly owing to the strain, and the trousers were as tight as those of a cavalry officer. Anywhere, and any moment, he might burst out into unexpected revelation. ‘A little alteration,’ he suggested hopefully, ‘and it would be all right — don’t you think?’ And then he added ‘perhaps.’

He turned and showed himself. Even the roar of laughter that greeted his appearance did not quite convince him. He looked like a fat, impoverished bookmaker.

‘I think it will fit Edward better,’ said Mother again without pity, for she did not like to see her husband look foolish before the children. He disappeared behind the screen, but repeated the performance with two other suits. ‘This striped one seems a little looser,’ he said; or, ‘If you’d let out the trousers at the bottom, I think they would do.’ But in the end all he got from the box was two pairs of pink silk pyjamas, the Homburg hat, several pairs of gloves, spats, and gaiters, and half a dozen neckties that no one else would wear. He made his heap carefully in the corner of the room, and later, when the mess was all cleared up and everybody went off with their respective treasures, he entirely forgot them in his pleasure and admiration of the others. He left them lying in the corner. Riquette slept on them that night, and next morning Jimbo brought them over for him to the carpenter’s house. And Edward later magnanimously yielded up two flannel shirts because he had so many left over from the previous box. Also a pair of pumps.

‘I’ve not done so badly after all,’ was his final matured opinion. ‘Poor mother! She got nothing but motor caps.’ Jimbo, however, had made a final discovery of value for himself — of some value, at least. When the empty case was overturned as a last hope, he rummaged among the paper with his hammer and chisel, and found four pairs of golf stockings! The legs fitted him admirably, but the feet were much too big. There was some discussion as to whether they had belonged to a very thin-legged boy with big feet or to a girl who had no calves. Luckily, the former was decided upon, for otherwise they would have given no pleasure to Jimbo. Even as it was, he adopted them chiefly because it pleased his parents. Mother cut off the feet and knitted new ones a little smaller. But there was no mystery about those stockings. No special joy went with them. He had watched Mother knitting too often for that; she could make stockings half asleep.

Two hours later, while Jane Ann and Mother prepared the tea in the Den, Daddy, Jimbo, and Cousin Henry went in a procession to the carpenter’s house carrying the piles of clothing in their arms to the astonishment of half the village. They were to be re-sorted there in privacy by the ‘men,’ where the ‘children’ could not interfere. The things they could not use were distributed later among the governesses; the Pension and the village also, got their share. And the Postmaster got his hat — a black Trilby. He loved its hue.

And for days afterwards the children hoarded their treasures with unholy joy. What delighted them as much as anything, perhaps, were the coronets upon the pyjamas and the shirts. They thought it was a London or Edinburgh laundry mark. But Jimbo told them otherwise: ‘It means that Daddy’s Cousin is a Lord-and-Waiting, and goes to see the King.’ This explanation was generally accepted.

The relief to the parents, however, as they sat up in the Den that night and discussed how much this opportune Magic Box had saved them, may be better imagined than described. The sum ran into many, many francs.

Edward had suits now for at least two years. ‘He’s stopped growing,’ said his mother; ‘thank goodness,’ said his father.

And to the long list he prayed for twice a day Jimbo added of his accord, ‘Ceux qui ont envoye la grosse caisse.’

CHAPTER XX

Break up the heavens, O Lord! and far,
 Thro’ all yon starlight keen,
 Draw me, thy bride, a glittering star,
 In raiment white and clean.

He lifts me to the golden doors;
 The flashes come and go;
 All heaven bursts her starry floors,
 And strews her lights below.
 St. Agnes’ Eve, Tennyson.

Miss Waghorn, of late, had been unusually trying, and especially full of complaints. Her poor old memory seemed broken beyond repair. She offered Madame Jequier her weekly payment twice within ten minutes, and was quite snappy about it when the widow declined the second tender.

‘But you had the receipt in your hand wizin ten minutes ago, Mees Wag’orn. You took it upstairs. The ink can hardly be now already yet dry.’ But nothing would satisfy her that she had paid until they went up to her room together and found it after much searching between her Bible and her eternal novel on the writing-table.

‘Forgive me, Madame, but you do forget sometimes, don’t you?’ she declared with amusing audacity. ‘I like to make quite sure — especially where money is concerned.’ On entering the room she had entirely forgotten why they came there. She began complaining, instead, about the bed, which had not yet been made. A standing source of grumbling, this; for the old lady would come down to breakfast many a morning, and then go up again before she had it, thinking it was already late in the day. She worried the *pensionnaires* to death, too. It was their duty to keep the salon tidy, and Miss Waghorn would flutter into the room as early as eight o’clock, find the furniture still unarranged, and at once dart out again to scold the girls. These interviews were amusing before they became monotonous, for the old lady’s French was little more than ‘nong pas’ attached to an infinitive verb, and the girls’ Swiss-German explanations of the alleged neglect of duty only confused her. ‘Nong pas faire la chambre,’ she would say, stamping her foot with vexation. ‘You haven’t done the room, though it’s nearly dejooner time!’ Or else— ‘Ten minutes ago it was tidy. Look at it now!’ while she dragged them in and forced them to put things straight, until some one in authority came and explained gently her mistake. ‘Oh, excuse me, Madame,’ she would say then, ‘but they do forget *so* often.’ Every one was very patient with her as a rule.

And of late she had been peculiarly meddlesome, putting chairs straight, moving vases, altering the lie of table-cloths and the angle of sofas, opening windows because it was ‘so stuffy,’ and closing them a minute later with complaints about the draught, forcing occupants of arm-chairs to get up because the carpet was caught, fiddling with pictures because they were crooked either with floor or ceiling, and never realising that in the old house these latter were nowhere parallel. But her chief occupation was to prevent the children crossing their legs when they sat down, or pulling their dresses lower, with a whispered, ‘You *must* not cross your legs like that; it isn’t ladylike, dear.’

She had been very exasperating and interfering. Tempers had grown short. Twice running she had complained about the dreadful noise the *pensionnaires* made at seven o’clock in the morning. ‘Nong pas creer comme ca!’ she called, running down the passage in her dressing-gown and bursting angrily into their rooms without knocking — to find them empty. The girls had left the day before.

But to-day (the morning after the Star Cave adventure) the old lady was calmer, almost soothed, and at supper she was composed and gentle. Sleep, for some reason, had marvellously refreshed her. Attacks that opened as usual about Cornish Cream or a Man with a long Beard, she repelled easily and quietly. ‘I’ve told you that story before, my dear; I know I have.’ It seemed her mind and memory were more orderly somehow. And the Widow Jequier explained how sweet and good-natured she had been all day — better than for years. ‘When I took her drops upstairs at eleven o’clock I found her tidying her room; she was sorting her bills and papers. She read me a letter she had written to her nephew to come out and take her home — well written and quite coherent. I’ve not known her mind so clear for months. Her memory, too. She said she had slept so well. If only it would last, *helas*!’

‘There *are* days like that,’ she added presently, ‘days when everything goes right and easily. One wakes up happy in the morning and sees only the bright side of things. Hope is active, and one has new courage somehow.’ She spoke with feeling, her face was brighter, clearer, her mind less anxious. She had planned a visit to the Bank Manager about the mortgages. It had come as an inspiration. It might be fruitless, but she was hopeful, and so knew a little peace. ‘I wonder why it is,’ she added, ‘and what brings these changes into the heart so suddenly.’

‘Good sleep and sound digestion,’ Mrs. Campden thought. She expressed her views deliberately like this in order to counteract any growth of fantasy in the children.

‘But it is strange,’ her husband said, remembering his new story; ‘it may be much deeper than that. While the body sleeps the spirit may get into touch with helpful forces — —’ His French failed him. He wumbled painfully.

‘Thought-forces possibly from braver minds,’ put in Rogers. ‘Who knows? Sleep and dreaming have never really been explained.’ He recalled a theory of Minks.

‘*I* dream a great deal,’ Miss Waghorn observed, eager to take part. ‘It’s delightful, dreaming — if only one could remember!’ She looked round the table with challenge in her eager old eyes. But no one took her up. It involved such endless repetition of well-known stories. The Postmaster might have said a word — he looked prepared — but, not understanding English, he went on with his salad instead.

‘Life is a dream,’ observed Monkey, while Jinny seemed uncertain whether she should laugh or take it seriously.

The Widow Jequier overheard her. There was little she did not overhear.

‘Coquine!’ she said, then quoted with a sentimental sigh: —

La vie est breve,
Un peu d’amour.
Un peu de rive
Et puis — bonjour!

She hung her head sideways a moment for effect. There was a pause all down the long table.

‘I’m sure dreams have significance,’ she went on. ‘There’s more in dreaming than one thinks. They come as warnings or encouragement. All the saints had dreams. I always pay attention to mine.’

‘Madame, *I* dream a great deal,’ repeated Miss Waghorn, anxious not to be left out of a conversation in which she understood at least the key-word *reve*; ‘a very great deal, I may say.’

Several looked up, ready to tell nightmares of their own at the least sign of encouragement. The Postmaster faced the table, laying down his knife and fork. He took a deep breath. This time he meant to have his say. But his deliberation always lost him openings.

I don’t,’ exclaimed Jinny, bluntly, five minutes behind the others. ‘When I’m in bed, I sleep.’ The statement brought laughter that confused her a little. She loved to define her position. She had defined it. And the Postmaster had lost his chance. Mlle. Sandoz, a governess who was invited to supper as payment for a music lesson given to his boy, seized the opening.

‘Last night I dreamed that a bull chased me. Now what did *that* mean, I wonder?’

‘That there was no danger since it was only a dream!’ said the Postmaster sharply, vexed that he had not told his own.

But no one applauded, for it was the fashion to ignore his observations, unless they had to do with stamps and weights of letters, parcels, and the like. A clatter of voices rose, as others, taking courage, decided to tell experiences of their own; but it was the Postmaster’s wife in the hall who won. She had her meals outside with the kitchen maid and her niece, who helped in the Post Office, and she always tried to take part in the conversation from a distance thus. She plunged into a wordy description of a lengthy dream that had to do with clouds, three ravens, and a mysterious face. All listened, most of them in mere politeness, for as cook she was a very important personage who could furnish special dishes on occasion — but her sister listened as to an oracle. She nodded her head and made approving gestures, and said, ‘Aha, you see,’ or ‘Ah, voila!’ as though that helped to prove the importance of the dream, if not its actual truth. And the sister came to the doorway so that no one could escape. She stood there in her apron, her face hot and flushed still from the kitchen.

At length it came to an end, and she looked round her, hoping for a little sympathetic admiration, or at least for expressions of wonder and interest. All waited for some one else to speak. Into the pause came her husband's voice, 'Je n'ai pas de sel.'

There was no resentment. It was an everyday experience. The spell was broken instantly. The cook retired to her table and told the dream all over again with emphatic additions to her young companions. The Postmaster got his salt and continued eating busily as though dreams were only fit for women and children to talk about. And the English group began whispering excitedly of their Magic Box and all it had contained. They were tired of dreams and dreaming.

Tante Jeanne made a brave effort to bring the conversation back to the key of sentiment and mystery she loved, but it was not a success.

'At any rate I'm certain one's mood on going to bed decides the kind of dream that comes,' she said into the air. 'The last thought before going to sleep is very important. It influences the adventures of the soul when it leaves the body every night.'

For this was a tenet of her faith, although she always forgot to act upon it. Only Miss Waghorn continued the train of ideas this started, with a coherence that surprised even herself. Somehow the jabber about dreams, though in a language that only enabled her to catch its general drift, had interested her uncommonly. She seemed on the verge of remembering something. She had listened with patience, a look of peace upon her anxious old face that was noticed even by Jane Anne. 'It smoothed her out,' was her verdict afterwards, given only to herself though. 'Everything is a sort of long unfinished dream to her, I suppose, at *that* age.'

While the *famille anglaise* renewed noisily their excitement of the Magic Box, and while the talk in the hall went on and on, re-hashing the details of the cook's marvellous experience, and assuming entirely new proportions, Miss Waghorn glanced about her seeking whom she might devour — and her eye caught Henry Rogers, listening as usual in silence.

‘Ah,’ she said to him, ‘but *I* look forward to sleep. I might say I long for it.’ She sighed very audibly. It was both a sigh for release and a faint remembrance that last night her sleep had been somehow deep and happy, strangely comforting.

‘It is welcome sometimes, isn’t it?’ he answered, always polite and rather gentle with her.

‘Sleep unravels, yes,’ she said, vaguely as to context, yet with a querulous intensity. It was as if she caught at the enthusiasm of a connected thought somewhere. ‘I might even say it unties,’ she added, encouraged by his nod, ‘unties knots — if you follow me.’

‘It does, Miss Waghorn. Indeed, it does.’ Was this a precursor of the Brother with the Beard, he wondered? ‘Untied knots’ would inevitably start her off. He made up his mind to listen to the tale with interest for the twentieth time if it came. But it didn’t come.

‘I am very old and lonely, and *I* need the best,’ she went on happily, half saying it to herself.

Instantly he took her up — without surprise too. It was like a dream.

‘Quite so. The rest, the common stuff — —’

‘Is good enough — —’ she chimed in quickly —

‘For Fraulein, or for baby, or for mother,’ he laughed.

‘Or any other,’ chuckled Miss Waghorn.

‘Who needs a bit of sleep — —’

‘But yet can do without it — —’ she carried it on.

Then both together, after a second’s pause —

‘If they must — —’ and burst out laughing.

Goodness, how did *she* know the rhyme? Was it everywhere? Was thought running loose like wireless messages to be picked up by all who were in tune for acceptance?

‘Well, I never!’ he heard her exclaim, ‘if that’s not a nursery rhyme of my childhood that I’ve not heard for sixty years and more! I declare,’ she added with innocent effrontery, ‘I’ve not heard it since I was ten years old. And I was born in ‘37 — the year — —’

‘Just fancy!’ he tried to stop her.

‘Queen Victoria came to the throne.’

‘Strange,’ he said more to himself than to any one else. She did not contradict him.

‘You or me?’ asked Monkey, who overheard.

‘All of us,’ he answered. ‘We all think the same things. It’s a dream, I believe; the whole thing is a dream.’

‘It’s a fact though,’ said Miss Waghorn with decision, ‘and now I must go and write my letters, and then finish a bit of lace I’m doing. You will excuse me?’ She rose, made a little bow, and left the table.

Mother watched her go. ‘What *has* come over the old lady?’ she thought. ‘She seems to be getting back her mind and memory too. How very odd!’

In the afternoon Henry Rogers had been into Neuchatel. It seemed he had some business there of a rather private nature. He was very mysterious about it, evading several offers to accompany him, and after supper he retired early to his own room in the carpenter’s house. And, since he now was the principal attraction, a sort of magnet that drew the train of younger folk into his neighbourhood, the Pension emptied, and the English family, deprived of their leader, went over to the Den.

‘Partir a l’anglaise,’ laughed the Widow Jequier, as she saw them file away downstairs; and then she sighed. Some day, when the children were older and needed a different education, they would all go finally. Down these very stairs they would go into the street. She loved them for themselves, but, also, the English family was a permanent source of income to her, and the chief. They stayed on in the winter, when boarders were few and yet living expenses doubled. She sighed, and fluttered into her tiny room to take her finery off, finery that had once been worn in Scotland and had reached her by way of Cook and *la petite vitesse* in the Magic Box.

And presently she fluttered out again and summoned her sister. The Postmaster had gone to bed; the kitchen girl was washing up the last dishes; Miss Waghorn would hardly come down again. The salon was deserted.

‘Come, Anita,’ she cried, yet with a hush of excitement in her voice, ‘we will have an evening of it. Bring the *soucoupe* with you, while I prepare the little table.’ In her greasy kitchen apron Anita came. Zizi, her boy, came with her. Madame Jequier, with her flowing garment that was tea-gown, garden-dress, and dressing-gown all in one, looked really like a witch, her dark hair all askew and her eyes shining with mysterious anticipation. ‘We’ll ask the spirits for help and guidance,’ she said to herself, lest the boy should overhear. For Zizi often helped them with their amateur planchette, only they told him it was electricity: *le magnetisme*, *le fluide*, was the term they generally made use of. Its vagueness covered all possible explanations with just the needed touch of confusion and suggestion in it.

They settled down in a corner of the room, where the ivy from the ceiling nearly touched their heads. The small round table was produced; the saucer, with an arrow pencilled on its edge, was carefully placed upon the big sheet of paper which bore the letters of the alphabet and the words *oui* and *non* in the corners. The light behind them was half veiled by ivy; the rest of the old room lay in comparative darkness; through the half-opened door a lamp shone upon the oil-cloth in the hall, showing the stains and the worn, streaked patches where the boards peeped through. The house was very still.

They began with a little prayer — to *ceux qui ecoutent*, — and then each of them placed a finger on the rim of the upturned saucer, waiting in silence. They were a study in darkness, those three pointing fingers.

‘Zizi, tu as beaucoup de fluide ce soir, oui?’ whispered the widow after a considerable interval.

‘Oh, comme d’habitude,’ he shrugged his shoulders. He loved these mysterious experiments, but he never claimed much *fluide* until the saucer moved, jealous of losing his reputation as a storehouse of this strange, human electricity.

Yet behind this solemn ritual, that opened with prayer and invariably concluded with hope renewed and courage strengthened, ran the tragic element that no degree of comedy could kill. In the hearts of the two old women, ever fighting their uphill battle with adversity, burned the essence of big faith, the faith that plays with mountains. Hidden behind the curtain, an indulgent onlooker might have smiled, but tears would have wet his eyes before the smile could have broadened into laughter. Tante Jeanne, indeed, *had* heard that the subconscious mind was held to account for the apparent intelligence that occasionally betrayed itself in the laboriously spelled replies; she even made use of the word from time to time to baffle Zizi's too importunate inquiries. But after *le subconscient* she always tacked on *fluide*, *magnetisme*, or *electricite* lest he should be frightened, or she should lose her way. And of course she held to her belief that spirits produced the phenomena. A subconscious mind was a cold and comfortless idea.

And, as usual, the saucer told them exactly what they had desired to know, suggested ways and means that hid already in the mind of one or other, yet in stammered sentences that included just enough surprise or turn of phrase to confirm their faith and save their self-respect. It was their form of prayer, and with whole hearts they prayed. Moreover, they acted on what was told them. Had they discovered that it was merely the content of their subconscious mind revealing thus its little hopes and fears, they would have lost their chief support in life. God and religion would have suffered a damaging eclipse. Big scaffolding in their lives would have collapsed.

Doubtless, Tante Jeanne did not knowingly push the saucer, neither did the weighty index finger of the concentrated cook deliberately exert muscular pressure. Nor, similarly, was Zizi aware that the weight of his entire hand helped to urge the dirty saucer across the slippery surface of the paper in whatever direction his elders thus indicated. But one and all knew 'subconsciously' the exact situation of consonants and vowels — that *oui* lay in the right-hand corner and *non* in the left. And neither Zizi nor his mother dared hint to their leader not to push, because she herself monopolised that phrase, saying repeatedly to them both, 'mais il ne faut *pas* pousser! Legerement avec les doigts, toujours tres legerement! Sans ca il n'y a pas de valeur, tu comprends!' Zizi inserted an occasional electrical question. It was discreetly ignored always.

They asked about the Bank payments, the mortgages, the future of their much-loved old house, and of themselves; and the answers, so vague concerning any detailed things to come, were very positive indeed about the Bank. They were to go and interview the Manager three days from now. They had already meant to go, only the date was undecided; the corroboration of the spirits was required to confirm it. This settled it. Three days from to-night!

‘Tu vois!’ whispered Tante Jeanne, glancing mysteriously across the table at her sister. ‘Three days from now! That explains your dream about the three birds. Aha, tu vois!’ She leaned back, supremely satisfied. And the sister gravely bowed her head, while Zizi looked up and listened intently, without comprehension. He felt a little alarm, perhaps, to-night.

For this night there *was* indeed something new in the worn old ritual. There was a strange, uncalculated element in it all, unexpected, and fearfully thrilling to all three. Zizi for the first time had his doubts about its being merely electricity.

‘C’est d’une puissance extraordinaire,’ was the widow’s whispered, eager verdict.

‘C’est que j’ai enormement de fluide ce soir,’ declared Zizi, with pride and confidence, yet mystified. The other two exchanged frequent glances of surprise, of wonder, of keen expectancy and anticipation. There was certainly a new ‘influence’ at work to-night. They even felt a touch of faint dread. The widow, her ruling passion strong even before the altar, looked down anxiously once or twice at her disreputable attire. It was vivid as that — this acute sense of another presence that pervaded the room, not merely hung about the little table. She could be ‘invisible’ to the Pension by the magic of old- established habit, but she could not be so to the true Invisibles. And they saw her in this unbecoming costume. She forgot, too, the need of keeping Zizi in the dark. He must know some day. What did it matter when?

She tidied back her wandering hair with her free hand, and drew the faded garment more closely round her neck.

‘Are you cold?’ asked her sister with a hush in her voice; ‘you feel the cold air — all of a sudden?’

‘I do, *maman*,’ Zizi answered. ‘It’s blowing like a wind across my hand. What is it?’ He was shivering. He looked over his shoulder nervously.

There was a heavy step in the hall, and a figure darkened the doorway. All three gave a start.

‘J’ai sommeil,’ announced the deep voice of the Postmaster. This meant that the boy must come to bed. It was the sepulchral tone that made them jump perhaps. Zizi got up without a murmur; he was glad to go, really. He slept in the room with his parents. His father, an overcoat thrown over his night things, led him away without another word. And the two women resumed their seance. The saucer moved more easily and swiftly now that Zizi had gone. ‘C’est done *toi* qui as le fluide,’ each said to the other.

But in the excitement caused by this queer, new element in the proceedings, the familiar old routine was forgotten. Napoleon and Marie Antoinette were brushed aside to make room for this important personage who suddenly descended upon the saucer from an unknown star with the statement — it took half an hour to spell— ‘Je viens d’une etoile tres eloignee qui n’a pas encore de nom.’

‘There *is* a starry light in the room. It was above your head just now,’ whispered the widow, enormously excited. ‘I saw it plainly.’ She was trembling.

‘That explains the clouds in my dream,’ was the tense reply, as they both peered round them into the shadows with a touch of awe. ‘Now, give all your attention. This has an importance, but, you know, an importance—’ She could not get the degree of importance into any words. She looked it instead, leaving the sentence eloquently incomplete.

For, certainly, into the quaint ritual of these two honest, troubled old women there crept then a hint of something that was uncommon and uplifting. That it came through themselves is as sure as that it spelt out detailed phrases of encouragement and guidance with regard to their coming visit to the Bank. That they both were carried away by it into joy and the happiness of sincere relief of mind is equally a fact. That their receptive mood attuned them to overhear subconsciously messages of thought that flashed across the night from another mind in sympathy with their troubles — a mind hard at work that very moment in the carpenter’s house — was not known to them; nor would it have brought the least explanatory comfort even if they had been told of it. They picked up these starry telegrams of unselfish thinking that flamed towards them through the midnight sky from an eager mind elsewhere busily making plans for their benefit. And, reaching them subconsciously, their deep subconsciousness urged the dirty saucer to the spelling of them, word by word and letter by letter. The flavour of their own interpretation, of course, crept in to mar, and sometimes to obliterate. The instruments were gravely imperfect. But the messages came through. And with them came the great feeling that the Christian calls answered prayer. They had such absolute faith. They had belief.

‘Go to the Bank. Help awaits you there. And I shall go with you to direct and guide.’ This was the gist of that message from ‘une etoile tres eloignee.’

They copied it out in violet ink with a pen that scratched like the point of a pin. And when they stole upstairs to bed, long after midnight, there was great joy and certainty in their fighting old hearts. There was a perfume of flowers, of lilacs and wistaria in the air, as if the whole garden had slipped in by the back door and was unable to find its way out again. They dreamed of stars and starlight.

CHAPTER XXI

LA VIE EST un combat qu'ils ont change en fete. *Lei Elus*, E. VERHAIREN.

The excitement a few days later spread through the village like a flame. People came out of their way to steal a glance at the Pension that now, for the first time in their — memory, was free of debt. Gygi, tolling the bell at *midi*, forgot to stop, as he peered through the narrow window in the church tower and watched the Widow Jequier planting and digging recklessly in her garden. Several came running down the street, thinking it was a warning of fire.

But the secret was well kept; no one discovered who had worked the miracle. Pride sealed the lips of the beneficiaries themselves, while the inhabitants of the Citadelle, who alone shared the knowledge, kept the facts secret, as in honour bound. Every one wondered, however, for every one knew the sum ran into several thousand francs; and a thousand francs was a fortune; the rich man in the corner house, who owned so many vineyards, and was reputed to enjoy an income of ten thousand francs a year, was always referred to as 'le million naire.' And so the story spread that Madame Jequier had inherited a fortune, none knew whence. The tradespeople treated her thereafter with a degree of respect that sweetened her days till the end of life.

She had come back from the Bank in a fainting condition, the sudden joy too much for her altogether. A remote and inaccessible air pervaded her, for all the red of her inflamed eyes and tears. She was aloof from the world, freed at last from the ceaseless, gnawing anxiety that for years had eaten her life out. The spirits had justified themselves, and faith and worship had their just reward. But this was only the first, immediate effect: it left her greater than it found her, this unexpected, huge relief — brimming with new sympathy for others. She doubled her gifts. She planned a wonderful new garden. That very night she ordered such a quantity of bulbs and seedlings that to this day they never have been planted.

Her interview with Henry Rogers, when she called at the carpenter's house in all her finery, cannot properly be told, for it lay beyond his powers of description. Her sister accompanied her; the Postmaster, too, snatched fifteen minutes from his duties to attend. The ancient tall hat, worn only at funerals as a rule, was replaced by the black Trilby that had been his portion from the Magic Box, as he followed the excited ladies at a reasonable distance. 'You had better show yourself,' his wife suggested; 'Monsieur Rogairs would like to see you with us — to know that you are there.' Which meant that he was not to interfere with the actual thanksgiving, but to countenance the occasion with his solemn presence. And, indeed, he did not go upstairs. He paced the road beneath the windows during the interview, looking exactly like a professional mourner waiting for the arrival of the hearse.

'My dear old friend — friends, I mean,' said Rogers in his fluent and very dreadful French, 'if you only knew what a pleasure it is to *me* — It is *I* who should thank you for giving me the opportunity, not you who should thank me.' The sentence broke loose utterly, wandering among intricacies of grammar and subjunctive moods that took his breath away as he poured it out. 'I was only afraid you would think it unwarrantable interference. I am delighted that you let me do it. It's such a little thing to do.'

Both ladies instantly wept. The Widow came closer with a little rush. Whether Rogers was actually embraced, or no, it is not stated officially.

'It is a loan, of course, it is a loan,' cried the Widow.

'It is a present,' he said firmly, loathing the scene.

'It's a part repayment for all the kindness you showed me here as a boy years and years ago.' Then, remembering that the sister was not known to him in those far-away days, he added clumsily, 'and since — I came back…. And now let's say no more, but just keep the little secret to ourselves. It is nobody's business but our own.'

'A present!' gasped both ladies to one another, utterly overcome; and finding nothing else to embrace, they flung their arms about each other's necks and praised the Lord and wept more copiously than ever…. 'Grand ciel' was heard so frequently, and so loudly, that Madame Michaud, the carpenter’s wife, listening on the stairs, made up her mind it was a quarrel, and wondered if she ought to knock at the door and interfere.

‘I see your husband in the road,’ said Rogers, tapping at the window. ‘I think he seems waiting for you. Or perhaps he has a telegram for me, do you think?’ He bowed and waved his hand, smiling as the Postmaster looked up in answer to the tapping and gravely raised his Trilby hat.

‘There now, he’s calling for you. Do not keep him waiting — I’m sure—’ he didn’t know what to say or how else to get them out. He opened the door. The farewells took some time, though they would meet an hour later at *dejeuner* as usual.

‘At least you shall pay us no more *pension*,’ was the final sentence as they flounced downstairs, so happy and excited that they nearly tumbled over each other, and sharing one handkerchief to dry their tears.

‘Then I shall buy my own food and cook it here,’ he laughed, and somehow managed to close his door upon the retreating storm. Out of the window he saw the procession go back, the sombre figure of the Postmaster twenty yards behind the other two.

And then, with joy in his heart, though a sigh of relief upon his lips — there may have been traces of a lump somewhere in his throat as well, but if so, he did not acknowledge it — he turned to his letters, and found among them a communication from Herbert Montmorency Minks, announcing that he had found an ideal site, and that it cost so and so much per acre — also that the County Council had made no difficulties. There was a hint, moreover — a general flavour of resentment and neglect at his master’s prolonged absence — that it would not be a bad thing for the great Scheme if Mr. Rogers could see his way to return to London ‘before very long.’

‘Bother the fellow!’ thought he; ‘what a nuisance he is, to be sure!’

And he answered him at once. ‘Do not trouble about a site just yet,’ he wrote; ‘there is no hurry for the moment.’ He made a rapid calculation in his head. He had paid those mortgages out of capital, and the sum represented just about the cost of the site Minks mentioned. But results were immediate. There was no loss, no waste in fees and permits and taxes. Each penny did its work.

‘There’s the site gone, anyhow,’ he laughed to himself. ‘The foundation will go next, then the walls. But, at any rate, they needed it. The Commune Charity would have had ’em at the end of the month. They’re my neighbours after all. And I must find out from them who else in the village needs a leg up. For these people are worth helping, and I can see exactly where every penny goes.’

Bit by bit, as it would seem, the great Scheme for Disabled Thingumagigs was being undermined.

CHAPTER XXII

And those who were good shall be happy.
They shall sit in a golden chair;
They shall splash at a ten-league canvas
With brushes of comets' hair.
They shall have real saints to paint from —
Magdalene, Peter, and Paul;
They shall work for an age at a sitting
And never get tired at all.

And only the Master shall praise them,
And only the Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money,
And no one shall work for fame;
But each for the joy of the working,
And each in his separate star,
Shall draw the thing as he sees it
For the God of things as they are,
R. KIPLING.

And meanwhile, as May ran laughing to meet June, an air of coloured wonder spread itself about the entire village. Rogers had brought it with him from that old Kentish garden somehow. His journey there had opened doors into a region of imagination and belief whence fairyland poured back upon his inner world, transfiguring common things. And this transfiguration he unwittingly put into others too. Through this very ordinary man swept powers that usually are left behind with childhood. The childhood aspect of the world invaded all who came in contact with him, enormous, radiant, sparkling, charged with questions of wonder and enchantment. And every one felt it according to their ability of reconstruction. Yet he himself had not the least idea that he did it all. It was a reformation, very tender, soft, and true.

For wonder, of course, is the basis of all inquiry. Interpretation varies, facts remain the same; and to interpret is to recreate. Wonder leads to worship. It insists upon recreation, prerogative of all young life. The Starlight Express ran regularly every night, Jimbo having constructed a perfect time-table that answered all requirements, and was sufficiently elastic to fit instantly any scale that time and space demanded. Rogers and the children talked of little else, and their adventures in the daytime seemed curiously fed by details of information gleaned elsewhere.

But where? The details welled up in one and all, though whence they came remained a mystery. ‘I believe we dream a lot of it,’ said Jimbo. ‘It’s a lot of dreams we have at night, comme fa.’ He had made a complete map of railway lines, with stations everywhere, in forests, sky, and mountains. He carried stations in his pocket, and just dropped one out of the carriage window whenever a passenger shouted, ‘Let’s stop here.’ But Monkey, more intellectual, declared it was ‘all Cousinenry’s invention and make-up,’ although she asked more questions than all the others put together. Jinny, her sister, stared and listened with her puzzled, moth-like expression, while Mother watched and marvelled cautiously from a distance. In one and all, however, the famished sense of wonder interpreted life anew. It named the world afresh — the world of common things. It subdued the earth unto itself. What a mind creates it understands. Through the familiar these adventurers trace lines of discovery into the unfamiliar. They understood. They were up to their waists in wonder. There was still disorder, of course, in their great reconstruction, but that was where the exciting fun came in; for disorder involves surprise. Any moment out might pop the unexpected — event or person.

Cousin Henry was easily leader now. While Daddy remained absorbed with his marvellous new story, enthusiastic and invisible, they ran about the world at the heels of this ‘busy engineer,’ as Jane Ann entitled him. He had long ago told them, with infinite and exaccurate detail, of his journey to the garden and his rediscovery of the sprites, forgotten during his twenty years of business life. And these sprites were as familiar to them now as those of their own childhood. They little knew that at night they met and talked with them. Daddy had put them all into the Wumble Book, achieving mediocre success with the rhymes, but amply atoning with the illustrations. The Woman of the Haystack was evidently a monster pure and simple, till Jinny announced that she merely had ‘elephantitis,’ and thus explained her satisfactorily. The Lamplighter, with shining feet, taking enormous strides from Neuchatel to a London slum, putting fire into eyes and hearts *en route*, thrilled them by his radiant speed and ubiquitous activity, while his doggerel left them coldly questioning. For the rhymes did *not* commend themselves to their sense of what was proper in the use of words. His natural history left them unconvinced, though the anatomy of the drawing fascinated them.

He walked upon his toes
As softly as a saying does,
For so the saying goes.

That he 'walked upon his toes' was all right, but that he 'walked softly as a saying' meant nothing, even when explained that 'thus the saying goes.'

'Poor old Daddy,' was Jinny's judgment; 'he's got to write something. You see, he is an author. Some day he'll get his testimonial.'

It was Cousin Henry who led them with a surer, truer touch. He always had an adventure up his sleeve — something their imaginations could accept and recreate. Each in their own way, they supplied interpretations as they were able.

Every walk they took together furnished the germ of an adventure.

'But I'm not exciting to-day,' he would object thirsting for a convincing compliment that should persuade him to take them out. Only the compliment never came quite as he hoped.

'Everybody's exciting somewhere,' said Monkey, leading the way and knowing he would follow. 'We'll go to the Wind Wood.'

Jimbo took his hand then, and they went. Corners of the forest had names now, born of stories and adventures he had placed there — the Wind Wood, the Cuckoo Wood, where Daddy could not sleep because 'the beastly cuckoo made such a noise'; the Wood where Mother Fell, and so on. No walk was wholly unproductive.

And so, one evening after supper, they escaped by the garden, crossed the field where the standing hay came to their waists, and climbed by forest paths towards the Wind Wood. It was a spot where giant pines stood thinly, allowing a view across the lake towards the Alps. The moss was thick and deep. Great boulders, covered with lichen, lay about, and there were fallen trees to rest the back against. Here he had told them once his vision of seeing the wind, and the name had stuck; for the story had been very vivid, and every time they felt the wind or heard it stirring in the tree-tops, they expected to see it too. There were blue winds, black winds, and winds — violent these — of purple and flaming scarlet.

They lay down, and Cousinenry made a fire. The smoke went up in thin straight lines of blue, melting into the sky. The sun had set half an hour before, and the flush of gold and pink was fading into twilight. The glamour of Bourcelles dropped down upon all three. They ought to have been in bed — hence the particular enjoyment.

‘Are you getting excited now?’ asked Monkey, nestling in against him.

‘Hush!’ he said, ‘can’t you hear it coming?’

‘The excitement?’ she inquired under her breath.

‘No, the Night. Keep soft and silent — if you can.’

‘Tell us, please, at once,’ both children begged him instantly, for the beauty of the place and hour demanded explanation, and explanation, of course, must be in story or adventure form. The fire crackled faintly; the smell crept out like incense; the lines of smoke coiled upwards, and seemed to draw the tree-stems with them. Indeed they formed a pattern together, big thick trunks marking the uprights at the corners, and wavy smoke lines weaving a delicate structure in between them. It was a kind of growing, moving scaffolding. Saying nothing, Cousin Henry pointed to it with his finger. He traced its general pattern for them in the air.

‘That’s the Scaffolding of the Night beginning,’ he whispered presently, feeling adventure press upon him.

‘Oh, I say,’ said Jimbo, sitting up, and pretending as usual more comprehension than he actually possessed. But his sister instantly asked, ‘What is it — the Scaffolding of the Night? A sort of cathedral, you mean?’

How she divined his thought, and snatched it from his mind always, this nimble-witted child! His germ developed with a bound at once.

‘More a palace than a cathedral,’ he whispered. ‘Night is a palace, and has to be built afresh each time. Twilight rears the scaffolding first, then hangs the Night upon it. Otherwise the darkness would simply fall in lumps, and lie about in pools and blocks, unfinished — a ruin instead of a building.

Everything must have a scaffolding first. Look how beautifully it’s coming now,’ he added, pointing, ‘each shadow in its place, and all the lines of grey and black fitting exaccurately together like a skeleton. Have you never noticed it before?’

Jimbo, of course, *had* noticed it, his manner gave them to understand, but had not thought it worth while mentioning until his leader drew attention to it.

‘Just as trains must have rails to run on,’ he explained across Cousinenry’s intervening body to Monkey, ‘or else there’d be accidents and things all the time.’

‘And night would be a horrid darkness like a plague in Egypt,’ she supposed, adroitly defending herself and helping her cousin at the same time. ‘Wouldn’t it?’ she added, as the shadows drew magically nearer from the forest and made the fire gradually grow brighter. The children snuggled closer to their cousin’s comforting bulk, shivering a little. The woods went whispering together. Night shook her velvet skirts out.

‘Yes, everything has its pattern,’ he answered, ‘from the skeleton of a child or a universe to the outline of a thought. Even a dream must have its scaffolding,’ he added, feeling their shudder and leading it towards fun and beauty. ‘Insects, birds, and animals all make little scaffoldings with their wee emotions, especially kittens and butterflies. Engine-drivers too,’ for he felt Jimbo’s hand steal into his own and go to sleep there, ‘but particularly little beasties that live in holes under stones and in fields.

When a little mouse in wonder
 Flicks its whiskers at the thunder,

it makes a tiny scaffolding behind which it hides in safety, shuddering. Same with Daddy’s stories. Thinking and feeling does the trick. Then imagination comes and builds it up solidly with bricks and wall-papers….’

He told them a great deal more, but it cannot be certain that they heard it all, for there were other Excitements about besides their cousin — the fire, the time, the place, and above all, this marvellous coming of the darkness. They caught words here and there, but Thought went its own independent way with each little eager mind. He had started the machinery going, that was all. Interpretation varied; facts remained the same. And meanwhile twilight brought the Scaffolding of Night before their eyes.

‘You can see the lines already,’ he murmured sleepily, ‘like veins against the sunset…. Look!’

All saw the shadowy slim rafters slip across the paling sky, mapping its emptiness with intricate design. Like an enormous spider’s web of fine dark silk it bulged before the wind. The trellis-work, slung from the sky, hung loose. It moved slowly, steadily, from east to west, trailing grey sheets of dusk that hung from every filament. The maze of lines bewildered sight. In all directions shot the threads of coming darkness, spun from the huge body of Night that still hid invisible below the horizon.

‘They’re fastening on to everything … look!’ whispered Cousin Henry, kicking up a shower of sparks with his foot. ‘The Pattern’s being made before your eyes! Don’t you see the guy ropes?’

And they saw it actually happen. From the summits of the distant Alps ran filmy lines of ebony that knotted themselves on to the crests of the pines beside them. There were so many no eye could follow them. They flew and darted everywhere, dropping like needles from the sky itself, sewing the tent of darkness on to the main supports, and threading the starlight as they came. Night slowly brought her beauty and her mystery upon the world. The filmy pattern opened. There was a tautness in the lines that made one feel they would twang with delicate music if the wind swept its hand more rapidly across them. And now and again all vibrated, each line making an ellipse between its fastened ends, then gradually settling back to its thin, almost invisible bed. Cables of thick, elastic darkness steadied them.

How much of it all the children realised themselves, or how much flashed into them from their cousin’s mind, is of course a thing not even a bat can tell.

‘Is that why bats fly in such a muddle? Like a puzzle?’

‘Of course,’ he said. The bats were at last explained.

They built their little pictures for themselves. No living being can lie on the edge of a big pine forest when twilight brings the darkness without the feeling that everything becomes too wonderful for words. The children as ever fed his fantasy, while he thought he did it all himself. Dusk wore a shroud to entangle the too eager stars, and make them stay.

'I never noticed it before,' murmured Monkey against his coat sleeve. 'Does it happen every night like this?'

'You only see it if you look very closely,' was the low reply. 'You must think hard, very hard. The more you think, the more you'll see.'

'But really,' asked Jimbo, 'it's only — *crepuscule, comme ca,* isn't it?' And his fingers tightened on his leader's hand.

'Dusk, yes,' answered Cousin Henry softly, 'only dusk. But people everywhere are watching it like ourselves, and thinking feather thoughts. You can see the froth of stars flung up over the crest of Night. People are watching it from windows and fields and country roads everywhere, wondering what makes it so beautiful. It brings yearnings and long, long desires. Only a few like ourselves can see the lines of scaffolding, but everybody who thinks about it, and loves it, makes it more real for others to see, too. Daddy's probably watching it too from his window.'

'I wonder if Jinny ever sees it,' Monkey asked herself.

But Jimbo knew. 'She's in it,' he decided. 'She's always in places like that; that's where she lives.'

The children went on talking to each other under their breath, and while they did so Cousin Henry entered their little wondering minds. Or, perhaps, they entered his. It is difficult to say. Not even an owl, who is awfully wise about everything to do with night and darkness, could have told for certain. But, anyhow, they all three saw more or less the same thing. The way they talked about it afterwards proves that. Their minds apparently merged, or else there was one big mirror and two minor side-reflections of it. It was their cousin's interpretation, at any rate, that they remembered later. They brought the material for his fashioning.

'Look!' cried Monkey, sitting up, 'there are millions and millions now — lines everywhere — pillars and squares and towers. It's like a city. I can see lamps in every street — —'

'That's stars,' interrupted Jimbo. The stars indeed were peeping here and there already. 'I feel up there,' he added, 'my inside, I mean — up among the stars and lines and sky-things.’

‘That’s the mind wandering,’ explained the eldest child of the three. ‘Always follow a wandering mind. It’s quite safe. Mine’s going presently too. We’ll all go off together.’

Several little winds, released by darkness, passed them just then on their way out of the forest. They gathered half a dozen sparks from the fire to light them on their way, and brought cool odours with them from the deepest recesses of the trees — perfumes no sunlight ever finds. And just behind them came a big white moth, booming and whirring softly. It darted to and fro to find the trail, then vanished, so swiftly that no one saw it go.

‘He’s pushing it along,’ said Jimbo.

‘Or fastening the lines,’ his sister thought, ‘you see he hovers in one place, then darts over to another.’

‘That’s fastening the knots,’ added Jimbo.

‘No; he’s either an Inspector or a Pathfinder,’ whispered Cousin Henry, ‘I don’t know exactly which. They show the way the scaffolding goes. Moths, bats, and owls divide the work between them somehow.’ He sat up suddenly to listen, and the children sat up with him. ‘Hark!’ he added, ‘do you hear that?’

Sighings and flutterings rose everywhere about them, and overhead the fluffy spires of the tree-tops all bent one way as the winds went foraging across the night. Majestically the scaffolding reared up and towered through the air, while sheets of darkness hung from every line, and trailed across the earth like gigantic sails from some invisible vessel. Loose and enormous they gradually unfolded, then suddenly swung free and dropped with a silent dip and rush. Night swooped down upon the leagues of Jura forest. She spread her tent across the entire range.

The threads were fastened everywhere now, and the uprights all in place. Moths were busy in all directions, showing the way, while bats by the dozen darted like black lightning from corner to corner, making sure that every spar and beam was fixed and steady. So exquisitely woven was the structure that it moved past them overhead without the faintest sound, yet so frail and so elastic that the whirring of the moths sent ripples of quivering movement through the entire framework.

‘Hush!’ murmured Rogers, ‘we’re properly inside it now. Don’t think of anything in particular. Just follow your wandering minds and wait.’ The children lay very close against him. He felt their warmth and the breathing of their little bosoms. All three moved sympathetically within the rhythm of the dusk. The ‘inside’ of each went floating up into the darkening sky.

The general plan of the scaffolding they clearly made out as they passed among its myriad, mile-long rafters, but the completed temple, of course, they never saw. Black darkness hides that ever. Night’s secret mystery lies veiled finally in its innermost chamber, whence it steals forth to enchant the mind of men with its strange bewilderment. But the Twilight Scaffolding they saw clearly enough to make a map of it. For Daddy afterwards drew it from their description, and gave it an entire page in the Wumble Book, Monkey ladling on the colour with her camel’s-hair brush as well as she could remember.

It was a page to take the breath away, the big conception blundering clumsily behind the crude reconstruction. Great winds formed the base, winds of brown and blue and purple, piled mountainously upon each other in motionless coils, and so soft that the upright columns of the structure plunged easily and deeply into them. Thus the framework could bend and curve and sway, moving with steady glide across the landscape, yet never collapsing nor losing its exquisite proportions. The forests shored it up, its stays and bastions were the Jura precipices; it rested on the shoulders of the hills. From vineyard, field, and lake vast droves of thick grey shadows trooped in to curtain the lower halls of the colossal edifice, as chamber after chamber disappeared from view and Night clothed the structure from the ground-floors upwards. And far overhead a million tiny scarves, half sunset and half dusk, wove into little ropes that lashed the topmost spars together, dovetailing them neatly, and fastening them at last with whole clusters of bright thin stars.

‘Ohhhhh!’ breathed Jimbo with a delicious shudder of giddiness. ‘Let’s climb to the very tip and see all the trains and railway stations in the world!’

‘Wait till the moon comes up and puts the silver rivets in,’ the leader whispered. ‘It’ll be safer then. My weight, you know—’

‘There she is!’ interrupted Monkey with a start, ‘and there’s no such thing as weight—’

For the moon that instant came up, it seemed with a rush, and the line of distant Alps moved forward, blocked vividly against the silvery curtain that she brought. Her sight ran instantly about the world. Between the trees shot balls of yellowish white, unfolding like ribbon as they rolled. They splashed the rocks and put shining pools in the hollows among the moss. Spangles shone on Monkey's hair and eyes; skins and faces all turned faintly radiant. The lake, like a huge reflector, flashed its light up into the heavens. The moon laid a coating of her ancient and transfiguring paint upon the enormous structure, festooning the entire sky. 'She's put the silver rivets in,' said Jimbo.

'Now we can go,' whispered Rogers, 'only, remember, it's a giddy business, rather.'

All three went fluttering after it, floating, rising, falling, like fish that explore a sunken vessel in their own transparent medium. The elastic structure bore them easily as it swung along. Its enormous rhythm lulled their senses with a deep and drowsy peace, and as they climbed from storey to storey it is doubtful if the children caught their leader's words at all. There were no echoes — the spaces were too vast for that — and they swung away from spar to spar, and from rafter to rafter, as easily as acrobats on huge trapezes. Jimbo and Monkey shot upwards into space.

'I shall explore the lower storeys first,' he called after them, his words fluttering in feathers of sound far up the vault. 'Keep the fire in sight to guide you home again …' and he moved slowly towards the vast ground-floor chambers of the Night. Each went his independent way along the paths of reverie and dream. He found himself alone.

For he could not soar and float as they did; he kept closer to the earth, wandering through the under chambers of the travelling building that swung its way over vineyards, woods, and village roofs. He kept more in touch with earth than they did. The upper sections where the children climbed went faster than those lower halls and galleries, so that the entire framework bent over, breaking ever into a crest of foaming stars. But in these under halls where he stood and watched there was far less movement. From century to century these remained the same. Between the bases of the mighty columns he watched the wave of darkness drown the world, leading it with a rush of silence towards sleep. For the children Night meant play and mischief; for himself it meant graver reverie….

These were the chambers, clearly, of ancestral sleep and dream: they seemed so familiar and well known. Behind him blinked the little friendly fire in the forest, link with the outer world he must not lose. He would find the children there when he went back, lively from their scamper among the stars; and, meanwhile, he was quite content to wander down these corridors in the floor of Night and taste their deep repose. For years he had not visited or known them. The children had led him back, although he did not realise it. He believed, on the contrary, that it was he who led and they who followed. For true leadership is ever inspired, making each follower feel that he goes first and of his own free will….

‘Jimbo, you flickery sprite, where are you now?’ he called, suddenly noticing how faint the little fire had grown with distance.

A lonely wind flew down upon him with a tiny shout:

‘Up here, at the very top, with Daddy. He’s making notes in a tower- room all by himself!’

Rogers could not believe his ears. Daddy indeed!

‘Is Monkey with you? And is she safe?’

‘She’s helping Daddy balance. The walls aren’t finished, and he’s on a fearful ledge. He’s after something or other for his story, he says.’

It seemed impossible. Daddy skylarking on the roof of Night, and making notes! Yet with a moment’s reflection the impossibility vanished; surprise went after it; it became natural, right, and true. Daddy, of course, sitting by his window in the carpenter’s house, had seen the Twilight Scaffolding sweep past and had climbed into it. Its beauty had rapt him out and away. In the darkness his mind wandered, too, gathering notes subconsciously for his wonderful new story.

‘Come down here to me,’ he cried, as a man cries in his sleep, making no audible sound. ‘There’s less risk among the foundations.’ And down came Daddy with an immediate rush. He arrived in a bundle, then straightened up. The two men stood side by side in these subterraneans of the night.

‘You!’ whispered Rogers, trying to seize his hand, while the other evaded him, hiding behind a shadow.

‘Don’t touch me,’ he murmured breathlessly. ‘You’ll scatter my train of thought. Think of something else at once, please….’ He moved into thicker shadows, half disappearing. ‘I’m after something that suddenly occurred to me for my story.’

‘What is it? I’ll think it with you,’ his cousin called after him.
‘You’ll see it better if I do. Tell me.’

‘A train that carries Thought, as this darkness carries stars — a starlight express,’ was the quick reply, ‘and a cavern where lost starlight gathers till it’s wanted-sort of terminus of the railway. They belong to the story somewhere if only I can find them and fit them in. Starlight binds all together as thought and sympathy bind minds….’

Rogers thought hard about them. Instantly his cousin vanished.

‘Thank you,’ ran a faint whisper among the pillars; ‘I’m on their trail again now. I must go up again. I can see better from the top,’ and the voice grew fainter and higher and further off with each word till it died away completely into silence. Daddy went chasing his inspiration through the scaffolding of reverie and dream.

‘We did something for him the other night after all, then,’ thought Rogers with delight.

‘Of course,’ dropped down a wee, faint answer from above, as the author heard him thinking; ‘you did a lot. I’m partly out at last. This is where all the Patterns hide. Awake, I only get their dim reflections, broken and distorted. This is reality, not that. Ha, ha! If only I can get it through, my lovely, beautiful pattern—’

‘You will, you will,’ cried the other, as the voice went fluttering through space. ‘Ask the children. Jimbo and Monkey are up there somewhere. They’re the safest guides.’

Rogers gave a gulp and found that he was coughing. His feet were cold. A shudder ran across the feathery structure, making it tremble from the foundations to the forest of spires overhead. Jimbo came sliding down a pole of gleaming ebony. In a hammock of beams and rafters, swinging like a network of trapezes, Monkey swooped down after him, head first as usual. For the moon that moment passed behind a cloud, and the silver rivets started from their shadowy sockets. Clusters of star nails followed suit. The palace bent and tottered like a falling wave. Its pillars turned into trunks of pine trees; its corridors were spaces through the clouds; its chambers were great dips between the mountain summits.

‘It’s going too fast for sight,’ thought Rogers; ‘I can’t keep up with it. Even the children have toppled off.’ But he still heard Daddy’s laughter echoing down the lanes of darkness as he chased his pattern with yearning and enthusiasm.

The huge structure with its towers and walls and platforms slid softly out of sight. The moonlight sponged its outlines from the sky. The scaffolding melted into darkness, moving further westwards as night advanced. Already it was over France and Italy, sweeping grandly across the sea, bewildering the vessels in its net of glamour, and filling with wonder the eyes of the look-out men at the mast heads.

‘The fire’s going out,’ a voice was saying. Rogers heard it through a moment’s wild confusion as he fell swiftly among a forest of rafters, beams, and shifting uprights.

‘I’ll get more wood.’

The words seemed underground. A mountain wind rose up and brought the solid world about him. He felt chilly, shivered, and opened his eyes. There stood the solemn pine trees, thick and close; moonlight flooded the spaces between them and lit their crests with silver.

‘This is the Wind Wood,’ he remarked aloud to reassure himself.

Jimbo was bending over the fire, heaping on wood. Flame leaped up with a shower of sparks. He saw Monkey rubbing her eyes beside him.

‘I’ve had a dream of falling,’ she was saying, as she snuggled down closer into his side.

‘*I* didn’t,’ Jimbo said. ‘I dreamed of a railway accident, and everybody was killed except one passenger, who was Daddy. It fell off a high bridge. We found Daddy in the *fourgon* with the baggages, writing a story and laughing — making an awful row.’

‘What did *you* dream, Cousinenry?’ asked Monkey, peering into his eyes in the firelight.

‘That my feet were cold, because the fire had gone out,’ he answered, trying in vain to remember whether he had dreamed anything at all. ‘And — that it’s time to go home. I hear the curfew ringing.’

Some one whistled softly. They ought to have been in bed an hour ago.

It was ten o’clock, and Gygi was sounding the *couvre feu* from the old church tower. They put the fire out and walked home arm in arm, separating with hushed good-nights in the courtyard of the Citadelle. But Rogers did not hear the scolding Mother gave them when they appeared at the Den door, for he went on at once to his own room in the carpenter’s house, with the feeling that he had lived always in Bourcelles, and would never leave it again. His Scheme had moved bodily from London to the forest.

And on the way upstairs he peeped a moment into his cousin’s room, seeing a light beneath the door. The author was sitting beside the open window with the lamp behind him and a note-book on his knees. Moonlight fell upon his face. He was sound asleep.

‘I won’t wake him,’ thought his cousin, going out softly again. ‘He’s dreaming — dreaming of his wonderful new story probably.’

CHAPTER XXII

Even as a luminous haze links star to star,
 I would supply all chasms with music, breathing
 Mysterious motions of the soul, no way
 To be defined save in strange melodies.
 Paracelsus, R. BROWNING.

Daddy's story, meanwhile, continued to develop itself with wonder and enthusiasm. It was unlike anything he had ever written. His other studies had the brilliance of dead precious stones, perhaps, but this thing moved along with a rushing life of its own. It grew, fed by sources he was not aware of. It developed of itself — changed and lived and flashed. Some creative fairy hand had touched him while he slept perhaps. The starry sympathy poured through him, and he thought with his feelings as well as with his mind.

At first he was half ashamed of it; the process was so new and strange; he even attempted to conceal his method, because he could not explain or understand it. 'This is emotional, not intellectual,' he sighed to himself; 'it must be second childhood. I'm old. They'll call it decadent!' Presently, however, he resigned himself to the delicious flow of inspiration, and let it pour out till it flowed over into his daily life as well. Through his heart it welled up and bubbled forth, a thing of children, starlight, woods, and fairies.

Yet he was shy about it. He would talk about the story, but would not read it out. 'It's a new *genre* for me,' he explained shyly, 'an attempt merely. We'll see what comes of it. My original idea, you see, has grown out of hand rather. I wake every morning with something fresh, as though' — he hesitated a moment, glancing towards his wife— 'as if it came to me in sleep,' he concluded. He felt her common sense might rather despise him for it.

'Perhaps it does,' said Rogers.

'Why not?' said Mother, knitting on the sofa that was her bed at night.

She had put her needles down and was staring at her husband; he stared at Rogers; all three stared at each other. Something each wished to conceal moved towards utterance and revelation. Yet no one of them wished to be the first to mention it. A great change had come of late upon Bourcelles. It no longer seemed isolated from the big world outside as before; something had linked it up with the whole surrounding universe, and bigger, deeper currents of life flowed through it. And with the individual life of each it was the same. All dreamed the same enormous, splendid dream, yet dared not tell it — yet.

Both parents realised vaguely that it was something their visitor had brought, but what could it be exactly? It was in his atmosphere, he himself least of all aware of it; it was in his thought, his attitude to life, yet he himself so utterly unconscious of it. It brought out all the best in everybody, made them feel hopeful, brighter, more courageous. Yes, certainly, *he,* brought it. He believed in them, in the best of them — they lived up to it or tried to. Was that it? Was it belief and vision that he brought into their lives, though unconsciously, because these qualities lay so strongly in himself? Belief is constructive. It is what people *are* rather than what they preach that affects others. Two strangers meet and bow and separate without a word, yet each has changed; neither leaves the other quite as he was before. In the society of children, moreover, one believes everything in the world — for the moment. Belief is constructive and creative; it is doubt and cynicism that destroy. In the presence of a child these latter are impossible. Was this the explanation of the effect he produced upon their little circle — the belief and wonder and joy of Fairyland?

For a moment something of this flashed through Daddy’s mind. Mother, in her way, was aware of something similar. But neither of them spoke it. The triangular staring was its only evidence. Mother resumed her knitting. She was not given to impulsive utterance. Her husband once described her as a solid piece of furniture. She was.

‘You see,’ said Daddy bravely, as the moment’s tension passed, ‘my original idea was simply to treat Bourcelles as an epitome, a miniature, so to speak, of the big world, while showing how Nature sweetened and kept it pure as by a kind of alchemy. But that idea has grown. I have the feeling now that the Bourcelles we know is a mere shadowy projection cast by a more real

Bourcelles behind. It is only the dream village we know in our waking life. The real one — er — we know only in sleep.' There! — it was partly out!

Mother turned with a little start. 'You mean when we sleep?' she asked. She knitted vigorously again at once, as though ashamed of this sudden betrayal into fantasy. 'Why not?' she added, falling back upon her customary non-committal phrase. Yet this was not the superior attitude he had dreaded; she was interested. There was something she wanted to confess, if she only dared. Mother, too, had grown softer in some corner of her being. Something shone through her with a tiny golden radiance.

'But this idea is not my own,' continued Daddy, dangerously near to wumbling. 'It comes *through* me only. It develops, apparently, when I'm asleep,' he repeated. He sat up and leaned forward. 'And, I believe,' he added, as on sudden reckless impulse, 'it comes from you, Henry. Your mind, I feel, has brought this cargo of new suggestion and discharged it into me — into every one — into the whole blessed village. Man, I think you've bewitched us all!'

Mother dropped a stitch, so keenly was she listening. A moment later she dropped a needle too, and the two men picked it up, and handed it back together as though it weighed several pounds.

'Well,' said Rogers slowly, 'I suppose all minds pour into one another somewhere — in and out of one another, rather — and that there's a common stock or pool all draw upon according to their needs and power to assimilate. But I'm not conscious, old man, of driving anything deliberately into you—'

'Only you think and feel these things vividly enough for me to get them too,' said Daddy. Luckily 'thought transference' was not actually mentioned, or Mother might have left the room, or at least have betrayed an uneasiness that must have chilled them.

'As a boy I imagined pretty strongly,' in a tone of apology, 'but never since. I was in the City, remember, twenty years—'

'It's the childhood things, then,' Daddy interrupted eagerly. 'You've brought the great childhood imagination with you — the sort of gorgeous, huge, and endless power that goes on fashioning of its own accord just as dreams do —'

‘I *did,* indulge in that sort of thing as a boy, yes,’ was the half- guilty reply; ‘but that was years and years ago, wasn’t it?’

‘They have survived, then,’ said Daddy with decision. ‘The sweetness of this place has stimulated them afresh. The children’ — he glanced suspiciously at his wife for a moment— ‘have appropriated them too. It’s a powerful combination. After a pause he added, ‘I might develop that idea in my story — that you’ve brought back the sweet creations of childhood with you and captured us all — a sort of starry army.’

‘Why not?’ interpolated Mother, as who should say there was no harm in *that*. ‘They certainly have been full of mischief lately.’

‘Creation *is* mischievous,’ murmured her husband. ‘But since you have come,’ he continued aloud,— ‘how can I express it exactly? — the days have seemed larger, fuller, deeper, the forest richer and more mysterious, the sky much closer, and the stars more soft and intimate. I dream of them, and they all bring me messages that help my story. Do you know what I mean? There were days formerly, when life seemed empty, thin, peaked, impoverished, its scale of values horribly reduced, whereas now — since you’ve been up to your nonsense with the children — some tide stands at the full, and things are always happening.’

‘Well, really, Daddy!’ said the expression on Mother’s face and hands and knitting-needles, ‘you *are* splendid to-day’; but aloud she only repeated her little hold-all phrase, ‘Why not?’

Yet somehow he recognised that she understood him better than usual. Her language had not changed — things in Mother worked slowly, from within outwards as became her solid personality — but it held new meaning. He felt for the first time that he could make her understand, and more — that she was ready to understand. That is, he felt new sympathy with her. It was very delightful, stimulating; he instantly loved her more, and felt himself increased at the same time.

‘I believe a story like that might even sell,’ he observed, with a hint of reckless optimism. ‘People might recognise a touch of their own childhood in it, eh?’

He longed for her to encourage him and pat him on the back.

'True,' said Mother, smiling at him, 'for every one likes to keep in touch with their childhood — if they can. It makes one feel young and hopeful — jolly; doesn't it? Why not?'

Their eyes met. Something, long put aside and buried under a burden of exaggerated care, flashed deliciously between them. Rogers caught it flying and felt happy. Bridges were being repaired, if not newly built.

'Nature, you see, is always young really,' he said; 'it's full of children. The very meaning of the word, eh, John?' turning to his cousin as who should say, 'We knew our grammar once.'

'*Natura*, yes — something about to produce.' They laughed in their superior knowledge of a Latin word, but Mother, stirred deeply though she hardly knew why, was not to be left out. Would the bridge bear her, was perhaps her thought.

'And of the feminine gender,' she added slyly, with a touch of pride.
The bridge creaked, but did not give way. She said it very quickly.
She had suddenly an air of bouncing on her sofa.

'Bravo, Mother,' said her husband, looking at her, and there was a fondness in his voice that warmed and blessed and melted down into her. She had missed it so long that it almost startled her. 'There's the eternal old magic, Mother; you're right. And if I had more of you in me — more of the creative feminine — I should do better work, I'm sure. You must give it to me.'

She kept her eyes upon her needles. The others, being unobservant 'mere men,' did not notice that the stitches she made must have produced queer kind of stockings if continued. 'We'll be collaborators,' Daddy added, in the tone of a boy building on the sands at Margate.

'I will,' she said in a low voice, 'if only I know how.'

'Well,' he answered enthusiastically, looking from one to the other, delighted to find an audience to whom he could talk of his new dream, 'you see, this is really a great jolly fairy-tale I'm trying to write. I'm blessed if I know where the ideas come from, or how they pour into me like this, but — anyhow it's a new experience, and I want to make the most of it. I've never done imaginative work before, and — though it is a bit fantastical, mean to keep in touch with reality and show great truths that emerge from the commonest facts of life. The critics, of course, will blame me for not giving ’em the banal thing they expect from me, but what of that?’ He was dreadfully reckless.

‘I see,’ said Mother, gazing open-mindedly into his face; ‘but where does *my* help come in, please?’

She leaned back, half-sighing, half-smiling. ‘Here’s my life’ — she held up her needles— ‘and that’s the soul of prosaic dulness, isn’t it?’

‘On the contrary,’ he answered eagerly, ‘it’s reality. It’s courage, patience, heroism. You’re a spring-board for my fairy-tale, though I’d never realised it before. I shall put you in, just as you are. You’ll be one of the earlier chapters.’

‘Every one’ll skip me, then, I’m afraid.’

‘Not a bit,’ he laughed gaily; ‘they’ll feel you all through the book. Their minds will rest on you. You’ll be a foundation. “Mother’s there,” they’ll say, “so it’s all right. This isn’t nonsense. We’ll read on.” And they will read on.’

‘I’m all through it, then?’

‘Like the binding that mothers the whole book, you see,’ put in Rogers, delighted to see them getting on so well, yet amazed to hear his cousin talk so openly with her of his idea.

Daddy continued, unabashed and radiant. Hitherto, he knew, his wife’s attitude, though never spoken, had been very different. She almost resented his intense preoccupation with stories that brought in so little cash. It would have been better if he taught English or gave lessons in literature for a small but regular income. He gave too much attention to these unremunerative studies of types she never met in actual life. She was proud of the reviews, and pasted them neatly in a big book, but his help and advice on the practical details of the children’s clothing and education were so scanty. Hers seemed ever the main burden.

Now, for the first time, though she distrusted fantasy and deemed it destructive of action, she felt something real. She listened with a kind of believing sympathy. She noticed, moreover, with keen pleasure, that her attitude fed him. He talked so freely, happily about it all. Already her sympathy, crudely enough expressed, brought fuel to his fires. Some one had put starlight into her.

‘He’s been hungry for this all along,’ she reflected; ‘I never realised it. I’ve thought only of myself without knowing it.’

‘Yes, I’ll put you in, old Mother,’ he went on, ‘and Rogers and the children too. In fact, you’re in it already,’ he chuckled, ‘if you want to know. Each of you plays his part all day long without knowing it.’ He changed his seat, going over to the window-sill, and staring down upon them as he talked on eagerly. ‘Don’t you feel,’ he said, enthusiasm growing and streaming from him, ‘how all this village life is a kind of dream we act out against the background of the sunshine, while our truer, deeper life is hidden somewhere far below in half unconsciousness? Our daily doings are but the little bits that emerge, tips of acts and speech that poke up and out, masquerading as complete? In that vaster sea of life we lead below the surface lies my big story, my fairy-tale — when we sleep.’ He paused and looked down questioningly upon them. ‘When we sleep,’ he repeated impressively, struggling with his own thought. ‘You, Mother, while you knit and sew, slip down into that enormous under-sea and get a glimpse of the coloured pictures that pass eternally behind the veil. I do the same when I watch the twilight from my window in reverie. Sunshine obliterates them, but they go just the same. *You* call it day- dreaming. Our waking hours are the clothes we dress the spirit in after its nightly journeys and activities. Imagination does not create so much as remember. Then, by transforming, it reveals.’

Mother sat staring blankly before her, utterly lost, while her husband flung these lumps of the raw material of his story at her — of its atmosphere, rather. Even Rogers felt puzzled, and hardly followed what he heard. The intricacies of an artistic mind were indeed bewildering. How in the world would these wild fragments weave together into any intelligible pattern?

‘You mean that we travel when we sleep,’ he ventured, remembering a phrase that Minks had somewhere used, ‘and that our real life is out of the body?’ His cousin was taking his thought — or was it originally Minks’s? — wholesale.

Mother looked up gratefully. ‘I often dream I’m flying,’ she put in solemnly. ‘Lately, in particular, I’ve dreamed of stars and funny things like that a lot.'

Daddy beamed his pleasure. 'In my fairy-tale we shall all see stars,' he laughed, 'and we shall all get "out." For our thoughts will determine the kind of experience and adventure we have when the spirit is free and unhampered. And contrariwise, the kind of things we do at night — in sleep, in dream — will determine our behaviour during the day. There's the importance of thinking rightly, you see. Out of the body is eternal, and thinking is more than doing — it's more complete. The waking days are brief intervals of test that betray the character of our hidden deeper life. We are judged in sleep. We last for ever and ever. In the day, awake, we stand before the easel on which our adventures of the night have painted those patterns which are the very structure of our outer life's behaviour. When we sleep again we re- enter the main stream of our spirit's activity. In the day we forget, of course — as a rule, and most of us — but we follow the pattern just the same, unwittingly, because we can't help it. It's the mould we've made.'

'Then your story,' Rogers interrupted, 'will show the effect in the daytime of what we do at night? Is that it?' It amazed him to hear his cousin borrowing thus the entire content of his own mind, sucking it out whole like a ripe plum from its skin.

'Of course,' he answered; 'and won't it be a lark? We'll all get out in sleep and go about the village together in a bunch, helping, soothing, cleaning up, and putting everybody straight, so that when they wake up they'll wonder why in the world they feel so hopeful, strong, and happy all of a sudden. We'll put thoughts of beauty into them — beauty, you remember, which "is a promise of happiness."'

'Ah!' said Mother, seizing at his comprehensible scrap with energy. 'That *is* a story.'

'If I don't get it wumbled in the writing down,' her husband continued, fairly bubbling over. 'You must keep me straight, remember, with your needles — your practical aspirations, that is. I'll read it out to you bit by bit, and you'll tell me where I've dropped a stitch or used the wrong wool, eh?'

'Mood?' she asked.

'No, wool,' he said, louder.

There was a pause.

'But you see my main idea, don't you — that the sources of our life lie hid with beauty very very far away, and that our real, big, continuous life is spiritual — out of the body, as I shall call it. The waking-day life uses what it can bring over from this enormous under-running sea of universal consciousness where we're all together, splendid, free, untamed, and where thinking is creation and we feel and know each other face to face? See? Sympathy the great solvent? All linked together by thought as stars are by their rays. Ah! You get my idea — the great Network?'

He looked straight into his wife's eyes. They were opened very wide. Her mouth had opened a little, too. She understood vaguely that he was using a kind of shorthand really. These cryptic sentences expressed in emotional stenography mere odds and ends that later would drop into their proper places, translated into the sequence of acts that are the scaffolding of a definite story. This she firmly grasped — but no more.

'It's grand-a wonderful job,' she answered, sitting back upon the sofa with a sigh of relief, and again bouncing a little in the process, so that Rogers had a horrible temptation to giggle. The tension of listening had been considerable. 'People, you mean, will realise how important thinking is, and that sympathy — er—' and she hesitated, floundering.

'Is the great way to grow,' Rogers quickly helped her, 'because by feeling with another person you add his mind to yours and so get bigger. And ' — turning to his cousin—' you're taking starlight as the symbol of sympathy? You told me that the other day, I remember.' But the author did not hear or did not answer; his thought was far away in his dream again.

The situation was saved. All the bridges had borne well. Daddy, having relieved his overcharged mind, seemed to have come to a full stop. The Den was full of sunlight. A delightful feeling of intimacy wove the three humans together. Mother caught herself thinking of the far-off courtship days when their love ran strong and clear. She felt at one with her husband, and remembered him as lover. She felt in touch with him all over. And Rogers was such a comfortable sort of person. Tact was indeed well named — sympathy so delicately adjusted that it involved feeling-with to the point of actual touch.

Daddy came down from his perch upon the window-sill, stretched his arms, and drew a great happy sigh.

‘Mother,’ he added, rising to go out, ‘you shall help me, dearie. We’ll write this great fairy-tale of mine together, eh?’ He stooped and kissed her, feeling love and tenderness and sympathy in his heart.

‘You brave old Mother!’ he laughed; ‘we’ll send Eddie to Oxford yet, see if we don’t. A book like that might earn 100 pounds or even 200 pounds.’

Another time she would have answered, though not bitterly, ‘Meanwhile I’ll go on knitting stockings,’ or ‘Why not? we shall see what we shall see’ — something, at any rate, corrective and rather sober, quenching. But this time she said nothing. She returned the kiss instead, without looking up from her needles, and a great big thing like an unborn child moved near her heart. He had not called her ‘dearie’ for so long a time, it took her back to their earliest days together at a single, disconcerting bound. She merely stroked his shoulder as he straightened up and left the room. Her eyes then followed him out, and he turned at the door and waved his hand. Rogers, to her relief, saw him to the end of the passage, and her handkerchief was out of sight again before he returned. As he came in she realised even more clearly than before that he somehow was the cause of the changing relationship. He it was who brought this something that bridged the years — made old bridges safe to use again. And her love went out to him. He was a man she could open her heart to even.

Patterns of starry beauty had found their way in and were working out in all of them. But Mother, of course, knew nothing of this. There was a tenderness in him that won her confidence. That was all she felt. ‘Oh, dear,’ she thought in her odd way, ‘what a grand thing a man is to be sure, when he’s got that!’ It was like one of Jane Anne’s remarks.

As he came in she had laid the stocking aside and was threading a needle for darning and buttons, and the like.

‘“Threading the eye of a yellow star,” eh?’ he laughed, ‘and always at it. You’ve stirred old Daddy up this time. He’s gone off to his story, simply crammed full. What a help and stimulus you must be to him!’

‘I,’ she said, quite flabbergasted; ‘I only wish it were true — again.’
The last word slipped out by accident; she had not meant it.

But Rogers ignored it, even if he noticed it.

‘I never can help him in his work. I don’t understand it enough. I don’t understand it at all.’ She was ashamed to hedge with this man. She looked him straight in the eye.

‘But he feels your sympathy,’ was his reply. ‘It’s not always necessary to understand. That might only muddle him. You help by wishing, feeling, sympathising — believing.’

‘You really think so?’ she asked simply. ‘What wonderful thoughts you have I One has read, of course, of wives who inspired their husbands’ work; but it seemed to belong to books rather than to actual life.’

Rogers looked at her thoughtful, passionate face a moment before he answered. He realised that his words would count with her. They approached delicate ground. She had an absurd idea of his importance in their lives; she exaggerated his influence; if he said a wrong thing its effect upon her would be difficult to correct.

‘Well,’ he said, feeling mischief in him, ‘I don’t mind telling *you* that I should never have understood that confused idea of his story but for one thing.’

‘What was that?’ she asked, relieved to feel more solid ground at last.

‘That I saw the thing from his own point of view,’ he replied; ‘because I have had similar thoughts all my life. I mean that he’s bagged it all unconsciously out of my own mind; though, of course,’ he hastened to add, ‘I could never, never have made use of it as he will. I could never give it shape and form.’

Mother began to laugh too. He caught the twinkle in her eyes. She bounced again a little on the springy sofa as she turned towards him, confession on her lips at last.

‘And I do believe you’ve felt it too, haven’t you?’ he asked quickly, before she could change her mind.

‘I’ve felt something — yes,’ she assented; ‘odd, unsettled; new things rushing everywhere about us; the children mysterious and up to all sorts of games and wickedness; and bright light over everything, like- like a scene in a theatre, somehow. It’s exhilarating, but I can’t quite make it out. It can’t be right to feel so frivolous and jumpy- about at my age, can it?’

‘You feel lighter, eh?

She burst out laughing. Mother was a prosaic person; that is, she had strong common-sense; yet through her sober personality there ran like a streak of light some hint of fairy lightness, derived probably from her Celtic origin. Now, as Rogers watched her, he caught a flash of that raciness and swift mobility, that fluid, protean elasticity of temperament which belonged to the fairy kingdom. The humour and pathos in her had been smothered by too much care. She accepted old age before her time. He saw her, under other conditions, dancing, singing, full of Ariel tricks and mischief — instead of eternally mending stockings and saving centimes for peat and oil and washerwomen. He even saw her feeding fantasy — poetry — to Daddy like a baby with a spoon. The contrast made him laugh out loud.

‘You’ve lived here five years,’ he went on, ‘but lived too heavily. Care has swamped imagination. I did the same-in the City-for twenty years. It’s all wrong. One has to learn to live carelessly as well as carefully. When I came here I felt all astray at first, but now I see more clearly. The peace and beauty have soaked into me.’ He hesitated an instant, then continued. Even if she didn’t grasp his meaning now with her brains, it would sink down into her and come through later.

‘The important things of life are very few really. They stand out vividly here. You’ve both vegetated, fossilised, atrophied a bit. I discovered it in my own case when I went back to Crayfield and—’

He told her about his sentimental journey, and how he found all the creations of his childhood’s imagination still so alive and kicking in a forgotten backwater of his mind that they all hopped out and took objective form — the sprites, the starlight express, the boundless world of laughter, fun and beauty.

‘And, without exactly knowing it, I suppose I’ve brought them all out here,’ he continued, seeing that she drank it in thirstily, ‘and — somehow or other — you all have felt it and responded. It’s not my doing, of course,’ he added; ‘it’s simply that I’m the channel as it were, and Daddy, with his somewhat starved artist's hunger of mind, was the first to fill up. It's pouring through him now in a story, don't you see; but we're all in it—'

'In a way, yes, that's what I've felt,' Mother interrupted. 'It's all a kind of dream here, and I've just waked up. The unchanging village, the forests, the Pension with its queer people, the Magic Box—'

'Like a play in a theatre,' he interrupted, 'isn't it?'

'Exactly,' she laughed, yet half-seriously.

'While your husband is the dramatist that writes it down in acts and scenes. You see, his idea is, perhaps, that life as we know it is never a genuine story, complete and leading to a climax. It's all in disconnected fragments apparently. It goes backwards and forwards, up and down, in and out in a wumbled muddle, just anyhow, as it were. The fragments seem out of their proper place, the first ones often last, and *vice versa*. It seems inconsequential, because we only see the scraps that break through from below, from the true inner, deeper life that flows on steadily and dramatically out of sight. That's what he means by "out of the body" and "sleep" and "dreaming." The great pattern is too big and hidden for us to see it whole, just as when you knit I only see the stitches as you make them, although the entire pattern is in your mind complete. Our daily, external acts are the stitches we show to others and that everybody sees. A spiritual person sees the whole.'

'Ah!' Mother interrupted, 'I understand now. To know the whole pattern in my mind you'd have to get in sympathy with my thought below. Is that it?'

'Sometimes we look over the fence of mystery, yes, and see inside — see the entire stage as it were.'

'It *is* like a great play, isn't it?' she repeated, grasping again at the analogy with relief. 'We give one another cues, and so on—'

'While each must know the whole play complete in order to act his part properly — be in sympathy, that is, with all the others. The tiniest details so important, too,' he added, glancing significantly at the needles on her lap. 'To act your own part faithfully you must carry all the others in your mind, or else — er — get your own part out of proportion.'

‘It will be a wonderful story, won’t it?’ she said, after a pause in which her eyes travelled across the sunshine towards the carpenter’s house where her husband, seen now in a high new light, laboured steadily.

There was a clatter in the corridor before he could reply, and Jimbo and Monkey flew in with a rush of wings and voices from school. They were upon him in an instant, smelling of childhood, copy-books, ink, and rampagious with hunger. Their skins and hair were warm with sunlight. ‘After tea we’ll go out,’ they cried, ‘and show you something in the forest — oh, an enormous and wonderful thing that nobody knows of but me and Jimbo, and comes over every night from France and hides inside a cave, and goes back just before sunrise with a sack full of thinkings—’

‘Thoughts,’ corrected Jimbo.

‘ — that haven’t reached the people they were meant for, and then—’

‘Go into the next room, wash yourselves and tidy up,’ said Mother sternly, ‘and then lay the table for tea. Jinny isn’t in yet. Put the charcoal in the samovar. I’ll come and light it in a moment.’

They disappeared obediently, though once behind the door there were sounds that resembled a pillow-fight rather than tidying-up; and when Mother presently went after them to superintend, Rogers sat by the window and stared across the vineyards and blue expanse of lake at the distant Alps. It was curious. This vague, disconnected, rambling talk with Mother had helped to clear his own mind as well. In trying to explain to her something he hardly understood himself, his own thinking had clarified. All these trivial scenes were little bits of rehearsal. The Company was still waiting for the arrival of the Star Player who should announce the beginning of the real performance. It was a woman’s role, yet Mother certainly could not play it. To get the family really straight was equally beyond his powers. ‘I really must have more common-sense,’ he reflected uneasily; ‘I am getting out of touch with reality somewhere. I’ll write to Minks again.’

Minks, at the moment, was the only definite, positive object in the outer world he could recall. ‘I’ll write to him about—’ His thought went wumbling. He quite forgot what it was he had to say to him— ‘Oh, about lots of things,’ he concluded, ‘his wife and children and — and his own future and so on.’

The Scheme had melted into air, it seemed. People lost in Fairyland, they say, always forget the outer world of unimportant happenings. They live too close to the source of things to recognise their clownish reflections in the distorted mirrors of the week-day level.

Yes, it was curious, very curious. Did Thought, then, issue primarily from some single source and pass thence along the channels of men's minds, each receiving and interpreting according to his needs and powers? Was the Message — the Prophet's Vision — merely the more receipt of it than most? Had, perhaps, this whole wonderful story his cousin wrote originated, not in his, Rogers's mind, nor in that of Minks, but in another's altogether — the mind of her who was destined for the principal role? Thrills of absurd, electric anticipation rushed through him — very boyish, wildly impossible, yet utterly delicious.

Two doors opened suddenly — one from the kitchen, admitting Monkey with a tray of cups and saucers, steam from the hissing samovar wrapping her in a cloud, the other from the corridor, letting in Jane Anne, her arms full of packages. She had been shopping for the family in Neuchatel, and was arrayed in garments from the latest Magic Box. She was eager and excited.

'Cousinenry,' she cried, dropping half the parcels in her fluster, 'I've had a letter!' It was in her hand, whereas the parcels had been merely under her arms. 'The postman gave it me himself as I came up the steps. I'm a great correspondencer, you know.' And she darted through the steam to tell her mother. Jimbo passed her, carrying the tea-pot, the sugar-basin dangerously balanced upon spoons and knives and butter-dish. He said nothing, but glanced at his younger sister significantly. Rogers saw the entire picture through the cloud of steam, shot through with sunlight from the window. It was like a picture in the clouds. But he intercepted that glance and knew then the writer of the letter.

'But did you get the mauve ribbon, child?' asked Mother.

Instead of answer, the letter was torn noisily open. Jinny never had letters. It was far more important than ribbons.

'And how much change have you left out of the five francs? Daddy will want to know.'

Jimbo and Monkey were listening carefully, while pretending to lay the table. Mother's silence betrayed that she was reading the letter with interest and curiosity equal to those of its recipient. 'Who wrote it? Who's it from? I must answer it at once,' Jinny was saying with great importance. 'What time does the post go, I wonder? I mustn't miss it.'

'The post-mark,' announced Mother, 'is Bourcelles. It's very mysterious.' She tapped the letter with one hand, like the villain in the theatre. Rogers heard her and easily imagined the accompanying stage gesture. 'The handwriting on the envelope is like Tante Anna,' he heard, 'but the letter itself is different. It's all capitals, and wrongly spelt.' Mlle. Lemaire was certainly not the writer.

Jimbo and Monkey were busy hanging the towel out of the window, signal to Daddy that tea was ready. But as Daddy was already coming down the street at a great pace, apparently excited too, they waved it instead. Rogers suddenly remembered that Jimbo that morning had asked him for a two-centime stamp. He made no remark, however, merely wondering what was in the letter itself.

'It's a joke, of course,' Mother was heard to say in an odd voice.

'Oh no, Mother, for how could anybody know? It's what I've been dreaming about for nights and nights. It's so aromantic, isn't it?'

The louder hissing of the samovar buried the next words, and at that moment Daddy came into the room. He was smiling and his eyes were bright. He glanced at the table and sat down by his cousin on the sofa.

'I've done a lot of work since you saw me,' he said happily, patting him on the knee, 'although in so short a time. And I want my cup of tea. It came so easily and fluently for a wonder; I don't believe I shall have to change a word — though usually I distrust this sort of rapid composition.'

'Where are you at now?' asked Rogers. 'We're all "out,"' was the reply, 'and the Starlight Express is just about to start and — Mother, let me carry that for you,' he exclaimed, turning round as his wife appeared in the doorway with more tea-things. He got up quickly, but before he could reach her side Jinny flew into his arms and kissed him.

'Did you get my tobacco, Jinny?' he asked. She thrust the letter under his nose. What was tobacco, indeed, compared to an important letter! 'You can keep the change for yourself.'

He read it slowly with a puzzled expression, while Mother and the children watched him. Riquette jumped down from her chair and rubbed herself against his leg while he scratched himself with his boot, thinking it was the rough stocking that tickled him.

'Eh? This is very queer,' he muttered, slapping the open sheet just as his wife had done, and reading it again at arm's-length. 'Somebody' — he looked suspiciously round the room— 'has been reading my notes or picking out my thoughts while I'm asleep, eh?'

'But it's a real letter,' objected Jinny; 'it's correspondence, isn't it, Daddy?'

'It is certainly a correspondence,' he comforted her, and then, reading it aloud, he proceeded to pin it on the wall above the mantelpiece: —

'The Starlight Xpress starts to-night, Be reddy and punctuel. Sleep titely and get out.'

That was all. But everybody exchanged glances.

'Odd,' thought Mother, again remembering her dreams.

Jimbo upset the milk-jug. Usually there would have been a rumpus over this. To-day it seemed like something happening far away — something that had not really happened at all.

'We must all be ready then,' said Rogers, noticing vaguely that Mother's sleeve had smeared the butter as she mopped up the mess.

Daddy was making a note on his shirt sleeve: —

The Sweep, the Laugher and the Tramp,
The running man who lights the lamp,
The Woman of the Haystack, too,
The Gardener and Man of Dust
Are passengers because they must
Follow the Guard with eyes of blue.
Over the forests and into the Cave
That is the way we must all behave —

'Please, Daddy, will you move? It's dripping on to your boot.'

They all looked down; the milk had splashed from the cloth and fallen upon the toe of his big mountain boots. It made a pretty, white star. Riquette was daintily lapping it up with her long pink Tongue. Ray by ray the star set in her mysterious interior.

‘Riquette must come too,’ said Rogers gravely. ‘She’s full of white starlight now.’

And Jimbo left his chair and went seriously over to the book-shelf above Mother’s sofa-bed to arrange the signals. For between the tightly-wedged books he had inserted all the available paper-knives and book-markers he could find to represent railway-signals. They stuck out at different angles. He altered several, putting some up, some down, and some at right angles.

‘The line’s all clear for to-night,’ he announced to Daddy with a covert significance he hardly grasped himself, then coming back to home-made jam and crusty village bread.

Jane Anne caught her father’s answering glance-mysterious, full of unguessed meanings. ‘Oh, excuse me, Mother,’ she said, feeling the same thing in herself and a little frightened; ‘but I do believe they’re conspiring, aren’t they?’

And Mother gave a sudden start, whose cause she equally failed to analyse. ‘Hush, dear,’ she said. ‘Don’t criticise your elders, and when you do, don’t use long words you cannot possibly understand.’

And everybody understood something none of them understood-while tea went on as usual to the chatter of daily details of external life.

CHAPTER XXIV

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by and by.
Abt Vogler, R. BROWNING.

Some hours later, as Rogers undressed for bed in his room beneath the roof, he realised abruptly that the time had come for him to leave. The weeks had flown; Minks and the Scheme required him; other matters needed attention too. What brought him to the sudden decision was the fact that he had done for the moment all he could find to do, beginning with the Pension mortgages and ending with little Edouard Tissot, the *vigneron's* boy who had curvature of the spine and could not afford proper treatment. It was a long list. He was far from satisfied with results, yet he had done his best, in spite of many clumsy mistakes. In the autumn he might return and have a further try. Finances were getting muddled, too, and he realised how small his capital actually was when the needs of others made claims upon it. Neighbours were as plentiful as insects.

He had made all manner of schemes for his cousin's family as well, yet seemed to have accomplished little. Their muddled life defied disentanglement, their difficulties were inextricable. With one son at a costly tutor, another girl in a Geneva school, the younger children just outgrowing the local education, the family's mode of living so scattered, meals in one place, rooms in several others, — it was all too unmethodical and dispersed to be covered by their small uncertain income. Concentration was badly needed. The endless talks and confabulations, which have not been reported here because their confusion was interminable and unreportable, landed every one in a mass of complicated jumbles. The solution lay beyond his power, as equally beyond the powers of the obfuscated parents. He would return to England, settle his own affairs, concoct some practical scheme with the aid of Minks, and return later to discuss its working out. The time had come for him to leave.

And, oddly enough, what made him see it were things the children had said that very evening when he kissed them all good-night. England had been mentioned.

‘You’re here for always now,’ whispered Monkey, ‘because you love me and can’t get away. I’ve tied you with my hair, you know.’

‘You’ll have no sekrity in London,’ said Jimbo. ‘Who’ll stick your stamps on?’

‘The place will seem quite empty if you go,’ Jane Anne contributed, not wishing to make her contribution too personal, lest she should appear immodest. ‘You’ve made a memorandum of agreement.’ This meant he had promised rashly once to stay for ever. The phrase lent an official tone besides.

He fell asleep, devising wonderful plans, as usual, for the entire world, not merely a tiny section of it. The saviour spirit was ever in his heart. It failed to realise itself because the mind was unequal to the strain of wise construction; but it was there, as the old vicar had divined. He had that indestructible pity to which no living thing is outcast.

But to-night he fell asleep so slowly, gradually, that he almost watched the dissolving of consciousness in himself. He hovered a long time about the strange, soft frontiers. He saw the barriers lower themselves into the great dim plains. Inch by inch the outer world became remote, obscure, lit dubiously by some forgotten sun, and inch by inch the profound recesses of nightly adventure coaxed him down. He realised that he swung in space between the two. The room and house were a speck in the universe above him, his brain the mere outlet of a tunnel up which he climbed every morning to put his horns out like a snail, and sniff the outer world. Here, in the depths, was the workroom where his life was fashioned. Here glowed the mighty, hidden furnaces that shaped his tools. Drifting, glimmering figures streamed up round him from the vast under-world of sleep, called unconscious. ‘I *am* a spirit,’ he heard, not said or thought, ‘and no spirit can be unconscious for eight hours out of every twenty-four…!’

Slowly the sea of dreamless sleep, so-called, flowed in upon him, down, round, and over; it submerged the senses one by one, beginning with hearing and ending with sight. But, as each physical sense was closed, its spiritual counterpart — the power that exists apart from its limited organ-opened into clear, divine activity, free as life itself….

How ceaseless was this movement of Dreams, never still, always changing and on the dance, incessantly renewing itself in kaleidoscopic patterns. There was perpetual metamorphosis and rich transformation; many became one, one many; the universe was a single thing, charged with stimulating emotional shocks as each scrap of interpretation passed in and across the mind….

He was falling into deeper and deeper sleep, into that eternal region where he no longer thought, but knew… Immense processions of shifting imagery absorbed him into themselves, spontaneous, unfamiliar, self-multiplying, and as exquisitely baffling as God and all His angels….

The subsidence of the external world seemed suddenly complete.

So deeply was he sunk that he reached that common pool of fluid essence upon which all minds draw according to their needs and powers. Relations were established, wires everywhere connected. The central switchboard clicked all round him; brains linked with brains, asleep or not asleep. He was so deep within himself that, as the children and the Story phrased it, he was ‘out.’ The air grew light and radiant.

‘Hooray! I’m out!’ and he instantly thought of his cousin.

‘So am I!’ That wumbled author shot immediately into connection with him. ‘And so is Mother — for the first time. Come on: we’ll all go together.’

It was unnecessary to specify where, for that same second they found themselves in the room of Mlle. Lemaire. At this hour of the night it was usually dark, except for the glimmer of the low-turned lamp the sufferer never quite extinguished.

From dusk till dawn her windows in La Citadelle shone faintly for all to see who chanced to pass along the village street. ‘There she lies, poor aching soul, as she has lain for twenty years, thinking good of some one, or maybe praying!’ For the glimmer was visible from very far, and familiar as a lighthouse to wandering ships at sea. But, had they known her inner happiness, they would not have said ‘poor soul!’ They would have marvelled. In a Catholic canton, perhaps, they would have crossed themselves and prayed. Just now they certainly would have known a singular, exalted joy. Caught in fairyland, they would have wondered and felt happy.

For the room was crowded to the doors. Walls, windows, ceiling, had melted into transparency to let in the light of stars; and, caught like gold-fish in the great network of the rays, shone familiar outlines everywhere — Jimbo, Monkey, Jinny, the Sweep, the Tramp, the Gypsy, the Laugher up against the cupboard, the Gardener by the window where the flower-pots stood, the Woman of the Haystack in the corridor, too extensive to slip across the threshold, and, in the middle of the room, motionless with pleasure-Mother!

‘Like gorgeous southern butterflies in a net, I do declare!’ gasped Daddy, as he swept in silently with his companion, their colours mingling harmoniously at once with the rest.

And Mother turned.

‘You’re out, old girl, at last!’ he cried.

‘God bless my soul, I am!’ she answered. Their sentences came both together, and their blues and yellows swam into each other and made a lovely green. ‘It’s what I’ve been trying to do all these years without knowing it. What a glory! I understand now — understand myself and you. I see life clearly as a whole. Hooray, hooray!’ She glided nearer to him, her face was beaming.

‘Mother’s going to explode,’ said Monkey in a whisper. But, of course, everybody ‘heard’ it; for the faintest whisper of thought sent a ripple through that sea of delicate colour. The Laugher bent behind the cupboard to hide her face, and the Gardener by the window stooped to examine his flower-pots. The Woman of the Haystack drew back a little into the corridor again, preparatory to another effort to squeeze through. But Mother, regardless of them all, swam on towards her husband, wrapped in joy and light as in a garment. Hitherto, in her body, the nearest she had come to coruscating was once when she had taken a course of sulphur baths. This was a very different matter. She fairly glittered.

‘We’ll never go apart again,’ Daddy was telling her. ‘This inner sympathy will last, you know. *He* did it. It’s him we have to thank,’ and he pointed at his cousin. ‘It’s starlight, of course, he has brought down into us.’

But Rogers missed the compliment, being busy in a corner with Monkey and Jimbo, playing at mixing colours with startling results. Mother swam across to her old friend, Mile. Lemaire. For a quarter of a century these two had understood one another, though never consciously been ‘out’ together. She moved like a frigate still, gliding and stately, but a frigate that has snapped its hawsers and meant to sail the skies.

‘Our poor, stupid, sleeping old bodies,’ she smiled.

But the radiant form of the other turned to her motionless cage upon the bed behind her. ‘Don’t despise them,’ she replied, looking down upon the worn-out prison-house, while a little dazzle of brilliance flashed through her atmosphere. ‘They are our means of spreading this starlight about the world and giving it to others. Our brains transmit it cunningly; it flashes from our eyes, and the touch of our fingers passes it on. We gather it here, when we are “out,” but we can communicate it best to others when we are “in.”’

There was sound of confusion and uproar in the room behind as some one came tumbling in with a rush, scattering the figures in all directions as when a gust of wind descends upon a bed of flowers.

‘In at last!’ cried a muffled voice that sounded as though a tarpaulin smothered it, and the Woman of the Haystack swept into the room with a kind of clumsy majesty. The Tramp and Gypsy, whose efforts had at length dislodged her awkward bulk, came rolling after. They had been pushing steadily from behind all this time, though no one had noticed them slip out.

‘*We* can do more than the smaller folk,’ she said proudly, sailing up to Mother. ‘We can’t be overlooked, for one thing’; and arm-in-arm, like a pair of frigates then, they sailed about the room, magnificent as whales that swim in a phosphorescent sea. The Laugher straightened up to watch them, the Gardener turned his head, and Rogers and the children paused a moment in their artificial mixing, to stare with wonder.

‘I’m in!’ said the Woman.

‘I’m out!’ said Mother.

And the children felt a trifle envious. Instantly their brilliance dimmed a little. The entire room was aware of it.

‘Think always of the world in gold and silver,’ shot from Mile. Lemaire. The dimness passed as she said it.

‘It was my doing,’ laughed Monkey, turning round to acknowledge her wickedness lest some one else should do it for her and thus increase her shame.

‘Sweep! Sweep!’ cried Rogers.

But this thought-created sprite was there before the message flashed. With his sack wide open, he stood by Monkey, full of importance. A moment he examined her. Then, his long black fingers darting like a shuttle, he discovered the false colouring that envy had caused, picked it neatly out — a thread of dirty grey — and, winding it into a tiny ball, tossed it with contempt into his sack.

’Over the edge of the world you go,
With the mud and the leaves and the dirty snow!’

he sang, skipping off towards the door. The child’s star-body glowed and shone again, pulsing all over with a shimmering, dancing light that was like moonshine upon running water.

‘Isn’t it time to start now?’ inquired Jinny; and as she said it all turned instinctively towards the corner of the room where they were assembled. They gathered round Mlle. Lemaire. It was quite clear who was leader now. The crystal brilliance of her whiteness shone like a little oval sun. So sparkling was her atmosphere, that its purity scarcely knew a hint of colour even. Her stream of thought seemed undiluted, emitting rays in all directions till it resembled a wheel of sheer white fire. The others fluttered round her as lustrous moths about an electric light.

‘Start where?’ asked Mother, new to this great adventure.

Her old friend looked at her, so that she caught a darting ray full in the face, and instantly understood.

‘First to the Cave to load up,’ flashed the answer; ‘and then over the sleeping world to mix the light with everybody’s dreams. Then back again before the morning spiders are abroad with the interfering sun.’

She floated out into the corridor, and all the others fell into line as she went. The draught of her going drew Mother into place immediately behind her. Daddy followed close, their respective colours making it inevitable, and Jinny swept in after him, bright and eager as a little angel. She tripped on the edge of something he held tightly in one hand, a woven maze of tiny glittering lines, exquisitely inter-threaded — a skeleton of beauty, waiting to be filled in and clothed, yet already alive with spontaneous fire of its own. It was the Pattern of his story he had been busy with in the corner.

‘I won’t step on it, Daddy,’ she said gravely.

‘It doesn’t matter if you do. You’re in it,’ he answered, yet lifted it higher so that it flew behind him like a banner in the night.

The procession was formed now. Rogers and the younger children came after their sister at a little distance, and then, flitting to and fro in darker shades, like a fringe of rich embroidery that framed the moving picture, came the figures of the sprites, born by Imagination out of Love in an old Kentish garden years and years ago. They rose from the tangle of the ancient building. Climbing the shoulder of a big, blue wind, they were off and away!

It was a jolly night, a windy night, a night without clouds, when all the lanes of the sky were smooth and swept, and the interstellar spaces seemed close down upon the earth.

’Kind thoughts, like fine weather,
Link sweetly together God’s stars
With the heart of a boy,’

sang Rogers, following swiftly with Jimbo and his sister. For all moved along as easily as light across the surfaces of polished glass. And the sound of Rogers’s voice seemed to bring singing from every side, as the gay procession swept onwards. Every one contributed lines of their own, it seemed, though there was a tiny little distant voice, soft and silvery, that intruded from time to time and made all wonder where it came from. No one could see the singer. At first very far away, it came nearer and nearer.

DADDY. ‘The Interfering Sun has set!
GARDENER. Now Sirius flings down the Net!
LAMPLIGHTER. See, the meshes flash and quiver,
As the golden, silent river

SWEEP. Clears the dark world’s troubled dream.
DUSTMAN. Takes it sleeping,
Gilds its weeping
With a star’s mysterious beam.
Tiny, distant Voice. Oh, think Beauty!
It’s your duty!
In the Cave you work for others,
All the stars are little brothers;

ROGERS. Think their splendour,

Strong and tender;
DADDY. Think their glory
In the Story
MOTHER. Of each day your nights redeem?
Voice (nearer). Every loving, gentle thought
Of this fairy brilliance wrought,
JANE ANNE. Every wish that you surrender,
MONKEY. Every little impulse tender,
JIMBO. Every service that you render
TANTE ANNA. Brings its tributary stream!
TRAMP AND GYFSY. In the fretwork
Of the network
Hearts lie patterned and a-gleam!

WOMAN OF THE Think with passion
HAYSTACK. That shall fashion
Life’s entire design well-planned;
Voice (still nearer). While the busy Pleiades,
ROGERS. Sisters to the Hyades,
Voice (quite close). Seven by seven,
Across the heaven,

ROGERS. Light desire
With their fire!
Voice (in his ear). Working cunningly together in a soft and
tireless band,
Sweetly linking
All our thinking,
In the Net of Sympathy that brings back
Fairyland!'

Mother kept close to her husband; she felt a little bewildered, and uncertain in her movements; it was her first conscious experience of being out. She wanted to go in every direction at once; for she knew everybody in the village, knew all their troubles and perplexities, and felt the call from every house.

'Steady,' he told her; 'one thing at a time, you know.' Her thoughts, he saw, had turned across the sea to Ireland where her strongest ties were. Ireland seemed close, and quite as accessible as the village. Her friend of the Haystack, on the other hand, seemed a long way off by comparison.

'That's because Henry never realised her personality very clearly,' said Daddy, seeing by her colour that she needed explanation. 'When creating all these Garden Sprites, he didn't *think* her sharply, vividly enough to make her effective. He just felt that a haystack suggested the elderly spread of a bulky and untidy old woman whose frame had settled beneath too many clothes, till she had collapsed into a field and stuck there. But he left her where he found her. He assigned no duties to her. She's only half alive. As a rule, she merely sits — just "stays put" — until some one moves her.'

Mother turned and saw her far in the rear, settling down comfortably upon a flat roof near the church. She rather envied her amiable disposition. It seemed so safe. Every one else was alive with such dangerous activity.

'Are we going *much* further — ?' she began, when Monkey rushed by, caught up the sentence, and discharged herself with impudence into Daddy.

'Which is right, "further" or "farther"?' she asked with a flash of light.

'Further, of course,' said unsuspecting Mother.

'But "further" sounds "farther," she cried, with a burst of laughter that died away with her passage of meteoric brilliance — into the body of the woods beyond.

‘But the other Sprites, you see, are real and active,’ continued Daddy, ignoring the interruption as though accustomed to it, because he thought out clearly every detail. ‘They’re alive enough to haunt a house or garden till sensitive people become aware of them and declare they’ve seen a ghost.’

‘And *we*?’ she asked. ‘Who thought us out so wonderfully?’

‘That’s more than I can tell,’ he answered after a little pause. ‘God knows that, for He thought out the entire universe to which we belong. I only know that we’re real, and all part of the same huge, single thing.’ He shone with increased brightness as he said it. ‘There’s no question about *our* personalities and duties and the rest. Don’t you feel it too?’

He looked at her as he spoke. Her outline had grown more definite. As she began to understand, and her bewilderment lessened, he noted that her flashing lines burned more steadily, falling into a more regular, harmonious pattern. They combined, moreover, with his own, and with the starlight too, in some exquisite fashion he could not describe. She put a hand out, catching at the flying banner of his Story that he trailed behind him in the air. They formed a single design, all three. His happiness became enormous.

‘I feel joined on to everything,’ she replied, half singing it in her joy. ‘I feel tucked into the universe everywhere, and into you, dear. These rays of starlight have sewn us together.’ She began to tremble, but it was the trembling of pure joy and not of alarm….

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’m learning it too. The moment thought gets away from self it lets in starlight and makes room for happiness. To think with sympathy of others is to grow: you take in their experience and add it to your own — development; the heart gets soft and deep and wide till you feel the entire universe buttoning its jacket round you. To think of self means friction and hence reduction.’

‘And your Story,’ she added, glancing up proudly at the banner that they trailed. ‘I have helped a little, haven’t I?’

‘It’s nearly finished,’ he flashed back; ‘you’ve been its inspiration and its climax. All these years, when we thought ourselves apart, you’ve been helping really underground — that’s true collaboration.’

‘Our little separation was but a *reculer pour mieux sauter*. See how we’ve rushed together again!’

A strange soft singing, like the wind in firs, or like shallow water flowing over pebbles, interrupted them. The sweetness of it turned the night alive.

‘Come on, old Mother. Our Leader is calling to us. We must work.’

They slid from the blue wind into a current of paler air that happened to slip swiftly past them, and went towards the forest where Mlle. Lemaire waited for them. Mother waved her hand to her friend, settled comfortably upon the flat roof in the village in their rear. ‘We’ll come back to lean upon you when we’re tired,’ she signalled. But she felt no envy now. In future she would certainly never ‘stay put.’ Work beckoned to her — and such endless, glorious work: the whole Universe.

‘What life! What a rush of splendour!’ she exclaimed as they reached the great woods and heard them shouting below in the winds. ‘I see now why the forest always comforted me. There’s strength here I can take back into my body with me when I go.’

‘The trees, yes, express visibly only a portion of their life,’ he told her. ‘There is an overflow we can appropriate.’

Yet their conversation was never audibly uttered. It flashed instantaneously from one to the other. All they had exchanged since leaving La Citadelle had taken place at once, it seemed. They were awake in the region of naked thought and feeling. The dictum of the materialists that thought and feeling cannot exist apart from matter did not trouble them. Matter, they saw, was everywhere, though too tenuous for any measuring instrument man’s brain had yet invented.

‘Come on!’ he repeated; ‘the Starlight Express is waiting. It will take you anywhere you please — Ireland if you like!’

They found the others waiting on the smooth layer of soft purple air that spread just below the level of the tree-tops. The crests themselves tossed wildly in the wind, but at a depth of a few feet there was peace and stillness, and upon this platform the band was grouped. ‘The stars are caught in the branches to-night,’ a sensitive walker on the ground might have exclaimed. The spires rose about them like little garden trees of a few years’ growth, and between them ran lanes and intricate, winding thoroughfares Mother saw long, dark things like thick bodies of snakes converging down these passage-ways, filling them, all running towards the centre where the group had established itself. There were lines of dotted lights along them. They did not move with the waving of the tree-tops. They looked uncommonly familiar.

‘The trains,’ Jimbo was crying. He darted to and fro, superintending the embarking of the passengers.

All the sidings of the sky were full of Starlight Expresses.

The loading-up was so quickly accomplished that Mother hardly realised what was happening. Everybody carried sacks overflowing with dripping gold and bursting at the seams. As each train filled, it shot away across the starry heavens; for everyone had been to the Cave and gathered their material even before she reached the scene of action. And with every train went a *mecanicien* and a *conducteur* created by Jimbo’s vivid and believing thought; a Sweep, a Lamplighter, and a Head Gardener went, too, for the children’s thinking multiplied these, too, according to their needs. They realised the meaning of these Sprites so clearly now — their duties, appearance, laws of behaviour, and the rest-that their awakened imaginations thought them instantly into existence, as many as were necessary. Train after train, each with its full complement of passengers, flashed forth across that summer sky, till the people in the Observatories must have thought they had miscalculated strangely and the Earth was passing amid the showering Leonids before her appointed time.

‘Where would you like to go first?’ Mother heard her friend ask softly. ‘It’s not possible to follow all the trains at once, you know.’

‘So I see,’ she gasped. ‘I’ll just sit still a moment, and think.’

The size and freedom of existence, as she now saw it, suddenly overwhelmed her. Accustomed too long to narrow channels, she found space without railings and notice-boards bewildering. She had never dreamed before that thinking can open the gates to heaven and bring the Milky Way down into the heart. She had merely knitted stockings. She had been practical. At last the key to her husband’s being was in her hand. That key at the same time opened a door through him, into her own. Hitherto she had merely criticised. Oh dear! Criticism, when she might have created!

She turned to seek him. But only her old friend was there, floating beside her in a brilliant mist of gold and white that turned the tree- tops into rows of Burning Bushes.

‘Where is he?’ she asked quickly.

‘Hush!’ was the instant reply; ‘don’t disturb him. Don’t think, or you’ll bring him back. He’s filling his sack in the Star Cave. Men have to gather it, — the little store they possess is soon crystallised into hardness by Reason, — but women have enough in themselves usually to last a lifetime. They are born with it.’

‘Mine crystallised long ago, I fear.’

‘Care and anxiety did that. You neglected it a little. But your husband’s cousin has cleaned the channels out. He does it unconsciously, but he does it. He has belief and vision like a child, and therefore turns instinctively to children because they keep it alive in him, though he hardly knows why he seeks them. The world, too, is a great big child that is crying for its Fairyland….’

‘But the practical—’ objected Mother, true to her type of mind-an echo rather than an effort.

‘ — is important, yes, only it has been exaggerated out of all sane proportion in most people’s lives. So little is needed, though that little of fine quality, and ever fed by starlight. Obeyed exclusively, it destroys life. It bricks you up alive. But now tell me,’ she added, ‘where would you like to go first? Whom will you help? There is time enough to cover .the world if you want to, before the interfering sun gets up.’

‘*You*!’ cried Mother, impulsively, then realised instantly that her friend was already developed far beyond any help that she could give. It was the light streaming from the older, suffering woman that was stimulating her own sympathies so vehemently. For years the process had gone on. It was at last effective.

‘There are others, perhaps, who need it more than I,’ flashed forth a lovely ray.

‘But I would repay,’ Mother cried eagerly, ‘I would repay.’ Gratitude for life rushed through her, and her friend must share it.

‘Pass it on to others,’ was the shining answer. ‘That’s the best repayment after all.’ The stars themselves turned brighter as the thought flashed from her.

Then Ireland vanished utterly, for it had been mixed, Mother now perceived, with personal longings that were at bottom selfish. There were indeed many there, in the scenes of her home and childhood, whose lives she might ease and glorify by letting in the starlight while they slept; but her motive, she discerned, was not wholly pure. There was a trace in it, almost a little stain, of personal gratification — she could not analyse it quite — that dimmed the picture in her thought. The brilliance of her companion made it stand out clearly. Nearer home was a less heroic object, a more difficult case, some one less likely to reward her efforts with results. And she turned instead to this.

‘You’re right,’ smiled the other, following her thought; ‘and you couldn’t begin with a better bit of work than that. Your old mother has cut herself off so long from giving sympathy to her kind that now she cannot accept it from others without feeling suspicion and distrust. Ease and soften her outlook if you can. Pour through her gloom the sympathy of stars. And remember,’ she added, as Mother rose softly out of the trees and hovered a moment overhead, ‘that if you need the Sweep or the Lamplighter, or the Gardener to burn away her dead leaves, you have only to summon them. Think hard, and they’ll be instantly beside you.’

Upon an eddy of glowing wind Mother drifted across the fields to the corner of the village where her mother occupied a large single room in solitude upon the top floor, a solitude self-imposed and rigorously enforced.

‘Use the finest quality,’ she heard her friend thinking far behind her, ‘for you have plenty of it. The Dustman gave it to you when you were not looking, gathered from the entire Zodiac… and from the careless meteor’s track….’

The words died off into the forest.

That he keeps only
For the old and lonely,
(And is very strict about it)
Who sleep so little that they need the best—’

The words came floating behind her. She felt herself brimful — charged with loving sympathy of the sweetest and most understanding quality. She looked down a moment upon her mother's roof. Then she descended.

CHAPTER XXV

And also there’s a little star —
So white, a virgin’s it must be; —
Perhaps the lamp my love in heaven
Hangs out to light the way for me.
Song, THEOPHILE MARZIALS.

In this corner of Bourcelles the houses lie huddled together with an air of something shamefaced; they dare not look straight at the mountains or at the lake; they turn their eyes away even from the orchards at the back. They wear a mysterious and secret look, and their shoulders have a sly turn, as though they hid their heads in the daytime and stirred about their business only after dark.

They lie grouped about a cobbled courtyard that has no fountain in it. The fair white road goes quickly by outside, afraid to look in frankly; and the entrance to the yard is narrow. Nor does a single tree grow in it. If Bourcelles could have a slum, this would be it.

Why the old lady had left her cosy quarters in Les Glycines and settled down in this unpleasant corner of the village was a puzzle to everybody. With a shrug of the shoulders the problem was generally left unsolved. Madame Jequier discussed it volubly a year ago when the move took place, then dismissed it as one of those mysteries of old people no one can understand. To the son-in-law and the daughter, who got nearer the truth, it was a source of pain and sadness beyond their means of relief. Mrs. ‘Plume’ — it was a play in French upon her real name, — had been four years in the Pension, induced to come from a lonely existence in Ireland by her daughter and throw in her lot with the family, and at first had settled down comfortably enough. She was over seventy, and possessed 80 pounds a year — a dainty, witty, amusing Irish lady, with twinkling eyes and a pernicketty strong will, and a brogue she transferred deliciously into her broken French. She loved the children, yet did not win their love in return, because they stood in awe of her sarcastic criticisms. Life had gone hardly with her; she had lost her fortune and her children, all but this daughter, with whose marriage she was keenly disappointed. An aristocrat to the finger-tips, she could not accept the change of circumstances; distress had soured her; the transplanting hastened her decline; there was no sweetness left in her. She turned her heart steadily against the world.

The ostensible cause of this hiding herself away with her sorrow and disappointment was the presence of Miss Waghorn, with whom she disagreed, and even quarrelled, from morning till night. They formed a storm-centre that moved from salon to dining-room, and they squabbled acutely about everything — the weather, the heating, the opening or shutting of windows, the details of the food, the arrangement of the furniture, even the character of the cat. Miss Waghorn loved. The bickerings were incessant. They only had to meet for hot disagreement to break out. Mrs. Plume, already bent with age, would strike the floor with the ebony stick she always carried, and glare at the erect, defiant spinster— 'That horrud, dirrty cat; its always in the room!' Then Miss Waghorn: 'It's a very nice cat, Madame' — she always called her Madame— 'and when *I* was a young girl I was taught to be kind to animals.'— 'The drawing-room is *not* the place for animals,' came the pricking answer. And then the scuffle began in earnest.

Miss Waghorn, owing to her want of memory, forgot the squabble five minutes afterwards, and even forgot that she knew her antagonist at all. She would ask to be introduced, or even come up sweetly and introduce herself within half an hour of the battle. But Madame Plume forgot nothing; her memory was keen and accurate. She did not believe in the other's failing. 'That common old woman!' she exclaimed with angry scorn to her daughter.

'It's deliberate offensiveness, that's all it is at all!' And she left the Pension.

But her attitude to the harmless old Quaker lady was really in small her attitude to humanity at large. She drew away in disgust from a world that had treated her so badly. Into herself she drew, growing smaller every day, more sour, more suspicious, and more averse to her own kind. Within the restricted orbit of her own bitter thoughts she revolved towards the vanishing point of life which is the total loss of sympathy. She felt *with* no one but herself. She belonged to that, alas, numerous type which, with large expectations unrealised, cannot accept disillusionment with the gentle laughter it deserves. She resented the universe. Sympathy was dead.

And she had chosen this unsavoury corner to dwell in because ‘the poor’ of the village lived there, and she wished to count herself among them. It emphasised the spite, the grudge, she felt against humanity. At first she came into *dejeuner* and *souper*, but afterwards her meals were sent over twice a day from the Pension. She discovered so many reasons for not making the little journey of a hundred yards. On Sunday the ‘common people’ were in the streets; on Saturday it was cleaning-day and the Pension smelt of turpentine; Monday was for letter-writing, and other days were too hot or too cold, too windy or too wet. In the end she accomplished her heart’s desire. Madame Cornu, who kept the grocer’s shop, and lived on the floor below with her husband, prepared the two principal meals and brought them up to her on a tray. She ate them alone. Her breakfast cup of tea she made herself, Mme. Cornu putting the jug of milk outside the door. She nursed her bitter grievance against life in utter solitude. Acidity ate its ugly pattern into her heart.

The children, as in duty bound, made dolorous pilgrimages to that upper floor from time to time, returning frightened, and Mother went regularly twice a week, coming home saddened and distressed. Her husband rarely went at all now, since the time when she told him to his face he came to taunt her. She spent her time, heaven only knows how, for she never left the building. According to Mother she was exceedingly busy doing nothing. She packed, unpacked, and then repacked all her few belongings. In summer she chased bees in her room with a wet towel; but with venom, not with humour. The Morning Post came daily from London. ‘I read my paper, write a letter, and the morning’s gone,’ she told her daughter, by way of complaint that time was so scanty. Mme. Cornu often heard her walking up and down the floor, tapping her ebony stick and talking softly to herself. Yet she was as sane as any old body living in solitude with evil thinking well can be. She starved-because she neither gave nor *asked*.

As Mother thought of her, thus finding the way in instantly, the church clock sounded midnight. She entered a room that was black as coal and unsweetened as an airless cellar. The fair rays that had been pouring out of her returned with a little shock upon themselves — repulsed. She felt herself reduced, and the sensation was so unpleasant at first that she almost gasped. It was like suffocation. She felt enclosed with Death. That her own radiance dimmed a moment was undeniable, but it was for a moment only, for, thinking instantly of her friend, she drew upon that woman’s inexhaustible abundance, and found her own stores replenished.

Slowly, as a wintry sun pierces the mist in some damp hollow of the woods, her supply of starlight lit up little pathways all about her, and she saw the familiar figure standing by the window. The figure was also black; it stood like an ebony statue in an atmosphere that was thick with gloom, turgid, sinister, and wholly rayless. It was like a lantern in a London fog. A few dim lines of sombre grey issued heavily from it, but got no farther than its outer surface, then doubled back and plunged in again. They coiled and twisted into ugly knots. Her mother’s atmosphere was opaque, and as dismal as a November fog. There was a speck of light in the room, however, and it came, the visitor then perceived, from a single candle that stood beside the bed. The old lady had been reading; she rarely slept before two o’clock in the morning.

And at first, so disheartening, so hopeless seemed the task, that Mother wavered in her mission; a choking, suffocating sensation blocked all her channels of delivery. The very flowers on the window- sill, she noted, drooped in a languishing decline; they had a lifeless air as of flowers that struggle for existence in deep shadow and have never known the kiss of sunshine. Through the inch of opened window stole a soft breath of the night air, but it turned black and sluggish the moment it came in. And just then, as Mother hovered there in hesitating doubt, the figure turned and moved across to the bed, supporting herself with the ebony cane she always used. Stiffly she sank upon her knees. The habit was as strong as putting her shoes outside the door at night to be cleaned,-those shoes that never knew the stain of roadway dust-and equally devoid of spiritual significance. Yet, for a moment, as the embittered mind gabbled through the string of words that long habit had crystallised into an empty formula, Mother noticed that the lines of grey grew slightly clearer; the coil and tangle ceased; they even made an effort to emerge and leave the muddy cloud that obscured their knotted, intricate disorder.

The formula Mother recognised; it had hardly changed, indeed, since she herself had learned it at those very knees when days were brighter; it began with wholesale and audacious requests for self, then towards the end passed into vague generalities for the welfare of others. And just here it was that the lines of grey turned brighter and tried to struggle out of the murky atmosphere. The sight was pathetic, yet deeply significant. Mother understood its meaning. There was hope. Behind the prayer for others still shone at least an echo of past meaning.

'I believe in you, old, broken, disappointed heart,' flashed through her own bright atmosphere, 'and, believing, I can help you!'

Her skill, however, was slight, owing to lack of practice and experience. She moved over to the bed, trying first to force her own darting rays into the opaque, dull cloud surrounding the other; then seeking a better way-for this had no results — she slipped somehow inside the mist, getting behind it, down at the very source. From here she forced her own light through, mixing her beams of coloured radiance with the thick grey lines themselves. She tried to feel and think as her mother felt and thought, moving beside her mind's initial working, changing the gloom into something brighter as she moved along. This was the proper way, she felt-to clean the source itself, rather than merely untie knots at the outer surface. It was a stifling business, but she persisted. Tiny channels cleared and opened. A little light shone through. She felt-with her mother, instead of arguing, as it were…

The old lady presently blew the candle out and composed herself to sleep. Mother laboured on….

'Oh dear,' she sighed, 'oh dear!' as she emerged from the gloom a moment to survey her patient and note results. To her amazement she saw that there was a change indeed, though a very curious one. The entire outer surface of the cloud seemed in commotion, with here and there a glimmering lustre as if a tiny lamp was at last alight within. She felt herself swell with happiness. Instantly, then, the grey lines shot out, fastening with wee loops and curves among her own. Some links evidently had been established. She had imparted something.

'She's dreaming! I do believe I've sown some dream of beauty in her!' she beamed to herself.

Some golden, unaccustomed sleep had fallen over the old lady. Stray shreds of darkness loosened from the general mass and floated off, yet did not melt entirely from sight. She was shedding some of her evil thoughts.

‘The Sweep!’ thought Mother, and turning, found him beside her in the room. Her husband, to her astonishment, was also there.

‘But I didn’t think of *you*!’ she exclaimed.

‘Not a definite thought,’ he answered, ‘but you needed me. I felt it. We’re so close together now that we’re practically one, you see.’ He trailed his Pattern behind him, clothed now with all manner of rich new colouring, ‘I’ve collected such heaps of new ideas,’ he went on, ‘and now I want her too. She’s in the Story. I’ll transfigure her as well.’ He was bright as paint, and happy as a sand-boy. ‘Well done, old Mother,’ he added, ‘you’ve done a lot already. See, she’s dreaming small, soft, tender things of beauty that your efforts have let through.’

He glided across and poured from his own store of sympathy into that dry, atrophied soul upon the bed. ‘It’s a question how much she will be able to transmit, though,’ he said doubtfully. ‘The spiritual machinery is so stiff and out of gear from long disuse. In Miss Waghorn’s case it’s only physical — I’ve just been there — but this is spiritual blackness. We shall see to-morrow. Something will get through at any rate, and we must do this every night, you know.’

‘Rather!’ echoed Mother.

‘Her actual self, you see, has dwindled so that one can hardly find it. It’s smaller than a flea, and as hard and black.’ They smiled a little sadly.

The Sweep, rushing out of the window with his heavy sack loaded to the brim, interrupted their low laughter. He was no talker, but a man of action. Busily all this time he had been gathering up the loose, stray fragments that floated off from the cloud, and stuffing them into the sack. He now flew, singing, into the night, and they barely caught the last words of his eternal song: —

’… a tremendously busy Sweep,
Tossing the blacks in the Rubbish Heap
Over the edge of the world.’

‘Come,’ whispered Daddy. ‘It’s getting late. The interfering sun is on the way, and you’ve been hours here already. All the trains are back, and every one is waiting for us.’ Yet it had seemed so short a time really.

Wrapped together in the beauty of his Pattern, they left the old lady peacefully asleep, and sped across the roofs towards the forest.

But neither of them noticed, it seemed, the lovely little shining figure that hovered far in the air above and watched them go. It followed them all the way, catching even at the skirts of the flying Pattern as they went. Was it the Spirit of some unknown Star they had attracted from beyond the Milky Way? Or was it, perhaps, a Thought from some fair, exquisite heart that had been wakened by the rushing of the Expresses, and had flashed in to take a place in the wonderful story Daddy wove?

It had little twinkling feet, and its eyes were of brown flame and amber.

‘No, they did not notice the starry, fluttering figure. It overtook them none the less, and with a flying leap was into the Pattern of his story — in the very centre, too! — as quickly as lightning passes through the foliage of the tree it strikes. Only the lightning stayed. The figure remained caught. The entire Pattern shivered to its outer fringes, then began to glow and shine all over. As the high harmonic crowns the end of a long cadenza on a violin, fulfilling bars of difficult effort, this point of exquisite beauty flashed life into the Pattern of the story, consummating the labour of construction with the true, inevitable climax. There was something of fairy insolence, both cheeky and delicious, in the proprietary way it chose the principal place, yet the only place still unoccupied, and sang ‘I’m here. I’ve come!’ It calmly fashioned itself a nest, as it were, curled up and made itself at home. It *was* at home. The audacity was justified. The Pattern seemed at last complete. Beauty and Truth shone at its centre. And the tiny voice continued singing, though no one seemed to know exactly whence the sound proceeded: —

’While the busy Pleiades,
Sisters to the Hyades,
Seven by seven,
Across the heaven,
Light desire
With their fire,

Flung from huge Orion’s hand,
Sweetly linking
All our thinking
In the Net of Sympathy that brings back Fairyland!’

No — neither Mother nor Daddy were aware of what had happened thus in the twinkling of an eye. Certainly neither guessed that another heart, far distant as the crow flies, had felt the stream of his vital, creative thinking, and had thus delicately responded and sent out a sympathetic message of belief. But neither did Adams and Leverrier, measuring the heavens, and calculating through years of labour the delicate interstellar forces, know that each had simultaneously caught Neptune in their net of stars — three thousand million miles away. Had they been 'out,' these two big, patient astronomers, they might have realised that they really worked in concert every night. But history does not relate that they slept well or ill; their biographies make no mention of what their 'Underneaths' were up to while their brains lay resting on the pillow; and private confession, if such exists, has never seen the light of print as yet. In that region, however, where Thinking runs and plays, thought dancing hand in hand with thought that is akin to it, the fact must surely have been known and recognised. They, too, travelled in the Starlight Express.

Mother and Daddy realised it just then as little as children are aware of the loving thoughts of the parent that hovers protectingly about them all day long. They merely acknowledged that a prodigious thrill of happiness pulsed through both of them at once, feeling proud as the group in the tree-tops praised their increased brightness and admired the marvellous shining of the completed Pattern they trailed above their heads. But more than that they did not grasp. Nor have they ever grasped it perhaps. That the result came through later is proved, however, by the published story, and by the strange, sweet beauty its readers felt all over the world. But this belongs to the private working of inspiration which can never be explained, not even by the artist it has set on fire. He, indeed, probably understands it least of all.

'Where are the trains, the Starlight Expresses?' asked Mother.

'Gone!' answered Jimbo. 'Gone to Australia where they're wanted. It's evening now down there.'

He pointed down, then up. 'Don't you see? We must hurry.' She looked across the lake where the monstrous wall of Alps was dimly visible. The sky was brightening behind them. Long strata of thin cloud glimmered with faintest pink. The stars were rapidly fading. ‘What ages you’ve been!’ he added.

‘And where’s Tante Anna?’ she inquired quickly, looking for her brilliant friend.

‘She’s come and gone a dozen times while you’ve been skylarking somewhere else,’ explained Monkey with her usual exaggeration. ‘She’s gone for good now. She sleeps so badly. She’s always waking up, you know.’ Mother understood. Only too well she knew that her friend snatched sleep in briefest intervals, incessantly disturbed by racking pain.

A stream of light flashed past her, dashing like a meteor towards the village and disappearing before she could see the figure.

‘There goes Jinny,’ cried some one, ‘always working to the very last. The interfering sun’ll catch her if she doesn’t look out!’

There was movement and hurry everywhere. Already the world ran loose and soft in colour. Birds, just awake, were singing in the trees below. Several passed swiftly overhead, raking the sky with a whirring rush of wings. Everybody was asking questions, urging return, yet lingering as long as possible, each according to his courage. To be caught ‘out’ by the sun meant waking with a sudden start that made getting out of bed very difficult and might even cause a headache.

Rogers alone seemed unperturbed, unhurried, for he was absorbed in a discovery that made him tremble. Noting the sudden perfection of his cousin’s Pattern, he had gone closer to examine it, and had — seen the starry figure. Instantly he forgot everything else in the world. It seemed to him that he had suddenly found all he had ever sought. He gazed into those gentle eyes of amber and felt that he gazed into the eyes of the Universe that had taken shape in front of him. Floating up as near as he could, he spoke —

‘Where do you come from — from what star?’ he asked softly in an ecstasy of wonder.

The tiny face looked straight at him and smiled.

‘From the Pleiades, of course, — that little group of star-babies as yet unborn.’

‘I’ve been looking for you for ever,’ he answered.

‘You’ve found me,’ sang the tiny voice. ‘This is our introduction. Now, don’t forget. There was a lost Pleiad, you know. Try to remember me when you wake.’

‘Then why are you here?’ He meant in the Pattern.

The star-face rippled with laughter.

‘It’s yours — your Scheme. He’s given it perfect shape for you, that’s all. Don’t you recognise it? But it’s my Story as well. …’

A ray with crimson in it shot out just then across the shoulder of the Blumlisalp, and, falling full upon the tiny face, it faded out; the Pattern faded with it; Daddy vanished too. On the little azure winds of dawn they flashed away. Jimbo, Monkey, and certain of the Sprites alone held on, but the tree-tops to which they clung were growing more and more slippery every minute. Mother, loth to return, balanced bravely on the waving spires of a larch. Her sleep that night had been so deep and splendid, she struggled to prolong it. She hated waking up too early.

‘The Morning Spiders! Look out!’ cried a Sprite, as a tiny spider on its thread of gossamer floated by. It was the Dustman’s voice. Catching the Gypsy with one arm and the Tramp with the other, all three instantly disappeared.

‘But where’s my Haystack friend?’ called Mother faintly, almost losing her balance in the attempt to turn round quickly.

‘Oh, she’s all right,’ the Head Gardener answered from a little distance where he was burning something. ‘She just “stays put” and flirts with every wind that comes near her. She loves the winds. They know her little ways.’ He went on busily burning up dead leaves he had been collecting all night long — dead, useless thoughts he had found clogging a hundred hearts and stopping outlets.

‘Look sharp!’ cried a voice that fell from the sky above them.

’Here come the Morning Spiders,
On their gossamer outriders!’

This time it was the Lamplighter flashing to and fro as he put the stars out one by one. He was in a frantic hurry; he extinguished whole groups of them at once. The Pleiades were the last to fade.

Rogers heard him and came back into himself. For his ecstasy had carried him even beyond the region of the freest 'thinking.' He could give no account or explanation of it at all. Monkey, Jimbo, Mother, and he raced in a line together for home and safety. Above the fields they met the spiders everywhere, the spiders that bring the dawn and ride off into the Star Cave on lost rays and stray thoughts that careless minds have left scattered about the world.

And the children, as they raced and told their mother to 'please move a little more easily and slipperily,' sang together in chorus: —

'We shall meet the Morning Spiders,
The fairy-cotton riders,
Each mounted on a star's rejected ray;
With their tiny nets of feather

They collect our thoughts together,
And on strips of windy weather
Bring the Day. …'

'That's stolen from you or Daddy,' Mother began to say to Rogers — but was unable to complete the flash. The thought lay loose behind her in the air.

A spider instantly mounted it and rode it off.

Something brushed her cheek. Riquette stood rover her, fingering her face with a soft extended paw.

'But it surely can't be time yet to get up!' she murmured. 'I've only just fallen asleep, it seems.' She glanced at her watch upon the chair beside the bed, saw that it was only four o'clock, and then turned over, making a space for the cat behind her shoulder. A tremendous host of dreams caught at her sliding mind. She tried to follow them. They vanished. 'Oh dear!' she sighed, and promptly fell asleep again. But this time she slept lightly. No more adventures came. She did not dream. And later, when Riquette woke her a second time because it was half-past six, she remembered as little of having been 'out' as though such a thing had never taken place at all.

She lit the fire and put the porridge saucepan on the stove. It was a glorious July morning. She felt glad to be alive, and full of happy, singing thoughts. ‘I wish I could always sleep like that!’ she said. ‘But what a pity one has to wake up in the end!’

And then, as she turned her mind toward the coming duties of the day, another thought came to her. It was a very ordinary, almost a daily thought, but there seemed more behind it than usual. Her whole heart was in it this time —

‘As soon as the children are off to school I’ll pop over to mother, and see if I can’t cheer her up a bit and make her feel more happy. Oh dear!’ she added, ‘life is a bag of duties, whichever way one looks at it!’ But she felt a great power in her that she could face them easily and turn each one into joy. She could take life more bigly, carelessly, more as a whole somehow. She was aware of some huge directing power in her ‘underneath.’ Moreover, the ‘underneath’ of a woman like Mother was not a trifle that could be easily ignored. That great Under Self, resting in the abysses of being, rose and led. The pettier Upper Self withdrew ashamed, passing over the reins of conduct into those mighty, shadowy hands.

CHAPTER XXVI

Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades,
  Or loose the bands of Orion?
    Book of Job.

The feeling that something was going to happen — that odd sense of anticipation — which all had experienced the evening before at tea-time had entirely vanished, of course, next morning. It was a mood, and it had passed away. Every one had slept it off. They little realised how it had justified itself. Jane Anne, tidying the Den soon after seven o'clock, noticed the slip of paper above the mantelpiece, read it over— 'The Starlight Express will start to-night. Be reddy!' — and tore it down. 'How could that. have amused us!' she said aloud, as she tossed it into the waste-paper basket. Yet, even while she did so, some stray sensation of delight clutched at her funny little heart, a touch of emotion she could not understand that was wild and very sweet. She went singing about her work. She felt important and grown- up, extraordinarily light-hearted too. The things she sang made up their own words — such odd snatches that came she knew not whence. An insect clung to her duster, and she shook it out of the window with the crumbs and bits of cotton gathered from the table-cloth.

'Get out, you Morning Spider,
 You fairy-cotton rider!'

she sang, and at the same minute Mother opened the bedroom door and peeped in, astonished at the unaccustomed music. In her voluminous dressing-gown, her hair caught untidily in a loose net, her face flushed from stooping over the porridge saucepan, she looked, thought Jinny, 'like a haystack somehow.' Of course she did not say it. The draught, flapping at her ample skirts, added the idea of a covering tarpaulin to the child's mental picture. She went on dusting with a half-offended air, as though Mother had no right to interrupt her with a superintending glance like this.

'You won't forget the sweeping too, Jinny?' said Mother, retiring again majestically with that gliding motion her abundant proportions achieved so gracefully.

‘Of course I won’t, Mother,’ and the instant the door was closed she fell into another snatch of song, the words of which flowed unconsciously into her mind, it seemed —

’For I’m a tremendously busy Sweep,
Dusting the room while you’re all asleep,
And shoving you all in the rubbish heap,
Over the edge of the tiles’

— a little wumbled, it is true, but its source unmistakable.

And all day long, with every one, it was similar, this curious intrusion of the night into the day, the sub-conscious into the conscious — a kind of subtle trespassing. The flower of forgotten dreams rose so softly to the surface of consciousness that they had an air of sneaking in, anxious to be regarded as an integral part of normal waking life. Like bubbles in water they rose, discharged their puff of fragrant air, and disappeared again. Jane Anne, in particular, was simply radiant all day long, and more than usually clear-headed. Once or twice she wumbled, but there was big sense in her even then. It was only the expression that evaded her. Her little brain was a poor transmitter somehow.

‘I feel all endowed to-day,’ she informed Rogers, when he congratulated her later in the day on some cunning act of attention she bestowed upon him. It was in the courtyard where they all sat sunning themselves after *dejeuner*, and before the younger children returned to afternoon school.

‘I feel emaciated, you know,’ she added, uncertain whether emancipated was the word she really sought.

‘You’ll be quite grown-up,’ he told her, ‘by the time I come back to little Bourcelles in the autumn.’ Little Bourcelles! It sounded, the caressing way he said it, as if it lay in the palm of his big brown hand.

‘But you’ll never come back, because you’ll never go,’ Monkey chimed in. ‘My hair, remember—’

‘*My* trains won’t take you,’ said Jimbo gravely.

‘Oh, a train may *take* you,’ continued Monkey, ‘but you can’t leave. Going away by train isn’t leaving.’

‘It’s only like going to sleep,’ explained her brother. You’ll come back every night in a Starlight Express—’

‘Because a Starlight Express takes passengers — whether they like it or not. You take an ordinary train, but a starlight train takes you!’ added Monkey.

Mother heard the words and looked up sharply from her knitting. Something, it seemed, had caught her attention vividly, though until now her thoughts had been busy with practical things of quite another order. She glanced keenly round at the faces, where all sat grouped upon the stone steps of La Citadelle. Then she smiled curiously, half to herself. What she said was clearly not what she had first meant to say.

‘Children, you’re not sitting on the cold stone, are you?’ she inquired, but a little absent-mindedly.

‘We’re quite warm; we’ve got our thick under-neathies on,’ was the reply. They realised that only part of her mind was in the, question, and that any ordinary answer would satisfy her.

Mother resumed her knitting, apparently satisfied.

But Jinny, meanwhile, had been following her own train of thought, started by her cousin’s description of her as ‘grown-up.’ The picture grew big and gracious in her mind.

‘I wonder what I shall do when my hair goes up?’ she observed, apparently *a propos de bottes*. It was the day, of course, eagerly, almost feverishly, looked forward to.

‘Hide your head in a bag probably,’ laughed her sister. Jinny flushed; her hair was not abundant. Yet she seemed puzzled rather than offended.

‘Never mind,’ Rogers soothed her. ‘The day a girl puts up her hair, a thousand young men are aware of it, — and one among them trembles.’ The idea of romance seemed somehow in the air.

‘Oh, Cousinenry!’ She was delighted, comforted, impressed; but perplexity was uppermost. Something in his tone of voice prevented impudent comment from the others.

‘And all the stars grow a little brighter,’ he added. ‘The entire universe is glad.’

‘I shall be a regular company promoter!’ she exclaimed, nearer to wit than she knew, yet with only the vaguest inkling of what he really meant.

‘And draw up a Memorandum of Agreement with the Milky Way,’ he added, gravely smiling.

He had just been going to say ‘with the Pleiades,’ when something checked him. A wave of strange emotion swept him. It rose from the depths within, then died away as mysteriously as it came. Like exquisite music heard from very far away, it left its thrill of beauty and of wonder, then hid behind the breath of wind that brought it. ‘The whole world, you see, will know,’ he added under his breath to the delighted child. He looked into her queer, flushed face. The blue eyes for a moment had, he thought, an amber tinge. It was a mere effect of light, of course; the sun had passed behind a cloud. Something that he ought to have known, ought to have remembered, flashed mockingly before him and was gone. ‘One among them trembles,’ he repeated in his mind. He himself was trembling.

‘The Morning Spiders,’ said some one quietly and softly, ‘are standing at their stable doors, making faces at the hidden sun.’

But he never knew who said it, or if it was not his own voice speaking below his breath. He glanced at Jimbo. The small grave face wore an air of man-like preoccupation, as was always the case when he felt a little out of his depth in general conversation. He assumed it in self-protection. He never exposed himself by asking questions. The music of that under-voice ran on: —

’Sweet thoughts, like fine weather,
 Bind closely together
 God’s stars with the heart of a boy.’

But he said it aloud apparently this time, for the others looked up with surprise. Monkey inquired what in the world he was talking about, only, not quite knowing himself, he could not answer her. Jimbo then, silent and preoccupied, found his thoughts still running on marriage. The talk about his sister’s hair going up no doubt had caused it. He remembered the young schoolmistress who had her meals at the Pension, and the Armenian student who had fallen in love with, and eventually married, her. It was the only courtship he had ever witnessed. Marriage and courtship seemed everywhere this morning.

‘I saw it all with Mlle. Perette,’ he informed the party. ‘It began already by his pouring out water for her and passing the salt and things. It *always* begins like that. He got shawls even when she was hot.’

He looked so wise and grave that nobody laughed, and his sisters even seemed impressed rather. Jinny waited anxiously for more. If Mother did make an odd grimace, it was not noticed, and anyhow was cleverly converted into the swallowing of a yawn. There was a moment’s silence. Jimbo, proudly conscious that more was expected of him, provided it in his solemn little voice.

‘But it must be horrid,’ he announced, ‘to be married — always sticked to the same woman, like that.’ No sentence was complete without the inevitable ‘already’ or ‘like that,’ translated from the language he was more at home in. He thought in French. ‘I shall never marry myself (*me marier*) he decided, seeing his older sister’s eyes upon him wonderingly. Then, uncertain whether he had said an awfully wise or an awfully foolish thing, he added no more. Anyhow, it was the way a man should talk — with decision.

‘It’s bad enough to be a wife,’ put in Monkey, ‘but it must be worse still to have one!’

But Jane Anne seemed shocked. A man, Jimbo reflected, can never be sure how his wisdom may affect the other sex; women are not meant to know everything. She rose with dignity and went upstairs towards the door, and Monkey, rippling with laughter, smacked her as she went. This only shocked her more.

‘That was a slight mistake behind,’ she said reprovingly, looking back; ‘you should have more reserve, I think,’ then firmly shut the door.

All of which meant — so far as Jane Anne was concerned — that an important standard of conduct — grown-up, dignified, stately in a spiritual sense — was being transferred to her present behaviour, but transferred ineffectively. Elsewhere Jane Anne lived it, *was* it. She knew it, but could not get at the part of her that knew it. The transmitting machinery was imperfect. Connecting links and switches were somehow missing. Yearning was strong in her, that yearning which is common to all the world, though so variously translated. Once out of the others' sight, she made a curious face. She went into her room between the kitchen and the Den, flung herself on the bed, and burst into tears. And the fears brought relief. They oiled the machinery perhaps. At any rate, she soon felt better.

'I felt so enormous and unsettled,' she informed Mother later, when the redness of her eyes was noticed and she received breathlessly a great comforting hug. I never get anything right.'

'But you *are* right, darling,' Mother soothed her, little guessing that she told the perfect truth. 'You are all right, only you don't know it. Everybody's wumbled somewhere.' And she advised her — ah, Mother was profoundly wise instinctively — not to think so much, but just go ahead as usual and do her work.

For Mother herself felt a little queer that day, as though something very big and splendid lay hiding just beyond her reach. It surged up, vanished, then surged up again, and it came closest when she was not thinking of it. The least effort of the mind to capture it merely plunged her into an empty gulf where she could not touch bottom. The glorious thing ran instantly underground. She never ceased to be aware of it, but any attempt to focus resulted in confusion. Analysis was beyond her powers, yet the matter was very simple really, for only when thought is blank, and when the mind has forgotten to think, can inspiration come through into the heart. The intellect interprets afterwards, sets in order, regulates, examines the wonder and beauty the heart distils alchemically out of the eternal stream in which life everywhere dips its feet. If Reason interferes too soon, or during transmission, it only muddles and destroys. And Mother, hitherto, had always been so proud of being practical, prosaic, reasonable. She had deliberately suppressed the other. She could not change in a single day just because she had been 'out' and made discoveries last night. Oh, how simple it all was really, and yet how utterly most folk convert the wonder of it into wumbling!

Like Jane Anne, her miniature, she felt splendid all day long, but puzzled too. It was almost like those religious attacks she had experienced in early youth. She had no definite creed by which she could explain it. Though nominally Christian, like her husband, she could not ascribe her joy to a

‘Holy Spirit,’ or to a ‘God’ working in her. But she was reminded of her early ‘religious attacks’ because she now experienced that large sensation of glorious peace and certainty which usually accompanies the phenomenon in the heart called ‘conversion.’ She saw life whole. She rested upon some unfailing central Joy. Come what might, she felt secure and ‘saved.’ Something everlasting lay within call, an ever-ready help in trouble; and all day she was vaguely conscious that her life lay hid with — with what? She never found the word exactly, for ‘Joy’ was but one aspect of it. She fell back upon the teachings of the big religions which are the police regulations of the world. Yet all creeds shared these, and her feeling was far deeper than mere moral teachings. And then she gave up thinking about it. Besides, she had much knitting to do.

‘It’s come to stay anyhow; I feel in sympathy with everybody,’ she said, and so dismissed vain introspection, keeping the simple happiness and peace. That was her strength, as it was also Jinny’s. A re-formation had begun.

Jimbo, too, felt something in his microcosmic way, only he said little and asked no single question. It betrayed itself, however, to his Mother’s widened vision. He was all stirred up. He came back again from school at three o’clock — for it was Thursday and he did not take the singing lesson from three to four — put down his books with a very business-like air, forgot to kiss his Mother — and went out.

‘Where are you off to, Jimbo?’ She scented mischief. He was so *affaire*.

He turned obediently at once, the face grave and puckered.

‘Going over to the carpenter’s house, Mummy.’

‘What for, dear? Why don’t you stay and play here?’ She had the feeling that her husband was absorbed in his work and would not like to be disturbed.

The boy’s reply was evasive too. ‘I want to have a long discuss with Daddy,’ he said.

‘Can’t you have your long discuss with me instead?’ she asked.

He shook his head. ‘You see,’ he answered solemnly, ‘it’s about things.’

‘But Daddy’s working just now; he’ll be over to tea at four. Can’t it wait till then?’

She understood too well to inquire what ‘things’ might be. The boy wished to speak with one of his own sex — as one man to another man.

‘When a man’s at work,’ she added, ‘he doesn’t like to be disturbed.’

‘All right,’ was the reply. ‘We can wait a little,’ and he settled down to other things in a corner by himself. His mind, clearly, was occupied with grave considerations he could not discuss with anybody, least of all with women and children. But, of course, busy men must not be interrupted. For a whole hour in his corner he made no sound, and hardly any movement.

But Daddy did not come at four o’clock. He was evidently deep in work. And Mother did not send for him. The carpenter’s wife, she knew, would provide a cup of tea.

He came late to supper, too, at the Pension, nodded to Mother with an expression which plainly said, ‘I’ve finished the story at last’; winked to his cousin, meaning, ‘It came out all right, I’m satisfied,’ and took his seat between Jinny and Mlle. Vuillemot, the governess who had earned her meal by giving a music lesson that afternoon to a *pensionnaire*. Jinny looked sideways at him in a spirit of examination, and picked the inevitable crumb deftly from his beard.

‘Reminiscences!’ she observed slyly. ‘You did have some tea, then.’ Her long word was well chosen for once; her mind unusually logical, too.

But Daddy made no reply; he went on eating whatever was set before him with an air of complete detachment; he devoured cold ham and salad automatically; and the children, accustomed to this absorption, ignored his presence. He was still in the atmosphere of his work, abstracted, lost to the outer world. They knew they would only, get wumbled answers to their questions and remarks, and they did not dare to tease him. From time to time he lifted his eyes — very bright they were — and glanced round the table, dimly aware that he was in the midst of a stream of noisy chatter, but unable to enter it successfully at any point. Mother, watching him, thought, ‘He’s sitting on air, he’s wrapped in light, he’s very happy’; and ate an enormous supper, as though an insatiable hunger was in her.

The governess, Mlle. Vuillemot, who stood in awe of the ‘author’ in him, seized her opportunity. She loved to exchange a *mot* with a real writer, reading all kinds of unintended subtlety into his brief replies in dreadful

French. To-night she asked him the meaning of a word, title of a Tauchnitz novel she had been reading — Juggernaut; but, being on his deaf side, he caught ‘Huguenot’ instead, and gave her a laboured explanation, strangled by appalling grammar.

The historical allusions dazed her; the explanation ended on a date. She was sorry she had ventured, for it made her feel so ignorant.

‘Shuggairnort,’ she repeated bravely. She had a vague idea he had not properly heard before.

But this time he caught ‘Argonaut,’ and swamped her then with classical exposition, during which she never took her eyes off him, and decided that he was far more wonderful than she had ever dreamed. He was; but not for the reasons she supposed.

‘Thank you,’ she said with meek gratitude at the end, ‘I thank you.’

‘Il n’y a pas de quar,’ replied Daddy, bowing; and the adventure came to an end. The others luckily had not heard it in full swing; they only caught the final phrase with which he said adieu. But it served its unwitting purpose admirably. It brought him back to the world about him. The spell was broken. All turned upon him instantly.

‘Snay pas un morsow de bong.’ Monkey copied his accent, using a sentence from a schoolboy’s letter in *Punch*. ‘It’s not a bit of good.’ Mother squelched her with a look, but Daddy, even if he noticed it, was not offended. Nothing could offend him to-night. Impertinence turned silvery owing to the way he took it. There was a marvellous light and sweetness about him. ‘He *is* on air,’ decided Mother finally. ‘He’s written his great Story — our story. It’s finished!’

‘I don’t know,’ he said casually to the others, as they stood talking a few minutes in the salon before going over to the Den, ‘if you’d like to hear it; but I’ve got a new creature for the Wumble Book. It came to me while I was thinking of something else—’

‘Thinking of one thing while you were thinking of another!’ cried Monkey. It described exaccurately his state of mind sometimes.

‘ — and I jotted down the lines on my cuff. So it’s not very perfect yet.’

Mother had him by the arm quickly. Mlle. Vuillemot was hovering in his neighbourhood, for one thing. It seemed to her they floated over, almost flew.

'It's a Haystack Woman,' he explained, once they were safely in the Den grouped about him. 'A Woman of the Haystack who is loved by the Wind. That is to say, the big Wind loves her, but she prefers the younger, handsomer little Winds, and—'

He was not allowed to finish. The children laid his cuff back in a twinkling, drawing up the coat sleeve.

'But surely I know that,' Mother was saying. 'I've heard of her before somewhere. I wonder where?' Others were saying the same thing. 'It's not new.'

'Impossible,' said Daddy, 'for the idea only came to me this morning while I was—'

'Thinking of something else,' Monkey again finished the sentence for him.

Mother felt that things were rushing about her from another world. She was vaguely conscious — deliciously, bewilderingly — of having heard this all before. Imaginative folk have built the certainty of a previous existence upon evidence as slight; for actual scenery came with it, and she saw dim forest trees, and figures hovering in the background, and bright atmosphere, and fields of brilliant stars. She felt happy and shining, light as a feather, too. It all was just beyond her reach, though; she could not recover it properly. 'It must have been a dream *she* told me,' was her conclusion, referring to Mlle. Lemaire. Her old friend was in it somewhere or other. She felt sure of that.

She hardly heard, indeed, the silly lines her husband read aloud to the children. She liked the sound of his voice, though; it suggested music she had known far away — in her childhood.

'It's high spirits really,' whispered Rogers, sitting beside her in the window. 'It's a sort of overflow from his story. He can't do that kind of rhyme a bit, but it's an indication—'

'You think he's got a fine big story this time?' she asked under her breath; and Cousin Henry's eyes twinkled keenly as he gave a significant nod and answered: ‘Rather! Can’t you feel the splendour all about him, the strength, the harmony!’

She leaped at the word. Harmony exactly described this huge new thing that had come into the family, into the village, into the world. The feeling that they all were separate items, struggling for existence one against the other, had gone for ever. Life seemed now a single whole, an enormous pattern. Every one fitted in. There was effort — wholesome jolly effort, but no longer the struggle or fighting that were ugly. To ‘live carelessly’ was possible and right because the pattern was seen entire. It was to live in the whole.

‘Harmony,’ she repeated to herself, with a great swelling happiness in her heart, ‘that’s the nunculus of the matter.’

‘The what?’ he asked, overhearing her.

‘The nunculus,’ she repeated bravely, seeing the word in her mind, yet unable to get it quite. Rogers did not correct her.

‘Rather,’ was all he said. ‘Of course it is.’ What did the pronunciation of a word matter at such a time? Her version even sounded better than the original. Mother saw things bigger! Already she was becoming creative!

‘And you’re the one who brought it,’ she continued, but this time so low that he did not catch the words. ‘It’s you, your personality, your thinking, your atmosphere somehow that have brought this gigantic sense of peace and calm security which are *au fond* nothing but the consciousness of harmony and the power of seeing ugly details in their proper place — in a single *coup d’oeil* — and understanding them as parts of a perfect whole.’

It was her thought really running on; she never could have found the words like that. She thought in French, too, for one thing. And, in any case, Rogers could not have heard her, for he was listening now to the uproar of the children as they criticised Daddy’s ridiculous effusion. A haystack, courted in vain by zephyrs, but finally taken captive by an equinoctial gale, strained nonsense too finely for their sense of what was right and funny. It was the pictures he now drew in the book that woke their laughter. He gave the stack a physiognomy that they recognised.

‘But, Mother, he’s making it look like you!’ cried Monkey — only Mother was too far away in her magnificent reverie to reply intelligently.

I know her; she’s my friend,’ she answered vaguely. ‘So it’s all right.’

‘Majestic Haystack’ — it was the voice of the wind addressing her: —

’Majestic Haystack, Empress of my life,
Your ample waist
Just fits the gown I fancy for my wife,
And suits my taste;
Yet there you stand, flat-footed, square and deep,
An unresponsive, elephantine heap,
Coquetting with the stars while I’m asleep,
O cruel Stack!

Coy, silent Monster, Matron of the fields,
I sing to you;
And all the fondest love that summer yields
I bring to you;
Yet there you squat, immense in your disdain,
Heedless of all the tears of streaming rain
My eyes drip over you — your breathless swain;
O stony Stack!

Stupendous Maiden, sweetest when oblong,
Does inner flame
Now smoulder in thy soul to hear my song
Repeat thy name?
Or does thy huge and ponderous heart object
The advances of my passion, and reject
My love because it’s airy and elect?
O wily Stack!

O crested goddess, thatched and top-knotted,
O reckless Stack!
Of wives that to the Wind have been allotted
There is no lack;
You’ve spurned my love as though I were a worm;
But next September when I see thy form,
I’ll woo thee with an equinoctial storm!
I have that knack!’

‘Far less wumbled than usual,’ thought Rogers, as the children danced about the room, making up new ridiculous rhymes, of which ‘I’ll give you a whack’ seemed the most popular. Only Jane Anne was quiet. A courtship even so remote and improbable as between the Wind and a Haystack sent her thoughts inevitably in the dominant direction.

‘It must be nice when one is two,’ she whispered ambiguously to Mother with a very anxious face, ‘but I’m sure that if a woman can’t cook, love flies out of the window. It’s a positive calamity, you know.’

But it was Cousin Henry’s last night in Bourcelles, and the spirit of pandemonium was abroad. Neither parent could say no to anything, and mere conversation in corners was out of the question. The door was opened into the corridor, and while Mother played her only waltz, Jimbo and Monkey danced on the splintery boards as though it were a parquet floor, and Rogers pirouetted somewhat solemnly with Jane Anne. She enjoyed it immensely, yet rested her hand very gingerly upon his shoulder. ‘Please don’t hold me *quite* so tight,’ she ventured. ‘I’ve never danced with a strange man before, you see’; and he no more laughed at her than he had laughed at Mother’s ‘nunculus.’ Even Jane Anne, he knew, would settle down comfortably before long into the great big pattern where a particular nook awaited — aye, needed — her bizarre, odd brilliance. The most angular fragments would nest softly, neatly in. A little filing, a little polishing, and all would fit together. To force would only be to break. Hurry was of the devil. And later, while Daddy played an ancient tune that was written originally as a mazurka yet did duty now for a two-step, he danced with Mother too, and the children paused to watch out of sheer admiration.

‘Fancy, Mother dancing!’ they exclaimed with glee — except Jinny, who was just a little offended and went to stand by the piano till it was over. For Mother danced as lightly as a child for all her pride of measurement, and no frigate ever skimmed the waves more gracefully than Mother glided over those uneven boards.

‘The Wind and the Haystack’ of course, was Monkey’s description.

‘You’ll wind and haystack to bed now,’ was the reply, as Mother sat and fanned herself in the corner. The ‘bed-sentence’ as the children called it, was always formed in this way. Whatever the child was saying when the moment came, Mother adopted as her verb. ‘Shall I put some peat on, Mother?' became 'Peat yourself off to bed-it's nine o'clock' — and the child was sorry it had spoken.

Good-byes had really been said at intervals all day long, and so to- night were slight enough; the children, besides, were so 'excitey- tired,' as Monkey put it, that they possessed no more emotion of any kind. There were various disagreeable things in the immediate future of To-morrow — getting up early, school, and so forth; and Cousin Henry's departure they lumped in generally with the mass, accepted but unrealised. Jimbo could hardly keep his eyes alight, and Monkey's hair was like a baby haystack the wind had treated to an equinoctial storm. Jinny, stiff, perplexed, and solemn with exhaustion, yet dared not betray it because she was older, in measurable distance of her hair going up.

'Why don't you play with the others, child?' asked Mother, finding her upright on a sofa while the romp went on.

'Oh, to-night,' Jinny explained, 'I sit indifferent and look on. I don't always feel like skedivvying about!'

To skedivvy was to chivvy and skedaddle — its authority not difficult to guess.

'Good-bye, Cousinenry,' each gasped, as his big arms went round them and squeezed out the exclamation. 'Oh, thank you most awfully,' came next, with another kiss, produced by his pressing something hard and round and yellow into each dirty little hand. 'It's only a bit of crystallised starlight,' he explained, 'that escaped long ago from the Cave. And starlight, remember, shines for everybody as well as for yourselves. You can buy a stamp with it occasionally, too,' he added, 'and write to me.'

'We will. Of course!'

Jimbo straightened up a moment before the final collapse of sleep.

'Your train leaves at 6.23,' he said, with the authority of exclusive information. 'You must be at the station at six to get the *bagages enregistrees*. It's a slow train to Pontarlier, but you'll find a *wagon direct* for Paris in front, next to the engine. I shall be at the station to see you off.'

'*I* shan't,' said Monkey.

Rogers realised with delight the true meaning of these brief and unemotional good-byes. ‘They know I’m coming back; they feel that the important part of me is not going away at all. My thinking stays here with them.’

Jinny lingered another ten minutes for appearance’s sake. It was long past her bed-time, too, but dignity forbade her retiring with the others. Standing by the window she made conversation a moment, feeling it was the proper, grown-up thing to do. It was even expected of her.

‘Look! It’s full moon,’ she observed gravely, as though suggesting that she could, if she liked, go out and enjoy the air. ‘Isn’t it lovely?’

‘No, yesterday was full moon,’ Rogers corrected her, joining her and looking out. ‘Two nights ago, to be exact, I think.’

‘Oh,’ she replied, as solemnly as though politics or finance were under discussion, ‘then it’s bigger than full moon now. It goes on, does it, getting fuller and fuller, till—’

‘Now, Jinny dear, it’s very late, and you’d better full-moon off to bed,’ Mother interrupted gently.

‘Yes, Mother; I’m just saying good-night.’ She held her hand out, as though she was afraid he might kiss her, yet feared he would not. ‘Good-bye, Mr. Cousin Henry, and I hope you’ll have an exceedingly happy time in the train and soon come back and visit us again.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘I’m sure I shall.’ He gave her a bit of solid starlight as he said it, then suddenly leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. Making a violent movement like an experienced boxer who dodges an upper cut, Jinny turned and fled precipitately from the room, forgetting her parents altogether. That kiss, she felt, consumed her childhood in a flash of fiery flame. In bed she decided that she must lengthen her skirts the very next day, and put her hair up too. She must do something that should give her protection and yet freedom. For a long time she did not sleep. She lay thinking it over. She felt supremely happy — wild, excited, naughty. ‘A man has kissed me; it was a man; it was Mr. Rogers, Daddy’s cousin…. He’s not *my* cousin exactly, but just “a man.”’ And she fell asleep, wondering how she ought to begin her letter to him when she wrote, but, more perplexing still, how she ought to — end it! That little backward brain sought the solution of the problem all night long in dreams. She felt a criminal, a dare-devil caught in the act, awaiting execution. Light had been flashed cruelly upon her dark, careful secret — the greatest and finest secret in the world. The child lay under sentence indeed, only it was a sentence of life, and not of death.

CHAPTER XXVII

Asia. … I feel, I see
Those eyes which burn through smiles that fade in tears,
Like stars half quenched in mists of silver dew.
Prometheus Unbound, SHELLEY.

It was only ten o'clock, really, and the curfew was ringing from every village on the mountain-side. The sound of the bells, half musical, half ominous, was borne by the bise across the vineyards, for the easterly wind that brings fine weather was blowing over lake and forest, and seemed to drive before it thin sheets of moonlight that turned the whole world soft. The village lay cosily dreaming beneath the sky. Once the curfew died away there was only the rustling of the plane trees in the old courtyard. The great Citadelle loomed above the smaller houses, half in shadow half in silver, nodding heavily to the spire of the Church, and well within sight of the sentinelle poplar that guarded the village from the forest and the mountains. Far away, these mountains now lowered their enormous shoulders to let night flow down upon the sleeping world. The Scaffolding that brought it had long since sailed over France towards the sea….

Mother, still panting from the ritual of fastening the younger children into bed, had gone a moment down the passage to say good- night to Mlle. Lemaire, and when she returned, the three of them — herself, her husband, and Cousin Henry — dropped into chairs beside the window and watched the silvery world in silence for a time. None felt inclined to speak. There was drama somehow in that interval of silence — that drama which lurks everywhere and always behind life's commonest, most ordinary moments. Actions reveal it — sometimes — but it mostly lies concealed, and especially in deep silences like this, when the ticking of a cuckoo clock upon the wall may be the sole hint of its presence.

It was not the good-byes that made all three realise it so near, though good-byes are always solemn and momentous things; it was something that stirred and rose upon them from a far deeper strata of emotion than that caused by apparent separation. For no pain lay in it, but a power much more difficult to express in the sounds and syllables of speech — Joy. A great joy, creative and of big significance, had known accomplishment. Each felt it, knew it, realised it. The moonlit night was aware of it. The entire universe knew it, too. The drama lay in that. There had been creation — of more light…. The world was richer than it had been. Some one had caught Beauty in a net, and to catch Beauty is to transform and recreate all common things. It is revelation.

Through the mind of each of these three flowed the stream of casual thinking — images, reflections, and the shadowy scaffoldings of many new emotions — sweeping along between the banks of speech and silence. And this stream, though in flood, did not overflow into words for a long time. With eyes turned inwards, each watched the current pass. Clear and deep, it quietly reflected — stars. Each watched the same stream, the same calm depths, the same delicate reflections. They were in harmony with themselves, and therefore with the universe….

Then, suddenly, one of the reflections — it was the Pleiades — rose to the surface to clasp its lovely original. It was the woman who netted the golden thought and drew it forth for all to see.

‘Couldn’t you read it to us, Daddy?’ she whispered softly across the silence.

‘If it’s not too long for you.’ He was so eager, so willing to comply.

‘We will listen till the Morning Spiders take us home,’ his cousin said.

‘It’s only the shorter version,’ Daddy agreed shiningly, ‘a sketch for the book which, of course, will take a year to write. I might read *that*, perhaps.’

‘Do,’ urged Mother. ‘We are all in it, aren’t we? It’s our story as well as yours.’

He rose to get the portfolio from the shelf where he had laid it, and while Rogers lit the lamp, Riquette stole in at the window, picking her way daintily across the wet tiles. She stood a moment, silhouetted against the sky; then shaking her feet rapidly each in turn like bits of quivering wire, she stepped precisely into the room. ‘I am in it too,’ she plainly said, curling herself up on the chair Daddy had just vacated, but resigning herself placidly enough to his scanty lap when he came back again and began to read. Her deep purring, while he stroked her absent-mindedly, became an undercurrent in the sound of his voice, then presently ceased altogether….

On and on he read, while the moon sailed over La Citadelle, bidding the stars hush to listen too. She put her silvery soft hands across their eyes that they might hear the better. The blue wind of night gathered up the meaning and spread it everywhere. The forest caught the tale from the low laughter in the crest of the poplar, and passed it on to the leagues of forest that bore it in turn across the frontiers into France. Thence snowy Altels and the giant Blumlisalp flashed it south along the crowding peaks and down among the Italian chestnut woods, who next sent it coursing over the rustling waves of the Adriatic and mixed it everywhere with the Mediterranean foam. In the morning the shadows upon bare Grecian hills would whisper it among the ancient islands, and the East catch echoes of it in the winds of dawn. The forests of the North would open their great gloomy eyes with wonder, as though strange new wild-flowers had come among them in the night. All across the world, indeed, wherever there were gardened minds tender enough to grow fairy seed, these flakes of thought would settle down in sleep, and blossom in due season into a crop of magic beauty.

He read on and on…. The village listened too, the little shadowy street, the familiar pine woods, the troubled Pension, each, as its image was evoked in the story, knew its soul discovered, and stirred in its sleep towards the little room to hear. And the desolate ridges of La Tourne and Boudry, the clefts where the wild lily of the valley grew unknown, high nooks and corners where the buzzards nested, these also knew and answered to the trumpet summons of the Thought that made them live. A fire of creation ran pulsing from this centre. All were in the Pattern of the Story.

To the two human listeners it seemed as familiar as a tale read, in childhood long ago, and only half forgotten. They always knew a little of what was coming next. Yet it spread so much further than mere childhood memories, for its golden atmosphere included all countries and all times. It rose and sang and sparkled, lighting up strange deep recesses of their unconscious and half-realised life, and almost revealing the tiny silver links that joined them on to the universe at large. The golden ladders from the Milky Way were all let down. They climbed up silvery ropes into the Moon….

‘It’s not my own idea,’ he said; ‘I’m convinced of that. It’s all flocked into me from some other mind that thought it long ago, but could not write it, perhaps. No thought is lost, you see — never can be lost. Like this, somehow, I feel it: —

Now sinks to sleep the clamour of the day,
And, million-footed, from the Milky Way,
Falls shyly on my heart the world's lost Thought —
Shower of primrose dust the stars have taught
To haunt each sleeping mind,
Till it may find

A garden in some eager, passionate brain
That, rich in loving-kindness as in pain,
Shall harvest it, then scatter forth again
It's garnered loveliness from heaven caught.

Oh, every yearning thought that holds a tear,
Yet finds no mission,
And lies untold,

Waits, guarded in that labyrinth of gold, —
To reappear
Upon some perfect night,
Deathless — not old —
But sweet with time and distance,
And clothed as in a vision
Of starry brilliance
For the world's delight.'

In the pauses, from time to time, they heard the distant thunder of the Areuse as it churned and tumbled over the Val de Travers boulders. The Colombier bells, as the hours passed, strung the sentences together; moonlight wove in and out of every adventure as they listened; stars threaded little chapters each to each with their eternal golden fastenings. The words seemed written down in dew, but the dew crystallised into fairy patterns that instantly flew about the world upon their mission of deliverance. In this ancient Network of the Stars the universe lay fluttering; and they lay with it, all prisoners in Fairyland.

For the key of it all was sympathy, and the' delicate soul of it was tender human love. Bourcelles, in this magic tale, was the starting- point whence the Starlight Expresses flashed into all the world, even unto unvisited, forgotten corners that had known no service hitherto. It was so adaptable and searching, and knew such tiny, secret ways of entrance. The thought was so penetrating, true, and simple. Even old Mother Plume would wake to the recovery of some hitherto forgotten fragrance in her daily life… just as those Northern forests would wake to find new wild-flowers. For all fairytales issue first from the primeval forest, thence undergoing their protean transformation; and in similar fashion this story, so slight but so tremendous, issued from the forest of one man's underthinking — one deep, pure mind, wumbled badly as far as external things were concerned, yet realising that Bourcelles contained the Universe, and that he, in turn contained Bourcelles. Another, it is true, had shown it to him, though all unwittingly, and had cleaned in his atmosphere the channels for the entrance of the glorious pattern. But the result was the same. In his brain — perhaps by Chance, perhaps by God — lay the machinery which enabled him to give it out to others — the power and ability to transmit. It was a fairy-tale of the world, only the world had forgotten it. He brought back its fairyland again.

And this fairyland, what and where was it? And how could this tale of its recovery bring into his listeners' hearts such a sense of peace and joy that they felt suddenly secure in the world and safe mid all the confusion of their muddled lives? That there were tears in Mother's eyes seems beyond question, because the moonlight, reflected faintly from a wet cobble in the yard below, glistened like a tiny silver lantern there. They betrayed the fact that something in her had melted and flowed free. Yet there was no sadness in the fairy-tale to cause it; they were tears of joy.

Surely it was that this tale of Starlight, Starlight Expresses and Star Caves, told as simply as running water, revealed the entire Universe — as One, and that in this mighty, splendid thing each of them nested safe and comfortable. The world was really *thinking*, and all lay fluttering in the grand, magnificent old Net of Stars. What people think, they are. All can think Beauty. And sympathy — to feel with everything — was the clue; for sympathy is love, and to love a star was to love a neighbour. To be without sympathy was to feel apart, and to think apart was to cut oneself off from life, from the Whole, from God and joy — it was Death. To work at commonplace duties because they were duties to the Universe at large, this was the way to find courage, peace, and happiness, because this was genuine and successful work, no effort lost, and the most distant star aware of it. Thinking was living, whether material results were visible or not;

yearning was action, even though no accomplishment was apparent; thought and sympathy, though felt but for a passing moment, sweetened the Pleiades and flashed along the Milky Way, and so-called tangible results that could prove it to the senses provided no adequate test of accomplishment or success. In the knowledge of belonging to this vast underlying unity was the liberation that brings courage, carelessness, and joy, and to admit failure in anything, by thinking it, was to weaken the entire structure which binds together the planets and the heart of a boy. Thoughts were the fairies that the world believed in when it was younger, simpler, less involved in separation; and the golden Fairyland recovered in this story was the Fairyland of lovely thinking….

In this little lamp-lit room of the Citadelle, the two listeners were conscious of this giant, delicate network that captured every flying thought and carried it streaming through the world. God became a simple thing: He fashioned Rogers's Scheme, even though it never materialised in bricks and mortar. God was behind Mother, even when she knitted or lit the fire in the Den. All were prisoners in His eternal Fairyland….

And the symbolism of the story, the so-called fantasy, they also easily understood, because they felt it true. To be 'out' of the body was merely to think and feel away from self. As they listened they realised themselves in touch with every nation and with every time, with all possible beliefs and disbeliefs, with every conceivable kind of thinking, that is, which ever has existed or ever shall exist….

The heat and radiance given out by the clear delivery of this 'inspirational' fairy-tale must have been very strong; far-reaching it certainly was….

'Ah!' sighed Rogers to himself, 'if only I could be like that!' not realising that he was so.

'Oh dear!' felt the Woman, 'that's what I've felt sometimes. I only wish it were true of me!' unaware that it could be, and even by the fact of her yearning, *was* so.

'If only I could get up and help the world!' passed like a flame across the heart of the sufferer who lay on her sleepless bed next door, listening to the sound of the droning voice that reached her through the wall, yet curiously ignorant that this very longing was already majestically effective in the world of definite action.

And even Mother Plume, pacing her airless room at the further end of the village and tapping her ebony stick upon the floor, turned suspiciously, as at a passing flash of light that warmed her for a sudden instant as it went.

‘Perhaps, after all, they don’t mean all these unkind things they do to me!’ she thought; ‘I live so much alone. Possibly I see things less clearly than I used to do!’

The spell was certainly very potent, though Daddy himself, reading out the little shining chapters, guessed as little as the rest of them how strong. So small a part of what he meant to say, it seemed, had been transferred to the paper. More than he realised, far, far more, lay between the lines, of course. There was conviction in it, because there was vision and belief. Not much was said when he put his roll of paper down and leaned back in his chair. Riquette opened her eyes and blinked narrowly, then closed them again and began to purr. The ticking of the cuckoo clock seemed suddenly very loud and noticeable.

‘Thank you,’ said Mother quietly in an uncertain kind of voice. ‘The world seems very wonderful now — quite different.’

She moved in her chair — the first movement she had made for over two hours. Daddy rubbed his eyes, stroked his beard, and lit a cigarette; it went out almost immediately, but he puffed on at it just the same, till his cousin struck a match and stood over him to see it properly alight.

‘You have caught Beauty naked in your net of stars,’ he murmured; ‘but you have left her as you found her — shining, silvery, unclothed. Others will see her, too. You have taken us all back into Fairyland, and I, for one, shall never get out again.’

‘Nor I,’ breathed some one in the shadows by the window….

The clock struck two. ‘Odd,’ said Mother, softly, ‘but I never heard it strike once while you were reading!’

‘We’ve all been out,’ Rogers laughed significantly, ‘just as you make them get out in the story’; and then, while Riquette yawned and turned a moment from the window-sill to say thank you for her long, warm sleep, Mother lit the spirit-lamp and brewed the cups of chocolate. She tiptoed in next door, and as she entered the sick-room she saw through the steam rising from the cup she carried a curious thing — an impression of brilliance about the bed, as though shafts of light issued from it. Rays pulsed and trembled in the air. There was a perfume of flowers. It seemed she stepped back into the atmosphere of the story for an instant.

‘Ah, you’re not asleep,’ she whispered. ‘We’ve brewed some chocolate, and I thought you might like a cup.’

‘No, I’m not asleep,’ answered the other woman from the bed she never would leave until she was carried from it, ‘but I have been dreaming. It seemed the stars came down into my room and sang to me; this bed became a throne; and some power was in me by which I could send my thoughts out to help the world. I sent them out as a king sends messengers — to people everywhere — even to people I’ve never heard of. Isn’t it wonderful?’

‘You’ve had no pain?’ For Mother knew that these sleepless hours at night brought usually intense suffering. She stared at her, noting how the eyes shone and glistened with unshed moisture.

‘None,’ was the answer, ‘but only the greatest joy and peace I’ve ever known.’ The little glass of *calmant* was untouched; it was not a drug that had soothed the exhausted nerves. In this room at any rate the spell was working still. ‘I was carried through the air by stars, as though my ceaseless yearning to get up and work in the world for once was realised.’

‘You can do everything from your bed,’ her friend murmured, sitting down beside her. ‘You do. Your thoughts go out so strongly. I’ve often felt them myself. Perhaps that’s why God put you here in bed like this,’ she added, surprised at the power in herself that made her say such things— ‘just to think and pray for the world.’

‘I do pray sometimes for others,’ the tortured woman answered modestly, ‘but this time I was not conscious of praying at all. It all swept out of me of its own accord. The force in me seemed so free and inexhaustible that it overflowed. It was irresistible. I felt able to save the world.’

‘You were out,’ said Mother softly, ‘out of yourself, I mean,’ she corrected it. ‘And your lovely thoughts go everywhere. You do save the world.’

There fell a long silence then between them.

‘You’ve been reading aloud,’ Mlle. Lemaire said presently. ‘I heard the drone of the voice through the wall—’

‘Daddy was reading his new story to us,’ the other said. ‘It didn’t disturb you?’

‘On the contrary. I think it was the voice somehow that brought the vision. I listened vaguely at first, trying to sleep; then, opening my eyes suddenly, the room, as I told you, was full of stars. Their rays caught hold of me and drew these forces out of my very heart. I yielded, giving and giving and giving … such life flowed from me, and they carried it away in streams…. Oh, it was really like a divine sensation.’ ‘It was divine,’ said Mother, but whether she meant the story or her friend’s experience, she hardly knew herself.

‘And the story — was it not about our little Bourcelles?’ asked the other.

Mother held her hands up as though words failed her. She opened her arms wide. She was not quite sure of her voice.

‘It was,’ she said at length, ‘but Bourcelles had grown into the universe. It’s a fairy-tale, but it’s like a great golden fire. It warmed my heart till my whole body seemed all heart, and I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. It makes you see that the whole world is *one*, and that the sun and moon and stars lie in so small and unimportant a thing as, say, Jimbo’s mischief, or Monkey’s impudence, or Jinny’s backwardness and absurdity. All are in sympathy together, as in a network, and to feel sympathy with anything, even the most insignificant, connects you instantly with the Whole. Thought and sympathy *are* the Universe — they are life.’

While Mother paused for breath, her old friend smiled a curious, meaning smile, as though she heard a thing that she had always known.

‘And all of us are in the story, and all the things we *think* are alive and active too, because we have created them. Our thoughts populate the world, flying everywhere to help or hinder others, you see.’

The sound of a door opening was heard. Mother got up to go. Shafts of light again seemed to follow her from the figure in the bed.

‘Good-night,’ she whispered with a full heart, while her thought ran suddenly— ‘You possess the secret of life and of creation, for suffering has taught it to you, and you have really known it always. But Daddy has put it into words for everybody.' She felt proud as a queen.

There were whispered good-nights then in the corridor, for Rogers and her husband were on their way home to bed.

'Your chocolate is getting cold,' said Daddy kindly.

'We thought you would probably stay in there. We're going over now. It's very late,' Rogers added. They said good-night again.

She closed and locked the great door of the Citadelle behind them, hearing their steps upon the cobbles in the yard, and for some time afterwards upon the road. But their going away seemed the same as coming nearer. She felt so close to everything that lived. Everything did live. Her heart included all that existed, that ever had existed, that ever could exist. Mother was alive all over. 'I have just been created,' she laughed, and went back into the Den to drink her cup of tepid chocolate.

CHAPTER XXVIII

See, the busy Pleiades,
Sisters to the Hyades,
Seven by seven
Across the heaven,
Light desire
With their fire,
Working cunningly together in a soft and tireless band,

Sweetly linking
All our thinking
In the Net of Sympathy that brings back Fairyland.
A Voice.

The prophecy of the children that Bourcelles was a difficult place to get away from found its justification next morning, for Rogers slept so heavily that he nearly missed his train. It was six o'clock when he tumbled downstairs, too late for a real breakfast, and only just in time to get his luggage upon the little char that did duty for all transport in this unsophisticated village. The carpenter pulled it for him to the station.

'If I've forgotten anything, my cousin will send it after me,' he told Mme. Michaud, as he gulped down hot coffee on the steps.

'Or we can keep it for you,' was the answer. 'You'll be coming back soon.' She knew, like the others, that one always came back to Bourcelles. She shook hands with him as if he were going away for a night or two. 'Your room will always be ready,' she added. 'Ayez la bonte seulement de m'envoyer une petite ligne d'avance.'

'There's only fifteen minutes,' interrupted her husband, 'and it's uphill all the way.'

They trundled off along the dusty road, already hot in the early July sun. There was no breath of wind; swallows darted in the blue air; the perfume of the forests was everywhere; the mountains rose soft and clear into the cloudless sky. They passed the Citadelle, where the awning was already being lowered over the balcony for Mlle. Lemaire's bed to be wheeled out a little later. Rogers waved his handkerchief, and saw the answering flutter inside the window. Riquette, on her way in, watched him from the tiles. The orchards then hid the lower floors; he passed the tinkling fountain; to the left he saw the church and the old Pension, the wistaria blossoms falling down its walls in a cascade of beauty.

The Postmaster put his head out and waved his Trilby hat with a solemn smile. 'Le barometre est tres haut…' floated down the village street, instead of the sentence of good-bye. Even the Postmaster took it for granted that he was not leaving. Gygi, standing in the door of his barn, raised his peaked hat and smiled. 'Fait beau, ce matin,' he said, 'plus tard il fera rudement chaud.' He spoke as if Rogers were off for a walk or climb. It was the same everywhere. The entire village saw him go, yet behaved as if he was not really leaving. How fresh and sweet the morning air was, keen mountain fragrance in it, and all the delicious, delicate sharpness of wet moss and dewy fields.

As he passed the courtyard near the Guillaume Tell, and glanced up at the closed windows of Mother Plume's apartment, a pattering step startled him behind, and Jimbo came scurrying up. Rogers kissed him and lifted him bodily upon the top of his portmanteau, then helped the carpenter to drag it up the hill. 'The barriers at the level crossing are down, the warning gongs are ringing. It's signalled from Auvernier.' They were only just in time. The luggage was registered and the train panting up the steep incline, when Monkey, sleep still thick in her eyes, appeared rolling along the white road. She was too breathless to speak; she stood and stared like a stuffed creature in a Museum. Jimbo was beside the engine, having a word with the *mecanicien*.

'Send a telegram, you know — like that,' he shouted, as the carriage slid past him, 'and we'll bring the *char*.' He knew his leader would come back. He took his cap off politely, as a man does to a lady — the Bourcelles custom. He did not wave his handkerchief or make undignified signs. He stood there, watching his cousin to the last, and trying to see the working of the engine at the same time. He had already told him the times and stopping places, and where he had to change; there was nothing more for a man to say.

Monkey, her breath recovered now, shouted something impudent from the road. ‘The train will break down with you in it before it gets to Pontarlier, and you’ll be back for tea — worse luck!’ He heard it faintly, above the grinding of the wheels. She blew him a kiss; her hair flew out in a cloud of brown the sunshine turned half golden. He almost saw the shining of her eyes. And then the belt of the forest hid her from view, hid Jimbo and the village too. The last thing he saw of Bourcelles was the top of the church spire and the red roof of the towering Citadelle. The crest of the sentinel poplar topped them both for a minute longer, waved a slight and stately farewell, then lowered itself into the forest and vanished in its turn.

And Rogers came back with a start and a bump to what is called real life.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his corner, feeling he had suddenly left his childhood behind him for the second time, not gradually as it ought to happen, but all in one dreadful moment. A great ache lay in his heart. The perfect book of fairy-tales he had been reading was closed and finished. Weeks had passed in the delicious reading, but now the last page was turned; he came back to duty — duty in London — great, noisy, overwhelming London, with its disturbing bustle, its feverish activities, its complex, artificial, unsatisfying amusements, and its hosts of frantic people. He grew older in a moment; he was forty again now; an instant ago, just on the further side of those blue woods, he had been fifteen. Life shrank and dwindled in him to a little, ugly, unattractive thing. He was returning to a flat in the dolorous edifice of civilisation. A great practical Scheme, rising in sombre bricks and mortar through a disfiguring fog, blocked all the avenues of the future.

The picture seemed sordid somewhere, the contrast was so striking. In a great city was no softness; hard, sharp angles everywhere, or at best an artificial smoothness that veiled ugliness and squalor very thinly. Human relationship worked like parts of a machine, cramped into definite orbits, each wheel, each pulley, the smallest deviation deemed erratic. In Bourcelles, the mountain village, there was more latitude, room for expansion, space. The heart leaped up spontaneously like a spring released. In the city this spring was held down rigidly in place, pressed under as by a weight; and the weight, surely, was that one for ever felt compelled to think of self — self in a rather petty, shameful way — personal safety. In the streets, in the houses, in public buildings, shops, and railway stations, even where people met to eat and drink in order to keep alive, were Notice Boards of caution and warning against their fellow kind. Instead of the kindly and unnecessary, even ridiculous little Gygi, there were big, grave policemen by the score, a whole army of them; and everywhere grinned the Notice Boards, like automatic, dummy policemen, mocking joy with their insulting warnings. The heart was oppressed with this constant reminder that safety could only be secured by great care and trouble — safety for the little personal self; protection from all kinds of robbery, depredation, and attack; beware of pickpockets, the proprietor is not responsible for overcoats and umbrellas even! And burglar alarms and doors of steel and iron everywhere — an organised defence from morning till night — against one’s own kind.

He had lived among these terrible conditions all his life, proud of the personal security that civilisation provided, but he had never before viewed it from outside, as now he suddenly did. A spiritual being, a man, lives in a city as in a state of siege among his own kind. It was deplorable, it was incredible. In little Bourcelles, a mountain village most would describe pityingly as half civilised and out of the world, there was safety and joy and freedom as of the universe…. His heart contracted as he thus abruptly realised the distressing contrast. Although a city is a unit, all classes neatly linked together by laws and by-laws, by County Councils, Parliaments, and the like, the spirit of brotherhood was a mockery and a sham. There is organised charity, but there is not — Charity. In a London Square he could not ring the bell and ask for a glass of milk…. In Bourcelles he would walk into any house, since there were no bells, and sit down to an entire meal!

He laughed as the absurd comparison darted across his mind, for he recognised the foolish exaggeration in it; but behind the laughter flamed the astonishing truth. In Bourcelles, in a few weeks, he had found a bigger, richer life than all London had supplied to him in twenty years; he had found wings, inspiration, love, and happiness; he had found the universe. The truth of his cousin’s story blazed upon him like an inner sun. In this new perspective he saw that it was a grander fairy-tale than he had guessed even when close to it. What was a Scheme for Disabled Thingumabobs compared to the endless, far- reaching schemes that life in Bourcelles suggested to him! There was the true centre of life; cities were accretions of disease upon the surface merely! He was leaving Fairyland behind him.

In sudden moments like this, with their synthetic bird's-eye view, the mind sometimes sees more clearly than in hours of careful reflection and analysis. And the first thing he saw now was Minks, his friendly, ridiculous little confidential secretary. From all the crowds of men and women he knew, respected, and enjoyed in London, as from the vast deluge of human mediocrity which for him *was* London, he picked out suddenly — little Minks — Herbert Montmorency Minks. His mind, that is, darting forward in swift, comprehensive survey, and searching automatically for some means whereby it might continue the happiness and sweetness recently enjoyed, selected Minks. Minks was a clue. Minks possessed — no matter how absurd the proportions of their mixing — three things just left behind: Vision, Belief, Simplicity, all products of a spiritual imagination.

And at first this was the single thought sent forward into the future. Rogers saw the fact, flash-like and true-then let it go, yielding to the greater pull that drew reflection back into the past.

And he found it rather dislocating, this abrupt stepping out of his delightful forest Fairyland…. Equilibrium was not recovered for a long time, as the train went thundering over the Jura Mountains into France, Only on the other side of Pontarlier, when the country grew unfamiliar and different, did harmony return. Among the deep blue forests he was still in Fairyland, but at Mouchard the scenery was already changing, and by the time Dole was reached it had completely changed. The train ran on among the plains and vineyards of the Burgundy country towards Laroche and Dijon. The abrupt alteration, however, was pain. His thoughts streamed all backwards now to counteract it. He roamed again among the star fields above the Bourcelles woods. It was true — he had not really left Bourcelles. His body was bumping into Dijon, but the important part of him — thought, emotion, love — lingered with the children, hovered above the Citadelle, floated through the dusky, scented forests.

And the haunting picture was ever set in its framework of old burning stars. He could not get the Pleiades in particular out of his mind. The pictures swarmed past him as upon a boy returning to school after the holidays, and each one had a background of sky with stars behind it; the faces that he knew so well had starry eyes; Jimbo flung handfuls of stars loose across the air, and Monkey caught them, fastening them like golden pins into her hair. Glancing down, he saw a long brown hair upon his sleeve. He picked it off and held his finger and thumb outside the window till the wind took it away. Some Morning Spider would ride it home — perhaps past his cousin’s window while he copied out that wonderful, great tale. But, instead — how in the world could it happen in clear daylight? — a little hand shot down from above and gathered it in towards the Pleiades.

The Pleiades — the Seven Sisters — that most exquisite cluster of the eastern sky, soft, tender, lovely, clinging close together always like a group of timid children, who hide a little dimly for fear of being surprised by bolder stars upon their enormous journey — they now shone down upon all he thought and remembered. They seemed always above the horizon of his mind. They never set. In them lay souls of unborn children, children waiting to be born. He could not imagine why this particular constellation clung with such a haunting touch of beauty about his mind, or why some passion of yearning unconfessed and throbbing hid behind the musical name. Stars and unborn children had got strangely mixed!

He tried to recall the origin of the name — he had learned it once in the old Vicar’s study. The Pleiades were attendants upon Artemis, the huntress moon, he recalled vaguely, and, being pursued by Orion, were set for safety among the stars. He even remembered the names of some of them; there was Maia, Tagete, Alcyone, but the other four lay in his mental lumber room, whence they could not be evoked, although Merope, he felt sure, was one of them. Of Maia, however, he felt positive…. How beautiful the names were!

Then, midway, in thinking about them, he found himself, as Monkey said, thinking of something else: of his weeks at Bourcelles again and what a long holiday it had been, and whether it was wasted time or well-used time-a kind of general stock-taking, as it were, but chiefly of how little he had accomplished after all, set down in black and white. He had enjoyed himself and let himself go, rather foolishly perhaps, but how much after all had he actually accomplished? He remembered pleasant conversations with Mother that possibly cheered and helped her — or possibly were forgotten as soon as ended. He remembered his cousin’s passing words of gratitude — that he had helped him somehow with his great new story: and he remembered — this least of all-that his money had done something to relieve a case or two of suffering. And this was all! The net result so insignificant! He felt dissatisfied, eager already to make new plans, something definite and thorough that should retrieve the wasted opportunities. With a little thought and trouble, how easily he might have straightened out the tangle of his cousin’s family, helped with the education of the growing children, set them all upon a more substantial footing generally. It was possible still, of course, but such things are done best on the spot, the personal touch and presence of value; arranged by correspondence it becomes another thing at once and loses spontaneity. The accent lies on the wrong details. Sympathy is watered by the post…. Importance lodges in angles not intended for it. Master of his time, with certain means at his disposal, a modicum of ability as well, he was free to work hard on the side of the angels wherever opportunity might offer; yet he had wasted all these weeks upon an unnecessary holiday, frittering the time away in enjoyment with the children. He felt ashamed and mortified as the meagre record stared him in the face.

Yet, curiously enough, when Reason had set down the figures accurately, as he fancied, and totted up the trifling totals, there flitted before him something more that refused to be set down upon the paper. The Ledger had no lines for it. What was it? Why was it pleasant, even flattering? Why did it mitigate his discontent and lessen the dissatisfied feeling? It passed hovering in and about his thoughts, though uncaught by actual words; and as his mind played with it, he felt more hopeful. He searched in vain for a definition, but, though fruitless, the search brought comfort somehow. Something *had* been accomplished and it was due to himself, because without his presence it would never have been done. This hint slipped into desire, yearning, hope — that, after all, a result *had* perhaps been achieved, a result he himself was not properly aware of — a result of that incalculable spiritual kind that escapes the chains of definite description. For he recalled — yet mortified a little the memory should flatter — that his cousin had netted Beauty in his story, and that Mother had spoken of living with greater carelessness and peace, and that each had thanked him as though he were the cause.

And these memories, half thought, half feeling, were comforting and delicious, so that he revelled in them lingeringly, and wished that they were really true. For, if true, they were immensely significant. Any one with a purse could build a hospital or pay an education fee, but to be helpful because of being oneself was a vast, incalculable power, something direct from God… and his thoughts, wandering on thus between fact and fantasy, led him back with a deep inexplicable thrill again to — the Pleiades, whose beauty, without their being aware of it, shines nightly for all who can accept it. Here was the old, old truth once more-that the left hand must not know what the right is doing, and that to be is of greater importance than to do. Here was Fairyland once more, the Fairyland he had just left. To think beauty and love is to become them, to shed them forth without realising it. A Fairy blesses because she is a Fairy, not because she turns a pumpkin into a coach and four…. The Pleiades do not realise how their loveliness may….

Rogers started. For the thought had borrowed a tune from the rhythm of the wheels and sleepers, and he had uttered the words aloud in his corner. Luckily he had the carriage to himself. He flushed. Again a tender and very exquisite thing had touched him somewhere…. It was in that involuntary connection his dreaming had found between a Fairy and the Pleiades. Wings of gauzy gold shone fluttering a moment before his inner sight, then vanished. He was aware of some one very dear and wild and tender, with amber eyes and little twinkling feet — some one whom the Great Tale brought almost within his reach…. He literally had seen stars for an instant — *a* star! Its beauty brimmed him up. He laughed in his corner. This thing, whatever it was, had been coming nearer for some time. These hints of sudden joy that breathe upon a sensitive nature, how mysterious, how wildly beautiful, how stimulating they are! But whence, in the name of all the stars, do they come? A great happiness passed flaming through his heart, an extraordinary sense of anticipation in it — as though he were going to meet some one who — who — well, what? — who was a necessity and a delight to him, the complement needed to make his life effective — some one he loved abundantly — who would love him abundantly in return. He recalled those foolish lines he had written on sudden impulse once, then thrown away….

Thought fluttered and went out. He could not seize the elusive cause of this delicious joy. It was connected with the Pleiades, but how, where, why? Above the horizon of his life a new star was swimming into glory. It was rising. The inexplicable emotion thrilled tumultuously, then dived back again whence it came… It had to do with children and with a woman, it seemed, for the next thing he knew was that he was thinking of children, children of his own, and of the deep yearning Bourcelles had stirred again in him to find their Mother… and, next, of his cousin's story and that wonderful detail in it that the principal role was filled at last, the role in the great Children's Play he himself had felt was vacant. It was to be filled by that childless Mother the writer's imagination had discovered or created. And again the Pleiades lit up his inner world and beckoned to him with their little fingers of spun gold; their eyes of clouded amber smiled into his own. It was most extraordinary and delightful. There was something — come much closer this time, almost within reach of discovery — something he ought to remember about them, something he had promised to remember, then stupidly forgotten. The lost, hidden joy was a torture. Yet, try as he would, no revelation came to clear the matter up. Had he read it somewhere perhaps? Or was it part of the Story his cousin had wumbled into his ear when he only partly listened?

'I believe I dreamed it,' he smiled to himself at last in despair. 'I do believe it was a dream — a fragment of some jolly dream I had in my Fairyland of little Bourcelles!'

Children, stars, Fairyland, dreams — these brought it somehow. His cousin's story also had to do with it, chiefly perhaps after all — this great story.

'I shall have to go back there to get hold of it completely,' he added with conviction. He almost felt as if some one were thinking hard about him — one of the characters in the story, it seemed. The mind of some one far away, as yet unknown, was searching for him in thought, sending forth strong definite yearnings which came to rest of their own accord in his own being, a garden naturally suited to their growth. The creations of his boyhood's imagination had survived, the Sweep, the Dustman, and the Lamplighter, then why not the far more powerful creations in the story…? Thought was never lost!

'But no man in his senses can believe such a thing!' he exclaimed, as the train ran booming through the tunnel.

'That's the point,' whispered a voice beside him. 'You are *out* of your senses. Otherwise you could not feel it!'

He turned sharply. The carriage was empty; there was no one there. It was, of course, another part of himself that supplied the answer; yet it startled him. The blurred reflection of the lamp, he noticed, cast a picture against the black tunnel wall that was like a constellation. The Pleiades again! It almost seemed as if the voice had issued from that false reflection in the shaking window-pane….

The train emerged from the tunnel. He rushed out into the blaze of the Interfering Sun. The lovely cluster vanished like a dream, and with it the hint of explanation melted down in dew. Fields sped past with a group of haystacks whose tarpaulin skirts spread and lifted in the gust of wind the train made. He thought abruptly of Mother…. Perhaps, after all, he had taught her something, shown her Existence as a big, streaming, endless thing in which months and years, possibly even life itself, were merely little sections, each unintelligible unless viewed as portions of the Whole, and not as separate, difficult, puzzling items set apart. Possibly he had drawn her map to bigger scale, increased her faith, given her more sense of repose and peace, more courage therefore. She thought formerly of a day, but not of its relation to all days before and behind. She stuck her husband's 'reviews' in the big book, afflicted by the poor financial results they represented, but was unable to think of his work as a stage in a long series of development and progress, no effort lost, no single hope mislaid. And that was something — *if* he had accomplished it. Only, he feared he had not. There was the trouble. There lay the secret of a certain ineffectiveness in his character. For he did not realise that fear is simply suppressed desire, vivid signs of life, and that desire is the ultimate causative agent everywhere and always. 'Behind Will stands Desire,' and Desire is Action.

And if he *had* accomplished this, how was it done? Not by preaching, certainly. Was it, then, simply by being, thinking, feeling it? A glorious thought, if true! For assuredly he had this faculty of seeing life whole, and even in boyhood he had looked ahead over its entire map. He had, indeed, this way of relating all its people, and all its parts together, instead of seeing them separate, unintelligible because the context was left out. He lived intensely in the present, yet looked backwards and forwards too at the same time. This large sympathy, this big comforting vision was his gift. Consequently he believed in Life. Had he also, then, the gift of making others feel and believe it too…?

There he was again, thinking in a circle, as Laroche flew past with its empty platforms, and warned him that Paris was getting close. He bumped out of

Fairyland, yet tumbled back once more for a final reverie before the long ugly arms of the city snatched him finally out. ‘To see life whole,’ he reflected, ‘is to see it glorious. To think one’s self part of humanity at large is to bring the universe down into the heart. But to see life whole, a whole heart is necessary…. He’s done it in that splendid story, and he bagged the raw idea somehow from me. That’s something at any rate. … So few think Beaaty…. But will others see it? That’s the point!’

‘No, it isn’t,’ answered the voice beside him. ‘The point is that he has thought it, and the universe is richer. Even if others do not read or understand, what he has thought *is there now*, for ever and ever.’

‘True,’ he reflected, ‘for that Beauty may float down and settle in other minds when they least are looking for it, and ignoring utterly whence comes the fairy touch. Divine! Delicious! Heavenly!’

‘The Beauty he has written came through you, yet was not yours,’ the voice continued very faintly. ‘A far more beautiful mind first projected it into that network which binds all minds together. ’Twas thence you caught it flying, and, knowing not how to give it shape, transferred it to another — who could use it — for others…. Thought is Life, and Sympathy is living….’

The voice died away; he could not hear the remainder clearly; the passing scenery caught his attention again; during his reverie it had been unnoticed utterly. ‘Thought is Life, but Sympathy is living—’ it rolled and poured through him as he repeated it. Snatches of another sentence then came rising into him from an immense distance, falling upon him from immeasurable heights — barely audible:-

‘… from a mind that so loved the Pleiades she made their loveliness and joy her own… Alcyone, Merope, Maia…’ It dipped away into silence like a flower closing for the night, and the train, he realised, was slackening speed as it drew into the hideous Gare de Lyon.

‘I’ll talk to Minks about it, perhaps,’ he thought, as he stood telling the Customs official that he had no brandy, cigarettes, or lace. ‘He knows about things like that. At any rate, he’ll sympathise.’

He went across Paris to the Gare du Nord, and caught the afternoon boat train to London. The sunshine glared up from the baking streets, but he never forgot that overhead, though invisible, the stars were shining all the time — Starlight, the most tender and least suspected light in all the world, shining bravely even when obscured by the Interfering Sun, and the Pleiades, softest, sweetest little group among them all.

And when at eleven o’clock he entered his St. James’s flat, he took a store of it shining in his heart, and therefore in his eyes. Only that was no difficult matter, for all the lamps far up the heights were lit and gleaming, and caught old mighty London in their gorgeous net.

CHAPTER XXIX

Think with passion
 That shall fashion
 Life’s entire design, well planned.
 Woman of the Haystack.

‘You are looking so wonderfully well, Mr. Rogers,’ Minks observed at Charing Cross Station, ‘the passage across the Channel, I trust, was calm.’

‘And yourself and Mrs. Minks?’ asked Rogers, looking into the equally sunburned face of his secretary, remembering suddenly that he had been to the sea with his family; ‘Frank, too, and the other children? All well, I hope?’

‘All in excellent health, Mr. Rogers, thanks to your generous thought. My wife—’

‘These are the small bags,’ the other interrupted, ‘and here are the keys for my portmanteaux. There’s nothing dutiable. You might bring them on to the flat while I run over to the Club for a bit of supper, Minks.’

‘Certainly, with pleasure, Mr. Rogers,’ was the beaming reply. ‘And Mrs. Minks begged me to tell you—’

Only Rogers was already in his taxi-cab and out of ear-shot.

‘How well he looks!’ reflected Minks, dangling the keys, accustomed to these abrupt interruptions, and knowing that his message had been understood and therefore duly delivered. These cut-off sentences were like a secret code between them. ‘And ten years younger! Almost like a boy again. I wonder if—’ He did not permit himself to finish the thought. He tried to remember if he himself had looked like that perhaps in the days of long ago when he courted Albinia Lucy — an air of joy and secrecy and an absent-minded manner that might any moment flame into vehement, concentrated action. For this was the impression his employer had made upon him. Only he could not quite remember those far-off, happy days.

There was ecstasy in them; that he knew. And there was ecstasy in Henry Rogers now; that he divined.

‘He oughtn’t to,’ he reflected, as he hurried in another taxi with the luggage. ‘All his yearnings would be satisfied if he did, his life flow into a single channel instead of into many.’

He did not think about his own position and his salary.

‘He won’t,’ he decided as the cab stopped at the door; ‘he’s not that kind of man.’ Minks had insight; he knew men. ‘No artist ever ought to. We are so few, and the world has need of us.’ His own case was an exception that had justified itself, for he was but a man of talent, and talent did not need an exclusive asceticism; whereas his employer was a man of genius, and no one woman had the right to monopolise what was intended to sweeten the entire universe.

By the time the luggage had been taken up, he had missed the last tram home, and his sleep that night must in any case be short. Yet he took no note of that. One must live largely. A small sacrifice for such a master was nothing at all. He lingered, glancing now and again at the heap of correspondence that would occupy them next morning, and sorting once more the little pile that would need immediate personal attention. He was picking a bit of disfiguring fluff from his coat sleeve when the door opened and Henry Rogers came upon him.

‘Ah! I waited a moment, Mr. Rogers. I thought you might have something to say before I went, perhaps.’

‘I hoped you would, Minks. I have a great deal to say. It can wait till to-morrow, really — only I wanted — but, there now, I forgot; you have to get down to Sydenham, haven’t you? And it’s late already—’

‘That’s nothing, Mr. Rogers. I can easily sleep in town. I came prepared, indeed, to do so—’ as though he, too, had his Club and would take a bedroom in it.

‘Clever and thoughtful of you, Minks!’

‘Only you must be tired after your journey,’ suggested the secretary.

‘Tired!’ exclaimed the other vigorously, ‘not a bit! I’m as fresh as a st — a daisy, I mean. Come, draw your chair up; we’ll have a smoke and a little chat. I'm delighted to see you again. How are you? And how's everything?'

Goodness! How bright his eyes were, how alert his manner! He looked so young, almost springy, thought Minks, as he obeyed decorously, feeling flattered and pleased, yet at the same time uneasy a little. Such spirits could only proceed, he feared, from one cause. He was a close observer, as all poets had need to be. He would discover some clue before he went to bed, something that should betray the true state of affairs. In any case sleep would be impossible unless he did.

'You stayed away somewhat longer than you originally intended,' he ventured at length, having briefly satisfied his employer's question. 'You found genuine recreation. You needed it, I'm sure.' He glanced with one eye at the letters.

'Re-creation, yes; the very word. It was difficult to leave. The place was so delightful,' said Rogers simply, filling his pipe and lighting it. 'A wonderful mountain village, Minks,' he added, between puffs of smoke, while the secretary, who had been waiting for the sign, then lit his own Virginian and smoked it diffidently, and with just the degree of respect he felt was becoming. He never presumed upon his master's genial way of treating him. He made little puffs and was very careful with the ashes.

'Ah, yes,' he said; 'I am sure it must have been — both delightful and — er — difficult to leave.' He recalled the Margate sands, bathing with Albinia and digging trenches with the children. He had written many lyrics during those happy weeks of holiday.

'Gave one, in fact, quite a new view of life — and work. There was such space and beauty everywhere. And my cousin's children simply would not let me go.'

There was a hint of apology and excuse in the tone and words — the merest hint, but Minks noticed it and liked the enthusiasm. 'He's been up to some mischief; he feels a little ashamed; his work — his Scheme — has been so long neglected; conscience pricks him. Ha, ha!' The secretary felt his first suspicion confirmed. 'Cousin's children,' perhaps! But who else?

'He made a tactful reference — oh, very slight and tentative — to the data he had collected for the Scheme, but the other either did not hear it, or did not wish to hear it. He brushed it aside, speaking through clouds of tobacco smoke. Minks enjoyed a bigger, braver puff at his own. Excitement grew in him.

‘Just the kind of place you would have loved, Minks,’ Rogers went on with zeal. ‘I think you really must go there some day; cart your family over, teach the children French, you know, and cultivate a bit of vineyard. Such fine big forests, too, full of wild flowers and things — O such lovely hand-made things — why, you could almost see the hand that made ‘em.’ The phrase had slipped suddenly into his mind.

‘Really, really, Mr. Rogers, but how very jo — delightful it sounds.’ He thought of the stubble fields and treeless sea-coast where he had been. The language, however, astonished him. Enthusiasm like this could only spring from a big emotion. His heart sank a little.

‘And the people all so friendly and hospitable and simple that you could go climbing with your bootmaker or ask your baker in to dine and sleep. No snobbery! Sympathy everywhere and a big free life flowing in your veins.’ This settled it. Only a lover finds the whole world lovable.

‘One must know the language, though,’ said Minks, ‘in order to enjoy the people and understand them, I suppose?’

‘Not a bit, not a bit! One *feels* it all, you see; somehow one feels it and understands. A few words useful here and there, but one gets along without even these. I never knew such a place. Every one seemed to be in sympathy together. They think it, as it were. It was regular fairyland, I tell you.’

‘Which means that *you* felt and thought it,’ said Minks to himself. Aloud he merely remarked, though with conviction, for he was getting interested, ‘Thinking is important, I know.’

Rogers laid his pipe aside and suddenly turned upon him — so abruptly that Minks started. Was this the confession coming? Would he hear now that his chief was going to be married? His wandering eyes almost drew level in the excitement that he felt. He knocked a tiny ash from his cigarette and waited. But the expected bomb did not explode. He heard instead this curious question: —

‘And that’s something — it reminds me now — something I particularly wanted to ask you about, my dear fellow. You are familiar, I know, with such things and theories — er — speculations, as it were. You read that sort of stuff. You are in touch with the latest ideas, I mean, and up-to-date. You can tell me, if any one can.'

He paused, hesitating a moment, as Minks, listening in some bewilderment, gazed into his eager face. He said nothing. He only committed himself to a deprecating gesture with his hands, letting his cigarette slip from his fingers on to the carpet.

'About *thought*,' continued Rogers, keeping his eyes fixed upon him while he rose with flushed face from the search to find the stump. 'What do you know about thought? Tell me what you hear about *that* — what theories are held — what people believe about it. I mean thought- transference, telepathy, or whatever it is called. Is it proved? Is it a fact?'

His voice had lowered. There was mystery in his manner. He sat back in his chair, picked up his pipe, replaced it in his mouth unlighted, and waited.

Minks pulled himself together. His admirable qualities as a private secretary now came in. Putting excitement and private speculations of his own aside, he concentrated his orderly mind upon replies that should be models of succinct statement. He had practised thought- control, and prided himself upon the fact. He could switch attention instantly from one subject to another without confusion. The replies, however, were, of course, drawn from his own reading. He neither argued nor explained. He merely stated.

'Those who have taken the trouble to study the evidence believe,' he began, 'that it is established, though its laws are as yet unknown. Personally, if I may quote myself, I do believe it.'

'Quite so, quite so. Do quote yourself — that's what I want — facts. But you refer to deliberate experiments, don't you?'

'In my own case, yes, Mr. Rogers, although the most successful thought-transference is probably unconscious and not deliberate—'

'Such as, for instance—'

'Public opinion,' replied Minks, after a moment's search, 'which is the result of waves of thought sent out by everybody — by a community; or by the joint thinking of a nation, again, which modifies every mind born into that nation, the result of' centuries of common thinking along definite familiar channels. Thought-currents rush everywhere about the world, affecting every one more or less, and — er — particularly lodging in minds receptive to them.'

'Thought is dynamic, then, they hold?'

'An actual force, yes; as actual as electricity, and as little understood,' returned the secretary, proud that he had read these theories and remembered them. 'With every real thought a definite force goes forth from you that modifies every single person, and probably every single object as well, in the entire world. Thought is creative according to its intensity. It links everybody in the world with everybody else—'

'Objects too, you say?' Rogers questioned.

Minks glanced up to make sure there was no levity in the question, but only desire for knowledge.

'Objects too,' he replied, apparently satisfied, 'for science tells us that the movement of a body here affects the farthest star. A continuous medium — ether — transmits the vibrations without friction — and thought-force is doubtless similarly transmitted — er—'

'So that if I think of a flower or a star, my thought leaps into them and affects them?' the other interrupted again.

'More, Mr. Rogers,' was the reply, 'for your thought, being creative, enriches the world with images of beauty which may float into another mind across the sea, distance no obstacle at all. You make a mental image when you think. There's imagination in all real thinking — if I make myself clear. "Our most elaborate thoughts," to quote for a moment, "are often, as I think, not really ours, but have on a sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven." So what one thinks affects everybody in the world. The noble thinkers lift humanity, though they may never tell their thoughts in speech or writing.'

His employer stared at him in silence through the cloud of smoke. The clock on the mantelpiece struck half-past twelve.

'That is where the inspiration of the artist comes in,' continued the secretary after a moment's hesitation whether he should say it or not, 'for his sensitive soul collects them and gives them form. They lodge in him and grow, and every passionate longing for spiritual growth sets the whole world growing too. Your Scheme for Disabled—'

'Even if it never materialises—' Rogers brusquely interposed.

'Sweetens the world — yes — according to this theory,' continued Minks, wondering what in the world had come over his chief, yet so pleased to state his own views that he forgot to analyse. 'A man in a dungeon earnestly praying would accomplish more than an active man outside who merely lived thoughtlessly, even though beneficently — if I make myself clear.'

'Yes, yes; you make yourself admirably clear, Minks, as I knew you would.' Rogers lit his pipe again and puffed hard through a minute's silence. The secretary held his peace, realising from the tone of the last sentence that he had said enough. Mr. Rogers was leading up to other questions. Hitherto he had been clearing the ground.

It came then, through the clouds of smoke, though Minks failed to realise exactly why it was — so important:

'So that if I thought vividly of anything, I should. actually create a mental picture which in turn might slip into another's mind, while that other would naturally suppose it was his own?'

'Exactly, Mr. Rogers; exactly so.' Minks contrived to make the impatience in his voice sound like appreciation of his master's quickness. 'Distance no obstacle either,' he repeated, as though fond of the phrase.

'And, similarly, the thought I deemed my own might have come in its turn from the mind of some one else?'

'Precisely; for thought binds us all together like a network, and to think of others is to spread oneself about the universe. When we think thus we get out — as it were — into that medium common to all of us where spirit meets spirit—'

'Out!' exclaimed Rogers, putting down his pipe and staring keenly, first into one eye, then into the other. 'Out?'

'Out — yes,' Minks echoed faintly, wondering why that particular word was chosen. He felt a little startled. This earnest talk, moreover, stirred the subconsciousness in him, so that he remembered that unfinished sonnet he had begun weeks ago at Charing Cross. If he were alone now he could complete it. Lines rose and offered themselves by the dozen. His master's emotion had communicated itself to him. A breath of that ecstasy he had already divined passed through the air between them.

'It's what the Contemplative Orders attempt—' he continued, yet half to himself, as though a little bemused.

'Out, by George! Out!' Rogers said again.

So emphatic was the tone that Minks half rose from his chair to go.

'No, no,' laughed his chief; 'I don't mean that you're to get out. Forgive my abruptness. The fact is I was thinking aloud a moment. I meant — I mean that you've explained a lot to me I didn't understand before — had never thought about, rather. And it's rather wonderful, you see. In fact, it's *very* wonderful. Minks,' he added, with the grave enthusiasm of one who has made a big discovery, 'this world *is* a very wonderful place.'

'It is simply astonishing, Mr. Rogers,' Minks answered with conviction, 'astonishingly beautiful.'

'That's what I mean,' he went on. 'If I think beauty, that beauty may materialise—'

'Must, will, does materialise, Mr. Rogers, just as your improvements in machinery did. You first thought them out!'

'Then put them into words; yes, and afterwards into metal. Strong thought is bound to realise itself sooner or later, eh? Isn't it all grand and splendid?'

They stared at one another across the smoky atmosphere of the London flat at the hour of one in the morning in the twentieth century.

'And when I think of a Scaffolding of Dusk that builds the Night,' Rogers went on in a lower tone to himself, yet not so low that Minks, listening in amazement, did not catch every syllable, 'or of a Dustman, Sweep, and Lamplighter, of a Starlight Express, or a vast Star Net that binds the world in sympathy together, and when I weave all these into a story, whose centre somehow is the Pleiades — all this is real and actual, and — and—'

'May have been projected by another mind before it floated into your own,' Minks suddenly interposed almost in a whisper, charmed wholly into the poet’s region by these suggestive phrases, yet wondering a little why he said it, and particularly how he dared to say it.

His chief turned sharply upon him.

‘My own thought exactly!’ he exclaimed; ‘but how the devil did you guess it?’

Minks returned the stare with triumph.

‘Unconscious transference!’ he said.

‘You really think *that*?’ his master asked, yet not mockingly.

Minks turned a shade pinker.

‘I do, indeed, sir,’ he replied warmly. ‘I think it probable that the thoughts of people you have never seen or heard of drop into your mind and colour it. They lodge there, or are rejected, according to your mood and the texture of your longings — what you want to be, that is. What you want, if I may say so, is emptiness, and that emptiness invites. The flying thought flits in and makes itself at home. Some people overflow with thoughts of kindness and beauty that radiate from them, of love and tenderness and desire to help. These thoughts, it may be, find no immediate object; but they are not lost. They pour loose about the world of men and women, and sooner or later find the empty heart that needs them. I believe, sir, that to sit in a chair and think such things strongly brings comfort to thousands who have little idea whence comes the sudden peace and happiness. And any one who happens to be praying for these things at the moment attracts them instantly. The comfort, the joy, the relief come—’

‘What a good idea, Minks,’ said Rogers gently, ‘and how helpful if we all believed it. No one’s life need be a failure then. Those who want love, for instance, need it, crave it, just think what an army they are!’

He stared thoughtfully a moment at his little secretary.

‘You might write a book about it, you know — try and make people believe it — convince them. Eh? Only, you’d have to give your proofs, you know. People want proofs.’

Minks, pinker than before, hesitated a moment. He was not sure how far he ought to, indulge his private theories in words. The expression in his chief’s blue eyes apparently encouraged him.

‘But, indeed, Mr. Rogers, the proofs are there. Those moments of sudden strength and joy that visit a man, catching him unawares and unexplained — every solitary man and woman knows them, for every solitary man and woman in the world craves first of all — to *be* loved. To love another, others, an impersonal Cause, is not enough. It is only half of life; to *be* loved is the other half. If every single person — I trust, sir, I do not tire you? — was loved by some one, the happiness of life would be enormously greater than it is, for each one loved would automatically then give out from his own store, and to receive love makes one overflow with love for every one else. It is so, is it not, sir?’

Rogers, an odd thrill catching him unawares, nodded. ‘It is, Minks, it is,’ he agreed. ‘To love one person makes one half prepared to love all, and to be loved in turn may have a similar effect. It is nice to think so anyhow.’

‘It is true, sir — —’ and Minks sat up, ready with another deluge.

‘But you were saying something just now,’ interrupted the other, ‘about these sudden glimpses of joy and beauty that — er — come to one — er — inexplicably. What d’ye mean by that precisely?’

Minks glowed. He was being listened to, and understood by his honoured chief, too!

‘Simply that some one, perhaps far away — some sweet woman probably — has been thinking love,’ he replied with enthusiasm, yet in a low and measured voice, ‘and that the burning thoughts have rushed into the emptiness of a heart that needs them. Like water, thought finds its level. The sudden gush — all feel it more or less at times, surely! — may rise first from her mind as she walks lonely upon the shore, pacing the decks at sea, or in her hillside rambles, thinking, dreaming, hoping, yearning — to pour out and find the heart that needs these very things, perhaps far across the world. Who knows? Heart thrills in response to heart secretly in every corner of the globe, and when these tides flood unexplained into your soul —’

‘Into *my* soul — !’ exclaimed his chief.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ Minks hurried to explain; ‘I mean to any lonely soul that happens to crave such comfort with real longing — it implies, to my mind at least, that these two are destined to give and take from one another, and that, should they happen to meet in actual life, they will rush together instantly like a pair of flames—'

'And if they never — meet?' asked Rogers slowly, turning to the mantelpiece for the matches.

'They will continue to feed each other in this delicious spiritual way from a distance, sir. Only — the chances are — that they will meet, for their thought already connects them vitally, though as yet unrealised.'

There was a considerable pause. Rogers lit his pipe. Minks, feeling he ought to stand while his master did so, also rose from his chair. The older man turned; they faced each other for a moment, Rogers putting smoke violently into the air between them.

'Minks, my dear fellow,' he observed, 'you are, as I have always thought, a poet. You have ideas, and, whether true or not, they are rather lovely. Write them out for others to read. Use your spare time writing them out. I'll see to it that you have more leisure.'

With a laugh the big man moved abruptly past his chair and knocked his pipe on the edge of the ash-bowl. His eye, as he did so, fell upon the pile of letters and papers arranged so neatly on the table. He remembered the lateness of the hour — and other things besides.

'Well, well,' he said vaguely with a sigh; 'so here we are again back at work in London.'

Minks had turned, too, realising that the surprising conversation was over. A great excitement was in him. He did not feel in the least tired. An unusual sense of anticipation was in the air. He could not make it out at all. Reviewing a dozen possibilities at once, he finally rejected the romantic one he had first suspected, and decided that the right moment had at last come to say something of the Scheme. He had worked so hard to collect data. All was in perfect order. His chief could not feel otherwise than pleased.

'Then I'll be saying good-night, Mr. Rogers,' he began, 'for you must be very tired, and I trust you will enjoy a long night's rest. Perhaps you would like me to come a little later in the morning than usual.'

He stood looking affectionately at the formidable pile of correspondence, and, as his chief made no immediate reply, he went on, with more decision in his voice:

‘Here,’ he said, touching the papers he had carefully set on one side, ‘are all the facts you wanted referring to your great Scheme—’

He jumped. His master’s fist had come down with a bang upon the table. He stepped back a pace. They stared at one another.

‘Damn the Scheme!’ cried Rogers. ‘have done and finished with it. Tear up the papers. Cancel any arrangements already made. And never mention the thing again in my hearing. It’s all unreal and wrong and unnecessary!’

Minks gasped. The man was so in earnest. What could it mean?

‘Wrong — unnecessary — done with!’ he faltered. Then, noticing the flashing eyes that yet betrayed a hint of merriment in their fire, he added quickly, ‘Quite so, Mr. Rogers; I understand. You’ve got an improvement, you mean?’

It was not his place to ask questions, but he could not contain himself. Curiosity and disappointment rushed over him.

‘A bigger and a better one altogether, Minks,’ was the vehement reply. He pushed the heap of papers towards the secretary. Minks took them gingerly, reluctantly.

‘Burn ’em up,’ Rogers went on, ‘and never speak to me again about the blessed thing. I’ve got a far bigger Scheme than that.’

Minks slowly gathered the papers together and put them in his biggest pocket. He knew not what to think. The suddenness of the affair dazed him. Thought-transference failed this time; he was too perturbed, indeed, to be in a receptive state at all. It seemed a catastrophe, a most undesirable and unexpected climax. The romantic solution revived in him — but only for a passing moment. He rejected it. Some big discovery was in the air. He felt that extraordinary sense of anticipation once again.

‘Look here, my dear fellow, Minks,’ said Rogers, who had been watching his discomfiture with amusement, ‘you may be surprised, but you need not be alarmed. The fact is, this has been coming for a long time; it’s not an impulsive decision. You must have felt it — from my letters. That Scheme was all right enough, only I am not the right man for it. See? And our work,' he added laughingly, 'won't go for nothing either, because our thought will drop into another mind somewhere that will accomplish the thing far better than I could have accomplished it.'

Minks made an odd gesture, as who should say this might not be true. He did not venture upon speech, however. This new plan must be very wonderful, was all he thought just then. His faith in his employer's genius was complete.

'And in due time you shall hear all about it. Have a little patience. Perhaps you'll get it out of my thoughts before I tell it to you,' he smiled, 'but perhaps you won't. I can only tell you just now that it has beauty in it — a beauty of the stars.'

Yet what his bigger Scheme was he really had no clear idea. He felt it coming-that was all!

And with that Minks had to be content. This was dismissal. Good-nights were said, and the secretary went out into the street.

'Go to a comfortable hotel,' was the last thing he heard, 'and put it down to me, of course. Sleep well, sleep well. To-morrow at two o'clock will do.'

Minks strolled home, walking upon air. The sky was brilliant with its gorgeous constellations — the beauty of the stars. Poems blazed upon him. But he was too excited to compose. Even first lines evaded capture. 'Stars,' besides, was a dreadful word to rhyme with, for all its charm and loveliness. He knew of old that the only word was 'wars,' most difficult to bring in naturally and spontaneously, and with the wrong sound in any case.

'He must have been writing poetry out there,' he reflected finally, 'or else living it. Living it, probably. He's a grand fellow anyhow, grand as a king.' Stars, wars, kings, thrones-=the words flew in and out among a maze of unaccomplished lines.

But the last thing in his mind as he curled up to sleep in the strange bed was that he had delivered his wife's message, but that he could not tell her about this sudden collapse of the great, long-talked-of Scheme. Albinia would hardly understand. She might think less of his chief. He would wait until the new one dawned upon the horizon with its beauty of the stars. Then he would simply overwhelm her with it, as his temperament loved to do.

CHAPTER XXX

Lo, every yearning thought that holds a tear,
Yet finds no mission
And lies untold,
Waits, guarded in that labyrinth of gold, —
To reappear
Upon some perfect night,
Deathless — not old —
But sweet with time and distance,
And clothed as in a vision
Of starry brilliance
For the world's delight.
JOHN HENRY CAMPDEN.

Then, as the days passed, practical life again caught Henry Rogers in its wholesome grip. Fairyland did not fade exactly, but it dipped a little below the horizon. Like hell and heaven, it was a state of mind, open potentially to all, but not to be enjoyed merely for the asking. Like other desirable things, it was to be 'attained.' Its remoteness and difficulty of access lent to it a haunting charm; for though its glory dimmed a little, there was a soft afterglow that shed its radiance even down Piccadilly and St. James's Street. He was always conscious of this land beyond the sunset; the stars shone brightly, though clouds or sunlight interfered to blur their message.

London life, however, by the sheer weight of its grinding daily machinery, worked its slow effect upon him. He became less sensitive to impressions. These duller periods were interrupted sometimes by states of brilliant receptiveness, as at Bourcelles; but there was a fence between the two — a rather prickly frontier, and the secret of combining them lay just beyond his reach. For his London mind, guided by reason, acted in a logical plane of two dimensions, while imagination, captained by childhood's fairy longings, cantered loose in all directions at once — impossibly. The first was the world; the second was the universe. As yet, he was unable to co-ordinate them. Minks, he was certain, could — and did, sailing therefore upon an even keel. There was this big harmony in little Minks that he envied. Minks had an outlet. Sydenham, and even the City, for him were fairyland; a motor-bus fed his inspiration as surely as a starlit sky; moon always rhymed with June, and forget with regret. But the inner world of Henry Rogers was not yet properly connected with the outer. Passage from one to the other was due to chance, it seemed, not to be effected at will. Moods determined the sudden journey. He rocked. But for his talks with little Minks, he might have wrecked.

And the talks with Minks were about — well, he hardly knew what, but they all played round this map of fairyland he sought to reduce to the scale of everyday life. They discussed thought, dreams, the possibility of leaving the body in sleep, the artist temperament, the source of inspiration as well as the process of the imaginative faculty that created. They talked even of astronomy. Minks held that the life of practical, daily work was the bed-rock of all sane production, yet while preaching this he bubbled over with all the wild, entrancing theories that were in the air to-day. They were comical, but never dangerous — did not upset him. They were almost a form of play.

And his master, listening, found these conversations an outlet somehow for emotions in himself he could not manage — a scaffolding that provided outlines for his awakening dreams to build upon. He found relief. For Minks, with his delightful tact, asked no awkward questions. He referred neither to the defunct Scheme, nor mentioned the new one that held ‘a beauty of the stars.’ He waited. Rogers also waited.

And, while he waited, he grew conscious more and more of an enormous thing that passed, driving behind, *below*, his daily external life. He could never quite get at it. In there, down out of sight somewhere, he knew everything. His waking existence was fed invisibly from below. In the daytime he now frequently caught himself attempting to recover the memory of things that went on elsewhere, things he was personally involved in, vital things. This daylight effort to recover them was as irksome as the attempt to draw a loose hair that has wound about the tongue. He spoke at length to Minks about it.

‘Some part of you,’ replied the imperturbable secretary, after listening carefully to his master’s vague description of the symptoms, ‘is being engaged elsewhere — very actively engaged—'

'Eh?' asked Rogers, puzzled.

'Probably at night, sir, while your brain and body sleep,' Minks elaborated, 'your energetic spirit is out — on the plane of causes—'

The other gasped slightly, 'While my body lies unconscious?'

'Your spirit may be busy at all kinds of things. *That* can never be unconscious,' was the respectful answer. 'They say—'

'Yes, what do they say?' He recognised a fairy theory, and jumped at it.

'That in sleep,' continued the other, encouraged, 'the spirit knows a far more concentrated life — dips down into the deep sea of being — our waking life merely the froth upon the shore.'

Rogers stared at him. 'Yes, yes,' he answered slowly, 'that's very pretty, very charming; it's quite delightful. What ideas you have, my dear Minks! What jolly, helpful ideas!'

Minks beamed with pleasure.

'Not my own, Mr. Rogers, not my own,' he said, with as much pride as if they *were* his own, 'but some of the oldest in the world, just coming into fashion again with the turn of the tide, it seems. Our daily life — even the most ordinary — is immensely haunted, girdled about with a wonder of incredible things. There are hints everywhere to-day, though few can read the enormous script complete. Here and there one reads a letter or a word, that's all. Yet the best minds refuse to know the language, not even the ABC of it; they read another language altogether—'

'The best minds!' repeated Rogers. 'What d'you mean by that!' It sounded, as Minks said it, so absurdly like best families.

'The scientific and philosophical minds, sir. They think it's not worth learning, this language. That's the pity of it — ah, the great pity of it!' And he looked both eager and resentful — his expression almost pathetic. He turned half beseechingly to his employer, as though *he* might alter the sad state of things. 'As with an iceberg, Mr. Rogers,' he added, 'the greater part of everything — of ourselves especially — is invisible; we merely know the detail banked against an important grand Unseen.'

The long sentence had been suffered to its close because the audience was busy with thoughts of his own instead of listening carefully. Behind the wild language stirred some hint of meaning that, he felt, held truth. For a moment, it seemed, his daylight searching was explained — almost.

‘Well and good, my dear fellow, and very picturesque,’ he said presently, gazing with admiration at his secretary’s neat blue tie and immaculate linen; ‘but thinking, you know, is not possible without matter.’ This in a tone of ‘*Do* talk a little sense.’ ‘Even if the spirit does go out, it couldn’t think apart from the brain, could it now, eh?’

Minks took a deep breath and relieved himself of the following:

‘Ah, Mr. Rogers’ — as much as to say ‘Fancy *you* believing that!’— ‘but it can experience and know *direct*, since it passes into the region whence the material that feeds thought issues in the first instance — causes, Mr. Rogers, causes.’

‘Oho!’ said his master, ‘oho!’

‘There is no true memory afterwards,’ continued the little dreamer, ‘because memory depends upon how much the spirit can bring back into the brain, you see. We have vague feelings, rather than actual recollection — feelings such as you were kind enough to confess to me you had been haunted by yourself—’

‘All-overish feelings,’ Rogers helped him, seeing that he was losing confidence a little, ‘vague sensations of joy and wonder and — well — in a word, strength.’

‘Faith,’ said Minks, with a decision of renewed conviction, ‘which is really nothing but unconscious knowledge — knowledge unremembered. And it’s the half-memory of what you do at night that causes this sense of anticipation you now experience; for what is anticipation, after all, but memory thrown forward?’

There was a pause then, during which Rogers lit a cigarette, while Minks straightened his tie several times in succession.

‘You are a greater reader than I, of course,’ resumed his employer presently; ‘still, I have come across one or two stories which deal with this kind of thing. Only, in the books, the people always remember what they’ve done at night, out of the body, in the spirit, or whatever you like to call it. Now, *I* remember nothing whatever. How d'you account for that, pray?'

Minks smiled a little sadly. 'The books,' he answered very softly, 'are wrong there — mere inventions — not written from personal experience. There can be no detailed memory unless the brain has been 'out' too — which it hasn't. That's where inaccuracy and looseness of thought come in. If only the best minds would take the matter up, you see, we might—'

Rogers interrupted him. 'We shall miss the post, Minks, if we go on dreaming and talking like this,' he exclaimed, looking at his watch and then at the pile of letters waiting to be finished. 'It is very delightful indeed, very — but we mustn't forget to be practical, too.'

And the secretary, not sorry perhaps to be rescued in time from the depths he had floundered in, switched his mind in concentration upon the work in hand again. The conversation had arisen from a chance coincidence in this very correspondence — two letters that had crossed after weeks of silence.

Work was instantly resumed. It went on as though it had never been interrupted. Pride and admiration stirred the heart of Minks as he noticed how keenly and accurately his master's brain took up the lost threads again. 'A grand fellow!' he thought to himself, 'a splendid man! He lives in both worlds at once, yet never gets confused, nor lets one usurp his powers to the detriment of the other. If only I were equally balanced and effective. Oh dear!' And he sighed.

And there were many similar conversations of this kind. London seemed different, almost transfigured sometimes. Was this the beginning of that glory which should prove it a suburb of Bourcelles?

Rogers found his thoughts were much in that cosy mountain village: the children capered by his side all day; he smelt the woods and flowers; he heard the leaves rustle on the poplar's crest; and had merely to think of a certain room in the tumble-down old Citadelle for a wave of courage and high anticipation to sweep over him like a sea. A new feeling of harmony was taking him in hand. It was very delightful; and though he felt explanation beyond his reach still, his talks with Minks provided peep-holes through which he peered at the enormous thing that brushed him day and night.

A great settling was taking place inside him. Thoughts certainly began to settle. He realised, for one thing, that he had left the theatre where the marvellous Play had been enacted. He stood outside now, able to review and form a judgment. His mind loved order. Undue introspection he disliked, as a form of undesirable familiarity; a balanced man must not be too familiar with himself; it endangered self-respect.

He had been floundering rather. After years of methodical labour the freedom of too long a holiday was disorganising. He tried to steady himself. And the Plan of Life, answering to control, grew smaller instantly, reduced to proportions he could examine reasonably. This was the beginning of success. The bewildering light of fairyland still glimmered, but no longer so diffused. It focused into little definite kernels he could hold steady while he scrutinised them.

And these kernels he examined carefully as might be: in the quiet, starry evenings usually, while walking alone in St. James's Park after his day of board meetings, practical work with Minks, and the like.

Gradually then, out of the close survey, emerged certain things that seemed linked together in an intelligible sequence of cause and effect. There was still mystery, for subconscious investigation ever involves this background of shadow. Question and Wonder watched him. But the facts emerged.

He jotted them down on paper as best he could. The result looked like a Report drawn up by Minks, only less concise and — he was bound to admit it — less intelligible. He smiled as he read them over….

'My thoughts and longings, awakened that night in the little Crayfield garden,' he summed it up to himself, having read the Report so far, 'went forth upon their journey of realisation. I projected them — according to Minks — vividly enough for that! I thought Beauty — and this glorious result materialised! More — my deepest, oldest craving of all has come to life again — the cry of loneliness that yearns to — that seeks — er—'

At this point, however, his analysis grew wumbled; the transference of thought and emotion seemed comprehensible enough; though magical, it was not more so than wireless telegraphy, or that a jet of steam should drive an express for a hundred miles. It was conceivable that Daddy had drawn thence the inspiration for his wonderful story. What baffled him was the curious feeling that another was mixed up in the whole, delightful business, and that neither he nor his cousin were the true sponsors of the fairy fabric. He never forgot the description his cousin read aloud that night in the Den — how the Pattern of his Story reached its climax and completeness when a little starry figure with twinkling feet and amber eyes had leaped into the centre and made itself at home there. From the Pleiades it came. The lost Pleiad was found. The network of thought and sympathy that contained the universe had trembled to its uttermost fastenings. The principal role was filled at last.

It was here came in the perplexing thing that baffled him. His mind sat down and stared at an enormous, shadowy possibility that he was unable to grasp. It brushed past him overhead, beneath, on all sides. He peered up at it and marvelled, unconvinced, yet knowing himself a prisoner. Something he could not understand was coming, was already close, was watching him, waiting the moment to pounce out, like an invisible cat upon a bewildered mouse. The question he flung out brought no response, and he recalled with a smile the verse that described his absurd position: —

Like a mouse who, lost in wonder,
 Flicks its whiskers at the thunder!

For, while sprites and yearning were decidedly his own, the interpretation of them, if not their actual origin, seemed another's. This other, like some dear ideal on the way to realisation, had taken him prisoner. The queer sense of anticipation Bourcelles had fostered was now actual expectation, as though some Morning Spider had borne his master-longing, exquisitely fashioned by the Story, across the Universe, and the summons had been answered-from the Pleiades. The indestructible threads of thought and feeling tightened. The more he thought about his cousin's interpretation the more he found in it a loveliness and purity, a crystal spiritual quality, that he could credit neither to the author's mind nor to his own. This soft and starry brilliance was another's. Up to a point the interpretation came through Daddy's brain, just as the raw material came through his own; but thereafter this other had appropriated both, as their original creator and proprietor. Some shining, delicate hand reached down from its starry home and gathered in this exquisite form built up from the medley of fairy thought and beauty that were first its own. The owner of that little hand would presently appear to claim it.

‘We were but channels after all then — both of us,’ was the idea that lay so insistently in him. ‘The sea of thought sends waves in all directions. They roll into different harbours. I caught the feeling, he supplied the form, but this other lit the original fire!’

And further than this wumbled conclusion he could not get. He went about his daily work. however, with a secret happiness tugging at his mind all day, and a sense of expectant wonder glancing brightly over everything he thought or did. He was a prisoner in fairyland, and what he called his outer and his inner world were, after all, but different ways of looking at one and the same thing. Life everywhere was one.

CHAPTER XXXI

Es stehen unbeweglich
 Die Sterne in der Hoh’
 Viel tausend Jahr’, und schauen
 Sich an mit Liebesweh.

Sie sprechen eine Sprache,
 Die ist so reich, so schon;
 Doch keiner der Philologen
 Kann diese Sprache verstehen.

Ich aber hab’ sie gelernet,
 Und ich vergesse sie nicht;
 Mir diente als Grammatik
 Der Herzallerliebsten Gesicht.
HEINE.

One evening in particular the sense of expectation in him felt very close upon delivery. All day he had been aware of it, and a letter received that morning from his cousin seemed the cause. The story, in its shorter version, had been accepted. Its reality, therefore, had already spread; one other mind, at least, had judged it with understanding. Two months from now, when it appeared in print, hundreds more would read it. Its beauty would run loose in many hearts. And Rogers went about his work that day as though the pleasure was his own. The world felt very sweet. He saw the good in every one with whom he came in contact. And the inner excitement due to something going to happen was continuous and cumulative.

Yet London just then — it was August — was dull and empty, dusty, and badly frayed at the edges. It needed a great cleaning; he would have liked to pour sea water over all its streets and houses, bathed its panting parks in the crystal fountains of Bourcelles. All day long his thoughts, indeed, left London for holidays in little Bourcelles. He was profoundly conscious that the Anticipation he first recognised in that forest village was close upon accomplishment now. On the journey back to England he recalled how urgent it had been. In London, ever since, it had never really left him. But to-day it now suddenly became more than expectation — he felt it in him as a certainty that approached fulfilment. It was strange, it was bewildering; it seemed to him as though something from that under-self he could never properly reach within him, pushed upwards with a kind of aggressive violence towards the surface. It was both sweet and vital. Behind the ‘something’ was the ‘some one’ who led it into action.

At half-past six he strolled down a deserted St. James’s Street, passed the door of his club with no temptation to go in, and climbed the stairs slowly to his rooms. His body was languid though his mind alert. He sank into an arm-chair beside the open window. ‘I must *do* something to-night,’ he thought eagerly; ‘mere reading at the club is out of the question. I’ll go to a theatre or — or — .’ He considered various alternatives, deciding finally upon Richmond Park. He loved long walks at night when his mind was restless thus; the air in Richmond Park was peculiarly fresh and scented after dark. He knew the little gate that was never closed. He would dine lightly, and go for a ten-mile stretch among the oaks, surprise the deer asleep, listen to the hum of distant London, and watch the fairy battle between the lurid reflection of its million lights and the little stars…. There were places in the bracken where….

The rumbling clatter of a railway van disturbed the picture. His mind followed the noise instead. Thought flashed along the street to a station. He saw trains…

‘Come at once! You’re wanted here — some one calls you!’ sounded a breathless merry voice beside him. ‘Come quickly; aussi schnell que moglich!’

There was a great gulp of happiness in him; his spirit plunged in joy. He turned and looked about him swiftly. That singing voice, with its impudent mingling of languages was unmistakable.

‘From the Pleiades. Look sharp! You’ve been further off than ever lately, and further is further than farther — much! Over the forests and into the cave, that is the way we must all behave — !’

He opened an eye.

Between him and a great gold sunset ran the wind. It was a slender violet wind. The sunset, however, was in the act of disappearing for the

Scaffolding of Dusk was passing through the air — he saw the slung trellis-work about him, the tracery of a million lines, the guy-ropes, uprights, and the feathery threads of ebony that trailed the Night behind them like a mighty cloth. There was a fluttering as of innumerable wings.

‘You needn’t tug like that,’ he gasped. ‘I’m coming all right. I’m out!’

‘But you’re so slow and sticky,’ she insisted. ‘You’ve been sticky like this for weeks now!’

He saw the bright brown eyes and felt the hair all over his face like a bath of perfume. They rushed together. His heart beat faster….

‘Who wants me in such a hurry?’ he cried, the moment he was disentangled. Laughter ran past him on every side from the world of trees.

‘As if you didn’t know! What *is* the good of pretending any longer! You’re both together in the Network, and you know it just as well as she does!’

Pretending! Just as well as *she* does!

As though he had eyes all over his body he saw the Net of Stars above him. Below were forests, vineyards, meadows, and the tiny lights of houses. In the distance shimmered the waters of a familiar lake. Great purple mountains rolled against the sky line. But immediately over his head, close yet also distant, filling the entire heavens, there hung a glittering Pattern that he knew, grown now so vast that at first he scarcely recognised its dazzling loveliness. From the painted western horizon it stretched to other fastenings that dipped below the world, where the East laid its gulfs of darkness to surprise the sun. It swung proudly down, as though hung from the Pole Star towards the north, and while the Great Bear ‘pointers’ tossed its embroidery across Cassiopeia, the Pleiades, just rising, flung its further fringes down to Orion, waiting in wonder to receive them far below the horizon. Old Sirius wore one breadth of it across his stupendous shoulder, and Aldebaran, with fingers of bronze and fire, drew it delicately as with golden leashes over the sleeping world.

When first he saw it, there was this gentle fluttering as of wings through all its intricate parts, but the same moment four shooting stars pierced its outlying edges with flying nails of gold. It steadied and grew taut.

‘There she is!’ cried Monkey, flashing away like a comet towards the Cave. ‘You’ll catch it now — and you deserve to!’ She turned a brilliant somersault and vanished.

Then, somehow, the vast Pattern settled into a smaller scale, so that he saw it closer, clearer, and without confusion. Beauty and wonder focused for his sight. The perfected design of Daddy’s fairy story floated down into his heart without a hint of wumbling. Never had he seen it so luminous and simple. For others, of course, meanwhile had known and understood it. Others believed. Its reality was more intense, thus, than before.

He rose from the maze of tree-tops where he floated, and stretched his arms out, no fear or hesitation in him anywhere. Perched in the very centre of the Pattern, seated like a new-born star upon its throne, he saw that tiny figure who had thrilled him months ago when he caught it in a passing instant, fluttering in the web of Daddy’s story, — both its climax and its inspiration. The twinkling feet were folded now. He saw the soft little eyes that shone like starlight through clear amber. The hands, palms upwards, were stretched to meet his own.

‘You, of course, must come up — to me,’ he heard.

And climbing the lace-like tracery of the golden web, he knelt before her. But, almost before both knees were bent, her hands had caught him — the touch ran like a sheath of fire through every nerve — and he was seated beside her in that shining centre.

‘But why did it suddenly grow small?’ he asked at once. He felt absolutely at home. It was like speaking to a child who loved him utterly, and whom he, in his turn, knew intimately inside out.

‘Because you suddenly understood,’ was the silvery, tiny answer. ‘When you understand, you bring everything into yourself, small as a toy. It is size that bewilders. Men make size. Fairy things, like stars and tenderness, are always small.’

‘Of course,’ he said; ‘as if I didn’t know it already!’

‘Besides,’ she laughed, half closing her brilliant eyes and peering at him mischievously, ‘I like everything so tiny that you can find it inside a shell. That makes it possible to do big things.’

‘Am *I* too big — ?’ he exclaimed, aware of clumsiness before this exquisite daintiness.

‘A little confused, that’s all,’ her laughter rippled. ‘You want smoothing down. I’ll see to that.’

He had the feeling, as she said it, that his being included the entire Pattern, even to its most distant edges where it fastened on to the rim of the universe. From this huge sensation, he came back swiftly to its tiny correspondence again. His eyes turned to study her. But she seemed transparent somehow, so that he saw the sky behind her, and in it, strangely enough — just behind her face — the distant Pleiades, shining faintly with their tender lustre. They reached down into her little being, it seemed, as though she emanated from them. Big Aldebaran guided strongly from behind. For an instant he lost sight of the actual figure, seeing in its place a radiant efflorescence, purified as by some spiritual fire — the Spirit of a Star.

‘I’m here, quite close beside you,’ whispered the tiny voice. ‘Don’t let your sight get troublesome like your size. Inside-sight, remember, is the thing!’

He turned, or rather he focused sight again to find her. He was startled a little. For a moment it seemed like his own voice speaking deep down within himself.

‘Make yourself at home,’ it continued, ‘you belong here — almost as much as I do.’ And at the sound of her voice all the perplexities of his life lay down. It brushed him smooth, like a wind that sets rough feathers all one way,

He remembered again where he was, and what was going on.

‘I do,’ he answered, happy as a boy. ‘I am at home. It is perfect.’

‘Do you, indeed! You speak as though this story were your own!’

And her laugh was like the tinkle of hare-bells in the wind.

‘It is,’ he said; ‘at least I had — I *have*, rather, a considerable hand in the making of it.’

‘Possibly,’ she answered, ‘but the story belongs to the person who first started it. And that person is myself. The story is mine really!’

‘Yours!’ he gasped.

‘Because — I am the story!’

He stared hard to find the face that said this thing. Thought stopped dead a moment, blocked by a marvel that was impossible, yet true.

‘You mean — ?’ he stammered.

‘You heard perfectly what I said; you understood it, too. There’s no good pretending,’ impatience as well as laughter in the little voice. ‘I am the story, — the story that you love.’

A sudden joy burst over him in a flood. Struggle and search folded their wings and slept. An immense happiness wrapped him into the very woof of the pattern wherein they sat. A thousand loose and ineffective moods of his life found coherence, as a thousand rambling strands were gathered home and fastened into place.

And the Pattern quivered and grew brighter.

‘I am the story because I thought of it first. You, as a version of its beauty — a channel for its delivery — belong utterly to me. You can no more resist me than a puddle can resist the stars’ reflection. You increase me. We increase each other.’

‘You say you thought it first,’ he cried, feeling the light he radiated flow in and mingle with her own. ‘But who are you? Where do you come from?’

‘Over there somewhere, I think,’ she laughed, while a ray like fire flashed out in the direction of the Pleiades that climbed the sky towards the East. ‘You ought to know. You’ve been hunting for me long enough!’

‘But who *are* you?’ he insisted again, ‘for I feel it’s you that have been looking for me — I’ve so often heard you calling!’

She laughed again till the whole web quivered. Through her eyes the softness of all the seven Pleiades poured deliciously into him.

‘It’s absurd that such a big thing as you could hide so easily,’ she said. ‘But you’ll never hide again. I’ve got you fast now. And you’ve got me! It’s like being reflected together in the same puddle, you see!’

The dazzling radiance passed as she said it into a clearer glow, and across the fire of it he caught her eyes steadily a moment, though he could not see the face complete. Two brilliant points of amber shone up at him, as stars that peep from the mirror of a forest pool. That mental daylight-searching seemed all explained, only he could not remember now that there was any such thing at all as either searching or daylight. When ‘out’ like this, waking was the dream — the sunlight world forgotten.

‘This Pattern has always been my own,’ she continued with infinite softness, yet so clearly that his whole body seemed a single ear against her lips, ‘for I’ve thought it ever since I can remember. I’ve lived it. This Network of Stars I made ages ago in a garden among far bigger mountains than these hills, a garden I knew vividly, yet could not always find — almost as though I dreamed it. The Net included the — oh, included everything there is, and I fastened it to four big pines that grew on the further side of the torrent in that mountain garden of my dream — fastened it with nails of falling stars. And I made the Pleiades its centre because I loved them best of all. Oh! Orion, Orion, how big and comforting your arms are! Please hold me tight for ever and ever!’

‘But I know it, too, that lovely dream,’ he cried. ‘It all comes back to me. I, too, have dreamed it with you then somewhere — somewhere — !’ His voice choked. He had never known that life could hold such sweetness, wonder, joy. The universe lay within his arms.

‘All the people I wanted to help I used to catch in my Net of Stars,’ she went on. ‘There was a train that brought them up to its edges, and once I got the passengers into the web, and hung them loose in it till they were soaked with starlight, I could send them back happier and braver than they came. It’s been my story ever since I can remember anything — my adventure, my dream, my life. And when the great Net faded a little and wanted brightening, we knew an enormous cavern in the mountains where lost starlight collected, and we used to gather this in thousands of sacks, and wash and paint the entire web afresh. That made it sticky, so that the passengers hung in it longer. Don’t you remember?

They came back with starlight in their hair and eyes and voices — and in their hearts.’

‘And the way you — *we* got them into the Net,’ he interrupted excitedly, ‘was by understanding them — by feeling with them—’

‘Sympathy,’ she laughed, ‘of course! Only there were so many I could not reach and could not understand, and so could never get in. In particular there was some one who ought to have been there to help me. If I could find that some one I could do twice as much. I searched and searched. I hunted through every corner of the garden, through forest, cavern, sky, but never with success. Orion never overtook me! My longing cried every where, but in vain. Oh, Orion, my lost Orion, I have found you now at last!… The Net flashed messages in all directions, but without response. This some one who could make my work complete existed — that I *knew* — only he was hidden somewhere out of sight — concealed in some corner or other, veiled by a darkness that he wove about himself — as though by some funny kind of wrong thinking that obscured the light I searched for and made it too dim to reach me properly. His life or mind — his thought and feeling, that is — were wumbled—’

‘*Wumbled!*’ he cried, as the certainty burst upon him with the password. He stood close to her, opening his arms.

Instantly she placed her golden palm upon his mouth, with fingers that were like soft star-rays. Her words, as she continued, were sweeter than the footfalls of the Pleiades when they rise above the sea.

‘Yet there were times when we were so close that we could feel each other, and each wondered why the other did not actually appear. I have been trying,’ she whispered, oh so dearly, ‘to find you always. And you knew it, too, for I’ve felt you searching too….’

The outlying skirts of the Pattern closed in a little, till the edges gathered over them like a tent of stars. Alone in the heart of the universe they told their secret very softly….

‘There are twin-stars, you know,’ she whispered, when he released her, ‘that circle so close about each other that they look like one. I wonder, oh, I wonder, do they ever touch!’

‘They are apart in order to see one another better,’ he murmured. ‘They watch one another more sweetly so. They play at separation for the joy of coming together again.’

And once more the golden Pattern hid them for a moment from the other stars…. The shafts of night-fire played round and above their secret tent in space…. Most marvellously their beings found each other in the great whispering galleries of the world where Thought and Yearning know that first fulfilment which is the source of action later….

‘So, now that I have found you,’ her voice presently went on, ‘our Network shall catch everybody everywhere. For the Pattern of my story, woven so long ago, has passed through you as through a channel — to another who can give it forth. It will spread across every sky. All, all will see it and climb up.’

‘My scheme—’ he cried, with eager delight, yet not quite certain what he meant, nor whence the phrase proceeded.

‘Was my thought first,’ she laughed, ‘when you were a little boy and I was a little girl — somewhere in a garden very long ago. A ray from its pattern touched you into beauty. Though I could do nothing with it myself, one little ray shot into the mirror of your mind and instantly increased itself. But then, you hid yourself; the channel closed—’

‘It never died, though,’ he interrupted; ‘the ray, I mean.’

‘It waited,’ she went on, ‘until you found children somewhere, and the channel cleared instantly. Through you, opened up and cleaned by them, my pattern rushed headlong into another who can use it. It could never die, of course. And the long repression — I never ceased to live it — made its power irresistible.’

‘Your story!’ he cried. ‘It *is* indeed your story.’

The eyes were so close against his own that he made a movement that was like diving into a deep and shining sea to reach them…. The Pleiades rushed instantly past his face…. Soft filaments of golden texture stroked his very cheeks. That slender violet wind rose into his hair. He saw other larger winds behind it, deeply coloured…. Something made him tremble all over like a leaf in a storm. He saw, then, the crest of the sentinel poplar tossing between him and the earth far, far below. A mist of confusion caught him, so that he knew not where he was…. He made an effort to remember… a violent effort…. Some strange sense of heaviness oppressed him…. He was leaving her.

‘Quick!’ he tried to cry; ‘be quick! I am changing. I am drowsy with your voice and beauty. Your eyes have touched me, and I am — falling asleep!’ His voice grew weaker as he said it.

Her answer sounded faint, and far above him:

‘Give me… your… hand. Touch me. Come away with me… to… my … garden … in the mountains…. We may wake together … You are waking now…!’

He made an effort to find her little palm. But the wind swept coldly between his opened fingers.

‘Waking! — what is it?’ he cried thinly. He thought swiftly of something vague and muddy — something dull, disordered, incomplete. Here it was all glass-clear. ‘Where are you? I can’t find you. I can’t see!’

A dreadful, searching pain shot through him. He was losing her, just when he had found her. He struggled, clung, fought frantically to hold her. But his fingers seized the air.

‘Oh, I shall find you — even when you wake,’ he heard far away among the stars. ‘Try and remember me — when I come. *Try and remember*….’

It dipped into the distance. He had lost her. He caught a glimpse of the Pleiades as he fell at a fearful speed. Some one behind them picked up stars and tossed them after him. They dimmed as they shot by — from gold to white, from white to something very pale. Behind them rose a wave of light that hurt his eyes.

‘Look out! The Interfering Sun!’ came a disappearing voice that was followed by a peal of laughter. ‘I hope you found her, and I hope you caught it well. You deserved to….’

There was a scent of hair that he loved, a vision of mischievous brown eyes, an idea that somebody was turning a somersault beside him — and then he landed upon the solid earth with a noise like thunder.

The room was dark. At first he did not recognise it. Through the open window came the clatter of lumbering traffic that passed heavily down St. James’s Street. He rose stiffly from his chair, vexed with himself for having dozed. It was more than a doze, though; he had slept some thirty minutes by his watch. No memory of any dreams was in him — nothing but a feeling of great refreshing lightness and peace….

It was wonderful, he reflected, as he changed into country clothes for his walk in Richmond Park, how even the shortest nap revives the brain and body. There was a sense that an immense interval had elapsed, and that something very big had happened or was going to happen to him very soon….

And an hour later he passed through the Richmond Gate and found the open spaces of the Park deserted, as they always were. The oaks and bracken rustled in a gentle breeze. The swishing of his boots through the wet grass was the only sound he heard, for the boom and purr of distant London reached him more as touch than as something audible. Seated on a fallen tree, he watched the stars and listened to the wind. That hum and boom of the city seemed underground, the flare it tossed into the sky rose from vast furnaces below the world. The stars danced lightly far beyond its reach, secure and unafraid. He thought of children dancing with twinkling feet upon the mountains….

And in himself there was hum and light as well. Too deep, too far below the horizon for full discovery, he caught the echo, the faint, dim flashings of reflection that are called by men a Mood. These, rising to the surface, swept over him with the queer joy of intoxicating wonder that only children know. Some great Secret he had to tell himself, only he had kept it so long and so well that he could not find it quite. He felt the thrill, yet had forgotten what it was.

Something was going to happen. A new footfall was coming across the world towards him. He could almost hear its delicate, swift tread. Life was about to offer him this delicious, thrilling secret — very soon. Looking up he saw the Pleiades, and the single footfall became many. He remembered that former curious obsession of the Pleiades… and as Thought and Yearning went roaming into space, they met Anticipation, who took them by the hand. It seemed, then, that children came flocking down upon him from the sky, led by a little figure with starry eyes of clearest amber, a pair of tiny twinkling feet, and a voice quite absurdly soft and tender.

‘Your time is coming,’ he heard behind the rustling of the oak leaves overhead, ‘for the children are calling to you — children of your own. And this is the bravest Scheme in all the world. There is no bigger. How can there be? For all the world is a child that goes past your windows crying for its lost Fairyland…!'

It was after midnight when at length he slipped through the Robin Hood Gate, passed up Priory Lane, and walked rapidly by the shuttered houses of Roehampton. And, looking a moment over Putney Bridge; he saw the reflections of the stars in the muddy, dawdling Thames. Nothing anywhere was thick enough to hide them. The Net of Stars, being in his heart, was everywhere. No prisoner could be more securely caught than he was.

CHAPTER XXXII

Asia. The point of one white star is quivering still
Deep in the orange light of widening morn
Beyond the purple mountains: through a chasm
Of wind-divided mist the darker lake
Reflects it: now it wanes: it gleams again
As the waves fade, and as the burning threads
Of woven cloud unravel in the pale air:
'Tis lost! and through yon peaks of cloud-like snow
The roseate sunlight quivers: hear I not
The AEolian music of her sea-green plumes
Winnowing the crimson dawn?
Prometheus Unbound, SHELLEY.

August had blazed its path into September, and September had already trimmed her successor's gown with gold and russet before Henry Rogers found himself free again to think of holidays. London had kept its grip upon him all these weeks while the rest of the world was gay and irresponsible. He was so absurdly conscientious. One of his Companies had got into difficulties, and he was the only man who could save the shareholders' money. The Patent Coal Dust Fuel Company, Ltd., had bought his invention for blowing fine coal dust into a furnace whereby an intense heat was obtainable in a few minutes. The saving in material, time, and labour was revolutionary. Rogers had received a large sum in cash, though merely a nominal number of the common shares. It meant little to him if the Company collapsed, and an ordinary Director would have been content with sending counsel through the post in the intervals of fishing and shooting. But Henry Rogers was of a different calibre. The invention was his child, born by hard labour out of loving thought. The several thousand shareholders believed in him: they were his neighbours. Incompetence and extravagance threatened failure. He took a room in the village near the Essex factories, and gave his personal energy and attention to restoring economical working of every detail. He wore overalls. He put intelligence into hired men and foremen; he spent his summer holiday turning a system of waste into the basis of a lucrative industry. The shareholders would never know whose faithfulness had saved them loss, and at the most his thanks would be a formal paragraph in the Report at the end of the year. Yet he was satisfied, and worked as though his own income depended on success. For he knew — of late this certainty had established itself in him, influencing all he did — that faithful labour, backed by steady thinking, must reach ten thousand wavering characters, merge with awakening tendencies in them, and slip thence into definite daily action. Action was thought materialised. He helped the world. A copybook maxim thus became a weapon of tempered steel. His Scheme was bigger than any hospital for disabled bodies. It would still be cumulative when bodies and bricks were dust upon the wind. It must increase by geometrical progression through all time.

It was largely to little Minks that he owed this positive conviction and belief, to that ridiculous, high-souled Montmorency Minks, who, while his master worked in overalls, took the air himself on Clapham Common, or pored with a wet towel round his brow beneath the oleograph of Napoleon in the attempt to squeeze his exuberant emotion into tripping verse. For Minks admired intensely from a distance. He attended to the correspondence in the flat, and made occasional visits down to Essex, but otherwise enjoyed a kind of extra holiday of his own. For Minks was not learned in coal dust. The combustion was in his eager brain. He produced an amazing series of lyrics and sonnets, though too high-flown, alas, to win a place in print. Love and unselfishness, as usual, were his theme, with a steady sprinkling of ‘the ministry of Thought,’ ‘true success, unrecognised by men, yet noted by the Angels,’ and so forth. His master’s labour seemed to him a ‘brilliant form of purity,’ and ‘the soul’s security’ came in admirably to close the crowded, tortuous line. ‘Beauty’ and ‘Duty’ were also thickly present, both with capitals, but the verse that pleased him most, and even thrilled Albinia to a word of praise, was one that ended— ‘Those active powers which are the Doves of Thought.’ It followed ‘neither can be sold or bought,’ and Mrs. Minks approved, because, as she put it, ‘there, now, is something you can *sell*; it’s striking and original; no editor could fail to think so.’ The necessities of Frank and Ronald were ever her standard of praise or blame.

Thus, it was the first week in October before Rogers found himself free to leave London behind him and think of a change of scene. No planning was necessary…. Bourcelles was too constantly in his mind all these weary weeks to admit of alternatives. Only a few days ago a letter had come from Jinny, saying she was going to a Pension in Geneva after Christmas, and that unless he appeared soon he would not see her again as she 'was,' a qualification explained by the postscript, 'My hair will be up by that time. Mother says I can put it up on Xmas Day. So please hurry up, Mr. Henry Rogers, if you want to see me as I am.'

But another thing that decided him was that the great story was at last in print. It was published in the October number of the Review, and the press had already paid considerable attention to it. Indeed, there was a notice at the railway bookstall on the day he left, to the effect that the first edition was exhausted, and that a large second edition would be available almost immediately. 'Place your orders at once' was added in bold red letters. Rogers bought one of these placards for his cousin.

'It just shows,' observed Minks, whom he was taking out with him.

'Shows what?' inquired his master.

'How many more thoughtful people there are about, sir, than one had any idea of,' was the reply. 'The public mind is looking for something of that kind, expecting it even, though it hardly knows what it really wants. That's a story, Mr. Rogers, that must change the point of view of all who read it — with understanding. It makes the commonest man feel he is a hero.'

'You've put our things into a non-smoker, Minks,' the other interrupted him. 'What in the world are you thinking about?'

'I beg your pardon, I'm sure, sir; so I have,' said Minks, blushing, and bundling the bags along the platform to another empty carriage, 'but that story has got into my head. I sat up reading it aloud to Mrs. Minks all night. For it says the very things I have always longed to say. Sympathy and the transference of thought — to say nothing of the soul's activity when the body is asleep — have always seemed to me—'

He wandered on while his companion made himself comfortable in a corner with his pipe and newspaper. But the first thing Rogers read, as the train went scurrying through Kent, was a summary of the contents of this very Review. Two-thirds of the article was devoted to the 'Star Story' of John Henry Campden, whose name 'entitled his work to a high standard of criticism.' The notice was well written by some one evidently of intelligence and knowledge; sound judgment was expressed on style and form and general execution, but when it came to the matter itself the criticism was deplorably misunderstanding. The writer had entirely missed the meaning. While praising the 'cleverness' he asked plainly between the lines of his notice 'What does it mean?' This unconscious exposure of his own ignorance amused his reader while it also piqued him. The critic, expert in dealing with a political article, was lamentably at sea over an imaginative story.

'Inadequate receiving instrument,' thought Rogers, smiling audibly.

Minks, deep in a mysterious looking tome in the opposite corner, looked up over his cigarette and wondered why his employer laughed. He read the article the other handed to him, thinking how much better he could have done it himself. Encouraged by the expression in Mr. Rogers's eyes, he then imparted what the papers call 'a genuine contribution to the thought upon the subject.'

'The writer quarrels with him,' he observed, 'for not giving what is expected of him. What he has thought he must go on thinking, or be condemned. He must repeat himself or be uncomprehended.

Hitherto' — Minks prided himself upon the knowledge— 'he has written studies of uncommon temperaments. Therefore to indulge in fantasy now is wrong.'

'Ah, you take it that way, do you?'

'Experience justifies me, Mr. Rogers,' the secretary continued. 'A friend of mine, or rather of Mrs. Minks's, once wrote a volume of ghost stories that, of course, were meant to thrill. His subsequent book, with no such intention, was judged by the object of the first — as a failure. It must make the flesh creep. Everything he wrote must make the flesh creep. One of the papers, the best — a real thunderer, in fact — said "Once or twice the desired thrill comes close, but never, alas, quite comes off."'

'How wumbled,' exclaimed his listener.

'It is indeed,' said Minks, 'in fact, one of the thorns in the path of literature. The ordinary clever mind is indeed a desolate phenomenon. And how often behind the "Oxford manner" lurks the cultured prig, if I may put it so.'

‘Indeed you may,’ was the other’s rejoinder, ‘for you put it admirably.’

They laughed a little and went on with their reading in their respective corners. The journey to Paris was enlivened by many similar discussions, Minks dividing his attentions between his master, his volume of philosophy, and the needs of various old ladies, to whom such men attach themselves as by a kind of generous, manly instinct. Minks was always popular and inoffensive. He had such tact.

‘Ah! and that reminds me, Minks,’ said Rogers, as they paced the banks of the Seine that evening, looking at the starry sky over Paris. ‘What do you know about the Pleiades? Anything — eh?’

Minks drew with pride upon his classical reading.

‘The seven daughters of Atlas, Mr. Rogers, if I remember correctly, called therefore the Atlantides. They were the virgin companions of Artemis. Orion, the great hunter, pursued them in Boeotia, and they called upon the gods for help.’

‘And the gods turned ’em into stars, wasn’t it?’

‘First into doves, sir — Peleiades means doves — and then set them among the Constellations, where big Orion still pursues, yet never overtakes them.’

‘Beautiful, isn’t it? What a memory you’ve got, Minks. And isn’t one of ’em lost or something?’

‘Merope, yes,’ the delighted Minks went on. He knew it because he had looked it up recently for his lyric about ‘the Doves of Thought.’ ‘She married a mortal, Sisyphus, the son of Aeolus, and so shines more dimly than the rest. For her sisters married gods. But there is one who is more luminous than the others—’

‘Ah! and which was that?’ interrupted Rogers.

‘Maia,’ Minks told him pat. ‘She is the most beautiful of the seven. She was the Mother, too, of Mercury, the Messenger of the gods. She gave birth to him in a cave on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. Zeus was the father—’

‘Take care; you’ll get run over,’ and Rogers pulled him from the path of an advancing taxi-cab, whose driver swore furiously at the pair of them. ‘Charming, all that, isn’t it?’

‘It is lovely, sir. It haunts the mind. I suppose,’ he added, ‘that’s why your cousin, Mr. Campden, made the Pleiades the centre of his Star Net in the story — a cluster of beautiful thoughts as it were.’

‘No doubt, no doubt,’ his tone so brusque suddenly that Minks decided after all not to mention his poem where the Pleiades made their appearance as the ‘doves of thought.’

‘What a strange coincidence,’ Rogers said as they turned towards the hotel again.

‘Subconscious knowledge, probably, sir,’ suggested the secretary, scarcely following his meaning, if meaning indeed there was.

‘Possibly! One never knows, does one?’

‘Never, Mr. Rogers. It’s all very wonderful.’

And so, towards six o’clock in the evening of the following day, having passed the time pleasantly in Paris, the train bore them swiftly beyond Pontarlier and down the steep gradient of the Gorges de l’Areuse towards Neuchatel. The Val de Travers, through which the railway slips across the wooded Jura into Switzerland, is like a winding corridor cleft deep between savage and precipitous walls. There are dizzy glimpses into the gulf below. With steam shut off and brakes partly on, the train curves sharply, hiding its eyes in many tunnels lest the passengers turn giddy. Strips of bright green meadow- land, where the Areuse flows calmly, alternate with places where the ravine plunges into bottomless depths that have been chiselled out as by a giant ploughshare. Rogers pointed out the chosen views, while his secretary ran from window to window, excited as a happy child. Such scenery he had never known. It changed the entire content of his mind. Poetry he renounced finally before the first ten minutes were past. The descriptions that flooded his brain could be rendered only by the most dignified and stately prose, and he floundered among a welter of sonorous openings that later Albinia would read in Sydenham and retail judiciously to the elder children from ‘Father’s foreign letters.’

‘We shall pass Bourcelles in a moment now! Look out! Be ready with your handkerchief!’ Rogers warned him, as the train emerged from the final tunnel and scampered between thick pine woods, emblazoned here and there with golden beeches. The air was crystal, sparkling. They could smell the forests.

They took their places side by side at the windows. The heights of Boudry and La Tourne, that stand like guardian sentries on either side of the mountain gateway, were already cantering by. The precipices flew past. Beyond lay the smiling slopes of vineyard, field, and orchard, sprinkled with farms and villages, of which Bourcelles came first. The Areuse flowed peacefully towards the lake. The panorama of the snowy Alps rolled into view along the farther horizon, and the slanting autumn sunshine bathed the entire scene with a soft and ruddy light. They entered the Fairyland of Daddy’s story.

‘Voila la sentinelle deja!’ exclaimed Rogers, putting his head out to see the village poplar. ‘We run through the field that borders the garden of the Pension. They’ll come out to wave to us. Be ready.’

‘Ah, oui,’ said Minks, who had been studying phrase books, ‘je vwa.’ But in reality he saw with difficulty, for a spark had got into his eye, and its companion optic, wandering as usual, was suffused with water too.

The news of their arrival had, of course, preceded them, and the row of waving figures in the field gave them a welcome that went straight to Minks’s heart. He felt proud for his grand employer. Here was a human touch that would modify the majesty of the impersonal mountain scenery in his description. He waved his handkerchief frantically as the train shot past, and he hardly knew which attracted him most — the expression of happiness on Mr. Rogers’s face, or the line of nondescript humanity that gesticulated in the field as though they wished to stop the Paris ‘Rapide.’

For it was a *very* human touch; and either Barnum’s Circus or the byeways and hedges of Fairyland had sent their picked representatives with a dance seen usually only in shy moonlit glades. His master named them as the carriage rattled by. The Paris Express, of course, did not stop at little Bourcelles. Minks recognised each one easily from the descriptions in the story.

The Widow Jequier, with garden skirts tucked high, and wearing big gauntlet gloves, waved above her head a Union Jack that knocked her bonnet sideways at every stroke, and even enveloped the black triangle of a

Trilby hat that her brother-in-law held motionless aloft as though to test the wind for his daily report upon the condition of le barometre. The Postmaster never waved. He looked steadily before him at the passing train, his small, black figure more than usually dwarfed by a stately outline that rose above the landscape by his side, and was undoubtedly the Woman of the Haystack. Telling lines from the story's rhymes flashed through Minks's memory as, chuckling with pleasure, he watched the magnificent, ample gestures of Mother's waving arms. She seemed to brush aside the winds who came a-courting, although wide strokes of swimming really described her movements best. A little farther back, in the middle distance, he recognised by his peaked cap the gendarme, Gygi, as he paused in his digging and looked up to watch the fun; and beyond him again, solid in figure as she was unchanging in her affections, he saw Mrs. Postmaster, struggling with a bed sheet the *pensionnaires des Glycines* helped her shake in the evening breeze. It was too close upon the hour of *souper* for her to travel farther from the kitchen. And beside her stood Miss Waghorn, waving an umbrella. She was hatless. Her tall, thin figure, dressed in black, against the washing hung out to dry, looked like a note of exclamation, or, when she held the umbrella up at right angles, like a capital L the fairies had set in the ground upon its head.

And the fairies themselves, the sprites, the children! They were everywhere and anywhere. Jimbo flickered, went out, reappeared, then flickered again; he held a towel in one hand and a table napkin in the other. Monkey seemed more in the air than on the solid earth, for one minute she was obviously a ball, and the next, with a motion like a somersault, her hair shot loose across the sunlight as though she flew. Both had their mouths wide open, shouting, though the wind carried their words all away unheard. And Jane Anne stood apart. Her welcome, if the gesture is capable of being described at all, was a bow. She moved at the same time sedately across the field, as though she intended to be seen separately from the rest. She wore hat and gloves. She was evidently in earnest with her welcome. But Mr. John Henry Campden, the author and discoverer of them all, Minks did not see.

'But I don't see the writer himself!' he cried. 'I don't see Mr. Campden.'

'You can't,' explained Rogers, 'he's standing behind his wife.'

And the little detail pleased the secretary hugely. The true artist, he reflected, is never seen in his work.

It all was past and over — in thirty seconds. The spire of the church, rising against a crimson sky, with fruit trees in the foreground and a line of distant summits across the shining lake, replaced the row of wonderful dancing figures. Rogers sank back in his corner, laughing, and Minks, saying nothing, went across to his own at the other end of the compartment. It all had been so swift and momentary that it seemed like the flash of a remembered dream, a strip of memory’s pictures, a vivid picture of some dazzling cinematograph. Minks felt as if he had just read the entire story again from one end to the other — in thirty seconds. He felt different, though wherein exactly the difference lay was beyond him to discover. ‘It must be the spell of Bourcelles,’ he murmured to himself. ‘Mr. Rogers warned me about it. It is a Fairyland that thought has created out of common things. It is quite wonderful!’ He felt a glow all over him. His mind ran on for a moment to another picture his master had painted for him, and he imagined Albinia and the family out here, living in a little house on the borders of the forest, a strip of vineyards, sunlight, mountains, happy scented winds, and himself with a writing-table before a window overlooking the lake… writing down Beauty.

CHAPTER XXXIII

We never meet; yet we meet day by day
Upon those hills of life, dim and immense:
The good we love, and sleep-our innocence.
O hills of life, high hills! And higher than they,

Our guardian spirits meet at prayer and play.
Beyond pain, joy, and hope, and long suspense,
Above the summits of our souls, far hence,
An angel meets an angel on the way.

Beyond all good I ever believed of thee
Or thou of me, these always love and live.
And though I fail of thy ideal of me,

My angel falls not short. They greet each other.
Who knows, they may exchange the kiss we give,
Thou to thy crucifix, I to my mother.
ALICE MCYNELL.

The arrival at the station interrupted the reverie in which the secretary and his chief both were plunged.

‘How odd,’ exclaimed Minks, ever observant, as he leaped from the carriage, ‘there are no platforms. Everything in Switzerland seems on one level, even the people — everything, that is, except the mountains.’

‘Switzerland *is* the mountains,’ laughed his chief.

Minks laughed too. ‘What delicious air!’ he added, filling his lungs audibly. He felt half intoxicated with it.

After some delay they discovered a taxi-cab, piled the luggage on to it, and were whirled away towards a little cluster of lights that twinkled beneath the shadows of La Tourne and Boudry. Bourcelles lay five miles out.

‘Remember, you’re not my secretary here,’ said Rogers presently, as the forests sped by them. ‘You’re just a travelling companion.’

‘I understand,’ he replied after a moment’s perplexity. ‘You have a secretary here already.’

‘His name is Jimbo.’

The motor grunted its way up the steep hill above Colombier. Below them spread the vines towards the lake, sprinkled with lights of farms and villages. As the keen evening air stole down from forest and mountain to greet them, the vehicle turned into the quiet village street. Minks saw the big humped shoulders of La Citadelle, the tapering church spire, the trees in the orchard of the Pension. Cudrefin, smoking a cigar at the door of his grocery shop, recognised them and waved his hand. A moment later Gygi lifted his peaked hat and called ‘bon soir, bonne nuit,’ just as though Rogers had never gone away at all. Michaud, the carpenter, shouted his welcome as he strolled towards the Post Office farther down to post a letter, and then the motor stopped with a jerk outside the courtyard where the fountain sang and gurgled in its big stone basin. Minks saw the plane tree. He glanced up at the ridged backbone of the building. What a portentous looking erection it was. It seemed to have no windows. He wondered where the famous Den was. The roof overlapped like a giant hood, casting a deep shadow upon the cobbled yard. Overhead the stars shone faintly.

Instantly a troop of figures shot from the shadow and surrounded them. There was a babel of laughter, exclamations, questions. Minks thought the stars had fallen. Children and constellations were mingled all together, it seemed. Both were too numerous to count. All were rushing with the sun towards Hercules at a dizzy speed.

‘And this is my friend, Mr. Minks,’ he heard repeated from time to time, feeling his hand seized and shaken before he knew what he was about. Mother loomed up and gave him a stately welcome too.

‘He wears gloves in Bourcelles!’ some one observed audibly to some one else.

‘Excuse me! This is Riquette!’ announced a big girl, hatless like the rest, with shining eyes. ‘It’s a she.’

‘And this is my secretary, Mr. Jimbo,’ said Rogers, breathlessly, emerging from a struggling mass. Minks and Jimbo shook hands with dignity.

‘Your room is over at the Michauds, as before.’

‘And Mr. Mix is at the Pension — there was no other room to be had—’

‘Supper’s at seven—’

‘Tante Jeanne’s been *grand-cieling* all day with excitement. She’ll burst when she sees you!’

‘She’s read the story, too. Elle dit que c’est le bouquet!’

‘There’s new furniture in the salon, and they’ve cleaned the sink while you’ve been away!…’

The author moved forward out of the crowd. At the same moment another figure, slight and shadowy, revealed itself, outlined against the white of the gleaming street. It had been hidden in the tangle of the stars. It kept so quiet.

‘Countess, may I introduce him to you,’ he said, seizing the momentary pause. There was little ceremony in Bourcelles. ‘This is my cousin I told you about — Mr. Henry Rogers. You must know one another at once. He’s Orion in the story.’

He dragged up his big friend, who seemed suddenly awkward, difficult to move. The children ran in and out between them like playing puppies, tumbling against each in turn.

‘They don’t know which is which,’ observed Jinny, watching the introduction. Her voice ran past him like the whir of a shooting star through space — far, far away. ‘Excuse me!’ she cried, as she cannoned off Monkey against Cousinenry. ‘I’m not a terminus! This is a regular shipwreck!’

The three elder ones drew aside a little from the confusion.

‘The Countess,’ resumed Daddy, as soon as they were safe from immediate destruction, ‘has come all the way from Austria to see us. She is staying with us for a few days. Isn’t it delightful? We call her the little Grafin.’ His voice wumbled a trifle thickly in his beard. ‘She was good enough to like the story — our story, you know — and wrote to me—’

‘My story,’ said a silvery, laughing voice.

And Rogers bowed politely, and with a moment’s dizziness, at two bright smiling eyes that watched him out of the little shadow standing between him and the children. He was aware of grandeur.

He stood there, first startled, then dazed. She was so small. But something about her was so enormous. His inner universe turned over and showed its under side. The hidden thing that so long had brushed his daily life came up utterly close and took him in its gigantic arms. He stared like an unmannered child.

Something had lit the world….

‘This *is* delicious air,’ he heard Minks saying to his cousin in the distance — to his deaf side judging by the answer:

‘Delicious here — yes, isn’t it?’

Something had lit the stars….

Minks and his cousin continued idly talking. Their voices twittered like birds in empty space. The children had scattered like marbles from a spinning-top. Their voices and footsteps sounded in the cobbled yard of La Citadelle, as they scampered up to prepare for supper. Mother sailed solemnly after them, more like a frigate than ever. The world, on fire, turned like a monstrous Catherine wheel within his brain.

Something had lit the universe….

He stood there in the dusk beneath the peeping stars, facing the slender little shadow. It was all he saw at first — this tiny figure. Demure and soft, it remained motionless before him, a hint of childhood’s wonder in its graceful attitude. He was aware of something mischievous as well — that laughed at him…. He realised then that she waited for him to speak. Yet, for the life of him, he could find no words, because the eyes, beneath the big-brimmed hat with its fluttering veil, looked out at him as though some formidable wild creature watched him from the opening of its cave. There was a glint of amber in them. The heart in him went thumping. He caught his breath. Out, jerked, then, certain words that he tried hard to make ordinary —

‘But surely — we have met before — I think I know you—’

He just said it, swallowing his breath with a gulp upon the unfinished sentence. But he said it — somewhere else, and not here in the twilight street of little Bourcelles. For his sight swam somehow far away, and he was giddy with the height. The roofs of the houses lay in a sea of shadow below him, and the street wound through them like a ribbon of thin lace. The tree-tops waved very softly in a wind that purred and sighed beneath his feet, and this wind was a violet little wind, that bent them all one way and set the lines and threads of gold a-quiver to their fastenings. For the fastenings were not secure; any minute he might fall. And the threads, he saw, all issued like rays from two central shining points of delicate, transparent amber, radiating forth into an exquisite design that caught the stars. Yet the stars were not reflected in them. It was they who lit the stars….

He *was* dizzy. He tried speech again.

'I told you I *should*—' But it was not said aloud apparently.

Two little twinkling feet were folded. Two hands, he saw, stretched down to draw him close. These very stars ran loose about him in a cloud of fiery sand. Their pattern danced in flame. He picked out Sirius, Aldebaran — the Pleiades! There was tumult in his blood, a wild and exquisite confusion. What in the world had happened to him that he should behave in this ridiculous fashion? Yet he was doing nothing. It was only that, for a passing instant, the enormous thing his life had been dimly conscious of so long, rose at last from its subterranean hiding-place and overwhelmed him. This picture that came with it was like some far-off dream he suddenly recovered. A glorious excitement caught him. He felt utterly bewildered.

'Have we?' he heard close in front of him. 'I do not think I have had the pleasure' — it was with a slightly foreign accent— 'but it is so dim here, and one cannot see very well, perhaps.'

And a ripple of laughter passed round some gigantic whispering gallery in the sky. It set the trellis-work of golden threads all trembling. He felt himself perched dizzily in this shaking web that swung through space. And with him was some one whom he knew…. He heard the words of a song:

'Light desire With their fire.'

Something had lit his heart….

He lost himself again, disgracefully. A mist obscured his sight, though with the eyes of his mind he still saw crystal-clear. Across this mist fled droves and droves of stars. They carried him out of himself — out, out, out!… His upper mind then made a vehement effort to recover equilibrium. An idea was in him that some one would presently turn a somersault and disappear. The effort had a result, it seemed, for the enormous thing passed slowly away again into the caverns of his under-self, … and he realised that he was conducting himself in a foolish and irresponsible manner, which Minks, in particular, would disapprove. He was staring rudely — at a shadow, or rather, at two eyes in a shadow. With another effort — oh, how it hurt! — he focused sight again upon surface things. It seemed his turn to say something.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he stammered, ‘but I thought — it seemed to me for a moment — that I — remembered.’

The face came close as he said it. He saw it clear a moment. The figure grew defined against the big stone fountain — the little hands in summer cotton gloves, the eyes beneath the big brimmed hat, the streaming veil. Then he went lost again — more gloriously than before. Instead of the human outline in the dusky street of Bourcelles, he stared at the host of stars, at the shimmering design of gold, at the Pleiades, whose fingers of spun lustre swung the Net loose across the world….

‘Flung from huge Orion’s hand…’

he caught in a golden whisper,

’Sweetly linking
All our thinking….’

His cousin and Minks, he was aware vaguely, had left him. He was alone with her. A little way down the hill they turned and called to him. He made a frantic effort — there seemed just time — to plunge away into space and seize the cluster of lovely stars with both his hands. Headlong, he dived off recklessly… driving at a fearful speed, … when — the whole thing vanished into a gulf of empty blue, and he found himself running, not through the sky to clutch the Pleiades, but heavily downhill towards his cousin and Minks.

It was a most abrupt departure. There was a curious choking in his throat. His heart ran all over his body. Something white and sparkling danced madly through his brain. What must she think of him?

‘We’ve just time to wash ourselves and hurry over to supper,’ his cousin said, as he overtook them, flustered and very breathless. Minks looked at him — regarded him, rather — astonishment, almost disapproval, in one eye, and in the other, apparently observing the vineyards, a mild rebuke.

He walked beside them in a dream. The sound of Colombier's bells across Planeyse, men's voices singing fragments of a Dalcroze song floated to him, and with them all the dear familiar smells: —

Le coeur de ma mie
Est petit, tout petit petit,
J'en ai l'ame ravie….

It was Minks, drawing the keen air noisily into his lungs in great draughts, who recalled him to himself.

'I could find my way here without a guide, Mr. Campden,' he was saying diffidently, burning to tell how the Story had moved him. 'It's all so vivid, I can almost see the Net. I feel in it,' and he waved one hand towards the sky.

The other thanked him modestly. 'That's your power of visualising then,' he added. 'My idea was, of course, that every mind in the world is related with every other mind, and that there's no escape — we are all prisoners. The responsibility is vast.'

'Perfectly. I've always believed it. Ah! if only one could *live* it!'

Rogers heard this clearly. But it seemed that another heard it with him. Some one very close beside him shared the hearing. He had recovered from his temporary shock. Only the wonder remained. Life was sheer dazzling glory. The talk continued as they hurried along the road together. Rogers became aware then that his cousin was giving information — meant for himself.

'… A most charming little lady, indeed. She comes from over there,' and he pointed to where the Pleiades were climbing the sky towards the East, 'in Austria somewhere. She owns a big estate among the mountains. She wrote to me — I've had *such* encouraging letters, you know, from all sorts of folk — and when I replied, she telegraphed to ask if she might come and see me. She seems fond of telegraphing, rather.' And he laughed as though he were speaking of an ordinary acquaintance.

'Charming little lady!' The phrase was like the flick of a lash.
Rogers had known it applied to such commonplace women.

‘A most intelligent face,’ he heard Minks saying, ‘quite beautiful, *I* thought — the beauty of mind and soul.’

‘… Mother and the children took to her at once,’ his cousin’s voice went on. ‘She and her maid have got rooms over at the Beguins. And, do you know, a most singular coincidence,’ he added with some excitement, ‘she tells me that ever since childhood she’s had an idea like this — like the story, I mean — an idea of her own she always wanted to write but couldn’t — —’

‘Of course, of course,’ interrupted Rogers impatiently; and then he added quickly, ‘but how *very* extraordinary!’

‘The idea that Thought makes a network everywhere about the world in which we all are caught, and that it’s a positive duty, therefore, to think beauty — as much a duty as washing one’s face and hands, because what you think *touches* others all day long, and all night long too — in sleep.’

‘Only she couldn’t write it?’ asked Rogers. His tongue was like a thick wedge of unmanageable wood in his mouth. He felt like a man who hears another spoil an old, old beautiful story that he knows himself with intimate accuracy.

‘She can telegraph, she says, but she can’t write!’

‘An expensive talent,’ thought the practical Minks.

‘Oh, she’s very rich, apparently. But isn’t it odd? You see, she thought it vividly, played it, lived it. Why, she tells me she even had a Cave in her mountains where lost thoughts and lost starlight collected, and that she made a kind of Pattern with them to represent the Net. She showed me a drawing of it, for though she can’t write, she paints quite well. But the odd thing is that she claims to have thought out the main idea of my own story years and years ago with the feeling that some day her idea was bound to reach some one who *would* write it—’

‘Almost a case of transference,’ put in Minks.

‘A fairy tale, yes, isn’t it!’

‘Married?’ asked Rogers, with a gulp, as they reached the door. But apparently he had not said it out loud, for there was no reply.

He tried again less abruptly. It required almost a physical effort to drive his tongue and frame the tremendous question.

‘What a fairy story for her children! How *they* must love it!’ This time he spoke so loud that Minks started and looked up at him.

‘Ah, but she has no children,’ his cousin said.

They went upstairs, and the introductions to Monsieur and Madame Michaud began, with talk about rooms and luggage. The mist was over him once more. He heard Minks saying: —

‘Oui, je comprongs un poo,’ and the clatter of heavy boots up and down the stairs, … and then found himself washing his hands in stinging hot water in his cousin’s room.

‘The children simply adore her already,’ he heard, ‘and she won Mother’s confidence at the very start. They can’t manage her long name. They just call her the Little Countess — die kleine Grafin. She’s doing a most astonishing work in Austria, it seems, with children… the Montessori method, and all that….’

‘By George, now; is it possible? Bourcelles accepted her at once then?’

‘She accepted Bourcelles rather — took it bodily into herself — our poverty, our magic boxes, our democratic intimacy, and all the rest; it was just as though she had lived here with us always. And she kept asking who Orion was — that’s you, of course — and why you weren’t here—’

‘And the Den too?’ asked Rogers, with a sudden trembling in his heart, yet knowing well the answer.

‘Simply appropriated it — came in naturally without being asked; Jimbo opened the door and Monkey pushed her in. She said it was her Star Cave. Oh, she’s a remarkable being, you know, rather,’ he went on more gravely, ‘with unusual powers of sympathy. She seems to feel at once what you are feeling. Takes everything for granted as though she knew. I think she *does* know, if you ask me—’

‘Lives the story in fact,’ the other interrupted, hiding his face rather in the towel, ‘lives her belief instead of dreaming it, eh?’

‘And, fancy this!’ His voice had a glow and softness in it as he said it, coming closer, and almost whispering, ‘she wants to take Jinny and Monkey for a bit and educate them.’ He stood away to watch the effect of the announcement. ‘She even talks of sending Edward to Oxford, too!’ He cut a kind of wumbled caper in his pleasure and excitement.

‘She loves children then, evidently?’ asked the other, with a coolness that was calculated to hide other feelings. He rubbed his face in the rough towel as though the skin must come off. Then, suddenly dropping the towel, he looked into his cousin’s eyes a moment to ensure a proper answer.

‘Longs for children of her own, I think,’ replied the author; ‘one sees it, feels it in all she says and does. Rather sad, you know, that! An unmarried mother—’

‘In fact,’ put in Rogers lightly, ‘the very character you needed to play the principal role in your story. When you write the longer version in book form you’ll have to put her in.’

‘And find her a husband too — which is a bore. I never write love stories, you see. She’s finer as she is at present — mothering the world.’

Rogers’s face, as he brushed his hair carefully before the twisted mirror, was not visible.

There came a timid knock at the door.

‘I’m ready, gentlemen, when you are,’ answered the voice of Minks outside.

They went downstairs together, and walked quickly over to the Pension for supper. Rogers moved sedately enough so far as the others saw, yet inwardly he pranced like a fiery colt in harness. There were golden reins about his neck. Two tiny hands directed him from the Pleiades. In this leash of sidereal fire he felt as though he flew. Swift thought, flashing like a fairy whip, cut through the air from an immense distance, and urged him forwards. Some one expected him and he was late — years and years late. Goodness, how his companions crawled and dawdled!

‘… she doesn’t come over for her meals,’ he heard, ‘but she’ll join us afterwards at the Den. You’ll come too, won’t you, Mr. Minks?’

‘Thank you, I shall be most happy — if I’m not intruding,’ was the reply as they passed the fountain near the courtyard of the Citadelle. The musical gurgle of its splashing water sounded to Rogers like a voice that sang over and over again, ‘Come up, come up, come up! You must come up to me!’

‘How brilliant your stars are out here, Mr. Campden,’ Minks was saying when they reached the door of La Poste. He stood aside to let the others pass before him. He held the door open politely. ‘No wonder you chose them as the symbol for thought and sympathy in your story.’ And they climbed the narrow, creaking stairs and entered the little hall where the entire population of the Pension des Glycines awaited them with impatience.

The meal dragged out interminably. Everybody had so much to say. Minks, placed between Mother and Miss Waghorn, talked volubly to the latter and listened sweetly to all her stories. The excitement of the Big Story, however, was in the air, and when she mentioned that she looked forward to reading it, he had no idea, of course, that she had already done so at least three times. The Review had replaced her customary Novel. She went about with it beneath her arm. Minks, feeling friendly and confidential, informed her that he, too, sometimes wrote, and when she noted the fact with a deferential phrase about ‘you men of letters,’ he rose abruptly to the seventh heaven of contentment. Mother meanwhile, on the other side, took him bodily into her great wumbled heart. ‘Poor little chap,’ her attitude said plainly, ‘I don’t believe his wife half looks after him.’ Before the end of supper she knew all about Frank and Ronald, the laburnum tree in the front garden, what tea they bought, and Albinia’s plan for making coal last longer by mixing it with coke.

Tante Jeanne talked furiously and incessantly, her sister-in-law told her latest dream, and the Postmaster occasionally cracked a solemn joke, laughing uproariously long before the point appeared. It was a merry, noisy meal, and Henry Rogers sat through it upon a throne that was slung with golden ropes from the stars. He was in Fairyland again. Outside, the Pleiades were rising in the sky, and somewhere in Bourcelles — in the rooms above Beguin’s shop, to be exact — some one was waiting, ready to come over to the Den. His thoughts flew wildly. Passionate longing drove behind them. ‘You must come up to me,’ he heard. They all were Kings and Queens.

He played his part, however; no one seemed to notice his preoccupation. The voices sounded now far, now near, as though some wind made sport with them; the faces round him vanished and reappeared; but he contrived cleverly, so that none remarked upon his absent-mindedness. Constellations do not stare at one another much.

‘Does your Mother know you’re “out”?’ asked Monkey once beside him — it was the great joke now, since the Story had been read — and as soon as she was temporarily disposed of, Jimbo had serious information to impart from the other side. ‘She’s a real Countess,’ he said, speaking as man to man. ‘I suppose if she went to London she’d know the King — visit him, like that?’

Bless his little heart! Jimbo always knew the important things to talk about.

There were bursts of laughter sometimes, due usually to statements made abruptly by Jane Anne — as when Mother, discussing the garden with Minks, reviled the mischievous birds: —

‘They want thinning badly,’ she said.

‘Why don’t they take more exercise, then?’ inquired Jinny gravely.

And in these gusts of laughter Rogers joined heartily, as though he knew exactly what the fun was all about. In this way he deceived everybody and protected himself from discovery. And yet it seemed to him that he shouted his secret aloud, not with his lips indeed, but with his entire person. Surely everybody knew it…! He was self- conscious as a schoolgirl.

‘You must come up — to me,’ rang continuously through his head like bells. ‘You must come up to me.’

CHAPTER XXXIV

How many times do I love thee, dear?
Tell me how many thoughts there be
In the atmosphere
Of a new fall’n year,
Whose white and sable hours appear
The latest flake of Eternity: —
So many times do I love thee, dear.

How many times do I love again?
Tell me how many beads there are
In a silver chain
Of evening rain,
Unravelled from the tumbling main,
And threading the eye of a yellow star: —
So many times do I love again.
THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES.

A curious deep shyness settled upon Henry Rogers as they all trooped over to the Den. The others gabbled noisily, but to him words came with difficulty. He felt like a boy going up for some great test, examination, almost for judgment. There was an idea in him that he must run and hide somewhere. He saw the huge outline of Orion tilting up above the Alps, slanting with the speed of his eternal hunt to seize the Pleiades who sailed ever calmly just beyond his giant arms. Yet what that old Hunter sought was at last within his reach. He knew it, and felt the awe of capture rise upon him.

‘You’ve eaten so much supper you can’t speak,’ said Monkey, whose hand was in his coat-pocket for loose chicken-feed, as she called centimes. ‘The Little Countess will *regler ton affaire* all right. Just wait till she gets at you.’

‘You love her?’ he asked gently, feeling little disposed to play.

The child’s reply was cryptic, yet uncommonly revealing: —

‘She’s just like a relation. It’s so funny she didn’t know us long, long ago — find us out, I mean.’

‘Mother likes her awfully,’ added Jimbo, as though that established the matter of her charm for ever. ‘It’s a pity she’s not a man’ — just to show that Cousinenry’s position was not endangered.

They chattered on. Rogers hardly remembers how he climbed the long stone steps. He found himself in the Den. It came about with a sudden jump as in dreams. *She* was among them before the courtyard was crossed; she had gone up the steps immediately in front of him…. Jinny was bringing in the lamp, while Daddy struggled with a load of peat for the fire, getting in everybody’s way. Riquette stood silhouetted against the sky upon the window sill. Jimbo used the bellows. A glow spread softly through the room. He caught sight of Minks standing rather helplessly beside the sofa talking to Jane Anne, and picking at his ear as he always did when nervous or slightly ill at ease. He wondered vaguely what she was saying to him. He looked everywhere but at the one person for whose comfort the others were so energetic.

His eyes did not once turn in her direction, yet he knew exactly how she was dressed, what movements she made, where she stood, the very words, indeed, she used, and in particular the expression of her face to each in turn. For he was guilty of a searching inner scrutiny he could not control. And, above all, he was aware, with a divine, tumultuous thrill, that she, for her part, also neither looked at him nor uttered one sentence that he could take as intended for himself.

Because, of course, all she said and did and looked *were* meant for him, and her scrutiny was even closer and more searching than his own.

In the Den that evening there was one world within another, though only these two, and probably the intuitive and diabolically observant Minks, perceived it. The deep furnaces of this man’s inner being, banked now so long that mere little flames had forgotten their way out, lay open at last to that mighty draught before whose fusing power the molten, fluid state becomes inevitable.

‘You must come up to me’ rang on in his head like a chime of bells. ‘O think Beauty: it’s your duty….’

The chairs were already round the open fireplace, when Monkey pushed him into the big one with the broken springs he always used, and established herself upon his knee. Jimbo was on the other in a twinkling. Jane Anne plumped down upon the floor against him. Her hair was up, and grown-ups might sit as they pleased. Minks in a hard, straight-backed chair, firmly assured everybody that he was exceedingly comfortable and really preferred stiff chairs. He found safety next to Mother who, pleased and contented, filled one corner of the sofa and looked as though she occupied a pedestal. Beyond her perched Daddy, on the music stool, leaning his back against the unlighted fourneau. The Wumble Book was balanced on his knees, and beside him sat the little figure of the visitor who, though at the end, was yet somehow the true centre of the circle. Rogers saw her slip into her unimportant place. She took her seat, he thought, as softly as a mouse. For no one seemed to notice her. She was so perfectly at home among them. In her little folded hands the Den and all its occupants seemed cared for beyond the need of words or definite action. And, although her place was the furthest possible remove from his own, he felt her closer to him than the very children who nestled upon his knees.

Riquette then finally, when all were settled, stole in to complete the circle. She planted herself in the middle of the hearth before them all, looked up into their faces, decided that all was well, and began placidly to wash her face and back. A leg shot up, from the middle of her back apparently, as a signal that they might talk. A moment later she composed herself into that attitude of dignified security possible only to the feline species. She made the fourth that inhabited this world within a world. Rogers, glancing up suddenly from observing her, caught — for the merest fraction of an instant — a flash of starfire in the air. It darted across to him from the opposite end of the horse- shoe. Behind it flickered the tiniest smile a human countenance could possibly produce.

’Little mouse who, lost in wonder,
 Flicks its whiskers at the thunder.’

It was Jane Anne repeating the rhyme for Minks’s benefit. How appropriately it came in, he thought. And voices were set instantly in motion; it seemed that every one began to speak at once.

Who finally led the conversation, or what was actually said at first, he has no more recollection than the man in the moon, for he only heard the silvery music of a single voice. And that came rarely. He felt washed in glory from head to foot. In a dream of happy starlight he swam and floated. He hid his face behind the chair of Monkey, and his eyes were screened below the welcome shelter of Jimbo's shoulder.

The talk meanwhile flowed round the horse-shoe like a river that curves downhill. Life ran past him, while he stood on the banks and watched. He reconstructed all that happened, all that was said and done, each little movement, every little glance of the eye. These common things he recreated. For, while his body sat in the Den before a fire of peat, with children, a cat, a private secretary, three very ordinary people and a little foreign visitor, his spirit floated high above the world among the immensities of suns and starfields. He was in the Den, but the Den was in the universe, and to the scale of the universe he set the little homely, commonplace picture. Life, he realised, *is* thought and feeling; and just then he thought and felt like a god. He was Orion, and Orion had at last overtaken the Pleiades. The fairest of the cluster lay caught within his giant arms. The Enormous Thing that so long had haunted him with hints of its approach, rose up from his under-self, and possessed him utterly. And, oh, the glory of it, the splendour, the intoxication!

In the dim corner where *she* sat, the firelight scarcely showed her face, yet every shade of expression that flitted across her features he saw unobscured. The sparkling, silvery sentences she spoke from time to time were volumes that interpreted life anew. For years he had pored over these thick tomes, but heavily and without understanding. The little things she said now supplied the key. Mind and brain played no part in this. It was simply that he heard — and knew. He re- discovered her from their fragments, piece by piece….

The general talk flowed past him in a stream of sound, cut up into lengths by interrupting consonants, and half ruined by this arbitrary division; but what *she* said always seemed the living idea that lay behind the sound. He could not explain it otherwise. With herself, and with Riquette, and possibly with little, dreaming Minks, he sat firmly at the centre of this inner world. The others, even the children, hovered about its edges, trying to get in. That tiny smile had flashed its secret, ineffable explanation into him. Starlight was in his blood….

Mother, for instance, he vaguely knew, was speaking of the years they all had lived in Bourcelles, of the exquisite springs, of the fairy, gorgeous summers. It was the most ordinary talk imaginable, though it came sincerely from her heart.

‘If only you had come here earlier,’ she said, ‘when the forest was so thick with flowers.’ She enumerated them one by one. ‘Now, in the autumn, there are so few!’

The little sparkling answer lit the forest glades afresh with colour, perfume, wonder: —

‘But the autumn flowers, I think, are the sweetest; for they have the beauty of all the summer in them.’

A slight pause followed, and then all fell to explaining the shining little sentence until its lustre dimmed and disappeared beneath the smother of their words. In himself, however, who heard them not, a new constellation swam above the horizon of his inner world. Riquette looked slyly up and blinked. She purred more deeply, but she made no stupid sign….

And Daddy mentioned then the forest spell that captured the entire village with its peace and softness— ‘all so rough and big and tumbled, and yet every detail so exquisitely finished and thought out, you know.’

Out slipped the softest little fairy phrase imaginable from her dim corner then: —

‘Yes, like hand-made things — you can almost see the hand that made them.’

And Rogers started so perceptibly that Jimbo shifted his weight a little, thinking he must be uncomfortable. He had surely used that very phrase himself! It was familiar. Even when using it he remembered wondering whence its sweetness had dropped into his clumsier mind. Minks uncrossed his legs, glanced up at him a moment, then crossed them again. He made this sign, but, like Riquette, he said nothing….

The stream flowed on and on. Some one told a story. There was hushed attentive listening, followed suddenly by bursts of laughter and delight.

Who told it, or what it was about, Rogers had no notion. Monkey dug him in the ribs once because apparently he grunted at the wrong moment, and Jimbo chided her beneath his breath— 'Let him have a nap if he wants to; a man's always tired after a long journey like that…!' Some one followed with another story — Minks, was it, this time? — for Rogers caught his face, as through a mist, turning constantly to Mother for approval. It had to do with a vision of great things that had come to a little insignificant woman on a bed of sickness. He recognised the teller because he knew the tale of old. The woman, he remembered, was Albinia's grandmother, and Minks was very proud of it.

'That's a *very* nice story,' rippled from the dim corner when it was over. 'For I like everything so tiny that you can find it inside a shell. That's the way to understand big things and to do them.'

And again the phrase was as familiar to him as though he had said it himself — heard it, read it, dreamed it, even. Whatever its fairy source, he knew it. His bewilderment increased absurdly. The things she said were so ordinary, yet so illuminating, though never quite betraying their secret source. Where had he heard them? Where had he met this little foreign visitor? Whence came the singular certainty that she shared this knowledge with him, and might presently explain it, all clear as daylight and as simple? He had the odd impression that she played with him, delayed purposely the moment of revelation, even expected that *he* would be the first to make it known. The disclosure was to come from himself! She provided him with opportunities — these little sparkling sentences! But he hid in his corner, silent and magically excited, afraid to take the lead. These sentences were addressed to him. There was conversation thus between the two of them; but his replies remained inaudible. Thought makes no sound; its complete delivery is ever wordless…. He felt very big, and absurdly shy.

It was gesture, however, that infallible shorthand of the mind, which seemed the surest medium of this mute delightful intercourse. For each little gesture that she made — unconsciously, of course — expressed more than the swiftest language could have compassed in an hour. And he noted every one: the occasional flourish of the little hands, the bending of the graceful neck, the shadowy head turned sideways, the lift of one shoulder, almost imperceptible, and sometimes the attitude of the entire body. To him they were, one and all, eloquently revealing. Behind each little gesture loomed a yet larger one, the scale increasing strangely, till his thoughts climbed up them as up a ladder into the region where her ideas lay naked before casual interpretation clothed them. Those, he reflected, who are rich in ideas, but find words difficult, may reveal themselves prodigally in gesture. Expression of one kind or another there must be; yet lavish action, the language of big souls, seems a man's expression rather than a woman's…. He built up swiftly, surely, solidly his interpretation of this little foreign visitor who came to him thus suddenly from the stars, whispering to his inmost thought, 'You must come up to me.' The whole experience dazed him. He sat in utter dumbness, shyer than a boy, but happier than a singing star!… The Joy in his heart was marvellous.

Yet how could he know all this?

In the intervals that came to him like breathing spaces he asked himself this childish question. How could he tell that this little soft being with the quiet unobtrusive manners had noble and great beauty of action in her anywhere? A few pretty phrases, a few significant gestures, these were surely a slight foundation to build so much upon! Was there, then, some absolute communion of thought between the two of them such as his cousin's story tried to show? And had their intercourse been running on for years, neither of them aware of it in the daytime? Was this intimate knowledge due to long acquaintance? Had her thought been feeding him perhaps since childhood even?

In the pause of his temporary lunacy he asked himself a dozen similar questions, but before the sign of any answer came he was off again, sweeping on outstretched wings among the stars. He drank her in. He knew. What was the good of questions? A thirsty man does not stop midway in his draught to ask when his thirst began, its cause, or why the rush of liquid down his throat is satisfying. He knows, and drinks. It seemed to Henry Rogers, ordinary man of business and practical affairs, that some deep river which so long had flowed deep out of sight, hidden below his daily existence, rose now grandly at the flood. He had heard its subterranean murmurs often. Here, in the Den, it had reached his lips at last. And he quenched his thirst…. His thought played round her without ceasing, like flowing water….

This idea of flux grew everywhere about him. There was fluid movement in this world within a world. All life was a flowing past of ceaseless beauty, wonder, splendour; it was doubt and question that dammed the rush, causing that stoppage which is ugly, petty, rigid. His being flowed out to mingle with her own. It was all inevitable, and he never really doubted once. Only before long he would be compelled to act — to speak — to tell her what he felt, and hear her dear, dear answer…. The excitement in him became more and more difficult to control. Already there was strain and tension below his apparent outer calmness. Life in him burst forward to a yet greater life than he had ever known….

The others — it was his cousin's voice this time — were speaking of the Story, and of his proposed treatment of it in its larger version as a book. Daddy was saying, apparently, that it must fail because he saw no climax for it. The public demanded a cumulative interest that worked up to some kind of thrilling denouement that they called a climax, whereas his tale was but a stretch of life, and of very ordinary life. And Life, for the majority, knew no such climax. How could he manage one without inventing something artificial?

'But the climax of life comes every day and every minute,' he heard her answer — and how her little voice rang out above the others like a bell!— 'when you deny yourself for another, and that other does not even know it. A day is lost that does not pin at least one sweet thought against each passing hour.'

And his inner construction took a further prodigious leap, as the sentence showed him the grand and simple motive of her being. It had been his own as well, though he had stupidly bungled it in his search to find something big enough to seem worth doing. She, he divined, found neighbours everywhere, losing no time. He had known a few rare, exquisite souls who lived for others, but here, close beside him at last, was one of those still rarer souls who seem born to — die for others…. They give so unsparingly of their best…. To his imaginative interpretation of her he gave full rein…. And it was instantaneous as creation….

The voices of Minks and Mother renewed the stream of sound that swept by him then, though he caught no words that were comparable in value to these little singing phrases that she used from time to time. Jimbo, bored by the grown-up talk that took the place of expected stories, had fallen asleep upon his shoulder; Monkey's hair, as usual, was in his eyes; he sat there listening and waiting with a heart that beat so loudly he thought the children must feel it and ask him what was the matter. Jinny stirred the peat from time to time. The room was full of shadows. But, for him, the air grew brighter every minute, and in this steady brilliance he saw the little figure rise and grow in grandeur till she filled all space.

'You called it "getting out" while the body is asleep,' came floating through the air through the sound of Jimbo's breathing, 'whereas *I* called it getting away from self while personal desire is asleep. But the idea is the same….'

His cousin's words that called forth this criticism he had not heard.
It was only her sentence that seemed to reach him.

From the river of words and actions men call life she detained, it seemed to him, certain that were vital and important in some symbolical sense; she italicised them, made them her own — then let them go to join the main stream again. This selection was a kind of genius. The river did not overwhelm her as it overwhelms most, because the part of it she did not need for present action she ignored, while yet she swam in the whole of it, shirking nothing.

This was the way he saw her — immediately. And, whether it was his own invention, or whether it was the divination of a man in the ecstasy of sudden love, it was vital because he felt it, and it was real because he believed it. Then why seek to explain the amazing sense of intimacy, the certainty that he had known her always? The thing was *there*; explanation could bring it no nearer. He let the explanations go their way; they floated everywhere within reach; he had only to pocket them and take them home for study at his leisure afterwards — with her.

'But, we *shall* come to it in time,' he caught another flying sentence that reached him through the brown tangle of Monkey's hair. It was spoken with eager emphasis. 'Does not every letter you write begin with *dear*?….'

All that she said added something to life, it seemed, like poetry which, he remembered, 'enriches the blood of the world.' The selections were not idle, due to chance, but belonged to some great Scheme, some fairy edifice she built out of the very stuff of her own life. Oh, how utterly he understood and knew her. The poison of intellectuality, thank heaven, was not in her, yet she created somehow; for all she touched, with word or thought or gesture, turned suddenly alive in a way he had never known before. The world turned beautiful and simple at her touch….

Even the commonest things! It was miraculous, at least in its effect upon himself. Her simplicity escaped all signs of wumbling. She had no favourite and particular Scheme for doing good, but did merely what was next her at the moment to be done. She *was* good. In her little person glowed a great enthusiasm for life. She created neighbours. And, as the grandeur of her insignificance rose before him, his own great Scheme for Disabled Thingumabobs that once had filled the heavens, shrank down into the size of a mere mouse-trap that would go into his pocket. In its place loomed up another that held the beauty of the Stars. How little, when announcing it to Minks weeks and weeks ago, had he dreamed the form it was to take!

And so, wrapped in this glory of the stars, he dreamed on in his corner, fashioning this marvellous interpretation of a woman he had never seen before, and never spoken with. It was all so different to ordinary falling in love at sight, that the phrase never once occurred to him. It was consummated in a moment — out there, beside the fountain when he saw her first, shadowy, with brilliant, peering eyes. It seemed perfect instantly, a recovery of something he had always known. And who shall challenge the accuracy of his vision, or call its sudden maturity impossible? For where one sees the surface only, another sees the potentialities below. To believe in these is to summon them into activity, just as to think the best of a person ever brings out that best. Are we not all potential splendours?

Swiftly, in a second, he reviewed the shining sentences that revealed her to him: The ‘autumn flowers’ — she lived, then, in the Present, without that waste of energy which is regret! In ‘a little shell’ lay the pattern of all life, — she saw the universe in herself and lived, thus, in the Whole! To be ‘out’ meant forgetting self; and life’s climax is at every minute of the day — she understood, that is, the growth of the soul, due to acceptance of what every minute brings, however practical, dull, uninteresting. By recreating the commonest things, she found a star in each. And her world was made up of neighbours — for ‘every letter that one writes begins with *dear*!’

The Pattern matured marvellously before his eyes; and its delicate embroideries, far out of sight, seemed the arabesques that yearnings, hitherto unfulfilled, had traced long long ago with the brush of tender thinking. Together, though at opposite ends of the world, these two had woven the great Net of sympathy, thought, and longing in which at last they both were prisoners … and with them all the earth.

The figure of Jane Anne loomed before him like an ogress suddenly.

‘Cousinenry, *will* you answer or will you *not*? Daddy’s already asked you twenty times at least!’ Then, below her breath, as she bent over him, ‘The Little Countess will think you awf’ly rude if you go to sleep and snore like this.’

He looked up. He felt a trifle dazed. For a moment he had forgotten where he was. How dark the room had grown! Only — he was sure he had not snored.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he stammered, ‘but I was only thinking — how wonderful you — how wonderful it all is, isn’t it? I was listening. I heard perfectly.’

‘You were dozing,’ whispered Monkey. ‘Daddy wants the Countess to tell you how she knew the story long ago, or something. *Ecoute un peu, man vieux*!’

‘I should love to hear it,’ he said, louder, sitting up so abruptly in his chair that Jimbo tilted at a dangerous angle, though still without waking. ‘Please, please go on.’

And he listened then to the quiet, silvery language in which the little visitor described the scenery of her childhood, when, without brothers or sisters, she was forced to play alone, and had amused herself by imagining a Net of Constellations which she nailed by shooting stars to four enormous pine trees that grew across the torrent. She described the great mountains that enclosed her father’s estate, her loneliness in this giant garden, due to his morose severity of character, her yearnings to escape and see the big world beyond the ridges. All her thought and longing went to the fashioning of this Net, and every night she flung it far across the peaks and valleys to catch companions with whom she might play. The characters in her fairy books came out of the pages to help her, and sometimes when they drew it in, it was so heavy with the people entangled in its meshes that they could scarcely move it. But the moment all were out, the giant Net, relieved of their weight, flew back into the sky. The Pleiades were its centre, because she loved the Pleiades best of all, and Orion pursued its bright shape with passion, yet could never quite come up with it.

‘And these people whom you caught,’ whispered Rogers from his corner, listening to a tale he knew as well as she did, ‘you kept them prisoners?’

‘I first put into them all the things I longed to do myself in the big world, and then flung them back again into their homes and towns and villages—’

‘Excepting one,’ he murmured.

‘Who was so big and clumsy that he broke the meshes and so never got away.’ She laughed, while the children stared at their cousin, wondering how he knew as much as she did. ‘He stayed with me, and showed me how to make our prisoners useful afterwards by painting them all over with starlight which we collected in a cave. Then they went back and dazzled others everywhere by their strange, alluring brilliance. We made the whole world over in this way—’

‘Until you lost him.’

‘One cloudy night he disappeared, yes, and I never found him again. There was a big gap between the Pleiades and Orion where he had tumbled through. I named him Orion after that; and I would stand at night beneath the four great pine trees and call and call, but in vain. “You must come up to me! You must come up to me!” I called, but got no answer—’

‘Though you knew quite well where he had fallen to, and that he was only hiding—’

‘Excuse me, but *how* did she know?’ inquired Jinny abruptly.

The Little Countess laughed. ‘I suppose — because the threads of the Net were so sensitive that they went on quivering long after he tumbled out, and so betrayed the direction—’

‘And afterwards, when you got older, Grafin,’ interrupted Daddy, who wished his cousin to hear the details of the extraordinary coincidence, ‘you elaborated your idea—’

‘Yes, that thought and yearning always fulfil themselves somewhere, somehow, sooner or later,’ she continued. ‘But I kept the imagery of my Star Net in which all the world lies caught, and I used starlight as the symbol of that sympathy which binds every heart to every other heart. At my father’s death, you see, I inherited his property. I escaped from the garden which had been so long my prison, and I tried to carry out in practical life what I had dreamed there as a child. I got people together, where I could, and formed Thinkers’ Guilds — people, that is, who agreed to think beauty, love, and tolerance at given hours in the day, until the habit, once formed, would run through all their lives, and they should go about as centres of light, sweetening the world. Few have riches, fewer still have talent, but all can think. At least, one would *think* so, wouldn’t one?’ — with a smile and a fling of her little hands.

She paused a moment, and then went on to describe her failure. She told it to them with laughter between her sentences, but among her listeners was one at least who caught the undertone of sadness in the voice.

‘For, you see, that was where I made my mistake. People would do anything in the world rather than think. They would work, give money, build schools and hospitals, make all manner of sacrifices — only — they would not think; because, they said, there was no visible result.’ She burst out laughing, and the children all laughed too.

‘I should think not indeed,’ ventured Monkey, but so low that no one heard her.

‘And so you went on thinking it all alone,’ said Rogers in a low voice.

‘I tried to write it first as a story,’ she answered softly, ‘but found that was beyond me; so I went on thinking it all alone, as you say—’

‘Until the Pattern of your thought floated across the world to me,’ said Daddy proudly. ‘I imagined I was inspired; instead I was a common, unoriginal plagiarist!’

‘Like all the rest of us,’ she laughed.

‘Mummie, what *is* a plagiarist?’ asked Jinny instantly; and as Rogers, her husband, and even Minks came hurriedly to her aid, the spell of the strange recital was broken, and out of the turmoil of voices the only thing distinctly heard was Mother exclaiming with shocked surprise: —

‘Why, it’s ten o’clock! Jimbo, Monkey, please plagiarise off to bed at once!’ — in a tone that admitted of no rejoinder or excuses.

‘A most singular thing, isn’t it, Henry?’ remarked the author, coming across to his side when the lamp was lit and the children had said their good-nights.

‘I really think we ought to report it to the Psychical Society as a genuine case of thought-transference. You see, what people never properly realise is —’

But Henry Rogers lost the remainder of the sentence even if he heard the beginning, for his world was in a state of indescribable turmoil, one emotion tumbling wildly upon the heels of another. He was elated to intoxication. The room spun round him. The next second his heart sank down into his boots. He only caught the end of the words she was saying to Mother across the room: —

‘… but I must positively go to-morrow, I’ve already stayed too long. So many things are waiting at home for me to do. I must send a telegram and….’

His cousin’s wumbling drowned the rest. He was quite aware that Rogers was not listening to him.

‘… your great kindness in writing to him, and then coming yourself,’ Mother was saying. ‘It’s such an encouragement. I can’t tell you how much he — we—’

‘And you’ll let me write to you about the children,’ she interrupted, ‘the plans we discussed, you know….’

Rogers broke away from his cousin with a leap. It felt at least like a leap. But he knew not where to go or what to say. He saw Minks standing with Jane Anne again by the fourneau, picking at his ear. By the open window with Mother stood the little visitor. She was leaving to-morrow. A torturing pain like twisting knives went through him. The universe was going out!… He saw the starry sky behind her. Daddy went up and joined them, and he was aware that the three of them talked all at once for what seemed an interminable time, though all he heard was his cousin’s voice repeating at intervals, ‘But you *can’t* send a telegram before eight o’clock to-morrow morning in any case; the post is closed….’

And then, suddenly, the puzzle reeled and danced before his eyes. It dissolved into a new and startling shape that brought him to his senses with a shock. There had been a swift shuffling of the figures.

Minks and his cousin were helping her into her cloak. She *was* going.

One of them — he knew not which — was offering politely to escort her through the village.

It sounded like his own sentence of exile, almost of death. Was he forty years of age, or only fifteen? He felt awkward, tongue-tied, terrified.

They were already in the passage. Mother had opened the door into the yard.

‘But your way home lies down the hill,’ he heard the silver voice, ‘and to go with me you must come up. I can easily—’

Above the leaves of the plane tree he saw the stars. He saw Orion and the Pleiades. The Fairy Net flung in and caught him. He found his voice.

In a single stride he was beside her. Minks started at his sudden vehemence and stepped aside.

‘*I* will take you home, Countess, if I may,’ and his tone was so unnecessarily loud and commanding that Mother turned and stared. ‘Our direction lies together. I will come up — with you.’

She did not even look at him. He saw that tiny smile that was like the flicker of a star — no more. But he heard her answer. It seemed to fill the sky.

‘Thank you. I might lose my way alone.’

And, before he realised how she managed it, they had crossed the cobbled yard, Daddy was swinging away downhill towards the carpenter’s, and Minks behind them, at the top of the stone steps, was saying his last good-night to Mother. With the little visitor beside him, he passed the singing fountain and led her down the deserted village street beneath the autumn stars.

Three minutes later they were out of sight… when Minks came down the steps and picked his way among the shadows after Daddy, who had the latch-key of the carpenter’s house. He ran to overtake him.

And he ran upon his toes
As softly as a saying does,
For so the saying goes!

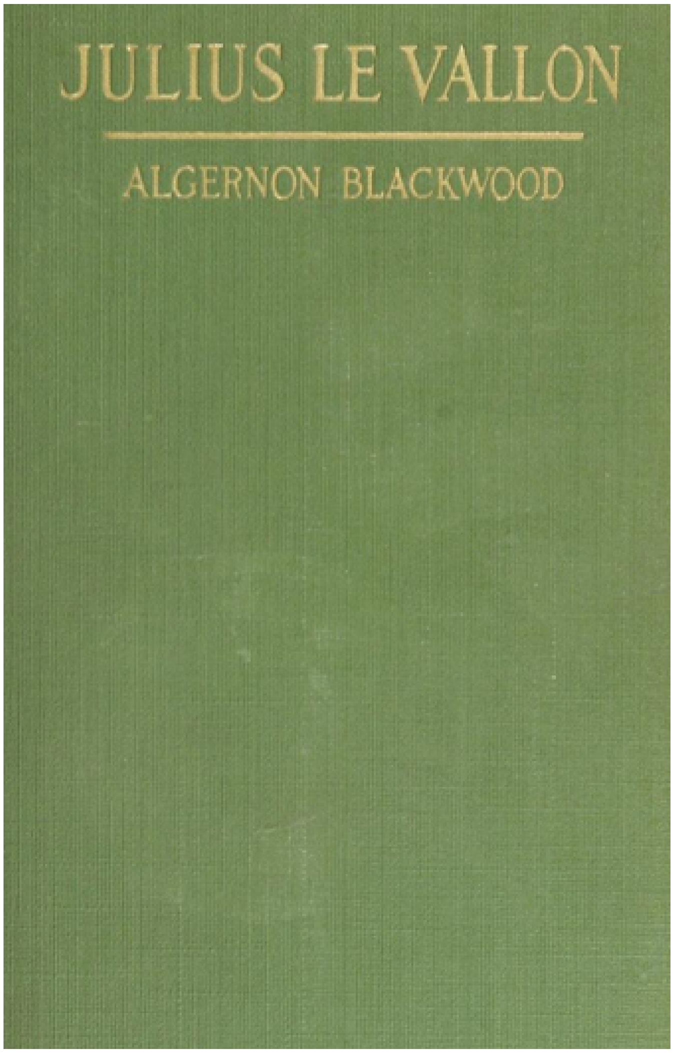
His thoughts were very active, but as clear as day. He was thinking whether German was a difficult language to acquire, and wondering whether a best man at a wedding ought to wear white gloves or not. He decided to ask Albinia. He wrote the letter that very night before he went to sleep.

And, while he slept, Orion pursued the Pleiades across the sky, and numerous shooting stars fastened the great Net of thought and sympathy close over little Bourcelles.

THE END

Julius Le Vallon (1916)

This novel, subtitled “An Episode”, first appeared in 1916, although it had been written earlier in 1912. *Julius Le Vallon* deals with the theme of reincarnation, as the title character lives several lives over many centuries, all the while trying to rectify a mistake perpetrated in prehistoric times, when he released a destructive elemental spirit upon the world. In 1921, Blackwood published a sequel entitled *The Bright Messenger*.


JULIUS LE VALLON
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

Cover of the first U.S. edition

CONTENTS

BOOK I. SCHOOLDAYS
CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
BOOK II. EDINBURGH
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
BOOK III. THE CHÂLET IN THE JURA MOUNTAINS
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX
CHAPTER XX
CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII

CHAPTER XXIII

CHAPTER XXIV

BOOK IV. THE ATTEMPTED RESTITUTION

CHAPTER XXV

CHAPTER XXVI

CHAPTER XXVII

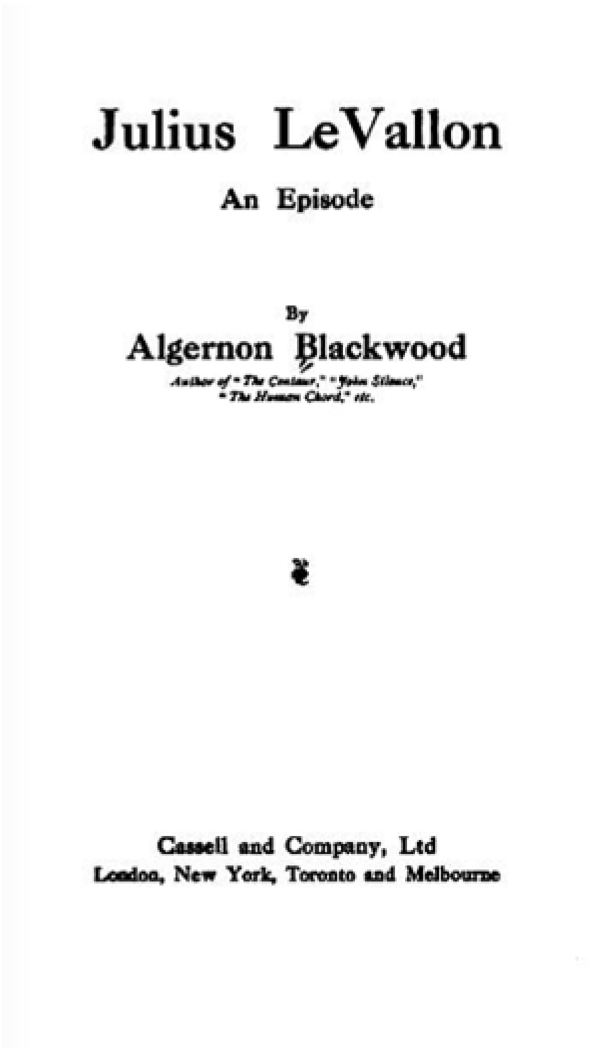
CHAPTER XXVIII

CHAPTER XXIX

CHAPTER XXX

CHAPTER XXXI

CHAPTER XXXII



Julius LeVallon

An Episode

By

Algernon Blackwood

Author of "The Centaur," "John Silence," "The Human Chord," etc.

❦

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TO

M. S-K.

(1906)

BOOK I. SCHOOLDAYS

“*Dream faces bloom around your face*
Like flowers upon one stem;
The heart of many a vanished race
Sighs as I look on them.”
A. E.

CHAPTER I

"*SURELY DEATH ACQUIRES a new and deeper significance when we regard it no longer as a single and unexplained break in an unending life, but as part of the continually recurring rhythm of progress — as inevitable, as natural, and as benevolent as sleep.*"— "Some Dogmas of Religion" (Prof. J. M'Taggart).

IT was one autumn in the late 'nineties that I found myself at Bâle, awaiting letters. I was returning leisurely from the Dolomites, where a climbing holiday had combined pleasantly with an examination of the geologically interesting Monzoni Valley. When the claims of the latter were exhausted, however, and I turned my eyes towards the peaks, it happened that bad weather held permanent possession of the great grey cliffs and towering pinnacles, and climbing was out of the question altogether. A world of savage desolation gloomed down upon me through impenetrable mists; the scouts of winter's advance had established themselves upon all possible points of attack; and the whole tossed wilderness of precipice and scree lay safe, from my assaults at least, behind a frontier of furious autumn storms.

Having ample time before my winter's work in London, I turned my back upon the unconquered Marmolata and Cimon della Pala, and made my way slowly, via Bozen and Innsbruck, to Bâle; and it was in the latter place, where my English correspondence was kind enough to overtake me, that I found one letter in particular that interested me more than all the others put together. It bore a Swiss stamp; and the handwriting caused me a thrill of anticipatory excitement even before I had consciously recalled the name of the writer. It was addressed before and behind till there was scarcely room left for a postmark, and it had journeyed from my chambers to my club, from my club to the university, and thence, by way of various poste-restantes, from one hotel to another till, with good luck little short of marvellous, it discovered me in my room of the Trois Rois Hotel overlooking the Rhine.

The signature, to which I turned at once before reading the body of the message, was Julius LeVallon; and as my eye noted the firm and very individual writing, once of familiar and potent significance in my life, I was conscious that emotions of twenty years ago woke vigorously into being, releasing sensations and memories I had thought buried beyond all effective resurrection. I knew myself swept back to those hopes and fears that, all these years before, had been — me. The letter was brief; it ran as follows:

Friend of a million years, — Should you remember your promise, given to me at Edinburgh twenty years ago, I write to tell you that I am ready. Yours, especially in separation,

Julius LeVallon.

And then followed two lines of instructions how to reach him in the isolated little valley of the Jura Mountains, on the frontier between France and Switzerland, whence he wrote.

The wording startled me; but this surprise, not unmingled with amusement, gave place immediately to emotions of a deeper and much more complex order, as I drew an armchair to the window and resigned myself, half pleasurably, half uneasily, to the flood of memories that rose from the depths and besieged me with their atmosphere of half-forgotten boyhood and of early youth. Pleasurably, because my curiosity was aroused abruptly to a point my dull tutorial existence now rarely, if ever, knew; uneasily, because these early associations grouped themselves about the somewhat unearthly figure of a man with whom once I had been closely intimate, but who had since disappeared behind a veil of mystery to follow pursuits where danger to body, mind and soul — it seemed to me — must be his constant attendant.

For Julius LeVallon, or Julius, as he was known to me in our school and university days, had been once a name to conjure with; a personality who evoked for me a world more vast and splendid, horizons wider, vistas of possibilities more dazzling, than any I have since known — which have contracted, in fact, with my study of an exact science to a dwindled universe of pettier scale and measurement; — and wherein, formerly, with all the terror and delight of vividly imagined adventure, we moved side by side among strange experiences and fascinating speculations.

The name brings back the face and figure of as singular an individual as I have ever known who, but for my saving streak of common sense and inability to imagine beyond a certain point, might well have swept me permanently into his own region of research and curious experiment. As it was, up to the time when I felt obliged to steer my course away from him, he found my nature of great assistance in helping him to reconstruct his detailed mental pictures of the past; we were both "in the same boat together," as he constantly assured me — this boat that travelled down the river of innumerable consecutive lives; and there can be no doubt that my cautious questionings — lack of perspective, he termed it — besides checking certain aspects of his conception, saved us at the same time from results that must have proved damaging to our reputations, if not injurious actually to our persons, physically and mentally. Yet that he captured me so completely at the time was due to an innate sympathy I felt towards his theories, a sympathy that at times amounted to complete acceptance. I freely admit this sympathy. He used another word for it, however: he called it Memory.

As a boy, Julius LeVallon was beyond question one of the strangest beings that ever wore a mortar-board, or lent his soul and body to the conventionalities of an English private school.

I recall, as of yesterday, my first sight of him, and the vivid impression, startling as of shock, he then produced: the sensitive, fine face, pallid as marble, the thatch of tumbling dark hair, and the eyes of changing greeny blue that shone unlike any English eyes I have ever looked upon before or since. "Giglamps" the other boys called them, of course; but when you caught them through the black hair that straggled over the high white forehead, they somehow conveyed the impression of twin lanterns, now veiled, now clear, seen through the tangled shadows of a twilight wood. Unlike the eyes of most dreamers, they looked keenly within, rather than vaguely beyond; and I recall to this day the sharp, half disquieting effect produced upon my mind as a new boy the first instant I saw them — that here was an individual who somehow stood aloof from the mob of noisy, mischief-loving youngsters all about him, and had little in common with the world in which this school was a bustling, practical centre of educational energy.

Nor is it that I recall that first sight with the added judgment of later years. I insist that this moment of his entrance into my life was accompanied by an authentic thrill of wonder that announced his presence to my nerves, or even deeper, to my very soul. My sympathetic nervous system was instinctively aware of him. He came upon me with a kind of rush for which the proper word is startling; there was nothing gradual about it; its nature was electrifying; and in some sense he certainly captivated me, for, immediately upon knowing him, this opening wonder merged in a deep affection of a kind so intimate, so fearless, so familiar, that it seemed to me that I must, somewhere, somehow, have known him always. For years to come it bound me to his side. To the end, moreover, I never quite lost something of that curious first impression, that he moved, namely, in an outer world that did not claim him; that those luminous, inward-peering eyes saw but dimly the objects we call real; that he saw them as counters in some trivial game he deemed it not worth while to play; that while, perforce, he used them like the rest of us, their face-value was as naught compared to what they symbolised; that, in a word, he stood apart from the vulgar bustle of ordinary ambitious life, and above it, in a region by himself where he was forever questing issues of infinitely greater value.

For a boy of fifteen, as I then was, this seems much to have discerned. At the time I certainly phrased it all less pompously in my own small mind. But that first sense of shock remains: I yearned to know him, to stand where he stood, to be exactly like him. And our speedy acquaintance did not overwhelm me as it ought to have done — for a singular reason; I felt oddly that somehow or other I had the *right* to know him instantly.

Imagination, no doubt, was stronger in me at that time than it is to-day; my mind more speculative, my soul, perhaps, more sensitively receptive. At any rate the insignificant and very ordinary personality I own at present has since largely recovered itself. If Julius LeVallon was one in a million, I know that I can never expect to be more than one *of* a million. And it is something in middle age to discover that one can appreciate the exceptional in others without repining at its absence in oneself.

Julius was two forms above me, and for a day or two after my arrival at mid-term, it appears he was in the sick-room with one of those strange nervous illnesses that came upon him through life at intervals, puzzling the doctors and alarming those responsible for his well-being; accompanied, too, by symptoms that to-day would be recognised, I imagine, as evidence of a secondary personality. But on the third or fourth day, just as afternoon “Preparation” was beginning and we were all shuffling down upon our wooden desks with a clatter of books and pens, the door beside the great blackboard opened, and a figure stole into the room, tall, slender, and unsubstantial as a shadow, yet intensely real.

“Hullo! Giglamps back again!” whispered the boy on my left, and another behind me sniggered audibly “Jujubes” — thus Julius was sometimes paraphrased— “tired of shamming at last!” Then Hurrish, the master in charge, whose head had been hidden a moment behind his desk, closed the lid and turned. He greeted the boy with a few kind words of welcome which, of course, I have forgotten; yet, so strange are the freaks of memory, and so instantaneous and prophetic the first intuitions of sympathy or aversion, that I distinctly recall that I liked Hurrish for his words, and was grateful to him for his kindly attitude towards a boy whose very existence had hitherto been unknown to me. Already, before I knew his name, Julius LeVallon meant, at any rate, this to me.

But from that instant the shadow became most potently real substance. The boy moved forward to his desk, looked about him as though to miss no face, and almost immediately across that big room full of heads and shoulders saw — myself.

That something of psychical import passed swiftly between us is indubitable, for while Julius visibly started, pausing a moment in his walk and staring as though he would swallow me with his eyes, there flashed upon my own mind a thought so vivid, so precise, that it took actual sentence form, and before I could possibly have imagined or invented an idea so uncorrelated with a previous experience of any kind at all, I heard myself murmuring: “He’s found me...!”

It seemed audible, at least. I hid my face a second, thinking I had spoken it aloud. No one looked at me, however; Hurrish made no comment. My name did not sound terribly across the class-room. The sentence, after all, had remained a thought. But that it leaped into my mind at all seems to me now, as it did at the time, significant.

His eyes rested for the fraction of a second on my face as he crossed the floor, and I felt — but how describe it intelligibly? — as though a wind had risen and caught me up into another place where there was great light and an impression of vast distances. Hypnotic we should call it to-day; hypnotic let it be. I can only affirm how, with that single glance from a boy but slightly older than myself, seen then for the first time, and with no word yet spoken, there came back to me a larger sense of life, and of the meaning of life. I became aware of an extended world, of wonder, movement, adventure on a scale immensely grander than anything I found about me among known external things. But I became aware— "again." In earlier childhood I had known this bigger world. It suddenly flashed over me that time stretched *behind* me as well as before — and that I stretched back with it. Something scared me, I remember, with a faint stirring as of old pains and pleasures suffered long ago. The face and eyes that called into being these fancies, so oddly touched with alarm, were like those seen sometimes in dreams that never venture into daily life — things of composite memory, no doubt, that bring with them an atmosphere, and a range of query, nothing in normal waking life can even suggest.

He passed to his place in front of Hurrish's desk among the upper forms, and a sea of tousled heads intervened to hide him from my sight; but as he went the afternoon sunshine fell through the unfrosted half of the window, and in later years — now, in fact, as I hold his letter in my hand and re-collect these vanished memories — I still see him coming into my life with the golden sunlight about his head and his face wrapped in its halo. I see it reflected in the lamping eyes, glistening on the mop of dark hair, shining on the pallid face with its high expression of other-worldliness and yearning remote from the chaos of modern life.... It was a long time before I managed to bring myself down again to parse the verbs in that passage of *Hecuba*, for, if anything, I have understated rather than exaggerated the effect that this first sight of Julius LeVallon produced upon my feelings and imagination. Some one, lost through ages but ever seeking me, rose suddenly and spoke: "So here you are, at last! I've found you. We've found each other again!"

To say more could only be to elaborate the memory with knowledge that came later, and thus to distort the first simple and profound impression. I merely wish to present, as it occurred, the picture of this wizard face appearing suddenly above the horizon of my small schoolboy world, staring with that deep suggestion of having travelled down upon me from immense distances *behind*, bringing fugitive and ghostly sensations of things known long ago, and hinting very faintly, as I have tried to describe, of vanished pains and alarms — yet of sufferings so ancient that to touch them even with the tenderest of words is to make them crumble into dust and disappear.

CHAPTER II

"'*BODY,' OBSERVES PLOTINUS, 'is the true river of Lethe.' The memory of definite events in former lives can hardly come easily to a consciousness allied with brain.... Bearing in mind also that even our ordinary definite memories slowly become indefinite, and that most drop altogether out of notice, we shall attach no importance to the naïve question, 'Why does not Smith remember who he was before?' It would be an exceedingly strange fact if he did, a new Smith being now in evidence along with a new brain and nerves. Still, it is conceivable that such remembrances occasionally arise. Cerebral process, conscious or subconscious, is psychical.*"— "Individual and Reality" (E. D. Fawcett).

Looking back upon this entrance, not from the present long interval of twenty years, but from a point much nearer to it, and consequently more sympathetically in touch with my own youth, I must confess that his presence — his arrival, as it seemed — threw a momentary clear light of electric sharpness upon certain "inner scenery" that even at this period of my boyhood was already beginning to fade away into dimness and "mere imagining." Which brings me to a reluctant confession I feel bound to make. I say "reluctant," because at the present time I feel intellectually indisposed to regard that scenery as real. Its origin I know not; its reality at the time I alone can vouch for. Many children have similar experiences, I believe; with myself it was exceptionally vivid.

Ever since I could remember, my childhood days were charged with it — haunting and stimulating recollections that were certainly derived from nothing in this life, nor owed their bright reality to anything seen or read or heard. They influenced all my early games, my secret make-believe, my magical free hours after lessons. I dreamed them, played them, lived them, and nothing delighted me so much as to be alone on half-holidays in summer out of doors, or on winter evenings in the empty schoolroom, so that I might reconstruct for myself the gorgeous detail of their remote, elusive splendour. For the presence of others, even of my favourite playmates, ruined their reality with criticising questions, and a doubt as to their genuineness was an intrusion upon their sacredness my youthful heart desired to prevent by — killing it at once. Their nature it would be wearisome to detail, but I may mention that their grandeur was of somewhat mixed authority, and that if sometimes I was a general like Gideon, against whom Amalekites and such like were the merest insects, at others I was a High Priest in some huge, dim-sculptured Temple whose magnificence threw Moses and the Bible tabernacles into insignificance.

Yet it was upon these glories, and upon this sacred inner scenery, that the arrival of Julius LeVallon threw a new daylight of stark intensity. He made them live again. His coming made them awfully real. They had been fading. Going to school was, it seemed, a finishing touch of desolating destruction. I felt obliged to give them up and be a man. Thus ignored, disowned, forgotten of set deliberation, they sank out of sight and were prepared to disappear, when suddenly his arrival drew the entire panorama delightfully into the great light of day again. His presence re-touched, re-coloured the entire series. He made them true.

It would take too long, besides inviting the risk of unconscious invention, were I to attempt in detail the description of our growing intimacy. Moreover, I believe it is true that the intimacy did not grow at all, but suddenly, incomprehensibly *was*. At any rate, I remember with distinctness our first conversation. The hour’s “prep.” was over, and I was in the yard, lonely and disconsolate as a new boy, watching the others playing tip-and-run against the high enclosing wall, when Julius LeVallon came up suddenly behind me, and I turned expectantly at the sound of his almost stealthy step. He came softly. He was smiling. In the falling dusk he looked more shadow-like than ever. He wore the school cap at the back of his head, where it clung to his tumbling hair like some absurd disguise circumstances forced him to adopt for the moment.

And my heart gave a bound of excitement at the sound of his voice. In some strange way the whole thing seemed familiar. I had expected this. It had happened before. And, very swiftly, a fragment of that inner scenery, laid like a theatre-inset against the playground of to-day, flashed through the depths of me, then vanished.

“What is your name?” he asked me, very gently.

“Mason,” I told him, conscious that I flushed and almost stammered. “John Mason. I’m a new boy.” Then, although my brother, formerly Head of the school, had already gone on to Winchester, I added “Mason secundus.” My outer self felt shy, but another, deeper self realised a sense of satisfaction that was pleasure. I was aware of a desire to seize his hand and utter something of this bigger, happier sensation. The strength of school convention, however, prevented anything of the sort. I was at first embarrassed by the attention of a bigger boy, and showed it.

He looked closely into my face a moment, as though searching for something, but so penetratingly that I felt his eyes actually inside me. The information I had given did not seem to interest him particularly. At the same time I was conscious that his near presence affected me in a curious way, for I lost the feeling that this attention to a new boy was flattering and unusual, and became aware that there was something of great importance he wished to say to me. It was all right and natural. There was something he desired to find out and know: it was not my name. A vague yet profound emotion troubled me.

He spoke then, slowly, earnestly; the voice gentle and restrained, but the expression in the eyes and face so grave, almost so solemn, that it seemed an old and experienced man who addressed me, instead of a boy barely sixteen years of age.

“Have you then ... quite ... forgotten ... everything?” he asked, making dramatic pauses thus between the words.

And, singular in its abruptness though the question was, there flashed upon me even while he uttered it, a sensation, a mood, a memory — I hardly know what to call it — that made the words intelligible. It dawned upon me that I *had* “forgotten ... everything ... quite”: crowded, glorious, ancient things, that somehow or other I ought to have remembered. A faint sense of guiltiness accompanied the experience. I felt disconcerted, half ashamed.

“I’m afraid ... I have,” came my faltering reply. Though bewildered, I raised my eyes to his. I looked straight at him. “I’m — Mason secundus ... now....”

His eyes, I saw, came up, as it were, from their deep searching. They rested quietly upon my own, with a reassuring smile that made them kindly and understanding as those of my own father. He put his hand on my shoulder in a protective fashion that gave me an intense desire to remember all the things he wished me to remember, and thus to prove myself worthy of his interest and attention. The desire in me was ardent, serious. Its fervency, moreover, seemed to produce an effect, for immediately there again rose before my inner vision that flashing scenery I had “imagined” as a child.

Possibly something in my face betrayed the change. His expression, at any rate, altered instantly as though he recognised what was happening.

“You’re Mason secundus now,” he said more quickly. “I know that. But — can you remember nothing of the Other Places? Have you quite forgotten when — we were together?”

He stopped abruptly, repeating the last three words almost beneath his breath. His eyes rested on mine with such pleasure and expectancy in them that for the moment the world I stood in melted out, the playground faded, the shouts of cricket ceased, and I seemed to forget entirely who or where I was. It was as though other times, other feelings, other scenery battled against the actual present, claiming me, sweeping me away, extending the sense of personal identity towards a previous series. Seductive the sensation was beyond belief, yet at the same time disturbing. I wholly ignored the flattery of this kindness from an older boy. A series of vivid pictures, more familiar than the nursery, more distant than a dream of years ago, swam up from some inner region of my being like memories of places, people, adventures I had actually lived and seen. The near presence of Julius LeVallon drew them upwards in a stream above the horizon of some temporarily veiled oblivion.

“... in the Other Places,” his voice continued with a droning sound that was like the sea a long way off, or like wind among the branches of a tree.

And something in me leaped automatically to acknowledge the truth I suddenly realised.

“Yes, yes!” I cried, no shyness in me any more, and plunged into myself to seize the flying pictures and arrest their sliding, disappearing motion. “I remember, oh, I remember ... a whole lot of ... dreams ... or things like made-up adventures I once had ages and ages ago ... with ...” I hesitated a second. A rising and inexplicable excitement stopped my words. I was shaking all over. "... with you!" I added boldly, or rather the words seemed to add themselves inevitably. "It was with you, sir?"

He nodded his head slightly and smiled. I think the "sir," sounding so incongruous, caused the smile.

"Yes," he said in his soft, low voice, "it was with me. Only they were not dreams. They were real. There's no good denying what's real; it only prevents your remembering properly."

The way he said it held conviction as of sunrise, but anyhow denial in myself seemed equally to have disappeared. Deep within me a sense of reality answered willingly to his own.

"And myself?" he went on gently yet eagerly at the same time, his eyes searching my own. "Don't you remember — me? Have I, too, gone quite beyond recall?"

But with truth my answer came at once:

"Something ... perhaps ... comes back to me ... a little," I stammered. For while aware of a keen sensation that I talked with someone I knew as well as I knew my own father, nothing at the moment seemed wholly real to me except his sensitive, pale face with the large and beautiful eyes so keenly peering, and the tangled hair escaping under that ridiculous school cap. The pine trees in the cricket-field rose into the fading sky behind him, and I remember being puzzled to determine where his hair stopped and the feathery branches began.

"... carrying the spears up the long stone steps in the sunshine," his voice murmured on with a sound like running water, "and the old man in the robe of yellow standing at the top ... and orchards below, all white and pink with blossoms dropping in the wind ... and miles of plain in blue distances far away, the river winding ... and birds fishing in the shallow places ..."

The picture flashed into my mind. I saw it. I remembered it in detail as easily as any childhood scene of a few years ago, but yet through a blur of summery haze and at the end of a stupendous distance that reduced the scale to lilliputian proportions. I looked down the wrong end of a telescope at it all. The appalling distance — and something else as well I was at a loss to define — frightened me a little.

“I ... my people, I mean ... live in Sussex,” I remember saying irrelevantly in my bewilderment, “and my father’s a clergyman.” It was the upper part of me that said it, no doubt anticipating the usual question “What’s your father?” My voice had a lifeless, automatic sound.

“That’s now,” LeVallon interrupted almost impatiently. “It’s thinking of these things that hides the others.”

Then he smiled, leaning against the wall beside me while the sunset flamed upon the clouds above us and the tide of noisy boys broke, tumbling about our feet. I see those hurrying clouds, crimson and gold, that scrimmage of boys in the school playground, and Julius LeVallon gazing into my eyes, his expression rapt and eager — I see it now across the years as plainly as I saw that flash of inner scenery far, far away. I even hear his low voice speaking. The whole, strange mood that rendered the conversation not too incredibly fantastic at the time comes over me again as I think of it.

He went on in that murmuring tone, putting true words to the pictures that rolled clearly through me:

“... and the burning sunlight on the white walls of the building ... the cool deep shadows where we talked and slept ... the shouting of the armies in the distance ... with the glistening of the spears and shining shields ...”

Mixed curiously together, kaleidoscopic, running one into the other without sharp outlines of beginning or end, the scenes fled past me like the pages of a coloured picture-book. I saw figures plainly, more plainly than the scenery beyond. The man in the yellow robe looked close into my eyes, so close, indeed, I could almost hear him speak. He vanished, and a woman took his place. Her back was to me. She stood motionless, her hands upraised, and a gesture of passionate entreaty about her plunged me suddenly into a sea of whirling, poignant drama that had terror in it. The blood rushed to my head. My heart beat violently. I knew a moment of icy horror — that she would turn — and I should recognise her face — worse, that she would recognise my own. I experienced actual fear, a shrinking dread of something that was nameless. Escape was impossible, I could neither move nor speak, nor alter any single detail in this picture which — most terrifying of all — I knew contained somewhere too — myself. But she did not turn; I did not see her face. She vanished like the rest ... and I next saw quick, running figures with skins of reddish brown, circlets of iron about their foreheads and red tassels hanging from their loin cloths. The scene had shifted.

"... when we lit the signal fires upon the hills," the voice of LeVallon broke in softly, looking over his shoulder lest we be disturbed, "and lay as sentinels all night beside the ashes ... till the plain showed clearly in the sunrise with the encampments marked over it like stones ..."

I saw the blue plain fading into distance, and across it a swiftly-moving cloud of dust that was ominous in character, presaging attack. Again the scene shifted noiselessly as a picture on a screen, and a deserted village slid before me, with small houses built of undressed stone, and roomy paddocks, abandoned to the wild deer from the hills. I smelt the keen, fresh air and the scent of wild flowers. A figure, carrying a small blue stick, passed with tearing rapidity up the empty street.

"... when you were a Runner to the tribe," the voice stepped curiously in from a world outside it all, "carrying warnings to the House of Messengers ... and I held the long night-watches upon the passes, signalling with the flaming torches to those below ..."

"But so far away, so dim, so awfully small, that I can hardly — —"

The world of to-day broke in upon my voice, and I stopped, not quite aware of what I had been about to say. Martin, the Fourth Form and Mathematical Master, had come up unobserved by either of us, and was eyeing LeVallon and myself somewhat curiously. It was afterwards, of course, that I discovered who the interrupter was. I only knew at the moment that I disliked the look of him, and also that I felt somehow guilty.

"New boy in tow, LeVallon?" he remarked casually, the tone and manner betraying ill-concealed disapproval. The change of key, both in its character and its abruptness, seemed ugly, almost dreadful. It was so trivial.

"Yes, sir. It's young Mason." LeVallon answered at once, touching his cap respectfully, but by no means cordially.

"Ah," said the master dryly. "He's fortunate to find a friend so soon. Tell him we look to him to follow his brother's example and become Head of the school one day perhaps." I got the impression, how I cannot say, that

Martin stood in awe of LeVallon, was even a little afraid of him as well. He would gladly have "scored off" him if it were possible. There was a touch of spite in his voice, perhaps.

"We knew one another before, sir," I heard Julius say quietly, as though his attention to a new boy required explanation — to Martin.

I could hardly believe my ears. This extraordinary boy was indeed in earnest. He had not the smallest intention of saying what was untrue. He said what he actually believed. I saw him touch his cap again in the customary manner, and Martin, the under-master, shrugging his shoulders, passed on without another word. It is difficult to describe the dignity LeVallon put into that trivial gesture of conventional respect, or in what way Martin gained a touch of honour from it that really was no part of his commonplace personality. Yet I can remember perfectly well that this was so, and that I deemed LeVallon more wonderful than ever from that moment for being able to exact deference even from an older man who was a Form Master and a Mathematical Master into the bargain. For LeVallon, it seemed to me, had somehow positively dismissed him.

Yet, to such extent did the pictures in my mind dominate the playground where our bodies stood, that I almost expected to see the master go down the "long stone steps towards the sunny orchard below" — instead of walk up and cuff young Green who was destroying the wall by picking out the mortar from between the bricks. That wall, and the white wall in the dazzling sunshine seemed, as it were, to interpenetrate each other. The break of key caused by the interruption, however, was barely noticeable. The ugliness vanished instantly. Julius was speaking again as though nothing had happened. He had been speaking for some little time before I took in what the words were:

"... with the moonlight gleaming on the bosses of the shields ... the sleet of flying arrows ... and the hissing of the javelins ..."

The battle-scene accompanying the sentence caught me so vividly, so fiercely even, that I turned eagerly to him, all shyness gone, and let my words pour out impetuously as they would, and as they willy-nilly had to. For this scene, more than all the others, touched some intimate desire, some sharp and keen ambition that burned in me to-day. My whole heart was wrapped up in soldiering. I had chosen a soldier's career instinctively, even before I knew quite the meaning of it.

"Yes, rather!" I cried with enthusiasm, staring so close into his face that I could have counted the tiny hairs on the smooth pale skin, "and that narrow ledge high up inside the dome where the prisoners stood until they dropped on to the spear-heads in the ground beneath, and how some jumped at once, and others stood all day, and — and how there was only just room to balance by pressing the feet sideways against the curving wall...?"

It all rushed at me as though I had witnessed the awful scene a week ago. Something inside me shook again with horror at the sight of the writhing figures impaled upon the spears below. I almost felt a sharp and actual pain pierce through my flesh. I overbalanced. It was my turn to fall ...

A sudden smile broke swiftly over LeVallon's face, as he held my arm a moment with a strength that almost hurt.

"Ah, you remember *that!* And little wonder — —" he began, then stopped abruptly and released his grip. The cricket ball came bouncing to our feet across the yard, with insistent cries of "Thank you, ball! Thank you, LeVallon!" impossible to ignore. He did not finish the sentence, and I know not what shrinking impulse of suffering and pain in me it was that felt relieved he had not done so. Instead, he stooped good-naturedly, picked up the ball, and flung it back to the importunate cricketers; and as he did so I noticed that his action was unlike that of any English boy I had ever seen. He did not throw it as men usually throw a ball, but used a violent yet graceful motion that I vaguely remembered to have seen somewhere before. It perplexed me for a moment — then, suddenly, out of that deeper part of me so strangely now astir, the hint of explanation came. It was the action of a man who flings a spear or javelin.

A bell rang over our heads with discordant clangour, and we were swept across the yard with the rush of boys. The transition was abrupt and even painful — as when one comes into the noisy street from a theatre of music, lights and colour. A strong effort was necessary to recover balance and pull myself together. Until we reached the red-brick porch, however, LeVallon kept beside me, and his hurried last phrases, as we parted, were the most significant of all. It seemed as if he kept them for the end, although no such intention was probably in his thought. They left me quivering through and through as I heard them fall from his lips so quietly.

His face was shining. The words came from his inmost heart:

“Well, anyhow,” he said beneath his breath lest he might be overheard, “I’ve found you, and we’ve found each other — at last. That’s the great thing, isn’t it? No one here understands all that. Now, we can go on together where we left off before; and, having found you, I expect I shall soon find her as well. For we’re all three together, and — sooner or later — there’s no escaping anything.”

I remember that I staggered. The hand I put out to steady myself scraped along the uneven bricks and broke the skin. A boy with red hair struck me viciously in the back because I had stumbled into him; he shouted at me angrily too, though I heard no word he said. And LeVallon, for his part, just had time to bend his head down with “work hard and get up into my form — we shall have more chances then,” and was gone into the passage and out of sight — leaving me trembling inwardly as though stricken by some sudden strange attack of nerves.

For his words about the woman turned me inexplicably — into ice. My legs gave way beneath me. A cold perspiration broke out upon my skin. No words of any kind came to me; there was no definite thought; clear recollection, absolutely none. The strange emotion itself I could not put a name to, nor could I say what part was played in it by any particular ingredient such as horror, terror, or mere ordinary alarm. All these were in it somewhere, linked darkly to a sense of guilt at length discovered and brought home. I can only say truthfully that I saw again the picture of that woman with her back towards me; but that, when he spoke, she turned and looked at me. She showed her face. I knew a sense of dreadful chill like some murderer who, after years of careful hiding, meets unexpectedly The Law and sees the gallows darkly rise. A hand of justice — of retribution — seemed stretched upon my shoulder from the empty sky.

I now set down my faithful recollection of what happened; and, incredible as it doubtless sounds to-day, yet it was most distressingly real. Out of what dim, forgotten past his words, this woman’s face, arose to haunt “me” of To-day, I had no slightest inkling. What crime of mine, what buried sin, came as with a blare of trumpets, seeking requital, no slightest hint came whispering. Yet this was the impression I instantly received. I was a boy. It terrified and amazed me, but it held no element of make-believe. Julius LeVallon, myself, and an unknown woman stood waiting on the threshold of the breathless centuries to set some stone in its appointed place — a stone, moreover, he, I, and she, together breaking mighty laws, had left upon the ground. It seemed no common wrong to her, to him, to me, and yet we three, working together, alone could find it and replace it.

This, somehow, was the memory his words, that face, struggled to reconstruct.

I saw LeVallon smiling as he left my side. He disappeared in the way already described. The stream of turbulent boys separated us physically, just as, in his belief, the centuries had carried us apart spiritually — he — myself — and this other. I saw a veil drop down upon his face. The lamps in his splendid eyes were shrouded. At supper we sat far apart, and the bedroom I shared with two other youngsters of my own age and form, of course, did not include LeVallon.

CHAPTER III

“*SOULS WITHOUT A past behind them, springing suddenly into existence, out of nothing, with marked mental and moral peculiarities, are a conception as monstrous as would be the corresponding conception of babies suddenly appearing from nowhere, unrelated to anybody, but showing marked racial and family types.*”— “The Ancient Wisdom” (A. Besant).

As the terms passed and I ceased to be a new boy, it cannot be said that I got to know Julius LeVallon any better, because our intimacy had been established, or “resumed” as he called it, from the beginning; but the chances of being together increased, we became members of the same form, our desks were side by side, and we shared at length the same bedroom with another Fifth Form boy named Goldingham. And since Goldingham, studious, fat, good-natured, slept soundly from the moment his head touched the pillow till the seven o’clock bell rang — and sometimes after it in order to escape his cold bath — we practically had the room to ourselves.

Moreover, from the beginning, it all seemed curiously true. It was not Julius who invented, but I who in my stupidity had forgotten. Long, detailed dreams, too, came to me about this time, which I recognised as a continuation of these of “Other Places” his presence near me in the daytime would revive. They existed, apparently, in some layer deeper than my daily consciousness, recoverable in sleep. In the daytime something sceptical in me that denied, rendered them inaccessible, but once reason slept and the will was in abeyance, they poured through me in a continuous, uninterrupted flow. A word from Julius, a touch, a glance from his eyes perhaps, would evoke them instantly, and I would *see*. Yet he made no potent suggestions that could have caused them; there was no effort; I did not imagine at his bidding; and often, indeed, his descriptions differed materially from my own, which makes me hesitate to ascribe the results to telepathy alone. It was his presence, his atmosphere that revived them. To-day, of course, immediately after our schooldays in fact, they ceased to exist for me — to my regret, I think, on the whole, for they were very entertaining, and sometimes very exquisite. I still retain, however, the vivid recollection of blazing summer landscapes; of people, sometimes barbaric and always picturesque, moving in brilliant colours; of plains, and slopes of wooded mountains that dipped, all blue and thirsty, into quiet seas — scenes and people, too, utterly unlike any I had known during my fifteen years of existence under heavy English skies.

LeVallon knew this inner world far better and more intimately than I did. He lived in it. Motfield Close, the private school among the Kentish hills, was merely for him a place where his present brain and body — instruments of his soul — were acquiring the current knowledge of To-day. It was but temporary. He himself, the eternal self that persisted through all the series of lives, was in quest of other things, "real knowledge," as he called it. For this reason the recollection of his past, these "Other Places," was of paramount importance, since it enabled him to see where he had missed the central trail and turned aside to lesser pursuits that had caused delay. He was forever seeking to recover vanished clues, to pick them up again, and to continue the main journey with myself and, eventually, with — one other.

"I've always been after those things," he used to say, "and I'm searching, searching always — inside myself, for the old forgotten way. We were together, you and I, so your coming back like this will help — —"

I interrupted, caught by an inexplicable dread that he would mention another person too. I said the first thing that came into my head. Instinctively the words came, yet right words:

"But my outside is different now. How could you know? My face and body, I mean —— ?"

"Of course," he smiled; "but I knew you instantly. I shall never forget that day. I felt it at once — all over me. I had often dreamed about you," he added after a moment's pause, "but that was no good, because you didn't dream with me." He looked hard into my eyes. "We've a lot to do together, you know," he said gravely, "a lot of things to put right — one thing, one big thing in particular — when the time comes. Whatever happens, we mustn't drift apart again. We shan't."

Another minute and I knew he would speak of “her.” It was strange, this sense of shrinking that particular picture brought. Never, except in sleep occasionally, had it returned to me, and I think it was my dread that kept it out of sight. Yet Julius just then did not touch the topic that caused my heart to sink.

“I must be off,” he exclaimed a moment later. “There’s ‘stinks’ to mug up, and I haven’t looked at it. I shan’t know a blessed word!” For the chemistry, known to the boys by this shorter yet appropriate name, was a constant worry to him. He was learning it for the first time, he found it difficult. But he was a boy, a schoolboy, and he talked like one.

He never doubted for one instant that I was not wholly with him. He assumed that I knew and remembered, though less successfully, and that we merely resumed an interrupted journey. Pre-existence was as natural to him as that a certain man and woman had provided his returning soul with the means of physical expression, termed body. His soul remembered; he, therefore, could not doubt. It was innate conviction, not acquired theory.

“I can’t get down properly to the things I want,” he said another time, “but they’re coming. It’s a rotten nuisance — learning dates and all these modern languages keeps them out. The two don’t mix. But, now you’re here, we can dig up a jolly sight more than I could alone. And you’re getting it up by degrees all right enough.”

For the principle of any particular knowledge, once acquired, was never lost. It was learning a thing for the first time that was the grind. Instinctive aptitude was subconscious memory of something learned before.

“The pity is we’re made to learn a lot of stuff that belongs to one particular section, and doesn’t run through them all. It clogs the memory. The great dodge is to recognise the real knowledge and go for it bang. Then you get a bit further every section.”

Until my arrival, it seems, he kept these ideas strictly to himself, knowing he would otherwise be punished for lying, or penalised in some other educational manner for being too imaginative. Yet, while he stood aloof somewhat from the common school life, he was popular and of good repute. The boys admired, but stood in awe of him. He pleased the masters almost as much as he puzzled them; for, unlike most dreamy, fanciful youths, he possessed concentration and an imperious will; he worked hard and always knew his lessons. Modern knowledge he found difficult, and only mastered with great labour the details of recent history, elementary science, chemistry, and so forth, whereas in algebra, Euclid, mathematics, and the dead languages, especially Greek, he invariably stood at the head of the form. He was merely re-collecting them.

During the whole two years of our schooldays at the Close, I never heard him use such phrases as "former life" or "reincarnation." Life, for him, was eternal simply, and at Motfield he was in eternal life, just as he always had been and always would be. Only he never said this. He was a boy and talked like a boy. He just lived it. Death to him was an insignificant detail. His whole mind ran to the idea that life was continuous, each section casting aside the worn-out instrument which had been exactly suited to the experience its wearer needed for its development at that time and under those conditions. And, certainly, he never understood that astounding tenet of most religions, that life can be "eternal" by prolonging itself endlessly in the future, without having equally extended endlessly also in the past!

"But *I'm* going to be a general," I said, "when I grow up," afraid that the "real knowledge" might interfere with my main ambition. "I could never think of giving up *that*."

Julius looked up from tracing figures in the sand with the point of his gymnasium shoe. There was a smile on his lips, a light in his eye that I understood. I had said something that belonged to To-day, and not to all To-days.

"You were before," he answered patiently, "a magnificent general, too."

"But I don't remember it," I objected, being in one of my denying moods.

"You want to be it again," he smiled. "It's born in you. That *is* memory. But, anyhow," he added, "you can do both — be a general with your mind and the other thing with your soul. To shirk your job only means to come back to it again later, don't you see?"

Quite naturally, and with profound conviction, he spoke of life's obligations. Physical infirmities resulted from gross errors in the past; mental infirmities, from lost intellectual opportunities; spiritual disabilities, from past moral shirkings and delinquencies: all were methods, moreover, by which the soul divines her mistakes and grows, through discipline, stronger, wiser. He would point to a weakness in someone, and suggest what kind of error caused it in a previous section, with the same certainty that a man might show a scar and say "that came from fooling with a mowing machine when I was ten years old."

The antipathies and sympathies of To-day, the sudden affinities like falling in love at sight, and the sudden hostilities that apparently had no cause — all were due to relationships in some buried Yesterday, while those of To-morrow could be anticipated, and so regulated, by the actions of To-day. Even to the smallest things. If, for instance, Martin vented his spite and jealousy, working injustice upon another, he but prepared the way for an exactly adequate reprisal later that must balance the account to date. For into the most trivial affairs of daily life dipped the spirit of this remarkable boy's belief, revealing as with a torch's flare the workings of an implacable justice that never could be mocked. No question of punishment meted out by another entered into it, but only an impersonal law, which men call — elsewhere — Cause and Effect.

At the time, of course, I was somewhat carried away by the thoroughness with which he believed and practised these ideas, though without grasping the logic and consistency of his intellectual position. I was aware, most certainly, in his presence of large and vitalising sensations not easily accounted for, of being caught up into some unfamiliar region over vast horizons, where big winds blew from dim and ancient lands, where a sunlight burned that warmed the inmost heart in me, and where I seemed to lose myself amid the immensities of an endless, vistaed vision.

This, of course, is the language of maturity. At the time I could not express a tithe of what my feelings were, except that they were vast and wonderful. To think myself back imaginatively, even now, into that period of my youth with Julius LeVallon by my side, is to feel myself eternally young, alive forever beyond all possibility of annihilation or decay; it is, further, to realise an ample measure of lives at my disposal in which to work towards perfection, the mere ageing and casting off of any particular body after using it for sixty years or so — nothing, and less than nothing.

"Don't funk!" I remember his saying once to a boy named Creswick who had "avoided" the charging Hurrish at football. "You can't lose your life.

You can only lose your body. And you’ll lose that anyhow.”

“Crazy lout!” Creswick exclaimed, nursing his ankle, as he confided to another boy of like opinions. “I’m not going to have my bones all smashed to pulp for anybody. Body I’m using at the moment indeed! It’ll be life I’m using at the moment next!”

Which, I take it, was precisely what LeVallon meant.

CHAPTER IV

"*IN THE CASE of personal relations, I do not see that heredity would help us at all. Heredity, however, can produce a more satisfactory explanation of innate aptitudes. On the other hand, the doctrine of pre-existence does not compel us to deny all influence on a man's character of the character of his ancestors. The character which a man has at any time is modified by any circumstances which happen to him at that time, and may well be modified by the fact that his re-birth is in a body descended from ancestors of a particular character.*" — Prof. J. M'Taggart.

There were numerous peculiarities about this individual with a foreign name that I realise better on looking back than I did at the time.

Of his parentage and childhood I knew nothing, for he mentioned neither, and his holidays were spent at school; but he was always well dressed and provided with plenty of pocket-money, which he generously shared. Later I discovered that he was an orphan, but a certain cruel knowledge of the world whispered that he was something else as well. This mystery of his origin, however, rather added to the wonder of him than otherwise. Compared to the stretch of time behind, it seemed a trifling detail of recent history that had no damaging significance. "Julius LeVallon is my label for this section," he observed, "and John Mason is yours." And family ties for him seemed to have no necessary existence, since neither parents nor relations were of a man's own choosing. It was the ties deliberately formed, and especially the ties renewed, that held real significance.

I thought of him as "foreign," though, in a deeper sense than that he was not quite English. He carried me away from England, but also away from modern times; and something about him belonged to lands where life was sunnier, more passionate, more romantic even, and where the shadows of great Gods haunted blue, wooded mountains, vast plains and deep, sequestered valleys. He claimed kinship somehow with an earlier world, magical, unstained. Even his athletic gifts, admired of all, had this subtle distinction too: the way he ran and jumped and "fielded" was not English. At fives, squash-racquets, or with the cricket-bat he fumbled badly, whereas in any game that demanded speed, adroitness, swift intuitive decision, and physical dexterity of a certain un-English kind — as against mere strength and pluck — he was supreme. He was deer rather than bull-dog. The school-games of modern days he was learning, apparently, for the first time.

In a corner of the field, where a copse of larches fringed the horizon against the sloping woods and hop-poles in the distance, we used to lie and talk for hours during playtime. The high-road skirted this field, and a hedge was provided with a gate which, under penalties, was the orthodox means of entrance. Few boys attempted any other, though Peabody was once caught by the Head as he floundered through a thorny opening with the jumping pole. But Julius never used the gate — nor was ever caught. He would dart from my side with a few quick steps, leap into the air, and fly soaring over the hedge, his feet tucked neatly under him like a bird's.

"Now," he would say, as we flung ourselves down beneath the shade of the larches, "we've got an hour or more. Let's talk, and remember, and get well down into it all."

How it was accomplished I cannot hope to describe. The world about me faded, another took its place. It rose in sheets and layers, shimmering, alive, and amazingly familiar. Space and time seemed to overlap, objects and scenery interpenetrated. There was fragrance, light and colour; adventure and alarm; delight and ceaseless expectation. It was a kind of fairyland where flowers never died, where motion was swift as thought, and life seemed meted out on a more lavish scale than by the meagre measurements of ticking clocks. And, while the memories were often hard to disentangle, the marked idiosyncrasies of our separate natures were never in the least confusion: *my* passion for adventure, *his* to find the reality that lay behind all manifested life. For this was the lode-star that guided him over the hills and deserts of all his many "sections" — the unquenchable fever to learn essential truth, to pierce behind the veil of appearances and discover the secret nature of the soul, its origin, its destiny, the methods of its full realisation.

It was a pastoral people that interested me most, primitive folk with migratory habits not yet abandoned. Their herds roamed an enormous territory. There was a Red Tribe and a Blue Tribe. The fighting men used bows, spears and javelins, and carried shields with round, smooth metal bosses to deflect the rain of arrows. And there was cavalry — two thousand men on horseback called a "coorlie." Julius and I both knew it all as if we had lived with them, not merely read an invented tale; and it was pictures of this land and people that had first flared up in me that afternoon in the playground when he asked if I "remembered." Memories of my childhood a few years before had not half the vividness and actuality of these. Nothing could have been more stupid than such undistinguished legends, but for this convincing reality that was their outstanding characteristic.... It all came back to me: the days and nights of hunting, nomad existence, the wild freedom of open plains and trackless forests, of migrations in the spring, wood fires, lawless raids, and also of some kind of mighty worship that stirred me deeply with an old, grand sense of Nature Deities adequately approached.

This latter fact, indeed, rose most possessingly upon me. There came a vague uneasiness and discomfort with it. I was aware of brooding Presences....

"And they are still about us if we care to look for them," interrupted a low voice in my ear, "ready to give us of their strength and happiness, waiting to answer if we call...."

I looked up, disagreeably startled. A breath of wind stirred in the branches overhead. The tufts of ragwort bent their yellow heads. In the sky there was a curious glow and warmth. A sense of hush pervaded all the air, as though someone had crept close to where we lay and overheard our thoughts with sympathy.

And in that very moment, just as I looked up at Julius, the picture of the woman, her face averted and her hands upraised, stole like a ghost before my inner vision. She vanished into mist again; the layer that had so suddenly disclosed itself, sank down; the other shifted up into its former place; and my companion, I saw, with sharp amazement was stretched upon his back, his head turned from me, resting on his folded hands — as though he had not spoken any word at all. For his eyes, as I then leaned over to discover, were gazing into space, and his mind seemed intent upon pictures that he visualised for himself.

"Julius," I said quickly, "you spoke to me just now?"

He turned slowly, as with an effort to tear himself away from what he saw within him; he answered quietly:

“I may have spoken. I can’t be sure. Why do you ask? I’ve been so far away.” His face was rapt as with some inner light. It had a radiant look. There was no desire in me to insist.

“Oh, nothing,” I answered quickly, and lay down again to follow what memories might come. The slight shiver that undeniably had touched me went its way. There was relief, intense relief — that he had not taken the clue I recklessly had offered. And, almost at once, the world about me faded out once more, the larches dipped away, the field sank out of sight. I plunged down into the sea of older memories....

I saw the sunlight flashing on shield and spear; I saw the hordes all gathered in the plains below, a mass of waving plumes, with red on the head-dress of the chieftains; I saw the river blackened by the thousands crossing it, covering the opposite bank like swarms of climbing ants.... I saw the chieftains lay aside their arms as they entered the sacred precincts of the grove; I smelt the odour of the sacrificial fires, heard the long-drawn droning of petitions, the cries of the victims.... And then the sentry-fires behind the sleeping camps ... the stirring of the soldiers at dawn ... the perfume of leagues of open plain ... muffled tramping far away ... wind ... fading stars ... wild-flowers dripping with the dew....

There was fighting, too, galore; tremendous marches; signalling by night from the mountain-tops with torches alternately hidden and revealed; and of sacred rites, primitive and fraught with danger to human life, no end....

In the middle of which up stole again that other layer, breathing terror and shrinking dread, and with a vividness of actuality that put all the rest into the shade. It could not, *would* not be dismissed. Its irruption was of but an instant’s duration, but in that instant there flashed upon me a clear intuition of certainty. I knew that Julius refrained purposely from speaking of this figure, because he understood my dread might drive me from his side before what we three must accomplish together was ripe for action, and because he waited — till she should appear in person. And, before it vanished again, I knew another thing: that what we three must accomplish together had to do directly with the worship of these mighty, old-world Nature Deities.

The stirring of these deep, curious emotions in me banished effectually all further scenery. I sat up and began to talk. I laughed a little and raised my voice. The sky, meanwhile, had clouded over, there was no heat in the occasional gleams of sunshine.

“I’ve been hunting and fighting and the Lord knows what else besides,” I exclaimed, touching Julius on the shoulder where he lay. “But somehow I didn’t feel that you were with me — always.”

“It’s too awfully far back, for one thing,” he replied dreamily, as if still half withdrawn, “and, for another, we both left that section young. The three of us were not together then. That was a bit later. All the same,” he added, “it was there you sowed the first seeds of the soldiering instinct which is so strong in you to-day. I was killed in battle. We were on opposite sides. You fell — —”

“On the steps — —” I cried, seizing a flashing memory.

“Of the House of Messengers,” he caught me up. “You carried the Blue Stick of warning. You got down the street in safety when the flying javelin caught you as you reached the very steps — —”

There was a sound behind us in the field quite close.

“What in the world do you two boys find to talk about so much?” asked the voice of Hurrish suddenly. “I’m afraid it’s not all elegiacs.” And he laughed good-humouredly.

We turned with a start. Julius looked up, then rose and touched his cap. I followed his example the same moment.

“No, sir,” he said, before I could think of anything to answer. “It’s the Memory Game.”

Hurrish looked at him with a quiet smile upon his face. His expression betrayed interest. But he said nothing, merely questioning with his eyes.

“The most wonderful game you ever played, sir,” continued Julius.

“Indeed! The most wonderful game you ever played?” Hurrish repeated, yet by no means unkindly.

“Getting down among the memories of — of before, sir. Recovering what we did, and what we were — and so understanding what we are to-day.”

The master stared without a sign of emotion upon his face. Apparently, in some delightful way, he understood. He was very sympathetic, I remember, to both of us. We thought the world of him, respecting him almost to the point of personal affection; and this in spite of punishments his firm sense of justice often obliged him to impose. I think, at that moment, he divined what Julius meant and even felt more sympathy than he cared to show.

"The Memory Game," he repeated, looking quizzically down at us over the top of his glasses. "Well, well." He hummed and hesitated a moment, choosing his words, it seemed, with care. "There's a good deal of that in the air just now, I know — as you'll discover for yourselves when you leave here and get into the world outside. But, remember," he went on with a note of earnestness and warning in his voice, "most of it is little better than a feeble, yet rather dangerous, form of hysteria, with vanity as a basis."

I hardly understood what he meant myself, but I saw the quick flush that coloured the pale cheeks of my companion.

"There are numbers of people about to-day," continued Hurrish, as we walked home slowly across the field, "who pretend to remember all kinds of wonderful things about themselves and about their past, not one of which can be justified. But it only means, as a rule, that they wish to appear peculiar by taking up the fad of the moment. They like to glorify themselves, though few of them understand even the A B C of the serious belief that *may* lie behind it all."

Julius squeezed my arm; the flush had left his skin; he was listening eagerly.

"You may later come across a good many thinking people, too," said the master, "who play your Memory Game, or think they do, and some among them who claim to have carried it to an extraordinary degree of perfection. There are ways and means, it is said. I do not deny that their systems may be worthy of investigation; I merely say it is a good plan to approach the whole thing with caution and common sense."

He glanced down first at one, then the other of us, with a grave and kindly expression in the eyes his glasses magnified so oddly.

"And most who play it," he added dryly, "remember so much of their wonderful past that they forget to do their ordinary duties in their very commonplace present.” He chuckled a little, while Julius again gripped my flesh so hard that I only just prevented crying out.

“I’ll remember him in a minute — if only I can get down far enough,” he managed to whisper in my ear. “We were together — —”

We had reached the gate, and were walking down the road towards the house. It was very evident that Hurrish understood more than he cared to admit about our wonderful game, and was trying to guide us rather than to deride instinctive beliefs.

That night in our bedroom, when Goldingham was asleep and snoring, I felt a touch upon my pillow, and looking up from the edge of unconsciousness, saw the white outline of Julius beside the bed.

“Come over here,” he whispered, pointing to a shaded candle on the chest of drawers, “I’ve got something to show you. Something Hurrish gave me — something out of a book.”

We peered together over a page of writing spread before us. Julius was excited and very eager. I do not think he understood it much better than I myself did, but it was the first time he had come across anything approaching his beliefs in writing. The discovery thrilled him. The authority of print was startling.

“He said it was somebody or other of importance, an Authority,” Julius whispered as I leaned over to read the fine handwriting. “It’s Hurrish’s,” I announced. “Rather,” Julius answered. “But he copied it from a book. *He* knows right enough.”

Oddly enough, the paper came eventually into my hands, though how I know not; I found it many years later in an old desk I used in those days. I have it now somewhere. The name of the author, however, I quite forget.

“The moral and educational importance of the belief in metempsychosis,” it ran, as our fingers traced the words together in the uncertain candle-light, “lies in the fact that it is a manifestation of the instinct that we are not ‘complete,’ and that one life is not enough to enable us to reach that perfection whither we are urged by the inmost depths of our being, and also an evidence of the belief that all human action will be inevitably rewarded or punished — —”

“Rewards or punishes *itself*,” interrupted Julius; “it’s not punishment at all really.”

“And this is an importance that must not be underestimated,” the interrupted sentence concluded. “In so far,” we read on together, somewhat awed, I think, to tell the truth, “as the theory is based upon the supposition that a personal divine power exists and dispenses this retributive justice — —”

“Wrong again,” broke in Julius, “because it’s just the law of natural results — there’s nothing personal about it.”

“ — and that the soul must climb a long steep path to approach this power, does metempsychosis preserve its religious character.”

“He means going back into animals as well — which *never* happens,” commented the excited boy beside me once again. We read to the end then without further interruption.

“This, however, is not all. The Theory is also the expression of another idea which gives it a philosophical character. It is the earliest intellectual attempt of man, when considering the world and his position in it, to conceive that world, not as alien to him, but as akin to him, and to incorporate himself and his life as an indispensable and eternal element in the past and future of the world with which it forms one comprehensive totality. I say an eternal element, because, regarded philosophically, the belief in metempsychosis seems a kind of unconscious anticipation of the principle now known as ‘Conservation of Energy.’ Nothing that has ever existed can be lost, either in life or by death. All is but change; and hence souls do not perish, but return again and again in ever-changing forms. Moreover, later developments of metempsychosis, especially as conceived by Lessing, can without difficulty be harmonised with the modern idea of evolution from lower to higher forms.”

“That’s all,” Julius whispered, looking round at me.

“By George!” I replied, returning his significant stare.

"I promised Hurrish, you know," he added, blowing out the candle. "Promised I'd read it to you."

"All right," I answered in the dark.

And, without further comment or remark, we went back to our respective beds, and quickly so to sleep.

Before taking the final plunge, however, into oblivion, I heard the whisper of Julius, sharply audible in the silence, coming at me across the darkened room:

"It's all rot," he said. "The chap who wrote that was simply thinking with his brain. But it's not the brain that remembers; it's the other part of you." There was a pause. And then he added, as though after further reflection: "Don't bother about it. There's lots of stuff like that about — all tommy-rot and talk, that's all. Good night! We'll dream together now and p'raps remember."

CHAPTER V

"*WE HAVE NO right whatever to speak of really unconscious Nature, but only of uncommunicative Nature, or of Nature whose mental processes go on at such different time-rates to ours that we cannot easily adjust ourselves to an appreciation of their inward fluency, although our consciousness does make us aware of their presence.... Nature is a vast realm of finite consciousness of which your own is at once a part and an example.*" — Royce.

There was a great deal more in LeVallon, however, than the Memory Game: he brought a strange cargo with him from these distant shores, where, apparently, I — to say nothing of another — had helped to load it. Bit by bit, as my own machinery of recovery ran more easily, I tapped other layers also in myself. Our freight was slowly discharged. We examined and discussed each bale, as it were, but I soon became aware that there was a great deal he kept back from me. This secrecy first piqued and then distressed me. It brought mystery between us; there stood a shadowy question-mark in our relationship.

I divined the cause, and dreaded it — that is, I dreaded the revelation he would sooner or later make. For I guessed — I *knew* — what it involved and whom. I asked no questions. But I noticed that at a certain point our conversations suddenly stopped, he changed the subject, or withdrew abruptly into silence. And something sinister gripped my heart. Behind it, closely connected in some undiscovered manner, lay two things I have already mentioned: the woman, and the worship.

This reconstruction of our past together, meanwhile, was — for a pair of schoolboys — a thrilling pursuit that never failed to absorb. Stone by stone we built it up. After often missing one another, sometimes by a century, sometimes by a mere decade or so, our return at last had chimed, and we found ourselves on earth again. We had inevitably come together. There was no such thing as missing eventually, it seemed. Debts must be discharged between those who had incurred them. And, chief among these mutual obligations, I gathered, were certain dealings we had together in connection with some form of Nature worship, during a section he referred to as our "Temple Days."

The character of these dealings was one of those secret things that he would not disclose; he knew, but would not speak of it; and alone I could not "dig it up." Moreover, the effect upon me here was decidedly a mixed one, for while there was great beauty in these Temple Days, there lurked behind this portion of them — terror. We had not been alone in this. Involved somehow or other with us was "the woman."

Julius would talk freely of certain aspects of this period, of various practices, physical, mental, spiritual, and of gorgeous ceremonies that were stimulating as well as true, pertaining undoubtedly to some effective worship of the sun, that resulted in the obtaining of enormous energy by the worshippers; but after a certain point he would say no more, and would deliberately try to shift back to some other "layer" altogether. And it was sheer cowardice in me that prevented my forcing a declaration. I burned to know, yet was afraid.

"I do wish I could remember better," I said once.

"It comes gradually of itself," he answered, "and best of all when you're not thinking at all. The top part gets thin, and suddenly you see down into clear deep water. The top part, of course, is recent; it smothers the older things."

"Like thick sand, mine is," I said, "heaps and heaps of it."

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"The pictures of To-day hide those of Yesterday," he explained. "You can't remember two things at once. If your head is stuffed with what's happening at the moment, you can't expect to remember what happened a month ago. Dig back. It's trying that starts it moving."

Ancient as the stars themselves appeared the origins of our friendship and affection of to-day.

"Then I didn't get as far as you — in those Temple Days?" I asked.

He glanced sharply at me beneath his long dark eyelids. He hesitated a moment.

"You began," he answered presently in a low voice, "but got caught later by — something in the world — fighting, or money, or a woman — something sticky like that. And you left me for a time."

Any temptation that enticed the soul from "real knowledge" he described as "sticky."

"For several sections you fooled with things that counted for the moment, but were not carried over through the lot. You came back to the real ones — but too late." His voice sank down into a whisper; his face was grave and troubled. Shrinking stole over me. There was the excitement that he was going to tell me something, yet the dread, too, that I should hear it. "But now," he went on, half to himself and half to me, "we can put that right. Our chance — at last — is coming." These last words he uttered beneath his breath.

And then he abruptly shifted the subject, leaving me with a strangely disquieting emotion that I should be drawn against my will into something that I dreaded yet could not possibly avoid. The expression of his face chilled my heart. He pulled me down upon the grass beside him. "You've got to burrow down inside yourself," he went on earnestly, raising his voice again to its normal pitch, "that's where it all lies buried. Once you get it up by yourself, you'll understand. Then you can help me."

His own excitement ran across the air to me. I felt grandeur in his wonderful conception — this immense river of our lives, the justice of inevitable cause and effect, the ultimate importance of every action, word and thought, and, what appealed to me most of all, the idea that results depended upon one's own character and will without the hiring of exalted substitutes to make it easy. Even as a boy this all appealed strongly to me, probably to the soldier fighting-instinct that was my chief characteristic....

Of these Temple Days with their faint, flying pictures I retain fascinating recollections. In them was nothing to suggest any country I could name, certainly neither Egypt, Greece nor India. Julius spoke of some great civilisation in which primitive worship of some true kind combined with accomplishments we might regard to-day as the result of trained and accurate science. It involved union somehow with great "natural" forces. There was awe in it, but an atmosphere, too, of wonder, power and aspiration of a genuinely lofty type.

It left upon me the dim impression that it was not on the earth at all. But, for me it was too thickly veiled for detailed recovery, though an invincible instinct whispered that it was here "the woman" first intruded upon our joint relationship. I saw, with considerable sharpness, however, delightful pictures of what was evidently sun-worship, though of an intelligent rather than a superstitious kind. We seemed nearer to the sun than we are to-day, differently constituted, aware of greater powers; there was vast heat, there were gigantic, mighty winds. In this heat, through these colossal winds, came deity. The elemental powers were its manifestation. The sun, the planets, the entire universe, in fact, seemed then alive; we knew it was alive; we were kin with every point in it; and worship of a sun, a planet, or a tree, as the case might be, somehow drew their beings into definite relationship with our own, even to the point of leaving the characteristics of their particular Powers in our systems. A human being was but *one* living detail of a universe in which all other details were equally living and equally — possibly more — important. Nature was a power to be experienced, shared, and natural objects had a meaning in their own right. We read the phenomena of Nature as signs and symbols, clear as the black signs of writing on a printed page.

Out of many talks together, Julius and I recovered all this. Alone I could not understand it. Julius, moreover, believed it still to-day. Though nominally, and in his life as well, a Christian, he always struck me as being intensely religious, yet without a definite religion. It was afterwards, of course, I realised this, when my experience of modern life was larger. He was unfettered by any little dogmas of man-made creeds, but obeyed literally the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, which he knew by heart. It was essential spiritual truth he sought. His tolerance and respect for all the religions of to-day were based upon the belief that each contained a portion of truth at least. His was the attitude of a perfect charity — of an "old soul," as he phrased it later, who "had passed through all the traditions." His belief included certainly God and the gods, Nature and Christ, temples of stone and hills and woods and that temple of the heart which is the Universe itself. True worship, however, was *with* Nature.

A vivid picture belongs to this particular "layer." I saw the light of a distant planet being used, apparently in some curative sense, by human beings. It took place in a large building. Long slits in the roof were so arranged that the planet shone through them exactly upon the meridian. Dropping through the dusky atmosphere, the rays were caught by an immense concave mirror of polished metal that hung suspended above an altar where the smoke of incense rose; and, since a concave mirror forms at its focus in the air before it an image of whatever is reflected in its depths, a radiant image of the planet stood shining there in the heart of the building. It was a picture of arresting beauty and significance. Gleaming overhead, hung a mirror of still mightier proportions that caught the reflected rays and poured them down in a stream of intensified light upon the backs of men and women who lay naked on the ground, waiting to receive them.

"The quality of that particular planet is what they need," whispered Julius, as we watched together; "the light-cures of that age have hardly changed," he laughed; "the principle, at least, remains the same."

There was another scene as well in which I saw motionless, stretched figures. I could never see it clearly, though. Darkness invariably rolled down and hid it; and I had the idea that LeVallon tried to prevent its complete recovery — just then. Nor was I sorry at this, for beyond it lay something that seemed the source of the shrinking dread that haunted me. If I saw all, I should see also — *her*. I should know the secret thing Julius kept back from me, the thing we three had somehow to "set right again." And once, when this particular scene was in my mind and Julius, I felt sure, was seeing it too, as he lay beside me on the grass, there passed into me a sudden sensation of a kind I find it difficult to describe. There was yearning in it, but there was anguish too, and a pain as of deep, unfathomable regret wholly beyond me to account for. It swept into me, I think, from him.

I turned suddenly. He lay, I saw, with his face hidden in his hands; his shoulders shook as though he sobbed; and it seemed that some memory of great poignancy convulsed him. For several minutes he lay speechless in this way, yet an air of privacy about him, that forbade intrusion. Once or twice I surprised him under these curious attacks; they were invariably connected with this particular "inner scenery"; and sometimes were followed by bouts of that nameless and mysterious illness that kept him in the sick-room for several days. But I asked no questions, and he vouchsafed no explanation.

On this particular point, at least, I asked no questions; but on the general subject of my uneasiness I sometimes probed him.

“This sense of funk when I remember these old forgotten things,” I asked, “what is it? Why does it frighten me?”

Gazing at me out of those strange eyes that saw into so huge a universe, he answered softly:

“It’s a faint memory too — of the first pains and trials you suffered when you began to learn. You feel the old wrench and strain.”

“It hurt so —— ?”

He nodded, with that smile of yearning that sometimes shone so beautifully on his face.

“At first,” he replied. “It seemed like losing your life — until you got far enough to know the great happiness of the bigger way of living. Coming back to me like this revives it. We began to learn together, you see.”

I mentioned the extraordinary feelings of the playground when first I spoke with him, and of the class-room when first we saw each other.

“Ah,” he sighed, “there’s no mistaking it — the coming together of old friends or enemies. The instant the eyes meet, the flash of memory follows. Only, the tie must have been real, of course, to make it binding.”

“How can it ever end?” I asked. “Each time starts it all going again.”

“By starting the opposite. Love dissolves the link. Understand why you hate — and at once it lessens. Sympathy follows, feeling-with — that’s love; and love sets you both free. It’s not thinking, but feeling that makes the strongest chains.”

And it was speaking of “feeling” that led to his saying things I have never forgotten. For thinking, in those older days, seemed of small account. It was an age of feeling, chiefly. Feeling was the way to knowledge: here was the main difference between To-day and those far-off Yesterdays. The way to know an object was to feel it — feel-with it. The simplicity of the method was as significant as its — impossibility! Yet a fundamental truth was in it.

To know a thing was not to enumerate merely its qualities. To state the weight, colour, texture of a stone, for instance, was merely to mention its external characteristics; whereas to think of it till it became part of the mind, seen from its own point of view, was to know it as it actually is. The mind felt-with it. It became a part of yourself. Knowledge, as Julius understood the word, was identifying himself with the object: it became part of the substance of the mind: it was known from within.

Communion with inanimate objects, with Nature itself, was in this way actually possible.

"Dwell upon anything you like," he said, "to the point where you feel it, and you get it all exactly as it *is*, not merely as *you* see it. Its quality, its power, becomes a part of yourself. Take trees, rivers, mountains, take wind and fire in this way — and you feel their power in you. You can use them. That was the way of worship — then."

"The sun itself, the planets, anything?" I asked eagerly, recognising something that seemed once familiar to me.

"Anything," he replied quietly. "Copy their own movements too, and you'll get nearer still. Imitate the attitude and gestures of a stranger and you begin to understand what he's up to, his point of view — what he's feeling. You begin to know him. All ceremonies began that way. On that big plain where the worship of the sun was held, the smaller temples represented the planets, the distances all calculated in proper ratio from the heavens. We copied their movements exactly, as we moved, thousands and thousands of us, in circular form about the centre. We felt-with them, got all joined up to the whole system; by imitating their gestures, we understood them and absorbed a portion of their qualities and powers. Our energy became as theirs. Acting the ceremony brought the knowledge, don't you see? Oh, it's scientific, right enough," he added. "It's not going backwards — instinctive knowledge. It's a pity it's forgotten now."

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"I've done it so often. You've done it with me. Alone, of course, it's difficult to get results; but when a lot together do it — a crowd — a nation

— the whole world — you could shift Olympus into the Ægean, or bring Mars near enough to throw a bridge across!”

We burst out laughing together, though his face instantly again grew grave and earnest.

“It will come,” he said, “it will come again in time. When the idea of brotherhood has spread, and the separate creeds have merged, and the whole world feels the same thing together — it will come. It’s another order of consciousness, that’s all.”

His passionate conviction certainly stirred joy and wonder in me somewhere. It was stupendous, yet so simple. The universe was knowable; its powers assimilable by human beings. Here was true Nature Magic, the elements co-operating, the stars alive, the sun a deity to be known and felt.

“And that’s why concentration gives such power,” he added. “By feeling anything till you *feel-with* it and become it, you know every blessed thing about it from inside. You have instinctive knowledge of it. Mistakes become impossible. You live and act with the whole universe.”

And, as I listened, it seemed a kind of childish presumption that had shut us off from the sun, the stars, the numerous other systems of space, and that reduced knowledge to the meagre statement of a people dwelling upon one unimportant globe of comparatively recent matter in one of the smaller solar systems.

Our earth, indeed, was not the centre of the universe; it was but a temporary point in the long, long journey of the River of Lives. The soul would eventually traverse a million other points. It was so integral a part of everything, so intimately akin to every corner and aspect of the cosmos, that a “human” being’s relative position to the very stars, the angle at which he met their light and responded to the tension of their forces, must necessarily affect his inmost personality. If the moon could raise the tides, she could assuredly cause an ebb and flow in the fluids of the human body, and how could men and women expect to resist the stress and suction of those tremendous streams of power that played upon the earth from the network of great distant suns? Times and seasons, now known as feast-days and the like, were likewise of significance. There were moments, for instance, in the “ceremony” of the heavens when it was possible to see more easily in one direction than in another, when certain powers, therefore, were open and accessible. The bridges then were clear, the channels open. A revelation of intenser life — from the universe, from a star, from mountains, rivers, winds or forests — could then steal down and leave their traces in the heart and passion of a human being. For, just as there is a physical attitude of prayer by which the human body invites communion, so times and seasons were attitudes and gestures of that greater body of Nature when results could be most favourably expected.

It was all very bewildering, very big, very curious; but if I protested that it merely meant a return to the unreasoning superstitious days of Nature Magic, there was something in me at the same time that realised vital, forgotten truth behind it all. Cleansed and scientific, Julius urged, it must return into the world again. What men formerly knew by feeling, an age now coming would justify and demonstrate by brain and reason. Touch with the universe would be restored. We should go back to Nature for peace and power and progress. Scientific worship would be known.

Yet by worship he meant not merely kneeling before an Ideal and praying eagerly to resemble it; but approaching a Power and acquiring it. What heat in itself may be we do not know; only that without it we collapse into inert particles. What lies behind, beyond the physicist's account of air as a gas, remains unknown; deprived of it, however, we cease to breathe and be conscious in matter. Each moment we feel the sun, take in the air, we live; and the more we accomplish this union, the more we are alive. In addition to these physical achievements, however, their essential activities could be known and acquired spiritually. And the means was that worship which is union — feeling-with.

To Julius this achievement was a literal one. The elements were an expression of spiritual powers. To be in touch with them was to be in touch with a Whole in which the Earth or Sirius are, after all, but atoms. Moreover, it was a conscious Whole. In atoms themselves he found life too. Chemical affinity involved intelligence. Certain atoms refuse to combine with certain other atoms, they are hostile to each other; while others rush headlong into each other's arms. How do the atoms know?

Here lay hints of powers he sought to reclaim for human use and human help and human development.

“For they were known once,” he would cry. “We knew them, you and I. Their nature is not realised to-day; consciousness has lost touch with them. We recall a broken fragment, but label it superstition, ignorance, and the like. And, being incomplete, these remnants of necessity seem childish. Their meaning cannot come through the brain, and that other mode of consciousness which understood has left us now. The world, pursuing a lesser ideal, denies its forgotten greatness with a sneer!”

A great deal of this he said to me one day while we were walking home from church, whose “service” had stirred him into vehement and eager utterance. His language was very boyish, and yet it seemed to me that I listened to someone quite as old as Dr. Randall, the Headmaster who had preached. I can see the hedges, wet and shining after rain; the dull November sky; ploughed fields and muddy lanes. I can hear again the plover calling above the hill. Nothing could possibly have been more uninspiring than the dreary hop-poles, the moist, depressing air, the leafless elms, and the “Sunday feeling” amid which the entire scene was laid.

The boys straggled along the road in twos and threes, hands in pockets, points of Eton jackets sticking out behind. Hurrish, the nice master, was just in front of us, walking with Goldingham. I saw the latter turn his face up sideways as he asked some question, and I suddenly wondered whether he knew how odd he looked, or, indeed, what he looked like at all. I wondered what sort of “sections” and adventures Goldingham, Hurrish, and all these Eton-jacketed boys had been through before they arrived at *this;* and next it flashed across me what a grotesque result it was for LeVallon to have reached after so many picturesque and stimulating lives — an Eton jacket, a mortar-board, and tight Wesleyan striped trousers.

And now, as I recall these curious recollections of years ago, it occurs to me as remarkable that, although a sense of humour was not lacking in either of us, yet neither then nor now could the spirit of the comic, and certainly never of the ludicrous, rob by one little jot the reality, the deep, convincing actuality of these strange convictions that LeVallon and I shared together when at Motfield Close we studied Greek and Latin, while remembering a world before Greeks or Latins ever existed at all.

CHAPTER VI

"*THERE SEEMS NOTHING in pre-existence incompatible with any of the dogmas which are generally accepted as fundamental to Christianity.*" — Prof. M'Taggart.

By my last half-year at Motfield Close, when I was Head of the school, LeVallon had already left, but the summer term preceding his departure is the one most full of delightful recollections for me. He was Head then — which proves that he was sufficiently normal and practical to hold that typically English position, and to win respect in it — and I was "Follow-on Head," as we called it.

I suppose he was verging on eighteen at the time, for neither of us was destined for a Public School later, and we stayed on longer than the general run of boys. We still shared the room with Goldingham— "Goldie," who went on to Wellington and Sandhurst, and afterwards lost his life in the Zulu War — and we enjoyed an unusual amount of liberty. The "triumvirate" the masters called us, and I remember that we were proud of topping Hurrish by half an inch, each being over six feet in his socks.

With peculiar pleasure, too, I recall the little class we formed by ourselves in Greek, and the hours spent under Hurrish's sympathetic and enthusiastic guidance, reading Plato for the first time. Hurrish was an admirable scholar, and myself and Goldie, though unable to match LeVallon's singular and intuitive mastery of the language, made up for our deficiency by working like slaves. The group was a group of enthusiasts, not of mere plodding schoolboys. But Julius it undoubtedly was who fed the little class with a special subtle fire of his own, and with a spirit of searching interpretative insight that made the delighted Hurrish forget that he was master and Julius pupil. And in the "Sympathetic Studies" the former published later upon Plotinus and some of the earlier Gnostic writings, I certainly traced more than one illuminating passage to its original inspiration in some remark let fall by LeVallon in those intimate talks round Hurrish's desk at Motfield Close.

But what comes back to me now with a kind of veritable haunting wonder that almost makes me sorry such speculations are no longer possible, were the talks and memories we enjoyed together in our bedroom. For there was a stimulating excitement about these whispered conversations we held by the open window on summer nights — an atmosphere of stars and scented airs and hushed silent spaces beyond the garden — that comes back to me now with an added touch of mystery and beauty both compelling and suggestive. When I think of those bedroom hours I step suddenly out of the London murk and dinginess, out of the tedium of my lecturing and teaching, into a vast picture gallery of vivid loveliness. The scenery of mighty dreams usurps the commonplace realities of the present.

Ten o'clock was the hour for lights out, and by ten-fifteen Goldie, with commendable regularity, was asleep and snoring. We thanked him much for that, as somebody says in "Alice," and Julius, as soon as the signal of Goldie's departure became audible, would creep over to my bed, touch me on the shoulder, and give the signal to drag the bolsters from a couple of unused beds and plant ourselves tailor-wise in our dressing-gowns before the window.

"It's like the old, old days," he would say, pointing to the sky. "The stars don't change much, do they?" He indicated the dim terraces of lawn with the tassel of his dressing-gown. "Can't you imagine it all? *I* can. There were the long stone steps — don't you see? — below, running off into the plain. Behind us, all the halls and vestibules, cool and silent, veil after veil hiding the cells for meditation, and over there in the corner the little secret passages down to the crypts below ground where the tests took place. Better put a blanket round you if you're cold," he added, noticing that I shivered, though it was excitement and not cold that sent the slight trembling over my body. "And there" — as the church clock sounded the hour across the Kentish woods and fields— "are the very gongs themselves, I swear, the great gongs that swung in the centre of the dome."

Goldie's peaceful snoring, and an occasional closing of a door as one master after another retired to his room in the house below, were the only sounds that reminded me of the present. Julius, sitting beside me in the starlight, his eyes ashine, his pale skin gleaming under the mop of tangled dark hair, whispered words that conjured up not only scenes and memories, but the actual feelings, atmosphere and emotions of days more ancient than any dreams. I smelt the odour of dim, pillared aisles, tasted the freshness of desert air, heard the high rustle of other winds in palm and tamarisk. The Past that never dies swept down upon us from sky and Kentish countryside with the murmur of the night-breeze in the shrubberies below. It enveloped us completely.

“Not the stars we knew together *first* — not the old outlines we once travelled by,” he whispered, describing in the air with his finger the constellations presumably of other skies. “That was earlier still. Yet the general look is the same. You can feel the old tinglings coming down from some of them.” And he would name the planet that was in ascension at the moment, with invariable correctness I found out afterwards, and describe the particular effect it produced upon his thoughts and imagination, the moods and forces it evoked, the mental qualities it served — in a word its psychic influence upon the inner personality.

“Look,” he whispered, but so suddenly that it made me start. He pointed to the darkened room behind us. “Can’t you almost see the narrow slit in the roof where the rays came through and fell upon the metal discs swinging in mid-air? Can’t you see the rows of dark-skinned bodies on the ground? Can’t you feel the minute and crowding vibrations of the light on your flesh, as the disc swung round and the stream fell down in a jolly blaze all over you?”

And, though I saw nothing in the room but faintly luminous patches where the beds stood, and the two tin baths upon the floor, a vivid scene rose before my mind’s eye that stirred poignant emotions I was wholly at a loss to explain. The consciousness of some potent magical life stirred in my veins, a vaster horizon, and a larger purpose than anything I had known hitherto in my strict and conventional English life and my quaint worship in a pale-blue tin tabernacle where all was ugly, cramped, and literally idolatrous.

“And the gongs so faintly ringing,” I cried.

Julius turned quickly and thrust his face closer into mine. Then he stood up beside the open window and drew in a deep breath of the June night air.

“Ah, you remember that?” he said, with eyes aglow. “The gongs — the big singing gongs! There you had a bit of clean, deep memory right out of the centre. No wonder you feel excited...!”

And he explained to me, though I scarcely recognised the voice or language, so strongly did the savour of shadowy past days inform them, how it was in those old temples when the world was not cut off from the rest of the universe, but claimed some psychical kinship with all the planetary and stellar forces, that each planet was represented by a metal gong so attuned in quality and pitch as to vibrate in sympathy with the message of its particular rays, sound and colour helping and answering one another till the very air trembled and pulsed with the forces the light brought down. No doubt, Julius’s words, vibrating with earnestness, completed my confusion while they intensified my enjoyment, for I remember how carried away I was by this picture of the temples acting as sounding-boards to the sky, and by his description of the healing powers of the light and sound thus captured and concentrated.

The spirit of comedy peeped in here and there between the entr’actes, as it were, for even the peaceful and studious Goldie was also included in these adventures of forgotten days, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously.

“By the gods!” Julius exclaimed, springing up, “I’ve an idea! We’ll try it on Goldie, and see what happens!”

“Try what?” I whispered, catching his own excitement.

“Gongs, discs and planet,” was the reply.

I stared at him through the gloom. Then I glanced towards the unconscious victim.

“There’s no harm. We’ll imagine this is one of the old temples, and we’ll do an experiment!” He touched me on the back. Excitement ran through me. Something caught me from the past. I watched him with an emotion that was half amazement, half alarm.

In a moment he had the looking-glass balanced upon the window-ledge at a perilous angle, reflecting the faint starlight upon the head of the sleeping Goldingham. Any minute I feared it would fall with a crash upon the lawn below, or break into smithereens upon the floor. Julius fixed it somehow with a hair-brush and a towel against the sash.

“Get the disc,” he whispered, and after a moment’s reflection I understood what he meant; I emptied one bath as quietly as possible into the other, then dragged it across the carpet to the bedside of the snoring Goldie who was to be “healed.” The ridiculous experiment swept me with such a sense of reality, owing to the intense belief LeVallon injected into it, that I never once felt inclined to laugh. I was only vaguely afraid that Goldingham might somehow suffer.

“It’s Venus,” exclaimed Julius under his breath. “She’s in the ascendant too. That’s the luck of the gods, isn’t it?”

I whispered something in reply, wondering dimly what Goldie might think.

“You bang the bath softly for the sound,” said he, “while I hold it up for you. We *may* hit the right note — the vibrations that fit in with the rate of the light, I mean — though it’s a bit of a chance, I suppose!”

I obeyed, thinking of masters sleeping down below in the silent building.

“Louder!” exclaimed Julius peremptorily.

I obeyed again, with a dismal result resembling tin cans in orgy. And the same minute the good-natured and studious Goldingham awoke with a start and stretched out a hand for his glasses.

“Feel anything unusual, Goldie?” asked LeVallon at once, tremendously in earnest, as he lowered the tin bath.

“Oh, it’s only *you!*” exclaimed the victim, awakened out of his first sleep and blinking in the gloom, “and *you!*” he added, catching sight of me, my fist still upraised to beat; “rotten brutes, both of you! You *might* let a fellow sleep a bit. You know I’m swotting up for an exam.!”

“But do you *feel* anything, Goldie?” insisted LeVallon, as though it were a matter of life and death. “It was Venus, you know....”

“Was it?” spluttered the other, catching sight of the big bath between him and the open window. “Well, Venus is beastly cold. Who opened the window?” The sight of the bath apparently unnerved him. He hardly expected it before seven in the morning.

Further explanations were cut short by the sudden collapse of the mirror with a crash of splintering glass upon the floor. The noise of the bath, that pinged and boomed as I balanced it against the bed, completed the uproar. Then the door opened, and there stood — Martin.

It was an awkward moment. Yet it was not half as real, half as vivid, half as alive with the emotion of actual life, as that other memory so recently vanished. Martin, at first, seemed the dream; that other, the reality.

He entered with a lighted candle. The noise of the opening window and the footsteps had, no doubt, disturbed him for some time. Yet, quickly as he came, Goldie and I were "asleep" even before he had time to cross the threshold. Julius stood alone to face him in the middle of the floor. It was characteristic of the boy. He never shirked.

"What's the meaning of all this noise?" asked Martin, obviously pleased to find himself in a position of unexpected advantage. "LeVallon, why are you not in bed? And why is the window open?"

Secretly ashamed of myself, I lay under the sheets, wondering what Julius would answer.

"We always sleep with the window open, sir," he said quietly.

"What was that crash I heard?" asked the master, coming farther into the room, and holding the candle aloft so that it showed every particle of the broken glass. "Who did this?" He glanced suspiciously about him, knowing of course that Julius was not the only culprit.

LeVallon stood there, looking straight at him. Martin — as I think of the incident to-day — had the appearance of a weasel placed by chance in a position of advantage, yet afraid of its adversary. He winced, yet exulted.

"Do you realise that it's long after eleven," he observed frigidly, "and that I shall be obliged to report you to Dr. Randall in the morning...."

"Yes, sir," said Julius.

"It's very serious," continued Martin, more excitedly, and apparently uncertain how to drive home his advantage, "it's very distressing — er — to find you, LeVallon, Head of the School, guilty of mischief like a Fourth-Form boy — at this hour of the night too!"

The reference to the lower form was, of course, intended to be crushing. But Julius in his inimitable way turned the tables astonishingly.

“Very good, sir,” he said calmly, “but I was only trying to get the light of Venus, and her sound, into Goldingham’s head — into his system, that is — by reflecting it in the looking-glass; and it fell off the ledge. It’s an experiment of antiquity, as you know, sir. I’m exceedingly sorry....”

Martin stared. He was a little afraid of LeVallon; the boy’s knowledge of mathematics had compelled his admiration as often as his questions, sometimes before the whole class, had floored him.

“It’s an old experiment,” the boy added, his pale face very grave, “healing, you know, sir, by the rays of the planets — forgotten star-worship — like the light-cures of to-day — —”

Martin’s somewhat bewildered eye wandered to the flat tin bath still propped against Goldingham’s bedside.

“... and using gongs to increase the vibrations,” explained Julius further, noticing the glance. “We were trying to make it do for a gong — the scientists will discover it again before long, sir.”

The master hardly knew whether to laugh or scold. He stood there in his shirt-sleeves looking hard at LeVallon who faced him with tumbled hair and shining eyes in his woolly red dressing-gown. Erect, dignified, for all the absurdity of the situation, the flush of his strange enthusiasm emphasising the delicate beauty of his features, I remember feeling that even the stupid Martin must surely understand that there was something rather wonderful about him, and pass himself beneath the spell.

“I was the priest,” he said.

“But I did the gong — I mean, the bath-part, please sir,” I put in, unable any longer to let Julius bear all the blame.

There was a considerable pause, during which grease dripped audibly upon the floor from the master’s candle, while Goldingham lay blinking in bed in such a way that I dared not look at him for fear of laughter. I have often wondered since what passed through the mind of Tuke Martin, the senior Master of Mathematics, during that pregnant interval.

“Get up, all of you,” he said at length, “and pick up this mess. Otherwise you’ll cut your feet to pieces in the morning. Here, Goldingham, you help too. You’re no more asleep than the others.” He tried to make his tone severe.

“Goldingham only woke when the glass fell off the ledge, sir,” explained LeVallon. “It was all my doing, really — —”

“And mine,” I put in belatedly.

Martin watched us gather up the fragments, Goldie, still dazed and troubled, barking his shins against chairs and bedposts, unable to find his blue glasses in the excitement.

“Put the pieces in the bath,” continued Martin shortly, “and ring for William in the morning to clear it away. And pay the matron for a new looking-glass,” he added, with something of a sneer; “Mason half, and you, LeVallon, the other half.”

“Of course, sir,” said Julius.

“And don’t let me hear any further sounds to-night,” said the master finally, closing the window, and going out after another general look of suspicion round the room.

Which was all that we ever heard of the matter! For the Master of Mathematics did not particularly care about reporting the Head of the School to Dr. Randall, and incurring the dislike of the three top boys into the bargain. I got the impression, too, that Tuke Martin was as glad to get out of that room without loss of dignity as we were to see him go. LeVallon, by his very presence even, had a way of making one feel at a disadvantage.

“Anything particular come to you?” he asked Goldie, as soon as we were alone again, and the victim’s temper was restored by finding himself the centre of so much general interest. “I suppose there was hardly time, though — —”

“Queer dream’s all I can remember,” he replied gruffly.

“What sort?”

“Nothing much. I seemed to be hunting through a huge lexicon for verbs, but every time I opened the beastly thing it was like opening the lid of a box instead of the cover of a book; and, in place of pages, I saw rows of people lying face downwards, and streaks of light dodging about all over their skins. Rotten nightmare, that’s all!”

Julius and I exchanged glances.

“And then,” continued Goldie, “that bally tin bath banged like thunder and I woke up to see you two rotters by my bed.”

“If there had been more time — —” Julius observed to me in an aside.

“I’m jolly glad it’s your last term,” Goldingham growled, looking at LeVallon, or LeValion, as he usually called him; “you’re as mad as a March hare, anyhow!” — which was the sentence I took into dreamland with me.

CHAPTER VII

"*THE BLUE DUSK ran between the streets: my love was winged within my mind,*

It left to-day and yesterday and thrice a thousand years behind.

To-day was past and dead for me, for from to-day my feet had run

Through thrice a thousand years to walk the ways of ancient Babylon." — A. E.

It was another time, very early in the morning, that LeVallon called me from the depths of dreamless sleep with a whisper that seemed to follow me out of some vast place where I had been lying under open skies with the winds of heaven about my face and the stars as close as flowers. It was no dream; I brought back no single detail of incident or person — only this keen, sweet awareness of having been somewhere far away upon an open plain or desert of enormous stretch, waiting for something, watching, preparing — and that I had been awakened. Great hands drew back into the stars; eyes that were mighty closed; heads of majestic aspect turned away; and Presences of some infinite demeanour grandly concealed themselves as when mountains become veiled by the hood of hurrying clouds. I had the feeling that the universe had touched me, then withdrawn.

The room was dark, but shades of tender grey, stealing across the walls and ceiling, told that the dawn was near. Our windows faced the east; a flush of delicate light was in the sky; and, between me and this sky, something moved very softly and came close. It touched me.

Julius, I saw, was bending down above my pillow.

"Are you ready?" he whispered, as I felt his hand upon my hair. "The sun is on the way!"

The words, however, at first, seemed not in English, but in some other half-familiar language that I instantly translated into my own tongue. They drifted away from me like feathers into space. I grew wide awake and rubbed my eyes. It startled me a little to find myself in this modern room and to see his pale visage peering so closely into mine. I surely had dropped from a height, or risen from some hollow of prodigious depth; for it flashed across me that, had I waked a moment sooner, I must have caught a glimpse of other faces, heard other voices in that old familiar language, remembered other well-known things, all of which had fled too suddenly away, plunging with swiftness into the limbo of forgotten times and places.... It was very sweet. There was yearning desire in me to know more.

I sat up in bed.

“What is it?” I asked, my tongue taking the words with a certain curious effort. “What were you saying...? A moment ago ... just now?” I tried to arrest the rout of flying sensations. Dim, shadowy remoteness gathered them away like dreams.

“I’m calling you to see the sunrise,” he whispered softly, taking my hand to raise me; “the sunrise on the Longest Day upon the plain. Wake up and come!”

Confusion vanished at his touch and voice. Yet a fragment of words just vanished dropped back into my mind. Something sublime and lovely ran between us.

“But you were saying — about the Blue Circle and the robes — that it was time to — —” I went on, then, with the effort to remember, lost the clue completely. He *had* said these other things, but already they had dipped beyond recovery. I scrambled out of bed, almost expecting to find some robe or other in place of my old grey dressing-gown beside the chair. Strong feelings were in me, awe, wonder, high expectancy, as of some grand and reverent worship. No mere bedroom of a modern private school contained me. I was elsewhere, among imperial and august conditions. I was aware of the Universe, and the Universe aware of me.

I spoke his name as I followed him softly over the carpet. But to my amazement, my tongue refused the familiar “Julius” of to-day, and framed instead another sound. Four syllables lay in the name. It was “Concerighé” that slipped from my lips. Then instantly, in the very second of utterance, it was gone beyond recovery. I tried to repeat the name, and could not find it.

Julius laughed softly just below his breath, making no reply. I saw his white teeth shine in the semi-darkness. He moved away on tiptoe towards the window, while I followed....

The lower sash was open wide as usual. I heard Goldingham breathing quietly in his sleep. Still with the mistiness of slumber round me, I felt bewildered, half caught away, as it seemed, into some web of ancient, far-off things that swung earthwards from the stars. In this net of other times and other places, I hung suspended above the world I ordinarily knew. I was not Mason, a Sixth-Form boy at a private school in Kent, yet I was indubitably myself. A flood of memories rose; my soul moved among more spacious conditions; all hauntingly alive and real, yet never recoverable completely....

We stood together by the open window and looked out. The country lay still beneath the fading stars. A faint breath of air stirred in the laurel shrubberies below. The notes of awakening birds, marvellously sweet, came penetratingly from the distant woods. I smelt the night, I smelt the coolness of very early morning, but there was another subtler, wilder perfume, that came to my nostrils with a deep thrill of happiness I could not name. It was the perfume of another day, another time, another land, all three as familiar to me as this Kentish hill where now I lived, yet gone otherwise beyond recall. Deep emotion stirred in me the sense of recognition, as though smell alone had the power to reconstruct the very atmosphere of those dim days by raising the ghosts of feelings that once accompanied them....

To the right I saw the dim cricket-field with hedge of privet and hawthorn that ran away in a dark and undulating line towards the hop-poles standing stiffly in the dusk; and, farther off, to the left, loomed the oast-houses, peaked and hooded, their faces turned the other way like a flock of creatures that belonged to darkness. The past seemed already indistinguishable from the present. I stood upon shifting sands that rustled beneath my feet.... The centuries drove backwards....

And the eastern sky, serene and cloudless, ran suddenly into gold and crimson near to the horizon’s rim. It became a river of fire that flashed along the edge of the world with high, familiar speed. It broke the same instant into coloured foam far overhead, with shafts of reddish light that swept the stars and put them out. And then this strange thing happened:

For, as my sight passed from the shadowy woods beyond, the scene before me rose like a lifted map into the air; changed; trembled as though it were a sheet shaken from the four corners, and — disclosed another scene below it, most exquisitely prepared. The world I knew melted and disappeared. I looked a second time. It was gone.

And with it vanished the entire little bundle of thoughts and feelings I was accustomed to regard as John Mason.... I smelt the long and windy odours of the open world. The stars bent down and whispered. Rivers rolled through me. Forests and grass grew thickly in my thoughts. And there was dew upon my face.... It was all so natural and simple. It was divine. The Universe was conscious. I was not separate from it at any point.... More, I was conscious with it.

Far off, as an auditorium seen with a bird's-eye view from some gigantic height, yet with the distinctness of a map both scaled and raised, I saw a treeless plain of vast dimensions, grey in the shadows just before the dawn. In the middle distance stood a domed white building upon the summit of a mound, with broad steps of stone in circles all about it, leading to a pillared door that faced the east. On all sides round it, covering the plain like grass, there was a concourse, many thousands strong, of people, upright and motionless, arranged in wide concentric rings, each one a hundred to two hundred deep. Each ring was dressed in coloured robes, from blue to red, from green to a soft pale yellow, purple, brown and orange, and the outermost of all a delicate and tender green that merged into the tint of the plain itself at a distance of a mile beyond the central building.

These concentric rings of colour, this vast living wheel of exquisitely merging tints, standing motionless and silent about the hub of that majestic temple, formed a picture whose splendour has never left my mind; and a sense of intoxicating joy and awe swept through me as something whispered that long ago, I, too, had once taken my appointed place in those great circles, and had felt the power of the Deity of Living Fire pass into me in the act of worship just about to begin. The courage and sweetness of the sun stole on me; light, heat and glory burned in my heart; I knew myself akin to earth, sea and sky, as also to every human unit in the breathing wheel; and, knowing this, I knew the power of the universe was in me because the universe was my Self.

Imperceptibly at first, but a moment later with measurable speed, a movement ran quivering round the circles. They began to turn. The immense, coloured wheel revolved silently upon the plain. The rings moved alternately, the first to the right, the second to the left, those at the outer rim more swiftly, and those within more slowly, each according to its distance from the centre, so that the entire mass presented the appearance of a single body rotating with a uniform and perfect smoothness. There rose a deep, muffled sound of myriad feet that trampled down the sand. The mighty shuffling of it paced the air. No other sound was audible. The sky grew swiftly brighter. The shafts of light shot out like arms towards the paling zenith. There came a whir of cool, delicious wind that instantly died down again and left the atmosphere more still and empty than before.

And then the sun came up. With the sudden rush of an eastern clime, it rose above the world. One second it was not there, the next it had appeared. The wheel blazed into flame. The circles turned to coloured fire. And a roaring chant burst forth instantaneously — a prodigious sound of countless voices whose volume was as the volume of an ocean. This wind of singing swept like a tempest overhead, each circle emitting the note related to its colour, the total resulting in a chord whose magnificence shook the heart with an ecstasy of joyful worship.... I was aware of the elemental power of fire in myself....

How long this lasted, or how long I listened is impossible to tell ... the dazzling glory slowly faded; there came a moment when the brilliance dimmed; a blur of coloured light rose like a sheet from the surface of the wheeling thousands, floating off into the sky as though it were a separate shining emanation the multitude gave off. I seemed to lose my feet. I no longer stood on solid earth. There came upon me a curious sense of lightness, as of wings, that yet left my body far below.... I was charged with a deific power, energy.... Long shafts of darkness flashed across the sea of light; the pattern of interwoven colour was disturbed and broken; and, suddenly, with a shock as though I fell again from some great height, I remembered dimly that I was no longer — that my name was ——

I cannot say. I only know confusion and darkness sponged the entire picture from the world; and my sight, I suddenly realised, went groping with difficulty about a little field, a rough, uneven hedge, a strip of ribboned whiteness that was a road, and some ugly, odd-shaped things that I recognised as — yes, as oast-houses just beyond. And a pale, sad-looking sun then crawled above the horizon where the hop-poles stood erect.

“You saw...?” whispered someone beside me.

It was Julius. His voice startled me. I had forgotten his very presence.

I nodded in reply; no words came to me; there was still a trembling in me, a sense of intolerable yearning, of beauty lost, of power gone beyond recall, of pain and littleness in the place of it.

Julius kept his eyes upon my face, as though waiting for an answer.

“The sun ...” I said in a low and shaking voice.

He bent his head a moment, leaning down upon the window-sill with his face in his hands.

“As we knew it then,” he said with a deep-drawn sigh, raising himself again. “To-day —— !”

He pointed. Across the fields I saw the tin roof of the conventicle where we went to church on Sunday, lifting its modern ugliness beyond the playground walls. The contrast was somehow dreadful. A revulsion of feeling rose within me like a storm. I stared at the meagre building beneath whose roof of corrugated iron, once a week, we knelt and groaned that we were “miserable sinners” — begging another to save us from “punishment” because we were too weak to save ourselves. I saw once more in memory the upright-standing throng, claiming with joy the powers of that other Deity of whom they knew they formed a living portion. And again this intolerable yearning swept me. My soul rose up in a passionate protest that vainly sought to express itself in words. Language deserted me; tears dimmed my eyes and blurred my sight; I stretched my hands out straight towards that misty sunrise of To-day....

And, when at length I turned again to speak to Julius, I saw that he had already left my side and gone back to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

"*NOT UNREMEMBERING WE pass our exile from the starry ways:*

One timeless hour in time we caught from the long night of endless days."
— A. E.

And so, in due course, the period of our schooldays came to its appointed end without one single further reference to the particular thing I dreaded. Julius had offered no further word of explanation, and my instinctive avoidance of the subject had effectively prevented my asking pointed questions. It remained, however; it merely waited the proper moment to reveal itself. It was real. No effort on my part, no evasion, no mere pretence that it was fantasy or imagination altered *that*. The time would come when I should know and understand; evasion would be impossible. It was inevitable as death.

During our last term together it lay in almost complete abeyance, only making an appearance from time to time in those vivid dreams which still presented themselves in sleep. It hid; and I pretended bravely to ignore it altogether.

Meanwhile our days were gloriously happy, packed with interest, and enlivened often with experiences as true and beautiful as the memory of our ancient sun-worship I have attempted to describe. No doubt assailed me; we *had* existed in the past together; those pictures of "inner scenery" were memories. The emotions that particular experience, and many others, stirred in me were as genuine as the emotions I experienced the last term but one, when my mother died; and, whatever my opinion of the entire series may be to-day, on looking back, honesty compels me to admit this positive character of their actuality. There was no make-believe, no mere imagination.

Our intimacy became certainly very dear to me, and I felt myself linked to Julius LeVallon more closely than to a brother. The knowledge that much existed he could not, or would not, share with me was pain, the pain of jealousy and envy, or possibly the deeper pain that a barrier was raised. Sometimes, indeed, he went into his Other Places almost for days together where I could not follow him, and on these occasions the masters found him absent-minded and the boys avoided him; he went about alone; if games or study compelled his attention, he would give it automatically — almost as though his body obeyed orders mechanically while the main portion of his consciousness seemed otherwise engaged. And, while it lasted, he would watch me curiously, as from a distance, expecting apparently that I would suddenly "remember" and come up to join him. His soul beckoned me, I felt, but half in vain. I longed to be with him, to go where he was, to see what he saw, but there was something that effectually prevented.

And these periods of absence I rather dreaded for some reason. It was uncanny, almost creepy. For I would suddenly meet his glowing eyes fixed queerly, searchingly on my own, gazing from behind a veil at me, asking pregnant questions that I could not catch. I would see him lying there beneath the larches of the cricket-field alone, rapt, far away, deep in his ancient recollections, and apart from me; or I would come upon him suddenly in the road, in a sunny corner of the playground, even in the deserted gymnasium on certain afternoons, when he would start to see me, and turn away without a word, but with an expression of unhappy yearning in his eyes as though he shared my pain that he dwelt among these Other Places which, for the moment, I might not know.

Many, many, indeed, are the details of these days that I might mention, but their narration would prove too long. One, however, may be told. He had, for instance, a kind of sign-language that was quite remarkable. On the sandy floor of a disused gravel-pit, where we lay on windy days for shelter while we talked, he would trace with a twig a whole series of these curious signs. They were for him the alphabet of a long-forgotten language — some system of ideograph or pictorial representation that expressed the knowledge of the times when it was used. He never made mistakes; the same sign invariably had the same meaning; and it all existed so perfectly in his inner vision that he used it even in his work, and kept a book in which the Greek play of the moment was written out entirely in this old hieroglyphic side by side with the original. He read from it in class, even under the eagle eye of the Head, with the same certainty as he read from the Greek itself.

There were characteristic personal habits, too, that struck me later as extraordinary for a boy of eighteen — in England; for he led an inner life of exceeding strictness, not to say severity, and was for ever practising mental concentration with a view to obtaining complete control of his feelings, thoughts and, therefore, actions. Upright as a rod of steel himself, he was tolerant to the failings of others, lenient to their weaknesses, and forgiving to those who wronged him. He bore no malice, cherished no ill-feeling. “It’s as far as they’ve got,” he used to say, “and no one can be farther than he is.” Indeed, his treatment of others implied a degree of indifference to self that had something really big about it. And, even on the lowest grounds, to bear a grudge meant only casting a net that must later catch the feet.

His wants in the question of food were firmly regulated too; for at an age when most boys consider it almost an aim in life to devour all they can possibly get and to spend half of their pocket-money on tempting eatables, Julius exercised a really Spartan control over these particular appetites. Not only was his fare most frugal in quantity, but he avoided the eating of meat almost entirely, alcohol completely, and sometimes would fast for a period that made me wonder for his health. He never spoke of this. I noticed it. Nor ever once did he use his influence to persuade me to like habits. No boy was ever less a prig than LeVallon. Another practice of his was equally singular. In order to increase control of the body and develop tenacity of will, I have known him, among other similar performances, stand for hours at a time on winter nights, clad only in a nightshirt, fighting sleep, cold, hunger, movement — stand like a statue in the centre of the room, as though the safety of the world depended upon success.

Most curious of all, however, seemed to me his habit of — what I can only call — communing with inanimate things. “You only remember the sections where we were together,” he explained, when once I asked the meaning of what he did; “and as you were little with me when this was the way of getting knowledge, it is difficult for you to understand.” This fact likewise threw light upon the enormous intervals between remembered sections. We recalled no recent ones at all. We had not come back together in them.

This communing with inanimate things had chiefly to do, of course, with Nature, and I may confess at once that it considerably alarmed me. To read about it comfortably in an armchair over the fire is one thing; to see it done is another. It alarmed me, moreover, for the reason that somewhere, somehow, it linked on to the thing I dreaded above all others — the days when he and I and *she* had made some wrong, some selfish use of it. This, of course, remained an intuition of my own. I never asked; I never spoke of it. Only in my very bones I felt sure that the thing we three must come together to put right again somehow involved, and involved unpleasantly, this singular method of acquiring knowledge and acquiring power. We had abused it together; we had yet to put it right.

To see Julius practising this mysterious process with a stone, a flower, a tree, and to hear him then talk about these three different objects, was like listening to a fairy tale told with the skill of a great imaginative artist. He personified them, gave their life history, rendered their individual experiences, moods, sensations, qualities, adventures — anything and everything that could ever happen to a stone, a flower, a tree. I realised their existence from their own point of view; felt-with them; shared their joys and sufferings, and understood that they were living things, though with a degree of life so far below our own. Communion with Nature was, for him, communion with the very ground of things. All this, though exquisitely wonderful, was within the grasp of sympathetic comprehension. It was natural.

But when he dealt with things less concrete — and his favourites were elemental forces such as air and heat, or as he preferred to call them, wind and fire — the experience, though no whit less convincing owing to the manner of his description, was curiously disturbing, because of the results produced upon himself. I can describe it in two words, though I can give no real idea of it in two thousand. He rushed, he flamed. It was almost as if, in one case, his actual radiation became enormous, and in the other, some power swept, as in the form of torrential enthusiasm, from his very person. *I* remember my first impression in the class-room — that a great wind blew, and that flaming colours moved upon the air.

When he was "feeling-with" this pair of elemental forces he seemed to draw their powers into his own being so that I, being in close sympathy with him, caught some hint of what was going forward in his heart. Sometimes on drowsy summer afternoons when no air stirred through the open windows of the room, there would come a sudden change in my surroundings, an alteration. I would hear a faint and distant sound of roaring; something invisible drove past me. Julius, at the desk beside me, had finished work, and closed his books. His head in his hands, he sat motionless, an intent expression on both face and body, wrapped deep in concentrated effort of some kind. He was practising.... And once, too, I remember being waked out of sleep in the early morning with an impression of a stimulating heat about me which amounted to an intensification of life almost. There he stood beside the window, arms folded, head bent down upon his breast, and an effect about him that can only be described as glowing. The air immediately round him seemed to shine with a faint, delicate radiance as of tropical starlight, or as though he stood over a dying fire of red-hot coals. It was a half fascinating, half terrifying sight; the light pulsed and trembled with distinct vibrations, the air quivered so as to increase his bodily appearance. He looked taller, vaster. And not once I saw this thing, but many times. No single dream could possibly explain it. In both cases, with the wind as with the fire, his life seemed magnified as though he borrowed from these elemental forces of Nature their own special qualities and powers.

“All the elements,” I remember his saying to me once, “are in our bodies. Do you expect Nature to be less intelligent than the life that she produces?” For him, certainly, there was the manifestation of something deeper than physics in the operations of so-called natural laws.

For here, let me say now in conclusion of this broken record of our days at school together, was the rock on which our intercourse eventually suffered interruption, and here was that first sign of the parting of our ways. It frightened me.... Later, in our university days, the cleavage became definite, causing a break in our friendship that seemed at the moment final. For a long time the feeling in me had been growing that his way and mine could not lie much farther together. Julius attributed it to my bringing up, which I was not independent enough to shake off. I can only say that I became conscious uneasily that this curious intercourse with Nature—“communing” as he termed it — led somehow away from the Christianity of my childhood to the gods and deification of the personal self. I did not see at the time, as he insisted, that *both* were true, being different aspects of the central fact that God is the Universe, and that man, being literally part of it, must eventually know Him face to face by actually becoming Him. All this lay far beyond me at the time.

It seemed to me then, and more as I grew older, an illegitimate, dangerous traffic; for paganism, my father taught me sternly, was the Devil, and that the Universe could actually be alive was a doctrine of heathenish days that led straight to hell and everlasting burning. I could not see, as Julius saw, that here was teaching which might unify the creeds, put life into the formal churches, inspire the world with joy and hope, and bring on the spirit of brotherhood by helping the soul to rediscover its kinship with a living cosmos.

One certainty, however, my schooldays with this singular boy bequeathed to me, a certainty I have never lost, and a very gorgeous and inspiring one — that life is continuous.

LeVallon lived in eternal life. He knew that it stretched infinitely behind his present "section," and infinitely ahead into countless other "sections." The results of what lay behind he must inevitably exhaust. Be that harvest painful or pleasant, he must reap what he had sown. But the future lay entirely in his own hands, and in his power of decision; chance or caprice had no word to say at all. And this consciousness of being in eternal life now, at the present moment, master of fate, potentially at least deific — this has remained a part of me, whether I will or no. To Julius LeVallon I owe certainly this unalterable conviction.

Another memory of that early intercourse that has remained with me, though too vaguely for very definite description, is the idea that personal life, even in its smallest details, is part of a cosmic ceremony, that to perform it faithfully deepens the relationship man bears to the Universe as a living whole, and is therefore of ultimate spiritual significance. An inspiring thought, I hold, even in the vagueness of my comprehension of it.

Yet above and beyond such notions, remained the chief memory of all: that in some such ancient cosmic ceremony, Julius, myself and one other had somehow abused our privileges in regard to Nature Powers, and that the act of restoration still awaiting fulfilment at our hands, an act involving justice to the sun and stars as well as to our lesser selves, could not be accomplished until that "other" was found on earth together with himself and me. And that other was a woman.

BOOK II. EDINBURGH

"*WE DO NOT know where sentient powers, in the widest sense of the term, begin or end. And there may be disturbances and moods of Nature wherein the very elemental forces approach sentient being, so that, perhaps, mythopœic man has not been altogether a dreamer of dreams. I need not dwell on the striking reflections to which this possibility gives rise; enough that an idealistic dynamism forces the possibility on our view. If the life of Nature is from time to time, and under special conditions, raised to the intense requisite level, we are in the presence of elemental forces whose character primitive man has not entirely misunderstood.*"— "Individual and Reality" (E. D. Fawcett).

CHAPTER IX

THERE WAS AN interval of a year and a half before we met again. No letters passed between us, and I had no knowledge of where LeVallon was or what he did. Yet while in one sense we had gone apart, in another sense I knew that our relationship suffered no actual break. It seemed inevitable that we should come together again. Our tie was of such a kind that neither could shake the other off. In the meantime my soldier's career had been abandoned; loss of money in the family decreed a more remunerative destiny; and the interval had been spent learning French and German abroad with a view to a less adventurous profession. At the age of nineteen, or thereabouts, I found myself at Edinburgh University to study for a Bachelor of Science degree, and the first face I saw in Professor Geikie's lecture room for geology was that of my old school-friend of the "Other Places," Julius LeVallon.

I stood still and stared, aware of two opposing sensations. For this unexpected meeting came with a kind of warning upon me. I felt pleasure, I felt dread: I cannot determine which came first, only that, mingled with the genuine gratification, there was also the touch of uneasiness, the sinking of the heart I knew so well.

And I remember saying to myself — so odd are the tricks of memory— "Why, he's as pale as ever! Always that marble skin!" As though during the interval he ought somehow to have acquired more colour. He was tall, over six feet, thin, graceful as an Oriental; an expression of determination in his face had replaced the former dreaminess. The eyes were clear and very strong. There was an expression of great intensity about him.

His greeting was characteristic: he showed eager pleasure, but expressed no surprise.

"Old souls like ours are bound to meet again," he said with a smile as he shook my hand. "We have so much to do together."

I recalled the last time I had seen him, waiting on the school platform as the train went out, and I realised that there were changes in him that left me standing still, as it were. Perhaps he caught my thought, for his face took on a touch of sadness; he gazed into my eyes, making room for me beside him on the bench. “But you’ve been dawdling on the way a bit,” he added. “You’ve been after other things, I see.”

It was true enough. I had fallen in love, for one thing, besides devoting myself with the ardour of youth to literature, music, sport, and other normal interests of my age. From his point of view, of course, I had not advanced, whereas he obviously had held steadily to the path he had chosen for himself, following always one main thing — this star in the east of his higher knowledge. His attitude to me, I felt moreover, had undergone a change. The old sympathy and affection had not altered, but a strain of pity had crept in, a regret that I suffered the attractions of the world to interfere with my development.

A delay, as he called it, in our relationship there had certainly been, though the instant we met I realised that something bound us together fundamentally with a power that superficial changes or external separation could never wholly dissolve.

Yet, on the whole, I saw little enough of him during these Edinburgh days, far less certainly than at Motfield Close. I was older, for one thing, more of the world for another. As a boy, of course, the idea that we renewed an eternal friendship, faithful to one another through so many centuries, made a romantic appeal that was considerable. But the glamour had evaporated; I was a man now, I considered, busy with the things of men. At the same time I was aware that these other tendencies were by no means dead in me, and that very little would be required to revive them. Buried by other interests, they were yet ready to assert themselves again.

And LeVallon, for his part, though he saw less of me, and I think cared to see less of me than before, kept deliberately in touch, and of set purpose would not suffer us to go too far apart. We did not live in the same building, but he came often to my rooms, we took great walks together over the Pentland Hills, and once or twice wandered down the coast from Musselburgh to the cliffs of St. Abbs Head above the sea. Why he came to Edinburgh at all, indeed, puzzled me a little; but I am probably not far wrong in saying that two things decided the choice: He wished to keep me in sight, having heard somehow of my destination; and, secondly, certain aspects of Nature that he needed were here easily accessible — the sea, hills, woods, and lonely places that his way of life demanded. Among the lectures he took a curious selection: geology, botany, chemistry, certain from the Medical Course, such as anatomy and materia medica, and, above all, the advanced mental classes. He attended operations, post-mortems, and anything in the nature of an experiment, while the grim Dissecting Room knew him as well as if his living depended upon passing the examination in anatomy.

Of his inner life at this period it was not so easy to form an estimate. He worked incessantly, but at something I never could quite determine. At school he was for ever thinking of this "something"; now he was working at it. It seemed remote from the life of the rest of us, students and others, because its aim was different. Pleasure, as such, and the usual forms of indulgence, he left on one side; and women, though his mysterious personality, his physical beauty, and his cold indifference attracted them, he hardly admitted into his personal life at all; to his intimacy, never. His habits were touched with a singular quality of selflessness, very rare, very exquisite, sincere as it was modest, that set him apart in a kind of divine loneliness, giving to all, yet asking of none. My former feeling that his aims were tinged by something dark and anti-spiritual no longer held good; it was due to a partial and limited judgment, to ignorance, even to misunderstanding. His aims were undeniably lofty, his life both good and pure. Respect grew with my closer study of him, for his presence brought an uplifting atmosphere of intenser life whose centre of activity lay so high above the aims of common men as to constitute an "other-worldliness" of a very unusual kind indeed.

I observed him now as a spectator, more critically. No dreams or imaginative visions — with one or two remarkable exceptions — came to bewilder judgment. I saw him from outside. If not sufficiently unaffected by his ideas to be quite a normal critic, I was certainly more prosaic, and often sceptical. None the less the other deeper tendency in me was still strong; it easily wakened into life. This deep contradiction existed.

The only outward change I noticed, apart from the greater maturity and decision in the features, was a look of sadness he habitually wore, that altered when he spoke of the things he cared about, into an expression of radiant joy. The thought of his great purpose then lit flames in his eyes, and brought into the whole countenance a certain touch of grandeur. It was not often, evidently, that he found anyone to talk with; and arguing, as such, he never cared about. He knew. He was one of those fortunate beings who never had felt doubt. Perfect assurance he had.

Julius, at that time, occupied a suite of rooms at the end of Princes Street, where Queensferry Road turns towards the Forth. They were, I think, his only extravagance, for the majority of students were content with a couple of rooms, or a modest flat on the Morningside. This suite he furnished himself, and there was one room in it that no one but himself might enter. It had, I believe, no stick of furniture in it, and required, therefore, no dusting apparently; in any case, neither landlady, friend nor servant ever passed its door.

My curiosity concerning it was naturally considerable, though never satisfied. He needed a place, it seems, where absolute solitude was possible, an atmosphere uncoloured by others. He made frequent use of it, but whether for that process of "feeling-with" already mentioned, or for some kind of secret worship, ceremonial, or what not, is more than I can say. Often enough I have sat waiting for him in the outer room when he was busy within this mysterious sanctum; no sound audible; no movement; a bright light visible beneath the crack of the door; a sense of hush, both deep and solemn, about the entire place. Though it may sound ridiculous to say so, there was a certain air of sanctity that hung like a veil about that inner chamber, the silence and stillness evoked a hint of reverence. I waited with something between awe and apprehension for the handle to turn, aware that behind the apparent stillness something intensely active was going forward, of which faint messages reached my mind outside. Certainly, while sitting with book or newspaper, waiting for his footstep, my thoughts would glow and burn within me, rushing with energy along unaccustomed channels, and I remember the curious feeling that behind those panels of painted deal there lay a space far larger than the mere proportions of a room.

As in the fairy-tale, that door opened into outer space; and I suspect that Julius used the solitude for "communing" with those Nature Powers he seemed always busy with. Once, indeed, when he at length appeared, after keeping me waiting for a longer period than usual, I was aware of two odd things about him: he brought with him a breath of open air, cool, fresh and scented as by the fragrance of the forest; about him, too, a faintly luminous atmosphere that lent to his face a kind of delicate radiance almost shining. My sight for a moment wavered; the air between us vibrated as he came across the room towards me. There was a strangeness round about him. There was power. And when he spoke, his voice, though low as always, had a peculiar resonance that woke echoes, it seemed, beyond the actual walls.

The impressions vanished as curiously as they came; but their reality was beyond question. And at times like these, I confess, the old haunting splendour of his dream would come afresh upon me as at Motfield Close. My little world of ambition and desire seemed transitory and vain. The magic of his personality stole sweetly, powerfully upon me; I was swept by gusts of passionate yearning to follow where he led. For his purpose was not selfish. The knowledge and powers he sought were for the ultimate service of the world. It was the permanent Self he trained rather than the particular brain and body of one brief and transient "section," called To-day.

These moods with me passed off quickly, and the practical world in which I now lived brought inevitable reaction; I mention them to show that in me two persons existed still: an upper, that took life normally like other people, and a lower, that hid with Julius LeVallon in strange "Other Places." For in this duality lies the explanation of certain experiences I later shared with him, to be related presently.

Our relations, meanwhile, held intimate and close as of old — up to a certain point. There was this barrier of my indifference and the pity that it bred in him. Though never urging it, he was always hoping that I would abandon all and follow him; but, failing this, he held to me because something in the future made me necessary. Otherwise the gulf between us had certainly not widened.

I see him as he stood before me in those Edinburgh lodgings: young, in the full tide of modern life, with good faculties, health, means, looks, high character, and sane as a policeman! All that men hold dear and the world respects was his. Yet, without a hint of insincerity or charlatanism, he seemed conscious only of what he deemed the long, sweet prizes of the soul, difficult of attainment, and to the majority mere dreams. His was that rare detachment which sees clear to the end, not through avoiding the stress of perilous adventure by the way, but through refusing the conclusion that the adventures were ends in themselves, or could have any other significance than as items in development, justifying all suffering.

Eternal life for him was *now*. He sought the things that once acquired can never be forgotten, since their fruits are garnered by the Self that persists through all the series of consecutive lives. Through all the bewildering rush and clamour of the amazing world he looked ever to the star burning in the depths of his soul. And for a tithe of his certainty, as of the faith and beauty of living that accompanied it, I sometimes felt tempted to give all that I possessed and follow him. The scale at any rate was grand. The fall of empires, the crash of revolutions, the destiny of nations, all to him were as nothing compared with the advance or retreat of a single individual soul in the pursuit of what he deemed "real knowledge."

Yet, while acknowledging the seduction of his dream, and even half yielding to it sometimes, ran ever this hidden thread of lurking dread and darkness that, for the life of me, I could never entirely get rid of. It was lodged too deeply in me for memory to discover, or for argument to eject. Ridicule could not reach it, denial made no difference. To ignore it was equally ineffective. Even during the long interval of our separation it was never quite forgotten. Like something on the conscience it smouldered out of sight, but when the time was ripe it would burst into a blaze.

At school I merely "funked" it; I would not hear about it. Now, however, my attitude had changed a little. The sense of responsibility that comes with growing older was involved — rather to my annoyance and dismay. Here was something I must put right, or miss an important object of my being. It was inevitable; the sooner it was faced and done with, the better.

Yet the time, apparently, was not quite yet.

CHAPTER X

“*INSTEAD OF CONCEIVING the elements as controlled merely by blindly operative forces, they may be imagined as animated spiritual beings, who strive after certain states, and offer resistance to certain other states.*” — Lotze.

In connection with LeVallon’s settled conviction that the Universe was everywhere alive and one, and that only the thinnest barriers divided animate from so-called inanimate Nature, I recall one experience in particular. The world men ordinarily know is limited to a few vibrations the organs of sense respond to. Though science, with her delicate new instruments, was beginning to justify the instinctive knowledge of an older time, and wireless marvels and radio-activity were still unknown (at the time of which I write), Julius spoke of them as the groundwork of still greater marvels by which thought would be transmissible. The thought-current was merely a little higher than the accepted wave lengths; moreover, powers and qualities were equally transmissible. Unscientifically, he was aware of all these things, and into this beyond-world he penetrated, apparently, though with the effort of a long-forgotten practice. He linked the human with the non-human. He knew Saturn or the Sun in the same way that he knew a pebble or a wild flower — by feeling-with them.

“It’s coming back into the world,” he said. “Before we leave this section it will all be known again. The ‘best minds,’” he laughed, “will publish it in little primers, and will label it ‘extension of consciousness,’ or some such laboured thing. And they will think themselves very wonderful to have discovered what they really only re-collect.”

He looked up at me and smiled significantly, as we sat side by side in the Dissecting Room, busily tracing the nerves and muscles in a physical “instrument” some soul had recently cast aside. I use his own curious phraseology, of course. He laid his pointed weapon down a moment upon the tangle of the solar plexus that resembled the central switch-board of a great London telegraph office.

“There’s the main office,” he pointed, “not *that*,” indicating the sawn-off skull where the brain was visible. “Feeling is the clue, not thinking.”

And, then and there, he described how this greatest nerve-centre of the human system could receive and transmit messages and powers between its owner and the entire universe. His quiet yet impassioned language I cannot pretend at this interval to give; I only remember the conviction that his words conveyed. It was more wonderful than any fairy-tale, for it made the fairy-tale come true. For this “beyond-world” of Julius LeVallon contained whole hierarchies of living beings, whose actuality is veiled to-day in legend, folk-lore, and superstition generally — some small and gentle as the fairies, some swift and radiant as the biblical angels, others, again, dark, powerful and immense as the deities of savage and “primitive” races. But all knowable, all obedient to the laws of their own being, and, furthermore, all accessible to the trained will of the human who understood them. Their great powers could be borrowed, used, adapted. Herein lay for him a means to deeper wisdom, richer life, the recovery of true worship, powers that must eventually help Man to that knowledge of the universe which is, more simply put, the knowledge of one God. At present Man was separate, cut off from all this bigger life, matter “inanimate” and Nature “dead.”

And I remember that in this remarkable outburst he touched very nearly upon the origin of my inner dread. Again I felt sure that it was in connection with practices of this nature that he and I and *she* had involved ourselves in something that, as it were, disturbed the equilibrium of those forces whose balance constitutes the normal world, but something that could only be put right again by the three of us acting in concert and facing an ordeal that was somehow terrible.

One afternoon in October I always associate particularly with this talk about elemental Nature Powers being accessible to human beings, for it was the first occasion that I actually witnessed anything in the nature of definite results. And I recall it in detail; the memory of such an experience could never fade.

We had been walking for a couple of hours, much of the time in silence. My own mind was busy with no train of thought in particular; rather I was in a negative, receptive state, idly reviewing mental pictures, and my companion’s presence obtruded so little that I sometimes almost forgot he was beside me. On the Pentlands we followed the sheep tracks carelessly where they led, and presently lay down among the heather of the higher slopes to rest. Julius flung himself down first, and, pleasantly tired, I imitated him at once. In the distance lay the mosaic of Edinburgh town, her spires rising out of haze and mist. Across the uninspiring strip of modern houses called the Morningside, the Castle Rock stood on its blunt pedestal, carved out by the drive of ancient glaciers. At the end of the small green valley where immense ice-chisels once had ploughed their way, we saw the Calton Hill; beyond it, again, the line of Princes Street with its stream of busy humanity; and further still, the lovely dip over the crest of the hill where the Northern ocean lay towards the Bass Rock and the sea-birds.

The autumn air drew cool and scented along the heathery ridges, and while Julius lay gazing at the cirrus clouds, I propped myself upon one elbow and enjoyed the scene below. It was my pleasure always to know a thing by name and recognise it — the different churches, the prison, the University buildings, the particular house where my own lodgings were; and I was searching for Frederick Street, trying to pick out the actual corner where George Street cut through it, when I became aware that, across the great dip of intervening valley, something equally saw me. This was my first impression — that something watched me.

I placed it, naturally enough, where my thought was fixed, across the dip; but the same instant I realised my mistake. It was much nearer — close beside me. Something was watching us intently. We were no longer quite alone. And, with the discovery, there grew gradually about me a sense of indescribable loveliness, a soft and tender beauty impossible to define precisely. It came like one of those enveloping moods of childhood, when everything is alive and anything may happen. My heart, it seemed, expanded. It turned wild.

I looked round at Julius. He still lay on his back as before, with the difference that his hands now were folded across his eyes and that his body was motionless and rigid as a log. He hardly breathed. He seemed part and parcel of the earth, merged in the hill-side as naturally as the heather.

Yet something had happened, or was in the act of happening, to him. The forgotten schoolday atmosphere of Other Places stole over me as I gazed.

I made no sound; I did not speak; my eyes passed quickly from the panorama of town and sea to a flock of mountain sheep that nibbled the patches of coarse grass not far away. The feeling that something invisible yet conscious approached us from the empty spaces of the afternoon became a certainty. My spirit lifted. There was a new and vital relationship between my inner nature, so to speak, and my material environment. My nerves were quivering, the sense of beauty remained, but my questioning wonder changed to awe. Somewhere about me on that bare hill-side Nature had become aggressively alive.

Yet no one of my senses in particular conveyed the great impression; it seemed wrought of them all in combination — a large, synthetic, universal report sent forth by the natural things about me. Some flooding energy, like a tide of unknown power, rose through my body. But my brain was clear. One by one I ticked off the different senses; it was neither sight, smell, touch, nor hearing that was individually affected. There was vague uneasiness, it seems, as well, for I sought instinctively what was of commonplace import in the landscape. I stared at the group of nibbling sheep. My sight wandered to the larches on my right, some thirty yards away. Next, seeking things more humanly comforting still, I fixed my gaze upon my nailed and muddy boots.

At the same moment Julius became suddenly alert. He sat erect.

The change in his attitude startled me; he seemed intent upon something in the nearer landscape that escaped me. He, like myself, was aware that other life approached; he shared my strange emotion of delight and power; but in him was no uneasiness, for whereas I questioned nervously, he *knew* with joy. Yet he was doing nothing definite, so far as I could see. The change of attitude resulted in no act. His face, however, was so intense, so animated, that I understood it was the touch of his mind that had reached my own so stimulatingly, and that what was coming — came through him. His eyes were fixed, I saw, upon the little grove of larches.

I made no movement, but watched the larches and his face alternately. And what I can only call the childhood mood of make-believe enormously increased. It extended, however, far beyond the child’s domain; it seemed all-potent, irresistibly imperative. By the mere effort of my will I could — create. Some power in me hidden, lost, unused, seemed trying to assert itself. I merely had to say “Let there be a ball before me in the air,” and by the simple fiat of this power it must appear. I had only to will the heather at my feet to move, and it must move — as though, in the act of willing, some intense, intermolecular energy were set free. There was almost the sense that I had this power in me now — that I had certainly once known how to use it.

I can hardly describe intelligently what followed. It is so easy to persuade myself that I was dreaming or deceived, yet so difficult to prove that I was neither one nor other, but keenly observant and wholly master of my mind. For by this time it was clear to me that the sensation of being watched, of knowing another living presence close, as also of sharing this tender beauty, issued primarily from the grove of larches. My being and their own enjoyed some inter-relationship, exquisite yet natural. There was exchange between us. And the wind, blowing stiffly up the heather slopes, then lifted the lower branches of the trees, so that I saw deep within the little grove, yet at the same time behind and beyond them. Something that their veil of greenness draped went softly stirring. The same minute it came out towards me with a motion best described as rushing. The heart of the grove became instinct with life, life that I could appreciate and understand, each individual tree contributing its thread to form the composite whole, Julius and myself contributing as well. This Presence swam out through the afternoon atmosphere towards us, whirring, almost dancing, as it came. There was an impression of volume — of gigantic energy. The air in our immediate neighbourhood became visible.

Yet to say that I saw something seems as untrue as to say that I saw nothing. Form was indistinguishable from movement. The air, the larches and ourselves were marvellously entangled with the sunshine and the landscape. I was aware of an intelligence different from my own, immensely powerful, but somehow not a human intelligence. Superb, unearthly beauty touched the very air.

“Hush!” I heard LeVallon whisper. “Feel-with it, but do not think.”

The advice was unnecessary. I felt; but I had no time to think, no inclination either. A long-forgotten “I” was active. My familiar, daily self shrank out of sight. Vibrant, sensitive, amazingly extended, my being responded in an *immediate* fashion to things about me. Any “thoughts” I had came afterwards.

For the greenness whirled and flashed like sunlight upon water or on fluttering silk. With an intricate and complex movement it appeared to spin and revolve within itself; and I cannot dare to say from what detail came the absolute persuasion that it was alive in the same sense that I myself and Julius were alive, while of another order of intelligence.

Julius rose suddenly to his feet, and a fear came over me that he was going to touch it; for he moved forwards with an inviting gesture that caused me an exhilarating distress as when a friend steps too near the edge of a precipice. But the next moment I saw that he was directing it rather, with the immediate result that it swerved sharply to one side, passed with swiftness up the steep hill-side, and — disappeared. It raced by me with a soft and roaring noise, leaving a marked disturbance of the air that was like a wind within a wind. I seemed pushed aside by the fringe of a small but violent whirlwind. The booming already sounded some distance up the slope.

“I’ve lost it!” I remember shouting with a pang of disappointment. For it seemed that the power and delight in me both ebbed and that energy went with them.

“Because you thought a moment instead of felt!” cried Julius. He turned, holding up one hand by way of warning. His voice was more than ordinarily resonant, his whole body charged with force. “Now — watch the sheep,” he added in a lower tone. And, although the words surprised me in one way, in another I anticipated them. There passed across his face a momentary expression of intense effort, but even before the sentence was finished I heard the rushing of the frightened animals, and understood something of what was happening. There was panic in them. The entire flock ran headlong down the steep slope of heather. The thunder of their feet is in my ears to-day. I see their heaving backs of dirty wool climbing in tumbling fashion one upon another as they pressed tightly in a wedge-shaped outline. They plunged frantically together down the steep place to some level turf below. But, even then, I think they would not have stopped, had not a sound, half cry, half word of command, from my companion brought them to a sudden halt again. They paused in their wild descent.

Like a single animal the entire company of them — twenty or thirty, perhaps, all told — were arrested. They looked stupidly about them, turned their heads in the opposite direction, and with one accord began once more peacefully — eating grass.

The incident had occupied, perhaps, three minutes.

“The larches!” I heard, and the same instant that softly-roaring thing, not wind, yet carried inside the wind, again raced past me, going this time in the direction of the grove. There was just time to turn, when I heard a clap — not unlike the sound of an open hand that strikes a pillow, though on a far vaster scale — and it seemed to me that the bodies of the trees trembled for a moment where they melted into one another amid the general greenness of stems and branches.

For the fraction of a second they shone and pulsed and quivered. Something opened; something closed again. The enthralling sense of beauty left my heart, the power sank away, the huge energy retired. And, in a flash, all was normal once again; it was a cool October afternoon upon the Pentland Hills, and a wind was blowing freshly from the distant sea.

I was lying on the grass again exactly as before; Julius, watching me keenly beneath the lids of his narrowed eyes, had just flung himself down to keep me company....

“The barriers, you see, are thin,” he said quietly. “There really are no barriers at all.”

This was the first sentence I heard, though his voice, it seemed, had been speaking for some considerable time. I had closed my eyes — to shut out a rising tide of wonderful and familiar pictures whose beauty somehow I sought vigorously to deny. Yet there was this flare of vivid memory: a penetrating odour of acrid herbs that burned in the clearing of a sombre forest; a low stone altar, the droning of men’s voices chanting monotonously as they drew near in robes of white and yellow ... and I seemed aware of some forgotten but exquisite ceremonial by means of which natural forces were drawn upon to benefit the beings of the worshippers....

“All is transmissible,” rose LeVallon’s voice out of the picture, “all can be shared. That was the aim and meaning of our worship....”

I opened my eyes and looked at him. The expansion of my consciousness had been a genuine thing; the power and joy both real; the worship authentic. Now they had left me and the shrinkage caused me pain; there was a poignant sense of loss. I felt afraid again.

“But it’s all gone,” I answered in a hushed tone, “and everything has left me.” Reason began to argue and deny. I could scarcely retain the memory of those big sensations which had offered a channel into an extended world.

Julius searched my face with his patient, inward-gazing eyes.

“Your attitude prevented,” he replied after a moment’s hesitation; “it became unsafe.”

“You brought it?” I faltered.

He nodded. “A human will,” he replied, “and a physical body — as channel. Your resistance broke the rhythm and brought danger in.” And after a pause he added significantly: “For the return — the animals served well.” He smiled. “Ran down a steep place into the sea — almost.”

And, abruptly then, the modern world came back, as though what I had just experienced had been but some pictured memory, thrust up, withdrawn. I was aware that my fellow student at Edinburgh University, LeVallon by name, lay beside me in the heather, his face charged with peace and happiness ... that the dusk was falling, and that the air was turning chilly.

Without further speech we rose and made our way down from the windy ridge, and the chief change I noticed in myself seemed to be a marked increase of vitality that was singularly exhilarating, yet included the touch of awe already mentioned. The feeling was in me that life of some non-human kind had approached us both. I looked about me, first at Julius, then at the landscape, growing dim. The wind blew strongly from the sea. Far in the distance rose the outline of the Forth Bridge, then a-building, its skeleton, red in the sunset, rearing across the water like a huge sea-serpent with ribs of gleaming steel. I could almost hear the hammering of the iron.... And, at our feet, the first lights of the Old Town presently twinkled through the veil of dusk and smoke that wove itself comfortingly about the habitations of men and women.

My thoughts were busy, but for a long time no speech passed. Occasionally I stole glances at my companion as we plodded downwards through the growing dusk, and there seemed a curious glow about his face that made him more clearly visible than the other objects about us. The way he looked back from time to time across his shoulder increased my impression — by no means a pleasant one just then — that something followed us from those heathery hill-tops, kept close behind us through the muddy lanes, and watched our movements across the fields and hedges.

I have never forgotten that walk home in the autumn twilight, nor the sense of haunting possibilities that hung about it like an atmosphere — the feeling that other life loomed close upon our steps. Before Roslin Chapel was passed, and the welcome lights of the town were near, this consciousness of a ghostly following suite became a certainty, and I felt that every copse and field sent out some messenger to swell the throng. We had established touch with another region of life, of power, and the link was not yet fully broken.

And the sentences Julius let fall from time to time, half to himself and half to me, increased my nervousness instead of soothing it.

“The gods, you see, are not dead,” he said, waving his hand towards the hills, “but only distant. They are still accessible to all who can feel-with their powers. In your self-consciousness a door stands open; they can be approached — through Nature. Ages ago, when the sun was younger, and you and I were nearer to the primitive beauty ...”

A cat, darting silently across the road like a shadow from a cottage door, gave me such a start that I lost the remainder of the sentence. His arm was linked in mine as he added softly:

“... Only, what is borrowed in this way must always be returned, for otherwise the equilibrium is destroyed, and the borrower suffers until he puts it right again. So utterly exact is the balance of the universe....”

I deliberately turned my head away, aware that something in me *would* not listen. The conviction grew that he had a motive in the entire business. That inner secret dread revived. Yet, in spite of it, there was a curiosity that refused to let me escape altogether. It was bound to satisfy itself. The question seemed to force itself out of my lips:

“They are unconscious, though, these Powers?” And, having asked it, I would willingly have blotted out the words. I heard his low voice answer so far away it seemed an echo from the hills behind us.

“Of a different order,” he replied, “until they are part of you; and then they share *your* consciousness....”

“Hostile or friendly?” I believed I thought this question only, but apparently I spoke it out aloud. Julius paused a moment. Then he said briefly:

“Neither one nor other, of themselves. Merely that they resent an order being placed upon them. It involves mastery or destruction.”

The words sank into me with something like a shudder. It seemed that everything I asked and everything he answered were as familiar as though we spoke of some lecture of the day before. What I had witnessed shared this familiarity, too, though more faintly. All belonged to this incalculable past he for ever searched to bring to light. Yet of what dim act of mine, of his, or of another working with us, this mysterious shudder was born, I still remained in ignorance, though an ignorance that seemed now slowly about to lift.

Then, suddenly, the final question was out before I could prevent it. It came irresistibly:

“And if, instead of animals, it had been men...?”

The effect was instantaneous, and very curious. I could have sworn he had been waiting for that question. For he turned upon me with passion that shone a moment in his pale and eager face, then died away as swiftly as it came. His hand tightened upon my arm; he drew me closer. He bent down. I saw his eyes gleam in the darkness as he whispered:

“Such men would know themselves cut off from their own kind, a gulf between humanity — and themselves. For the elemental powers may be borrowed, but not kept. There would burn in them fires no human hands could quench, because no human hands had lit them. Yet their vast energies might lift our little self-seeking race into that grander universal life where — —”

He stopped dead in the darkened road and fixed me with his eyes. He said the next words with a vehement conviction that struck cold into my very entrails:

“He who retains within himself the elemental powers which are the deities in Nature, is both above and below his kind.”

A moment he hid his face in his hands; then, opening his arms wide and throwing his head back to the sky, he raised his voice; he almost cried aloud: “A man who has worshipped the Powers of Wind and the Powers of Fire, and has retained them in himself, keeping them out of their appointed places, is born of them. He is become their child. He is a son of Wind and Fire. And though he break and flame with energies that could regenerate the world, he must remain alien and outcast from humanity, untouched by love or sorrow, stranger to joy, aloof, impersonal, until by full and complete restitution, he restore the balance in the surrender of his stolen powers.”

It seemed to me he towered; that his stature grew; that the darkness round his very head turned bright; and that a wind from nowhere went driving down the sky behind him with a wailing violence. The amazing outburst took me off my feet by its suddenness. An emotion from the depths rose up and shook me. What happened next I hardly realised, only that he caught my arm and hurried along the road at a reckless, half stumbling speed, and that the lonely hills behind us followed in the darkness....

A few moments afterwards we found ourselves among the busy lights and traffic of the streets. His calm had returned as suddenly as it had deserted him. Such moments with him were so rare, he seemed almost unnatural, superhuman. And presently we separated at the corner of the North Bridge, going home to our respective rooms. He made no single reference to the storm that had come upon him in this extraordinary manner; I likewise spoke no word. We said good night. He turned one way, I another. But, as I went, his burning sentences still haunted me; I saw his face like moonlight through the tangle of a wood; and I *knew* that all we had seen and heard and spoken that afternoon had reference to a past that we had shared, yet also to a future, which he and I awaited together for the coming of a — third.

CHAPTER XI

"*STRANGE AS IT may appear to the modern mind, whose one ambition is to harden and formalise itself ... the ancient mind conceived of knowledge in a totally different fashion. It did not crystallise itself into a hardened point, but, remaining fluid, knew that the mode of knowledge suitable to its nature was by intercourse and blending. Its experience was ... that it could blend with intelligence greater than itself, that it could have intercourse with the gods.*"— "Some Mystical Adventures" (G. R. S. Mead).

An inevitable result of this experience was that, for me, a reaction followed. I had no stomach for such adventures. Though carried away at the moment by the enthralling character of the feelings roused that afternoon, my normal self, my upper self as I had come to call it, protested — with the result that I avoided Julius. I changed my seat in the class-rooms, giving as excuse that I could not hear the lecturer; I gave up attending post-mortems and operations where I knew that he would be; and if I saw him in the street I would turn aside or dive into some shop until the danger of our meeting passed. Ashamed of my feebleness, I yet could not bring myself to face him and thrash the matter out.

Other influences also were at work, for my father, it so happened, and the girl I was engaged to marry, her family too, were all of them in Edinburgh just about that time, and some instinct warned me that they and LeVallon must not meet. In the latter case particularly I obeyed this warning instinct, for in the influence of Julius there hid some strain of opposition towards these natural affections. I was aware of it unconsciously, perhaps. It seemed he made me question the reality of my love; made me doubt and hesitate; sometimes almost made me challenge the value of these ties that meant so much to me. From his point of view, I knew, these emotions belonged to transient relationships of one brief section, and to become centred in them involved the obliteration of the larger view. His attitude was more impersonal: Love everyone, but do not lose perspective by focusing your entire self in one or two. It was *au fond* a selfish pleasure merely; it delayed the development of the permanent personality; it destroyed — more important still — the sense of kinship with the universe which was the basic principle with him. It need not: but it generally did.

For some weeks, therefore, our talks and walks were interrupted; I devoted myself to work, to intercourse with those I loved, and led generally the normal existence of a university student who was reading for examinations that were of importance to his future career in life.

Yet, though we rarely met, and certainly held no converse for some time, interruption actually there was none at all. To pretend it were a farce. The inner relationship continued as before. Physical separation meant absolutely nothing in those ties that so strangely and so intimately knit our deeper lives together. There was no more question of break between us than there is question of a break in time when light is extinguished and the clock becomes invisible. His presence always stood beside me; the beauty of his pale, un-English face kept ever in my thoughts; I heard his whisper in my dreams at night, and the ideas his curious language watered continued growing with a strength I could not question.

There were two selves in me then as in our schooldays: one that resisted, and one that yearned. When together, it was the former that asserted its rights, but when apart, oddly enough, it was the latter. There is little question, however, that the latter was the stronger of the two. Thus, the moment I found myself alone again, my father and my fiancée both gone, we rushed together like two ends of an elastic that had been stretched too long apart.

And almost immediately, as though the opportunity must not be lost, he spoke to me of an experiment he had in view.

By what network of persuasiveness he induced me to witness, if not actually to co-operate in, this experiment, I cannot pretend at this distance to remember. I think it is true that he used no persuasion at all, but that at the first mention of it my deeper being met the proposal with curious sympathy. At the horror and audacity my upper self shrank back aghast; the thing seemed wholly impermissible and dreadful; something unholy, as of blasphemy, lay in it too. But, as usual, when this mysterious question of “Other Places” was involved, in the end I followed blindly where he led. My older being held the casting vote. And the reason — I admit it frankly

— was that somewhere behind the amazing glamour of it all lay — truth. While reason scoffed, my heart remembered and believed.

Moreover, in this particular instance, a biting curiosity had its influence too. I was wholly sceptical of results. The thing was mad, incredible, even wicked. It could never happen. Yet, while I said these words, and more besides, there ran a haunting terror in me underground that, after all ... that possibly ... I cannot even set down in words the nature of my doubt. I can merely affirm that something in me was not absolutely sure.

“The essential thing,” he told me, “is to find an empty ‘instrument’ that is in perfect order — young, vigorous, the tissues unwasted by decay or illness. There must have been no serious deterioration of the organs, muscles, and so forth.”

I knew then that this new experiment was akin to that other I had already witnessed. The experience on the Pentlands had also been deliberately brought about. The only difference was that this second one he announced beforehand. Further, it was of a higher grade. The channel of evocation, instead of being in the vegetable kingdom, was in the human.

I understood his meaning, and suggested that someone in deep trance might meet the conditions, for in trance he held that the occupant, or soul, was gone elsewhere, the tenement of flesh deserted.

But he shook his head. That was not, he said, legitimate. The owner would return. He watched me with a curious smile as he said this. I knew then that he referred to the final emptiness of a vacated body.

“Sudden death,” I said, while his eyes flashed back the answer. “And the Elemental Powers?” I asked quickly.

“Wind and fire,” he replied. And in order to carry his plan into execution he proposed to avail himself of his free access to the students’ Dissecting Room.

During the longish interval between the conception and carrying out of this preposterous experiment I shifted like a weathercock between acceptance and refusal. My doubts were torturing. There were times when I treated it as the proposal of a lunatic that at worst could work no injury to anyone concerned. But there were also times when a certain familiar reality clothed it with a portentous actuality. I was reminded faintly of something similar I had been connected with before. Dim figures of this lost familiarity stalked occasionally across the field of inner sight. Julius and I had done this thing together long, long ago, "when the sun was younger," and when we were "nearer to the primitive beauty," as he phrased it. In reverie, in dreams, in moments when thinking was in abeyance, this odd conviction asserted itself. It had to do with a Memory of some worship that once was mighty and effective; when august Presences walked the earth in stupendous images of power; and traffic with them had been useful, possible. The barrier between the human and the non-human, between Man and Nature, was not built. Wind and fire! It was always wind and fire that he spoke of. And I remember one vivid and terrific dream in particular in which I heard again a voice pronounce that curious name of "Concerighé," and, though the details were blurred on waking, I clearly grasped that certain elemental powers had been evoked by us for purposes of our own and had not been suffered to return to their appointed places; further, that concerned with us in the awful and solemn traffic was — another. We had been three.

This dream, of course, I easily explained as due directly to my talks with Julius, but my dread was not so easily dismissed, and that I overcame it finally and consented to attend was due partly to the extraordinary curiosity I felt, and partly to this inexplicable attraction in my deeper self which urged me to see the matter through. Something inevitable about it forced me. Yet, but for the settled conviction that behind the abhorrent proposal lay some earnest purpose of LeVallon's, not ignoble in itself, I should certainly have refused. For, though saying little, and not taking me fully into his confidence, he did manage to convey the assurance that this thing was not to be carried out as an end, but as a means to an end, in itself both legitimate and necessary. It was, I gathered, a kind of preliminary trial — an attempt that *might* possibly succeed, even without the presence of the third.

"Sooner or later," he said, aware that I hesitated, "it must be faced. Here is an opportunity for us, at least. If we succeed, there is no need to wait for — another. It is a question. We can but try."

And try accordingly we did.

The occasion I shall never forget — a still, cold winter's night towards the middle of December, most of the students already gone down for Christmas, and small chance of the room being occupied. For even in the busiest time before examinations there were few men who cared to avail themselves of the gruesome privilege of night-work, for which special permission, too, was necessary. Julius, in any case, made his preparations well, and the janitor of the grey-stone building on the hill, whose top floor was consecrated to this grisly study of life in death, had surrendered the keys even before we separated earlier in the evening for supper at the door of the post-mortem theatre.

“Upstairs at eleven o’clock,” he whispered, “and if I’m late — the preparations may detain me — go inside and wait. Your presence is necessary to success.” He laid his hand on my shoulder; he looked at me searchingly a moment, almost beseechingly, as though he detected the strain of opposition in me. “And be as sympathetic as you can,” he begged. “At least, do not actively oppose.” Then, as he turned away, “I’ll try to be punctual,” he added, smiling, “but — well, you know as well as I do —— !” He shrugged his shoulders and was gone.

You know! Somehow or other it was true: I did know. The interval of several hours he would spend in his inner chamber concentrated upon the process of feeling-with — evoking. He would have no food, no rest, no moment’s pause. At the appointed hour he would arrive, charged with the essential qualities of these two elemental powers which in dim past ages, summoned by another audacious “experiment” from their rightful homes, he now sought to “restore.” He would seek to return what had been “borrowed.” He would attempt to banish them again. For they could only be thus banished, as they had been summoned — through the channel of a human organism. They were of a loftier order, then, than the Powers for whose return the animal organisms of the sheep had served.

I went my way down Frederick Street with a heart, I swear, already palpitating.

Of the many thrilling experiences that grew out of my acquaintance with this extraordinary being, I think that night remains supreme — certainly, until our paths met again in the Jura Mountains. But, strangest of all, is the fact that throughout the ghastly horror of what occurred was — beauty! To convey this beauty is beyond any power that I possess, yet it was there, a superb and awful beauty that informed the meanest detail of what I witnessed. The experiment failed of course; in the accomplishment of

LeVallon’s ultimate purpose, that is, it failed; but the failure was due, apparently, to one cause alone: that the woman was not present.

It is most difficult to describe, and my pen, indeed, shrinks from setting down so revolting a performance. Yet this curious high beauty redeems it in my memory as I now recall the adventure through the haze of years, and I believe the beauty was due to a deeper fact impossible to convey in words. Behind the little “modern” experiment, and parallel to it, ran another, older Memory that was fraught with some significance of eternity. This parent memory penetrated and overshadowed the smaller copy of it; it exalted what was ugly, uplifted what seemed abominable, sublimated the distressing failure into an image of what might have been magnificent. I mean, in a word, that this experiment was a poor attempt to reconstruct an older ritual of spiritual significance whereby those natural forces, once worshipped as the gods, might combine with qualities similar to their own in human beings. The memory of a more august and effective ceremony moved all the time behind the little reconstruction. The beauty was derived from my dim recollection of some transcendent but now forgotten worship.

At the appointed hour I made my way across the Bridge and towards the Old Town where the University buildings stood. It was, as I said, a bitter night. The Castle Rock and Cathedral swam in a flood of silvery moonlight; frost sparkled on the roofs; the spires of Edinburgh shone in the crystal wintry atmosphere. The air, so keen, was windless. Few people were about at this late hour, and I had the feeling that the occasional pedestrians, hurrying homewards in tightly-buttoned overcoats, eyed me askance. No one of them was going in the same direction as myself. They questioned my purpose, looked sharply over their shoulders, then quickened their pace away from me towards the houses where the fires burned in cosy human sitting-rooms.

At the door of the great square building itself I hesitated a moment, hiding in the shadow of the overhanging roof. It was easy to pretend that moral disapproval warned me to turn back, but the simpler truth is that I was afraid. At the best of times the Dissecting Room, with its silent cargo of dreadful forms and faces, was a chamber of horrors I could never become hardened to as the majority of students did; but on this occasion, when a theory concerning life alien to humanity was to be put to so strange a test, I confess that the prospect set my nerves a-quivering and made the muscles of my legs turn weak. A cold sensation ran down my spine, and it was not the wintry night alone that caused it.

Opening the heavy door with an effort, I went in and waited a moment till the clanging echo had subsided through the deserted building. My imagination figured the footsteps of a crowd hurrying away behind the sound down the long stone corridors. In the silence that followed I slowly began climbing the steps of granite, hoping devoutly that Julius would be waiting for me at the top. I was a little late; he might possibly have arrived before me. Up the four flights of stairs I went stealthily, trying to muffle my footsteps, putting my weight heavily upon the balustrade, and doing all I could to make no sound at all. For it seemed to me that my movements were both watched and heard, and that those motionless, silent forms above were listening for my approach, and knew that I was coming.

On the landings at each turn lay a broad sweet patch of moonlight that fell through the lofty windows, and but for these the darkness would have been complete. No light, it seemed to me, had ever looked more clean and pure and welcome. I thought of the lone Pentland ridges, and of the sea, lying calm and still outside beneath the same sheet of silver, the air of night all keen and fragrant. The heather slopes came back to me, the larches and the flock of nibbling sheep. I thought of these in detail, of my fire-lit rooms in Frederick Street, of the vicarage garden at home in Kent where my boyhood had been spent; I thought of a good many things, truth to tell, all of them as remote as possible from my present surroundings; but when I eventually reached the topmost landing and found LeVallon was not there, I thought of one thing only — that I was alone. Just beyond me, through that door of frosted glass, lay in its most loathsome form the remnant of humanity left behind by death.

In the daytime, when noisy students, callous and unimaginative, thronged the room, the horror of it retreated, modified by the vigorous vitality of these doctors of the future; but now at night, amid the ominous silence, with darkness over the town and the cold of outer space dropping down upon the world, as though linking forces with that other final cold within the solemn chamber, it seemed quite otherwise. I stood shivering and afraid upon the landing, angry that I could have lent myself to so preposterous and abominable a scheme, yet determined, so long as my will held firm, to go through with it to the end.

He had asked me to wait for him — inside.

Knowing that every minute of hesitation must weaken my powers of resolve, I moved at once towards the door, then paused again. The comforting roar of the traffic floated to my ears; I heard the distant tinkle of a tramcar bell, the boom of Edinburgh, a confused noise of feet and wheels and voices, far away, it is true, but distinctly reassuring.

Outside, the life of humanity rolled upon its accustomed way, recking little of the trembling figure that stood on the top floor of this silent building, one hand on the door upon whose further side so many must one day come to final rest. For one hand already touched the freezing knob, and I was in the act of turning it when another sound, that was certainly not the murmur of the town, struck sharply through the stillness and brought all movement in me to a sudden halt.

It came from within, I thought at first; and it was like a wave of sighs that rose and fell, sweeping against the glass door a moment, then passing away as abruptly as it came. Yet it was more like wind than sighs through human lips, and immediately, then, I understood that it *was* wind. I caught my breath again with keen relief. Wind was rising from the hills, and this was its first messenger running down among the roofs and chimney-pots. I heard its wailing echoes long after it had died away.

But a moment later it returned, louder and stronger than before, and this time, hearing it so close, I know not what secret embassies of wonder touched me from the night outside, deposited their undecipherable messages, and were gone again. I can only say that the key of my emotions changed, changed, moreover, with a swelling rush as when the heavier stops are pulled out upon an organ-board. For, on entering the building, the sky had been serenely calm, and keen frost locked the currents of the air; whereas now that wind went wailing round the walls as though it sought an entrance, almost as though its crying voice veiled purpose. There seemed a note of menace, eager and peremptory, in its sudden rush and drop. It knocked upon the stones and upon the roof above my head with curious and repeated buffets of sound that resembled the “clap” I had heard that October afternoon among the larches, only a hundred times repeated and a hundredfold increased. The change in myself, moreover, was similar to the change then experienced — the flow and drive of bigger consciousness that helped to banish fear. I seemed to know about that wind, to feel its life and being, indeed, to share it. No longer was I merely John Mason, a student in Edinburgh, separate and distinct from all about me, but was — I realised it amazingly — a bit of life in the universe, not isolated even from the wind.

The beauty of the sensation did not last; it passed through me, linked to that insistent roar; but the fact that I had felt it gave me courage. The stops were instantly pushed in again ... and the same minute the swing-door closed behind me with a sullen thud.

I stood within the chamber; Julius, I saw in a moment, was not there. I moved through the long, narrow room, keeping close beside the wall, taking up my position finally about halfway down, where I could command the six tall windows and the door. The moon was already too high to send her rays directly through the panes, but from the extensive sky-lights she shed a diffused, pale glow upon the scene, and my eyes, soon accustomed to the semi-darkness, saw everything quite as clearly as I cared about.

In front of me stretched the silent, crowded room, patchy in the moonshine, but with shadows deeply gathered in the corners; and, row after row upon the white marble slabs, lay the tenantless forms in the grotesque, unnatural positions as the students had left them a few hours before. The picture does not invite detailed description, but I at once experienced the peculiar illusion that attacks new students even in the daytime. It seemed that the sightless eyes turned slowly round to stare at me, that the shrunken lips half opened as in soundless speech, and that the heads with one accord shifted to an angle whence they could observe and watch me better. There went a rustling through that valley of dry bones as though life returned for a moment to drive the broken machinery afresh.

This sensible illusion was, of course, one I could easily dismiss. More difficult, however, was the subtler attack that came upon me from behind the sensory impressions. For, while I stood with my back against the wall, listening intently for LeVallon’s step upon the stairs, I could not keep from my mind the terror of those huddled sheep upon the Pentland ridges; the whole weird force of his theories about “life” in Nature came beating against my mind, aided, moreover, by some sympathy in myself that could never wholly ridicule their possible truth.

I gazed round me at the motionless, discarded forms, used for one brief “section,” then cast aside, and as I did so my mind naturally focused itself upon a point of dreadful and absorbing interest — which one was to be the subject of the experiment? So short a time ago had each been a nest of keenest activity and emotion, enabling its occupant to reap its harvest of past actions while sowing that which it must reap later again in its new body, already perhaps now a-forming. And of these discarded vehicles, one was to be the channel through which two elemental Powers, evoked in vanished ages, might return to their appointed place. I heard that clamouring wind against the outer walls; I felt within me the warmth of a strange enthusiasm rise and glow; and it seemed to me just then that the whole proposal was as true and simple and in the natural order of things as birth or death, or any normal phenomenon to the terror and glory of which mankind has grown accustomed through prolonged familiarity. To this point, apparently, had the change in my feelings brought me. The dreadful novelty had largely gone. Something would happen, nor would it be entirely unfamiliar.

Then, on a marble slab beside the door, the body of a boy, fresh, white and sweet, and obviously brought in that very day, since it was as yet untouched by knife or scalpel, “drew” my attention of its own accord — and I knew at once that I had found it.

Oddly enough, the discovery brought no increase of fearful thrill; it was as natural as though I had helped to place it there myself. And, again, for some reason, that delightful sense of power swept me; my diminutive modern self slipped off to hide; I remembered that a million suns surrounded me; that the earth was but an insignificant member of one of the lesser systems; that man’s vaunted Reason was as naught compared to the oceans of what might be known and possible; and that this body I wore and used, like that white, empty one upon the slab, was but a transient vehicle through which *I*, as a living part of the stupendous cosmos, acted out my little piece of development in the course of an eternal journey. This wind, this fire, that Julius spoke of, were equally the vehicles of other energies, alive as myself, only less tamed and cabined, yet similarly obedient, again, to the laws of their own beings. The extraordinary mood poured through me like a flood — and once more passed away. And the wind fled singing round the building with a shout.

I looked steadily at the beautiful but vacated framework that the soul had used — used well or ill I knew not — lying there so quietly, so calmly, the smooth skin as yet untouched by knife, unmarred by needle, surrounded on all sides by the ugly and misshapen crew of older death; and as I looked, I thought of some fair shell the tide had left among the seaweed wrack, a flower of beauty shining ‘mid decay. In the moonlight I could plainly see the thin and wasted ribs, the fixed blue eyes still staring as in life, the lank and tangled hair, the listless fingers that a few hours before must have been active in the flush of health, and passionately loved by more than one assuredly. For, though I knew not the manner of the soul’s out-passing, this boy must have suddenly met death that very day. And I found it odd that he should now be lying here, since usually the students’ work is concerned to study the processes of illness and decay. It confirmed my certainty that here was the channel LeVallon meant to use.

Time for longer reflection, however, there was none, for just then another gust of this newly-risen wind fell against the building with a breaking roar, and at the same moment the swing door opened and Julius LeVallon stood within the room.

Whether windows had burst, or the great skylights overhead been left unfastened, I had no time, nor inclination either, to discover, but I remember that the wind tore past him down the entire length of the high-ceilinged chamber, tossing the hair uncannily upon a dozen heads in front of me and even stirring the dust about my feet. It was almost as though we stood upon an open plain and met the unobstructed tempest in our teeth.

Yet the rush and vehemence with which he entered startled me, for I found myself glad of the support which a high student’s stool afforded. I leaned against it heavily, while Julius, after standing by the door a moment, turned immediately then to the left. He knew exactly where to look. Simultaneously, he saw me too.

Our eyes, in that atmosphere of shadow and soft moonlight, met also across centuries. He spoke my name; but it was no name I answered to To-day.

"Come, Silvatela," he said, "lend me your will and sympathy. Feel now with Wind and Fire. For both are here, and the time is favourable. At last, I shall perhaps return what has been borrowed." He beckoned me with a gesture of strange dignity. "It is not that time of balanced forces we most desire — the Equinox — but it is the winter solstice," he went on, "when the sun is nearest. That, too, is favourable. We *may* transcend the appointed boundaries. Across the desert comes the leaping wind. Both heat and air are with us. Come!"

And, having vaguely looked for some kind of elaborate preparation or parade, this sudden summons took me by surprise a little, though the language somehow did not startle me. I sprang up; the stool fell sideways, then clattered noisily upon the concrete floor. I made my way quickly between the peering faces. It seemed no longer strange, this abrupt disturbance of two familiar elements, nor did I remark with unusual curiosity that the wind went rushing and crying about the room, while the heat grew steadily within me so that my actual skin was drenched with perspiration. All came about, indeed, quickly, naturally, and without any pomp of dreadful ceremonial as I had expected. Julius had come with power in his hands; and preparation, if any, had already taken place elsewhere. He spoke no further word as I approached, but bent low over the thin, white form, his face pale, stern and beautiful as I had never seen it before. I thought of a star that entered the roof of those Temple Memories, falling beneficently upon the great concave mirrors where the incense rose in a column of blue smoke. His entire personality, when at length I stood beside him, radiated an atmosphere of force as though charged with some kind of elemental activity that was intense and inexhaustible. The wonder and beauty of it swept me from head to foot. The air grew marvellously heated. It rose in beating waves that accompanied the rushing wind, like a furnace driven by some powerful, artificial draught; in his immediate neighbourhood it whirled and roared. It drew me closer. I, too, found myself bending down above the motionless, stretched form, oblivious of the other crowded slabs about us.

So familiar it all seemed suddenly. Some such scene I had witnessed surely many a time elsewhere. I knew it all before. Upon success hung issues of paramount importance to his soul, to mine, to the soul of another who, for some reason unexplained, was not present with us, and, somehow, also, to the entire universe of which we formed, with these two elements, a living, integral portion. A weight of solemn drama lay behind our little show. It seemed to me the universe looked on and waited. The issue was of cosmic meaning.

Then, as I entered the sphere of LeVallon's personality, a touch of dizziness caught me for an instant, as though this running wind, this accumulating heat, emanated directly from his very being; and, before I quite recovered myself, the moonlight was extinguished like a lamp blown out. Across the sky, apparently, rushed clouds that changed the spreading skylights into thick curtains, while into the room of death came a blast of storm that I thought must tear the windows from their very sockets in the stone. And with the wind came also a yet further increase of heat that was like a touch of naked fire on some inner membrane.

I dare not assert that I was wholly master of myself throughout the swift, dramatic scene that followed in darkness and in tumult, nor can I claim that what I witnessed in the gloom, shot with occasional gleams of moonlight here and there, was more than the intense visualisation of an over-wrought imagination. It well may be that what I expected to happen dramatised itself as though it actually did occur. I can merely state that, at the moment, it seemed real and natural, and that what I saw was the opening scene in a ceremony as familiar to me as the Litany in my father's church.

For, with the pouring through the room of these twin energies of wind and fire, I saw, sketched in the dim obscurity, one definite movement — as the body of the boy rose up into a sitting posture close before our faces. It instantly then sank back again, recumbent as before upon the marble slab. The upright movement was repeated the same second, and once more there came the sinking back. There were several successive efforts before the upright position was maintained; and each time it rose slowly, gradually, all of one piece and rigidly, until finally these tentative movements achieved their object — and the boy sat up as though about to stand. Erect before us, the head slightly hanging on one side, the shoulders squared, the chest expanded as with lung-drawn air, he rose steadily above his motionless companions all around.

And Julius drew back a pace. He made certain gestures with his arms and hands that in some incalculable manner laid control upon the movements. I saw his face an instant as the moon fell on it, pale, glorious and stately, wearing a glow that was *not* moonlight, the lips compressed with effort, the eyes ablaze. He looked to me unearthly and magnificent. His stature seemed increased. There was an air of power, of majesty about him that made his presence beautiful beyond words; and yet, most strange of all, it was familiar to me, even this. I had seen it all before. I knew well what was about to happen.

His gesture changed. No word was spoken. It was a Ceremony in which gesture was more significant than speech. There was evidence of intense internal struggle that yet did not include the ugliness of strain. He put forth all his power merely — and the body rose by jerks. Spasmodically, this time, as though pulled by wires, yet with a kind of terrible violence, it floated from that marble slab into the air. With a series of quick, curious movements, half plunge, half jerk, it touched the floor. It stood stiffly upright on its feet. It rose again, it turned, it twisted, moving arms and legs and head, passing me unsupported through the atmosphere some four feet from the ground. The wind rushed round it with a roar; the fire, though invisible, scorched my eyes. This way and that, now up, now down, the body of this boy danced to and fro before me, silent always, the blue eyes fixed, the lips half parted, more with the semblance of some awful marionette than with human movement, yet charged with a colossal potency that drove it hither and thither. Like some fair Ariel, laughing at death, it flitted above the yellow Calibans of horror that lay strewn below.

Yet, from the very nature of these incompleted movements, I was aware that the experiment was unsuccessful, and that the power was insufficient. Instead of spasmodic, the movements should have been rhythmical and easy; there should have been purpose and intention in the performance of that driven body; there should have been commanding gestures, significant direction; there should have been spontaneous breathing and — a voice — the voice of Life.

And instead — I witnessed an unmeaning pantomime, and heard the wailing of the dying wind....

A voice, indeed, there was, but it was the voice of Julius LeVallon that eventually came to me across the length of the room. I saw him slowly approaching through the patches of unequal moonlight, carrying over his shoulder the frail, white burden that had collapsed against the further wall. And his words were very few, spoken more to himself apparently than to me. I heard them; they struck chill and ominous upon my heart:

"The conditions were imperfect, the power insufficient. Alone we cannot do it. We must wait for *her*.... And the channel must be another's — as before."

The strain of high excitement passed. I knew once again that small and pitiful sensation of returning to my normal consciousness. The exhilaration all was gone. There came a dwindling of the heart. I was "myself" again, John Mason, student at Edinburgh University. It produced a kind of shock, the abruptness of the alteration took my strength away. I experienced a climax of sensation, disappointment, distress, fear and revolt as well, that proved too much for me. I ran. I reeled. I heard the sound of my own falling.

No recollection of what immediately followed remains with me ... for when I opened my eyes much later, I found myself prone upon the landing several floors below, with Julius bending solicitously over me, helping me to rise. The moonlight fell in a flood through a window on the stairs. My recovery was speedy, though not complete. I accompanied him down the remaining flight, leaning upon his arm; and in the street my senses, though still dazed, took in that the night was calm and cloudless, that the moonlight veiled the stars by its serene brightness, and that the clock above the University buildings pointed to the hour of two in the morning.

The cold was bitter. There was no wind!

Julius came with me to my door in Frederick Street, but the entire distance of a mile neither of us spoke a word.

At the door of my lodging-house, however, he turned. I drew back instinctively, hesitating, for my desire was to get upstairs into my own room with the door locked safely behind me. But he caught my hand.

"We failed to-night," he whispered, "but when the real time comes we shall succeed. *You* will not — fail me then?"

In the stillness of very early morning, the moon sinking towards the long dip of the Queensferry Road, and the shadows lying deep upon the deserted streets, I heard his voice once more come travelling down the centuries to where I stood. The atmosphere of those other days and other places came back with incredible appeal upon me.

He drew me within the chilly hall-way, the sound of our feet echoing up the spiral staircase of stone. Night lay silently over everything, sunrise still many hours away.

I turned and looked into his eager, passionate face, into his eyes that still shone with the radiance of the two great powers, at the mouth and lips which now betrayed the exhaustion that had followed the huge effort. And something appealing and personal in his entire expression made it impossible to refuse. I shook my head, I shrank away, but a voice I scarcely recognised as my own gave the required answer. My upper and my under selves conflicted; yet the latter gave the inevitable pledge: “Julius ... I promise you.”

He gazed into my eyes. An inexpressible tenderness stole into his manner. He took my hand and held it. The die was cast.

“She is now upon the earth with us,” he said. “I soon shall find her. We three shall inevitably be drawn together, for we are linked by indestructible ties. There is this debt we must repay — we three who first together incurred it.”

There was a pause. Far away I heard a cart rumbling over the cobbles of George Street. In another world it seemed, for the gods were still about us where we stood. Julius moved from me. Once more I saw his eyes fixed pleadingly, almost yearningly upon my own. Then the street door closed upon him and he was gone.

CHAPTER XII

"*LOVE AND PITY are pleading with me this hour.*

What is this voice that stays me forbidding to yield,

Offering beauty, love, and immortal power,

Aeons away in some far-off heavenly field?" — A. E.

The actual beginnings of a separation are often so slight that they are scarcely noticed. Between two friends, whose acquaintance is of several years' standing, sure that their tie will stand the ordinary tests of life, some unexpected and trivial incident first points to the parting of the ways; each discovers suddenly that, after all, the other is not necessary to him. An emotion unshared is sufficient to reveal some fundamental lack of sympathy hitherto concealed, and they go their different ways, neither claim debited with the least regret. Like the scarce perceptible mist of evening that divides dusk from night, the invisible chill has risen between them; each sees the other through a cloud that first veils, then distorts, and finally obliterates.

For some weeks after the "experiment" I saw LeVallon through some such risen mist, now thin, now thick, but always there and invariably repelling. I remember distinctly, however, that our going apart was to me not without a sense of regret both keen and poignant. I owed him something impossible to describe; a yearning sense of beauty touched common things about me at the sight of him, even at the mention of his name in the University class-rooms; he had given me an awareness of other possibilities, an exhilarating view of life that held immense perspectives; a feeling that justice determined even the harshest details; above all, a sense of kinship with Nature that combined to form a tie of a most uncommon order.

Yet I went willingly from his side; for his prospectus of existence led me towards heights where I could not comfortably breathe. His entire scheme I never properly grasped, perhaps; the little parts we shared I saw, possibly, in wrong proportion, uncorrelated to the huge map his mind contained so easily. My own personality was insignificant, my powers mediocre; above all I had not always his strange conviction of positive memory to support me. I lagged behind. I left him. The seductive world that touched him not made decided claims upon my heart — love, passion, ambition and adventure called me strongly. I would not give up all and follow where he led. Yet I left him with the haunting consciousness that I surrendered a system of belief that was logical, complete and adequate, its scale of possible achievement wonderful, and its unselfish ideal, if immensely difficult, at least noble and inspiring. For all his mysticism, Julius, it seems to me, was practical and scientific.

Yet, the plausibility of his audacious theories would sometimes return questioningly upon me. Man was an integral part of Nature, not alien to it. What was there, after all, so impossible in what he claimed? And what amongst it might not the science of to-morrow, with its X rays, N rays, its wireless messages, its radium, its inter-molecular energy, and its slowly-formulating laws of telepathy and the dynamic character of Thought, not come eventually to confirm under new-fangled names?

So far as I reflected concerning these things at all, I kept an open mind; my point was simply that I preferred the ordinary pursuits of ordinary men. He was evidently aware of the change in me, while yet he made no effort to prevent my going. Nor did he make, so far as I can recall, any direct reference to the matter. Once only, in a lecture room, with a hand upon my shoulder while we jostled out together in the stream of other students, he bent his face towards me and said with the tender, comprehending smile that never failed to touch me deeply: “Our lives are far too deeply knit for any final separation. Out of the Past we come, and that Past is not exhausted yet.” The crowd had carried us apart before I could reply, but through me like a flash of lightning rose the certainty that this was literally true, and that while my upper, modern Self went off, my older, hidden Self was with him to the end. We merely took two curves that presently must join again.

But, though we saw little of one another all these weeks, I can never forget the scene of our actual leave-taking, nor the extraordinary incidents that led up to it. Now that I set it down on paper such phrases as “imaginative glamour” and the like may tempt me, but at the time it was as real and actual as the weekly battles with my landlady, or the sheaves of laborious notes I made at lecture-time. In some region of my consciousness, abnormal or otherwise, this scene most certainly took place.

It was one late evening towards the close of the session — March or April, therefore — that I had occasion to visit LeVallon’s house for some reason in itself of no importance; one of those keen and blustery nights that turn Edinburgh into a scene of unspeakable desolation, Princes Street, a vista of sheeted rain where shop-windows glistened upon black pavements; the Castle smothered in mist; Scott’s Monument semi-invisible with a monstrous air about it in the gloom; and the entire deserted town swept by a wind that howled across the Forth with gusts of quite thunderous energy. Even the cable-cars blundered along like weary creatures blindly seeking shelter.

I hurried through the confusion of the tempest, fighting my way at every step, and on turning the corner past the North British Railway Station, the storm carried me with a rush into the porch of the house, whipping the soaked macintosh with a blow across my face. The rain struck the dripping walls down their entire height, then poured splashing along the pavement in a stream. Night seemed to toss me into the building like some piece of wreckage from the crest of a great wave.

Panting and momentarily flustered, I paused in the little hall to recover breath, while the hurricane, having flung me into shelter, went roaring and howling down the sloping street. I wiped the rain from my face and put straight my disordered clothes. My mind just then was occupied with nothing but these very practical considerations. The impression that followed the next instant came entirely unbidden:

For I became aware of a sudden and enveloping sense of peace, beyond all telling calm and beautiful — an interior peace — a calm upon the spirit itself. It was a spiritual emotion. There drifted over me and round me, like the stillness of some perfect dawn, the hush of something serene and quiet as the stars. All stress and turmoil of the outer world passed into an exquisite tranquillity that in some nameless way was solemn as the spaces of the sky. I felt almost as if some temple atmosphere, some inner Sanctuary of olden time, where the tumult of external life dared not intrude, had descended on me. And the change arrested every active impulse in my being; my hurrying thoughts lay down and slept; all that was scattered in me gathered itself softly into an inner fold; unsatisfied desires closed their eyes. It seemed as if all the questing energies of my busy personality found suddenly repose. Life's restlessness was gone. I even forgot momentarily the purpose for which I came.

So abrupt a change of key was difficult to realise; I can only say that the note of spiritual peace seemed far more true and actual than the physical relief due to the escape from wind and rain. Moreover, as I climbed the spiral staircase to the second floor where Julius lived, it deepened perceptibly — as though it emanated from his dwelling quarters, pervading the entire building. It brought back the atmosphere of what at school we called our "Temple Days."

I went on tiptoe, fearful of disturbing what seemed solemn even to the point of being sacred, for the mood was so strong that I felt no desire to resist or criticise. Whatever its cause, this subjective state of mind was soothing to the point of actual happiness. A hint of bliss was in it. And it did not lessen either, when I discovered the landlady, Mrs. Garnier, white of face in the little hall-way, showing signs of nervousness that she made no attempt whatever to conceal.

She was all eagerness to speak. Before I could ask if Julius was at home, she relieved her burdened mind:

"Oh, it'll be you, Mr. Mason! And I'm that glad ye've come!"

Her round, puffy visage plainly expressed relief, as she came towards me with a shambling gait, looking over her shoulder across the dim-lit hall. "Mr. LeVallion," she whispered, "has been in there without a sound since mornin', and I'm thinkin', maybe, something would ha' happened to him." And she stared into my face as though I could instantly explain what troubled her. Where I felt spiritual peace, she felt, obviously, spiritual alarm.

"He is engaged?" I inquired. Then — though hardly aware why I put the question — I added: "There is someone with him?"

She peered about her.

"He'll be no engaged to you, sir," she replied. Plainly, it was not her lodger's instructions that prompted the words; by the way she hung back I discerned that she dreaded to announce me; she hoped I would go in and explore alone.

"I'll wait in the sitting-room till he comes out," I said, after a moment's hesitation. And I moved towards the door.

Mrs. Garnier, however, at once made an involuntary gesture to prevent me. I can still hear her slippered tread shuffling across the oil-cloth. The gesture became a sort of leap when she saw that I persisted. It reminded me of a frightened animal.

"There'll be twa gentlemen already waiting," she mumbled thickly, her face turning a shade paler.

And, hearing this, I paused. The old woman, I saw, was trembling. I was annoyed at the interruption, for it destroyed the sense of delightful peace I had enjoyed.

"Anyone I know?"

I was close to the door as I asked it, the terrified old woman close beside me. She thrust her grey face up to mine; her eyes shone in the gleam of the low-turned gas jet above our heads; and her excitement communicated itself suddenly to my own blood. A distinct shiver ran down my back.

"I dinna ken them," she whispered behind a hand she held to her mouth, "for, ye see, I dinna let them in."

I stared at her, wondering what was coming next. The slight trepidation I had felt for a moment vanished, but I kept my voice at a whisper for fear of disturbing Julius in his inner chamber on the other side of the wall.

"What do you mean? Tell me plainly what's the matter." I said it with some sharpness.

She replied at once, only too glad to share her anxiety with another.

"They came in by themselves," she whispered with a touch of superstitious awe; "wonderfu' big men, the twa of them, and dark-skinned as the de'il," and she drew back a pace to watch the effect of her words upon me.

"How long ago?" I asked impatiently. I remembered suddenly that Julius had friends among the Hindu students. It was more than possible that he had given them his key.

Mrs. Garnier shook her head suggestively. “I went in an hour ago,” she told me in a low tone, “thinkin’ maybe he would be eatin’ something, and, O Lord mercy, I ran straight against the pair of them, settin’ there in the darkness wi’oot a word.”

“Well?” I said, seeing that she was likely to invent, “and what of it?”

“Neither of them moved a finger at me,” she continued breathlessly, “but they looked all over me, and they had eyes like a flame o’ fire, and I all but let the lamp fall and came out in a faintin’ condeetion, and have been prayin’ ever since that someone would come in.”

She shuffled into the middle of the hall-way, drawing me after her by my sleeve. She pointed towards a corner of the ceiling. A small square window was let into the wall of the little interior room where Julius sought his solitude, and where at this moment he was busy with his mysterious occupations.

“And what’ll be that awfu’ licht, then?” she inquired, plucking me by the arm.

A gleam of bright white light, indeed, was visible through the small dusty pane above us, and again a curious memory ran like sheet-lightning across my mind that I had seen this kind of light before and that it was familiar to me. It vanished instantly before I could seize the fleeting picture. The light certainly was of peculiar brightness, coming from neither gas nor candle, nor from any ordinary light that I could have named off-hand.

“It’ll be precisely that kind of licht that’s in their eyes,” I heard her whisper, as she jerked her whole body rather than her head alone towards the sitting-room I was about to enter. She wiped her clammy hands upon the striped apron that hung crooked from her angular hips.

“Mrs. Garnier,” I said with authority, “there’s nothing to be afraid of. Mr. LeVallon makes experiments sometimes, that’s all. He wouldn’t hurt a hair of your head — —”

“Nae doot,” she interrupted me, backing away from the door, “for his bonny face is a face to get well on, but the twa others in there, the darkies — aye, and that’ll be another matter, and not one for me to be meddlin’ with — —”

I cut her short. “If you feel frightened,” I said, smiling, “go to your room and pray. You needn’t announce me. I’ll go in and wait until he’s ready to come out and see me.”

Her face went white as linen, showing up an old scar on the cheek in an ugly reddish pattern, while I pushed past her and turned the handle of the door. I heard the breath catch in her throat. The next minute, lamp in hand, I was in the room, slamming the door literally in her face lest she might follow and do some foolish thing. I set the lamp down upon the table in the centre. I looked quickly about me. No living person but myself was there — certainly no Hindu gentlemen with eyes of flame. Mrs. Garnier’s Celtic imagination had run away with her altogether. I sat down and waited. A line of that same bright, silvery light shone also beneath the crack of the door from the inner chamber. The wind and rain trumpeted angrily at the windows. But the room was undeniably empty.

Yet it is utterly beyond me to describe the sense of exaltation that at once rose over me like some influence of perfect music; “exaltation” *is* the right word, I think, and “music” conveys best the uplifting and soothing effect that was produced. For here, at closer quarters, the sensation of exquisite peace was doubly renewed. The nervous alarm inspired by the woman fled. This peace flooded me; it stirred the bliss of some happy spiritual life long since enjoyed and long since forgotten. I passed instantly, as it were, under the sway of some august authority that banished the fret and restlessness of the extraneous world; and compared to which the strife and ambition of my modern life seemed, indeed, well lost.

Behind it, however, and behind the solemnity that awed, was at the same time the faint presage of something vaguely disquieting. The memory of some afflicting incompleteness gripped me; the anguish of ideals too lofty for attainment; the sweet pain and passion of some exquisite long suffering; the secret yearning of a soul that had dared sublime accomplishment, then plunged itself and others in the despair of failure — all this lay in the apprehension that stood close behind the bliss.

But, above all else, was the certainty that I remembered definite details of those Temple Days, and that I was upon the verge of still further and more detailed recollection.... That faintness stealing over me was the faintness of immeasurable distance, the ache of dizzy time, the weariness that has no end and no beginning. I felt what Julius LeVallon felt — the deep sickness of eternity that knows no final rest, either of blessed annihilation or of non-existence, until the journey of the soul comes to its climax in the Deity. And, feeling this — realising it — for the first time, I understood, also for the first time, LeVallon's words at Motfield Close two years ago— "If the soul remembered all, it would lose the courage to attempt. Only the vital things are worth recalling, because they guide."

This flashed across me now, as I sat in that Edinburgh lodging-house, waiting for him to come. I knew myself, beyond all doubt or question, caught away in that web of wonderful, far-off things; there revived in me the yearnings of memories exceedingly remote; poignant still with life, because they were unexhausted still, and terrible with that incompleteness which sooner or later *must* find satisfaction. And it was this sense of things left undone that brought the feeling of presentiment. Julius, in that inner chamber, was communing as of old. But also — he was searching. He was hard upon the trail of ancient clues. He was seeking *her*. I knew it in my bones.

For I felt some subtle communication with that other mind beyond the obstructing door — not, however, as it was to-day, but as it was in the recoverable centuries when the three of us had committed the audacious act which still awaited its final readjustment at our hands. Julius, searching by some method of his own among the layers of our ancient lives, reconstructed the particular scenes he needed. Involuntarily, unwittingly, I shared them too. I had stepped into his ancient mood....

My mind grew crowded. The pictures rose and passed, and rose again....

But it was always one in particular that returned, staying longer than the others. He concentrated upon one, then. In his efforts to find *her* soul in its body of to-day, he went back to the source of our original relationship, the immensely remote experience when he and I and she had sown the harvest we had now come back to reap together. Thence, holding the clue, he could trace the thread of her existences down to this very moment. He could find her where she stood upon the earth — to-day.

This seemed very clear to me, though how I realised it is difficult to say. I remember a curious thought — which proves how real the conviction was in me. I asked myself: "Does *she* feel anything now, as she goes about her business on this earth, perhaps in England, perhaps not far removed from us, as distance goes? And is she, too, wherever she stands and waits, aware perhaps of some queer presentiment that haunts her waking or her sleeping mind — the presentiment of something coming, something about to happen — that someone waits for her?”

The one persistent picture rose and captured me again....

In blazing sunlight stood the building of whitened stone against the turquoise sky; and, a little to the left, the yellow cliffs, precipitous and crumbling. At their base were mounds of sand the wind and sun had chiselled and piled up against their feet. The soft air trembled with the heat; fierce light bathed everything — from the small white figures moving up and down the rock-hewn steps, to the Temple hollowed out between the stone paws of an immense outline half animal, half human. To the right, and towards the east, stretched the abundant desert, shimmering grey and blue and green beneath the torrid sun. I smelt the empty leagues of sand, the delicate perfume that gathers among the smooth, baked hollows of a million dunes; I felt the breeze, sharp and exhilarating, that knew no interruption of broken surfaces to break its journey of days and nights; and behind me I heard the faint, sharp rustle of trees whose shadows flickered on the burning ground. This heat and air grew stealthily upon me; fire and wind were here the dominating influences, the natural methods which furnished vehicles for the manifestation of particular Powers. Here was the home of our early worship of the Sun and space, of Fire and Wind. Yet, somehow, it seemed not of this present planet we call Earth, but of some point nearer to the centre.

Beside those enormous paws, where the air danced and shimmered in the brilliant glare, I saw the narrow flight of steps leading to the crypts below — the retreats for solitude. And then, suddenly, with a shock of poignant recognition, I saw a figure that I knew instantly to be myself, the Sower of my harvest of To-day. It slowly moved down the steps behind another figure that I recognised with equal conviction — some inner flash of lightning certainty — as Julius LeVallon, the soul I knew to-day in Edinburgh, the soul that, in another body, now stood near me in a nineteenth century lodging-house. The bodies, too, were lighter, less dense and material than those we used to-day, the spirit occupier less hampered and restricted. That too was clear to me.

I was aware of both times, both places simultaneously. That is, I was not dreaming. The peace, moreover, that stole round me in this modern building was but a faint reflection of the peace once familiar to me in those far-off Temple Days. And somehow it was the older memory that dominated consciousness.

About me the room held still as death, the battle of that earthly storm against the walls and windows half unreal, or so remote as to be not realised. Time paused a moment. I looked back. I lived as I had been then — in another type of consciousness, it seemed. It was marvellous, yet natural as in a dream. Only, as in a dream, subsequent language fails to retain the searching, vivid reality. The living *fact* is not recaptured. I felt. I understood. Certain tendencies and characteristics that were "me" to-day I saw explained — those that derived from this particular period. What must be conquered, and why, flashed sharply; also individuals whom to avoid would be vain shirking, since having sown together we must reap together — or miss the object of our being.

I heard strange names — Concerighé, Silvatela, Ziaz ... and a surge of passionate memories caught at my heart. Yet it was not Egypt, it was not India or the East, it was not Assyria or old Chaldea even; this belonged to a civilisation older than them all, some dim ancient kingdom that antedated all records open to possible research to-day....

I was in contact with the searching mind within that inner chamber. His effort included me, making the deeps in me give up their dead. I saw. He sought through many "sections."... I followed.... There was confusion — the pictures of recent days breaking in upon others infinitely remote. I could not disentangle....

Very sharply, then, and with a sensation of uneasiness that was almost pain, another figure rose. I saw a woman. With the same clear certainty of recognition the face presented itself. Hair, lips, and eyes I saw distinctly, yet somehow through a haze that veiled the expression. About the graceful neck hung a soft cloth of gold; dark lashes screened a gaze still starry and undimmed; there was a smile of shining teeth ... the eyes met mine....

With a diving rush the entire picture shifted, passing on to another scene, and I saw two figures, her own and his, bending down over something that lay stretched and motionless upon an altar of raised stones. We were in shadow now; the air was cool; the perfume of the open desert had altered to the fragrance that was incense.... The picture faded, flashed quickly back, faded again, and once again was there. I could not hold it for long. Larger, darker figures swam between to confuse and blur its detail, figures of some swarthier race, as though layers of other memories, perhaps more recent, mingled bewilderingly with it. The two passed in and out of one another, sometimes interpenetrating, as when two slides appear upon the magic-lantern sheet together; yet, peering at me through the phantasmal kaleidoscope, shone ever this woman-face, seductively lovely, haunting as a vision of stars, mask of a soul even then already “old,” although the picture was of ages before the wisdom of Buddha or the love of Christ had stolen on the world....

Then came a moment of clearer sight suddenly, and I saw that the objects lying stretched and motionless in the obscurity, and over one of which they bent in concentrated effort, were the bodies of men not dead, but temporarily vacated. And I knew that we stood in the Hall of the Vacated Bodies, an atmosphere of awe and solemnity about us. For these were the advanced disciples who in the final initiation lay three days and nights entranced, while their souls acquired “elsewhere and otherwise” the knowledge no brain could attain to in the flesh. During the interval there were those who watched the empty tenements — Guardians of the Vacated Bodies — and two of these I now saw bending low — the woman and a man. The body itself I saw but dimly, but an overmastering curiosity woke in me to see it clearly — to recognise —— !

The intensity of my effort caused a blur, it seemed. Across my inner sight the haze thickened for a moment, and I lost the scene. But this time I understood. The dread of something they were about to consummate blackened the memory with the pain of treachery. Guardians of the Vacated Bodies, they had been faithless to their trust: they had used their position for some personal end. Awe and terror clutched my soul. Who was the leader, who the led, I failed utterly to recover, nor what the motive of the broken trust had been. A sublime audacity lay in it, that I knew. There was the desire for knowledge not yet properly within their reach; there was the ambition to evoke the elemental powers; and there was an “experiment,” using the instrument at hand as the channel for an achievement that might have made them — one of them, at any rate — as the gods. But there was about it all an entanglement of personalities and motives I was helpless to unravel. The whole deep significance I could not recover. My own part, the part he played, and the part the woman played, seemed woven in an involved and inextricable knot. It belonged, I felt, to an order of consciousness which is not the order of to-day. I, therefore, failed to understand completely. Only that we three were together, closely linked, emerged absolutely clear.

For one moment the scene returned again. I remember that something drove forcibly against me in that ancient place, that it flung itself roaring like a tempest in my face, that a great burning sensation passed through me, while sheets of what I can only describe as black fire tore through the air about us. There was fire and there was wind ... that much I realised.

I rocked — that is my present body rocked. I reeled upon my chair. The entire memory plunged down into darkness with a speed of lightning. I seemed to rise — to emerge from the depths of some sea within me where I had lain sunk for ages. In one sense — I awoke. But, before the glamour passed entirely, and while the reality of the scene hung about me still, I remember that a cry for help escaped my lips, and that it was the name of our leader that I called upon:

“Concerighé...!”

With that cry still sounding in the air, I turned, and saw him whom I had called upon beside me. With a kind of splendid, dazzling light he came. He rested one hand upon my shoulder; he gazed down into my eyes; and I looked into a face that was magnificent with power, radiant, glorious. The atmosphere momentarily seemed turned to flame. I felt a wind of strength strike through me. The old temptation and the sin — the failure — all were clear at last.

I remembered....

CHAPTER XIII

THE BRILLIANCE OF the figure dimmed and melted, as though the shadows ate it from the edges inwards; there came a rattling at the handle of that inner chamber door; it opened suddenly; and Julius LeVallon, this time in his body of To-day, stood framed against the square of light that swirled behind him like clouds of dazzlingly white steam. The door swung to and closed. He moved forward quickly into the room.

By this time I was more in possession of my normal senses again. Here was no question of memory, vision, or imagination's glamour. Beyond any doubt or ambiguity, there stood beside me in this sitting-room of the Edinburgh lodging-house two figures of Julius LeVallon. I saw them simultaneously. There was the normal Julius walking across the carpet towards me, and there was his double that stood near me in a body of light — now fading, yet unquestionably wearing the likeness of that Concerighé whom I had seen bending with the woman above the vacated body.

They moved together swiftly. Almost the same moment they met; they intermingled, much as two outlines of an object slip one into the other when the finger's pressure on the eyeball is removed. They became one person. Julius was there before me in the lamp-lit room, just come from his inner chamber that blazed with brilliance. This light now disappeared. No line showed beneath the crack of the door. I heard the wind and rain shout drearily past the windows with the dying storm.

I caught my breath. I stood up to face him, taking a quick step backwards. And I heard Julius laugh a little. He told me afterwards I had assumed an attitude of defence.

He was speaking — in his ordinary voice, no sign of excitement in him, nor about his presence anything unusual.

"You called me," he said quietly; "you called for help. But I could not come at once; I could not get back; it was such a long way off." He looked at me and smiled. "I was searching," he added, as though he had been merely turning the pages of a book.

“Our old Memory Game. I know. I felt it — even out here.”

He nodded gravely.

“You could hardly help it,” he replied, “being so close,” and indicated that inner room with a gesture of his head. “Besides, you were in it all the time. And she was in it too. Oh,” he said with a touch of swift enthusiasm, “I have recovered nearly all. I know exactly now what happened. I was the leader, I the instigator; you both merely helped me; you with your faithful friendship, even while you warned; she with her passionate love that asked no questions, but obeyed.”

“She loved you so?” I asked faintly, but with an uncontrollable trembling of the voice. An amazing prescience seized me.

“You,” he said calmly. “It was you she loved.”

What thrill of romance, deathless and enthralling, stirred in me as I heard these words! What starry glory stepped down upon the world! A memory of bliss poured into me; the knowledge of an undying love constant as the sun itself. Then, hard upon its heels, flashed back the Present with a small and insignificant picture — of my approaching union — with another. An extraordinary revulsion caught me. I remember steadying myself against the chair in front of me.

“For it was your love,” Julius went on quietly, “that made you so necessary. You two were a single force together. I had the knowledge, but you together had the greatest power in the world. We were three — a trinity — the strongest union possible. And the temptation was too much for me — —”

He turned away a moment so that I could not see his face. He broke off suddenly. There was a new and curious quality in his voice, as though it dwindled in volume and grew smaller, yet was not audibly lowered.

What caused the old sense of dread to quicken in me? What brought this sudden sinking of the heart as he turned again from the cabinet where he stood, and our eyes met steadily through the lamp-lit room?

“I borrowed love, but knew not how to use it,” he went on slowly, solemnly. “I had evoked the Powers successfully; through the channel of that vacated body I had drawn them into my own being. Then came the failure — —”

“I — we failed you!” I faltered.

“The failure,” he replied, still fixing me with his glowing eyes, “was mine, and mine alone. The power lent me I did not understand. It was not my own, and without great love these things cannot be accomplished. I must first know love. What I had summoned I was too weak to banish. The owner of the vacated body returned.” Then, after a pause, he added half below his breath: “The Powers, exiled from their appointed place, are about me to this very day. But it is the owner of that body whose forgiveness I need most. And only with your help — with the presence, the sympathetic presence of yourself and her — can this be effected.”

Past, present, and future seemed strangely intermingled as I heard, for my thoughts went groping forward, and at the same time diving backwards among desert sands and temples. The passion of an immense love-story caught me; I was aware of intense yearning to resume my place in it all with him, with her, with all the reconstructed conditions of relationships so ancient and so true. It swept over me like a storm unchained. That scene in the cool and sunless crypt flamed forth again, reality in each smallest detail. The meaning of his words I did not wholly grasp, however; there was something lacking in my mind of To-day that withheld the final clue. My present consciousness was not as then. From brain and reason all this seemed so utterly divorced, and I had forgotten how to understand by *feeling* in the way that Julius did. Those last words, however, brought a sudden question to my lips. Almost unconsciously I gave it utterance:

“Through the channel of a body?” I asked, and my voice was lower than his own.

“Through the channel of a human system,” was his answer, “an organism that uses consciously both heat and air, and that, therefore, knows the nature of them both. For the Powers can be summoned only by those who understand them; and understanding, being worship, depends ultimately upon *sharing* their natures, though it be in little.”

There came a welcome break, then, in the strain of this extraordinary conversation, as Julius, using no bridge to transpose our emotions from one key to the other, walked quietly over to the cupboard. It was characteristically significant of his attitude to life in general, that the solemn things we had been speaking of were yet no more sacred than the prosaic detail of to-day that now concerned him — a student’s supper. All was "one" to him in this rare but absolutely genuine way. He was unconscious of any break in the emotional level of what had been — for him there was, indeed, no break — and, watching him, it almost seemed that I still saw that other figure of long ago striding across the granite, sun-drenched slabs.

The voice rose unbidden within me, choked by the stress of some inexplicable emotion:

"Concerighé...!" I cried aloud involuntarily; "Concerighé ... Ziaz.... We are all together still ... my help is yours ... my unfailing help...."

Julius, loaf and marmalade jar in hand, turned from the cupboard as though he had been struck. For a moment he stood and stared. The customary expression melted from his face, and in its place a look of tenderest compassion shone through the strength.

"You do remember, then!" he said very softly; "even the names!"

"And Silvatela," I murmured, moisture rising unaccountably to my eyes. I saw the room in mist.

Julius stood before me like a figure carved in stone. For a long time he spoke no word. Gradually the curious disturbance in my own breast sank and passed. The mist lifted and disappeared. I felt myself slipping back into To-day on the ebb of some shattering experience, already half forgotten.

"You remember," he repeated presently, his voice impassioned but firmly quiet, "the temptation — and — the failure...?"

I nodded, almost involuntarily again.

"And still hold to you — both," I murmured.

He held me with his eyes for quite a minute. Though he used no word or gesture, I felt his deep delight.

"Because we must," he answered presently; "because we must."

He had moved so close to me that I felt his breath upon my face. I could have sworn for a second that I gazed into the shining eyes of that other and audacious figure, for it was the voice of Concerighé, yet the face of Julius. Past and present seemed to join hands, mingling confusedly in my mind.

Cause and effect whispered across the centuries, linking us together. And the voice continued deeply, as if echoing down hollow aisles of stone.

I heard the words in the shadowy spaces of that old-world crypt, rather than among the plush furniture of these Edinburgh lodgings.

“We three are at last together again, and must bring the Balance to a final close. As the stars are but dust upon the pathway of the gods, so our mistakes are but dust upon the pathway of our lives. What we let fall together, we must together remove.”

Then, with an abruptness that pertained sometimes to these curious irruptions from the past, the values shifted. He became more and more the Julius LeVallon whom I knew to-day. Speech changed to a modern and more usual key. And the effect upon myself was of vague relief, for while the impression of great drama did not wholly pass, the uneasiness lightened in me, and I found my tongue again. I told my own experience — all that I had seen and felt and thought. Brewing the cocoa, and setting out the bread and marmalade upon the table, Julius listened to every word without interruption. Our intimacy was complete again as though no separation, either of lives or days, had been between us.

“Inside me, of course,” I concluded the recital; “in some kind of interior sight I saw it all — —”

“The only true sight,” he declared, “though what you saw was but the reflection at second-hand of memories I evoked in there.” He pointed to the inner room. “In there,” he went on significantly, “where nothing connected with the Present enters, no thought, no presence, nothing that can disturb or interrupt, — in there you would see and remember as vividly as I myself. The room is prepared.... The channels all are open. As it was, my pictures flashed into you and set the great chain moving. For no life is isolated; all is shared; and every detail, animate or so-called inanimate, belongs inevitably to every other.”

“Yet what I saw was so much clearer than our schoolday memories,” I said. “Those pictures, for instance, of the pastoral people where we came together first.”

An expression of yearning passed into his eyes as he answered.

"Because in our Temple Days you led the life of the soul instead of the body merely. The soul alone remembers. There lies the permanent record. Only what has touched the soul, therefore, is recoverable — the great joys, great sorrows, great adventures that have reached it. You *feel* them. The rest are but fugitive pictures of scenery that accompanied the spiritual disturbances. Each body you occupy has a different brain that stores its own particular series. But true memory is in, and of, the Soul. Few have any true soul-life at all; few, therefore, have anything to remember!"

His low voice ran on and on, charged with deep earnestness; his very atmosphere seemed to vibrate with the conviction of his words; about his face occasionally were flashes of that radiance in which his body of light — his inmost being — dwelt for ever. I remember moving the marmalade pot from its precarious position on the table edge, lest his gestures should send it flying! But I remember also that the haunting reality of "other days and other places" lay about us while we talked, so that the howling of the storm outside seemed far away and quite unable to affect us. We knew perfect communion in that dingy room. We *felt* together.

"But it is difficult, often painful, to draw the memories up again," he went on, still speaking of recovery, "for they lie so deeply coiled about the very roots of joy and grief. Things of the moment smother the older pictures. The way of recovery is arduous, and not many would deem the sacrifice involved worth while. It means plunging into yourself as you must plunge below the earth if you would see the starlight while the sun is in the sky. To-day's sunlight hides the stars of yesterday. Yet all is accessible — the entire series of the soul's experiences, and real forgetting is not possible."

A movement as of wind seemed to pass between us over the faded carpet, bearing me upwards while he spoke, sweeping me with his own conviction of our eternal ancestry and of our unending future.

"We have made ourselves exactly what we are. We are making our future at this very minute — *now!*" I exclaimed. The justice of the dream inspired me. Great courage, a greater hope awoke.

He smiled, opening his arms with a gesture that took in the world.

"Your aspirations, hopes and fears, all that has ever burned vitally at your centre, every spiritual passion that uplifted or enticed, each deep endeavour that seeded your present tendencies and talents — everything, in fact, strong enough to have touched your Soul — sends up its whirling picture of beauty or dismay at the appointed time. The disentangling may be difficult, but all are there, for you yourself are their actual, living Record. Feeling, not thinking, best unravels them — the primitive vision as of children — the awareness of kinship with everything about you. The sense of separateness and isolation vanishes, and the soul recovers the consciousness of sharing all the universe. There is no loneliness; there is no more fear."

Ah, how we talked that night of tempest through! What thoughts and dreams and possibilities Julius sent thundering against my mind as with the power of the loosed wind and rain outside. The scale of life became immense, each tiniest detail of act and thought important with the sacredness of some cosmic ceremonial that it symbolised. Yet to his words alone this power was not due, but rather to some force of driving certitude in himself that brought into me too a similar conviction. The memory of it hardened in the sands of my imagination, as it were, so that the result has remained, although the language by which he made it seem so reasonable has gone.

I smoked my pipe; and, as the smoke curled upwards, I watched his face of pallid marble and the mop of ebony hair that set off so well the brilliance of the eyes. He looked, I thought to myself, like no human being I had ever seen before.

"And sometimes," I remember hearing, "the memories from a later section may suddenly swarm across an earlier one — confusing the sight, perhaps, just when it is getting clear. A few hours ago, for instance, my search was interrupted by an inrush of two more recent layers — Eastern ones — which came to obliterate with their vividness the older, dimmer ones I sought."

I mentioned what the frightened woman imagined she had seen.

"She caught a reflected fragment too," he said. "So strong a picture was bound to spread."

“Then was Mrs. Garnier with us too before?” I asked, as we burst out laughing.

“Not in that sense, no. It was the glamour that touched her only — second-sight, as she might call it. She is sensitive to impressions, nothing more.”

He came over and sat closer to me. The web of his language folded closer too. The momentum of his sincerity threw itself against all my prejudices, so that I, too, saw the serpentine vista of these previous lives stretching like a river across the ages. To this day I see his tall, slim figure, his face with the clear pale skin, the burning eyes; now he leaned across the table, now stood up to emphasise some phrase, now paced the floor of that lamp-lit students’ lodging-house, while he spoke of the long battling of our souls together, sowing thoughts and actions whose consequences must one day be reaped without evasion. The scale of his Dream was vast indeed, its prospect austere and merciless, yet the fundamental idea of justice made it beautiful, as its inclusion of all Nature made it grand.

To Julius LeVallon the soul was indeed unconquerable, and man master of his fate. Death lost its ugliness and terror; the sense of broken, separated life was replaced by the security of a continuous existence, whole, unhurried, eternal, affording ample time for all development, accepting joy and suffering as the justice of results, but never as of reward or punishment. There was no caprice; there was no such thing as chance.

Then, as the night wore slowly on, and the wind died down, and the wonderful old town lay sleeping peacefully, we talked at last of that one thing towards which all our conversation tended subconsciously: our future together and the experiment that it held in store for us — with her.

I cannot hope to set down here the words by which this singular being led me, half accepting, to the edge of understanding that his conception might be right. To that edge, however, I somehow felt my mind was coaxed. I looked over that edge. I saw for a moment something of his magnificent panorama. I realised a hint of possibility in his shining scheme. But it is beyond me to report the persuasive reasonableness of all I heard, for the truth is that Julius spoke another language — a language incomprehensible to my mind to-day. His words, indeed, were those of modern schools and books, but the spirit that ensouled them belonged to a forgotten time. Only by means of some strange inner sympathy did I comprehend him. Another, an older type of consciousness, perhaps, woke in me. As with the pictures, this also seemed curiously familiar as I listened. Something in me old as the stars and wiser than the brain both heard and understood.

For the elemental forces he held to be Intelligences that share the life of the cosmos in a degree enormously more significant than anything human life can claim. Mother Earth, for him, was no mere poetic phrase. There was spiritual life in Nature as there was spiritual life in men and women. The insignificance of the latter was due to their being cut off from the great sources of supply — to their separation from Nature. Under certain conditions, and with certain consequences, it was possible to obtain these powers which, properly directed, might help the entire world. This experiment we had once made — and failed.

The method I already understood in a certain measure; but the rest escaped my comprehension. Memory failed to reconstruct it for me; vision darkened; his words conveyed no meaning. It was beyond me. Somewhere, somehow, personal love had entered to destroy the effective balance that ensured complete success. Yet, equally, the power of love which is quintessential sympathy, *was* necessary.

What, however, I did easily understand was that the object of that adventure was noble, nothing meanly personal in it anywhere; and, further, that to restore the damaged equilibrium by returning these particular powers to their rightful places, there must be an exact reproduction of the conditions of evocation — that is, the three original participants must be together again — a human system must serve again as channel.

And the essential fact of all that passed between us on this occasion was that I gave again my promise. When the necessary conditions were present — I would not fail him. This is the memory I have carried with me through the twenty years of our subsequent separation. I gave my pledge.

The storm blew itself to rest behind the hills; the rain no longer set the windows rattling; the hush of early morning stole down upon the sleeping city. We had talked the night away. He seemed aware — I know not how — that we stood upon the brink of going apart for years. There was great tenderness in his manner, his voice, his gestures. Turning to me a moment as the grey light crept past the curtains, he peered into my face as though he would revive lost centuries with the passion of his eyes. He took my hand and held it, while a look of peace and trust passed over his features as though the matter of the future were already then accomplished.

He led me silently across the room towards the door. I turned instinctively; words rose up in me, but words that found no utterance. A deep emotion held me dumb. Then, as I opened the door, I found the old, familiar name again:

“Concerighé ... Friend of a million years...!”

But no sentence followed it. He touched my arm. A cold wind seemed to pass between us. I firmly believe that somehow he foresaw the long interval of separation that was coming. Something about him seemed to fade; I saw him less distinctly; my sight, perhaps, was blurred with the strain of these long hours — hours the like of which I was not to know again for many years. That magical name has many a time echoed since in my heart away from him, as it echoed then across the darkened little hall-way of those Edinburgh lodgings: “Concerighé! Friend of a million years!”

Side by side we went down the granite steps of the spiral staircase to the street. Julius opened the big front door. I heard the rattling of the iron chain. A breeze from the sea blew salt against our faces, then ran gustily along the streets. Behind the Calton Hill showed a crimson streak of dawn. A line of clouds, half rosy and half gold, ran down the sky. No living being was astir. I heard only the noisy whirling of the iron chimney-pots against the morning wind.

And then his voice:

“Good-bye —— Until we meet again....”

He pressed my hands. I looked into his eyes. He stepped back into the shadow of the porch. The door closed softly.

CHAPTER XIV

"*FORGIVE? O YES! How lightly, lightly said!*
Forget? No, never, while the ages roll,
Till God slay o'er again the undying dead,
And quite unmake my soul!" — Mary Coleridge.

I stepped down, it seemed, into a lilliputian world where the grander issues no longer drew the souls of men. The deep and simple things were fled, the old Nature gods withdrawn. The scale of life had oddly shrunk.

I saw the names above the shuttered shops with artificial articles for sale —"11-¾d. a yard" — on printed paper labels. The cheapness of a lesser day flashed everywhere.

I passed the closed doors of a building where people flocked to mumble that no good was in them, while a man proclaimed in a loud voice things he hardly could believe. A few streets behind me Julius LeVallon stood in the shadows of another porch, solitary and apart, yet communing with stars and hills and seas, survival from a vital, vanished age when life was realised everywhere and the elemental Nature Powers walked hand in hand with men.

Through the deserted streets I made my way across the town to my own little student's flat on the Morningside where I then lived. Gradually the crimson dawn slipped into a stormy sunrise. I watched the Pentlands take the gold, and the Castle rock turn ruddy; a gentle mist lay over Leith below; a pool of deep blue shadow marked the slumbering Old Town.

But about my heart at this magic hour stirred the dawn-winds of a thousand ancient sunrises, and I felt the haunting atmosphere of other days and other places steal up through the mists of immemorial existences. I thought of the whole great series, each life rising and setting like a little day, each with its dawn and noon and sunset, each with its harvest of failure and success, of joy and sorrow, of friendships formed and enemies forgiven, of ideals realised or abandoned — pouring out of the womb of time and slowly bringing the soul through the discipline of all possible experience towards that perfection which proclaims it one with the entire universe — the Deity.

And a profound weariness fell about my spirit as I went. I became aware of my own meagre enthusiasm. I welcomed the conception of some saviour who should do it all for me. I knew myself unequal to the gigantic task. In that moment the heroic figure of Julius seemed remote from reality, a towering outline in the sky, an austere embodiment of legendary myth. The former passionate certainty that he was right dwindled amid wavering doubts. The perplexities of life came back upon me with tormenting power. I lost the coherent vision of consistent and logical beauty that he inspired. It was all too vast for me.

This reaction was natural enough, though for a long time mood chased mood across my troubled mind, each battling for supremacy. The materialism of the day, proudly strutting with its boundless assurance and its cock-sure knowledge, regained possession of my thoughts. The emptiness of scholastic theology no longer seemed so hideously apparent. It was pain to let the other go, but go it did — though never, perhaps, so completely as I then believed.

By insignificant details the change revealed itself. I recalled that I was due that very afternoon at a luncheon where “intellectual” folk would explain away the soul with a single scientific formula, and where learned heads would wag condescendingly as they murmured “But there’s no evidence to prove *that*, you know ...” ... and Julius rose before me in another light at once — Pagan, dreamer, monster of exploded superstitions, those very hills where he evoked the sylvan deities, a momentary hallucination....

Then again, quite suddenly, it was the chatterers at the luncheon party who seemed unreal, and all their clever patter about the “movements” of the day mere shallow verbiage. The hoardings of the town were blue and yellow with gaudy election posters, but the sky was aflame with the grand old message of the Sun God, written in eternal hieroglyphs of gold and red upon the clouds that brushed the hills. The elemental deities stormed thundering by. And, instead of scholars laying down the letter of their little law, I heard the tones of Concerighé calling across the centuries the names of great belief, of greater beauty.

And the older pageantry stole back across the world.

Almost it was in me to turn and seek ... with him ... that soul-knowledge which ran through all the “sections.”... Yet the younger fear oppressed me. The endless journey, the renunciation and suffering involved, the incessant, tireless striving, with none to help but one’s own unconquerable will — this, and a host of other feelings that lay beyond expression, bore down upon me with their cold, glacier power. I thought of Julius with something of reverence akin to terror.... I despised myself. I also understood why the majority need priests and creeds and formulæ to help them.... The will, divorced from Nature, was so small a thing!

When I entered my rooms the sunlight lay upon the carpet, and never before had it seemed so welcome or so comforting. I could then and there have worshipped the great body that sent it forth. But, instead, in a state of exhaustion and weariness, I flung myself upon the bed. Yet, while I slept, it seemed I left that little modern room and entered the region of great, golden days “when the sun was younger.” In very different attire, I took my place in the blue-robed circle, a portion of some ancient, gorgeous ceremonial that was nearer to the primitive beauty, when the “circles swallowed the sun,” and the elemental Powers were accessible to every heart.

It was not surprising that I slept till dusk, missing my lectures and the luncheon party as well; but it was distinctly surprising to find myself wakened by a knocking at the door for a telegram that summoned me south forthwith. And only in the train, anxiously counting the minutes in the hope that I might find my father still alive, did the possible significance of LeVallon’s final words come back upon my troubled mind: “Until we meet again.”

For little did I guess that my father’s death was to prevent my returning to the University, that my career would be changed and hastened owing to an unexpected lack of means, that my occasional letters to Julius were to be returned “unknown,” or that my next word of him would be received twenty years later in a room overlooking the Rhine at Bâle, where I have attempted to set down these difficult notes of reminiscence....

BOOK III. THE CHÂLET IN THE JURA MOUNTAINS

"*HE (MAN) FIRST clothes the gods in the image of his own innermost nature; he personifies them as modes of his own greater consciousness. All this was native to him when he still felt himself kin with Nature; when he felt rather than thought, when he followed instinct rather than ratiocination. But for long centuries this feeling of kinship with Nature has been gradually weakened by the powerful play of that form of mind peculiar to man; until he has at last reached a stage when he finds himself largely divorced from Nature, to such an extent indeed that he treats her as something foreign and apart from himself....*

"*He seems at present, at any rate in the persons of most of the accredited thinkers of the West, to be absolutely convinced that no other mode of mind can exist except his own mode.... To say that Nature thinks, he regards as an entire misuse of language.... That Nature has feelings even, he will not allow; to speak of love and hate among the elements is for him a puerile fancy the cultured mind has long outgrown.*

"*The sole joy of such a mind would almost seem to be the delight of expelling the life from all forms and dissecting their dead bodies.*"— "Some Mystical Adventures" (G. R. S. Mead).

CHAPTER XV

FOR A LONG time that letter lay on my table like a challenge — neither accepted nor refused. Something that had slumbered in me for twenty years awoke. The enchantment of my youthful days, long since evaporated as I believed, rose stealthily upon me at the sight of this once familiar handwriting. LeVallon, of course, had found the woman. And my word was pledged.

To say that I hesitated, however, would be no more true than to say that I debated or considered. The first effect upon me was a full-blown amazement that I could ever have come under the spell of so singular a kind or have promised co-operation in anything so wildly preposterous as Julius had proposed. The second effect, however — and, as it turned out, the deeper one — was different. I experienced a longing, a thrill of anticipation, a sense even of joy — I know not what to call it; while in its train came a hint, though the merest hint, of that vague uneasiness I had known in my school and university days.

Yet by some obscure mental process difficult to explain, I found myself half caught already in consent. I answered the letter, asking instructions how to reach him in his distant valley of the Jura Mountains. Some love of adventure — so I flattered myself — long denied by my circumscribed conditions of life, prompted the decision in part. For in the heart of me I obviously wished to go; and, briefly, it was the heart of me that finally went.

I passed some days waiting for a reply, LeVallon's abode being apparently inaccessible to the ordinary service of the post— "poste restante" in a village marked only upon the larger maps where, I judged, he had to fetch his letters. And those days worked their due effect upon me; they were filled with questions to which imagination sought the answers. How would the intervening years have dealt with him? What changes would have come upon him with maturity? And this woman — what melancholy splendours brought from "old, forgotten, far-off things" would she bring with her down into the prosaic conditions of this materialistic century? What signs and evidences would there be that she, like himself, was an adept at life, seeking eternal things, discerning what was important, an “old soul” taught of the gods and charged with the ideals of another day? I saw her already in imagination — a woman of striking appearance and unusual qualities. And, how had he found her? A hundred similar questions asked themselves, but, chief among them, two: Would she — should I, *remember?*

The time passed slowly; my excitement grew; sometimes I hesitated, half repented, almost laughed, but never once was tempted really to change my mind. For in the deeper part of me, now so long ignored, something of these ancient passions blew to flame again; symptoms of that original dread increased; there rose once more the whisper “we are eternally together; the thing is true!” And on the seventh day, when the porter handed me the letter, it almost seemed that Julius stood beside me, beckoning. I felt his presence; the old magic of his personality tightened up a thousand loosened threads; belief was unwillingly renewed.

The instructions were very brief, no expression of personal feeling accompanying them. Julius counted on my fidelity. It had never occurred to him that I could fail. I left my heavy luggage in the care of the hotel and packed the few things necessary for the journey. The notes of our school and university days I have just jotted down I sent by post to my London chambers. A spirit of recklessness seemed in me. I was off into fairyland, mystery and wonder about me, possibly romance. Nothing mattered; work could wait; I possessed a small competency of my own; the routine of my life was dull and uninspiring. Also I was alone in the world, for my early attachment had not resulted in marriage, and I knew no other home than that of chambers, restaurants, and the mountain inns where my holidays were usually spent. I welcomed the change with its promise of adventure — and I went. This feeling of welcome owned perhaps a deeper origin than I realised.

Travelling via Bienne and Neuchâtel to a point beyond the latter town, I took thence, according to instructions, a little mountain railway that left the lake behind and plunged straight into the purple valleys of the Jura range. Deep pine woods spread away on all sides as we climbed a winding ravine among the folds of these soft blue mountains that are far older than the Alps. Scarred cliffs and ridges of limestone gleamed white against the velvet forests, now turning red and yellow in the sunset, but no peaks were visible and no bare summits pricked the sky. Thick and soft, the trees clothed all. Their feathery presence filled the air. The clatter of the train seemed muffled, and the gathering shadows below the eastern escarpments took on that rich black hue that ancient forests lend to the very atmosphere above them. We passed into a world where branches, moss and flowers muted every sound with a sense of undisturbable peace. The softness of great age reigned with delicious silence. The very engine puffed uphill on wheels of plush.

Occasional hamlets contributed a few wood-cutters by way of passengers; strips of half-cleared valley revealed here and there a farm-house with dark brown walls and spreading roof; little *sentiers* slipped through the pine trees to yet further recesses of unfrequented woods; but nowhere did I see a modern building, a country house, nor any dwelling that might be occupied by other than simple peasant folk. Suggestion of tourists there was absolutely none; no trees striped blue and yellow by Improvement Committees; no inns with central-heating and tin banners stating that touring clubs endorsed them; no advertisements at all; only this air of remote and kindly peace, the smoke of peat fires, and the odour of living woods stealing upon the dusk.

The feeling grew that I crossed a threshold into a region that lay outside the common happenings of the world; life here must be very gentle, wonderful, distinguished, and things might come to pass that would be true yet hard to explain by the standards of the busy cities. Those cities, indeed, seemed very far away, unreal, and certainly unimportant. For the leisurely train itself was almost make-believe, and the station officials mere uniformed automata. The normal world, in a word, began to fade a little. I was aware once more of that bigger region in which Julius LeVallon lived — the cosmic point of view. The spell of our early days revived, worked on my nerves and thought, altering my outlook sensibly even at this early stage of my return.

The autumn afternoon was already on the wane when at length I reached C —— , an untidy little watch-making town, and according to instructions left the train. I searched the empty platform in vain for any sign of Julius. Instead of the tall, familiar figure, a little dark-faced man stood abruptly before me, stared into my face with the questioning eyes of a child or animal, and exclaimed bluntly enough “*Monsieur le professeur?*” We were alone on the deserted platform, the train already swallowed by the forest, no porter, of course, visible, and signs of civilisation generally somewhat scanty.

This man, sent by Julius, made a curious impression on me as I gave him my bag and prepared to follow him to the cart I saw standing outside the station. His mode of addressing me seemed incongruous. Of peasant type, with black moustaches far too big for his features, and bushy eyebrows reminding me of tree-lichen, there was something in his simplicity of gesture and address that suggested a faithful animal. His voice was not unlike a growl; he was delighted to have found me, but did not accept me yet; he showed his pleasure in his honest smile and in certain quick, jerky movements of the body that made me think how a clever caricaturist could see the dog in him. Yet in his keen and steady eyes there was another look that did not encourage levity; one would not lightly trifle with him. There was something about the alert little fellow that insisted on respect, and a touch of the barbaric counteracted the comedy of the aggressive eyebrows and moustache. In the eyes, unflinching yet respectful, I fancied to detect another thing as well: a nameless expression seen sometimes in the eyes of men who have known uncommon things — habitual amazement grown slowly to unwilling belief. He was a man, certainly, who would serve his master to the death and ask no questions.

But also he would not answer questions; I could get nothing out of him, as the springless cart drove slowly up the steep mountain road behind the pair of sturdy horses. *Oui* and *non* and *peut-être* summed up his conversational powers, till I gave up trying and lapsed into silence. Perhaps he had not "passed" me yet, not quite approved me. He was just the sort of faithful, self-contained servant Julius required, no doubt, and, as a conductor into mysterious adventure, a by no means inadequate figure. Name, apparently, he had also none, for Julius, as I learned later, referred to him as simply "he." But my imagination instantly christened him "The Dog-Man," and as such the inscrutable fellow lives in my memory to this day. He seemed just one degree above the animal stage.

But while thought was busy with a dozen speculations, the dusk had fallen steadily, and the character of the country, I saw, had changed. It was more rugged and inhospitable, the valleys narrower, the forests very deep, with taller and more solemn trees, and no signs anywhere of the axe. An hour ago we had left the main road and turned up a rough, deep-rutted track that only the feet of oxen seemed to have used. We moved in comparative gloom, though far overhead the heights shone still with the gold of sunset. For a long time we had seen no peasant huts, no sign of habitation, nor passed a single human being. Wood-cutters and charcoal-burners apparently had not penetrated here, and the track, I gathered, was used in summer only and led to some lonely farm among the upper pastures. It was very silent; no wind stirred the sea of branches; no animal life showed itself; and the only moving things beside ourselves were the jays that now and again flew across the path or announced their invisible presence in the woods by raucous screaming.

Although the ceaseless jolting of the cart was severe, the long journey most fatiguing, I was sensible of the deep calm that brooded everywhere. After the bluster of the aggressive Alps, this peaceful Jura stole on the spirit with a subtle charm. Something whispered that I was not alone, but that a friendly touch of welcome pervaded the cool recesses of these wooded hills. The sense of hostile isolation inspired by the snowy peaks, that faint dismay one knows sometimes at the foot of towering summits, was wholly absent here. I felt myself, not alien to these rolling mountains, but akin. I was known and hospitably admitted, not merely ignored, nor let in at my own grave risk. The spirit of the mountains here was kind.

Yet that I was aware of this at all made me realise the presence of another thing as well: It was in myself, not in these velvet valleys. For, while the charm of the scenery acted as a sedative, I realised that something alert in me noted the calming influence and welcomed it. *That* did not go to sleep — it resolutely kept awake. A faint instinct of alarm had been stimulated, if ever so slightly, from the moment I left the train and touched the atmosphere of my silent guide, the “Dog-Man.” It was, of course, that he brought his master nearer. Julius and I should presently meet again, shake hands, look into each other’s eyes — I should hear his voice and share again the glamour of his personality. Also there would be — a third.

It was an element, obviously, in a process of readjustment of my being which had begun the moment I received his letter; it had increased while I sat in the Bâle hotel and jotted down those early recollections — an ingredient in the new grouping of emotions and sensations constituting myself which received the attack, so to speak, of what came later. My consciousness was slowly changing.

Yet this, I think, was all I felt at the moment: a perfectly natural anticipatory excitement, a stirring wonder, and behind them both a hint of shrinking that was faint uneasiness. It was the thought of the woman that caused the last, the old premonition that something grave involving the three of us would happen. The potent influences of my youth were already at work again.

My entrance into the secluded spot Julius had chosen came unexpectedly; we were suddenly upon it; the effect was almost dramatic. The last farm-house had been left behind an hour or more, and we had been winding painfully up a steep ascent that led through a tunnel of dark, solemn trees, when the forest abruptly stopped, and a little, cup-like valley lay before me, bounded on three sides by jagged limestone ridges. Open to the sky like some lonely flower, it lay hidden and remote upon this topmost plateau, difficult of access to the world. I saw cleared meadows of emerald green beneath the peeping stars; a stream ran gurgling past my feet; the surface of a little lake held the shadows of the encircling cliffs; and at the further end, beneath the broken outline of the ridges, lights twinkled in a peasant’s châlet.

The effect was certainly of Fairyland. The stillness and cool air, after the closeness of the heavy forest, seemed to bring the stars much nearer. There was a clean, fresh perfume; the atmosphere crystal clear, the calm profound. I felt a little private world about me, self-contained, and impressive with a quiet dignity of its own. Unknown, unspoilt, serene and exquisite, it lay hidden here for some purpose that vulgar intrusion might not discover. If ever an enchanted valley existed, it was here before my eyes.

“So this is the chosen place — this isolated spot of beauty!” My heart leaped to think that Julius stood already within reach of my voice, possibly of my sight as well. No meeting-place, surely, could have been more suitable.

The cart moved slowly, and the horses, steam rising from their heated bodies against the purple trees, stepped softly upon the meadow-land. The sound of hoofs and wheels was left behind, we silently moved up the gentle slope towards the lights. Night stepped with us from the hills; the forest paused and waited at a distance; only the faint creaking of the wheels upon damp grass and the singing of the little stream were audible. The air grew sharp with upland perfumes. We passed the diminutive lake that mirrored the first stars. And a curious feeling reached me from the sky and from the lonely ridges; a nameless emotion caught my heart a moment; some thrill of high, unearthly loveliness, familiar as a dream yet gone again before it could be seized, mirrored itself in the depths of me like those buried stars within the water — when, suddenly, a figure detached itself from the background of trees and cliffs, and towards me over the dew-drenched grass moved — Julius LeVallon.

He came like a figure from the sky, the forest, the distant ridges. The spirit of this marvellous spot came with him. He seemed its incarnation. Whether he first drew me from the cart, or whether I sprang down to meet him, is impossible to say, for in that big moment the thousand threads that bound us together with their separate tensions slipped into a single cable of overwhelming strength. We stood upon the wet meadow, close to one another, hands firmly clasped, eyes gazing into eyes.

“Julius — it’s really you — at last!” I found to say — then his reply in the old, unchanging voice that made me tremble a little as I heard it: “I knew you would come — friend of a million years!” He laughed a little; I laughed too.

“I promised.” It seemed incredible to me that I had ever hesitated.

“Ages ago,” I heard his answer. It was like the singing of the stream that murmured past our feet. “Ages ago.”

I was aware that he let go my hand. We were moving through the dripping grass, crossing and recrossing the little stream. The mountains rose dark and strong about us. I heard the cart lumbering away with creaking wheels towards the barn. Across the heavens the stars trailed their golden pattern more and more thickly. I saw them gleaming in the unruffled lake. I smelt the odour of wood-smoke that came from the châlet chimney.

We walked in silence. Those stars, those changeless hills, deep woods and singing rivulet — primitive and eternal things — accompanied us. They were the right witnesses of our meeting. And a night-wind, driving the dusk towards the west, woke in the forest and came out to touch our faces.

Splendour and loneliness closed about us, heralding Powers of Nature that were here not yet explained away.

CHAPTER XVI

“*WE CANNOT LIMIT the types, superhuman or subhuman, that may obtain. We can ‘set no bounds to the existence or powers of sentient beings’ — a consideration of the highest importance*, as well, perhaps, practical as theoretical.... *The discovery of Superhumans of an exalted kind may be only a question of time, and the attainment of knowledge on this head one of the most important achievements in the history of races that are to come.*”—“The Individual and Reality” (Fawcett).

Something certainly tightened in my throat as we went across that soaking grass towards the building that was half châlet, half farm-house, with steep, heavy roof and wide veranda. The lights beckoned to us through the little windows. I saw a shadow slip across the casement window on the upper floor. And my question was out of its own accord before I could prevent it. My mind held in that moment no other thought at all; my pulses quickened.

“So, Julius, you have — found her?”

And he answered as though no interval of years had been; as though still we stood in the dawn upon the steps of the Edinburgh lodging-house. The tone was matter of fact and without emotion:

“She is with me here — my wife — eager to see you at last.”

The words dropped down between us like lightning into the earth, and a sense of chill, so faint I hardly recognised it, passed over me. Emotion followed instantly, yet emotion, again, so vague, so odd, so distant in some curious way, that I found no name for it. A shadow as, perhaps, of disappointment fell on my thoughts. Yet, assuredly, I had expected no different statement. He had said the right and natural thing. He had found the woman of his dream and married her. What lurked, I wondered nervously, behind my lame congratulations? Why was I baffled and ashamed? What made my speech come forth with a slight confusion between the thought and its utterance? For — almost — I had been about to say another thing, and had stopped myself just in time.

“And she — remembers?” I asked quickly — point-blank, and bluntly enough — and felt mortified the same instant by my premature curiosity. Before I could modify my words, or alter them into something less aggressively inquisitive, he turned and faced me, holding my arm to make me look at him. His skin wore the familiar marble pallor as of old; I saw it shine against the dark building where the light from the window caught it.

“Me?” he asked quietly, “or — you?”

“Anything,” I stammered, “anything at all of — of the past, I meant. Forgive me for asking so abruptly; I — —”

The words froze on my lips at the expression that came into his face. He merely looked at me and smiled. No more than that, so far as accurate description goes, and yet enough to make my heart stop dead as a stone, then start thumping against my ribs as though a paddle-wheel were loose in me. For it was not Julius in that instant who looked at me. His white skin masked another; behind and through his eyes this other stared straight into my own; and this other was familiar to me, yet unknown. The look disappeared again as instantaneously as it came.

“You shall judge for yourself,” I heard, as he drew me on towards the house.

His tone made further pointed questioning impossible, rousing my curiosity higher than ever before. Again I saw the woman in my imagination; I pictured her as a figure half remembered. As the shadow had slid past the casement of the upper floor, so her outline slipped now across a rising screen of memory not entirely obliterated.

The presentment was even vivid: she would be superb. I saw her of the Greek goddess type, with calm, inscrutable eyes, majestic mien, the suggestion of strange knowledge in her quiet language and uncommon gestures. She would be genuinely distinguished, remarkable in mind as well as in appearance. Already, as we crossed the veranda, the thrill of anticipation caught me. She would be standing in the hall to greet us, or, seated before an open fire of logs, would rise out of the shadows to meet the friend of whom she had doubtless “heard so much,” and with whom such strange things were now to be accomplished. The words Julius next actually uttered, accordingly, reached me with a sense of disappointment that was sharp, and the entire picture collapsed like a house of cards. The reaction touched my sense of comedy almost.

“I think she is still preparing your room,” he said. “I had just taken the water up when I heard your cart. We have little help, or need for help. A girl from the farm in the lower valley brings butter sometimes. We do practically everything ourselves.” I murmured something, courtesy keeping a smile in check; and then he added, “We chose this solitude on purpose, of course — she chose it, rather — and you are the first visitor since we came here months ago. We were only just ready for you; it was good that you were close — that it was so easy for you to get here.”

“I am looking forward immensely to seeing Mrs. LeVallon,” I replied, but such a queer confusion of times and places had fallen on my mind that my tongue almost said “to seeing her again.”

He smiled. “She will be with us in the morning,” he added quietly, “if not to-night.”

This simple exchange of commonplaces let down the tension of my emotions pleasantly. He turned towards me as he spoke, and for the first time, beneath the hanging oil lamp, I noted the signature of the intervening years. There was a look of power in eyes and mouth that had not been there previously. I was aware of a new distance between us, and a new respect came with it. Julius had “travelled.” He seemed to look down upon me from a height. But, at the same time, the picture his brief words conveyed had the effect of restoring me to my normal world again. For nothing more banal could have been imagined, and side by side with the chagrin to my sense of the theatrical ran also a distinct relief. It came as a corrective to the loneliness and grandeur of the setting, and checked the suggestion lying behind the hint that they were “only just ready” for my coming.

My emotions sank comfortably to a less inflated level. I murmured something politely as we passed into the so-called “sitting-room” together, and for a moment the atmosphere of my own practical world came in strongly with me. The sense of the incongruous inevitably was touched. The immense fabric of my friend’s beliefs seemed in that instant to tremble a little. That the woman he — *we* — had been waiting for through centuries, this “old soul” taught of the ancient wisdom and aware of august, forgotten worship, should be “making a bed upstairs” woke in me a sense of healthy amusement. Julius took up the water! She was engaged in menial acts! A girl brought butter from a distant farm! And I could have laughed — but for one other thing that lay behind and within the comedy. For that other thing was — pathos. There was a kind of yearning pain at the heart of it: a pain whose origins were too remote to be discoverable by the normal part of me.

It touched the poetry in me, too. For after the first disturbing effect — that it was not adequate — I felt slowly another thing: that this commonplace meeting was far more likely to be *true* than the dramatic sort I had anticipated. It was natural, it was simple; all big adventures of the soul begin in a quiet way. Obviously, as yet, the two selves in me were not yet comfortably readjusted.

I became aware, too, that Julius was what I can only call somewhere less human than before — more impersonal. He talked, he acted, he even looked as a figure might outside our world. I had no longer insight into his being as before. His life lay elsewhere, expresses it best perhaps. I can hardly present him as a man of flesh and blood. Emotion broke through so rarely.

And our talk that evening together — for Mrs. LeVallon put in no appearance — was ordinary, too. Julius, of course, as ever, used phrases that belonged to the world peculiarly his own, but he said nothing startling in the sense I had expected. No dramatic announcement came. He took things for granted in the way he always did, assuming my beliefs and theories were his own, and that my scepticism was merely due to the "mind" in me to-day. We had some supper together, a bowl of bread and milk the man brought in, and we talked of the intervening years as naturally as might be — but for this phraseology he favoured. When the man said "good night," Julius smiled kindly at him, and the fellow made a gesture of delight as though the attention meant far more to him than money. He reminded me again irresistibly, yet in no sense comically, of a faithful and devoted animal. Julius had patted him! It was delightful. An inarticulateness, as of the animal world, belonged to him. His rare words came out with effort, almost with difficulty. He looked his master straight in the eye, listened to orders with a personal interest mere servants never have, and, without a trace of servility in face or manner, hurried off gladly to fulfil them. The distress in the eyes alone still puzzled me.

"You have a treasure there," I said. "He seems devoted to you."

“A young soul,” he said, “in a human body for the first time, still with the innocence and simplicity of the recent animal stage about his awakening self-consciousness. It is unmistakable....”

“What sleeps in the vegetable, dreams in the animal, wakes in the man,” I said, remembering Leibnitz. “I’m glad we’ve left the earlier stages behind us.” His explanation interested me. “But that expression in his eyes,” I asked, “that look of searching, almost of anxiety?”

Julius replied thoughtfully. “My atmosphere acts upon him as a kind of forcing-house, perhaps. He is dimly aware of knowledge that lies, at present, too far beyond him — and yet he reaches out for it. Instinctive, but not yet intuitional. The privilege brings terror. Opportunities of growth so swift and concentrated involve bewilderment, even pain.”

“Pain?” I queried, interested as of old.

“Development is nothing but a series of little deaths. The soul passes so quickly to new stages.” He looked up searchingly into my face. “We knew that privilege once,” he added significantly; “we, too, knew special teaching.”

And, though at the moment I purposely ignored this reference to our “Temple Days,” I understood that this man’s neighbourhood might, indeed, have an unusual and stimulating effect upon a simple, ignorant type of mind. Even in my own case his presence gave me furiously to think. The “Dog-Man,” the more I observed him, was little more than a faithful creature standing on his hind legs with considerable surprise and enjoyment that he was able to do so — that “little more” being quite possibly *self*-consciousness. He showed his teeth when I met him at the station, whereas, now that I was accepted by his master, his approval was unlimited. He gave willing service in the form of love.

While Julius continued speaking, as though nothing else existed at the moment, I observed him carefully. My eyes assessed the changes in the outward “expression” of himself. He was thinner, slighter than before; there was an increased balance and assurance in his manner; a poise not present in our earlier days; but to say that he looked older seemed almost a misuse of language. Though the eyes were stronger, steadier, the lines in the skin more deeply cut, the outline of the features chiselled with more decision, these, even in combination, added no signature of age to the general expression of high beauty that was his. The years had not coarsened, but etherealised the face. Two other things, moreover, impressed me: the texture of skin and flesh had refined away, so that the inner light of his enthusiasm shone through; and — there was a marked increase in what I must term the “feel” of his immediate atmosphere or presence. Always electric and alive, it now seemed doubly charged. Against that dark inner screen where the mind visualises pictorially, he rose in terms of radiant strength. Immense potency lay suppressed in him; Powers — spiritual or Nature Powers — were in attendance. He had acquired a momentum that was in some sense both natural and super-human. It was not unlike the sense of power that great natural scenes evoke in those who are receptive — mountains, landscapes, forests. It was elemental. I felt him immense, at the head of an invisible procession, as it were, a procession from the sky, the heights, the woods, the stars.

And a touch of eeriness stole over me. I was aware of strange vitality in this lonely valley; and I was aware of it — through him. I stood, as yet, upon the outer fringe. Its remoteness from the modern world was not a remoteness of space alone, but of — condition.

There was, however, another thing impossible to ignore — that somewhere in this building there moved a figure already for me mysterious and half legendary. Upstairs, not many feet away from us, her step occasionally audible by the creaking of the boards, she moved, breathing, thinking, listening, hearing our voices, almost within touching distance of our hands. There was a hint of the fabulous in it somewhere.

And, realising her near presence, I felt a curious emotion rising through me as from a secret spring. Its character, veiled by interest and natural anticipation, remained without a name. I could not describe it to myself even. Each time the thought of meeting her, that she was close, each time the sound of her soft footfall overhead was audible, this emotion rose in me pleasurably, yet with dread behind it somewhere lurking. I caught it stirring; the stream of it went out to this woman I had never seen with the certain aim of intuitive direction; I surprised it in the act. But always something blocked it, hiding its name away. It escaped analysis. And, never more than instantaneous, passing the very moment it was born, it seemed to me that the opposing force that blocked it thus had to do with the man who was my host and my companion. It emanated from him — this objecting force. Julius checked it; though not with deliberate consciousness — he prevented my discovery of its nature. There was uncommon and mysterious sweetness in it, a sweetness as of long mislaid romance that lifted the heart. Yet it returned each time upon me, blank and unrewarded.

It was noticeable, moreover, that our talk avoided the main object of my presence here. LeVallon talked freely of other things, of the "Dog-Man," of myself — I gave him a quick sketch of my life in the long interval — of anything and everything but the purpose of my coming. There was, doubtless, awkwardness on my side, since my instinct was not to take my visit heavily, but to regard the fulfilment of my old-time pledge as an adventure, even a fantasy, rather than the serious acceptance of a grave "experiment." His reluctance, yet, was noticeable. He told me little or nothing of himself by way of exchange.

"To-morrow, when you are thoroughly rested from your journey," he met my least approach to the matter that occupied our deepest thoughts; or— "later, when you've had a little time to get acclimatised. You must let this place soak into you. Rest and sleep and take things easy; there is no hurry — here." Until I realised that he wished to establish a natural sympathy between my being and the enchanted valley, to avoid anything in the nature of surprise or shock which might disturb a desired harmony, and that, in fact, the absence of his wife and his silence about himself were both probably intentional. Conditions were to flow in upon me of their own accord and naturally, thus reducing possible hostility to a minimum. Before we rose to go to bed an hour later this had become a conviction in me. It was all thought out beforehand.

We stood a moment on the veranda to taste the keen, sweet air and see the dark mountains blocked against the stars. The sound of running water was all we heard. No lights, of course, showed anywhere. The meadows, beneath thin, frosty mist, lay very still. But the valley somehow rushed at me; it seemed so charged to the brim with stimulating activity and life. Something felt on the move in it. I stood in the presence of a crowd, waiting to combine with energies latent in it. I was aware of the idea of co-operation almost.

“One of the rare places,” he said significantly when I remarked upon it cautiously, “where all is clean and open still. Humanity has been here, but humanity of the helpful kind. We went to infinite trouble to find it.”

It was the first time he had come so near to the actual subject. I was aware he watched me, although his eyes were turned towards the darkness of the encircling forest.

“And — your wife likes it too?” For though I remembered that she had “chosen it,” its loneliness must surely have dismayed an ordinary woman.

Still with his eyes turned out across the valley, he replied, “She chose it. Yes” — he hesitated slightly— “she likes it, though not always — —” He broke off abruptly, still without looking at me, then added, as he came a little nearer, “But we both agree — we *know* it is the right place for us.” That “us,” I felt certain, included myself as well.

I did not press for explanation at the moment. I touched upon another thing.

“Humanity, you say, has been here! I should have thought some virgin corner of the earth would have suited your — purpose — better?” Then, as he did not answer for a moment, I added: “This is surely an ordinary peasant’s house that you’ve made comfortable?”

He looked at me. A breath of wind went past us. I had the ghostly feeling someone had been listening; and a faint shiver ran across my nerves.

“A peasant’s, yes, but not” — and he smiled— “an ordinary peasant. We found here an old man with his sons; they, or their forbears, had lived in isolation for generations in this valley; they were ‘superstitious’ in the sense of knowing Nature and understanding her. They *believed*, though in an imperfect and degraded form, what was once a living truth. They sold out to me quite willingly and are now established in the plains below. In this loneliness, away from modern ‘knowledge,’ they loved what surrounded them, and in that sense their love was worship. They felt-with the forests, with streams and mountains, with clouds and sky, with dawn and sunset, with the darkness too.” He looked about him as he said it, and my eyes followed the direction of his own across the night. Again the valley stirred and moved throughout its whole expanse. “They also,” Julius continued in a lower tone, his face closer than before, “felt-with the lightning and the wind.”

I could have sworn some subtle change went through the surrounding darkness as he said the words. Fire and wind sprang at me, so vivid was their entrance into my thought. Again that slight shudder ran tingling up my spine.

“The place,” he continued, “is therefore already prepared to some extent, for the channels that we need are partly open. The veil is here unthickened. We can work with less resistance.”

“There is certainly peace,” I agreed, “and an uplifting sense of beauty.”

“You feel it?” he asked quickly.

“I feel extraordinarily and delightfully alive,” I admitted truthfully.

Whereupon he turned to me with a still more significant rejoinder:

“Because that which worship and consecration-ceremonies ought to accomplish for churches — are meant to accomplish, rather — has never been here *undone*. All places were holy ground until men closed the channels with their unbelief and thus defiled them by cutting them off from the life about them.”

I heard a window softly closing above us; we turned and went indoors. Julius put the lamps out one by one, taking a candle to show me up the stairs. We went along the wooden passage. We passed several doors, beneath one of which I saw a line of light. My own room was at the further end, simply, almost barely, furnished, with just the actual necessaries. He paused at the threshold, shook my hand, said a short “good night,” and left me, closing the door behind him carefully. I heard his step go softly down the passage. A door in the distance also opened and closed. Then complete silence hushed the entire house about me, yet a silence that was listening and alive. No ancient, turreted castle, with ivied walls and dungeons, with forsaken banqueting-hall or ghostly corridors, could possibly have felt more haunted than this peasant’s châlet in the Jura fastnesses.

For a considerable time I sat at my open window, thinking; and yet not thinking so much, perhaps, as — relaxing. I was aware that my mind had been at high tension the entire day, almost on guard — as though seeking unconsciously to protect itself. Ever since the morning I had been on the alert against quasi-attack, and only now did I throw down my arms and abandon myself without reserve. Something I had been afraid of had shown itself friendly after all. A feeling of security stole over me; I was safe; gigantic powers were round me, oddly close, yet friendly, provided I, too, was friendly. It was a singular feeling of being helpless, yet cared for. The valley took hold of me and all my little human forces. To set myself against it would be somehow dangerous, but to go with it, adopting its overmastering stride, was safety. This became suddenly clear to me — that I must be sympathetic and that hostility on my part might involve disaster.

Here, apparently, was the first symptom of that power which Julius declared was derived from "feeling-with." I began to understand another thing as well; I recalled his choice of words — that the veil hereabouts was "unthickened" and the channels "open." He did not say the veil was thin, the channels cleared. It was in its native, primitive condition.

I sat by the window, letting the valley pour through and over me. It flooded my being with its calm and beauty. The stars were very bright above the ridges; small clouds passed westwards; the water sang and tinkled; the cup-like hollow had its secrets, but it told them. I had never known night so wonderfully articulate. Power brooded here. I felt my blood quicken with the sense of kinship.

And the little room with its unvarnished pine-boards that held a certain forest perfume, was comforting too; the odour of peat fires still clung to the darkened rafters overhead; the candle, in its saucer-like receptacle of wood, gave just the simple, old-fashioned light that was appropriate. Bodily fatigue made bed exceedingly welcome, though it was long before I fell asleep. Figures, at first, stole softly in across the night and peered at me — Julius, pale and rapt, remote from the modern world; the silent "Dog-Man," with those eyes of questioning wonder and half-disguised distress. And another ghostly figure stole in too, though without a face I could decipher; a woman whom the long, faultless balance of the ages delivered, with the rest of us, into the keeping of this lonely spot for some deep purpose of our climbing souls. Their outlines hovered, mingled with the shadows, and withdrew.

And a certain change in myself, though perhaps not definitely noted at the time, was apparent too — I found in my heart a singular readiness to believe. While sleep crept nearer, and reason dropped a lid, there assuredly was in me, as part of something accepted naturally, the likelihood that LeVallon's attitude was an aspect of forgotten truth. Veiled in Nature's operations, perchance directing them, and particularly in spots of loneliness such as this, dwelt those mighty elemental Potencies he held were accessible to humanity. A phrase from some earlier reading floated back to me, as though deliberately supplied — not that Nature "works towards what are called 'ends,' but that it was possible or rather probable, that 'ends' which implied conscious superhuman activities, are being realised." The sentence, for some reason, had remained in my memory. When life was simpler, closer to Nature, some such doctrine may have been objectively verifiable, and worship, in the sense that Julius used the word, might well promise to restore the grandeur of forgotten beliefs which should make men as the gods....

With the delightful feeling that in this untainted valley, the woods, the mountains, the very winds and stormy lightnings, were yet but the physical vehicle of powers that expressed intelligence and true *being*, I passed from dozing into sleep, the cool outside air touching my eyelids with the beauty of the starry Jura night. An older, earlier type of consciousness — though I did not phrase it to myself thus — was asserting itself and taking charge of me. The spell was on my heart.

Yet the human touch came last of all, following me into the complicated paths of slumber, and haunting me as with half-recovered memories of far-off, enchanted days. Uncommon visions met my descending or ascending consciousness, so that while brain and body slept, some deeper part of me went travelling swiftly backwards. I knew the old familiar feeling that the whole of me did not sleep ... and, though remembering nothing definite, my first thought on awakening was the same as my final thought on falling into slumber: What manner of marvellous woman would *she* prove to be?

CHAPTER XVII

"*THY VOICE IS like to music heard ere birth,*

Some spirit lute touched on a spirit sea;

Thy face remembered is from other worlds.

It has been died for, though I know not when,

It has been sung of, though I know not where.

It has the strangeness of the luring West,

And of sad sea-horizons; beside thee

I am aware of other times and lands,

Of birth far back, of lives in many stars."— "Marpessa" (Stephen Phillips).

During sleep, however, the heavier emotions had sunk to the bottom, the lighter had risen to the top. I woke with a feeling of vigour, and with the sense called "common" distinctly in the ascendant. Through the open window came sunshine in a flood, the crisp air sparkled. I could taste it from my bed. Youth ran in my veins and ten years seemed to drop from my back as I sprang up and thrust my face into the radiant morning. Drawing a deep draught into my lungs, I must at the same time have unconsciously exclaimed, for the peasant girl gathering vegetables below — the garden, such as it was, merged into the pastures — looked up startled. She had been singing to herself. I withdrew my pyjamaed figure hurriedly, while she, as hurriedly, let drop the skirts the dew had made her lift so high; and when I peeped a moment later, she had gone. I, too, felt inclined to sing with happiness, so invigorating was the clear brilliance of the opening day. A joyful irresponsibility, as of boyhood, coursed in my tingling blood. Everything in this enchanted valley seemed young and vigorous; the stream ran gaily past the shining trees; the meadows glistened; the very mountains wore a lustre as of life that ran within their solid frames.

It was impossible to harbour the slightest thought of dread before such peace and beauty; all ominous forebodings fled away; this joy and strength of Nature brought in life. Even the "Dog-Man" smiled with eyes unclouded when, a little later, he brought a small pail of boiling water, and informed me that there was a pool in the forest close at hand where I could bathe. He nosed about the room — only thus can I describe his friendly curiosity for my welfare — fussed awkwardly with my boots and clothes, looked frankly into my eyes with an expression that said plainly "How are *you* this morning? I'm splendid!" grunted, sniffed, almost wagged his tail for pleasure — and trotted out. And he went, I declare, as though he had heard a rabbit and must be after it. The laughter in me was only just suppressed, for I could have sworn that he expected me to pat him, with the remark "Good fellow! Sik 'em, then!" or words to that effect.

The secluded valley, walled-in from the blustering world like some wild, primitive garden, was drenched in sunshine by the time I went downstairs; the limestone cliffs a mile away of quite dazzling brilliance; and the pine woods across the meadow-land scented the whole interior of the little châlet. But for stray wisps of autumn mist that still clung along the borders of the stream, it might have been a day in June the mountains still held prisoner. My heart leaped with the beauty. This lonely region of woods and mountain tops suggested the presence of some Nature Deity that presided over it, and as I stood a moment on the veranda, I turned at a sound of footsteps to see the figure of my imagination face to face. "If *she* is of equal splendour!" flashed instantly through my mind. For Julius wore the glory of the morning in his eyes, the neck was bare and the shirt a little open; standing there erect in his mountain clothes, he was as like the proverbial Greek god as any painter could have possibly desired.

"Whether I slept well?" I answered his inquiry. "Why, Julius, I feel positively like a boy again. This place has worked magic on me while I slept. There's the idea in me that one must live for ever."

And, even while I said it, my eyes glanced over his shoulder into the hall for a sight of someone who any moment might appear. Excitement was high in me.

Julius quietly held my hand in his own firm grasp a second.

"Life came to you in sleep," he said. "I told you — I warned you, the channels here were open and easily accessible. All power — all powers — everywhere are natural. Our object is to hold them, isn't it?"

"You mean control them?" I said, still watching the door behind him.

"They visit the least among us; they touch us, and are gone. The essential is to harness them — in this case before they harness us — again."

I made no reply. The other excitement was too urgent in me.

Linking his arm in mine, he led me towards a corner of the main room, half hall, half kitchen, where a white tablecloth promised breakfast. The "man" was already busying himself to and fro with plates and a gleaming metal pot that steamed. I smelt coffee and the fragrance of baked bread. But I listened half-heartedly to my host's curious words because every minute I expected the door to open. There was a nervousness in me what I should find to say to such a woman when she came.

Was there, as well, among my bolder feelings, a faint suspicion of something else — something so slight and vague it hardly left a trace, while yet I was aware that it had been there? I could not honestly say. I only knew that, again, there stirred about my heart unconsciously a delicate spider-web of resentment, envy, disapproval — call it what one may, since it was too slight to own a definite name — that seemed to wake some ghost of injustice, of a grievance almost, in the hidden depths of me. It passed, unexplained, untraceable. Perhaps I smothered it, perhaps I left it unacknowledged. I know not. So elusive an emotion I could not retain a second, far less label. "Julius has found her; she is his," was the clear thought that followed it. No more than that. And yet — like the shadow of a leaf, it floated down upon me, darkening, though almost imperceptibly, some unknown corner of my heart.

And, remembering my manners, I asked after her indisposition, while he laughed and insisted upon our beginning breakfast; she would presently join us; I should see her for myself. He looked so happy that I yielded to the momentary temptation.

"Julius," I said, by way of compliment and somewhat late congratulation, "she must be wonderful. I'm so — so very pleased — for you."

“Yes,” he said, as he poured coffee and boiling milk into my wooden bowl, “and we have waited long. But the opportunity has come at last, and this time we shall not let it slip.”

The simple words were not at all the answer I expected. There was a mingling of relief and anxiety in his voice; I remembered that she “did not always like it here,” and I wondered again what my “understanding” was to be that he had promised would “come later.” What determined her change of mood? Why did she sometimes like it, and sometimes not like it? Was it loneliness, or was it due to things that — happened? Any moment now she would be in the room, holding my hand, looking into my eyes, expecting from me words of greeting, speaking to me. I should hear her voice. Twice I turned quickly at the sound of an opening door, only to find myself face to face with the “man”; but at length came a sound that was indisputably the rustle of skirts, and, with a quickening of the heart, I pushed my plate away, and rose from my chair, turning half way to greet her.

Disappointment met me again, however, for this time it was merely the peasant girl I had seen from my window; and once more I sat down abruptly, covering my confusion with a laugh and feeling like a schoolboy surprised in a foolish mistake. And then a movement from Julius opposite startled me. He had risen from his seat. There was a new expression on his face, an extraordinary expression — observation the most alert imaginable, anxiety, question, the tension of various deep emotions oddly mingled. He watched me keenly. He watched us both.

“My wife,” he said quietly, as the figure advanced towards us. Then, turning to her: “And this is my friend, Professor Mason.” He indicated myself.

I rose abruptly, startled and dismayed, nearly upsetting the chair behind me in my clumsiness. The “Professor Mason” sounded ludicrous, almost as ludicrous as the “Mrs. LeVallon” he had not uttered. I stared. She stared. There was a moment of blank silence. Disappointment petrified me. There was no distinction, there was no beauty. She was tall and slim, and the face, of a commonplace order, was slightly pockmarked. I forgot all manners.

She was the first to recover. We both laughed. But if there was nervousness of confused emotion in my laugh, there was in hers a happy pleasure, frankly and naturally expressed.

“How do you do, sir — Professor?” she instantly corrected herself, shaking me vigorously, yet almost timidly, by the hand. It was a provincial and untutored voice.

“I’m — delighted to see you,” my lips stammered, stopping dead before the modern title. The control of my breath was not quite easy for a moment.

We sat down. In her words — or was it in her manner, rather? — there was a hint of undue familiarity that tinged my disappointment with a flash of disapproval too, yet caught up immediately by a kind of natural dignity that denied offence, or at any rate, corrected it. Another impression then stole over me. I was aware of charm. The voice, however, unquestionably betrayed accent. Of the “lady,” in the restricted, ordinary meaning of the word, there was no pretence. A singular revulsion made me tremble. For a moment she had held my hand with deliberate pressure, while her eyes remained fixed upon my face with a direct, a searching intentness. She too, like her husband, watched me. If she formed a swift, intuitive judgment regarding myself, nothing at first betrayed it. I was aware, however, at once, that, behind the decision of her natural frankness, something elusive hovered. The effect was highly contradictory, even captivating, certainly provocative of curiosity. Accompanying her laughter was a delicate, swift flush, and the laugh, though loud in some other sense than of sound alone, was not unmusical. A breath of glamour, seductive as it was fleeting, caught me as I heard.

For a moment or two my senses certainly reeled. It seemed that swift shutters rose and fell before my eyes. One screen rolled up, another dropped, vistas opened, vanishing before their depths showed anything. The châlet, with our immediate surroundings, faded; I was aware of ourselves only, chiefly, however, of her. This first sight of her had the effect that years before Julius had produced: the peculiar sense of “other places.” And this in spite of myself, without any decided belief of my own as yet to help it....

The confusion of my senses passed then, and consciousness focused clearly once more on my surroundings. The disturbed emotions, however, refused wholly to quiet down. Her face, I noted, beneath the disfiguring marks, was rosy, and the grey-green eyes were very bright. They were luminous, changing eyes, their hue altering of its own accord apart from mere play or angle of the light. Sometimes their grey merged wholly into green, but a very wonderful deep green that made them like the sea; later, again, they were distinctly blue. They lit the entire face, its expression changing when they changed. The frank and open innocence of the child in them was countered, though not injuriously, by an unfathomed depth that had its effect upon the whole physiognomy. An arresting power shone in them as if imperiously. There were two faces there.

And the singular and fascinating effect of these dominating eyes left further judgment at first disabled. I noticed, however, that her mouth had that generous width that makes for strength rather than for beauty; that the teeth were fine and regular; and that the brown hair, tinged with bronze, was untidy about the neck and ears. A narrow band of black velvet encircled the throat; she wore a blouse, short skirt, and high brown boots with nails that clattered on the stone flooring when she moved. Since gathering vegetables in the dawn she had changed her costume, evidently. A certain lightness, I saw now, had nothing of irresponsibility in it, but was merely youth, vitality, and physical vigour. She was fifteen years younger than Julius, if a day, and I judged her age no more than twenty-five perhaps.

“It’s a pore house to have your friends to,” she said in her breezy, uncultivated voice, “but I hope you managed all right with your room — Professor?” It was the foundation of the voice that had the uncultivated sound; on the top of it, like a layer of something imitated or acquired, there was refinement. I got the impression that, unconsciously, she aped the better manner of speech, yet was not aware she did so.

Burning questions rose within me as I listened to this opening conversation: How much she knew, and believed, of her husband’s vast conceptions; what explanation of my visit he had offered her, what explanation of myself; chief of all, how much — if anything — she remembered? For our coming together in this hidden Jura valley under conditions that seemed one minute ludicrous, and the next sublime, was the alleged meeting of three Souls who had not recognised each other through bodily, human eyes for countless centuries. And our purpose, if not madness, held a solemnity that might well belong to a forgotten method of approaching deity.

“He’s told me such a lot about you, Julius has,” she continued half shyly, jerking her thumb in the direction of her husband, “that I wanted to see what you were like.” It was said naturally, as by a child; yet the freedom might equally have been assumed to conceal an admitted ignorance of manners. “You’re such — very old friends, aren’t you?” She seemed to look me up and down. I thought I detected disappointment in her too.

“We were together at school and university, you see,” I made reply, shirking the title again, “but it’s a good many years now since we met. We’ve been out of touch for a long time. I hadn’t even heard of his marriage. My congratulations are late, but most sincere.”

I bowed. Strange! Both in word and gesture some faintest hint of sarcasm or resentment forced itself against my conscious will. The blood rose — I hoped unnoticed — to my cheeks. My eyes dropped quickly from her face.

“That’s reely nice of you,” she said simply, and without a touch of embarrassment anywhere. She cut a lump of bread from the enormous loaf in front of us and broke it in little pieces into her bowl of milk. Her spoon remained standing in her coffee cup. It seemed impossible for me to be unaware of any detail that concerned her, either of gesture or pronunciation. I noticed every tiniest detail whether I would or no. Her charm, I decided, increased. It was wholly independent of her looks. It took me now and again by surprise, as it were.

“Maybe — I suppose he didn’t know where you were,” she added, as Julius volunteered no word. “But he was shore you’d come if you got the letter.”

“It was a promise,” her husband put in quietly. Evidently he wished us to make acquaintance in our own way. He left us alone with purpose, content to watch and show his satisfaction. The relationship between them seemed natural and happy, utterly devoid of the least sign of friction. She certainly — had I perhaps, anticipated otherwise? — showed no fear of him.

The “man” came in with a plate of butter, clattering out noisily again in his heavy boots. He gave us each a look in turn, of anxiety first, and then of pleasure. All was well with us, he felt. His eyes, however, lingered longest on his mistress, as though she needed his protective care more than we did. It was the attitude and expression of a faithful dog who knows he has the responsibility of a child upon his shoulders, and is both proud and puzzled by the weight of honour.

A pause followed, during which I made more successful efforts to subdue the agitation that was in me. I broke the silence by a commonplace, expressing a hope that my late arrival the night before had not disturbed her.

“Lord, no!” she exclaimed, laughing gaily, while she glanced from me to Julius. “Only I thought you and he’d like to be alone for a bit after such a long time apart.... Besides, I didn’t fancy my food somehow — I get that way up here sometimes,” she added, “don’t I, Julius?”

“You’ve been here some time already?” I asked sympathetically, before he could reply.

“Ever since the wedding,” she answered frankly. “Seven — getting on for eight — months ago, it is now — we came up straight from the Registry Office. At times it’s a bit funny, an’ no mistake — lonely, I mean,” she quickly corrected herself. And she looked at her husband again with a kind of childish mischief in her expression that I thought most becoming.

“It’s not for ever, is it?” he laughed with her.

“And I understand you chose it, didn’t you?” I fell in with her mood. “It must be lonely, of course, sometimes,” I added.

“Yes, we chose it,” she replied. “We choose everything together.” And they looked proudly at each other like two children. For a moment it flashed across me to challenge him playfully, yet not altogether playfully, for burying a young wife in such a deserted place. I did not yield to the temptation, however, and Mrs. LeVallon continued breezily in her off-hand manner:

“Julius wanted you badly, I know. You must stay here now we’ve got you. There’s reelly lots to do, once you get used to it; only it seems strange at first after city life — like what I’ve had, and sometimes” — she hesitated a second— “well, of an evening, or when it gets stormy — the thunder-storms are something awful — you feel wild and want to do things, to rush about and take your clothes off.” She stopped; and the deep green of the sea came up into her eyes. Again, for an instant, I caught two faces in her. “It turns you wild here when the wind gets to blowing,” she added, laughing, “and the lightning’s like loose, flying fire.” The way she said it made me forget the physical disabilities. There was even a hint of fascination somewhere in the voice.

“It takes you back to the natural, primitive state,” I said. “I can well believe it.” And no amount of restraint could keep the admiration out of my eyes.

"Civilisation is easily forgotten in a place like this."

"Oh, is that it?" she said shortly, while we laughed, all three together. "Civilisation — eh?"

I got the impression that she felt left out of something, something she knew was going on, but that didn't include her quite. Her intuition, I judged, was very keen. Beneath this ordinary conversation she was aware of many things. She was fully conscious of a certain subdued excitement in the three of us, and that between her husband and her guest there was a constant interplay of half-discovered meaning, half-revealed emotion. She was reading me too. Yet all without deliberation; it was intuitive, the mind took no conscious part in it. And, when she spoke of the effect of the valley upon her, I saw her suddenly a little different, too — wild and free, untamed in a sense, and close to the elemental side of life. Her enthusiasm for big weather betrayed it. During the whole of breakfast, indeed, we all were "finding" one another, Julius in particular making notes. For him, of course, there was absorbing interest in this meeting of three souls whom Fate had kept so long apart — the signs of recognition he detected or imagined, the sympathy, the intimacy betrayed by the way things were *taken for granted* between us. He said no word, however. He was very quiet.

My own feelings, meanwhile, seemed tossed together in too great and violent confusion for immediate disentanglement. My sense of the dramatic fitness of things was worse than unsatisfied — it was shattered. Julius unquestionably had married a superior domestic servant.

"Is the bread to your liking, Professor?"

"I think it's quite delicious, Mrs. LeVallon. It tempts me even to excess," I added, facetious in my nervousness. I had used her name at last, but with an effort.

"I made it," she said proudly. "Mother taught me that before I was fifteen."

"And the butter, too?" I asked.

"No," she laughed, with a touch of playful disappointment. "We get that from a farm five miles down the valley. It's in special honour of your arrival, this."

"Our nearest contact with the outside world," added Julius, "and over a thousand feet below us. We're on a little plateau here all by ourselves — —"

"Put away like," she interrupted gaily, "as though we'd been naughty," and then she added, "or for something special and very mysterious." She looked into his face half archly, half inquisitively, as if aware of something she divined yet could not understand. Her honesty and sincerity made every little thing she said seem dignified. I was again aware of pathos.

"The peace and quiet," I put in quickly, conscious of something within me that watched and listened intently, "must be delightful — after the cities — and with the great storms you mention to break the possible monotony."

She looked at me a full moment steadily, and in her eyes, no longer green but sky-blue, I read the approach of that strange expression I called another "face," that in the end, however, did not fully come. But the characteristic struck me, for Julius had it too.

"Oh, you find out all about yourself in a place like this," she said slowly, "a whole lot of things you didn't know before. You'll like it; but it's not for everybody. It's very élite." She turned to Julius. "The Professor'll love it, won't he? And we must keep him," she repeated, "now we've got him."

Something moved between the three of us as she said it. There was no inclination in me to smile, even at the absurd choice of a word. An upheaving sense of challenge came across the air at me, including not only ourselves at the breakfast table, but the entire valley as well. Against some subterranean door in me rose sudden pressure, and the woman's commonplace words had in them something incalculable that caused the door to yield. Out rushed a pouring, bursting flood. A wild delight of beauty ran suddenly in my civilised veins; I felt uplifted, stimulated, carried off my feet.

It was but the flash and touch of a passing mood, of course, yet it marked a change in me, another change. *She* was aware of elemental powers even as her husband was. First through him, but now through her, I, too, was becoming similarly — aware.

I glanced at Julius, calmly devouring bread and milk beyond all reach of comedy — Julius who recognised an "old soul" in a servant girl with the same conviction that he invoked the deific Powers of a conscious Nature; to whom nothing was trivial, nothing final, the future magnificent as the past, and behind whose chair stood the Immensities whispering messages of his tireless evolutionary scheme. And I saw him "unclassable" — merely an eternal, travelling soul, working out with myself and with this other "soul" some detail long neglected by the three of us. Marriage, class, social status, education, culture — what were they but temporary external details, whose sole value lay in their providing conditions for acquiring certain definite experiences? Life's outer incidents were but episodic, after all.

And this flash of insight into his point of view came upon me thus suddenly through *her*. The mutual sympathy and understanding between the three of us that he so keenly watched for had advanced rapidly. Another stage was reached. The foundations seemed already established here among us.

Thus, while surprise, resentment and distress fought their battle within me against something that lay midway between disbelief and acceptance, my mind was aware of a disharmony that made judgment extremely difficult. Almost I knew the curious feeling that one of us had been fooled. It was all so incongruous and disproportioned, on the edge of the inconceivable. And yet, at the same time, some sense of keen delight awoke in me that satisfied. Joy glowed in some depth I could not reach or modify.

Had the "woman" proved wonderful in some ordinary earthly way, I could have continued to share in a kind of dramatic make-believe LeVallon's imagination of an "old soul" returned. The sense of fitness would have felt requited. Yet what so disconcerted me was that this commonplace disclosure of the actual facts did not destroy belief, but even increased it! This unexpected and banal *dénouement*, denying, apparently, all the requirements of his creed, fell upon me with a crash of reality that was arresting in an entirely unexpected way. It made the conception so much more likely — possible — true!

Out of some depth in me I could not summon to the bar of judgment or analysis rose the whisper that in reality the union of these two was not so incongruous and outrageous as it seemed. To a penetrating vision such as his, what difference could that varnish of the mind called "education" pretend to make? Or how could he be deceived by the surface tricks of "refinement," in accent, speech, and manner, that so often cloak essential crudeness and vulgarity? These were to him but the external equipment of a passing To-day, whereas he looked for the innate acquirements due to real experience — age in the soul itself. Her social status, education and so forth had nothing to do with — her actual Self. In some ultimate region that superficial human judgment barely acknowledges the union of these two seemed right, appropriate and inevitably true.

This breakfast scene remains graven in my mind. LeVallon talked little, even as he ate little, while his wife and I satisfied our voracious appetites with the simple food provided. She chattered *sans gêne*, eating not ungracefully so much as in a manner untaught. Her smallest habits drew my notice and attention of their own accord. I watched the velvet band rising and falling as she swallowed — noisily, talking and drinking with her mouth full, and holding her knife after the manner of the servants' hall. Her pronunciation at times was more than marked. For instance, though she did not say "gime," she most assuredly did not say "game," and her voice, what men call "common," was undeniably of the upper servant class. While guilty now and again of absurd solecisms, she chose words sometimes that had an air of refinement above the ordinary colloquial usage — the kind affected by a lady's-maid who has known service in the "upper suckles" of the world— "close" the door in place of simply "shut" it, "commence" in preference to the ordinary "begin," "costume" rather than merely "clothes," and a hundred others of similar kind. Sofa, again, was "couch." She missed a sentence, and asked for it with "What say?" while her "if you please" and "pardon" held a suspicion of that unction which, it seemed, only just remembered in time not to add "sir," or even "my lady." She halted instinctively before a door, as though to let her husband or myself pass out in front, and even showed surprise at being helped at the table before ourselves. These and a thousand other revealing touches I noticed acutely, because I had expected something so absolutely different. I was profoundly puzzled.

Yet, while I noted closely these social and mental disabilities, I was aware also of their flat and striking contradiction; and her beautifully-shaped hands, her small, exquisite feet and ankles, her natural dignity of carriage, gesture, bearing, were the least of these. Setting her beside maid or servitor, my imagination recoiled as from something utterly ill-placed. I could have sworn she owned some secret pedigree that no merely menial position could affect, most certainly not degrade. In spite of less favourable indications, so thick about her, I caught unmistakable tokens of a superiority she herself ignored, which yet proclaimed that her soul stood erect and four-square to the winds of life, independent wholly of the "social position" her body with its untutored brain now chanced to occupy.

Exactly the nature of these elusive signs of innate nobility I find it more than difficult to describe. They rose subtly out of her, yet evaded separate subtraction from either the gestures or conversation that revealed them. They explained the subtle and increasing charm. They were of the soul.

For, even thus early in our acquaintance, there began to emerge these other qualities in this simple girl that at first the shock of disappointment and surprise had hidden from me. The apparent emptiness of her face was but a mask that cloaked an essential, native dignity. From time to time, out of those strange, arresting eyes that at first had seemed all youth and surface, peered forth that other look, standing a moment to query and to judge, then, like moods of sky which reveal and hide a depth of sea, plunged out of sight again. It betrayed an inner, piercing sight of a far deeper kind. Out of this deeper part of her I felt she watched me steadily — to wonder, ask, and weigh. It was hence, no doubt, I had the curious impression of two faces, two beings, in her, and the moments when I surprised her peering thus were, in a manner, electrifying beyond words. For then, into tone and gesture, conquering even accent and expression, crept flash-like this "something" that would not be denied, hinting at the distinction of true spiritual independence superior to all local, temporary, or worldly divisions implied in mere "class" or "station."

This girl, behind her ignorance of life's snobbish values, possessed that indefinable spiritual judgment best called "taste." And taste, I remember Julius held, was the infallible evidence of a soul's maturity — of age. The phrase "old soul" acquired more meaning for me as I watched her. I recalled that strange hint of his long years before, that greatness and position, as the world accepts them, are actually but the kindergarten stages for the youngest, crudest souls of all. The older souls are not "distinguished" in the "world." They are beyond it.

Moreover, during the course of this singular first meal together, while she used the phraseology of the servant class and betrayed the manners of what men call “common folk,” it was borne in upon me that she, too, unknowingly, touched the same vast sources of extended life that her husband claimed to realise, and that her being unknowingly swept that region of elemental Powers with which he now sought conscious union. In her infectious vitality beat the pulse of vaster tides than she yet knew.

Already, in our conversation, this had come to me; it increased from minute to minute as our atmospheres combined and mingled. The suggestion of what I must call great exterior Activities that always accompanied the presence of Julius made themselves felt also through the being of this simple and uneducated girl. Winds, cool and refreshing, from some elemental region blew soundlessly about her. I was aware of their invigorating currents. And this came to me with my first emotions, and was not due to subsequent reflection. For, in my own case, too, while resenting the admission, I felt something more generously scaled than my normal self, scientifically moulded, trying to urge up as with great arms and hands that thrust into my mind. What hitherto had seemed my complete Self opened, as though it were but a surface tract, revealing depths of consciousness unguessed before.

And this, I think, was the disquieting sensation that perplexed me chiefly with a sense of unstable equilibrium. The idea of pre-existence, with its huge weight of memory lost and actions undischarged, pressed upon a portion of my soul that was trying to awake. The foundations of my known personality appeared suddenly insecure, and what the brain denied, this other part accepted, even half remembered. The change of consciousness in me was growing. While observing Mrs. LeVallon, listening to the spontaneous laughter that ran between her sentences, meeting her quick eyes that took in everything about them, these varied and contradictory judgments of my own worked their inevitable effect upon me. The quasi-memory, with its elusive fragrance of far-off, forgotten things; the promised reconstruction of passionate emotions that had burned the tissues of our earlier bodies before even the foundations of these “eternal” hills were laid; the sense of being again among ancient friends, netted by deathless forces of spiritual adventure and desire — Julius, his wife, myself, mutually involved in the intricate pattern of our souls’ development: — all this, while I strove to regard it as mere telepathic reflection from his own beliefs, yet made something in me, deeper than any ratiocination, stand up and laugh in my face with the authoritative command that it was absolutely — true.

Our very intimacy, so readily established as of its own accord — established, moreover, among such unlikely and half antagonistic elements — seemed to hint at a relationship resumed, instead of now first beginning. The fact that the three of us took so much for granted almost suggested memory. For the near presence of this woman — I call her woman, though she was but girl — disturbed me more than uncommonly; and this curious, soft delight I felt raging in the depths of me — whence did it come? Whence, too, the depth and power of other feelings that she roused in me, their reckless quality, their certainty, the haunting pang and charm that her face, not even pretty apart from its disfigurement, stirred in my inmost being? There was mischief and disaster in her sea-green eyes, though neither mischief nor disaster quite of this material world.

I confessed — the first time for many years — to something moving beyond ordinary. More and more I longed to learn of her first meeting with the man she had married, and by what method he claimed to have recognised in this servant girl the particular ancient soul he waited for, and by what unerring instinct he had picked her out and set her upon so curious a throne.

I watched the velvet band about the well-shaped neck....

“*I have been here before,*
But when or how I cannot tell:
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell,
The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

“*You have been mine before,*
How long ago I may not know:
But just when at that swallow’s soar
Your neck turned so ...

Some veil did fall — I knew it all of yore.”

“And now,” she exclaimed, springing up and turning to her husband, “I’m going to leave you and the Professor together to talk out all your old things without me intervening! Besides I’ve got the bread to make,” she added with a swift, gay smile in my direction, “that bread you called delicious. I generally do it of a morning.”

With a swinging motion of her lithe young body she was gone; the room seemed strangely empty; the disfiguring marks upon her girlish face were already forgotten; and a sense of companionship within me turned somehow lonely and bereft.

CHAPTER XVIII

TO MEMORY

“*Yet, when I would command thee hence,*

Thou mockest at the vain pretence,

Murmuring in mine ear a song

Once loved, alas! forgotten long;

And on my brow I feel a kiss

That I would rather die than miss.” — Mary Coleridge.

“Well?” Julius asked me, as we strolled across the pastures that skirted the main forest, “and does it seem anywhere familiar to you — the three of us together again? You recall — how much?” A rather wistful smile passed over his face, but the eyes were grave. He was in earnest if ever man was. “She doesn’t seem wholly a stranger to you?”

My mind searched carefully for words. To refer to any of my recent impressions was difficult, even painful, and frank discussion of my friend’s wife impossible — though, probably, there was nothing Julius would not have understood and even welcomed.

“I — cannot deny,” I began, “that somewhere — in my imagination, perhaps, there seems — —”

He interrupted me at once. “Don’t suppress the imaginative pictures — they’re memory. To deny them is only to forget again. Let them come freely in you.”

“Julius —— !” I exclaimed, conscious that I flushed a little, “but she is wonderful; superior, too, in some magnificent way to — any — —”

“Lady,” he came abruptly to my assistance, no vestige of annoyance visible.

“To anyone of our own class,” I completed the sentence more to my liking. “I admit I feel drawn to her — in a kind of understanding sympathy — though how can I pretend that I — that this sense of familiarity is really memory?” It was impossible to treat him lightly; his belief was his life, commanding a respect due to all great convictions of the soul. “You have found someone you can love,” I went on, aware that it gave me no pleasure to say it, “and someone who loves you. I — am delighted.”

He turned to me, standing hatless, the sunlight in his face, his eyes fixed steadily upon my own.

“We had to meet — all three,” he said slowly; “sooner or later. It’s an old, old debt we’ve got to settle up together, and the opportunity has come at last. I only ask your sympathy — and hers.” He shrugged his shoulders slightly. “To you it may seem a small thing, and, if you have no memory, a wild, impossible thing as well, even with delusion in it. But nothing is really small.” He paused. “I only ask that you shall not resist.” And then he added gravely: “The risk is mine.”

I felt uneasiness; the old schooldays’ basis of complete sincerity was not in me quite. I had lived too long in the world of ordinary men and women. His marriage seemed prompted by an impersonal sense of justice to the universe rather than by any desire for the companionship and sweetness that a woman’s love could give him. For a moment I knew not what to say. Could such a view be hers as well? Had she yielded herself to him upon a similar understanding? And if not — the thought afflicted me — might not this debt he spoke of have been discharged without claiming the whole life of another in a union that involved also physical ties?

Yet, while I could not find it in me to utter all I thought, there was a burning desire to hear details of the singular courtship. Almost I felt the right to know, yet shrank from asking it.

“Then nothing more definite stirs in you?” he asked quietly, his eyes still holding mine, “no memory you can recognise? No wave of feeling; no picture, even of that time when we — we three — —”

“Julius, old friend,” I exclaimed with sudden impulsiveness, and hardly knowing why I said it, “it only seems to me that these pine woods behind you are out of the picture rather. They should be palms, with spaces of sand shimmering in a hot sun. And the châlet” — pointing over his shoulder— “seems still less to belong to you when I recall the temples we talked about before the plain where the worship of the rising sun took place — —”

I broke off abruptly with a little shamefaced laughter: my invention, or imagination, seemed so thin. But Julius turned eagerly, his face alight.

“Laugh as you please,” he said, “but what makes you feel me out of the picture, as you call it, is memory — memory of where we three were last together. That sense of incongruity is memory. Don’t resist. Let the pictures rise and grow as they will. And don’t deny any instinctive feelings that come to you — they’re memory too.”

A moment of revolt swept over me, yet with it an emotion both sweet and painful. Dread and delight both troubled me. Unless I resisted, his great conviction would carry me away again as of old. And what if she should come to aid him? What if she should bring the persuasion of her personality to the attack, and with those eyes of mischief and disaster ask me questions out of a similar conviction and belief? If she should hold me face to face: “Do you remember me — *as I remember you?*”

“Julius,” I cried, “let me speak plainly at once and so prevent your disappointment later.” I forced the words out against my will, it seemed. “For the truth, my dear fellow, is simply — that I remember — nothing! Definitely — I remember nothing.”

Yet there was pain and sadness in me suddenly. I had prevaricated. Almost I had told a lie. Some vague fear of involving myself in undesirable consequences had forced me against my innate knowledge. Almost I had denied — her.

From the forest stole forth a breath too soft and perfumed for an autumn wind. It stirred the hair upon his forehead, left its touch of dream upon my cheeks, then passed on to lift a wreath of mist in the fields below. And, as though a spirit older than the wind moved among my thoughts, this modern world seemed less real when it had gone. I heard the voice of Julius answering me. His words came very slowly, fastening upon my own. The resentment, the disappointment I had looked for were not there, nor the comparison of myself — in her favour — I had half anticipated.

The answer utterly nonplussed me:

“Neither does she remember — anything.”

I started. A curious pang shot through me — something of regret, even of melancholy in it. That she had forgotten “everything” was pain. She had forgotten me.

“But we — you, I mean — can make her?”

The words were out impulsively before I could prevent them. He did not look at me. I did not look at him.

“I should have put it differently, perhaps,” he answered. “She is not *aware* that she remembers.”

He drew me further along the dewy meadow towards the upper valley, and drew me deeper, as it seemed, into his own strange region whence came these perplexing statements.

“But, Julius,” I stammered, seeing that he kept silence, “if she remembers nothing — how could you know — how could you feel sure, when you met her —— ?”

My sentences stopped dead. Even in these unusual circumstances it was not possible to question a friend about the woman he had married. Had she proved some marvel of physical beauty or of intellectual attainment, curiosity might have been taken as a compliment. But as it was —— !

Yet all the time I *knew* that her insignificant worldly value was a clean stroke of proof that he had not suffered himself to be deceived in this recovery and recognition of the spiritual maturity he meant by the term “old soul.” His voice reached me, calm and normal as though he talked about the weather. “I’ll tell you,” he said, “for it’s interesting, and, besides, you have the right to know.”

And the words fell among my tangled thoughts like deft fingers that put confusion straight. The incredible story he told me as a child might relate a fairy-tale it knows is true, yet thinks may not be quite believed. Without the slightest emphasis, and certainly without the least embarrassment or sense that it was unusual. Even of comedy I was not properly once aware. All through the strange recital rang in my mind, “She is not aware that she remembers.”

“‘The Dardanelles,’” he began, smiling a little as though at the recollection, “was where I met her, thus recovered. Not on the way from Smyrna to Constantinople; oh, no! It was not romantic in that little sense. ‘The Dardanelles’ was a small and ugly red-brick villa in Upper Norwood, with a drive ten yards long, ragged laurel bushes, and a green five-barred gate, gold-lettered. Maennlich lives there — the Semitic language man and Egyptologist; you know. She was his parlour-maid at the time, and before that had been lady's-maid to the daughter of some undistinguished duchess. In this way," he laughed softly, "may old souls wait upon the young ones sometimes! Her father," he continued, "was a market-gardener and fruiterer in a largish way at East Croydon, and she herself had been brought up upon the farm whence his supplies came. 'Chance,' as they call it, led her into these positions I have mentioned, and so, inevitably — to me."

He looked up at me a moment. "And so to you as well."

His manner was composed and serious. He spoke with the simple conviction of some Christian who traces the Hand of God in the smallest details of his daily life, and seeks His guidance in his very train journeys. There was something rather superb about it all.

"A fruiterer in East Croydon! A maid in service! And — you knew — you recognised her?"

"At once. The very first day she let me in at the front door and asked if I wished to see her master, what name she might announce, and so forth."

"It was all — er — unexpected and sudden like that?" came the question from a hundred others that crowded together in me. "To find a lost friend of years only — in such a way — the shock, I mean, to you —— !" I simply could not find my words. He told it all so calmly, naturally. "You were wholly unprepared, weren't you? Nothing had led you to expect?" I ended with a dash.

"Not wholly unprepared," was his rejoinder; "nor was the meeting altogether unexpected — on my side, that is. Intimations, as I told you at Motfield Close twenty years ago — when she was born — had come to me. No soul draws breath for the first time, without a quiver of response running through all that lives. Souls intimately connected with each other may feel the summons. There are ways —— ! I knew that she was once more in the world, that, like ourselves, her soul had reincarnated; and ever since I have been searching — —"

"Searching —— !"

"There are clues that offer themselves — that come, perhaps in sleep, perhaps by direct experiment, and, regardless of space, give hints — —"

"Psychometry?" I asked, remembering a word just coined.

He shrugged his shoulders. "All objects radiate," he said, "no matter how old they are. Their radiation never ceases till they are disintegrated; and if you are sensitive you can receive their messages. If you have certain powers, due to relation and affinity, you may interpret them. There is an instantaneous linking-up — in picture-form — impossible to mistake."

"You knew, then, she was somewhere on the earth — waiting for you?" I repeated, wondering what was coming next. That night in the Edinburgh lodgings, when he had been "searching," came back to me.

"For *us*," he corrected me. "It was something from a Private Collection that gave me the clue by which I finally traced her — something from the older sands."

"The sands! Egyptian?"

Julius nodded. "Egypt, for all of us, was a comparatively recent section — nearer to To-day, I mean. Many a time has each of us been back there — Thebes, Memphis, even as lately ago as Alexandria at its zenith, learning, developing, reaping what ages before we sowed — for in Egypt the knowledge that was *our* knowledge survived longer than anywhere else. Yet never, unfortunately, returning together, and thus never finding the opportunity to achieve the great purpose of our meeting."

"But the clue?" I asked breathlessly.

He smiled again at the eagerness that again betrayed me.

"This old world," he resumed quietly, "is strewn, of course, with the remnants of what once has been our bodies— 'suits of clothes' we have inhabited, used, and cast aside. Here and there, from one chance or another, some of these may have been actually preserved. The Egyptians, for instance, went to considerable trouble to ensure that they should survive as long as possible, thus assisting memory later."

"Embalming, you mean?"

"As you wander through the corridors of a modern museum," he continued imperturbably, "you may even look through a glass covering at the very tenement your soul has occupied at an earlier stage! Probably, of course, without the faintest whisper of recognition, yet, possibly, with just that acute and fascinated interest which *is* the result of stirring memory. For the 'old clothes' still radiate vibrations that belong to *you;* the dried blood and nerves once thrilled with emotions, spiritual or otherwise, that were you — the link may be recoverable. You think it is wild nonsense! I tell you it is in the best sense scientific. And, similarly," he added, "you may chance upon some such remnant of another — the body of ancient friend or enemy." He paused abruptly in his extraordinary recital. "I had that good fortune," he added, "if you like to call it so."

"You found *hers?*" I asked in a low voice. "Her, I mean?"

"Maennlich," he replied with a smile, "has the best preserved mummies in the world. He never allowed them even to be unwrapped. The object I speak of — a body she had occupied in a recent Egyptian section — though not when *we* were there, unfortunately — lay in one of his glass cases, while the soul who once had used it answered his bell and walked across his carpets — two of her bodies in the house at once. Curious, wasn't it? A discarded instrument and the one in present use! The rest was comparatively easy. I traced her whereabouts at once, for the clue furnished the plainest possible directions. I went straight to her."

"And you knew instantly — when you saw her? You had no doubt?"

"Instantly — when the door swung open and our eyes met on the threshold."

"Love at first sight, Julius, you mean? It was love you felt?" I asked it beneath my breath, for my heart was beating strangely.

He raised his eyebrows. "Love?" he repeated, questioningly. "Deep joy, intuitive sympathy, content and satisfaction, rather. I knew her. I knew *who* she was. In a few minutes we were more intimate in mind and feeling than souls who meet for the first time can become after years of living together. You understand?"

I lowered my eyes, not knowing what to say. The standards of modern conduct, so strong about me, prevented the comments or questions that I longed to utter.

There flashed upon me in that instant's pause a singular conviction — that these two had mated for a reason of their own. They had not known the clutch of elemental power by which Nature ensures the continuance of the race. They had not shuddered, wept, and known the awful ecstasy, but had slipped between her fingers and escaped. They had not loved. While he knew this consciously, she was aware of it unconsciously. They mated for another reason, yet one as holy, as noble, as pure — if not more so, indeed — as those that consecrate marriage in the accepted sense. And the thought, strange as it was, brought a sweet pleasure to me, though shot with a pain that was equally undeniable and equally perplexing. While my thoughts floundered between curiosity, dismay and something elusive that yet was more clamorous than either, Julius continued without a vestige of embarrassment, though obviously omitting much detail that I burned to hear.

"And that very week — the next day, I think, it was — I asked Maennlich to allow me an hour's talk with her alone — —"

"She — er —— ?"

"She liked me — from the very first, yes. She felt me."

"And showed it?" I asked bluntly.

"And showed it," he repeated, "although she said it puzzled her and she couldn't understand."

"On her side, then, it was love — love at first sight?"

"Strong attraction," he put it, "but an attraction she thought it her duty to resist at first. Her present conditions made any relationship between us seem incongruous, and when I offered marriage — as I did at once — it overwhelmed her. She made sensible objections, but it was her brain of To-day that made them. You can imagine how it went. She urged that to marry a man in another class of life, a 'gentleman,' a 'wealthy' gentleman and an educated, 'scholar gentleman,' as she called me, could only end in unhappiness — because I should tire of her. Yet, all the time — she told me this afterwards — she had the feeling that we were meant for one another, and that it must surely be. She was shy about it as a child."

"And you convinced her in the end!" I said to myself rather than aloud to him. There were feelings in me I could not disentangle.

"Convinced her that we needed one another and could never go apart," he said. "We had something to fulfil together. The forces that drove us together, though unintelligible to her, were yet acknowledged by her too, you see."

"I see," my voice murmured faintly, as he seemed to expect some word in reply. "I see." Then, after a longer pause than usual, I asked: "And you told her of your — your theories and beliefs — the purpose you had to do together?"

"No single word. She could not possibly have understood. It would have frightened her." I heard it with relief, yet with resentment too.

"Was that quite fair, do you think?"

His answer I could not gainsay. "Cause and effect," he said, "work out, whether memory is there or not. To attempt to block fulfilment by fear or shrinking is but to delay the very thing you need. I told her we were necessary to each other, but that she must come willingly, or not at all. I used no undue persuasion, and I used no force. I realised plainly that her upper, modern, uncultured and uneducated self was merely what she had acquired in the few years of her present life. It was this upper self that hesitated and felt shy. The older self below was not awake, yet urged her to acceptance blindly — as by irresistible instinctive choice. She knew subconsciously; but, once I could succeed in arousing her knowledge consciously, I knew her doubts would vanish. I suggested living away from city life, away from any conditions that might cause her annoyance or discomfort due to what she called our respective 'stations' in life; I suggested the mountains, some beautiful valley perhaps, where in solitude for a time we could get to know each other better, untroubled by the outer world — until she became accustomed — —"

"And she approved?" I interrupted with impatience.

"Her words were 'That's the very thing; I've always had a dream like that.' She agreed with enthusiasm, and the opposition melted away. She knew the kind of place we needed," he added significantly.

We had reached the head of the valley by this time, and I sat down upon a boulder with the sweep of Jura forests below us like a purple carpet. The sun and shadow splashed it everywhere with softest colouring. The morning wind was fresh; birds were singing; this green vale among the mountains seemed some undiscovered paradise.

“And you have never since felt a moment’s doubt — uncertainty — that she really is this ‘soul’ you knew before?”

He lay back, his head upon his folded hands, and his eyes fixed upon the blue dome of sky.

“A hundred proofs come to me all the time,” he said, stretching himself at full length upon the grass. “And in her atmosphere, in her presence, the memories still revive in detail from day to day — just as at school they revived in you — those pictures you sought to stifle and deny. From the first she never doubted me. She was aware of a great tie and bond between us. ‘You’re the only man,’ she said to me afterwards, ‘that could have done it like that. I belonged to you — oh! I can’t make it out — but just as if there wasn’t any getting out of it possible. I felt stunned when I saw you. I had always felt something like this coming, but thought it was a dream.’ Only she often said there was something else to come as well, and that we were not quite complete. She knew, you see; she knew.” He broke off suddenly and turned to look at me. He added in a lower tone, as he watched my face: “And you see how pleased and happy she is to have *you* here!”

I made no reply. I reached out for a stone and flung it headlong down the steep slope towards the stream five hundred feet below.

“And so it was settled then and there?” I asked, after a pause that Julius seemed inclined to prolong.

“Then and there,” he said, watching the rolling stone with dreamy eyes. “In the hall-way of that Norwood villa, under the very eyes of Maennlich who paid her wages and probably often scolded her, she came up into my arms at the end of our final talk, and kissed me like a happy child. She cried a good deal at the time, but I have never once seen her cry since!”

“And it’s all gone well — these months?” I murmured.

"There was a temporary reaction at first — at the very first, that is," he said, "and I had to call in Maennlich to convince her that I was in earnest. At her bidding I did that. Some instinct told her that Maennlich ought to see it — perhaps, because it would save her awkward and difficult explanations afterwards. There's the woman in her, you see, the normal, wholesome woman, sweet and timid."

"A fascinating personality," I murmured quickly, lest I might say other things — before their time.

"No looks, no worldly beauty," he nodded, "but the unconscious charm of the old soul. It's unmistakable."

Worlds and worlds I would have given to have been present at that interview; Julius LeVallon, so unusual and distinguished; the shy and puzzled serving-maid, happy and incredulous; the grey-bearded archæologist and scholar; the strange embarrassment of this amazing proposal of marriage!

"And Maennlich?" I asked, anxious for more detail.

Julius burst out laughing. "Maennlich lives in his own world with his specimens and theories and memories of travel — more recent memories of travel than our own! It hardly interested him for more than a passing moment. He regarded it, I think, as an unnecessary interruption — and a bothering one — some joke he couldn't quite appreciate or understand. He pulled his dirty beard, patted me on the back as though I were a boy running after some theatre girl, and remarked with a bored facetiousness that he could give her a year's character with a clear conscience and great pleasure. Something like that it was; I forget exactly. Then he went back to his library, shouting through the door some appointment about a Geographical Society meeting for the following week. For how could he know" — his voice grew softer as he said it and his laughter ceased— "how could he divine, that old literal-minded savant, that he stood before a sign-post along the route to the eternal things *we* seek, or that my marrying his servant was a step towards something we three owe together to the universe itself?"

It was some time before either of us spoke, and when at length I broke the silence it was to express surprise that a woman, so long ripened by the pursuit of spiritual, or at least exalted aims, should have returned to earth among the lowly. By rights, it seemed, she should have reincarnated among the great ones of the world. I knew I could say this now without offence.

"The humble," Julius answered simply, "*are* the great ones."

His fingers played with the fronds of a piece of staghorn moss as he said it, and to this day I cannot see this kind of moss without remembering his strange words.

"It's among what men call the lower ranks that the old souls return," he went on; "among peasants and simple folk, unambitious and heedless of material power, you always find the highest ones. They are there to learn the final lessons of service or denial, neglected in their busier and earlier — kindergarten sections. The last stages are invariably in humble service — they are by far the most difficult; no young, 'ambitious' soul could manage it. But the old souls, having already mastered all the more obvious lessons, are content."

"Then the oldest souls are not the great minds and great characters of history?" I exclaimed.

"Not necessarily," he answered; "probably never. The most advanced are unadvertised, in the least assuming positions. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them, hard of attainment by those the world applauds. The successful, so called, are the younger, cruder souls, passionately acquiring still the external prizes men hold so dear. Maturer souls have long since discarded these as worthless. The qualities the world crowns are great, perhaps, at that particular stage, but they never are the highest. Intellect, remember, is not of the soul, and all that reason teaches must be unlearned again. Theories change, knowledge shifts, facts are forgotten or proved false; only what the soul itself acquires remains eternally the same. The old are the intuitional; and the oldest of all — ah! how wonderful! — He who came back from loftier heights than most of us can yet even conceive of, was the — son of a carpenter."

I left my seat upon the boulder and lay beside him, listening for a long time while he talked, and if there was much that seemed visionary, there was also much that thrilled me with emotions beyond ordinary. Nothing, certainly, was foolish — because of the man who said it. And, while he took it for granted that all Nature was alive and a manifestation of spiritual powers, the elements themselves but forces to be mastered and acquired, it grew upon me that I had indeed entered an enchanted valley where, with my strange companions, I might witness new, incredible things. Finding little to reply, I was content to listen, wondering what was coming next. And in due course the talk came round again to ourselves, and so to the woman who was now his wife.

“Then she has no idea,” I said at length, “that we three — you and I and she — have been together before, or that there is any particular purpose in my being here at this moment?”

“In her normal condition — none,” he answered. “For she has no memory.”

“There is a state, however, when she does remember?” I asked. “You have helped her to remember? Is that it, Julius?”

“Yes,” he replied; “I have reached down and touched her soul, so that she remembers for herself.”

“The deep trance state?”

“Where all the memories of the past lie accumulated,” he answered, “the subconscious state. Her Self of To-day — with new body and recent brain — she has forgotten; in trance — the subconscious Self where the soul dwells with all its past — she remembers.”

CHAPTER XIX

"*PROOF OF THE reality of a personal sovereign of the universe will not be obtained. But proof of the reality of a power or powers, not unworthy of the title of gods*, in respect of our corner of the cosmos, *may be feasible*."— "The Individual and Reality" (E. D. Fawcett).

I shrank. Certain memories of our Edinburgh days revived unpleasantly. They seemed to have happened yesterday instead of years ago. A shadowy hand from those distant skies he spoke of, from those dim avenues of thickly written Time, reached down and touched my heart, leaving the chill of an indescribable uneasiness. The change in me since my arrival only a few hours before was too rapid not to bring reaction. Yet on the whole the older, deeper consciousness gained power.

Possibilities my imagination had unwisely played with now seemed stealing slowly toward probabilities. I felt as a man might feel who, having never known fire, and disbelieved in its existence, becomes aware of the warmth of its approach — a strange and revolutionary discomfort. For Julius was winning me back into his world again, and not with mere imaginative, half-playful acceptance, but with practical action and belief. Yet the change in me was somehow welcome. No feeling of resentment kept it in check, and certainly neither scorn nor ridicule. Incredulity glanced invitingly at faith. They would presently shake hands.

I made, perhaps, an effort to hold back, to define the position, *my* position, at any rate.

"Julius," I said gravely, yet with a sympathy I could not quite conceal, "as boys together, and even later at the University, we talked of various curious things, remarkable, even amazing things. You even showed me certain extraordinary things which, at the time, convinced me possibly. I ought to tell you now — and before we go any further, since you take it for granted that my feelings and — er — beliefs are still the same as yours — that I can no longer subscribe to all the articles of your wild conviction. I have been living in the world, you see, these many years, and — well, my imagination has collapsed or dried up or whatever you like to call it. I don’t really see, or remember — anything — quite in the way *you* mean — —”

“The ‘world’ has smothered it — temporarily,” he put in gently.

“And what is more,” I continued, ignoring his interruption, “I must confess that I have no stomach now for any ‘great experiment’ such as you think our coming together in this valley must involve. Your idea of reincarnation may be true — why not? It’s a most logical conception. And we three may have been together before — granted! I admit I rather like the notion. It may even be conceivable that the elemental powers of Nature are intelligent, that men and women could use them to their advantage, and that worship and feeling-with is the means to acquire them — it’s just as likely as that some day we shall send telegrams without wires, thoughts and pictures too!”

I drew breath a moment, while he waited patiently, linking his arm in mine and listening silently.

“It may even be possible, too,” I went on, finding some boyish relief in all these words, “that we three together in earlier days *did* — in some kind of primitive Nature Worship — make wrong use of an unconscious human body to evoke those particular Powers you say exist behind Wind and Fire, and that, having thus upset the balance of material forces, we must readjust that balance or suffer accordingly — *you* in particular, since you were the prime mover — —”

“How well you state it,” he murmured. “How excellent your memory is after all.”

“But even so,” I continued, nettled by his calm interpretation of my long and plodding objection, “and even if all you claim is true — I — I mean bluntly — that the transitory acceptance you woke in me years ago no longer holds. I am with you now merely to keep a promise, a boy’s promise, but my heart is no longer in the matter — except out of curiosity — curiosity pure and simple.”

I stopped, or rather it was his face and the expression in his eyes that stopped me. I felt convicted of somewhat pompous foolishness, my sense of humour and proportion gone awry. Fear, with its ludicrous inhibitions, made me strut in this portentous fashion. His face, wearing the child’s expression of belief and confidence, arrested me by its sheer simplicity. But the directness of his rejoinder, however — of his words, at least, for it was not a reply — struck me dumb.

“You are afraid for *her*,” he said without a trace of embarrassment or emotion, “because you love her still, even as she loves you — beneath.”

If unconsciously or consciously I avoided his eye, he made no attempt to avoid my own. He looked calmly at me like some uncannily clairvoyant lawyer who has pierced the elaborate evasions of his cross-examined witness — yet a witness who believed in his own excuses, quite honestly self-deceived.

At first the shock of his words deprived me of any power to think. I was not offended, I was simply speechless. He forgot who I was and what my life had been, forgot my relation with himself, forgot also the brevity of my acquaintance with his wife. He forgot, too, that I had accepted her, an inferior woman, accepted her without a hint of regret — nay, let me use the word I mean — of contempt that he, my friend, had linked his life with such a being — married her. And, further, he forgot all that was due to himself, to me, to *her!* It was too distressing. What could he possibly think of me, of himself, of her, that so outrageous a statement, and without a shred of evidence, could pass his lips? I, a middle-aged professor of geology, with an established position in the world! And she, a parlour-maid he had been wild enough to marry for the sake of some imagined dream, a woman, moreover, I had seen for the first time a short hour before, and with whom I had exchanged a few sentences in bare politeness, remembering that this uneducated creature was the wife of my old friend, and —— !

Thought galloped on in indignant disorder and agitation. The pretence was so apparent even to myself. But I remained speechless. For while he spoke, looking me calmly in the eye, without a sign of *arrière pensée*, I realised in a flash — that it all was true. Like the witness who still believes in his indignant answers until the lawyer puts questions that confound him by unexpected self-revelation — I suddenly saw — myself. My own heart opened in a blaze of fire. It was the truth.

And all this came upon me, not in a flash, but in a series of flashes. I had not known it. I now discovered myself, but for the first time. Layer after layer dropped away. The naked fact shone clearly.

“It is exactly what I hoped,” he went on quietly. “It proves memory beyond all further doubt. A love like yours and hers can never die. Even another thirty thousand years could make no difference — the instant you met you would be bound to take it up again — exactly where you left it off — no matter how long the interval of separation. The first sign would be this divine and natural intimacy.”

“Of course.”

How I said it passes my understanding. I swear my lips moved without my mind’s consent. The words slipped out. I couldn’t help myself. The same instant some words he had used in our Edinburgh days came back to me: that human love was somehow necessary to him, since love was the greatest power in the world, the supreme example of “feeling-with.” Without its aid — that majestic confidence it brings — his great experiment must be impossible and fail. That union which is love was necessary.

I felt an extraordinary exultation, an extraordinary tumult of delight, and — a degrading flush of shame. I felt myself blushing under his quiet gaze while the blood rushed over neck and cheeks and forehead. Both guilty and innocent I felt. The very sun and trees, it seemed, witnessed my nakedness. I stumbled as I moved beside my friend, and it was my friend who caught my arm and steadied me.

“Good God, Julius,” I remember stammering, “but what in the name of heaven are you saying?”

“The truth,” he answered, smiling. “And do not for a moment think of me as unnatural or a monster. For this is all inevitable and right and good. It means our opportunity has come at last. It also means that you have not failed me.”

I was glad he went on talking. I am a fool, I know it. I am weak, susceptible and easily influenced. I have no claim to any strength of character, nor ever had. But, without priggishness or self-righteousness, I can affirm that hitherto I have never done another man deliberate, conscious injury, or wronged a personal friend — never in all my days. I can say that, and for the satisfaction of my conscience I did say it, and kept on saying it in my thought while listening to the next words that Julius uttered there beside me.

“And so, quite naturally, from your point of view,” he pursued, “you are afraid for *her*. I am delighted; for it proves again the strength of the ineradicable, ancient tie. My union, remember, is not, properly speaking, love; it is the call of sympathy, of friendship, of something that we have to do together, of a claim that has the drive of all the universe behind it. And if I have felt it wise and right and necessary to” — he must have felt the shudder down the arm he held, for he said it softly, even tenderly— “give to her a child, it is because her entire nature needs it, and maternity is the woman’s first and ultimate demand of her present stage in life. Without it she is never quite complete....”

“A child!”

“A child,” he repeated firmly but with a kind of reverent gravity, “for otherwise her deepest functions are not exercised and — —”

“And?” I asked, noticing the slight pause he made.

“The soul — her complete and highest self — never takes full possession of her body. It hovers outside. She misses the full, entire object of her reincarnation. The child, you see, was necessary — for her sake as well as for my own — for ours.”

Thought, speech and action — all three stood still in me. I stopped in my walk, half paralysed. I remember we sat down.

“And she,” I said at length, “knows nothing — of all this?”

“She,” he replied, “knows everything, and is content. Her mind and brain of To-day may remain unaware; but *she* — the soul now fully in her — knows all, and is content, as you shall see. She has her debt to pay as well as myself — and you.”

For a long time we sat there silent in that sweet September sunshine. The birds sang round us, the rivulet went murmuring, the branches sighed and rustled just behind us, as though no problems vexed their safe, unconscious lives. Yet to me just then they all seemed somehow to participate in this complex plot of human emotion. Nature herself in some deep fashion was involved.

No man, I realised, knows himself, nor understands the acts of which he is potentially capable, until certain conditions bring them out. We imagine we know exactly how we should act in given circumstances — until those circumstances actually arrive and dislocate all our preconceived decisions. For the "given circumstances" produce emotions before whose stress — not realised when the decisions were so lightly made — we act quite otherwise. I could have sworn, for instance, that in a case like this — incredible though its ever happening must have seemed — I should then and there have taken my departure. I should have left. I would have gone without a moment's hesitation, and let him follow his own devices without my further assistance at any rate. I would have been furious with anyone who dared to state the contrary.

Yet it was exactly the opposite I did. The first instinct to clear out of this outrageous situation — proved impossible. It was not for her I remained; it was equally not for him; and it was assuredly not for myself in any meaning of the words. But yet I stayed. I could no more have gone away than I could have — made love to her before his eyes, or even not before his eyes. I argued, reasoned, moralised — but I stayed. It was over very soon — what there was of doubt and hesitation. While we sat there side by side upon that sunny mountain slope, I came to the clear decision that I could not go. But why, or how, I stayed is something beyond my powers to explain. Perhaps, *au fond*, it was because I believed in Julius LeVallon — believed, that is, in his innate uprightness and rectitude and nobility of soul. It was all beyond me. I could not understand. But — I had this strange belief in him. My relationship with her was, and would remain on both sides, a subconscious one — a memory. There would be no betrayal anywhere. I resolved to see it through.

"I ask nothing but your presence," I heard him saying presently; "if not actively sympathetic, at least not actively hostile. It is the sum of forces you bring with you that I need. They are in your atmosphere, whether expressed or merely latent. You are *you*." He watched me as he said this. "I failed once before, you remember," he added, "because *she* was absent. Your desertion now would render success again impossible."

He took my hand in his. A tender, even beseeching note crept into his deep voice. "Help me," he concluded, "if you will. You bring your entire past with you, though you know it not. It is that Past that our reconstruction needs."

A wind from the south, I remember, blew the firs behind us into low, faint sighing, and with the exquisite sound there stole a mingled joy and yearning on my soul. Perhaps some flower of memory in that moment yielded up its once familiar perfume, dim, ancient, yet not entirely forgotten. The sighing of the forest wafted it from other times and other places. Wonder and beauty touched me; I knew longing, but a longing so acutely poignant that it seemed not of this little earth at all. A fragrance and power of other stars, I could have sworn, lay in it. The pang of some long, long sweetness made me tremble. An immense ideal rose and beckoned with that whispering wind among the Jura pine woods, and a grandeur, remote but of ineffable sweetness, stirred through the undergrowths of a half-claimed, half-recognised consciousness within me.

I was aware of this incalculable emotion. Ancient yearnings seemed on the verge of coaxing loved memories into the light of day. I burned, I trembled, I suffered atrociously, yet with a rush of blind delight never before realised by me on earth. Then, suddenly, and wholly without warning, the desire for tears came over me in a flood.... Control *was* possible, but left no margin over. Somehow I managed it, so that no visible sign of this acute and extraordinary collapse should appear. It seemed, for a moment, that the frame of my modern personality was breaking down under the stress of new powers unleashed by my meeting with these two in this enchanted valley. Almost, another order of consciousness supervened ... then passed without being quite accomplished.... I heard the singing of the trees in the low south wind again. I saw the clouds sailing across the blue foreign sky. I saw *his* eyes upon me like twin flames. With the greatest difficulty I found speech possible in that moment.

“I can promise, at least, that I will not be hostile. I can promise that,” I said in a low and faltering tone.

He made no direct reply; least of all did it occur to him to thank me. The storm that had shaken me had apparently not touched him. His tone was quiet and normal as he continued speaking, though its depth and power, with that steady drive of absolute conviction behind, could never leave it quite an ordinary voice.

“She, as I told you, knows nothing in her surface mind,” I heard. “Beyond occasional uprushes of memory that have come to her lately in dreams —

she tells them naïvely, confusedly in the morning sometimes — she is aware of no more than a feeling of deep content, and that our union is right in the sense of being inevitable. Her pleasure that you have come is obvious. And more," he added, "I do not wish the older memories to break through yet, for that might wake pain or terror in her and, therefore, unconscious opposition."

He touched my arm a moment, looking at me with a significant expression. It was a suggestive thing he said: "For human consciousness is different at different periods, remember, and ages remotely separated cannot understand each other. Their points of view, their modes of consciousness, are too different. In *her* deeper state — separated by so huge an interval from the nineteenth century — with its origin long before we came to live upon this little earth — she would not, could not understand. There would be no sympathy; there might be terror; there must certainly be failure."

I murmured something or other, heaven alone knows what it was.

"What we think fine and wonderful may then have seemed the crudest folly, superstition, wickedness — and vice versa. Look at the few thousand years of history we have — and you'll see the truth of this. We cannot grasp how certain periods could possibly have done the things they did." He paused, then added in a lower tone, more to himself than to me: "So with what we have to do now — though exceptional, utterly exceptional — it is a remnant that we owe to Nature — to the universe — and we must see it through...." His voice died away.

"I understand," my voice dropped into the open pause he left.

"Though you neither believe nor welcome," he replied.

"My promise," I said quietly, "holds good. Also" — I blushed and half-stammered over the conventional words— "I will do nothing that can cause possible offence — to anyone."

The hand that rested on my arm tightened its grasp a little. He made no other sign. It was remarkable how the topic that must have separated two other men — any two other men in the world, I suppose — had been subtracted from our relationship, laid aside as dealt with and admitted, calling for no further mention even. It all seemed, in some strange way, impersonal almost — another attitude to life — a faint sign, it may well have been, of that older mode of consciousness he spoke about.

I hardly recognised myself, so complete was the change in me, and so swiftly going forward. This dragnet from the Past drew ever closer. If the mind in me resisted still, it seemed rather from some natural momentum acquired by habit, than from any spontaneous activity due to the present. The modern, upper self surrendered.

“How soon?” was the question that seemed to come of its own accord; it was certainly not my confused and shaken mind that asked it. “When do you propose to — —”

He answered without a sign of hesitation. “The Autumnal Equinox. You’ve forgotten *that*,” he added as though he justified my lack of memory here, “for all the world has forgotten it too — the science of Times and Seasons — the oldest known to man. It was true cosmic knowledge, but so long ago that it has left our modern consciousness as though it never had existed even.”

He stopped abruptly. I think he desired me to discover for myself, unguided, unhampered by explanation. And, at the words, something remote and beautiful did stir, indeed, within me. A curtain drew aside....

CHAPTER XX

SOME REMNANT OF ghostly knowledge quickened. Behind the mind and brain, in that region, perhaps, where thought ceases and intuition offers her amazing pageant, there stirred — reality. Times and seasons, I seemed to realise, have spiritual importance; there is a meaning in months and hours; if noon is different from six o'clock, what happens at noon varies in import from what happens at six o'clock, although the happening itself at both moments be identical. An event holds its minimum or its maximum of meaning according to the moment when it happens. Its effectiveness varies with the context.

Power is poured out, or power is kept back. To ask a man for energetic action when he is falling asleep is to court refusal; to expect life of him when he is overflowing with vitality and joy is probably to obtain it. The hand is stretched out to give, or the hand is withheld.

With the natural forces of the earth — it now dawned upon me — the method was precisely similar. Nature and human-nature reacted differently at different moments. At the moment of equilibrium called "equinox," there was a state of balance so perfect that this balance could be most easily, most naturally — transcended.

And objects in the outer world around me changed. Their meaning, ordinarily superficial, appeared of incalculable significance. The innate activities of Nature, the elements, I realised indeed as modes of life; the communication Julius foreshadowed, a possible and *natural* thing.

Someone, I believe, was speaking of these and similar things — words came floating on the wind, it seemed — yet with meanings so remote from all that my mind of To-day deemed possible, that I scarcely knew whether it was the voice of my companion speaking, or a voice of another kind, whispering in my very blood.

In Bâle a week ago, or in London six weeks ago, such theories would have left me cold. Now, at this particular juncture, they came with a solemn beauty I can only account for by the fact that I had changed into almost another being. My mind seemed ready for anything and everything. No modern creeds and dogmas could confine my imagination....

I had entered a different cycle of operation. I felt these ideas all-over-me. The brain might repeat insistently “this is false, this is superstition”; but something bigger than reason steadily overrode the criticism. My point of view had changed. In some new way, strangely exciting, I saw everything at once. My entire Self became the percipient, rather than my five separate senses. In Nature all around me another language uttered. It was the cosmic sense that stirred and woke. It was another mode of consciousness.

We three, it came upon me, were acting out some omitted detail of a great world-purpose. The fact that *she* forgot, that I was ignorant, that Julius LeVallon seemed guilty of unmoral things — these were but ripples upon the deep tide that bore us forward. We were uttering a great sentence we had left unfinished. I knew not exactly what was coming, only that we had begun its utterance ages before the present, and probably upon a planet nearer to the sun than our younger earth. The verb had not yet made its appearance in this sentence, but it would presently appear and explain the series of acts, and, meanwhile, I must go on acting and wondering what it all could mean. I thought of a language that first utters the nouns and adjectives, then adds the verb at the end, explaining the whole series of unmeaning sounds. Our “experiment” was the verb.

Then came the voice of Julius suddenly:

“Fate is the true complement of yourself; it completes your nature. By doing it, you become one with your surroundings. Note attitude and gesture — of yourself and of everything. They are signs. Our attitudes must coincide with that of the earth to the heavens — possible only at the Equinox. We must feel with her. We then act with her. Do not resist. Let this valley say to you what it will. Regard it, and regard our life here at the moment, as a symbol, clothed in a whole story of information, the story varying with every hour of the day and with the slightest change of the earth in relation to the universe.”

It seemed I watched the track of some unknown animal upon the ground, and tried to reconstruct the entire creature. Such imprint is but a trace of the invisible being that has made it. All about this valley there were tracks offering a hint of Beings that had left them — that any moment might reveal themselves. Julius talked on in his calm and unimpassioned way. I both understood and could not understand. I realised that there is a language for the mind, but no language for the spirit. There are no words in which to express big cosmic meanings. Action — a three-dimensional language — alone could be their vehicle. The knowledge must be performed — acted out in ceremony. Comprehension filtered into me, though how I cannot say.

“Symbols are merely the clues,” he went on. “It is a question of stimulating your own imagination. Into the images created by your own activities the meaning flows. You must play with them and let them play with you. They depend for their meaning on history and happenings, and vary according to their setting — the time of day or night, the season of the year, the year itself, the exact relation of your Self to every other Self, human *or otherwise*, in the universe. Let your life and activities now arrange themselves in such a way that they shall demonstrate the workings of the elemental powers you feel about you. Every automatic activity of your body, every physiological process in you, links you on to this great elemental side of things. Be open now to the language of action. Think of the motion of all objects here as connected with the language of symbols, a living, ever-moving language, and do not allow your mind to mutilate the moods that come upon you. Let your nerves, if they will, come into contact with the Nature Powers, and so realise that the three kingdoms are alive. Watch your own automatic activities — I mean what you do unconsciously without deliberate thinking. For what you do consciously you are learning, but what you do unconsciously you have learned before. We have to *become* the performance by acting it — instantaneous understanding. All such attitudes are language, and the power to read it comes from a synthetical, intuitive feeling of the entire being. The heart may get one letter only, but that letter is a clue, an omen. A moth flies into the room and everything immediately looks different; it remains the same, yet means something different. It’s like the vowel in the ancient languages — put in later, according to the meaning. You have, I know, forgotten” — he paused a moment and put his hand on my shoulder— “but every wind that blows across our valley here, and every change in temperature that lowers or raises the heat and fire of your own particular system” — he looked at me with a power in bearing and gesture impossible to describe— “is a sign and hint of whether — —”

He stopped, glancing suddenly down the steep grass slopes. A breeze stirred the hair upon his forehead. It brushed my eyes and cheeks as well. I felt as though a hand had touched me as it passed invisibly. A momentary sensation of energy, of greater life swept over me, then disappeared as though the wind had borne it off.

“Of whether your experiment will be successful?” I broke in.

Turning his eyes from the sunny valley to my face again, he said slowly:

“These Powers can only respond to the language they understand. My deliverance must be experienced, acted out.”

“A ceremony?” I asked, wondering uneasily what “acts of language” he might demand of me and of another.

“To restore them finally — where they rightfully belong,” he answered, “I must become them. There is no other way.”

How little intelligible result issued from this conversation must be apparent from the confused report here given, yet that something deep and true was in *his* mind lay beyond all question. At the back of my own, whence no satisfactory sentences could draw it out into clean description, floated this idea that the three of us were already acting out some vast, strange ceremonial in which Nature, indeed the very earth and heavens themselves, were acting with us. There was this co-operation, this deep alliance. The “experiment” we approached would reveal itself in natural happenings and circumstances. Action was to take the place of words, conveying meaning as speech or handwriting conveys a message. The attitude of ourselves, the very grouping of inanimate objects, of trees and hills, the effects of light and shade, the moods of day and night, above all, the time and season of the year which is nothing but the attitude of the earth towards the rest of the universe — all these, as modes of intelligent expression, would belong to the strange performance. They were the conscious gestures of the universe. If I could *feel-with* them, interpretation would be mine.

And, that I understood even this proved memory. “You will gradually become conscious,” he said, “of various signs about you. Analyse these signs. But analyse them with a view to creating language. For language does not create ideas; Ideas become language. Put the vowels in. When communication begins to be established, the inanimate world here will talk to you as in the fairy tales — seem alive. Play with it, as you play with symbols in algebra before you rise to the higher mathematics. So, notice and think about anything that" — he emphasised the verb significantly— "*draws* your attention. Do not point out at the moment; that's compulsion and rouses opposition; just be aware and accept by noticing. And do not concentrate too much; what flows in must also be able to flow out; otherwise there comes congestion, and so — fear. In this valley the channels all are open, and wonder everywhere. The more you wonder, the more your memory will come back and consciousness extend. Great language has no words. The only way to grow in consciousness is to be for ever changing your ideas and point of view. Accept Nature here. Feel like a tree and then like a star. Be violent with wind, and burn with fire. These things are forgotten To-day because Wonder has left the world — and with it worship. So do not be ashamed to wonder at anything you notice. It all lies in you — I know that — and here it will rise to the surface." He laughed. "If a woman," he went on, "wears embroidered lilies on her dress, all London seems full of flower-sellers. They were there before, but she had nothing in herself to make her conscious of them. Notice all the little things, for you are a portion of the universe as much as Sirius or Vega, and in living relation with every other atom. You can share Nature, and here in our secret valley you may welcome her without alarm. The cosmic organism, denied by civilisation, survives in you as it survives also in myself and in — my wife. Through that, and through that alone, is the experiment possible to us."

And it flashed into me that my visit to this enchanted valley would witness no concentrated, miniature "ceremonial," reduced in form for worship as in a church or temple, but that all we did and experienced in the course of normal, every-day life would mark the outlines of this vast performance. Understanding would come that way.

And then the mention of his "wife" brought me sharply back to emotions of — another kind. My thought leaped back again — by what steps I cannot say, it seemed so disconnected with what had just occupied my mind — to his statement of ten minutes before.

"By becoming them," I asked, "you mean that you must feel-with wind and fire to the point of being them?"

“You think this might be done alone, without your help or hers?” he asked, picking the thought straight out of my mind. “But only a group could have done what we did — a group, moreover, in perfect sympathy. For as love between the three of us was essential to success then, so is love between us essential now. A group, combined by love into a unit, exerts a power impossible to an individual. The secret of our power lies in that — ideal love and perfect sympathy.”

I listened, sure of one thing only — that I would keep an open mind. To deny, object, criticise, above all to ridicule would rob me of an experience. I believe honestly this was my attitude: to miss no value that might be in it by assuming it was nonsense merely because it was so strange. Apart from the curious fact that something in me was sympathetic to a whole world of deep ideas behind his language, I felt the determined desire to see the matter through. There was no creed or religious dogma in me to offend. I made myself receptive. For, out of this singular exposition the conviction grew that I was entering almost a new order of existence, and that an earlier mode of consciousness revived.

In this lonely valley, untouched by the currents of modern thought and feeling, companioned by Julius LeVallon and that old, recovered soul, his wife, the conditions of our previous existence together perhaps re-formed themselves. Behind his talk came ideas that wore an aspect of familiarity, although my present brain, try as it might, failed to mould them into any acceptable form. The increasing change in myself was certainly significant. The crumbling of old shibboleths continued. A relationship between my inner nature and the valley seemed established in some way that was new, yet not entirely forgotten. The very sunlight and the wind assisted. Closer to the natural things I felt, the earth not alien to me....

We had neared the châlet again. I saw the peat smoke rising against the background of the ridges. The “man” was whistling at his work in the yard behind the building. The column of smoke, I remember, was agitated by the wind towards the top; it turned, blew downwards. No other sign of movement was anywhere visible, for in the bottom of the hollow where we now stood, the wind did not even stir the isolated larches or tall yellow gentians. Sunshine flooded everything. Out of this peace and stillness then came a sudden cry and the sight of something moving rapidly — both from the châlet.

“Julius!” called a shrill voice, as the figure of Mrs. LeVallon, with flying hair and skirts, came running over the meadow towards us. “Julius! — Professor! Quick!”

The voice and figure startled me; both came, it seemed, out of some other place; a picture from my youth rose up — a larch grove in October upon the Pentland Hills. I experienced a sense of deep and thrilling beauty similar to what I had felt then. But as I watched the slim, hurrying figure I was aware of another thing that left me breathless: For with her, as she passed through chequered sun and shadow along the fringe of forest, there moved something else enormously larger than herself. It was in the air about her. Like that strange Pentland memory, it whirled. It was formless, and owing to its huge proportions gave the impression of moving slowly, yet its very formlessness was singularly impressive and alive, so that the word “body” sprang instantly into my mind. Actually it moved at a tremendous speed.

In my first confusion and bewilderment I remember saying aloud in sheer amazement: “a fragment of the day has broken off; it’s clothed in wind and sunlight!”

A phrase quite meaningless, of course, yet somehow accurately descriptive, for it appealed to me as a fragment of conditionless, universal activity that had seized upon available common elements to furnish itself a visible appearance. I got the astounding suggestion that it was heat and air moving under intelligent and conscious direction. Combined with its airy lightness there was power, for in its brief, indeed its instantaneous, appearance I felt persuaded of an irresistible strength that no barrier of solid matter could possibly withstand. At the same time it was transparent, for I saw the trees upon its further side. It passed ahead of the human figure, so close it seemed to touch her dress, rose with a kind of swift, driving plunge into the air, slipped meltingly into the clean blue colour of the atmosphere — and disappeared.

And so swift was the entire presentment of the thing, that even while I tried to focus my sight upon it to make sure I was not deceived, it had both come and gone. The same second Julius caught my arm. I heard him utter a quick, low cry, stifled instantly. He gasped. He quivered. I heard him whispering:

“Already! Your presence here — the additional forces that *you* bring — are known and recognised! See, how complete we are — a unit — you, she and

I — a trinity!”

A coldness not of this world touched me as I heard. But that first sense of joy and beauty followed. I felt it true — the three of us were somehow one.

“You saw it too?” I asked, exhilaration still about me.

“They are everywhere and close,” he whispered quickly, as the running figure came on toward us, “breaking out into visible manifestation even. Hold yourself strong and steady. Remember, your attitude of mind and feeling are important. Each detail of behaviour is significant.”

His anxiety, I realised, was for us, not for himself. Already, it seemed, our souls were playing vital rôles in some great dramatic ceremonial just beginning. What we did and felt and thought was but a partial expression of something going forward with pregnant completeness behind the visible appearances all round. Mrs. LeVallon stood breathless in front of us. She was hatless, her hair becomingly dishevelled; her arms bare to the elbow and white with flour. She stopped, placed her hands upon her hips, and panted for a full minute before she could get breath enough to speak. Her eyes, a deep, luminous sea-green, looked into ours. Her face was pale, yet the emotion was excitement rather than alarm. I was aware of a superb, nymph-like grace and charm about her. I caught my breath. Julius made no movement, spoke no word. I wondered. I made a step forward to catch her. But she did not fall; she merely sank down upon the ground at our feet.

“Julius,” she panted, “that thing I’ve dreamed about so of*t*en — —”

She stopped short, glancing up at me, the eyes, charged with a sweet agitation, full upon my own. I turned to Julius with a gesture of uncontrollable impatience.

He spoke calmly, sitting down on the slope beside her. “You felt it again — the effect of your vivid dreaming? Or did you this time — see anything?”

The swiftness and surprise of the little scene had been bewildering, but the moment he spoke confusion and suspense both vanished. The sound of his quiet voice restored the threatened balance. Peace came back into the sunlight and the air. There was composure again.

“You certainly were not frightened!” he added, as she made no reply. “You look too happy and exhilarated for that.” He put his hand on hers.

I sat down then beside her, and she turned and looked at me with a pathetic mingling of laughter and agitation still in her wide-opened eyes. The three of us were close together. He kept his hand on hers. Her shoulder touched me. I was aware of something very wonderful there between us. We comforted her, but it was more, far more, than that. There was sheer, overflowing happiness in it.

"It came into the house," she said, her breath recovered now, and her voice gentle. "It follered me — out here. I ran." She looked swiftly round at me. The radiance in her face was quite astonishing, turning her almost beautiful. Her eyelids quivered a moment and the corners of her lips seemed trying to smile — or not to smile. She was happy there, sitting between us two. Yet there was nothing light or foolish in her. Something of worship rose in me as I watched her.

"Well," urged Julius, "and then — what?" I saw him watching me as well as her. "You remembered your dream, you felt something, and — you ran out here to us. What else?"

She hesitated deliciously. But it was not that she wanted coaxing. She evidently knew not how to tell the thing she had to say. She looked hard into my face, her eyes keenly searching.

"It has something to do with *him*, you mean?" asked Julius, noting the direction of her questioning gaze.

"Oh, I'm glad he's here," she answered quickly. "It's the best thing that could happen." And she looked round again at Julius, moving her hand upon his own.

"We need him," said Julius simply with a smile. Then, suddenly, she took my hand too, and held it tightly. "He's a protection, I think, as well," she added quite gravely; "that's how I feel him." Her hand lay warm and fast on mine.

There was a pause. I felt her fingers strongly clasp my own. The three of us were curiously linked together somehow by those two hands of hers. A great harmony united us. The day was glorious, the power of the sun divine, there was power in the wind that touched our faces.

"Yes," she continued slowly, "I think it had to do with him — with *you*, Professor," she repeated emphatically, fixing her bright gaze upon me. "I think you brought it — brought my dream back — brought that thing I dreamed about into — the house itself." And in her excitement she said distinctly "'ouse."

I found no word to say at the moment. She kept her hand firmly upon mine.

"I was making bread there, by the back winder as usual," she went on, "when suddenly I started thinking of that splendid dream I've had so of*t*en — of you," looking at her husband, "and me and another man — that's *you* I'm sure," she gazed at me— "all three of us doing some awful thing together in a place underground somewhere, but dressed quite different to what we are now, and standing round a lot of people sleeping in a row — when something we expected, yet were frightened at, used to come in — and give me such a start that I always woke up before knowing what was really going to happen."

She paused a second. She was confused. Her sentences ran into each other.

"Well, I was making the bread there when the wind came in with a bang and sent the flour in a cloud all over everything — look! You can see it over my dress still — and with it, sort of behind it, so to speak, something followed with a rush — oh, an enormous rush and scurry it was — and I thought I was rising in the air, or going to burn to pieces by the heat that came in with it. I felt big like — as the sea when you get out of your depth and feel yourself being carried away. I screamed — and the three of us were all together in a moment, just as in the dream, you know — and we were glad, tremendously glad, because we'd got something we wanted that made us feel as if we could do anything, oh, anything in the world — a sort of 'eavenly power I think it was — and then, just as we were going to use our power and do all kinds of things with it, someone — I don't know who it was, for I never can see the face — a man, though — one of those sleeping figures — rose up and came at us all in a fury, and — well, I don't know exactly, but it all turned out a failure somehow — It got terrible then — —" She looked like a flash of lightning into my face, then dropped her eyes again.

"You acted out your dream, as it were?" interrupted Julius a moment.

She looked at him with a touch of wonder. “I suppose so,” she said, and let go both our hands. “Only this time someone really did come in and caught me just as I seemed going out of myself — it may have been fainting, but I don’t think so, for I’m never one to faint — more like being carried off in a storm, a storm with wind and fire in it — —”

“It was the ‘man’ caught you?” I asked quickly.

“The man, yes,” she continued. “I didn’t fall. He caught me just in time; but my wind was gone — gone clean out of me as though someone had knocked me down.”

“He said nothing?” Julius asked.

She looked sharply at him. “Nothing,” she answered, “not a single word. I ran away. He frightened me. For a moment — I was that confused with remembering my dream, I suppose; so I just pushed him off and ran out here to find you both. I’d been watching you for a long time while I was mixing the dough.”

“I’m glad he was close enough to help you,” put in Julius.

“Well,” she explained, “I’ve a sort of idea he was watching me and saw the thing coming, for he’d been in and out of the kitchen for half an hour before, asking me silly questions about whether I wanted this or that, and fussing about” — she laughed at her own description— “just like an old faithful dog or something.”

We all laughed together then.

“I’m glad I found you so quickly,” she concluded, “because while I was running up here I felt that something was running with me — something that was burning and rushing — like a bit of what was in the house.”

She stopped, and a shadow passed across her eyes, changing their colour to that nondescript grey tint they sometimes wore. The wonderful deep green went out of them. And for a moment there was silence that seemed to fill the entire valley. Julius watched her steadily, strong and comforting in his calmness. The valley, I felt, watched us too, something protective in its perfect stillness. All signs of agitation were gone; the wind sank down; the trees stood by in solemn rows; the very clouds moved more slowly down the calm blue sky. I watched the bosom of Mrs. LeVallon rise and fall as she recovered breath again. She put her hands up to gather in the hair at the back of her head, deftly tidying its disordered masses, and as she did so I felt her gaze draw my own with a force I could not resist. We looked into each other's eyes for a full two minutes, no one speaking, no signs anywhere exchanged, Julius watchfully observant close beside us; and though I know not how to tell it quite, it is a fact that something passed from those clear, discerning eyes into my heart, convincing me more than any words of Julius ever could, that all he claimed about her and myself was true. She was imperial somewhere.... She had once been mine....

The cloud passed slowly from her face. To my intense relief — for I had the dread that the silent gaze would any moment express itself in fateful words as well. The muscles of her firm, wide mouth relaxed. She broke into happy laughter suddenly.

"It's very silly of me to think and feel such things, or be troubled by a dream," she exclaimed, still holding my eyes, and her laughter running over me like some message of forgiveness. "We shall frighten him away," she went on, turning now to Julius, "before he's had time to taste the new bread I'm making — for him." Her manner was quiet and composed again, natural, prettily gracious. I searched in vain for something to say; the turmoil of emotion within offered too many possible rejoinders; I could not choose. Julius, however, relieved me of the necessity by taking her soothingly in both his arms and kissing her. The next second, before I could move or speak, she leaned over against my shoulder and kissed me on the cheek as well.

Yet nothing happened; there was no sign anywhere that an unusual thing had occurred; I felt that the sun and wind had touched me. It was as natural as shaking hands. Ah! but the sun and wind were magical with life!

"There!" she laughed happily, "we're all three together and understanding, and nothing can go wrong. Isn't it so, Julius?" And, if there was archness in her voice and manner, there was certainly no trace of that mischief which can give offence. "And you understand, Professor, don't you?"

I saw him take her hand and stroke it. He showed no more resentment than if she had handed me a flower. And I tried to understand. I struggled. I at least succeeded in keeping my attitude of thought and feeling above destructive levels. We three were one; love made us so. A devouring joy was in me, but with it the strange power of a new point of view.

“We couldn’t be together like this,” she laughed naïvely, “in a city. It’s only here. It’s this valley and the sun and wind what does it.” She looked round her. “All this sun and air, and the flowers, and the forest and the clear cold little stream. Why, *I* believe, if we stay here we shall never die at all. We’d turn into gods or something.”

She murmured on half to herself, the voice sinking towards a whisper — leaning over upon her husband’s breast, she stretched out her hand and quietly took my own again. “It’s got much stronger,” I heard, “since *he’s* come; it makes me feel closer to you too, Julius. Only — he’s with us as well, just like — just as if we were all meant for each other somehow.”

There was pressure, yet no suggestive pressure, in the hand that held my own. It just took me firmly, with a slight gesture of drawing me closer to herself and to Julius too. It united us all three. And, strange as it all was, I, for my part, was aware of no uneasiness, no discomfort, no awkwardness certainly. I only felt that what she said was true: we were linked together by some deep sympathy of feeling-with; we were at one; we were marvellously fused by some tie of universal life that this enchanted valley made apparent. Nature fused with human nature, raising us all to a diviner level.

There was a period of silence in which no one moved or spoke; and then, to my relief, words came from Julius — natural and unforced, yet with a meaning that I saw was meant for me:

“The presence of so distinguished a man,” he said lightly, looking down into her face with almost a boyish smile, “is bound to make itself felt anywhere.” He glanced across at me significantly. “Even the forces of Nature in this peaceful valley, you see, are aware of his arrival, and have sent out messengers to greet him. Only,” he added, “they need not be in such a hurry about it, need they — or so violent?”

We all laughed together. It was the only reference he made in her presence to what had happened. Nor did she ask a single question. We lay a little longer, basking in the sunlight and breathing the fragrant mountain air, and then Mrs. LeVallon sprang to her feet alertly, saying that she must go and finish her bread. Julius went with her. I was left alone — with the eerie feeling that more than these two had just been with me....

Less than an hour later the horizon darkened suddenly. Out of a harmless sky appeared masses of ominous cloud. Wild gusts of hot, terrific wind rushed sideways over the swaying forest. The trees shook to their roots, groaning; they shouted; loosened stones fell rattling down the nearer gullies; and, following a minute of deep silence, there blazed forth then a wild glory of lightning such as I have never witnessed. It was a dancing sea of white and violet. It came from every quarter of the sky at once with a dazzling fury as though the entire atmosphere were set on fire. The wind and thunder shook the mountains. From a cupful of still, sweet sunshine, our little valley changed into a scene of violent pandemonium. The precipices tossed the echoing thunder back and forth, the clear stream beside the châlet became a torrent of foaming, muddy water, and the wind was of such convulsive turbulence that it seemed to break with explosive detonations that menaced the upheaval of all solid things. There was a magnificence in it all as though the universe, and not a small section of the sky, produced it.

It passed away again as swiftly as it came. At lunch time the sun blazed down upon a drenched and laughing scene, washed as by magic, brilliant and calm as though made over all afresh. The air was limpid; the forest poured out perfume; the meadows shone and twinkled.

During the assault I saw neither Julius nor the Man, but in the occasional deep pauses I heard the voice of Mrs. LeVallon singing gaily while she kneaded bread at the kitchen “winder” just beneath my own. She, at any rate, was not afraid. But, while it was in progress, I went alone to my room and watched it, caught by a strange sensation of power and delight its grandeur woke in me, and also by a sense of wonder that was on the increase.

CHAPTER XXI

"*WHY IS SHE set so far, so far above me,*

And yet not altogether raised above?

I would give all the world that she should love me,

My soul that she should never learn to love." — Mary Coleridge.

"The channels here are open."

As the days went by the words remained with me. I recognised their truth. Nature was pouring through me in a way I had never known before. I had gone for a walk that afternoon after the sudden storm, and tried to think things out. It was all useless. I could only feel. The stream of this strange new point of view had swept me from known moorings; I was in deep water now; there was exhilaration in the rush of an unaccustomed tide. One part of me, hourly fading, weighed, criticised and judged; another part accepted and was glad. It was like the behaviour of a divided personality.

"Your brain of To-day asks questions, while your soul of long ago remembers and is sure."

I was constantly in the presence of Mrs. LeVallon. My "brain" was active with a thousand questions. The answers pointed all one way. This woman, so humbly placed in life to-day, rose clearer and clearer before me as the soul that Julius claimed to be of ancient lineage. Respect increased in me with every word, with every act, with every gesture. Her mental training, obviously, was small, and of facts that men call knowledge she had but few; but in place of these recent and artificial acquirements she possessed a natural and spontaneous intelligence that was swiftly understanding. She seized ideas though ignorant of the words that phrased them; she grasped conceptions that have to be hammered into minds the world regards as well equipped — seized them naïvely, yet with exquisite comprehension. Something in her discriminated easily between what was transitory and what was real, and the glory of this world made evidently small appeal to her. No ordinary ambition of vulgar aims was hers. Fame and position were no bait at all; she cared nothing about being "somebody." There was a touch of unrest and impatience about her when she spoke of material things that most folk value more than honour, some even more than character. Something higher, yet apparently forgotten, drew her after it. The pursuit of pleasure and sensation scarcely whispered to her at all, and though her self-esteem was strong, personal vanity in the little sense was quite a negligible quantity.

This young wife had greatness in her. Domestic servant though she certainly had been, she was distinguished in her very bones. A clear ray of mental guidance and intuition ran like a gleam behind all her little blunders of speech and action. To her, it was right and natural, for instance, that her husband's money should mostly be sent away to help those who were without it. "We're much better this way," she remarked lightly, remembering, perhaps, the life of detailed and elaborate selfishness she once had served, "and anyhow I can't wear two dresses at the same time, can I? Or live in two houses — what's the good of all that? But for those who like it," she added, "I expect it's right enough. They need it — to learn, or something. I've been in families of the best that didn't want for anything — but really they had nothing at all." It was in the little things I caught the attitude. Although conditions here made it impossible to test it, I had more and more the impression, too, that she possessed insight into the causes of human frailty, and understood temptations she could not possibly have experienced personally in this present life.

An infallible sign of younger souls was their pursuit hot-foot of pleasure and sensation, of power, fame, ambition. The old souls leave all that aside; they have known its emptiness too often. Their hall-mark lies in spiritual discernment, the power to choose between the permanent and the transitory. Brains and intellect were no criterion of development at all. And I reflected with a smile how the "educated" and "social" world would close its doors to such a woman — the common world of younger, cruder souls, insipid and undistinguished, many of them but just beyond the animal stage — the "upper classes"! The Kingdom of Heaven lies within, I remembered, and the meek and lowly shall inherit the "earth."

And the "Dog-Man" also rose before me in another light — this slow-minded, instinctive being whom elsewhere I should doubtless have dismissed as "stupid." His approximation to the instinctive animal life became so clear. In his character and essential personality lay the curious suggestion. Out of his frank gaze peered the mute and searching appeal of the soul awakening into self-consciousness — a look of direct and simple sincerity, often questioning, often poignant. The interval between Mrs. LeVallon and himself was an interval of countless lives. How welcome to him would be the support of a thought-out religious creed, to her how useless! The different stages individuals occupy, how far apart, how near, how various! I felt it all as true, and the effect of this calm valley upon me was not sympathy with Nature only, but a certain new sympathy with all the world. It was very wonderful.

I watched the "man" with a new interest and insight — the proud and self-conscious expression on his face as he moved constantly about us, his menial services earnest and important. The safety of the entire establishment lay upon his shoulders. He made the beds as he served the coffee, cleaned the boots or lit the lamps at dusk, with a fine dignity that betrayed his sense of our dependence on him — he would never fail. He was ever on the watch. I could believe that he slept at night with one eye open, muscles ready for a spring in case of danger. In myself, at any rate, his signal devotion to our interest woke a kind of affectionate wonder that touched respect. He was so eager and ready to learn, moreover. The pathos in his face when found fault with was quite appealing — the curious dumb attitude, the air of mortification that he wore: "I'm rather puzzled, but I shall know another time. I shall do better. Only — I haven't got as far as you have!"

In myself, meanwhile, the change worked forward steadily. I was much alone, for Julius, preoccupied and intense, was now more and more engaged upon purposes that kept him out of sight. Much of the time he kept to his room upstairs, but he spent hours, too, in the open, among the woods and on the further ridges, especially at night. Not always did he appear at meals even, and what intercourse I had was with Mrs. LeVallon, so that our intimacy grew quickly, ripening with this sense of sudden and delightful familiarity as though we had been long acquainted. There was at once a happy absence of formality between us, although a dignity and sweet reserve tempered our strange relationship in a manner the ordinary world — I feel certain — could hardly credit. Out of all common zones of danger our intercourse was marvellously lifted, yet in a way it is difficult to describe without leaving the impression that we were hardly human in the accepted vulgar meaning of the words.

But the truth was simple enough, the explanation big with glory. It was that Nature included us, mothering all we said or did or thought, above all, *felt*. Our intercourse was not a separate thing, apart, shut off, two little humans merely aware of the sympathetic draw of temperament and flesh. It was part of Nature, natural in the biggest sense, a small, true incident in the processes of the entire cosmos whose life we shared. The physical thing called passion, of course, was present, yet a passion that the sun and wind took care of, spreading it everywhere about us through the hourly happenings of "common" things — in the wind that embraced the trees and then passed on, in the rushing stream that caught the flowers on its bank, then let them go again, in the fiery sunshine that kissed the earth while leaving the cooling shadows beside every object that it glorified.

All this seemed in some new fashion clear to me — that passion degrades because it is set exclusive and apart, magnified, idolatrised into a false importance due to Nature's being neglected and left outside. For not alone the wind and sun and water shared our intercourse, knowing it was well, but in some further sacramental way the whole big Earth, the movements of the Sun, the Seasons, aye, and the armies of the other stars in all their millions, took part in it, justifying its necessity and truth. Without a trace of false exaltation in me I saw far, far beyond even the poet's horizon of love's philosophy:

"*Nothing in the world is single;*

All things by a law divine

In one another's being mingle —

Why not I with thine?"

and so came again with a crash of fuller comprehension upon the words of Julius that here we lived and acted out a Ceremony that conveyed great teaching from a cosmic point of view. My relations with Mrs. LeVallon, as our relations all three together, seen from this grander angle, were not only possible and true: they were necessary. We were a unit formed of three, a group-soul affirming truths beyond the brain's acceptance, proving universal, cosmic teaching in the only feasible way — by acting it out.

The scale of experience grew vast about me. This error of the past we would set right was but an episode along the stupendous journey of our climbing souls. The entire Present, the stage at which humanity found itself to-day, was but a moment, and values worshipped now, and by the majority rightly worshipped, would pass away, and be replaced by something that would seem entirely new, yet would be in reality not discovery but recovery.

CHAPTER XXII

"*THIS MIGHTY SEA of Love, with wondrous tides,*
Is sternly just to sun and grain;
'Tis laving at this moment Saturn's sides,
'Tis in my blood and brain." — Alexander Smith.

One evening, as the shadows began to lengthen across the valley, I came in from my walk, and saw Mrs. LeVallon on the veranda, looking out towards the ridges now tipped with the sunset gold. Her back was to me. One hand shaded her eyes; her tall figure was like a girl's; her attitude conveyed expectancy. I got the impression she had been watching for me.

She turned at the sound of my footstep on the boards. "Ah, I hoped you'd get back before the dark," she said, with a smile of welcome that betrayed a touch of relief. "It's so easy to get lost in those big woods." She led the way indoors, where a shaded lamp stood on the table laid for tea. She talked on easily and simply. She had been washing "hankercheefs," and as the dusk came on had felt she "oughter" be seeing where I'd got to. I thanked her laughingly, saying that she must never regard me as a guest who had to be looked after, and she replied, her big eyes penetratingly on my own— "Oh, I didn't mean *that*, Professor. I knew by instinc' you were not one to need entertaining. I saw it reely the moment you arrived. I was just wondering where you'd got to and — whether you'd find your way back all right." And then, as I made no reply, she went on to talk about the housework, what fun it was, how it amused her, and how different it was from working for other people. "I could work all day and night, you see, when the results are there, in sight. It's working for others when you never see the result, or what it leads to, and jest get paid so much a week or month, that makes you tired. Seeing the result seems to take away fatigue. The other's simply toil. Now, come to tea. I do relish my cup of tea."

It was very still and peaceful in the house; the logs burned brightly on the open hearth; Julius was upstairs in his room. The winds had gone to sleep, and the hush of dusk crept slowly on the outside world.

I followed my hostess into the corner by the fire where two deep arm-chairs beside the table beckoned us. Rather severe she looked now in a dark stuff dress, dignified, something half stately, half remote about her attitude. The poise in her physical expression came directly from the mind. She moved with grace, sure of herself, seductive too, yet with a seduction that led the thoughts far beyond mere physical attraction. It was the charm of a natural simplicity I felt.

"I've taken up Julius his," I heard her saying in her uncultivated voice, as she began to pour out tea. "And I've made these — these sort of flat unleavened cakes for us." The adjective startled me. She pointed to thin, round scone-like things that lay steaming in a plate. But her eyes were fixed on mine as though they questioned.

"You used to like 'em...."

Or, whether she said "I hope you'll like 'em," I am not certain — for a sudden sense of intimacy flashed between us and disconcerted me. Perhaps it was the tone and gesture rather than the actual words. A sweetness as of some deep, remembered joy rose in me.

I started. There had been disclosure, a kind of revelation. A door had opened. They were familiar to me — those small "unleavened cakes." Something of happiness that had seemed lost slipped back of its own accord into my heart. My head swam a second. Some part of me was drawn backwards. For, as I took the offered cake, there stole to my nostrils a faint perfume that made me tremble. Elusive, ghostly sensations dropped their hair-like tracery on the brain, then vanished utterly. It was all dim, yet haunting as a dream. The perfume faded instantly.

"Thank you," I murmured. "You make them deliciously ..." aware at the same moment I had been about to say another thing in place of the empty words, but had deliberately kept it back.

The bewilderment came and went. Mrs. LeVallon dropped her eyes from mine, although the question in their penetrating gaze still lingered. I realised this new sense of intimacy that seemed uncannily perfect, it was so natural. No suggestion lay in it of anything that should not be, but rather the close-knit comfortable atmosphere of two minds that were familiar and at home in silence. It deepened with every minute. It seemed the deep companionship that many, many years had forged.

Yet the moment of wonder had mysteriously come and gone. Even the aroma of the little steaming cake was lost as well — I could not recapture the faint odour. And it was my surface consciousness, surely, that asked then about the recipe, and joined in the soft, familiar laughter with which she answered that she "reely couldn't say quite," because "it seemed to have come of its own accord while I was doing nothing in particular with odds and ends about the cooking-stove."

"A very simple way," I suggested, trying to keep my thoughts upon the present, "a very easy way of finding new recipes," whereupon, her manner graver somewhat, she replied: "But, of course, I could make them better if I stopped to think a bit first ... and had the proper things. It's jest my laziness. I know how — only" — she looked peeringly at me again as with an air of searching for something I might supply— "I've sort of mislaid something — forgot it, rather ... and I can't, for the life of me, remember where I learned it first."

There stirred between us into that corner of the lamp-lit room an emotion that made me feel we used light words together as men use masks upon their faces for disguise, fully aware that while the skin is hidden the eyes are clear. My happiness seemed long-established. There was a little pause in which the key sank deeper. Before I could find anything to say, Mrs. LeVallon went on again:

"There's several things come to me like that these last few days — —"

"Since I came?" I could not prevent the question, nor could I hide the pleasure in my voice.

"That's it," she agreed instantly; "it's as though you brought them — back — simply by being here. It's got to do with you." Her elbows were on the table, the chin resting on her folded hands as she stared at me, both concentration and absent-mindedness in her expression at the same time. Her thoughts were travelling, searching, beating backwards into time. She leaned a little nearer to me suddenly, so that I could almost feel her breath upon my face.

"Like memories of childhood revived," I said. My heart beat quickly. There was great sweetness in me.

"That's it," she repeated, but in a lowered tone. "That's it, I think; as if we'd been children together, only so far back I can't hardly remember."

She gazed again into my eyes, searching for words her untutored brain could not supply. There was a moment of extraordinary tenseness. I felt unsure of myself; uneasiness was in it, but a strange, lifting joy as well. I knew an instant's terror that either she or I might say an undesirable thing.

And to my relief just then the Man came clattering in with a cup containing — cream! Her eyes left mine as with an effort. Drawing herself free, yet not easily, from some inner entanglement that had captured both of us, she turned and took the little cup. "There is no proper cream jug," she observed with a smile, dropping back into the undisguised accent of the East Croydon fruiterer's daughter, "but the cream's thick and good jest the same, and we'll take it like this, won't we?" She stirred it with a spoon into my teacup.

The "Man" stood watching us a moment with a questioning, puzzled look, and then went out again. At the door he turned once more to assure himself that all was as it should be, decided that it was so, and vanished with a little run. Slowly, then, upon her face stole back that graver aspect of the eyes and mouth; and into my own mind stole equally a sense of deep confusion as I watched her — very delightful, strangely sweet, but my first uneasiness oddly underlying it. Instinctively I caught myself shrinking as from vague pain or danger. I made a struggle to get free, but it was a feeble and half-hearted effort. Mrs. LeVallon was saying exactly what I had known she was going to say.

"I'm all upset to-day," she said with blunt simplicity, "and you must excuse my manners. I feel sort of lost and queer. I can't make it out, but I keep forgettin' who I am, and sometimes even where I am. You" — raising her eyes from the plate to mine— "oughter be able to help me. D'you know what I mean? Professor, sometimes, especially nights," her voice sinking as she said it, "I feel afraid of something — —" She paused, correcting herself suddenly. "Oh, no, it isn't fear exactly, you see, but a great happiness that seems too big to get hold of quite. It's jest out of reach always, and something'll go wrong before it reely comes." She looked very hard at me. The strange sea-green eyes became luminous. I felt power in her, a power she was not aware of herself. “As if,” she continued earnestly, “there was some price to pay for it — first. And somehow it’s for *you* — it’s what you’ve come for — —” She broke off suddenly.

A touch of rapture caught me. It was only with strong effort that I made a commonplace reply:

“This valley, Mrs. LeVallon” — I purposely used the name and title— “is exceedingly lonely; you are shut off from the world you are accustomed to.” I tried to put firmness and authority into my words and manner. “You have no companionship — of your own sex — —”

She brushed my explanation aside impatiently. “Oh, but it ain’t nothing of that sort,” she exclaimed, seeing through my conventional words, and knowing I realised that she did so; “it’s not loneliness, nor anything ordin’ry like that. Julius is everything to me in *that* way. It’s something bigger and quite different — that’s got worse, got stronger I mean, since you came. But I like your being here,” she added quickly, “because I feel it’s jest the thing for Julius and for — for all of us. Only, since you’ve been here it seems — well, it’s sort of coming to a head.”

I remained speechless. A kind of helplessness came over me. I could not prevent it.

“And mixed up with it,” she continued, not waveringly, but wholly mistress of herself, “is the feeling that you’ve been here before too — been with me. We’ve been together, and you know we have.” Her cheek turned a shade paler; she was very earnest; there was deep emotion in her. “That’s what I keep feelin’ for one thing. Everything is that familiar — as if all three of us had been together before and had come back again.” Her breath came faster.

“You understand me, don’t you? When Julius told me you were coming, it seemed quite natural, and I didn’t feel nothing of any kind except that it was so natural; but the day you arrived I felt — afraid, though always with this tremendous happiness behind it. And *that’s* why I didn’t come down to meet you!” The words came pouring out, yet without a sign of talking wildly. Her eyes shone; the velvet band on her throat rose and fell; I was aware of happiness and amazement, but never once of true surprise. I had expected this, and more besides. “The moment I saw you — up there at the winder in the early mornin’ — it came bursting over me, Professor, as sure as anything in this world, that we’ve come together again like old, old friends.”

And it was still my conventional sense of decent conduct that held me to make a commonplace rejoinder. Yet how the phrases came, and why the thin barrier between us did not fall with a crash is more than I can tell.

“Julius had spoken about me, and no doubt your imagination — here in this deserted place — —”

She shook her head almost contemptuously. “Julius said nothing,” she put in quickly, “nothing in particular, I mean; only that you were old friends and he was positive sure you’d come because you’d promised. It’s since you’ve come here that I’ve felt all this so strong. You come as familiar and natural to me as my own mother,” she continued, a faint flush rising on the former pallor; “and what’s more, your coming has brought a whole lot of other things nearer, too,” adding in a whisper suddenly, “things that make me afraid and happy at the same time.”

She paused a moment, peering round the room and out of the blindless windows into the darkening valley. “Now, *he*” — pointing with her thumb in the direction of the kitchen— “is all new to me, and I have no feeling about him at all. But you! Why, I always know where you are, and what you’ll be doing next, and saying, and even what you’re thinking and feeling half the time — jest as I do with Julius — almost.”

The next minute came the direct question that I dreaded. It was like a pistol shot:

“And you feel the same, Professor? You feel it, too? You know all about me — and this great wonderful thing that’s creepin’ up nearer all the time. Don’t you, now?”

I looked straight at her over the big lamp-shade, feeling that some part of me went lost in the depths of those strange, peering eyes. There was a touch of authority in her face — about lips and mouth — that I had seen once before. For an instant it hovered there while she waited for my reply. It lifted the surface plainness of her expression into a kind of solemn beauty. Her charm poured over me envelopingly.

“There is,” I stammered, “a curious sense of intimacy between us — all, and it is very delightful. It comes to me rather like childhood memories revived. The loneliness of this valley," I added, sinking my voice lest its trembling should be noticeable, "may account for a good many strange feelings, but it's the peace and loveliness that should make the chief appeal."

The searching swiftness of the look she flashed upon me, faintly touched with scorn, I have seen sometimes in the eyes of a child who knows an elder says vain things for its protection in the dark. Such weak attempts but bring the reality nearer.

"Oh, I feel that too — the loveliness — right enough," she said at once, her eyes still fixed on mine, "but I mean these other things as well." Her tone, her phrase, assumed that I also was aware of them. "Where do they come from? What are they exactly? I often fancy there's lots of other people up here besides ourselves, only they're hidden away always — watchin', waitin' for something to happen — something that's being got ready like. Oh, but it's a splendid feeling, too, and makes me feel alive all over." She sat up and clapped her hands softly like a child, but there was awe as well as joy in her. "And it comes from the woods and sky somehow — like wind and lightning. God showed Himself once, didn't He, in a burnin' bush and in a mighty rushin' wind?"

"Nature seems very real in a place like this," I said hurriedly. "We see no other human beings. Imagination grows active and constructs — —"

The instant way she swept aside the evasive reply I was so proud of made me feel foolish.

"Imagination," she said firmly, yet with a bewitching smile, "is not making up. It's finding out. You know that!"

We stared at one another for a moment without speech. It seemed as if the forest, the meadows, the little rivulet of cool, clear water, the entire valley itself became articulate — through her. Her personality rushed over me like a gush of wind. In her enthusiasm and belief rose the glow of fire.

"You feel the same," she went on, with conviction in her voice, "or you wouldn't try to pretend you don't. You wouldn't try to hide it." And the authority grew visibly upon her face. There was a touch of something imperious as well. "You see, I can't speak to *him* about it, I can't ask him"

— jerking her head towards the room upstairs— “because” — she faltered oddly for a second— “because it’s about himself. I mean he knows it *all*. And if I asked him — my God, he’d tell me!”

“You prefer not to know?”

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders with a curious gesture impossible to interpret. “I long to know,” she replied, “but I’m half afraid” — she shivered slightly— “to hear everything. I feel as if it would change me — into — someone else.” The last words were spoken almost below her breath.

But the joy broke loose in me as I heard. It was another state of consciousness she dreaded yet desired. This new consciousness was creeping over her as well. She shared it with me; our innate sympathy was so deep and perfect. More, it was a type of consciousness we had shared together before. An older day rose hauntingly about us both. We felt-with one another.

“For yourself?” I asked, dropping pretence as useless any longer. “You feel afraid for yourself?”

She moved the lamp aside with a gesture so abrupt it seemed almost violent; no object intervened between our gaze; and she leaned forward, folding her hands upon the white tablecloth. I sat rigidly still and watched her. Her face was very near to mine. I could see myself reflected in her glowing eyes.

“Not for myself, Professor, nor for you,” she said in a low voice. Then, dropping the tone to a whisper, “but for him. I’ve felt it on and off ever since we came up here last spring. But since you’ve come, I’ve known it positive — that something’ll happen to Julius — before we leave — and before you leave....”

“But, Mrs. LeVallon — —”

“And it’s something we can’t prevent,” she went on whispering, “neither of us — nor oughter prevent either — because it’s something we’ve got to do all three together.”

The intense conviction in her manner blocked utterance in me.

“Something I want to do, what’s more,” she continued, “because it’s sort of magnificent — if it comes off proper and as it should — magnificent for all of us, and like a great vision or something. *You* know what I mean. We are together in it, but this old valley and the whole world is somehow in it, too. I can’t quite understand. It’s very wonderful. Julius will suffer, too, only he’ll call it jest development.” Her voice sank lower still. “D’you know, Professor, I sometimes feel there’s something in Julius that seems to me like — God.”

She stood up as she said it, tall, erect, her figure towering above me; and as she rose her face passed out of the zone of yellow lamplight into comparative shadow, the eyes fixed always penetratingly upon my own. And I could have sworn that not alone their expression altered, growing as with fiery power, but that the very outline of her head and shoulders shifted into something else, something dark, remote and solemn as a tree at midnight, drawn almost visibly into larger scale.

She bent lower again a little over the table, leaning her hands upon the back of the chair she had just occupied. I knew exactly what she was going to say. The sentences dropped one by one from her lips just as I expected.

“I’ve always had a dread in me, ever since I can remember,” I heard this familiar thing close in my ear, “a sinking like — of some man that I was bound to meet — that there was an injury I’d got to put right, and that I’d have to suffer a lot in doing it. When I met Julius first I thought it might be him. Then I knew it wasn’t him, but that I’d meet the other — the right man — through him sooner or later.” She stopped and watched me for a second. Her eyes looked through and through me. “It’s you, Professor,” she concluded; “it’s you.”

She straightened up again and passed behind my chair. I heard her retreating steps. A thousand words rose up in me, but I kept silence. What should I say? How should I confess that I, too, had known a similar dread of meeting — her? A net encompassed me, a web was flung that tightened as it fell — a web of justice, marvellously woven, old as the stars and certain as the pull of distant planets, closing us all together into a pattern of actions necessary and inexorable.

I turned. I saw her against the window where she stood looking out into the valley, now thick with darkness about the little house. And for one passing instant it seemed to me that the entire trough of that dark valley brimmed with the forces of wind and fire that were waiting to come in upon us.

And Mrs. LeVallon turned and looked at me across the room. There was a smile upon her lips.

“But we’ll play it out,” her whisper reached me, “and face it all without fear or shirking ... when it ... comes....” And as she whispered it I hid my face in my hands so as not to meet her gaze. For my own dread of years ago returned in force upon me, and I knew beyond all doubt or question, though without a shred of evidence, that what she said was true.

And when I lifted my eyes a moment later Mrs. LeVallon had gone from the room, and the Man, I saw, was clearing away the tea things, glancing at me from time to time for a word or smile, as though to show that whatever happened he was always faithful, ready to fight for all of us to the death if necessary, and to be depended upon absolutely.

CHAPTER XXIII

"*A THOUSAND AGES onward led*
Their joys and sorrows to that hour;
No wisdom weighed, no word was said,
For only what we were had power." — A. E.

Meanwhile my intercourse with Nature now began to betray itself in curious little ways, and none more revealing of this mingled joy and nervousness than my growing excitement on being abroad after dark alone.

In the far more desolate Monzoni Valley a few weeks before I had passed whole nights in the open without the least suspicion of uneasiness, yet here, amid these friendly woods, covered by this homely, peaceful valley, it was suddenly made clear to me that I had nerves. And the reason, briefly put, was that there I knew myself alone, whereas here I knew myself never alone.

This sense of a populated Nature grew. After dusk it fairly mastered me, but even in broad daylight, when the September sunshine flooded the whole trough of valley with warmth and brightness, there clung to me the certainty that my moods and feelings, as my very footsteps, too, were noted — and understood. This sense of moving Presences, as in childhood, was stirred by every wind that blew. The feeling of co-operation increased. It was conscious, intelligent co-operation.

"Over that limestone ridge against the sky," I caught myself feeling, rather than definitely thinking; "from just beyond the crests of those tall pines, will presently come — —" What? I knew not, even as the child knows not. Only, it would come — appearing suddenly from the woods, or clouds, or from behind the big boulders that strewed the open spaces.

In the fields about the châlet this was manifest too, but especially on the naked ridges above the forests and in the troughs that held the sunlight. Where the wind had unobstructed motion, and where the heat of the sun accumulated in the hollows, this sense of preparation, of co-operation, chiefly touched me. There was behind it pressure — as of purpose and direction, the idea that intelligence stirred within these natural phenomena. Some type of elemental life, enormous yet generally diffused through formlessness, moved and had its being behind natural appearances.

More and more, too, I realised that “inanimate” Nature was a script that it was possible to read; that certain objects, certain appearances drew my attention because they had a definite meaning to convey, whereas others remained unnoticed, as though not necessary to the sentence of some message or communication. The Language of Happenings that Julius talked about — the occurrences of daily life as words in some deep cosmical teaching — connected itself somewhere with this meaning that hid in common objects.

That my awareness of these things was known to others of the household besides myself was equally clear, for I never left the immediate neighbourhood of the châlet after dark without the Man following my movements with a kind of anxiety, sometimes coming on my very tracks for a considerable distance, or hanging about until I returned to light and safety. In sleep, too, as I passed slowly into unconsciousness, it seemed that the certainty of these Presences grew startlingly distinct, and more than once I woke in the night without apparent cause, yet with the conviction that they brooded close upon the châlet and its inmates, pressing like a rising flood against the very walls and windows. And on these occasions I usually heard Julius moving in his room just across the narrow passage, or the Man astir in the lower regions of the house. Outside, the moonlight, cold and gleaming, silvered the quiet woods and limestone heights. Yet not all the peace and beauty of the scene, nor the assurance of the steady stars themselves, could quite dispel this conviction that something was in active progress all about me, and that the elements themselves urged forward towards the deliverance of some purpose that had relation to ourselves.

Julius, I knew, was at the root of it.

One night — a week or so after my arrival — I woke from a dreamless sleep with the impression that a voice had called me. I paused and listened, but the sound was not repeated. I lay quietly for some minutes, trying to discover whose voice it was, for I seemed bereft of some tender companionship quite recently enjoyed. Someone who had been near me had gone again. I was aware of loneliness.

It was between one and two in the morning and I had slept for several hours, yet this mood was not the one in which I had gone to bed. Sleep, even ten minutes' sleep, brings changes on the heart; I woke to this sense of something desirable just abandoned. Someone, it seemed, had called my name. There was a tingling of the nerves, a poignant anticipation that included high delight. I craved to hear that voice again. Then, suddenly, I knew.

I rose and crossed the room. The warmth of the house oppressed me, although the wood-fire in the hearth downstairs was long since out, and by the open window I drank in the refreshing air. The valley lay in a lake of silver. There was mist upon the meadows, transparent, motionless, the tinkling of the rivulet just audible beneath its gauzy covering. The cliffs rose in the distance, gaunt and watchful; the forest was a pool of black. I saw the lake, a round blot upon the fields. Over the shingled roof occasional puffs of wind made a faint rushing sound under the heavy eaves. The moonlight was too bright for stars, and the ridges seemed to top the building with the illusion of nearness that such atmosphere engenders. The hush of a perfect autumn night lay over all.

I stood by that open window spellbound. For the clear loveliness seemed to take my hand and lead me forth into a vale of beauty that, behind the stillness, was brimming with activity. Vast energy paused beneath the immobility. The moonlight, so soft and innocent, yet gleamed with a steely brightness as of hidden fire; the puffs of wind were but the trickling draughts escaping from reservoirs that stored incalculable reserves. A terrific quality belied the appearance of this false repose. I was aware of elemental powers, pressed down and eager to run over. It came to me they also had been — called. Their activity, moreover, was in some very definite relation to myself. The voice that summoned me had warned as well.

I stood listening, trembling with an anticipation of things called unearthly. Nature, dressed in the Night, stepped in and took my hand. There seemed an enormous gesture; and it was a gesture, I felt, of adoration. Somewhere behind the calm picture there lay worship.

And I realised, then, that I stood before a page of writing. Out of this inanimate map that was composed of earth, air, fire and water, a deep sentence of elemental significance thrust up into my consciousness. Objects, forced into syllables of this new language, spoke to me. The cosmic language which is the language of the gods stood written on the moonlit world. “We lie here ready for your use,” I read. “Worship is the link. We may be known on human terms. You can use us. We can work with you.”

The message was so big, it seemed to thunder. Close to this window-sill on which I leaned the rising energy swayed like a sea. It was obedient to human will, and human will could harness it for practical purposes. I was *feeling-with* it. Immense, far-spreading, pouring down in viewless flood from the encircling heights, the surge of it came round the lonely châlet. The valley brimmed. The blindly-heaving lift of it — thus it presented itself to my imagination — could alter the solid rocks until they flowed like water, could float the trees as though they were but straws. For this also came to me with a conviction no less significant than the rest — that the particular elemental powers at hand were the familiar ones of heat and air. With those twin powers, which in their ultimate physical manifestation men know as wind and fire, my mind had established contact. But it was with the spiritual prototypes of these two elements my own small personal breath and heat linked on. There was co-operation. I had been called by name; yet my summoning was but a detail in some vaster evocation. There was no barrier between the not-me, as I must call it, and the me. Others had been called as well.

So strong was the sense that some unusual manifestation of these two “elements” approached, that I instinctively drew back; and in that same instant there flashed into me a vision, as it were, of sheeted flame and of gigantic wind. In my heart the picture rushed, for outwardly still reigned the calm and silence of the autumn night. Yet any moment, it seemed, the barrier into visible, sensible appearance would be leaped. And it was then, while I stood hesitating half-way between the window and the bed, that the sound rose again with sharp distinctness, and my name was called a second time.

I heard the voice; I recognised it; but the name was not the one I answer to to-day. It was another — first uttered at Edinburgh many years ago —

Silvatela. And strong emotion laid a spell upon my senses, masking the present with a veil of other times and other places. I stood entranced.... I heard Julius moving softly on the bare boards of the passage as he came towards my room; the door opened quietly; he held a lighted candle; I saw him framed against the darkness on the threshold.

For a fraction of a second then, before either of us spoke, it was as though he stood before me in another setting. For the meagre wood on either side of him gave place somehow to pylons of grey stone, hewn massively; the ceiling lifted into vaulted space where stars hung brightly; cool air breathed against my skin; and through an immense crepuscular distance I was aware of moving figures, clothed like his own in flowing white with napkined heads, their visages swarthier than those I knew to-day. He took a step forward into the room, and the shifting shadows from the moving candle dispelled the entire scene as though the light and darkness had constructed it. He spoke at once:

“*She* calls you,” he said quietly.

He set the candle down upon the table by my bed and gently closed the door. The draught, as he did so, shook the flame, sending a flutter of shadows dancing through the air. Yet it was no play of light and shadow that this time laid the strange construction on his face and gestures. So stately were his movements, so radiant his pale, passionless features, so touched with high, unearthly glory his whole appearance, that I watched him for a minute in silence, conscious of respect that bordered upon awe. He had been, I knew, in direct communication with the very sources of his strange faith, and a remnant of the power still clung to the outer body of his flesh. Into that small, cramped chamber Julius brought the touch of other life, of other consciousness that yet was not wholly unfamiliar to me. I remained close beside him. I drank in power from him. And, again, across my thoughts swept that sheet of fire and that lift of violent wind.

“*She* calls you,” he repeated calmly; and by the emphasis on the pronoun I knew he meant her Self of older times.

“She — —” I whispered. “Your wife!”

He bowed his head. “She knows, now for the first time, that *you* are here.”

"She remembers?" I asked falteringly, knowing the "you" he meant was also of an older day.

"She lies in trance," he answered, "and the buried Self is in command. She felt your presence, and she called for you — by name."

"In trance?" I had the feeling of distress that he had forced her. But he caught my thought and set it instantly at rest.

"From deep sleep she passed of her own accord," he said, "into the lucid state. Her older Self, which retains the memories of all the sections, is now consciously awake."

"And she knows you too? Knows you as you were — remembers?" I asked breathlessly, thinking of my first sight of him in the doorway.

"She is aware at this very moment of both you and me," he answered, "but as she knew us in that particular past. For the old conditions are gathering to-night about the house, and the Equinox is nearer."

"Gathered, then, by you," I challenged, conscious that an emotion of protection rose strong in me — protection of the woman.

"Gathered, rather," he at once rejoined, "by our collective presence, by our collective feeling, thought and worship, but also by necessity and justice which bring the opportunity."

He spoke with solemnity. I stared for several minutes in silence, facing him and holding his brilliant eyes with an answering passion in my own. Through the open window came a sighing draught of wind; a sense of increasing warmth came with it; it seemed to me that the pictured fire and wind were close upon me, as though the essential life of these two common elements were rising upon me from within; and I turned, trembling slightly, aware of the valley behind me in the moonlight. The châlet, it seemed, already was surrounded. The Presences stood close.

"They also know," he whispered; "they wait for the moment when we shall require them — the three of us together. She, too, desires them. The necessity is upon us all."

With the words there rose a certainty in me that knew no vain denial. The sense of reality and truth came over me again. He was in conscious league with powers of Nature that held their share of universal intelligence; we three had returned at last together. The approach of semi-spiritual intelligences that operate through phenomenal effects — in this case wind and fire — was no imaginative illusion. The channels here were open.

“No sparrow falls, no feather is misplaced,” he whispered, “but it is known and the furthest star responds. From our life in another star we brought our knowledge first. But we used it here — on the earth. It was you — your body — that we used as channel. It was your return that prevented our completion. Your dread of to-day is memory — —”

There broke in upon his unfinished sentence an interrupting voice that turned me into stone. Ringing with marvellous authority, half sweet, half terrible, it came along the wooden walls of that narrow corridor, entered the very room about our ears, then died away in the open valley at our backs. The awakened Self of “Mrs. LeVallon” called us:

“Concerighé ... Silvatela...!” sounded through the quiet night.

The voice, with its clear accents, plunged into me with an incredible appeal of some forgotten woe and joy combined. It was a voice I recognised, yet one unheard by me for ages. Power and deep delight rose in me, but with them a flash of stupid, earthly terror. It sounded again, breaking the silence of the early morning, but this time nearer than before. It was close outside the door. I felt Julius catch me quickly by the arm. My terror vanished at his touch.

The tread of bare feet upon the boards was audible; the same second the door pushed open and *she* stood upon the threshold, a tall, white figure with fixed and luminous eyes, and hair that fell in a dark cloud to the waist. Into the zone of pallid candle-light that the moon made paler still, she passed against the darkness of the outer passage, white and splendid, like some fair cloud that swims into the open sky. And as wind stirs the fringes of a cloud, the breeze from the window stirred the edges of her drapery where the falling hair seemed to gather it in below the waist.

It was the wife of Julius, but the wife of Julius changed. Like some vision of ethereal beauty she stood before us, yet a vision that was alive. For she moved, she breathed, she spoke. It was both the woman as I knew her actually To-day, and the woman as I had known her — Yesterday. The partial aspect that used this modern body was somehow supplemented — fulfilled by the presentment of her entire Self. The whole series of past sections came up to reinforce the little present, and I gazed upon the complete soul of her, rather than upon the fragment that made bread now in the kitchen and had known domestic service. The bearing was otherwise, the attitude another, the very fashion of her features changed. Her walk, her gestures, her mien had undergone enthralling alteration.

The stream of time went backwards as I gazed, or, rather, it stopped flowing altogether and held steady in a sea that had no motion. I sought the familiar points in her, plunging below the surface with each separate one to find what I — remembered. The eyes, wide open in the somnambulistic lucidity, were no longer of a nondescript mild grey, but shone with the splendour I had already half surprised in them before; the poise of the neck, the set of the shoulders beneath the white linen of her simple night-dress, had subtly, marvellously changed. She stood in challenge to a different world. It seemed to me that I saw the Soul of her, attended by the retinue of memories, experience, knowledge of all its past, summed up sublimely in a single moment. She was superb.

The outward physical change was, possibly, of the slightest, yet wore just that touch of significant alteration which conveyed authority. The tall, lithe figure moved with an imperial air; she raised her arm towards the open window; she spoke. The voice was very quiet, but it held new depth, sonority and accent. She had not seen me yet where I stood in the shadows by the wall, for Julius screened me somewhat, but I experienced that familiar clutch of dread upon the heart that once before — ages and ages ago — had overwhelmed me. Memory poured back upon my own soul too.

“Concerighé,” she uttered, looking full at Julius while her hand pointed towards the moonlit valley. “They stand ready. The air is breaking and the fire burns. Then where is *he?* I called him.”

And Julius, looking from her face to mine, answered softly: “He is beside you — close. He is ready with us too. But the appointed time — the Equinox — is not quite yet.”

The pointing hand sank slowly to her side. She turned her face towards me and she — saw. The gaze fell full upon my own, the stately head inclined a little. We both advanced; she took my outstretched hand, and at the touch a shock as of wind and fire seemed to drive against me with almost physical violence. I heard her voice.

“Silvatela — we meet — again!” Her eyes ran over in a smile of recognition as the old familiar name came floating to me through the little room. But for the firm clasp of her hand I should have dropped, for there was a sudden weakness in my knees, and my senses reeled a moment. “We meet again,” she repeated, while her splendid gaze held mine, “yet to you it is a dream. Memory in you lies unawakened still. And the fault is ours.”

She turned to Julius; she took his hand too; we stood linked together thus; and she smiled into her husband’s eyes. “His memory,” she said, “is dim. He has forgotten that we wronged him. Yet forgiveness is in his soul that only half remembers.” And the man who was her husband of To-day said low in answer: “He forgives and he will help us now. His love forgives. The delay we caused his soul he may forget, but to the Law there is no forgetting possible. We must — we shall — repay.”

The clasp of our hands strengthened; we stood there linked together by the chain of love both past and present that knows neither injustice nor forgetting.

Then, with the words, as also with the clasping hands that joined us into one, some pent up barrier broke down within my soul, and a flood of light burst over me within that made all things for a moment clear. There came a singular commotion of the moonlit air outside the window, as if the tide that brimmed the valley overflowed and poured about us in the room. I stood transfixed and speechless before the certainty that Nature, in the guise of two great elements, flooded in and shared our passionate moment of recognition. A blinding confusion of times and places struggled for possession of me. For a tempest of memories surged past, driven tumultuously by sheeted flame and rushing wind. The inner hurricane lasted but a second. It rose, it fell, it passed away. I was aware that I saw down into deep, prodigious depths as into a pool of water, crystal clear; veil lifted after veil; memory revived.

I shuddered; for it seemed my present self slipped out of sight while this more ancient consciousness usurped its place. My little modern confidence collapsed; the mind that doubts and criticises, but never knows, fell back into its smaller rôle. The sum-total that was Me remembered and took command. And realising myself part of a living universe, I answered her:

“With love and sympathy,” I uttered in no uncertain tones, “and with complete forgiveness too.”

In that little bedroom of a mountain châlet, lit by the moon and candle-light, we stood together, our bodies joined by the clasp of hands, and our ancient souls united in a single purpose.

I looked into the eyes of this great woman, imperially altered in her outward aspect, magnificent in the towering soul of her; I looked at Julius, stately as some hierophantic figure who mastered Nature by comprehending her; I felt their hands, his own firm and steady, hers clasping softly, tenderly, yet with an equal strength; and I realised that I stood thus between them, not merely in this isolated mountain valley, but in the full tide of life whose source rose in the fountains of an immemorial past, Nature and human-nature linked together in a relationship that was a practical reality. Our three comrade-souls were re-united in an act of restitution; sharing, or about to share, a ceremony that had cosmic meaning.

And the beauty of the woman stole upon my heart, bringing the loveliness of the universe, while Julius brought its strength.

“This time,” I said aloud, “you shall not fail. I am with you both in sympathy, forgiveness, — love.”

Their hands increased the pressure on my own.

Her eyes held mine as she replied: “This duty that we owe to Nature and to you — so long — so long ago.”

“To me —— ?” I faltered.

With shining eyes, and a smile divinely tender, she answered: “Love shall repay. We have delayed you by our deep mistake.”

“We shall undo the wrong we worked upon you,” I heard Julius say. “We stole the channel of your body. And we failed.”

“My love and sympathy are yours,” I repeated, as we drew closer still together. “I bear you no ill-will....”

And then she continued gravely, but ever with that solemn beauty lighting up her face:

“Oh, Silvatela, it seems so small a thing in the long, long journey of our souls. We were too ambitious only. The elemental Powers we tried to summon through your vacated body are still unhoused. The fault was not yours; it was our ambition and our faithlessness. I loved you to your undoing — you sacrificed yourself so willingly, loving me, alas, too well. The failure came. Instead of becoming as the gods, we bear this burden of a mighty debt. We owe it both to you and to the universe. Fear took us at the final moment — and you returned too soon — robbed of the high teaching that was yours by right, your progress delayed thereby, your memory clouded *now*....”

“My development took another turning,” I said, hardly knowing whence the knowledge came to me, “no more than that. It was for love of you that I returned too soon — the fault was mine. It was for the best — there has been no real delay.” But there mingled in me a memory both clouded and unclouded. There was a confusion beyond me to unravel. I only knew our love was marvellous, although the fuller motives remained entangled. “It is all forgiven,” I murmured.

“Your forgiveness,” she answered softly, “is of perfect love. We loved each other then — nor have we quite forgotten now. This time, at least, we shall ensure success. The Powers stand ready, waiting; we are united; we shall act as one. At the Equinox we shall restore the balance; and memory and knowledge shall be yours a hundredfold at last.”

The voice of Julius interrupted, though so low it was scarcely audible:

“I offer myself. It is just and right, not otherwise. The risk must be all mine. Once accomplished” — he turned to me with power in his face— “we shall provide you with the privilege you lost through us. Our error will then be fully expiated and the equilibrium restored. It is an expiation and a sacrifice. Nature in this valley works with us now, and behind it is the universe — all, all aware....”

It seemed to me she leaped at him across the space between us. Our hands released. Perhaps, with the breaking of our physical contact, some measure of receptiveness went out of me, or it may have been the suddenness of the unexpected action that confused me. I no longer fully understood. Some bright clear flame of comprehension wavered, dimmed, went out in me. Even the words that passed between them then I did not properly catch. I saw that she clasped him round the neck while she uttered vehement words that he resisted, turning aside as with passionate refusal. It was — this, at least, I grasped before the return of reason in me broke our amazing union and left confusion in the place of harmony — that each one sought to take the risk upon himself, herself. The channel of evocation — a human system — I dimly saw, was the offering each one burned to make. The risk, in some uncomprehended way, was grave. And I stepped forward, though but half understanding what it was I did. I offered, to the best of my memory and belief — offered myself as a channel, even as I had offered or permitted long ago in love for her.

For I had discerned the truth, and knew deep suffering, nor cared what happened to me. It was the older Self in her that gave me love, while her self of To-day — the upper self — loved Julius. Mine was the old subconscious love unrecognised by her normal self; the love of the daily, normal self was his.

The look upon their faces stopped me. They moved up closer, taking my hands again. The moonlight fell in a silver pool upon the wooden flooring just between us; it clothed her white-clad figure with its radiance; it shone reflected in the eyes of Julius. I heard the tinkling of the little stream outside, beginning its long journey to an earthly sea. The nearer pine trees rustled. And *her* voice came with this moonlight, wind and water, as though the quiet night became articulate.

“So great is your forgiveness, so deep our ancient love,” she murmured. And while she said it, both he and she together made the mightiest gesture I have ever seen upon small human outlines — a gesture of resignation and refusal that yet conveyed power as though a forest swayed or some great sea rolled back its flood. There was this sublime suggestion in the wordless utterance by which they made me know my offering was impossible. For Nature behind both of them said also No....

Then, with a quiet motion that seemed gliding rather than the taking of actual steps, her figure withdrew slowly towards the door. Her face turned from me as when the moon slips down behind a cloud. Erect and stately, as though a marble statue passed from my sight by some interior motion of its own, her figure entered the zone of shadow just beyond the door. The sound of her feet upon the boards was scarcely audible. The narrow passage took her. She was gone.

CHAPTER XXIV

I STOOD ALONE with Julius, Nature alive and stirring strangely, as with aggressive power, just beyond the narrow window-sill on which he leaned.

“You understand,” he murmured, “and you remember too — at last.”

I made no reply. There are moments when extraordinary emotions, beyond expression either of tears or laughter, move the heart as with the glory of another world. And one of these was certainly upon me now. I knew things that I did not understand. A pageant of incomparable knowledge went past me, yet, as it were, just out of reach. The memories that offered themselves were too enormous — and too different — to be grasped intelligently by the mind.

And yet one thing I realised clearly: that the elemental powers of Nature already existing in every man and woman in small degree, could know an increase, an intensification, which, directed rightly, might exalt humanity. The consciousness of those olden days knew direct access to Nature. And the method, for which no terms exist To-day in any spoken language, was that *feeling-with* which is adoration, and that desiring sympathy which is worship. The script of Nature wrote it clear. To read it was to act it out. The audacity of their fire-stealing ambition in the past I understood, and so forgave. My memory, further than this, refused to clear....

I remember that we talked together for a space; and it was longer than I realised at the time, for before we separated the moon was down behind the ridges and the valley lay in a single blue-black shadow. There was confusion on my heart and mind. The self in me that asked and answered seemed half of To-day and half of Yesterday.

“She remembered,” Julius said below his breath yet with deep delight; “she recognised us both. In the morning she will have again forgotten, for she knows not how to bring the experiences of deep sleep over into her upper consciousness.”

"She said 'they waited.' There are — others — in this valley?" It was more a statement to myself than a question, but he answered it:

"Everywhere and always there are others. But just now in this valley they are near to us and active. I have sent out the call."

"You have sent out the call," I repeated without surprise and yet with darkened meaning. "Yes, I knew — I was aware of it." My older consciousness was sinking down again.

"By worship," he interrupted, "the worship of many weeks. We have worshipped and felt-with, intensifying the link already established by those who lived before us here. Your attitude is also worship. Together we shall command an effective summons that cannot fail. Already they are aware of us, and at the Equinox their powers will come close — closer than love or hunger."

"In ourselves," I muttered. "Aware of their activities in ourselves!"

And my mouth went suddenly dry as I heard his quiet answer:

"We shall feel their immense activities in ourselves as they return to their appointed places whence we first evoked them. Through one of our three bodies they must pass — the bodiless ones." A silence fell between us. The blood beat audibly in my ears like drums.

"They need a body — again?" I whispered.

He bowed his head. "The channel, as before," he whispered with deep intensity, "of a human organism — a brain, a mind, a body." And, seeing perhaps that I stared with a bewilderment half fear and half refusal, he added quietly, "In the raw, they are too vast for human use, their naked, glassy essence impossible to hold. They must mingle first with our own smaller powers that are akin to them, and thus take on that restraint which enables the human will to harness their colossal strength. Alone I could not accomplish this, but with the three of us, merged by our love into a single unit — —"

"But the risk — you both spoke of —— ?" I asked it impatiently, yet it was only a thick whisper that I heard.

There was a little pause before he answered me.

"There are two risks," he said with utmost gravity in his voice and face. "The descent of such powers *may* cause a shattering of the one on whom they first arrive — he is the sacrifice. My death — any consequent delay — might thus be the expiation I offer in the act of their release. That is the first, the lesser risk."

He paused, then added: "But I shall not fail."

"And — should you —— !" My voice had dwindled horribly.

"The Powers, once summoned, would — automatically — seek another channel: the channel for their return — in case I failed. That is the second and the greater risk."

"Your wife?" The words came out with such difficulty that they were scarcely audible. But Julius heard them.

He shook his head. "For herself there is no danger," he answered. "My love of to-day, and yours of yesterday protect her. Nor has it anything to do with you," he added, seeing the touch of fear that flashed from my eyes beyond my power to conceal it. "The Powers, deprived of my control in the case of my collapse beneath the strain, would follow the law of their own beings automatically. They would seek the easiest channel they could find. They would follow the line of least resistance."

And, realising that it was the other human occupant of the house he meant, I experienced a curious sensation of pity and relief; and with a hint of grandeur in my thought, I knew with what fine pathetic willingness, with what whole-hearted simplicity of devotion, this faithful "younger soul" would offer himself to help in so big a purpose — if he understood.

It was with an appalling shock that I realised my mistake. Julius, watching me closely, divined my instant thought. He made a gesture of dissent. To my complete amazement, I saw him shake his head.

"An empty and deserted organism, as yours was at the time we used it for our evocation," he said slowly; "an organism unable to offer resistance owing to its being unoccupied — that is the channel, if it were available, which they would take. When the soul is out — or *not yet — in*."

We gazed fixedly at one another for a time I could not measure. I knew his awful meaning. For to me, in that first moment of comprehension, it seemed too terrible, too incredible for belief. I staggered over to the open window. Julius came after me and laid his hand upon my shoulder.

“The body is but the instrument,” I heard him murmur; “the vehicle of the soul that uses it. Only at the moment of birth does a soul move in to take possession. The parents provide it, helpless and ignorant as to who eventually shall take command. And if this thing happened — though the risk is small — —”

I turned and faced him as he stopped.

“A monster!”

“An elemental being, a child of the elements — —”

“Non-human?” I gasped.

“Nature and human-nature linked,” he replied with curious reverence. “A cosmic being born in a human body. Only —— I shall not fail.”

And before I could find another word to utter, or even acknowledge the quick pressure of his hand upon my own, I heard his step upon the passage boards, and found myself alone again. I stood by the open window, gazing into the deep, star-lit sky above this mountain valley on our little, friendly Earth, prey to emotions that derived from another, but forgotten planet — emotions, therefore, that no “earthly” words can attempt to fathom or describe....

BOOK IV. THE ATTEMPTED RESTITUTION

CHAPTER XXV

"*LET US CONSIDER* wisdom *first*.

"*Can we be wiser by reason of something which we have forgotten? Unquestionably we can.... A man who dies after acquiring knowledge — and all men acquire some — might enter his new life, deprived indeed of his knowledge, but not deprived of the increased strength and delicacy of mind which he had gained in acquiring the knowledge. And if so, he will be wiser in the second life because of what has happened in the first.*

"*Of course he loses something in losing the actual knowledge.... But ... is not even this loss really a gain? For the mere accumulation of knowledge, if memory never ceased, would soon become overwhelming, and worse than useless. What better fate would we wish for than to leave such accumulations behind us, preserving their greatest value in the* mental faculties *which have been strengthened by their acquisition*." — J. M'Taggart.

As I sit here in the little library of my Streatham house, trying to record faithfully events of so many years ago, I find myself at a point now where the difficulty well-nigh overwhelms me. For what happened in that valley rises before me now as though it had been some strange and prolonged enchantment; it comes back to me almost in the terms of dream or vision.

If it be possible for a man to enjoy two states of consciousness simultaneously, then that possibility was mine. I know not. I can merely state that at the time my normal consciousness seemed replaced by another mode, another order, that usurped it, and that this usurping consciousness was incalculably older than anything known to men to-day; further, also, that the three of us had revived it from some immemorial pre-existence. It was memory.

Thus it seemed to me at the time; thus, therefore, I must record it. And so completely was the change effected in me that belief came with it. In no one of us, indeed, lay the slightest hint of doubt. What happened must otherwise have been the tawdriest superstition, whereas actually there was solemnity in it, even grandeur. The performance our sacramental attitude of mind made holy, was true with the reality of an older time when Nature-Worship was effective in some spiritual sense far beyond what we term animism in our retrospective summary of the past. We did, each one of us, and in more or less degree, share the life of Nature by the inner process of feeling-with that life. Her natural forces augmented us indubitably — there was intelligent co-operation.

To-day, of course, the forces in humanity drive in quite another direction; Nature is inanimate and Pan is dead; another attitude obtains — thinking, not feeling, is our ideal; men's souls are scattered beyond the hope of unity and the sword of formal creeds sharply separates them everywhere. We regard ourselves proudly as separate from Nature. Yet, even now, as I struggle to complete this record in the suburban refuge my old age has provided for me, I seem aware of changes stealing over the face of the world once more. Like another vast dream beginning, I feel, perhaps, that man's consciousness is slowly spreading outwards once again; it is re-entering Nature, too, in various movements; the wireless note is marvellously sounding; on all sides singular phenomena that *seem* new suggest that there is no limit — to extension of consciousness — to interior human activity. Some voice from the long ago is divinely trumpeting across our little globe.

This, possibly, is an old man's dream. Yet it helps me vaguely to understand how, in that enchanted valley, the three of us may actually have realised another, older point of view which amounted even to a different type of consciousness. The slight analogy presents itself; I venture to record it. Only on some such supposition could I, a normal, commonplace product of the day, have consented to remain in the valley without repugnance and distress, much less to have participated willingly as I did in all that happened. For I was almost whole-heartedly in and of it. My moments of criticism emerged, but passed. I saw existence from some cosmic point of view that presented a human life as an insignificant moment in an eternal journey that was related both to the armies of the stars and to the blades of grass along the small, cool rivulet. At the same time this vast perspective lifted each tiny detail into a whole that inspired these details with sacramental value whose meaning affected everything. To live *with* the universe made life the performance of a majestic ceremony; to live against it was to creep aside into a *cul de sac*. And so this small item of balance we three, as a group, desired to restore was both an insignificant and a mighty act of worship.

Yet, whereas to myself the happenings were so intense as to seem terrific even, to one who had not *felt* them — as I did — they must seem hardly events or happenings at all. I say "felt," because my perception of what occurred was "feeling" more than anything else. I enjoyed this other mode of existence known to the human spirit in an earlier day, and brought, apparently, to earth from our experience upon another planet.

The happenings, to me, seemed momentous — yet they consisted largely of interior changes. They were inner facts. And such inner facts "To-day" regards as less real than outer events, dismissing them as subjective. The collapse of a roof is real, the perception of an eternal verity is a mood! And if my attempt to describe halts between what is alternately bald and overstrained, it is because modern words can only stammer in dealing with experiences that have so entirely left the racial memory.

For myself the test of their actuality lies in the death that resulted — an indubitable fact at any rate! — and in the birth that followed it a little later — another unquestionable "fact."

I may advantageously summarise the essential gist of the entire matter. I would do so for this reason: that physical memory grows dim on looking back so many years and that the events in the châlet grow more and more elusive, so that I find a sharp general outline helpful to guide me in this subsequent record. Further, the portion I am now about to describe depends wholly upon a yet older memory, the memory — as it seemed to me — of thousands of years ago. This more ancient memory came partially to me only. I saw much I could not understand or realise, and so can merely report baldly. There was fluctuation. Perhaps, after all, my earlier consciousness was never restored with sufficient completeness to reconstitute the entire comprehension that had belonged to it when it was my *natural* means of perceiving, knowing, being. Words, therefore, obviously fail.

Let me say then, as Julius himself might have said, that in some far off earlier existence the three of us had offended a cosmic law, and that for the inevitable readjustment of this error, its expiation, the three of us must first of all find ourselves reincarnated once again together. This, after numerous intervening centuries, had come to pass.

The nature of the offence seemed crudely this: that, in the days when elemental Nature-Powers were accessible to men, we used two of these — those operating behind wind and fire — for selfish instead of for racial purposes. Apparently they had been evoked by means of a human body which furnished their channel of approach. It was available because untenanted, as already described. I state merely the belief and practice of an earlier day. Special guardians protected the vacated bodies from undesirable invasion, and while Julius and the woman performed this duty, they had been tempted to unlawful use for purposes of their own. The particular body was my own: I was the channel of evocation. That I had, however, been persuaded to permit such usage was as certain as that it was the love between the woman and myself that was the reason of such permission. How and why I cannot state, because, simply, I could not — remember. But that the failure of their experiment resulted in my sudden recall into the body, and the loss, therefore, of teaching and knowledge I should have otherwise enjoyed — this had delayed my soul's advance and explained also why, To-day, memory failed in me and my soul had lagged behind in its advance. Somewhat in this way LeVallon stated it.

Where this ancient experiment took place, in what country and age, I cannot pretend to affirm. The knowledge made use of, however, seems to have been, in its turn, a yet earlier memory still, and of an existence upon a planet nearer to the sun, since Fire and Wind were there recognised as a means by which deific Powers became accessible — through worship. That the human spirit was then clothed in bodies of lighter mould, and that Wind and Fire were viewed as manifestations of deity, turns my imagination, if not my definite memory, to a planet like Mercury, where gigantic Heat and therefore mighty Winds would be imposing vehicles of conveying energy from their source — the Sun.

For the expiation of the error, a re-enactment of the actual scene of its committal was necessary. It must be acted out to be effective — a ceremony. The channel, again, of a human system was essential as before. The struggles that eventually ensued, complicated by the stress of personal emotion — the individual attempts each participator made to become the channel and so the possible sacrifice — this caused, apparently, the awful failure. Emotion destroyed the unity of the group. For Julius was unable to direct the Powers evoked. They were compelled to seek a channel elsewhere, and they automatically availed themselves of that which offered the least resistance. The birth that subsequently followed, accordingly, was a human body informed literally by these two elemental Powers; and it is in the hope that of those who chance to read these notes, someone may perhaps be aware of the existence in the world of this unique being — it is in this hope primarily, I say, that the record I have attempted is made, that it may survive my death which cannot now be very long delayed.

One word more, however, I am compelled to add:

I am aware that my so easy surrender to the spell of LeVallon's personality and ideas must seem difficult to justify. Even those of my intimates, who may read this record after I am gone, may feel that my capitulation was due to what men now term hypnotic influence; whereas, that some part of me accepted with joy and welcome is the actual truth — it was some lesser part that objected and disapproved.

To myself, as to those few who may find these notes, I owe this somewhat tardy confession of personal bias. That I have concealed it in this Record hitherto seems because my "educated" self must ever struggle to deny it.

For there have always been two men in me — more than in the usual sense of good and evil. One, up to date and commonplace, enjoys the game of nineteenth century life, interests itself in motors, telephones, and mechanical progress generally, finds Socialism intriguing and even politics absorbing; while the other, holding all that activity of which such things are symbols, in curious contempt, belongs to the gods alone know what. It remains essentially inscrutable, incalculable, its face masked by an indecipherable smile. It worships the sun, believes in Magic, accepts the influences of the stars, and acknowledges with sweet reverence extended hierarchies of Beings, both lower and higher than the stage at which humanity now finds itself.

In youth, of course, this other self was stronger than in later years; yet, though submerged, it has never been destroyed. It seemed an older aspect of my divided being that declined to die. For periods of varying duration, the modern part would deny it as the superstition of primitive animistic ignorance; but, biding its time, it would rise to the surface and take the reins again. The modern supremacy passed, the older attitude held authoritative sway. The Universe then belonged to it, alive in every detail; there was communion with trees and winds and streams; the thrill of night became articulate; it was concerned with distant stars; the sun changed the earth once more into a vast temple-floor. I was not apart from any item, large or small, on earth or in the heavens, while myth and legend, poetry and folk-lore were but the broken remnants of a once extended faith, a mighty worship that was both of God and knew the gods.

At such times the drift of modern life seemed in another — a minor — direction altogether. The two selves in me could not mingle, could not even compromise. The recent one seemed trivial, but the older one pure gold. It dwelt, this latter, in loneliness, sweetly-prized, perhaps, but isolated from all minds of to-day worth knowing, because its mode of being was not theirs. A loneliness, however, not intolerable, since it was aware of lifting joy, of power no mere contrivance could conceive, and of a majestic beauty nothing of to-day could even simulate.... Societies, moreover, called secret, fraternities labelled magical and hierophantic, were all too trumpery to feed its ancient longings, too charlatan to offer it companionship, too compromising to obtain results. Among modern conditions I found no mode of life that answered to its imperious call in me. It seemed an echo and a memory.

As I grew older, both science and religion told me it must be denied. Respectful of the former, I sought some reasonable basis for these strange burning beliefs that flamed up with this older self — in vain. Unjustifiable, according to all knowledge at my disposal, they remained. History went back step by step to that darkness whence ignorance emerged; evolution traced a gradual rise from animal conditions; to no dim, former state of exalted civilisation, either remembered or imagined, could this deeper part of me track its home and origin. Yet that home, that origin, I felt, existed, and were accessible. I could no more resign their actuality than I could cease to love, to hate, to live. The mere thought of them woke emotions independent of my will, contemptuous of my intellect — emotions that were of indubitable reality. They remained convictions.

Had I, then, known some state antedating history altogether, some unfabled land of which storied Atlantis, itself a fragment, lingered as a remnant of some immenser life? Had I experienced a mode of being less cabined than the one I now experienced in a body of blood and flesh — another order of consciousness, yet identity retained — upon another star? ... The centuries geology counts backwards were but moments, the life of a planet only a little instant in the universal calendar. Was there, a million years ago, a civilisation of another kind, too ethereal to leave its signatures in sand and rocks, yet in its *natural* simplicity nearer, perhaps, to deity? Was here the origin of my unrewarded yearnings? Could reincarnation, casting back across the æons to lovelier or braver planets, give the clue? And did this older self trail literally clouds of glory from a golden age of light and heat and splendour that lay nearer to the shining centre of our corner of the heavens...?

At intervals I flung my queries like leaves upon the wind; and the leaves came back to me upon the wind. I found no answer. Speculation became gradually less insistent, though the yearnings never died. Deeper than doubt or question, they seemed ingrained — that my pre-existence has been endless, that I continue always.... And it was this strange, buried self in me, already beginning to fade a little when I went to Motfield Close to train my modern mind in modern knowledge — it was this curious older self that Julius LeVallon vitalised anew. Back came the flood of mighty questions: — Whence have we come? From what dim corner of the unmeasured cosmos are we derived, descended, making our little way on to the earth? Where have these hints of an immenser life their sweet, terrific origin, and — why this unbridged hiatus in our memory...?

The subsequent events lie somewhat confused in me until the night that heralded the Equinox. Whether two days or three intervened between the night-scene of Mrs. LeVallon’s Older Self already described, and the actual climax, I cannot remember clearly. The sequence of hours went so queerly sliding; incidents of external kind were so few that the interval remained unmarked; little happened in the sense of outward happenings on which the mind can fasten by way of measurement. We lived, it seems, so close to Nature that those time-divisions we call hours and days flowed *with* us in a smooth undifferentiated stream. I think we were too much in Nature to observe the size or length of any particular parcels. We just flowed forward with the tide itself. Yet to explain this, now that for years I am grown normal and ordinary again, is hardly possible. I only remember that larger scale; I can no longer realise it.

I recall, however, the night of that conversation when Julius left me to my hurricane of thoughts and feelings, and think I am right in saying it immediately preceded the September day that ushered in the particular "attitude" of our earth towards the rest of the Universe we call the Autumnal Equinox.

Sleep and resistance were equally impossible; I swam with an enormous current upon a rising tide. And this tide bore stars and worlds within its irresistible momentum. It bore also little flowers; moisture felt, before it is seen, as dew or rain; heat that is latent before the actual flame is visible; and air that lies everywhere until the rush of wind insists on recognition. I was aware of a prophecy that included almost menace. An uneasy sense that preparations of immense, portentous character were incessantly in progress, not in the house and in ourselves alone, but in the entire sweep of forest, vale and mountain, pressed upon me from all sides. Nature conspired, I felt, through her most usual channels to drive into a corner where she would drip over, so to speak, into amazing manifestation. And that corner, waiting and inviting, was ourselves....

Towards morning I fell asleep, and when I woke a cloudless day lay clear and fresh upon the world, the meadows shone with dew, cobwebs shimmered past my open window, and a keen breeze from the heights stung my nostrils with the scent from miles of forest. A sparkling vitality poured almost visibly with the air and sunshine into my human blood. I bathed and dressed. Frost had laid silvery fingers upon the valley during the night, and the shadows beneath the woods still shone in white irregular patches of a pristine loveliness. The feeling that Nature brimmed over was even stronger than before, and I went downstairs half conscious that the "corner" we prepared would show itself somehow fuller, *different*. The little arena waiting for it — that arena occupied by our human selves — would proclaim the risen tide. I almost expected to find Julius and his wife expressing in their physical persons the advent of this power, their very bodies, gestures, voices increased and grown upon a larger scale. And when I met them at the breakfast table, two normal, ordinary persons, merely full of the exhilarating autumn morning, I knew a moment of surprise that at the same time included relief, though possibly, too, a touch of disappointment. They were both so simple and so natural.

It brought me up short, as though before a promised hope not justified, a balked anticipation. But the next moment my mistake was clear. The sense of something dwindled gave place to its very opposite — a fuller realisation. The three of us were so intimate — I might say so divinely intimate — that my failure to see them "grander" arose from my attempt to see them "separate" — from myself. For actually we floated, all three, upon the risen tide together. It was the "mind" in me that sounded the old false note. Having increased like themselves, I was of equal stature with them; to see them "different" was impossible.

And this amazing quality was characteristic of all that followed. Ever since my arrival I had been slowly rising with the tide that brimmed the valley now to the very lips of the surrounding mountains. It brimmed our hearts as well. My companions were quiet because they, like myself, were part of it. There was no sense of disproportion or exaggeration, much less of dislocation; we shared Nature's powers without effort, without struggle, as naturally as sunshine, wind or rain. We stood within; the day contained all three. The Ceremony, which was living-with Nature, tuned to the universal life, had been in progress from the instant Julius had welcomed me a week ago. Our attitude and the earth's were one. The Equinox was in us too.

In that moment when we met at breakfast, the flash of clearer sight left all this beyond dispute. Memory shot back in a lightning glance over recent sensations and events. I realised my gradual growth into the larger scale, I grasped the significance of the various moods and tenses my changing consciousness had known as in a kind of initiation. Premonitions of another mode of mind had stolen upon me out of ordinary things. The habitual had revealed its marvellous hidden beauty. There had been transmutation. The ensouling life behind broke loose everywhere, even through the elements themselves: but particularly through the two of them that are so closely levelled to the little division we call human life: air-things and fire-things had become alert and eager. There was commotion in the palaces of Wind and Fire.

And so the bigger truth explained itself to me. What happened later seems only incredible on looking back at it from my present dwindled consciousness. At the time it was natural and quiet. A tourist, passing through our lonely valley, need not have been aware either of tumult or of wonder. He would have been too remote from us, too centred in the consciousness of To-day that accepts only what is expected, or explicable — too different, in a word, to have noticed anything beyond the presence of three strangely quiet people in a lonely châlet of the mountains.

But for us, the gamut of experience had stretched; there was in our altered state both a microscope and telescope; but a casual intruder, unprovided with either, must have gone his way, I think, unaware, unstimulated, and uninformed.

CHAPTER XXVI

"*WITH VIRTUE THE point is perhaps clearer.... I have forgotten the greater number of the good and evil acts which I have done in my present life. And yet each must have left a trace on my character. And so a man may carry over into his next life the dispositions and tendencies which he has gained by the moral contests of this life, and the value of those experiences will not have been destroyed by the death which has destroyed the memory of them.*" — Ibid.

The day that followed lives with me still as an experience of paradise beyond intelligible belief. Yet I unquestionably experienced it. The touch of dread was but the warning of the little mind, which shrank from a joy too vast for it to comprehend. Of Mrs. LeVallon this was similarly true. Julius alone, sure and steadfast in the state from which since early boyhood he had never lapsed, combined Reason and Intuition in that perfect achievement towards which humanity perhaps slowly seems moving now. He remained an image of strength and power; he lived in full consciousness what she and I lived half unconsciously. Yet to record the acts and words which proved it I find now stammeringly difficult; they were so ordinary. The point of view which revealed their "otherness" I have so wholly lost.

"The Equinox comes to-night — the pause in Nature," he said at breakfast, joy in his voice and eyes. "We shall have greater life. The moment is ours, because we know how to use it." Yet what pregnant truth came with the quiet words, what realisation of simple, overflowing beauty, what incalculable power, no language known to me can possibly express.

And his wife, equally, was aglow with happiness and splendour as of a forgotten age. In myself, too, remained no vestige of denial or alarm. The day seemed a long, sweet period without divisions, a big, simple sacrament of unconditioned bliss. Memory came back upon me in a flood, yet a memory of states, and never once of scenes or places. I re-lived a time, a state, when men knew greater purposes than they realised, dimly and instinctively perhaps, not blindly altogether, yet taught of Nature and the Nature Powers close upon their daily lives. They knew these Powers direct, experiencing them, existing side by side with them in definite mutual relationship. They neither reasoned nor, possibly, even thought. They knew.

For my nature was no longer in opposition to the rest of things, nor set over against the universe, as apart from it. I felt my acts related in a vital manner to the planet, as to the entire cosmos, and the elemental side of Nature moved alongside of my most trivial motions. The drift of happenings, in things "external" to me, were related to that drift of inner sensation that I called myself. Thoughts, desires, emotions found themselves completed in trees and grass, in rocks and flowers, in the flowing rivulet, in the whir of wind, the drip of water, the fire of the sunshine. They told me things about myself; they revealed a pregnant story of information by their attitudes and aspects; they were related to my very fate and character. The sublime simplicity of it lies beyond description. For this sacramental tone changed ordinary daily life into something splendid as eternity. I shared the elemental power of "inanimate" things. They affected me and I affected them. The Universe itself, but especially the known and friendly Earth, was hand in hand and arm in arm with me. It was feeling-with; it was the cosmic point of view.

And thus, I suppose, it was that I realised humanity as but a little portion of the whole — important, of course, as the animalculæ in a drop of water are important, yet living towards extinction only if they live apart from the surrounding ocean which divinely mothers them. To this divinity seemed due the presumption with which man To-day imagines himself the centre of this colossal ocean, and lays down the law so insolently for the entire Universe. The birth of a soul — its few years of gaining experience in a material form called body — was vital certainly for itself, yet whether that body should be informed by a "human" soul, or by another type of life of elemental kind — this, seen in proportion to the gigantic scale of universal life, left me unshocked and undismayed. To provide a body for any life was a joy, a proud delight, a duty to the whole, but whether Mrs. LeVallon bore a girl or a boy, or furnished a vehicle for some swift marvellous progeny of another kind, seemed in no sense to offer an afflicting alternative. My *present* point of view may be imagined — the ghastliness and terror, even the horror of it — but at the time I faced it otherwise, regarding the possibility with a kind of reverent wonder only. It was not terrible, but grand.

The certainty of all this I realised at the time. I see it now less vividly. The intensity has left me. So overwhelming was its perfection, however, that, as I have said, the contingency to which Mrs. LeVallon, as mother, was exposed, held no dire or unmoral suggestion for me, as it now must hold. Nor did the correlative conditions appear otherwise than true and possible. And that these two, Julius and his wife, staked an entire lifetime to correct an error of the past, meant no more — viewed in this vaster proportion — than if I ran upstairs to close a door I had foolishly left open. An open door is a little thing, yet may cause currents of air that can disarrange the harmony of the objects in its path, upsetting the purpose and balance of the entire household. It must be closed before the occupants of the house can do their work effectively. They owe it to the house as well as to themselves. There was this door left open. It must be closed.

But it could not be closed by one. We three, a group, alone could compass this small act. We who had opened it alone could close it. The potential strength of three in one was the oldest formula of effective power known to life. Such a group was capable of a claim on Nature impossible to an individual — the method of evocation we had used together in the long ago.

CHAPTER XXVII

"*THERE REMAINS LOVE. The gain which the memory of the past gives us here is that the memory of past love for any person can strengthen our present love of him. And this is what must be preserved if the value of past love is not to be lost. But love has no end but itself. If it has gone, it helps us little that we keep anything it has brought us....*

"*What more do we want? The past is not preserved separately in memory, but it exists, concentrated and united in the present.... If we still think that the past is lost, let us ask ourselves whether we regard as lost all those incidents in a friendship which, even before death, are forgotten.*" — Ibid.

Here, then, as well as the mind in me can set it down, was the background against which the various incidents of this final day occurred. This was my "attitude" towards them; these thoughts and feelings, though unexpressed in words, were the "mood" which accepted and understood each slightest incident of those extraordinary hours.

The length of the day amazed me; it seemed endless. Time went another gait. The sequence of little happenings that marked its passage remains blurred in the memory, and I look back to these with the curious feeling that they happened all at once. Yet the strongest impression, perhaps, is that time, the sense of duration, was arrested or at least moved otherwise. There was a pause in Nature, the pause before the approaching Equinox. A river halted a moment at the bend. And hence came, of course, the sensation of pressure accumulating everywhere in the valley. Acceleration would come afterwards, but first this wondrous pause.

And this pressure that brimmed the valley forced common details into an uncommon view. The rising tide drove objects on the banks above high-water mark. There was exhilaration without alarm, as when an exceptional tide throws a full ocean into unaccustomed inlets. The thrill was marvellous. The forest made response, offering its secret things without a touch of fear ... as when the deer came out and grazed upon the meadow before the châlet windows, not singly but in groups, and invariably, I noticed, groups of three and three. We passed close in and out among them;

I stroked the thick rough hair upon their flanks; I remember Mrs. LeVallon’s arm about their necks, and once in particular, when she was lying down, that a fawn, no hint of fear in its beautiful, gracious eyes, pushed her hair aside with its shining muzzle to nibble the grass against her neck. The mood of an ancient and divining prophecy lay in the sight, linking Nature with human-nature in natural harmony when the lion and the lamb might play together, and a little child might lead them. For — significant, arresting item — the very air came sweetly down among us too, and the friendly intimacy of the birds brought this exquisite touch of love into the entire day. There was communion everywhere between our Selves and Nature. The birds were in my room when I went upstairs, one hopping across the pillow on my bed, its bright eyes shining as it perched an instant on my shoulder, two others twittering and dancing along the narrow window-sill. There was no fear in them; they fluttered here and there at will, and my quickest movements caused them no alarm. From the table they peeped up into my face; they were downstairs flitting in and out among the chairs and sofas; they did not fly away when we came in. And in threes I saw them, always in threes together. It was like reading natural omens; I understood the significance that lay in omens; and in this delightful sense, but in no other, these natural signs were — ominous.

Over the face of Nature, and in our hearts as well, lay everywhere this attitude of divine carelessness. Everything felt-with everything else, and all were neighbours. The ascension of the soul through all the natural kingdoms seemed written clear upon the trees and rocks and flowers, upon birds and animals, upon the huge, quiet elements themselves.

For the pause and stillness, these were ominous, too. This hush of Nature upon the banks of Time, this beautiful though solemn pause upon the heart of things, was but the presage of an accelerated rushing forward that would follow it. The world halted and took breath. It was the moment just before the leap.

With midnight the climax would be reached — the timeless instant of definite arrest, too brief, too swift for mechanism to record, the instant when Julius would enforce his ancient claim. Then the impetuous advance would be resumed, but resumed with the increased momentum, moreover, of natural forces whose outward manifestation men call the equinoctial gales. Those elemental disturbances, that din and riot in the palaces of heat and air, of wind and fire — how little the sailors, the men upon the heights, the dwellers in the streets of crowded cities might guess the free divinity loose upon the earth behind the hurricanes! The forgotten majesty of it broke in upon me as I realised it. For realise it I most assuredly did. The channels here, indeed, were open.

There seemed a halo laid upon the day; sanctity and peace in all its corners; the valley was a temple, the splendour of true old-world worship ushering in the Equinox: Earth's act of adoration to the sun, the breathless moment when she sank upon her knees before her source of life, her progeny aware, participating.

For the joy and power that vibrated with every message of light and sound about us came to me in the terms of love, as though a love which broke all barriers down flowed in from Nature. It woke in me an unmanageable, an infinite yearning; I burned to sweep all modern life into this lonely mountain valley, to share its happiness with the entire world; the tired ones, the sick and weary, the poor, those who deem themselves outcast and useless in the scheme of things, the lonely, the destitute in spirit, the failures, the wicked, and, above all, the damned. For here all broken and shattered lives, it seemed to me, must find that sense of wholeness which is confidence and that peace due to the certainty of being cared for by the universe — divinely mothered. The natural sacrament of elemental powers, in its simplicity, could heal the nations. I yearned to bring humanity into the power of Nature and the joy of Nature-Worship.

So complete, moreover, was my inclusion in this sacramental attitude towards Nature, that I saw the particular purpose for which we three were here — as Julius saw it. I experienced a growing joy, an ever lessening alarm. Three human souls met here upon this island of a moment's restitution, important certainly, yet after all an episode merely, set between a series of lives long past and of countless lives to follow after. The elements, and the Earth to which they were consciously related, the Universe of which, with ourselves, she formed an integral constituent — all were relatively and in their just proportions involved in this act of restitution. Hence, in a dim way, it was out of time and space. Our very acts and feelings were those of Nature and of that vaster Whole, wherein Nature, herself but a little item, lies secure. The Universe felt and acted with us. The gentian in the field would be aware, but Sirius, too.

Three human specks would act out certain things, but the wind in the forest would co-operate and feel glad, and the fire in Orion's nebula would be aware.

An older form of consciousness was operative. We were not separate. Instead of *thinking* as separate items apart from the rest of the cosmos, we *felt* as integral bits of it — and here, perhaps, lay the essence of what I call another kind of consciousness than the one known to-day.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MY MIND RETAINS with photographic accuracy the detail of that sinister yet gorgeous night. One thing alone vitiates the value of my report — while I remember what happened, I cannot remember *why* it happened.

At the actual time, I understood the meaning of every word and action because the power to do so was in me. I was in another state of consciousness. That state has passed, and with it the ability to interpret. I am in the position of a man who remembers clearly the detail of some dream to which, on waking, he has lost the key. While dreaming it, the meaning was daylight clear. The return to normal consciousness has left him with a photograph he no longer can explain.

The first tentative approach, however, of those Intelligences men call Fire and Wind — their first contact with this other awakened Self in me, I remember perfectly. Wind came first, then Fire; yet at first it was merely that they made their presence known. I became aware of them. And the natural, simple way in which this came about I may describe to some extent perhaps.

The ruins of a flaming sunset lay above the distant ridges when Julius left my room, and, after locking away the private papers entrusted to my charge, I stood for some time watching the coloured storm-clouds hurrying across the sky. For, though the trees about the châlet were motionless, a violent wind ran high overhead, and on the summits it would have been impossible to stand. Round the building, however, sunken in its protected valley, and within the walls especially, reigned a still, delightful peace. The wind kept to the summits. But of some Spirit of Wind I was aware long before the faintest movement touched a single branch.

Upon me then, gathering with steady power, stole the advance-guard of these two invasions — air and warmth, yet an inner air, an inner warmth. For, while I watched, the silence of those encircling forests conveyed the sound and movement of approaching life. There grew upon me, first as by dim and curious suggestion, a sense of ordered preparation slowly accumulating behind the mass of shadowy trees. The picture then sharpened into more definite outline. The forest was busy with the stirrings of a million thread-like airs that built up together the body of a rising wind, yet not of wind as commonly experienced, but rather of some subtler, more acute activity of which wind is but the outer vehicle. The inner activity, of which it is the sensible manifestation — the body — was beginning to move. The soul of air itself was stirring. These million ghost-like airs were lifting wings from their invisible, secret lairs, all running as by a word of command towards a determined centre whence, obeying a spiritual summons, they would presently fall upon the valley in that sensible manifestation called the equinoctial gales. Behind the material effect, the spiritual Cause was active.

This imaginative picture grew upon me, as though in some way I was let into the inner being of that life which prompts all natural movements and hides, securely veiled, in every stock and stone. A new interpretative centre was awake in me. In the movement of wind I was aware of — life. Then, while this subtle perception that an intelligent, directing power lay behind the very air I breathed, a similar report reached me from another, equally elemental, quarter, though it is less easy to describe.

From the sun? Originally, yes — since primarily from the sun emerges all the heat the earth contains. It first stirred definite sensation in me when my eye caught the final gleam upon the turreted walls of vapour where still the sunset stood emblazoned. From that coloured sea of light, and therefore of heat, something flashed in power through me; a vision of running fire broke floodingly above the threshold of my mind, ran into every corner of my being, left its inspiring trail, became part of my very nerves and blood. Consciousness was deepened and intensified.

Yet it was neither common heat I felt nor common flame I pictured, but rather a touch of that primordial and ethereal fire which dwells at the heart of all manifested life — latent heat. For it was neither yellow, red, nor white with any aspect of common flame, but what I can only dare to describe as a fierce, dark splendour, black and shining, yet of intense, incandescent brilliance. The contradictory adjectives catch a ghost of it. Moreover, I was aware of no discomfort, for while it threatened to overwhelm me, the chief effect was to leave a glow, a radiance, an enthusiasm of strengthened will and confidence, combined with a sense of lightning's power. It was spiritual heat, of which fire is but a physical vehicle. The central fire of the universe burned in my heart.

I realised, in a word, that both elements were vehicles of intelligent and living Agencies. Of their own accord they became active, and natural laws were but their method of activity. They were alert; the valley was alive, combining, co-operating with myself — and taking action.

This was their first exquisite approach. But presently, when I moved away from the window, the sunset clouds grown dark and colourless again, I realised lesser manifestations of this new emotion which may seem more intelligible when I set them down in words. The candle flame, for instance, and the flaring match with which I lit my cigarette seemed not so much to produce fire by a chemical device, as to puncture holes through a curtain into that sea of latent fire that lies in all material things. The breath of air, moreover, that extinguished the flame did not annihilate it, but merged it into the essential being of its own self. The two acted in sympathy together. Both Wind and Fire drew attention to themselves of set intention, insisting upon notice, as if inviting co-operation.

And something leviathan leaped up in me to welcome them. The standing miracle of fire lit up the darkened valley. Pure flame revealed itself suddenly as the soul in me, the eternal part that remembered and grew wise, the deathless part that survived all successive bodies.

And I realised with a shock of comprehension the danger that Julius ran in the evocation that his "experiment" involved: Fire, once kindled, and aided naturally by air, must seek to destroy the prison that confines it....

I remained for some time in my room. My will, my power of choice, seemed taken from me. My life moved with these vaster influences. I argued vehemently with some part of me that still offered a vague resistance. It was the merest child's play. I figured myself in my London lecture room, explaining to my students the course and growth of the delusion that had captured me. The result was futile; I convinced neither my students nor myself. It was the thinking mind in me that opposed, but it was another thing in me that *knew*, and this other thing was enormously stronger than the reasoning mind, and overwhelmed it. No amount of arguing could stand against the power of knowledge that had become established in me by feeling-with. I felt-with Nature, especially with her twin elemental powers of wind and fire. And this wisdom of feeling-with dominated my entire being. Denial and argument were merely false.

All that evening this sense of the companionship of Wind and Fire remained vividly assertive. Everywhere they moved about me. They acted in concert, each assisting the other. I was for ever aware of them; their physical manifestations were as great dumb gestures of two living and intelligent Immensities in Nature. Yet it was only in part, perhaps, I knew them. Their full, amazing power never came to me completely. The absolute realisation that came to Julius in full consciousness was not mine. I shared at most, it seems, a reflected knowledge, seeing what happened as through some lens of half-recovered memory.

Moreover, supper, when I came downstairs to find Julius and his wife already waiting for me, was the most ordinary and commonplace meal imaginable. We talked of the weather! Mrs. LeVallon was light-hearted, almost gay, though I felt it was repressed excitement that drove outwards this trivial aspect of her. But for the fact that all she did now seemed individual and distinguished, her talk and gestures might have scraped acquaintance with mere foolishness. Indeed, our light talk and her irresponsibility added to the sense of reality I have mentioned. It was a mask, and the mask dropped occasionally with incongruous abruptness that was startling.

Such insignificant details revealed the immediate range of the Powers that watched and waited close beside our chairs. That sudden, fixed expression in her eyes, for instance, when the Man brought in certain private papers, handed them to Julius who, after reading them, endorsed them with a modern fountain pen, then passed them on to me! That fountain pen and her accompanying remark — how incongruous and insignificant they were! Both seemed symbolical items in some dwindled, trivial scale of being!

“It isn’t everybody that’s got a professor for a secretary, Julius, is it?”

She said it with her mouth full, her elbows on the table, and only that other look in the watchful eyes seemed to contradict the awkward, untaught body. There was a flash of tenderness and passion in them, a pathetic questioning and wonder, as though she saw in her husband’s act an acknowledgment of dim forebodings in her own deep heart. She appealed, it seemed, to me. Was it that she divined he was already slipping from her, farewells all unsaid, yet that she was — inarticulate? ... The entire little scene, the words, the laughter and the look, were but evidence of an attempt to lift the mask. Her choice of words, their accent and pronunciation, that fountain pen, the endorsement, the stupid remark about myself — were all these lifted by those yearning eyes into the tragedy of a fateful good-bye message? ...

More significant still, though even less direct, was another moment — when the Man stretched his arm across the table to turn the lamp up. For in this unnecessary act she saw — the intuition came sharply to me — an effect of the approaching Powers upon his untutored soul. The wick was already high enough when, with an abrupt, impulsive movement, he stooped to turn it higher; and instantly Mrs. LeVallon was on her feet, her face first pale, then hotly flushed. She rose as though to strike him, then changed the gesture as if to ward a blow — almost to protect. It was an impetuous, revealing act.

Out of some similar impulse, too, only half understood, I sprang to her assistance.

“There’s light enough,” I exclaimed.

“And heat,” she added quickly. “Good Lord! the room’s that hot, it’s like a furnace!”

She flashed a look of gratitude at me. What exactly was in her mind I cannot know, but in my own was the strange feeling that the less *visible* fire in the air the better. An expression of perplexed alarm showed itself in the face of the faithful but inarticulate serving man. Unwittingly he had blundered. His distress was acute. I almost thought he would drop to his knees and lick his mistress’s hand for forgiveness.

Whether Julius perceived all this is hard to say. He looked up calmly, watching us; but the glance he gave, and the fact that he spoke no word, made me think he realised what the energy of her tone and gesture veiled. The desire to assist the increase of heat, of fire — co-operation — had acted upon the physical medium least able to resist — the most primitive system present. The approach of the two Activities affected us, one and all.

There were other incidents of a similar kind before the meal was over, quite ordinary in themselves, yet equally revealing; my interpretation of them due to this enhanced condition of acute perception that pertained to awakening memory. Air and fire accumulated, flake by flake. A kind of radiant heat informed all common objects. It was in our hearts as well. And wind was waiting to blow it into flame.

CHAPTER XXIX

"*NOT YET ARE fixed the prison bars;*

The hidden light the spirit owns

If blown to flame would dim the stars

And they who rule them from their thrones:

And the proud sceptred spirits thence

Would bow to pay us reverence." — A. E.

It was out of this accumulation of unusual emotion that a slight but significant act of Julius recalled me to the outer world. I was lighting my pipe — from the chimney of the lamp rather than by striking a match — when I overheard him telling the Man that, instead of sitting up as usual, he might go to bed at once. He went off obediently, but with some latent objection, half resentment, half opposition, in his manner. There was a sulkiness as of disappointment in his face. He knew that something unusual was on foot, and he felt that he should by rights be in it — he might be of use, he might be needed. There was this dumb emotion in him, as in a faithful dog who, scenting danger, is not called upon to fight, and so retires growling to his kennel.

He went slowly, casting backward glances, and at the door he turned and caught my eye. I had only to beckon, to raise my hand a moment, to say a word — he would have come running back with a bound into the room. But the gaze of his master was upon him, and he went; and though he may have lain down in his room beyond the kitchen, I felt perfectly sure he did not sleep. His body lay down, but not his excited instincts.

For this dismissal of the Man was, of course, a signal. The three of us were then in that dim-lit peasant's room — alone; and for a long time in a silence broken only by the sparks escaping from the burning logs upon the hearth, and by the low wind that now went occasionally sighing past the open window. We sat there waiting, not looking at each other, yet each aware of the slightest physical or mental movement. It was an intense and active silence in which deep things were being accomplished; for, if Mrs. LeVallon and myself were negative, I was alert to immense and very positive actions that were going forward in the being of our companion. Julius, sitting quietly with folded hands, his face just beyond the lamp's first circle of light, was preparing, and with a stress of extreme internal effort that made the silence seem a field of crashing battle. The entire strength of this strange being's soul, co-operating with Nature, and by methods of very ancient acquirement known fully to himself alone, sought an achievement that should make us act as one. Through two natural elemental powers, fire and wind — both vitally part of us since the body's birth — we could claim the incalculable support of the entire universe. It was a cosmic act. Ourselves were but the channel. Later this channel would define itself still more.

Beneath those smoke-stained rafters, as surely as beneath the vaulted roof of some great temple, stepped worship and solemnity. The change came gradually. From the sky above the star-lit valley this grave, tremendous attitude swung down into our hearts. Not alone the isolated châlet, but the world itself contained us, a temple wherein we, insignificant worshippers, knelt before the Universe. For the powers we invoked were not merely earthly powers, but those cosmic energies that drove and regulated even the flocks of stars.

Mrs. LeVallon and I both knew it dimly, as we waited with beating hearts in that great silence. She scarcely moved. Somehow divining the part she had to play, she sat there motionless as a figure in stone, offering no resistance. Her reawakened memory must presently guide us; she knew the importance of her rôle, and the composure with which she accepted it touched grandeur. Yet each one of us was necessary. If Julius took the leader's part, her contribution, as my own, were equally essential to success. If the greater risk was his, our own risk was yet not negligible. The elemental Powers would take what channel seemed best available. It was not a personal consideration for us. We were most strangely *one*.

My own measure of interpretation I have already attempted to describe. Hers I guess intuitively. For we shared each other's feelings as only love and sympathy know how to share. These feelings now grew steadily in power; and, obeying them, our bodies moved to new positions. We changed our *attitudes*.

For I remember that while Julius rose and stood beside the table, his wife went quietly from my side and seated herself before the open window, her face turned towards the valley and the night. Instinctively we formed a living triangle, Mrs. LeVallon at the apex. And, though at the time I understood the precise significance of these changes, reading clearly the language they acted out in motion, that discernment is now no longer in me, so that I cannot give the perfect expression of meaning they revealed. Upon Julius, however, some appearance, definite as a robe upon the head and shoulders, proclaimed him a figure of command and somehow, too, of tragedy. It set him in the centre. Close beside me, within the circle of the lamplight, I watched him — so still, so grave, the face of marble pallor, the dark hair tumbling as of old about the temples whereon the effort of intensest concentration made the pulsing veins stand out as thick as cords. Calm as an image he stood there for a period of time I cannot state. Beyond him, in the shadows by the window, his wife's figure was just visible as she leaned, half reclining, across the wooden sill into the night. There was no sound from the outer valley, there was no sound in the room. Then, suddenly of itself, a change approached. The silence broke.

"Julius...!" came faintly from the window, as Mrs. LeVallon with a sudden gesture drew the curtain to shut out the darkness. She turned towards us. "Julius!" And her voice, using the tone I had heard before when she fled past me up that meadow slope, sounded as from some space beyond the walls. I looked up, my nerves on the alert, for it came to me that she was at the limit of endurance and that something now must break in her.

Julius moved over to her side, while she put her hands out first to welcome him, then half to keep him off. He spoke no word. He took her outstretched hands in both of his, leading her back a little nearer towards the centre of the room.

"Julius," she whispered, "what frightens me to-night? I'm all a-shiver. There's something coming? — but what is it? And why do I seem to know, yet not to know?"

He answered her quietly, the voice deep with tenderness:

"We three are here together" — I saw the shining smile I knew of old— "and there is no cause to feel afraid. You are tired with your long, long waiting." And he meant, I knew, the long fatigue of ages that she apprehended, but did not grasp fully yet. She was Mrs. LeVallon still.

"I'm both hot and cold together, and all oppressed," she went on; "like a fever it is — icy and yet on fire. I can't get at myself, to keep it still. Julius ... what is it?" The whisper held somehow for me the potentiality of scream. Then, taking his two hands closer, she raised her voice with startling suddenness. "Julius," she cried, "I know what frightens me — it's *you!* What are you to-night?" She looked searchingly a moment into his face. "And what is this thing that's going to happen to you? I hear it coming nearer — outside" — she moved further from the curtained window with small, rushing steps, looking back across her shoulder— "all down the valley from the mountains, those awful mountains. Oh, Julius, it's coming — for you — my husband —— ! And for him," she added, laying her eyes upon me like a flame.

I thought the tears must come, but she held them back, looking appealingly at me, and clutching Julius as though he would slip from her. Then, with a quick movement and a little gust of curious laughter, she clapped her hand upon her mouth to stop the words. Something she meant to say to me was left unspoken, she was ashamed of the momentary weakness. "Mrs. LeVallon" was still uppermost.

"Julius," she added more softly, "there's something about to-night I haven't known since childhood. There's such heat and — oh, hark!" — she stopped a moment, holding up her finger— "there's a sound — like riggin' in the wind. But it ain't wind. What is it, Julius? And why is that wonderful?"

Yet no sound issued from the quiet valley; it was as still as death. Even the sighing of the breeze had ceased about the walls.

"If only I understood," she went on, looking from his face to mine, "if only I knew exactly. It was something," she added almost to herself, "that used to come to me when I was little — on the farm — and I put it away because it made me" — she whispered the last two words below her breath— "feel crazy — —"

"Crazy?" repeated Julius, smiling down at her.

"Like a queen," she finished proudly, yet still timid. "I couldn't feel that way and do my work." And her long lashes lifted, so that the eyes flashed at me across the table. “It made everything seem too easy.”

I cannot say what quality was in his voice, when, leading her gently towards a wicker chair beside the fire, he spoke those strange words of comfort. There seemed a resonant power in it that brought strength and comfort in. She smiled as she listened, though it was not her brain his language soothed. That other look began to steal upon her face as he proceeded.

“*You!*” he said gently, “so wonderful a woman, and so poised with the discipline these little nerves forget — you cannot yield to the fear that loneliness and darkness bring to children.” She settled down into the chair, gazing into his face as he settled the cushions for her back. Her hands lay in her lap. She listened to every syllable, while the expression of perplexity grew less marked. And the change upon her features deepened as he continued: “There are moments when the soul sees her own shadow, and is afraid. The Past comes up so close. But the shadow and the fear will pass. We three are here. Beyond all chance disaster, we stand together ... and to our real inner selves nothing that is sad or terrible can ever happen.”

Again her eyes flashed their curious lightning at me as I watched; but the sudden vague alarm was passing as mysteriously as it came. She said no more about the wind and fire. The magic of his personality, rather than the words which to her could only have seemed singular and obscure, had touched the sources of her strength. Her face was pale, her eyes still bright with an unwonted brilliance, but she was herself again — I think she was no longer the “upper” self I knew as “Mrs. LeVallon.” The marvellous change was slowly stealing over her.

“You’re cold and tired,” he said, bending above her. “Come closer to the fire — with us all.”

I saw her shrink, for all the brave control she exercised. The word “fire” came on her like a blow. “It’s not my body,” she answered; “that’s neither cold nor tired. It’s another thing — behind it.” She turned toward the window, where the curtain at that moment rose and fell before a draught of air. “I keep getting the feeling that something’s coming to-night for — one of us.” She said it half to herself, and Julius made no answer. I saw her look back then at the glowing fire of wood and peat. At the same moment she threw out both hands first as if to keep the heat away, then as though to hold her husband closer.

“Julius! If you went from me! If I lost you —— !”

I heard his low reply:

“Never, through all eternity, can *we* go — away from one another — except for moments.”

She partly understood, I think, for a great sigh, but half suppressed, escaped her.

“Moments,” she murmured, “that are very long ... and lonely.”

It was then, as she said the words, that I noticed the change which so long had been rising, establish itself definitely in the luminous eyes. That other colour fastened on them — the deep sea-green. “Mrs. LeVallon” before my sight sank slowly down, and a completer, far more ancient self usurped her. Small wonder that my description halts in confusion before so beautiful a change, for it was the beginning of an actual transfiguration of her present person. It was bewildering to watch the gradual, enveloping approach of that underlying Self, shrine of a million memories, deathless, and ripe with long-forgotten knowledge. The air of majesty that she wore in the sleep-walking incident gathered by imperceptible degrees about the uninspired modern presentment that I knew. Slowly her face turned calm with beauty. The features composed themselves in some new mould of grandeur. The perplexity, at first so painfully apparent, but marked the singular passage of the less into the greater. I saw it slowly disappear. As she lay back in that rough chair of a peasant’s châlet, there was some calm about her as of the steadfast hills, some radiance as of stars, a suggestion of power that told me — as though some voice whispered it in my soul — she knew the link with Nature re-established finally within her being. Her head turned slightly towards me. I stood up.

Instinctively I moved across the room and drew the curtain back. I saw the stars; I saw the dark line of mountains; the odours of forest and meadow came in with sweetness; I heard the tinkling of the little stream — yet all contained somehow in the message of her turning head and shoulders.

There was no sound, there was no spoken word, but the language was one and unmistakable. And as I came slowly again towards the fire Julius stood over her, uttering in silence the same stupendous thing. The sense of my own inclusion in it was amazing. He smiled down into her lifted face. These two, myself a vital link between them, smiled across the centuries at one another. We formed — I noticed then — with the fire and the open window into space — a circle.

To say that I grasped some spiritual import in these movements of our bodies, realising that they acted out an inevitable meaning, is as true as my convinced belief can make it. It is also true that in this, my later report of the event, that meaning is no longer clear to me. I cannot recover the point of view that discerned in our very positions a message of some older day. The significance of attitude and gesture then were clear to me; the translation of this three-dimensional language I have lost again. A man upon his knees, two arms outstretched to clasp, a head bowed down, a pointing finger — these are interpretable gestures and attitudes that need no spoken words. Similarly, following some forgotten wisdom, our related movements held a ceremonial import that, by way of acceptance or refusal, helped or hindered the advance of the elemental powers then invoked. In some marvellous fashion one consciousness was shared amongst us all. We worked with a living Nature, and a living Nature worked actively with us, and it was attitude, movement, gestures, rather than words, that assisted the alliance.

Then Julius took the hand that lay nearest to him, while the other she lifted to place within my own. And a light breeze came through the open window at that moment, touched the embers of the glowing logs, and blew them into flame. I felt our hands tighten as that slight increase of heat and air passed into us. For in that passing breeze was the eternal wind which is the breath of God, and in that flame upon the hearth was the fire which burns in suns and lights the heart in men and women....

There came with unexpected suddenness, then, a moment of very poignant human significance — because of the great perspective against which it rose. She sat erect; she gazed into his face and mine; in her eyes burned an expression of beseeching love and sacrifice, but a love and sacrifice far older than this present world on which her body lay. Her arms stretched out and opened, she raised her lips, and, while I looked aside, she kissed him softly. I turned away from that embrace, aware in my heart that it was a half-divined farewell ... and when I looked back again the little scene was over.

He bent slightly down, releasing the hand he held, and signifying by a gesture that I should do the same. Her body relaxed a little; she sank deeper into the chair; she sighed. I realised that he was assisting her into that artificial slumber which would lead to the full release of the subconscious self whose slow approach she already half divined. Stooping above her, he gently touched the hypnogenic points above the eyes and behind the ears. It was the oldest memories he sought. She offered them quite willingly.

"Sleep!" he said soothingly, command and tenderness mingled in the voice. "Sleep ... and remember!" With the right hand he made slow, longitudinal passes before her face. "Sleep, and recover what you ... knew! We need your guidance."

Her body swayed a little before it settled; her feet stretched nearer to the fire; her respiration rapidly diminished, becoming deep and regular; with the movement of her bosom the band of black velvet rose and fell about the neck, her hands lay folded in her lap. And, as I watched, my own personal sensations of quite nameless joy and anguish passed into a curious abandonment of self that merged me too completely in the solemnity of worship to leave room for pain. Hand in hand with the earthly darkness came in to us that Night of Time which neither sleeps nor dies, and like a remembered dream up stole our inextinguishable Past.

"Sleep!" he repeated, lower than before.

Cold, indeed, touched my heart, but with it came a promise of some deep spiritual sweetness, rich with the comfort of that life which is both abundant and universal. The valley and the sky, stars, mountains, forests, running water, all that lay outside of ourselves in Nature everywhere, came with incredible appeal into my soul. Confining barriers crumbled, melted into air; the imprisoned human forces leaped forth to meet the powers that "inanimate" Nature holds. I knew the drive of tireless wind, the rush of irresistible fire. It seemed a state in which we all joined hands, a state of glory that justified the bravest hopes, annihilating doubt and disbelief.

She slept. And in myself something supremely sure, supremely calm, looked on and watched.

"It helps," Julius murmured in my ear, referring to the sleep; "it makes it easier for her. She will remember now ... and guide."

He moved to her right side, I to her left. Between the fire and the open window we formed then — a line.

Along a line there is neither tension nor resistance. It was the primitive, ultimate figure.

CHAPTER XXX

A RUSH OF air ran softly round the walls and roof, then dropped away into silence. There was this increased activity outside. A roar next sounded in the chimney, high up rather; a block of peat fell with a sudden crash into the grate, sending a shower of sparks to find the outer air. Behind us the pine boards cracked with miniature, sharp reports.

Julius continued the longitudinal passes, and "Mrs. LeVallon" passed with every minute into deeper and more complete somnambulism. It was a natural, willing process. He merely made it easier for her. She sank slowly into the deep subconscious region where all the memories of the soul lie stored for use.

It seemed that everything was in abeyance in myself, except the central fact that this experience was true. The rest of existence fell away, clipped off as by a pair of mighty shears. Both fire and wind seemed actively about me; yet not unnaturally. There was this heat and lift, but there was nothing frantic. The native forces in me were raised to their ultimate capacity, though never for a moment beyond the limit that high emotion might achieve. Nature accomplished the abnormal, possibly, but still according to law and what was — or had been once — comprehensible.

The passes grew slower, with longer intervals between; Mrs. LeVallon lay motionless, the lips slightly parted, the skin preternaturally pale, the eyelids tightly closed.

"Hush!" whispered Julius, as I made an involuntary movement, "it is still the normal sleep, and she may easily awake. Let no sound disturb her. It must go gradually." He spoke without once removing his gaze from her face. "Be ready to write what you hear," he added, "and help by 'thinking' fire and wind — in my direction."

A long-drawn sigh was audible, accompanied by the slightest possible convulsive movement of the reclining body.

"She sinks deeper," he whispered, ceasing the passes for a moment. "The consciousness is already below the deep-dream stage. Soon she will wake into the interior lucidity when her Self of To-day will touch the parent source behind. *They* are already with her: they light — and lift — her soul. She will remember all her past, and will direct us."

I made no answer; I asked no questions; I stood and watched, willingly sympathetic, yet incapable of action. The curious scene held something of tragedy and grandeur. There was triumph in it. The sense of Nature working with us increased, yet we ourselves comparatively unimportant. The earth, the sky, the universe took part and were involved in our act of restitution. It was beyond all experience. It was also — at times — intolerable.

The body settled deeper into the chair; the crackling of the wicker making sharp reports in the stillness. The pallor of the face increased; the cheeks sank in, the framework of the eyes stood out; imperceptibly the features began to re-arrange themselves upon another, greater scale, most visible, perhaps, in the strong, delicate contours of the mouth and jaw. Upon Julius, too, as he stood beside her, came down some indefinable change that set him elsewhere and otherwise. His dignity, his deep solicitous tenderness, and at the same time a hint of power that emanated more and more from his whole person, rendered him in some intangible fashion remote and inaccessible. I watched him with growing wonder.

For over the room as well a change came stealing. In the shadows beyond the fringe of lamplight, perspective altered. The room ran off in distances that yet just escaped the eye: I *felt* the change, though it was so real that the breath caught in me each time I sought to focus it. Space spread and opened on all sides, above, below, while so naturally that it was never actually unaccountable. Wood seemed replaced by stone, as though the solidity of our material surroundings deepened. I was aware of granite columns, corridors of massive build, gigantic pylons towering to the sky. The atmosphere of an ancient temple grew about my heart, and long-forgotten things came with a crowding of half-familiar detail that insisted upon recognition. It was an early memory, I knew, yet not the earliest....

"Be ready." I heard the low voice of Julius. "She is about to wake — within," and he moved a little closer to her, while I took up my position by the table by the lamp. The paper lay before me. With fingers that trembled I lifted the pencil, waiting. The hands of the sleeping woman raised themselves feebly, then fell back upon the arms of the chair. It seemed she tried to make signs but could not quite complete them. The expression on the face betrayed great internal effort.

“Where are you?” Julius asked in a steady but very gentle tone.

The answer came at once, with slight intervals between the words:

“In a building ... among mountains....”

“Are you alone?”

“No ... not alone,” spoken with a faint smile, the eyes still tightly closed.

“Who, then, is with you?”

“You ... and he,” after a momentary hesitation.

“And who am I?”

The face showed slight confusion; there was a gesture as though she felt about her in the air to find him.

“I do not know ... quite,” came the halting answer. “But you — both — are mine ... and very near to me. Or else you own me. All three are so close I cannot see ourselves apart ... quite.”

“She is confused between two memories,” Julius whispered to me. “The true regression of memory has not yet begun. The present still obscures her consciousness.”

“It is coming,” she said instantly, aware of his lightest whisper.

“All in due time,” he soothed her in a tender tone; “there is no hurry. Nor is there anything to fear — —”

“I am not afraid. I am ... happy. I feel safe.” She paused a moment, then added: “But I must go deeper ... further down. I am too near the surface still.”

He made a few slow passes at some distance from her face, and I saw the eyelids flutter as though about to lift. She sighed deeply. She composed herself as into yet deeper sleep.

“Ah! I see better now,” she murmured. “I am sinking ... sinking ...”

He waited for several minutes and then resumed the questioning.

"Now tell me who *you* are," he enjoined.

She faintly shook her head. Her lips trembled, as though she tried to utter several names and then abandoned all. The effort seemed beyond her. The perplexed expression on the face with the shut eyes was movingly pathetic, so that I longed to help her, though I knew not how.

"Thank you," she murmured instantly, with a gentle smile in my direction. Our thoughts, then, already found each other!

"Tell me who you are," Julius repeated firmly. "It is not the name I ask."

She answered distinctly, with a smile:

"A mother. I am soon to be a mother and give birth."

He glanced at me significantly. There was both joy and sadness in his eyes. But it was not this disclosure that he sought. She was still entangled in the personality of To-day. It was far older layers of memory and experience that he wished to read. "Once she gets free from this," he whispered, "it will go with leaps and bounds, whole centuries at a time." And again I knew by the smile hovering round the lips that she had heard and understood.

"Pass deeper; pass beyond," he continued, with more authority in the tone. "Drive through — sink down into what lies so far behind."

A considerable interval passed before she spoke again, ten minutes at the lowest reckoning, and possibly much longer. I watched her intently, but with an afflicting anxiety at my heart. The body lay so still and calm, it was like the immobility of death, except that once or twice the forehead puckered in a little frown and the compression of the lips told of the prolonged internal effort. The grander aspect of her features came for moments flittingly, but did not as yet establish itself to stay. She was still confused with the mind and knowledge of To-day. At length a little movement showed itself; she changed the angle of her head in an effort to look up and speak; a scarcely perceptible shudder ran down the length of her stretched limbs. "I cannot," she murmured, as though glancing at her husband with closed eyelids. "Something blocks the way. I cannot see. It's too thickly crowded ... crowded."

"Describe it, and pass on," urged Julius patiently. There was unalterable decision in his quiet voice. And in her tone a change was also noticeable. I was profoundly moved; only with a great effort I controlled myself.

“They crowd so eagerly about me,” — the choice of words seemed no longer quite “Mrs. LeVallon’s”— “with little arms outstretched and pleading eyes. They seek to enter, they implore ...”

“Who are they?”

“The Returning Souls.” The love and passion in her voice brought near, as in a picture, the host of reincarnating souls eager to find a body for their development in the world. They besieged her, clamouring for birth — for a body.

“Your thoughts invite them,” replied Julius, “but you have the power to decide.” And then he asked more sternly: “Has any entered yet?”

It was unspeakably moving — this mother willing to serve with anguish the purpose of advancing souls. Yet this was all of To-day. It was not the thing he sought. The general purpose must stand aside for the particular. There was an error to be set right first. She had to seek its origin among the ages infinitely far away. The guidance Julius sought lay in the long ago. But the safety of the little unborn body troubled him, it seemed.

“As yet,” she murmured, “none. The little body of the boy is empty ... though besieged.”

“By whom besieged?” he asked more loudly. “Who hinders?”

The little body of the boy! And it was then a further change came suddenly, both in her face and voice, and in the voice of Julius too.

That larger expression of some forgotten grandeur passed into her features, and she half sat up in the chair; there was a stiffening of the frame; resistance, power, an attitude of authority, replaced the former limpness. The moment was, for me, electrifying. Ice and fire moved upon my skin.

She opened her lips to speak, but no words were audible.

“Look close — and tell me,” came from Julius gravely.

She made an effort, then shrank back a little, this time raising one arm as though to protect herself from something coming, then sharply dropping it again over the heart and body.

“I cannot see,” she murmured, slightly frowning; “they stand so close and ... are ... so splendid. They are too great ... to see.”

“Who — what — are they?” he insisted. He took her hand in his. I saw her smile.

The simple words were marvellously impressive. Depths of untold memory stirred within me as I heard.

“Powers ... we knew ... so long ago.”

Some ancient thing in me opened an eye and saw. The Powers we evoked came seeking an entrance, brought nearer by our invitation. They came from the silent valley; they were close about the building. But only through a human channel could they emerge from the spheres where they belonged.

“Describe them, and pass on,” I heard Julius say, and there came a pause then that I thought would never end. The look of power rolled back upon her face. She spoke with joy, with a kind of happiness as though she welcomed them.

“They rush and shine.... They flood the distance like a sea, and yet stand close against my heart and blood. They are clothed in wind and fire. I see the diadems of flame ascending and descending. Their breath is all the winds. There is such roaring. I see mountains of wind and fire ... advancing ... nearer ... nearer.... We used them — we invited ... long, long ago.... And so they ... come again about us....”

His following command appalled me:

“Keep them back. You must protect the vacant body from invasion.”

And then he added in tones that seemed to make the very air vibrate, although the voice but whispered, “You must direct them — towards *me*.”

He moved to a new position, so that we formed a triangle again. Dimly at the time I understood. The circle signified the union which, having received, enclosed the mighty forces. Only it enclosed too much; the danger of misdirection had appeared. The triangle, her body forming the apex towards the open night, aimed at controlling the immense arrival by lessening the entry. Another thing stood out, too, with crystal clearness — at the time: the elemental Powers sought the easiest channel, the channel of least resistance, the body still unoccupied: whereas Julius offered — himself. The risk must be his and his alone. There was — in those few steps he took across the dim-lit room — a sense of tremendous, if sinister, drama that swept my heart with both tenderness and terror. The significance of his changed position was staggering.

I watched the sleeper closely. The lips grew more compressed, and the fingers of both hands clenched themselves upon the dark dress on her lap. I saw the muscles of the altering face contract with effort; the whole framework of the body became more rigid. Then, after several minutes, followed a gradual relaxation, as she sank back again into her original position.

“They retire ...” she murmured with a sigh. “They retire ... into darkness a little. But they still ... wait and hover. I hear the rush of their great passing.... I see the distant shine of fire ... still.”

“And the souls?” he asked gently, “do they now return?”

She lowered her head as with a gesture of relief.

“They are crowding, crowding. I see them as an endless flight of birds....” She held out her arms, then shrank back sharply. An expression I could not interpret flashed across the face. Behind a veil, it seemed. And the stern voice of Julius broke in upon the arrested action:

“Invite them by your will. Draw to you by desire and love one eager soul. The little vacant body must be occupied, so that the Mighty Ones, returning, shall find it thus impossible of entry.”

It was a command; it was also a precaution; for if the body of the child were left open it would inevitably attract the invading Powers from — himself. I watched her very closely then. I saw her again stretch out her arms and hands, then once again — draw sharply back. But this time I understood the expression on the quivering face. The veil had lifted.

By what means this was clear to me, yet hidden from Julius, I cannot say. Perhaps the ineradicable love that she and I bore for one another in that long-forgotten time supplied the clue. But of this I am certain — that she disobeyed him. She left the little waiting body as it was, empty, untenanted. Life — a soul returning to re-birth — was not conceived and did not enter in. The reason, moreover, was also clear to me in that amazing moment of her choice: she divined his risk of failure, she wished to save him, she left open the channel of least resistance of set purpose — the unborn body. For a love known here and now, she sacrificed a love as yet unborn. If Julius failed, at least he would not now be destroyed; there would be another channel ready.

That thus she thought, intended, I felt convinced. If her mistake was fraught with more danger than she knew, my lips were yet somehow sealed. Our deeper, ancient bond gave me the clue that to Julius was not offered, but no words came from me to enlighten him. It seemed beyond my power; I should have broken faith with her, a faith unbelievably precious to me.

For a long time, then, there was silence in the little room, while LeVallon continued to make slow passes as before. The anguish left her face, drowned wholly in the grander expression that she wore. She breathed deeply, regularly, without effort, the head sunk forward a little on the breast. The rustle of his coat as his arm went to and fro, and the creaking of the wicker chair were all I heard. Then, presently, Julius turned to me with a low whisper I can hear to this very day. “I, and I alone,” he said, “am the rightful channel. I have waited long.” He added more that I have forgotten; I caught something about “all the aspects being favourable,” and that he felt confidence, sure that he would not fail.

“You will not,” I interrupted passionately, “you dare not fail....” And then speech suddenly broke down in me, and some dark shadow seemed to fall upon my senses so that I neither heard nor saw nor felt anything for a period I cannot state.

An interval there certainly was, and of some considerable length probably, for when I came to myself again there was change accomplished, though a change I could not properly estimate. His voice filled the room, addressing the sleeper as before, yet in a way that told me there had been progress accomplished while I had been unconscious.

“Deeper yet,” I heard, “pass down deeper yet, pass back across a hundred intervening lives to that far-off time and place when first — *first* — we called Them forth. Sink down into your inmost being and remember!”

And in her immediate answer there was a curious faintness as of distance: “It is ... so ... far away ... so far beyond ...”

“Beyond what?” he asked, the expression of “Other Places” deepening upon his face.

Her forehead wrinkled in a passing frown. “Beyond this earth,” she murmured, as though her closed eyes saw within. “Oh, oh, it hurts. The heat is awful ... the light ... the tremendous winds ... they blind, they tear me...!” And she stopped abruptly.

“Forget the pain,” he said; “it is already gone.” And instantly the tension of her face relaxed. She drew a sigh of deep relief. Before I could prevent it, my own voice sounded: “When we were nearer to the sun!”

She made no reply. He took my hand across the table and laid it on her own. “She cannot hear your voice,” he said, “unless you touch us. She is too far away. She does not even know that you are here beside me. You of To-day she has forgotten, and the you of that long ago she has not yet found.”

“You speak with someone — but with whom?” she asked at once, turning her head a little in my direction. Not waiting for his reply she at once went on: “Upon another planet, yes ... but oh, so long ago....” And again she paused.

“The one immediately before this present one?” asked Julius.

She shook her head gently. “Still further back than that ... the one before the last, when first we knew delight of life ... without these heavy, closing bodies. When the sun was nearer ... and we knew deity in the fiery heat and mighty winds ... and Nature was ... ourselves....” The voice wavered oddly, broke, and ceased upon a sigh. A thousand questions burned in me to ask. An amazing certainty of recognition and remembrance burst through my heart. But Julius spoke before my tongue found words.

“Search more closely,” he said with intense gravity. “The time and place we summoned Them is what we need — not where we first learned it, but where we practised it and failed. Confine your will to that. Forget the earlier planet. To help you, I set a barrier you cannot pass....”

“The scene of our actual evocation is what we must discover,” he whispered to me. “When that is found we shall be in touch with the actual Powers our worship used.”

“It was not there, in that other planet,” she murmured. “It was only there we first gained the Nature-wisdom. Thence — we brought it with us ... to another time and place ... later ... much nearer to To-day — to Earth.”

“Remember, then, and see — —” he began, when suddenly her unutterably wonderful expression proclaimed that she at last had found it.

It was curiously abrupt. He moved aside. We waited. I took up my pencil between fingers that were icy cold. My gaze remained fixed upon the motionless body. Those fast-closed eyes seemed cut in stone, as if they never in this world could open. The forehead gleamed pale as ivory in the lamplight. The soft gulping of the lamp oil beside me, the crumbling of the firewood in the grate deepened the silence that I feared to break. The pallid oval of the sleeper’s countenance shone at me out of a room turned wholly dark. I forgot the place wherein we sat, our names, our meanings in the present. For there grew vividly upon that disc-like countenance the face of another person — and of one I knew.

And with this shock of recognition — there came over me both horror and undying sweetness — a horror that the face would smile into my own with a similar recognition, that from those lips a voice must come I should remember; that those arms would lift, those hands stretch out; an ecstasy that I should be remembered.

“Open!” I heard, as from far away, the voice of Julius.

And then I realised that the eyes *were* open. The lids were raised, the eyeballs faced the lamp. Some tension drew the skin sideways. They were other eyes. The eternal Self looked out of them bringing the message of a vast antiquity. They gazed steadily and clearly into mine.

CHAPTER XXXI

TO-DAY RETIRED. I remembered Yesterday, but a Yesterday more remote, perhaps, than the fire-mist out of which our little earth was born....

I half rose in my chair. The first instinct — strong in me still as I write this here in modern Streatham — was to fall upon my knees as in the stress of some immense, remembered love. That glory caught me, that power of an everlasting passion that was holy. Bathed in a sea of perfect recollection, my eyes met hers, lost themselves, lived back into a Past that had been joy. A flood of shame broke fiercely over me that such a union could ever have seemed "forgotten." That To-day could smother Yesterday so easily seemed sacrilege. For this memory, uprising from the mists of hoary pre-existence, brought in its train other great emotions of recovered grandeur, all stirred into life by this ancient ceremony we three acted out. Our purpose then had been, I knew, no ordinary, selfish love, no lust of possession or ownership behind it. Its aim and end were not mere personal contentment, mere selfish happiness that excluded others, but, rather, a part of some vast, co-ordinated process that involved all Nature with her powers and workings, and fulfilled with beauty a purpose of the entire Universe. It was holy in the biggest sense; it was divine. The significance of our attitudes To-day was all explained — Julius, herself and I, exquisitely linked to Nature, a group-soul formed by the loves of Yesterday and Now.

We gazed at one another in silence, smiling at our recovered wonder. We spoke no word, we made no gesture; there was perfect comprehension; we were, all three, as we had been — long ago. An earlier state of consciousness took this supreme command.... And presently — how long the interval I cannot say — *her* eyelids dropped, she drew a deep sigh of happiness, and lay quiescent as before.

It was then, I think, that the sense of worship in me became so imperative that denial seemed impossible. Some inner act of adoration certainly accomplished itself although no physical act resulted, for I remember dropping back again into my chair, not knowing what exactly I meant to do. The old desire for the long, sweet things of the soul burst suddenly into flame, the inner yearning to know the deathless Nature Powers which were the gods, and to taste divinity by feeling-with their mighty beings. That early state of simpler consciousness, it seems, lay too remote from modern things to be translatable in clear language. Yet at the time I knew it, felt it, realised it, because I lived it once again. The flood of aspiration that bore me on its crest left thinking and reason utterly out of account. No link survives To-day with the state we then recovered....

And both she and Julius changed before my eyes. The châlet changed as well, slipping into the shadowy spaces of some vast, pillared temple. The soul in me realised its power and *knew* its origin divine. Bathed in a sea of long-forgotten glory, it rose into a condition of sublimest bliss and confidence. It recognised its destiny and claimed all Heaven. And this raging fire of early spiritual ambition passed over me as upon a mighty wind; desire and will became augmented as though wind blew them into flame.

“Watch ... and listen,” I heard, “and feel no fear!”

The change visibly increased; it seemed that curtains lifted in succession.... The sunken head was raised; the lips quivered with approaching speech; the pale cheeks deepened with a sudden flush that set the cheekbones in a quick, high light; the neck bent slightly forward, foreshortening, as it were, the presentment of the head and shoulders; while some indescribable touch of power painted the marble brows cold and almost stern. The entire countenance breathed the august passion of a remoter age dropped close.... And to see the little face I knew as Mrs. LeVallon, domestic servant in the world To-day, unscreen itself thus before me, while its actual structure yet remained unchanged, broke down the last resistance in me, and rendered my subjugation absolute. Transfiguration was visibly accomplished....

Once more she turned her head and looked at me. I met the eyes that saw me and remembered. And, though I would have screened myself from their tremendous gaze, there was no remnant of power in me that could do so.... She smiled, then slowly withdrew her eyes.... I passed, with these two beside me, back into the womb of pre-existence. We were upon the Earth — at the very time and place where we had used the knowledge brought from a still earlier globe.

“What do you see?” came in those quiet tones that rolled up time and distance like a scroll. “Tell me now!” It was the scene of the lost experiment he sought. We were close upon it.

She spread her arms; her hands waved slowly through the air to indicate these immense enclosing walls of stone about us. The voice reverberated as in great hollow space.

“Darkness ... and the Vacated Bodies,” was the reply. I knew that we stood in the Hall of Silence where the bodies lay entranced while their spirits went forth upon the three days’ quest. And one of these, I knew, was mine.

“What besides?”

“The Guardians — who protect.”

“Who are they? Who are these Guardians?”

An expression of shrinking passed across her face, and disappeared again. The eyes stared fixedly before her into space.

“Myself,” she answered slowly, “you — Concerighé ... and ...”

“There was another?” he asked. “Another who was with us?”

She hesitated. At first no answer came. She seemed to search the darkness to discover it.

“He is not near enough to see,” she murmured presently. “Somewhere beyond ... he stands ... he lies ... I cannot see him clearly.”

Julius touched my hand, and with the contact the expression on her face grew clear. She smiled.

“You see him now,” he said with decision.

She turned her face towards me with a tender, stately movement. The sterner aspect deepened into softness on the features. Great joy for an instant passed into the strange sea-green eyes.

“Silvatela,” she whispered, slightly lowering the head. “He offered himself — for me. He lies now — empty at our feet.” And the utterance of the name passed through me with a thrill of nameless sweetness. An infinite desire woke, yet desire not for myself alone.

“The time...?” asked Julius in that calm, reverent tone.

She rose with a suddenness that made me start, though, somehow, I had expected it. At her full height she stood between us. Then, spreading her hands from both the temples outwards, she bowed her head to the level of the breast. Julius, I saw, did likewise, and before I realised it, the same deep, instinctive awe had brought me to my feet in a similar obeisance. A breath of air from the night outside passed sensibly between us, enough to stir the hair upon my head and increase the fire on the hearth behind. It ceased, and a wave of comforting heat moved in, paused a moment, settled like a great invisible presence, and held the atmosphere.

“It is the Pause in Nature,” I heard the answer, and saw that she was seated in the chair once more. “The Third Day nears its end.... The Questing Souls ... draw near again to enter. We have kept their vacated bodies safe for them. Our task is almost over....”

She drew a deep, convulsive sigh. Then Julius, taking her right hand, guided my left to hold the other one. I touched her fingers and felt them instantly clasp about my own; she sighed again, the frown went from her forehead, and turning her gaze upon us both she murmured:

“I see clearly, I see everything.”

The past surged over me in a drowning flood.

“This is the moment, this the very place,” came the voice of Julius. “It was at this moment we were faithless to our trust. We used your body as the channel....” He turned slightly in my direction.

“The moment and the place,” she interrupted. “There is just time. Before the Souls return.... You have called upon the Powers.... Yet both cannot enter! ... he ... and they....”

There was a mighty, echoing cry.

She stopped abruptly. Her face darkened as with some great internal effort. I darkened too. My vision broke.... There was a sense of interval....

“And the channel —— ?” he asked below his breath.

She shook her head slowly to and fro. “It lies waiting still in the Iron Slumber.... You used it ... it is shattered.... The soul returning finds it not....

His soul ... whom I loved ...”

The voices ceased. A sudden darkness dropped. I had the sensation that I was rushing, flying, whirling. The hand I clasped seemed melted into air. I lost the final remnant of present things about me. The circle of my own sensations, my identity, the identity of my two companions vanished. A remarkable feeling of triumph came upon me, of joyful power that lifted me high above all injury and death, while something utterly gigantic asserted itself in the place of what had just been “me” — something that could never be maimed, subdued, held prisoner. The darkness then lifted, giving way before a hurricane of light that swept me, as it were, upon a pinnacle. Secure and strong I felt beyond all possible disaster, yet breathless amid things too long unfamiliar.... And then, abruptly, I knew searing pain, the pain of something broken in me, of spiritual incompleteness, disappointment.... I was called back to lesser life — before my time — before some high fulfilment due to me....

Julius and Mrs. LeVallon were no longer there beside me, but in their place I saw two solemn figures standing motionless and grave above a prostrate body. It lay upon a marble slab, and sunlight fell over the face and folded hands. The two moved forward. They knelt ... there was a sound of voices as in prayer, a powerful, drawn-out sound that produced intense vibrations, vibrations so immense that the motion in the air was felt as wind. I saw gestures ... the body half rose up upon its marble slab ... and then the blaze of some incredible effulgence descended before my eyes, so fiercely brilliant, and accompanied by such an intolerable, radiant heat ... that the entire scene went lost behind great shafts of light that splintered and destroyed it ... and an awful darkness followed, a darkness that again had pain and incompleteness at the heart of it....

One thing alone I understood — that body on the shining slab was mine. My absent soul, deprived of high glory elsewhere that was mine by right, returned into it unexpectedly, aware of danger. It had been used for the purposes of evocation. I had met the two Powers evoked by means of it midway: Fire and Wind....

The vision vanished. I was standing in the châlet room again, he and the woman by my side. There was a sense of enormous interval.

We were back among the present things again. I had merely re-lived in a moment's space a vision of that Past where these two had sinned against me. The memory was gone again. We now resumed our present reconstruction, by means of which the balance should be finally restored. The same two elemental Powers were with us still. Summoned once again — but this time that they might be dismissed.

"The Messengers of Wind and Fire approach," Julius was saying softly. "Be ready for the Powers that follow after."

"But — there poured through me but a moment ago — —" I began, when his face stopped my speech sharply.

"That 'moment' was sixty centuries ago! Keep hold now upon your will," he interrupted, yet without a trace of the vast excitement that *I* felt, "lest they invade your heart instead of mine. The glory that you knew was but the shadow of their coming — as long ago you returned *and met them* — when we failed. Keep close watch upon your will. It is the Equinox.... The pause now comes with midnight."

Even before he had done speaking the majesties of Wind and Fire were upon us. And Nature came in with them. A dislocating change, swift as the shaking of some immense thick shutter that hides life behind material things, passed in a flash about us. We stood in a circle, hands firmly clasped. There was a first effect as if those very hands were fused and ran into a single molten chain. There was no outer sound. The silence in the air was deathlike. But the sensation in my soul was — life. The momentary confusion was stupendous, then passed away. I stood in that room, but I stood in the valley too. I was in Nature everywhere. I heard the deer go past me, I heard them on the soft, sweet grass, I heard their breathing and the beating of their hearts. Birds fluttered round my face and shoulders, I heard their singing in my blood and ears, I knew their wild desires and freedom, their darting to and fro, their swaying on the boughs. My feet were running water, while yet the solid mass of earth and cliff stood up in me. I also knew the growing of the flowers by the forests, tasted their fragrance in my breath, their tender, delicate essence all unwasted. It passed understanding, yet was natural as sight, for my hands went far away, while still quite close, dipping among the stars that grew and piled like heaps of gathered sand. It all was simple, easy, mine by right. Nature gave me her myriad sensations without stint. I had forgotten. I remembered. The universe stood open. "I" had entered with these other two beside me.

She raised her arms aloft, taking our hands up with her own, and cried with a voice like wind against great branches:

"They come! The Doors of Fire are wide, and the Gates of Wind stand open! They enter the channel that is offered."

And his voice, like a roar of flame, came answering hers:

"The salutations of the Fire and Wind are made! The channel is prepared! There is no resistance!"

They stood erect and rigid, their outlines merged with some strange extension into space. They were superb, tremendous. There was no shrinking there. The deities of wind and fire came up, seeking their channel of return.

And so "They" came. Yet not outwardly; nor was the terrific impact of their advent known completely to any but himself alone who sought to harbour them now within his little human organism. Into *my* heart and soul poured but a fragment of their radiant, rushing presences. About us all some intelligent power as of a living wind brought in its mighty arms that ethereal fire which is not merely living, but is life itself. Material objects wavered, then disappeared, thin as transparent glass that increases light and heat. Walls, ceiling, floor were burned away, yet not consumed; the atoms composing all physical things glowed with a radiant energy they no longer could conceal. The latent heat of inanimate Nature emerged, not rebellious but triumphant. It was a deific manifestation of those natural powers which are the first essentials of human existence — heat and air. We were not alien to Nature, nor was Nature set apart from us; we shared her inexhaustible life, and the glory of the Universe in which she is a fragment.

"The Doors of the Creative Fire stand wide," rang out her triumphant voice again. "The golden splendour of the invisible Fire loosens and flows free. The Breath of Life is everywhere ... our own.... But what, oh what of — *him!*" The scene of their past audacious error swept again before me. And, partially, I caught it.

Into a gulf of silence her words fell, recaptured from a mode of invocation effective in forgotten ages. Quivering lightnings, like a host of running stars, flashed marvellously about us, with bars of fire that seemed to map all space, while there was a sense of prodigious lifting in the heart as though some power like rushing wind drove will and yearning to the summit of all possible achievement. I realised simply this — that Nature's powers and purposes became mine too.

How long this lasted is impossible to state; duration disappeared. The Universe, it seemed, had caught me up, joyful and unafraid, into her bosom. It was too immense for little terrors.... And it was only after what seemed an interminable interval that I became aware of something that marred; of effort somewhere to confine and limit; of conflict, in a word, as though some smaller force strove to impose an order upon Powers that resented it. And I understood the meaning of this too. Julius battled in his soul. He wrestled with the Energies he had invoked, exerting to the utmost a trained, spiritual will to influence their direction into himself, as expiatory channel. Julius, after the lapse of centuries, fought to restore the balance he had long ago disturbed.

Her voice, too, occasionally reached me with a sound as of wind that rushed, but very far away. The words went past me with a heat like flame. I caught fragments only ... "The King of Breath ... The Master of the Diadems of Fire ... they seek to enter ... the channel of safe return.... Oh, beware ... beware ..."

And it was then I saw this wonderful thing happen, poignant with common human drama, intensifying the reality of the whole amazing experience. For she turned suddenly to him, her face alight and radiant. She would not let him accept the awful risk. Her arms went out to hold him to her. He drove her back.

"I open wide the channel of my life and soul!" he cried, with a gesture of the entire body that made it relaxed and unresisting. He stepped backwards a little from her touch. "It must be through *me!*"

And there was anguish in her tone that seemed to press all possible human passion into the single sentence:

"I, too, throw myself open! I cannot let you go from me!"

He moved still further from her. It seemed to me he went at prodigious speed, yet grew no smaller to the eye. The withdrawal belonged to some part of his being that I was aware of inwardly. Streams of fire and wind went with him. They followed. And I heard her voice in agonised pursuit. She raised her hands as in supplication, but to whom or what I knew not. She fought to prevent. She fought to offer herself instead.

But also she offered the body as yet unclaimed — untenanted.

"He who is in the Fire and in the Sun ... I call upon His power. I offer myself!" I heard her cry.

His answering voice seemed terrible:

"The Law forbids. You hold Them back from me." And then as from a greater distance, the voice continued more faintly: "You prevent. It has to be! Help me before it is too late; help me ... or ... I ... fail!"

Fail! I heard the awful word like thunder in the heavens.

The conflict of their wills, the distress of it was terrible. At this last moment she realised that the strain was more than he could withstand — he would go from her in that separation which is the body's death. She saw it all; there was division in her will and energies. Opposing herself to the justice he had invoked, she influenced the invasion of the elemental Powers, offering herself as channel in the hope of saving him. Her human desire weighed the balance — turning it just against him. Her insight clouded with emotion. She increased the risk for him, and at the same time left open to the great invading Powers another channel — the line of least resistance, the empty vehicle all prepared within herself.

To me it was mercilessly clear. I tried to speak, but found no words to utter; my tongue refused to frame a single sound; nor could I move my limbs. I heard Julius only, his voice calling like a distant storm.

"I call upon the Fire and Wind to enter me, and pass to their eternal home ... whence you and I ... and he ..."

His voice fell curiously away into a gulf; there was weakness in it. I saw her frail body shake from head to foot. She swayed as though about to fall. And then her voice, strong as a bugle-call, rang out:

“I claim it by — my *love*....!”

There was a burst of wind, a rush of sheeted fire. Then darkness fell. But in that instant before the fire passed, I saw his form stand close before my eyes. The face, alight with compassion and resignation, was turned towards her own. I saw the eyes; I saw the hands outstretched to take her; the lips were parted in a final attempt at utterance which never knew completion. And I knew — the certainty stopped the beating of my heart — that he had failed. There was no actual sound. Like a gleaming sword drawn swiftly from its scabbard, he rose past me through the air, borne from his body, as it were, on wings of ascending flame. There was a second of intolerable radiance, a rush of driving wind — and he was gone.

And far away, at the end of some stone corridor in the sunshine, yet at the same time close beside me upon the floor of the little mountain châlet, I heard the falling body as it dropped with a thud before my feet — untenanted....

CHAPTER XXXII

I REMEMBER WHAT followed very much as one remembers the confusion after an anæsthetic — fragments of extraordinary dream and of sensational experience jostling one another on the threshold of awakening. Then, very swiftly, like a train of gorgeous colour disappearing into a tunnel of darkness, the memory slipped down within me and was gone. The Past with a rush of lightning swept back into its sheath.

The glory and sense of exaltation, that is, were gone, but not the memory that they had been. I knew what had happened, what I had felt, seen, yearned for; but it was the cold facts alone remained, the feelings that had accompanied them vanished. Into a dull, chilled world I dropped back, wondering and terrified. A long interval had passed.

And the first thing I realised was that Mrs. LeVallon still lay sleeping in that chair of wicker — profoundly sleeping — that the lamp had burned low, and that the châlet felt like ice. Her face, even in the twilight, I saw was normal, the older expression gone. I turned the wick up higher, noting as I did so that the paper strewn about me was thick with writing, and it was then my half-dazed senses took in first that Julius was not standing near us, and that a shadow, oddly shaped and huddled, lay on the floor where the lamplight met the darkness.

The moving portion seemed at once to disentangle itself from the rest, and a face turned up to stare at me. It was the serving-man upon his knees. The expression in his eyes did more to bring me to my normal senses than anything else. That scared and anguished look made me understand the truth — that, and the moaning that from time to time escaped his lips.

Of speech from him I hardly got a word; he was inarticulate to the last as ever, and all that I could learn was that he had felt his master’s danger and had come....

We carried the body upstairs and laid it on the bed. I strove to regard it merely as the “instrument” *he* had used awhile, strove to find still his real undying Presence close to me — but that comfort failed me too. The face was very white. Upon the pale marble features lay still that signature of "Other Places" which haunted his life and soul. We closed the staring eyes and covered him with a sheet. And there the servant crouched upon the floor for the remaining five hours until the dawn, when I came up from watching that other figure of sleep in the room below, and found him in the same position. All that day as well he watched indeed, until at last I made him realise that the sooner he got the farmer's horse below and summoned a doctor, the better for all concerned.

But that was many hours later in the day, and meanwhile he just crouched there, difficult of approach, eyeing me savagely almost when I came, his eyes aflame with a kind of ugly, sullen resentment, but faithful to the last. What the silent, devoted being had heard or seen during our long hours of sinister struggle and experiment, I never knew, nor ever shall know.

My memory hardly lingers upon that; nor upon the unprofitable detail of the doctor's tardy arrival in the evening, his ill-concealed suspicion and eventual granting of a death certificate according to Swiss law; nor, again, upon his obvious verdict of a violent heart-stroke, or the course of procedure that he bade us follow.

Even the distressing details of the burial have somewhat faded, and I recall chiefly the fact that the Man established himself in the village where the churchyard was and began his watch that kept him near the grave, I believe, till death relieved him. My memory lingers rather upon the hours that I watched beside the sleeping woman, and upon the dreadful scene of her awakening and discovery of the truth.

For hours we had the darkness and the silence to ourselves, a silence broken only by the steady breathing of her slumber. I dared not wake her; knowing that the trance condition in time exhausts itself and the subject returns to normal waking consciousness without effort or distress, I let her slumber on, dreading the moment when the eyes would open and she must question me. The cold increased with the early hours of the morning, and I spread a rug about her stretched-out form. Slowly with the failing of the oil, the little lamp flame flickered and died, then finally went out, leaving us in the chill gloom together. All heat had long since left the fire of peat.

It was a vigil never to be forgotten. My thoughts revolved the whole time in one and the same circle, seeking in vain support from common things.

Slowly and by degrees my mind found steadiness, though with returning balance my pain grew keener and more searching. The poignant minutes stretched to days and years. For ever I fell to reconstructing those vanished scenes of memory, while striving to believe that the whole thing had been but a detailed vivid dream, and that presently I, too, should awake to find our life in the châlet as before, Julius still alive and close....

The moaning from the room overhead, where the Man watched over that other, final sleep, then brought bitterly again the sad reality, and set my thoughts whirling afresh with anguish. I was distraught and trembling.... London and my lectures, the recent climbing in the Dolomites, cities and trains and the business of daily modern life, these were the dreams.... The reality, truth, lay in that world of vision just departed ... Concerighé, Silvatela, the woman of that ancient, splendid past, the re-capture of the Temple Days when we three trod together that strange path of questing; the broken fragment of it all; the Chamber of the Vacated Bodies, and the sin of long ago; then, chief of all, the attempt to banish the Powers, evoked in those distant ages, back to their eternal home — *his* effort to offer himself as channel — *her* fear to lose him and her offering of herself — the failure ... and that appalling result upstairs.

For, ever and again, my thoughts returned to that: the spirit of the chief transgressor hovering now without a body, waiting for the River of the Lives to bring in some dim future another opportunity for atonement.

The failure...! In the glimmer of that pale, cold dawn I watched the outline of her slumbering form. I remembered her cry of sacrificing love that drew the great rushing Powers down into herself, and thus into the unresisting little body gathered now in growth against her heart. That human love the world deems great, seeking to save him to her own distress, had only blocked the progress of his soul she yearned to protect, so little understanding.... I heard her deep-drawn breathing in the darkness and wondered ... for the child that she would bear ... come to our modern strife and worldly things with this freight of elemental forces linked about his human heart and mind — fierce child of Wind and Fire...! A “natural,” perhaps a “super-natural” being....

This sense of woe and passion, haunting my long, silent vigil from night to dawn, and after it when the sunshine of the September morning lit the room and turned her face to silver — this it is that, after so many years, clings to the memory as though of yesterday.

And then, without a sign or movement to prepare me, I saw that the eyes had opened and were fixed upon my face.

The whispered words came instantly:

“Where is he? Has he gone away?”

Stupid with distress and pain, my heart was choked. I stared blankly in return, the channels of speech too blocked to find a single syllable.

I raised my hands, though hardly knowing what I meant to do. She sat up in the chair and looked a moment swiftly about the room. Her lips parted for another question, but it did not come. I think in my face, or in my gesture perhaps, she read the message of despair. She hid her face behind her hands, leaned back with a dreadful drooping of the entire frame, and let a sigh escape her that held the substance of all unutterable words of grief.

I yearned to help, but it was my silence, of course, that brought the truth so swiftly home to her returning consciousness. The awakening was complete and rapid, not as out of common sleep. I longed to touch and comfort her, yet my muscles refused to yield in any action I could manage, and my tongue clung dry against the roof of my mouth.

Then, presently, between her fingers came the words below a whisper:

“I knew that this would happen ... I knew that once I slept, he’d go from me ... and I should lose him. I tried ... that hard ... to keep awake.... But sleep *would* take me. An’ now ... it’s took him ... too. He’s gone for — for very long ... again!” She did not say “for ever.”

It was the voice, the accent and the words again of Mrs. LeVallon.

“Not for ever,” I whispered, “but for a little time.”

She rose up like a figure of white death, taking my hand. She did not tremble, and her step was firm. And more than this I never heard her say, for the entire contents of the interval since she first fell asleep beneath her husband’s passes had gone beyond recall.

“Take me to him,” she said gently. “I want to say good-bye.”

I led her up those creaking wooden stairs and left her with her dead.

Her strength was wonderful. I can never forget the quiet self-control she showed through all the wretched details that the situation then entailed. She asked no questions, shed no tears, moving brave and calm through all the ghastly duties. Something in her that lay deeper than death understood, and with the resignation of a truly great heart, accepted. Far stronger than myself she was; and, indeed, it seemed that my pain for her — at the time anyhow — absorbed the suffering that made my own heart ache with a sense of loss that has ever since left me empty and bereaved. Only in her eyes was there betrayal of sorrow that was itself, perhaps, another half revival of yet dimmer memories ... "eyes in which desire of some strange thing unutterably burned, unquenchable...." For the first time I understood the truth of another's words — so like a statue was her appearance, so set in stone, her words so sparing and her voice so dead:

"*I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;*

That only men incredulous of despair,

Half taught in anguish, through the midnight air

Beat upward to God's throne in loud access

Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness

In souls as countries lieth silent-bare...."

Her soul lay silent-bare; her grief was hopeless.... To my shame it must be confessed that I longed to escape from all the strain and nightmare of what had passed. The few days had been charged with material for a lifetime. I knew the sharp desire to find myself in touch once more with common, wholesome things — with London noise and bustle, trains, telephones and daily newspapers, with stupid students who could not even remember what they had learned the previous week, and with all the great majority who never even dreamed of a consciousness less restricted than their own. I saw the matter through, however, to the bitter end, and did not lose sight of Mrs. LeVallon until I left her safely in Lausanne, and helped her find a woman who should be both maid and companion, at least for the immediate future. It cannot be of interest or value to relate here. She did not cross my path again; while, on the other hand, it has never been possible for me to forget her. To this day I hear her voice and accent, I feel the touch of that hand that drew me softly into such depths of inexplicable vision; above all, I see her luminous, strange eyes and her movements of strange grace across the châlet floor.... And sometimes, even now, I half ... remember.

Yet never, till after this long interval of years, could I bring myself to set down any record of what had happened. Perhaps — most probably, I think — I feared that dwelling upon the haunting details that writing would involve might revive too obsessingly the memory of an experience so curiously overwhelming.

Now time has brought the necessity, as it were, of this confession; and I have done my best with material that really resists the mould of language, at least as I can use it. Later reading — for I devoured the best authorities and ransacked even the most extravagant records in my quest — has come to throw a little curious light upon some parts of it; and the results of this subsequent study no doubt appear in this report. At the time, however, I was ignorant of all such things, and the effect upon me of what I witnessed thus for the first time may be judged accordingly. It was dislocating.

Two facts alone remain to mention. And the first seems to me perhaps the most singular of the entire experience. For the pages I had covered with writing showed suddenly an abrupt and extraordinary change of script. Although the earlier sheets were in my own handwriting, roughly jotting down question and reply as they fell from the lips of Julius or his wife, there came midway in them this inexplicable change that altered them into the illegible scribble of a language that I could not read, yet recognised. It changed into that curious kind of ideograph that Julius used at school, that he showed me many a time in the sand at the end of the football field where we used to lie and talk, and that he claimed then was the ancient sacerdotal cipher we had used together in our remotest "Temple Days." I cannot read a word of it, nor can any to whom I have shown it decipher a single outline. The change began, it seems, at the point where "Mrs. LeVallon" went "deeper" at his word of command, and entered the layer of memories that dealt with that most ancient "section." This accounts, too, for the confusion and incompleteness of my record as written. A page of this script is framed upon my walls to-day; my eye rests on it as I write these words upon a modern typewriter — in Streatham.

The other fact I have to mention might well be the starting point for study and observation of an interesting kind. Yet, though it sorely tempted me, I resisted the temptation, and now, after twenty years, it is too late, and I, too old. This record, if published, may fall beneath the eye of someone to whom the chance and the desire may possibly combine to bring the opportunity.

For some weeks after the events that have been here described, Mrs. LeVallon gave birth to a boy, surviving him, alas! by but a single day.

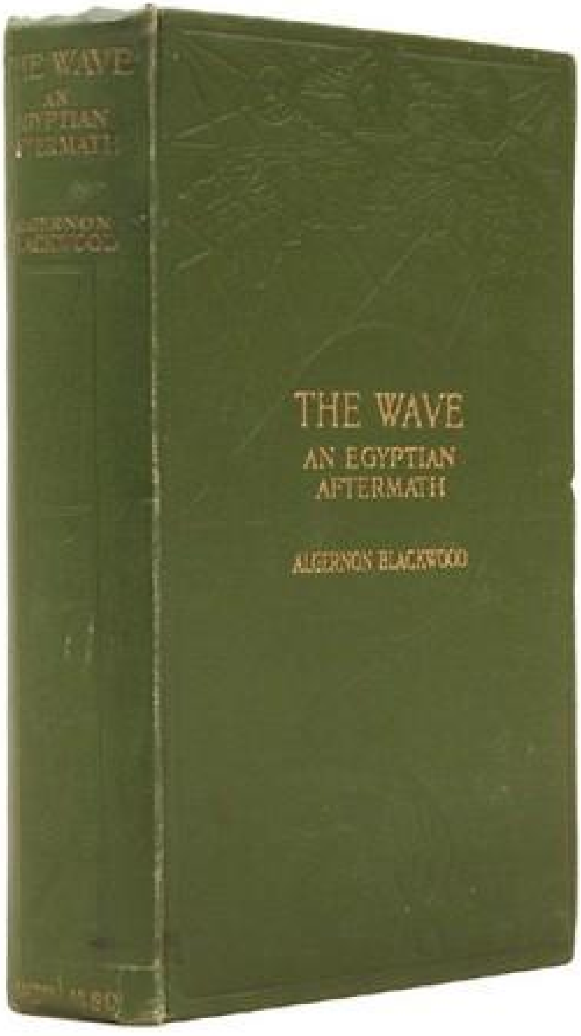
This I heard long afterwards by the merest chance. But my strenuous efforts to trace the child proved unavailing, and I only learned that he was adopted by a French family whose name even was not given to me. If alive he would be now about twenty years of age.

THE END

The Wave (1916)

AN EGYPTIAN AFTERMATH

This novel was first published in 1916. Another story of reincarnation, its protagonist is Thomas Kelverdon, whose life is haunted by a premonition of his own death by drowning under the eponymous wave. As the story progresses, it transpires that the origin of this recurring dream lies in a tragic love triangle, which Kelverdon was involved in during a previous existence in ancient Egypt – a love triangle which seems set to be played out again in the present day…

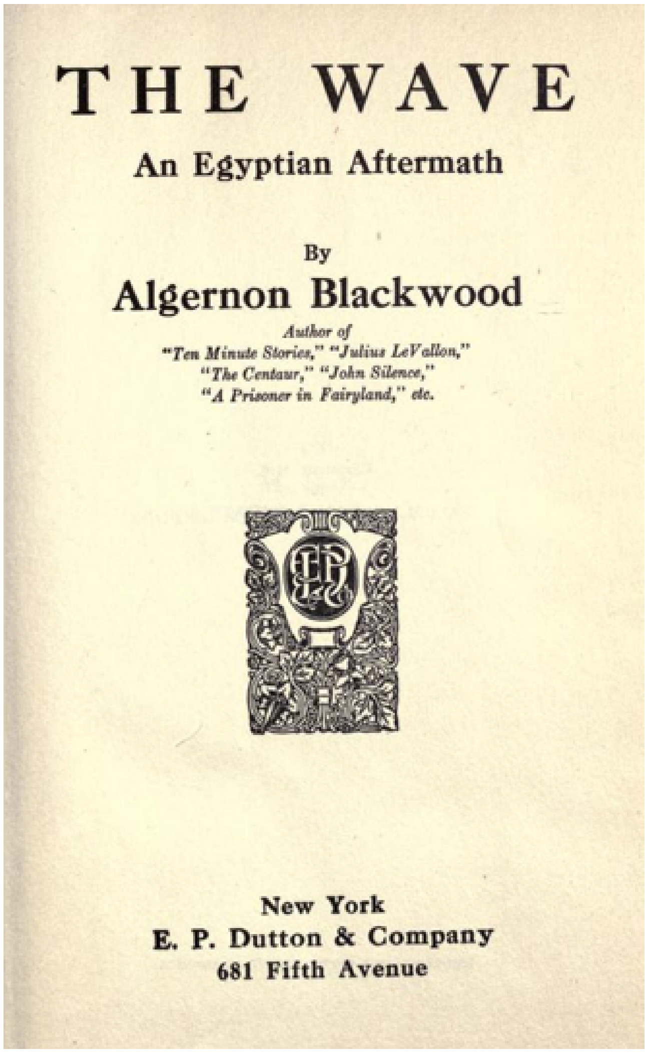

THE WAVE
AN EGYPTIAN
AFTERMATH
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

The first edition

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.
CHAPTER II.
CHAPTER III.
CHAPTER IV.
CHAPTER V.
CHAPTER VI.
CHAPTER VII.
CHAPTER VIII.
CHAPTER IX.
CHAPTER X.
CHAPTER XI.
CHAPTER XII.
CHAPTER XIII.
CHAPTER XIV.
CHAPTER XV.
CHAPTER XVI.
CHAPTER XVII.
CHAPTER XVIII.
CHAPTER XIX.
CHAPTER XX.
CHAPTER XXI.
CHAPTER XXII.
CHAPTER XXIII.
CHAPTER XXIV.

CHAPTER XXV.
CHAPTER XXVI.
CHAPTER XXVII.
CHAPTER XXVIII.
CHAPTER XXIX.
CHAPTER XXX.
CHAPTER XXXI.
CHAPTER XXXII.
CHAPTER XXXIII.



THE WAVE

An Egyptian Aftermath

By

Algernon Blackwood

Author of
"Ten Minute Stories," "Julius LeVallon,"
"The Centaur," "John Silence,"
"A Prisoner in Fairyland," etc.

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CHAPTER I.

SINCE CHILDHOOD DAYS he had been haunted by a Wave.

It appeared with the very dawn of thought, and was his earliest recollection of any vividness. It was also his first experience of nightmare: a wave of an odd, dun colour, almost tawny, that rose behind him, advanced, curled over in the act of toppling, and then stood still. It threatened, but it did not fall. It paused, hovering in a position contrary to nature; it waited.

Something prevented; it was not meant to fall; the right moment had not yet arrived.

If only it would fall! It swept across the skyline in a huge, long curve far overhead, hanging dreadfully suspended. Beneath his feet he felt the roots of it withdrawing; he shuffled furiously and made violent efforts; but the suction undermined him where he stood. The ground yielded and dropped away. He only sank in deeper. His entire weight became that of a feather against the gigantic tension of the mass that any moment, it seemed, must lift him in its rising curve, bend, break, and twist him, then fling him crashing forward to his smothering fate.

Yet the moment never came. The Wave hung balanced between him and the sky, poised in mid-air. It did not fall. And the torture of that infinite pause contained the essence of the nightmare.

The Wave invariably came up behind him, stealthily, from what seemed interminable distance. He never met it. It overtook him from the rear. The horizon hid it till it rose.

There were stages in its history, moreover, and in the effect it produced upon his early mind. Usually he woke up the moment he realised it was there. For it invariably announced its presence. He heard no sound, but knew that it was coming — there was a feeling in the atmosphere not unlike the heavy brooding that precedes a thunderstorm, only so different from anything he had yet known in life that his heart sank into his boots. He looked up. There, above his head was the huge, curved monster, hanging in mid-air. The mood had justified itself. He called it the ‘wavy feeling.’ He was never wrong about it.

The second stage was reached when, instead of trying to escape shorewards, where there were tufts of coarse grass upon a sandy bank, he turned and faced the thing. He looked straight into the main under-body of the poised billow. He saw the opaque mass out of which this line rose up and curved. He stared against the dull, dun-coloured parent body whence it came — the sea. Terrified yet fascinated, he examined it in detail, as a man about to be executed might examine the grain of the wooden block close against his eyes. A little higher, some dozen feet above the level of his head, it became transparent; sunlight shot through the glassy curve. He saw what appeared to be streaks and bubbles and transverse lines of foam that yet did not shine quite as water shines. It moved suddenly; it curled a little towards the crest; it was about to topple over, to break — yet did not break.

About this time he noticed another thing: there was a curious faint sweetness in the air beneath the bend of it, a delicate and indescribable odour that was almost perfume. It was sweet; it choked him. He called it, in his boyish way, a whiff. The ‘whiff’ and the ‘wavy feeling’ impressed themselves so vividly upon his mind that if ever he met them in his ordinary life — out of dream, that is — he was sure that he would know them. In another sense he felt he knew them already. They were familiar.

But another stage went further than all the others put together. It amounted to a discovery. He was perhaps ten years old at this time, for he was still addressed as ‘Tommy,’ and it was not till the age of fifteen that his solid type of character made ‘Tom’ seem more appropriate. He had just told the dream to his mother for the hundredth time, and she, after listening with sympathy, had made her ever-green suggestion— ‘If you dream of water, Tommy, it means you’re thirsty in your sleep,’ — when he turned and stared straight into her eyes with such intentness that she gave an involuntary start.

‘But, mother, it *isn’t* water!’

‘Well, darling, if it isn’t water, what is it, then?’ She asked the question quietly enough, but she felt, apparently, something of the queer dismay that her boy felt too. It seemed the mother-sense was touched. The instinct to protect her offspring stirred uneasily in her heart. She repeated the question, interested in the old, familiar dream for the first time since she heard it several years before: ‘If it isn’t water, Tommy, what is it? What can it be?’ His eyes, his voice, his manner — something she could not properly name — had startled her.

But Tommy noticed her slight perturbation, and knowing that a boy of his age did not frighten his mother without reason, or even with it, turned his eyes aside and answered:

‘I couldn’t tell. There wasn’t time. You see, I woke up then.’

‘How curious, Tommy,’ she rejoined. ‘A wave is a wave, isn’t it?’

And he answered thoughtfully: ‘Yes, mother; but there are lots of things besides water, aren’t there?’

She assented with a nod, and a searching look at him which he purposely avoided. The subject dropped; no more was said; yet somehow from that moment his mother knew that this idea of a wave, whether it was nightmare or only dream, had to do with her boy’s life in a way that touched the protective thing in her, almost to the point of positive defence. She could not explain it; she did not like it; instinct warned her — that was all she knew. And Tommy said no more. The truth was, indeed, that he did not know himself of what the Wave was composed. He could not have told his mother even had he considered it permissible. He would have loved to speculate and talk about it with her, but, having divined her nervousness, he knew he must not feed it. No boy should do such a thing.

Moreover, the interest he felt in the Wave was of such a deep, enormous character — the adjectives were his own — that he could not talk about it lightly. Unless to some one who showed genuine interest, he could not even mention it. To his brothers and sister, both older and younger than himself, he never spoke of it at all. It had to do with something so fundamental in him that it was sacred. The realisation of it, moreover, came and went, and often remained buried for weeks together; months passed without a hint of it; the nightmare disappeared. Then, suddenly, the feeling would surge over him, perhaps just as he was getting into bed, or saying his prayers, or thinking of quite other things. In the middle of a discussion with his brother about their air-guns and the water-rat they hadn’t hit — up would steal the ‘wavy’ feeling with its dim, familiar menace. It stole in across his brother’s excited words about the size and speed of the rat; interest in sport entirely vanished; he stared at Tim, not hearing a word he said; he dived into bed; he had to be alone with the great mood of wonder and terror that was rising. The approach was unmistakable; he cuddled beneath the sheets, fighting-angry if Tim tried to win him back to the original interest. The dream was coming; and, sure enough, a little later in his sleep, it came.

For even at this stage of his development he recognised instinctively this special quality about it — that it could not, was not meant to be avoided. It was inevitable and right. It hurt, yet he must face it. It was as necessary to his well-being as having a tooth out. Nor did he ever seek to dodge it. His character was not the kind that flinched. The one thing he did ask was — to understand. Some day, he felt, this full understanding would come.

There arrived then a new and startling development in this curious obsession, the very night, Tommy claims, that there had been the fuss about the gun and water-rat, on the day before the conversation with his mother. His brother had plagued him to come out from beneath the sheets and go on with the discussion, and Tommy, furious at being disturbed in the ‘wavy’ mood he both loved and dreaded, had felt himself roused uncommonly. He silenced Tim easily enough with a smashing blow from a pillow, then, with a more determined effort than usual, buried himself to face the advent of the Wave. He fell asleep in the attempt, but the attempt bore fruit. He felt the great thing coming up behind him; he turned; he saw it with greater distinctness than ever before; almost he discovered of what it was composed.

That it was *not* water established itself finally in his mind; but more — he got very close to deciding its exact composition. He stared hard into the threatening mass of it; there was a certain transparency about the substance, yet this transparency was not clear enough for water: there were particles, and these particles went drifting by the thousand, by the million, through the mass of it. They rose and fell, they swept along, they were very minute indeed, they whirled. They glistened, shimmered, flashed. He made a guess; he was just on the point of guessing right, in fact, when he saw another thing that for the moment obliterated all his faculties. There was both cold and heat in the sensation, fear and delight. It transfixed him. He saw eyes.

Steady, behind the millions of minute particles that whirled and drifted, he distinctly saw a pair of eyes of light-blue colour, and hardly had he registered this new discovery, when another pair, but of quite different kind, became visible beyond the first pair — dark, with a fringe of long, thick lashes. They were — he decided afterwards — what is called Eastern eyes, and they smiled into his own through half-closed lids. He thinks he made out a face that was dimly sketched behind them, but the whirling particles glinted and shimmered in such a confusing way that he could not swear to this. Of one thing only, or rather of two, did he feel quite positive: that the dark eyes were those of a woman, and that they were kind and beautiful and true: but that the pale-blue eyes were false, unkind, and treacherous, and that the face to which they belonged, although he could not see it, was a man's. Dimly his boyish heart was aware of happiness and suffering. The heat and cold he felt, the joy and terror, were half explained. He stared. The whirling particles drifted past and hid them. He woke.

That day, however, the 'wavy' feeling hovered over him more or less continuously. The impression of the night held sway over all he did and thought. There was a kind of guidance in it somewhere. He obeyed this guidance as by an instinct he could not, dared not disregard, and towards dusk it led him into the quiet room overlooking the small Gardens at the back of the house, his father's study. The room was empty; he approached the big mahogany cupboard; he opened one of the deep drawers where he knew his father kept gold and private things, and birthday or Christmas presents. But there was no dishonourable intention in him anywhere; indeed, he hardly knew exactly why he did this thing. The drawer, though moving easily, was heavy; he pulled hard; it slid out with a rush; and at that moment a stern voice sounded in the room behind him: 'What are you doing at my Eastern drawer?'

Tommy, one hand still on the knob, turned as if he had been struck. He gazed at his father, but without a trace of guilt upon his face.

'I wanted to see, Daddy.'

'I'll show you,' said the stern-faced man, yet with kindness and humour in the tone. 'It's full of wonderful things. I've nothing secret from you; but another time you'd better ask first — Tommy.'

'I wanted to see,' faltered the boy. 'I don't know why I did it. I just had a feeling. It's the first time — *really*.'

The man watched him searchingly a moment, but without appearing to do so. A look of interest and understanding, wholly missed by the culprit, stole into his fine grey eyes. He smiled, then drew Tommy towards him, and gave him a kiss on the top of his curly head. He also smacked him playfully. 'Curiosity,' he said with pretended disapproval, 'is divine, and at your age it is right that you should feel curiosity about everything in the world. But another time just ask me — and I'll show you all I possess.' He lifted his son in his arms, so that for the first time the boy could overlook the contents of the opened drawer. 'So you just had a feeling, eh —— ?' he continued, when Tommy wriggled in his arms, uttered a curious exclamation, and half collapsed. He seemed upon the verge of tears. An ordinary father must have held him guilty there and then. The boy cried out excitedly:

'The whiff! Oh, Daddy, it's my whiff!'

The tears, no longer to be denied, came freely then; after them came confession too, and confused though it was, the man made something approaching sense out of the jumbled utterance. It was not mere patient kindness on his part, for an older person would have seen that genuine interest lay behind the half-playful, half-serious cross-examination. He watched the boy's eager, excited face out of the corner of his eyes; he put discerning questions to him, he assisted his faltering replies, and he obtained in the end the entire story of the dream — the eyes, the wavy feeling, and the whiff. How much coherent meaning he discovered in it all is hard to say, or whether the story he managed to disentangle held together. There was this strange deep feeling in the boy, this strong emotion, this odd conviction amounting to an obsession; and so far as could be discovered, it was not traceable to any definite cause that Tommy could name — a fright, a shock, a vivid impression of one kind or another upon a sensitive young imagination. It lay so deeply in his being that its roots were utterly concealed; but it was real.

Dr. Kelverdon established the existence in his second boy of an unalterable premonition, and, being a famous nerve specialist, and a disciple of Freud into the bargain, he believed that a premonition has a cause, however primitive, however carefully concealed that cause may be. He put the boy to bed himself and tucked him up, told Tim that if he teased his brother too much he would smack him with his best Burmese slipper which had tiny nails in it, and then whispered into Tommy's ear as he cuddled down, happy and comforted, among the blankets: ‘Don’t make a special effort to dream, my boy; but if you do dream, try to remember it next morning, and tell me exactly what you see and feel.’ He used the Freudian method.

Then, going down to his study again, he looked at the open drawer and sniffed the faint perfume of things — chiefly from Egypt — that lay inside it. But there was nothing of special interest in the drawer; indeed, it was one he had not touched for years.

He went over one by one a few of the articles, collected from various points of travel long ago. There were bead necklaces from Memphis, some trash from a mummy of doubtful authenticity, including several amulets and a crumbling fragment of old papyrus, and, among all this, a tiny packet of incense mixed from a recipe said to have been found in a Theban tomb. All these, jumbled together in pieces of tissue-paper, had lain undisturbed since the day he wrapped them up some dozen years before — indeed he heard the dry rattle of the falling sand as he undid the tissue-paper. But a strong perfume rose from the parcel to his nostrils. ‘That’s what Tommy means by his whiff,’ he said to himself. ‘That’s Tommy’s whiff beyond all question. I wonder how he got it first?’

He remembered, then, that he had made a note of the story connected with the incense, and after some rummaging he found the envelope and read the account jotted down at the time. He had meant to hand it over to a literary friend — the tale was so poignantly human — then had forgotten all about it. The papyrus, dating over 3000 B.C., had many gaps. The Egyptologist had admittedly filled in considerable blanks in the afflicting story: —

A victorious Theban General, Prince of the blood, brought back a Syrian youth from one of his foreign conquests and presented him to his young wife who, first mothering him for his beauty, then made him her personal slave, and ended by caring deeply for him. The slave, in return, loved her with passionate adoration he was unable to conceal. As a Lady of the Court, her quasi-adoption of the youth caused comment. Her husband ordered his dismissal. But she still made his welfare her especial object, finding frequent reasons for their meeting. One day, however, her husband caught them together, though their meeting was in innocence. He half strangled the youth, till the blood poured down upon his own hands, then had him flogged and sent away to On, the City of the Sun.

The Syrian found his way back again, vengeance in his fiery blood. The clandestine yet innocent meetings were renewed. Rank was forgotten. They met among the sand-dunes in the desert behind the city where a pleasure tent among a grove of palms provided shelter, and the slave losing his head, urged the Princess to fly with him. Yet the wife, true to her profligate and brutal husband, refused his plea, saying she could only give a mother's love, a mother's care. This he rejected bitterly, accusing her of trifling with him. He grew bolder and more insistent. To divert her husband's violent suspicions she became purposely cruel, even ordering him punishments. But the slave misinterpreted. Finally, warning him that if caught he would be killed, she devised a plan to convince him of her sincerity. Hiding him behind the curtains of her tent, she pleaded with her husband for the youth's recall, swearing that she meant no wrong. But the soldier, in his fury, abused and struck her, and the slave, unable to contain himself, rushed out of his hiding-place and stabbed him, though not mortally. He was condemned to death by torture. She was to be chief witness against him.

Meanwhile, having extracted a promise from her husband that the torture should not be carried to the point of death, she conveyed word to the victim that he should endure bravely, knowing that he would not die. She now realised that she loved. She promised to fly with him.

The sentence was duly carried out, the slave only half believing in her truth. It was a public holiday in Thebes. She was compelled to see the punishment inflicted before the crowd. There were a thousand drums. A sand-storm hid the sun.

Seated beside her husband on a terrace above the Nile, she watched the torture — then knew she had been tricked. But the Syrian did not know; he believed her false. As he expired, casting his last glance of anguish and reproach at her, she rose, leaped the parapet, flung herself into the river, and was drowned. The husband had their bodies thrown into the sea, unburied. The same wave took them both. Later, however, they were recovered by influential friends; they were embalmed, and secretly laid to rest in his ancestral Tomb in the Valley of the Kings among the Theban Hills. In due course the husband, unwittingly, was buried with them.

Nearly five thousand years later all three mummies were discovered lying side by side, their story inscribed upon a papyrus inside the great sarcophagus.

Dr. Kelverdon glanced through the story he had forgotten, then tore it into little pieces and threw them into the fireplace. For a moment longer, however, he stood beside the open drawer reflectingly. Had he ever told the tale to Tommy? No; it was hardly likely; indeed it was impossible. The boy was not born even when first he heard it. To his wife, then? Less likely still. He could not remember, anyhow. The faint suggestion in his mind — a story communicated pre-natally — was not worth following up. He dismissed the matter from his thoughts. He closed the drawer and turned away. The little packet of incense, however, taken from the Tomb, he did not destroy. ‘I’ll give it to Tommy,’ he decided. ‘Its whiff may possibly stimulate him into explanation!’

CHAPTER II.

AS A RESULT of having told everything to his father, Tommy’s nightmare, however, largely ceased to trouble him. He had found the relief of expression, which is confession, and had laid upon the older mind the burden of his terror. Once a month, once a week, or even daily if he wanted to, he could repeat the expression as the need for it accumulated, and the load which decency forbade being laid upon his mother, the stern-faced man could carry easily for him.

The comfortable sensation that forgiveness is the completion of confession invaded his awakening mind, and had he been older this thin end of a religious wedge might have persuaded him to join what his mother called that ‘vast conspiracy.’ But even at this early stage there was something stalwart and self-reliant in his cast of character that resisted the cunning sophistry; vicarious relief woke resentment in him; he meant to face his troubles alone. So far as he knew, he had not sinned, yet the Wave, the Whiff, the Eyes were symptoms of some fate that threatened him, a premonition of something coming that he must meet with his own strength, something that he could only deal with effectively alone, since it was deserved and just. One day the Wave would fall; his father could not help him then. This instinct in him remained unassailable. He even began to look forward to the time when it should come — to have done with it and get it over, conquering or conquered.

The premonition, that is, while remaining an obsession as before, transferred itself from his inner to his outer life. The nightmare, therefore, ceased. The menacing interest, however, held unchanged. Though the name had not hitherto occurred to him, he became a fatalist. ‘It’s got to come; I’ve got to meet it. I will.’

‘Well, Tommy,’ his father would ask from time to time, ‘been dreaming anything lately?’

‘Nothing, Daddy. It’s all stopped.’

‘Wave, eyes, and whiff all forgotten, eh?’

Tommy shook his head. ‘They’re still there,’ he answered slowly, ‘but — —’ He seemed unable to complete the sentence. His father helped him at a venture.

‘But they can’t catch you — is that it?’

The boy looked up with a dogged expression in his big grey eyes. ‘I’m ready for them,’ he replied. And his father laughed and said, ‘Of course. That’s half the battle.’

He gave him a present then — one of the packets of tissue-paper — and Tommy took it in triumph to his room. He opened it in private, but the contents seemed to him without especial interest. Only the Whiff was, somehow, sweet and precious; and he kept the packet in a drawer apart where the fossils and catapult and air-gun ammunition could not interfere with it, hiding the key so that Tim and the servants could not find it. And on rare occasions, when the rest of the household was asleep, he performed a little ritual of his own that, for a boy of his years, was distinctly singular.

When the room was dark, lit in winter by the dying fire, or in summer by the stars, he would creep out of bed, make quite sure that Tim was asleep, stand on a chair to reach the key from the top of the big cupboard, and carefully unlock the drawer. He had oiled the wood with butter, so that it was silent. The tissue-paper gleamed dimly pink; the Whiff came out to meet him. He lifted the packet, soft and crackling, and set it on the window-sill; he did not open it; its contents had no interest for him, it was the perfume he was after. And the moment the perfume reached his nostrils there came a trembling over him that he could not understand. He both loved and dreaded it. This manly, wholesome-minded, plucky little boy, the basis of whose steady character was common sense, became the prey of a strange, unreasonable fantasy. A faintness stole upon him; he lost the sense of kneeling on a solid chair; something immense and irresistible came piling up behind him; there was nothing firm he could push against to save himself; he began shuffling with his bare feet, struggling to escape from something that was coming, something that would probably overwhelm him yet must positively be faced and battled with. The Wave was rising. It was the wavy feeling.

He did not turn to look, because he knew quite well there was nothing in the room but beds, a fender, furniture, vague shadows and his brother Tim. That kind of childish fear had no place in what he felt. But the Wave was piled and curving over none the less; it hung between him and the shadowed ceiling, above the roof of the house; it came from beyond the world, far overhead against the crowding stars. It would not break, for the time had not yet come. But it was there. It waited. He knelt beneath its mighty shadow of advance; it was still arrested, poised above his eager life, competent to engulf him when the time arrived. The sweep of its curved mass was mountainous. He knelt inside this curve, small, helpless, but not too afraid to fight. The perfume stole about him. The Whiff was in his nostrils. There was a strange, rich pain — oddly remote, yet oddly poignant.…

And it was with this perfume that the ritual chiefly had to do. He loved the extraordinary sensations that came with it, and tried to probe their meaning in his boyish way. Meaning there was, but it escaped him. The sweetness clouded something in his brain, and made his muscles weak; it robbed him of that resistance which is fighting strength. It was this battle that he loved, this sense of shoving against something that might so easily crush and finish him. There *was* a way to beat it, a way to win — could he but discover it. As yet he could not. Victory, he felt, lay more in yielding and going-with than in violent resistance.

And, meanwhile, in an ecstasy of this half yielding, half resisting, he lent himself fully to the overmastering tide. He was conscious of attraction and repulsion, something that enticed, yet thrust him backwards. Some final test of manhood, character, value, lay in the way he faced it. The strange, rich pain stole marvellously into his blood and nerves. His heart beat faster. There was this exquisite seduction that contained delicious danger. It rose upon him out of some inner depth he could not possibly get at. He trembled with mingled terror and delight. And it invariably ended with a kind of inexpressible yearning that choked him, crumpled him inwardly, as he described it, brought the moisture, hot and smarting, into his burning eyes, and — each time to his bitter shame — left his cheeks wet with scalding tears.

He cried silently; there was no heaving, gulping, audible sobbing, just a relieving gush of heartfelt tears that took away the strange, rich pain and brought the singular ritual to a finish. He replaced the tissue-paper, blotted with his tears; locked the drawer carefully; hid the key on the top of the cupboard again, and tumbled back into bed.

Downstairs, meanwhile, a conversation was in progress concerning the welfare of the growing hero.

‘I’m glad that dream has left him anyhow. It used to frighten me rather. I did *not* like it,’ observed his mother.

‘He doesn’t speak to you about it any more?’ the father asked.

For months, she told him, Tommy had not mentioned it. They went on to discuss his future together. The other children presented fewer problems, but Tommy, apparently, felt no particular call to any profession.

‘It will come with a jump,’ the doctor inclined to think. ‘He’s been on the level for some time now. Suddenly he’ll grow up and declare his mighty mind.’

Father liked humour in the gravest talk; indeed the weightier the subject, the more he valued a humorous light upon it. The best judgment, he held, was shaped by humour, sense of proportion lost without it. His wife, however, thought ‘it a pity.’ Grave things she liked grave.

‘There’s something very deep in Tommy,’ she observed, as though he were developing a hidden malady.

‘Hum,’ agreed her husband. ‘His subconscious content is unusual, both in kind and quantity.’ His eyes twinkled. ‘It’s possible he may turn out an artist, or a preacher. If the former, I’ll bet his output will be original; and, as for the latter,’ — he paused a second— ‘he’s too logical and too fearless to be orthodox. Already he thinks things out for himself.’

‘I should like to see him in the Church, though,’ said Mother. ‘He would do a lot of good. But he *is* uncompromising, rather.’

‘His honesty certainly is against him,’ sighed his father. ‘What do you think he asked me the other day?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know, John.’ The answer completed itself with the unspoken ‘He never asks *me* anything now.’

‘He came straight up to me and said, ‘Father, is it good to feel pain? To let it come, I mean, or try to dodge it?’’

‘Had he hurt himself?’ the woman asked quickly. It seemed she winced.

‘Not physically. He had been feeling something inside. He wanted to know how ‘a man’ should meet the case.’

‘And what did you tell him, dear?’

‘That pain was usually a sign of growth, to be understood, accepted, faced. That most pain was cured in that way — —’

‘He didn’t tell you what had hurt him?’ she interrupted.

‘Oh, I didn’t ask him. He’d have shut up like a clam. Tommy likes to deal with things alone in his own way. He just wanted to know if his way was — well, *my* way.’

There fell a pause between them; then Mother, without looking up, enquired: ‘Have you noticed Lettice lately? She’s here a good deal now.’

But her husband only smiled, making no direct reply. ‘Tommy will have a hard time of it when he falls in love,’ he remarked presently. ‘He’ll know the real thing and won’t stand any nonsense — just as I did.’ Whereupon his wife informed him that if he was not careful he would simply ruin the boy — and the brief conversation died away of its own accord. As she was leaving the room a little later, unsatisfied but unaggressive, he asked her: ‘Have you left the picture books, my dear?’ and she pointed to an ominous heap upon the table in the window, with the remark that Jane had ‘unearthed every book that Tommy had set eyes upon since he was three. You’ll find everything that’s ever interested him,’ she added as she went out, ‘every picture, that is — and I suppose it is the pictures that you want.’

For an hour and a half the great specialist turned pages without ceasing — well-thumbed pages; torn, crumpled, blotted, painted pages. It was easy to discover the boy’s favourite pictures; and all were commonplace enough, the sort that any normal, adventure-loving boy would find delightful. But nothing of special significance resulted from the search; nothing that might account for the recurrent nightmare, nothing in the way of eyes or wave. He had already questioned Jane as to what stories she told him, and which among them he liked best. ‘Hunting or travel or collecting,’ Jane had answered, and it was about ‘collecting that he asks most questions. What kind of collecting, sir? Oh, treasure or rare beetles mostly, and sometimes — just bones.’

‘Bones! What kind of bones?’

‘The villin’s, sir,’ explained the frightened Jane. ‘He always likes the villin to get lost, and for the jackals to pick his bones in the desert — —’

‘Any particular desert?’

‘No, sir; just desert.’

‘Ah — just desert! Any old desert, eh?’

‘I think so, sir — as long as it *is* desert.’

Dr. Kelverdon put the woman at her ease with the humorous smile that made all the household love — and respect — him; then asked another question, as if casually: Had she ever told him a story in which a wave or a pair of eyes were in any way conspicuous?

‘No, never, sir,’ replied the honest Jane, after careful reflection. ‘Nor I wouldn’t,’ she added, ‘because my father he was drowned in a tidal wave; and as for eyes, I know that’s wrong for children, and I wouldn’t tell Master Tommy such a thing for all the world — —’

‘Because?’ enquired the doctor kindly, seeing her hesitation.

‘I’d be frightening myself, sir, and he’d make such fun of me,’ she finally confessed.

No, it was clear that the nurse was not responsible for the vivid impression in Tommy’s mind which bore fruit in so strange a complex of emotions. Nor were other lines of enquiry more successful. There was a cause, of course, but it would remain unascertainable unless some clue offered itself by chance. Both the doctor and the father in him were pledged to a persistent search that was prolonged over several months, but without result. The most perplexing element in the problem seemed to him the whiff. The association of terror with a wave needed little explanation; the introduction of the eyes, however, was puzzling, unless some story of a drowning man was possibly the clue; but the addition of a definite odour, an Eastern odour, moreover, with which the boy could hardly have become yet acquainted, — this combination of the three accounted for the peculiar interest in the doctor’s mind.

Of one thing alone did he feel reasonably certain: the impression had been printed upon the deepest part of Tommy’s being, the very deepest; it arose from those unplumbed profundities — though a scientist, he considered them unfathomable — of character and temperament whence emerge the most primitive of instincts, — the generative and creative instinct, choice of a mate, natural likes and dislikes, — the bed-rock of the nature. A girl was in it somewhere, somehow.…

Midnight had sounded from the stable clock in the mews when he stole up into the boys’ room and cautiously approached the yellow iron bed where Tommy lay. The reflection of a street electric light just edged his face. He was sound asleep — with tear-stains marked clearly on the cheek not pressed into the pillow. Dr. Kelverdon paused a moment, looked round the room, shading the candle with one hand. He saw no photograph, no pictures anywhere. Then he sniffed. There was a faint and delicate perfume in the air. He recognised it. He stood there, thinking deeply.

‘Lettice Aylmer,’ he said to himself presently as he went softly out again to seek his own bed; ‘I’ll try Lettice. It’s just possible.… Next time I see her I’ll have a little talk.’ For he suddenly remembered that Lettice Aylmer, his daughter’s friend and playmate, had very large and beautiful dark eyes.

CHAPTER III.

LETTICE AYLMER, DAUGHTER of the Irish Member of Parliament, did not provide the little talk that he anticipated, however, because she went back to her Finishing School abroad. Dr. Kelverdon was sorry when he heard it. So was Tommy. She was to be away a year at least. ‘I must remember to have a word with her when she comes back,’ thought the father, and made a note of it in his diary twelve months ahead. ‘Three hundred and sixty-five days,’ thought Tommy, and made a private calendar of his own.

It seemed an endless, zodiacal kind of period; he counted the days, a sheet of foolscap paper for each month, and at the bottom of each sheet two columns showing the balance of days gone and days to come. Tuesday, when he had first seen her, was underlined, and each Tuesday had a number attached to it, giving the total number of weeks since that wonderful occasion. But Saturdays were printed. On Saturday Lettice had spoken to him; she had smiled, and the words were, ‘Don’t forget me, Tommy!’ And Tommy, looking straight into her great dark eyes, that seemed to him more tender even than his mother’s, had stammered a reply that he meant with literal honesty: ‘I won’t — never…’; and she was gone… to France… across the sea.

She took his soul away with her, leaving him behind to pore over his father’s big atlas and learn French sentences by heart. It seemed the only way. Life had begun, and he must be prepared. Also, his career was chosen. For Lettice had said another thing — one other thing. When Mary, his sister, introduced him, ‘This is Tommy,’ Lettice looked down and asked: ‘Are you going to be an engineer?’ adding proudly, ‘My brother is.’ Before he could answer she was scampering away with Mary, the dark hair flying in a cloud, the bright bow upon it twinkling like a star in heaven — and Tommy, hating his ridiculous boyish name with an intense hatred, stood there trembling, but aware that the die was cast — he was going to be an engineer.

Trembling, yes; for he felt dazed and helpless, caught in a mist of fire and gold, the furniture whirling round him, and something singing wildly in his heart. Two things, each containing in them the essence of genuine shock, had fallen upon him: shock, because there was impetus in them as of a blow. They had been coming; they had reached him. There was no doubt or question possible. He staggered from the impact. Joy and terror touched him; at one and the same moment he felt the enticement and the shrinking of his dream.… He longed to seize her and prevent her ever going away, yet also he wanted to push her from him as though she somehow caused him pain.

For, on the two occasions when speech had taken place between himself and Lettice, the dream had transferred itself boldly into his objective life — yet not entirely. Two characteristics only had been thus transferred. When his sister first came into the hall with ‘This is Tommy,’ the wavy feeling had already preceded her by a definite interval that was perhaps a second by the watch. He was aware of it behind him, curved and risen — not curving, rising — from the open fireplace, but also from the woods behind the house, from the whole of the country right back to the coast, from across the world, it seemed, towering overhead against the wintry sky. And when Lettice smiled and asked that question of childish admiration about being an engineer, he was already shuffling furiously with his feet upon the Indian rug. She was gone again, luckily, he hoped, before the ridiculous pantomime was noticeable.

He saw her once or twice. He was invariably speechless when she came into his presence, and his silence and awkwardness made him appear at great disadvantage. He seemed intentionally rude. Nervous self-consciousness caused him to bridle over nothing. Even to answer her was a torture. He dreaded a snub appallingly, and bridled in anticipation. Furious with himself for his inability to use each precious opportunity, he pretended he didn’t care. The consequence was that when she once spoke to him sweetly, he was too overpowered to respond as he might have done. That she had not even noticed his anguished attitude never occurred to him.

‘We’re always friends, aren’t we, Tommy?’

‘Rather,’ he blurted, before he could regain his composure for a longer sentence.

‘And always will be, won’t we?’

‘Rather,’ he repeated, cursing himself later for thinking of nothing better to say. Then, just as she flew off in that dancing way of hers, he found his tongue. Out of the jumbled mass of phrases in his head three words got loose and offered themselves: ‘We’ll always be!’ he flung at her retreating figure of intolerable beauty. And she turned her head over her shoulder, waved her hand without stopping her career, and shouted ‘Rather!’

That was the Tuesday in his calendar. But on Saturday, the printed Saturday following it, the second characteristic of his dream announced itself: he recognised the Eyes. Why he had not recognised them on the Tuesday lay beyond explanation; he only knew it was so. And afterwards, when he tried to think it over, it struck him that she had scampered out of the hall with peculiar speed and hurry; had made her escape without the extra word or two the occasion naturally demanded — almost as though she, too, felt something that uneasily surprised her.

Tommy wondered about it till his head spun round. She, too, had received an impact that was shock. He was as thorough about it as an instinctive scientist. He also registered this further fact — that the dream-details had not entirely reproduced themselves in the affair. There was no trace of the Whiff or of the other pair of Eyes. Some day the three would come together; but then.…

The main thing, however, undoubtedly was this: Lettice felt something too: she was aware of feelings similar to his own. He was too honest to assume that she felt exactly what he felt; he only knew that her eyes betrayed familiar intimacy when she said ‘Don’t forget me, Tommy,’ and that when she rushed out of the hall with that unnecessary abruptness it was because — well, he could only transfer to her some degree of the ‘wavy’ feeling in himself.

And he fell in love with abandonment and a delicious, infinite yearning. From that moment he thought of himself as Tom instead of Tommy.

It was an entire, sweeping love that left no atom or corner of his being untouched. Lettice was real; she hid below the horizon of distant France, yet could not, did not, hide from him. She also waited.

He knew the difference between real and unreal people. The latter wavered about his life and were uncertain; sometimes he liked them, sometimes he did not; but the former — remained fixed quantities: he could not alter towards them. Even at this stage he knew when a person came into his life to stay, or merely to pass out again. Lettice, though seen but twice, belonged to this first category. His feeling for her had the Wave in it; it gathered weight and mass, it was irresistible. From the dim, invisible foundations of his life it came, out of the foundations of the world, out of that inexhaustible sea-foundation that lay below everything. It was real; it was not to be avoided. He knew. He persuaded himself that she knew too.

And it was then, realising for the first time the searching pain of being separated from something that seemed part of his being by natural right, he spoke to his father and asked if pain should be avoided. This conversation has been already sufficiently recorded; but he asked other things as well. From being so long on the level he had made a sudden jump that his father had foretold; he grew up; his mind began to think; he had peered into certain books; he analysed. Out of the nonsense of his speculative reflections the doctor pounced on certain points that puzzled him completely. Probing for the repressed elements in the boy's psychic life that caused the triple complex of Wave and Eyes and Whiff, he only saw the cause receding further and further from his grasp until it finally lost itself in ultimate obscurity. The disciple of Freud was baffled hopelessly.…

Tom, meanwhile, bathed in a sea of new sensations. Distance held meaning for him, separation was a kind of keen starvation. He made discoveries — watched the moon rise, heard the wind, and knew the stars shone over the meadows below the house, things that before had been merely commonplace. He pictured these details as they might occur in France, and once when he saw a Swallow Tail butterfly, knowing that the few English specimens were said to have crossed the Channel, he had a touch of ecstasy, as though the proud insect brought him a message from the fields below the Finishing School. Also he read French books and found the language difficult but exquisite. All sweet and lovely things came from France, and at school he attempted violent friendships with three French boys and the Foreign Language masters, friendships that were not appreciated because they were not understood. But he made progress with the language, and it stood him in good stead in his examinations. He was aiming now at an Engineering College. He passed in — eventually — brilliantly enough.

Before that satisfactory moment, however, he knew difficult times. His inner life was in a splendid tumult. From the books he purloined he read a good many facts concerning waves and wave-formation. He learned, among other things, that all sensory impressions reached the nerves by impact of force in various wave-lengths; heat, light and sound broke upon the skin and eyes and ears in vibrations of æther or air that advanced in steady series of wavy formations which, though not quite similar to his dream-wave, were akin to it. Sensation, which is life, was thus linked on to his deepest, earliest memory.

A wave, however, instantly rejoined the parent stock and formed again. And perhaps it was the repetition of the wave — its forming again and breaking again — that impressed him most. For he imagined his impulses, emotions, tendencies all taking this wave-form, sweeping his moods up to a certain point, then dropping back into his centre — the Sea, he called it — which held steady below all temporary fluctuations — only to form once more and happen all over again.

With his moral and spiritual life it was similar: a wind came, wind of desire, wind of yearning, wind of hope, and he felt his strength accumulating, rising, bending with power upon the object that he had in view. To take that object exactly at the top of the wave was to achieve success; to miss that moment was to act with a receding and diminishing power, to dissipate himself in foam and spray before he could retire for a second rise. He saw existence as a wave. Life itself was a wave that rose, swept, curved, and finally — must break.

He merely visualised these feelings into pictures; he did not think them out, nor get them into words. The wave became symbolic to him of all life’s energies. It was the way in which all sensation expressed itself. Lettice was the high-water mark on shore he longed to reach and sweep back into his own tumultuous being. In that great underneath, the Sea, they belonged eternally together.…

One thing, however, troubled him exceedingly: he read that a wave was a segment of a circle, the perfect form, yet that it never completed itself. The ground on which it broke prevented the achievement of the circle. That, he felt, was a pity, and might be serious; there was always that sinister retirement for another effort that yet never did, and never could, result in complete achievement. He watched the waves a good deal on the shore, when occasion offered in the holidays — they came from France! — and made a discovery on his own account that was not mentioned in any of the books. And it was this: that the top of the wave, owing to its curve, was reflected in the under part. Its end, that is, was foretold in its beginning.

There was a want of scientific accuracy here, a confusion of time and space, perhaps, yet he noticed the idea and registered the thrill. At the moment when the wave was poised to fall its crest shone reflected in the base from which it rose.

But the more he watched the waves on the shore, the more puzzled he became. They seemed merely a movement of the sea itself. They endlessly repeated themselves. They had no true, separate existence until they — broke. Nor could he determine whether the crest or the base was the beginning, for the two ran along together, and what was above one minute was below the minute after. Which part started first he never could decide. The head kept chasing the tail in an effort to join up. Only when a wave broke and fell was it really — a wave. It had to ‘happen’ to earn its name.

There were ripples too. These indicated the direction of the parent wave upon whose side they happened, but not its purpose. Moods were ripples: they varied the surface of life but did not influence its general direction.

His own life followed a similar behaviour; he was full of ripples that were for ever trying to complete themselves by happening in acts. But the main Wave was the thing — end and beginning sweeping along together, both at the same time somehow. That is, he knew the end and could foretell it. It rose from the great ‘beneath’ which was the sea in him. It must topple over in the end and complete itself. He knew it would; he knew it would hurt; he knew also that he would not shirk it when it came. For it was a repetition somehow.

‘I jolly well mean to enjoy the smash,’ he felt. ‘I know one pair of Eyes already; there’s only the Whiff and the other Eyes to come. The moment I find them, I’ll go bang into it.’ He experienced a delicious shiver at the prospect.

One thing, however, remained uncertain: the stuff the Wave was made of. Once he discovered that, he would discover also — *where* the smash would come.

CHAPTER IV.

‘CAN A CHAP feel things coming?’ he asked his father. He was perhaps fifteen or sixteen then. ‘I mean, when you feel them coming, does that mean they *must* come?’

His father listened warily. There had been many similar questions lately.

‘You can feel ordinary things coming,’ he replied; ‘things due to association of ideas.’

Tom looked up. ‘Association?’ he queried uncertainly.

‘If you feel hungry,’ explained the doctor, ‘you know that dinner’s coming; you associate the hunger with the idea of eating. You recognise them because you’ve felt them both together before.’

‘They *ought* to come, then?’

‘Dinner does come — ordinarily speaking. You’ve learned to expect it from the hunger. You could, of course, prevent it coming,’ he added dryly, ‘only that would be bad for you. You need it.’

Tom reflected a moment with a puckered face. His father waited for him to ask more, hoping he would. The boy felt the sympathy and invitation.

‘*Before*,’ he repeated, picking out the word with sudden emphasis, his mind evidently breaking against a problem. ‘But if I felt hungry for something I *hadn’t* had before —— ?’

‘In that case you wouldn’t call it hunger. You wouldn’t know what to call it. You’d feel a longing of some kind and would wonder what it meant.’

Tom’s next words surprised him considerably. They came promptly, but with slow and thoughtful emphasis.

‘So that if I know what I want, and call it dinner, or pain, or — love, or something,’ he exclaimed, ‘it means that I’ve had it *before*? And that’s why I know it.’ The last five words were not a question but a statement of fact apparently.

The doctor pretended not to notice the variants of dinner. At least he did not draw attention to them.

‘Not necessarily,’ he answered. ‘The things you feel you want may be the things that everybody wants — things common to the race. Such wants are naturally in your blood; you feel them because your parents, your grandparents, and all humanity in turn behind your own particular family have always wanted them.’

‘They come out of the sea, you mean?’

‘That’s very well expressed, Tom. They come out of the sea of human nature, which is everywhere the same, yes.’

The compliment seemed to annoy the boy.

‘Of course,’ he said bluntly. ‘But — if it hurts?’ The words were sharply emphasised.

‘Association of ideas again. Toothache suggests the pincers. You want to get rid of the pain, but the pain has to get worse before it can get better. You know that, so you face it gladly — to get it over.’

‘You face it, yes,’ said Tom. ‘It makes you better in the end.’

It suddenly dawned upon him that his learned father knew nothing, nothing at least that could help him. He knew only what other people knew. He turned then, and asked the ridiculous question that lay at the back of his mind all the time. It cost him an effort, for his father would certainly deem it foolish.

‘Can a thing happen before it really happens?’

Dr. Kelverdon may or may not have thought the question foolish; his face was hidden a moment as he bent down to put the Indian rug straight with his hand. There was no impatience in the movement, nor was there mockery in his expression, when he resumed his normal position. He had gained an appreciable interval of time — some fifteen seconds. ‘Tom, you’ve got good ideas in that head of yours,’ he said calmly; ‘but what is it that you mean exactly?’

Tom was quite ready to amplify. He knew what he meant:

‘If I *know* something is going to happen, doesn’t that mean that it has already happened — and that I remember it?’

‘You’re a psychologist as well as engineer, Tom,’ was the approving reply. ‘It’s like this, you see: In emotion, with desire in it, can predict the fulfilment of that desire. In great hunger you imagine you’re eating all sorts of good things.’

‘But that’s looking forward,’; the boy pounced on the mistake. ‘It’s not remembering.’

‘That *is* the difficulty,’ explained his father; ‘to decide whether you’re anticipating only — or actually remembering.’

‘I see,’ Tom said politely.

All this analysis concealed merely: it did not reveal. The thing itself dived deeper out of sight with every phrase. *He* knew quite well the difference between anticipating and remembering. With the latter there was the sensation of having been through it. Each time he remembered seeing Lettice the sensation was the same, but when he looked forward to seeing her *again* the sensation varied with his mood.

‘For instance, Tom — between ourselves this — we’re going to send Mary to that Finishing School in France where Lettice is.’ The doctor, it seemed, spoke carelessly while he gathered his papers together with a view to going out. He did not look at the boy; he said it walking about the room. ‘Mary will look forward to it and think about it so much that when she gets there it will seem a little familiar to her, as if — almost as if she remembered it.’

‘Thank you, father; I see, yes,’ murmured Tom. But in his mind a voice said so distinctly ‘Rot!’ that he was half afraid the word was audible.

‘You see the difficulty, eh? And the difference?’

‘Rather,’ exclaimed the boy with decision.

And thereupon, without the slightest warning, he looked out of the window and asked certain other questions. Evidently they cost him effort; his will forced them out. Since his back was turned he did not see his father’s understanding smile, but neither did the latter see the lad’s crimson cheeks, though possibly he divined them.

‘Father — is Miss Aylmer older than me?’

‘Ask Mary, Tom. She’ll know. Or, stay — I’ll ask her for you — if you like.’

‘Oh, that’s all right. I just wanted to know,’ with an assumed indifference that barely concealed the tremor in the voice.

‘I suppose,’ came a moment later, ‘a Member of Parliament is a grander thing than a doctor, is it?’

‘That depends,’ replied his father, ‘upon the man himself. Some M.P.’s vote as they’re told, and never open their mouths in the House. Some doctors, again — —’

But the boy interrupted him. He quite understood the point.

‘It’s fine to be an engineer, though, isn’t it?’ he asked. ‘It’s a real profession?’

‘The world couldn’t get along without them, or the Government either. It’s a most important profession indeed.’

Tom, playing idly with the swinging tassel of the window-blind, asked one more question. His voice and manner were admirably under control, but there *was* a gulp, and his father heard and noted it.

‘Shall I have — shall I be rich enough — to marry — some day?’

Dr. Kelverdon crossed the room and put his hand on his son’s shoulder, but did not try to make him show his face. ‘Yes,’ he said quietly, ‘you will, my boy — when the time comes.’ He paused a moment, then added: ‘But money will not make you a distinguished man, whereas if you become a famous engineer, you’ll have money of your own and — any nice girl would be proud to have you.’

‘I see,’ said Tom, tying the strings of the tassel into knots, then untying them again with a visible excess of energy — and the conversation came somewhat abruptly to an end. He was aware of the invitation to talk further about Lettice Aylmer, but he resisted and declined it. What was the use? He knew his own mind already about *that*.

Yet, strictly speaking, Tom was not imaginative. It was as if an instinct taught him. More and more, the Wave, with its accompanying details of

Eyes and Whiff, seemed to him the ghost of some dim memory that brought a forgotten warning in its train — something missed, something to be repeated, something to be faced and learned and — mastered.…

His father, meanwhile, went forth upon his rounds that day, much preoccupied about the character of his eldest boy. He felt a particular interest in the peculiar obsession that he knew overshadowed the young, growing life. It puzzled him; he found no clue to it; in his thought he was aware of a faint uneasiness, although he did not give it a definite name — something akin to what the mother felt. Admitting he was baffled, he fell back, however, upon such generalities as prenatal influence, ancestral, racial, and so eventually dismissed it from his active mind.

Tom, meanwhile, for his part, also went along his steep, predestined path. The nightmare had entirely deserted him, he now rarely dreamed; and his outer life shaped bravely, as with a boy of will, honesty, and healthy ambition might be expected. Neither Wavy feeling, Eyes, nor Whiff obtruded themselves: they left him alone and waited: he never forgot them, but he did not seek them out. Things once firmly realised remained in his consciousness; he knew that his life was rising like a wave, that all his energies worked in the form of waves, his moods and wishes, his passions, emotions, yearnings — all expressed themselves by means of this unalterable formula, yet all contributed finally to the one big important Wave whose climax would be reached only when it fell. He distinguished between Wave and Ripples. He, therefore, did not trouble himself with imaginary details; he did not search; he waited. This steady strength was his. His firm, square jaw and the fearless eyes of grey beneath the shock of straight dark hair told plainly enough the kind of stuff behind them. No one at school took unnecessary liberties with Tom Kelverdon.

But, having discovered one pair of Eyes, he did not let them go. In his earnest, dull, inflexible way he loved their owner with a belief in her truth and loyalty that admitted of no slightest question. Had his mother divined the strength and value of his passion, she would surely have asked herself with painful misgiving: ‘Is she — *can* she be — worthy of my boy?’ But his mother guessed it as little as any one else; even the doctor had forgotten those early signs of its existence; and Tom was not the kind to make unnecessary confidences, nor to need sympathy in any matter he was sure about.

There was down now upon his upper lip, for he was close upon seventeen and the Entrance Examination was rising to the crest of its particular minor wave, yet during the two years' interval nothing — no single fact — had occurred to justify his faith or to confirm its amazing certainty within his heart. Mary, his sister, had not gone after all to the Finishing School in France; other girl friends came to spend the holidays with her; the Irish member of Parliament had either died or sunk into another kind of oblivion; the paths of the Kelverdons and the Aylmer family had gone apart; and the name of Lettice no longer thrilled the air across the tea-table, nor chance reports of her doings filled the London house with sudden light.

Yet for Tom she existed more potently than ever. His yearning never lessened; he was sure she remembered him as he remembered her; he persuaded himself that she thought about him; she doubtless knew that he was going to be an engineer. He had cut a thread from the carpet in the hall — from the exact spot her flying foot had touched that Tuesday when she scampered off from him — and kept it in the drawer beside the Eastern packet that enshrined the Whiff. Occasionally he took it out and touched it, fingered it, even caressed it; the thread and the perfume belonged together; the ritual of the childish years altered a little — worship raised it to a higher level.

He saw her with her hair done up now, long skirts, and a softer expression in the tender, faithful eyes; the tomboy in her had disappeared; she gazed at him with admiration. The face was oddly real, it came very close to his own; once or twice, indeed, their cheeks almost touched: 'almost,' because he withdrew instantly, uneasily aware that he had gone too far — not that the intimacy was unwelcome, but that it was somehow premature. And the instant he drew back, a kind of lightning distance came between them; he saw her eyes across an immense and curious interval, though whether of time or space he could not tell. There was strange heat and radiance in it — as of some blazing atmosphere that was not England.

The eyes, moreover, held a new expression when this happened — pity. And with this pity came also pain: the strange, rich pain broke over all the other happier feelings in him and swamped them utterly.…

But at that point instinct failed him; he could not understand why she should pity him, why pain should come to him through her, nor why it was necessary for him to feel and face it. He only felt sure of one thing — that it was essential to the formation of the Wave which was his life. The Wave must ‘happen,’ or he would miss an important object of his being — and she would somehow miss it too. The Wave would one day fall, but when it fell she would be with him, by his side, under the mighty curve, involved in the crash and tumult — with himself.

CHAPTER V.

THEN, WITHOUT ANY warning, he received a second shock — it fell upon him from the blue and came direct from Lettice.

The occasion was a tennis party in the garden by the sea where the family had come to spend the summer holidays. Tom was already at College, doing brilliantly, and rapidly growing up. The August afternoon was very hot; no wind ruffled the quiet blue-green water; there were no waves; the leaves of the privet hedge upon the side of the cliffs were motionless. A couple of Chalk-Blues danced round and round each other as though a wire connected them, and Tom, walking in to tea with his partner after a victorious game, found himself watching the butterflies and making a remark about them — a chance observation merely to fill an empty pause. He felt as little interest in the insects as he did in his partner, an uncommonly pretty, sunburned girl, whose bare arms and hatless light hair became her admirably. She, however, approved of the remark and by no means despised the opportunity to linger a moment by the side of her companion. They stood together, perhaps a dozen seconds, watching the capricious scraps of colour rise, float over the privet hedge on balanced wings, dip abruptly down and vanish on the farther side below the cliff. The girl said something — an intentional something that was meant to be heard and answered: but no answer was forthcoming. She repeated the remark with emphasis; then, as still no answer came, she laughed brightly to make his silence appear natural.

But Tom had no word to say. He had not noticed the manœuvre of the girl, nor the manœuvre of the two Chalk-Blues; neither had he heard the words, although conscious that she spoke. For in that brief instant when the insects floated over the hedge, his eyes had wandered beyond them to the sea, and on the sea, far off against the cloudless horizon, he had seen — the Wave.

Thinking it over afterwards, however, he realised that it was not actually a wave he saw, for the surface of the blue-green sea was smooth as the tennis lawn itself: it was the sudden appearance of the ‘wavy feeling’ that made him *think* he saw the old, familiar outline of his early dream. He had objectified his emotion. His father perhaps would have called it association of ideas.

Abruptly, out of nothing obvious, the feeling rose and mastered him: and, after its quiescence — its absence — for so long an interval, this revival without hint or warning of any kind was disconcerting. The feeling was vivid and unmistakable. The joy and terror swept him as of old. He braced himself. Almost — he began shuffling with his feet.…

‘Tea’s waiting for you,’; his mother’s voice floated to his ears across the lawn, as he turned with an effort from the sea and made towards the group about the tables. The Wave, he knew, was coming up behind him, growing, rising, curving high against the evening sky. Beside him walked the sunburned girl, wondering doubtless at his silence, but happy enough, it seemed, in her own interpretation of its cause. Scarcely aware of her presence, however, Tom was searching almost fiercely in his thoughts, searching for the clue. He knew there was a clue, he felt sure of it; the ‘wavy feeling’ had not come with this overwhelming suddenness without a reason. Something had brought it back. But what? Was there any recent factor in his life that might explain it? He stole a swift glance at the girl beside him: had she, perhaps, to do with it? They had played tennis together for the first time that afternoon: he had never seen her before, was not even quite sure of her name; to him, so far, she was only ‘a very pretty girl who played a ripping game.’ Had this girl to do with it?

Feeling his questioning look, she glanced up at him and smiled. ‘You’re very absent-minded,’ she observed with mischief in her manner. ‘You took so many of my balls, it’s tired you out!’ She had beautiful blue eyes, and her voice, he noticed for the first time, was very pleasant. Her figure was slim, her ankles neat, she had nice, even teeth. But, even as he registered the charming details, he knew quite well that he registered them, one and all, as belonging merely to a member of the sex, and not to this girl in particular. For all he cared, she might follow the two Chalk-Blues and disappear below the edge of the cliff into the sea. This ‘pretty girl’ left him as untroubled as she found him. The wavy feeling was not brought by her.

He drank his tea, keeping his back to the sea, and as the talk was lively, his silence was not noticed. The Wave, meanwhile, he knew, had come up closer. It towered above him. Its presence would shortly be explained. Then, suddenly, in the middle of a discussion as to partners for the games to follow, a further detail presented itself — also apparently out of nothing. He smelt the Whiff. He knew then that the Wave was poised immediately above his head, and that he stood underneath its threatening great curve. The clue, therefore, was at hand.

And at this moment his father came into view, moving across the lawn towards them from the French window. No one guessed how Tom welcomed the slight diversion, for the movement was already in his legs and in another moment must have set his feet upon that dreadful shuffling. As from a distance, he heard the formal talk and introductions, his father's statement that he had won his round of golf with 'the Dean,' praise of the weather, and something or other about the strange stillness of the sea — but then, with a sudden, hollow crash against his very ear, the appalling words: '. . . broke his mashie into splinters, yes. And, by the by, the Dean knows the Aylmers. They were staying here earlier in the summer, he told me. Lettice, the girl, — Mary's friend, you remember — is going to be married this week.…'

Tom clutched the back of the wicker-chair in front of him. The sun went out. An icy air passed Up his spine. The blood drained from his face. The tennis courts, and the group of white figures moving towards them, swung up into the sky. He gripped the chair till the rods of wicker pressed through the flesh into the bone. For a moment he felt that the sensation of actual sickness was more than he could master; his legs bent like paper beneath his weight.

'*You* remember Lettice, Tom, don't you?' his father was saying somewhere in mid-air above him.

'Yes, rather.' Apparently he said these words; the air at any rate went through his teeth and lips, and the same minute, with a superhuman effort that only just escaped a stagger, he moved away towards the tennis courts. His feet carried him, that is, across the lawn, where some figures dressed in white were calling his name loudly; his legs went automatically. 'Hold steady!' he remembers saying somewhere deep inside him. 'Don't make an ass of yourself,'; whereupon another voice — or was it still his own? — joined in quickly, 'She's gone from me, Lettice has gone. She's dead.' And the words, for the first time in his life, had meaning: for the first time in his life, rather, he realised what their meaning was. The Wave had fallen. Moreover — this also for the first time in the history of the Wave — there was something audible. He heard a Sound.

Shivering in the hot summer sunshine, as though icy water drenched him, he knew the same instant that he was wrong about the falling: the Wave, indeed, had curled lower over him than ever before, had even toppled — but it had not broken. As a whole, it had not broken. It was a smaller wave, upon the parent side, that had formed and fallen. The sound he heard was the soft crash of this lesser wave that grew out of the greater mass of the original monster, broke upon the rising volume of it, and returned into the greater body. It was a ripple only. The shock and terror he felt were a foretaste of what the final smothering crash would be. Yet the Sound he had heard was not the sound of water. There was a sharp, odd rattling in it that he had never consciously heard before. And it was — dry.

He reached the group of figures on the tennis-courts: he played: a violent energy had replaced the sudden physical weakness. His skill, it seemed, astonished everybody; he drove and smashed and volleyed with a recklessness that was always accurate: but when, at the end of the amazing game, he heard voices praising him, as from a distance, he knew only that there was a taste of gall and ashes in his mouth, and that he had but one desire — to get to his room alone and open the drawer. Even to himself he would not admit that he wished for the relief of tears. He put it, rather, that he must see and feel the one real thing that still connected him with Lettice — the thread of carpet she had trodden on. That — and the ‘whiff’ — alone could comfort him.

The comedy, that is, of all big events lay in it; no one must see, no one must know: no one must guess the existence of this sweet, rich pain that ravaged the heart in him until from very numbness it ceased aching. He double-locked the bedroom door. He had waited till darkness folded away the staring day, till the long dinner was over, and the drawn-out evening afterwards. None, fortunately, had noticed the change in his demeanour, his silence, his absentmindedness when spoken to, his want of appetite. ‘She is going to be married… this week,’ were the only words he heard; they kept ringing in his brain. To his immense relief the family had not referred to it again.

And at last he had said good-night and was in his room — alone. The drawer was open. The morsel of green thread lay in his hand. The faint eastern perfume floated on the air. ‘I am *not* a sentimental ass,’ he said to himself aloud, but in a low, steady tone. ‘She touched it, therefore it has part of her life about it still.’ Three years and a half ago! He examined the diary too; lived over in thought every detail of their so-slight acquaintance together; they were few enough; he remembered every one.… Prolonging the backward effort, he reviewed the history of the Wave. His mind stretched back to his earliest recollections of the nightmare. He faced the situation, tried to force its inner meaning from it, but without success.

He did not linger uselessly upon any detail, nor did he return upon his traces as a sentimental youth might do, prolonging the vanished sweetness of recollection in order to taste the pain more vividly. He merely ‘read up,’ so to speak, the history of the Wave to get a bird’s-eye view of it. And in the end he obtained a certain satisfaction from the process — a certain strength. That is to say, he did not understand, but he accepted. ‘Lettice has gone from me — but she hasn’t gone for good.’ The deep reflection of hours condensed itself into this.

Whatever might happen ‘temporarily,’ the girl was loyal and true: and she was — his. It never once occurred to him to blame or chide her. All that she did sincerely, she had a right to do. They were in the ‘underneath’ together for ever and ever. They were in the sea.

The pain, nevertheless, was acute and agonising; the temporary separation of ‘France’ was nothing compared to this temporary separation of her marrying. There were alternate intervals of numbness and of acute sensation; for each time thought and feeling collapsed from the long strain of their own tension, the relief that followed proved false and vain. Up sprang the aching pain again, the hungry longing, the dull, sweet yearning — and the whole sensation started afresh as at the first, yet with a vividness that increased with each new realisation of it. ‘Wish I could cry it out,’ he thought. ‘I wouldn’t be a bit ashamed to cry.’ But he had no tears to spill.…

Midnight passed towards the small hours of the morning, and the small hours slipped on towards the dawn before he put away the parcel of tissue-paper, closed the drawer and locked it. And when at length he dropped exhausted into bed, the eastern sky was already tinged with the crimson of another summer's day. He dreaded it, and closed his eyes. It had tennis parties and engagements in its wearisome, long hours of heat and utter emptiness.…

Just before actual sleep took him, however, he was aware of one other singular reflection. It rose of its own accord out of that moment's calm when thought and feeling sank away and deliberate effort ceased: the fact namely that, with the arrival of the Sound, all his five senses had been now affected. His entire being, through the only channels of perception it possessed, had responded to the existence of the Wave and all it might portend. Here was no case of a single sense being tricked by some illusion: all five supported each other, taste being, of course, a modification of smell.

And the strange reflection brought to his aching mind and weary body a measure of relief. The Wave was real: being real, it was also well worth facing when it — fell.

CHAPTER VI.

BETWEEN TWENTY AND thirty a man rises through years reckless of power and spendthrift of easy promises. The wave of life is rising, and every force tends upwards in a steady rush. At thirty comes a pause upon the level, but with thirty-five there are signs of the droop downhill. Age is first realised when, instead of looking forward only, he surprises thought in the act of looking — behind.

Of the physical, at any rate, this is true; for the mental and emotional wave is still ripening towards its higher curve, while the spiritual crest hangs hiding in the sky far overhead, beckoning beyond towards unvistaed reaches.

Tom Kelverdon climbed through these crowded years with the usual scars and bruises, but steadily, and without the shame of any considerable disaster. His father’s influence having procured him an opening in an engineering firm of the first importance, his own talent and application maintained the original momentum bravely. He justified his choice of a profession. Also, staring eagerly into life’s marvellous shop-window, he entered, hand in pocket, and made the customary purchases of the enchantress behind the counter. If worthless, well, — everybody bought them; the things had been consummately advertised; he paid his money, found out their value, threw them away or kept them accordingly. A certain good taste made his choice not too foolish: and there was this wholesome soundness in him, that he rarely repeated a purchase that had furnished him cheap goods. Slowly he began to find himself.

From learning what it meant to be well thrashed by a boy he loathed, and to apply a similar treatment himself — he passed on to the pleasure of being told he had nice eyes, that his voice was pleasant, his presence interesting. He fell in love — and out again. But he went straight. Moreover, beyond a given point in any affair of the heart he seemed unable to advance: some secret, inner tension held him back. While believing he loved various adorable girls the years offered him, he found it impossible to open his lips and tell them so. And the mysterious instinct invariably justified itself: they faded, one and all, soon after separation. There was no wave in them; they were ripples only.…

And, meanwhile, as the years rushed up towards the crest of thirty, he did well in his profession, worked for the firm in many lands, obtained the confidence of his principals, and proved his steady judgment if not his brilliance. He became, too, a good, if generous, judge of other men, seeing all sorts, both good and bad, and in every kind of situation that proves character. His nature found excuses too easily, perhaps, for the unworthy ones. It is not a bad plan, wiser companions hinted, to realise that a man has dark behaviour in him, while yet believing that he need not necessarily prove it. The other view has something childlike in it; Tom Kelverdon kept, possibly, this simpler attitude alive in him, trusting overmuch, because suspicion was abhorrent to his soul. The man of ideals had never become the man of the world. Some high, gentle instinct had preserved him from the infliction that so often results in this regrettable conversion. Slow to dislike, he saw the best in everybody. ‘Not a bad fellow,’ he would say of some one quite obviously detestable. ‘I admit his face and voice and manner are against him; but that’s not his fault exactly. He didn’t make himself, you know.’

The idea of a tide in the affairs of men is obvious, familiar enough. Nations rise and fall, equally with the fortunes of a family. History repeats itself, so does the tree, the rose: and if a man live long enough he recovers the state of early childhood. There is repetition everywhere. But while some think evolution moves in a straight line forward, others speculate fancifully that it has a spiral twist upwards. At any given moment, that is, the soul looks down upon a passage made before — but from a point a little higher. Without living through events already experienced, it literally lives them over; it sees them mapped out below, and with the bird’s-eye view it understands them.

And in regard to his memory of Lettice Aylmer — the fact that he was still waiting for her and she for him — this was somewhat the fanciful conception that lodged itself, subconsciously perhaps, in the mind of Tom Kelverdon, grown now to man’s estate. He was dimly aware of a curious familiarity with his present situation, a sense of repetition — yet with a difference. Something he had experienced before was coming to him again. It was waiting for him. Its wave was rising. When it happened before it had not happened properly somehow — had left a sense of defeat, of dissatisfaction behind. He had taken it, perhaps, at the period of receding momentum, and so had failed towards it. This time he meant to face it. His own phrase, as has been seen, was simple: ‘I’ll let it all come.’ It was something his character needed. Deep down within him hid this attitude, and with the passage of the years it remained — though remained an attitude merely.

But the attitude, being subconscious in him, developed into a definite point of view that came, more and more, to influence the way he felt towards life in general. Life was too active to allow of much introspection, yet whenever pauses came — pauses in thought and feeling, still backwaters in which he lay without positive direction — there, banked up, unchanging in the background, stood the enduring thing: his love for Lettice Aylmer. And this background was ‘the sea’ of his boyhood days, the ‘underneath’ in which they remained unalterably together. There, too, hid the four signs that haunted his impressionable youth: the Wave, the other Eyes, the Whiff, the Sound. In due course, and at their appointed time, they would combine and ‘happen’ in his outward life. The Wave would — fall.

Meanwhile his sense of humour had long ago persuaded him that, so far as any claim upon the girl existed, or that she reciprocated his own deep passion, his love-dream was of questionable security. The man in him that built bridges and cut tunnels laughed at it; the man that devised these first in imagination, however, believed in it, and waited. Behind thought and reason, suspected of none with whom he daily came in contact, and surprised only by himself when he floated in these silent, tideless backwaters — it persisted with an amazing conviction that seemed deathless. In these calm deeps of his being, securely anchored, hid what he called the ‘spiral’ attitude. The thing that was coming, a tragedy whereof that childish nightmare was both a memory and a premonition, clung and haunted still with its sense of dim familiarity. Something he had known before would eventually repeat itself. But — with a difference; that he would see it from above — from a higher curve of the ascending spiral.

There lay the enticing wonder of the situation. With his present English temperament, stolid rather, he would meet it differently, treat it otherwise, learn and understand. He would see it from another — higher — point of view. He would know great pain, yet some part of him would look on, compare, accept the pain — and smile. The words that offered themselves were that he had ‘suffered blindly,’ but suffered with fierce and bitter resentment, savagely, even with murder in his heart; suffered, moreover, somehow or other, at the hands of Lettice Aylmer.

Lettice, of course, — he clung to it absurdly still — was true and loyal to him, though married to another. Her name was changed. But Lettice Aylmer was not changed. And this mad assurance, though he kept it deliberately from his conscious thoughts, persisted with the rest of the curious business, for nothing, apparently, could destroy it in him. It was part of the situation, as he called it, part of the ‘sea,’ out of which would rise eventually — the Wave.

Outwardly, meanwhile, much had happened to him, each experience contributing its modifying touch to the character as he realised it, instead of merely knowing that it came to others. His sister married; Tim, following his father’s trade, became a doctor with a provincial practice, buried in the country. His father died suddenly while he was away in Canada, busy with a prairie railway across the wheat fields of Assiniboia. He met the usual disillusions in a series, savoured and mastered them more or less in turn.

He was in England when his mother died; and, while his other experiences were ripples only, her going had the wave in it. The enormous mother-tie came also out of the ‘sea’; its dislocation was a shock of fundamental kind, and he felt it in the foundations of his life. It was one of the things he could not quite realise. He still felt her always close and near. He had just been made a junior partner in the firm; the love and pride in her eyes, before they faded from the world of partnerships, were unmistakable: ‘Of course,’ she murmured, her thin hand clinging to his own, ‘they had to do it… if only your father knew…’ and she was gone. The wave of her life sank back into the sea whence it arose. And her going somehow strengthened him, added to his own foundations, as though her wave had merged in his.

With her departure, he felt vaguely the desire to settle down, to marry. Unconsciously he caught himself thinking of women in a new light, appraising them as possible wives. It was a dangerous attitude rather; for a man then seeks to persuade himself that such and such a woman may do, instead of awaiting the inevitable draw of love which alone can justify a life-long union.

In Tom’s case, however, as with the smaller fires of his younger days, he never came to a decision, much less to a positive confession. His immense idealism concerning women preserved him from being caught by mere outward beauty. While aware that Lettice was an impossible dream of boyhood, he yet clung to an ideal she somehow foreshadowed and typified. He never relinquished this standard of his dream; a mysterious woman waited for him somewhere, a woman with all the fairy qualities he had built about her personality; a woman he could not possibly mistake when at last he met her. Only he did not meet her. He waited.

And so it was, as time passed onwards, that he found himself standing upon the little level platform of his life at a stage nearer to thirty-five than thirty, conscious that a pause surrounded him. There was a lull. The rush of the years slowed down. He looked about him. He looked — back.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PARTICULAR MOMENT when this happened, suitable, too, in a chance, odd way, was upon a mountain ridge in winter, a level platform of icy snow to which he had climbed with some hotel acquaintances on a skiing expedition. It was on the Polish side of the Hohe Tatra.

Why, at this special moment, pausing for breath and admiring the immense wintry scene about him, he should have realised that he reached a similar position in his life, is hard to say. There is always a particular moment when big changes claim attention. They have been coming slowly; but at a given moment they announce themselves. Tom associated that icy ridge above Zakopané with a pause in the rushing of the years: 'I'm getting on towards middle age; the first swift climb — impetuous youth — lies now behind me.' The physical parallel doubtless suggested it; he had felt his legs and wind a trifle less willing, perhaps; there was still a steep, laborious slope of snow beyond; he discovered that he was no longer twenty-five.

He drew breath and watched the rest of the party as they slowly came nearer in the track he had made through the deep snow below. Each man made this track in his turn, it was hard work, his share was done. 'Nagorsky will tackle the next bit,' he thought with relief, watching a young Pole of twenty-three in the ascending line, and glancing at the summit beyond where the run home was to begin. And then the wonder of the white silent scene invaded him, the exhilarating thrill of the vast wintry heights swept over him, he forgot the toil, he regained his wind and felt his muscles taut and vigorous once more. It was pleasant, standing upon this level ridge, to inspect the long ascent below, and to know the heavy yet enjoyable exertion was nearly over.

But he had felt — older. That ridge remained in his memory as the occasion of its first realisation; a door opened behind him; he looked back. He envied the other's twenty-three years. It is curious that, about thirty, a man feels he is getting old, whereas at forty he feels himself young again. At thirty he judges by the standard of eighteen, at the later age by that of sixty. But this particular occasion remained vivid for another reason — it was accompanied by a strange sensation he had almost forgotten; and so long an interval had elapsed since its last manifestation that for a moment a kind of confusion dropped upon him, as from the cloudless sky. Something was gathering behind him, something was about to fall. He recognised the familiar feeling that he knew of old, the subterranean thrill, the rich, sweet pain, the power, the reality. It was the wavy feeling.

Balanced on his ski, the sealskin strips gripping the icy ridge securely, he turned instinctively to seek the reason, if any were visible, of the abrupt revival. His mind, helped by the stimulating air and sunshine, worked swiftly. The odd confusion clouded his faculties still, as in a dream state, but he pierced it in several directions simultaneously.

Was it that, envying another's youth, he had re-entered imaginatively his own youthful feelings? He looked down at the rest of the party climbing towards him. And doing so, he picked out the slim figure of Nagorsky's sister, a girl whose winter costume became her marvellously, and whom the happy intimacy of the hotel life had made so desirable that an expedition without her seemed a lost, blank day. Unless she was of the party there was no sunshine. He watched her now, looking adorable in her big gauntlet gloves, her short skirt, her tasselled cap of black and gold, a fairy figure on the big snowfield, filling the world with sunshine — and knew abruptly that she meant to him just exactly — nothing. The intensity of the wavy feeling reduced her to an unreality.

It was not she who brought the great emotion.

The confusion in him deepened. Another scale of measurement appeared. The crowded intervening years now seemed but a pause, a brief delay; he had run down a side track and returned. *He* had not grown older. Seen by the grand scale to which the Wave and 'sea' belonged, he had scarcely moved from the old starting-point, where, far away in some unassailable recess of life, still waiting for him, stood — Lettice Aylmer.

Turning his eyes, then, from the approaching climbers, he glanced at the steep slope above him, and saw — as once before on the English coast — something that took his breath away and made his muscles weak. He stared up at it. It looked down at him.

Five hundred feet above, outlined against the sky of crystal clearness, ran a colossal wave of solid snow. At the highest point it was, of course, a cornice, but towards the east, whence came the prevailing weather, the wind had so manipulated the mass that it formed a curling billow, twenty or thirty feet in depth, leaping over in the very act of breaking, yet arrested just before it fell. It hung waiting in mid-air, perfectly moulded, a wave — but a wave of snow.

It swung along the ridge for half a mile and more: it seemed to fill the sky; it rose out of the sea of eternal snow below it, poised between the earth and heavens. In the hollow beneath its curve lay purple shadows the eye could not pierce. And the similarity to the earlier episode struck him vividly; in each case Nature assisted with a visible wave as by way of counterpart; each time, too, there was a girl — as though some significance of sex hid in the ‘wavy feeling.’ He was profoundly puzzled.

The same second, in this wintry world where movement, sound, and perfume have no place, there stole to his nostrils across the desolate ranges another detail. It was more intimate in its appeal even than the wavy feeling, yet was part of it. He recognised the Whiff. And the joint attack, both by its suddenness and by its intensity, overwhelmed him. Only the Sound was lacking, but that, too, he felt, was on the way. Already a sharp instinctive movement was running down his legs. He began to shuffle on his ski.…

A chorus of voices, as from far away, broke round him, disturbing the intense stillness; and he knew that the others had reached the ridge. With a violent effort he mastered the ridiculous movement of his disobedient legs, but what really saved him from embarrassing notice was the breathless state of his companions, and the fact that his action looked after all quite natural — he seemed merely rubbing his ski along the snow to clean their under-surface.

Exclamations in French, English, Polish rose on all sides, as the view into the deep opposing valley caught the eye, and a shower of questions all delivered at once, drew attention from himself. What scenery, what a sky, what masses of untrodden snow! Should they lunch on the ridge or continue to the summit? What were the names of all these peaks, and was the Danube visible? How lucky there was no wind, and how they pitied the people who stayed behind in the hotels! Sweaters and woollen waistcoats emerged from half a dozen knapsacks, cooking apparatus was produced, one chose a spot to make a fire, while another broke the dead branches from a stunted pine, and in five minutes had made a blaze behind a little wall of piled-up snow. The Polish girl came up and asked Tom for his Zeiss glasses, examined the soaring slope beyond, then obediently put on the extra sweater he held out for her. He hardly saw her face, and certainly did not notice the expression in her eyes. All took off their ski and plunged them upright in the nearest drift. The sun blazed everywhere, the snow crystals sparkled. They settled down for lunch, a small dark clot of busy life upon the vast expanse of desolate snow… and anything unusual about Tom Kelverdon, muffled to the throat against the freezing cold, his eyes, moreover, concealed by green snow-spectacles, was certainly not noticed.

Another party, besides, was discovered climbing upwards along their own laborious track: in the absorbing business of satisfying big appetites, tending the fire, and speculating who these other skiers might be, Tom's silence caused no comment. His self-control, for the rest, was soon recovered. But his interest in the expedition had oddly waned; he was still searching furiously in his thoughts for an explanation of the unexpected 'attack,' waiting for the Sound, but chiefly wondering why his boyhood's nightmare had never revealed that the Wave was of snow instead of water — and, at the same time, oddly convinced that he had moved but *one* stage nearer to its final elucidation. That it was solid he had already discovered, but that it was actually of snow left a curious doubt in him.

Of all this he was thinking as he devoured his eggs and sandwiches, something still trembling in him, nerves keenly sensitive, but not *quite* persuaded that this wave of snow was the sufficient cause of what he had just experienced — when at length the other climbers, moving swiftly, came close enough to be inspected. The customary remarks and criticisms passed from mouth to mouth, with warnings to lower voices since sound carried too easily in the rarefied air. One of the party was soon recognised as the hotel doctor, and the other, first set down as a Norwegian owing to his light hair, shining hatless in the sunlight, proved on closer approach to be an Englishman — both men evidently experienced and accomplished 'runners.'

In any other place the two parties would hardly have spoken, settling down into opposing camps of hostile silence; but in the lonely winter mountains human relationship becomes more natural; the time of day was quickly passed, and details of the route exchanged; the doctor and his friend mingled easily with the first arrivals; all agreed spontaneously to take the run home together; and finally, when names were produced with laughing introductions, the Englishman — by one of those coincidences people pretend to think strange, but that actually ought to occur more often than they do — turned out to be known to Tom, and after considerable explanations was proved to be more than that — a cousin.

Welcoming the diversion, making the most of it in fact, Kelverdon presented Anthony Winslowe to his Polish companions with a certain zeal to which the new arrival responded with equal pleasure. The light-haired blue-eyed Englishman, young and skilful on his ski, formed a distinct addition to the party. He was tall, with a slight stoop about the shoulders that suggested study; he was gay and very easy-going too. It was 'Tom' and 'Tony' before lunch was over; they recalled their private school, a fight, an eternal friendship vowed after it, and the twenty intervening years melted as though they had not been.

'Of course,' Tom said, proud of his new-found cousin, 'and I've read your bird books, what's more. By Jove, you're quite an authority on natural history, aren't you?'

The other modestly denied any notoriety, but the girls, especially Nagorsky's sister, piqued by Tom's want of notice, pressed for details in their pretty broken English. It became a merry and familiar party, as the way is with easy foreigners, particularly when they meet in such wild and unconventional surroundings. Winslowe had lantern slides in his trunk: that night he promised to show them: they chattered and paid compliments and laughed, Tony explaining that he was on his way to Egypt to study the bird-life along the Nile. Natural history was his passion; he talked delightfully; he made the bird and animal life seem real and interesting; there was imagination, humour, lightness in him. There was a fascination, too, not due to looks alone. It was in his atmosphere, what is currently, perhaps, called magnetism.

‘No animals *here* for you,’ said a girl, pointing to the world of white death about them.

‘There’s something better,’ he said quickly in quite decent Polish. ‘We’re all in the animal kingdom, you know.’ And he glanced with a bow of admiration at the speaker, whom the others instantly began to tease. It was Irena, Nagorsky’s sister; she flushed and laughed. ‘We thought,’ she said, ‘you were Norwegian, because of your light hair, and the way you moved on your ski.’

‘A great compliment,’ he rejoined, ‘but I saw *you* long ago on the ridge, and I knew at once that you were — Polish.’

The girl returned his bow. ‘The largest compliment,’ she answered gaily, ‘I had ever in my life.’

Tom had only arrived two days before, bringing a letter of introduction to the doctor, and that night he changed his hotel, joining his new friends and his cousin at the Grand. An obvious flirtation, possibly something more, sprung up spontaneously between him and the Polish girl, but Kelverdon welcomed it and felt no jealousy. ‘Not trespassing, old chap, am I?’ Tony asked jokingly, having divined on the mountains that the girl was piqued. ‘On the contrary,’ was the honest assurance given frankly, ‘I’m relieved. A delightful girl, though, isn’t she? And fascinatingly pretty!’

For the existence of Nagorsky’s sister had become suddenly to him of no importance whatsoever. It was strange enough, but the vivid recurrence of long-forgotten symbols that afternoon upon the heights had restored to him something he had curiously forgotten, something he had shamefully neglected, almost, it seemed, had been in danger of losing altogether. It came back upon him now. He clung desperately to it as to a real, a vital, a necessary thing. It was a genuine relief that the relationship between him and the girl might be ended thus. In any case, he reflected, it would have ‘ended thus’ a little later — like all the others. No trace or sign of envy stayed in him. Irena and Tony, anyhow, seemed admirably suited to one another; he noticed on the long run home how naturally they came together. And even his own indifference would not bring her back to him. He felt quite pleased and satisfied. He had a long talk with Tony before going to bed. He felt drawn to him. There was a spontaneous innate sympathy between them.

They had many other talks together, and Tom liked his interesting, brilliant cousin. A week passed; dances, ski-ing trips, skating, and the usual programme of wintry enjoyments filled the time too quickly; companionship became intimacy; all sat at the same table: Tony became a general favourite. He had just that combination of reserve and abandon which — provided something genuine lies behind — attracts the majority of people who, being dull, have neither. Most are reserved, through emptiness, or else abandoned — also through emptiness. Tony Winslowe, full of experience and ideas, vivid experience and original ideas, combined the two in rarest equipoise. It was spontaneous, and not calculated in him. There was a stimulating quality in his personality. Like those tiny, exciting Japanese tales that lead to the edge of a precipice, then end with unexpected abruptness that is their purpose, he led all who liked him to the brink of a delightful revelation — then paused, stopped, vanished. And all did like him. He was light and gay, for all the depth in him. Something of the child peeped out. He won Tom Kelverdon's confidence without an effort. He also won the affectionate confidence of the Polish girl.

'You're not married, Tony, are you?' Tom asked him.

'Married!' Tony answered with a flush — he flushed so easily when teased — 'I love my wild life and animals far too much.' He stammered slightly. Then he looked up quickly into his cousin's eyes with frankness. Tom, without knowing why, almost felt ashamed of having asked it. 'I — I never can go beyond a certain point,' he said, 'with girls. Something always holds me back. Odd — isn't it?' He hesitated. Then this flashed from him: 'Bees never sip the last, the sweetest drop of honey from the rose, you know. The sunset always leaves one golden cloud adrift — eh?' So there was poetry in him too!

And Tom, simpler, as well as more rigidly moulded, felt a curious touch of passionate sympathy as he heard it. His heart went out to the other suddenly with a burst of confidence. Some barrier melted in him and disappeared. For the first time in his life he knew the inclination, even the desire, to speak of things hidden deep within his heart. His cousin would understand.

And Tony's sudden, wistful silence invited the confession. They had already been talking of their forgotten youthful days together. The ground was well prepared. They had even talked of his sister, Mary, and her marriage. Tony remembered her distinctly. He spoke of it, leaning forward and putting a hand on his cousin's knee. Tom noticed vaguely the size of the palm, the wrist, the fingers — they seemed disproportionate. They were ugly hands. But it was subconscious notice. His mind was on another thing.

'I say,' Tom began with a sudden plunge, 'you know a lot about birds and natural history — biology too, I suppose. Have you ever heard of the spiral movement?'

'Spinal, did you say?' queried the other, turning the stem of his glass and looking up.

'No — *spiral*,' Tom repeated, laughing dryly in spite of himself. 'I mean the idea — that evolution, whether individually in men and animals, or with nations — historically, that is — is not in a straight line ahead, but moves upwards — in a spiral?'

'It's in the air,' replied Tony vaguely, yet somehow as if he knew a great deal more about it. 'The movement of the race, you mean?'

'And of the individual too. We're here, I mean, for the purpose of development — whatever one's particular belief may be — and that this development, instead of going forwards in a straight line, has a kind of — spiral movement — upwards?'

Tony looked wonderfully wise. 'I've heard of it,' he said. 'The spiral movement, as you say, is full of suggestion. It's common among plants. But I don't think science — biology, at any rate — takes much account of it.'

Tom interrupted eagerly, and with a certain grave enthusiasm that evidently intrigued his companion. 'I mean — a movement that is always upwards, always getting higher, and always looking down upon what has gone before. That, if it's true, a soul can look back — look down upon what it has been through before, but from a higher point — do you see?'

Tony emptied his glass and then lit a cigarette. 'I see right enough,' he said at length, quick and facile to appropriate any and every idea he came across, yet obviously astonished by his companion's sudden seriousness. 'Only the other day I read that humanity, for instance, is just now above the superstitious period — of the Middle Ages, say — going over it again — but that the recrudescence everywhere of psychic interests — fortune-telling, palmistry, magic, and the rest — has become quasi-scientific. It's going through the same period, but seeks to explain and understand. It's above it — one stage or so. Is that what you mean, perhaps?'

Tom drew in his horns, though for the life of him he could not say why. Tony appropriated his own idea too easily somehow — had almost read his thoughts. Vaguely he resented it. Tony had stolen from him — offended against some schoolboy *meum* and *tuum* standard.

'That's it — the idea, at any rate,' he said, wondering why confidence had frozen in him. 'Interesting, rather, isn't it?'

And then abruptly he found that he was staring at his cousin's hands, spread on the table palm downwards. He had been staring at them for some time, but unconsciously. Now he saw them. And there was something about them that he did not like. Absurd as it seemed, his change of mood had to do with those big, ungainly hands, tanned a deep brown-black by the sun. A faint shiver ran through him. He looked away.

'Extraordinary,' Tony went chattering on. 'It explains these new wild dances perhaps. Anything more spiral and twisty than these modern gyrations I never saw!' He turned it off in his light amusing way, yet as though quite familiar with the deeper aspects of the question — if he cared. 'And what the body does,' he added, 'the mind has already done a little time before!'

He laughed, but whether he was in earnest, or merely playing with the idea, was uncertain. What had stopped Tom was, perhaps, that they were not in the same key together; Tom had used a word he rarely cared to use — soul — it had cost him a certain effort — but his cousin had not responded. That, and the hands, explained his change of mood. For the first time it occurred to his honest, simple mind that Tony was of other stuff, perhaps, than he had thought. That remark about the bees and sunset jarred a little. The lightness suggested insincerity almost.

He shook the notion off, for it was disagreeable, ungenerous as well. This was holiday-time, and serious discussion was out of place. The airy lightness in his cousin was just suited to the conditions of a winter-sport hotel; it was what made him so attractive to all and sundry, so easy to get on with. Yet Tom would have liked to confide in him, to have told him more, asked further questions and heard the answers; stranger still, he would have liked to lead from the spiral to the wave, to his own wavy feeling, and, further even — almost to speak of Lettice and his boyhood nightmare. He had never met a man in regard to whom he felt so forthcoming in this way. Tony surely had seriousness and depth in him; this irresponsibility was on the surface only.… There was a queer confusion in his mind — several incongruous things trying to combine.…

‘I knew a princess once — the widow of a Russian,’ Tony was saying. He had been talking on, gaily, lightly, for some time, but Tom, busy with these reflections, had not listened properly. He now looked up sharply, something suddenly alert in him. ‘They’re all princes in Russia,’ Tony laughed; ‘it means less than Count in France or *von* in Germany.’ He stopped and drained his glass. ‘But you know,’ he went on, his thoughts half elsewhere, it seemed, ‘it’s bad for a country when titles are too common, it lowers the aristocratic ideal. In the Caucasus — Batoum, for instance — every Georgian is a noble, your hotel porter a prince.’ He broke off abruptly as though reminded of something. ‘Of course!’ he exclaimed, ‘I was going to tell you about the Russian woman I knew who had something of that idea of yours.’ He stopped as his eye caught his cousin’s empty glass. ‘Let’s have another,’ he said, beckoning to the waitress, ‘it’s very light stuff, this beer. These long ski-trips give one an endless thirst, don’t they?’ Tom didn’t know whether he said yes or no. ‘What idea?’ he asked quickly. ‘What do you mean exactly?’ A curious feeling of familiarity stirred in him. This conversation had happened before.

‘Eh?’ Tony glanced up as though he had again forgotten what he was going to say. ‘Oh yes,’ he went on, ‘the Russian woman, the Princess I met in Egypt. She talked a bit like that once… I remember now.’

‘Like what?’ Tom felt a sudden, breathless curiosity in him: he was afraid the other would change his mind, or pass to something else, or forget what he was going to say. It would prove another Japanese tale — disappear before it satisfied.

But Tony went on at last, noticing, perhaps, his cousin’s interest.

‘I was up at Edfu after birds,’ he said, ‘and she had a *dahabieh* on the river. Some friends took me there to tea, or something. It was nothing particular. Only it occurred to me just now when you talked of spirals and things.’

‘*You* talked about the spiral?’ Tom asked. ‘Talked with *her* about it, I mean?’ He was slow, almost stupid compared to the other, who seemed to flash lightly and quickly over a dozen ideas at once. But there was this real, natural sympathy between them both again. It seemed he knew exactly what his cousin was going to say.

Tony, blowing the foam off his beer glass, proceeded to quench his wholesome thirst. ‘Not exactly,’ he said at length, ‘but we talked, I remember, along that line. I was explaining about the flight of birds — that all wild animal life moves in a spontaneous sort of natural rhythm — with an unconscious grace, I mean, we’ve lost because we think too much. Birds in particular rise and fall with a swoop, the simplest, freest movement in the world — like a wave — —’

‘Yes?’ interrupted Tom, leaning over the table a little and nearly upsetting his untouched glass. ‘I like that idea. It’s true.’

‘And — oh, that all the forces known to science move in a similar way — by wave-form, don’t you see? Something like that it was.’ He took another draught of the nectar his day’s exertions had certainly earned.

‘*She* said that?’ asked Tom, watching his cousin’s face buried in the enormous mug.

Tony set it down with a sigh of intense satisfaction, ‘*I* said it,’ he exclaimed with a frank egoism. ‘You’re too tired after all your falls this afternoon to listen properly. *I* was the teacher on that occasion, she the adoring listener! But if you want to know what *she* said too, I’ll tell you.’

Tom waited; he raised his glass, pretending to drink; if he showed too much interest, the other might swerve off again to something else. He knew what was coming, yet could not have actually foretold it. He recognised it only the instant afterwards.

‘She talked about water,’ Tony went on, as though he had difficulty in recalling what she really had said, ‘and I think she had water on the brain,’ he added lightly. ‘The Nile had bewitched her probably; it affects most of ’em out there — the women, that is. She said life moved in a stream — that she moved down a stream, or something, and that only things going down the stream with her were real. Anything on the banks — stationary, that is — was not real. Oh, she said a lot. I’ve really forgotten now — it was a year or two ago — but I remember her mentioning shells and the spiral twist of shells. In fact,' he added, as if there was no more to tell, 'I suppose that's what made me think of her just now — your mentioning the spiral movement.'

The door of the room, half *café* and half bar, where the peasants sat at wooden tables about them, opened, and the pretty head of Irena Nagorsky appeared. A burst of music came in with her. 'We dance,' she said, a note of reproach as well as invitation in her voice — then vanished. Tony, leaving his beer unfinished, laughed at his cousin and went after her. 'My last night,' he said cheerily. 'Must be gay and jolly. I'm off to Trieste tomorrow for Alexandria. See you later, Tom — unless you're coming to dance too.'

But, though they saw each other many a time again that evening, there was no further conversation. Next day the party broke up, Tom returning to the Water Works his firm was constructing outside Warsaw, and Tony taking the train for Budapesth *en route* for Trieste and Egypt. He urged Tom to follow him as soon as his work was finished, gave the Turf Club, Cairo, as his permanent address where letters would always reach him sooner or later, waved his hat to the assembled group upon the platform, and was gone. The last detail of him visible was the hand that held the waving hat. It looked bigger, darker, thought Tom, than ever. It was almost disfiguring. It stirred a hint of dislike in him. He turned his eyes away.

But Tom Kelverdon remembered that last night in the hotel for another reason too. In the small hours of the morning he woke up, hearing a sound close beside him in the room. He listened a moment, then turned on the light above the bed. The sound, of an unusual and peculiar character, continued faintly. But it was not actually in the room as he first supposed. It was outside.

More than ten years had passed since he had heard that sound. He had expected it that day on the mountains when the wavy feeling and the Whiff had come to him. Sooner or later he felt positive he would hear it. He heard it now. It had merely been delayed, postponed. Something gathering slowly and steadily behind his life was drawing nearer — had come already very close. He heard the dry, rattling Sound that was associated with the Wave and with the Whiff. In it, too, was a vague familiarity.

And then he realised that the wind was rising. A frozen pine-branch, stiff with little icicles, was rattling and scraping faintly outside the wooden framework of the double windows. It was the icy branch that made the dry, rattling sound. He listened intently; the sound was repeated at certain intervals, then ceased as the wind died down. And he turned over and fell asleep again, aware that what he had heard was an imitation only, but an imitation strangely accurate — of a reality. Similarly, the wave of snow was but an imitation of a reality to come. This reality lay waiting still beyond him. One day — one day soon — he would know it face to face. The Wave, he felt, was rising behind his life, and his life was rising with it towards a climax. On the little level platform where the years had landed him for a temporary pause, he began to shuffle with his feet in dream. And something deeper than his mind — looked back.…

The instinct, or by whatever name he called that positive, interior affirmation, proved curiously right. Life rose with the sweep and power of a wave, bearing him with it towards various climaxes. His powers, such as they were, seemed all in the ascendant. He passed from that level platform as with an upward rush, all his enterprises, all his energies, all that he wanted and tried to do, surging forward towards the crest of successful accomplishment.

And a dozen times at least he caught himself asking mentally for his cousin Tony; wishing he had confided in him more, revealed more of this curious business to him, exchanged sympathies with him about it all. A kind of yearning rose in him for his vanished friend. Almost he had missed an opportunity. Tony would have understood and helped to clear things up; to no other man of his acquaintance could he have felt similarly. But Tony was now out of reach in Egypt, chasing his birds among the temples of the haunted Nile, already, doubtless, the centre of a circle of new friends and acquaintances who found him as attractive and fascinating as the little Zakopané group had found him. Tony must keep.

Tom Kelverdon meanwhile, his brief holiday over, returned to his work at Warsaw, and brought it to a successful conclusion with a rapidity no one had foreseen, and he himself had least of all expected. The power of the rising wave was in all he did. He could not fail. Out of the success grew other contracts highly profitable to his firm. Some energy that overcame all obstacles, some clarity of judgment that selected unerringly the best ways and means, some skill and wisdom in him that made all his powers work in unison till they became irresistible, declared themselves, yet naturally and without adventitious aid. He seemed to have found himself anew. He felt pleased and satisfied with himself: always self-confident, as a man of ability ought to be, he now felt proud; and, though conceit had never been his failing, this new-born assurance moved distinctly towards pride. In a moment of impulsive pleasure he wrote to Tony, at the Turf Club, Cairo, and told him of his success.… The senior partner, his father's old friend, wrote and asked his advice upon certain new proposals the firm had in view; it was a question of big docks to be constructed at Salonica, and something to do with a barrage on the Nile as well — there were several juicy contracts to choose between, it seemed, — and Sir William proposed a meeting in Switzerland, on his way out to the Near East; he would break the journey before crossing the Simplon for Milan and Trieste. The final telegram said Montreux, and Kelverdon hurried to Vienna and caught the night express to Lausanne by way of Bâle.

And at Montreux further evidence that the wave of life was rising then declared itself, when Sir William, having discussed the various propositions with him, listening with attention, even with deference, to Kelverdon's opinion, told him quietly that his brother's retirement left a vacancy in the firm which — he and his co-directors hoped confidently — Kelverdon might fill with benefit to all concerned. A senior partnership was offered to him before he was thirty-five! Sir William left the same night for his steamer, and Tom was to wait at Montreux, perhaps a month, perhaps six weeks, until a personal inspection of the several sites enabled the final decision to be made; he was then to follow and take charge of the work itself.

Tom was immensely pleased. He wrote to his married sister in her Surrey vicarage, told her the news with a modesty he did not really feel, and sent her a handsome cheque by way of atonement for his bursting pride.

For simple natures, devoid of a saving introspection and self-criticism, upon becoming unexpectedly successful easily develop an honest yet none the less corroding pride. Tom felt himself rather a desirable person suddenly; by no means negligible at any rate; pleased and satisfied with himself, if not yet overweeningly so. His native confidence took this exaggerated turn and twist. His star was in the ascendant, a man to be counted with.…

The hidden weakness rose — as all else in him was rising — with the Wave. But he did not call it pride, because he did not recognise it. It was akin, perhaps, to that fatuous complacency of the bigoted religionist who, thinking he has discovered absolute truth, looks down from his narrow cell upon the rest of the world with a contemptuous pity that in itself is but the ignorance of crass self-delusion. Tom felt very sure of himself. For a rising wave drags up with it the mud and rubbish that have hitherto lain hidden out of sight in the ground below. Only with the fall do these undesirable elements return to their proper place again — where they belong and are of value. Sense of proportion is recovered only with perspective, and Tom Kelverdon, rising too rapidly, began to see himself in disproportionate relation to the rest of life. In his solid, perhaps stolid, way he considered himself a Personality — indispensable to no small portion of the world about him.

PART II

CHAPTER VIII.

IT WAS TOWARDS the end of March, and spring was flowing down almost visibly from the heights behind the town. April stood on tiptoe in the woods, finger on lip, ready to dance out between the sunshine and the rain.

Above four thousand feet the snows of winter still clung thickly, but the lower slopes were clear, men and women already working busily among the dull brown vineyards. The early mist cleared off by ten o'clock, letting through floods of sunshine that drenched the world, sparkled above the streets crowded with foreigners from many lands, and lay basking with an appearance of July upon the still, blue lake. The clear brilliance of the light had a quality of crystal. Sea-gulls fluttered along the shores, tame as ducks and eager to be fed. They lent to this inland lake an atmosphere of the sea, and Kelverdon found himself thinking of some southern port, Marseilles, Trieste, Toulon.

In the morning he watched the graceful fishing-boats set forth, and at night, when only the glitter of the lamps painted the gleaming water for a little distance, he saw the swans, their heads tucked back impossibly into the centre of their backs, scarcely moving on the unruffled surface as they slept into the night. The first sounds he heard soon after dawn through his wide-opened windows were the whanging strokes of their powerful wings flying low across the misty water; they flew in twos and threes, coming from their nests now building in the marshes beyond Villeneuve. This, and the screaming of the gulls, usually woke him. The summits of Savoy, on the southern shore, wore pink and gold upon their heavy snows; the sharp air nipped; far in the west a few stars peeped before they faded; and in the distance he heard the faint, drum-like mutter of a paddle-steamer, reminding him that he was in a tourist centre after all, and that this was busy, little, organised Switzerland.

But sometimes it was the beating strokes of the invisible paddle-steamer that woke him, for it seemed somehow a continuation of dreams he could never properly remember. That he had been dreaming busily every night of late he knew as surely as that he instantly forgot these dreams. That muffled, drum-like thud, coming nearer and nearer towards him out of the quiet distance, had some connection — undecipherable as yet — with the curious, dry, rattling sound belonging to the Wave. The two were so dissimilar, however, that he was unable to discover any theory that could harmonise them. Nor, for that matter, did he seek it. He merely registered a mental note, as it were, in passing. The beating and the rattling were associated.

He chose a small and quiet hotel, as his liking was, and made himself comfortable, for he might have six weeks to wait for Sir William's telegram, or even longer, if, as seemed likely, the summons came by post. And Montreux was a pleasant place in early spring, before the heat and glare of summer scorched the people out of it towards the heights. He took long walks towards the snow-line beyond Les Avants and Les Pléiades, where presently the carpets of narcissus would smother the fields with white as though winter had returned to fling, instead of crystal flakes, a hundred showers of white feathers upon the ground. He discovered paths that led into the whispering woods of pine and chestnut. The young larches wore feathery green upon their crests, primroses shone on slopes where the grass was still pale and dead, snowdrops peeped out beside the wooden fences, and here and there, shining out of the brown decay of last year's leaves and thick ground-ivy, he found hepaticas. He had never felt the spring so marvellous before; it rose in a wave of colour out of the sweet brown earth.

Though outwardly nothing of moment seemed to fill his days, inwardly he was aware of big events — maturing. There was this sense of approach, of preparation, of gathering. How insipid external events were after all, compared to the mass, the importance of interior changes! A change of heart, an altered point of view, a decision taken — these were the big events of life.

Yet it was a pleasant thing to be a senior partner. Here by the quiet lake, stroking himself complacently, he felt that life was very active, very significant, as he wondered what the choice would be. He rather hoped for Egypt, on the whole. He could look up Tony and the birds. They could go after duck and snipe together along the Nile. He would, moreover, be quite an important man out there. Pride and vanity rose in him, but unobserved. For the Wave was in this too.

One afternoon, late, he returned from a long scramble among icy rocks about the Dent de Jaman, changed his clothes, and sat with a cigarette beside the open window, watching the throng of people underneath. In a steady stream they moved along the front of the lake, their voices rising through the air, their feet producing a dull murmur as of water. The lake was still as glass; gulls asleep on it in patches, and here and there a swan, looking like a bundle of dry white paper, floated idly. Off-shore lay several fishing-boats, becalmed; and far beyond them, a rowing-skiff broke the surface into two lines of widening ripples. They seemed floating in mid-air against the evening glow. The Savoy Alps formed a deep blue rampart, and the serrated battlements of the Dent du Midi, full in the blaze of sunset, blocked the Rhone Valley far away with its formidable barricade.

He watched the glow of approaching sunset with keen enjoyment; he sat back, listening to the people's voices, the gentle lap of the little waves; and the pleasant lassitude that follows upon hard physical exertion combined with the even pleasanter stimulus of the tea to produce a state of absolute contentment with the world.…

Through the murmur of feet and voices, then, and from far across the water, stole out another sound that introduced into his peaceful mood an element of vague disquiet. He moved nearer to the window and looked out. The steamer, however, was invisible; the sea of shining haze towards Geneva hid it still; he could not see its outline. But he heard the echoless mutter of the paddle-wheels, and he knew that it was coming nearer. Yet at first it did not disturb him so much as that, for a moment, he heard no other sound: the voices, the tread of feet, the screaming of the gulls all died away, leaving this single, distant beating audible alone — as though the entire scenery combined to utter it. And, though no ordinary echo answered it, there seemed — or did he fancy it? — a faint, interior response within himself. The blood in his veins went pulsing in rhythmic unison with this remote hammering upon the water.

He leaned forward in his chair, watching the people, listening intently, almost as though he expected something to happen, when immediately below him chance left a temporary gap in the stream of pedestrians, and in this gap — for a second merely — a figure stood sharply defined, cut off from the throng, set by itself, alone. His eyes fixed instantly upon its appearance, movements, attitude. Before he could think or reason he heard himself exclaim aloud:

‘Why — it’s — —’

He stopped. The rest of the sentence remained unspoken. The words rushed down again. He swallowed, and with a gulp he ended — as though the other pedestrians all were men—’ —— a woman!’

The next thing he knew was that the cigarette was burning his fingers — had been burning them for several seconds. The figure melted back into the crowd. The throng closed round her. His eyes searched uselessly; no space, no gap was visible; the stream of people was continuous once more. Almost, it seemed, he had not really seen her — had merely thought her — up against the background of his mind.

For ten minutes, longer perhaps, he sat by that open window with eyes fastened on the moving crowd. His heart was beating oddly; his breath came rapidly. ‘She’ll pass by presently again,’ he thought; ‘she’ll come back!’ He looked alternately to the right and to the left, until, finally, the sinking sun blazed too directly in his eyes for him to see at all. The glare blurred everybody into a smudged line of golden colour, and the faces became a series of artificial suns that mocked him.

He did, then, an unusual thing — out of rhythm with his normal self, — he acted on impulse. Kicking his slippers off, he quickly put on a pair of boots, took his hat and stick, and went downstairs. There was no reflection in him; he did not pause and ask himself a single question; he ran to join the throng of people, moved up and down with them, in and out, passing and re-passing the same groups over and over again, but seeing no sign of the particular figure he sought so eagerly. She was dressed in black, he knew, with a black fur boa round her neck; she was slim and rather tall; more than that he could not say. But the poise and attitude, the way the head sat on the shoulders, the tilt upwards of the chin — he was as positive of recognising these as if he had seen her close instead of a hundred yards away.

The sun was down behind the Jura Mountains before he gave up the search. Sunset slipped insensibly into dusk. The throng thinned out quickly at the first sign of chill. A dozen times he experienced the thrill — his heart suddenly arrested — of seeing her, but on each occasion it proved to be some one else. Every second woman seemed to be dressed in black that afternoon, a loose black boa round the neck. His eyes ached with the strain, the change of focus, the question that burned behind and in them, the joy — the strange rich pain.

But half, at least, of these dull people, he renumbered, were birds of passage only; to-morrow or the next day they would take the train. He said to himself a dozen times, ‘Once more to the end and back again!’ For she, too, might be a bird of passage, leaving to-morrow or the next day, leaving that very night, perhaps. The thought afflicted, goaded him. And on getting back to the hotel he searched the *Liste des Étrangers* as eagerly as he had searched the crowded front — and as uselessly, since he did not even know what name he hoped to find.

But later that evening a change came over him. He surprised some sense of humour: catching it in the act, he also surprised himself a little — smiling at himself. The laughter, however, was significant. For it was just that restless interval after dinner when he knew not what to do with the hours until bedtime: whether to sit in his room and think and read, or to visit the principal hotels in the hope of chance discovery. He was even considering this wild-goose chase to himself, when suddenly he realised that his course of procedure was entirely the wrong one.

This thing was going to happen anyhow, it was inevitable; but — it would happen in its own time and way, and nothing he might do could hurry it. To hunt in this violent manner was to delay its coming. To behave as usual was the proper way. It was then he smiled.

He crossed the hall instead, and put his head in at the door of the little Lounge. Some Polish people, with whom he had a bowing acquaintance, were in there smoking. He had seen them enter, and the Lounge was so small that he could hardly sit in their presence without some effort at conversation. And, feeling in no mood for this, he put his head past the edge of the glass door, glanced round carelessly as though looking for some one — then drew sharply back. For his heart stopped dead an instant, then beat furiously, like a piston suddenly released. On the sofa, talking calmly to the Polish people, was — the figure. He recognised her instantly.

Her back was turned; he did not see her face. There was a vast excitement in him that seemed beyond control. He seemed unable to make up his mind.

He walked round and round the little hall examining intently the notices upon the walls. The excitement grew into tumult, as though the meeting involved something of immense importance to his inmost self — his soul. It was difficult to account for. Then a voice behind him said, ‘There is a concert to-night. Radwan is playing Chopin. There are tickets in the Bureau still — if Monsieur cares to go.’ He thanked the speaker without turning to show his face: while another voice said passionately within him, ‘I was wrong; she is slim, but she is not so tall as I thought.’ And a minute later, without remembering how he got there, he was in his room upstairs, the door shut safely after him, standing before the mirror and staring into his own eyes. Apparently the instinct to see what he looked like operated automatically. For he now remembered — realised — another thing. Facing the door of the Lounge was a mirror, and their eyes had met. He had gazed for an instant straight into the kind and beautiful Eyes he had first seen twenty years ago — in the Wave.

His behaviour then became more normal. He did the little, obvious things that any man would do. He took a clothes-brush and brushed his coat; he pulled his waistcoat down, straightened his black tie, and smoothed his hair, poked his hanging watch-chain back into its pocket. Then, drawing a deep breath and compressing his lips, he opened the door and went downstairs. He even remembered to turn off the electric light according to hotel instructions. ‘It’s perfectly all right,’ he thought, as he reached the top of the stairs. ‘Why shouldn’t I? There’s nothing unusual about it.’ He did not take the lift, he preferred action. Reaching the *salon* floor, he heard voices in the hall below. She was already leaving therefore, the brief visit over. He quickened his pace. There was not the slightest notion in him what he meant to say. It merely struck him that — idiotically — he had stayed longer in his bedroom than he realised; too long; he might have missed his chance. The thought urged him forward more rapidly again.

In the hall — he seemed to be there without any interval of time — he saw her going out; the swinging doors were closing just behind her. The Polish friends, having said good-bye, were already rising past him in the lift. A minute later he was in the street. He realised that, because he felt the cool night air upon his cheeks. He was beside her — looking down into her face.

‘May I see you back — home — to your hotel?’ he heard himself saying. And then the queer voice — it must have been his own — added abruptly, as though it was all he really had to say: ‘You haven’t forgotten me really. I’m Tommy — Tom Kelverdon.’

Her reply, her gesture, what she did and showed of herself in a word, was as queer as in a dream, yet so natural that it simply could not have been otherwise: ‘Tom Kelverdon! So it is! Fancy — *you* being here!’ Then: ‘Thank you very much. And suppose we walk; it’s only a few minutes — and quite dry.’

How trivial and commonplace, yet how wonderful!

He remembers that she said something to a coachman who immediately drove off, that she moved beside him on this Montreux pavement, that they went up-hill a little, and that, very soon, a brilliant door of glass blazed in front of them, that she had said, ‘How strange that we should meet again like this. Do come and see me — any day — just telephone. I’m staying some weeks probably,’ — and he found himself standing in the middle of the road, then walking wildly at a rapid pace downhill, he knew not whither, that he was hot and breathless, that stars were shining, and swans, like bundles of white newspaper, were asleep on the lake, and — that he had found her.

He had walked and talked with Lettice. He bumped into more than one irate pedestrian before he realised it; they knew it better than he did, apparently. ‘It was Lettice Aylmer, Lettice…’ he kept saying to himself. ‘I’ve found her. She shook hands with me. That was her voice, her touch, her perfume. She’s here — here in little Montreux — for several weeks. After all these years! Can it be true — really true at last? She said I might telephone — might go and see her. She’s glad to see me — again.’

How often he paced the entire length of the deserted front beside the lake he did not count: it must have been many times, for the hotel door, which closed at midnight, was locked and the night-porter let him in. He went to bed — if there was rose in the eastern sky and upon the summits of the Dent du Midi, he did not notice it. He dropped into a half-sleep in which thought continued but not wearingly. The excitement of his nerves relaxed, soothed and mothered by something far greater than his senses, stronger than his rushing blood. This greater Rhythm took charge of him most comfortably. He fell back into the mighty arms of something that was rising irresistibly — something inevitable and — half-familiar. It had long been gathering; there was no need to ask a thousand questions, no need to fight it anywhere. From the moment when he glanced idly into the Lounge he had been aware of it. It had driven him downstairs without reflection, as it had driven him also uphill till the blazing door was reached. He smelt it, heard it, saw it, touched it. It was the Wave.

Time certainly proved its unreality that night; the hours seemed both endless and absurdly brief. His mind flew round and round in a circle, lingering over every detail of the short interview with a tumultuous pleasure that hid pain very thinly. He felt afraid, felt himself on the brink of plunging headlong into a gigantic whirlpool. Yet he wanted to plunge.… He would.… He had to.… It was irresistible.

He reviewed the scene, holding each detail forcibly still, until the last delight had been sucked out of it. At first he remembered next to nothing — a blur, a haze, the houses flying past him, no feeling of pavement under his feet, but only her voice saying nothing in particular, her touch, as he sometimes drew involuntarily against her arm, her eyes shining up at him. For her eyes remained the chief impression perhaps — so kind, so true, so very sweet and frank — soft Irish eyes with something mysterious and semi-eastern in them. The conversation seemed to have entirely escaped recovery.

Then, one by one, he remembered things that she had said. Sentences offered themselves of their own accord. He flung himself upon them, trying to keep tight hold of their first meaning — before he filled them with significance of his own. It was a desperate business altogether; emotion distorted her simple words so quickly. ‘I was thinking of you only to-day. I had the feeling you were here. Curious, wasn’t it?’ He distinctly remembered her saying this. And then another sentence: ‘I should have known you anywhere; though, of course, you’ve changed a lot. But I knew your eyes. Eyes don’t change much, do they?’ The meanings he read into these simple phrases filled an hour at least; he lost entirely their simple first significance. But this last remark brought up another in its train. As the tram went past them she had raised her voice a little and looked up into his face — it was just then they had cannonaded. People who like one another always cannonade, he reflected. And her remark— ‘Ah, it comes back to me. You’re so very like your sister Mary. I’ve seen her several times since the days in Cavendish Square. There’s a strong family likeness.’

He disliked the last part of the sentence. Mary, besides, had mentioned nothing; her rare letters made no reference to it. The schooldays' friendship had evaporated perhaps. This sent his thoughts back upon the early trail of those distant months when Lettice was at a Finishing School in France and he had kept that tragic Calendar.…

Another sentence interrupted them: 'I had, oddly enough, been thinking of you this very afternoon. I knew you the moment you put your head in at the door, but, for the life of me, I couldn't get the name. All I got was 'Tommy'!' And only his sense of humour prevented the obvious rejoinder, 'I wish you would always call me that.' It struck him sharply. Such talk could have no part in a meeting of this kind; the idea of flirtation was impossible, not even thought of. Yet twice she had said, 'I was thinking of you only to-day!'

But other things came back as well. It was strange how much they had really said to each other in those few brief minutes. Next day he retraced the way and discovered that, even walking quickly, it took him a good half hour; yet they had walked slowly, even leisurely. But, try as he would, he was unable to force deeper meanings into these other remarks that he recalled. She was evidently pleased to see him, that at least was certain, for she had asked him to come and see her, and she meant it. He remembered his reply, 'I'll come to-morrow — may I?' and then abruptly realised for the first time that the plunge was taken. He felt himself committed, sink or swim. The Wave already had lifted him off his feet.

And it was on this his whirling thoughts came down to rest at last, and sleep crept over him — just as dawn was breaking. He felt himself in the 'sea' with Lettice, there was nothing he could do, no course to choose, no decision to be made. Though married, she was somehow free — he felt it in her attitude. That sense of fatalism known in boyhood took charge of him. The Wave was rising towards the moment when it must invariably break and fall, and every impulse in him rising in it without a shade of denial or resistance. It would hurt — the fall and break would cause atrocious pain. But it was somewhere necessary to him. No atom of him held back or hesitated. For there was joy beyond it somehow — an intense and lasting joy, like the joy that belongs to growth and development after accepted suffering.

Vaguely — not put into definite words — it was this he felt, when at length sleep took him. Yet just before he slept he remembered two other little details, and smiled to himself as they rose before his sleepy mind, yet not understanding exactly why he smiled: for he did not yet know her name — and there was, of course, a husband.

CHAPTER IX.

THIS RESUMPTION OF a childhood's acquaintance that, by one at least, had been imaginatively coaxed into a relationship of ideal character, at once took on a standing of its own. It started as from a new beginning.

Tom Kelverdon did not forget the childhood part, but he neglected it at first. It was as if he met now for the first time — a woman who charmed him beyond anything known before; he longed for her; that he had longed for her subconsciously these twenty years slipped somehow or other out of memory. With it slipped also those strange corroborative details that imagination had clung to so tenaciously during the interval. The Whiff, the Sound, the other pair of Eyes, the shuffling feet, the joy that cloaked the singular prophecy of pain — all these, if not entirely forgotten, ceased to intrude themselves. Even when looking into her clear, dark eyes, he no longer quite realised them as the 'eastern eyes' of his dim, dim dream; they belonged to a woman, and a married woman, whom he desired with body, heart and soul. Calm introspection was impossible, he could only feel, and feel intensely. He could not fuse this girl and woman into one continuous picture: each was a fragment of some much older, larger picture. But this larger canvas he could never visualise successfully. It was coloured, radiant, gorgeous; it blazed as with gold, a gold of sun and stars. But the strain of effort caused rupture instantly. The vaster memory escaped him. He was conscious of reserve.

The comedy of telephoning to a name he did not know was obviated next morning by the arrival of a note: 'Dear Tom Kelverdon,' it began, and was signed 'Yours, Lettice Jaretzka.' It invited him to come up for *déjeuner* in her hotel. He went. The luncheon led naturally to a walk together afterwards, and then to other luncheons and other walks, to evening rows upon the lake, and to excursions into the surrounding country.… They had tea together in the lower mountain inns, picked flowers, photographed one another, laughed, talked and sat side by side at concerts or in the little Montreux cinema theatre. It was all as easy and natural as any innocent companionship well could be — because it was so deep. The foundations were of such solid strength that nothing on the surface trembled.… Madame de Jaretzka was well known in the hotel — she came annually, it seemed, about this time and made a lengthy stay, — but no breath of anything untoward could ever be connected with her. He, too, was accepted by one and all, no glances came their way. He was her friend: that was apparently enough. And though he desired her, body, heart and soul, he was quick to realise that the first named in the trio had no rôle to play. Something in her, something of attitude and atmosphere, rendered it inconceivable. The reserve he was conscious of lay very deep in him; it lay in her too. There was a fence, a barrier he must not, could not pass — both recognised it. Being a man, romance for him drew some tendril doubtless from the creative physical, but the shade of passing disappointment, if it existed, was renounced as instantly as recognised. Yet he was not aware at first of any incompleteness in her. He felt only a bigger thing. There seemed something in this simple woman that bore him to the stars.

For simple she undoubtedly was, not in the way of shallowness, but because her nature seemed at harmony with itself: uncomplex, natural, frank and open, and with an unconventional carelessness that did no evil for the reason that she thought and meant none. She could do things that must have made an ordinary worldly woman the centre of incessant talk and scandal. There was, indeed, an extraordinary innocence about her that perturbed the judgment, somewhat baffling it. Whereas with many women it might have roused the suspicion of being a pose, an affectation, with her, Tom felt, it was a genuine innocence, beyond words delightful and refreshing. And it arose, he soon discovered, from the fact that, being good and true herself, she thought everybody else was also good and true. This he realised before two days' intercourse had made it seem as if they had been together always and were made for one another. Something bigger and higher than he had ever felt before stirred in him for this woman, whom he thought of now invariably as Madame de Jaretzka, rather than as Lettice of his younger dream. If she woke something nobler in him that had slept, he did not label it as such: nor, if a portion of his younger dream was fulfilling itself before his eyes, in a finer set of terms, did he think it out and set it down in definite words. There *was* this intense and intimate familiarity between them both, but somehow he did not call it by these names. He just thought her wonderful — and longed for her. The reserve began to trouble him.…

‘It’s sweet,’ she said, ‘when real people come together — find each other.’

‘Again,’ he added. ‘You left that out. For *I’ve* never forgotten — all these years.’

She laughed. ‘Well, I’ll tell you the truth,’ she confessed frankly. ‘I hadn’t forgotten either; I often thought of you and wondered — —’

‘What I was like now?’

‘What you were doing, where you were,’ she said. ‘I always knew what you were like. But I often wondered how far on you had got.’

‘You had no news of me?’

‘None. But I always believed you’d do something big in the world.’

Something in her voice or manner made it wholly natural for him to tell her of his boyhood love. He mentioned the Wave and wavy feeling, the nightmare too, but when he tried to go beyond that, something checked him; he felt a sudden shyness. It ‘sounds so silly,’ was his thought. ‘But I always know a real person,’ he said aloud, ‘anybody who’s going to be real in my life; they always arrive on a wave, as it were. My wavy feeling announces them.’ And the interest with which she responded prevented his regretting having made his confession.

‘It’s an instinct, I think,’ she agreed, ‘and instincts are meant to be listened to. I’ve had something similar, though with me it’s not a wave.’ Her voice grew slower, she made a pause; when he looked up — her eyes were gazing across the lake as though in a moment of sudden absent-mindedness. . . . ‘And what’s yours?’ he asked, wondering why his heart was beating as though something painful was to be disclosed.

‘I see a stream,’ she went on slowly, still gazing away from him across the expanse of shining water, ‘a flowing stream — with faces on it. They float down with the current. And when I see one I know it’s somebody real — real to me. The unreal faces are always on the bank. I pass them by.’

‘You’ve seen mine?’ he asked, unable to hide the eagerness. ‘My face?’

‘Often, yes,’ she told him simply. ‘I dream it usually, I think: but it’s quite vivid.’

‘And is that all? You just see the faces floating down with the current?’

‘There’s one other thing,’ she answered, ‘if you’ll promise not to laugh.’

‘Oh, I won’t laugh,’ he assured her. ‘I’m awfully interested. It’s no funnier than my Wave, anyhow.’

‘They’re faces I have to save,’ she said. ‘Somehow I’m meant to rescue them.’ In what way she did not know. ‘Just keep them above water, I suppose!’ And the smile in her face gave place to a graver look. The stream of faces was real to her in the way his Wave was real. There was meaning in it. ‘Only three weeks ago,’ she added, ‘I saw *you* like that.’ He asked where it was, and she told him Warsaw. They compared notes; they had been in the town together, it turned out. Their outer paths had been converging for some time, then.

‘Why — did you leave?’ he asked suddenly. He wanted to ask why she was there at all, but something stopped him.

‘I usually come here,’ she said quietly, ‘about this time. It’s restful. There’s peace in these quiet hills above the town, and the lake is soothing. I get strength and courage here.’

He glanced at her with astonishment a moment. Behind the simple language another meaning flashed. There was a look in the eyes, a hint in the voice that betrayed her.… He waited, but she said no more. Not that she wished to conceal, but that she did not wish to speak of something. Warsaw meant pain for her, she came here to rest, to recuperate after a time of stress and struggle, he felt. And looking at the face he recognised for the first time that behind its quiet strength there lay deep pain and sadness, yet accepted pain and sadness conquered, a suffering she had turned to sweetness. Without a particle of proof, he yet felt sure of this. And an immense respect woke in him. He saw her saving, rescuing others, regardless of herself: he felt the floating faces real; the stream was life — her life.… And, side by side with the deep respect, the bigger, higher impulse stirred in him again. Name it he could not: it just came: it stole into him like some rare and exquisite new fragrance, and it came from her.… He saw her far above him, stooping down from a higher level to reach him with her little hand.… He knew a yearning to climb up to her — a sudden and searching yearning in his soul. ‘She’s come back to fetch me,’ ran across his mind before he realised it; and suddenly his heart became so light that he thought he had never felt such happiness before. Then, before he realised it, he heard himself saying aloud — from his heart:

‘You do me an awful lot of good — really you do. I feel better and happier when I’m with you. I feel—’ He broke off, aware that he was talking rather foolishly. Yet the boyish utterance was honest; she did not think it foolish apparently. For she replied at once, and without a sign of lightness:

‘Do I? Then I mustn’t leave you, Tom!’

‘Never!’ he exclaimed impetuously.

‘Until I’ve saved you.’ And this time she did not laugh.

She was still looking away from him across the water, and the tone was quiet and unaccented. But the words rang like a clarion in his mind. He turned; she turned too: their eyes met in a brief but penetrating gaze. And for an instant he caught an expression that frightened him, though he could not understand its meaning. Her beauty struck him like a sheet of fire — all over. He saw gold about her like the soft fire of the southern stars. With any other woman, at any other time, he would — but the thought utterly denied itself before it was half completed even. It sank back as though ashamed. There was something in her that made it ugly, out of rhythm, undesirable, and undesired. She would not respond — she would not understand.

In its place another blazed up with that strange, big yearning at the back of it, and though he gazed at her as a man gazes at a woman he needs and asks for, her quiet eyes did not lower or turn aside. The cheaper feeling ‘I’m not worthy of you,’ took in his case a stronger form: ‘I’ll be better, bigger, for you.’ And then, so gently it might have been a mother’s action, she put her hand on his with firm pressure, and left it lying there a moment before she withdrew it again. Her long white glove, still fastened about the wrist, was flung back so that it left the palm and fingers bare, and the touch of the soft skin upon his own was marvellous; yet he did not attempt to seize it, he made no movement in return. He kept control of himself in a way he did not understand. He just sat and looked into her face. There was an entire absence of response from her — in one sense. Something poured from her eyes into his very soul, but something beautiful, uplifting. This new yearning emotion rose through him like a wave, bearing him upwards.… At the same time he was vaguely aware of a lack as well… of something incomplete and unawakened.…

‘Thank you — for saying that,’ he was murmuring; ‘I shall never forget it,’; and though the suppressed passion changed the tone and made it tremble even, he held himself as rigid as a statue. It was she who moved. She leaned nearer to him. Like a flower the wind bends on its graceful stalk, her face floated very softly against his own. She kissed him. It was all very swift and sudden. But, though exquisite, it was not a woman’s kiss.… The same instant she was sitting straight again, gazing across the blue lake below her.

‘You’re still a boy,’ she said, with a little innocent laugh, ‘still a wonderful, big boy.’

‘Your boy,’ he returned. ‘I always have been.’

There was deep, deep joy in his heart, it lifted him above the world — with her. Yet with the joy there was this faint touch of disappointment too.

‘But, I say — isn’t it awfully strange?’ he went on, words failing him absurdly. ‘It’s very wonderful, this friendship. It’s so natural.’ Then he began to flush and stammer.

In an even tone of voice she answered: ‘It’s wonderful, Tom, but it’s not strange.’ And again he was vaguely aware that something which might have made her words yet more convincing was not there.

‘But I’ve got that curious feeling — I could swear it’s all happened before.’ He moved closer as he spoke; her dress was actually against his coat, but he could not touch her. Something made it impossible, wrong, a false, even a petty thing. It would have taken away the kiss. ‘Have *you*?’ he asked abruptly, with an intensity that seemed to startle her, ‘have *you* got that feeling of familiarity too?’

And for a moment in the middle of their talk they both, for some reason, grew very thoughtful.…

‘It had to be — perhaps,’ she answered simply a little later. ‘We are both real, so I suppose — yes, it *has* to be.’

There was the definite feeling that both spoke of a bigger thing that neither quite understood. Their eyes searched, but their hearts searched too. There was a gap in her that somehow must be filled, Tom felt.… They stared long at one another. He was close upon the missing thing — when suddenly she withdrew her eyes. And with that, as though a wave had swept them together and passed on, the conversation abruptly changed its key. They fell to talking of other things. The man in him was again aware of disappointment.

The change was quite natural, nothing forced or awkward about it. The significance had gone its way, but the results remained. They were in the 'sea' together. It 'had to be.' As from the beginning of the world they belonged to one another, each for the other — real. There was nothing about it of a text-book 'love affair,' absolutely nothing. Deeper far than a passional relationship, guiltless of any fruit of mere propinquity, the foundations of the sudden intimacy were as ancient as immovable. The inevitable touch lay in it. And Tom knew this partly confirmed, at any rate, by the emotion in him when she said 'my boy,' for the term woke no annoyance, conveyed no lightness. Yet there was a flavour of disappointment in it somewhere — something of necessary value that he missed in her.… To a man in love it must have sounded superior, contemptuous: whereas to him it sounded merely true. He was her boy. This mother-touch was in her. To care, to cherish, somehow even to rescue, she had come to find him out — again. She had come *back*.… It was thus, at first, he felt it. From somewhere above, beyond the place where he now stood in life, she had 'come back, come down, to fetch him.' She was further on than he was. He longed to stand beside her. Until he did so… this gap in her must prevent absolute union. On both sides it was not entirely natural as yet.… Thought grew confused in him.

And, though he could not understand, he accepted it as inevitable. The joy, moreover, was so urgent and uprising, that it smothered a delicate whisper that yet came with it — that the process involved also — pain. Though aware, from time to time, of this vague uneasiness, he easily brushed it aside. It was the merest gossamer-thread of warning that with each recurrent appearance became more tenuous, until finally it ceased to make its presence felt at all.…

In the entire affair of this sudden intercourse he felt the Wave, yet the Wave, though steadily rising, ceased to make its presence too consciously known; the Whiff, the Sound, the Eyes seemed equally forgotten: that is, he did not realise them. He was living now, and introspection was a waste of time, living too intensely to reflect or analyse. He felt swept onwards upon a tide that was greater than he could manage, for instead of swimming consciously, he was borne and carried with it. There was certainly no attempt to stem. Life was rising. It rushed him forwards too deliciously to think.…

He began asking himself the old eternal question: ‘Do I love? Am I in love — at last, then?’… Some time passed, however, before he realised that he loved, and it was in a sudden, curious way that this realisation came. Two little words conveyed the truth — some days later, as they were at tea on the verandah of her hotel, watching the sunset behind the blue line of the Jura Mountains. He had been talking about himself, his engineering prospects — rather proudly — his partnership and the letter he expected daily from Sir William. ‘I hope it will be Assouan,’ he said, ‘I’ve never been in Egypt. I’m awfully keen to see it.’ She said she hoped so too. She knew Egypt well: it enchanted, even enthralled her: ‘familiar as though I’d lived there all my life. A change comes over me, I become a different person — and a much older one; not physically,’ she explained with a curious shy gaze at him, ‘but in the sense that I feel a longer pedigree behind me.’ She gave the little laugh that so often accompanied her significant remarks. ‘I always think of the Nile as the ‘stream’ where I see the floating faces.’

They went on chatting for some minutes about it. Tom asked if she had met his cousin out there; yes, she remembered vaguely a Mr. Winslowe coming to tea on her *dahabieh* once, but it was only when he described Tony more closely that she recalled him positively. ‘He interested me,’ she said then: ‘he talked wildly, but rather picturesquely, about what he called the ‘spiral movement of life,’ or something.’ ‘He goes after birds,’ Tom mentioned. ‘Of course,’ she replied, ‘I remember distinctly now. It was something about the flight of birds that introduced the spiral part of it. He had a good deal in him, that man,’ she added, ‘but he hid it behind a lot of nonsense — almost purposely, I felt.’

‘That’s Tony all over,’ Tom assented, ‘but he’s a rare good sort and I’m awfully fond of him. He’s ‘real’ in our sense too, I think.’

She said then very slowly, as though her thoughts were far away in Egypt at the moment: ‘Yes, I think he is. I’ve seen *his* face too.’

‘Floating down, you mean — or on the bank?’

‘Floating,’ she answered. ‘I’m sure I have.’

Tom laughed happily. ‘Then you’ve got him to rescue too,’ he said. ‘But, remember, if we’re both drowning, I come first.’

She looked into his face and smiled her answer, touching his fingers with her hand. And again it was not a woman’s touch.

‘He was in Warsaw, too, a few weeks ago,’ Tom went on, ‘so we were all three there together. Rather odd, you know. He was ski-ing with me in the Carpathians,’; and he described their meeting at Zakopané after the long interval since boyhood. ‘He told me about you in Egypt, too, now I come to think of it. He mentioned the *dahabieh*, but called you a Russian — yes, I remember now, — and a Russian Princess into the bargain. Evidently you made less impression on Tony than — —’

It was then he stopped as though he had been struck. The idle conversation changed. He heard her interrupting words from a curious distance. They fell like particles of ice upon his heart.

‘Polish, of course, not Russian,’ she mentioned casually, ‘but the rest is right, though I never use the title. My husband, in his own country, is a Prince, you see.’

Something reeled in him, then instantly righted itself. For a moment he felt as though the freedom of their intercourse had received a shock that blighted it. The words, ‘my husband,’ struck chill and ominous into his heart. The recovery, however, — almost simultaneous — showed him that both the freedom and the intercourse were right and unashamed. She gave him nothing that belonged to any other: she was loyal and true to that other as she was loyal and true to himself. Their relationship was high above mere passional intrigue; it could exist — in the way she knew it, felt it — side by side with that other one, before that other one’s very eyes, if need be.… He saw it true: he saw it innocent as daylight.… For what he felt was somehow this: the woman in her was not his, but more than that — it was not any one’s. It still lay dormant.…

If there was a momentary confusion in his own mind, there was none, he felt positive, in hers. The two words that struck him such a blow, she uttered as lightly, innocently, as the rest of the talk between them. Indeed, had that other — even in thought Tom preferred the paraphrase — been present, she would have introduced them to each other then and there. He heard her saying the little phrases even: ‘My husband,’ and, ‘This is Tom Kelverdon whom I’ve loved since childhood.’

Nothing brought more home to him the high innocence, the purity and sweetness of this woman than the reflections that flung after one another in his mind as he realised that his hope of her being a widow was not justified, and at the same moment that he desired exclusive possession of her — that he was definitely in love.

That she was unaware of any discovery, even if she divined the storm in him at all, was clear from the way she went on speaking. For, while all this flashed through his mind, she added quietly: ‘He is in Warsaw now. He — lives there. I go to him for part of every year.’ To which Tom heard his voice reply something as natural and commonplace as ‘Yes — I see.’

Of the hundred pregnant questions that presented themselves, he did not ask a single one: not that he lacked the courage so much as that he felt the right was — not yet — his. Moreover, behind her quiet words he divined a tragedy. The suffering that had become sweetness in her face was half explained, but the full revelation of it belonged to ‘that other’ and to herself alone. It had been their secret, he remembered, for at least fifteen years.

CHAPTER X.

YET, KNOWING HIMSELF in love, he was able to set his house in order. Confusion disappeared. With the method and thoroughness of his character he looked things in the face and put them where they belonged. Even to wake up to an untidy room was an affliction. He might arrive in a hotel at midnight, but he could not sleep until his trunks were empty and everything in its place. In such outer details the intensity of his nature showed itself: it was the intensity, indeed, that compelled the orderliness.

And the morning after this conversation, he woke up to an ordered mind — thoughts and emotions in their proper places where he could see and lay his hand upon them. The strength and weakness of his temperament betrayed themselves plainly here, for the security that pedantic order brought precluded the perspective of a larger vision. This careful labelling enclosed him within somewhat rigid fences. To insist upon this precise ticketing had its perilous corollary; the entire view — perspective, proportion, vision — was lost sight of.

‘I’m in love: she’s beautiful, body, mind and soul. She’s high above me, but I’ll climb up to where she is.’ This was his morning thought, and the thought that accompanied him all day long and every day until the moment came to separate again.… ‘She’s a married woman, but her husband has no claim on her.’ Somehow he was positive of that; the husband had forfeited all claim to her; details he did not know; but she was free; she did no wrong.

In imagination he furnished plausible details from sensational experiences life had shown him. These may have been right or wrong; possibly the husband had ill-treated, then deserted her; they were separated possibly, though — she had told him this — there were no children to complicate the situation. He made his guesses.… There was a duty, however, that she would not, did not neglect: in fulfilment of its claim she went to Warsaw every year. What it was, of course, he did not know; but this thought and the emotions caused by it, he put away into their proper places; he asked no questions of her; the matter did not concern him really. The shock experienced the day before was the shock of realising that — he loved. Those two significant words had suddenly shown it to him. The order of his life was changed. ‘She is essential to me; I am essential to her.’ But ‘She’s all the world to me,’ involved equally ‘I’m all the world to her.’ The sense of his own importance was enormously increased. The Wave surged upwards with a sudden leap.…

There was one thing lacking in this love, perhaps, though he hardly noticed it — the element of surprise. Ever since childhood he had suspected this would happen. The love was predestined, and in so far seemed a deliberate affair, pedestrian, almost calm. This sense of the inevitable robbed it of that amazing unearthly glamour which steals upon those who love for the first time, taking them deliciously by surprise. He saw her beautiful, and probably she was, but her beauty was familiar to him. He had come up with the childhood dream, and in coming up with it he recognised it. It seemed thus somewhat.… But her mind and soul were beautiful too, only these were more beautiful than he had dreamed. In that lay surprise and wonder too. There was genuine magic here, discovery and exhilarating novelty. He had not caught up with *that*. The love as a whole, however, was expected, natural. It was inevitable. The familiarity alone remained strange, a flavour of the uncanny about it almost — yet certainly real.

And these things also he tried to face and label, though with less success. To bring order into them was beyond his powers. She had outstripped him somehow in her soul, but had come back to fetch him — also to get something for herself she lacked. The rest was oddly familiar: it had happened before. It was about to happen now again, but on a higher level; only before it could happen completely he must overtake her. The spiral idea lay in it somewhere. But the Wave contained and drove it.… His mind was not supple; analogy, that spiritual solvent, did not help him. Yet the fact remained that he somehow visualised the thing in picture form; a rising wave bore them charging up the spiral curve to a point whence they both looked down upon a passage they had made before. She was always a little in front of him, beyond him. But when the Wave finally broke they would rush together — become one… there would be pain, but joy would follow.

And during all their subsequent happy days of companionship this one thing alone marred his supreme contentment — this sense of elusiveness, that while he held her she yet slipped between his fingers and escaped. He loved; but whereas to most men love brings a feeling of finality and rest, as of a search divinely ended, to Tom came the feeling that his search was merely resumed, or, indeed, had only just begun. He had not come into full possession of this woman: he had only found her.… She was deep; her deceptive simplicity hid surprises from him; much — and it was the greater part — he could not understand. Only when he came up with that would possession be complete. Not that she said or did a single thing that suggested this; she was not elusive of set purpose; she was entirely guiltless of any desire to hold back a fraction of herself, and to conceal was as foreign to her nature as to play with him; but that some part of her hung high above his reach, and that he, knowing this, admitted a subtle pain behind the joy. 'I can't get at her — quite,' he put it to himself. 'Some part of her is not mine yet — doesn't belong to me.'

He thought chiefly, that is, of his own possible disabilities rather than of hers.

'I often wonder why we've come together like this,' he said once, as they lay in the shade of a larch wood above Corvaux and looked towards the snowy summits of Savoy. 'What brought us together, I mean? There's something mysterious about it to me — —'

'God,' she said quietly. 'You needed me. You've been lonely. But you'll never be lonely again.'

Her introduction of the Deity into a conversation did not displease. Fate, or any similar word, could have taken its place; she merely conveyed her sense that their coming together was right and inevitable. Moreover, now that she said it, he recognised the fact of loneliness — that he always had been lonely, but that it was no longer possible. He felt like a boy and spoke like a boy. She had come to look after, care for him. She asked nothing for herself. The thought gave him a sharp and sudden pang.

'But my love means a lot to you, doesn't it?' he asked tenderly. 'I mean, you need me too?'

'Everything, Tom,' she told him softly. He was conscious of the mother in her, as though the mother overshadowed the woman. But while he loved it, the tinge of resentment still remained.

‘You couldn’t do without me, could you?’ He took the hand she placed upon his knee and looked up into her quiet eyes. ‘You’d be lonely too if — I went?’

For a moment she gazed down at him and did not answer; he was aware of both the pain and sweetness in her face; an interval of thoughtfulness again descended on them both: then a great tenderness came welling up into her eyes as she answered slowly: ‘You couldn’t go, Tom. You couldn’t leave me ever.’

Her hand was on his shoulder, almost about his neck as she said it, and he came in closer, and before he knew what he was doing his face was buried in her lap. Her hand stroked his hair. Twenty-five years dropped from him — he was a child again, a little boy, and she, in some divine, half-impersonal sense he could not understand, was mothering him. No foolish feeling of shame came with it; the mood was too sudden for analysis, it passed away swiftly too; but he knew, for a brief second, all the sensations of a restless and dissatisfied boy who needed above all else — comfort: the comfort that only an inexhaustible mother-love could give.… And this love poured from her in a flood. Till now he had never known it, nor known the need of it. And because it had been curiously lacking he suddenly wondered how he had done without it. A strange sense of tears rose in his heart. He felt pain and tragedy somewhere. For there was another thing he wanted from her too.… Through the sparkle of his joy peeped out that familiar, strange, rich pain, but so swiftly he hardly recognised it. It withdrew again. It vanished.

‘But *you* couldn’t leave me either, could you?’ he asked, sitting erect again. He made a movement as though to draw her head down upon his shoulder in the protective way of a man who loves, but — he could not do it. It was curious. She did nothing to prevent, only somehow the position would be a false one. She did not need him in that way. He was not yet big enough to protect. It was she who protected him. And when she answered the same second, the familiar sentence flashed across his mind again: ‘She has come back to fetch me.’

‘I shall never, never leave you, Tom. We’re together for always. I know it absolutely.’ The girl of seventeen, the unawakened woman who was desired, the mother who thought not of herself, — all three spoke in those quiet words; but with them, too, he was aware of this elusive other thing he could not name. Perhaps her eyes conveyed it, perhaps the pain and sweetness in the little face so close above his own. She was bending over him. He looked up. And over his heart rushed again that intolerable yearning — the yearning to stand where she stood, far, far beyond him, yet with it the certainty that pain must attend the effort. Until that pain, that effort were accomplished, she could not entirely belong to him. He had to win her yet. Yet also he had to teach *her* something.… Meanwhile, in the act of protecting, mothering him she must use pain, as to a learning child. Their love would gain completeness only thus.

Yet in words he could not approach it; he knew not how to.

‘It’s a strange relationship,’ he stammered, concealing, as he thought, the deep emotions that perplexed him. ‘The world would misunderstand it utterly.’ She smiled, nodding her head. ‘I wish — —’ he added, ‘I mean it comes to me sometimes — that you don’t need me quite as I need you. You’re my whole life, you know — now.’

‘You’re growing imaginative, Tom,’ she teased him smilingly. Then, catching the earnest expression in his face, she added: ‘My life has been very full, you see, and I’ve always had to stand alone. There’s been so much for me to do that I’ve had no time to feel loneliness perhaps.’

‘Rescuing the other floating faces!’

A slight tinge of a new emotion slipped through his mind, something he had never felt before, yet so faint he could not even recapture it, much less wonder whether it were jealousy or envy. It rose from the depths; it vanished into him again.… Besides, he saw that she was smiling; the teasing mood that so often baffled him was upon her; he heard her give that passing laugh that almost ‘kept him guessing,’ as the Americans say, whether she was in play or earnest.

‘It’s worth doing, anyhow — rescuing the floating faces,’ she said: ‘worth living for.’ And she half closed her eyes so that he saw her as a girl again. He saw her as she had been even before he knew her, as he used to see her in his dream. It was the dream-eyes that peered at him through long, thick lashes. They looked down at him. He felt caught away to some remote, strange place and time. He was aware of gold, of colour, of a hotter blood, a fiercer sunlight.…

And the sense of familiarity became suddenly very real; he knew what she was going to say, how he would answer, why they had come together. It all flashed near, yet still just beyond his reach. He almost understood. They had been side by side like this before, not in this actual place, but somewhere — somewhere that he knew intimately. Her eyes had looked down into his own precisely so, long, long ago, yet at the same time strangely near. There was a perfume, a little ghostly perfume — it was the Whiff. It was gone instantly, but he had tasted it.… A veil drew up.… He saw, he knew, he remembered — *almost*.… Another second and he would capture the meaning of it all. Another moment and it would reveal itself — then, suddenly, the whole sensation vanished. He had missed it by the minutest fraction in the world, yet missed it utterly. It left him confused and baffled.

The veil was down again, and he was talking with Madame Jaretzka, the Lettice Aylmer of his boyhood days. Such moments of the *déjà-vu* leave bewilderment behind them, like the effect of sudden change of focus in the eye; and with the bewilderment a sense of insecurity as well.

‘Yes,’ he said half dreamily, ‘and you’ve rescued a lot already, haven’t you?’ as though he still followed in speech the direction of the vanished emotion.

‘You know that, Tom?’ she enquired, raising her eyelids, thus finally restoring the normal.

He stammered rather: ‘I have the feeling — that you’re always doing good to some one somewhere. There’s something,’ — he searched for a word— ‘impersonal about you — almost.’ And he knew the word was nearly right, though found by chance. It included ‘un-physical,’ the word he did not like to use. He did not want an angel’s love; the spiritual, to him, rose from the physical, and was not apart from it. He was not in heaven yet, and had no wish to be. He was on earth; and everything of value — love, above all — must spring from earth, or else remain incomplete, insecure, ineffective even.

And again a tiny dart of pain shot through him. Yet he was glad he said it, for it was true. He liked to face what hurt him. To face it was to get it over.…

But she was laughing again gently to herself, though certainly not at him. ‘What were you thinking about so long?’ she asked. ‘You’ve been silent for several minutes and your thoughts were far away.’ And as he did not reply immediately, she went on: ‘If you go to Assouan you mustn’t fall into reveries like that or you’ll leave holes in the dam, or whatever your engineering work is — *Tom*!’

She spoke the name with a sudden emphasis that startled him. It was a call.

‘Yes,’ he said, looking up at her. He was emerging from a dream.

‘Come back to me. I don’t like your going away in that strange way — forgetting me.’

‘Ah, I like that. Say it again,’ he returned, a deeper note in his voice.

‘You *were* away — weren’t you?’

‘Perhaps,’ he said slowly. ‘I can’t say quite. I was thinking of you, wherever I was.’ He went on, holding her eyes with a steady gaze: ‘A curious feeling came over me like — like heat and light. You seemed so familiar to me all of a sudden that I felt I had known you ages and ages. I was trying to make out where — it was — —’

She dropped her eyelids again and peered at him, but no longer smiling. There was a sterner expression in her face. The lips curved a moment in a new strange way. The air seemed to waver an instant between them. She peered down at him as through a mist.…

‘There — like that!’ he exclaimed passionately. ‘Only I wish you wouldn’t. There’s something I don’t like about it. It hurts,’ — and the same minute felt ashamed, as though he had said a foolish thing. It had come out in spite of himself.

‘Then I won’t, Tom — if you’ll promise not to go away again. I was thinking of Egypt for a second — I don’t know why.’

But he did not laugh with her; his face kept the graver expression still.

‘It changes you — rather oddly,’ he said quietly, ‘that lowering of the eyelids. I can’t say why exactly, but it makes you look —— Eastern.’ Again he had said a foolish thing. A kind of spell seemed over him.

‘Irish eyes!’ he heard her saying. ‘They sometimes look like that, I’m told. But you promise, don’t you?’

‘Of course I promise,’ he answered bluntly enough, because he meant it. ‘I can never go away from you because,’ — he turned and looked very hard at her a moment— ‘because there’s something in you I need in my very soul,’ he went on earnestly, ‘yet that always escapes me. I can’t get hold of — all of you.’

And though she refused his very earnest mood, she answered with obvious sincerity at once. ‘That’s as it should be, Tom. A man tires of a woman the moment he gets to the end of her.’ She gave her little laugh and touched his hand. ‘Perhaps that’s what I’m meant to teach you. When you know all of me — —’

‘I shall never know all of you,’ said Tom.

‘You never will,’ she replied with meaning, ‘for I don’t even know it all myself.’ And as she said it, he thought he had never seen anything so beautiful in all the world before, for the breeze caught her long gauzy veil of blue and tossed it across her face so that the eyes seemed gazing at him from a distance, but a distance that had height in it. He felt her above him, beyond him, on this height, a height he must climb before he could know complete possession.

‘By Jove!’ he thought, ‘isn’t it rising just!’ For the Wave was under them tremendously.

April meanwhile had slipped into May, and their daily companionship had become the most natural thing in the world, when the telegram arrived that threatened to interrupt the delightful intercourse. But it was not the telegram Tom expected. Neither Greece nor Egypt claimed his talents yet, for the contracts both at Assouan and Salonica were postponed until the autumn, and the routine of a senior partner’s life in London was to be his immediate fate. He brought her the news at once: they discussed it together in all its details and as intimately as though it affected their joint lives similarly. His first thought was to run and talk it over with her; hers, how the change might influence their intercourse, their present and their future. Their relationship was now established in this solid, natural way. He told her everything as a son might tell his mother: she asked questions, counselled, made suggestions as a woman whose loving care considered his welfare and his happiness before all else.

However, it brought no threatened interruption after all — involved, indeed, less of separation than if he had been called away as they expected: for though he must go to London that same week, she would shortly follow him. ‘And if you go to Egypt in the autumn, Tom,’ — she smiled at the way they influenced the future nearer to the heart’s desire— ‘I may go with you. I could make my arrangements accordingly — take my holiday out there earlier instead of here as usual in the spring.’

The days passed quickly. Her first duty was to return to Warsaw; she would then follow him to London and help him with his flat. No man could choose furniture and carpets and curtains properly. They discussed the details with the enthusiasm of children: she would come up several times a week from her bungalow in Kent and make sure that his wall-papers did not clash with the general scheme. Brown was his colour, he told her, and always had been. It was the dominant shade of her eyes as well. He made her promise to stand in the rooms with her eyes opened very wide so that there could be no mistake, and they laughed over the picture happily.

She came to the train, and although he declared vehemently that he disliked ‘being seen off,’ he was secretly delighted. ‘One says such silly things merely because one feels one must say something. And those silly things remain in the memory out of all proportion to their value.’ But she insisted. ‘Good-byes are always serious to me, Tom. One never knows. I want to see you to the very last minute.’ She had this way of making him feel little things significant with Fate. But another little thing also was in store for him. As the train moved slowly out he noticed some letters in her hand; and one of them was addressed to Warsaw. The name leaped up and stung him — Jaretzka. A spasm of pain shot through him. She was leaving in the morning, he knew.…

‘Write to me from Warsaw,’ he said. ‘Take care! We’re moving!’

‘I’ll write every day, my dearest Tom, my boy. You won’t forget me. I shall see you in a fortnight.’

He let go the little hand he held till the last possible minute. The bells drowned her final words. She stood there waving her hand with the unposted letters in them, till the station pillars intervened and hid her from him.

And this time no ‘silly last things’ had been said that could ‘stay in the memory out of all proportion to their value.’ It was something he had noticed on the envelope that stayed — not the husband’s name, but a word in the address, a peculiar Polish word he happened to know:— ‘Tworki’ — the name of the principal *maison de santé* that stood just outside the city of Warsaw.…

Half an hour, perhaps an hour, he sat smoking in his narrow sleeping compartment, thinking with a kind of intense confusion out of which no order came.… At Pontarlier he had to get out for the Customs formalities. It was midnight. The stars were bright. The keen spring air from the wooded Jura Mountains had a curious effect, for he returned to his carriage feeling sleepy, the throng of pictures drowned into calmness by one master-thought that reduced their confusion into order. He looked back over the past weeks and realised their intensity. He had lived. There was a change in him, the change of growth, development. He loved. There was now a woman who was his entire world, essential to him. He was essential to her too. And the importance of this ousted all lesser things, even the senior partnership. This was the master-thought — that he now lived for her. He was ‘real’ even as she was ‘real,’ each to the other *real*. The Wave had lifted him to a level never reached before. And it was rising still.…

He fell asleep on this, to dream of a mighty stream that swept them together irresistibly towards some climax that he never could quite see. She floated near to save him. She floated down. Her little hands were stretched. It was a gorgeous and stupendous dream — a dream of rising life itself — rising till it would curve and break and fall, and the inevitable thing would happen that would bring her finally into his hungry arms, complete, mother and woman, a spiritual love securely founded on the sweet and wholesome earth.…

CHAPTER XI.

DURING THE BRIEF separation of a fortnight Tom was too busy in London to allow himself much reflection. Absence, once the first keen sense of loss is over, is apt to bring reaction. The self makes an automatic effort to regain the normal life it led before the new emotion dislocated the long-accustomed routine. It tries to run back again along the line of least resistance that habit has made smooth and easy. If the reaction continues to assert its claim, the new emotion is proved thereby a delusion. The test lies there.

In Tom's case, however, the reaction was a feeble reminder merely that he had once lived — without her. It took the form of regret for all the best years of his life he had endured — how, he could not think — without this tender, loving woman at his side. That is, he recognised that his love was real and had changed his outlook fundamentally. He could never do without her from this moment onwards. She equally needed him. He would never leave her.… Further than that, for the present, he did not allow himself to think. Having divined something of her tragedy, he accepted the definite limitations. Speculations concerning another he looked on as beside the point. As far as possible he denied himself the indulgence in them. But another thing he felt as well — the right to claim her, whether he exercised that right or not.

Concerning his relationship with her, however, he did not deny speculation, though somehow this time the perspective was too vast for him to manage quite. There was a strange distance in it: he lost himself in remoteness. In either direction it ran into mists that were interminable, as though veils and curtains lifted endlessly, melting into shadowy reaches beyond that baffled all enquiry. The horizons of his life had grown so huge. This woman had introduced him to a scale of living that he could only gaze at with wondering amazement and delight, too large as yet to conform to the order that his nature sought. He could not properly find himself.

'It feels almost as if I've loved her before like this — yet somehow not enough. That's what I've got to learn,' was the kind of thought that came to him, at odd moments only. The situation seemed so curiously familiar, yet only half familiar. They were certainly made for one another, and the tie between them had this deep touch of the inevitable about it that refused to go. That notion of the soul's advance in a spiral cropped up in his mind again. He saw her both coming nearer and retreating — as a moving figure against high light leaves the spectator uncertain whether it is advancing or retiring. He would have liked to talk to Tony all about it, for Tony would be sympathetic. He wanted a confidant and turned instinctively to his cousin.… *She* already understood more than he did, though perhaps not consciously, and therein lay the secret of her odd elusiveness. Yet, in another sense, his possession was incomplete because a part of her still lay unawakened. 'I must love her more and more and more,' he told himself. But, at the same time, he took it for granted that he was indispensable to her, as she was to him.

These flashes of perception, deeper than anything he had experienced in life hitherto, came occasionally while he waited in London for her return; and though puzzled — his straightforward nature disliked all mystery — he noted them with uncommon interest. Nothing, however, could prevent the rise upwards of the Wave that bore the situation on its breast. The affair swept him onwards; it was not to be checked or hindered. He resigned direction to its elemental tide.

The faint uneasiness, also, recurred from time to time, especially now that he was alone again. He attributed it to the unsatisfied desire in his heart, the knowledge that as yet he had no exclusive possession, and did not really own her; the sense of insecurity unsettled him, the feeling that she was open to capture by any one— 'who understands and appreciates her better than I do,' was the way he phrased it sometimes. He was troubled and uneasy because so much of her lay unresponsive to his touch — not needing him. While he was climbing up to reach her, another, with a stronger claim, might step in — step back — and seize her.

It made him smile a little even while he thought of it, for her truth and constancy were beyond all question. And then, suddenly, he traced the uneasiness to its source. There *was* 'another' who had first claim upon her — who had it once, at any rate. Though at present some cloud obscured and negatived that claim, the cloud might lift, the situation change, the claim become paramount again, as once it surely had been paramount. And, disquieting though the possibility was, Tom was pleased with himself — he was so naïve and simple towards life — for having discerned it clearly. He recognised the risk and thus felt half prepared in advance.… In another way it satisfied him too. With this dream-like suggestion that it all had happened before, he had always felt that a further detail was lacking to complete the scene he half remembered. Something, as yet, was wanting. And this item needed to make the strange repetition of the scene fulfil itself seemed, precisely, the presence of 'another.'

Their intercourse, meanwhile, proved beyond words delightful during the following weeks, when, after her return from Warsaw, she kept her word and helped him in the prosaic business of furnishing his flat and settling down, as in a hundred other details of his daily life as well. All that they did and said together confirmed their dear relationship and established it beyond reproach. There was no question of anything false, illicit, requiring concealment: nothing to hide and no one to evade. In their own minds their innocence was so sure, indeed, that it was not once alluded to between them. It was impossible to look at her and doubt: nor could the most cynical suspect Tom Kelverdon of an undesirable intrigue with the wife of another man. His acquaintance, moreover, were not of the kind that harboured the usual 'worldly' thoughts; he went little into society, whereas the comparatively few Londoners she knew were almost entirely — he discovered it by degrees — people whose welfare in one way or another she had earnestly at heart. It was a marvel to him, indeed, how she never wearied of helping ungrateful folk, for the wish to be of service seemed ingrained in her. Her first thought on making new acquaintances was always what she could do for them, not with money necessarily, but by 'seeing' them in their proper *milieu* and planning to bring about the conditions they needed in order to realise themselves fully. Failure, discontent, unhappiness were due to wrong conditions more than to radical fault in the people themselves; once they 'found themselves,' the rest would follow. It amounted to a genius in her.

It seemed the artist instinct that sought this unselfish end rather than any religious tendency. She felt it ugly to see people at issue with their surroundings. Her religion was humanity, and had no dogmas. Even Tony Winslowe, now in England again, came in for his share of this sweet fashioning energy in her; much to his own bewilderment and to Tom's amusement.…

The summer passed towards early autumn and London emptied, but it made no difference to them. Tom had urgent work to do and was absorbed in it, never forgetting for a moment that he was now a Partner in the Firm. He spent frequent week-ends at Madame Jaretzka's Kentish bungalow, where she had for companion at the moment an Irish cousin who, as Tom easily guessed, was also a dependant. This cousin had been invited with her child, Molly, for the summer holidays, and these summer holidays had run on into three months at least.

A tall, thin, angular woman, of uncertain manners and capricious temperament, Mrs. Haughstone had perhaps lived so long upon another's bounty that she had come to take her good fortune for granted, and permitted herself freely two cardinal indulgences — grumbling and jealousy. Having married unwisely, in order to better herself rather than because she loved, her shiftless husband had disgraced himself with an adventuress governess, leaving her with three children and something below £150 a year. Madame Jaretzka had stepped in to bring them together again: she provided schooling abroad, holidays, doctors, clothes, and all she could devise by way of helping them 'find themselves' again, and so turning their broken lives to good account. With the husband, sly, lazy, devoid of both pride and honesty, she could do little, and she was quite aware that he and his wife put their heads together to increase the flow of 'necessaries' she generously supplied.

It was a sordid, commonplace story, sordidly treated by the soured and vindictive wife, whose eventual aims upon her saviour's purse were too obvious to be mistaken. Even Tom perceived the fact without delay. He also perceived, behind the flattering tongue, an acid and suspicious jealousy that regarded new friends with ill-disguised alarm. Mrs. Haughstone thought of herself and her children before all else. She mistook the impersonal attitude of her benefactress for credulous weakness. A new friend was hostile to her shameless ambitions and disliked accordingly.… Tom scented an enemy the first time he met her. To him she expressed her disapproval of Tony, and *vice versa*, while to her hostess she professed she liked them both— 'but': the 'but' implying that men were selfish and ambitious creatures who thought only of their own advantage.

His country visits, therefore, were not made happier by the presence in the cottage of this woman and her child, but the manner in which the benefactress met the situation justified the respect he had felt first months before. It increased his love and admiration. Madame Jaretzka behaved unusually. That she grasped the position there could be no doubt, but her manner of dealing with it was unique. For when Mrs. Haughstone grumbled, Madame Jaretzka gave her more, and when Mrs. Haughstone yielded to jealousy, Madame Jaretzka smiled and said no word. She won her victories with further generosity.

‘Another face that has to be rescued?’ Tom permitted himself to say once, after an unfortunate scene in which his hostess had been subtly accused of favouritism to another child in the house. He could hardly suppress the annoyance and impatience that he felt.

‘Oh, I never thought about it in that way,’ she answered with her little laugh, quite unruffled by what had happened. ‘The best way is to help them to — see themselves. Then they try to cure themselves.’ She laughed again, as though she had said a childish thing instead of something distinctly wise. ‘I can’t *cure* them,’ she added. ‘I can only help.’

Tom looked at her. ‘Help others to see themselves — as they are,’ he repeated slowly. ‘So that’s how you do it, is it?’ He reflected a moment. ‘That’s being impersonal. You rouse no opposition that way. It’s good.’

‘Is it?’ she replied, as though guiltless of any conscious plan. ‘It seems the natural thing to do.’ Then, as he was evidently preparing for discussion in his honest and laborious way, she stopped him with a look, smiling, sighing, and holding up her little finger warningly. He understood. Analysis and argument she avoided always; they obscured the essential thing; here was the intuitive method of grasping the solution the instant the problem was stated. Detailed examination exhausted her merely. And Tom obeyed that look, that threatening finger. In little things he invariably yielded, while in big things he remained firm, even obstinate, though without realising it.

Her head inclined gracefully, acknowledging her victory. ‘That’s one reason I love you, Tom,’ she told him as reward; ‘you’re a boy on the surface and a man inside.’

Tom saw beauty flash about her as she said it; emotion rose through him in a sudden tumult; he would have seized her, kissed her, crumpled her little self against his heart and held her there, but for the tantalising truth that the thing he wanted would have escaped him in the very act. The loveliness he yearned for, craved, was not open to physical attack; it was a loveliness of the spirit, a bird, a star, a wild flower on some high pinnacle near the snow: to obtain it he must climb to where it soared above the earth — rise up to her.

He laughed and took her little finger in both hands. He felt awkward, big and clumsy, a giant trying to catch an elusive butterfly. 'You turn us all round *that*!' he declared. 'You turn her,' nodding towards the door, 'and me,' kissing the tip quickly, 'and Tony too. Only she and Tony don't know you twiddle them — and I do.'

She let him kiss her hand, but when he drew nearer, trying to set his lips upon the arm her summer dress left bare, she put up her face instead and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Her free hand made a caressing gesture across his neck and shoulder, as she stood on tiptoe to reach him. The mother in her, not the woman, caressed him dearly. It was wonderful; but the surge of mingled emotions clouded something in his brain, and a string of words came tumbling out in a fire of joy and pain. 'You're a queen and a conqueror,' he said, longing to seize her, yet holding himself back strongly. 'Somewhere I'm your helpless slave, but somewhere I'm your master.' The protective sense came up in him. 'It's too delicious! I'm in a dream! Lettice,' he whispered, 'it's my Wave! The Wave is behind it! It's behind us both!'

For an instant she half closed her eyelids in the way she knew both pleased and frightened him. Invariably this gave her the advantage. He felt her above him when she looked like this, he kneeling with hands outstretched, yearning to be raised to where she stood. 'You're a baby, a poet, and a man rolled into a dear big boy,' she said quickly, moving towards the door away from him. 'And now I must go and get my garden hat, for it's time to meet Tony and Moyra at the train, and as you have so much surplus energy to-day we'll walk through the woods instead of going in the motor.' She waved her hand and vanished behind the door. He heard the patter of her feet as she ran upstairs.

He went to the open window, lit his pipe, leaned out with his head among the climbing roses, and thought of many things. Great joy was in him, but behind it, far down where he could not reach it quite, hid a gnawing pain that was obscure uneasiness. Pictures came floating across his mind, rising and falling, sometimes rushing hurriedly; he saw things and faces mixed, his own and hers chief among them. Her little finger pointed to a star. He sighed, he wondered, he half prayed. Would he ever understand, rise to her level, possess her for his very own? She seemed so far beyond him. It was only part of her he touched.

The faces fluttered and looked into his own, one among them an imagined face — the husband's. It was a face with light blue eyes, moreover. He saw Tony's too, frank, laughing, irresponsible, and the face of the Irish girl who was Tony's latest passion. Tony could settle down to no one for long. Tom remembered suddenly his remark at Zakopané months ago, that the bee never sipped the last drop of honey from the flower.… His thoughts tumbled and flew in many directions, yet all at once. Life seemed very full and marvellous; it had never seemed so intense before; it bore him onwards, upwards, forwards, with a rush beyond all possible control and guidance. He acknowledged a rather delicious sense of helplessness. The Wave was everywhere behind and under him. It was sweeping him along.

Then thought returned to Tony and the Irish girl who were coming down for the Sunday, and he smiled to himself as he recalled his cousin's ardent admiration at a theatre party a few nights ago in town. Tony had something that naturally attracted women, dominating them too easily. Was he heartless a little in the business? Would he never, like Tom, settle down with one? His thought passed to the latest capture: there were signs, indeed, that here Tony was caught at last.

For Tom, Tony, and Madame Jaretzka formed an understanding trio, and there were few expeditions, town or country, of which the lively bird-enthusiast did not form an active member. Tony took it all very lightly, unaware of any serious intention behind the pleasant invitations. Tom was amused by it. He looked forward to his cousin's visit now. He was feeling the need of a confidant, and Tony might so admirably fill the rôle. It was curious, a little: Tom often felt that he wanted to confide in Tony, yet somehow or other the confidences were never actually made. There was something in Tony that invited that free, purging confidence which is a need of every human being. It was so easy to tell things, difficult things, to this careless, sympathetic being; yet Tom never passed the frontier into definite revelation. At the last moment he invariably held back.

Thought passed to his hostess, already manœuvring to help Tony ‘find himself.’ It amused Tom, even while he gave his willing assistance; for Tony was of evasive, slippery material, like a fluid that, pressed in one given direction, resists and runs away into several others. ‘He scatters himself too much,’ she remarked, ‘and it’s a pity; there’s waste.’ Tom laughed, thinking of his episodic love affairs. ‘I didn’t mean that,’ she added, smiling with him; ‘I meant generally. He’s full of talent and knowledge. His power over women is natural, but it comes of mere brilliance. If all that were concentrated instead, he would do something real; he might be extraordinarily effective in life. Yes, Tom, I mean it.’ But Tom, though he smiled, agreed with her, feeling rather flattered that she liked his cousin.

‘But he breaks too many hearts,’ he said lightly, thinking of his last conquest, and then added, hardly knowing why he said it, ‘By the by, did you ever notice his hands?’

The way she quickly looked up at him proved that she divined his meaning. But the glance had a flash of something that escaped him.

‘You’re very observant, Tommy,’ she said evasively. It seemed impossible for her to say a disparaging thing of anybody. She invariably picked out and emphasised the best. ‘You don’t admire them?’

‘Do *you*, Lettice?’

She paused for an imperceptible second, then smiled. ‘I rather like big rough hands in a man — perhaps,’ she said without any particular interest, ‘though — in a way — they frighten me sometimes. Tony’s are ugly, but there’s power in them.’ And she placed her own small gloved hand upon his arm. ‘He’s rather irresponsible, I know,’ she added gently, ‘but he’ll grow out of that in time. He’s beginning to improve already.’

‘You see, he’s got no mother,’ Tom observed.

‘No wife either — yet,’ she added with a laugh.

‘Or work,’ put in Tom, with a touch of self-praise, and thinking of his own position in the world. Her interest in Tony had the effect of making himself seem worthier, more important. This fine woman, who judged people from so high a standpoint, had picked out — himself! He had an absurd yet delightful feeling as though Tony was their child, and the perfectly natural way she took him under her mothering wing stirred an admiring pity in him.

Then as they walked together through the fragrant pine-woods to the station, an incident at a recent theatre party rose before his memory. Tony and his Amanda had been with them. The incident in question had left a singular impression on his mind, though why it emerged now, as they wandered through the quiet wood, he could not tell. It had occurred a week or two ago. He now saw it again — in a tenth of the time it takes to tell.

The scene was laid in ancient Egypt, and while the play was commonplace, the elaborate production — scenery, dresses, atmosphere — was good. But Tom, unable to feel interest in the trivial and badly acted story, had felt interest in another thing he could not name. There was a subtle charm, a delicate glamour about it as of immensely old romance, but some lost romance of very far away. Yet, whether this charm was due to the stage effects or to themselves, sitting there in the stalls together, escaped him. For in some singular way the party, his hostess certainly, seemed to interpenetrate the play itself. She, above all, and Tony vaguely, seemed inseparable from what he gazed at, heard, and felt.

Continually he caught himself thinking how delightful it was to know himself next to Madame Jaretzka, so close that he shared her atmosphere, her perfume, touched her even; that their minds were engaged intimately together watching the same scene; and also, that on her other side, sat Tony, affectionate, whimsical, fascinating Tony, whom they were trying to help ‘find himself’; and that he, again, was next to a girl he liked. The harmonious feeling of the four was pleasurable to Tom. He felt himself, moreover, an important and indispensable item in its composition. It was vague; he did not attempt to analyse it as self-flattery, as vanity, as pride — he was aware, merely, that he felt very pleased with himself and so with everybody else. It was gratifying to sit at the head of the group; everybody could see how beautiful *she* was; the dream of exclusive ownership stole over him more definitely than ever before. ‘She’s chosen *me*! She needs me — a woman like that!’

The audience, the lights, the colour, the music influenced him. It seemed he caught something from the crude human passion that was being ranted on the stage and transferred it unconsciously into his relations with the party he belonged to, but, above all, into his relationship with her — and with another. But he refused to let his mind dwell upon that other. He found himself thinking instead of the divine tenderness that was in her, yet at the same time of her elusiveness and the curious pain it caused him. Whence came, he wondered, the sweet and cruel flavour? It seemed like a memory of something suffered long ago, the sweetness in it true and exquisite, the cruelty an error on his own part somehow. The old hint of uneasiness, the strange, rich pain he had known in boyhood, stole faintly over him; its first and immediate effect heightening the sense of dim, old-world romance already present.…

And he had turned cautiously to look at her. She was leaning forward a little as though the play absorbed her, and the attitude startled him. It caused him almost a definite shock. The face had pain in it.

She was not aware that he stared; her attention was fastened upon the stage; but the eyes were fixed, the little mouth was fixed as well, the lips compressed; and all her features wore this expression of curious pain. There was sternness in them, something almost hard. He watched her for some minutes, surprised and fascinated. It came over him that he almost knew what that was in her mind. Another moment and he would discover it — when, past her profile, he caught his cousin’s eyes peering across at him. Tony had felt the direction of his glance and had looked round: and Tony — mischievously — winked!

The spell was broken. In that instant, however, through the heated air of the crowded stalls already weighted with sickly artificial perfumes, there reached him faintly, as from very far away, another and a subtler perfume, something of elusive fragrance in it. It was very poignant, instinct as with forgotten associations. It was the Whiff. It came, it went; but it was unmistakable. And he connected it, as by some instantaneous certitude, with the play — with Egypt.

‘What do you think of it, Lettice?’ he had whispered, nodding towards the stage.

She turned with a start. She came back. The expression of pain flashed instantly away. She had evidently not been thinking of the performance. ‘It’s not much, Tom, is it? But I like the scenery. It makes me feel strange somewhere — the change that comes over me in Egypt. We’ll be there together — some day.’ She leaned over with her lips against his ear.

And there was significance in the commonplace words, he thought — a significance her whisper did not realise, and certainly did not intend.

‘All three of us,’ he rejoined before he knew what he meant exactly.

And she nodded hurriedly. Either she agreed, or else she had not heard him. He did not insist, he did not repeat, he sat there wondering why on earth he said the thing. A touch of pain pricked him like an insect’s sting, but a pain he could not account for. His blood, at the same time, leaped as she bent her face so near to his own. He felt his heart swell as he looked into her eyes. Her beauty astonished him; in this twilight of the theatre it glowed and burned like a veiled star. He fancied — it was the trick of the half-light, of course — she had grown darker and that a dusky flush lay on her cheeks.

‘What were you thinking about?’ he whispered lower again, changing the sentence slightly. And, as he asked it, he saw Tony still watching him, two seats away. It annoyed him; he drew his head back a little so that her face concealed him.

‘I don’t know,’ she whispered back; ‘nothing in particular.’ She put her gloved hand stealthily towards him and touched his knee. The gesture, he felt, was intended to supplement the words. For the first time in his life he did not quite believe her. The thought was odious, but not to be denied. It merely flashed across him, however. He forgot it instantly.

‘Seems oddly familiar somehow,’ he said, ‘doesn’t it?’

Again she nodded, smiling, as she gazed for a moment first into one eye, then into the other, then turned away to watch the stage. And abruptly, as she did so, the entire feeling vanished, the mood evaporated, her expression was normal once more, and he fixed his attention on the stupid play.

He turned his interest into other channels; he would take his party on to supper. He did so. Yet an impression remained — the impression that the Wave had come nearer, higher, that it was rising and gaining impetus, accumulating mass, momentum, power. The gay supper could not dissipate that, nor could the happy ten minutes in a taxi, when he drove her to her door, decrease or weaken it. She was very tired. They spoke little, he remembered; she gave him a gentle touch as the cab drew up, and the few things she said had entirely to do with his comfort in his flat. He felt in that touch and in those tender questions the mother only. The woman, it suddenly occurred to him, had gone elsewhere. He had never had it, never even claimed it. A deep sense of loneliness touched him for a moment. His heart beat rapidly. He dreamed.…

Why the scene came back to him now as they walked slowly through the summery pine-wood he knew not. He caught himself thinking vividly of Egypt suddenly, of being in Egypt with her — and with another. But on that other he refused to let thought linger. Of set purpose he chose Tony in that other's place. He saw it in a picture: he and she together helping Tony, she and Tony equally helping him. It passed before him merely, a glowing coloured picture set in high light against the heavy background of these English fir-woods and the Kentish sky. Whether it came towards him or retreated, he could not say. It was very brief, instantaneous almost. The memory of the play, with its numerous attendant correlations, rose up, then vanished.

'Give me your arm, Tom, you mighty giant: these pine-needles are so slippery.' He felt her hand creep in and rest upon his muscles, and a glow of boyish pride came with it. In her summer dress of white, her big garden hat and flowing violet veil, she looked adorable. He liked the long white gauntlet gloves. The shadows of the trees became her well: against the thick dark trunks she seemed slim and dainty as a flower that the breeze bent over towards him. 'You're so horribly big and strong,' she said, and her eyes, full of expression, glanced up at him. He watched her little feet in the neat white shoes peep out in turn as they walked along; her fingers pressed his arm. He tried to take her parasol, but she prevented him, saying it was her only weapon of defence against a giant, 'and there *is* a giant in this forest, though only a baby one perhaps!' He felt the mother in her pour over him in a flood of tenderness that blessed and soothed and comforted. It was as if a divine and healing power streamed from her into him.

‘And what *were* you thinking about, Tom?’ she enquired teasingly. ‘You haven’t said a word for a whole five minutes!’

‘I was thinking of Egypt,’ he answered with truth.

She looked up quickly.

‘I’m to go out in December,’ he went on. ‘I told you. It was decided at our last Board Meeting.’

She said she remembered. ‘But it’s funny,’ she added, ‘because I was thinking of Egypt too just then — thinking of the Nile, my river with the floating faces.’

The week-end visit was typical of many others; Mrs. Haughstone, seeing safety in numbers possibly, was pleasant on the surface, Molly deflecting most of her poisoned darts towards herself; while Tom and Tony shared the society of their unconventional hostess with boyish enjoyment. Tom modified the air of ownership he indulged when alone with her, and no one need have noticed that there was anything more between them than a hearty, understanding friendship. Tony, for instance, may have guessed the true situation, or, again, he may not; for he said no word, nor showed the smallest hint by word, by gesture, or by silence — most significant betrayal of all — that he was aware of any special tie. Though a keen observer, he gave no sign. ‘She’s an interesting woman, Tom,’ he remarked lightly yet with enthusiasm once, ‘and a rare good hostess — a woman in a thousand, I declare. We make a famous trio. As you’ve got that Assouan job we’ll have some fun next winter in Egypt, eh?’

And Tom, pleased and secretly flattered by the admiration, tried to make his confidences. Unless Tony had liked her this would have been impossible. But they formed such a natural, happy trio together, giving the lie to the hoary proverb, that Tom felt it was permissible to speak of her to his sympathetic cousin. Already they had laughingly discussed the half-forgotten acquaintanceship begun in the *dahabieh* on the Nile, Tony making a neat apology by declaring to her, ‘Beautiful women blind me so, Madame

Jaretzka, that I invariably forget all lesser details. And that's why I told Tom you were a Russian.'

On this particular occasion, too, it was made easier because Tony had asked his cousin's opinion about the Irish girl, invited for his special benefit. 'I was never so disappointed in my life,' he said in his convincing yet airy way. 'She looked so wonderful the other night. It was the evening dress, I suppose. You should always see a girl first in the daytime; the daylight self is the real self.' And Tom, amused by the irresponsible attitude towards the sex, replied that the right woman looked herself in any dress because it was as much a part of her as her own skin. 'Yes,' said Tony, 'it's the thing inside the skin that counts, of course; you're right; the rest is only a passing glamour. But friendship with a woman is the best of all, for friendship grows insensibly into the best kind of love. It's a delightful feeling,' he added sympathetically, 'that kind of friendship. Independent of what they wear!'

He enjoyed his pun and laughed. 'I say, Tom,' he went on suddenly with a certain inconsequence, 'have you ever met the Prince — Madame Jaretzka's husband — by the way? I wonder what he's like.' He looked up carelessly and raised his eyebrows.

'No,' replied Tom in a quiet tone, 'but I — exp — hope to some day.'

'I think he ran away and left her, or something,' continued the other. 'He's dead, anyhow, to all intents and purposes. But I've been wondering lately. I'll be bound there was ill-treatment. She looks so sad sometimes. The other night at the theatre I was watching her — —'

'That Egyptian play?' broke in Tom.

'Yes; it was bad enough to make any one look sad, wasn't it? But it was curious all the same — —'

'I didn't mean the badness.'

'Nor did I. It was odd. There was atmosphere in spite of everything.'

'I thought you were too occupied to notice the performance,' Tom hinted.

Tony laughed good-naturedly. 'I was a bit taken up, I admit,' he said. 'But there was something curious all the same. I kept seeing you and our hostess on the stage — —'

‘In Egypt!’

‘In a way, yes.’ He hesitated.

‘Odd,’ said his cousin briefly.

‘Very. It seemed — there was some one else who ought to have been there as well as you two. Only he never came on.’

Tom made no comment. Was this thought-transference, he wondered?

The natural sympathy between them furnished the requisite conditions certainly.

‘He never came on,’ continued Tony, ‘and I had the queer feeling that he was being kept off on purpose, that he was busy with something else, but that the moment he came on the play would get good and interesting — real. Something would happen. And it was then I noticed Madame Jaretzka — —’

‘And me, too, I suppose,’ Tom put in, half amused, half serious. There was an excited yet uneasy feeling in him.

‘Chiefly her, I think. And she looked so sad, — it struck me suddenly. D’you know, Tom,’ he went on more earnestly, ‘it was really quite curious. I got the feeling that we three were watching that play together from above it somewhere, looking down on it — sort of from a height above — —’

‘Above,’ exclaimed his cousin. There was surprise in him — surprise at himself. That faint uneasiness increased. He realised that to confide in Tony was impossible. But why?

‘H’m,’ Tony went on in a reflective way as if half to himself. ‘I may have seen it before and forgotten it.’ Then he looked up at his cousin. ‘And what’s more — that we three, as we watched it, knew the same thing together — knew that we were waiting for another chap to come on, and that when he came the silly piece would turn suddenly interesting, dramatic in a true sense, only tragedy instead of comedy. Did *you*, Tom?’ he asked abruptly, screwing up his eyes and looking quite serious a moment.

Tom had no answer ready, but his cousin left no time for answering.

‘And the fact is,’ he continued, lowering his voice, ‘I had the feeling the other chap we were waiting for was *him*.’

Tom was too interested to smile at the grammar. ‘You mean — her husband?’ he said quietly. He did not like the turn the talk had taken; it pleased him to talk of her, but he disliked to bring the absent husband in. There was trouble in him as he listened.

‘Possibly it was,’ he added a trifle stiffly. Then, ashamed of his feeling towards his imaginative cousin, he changed his manner quickly. He went up and stood behind him by the open window. ‘Tony, old boy, we’re together somehow in this thing,’ he began impulsively; ‘I’m sure of it.’ Then the words stuck. ‘If ever I want your help — —’

‘Rather, Tom,’ said the other with enthusiasm, yet puzzled, turning with an earnest expression in his frank blue eyes. In another moment, like two boys swearing eternal friendship, they would have shaken hands. Tom again felt the impulse to make the confidences that desire for sympathy prompted, and again realised that it was difficult, yet that he would accomplish it. Indeed, he was on the point of doing so, relieving his mind of the childhood story, the accumulated details of Wave and Whiff and Sound and Eyes, the singular Montreux meeting, the strange medley of joy and uneasiness as well, all in fact without reserve — when a voice from the lawn came floating into the room and broke the spell. It lifted him sharply to another plane. He felt glad suddenly that he had not spoken — afterwards, he felt very glad. It was not right in regard to her, he realised.

‘You’re never ready, you boys,’ their hostess was saying, ‘and Miss Monnigan declares that men always wait to be fetched. The lunch-baskets are all in, and the motor’s waiting.’

‘We didn’t want to be in the way,’ cried Tony gaily, ever ready with an answer first. ‘We’re both so big and clumsy. But we’ll make the fire in the woods and do the work that requires mere strength without skill all right.’ He leaped out of the window to join them, while Tom went by the door to fetch his cap and overcoat. Turning an instant he saw the three figures on the lawn standing in the sunlight, Madame Jaretzka with a loose, rough motor-coat over her white dress, a rose at her throat and the long blue veil he loved wound round her hair and face. He saw her eyes look up at Tony and heard her chiding him. ‘You’ve been talking mischief in there together,’ she was saying laughingly, giving him a searching glance in play, though the tone had meaning in it. ‘We were talking of you,’ swore Tony, ‘and you,’ he added, turning by way of polite after-thought to the girl. And one of his big hands he laid for a moment upon Madame Jaretzka’s arm.

Tom turned sharply and hurried on into the hall. The first thought in his mind was how tender and gentle Madame Jaretzka looked standing in the sunshine, her eyes turned up at Tony. His second thought was vaguer: he felt glad that Tony admired and liked her so. The third was vaguer still: Tony didn’t really care for the girl a bit and was only amusing himself with her, but Madame Jaretzka would protect her and see that no harm came of it. She could protect the whole world. That was her genius.

In a moment these three thoughts flashed through him, but while the last two vanished as quickly as they came, the first lingered like sunlight in him. It remained and grew and filled his heart, and all that day it kept close by him — her love, her comfort, her mothering compassion.

And Tom felt glad for some reason that his confidences to Tony after all had been interrupted and prevented. They remained thus interrupted and prevented until the end, even when the ‘other’ came upon the scene, and above all while that ‘other’ stayed. It all seemed curiously inevitable.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST FEW weeks of September they were much alone together, for Mrs. Haughstone had gone back to her husband's tiny house at Kew, Molly to the Dresden school, and Tony somewhere into space — northern Russia, he said, to watch the birds beginning to leave.

Meanwhile, with deepening of friendship, and experiences whose ordinariness was raised into significance because this woman shared them with him, Tom saw the summer fade in England and usher in the longer evenings. Light and heat waned from the sighing year; winds, charged with the memory of roses, took the paling skies; the swallows whispered together of the southern tour. New stars swam into their autumnal places, and the Milky Way came majestically to its own. He watched the curve of it on moonless nights, pouring its grand river across the heavens. And in the heart of its soft brilliance he saw Cygnus, cruciform and shining, immersed in the white foam of the arching wave.

He noticed these things now, as once long ago in early boyhood, because a time of separation was at hand. His yearning now was akin to his yearning then — it left a chasm in his soul that beauty alone could help to fill. At fifteen he was thirty-five, as now at thirty-five he was fifteen again.

Lettice was not, indeed, at a Finishing School across the Channel, but she was shortly going to Warsaw to spend October with her husband, and in November she was to sail for Egypt from Trieste. Tom was to follow in December, so a separation of three months was close at hand. 'But a necessary separation,' she said one evening as they motored home beneath the stars, 'is always bearable and strengthening; we shall both be occupied with things that must — I mean, things we ought to do. It's the needless separations that are hard to bear.' He replied that it would be wonderful meeting again and pretending they were strangers. He tried to share her mood, her point of view with honesty. 'Yes,' she answered, 'only that wouldn't be quite true, because you and I can never be separated — really. The curve of the earth may hide us from each other's sight like that,' — and she pointed to the sinking moon— 'but we feel the pull just the same.'

They leaned back among the cushions, sharing the mysterious beauty of the night-sky in their hearts. They lowered their voices as though the hush upon the world demanded it. The little things they said seemed suddenly to possess a significance they could not account for quite and yet admitted.

He told her that the Milky Way was at its best these coming months, and that Cygnus would be always visible on clear nights. ‘We’ll look at that and remember,’ he said half playfully. ‘The astronomers say the Milky Way is the very ground-plan of the Universe. So we all come out of it. And you’re Cygnus.’ She called him sentimental, and he admitted that perhaps he was. ‘I don’t like this separation,’ he said bluntly. In his mind he was thinking that the Milky Way had his wave in it, and that its wondrous arch, like his life and hers, rose out of the ‘sea’ below the world. In that sea no separation was possible.

‘But it’s not that that makes you suddenly poetic, Tom. It’s something else.’

‘Is it?’ he answered. A whisper of pain went past him across the night. He felt something coming; he was convinced she felt it too. But he could not name it.

‘The Milky Way is a stream as well as a wave. You say it rises in the autumn —— ?’ She leaned nearer to him a little.

‘But it’s seen at its best a little later — in the winter, I believe.’

‘We shall be in Egypt then,’ she mentioned. He could have sworn she would say those very words.

‘Egypt,’ he repeated slowly. ‘Yes — in Egypt.’

And a little shiver came over him, so slight, so quickly gone again, that he hoped it was imperceptible. Yet she had noticed it.

‘Why, Tom, don’t you like the idea?’

‘I wonder—’ he began, then changed the sentence— ‘I wonder what it will be like. I have a curious desire to see it — I know that.’

He heard her laugh under her breath a little. What came over them both in that moment he couldn’t say. There was a sense of tumult in him somewhere, a hint of pain, of menace too. Her laughter, slight as it was, jarred upon him. She was not feeling quite what he felt — this flashed, then vanished.

‘You don’t sound enthusiastic,’ she said calmly.

‘I am, though. Only — I had a feeling — —’ He broke off. The truth was he couldn’t describe that feeling even to himself.

‘Tom, dear, my dear one—’ she began, then stopped. She also stopped an impulsive movement towards him. She drew back her sentence and her arms. And Tom, aware of a rising passion in him he might be unable to control, turned his face away a moment. Something clutched at his heart as with cruel pincers. A chill followed close upon the shiver. He felt a moment of keen shame, yet knew not exactly why he felt it.

‘I am a sentimental ass!’ he exclaimed abruptly with a natural laugh. His voice was tender. He turned again to her. ‘I believe I’ve never properly grown up.’ And before he could restrain himself he drew her towards him, seized her hand and kissed it like a boy. It was that kiss, combined with her blocked sentence and uncompleted gesture, rather than any more passionate expression of their love for one another, that he remembered throughout the empty months to follow.

But there was another reason, too, why he remembered it. For she wore a silk dress, and the arm against his ear produced a momentary rustling that brought back the noise in the Zakopané bedroom when the frozen branch had scraped the outside wall. And with the Sound, absent now so long, the old strange uneasiness revived acutely. For that caressing gesture, that kiss, that phrase of love that blocked its own final utterance brought back the strange rich pain.

In the act of giving them, even while he felt her touch and held her within his arms — she evaded him and went far away into another place where he could not follow her. And he knew for the first time a singular emotion that seemed like a faint, distant jealousy that stirred in him, yet a spiritual jealousy… as of some one he had never even seen.

They lingered a moment in the garden to enjoy the quiet stars and see the moon go down below the pine-wood. The tense mood of half an hour ago in the motor-car had evaporated of its own accord apparently.

A conversation that followed emphasised this elusive emotion in him, because it somehow increased the remoteness of the part of her he could not claim. She mentioned that she was taking Mrs. Haughstone with her to Egypt in November; it again exasperated him; such unselfishness he could not understand. The invitation came, moreover, upon what Tom felt was a climax of shameless behaviour. For Madame Jaretzka had helped the family with money that, to save their pride, was to be considered lent. The husband had written gushing letters of thanks and promises that — Tom had seen these letters — could hardly have deceived a schoolgirl. Yet a recent legacy, which rendered a part repayment possible, had been purposely concealed, with the result that yet more money had been 'lent' to tide them over non-existent or invented difficulties.

And now, on the top of this, Madame Jaretzka not only refused to divulge that the legacy was known to her, but even proposed an expensive two months' holiday to the woman who was tricking her.

Tom objected strongly for two reasons; he thought it foolish kindness, and he did not want her.

'You're too good to the woman, far too good,' he said. But his annoyance was only increased by the firmness of the attitude that met him. 'No, Tom; you're wrong. They'll find out in time that I know, and see themselves as they are.'

'You forgive everything to everybody,' he observed critically. 'It's too much.'

She turned round upon him. Her attitude was a rebuke, and feeling rebuked he did not like it. For though she did not quote 'until seventy times seven,' she lived it.

'When she sees herself sly and treacherous like that, she'll understand,' came the answer, 'she'll get her own forgiveness.'

'Her own forgiveness!'

'The only real kind. If I forgive, it doesn't alter her. But if she understands and feels shame and makes up her mind not to repeat — that's forgiving herself. She really changes then.'

Tom gasped inwardly. This was a level of behaviour where he found the air somewhat rarified. He saw the truth of it, but had no answer ready.

‘Remorse and regret,’ she went on, ‘only make one ineffective in the present. It’s looking backwards, instead of looking forwards.’

He felt something very big in her as she said it, holding his eyes firmly with her own. To have the love of such a woman was, indeed, a joy and wonder. It was a keen happiness to feel that he, Tom Kelverdon, had obtained it. His admiration for himself, and his deep, admiring love for her rose side by side. He did not recognise the flattery of self in this attitude. The simplicity in her baffled him.

‘I could forgive *you* anything, Lettice!’ he cried.

‘Could you?’ she said gently. ‘If so, you really love me.’

It was not the doubt in her voice that overwhelmed him then; she never indulged in hints. It was a doubt in himself, not that he loved her, but that his love was not yet big enough, unselfish enough, sufficiently large and deep to be worthy of this exquisite soul beside him. Perhaps it was realising he could not yet possess her spirit that made him seize the precious little body that contained it. Nothing could stop him. He took her in his arms and held her till she became breathless. The passionate moment expressed real spiritual yearning. And she knew it. She did not struggle, yet neither did she respond. They stood upon different levels somehow.

‘There’ll be nothing left to love,’ she gasped, ‘if you do that often!’ She released herself quietly, tidying her hair and putting her hat straight while she smiled at him. Her dark veil had caught in his tie-pin. She disentangled it, her hands touching his mouth as she did so. He kissed them gently, bending his head down with an air of repentance.

‘My God, Lettice — you’re precious to me!’ he stammered.

But even as he said it, even while he still felt her soft cheeks against his lips, her frail unresisting figure within his arms, there came this pang of sudden pain that was so acute it frightened him. There was something impersonal in her attitude that alarmed him. What was it? He was helpless to understand it. The excitement in his blood obscured inner perception.… Such tempestuous moments were rare enough between them, and when they came he felt that she endured them rather than responded. He was aware of a touch of shame in himself. But this pain —— ? Even while he held her it seemed again that she escaped him because of the heights she lived on, yet partly, too, because of the innocence which had not yet eaten of the tree of knowledge.… Was that, then, the lack in her? Had she yet to learn that the spiritual dare not be divorced wholly from the physical and that the divine blending of the two in purity of heart alone brings safety?

She slipped from his encircling arms and — rose. He struggled after her. But that air he could not breathe. She was too far above him. She had to stoop to meet the passionate man in him that sought to seize and hold her. She had — the earlier phrase returned — come back to fetch him. He did not really love yet as he ought to love. He loved himself — in her; selfishly somehow, somewhere. But this thought he did not capture wholly. It cast a shadow merely and was gone.

Somewhere, too, there was jealous resentment in him. He could not feel himself indispensable to a woman who occupied a pinnacle.

His cocksureness wavered a little before the sharp attack. Pang after pang stung him shrewdly, stung his pride, his confidence, his vanity, shaking the platform on which he stood till each separate plank trembled and the sense of security grew less.

But the confusion in his heart and mind bewildered him. It was all so strange and incomprehensible; he could not understand it. He knew she was true and loyal, her purity beyond reproach, her elusiveness not calculated or intended, yet that somewhere, somehow she could do without him, and that if he left her she — almost — would have neither remorse nor regret. She would just accept it and — forgive.…

And he thought suddenly with an intense bitterness that amazed him — of the husband. The thought of that ‘other’ who had yet to come afflicted him desperately. When he met those light-blue eyes of the Wave he would surely know them…! He felt again the desire to seek counsel and advice from another, some one of his own sex, a sympathetic and understanding soul like Tony.

The turmoil in him was beyond elucidation: thoughts and emotions of nameless kind combined to produce a fluid state of insecurity he could not explain. As usual, however, there emerged finally the solid fact which seemed now the keynote of his character; at least, he invariably fell back upon it for support against these occasional storms: ‘She has singled me out; she can’t really do without me; we’re necessary to each other; I’m safe.’ The rest he dismissed as half realised only and therefore not quite real. His position with her was unique, of course, something the world could not possibly understand, and, while resenting what he called the ‘impersonal’ attitude in her, he yet knew that it was precisely this impersonal attitude that justified their love. Their love, in fine, was proved spiritual thereby. They were in the ‘sea’ together. Invariably in the end he blamed himself.

The rising Wave, it seemed, was bringing up from day to day new, unexpected qualities from the depths within him, just as it brings up mud and gravel from the ground-bed of the shore. He felt it driving him forward with increasing speed and power. With an irresistible momentum that left him helpless, it was hurrying him along towards the moment when it would lower its crest again towards the earth — and break.

He knew now where the smothering crash would come, where he would finally meet the singular details of his boyhood’s premonition face to face, — the Sound, the Whiff, the other pair of Eyes. They awaited him — in Egypt. In Egypt, at last, he would find the entire series, recognise each item. He would also discover the nature of the wave that was neither of water nor of snow.…

Yet, strange to say, when he actually met the pair of light-blue eyes, he did not recognise them. He encountered the face to which they belonged, but was not warned. While fulfilling its prophecy, the premonition failed, of course, to operate.

For premonitions are a delicate matter, losing their power in the act of justifying themselves. To prevent their fulfilment were to stultify their existence. Between a spiritual warning and its material consummation there is but a friable and gossamer alliance. Had he recognised, he might possibly have prevented; whereas the deeper part of him unconsciously invited and said, Come.

And so, not recognising the arrival of the other pair of eyes, Tom, when he met them, knew himself attracted instead of repelled. Far from being warned, he knew himself drawn towards their owner by natural sympathy, as towards some one whose deep intrusion into his inner life was necessary to its fuller realisation — the tumultuous breaking of the rapidly accumulating Wave.

PART III

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WEEKS THAT followed seemed both brief and long to Tom. The separation he felt keenly, though as a breathing spell the interval was even welcome in a measure. Since the days at Montreux he had been living intensely, swept along by a movement he could not control: now he could pause and think a moment. He tried to get the bird's-eye view in which alone details are seen in their accurate relations and proportions. There was much that perplexed his plain, straightforward nature. But the more he thought, the more puzzled he became, and in the end he resigned himself happily to the great flow of life that was sweeping him along. He was distinctly conscious of being 'swept along.' What was going to happen would happen. He wondered, watched and waited. The idea of Egypt, meanwhile, thrilled him with a curious anticipation each time he thought of it. And he thought of it a good deal.

He received letters from Warsaw, but they told nothing of her life there: she referred vaguely to duties whose afflicting nature he half guessed now; and the rest was filled with loving solicitude for his welfare. Even through the post she mothered him absurdly. He felt his life now based upon her. Her love was indispensable to him.

The last letters — from Vienna and Trieste — were full of a tenderness most comforting, and he felt relief that she had 'finished with Warsaw,' as he put it. His own last letter was timed to catch her steamer. 'You have all my love,' he wrote, 'but you can give what you can spare to Tony, as he's in Egypt by now, and tell him I shall be out a month from to-day. Everything goes well here. I'm to have full charge of the work at Assouan. The Firm has put everything in my hands, but there won't be much to do at first, and I shall be with you at Luxor a great deal. I'm looking forward to Egypt too — immensely. I believe all sorts of wonderful things are going to happen to us there.'

He was very pleased with himself, and very pleased with her, and very pleased with everything. The wave of his life was rising still triumphantly.

He kept her Warsaw letters and reread them frequently. She wrote admirably. Mrs. Haughstone, it seemed, complained about everything, from the cabin and hotel room ‘which, she declares, are never so good as my own,’ to her position as an invited guest, ‘which she accepts as though she favoured me by coming, thinking herself both chaperone and indispensable companion. How little some people realise that no one is ever really indispensable!’ And the first letter from Egypt told him to come out quickly and ‘help me keep her in her place, as only a man can do. Tony wonders why you’re so long about it.’ It pleased him very much, and as the time approached for leaving, his spirits rose; indeed, he reached Marseilles much in the mood of a happy, confident boy who has passed all exams, and is off upon a holiday most thoroughly deserved.

There had been time for three or four letters from Luxor, and he read them in the train as he hurried along from Geneva towards the south, leaving the snowy Jura hills behind him. ‘Those are the blue mountains we watched from Montreux together in the spring,’ he said to himself, looking out of the window. ‘Soon, in Egypt, we shall watch the Desert and the Nile instead.’ And, remembering that dream-like, happy time of their earliest acquaintance, his heart beat in delighted anticipation. He could think of nothing else but her. Those Montreux days seemed years ago instead of a brief six months. What a lot he had to tell her, how much they would have to talk about. Life, indeed, was rich and full. He was a lucky man; yet — he deserved it all. Belief and confidence in himself increased. He gazed out of the window, thinking happily as the scenery rushed by.… Then he came back to the letters and read them over yet once again; he almost knew them now by heart; he opened his bag and read the Warsaw letters too. Then, putting them all away, he lay back in his corner and tried to sleep. The express train seemed so slow, but the steamer would seem slower still.… Thoughts and memories passed idly through his brain, grew mingled and confused; his eyes were closed; he fell into a doze: he almost slept — when something rose into his drowsy mind and made him suddenly wakeful.

What was it? He didn’t know. It had vanished as soon as it appeared. But the drowsy mood had passed, the desire to sleep was gone. There was impatience in him, the keen wish to be in Egypt — immediately. He cursed the slow means of travel, longed to be out there, on the spot, with her and Tony. Her last letters had been full of descriptions of the place and people, of Tony and his numerous friends, his kindness in introducing her to the most interesting among them, their picnics together on the Nile and in the

Desert, visits to the famous sites of tomb and temple, in particular of an all-night bivouac somewhere and the sunrise over the Theban hills.… Tom, as he read it all, felt this keen impatience to be sharing it with them; he was out of it; oh, how he would enjoy it all when he got there! The words ‘Theban hills’ called up a vivid and stimulating picture in particular.

But it was not this that chased the drowsy mood and made him wakeful. It was the letters themselves, something he had not noticed hitherto, something that had escaped him as he first read them one by one. Indefinable, it hid between the lines. Only on reading the series as a whole was it noticeable at all. He wondered. He asked himself vague questions.

Opening his bag again, he went through the letters in the order of their arrival; then put them back inside the elastic ring with a sensation of relief and a happy sigh. He had discovered the faint, elusive impression that had made him wakeful, but in discovering it had satisfied himself that it was imagination — caused by the increasing impatience of his impetuous heart. For it had seemed to him that he was aware of a change, though so slight as to be scarcely perceptible, and certainly not traceable to actual words or sentences. It struck him that the Warsaw letters felt the separation more keenly, more poignantly, than the Egyptian letters. This seemed due rather to omissions in the latter than to anything else that he could name, for while the Warsaw letters spoke frequently of the separation, of her longing to see him close, those from Luxor omitted all such phrases. There were pleas in plenty for his health, his comfort, his welfare and success — the Mother found full scope — but no direct expression of her need for him. This, briefly, was the notion he had caught faintly from ‘between the lines.’

But, having run it to earth, he easily explained it too. At Warsaw she was unhappy; whereas now, in Egypt, their reunion was almost within sight: she felt happier, too, her unpleasant duties over. It was all natural enough. ‘What a sentimental donkey a man is when he’s in love!’ he exclaimed with a self-indulgent smile of pleased forgiveness; ‘but the fact is — when she’s not by me to explain — I could imagine anything!’ And he fell at length into the doze his excited fancy had postponed.

After leaving Marseilles his impatience grew with the slowness of the steamer. The voyage of four days seemed interminable. The sea and sky took on a deeper blue, the air turned softer, the sweetness of the south became more marked. His exhilaration increased with every hour, the desire to reach his destination increasing with it. There was an intensity about his feelings he could not entirely account for. The longing to see Egypt merged with the longing to see Lettice. But the two were separate. The latter was impatient happiness, while the former struck a slower note — respect and wonder that contained a hint of awe.

Somewhere in this anticipatory excitement, too, hid drama. And his first glimpse of the marvellous old land did prove dramatic in a sense. For when a passenger drew his attention to the white Alexandrian harbour floating on the shining blue, he caught his breath a moment and his heart gave a sudden unexpected leap. He saw the low-lying coast, a palm, a mosque, a minaret; he saw the sandy lip of — Africa.

That shimmering line of blue and gold was Egypt.… He had known it would look exactly thus, as he now saw it. The same instant his heart contracted a little.… He leaned motionless upon the rail and watched the coast-line coming nearer, ever nearer. It rose out of the burning haze of blue and gold that hung motionless between the water and the air. Bathed in the drenching sunlight, the fringe of the great thirsty Desert seemed to drink the sea.…

His entry was accompanied by mingled emotions and sensations. That Lettice stood waiting for him somewhere behind the blaze of light contributed much; yet the thrill owned a more complex origin, it seemed. To any one not entirely callous to the stab of strange romance and stranger beauty, the first sight of Egypt must always be an event, and Tom, by no means thus insensitive, felt it vividly. He was aware of something not wholly unfamiliar. The invitation was so strong, it seemed to entice as with an attraction that was almost summons. As the ship drew nearer, and thoughts of landing filled his mind, he felt no opposition, no resistance, no difficulty, as with other countries. There was no hint of friction anywhere. He seemed instantly at home. Egypt not merely enticed — she pulled him in.

‘Here I am at last!’ whispered a voice, as he watched the noisy throng of Arabs, Nubians, Soudanese upon the crowded wharf. He delighted in the colour, the gleaming eyes, bronze skins, the white caftans with their red and yellow sashes. The phantasmal amber light that filled the huge, still heavens lit something similar in his mind and thoughts. Only the train, with its luxurious restaurant car, its shutters to keep out the dust and heat, appeared incongruous. He lost the power to think this or that. He could only feel, and feel intensely. His feet touched Egypt, and a deep glow of inner happiness possessed him. He was not disappointed anywhere, though as yet he had seen nothing but a steamer quay. Then he sent a telegram to Lettice: ‘Arrived safely. Reach Luxor eight o’clock to-morrow morning.’; and, having slid through the Delta country with the flaming sunset, he had his first glimpse of the lordly Pyramids as the train drew into Cairo. Dim and immense he saw them across the swift-falling dusk, shadowy as forgotten centuries that cannot die. Though too distant to feel their menace, he yet knew them towering over him, mysterious, colossal, unintelligible, the sentinels of a gateway he had passed.

Such was the first touch of Egypt on his soul. It was as big and magical as he had known it would be. The magnificence and the glamour both were there. Europe already lay forgotten far behind him, non-existent. Some one tapped him on the shoulder, whispered a password, he was — in.…

He dined in Cairo and took the night train on to Luxor, the white, luxurious *wagon lit* again striking an incongruous note. For he had stepped from a platform into space, a space that floated suns and constellations. About him was that sense of the illimitable which broods everywhere in Egypt, in sand and sky, in sun and stars; it absorbed him easily, small human speck in a toy train with electric lights and modern comforts! An emotion difficult to seize gripped his heart, as he slid deeper and deeper into the land towards Lettice.… For Lettice also was involved in this. With happiness, yet somehow, too, with tears, he thought of her waiting for him now, expecting him, perhaps reading his telegram for the twentieth time. Through a mist of blue and gold she seemed to beckon to him across the shimmer of the endless yellow sands. He saw the little finger he had kissed. The dear face smiled. But there was a change upon it somewhere, though a change too subtle to be precisely named. The eyelids were half closed, and in the smile was power; the beckoning finger conveyed a gesture that was new — command. It seemed to point; it had a motion downwards; about her aspect was some flavour of authority almost royal, borrowed, doubtless, from the regal gold and purple of the sky’s magnificence.

Oddly, again, his heart contracted as this changed aspect of her, due to heightened imagination, rose before the inner eye. A sensation of uncertainty and question slipped in with it, though whence he knew not. A hint of insecurity assailed his soul — almost a sense of inferiority in himself. It even flashed across him that he was under orders. It was inexplicable.… A restlessness in his blood prevented sleep.… He drew the blind up and looked out.

There was no moon. The night was drowned in stars. The train rushed south towards Thebes along the green thread of the Nile; the Lybian desert keeping pace with it, immense and desolate, death gnawing eternally at the narrow strip of life.… And again he knew the feeling that he had stepped from a platform into space. Egypt lay spread *below* him. He fell towards it, plunging, and as he fell, looked down — upon something vaguely familiar and half known.… An underlying sadness, inexplicable but significant, crept in upon his thoughts.

They rushed past Bedrashein, a straggling Arab village where once great Memphis owned eighteen miles of frontage on the stately river; he saw the low mud huts, the groves of date-palms that now marked the vanished splendour. They slid by in their hundreds, the spectral desert gleaming like snow between the openings. The huge pyramids of Sakkhâra loomed against the faint western afterglow. He saw the shaft of strange green light they call zodiacal.

And the sadness in him deepened inexplicably — that strange Egyptian sadness which ever underlies the brilliance.… The watchful stars looked down with sixty listening centuries between them and a forgotten glory that dreamed now among a thousand sandy tombs. For the silent landscape flying past him like a dream woke emotions both sweet and painful that he could not understand — sweet to poignancy, exquisitely painful.

Perhaps it was natural enough, natural, too, that he should transfer these in some dim measure to the woman now waiting for him among the ruins of many-gated Thebes. The ancient city, dreaming still beside the storied river, assumed an appearance half fabulous in his thoughts. Egypt had wakened imagination in his soul. The change he fancied in Lettice was due, doubtless, to the transforming magic that mingled an actual present with a haunted past. Possibly this was some portion of the truth.… And yet, while the mood possessed him, some joy, some inner sheath, as it were, of anticipated happiness slipped off him into the encroaching yellow sand — as though he surrendered, not so much the actual happiness, as his right to it. A second's helplessness crept over him; another Self that was inferior peeped up and sighed and whispered.… He was aware of hidden touches that stabbed him into uneasiness, disquiet, almost pain.… Some outer tissue was stripped from his normal being, leaving him naked to the tang of extremely delicate shafts, buried so long that interpretation failed him.

The curious sensation, luckily, did not last; but this hint of a familiarity that seemed both sweet and dangerous, made it astonishingly convincing at the time. Some aspect of vanity, of confidence in himself distinctly weakened.…

It passed with the spectral palm trees as the train sped farther south. He finally dismissed it as the result of fatigue, excitement and anticipation too prolonged.… Yes, he dismissed it. At any rate it passed. It sank out of sight and was forgotten. It had become, perhaps, an integral portion of his being. Possibly, it had always been so, and had been merely waiting to emerge.…

But such intangible and elusive emotions were so new to him that he could not pretend to deal with them. There is a stimulus as of ether about the Egyptian climate that gets into the mind, it is said, and stirs unwonted dreams and fantasies. The climate becomes mental. His stolid temperament was, perhaps, pricked thus half unintelligibly. He could not understand it. He drew the blind down. But before turning out the light, he read over once again the note of welcome Lettice had sent to meet him at the steamer. It was brief, but infinitely precious. The thought of her love sponged all lesser feelings completely from his mind, and he fell asleep thinking only of their approaching meeting, and of his marvellous deep joy.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON REACHING LUXOR at eight o'clock in the morning, to his keen delight an Arab servant met him with an unexpected invitation. He had meant to go first to his hotel, but Lettice willed otherwise, everything thought out beforehand in her loving way. He drove accordingly to her house on the outskirts of the town towards Karnak, changed and bathed in a room where he recognised with supreme joy a hundred familiar touches that seemed transplanted from the Brown Flat at home — and found her at nine o'clock waiting for him on the verandah. Breakfast was laid in the shady garden just beyond.

It was ideal as a dream. She stood there dressed in white, wearing a big sun-hat with little roses, sparkling, radiant, a graceful fairy figure from the heart of spring. 'Here's the inevitable fly-whisk, Tom,' was the first thing she said, and as naturally as though they had parted a few hours before, 'it's to keep the flies away, and to keep you at your distance too!' And his first remark, escaping him impulsively in place of a hundred other things he had meant to say, was, 'You look different; you've changed. Lettice, you're far more lovely than I knew. I've never seen you look like that before!' He felt his entire being go out to her in a consuming flame. 'You look perfectly divine.' Sheer admiration took his breath away. 'I believe you're Isis herself,' he laughed in his delight, 'come back into her own!'

'Then you must be Osiris, Tom!' her happy voice responded, 'new risen from his sandy tomb!'

There was no time for private conversation, for Mrs. Haughstone appeared just then and enquired politely after his health and journey. 'The flies are awful,' she mentioned, 'but Lettice always insists on having breakfast out of doors. I hope you'll be able to stand it.' And she continued to flutter her horse-hair whisk as though she would have liked to sweep Egypt itself from the face of the map. 'No wonder the Israelites were glad to leave. There's sand in everything you eat and flies on everything you see.' Yet she said it with what passed in her case for good nature; she, too, was evidently enjoying herself in Egypt.

Tom said that flies and sand would not trouble him with such gorgeous sunlight to compensate, and that anyhow they were better than soot and fogs in London.

‘You’ll be tired of the sun before a week is over,’ she replied, ‘and long to see a cloud or feel a drop of rain.’ She followed his eyes which seemed unable to leave the face and figure of his hostess. ‘But it all agrees wonderfully with my cousin. Don’t you find her looking well? She’s quite changed into another person, *I* think,’ the tone suggesting that it was not altogether a change that she herself approved of. ‘We’re all different here, a little. Even Mr. Winslowe’s improved enormously. He’s steadier and wiser than he used to be.’ And Tom, laughing, said he hoped he would improve, too, himself.

The comforting hot coffee, the delicious rolls, the cool iced fruit, and, above all, Lettice beside him at last in the pleasant shade, gave Tom such high spirits that the woman’s disagreeable personality produced no effect. Through the gate in the stone wall at the end of the garden, beneath masses of drooping bougainvillæa, the Nile dreamed past in a sheet of golden haze; the Theban hills, dipped in the crystal azure of the sky, rose stern and desolate upon the horizon; the air, at this early hour, was fresh and keen. He felt himself in some enchanted garden of the ancient world with a radiant goddess for companion.… There was a sound of singing from the river below — the song of the Nile boatman that has not changed these thousand years; a quaint piping melody floated in from the street outside; from the farther shore came the dull beating of a native tom-tom; and the still, burning atmosphere held the mystery of wonder in suspension. Her beauty, at last, had found its perfect setting.

‘I never saw your eyes so wonderful — so soft and brilliant,’ he whispered as soon as they were alone. ‘You’re very happy.’ He paused, looking at her. ‘That’s me, isn’t it? Lettice, say it is at once.’ He was very playful in his joy; but he longed eagerly to hear her admit that his coming meant as much to her as it meant to him.

‘I suppose it must be,’ she replied, ‘but it’s the climate too. This keen dry air and the sunshine bring all one’s power out. There’s something magical in it. You forget the years and feel young — against the background of this old land a lifetime seems like an afternoon, merely. And the nights — oh, Tom, the stars are too, too marvellous.' She spoke with a kind of exuberance that seemed new in her.

'They must be,' he rejoined, as he gazed exultantly, 'for they're all in you, sun, air, and stars. You're a perfect revelation to me of what a woman — —'

'Am I?' she interrupted, fluttering her whisk between her chair and his. 'But now, dear Tom, my headstrong boy, tell me how you are and all about yourself, your plans, and everything else in the world besides.' He told her what he could, answered all her questions, declared he and she were going to have the time of their lives, and behaved generally, as she told him, like a boy out of school. He admitted it. 'But I'm hungry, Lettice, awfully hungry.' He kept reminding her that he had been starving for two long months; surely she was starving too. He longed to hear her confess it with a sigh of happy relief. 'My arms and lips are hungry,' he went on incorrigibly, 'but I'm tired, too, from travelling. I feel like putting my head on your breast and going sound asleep.' 'My boy,' she said tenderly, 'you shall.' She responded instantly to that. 'You always were a baby and I'm here to take care of you.' He seized her hand and kissed it before she could draw it away. 'You must be careful, Tom. Everything has eyes in Egypt; the Arabs move like ghosts.' She glanced towards the windows. 'And the gossip is unbelievable.' She was quiet again now, and very gentle; it struck him how calm and sweet she was towards him, yet that there was a delightful happy excitement underneath that she only just controlled. He was aware of something wild in her just out of sight — a kind of mental effervescence, almost intoxication she deliberately suppressed.

'And so are you — unbelievable,' he exclaimed impetuously; 'unbelievably beautiful. This is your country with a vengeance, Lettice. You're like an Egyptian queen — a princess of the sun!'

He gazed critically at her till she lowered her eyes. He realised that, actually, they were not visible from the house and that the garden trees were thick about them; but he also received a faint impression that she did not want, did not intend, to allow quite the same intimacy as before. It just flashed across him with a hint of disappointment, then was gone. His boyish admiration, perhaps, annoyed her. He had felt for a second that her excuse of the windows and the gossip was not the entire truth. The merest shadow of a thought it was. He noticed her eyes fixed intently upon him. The same minute, then, she rose quietly and rustled over to his chair, kissed him on the cheek quickly, and sat down again. ‘There!’ she said playfully as though she had guessed his thoughts, ‘I’ve done the awful thing; now you’ll be reasonable, perhaps!’ And whether or not she had divined his mood, she instantly dispelled it — for the moment.…

They talked about a hundred things, moving their chairs as the blazing sunshine found them out, till finally they sat with cushions on the steps of stone that led down to the river beneath the flaming bougainvillæa. He felt the strange touch of Egypt all about them, that touch of eternity that floats in the very air, a hint of something deathless and sublime that whispers in the sunshine. Already he was aware of the long fading stretch of years behind. He thought of Egypt as two vast hands that held him, one of tawny gold and one of turquoise blue — the desert and the sky. In the hollow of those great hands, he lay with Lettice — two tiny atoms of sand.…

He watched her every movement, every gesture, noted the slightest inflection of her voice, was aware that five years at least had dropped from her, that her complexion had grown softer, a shade darker, too, from the sun; but, above all, that there was a new expression, a new light certainly, soft and brilliant, in her eyes. It seemed, briefly put, that she had blossomed somehow into a fuller expression of herself. An overflowing vitality, masked behind her calmness, betrayed itself in every word and glance and gesture. There was an exuberance he called joy, but it was, somehow, a new, an unexpected joy.

She was, of course, aware of his untiring scrutiny; and presently, in a lull, keeping her eyes on the river below them, she spoke of it. ‘You find me a little changed, Tom, don’t you? I warned you that Egypt had a certain effect on me. It enflames the heart and — —’

‘But a very wonderful effect,’ he broke in with admiration. ‘You’re different in a way — yes — but *you* haven’t changed — not towards me, I mean.’ He wanted to say a great deal more, but could not find the words; he divined that something had happened to her, in Warsaw probably, and he longed to question her about the ‘other’ who was her husband, but he could not, of course, allow himself to do so. An intuitive feeling came to him that the claim upon her of this other was more remote than formerly. His dread had certainly lessened. The claims upon her of this ‘other’ seemed no longer — dangerous.… He wondered.… There was a certain confusion in his mind.

‘You got my letter at Alexandria?’ she interrupted his reflections. He thanked her with enthusiasm, trying to remember what it said — but without success. It struck him suddenly that there was very little in it after all, and he mentioned this with a reproachful smile. ‘That’s my restraint,’ she replied. ‘You always liked restraint. Besides, I wasn’t sure it would reach you.’ She laughed and blew a kiss towards him. She made a curious gesture he had never seen her make before. It seemed unlike her. More and more he registered a difference in her, as if side by side with the increase of spontaneous vitality there ran another mood, another aspect, almost another point of view. It was not towards him, yet it affected him. There seemed a certain new lightness, even irresponsibility in her; she was more worldly, more human, not more ordinary by any means, but less ‘impersonal.’ He remembered her singular words: ‘It enflames the heart.’ He wondered — a little uneasily. There seemed a new touch of wonder about her that made him aware of something commonplace, almost inferior, in himself.…

At the same time he felt another thing — a breath of coldness touched him somewhere, though he could not trace its origin to anything she did or said. Was it perhaps in what she left unsaid, undone? He longed to hear her confess how she had missed him, how thrilled she was that he had come: but she did not say these passionately desired things, and when he teased her about it, she showed a slight impatience almost: ‘Tom, you know I never talk like that. Anything sentimental I abhor. But I live it. Can’t you see?’ His ungenerous fancies vanished then at once; at a word, a smile, a glance of the expressive eyes, he instantly forgot all else.

‘But I *am* different in Egypt,’ she warned him playfully again, half closing her eyelids as she said it. ‘I wonder if you’ll like me — quite as well.’

‘More,’ he replied ardently, ‘a thousand times more. I feel it already. There’s mischief in you,’ he went on watching the half-closed eyes, ‘a touch of magic too, but very human magic. I love it.’ And then he whispered, ‘I think you’re more within my reach.’

‘Am I?’ She looked bewitching, a being of light and air.

‘Everybody will fall in love with you at sight.’ He laughed happily, aware of an enchantment that fascinated him more and more, but when he suddenly went over to her chair, she stopped him with decision. ‘Don’t, Tom, please don’t. Tony’ll be here any minute now. It would be unpleasant if he saw you behaving wildly like this! He wouldn’t understand.’

He drew back. ‘Oh, Tony’s coming — then I must be careful!’ He laughed, but he was disappointed and he showed it: it was their first day together, and eager though he was to see his cousin, he felt it might well have been postponed a little. He said so.

‘One must be natural, Tom,’ she told him in reply; ‘it’s always the best way. This isn’t London or Montreux, you see, and — —’

‘Lettice, I understand,’ he interrupted, a trifle ashamed of himself. ‘You’re quite right.’ He tried to look pleased and satisfied, but the truth was he felt suddenly — stupid. ‘And we’ve got lots of time — three months or more ahead of us, haven’t we?’ She gave him an expressive, tender look with which he had to be contented for the moment.

‘And by the by, how is old Tony, and who is his latest?’ he enquired carelessly.

‘Very excited at your coming, Tom. You’ll think him improved, I hope. I believe *I*’m his latest,’ she added, tilting her chin with a delicious pretence at mischief. And the gesture again surprised him. It was new. He thought it foreign to her. There seemed a flavour of impatience, of audacity, almost of challenge in it.

‘Finding himself at last. That’s good. Then you’ve been fishing to some purpose.’

‘Fishing?’

‘Rescuing floating faces.’

She pouted at him. ‘I’m not a saint, Tom. You know I never was. Saints are very inspiring to read about, but you couldn’t live with one — or love one. Could you, now?’

He gave an inward start she did not notice. The same instant he was aware that it was her happy excitement that made her talk in this exaggerated way. That was why it sounded so unnatural. He forgot it instantly.

They laughed and chatted as happily as two children — Tom felt a boy again — until Mrs. Haughstone appeared, marching down the river bank with an enormous white umbrella over her head, and the talk became general. Tom said he would go to his hotel and return for lunch; he wanted to telephone to Assouan. He asked where Tony was staying. 'But he knew I was at the Winter Palace,' he exclaimed when she mentioned the Savoy. 'He found some people there he wanted to avoid,' she explained, 'so moved down to the Savoy.'

Tom said he would do the same; it was much nearer to her house, for one thing: 'You'll keep him for lunch, won't you?' he said as he went off. 'I'll try,' she promised, 'but he's so busy with his numerous friends as usual that I can't be sure of him. He has more engagements here than in London,' — whereupon Mrs. Haughstone added, 'Oh, he'll stay, Mr. Kelverdon. I'm sure he'll stay. We lunch at one o'clock, remember.'

And in his room at the hotel Tom found a dozen signs of tenderness and care that increased his happiness; there were touches everywhere of her loving thought for his comfort and well-being — flowers, his favourite soap, some cigarettes, one of her own deck-chairs, books, and even a big box of crystallised dates as though he was a baby or a little boy. It all touched him deeply; no other woman in the world could possibly have thought out such dear reminders, much less have carried them into effect. There was even a writing-pad and a penholder with the special nib he liked. He laughed. But her care for him in such trivial things was exquisite because it showed she claimed the right to do them.

His heart brimmed over as he saw them. It was impossible to give up any room, even a hotel room, into which she had put her sweet and mothering personality. He could do without Tony's presence and companionship, rather than resign a room she had thus prepared for him. He engaged it permanently therefore. Then, telephoning to Assouan, he decided to take the night train and see what had to be done there. It all sounded most satisfactory; he foresaw much free time ahead of him; occasional trips to the work would meet the case at present.…

Happier than ever, he returned to a lunch in the open air with her and Tony, and it was the gayest, merriest meal he had ever known. Mrs. Haughstone retired to sleep through the hotter hours of the afternoon, leaving the trio to amuse themselves in freedom. And though they never left the shady garden by the Nile, they amused themselves so well that tea was over and it was time for Tom to get ready for his train before he realised it. Tony and Madame Jaretzka drove him to his hotel, and afterwards to the station, sitting in the compartment with him until the train was actually moving. He watched them standing on the platform together, waving their hands. He waved his own. 'I'll be back to-morrow or the next day,' he cried. Emotions and sensations were somewhat tangled in him, but happiness certainly was uppermost.

'Don't forget,' he heard Tony shout.… And her eyes were on his own until the trees on the platform hid her from his sight behind their long deep shadows.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRST EXCITEMENT of arrival over, he drew breath, as it were, and looked about him. Egypt delighted and amazed him, surpassing his expectations. Its effect upon him was instantaneous and profound. The decisive note sounded at Alexandria continued in his ears. Egypt drew him in with golden, powerful arms. In every detail it was strange, yet with the strangeness of a predetermined welcome. It was not strange to *him*. The thrill of welcome made him feel at home. He had come back.…

Here, at Assouan, he was aware of Africa, mystic, half-monstrous continent, lying with its heat and wonder just beyond the horizon. He saw the Southern Cross, pitched low above the sandy rim.… Yet Africa had no call for him. It left him without a thrill, an uninviting, undesirable land. It was Egypt that made the intimate and personal appeal, as of a deeply loved and half-familiar place. It seemed to gather him in against its mighty heart. He lay in some niche of comforting warm sand against the ancient mass that claimed him, tucked in by the wonder and the mystery, protected, even mothered. It was an oddly stimulated imagination that supplied the picture — and made him smile. He snuggled down deeper and deeper into this figurative warm bed of sand the ages had pre-ordained. He felt secure and sheltered — as though the wonder and the mystery veiled something that menaced joy in him, something that concealed a notion of attack. Almost there seemed a whisper in the wind, a watchful and unclosing eye behind the dazzling sunshine: ‘Surrender yourself to me, and I will care for you. I will protect you against… yourself.… Beware!’

This peculiar excitement in his blood was somehow precisely what he had expected; the wonder and the thrill were natural and right. He had known that Egypt would mesmerise his soul exactly in this way. He had, it seemed, anticipated both the exhilaration and the terror. He thought much about it all, and each time Egypt looked him in the face, he saw Lettice too. They were inseparably connected, as it were. He saw her brilliant eyes peering through the great tawny visage. Together they bade him pause and listen.…

The wind brought up its faint, elusive whisper: ‘Wait.… We have not done with you.… Wait and listen! Watch…!’

Before his mind’s eye the mighty land lay like a map, a blazing garden of intenser life that the desolation ill concealed. Europe seemed infinitely remote, the life he had been accustomed to unreal, of tepid interest, while the intimate appeal that Egypt made grew more insistent every hour of the day. It was Luxor, however, that called him peremptorily — Luxor where all that was dearest to him in life now awaited his return. He yearned for Luxor; Thebes drew him like a living magnet. Lettice was in Thebes, and Thebes also seemed the heart of ancient Egypt, its centre and its climax. ‘Come back to us,’ whispered the sweet desert wind; ‘we are waiting.…’ In Thebes seemed the focus of the strange Egyptian spell.

At all hours of the day and night, here in Assouan, it caught him, asking forever the great unanswerable questions. In the pauses of his strenuous work, in the watches of the night, when he heard the little owls and the weird barking of the prowling jackals; in the noontide heat, and in the cold glimmer of the quiet stars, he was never unconscious of its haunting presence, he was never beyond its influence. He was never quite alone.…

What did it mean? And why did this hint of danger, of pain, of loneliness lurk behind the exhilaration and the peace? Wherein lay the essence of the enchantment this singular Egyptian glamour laid upon his very soul?

In his laborious way, Tom worked at the disentanglement, but without much success. One curious thought, however, persisted with a strange enough significance. It rose, in a sense, unbidden. It was not his brain that discovered it. It just ‘came.’

For he was thinking of other wonderful countries he had known. He remembered Japan and India, both surpassing Egypt in colour, sunshine, gorgeous pageantry, and certainly equalling it in historical association and the rest. Yet, for him, these old lands had no spell, no glamour comparable to what he now experienced. The mind contains them, understands them easily. They are continuous with their past. The traveller drops in and sees them as they always have been. They are still, so to speak, going on comfortably as before. There is no shock of dislocation. They have not died.

Whereas Egypt has left the world; Egypt is dead; there is no link with present things. Both heart and mind are aware of this deep vacuum they vainly strive to fill. That ancient civilisation, both marvellous and somewhere monstrous, breaking with beauty, burning with aspiration, mysterious and vital — all has vanished as completely as though it had not been. The prodigious ruins hint, but cannot utter. No reconstruction from tomb or temple can recall a great dream the world has lost. It is forgotten, swept away, there is no clue. Egypt has left the world.…

Yet, as he thought about it in his uninspired way, it seemed that some part of him still beat in sympathy with the pulse of the forgotten dream. Egypt indeed was dead, yet sometimes — she came back.… She came to revisit her soft stars and moon, her great temples and her mighty tombs. She stole back into the sunshine and the sand; her broken, ruined heart at Thebes received her. He saw her as a spirit, a persistent, living presence, a stupendous Ghost.… And the idea, having offered itself, remained. Both he and Lettice somehow were associated with it, and with this elusive notion of return. They, too, were entangled in the glamour and the spell. They, too, had stolen back as from some immemorial lost dream to revisit the scenes of an intenser yet forgotten life. And Thebes was its centre; the secretive and forbidding Theban Hills, with their desolate myriad sepulchres, its focus and its climax.…

Assouan detained him only a couple of days. He had capable lieutenants; there was delay, moreover, in the arrival of certain material; he could always be summoned quickly by telephone. He sent home his report and took the express train back to Luxor and to — her.

He had been too occupied, too tired at night, to do more than write a fond, short letter, then go to sleep; the heat was considerable; he realised that he was in Africa; the scenery fascinated him, the enormous tawny desert, the cataracts of golden yellow sand, the magical old river. The wonder of Philae, with its Osirian shrine and island sanctuary, caught him as it has caught most other humans. After the sheer bulk of the pyramids and temples, Philae bursts into the heart with almost lyrical sweetness. But his heart was fast in Thebes, and not all the enchantment of this desert paradise could seduce him. Moreover, one detail he disliked: the ubiquitous earthenware tom-tom that sounded day and night… he heard its sullen beating in his dreams.

Yet of one thing he was ever chiefly conscious — that he was impatient to be with Lettice, that his heart hungered without ceasing, that she meant more to him than ever. Her new beauty astonished him, there was a subtle charm in her presence he had not felt in London, her fresh spontaneous gaiety filled him with keen delight. And all this was his. His arrival gave her such joy that she could not even speak of it; yet he was the cause of it. It made him feel almost shy.

He received one characteristic letter from her. 'Come back as quickly as you can,' she wrote. 'Tony has gone down the river after his birds, and I feel lonely. Telegraph, and come to dinner or breakfast according to your train. I'll meet you if possible. You must come here for all your meals, as I'm sure the hotel food is poor and the drinking water unsafe. This is open house, remember, for you both.' And there was a delicious P.S. 'Mind you only drink filtered water, and avoid the hotel salads because the water hasn't been boiled.' He kissed the letter. He laughed. Her tender thought for him almost brought the tears into his eyes. It was the tenderness of his own mother who was dead.

He reached Luxor in the evening, and to his delight she was on the platform; long before the train stopped he recognised her figure, the wide sun-hat with the little roses, the white serge skirt and jacket of knitted yellow silk to keep the evening chill away. They drove straight to her house; the sun was down behind the rocky hills and the Nile lay in a dream of burnished gold; the little owls were calling; there was singing among the native boatmen on the water; they saw the fields of brilliant green with the sands beyond, and the keen air from the desert wafted down the street of what once was great hundred-gated Thebes. A strangely delicate perfume hung about the ancient city. Tom turned to look at the woman beside him in the narrow-seated carriage, and felt as if he were driving through a dream.

'I can stay a week or ten days at least,' he said at last. 'Is old Tony back?'

Yes, he had just arrived and telephoned to ask if he might come to dinner. 'And look, Tom, you can just see the heads of the Colossi rising out of the haze,' — she pointed quickly— 'I thought we would go and show them you to-morrow. We might all take our tea and eat it in the clover. You've seen nothing of Egypt yet.' She spoke rapidly, eagerly, full of her little plan.

'All?' he repeated doubtfully.

'Yes, wouldn't you like it?'

'Oh, rather,' he said, wondering why he did not say another thing that rose for a moment in his mind.

'You must see everything,' she went on spontaneously, 'and a dragoman's a bore. Tony's a far better guide. He knows old Egypt as well as he knows his old birds.' She laughed. 'It's too ridiculous — his enthusiasm; he's been dying to explain it all to you as he did to me, and he does it exactly like a museum guide who is a scholar and a poet too. And he is a poet, you know. I'd never noticed it before.'

'Splendid,' said Tom. He was thinking several things at once, among them that the perfumed air reminded him of something he could not quite recall. It seemed far away and yet familiar. 'I'm a rare listener too,' he added.

'The King's Valley you really must do alone together,' she went on; 'I can't face it a second time — the heat, the gloom of it — it oppressed and frightened me a little. Those terrible grim hills — they're full of death, those Theban hills.'

'Tony took you?' he asked.

She nodded. 'We did the whole thing,' she added, 'every single Tomb. I was exhausted. I think we all were — except Tony.' The eager look in her face had gone. Her voice betrayed a certain effort. A darkness floated over it, like the shadow of a passing cloud.

'All of you!' he exclaimed, as though it were important. 'No bird-man ever feels tired.' He seemed to think a moment. There was a tiny pause. The carriage was close to the house now, driving up with a flourish, and Tony and Mrs. Haughstone, an incongruous couple, were visible standing against the luminous orange sky beside the river. Tom pointed to them with a chuckle. 'All right,' he exclaimed, with a gesture as though he came to a decision suddenly, 'it shall be the Colossi to-morrow. There are two of them, aren't there — only two?'

‘Two, yes, the Twin Colossi they call them,’ she replied, joining in his chuckle at the silhouetted figures in the sunset.

‘Two,’ he repeated with emphasis, ‘not three.’ But either she did not notice or else she did not hear. She was leaning forward waving her hand to her other guests upon the bank.

There followed then the happiest week that Tom had ever known, for there was no incident to mar it, nor a single word or act that cast the slightest shadow. His dread of the ‘other’ who was to come apparently had left him, the faint uneasiness he had felt so often seemed gone. He even forgot to think about it. Lettice he had never seen so gay, so full of enterprise, so radiant. She sparkled as though she had recovered her girlhood suddenly. With Tony in particular she had incessant battles, and Tom listened to their conversations with amusement, for on no single subject were they able to agree, yet neither seemed to get the best of it. Tom felt unable to keep pace with their more nimble minds.…

Tony was certainly improved in many ways, more serious than he had showed himself before, and extraordinarily full of entertaining knowledge into the bargain. Birds and the lore of ancient Egypt, it appeared, were merely two of his pet hobbies; and he talked in such amusing fashion that he kept Tom in roars of laughter, while stimulating Madame Jaretzka to vehement contradictions. They were much alone, and profited by it. The numerous engagements Lettice had mentioned gave no sign. Tony certainly was a brilliant companion as well as an instructive cicerone. There was more in him than Tom had divined before. His clever humour was a great asset in the longer expeditions. ‘Tony, I’m tired and hot; please come and talk to me: I want refreshing,’ was never addressed to Tom, for instance, whose good nature could not take the place of wit. Each of the three, as it were, supplied what the other lacked; it was not surprising they got on well together. Tom, however, though always happy provided Lettice was of the party, envied his cousin’s fluid temperament and facile gifts — even in the smallest things. Tony, for instance, would mimic Mrs. Haughstone’s attitude of having done her hostess a kindness in coming out to Egypt: ‘I couldn’t do it *again*, dear Lettice, even for *you*’ — the way Tony said and acted it had a touch of inspiration.

Mrs. Haughstone herself, meanwhile, within the limits of her angular personality, Tom found also considerably improved. Egypt had changed her too. He forgave her much because she was afraid of the sun, so left them often alone. She showed unselfishness, too, even kindness, on more than one occasion. Tom was aware of a nicer side in her; in spite of her jealousy and criticism, she was genuinely careful of her hostess's reputation amid the scandal-loving atmosphere of Egyptian hotel life. It amused him to see how she arrogated to herself the place of chaperone, yet Tom saw true solicitude in it, the attitude of a woman who knew the world towards one who was too trustful. He figured her always holding up a warning finger, and Lettice always laughingly disregarding her advice.

Her warnings to Lettice to be more circumspect were, at any rate, by no means always wrong. Though not particularly observant as a rule, he caught more than once the tail-end of conversations between them in which advice, evidently, had been proffered and laughed aside. But, since it did not concern him, he paid little attention, merely aware that there existed this difference of view. One such occasion, however, Tom had good cause to remember, because it gave him a piece of knowledge he had long desired to possess, yet had never felt within his rights to ask for. It merely gave details, however, of something he already knew.

He entered the room, coming straight from a morning's work at his own hotel, and found them engaged hammer and tongs upon some dispute regarding 'conduct.' Tony, who had been rowing Madame Jaretzka down the river, had made his escape. Madame Jaretzka effected hers as Tom came in, throwing him a look of comical relief across her shoulder. He was alone with the Irish cousin. 'After all, she *is* a married woman,' remarked Mrs. Haughstone, still somewhat indignant from the little battle.

She addressed the words to him as he was the only person within earshot. It seemed natural enough, he thought.

'Yes,' said Tom politely. 'I suppose she is.'

And it was then, quite unexpectedly, that the woman spoke to him as though he knew as much as she did. He ought, perhaps, to have stopped her, but the temptation was too great. He learned the facts concerning Warsaw and the — husband. That the Prince had ill-treated her consistently during the first five years of their married life could certainly not justify her freedom, but that he had lost his reason incurably, no longer even recognised her, that her presence was discouraged by the doctors since it increased the violence of his attacks, and that his malady was hopeless and could end only in his death — all this, while adding to the wonder of her faithful pilgrimages, did assuredly at the same time set her free.… The effect upon his mind may be imagined; it deepened his love, increased his admiration, for it explained the suffering in the face she had turned to sweetness, while also justifying her conduct towards himself. With a single blow, moreover, it killed the dread Tom had been haunted by so long — that this was that 'other' who must one day take her from him, obedient to a bigger claim.

This knowledge, as though surreptitiously obtained, Tom locked within his breast until the day when she herself should choose to share it with him.

He remembered another little conversation too when, similarly, he disturbed them in discussion: this time it was Mrs. Haughstone who was called away.

'Behaving badly, Lettice, is she? Scolding you again?'

'Not at all. Only she sees the bad in every one and I see the good. She disapproves of Tony rather.'

'Then she will be less often deceived than you,' he replied laughingly. The reference to Tony had escaped him; his slow mind was on the general proposition.

'Perhaps. But you can only make people better by believing that they *are* better,' she went on with conviction — when Mrs. Haughstone joined them and took up her parable again:

'My cousin behaves like a child,' she said with amusing severity. 'She doesn't understand the world. But the world is hard upon grown-ups who behave like children. Lettice thinks everybody good. Her innocence gets her misjudged. And it's a pity.'

'I'll keep an eye on her,' Tom said solemnly, 'and we'll begin this very afternoon.'

'Do, Mr. Kelverdon, I'm glad to hear it.' And as she said it, he noticed another expression on her face as she glanced down the drive where Tony, dressed in grey flannels and singing to himself, was seen sauntering towards them. She wore an enigmatic smile by no means pleasant. It gave him a moment’s twinge. He turned from her to Lettice by way of relief. She was waving her white-gloved hand, her eyes were shining, her little face was radiant — and Tom’s happiness came back upon him in a rising flood again as he watched her beauty.… He thought that Egypt was the most marvellous place he had ever known. Even Tony looked enchanted — almost handsome. But Lettice looked divine. He felt more and more that the woman in her blossomed into life before his very eyes. His content was absolute.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITH TONY AS guide they took their fill of wonder. The principal expeditions were made alone, introducing Tom to the marvels of ancient Egypt which they already knew. On the sturdiest donkey Thebes could furnish, he raced his cousin across the burning sands, Madame Jaretzka following in a sand-cart, her blue veil streaming in the cool north wind. They played like children, defying the tide of mystery that this haunted land pours against the modern human soul, while yet the wonder and the mystery added to their enjoyment, deepening their happiness by contrast.

They ate their *al fresco* luncheons gaily, seated by hoary tombs that opened into the desolate hills; kings, priests, princesses, dead six thousand years, listening in caverns underground to their careless talk. Yet their gaiety had a hush in it, a significance behind the sentences; for even their lightest moments touched ever upon the borders of an awfulness that was sublime, and all that they said or did gained this hint of deeper value — that it was set against a background of the infinite, the deathless.

It was impossible to forget that this was Egypt, the deposit of immemorial secrets, the store-house of stupendous vanished dreams.

‘There was a majesty, after all, about their strange old gods,’ said Tony one afternoon as they emerged from the stifling darkness of a forgotten kingly tomb into the sunlight. ‘They seem to thunder still — below the ground — subconsciously.’ He was ever ready with the latest modern catchword. He flung himself down upon the sand, shaded from the glare by a recumbent column of granite exquisitely carved, then abandoned of the ages. ‘They touch something in one even to-day — something superb. Human worship hasn’t changed so fundamentally after all.’

‘A sort of ghostly deathlessness,’ agreed Lettice, making a bed of sand beside him. ‘I think that’s what one feels.’

Tony looked up. He glanced alertly at her. A question flashed a moment in his eyes, then passed unspoken.

‘Perhaps,’ Tony went on in a more flippant tone, ‘even the dullest has to acknowledge the sublime in their conceptions. Isis! Why, the very name is a poem in a single word. Anubis, Nepthys, Horus — there’s poetry in them all. They seem to sing themselves into the heart, as Petrie might have said — but didn’t.’

‘The names *are* rather splendid,’ Tom put in, as he unpacked the kettle and spirit-lamp for tea. ‘One can’t forget them either.’

There was a moment’s silence, then Tony spoke again. He had lost his flippant tone. He addressed his remark to Lettice. Tom was aware that she was somehow waiting for it.

‘Their deathlessness! Yes, you’re right.’ He turned an instant to look at the colossal structure behind them, whence the imposing figures of a broken Pharaoh and his Queen stared to the east cross the shoulder of some granite Deity that had refused to crumble for three thousand years. ‘Their deathlessness,’ he repeated, lowering his voice, ‘it’s really startling.’

He looked about him. It was amazing how his little words, his gesture, his very atmosphere created a spontaneous expectancy — as though Thoth might stride sublimely up across the sand, or even Ra himself come blazing with extended wings and awful disk of fire.

Tom felt the touch of the unearthly as he watched and listened. Lettice — he was certain of it — shivered. He moved nearer and spread a rug across her feet.

‘Don’t, Tom, please! I’m hot enough already.’ Her tone had a childish exasperation in it — as though he interrupted some mood that gave her pleasure. She turned her eyes to Tony, but Tony was busily opening sandwich packets with hands that — Tom thought — shared one quality at least of the stone effigies they had been discussing — size. And he laughed. The spell was broken. They fell hungrily upon their desert meal.…

Yet, it was odd how Tony had expressed precisely what Tom had himself been vaguely feeling, though unable to find the language for his fancy — odd, too, that apparently all three of them had felt the same dim thing. No one among them was ‘religious,’ nor, strictly speaking, imaginative; poetical least of all in the regenerative, creative sense. Not one of the trio, that is, could have seized imaginatively the conception of an alien deity and made it live. Yet Tony's idle mood or idler words had done this very thing — and all three acknowledged it in their various ways. The flavour of a remote familiarity was manifest in each one of them — collectively as well.

Another time they sat by night in ruined Karnak, watching the silver moonlight bring out another world among the mighty pylons. It painted the empty and enormous aisles with crowding processions of lost ages. Speaking in whispers, they saw the stars peep down between the soaring forest of old stone; the cold desert wind brought with it a sadness, a mournful retrospect too vast to realise, the tragedy that such splendour left but a lifeless skeleton behind, a gigantic, soulless ruin. That such great prophecies remained unfulfilled was somewhere both terrible and melancholy. The immortal strength of these Egyptian stones conveyed a grandeur almost sinister. The huge dumb beauty seemed menacing, even ominous; they sat closer; they felt dwarfed uncomfortably, their selves reduced to insignificance, almost threatened. Even Tony sobered as they talked in lowered voices, seated in the shadow of the towering columns, their feet resting on the sand.

'I'm sure we've sat here before just like this, the three of us,' he said in a lowered voice; 'it all seems like a dream to me.'

Madame Jaretzka, who was between them, made no answer, and Tom, leaning forward, caught his cousin's eye beyond her.… The scene in the London theatre flashed across his mind. He felt very happy, very close to them both, extraordinarily at one with them, the woman he loved best in all the world, the man who was his greatest friend. He felt truth, not foolishness, in Tony's otherwise commonplace remarks that followed: 'I could swear I'd known you both before — here in Egypt.'

Madame Jaretzka moved a little, shuffling farther back so that she could lean against the great curved pillar. It brought them closer together still. She said no word, however.

'There's certainly a curious sympathy between the three of us,' murmured Tom, who usually felt out of his depth in similar talks, leaving his companions to carry it further while he listened merely. 'It's hard to believe that we meet for the first time now.'

He sat close to her, fingering her gauzy veil that brushed his face. There was a pause, and then Madame Jaretzka said, turning to Tony: '*We* met here first anyhow, didn't we? Two winters ago, before I met Tom — —'

But Tony said he meant something far older than that, much longer ago. 'You and Tom knew each other as children, you told me once. Tom and I were boys together too… but…'

His voice died away in Tom's ears; her answers also were inaudible as she kept her head turned towards Tony: his thoughts, besides, were caught away a moment to the days in Montreux and in London.… He fell into a reverie that lasted possibly a minute, possibly several minutes. The conversation between them left him somehow out of it; he had little to contribute; they had an understanding, as it were, on certain subjects that neglected him. His mind accordingly left them. He followed his own thoughts dreamily… far away … past the deep black shadows and out into the soft blaze of moonlight that showered upon the distant Theban hills.… He remembered the curious emotions that had marked his entry into Egypt. He thought of a change in Lettice, at present still undefined. He wondered what it was about her now that lent to her gentle spirit a touch of authority, of worldly authority almost, that he dared not fail to recognise — as though she had the right to it. The flavour of uneasiness stole back. It occurred to him suddenly that he felt no longer quite at home with her *alone* as of old. Some one watched him: some one watched them both.…

It was as though for the first time he realised distance — a new distance creeping in upon their relationship somewhere.…

A slight shiver brought him back. The wind came moaning down the monstrous, yawning aisles against them. The overpowering effect of so much grandeur had become intolerable. 'Ugh! I'm cold,' he exclaimed abruptly. 'I vote we move a bit. I think — *I*'ll move anyhow.'

Madame Jaretzka turned to him with a definite start; she straightened herself against the huge sandstone column. The moonlight touched her; it clothed her in gold and silver, the gold of the sand, the silver of the moon. She looked ethereal, ghostly, a figure of air and distance. She seemed to belong to her surroundings — another person somehow — faintly Egyptian almost.

‘I thought you were asleep, Tom,’ she said softly. She had been in the middle of an animated, though whispered, talk with Tony. She peered at him with a little smile that lifted her lip oddly.

‘I was far away somewhere,’ he returned, peering at her closely. ‘I forgot all about you both. I thought, for a moment, I was quite — alone.’

He saw her start again. A significance he hardly intended had crept into his tone. Her face moved back into the shadow quickly beside Tony.

She teased Tom for his want of manners, then fell to caring for his comfort. ‘It’s icy,’ she said, ‘and you’re in flannels. The sudden chill of these Egyptian nights is really treacherous,’ and she took the rug from her lap and put it round his shoulders. As she did so, the strange appearance he had noted increased about her.

And Tom got up abruptly. ‘No, Lettice dear, thank you; I think I’ll move a bit.’ He had said ‘Lettice dear’ without realising it, and before his cousin too. ‘I’ll take a turn and then come back for you. You stay here with Tony,’ and he moved off somewhat briskly.

Then, instantly, the other two rose up like one person, following him to where the carriage waited.…

‘They’re frightening rather, don’t you think — these ancient places?’ she said presently, as they drove along past palms and the flat-topped houses of the fellaheen. ‘There’s something watching and listening all the time.’

Tom made no answer. He felt suddenly unsure of something — almost unsure of himself, it seemed.

‘One feels a bit lost,’ he said slowly after a bit, ‘and lonely. It’s the size, I think.’

‘Perhaps,’ she rejoined, peering at him with half-lowered eyelids, ‘and the silence.’ She broke off, then added, ‘You can hear your thoughts too clearly.’

Tom was sitting back amid a bundle of rugs she had wrapped him in; Tony, beside her, on the front seat, seemed in a gentle doze. They drove the rest of the way in silence, dropping Tony first at the Savoy, then going on to Tom’s hotel. She insisted, although her own house was in the opposite direction. ‘And you’re to take a hot whisky when you get into bed, remember, and don’t get up to-morrow if you feel a chill.’ She gave him orders for his health and comfort as though he were her son. Tom noticed it, told her she was divinely precious to him, and promised faithfully to obey.

‘What do you think about Tony?’ he asked suddenly, when they had driven alone for several minutes. ‘I mean, what impression does he make on you? How do you *feel* him?’

‘He’s enjoying himself immensely with his numerous friends,’ she replied at once. ‘He grows on one rather. He’s a dear, I think.’ She looked at him, then turned away again. ‘Don’t you, Tom?’

‘Oh, rather. I’ve always thought so. I told you first long ago, didn’t I?’ He made no reference to the exaggeration about the friends. ‘And I think it’s wonderful how well we — what a perfect trio we are.’

‘Yes, isn’t it?’

They both became thoughtful then. There fell a pause between them, when Tom broke in abruptly once again:

‘But — what do *you* feel? Because *I* think he’s half in love with you, if you want to know.’ He leaned over and whispered in her ear. The words tumbled out as though they were in a hurry. ‘It pleases me immensely, Lettice; it makes me feel so proud of you and happy. It’ll do him a world of good, too, if he loves a woman like you. You’ll teach him something.’ She smiled shyly and said, ‘I wonder, Tom. Do you really think so? He certainly seems fond of me, but I hadn’t thought quite that. You think everybody must fall in love with me.’ She pushed him away with a gentle yet impatient pressure of her arm, indicating the Arab coachman with a nod of her head. ‘Take care of him, Lettice: he’s a dear fellow; don’t let him break his heart.’

Tom began to flirt outrageously; his arm crept round her, he leaned over and stole a kiss — and to his amazement she did not try to stop him. She did not seem to notice it. She sat very still — a stone statue in the moonlight.

Then, suddenly, he realised that she had not replied to his question. He promptly repeated it therefore. ‘You put me off with what *he* feels, but I want to know what *you* feel,’ he said with emphasis.

‘But, Tom, I’m not putting you off, as you call it — with anything,’ and there was a touch of annoyance in her tone and manner.

‘Tell me, Lettice; it interests me. You’re such a puzzle, d’you know, out here.’ His tone unconsciously grew more earnest as he spoke.

Madame Jaretzka broke into a little laugh. ‘You boy!’ she exclaimed teasingly, ‘you’re trying to heighten his value so as to increase your own by contrast. The more people you can find in love with me, the more you’ll be able to flatter yourself.’

Tom laughed with her, though he did not quite understand. He had never heard her say such a thing before. He accepted the cleverness she gave him credit for, however. ‘Of course, and why shouldn’t I?’ And he was just going to put his original question in another form — had already begun it, in fact — when she interrupted him, putting her hand playfully over his mouth for a second: ‘I do think Tony’s a happy entertaining sort of man,’ she told him, ‘even fascinating in a certain kind of way. He’s very stimulating to me. And I feel — don’t you, Tom?’ — a slight change — was it softness? — crept into her tone— ‘a sort of beauty in him somewhere?’

‘Yes, p’raps I do,’ he assented briefly; ‘but, I say, Lettice darling, you mischievous Egyptian princess.’

‘Be quiet, Tom, and take your arm away. Here’s the hotel in sight.’ And yet, somehow, he fancied that she preferred his action to the talk.

‘Tell me this first,’ he went on, obeying her peremptory tone: ‘do you think it’s true that we three have been together before like that — as Tony said, I mean? It’s a funny thing, but I swear it sounded true when he said it.’ His tone was earnest again. ‘It gave me the creeps a bit, and, d’you know, you looked so queer, so wonderful in the moonlight — you looked un-English, foreign — like one of those Egyptian figures come to life. That’s what made me cold, I think.’ His laughter died away. He was grave suddenly. He sighed a little and moved closer to her. ‘That’s — what made me get up and leave you,’ he added abruptly.

‘Oh, he’s always saying that kind of thing,’ she answered quickly, moving the rugs for him to get out as the carriage slowed up before the brilliantly lit hotel. She made no reference to his other words. ‘There’s a lot of poetry in Tony too — out here.’

‘Said it before, has he?’ exclaimed Tom with genuine astonishment. ‘All three of us or — or just you and him? Am *I* in the business too?’ He was now bubbling over with laughter again for some reason; it all seemed comical, almost. Yet it was a sudden, an emotional laughter. His emotion — his excitement surprised him even at the time.

‘All three of us — I think,’ she said, as he held her hand a moment, saying good-bye. ‘Yes, all three of us, of course. Now good-night, you inquisitive and impertinent boy, and if you have to stay in bed to-morrow we’ll come over and nurse you all day long.’ He answered that he would certainly stay in bed in that case — and watched her waving her hand over the back of the carriage as she drove away into the moonlight like a fading dream of stars and mystery and beauty. Then he took his telegrams and letters from the Arab porter with the face of expressionless bronze, and went up to bed.

‘What a strange and wonderful woman!’ he thought as the lift rushed him up: ‘out here she seems another being, and a thousand times more fascinating.’ He felt almost that he would like to win her all over again from the beginning. ‘She’s different to what she was in England. Tony’s different too. And so am I, I do believe!’ he exclaimed in his bedroom, looking at his sunburned face in the glass a moment. ‘We’re all different!’ He felt singularly happy, hilarious, stimulated — a deep and curious excitement was in him. Above all there was high pride that she belonged to him so absolutely. But the analysis he had indulged in England vanished here. He forgot it all.… He was in Egypt with her… now.

He read his letters and telegrams, only half realising at first that they called him back to Assouan. ‘What a bore,’ he thought; ‘I simply shan’t go. A week’s delay won’t matter. I can telephone.’

He laid them down upon the table beside him and walked out on to his balcony. Responsibility seemed less in him. He felt a little reckless. His position was quite secure. He was his own master. He meant to enjoy himself.… But another, deeper voice was sounding in him too. He heard it, but at first refused to recognise it. It whispered. One word it whispered: ‘Stay…!’

There was no sleep in him; with an overcoat thrown across his shoulders he watched the calm Egyptian night, the soft army of the stars, the river gleaming in a broad band of silver. Hitherto Lettice had monopolised his energies; he had neglected Egypt, whose indecipherable meaning now came floating in upon him with a strange insistence. Lettice came with it too. The two beauties were indistinguishable.…

A flock of boats lay motionless, their black masts hanging in mid-air; all was still and silent, no voices, no footsteps, no movements anywhere. In the distance the desolate rocky hills rolled like a solid wave along the horizon. Gaunt and mysterious, they loomed upon the night. They were pierced by myriad tombs, those solemn hills; the stately dead lay there in hundreds — he imagined them looking forth a moment like himself across the peace and silence of the moonlit desert. They focussed upon Thebes, upon the white hotel, upon a modern world they could not recognise — upon his very windows. It seemed to him for a moment that their ancient eyes met his own across the sand, across the silvery river, and, as they met, a shadowy gleam of recognition passed between them and himself. At the same time he also saw the eyes he loved. They gazed through half-closed eyelids… the Eastern eyes of his early boyhood's dream. He remembered again the strange emotion of the day he first arrived in Egypt, weeks ago.…

And then he suddenly thought of Tony, and of Tony's careless remark as they sat in ruined Karnak together: 'I feel as if we three had all been here before.'

Why it returned to him just now he did not know: for some reason unexplained the phrase revived in him. Perhaps he felt an instinctive sympathy towards the poet's idea that he and *she* were lovers of such long standing, of such ancient lineage. It flattered his pride, while at the same time it disturbed him. A sense of vague disquiet grew stronger in him. In any case, he did not dismiss it and forget — his natural way of treating fancies. 'Perhaps,' he murmured, 'the bodies she and I once occupied lie there now — lie under the very stars their eyes — *our* own — once looked upon.'

It was strange the fancy took such root in him.… He stood a long time gazing at the vast, lonely necropolis among the mountains. There was an extraordinary stillness over that western bank, where the dead lay in their ancient tombs. The silence was eloquent, but the whole sky whispered to his soul. And again he felt that Egypt welcomed him; he was curiously at home here. It moved the deeps in him, brought him out; it changed him; it brought out Lettice too — brought out a certain power in her. She was more of a woman here, a woman of the world. She was more wilful, and more human. Values had subtly altered. Tony himself was altered.… Egypt affected them all three.…

The vague uneasiness persisted. His mood changed a little, the excitement gradually subsided; thought shifted to a minor key, subdued by the beauty of the southern night. The world lay in a mysterious glow, the hush was exquisite. Yet there was expectancy: that glow, that hush were ready to burst into flame and language. They covered secrets. Something was watching him. He was dimly aware of a thousand old forgotten things.…

He no longer thought, but felt. The calm, the peace, the silence laid soothing fingers against the running of his blood; the turbulent condition settled down. Then, through the quieting surface of his reverie, stole up a yet deeper mood that seemed evoked partly by the mysterious glamour of the scene, yet partly by his will to let it come. It had been a long time in him; he now let it up to breathe. It came, moreover, with ease, and quickly.

For a gentle sadness rose upon him, a sadness deeply hidden that he suddenly laid bare as of set deliberation. The recent play and laughter, above all his own excitement, had purposely concealed it — from others possibly, but certainly from himself. The excitement had been a mask assumed by something deeper in him he had wished — and tried — to hide. Gently it came at first, this sadness, then with increasing authority and speed. It rose about him like a cloud that hid the stars and dimmed the sinking moon. It spread a veil between him and the rocky cemetery on those mournful hills beyond the Nile. In a sense it seemed, indeed, to issue thence. It emanated from their silence and their ancient tombs. It sank into him. It was penetrating — it was familiar — it was deathless.

But it was no mood of common sadness; there lay no physical tinge in it, but rather a deep, unfathomable sadness of the spirit: an inner loneliness. From his inmost soul it issued outwards, meeting half-way some sense of similar loneliness that breathed towards him from these tragic Theban hills.…

And Tom, not understanding it, tried to shake himself free again; he called up cheerful things to balance it; he thought of his firm position in the world, of his proud partnership, of his security with her he loved, of his zest in life, of the happy prospect immediately in front of him. But, in spite of all, the mood crept upwards like a rising wave, swamping his best resistance, drowning all appeal to joy and confidence. He recognised an unwelcome revival of that earlier nightmare dread connected with his boyhood, things he had decided to forget, and had forgotten as he thought. The mood took him gravely, with the deepest melancholy he had ever known. It had begun so delicately; it became in a little while so determined, it threatened to overmaster him. He turned then and faced it, so to speak. He looked hard at it and asked of himself its meaning. Thought and emotion in him shuffled with their shadowy feet.

And then he realised that, in germ at any rate, the mood had lain actually a long time in him, deeply concealed — the surface excitement merely froth. He had hidden it from himself. It had been accumulating, gaining strength and impetus, pausing upon direction only. All the hours just spent at Karnak it had been there, drawing nearer to the surface; this very night, but a little while ago, during the drive home as well; before that even — during all the talks and out-door meals and expeditions; he traced its existence suddenly, and with tiny darts of piercing, unintelligible pain, as far back as Alexandria and the day of his arrival. It seemed to justify the vivid emotions that had marked his entry into Egypt. It became sharply clear now — this had been in him subconsciously since the moment when he read the little letter of welcome Lettice sent to meet him at the steamer, a letter he discovered afterwards was curiously empty. This disappointment, this underlying sadness he had kept hidden from himself: he now laid it bare and recognised it. He faced it. With a further flash he traced it finally to the journey in the Geneva train when he had read over the Warsaw and the Egyptian letters.

And he felt startled: something at the roots of his life was trembling. He tried to think. But Tom was slow; he could feel, but he could not dissect and analyse. Introspection with him invariably darkened vision, led to distortion and bewilderment. The effort to examine closely confused him. Instead of dissipating the emotion he intensified it. The sense of loneliness grew inexplicably — a great, deep loneliness, a loneliness of the spirit, a loneliness, moreover, that it seemed to him he had experienced before, though when, under what conditions, he could not anywhere remember.

His former happiness was gone, the false excitement with it. This freezing loneliness stole in and took their places. Its explanation lay hopelessly beyond him, though he felt sure it had to do with this haunted and mysterious land where he now found himself, and in a measure with her, even with Tony too.…

The hint Egypt dropped into him upon his arrival was a true one — he had slipped over an edge, slipped into something underneath, below him — something past. But slipped *with her*. She had come back to fetch him. They had come back to fetch — each other… through pain.…

And a shadow from those sombre Theban mountains crept, as it were, upon his life. He knew a sinking of the heart, a solemn, dark presentiment that murmured in his blood the syllables of 'tragedy.' To his complete amazement — at first he refused to believe it indeed — there came a lump into his throat, as though tears must follow to relieve the strain; and a moment later there was moisture, a perceptible moisture, in his eyes. The sadness had so swiftly passed into foreboding, with a sense of menacing tragedy that oppressed him without cause or explanation. Joy and confidence collapsed before it like a paper platform beneath the pressure of a wind. His feet and hands were cold. He shivered.…

Then gradually, as he stood there watching the calm procession of the stars, he felt the ominous emotion draw down again, retreat. Deep down inside him whence it came, it retired into a kind of interior remoteness that lay beyond his reach. It was incredible and strange. The intensity had made it seem so real.… For, while it lasted, he had felt himself bereft, lonely beyond all telling, outcast, lost, forgotten, wrapped in a cold and desolate misery that frightened him past all belief. The hand that lit his pipe still trembled. But the mood had passed as mysteriously as it came. It left him curiously shaken in his heart. 'Perhaps this too,' — thought murmured from some depth in him he could neither control nor understand— 'perhaps this too is — Egypt.'

He went to bed, emotion all smoothed out again, yet wondering a good deal at himself. For the odd upheaval was a new experience. Such an attack had never come to him before; he laughed at it, called it hysteria, and decided that its cause was physical; he persuaded himself that it had a very banal cause — a chill, even a violent chill, incipient fever and over-fatigue at the back of it. He smiled at himself, while obeying the loving orders he had received, and brewing the comforting hot mixture with his spirit-lamp.

Then drinking it, he looked round the room with satisfaction at the various evidences of precious motherly care. This mother-love restored his happiness by degrees. His more normal, stolid, unimaginative self climbed back into its place again — yet with a touch of awkwardness and difficulty. Something in him was changed, or changing; he had surprised it in the act.

The nature of the change escaped him, however. It seemed, perhaps — this was the nearest he could get to it — that something in him had weakened, some sense of security, of confidence, of self-complacency given way a little. Only it was not his certainty of the mother-love in her: that remained safe from all possible attack. A tinge of uneasiness still lay like a shadow on his mind — until the fiery spirit chased it away, and a heavy sleep came over him that lasted without a break until he woke two hours after sunrise.

CHAPTER XVII.

HE SPRANG FROM his bed, went to the open window and thrust his head out into the crystal atmosphere. It was impossible to credit the afflicting nightmare of a few hours ago. Gold lay upon the world, and the face of Egypt wore her great Osirian look.

In the air was that tang of mountain-tops that stimulated like wine. Everything sparkled, the river blazed, the desert was a sheet of burnished bronze. Light, heat, and radiance pervaded the whole glad morning, bathing even his bare feet on the warm, soft carpet. It was good to be alive. How could he not feel happy and unafraid?

The change, perhaps, was sudden; it certainly was complete.… These vivid alternations seemed characteristic of his whole Egyptian winter. Another self thrust up, sank out of sight, then rose again. The confusion seemed almost due to a pair of competing selves, each gaining the upper hand in turn — sometimes he lived both at once.… The uneasy mood, at any rate, had vanished with the darkness, for nothing sad or heavy-footed could endure amid this dancing exhilaration of the morning. Born of the brooding night and mournful hills, his recent pain was forgotten.

He dressed in flannels, and went his way to the house upon the Nile soon after nine o'clock; he certainly had no chill, there was only singing in his heart. The curious change in Lettice, it seemed, no longer troubled him. And, finding Tony already in the garden, they sat in the shade and smoked together while waiting for their hostess. Light-hearted as himself, Tony outlined various projects, to which the other readily assented. He persuaded himself easily, if recklessly; the work could wait. 'We simply must see it all together,' Tony urged. 'You can go back to Assouan next week. You'll find everything all right. Why hurry off?' … How his cousin had improved, Tom was thinking; his tact was perfect; he asked no awkward questions, showed no inquisitiveness. He just assumed that his companions had a right to be fond of each other, while taking his own inclusion in the collective friendship for granted as natural too.

And when Lettice came out to join them, radiant in white, with her broad sun-hat and long blue veil and pretty gauntlet gloves, Tony explained with enthusiasm at the beauty of the picture: ‘She’s come into her own out here with a vengeance,’ he declared. ‘She ought to live in Egypt always. It suits her down to the ground.’ Whereupon Tom, pleased by the spontaneous admiration, whispered proudly to himself, ‘And she is mine — all mine!’ Tony’s praise seemed to double her value in his eyes at once. So Tony, too, was aware that she had changed; had noted the subtle alteration, the enhancement of her beauty, the soft Egyptian transformation!

‘You’d hardly take her for European, I swear — at a distance — now, would you?’

‘N-no,’ Tom agreed, ‘perhaps you wouldn’t — —’ at which moment precisely the subject of their remarks came up and threw her long blue veil across them both with the command that it was time to start.

The following days were one long dream of happiness and wonder spent between the sunlight and the stars. They were never weary of the beauty, the marvel, and the mystery of all they saw. The appeal of temple, tomb, and desert was so intimate — it seemed instinctive. The burning sun, the scented winds, great sunsets and great dawns, these with the palms, the river, and the sand seemed a perfect frame about a perfect picture. They knew a kind of secret pleasure that was satisfying. Egypt harmonised all three of them. And if Tom did not notice the change increasing upon one of them, it was doubtless because he was too much involved in the general happiness to see it separate.

There came a temporary interruption, however, in due course — his conscience pricked him. ‘I really must take a run up to Assouan,’ he decided. ‘I’ve been rather neglecting things perhaps. A week at most will do it — and then for another ten days’ holiday again!’

The rhythm broke, as it were, with a certain suddenness. A rift came in the collective dream. He saw details again — saw them separate. And the day before he left a trifling thing occurred that forced him to notice the growth of the change in Lettice. He focussed it. It startled him a little.

The others had not sought to change his judgment. But they planned an all-night bivouac in the desert for his return; they would sleep with blankets on the sand, cook their supper upon an open fire, and see the dawn. ‘It’s an exquisite experience,’ said Tony. ‘The stars fade quickly, there’s a puff of warmer wind, and the sun comes up with a rush. It’s marvellous. I’ll get de Lorne and his sister to join us; he can tell stories round the fire, and perhaps she will get inspiration at last for her awful pictures.’ Madame Jaretzka laughed. ‘Then we must have Lady Sybil too,’ she added; ‘de Lorne may find courage to propose to her fortune at last.’ Tom looked up at her with a momentary surprise. ‘I declare, Lettice, you’ve grown quite worldly; that’s a very cynical remark and point of view.’

He said it teasingly, but it was this innocent remark that served to focus the change in her he had been aware of vaguely for a long time. She was more worldly here, the ordinary ‘woman’ in her was more in evidence: and while he rather liked it — it brought her more within his reach, as it were, yet without lowering her — he felt also puzzled. Several times of late he had surprised this wholesome sign of sex in things she said and did, as though the woman-side, as he called it, was touched into activity at last. It added to her charm; at the same time it increased his burning desire to possess her absolutely for himself. What he felt as the impersonal — almost spiritually elusive — aspect of her he had first known, was certainly less in evidence. Another part of her was rising into view, if not already in the ascendant. The burning sun, the sensuous colour and beauty of the Egyptian climate, he had heard, could have this physiological effect. He wondered.

‘Sybil has been waiting for him to ask her ever since I came out,’ he heard her saying with a gesture almost of impatience. ‘Only he thinks he oughtn’t to speak because he’s poor. The result is she’s getting bolder in proportion as he gets more shy.’

They all laughingly agreed to help matters to a climax when Tom, looking up suddenly, saw Madame Jaretzka smiling at his cousin with her eyelids half closed in the way he once disliked but now adored. He wondered suddenly how much Tony liked her; the improvement in him was assuredly due to her, he felt; Tony had less and less time now for his other friends. It occurred to him for a second that the change in her was greater than he quite knew, perhaps. He watched them together for some moments. It gave him a proud sense of pleasure to feel that her influence was making a man out of the medley of talent and irresponsibility that was Tony. Tony was learning at last to ‘find himself.’ It must be quite a new experience for him to know and like a woman of her sort, almost a discovery. But with a flash — too swift and fleeting to be a definite thought — Tom was conscious of another thing as well — and for the first time: 'How she would put him in his place if he attempted any liberties with her!'

The same second he was ashamed that such a notion could ever have occurred to him: it was mean towards Tony, ungenerous towards her; and yet — he was aware of a distinct emotion, a touch of personal triumph in it somewhere.…

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden tumult. There was a scurry; Tony flung a stone; Madame Jaretzka leaped upon a boulder, gathering her skirts together hurriedly, with a little scream. 'Kill it, Tony! Quick!' he heard her cry. And he saw then a very large and hairy spider crawling swiftly across the white paper that had wrapped their fruit and sandwiches, an ugly and distressing sight. 'It's a tarantula,' she screamed, half laughing, half alarmed, showing neat ankles as she balanced precariously upon her boulder, 'and it's coming at me. Quick, Tony, another stone,' as he missed it for the second time, 'it's making for me! Oh, kill it, kill it!' Tony, still aiming badly, assured her it was not a tarantula, nor poisonous even; he knew the species well. 'It's quite harmless,' he cried, 'there's no need to kill it. It's not in a house — —' And he flung another useless stone at it.

What followed happened very quickly, in a second or two at most. Tom saw it with sharp surprise, a curious distaste, almost with a shudder. It certainly astonished him, and in another sense it shocked him. He had done nothing himself because Lettice, he thought, was half in fun, making a diversion out of nothing. Only much later did it occur to him that she had turned instinctively to Tony for protection, rather than to himself. What caused him the unpleasant sensation, however, was that she deliberately stepped down from her perch of safety and kicked at the advancing horror. Probably her intention was merely to drive it away — she was certainly excited — but the result was that she set her foot upon the creature and crushed its life out with an instant's pressure of her dainty boot. 'There!' she cried. 'Oh, but I didn't mean to kill it! How frightful of me!'

He heard Tony say, 'Bravo, you *are* a brave woman! Such creatures have no right to live!' as he hid the disfigured piece of paper beneath some stones… and, after a few minutes' chatter, the donkey-boys had packed up the luncheon things and they were all on their way towards the next object of their expedition, as though nothing had happened. The entire incident had occupied a moment and a half at most. Madame Jaretzka was laughing and talking as before, gay as a child and pretty as a dream.

In Tom’s mind, however, it went on happening — over and over again. He could not at once clean his mind of a disagreeable impression that remained. Another woman, any woman for that matter, might have done what she did without leaving a trace in him of anything but a certain admiration. It was a perfectly natural thing. The creature probably was poisonous as well as hideous; Tony merely said the contrary to calm her; moreover, he gave no help, and the insect was certainly making hurriedly towards her — she had to save and protect herself. There was nothing in the incident beyond an ugliness, a passing second of distress; and yet — this was what remained with him — it was not a natural thing for ‘Lettice’ to have done. Her intention, no doubt, was otherwise; there was miscalculation as well. She had only meant to frighten the scurrying creature. Yet at the same time the instinctive act issued, he felt, from another aspect, another part of her, a part that in London, in Montreux, lay unexpressed and unawakened. And it issued deliberately too. The exquisite tenderness that could not have put a fly to death was less in her. Egypt had changed her oddly. He was aware of something that made him shrink, though he did not use the phrase even to himself in thought; of something hard and almost cruel, though both adjectives lay far from clothing the faint sensation in his mind with definite words.

Tom watched her instinctively from that moment, unconsciously, that is; less with his eyes than with a little pair of glasses in his heart. There was certainly a change in her that he could not quite account for; the notion came to him once or twice that some influence was upon her, some power that was outside herself, modifying the sharp outlines of her first peculiar tenderness. These dear outlines blurred a trifle in the fierce sunlight of this desert air. He knew not how to express it even to himself, for it was too tenuous to seize in actual words.

He arrived at this partial conclusion anyhow: that he was aware of what he called the ‘woman’ in her, but a very human woman — a certain wilfulness that was half wildness in it. There was a hint of the earthly, too, as opposed to spiritual, though in a sense that was wholesome, good, entirely right. Yet it was rather, perhaps, primitive than earthly in any vulgar meaning.… It had been absent or dormant hitherto. She needed it; something — was it Egypt? was it sex? — had stirred it into life. And its first expression — surprising herself as much as it surprised him — had an aspect of exaggeration almost.

The way she raced their donkeys in her sand-cart on the way home, by no means sparing the whip, was extremely human, but unless he had witnessed it he could never have pictured it as possible — so utterly unlike the gentle, gracious, almost fastidious being he had known first. There was a hint of a darker, stronger colour in the pattern of her being now, partly of careless and abundant spirits, partly of this new primitive savagery. He noticed it more and more, it was both repellant and curiously attractive; yet, while he adored it in her, he also shrank. He detected a touch even of barbaric vanity, and this singular touch of the barbaric veiled the tenderness. He almost felt in her the power to inflict pain without flinching — upon another.…

The following day their time of gaiety was to end, awaiting only his return later from Assouan. Tony was going down to Cairo with some other friends. Tom would be away at least a week, and tried hard to persuade his cousin to come with him instead; but Tony had given his word, and could not change. Moreover, he was dining with his friends that very night, and must hurry off at once. He said his good-byes and went.

‘We’re very rarely alone now, are we, Lettice?’ Tom began abruptly the instant they were together. At the back of his mind rose something he did not understand that forced more significance into his tone than he intended. He felt very full — an accumulation that must have expression. He blurted it out without reflection. ‘Hardly once since I arrived two weeks ago, now I come to think of it.’ He looked at her half playfully, half reproachfully. ‘We’re always three,’ he added with the frank pathos of a boy. And while one part of him felt ashamed, another part urged him onward and was glad.

But the way she answered startled him.

‘Tom dear, don’t scold me now. I *am* so tired.’ It was the tone that took his breath away. For the first time in their acquaintance he noticed something like exasperation. ‘I’ve been doing too much,’ she went on more gently, smiling up into his face: ‘I feel it. And that dreadful thing — that insect,’ — she shuddered a little— ‘I never meant to hurt it. It’s upset me. All this daily excitement, and the sun, and the jolting of that rickety sand-cart — There, Tom, come and sit beside me a moment and let's talk before you go. I'm really too done up to drive you to the station to-night. You'll understand and forgive me, won't you?' Her voice was very soft. She was excited, too, talking at random rather. Her being seemed confused.

He took his place on a sturdy cushion at her feet, full of an exaggerated remorse. She looked pale, though her eyes were very sparkling. His heart condemned him. He said nothing about the 'dreadful incident.'

'Lettice, dearest girl, I didn't mean anything. You have been doing far too much, and it's my fault; you've done it all for me — to give me pleasure. It's been too wonderful.' He took her hand, while her other stroked his head. 'You must rest while I'm away.'

'Yes,' she murmured, 'so as to be quite fresh when you come back. You won't be *very* long, will you?' He said he would risk his whole career to get back within the week. 'But, you know, I have neglected things rather — up there.' He smiled fondly as he said 'up there.' She looked down tenderly into his eyes. 'And I have neglected you — down here,' she said. 'That's what you mean, boy, isn't it?' And for the first time he did not like the old mode of address he once thought perfect. There seemed a flavour of pity in it. 'It *would* be nice to be alone sometimes, wouldn't it, Lettice? Quite alone, I mean,' he said with meaning.

'We shall be, we will be — later, Tom,' she whispered; '*quite* alone together.' She paused, then added louder: 'The truth is, Egypt — the air and climate — stimulates me too much; it makes me restless. It excites me in a way I can't quite understand. I can't sit still and talk and be idle as one does in sleepy, solemn England.'

He was explaining with laborious logic that it was the dryness of the air that exhausted the nerves a bit, when she straightened herself up and took her hand away. 'Oh yes, Tom, I know, I know. That's perfectly true, and everybody says that — I mean, everybody feels it, don't they?' She said it quickly, almost impatiently.

The old uneasiness flashed through him at that moment: it occurred to him, 'I'm dull, I'm boring her.' She was over-tired, he remembered then, her nerves on edge a trifle; it was natural enough; he would just kiss her and leave her to rest quietly. Yet a tiny sense of resentment, even of chill, crept over him. This impatience in her was new to him. He wondered an instant, then crushed back the words that tried to rise. He said goodbye, taking her in his arms for a moment with an overmastering impulse he could not check. Deep love and tenderness were in his heart and eyes. He yearned to protect and guide her — keep her safe from harm. He felt his older years, his steadier strength; he was a man, she but a little gentle woman. And the elemental powers of life were very strong. With a sudden impulsive gesture, then, that surprised him, she returned the embrace with a kind of vehemence, pressing him closely to her heart and kissing him repeatedly on the cheeks and eyes.

Tom had expected her to resist and chide him. He was bewildered and delighted; he was also puzzled — for the first second only. ‘You darling woman,’ he cried, forgetting utterly the suspicion, the uneasiness, the passing cold of a moment before. He marvelled that his heart could have let such fancies come to birth. Surely he had changed for such a thing to be possible at all!… Various impulses and emotions that clamoured in him he kept back with an effort. He was aware of clashing contradictions. Confidence was less in him. He felt curiously unsure of himself — also, in a cruel, subtle way — of her. There was a new thing in her — rising. Was it against himself somewhere? The tangle in his heart and mind seemed inextricable: he wanted to seize her and carry her away, struggling but captured, and at the same time — singular contradiction — to entreat her humbly, though passionately, to love him more, and to *show* more that she loved him. Surely there were two selves in him.

He moved over to the door. ‘Cataract Hotel, remember, finds me.’ He stood still, looking back at her.

She smiled, repeating the words after him. ‘And Lettice, you *will* write?’ She blew a kiss to him by way of answer. Then, charged to the brim with a thousand things he ached to say, yet would not, almost dared not say, he added playfully — a child must have noticed that his voice was too deep for banter and his breath came oddly:

‘And mind you don’t let Tony lose his head *too* much. He’s pretty far gone, you know, already.’

The same instant he could have bitten his tongue off to recall the words. Somewhere he had been untrue to himself, almost betrayed himself.

She rose suddenly from her sofa and came quickly towards him across the floor; he felt his heart sink a moment, then start hammering irregularly against his ribs. Something frightened him. For he caught in her face an expression he could not understand — the struggle of many strong emotions — anxiety and passion, fear and love; the eyes were shining, though the lids remained half closed; she made a curious gesture: she moved swiftly. He braced himself as against attack. He shrank. Her power over him was greater than he knew.

For he saw her in that instant as another person, another woman, foreign — almost Eastern; the barbaric primitive thing flamed out of her, but with something regal, queenly, added to it; she looked Egyptian; the Princess, as he called her sometimes, had come to life. And the same moment in himself this curious sense of helplessness appeared — he raged against it inwardly — as though he were in her power somehow, as though her little foot could crush him — too — into the yellow sand.…

A spasm of acute and aching pain shot through him; he winced; he wanted to turn and fly, yet was held rooted to the floor. He could not escape. It had to be. For oddly, mysteriously, he felt pain in her quick approach: she was coming to do him injury and hurt. The incident of the afternoon flashed again upon his mind — with the idea of cruelty in it somewhere, but a deep surge of strange emotion that flung wild sentences into his mind at the same instant. He tightly shut his lips, lest a hundred thoughts that had lain in him of late might burst into words he would later regret intensely. He must not avoid, delay, an inevitable thing. To resist was somehow to be untrue to the deepest in him — to something painful he deserved, and, paradoxically, desired too. What could it all mean?… He shivered as he waited — watching her come nearer.

She reached his side and her arms were stretched towards him. To his amazement she folded him in closely against her breast and held him as though she never could let him go again. He stood there helpless; the revulsion of feeling took his strength away. He heard her breathless, yearning whisper as she kissed him: ‘My Tom, my precious boy, I couldn’t see a hair of your dear head injured — I couldn’t see you hurt! Take care of yourself and come back quickly — do, *do* take care of yourself. I shall count the days — —' she broke off, held his face between her hands, gazed into his astonished eyes, and kissed him with the utmost tenderness again, the tenderness of a mother who is forced to be separated from the boy she loves better than herself.

Tom stood there trembling before her, and no speech came to help him. The thing passed like a dream; the dread, the emotion left him; the nightmare touch was gone. Her self-betrayal his simple nature did not at once discern. He felt only her divine tenderness pour over him. A spring of joy rose bubbling in him that no words could tell. Also he felt afraid. But the fear was no longer for himself. In some perplexing, singular way, he felt afraid for her.

Then, as a sentence came struggling to his lips, a step was heard upon the landing. There was time to resume conventional attitudes of good-bye when Mrs. Haughstone appeared on the staircase leading to the hall. Tom said his farewells hurriedly to both of them, making his escape as naturally as possible. 'I've just time to pack and catch the train,' he shouted, and was gone.

And what remained with him afterwards of the curious little scene was the absolute joy and confidence those last tender embraces had restored to him, side by side with another thing that he was equally sure about, yet refused to dwell upon because he dared not — yet. For, as she came across the floor of the sunny room towards him, he realised two things in her, two persons almost. Another influence, he was convinced, worked in her strangely — some older, long-buried presentment of her interpenetrating, even piercing through, the modern self. She was divided against herself in some extraordinary fashion, one half struggling fiercely, yet struggling bravely, honestly, against the other. And the relationship between himself and her, though the evidence was so negligibly slight as yet, he knew had definitely changed.…

It came to him as the Mother and the Woman in her. The Mother belonged unchangeably to him: the Woman, he felt, was troubled, tempted, and afraid.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTERWARDS, MONTHS, YEARS afterwards, looking back upon these strange weeks of his brief Egyptian winter, Tom marvelled at himself; he looked back, as it were, upon the thoughts and emotions of another man he could not recognise. This illusion involved his two companions also, Madame Jaretzka supremely, Tony slightly less, all three, however, together affected, all three changed.

As regards himself, however, there was always a part, it seemed, that remained unaffected. It looked on, it compared, it judged. He called it the Onlooker.…

Explanation lay beyond his reach; he termed it enchantment: and there he left it. Insight seemed only to operate with regard to himself: of *their* feelings, thoughts, or point of view he was uninformed. They offered no explanations, and he sought none.… The man honest with himself is more rare than a January swallow. He alone is honest who can state a case without that bias of exaggeration favourable to himself which is almost lying. Try as he may, his statement leans one way or the other. The spirit-level of absolute honesty is hard to find, and, of course, Tom was no exception.… Occasionally he recalled the ‘spiral theory,’ which once, at least, had been in the minds of all three — the notion that their three souls lived over a former episode together, but from a higher point, and with the bird’s-eye view which brought in understanding. But if this offered a hint of that winter’s inner spiritual structure, Tom certainly did not claim it as a true solution. The whole thing began so stealthily, and progressed so slowly yet so surely.…

He could only marvel at himself: he was so singularly changed — imagination so active, judgment alternately so positive and so faltering, every emotion so amazingly intensified. All the weakest and least admirable in him, the very dregs, seemed dragged up side by side with what was noblest, highest, and flung together in the rush and smother of the breaking Wave.

Events, in the dramatic meaning of the word, and outwardly, there were few perhaps, and those few meagre and unsensational. No one was shot or drowned, no one was hanged and quartered; the police were not called in; to outsiders there seemed no air or attitude of drama anywhere; but in three human hearts, thrown together as by chance currents of normal life, there came to pass changes of a spiritual kind, conflict between essential, primitive forces of the soul, battlings, temptings, aspirations, sacrifice, that are the truest drama always, because the inmost being, whether glorified or degraded, is thereby — changed.

In this fierce intensification of his own being, and in the events experienced, Tom recognised the rising of his childhood Wave towards the breaking point. The early premonition that had seemed causeless to his learned father, that stirred in his mother the deep instinct to protect, and that ever, more or less, hung poised above the horizon of his passing years, had its origin in the bed-rock of his nature. It was associated with memory and instinct; the native tendencies and forces of his being had dramatised their inevitable fulfilment in a dream. He recognised intuitively what was coming — and he welcomed it. The body shrank from pain; the soul held out her hands to it.…

Thus, looking back, he saw it mapped below him from a higher curve in life's ascending spiral. In the glare of a drenching sunshine that seemed hauntingly familiar, in the stupendous blaze of Egypt that knew and favoured it, the action lay spread out: but in darkness, too, an oppressive, suffocating darkness as of the grave, as of the bottom of the sea. The map was streaked with this alternate light and gloom of elemental kind. It passed swiftly, he went swiftly with it. A few short crowded weeks of the intensest pain and happiness he had ever known, — and the Wave, its crest reflected in its origin, fell with a drowning crash. He merged into his background, yet he did not drown: in due course he again — emerged.

The sense of rushing that accompanied it all was in himself apparently: heightened by the contrast of the divine stillness which is Egypt — the golden, hanging days, the nights of cool, soft moonlight, the sighing winds with perfume in their breath, the mournful palms that fringed the peaceful river, the calm of multitudinous stars. The grim Theban hills looked on; the ruined Temples watched and knew; there were listening ears within a thousand tombs.… And there was the Desert — the endless emptiness where everything had already happened, the place where, therefore, everything could happen again without affronting time and space — the Desert seemed the infinite background whence the Wave tossed up three little specks of passionate human action and reaction. It was the ‘sea,’ a sea of dust. Yet out of the dust wild roses blossomed eventually with a sweetness of beauty unknown to any cultivated gardens.…

And while he and his two companions made their moves upon this ancient chessboard of half-forgotten, half-remembered life, all natural things as well seemed raised to their most significant expression, sharing the joy and sadness, the beauty and the terror of his own experience. For the very scenery borrowed of his intensity, the familiar details urged a fraction beyond the normal, as though any moment they must break down into their elemental and essential nakedness. The pungent odour of the universal sand, the dust, the minute golden particles suspended in the flaming air, the marvellous dawns and sunsets, the mighty, awful pylons, and the heat — all these contributed their quota of wonder and mystery to what happened. Egypt inspired it, and was satisfied.

The sediment of his nature was drawn up, the rubbish floated before his eyes, he saw himself through the curtains of suspended dust — until the flood, retiring, left him high upon the shore, no longer shuffling with his earthly, physical feet.

In the train to Assouan, Tom still felt the clinging arms about his neck, still heard the loving voice, eager with tenderness for his welfare and his quick return. She needed him: he was everything to her. He knew it, oh he was sure of it. He thought of his work, and knew some slight anxiety that he had neglected it. He would devote all his energies to the interests of his firm: there should be no shirking anywhere; his ten days’ holiday was over. His mind fixed itself deliberately, though not too easily, on this alone.

He knew his own capacity, however, and that by concentration he could accomplish in a short time what other men might ask weeks to complete. Provided all was going well, he saw no reason why he could not be free again in a week at most. He knew quite well his value to the firm, but he knew also that he must continue to justify it. He was complacent, but, he hoped, not carelessly complacent. Tom felt very sure of himself again.

To his great relief he found things running smoothly. He examined every detail, interviewed all and sundry, supervised, decided, gave instructions. There was a letter from the London office conveying the formal satisfaction of the Board with results so far, praising especially certain reductions in cost he had judiciously effected; another private letter from the older partner referred confidently to greater profits than they had dared to anticipate; also there was a brief note from Sir William, the Chairman, now at Salonica, saying he might run over a little later and see for himself how the work was getting along.

Tom was supremely happy with it all. There was really very little for him to do; his engineers were highly competent; they could summon him at a day's notice from Luxor if anything went wrong. 'But there's no sign of difficulty, sir,' was their verdict; 'everything's going like clockwork; the men working splendidly; it's only a matter of time.'

It was the evening of the second day that Tom decided to go back to Luxor. He was eager for the promised bivouac they had arranged together. He had written once to say that all was well, but no word had yet come from her; she was resting, he was glad to think: Tony was away at Cairo with his friends; there might be a letter for him in the morning, but that could be sent after him. Joy and impatience urged him. He chuckled happily over his boyish plan; he would not announce himself; he would surprise her. He caught a train that would get him in for dinner.

And during his journey of six hours he rehearsed this pleasure of surprising her. She was lonely without him. He visualised her delight and happiness. He would creep up to the window, to the edge of the verandah where she sat reading, Mrs. Haughstone knitting in a chair opposite. He would call her name 'Lettice.…' Her eyes would lighten, her manner change. That new spontaneous joy would show itself.…

The sun was setting when the train got in, but by the time he had changed into flannels at his hotel the short dusk was falling. The entire western sky was gold and crimson, the air was sharp, the light dry desert wind blew shrewdly down the street. Behind the eastern hills rose a huge full moon, still pale with daylight, peering wisely over the enormous spread of luminous desert.… He drove to her house, leaving the *arabyieh* at the gates.

He walked quickly up the drive. The heavy foliage covered him with shadows, and he easily reached the verandah unobserved; no one seemed about; there was no sound of voices; the thick creepers up the wooden pillars screened him admirably. There was a movement of a chair, his heart began to thump, he climbed up softly, and at the other end of the verandah saw — Mrs. Haughstone knitting. But there was no sign of Lettice — and the blood rushed from his heart.

He had not been noticed, but his game was spoilt. He came round to the front steps and wished her politely a good-evening. Her surprise once over and explanations made, she asked him, cordially enough, to stay to dinner. ‘Lettice, I know, would like it. You must be tired out. She did not expect you back so soon; but she would never forgive me if I let you go after them.’

Tom heard the words as in a dream, and answered also in a dream — a dream of astonishment, vexation, disappointment, none of them concealed. His uneasiness returned in an acute, intensified form. For he learned that they were bivouacking on the Nile to see the sunrise. Tony had, after all, not gone to Cairo; de Lorne and Lady Sybil accompanied them. It was the picnic they had planned together against his return. ‘Lettice wrote,’ Mrs. Haughstone mentioned, ‘but the letter must have missed you. I warned her you’d be disappointed — if you knew.’

‘So Tony didn’t go to Cairo after all?’ Tom asked again. His voice sounded thin, less volume in it than usual. That ‘if you knew’ dropped something of sudden anguish in his heart.

‘His friends put him off at the last moment — illness, he said, or something.’ Mrs. Haughstone repeated the invitation to dine and make himself at home. ‘I’m positive my cousin would like you to,’ she added with a certain emphasis.

Tom thanked her. He had the impression there was something on her mind. ‘I think I’ll go after them,’ he repeated, ‘if you’ll tell me exactly where they’ve gone.’ He stammered a little. ‘It would be rather a lark, I thought, to surprise them.’ What foolish, what inadequate words!

‘Just as you like, of course. But I’m sure she’s quite safe,’ was the bland reply. ‘Mr. Winslowe will look after her.’

‘Oh, rather,’ replied Tom; ‘but it would be good fun — rather a joke, you know — to creep upon them unawares,’ — and then was surprised and sorry that he said it. ‘Have they gone very far?’ he asked, fumbling for his cigarettes.

He learned that they had left after luncheon, taking with them all necessary paraphernalia for the night. There were feelings in him that he could not understand quite as he heard it. But only one thing was clear to him — he wished to be quickly, instantly, where Lettice was. It was comprehensible. Mrs. Haughstone understood and helped him. ‘I’ll send Mohammed to get you a boatman, as you seem quite determined,’ she said, ringing the bell: ‘you can get there in an hour’s ride. I couldn’t go,’ she added, ‘I really felt too tired. Mr. Winslowe was here for lunch, and he exhausted us all with laughing so that I felt I’d had enough. Besides, the sun — —’

‘They all lunched here too?’ asked Tom.

‘Mr. Winslowe only,’ she mentioned, ‘but he was a host in himself. It quite exhausted me — —’

‘Tony can be frightfully amusing, can’t he, when he likes?’ said Tom. Her repetition of ‘exhausted’ annoyed him furiously for some reason.

He saw her hesitate then: she began to speak, but stopped herself; there was a curious expression in her face, almost of anxiety, he fancied. He felt the kindness in her. She was distressed. And an impulse, whence he knew not, rose in him to make her talk, but before he could find a suitable way of beginning, she said with a kind of relief in her tone and manner: ‘I’m glad you’re back again, Mr. Kelverdon.’ She looked significantly at him. ‘Your influence is so steadying, if you don’t mind my saying so.’ She gave an awkward little laugh, half of apology, half of shyness, or of what passed with her for shyness. ‘This climate — upsets some of us. It does something to the blood, I’m sure — —’

‘You feel anxious about — anything in particular?’ Tom asked, with a sinking heart. At any other time he would have laughed.

Mrs. Haughstone shrugged her shoulders and sighed. She spoke with an effort apparently, as though doubtful how much she ought to say. ‘My cousin, after all, is — in a sense, at least — a married woman,’ was the reply, while Tom remembered that she had said the same thing once before.

‘And all men are not as careful for her reputation, perhaps, as you are.’ She mentioned the names of various people in Luxor, and left the impression that there was considerable gossip in the air. Tom disliked exceedingly the things she said and the way she said them, but felt unable to prevent her. He was angry with himself for listening, yet felt it beyond him to change the conversation. He both longed to hear every word, and at the same time dreaded it unspeakably. If only the boat would give him quickly an excuse.… He therefore heard her to the end concerning the unwisdom of Madame Jaretzka in her careless refusal to be more circumspect, even — Mrs. Haughstone feared — to the point of compromising herself. With whom? Why, with Mr. Winslowe, of course. Hadn’t he noticed it? No! Well, of course there was no harm in it, but it was a mistake, she felt, to be seen about always with the same man. He called, too, at such unusual hours.…

And each word she uttered seemed to Tom exactly what he had expected her to utter, entering his mind as a keenly poisoned shaft. Something already prepared in him leaped swiftly to understanding; only too well he grasped her meaning. The excitement in him passed into a feverishness that was painful.

For a long time he merely stood and listened, gazing across the river but seeing nothing. He said no word. His impatience was difficult to conceal, yet he concealed it.

‘Couldn’t you give her a hint perhaps?’ continued the other, as they waited on the steps together, watching the preparations for the boat below. She spoke with an assumed carelessness that was really a disguised emphasis. ‘She would take it from *you*, I’m sure. She means no harm; there is no harm. We all know that. She told me herself it was only a boy and girl affair. Still — —’

‘*She* said that?’ asked Tom. His tone was calm, even to indifference, but his eyes, had she looked round, must certainly have betrayed him. Luckily she kept her gaze upon the moon-lit river. She drew her knitted shawl more closely round her. The cold air from the desert touched them both. Tom shivered.

‘Oh, before you came out, that was,’ she mentioned; and each word was a separate stab in the centre of his heart. After a pause she went on: ‘So you might say a little word to be more careful, if you saw your way. Mr.

Winslowe, you see, is a poor guide just now: he has so completely lost his head. He's very impressionable — and very selfish — *I* think.'

Tom was aware that he braced himself. Various emotions clashed within him. He knew a dozen different pains, all equally piercing. It angered him, besides, to hear Lettice spoken of in this slighting manner, for the inference was unavoidable. But there hid below his anger a deep, dull bitterness that tried angrily to raise its head. Something very ugly, very fierce moved with it. He crushed it back.… A feeling of hot shame flamed to his cheeks.

'I should feel it an impertinence, Mrs. Haughstone,' he stammered at length, yet confident that he concealed his inner turmoil. 'Your cousin — I mean, all that she does is quite beyond reproach.'

Her answer staggered him like a blow between the eyes.

'Mr. Kelverdon — on the contrary. My cousin doesn't realise quite, I'm sure — that she may cause *him* suffering. She won't listen to me, but you could do it. *You* touch the mother in her.'

It was a merciless, keen shaft — these last six words. The sudden truth of them turned him into ice. He touched only the mother in her: the woman — but the thought plunged out of sight, smothered instantly as by a granite slab he set upon it. The actual thought was smothered, yes, but the feeling struggled horribly for breath; and another inference, more deadly than the first, stole with a freezing touch upon his soul.

He turned round quietly and looked at his companion. 'By Jove,' he said, with a laugh he believed was admirably natural, 'I believe you're right. I'll give her a little hint — for Tony's sake.' He moved down the steps. 'Tony is so — I mean he so easily loses his head. It's quite absurd.'

But Mrs. Haughstone did not laugh. 'Think it over,' she rejoined. 'You have excellent judgment. You may prevent a little disaster.' She smiled and shook a warning finger. And Tom, feigning amusement as best he might, murmured something in agreement and raised his helmet with a playful flourish.

Mohammed, soft of voice and moving like a shadow, called that the boat was ready, and Tom prepared to go. Mrs. Haughstone accompanied him half-way down the steps.

‘You won’t startle them, will you, Mr. Kelverdon?’ she said. ‘Lettice, you know, is rather easily frightened.’ And she laughed a little. ‘It’s Egypt — the dry air — one’s nerves — —’

Tom was already in the boat, where the Arab stood waiting in the moonlight like a ghost.

‘Of course not,’ he called up to her through the still air. But, none the less, he meant to surprise her if he could. Only in his thought the pronoun insisted, somehow, on the plural form.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BOAT SWUNG out into mid-stream. Behind him the figure of Mrs. Haughstone faded away against the bougainvillæa on the wall; in front, Mohammed's head and shoulders merged with the opposite bank; beyond, the spectral palms and the shadowy fields of clover slipped into the great body of the moon-fed desert. The desert itself sank down into a hollow that seemed to fling those dark Theban hills upwards — towards the stars.

Everything, as it were, went into its background. Everything, animate and inanimate, rose out of a common ultimate — the Sea. Yet for a moment only. There was this sense of preliminary withdrawal backwards, as for a leap that was to come.…

He, too, felt merged with his own background. In his soul he knew the trouble and tumult of the Wave — gathering for a surging rise to follow.…

For some minutes the sense of his own identity passed from him, and he wondered who he was. 'Who am I?' would have been a quite natural question. 'Let me see; I'm Kelverdon, Tom Kelverdon.' Of course! Yet he felt that he was another person too. He lost his grip upon his normal modern self a moment, lost hold of the steady, confident personality that was familiar.… The voice of Mohammed broke the singular spell. 'Shicago, vair' good donkey. Yis, bes' donkey in Luxor—' and Tom remembered that he had a ride of an hour or so before he could reach the Temple of Deir El-Bahri where his friends were bivouacking. He tipped Mohammed as he landed, mounted 'Chicago,' and started off impatiently, then ran against little Mohammed coming back for a forgotten — kettle! He laughed. Every third Arab seemed called Mohammed. But he learned exactly where the party was. He sent his own donkey-boy home, and rode on alone across the moon-lit plain.

The wonder of the exquisite night took hold of him, searching his heart beyond all power of language — the strange Egyptian beauty. The ancient wilderness, so calm beneath the stars; the mournful hills that leaped to touch the smoking moon; the perfumed air, the deep old river — each, and all together, exhaled their innermost, essential magic. Over every separate boulder spilt the flood of silver. There were troops of shadows. Among these shadows, beyond the boulders, Isis herself, it seemed, went by with audible footfall on the sand, secretly guiding his advance; Horus, dignified and solemn, with hawk-wings hovering, and fierce, deathless eyes — Horus, too, watched him lest he stumble.…

On all sides he seemed aware of the powerful Egyptian gods, their protective help, their familiar guidance. The deeps within him opened. He had done this thing before.… Even the little details brought the same lost message back to him, as the hoofs of his donkey shuffled through the sand or struck a loose stone aside with metallic clatter. He heard the lizards whistling.…

There were other vaster emblems too, quite close. To the south, a little, the shoulders of the Colossi domed awfully above the flat expanse, and soon he passed the Ramesseum, the moon just entering the stupendous aisles. He saw the silvery shafts beneath the huge square pylons. On all sides lay the welter of prodigious ruins, steeped in a power and beauty that seemed borrowed from the scale of the immeasurable heavens. Egypt laid a great hand upon him, her cold wind brushed his cheeks. He was aware of awfulness, of splendour, of all the immensities. He was in Eternity; life was continuous throughout the ages; there was no death.…

He felt huge wings, and a hawk, disturbed by his passing, flapped silently away to another broken pillar just beyond. He seemed swept forward, the plaything of greater forces than he knew. There was no question of direction, of resistance: the Wave rushed on and he rushed with it. His normal simplicity disappeared in a complexity that bewildered him. Very clear, however, was one thing — courage; that courage due to abandonment of self. He would face whatever came. He needed it. It was inevitable. Yes — this time he would face it without shuffling or disaster.… For he recognised disaster — and was aware of blood.…

Questions asked themselves in long, long whispers, but found no answers. They emerged from that mothering background and returned into it again.… Sometimes he rode alone, but sometimes Lettice rode beside him: Tony joined them.… He felt them driven forward, all three together, obedient to the lift of the same rising wave, urged onwards towards a climax that was lost to sight, and yet familiar. He knew both joy and shrinking, a delicious welcome that it was going to happen, yet a dread of searing pain involved. A great fact lay everywhere about him in the night, but a fact he could not seize completely. All his faculties settled on it, but in vain — they settled on a fragment, while the rest lay free, beyond his reach. Pain, which was a pain at nothing, filled his heart; joy, which was joy without a reason, sang in him. The Wave rose higher, higher… the breath came with difficulty… the wind was icy… there was choking in his throat.…

He noticed the same high excitement in him he had experienced a few nights ago beneath the Karnak pylons — it ended later, he remembered, in the menace of an unutterable loneliness. This excitement was wild with an irresponsible hilarity that had no justification. He felt *exalté*. The wave, he swinging in the crest of it, was going to break, and he knew the awful thrill upon him before the dizzy, smothering plunge.

The complex of emotions made clear thought impossible. To put two and two together was beyond him. He felt the power that bore him along immensely greater than himself. And one of the smaller, self-asking questions issued from it: ‘Was this what *she* felt? Was Tony also feeling this? Were all three of them being swept along towards an inevitable climax?’ … This singular notion that none of them could help themselves passed into him.…

And then he realised from the slower pace of the animal beneath him that the path was going uphill. He collected his thoughts and looked about him. The forbidding cliffs that guard the grim Valley of the Kings, the haunted Theban hills, stood up pale yellow against the stars. The big moon, no longer smoking in the earthbound haze, had risen into the clear dominion of the upper sky. And he saw the terraces and columns of the Deir El-Bahri Temple facing him at the level of his eyes.

Nothing bore clearer testimony to the half-unconscious method by which the drama developed itself, to the deliberate yet uncalculated attitude of the actors towards some inevitable fulfilment, than the little scene which Tom’s surprise arrival then discovered. According to the mood of the beholder it could mean much or little, everything or nothing. It was so nicely contrived between concealment and disclosure, and, like much else that happened, seemed balanced exquisitely, if painfully, between guilt and innocence. The point of view of the onlooker could alone decide. At the same time it provided a perfect frame for another picture that later took the stage. The stage seemed set for it exactly. The later picture broke in and used it too. That is to say, two separate pictures, distinct yet interfused, occupied the stage at once.

For Tom, dismounting, and leaving his animal with the donkey-boys some hundred yards away, approached stealthily over the sand and came upon the picnic group before he knew it. He watched them a moment before he announced himself. The scene was some feet below him. He looked down.

Two minutes sooner, he might conceivably have found the party quite differently grouped. Instead, however, his moment of arrival was exactly timed as though to witness a scene set cleverly by the invisible Stage Manager to frame two similar and yet different incidents.

Tom leaned against a broken column, staring.

Young de Lorne and Lady Sybil, he saw, were carefully admiring the moonlight on the yellow cliffs. Miss de Lorne stooped busily over rugs and basket packages. Her back was turned to Tony and Madame Jaretzka, who were intimately engaged, their faces very close together, in the half-prosaic, half-poetic act of blowing up a gipsy fire of scanty sticks and crumpled paper. The entire picture seemed arranged as though intended to convey a ‘situation.’ And to Tom a situation most certainly was conveyed successfully, though a situation of which the two chief actors — who shall say otherwise? — were possibly unconscious. For in that first moment as he leaned against the column, gazing fixedly, the smoking sticks between them burst into a flare of sudden flame, setting the two faces in a frame of bright red light, and Tom, gazing upon them from a distance of perhaps some twenty yards saw them clearly, yet somehow did not — recognise them. Another picture thrust itself between: he watched a scene that lay deep below him. Through the soft blaze of that Egyptian moonlight, across the silence of that pale Egyptian desert, beneath those old Egyptian stars, there stole upon him some magic which is deathless, though its outer covenants have vanished from the world.… Down, down he sank into the forgotten scenes whence it arose. Smothered in sand, it seemed, he heard the centuries roar past him.…

He saw two other persons kneeling above that fire on the desert floor, two persons familiar to him, yet whom he could not wholly recognise. In that amazing second, while his heart stopped beating, it seemed as if thought in anguish cried aloud: ‘So, there you are! I have the proof!’ while yet all verification of the tragic ‘you’ remained just out of reach and undisclosed.

He did not recognise two persons whom he knew, while yet some portion of him keenly, fiercely searching, dived back into the limbo of unremembered time.… A thin blue smoke rose before his face, and to his nostrils stole a delicate perfume as of ambra. It was a picnic fire no longer. It was an Eastern woman he saw lean forward across the gleam of a golden brazier and yield a kiss to the lips of a man who claimed it passionately. He saw her small hands folded and clinging about his neck. The face of the man he could not see, the head and shoulders being turned away, but hers he saw clearly — the dark, lustrous eyes that shone between half-closed eyelids. They were highly placed in life, these two, for their aspect as their garments told it; the man, indeed, had gold about him somewhere and the woman, in her mien, wore royalty. Yet, though he but saw their hands and heads alone, he knew instinctively that, if not regal, they were semi-regal, and set beyond his reach in power natural to them both. They were high-born, the favoured of the world. Inferiority was his who watched them, the helpless inferiority of subordinate position. That, too, he knew… for a gasp of terror, though quickly smothered terror, rose vividly behind an anger that could gladly — kill.

There was a flash of fiery and intolerable pain within him.…

The next second he saw merely — Lettice! — blowing the smoke from her face and eyes, with an impatient little gesture of both hands, while in front of her knelt Tony — fanning a reluctant fire of sticks and paper with his old felt hat.

He had been gazing at a coloured bubble, the bubble had burst into air and vanished, the entire mood and picture vanished with it — so swiftly, so instantaneously, moreover, that Tom was ready to deny the entire experience.

Indeed, he did deny it. He refused to credit it. It had been, surely, a feeling rather than a sight. But the feeling having utterly vanished, he discredited the sight as well. The fiery pain had vanished too. He found himself watching the semi-comical picture of de Lorne and Lady Sybil flirting in dumb action, and Tony and Lettice trying to make a fire without the instinct or ability to succeed. And, incontinently, he burst out laughing audibly.

Yet, apparently, his laughter was not heard; he had made no actual sound. There was, instead, a little scream, a sudden movement, a scurrying of feet among the sand and stones, and Lettice and Tony rose upon one single impulse, as once before he had seen them rise in Karnak weeks ago. They stood up like one person. They looked about them into the surrounding shadows, disturbed, afflicted, yet as though they were not certain they had heard… and then, abruptly, the figure of Tony went out… it disappeared. How, precisely, was not clear, but it was gone into the darkness.…

And another picture — or another aspect of the first — dropped into place. There was an outline of a shadowy tent. The flap was stirring lightly, as though behind it some one hid — and watched. He could not tell. A deep confusion, as of two pictures interfused, was in him. For somehow he transferred his own self — was it physical desire? was it spiritual yearning? was it love? — projected his own self into the figure that had kissed her, taking her own passionate kiss in return. He actually experienced it. He did this thing. He had done it — once before! Knowing himself beside her, he both did it and saw himself doing it. He was both actor and onlooker.…

There poured back upon him then, sweet and poignant, his love of an Egyptian woman, the fragrance of remembered tresses, the perfume of fair limbs that clung and of arms that lingered round his neck — yet that in the last moment slipped from his full possession. He was on his knees before her; he gazed up into her ardent eyes, set in a glowing face above his own; the face bent lower; he raised two slender hands, the fingers henna-stained, and pressed them to his lips. He felt their silken texture, the fragile pressure, her breath upon his face — yet all sharply withdrawn again before he captured them completely. There was the odour of long-forgotten unguents, sweet with a tang that sharpened them towards desire in days that knew a fiercer sunlight.… His brain went reeling. The effort to keep one picture separate from the other broke them both. He could not disentangle, could not distinguish. They intermingled. He was both the figure hidden behind the tent and the figure who held the woman in his arms. What his heart desired became, it seemed, that which happened.…

And then the flap of the tent flung open, and out rushed a violent, leaping outline — the figure of a man. Another — it seemed himself — rushed to meet him. There was a gleam, a long deep cry.… A woman, with arms outstretched, knelt close beside the struggling figures on the sand. He saw two huge, dark, muscular hands about a bent and yielding neck, blood oozing thickly between the gripping fingers, staining them… then sudden darkness that blacked out the entire scene, and a choking effort to find breath.… But it was his own breath that failed, choked as by blood and fire that broke into his own throat.… Smothered in sand, the centuries roared past him, died away into the distance, sank back into the interminable desert.… He found his voice this time. He shouted.

He saw again — Lettice, blowing the smoke from her face and eyes with an impatient little gesture of both hands, while Tony knelt in front of her and fanned a reluctant fire with his old felt hat. The picture — the second picture — had been instantaneous. It had not lasted a fraction of a second even.

He shouted. And this time his voice was audible. Lettice and Tony stood up, as though a single person rose. Both turned in the direction of the sound. Then Tony moved off quickly. Tom's vision had interpenetrated this very action even while it was actually taking place — the first time.

'Why — I do declare — if it isn't — Tom!' he heard in a startled woman's voice.

He came down towards her slowly. Something of the 'pictures' still swam in between what was next said and done. It seemed in the atmosphere, pervading the three of them. But it was weakening, passing away quickly. For one moment, however, before it passed, it became overpowering again.

'But, Tom — is this a joke, or what? You frightened me,' — she gave a horrid gasp— 'nearly to death! You've come back —— !'

'It's a surprise,' he cried, trying to laugh, though his lips were dry and refused the effort. 'I have surprised you. I've come back!'

He heard the gasp prolonged. Breathing seemed difficult. Some deep distress was in her. Yet, in place of pity, exultation caught him oddly. The next instant he felt suddenly afraid. There was confusion in his soul. For it was *he and she*, it seemed, who had been ‘surprised and caught.’ And her voice called shrilly:

‘Tony! Tony…!’

There was amazement in the sound of it — terror, relief, and passion too. The thin note of fear and anguish broke through the natural call. Then, as Tony came running up, a few sticks in his big hands — she screamed, yet with failing breath:

‘Oh, oh…! Who *are* you…?’

For the man she summoned came, but came too swiftly. Moving with uncertain gait, he yet came rapidly — terribly, somehow, and with violence. Instantaneously, it seemed, he covered the intervening space. In the calm, sweet moonlight, beneath the blaze of the steady stars, he suddenly was — there, upon that patch of ancient desert sand. He looked half unearthly. The big hands he held outspread before him glistened a little in the shimmer of the moon. Yet they were dark, and they seemed menacing. They threatened — as with some power he meant to use, because it was his right. But the gleam upon them was not of swarthy skin alone. The gleam, the darkness, were of blood.… There was a cry again — a sound of anguish almost intolerable.…

And the same instant Tom felt the clasp of his cousin’s hand upon his own, and heard his jolly voice with easy, natural laughter in it: ‘But, Tom, old chap, how ripping! You’re really back! This *is* a grand surprise! It’s splendid!’

There was nothing that called upon either his courage or control. They were overjoyed to see him, the surprise he provided proved indeed the success of the evening.

‘I thought at first you were Mohammed with the kettle,’ exclaimed Madame Jaretzka, coming close to make quite sure, and murmuring quickly — nervously as well, he thought— ‘Oh, Tom, I *am* so glad,’ beneath her breath. ‘You’re just in time — we all wanted you so.’

Explanations followed; Tony's friends had postponed the Cairo trip at the last moment; the picnic had been planned as a rehearsal for the real one that was to follow later. Tom's adroitness in finding them was praised; he became the unwilling hero of the piece, and as such had to make the fire a success and prove himself generally the *clou* of the party that hitherto was missing. He became at once the life and centre of the little group, gay and in the highest spirits, the emotion accumulated in him discharging itself in the entirely unexpected direction of hilarious fun and gaiety.

The sense of tragedy he had gathered on his journey, if it muttered at all, muttered out of sight. He looked back upon his feelings of an hour before with amazement, dismay, distress — then utterly forgot them. The picture itself — the vision — was as though it had not been at all. What, in the name of common sense, had possessed him that he could ever have admitted such preposterous uneasiness? He thought of Mrs. Haughstone's absurd warnings with a sharp contempt, and felt his spirits only rise higher than before. She was meanly suspicious about nothing. Of course he would give Lettice a hint: why not, indeed? He would give it then and there before them all and hear them laugh about it till they cried. And he would have done so, doubtless, but that he realised the woman's jealousy was a sordid topic to introduce into so gay a party.

'You arrived in the nick of time, Tom,' Lettice told him. 'We were beginning to feel the solemnity of these surroundings, the awful Tombs of the Kings and Priests and people. Those cliffs are too oppressive for a picnic.'

'A fact,' cried Tony. 'It feels like sacrilege. They resent us being here.' He glanced at Madame Jaretzka as he said it. 'If you hadn't come, Tom, I'm sure there'd have been a disaster somewhere. Anyhow, one must feel superstitious to enjoy a place like this. It's the proper atmosphere!'

Lettice looked up at Tom, and added, 'You've really saved us. The least we can do is to worship the sun the moment he gets up. We'll adore old Amon-Ra. It's obvious. We must!'

They made themselves merry over a rather sandy meal. She arranged a place for him close beside her, and her genuine pleasure at his unexpected return filled him with a joy that crowded out even the memory of other emotions. The mixture called Tom Kelverdon asserted itself: he felt ashamed; he heartily despised his moods, wondering whence they came so strangely. Tony himself was quiet and affectionate. If anything was lacking, Tom's high spirits carried him too boisterously to notice it. Otherwise he might possibly have thought that she spoke a little sharply once or twice to Tony, neglecting him in a way that was not quite her normal way, and that to himself, even before the others, she was unusually — almost too emphatically — dear and tender. Indeed, she seemed so pleased he had come that a cynical observer, cursed with an acute, experienced mind, might almost have thought she showed something not far from positive relief. But Tom, too happy to be sensitive to shades of feminine conduct, was aware chiefly, if not solely, of his own joy and welcome.

'You didn't get my letter, then, before you left?' she asked him once; and he replied, 'The answer, as in Parliament, is in the negative. But it will be forwarded all right.' He would get it the following night. 'Ah, but you mustn't read it *now*,' she said. 'You must tear it up unread,' and made him promise faithfully he would obey. '*I* wrote to you too,' mentioned Tony, as though determined to be left out of nothing. 'You'll get it at the same time. But you mustn't tear mine up, remember. It's full of advice and wisdom you badly need.' And Tom promised that faithfully as well. The reply was in the affirmative.

The bivouac was a complete success; all looked back upon it as an unforgettable experience. They declared, of course, they had not slept a wink, yet all had snored quite audibly beneath the wheeling stars. They were fresh and lively enough, certainly, when the sun poured his delicious warmth across the cloudless sky, while Tom and Tony made the fire and set the coffee on for breakfast.

Of the marvellous beauty that preceded the actual sunrise no one spoke; it left them breathless rather; they watched the sky beyond the hills change colour; great shafts of gold transfixed the violet heavens; the Nile shone faintly; then, with a sudden drive, the stars rushed backwards in a shower, and the amazing sun came up as with a shout. Perfumes that have no name rose from the desert and the fields along the distant river banks. The silence deepened, for no birds sang. Light took the world — and it was morning.

And when the donkey-boys arrived at eight o'clock, the party were slow in starting: it was so pleasant to lie and bask in the sumptuous bath of heat and light that drenched them. The night had been chilly enough. They were a tired party. Once home again, all retired with one accord to sleep, remaining invisible until the sun was slanting over Persia and the Indian Ocean, gilding the horizon probably above the starry skies of far Cathay.

But as Tom dozed off behind the shuttered windows in the hotel towards eleven o’clock, having bathed and breakfasted a second time, he thought vaguely of what Mrs. Haughstone had said to him a few hours before. It seemed days ago already. He was too drowsy to hold the thought more than a moment in his mind, much less to reflect upon it. ‘It may be just as well to give a hint,’ occurred to him. ‘Tony *is* a bit too fond of her — too fond for his happiness, perhaps.’ Nothing had happened at the picnic to revive the notion; it just struck him as he fell asleep, then vanished; it was a moment’s instinct. The vision — it had been an instantaneous flash after all and nothing more — had left his mind completely for the time.

But Tom looked back afterwards upon the all-night bivouac as an occasion marked specially in memory’s calendar, yet for a reason that was unlike the reasons his companions knew. He remembered it with mingled joy and pain, also with a wonder that he could have been so blind — the last night of happiness in his brief Egyptian winter.

CHAPTER XX.

HE SLEPT THROUGH the hot hours of the afternoon. In the cool of the evening, as he strolled along the river bank, he read the few lines Lettice had written to him at Assouan. For the porter had handed him half-a-dozen letters as he left the hotel. Tony's he put for the moment aside; the one from Lettice was all he cared about, quite forgetting he had promised to tear it up unread. It was short but tender — anxious about his comfort and well-being in a strange hotel 'when I am not there to take care of you.' It ended on a complaint that she was 'tired rather and spending my time at full length on a deck-chair in the garden.' She promised to write 'at greater length to-morrow.'

'Instead of which,' thought Tom with a boy's delight, 'I surprised her and we talked face to face.' But for the Arab touts who ran beside him, offering glass beads made in Birmingham, he could have kissed the letter there and then.

The resplendent gold on the river blinded him, he was glad to enter the darker street and shake off the children who pestered him for bakshish. Passing the Savoy Hotel, he hesitated a moment, then went on. 'No, I won't call in for Tony; I'll find her alone, and we'll have a cosy little talk together before the others come.' He quickened his pace, entered the shady garden, discovered her instantly, and threw himself down upon the cushions beside her deck-chair. 'Just what I hoped,' he said, with pleasure and admiration in his eyes, 'alone at last. That is good luck — isn't it, Lettice?'

'Of course,' she agreed, and smiled lazily, though some might have thought indifferently, as she watched him arranging the cushions. He flung himself back and gazed at her. She wore a dress of palest yellow, and the broad-brimmed hat with the little roses. She seemed part of the flaming sunset and the tawny desert.

'Well,' he grumbled playfully, 'it is true, isn't it? Our not being alone often, I mean?' He watched her without knowing that he did so.

‘In a way — yes,’ she said. ‘But we can’t have everything at once, can we, Tom?’ Her voice was colourless perhaps. A tiny frown settled for an instant between her eyes, then vanished. Tom did not notice it. She sighed. ‘You baby, Tom. I spoil you dreadfully, and you know I do.’

He liked her in this quiet, teasing mood; it was often the prelude to more delightful spoiling. He was in high spirits. ‘You look as fresh as a girl of sixteen, Lettice,’ he declared. ‘I believe you’re only this instant out of your bath and bed. D’you know, I slept like a baby too — the whole afternoon — —’

He interrupted himself, for at that moment a cigarette-case on the sand beside him caught his eye. He picked it up — he recognised it. ‘Yes — I wish you’d smoke,’ she said the same instant, brushing a fly quickly from her cheek.

‘Tony’s,’ he exclaimed, examining the case.

He noticed at the same time several burnt matches between his cushions and her chair.

‘But he’d love you to smoke them: I’ll take the responsibility.’ She laughed quietly. ‘I’m sure they’re good — better than yours; he’s wickedly extravagant.’ She watched him as he took one out, examining the label critically, then lighting it slowly and inhaling the smoke to taste it. There was a faint perfume that clung to the case and its contents. ‘Ambra,’ said Lettice, a kind of watchful amusement in her eyes. ‘You don’t like it!’

Tom looked up sharply.

‘Is that it? I didn’t know.’

She nodded. ‘It’s Tony’s smell; haven’t you noticed it? He always has it about him. No, no,’ she laughed, noticing his expression of disapproval, ‘he doesn’t use it. It’s just in his atmosphere, I mean.’

‘Oh, is it?’ said Tom.

‘I rather like it,’ she went on idly, ‘but I never can make out where it comes from. We call it ambra — the fragrance that hangs about the bazaars: I believe they used it for the mummies; but the desert perfume is in it too. It’s rather wonderful — it suits him — don’t you think? Penetrating, and so delicate.’

What a lot she had to say about it! He made no reply. He was looking down to see what caused him that sudden, inexplicable pain — and discovered that the lighted match had burned his fingers. The next minute he looked up again — straight into her eyes.

But, somehow, he did not say exactly what he meant to say. He said, in fact, something that occurred to him on the spur of the moment. His mind was simple, possibly, yet imps occasionally made use of it. An imp just then reminded him: ‘Her letter made no mention of the picnic, of Tony’s sudden change of plan, yet it was written yesterday morning when both were being arranged.’

So Tom did not refer to the ambra perfume, nor to the fact that Tony had spent the afternoon with her. He said quite another thing — said it rather bluntly too: ‘I’ve just got your letter from Assouan, Lettice, and I clean forgot my promise that I wouldn’t read it.’ He paused a second. ‘You said nothing about the picnic in it.’

‘I thought you’d be disappointed if you knew,’ she replied at once. ‘That’s why I didn’t want you to read it.’ And she fell to scolding him in the way he usually loved, — but at the moment found less stimulating for some reason. He smoked his stolen cigarette with energy for a measurable period.

‘You’re the spoilt child, not I,’ he said at length, still looking at her. ‘You said you were tired and meant to rest, and then you go for an exhausting expedition instead.’

The tiny frown reappeared between her eyes, lingered a trifle longer than before, and vanished. She made a quick gesture. ‘You’re in a very nagging mood, Tom; bivouacs don’t agree with you.’ She spoke lightly, easily, in excellent good temper really. ‘It was Tony persuaded me, if you want to know the truth. He found himself free unexpectedly; he was so persistent; it’s impossible to resist him when he’s like that — the only thing is to give in and go.’

‘Of course.’ Tom’s face was like a mask. He thought so, at least, as he laughed and agreed with her, saying Tony was an unscrupulous rascal at the best of times. Apparently there was a struggle in him; he seemed in two minds. ‘Was he here this afternoon?’ he asked. He learned that Tony had come at four o’clock and had tea with her alone. ‘We didn’t telephone because he said it would only spoil your sleep, and that a man who works as well as plays must sleep — longer than a younger man.' Then, as Tom said nothing, she added, 'Tony *is* such a boy, isn't he?'

There were several emotions in Tom just then. He hardly knew which was the true, or at least, the dominant one. He was thinking of several things at once too: of her letter, of that faint peculiar odour, of Tony's coming to tea, but chiefly, perhaps, of the fact that Lettice had not mentioned it, — but that he had found it out.… His heart sank. It struck him suddenly that the mother in her sought to protect him from the pain the woman gave.

'Is he — yes,' he said absent-mindedly. And she repeated quietly, 'Oh, I think so.'

The brief eastern twilight had meanwhile fallen, and the rapidly cooling air sighed through the foliage. It grew darker in their shady corner. The western sky was still a blaze of riotous colour, however, that filtered through the trees and shed a luminous glow upon their faces. It was a bewitching light — there was something bewitching about Lettice as she lay there. Tom himself felt a touch of that deep Egyptian enchantment. It stole in among his thoughts and feelings, colouring motives, lifting into view, as from far away, moods that he hardly understood and yet obeyed because they were familiar.

This evasive sense of familiarity, both welcome and unwelcome, swept in, dropped a fleeting whisper, and was gone again. He felt himself for an instant — some one else: one Tom felt and spoke, while another Tom looked on and watched, a calm, outside spectator. And upon his heart came a touch of that strange, rich pain that was never very far away in Egypt.

'I say, Lettice,' he began suddenly, as though he came to an abrupt decision. 'This is an awful place for talk — these Luxor hotels — —' He stuck. 'Isn't it? You know what I mean.' His laborious manner betrayed intensity, yet he meant to speak lightly, easily, and thought his voice was merely natural. He stared hard at the glowing tip of his cigarette.

Lettice looked across at him without speaking for a moment. Her eyelids were half closed. He felt her gaze and raised his own. He saw the smile steal down towards her lips.

'Tom, why are you glaring at me?'

He started. He tried to smile, but there was no smile in him.

‘Was I, Lettice? Forgive me.’ The talk that was coming would hurt him, yet somehow he desired it. He would give his little warning and take the consequences. ‘I was devouring your beauty, as the *Family Herald* says.’ He heard himself utter a dry and unconvincing laugh. Something was rising through him; it was beyond control; it had to come. He felt stupid, awkward, and was angry with himself for being so. For, somehow, at the same time he felt powerless too.

She came to the point with a directness that disconcerted him. ‘Who has been talking about me?’ she enquired, her voice hardening a little; ‘and what does it matter if they have?’

Tom swallowed. There was something about her beauty in that moment that set him on fire from head to foot. He knew a fierce desire to seize her in his arms, hold her for ever and ever — lest she should escape him.

But he was unable to give expression in any way to what was in him. All he did was to shift his cushions slightly farther from her side.

‘It’s always wiser — safer — not to be seen about too much with the same man — alone,’ he fumbled, recalling Mrs. Haughstone’s words, ‘in a place like this, I mean,’ he qualified it. It sounded foolish, but he could evolve no cleverer way of phrasing it. He went on quicker, a touch of nervousness in his voice he tried to smother: ‘No one can mistake *our* relationship, or think there’s anything wrong in it.’ He stopped a second, as she gazed at him in silence, waiting for him to finish. ‘But Tony,’ he concluded, with a gulp he prayed she did not notice, ‘Tony is a little — —’

‘Well?’ she helped him, ‘a little what?’

‘A little different, isn’t he?’

Tom realised that he was producing the reverse of what he intended. Somehow the choice of words seemed forced upon him. He was aware of his own helplessness; he felt almost like a boy scolding his own wise, affectionate mother. The thought stung him into pain, and with the pain rose, too, a first distant hint of anger. The turmoil of feeling confused him. He was aware — by her silence chiefly — of the new distance between them, a distance the mention of Tony had emphasised. Instinctively he tried to hide both pain and anger — it could only increase this distance that was already there. At the same time he saw red.… Her answer, then, so gently given, baffled him absurdly. He felt out of his depth.

‘I’ll be more careful, Tom, dear — you wise, experienced chaperone.’

The words, the manner, stung him. Another emotion, wounded vanity, came into play. To laugh at himself was natural and right, but to be laughed at by a woman, a woman whom he loved, whom he regarded as exclusively his own, against whom, moreover, he had an accumulating grievance — it hurt him acutely, although he seemed powerless to prevent it. He felt his own stupidity increase.

‘It’s just as well, I think, Lettice.’ It was the wrong, the hopeless thing to say, but the words seemed, in a sense, pushed quickly out of his mouth lest he should find better ones. He anticipated, too, her exasperation before her answer proved it: ‘But, really, Tom, you know, I can look after myself rather well as a rule — don’t you think?’

He interrupted her then, a mixture of several feelings in him — shame, the pain of frustrate yearning, perversity too. For, in spite of himself, he wanted to hear how she would speak of Tony. He meant to punish himself by hearing her praise him. He, too, meant to speak well of his cousin.

‘He’s a bit careless, though,’ he blurted, ‘irresponsible, in a way — where women are concerned. I’m sure he means no harm, of course, but — —’ He paused in confusion, he was no longer afraid that harm might come to Tony; he was afraid for her, but now also for himself as well.

‘Tom, I do believe you’re jealous!’

He laughed boisterously when he heard it. It was really comical, absurdly comical, of course. It sounded, too, the way she said it — ugly, mean, contemptible. The touch of shame came back.

‘Lettice! But what an idea!’ He gasped, turning round upon his other elbow, closer to her. But the sinking of his heart increased; he felt an inner cold. And a moment of deep silence followed the empty laughter. The rustle of the foliage alone was audible.

Lettice looked down sideways at him through half-closed eyelids; propped on his cushions beside her, this was natural: yet he felt it mental as well as physical. There was pity in her attitude, a concealed exasperation, almost contempt. At the same time he realised that she had never seemed so adorably lovely, so exquisite, so out of his reach. He had never felt her so seductively desirable. He made an impetuous gesture towards her before he knew it.

‘Don’t, Tom; you’ll upset my papers and everything,’ she said calmly, yet with the merest suspicion of annoyance in her tone. She was very gentle, she was also very cold — cold as ice, he felt her, while he was burning as with fire. He was aware of this unbridgeable distance between his passion and her indifference; and a dreadful thought leaped up in him with stabbing pain: ‘Her answer to Tony would have been quite otherwise.’

‘I’m sorry, Lettice — so sorry,’ he said brusquely, to hide his mortification. ‘I’m awfully clumsy.’ She was putting her papers tidy again with calm fingers, while his own were almost cramped with the energy of suppressed desire. ‘But, seriously,’ he went on, refusing the rebuff by pretending it was play on his part, ‘it isn’t very wise to be seen about so much alone with Tony. Believe me, it isn’t.’ For the first time, he noticed, it was difficult to use the familiar and affectionate name. But for a sense of humour he could have said ‘Anthony.’

‘I do believe you, Tom. I’ll be more careful.’ Her eyes were very soft, her manner quiet, her gentle tone untinged with any emotion. Yet Tom detected, he felt sure, a certain eagerness behind the show of apparent indifference. She liked to talk — to go on talking — about Tony. ‘Do you *really* think so, really mean it?’ he heard her asking, and thus knew his thought confirmed. She invited more. And, with open eyes, with a curious welcome even to the pain involved, Tom deliberately stepped into the cruel little trap. But he almost felt that something pushed him in. He talked exactly like a boy: ‘He — he’s got a peculiar power with women,’ he said. ‘I can’t make it out quite. He’s not good-looking — exactly — is he?’ It was impossible to conceal his eagerness to know exactly what she did feel.

‘There’s a touch of genius in him,’ she answered. ‘I don’t think looks matter so much — I mean, with women.’ She spoke with a certain restraint, not deliberately saying less than she thought, but yet keeping back the entire truth. He suddenly realised a relationship between her and Tony into which he was not admitted. The distance between them increased visibly before his very eyes.

And again, out of a hundred things he wanted to say, he said — as though compelled to — another thing.

‘Rather!’ he burst out honestly. ‘I should hate it if — you hadn’t liked him.’ But a week ago he would have phrased this differently— ‘If *he* had not liked you.’

There were perceptible pauses between their sentences now, pauses that for him seemed breaking with a suspense that was painful, almost cruel. He knew worse was coming. He both longed for it yet dreaded it. He felt at her mercy, in her power somehow.

‘It’s odd,’ she went on slowly, ‘but in England I thought him stupid rather, whereas out here he’s changed into another person.’

‘I think we’ve all changed — somehow,’ Tom filled the pause, and was going to say more when she interrupted.

She kept the conversation upon Tony. ‘I shall never forget the day he walked in here first. It was the week I arrived. You’ll laugh, Tom, when I tell you — —’ She hesitated — almost it seemed on purpose.

‘How was it? How did he look?’ The forced indifference of the tone betrayed his anxiety.

‘Well, he’s not impressive exactly — is he? — as a rule. That little stoop — and so on. But I saw his figure coming up the path before I recognised who it was, and I thought suddenly of an Egyptian, almost an old Pharaoh, walking.’

She broke off with that little significant laugh Tom knew so well. But, comical though the picture might have been — Tony walking like a king, — Tom did not laugh. It was not ludicrous, for it was somewhere true. He remembered the singular inner mental picture he had seen above the desert fire, and the pain within him seemed the forerunner of some tragedy that watched too close upon his life. But, for another and more obvious reason, he could not laugh; for he heard the admiration in her voice, and it was upon that his mind fastened instantly. His observation was so mercilessly sharp. He hated it. Where was his usual slowness gone? Why was his blood so quickly apprehensive?

She kept her eyes fixed steadily on his, saying what followed gently, calmly, yet as though another woman spoke the words. She stabbed him, noting the effect upon him with a detached interest that seemed indifferent to his pain. Something remote and ancient stirred in her, something that was not of herself To-day, something half primitive, half barbaric.

‘It may have been the blazing light,’ she went on, ‘the half-savage effect of these amazing sunsets — I cannot say, — but I saw him in a sheet of gold. There was gold about him, I mean, as though he wore it — and when he came close there was that odd, faint perfume, half of the open desert and half of ambra, as we call it — —’ Again she broke off and hesitated, leaving the impression there was more to tell, but that she could not say it. She kept back much. Into the distance now established between them Tom felt a creeping sense of cold, as of the chill desert wind that follows hard upon the sunset. Her eyes still held him steadily. He seemed more and more aware of something merciless in her.

He sat and gazed at her — at a woman he loved, a woman who loved him, but a woman who now caused him pain deliberately because something beyond herself compelled. Her tenderness lay inactive, though surely not forgotten. She, too, felt the pain. Yet with her it was in some odd way — impersonal.… Tom, hopelessly out of his depth, swept onward by this mighty wave behind all three of them, sat still and watched her — fascinated, even terrified. Her eyelids were half closed again. Another look stole up into her face, driving away the modern beauty, replacing its softness, tenderness with another expression he could not fathom. Yet this new expression was somehow, too, half recognisable. It was difficult to describe — a little sterner, a little wilder, a faint emphasis of the barbaric peering through it. It was darker. She looked eastern. Almost, he saw her visibly change — here in the twilight of the little Luxor garden by his side. Distance increased remorselessly between them. She was far away, yet ever close at the same time. He could not tell whether she was going away from him or coming nearer. The shadow of tragedy fell on him from the empty sky.…

In his bewilderment he tried to hold steady and watch, but the soul in him rushed backwards. He felt, but could not think. The wave surged under him. Various impulses urged him into a pouring flood of words; yet he gave expression to none of them. He laughed a little dry, short laugh. He heard himself saying lightly, though with apparent lack of interest: ‘How curious, Lettice, how very odd! What made him look like that?’

But he knew her answer would mean pain. It came just as he expected:

‘He *is* wonderful — out here — quite different — —’ Another minute and she would have added ‘I’m different, too.’ But Tom interrupted hurriedly:

‘Do you always see him — like that — now? In a sheet of gold — with beauty?’ His tongue was so hot and dry against his lips that he almost stammered.

She nodded, her eyelids still half closed. She lay very quiet, peering down at him. ‘It lasts?’ he insisted, turning the knife himself.

‘You’ll laugh when I tell you something more,’ she went on, making a slight gesture of assent, ‘but I felt such joy in myself — so wild and reckless — that when I got to my room that night I danced — danced alone with all my clothes off.’

‘Lettice!’

‘The spontaneous happiness was like a child’s — a sort of freedom feeling. I *had* to shake my clothes off simply. I wanted to shake off the walls and ceiling too, and get out into the open desert. Tom — I felt out of myself in a way — as though I’d escaped — into — into quite different conditions — —’

She gave details of the singular mood that had come upon her with the arrival of Tony, but Tom hardly heard her. Only too well he knew the explanation. The touch of ecstasy was no new thing, although its manifestation may have been peculiar. He had known it himself in his own lesser love affairs. But that she could calmly tell him about it, that she could deliberately describe this effect upon her of another man — ! It baffled him beyond all thoughts or words.… Was the self-revelation an unconscious one? Did she realise the meaning of what she told him? The Lettice he had known could surely not say this thing. In her he felt again, more distinctly than before, another person — division, conflict. Her hesitations, her face, her gestures, her very language proved it. He shrank, as from some one who inflicted pain as a child, unwittingly, to see what the effect would be.… He remembered the incident of the insect in the sand.…

‘And I feel — even now — I could do it again,’ her voice pierced in across his moment of hidden anguish. The knife she had thrust again into his breast was twisted then.

It was time that he said something, and a sentence offered itself in time to save him. The desire to hide his pain from her was too strong to be disobeyed. He wanted to know, yet not, somehow, to prevent. He seized upon the sentence, keeping his voice steady with an effort that cut his very flesh: ‘There’s nothing impersonal exactly in *that*, Lettice!’ he exclaimed with an exaggerated lightness.

‘Oh no,’ she agreed. ‘But it’s only in England, perhaps, that I’m impersonal, as you call it. I suppose, out here, I’ve changed. The beauty, the mystery, — this fierce sunshine or something — stir — —’ She hesitated for a fraction of a second.

‘The woman in you,’ he put in, turning the knife this time with his own fingers deliberately. The words seemed driven out by their own impetus; he did not choose them. A faint ghastly hope was in him — that she would shake her head and contradict him.

She waited a moment, then turned her eyes aside. ‘Perhaps, Tom. I wonder.…!’

And as she said it, Tom knew suddenly another thing as well. It stood out clearly, as with big printed letters that violent advertisements use upon the hoardings. Her new joy and excitement, her gaiety and zest for life — all had been caused, not by himself, but by another. Heavens! how blind he had been! He understood at last, and a flood of freezing water drenched him. His heart stopped beating for a moment. He gasped. He could not get his breath. His accumulating doubts hitherto unexpressed, almost unacknowledged even, were now confirmed.

He got up stiffly, awkwardly, from his cushions, and moved a few steps towards the house, for there stole upon her altered face just then the very expression of excitement, of radiant and spontaneous joy, he had believed until this moment were caused by himself. Tony was coming up the darkened drive. He was exactly in her line of sight. And a severe, embittered struggle then took place in a heart that seemed strangely divided against itself. He felt as though a second Tom, yet still himself, battled against the first, exchanging thrusts of indescribable torture. The complexity of emotions in his heart was devastating beyond anything he had ever known in his thirty-five years of satisfied, self-centred life. Two voices spoke in clear, sharp sentences, one against the other:

‘Your suspicions are unworthy, shameful. Trust her. She’s as loyal and true and faithful as yourself!’ cried the first.

And the second:

‘Blind! Can’t you see what’s going on between them? It has happened to other men, why not to you? She is playing with you; she has outgrown your love.’ It was the older voice that used the words.

‘Impossible, ridiculous!’ the first voice cried. ‘There’s something wrong with me that I can have such wretched thoughts. It’s merely innocence and joy of life. No one can take *my* place.’

To which, again, the second Tom made bitter answer. ‘You are too old for her, too dull, too ordinary! You hold the loving mother still, but a younger man has waked the woman in her. And you must let it come. You dare not blame. Nor have you the right to interfere.’

So acute, so violent was the perplexity in him that he knew not what to say or do at first. Unable to come to a decision, he stood there, waving his hand to Tony with a cry of welcome. His first vehement desire to be alone, to make an excuse, to get to his room and think, had passed: a second, a maturer attitude, conquered it: to take whatever came, to face it, in a word to know the worst.… And the extraordinary pain he hid by an exuberance of high spirits that surprised himself. It was, of course, the suppressed emotional energy finding another outlet. A similar state had occurred that ‘Karnak night’ of a long ten days ago, though he had not understood it then. Behind it lay the misery of loneliness that he knew in his very bones was coming.

‘Tony! So it is. I was afraid he’d change his mind and leave us in the lurch.’

Tom heard the laugh of happiness as she said it; he heard the voice distinctly — the change of tone in it, the softness, the half-caressing tenderness that crept unconsciously in, the faint thrill of womanly passion. Unconsciously, yes! he was sure, at least, of that. She did not know quite yet, she did not realise what had happened. Honest to the core, he felt her.

His love surged up tumultuously. He could face pain, loss, death — or, as he put it, 'almost anything,' if it meant happiness to her. The thought, at any rate, came to him thus.… And Tom believed it.

At the same moment he heard her voice, close behind him this time. She had left her chair, meaning to go indoors and prepare for supper before Tony actually arrived. 'Tom, dear boy,' her hand upon his shoulder a moment as she passed, 'you're tired or something. I can see it. I believe you're worrying. There's something you haven't told me — isn't there now?' She gave him a loving glance that was of purest gold. 'You shall tell me all about it when we're alone. You must tell me everything.'

The pain and joy in him were equal then. He was a boy of eighteen, aching over his first love affair; and she was divinely mothering him. It was extraordinary; it was past belief; another minute, had they been alone, he could almost have laid his head upon her breast, complaining in anguish to the mother in her that the woman he loved was gone: 'I feel you're slipping from me! I'm losing you…!'

Instead he stammered some commonplace unreality about his work at Assouan and heard her agree with him that he certainly must not neglect it — and she was gone into the house. The swinging curtains of dried grasses hid her a few feet beyond, but between them, he felt, stretched five thousand years and half a dozen continents as well.

'Tom, old chap, did you get my letter? You promised to read it. Is it all right, I mean? I wouldn't for all the world let anything — —'

Tom stopped him abruptly. He wished to read the letter for himself without foreknowledge of its contents.

'Eh? No — that is, I got it,' he said confusedly, 'but I haven't read it yet. I slept all the afternoon.'

An expression of anxiety in Tony's face came and vanished. 'You can tell me to-morrow — frank as you like, mind,' he replied, to which Tom said quite eagerly, 'Rather, Tony: of course. I'll read your old letter the moment I get back to-night.' And Tony, merry as a sandboy, changed the subject, declaring that he had only one desire in life just then, and that was — food.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CONFLICT IN Tom’s puzzled heart sharpened that evening into dreadful edges that cut him mercilessly whichever way he turned. One minute he felt sure of Lettice, the next the opposite was clear. Between these two certainties he balanced in secret torture, one factor alone constant — that his sense of security was shaken to the foundations.

Belief in his own value had never been thus assailed before; that he was indispensable had been an ultimate assurance. His vanity and self-esteem now toppled ominously. A sense of inferiority crept over him, as on the first day of his arrival at Alexandria. There seemed the flavour of some strange authority in her that baffled all approach to the former intimacy. He hardly recognised himself, for, the foundations being shaken, all that was built upon them trembled too.

The insecurity showed in the smallest trifles — he expressed himself hesitatingly; he felt awkward, clumsy, ineffective; his conversation became stupid for all the false high spirits that inflated it, his very manners gauche; he said and did the wrong things; he was boring. Being ill at ease and out of harmony with himself, he found it impossible to play his part in the trio as of old; the trio, indeed, had now divided itself — one against two.

That is, keenly, and in spite of himself, he watched the other two; he watched them as a detective does, for evidence. He became uncannily observant. And since Tony was especially amusing that evening, Lettice, moreover, apparently absorbed in his stimulating talk, Tom’s alternate gaucheries and silence passed unnoticed, certainly uncommented. In schoolboy phraseology, Tom felt out of it. His presence was tolerated — as by favour. The two enjoyed a mutual understanding from which he was excluded, a private intimacy that was spiritual, mental, — physical.

He even found it in him for the first time to marvel that Lettice had ever cared for him at all. Beside Tony’s brilliance he felt himself cheaper, almost insignificant. He felt old.… His pain, moreover, was twofold: his own selfish sense of personal loss produced one kind of anguish, but the possibility that *she* was playing false produced another. The first was manageable: the second beyond words appalling.

Against this background of emotional disturbance he watched the evening pass. It developed as the hours moved. Tony, he noticed, though so full of life, betrayed a certain malaise towards himself and avoided that direct meeting of the eye that was his characteristic. More and more, especially when Mrs. Haughstone had betaken herself to bed, and the trio sat in the cooler garden alone, Tom became aware of a subtle intimacy between his companions that resented all his efforts to include him too. It was, moreover — his heart warned him now, — an affectionate, a natural intimacy, built upon many an hour of intercourse while he was yet in England, and, worst of all, that it was secret. But more — he realised that the missing part of her was now astir, touched into life by another, and a younger, man. It was ardent and untamed. It had awakened from its slumber. He even fancied that something of challenge flashed from her, though without definite words or gesture.

With a degree of acute perception wholly new to him, he watched the evidence of inner proximity, yet watched it automatically and certainly not meanly nor with slyness. The evidence that was sheer anguish thrust itself upon him. His eyes had opened; he could not help himself.

But he watched himself as well. Only at moments was he aware of this — a kind of higher Self, detached from shifting moods, looked on calmly and took note. This Self, placed high above the stage, looked down. It was a Self that never acted, never wept or suffered, never changed. It was secure, superb, it was divine. Its very existence in him hitherto had been unknown. He was now vividly aware of it. It was the Onlooker.

The explanation of his mysterious earlier moods offered itself with a clarity that was ghastly. Watching the happiness of these two, he recalled a hundred subconscious hints he had disregarded: the empty letter at Alexandria, her dislike of being alone with him, the increasing admiration for his cousin, a thousand things she had left unsaid, above all, the exuberance and radiant joy that Tony’s presence woke in her. The gradual but significant change, the singular vision in the desert, his own foretaste of misery as he watched the Theban Hills from the balcony of his bedroom — all, all returned upon him, arranged in a phalanx of neglected proofs that the new Tom offered cruelly to the old. But it was her slight exasperation, her evasion when he questioned her, that capped the damning list. And her silence was the culminating proof.

Then, inexplicably, he shifted to the other side that the old, the normal Tom presented generously to the new. While this reaction lasted he laughed away the evidence, and honestly believed he was exaggerating trifles. The new zest that Egypt woke in her — God bless her sweetness and simplicity! — was only natural; if Tony stimulated the intellectual side of her, he could feel only pleasure that her happiness was thus increased. She was innocent. He could not possibly doubt or question, and shame flooded him till he felt himself the meanest man alive. Suspicion was no normal part of him. He crushed it out of sight, scotched as he thought to death. To lose belief in her would mean to lose belief in everybody. It was inconceivable. Every instinct in him repelled the vile suggestion. And while this reaction lasted his security returned.

Only it did *not* last; it merged invariably into its opposite again; and the alternating confidence and doubt produced a state of confused emotion that contained the nightmare touch in its most essential form. The Wave hung, poised above him — but would not fall — quite yet.

It was later in the evening that the singular intensity introduced itself into all they said and did, hanging above them like a cloud. It came curiously, was suddenly there — without hint or warning. Tom had the feeling that they moved amid invisible dangers, almost as though explosives lay hidden near them, ready any moment to bring destruction with a sudden crash — final destruction of the happy pre-existing conditions. The menace of a thunder-cloud approached as in his childhood's dream; disaster lurked behind the quiet outer show. The Wave was rising almost audibly.

For upon their earlier mood of lighter kind that had preceded Mrs. Haughstone's exit, and then upon the more serious talk that followed in the garden, there descended abruptly this uncanny quiet that one and all obeyed. The contrast was most marked. Tom remembered how their voices hushed upon a given moment, how they looked about them during the brief silence following, peering into the luminous darkness as though some one watched them — and how Madame Jaretzka, remarking on the chilly air, then rose suddenly and led the way into the house. Both she and Tony, he remembered, had been restless for some little time. ‘It’s chilly. We shall be cosier indoors,’ she said lightly, and moved away, followed by his cousin.

Tom lingered a few minutes, watching them pass along the verandah to the room beyond. He did not like the change. In the open air, the intimacy he dreaded was less suggested than in the friendly familiarity of a room, her room; out of doors it was more diffused; he preferred the remoteness that the garden lent. At the same time he was glad of a moment by himself — though a moment only. He wanted to collect his thoughts and face things as they were. There should be no ‘shuffling’ if he possibly could prevent it.

He lingered with his cigarette behind the others. A red moon hung above the mournful hills, and the stars shone in their myriads. Both lay reflected in the quiet river. The night was very peaceful. No wind stirred.… And he strove to force the exquisite Egyptian silence upon the turmoil that was in his soul — to gain that inner silence through which the voice of truth might whisper clearly to him. The poise he craved lay all about him in the solemn stillness, in stars and moon and desert; the temple columns had it, the steadfast, huge Colossi waiting for the sun, the bleak stone hills, the very Nile herself. Something of their immemorial resolution and resistance he might even borrow for his little tortured self… before he followed his companions. For it came to him that within the four walls of her room all that he dreaded must reveal itself in such concentrated, visible form that he no longer would be able to deny it: the established intimacy, the sweetness, the desire, and — the love.

He made this effort, be it recorded in his favour, and made it bravely; while every minute that he left his companions undisturbed was a long-drawn torment in his heart. For he plainly recognised now a danger he knew not how he might adequately meet. Here was the strangeness of it: that he did *not* distrust Lettice, nor felt resentment against Tony. Why this was so, or what the meaning was, he could not fathom. He felt vaguely that Lettice, like himself, was the plaything of greater forces than she knew, and that her perplexing conduct was based upon disharmony in herself beyond her possible control. Some part of her, long hidden, had emerged in Egypt, brought out by the deep mystery and passion of the climate, by its burning, sensuous splendour: its magic drove her along unconsciously. There were two persons in her.

It may have been absurd to divide the woman and the mother as he did; probably it was false psychology as well; where love is, mother and woman blend divinely into one. He did not know: it seemed, as yet, they had not blended. He was positive only that while part of her was going from him, if not already gone, the rest, and the major part, was true and loyal, loving and marvellously tender. The conflict of these certainties left hopeless disorder in every corner of his being.…

Tossing away his cigarette, he moved slowly up the verandah steps. The Wave was never more sensibly behind, beneath him, than in that moment. He rose upon it, it was under him, he felt its lift and irresistible momentum; almost it bore him up the steps. For he meant to face whatever came; deliberately he welcomed the hurt; it had to come; beyond the suffering beckoned some marvellous joy, pure as the dawn beyond the cruel desert. There was in him that rich, sweet pain he knew of old. It beckoned and allured him even while he shrank. Alone the supreme Self in him looked calmly on, seeming to lessen the part that trembled and knew fear.

Then, as he neared the room, a sound of music floated out to meet him — Tony was singing to his own accompaniment. Lettice, upon a sofa in the corner, looked up and placed a finger on her lips, then closed her eyes again, listening to the song. And Tom was glad she closed her eyes, glad also that Tony's back was towards him, for as he crossed the threshold a singular impulse took possession of his legs and he was only just able to stop a ridiculous movement of shuffling with his feet upon the matting. Quickly he gained a sofa by the window and dropped down upon it, watching, listening. Tony was singing softly, yet with deep expression half suppressed:

We were young, we were merry, we were very very wise,
And the door stood open at our feast,
When there passed us a woman with the West in her eyes,
And a man with his back to the East.

O, still grew the hearts that were beating so fast,
The loudest voice was still.
The jest died away on our lips as they passed,
And the rays of July struck chill.

He sang the words with an odd, emphatic slowness, turning to look at Lettice between the phrases. He was not yet aware that Tom had entered. The tune held all the pathos and tragedy of the world in it. ‘Both going the same way together,’ he said in a suggestive undertone, his hands playing a soft running chord; ‘the man and the woman.’ He again leaned in her direction. ‘It’s a pregnant opening, don’t you think? The music I found in the very depths of me somewhere. Lettice, I believe you’re asleep!’ he whispered tenderly after a second’s pause.

She opened her eyes then and looked meaningly at him. Tom made no sound, no movement. He saw only her eyes fixed steadily on Tony, whose last sentence, using the Christian name so softly, rang on inside him like the clanging of a prison bell.

‘Sing another verse first,’ said Madame Jaretzka quietly, ‘and we’ll pass judgment afterwards. But I wasn’t asleep, was I, Tom?’ And, following the direction of her eyes, Tony started, and turned round. ‘I shut my eyes to listen better,’ she added, almost impatiently. ‘Now, please go on; we want to hear the rest.’

‘Of course,’ said Tom, in as natural a tone as possible. ‘Of course we do. What is it?’ he asked.

‘Mary Coleridge — the words,’ replied Tony, turning to the piano again. ‘In a moment of aberration I thought I could write the music for it — —’ The softness and passion had left his voice completely.

‘Oh, the tune is yours?’

His cousin nodded. There was a little frown between the watching eyes upon the sofa. ‘Tom, you mustn’t interrupt; it spoils the mood — the rhythm,’ and she again asked Tony to go on. The difference in the two tones she used was too obvious to be missed by any man who heard them — the veiled exasperation and — the tenderness.

Tony obeyed at once. Striking a preliminary chord as the stool swung round, he said for Tom’s benefit, ‘To me there’s tragedy in the words, real tragedy, so I tried to make the music fit it. Madame Jaretzka doesn’t agree.’ He glanced towards her; her eyes were closed again; her face, Tom thought, was like a mask. Tony did not this time use the little name.

The next verse began, then suddenly broke off. The voice seemed to fail the singer. ‘I don’t like this one,’ he exclaimed, a suspicion of trembling in his tone. ‘It’s rather too awful. Death comes in, the bread at the feast turns black, the hound falls down — and so on. There’s general disaster. It’s too tragic, rather. I’ll sing the last verse instead.’

‘I want to hear it, Tony. I insist,’ came the command from the sofa. ‘I want the tragic part.’

To Tom it seemed precisely as though the voice had said, ‘I want to see Tom suffer. He knows the meaning of it. It’s right, it’s good, it’s necessary for him.’

Tony obeyed. He sang both verses:

The cups of red wine turned pale on the board,
The white bread black as soot.
The hound forgot the hand of his lord,
She fell down at his foot.

Low let me lie, where the dead dog lies,
Ere I sit me down again at a feast,
When there passes a woman with the West in her eyes,
And a man with his back to the East.

The song stopped abruptly, the music died away, there was an interval of silence no one broke. Tom had listened spellbound, haunted. He was no judge of poetry or music; he did not understand the meaning of the words exactly; he knew only that both words and music expressed the shadow of tragedy in the air as though they focussed it into a tangible presence. A woman and a man were going in the same direction; there was an onlooker.… A spontaneous quality in the words, moreover, proved that they came burning from the writer’s heart, and in Tony’s music, whether good or bad, there was this same proof of genuine feeling. Judge or no judge, Tom was positive of that. He felt himself the looker-on, an intruder, almost a trespasser.

This sense of exclusion grew upon him as he listened; it passed without warning into the consciousness of a mournful, freezing isolation. These two, sitting in the room, and separated from him by a few feet of coloured Persian rug, were actually separated from him by unbridgeable distance, wrapped in an intimacy that kept him inexorably outside — because he did not understand. He almost knew an objective hallucination — that the sofa and the piano drew slightly nearer to one another, whereas his own chair remained fixed to the floor, immovable — outside.

The intensity of his sensations seemed inexplicable, unless some reality, some truth, lay behind them. The bread at the feast turned black before his very eyes. But another line rang on with a sound of ominous and poignant defeat in his heart, now lonely and bereft: ‘Low let me lie, where the dead dog lies…’ To the onlooker the passing of the pair meant death.…

Then, through his confusion, flashed clearly this bitter certitude: Tom suddenly realised that after all he knew nothing of her real, her inner life; he knew her only through himself and in himself — knew himself in her. Tony, less self-centred, less rigidly contained, had penetrated her by an understanding sympathy greater than his own. She was unintelligible to him, but not to Tony. Tony had the key.… He had touched in her what hitherto had slept.

As the music wailed its dying cadences into this fateful silence, Tom met her eyes across the room. They were strong, and dark with beauty. He met them with no outer quailing, though with a sense of drenching tears within. They seemed to him the eyes of the angel gazing through the gate. He was outside.…

He was the first to break a silence that had grown unnatural, oppressive.

‘What was it?’ he asked again abruptly. ‘Has it got a name, I mean?’ His voice had the cry of a wounded creature in it.

Tony struck an idle chord from the piano as he turned on his stool, ‘Oh, yes, it’s got a name. It’s called “Unwelcome.” And Tom, aware that he winced, was also aware that something in his life congealed and stopped its normal flow.

‘Tony, you *are* a genius,’ broke in quickly the voice from the other side of the room; ‘I always said so. Do you know, that’s the most perfect accompaniment I ever heard.’ She spoke with feeling, her tone full of admiration.

Tony made no reply. He strummed softly, swaying to the rhythm of what he played.

‘I meant the setting,’ explained Lettice, ‘the music. It expresses the emotion of the words too, *too* exactly. It’s wonderful!’

‘I didn’t know you composed,’ put in Tom stupidly. He had to say something. He saw them exchange a glance. She smiled. ‘When did you do it?’

‘Oh, the other day in a sudden fit,’ said Tony, without turning. ‘While you were at Assouan, I think.’

‘And the words, Tom; don’t you think they’re wonderful, too, and strange?’ asked Lettice. ‘I find them really haunting.’

‘Y-es,’ he agreed, without looking at her. He realised that the lyric, though new to him, was not new to them; they had discussed it together already; they felt the same emotion about it; it had moved and stirred them before, moved Tony so deeply that he had found the music for it in the depths of himself. It was an enigmatical poem, it now became symbolic. It embodied the present situation somehow for him. Tom did not understand its meaning as they did; to him it was a foreign language. But they knew the language easily. It betrayed their deep emotional intimacy.

‘You didn’t hear the first part?’ said Tony.

‘Not quite. You had just started — when I came in.’ Tom easily read the meaning in the question. And in his heart the name of the poem repeated itself with significant insistence: *Unwelcome*! It had come like a blow in the face when Tony mentioned it, bruising him internally. He was bleeding.… He watched the big, dark hands upon the keys as they moved up and down. It suddenly seemed they moved towards himself. There was power, menace in them — there was death. He felt as if they seized — choked him.… They grew stained.…

The voices of his companions came to him across great distance; there was a gulf between them, they on that side, he on this: he was aware of antagonism between himself and Tony, and between himself and Lettice. It was very dreadful; his feet and hands were cold; he shivered. But he gave no outer sign that he was suffering, and a desperate pride — though he knew it was but a sham, a temporary pride — came to his assistance. Yet at the same time — he saw red. He felt like a boy at school again.

In imagination, then, he visualised swiftly a definite scene:

‘Tony,’ he heard himself say, ‘you’re coming between us. It means all the world to me, to you it means only a passing game. If it means more, it’s time for you to say so plainly — and let *her* decide.’

The situation seemed all cleared up; the clouds of tragedy dissipated, the dreadful accumulation of emotion, suspense, and hidden pain, too long suppressed, too intense to be borne another minute, discharged itself in an immense relief. Lettice at last spoke freely and explained: Tony expressed regret, laughing it all away with his accustomed brilliance and irresponsibility.

Then, horribly, he heard Tony give a different answer that was far more possible and likely:

‘I knew you were great friends, but I did not guess there was anything more between you. You never told me. I’m afraid I — I *am* desperately fond of her, and she of me. We must leave it — yes, to her. There is no other way.’

He was lounging on his sofa by the window, his eyes closed, while these thoughts flashed through him. He had never known such insecurity before; he felt sure of nothing; the foundations of his being seemed sliding into space.… For it came to him suddenly that he was a slave and that she was set upon a throne far, far beyond his reach.…

Across the room, lit only by a single lamp upon the piano, the voices of his companions floated to him, low pitched, a ceaseless murmuring stream. He had been listening even while busy with his own reflections, intently listening. They were still talking of the poem and the music, exchanging intimate thoughts in the language he could not understand. They had passed on to music and poetry at large — dangerous subjects by whose means innocent words, donning an easy mask, may reveal passionate states of mental and physical kind — and so to personal revelations and confessions the apparently innocent words interpreted. He heard and understood, yet could not wholly follow because the key was missing. He could not take part, much less object. It was all too subtle for his mind. He listened.…

The moonlight fell upon his stretched-out figure, but left his face in shadow; opening his eyes, he could see the others clearly; the intent expression upon *her* face fascinated him as he watched. Yet before his eyes had opened, the feeling again came to him that they had changed their positions somehow, and the verification of this feeling was the first detail he then noticed. Tony's stool was nearer to the bass keys of the piano, while the sofa Lettice lay upon had certainly been drawn up towards him. And Tony leaned over as he talked, bringing their lips within whispering distance. It was all done with that open innocence which increased the cruelty of it. Tom saw and heard and felt all over his body. He lay very still. He half closed his eyes again.

'I do believe Tom's dropped asleep,' said Lettice presently. 'No, don't wake him,' as Tony half turned round, 'he's tired, poor boy!'

But Tom could not willingly listen to a private conversation.

'I'm not asleep,' he exclaimed, 'not a bit of it,' and noticed that they both were startled by the suddenness and volume of his voice. 'But I *am* tired rather,' and he got up, lit a cigarette, wandered about the room a minute, and then leaned out of the open window. 'I think I shall slip off to bed soon — if you'll forgive me, Lettice.'

He said it on impulse; he did not really mean to go; to leave them alone together was beyond his strength. She merely nodded. The woman he had felt so proudly would put Tony in his place — nodded consent!

'I must be going too in a moment,' Tony murmured. He meant it even less than Tom did. He shifted his stool towards the middle of the piano and began to strum again.

'Sing something more first, Tony; I love your ridiculous voice.'

Tom heard it behind his back; it was said half in banter, half in earnest; yet the tone pierced him. She used the private language she and Tony understood. The little sentence was a paraphrase that, being interpreted, said plainly: 'He'll go off presently; then we can talk again of the things we love together — the things he doesn't understand.'

With his face thrust into the cold night air Tom felt the blood go throbbing in his temples. He watched the moonlight on the sandy garden paths. The leaves were motionless, the river crept past without a murmur, the dark hills rose out of the distant desert like a wave. There was faint fragrance as of wild flowers, very tiny, very soft. But he kept his eyes upon the gliding river rather than on those dark hills crowded with their ancient dead. For he felt as if some one watched him from their dim recesses. It almost seemed that from those bleak, lonely uplands, silent amid the stream of hurrying life to-day, came his pain, his agony. He could not understand it; the strange, sinister mood he had known already once before stole out from the desolate Theban hills and mastered him again. Any moment, if he looked up, he would meet eyes — eyes that gazed with dim yet definite recognition into his own across the night. They would gaze up at him, for somehow he was placed above them.… He had known all this before, this very situation, these very actors — he now looked down upon it all, a scene mapped out below him. There were two pictures that yet were one.

‘What shall it be?’ the voice of Tony floated past him through the open window.

‘The gold and ambra one — I like best of all,’ her voice followed like a sigh across the air. ‘But only once — it makes me cry.’

To Tom, as he heard it, came the shattering conviction that the words were not in English, and that it was neither Lettice nor his cousin who had used them. Reality melted; he felt himself — brain, heart, and body — dropping down through empty space as though towards the speakers. This was another language that they spoke together. *He* had forgotten it.… They were themselves, yet different. Amazement seized him. A familiarity, intense with breaking pain, came with it. Where, O where…?

He heard the music steal past him towards these Theban hills.

His heart was no longer beating; it was still. Life paused, as it were, to let the voice insert itself into another setting, out of due place, yet at the same time true and natural. An intolerable sweetness in the music swept him. But there was anguish too. The pain and pleasure were but one sensation.… All the melancholy blue and gold of Egypt’s beauty passed in that singing before his soul, and something of transcendant value he had lost, something ancient it seemed as those mournful Theban hills, rose with it. It was offered to him again. He saw it rise within his reach — once more. Upon this tide of blue and of gold it floated to his hand, could he but seize it.… Emotion then blocked itself through sheer excess; the tide receded, the vision dimmed, the gold turned dull and faded, the music and the singing ceased. Yet an instant, above the pain, Tom had caught a flush of inexplicable happiness. Beyond the anguish he felt joy breaking upon him like the dawn.…

‘Joy cometh in the morning,’ he remembered, with a feeling as of some modern self and sanity returning. He had been some one else; he now was Tom again. The pain belonged to that ‘some one else.’ It must be faced, for the final outcome would be joy.… He turned round into the room now filled with tense silence only.

‘Tony,’ he asked, ‘what on earth was it?’ His voice was low but did not tremble. The atmosphere seemed drawn taut before him as though it must any instant split open upon a sound of crying. He saw Lettice on her sofa, the lamplight in her wide-open eyes that shone with moisture. She looked at Tony, not at him. There was no decipherable expression on her face. That elusive Eastern touch hung mysteriously about her. It was all half fabulous.

Without turning Tony answered shortly: ‘Oh, just a little native Egyptian song — very old — dug up somewhere, I believe,’ and he strummed softly to himself as though he did not wish to talk more about it.

Lettice watched him for several minutes, then fixed her eyes on Tom; they stared at each other across the room; her expression was enigmatical, yet he read resolution into it, a desire and a purpose. He returned her gaze with a baffled yearning, thinking how mysteriously beautiful she looked, frail, elusive, infinitely desirable, yet hopelessly beyond his reach.… And then he saw the eyelids lower slightly, and a shadowy darkness like a veil fall over her. A smile stole down towards the lips. Terror and fascination caught him; he turned away lest she should reach his secret and communicate her own. She looked right through him. Words, too, were spoken, ordinary modern words, though he did not hear them properly: ‘You’re tired out… you know. There’s no need to be formal where I’m concerned…’ or something similar. He listened, but he did not hear; they were remote, unreal, not audible quite; they were far away in space. He was only aware that the voice was tender and the tone was very soft.…

He made no answer. The pain in her leaped forth to clasp his own, it seemed. For in that instant he knew that the joy divined a little while before was *her*, but also that he must wade through intolerable pain to reach it.

The spell was broken. The balance of the evening, a short half-hour at the most, was uninspired, even awkward. There was strain in the atmosphere, cross-purposes, these purposes unfulfilled, each word and action charged with emotion that was unable to express itself. A desultory talk between Tony and his hostess seemed to struggle through clipped sentences that hung in the air as though afraid to complete themselves. The unfinished phrases floated, but dared not come to earth; they gathered but remained undelivered. Tom had divined the deep, essential intimacy at last, and his companions knew it.

He lay silent on his sofa by the window, or nearly silent. The moonlight had left him, he lay in shadow. Occasionally he threw in words, asked a question, ventured upon a criticism; but Lettice either did not hear or did not feel sufficient interest to respond. She ignored his very presence, though readily, eagerly forthcoming to the smallest sign from Tony. She hid herself with Tony behind the shadowy screen of words and phrases.

Tony himself was different too, however. There was acute disharmony in the room, where a little time before there had been at least an outward show of harmony. A heaviness as of unguessed tragedy lay upon all three, not only upon Tom. Spontaneous gaiety was gone out of his cousin, whose attempts to be his normal self became forced and unsuccessful. He sought relief by hiding himself behind his music, and his choice, though natural enough, seemed half audacious and half challenging — the choice of a devious soul that shirked fair open fight and felt at home in subterfuge. From Grieg's *Ich liebe Dich* he passed to other tender, passionate fragments Tom did not recognise by name yet understood too well, realising that sense of ghastly comedy, and almost of the ludicrous, which ever mocks the tragic.

For Tony certainly acknowledged by his attitude the same threatening sense of doom that lay so heavy upon his cousin's heart. There was presentiment and menace in every minute of that brief half-hour. Never had Tom seen his gay and careless cousin in such guise: he was restless, silent, intense and inarticulate. 'He gives her what I cannot give,' Tom faced the situation. 'They understand one another.… It's not *her* fault.… I'm old, I'm dull. She's found a stronger interest.… The bigger claim at last has come!'

They brewed their cocoa on the spirit-lamp, they munched their biscuits, they said good-night at length, and Tom walked on a few paces ahead, impatient to be gone. He did not want to go home with Tony, while yet he could not leave him there. He longed to be alone and think. Tony's hotel was but a hundred yards away. He turned and called to him. He saw them saying goodnight at the foot of the verandah steps. Lettice was looking up into his cousin's face.…

They went off together. 'Night, night,' cried Tony, as he presently turned up the path to his own hotel. 'See you in the morning.'

And Tom walked down the silent street alone. On his skin he still felt her fingers he had clasped two minutes before. But his eyes saw only — her face and figure as she stood beside his cousin on the steps. For he saw her looking up into his eyes as once before on the lawn of her English bungalow four months ago. And Tony's two great hands were laid upon her arm.

'Lettice, poor child…!' he murmured strangely to himself. For he knew that her suffering and her deep perplexity were somewhere, somehow almost equal to his own.

CHAPTER XXII.

HE WALKED DOWN the silent street alone.… How like a theatre scene it was! Supers dressed as Arabs passed him without a word or sign; the Nile was a painted back-cloth; the columns of the Luxor Temple hung on canvas. The memory of a London theatre flitted through his mind.… He was playing a part upon the stage, but for the second time, and this second performance was better than the first, different too, a finer interpretation as it were. He could not manage it quite, but he must play it out in order to know joy and triumph at the other end.

This sense of the theatre was over everything. How still and calm the night was, the very stars were painted on the sky, the lights were low, there lay a hush upon the audience. In his heart, like a weight of metal, there was sadness, deep misgiving, sense of loss. His life was fading visibly; it threatened to go out in darkness. Yet, like Ra, great deity of this ancient land, it would suffer only a temporary eclipse, then rise again triumphant and rejuvenated as Osiris.…

He walked up the sweep of sandy drive to the hotel and went through the big glass doors. The huge brilliant building swallowed him. Crowds of people moved to and fro, chattering and laughing, the women gaily, fashionably dressed; the band played with that extravagant abandon hotels demanded. The contrast between the dark, quiet street and this busy modern scene made him feel it was early in the evening, instead of close on midnight.

He was whirled up to his lofty room above the world. He flung himself upon his bed; no definite thought was in him; he was utterly exhausted. There was a vicious aching in his nerves, his muscles were flaccid and unstrung; a numbness was in his brain as well. But in the heart there was vital energy. For his heart seemed alternately full and empty; all the life he had was centred there.

And, lying on his bed in the darkened room, he sighed, as though he struggled for breath. The recent strain had been even more tense than he had guessed — the suppressed emotion, the prolonged and difficult effort at self-control, the passionate yearning that was denied relief in words and action. His entire being now relaxed itself; and his physical system found relief in long, deep sighs.

For a long time he lay motionless, trying vainly not to feel. He would have welcomed instantaneous sleep — ten hours of refreshing, dreamless sleep. If only he could prevent himself thinking, he might drop into blissful unconsciousness. It was chiefly forgetfulness he craved. A few minutes, and he would perhaps have slipped across the border — when something startled him into sudden life again. He became acutely wakeful. His nerves tingled, the blood rushed back into the brain. He remembered Tony's letter — returned from Assouan. A moment later he had turned the light on and was reading it. It was, of course, several days old already: —

Savoy Hotel, Luxor.

Dear old Tom — What I am going to say may annoy you, but I think it best that it should be said, and if I am all wrong you must tell me. I have seldom liked any one as much as I like you, and I want to preserve our affection to the end.

The trouble is this: — I can't help feeling — I felt it at the Bungalow, in London too, and even heard it *said* by some one — whom, possibly, you may guess — that you were very fond of her, and that she was of you. Various little things said, and various small signs, have strengthened this feeling. Now, instinctively, I have a feeling also that she and I have certain things in common, and I think it quite possible that I might have a bad effect on her.

I do not suppose for one moment that she would ever care for me, but, from one or two signs in her, I do see possibilities of a sort of playing with fire between us. One *feels* these things without apparent cause; and all I can say is that, absurd as it may sound, I scent danger. To put it quite frankly, I can imagine myself becoming sufficiently excited by her to lose my head a little, and to introduce an element of sex into our friendship which might have some slight effect on us both. I don't mean anything serious, but, given the circumstances, I can imagine myself playing the fool; and the only serious thing is that I can picture myself growing so fond of her that I would not think it playing the fool at the time.

Now, if I am right in thinking that you love her, it is obvious that I must put the matter before you, Tom, as I am here doing. I would rather have your friendship than her possible excitement — and I repeat that, absurd as it may seem, I do scent the danger of my getting worked up, and, to some extent, infecting her. You see, I know myself and know the wildness of my nature. I don't fool about with women at all, but I have had affairs in my life and can judge of the utter madness of which I am capable, madness which, to my mind, *must* affect and stimulate the person towards whom it is directed.

On my word of honour, Tom, I am not in love with her now at all, and it will not be a bit hard for me to clear out if you want me to. So tell me quite straight: shall I make an excuse, as, for example, that I want to avoid her for fear of growing too fond of her, and go? Or can we meet as friends? What I want you to do is to be with us if we are together, so that we may try to make a real trinity of our friendship. I enjoy talking to her; and I prefer you to be with me when I am with her — really, believe me, I do.

Words make things sound so absurd, but I am writing like this because I feel the presence of clouds, almost of tragedy, and I can't for the life of me think why. I want her friendship and 'motherly' care badly. I want your affection and friendship exceedingly. But I feel as though I were unconsciously about to trouble your life and hers; and I can only suppose it is that hard-working subconsciousness of mine which sees the possibility of my suddenly becoming attracted to her, suddenly losing control, and suddenly being a false friend to you both.

Now, Tom, old chap, you must prevent that — either by asking me to keep away, or else by making yourself a definite part of my friendship with her.

I want you to say no word to her about this letter, and to keep it absolutely between ourselves; and I am very hopeful — I feel sure, in fact — that we shall make the jolliest trio in the world. — Yours ever, Tony.

Tom, having read it through without a single stop, laid it down upon his table and walked round the room. In doing so, he passed the door. He locked it, then paused for a moment, listening. 'Why did I lock it? What am I listening for?' he asked himself. He hesitated. 'Oh, I know,' he went on, 'I don't want to be disturbed. Tony knows I shall read this letter to-night. He might possibly come up—' He walked back to the table again slowly. 'I couldn't *see* him,' he realised; 'it would be impossible!' If any one knocked, he would pretend to be asleep. His face, had he seen it in the glass, was white and set, but there was a curious shining in his eyes, and a smile was on the lips, though a smile his stolid features had never known before. '*I* knew it,' said the Smile, '*I* knew it long ago.'

His hand stretched out and picked the letter up again. But at first he did not look at it; he looked round the room instead, as though he felt that he was being watched, as though somebody were hiding. And then he said aloud, but very quietly:

'Light-blue eyes, by God! *The* light-blue eyes!'

The sound startled him a little. He repeated the sentence in a whisper, varying the words. The voice sounded like a phonograph.

'Tony's got light-blue eyes!'

He sat down, then got up again.

'I never, never thought of it! I never noticed. God! I'm as blind as a bat!'

For some minutes he stood motionless, then turned and read the letter through a second time, lingering on certain phrases, and making curious unregulated gestures as he did so. He clenched his fists, he bit his lower lip. The feeling that he was acting on a stage had left him now. This was reality.

He walked over to the balcony and drew the cold night air into his lungs. He remembered standing once before on this very spot, that foreboding of coming loneliness so strangely in his heart. 'It's come,' he said dully to himself. 'It's justified. I understand at last.' And then he repeated with a deep, deep sigh: 'God — how blind I've been! He's taken her from me! It's all confirmed. He's wakened the woman in her!'

It seemed, then, he sought a mitigation, an excuse — for the man who wrote it, his pal, his cousin, Tony. He wanted to exonerate, if it were possible. But the generous impulse remained frustrate. The plea escaped him — because it was not there. The falseness and insincerity were too obvious to admit of any explanation in the world but one. He dropped into a chair, shocked into temporary numbness.

Gradually, then, isolated phrases blazed into prominence in his mind, clearest of all — that what Tony pretended might happen in the future had already happened long ago. ‘I can picture myself growing too fond of her,’ meant ‘I am already too fond of her.’ That he might lose his head and ‘introduce an element of sex’ was conscience confessing that it had been already introduced. He ‘scented danger… tragedy’ because both were in the present — now.

Tony hedged like any other coward. He had already gone too far, he felt shamed and awkward, he had to put himself right, as far as might be, with his trusting, stupid cousin, so he warned him that what had already taken place in the past *might* take place — he was careful to mention that he had no self-control — in the future. He begged the man he had injured to assist him; and the method he proposed was that old, well-proved one of assuring the love of a hesitating woman— ‘I’ll tell her I’m too fond of her, and go!’

The letter was a sham and a pretence. Its assurance, too, was unmistakable: Tony felt certain of his own position. ‘I’m sorry, old chap, but we love each other. Though I’ve sometimes wondered, you never definitely told me that *you* did.’

He read once again the cruellest phrase of all: ‘From one or two signs in her, I do see possibilities of a sort of playing with fire between us.’ It was cleverly put, yet also vilely; he laid half the burden of his treachery on her. The ‘introduction of sex’ was gently mentioned three lines lower down. Tony already had an understanding with her — which meant that she had encouraged him. The thought rubbed like a jagged file against his heart. Yet Tom neither thought this, nor definitely said it to himself. He felt it; but it was only later that he *knew* he felt it.

And his mind, so heavily bruised, limped badly. The same thoughts rose again and again. He had no notion what he meant to do. There was an odd, half-boyish astonishment in him that the accumulated warnings of these recent days had not shown him the truth before. How could he have known the Eyes of his Dream for months, have lived with them daily for three weeks — the light-blue eyes — yet have failed to recognise them? It passed understanding. Even the wavy feeling that had accompanied Tony’s arrival in the Carpathians — the Sound heard in his bedroom the same night — had left him unseeing and unaware. It seemed as if the recognition had been hidden purposely; for, had he recognised it, he would have been prepared, he might even have prevented. It now dawned upon him slowly that the inevitable may not be prevented. And the cunning of it baffled him afresh: it was all planned consummately.

Tom sat for a long time before the open window in a state of half stupor, staring at the pictures his mind offered automatically. A deep, vicious aching gnawed without ceasing at his heart: each time a new picture rose a fiery pang rose with it, as though a nerve were bared.…

He drew his chair closer into the comforting darkness of the night. All was silent as the grave. The stars wheeled overhead with their accustomed majesty; he could just distinguish the dim river in its ancient bed; the desert lay watchful for the sun, the air was sharp with perfume. Countless human emotions had these witnessed in the vanished ages, countless pains and innumerable aching terrors; the emotions had passed away, yet the witnesses remained, steadfast, unchanged, indifferent. Moreover, his particular emotion *now* seemed known to them — known to these very stars, this desert, this immemorial river; they witnessed now its singular repetition. He was to experience it unto the bitter end again — yet somehow otherwise. He must face it all. Only in this way could the joy at the end of it be reached.… He must somehow accept and understand.… This confused, unjustifiable assurance strengthened in him.

Yet this last feeling was so delicate that he scarcely recognised its intense vitality. The cruder sensations blinded him as with thick, bitter smoke. He was certain of one thing only — that the fire of jealousy burned him with its atrocious anguish… an anguish he had somewhere known before.

Then presently there was a change. This change had begun soon after he drew his chair to the balcony, but he had not noticed it. The effect upon him, nevertheless, had been gradually increasing.

The psychological effects of sound, it would seem, are singular. Even when heard unconsciously, the result continues; and Tom, hearing this sound unconsciously, did not realise at first that another mood was stealing over him. Then hearing became conscious hearing — listening. The sound rose to his ears from just below his balcony. He listened. He rose, leaned over the rail, and stared. The crests of three tall palms immediately below him waved slightly in the rising wind. But the fronds of a palm-tree in the wind produce a noise that is unlike the rustle of any other foliage in the world. It was a curious, sharp rattling that he heard. It was *the* Sound.

His entire being was at last involved — the Self that used the separate senses. His thoughts swooped in another direction — he suddenly fixed his attention upon Lettice. But it was an inner attention of a wholesale kind, not of the separate mind alone. And this entire Self included regions he did not understand. Mind was the least part of it. The ‘whole’ of him that now dealt with Lettice was far above all minor and partial means of knowing. For it did not judge, it only saw. It was, perhaps, the soul.

For it seemed the pain bore him upwards to an unaccustomed height. He stood for a moment upon that level where she dwelt, even as now he stood on this balcony looking down upon the dim Egyptian scene. She was beside him; he gazed into her eyes, even as now he gazed across to the dark necropolis among the Theban hills. But also, in some odd way, he stood outside himself. He swam with her upon the summit of the breaking Wave, lifted upon its crest, swept onward irresistibly.… No halt was possible… the inevitable crash must come. Yet she was with him. They were involved together.… The sea!…

The first bitterness passed a little, the sullen aching with it. He was aware of high excitement, of a new reckless courage; a touch of the impersonal came with it all, one Tom playing the part of a spectator to another Tom — an onlooker at his own discomfiture, at his own suffering, at his own defeat.

This new exalted state was very marvellous; for while it lasted he welcomed all that was to come. ‘It’s right and necessary for me,’ he recognised; ‘I need it, and I’ll face it. If I refuse it I prove myself a failure — again. Besides… *she needs it too*!’

For the entire matter then turned over in his mind, so that he saw it from a new angle suddenly. He looked at it through a keyhole, as it were — the extent was large yet detailed, the picture distant yet very clearly focussed. It lay framed within his thoughts, isolated from the rest of life, isolated somehow even from the immediate present. There was perspective in it. This keyhole was, perhaps, his deep, unalterable love, but cleansed and purified.…

It came to him that she, and even Tony, too, in lesser fashion, were, like himself, the playthings of great spiritual forces that made alone for good. The Wave swept all three along. The attitude of his youth returned; the pain was necessary, yet would bring inevitable joy as its result. There had been cruel misunderstanding on his part somewhere; that misunderstanding must be burned away. He saw Lettice and his cousin helping towards this exquisite deliverance somehow. It was like a moment of clear vision from a pinnacle. He looked down upon it.…

Lettice smiled into his eyes through half-closed eyelids. Her smile was strangely distant, strangely precious: she was love and tenderness incarnate; her little hands held both of his.… Through these very eyes, this smile, these little hands, his pain would come; she would herself inflict it — because she could not help herself; she played her inevitable rôle as he did. Yet he kissed the eyes, the hands, with an absolute self-surrender he did not understand, willing and glad that they should do their worst. He had somewhere dreadfully misjudged her; he must, he would atone. This passion burned within him, a passion of sacrifice, of resignation, of free, big acceptance. He felt joy at the end of it all — the joy of perfect understanding… and forgiveness . . . on both sides.…

And the moment of clear vision left its visible traces in him even after it had passed. If he felt contempt for his cousin, he felt for Lettice a deep and searching pity — she was divided against herself, she was playing a part she had to play. The usual human emotions were used, of course, to convey the situation, yet in some way he was unable to explain she was — *being* driven. In spite of herself she must inflict this pain.… It was a mystery he could not solve.…

His exaltation, naturally, was of brief duration. The inevitable reaction followed it. He saw the situation again as an ordinary man of the world must see it.… The fires of jealousy were alight and spreading. Already they were eating away the foundations of every generous feeling he had ever known.… It was not, he argued, that he did not trust her. He did. But he feared the insidious power of infatuation, he feared the burning glamour of this land of passionate mirages, he feared the deluding forces of sex which his cousin had deliberately awakened in her blood — and other nameless things he feared as well, though he knew not exactly what they were. For it seemed to him that they were old as dreams, old as the river and the menace of these solemn hills.… From childhood up, his own trust in her truth and loyalty had remained unalterably fixed, ingrained in the very essence of his being. It was more than his relations with a woman he loved that were in danger: it was his belief and trust in Woman, focussed in her self symbolically, that were threatened.… It was his belief in Life.

With Lettice, however, he felt himself in some way powerless to deal; he could watch her, but he could not judge… least of all, did he dare prevent.… *Her* attitude he could not know nor understand.…

There was a pink glow upon the desert before he realised that a reply to Tony's letter was necessary; and that pink was a burning gold when he knew his answer must be of such a kind that Tony felt free to pursue his course unchecked. Tom held to his strange belief to 'Let it all come,' he would not try to prevent; he would neither shirk nor dodge. He doubted whether it lay in his power now to hinder anything, but in any case he would not seek to do so. Rather than block coming events, he must encourage their swift development. It was the best, the only way; it was the right way too. He belonged to his destination. He went into his own background.…

The sky was alight from zenith to horizon, the Nile aflame with sunrise, by the time the letter was written. He read it over, then hurriedly undressed and plunged into bed. A long, dreamless sleep took instant charge of him, for he was exhausted to a state of utter depletion.

Dear Tony — I have read your letter with the greatest sympathy — it was forwarded from Assouan. It cost you a good deal, I know, to say what you did, and I'm sure you mean it for the best. I feel it like that too — for the best.

But it is easier for you to write than for me to answer. Her position, of course, is an awfully delicate one; and I feel — no doubt you feel too — that her standard of conduct is higher than that of ordinary women, and that any issue between us — if there is an issue at all! — should be left to her to decide.

Nothing can touch my friendship with her; you needn't worry about *that*. But if you can bring any added happiness into her life, it can only be welcomed by all three of us. So go ahead, Tony, and make her as happy as you can. The important things are not in our hands to decide in any case; and, whatever happens, we both agree on one thing — that her happiness is the important thing. — Yours ever, Tom.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HE WAS WAKENED by the white-robed Arab housemaid with his breakfast. He felt hungry, but still tired; sleep had not rested him. On the tray an envelope caught his eye — sent by hand evidently, since it bore no stamp. The familiar writing made the blood race in his veins, and the instant the man was gone he tore it open. There was burning in his eyes as he read the pencilled words. He devoured it whole with a kind of visual gulp — a flash; the entire meaning first, then lines, then separate words.

Come for lunch, or earlier. My cousin is invited out, and Tony has suddenly left for Cairo with his friends. I shall be lonely. How beautiful and precious you were last night. I long for you to comfort me. But don't efface yourself again — it gave me a horrid, strange presentiment — as if I were losing you — almost as if you no longer trusted me. And don't forget that I love you with all my heart and soul. I had such queer, long dreams last night — terrible rather. I must tell you. *Do* come. — Yours, L.

P.S. Telephone if you can't.

Sweetness and pain rose in him, then numbness. For his mind flung itself with violence upon two sentences: he was 'beautiful and precious'; she longed for him to 'comfort' her. Why, he asked himself, was his conduct beautiful and precious? And why did she need his comfort? The words were like vitriol in the eyes.

Long before reason found the answer, instinct — swift, merciless interpreter — told him plainly. While the brain fumbled, the heart already understood. He was stabbed before he knew what stabbed him.

And hope sank extinguished. The last faint doubt was taken from him. It was not possible to deceive himself an instant longer, for the naked truth lay staring into his eyes.

He swallowed his breakfast without appetite… and went downstairs. He sighed, but something wept inaudibly. A wall blocked every step he took. The devastating commonplace was upon him — it was so ordinary. Other men… oh, how often he had heard the familiar tale! He tried to grip himself. ‘Others… of course… but *me*!’ It seemed impossible.

In a dream he crossed the crowded hall, avoiding various acquaintances with unconscious cunning. He found the letter-box and — posted his letter to Tony. ‘That’s gone, at any rate!’ he realised. He told the porter to telephone that he would come to lunch. ‘That’s settled too!’ Then, hardly knowing what blind instinct prompted, he ordered a carriage… and presently found himself driving down the hot, familiar road to — Karnak. For some faultless impulse guided him. He turned to the gigantic temple, with its towering, immense proportions — as though its grandeur might somehow protect and mother him.

In those dim aisles and mighty halls brooded a Presence that he knew could soothe and comfort. The immensities hung still about the fabulous ruin. He would lose his tortured self in something bigger — that beauty and majesty which are Karnak. Before he faced Lettice, he must forget a moment — forget his fears, his hopes, his ceaseless torment of belief and doubt. It was, in the last resort, religious — a cry for help, a prayer. But also it was an inarticulate yearning to find that state of safety where he and she dwelt secure from separation — in the ‘sea.’ For Karnak is a spiritual experience, or it is nothing. There, amid the deep silence of the listening centuries, he would find peace; forgetting himself a moment, he might find — strength.

Then reason parsed the sentences that instinct already understood complete. For Lettice — the tender woman of his first acquaintance — had obviously experienced a moment of reaction. She realised he was wounded at her hands. She felt shame and pity. She craved comfort and forgiveness — his comfort, his forgiveness. Conscience whispered. As against the pain she inflicted, he had been generous, long-suffering — therefore his conduct was ‘beautiful and precious.’ Tony, moreover, had hidden himself until his letter should be answered — and she was ‘lonely.’

With difficulty Tom suppressed the rising bitterness of contempt and anger in him. His cousin’s obliquity was a sordid touch. He forgot a moment the loftier point of view; but for a short time only. The contempt merged again in something infinitely greater. The anger disappeared. *Her* attitude occupied him exclusively. The two phrases rang on with insistent meaning in his heart, as with the clang of a fateful sentence of exile, execution — death:

‘How beautiful you were last night, and precious… I long for you to comfort me.…’

While the carriage crawled along the sun-baked sand, he watched the Arab children with their blue-black hair, who ran beside it, screaming for bakshish. The little faces shone like polished bronze; they held their hands out, their bare feet pattered in the sand. He tossed small coins among them. And their cries and movements fell into the rhythm of the song, whose haunting refrain pulsed ever in his blood: ‘We were young, we were merry, we were very very wise.…’

They were soon out-distanced, the palm-trees fell away, the soaring temple loomed against the blazing sky. He left the *arabyieh* at the western entrance and went on foot down the avenue of headless rams. The huge Khonsu gateway dropped its shadow over him. Passing through the Court with its graceful colonnades, and the Chapel, flanked by cool, dark chambers, where the Sacred Boat floated on its tideless sea beyond the world, he moved on across the sandy waste of broken stone again, and reached in a few minutes the towering grey and reddish sandstone that was Amon’s Temple.

This was the goal of his little pilgrimage. Sublimity closed round him. The gigantic pylon, its shoulders breaking the sky four-square far overhead, seemed the prodigious portal of another world. Slowly he passed within, crossed the Great Court where the figures of ancient Theban deities peered at him between the forest of broken monoliths and lovely Osiris pillars, then, moving softly beneath the second enormous pylon, found himself on the threshold of the Great Hypostyle Hall itself.

He caught his breath, he paused, then stepped within on tiptoe, and the hush of four thousand years closed after him. Awe stole upon him; he felt himself included in the great ideal of this older day. The stupendous aisles lent him their vast shelter; the fierce sunlight could not burn his flesh; the air was cool and sweet in these dim recesses of unremembered time. He passed his hand with reverence over the drum-shaped blocks that built up the majestic columns, as they reared towards the massive, threatening roof. The countless inscriptions and reliefs showered upon his sight bewilderingly.

And he forgot his lesser self in this crowded atmosphere of ancient divinities and old-world splendour. He was aware of kings and queens, of princes and princesses, of stately priests, of hosts and conquests; forgotten gods and goddesses trooped past his listening soul; his heart remembered olden wars, and the royalty of golden days came back to him. He steeped himself in the long, long silence in which an earlier day lay listening with ears of stone. There was colour; there was spendthrift grandeur, half savage, half divine. His imagination, wakened by Egypt, plunged backwards with a sense of strange familiarity. Tom easily found the mightier scale his aching heart so hungrily desired. It soothed his personal anguish with a sense of individual insignificance which was comfort.…

The peace was marvellous, an unearthly peace; the strength unwearied, inexhaustible. The power that was Amon lingered still behind the tossed and fabulous ruin. Those soaring columns held up the very sky, and their foundations made the earth itself swing true. The silence, profound, unalterable, was the silence in the soul that lies behind all passion and distress. And these steadfast qualities Tom absorbed unconsciously through his very skin.… The Wave might fall indeed, but it would fall into the mothering sea where levels must be restored again, secure upon unshakable foundations.… And as he paced these solemn aisles, his soul drank in their peace and stillness, their strength of calm resistance. Though built upon the sand, they still endured, and would continue to endure. They pointed to the stars.

And the effect produced upon him, though the adjective was not his, seemed spiritual. There was a power in the mighty ruin that lifted him to an unaccustomed level from which he looked down upon the inner drama being played. He reached a height; the bird’s-eye view was his; he saw and realised, yet he did not judge. The vast structure, by its harmony, its power, its overmastering beauty, made him feel ashamed and mortified. A sense of humiliation crept into him, melting certain stubborn elements of self that, grown out of proportion, blocked his soul’s clear vision. That he must stand aside had never occurred to him before with such stern authority; it occurred to him now. The idea of sacrifice stole over him with a sweetness that was deep and marvellous. It seemed that Isis touched him. He looked into the eyes of great Osiris,… and that part of him that ever watched — the great Onlooker — smiled.

His being, as a whole, remained inarticulate as usual; no words came to his assistance. It was rather that he attained — as once before, in another moment of deeper insight — that attitude towards himself which is best described as impersonal. Who was *he*, indeed, that he should claim the right to thwart another's happiness, hinder another's best self-realisation? By what right, in virtue of what exceptional personal value, could he, Tom Kelverdon, lay down the law to this other, and say, 'Me only shall you love… because I happen to love you…?'

And, as though to test what of strength and honesty might lie in this sudden exaltation of resolve, he recognised just then the very pylon against whose vast bulk *they* had rested together that moonlit night a few short weeks before… when he saw two rise up like one person… as he left them and stole away into the shadows.

'So I knew it even then — subconsciously,' he realised. 'The truth was in me even then, a few days after my arrival.… And they knew it too. She was already going from me, if not already gone…!'

He leaned against that same stone column, thinking, searching in his mind, feeling acutely. Reactions caught at him in quick succession. Doubt, suspicion, anger clouded vision; pain routed the impersonal conception. Loneliness came over him with the cool wind that stirred the sand between the columns; the patches of glaring sunshine took on a ghastly whiteness; he shivered.… But it was not that he lost belief in his moment of clear vision, nor that the impersonal attitude became untrue. It was another thing he realised: that the power of attainment was not yet in him… quite. He could renounce, but not with complete acceptance.…

As he drove back along the sandy lanes of blazing heat a little later, it seemed to him that he had been through some strenuous battle that had taxed his final source of strength. If his position was somewhat vague, this was due to his inability to analyse such deep interior turmoil. He was sure, at least, of one thing — that, before he could know this final joy awaiting him, he must first find in himself the strength for what seemed just then an impossible, an ultimate sacrifice. He must forget himself — if such forgetfulness involved the happiness of another. He must slip out. The strength to do it would come presently. And his heart was full of this indeterminate, half-formed resolve as he entered the shady garden and saw Lettice lying in her deck-chair beneath the trees, awaiting him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

EVENTS, HOWEVER SLIGHT, which involve the soul are drama; for once the soul takes a hand in them their effects are permanent and reproductive. Not alone the relationship between individuals are determined this way or that, but the relationships of these individuals towards the universe are changed upon a scale of geometrical progression. The results are of the eternal order. Since that which persists — the soul — is radically affected, they are of ultimate importance.

Had the strange tie between Tom and Lettice been due to physical causes only, to mental affinity, or to mere sympathetic admiration of each other's outward strength and beauty, a rupture between them could have been of a passing character merely. A pang, a bitterness that lasted for a day or for a year — and the gap would be filled again by some one else. They had idealised; they would get over it; they were not indispensable to one another; there were other fish in the sea, and so forth.

But with Tom, at any rate, there was something transcendental in their intimate union. Loss, where she was concerned, involved a permanent and irremediable bereavement — no substitute was conceivable. With him, this relationship seemed foreordained, almost prenatal — it had come to him at the very dawn of life; it had lasted through years of lonely waiting; no other woman had ever threatened its fixed security, and the sudden meeting in Switzerland had seemed to him reunion rather than discovery. Moreover, he had transferred his own sense of security to her; had always credited her with similar feelings; and the suspicion now that he had deceived himself in this made life tremble to the foundations. It was a terrible thought that robbed him of every atom of self-confidence. It affected his attitude to the entire universe.

The intensity of this drama, however, being interior, caused little outward disturbance that casual onlookers need have noticed. He waved his hat as he walked towards the corner where she lay, greeting her with a smile and careless word, as though no shadow stood between them. A barrier, nevertheless, was there he knew. He *felt* it almost sensibly. Also — it had grown higher. And at once he was aware that the Lettice who returned his smile with a colourless ‘Good morning, Tom, I’m so glad you could come,’ was not the Lettice who had known a moment’s reaction a little while before. He told by her very attitude that now there was lassitude, even weariness in her. Her eyes betrayed none of the excitement and delight that another could wake in her. His own presence certainly no longer brought the thrill, the interest that once it did. She was both bored and lonely.

And, while an exquisite pain ran through him, he made a prodigious effort to draw upon the strength he had felt in Karnak a short half-hour ago. He struggled bravely to forget himself. ‘So Tony’s gone!’ he said lightly, ‘run off and left us without so much as a word of warning or good-bye. A rascally proceeding, I call it! Rather sudden, too, wasn’t it?’

He sat down beside her and began to smoke. She need not answer unless she wanted to. She did answer, however, and at once. She did not look at him; her eyes were on the golden distance. It had to be said; she said it. ‘He’s only gone for two or three days. His friends suddenly changed their minds, and he couldn’t get out of it. He said he didn’t want to go — a bit.’

How did she know it, Tom wondered, glancing up over his cigarette? And how had she read his mind so easily?

‘He just popped in to tell me,’ she added, ‘and to say good-bye. He asked me to tell you.’ She spoke without a tremor, as if Tom had no right to disapprove.

‘Pretty early, wasn’t it?’ It was not the first time either. ‘He comes at such unusual hours’ — he remembered Mrs. Haughstone’s words.

‘I was only just up. But there was time to give him coffee before the train.’

She offered no further comment; Tom made none; he sat smoking there beside her, outwardly calm and peaceful as though no feeling of any kind was in him. He felt numb perhaps. In his mind he saw the picture of the breakfast-table beneath the trees. The plan had been arranged, of course, beforehand.

‘Miss de Lorne’s coming to lunch,’ she mentioned presently. ‘She’s to bring her pictures — the Deir-el-Bahri ones. You must help me criticise them.’

So they were not to be alone even, was Tom's instant thought. Aloud he said merely, 'I hope they're good.' She flicked the flies away with her horse-hair whisk, and sighed. He caught the sigh. The day felt empty, uninspired, the boredom of cruel disillusion in it somewhere. But it was the sigh that made him realise it. Avoiding the subject of Tony's abrupt departure, he asked what she would like to do that afternoon. He made various proposals; she listened without interest. 'D'you know, Tom, I don't feel inclined to do anything much, but just lie and rest.'

There was no energy in her, no zest for life; expeditions had lost their interest; she was listless, tired. He felt impatience in him, sharp disappointment too; but there was an alert receptiveness in his mind that noted trifles done or left undone. She made no reference, for instance, to the fact that they might be frequently alone together now. A faint hope that had been in him vanished quickly.… He wondered when she was going to speak of her letter, of his conduct the night before that was 'beautiful and precious,' of the 'comfort' she had needed, or even of the dreams that she had mentioned. But, though he waited, giving various openings, nothing was forthcoming. That side of her, once intimately precious and familiar, seemed buried, hidden away, perhaps forgotten. This was not Lettice — it was some one else.

'You had dreams that frightened you?' he enquired at length. 'You said you'd tell them to me.' He moved nearer so that he could watch her face.

She looked puzzled for a second. 'Did I?' she replied. She thought a moment. 'Oh yes, of course I did. But they weren't much really. I'd forgotten. It was about water or something. Ah, I remember now — we were drowning, and you saved us.' She gave a little unmeaning laugh as she said it.

'Who were drowning?'

'All of us — me and you, I think it was — and Tony — —'

'Oh, of course.'

She looked up. 'Tom, why do you say "of course" like that?'

'It was your old idea of the river and the floating faces, I meant,' he answered. 'I had the feeling.'

‘You said it so sharply.’

‘Did I!’ He shrugged his shoulders slightly. ‘I didn’t mean to.’ He noticed the beauty of her ear, the delicate line of the nostrils, the long eyelashes. The graceful neck, with the firm, slim line of the breast below, were exquisite. The fairy curve of her ankle was just visible. He could have knelt and covered it with kisses. Her coolness, the touch of contempt in her voice made him wild.… But he understood his rôle; and — he remembered Karnak.

A little pause followed. Lettice made one of her curious gestures, half impatience, half weariness. She stretched; the other ankle appeared. Tom, as he saw it, felt something in him burst into flame. He came perilously near to saying impetuously a hundred things he had determined that he must not say. He felt the indifference in her, the coolness, almost the cruelty. Her negative attitude towards him goaded, tantalised. He was full of burning love, from head to foot, while she lay there within two feet of him, calm, listless, unresponsive, passionless. The bitter pain of promises unfulfilled assailed him acutely, poignantly. Yet in ordinary life the situation was so commonplace. The ‘strong man’ would face her with it, have it out plainly; he would be masterful, forcing a climax of one kind or another, behaving as men do in novels or on the stage.

Yet Tom remained tongue-tied and restrained; he seemed unable to take the lead; an inner voice cried sternly No to all such natural promptings. It would be a gross mistake. He must let things take their course. He must not force a premature disclosure. With a tremendous effort, he controlled himself and smothered the rising fires that struggled towards speech and action. He would not even ask a single question. Somehow, in any case, it was impossible.

The subject dropped; Lettice made no further reference to the letter.

‘When you feel like going anywhere, or doing anything, you’ll let me know,’ he suggested presently. ‘We’ve been too energetic lately. It’s best for you to rest. You’re tired.’ The words hurt and stung him as though he were telling lies. He felt untrue to himself. The blood boiled in his veins.

She answered him with a touch of impatience again, almost of exasperation. He noticed the emphasis she used so needlessly.

‘Tom, I’m *not* tired — not in the way *you* mean. It’s just that I feel like being quiet for a bit. *Really* it’s not so remarkable! Can’t you understand?’

‘Perfectly,’ he rejoined calmly, lighting another cigarette. ‘We’ll have a programme ready for later — when Tony gets back.’ The blood rushed from his heart as he said it.

Her face brightened instantly, as he had expected — dreaded; there was no attempt at concealment anywhere; she showed interest as frankly as a child. ‘It was stupid of him to go, just when we were enjoying everything so,’ she said again. ‘I wonder how long he’ll stay — —’

‘I’ll write and tell him to hurry up,’ suggested Tom. He twirled his fly-whisk energetically.

‘Tell him we can’t get on without our *dragoman*,’ she added eagerly with her first attempt at gaiety; and then went on to mention other things he was to say, till her pleasure in talking about Tony was so obvious that Tom yielded to temptation suddenly. It was more than he could bear. ‘I strongly suspect a pretty girl in the party somewhere,’ he observed carelessly.

‘There is,’ came the puzzling reply, ‘but he doesn’t care for her a bit. He told me all about her. It’s curious, isn’t it, how he fascinates them all? There’s something very remarkable about Tony — I can’t quite make it out.’

Tom leaned forward, bringing his face in front of her own, and closer to it. He looked hard into her eyes a moment. In the depths of her steady gaze he saw shadows, far away, behind the open expression. There was trouble in her, but it was deep, deep down and out of sight. The eyes of some one else, it seemed, looked through her into his. An older world came whispering across the sunlight and the sand.

‘Lettice,’ he said quietly, ‘there’s something new come into your life these last few weeks — isn’t there?’ His voice grated — like machinery started with violent effort against resistance. ‘Some new, big force, I mean? You seem so changed, so different.’ He had not meant to speak like this. It was forced out. He expressed himself badly too. He raged inwardly.

She smiled, but only with her lips. The shadows from behind her eyes drew nearer to the surface. But the eyes themselves held steady. That other look peered out of them. He was aware of power, of something strangely bewitching, yet at the same time fierce, inflexible in her… and a kind of helplessness came over him, as though he was suddenly out of his depth, without sure footing. The Wave roared in his ears and blood.

‘Egypt probably — old Egypt,’ she said gently, making a slow gesture with one hand towards the river and the sky. ‘It must be that.’ The gesture, it seemed to him, had royalty in it somewhere. There was stateliness and dignity — an air of authority about her. It was magnificent. He felt worship in him. The slave that lies in worship stirred. He could yield his life, suffer torture for days to give her a moment’s happiness.

‘I meant something personal, rather,’ he prevaricated.

‘You meant Tony. I know it. Didn’t you, Tom?’

His breath caught inwardly. In spite of himself, and in spite of his decision, she drew his secret out. Enchantment touched him deliciously, an actual torture in it.

‘Yes,’ he said honestly, ‘perhaps I did.’ He said it shamefacedly rather, to his keen vexation. ‘For it *has* to do with Tony somehow.’

He got up abruptly, tossed his cigarette over the wall into the river, then sat down again. ‘There’s something about it — strange and big. I can’t make it out a bit.’ He faltered, stammered over the words. ‘It’s a long way off — then all at once it’s close.’ He had the feeling that he had put a match to something. ‘I’ve done it now,’ he said to himself like a boy, as though he expected that something dramatic must happen instantly.

But nothing happened. The river flowed on silently, the heat blazed down, the leaves hung motionless as before, and far away the lime-stone hills lay sweltering in the glare. But those hills had glided nearer. He was aware of them, — the Valley of the Kings, — the desolate Theban Hills with their myriad secrets and their deathless tombs.

Lettice gave her low, significant little laugh. ‘It’s odd you should say that, Tom — very odd. Because I’ve felt it too. It’s awfully remote and quite near at the same time — —’

‘And Tony’s brought it,’ he interrupted eagerly, half passionately. ‘It’s got to do with him, I mean.’

It seemed to him that the barrier between them had lowered a little. The Lettice he knew first peered over it at him.

‘No,’ she corrected, ‘I don’t feel that he’s brought it. He’s *in* it somehow, I admit, but he has not brought it exactly.’ She hesitated a moment. ‘I think the truth is he can’t help himself — any more than we — you or I — can.’

There was a caressing tenderness in her voice as she said it, but whether for himself or for another he could not tell. In his heart rose a frantic impulse just then to ask — to blurt it out: ‘Do you love Tony? Has he taken you from me? Tell me the truth and I can bear it. Only, for heaven’s sake, don’t hide it!’ But, instead of saying this absurd, theatrical thing, he looked at her through the drifting cigarette smoke a moment without speaking, trying to read the expression in her face. ‘Last night, for instance,’ he exclaimed abruptly; ‘in the music room, I mean. Did you feel *that*? — the intensity — a kind of ominous feeling?’

Her expression was enigmatical; there were signs of struggle in it, he thought. It was as if two persons fought within her which should answer. Apparently the dear Lettice of his first acquaintance won — for the moment.

‘You noticed it too!’ she exclaimed with astonishment. ‘I thought I was the only one.’

‘We all — all three of us — felt it,’ he said in a lower tone. ‘Tony certainly did — —’

Lettice raised herself suddenly on her elbow and looked down at him with earnestness. Something of the old eagerness was in her. The barrier between them lowered perceptibly again, and Tom felt a momentary return of the confidence he had lost. His heart beat quickly. He made a half-impetuous gesture towards her— ‘What is it? What does it all mean, Lettice?’ he exclaimed. ‘D’you feel what *I* feel in it — danger somewhere — danger for *us*?’ There was a yearning, almost a cry for mercy in his voice.

She drew back again. ‘You amaze me, Tom,’ she said, as she lay among her cushions. ‘I had no idea you were so observant.’ She paused, putting her hand across her eyes a moment. ‘N-no — I don’t feel danger exactly,’ she went on in a lower tone, speaking half to herself and half to him; ‘I feel—’ She broke off with a little sigh; her hand still covered her eyes. ‘I feel,’ she went on slowly, with pauses between the words, ‘a deep, deep something — from very far away — that comes over me at times — only at times, yes. It’s remote, enormously remote — but it has to be. I’ve never given you all that I ought to give. We have to go through with it — —’

‘You and I?’ he whispered. He was listening intently. The beats of his heart were most audible.

She sighed. ‘All three of us — somehow,’ she replied equally low, and speaking again more to herself than to him. ‘Ah! Now my dream comes back a little. It was *the* river — my river with the floating faces. And the thing I feel comes — from its source, far, far away — its tiny source among the hills — —’ She sighed again, more deeply than before. Her breast heaved slightly. ‘We must go through it — yes. It’s necessary for us — necessary for you — and me — —’

‘Lettice, my precious, my wonderful!’ Tom whispered as though the breath choked and strangled him. ‘But we stay together through it? We stay together *afterwards*? You love me still?’ He leaned across and took her other hand. It lay unresistingly in his. It was very cold — without a sign of response.

Her faint reply half staggered him: ‘We are always, always together, you and I. Even if you married, I should still be yours. He will go out — —’

Fear clashed with hope in his heart as he heard these words he could not understand. He groped and plunged after their meaning. He was bewildered by the reference to marriage — his marriage! Was she, then, already aware that she might lose him?… But there was confession in them too, the confession that she *had* been away from him. That he felt clearly. Now that the dividing influence was removed, she was coming back perhaps! If Tony stayed away she would come back entirely; only then the thing that had to happen would be prevented — which was not to be thought of for a moment.… ‘Poor Lettice.…’ He felt pity, love, protection that he burned to give; he felt a savage pain and anger as well. In the depths of him love and murder sat side by side.

‘Oh, Lettice, tell me everything. Do share with me — share it and we’ll meet it together.’ He drew her cold hand towards him, putting it inside his coat. ‘Don’t hide it from me. You’re my whole world. *My* love can never change.… Only don’t hide anything!’ The words poured out of him with passionate entreaty. The barrier had melted, vanished. He had found her again, the Lettice of his childhood, of his dream, the true and faithful woman he had known first. His inexpressible love rose like a wave upon him. Regardless of where they were he bent over to take her in his arms — when she suddenly withdrew her hand from his. She removed the other from her eyes. He saw her face. And he realised in an instant that his words had been all wrong. He had said precisely again what he ought not to have said. The moment in her had passed.

The sudden change had a freezing effect upon him.

‘Tom, I don’t understand quite,’ she said coldly, her eyes fixed on his almost with resentment in them. ‘I’m not *hiding* anything from you. Why do you say such things? I’m true — true to myself.’

The barrier was up again in an instant, of granite this time, with jagged edges of cut glass upon it, so that he could not approach it even. It was not Lettice that spoke then:

‘I don’t know what’s come over you out here,’ she went on, each word she uttered increasing the distance between them; ‘you misunderstand everything I say and criticise all I do. You suspect my tenderest instincts. Even a friendship that brings me happiness you object to and — and exaggerate.’

He listened till she ceased; it was as if he had received a blow in the face; he felt disconcerted, keenly aware of his own stupidity, helpless. Something froze in him. He had seen her for a second, then lost her utterly.

‘No, no, Lettice,’ he stammered, ‘you read all that into me — really, you do. I only want your happiness.’

Her eyes softened a little. She sighed wearily and turned her face away.

‘We were only talking of this curious, big feeling that’s come — —’ he went on.

‘You were speaking of Tony — that’s what you really meant, Tom,’ she interrupted. ‘You know it perfectly well. It only makes it harder — for *me*?’

He felt suddenly she was masquerading, playing with him again, playing with his very heart and soul. The devil tempted him. All the things he had decided he would not say rose to the tip of his tongue. The worst of them — those that hurt him most — he managed to force down. But even the one he did suffer to escape gave him atrocious pain:

‘Well, Lettice, to tell the truth, I do think Tony has a bad — a curious influence on you. I do feel he has come between us rather. And I do think that if you would only share with me — —’

The sudden way she turned upon him, rising from her chair and standing over him, was so startling that he got up too. They faced each other, he in the blazing sunshine, she in the shade. She looked so different that he was utterly taken aback. She wore that singular Eastern appearance he now knew so well. Expression, attitude, gesture, all betrayed it. That inflexible, cruel thing shone in her eyes.

‘Tom, dear,’ she said, but with a touch of frigid exasperation that for a moment paralysed thought and utterance in him, ‘whatever happens, you must realise this — that I am myself and that I can never allow my freedom to be taken from me. If you’re determined to misjudge, the fault is yours, and if our love, our friendship, cannot understand *that*, there’s something wrong with it.’

The word ‘friendship’ was like a sword thrust. It went right through him. ‘I trust you,’ he faltered, ‘I trust you wholly. I know you’re true.’ But the words, it seemed, gave expression to an intense desire, a fading hope. He did not say it with conviction. She gazed at him for a moment through half-closed eyelids.

‘*Do* you, Tom?’ she whispered.

‘Lettice…!’

‘Then believe at least—’ her voice wavered suddenly, there came a little break in it— ‘that I am true to you, Tom, as I am to myself. Believe in that… and — Oh! for the love of heaven — help me!’

Before he could respond, before he could act upon the hope and passion her last unexpected words set loose in him — she turned away to go into the house. Voices were audible behind them, and Miss de Lorne was coming up the sandy drive with Mrs. Haughstone. Tom watched her go. She moved with a certain gliding, swaying walk as she passed along the verandah and disappeared behind the curtains of dried grass. It almost seemed — though this must certainly have been a trick of light and shadow — that she was swathed from head to foot in a clinging garment not of modern kind, and that he caught the gleam of gold upon the flesh of dusky arms that were bare above the elbow. Two persons were visible in her very physical appearance, as two persons had just been audible in her words. Thence came the conflict and the contradictions.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FEW MINUTES later Lettice was presiding over her luncheon table as though life were simple as the sunlight in the street outside, and no clouds could ever fleck the procession of the years. She was quiet and yet betrayed excitement. Tom, at the opposite end of the table, watched her girlish figure, her graceful gestures. Her eyes were very bright, no shadows in their depths; she returned his gaze with untroubled frankness. Yet the set of her little mouth had self-mastery in it somewhere; there was no wavering or uncertainty; her self-possession was complete. But above his head the sword of Damocles hung. He saw the thread, taut and gleaming in the glare of the Egyptian sunlight.… He waited upon his cousin's return as men once waited for the sign thumbs up, thumbs down.…

'Molly has sent me her album,' mentioned Mrs. Haughstone when the four of them were lounging in the garden chairs; 'she wonders if you would write your name in it. It's her passion — to fill it with distinguished names.' And when the page was found, she pointed to the quotation against his birthday date with the remark, in a lowered voice: 'It's quite appropriate, isn't it? For a man, I mean,' she added, 'because when a man's unhappy he's more easily tempted to suspicion than a woman is.'

'What is the quotation?' asked Lettice, glancing up from her deck chair.

Tom was carefully inscribing his 'distinguished' name in the child's album, as Mrs. Haughstone read the words aloud over his shoulder:

'"Whatever the circumstances, there is no man so miserable that he need not be true." It's anonymous,' she added, 'but it's by some one very wise.'

'A woman, probably,' Miss de Lorne put in with a laugh.

They discussed it, while Tom laboriously wrote his name against it with a fountain pen. His writing was a little shaky, for his sight was blurred and ice was in his veins.

'There's no need for you to hurry, is there?' said Lettice presently. 'Won't you stay and read to me a bit? Or would you rather look in — after dinner

— and smoke?' The two selves spoke in that. It was as if the earlier, loving Lettice tried to assert itself, but was instantly driven back again. How differently she would have said it a few months ago.… He made excuses, saying he would drop in after dinner if he might. She did not press him further.

'I *am* tired a little,' she said gently. 'I'll sleep and rest and write letters too, then.'

She was invariably tired now, Tom soon discovered — until Tony returned from Cairo.…

And that evening he escaped the invitations to play bridge, and made his way back, as in a dream, to the little house upon the Nile. He found her bending over the table so that the lamp shone on her abundant coils of hair, and as he entered softly he saw the address on the envelope beside her writing pad, several pages of which were already covered with her small, fine writing. He read the name before he could turn his eyes away.

'I was writing to Tony,' she said, looking up with an untroubled smile, 'but I can finish later. And you've come just in time to take my part. Ettie's been scolding me severely again.'

She blotted the lines and put the paper on one side, then turned with a challenging expression at her cousin who was knitting by the open window. The little name sounded so incongruous; it did not suit the big gaunt woman who had almost a touch of the monstrous in her. Tom stared a moment without speaking. The playful challenge had reality in it. Lettice intended to define her position openly. She meant that Tom should support her too.

He smiled as he watched them. But no words came to him. Then, remembering all at once that he had not kept his promise, he said quietly: 'I must send a line as well. I quite forgot.'

'You can write it now,' suggested Lettice, 'and I'll enclose it in mine.' And she pointed to the envelopes and paper before him on the table.

There was a moment of acute and painful struggle in him; pride and love fought the old pitched battle, but on a field of her own bold choosing! Tom knew murder in his heart, but he knew also that strange rich pain of sacrifice. It was theatrical: he stood upon the stage, an audience watching him with intent expectancy, wondering upon his decision. Mrs. Haughstone, Lettice and another part of himself that was Onlooker were the audience; Mrs. Haughstone had ceased knitting, Lettice leaned back in her chair, a smile in the eyes, but the lips set very firmly together. The man in him, with scorn and anger, seemed to clench his fists, while that other self — as with a spirit's voice from very far away — whispered behind his pain: 'Obey. You must. It has to be, so why not help it forward!'

To play the game, but to play it better than before, flashed through him.… Half amazed at himself, yet half contented, he sat down mechanically and scribbled a few lines of urgent entreaty to his cousin to come back soon.… 'We want you here, it's dull, we can't get on without you…' knowing that he traced the sentences of his own death-warrant. He folded it and passed it across to Lettice, who slipped it unread into her envelope. 'That ought to bring him, you think?' she observed, a happy light in her eyes, yet with a faint sigh half suppressed, as though she did a thing which hurt her too.

'I hope so,' replied Tom. 'I think so.'

He knew not what she had written to Tony; but whatever it was, his own note would appear to endorse it. He had perhaps placed in her hand the weapon that should hasten his own defeat, stretch him bleeding on the sand. And yet he trusted her; she was loyal and true throughout. The quicker the climax came, the sooner would he know the marvellous joy that lay beyond the pain. In some way, moreover, she knew this too. Actually they were working together, hand in hand, to hasten its inevitable arrival. They merely used such instruments as fate offered, however trivial, however clumsy. They were *being* driven. They could neither choose nor resist. He found a germ of subtle comfort in the thought. The Wave was under them. Upon its tumultuous volume they swept forward, side by side… striking out wildly.

'And will you also post it for me when you go?' he heard. 'I'll just add a line to finish up with.' Tom watched her open the writing-block again and trace a hurried sentence or two; she did it openly; he saw the neat, small words flow from the nib; he saw the signature: 'Lettice.'

'Fasten it down for me, Tom, will you? It's such an ugly thing for a woman to do. It's absurd that science can't invent a better way of closing an envelope, isn't it?' He was oddly helpless; she forced him to obey out of some greater knowledge. And while he did the ungraceful act, their eyes met across the table. It was the other person in her — the remote, barbaric, eastern woman, set somehow in power over him — who watched him seal his own discomfiture, and smiled to know his obedience had to be. It was, indeed, as though she tortured him deliberately, yet for some reason undivined.

For a passing second Tom felt this — then the strange exaggeration vanished. They played a game together. All this had been before. They looked back upon it, looked down from a point above it.… Tom could not read her heart, but he could read his own.

In a few minutes at most all this happened. He put the letter in his pocket, and Lettice turned to her cousin, challenge in her manner, an air of victory as well. And Tom felt he shared that victory somehow too. It was a curious moment, charged with a subtle perplexity of emotions none of them quite understood. It held such singular contradictions.

‘There, Ettie!’ she exclaimed, as much as to say ‘Now you can’t scold me any more. You see how little Mr. Kelverdon minds!’

While she flitted into the next room to fetch a stamp, Mrs. Haughstone, her needles arrested in mid-air, looked steadily at Tom. Her face was white. She had watched the little scene intently.

‘The only thing I cannot understand, Mr. Kelverdon,’ she said in a low tone, her voice both indignant and sympathetic, ‘is how my cousin can give pain to a man like *you*. It’s the most heartless thing I’ve ever seen.’

‘Me!’ gasped Tom. ‘But I don’t understand you!’

‘And for a creature like that!’ she went on quickly, as Lettice was heard in the passage; ‘a libertine,’ — she almost hissed the word out— ‘who thinks every pretty woman is made for his amusement — and false into the bargain — —’

Tom put the stamp on. A few minutes later he was again walking along the narrow little Luxor street, the sentences just heard still filling the silent air about him, emotions charging wildly, each detail of the familiar little journey associated already with present pain and with prophecies of pain to come. The bewilderment and confusion in him were beyond all quieting. One moment he saw the picture of a slender foot that deliberately crushed life into the dust, the next he gazed into gentle, loving eyes that would brim with tears if a single hair of his head were injured.

A cold and mournful wind blew down the street, ruffling the darkened river. The black line of hills he could not see. Mystery, enchantment hung in the very air. The long dry fingers of the palm trees rattled overhead, and looking up, he saw the divine light of the starry heavens.… Surely among those comforting stars he saw her radiant eyes as well.…

A voice, asking in ridiculous English the direction to a certain house, broke his reverie, and, turning round, he saw the sheeted figure of an Arab boy, the bright eyes gleaming in the mischievous little face of bronze. He pointed out the gateway, and the boy slipped off into the darkness, his bare feet soundless and mysterious on the sand. He disappeared up the driveway to the house — her house. Tom knew quite well from whom the telegram came. Tony had telegraphed to let her know of his safe arrival. So even that was necessary! ‘And to-morrow morning,’ he thought, ‘he’ll get my letter too. He’ll come posting back again the very next day.’ He clenched his teeth a moment; he shuddered. Then he added: ‘So much the better!’ and walked on quickly up the street. He posted *her* letter at the corner.

He went up to his bedroom. His sleepless nights had begun now.…

What was the use of thinking, he asked himself as the hours passed? What good did it do to put the same questions over and over again, to pass from doubt to certainty, only to be flung back again from certainty to doubt? Was there no discoverable centre where the pendulum ceased from swinging? How could she be at the same time both cruel and tender, both true and false, frank and secretive, spiritual and sensual? Each of these pairs, he realised, was really a single state of which the adjectives represented the extremes at either end. They were ripples. The central personality travelled in one or other direction according to circumstances, according to the pull or push of forces — the main momentum of the parent wave. But there was a point where the heart felt neither one nor other, neither cruel nor tender, false nor true. Where, on the thermometer, did heat begin and cold come to an end? Love and hate, similarly, were extremes of one and the same emotion. Love, he well knew, could turn to virulent hatred — if something checked and forced it back upon the line of natural advance. Could, then, *her* tenderness be thus reversed, turning into cruelty.… Or was this cruelty but the awakening in her of another thing?…

Possibly. Yet at the centre, that undiscovered centre at present beyond his reach, Lettice, he knew, remained unalterably steadfast. There he felt the absolute assurance she was his exclusively. His centre, moreover, coincided with her own. They were in the ‘sea’ together. But to get back into the sea, the Wave now rolling under them must first break and fall.…

The sooner, then, the better! They would swing back with it together eventually.

He chose, that is — without knowing it — a higher way of moulding destiny. It was the spiritual way, whose method and secret lie in that subtle paradox: Yield to conquer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

YES, SHE WAS always ‘tired’ now, though the ‘always’ meant but three days at most. It was the starving sense of loneliness, the aching sense of loss, the yearning and the vain desire that made it seem so long. Lettice evaded him with laughter in her eyes, or with a tired smile. But the laughter was for another. It was merciless and terrible — so slightly, faintly indicated, yet so overwhelmingly convincing.

The talk between them rarely touched reality, as though a barrier deadened their very voices. Even her mothering became exasperating; it was so unforced and natural; it seemed still so right that she should show solicitude for his physical welfare. And therein lay the anguish and the poignancy. Yet, while he resented fiercely, knowing this was all she had to offer now, he struggled at the same time to accept. One moment he resisted, the next accepted. One hour he believed in her, the next he disbelieved. Hope and fear alternately made tragic sport of him.

Two personalities fought for possession of his soul, and he could not always keep back the lower of the two. They interpenetrated — as, at Dehr-el-Bahri, two scenes had interpenetrated, something very, very old projected upon a modern screen.

Lettice too — he was convinced of it — was undergoing a similar experience in herself. Only in her case just now it was the lower, the primitive, the physical aspect that was uppermost. She clung to Tony, yet struggled to keep Tom. She could not help herself. And he himself, knowing he must shortly go, still clung and hesitated, hoping against hope. More and more now, until the end, he was aware that he stood outside his present-day self, and above it. He looked back — looked down — upon former emotions and activities; and hence the confusing alternating of jealousy and forgiveness.

There were revealing little incidents from time to time. On the following afternoon he found her, for instance, radiant with that exuberant happiness he had learned now to distrust. And for a moment he half believed again that the menace had lifted and the happiness was for him. She held out both hands towards him, while she described a plan for going to Edfu and Abou Simbel. His heart beat wildly for a second.

‘But Tony?’ he asked, almost before he knew it. ‘We can’t leave him out!’

‘Oh, but I’ve had a letter.’ And as she said it his eye caught sight of a bulky envelope lying in the sand beside her chair.

‘Good,’ he said quietly, ‘and when is he coming back? I haven’t heard from him.’ The solid ground moved beneath his feet. He shivered, even in the blazing heat.

‘To-morrow. He sends you all sorts of messages and says that something you wrote made him very happy. I wonder what it was, Tom?’

Behind her voice he heard the north wind rattling in the palms; he heard the soft rustle of the acacia leaves as well; there was the crashing of little waves upon the river; but a deep, deep shadow fell upon the sky and blotted out the sunshine. The glory vanished from the day, leaving in its place a painful glare that hurt the eyes. The soul in him was darkened.

‘Ah!’ he exclaimed with assumed playfulness, ‘but that’s my secret!’ Men do smile, he remembered, as they are led to execution.

She laughed excitedly. ‘I shall find it out — —’

‘You will,’ he burst out significantly, ‘in the end.’

Then, as she passed him to go into the house, he lost control a moment. He whispered suddenly:

‘Love has no secrets, Lettice, anywhere. We’re in the Sea together. I shall *never* let you go.’ The intensity in his manner betrayed him; he adored her; he could not hide it.

She turned an instant, standing two steps above him; the sidelong downward glance lent to her face a touch of royalty, half pitying, half imperious. Her exquisite, frail beauty held a strength that mocked the worship in his eyes and voice. Almost — she challenged him:

‘Soothsayer!’ she whispered back contemptuously. ‘Do your worst!’ — and was gone into the house.

Desire surged wildly in him at that moment; impatience, scorn, fury even, raised their heads; he felt a savage impulse to seize her with violence, force her to confess, to have it out and end it one way or the other. He loathed himself for submitting to her cruelty, for it was intentional cruelty — she made him writhe and suffer of set purpose. And something barbaric in his blood leaped up in answer to the savagery in her own… when at that instant he heard her calling very softly:

‘Tom! Come indoors to me a moment; I want to show you something!’

But with it another sentence sprang across him and was gone. Like a meteor it streaked the screen of memory. Seize it he could not. It had to do with death — his death. There was a thought of blood. Outwardly what he heard, however, was the playful little sentence of to-day. ‘Come, I want to show you something.’

At the sound of her voice so softly calling all violence was forgotten; love poured back in a flood upon him; he would go through fire and water to possess her in the end. In this strange drama she played her inevitable part, even as he did; there must be no loss of self-control that might frustrate the coming climax. There must be no thwarting. If he felt jealousy, he must hide it; anger, scorn, desire must veil their faces.

He crossed the passage and stood before her in the darkened room, afraid and humble, full of a burning love that the centuries had not lessened, and that no conceivable cruelty of pain could ever change. Almost he knelt before her. Even if terrible, she was utterly adorable.

For he believed she was about to make a disclosure that would lay him bleeding in the dust; singularly at her mercy he felt, his heart laid bare to receive the final thrust that should make him outcast. Her little foot would crush him.…

The long green blinds kept out the glare of the sunshine; and at first he saw the room but dimly. Then, slowly, the white form emerged, the broad-brimmed hat, the hanging violet veil, the yellow jacket of soft, clinging silk, the long white gauntlet gloves. He saw her dear face peering through the dimness at him, the eyes burning like two dark precious stones. A table stood between them. There was a square white object on it. A moment’s bewilderment stole over him. Why had she called him in? What was she going to say? Why did she choose this moment? Was it the threat of Tony's near arrival that made her confession — and his dismissal — at last inevitable?

Then, suddenly, that night in the London theatre flashed back across his mind — her strange absorption in the play, the look of pain in her face, the little conversation, the sense of familiarity that hung about it all. He remembered Tony's words later: that another actor was expected with whose entry the piece would turn more real — turn tragic.

He waited. The dimness of the room was like the dimness of that theatre. The lights were lowered. They played their little parts. The audience watched and listened.

'Tom, dear,' her voice came floating tenderly across the air. 'I didn't like to give it you before the others. They wouldn't understand — they'd laugh at us.'

He did not understand. Surely he had heard indistinctly. He waited, saying nothing. The tenderness in her voice amazed him. He had expected very different words. Yet this was surely Lettice speaking, the Lettice of his spring-time in the mountains beside the calm blue lake. He stared hard. For the voice *was* Lettice, but the eyes and figure were another's. He was again aware of two persons there — of perplexing and bewildering struggle. But Lettice, for the moment, dominated as it seemed.

'So I put it here,' she went on in a low gentle tone, 'here, Tommy, on the table for you. And all my love is in it — my first, deep, fond love — our childhood love.' She leaned down and forward, her face in her hands, her elbows on the dark cloth; she pushed the square, white packet across to him. 'God bless you,' floated to him with her breath.

The struggle in her seemed very patent then. Yet in spite of that other, older self within her, it was still the voice of Lettice.…

There was a moment's silence while her whisper hung, as it were, upon the air. His entire body seemed a single heart. Exactly what he felt he hardly knew. There was a simultaneous collapse of several huge emotions in him.… But he trusted her.… He clung to that beloved voice. For she called him 'Tommy'; she was his mother; love, tenderness, and pity emanated from her like a cloud of perfume. He heard the faint rustle of her dress as she bent forward, but outside he heard the dry, harsh rattle of the palm trees in the northern wind. And in that — was terror.

‘What — what is it, Lettice?’ The voice sounded like a boy’s. It was outrageous. He swallowed — with an effort.

‘Tommy, you — don’t mind? You *will* take it, won’t you?’ And it was as if he heard her saying ‘Help me…’ once again, ‘Trust me as I trust you.…’

Mechanically he put his hand out and drew the object towards him. He knew then what it was and what was in it. He was glad of the darkness, for there was a ridiculous moisture in his eyes now. A lump *was* in his throat!

‘I’ve been neglecting you. You haven’t had a thing for ages. You’ll take it, Tommy, won’t you — dear?’

The little foolish words, so sweetly commonplace, fell like balm upon an open wound. He already held the small white packet in his hand. He looked up at her. God alone knows the strain upon his will in that moment. Somehow he mastered himself. It seemed as if he swallowed blood. For behind the mothering words lurked, he knew, the other self that any minute would return.

‘Thank you, Lettice, very much,’ he said with a strange calmness, and his voice was firm. Whatever happened he must not prevent the delivery of what had to be. Above all, that was clear. The pain must come in full before the promised joy.

Was it, perhaps, this strength in him that drew her? Was it his moment of iron self-mastery that brought her with outstretched, clinging arms towards him? Was it the unshakable love in him that threatened the temporary ascendancy of that other in her who gladly tortured him that joy might come in a morning yet to break?

For she stood beside him, though he had not seen her move. She was close against his shoulder, nestling as of old. It was surely a stage effect. A trap-door had opened in the floor of his consciousness; his first, early love sheltered in his aching heart again. The entire structure of the drama they played together threatened to collapse.

‘Tom… you love me less?’

He held her to him, but he did not kiss the face she turned up to his. Nor did he speak.

‘You’ve changed somewhere?’ she whispered. ‘You, too, have changed?’

There was a pause before he found words that he could utter. He dared not yield. To do so would be vain in any case.

‘N — no, Lettice. But I can’t say what it is. There is pain.… It has turned some part of me numb… killed something, brought something else to life. You will come back to me… but not quite yet.’

In spite of the darkness, he saw her face clearly then. For a moment — it seemed so easy — he could have caught her in his arms, kissed her, known the end of his present agony of heart and mind. She would have come back to him, Tony’s claim obliterated from her life. The driving power that forced an older self upon her had weakened before the steadfast love he bore her. She was ready to capitulate. The little, childish present in his hands was offered as of old.… Tears rose behind his eyes.

How he resisted he never understood. Some thoroughness in him triumphed. If he shirked the pain to-day, it would have to be faced to-morrow — that alone was clear in his breaking heart. To be worthy of the greater love, the completer joy to follow, they must accept the present pain and see it through — experience it — exhaust it once for all. To refuse it now was only to postpone it. She must go her way, while he went his.…

Gently he pushed her from him, released his hold; the little face slipped from his shoulder as though it sank into the sea. He felt that she understood. He heard himself speaking, though how he chose the words he never knew. Out of new depths in himself the phrases rose — a regenerated Tom uprising, though not yet sure of himself:

‘You are not wholly mine. I must first — oh, Lettice! — learn to do without you. It is you who say it.’

Her voice, as she answered, seemed already changed, a shade of something harder and less yielding in it:

‘That which you can do without is added to you.’

‘A new thing… beginning,’ he whispered, feeling it both belief and prophecy. His whisper broke in spite of himself. He saw her across the room, the table between them again. Already she looked different, ‘Lettice’ fading from her eyes and mouth.

She said a marvellous, sweet thing before that other self usurped her then:

‘One day, Tom, we shall find each other in a crowd.…’

There was a yearning cry in him he did not utter. It seemed she faded from the atmosphere as the dimness closed about her. He saw a darker figure with burning eyes upon a darker face; there was a gleam of gold; a faint perfume as of ambra hung about the air, and outside the palm leaves rattled in the northern wind. He had heard awful words, it seemed, that sealed his fate. He was forsaken, lonely, outcast. It was a sentence of death, for she was set in power over him.…

A flood of dazzling sunshine poured into the room from a lifted blind, as the others looked in from the verandah to say that they were going and wanted to say good-bye. A moment later all were discussing plans in the garden, Tom as loudly and eagerly as any of them. He held his square white packet. But he did not open it till he reached his room a little later, and then arranged the different articles in a row upon his table: the favourite cigarettes, the soap, the pair of white tennis socks with his initial neatly sewn on, the tie in the shade of blue that suited him best… the writing-pad and the dates!

A letter from Tony next caught his eye and he opened it, slowly, calmly, almost without interest, knowing exactly what it would say:

‘… I was delighted, old chap, to get your note,’ he read. ‘I felt sure it would be all right, for I felt somehow that I *had* exaggerated your feeling towards her. As you say, what one has to think of with a woman in so delicate a position is her happiness more than one’s own. But I wouldn’t do anything to offend you or cause you pain for worlds, and I’m awfully glad to know the way is clear. To tell you the truth, I went away on purpose, for I felt uneasy. I wanted to be quite sure first that I was not trespassing. She made me feel I was doing you no wrong, but I wanted your assurance too.…’

There was a good deal more in similar vein — he laid the burden upon *her* — ending with a word to say he was coming back to Luxor immediately. He would arrive the following day.

As a matter of fact Tony was already then in the train that left Cairo that evening and reached Luxor at eight o’clock next morning. Tom, who had counted upon another twenty-four hours’ respite, did not know this; nor did he know till later that another telegram had been carried by a ghostly little Arab boy, with the result that Tony and Lettice enjoyed their hot rolls and coffee alone together in the shady garden where the cool northern wind rattled among the palm trees. Mrs. Haughstone mentioned it in due course, however, having watched the *tête-à-tête* from her bedroom window, unobserved.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AND NEXT DAY there was one more revealing incident that helped, yet also hindered him, as he moved along his *via dolorosa*. For every step he took away from her seemed also to bring him nearer. They followed opposing curves of a circle. They separated ever more widely, back to back, yet were approaching each other at the same time. They would meet face to face.…

He found her at the piano, practising the song that now ran ever in his blood; the score, he noticed, was in Tony's writing.

'Unwelcome!' he exclaimed, reading out the title over her shoulder.

'Tom! How you startled me! I was trying to learn it.' She turned to him; her eyes were shining. He was aware of a singular impression — struggle, effort barely manageable. Her beauty seemed fresh made; he thought of a wild rose washed by the dew and sparkling in the sunlight.

'I thought you knew it already,' he observed.

She laughed significantly, looking up into his face so close he could have kissed her lips by merely bending his head a few inches. 'Not quite — yet,' she answered. 'Will you give me a lesson, Tom?'

'Unpaid?' he asked.

She looked reproachfully at him. 'The best services are unpaid always.'

'I'm afraid I have neither the patience nor the knowledge,' he replied.

Her next words stirred happiness in him for a moment; the divine trust he fought to keep stole from his heart into his eyes: 'But you would never, never give up, Tom, no matter how difficult and obstinate the pupil. You would always understand. *That* I know.'

He moved away. Such double-edged talk, even in play, was dangerous. A deep weariness was in him, weakening self-control. Sensitive to the slightest touch just then, he dared not let her torture him too much. He felt in her a strength far, far beyond his own; he was powerless before her. Had

Tony been present he could not have played his part at all. Somehow he had a curious feeling, moreover, that his cousin was not very far away.

‘Tony will be here later, I think,’ she said, as she followed him outside. ‘But, if not, he’s sure to come to dinner.’

‘Good,’ he replied, thinking that the train arrived in time to dress, and in no way surprised that she divined his thoughts. ‘We can decide our plans then.’ He added that he might be obliged to go back to Assouan, but she made no comment. Speech died away between them, as they sat down in the old familiar corner above the Nile. Tom, for the life of him, could think of nothing to say. Lettice, on the other hand, wanted to say nothing. He felt that she *had* nothing to say. Behind, below the numbness in him, meanwhile, her silence stabbed him without ceasing. The intense yearning in his heart threatened any minute to burst forth in vehement speech, almost in action. It lay accumulating in him dangerously, ready to leap out at the least sign — the pin-prick of a look, a word, a gesture on her part, and he would smash the barrier down between them and — ruin all. The sight of Tony, for instance, just then must have been as a red rag to a bull.

He traced figures in the sand with his heel, he listened to the wind above them, he never ceased to watch her motionless, indifferent figure stretched above him on the long deck-chair. A book peeped out from behind the cushion where her head rested. Tom put his hand across and took it suddenly, partly for something to do, partly from curiosity as well. She made a quick, restraining gesture, then changed her mind. And again he was conscious of battle in her, as if two beings fought.

‘The Mary Coleridge Poems,’ she said carelessly. ‘Tony gave it me. You’ll find the song he put to music.’

Tom vigorously turned the leaves. He had already glanced at the title-page with the small inscription in one corner: ‘To L. J., from A. W.’ There was a pencil mark against a poem half-way through.

‘He’s going to write music for some of the others too,’ she added, watching him; ‘the ones he has marked.’ Her voice, he fancied, wavered slightly.

Tom nodded his head. ‘I see,’ he murmured, noticing a cross in pencil. A sullen defiance rose in his blood, but he forced it out of sight. He read the words in a low voice to himself. It was astonishing how the powers behind the scenes forced a contribution from the commonest incidents:

The sum of loss I have not reckoned yet, I cannot tell
. For ever it was morning when we met,
Night when we bade farewell.

Perhaps the words let loose the emotion, though of different kinds, pent up behind their silence. The strain, at any rate, between them tightened first, then seemed to split. He kept his eyes upon the page before him; Lettice, too, remained still as before; only her lips moved as she spoke:

'Tom.…' The voice plunged into his heart like iron.

'Yes,' he said quietly, without looking up.

'Tom,' she repeated, 'what are you thinking about so hard?'

He found no answer.

'And all to yourself?'

The blood rushed to his face; her voice was so soft.

He met her eyes and smiled. 'The same as usual, I suppose,' he said.

For a moment she made no reply, then, glancing at the book lying in his hand, she said in a lower voice: 'That woman had suffered deeply. There's truth and passion in every word she writes; there's a marvellous restraint as well. Tom,' she added, gazing hard at him, 'you feel it, don't you? You understand her?' For an instant she knit her brows as if in perplexity or misgiving.

'The truth, yes,' he replied after a moment's hesitation; 'the restraint as well.'

'And the passion?'

He nodded curtly by way of agreement. He turned the pages over very rapidly. His fingers were as thick and clumsy as rigid bits of wood. He fumbled.

'Will you read it once again?' she asked. He did so… in a low voice. With difficulty he reached the end. There was a mist before his eyes and his voice seemed confused. He dared not look up.

‘There’s a deep spiritual beauty,’ he went on slowly, making an enormous effort, ‘that’s what I feel strongest, I think. There’s renunciation, sacrifice — —’

He was going to say more, for he felt the words surge up in his throat. This talk, he knew, was a mere safety valve to both of them; they used words as people attacked by laughter out of due season seize upon anything, however far-fetched, that may furnish excuse for it. The flood of language and emotion, too long suppressed, again rose to his very lips — when a slight sound stopped his utterance. He turned. Amazement caught him. Her frozen immobility, her dead indifference, her boredom possibly — all these, passing suddenly, had melted in a flood of tears. Her face was covered by her hands. She lay there sobbing within a foot of his hungry arms, sobbing as though her heart must break. He saw the drops between her little fingers, trickling.

It was so sudden, so unexpected, that Tom felt unable to speak or act at first. Numbness seized him. His faculties were arrested. He watched her, saw the little body heave down its entire length, noted the small convulsive movements of it. He saw all this, yet he could not do the natural thing. It was very ghastly.… He could not move a muscle, he could not say a single word, he could not comfort her — because he knew those tears were the tears of pity only. It was for himself she sobbed. The tenderness in her — in ‘Lettice’ — broke down before his weight of pain, the weight of pain she herself laid upon him. Nothing that *he* might do or say could comfort her. Divining what the immediate future held in store for him, she wept these burning tears of pity. In that poignant moment of self-revelation Tom’s cumbersome machinery of intuition did not fail him. He understood. It was a confession — the last perhaps. He saw ahead with vivid and merciless clarity of vision. Only another could comfort her.… Yet he could help. Yes — he could help — by going. There was no other way. He must slip out.

And, as if prophetically just then, she murmured between her tight-pressed fingers: ‘Leave me, Tom, for a moment… please go away… I’m so mortified… this idiotic scene.… Leave me a little, then come back. I shall be myself again presently.… It’s Egypt — this awful Egypt.…’

Tom obeyed. He got up and left her, moving without feeling in his legs, as though he walked in his sleep, as though he dreamed, as though he were —

dead. He did not notice the direction. He walked mechanically. It felt to him that he simply walked straight out of her life into a world of emptiness and ice and shadows.…

The river lay below him in a flood of light. He saw the Theban Hills rolling their dark, menacing wave along the far horizon. In the blistering heat the desert lay sun-drenched, basking, silent. Its faint sweet perfume reached him in the northern wind, that pungent odour of the sand, which is the odour of this sun-baked land etherealised.

A fiery intensity of light lay over it, as though any moment it must burst into sheets of flame. So intense was the light that it seemed to let sight through to — to what? To a more distant vision, infinitely remote. It was not a mirror, but a transparency. The eyes slipped through it marvellously.

He stood on the steps of worn-out sandstone, listening, staring, feeling nothing… and then a little song came floating across the air towards him, sung by a boatman in mid-stream. It was a native melody, but it had the strange, monotonous lilt of Tony’s old-Egyptian melody.… And feeling stole back upon him, alternately burning and freezing the currents of his blood. The childhood nightmare touch crept into him: he saw the wave-like outline of the gloomy hills, he heard the wind rattling in the leaves behind him, to his nostrils came the strange, penetrating perfume of the tawny desert that encircles ancient Thebes, and in the air before him hung two pairs of eyes, dark, faithful eyes, cruel and at the same time tender, true yet merciless, and the others — treacherous, false, light blue in colour.… He began to shuffle furiously with his feet.… The soul in him went under.… He turned to face the menace coming up behind… the falling Wave.…

‘Tom!’ he heard — and turned back towards her. And when he reached her side, she had so entirely regained composure that he could hardly believe it was the same person. Fresh and radiant she looked once more, no sign of tears, no traces of her recent emotion anywhere. Perhaps the interval had been longer than he guessed, but, in any case, the change was swift and half unaccountable. In himself, equally, was a calmness that seemed unnatural. He heard himself speaking in an even tone about the view, the river, the gold of the coming sunset. He wished to spare her, he talked as though nothing had happened, he mentioned the deep purple colour of the hills — when she broke out with sudden vehemence.

‘Oh, don’t speak of those hills, those awful hills,’ she cried. ‘I dread the sight of them. Last night I dreamed again — they crushed me down into the sand. I felt buried beneath them, deep, deep down — *buried*.’ She whispered the last word as though to herself. She hid her face.

The words amazed him. He caught the passing shiver in her voice.

‘“Again”?’ he asked. ‘You’ve dreamed of them before?’ He stood close, looking down at her. The sense of his own identity returned slowly, yet he still felt two persons in him.

‘Often and often,’ she said in a lowered tone, ‘since Tony came. I dream that we all three lie buried somewhere in that forbidding valley. It terrifies me more and more each time.’

‘Strange,’ he said. ‘For they draw me too. I feel them somehow known — familiar.’ He paused. ‘I believe Tony was right, you know, when he said that we three — —’

How she stopped him he never quite understood. At first he thought the curious movement on her face portended tears again, but the next second he saw that instead of tears a slow strange smile was stealing upon her — upwards from the mouth. It lay upon her features for a second only, but long enough to alter them. A thin, diaphanous mask, transparent, swiftly fleeting, passed over her, and through it another woman, yet herself, peered up at him with a penetrating yet somehow distant gaze. A shudder ran down his spine; there was a sensation of inner cold against his heart; he trembled, but he could not look away.… He saw in that brief instant the face of the woman who tortured him. The same second, so swiftly was it gone again, he saw Lettice watching him through half-closed eyelids. He heard her saying something. She was completing the sentence that had interrupted him:

‘We’re too imaginative, Tom. Believe me, Egypt is no place to let imagination loose, and I don’t like it.’ She sighed: there was exhaustion in her. ‘It’s stimulating enough without *our* help. Besides—’ she used a curious adjective— ‘it’s dangerous too.’

Tom willingly let the subject drop; his own desire was to appear natural, to protect her, to save her pain. He thought no longer of himself. Drawing upon all his strength, forcing himself almost to breaking-point, he talked quietly of obvious things, while longing secretly to get away to his own room where he could be alone. He craved to hide himself; like a stricken animal his instinct was to withdraw from observation.

The arrival of the tea-tray helped him, and, while they drank, the sky let down the emblazoned curtain of a hundred colours lest Night should bring her diamonds unnoticed, unannounced. There is no dusk in Egypt; the sun draws on his opal hood; there is a rush of soft white stars: the desert cools, and the wind turns icy. Night, high on her spangled throne, watches the sun dip down behind the Libyan sands.

Tom felt this coming of Night as he sat there, so close to Lettice that he could touch her fingers, feel her breath, catch the lightest rustle of her thin white dress. He felt night creeping in upon his heart. Swiftly the shadows piled. His soul seemed draped in blackness, drained of its shining gold, hidden below the horizon of the years. It sank out of sight, cold, lost, forgotten. His day was past and over.…

They had been sitting silent for some minutes when a voice became audible, singing in the distance. It came nearer. Tom recognised the tune— ‘We were young, we were merry, we were very, very wise,’; and Lettice sat up suddenly to listen. But Tom then thought of one thing only — that it was beyond his power just now to meet his cousin. He knew his control was not equal to the task; he would betray himself; the rôle was too exacting. He rose abruptly.

‘That must be Tony coming,’ Lettice said. ‘His tea will be all cold!’ Each word was a caress, each syllable alive with interest, sympathy, excited anticipation. She had become suddenly alive. Tom saw her eyes shining as she gazed past him down the darkening drive. He made his absurd excuse. ‘I’m going home to rest a bit, Lettice. I played tennis too hard. The sun’s given me a headache. We’ll meet later. You’ll keep Tony for dinner?’ His mind had begun to work, too; the evening train from Cairo, he remembered, was not due for an hour or more yet. A hideous suspicion rushed like fire through him.

But he asked no question. He knew they wished to be alone together. Yet also he had a wild, secret hope that she would be disappointed. He was speedily undeceived.

‘All right, Tom,’ she answered, hardly looking at him. ‘And mind you’re not late. Eight o’clock sharp. I’ll make Tony stay.’

He was gone. He chose the path along the river bank instead of going by the drive. He did not look back once. It was when he entered the road a little later that he met Mrs. Haughstone coming home from a visit to some friends in his hotel. It was then she told him.…

‘What a surprise you must have had,’ Tom believes he said in reply. He said something, at any rate, that he hoped sounded natural and right.

‘Oh, no,’ Mrs. Haughstone explained. ‘We were quite prepared. Lettice had a telegram, you see, to let her know.’

She told him other things as well.…

PART IV

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TONY HAD COME back. The Play turned very real.

The situation *à trois* thenceforward became, for Tom, an acutely afflicting one. He found no permanent resting-place for heart or mind. He analysed, asked himself questions without end, but a final decisive judgment evaded him. He wrote letters and tore them up again. He hid himself in Assouan with belief for a companion, he came back and found that companion had been but a masquerader — disbelief. Suspicion grew confirmed into conviction. Vanity persuaded him against the weight of evidence, then left him naked with his facts. He wanted to kill, first others, then himself. He laughed, but the same minute he could have cried. Such complicated tangles of emotion were beyond his solving — it amazed him; such prolonged and incessant torture, so delicately applied — he marvelled that a human heart could bear it without breaking. For the affection and sympathy he felt for his cousin refused to die, while his worship and passion towards an unresponsive woman increasingly consumed him.

He no longer recognised himself, his cousin, Lettice; all three, indeed, were singularly changed. Each duplicated into a double rôle. Towards their former selves he kept his former attitude — of affection, love, belief; towards the usurping selves he felt — he knew not what. Therefore he drifted.… Strange, mysterious, tender, unfathomable Woman! Vain, primitive, self-sufficing, confident Man! In him the masculine tried to reason and analyse to the very end; in her the feminine interpreted intuitively: the male and female attitudes, that is, held true throughout. The Wave swept him forward irresistibly, his very soul, it seemed, went shuffling to find solid ground.…

Meanwhile, however, no one broke the rules — rules that apparently had made themselves: subtle and delicate, it took place mostly out of sight, as it were, inside the heart. Below the mask of ordinary surface-conduct all agreed to wear, the deeper, inevitable intercourse proceeded, a Play within a Play, a tragedy concealed thinly by general consent under the most commonplace comedy imaginable. All acted out their parts, rehearsed, it seemed, of long ago. For, more and more, it came to Tom that the one thing he must never lose, whatever happened, was his trust in her. He must cling to that though it cost him all — trust in her love and truth and constancy. This singular burden seemed laid upon his soul. If he lost that trust and that belief, the Wave could never break, she could never justify that trust and that belief.

This ‘enchantment’ that tortured him, straining his whole being, was somehow a test indeed of his final worthiness to win her. Somehow, somewhence, he owed her this.… He dared not fail. For if he failed the Wave that should sweep her back into the ‘sea’ with him would not break — he would merely go on shuffling with his feet to the end of life. Tony and Lettice conquered him till he lay bleeding in the sand; Tom played the rôle of loss — obediently almost; the feeling that they were set in power over him persisted strangely. It dominated, at any rate, the resistance he would otherwise have offered. He must learn to do without her in order that she might in the end be added to him. Thus, and thus alone, could he find himself, and reach the level where she lived. He took his fate from her gentle, merciless hands, well knowing that it had to be. In some marvellous, sweet way the sacrifice would bring her back again at last, but bring her back completed — and to a Tom worthy of her love. The self-centred, confident man in him that deemed itself indispensable must crumble. To find regeneration he must risk destruction.

Events — yet always inner events — moved with such rapidity then that he lost count of time. The barrier never lowered again. He played his ghastly part in silence — always inner silence. Out of sight, below the surface, the deep wordless Play continued. With Tony’s return the drama hurried. The actor all had been waiting for came on, and took the centre of the stage, and stayed until the curtain fell — a few weeks, all told, of their short Egyptian winter.

In the crowded rush of action Tom felt the Wave — bend, break, and smash him. At its highest moment he saw the stars, at its lowest the crunch of shifting gravel filled his ears, the mud blinded sight, the rubbish choked his breath. Yet he had seen those distant stars.… Into the mothering sea, as he sank back, the memory of the light went with him. It was a kind of incredible performance, half on earth and half in the air: it rushed with such impetuous momentum.

Amid the intensity of his human emotions, meanwhile, he lost sight of any subtler hints, if indeed they offered: he saw no veiled eastern visions any more, divined no psychic warnings. His agony of blinding pain, alternating with briefest intervals of shining hope when he recovered belief in her and called himself the worst names he could think of — this seething warfare of cruder feelings left no part of him sensitive to the delicate promptings of finer forces, least of all to the tracery of fancied memories. He only gasped for breath — sufficient to keep himself afloat and cry, as he had promised he would cry, even to the bitter end: 'I'll face it… I'll stick it out… I'll trust….!'

The setting of the Play was perfect; in Egypt alone was its production possible. The brilliant lighting, the fathomless, soft shadows, deep covering of blue by day, clear stars by night, the solemn hills, and the slow, eternal river — all these, against the huge background of the Desert, silent, golden, lonely, formed the adequate and true environment. In no other country, in England least of all, could the presentation have been real. Tony, himself, and Lettice belonged, one and all, it seemed, to Egypt — yet, somehow, not wholly to the Egypt of the tourist hordes and dragoman, and big hotels. The Onlooker in him, who stood aloof and held a watching brief, looked down upon an ancient land unvexed by railways, graciously clothed and coloured gorgeously, mapped burningly mid fiercer passions, eager for life, contemptuous of death. He did not understand, but that it was thus, not otherwise, he knew.…

Her beauty, too, both physical and spiritual, became for him strangely heightened. He shifted between moods of worship that were alternately physical and spiritual. In the former he pictured her with darker colouring, half barbaric, eastern, her slender figure flitting through a grove of palms beyond a river too wide for him to cross; gold bands gleamed upon her arms, bare to the shoulder; he could not reach her; she was with another — it was torturing; she and that other disappeared into the covering shadows.… In the latter, however, there was no unworthy thought, no faintest desire of the blood; he saw her high among the little stars, gazing with tender, pitying eyes upon him, calling softly, praying for him, loving him, yet remote in some spiritual isolation where she must wait until he soared to join her.

Both physically and spiritually, that is, he idealised her — saw her divinely naked. She did not move. She hung there like a star, waiting for him, while he was carried past her, swept along helplessly by a tide, a flood, a wave, though a wave that was somehow rising up to where she dwelt above him.…

It was a marvellous experience. In the physical moods he felt the fires of jealousy burn his flesh away to the bare nerves — resentment, rage, a bitterness that could kill; in the alternate state he felt the uplifting joy and comfort of ultimate sacrifice, sweet as heaven, the bliss of complete renunciation — for her happiness. If she loved another who could give her greater joy, he had no right to interfere.

It was this last that gradually increased in strength, the first that slowly, surely died. Unsatisfied yearnings hunted his soul across the empty desert that now seemed life. The self he had been so pleased with, had admired so proudly with calm complacence, thinking it indispensable — this was tortured, stabbed and mercilessly starved to death by slow degrees, while something else appeared shyly, gently, as yet unaware of itself, but already clearer and stronger. In the depths of his being, below an immense horizon, shone joy, luring him onward and brightening as it did so.

Love, he realised, was independent of the will — no one can will to love: she was not anywhere to blame, a stronger claim had come into life and changed her. She could not live untruth, pretending otherwise. He, rather, was to blame if he sought to hold her to a smaller love she had outgrown. She had the inalienable right to obey the bigger claim, if such it proved to be. Personal freedom was the basis of their contract. It would have been easier for him if she could have told him frankly, shared it with him; but, since that seemed beyond her, then it was for him to slip away. He must subtract himself from an inharmonious three, leaving a perfect two. He must make it easier for *her*.

The days of golden sunshine passed along their appointed way as before, leaving him still without a final decision. Outwardly the little party *a trois* seemed harmonious, a coherent unit, while inwardly the accumulation of suppressed emotion crept nearer and nearer to the final breaking point. They lived upon a crater, playing their comedy within sight and hearing of destruction: even Mrs. Haughstone, ever waiting in the wings for her cue, came on effectively and filled her rôle, insignificant yet necessary. Its meanness was its truth.

‘Mr. Winslowe excites my cousin too much; I’m sure it isn’t good for her — in England, yes, but not out here in this strong, dangerous climate.’

Tom understood, but invariably opposed her:

‘If it makes her happy for a little while, I see no harm in it; life has not been too kind to her, remember.’

Sometimes, however, the hint was barbed as well: ‘Your cousin *is* a delightful being, but he can talk nonsense when he wants to. He’s actually been trying to persuade me that you’re jealous of him. He said you were only waiting a suitable moment to catch him alone in the Desert and shoot him!’

Tom countered her with an assumption of portentous gravity: ‘Sound travels too easily in this still air,’ he reminded her; ‘the Nile would be the simplest way.’ After which, confused by ridicule, she renounced the hint direct, indulging instead in facial expression, glances, and innuendo conveyed by gesture.

That there was some truth, however, behind this betrayal of her hostess and her fellow-guest, Tom felt certain; it lied more by exaggeration than by sheer invention: he listened while he hated it; ashamed of himself, he yet invited the ever-ready warnings, though he invariably defended the object of them — and himself.

Alternating thus, he knew no minute of happiness; a single day, a single hour contained both moods, trust ousted suspicion, and suspicion turned out trust. Lettice led him on, then abruptly turned to ice. In the morning he was first and Tony nowhere, the same afternoon this was reversed precisely — yet the balance growing steadily in his cousin’s favour, the evidence accumulating against himself. It was not purposely contrived, it was in automatic obedience to deeper impulses than she knew. Tom never lost sight of this amazing duality in her, the struggle of one self against another older self to which cruelty was no stranger — or, as he put it, the newly awakened Woman against the Mother in her.

He could not fail to note the different effects he and his cousin produced in her — the ghastly difference. With himself she was captious, easily exasperated; her relations with Tony, above all, a sensitive spot on which she could bear no slightest pressure without annoyance; while behind this attitude, hid always the faithful motherly care that could not see him in distress. That touch of comedy lay in it dreadfully: — wet feet, cold, hungry, tired, and she flew to his consoling! Towards Tony this side of her remained unresponsive; he might drink unfiltered water for all she cared, tire himself to death, or sit in a draught for hours. It could have been comic almost but for its significance: that from Tony she *received*, instead of gave. The woman in her asked, claimed even — of the man in him. The pain for Tom lay there.

His cousin amused, stimulated her beyond anything Tom could offer; she sought protection from him, leant upon him. In his presence she blossomed out, her eyes shone the moment he arrived, her voice altered, her spirits became exuberant. The wholesome physical was awakened by him. He could not hope to equal Tony's address, his fascination. He never forgot that she once danced for happiness.… Helplessness grew upon him — he had no right to feel angry even, he could not justly blame herself or his cousin. The woman in her was open to capture by another; so far it had never belonged to him. In vain he argued that the mother was the larger part; it was the woman that he wanted with it. Having separated the two aspects of her in this way, the division, once made, remained.

And every day that passed this difference in her towards himself and Tony grew more mercilessly marked. The woman in her responded to another touch than his. Though neither lust nor passion, he knew, dwelt in her pure being anywhere, there were yet a thousand delicate unconscious ways by which a woman betrayed her attraction to a being of the opposite sex; they could not be challenged, but equally they could not be misinterpreted. Like the colour and perfume of a rose, they emanated from her inmost being.… In this sense, she was sexually indifferent to Tom, and while passion consumed his soul, he felt her, dearly mothering, yet cold as ice. The soft winds of Egypt bent the full-blossomed rose into another's hand, towards another's lips.… Tony had entered the garden of her secret life.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AND SO THE fires of jealousy burned him. He struggled hard, smothering all outward expression of his pain, with the sole result that the suppression increased the fury of the heat within. For every day the tiniest details fed its fierceness. It was inextinguishable. He lost his appetite, his sleep, he lost all sense of what is called proportion. There was no rest in him, day and night he lived in the consuming flame.

His cousin's irresponsibility now assumed a sinister form that shocked him. He recognised the libertine in his careless play with members of the other sex who had pleased him for moments, then been tossed aside. He became aware of grossness in his eyes and lips and bearing. He understood, above all, his — hands.

Against the fiery screen of his emotions jealousy threw violent pictures which he mistook for thought…, and there burst through this screen, then, scattering all lesser feelings, the flame of a vindictive anger that he believed was the protective righteous anger of an outraged man. 'If Tony did her wrong,' he told himself, 'I would kill him.'

Always, at this extravagant moment, however, he reached a climax, then calmed down again. A sense of humour rose incongruously to check loss of self-restraint. The memory of her daily tenderness swept over him; and shame sent a blush into his cheeks. He felt mortified, ungenerous, a foolish figure even. While the reaction lasted he forgave, felt her above reproach, cursed his wretched thoughts that had tried to soil her, and lost the violent vindictiveness that had betrayed him. His affection for his cousin, always real, and the sympathy between them, always genuine, returned to complete his own discomfiture. His mood swayed back to the first, happy days when the three of them had laughed and played together.

And to punish himself while this reaction lasted, he would seek her out and see that she inflicted the punishment itself. He would hear from her own lips how fond she was of Tony, fighting to convince himself, while he listened, that she was above suspicion, and that his pain was due solely to unworthy jealousy. He would be specially nice to Tony, making things easier for him, even urging him, as it were, into her very arms.

These moments of generous reaction, however, seemed to puzzle her. The exalted state of emotion was confined, perhaps, to himself. At any rate, he produced results the very reverse of what he intended; Tony became more cautious, Lettice looked at himself with half-questioning eyes.… There was falseness in his attitude, something unnatural. It was not the part he was cast for in the Play. He could not keep it up. He fell back once more to watching, listening, playing his proper rôle of a slave who was forced to observe the happiness of others set somehow over him, while suffering in silence. The inner fires were fed anew thereby. He knew himself flung back, bruised and bleeding, upon his original fear and jealousy, convinced more than ever before that this cruelty and torture had to be, and that his pain was justified. To resist was only to delay the perfect dawn.

The sum of loss I have not reckoned yet,
I cannot tell
For ever it was morning when we met,
Night when we bade farewell.

He changed the pronouns in the last two lines, for always it was morning when *they* met, night when *they* bade farewell.

Mrs. Haughstone, meanwhile, neglected no opportunity of dotting the vowel for his benefit; she crossed each *t* that the writing of the stars dropped fluttering across her path. ‘Mr. Winslowe has emotions,’ she mentioned once, ‘but he has no heart. If he ever marries and settles down, his wife will find it out.’

‘My cousin is not the kind to marry,’ Tom replied. ‘He’s too changeable, and he knows it.’

‘He’s young,’ she said, ‘he hasn’t found the right woman yet. He will improve — a woman older than himself with the mother strong in her might hold him. He needs the mother too. Most men do, I think; they’re all children really.’

Tom laughed. ‘Tony as father of a family — I can’t imagine it.’

‘Once he had children of his own,’ she suggested, ‘he would steady wonderfully. Those men often make the best husbands — don’t you think?’

‘Perhaps,’ Tom replied briefly. ‘Provided there’s real heart beneath.’

‘In the woman, yes,’ returned the other quietly. ‘Too much heart in the man can so easily cloy. A real man is always half a savage; that’s why the woman likes him. It’s the woman who guards the family.’

Tom, knowing that her words veiled other meanings, pretended not to notice. He no longer rose to the bait she offered. He detected the nonsense, the insincerity as well, but he could not argue successfully, and generalisations were equally beyond him. Too polite to strike back, he always waited till she had talked herself out; besides he often acquired information thus, information he both longed for yet disliked intensely. Such information rarely failed: it was, indeed, the desire to impart it with an air of naturalness that caused the conversation almost invariably. It appeared now. It was pregnant information, too. She conveyed it in a lowered tone: there was news from Warsaw. The end, it seemed, was expected by the doctors; a few months at most. Lettice had been warned, however, that her appearance could do no good; the sufferer mistook her for a relative who came to persecute him. Her presence would only hasten the end. She had cabled, none the less, to say that she would come. This was a week ago; the answer was expected in a day or two.

And Tom had not been informed of this.

‘Mr. Winslowe thinks she ought to go at once. I’m sure his advice is wise. Even if her presence can do no good, it might be an unceasing regret if she was not there.…’

‘Your cousin alone can judge,’ he interrupted coldly. ‘I’d rather not discuss it, if you don’t mind,’ he added, noticing her eagerness to continue the conversation.

‘Oh, certainly, Mr. Kelverdon — just as you feel. But in case she asks your advice as well — I only thought you’d like to know — to be prepared, I mean.’

Only long afterwards did it occur to him that Tony’s informant was possibly this jealous parasite herself, who now deliberately put the matter in another light, hoping to sow discord to her own eventual benefit. All he realised at the moment was the intolerable pain that Lettice should tell him nothing. She looked to Tony for help, advice, possibly for consolation too.

There were moments of another kind, however, when it seemed quite easy to talk plainly. His position was absurd, undignified, unmanly. It was for him to state his case and abide by the result. Hearts rarely break in two, for all that poets and women might protest.

These moments, however, he did not use. It was not that he shrank from hearing his sentence plainly spoken, nor that he decided he must not prevent something that had to be. The reason lay deeper still: — it was impossible. In her presence he became tongue-tied, helpless. His own stupidity overwhelmed him. Silence took him. He felt at a hopeless disadvantage, ashamed even. No words of his could reach her through the distance, across the barrier, that lay between them now. He made no single attempt. His aching heart, filled with an immeasurable love, remained without the relief of utterance. He had lost her. But he loved now something in her place beyond the possibility of loss — an indestructible ideal.

Words, therefore, were not only impossible, they were vain. And when the final moment came they were still more useless. He could go, but he could not tell her he was going. Before that moment came, however, another searching experience was his: he saw Tony jealous — jealous of himself! He actually came to feel sympathy with his cousin who was his rival! It was his faithful love that made that possible too.

He realised this suddenly one day at Assouan.

He had been thinking about the long conversations Tony and Lettice enjoyed together, wondering what they found to discuss at such interminable length. From that his mind slipped easily into another question — how she could be so insensible to the pain she caused him? — when, all in a flash, he realised the distance she had travelled from him on the road of love towards Tony. The moment of perspective made it abruptly clear. She now talked with Tony as once, at Montreux and elsewhere, she had talked with himself. He saw his former place completely occupied. As an accomplished fact he saw it.

The belief that Tony’s influence would weaken deserted him from that instant. It had been but a false hope created by desire and yearning.

There was a crash. He reached the bottom of despair. That same evening, on returning to his hotel from the Works, he found a telegram. It had been arranged that Lettice, Tony, Miss de Lorne and her brother should join him in Assouan. The telegram stated briefly that it was not possible after all: — she sent an excuse.

The sleepless night was no new thing to him, but the acuteness of new suffering was a revelation. Jealousy unmasked her amazing powers of poisonous and devastating energy.… He visualised in detail. He saw Lettice and his cousin together in the very situations he had hitherto reserved imaginatively for himself, both sweets hoped for and delights experienced, but raised now a hundredfold in actuality. Like pictures of flame they rose before his inner eye; they seared and scorched him; his blood turned acid; the dregs of agony were his to drink. The happiness he had planned for himself, down to the smallest minutiæ of each precious incident, he now saw transferred in this appalling way — to another. Not deliberately summoned, not morbidly evoked — the pictures rose of their own accord against the background of his mind, yet so instinct with actuality, that it seemed he had surely lived them, too, himself with her, somewhere, somehow… before. There was that same haunting touch of familiarity about them.

In the long hours of this particular night he reached, perhaps, the acme of his pain; imagination, whipped by jealousy, stoked the furnace to a heat he had not known as yet. He had been clinging to a visionary hope. ‘I’ve lost her… lost her… lost her,’ he repeated to himself, as though with each repetition the meaning of the phrase grew clearer. Numbness followed upon misery; there were long intervals when he felt nothing at all, periods when he thought he hated her, when pride and anger whispered he could do without her.… A state of negative insensibility followed.… On the heels of it came a red and violent vindictiveness; next — resignation, complete acceptance, almost peace. Then acute sensitiveness returned again — he felt the whole series of emotions over and over without one omission. This numbness and sensitiveness alternated with a kind of rhythmic succession.… He reviewed the entire episode from beginning to end, recalled every word she had uttered, traced the gradual influence of Tony on her, from its first faint origin to its present climax. He saw her struggles and her tears… the mysterious duality working to possess her soul. It was all plain as daylight. No justification for any further hope was left to him. He must go.… It was the thunder, surely, of the falling Wave.

For Tony, he realised at last, had not merely usurped his own place, but had discovered a new Lettice to herself, and setting her thus in a new, a larger world, had taught her a new relationship. He had achieved — perhaps innocently enough so far as his conscience was concerned? — a new result, and a bigger one than Tom, with his lesser powers, could possibly have effected.

There was no falseness, no duplicity in her. 'She still loves me as before, the mother still gives me what she always gave,' Tom put it to himself, 'but Tony has ploughed deeper — reached the woman in her. He loves a Lettice I have never realised. It is this new Lettice that loves him in return.… What right have I, with my smaller claim, to stand in her way a single moment?… I must slip out.'

He had lost the dream that Tony but tended a blossom, the fruit of which would come sweetly to his plucking afterwards. The intense suffering concealed all prophecy, as the jealousy killed all hope. He spent that final night of awful pain on his balcony, remembering how weeks before in Luxor the first menacing presentiment had come to him. He stared out into the Egyptian wonder of outer darkness. The stillness held a final menace as of death. He recalled a Polish proverb: 'In the still marshes there are devils.' The world spread dark and empty like his life; the Theban Hills seemed to have crept after him, here to Assouan; the stars, incredibly distant, had no warmth or comfort in them; the river roared with a dull and lonely sound; he heard the palm trees rattling in the wind. The pain in him was almost physical.…

Dawn found him in the same position — yet with a change. Perhaps the prolonged agony had killed the ache of ceaseless personal craving, or perhaps the fierceness of the fire had burned it out. Tom could not say; nor did he ask the questions. A change was there, and that was all he knew. He had come at last to a decision, made a final choice. He had somehow fought his battle out with a courage he did not know was courage. Here at Assouan, he turned upon the Wave and faced it. He saw *her* happiness only, fixed all his hope and energy on that. A new and loftier strength woke in him. There was no shuffling now.

He would give her up. In his heart she would always remain his dream and his ideal — but outwardly he would no longer need her. He would do without her. He forgave — if there was anything to forgive — forgave them both.…

Something in him had broken.

He could not explain it, though he felt it. Yet it was not her that he had given up — it was himself.

The first effect of this, however, was to think that life lay in ruins round him, that, literally, the life in him was smothered by the breaking wave.…

And yet he did not break — he did not drown.

For, as though to show that his decision was the right, inevitable one, small outward details came to his assistance. Fate evidently approved. For Fate just then furnished relief by providing another outlet for his energies: the Works went seriously wrong: Tom could think of nothing else but how he could put things right again. Reflection, introspection, brooding over mental and spiritual pain became impossible.

The lieutenants he trusted had played him false; sub-contracts of an outrageous kind, flavoured by bribery, had been entered into; the cost of certain necessaries had been raised absurdly, with the result that the profits of the entire undertaking to the Firm must be lowered correspondingly. And the blame, the responsibility was his own; he had unwisely delegated his powers to underlings whose ambitions for money exceeded their sense of honour. But Tom’s honour was involved as well. He had delegated his powers in writing. He now had to pay the price of his prolonged neglect of duty.

The position was irremediable; Tom’s neglect and inefficiency were established beyond question. He had failed in a position of high trust. And to make the situation still less pleasant, Sir William, the Chairman of the Company — Tom’s chief, the man to whom he owed his partnership and post of trust — telegraphed that he was on the way at last from Salonika. One way alone offered — to break the disastrous contracts by payments made down without delay. Tom made these payments out of his own pocket; they were large; his private resources disappeared in a single day.…

But, even so, the delay and bungling at the Works were not to be concealed. Sir William, shrewd, experienced man of business, stern of heart as well as hard of head, could not be deceived. Within half an hour of his arrival, Tom Kelverdon's glaring incompetency — worse, his unreliability, to use no harsher word — were all laid bare. His position in the Firm, even his partnership, perhaps, became untenable. Resignation stared him in the face.

He saw his life go down in ruins before his very eyes; the roof had fallen long ago. The pillars now collapsed. The Wave, indeed, had turned him upside down; its smothering crash left no corner of his being above water; heart, mind, and character were flung in a broken tangle against the cruel bottom as it fell to earth.

But, at any rate, the new outlet for his immediate energies was offered. He seized it vigorously. He gave up his room at Luxor, and sent a man down to bring his luggage up. He did not write to Lettice. He faced the practical situation with a courage and thoroughness which, though too late, were admirable. Moreover, he found a curious relief in the new disaster, a certain comfort even. There was compensation in it somewhere. Everything was going to smash — the sooner, then, the better! This recklessness was in him. He had lost Lettice, so what else mattered? His attitude was somewhat devil-may-care, his grip on life itself seemed slipping.

This mood could not last, however, with a character like his. It seized him, but retained no hold. It was the last cry of despair when he touched bottom, the moment when weaker temperaments think of the emergency exit, realise their final worthlessness — proving themselves worthless, indeed, thereby.

Tom met the blow in other fashion. He saw himself unworthy, but by no means worthless. Suicide, whether of death or of final collapse, did not enter his mind even. He faced the Wave, he did not shuffle now. He sent a telegram to Lettice to say he was detained; he wrote to Tony that he had given up his room in the Luxor hotel, an affectionate, generous note, telling him to take good care of Lettice. It was only right and fair that Tony should think the path for himself was clear. Since he had decided to 'slip out' this attitude towards his cousin was necessarily involved. It must not appear that he had retired, beaten and unhappy. He must do no single thing that might offer resistance to the inevitable fate, least of all leave Tony with the sense of having injured him. True sacrifice forbade; renunciation, if real, was also silent — the smiling face, the cheerful, natural manner!

Tom, therefore, fixed his heart more firmly than ever upon one single point: her happiness. He fought to think of that alone. If he knew her happy, he could live. He found life in her joy. He lived in that. By ‘slipping out,’ no word of reproach, complaint, or censure uttered, he would actually contribute to her happiness. Thus, vicariously, he almost helped to cause it. In this faint, self-excluding bliss, he could live — even live on — until the end. That seemed true forgiveness.

Meanwhile, not easily nor immediately, did he defy the anguish that, day and night, kept gnawing at his heart. His one desire was to hide it, and — if the huge achievement might lie within his powers — to change it sweetly into a source of strength that should redeem him. The ‘sum of loss,’ indeed, he had not ‘reckoned yet,’ but he was beginning to add the figures up. Full measurement lay in the long, long awful years ahead. He had this strange comfort, however — that he now loved something he could never lose because it could not change. He loved an ideal. In that sense, he and Lettice were in the ‘sea’ together. His belief and trust in her were not lost, but heightened. And a hint of mothering contentment stole sweetly over him behind this shadowy yet genuine consolation.

The childhood nightmare was both presentiment and memory. The crest of the falling Wave was reflected in its base.

CHAPTER XXX.

TOM TOOK HIS passage home; he also told Sir William that his resignation, whether the Board accepted it or not, was final. His reputation, so far as the Firm was concerned, he knew was lost. His own self-respect had dwindled dangerously too. He had the feeling that he wanted to begin all over again from the very bottom. It seemed the only way. The prospect, at his age, was daunting. He faced it.

At the very moment in life when he had fancied himself most secure, most satisfied mentally, spiritually, materially — the entire structure on which self-confidence rested had given way. Even the means of material support had vanished too. The crash was absolute. This brief Egyptian winter had, indeed, proved the winter of his loss. The Wave had fallen at last.

During the interval at Assouan — ten days that seemed a month! — he heard occasionally from Lettice. ‘To-day I miss you,’ one letter opened. Another said: ‘We wonder when you will return. We *all* miss you very much: it’s not the same here without you, Tom.’ And all were signed ‘Your ever loving Lettice.’ But if hope for some strange reason refused to die completely, he did not allow himself to be deceived. His task — no easy one — was to transmute emotion into the higher, self-less, ideal love that was now — oh, he knew it well enough — his only hope and safety. In the desolate emptiness of desert that yawned ahead, he saw this single tree that blossomed, and offered shade. Beauty and comfort both were there. He believed in her truth and somehow in her faithfulness as well.

Tom sent his heavy luggage to Port Said, and took the train to Luxor. He had decided to keep his sailing secret. He could mention honestly that he was going to Cairo. He would write a line from there or, better still, from the steamer itself.

And the instinct that led to this decision was sound and wise. The act was not as boyish as it seemed. For he feared a reaction on her part that yet could be momentary only. His leaving so suddenly would be a shock, it might summon the earlier Lettice to the surface, there might be a painful scene for both of them. She would realise, to some extent at any rate, the immediate sense of loss; for she would surely divine that he was going, not to England merely, but out of her life. And she would suffer; she might even try to keep him — the only result being a revival of pain already almost conquered, and of distress for her.

For such reaction, he divined, could not be permanent. The Play was over; it must not, could not be prolonged. He must go out. There must be no lingering when the curtain fell. A curtain that halts in its descent upon the actors endangers the effect of the entire Play.

He wired to Cairo for a room. He wired to her too: ‘Arrive to-morrow, *en route* Cairo. Leave same night.’ He braced himself. The strain would be cruelly exacting, but the worst had been lived out already; the jealousy was dead; the new love was established beyond all reach of change. These last few hours should be natural, careless, gay, no hint betraying him, flying no signals of distress. He could just hold out. The strength was in him. And there was time before he caught the evening train for a reply to come: ‘All delighted; expect you breakfast. Arranging picnic expedition. — Lettice.’

And that one word ‘all’ helped him unexpectedly to greater steadiness. It eliminated the personal touch even in a telegram.

In the train he slept but little; the heat was suffocating; there was a Khamsîn blowing and the fine sand crept in everywhere. At Luxor, however, the wind remained so high up that the lower regions of the sky were calm and still. The sand hung in fog-like clouds shrouding the sun, dimming the usual brilliance. But the heat was intense, and the occasional stray puffs of air that touched the creeping Nile or passed along the sweltering street, seemed to issue from the mouth of some vast furnace in the heavens. They dropped, then ceased abruptly; there was no relief in them. The natives sat listlessly in their doorways, the tourists kept their rooms or idled complainingly in the hotel halls and corridors. The ominous touch was everywhere. He felt it in his heart as well — the heart he thought broken beyond repair.

Tom bathed and changed his clothes, then drove down to the shady garden beside the river as of old. He felt the gritty sand between his teeth, it was in his mouth and eyes, it was on his tongue.… He met Lettice without a tremor, astonished at his own coolness and self-control; he watched her beauty as the beauty of a picture, something that was no longer his, yet watched it without envy and, in an odd sense, almost without pain. He loved the fairness of it for itself, for her, and for another who was not himself. Almost he loved their happiness to come — for *her* sake. Her eyes, too, followed him, he fancied, like a picture's eyes. She looked young and fresh, yet something mysterious in the following eyes. The usual excited happiness was less obvious, he thought, than usual, the mercurial gaiety wholly absent. He fancied a cloud upon her spirit somewhere. He imagined tiny, uncertain signs of questioning distress. He wondered.… This torture of a last uncertainty was also his.

Yet, obviously, she was glad to see him; her welcome was genuine; she came down the drive to meet him, both hands extended. Apparently, too, she was alone, Mrs. Haughstone still asleep, and Tony not yet arrived. It was still early morning.

'Well, and how did you get on without me — all of you?' he asked, adding the last three words with emphasis.

'I thought you were never coming back, Tom; I had the feeling you were bored here at Luxor and meant to leave us.' She looked him up and down with a curious look — of admiration almost, an admiration he believed he had now learned to do without. 'How lean and brown and well you look!' she went on, 'but thin, Tom. You've grown thinner.' She shook her finger at him. Her voice was perilously soft and kind, a sweet tenderness in her manner, too. 'You've been over-working and not eating enough. You've not had me to look after you.'

He flushed. 'I'm awfully fit,' he said, smiling a little shyly. 'I may be thinner. That's the heat, I suppose. Assouan's a blazing place — you feel you're in Africa.' He said the banal thing as usual.

'But was there no one there to look after you?' She gave him a quick glance. 'No one at all?'

Tom noticed the repeated question, wondering a little. But there was no play in him; in place of it was something stern, unyielding as iron, though not tested yet.

‘The Chairman of my Company, nine hundred noisy tourists, and about a thousand Arabs at the Works,’ he told her. ‘There was hardly a soul I knew besides.’

She said no more; she gave a scarcely audible sigh; she seemed unsatisfied somewhere. To his surprise, then, he noticed that the familiar little table was only laid for two.

‘Where’s Tony?’ he asked. ‘And, by the by, how is he?’

He thought she hesitated a moment. ‘Tony’s not coming till later,’ she told him. ‘He guessed we should have a lot to talk about together, so he stayed away. Nice of him, wasn’t it?’

Behind the commonplace sentences, the hidden wordless Play also drew on towards its Curtain.

‘Well, it is my turn rather for a chat, perhaps,’ he returned presently with a laugh, taking his cup of steaming coffee from her hand. ‘I can see him later in the day. You’ve arranged something, I’m sure. Your wire spoke of a picnic, but perhaps this heat — this beastly Khamsîn — —’

‘It’s passing,’ she mentioned. ‘They say it blows for three days, for six days, or for nine, but as a matter of fact, it does nothing of the sort. It’s going to clear. I thought we might take our tea into the Desert.’

She went on talking rapidly, almost nervously, it seemed to Tom. Her mind was upon something else. Thoughts of another kind lay unexpressed behind her speech. His own mind was busy too — Tony, Warsaw, the long long interval he had been away, what had happened during his absence, and so forth? Had no cable come? What would she feel this time to-morrow when she knew? — these and a hundred others seethed below his quiet manner and careless talk. He noticed then that she was exquisitely dressed; she wore, in fact, the very things he most admired — and wore them purposely: the orange-coloured jacket, the violet veil, the hat with the little roses on the brim. It was his turn to look her up and down.

She caught his eye. Uncannily, she caught his thought as well. Tom steeled himself.

‘I put these on especially for you, you truant boy,’ she said deliciously across the table at him. ‘I hope you’re sensible of the honour done you.’

‘Rather, Lettice! I should think I am, indeed!’

‘I got up half an hour earlier on purpose too. Think what that means to a woman like me.’ She handed him a grape-fruit she had opened and prepared herself.

‘My favourite hat, and my favourite fruit! I wish I were worthy of them!’ He stammered slightly as he said the stupid thing: the blood rushed up to his very forehead, but she gave no sign of noticing either words or blush. The strong sunburn hid the latter doubtless. There was a desperate shyness in him that he could not manage quite. He wished to heaven the talk would shift into another key. He could not keep this up for long; it was too dangerous. Her attitude, it seemed, had gone back to that of weeks ago; there was more than the mother in it, he felt: it was almost the earlier Lettice — and yet not quite. Something was added, but something too was missing. He wondered more and more… he asked himself odd questions.… It seemed to him suddenly that her mood was assumed, not wholly natural. The flash came to him that disappointment lay behind it, yet that the disappointment was not with — himself.

‘You’re wearing a new tie, Tom,’ her voice broke in upon his moment’s reverie. ‘That’s not the one *I* gave you.’

It was so unexpected, so absurd. It startled him. He laughed with genuine amusement, explaining that he had bought it in Assouan in a moment of extravagance— ‘the nearest shade I could find to the blue you gave me. How observant you are!’ Lettice laughed with him. ‘I always notice little things like that,’ she said. ‘It’s what you call the mother in me, I suppose.’ She examined the tie across the table, while they smoked their cigarettes. He looked aside. ‘I hope it was admired. It suits you.’ She fingered it. Her hand touched his chin.

‘Does it? It’s your taste, you know.’

‘But *was* it admired?’ she insisted almost sharply.

‘That’s really more than I can say, Lettice. You see, I didn’t ask Sir William what he thought, and the natives are poor judges because they don’t wear ties.’ He was about to say more, talking the first nonsense that came into his head, when she did a thing that took his breath away, and made him tremble where he sat. Regardless of lurking Arab servants, careless of Mrs.

Haughstone's windows not far behind them, she rose suddenly, tripped round the little table, kissed him on his cheek — and was back again in her chair, smoking innocently as before. It was a repetition of an earlier act, yet with a difference somewhere.

The world seemed unreal just then; things like this did not happen in real life, at least not quite like this; nor did two persons in their respective positions talk exactly thus, using such banal language, such insignificant phrases half of banter, half of surface foolishness. The kiss amazed him — for a moment. Tom felt in a dream. And yet this very sense of dream, this idle exchange of trivial conversation cloaked something that was a cruel, an indubitable reality. It was not a dream shot through with reality, it was a reality shot through with dream. But the dream itself, though old as the desert, dim as those grim Theban Hills now draped with flying sand, was also true and actual.

The hidden Play had broken through, merging for an instant with the upper surface-life. He was almost persuaded that this last, strange action had not happened, that Lettice had never really left her chair. So still and silent she sat there now. She had not stirred from her place. It was the burning wind that touched his cheek, a waft of heated atmosphere, lightly moving, that left the disquieting trail of perfume in the air. The glowing heavens, luminous athwart the clouds of fine, suspended sand, laid this ominous hint of dream upon the entire day.… The recent act became a mere picture in the mind.

Yet some little cell of innermost memory, stirring out of sleep, had surely given up its dead.… For a second it seemed to him this heavy, darkened air was in the recesses of the earth, beneath the burden of massive cliffs the centuries had piled. It was underground. In some cavern of those mournful Theban Hills, some one — had kissed him! For over his head shone painted stars against a painted blue, and in his nostrils hung a faint sweetness as of ambra.…

He recovered his balance quickly. They resumed their curious masquerade, the screen of idle talk between significance and emptiness, like sounds of reality between dream and waking.

And the rest of that long day of stifling heat was similarly a dream shot through with incongruous touches of reality, yet also a reality shot through with the glamour of some incredibly ancient dream. Not till he stood later upon the steamer deck, the sea-wind in his face and the salt spray on his lips, did he awake fully and distinguish the dream from the reality — or the reality from the dream. Nor even then was the deep, strange confusion wholly dissipated. To the end of life, indeed, it remained an unsolved mystery, labelled a Premonition Fulfilled, without adequate explanation.…

The time passed listlessly enough, to the accompaniment of similar idle talk, careless, it seemed to Tom, with the ghastly sense of the final minutes slipping remorselessly away, so swiftly, so poignantly unused. For each moment was gigantic, brimmed full with the distilled essence, as it were, of intensest value, value that yet was not his to seize. He never lost the point of view that he watched a picture that belonged to some one else. His own position was clear; he had already leaped from a height; he counted, as he fell, the blades of grass, the pebbles far below; slipping over Niagara's awful edge, he noted the bubbles in the whirlpools underneath. They talked of the weather.…!

'It's clearing,' said Lettice. 'There'll be sand in our tea and thin bread and butter. But anything's better than sitting and stifling here.'

Tom readily agreed. 'You and I and Tony, then?'

'I thought so. We don't want too many, do we?'

'Not for our la — not for a day like this.' He corrected himself just in time. 'Tony will be here for lunch?' he asked.

She nodded. 'He said so, at any rate, only one never quite knows with Tony.' And though Tom plainly heard, he made no comment. He was puzzled.

Most of the morning they remained alone together. Tom had never felt so close to her before; it seemed to him their spirits touched; there was no barrier now. But there was distance. He could not explain the paradox. A vague sweet feeling was in him that the distance was not of height, as formerly. He had risen somehow; he felt higher than before; he saw over the barrier that had been there. Pain and sacrifice, perhaps, had lifted him, raised him to the level where she dwelt; and in that way he was closer. A new strength was in him. At the same time, behind her outer quietness and her calm, he divined struggle still. In her atmosphere was a hint of strain, disharmony. He was positive of this. From time to time he caught trouble in her eyes. Could she, perhaps, discern — foreknow — the shadow of the dropping Curtain? He wondered.… He detected something in her that was new.

If any weakening of resolve were in himself, it disappeared long before Tony's arrival on the scene. A few private words from Mrs. Haughstone later banished it effectually. 'Your telegram, Mr. Kelverdon, came as a great surprise. We had planned a three-day trip to the Sphinx and Pyramids. Mr. Winslowe had written to you; he hoped to persuade you to join us. Again you left Assouan before the letter arrived. It's a habit with you!'

'Apparently.'

The poison no longer fevered him; he was immune.

'Mr. Winslowe — I had better warn you before he comes — was disappointed.'

'I'm sorry I spoilt the trip. It was most inconsiderate of me. But you can make it later when I'm gone — to Cairo, can't you?'

Mrs. Haughstone watched him somewhat keenly. Did she discover anything, he wondered? Was she aware that he was no longer within reach of her little shafts?

'It's all for the best, I think,' she went on in a casual tone. 'Lettice was too easily persuaded — she didn't really want to go without you. She said so. And Mr. Winslowe soon gets over his sulks — —'

Tom interrupted her, turning sharply round. 'Oh,' he laughed, 'was that why he wouldn't come to breakfast, then?' And whether it was pain or pleasure that he felt, he did not know. The moment's anguish — he verily believed it — was for Lettice. And for Tony? Something akin to sympathy perhaps! If Tony should ever suffer pain like his — even temporarily.…!

The other shrugged her angular shoulders a little. 'It's all passed now,' she observed; 'he's forgotten it, I'm sure. You needn't notice anything, by the way,' she added, 'if — if he seems ungracious.'

'Not for worlds,' replied Tom, throwing stones into the sullen river below. 'I'm far too tactful.'

Mrs. Haughstone looked away. There was a moment's expression of admiration on her face. 'You're big, Mr. Kelverdon, very big. I wish all men were as generous.' She spoke hurriedly below her breath. 'I saw this coming before you arrived. I wish I could have saved you. You've got the hero in you.'

Tom changed the subject, and presently moved away: it was time for lunch for one thing, and for another he wanted to hide his face from her too peering eyes. He was not quite sure of himself just then; his lips trembled a little; he could not altogether control his facial muscles. Tony jealous! Lettice piqued! Was this the explanation of her new sweetness towards himself! The position tried him sorely, testing his new strength from such amazing and unexpected angles. It was all beyond him somehow, the reversal of rôles so afflicting, tears and laughter so oddly mingled. Yet the sheet-anchor — his self-less love — held fast and true. There was no dragging, no shuffling where he stood.

Nor was there any weakening of resolution in him, any dimming of the new dawn within his heart. He felt sure of something that he did not understand, aware of a radiant promise some one whispered marvellously in his ear. He was alone, yet not alone, outcast yet companioned sweetly, bereft of all the world holds valuable, yet possessor of riches that the world passed by. He felt a conqueror. The pain was somehow turning into joy. He seemed above the earth. Only one thing mattered — that his ideal love should have no stain upon it.

The lunch he dreaded passed smoothly and without alarm. Tony was gay, light-hearted as usual, belying Mrs. Haughstone's ominous prediction. They smoked together afterwards, walking up and down the garden arm-in-arm, Tony eagerly discussing expeditions, picnics, birds, anything and everything that offered, with keen interest as of old; he even once suggested coming back to Assouan with his cousin — alone… Tom made no comment on the adverb. Nor was his sympathy mere acting; he genuinely felt it; the affection for Tony somehow was not dead.… The joy in him grew, meanwhile, brighter, clearer, higher. It was alive. Some courage of the sun was in him. There seemed a great understanding with it, and a greater forgiveness.

Of one thing only did he feel uncertain. He caught himself sharply wondering more than once. For he had the impression — the conviction almost — that something had happened during his absence at Assouan — that there was a change in *her* attitude to Tony. It was a subtle change; it was beginning merely; but it was there. Her behaviour at breakfast was not due to pique, not solely due to pique, at any rate. It had a deeper origin. Almost he detected signs of friction between herself and Tony. Very slight they were indeed, if not imagined altogether. His perception was still exceptionally alert, its acuteness left over, apparently, from the earlier days of pain and jealousy. Yet the result upon him was confusing chiefly.

In very trivial ways the change betrayed itself. The talk between the three of them remained incongruously upon the surface always. The play and chatter went on independently of the Play beneath, almost ignoring it. In that Wordless Play, however, the change was registered.

'Tom, you've got the straightest back of any man I ever saw,' Lettice exclaimed once, eyeing them critically with an amused smile as they came back towards her chair. 'I've just been watching you both.'

They laughed, while Tony turned it wittily into fun. 'It's always safer to look a person in the face,' he observed. If he felt the comparison was made to his disadvantage he did not show it. Tom, wondering what she meant and why she said it, felt that the remark annoyed him. For there was disparagement of Tony in it.

'I can read your soul from your back alone,' she added.

'And mine!' cried Tony, laughing: 'what about my back too? Or have I got no soul misplaced between my shoulder-blades?'

Tom laid his hand between those slightly-rounded shoulders then — and rather suddenly.

'It's bent from too much creeping after birds,' he exclaimed. 'In your next life you'll be on all fours if you're not careful.'

The Arab appeared to say the donkeys and sand-cart were waiting in the road, and Tony went indoors to get cameras and other paraphernalia essential to a Desert picnic. Lettice continued talking idly to Tom, who stood beside her, smoking.… The feeling of dream and reality were very strong in him at the moment. He hardly realised what the nonsense was he had said to his cousin. There was a slight sense of discomfort in him. The little, playful conversation just over had meaning in it. He missed that meaning. Somehow the comparison in his favour was disagreeable — he preferred to hear his cousin praised, but certainly not belittled. Perhaps vanity was wounded there — that his successful rival woke contempt in her was unendurable.… And he thought of his train for the first time with a vague relief.

‘Birds,’ she was saying, half to herself, the eyes beneath the big sun-hat looking beyond him, ‘that reminds me, Tom — a dream I had. A little bird left its nest and hopped about to try all the other branches, because it thought it ought to explore them — had to, in a way. And it got into all sorts of danger, and ran fearful risks, and couldn’t fly or use its wings properly, — till finally — —’

She stopped, and her eyes turned full upon his own. The love in his face was plain to read, though he was not conscious of it. He waited in silence:

‘Till finally it crept back up into its own nest again,’ she went on, ‘and found its wings lying there all the time. It had forgotten them! And it got in, felt warm and safe and cosy — and fell asleep.’

‘Whereupon you woke and found it was all a dream,’ said Tom. His tone, though matter-of-fact, was lower than usual, but it was firm. No sign of emotion now was visible in his face. The eyes were steady, the lips betrayed no hint. Her little dream, the way of telling it rather, perplexed him.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘but I found somehow that the bird was me.’ She sighed a little.

It flashed upon him suddenly that she was exhausted, wearied out; that her heart was beating with some interior stress and struggle. She seemed on the point of giving up, some long long battle in her ended. There was something she wished to say to him — he got this impression too — something she could not bring herself to say, unless he helped her, unless he asked for it. The duality was ending, perhaps fused into unity again?… The intense and burning desire to help her rose upon him, the desire to protect. And the word ‘Warsaw’ fled across his mind… as though it fell through the heated air into his mind… from hers.

‘Tony declares,’ she was saying, ‘that our memories are packed away under pressure like steam in a boiler, and the dream is their safety-valve… I wonder.… He read it somewhere. It’s not his own, of course. But Tony never explains — because he doesn’t really know. He’s flashy — not the depth we thought — the truth… *Tom!*’

She called his name with emphasis, as if annoyed that he showed so little interest. There was an instant’s cloud upon her face; the eyes wavered, then looked away; he felt again there was disappointment somewhere in her — with himself or with Tony, he did not know.… He kept silent. He could think of nothing by way of answer — nothing appropriate, nothing safe.

She waited, keeping silent too. The Curtain was lowering, its shadow growing on the air.

‘I dream so little,’ he stammered at length, ‘I can’t say.’ It enraged him that he faltered. He turned away.… Tony at that moment arrived. The cart and animals were ready, everything was collected. He announced it loudly, urging them with a certain impatience, as though they caused the delay. He stared keenly at them a moment.… They started.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HOW TRIVIAL, YET how significant of the tension of interior forces — the careless words, the foolish little dream, the playful allusion to one man’s stoop and to another’s upright carriage, how easy to read, how obvious! Yet Tom, too intensely preoccupied, perhaps, with keeping his own balance, was unaware of revelation. His mind perceived the delicate change, yet attached a wrong direction to it. Perplexity and discomfort in him deepened. He was relieved when Tony interrupted; he felt glad. The shifting of values was disturbing to him. It was as though the falling Curtain halted.…

The hours left to him were few; they both rushed and lingered. The afternoon seemed gone so quickly, while yet the moments dragged, each separate instant too intense with feeling to yield up its being willingly. The minutes lingered; it was the hours that rushed.

Subconsciously, it seemed, Tom counted them in his heart.… Subconsciously, too, he stated the position, as though to do so steadied him: Three persons, three friends, were off upon a picnic. At a certain moment they would turn back; at a certain moment two of them would say good-bye; at a certain moment a final train would start — his eyes would no longer see *her*.… It seemed impossible, unreal; it could not happen.… He could so easily prevent it. No question had been asked about his going to Cairo; it was taken for granted that he went on business and would return. He could cancel his steamer-berth, no explanation necessary, nor any asked.

But having weighed the sacrifice against the joy, he was not wanting.

They mounted their lusty donkeys; Lettice climbed into her sand-cart; the boys came clattering after them down the street of Thebes with the tea-things and the bundles of clover for the animals. Across the belt of brilliant emerald green, past clover-fields and groves of palms, they followed the ancient track towards the desert. They were on the eastern bank, the Theban Hills far behind them on the horizon. Towards the Red Sea they headed, though Tom had no notion of their direction, aware only that while they went further and further from those hills, the hills themselves somehow came ever nearer. The gaunt outline followed them; each time he looked back the shadow cast was closer than before, almost upon their heels. But for the assurance of his senses he could have believed they headed towards these yellow cliffs instead of the reverse. He could not shake off the singular impression that their weight was on his back; he felt the oppression of those ancient tombs, those crowded corridors, that hidden subterranean world. No mummy, he remembered, but believed it would one day unwind again when the soul, cleansed and justified, came back to claim it. Regeneration was inevitable. A glorious faith secure in ultimate joy!

They hurried vainly; the distance between them, instead of increasing, lessened. The hills would not let them go.

The burning atmosphere, the motionless air caused doubtless the optical illusion. The glare was blinding. Tom did not draw attention to it. He tugged his obstinate donkey into line with the slower sand-cart, riding for several minutes in silence, close beside Lettice, aware of her perfume, her flying veil almost across his eyes from time to time. Tony was some way ahead.

‘Tom,’ he heard suddenly, ‘must you really go to Cairo to-night?’

‘I’m afraid so. It’s important.’ But after a pause he added ‘Why?’ He said it because his sentence sounded otherwise suspiciously incomplete. Above all, he must seem natural. ‘Why do you ask?’

The answer made him regret that extra word:

‘There’s something I want to tell you.’

‘*Very* important?’ He asked it laughingly, busy with the reins apparently.

‘Far more important than your going to Cairo. I want your advice and help.’

‘I must,’ he said slowly. ‘Won’t it keep?’ He tugged violently at the reins, though the donkey was behaving admirably.

‘How long will you stay?’ she asked.

‘One night only, Lettice. Not longer.’

They were on soft and yellow sand by now; the desert shone with a luminous glow; Tom could not hear the sound of his donkey’s hoofs, nor the crunching of the sand-cart. He heard nothing but a voice singing beside him in the burning air. But the air had grown radiant. He realised that he was beating the donkey without the slightest reason.

‘When you come back, then — I’ll tell you when you come back,’ he heard.

And a sudden inspiration came to his assistance. ‘Couldn’t you write it?’ he asked calmly. ‘The Semiramis Hotel will find me — in case anything happened. I should have time to think it over — I like that best — if it’s really so important. My mind, you know, works slowly.’

Her reply had a curious effect upon him. She needed help — his help. ‘Perhaps, Tom. But one can depend so upon your judgment.’

He knew that she was watching his face. With an effort he turned to meet her gaze. He saw her against the background of the hills, whose following mass towered menacingly above her little outline. And as he looked he was suddenly transfixed, he dropped his reins, he stared without a word. Two pairs of eyes, two smiles, two human physiognomies once again met his arrested gaze. He knew them, of course, well enough by now, but never before had he caught the two expressions so vividly revealed, so distinctly marked; clear as a composite picture, one face painted in upon another that lay beneath it. There was the darker face — and there was Lettice; and each struggled for complete possession of her features. There was conflict, sharp and dreadful; one second, the gleam of cruelty flashed out, a yellow of amber in it, as though gold shone reflected faintly — the next, an anguish of tenderness, as though love brimmed her eyes with the moisture of divine compassion. The conflict was desperate, amazing, painful beyond words. Then the darker aspect slowly waned, withdrawing backwards, melting away into the shadows of the hills behind — as though it first had issued thence — as though almost it belonged there. Alive and true, yet vanquished, it faded out.… He saw at last the dear, innocent eyes of — Lettice only. It was this Lettice who had spoken.

His donkey stumbled — it was natural enough, seeing that the reins hung loose and his feet had somehow left the stirrups. Tom pitched forward heavily, saving himself and his animal from an ignominious accident just in the nick of time. There were cries and laughter. The sand-cart swerved aside at the same moment, and Tony, from a distance, came galloping back towards them.

Tom recovered his balance and told his donkey in honest English what he thought of it. ‘But it was your fault, you careless boy,’ cried Lettice; ‘you let go the reins and whacked it at the same time. Your eyes were popping out of your head. I thought you’d seen a ghost.’

Tom glanced at her. ‘I was nearly off,’ he said. ‘Another second and it would have been a case of “Low let me lie where the dead dog — —”’

She interrupted him with surprising vehemence:

‘Don’t, don’t, Tom. I hate it! I hate the words and the tune and everything. I won’t hear it…!’

Tony came clattering up and the incident was over, ended as abruptly as begun. But, as Tom well realised, another hitch had occurred in the lowering of the Curtain. The actors, for a moment, had stood there in their normal fashion, betrayed, caught in the act, a little foolish even. It was the hand of a woman this time that delayed it.

‘Did you hurt yourself anywhere, Tom?’ Her question rang in his head like music for the next mile or two. He kept beside the sand-cart until they reached their destination. It was absurd — yet he could not ride in front with Tony lest some one driving behind them should notice — yes, that was the half-comical truth — notice that Tony was round-shouldered — oh, very, very slightly so — whereas his own back was straight! It was ridiculously foolish, yet pathetic. At the same time, it was poignantly dramatic.…

And their destination was a deep bay of yellow sand, soft and tawny, ribbed with a series of lesser troughs the wind had scooped out to look like a shore some withdrawing ocean had left exposed below the westering sun. A solitary palm tree stood behind upon a dune.

The afternoon, the beating hotness of the air, the clouds of high, suspended sand, the stupendous sunset — as if the world caught fire and burned along the whole horizon — it was all unforgettable. The yellow sand about them blazed and shone, scorching their bare hands; the Desert was empty, silent, lonely. Only the western heavens, where the sun sank in a red mass of ominous splendour, was alive with energy. Coloured shafts mapped the vault from horizon to zenith like the spokes of a prodigious wheel of fire. Any minute the air and the sand it pressed upon might burst into a sea of flame. The furnace where the Khamsîn brewed in distant Nubia sent its warnings in advance; it was slowly travelling northward. And hence, possibly, arose the disquieting sensation that something was gathering, something that might take them unawares. The sand lay listening, waiting, watching. There was whispering among the very grains.…

It was half way through tea when the first stray puffs of wind came dropping abruptly, sighing away in tiny eddies of dust beyond the circle. Three human atoms upon the huge yellow carpet, that ere long would shake itself across five hundred miles and rise, whirling, driving, suffocating all life within its folds — three human beings noted the puffs of heated air and reacted variously to the little change. Each felt, it seemed, a slight uneasiness, as though of trouble coming that was yet not entirely atmospherical. Nerves tingled. They looked into each other's faces. They looked back.

'We mustn't stay too late,' said Tony, filling a basket for the donkey-boys in their dune two hundred yards away. 'We've a long way to go.' He examined the portentous sky. 'It won't come till night,' he added, 'still — they're a bit awkward, these sandstorms, and one never knows.'

'And I've got a train to catch,' Tom mentioned, 'absurd as it sounds in a place like this.' He was scraping his lips with a handkerchief. 'I've eaten enough bread-and-sand to last me till dinner, anyhow.' He helped his cousin with the Arabs' food. 'They probably don't mind it, they're used to it.' He straightened up from his stooping posture. Lettice, he saw, was lying with a cigarette against the bank of sloping sand that curved above them. She was intently watching them. She had not spoken for some time; she looked almost drowsy; the eyelids were half closed; the cigarette smoke rose in a steady little thread that did not waver.… There was perhaps ten yards between them, but he caught the direction of her gaze, and throwing his own eyes into the same line of sight, he saw what she saw. Instinctively, he took a quick step forward — hiding Tony from her immediate view.

It was certainly curious, this desire to screen his cousin, to prevent his appearing at a disadvantage. He was impelled, at all costs and in the smallest details, to help the man she admired, to increase his value, to minimise his disabilities, however trivial. It pained him to see Tony even at a physical disadvantage; Tony must show always at his very best; and at this moment, bending over the baskets, the attitude of the shoulders was disagreeably emphasised.

Tom did not laugh, he did not even smile. Gravely, as though it were of importance, he moved forward so that Lettice should not see the detail of the rounded shoulders which, he knew, compared unfavourably with his own straighter carriage. Yet almost the next minute, when he looked back again, he saw that the cigarette had fallen from her fingers, the eyes were closed, her body had slipped into a more recumbent angle, she seemed actually asleep.

‘Give a shout, Tom, and the boys will come to fetch it,’ said Tony, when at length the basket was ready. He put his hands to his own mouth to coo-ee across the dunes. Tom stopped him at once. ‘Hush! Lettice has dropped off,’ he explained, ‘you’ll wake her. It’s the heat. I’ll carry the things over to them.’ He noticed Tony’s hands as he held them to his lips. And again he felt a touch of sympathy, almost pity. Had *she*, so observant, so discerning in her fastidious taste — had she failed to notice the small detail too?

‘No, let me take it,’ Tony was saying, seizing the hamper from his cousin. Tom suggested carrying it between them. They tried it, laughing and struggling together with the awkward burden, but keeping their voices low. They lost the direction too; for all the sand-dunes were alike, and the boys were hidden in a hollow. It ended in Tony going off in triumph with the basket under one arm, guided at length by the faint neighing of a donkey in the distance.

Some little time had passed, perhaps five minutes, perhaps longer, when Tom went back to the tea-place across the soft sand, stepping cautiously so as not to disturb the sleeper. And another five minutes, perhaps another ten, had slipped by before Tony’s head reappeared above a neighbouring dune. A boy had come to meet him, shortening his journey.

But Fate calculated to a nicety, wasting no seconds one way or the other. There had been time — just time before Tony’s return — for Tom to have stretched himself at her feet, to have lit a cigarette, and to have smoked sufficient of it for the first ash to fall. He was very careful to make no sound, even lighting the match softly inside his hat. But his hand was trembling. For Lettice slept, and in her sleep made little sounds of pain.

He watched her. There was a tiny frown between the eyebrows, the lips twitched from time to time, she moved uneasily upon the bank of sliding sand; and, as she made these little broken sounds of pain, from beneath the closed eyelids two small tears crept out upon her cheeks.

Tom stared, making no sound or movement. The tears rolled down and fell into the sand. The suffering in the face made his heart beat irregularly. Something transfixed him. She wore the expression he had seen in the London theatre. For a moment he felt terror — a terror of something coming, something going to happen. He stared, trembling, holding his breath. She was dreaming, as a person even in a three-minute sleep can dream — deeply, vividly. He waited. He had the amazing sensation that he knew what she was dreaming — that he took part in it with her almost.… Unable, finally, to restrain himself another instant, he moved — and the noise wakened her. She sighed. The eyes opened of their own accord. She stared at him in a dazed way for a moment. Then she looked over his shoulder across the desert.

‘You’ve been asleep, Lettice,’ he whispered, ‘and actually dreaming — all in five minutes.’

She rubbed her eyes slowly, as though sand was in them. She stared into his face a moment before she spoke.

‘Yes, I dreamed,’ she answered with a little frightened sigh. ‘I dreamed of you —— There was a tent — the flap lifted suddenly — oh, it was so vivid! Then there was a crowd and awful drums were beating — and my river with the floating faces was there and I plunged in to save one — it was yours, *Tom*, yours — —’

She paused for a fraction of a second, while his heart went thumping against his ribs. He did not speak. He waited.

‘Then somehow you were taken from me,’ she went on; ‘you left me, Tom.’ Her voice sank. ‘And it broke my heart in two.’

‘Lettice…!’

He made a sudden movement in the sand — at which moment, precisely, Tony’s head appeared above the neighbouring dune, the rest of his body following it immediately.

And it seemed to Tom that his cousin came upon them out of the heart of a dream, out of the earth, out of a sandy tomb. His very existence, for those minutes, had been utterly forgotten, obliterated. He rose from the dead and came towards them over the hot, yellow desert. The distant hills — the Theban Hills above the Valley of the Kings — disgorged him. And, as once before, he looked dreadful, threatening, his great hands held out in front of him. He came gliding down the yielding slope. He caught them!

In that second — it was but the fraction of a second actually — the impression upon Tom's mind was acute and terrible. Speech and movement were not in him anywhere; he could only sit and stare, both terrified and fascinated. Between himself and Lettice stretched an interval of six feet certainly, and into this very gap, the figure of his cousin, followed and preceded by heaps of moving sand, descended now. It was towards Lettice that Tony came so swiftly gliding.

It *was* his cousin surely…?

He saw the big hands outspread, he saw the slightly stooping shoulders, he saw the face and eyes, the light blue eyes. But also he saw strange, unaccustomed raiment, he saw a sheet of gold, he smelt the soft breath of ambra.… And the face was dark and menacing. There were words, too, careless, playful words, uttered undoubtedly by Tony's familiar voice: 'Caught you both asleep! Well, I declare! You *are* a couple…!' followed by something else about its being 'time to pack up and go because the sand was coming.…' Tom heard the words distinctly, but far away, tiny with curious distance; they were half smothered, half submerged, it seemed, behind an acute inner hearing that caught another set of words he could not understand — in a language he both remembered and forgot. And the deep sense of dread passed swiftly then into a blinding jealous rage; he saw red; a fury of wrath that could kill and stab and strangle rushed over him in a flood of passionate emotion. He lost control. He rushed headlong.

Seconds dragged out incredibly into minutes, as though time halted.… An intense, murderous hatred blazed in his heart.

From where he sat, both figures were above him, sheltered halfway up the long sliding slope. At the base of the yellow dune he crouched; he looked up at them. His eyes perhaps were blinded by the red tempest in his heart; or perhaps the tiny particles of flying sand drove against his eyeballs. He saw, at any rate, the figures close together, as if the man came gliding straight into her arms. He rose —

At the same moment a draught of sudden, violent wind broke with a pouring rush across the desert, and the entire crest of the undulating dune behind them rose to meet it in a single whirling eddy. As a gust of sea-wind tosses the spray into the air, this burst of scorching desert-wind drew the ridge up after it, then flung it in a blinding swirl against his face and skin.

The dune rose in a Wave of glittering yellow sand, drowning them from head to foot. He saw the glint and shimmer of the myriad particles in the sunset; he saw them drifting by the thousand, by the million through the whirling mass of it; he saw the two figures side by side above him, caught beneath the toppling crest of this bending billow that curved and broke against the fiery sky; he smelt the faint perfume of the desert underneath the hollow arch; he heard the thin, metallic grating of the countless grains in friction; he heard the palm leaves rattling; he saw two pairs of eyes… his feet went shuffling. It was The Wave — of sand.…

And the nightmare clutch laid hold upon his heart with giant pincers. The fiery red of insensate anger burst into flames, filled his throat to choking, set his paralysed muscles free with uncontrollable energy. This savage lust of murder caught him. The shuffling went faster, faster.… He turned and faced the eyes. He would kill — rather than see her touched by those great hands. It seemed he made the leap of a wild animal upon its prey.…

Fire flashed… then passed, before he knew it, from red to shining amber, from sullen crimson into purest gold, from gold to the sheen of dazzling whiteness. The change was instantaneous. His leap was arrested in mid-air. The red wrath passed amazingly, forgotten or transmuted. With a miraculous swiftness he was aware of understanding, of sympathy, of forgiveness.… The red light melted into white — the white of glory. The murder faded from his heart, replaced by a deep, deep glow of peace, of love, of infinite trust, of complete comprehension.… He accepted something marvellously. . . He forgot — himself.…

The eyes faded, the gold, the raiment, the perfume vanished, the sound died away. He no longer shuffled upon yielding sand. There was solid ground beneath his feet.… He was standing alert and upright, his arms outstretched to save — Tony from collapse upon the sliding dune. And the sandy wind drove blindingly against his face and skin.

The three of them stood side by side, holding to each other, laughing, choking, spluttering, heads bent and eyes closed tightly. Tom found his cousin’s hand in his own, clutching it firmly to keep his balance, while behind himself — against his ‘straight back,’ he realised, even while he choked and laughed — Lettice clung for shelter. Tom, therefore, actually *had* leaped forward — but to protect and not to kill. He protected both of them. This time, however, it was to himself that Lettice clung, instead of to another.

The violent gust passed on its way, the flying cloud of sand subsided, settling down on everything. For a moment they stood there rubbing their eyes, shaking their clothing free; then raising their heads cautiously, they looked about them. The air was still and calm again, but in the distance, already a mile away and swiftly travelling across the luminous waste, they saw the miniature whirlwind driving furiously, leaping from ridge to ridge. It swept over the innumerable dunes, lifting the series, one crest after another, into upright waves upon a yellow shimmering sea, then scattering them in a cloud that shone and glinted against the fiery sunset. Its track was easily marked. They watched it.…

Tony was the first to recover breath.

‘Whew!’ he cried, still spluttering, ‘but that was sudden! It took me clean off my feet for a moment. I got your hand, Tom, only just in time to save myself!’ He shook himself, the sand was down his back and in his hair, his shoes were full of it. ‘There’ll be another any minute now — another whirlwind — we’d better be starting.’ He began packing up busily, shouting as he did so to the donkey-boys. ‘By Jove!’ he cried the next second, ‘look what’s happened to our dune!’

Tom, who was on his knees, helping Lettice shake her skirts free, rose to look. The high, curving bank of sand where they had sheltered had indeed changed its shape; the entire ridge had been flattened by the wind; the crest had been lifted and carried away, scattered in all directions. The wave-outline of two minutes before no longer existed, it had broken, fallen over, melted back into the surrounding sea of desert whence it rose.…

‘It’s disappeared!’ exclaimed Tom and Lettice in the same breath.

The boys arrived with the animals and sand-cart; the baskets were quickly arranged, Tony mounted, Tom helped Lettice in. She leaned heavily on his arm and shoulder. It was in this moment’s pause before the actual start that Lettice turned her head suddenly as though listening. The air, motionless again, extraordinarily heated, hung in a dull and yet transparent curtain between them and the sinking sun. The entire heavens seemed to form a sounding-board, the least vibration resonant beneath its stretch.

‘Listen!’ she exclaimed. She had uttered no word till now. She looked down at Tom, then looked away again.

They turned their heads in the direction where she pointed, and Tom caught a faint, distant sound as of little strokes that fell thudding on the heavy air. Tony declared he heard nothing. The sound repeated itself rapidly, but at rhythmic intervals; it was unpleasant somewhere, a hint of alarm and menace in the throbbing note — ominous as though it warned. In the pulse of the blood it seemed, like the beating of the heart, Tom thought. It came to him almost through the pressure of her hand upon his shoulder, although his ear told him it came from the horizon where the Theban Hills loomed through the coming dusk, just visible, but shadowy. The muttering died away, then ceased, but not before he suddenly recalled an early morning hour beside a mountain lake, when months ago the thud of invisible paddle-wheels had stolen upon him through the quiet air.…

‘A drum,’ he heard Lettice murmur. ‘It’s a native drum in Thebes. My little dream! How the sound travels too! And how it multiplies!’ She peered at Tom through half-closed eyelids. ‘It must be at least a dozen miles away…!’ She smiled faintly, then dropped her eyes quickly.

‘Or a dozen centuries,’ he replied, not knowing quite why he said it. ‘And more like a thousand drums than only one!’ He smiled too. For another part of him, beyond capture somehow, knew what he meant, knew also why he smiled — knew also that *she* knew.

‘It frightens me! It’s horrible. It sounds like death!’ And though she whispered the words, more to herself than to the others, Tom heard each syllable.

The sound died away into the distance, and then ceased.

Then Tony, watching them both, but, unable to hear anything himself, called out again impatiently that it was time to start, that Tom had a train to catch, that any minute the real, big wind might be upon them. The hand slowly, half lingeringly, left Tom’s shoulder. They started rapidly with a kind of flourish. In a thin, black line the small procession crept across the immense darkening desert, like a strip of life that drifted upon a shoreless ocean.…

The sun sank down below the Libyan sands. But no awful wind descended. They reached home safely, exhausted and rather silent. The two hours seemed to Tom to have passed with a dream-like swiftness. The stars were shining as they clattered down the little Luxor street. In a dream, too, he went to the hotel to change, and fetch his bag; in a dream he stood upon the platform, held Tony’s hand, held the soft hand of Lettice, said good-bye… and watched the station lights glide past as he left them standing there together, side by side.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ONE INCIDENT, HOWEVER, — trivial, yet pregnant with significant revelation, — remained vividly outside the dream. The Play behind broke through, as it were; an actor forgot his rôle, and involved another actor; for an instant the masquerade tripped up, and merged with the commonplace reality of daily life. Explicit disclosure lay in the trifling matter.

They supplied a touch of comedy, but of rather ghastly comedy, ludicrous and at the same time painful — those smart, new yellow gloves that Tony put on when he climbed into the sand-cart and took the reins. His donkey had gone lame, he abandoned it to the boys behind, he climbed in to drive with Lettice. Tom, riding beside the cart, witnessed the entire incident; he laughed as heartily as either of the others; he felt it, however, as *she* felt it — a new sudden spiritual proximity to her proved this to him. Both shrank — from something disagreeable and afflicting. The hands looked somehow dreadful.

For the first time Tom realised the physiognomy of hands — that hands, rather than faces, should be photographed; not merely that they seemed now so large, so spread, so ugly, but that somehow the glaring canary yellow subtly emphasised another aspect that was distasteful and unpleasant — an undesirable aspect in their owner. The cotton was atrocious. So obvious was it to Tom that he felt pity before he felt disgust. The obnoxious revelation was so palpable. He was aware that he felt ashamed — for Lettice. He stared for a moment, unable to move his eyes away. The next second, lifting his glance, he saw that she, too, had noticed it. With a flash of keen relief, he was aware that she, like himself, shrank visibly from the distressing half-sinister revelation that was betrayal.

The hands, cased in their ridiculous yellow cotton, had physiognomy. Upon the pair of them, just then, was an expression not to be denied: of furtiveness, of something sly and unreliable, a quality not to be depended on through thick and thin, able to grasp for themselves but not to hold — for others; eager to take, yet incompetent to give. The hands were selfish, mean and unprotective. It was a remarkable disclosure of innate duality hitherto concealed. Their physiognomy dropped a mask the face still wore. The hands looked straight at Lettice; they assumed a sensual leer; they grinned.

‘One second,’ Tony cried, ‘the reins hurt my fingers,’ — and had drawn from his pocket the gloves and quickly slipped them on — canary yellow — cotton!

‘Oh, oh!’ exclaimed Lettice, ‘but how can you! It’s ghastly… for a man…!’ She stared a moment, as though fascinated, then turned her eyes away, flicking the whip in the air and laughing — a trifle nervously.

Why the innocent, if vulgar, scraps of clothing should have been so revealing was hard to say. That they were incongruous and out of place in the Desert was surely an inconsiderable thing, that they were possibly in bad taste was of even less account. It was something more than that. It came in a second of vivid intuition — so, at least, it seemed to Tom, and therefore perhaps to Lettice too — that he saw his cousin’s soul behind the foolish detail. Tony had put his soul upon his hands — and the hands were somewhere cheap and worthless.

So difficult was it to catch the elusive thought in language, that Tom certainly used none of the adjectives that flashed unbidden across his mind; he assuredly thought neither of ‘coarse,’ ‘untrustworthy,’ nor of ‘false’ or ‘nasty’ — yet the last named came probably nearest to expressing the disquieting sensation that laid its instant pressure upon his nerves, then went its way again. It was disturbing in a very searching way; he felt uneasy for *her* sake. How could he leave her with the owner of those hands, the wearer of those appalling yellow cotton gloves! The laughter in him was subtle mockery. For, of course, he laughed at himself for such an absurd conclusion.… Yet, somehow, those gloves revealed the man, betrayed him mercilessly! The hands were naked — they were stained.

It was just then that her exclamation of disapproval interrupted Tom’s curious sensations. It came with welcome. ‘Thank Heavens!’ a voice cried inside him.… ‘She feels it too!’

‘But my sister sent them to me,’ Tony defended himself, ‘sent them from London. They’re the latest thing at home!’ He was laughing at himself. At the same time he was shifting the responsibility as usual.

Lettice laughed with him then, though her laughter held another note that was not merriment. He felt disgust, resentment in her. There was no pity there. Tony had missed a cue — the entire Play was blocked. The 'hero' stirred contempt in place of admiration. But more — the incident confirmed, it seemed, much else that had preceded it. Her eyes were opened.

The conflict of pain and joy in Tom was most acute. His entire sacrifice — for an instant — trembled in a hair-like balance. For the capital rôle stood gravely endangered in her eyes.

'Take them off, Tony! Put them away! Hide them! I couldn't trust you to drive me with such things on your hands. A man in yellow canary cotton!'

All three laughed together, and Tom, watching the trivial incident, as he rode beside them, saw her seize one hand and pull the glove off by the fingers. It seemed she tore a mask from one side of his face — the face beneath was disfigured. The glove fell into the bottom of the cart, then caught the loose rein and was jerked out upon the sand. The next second, something of covert fury in the gesture, Tony had taken off the other and tossed it to keep company with the first. Both hands showed naked: the entire face was bare. Tom looked away. 'They *are* hideous rather, I admit,' exclaimed Tony. 'The donkey boys can pick them up and wear them.' And there was mortification in his tone and manner; almost — he was found out.

It was the memory of this pregnant little incident that held persistently before Tom's mind now, as the train bore him the long night through between the desert and the river that were Egypt. The bigger crowding pictures, scenes and sentences, thronged panorama of the recent weeks, lay in hiding underneath; but it was the incident of those yellow gloves that memory tossed up for ever before his eyes. He clung to it in spite of himself. Imagination played its impish pranks. What did it portend? Removing gloves was the first act in undressing, it struck him. Tony had dressed up for the Play, the Play was over, he must put off, piece by piece, the glamour he had worn so successfully for his passionate rôle. Once off the stage, the enchantment of the limelight, the scenery, the raiment of gold that left a perfume of ambra in the air — all the assumed allurements he had borrowed must be discarded. The Tony of the Play withdrew, the real Tony stood discovered, undressed — by no means admirable. No longer on the boards, walking like a king, with the regal fascination of an older day, he would pass along the busy street unnoticed, unadorned, bereft of the high distinction that imagination, so strangely stirred, had laid upon him for a little space.… The yellow gloves lay now upon the desert sand; perhaps the whirling tempest tossed them to and fro, perhaps it buried them; perhaps the Arab boys, proud of the tinsel they mistook for gold, now wore them in their sleep, lying on beds of rushes beneath the flat-roofed houses of sun-baked clay.…

This vivid detail kept the heavier memories back at first; somehow the long review of his brief Egyptian winter blocked each time against a pair of stooping shoulders and a pair of yellow cotton gloves.

During the voyage of four days, however, followed then the inevitable cruel aftermath of doubt, suspicion, jealousy he had fancied long since overthrown. A hundred incidents and details forced themselves upon him from the past — glances, gestures, phrases, such little things and yet so pregnant with delayed or undelivered meaning. The meanings rose remorselessly to the surface now.

All belonged to the first days in Egypt before he noticed anything; the mind worked backwards to their gleaning. They had escaped his attention at the time, yet the mind had registered them none the less. He did not seek their recovery, but the series offered itself, compelling him to examine one and all, demanding that he should pass judgment. He forced them back, they leaped up again on springs; the resilience was due to their life, their truth; they were not to be denied. There was no escape.…

All pointed to the same conclusion: the month spent alone with Tony had worked the mischief before his own arrival — by the time he came upon the scene the new relationship was in full swing beyond her power to stop it. Heavens, he had been blind! Ceaselessly, endlessly, he made the circle of alternate pain and joy, of hope and despair, of doubt and confidences — yet the ideal in him safe beyond assault. He believed in her, he trusted, and he — hoped.

The most poignant test, however, came when port was reached and the scented land-wind met his nostrils with the — Spring. He saw the harbour with its white houses shining in the early April sunshine; the blue sea recalled a wide-shored lake among the mountains: he saw the sea-gulls, heard the lapping of the waves against the shipping.…

He took the train to a little town along the coast, meaning to stay there a day or two before facing London, where the dismantling of the Brown Flat and the search for work awaited him. And there the full-blooded spring of this southern climate took him by the throat. The haze, the sweet moist air, the luscious fields, the woods and flowery roads, above all the singing birds — this biting contrast with the dry, blazing desert skies of tawny Egypt was dislocating. The fierce glare of perpetual summer seemed a nightmare he had left behind; he came back to the sweet companionship of friendly life in field and tree and flower.

The first soft shower of rain, the first long twilight, the singing of the thrushes after dark, the light in the little homestead windows — he felt such intimate kindness in it all that the tears rose to his eyes. He longed to share it with her… there was no joy in life without her.… Egypt lay behind him with its awful loneliness, its stern, forbidding emptiness, its nightmare sunsets, its cruel desert, its appalling vastness in which everything had already happened. Thebes was a single, enormous tomb; his past lay buried there; from the solemn, mournful, desolate hills he had escaped.… He emerged into a smiling land of running streams and flowers. His new life was beginning like the Spring. It gushed everywhere, reminding him of another Spring he had known among the mountains.… The ‘sum of loss’ he counted minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. He began the long, long reckoning.…

He felt intolerably alone. The hunger and yearning in his heart seemed more than he could bear. This beauty… without her beside him, without her to share the sweet companionship of the earth… was too much to bear. For one minute with her beside him in the meadows, picking flowers, listening to the birds, her blue veil flying in the wet mountain wind — he would have given all his life, his past, his future, everything that mind and heart held precious.… In the middle of which and at its darkest moment came the certain knowledge with a joy that broke in light and rapture on his soul — that she *was* beside him because she was within him.… He approached the impersonal, selfless attitude to which the attainment of an ideal alone is possible. She had been added to him.…

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SILENCE, MEANWHILE, was like the silence that death brings. He clung tenaciously to his ideal, yet he thought of her daily, nightly, hourly. She was really never absent from his thoughts. He starved, yet perhaps he did not know he starved.… The days grew into weeks with a grinding, dreadful slowness. He had written from the steamer, explaining briefly that he was called to England. He had written a similar line to Tony too. No answers came.

Yet the silence was full of questions. The mystery of her Egyptian infatuation remained the biggest one of all perhaps. But there were others, equally insistent. Did he really possess her in a way that made earthly companionship unnecessary? Had he lasting joy in this ideal possession? Was it true that an ideal once attained, its prototype becomes unsatisfying? Did he deceive himself? And had not her strange experience after all but ripened and completed her nature, provided something she had lacked before, and blended the Mother and the Woman into the perfect mate his dream foretold and his heart's deep instinct prophesied?

He heard many answers to these questions; his heart made one, his reason made another. It was the soft and urgent Spring, however, with its perfumed winds, its singing birds, its happy message breaking with tumultuous life — it was the Spring on those wooded Mediterranean shores that whispered the compelling truth. He needed her, he yearned. An ideal, on this earth, to retain its upward lure, must remain — an ideal. Attainment in the literal sense destroys it. His arms were hungry and his heart was desolate. Then one day he knew the happy yet unhappy feeling that she suffered too. He felt her thoughts about him like soft birds.…

And he wrote to her: 'I should just like to know that you are well — and happy.' He addressed it to the Bungalow. The same day, chance had it, he received word from her, forwarded from the Semiramis Hotel in Cairo. She wrote two lines only: 'Tom, the thing I had to tell you about was — Warsaw. It is over. As you said, it is better written, perhaps, than told. Yours, L.'

Egypt came flooding through the open window as he laid the letter down; the silence, the desert spaces, the perfume and the spell. He saw one thing clearly in that second, for he saw it in a flash. The secret of her trouble that last day in Luxor was laid bare — the knowledge that within a few hours she would be free. To Tom she could not easily tell it; delicacy, modesty, pride forbade. Her long, painful duty, faithfully fulfilled these many years, was over. Her world had altered, opened out. Values, of course, had instantly altered too; she saw what was real and what ephemeral; she looked at Tony and she looked at — himself. She could speak to Tony — it was easier, it did not matter — but she could not so easily speak to Tom. The yellow gloves of cotton!… His heart leaped within him.…

He stared out of the window across the blue Mediterranean with its dancing, white-capped waves; he saw the white houses by the harbour; he watched the whirling sea-gulls and tasted the fresh, salt air. How familiar it all was! Of her whereabouts at that moment he had no knowledge; she might be on the steamer, gazing at the same dancing waves; she might be in Warsaw or in London even; she might pass by the windows of the Brown Flat.…

He turned aside, closing the window. Egypt withdrew, the glamour waned, the ancient spell seemed lifted. He thought of those Theban Hills without emotion. Yet something in him trembled; he yearned, he ached, he longed with all the longing of the Spring. He wavered — oh, deliciously…! He was glad, radiantly glad, that she had written. Only — he dared not, he could not answer.…

Yet big issues are decided sometimes by paltry and ignoble influences when sturdier considerations produce no effect. It is the contrast that furnishes the magic. It was contrast, doubtless, that swayed Tom’s judgment in the very direction he had decided was prohibited. His surroundings at the moment supplied the contrast, for these surroundings were petty and ignoble — they drove him by the distress of sheer disgust into the world of larger values he had known with her. Probably, he did not discover this consciously for himself: the result, in any case, was logical and obvious. Values changed suddenly for him, too, both in his outlook and his judgment.

For he was spending a few days with his widowed sister, she who had been playmate to Lettice years ago; and the conditions of her life and mind distressed him. He had seen her name in a hotel list of Mentone; he surprised her with a visit; he was received with inexplicable coldness. His tie with her was slight, her husband, a clergyman, little to his liking; he had not been near them for several years. The frigid reception, however, had a deeper cause, he felt; his curiosity was piqued.

His sister's chart of existence, indeed, was too remote from his own for true sympathy to be possible, and her married life had not improved her. They had drifted apart without openly acknowledging it. There was no quarrel, but there was a certain bitterness between them. She had a marked *faiblesse*, strange in one securely born, for those nominally in high places that, while disingenuous enough, jarred painfully always on her brother. God was unknown to her, although her husband preached most familiarly concerning Him. She had never seen the deity, but an Earl was a living reality, and often very useful. This banal weakness, he now found, had increased in widowhood. Tom hid his extreme distaste — and learned the astonishing reason for her coldness. It was Mrs. Haughstone. It took his breath away. He was too amazed to speak.

How clearly he understood her conduct now in Egypt! For Mrs. Haughstone had spread stories of the Bungalow, pernicious stories of an incredible kind, yet with just sufficient basis of apparent truth to render them plausible — plausible, that is, to any who were glad of an excuse to believe them against himself. These stories by a round-about way, gathering in circumstantial detail as they travelled, had reached his sister. She wished to believe them, and she did. Certain relatives, moreover, of meagre intelligence but highly placed in the social world, and consequently of great importance in her life, were remotely affected by the lurid tales. A report in full is unnecessary, but Mary held that the family honour was stained. It was an incredible imbroglio. Tom was so overwhelmed by this revelation of the jealous woman's guile, and the light it threw upon her rôle in Egypt, that he did not even trouble to defend himself. He merely felt sorry that his sister could believe such tales — and forgave her without a single word. He saw in it all another scrap of evidence that the Wave had indeed fallen, that his life everywhere, and from the most unlikely directions, was threatened, that all the most solid in the structure he had hitherto built up and leaned upon, was crumbling — and must crumble utterly — in order that it might rise secure upon fresh foundations.

He faced it, but faced it silently. He washed his hands of all concerned; he had learned their values too; he now looked forward instead of behind; that is, he forgot, and at the same time utterly — forgave.

But the effect upon him was curious. The stagnant ditch his sister lived in had the result of flinging him headlong back into the larger stream he had just left behind him; in that larger world things happened indeed, things unpleasant, cruel, mysterious, amazing — but yet not little things. The scale was vaster, horizons wider, beauty and wonder walked hand in hand with love and death. The contrast shook him; the trivial blow had this immense effect, that he yearned with redoubled passion for the region in which bigger ideals with their prototypes, however broken, existed side by side.

This yearning, and the change involved, remained subtly concealed, however. He was not properly conscious of it. Other very practical considerations, it seemed, influenced him; his money was getting low; he had luckily sublet the flat, but the question of work was becoming insistent. There was much to be faced.… A month had slipped by, it was five weeks since he had left Egypt. He decided to go to London. He telegraphed to the Club for his letters — he expected important ones — to be sent to Paris, and it was in a small high room on the top floor of a second-rate hotel across the Seine that he found them waiting for him. It was here, in this dingy room, that he read the wondrous words. The letter had lain at his Club three days, it was dated Switzerland and the postmark was Montreux. It was in pencil, without beginning and without end; his name, the signature did not appear:

Your little letter has come — yes, I am well, but happy I am not. I went to the Semiramis and found that you had sailed, sailed without even a good-bye. I have come here, here to familiar little Montreux by the blue lake, where we first knew the Spring together. I can’t say anything, I can’t explain anything. You must never ask me to explain; Egypt changed me — brought out something in me I was helpless to resist. It was something perhaps I needed. I struggled — perhaps you can guess how I struggled, perhaps you can’t. I have suffered these past weeks, I believe that I have expiated something. The power that drove me is exhausted, and that is all I know. I have worked it out. I have come back. There is no blame for others — for any one; I can’t explain. Your little letter has come, and so I write. Help me, oh, help me in years to find my respect again, and try to love the woman you once knew — knew here in Montreux beside the lake, long ago in our childhood days, further back still, perhaps, though where I do not know. And, Tom — tell me how you are. I must know that. Please write and tell me that. I can bear it no longer. If anything happened to you I should just turn over and die. You have been true and very big, oh, so true and big. I see it now.…

Tom did not answer. He took the night train. He was just in time to catch the Simplon Express from the Gare de Lyon. He reached Montreux at seven o'clock, when the June sun was already high above the Dent du Midi and the lake a sheet of sparkling blue. He went to his old hotel. He saw the swans floating like bundles of dry paper, he saw the whirling sea-gulls, he obtained his former room. And spring was just melting into full-blown summer upon the encircling mountains.

It was still early when he had bathed and breakfasted, too early for visitors to be abroad, too early to search.… He could settle to nothing; he filled the time as best he could; he smoked and read an English newspaper that was several days old at least. His eyes took in the lines, but his mind did not take in the sense — until a familiar name caught his attention and made him keenly alert. The name was Anthony Winslowe. He remembered suddenly that Tony had never replied to his letter.… The paragraph concerning his cousin, however, dealt with another matter that sent the blood flaming to his cheeks. He was defendant in the breach of promise suit brought by a notorious London actress, then playing in a popular revue. The case had opened; the letters were already produced in court — and read. The print danced before his eyes. The letters were dated last October and November, just before Tony had come out to Egypt, and with crimson face Tom read them. It was more than distressing, it was afflicting — the letters tore an established reputation into a thousand pieces. He could not finish the report; he only prayed that another had not seen it.…

It was eleven o'clock when he went out and joined the throng of people sunning themselves on the walk beside the lake. The air was sweet and fresh, there were sailing-boats upon the water, the blue mountains lifted their dazzling snow far, far into the summer sky. He leaned over the rail and watched the myriads of tiny fishes, he watched the swans, he saw the dim line of the Jura hills in the hazy distance, he heard the muffled beat of a steamer's paddle-wheels a long way off. And then, abruptly, he was aware that some one touched him; a hand in a long white glove was on his arm;

there was a subtle perfume; two dark eyes looked into his; and he heard a low familiar voice:

‘One day we shall find each other in a crowd.’

Tom was amazingly inarticulate. He just turned and looked down at her, moving a few inches closer as he did so. She wore a black boa; the fur touched his cheek.

‘You have come back,’ he said.

There was a new wonder in her face, a soft new beauty. The woman in her glowed.… He saw the suffering plainly too.

‘We have both found out,’ she said very low, ‘found out what we are to one another.’

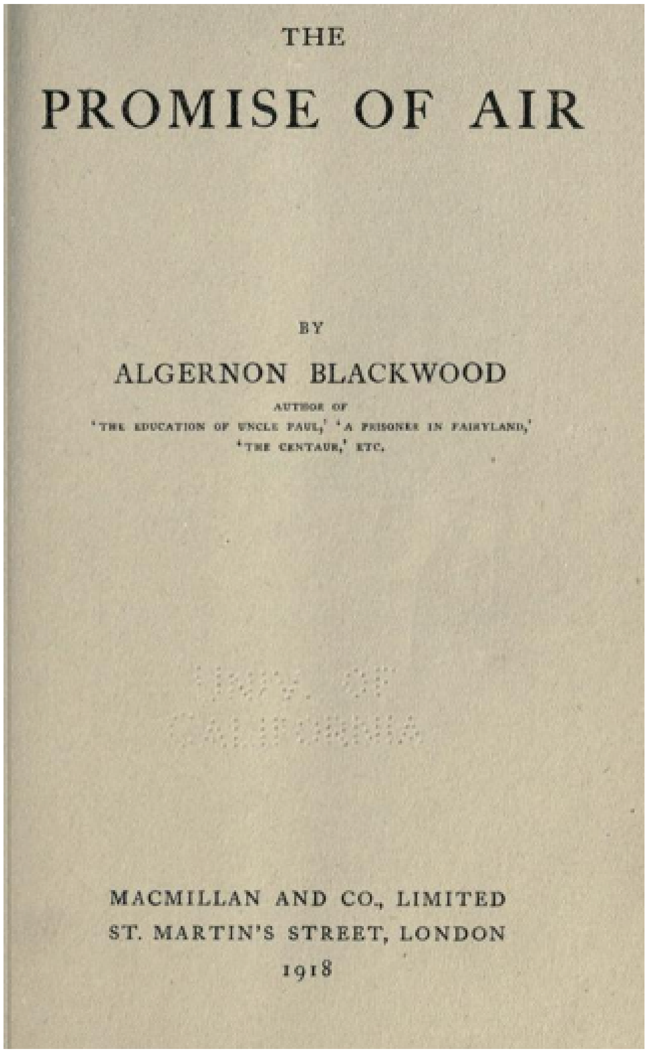
Tom’s supply of words failed completely then. He looked at her — looked all the language in the world. And she understood. She lowered her eyes. ‘I feel shy,’ he thought he heard. It was murmured only. The next minute she raised her eyes again to his. He saw them dark and beautiful, tender as his mother’s, true and faithful, as in his boyhood’s dream of years ago. But they were now a woman’s eyes.

‘I never really left you, Tom…’ she said with absolute conviction. ‘I never could. I went aside… to fetch something — to give to you. That was all!’

THE END

The Promise of Air (1918)

This is another of Blackwood's mystical novels, first published in 1918. It deals with the occultist notion that free spirits can become trapped in physical forms. The central character is obsessed with birds and throughout the narrative Blackwood employs copious avian metaphors and images to explore the theme of being trapped in one's own body. This idea was close to the author's heart as he came to believe that he was himself such a spirit. He believed his beloved Maya Stuart-King to be in a similar predicament and the novel is one of many which he dedicated to 'M S-K'. The pair were romantically involved until Maya's death in 1945, despite Maya's marriage to a German aristocrat, Baron Knoop.



THE

PROMISE OF AIR

BY

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

AUTHOR OF
'THE EDUCATION OF UNCLE PAUL,' 'A PRISONER IN FAIRYLAND,'
'THE CENTAUR,' ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.
CHAPTER II.
CHAPTER III.
CHAPTER IV.
CHAPTER V.
CHAPTER VI.
CHAPTER VII.
CHAPTER VIII.
CHAPTER IX.
CHAPTER X.
CHAPTER XI.
CHAPTER XII.
CHAPTER XIII.
CHAPTER XIV.
CHAPTER XV.
CHAPTER XVI.
CHAPTER XVII.
CHAPTER XVIII.
CHAPTER XIX.

CHAPTER I.

JOSEPH WIMBLE WAS the only son of an analytical chemist, who, having made considerable profits out of an Invisible Sticking Plaster, sent the boy to Charterhouse and Cambridge in the hope that he would turn out a gentleman. When Joseph left Cambridge his father left business, referred to himself as Expert, used a couple of letters after his name, and suggested making the Grand Tour of Europe together as a finishing touch. ‘To talk familiarly of Rome and Vienna and Constantinople as though you knew them,’ he explained, ‘is a useful thing. It helps one with the women, and to be helped by women in life is half the battle.’ His ambitions for his son were considerable, including above all a suitable marriage. The abrupt destruction of these ambitions, accordingly, was so bitter a disappointment that he felt justified in giving the lad a nominal sum and mentioning that he had better shift for himself. For Joseph married secretly the daughter of a Norfolk corn-chandler, announcing the news to his father upon the very eve of starting for the Grand Tour. Joseph found himself with £500 and a wife.

Joseph himself was of that placid temperament to which things in life just came and went apparently without making very deep impressions. He was a careless, indifferent sort of fellow even as a boy, careless of consequences, indifferent to results: not irresponsible, yet very easy-going. There was no intensity in him; he did not realise things. ‘Oh, it’s much the same to me,’ would be his reply to most proposals. ‘I’d as soon as not.’ There was something fluid in his nature that accepted life nonchalantly, as if all things were one to him; yet, again, not that he was devoid of feeling or desires, but that he did not realise life in the solid way of the majority. At school he did not realise that he was what the world calls ‘not quite a gentleman,’ although the boys made a point of proving it to him. At Cambridge he did not realise that to pass his Little-go, or acquire the letters B.Sc., was of any importance, although various learned and older men received good pay in order to convince him of the fact. He just went along in a loose, careless, big-hearted way of living, and took whatever came — exactly as it came. He had a delightful smile and put on fat; shared his money with one and all; existed in a methodical way as most other fellows of his age existed, and grew older much as they did. So ordinary was he in fact, so little distinguished from the rest of his kind, that men who knew him well would stop and think when questioned if they numbered Joseph Wimble among their acquaintances. ‘Wimble, lemme see — oh yes, of course! Why, I’ve known him for a couple of years!’ That was Joseph Wimble. Only it made no difference to him whether they remembered him or not. He behaved rather as if everything was one to him in a very literal sense; as if the whole bewildering kaleidoscope of life conveyed a single vast impression; there was no reason to get excited over particular details; in the end it was literally all one. His smattering of physics taught him that all things could be expressed, more or less, in terms of one another. That was his attitude, at any rate. ‘Take it as a whole,’ he would say vaguely, ‘and it’s all right. It’s all the same.’

Yet his indifference to things was not so colourless as it appeared; but was due, perhaps, to the transference of his interests elsewhere. His centre of gravity hardly seemed on earth is one way of expressing it. Behind the apparent stolidity hid something that danced and sang; something almost flighty. It was laborious explanation that he dreaded and despised, as though things capable of being ‘explained’ were of small importance to him. He was eager to know things he wanted to know, yet in a way he was too intensely curious, too impatient certainly, to put himself to much trouble to find out. He refused to work, to ‘grind’ he knew not how; yet he absorbed a good deal of knowledge; information came to him, as it were. He figured to himself vaguely that there was another surer way of learning than by memorising detail, — a flashing, darting, sudden way, like the way of a bird. To follow a line of information to its bitter end was a wearisome, stultifying business, the reality he sought was lost sight of in the process. The main idea had interest for him, but not the details, for the details blurred and obscured it. Proof was a stupid word that blocked his faculties. He did not despise or reject it exactly, but he refused to recognise it. In a sense he overlooked it. Of answers to the important questions millions have been asking for thousands of years there was no proof obtainable. Of survival, for instance, or the existence of the soul, there was no ‘proof,’ yet for that very reason he believed in both. He could ‘prove’ a stone, a tree, a dog. He could name and weigh and describe it. The senses of hearing, sight, and touch reported upon it, yet these reports he knew to be but vibrations of the respective nerves that brought them to his brain. They were at best indirect reports, and at worst referred to a mere collection of unverified appearances. Logic, too, the backbone of philosophy, affected him with weariness, just as his respect for reason was shockingly undeveloped. And argument could prove anything, hence argument for him was also futile. He jumped to the conclusion always. Thus at school, and even more at Cambridge, he liked to know what other fellows thought and believed, but as a whole and in outline only. A general idea of ‘what and why’ was enough for him — just to catch the drift.

This faculty of catching the drift of any knowledge that he cared about came to him naturally, as it seemed. They called him talented but lazy; for he took the cream off; he swooped like a bird, caught it flying, and was off upon another quest. Since there was no real proof of any of the important things, why toil to master the tedious arguments and facts of either side? There was somewhere a swifter, lighter way of knowing things, a direct and instantaneous way. He was sure of it. Thus the ordinary things of life he did not realise — quite as other people realised them. They passed him by.

One thing and one only, it seemed, he desired to realise, and that was birds. It was a passion in him, a mania. He had a yearning desire to understand the mystery of bird-life — not ornithology but *birds*. Anything to do with birds changed the expression of his face at once; the fat and placid indifference gave way to an emotion that, judging by his expression, caused him a degree of wonder that was almost worship, of happiness nearly painful. Their intense vitality inspired him, their equality stirred respect. Anything to do with their flight, their songs, their eggs, their habits fascinated him. And this fascination he realised. He indulged it furiously, if of necessity secretly, since to study bird-life fields and hedges must be visited without company. But here again he took no particular pains, it seemed. As is usual with an overmastering tendency, his knowledge of his subject was instinctive. Before he went to Charterhouse he knew the size and colouring of every egg that ever lay in a British nest, and by the time he left that school he could imitate with marvellous accuracy the singing notes and whistles of any bird he had heard once. He devoured books about them, studied their differing ways of flight, knew every nest within a radius of miles about his house in a given neighbourhood, and above all was moved to a kind of ecstasy of wonder over the magic of their annual migration. That in particular touched him into poetry. He thought dumbly about it, but his imagination stirred. Inarticulateness increased his accumulating store of wonder. The Grand Tour! Rome, Vienna, Constantinople, indeed! What were the capitals of Europe compared to the Southern Tour *they* made! That deep instinct to hurry after the fading sun, to keep in touch with their source of life, to follow colour, heat, light, and beauty. That vast autumnal flight! The marvel of the great return, entranced by the southern sun, intoxicated with the music of the southern winds! That such tiny bodies could dare four thousand miles of trackless space, travelling for the most part in the darkness, carelessly carrying nothing with them, and rush back in the spring to the very copse or hedgerow left six months before — that was a source of endless wonder to his mind. There was pathos and loneliness in their absence. England seemed empty once the birds had flown. The sky was dead without the swallows. Of course the land was dark and silent when they left, and of course it burst into colour, rhythm, movement, and singing when they showered back upon it in the spring!

The sweet passion of woodland music caught his heart. He realised that birds had a secret and mysterious life of their very own, and that the world they lived in was a happy and desirable world. That strange knowledge at a distance men called instinct, puzzled him. A new method of communication belonged to it too. It had its laws and customs, its joys and terrors, its habits, rules, and purposes; but these all were strangely different from anything that solid earth-life knew. Freedom, light, and swiftness were the characteristics of that existence, and joy its outstanding quality. Its universal telepathy exhilarated. No other beings in the universe expressed themselves naturally by singing.

The Kingdom of the Air became for him a symbol of an existence higher than anything on the earth; air stood for a condition that at present was beyond the reach of humanity, but that humanity one day would achieve. His imagination figured this glorious accomplishment as the next stage in evolution. A clever poet might have made Joseph Wimble the hero of an original fairy tale, in which he lived and suffered heavily on solid ground, eternal type of the exile, vainly yearning for his natural element, the air. For exile was in it; he claimed the knowledge of the air as a familiar experience. He felt that he knew and understood the air instinctively; he belonged ‘up there’; he had nested in the trees, perched on some topmost twig, had balanced in the breeze, and sung his heart out from sheer joy of living; he had even flown.

This was doubtless a mental exercise, an imaginative flight. It all seemed familiar to him, long, long ago, before this enormous physical frame had walled him down to the ground and weight had handicapped aspiration so distressingly. He looked at his body in the glass and sighed. ‘There’s something wrong,’ he realised. ‘Why should I need such a mass of stuff to function through? I’m supposed to be more intelligent than animals or things.’ He thought of a swift — and sighed. Size and weight were so out of proportion to the rôle he played on earth. The smaller forms of life were far less handicapped; a flea, a beetle were a thousand times stronger relatively than a human being, whereas a little bird —— It all left him inarticulate. He was always inarticulate. Dumbly he yearned for air; desired, that is, the mental attitude of one to whom free swift movement in the air was natural; and the intensity of the yearning — the one thing he fully realised — *must* some day produce a result. The beauty of an air-life hid in his blood. It expressed the ultimate yearning of his very soul.

‘The next stage of the world is air,’ he imagined with some part of his intelligence that never could articulately clothe the dream in language. ‘We shall never be happy and right until we know the air as birds do. We’ve learned all the earth has got to teach us. There’s a new age coming — a new element its key: Air!’

Earth, ever sweet and beautiful, was in the main, however, chiefly useful only. Somehow he no longer felt the need of it.

The unreality of objective knowledge, the limitations of the human intellect afflicted him. He thought of the barren sterility of learned minds, sacked tight with this objective information about the clothes of the universe, yet uninformed concerning the living personality that wears them. The scholars and collectors had no joy; they never sang.

He thought hard about it. He tried to state to himself what he meant in clear words. It was difficult. Already he thought in terms of air — transparent, everywhere at once, radiant and flashing. He experienced a completeness and a buoyancy that denied the accepted rule that two and two make four. Two and two, of course, did make four on earth and in the nursery or the nest. But somehow in the air — they just didn’t. There was no two and two at all. They didn’t exist. It was some kind of synthetical air-knowledge that he sought.

‘Earth is divisible — divided,’ he said to himself. ‘It has details, separate objects, definite divisions into stones and things. But in the air there is no division. Air is homogeneous — not as the physicist’s gas, but as an expression of space.’ In the air, or rather of the air, two and two make four became not false exactly, but impossible. It could not be said. Earth is not continuous, but broken up; it belongs to time and time’s divisions of the nursery. Earth is an expression of separateness. Even water has drops, fluid and cohering though it is. Air has no drops. There are no drops of air. There are currents, streams and surfaces, all undetailed. Earth, he felt, belonged to time and time’s divisions where two and two made four. But air was of another category altogether, and not of time at all. Air was one.

It explained his indifference to earth. Though fastened physically like every one else to the ground, his inmost being lived in the air already, and some day he would meet a person who would explain and justify this extraordinary yearning. He was aware of this expectancy in him, for the craving to become articulate produced it. He needed a mate, of course. Together, somehow, their deep desire would find expression. He would become articulate through her. And suddenly, with a kind of abrupt surprise that belongs to birds, he found her.

The surprising way he found her, too, was characteristic. They floated, if not flew, into each other’s arms.

CHAPTER II.

IT WAS A glad May morning, the air soft-flowing and cool, the sunshine warm and brilliant, when the youth cut his lectures and went out into the fields, drawn irresistibly by the electric rush and sparkle of the spring. The swallows were home from the Southern Tour, and the sky was singing. He could not sit and listen to chemical formulae in a lecture-room; it was not possible. He wandered out carelessly into the world of buttercups, following the stream where the feathered willows bent in a wave of falling green. It was a true bird-day, and his heart, uprising like the larks, was shrilling. He felt exactly like a bird himself, and it made him laugh as naturally as a bird might sing. He fell to copying their various cries. They came up close and saw him. They were aware of him. 'Birds of the sweet spring skies!' he thought, and yearned to share their strange collective life, individual still, yet part of their magical community.

He soon found himself out of the scholastic town and among the flat expanse of yellow fields beyond. The stream was blue, the grass an emerald green, the willows laughed, showing their under leaves, the dew still sparkled. Buttercups by the million nodded in the breeze; wings were everywhere, the surface of the earth was dancing, and the whole air fluttered. The earth was dressed in blue and gold.

The singing was so general that he had to pause in order to pick out the separate melodies; the song of the birds was, indeed, so much a part of their surroundings that an act of definite listening was necessary to hear it. It linked him on to Nature; it made Nature articulate. He heard the hearty whistle of the blackcap among the swaying tree-tops, shrill with joy; a whitethroat tossed itself exultantly into the air beside him; he heard the warblers trilling, the little calling cry of the chiff-chaff, the tiny poem of the willow-warbler, the merry laughter of the dainty wren. The tits shot everywhere, pecking in seed, pricking the sunshine with their tiny beaks, darting, flashing. He passed a farm and saw the vigorous outline of a blackbird, perched upon an oak bough still bare, fluting as Pan fluted upon many-fountained Ida long ago; a chaffinch dipped at him over the wall from wet shrubberies beyond, hopped to a twig in the sunlight above the blackbird, and let loose a shower of notes like silvery drops of water. Singing shook itself out of the atmosphere everywhere, as though the whole of Nature moved and trembled into her strange scale-less music. There was the joy of air upon the stirring world.

The life of air was dominant, ruling the heavy earth — bird-life. What delicious names they had, Whitethroat, Gold-oriel, Wheat-ear, Dipper, Bunting, Redpoll, Osprey, Snowy-owl, Snow-bunting, Martin; what lyrical names with fun and laughter in them, a childlike beauty of air and sunny woodland-space. The magic of Spring captured him by its suggestion: nothing was fully out, it was suggested only — eternal promise, ethereal glamour: prophecy, hope, expectancy — fulfilment.

On all sides he felt the tremendous lift of the year that comes in May with song and colour and movement. The world was rhythmical. It caught him into joy, as though it would sweep him like a harp into passionate response. Yet he remained dumb and inarticulate. He drank it in: but he could not sing, he could not soar, he could not fly. This piping, fluting, thrilling, this showering stream of sweet elemental song and dance was not of the earth, but of the air. The strange yearning in him grew and gathered into a dangerous accumulation. It must find expression somehow or he would — burst.

He threw himself down in the long grass beside the blue-throated stream, and became at once all eyes and ears. There was no other way. The cool touch of the luxuriant herbage brought a slight relief, as did the itemising of the songs he heard and imitated, the colours he gazed upon and named: the shimmering sheen of the rooks in the elm trees yonder; the deep, unpolished ebony of the blackbird with its beak of gleaming yellow; the bright and roving eye of the little whitethroat picking food along the bank; the shearing speed of the swifts cutting the air with tapering, scythe-like wings; the piping sweetness of a thrush, invisible in a thicket behind the farm buildings — all these combined to put the true bird-ecstasy upon him as he lay and watched and listened. The amazing outburst of spring music lifted him almost into the air to join the ropes of starlings twisting and untwisting as if they reproduced the wild soft tangle of his unsatisfied yearnings. And their tiny flickering shadows fell upon the ground in ever-shifting patterns that he could never catch or seize. Upon his mind fell similarly rushing thoughts he was unable to express . . . the rhythm of some mighty promise that uplifted. He was aware of love and beauty. The soul in him rose and twittered like a lark. . . .

Then, presently, he raised his head above the screen of grass. There was a sound of footsteps. His hearing was abnormally acute when this bird-mood took him, for the tapping tread of a wagtail on the bank had made itself distinctly heard. He saw the frisky creature, dainty as a sprite, tripping nimbly among the rushes just below him. It balanced very cleverly, neatly dressed in its tailor-made of feathers. He saw its fairy ankles. It seemed to hold its skirts up. He caught its bright eye peeping. It was gone.

‘Soft, slip of a bird!’ he thought to himself with a sharp sensation of regret; ‘why did it leave me in such a hurry?’ He felt something tender and earnest in him, something true and thorough, yet careless and light with joy, a true bird-quality. He felt, too, the pathos of the sudden disappearance: a moment ago it had been there in all its gracious beauty, and now the spot was empty.

‘Where, in what new haunted corner of these fields — —’ he began, half-singing, when a new and startling flash of loveliness caught his eye and took his breath away. Another wagtail, but this time yellow, marvellous as a dream, came pricking into view.

Somehow, beyond all understanding, the sweet apparition focussed his tangle of inarticulate yearning into a blaze of delight that was a climax. The advent of the exquisite little creature, with its delicate carriage, its bosom of pure yellow, seemed symbolical almost. The idea of something sylph-like from the heart of the air flashed into him. The whole singing, dancing, coloured element produced this living emblem from its central heart of the flooding Spring. There was true air-magic in it. The passion of Spring and the mystery of birds focussed together in the tiny symbol. Imagination touched the pitch of ecstasy. He turned abruptly. There was a whirr, a streak of burning yellow that lost itself against the sea of buttercups, and lo! He was — alone again.

But this time the loneliness was more than he could bear.

He sprang to his feet, and at full speed took the direction in which it disappeared. Some wisdom of the birds was in him possibly, though alas, not their light rapidity, for while guided wisely along the windings of the willow-guarded stream, across the fields, past hedges, copses, farms, over ditches innumerable, he could not overtake his prize — and so at last came into a lonely spot that lay far away upon the surface of the countryside. The occasional flash of yellow had led him onwards in this way, as though the bird enticed him of set purpose; it would land, then shoot away again just as he came up with it. It left a trail of gold across the sunlit fields. It was a will-o'-the-wisp — in sunlight. It behaved like some spiritual decoy.

Afterwards, when he thought about it, his chase took on this aspect of curious allurement, for he knew he could never catch the bird for actual handling, even had he so desired. Nor did he wish to; he had no desire to 'prove' this symbol that summed up his imaginative passion. He only wanted to come up with it; to meet its peeping eye, to watch it at close quarters: its sylph-like beauty had seduced him. Twice he dashed through the water, where the stream made a tiresome bend, and his track across the fields of early hay would have warranted a farmer in putting dust-shot into him. Yet he kept just within sight of it — of the flashing yellow which made him oblivious of all else; and the brimstone butterflies, the yellow-hammers, the orange-tinted kingfishers that obviously tried to confuse the trail by shooting across his path, failed wholly to divert him from the chase. He knew which gold to follow. It was in his heart.

The wagtail at last shot headlong past a clump of bramble-bushes, and Wimble, arriving also headlong, saw to his amazement that the yellow of its breast remained on the branches as though caught and fixed. To his astonishment the gold lay in a shining stream across the prickles without moving. It held fast. He saw the gleaming line of it. He thought he was dreaming for an instant — then discovered that the stream of gold was a yellow scarf that had been netted by the hedge. It belonged to a human being. The same second he saw a sun-bonnet and a book lying on the other side by a pond below some willows. And the being was a blue-eyed girl. His sylph of the air had come to earth. Two black stockings hung on a branch to dry. She was bare-footed. He certainly met her eye, and it was a surprised, reproachful eye. He looked down at her, and she looked up at him. His heart came up into his throat and then into his eyes.

'I suppose you know you're trespassing,' said a voice that was both cross and sweet at once. 'These fields are father's.'

‘Yes,’ replied young Wimble of Trinity, staring at her in amazement. ‘I’m awfully sorry.’ He was lost in admiration and unable to conceal it. She was more than a farmer’s daughter, he was thinking, as instinctively he transferred to her all the yearning, airy passion he had put into his search for the yellow wagtail.

‘Father complained last week again, and there are new boards up everywhere.’ He remembered vaguely there had been complaints about trespassing; he had blundered into the very spot where the offences had been committed. ‘So you’ve no excuse!’ she added, watching him.

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ he repeated, as he disentangled the yellow scarf and passed the end into her outstretched hand. The sunburned skin just matched the landscape, he noted the tiny bleached hairs upon her arm. ‘I saw a yellow wagtail and went after it. They’re rather uncommon.’ And then he added, ‘I suppose it — you — got caught, scrambling through the hedge. I’m frightfully sorry. Really, I’m ashamed. I saw the bird — and forgot everything. I believe it flew back — flew into you!’

They stood looking at each other. If he cut a comical figure, she certainly did not; for whereas his face was hot, his tie flown over one shoulder, his grey trousers splashed with mud; she seemed in her natural setting between the willows and the hedge, the untidy hair falling loose about the neck, her arms akimbo and her sunburned face suiting her to perfection. She looked cool and extraordinarily radiant. He thought she was absurdly beautiful; his heart began to beat deliciously; and when she lost the cross expression and smiled at him the next moment he blurted out a confused, impetuous something before he could possibly prevent it.

‘You’re awfully becoming,’ he stammered. ‘I say — I’m jolly glad I saw that yellow wagtail and followed it. I believe it flew back into your heart.’

Her smile broadened into a laugh at once. It was impossible to be angry with such a youth. ‘You undergraduates,’ she said, ‘are the most ridiculous people I’ve ever known. But I shan’t let you go now I’ve got you. You’re fairly caught.’

‘Rather,’ said Wimble with unfeigned delight.

‘Then you’d better come with me and see father at once,’ she went on. ‘You can explain yourself to him — about the wagtail.’

‘Rather,’ he repeated, though with less enthusiasm. It was the only word that he could think of; and he added, ‘presently.’

She looked him up and down. ‘It’s best, I think.’ And her laughter was now friendly.

‘I will,’ he repeated, ‘I’ll go anywhere with you. I admit I’m caught. Do you think he’ll be very nasty to me?’

But he scarcely knew what he was saying all the time, for his one desire was not to lose sight of her now that he had found her. Her face, her laughter, her singing voice, her attitude, everything about her made him gasp. He already thought of her in bird-terms. He remembered the redwing, delicate thrush, that comes to England from the North and is off again too soon — of countless birds that haunt our fields with transient beauty, then vanish suddenly, afraid to stay and rest. An anxious pang transfixed his heart. Any moment she might spread big yellow wings and leave him fluttering on the ground. ‘If I’ve done any damage,’ he added, ‘I’ll put it right. It was worth it, anyhow.’ But he saw that she laughed with him now, not at him, and he began to smile himself. She was adorable. ‘I’ll swear she’s a birdy girl,’ the thought flashed through him.

‘If you’ll turn your back a moment, please,’ he heard her saying, ‘I’ll put my shoes and stockings on again. There’s no good paddling any more with *you* here.’

‘Rather not,’ he said, and ran down to fetch them for her.

And so it began and ended in the brief ten minutes of this intoxicating May morning beside the willow pond where the birds of the countryside came down to bathe at dawn and drink at sunset. It was an ideal opening. She put her stockings on, but not before he had complained that she was slow about it because a thorn had run into her toe, blaming him so that he had to extract it with trembling fingers and a penknife. They were laughing together like two children by the time he finished; and by the time they reached the house he had dipped into her being and found, as in a book of poetry, that all his favourite passages were marked. Moreover, she had led him by so round a way that they had been obliged to rest under the hedges more than once, and had discovered also that they were very hungry. The sudden intimacy was the sudden falling in love of two young persons who were obviously made for one another. It was the mating of two birds. They had met by the pond, exchanged glances, and then flown off together across the lawn. For it was spring and nesting time. . . . The dust of blue and bronze was on the dragon-flies, the bloom and promise of deep-bosomed summer in the air. . . .

‘Father, this is my friend, Mr. Wimble,’ she introduced him. ‘You remember, I told you. He’s at Trinity.’

‘You’ll stay and have a bite with us, won’t you then? It’s just time,’ was the genial invitation, given to hide his excusable lack of recognition. There was no mention of the damaged fields nor of the trespassing. ‘Come, Joan, let’s get at it, for I’m starving.’

The name sounded wonderful, but Joseph knew it already and had already used it, his face close against her red lips and shining eyes. He also knew his fate was sealed, and he wished to heaven his own father was as nice as hers.

‘I’m a chandler,’ he was told in the course of the talk across the luncheon table by the window while the birds hushed their song outside, well knowing it was noon, ‘a corn-chandler down in Norfolk. But I’ve got two farms up here in Cambridgeshire, and I’m just up to look over ’em for a chap as wants to buy ’em off me.’ He was a rough-and-ready type, free in his drink and language, using meaningless oaths more frequently as intimacy grew, and betraying a somewhat irascible temperament as well. Yet he was kindly enough. And before Joseph left to go back to his forgotten lectures there had been an invitation too: ‘You must come down and see us there some time if you don’t mind a bit of roughing it. We live very simple.’

From all of which it was clear that the corn-chandler was favourably impressed by the visit of an Undergraduate of Cambridge University, and would not be at all averse to marrying his daughter to the first available young man with reasonable credentials. It was all so easy, instinctive, natural. It ran so smoothly. It flowed, it flew. No obstacles appeared. There was flight and rapture in it from the very start. The couple managed to see one another once a day at least for the next three weeks, but before the first week ended they were engaged. Young Wimble said nothing at home because he knew his father would object to the daughter of a corn-chandler who lived in Norfolk. By September they were married. But by the end of September Joseph realised that they were married — quite another thing. For his father meant what he said, and beyond a modest allowance from the chandler to his daughter, they started life with nothing but the small lump sum by means of which Mr. Wimble senior eased his conscience and set himself right with the outside world. The capitals of Europe were not visited.

Joseph and Joan, however, took the situation like a pair of birds, lightly and carelessly. They were as thoughtless as two finches on the lawn, and as faithful as red linnets. The game of the yellow wagtail chase was kept up between them. He pretended that it was her flying scarf he had seen shining two miles across the buttercup fields, and she declared that she had gone to the willow pond on purpose, knowing in her bones — she called them feathers — that one day some one would find her there and capture her. The actual wagtail was a real decoy. It was his yearning and her own materialised.

They laughed and played with the idea till it grew very real. And the future did not frighten them a bit. They took their money and spent it on their honeymoon, leaving for the south in October with the birds. They started on the great Southern Tour, building their first nest far away in a sun-drenched Algerian garden where the air, soft with the bloom of an eternal summer, mastered the earth and made it seem of small account. Nothing could weigh them down, nor cage them in. They led a true air-life together, the winds were softly scented, stars shone nightly above their cosy tent, they sang in the golden sunsets and washed their young bodies in the morning dew.

It was the paradise of a realised dream, a sparkling ecstasy they thought could never end. Her beauty seemed to him the one thing necessary. The autumn migration of the birds, mysterious with grandeur, had always suggested to him a passing-away from earth, a procession to another life, and a returning to sing of it with rapture in the spring. Their honeymoon was this dream come true. They mated and married as birds do, on the wing, and singing. And their first-born, a girl, was the offspring of a passion as intense and radiant as any passion can be in this world. Their imaginative ecstasy, prolonged wondrously through golden months, lifted them from the earth towards the very stars. In it was singing, flight, and rapture, the freedom of wild free spaces and the glory of flashing, coloured wings.

It was of the air. They fluted to one another beneath the moon; they soared above the noonday heat, they warbled in the scented dusk. Their child, conceived of sun and wind, in a transport of bliss akin to that careless passionate happiness that makes bird-life a ceaseless running song, was born where the missel-thrush sings in the moonlight, and the nightingales in February. She was a veritable child of air. A bird on the wing dropped her to earth in passing, and was gone. . . .

But something else was gone about that time as well. There came the collapse of inevitable reaction — tragedy. It was as pitiful as anything well could be. Having accomplished her chief end in life, the wife's strange beauty faded: her lightness, brilliance waned, her rapture sank and died; she became a heavy, rather stupid mother; she returned to type whence youth and imagination had temporarily rescued her. Her underlying traits of ordinary texture dulled the colour of her yellow wings. She bequeathed her all to this radiant, sparkling firstborn, and herself went out. The thing he loved in her vanished or became obliterated. He had caught her main drift; he tired. She tired too. In him patient affection replaced ecstatic adoration; in her there was tolerance, misunderstanding, then disappointment. To live longer on the heights they had first climbed became impossible. All that had fascinated him, caught him into the air, departed from her. The bird flew from her — into the little girl with yellow hair and big blue eyes.

She wearied of the life in tents and spoke of 'artistic furniture' at home, of comfort, and began to wonder how their 'living' could be 'earned.' The practical outlook developed, the carelessness of air decreased. Tom, the second-born, was the culminating proof of the saddening descent. He was just a jolly little dirty animal. 'He's like a rabbit,' thought his father, looking with disappointment on him, thus introducing the big, bitter quarrel that ended in their coming back to the heavy skies of England, settling in a flat in Maida Vale, and led eventually to his taking up work in connection with a modern publishing house to provide the necessary food and rent and clothing. They landed with a distinctly heavy thud — on earth.

It was, on the mother's part, a great tragedy of sacrifice. Having given all her best qualities to the first-born, she kept none over for herself — not even enough to appreciate her loss. Her radiance, sparkle, lightness, all her airy wonder, joy and singing, passed from her into yellow-haired little Joan. She stared at it with dull misunderstanding in her heart. She had not retained enough even to understand herself. She did not even discover that she had changed, for only when a fragment remains is the loss of the rest recognised, much less regretted.

By expressing herself in reproduction, she had not grown richer, but had somehow merely emptied herself. Her husband, moreover, was not heartless. He was not even to blame. He remained tender, kind, and true, but he did not love. For the thing he loved had gone — into another form.

Like the shifting shadows of the wings upon the Cambridge flats that gay spring morning, there fell upon his mind a shower of vague and indescribable thoughts, only one of which he pounced upon before it fled away.

‘What has been so long unconscious in me, little Joan may perhaps make conscious. I wonder . . .!’ He wondered till he died. He kept his wings, that is.

CHAPTER III.

THE RETURN TO London was a return to the demands of earth; from the bright and fiery aether of the southern climate they landed with something of a jar among sooty bricks and black-edged mortar. The sunshine dimmed, the very air seemed solid. Regular hours of work made it difficult for him to lift his wings, much less to fly; he knew the London air was good, but he never noticed that it was air at all; he almost forgot they had ever lived in the air and flown at all. Grocers, butchers, and bakers taught Mrs. Wimble to become very practical, and the halfpenny newspapers stirred her social ambitions for her children. Wimble worked hard and capably, and they made both ends meet. He proved a patient husband and a devoted father, if perhaps a rather vague one. His moment of realisation was over. He accepted the routine of the majority, living methodically, almost automatically, yet always a little absent-mindedly as though much of his intelligence was unconsciously at work elsewhere.

Both parents altered; but, whereas his change was on the surface only, his wife's seemed fundamental and permanent. He was aware that he had altered, she was not aware. They differed radically, for instance, about the prolonged and golden honeymoon in the south.

'The money lasted uncommonly well,' said Mrs. Wimble when they spoke of it; 'it was a pity we didn't keep over a little, wasn't it?' There was a hint of asperity in the droop of her lips.

'We should have it now if we had,' he answered vaguely but with patience. 'But for me it's a memory that will always live.' He spoke with longing tenderness.

'What?' said Mrs. Wimble, who, like all slow thinkers, liked sentences repeated, thus giving time to find an intelligent reply.

'We had a lovely time out there,' she admitted with a sigh, and went on to mention by way of complaint that she feared she was getting rather stout in London. There was no idea in her that she had changed in any other way; she looked back upon Algeria as a kind of youthful madness, half regretting it. That the bird had flown from her heart did not occur to her. Not alone her body, but her mind was getting stout. She had grown so artificial that she was no longer real. The manners, moods, the words and gestures she adopted in order to please or in order to appear as others are, had ended by effectually screening her own natural self, that which is every one's possession of unique value. It was not so much that she was false as that she was not herself. She was unreal.

In Wimble, however, those two years remained as something bewilderingly beautiful. Just out of sight in his heart he wore still the steady glow of it. He never could recall quite what he had felt in those deliriously happy days, yet the knowledge that they had been deliriously happy remained and warmed his blood. It was a big, brave, heartening memory beneath his coloured waistcoat. He dreamed his dream, only he did not tell it to any one — yet. He remained a kind, untidy husband and father. But that was the outer portion of him. The inner portion flew and soared and even sang. He no longer quite understood the meaning of this inner portion, but some day, he felt, it would be drawn out of him again and recognised. He would be taught to realise it, and what this bird-thing in him meant would be made clear. Already he looked to little Joan with something more than an infatuated father's adoration for her yellow hair, her bright blue eyes, her light and dancing ways. Tom he just loved in the way his mother loved. He remained a rabbit with distinctive tendencies of the animal. But with Joan it was different. In Joan there was something he looked forward to. Even at the age of five there was a glint about her that increased the glow in him; at ten it was still more marked. She puzzled her mother considerably, just as later she alarmed her. 'I'm nervous about the child; she doesn't seem like other girls of her age. I don't see her getting on much,' was her opinion, expressed again and again in the same or similar language. 'Joan seems to me backward.'

'Well,' admitted her husband, 'she's certainly not in a hurry about it. She's maturing slowly. Lots of them do — when there's a good deal to mature.'

'I hope you're right, Joe.' And then she added with pride by way of compensation— 'Tom's coming along nicely, anyhow,' — as though she spoke of a growing vegetable or, as he thought, of a rabbit in a cage with lettuces in front of it, and the idea of mating the chief end in life.

Once past the age of sixteen, however, Joan too came along nicely, and with a sudden rush that reminded her father of a young bird consciously leaving the nest. She seemed to mature so abruptly. There came a wondrous bloom upon her, as though the South poured up and blossomed in her body, mind, and soul. It took her father deliciously by surprise. The glowing thing in him spread too, rose to the surface, caught fire. He watched her with amazement, joy, and pride. He felt wings inside him. Thought danced — flashed against a background of blue and gold again.

‘She’ll do something in the world before she’s done,’ he said confusedly to himself, feeling a prophecy he had always made without realising it. ‘There’s wings in the girl. She’ll teach them how to fly!’

He was beginning to realise himself — through her. His early ideal had taken flesh again, but this time with a difference. He had not merely found it. He had created it.

For, more and more lately, the influence of Joan upon him had been growing. It was not merely that she made him feel young again, nor that her queer ways made him aware that he wanted to sing and dance. It was, in a word, that he recognised in her the remarkable thing he had known first in her mother years ago — but released in all its golden fullness. He recovered in her sparkling presence the imaginative dream that had caught him up into the air in youth, and it was both in her general attitude to life as well as in the odd things she now began to say and do. Her general attitude expressed it better than her words and acts. She *was* it — lived it naturally. She had the Air in her. In her presence the old magic rose over him again. He remembered the strange boyhood’s point of view about it — that a new thing was stealing down into the world of men, a new point of view, a new way of looking at old, dull, heavy things, that Air was catching at the heart of humanity here and there, trying to lift it somehow into freedom. He thought of the collective wisdom and brotherhood of birds. He forgot that he was growing old.

The old longing for carelessness, lightness, speed in life — these snatched at him with passionate yearning once again. Joan was the air-idea personified. And she had begun to find herself.

But so long now had he lived the mole-existence in London that at first this delicious revival baffled and bewildered him. He could not suddenly acquire speed without the risk of losing balance.

He became aware of a maddening desire to escape. He wanted air. Joan, he felt positive, knew the way. But the majority of people about him — his wife, Tom, their visitors, their neighbours — had not the least idea what it was he meant. And this lack of comprehension gave him a feeling of insecurity. He was out of touch with his environment. He was above, beyond, in advance of it. He was in the air a little.

He looked down on them — in one sense.

There were times when he did not know whether he was standing on his head or his feet. 'Everything looks different suddenly,' as he expressed it. He saw things upside down, or inside out, or backwards forwards. And the condition first betrayed itself one afternoon when he returned unexpectedly from work — he was still traveller to a publishing house — and found his wife talking over the tea-cups with a caller. He burst into the room before he knew that any one was there, and did not know how to escape without appearing rude. He sat down and fingered a cup of tea. They were talking of many things, the sins of their neighbours in Maida Vale, chiefly, and after the pause and interruption caused by his unwelcome entrance, the caller, searching for a suitable subject, asked:

'You've heard about Captain Fox, I suppose?'

'What?' asked Mrs. Wimble, opening her eyes as though anxious to read the other's thoughts. Evidently she had not heard about Captain Fox.

'I don't think I have,' she said cautiously. 'What — in particular?'

'He's going to marry her,' was the reply. 'I know it for a fact. But don't say anything about it *yet*, because I heard it from Lady Spears, who . . .'

She dragged a good deal of Burke into the complicated explanation, making it as impressive as she could. Captain Fox, who was no better than he should be, according to the speakers, paid rather frequent visits upon the young widow of the ground-floor flat, who should have been better than she was. To find that honest courtship explained the friendship was something of a disappointment. Mrs. Marks wished to be the first to announce the innocent interpretation, to claim authorship, indeed — having persistently advocated the darker view.

‘Who’d ever have guessed that?’ exclaimed Mrs. Wimble, off her guard a moment. ‘You always told me — —’

The face of her caller betrayed a passing flush.

‘Oh, one always hoped,’ she began primly, when Mrs. Wimble interrupted her with a firm, clear question:

‘By the bye, who *was* she?’ she asked.

And hearing it, Wimble felt his world turn upside down a moment. He realised, that is, that his wife saw it upside down. For his wife to ask such a question was as if he had asked it himself. He felt ashamed. His world turned inside out. He looked down on them. He rose abruptly, finding the energy to invent a true-escaping sentence:

‘You ask who she *was*,’ he said, not with intentional rudeness, yet firmly, ‘when you ought to ask — —’

Both ladies stared at him with surprise, waiting for him to finish. He was picking up the cup his sudden gesture had overturned.

‘Who she *is*,’ concluded Wimble, with the astonishment of positive rebuke in his tone. ‘What can it matter who she was? It’s what she is that’s of importance. The Captain’s got to live with *that*.’ And then the escaping-sentence: ‘If you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Marks, I have to go upstairs to see a book’ — he hesitated, stammered, and ended in confusion— ‘about a book.’ And off he went, making a formal little bow at the door. He went into the dining-room down the passage, vaguely aware that he had not behaved very nicely. ‘But, of course, I’m not a gentleman exactly,’ he said to himself; ‘what’s called a gentleman, that is. Father was only an analytical chemist.’

He stood still a moment, then dropped into a chair beside the table with the red and black check cloth. His mind worked on by itself, as it were.

‘What I said was true, anyhow. People always ask, “Who was she?” about everything. What the devil does that matter? It’s what you are that counts. Father was a chemist, but I — I — —’

He got up and walked over to the clock, because the clock stood on the mantelpiece, and there was a mirror behind it. He wanted to see his own face. He stared at himself a moment without speaking, thinking, or feeling anything. He put his tie straight and picked a bit of cotton from his shoulder.

‘I am Joseph Wimble, not a gentleman quite, not of much account anywhere perhaps, but a true workman, earning £250 a year, knowing all about the outside, and something about the inside of books; thirty-seven years old, with a boy at the Grammar School, a girl of sixteen in the house, and married to — to — —’ He paused, turned from the mirror, and sat down. It cost him an effort to remember— ‘to Joan Lumley, daughter of a corn-chandler in Norfolk, who might die any moment and leave us enough to live on,’ he went on, ‘in a more comfortable position,’ passing his hand over his forehead; ‘and my life is insured, and I’ve put a bit by, and Tom’s to be a solicitor’s clerk, and everything’s going smoothly except that taxes — —’

The sound of an opening door disturbed him. He felt confused in his mind. He heard Mrs. Marks saying loudly, ‘And please say good-bye for me to your *h*usband,’ the aspirate so emphasised that it was obviously an insecurity. She intended he should hear and understand she bore him no ill-will for his bad manners, yet despised him. The steps went downstairs, and the two questions came back upon him like pistol-shots:

‘Who *was* she? Who *am* I?

He realised he had been wandering from the point.

‘I’m a centre of life, independent and unafraid,’ thought flashed an answer. ‘I’m what I make myself, what I think myself. I’m not seeing things upside down; I’m beginning to think for myself, and that’s what it is. No one, nor nothing, nor anything anywhere in the world,’ he went on, mixed in speech, but clear in mind, ‘can prevent me from being anything I feel myself, will myself, say I am. I’ve never read nor thought nor bothered my head about things before. By heavens! I’ll begin! I *have* begun — —’

‘What’s the matter, Joe? Have you got a headache, or is it the books bothering you, dear?’ His wife had come in upon him.

She put her hand upon his forehead, and he got up from his chair and faced her.

‘I’ve made a discovery,’ he said, with exhilaration in his manner, ‘a great discovery.’ He looked triumphantly at her. ‘I am.’

‘What are you?’ she asked, thinking he was joking, and his sentence left unfinished on purpose.

‘I *am*,’ he repeated with emphasis. ‘I have discovered that I am, that I exist. Your question to that woman made me suddenly see it.’

His wife looked flustered, and said vaguely, ‘What?’ Wimble continued:

‘As yet, I don’t know exactly what I am, but I mean to find out. Up till now I’ve been automatic, just doing things because other people do ‘em. But I’ve discovered that’s not necessary. I’m going to do things in future because I want to. But first I must find out *why* I am what I am. Then the explanation’ll come — of everything. Do you see what I mean? It’s a case of “Enquire within upon everything.”’ And he smiled. His heart fluttered. He felt wings in it — again.

‘Do you mean you’re going to start in the writing or publishing line, Joe?’ It had always been her secret ambition.

‘That may come later,’ he told her, ‘when I’ve something to say. For it’s really big, this discovery of mine. Most people never find it out at all. She’ — indicating with his thumb the direction Mrs. Marks had taken— ‘hasn’t, for instance. She simply isn’t aware that she exists. She isn’t.’

‘Isn’t what, dear?’

‘She is *not*, I mean, because she doesn’t know she is,’ he said loudly.

‘Oh, that way. I see.’ Mrs. Wimble looked a wee bit frightened. He had seen an animal, a rabbit for instance, look like that before it decided to plunge back into its hole for safety.

‘There are strange, big things about these days, I know,’ she said after a pause, thinking of the books with queer titles his employers published. ‘You have been reading too much, dear, thinking and — —’

‘Mother,’ he interrupted, instinctively omitting her name, and in a tone that convinced her his head was momentarily turned, ‘that’s the whole trouble. I’ve never thought in my life.’

‘But why should you, dear?’ she soothed him, wondering if people who lost their memory and wandered off exhibited such symptoms first. ‘You always do your work splendidly. Don’t think too much, is what I say. It always leads to worrying — —’

‘Hardly ever — till this moment,’ he was saying in the grave, emphatic way that so alarmed her. ‘Not even when I asked you to marry me, when Tom was born, or Joan, or when we took this flat, or anything.’

‘You’ve made quite a success of your life without it anyhow, Joe dear. And no woman could ask more than that. D’you feel poorly? Joan can fetch Dr. Monson in a moment.’ It was a variant of ‘What?’

‘I feel better and bigger and stronger,’ he replied, ‘more real than ever in my life before. I have never been really alive till this moment. I *am* — and for the first time I know it. I’m experiencing.’ He stopped short, as Joan went down the passage singing, pausing a moment to look in, then tactfully going on her way again. The fluttering in his heart became more marked. Something was trying to escape. There was a whirr of wings again. ‘Mother,’ he said to his wife, as their heads turned back from the door together, ‘do you know what “experiencing” is? D’you realise what the word means?’

She sat down, resting her arms upon the table. She looked quietly into his eyes, as at one who is about to speak out of greater knowledge.

‘Joe dear, I *have* had experiences — experiences of my very own, you know.’

‘Yes, yes, I know, I know. But what I mean is — do you get the meaning, the real meaning of the word?’

She sighed audibly. ‘Not your meaning, perhaps,’ she meant. But she did not say it.

‘It means,’ he said, delighted with her exquisite silence, ‘it means — er — —’ He thought hard a moment. ‘Experience,’ he went on, ‘is that “something” which changes potatoes into nourishment, and so into emotion. That’s it. Until you eat potatoes, you don’t exist. Until you have experiences, you don’t exist. When you have experiences and know that you have them, you — *per*sist.’

She gasped aloud. She took his hand — very quietly.

‘Joe dear,’ she said, softly as in their courtship days, ‘such ideas don’t come into your head from nowhere. Has some one been talking to you? Have you been reading these books?’

His pulse was very quiet.

‘Have you been reading the firm’s books, dear?’ she repeated.

She asked it gently, forgivingly, as a mother might ask her boy, ‘Have you been tasting father’s whisky?’ The books were meant to sell to booksellers, to the public, to people who needed that particular kind of excitement. Her husband was to be trusted. He was not supposed to know what they contained. His ‘line’ of trade was chiefly medical, psychological, religious, philosophical. Fiction was another ‘line’ — for the apprentice. Joe was an ‘expert’ traveller. He was expected to talk about his wares, but not as one who read them. Merely their selling value was his strong point.

By the expression of his face she knew the answer.

He leaned back in his chair, just as he did sometimes when he asked what there was for dinner — the same real interest in his eyes — and he answered very calmly:

‘My dear, I have — a bit. *Cogito ergo sum*. For the first time I understood, in theory, that I existed. My reading taught me that. But I never knew it in practice until just now, when I heard you ask that question about the future Mrs. Fox: “Who *was* she?” And then I knew also that you — —’

‘You what?’ enquired Mrs. Wimble, bridling.

‘Were unaware that you existed,’ he replied point blank.

‘Aren’t you a little beside yourself, Joe — sort of excited, or something? ‘she gasped, proud of her tact and self-control. ‘What else could I have said? How could I have put it different?’

‘Joan,’ he answered gently, ‘you should have said, “What *is* she?” For that would have meant you thought for yourself. It would have meant that you knew you *were*, and that you knew she *was*.’

‘Original?’ said Mrs. Wimble slowly, catching her husband’s meaning vaguely, but more than a little disturbed in her mind.

‘No,’ he answered, ‘true. Just as when, years ago — the sunshine lovely and the fields full of buttercups — you wore a yellow scarf, and a wagtail beside a willow pond came so near that — —’

‘Joe,’ she said with a slight flush that was half displeasure yet half flattered vanity,’ you needn’t bring up that again. We were a bit above ourselves, dear, when that happened. We lost our heads — —’

‘Above ourselves! Free and real and happy,’ he interrupted her, ‘that’s what we were then. We had wings. We’ve lost ‘em. We were in the air, I tell you.’ His voice grew louder. ‘And what’s more, we knew it.’

He heard his daughter pass down the narrow passage again, singing. He got up and seemed to shake himself. There was again a fluttering in him.

‘We certainly were in the air,’ murmured his astonished wife.

‘You were a glorious yellow wagtail,’ he went on, so that she didn’t know whether his laughter was in earnest or in play, ‘and we were rising — into flight. We’ve come down to earth since. We live in a hole, as it were. I’m going to get out!’

Joan’s little song went past the door and died away towards the kitchen:

Flow, fly, flow,
Wherever I *am*, I *go*.

‘We’ve lost our wings. We crawl about. We never dance now, or sing, or — —’ He broke off abruptly. He felt the other portion of himself, so long hidden, coming to the surface; and he was aware that it went after his daughter. He was a little afraid of it — felt giddy. Her voice in the distance sounded like a lark’s, the lilt of her curious little song had an echo of the open air in it, her tread brought back the tripping of the wagtail along the river’s bank. ‘We never get out now,’ he finished the sentence, ‘we never get out. Earth smothers us. We want air!’

Mrs. Wimble watched him a moment with frightened eyes. He was standing on tiptoe, holding the tails of his coat in his hands as though he was about to do something very unusual — something foolish and ridiculous, she thought. He seemed about to dance, to rise, almost to fly up to the ceiling. She felt uneasy, hot — a little ashamed.

‘We can go out more, dear, if you think it wise,’ she said cautiously, moving a little further away. ‘It’s the expense — I always thought — —’

Her husband stared at her a moment dumbly. He seemed to be listening. In his heart a little, forgotten song crept back, answering the singing of the girl. Then, dropping upon his heels again, he said patiently in a soothing tone:

‘There, there, Mother! Forgive me if I frightened you. I was only pretending we were young again. That old bird thing — bird-magic — came over me for a moment. The girl’s singing did it, I suppose. Something ageless in me got the upper hand . . .’

He took her hand and comforted her. ‘Steady, Joe,’ she said, horribly puzzled, ‘she is a bit flighty, I know.’

‘But we will go out more,’ he went on more normally again, adopting her meaning perfectly. ‘Bother the expense! We’ll go out this very night and take the child with us. We’ll dine out, my dear. I’ll take you to a West End restaurant!’

CHAPTER IV.

FOR JOAN CERTAINLY was no ordinary girl; some called her backward, some considered her deficient, but all agreed that she was singular. Yet all liked her. Tall, slim and fair, with plenty of golden hair and eyes of merry brightness, she was out of the common in an attractive sort of way. Tom, her brother, with the mind of a solicitor's clerk, looked down upon her; her mother, fond, conventional, socially ambitious, despaired of her; her father alone held the opinion, 'There's something in that girl. She's always herself. But town-life over-weights and hides her; and in the end will suffocate. It'll snuff her out. She's meant for country.' He was aware of something unusually real in her. They were great friends. 'I want more air,' she had said once. 'In a field or garden I'd grow enormous like a bean plant. In these streets I'm just a stone squashed down by crowds. I'm in a hole and can't breathe. I prefer a fewity.' Even her words were her own like this. 'I'd like room to dance in. Life is a dance. I'd learn it in a field. I'd be a bird girl.' Space was her need, for mind as well as body.

It was her father's secret ambition too: a cottage, a garden with things that grew silently into beauty, flowers, vegetables, plants; sweet laughing winds; the rush of living rain at midnight; water to drink from a deep, cool spring instead of from metal pipes; a large, inviting horizon in which a man might lose himself; and above all — birds.

'After a month in real private country — loose country, talking, dancing, running country — —' She paused.

'Liquid, fluid, as it were,' he put in, delighted.

'Yes, deep and clear as a river,' she went on, 'in country like that, do you know what'd happen to me, father, after a few months of waiting?'

'I know, but I can't quite say,' he answered. 'Tell me, child, for I'd love to hear your own description.'

'I'd fly,' was her answer. 'Everything in me would fly about like a bird, picking up things, and all over the place at once without a plan — a fixed, heavy plan like a street or square in London here — and yet getting on all the time — getting further.'

'And how would you learn, dear?'

'Birds,' she laughed. 'There's bird-teaching, I'm sure.' She flitted across to another chair as she said it. She came closer to her father, who was listening with both ears, watching, drinking in something he had known long ago and then forgotten. '*You* know all about it, Daddy. You needn't pretend.'

'You're rather like one, d'you know,' he smiled. 'Like a bird, I mean.' He thought of a dabchick that hides so cleverly no one can put it up — then, suddenly, is there, close at hand.

She was perched on his knee before he knew it. Her small voice twittered on into his ear. Something about her sparkled, flashed and vanished, and it reminded him of sunshine on swift-fluttering wings through the speckled shade of an orchard. She darted, whirred, and came to rest. He stroked her.

'Father, you know everything before I say it,' she went on, her face shining with happiness that made her almost beautiful. 'If I could only live like a bird, I could *live*. Here it's all a big, stuffy cage.' She flitted to the window, pointing to roofs and walls and chimney-pots, black with grime. The same instant she was back again upon his knees. 'To live like a bird is to be alive all over, I'm sure, I'm sure. I know it. It's all routing here.'

Whether she meant rotten, routine, or living in a rut, he did not ask. He felt her meaning.

'There's a nest in a garden waiting for us somewhere,' he said, living the dream with her in his heart. 'And it's got an orchard, high deep grass, wild flowers, hills in the distance, with a tremendous sky where the winds go tearing about like the flight of birds. And a stream that ripples and sings and shines. All alive, I mean, and always moving. They say the country's stagnation. It isn't. It's a perfect rush — —'

'Of course,' she put in. 'Oh, father, think hard about that place, and we'll attract it nearer and nearer, till in the end we drop into it and grow like — —'

'Beans,' he laughed.

‘Birds,’ she rippled, and hopped from his knee across the room, and was down the passage and out of sight before he could draw another breath.

There was something alert as lightning in the girl. She woke a similar thing in him, too. It had nothing to do with brain as intellect, or with reason, or with knowledge in the ordinary sense the world gives to these words. But it had to do, he dimly felt, with another bigger thing that was everywhere and in everything. Joan shared it, brought it nearer; it was universal. What that bigger thing might be perplexed him. He was aware that it drove past, alertness in so huge a thing conveying the impression of vast power. There was grandeur in it somewhere, poise, dignity, beauty; yet this subtle alertness too, and this swift protean sparkle. It was towering as a night of stars, alluring as a peeping wildflower, but prodigious also as though all the oceans flowed suddenly between narrow banks in a flood of clearest water, very rapid, terrifyingly deep. For a robe it wore the lustrous colouring of untold age. His imagery, when he tried to visualise it, grew mixed. He called it Experience. But sometimes he told himself he knew its Christian name — its familiar, little, intimate nickname — and that was Wisdom.

And so he was rather glad that Joan, like himself, was but half educated; that she was backward, and that he knew, relatively, only the outsides of books. For facts, he vaguely felt, might come between them and this august yet precious thing they knew together. Birds could teach it, but Ornithology hid it.

Lately, however, as his wife divined, he had been dipping in between the covers of the goods he travelled in. Caught by the bait of several drugging titles, he had nibbled — in the train, in waiting-rooms, in the ‘parlours’ of commercial hotels where he put up for the night. He had found names and descriptions of various things, but they were the names and descriptions given by others to their own sensations. The ordered classification merely developed snapshots. He recognised photographs of dead things that he knew must be somewhere — alive. The names made stationary what ought to dance along with incessant movement. Only he did not realise this until he saw the photographs. The alleged accuracy of a photograph was an insolent falsehood, pretending that what was alive was dead, that what rushed was stationary. Dogs and savages cannot recognise the photographs of their masters. The resemblance has to be taught. Everything flows, his shilling *Heraclitus* told him. He had always known it. Birds taught it. Joan lived it. To classify was to photograph — a prevarication. To publish a snapshot of a jumping horse was to teach what is not true. Definitions were trivial and absurd, for what was true to-day was false to-morrow. The sole value of names, of classification, of photographing lay in stopping life for an instant so that its flow might be realised — as a momentary stage in an incessant process. And he looked at a group of acquaintances his wife had 'Kodaked' ten days ago, and realised with delight how they all had rushed away, torn on ahead, lived, since she had told that insignificant lie in black and white about them.

Joan, catching him in the act of destroying it, had said, 'I know why you're doing that, father.'

'Why?' he asked, half ashamed and half surprised.

'Because you don't want to stop them,' was her answer, 'and because it wasn't fair of mother to catch them in the act like that. It wasn't all.'

And as he stared at her curious peeping face, she came quickly up to him, saying passionately, imploringly:

'Oh, do let's get into the country soon, and live along with it, and grow and know things. I feel so stuck still here, and always caught-in-the-act like that photo. It's so dead. It's a toad of a place! The streets are all nailed down on to the ground. In the country they run about — —'

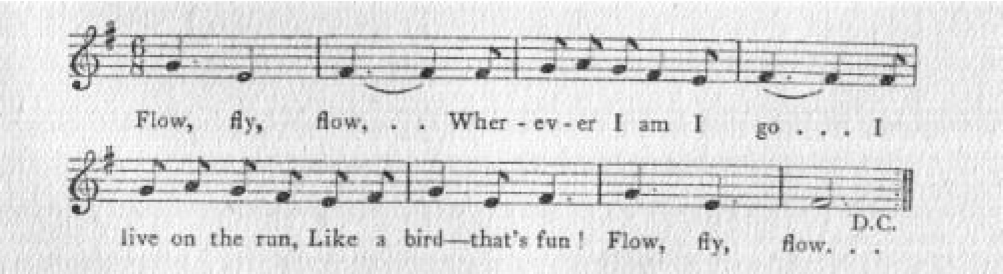
He interrupted her on purpose:

'But in a city life is supposed to be much richer than in the country,' he said. 'You know that?'

'It goes round and round like a circle, though; it doesn't go *on*. I'm living other people's lives here. I want to live my own. Everybody here lives the same thing over and over again till they get so hot they get ill. I want to be cool and naked like a fern. Here I'm being photographed all day long. Every man who looks at me takes a photograph. Oh, father, I'm so tired of it. Do let's go soon and live hoppily like the birds.'

'You mean happily?' he asked, laughing with her.

'It's the same thing,' she laughed back, 'it's like wings or running water — always going wherever they are ——


Flow, fly, flow, . . . Wher - ev - er I am I go . . . I
live on the run, Like a bird—that's fun! Flow, fly, flow. . .
D.C.

And was dancing to and fro over the carpet, when the door opened and in came her brother Tom, followed by another youth.

He looked surprised, ashamed, then vexed. It was Saturday afternoon. He had been six months now in the office.

‘I’ve brought Mr. Halliday with me,’ he said pompously, ‘to have tea. We’ve just been to a matinée at the Coliseum. Joan, this is Mr. Halliday, our junior clerk. My sister, Harold.’

Joan instantly looked gauche and ugly. She shook hands with a speckled youth, whose shy want of manners did not prevent his eyeing her all over. He sat down beside his friend, talking of the singing, dancing, juggling and so on that they had witnessed. All the time he talked at something else in her. But she hid it away as cleverly as a bird hides its nest. The callow youth, without realising it, was hunting for a nest. In the country he might have found it. He would have been sunburned, for one thing, instead of speckled. The wind, the rain, the starlight would have guided him. His natural instinct would have flowed out in a dance of spontaneous running movement, easy, graceful, clean. Here, however, it seemed rigid, ugly, diseased. He was living the life of others.

‘You were dancing just as we came in,’ observed Mr. Halliday. ‘Does that line of things attract you? You are going on the stage, perhaps?’

Joan looked past him out of the window, and saw the swallows flashing about the sky.

‘I *can* dance,’ she replied, ‘but not on a stage.’

‘But you’d be a great success, I think, from what I saw,’ opined the junior clerk. And somehow he said it unpleasantly. His tone half undressed her.

She didn’t flush, she didn’t stammer, at first she didn’t answer even. She watched the swallows a moment, as though she had not heard him.

‘You only stare, you don’t watch and enjoy,’ she said suddenly, turning upon him. ‘And an audience like that. . .!’ She stopped, got up from her chair, put her head out of the open window and gazed into the air above. When she turned back, she saw that her mother had come in and was leading the others into the dining-room for tea. Her father’s face wore a singular expression — it seemed, of exultation. Tom, black as a thunder-cloud, waited for her.

‘You’re nothing but a little barbarian,’ he said angrily under his breath. The life of others he led had been sorely wounded. ‘I can never bring Mr. Halliday here again. You’re simply not a lady.’

‘I’m a bird,’ she laughed in his face. ‘And you men can never understand that, because no man has a bird in him, but only a creepy, crawly animal. We go on two legs, you on four.’

‘I’m ashamed of you, Joan. You’re nothing but a savage.’ He snapped at her. He could have smacked her. His face was flushed, but his neck thin, scraggy, white. He looked starved and twisted. ‘In the City we — —’ he began with a clown’s dignity.

‘Live like rats in a drain,’ she interrupted quickly, perched a moment on her toes in front of his face. ‘You don’t breathe or dance. Tom,’ she added with a gesture of her arms like flapping wings, ‘if you were alive, you’d be — a mole. But you’re not. You’re a lot of other people. You’re a herd — always enclosed and always feeding.’

She danced down the corridor and into her room, locked the door, slipped out of some tight clothing, and began to sing her bird-song of incessant movement:

Flow! Fly! Flow!
Wherever I *am* I *go*;
I live on the run
Like the birds — it’s fun!
Flow, fly, flow. . . .

She sang it to a tiny, uneven, twittering melody that was made up of half notes. It went on and on, repeating itself without end. It seemed to have no real end at all.

CHAPTER V.

TO OTHERS SHE was doubtless an exasperating being. To her father alone — since he saw in her something he had lost but was now recovering, something he therefore idealised, seeing in perfected form what was actually but a germ still — to her father she expressed a little of that higher carelessness, or wisdom, that he had touched in boyhood and now yearningly desired again.

‘Oh, she’s all in the air,’ people said. And it was truer than they knew. She had an affinity with all that flew. This bird-idea was in her heart and blood. Whatever flew, whatever rose above the ground, whatever passed swiftly, suddenly, from place to place, without deliberation, without calculation, without weighing risk and profit — this appealed to her. Yet there must be steadiness in it somewhere too, and it must get somewhere. A swallow or a butterfly she approved, but not a bat. The latter, for all its darting swiftness, was a sham; it was an earth-crawler really, frightened into ridiculous movement by finding itself aloft like a blown leaf; like a flying fish, it was wrong and out of place. It merely flew round and round in stupid, broken circles without rhythm. But the former were perfect. They were ideal. They were almost spirits.

And when her father said he was glad she was half educated, he only meant glad that she had left school and teachers before her butterfly mind had become a rigid, accurate, mechanical thing. She might play with books as he himself did, fluttering over the covers, smelling their perfume, glancing at sentences and chapter headings, at indices even. But she must not build nests in them. A book, like a photograph, was an evillish attempt to nail a flowing idea into a fixed pattern. In the author’s mind an idea was true, but when he had put it down in black and white he had put down only a snapshot of it: the idea was already far away.

‘Not poetry-books,’ Joan qualified this, ‘because poetry runs clean off the page. It’s alive and wingy. It sings my bird-song —

Flow, fly, flow,
Wherever I *am* — I *go*!

She had this unerring instinct of the bird in everything, the quality that flashes, darts, is gone before it can be killed by capture. A bird is everywhere and nowhere. It's all over the place at once. Look at it, and it's no longer there; listen to it, and it's gone; touch it, and you catch a sunbeam that warms the hand but loses half its beauty; catch it — and it's dead. But no one ever caught a swallow or a skylark naturally on the wing. Even the eye, the mind, the following thought grows dizzy in the effort.

For the cow in the field she had no song. 'Wherever I am, I stay,' was without a tune of its own. A cow couldn't leave the ground. She wanted something with incessant movement that could touch the earth, yet leave it at will. Wings and water could. Birds and rain both flew. Half the time a river (the only real water for her) flowed over the earth without stopping on it, and half the time it was a cloud in the sky, yet never lived there. 'Flow, fly, flow; wherever I *am*, I *go*,' — this was the little song of life and change and movement that came out of her curious heart and mind. 'Live on the run, like a bird, *that's* fun!' And by fun she meant life, and the soaring joy of life.

She applied her principle unconsciously to people, too. Few men had the bird in them except her father. Mother was a badger, half the time out of sight below the earth. She felt respect, but no genuine love, for mother.

'A whale or a badger, I really don't know which,' she said. 'That's Mother.'

'Joan, I cannot allow you to speak in that way of your parent and my wife.' The sentence was unreal. He chose it deliberately, as it seemed, from some book or other. What she had said was sparklingly true, only it could not be said. 'You were born out of mother, and so must think her holy.'

'I only meant that she is not birdy,' was the answer, 'and that she likes thick salt water, or sticky earth. I mean that I never see her on the surface much, and never for an instant *above* it. A fish is all right, but not a half-and-half thing.'

'She built your nest for you. She taught you how to fly. Remember that.' He lit his pipe to hide the laughter that would bubble up.

'But she never flew with me, father — as you do. Besides, you know, I *like* whales and badgers. I only say they're not birds.'

She paused, stared triumphantly at him a moment, and then with anxiety in her tone, she added: ‘And you said that as if some one had taught it you, Daddy. Some one’s put bird-lime near you — some book, I suspect.’

‘Grammar’s all right enough in its way,’ he told her finally, meaning perhaps that there were correct and incorrect ways of saying a thing, and so the little matter was nicely settled up, and they flew on to other things as their way invariably was. But, after that, whenever mother was in the room, they thought of something under ground or under water that emerged for a brief moment to stare at them and wonder, heavens! — how they lived. *They* wondered how, on earth, she lived. They were in different worlds.

For a long time now Joseph Wimble, ‘travelling’ in tabloid knowledge, had been absorbing what is called the Spirit of the Age. On the paper wrappers of his books — chiefly Knowledge Primers — were printed neat and striking epitomes of the contents. Written by expert minds, these epitomes were admirable brief statements. There was no room for argument. They merely gave the entire book in a few short sentences that hit the mind — and stayed in it. They left the impression that the problem was proved, though actually it was merely stated. Hundreds of those statements he had now read, until they flowed like a single sentence through his consciousness, each *résumé* a word, as it were, in the phrase describing the knowledge — or at least the tendencies — of the day. Wimble was thus a concise phrase-book, who taught the grammar of the twentieth century.

For his Firm, alert and enterprising, had the gift of scenting a given tendency before it was understood by the mass — still ‘in the air,’ that is — yet while the mass still wanted to know about it; then of choosing the writer who could crystallise it in simple language that made the man in the street feel well informed and up to date. The What’s-in-the-Air-To-day Publishing Co. was well named; it had the bird quality. These Picturesque Knowledge Primers sold like wildfire. They purveyed knowledge in tabloid form and advertised the hungry public into nourishment. The latest thing in politics, painting, flying, in feminism or call-of-the-wild, in music, scouting, cubism, futurism, feeding, dancing, clothing, ancient philosophy redressed, or modern pulpit pretending to be neo — everything that thrills the public to-day, from pageantry and Eurhythmics to higher thought and psychism, they touched with clever condensing accuracy of aim, and grew fat upon the proceeds. The stream of little books flowed forth, written by birds, distributed in flocks, scattered broadcast like seed in a wind, each picked up eagerly and discarded for the next — winged knowledge in sparrow doses. The Managing Director, Fox Martin (*né* Max Levi), was a genius in his way, sure as a hawk, clairvoyant as a raven. His *Bergson* sold as successfully as his *Exercises for the Bedroom* — because he chose the writer. He hovered, swooped, struck — and the primer was caught and issued in its thousands. His advertising was consummate, for it convinced the ordinary man he ought to know that particular Thing-in-the-Air-To-day, just as he ought to wear a high collar with his evening clothes or a slit in his coat behind with flannels. He aimed at the men as the machine-made novel aims at the women.

Wimble, *the* traveller *facile princeps*, for this kind of goods, knew, therefore, everything that was 'in-the-air-to-day,' without knowing in the least why it was to be believed, or what the arguments were. And yet he knew that he was right. He knew things as a bird does, gathering them on every wind, and shaping his inner life swiftly, unburdened by reasoning calculation built on facts. Thus, useless in debate, his mind was packed with knowledge. He was a walking Index.

And the feeling in him that everything flowed and nothing was stationary was strong. He dealt in shooting ideas, not in dead, photographic detail. He flashed from one subject to another; flowed through all categories, ancient and modern; skimmed the cream off current tendencies, and swept above the knowledge of the day with a bird's-eye view, unburdened by fact or argument.

Of late, moreover, he had enjoyed these curious upside-down and inside-out experiences, because he had filled himself to the saturation point, and become, as it were, stationary. He could hold no more without a change. He stopped. He took a snapshot photograph of himself, realised that he existed as a separate, vital entity, and thenceforward watched himself expectantly to see what the change was going to be, for he knew he would not stay still. Hitherto he had been mechanical, whereas now he was an engine capable of self-direction — an engine stoked to the brim. When the air is at the saturation point, the tiniest additional percentage of moisture causes rain to fall. It's the final straw that makes the camel pause. So with Joseph Wimble. He was ready to discharge.

And it was this chance remark of his under-ground wife asking who the widow *was* that took the photograph, and made him say, ‘I am.’ All he had read was included in the affirmation. The epitomes had become part of his consciousness. Like the weary camel, like the moisture tired of balancing in the air, he wanted to sit down now and consider. His daughter’s longing for the country was his too. And it was she who now brought out all this.

At dinner that night in a West End restaurant near Piccadilly Circus he broached the subject and listened patiently to his wife’s objections.

‘What’s the good, even if we had the means, Joe? Burying ourselves like that.’

Joan hopped, as it were. She recognised her mother’s instinctive dread that she would go under ground or under water and never come up again.

‘None of the nice people, the county families, would call. There’d only be the vicar and the local doctor, or p’r’aps a gentleman-farmer or two. We know much better class in town, and there’s always chances of getting to know better still. Besides, who’d there be for Joan? The girl wouldn’t have a look-in, simply. And the winters are so sloppy in a country cottage. Think of the Sundays. And the chickens and pigs I really couldn’t abide, and howling winds at night, and owls in the eaves, and rats in the attics. You see, we’d have no standing at all.’

‘But just a week-end cottage, Mother,’ Joan put in, ‘just a place of flowers and orchards and a little stream to flit down to overnight, so to say — *that* now you’d like, wouldn’t you?’

‘Oh, that’s different,’ she said more brightly, ‘only that’s not what father means. He means a place to live in altogether. The week-end idea is right enough. That’s what everybody does who can afford to — a bungalow on the Thames. But that means more money than we shall ever see, and even for that you want to keep a motor or a horse and dog-cart, or a little steam launch to get about in. Then the handy places are very expensive, and we couldn’t go very far because of Tom. Tom could come down and bring his friends if it was near enough.’

‘Grandfather might give us a little nest cheap,’ suggested Joan. She didn’t ‘see’ Tom in the cottage.

But mother turned up her nose as she sipped her glass of Asti Spumante that accompanied the west-end dinner by way of champagne. She didn’t approve of Norfolk.

‘There’s no society,’ she said. ‘It’s flat and chilly. Your grandfather only stays there because there’s the business to keep going. If we ever did such a thing as to move to the country, it’d have to be the Surrey pinewoods or the Thames.’

She looked across the table questioningly at her husband. The music played ragtime. The waiters bustled. There was movement and excitement in the air about them. Joe looked quite distinguished in his evening dress, and she felt proud and distinguished herself. She only wished he were a publisher. Still, no one need feel ashamed of being interested in the book line. Literature was not a trade.

‘Some place, yes, where the country’s really alive,’ he agreed. ‘I don’t want to vegetate any more than you do, dear, I can assure you.’

‘Nor I, mother,’ laughed Joan. ‘I simply want to fly about all the time.’

‘Joan,’ was the reply, half reproachfully, ‘you always talk as if we kept you in a cage at home. The more you fly the better we like it; I only say choose places worth flying to — —’

Her husband interrupted abruptly.

‘It was nothing but a little dream of my own, really,’ he said lightly. ‘A castle in the air, a flash of country in the brain.’ He laughed and called the waiter.

‘Black, white, or Turkish?’ he asked his wife. ‘And what liqueur, dear?’

‘Turkish and Grand Marnier,’ was the prompt reply, and she would have said ‘*fine champagne*’ only felt uncertain how *fine* should be pronounced. They sipped their coffee and talked of other things. It was no good, this speculative talk, it was too much in the air.

The key of mother’s mind was always: Who *was* she? What’ll *they* say? She lived underground, using the worn old narrow routes. Joan and her father made their own pathways in the trackless air. During the remainder of the evening they kept to the earth beside mother.

That night in the poky flat, after the girl had gone to bed, Mrs. Wimble observed to her husband:

‘Do you know, Joe, I think a little change *would* do her a lot of good. She’s getting restless here, and seems to take to nobody. Why not take her with you sometimes on your literary trips?’

This was her name for his journeys to provincial booksellers, or when sent to interview one of the Primer writers upon some practical detail.

‘If we could afford it,’ he replied.

‘Father might help,’ she said, showing that she had considered the matter already. ‘It would be good for her — educational, I mean.’

Her husband agreed, and they fell asleep on that agreement.

A few days later a reply was received from Mrs. Wimble’s father, the corn-chandler in Norfolk, enclosing a cheque for £20 ‘as a starter.’ The parents were delighted. Joan preened her wings and began at once her short flying journeys about the country with her father. He avoided the Commercial Traveller Hotels and took her to little Inns, where they were very cosy together. They went from Norfolk to the edge of Wales. She acquired a bird’s-eye knowledge of the map of Southern England. These short trips gave her somehow the general ‘feel’ of the various counties, each with its different ‘note,’ in much the same way as the Primers gave her father his surface impression of England’s mental condition. She noticed and remembered the living arteries which are rivers, he the streams of thought and theory which are tendencies. The two maps were shown and explained, and each was wonderfully alert in understanding the other’s meaning. The girl drank in her father’s knowledge, while he in his turn ‘felt’ the country as a dancing sheet beneath them, flowing, liquid, alive. A new language grew into existence between them, a kind of shorthand, almost a symbol language. They realised it first when talking of their journeys at the dinner-table, and Mrs. Wimble looked puzzled. Her face betrayed anxiety; she asked perplexed questions, looking up at them as a badger might look up at wheeling pigeons from the opening of its hole. Mentally she turned tail and dived out of sight below ground, where, with her feet on solid earth, her back and sides touching material that did not yield, she felt more at home, the darkness comforting and safe. Her husband and Joan flew too near the sun. It dazzled her. They could have talked for hours without her catching the drift, only they were far too fond of her to do so. They resented going underground with her, but they came down and settled on earth, folded their wings, used words instead of unintelligible chirrupings, and chatted with her through the opening of the hole.

One afternoon, then, in Chester, they received a telegram from her that, for a moment, stopped the flow of things, though immediately afterwards the rush went on with greater impetus than ever.

“Father passed away peacefully
return at once funeral to-morrow Swaffham.”

And the family found itself with a solid little income of its own, free to fly and settle where it would.

CHAPTER VI.

NOTHING SHOWED MORE vividly the peculiarity of Joan's unearthly airiness than the way in which the death affected her. It was the first time the great thing all talk about but none realise until they touch it, had come near her. It gave her a feeling of insecurity. She felt the solid earth — so called — unreal. Not that she had a feather of affection for her mother's father. She regarded him as a second-rate animal of prey, like a jackal, and always shrank when he was near. There was something 'sticky' in him; she classed him with her father's father, earthy, but not 'clean-earthy'; muddy rather. But that an earthy person could disappear in such a way made her feel shaky. If *he* couldn't stay on the earth, who could?

Outwardly, and according to the newspapers, he had died rather well, leaving money to hospitals and waif Societies; but, inwardly, he had died in deep disgrace, a bankrupt soul with a heavy overdraft at the bank. He had been a self-seeker of that notorious kind that achieves worldly success without much thought for others. Now that he was gone, mother declared he was a hero, father denounced him privately as ignoble, — and their daughter divined secretly that he was a jackal.

His record, however, has nothing to do with this story, and is mentioned only because his departure affected the members of his family. Mother wept and pasted the obituary notices from the Norfolk papers in a book; father soothed her with 'earth to earth, my dear, you know,' and Joan remarked beneath her breath 'he belongs there, he never really left it.' And felt an entirely new sensation.

For death puzzled her. She realised it as a fact in her own life — she, too, would come to an end, stop, go out. Yet that life could come to an end astonished her; she simply didn't believe it. In her own queer way she looked into the odd occurrence. The corn-chandler's death had raised a dust; but it was an unjustifiable disappearance somehow; once the dust settled she would surely see how and why it was unjustifiable. He would still be on the earth. But the dust did not settle, the chandler did not come back. He was beneath the earth. The feeling of insecurity remained in her. Earth, evidently, was not her element.

She envisaged then suddenly a delightful thing, and possibly being a mere child still, in spite of her years, she actually believed it. It was wondrous enough anyhow to be worth believing. For it occurred to her that the body of earth went back merely to its own, earth to earth, sweetly, naturally, while Something that had used that bit of earth, borrowing it, was set free. It — that marvellous Something — likewise returned to its own element — air. ‘The airy part — that’s me — flies off, if it’s there at all.’ Only grandfather had made the mistake of identifying himself with his borrowed earth, so he was finished and done with. Mother had the same downward tendency. If she wasn’t careful, she would be finished and done with too. It was a matter of choice. But how could they? How could any one? She and her father ‘knew different’ — it was mother’s phrase — and identified themselves with the airy part that was the reality.

She looked the thing in the face as well as she could, trying to hold it steady for a photograph. Death, to her mind, seemed to photograph the life it put an end to. The long series of acts and movements ceased. There came an abrupt full stop. Like a photograph this was somewhere, somehow, false. Wings folded for the last time; air failed for ever; there was a sudden drop to earth. Her grandfather, whom death had photographed, had gone, yet surely only gone — elsewhere; his record in the world of men and women was his attitude in the photograph; he was posing elsewhere now, but even he had not really stopped. Her little Song of Being did not mention anything of the sort. ‘Flow, fly — stop! Wherever I am — I drop!’ was merely wrong. A living thing could never end. It could neither drop nor stop. Some one had made a big mistake about death. She felt insecure.

And then she saw the matter differently, as though her mind made a sudden swerving turn into bright sunlight. And the sense of insecurity began to pass. This act of death revealed another meaning, connecting her with a vaster centre somehow, joining her up with a main central power. Death was returning to the main. She recovered the immense sense of unity she had momentarily lost. It made her realise that this tremendous centre, this main, was elsewhere than on the earth. Her conception of this unity deepened. To join the majority was more than a neat phrase. The photograph analogy came back of its own accord. Life here on the earth was indeed but a photograph, taken almost instantaneously though it seemed quite long, of a — moment's pose. The shutter snapped, the sitter flashed elsewhere, flashed away to resume big interrupted activities, behind space, behind time, where no hurry was — into a universal, mothering state she felt as air. Man's life was a suburb of this state, a furnished house in that suburb, a Maida Vale tenancy, as it were; but there was this vast metropolis of air, the main, the centre, where the 'majority' lived, and whither all lines of flight converged. A thought of Everlasting Wings came to her with amazing comfort. And she realised that the insecurity she felt belonged to the suburb earth, rather than to herself. Others looked upon it as the one secure and solid permanency; for air was unsafe but earth did not change; air meant giddiness, absence of support, bewilderment, and terror of being lost, while earth stood for the reverse of all these dangers — permanent security. Her mother, for instance, simply dared not leave it for an instant. Whereas, it came to Joan suddenly now, that it was earth that crumbled, melted, got easily broken and dispersed, while air, though it moved, could never be destroyed. 'You can photograph earth,' she said, 'but no one has ever photographed the air.'

'A person just goes out — like that?' she asked her father, snapping her fingers. 'How can it be, exactly? Time ends for him: is that it?' Her face was distressed and puckered. She had no language to express the ugly thing that blocked her running, flowing mind. 'Once you're in among minutes, hours, years,' she went on, 'how can you ever get out of them? *They* don't stop.'

It seemed to her, apparently, that once a living thing exists it should not cease to exist unless Time, which bore it, ceased as well. And then another notion flashed upon her.

'Or perhaps they're just a trick,' she exclaimed, referring to days and minutes, 'and you've been alive somewhere else all the time too — and when you die you go back to *that*!'

Her father glanced up from the ordnance map he was studying and smiled with a sort of bewildered happy amusement on his face. Mother, however, turned with an uncomfortable sigh. 'That reminds me,' she stated inconsequently, 'I must go and sit in the Park.' She turned as a cow that prefers the rain upon its tail instead of in its eyes. 'I'll take a taxi, dear,' she added from the door. ‘Do,’ said her husband, suppressing with difficulty an intense desire to laugh out loud. ‘Ask the porter in the hall. Or shall I call one for you?’ ‘The porter’ll do,’ she said. ‘I’ll go and get ready.’ He said good-bye kindly, and she went.

‘Time doesn’t stop, of course,’ he went on to Joan. ‘*You* don’t stop either, I suppose, if the whole truth were known.’ He eyed her quizzically, for he delighted in her wild, nonsensical questioning. Behind it he divined that she knew something he didn’t know, but only guessed. Or perhaps he had known it in his youth and since forgotten it. He remembered the ecstasy which had produced her.

‘But why do we know a *bit* of the truth and not the whole? It’s all one piece. It must be, father. What hides the rest, then?’

But he ignored the new questions. ‘At death,’ he said, ‘you just go into another category perhaps. I suspect that’s it. You continue, sure enough, but in another direction, as it were.’

Joan brushed the map aside and lit with a hop upon the table as though she fluttered down from above his head. Her hands rested on his shoulders, and her eyes stared hard into his own. They were very bright and twinkling. ‘That’s just throwing words at me,’ she told him earnestly. ‘That catty-thing, as you call it, isn’t in *our* language and you know it. You nipped it out of a book.’ She shook her finger at him solemnly. ‘What *I* mean is’ — thrusting her keen face with its London pallor and shining eyes closer to him— ‘how in the world can any one get out of Time, once they’re in it?’ She drew back as though to focus him better and command a true reply. ‘Tell me that, please, father, will you?’

‘That’s a question, isn’t it?’ he said laughingly, yet not really trying to evade her. He wanted to hear her own answer, her own explanation. He knew quite well — had not the Primer on Expression said so? — that the things they discussed in this way lay just beyond known words. Only by apparent nonsense-talk could they be brought within sight at all.

‘It’s a thing we ought to know,’ Joan went on gravely. ‘I do know it somewhere — only I haven’t found it out quite.’ Then, with another flash of her blue eyes, she stated: ‘If a person goes from here — from now, I mean — they must go *to* somewhere else. I suppose they go back to the bigger thing. They go all over the place at once, perhaps.' And again she drew back a moment, staring at him as if judging height and distance before taking a breathless swoop down into a lower branch.

'Something like that, I imagine,' her father began. 'Time, you see, is only a point, a single point — the present. And if — —'

But Joan was already following her own wild swoop, and hardly listening.

'*That* I can understand,' she said rapidly. 'You escape at death from a point where you've been stuck — like in a photograph. You go all over then.' Her mind tried to say a hundred things. 'I understand. That's easy. I'm an all-over person myself; I do several things at once — like a flock of birds or a great high wind. And when I do things like that they're always right, but if I wait and think about one of them, they go wrong and I'm in an awful muddle — —'

'Your intuition being stronger than your reason,' he put in with a gasp.

She did not notice the interruption; she had reached her tree; she saw a thousand things below her simultaneously, grouped, as it were, into one.

'But what I don't see plainly,' she returned to her original puzzle, 'is how a person — by dying — can get out of all this.' She flung her arms out wide to include the room. 'Out of all this air and stuff.'

'Space?'

'Yes, Space!' She darted upon the word with a twitter of satisfaction. 'I feel much more free among yards and miles, up and down, across and round and through — than I do just in minutes and days and years. Oh, I've got it,' she cried so suddenly that it startled him; 'Space is several things, and Time is only one. Space has *throughth* — you go through it in several directions at once. Time hasn't!'

He caught his breath and stared obliquely at her, for the fact was she was taking these ideas out of his own head. He had found them in his Primers, of course; now, she was taking them from his mind, sharing his knowledge by some strange, instinctive method of her own. In some such way, perhaps, birds shared and communicated ideas with one another. He felt dizzy; there was confusion in him as though he flew at fifty miles an hour through the air and was without support, seeing many things at once below. One of those moments was near when he stood upon his head. He was up a tree with the girl; he felt the wind; he, too, saw a thousand things at-once; he swayed.

‘Space,’ he mentioned, as soon as he had recovered breath, and drawing upon his inexhaustible reserve of Primers, ‘has three dimensions, height, breadth, and length. But Time has only one — length. In Time you go forwards only, never back, or to the left or right. Time is a line. Don’t pinch — it hurts!’ he cried, for in her excitement she leaned forward and seized his coat-sleeve, taking up the flesh. ‘So, possibly, at death,’ he continued as soon as she released him, ‘a person — —’

‘Goes off sideways,’ she laughed, clapping her hands; ‘disappears off sideways — —’

‘In a new direction,’ he suggested. ‘That’s what I said long ago — another category, where a body isn’t necessary.’

‘It’s not a full stop, anyhow,’ she cried; ‘it’s a flight.’

‘Provided you’ve been already moving,’ he said; ‘some people don’t move. They haven’t started. And for them, I suppose, it’s a biggish change — difficult, uncomfortable, painful too, possibly,’ he added reflectively.

‘They start for the first time — at death.’ She ran to the window, but the same second was back again beside him.

‘They get off the ground — off the map altogether. But they go into the air. They get alive,’ and she picked the ordnance maps from the floor where her impetuous movements had tossed them. ‘Death is just a change of direction then, really; that’s all.’ And the door slammed after her flying figure, though it seemed to her father that she might equally have gone by the window or the chimney, so swift and sudden was her way of vanishing. ‘Bless me, Joan, how you do fly about, to be sure!’ he heard his wife complaining in the passage. ‘You bang about like a squirrel in a cage. Whatever will the neighbours say?’

She had taken all this time to clothe herself suitably for the Park. Mr. Wimble saw her to the lift.

‘That’s it,’ he reflected a moment, before returning to search the map for a suitable country place to settle down in; ‘that’s it exactly. Mother says

“Who was she?” and “What’ll people say?” Joan says “Where, why, who am I?” Mother is past and Joan is future. That’s it exactly. And I — well, what do I say?’ He rose and looked at himself in the mirror with the artistic frame his wife had ‘selected’ at Liberty’s Bazaar.

‘I just say “I am,”’ he concluded. ‘So I’m present. That’s it exactly.’ He chuckled inwardly. ‘Past, present, future, that’s what we are! Yet somehow Joan’s all three at once, a sort of universal point of view. Ah!’ He paused. ‘Ah! she’s not future. She’s *now*!’ He caught dimly at the idea she tried to convey. To think of many subjects simultaneously was to escape time, avoiding sequence of events and minutes, obliterating — or, rather, seeing through — perspective which pretends that a tree ten yards away is nearer to one than the forest just beyond it. The centre, for her, was everywhere. To see things lengthwise only, in time or space, was a slow addition sum achieved laboriously by the mind, whereas, subconsciously, the bird’s-eye view (as with the prodigy) perceived everything at once, making separate addition, or two and two make four, absurd. He was aware of a power in her, an attitude, a point of view, higher than this precious intellect which knows things lengthwise only, concentrating upon separate points, one at a time, consecutively. Joan knew everything at once. Her conception of perceiving things was all-embracing — as air. She flew; wherever she was, she went. ‘Throughth’ was the word she coined to express it.

He felt very happy, there was a peculiar sense of joy and lightness in him, and yet he sighed. It was his mind that sighed. He was completely muddled. Yet another part of him, something he shared rather, was bright and clear and lucid. And, putting on his hat, he went after his wife and sat with her in the Park for half an hour, feeling the need of a little wholesome earth to counteract the dose of air Joan had administered to him.

They watched the people pass, the distinguished people as his wife called them, but actually the people who were dressed in the fashion merely, ordinary as sheep, shocked by the slightest evidence of originality, — undistinguished in their very essence. Mr. Wimble knew this, but Mrs. Wimble remained uninformed. The review of rich, commonplace types passed to and fro before their penny chairs, while they eyed them, Mrs. Wimble thinking, ‘This is the great London world, the people whose names and dresses the newspapers refer to in Society columns. Oh dear!’ Park Lane was the background; none of them dined till half-past eight; they kept numerous servants and were carelessly immoral, carelessly in debt, intimate with 'foreign diplomats,' reserved and unemotional — the aileet, as Mrs. Wimble called them. But, according to Mr. Wimble, they were animals, a herd of animals. They couldn't escape from the line of Time. They knew 'through' in Space, but not in Time. The bird-thing was not in them.

'Joan's coming on a bit,' ventured the father presently, trying to keep himself down upon the earth.

'If you call it coming on,' replied his wife, with a touch of acid superiority she caught momentarily from her overdressed surroundings. 'It's a pity, it seems to me. She's not English, Joan isn't, whatever else she is.'

'Oh, come now,' said Mr. Wimble cautiously, adding, a moment afterwards, 'perhaps.'

'It'll be the ruin of her, if we don't stop it in time,' came presently in what he recognised as her 'Park' voice. 'She don't get it from *me*, Joe.' Her words became inaudible a moment as she turned her head to follow a vision she imagined was at least a duchess, though her husband could have told her it had emerged, like themselves, from a suburban flat. 'I sometimes think the girl's got a soupsong of the East in her,' continued Mrs. Wimble, glancing with what she meant to be an aristocratic hint of wickedness and suspicion at her untidy husband.

'She may have,' he replied innocently, 'for all I know. Something very old and very new. It's not silly now, but it might become silly. She's too careless somehow for this world — and too wise at the same time. I can't make it out quite.' He looked up at the trees as the wind passed rustling among the dull green leaves. How blue the sky was! How sweet and fresh the taste of the air! There was room up there to move in. He saw a swallow wheeling. And the old yearning burned in him. He thought of the phrase 'bird-happy' — happy as a singing-bird.

'It's a pity she's so peculiar. She'll make a mess of her life unless you're careful, dear.' Mrs. Wimble said it out of a full heart really, but she used the careless accent her surroundings prompted. She said it with an air. And, to her keen annoyance, the County Council man came up just then and asked for tickets, Mr. Wimble producing two plebeian coppers out of a dirty leather purse to settle the account. The pennies spoilt her dream. Money — but a lot of money — was what counted in life.

‘Tom’s doing exceptionally, I’m glad to say,’ she resumed, by way of relieving an emotion that exasperated her. ‘He’ll make money. He’ll be somebody — some day.’

‘Tom’s a good boy. He’s safe and normal,’ agreed her husband.

When the taxi had rushed them back to Maida Vale, and Mrs. Wimble had gone up in the lift, Mr. Wimble decided that he would like to go for a little walk before coming in. It was towards sunset as he ambled off. Joan, from the roof, watching the birds as they dashed racing through the air at play, caught sight of him below and waved her hand. But he did not see her; he did not look up; his eyes were on the ground. Yet he had a springy walk as if he might rise any moment. Joan watched him for some time, signalling as it were, making a series of slight movements and gestures that seemed a method of communication almost. Had he glanced up and seen her he must have noticed and understood what she was trying to say, as a bird on the lawn would understand what its companion, perched in the cedars overhead, was saying, distance no bar at all.

CHAPTER VII.

AND THEN, SUDDENLY, he did look up. Feeling his attention drawn, he turned and raised his eyes to her. The rays of the setting sun fell on her dress of white and yellow. She looked like a bird showing its under-plumage. He waved his hand in return, instinctively making gestures similar to her own, and as he did so, a Flock of Ideas flew down upon him like a shower of leaves — nothing very distinct and sharp, but just loose, flying ideas that were in-the-air-to-day.

They seemed to result from the signalling; they interpreted something he could not frame in words. They fluttered about his mind, trying to get in and lodge. It was wireless communication — the kind used by animals, fish, moths, insects, above all, birds. He remembered the female Emperor-moth that, hidden in a closed box during the short breeding season, summoned the males across twenty miles of country until her antennae were cut off, when no male came near her. He felt as if Joan transmitted ideas to him, shaking them through the air from invisible antennae. He received the currents, but could not properly de-code them. He waved back to her again, then was lost to view round the corner.

‘It’s a queer thing,’ ran through his mind, as though catching the drift of something she had flashed towards him, ‘but Joan’s got something no one else has got — yet. It’s coming into the world. Telepathy and wireless are signs, only she’s got it naturally, she’s born with it. She’s in touch with everything and everybody everywhere, as though Time and Space don’t trick her as they trick the rest. It’s life, but a new kind of life. It’s air life. That’s what she means by saying she’s an all-at-once and an all-over person. I understand it, but I haven’t got it myself — and, as if to prove it, he ran into another pedestrian who cursed him, and, before he could recover himself, collided the next minute with a lamp-post.

The current that had been pouring through him was interrupted; it switched elsewhere.

‘When more of us get like that,’ it went on brokenly, ‘when the whole world feels it’ — he snatched at an immense and brilliant certainty that was gone before he could switch it completely into his mind— 'it will be brotherhood! The world will *feel* together, — one! It's beginning already. Only people can't quite manage it yet.'

And the strange lost mood of his youth poured through him, the point of view that made everybody seem one to him, when air and birds offered the dream of some inexpressible ideal. . . . He lost himself among the buttercup fields of spring . . . wandered through Algerian gardens where the missel-thrush sang in the moonlight and the radiant air was perfumed with a thousand scents . . . then pulled himself up just in time to avoid collision with a policeman who came heavily along the solid earth against him.

'Look where you're a-going,' growled the policeman.

'Go where you're looking,' he answered silently in his mind. 'That's the important thing — to look and to go!'

He steadied himself then. His mind scurried through the Primers, but found nothing that helped him much. Joan had asked him about Time and Space, and he had replied almost as though she had put the words into him first. Never before had he actually thought in such a way. Time and Space, as a Primer reminded him, were merely 'Modes under which physical phenomena are presented to our consciousness, under which our senses act and by which our thoughts are limited.' Both were illusory, figments of our finite minds; both could be subdivided or extended infinitely; both, therefore, were unrealities. They were false, as a picture is false that makes a pebble in the foreground as large as a cathedral in the background in order to convey so-called perspective.

And Joan, somehow or other, was aware of this, for she saw things all-at-once and all-over. He thought of her word 'throughth'; it wasn't bad. For she applied it to time as well as space. Time was more than a line to her, it had several directions, like space. He smiled and felt light and airy. Joan knew a landscape all at once, as though she had another sense almost. Every man believes he sees a landscape all at once, but in reality each spot is past by the time he sees it; it happened several seconds ago; he sees it as it was when the light left it to travel to his eye. Each spot has its separate *now*; there is no absolute Now. He had been wrong to tell her there was only the present; he saw it; she had flashed this into him somehow. To think the future is not there until it is reached was as false as to think his flat was not there until he stepped into it. He laughed happily, aware of a strange, light-hearted carelessness known in childhood first, then known again when he fell in love and so shared everything in the world. An immensely exalted point of view seemed almost within his reach from which he could know, see and *be* everything at once. Joan would know and understand what it meant; yet he had created Joan . . . and had forgotten . . . He thought of light.

By overtaking the rays of light thrown off from the battle of Waterloo he could see it happening *now*; if he moved forward at the same pace as the rays he could see Waterloo stationary; if he moved faster he could see the battle going backwards, of course. But Waterloo remained always — there. Time and space were mere tricks. The unit of perception decided the childish dream of measurement. ‘Ha, ha!’ he chuckled. ‘Real perception is for the inner self, then, omnipresent, omniscient — at-once and all-over.’ To realise ‘I am’ was to identify oneself with all, and everywhere. ‘Wherever I am, I — *go*!’

‘That’s it,’ he concluded abruptly, dropping upon a bench in a little Park he had reached, ‘Joan doesn’t think or reason. She just knows. She’s an all-over and all-at-once person!’ And he put the Primers, with their neat, clever explanations, out of his head forthwith.

‘Cleverness,’ he reflected, leaning back in the soft smothering dusk, ‘is the hall-mark of To-day. It is worthless. It is the devil. It separates, shuts off, confines and crystallises what should flow and fly. Birds ain’t clever. They just know. There’s no cleverness in that Southern Tour, there’s knowledge — all shared together.’ The Primer writers, men who had made their names, were clever merely. By concentrating on a single thing they could describe it, but they didn’t know it, because the whole was out of sight. They explained the bit of truth. Joan, ignorant of the photographic details they described and explained, yet knew the whole — somehow. But how? Wherever she was, she went!

He drew a long breath as if he had flown ten miles.

‘She’s something new perhaps,’ he felt run through him, ‘something new and brilliant flashing down into the old, tired world.’ He lit his pipe with difficulty in the wind, fascinated by the marvel of the little flaming match. ‘She’s off the earth — a new type of consciousness altogether — sees old things in another way — from above and all at once. She's got the bird in her— 'Half-angel and half-bird,' he remembered with a sigh. Only that morning an essay on Rhythm in his newspaper, *The Times*, had mentioned: 'Angels have been called the Birds of God, and an angel, as we imagine him, is a being that can do all good things as easily as a bird flies. When we represent him with bodily wings we are thinking of the wings of his spirit, and of a soaring power of action and thought for which we have no analogy in this world except in the physical beauty of flight.' 'By Jove!' he cried aloud.

A flock of sparrows, startled by a cat, rose like a fountain of grey feathers past him, whirring through the air. There were fifty of them, but they moved like one.

'Got a whole flock in her!' he added.

He watched the fluttering mass of busy wings as they shot into a leafy plane tree overhead and vanished. A touch of awe stole over him. 'There's a whole flight of birds in her. She's a lot, yet one,' he went on under his breath, thinking that the fifty sparrows went out of sight like one person who turns a corner and is gone. How did they manage it? By what magical sympathy, as though one single consciousness actuated them all, did they swerve instantly together?

There was something uncanny about it. He felt a little creepy even. . . . The shadows were stealing over the deserted Park. A low wind shivered through the iron fence. A vast nameless power came close. . . . He got up slowly, heavily, and went out into the crowded street, glad a moment to feel himself surrounded by men and women, all following routine, thick, solid, reasoning folk, unable to fly. A swallow, flashing like visible wind across the paling sky of pink and gold, went past him. He looked up. He sighed. He wondered. Something marvellously sweet and lofty stirred in him. With intense yearning he thought of his little, strange, birdy daughter, Joan, again. His absorbing love for her spread softly to include the world. 'If she should teach them . . .!' came the bewildering idea, as though the swallow dropped it into him. 'Drag them out of their holes, show them air and wings, make them bird-happy . . . teach them that!'

A tremendous freedom, lofty and careless, beckoned to him, — release, escape at full speed into the infinite air; all cages opened, all bars destroyed, doors wide and ceilings gone; that was what he felt.

But lack of words blocked the completion of the wild, big thought in him, for he had never felt quite like this since early youth, and had no means of describing the swift yet deep emotion that was in him. He could not express it — unless he sang. And he was afraid to sing. The County Council would misinterpret Joy. There was an attendant in the Park, a policeman in the road; he would be locked up merely.

CHAPTER VIII.

HE PLUNGED INTO the stream of pedestrians and it struck him how thickly, heavily clothed they were; the street resembled a sluggish river of dark liquid; he struggled through it, immersed to his shoulders.

And the flock of curious, elusive thoughts, half-formed, fluttered above his mind just near enough to drop their shadows before they scattered and passed on. Much as a kitten pounces on the shadow of shifting foliage on a lawn his brain pursued and pounced upon them, bringing up the best words available, yet that did not suit because the necessary words do not exist. It was only the shadow of the ideas he captured.

‘A new language is wanted,’ he decided, ‘a flying language, with a rapid air vocabulary, condensed, intense. Everything else is speeding up nowadays, but language lags behind. It’s old-fashioned, slow. All these ideas I’ve got, for instance, ought to go into a word or two by rights. Joan put ’em into me just now from the roof by a couple of gestures — enough to fill a dozen Primers with words. Ah, that’s it! What comes to me in a single thought — and in a second — takes thousands of words to get itself told in language. Words are too detailed and clever: they miss the whole. Aha! There’s a new language floating into the world from the air — a new way, a bird-way, of communicating. We shall share as the birds do. We shall all understand each other by gesture — thought — feeling! Instant understanding means a new sympathy; that, again, means a divine carelessness, based on a common trust and faith.’ And the immensely lofty point of view — as from a dizzy height in space — once more floated past him.

He steadied himself by pausing to look in at the shop windows. On a chemist’s shelves he saw various things to stimulate, coax and feed people into keener life. The Invisible Sticking Plaster was there, too, to patch them up. Next door was a book-shop, where he remained glued to the window like a fly to treacle-paper. ‘Success and how to attain It,’ he read, ‘in twelve lessons, 1s.’; ‘Train your Will and earn more Money, 4½d.’; ‘The Mysteries of Life, Here and Hereafter, all explained, 6d. net.’ And second-hand copies of various books, marked ‘All in this row tuppence only,’ including several of the ‘What’s-in-the-Air-To-day’ Primers.

Beyond was a window full of clothing, woollen garments guaranteed not to shrink; electric or magnetic belts, to store energy, ‘special line — a bargain,’ and various goods for keeping warmth in various parts of the body. All these shops, he reflected, sold things intended to increase or preserve life, artificial things, cheaply made, and sold to the public as dearly as possible, things intended to increase life and prevent its going. In other shops he saw mechanical means for stimulating, intensifying, driving life along. Life had come to this: All these artificial tricks were necessary to keep it going. Food, knowledge, clothes, speed that a bird possessed naturally in abundance. A robin’s temperature in the snow was 110°. Yet human beings required thousands of shops that sold the conditions for keeping alive, — at a profit. He passed an undertaker’s shop — to die was a costly artificial business too. There was too much earth in the whole affair. He remembered that no one ever saw a bird dead, when its death was a natural death. It slipped away and hid itself — ashamed of being caught dead!

A crowd collected round him, thinking he had discovered something exciting, and it jostled him until he elbowed his way out. He swerved dizzily amid the booming, thundering traffic, as he crossed the road and brought up against a toy-shop, where the sight of balls and butterfly nets, ships and trains and coloured masks restored his equilibrium. ‘Real things are still to be had,’ the fluttering shadows danced across his mind, ‘And there are folk who like them!’ he added in his own words, as two tousled-headed children came up and stood beside him, staring hungrily. He gave sixpence to each, told them to go in and buy something, and then continued his evening walk along the crowded pavement. ‘Life is a great grand thing,’ he realised, ‘if we could all get together somehow. It’s coming, I think. A change is coming, something light and airy penetrating all this — this sluggish mass — —’ he broke off, again unable to express the idea that fluttered round him—’ ah! it’s good to be alive!’ he went on, ‘but to know it is better still. But you have no right to live unless you can be grateful to life, and create your own reason for existing. It means dancing, singing, flying!’ He felt new life everywhere near him; a new supply of a lighter, more vivid kind was descending from the air. ‘It’s a new thing coming down into the world; it’s beginning to burst through everywhere: a change, a change of direction — —’

He repeated this to himself as he moved slowly through the surging crowd. Joan, he remembered, had called death a change of direction only. But as he reached the word ‘change,’ it seemed to jump up at him and hang blazing with fire before his eyes. He had caught it flying; he held it fast and looked at it. The other shadows careered away, but this one stayed. He had caught the thing that cast it. The flock of shadows, he realised, were not cast by actual thoughts; they were the faint passage through his mind of mysterious premonitions that Joan’s gestures had tossed carelessly towards him through the air. Coming ideas cast their shadow before. This one, at least, he had captured in a word, a figure of speech. He had pounced and caught it by the tail. It fluttered, but could not wholly get away.

Change was the keyword. A gigantic change was coming, but coming gently, stealing along almost like a thief in the night, emerging into view wherever a channel offered itself. Life was being geared up everywhere. Human activities, physical, mental, spiritual, too, were increasing speed. Humanity was being quickened. They were passing from earth to air.

Signs were plentiful, though mysterious. His mind roamed through the Epitomes of his Primers, skimming off the cream. Thinkers, artists, preachers, although they hardly realised it, were beginning to look up instead of down; from pulpit, press, and platform the little signs peeped out and flashed about the mass of expectant men and women. The entire world seemed standing on tip-toe, ready for a tentative flight at last. There was a universal expectation abroad that was almost anticipation.

But change involved dislocation here and there, and this dislocation was apparent in the general confusion that reigned in the affairs of the world. Stupendous hope was felt, though not yet realised and fulfilled. No one as yet could justify it. Pessimism and confidence, both strangely fundamental, were violently active. So long accustomed to terra firma, the world asked questions of its little coming wings, and the new element of air frightened even while it attracted — nervous, timid, wild, uneasy questions were asked on every side. Deprived of the old, comfortable ideas of Heaven and Hell, and suspicious of the newly hinted promise of survival, hearts trembled while they listened to so sweet whispers of escape into the air. The old shibboleths, distrusted, were slinking one by one into their holes. Science could, perhaps, go usefully no further; Reason, still proud upon her pinnacle, yet hesitated, unable to advance; Theology looked round her with dim, tired eyes. The whole starving earth paused upon a mighty change that should usher in a new and single thing — a new direction. Alone the few who knew, felt glad and confident — joy. But they *felt* it only, for as yet they could not tell it in language usefully.

They might live it, though!

‘Live it — ah!’ he exclaimed, and his thoughts came back again to his queer, birdy daughter. For Joan, he told himself, brimmed over with it. She had in her the lightness, speed, and shining of the new element; she was glad and confident, full of joy, bird-happy, aware of principles rather than of details. She sang. Of all creatures this spontaneous expression of joy in life was known to birds alone. No other creatures sang. The essential ecstasy that dwells in air, making its inhabitants soar, fly, sing, was liberated in her human heart.

True. . . . The weary world stood everywhere on tiptoe, craning its neck into the air for some new expected prophet who should take it by the — wing.

It was a marvellous, delightful thought, and it sent his imagination whirring into space. The wings of his mind went shivering. He gave expression to it by a sudden gesture of his arms and head, making, it seemed, a spontaneous effort to rise and fly — and, luckily, no one observed him making it. It was similar, however, to the movement Joan had made upon the roof as she stood outlined against the red and yellow sky; similar, also, to the flashing curve the swallow had shown him not long afterwards. It conveyed a thousand laborious sentences in a small spontaneous gesture that was rhythmical. Ah! there was a change of rhythm coming! And in rhythm lay a new means of instantaneous communication. Two persons in the same rhythm knew and understood each other completely — felt together. Then why not all?

The flock of shifting shadows fell more thickly down upon the floor of his receptive mind. He pounced upon them eagerly.

‘Yes, it’s an air-thing somehow,’ he felt, watching the amazing pattern, ‘a bird-thing coming. And she knows it. She’s born with it.’ He again remembered the buttercup meadows of Cambridge and the singing gardens of Algeria, the ecstasy, the light and heat of that exalted passion. ‘Her mother had the germ of it, but in Joan it’s blossomed out. People would call her primitive, backward, even a little crazy, ‘hysterical’ is the word they’d use to-day, I suppose — but in reality she’s — er — awfully advanced. To be behind the race is the same as to be ahead of it, for life is circular and to run fast ahead is to overtake your tail. Signs of going back are equally signs of going forward. The same place is passed again and again until all it can teach has been caught from it; so the brain may be justifying scientifically To-day what was known instinctively to ancient times. The subconscious becomes the conscious.’

‘No, no,’ the shadows painted somewhere behind his thought, ‘it’s not circular, it’s spiral. We come round to the same place again, only higher up, above — in the air. And with the bird’s-eye view from above comes understanding.’

Joan, he remembered, had said a few days before, speaking of his button-hole: ‘A flower is a stone put up several octaves.’ That was flight in itself — all she said had flight in it. Her statement was true, literally, scientifically, spiritually, yet evolution was a word certainly unknown to her, and the spiral movement equally beyond her mental vocabulary.

The shadows danced and grouped themselves anew.

He reviewed strange signs that were-in-the-air-to-day, seeing them all as aspects of one single thing. They were not really disconnected; their apparent separation was caused by the various angles of survey, just as a floor seen from below became a ceiling. All that he was thinking now was, similarly, one big thing caught from various points of view. Some power swifter, surer than thought in him surveyed it all at once; the tiresome descriptions his mind laboured over took in the details separately — the shifting shadows; yet the pattern as a whole was in him, captured by some kind of instantaneous knowledge such as birds possess. Like Joan, he caught the bird’s-eye view, in principle. Yet she refused to be blinded and smothered by the details, whereas they certainly muddled *him*. It was necessary to select the details one thought about evidently. He tried to stand outside himself and see the single something that included all the details, and in proportion as he did so he seemed to rise into the air.

He reviewed these details flashily, and, so doing, got a glimpse, an inkling, of the entirety whence they arose. All seemed to him significant evidence of one and the same vast thing; this new, queer, rushing supply of air-life flowing through everything everywhere, forcing a swift and rhythmical way in the most unlikely places, modifying human activities in all directions unaccountably. He saw a hundred of his Primer-Writers sitting in a studious group about it, each describing certain specific details, while the general outline of the whole escaped them individually. Each called his scrap by different names, little aware that all sat regarding the same one thing. It came up bubbling, dancing, pouring forth with rhythm, bringing lightness into solid details, unsettling the old-fashioned, and carrying many off their feet into the air. It was so brimming that it overflowed; to resist it brought confusion, insecurity, distress; to go with it was the only way to understand it — accepting the huge new rhythm. Yet it had so many guises, so many protean forms. Proteus was, indeed, a deathless truth, things changing into one another because they all are one.

He felt this new thing as synthesis, unity. The signs he reviewed combined in a single gesture that conveyed it. Earth, with its reason, logic, facts, could teach no more; Science was blocked from sheer accumulation of undigested detail; the new knowledge was not there; a new element was needed. And it was coming: Air.

Already there was a change even in sight itself, and artists saw things in a new direction. Mere foolishness to the majority, the cubists, futurists and the like presented objects to others — others quite as intelligent as the majority, quite as competent to judge — with an authentic fiat of truth and beauty. They conveyed an essentially new view of objects, warning the man in the street that the objective world is illusory and that concepts built upon the reports of the senses are radically deceptive. A city seen from an aeroplane resembled a cubist picture. This new sight seemed a bird's-eye view, again, though using — going back to — the primitive, naked, savage sight, yet a stage above it, higher, a tumultuous rhythm in it. The spiral again!

Side by side with it ran a strange new hearing too. The musicians — he recalled the names that showered through the Primer pages — called attention to this new hearing-from-another-angle. And, here again, it was a going back apparently. Debussy used the old, primitive tone scale, while

Strauss and Scriabin, to say nothing of a hundred lesser ears, extended the rhythm of music to include the world of sounds as none have dared before. In literature, more swiftly assimilative and interpretative of the airy inrush, the signs were thickly bewildering. Only, for the majority, Pan being still misunderstood, the God of Air came more slowly to his own. But the signs were everywhere, like birds and buttercups in spring. The bird's-eye view, flashing marvellously, imperishably lovely, was on the way into the hearts of men, the fairy touch, the protean aspect, the light, electric rhythm running from the air upon the creaking ground, urging the mass upwards with singing, dancing, into a synthesis, a unity like a flock of birds.

The nonsense of unintelligible words and decapitated sentences tried to catch hold of what he felt, only failed to express it because it was too big for used-up, pedestrian language. He felt this coming change and swept along with it. He was aware of it all over.

It came, he realised, flushing the most sensitive, receptive channels first — the artists chiefly — and the apparent ugliness here and there was due to distortion and exaggeration, to that violence necessary to overcome the inertia of habit in a narrow groove, the tyranny of Mode. The accumulated momentum of habit flowing so long in one direction called for a prodigious rhythm to stop it first, then turn it back — into the new direction. Mode was the devil — *der Geist der stets verneint* — forbidding change, destroying innovators, worshipping that formal, dull routine which is ever anti-spiritual because it photographs a moment and fixes it to earth for always. . . . It was, of course, attacked, as all new movements are attacked, with contempt, with ridicule, with anger; but the attacks were negligible, and could not stay its gathering flow. The bright little minds of the day charged against it, stuck their clever shafts, and scuttled back again into the obscurity of their safe, accustomed groove. Mistaking stagnation for balance, they clung to the solid earth of years ago, but knew it not.

Of all this his mind did not frame, much less utter, a single word. But the pattern of its coming fell glowingly across his feelings. Life too long had been a single photograph; it seemed now a rushing cinematograph, revolving, advancing, mounting spirally into the air. He felt it thus. Something new was pushing up the map from underneath to meet the air; it was sprouting everywhere, going back to deep Pagan joy and wonder, yet with Reason added to it. Reason looked back breathless to Instinct long despised and cried, ‘Come! Help me out!’ And into his mind leaped the symbolic image of a Centaur combining both these faculties. He added wings to it.

‘Reason — oh, of course! Without reason who could know that at a certain station there must be a change of carriage?’ The train and station once there, that method of roving once accepted, Reason was as necessary as a railway ticket. Only — well, he thought of the great Southern Tour and the perfect motion and perfect knowledge that led those tiny travellers to their distant destination and brought them home again to the identical hedge and bush and twig six months later. There was another way of communication. Birds knew it. The female Emperor-moth used it. Our wireless poles and instruments followed laboriously to achieve it. Yet the power itself lay in ourselves too, somewhere, waiting to be recognised without costly mechanism.

Yes, there surely was another way of travelling, of motion, coming, a bird-way, yet even swifter, surer still, because independent of the earthy body. The real, airy part of men and women were acquiring it already, their real selves, thought and consciousness, learning the new mighty rhythm by degrees. The transference of thought and consciousness was close upon them — from the air; wireless communication with all parts of space; the mysterious, unconscious wisdom of the bird, organised and directed consciously by men and women.

An immense thrill passed over him. He began to sing softly to himself, but so softly, luckily, that no one overheard him: ‘Flow, fly, flow; Wherever I am, I *go*!’ Joan knew it all unconsciously. She just sang it.

And bits of a bird-primer flew across his mind, casting the same delicate, protean shadows against the wall where thought stopped helplessly. The precocious intelligence of feathered life was still a mystery no primer-writer could explain. The curlew, he recalled, after wintering in New Zealand, paused to mate and nest in the South of England on his way to Northern Siberia, while awaiting the summons to complete its journey when the ice is gone. ‘It is a fact, proved and attested beyond dispute, that the evening the curlew leaves the South of England is invariably the day on which the ice breaks in the north, at least two thousand miles distant.’ How does the curlew know it?

He thought of the plover with five drums in his ear, able to hear the ‘slow, sinuous movement of the worm in the soil, eight inches below the hard-crusted surface’; of the lapwing who imitates the sound of rain by drumming with his feet to bring the worms up; of the cuckoo matching her egg with those of the foster-mother selected for her baby — hundreds of variations; of the swallow, mating like the nightingale for life, and of a certain pair of swallows, in particular, who ‘for fifteen consecutive years returned to the same spot, after wintering in Cape Colony, to build their nest, arriving invariably on the same day of the year — the 11th of April’; of the nightingales who winter separately, but return faithfully together to England in the spring, the female, perhaps, from India, the male from Persia.

A hundred marvels of air-life came back to him; all ‘instinct’ — only ‘mere instinct’! Birds, birds, birds! The wisdom of the birds! Their communications, their flocking together, their swift rhythmical movements, their singing language, their unity, their — brotherhood!

From the air the new thing was rushing down upon the world, yes. Yet not alone the sensitive artist-temperament perceived it; it came overflowing into far less delicate channels as well, breaking up the old with difficulty, but producing first a tumult of disturbance that would later fall into harmonious rhythm too. There were everywhere new men, new women; behind the Woman Movement, for all its first excess, was a colossal, necessary, inevitable thing. Once rhythmical, the disorder and extravagance would become order, balance. The neuter woman was a passing moment in it, not to endure. The new woman was but another sign of the airy invasion which the painters and musicians, the writers and the preachers, felt. And the air-man, with new nerves, new courage, new outlook upon energy, even new bird-like face and strange lightning eyes, was another obvious, physical, yet only half-physical, expression. His audacious courage seemed somehow to focus the new consciousness preparing. The birds were coming everywhere. A new element, a new direction!

In advance of the invasion, making way for it, old solid obstacles were everywhere breaking down. He seemed to recognise a crumbling of religions, of religious forms. The rigid creeds and dogmas, made by man, and imprisoning him so long, were turning fluid before the stress of the new arrival, melting down like sand-castles when the tide comes in. They must hurry to adapt themselves, or else cease to exist. Formal, elaborate, dead-letter theology must go, to let in — Religion. The churches seemed to have become unreal already, continuing, parrot-like, to teach traditional doctrines the people have long ago abandoned. He heard another Primer whisper in his ear. ‘Every one is aware of the failure of the churches to touch modern life; to escape from their grooves; to cease to deal in conventional and monotonous iterations of old-fashioned formulae, instead of finding vital, human, developing expressions of the spiritual craving in man. They do not teach *that the Kingdom of Heaven is on earth*. They have isolated religion from practical life. Religion must evolve with the evolution of human culture’ — or disappear. Its teaching must take wings and rise to lead into the air, or remain stagnant on the ground in ruins, stony, motionless, dead, a photograph.

The ‘wireless imagination’ of the futurist was not so meaningless as it sounded. The exaggeration that preceded the new arrival would soon pass. Only, the first flight took the breath away a little, as when a man, from walking, breaks into a run to leap into an unknown element. Through the scientific world the quiver was running too. What’s coming next? What in the world is going to happen? seemed the universal cry. The composite face of the world already assumed the eager lineaments of the great bird-visage. The air was coming.

The rhythm of life was everywhere being accelerated, and side by side with the mechanical expression in telephones and wireless communications, a quickening transformation of human sensibility was taking place as well. It was the running start for a leap into the air. Facilities for increasing the spontaneity of living existed at every street corner, but it was air that first produced them. Air made them possible. There was even approach towards the unification of the senses, one man hearing through his teeth and skull, another seeing through his temples. The localisation of sensibility was merging into a unified perception whereby people would presently know all-over and at-once. They would realise the eternal principle and ignore the obscuring details. Once they all felt together as the bird did, brotherhood, which is sharing all in natural sympathy, would be close. . . .

The shadow-patterns flashed and rustled on across his mind. In a couple of minutes all these wild ideas occurred to him. They were extraordinarily elusive, yet extraordinarily real. In an interval as brief as that between saying ‘Quite well, thank you,’ to some one who asks ‘How are you?’ this flock of suggestions swept over him and went their way. They never grew clear enough to be actual thoughts; they were just passing hints of what was in-the-air-to-day. All telescoped together in a rapid rush, marked him, vanished, yet left behind them something that was real. They came through his skin, he fancied, rather than through his brain. They came all over.

The pedestrians, meanwhile, shuffled past him heavily; he made his way with difficulty, the thick stream opening to let him through, then closing in again behind him. He felt closely in touch with them all, in more ways than one; but the majority were still groping on the ground, hunting for luxurious holes to shelter in. Only a few were looking up. He saw, here and there, an eager face turned skywards, tipped with the beauty of a flushing dawn. These, perhaps, felt it coming. But few as yet — one in a million, say — would dare to fly.

He watched them as he passed along, feeling them gathering him in. He saw the endless, seething crowd as a unit. He felt their strength, their beauty. He was aware of democracy, virile, proud, inevitable. He felt the hovering bird above it somewhere, immense, inspiring. The advancing tide was rising, undermining caste and class distinctions steadily, breaking down conventions, the feeblest sand-castles children ever built. He heard an awful thunder too. It revealed a storming majesty, shattering, cataclysmic, making most hearts afraid — the opening and stirring of multitudinous huge wings. Yet it was merely the new element coming, the great invasion with its irresistible rhythm. Democracy wore striped wings beneath its Sunday black, powerful, magnificent eagle-wings. Birds flying in their thousands, he recalled, convey sublimity. But yet he shuddered. The rising of such tremendous wings involved somewhere — blood.

He saw, with his bird’s-eye view, the general levelling up, or levelling down, in progress. No big outstanding figure led the world to-day. There were no giants anywhere. Much of a muchness ruled in art and business, as in statesmanship. No towering figures showed the way into the air. On the other hand there was degeneracy that could not be denied. He saw it, however, like the dirty flotsam seaweed pushed in front of a great high-tide. Degeneracy precedes new growth when that growth is of a different kind. Out of decaying wood springs a tree of fairer type, and from the ashes of a burnt hemlock forest emerge maple, birch and oak, while the flaming

Fireweed lights the way with beauty. When a Canadian forest is destroyed by fire, the growth next spring is of a totally new kind, and no one has yet told whence came the seed of this new, different growth. After a prairie fire, similarly, new flowers spring up that were not there before. The subsoil possibly has concealed them; they are discovered by the fiery heat. The decay of old, true grandeur he saw everywhere, the democratic vulgarisation of beauty, the universal levelling up and levelling down, but he saw these as evidence of that crumbling of too in-bred forms which announced the new coming harvest from the air. It was but the decay of old foundations which have served their time.

‘We shall build lighter,’ he half sang, half whispered to himself, squeezing between a lamp-post and a workman who came rolling unsteadily out of a tavern door; ‘birds’-nests, up among the swinging trees! We shall live more carelessly, and nearer to the stars! No cellars any more, no basements, but gardens on the roof! Winds, colours, sunshine, air! Oh! — —’ as the man bumped into him and sent him off the pavement with ‘Beg parding, sir!’ ‘No, I beg yours,’ he replied, and came down to earth with a crash, remembering that supper was at seven-thirty and he must be turning homewards.

So he turned and retraced his steps, feeling somehow that he had come down from the mountain tops or from a skimming rush along high windy cliffs. The net result of all these strange half-thoughts was fairly simple. His imagination had been stirred by the sight of his daughter in the sunset making those suggestive gestures against the coloured sky. With her hands she had flung a shower of silver threads about him; along these, somehow, her own queer ideas flashed into him. A new point of view, a new attitude to life, something with the light, swift rhythm of a bird’s flight was coming into the minds of men. Most of those who felt it were hardly conscious, perhaps, that they did so, because carried along with it. The old were frightened, change being difficult for them; but the young, the more sensitive ones among them at any rate, stretched out their arms and legs to meet the flowing, flying invasion. ‘Flow, fly, flow; wherever I am — I *go*,’ was in the air to-day. Joan knew. New hope, new light, new language, all aspects of joy and confidence, seemed dawning. Air and birds were symbols of it. It was rhythmical, swift, spontaneous. It sang. It was bird-happy and bird-wise. It was a new kind of consciousness, yet more than a mere expansion of present consciousness. It was a new direction altogether, while its object, purpose, aim was the oldest dream known to this old-tired world — brotherhood and unity. A bird brotherhood! The wisdom of the Flock!

‘I declare,’ he murmured, laughing quietly to himself, ‘if any one could hear me — see inside my mind just now — they’d say I was —— !’

And that reminded him of his wife. He remembered that he was thinking of moving into the country with his family before very long. He came back to a definite thought again. He pondered facts and ways and means. He was very practical really at heart, no mere dreamer by any means. He weighed the difficulties. Mother was one of them. Sad, sad, the bird had left her; she was a badger now. He felt uneasy, troubled in his mind. But he smiled. He was fond of her.

‘How ever shall we manage?’ he asked himself. ‘There are so many incongruous things to reconcile. Gently, kindly, softly, airily is the way.’

Then, suddenly, a bird-thought came to help him. Ah, it was practically useful, this inspiration from the air. It was not merely nonsense, then!

‘If I just hope and believe, and do my best, and don’t think — too much — it will all come right. I must be spontaneous and instinctive, not overweighted by worrying and detailed reason. I must believe and trust. That’s the way to get what’s called good judgment. See it whole from the air!’

For the details that perplexed him were, after all, merely different aspects of one and the same thing — the several points of view of Mother, Joan, Tom, himself. Hold in the mind the details in solution, and the problem must solve itself. If he understood each one — *that* was necessary — while viewing the problem as a whole, the solution must come spontaneously of itself. The bird’s-eye view would show the way, while he remained nominally leader, like the bird that heads the triangular wedge of wild geese across a hundred miles of sky. This flashed upon him like a song.

And as he realised this, his trouble vanished; joy took its place; with it came a sense of confidence, power, even wisdom. Though the matter was trivial enough, it was the triumph of instinct: Reason laid out the details, instinct pieced them together, then Intuition led. It was seeing all-over, knowing all-at-once. Already he had begun to live like a bird, and Joan, though he knew not how exactly, had taught him.

‘Wherever I am, I go,’ went darting through his head. He smiled, felt light and happy — and strangely wise. Perhaps he could help. Perhaps he was going to be a teacher even. A Teacher, he realised, must first of all find out the point of view of the person to be taught, and then discover a new point of view which will make the wrong or foolish attitude harmonise with reality. Everybody is right where he is, however wrong he may be. Only he must not stay there. The Teacher is a priest who supplies the new point of view. New teaching, however, was not necessary; the world was choked to the brim with teaching already. A new airy understanding of old teaching was the thing. . . .

He was now close to the iron gates of Sun Court Mansions, where he lived. In the diminutive, yet pretentious, plot of garden stood a tall, leafy tree. A gust of wind blew past him at that moment with a roaring sound that was like laughter, and he saw the tree shake and tremble. The countless branches tossed in a dozen directions, hopelessly in disorder, each branch, each twig obeying its own particular little rhythm. That they all belonged to a single, central object seemed incredible, so brave the show they made of being independent and apart.

Then, as he stood and watched, seventy thousand leaves turned all one way, showing their delicate under-skins. The great tree suddenly blew open. He saw the trunk to which leaves and branches all belonged. And at the wind’s order the tree behaved as a single thing, even the most outlying portions answering to the one harmonious rhythm. At which moment, once again, a flock of birds rose from somewhere near with an effortless rush and swooped in among the leaves with one great gesture common to each one. They settled with the utmost ease. The myriad little busy details merged in one; they disappeared. But in settling thus, they made the solid green seem light as air, shiny, almost fluid.

And Wimble, taking the odd hint, felt too that his own difficulties had similarly turned fluid, melted, disappeared. The details merged into a whole; they were referred, at any rate, to some central authority that hid deep within him. A wind of inspiration, as it were, had blown him wide open too. Details that tossed in different directions, apparently hostile to one another, betrayed their common trunk. They showed their under-sides. He was aware of an essential unity to which all belonged.

Something in him shone. He had taught himself, at any rate. He went upstairs, confident and light-hearted, breathless a little too, as though he had enjoyed an exhilarating flight of leagues, instead of a two-mile trudge along the solid, crowded pavements of Maida Vale.

And later, when he went to bed, he fell asleep upon a gorgeous, airy conviction: ‘The Golden Age lies in front of us, and not behind!’ It was a birdy thought. He flew into dreamland with it in his wings.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. WIMBLE FELT the death in another manner. It disconnected her from life. It cut her off from a network of safe, accustomed grooves. Something solid she had clung to subsided under ground. A final link with childhood, youth, and beauty broke. Death has a way of making survivors older suddenly. Mrs. Wimble now admitted age to herself; wore unsightly and depressing black; felt sentimental about a big ‘p’ Past; and ruminated uneasily about other worlds. Black with her was an admission that an after-life was at best an open question. It was a lugubrious conventional act symbolical of selfish grief, a denial of true religious teaching which should have faith, and therefore joy, as its illuminating principle. She did not understand the question. She had no answer ready. She said, ‘What?’

She referred to the ‘lost’ at intervals. It did not occur to her that what is lost is open to recovery. When she said ‘lost’ she really meant annihilated. For, though a Christian nominally, and a faithful church-goer, when she had clothes she considered fit for the Deity to see her in, her notions of a future state were mental conceptions merely that contained no real belief. She was not aware that she did not believe, but this was, of course, the fact. Her father, moreover, had long ago destroyed the reality of the two after-death places generally accepted, soon after he had taught her that they both existed. Not wittingly for his part, nor for her part, consciously. But since ‘heavenly’ was a term he used to describe large sales of corn, and ‘Go to hell, you idiot’ was a phrase he applied frequently to underlings in yard and office, his daughter had grown up with less respect for the actuality of these localities than she might otherwise have had.

And with regard to her love for him — it was not love at all, but a selfish dependence tempered with mild affection. He was now gone; she missed him. A prop had sunk, a tie with the distant nursery snapped, the sense of continuity with the fragrance of early days, of toys, of romance and Christmas presents was no longer there. Instead of looking backwards — still possible while a parent lives — she now looked forward into a muddled, shadowy future that brought depression and low spirits. It was a subterranean look. She went down under ground into her hole, yet backwards, still peering with pathetic eagerness into the sunshine of life that she must leave behind.

Therefore, for her father at any rate, she knew not love. For the one thing certain and positive about love is that those who feel it *know*, and to mention loss in the sense of annihilation is but childish ignorance. There is physical disappearance, separation, going elsewhere, but these are temporary, another direction, as Joan expressed it. Love shouts the fact, contemptuous of exact photographic proof. No mother worth her salt, at any rate, believes that death is final loss. She has known union; and Love brings, above all, the absolute consciousness of eternal union. 'Loss,' used of death, is a devil-word where love is, and as ignorant as 'loss of appetite' when food has become a portion of the eater. One's self is not separable from its-self. Love, having absorbed the essentials of what it loves, remains because it *is*; for ever indivisible; there. The beloved dead step nearer when their bodies drop aside. 'The dead know where they are, and what they're doing,' as Joan mentioned. 'It's not for us to worry — in that way. And they're out of hours and minutes. They probably have no time to come back and tell us.'

To which Mother's whole attitude replied with an exasperated 'What? I don't think you know what you mean, child.'

Joan answered in a flash, her face clouding slightly, then breaking into a happy smile again: 'But, mother, what people think about a thing has nothing to do with the real meaning.'

'Eh?' said Mother.

'Their opinion doesn't matter.'

Mrs. Wimble bridled a little. She was not yet ready to be taught to fly. In this airy element she felt unsafe, bewildered, and therefore irritable.

'Then you'll find out later, Joan, that it *does* matter,' she replied emphatically with ruffled dignity. 'One can't play fast and loose with things like that, not in this world, my dear. One must be fixed to something — somewhere. Life isn't nonsense. And you'll remember later that I said so.'

Joan peeped at her sideways, as a robin might peep at a barking dog. A tender and earnest expression lit upon her sparkling little face.

‘But life is a vision,’ she said with a glow in her voice; ‘it begins and goes on just like that,’ and she clicked her fingers in the air. ‘If you see it from above, from outside — like a swallow — you know it all at once like in a dream and vision, and it means everything there is to be meant. You put in the details afterwards.’ She was perched upon the window-sill again, her long legs dangling. She began to sing her bird-song.

‘There, there,’ expostulated Mr. Wimble, who was listening, ‘we’re not birds yet, Joan, whatever we’re going to be,’ but the last seven words dropped unconsciously into the rhythm of her singing tune. He felt a wind blow from her into his heart. Mrs. Wimble, however, remained concealed behind her *World*. She was not actually reading anything, because her eyes moved too quickly from paragraph to paragraph. But she said nothing for some moments, and presently she folded the paper with great deliberation, laying it beside her on the table, and patting it emphatically.

‘Visions are for those that like them,’ she announced, moving towards the door and casting a sideways look of surprise and contempt at her husband whose silence seemed to favour Joan. ‘To my way of thinking, they’re unsettling. What time does Tom come in to-night?’

They discussed Tom for a few moments, and it was remembered that he had a latch-key and could let himself in, and that therefore they might go to bed without anxiety. But what Mrs. Wimble said upon this unnecessary topic meant really: ‘You’re both too much for me; my hopes are set on Tom.’ She continued her perusal of the *World* in her room, retiring shortly afterwards to sleep heavily for nine full hours without a break.

CHAPTER X.

HER FATHER STOOD upside-down — mentally, of course, not physically. Certain of the Primer ‘Epitomes’ came in helter-skelter to support his daughter’s nonsense. At the same time he was aware that he ought to chide her. And probably he would have done so but for the fact that before he knew it, the girl was asking to be forgiven. He had not seen her move; his mental sight was still following Mother. There was a flutter of something white across the air — and there Joan was — upon his knee.

And so he did not chide her. Nor did he rebuke her for singing under her breath what she called ‘Mother’s Song,’ beginning:

O Disaster!
You’re my Master!

‘Your mother’s tired to-night,’ he observed. ‘But all the same, you are a nasty little tease, you know.’ Her arms felt like warm, smooth feathers as he stroked them. He seemed floating lightly in mid-air above the roof. And he remembered vaguely the fairy tales of his youth when Princesses turned suddenly into swans. Oh, how beautiful it was, this bird idea, this seeing and feeling things in the terms of birds. Those girls in Greece the gods changed into a nightingale and a swallow — what a delightful, exhilarating experience! Easy — and how true! ‘The feathery change came o’er you,’ he murmured from the Treasury of Song, then, interrupting his own mood of curious enjoyment, turned to Joan abruptly.

‘Why did you talk like that?’ he inquired.

‘To make Mother move — —’

‘To bed, you mean?’ he asked, almost severely.

‘Yes, no,’ said Joan.

‘Answer me properly, girl,’ he observed.

‘Of course not. Move nearer to you — and me — even to grandpa. We ought to be a flock somehow, I felt. But we looked so separate and apart, you two on chairs, reading, him out of sight, and me on the window-sill.'

'Eh?'

'We ought to be one thing more. The whole world ought to be. Not crowded — oh, there'd be heaps of room to move in — but all together somehow like birds. It's only bad birds that are apart — ravens, hawks, and birds of prey. All the others flock.' She darted from his knee and stood upon her toes a second before him, staring down into his eyes. 'It's coming, you know, Daddy. It's coming, anyhow!' She said it brightly, eagerly, yet with a singular conviction in her tone. 'The whole world's flocking somehow — somewhere — for I feel it. We shall all be happy together once we get into the country.'

A shiver of beauty passed through him as he heard her. He remembered his walk up Maida Vale, and the rushing, shadowy presentiment in his mind that something new was on the way.

'Like a single big family, you mean? All after one high big thing together?' He asked it, greatly wondering at her. But her reply made him gasp. Where had she learned such things, unless from the air?

'Your language is so draughty, Daddy. *I* mean a bird-world. Birds aren't unselfish, they're just — together.'

He rubbed his forehead, saying nothing, while she fluttered down upon his knees again.

'Like my body,' she said. 'Don't you see?'

'Yes, no,' he laughed, using her method unconsciously.

'I can't lace my boot with one hand, but the other isn't unselfish when it comes to help. My head is no farther from *me* than my boot, is it?' And she sang softly her bird-song of movement and delight, until he felt the quality of her volatile, aerial mind flash down into his own and lighten it amazingly.

'My precious little daughter,' he cried, 'you are a bird, and you shall teach me all your flying secrets. But, tell me,' he whispered, 'how in the world did you find out all this?'

‘Oh, I can’t tell *that*,’ she replied almost impatiently, ‘for once I begin to think it all goes, and I feel like an animal in a hole. But I’ll tell you soon — when the right moment comes — in the fields. I just go about and it all shoots into me.’

It was the true bird-quality, always singing, always on the alert, swift to notice and be glad.

‘Yet I said it without thinking,’ she went on, ‘and the meaning came in afterwards at the end — all of its own accord. And that’s really the way to live together. At least, it’s coming — —’

‘The next stage, the next move!’

‘Flight!’ she cried, half singing it.

‘You live and talk,’ he laughed, ‘like a German sentence that carries all in the head and suddenly puts the verb down at the end.’

‘Yes, yes,’ he realised after she had gone to bed, while he sat there, pondering her fluid statements, ‘there is this new thing coming into life, and it is in some sense indeed a bird-thing. It’s a new outlook!’

He caught at her feathery meanings none the less. A great aerial movement had begun, an etherialisation, a spiritualisation of life. And in true spirituality there was nothing vague; its expression was terrifically definite, stupendously alive, swift, sure, and steady as a mighty bird. Spirit was a bird of fire. Joan left him in that dreary sitting-room with a feeling that life was glorious and that the entire population of the globe must presently take flight and wing its way to some less ponderous star — migration. Joan’s language was absurd, yet she left winged ideas rushing like imperial eagles through his mind. Humanity was really one, but on earth alone it would never, never find it out. In the air it would. Its upward struggles were not mere figures of speech. Routine oppressed and deadened life, prisoning it within a network of rigid, fixed ideas, and behind barriers of concentrated effort which turned the fluid stagnant — hard. Routine was dulling, anti-spiritual. To live like a quicksand before you get fixed and sank, this was the way. To be ready for a fire that should burn up all you had. Life flows, flies, flows; it has rhythm and abandon; self, by means of boundaries and casting limits, resists this universal flow towards expansion characteristic of all Nature. A bird was poised. True! But it was ready to go in any direction instantly, for it was more various and less intense, by no means purposeless, and never bound. It was spontaneous, instantaneous, for ever on the run. That was living, that was ‘fun.’ People, like animals, were congested. But life was growing quicker, lighter, with rhythm, movement everywhere.

The shadow dance began again deliciously.

Yet to act intuitively seemed a dangerous plan for the majority at present, to live on impulse seemed mere recklessness. But it would come. Already people were tired of knowing exact and detailed reasons for all they did. Confusion would come first, of course, but out of that confusion, as out of the apparent trouble of a rising flock of birds, or the scattered muddle of leaves and branches in a wind-tossed tree, would follow magnificent concerted life. Democracy was growing wings. Soon it would sing for joy.

Yes, there was truth in it. Majestic powers were moving already past the visible curtain of fixed and rigid formulae. To obey an intuition the instant it came, was to find the opportunity at hand for carrying it out effectively. To wait and hesitate, consider, reflect and reason out, was to lose the chance. It was disobedience, and disobedience detached from power. Fate was controlled by an obedient and instantaneous mind, for it meant acting in harmony with these majestic powers. Understanding followed later, as with Joan’s outlook; the verb came down at the end, explaining, justifying all that had preceded it. Good and evil were, after all, misnomers of the nursery. In rhythm or out of rhythm was common, aye, the commonest sense. Rhythm was simply ease, as separateness, due to want of rhythm, was dis-ease.

‘Oh dear!’ sighed Joseph Wimble, as he turned the light out and pattered down the corridor to bed. ‘I feel carried off my feet. What a buoyant thing life is, to be sure! It gets big and light and happy when you least expect it! Evidently, there’s a big universal thing underlying it all — that’s what she means by air — and to lean upon *that* — subconsciously, I suppose — to act in rhythm with it — —’ He broke off, colliding with a chest of drawers Mother *would* keep in the narrow passage.

Then, suddenly, as he switched the light on in his bedroom, he realised something very big and striking:

‘*Of course*, I’m a cosmic, not merely a planetary, being . . .!’

CHAPTER XI.

BUT WHAT FOLLOWED that night, while it may have caught him into the air, as he phrased it, and given him an airy point of view, took his breath away at the same time. He was not ready yet for so strange a revelation.

He did not sleep very soundly. Too many ideas were rustling in his brain. ‘Rise out of rigid ideas,’ a voice kept whispering. ‘Hold ideas loosely in the mind. Cultivate agility of thought. Re-fresh, remake your thought. Destroy the hard walls that hide God from you. He is so close to you always. Shatter your idols and get free! Rise out of the network of fixed ideas! Watch life without sinking into your own personality. That is, share every point of view and think in every corner of your body. Grow alive all over. Don’t think things out in your head; *just see* them! Embrace all possibilities! Get into the air! Melt down that absurdity, the scientific materialist, and show him LIFE!’

He heard these whispered sentences traversing the darkness like singing arrows whose whistling speed made a noise of words. Even in sleep he stood upon his head. But the arrows, of course, were feathered. They were feathers. Wings flashed and fluttered everywhere about him. He was in a cage. He must escape. He tried. Somehow, it seemed, he used his whole body instead of his brain alone. He *was* escaping. . . . Life, blown open by a wind, seemed to show its under-side where everything was one. . . .

By this time he was half awake. ‘I must do something; I must act,’ he dimly realised. He turned over in his bed, and the sound of arrowy, rushing air went farther into the distance as he did so.

‘It’s imagination,’ sneered a tiny, wakeful point in his mediocre brain. Another part of him not brain was alight and shining.

‘But you’re no farther from Reality by letting your imagination loose,’ sang a returning arrow — in his head. It came from something bigger than his mind. His mind, strutting and arrogant, seemed such an insignificant part of him, whereas the rest, where the arrows flashed and flew, seemed so enormous that he was conscious of the ‘nightmare touch’ of Size. Mind strove to justify itself, however, and Reason snatched at names and labels.

‘But that’s right,’ a flying sentence laughed. ‘You do not see a thing until you’ve named it. You only feel it. Once, however, it’s described, it’s seen!’

‘Aha! That’s Joan’s fairy-tale method grotesquely cropping up in my dreams,’ he realised — and so, of course, awoke properly.

And it was here that his breath got shorter and his heart beat irregularly.

The room was dark and silent, but he heard a murmuring as though Night were talking in her sleep. The dizziness of great heights was still about him, and remained a little even when he turned the lights on. It was four o’clock. The room wore a waiting, listening air, as though a moment before it had all been whirling, and his waking at this unlawful hour had disturbed it. Waking had rolled the darkness back, let in light, and taken — a photograph. He felt mad and happy — madly happy. There was nonsense in him that belonged to careless joy. The curious notion came that he ought to introduce himself to the various objects — chairs, cupboards, book-shelf, writing-table — and apologise to them for having believed himself separate from them. He ought to explain. But the same second he realised this as wrong, for he himself had been moving, whirling, too. Everything had stopped, himself included, when he awoke. He had stepped aside to look at it. He had photographed it. Of course it stopped.

‘I am,’ he remembered, ‘but wherever I am, I *go*!’

And then, before further Explanation could explain away the truth, he seized at another diving arrow and saw it whole, though it vanished the same instant:

‘I am the whole room. I am my surroundings!’

Some new point of view had leaped into him, something almost daemonic that suggested limitless confidence in his power to overcome all obstacles, because they were part of his own being.

Objects, things, details — during that amazing second at least — no longer seemed separate, alone, apart from one another. They were not anywhere cut off. Seen thus, a chair was a cupboard, a table was a basin, *he* was the ceiling, bed, and carpet. Equally, a cat was a peacock, a mouse was an elephant.

He said these words to himself in an astonished whisper, and in doing so he understood something he didn’t understand. The sentence waited for the verb, the meaning, and it suddenly came down pop — at the end. Reason helped a little there, for he had named and described, and therefore seen what before he had only felt. Perhaps further understanding would follow. The verb would come. He would get up and try. He would do something — act — act out his mood. Action seemed suddenly a new kind of language, a three-dimensional language, an ever-moving language in which objects took on character and played parts for the sake of expression. A language of action! You are whatever you do. . . .!

And as this arrow shot its message past him it seemed that certain objects in the room were about to jump at him. They did not actually move, but they were just about to move — ready and alert. The instant he slept they would rise and fly together again. It was his point of view, his mind in him, that made them appear separate. Each object was clothed in its own story of information, as it were. Objects were telling him something. They were demonstrating an idea.

‘I am not alone, although I’m only one,’ he said aloud. ‘In arithmetic one is not more lonely than seven.’ But, again, he didn’t understand quite why he said it, while yet he understood perfectly at the same time. ‘I’m not quite myself at any rate,’ he added, and it was true. Perhaps he was a trifle frightened, still hovering on the nightmare edge of sleep. For all this happened in a single instant when he turned the light up. With sight his breath came more easily at once, his heart beat steadily again.

Yet there was certainly a sense of rhythm in the room, though lessening rapidly. He must hurry. The cage was closing round him again. He heard the flying voices farther and farther in the distance, but still sweet with a rhythmical new music.

‘Use the mood of the moment, but first understand why it is the mood of the moment!’

‘Use the material you have at once! Don’t wait for something different!’

‘There is no need to wait; to wait shows incompetence!’

‘Act instantly! Don’t reason, calculate, think! Operate in a flash!’

He felt, that is, rather as a bird might feel. There was haste, yet no hurry, purpose yet leisure, delight without delay, spontaneity. So he got out of bed, put on dressing-gown and slippers, and went on tiptoe into the passage. Then, standing in the shaft of light from his room, the dark corridor in front of him, he realised that the entire flat — the furnished flat that Dizzy & Dizzy had let to him — was alive. The feathered arrows were not imagined, the voice was not a dream. Inanimate things stirred everywhere about him. He perceived their undersides and his own. Their apartness that so dislocated the upper, outer, surface-life was only apparent after all. Bars melted. He felt instantaneous. ‘Wherever I am I go!’ But objects shared the same illusion: wherever they were, they went! The sensations of a flock were in him. A new order of consciousness was close.

He paused and listened. No sound was audible. Mother’s door was closed, but Joan’s, he saw, just opposite, stood ajar. A draught blew coldly on him. He tapped gently and, receiving no reply, pushed the door wider and peeped through. The light from the corridor behind poured in. The room was empty, but the sheets, he saw, had not been lain in.

Recalling then her state of excitement when she went to bed, he searched the flat, peering cautiously even into Mother’s room, but without result. The front door was bolted on the inner side. She had not left the building. He felt alarmed. Then a cold air stirred the hair of his head, and, looking up, he saw that the trap-door in the ceiling was open and that the ladder looked inviting. It ‘jumped’ at him, as he called it, that is it drew his attention as with meaning. So he snatched a rug from the shelf beneath the hat-rack, and, throwing it round his shoulders, clambered up on to the roof.

It was September and the sky was soft with haze, yet still empty and hungry for the swallows. Round balls of vapour pretending to be solid were being driven by an upper wind across the stars; but the stars were brilliant and shone through the edges of the vapour. And the night seemed in a glow. The wind did not come down, the roof was still; the mass of London lay like a smouldering furnace far below, bright patches alternating with deep continents of shadow. He heard the town booming in its sleep, a thick and heavy sound, yet resonant. And at first he saw only a confused forest of chimneys about him that rose somewhat ominously into the air, their crests invisible. Then, suddenly, one of them bent over in a curve, fell silently with marvellous grace upon the leaden covering; and, fluttering towards him softly as an owl, came some one who had been standing against it — Joan.

This happened in the first few seconds; but even before she came he was aware that the strange stirring of inanimate nature in the room below had transferred its magic up here. It was not discontinuous, that is, but everywhere. It had come down into the flat, as from the outside world, but the singular rhythm emanated first from here — above. Joan had to do with it.

It was exquisite, this soft feathery way she came to him across the London roof, swooping low as with the flight of an owl, an owl that flies so easily and buoyantly, it seems it never *could* drop. It was lovely. In some such way a spirit, a disembodied life, might be expected to move. He listened with eager intensity for the first word she would utter.

‘Father,’ she whispered, ‘it’s the Bird!’

He felt his entire life leap out on wings into open space. He had asked no questions. She stood in front of him. Her voice, with its curious lilt, seemed on the verge of singing. It came from her lips, but it sounded everywhere about him, as though delivered by the air itself, as though it dropped from the unravelling clouds, as though it fell singing from the paling stars. Night breathed it. And it frightened him — for a moment — out of himself. His ordinary mind seemed loose, uprooted, floating away as though compelling music swayed it into great happiness. His stream of easy breath increased. He touched that indefinable ecstasy which is extension of consciousness, caused by what men call crudely Beauty. Joy flooded him.

‘The Bird!’ He repeated the words below his breath. ‘What *do* you mean?’ Yet, even as he did so, something in him knew. ‘A bird in her bosom’ flashed across him from some printed page. The girl, he realised, had been communing with that type of life to which she was so mysteriously akin. Its approach had stirred inanimate nature into language. Meaning had invaded objects, striking rhythm, almost speech, from inert details. Joan had brought this new living thing — new point of view — into the very slates and furniture.

‘The Bird!’ he whispered again.

‘Our Bird! Daddy.’ And she opened her arms like soft white wings, the shawl fluttering from them in the starlight.

He ought to have said— ‘Nonsense; go back to bed; you’ll catch your death of cold!’ Or to have asked ‘What bird? I don’t see any bird!’ — and laughed. Instead he merely echoed her strange remark. He agreed with her. Instinctively, again, he knew something that he didn’t know.

‘So it is!’ he exclaimed in a whisper of excitement, taking a deeper breath and peering expectantly about him, as though some exhilarating power drew closer with the dawn. ‘I do declare! The Bird — *our* Bird!’

He caught her hand in his. She was very warm. And, touching her, he was instantly aware of fuller knowledge, yet of less explanation. A sensation of keen delight rose in him, free, light, and airy, new vast possibilities in sight, almost within reach. He caught, for instance, at the meaning of this great rhythm everywhere, this impression that dead objects moved and conveyed a revelation that was so full of meaning it was almost language. Birds saw them thus, flashing above them, noting one swift, crowded series of objects one upon another. It was a runic script in the landscape that birds read and understood in long sentences of colour, shade, and surface, pages full of significant pictured outlines, turning rapidly over as they skimmed the earth. It was a new language, a movement-language. Birds read it out to one another as they flew. They acted it. Their language was one of movement and of action, three-dimensional; and, whether they flitted from one chimney to another, or travelled from Primrose Hill to the suns of Abyssinia, their lives acted out this significant, silent language.

High, sweet rapture caught him. Of course birds sang, where men only grunted and animals, still nearer to the ground, were inarticulate with unrhythmical noises.

All this flashed and vanished even while his eye lost its way in the canopy of smoky air immediately above him.

‘Listen!’ he heard in his ear, like the faint first opening whistle of some tiny songster. ‘They’re waking now all over England. You felt it in your sleep! That’s what brought you up. It’s the moment just before the dawn!’

A million, ten, twenty million birds were waking out of sleep. In field and wood, in copse and hedge and barn, in tall rushes by the lakes, in willows upon river banks, in glens and parks and gardens, on gaunt cliffs above the sea, and on lonely dim salt marshes — everywhere over England the birds were coming back to consciousness.

It was this vast collective consciousness that had awakened him. He had somehow or other taken on, through Joan, certain conditions of the great Bird-mind. It was marvellous, yet at the time seemed natural. He recalled the strange sentences: all descriptive of a bird's mentality, put into words, of course, by his own brain. The movement of objects was merely their new appearance, seen from above in rapid passage, all speaking, telling something, reporting to the rushing bird the conditions of the surface where they lay. And those at the point of lowest approach in the curve of flight appeared to 'jump.' The sense of rhythm, moreover, was the outstanding characteristic of feathered life — in song, in movement, in beat of wing, in swinging habits of the larger kind when migration regularly sets in and there is known that 'mighty breath which, in a powerful language, felt not heard, instructs the fowls of heaven.' He had responded somehow to the world of greater rhythms in which all airy life existed, and compared with which human existence seemed disjointed, disconnected, incomplete in rhythm.

'Air,' he remembered from one of the ridiculous Primers, 'is the highest perception we have, yet we need not be in the air to get this view. We have placed the Heaven within us up there, because it was, physically, our highest place to set it in.'

'Listen! and you'll feel it all over you,' Joan's voice reached him. 'I often come here in the dawn. I know things here.'

By 'listen' she meant apparently 'receive,' for no sound was audible except the hum of London town still sleeping heavily.

'So this is how you learn things! From the air?'

'I don't learn anything — in that sense,' she murmured quickly. 'It's in me. It just flies out — I see it.'

'Ah!' He caught a feather and understood.

‘Especially when I go like this! Look, Daddy!’ And she darted from his side and began on tiptoe a movement, half dance, half flight, between the crowding chimney-stacks. She vanished and reappeared. He heard no sound. The shadows clothed her, now close, now spread out, like wings whose motion just escaped the measuring eye. And the dance was revealing in someway he could not analyse. She seemed to bring the dawn up. The ugly roof turned garden, the chimneys shaded off into trees, as though her little dance flashed aspiration into rigid bricks. She interpreted the flight of darkness, the awakening of wings, the silent rush of dawn. No modern dancer, interpreting Chopin, Schumann, could have given a deeper, truer revelation. She uttered in her movements a language that she read, but a language for the majority at present undecipherable. Action and gesture interpreted the inarticulate.

She expressed, he was aware, the return to consciousness of the birds; but at the same time she expressed a new air-born consciousness that was stealing out of the skies upon a yet sleeping world.

‘By doing it, I understand it,’ she laughed softly, but no whit breathless, as she floated back to his side. ‘But I can’t tell it in words till long afterwards.’

The east grew lighter. The tips of the flying clouds turned red. A beauty, as of dawn in the mountains, crept slowly over the towered London world. It seemed the spires and soaring chimneys steadied down, as though precipitating a pattern from some intricate movement of the universe. Speech failed him for the moment. For the language of words is but an invention of civilisation, and he had just heard the runic speech that is universal and has no grammar but in natural signs of sky and earth. And then the words he vainly sought dropped into him suddenly from the air. Above him on a chimney crest a group of starlings fell to chattering gaily; hidden in the leaves of trees far below he heard the common sparrow chirrup; the earliest swallows, just awake, flashed overhead, telling the joy of morning in their curves of joy. In the distance trilled a rising lark.

The wonder and glory of that breaking dawn lay for him, indeed, beyond all telling; not that he had been insensible to loveliness in Nature hitherto, but that he saw new meaning in it now. In himself he saw it. The point of view was new. To Joan, however, it was merely familiar and natural. But more — he was aware that in him lay the germ, at least, of a new airy consciousness that included it all, and that he longed to share it with the still sleeping world below. A mighty spiritual emotion swept him.

‘Mother would feel cold, and notice the blacks,’ she laughed, but there was love and pity in her laughter.

For her it was all in the ordinary run and flow of habitual life. She was aware of no exalted state of emotion. She said it as normally as a swallow dares to take an insect from the heart of an amazing sunset. That sunset and that insect both belong to it. There was no need to be hysterical about either one or other.

CHAPTER XII.

HE WOKE IN the morning and decided that his experience of the night had been a vivid dream-experience, although that was not to deny a deep reality to it. A sense of uplifting joy was in his heart that was the rhythm of some larger life. A new lightness pervaded his very flesh and bones; it sent him along the narrow passage to the bathroom — dancing, much to the astonishment of the cook who caught a glimpse of the phenomenon as she stirred the porridge; it made him sing while he sponged himself, waking Mrs. Wimble earlier than usual and stirring in her an unwelcome reminder that she was older, stouter than she had been. For the singing brought back to her a fugitive memory of a sunny Algerian garden, where life sang to a measure of blue and gold Romance, now vanished beyond recall. ‘Joe’s odd this morning,’ she thought, turning over to sleep upon her other side.

But Joe, meanwhile, splashed in his bath and went on singing just because he couldn’t help himself; his voice was meagre, yet it would come out. He dried himself, standing in a hot sunbeam on the oil-cloth that made him feel he caught the entire sun. Such a deluge of happiness, confidence, natural bliss seemed in him, seemed everywhere about him too. He could not understand it, but he felt it, and therefore it was real. In the rise and fall of some larger rhythm than he had ever known he swung above a world that could no longer cage him in. He saw the bars below him. Alarm, anxiety, worry, even death were but little obstacles that tried to trip him up and make him stumble, stop, and give up existence as too difficult to face. They lay below him now. He saw them from above. He was in the air. It made him laugh and sing to think that such tricks could ever have frightened or discouraged him. Actually they were but of use to stand on for a leap into the air — taking-off-things, spots to jump from into space.

‘I can’t explain it,’ occurred to him, ‘so it must be true.’ It was a thing his daughter might have said. He shared her point of view, it seemed, completely now. They were in the air together.

And, though later and by degrees, the airy exhilaration left him, so that he came down to earth and settled, the descent was gradual and without a thud.

Something of lightness and of wonder stayed. The memory of some loftier point of view guided him all day long amid the tangle of little difficulties that usually seemed mountainous. He rose lightly above all obstacles that opposed and hindered. He saw them from above, that is, he saw them in proportion. Stepping on each in turn, he flew easily over every one; they served their purpose as jumping-off spots for taking flight. It was the Bird's-eye point of view.

But each time he flew thus, he left his mind behind, using it as a cushion for landing later, easily, without a jarring bump. And thus, before the day was over, he realised somewhat this: that the instantaneous, spontaneous attitude Joan stole from the air and taught him meant simply that the subconscious became convincingly, superbly, conscious. The personality operated as a whole without friction or delay from separate portions that held back and hesitated. All these lesser, separate rhythms merged in one. It mobilised, as with a lightning instinct, the entire available forces of the being. He reacted to every stimulus as a whole, instead of in separate parts. Action and decision came in a single flash; to reason, judgment, the weighing of pros and cons, and so forth, he appealed afterwards. That is, intuitive knowledge became instantaneous action.

And, realising this, he also grasped what Joan meant by describing a room as 'happening all at once,' and found meaning also in her nonsense-dream of feeling for the one-ness of all life everywhere. The details of the room could be inserted later according to judgment and desire, and four-footed animals on the ground might also discover later the point of view of birds who, from a high altitude in the air, saw everything at once. Instantaneous action, immediate conduct, spontaneous behaviour enlisted the supporting drive of the entire universe behind them. Properly accepted, absolutely obeyed, such a way of living ensured inevitable success. It was irresistible; for since everything was one, each detail was the whole, and no whole could be disobedient or hostile to itself. And this was why he had danced along the passage-way and sung into his sponge.

Yet this attitude of mind, this point of view, was easily lost again; it was difficult to hold permanently; to practise, still more difficult. How to translate it into daily action was the problem. At breakfast this new language of action seemed mere phantasy. He certainly *had* enjoyed a dream of a three-dimensional language in which objects and things helped to interpret his own wishes; he remembered that distinctly; and surely it was not all imagination? Imagination, he felt sure, included prophecy as well as memory.

‘It’s time we found our country cottage,’ he remarked, tasting his crisp Cambridge sausage and bacon. ‘I must get to work at once.’

Mother glanced up over the morning newspaper she had crumpled till it looked like a bundle for lighting the fire. She had ignored the news and been deep in the advertisements. ‘It’s best to go to the agents,’ she observed, folding the paper with the creases uneven and the pages mixed, then patting it into flatness. ‘And if they’re no good, we might insert an advertisement stating our exact requirements.’ She mopped up a remnant of fried egg with a thick wedge of brown bread at the end of her fork. ‘A nice neighbourhood’s the chief thing, isn’t it?’

Her husband straightened the paper so that the creases fitted evenly and the pages lay in sequence. It hurt him acutely to see it twisted; he felt something out of place inside himself, as though the feathers of a wing were tangled. ‘It’ll turn up,’ he said airily, ‘we shall come across it suddenly. I’ll go and see some agents all the same, though,’ he added. He had the feeling that the right place would hardly come through agents, but would just ‘turn up.’ Somehow he would be attracted to it: it would be there before his eyes; it would jump at him. He had already seen so many agents. Newspaper advertisements never mentioned it. This strange belief and faith was in him. ‘I’ll have a look,’ he added, as his wife put the plates together, swept some crumbs carefully from the cloth, then tapped the marmalade spoon on the rim of the jar before she sucked it clean.

‘There’s no good just hoping and trusting to chance,’ she said in a practical voice. ‘Nothing comes *that* way.’ She clicked her tongue, tasting the marmalade reflectively.

‘On the contrary — everything comes that way.’ To believe, he grasped, was to act with the Whole in which all that was required lay contained. ‘Enquire within upon everything.’ He laughed happily. But his wife had not followed his thought — nor heard him.

‘That’s turnip rind, not oranges,’ she added. ‘They sell you anything nowadays, and everything’s adulterated — —’ and laid the spoon aside.

‘In the country we’ll make our own,’ her husband interrupted. ‘Delicious stuff!’

‘If we ever get there,’ she replied, ‘and if sugar ever goes down again, and we can get servants who’ll condescend to stay. There’s no good being too remote, remember, or we won’t keep a single one. Servants won’t stand being dull.’ She sighed. Life to her spelt apprehension.

‘Well, we’ve agreed on Sussex, haven’t we?’ he answered cheerfully, hunting for his lost new attitude again. ‘A nice bit of wayward Sussex, where there are trees and fields and perhaps a snap of running water so that the birds’ll come—’ he saw the cloud on Mother’s face—’ Oh, but in a nice neighbourhood with decent neighbours,’ he added, ‘and a town not too far away, with a cinema and shops, and so on. Oh, it will come all right, Mother, don’t you worry. We’ll find it sure enough — probably this very day. I feel it coming; it’s close already; I can almost see it at this moment.’

‘It’s there, waiting for us all the time. The very place,’ said Joan suddenly, clapping her hands softly, and meeting her father’s eye. ‘Only we’ve got to want it enough and — —’

‘Tidy up your place, child,’ said Mother sharply, ‘and fold your serviette. It’s time you were at your scales.’ She sighed as Joan obeyed and left the room, and two minutes later, while Mother made notes on a squeaky slate for dinner, the sound of C major came to them through the wall, going rapidly up and down again with both hands. Only it was accompanied by a clear and happy voice that sang the notes, or rather sang a running melody to them that turned even the technical routine into music. The drudgery, though faithfully done, brought its fulfilment almost within reach. Like a bird, she leaped upon the promise and enjoyed it. Scales and music, toil and its results, prophecy and its accomplishment — even in this tiny detail — seemed present in her simultaneously. Carelessness and faithful plodding method went side by side. This came to her father as he lit his pipe and listened to the pure childish voice that unconsciously sang meaning, even beauty, into formal rigid outline.

‘An all-at-once and all-over little creature,’ he heard something whisper to him. ‘Care-less and happy as a bird. The true air quality! That’s the way, of course. I see it — a sort of bird’s-eye view of beginning and end in one. The joy of fulfilment shining through the actual work. I'll find the cottage that way too!'

He puffed thick clouds of smoke between himself and his wife, who stood watching him, a touch of apprehension about her somewhere, impatience as well. She too was listening. He recalled the smile of the badger at the mouth of its hole. But, at any rate, it was a faithful, practical, and affectionate badger. Moreover, once — strange memory — it had known wings, it had been a bird! Wrong methods had brought it down to earth. It puzzled him dreadfully, yet rather sweetly. The bird, he fancied, must still lie hidden in her somewhere.

'Joan never can do one thing properly at a time — not even her scales,' she was saying. 'There she is, trying to sing before she's learnt her notes. I wish you'd speak to her about it. But, if you ask *me*, *I* think it's good money wasted — those music lessons.'

How right she was, he thought, from her point of view. At the same time, how entirely that point of view lacked vision. A badger criticised a bird for flying uselessly when there were eggs to be laid and worms to be pulled up and twigs for a nest to look at instead of rushing landscapes.

'I will, dear. I'll speak to her at once, before I go to see the agents. I'll bring back good news at dinner-time. Now good-bye, bless you.' He kissed her. She looked so helpless and pathetic that he kissed her again, adding 'Good-bye, old thing, don't worry. Take everything lightly like a bird and remember — Wherever we are, we go!'

'Good-bye, Joe dear. Do your best. You know our limit as to rent.' He noticed that for once she had not asked him to repeat.

He left the room and walked down the passage to admonish Joan, yet knowing that there was nothing he could honestly chide her for. She sang at her scales for the same reason he sang in his bath. In both of them, father and daughter, was the carelessness and joy of air, the certainty that, whatever they did on earth with effort, toil, and purpose, had in it — behind it and sustaining it — the glad sweet element of air. Air had no divisions, it was whole — a universal radiant element containing end and beginning, everything. To act with it instantaneously was to be confident that fulfilment lay already in the smallest germ of every action. 'The cottage lies there waiting for us now. Just look for it with faith and careless happiness. . . . The perfect music lies within these boring scales. Just sing to them. It brings accomplishment more swiftly near!'

But on opening the door and poking his head inside, he found that she had ceased singing and was diligently practising.

'That's right,' he said, smiling; 'it's rather dull, but stick to it. It'll please your mother, and before long you'll be able to play all my favourite pieces.'

She stopped, swung round on the stool and looked at him. Her little face in its wreath of shining hair was very earnest, the eyes big with wonder as though she had made a great discovery. He had seen a robin thus, perched on a window-sill, its head cocked sideways at a crumb of bread — poise, alertness, happiness in the attitude and gesture.

'Well,' he asked, 'what is it now? 'And pointing to the maze of black printed notes, she said: 'I only wanted to tell you something I've got hold of — There are only seven notes after all — only seven altogether.'

'That's all, yes.'

'All the music in the world comes out of that — just seven notes—'

'Combinations of them — with a lot of half-notes too,' he explained.

'But half-notes only suggest. The real notes are the thing — just seven of them. Isn't it jolly? They'll never frighten me again. Now, listen a moment, Daddy, I'll play you what the wings sing when they rush along. You know — the sound in the air when birds fly past:

Flow, fly, flow,
Wherever I am, I go;
I live in the air
Without thought or care,
Flow, fly, flow. . . .

She played and sang till he felt every atom in his being moving rhythmically to the little doggerel. He took her in his arms and hugged her.

'Ah,' he cried, 'I put all this into you unconsciously, and now you're explaining it to me. That's fun indeed, isn't it?'

‘And I’ve only used three notes for it — for the tune, I mean,’ she exclaimed breathlessly as he released her. ‘I’ve still got four more.’

He blew her a kiss from the door and went on the top of a ‘bus to Dizzy & Dizzy, who gave him a list of orders to view some half-dozen desirable cottages and bungalows in Sussex that seemed reasonably within the price he could afford, but none of which, it so happened, was the thing he wanted.

And during the day, odd thoughts and feelings, born of that mystic dawn he had witnessed with the birds, came flitting round him. Being wordless, he could only translate them as best occurred to him. It was impossible to keep pace with many-sided life to-day unless a new method were discovered. To skim adequately among the numerous sources of information and instruction, wings were needed. With their speed and economy of energy the feathered mind could dive into all, absorb fresh knowledge instantly, and pass on swiftly to yet further sources. At present complete exhaustion followed the mere bodily and mental effort to keep abreast even with one line of thought and action. The bird’s-eye view, involving bird’s-eye action, alone could manage it. It was a case of flow, fly, flow, indeed. He was dimly aware of a new method coming softly, silently, from the air. Air meant the spiritual method. While the body, guided by surefooted, slow, laborious reason, attended to its necessary duties on the ground, the mind, the soul, the spirit would flow, fly, flow, with the new powers of the air. . . .

He played lovingly with the idea. He thought of birds as the aborigines of the air, the pioneers perhaps. They represent no climax of evolution. On the earth men appeared last, preceded by many stages of earlier development. Birds were, possibly, but the first, the earliest inhabitants of their delicious realm, still imperfect, but alive with a promise for mankind. They were not an ideal, they merely offered their best qualities to those below.

The Promise of the Air ran through him like a strain of glad spring music. Air, he knew, as Joan used the term, meant aether, the mother of all air. She dreamed of passages to dim old gleaming Hercules adrift in open space, to Cassiopeia, happily, mightily wandering, to the golden blossoms of the Nebulae’s garden of shining gold. Across his mind the great flocks of stars were flying. . . .

‘I’m *not* a “miserable sinner.” It’s a lie that “there is no health in me.” Nor do I believe that another man can “forgive my sins,” because I confess them to him, or that those who refuse to believe as I do — whatever it is I *do* believe! — shall forfeit my special favours, least of all suffer the smallest prick of a pin on that account. . . .!’

If ever he had been affected by the dogmatic teaching of any person or group of persons, alive or dead, he broke finally with them in that moment.

CHAPTER XIII.

REMEMBERING HIS PROMISE, though made only to himself, he proposed going to the cinema. Tom, who was present during the discussion that followed, wanted a Revue, but was overruled.

‘You can’t smoke,’ he objected, but what he really meant was that he wanted to have his physical sensations stimulated by suggestive reminders that he was a breeding rabbit that had never left earth — earth which a single shower could turn into mud.

‘That won’t hurt you for one night, Tom,’ observed Mother, aware vaguely of his difficulty.

They chose the best the advertisements supplied and went off after an early dinner. In a sort of bundle they started, Mother in her finery forgetting the performance was in the dark, Joan, smiling, neat and bright, her little ankles tripping, and Mr. Wimble important, holder of the purse-strings and full of anticipatory wonder. Tom, smoking cheap gold-tipped Turkish cigarettes, was superior and sulky. Like an untidy bundle the family made the journey towards Piccadilly Circus, a bundle with loose ends, patched corners, one end hardly belonging to the other, yet obviously coherent for all that, and with a spot of brilliant colour — Joan’s bright, glancing eyes and eagerly pretty face.

Tom, having bought a halfpenny evening paper, read the sporting and financial news; his racing tips had proved false; his mood was ill-humoured; he eyed the girls on the pavement below, flicking his cigarette ash over the edge of the motor-bus from time to time.

‘What’s on?’ enquired a chance acquaintance across the gangway, with an eye on pretty Joan. ‘Music hall or high-brow legitimate?’

‘Cinema,’ returned Tom in a scratchy voice, ‘with the family. I’m beat to the wide.’

‘Who’s put the wind up you this time?’ enquired his friend.

‘Family. They put it across me sometimes. Can’t be helped.’

‘Good egg!’ was the reply, as the youth looked past him admiringly at Joan.

‘Oh! — my sister,’ mentioned Tom, proudly, and with a flash of self-satisfaction; ‘Joan, a friend of mine — Mr. Spindle,’ adding under his breath something about Rolls Royce and Limousines, as though Mr. Spindle, who was actually merely an employé in some motor works, owned several expensive cars.

Joan, ignorant of the strange modern slang they used, nodded sweetly, then turned to watch the surging throng of energetic humanity on the pavement below. She was in the corner seat. Father and Mother sat below — inside. The sea of human beings rolled past like waves of water.

‘Everybody going somewhere,’ she said half to herself with a thrill of wonder. It struck her that, though hardly any one looked up, some must surely want to fly, and one or two, at least, must know they could. She wondered there were no collisions. All dodged and slid past and side-stepped so cleverly. The energy, skill, and subconscious calculation they used were considerable. In each brain was a distinct and separate purpose, a mental picture of the spot each busily made for, while yet all seemed governed by one common denial: that nothing off the earth was conceivable even. Like crowding ants, they stuck to the ground, shuffling laboriously along the world-worn routes. Their minds, she was persuaded, knew heavy ways, unaware that horizons are made to lift. She watched the herd in search for amusement after the drudgery of the day, engaged upon a common search. What they really sought, she felt, was air. Only they knew it not. In ignorance they toiled to find artificial excitement — pleasure.

She longed to lift them up and swing them loose into undivided space, let them know freedom, lightness, spontaneous carelessness. If they would only dance — it would be something.

‘And all going to the same place,’ she added aloud. She sighed.

‘I hope to God they’re not,’ said Tom in his scratchy voice, thinking of the cinema.

‘Eh?’ remarked Mr. Spindle, with a thrust forward of his head.

The motor-bus lumbered into the Circus and drew up, leaning over to one side.

‘So long,’ said Tom to his friend, ‘we push off here.’

Mr. Spindle offered his hand to Joan, who shook it, but looked past him, refusing the gleaming eye he offered her at the same time. They clambered down to their parents on the pavement, and joined the throng that swept heavily into the pretentious doorways of the cinema building. As they went in Joan glanced at her mother and realised that she loved her. She looked so worried and so helpless. It was pathetic how heavily she moved. Age! The age of the body, of course. But why should she be old? She was barely forty. She was out, seeking with a good expenditure of energy, for pleasure. It struck the girl suddenly that her mother’s ignorance was singular. She knew so little. Somewhere about her — at the corners of her mouth, flickering in her opaque eyes, in the tilt of her ears — was still a vestige of youth and fun and joy. But Mother ignored it, crawling willingly with the herd. Yet the bird lurked in her surely. In spite of this heavy crawling, there were wings tucked away in her somewhere.

‘Mother, we’re out on a spree,’ whispered Joan. ‘Wherever we are, we go! Let me carry your bag?’

‘Eh, Joan? What d’you say? Don’t shove, my love. We shall get nowhere *that* way.’ It was the Is-my-hat-on-straight tone of voice — self the centre. She yielded the tiresome bag gratefully.

‘Everywhere, mother,’ Joan whispered gaily. ‘We’ll get everywhere because we belong everywhere. Besides I’m not shoving.’

She glanced round at the other people, all pressing thickly towards the booking-office. All of them had troubles, joys, hopes, fears, and vague desires. All were out to enjoy themselves. Only their faces were so anxious, lined, and care-worn. They wore an enormous quantity of manufactured clothing, and each article of clothing represented similar joys, hopes, fears, and vague desires, complicated toil of those who had made and sold them.

She felt a curious longing — to collect them all together on the roof one morning so that they might dance and hear the birds sing at dawn. If only they could realise the bird-life and what it meant — care-less, happy, singing, dancing; deep purpose underneath it all, but that purpose not clogged with the stupefying detail of unimportant items. The trouble all had taken to clothe themselves suitably for this particular enjoyment was alone enough to kill any spontaneity. She smelt the fields, the keen, fresh air, the dew. She heard a lark rise whistling through the silver air. . . .

And she glanced back at her mother. Her mother was obviously adorned — with effort and difficulty. She looked as if she had walked through a Liberty curtain and parts of the curtain had stuck to her in patches. This complexity of cloth and silk and beads was wrong — funny at any rate. She sighed.

'It's all right,' said her father, catching the sigh behind him. 'We must take our turn, you know. But I'm out for the best seats — no matter what it costs.' It was like a breath of air to hear him say it.

'Extravagance,' put in Mother under her breath, overhearing. 'But it *is* an exception, isn't it?' Her mind fixed upon the difficult side of existence, the cost in labour and in pain.

'Eh?' said Wimble. He put his gaudy tie straight with a free half-finger.

'It isn't every night, I mean,' whispered Mother. 'It's an exception.' She looked challengingly at the listening crowd. It was very warm. The air smelt of people, clothes, and cheap scent. She was aware of scullery-maids, boot-polish, stable-boys, and wages. The ham in the larder — had they put the fly-cover over it? Oh dear, how sordid even enjoyment was!

'Move on, please,' boomed the deep voice of a policeman, and everybody moved on a step or half a step, casting looks of admiration, respect, and exasperation at the Great Bobby who represented rigidity, law, order, and that vague, distant power — the Government. To be spontaneous meant to be arrested, evidently.

'Wot've you got left?' asked Wimble mildly, facing at last the booking-clerk, then added quickly, 'Good. I'll take the three,' and put the money down. 'No — four, I mean; four, of course. How stupid of me! Thanks, thanks very much.' He had forgotten *himself*. Also, he had felt for a second that he couldn't afford the price, but yet somehow it didn't matter. It was stupid, it was extravagant, it was un-practical; no one in their senses could have approved his conduct. The clerk had explained briefly that no cheap seats were left; there was nothing under four shillings — and Wimble, without an instant's hesitation, had snapped up the expensive seats.

Joan witnessed it with a rush of joy. She saw her father slip several silver discs across the counter and take pink slips of paper in exchange. But it was not his extravagance, nor the prospect of greater comfort, that caused her joy; it was the unhesitating spontaneity. Daddy had not haggled; without hesitation he had taken the risk. He had flown. . . . In reality he could not afford it, yet only a stingy convention might have urged him to be careful. And he had not been care-full.

‘Take no thought . . .’ whispered a voice — was it Joan’s? — in his ear, as they pressed forward. And, as a consequence, he immediately bought several programmes where one would have been sufficient. Ah! They were in full flight. Their wings were spread. The earth lay mapped beneath them. In the silver, dewy dawn they flew. How keen the sweet, fresh air. . . .!

He looked at her. ‘*You* don’t earn the family income, my dear,’ he observed drily, half-ashamed, half-proud. He fingered the pink tickets nervously, clumsily.

‘But I will,’ she replied. ‘Besides, there’s heaps for everybody really.’

‘You’re an unpractical absurdity,’ he murmured — then gasped.

It was the child’s reply that made him gasp:

‘We’re alive! So we deserve it.’

They swept the meadows and the pine copse in their flight. There was a crimson dawn. They smelt the sea, the wide salt marshes. Freedom of space was theirs.

Perhaps he didn’t quite understand what she meant, yet it made him feel happy and careless. In a sense it made him feel — spiritual. She had said something that was beyond the reach of language, of accurate language. But it was true, true as a turnip. It satisfied him as a mouthful of mashed potatoes, and was as easy to eat and swallow. What a simile! He laughed to himself.

‘Be more accurate in your language,’ he said slyly.

‘And stick in grammar all your life!’ she replied. They moved on. Tom looked superior and aloof. He did not belong to this ridiculous party.

‘Hurry up, Daddy,’ and Joan poked him in the ribs. ‘Mother’s waiting. You’re thinking of your old Primers.’ It was true. He *had* paused a moment. A sentence had flashed into his mind and made him stop, while Mother and

Tom were waiting in the corridor beyond, something about the ‘courage of a fly.’

A fly, the most fearless of attack of all creatures, an insect incapable of fear. He remembered that Athena gave Menelaus, in order that he might resist Hector — what? Not weapons or money or skill or strength. No. Athena gave him— ‘the courage of a fly.’

It struck him suddenly that the reckless courage of a fly — a fly that settles on the nose, the lips, the hand of a being enormously more powerful and terrible than itself — was unequalled among all living creatures. No lion or tiger dared the half, no man the quarter. But a fly, depending solely on its swift, unconquerable wings and power of darting flight, risked these amazing odds. He — in paying this high price for the tickets recklessly — had shown the courage of the fly: the sneers of Tom, the abuse of Mother, the scorn of cautious and careful convention. He had the money in his pocket, then why not spend it? His labour had deserved it; he had earned it; he was indeed ‘alive.’ Like an audacious fly he had settled on the nose of Fate. And all this Joan had snapped into a sentence:

‘We deserve it. We’re *alive*!’

‘Is it all right, dear?’ asked Mother anxiously. She was stuck with her elaborate flounces in a corner of the corridor. The programme-seller was at her elbow, pressingly.

‘All right,’ he replied, waving the programmes like a flag of victory, and led the way towards the seats. ‘Everything’s paid.’ He bowed, dismissingly, to the girl. He walked on his toes.

They went in. Mother flounced down proudly, as though the cost, the risk, were hers. Anyhow, they had paid for their seats and had a right to them. Now they could see the show in comfort and with easy consciences. There was a vague feeling that too much had been expended, but it was discreetly ignored. Vanity forbade. Economy might follow. Let it follow. They could enjoy themselves for a few hours. They *would* enjoy themselves. Some one had paid good money and money well earned. Uneasiness was vulgar. Daddy’s flying attitude influenced them all secretly, and the great human power of make-believe, so gingerly expended as a rule, asserted itself. They took the moment as birds take the air. They flew with him.

Settling themselves into their front-row seats, they fingered their programmes, and felt like Royalty.

Mother looked round her at the inferior human mass. ‘We can see quite well,’ she observed. ‘You were lucky, Joe. You got good seats.’ She was wholly unaware that she tried her wings.

‘Not bad,’ scratched Tom, equally unaware that he flew behind her, though parting from the sticky loamy soil with difficulty. Had his companion of the motor-bus been with him, he would doubtless have said ‘Good egg!’ instead.

‘It’s all right,’ said Wimble. ‘Like to see a programme? ‘He passed over several — all he had. He felt uplifted, without knowing why. He felt reckless, extravagant, careless, happy. He had touched the element of air without knowing it. He had forgotten ‘money,’ toil, conventional rigid formality, the terror of the herd, everything that compressed life into a four-footed rut, like the rut trodden by cows and pigs and rabbits. He had, for a moment, left the earth. He had, however, no idea that he was hovering in mid-air. Having taken a risk with courage — the courage of the fly — he was not quite positive of his dizzy elevation. The strange, intuitive, natural certainty of Joan was not yet quite his. He caught his breath a little in this rarefied air, from this spiritual point of view — this bird’s-eye aspect — he was by no means sure of himself.

The rush of the wonderful cinema then began, and he forgot himself.

They experienced the sense such a performance leaves behind of having been — as Mother put it — all over the place. Sitting in the dark the individual at first is conscious only of himself, neighbours ignored if not forgotten. The screen then flashes into light, and with the picture, consciousness flashes across the world. The lie of the stationary photograph is corrected, time is denied, partially at least, and space is unable to boast and swagger as it loves to do. The cinema frees and extends the consciousness, restores the past, and sets distance close beneath the eyes. Only the watching self remains — pregnant symbol! — in the darkness.

It was one of the best performances in London; within an hour or two the audience danced from the dingy streets of the metropolis into the sunlight of India, Africa, and of islands among far southern seas. The kaleidoscope of other lands and other ways of thinking, acting, living carried them away with understanding sympathy. From savage wild life drinking at water-holes in the sun-drenched Tropics, they darted across half-charted oceans and watched the penguin and the polar bear amid arctic ice. Over mountains, down craters, flying above cities and peering deep under water, the various experiences of strange distant life came into their ken. They flew about the planet. The leaders of the world gazed at them, so close and real that their emotions were legible on their magnified features. They smiled or frowned, then flashed away, and yet still were there, living, thinking, willing this and that. Widely separated portions of the vast human family presented themselves vigorously, registered a tie of kinship, and were gone again about their business, now become in some sense the business of the audience too. Fighting, toiling, loving, hating, meeting death and adventure by sea and land, creating and destroying, differing much in colour, custom, clothing, and the rest, yet human as Wimble and his family were human, possessed with the same griefs, hopes, and joys, the same passion to live, the same fear of death — one great family.

Joan slipped her arm into that of her father; they nestled closely, very much in sympathy as the world rushed past their eyes upon the screen.

‘We’re flying,’ she whispered, with a squeeze, as the penguins on the polar ice gave place to a scene of negroes sweating in the sun and munching sugarcane while they lazily picked the fluffy cotton. ‘We’re everywhere all-at-once, don’t you see?’ A moment later, as though to point her words, they looked down upon a mapped-out county from an aeroplane. The unimportance of earth was visible in the distance.

‘You can’t fly under water anyhow,’ mumbled Wimble, as they left the air and flashed with a submarine upon sponges, coral, and inquisitive, perfectly poised fish. A black man was trying to knife a shark.

‘I can see what they feel though,’ was the whispered answer. ‘Inside their watery minds, I mean.’

‘Wherever I am I go,’ he thought, but didn’t say it, because by the time he had reflected how foolish it was to remain stuck only upon the minute point of his own tiny personal experience, they were climbing with a scientific Italian of eminence down a crater full of smoke and steam, and could almost hear the thunder of the explosions. But while they went down, everything else went up. Smoke, steam, masses of rock all trying to rise. ‘Gravity is the devil,’ he remembered; ‘it keeps us from flying into the sun.’

The idea made him chuckle, and Joan pinched his arm, giggling too audibly in her excitement.

‘Hush!’ said Mother. They watched in silence then; a bird’s-eye view of the planet was what they watched. With each picture they took part. Every corner of the globe, with its different activities, touched their hearts and minds with interest — busy, rushing life in various forms, and all going on simultaneously, at this very moment — now. Life obviously was one. The strange unity was convincing. Nothing they saw was alien to themselves, for they took part in it. In each picture they ‘wondered what it felt like.’ They took for an instant, longer or shorter, the point of view of a new aspect of life, of something as yet they had not actually experienced. They longed — or dreaded — to stand within that huge cavern of blue lonely ice and hear the waves of the Polar Sea lick up the snow; to taste that sugary cane with animal-white teeth, and feel the fluffy cotton between thick, lumpy fingers; to swim under water and look up instead of down; to crawl fearfully a little nearer to the molten centre of the planet through smoke and fire and awful thundering explosions. They longed or dreaded. Mentally, that is, they experienced a new relationship in each separate case, a relationship that stretched a suburban consciousness beyond its normal ken.

‘It’s very tiring,’ mentioned Mother, during a brief interval of glaring light, ‘and hurts my eyes. And I can’t see why they want to show us those half-naked natives. I’m glad I’m English. Disgusting people, I call them.’

‘They’ll improve it, you know,’ observed Tom; ‘the flickering, I mean. It’s a great invention. Somebody made a bit of cash there all right.’

One couple, at any rate, in the four-shilling seats felt the tie and knew their consciousness extended to include them all. They were engaged with all these various folk and multifarious activities. Humanity was one. The cinema shouted it aloud. The sense of collective consciousness was stirred.

‘Well,’ gasped Mother, blinking her eyes in the sudden light at the end, ‘that was a show, wasn’t it?’ She seemed tired rather than exhilarated.

‘Not half,’ declared Tom, feeling for his cigarettes. He kept the programmes, putting both into his pocket.

‘I’m glad I’m English anyhow,’ repeated Mother, stationary at the mouth of her hole in the ground; but whether she despised the Hottentots, the Eskimo, or the penguins, she did not specify. It was her final verdict merely. The statement said simply that she was satisfied to be her little self, balanced safely on a clod of earth, in a spot of the universe called England. Extension of consciousness gave her no joy at all. She felt unsafe.

They left the theatre slowly, their minds shrinking back with a touch of disappointment, almost of pain, within the prescribed limits of normal, practical life again. Wimble felt he had been flying, and had just come back; he settled with difficulty. In the brief space between the vestibule and the door his thoughts continued flying. There was excitement and anticipation in him. ‘The next stage,’ he said to himself, ‘will be hearing. We shall hear the people talk. After that — not so very far away either — we shall see ’em *now*, and no interval of time at all. Machinery won’t be used. Our *minds* will do the trick. We’ll see everywhere with our thoughts!’ He remembered his Telepathy Primer, giving individual instances, as authentic and well proven as any reasonable person could desire. He felt sure this vast, general development must follow — some faculty of air, swift and flashing as light — the bird’s-eye view.

The murky street, with its damp and chilly air, struck him in the face as he stood with his family a moment, then walked down the steps. There was still a luminous glow in the western sky above the roofs. Mother took his arm to steady herself; Tom was behind, his eyes roving hungrily; Joan flitted just in front.

‘Our ‘bus is over there,’ said Mother, pointing with a black-gloved hand.

‘We’ll take a taxi, my dear,’ was his reply. He hailed one, bundled his astonished family inside, wished the driver ‘Good-evening’ with a smile, and slammed the door upon his own coat-tails.

‘But you haven’t told him the address,’ said Mother.

‘He ought to know,’ exclaimed Wimble, ‘but he’s not a bird yet, so I’d better tell him.’

‘It might be safer,’ added his wife sarcastically, holding on to his coat-tails as he leaned out of the window to do so.

He watched the crowd as they whirled away; he felt happy, happy, happy. With the damp London air he felt as though a part of him still sweltered in the golden sunshine, diving under blue clear water where the sponges and the corals grew. Soft breezes touched his cheek one minute, the next he laid his hand on glittering ice. He heard the surf crashing upon a palm-clad reef. . . . These thronging people, policemen, costers, shop-folk, pale-faced workers, and over-dressed men and women of the big houses, all had some link with himself, that had been drawn closer; but so had the swarthy half-naked folk at the Antipodes who had just claimed his consciousness. They were all one really. Each nation seemed a mood. The sense of oneness leaped upon his heart and seized him.

‘It all happened without our even moving,’ as Joan had said on the way home. ‘I suppose everything’s in us then, really. We’re everywhere.’ And while Tom’s superior ‘Oh, cut it out’ seemed more than usually ignorant and silly, Wimble’s heart flamed within him. For it came to him, like a promise of wind-borne freedom, that there existed in his own being an immense and mighty under-side that was only waiting to be organised into fuller, even into all-embracing, consciousness. Man, he felt sure again, was a cosmic, not only a planetary, being. He could know the stars. The real self was of air. . . .

CHAPTER XIV.

‘LOOK HERE, FATHER,’ said Joan next day, ‘why is it — —’ then paused, unable apparently to express herself.

‘Eh, child?’ He gasped, thinking her question consisted of those three words alone, and wondering how in the world he was going to satisfy her.

‘Why is it,’ she went on the next moment, ‘that wherever we are we want to be somewhere else, and whatever we know we want to know something else — more at any rate? And we never want it alone. We want to tell everything to some one else, I mean.’

Father almost preferred the first question — it left openings for vaguer answers. This definiteness increased his difficulty rather. He scratched his head and passed his fingers through his hair, which looked just then as if it would neither stay on nor down. He smoothed it deliberately, thinking as hard and quickly as he could. He knew what the girl meant, of course, more or less.

‘The instinct to *share* what we like is, I suppose, a proof that we — —’ he was going to say.

Before he could utter the words, however, she answered for him: ‘Because we ought to be everywhere at once and know everything at once — like in that cinema. Isn’t that it?’

Mother, it so chanced, just then went past the open door along the corridor; she went steadily, not to say heavily; she was obviously in one place at a time, doing one thing at a time, a worthy, practical, useful human being, and what the world considers a valuable unit of humanity — yet surely, oh, surely, wrong and a wing-less entity clogged with earth and the limits that earth-ignorance involved. She was on her way to scold the servant, to order dinner, or to fetch socks to mend. Good. But it was the way she went about her job — the un-birdy way — that proved the badger in her. Air and the careless joy of air was nowhere in her, not even in her most helpful actions. ‘One should take life as a bird takes the air,’ he was thinking again. It had become a motto.

And a flood of shadowy thoughts swept down upon his mind. Joan, when he turned to find her, had already gone from the room. He was alone. The half-read newspaper lay upon his knee; Tom had long since gone to the office; the sun shone in across the sea of roofs and chimney-pots; he saw a white, soft, fluffy cloud bedded in the blue. A swift shot gloriously across the narrow strip of sky. And this flood of shadow thoughts poured in and out of his mind like a hundred thousand swifts.

They would have filled an entire Primer if written out and printed; but in his mind, together with their host of suggestive correlations, they flashed and vanished with the speed and ease of the swift, a bird that seemed only wings, without body, legs, or head — powerful, graceful flight personified. The laborious absurdity of words made him feel helpless and rather stupid. He felt lonely, too, exiled from a finer, easier state of being to which something in him properly and rightfully belonged. The wings of the spirit stirred and fluttered in him. He sighed. Joan's sentence vibrated in him like a song, for nothing so much as music sets free the bird in human beings, enabling the soul to soar beyond all possible categories of time and space, beyond all confinements and limitations, even beyond death.

It was his daughter's remark that led in this rushing shower of thoughts that followed: 'Why is it that, wherever we are, we want to be elsewhere?'

People as a whole were always afflicted with this desire to be somewhere else. It was true. In London he longed for windy lanes, but in the windy lanes he thought how nice it would be to see the shops and people in the streets; at a party he would think with longing of the cosy room at home, the book and chair beside the fire-corner with his pipe, yet in that corner with pipe and book he would suddenly lay them down and remember with envy the gaiety of company, the talk, the laughter, and the bright companionship he was missing. It was often, if not always, so: the desire to be elsewhere and otherwise seemed inherent in human beings; they were never content or satisfied with the place they were in at a given moment.

'It's the restlessness of the race,' he decided, 'for whom movement is so laborious, slow, and costly. If they moved as a bird moves, swiftly, instantly, and without trouble or cost, this restlessness would not be felt.'

Then he paused. 'But it's not merely that,' flashed through him, 'far, far more. It's the expression of a strange and deep belief: the belief that we ought to be, and should be, *can* be everywhere at once. This power lies in us somewhere, only as yet we haven't discovered how to use it. . . . But it's coming, and air and flight, wings and speed are already its beckoning symbols. We're being mysteriously quickened. We ought to be able to know everything, and to be everywhere, at once, in touch with all the universe, able to draw on all its powers. We have the right. This longing so to know and be, this uneasy yearning in us, what is it but an affirmation, a conviction that we can so be? Our wings go fluttering in our tiny cages. Wherever I am I go — and I *am* wherever my thought and desire are.'

He sat back and thought about it. It seemed to him a great discovery. He felt sure that somewhere in himself lay the power to be everywhere at once, one with everybody and everything. To be aware of everybody everywhere was the first step at any rate, and the cinema had dropped a hint that it was coming.

'Well — but the practical meaning of it — what? The use that people like Mother should make of it — what? Bodies will never actually fly. Certainly not, but thought flies already, and it only remains for consciousness to accompany it. Bodies, of course, are earth; yet they will, they must, grow lighter, more responsive, both as receiving and transmitting instruments, consciousness no longer focussed only where the body is. We shall be human cinemas,' he thought, 'going where we will, instantaneously and easily as a bird, seeing all and knowing all. Universal consciousness, of course, is a spiritual condition; it is an Air quality, space and time denied. The Kingdom of Air is within us. We shall experience air with its collective instantaneity. . . .'

He folded his newspaper and went down the narrow corridor to his little private den. 'Oh, that I had the wings of a dove,' occurred to him and made him smile. 'A cry of the soul, of course,' he realised, as he took his twenty limited steps between the rigid walls. He stubbed his toe against the desk, and sat down in his revolving chair.

The ideas set in motion by Joan's remark continued flowing, flying through him. He seized what he could catch.

'Our bodies, responding to a swifter, happier, more careless attitude of mind, will gradually grow lighter, more sensitive; become less dense and earthy; until at last we shall feel with everybody everywhere. No longer separate and cut off from others, divided as earth is divided, we shall win this immense increase of sympathy and be everywhere we want to be, every-at-once, as Joan put it. We shall move with our thought — air! We shall have instantaneity — air again! Our bodies may not fly, but our consciousness will fly to one another, as light flies across the universe unerringly from sun to sun — bodies of light. Like the birds in England, we shall know when the Siberian ice has broken. We shall be off!'

The thrill of some mighty wisdom came very near.

He became strangely aware — it was like the lifting of great wings within his soul — that this collective, airy consciousness was already gathering the world into a flock; and it was the cinema, explained by Joan's brief sentence, that flashed the amazing and uplifting thought upon him.

Whirling round and round in his revolving chair, reason tried to grapple with the rush of ideas. The contents of a hundred Primers rose higgledy-piggledy, to congest his mind and memory. But his soul, rising like a lark, outdistanced everything he had ever read. The one clear dazzling certainty was this: 'We shall no longer be cut off and separate from others.' A variant, surely, of loving, and therefore knowing, all neighbours as ourselves. A thousand years as one day! To be everywhere at once and to know everybody was, after all, but to slip the cables of the tiny, separate self, and experience the Whole. Hence the desire to be always elsewhere and otherwise. Hence, too, the innate yearning to *share* experiences of all kinds with others. 'Nirvana' dropped from a forgotten Primer into him, and for the first time pages of laborious explanation utterly ignored, he grasped its gracious meaning fully. 'To meet the Lord in the air and be for ever with him,' came another cliché. They poured and rained upon him in their naked meanings, undisguised by words.

'Ah! To live in the Whole was not, then, to lose individuality, but to extend and share it!' He spun round and round happily in his chair. 'Grand bird idea, and air ideal!' He saw in his heart the nations taking wing at last, leaving earth below them, free of space and free of time, sharing this new and undivided consciousness. It was spiritual, of course; yet not an inaccessible nor a different state; it was a state growing naturally and truly out of the physical. Spontaneous living and the bird's-eye point of view were the first faint signs of its approach. . . .

The chair stopped turning, while he filled and lit his pipe, watching the clouds of blue smoke float here and there in wreaths and eddies. Joan's eyes peered across it at him like a phantom's. . . . 'It's immense, but very simple,' he was thinking, 'her funny little song puts it all in a nutshell . . . and the way she tries to live . . .' when a heavy tread disturbed him and something came into the room.

'Joe dear!' said his wife as she entered,— 'but you've got no air here!' She opened a window, while he at once sprang up and opened another. Her manner gave him the impression that she had come in with a definite purpose; she had something important she wished to say. He decided to let it come out naturally. He would wait.

'Not both,' she said, 'it makes a draught,' and closed her own.

'Bless you, my dear,' he exclaimed, 'you do look after me splendidly.' He gave her a sudden hug and kiss that startled her. Looking at him in a puzzled, wistful way, she smiled, and something of long-forgotten days slipped in magically between them for an instant. He saw a yellow scarf across the smoke; she saw perhaps, a breathless boy with a field of golden buttercups behind him. . . .

'You catch cold so easily,' she mumbled, then added quickly, 'the country will suit us all better, won't it?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'yet, once we're there, we shall want to be somewhere else, I suppose — —'

'Oh, I hope not, Joe,' with a Martha sigh. 'Whatever makes you think that?'

'We can be, anyhow; we must remember that.'

'Oh dear, Joe, you're very restless these days,' she exclaimed, and the way she said it made him realise her customary load of apprehension, her care-full, heavy way of taking life, seeing the difficulties first. Pessimism was a sure sign of waning life-forces. He felt pity and sympathy. And instantly an eddy of his recent whirlwind ideas swept down upon him and joy followed. He longed to communicate this joy to his wife, the joy she had known in her days of courtship long ago when the airy consciousness had touched her. And, as though to emphasise the contrast between their points of view, a wasp buzzed in through the open window just then, and Mother — shrank.

In a flash he understood her very clearly. Her attitude to life was fear. Unable to leave the ground, she was always afraid of being caught. If she met a cow, it would toss her; a goat, it meant to butt her; a dog, a cat only waited an opportunity to bite or scratch, a wasp came in on purpose to sting her and not merely because it had lost its way. She invariably locked the door of her room and looked under the bed; she was nervous about lamps — they would blow up if she tried to put them out. Probably all these disasters *would* happen to her; her shrinking attitude of fear attracted the very thing she dreaded. People similarly would deceive her, since she expected, even demanded, it of them. In a word, the trouble she dreaded she attracted.

'Fly at anything you're afraid of,' he said suddenly. 'That paralyses it. It can't happen then. Or, better still, fly over it.' But she looked so bewildered, puzzled, even unhappy, that he got up and took her hand. 'Don't mind me, Mother dear,' he said soothingly; 'I've got an idea, that's all.' His heart brimmed full with comfort; her face said so plainly 'I don't understand, I feel out of it, I'm a little frightened! Only I can't express it quite.' 'It's immense but very simple,' he went on; 'Joan put it into me, I believe, first, and Joan was born out of us both, out of you and me, in those brilliant happy days when we were afraid of nothing. So it belongs to you, too, you see.' He paused, giving her an opportunity to state her mission.

'It's all a bit beyond me, I'm afraid,' said Mother patiently, an anxious expression in her eyes. But there was admiration as well. It occurred to her perhaps that she might have married a genius after all. She did not yet make her special and particular announcement, however. She would do so in her own way presently, no doubt.

'Mother,' he said abruptly, 'there's nothing in the universe beyond you.' He dropped her hand and stood erect, opening his short arms to the sky outside the window. The wasp buzzed out at that moment, and left him her undivided attention. His eyes were fixed upon the clouds where the swallows darted. 'Mother,' he went on, 'I'm illogical, unscientific, ignorant rather, and very confused in mind — in *mind*,' he emphasised 'but this immense idea beyond all books and learning has come to me, and I'm sure it's wisdom, though I call it Air.'

'Air,' she repeated slowly. 'Yes, dear.'

‘Air, dear, yes, and that means living like the birds, more carelessly, more lightly, taking no thought for the morrow — *not* shirking work and duties and so on, but — —’

‘But we know all that,’ she interrupted. ‘I mean, we’ve read it. It’s this sort of having-faith business. It’s all right for people with money.’

‘The very people,’ he corrected her, ‘for whom it’s most difficult.’

‘Oh dear,’ and she heaved another Martha sigh. There was a pause. ‘Couldn’t you put it in a book, Joe — write it?’ she asked, pride in one eye and ambition in the other. He looked very much of a man, standing there so erect with his eyes fixed on space above her head. ‘We could do with a bit extra, too.’

‘And might help other people,’ he added, ‘eh?’

She said nothing to that. ‘It might sell; you never know.’

He shook his head. He realised, once again, the pathos in her, and at the same time that she vampired him. It’s the pathetic people that ever vampire and exhaust those who are more vital.

‘I’m not literary,’ he replied, ‘not literary in that way. Only the few with air in them would catch my idea, and the others, the commonplace Press in particular which decides the sale of a book, would find a joke they *could* understand and call it air. And air is gas, you know.’ He chuckled. ‘Whereas what *I* mean is Air — instantaneous unifier of thought and action, the L.C.D. of a new order of existence, a new point of view born of collective sympathy, as with a flock of birds, community involving something akin to the strange bird-wisdom and bird-knowledge—’ he took a deep breath— ‘the solvent of all philosophic and religious problems — —’

She caught a word and clutched it. ‘Religious people,’ she put it hurriedly, ‘might buy it — a book like that.’

He came back from his flight with a thud, landing beside her. ‘Their imagination is too sluggish, dear. As a rule, too, they have not intellect enough to detect the comic element in life. They can’t laugh at themselves. They exclude joy and fun and play. They never really sing.’

‘They do, yes,’ said Mother— ‘I mean they don’t. That’s quite true.’

She settled herself more comfortably in her chair. Evidently she appreciated his talking to her of his intimate thought; she felt herself taken into his confidence and liked it. It made it easier for her to say what she had come to say. Noticing her gesture his own sympathy and pity deepened. ‘Ah, Mother dear,’ he exclaimed, touched by a sudden pathos,’ it’s wonderful to be alive, isn’t it? And to be able to think and feel ideas tearing about inside you? It’s worth everything — just to be able to say “I am,” and still more wonderful if you can add “I go.” That’s the secret. Live in the interest of the actual moment, but never imagine that it ties you there, eh? Life lies at your feet in a map; you can take what direction you please. Choice is your own, you can take or leave — as literally as when you stand above a jeweller’s counter. One person chooses the bright stones, another the dark. It’s all a matter of selection. On a picnic you may select the midge that stings you, the few drops of rain that fell, or the midges that did *not* sting you. . . . You can choose gloom or joy, I mean, just as you — —’

‘Joe dear,’ she interrupted, sitting forward in her chair, ‘there’s something I wanted to say to you — seriously.’

He took her hand again. He had noticed the growing pucker between her eyes and knew the difficulty she experienced in unburdening herself of something. He had chattered in this way to give her confidence and show his sympathy. But she had not followed, had not understood. She had remained safe in the mouth of her hole.

‘Talking of religion, as you were just now,’ she went on with an effort rather, ‘I — I wanted to talk to you about it.’ There was a hint, but a very tiny hint, of challenge in her voice.

‘Of course, of course,’ he said encouragingly, patting the hand he held.

There was a moment’s silence, while their eyes met and he smiled into her troubled face. What she was about to say meant much to her, and she feared opposition. She took a deeper breath.

‘I’m thinking of becoming High Church,’ she announced.

‘Admirable!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’m delighted!’

‘What! You don’t mind, dear?’

‘It’s just exactly what’ll suit you,’ he replied happily. ‘Just what you need.’

'But *very* High Church — it means confession, you know,' she went on quickly, relieving herself of ideas evidently long pent up, 'and it must be very helpful, I think, knowing one's sins forgiven.'

'Helpful, and very pleasant,' he agreed, lowering his eyes from hers. The sudden sense of his own failure towards her pained him. She needed some one to lean on, to confide in, to unburden herself upon, and she turned to a paid official instead of to himself. She didn't know yet that she could confess to herself and so forgive herself, which meant understanding her sins and deciding not to repeat them. She needed some one who could do this for her. It was the stage she was at. 'Splendid,' he reflected, 'there were creeds for every stage. What a mercy!' And while she explained herself now without shyness, but with a confusion as great as his own, at *his* stage, he listened to her as vaguely as, doubtless, she had listened to him. He glanced down at his newspaper, not to read it exactly, but in the way a man who wants to think — to think subconsciously perhaps — takes up the object nearest to his hand and regards it attentively. His eye ran along the print, while his thought was: 'She wants something, some one to lean upon, of course, poor soul. I'm not sufficient, I don't give her sympathy enough. I'll do better in future. Her wings are on the flutter.'

' . . . Something to guide and help one a bit,' he heard her saying.

'The very thing, Mother, the very thing,' he put in. 'I'm so glad. It'll speed you up. Quickening — that's it, isn't it? Quickening of the spirit, and of the body too,' he added. 'You'll be flying with us next!'

And while she poured into his ears the confused but genuine story of her need, his own mind continued its own wordless thoughts. He saw the millions of history wading through the creeds, and, thank heaven, there were creeds enough to satisfy every type. For himself, a creed seemed to play the rôle of a porter in a mountain climb — carrying the weight from the climber's shoulders, but never guiding. Nevertheless, he blessed them all, and the Creed Primers in a long series with red covers and black lettering flashed across his memory. 'All true,' he realised, 'every blessed one of them. And no wonder each man swears by his own that it alone is true. For it is true; it's exactly what *he* needs.'

' . . . I was sure you wouldn't mind, Joe dear. I knew you'd understand,' came from Mother at last.

‘And so you shall, dear. It’ll help you along magnificently. We’ll start the moment we get into the country — start it up, eh?’

‘I have begun already,’ she said, more sure of herself.

‘Better still,’ was his reply.

She got up, patted his shoulder awkwardly, kissed him, and stood a moment by his chair; a second later the door closed behind her. But hardly had her step died away along the corridor than the words his eye had rested upon absent-mindedly in the newspaper, rose and offered themselves. It was a coincidence, of course, but coincidences do occur. The sentence lay in the middle of a paragraph concerned with some new book or other, a book on Russia, he discovered, by glancing higher: ‘. . . She has a far-reaching vision, and her Church at least has for long been preoccupied with the idea of the union of humanity. . . . The idea of brotherhood and even universal brotherhood, permeates all classes of society . . .’; while opposite, and level with it in the adjoining column, oddly enough, was a notice of an article in some important Review or other with the title ‘The New Religion.’ The sentence quoted that caught his eye referred to the Church of England: ‘A pitifully forlorn body, bankrupt in valour and policy, resource and prestige.’ No one To-day with spiritual needs could, apparently, rely upon it; the new spirit regarded it as prehistoric. The people were far ahead of it already. . . .

He laid the paper down and wondered; the two statements capped his flying ideas so appositely.

‘Yes, there’s a new thing coming into life,’ he exclaimed aloud. ‘It’s in the air, even in this vulgar halfpenny paper.’ He relit his pipe and smoked a moment hard. ‘Of course it’s not generally realised yet,’ he went on to himself between the puffs; ‘but that’s not odd after all: it’s taken the world two thousand years to realise Christ, and only a few realised Him when He was there. When — how — will this new spirit touch us *all* . . .? What’s got to happen first, I wonder?’

He sighed and a curious shiver ran down his spine. Nothing, he remembered, was born, nothing big and deep ever came to birth, without travail and upheaval. He was conscious of this strange shiver in his being. He almost shuddered. His pipe went out. Through the open window he looked down upon the crowded pavements, but the next instant looked up to where the swallows danced and twittered happily in the summer light and air.

The vision in Maida Vale came back to him when the masses, clothed in black, had seemed to rise and open a million mighty wings. He remembered the singular idea of blood that had accompanied it. And again a shudder touched him.

‘Something’s got to happen first,’ he sighed, ‘before *all* can take the air. Something’s got to happen.’ And then, as a burst of sunshine and cool wind entered the room together by the window, a sudden conviction swept him off his feet. The world blew open; the nations rose in a stupendous flock before his eyes; humanity as a unit spread its wings. ‘something’s *going to happen*,’ he exclaimed, ‘but out of it will grow the new birth of happy air!’ There was both joy and shuddering in his heart, but the joy was uppermost.

He met his wife in the passage on his way out a little later. She button-holed him for a moment, a new confidence and lightness in her, it almost seemed. She was High Church now. It concerned their daughter. Joan, she mentioned, was not quite like other girls of her own age. She was growing very fast in mind as well as in body. She suggested a doctor for her. ‘A London doctor, and before we go to the country. We might have her overhauled, you know. She seems to me light-headed sometimes.’ Mother felt sure it would be wise. This time she was not anxious, did not worry as usual; she merely thought of the girl’s welfare in the best way that occurred to her. From her new High Church pedestal she looked out upon the world with a temporary new confidence, at any rate.

‘Admirable,’ agreed her husband. ‘I’ll take her myself to-morrow.’

‘Why not to-day, dear?’ she asked, relieved that she need not go herself.

‘We’re off to look at cottages,’ he told her. ‘I’ll take her to-morrow.’ And the matter was settled thus.

CHAPTER XV.

THE VISIT TO the doctor was a great success, and Wimble left two guineas on the marble mantelpiece without regret. Joan was growing rapidly in mind and body, and mind and body should develop evenly if possible, otherwise there must be unbalance somewhere. ‘It’s a nervous, restless age we live in,’ observed the physician; ‘the mind is apt to take in too much nourishment and shoot ahead much quicker than it did when *we* were young, Mr. Wimble, and unless the body is well cared for, the nervous system cannot possibly keep even pace with the mass of instruction it receives at every turn. The young it is wisest to consider as healthy animals that need play, food, and rest in right proportions. Personally, I prefer to see the mind develop a trifle late, rather than too early.’ He advised, therefore, play, rest, and ample nourishment. ‘Half an hour’s rest in the afternoon, or better still, an hour,’ he added, ‘is an excellent thing.’ He looked at Joan searchingly, with both severity and kindness, for he had that mixture of father and policeman which belongs to most successful doctors. Joan felt a little guilty. She had not read *Erewhon*, of course, yet was vaguely aware she had done something wrong. To be obliged to see a doctor touched the sense of shame in her. ‘The country’s just the thing for you,’ the specialist mentioned, ignoring the two guineas that lay within the reach of his hand, ‘the very place.’ And Wimble felt relieved as he went out. It was like a visit to the police that had ended happily. Neither he nor Joan had been arrested, but they had been told they must not do it again. He had paid a fine.

‘Mother’ll be very pleased with that,’ he remarked, while Joan, glancing up quickly, seemed glad it was over. ‘It’s the first time I’ve ever felt ill,’ she said. ‘The moment I saw him I felt I ought to be ill.’

‘Suggestion,’ he mumbled. ‘Never mind. Mother’ll feel better now that you’ve been. That’s something.’

They walked happily down Seymour Street together. ‘Don’t skip, child. It looks funny in a town. Besides, you’re too big to skip.’ She took a slower pace to suit his slower little legs. But even so there were springs in her feet, and her movements seemed to push the solid earth away as though she wanted to rise. ‘Flow, fly, flow,’ she hummed, ‘wherever I am, I go.’

‘I shouldn’t hum in the street, dear, if I were you,’ he chided. People were staring, he noticed. ‘It looks so odd. I mean it sounds unusual.’

She turned her bright, happy eyes upon him. ‘Daddy, that’s the doctor,’ she warned him, ‘you’re saying “No” to everything.’ She came close and took his arm, whispering at the same time, ‘I believe you’re sorry about the two guineas. You’re trying to get your money’s worth, as Tom calls it,’ and the shaft was so true it made him laugh.

They turned down into the great thoroughfare of Oxford Street. It was brimmed with people, a river filled and running over. They crossed it somehow, he rather like a bewildered rabbit, a step forwards, a pause, a hesitating step backwards, a glance in both directions that saw nothing accurately, and then a flurried run; Joan catching his outstretched hand and pulling him against his will and better judgment, while his little coat-tails flapped in the wind. They landed on the curb, merged in the stream of pedestrians, bumped into some, collided with others, and were swept round the swirling corner of the Circus into the downhill torrent of Regent Street.

‘Yet a bird,’ he remembered, ‘plunges headlong, at fifty miles an hour, into a forest of branches, swaying possibly in a wind, avoided the slightest collision, and with unerring and instant calculation selects a twig and lands on it, balancing with perfect security on feet so tiny they’re not worth mentioning!’ He felt clumsy and inferior. What co-ordination of sight and muscle! What confidence! What poise. . . . The throng of awkward, crawling, heavy-footed humans sprawled in all directions; he was one of them, one of the least steady too. And yet he was aware of something in himself that did not shake and wobble, something secure and balanced, something that went gliding with swift and certain safety. He noted the easy grace of Joan passing the shop windows like a nut-hatch along a twig, half dancing and half flitting on her toes. It was not a physical thing he felt. It was not that. It was a quality — a careless, exquisite balance in herself. It entered him too as he watched her. His soul rested securely amid the turmoil by means of it. It was poise.

His thoughts ran on. . . .

‘Look, Daddy,’ Joan interrupted him. ‘Here’s a funny sign. What does it mean? Let’s go in.’

He drew up beside her, a trifle breathless. They were in a side street, the main stream of people pouring away at right angles now, bathed in the autumn sunshine.

‘Look,’ she repeated. ‘Wings.’ She pointed to a brass plate advertisement in a little hall-way. ‘Isn’t it funny?’ He read the sign in neat black letters against the shining metal: ‘Aquarian Society, Membership Free,’ and wondered what it meant. Ruins and battered objects of the past occurred to him, for at first he connected the word with ‘antiquarian.’ Above them, black tipped with gold, were a pair of outspread wings, the badge of the Society apparently. In brackets was ‘First Floor,’ and a piece of paper pasted below bore a notice: ‘Meeting Daily from 11.30 to 1. All welcome.’

‘Let’s go up, Daddy,’ Joan said again. ‘There’s a meeting going on now, and it’s free. What does it mean? Something about birds — —’

‘Water birds, probably,’ he said, still puzzling about the strange word; ‘*old* water birds apparently,’ he added, combining both possible derivations; ‘perhaps a society to preserve old water birds and provide artificial paddles when their webbed feet wear out.’

They laughed at the idea, but their laughter hushed as a couple of ladies, beautifully dressed and with what is called refined, distinguished bearing, brushed past them and went upstairs, evidently going to the meeting. Though they were unknown to him, and it was obvious, in his black tail-coat and brown boots, that he was a commercial traveller of sorts, they bowed with a pleasant little smile of polite apology for pushing past. ‘A duchess and her daughter at least! Old families certainly!’ he thought; ‘yet they treated us as equals!’ It startled him, it was so un-English. He raised his hat and smiled. In their manner and the expression of face he caught something new, a kindness, a sympathy, a touch of light perhaps, something at any rate quick and alert and gentle that brought the word ‘sympathy’ intuitively across his mind. He held his hat in his hand a moment. ‘They’ve got air in them,’ flashed into him. ‘I wonder if they’re members.’

‘Your head’s in a draught, Daddy,’ said Joan. He put his hat on. A scrap of conversation reached them from the stairs: ‘I’d rather sit well at the back, I think,' said the younger of the two.

'We shall have to, probably,' was the reply; 'it's always full. And remember — just keep an open mind and listen. The quackery doesn't matter, nor the grammar. He was only a railway guard' — then something inaudible as they turned the corner— 'his idea of a New Age is true somewhere, I'm positive. It was the speed of the train, you know — always rushing through space — that made him . . .' And the voices died away.

'Come, Joan, we'll go in too. What are you dawdling about for?' exclaimed Wimble on the spur of the moment. Something in that interrupted sentence caught him.

'You, Daddy,' she said, as she tripped after him up the stairs.

People were standing in the corridor and in the little hall; the room beyond, where a heavily-moustached man, with an eager, soap-polished face, cheerful expression, and bright earnest eyes, stood lecturing, was full. The two ladies who had preceded them were sitting on a window-sill. 'I'm afraid there are no seats left,' whispered a pleasant, earnest woman beside the door, 'but I've sent for some chairs. They'll be here presently. I hope you'll hear something out here.' Wimble thanked her with a nod and smile; he leaned against the wall with Joan and looked about him.

Some thirty people were crowded into the small inner room, three-quarters of their number women, what are called 'nice' women. They were well dressed; there was a rustle of silk, a faint atmosphere of perfume, and fur, and soft expensive garments; young and old, he saw, a good many of them in mourning. The men looked, generally speaking, like well-to-do business men; he noticed one clergyman; a few were shabbily dressed; one or two were workmen, mechanics possibly. There was an alert attention on most of the faces, and in the air a kind of eager expectancy, serious, watchful, yearning, and waiting to be satisfied; sympathetic, it seemed, on the whole, rather than critical. One or two listeners looked vexed and scowling, and a tall, thin-visaged man in the corner was almost angry. But as a whole he got the impression of people just listening patiently, people for the most part empty, hungry, wondering if what they heard might fill them. He was aware of minds on tiptoe. Here, evidently, he judged, was a group of enquiring folk following a new Movement. 'One of the Signs of what's in the air To-day,' he thought. 'Five years ago these people would have been in Church, convinced they were miserable sinners with no good in them. That mechanic-looking fellow would have been in Chapel. That portly man with the stolid face, wearing a black tail-coat, a low collar, a heavy gold watch-chain and a black and white striped tie surely took round the plate in Kensington.’ The thin-faced angry man was merely a professional iconoclast.

He wondered. He thought a moment of the unimaginative English standing about the island in hordes, marvellously reliable, marvellously brave, with big, deep hearts, but childishly unobservant, conservative, conventional, not to be moved till the fire burns the soles of their feet, sturdy and unemotional, and constitutionally suspicious of all new things. He saw these hordes, strong in their great earth-qualities, ballast of the world, but at the same time world-rulers. . . . And then his thought flashed back with a snap to the scene before him. What was this group after? Why was it dissatisfied? Why had it turned from the ancient shibboleths? Something, of course, was up. He wondered. These people looked so earnest. This Aquarian Society, he knew, was one of a hundred, a thousand others. It might be rubbish, it might contain a true idea, it was sure to prove exaggerated. The people, however, were enquiring. He glanced at Joan, but her eyes were fixed intently upon the speaker’s face — the face of a former railway guard whose familiarity with speed (certainly not on *his* own crawling line, thought Wimble!), with rushing transit from scene to scene through the air, had opened his mind to some new idea or other.

‘I wonder if he sang “Wherever I am, I go!”’ he whispered to Joan. ‘He ought to, anyhow!’ But Joan was too intent to hear him. He swallowed his smile and listened. The speaker’s rough, uncultivated voice rang with sincerity. There was a glow about his face that only deep conviction brings. To Wimble, however, it all sounded at the moment as if he had fallen out of his Express Train and picked up his ideas as he picked up himself.

For at first he could not understand a single word, as though, coming out of the busy human street, he had plunged neck-deep into a stream of ideas that took his breath away. Having missed what had gone before, he could not catch the drift of what he heard. Then gradually, and by degrees, his listening mind fell into the rhythm of the minds about him; he slipped into the mood of the meeting; his intelligence merged with the collective intelligence of the others; he merged with the group-consciousness of the little crowd. The hostile interjections had no meaning for him, since those who made them, not being included in the group-consciousness, spoke an unintelligible language.

The speaker was very much in earnest evidently; he believed what he was saying, at the moment anyhow. Possibly this belief was permanent; possibly it was merely self-persuasion. Though obviously he expected hostile comment from time to time, when it came — usually from the iconoclast in the corner — he rarely replied to it. This method of ignoring criticism was not only easier than answering it, it induced an appearance of contemptuous superiority that increased his authority.

Wimble and his daughter had come in at a happy moment, for the long stretch of argument and explanation was just over, it seemed, and a summing up was about to begin.

‘So where are we, then, with it all?’ asked the lecturer. ‘Where ‘ave we got to? Where do we stand?’

He paused, and into the pause fell the angry voice of the thin-faced man: ‘Exactly where we started. You haven’t stated one single fact as yet.’

The speaker looked straight in front of him without a word, and the audience, almost to an individual, ignored the criticism. They supported the lecturer loyally, to the point at least of not even turning their heads away. They stared patiently and waited.

‘Where ‘ave we got to,’ repeated the man on the platform, ‘that’s wot we want to know, isn’t it? After all we’ve listened to this morning, ‘ow do we stand about it?’

‘That’s it exactly,’ from the interrupter in a contemptuous but intense tone of voice. He seemed annoyed that no one was intelligent enough to support him. At a Society of Rationalist Control across the road he would have been at home. He, too, was a seeker, and a very earnest one, only he had tumbled into the wrong group. Across the road he might have been constructive; here he was destructive merely.

‘Well, on the physical plane,’ resumed the speaker, ‘on wot I might call the scientific and materialistic plane, as I’ve tried to show you, the ‘ole trend of modern civilisation is towards speed and universality. That’s clear — at least I ‘ope I’ve made it so. Air, and wot air represents, shows itself in the physical plane like that. Distant countries are getting all linked up everywhere — by wireless, by motor, by aviation, by cinematograph, and the like. A kind of telepathy all over the world is—' he hesitated an instant — 'engendered.'

'Go on,' from the critic, 'any word will do as well.'

'That's the scientific side of the business, as it were,' he went on, 'the practical, everyday aspect we can all understand. It's the universality of the new element, air, as it affects the practical mind, so to speak; the technical understanding and mastery or space — wot I called aether a little while ago, as you'll remember — or, as the Aquarian Society prefers to call it, as being simpler and shorter — air.'

'Well,' he added, 'we now want to see 'ow we stand with regard to the 'igher side of life, the mental, spiritual aspect. Wot does this new Age, in which air is the key — the symbol like — wot does it mean to the race on *that* side?'

'Gas,' interjected the other, but in a lower voice.

From several books lying beside the water-bottle the lecturer selected one. He adjusted a pair of heavy reading-glasses to his eyes.

'The link between the two is better expressed than wot I can express it,' he resumed quickly, 'in this little volume, *The New Science of Colour* — and colour means light, remember, and light means aether, and aether means space, universality — so it's all the same.'

'Every bit of it,' came the contemptuous comment from the corner.

'Just this short paragraph — I came across it by chance — except that there reely is no chance at all — and it puts it well. It supplies the link. So I'll read it.' He heavily emphasised certain words:

'We are approaching an age of mental telepathy, in which the *organism of the race* is about to become attuned to the second sense of the earth and to the third element that sustains her — *i.e. air* — and in which our action and our outlook will alike assume the characteristics of that element, which are *elasticity and brilliance*.'

He laid down the book, slowly removing the heavy glasses from his nose, and while 'that's no proof was heard to snap from the corner, the other repeated with emphasis of manner, yet lowering his voice at the same time: ‘the organism of the race — becoming attuned to *air* — elasticity and brilliance.’

Fingering his glasses and looking very thoughtful, the speaker kept silence for a minute or so. He drank a few sips of water slowly, while everybody, even the interjector, waited, and those who had been staring at him turned their eyes away from his face, as though embarrassed to watch him drink. He produced a big handkerchief from his coat-tail pocket, wiped his lips, and replaced the handkerchief with some difficulty whence it came. The pause lengthened, but no one stirred. Then the earnest-faced woman near the door touched Wimble on the arm and indicated an empty chair, but Wimble, too absorbed in the proceedings, shook his head impatiently. Joan slipped into it. Joan, he noticed, did not seem interested; the keen attention she had shown at first had left her face, she looked half bewildered and half bored. ‘She’s too much in it to need explanation,’ flashed across him.

The slight shuffling warned the lecturer that the mind of his audience needed holding lest it begin to wander. Picking up a sheet of paper covered with notes, he advanced to the edge of the little platform and cleared his throat.

‘As I’ve been trying to explain,’ he began, ‘‘umanity has now reached a crushial moment in its development. The planet we live on belongs to the sun, and the sun has just entered — in 1881, to be igsact, — the sign of Aquarius. Aquarius, according to the old Chaldean system, is wot’s called an Air Sign, and the new powers waking in us all — coming down into our world now — will be ruled by the element of air. The Age of Pisces, a Water Sign, is just finished and done with. We are entering another period. A new Age is beginning — the Age of Air.’ And he glanced about him as though to catch any evidence of challenge.

‘What is an Age?’ asked a thin voice from the rear. It was not hostile, and heads were turned to find the questioner, but without success.

‘An accomplice,’ muttered the habitual interrupter to himself. No one noticed the comment, and Wimble, now completely captured by the collective sympathy, even wondered what he meant.

‘I’ll tell you,’ continued the lecturer, and referred to the sheet of notes in his hand. ‘I’ll tell you again with pleasure.’ He emphasised the word ‘again.’ The glasses were readjusted. With a certain air of mystery, as though he knew far more than he cared to impart, he read aloud, emphasising frequent passages as his habit was, and making here and there effective and semi-theatrical pauses. Behind this cheapness, however, burned obviously a deep sincerity and belief. He deemed himself a prophet, and he knew a prophet’s proverbial fate.

‘Astronomers tell us that our sun and his fam’ly of planets revolve around a central sun, which is millions of miles distant,’ he read slowly, ‘and that it requires about 26,000 years to make one revolution.’

Remembering one of his most successful Primers, Wimble sat forward on his chair, all eagerness. Here was what the critic called a ‘fact’ at any rate.

‘This orbit is called the Zodiac,’ continued the other, ‘and it is divided into twelve signs.’ He mentioned them, beginning with Aries and Taurus, and ending with Aquarius and Pisces. ‘Now, you asked what is an Age, didn’t you?’ He paused a second. ‘Well, our solar system takes a bit over 2000 years to pass through each of these Signs, and this time is the measurement of an Age. And with each Age certain new things ‘appen.’

He made this announcement with a certain mysterious significance.

‘Certain things ‘appen to the planet and to us as lives on it. Certain changes come. They’re sure as summer and winter is sure — that is, you can count on them. Those who know can count on them — prophets and people with inner vision. There you get prophecy and the meaning of prophecy. Vision!’ And without a vision the people perish — miss their chances, that is. The seers, the mystics, always know and see ahead, and this end of the Age — and of the world as it’s sometimes called stupidly — has been prophesied by many.’

The audience was on tiptoe with anticipation. Each individual possibly hoped that certain personal peculiarities of his own were going to be explained, made wonderful. Wimble was particularly aware of this excitement; it dawned upon him that he was about to receive an explanation, and a semi-scientific explanation too, of his own strange ideas and feelings. He glanced across at Joan. She seemed, to his amazement, asleep; her eyes were closed, at any rate; her attention was not held. He wanted to poke her. He wanted to say ‘I told you so,’ or rather ‘You told me so.’ But the speaker had ended his pause, and, to Wimble’s delight, was explaining that this movement of the sun passes through the Zodiacal Signs in reverse order— ‘precession of the equinoxes,’ as it is called — Pisces therefore preceding Aquarius instead of following it. Here was another ‘fact’ that his Knowledge Primer justified.

The personal anticipation in the audience was not immediately satisfied, however. The speaker intensified it first by a slight delay. Aware that he held the minds before him, he took his time.

‘Now, these Signs’ — lifting his eyes from the sheet of paper and fixing them upon a woman in the front row, who at once showed nervousness, as though she would believe black was white, if only he would stare at some one else—’ these Signs ain’t just dead things. They reveal and express and convey intelligent life. They’re immense intelligences, they’re Zodiacal Intelligences. That’s wot they are. The ‘ole universe, remember, is alive, and you and I ain’t the only living beings in it, nor the ‘ighest either. We’re not the only *bodies*. No one can say wot constitoots a body, a living body, nor define it. Our planet is a tuppeny-’alfpenny affair compared to the others, and we’re nothing but a lot of hinsects like ants and so forth on it. But if the ‘ole universe is alive — and we know it is — —’

‘Hanwell,’ interrupted the angry man.

‘ —— each and every part of it must be alive too. And you can’t leave out the planets, stars, and suns, the most magnificent bodies, called the ‘eavenly bodies, as you know. They’re all living bodies. They’re the bodies of beings, living beings, but beings far higher than wot we are. And the Zodiacal Signs are ‘igher still. They represent functions of the universe, as the ancients knew quite well. They’re a kind of intelligence we may call per’aps a Group Intelligence.’

Again he paused a moment. Then, as no interruption came, he went on with greater emphasis than before:

‘Now, each of these Zodiacal Intelligences — as the sun, with our little earth alongside, passes through it — rules over its partickler period. With every period we enter a new current of forces. Each period, therefore, of about 2000 years has new Gods, new characteristics, new types of 'uman beings with new tendencies and powers and possibilities in them — a new point of view, if you like to call it so, or, as we Aquarians call it, a new consciousness. Well, the Aquarius Sign just beginning, is an Air Sign. We're getting our new powers, our new point of view and hattitude, our new consciousness — from the air.'

In his excitement and deep belief the word 'air' was dangerously near 'hair,' but no one smiled. Perhaps even the critic experienced similar difficulties in his home circle that prevented his noticing it, or caring to take advantage of it if he did.

'I've already referred,' the speaker continued, 'to its effect on the physical plane, new inventions and the like, and 'ow men now navigate the air as fish do the sea, and send their thoughts spinning round the world with the speed of lightning. That's easy enough. I mean, you can all see it for yourselves. The areoplane's a fac' nobody can't get away from, whichever way you take it. But the effect on the spiritual plane is not so simple. It's not so easy to describe — far from it, I admit. When a new mode of consciousness begins to hoperate in men and women, they find difficulty in expressing it. They're puzzled a bit. They don't know where they are with it quite. Those 'oo get it first are called quacks and charlituns, and maybe swindlers too. The slower ones regard them with suspicion, and they may think themselves lucky if they 'ain't stoned or burned alive or crucified as they once was.'

He smiled, and the audience smiled deprecating with him.

'And the chief reason for their difficulty,' he went on, 'is simply this: They 'aven't got the language. Nor the words. That's it. The words describe the experiences of a new type of consciousness don't exist at first. They come later, slowly, gradually. They evolve as the new powers in the race evolve.'

He took his glasses off and wiped them carefully.

'So wot's the result?' he asked. 'Why, this. There's only *feeling* left. The people that first get the new consciousness feel it in them. But they can't prove it to others because their power is small. And they can't explain it in words, because the words don't exist. So there you are. Only the truth is there too jest the same.'

The challenge in his tone was unmistakable, but no one took it up. The critic was making notes on his cuff and probably had not heard it. Some one coughed, however, and feet shuffled here and there.

‘*I* know it’s true, and some of you ‘ere in front of me know it’s true,’ the speaker resumed quickly, his eyes alight and intense conviction in his tone and manner, ‘but we can’t do more at first than *feel* it and be glad. All we can do is to show it in our lives. We can live it. We can feel the joy and speed and lightness of the air, and we can live it, show it. We can express it that way, leaving the words to follow in good time. And that’s a lot, for example guides the world.’

A murmur of applause greeted the emphatic statement, and Wimble, for one, was tempted to rise on his toes with waving hands and give his confession of faith in no uncertain voice. This railway guard, half quack, half prophet, this man of the people whose knowledge was as faulty as his grammar, had offered the first explanation he had yet heard of his own strange attitude to life and of his experiences since boyhood. This man, similarly, had caught his secret from the air. His exposition might be as exaggerated and wild as the critic suggested, yet it was somewhere true, he felt. The man, owing to his very ignorance perchance, had caught at the skirts of a new and mighty truth that in a century would have become a commonplace, but that at the present moment caused others with better education than himself to talk of Hanwell. Wimble felt this excitement in him — to get up before them all and say that he, too, had felt and tried to live this light, new, swift and spontaneous airy consciousness. The impulse, the generous desire to help, caught at him. Another minute and he might have been on his toes, bearing stammering witness to the truth that was in him. The lecturer himself, however, prevented.

‘We stand to-day,’ he said, using his notes again, ‘upon the cusp of the Aquarian Age. The Piscean Age lies behind us. The Zodiacal Intelligences of that Piscean Age were watery powers and water was its keynote and its symbol. It was the Age of Jesus. Now, listen, please, listen closely, for ‘istory bears me out.’

He moved nearer to the edge of the platform, and heads were craned forward to lose no word.

‘The sun,’ he said, in a lowered tone, ‘entered the sign of Taurus in the days of our pre’istoric Adam. That was the Taurian Age. Next came the Arian Age — about the time that Abra’am lived, and with Aries the ram replaced the bull. With the rise of the Roman Empire the sun entered the sign of Pisces, and the Piscean Age began. It took the fish for its symbol. That was the Christian Dispensation with its new outlook and attitude, its new powers, its new type of consciousness. Jesus introduced water baptism, and water became the symbol of purification. It was a watery sign, as I told you. While it lasted, as you’ll notice — the last 2000 years — this Piscean Age, with a fish for its symbol, ‘as certainly been one of water, and the many uses of that element ‘ave been emphasised, and sea and lake and river navigation have been brought to a ‘igh degree of efficiency.’

He waited for the impression this was bound to produce. It was evidenced by deep silence, broken only by the rustle of paper and soft garments.

‘Jesus Himself referred to the beginning of this Aquarian Age in these words,’ he continued solemnly and reverently, ‘as you’ll find in one of Wisdom Books they don’t include in our own Bible:

‘And then the man who bears the pitcher will walk forth across an arc of ‘eaven; the sign and signet of the Son of Man will stand forth in the Eastern sky. The wise will then lift up their heads and know that the redemption of the earth is near.’

He paused significantly. Then he added, his hands raised aloft and his eyes turned toward the ceiling:

‘We’re already in it, the new Dispensation, the New Age — air.’

‘Compressed air,’ added the critic, after his long silence.

‘Bravo! bravo!’ exclaimed Wimble, unable to suppress himself.

‘But surely a new Age can only begin in each person individually, and not in any other sense,’ put in the thin voice that had spoken once before.

Unperturbed, the speaker repeated with deep emphasis, his eyes and hands still raised aloft:

‘And air means spiritual. The Aquarian Age is pre-eminently a spiritual age; and its meaning may now be apprehended by multitudes of people, ‘ungry for truth, who will now come — are already coming — into an advanced spiritual consciousness. Our air-bodies is being quickened.'

The last few words seemed to produce a strange effect upon the chief critic. Apparently they enraged him. He fidgeted, half rising from his chair as though about to make a violent speech in reply. In the end, however, he did nothing beyond shrugging his shoulders, with a muttered 'Consciousness indeed! Why, you don't even know the meaning of the word!' He leaned back in his seat, unwilling to stay, yet too annoyed to leave; he resigned himself, keeping his great onslaught perhaps for the close of the meeting. Then, suddenly changing his mind, he leaped to his feet. But the lecturer was before him. In a ringing voice that held his audience and drowned the interruption, he dominated the room. He was about to satisfy the anticipation raised some ten minutes earlier. He took his listeners into his confidence.

'Now, ladies and gentlemen,' he cried, 'or brothers and sisters, as I'd prefer to call you if you've no objection, wot is it we Aquarians means when we talk of air, when we speak of air as the sign of the New Age? We call it spiritual. Wot do we reely mean by that? 'Ow can we show it in our lives? Let us come down to plain words, the language of the street.'

There was again a rustle, as pencils and paper were prepared anew for taking notes.

'It means this — to put it quite plainly, simply: It means living lightly, carelessly, spontaneously, as a bird does, so to speak, 'oose 'ome is air and 'oo works 'ard without taking too much thought. It means living by faith and that means—' he uttered the next words with great emphasis— 'living by the subconsciousness — by intuition.'

'A bird's heart,' he cried, 'lies in the centre of its body. *We* must live from the centre too.

'That's the secret, and that's the first sign that you're getting it. There you get the first 'int of this new Aquarian Age, and from the moment we entered it — not so long ago, forty years or so — this idea of the Subconsciousness 'as showed itself as the key-word of the day. It's everywhere already. Even the scientific men 'as got it. Bergson began with 'is intuition, and professors like Frood of Vienna and Young of Zurich caught on like lightning. William

James too, and a ‘undred others. Why, it’s got down into our poietry and novels, and even the pore old dying pulpits ‘ave a smack at it just to try and keep their heads above water.

‘To live by your subconscious knowledge, instead of by your slow old calculating reason, means a new, airy way of living. And it’s spiritual, I say, because it stands for the beginning of a new knowledge and understanding, and therefore a new sympathy with each other. With everybody! All sorts of powers lie in our subconsciousness, powers of the ‘ole race, powers forgotten and powers to come, and it’s in touch with greater powers still that so far ‘ave been beyond us as a race. All knowledge ‘ides there — God.

‘And if you rely upon it, it will guide you — and guide you quickly, surely, in a flash. Nor you won’t go wrong either, for in your subconsciousness you touch everybody else; we all join on down there — within — and that’s where the Kingdom of ‘eaven lies — and if you rely upon the Kingdom of ‘eaven it will guide you right. We all touch ‘ands if you go deep enough, and that means brotherhood, don’t it? For it means sympathy, understanding, love. The ‘ottentot’s your neighbour.’

He stepped back, squaring his shoulders and drawing a deep breath as he surveyed his audience.

‘Well, it’s only just beginning. Some of us, many of us likely, don’t know about it yet, don’t *feel* it. We’re only ankle-deep as yet. And those ‘oo ain’t aware of this great subconscious life, no amount of argument or explanation won’t put it into them. A new Age touches individuals first, one ‘ere, one there. The end of the world, as some call it, ‘appens to each heart alone, as somebody said just now. But it’ll come to all in the end. It’s coming now. We’re in Aquarius, and sooner or later we’ll *all* get into the air and know it. And the new inventions, the new tricks everywhere, as I told you, are paving the way already on the physical plane so that even the hintellectuals and materialists are bound to feel its bigger side before long.

‘Air! Why, think of it, and wot a lovely symbol it is! It’s everywhere. It flows. Nothing belonging to the sky is stationary. It all moves. Light grows and wanes, wind falls and rises, clouds, birds pass rapidly across it. It ‘as nothing rigid about it anywhere. Breath is the first sign of life in your body when you’re born, and the breath of the spirit is the first sign of life in your soul when you are born again. And the bird, remember, the natural in'abitant of air, 'as its heart in the centre of its body!

'The subconscious powers, the subconscious life — yes, that's the secret. To rely upon it, live and act by it, means to act with the 'ole world at once and know the 'appiness of brother'ood and love. It means to lose yourself — your little conscious, surface, limited self — in the bigger ocean of the air. 'Itherto it's been called living by faith and prayer. That's all right enough, but it ain't enough. That means touching the subconscious at moments only. We want to touch it always and every minute. In this new Aquarian Age it will be at our fingers' ends, so to speak. The "sub" will disappear. The subconscious will become the conscious. We shall know everything, and everything at once; we shall be everywhere, and everywhere at once.' He raised his voice. 'We shall be ONE, and know that we are ONE. We shall 'ave spiritual consciousness.'

The noise of an overturned chair was heard. Outside the shrill blast of distant factory whistles suggested lunch and food. The critic, pushing hastily past the hushed sitters near him, made his way to the door. As he reached the passage he turned. 'That's the best recipe for hysteria I ever heard,' he cried back, 'and the sooner you're safe in Hanwell, the better for the world!' — and vanished.

It was an abrupt and violent interruption, but yet it startled no one; the thread of interest was not broken; a few heads turned to look, and then faced towards the lecturer again. A general sigh was heard, expressive of relief. The audience settled itself more comfortably, and a deeper concentration of interest was felt at once. The removal of the hostile element produced an immediate increase of attentive earnestness. It showed first in the lecturer's face; his eyes grew fixed and steady, his manner more confident, more impressive, and his tone of voice had a more authoritative ring than before.

He leaned forward with an air of mysterious intimacy, as though about to share a secret knowledge he had not dared to divulge before a scoffer. There was a booming note about his voice that thrilled. The charlatan that hides in every human soul slipped out, unconsciously perhaps but unmistakably. It was this, possibly, that affected Wimble as he watched and waited, so eagerly attentive; or, possibly, it was some uncanny anticipation of what he was about to hear. An emotion, at any rate, and one shared by others in the small packed room, rose suddenly in his soul. A little shiver ran down his spine, he shuddered, as once before he had shuddered in Maida Vale.

‘Before we close this little meeting,’ the deep voice rang, ‘and before you go your way and I go mine, per’aps not to come across each other’s path again for a tidy while — I want to just say this. It’s as well we all should know it, so as we are prepared.’

He fixed his glowing eyes on one of his audience — on Wimble, it so happened — and went on slowly, choosing his words with care and uttering them with a conviction that was not without its impressiveness:

‘I want to warn you all, to give you this little word of warning. For I’m led to believe — in fact, I may say it’s been given me — that a dying Age — don’t die without an effort. An expiring Age, so to say, seeks to prolong its life. With the result that, just before it passes, its characteristics is first intensified. The Powers that have ruled over us for 2000 years make themselves felt with extra strength; and these Powers, seeing that their time is past, are no longer right. They’re no longer what we need. Good and right in their time, they now seem wrong, and out of place. They’re evil. We see them as evil, any’ow, though they make for good in another way. I don’t know if you foller me. Wot I mean is that, when an old Age is passing and a new Age coming to birth — there’s conflict.’

There was a renewed rustling, as this sentence was written down on many half-sheets that had so far been blank. But Wimble had no need to make a note of it. He remembered that walk down Maida Vale of several months before, and again the singular shudder passed like a little wind of ice along his nerves.

‘Conflict means trouble,’ continued the speaker amid a solemn hush, ‘and nothing big ever comes to birth without labour and travail and pain. We must expect this pain and travail, and be ready for it. A new ‘eaven and a new earth will come, but they won’t come easily. They will be preceded by a mighty effort of the old ones to keep going a bit longer first. A ‘uge up’eaval, physically and spiritually, will take place first — on the earth, that is, as well as in our ‘earts — before we all get caught up to meet the Lord in the air.’

His sentences grew slower and more emphatic, more charged with conviction and with warning. He made privileged communications. There were pauses between his utterances:

‘I warn you, I prepare you, so that when it comes you will be ready and prepared — not for yourselves, mind, but so as you may ‘elp others wot won’t quite realise quite wot it all means.

‘For there’ll be *sacrifice* as well.

‘There’s always a sacrifice when a New Age catches ‘old of our old earth, and our old earth will shake and tremble in the re-making, and some of us will shake and tremble too. You’ll feel, maybe, that shudder in advance and know what it means. Signs and wonders, men’s ‘earts failing them for fear, and the instability of all solid things. ‘There will be *death*.

‘Death takes its ‘undreds, aye, its thousands at a time like that, and many — the best and finest usually — go out before their time, as it seems. But — mark this — they go out — to *h*elp!

‘There comes in the sacrifice.

‘They’ll be taken off to ‘elp, taken into the air, but taken away from those they leave be’ind.’

His tone grew lower, and a deeper hush passed over the little crowd before him. There was dull fire in his eyes. An atmosphere of the prophet clothed him.

‘It’s just there,’ he emphasised, ‘that we — we who know — can ‘elp.

‘For we know that death is nothing more nor less than slipping back into your own subconsciousness, and so becoming greater and finer and more active — more useful, too, and with grander powers — than we ever ‘ad in our limited, imperfect bodies. And we know that this separate life, ended at death, is nothing but an episode in our universal life which death can never put an end to because it is imperishable. We are part of the universe, not of this little planet alone.

‘There’ll be mourning, but we can ‘elp dry their tears; there’ll be terror, but we can take their fear away; there’ll be loneliness, but we can show them — show ’em by the way we live — that there’ll be reunion better than before. We all meet in the sub-consciousness, and know each other face to face. For it means reunion in the air, which is everywhere at once and universal, and stands for that denial of space and time — that spiritual haffirmation — we Aquarians call NOW.’

He held out his hands as in blessing over the intently listening and expectant throng. Gazing above their heads into space, he appeared to concentrate his thoughts a moment. Then his face lightened, as though his mental effort had succeeded.

‘After every meeting,’ he then went on, but this time in a conversational tone, as friend to friend, the prophet and his flock put aside, ‘it is our custom, as you know, to find a carrying-away Sentence. Something you can take away and remember easily. Something that sums up all we’ve talked about together. Something to keep in your minds and think about every minute of the day until we meet again. Something you can try to live in your daily lives.’

He waited a moment to ensure that all listened closely.

‘The sentence I’ve chosen this time will ‘elp you to remember all we’ve said to-day. It’s a symbol that includes the ‘ole promise of the air that’s so soon to be fulfilled in us.

‘I’ll now give it out — if yer all ready.’ The expectant, eager, attentive faces were a convincing proof that all were ready and listening attentively.

With a happy and confiding smile, the speaker then pronounced the carrying-away sentence:

‘The ‘eart of a bird lies in the *centre* of its body.’

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CARRYING-AWAY SENTENCE stuck in Wimble's mind as he journeyed back to the flat on the top of a motor omnibus with Joan, for it expressed a concrete fact, a fact that he could understand. 'The heart of a bird lies in the centre of its body,' he murmured to himself happily. It gave him a secret thrill of joy and wonder. His own heart, thrust to the left though it was, felt ageless. The happy, invincible optimism of the bird was in him. To live from the centre was a neat way of expressing what he had been trying to do for so long, and he had not been far wrong in taking the life and attitude of a bird for his symbol. It meant neglecting the strained, laborious effort of the calculating mind, and leaning for help and guidance upon something bigger, deeper, less fallible than the strutting conscious self. The railway guard labelled it the subconscious, that mysterious region in which every soul is linked to every other soul, involving thus that comprehensive sympathy which is the beginning possibly of brotherhood. He phrased it wildly, but that was what he meant. The bigger self that lay like an ocean behind his separate, personal *thought* shared everything with every one. The joy, the wisdom of the birds! The elasticity and brilliance of the universal air! The divine carelessness that flows from living at the centre!

'Flow, fly, flow!
Wherever I am, I *go*;
I live in the air
Without thought or care . . . !'

'Daddy, you mustn't hum in public. It sounds so unusual, and people are staring,' Joan reminded him. 'And you'll forget your hat and leave it behind, if you don't put it on.'

He smoothed his ruffled hair and placed his black billycock upon it.

'So you've woken up at last, have you?' he replied, laughing at her. 'You slept through most of the lecture. What did you make of it, — eh?'

She looked at him with a puzzled expression in her soft, bright eyes.

'D'you think it was all nonsense? Was it true, I mean?' he repeated.

‘He didn’t lie, but he didn’t tell the truth,’ she said at once. ‘Besides, I wasn’t asleep. I heard it all.’

‘You mean he didn’t explain it properly?’ he asked.

‘It was the wrong way,’ she said.

‘Ah! words — —’

‘He ought to have danced it,’ she said suddenly with decision. ‘It’s too quick, too flashing for words. *I* could have shown it to them easily, by dancing it.’

He remembered the amazing ideas her dancing gestures on the roof had once put into him. Then, thinking of the teachers of the world conveying their meaning by dancing and gestures from the pulpits, he chuckled.

‘Shall we join the Aquarians?’ he asked slyly. ‘What do you say to becoming members of their Society?’

She took her answer out of his own mind, it seemed.

‘If you belong, you belong. You needn’t join. Societies are only cages, Daddy. You’re caught and you can’t fly on.’

‘We could spend the money better, yes,’ he mumbled. ‘Garden-gloves for mother, a lawn-mower, a hurricane lantern for stormy nights or something — —’

‘Much, much better,’ she agreed.

‘When once we’ve found the cottage,’ he went on vaguely.

‘It’s there,’ she interrupted instantly. ‘Let’s get the hurricane lantern. I’d love to choose it with you. May I?’

Wimble looked about him as the heavy vehicle lumbered clumsily along its swaying journey. The soft autumn sunshine of hazy gold lay on the streets, but there was a nip, a sharpness in the air that put an electric sparkle into everything. The solid world was really lighter than it looked. There was a covert brilliance ready to dart forth into swift-rushing flame. He felt the throbbing sheen and rustle in the golden light, and his heart sang with joy above the heavy streets and pavements. He was aware of a point of view that almost denied weight to inert matter, making the dead mass of the universe alive and dancing. This nip and sparkle in the air interpenetrated all these fixed and heavy things, these laborious structures, these rigid forms, dissolving them into flowing, ever-changing patterns of fluid loveliness. He saw them again as powder, the parks and road blown everywhere, the pavements lifted, the walls wide open to the sky. The solid earth became transparent, flooded with light and air. It seemed etherealised. It spread great golden wings towards the blazing sun and limitless sky. Air knew no fixed and rigid forms. Societies, of course, were only cages. He saw the huge cage of the earth blow open. Humanity flew out at last. . . .

'We'll get three, and at once,' he remarked, referring to the lanterns. 'And a pair of hedge-clippers as well, a ladder for the fruit trees, two pair of best garden-gloves for mother, and a revolving summer-house where she can follow the sun — and sit in peace.'

That ridiculous lecture acted like some mental cuckoo that had chucked him finally out of the nest into the air. If he did not actually fly, he certainly walked on air, with the same faith that had once been claimed for walking on the sea. He became a daring and a happy soul. Air represented a confident and free imagination in which everything was possible. Earth he still loved, but only as a place to land on and take off from. Imagination and intuition must still, at his present stage, be backed and checked by reason; earth was still there to sleep on. But that spontaneous way of living which is air, using the ground merely as the swallow does — a swallow that exists in space and almost entirely neglects its legs — this careless and new attitude leaped forward in him towards realisation. A bird, he remembered, though apparently so free and careless, works actually with an ordered precision towards great purposes.

He seemed conscious suddenly of a complete and absolute independence, beyond the need of any one's comprehension. Few, if any, would understand him, but that did not matter. The need to be understood was left behind, below. He had soared beyond the loneliness even of a god. He felt very humble, but very happy. And the loneliness would be but temporary, for the rest of the world would follow before long. . . .

The motor omnibus lurched and stopped with grunting noises. Wimble, led by his more nimble daughter, climbed down the narrow spiral stair. He glanced upwards longingly as he descended. He saw the flashing birds.

‘The brotherhood of the air,’ he thought. ‘Oh, how the earth must yearn for it!’

‘There’s an ironmonger,’ cried Joan, pointing across the road. And they went in to buy the hurricane lanterns. They assumed, that is, that the cottage was already found.

Then, after luncheon, while Mother criticised the garden-gloves, observing with regard to the hurricane lanterns that it was ‘living backwards, rather, to buy things before we have the place to use them in,’ he took from the book-shelf his copy of the *Queen of the Air* and read once again a favourite passage. It was thumb-marked, the margin scored by his pencil long years ago.

‘ . . . the bird, in which the breath, or spirit, is more full than in any other creature and the earth-power least. . . . It is little more than a drift of the air brought into form by plumes; the air is in all its quills, it breathes through its whole frame and flesh, and glows with air in its flying, like a blown flame: it rests upon the air, subdues it, surpasses it, outraces it; — *is* the air, conscious of itself, conquering itself, ruling itself.

‘Also, into the throat of the bird is given the voice of the air. All that in the wind itself is weak, wild, useless in sweetness, is knit together in its song . . . unwearied, rippling through the clear heaven in its gladness, interpreting all intense passion through the soft spring nights, bursting into acclaim and rapture of choir at daybreak, or lisping and twittering among the boughs and hedges through heat of day, like little winds that only make the cowslip bells shake, and ruffle the petals of the wild rose. . . .’

His reading was interrupted by the entrance from the passage of his wife, her face heavily veiled; she was dressed for the street, in solemn black; she wore a mysterious yet very confident expression. ‘Joe dear, I’m going out. I have an appointment at three o’clock sharp. I mustn’t be late.’

He watched her with an absent-minded air for a moment, as though he saw her for the first time almost; all he could remember about her just then was that during the cinema performance she had said with proud superiority: ‘I’m glad I’m English.’ Then, recognising his wife, he realised that she was going to confession, of course, for he guessed it by the way she folded her hands, waiting patiently for a word of commendation.

‘All right, my dear,’ he said, ‘and good luck. You’ll be back for tea, I suppose.’ He rose and kissed her on her heavy veil, and she went out with a smile. ‘I’m so glad,’ he added.

‘That’s her stage,’ he thought to himself, ‘and the critic and the Aquarian quack have their stage, and I have mine. It’s all right.’

There were immense tracts of experience in everybody, unknown, unused, but waiting to be known and used. Some people lived in one tract only, caged and fixed, unaware of the vast freedom a little farther outside themselves. Different people knew different tracts, each positive that his own particular tract alone was right — as for him, assuredly, it was — thinking also that it was the only one, the whole, which, assuredly, it was not. There was, however, assuredly, a point of view, the bird’s, that saw all these tracts at once, the boundaries and divisions between them mere walls erected by the mind in ignorance. The bird’s-eye view looked down and saw the landscape whole, the divisions unreal, the separation false. This attitude was the attitude of air; air unified; the unity of humanity was realised. Consciousness, focussed hitherto upon little separate tracts with feeble light, blazed upon all at once with shining splendour.

It was true. A great world-telepathy was being ‘engendered,’ barriers of creed and class were crumbling, democracy was combing out its mighty wings; the ‘tracts’ inhabited by Mother, Tom, the quack, the critic, by himself and by Joan, by that narrow snob and gossip at the tea-party who asked, ‘Who *was* she?’ — all these would be seen as adjoining little strips belonging to the universal air which knows neither strips, divisions nor boundaries.

A great light blazed into his heart. He wondered. Apparently it was the little, simple, insignificant people, and not the great minds of the day, who were the first to become aware of air. The great ones were too rigid. Air rushed first into the hearts of the uneducated, the ignorant, the unformed and informal — the little children of the race. It has been ever so. The learned, knowing too much, solid with facts and explanations, are no longer fluid. They neither flow nor fly. The brotherhood of air, he grasped, would come first through the untaught babes and little children of earth’s vast, scattered family.

And, while these vague reflections danced across his mind, dropping their curious shadows upon his own little tract of experience, his wife was whispering her sins to another mind who should forgive them for her, the critic was writing a vehement pamphlet to prove that he alone was right, Tom, in the office, was scheming new plans for making money that should satisfy his natural desires for pleasure and self-indulgence, the quack was elaborating Zodiacal Explanations in his studio next to his Private Consulting Room, and Joan ——

He listened. A light, tripping step went down the corridor, passed his door and began to climb the ladder to the open skylight in the hall. He listened closely, eagerly, a new rhythm catching at his heart. The little song came to him faintly through the obstructing barriers of brick and mortar. He caught the tap and tremble of her feet upon the roof.

Joan sang and danced above the world.

CHAPTER XVII.

'CARELESS AS A bird! Bird-happy and bird-wise,' he murmured to himself as they moved in a month later. For he had found a cottage as by instinct. It was not on the agents' list of modern, ugly and comfortless cages, but was an old-world little place that had caught his eye by the corner of the lane as he returned to the country station, weary and almost faith-less, after a vain inspection. A white board suddenly peered at him through the branches of a yew, there were roses up the walls, a tiny fountain played on the lawn, and beyond he caught a glimpse of a neglected orchard, sloping fields of yellow ragwort, and a stream. The stream, moreover, ran under the road just there, so that he could look down into it from the old stone bridge. The water ran swiftly, but deep enough to grow long weeds of green and gold that swung with the current like thick fairy hair. Two or three silver birches shone and rustled by the wicket-gate. He went in. A robin hopped up, inspected him, and hopped away into the shadow of the yew.

The interior seemed to him like a bit of forest — the beams, the panelling, the dark, stained settles. Yet there was a bathroom, too, the kitchen was large and light, the bedrooms airy, the living-rooms just right in size and number. The front windows looked out across the rose-plot to the little green where the geese were gabbling, while the back ones opened straight into the orchard, where fruit and walnut trees stood ankle deep in uncut grass. The windows, too, were wide and high, letting in big stretches of the sky. Also, there were a mulberry-bush and several heavy quince trees. And the stream ran singing and bubbling between the orchard and the farther fields, where, amid the sprinkled gold of the ragwort, scuttled countless rabbits.

Moreover, it was cheap, the drains were safe, the church was as picturesque as an old-fashioned Christmas card, and the vicar was brother to a peer. Thus there was something for everybody. The nest was found. Mother inspected it in due course and gave her modified approval; Tom said it 'sounded ripping,' he would 'run down for week-ends' whenever he could;

and Joan, catching her breath when she saw it first on the afternoon of a golden-brown October day, felt a lump in her throat and moisture in her eyes, such happiness rose in her breast. She stood with her father in the sandy lane, — Mother had gone inside at once, — the larches rustling and the excited geese examining their stiff town clothing from behind. On the topmost branch of an apple tree a big brown thrush was singing its heart out over the garden, its small packed outline silhouetted against the pale blue sky. Joan caught her father's hand.

'Look!' she whispered, pointing. 'Listen!'

He did so. He felt the strange excitement in the child. Her lips were parted and her shining eyes turned heavenwards a moment. The thrush poured forth its liquid song deliciously; and the sound sank into his heart as though it expressed the full happiness of the air that welcomed them to the cottage and the garden. He experienced surely something of the soft air-magic as he stood there watching, listening. The natural joy and sweetness of it touched him deeply. And his daughter sang a strange thing then, murmuring it to herself. He only just caught the curious words:

'There's a bird for me
On the apple tree!
It's explaining all the garden!'

Up the scaffolding of the quaint phrases he passed, as it were, with her into the clear air beside the singing bird: that scrap of nonsense 'explaining all the garden' did the trick. A sack of meanings seemed emptied before him out of the sweet October sky. The interesting, valuable ideas in life began, he realised, just where language stops — intelligible, sensible language, that is. Then came either poetry, legend, nonsense, or else mere silence. Joan used a combination of the former.

'Words are parvenu people,' he recalled a Primer sentence, 'as compared with thought and action. Communications between God and man must always be either above or below them; for with words come in translations.'

'Explaining all the garden!' The touch of nonsense brought a thousand 'translations' into his mind. The air was full of fluttering meanings that showered about him. He balanced aloft on the twig beside the singing thrush, his sight darting, as with the bird's-eye view, upon recent happenings. He read various translations instantaneously.

In front of him stood the cottage and garden, the fields and trees and stream he had dreamed about with his daughter — an accomplished, solid fact. It had come as by magic, materialised by thought and desire, and yet, as Mother said, 'by chance.' But the chance included method, because Fate obeyed a confident Belief. And circumstances were moulded or modified by faith. He and Joan somehow held the sure sweetness of fulfilment in their minds from the beginning; they had always believed, indeed had known, the cottage would be found. And it had been found. He had not fussed nor worried; there had been no friction due to the grit of doubt. Like his queer, spontaneous daughter, he had believed in his dream — and at the same time kept his eyes wide open like a hawk.

As he stood there, listening to the song of the thrush and aware of its poise on the swaying twig balanced so steadily, yet alert for spontaneous flight in any direction, these fluttering translations of the child's nonsense words shot through him. The joy of the happy thrush shone in his heart, explaining the garden that was life.

The bird, at that moment, flew off with a whirr of wings, still singing as it vanished with an undulating swoop over the roof towards the orchard. Across the patch of watery blue sky he had been watching shot half a dozen swallows, then intent only upon darting insects, although on the eve of their huge journey of ten thousand miles. Beyond them two plover tumbled like blown leaves towards the ground, yet rising again instantly before they touched it . . . and into his hand he felt Joan's fingers creep softly. He looked down into her eyes, moist with excitement, joy, and wonder. The magic of the air seemed all about them, in their minds and hearts and very bodies even.

'You've found a real nest, Daddy, but we can travel everywhere from here.' It was said simply, as though a bird had learned to speak. 'Think of the journeys we shall make — just by staying here!'

'The cottage seems swung in the branches, doesn't it?' he replied. 'Come on, now; let's go inside.' And he walked across the lawn, lifting his feet quickly, lightly, as though he feared his weight might hurt the earth, yet still more as though he might any instant spring into the air and follow the thrush, the plover, or the swallows.

Upon the threshold of the open door, at that minute, Mother faced them. Having made her inspection of the arrangements and the furniture, all that the workmen had done in the last few days, she came out to report. She stood there very solidly, her feet in goloshes, planted tenaciously upon the damp October earth. She was smiling contentedly; behind her gleamed the white apron of the parlourmaid. Tea obviously was ready and she was waiting for them to come in. A fire burned pleasantly in the dining-room, glinting on a clean white table-cloth. There were buttered toast and a jug of cream — solid realities both. This atmosphere of wholesome, earthly comfort glowed about her. Her very smile conveyed it.

‘Mother’s settled down already,’ Joan whispered. ‘She likes it! That means Tom’ll like it too. But she’ll live indoors.’

In his own mind, however, rose another thought, although he agreed with what she said. He was thinking how odd it was that Mother always appeared to be settled in the mouth of a hole. She stood, framed by the dark doorway, as though a deep burrow stretched behind her and below. The simile of the nervous badger, peering forth upon a dangerous upper world, passed through him. A great tenderness rose in his heart. Mother, he knew, though she had done no actual work, had felt the move a heavy strain. To dig a new hole, of course, was a dusty and laborious job, whereas to flutter across a few fields to another tree was but a careless joy.

‘I’ve been through all the rooms,’ she said cautiously, as they went down the passage, ‘and everything seems very nice indeed, Joe. The wood makes it seem a bit dark, perhaps, but it’s all very respectable. And the parlour looks really quite distinguished. Tea’s laid for us in the dining-room.’

They went in; the fire shone brightly; the lamp was lit. Mother moved towards the great silver tea-pot, letting herself down with a sigh into the black horsehair arm-chair. It was as though she went down into the earth. He sat with his cup of tea in the wide settle of the ingle-nook, and Joan, having first seen to her parents’ wants, then took the corner facing him.

They settled in. Yet this settling was characteristic of the family, for whereas Mother settled down, Mr. Wimble and his daughter became unsettled. That is, they felt restless. Mother, with the security of a comfortable home and comfortable income at her back, cropped her food safely, yet wondered why she felt dull and bored and lonely. There is no call to describe the actions and reactions of her familiar type to the conditions of the quiet country life, and her chief tragedy that winter was perhaps that when ‘his lordship, the vicar,’ called, he surprised her in old garden clothes, the fire in the ‘distinguished parlour’ (kept unused against just this particular event) unlighted, so that she was obliged to receive him in the dark dining-room with the ungentlemanly settles.

Joan and her father were unsettled for the very reason that made her settled. Mother felt her feet. They felt their wings.

A week after the settling in, their restless feeling, wholly unanticipated, came to a head. The windy skies were already calling the swallows together swiftly, collecting their mobile squadrons in a few hours for the grand southern tour. And these amazing birds seemed nothing less than an incarnation of the air itself. There is nothing of earth about them anywhere; their feet are too weak to stand on the ground; every darting turn they make is a movement of the entire creature, rather than of the head first and then the body; they have no necks, their bullet heads turn simultaneously with the tail, and all at once. Joan and her father watched them daily going about their careless, windy life, gathering on the telegraph wires, giving the young ones hints, on the wing to the very last minute. They had no packing-up to do.

‘They’ll be off soon now,’ said Joan. ‘Wherever they are, they go — don’t they?’ There was a tinge of restless desire in her eyes as she followed their movements.

‘A few days, yes,’ said her father. ‘About the middle of the month they leave. *They* know right enough.’

And two days later — it was October 15th — Joan woke at dawn and looked out of her open window. The twittering of many thousand voices had called her out of sleep, but something in her heart had called her too. It was very early, the daylight of dawn, yet not the daylight quite, and everywhere, from fields and trees, the chorus of bird-life was audible. Birds sing their best and loudest always in that half-hour which precedes the actual dawn. The volume is astonishing. ‘As the real daylight comes, it sinks and almost ceases, and never in the whole twenty-four hours is there such an hour again.’ The entire air seemed calling ‘good-bye and safe return’ to those about to leave.

Joan ran and woke her father. ‘They’re off,’ she whispered, as he crawled out of his warm bed, careful not to waken his wife. ‘Come and say good-bye.’

The peculiar joy and mystery of early morning was in the quiet house and in the sharp tang of the fresh, cool autumn air. In nightgown and pyjamas, a single rug about their shoulders, they leaned out of the upper window. The ivy rustled just beneath them on the wall, there was a whisper among the yellow walnut leaves to their right, the orchard trees hung still and motionless, breathing out the perfume of earth and fruit and heavy dew.

The sky, however, was alive; it seemed all motion; even the streaky clouds tinged with pale colour looked like stretched wings mightily extended. And the vague murmur of a flock of birds rose everywhere. There was a hurricane of wings above the world, as the armies of the swallows came carelessly together. They left in scattered groups, but with every party that left, another instantly assembled, born out of empty space. Multitudes took the wing towards the sea, while other darting multitudes collected instantly behind them. The air, indeed, was alive and whirring into a symbol of lovely, rushing flight — swarming, settling, turning, wheeling in a turmoil of ascending and descending feathers that yet expressed a design of ordered beauty. Myriad clusters formed, then instantly dispersed again, threaded together upon one invisible pattern; now herded into a wedge, shaped like a wild black comet, now circling, streaming, dividing, melting away into a living cloud. The evolutions were bewildering.

As the eastern horizon began to burn with red and gold, the wings took colour faintly, brightening as an upward slant revealed their pallid under-sides, then darkening again as they tilted backwards. The swallows alternately focussed and dispersed. Separate hordes, turning at high velocity with one accord, shot forth and away to the south. They rose, they sank, they vanished. They went first to the coast; for their migration, led by the infallible sense of orientation which is subconscious knowledge, takes place chiefly in the night — in darkness. Within a brief half-hour the whole of the immense army disappeared. The sky was still and silent, motionless and empty. The swallows were gone.

‘They’ve taken part of me with them,’ whispered Joan, ‘part of my warmth,’ and she drew the rug closer about her shoulders as the October sun came up above the misty fields.

‘They’ll be in Algeria to-morrow,’ sighed her father, ‘and I’d like to be there too.’ His thought went back to the sun-drenched garden where nightingales sang in the February moonlight. . . . The old romance stirred in him painfully. ‘Mother, poor old Mother,’ he murmured to himself, ‘she seemed so wonderful then. How strange!’ He felt himself old suddenly. He felt himself caught, caged — stuck.

‘That’s where I was born, wasn’t it?’ Joan asked, catching the sentence. She straightened herself suddenly, throwing the rug aside; the sun shone into her face and on her golden hair that fell rippling over her nightgown. The light gleamed, too, in her moistened eyes. He saw joy steal back upon her. ‘But, Daddy,’ she exclaimed with an odd touch of confident wonder in her voice and look, ‘we *can* be there just the same, if we want to.’ She raised herself on her toes a moment as though she were going to dance or fly. In the pale gold light of the sunrise she looked like some ethereal bird of fire rising into the air.

‘We can be everywhere — everywhere at once — really! Don’t you see? We always want to be somewhere else anyhow. That proves it.’

And as she said it, he remembered the cinema, and felt his wings again; he was free, uncaged; of course he could go anywhere, everywhere at once almost. He knew himself eternally young. He realised Air, that which is everywhere at once and cannot age. Earth obeys time, grows old, changes, and eventually dies; but air is ever changeless, free of time altogether, unageing. It cannot wear away, it is invisible, omnipresent. The wings of the spirit opened in him, rose into space and light, then flashed, darting after the amazing swallows. ‘Wherever I am, I go,’ he hummed, as he went softly back along the cold passage and crept cautiously into bed beside his wife, who, heavily breathing still, had not moved since he left her, and lay in ignorance of the sunrise, as also of the army of happy wings that by now were already out of England and far across the sea.

And, later in the day, as he stood with her near a gravel-pit beside the road, watching a colony of busy starlings, she objected: ‘What a noise and fuss about nothing! What a nuisance they are, Joe. *Do* come on, dear. There’s really nothing to watch, and I want to get in and change my things in case any callers come.’

He remembered a passage about starlings written by a strenuous big-game hunter, who yet had the air-magic in his blood. He quoted it to her, as best he could, and she said it was pretty:

‘Happy birdies! What a bore all morality seems, as one watches them. How tiresome it is to be high in the scale (and human)! Those who would shake off the cobwebs — who are tired of teachings and preachings and heavy-high novellings, who would see things anew, and not mattering, rubbing their eyes and forgetting their dignities, missions, destinies, virtues, and the rest of it — let them come and watch a colony of starlings at work in a gravel-pit.’

‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘quite pretty. Selous got a glimpse there — didn’t he? — but only a glimpse. The great thing is to see it *all*. He forgot the swallows.’

His thought ran on, fragments becoming audible sometimes. ‘It’s all one, you see. Stars and starlings are the same one thing, only differently expressed. . . . That’s what genius does, of course. Genius has the bird’s-eye point of view. . . . It sees analogies everywhere, the underlying unity of everything — sees the similar in the dissimilar. It reduces the Many to the One,’ he added in a louder tone, as a Primer came opportunely to his support.

‘I ask you, Mother,’ he cried with enthusiasm, ‘what else is genius but that? I ask you?’

‘What?’ said Mother, as they went indoors.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WIMBLE WATCHED THE year draw to its close and run into the past. Born slowly out of sullen skies, it had shaken off the glistening pearls of April and slipped, radiant and laughing, into May; at the end of June, full-bosomed still and stately, it had begun to hasten, lest the roses hold it prisoner for ever; pausing a moment in August, it looked out with perfect eyes upon the world as from a pinnacle; then, poised and confident, began the grand descent down the red slopes of Autumn into the peace of winter and the snow.

Thus, at least, its history described itself in Wimble’s thoughts, because his little mind, standing on tiptoe, saw it whole and from above. ‘You ought to publish it, dear,’ said Mother, to whom he mentioned it one December evening round the fire. ‘You really ought to write it.’ He objected that everybody knew it just as well as he did. ‘It’s always happening to everybody, so why should I remind them?’ ‘Because they don’t see it,’ was her answer. ‘Besides, they’d think you wonderful.’ But Wimble was no writer. He shook his untidy head, yet secretly pleased with his wife’s remark that people don’t see the obvious. It was almost an air-remark. Mother was changing a little. . . . And he dozed in his chair, thinking how easily the world calls a man wonderful — he has but to startle it — and how easily, too, that man is destroyed if he believes its verdict.

With the rare exception of occasional signs like this, however, his wife had not mobilised her being radically for a big change. She retired into her prosaic background, against which, as with certain self-protecting, ultra-cautious animals and insects, she remained safely invisible. Back to the land proved rather literal for her; she wore her heavy garden-gloves with pride. At the same time her practical nature, streaked with affection, patience, and unselfishness, took on, somehow, a tiny glint of gold. Her eyes grew lighter, her movements less laborious. Fear lessened in her; joy often caught her by surprise. Sparks, though not yet flame, lit up her attitude to things, as if, close to her beloved element of earth, the country life both soothed and blessed her. She felt at home. She said ‘what’ far less frequently. This quiet, peaceful winter was perhaps for her a period of gestation. The family gathered about her more than in town.

With a buoyancy hard to define and possibly not justified, Wimble watched her. He looked out upon life about him. His health was good, but this buoyancy was based on something deeper than that; his health was good because of it. Nothing mattered, a foolish phrase of those who shirked responsibilities, was far from him; everything mattered equally expressed it better. The New Thing coming, which he and Joan called Air, lay certainly in him, though very far yet from finding full expression. The germ of it at any rate lay in him, as in her. The fact that they recognised it was proof of that. A divine carelessness took charge of his whole life and being; Mother was aware of it; even Tom responded mildly: ‘quite sets a fellow up,’ as he expressed it after his rare week-end visits, the Sunday spent in killing rabbits; ‘town’s overrated after all.’

They merged pleasantly enough with their surroundings, melting without shock into the life of neighbours, sharing the community existence, narrow, conventional, uninspired though it was. And all through the dark and clouded months, the skies emptied of birds, weighted at the low horizons, afraid to shine, yet waiting for the marvellous coming dawn — all through these heavy weeks and days Joan’s presence, flitting everywhere with careless singing and dancing, shot the wintry gloom with happy radiance. It was her spontaneous dancing that especially made Wimble stare and wonder. It conveyed meanings no words could compass, expressing better than anything else the new attitude he felt coming into life. He remembered the flood of shadowy ideas her graceful gestures had poured into him once before when he walked up Maida Vale; and that strange night in the flat when, seeing her dancing on the London roof, he was dimly aware of a new language which included even inanimate objects. The strange shudder that accompanied the vision he had forgotten. This magical rhythm was her secret. It stirred the heart, making it vulnerable to impulses from some brighter, happier state *she* knew instinctively and in advance. Mother, he noticed, watched her too, peering above her knitting-needles, moving her head in sympathy, sometimes a faint, wondering smile lighting upon her bewildered, careworn face. A real smile, however, for it was in the eyes alone, and did not touch the lips. Even Tom admired. ‘You ought to be taught,’ he said guardedly. ‘You’d touch ’em up a bit. If you did that in church the whole world would go.’ He too, without knowing it, realised that something sacred, inspired, regenerating was being whispered.

Yet Joan herself, though growing older, hardly developed in the ordinary way. She did not grow up. She remained backward somehow. She lived subconsciously, perhaps. Some new knowledge, gathering below the surface, found expression in this spontaneous dancing. With the dawn, now slowly coming, it would burst full-fledged upon the world, and the world itself would dance with joy. Meanwhile, a new bloom, a new beauty settled on the girl, and Mother proudly insisted that she ‘must go to a good photographer and have her picture taken.’ But the result was commonplace, for in the rigid black and white outline all the subtlety escaped, and, regretting the money wasted, Mother wondered why it had failed. Like the audience at the Vicarage charities when Joan danced, she watched the performance, felt a hint of strange beauty, clapped her hands and wondered ‘what it meant.’

‘It’s her life, you see,’ Wimble comforted her. ‘And you can’t photograph life. To get her real meaning, we ought to do it with her — dance it.’

‘She’s light, rather, for her age,’ replied Mother ambiguously. ‘But everybody seems to love her somehow,’ she added proudly. ‘She seems to make people happy. P’r’aps later she’ll develop and get sensible.’ She sighed, and resumed her knitting. Presently she got up to light the lamps. ‘The days are drawing out, Joe,’ she mentioned, smiling. ‘Spring will be here before we know it.’ He lifted the chimney to help her, turned up the wick, struck a match, and kissed her fondly.

The country life, it seemed, had brought them all together more, made them aware of their underlying unity, as it were. They flocked. Wimble, dressed now in wide brown knickerbockers, wearing bright stockings and brogue shoes with feathered tongues that flapped when he walked, noticed the change with pleasure. The new attitude was only in his brain as yet, but it was already stealing down into his heart. This increased sense of a harmonious manifold unity in the family impressed him, and it was Joan, he felt, who made him see it, if she was not also the cause of its coming to pass. Only some spiritual actuary could make it quite clear, but he discerned the oneness behind the different members of his family, uniting them. In this subconscious, completer self lay full understanding. There was no need to pay annual subscriptions to an Aquarian Society to realise that! Moreover, if a small family with such divergent interests and ambitions could flock and realise unity, the larger family of a village, country, nation could do the same — once the underlying unity were realised. That was the difficulty. The whole world was, after all, but a single family, humanity. . . . In his quiet country nook Wimble dreamed his great dream. He saw the nations with but a single flag, a single drum, a single anthem, true to a larger single patriotism that could never again be split up into lesser divisional patriotisms. The universal fraternity of indivisible Air was coming; the subconscious where individuals pooled their surface differences would become conscious; that was the truth, he felt, the one great thing the Aquarian lecturer had said. . . . He remembered the cinema, with its mechanical suggestion of a unification of world-experience faintly offered; he remembered the free, happy, collective life of the inhabitants of air, the natural singers of the world. The deep underlying sense of unity buried in the subconscious once realised, full understanding must follow, and with complete understanding the way was cleared for love. And it was Joan's dancing, somehow, that set the dream within his heart. The new attitude to life he imagined dawning on the world was the first hint of a coming spiritual consciousness, and for spiritual consciousness the totality of things is present. 'All at once and everywhere at once,' as she had put it. His heart swelled big within him as he dreamed. . . .

'Coal's getting very expensive,' mentioned Mother, as she leaned forward beside him to poke the fire. 'We'd better mix it with coke. You might find out, Joe. We can't go on at this rate.'

'I will, dear,' he replied. 'I'll write to Snodden and Tupps at once.' He patted her knee and got up to go to his little den where he kept his papers, books, and pipes, reflecting as he did so that it was easy enough to love the world; it was loving the individual that breaks the heart. Pricked by an instant of remorse, then, it occurred to him that a pat on the knee, as a sign of love, might be improved. He trotted back and kissed her. 'We must flock more and more and more,' he mumbled, and before she could say 'What, Joe?' he gave her another kiss and was gone to write to his coal merchant as she had suggested. He would bring back the bird into Mother's heart or die in the attempt. If the new thing he dreamed about didn't begin at home, it was not worth much. He felt happy, so happy that he longed to share it with others; he would have liked to mention it in his letter to the coal merchant. Instead, he merely began, ‘Dear Messrs. Snodden and Tupps,’ yet signed himself, ‘Yours full of faith,’ since ‘faithfully’ alone sounded insincere.

‘Odd,’ he reflected, ‘that unless happiness is shared, it’s incomplete, unsatisfying. The chief item lacks. Selfish happiness is a contradiction in terms. We are meant to share everything and be together more. There’s the instinctive proof of it.’ If the coal merchant felt equally happy, he might even have shared his coal. ‘But he’d only think me mad if I suggested that,’ thought Wimble, chuckling. ‘We can exchange coal and money and still love one another.’ He posted the letter before he could change his mind, and came back to his wife. ‘Some day,’ he said, as he sat down and poked the fire, ‘some day, Mother, and not very far off either, we shall all be sharing everything all over the world, just as birds share the air and worms and water.’ This time she did not ask him to repeat his words. She smiled a comfortable smile half-way between belief and incredulity. ‘You really think so, Joe?’ ‘It’s coming,’ he rejoined; ‘it’s in the air, you know, for I feel it. Don’t you?’ he added. He leaned nearer and softly whispered in her ear, ‘You’re happy here, aren’t you, Mother? Much happier than you used to be? ‘She smiled again contentedly. ‘The country air, Joe dear,’ she replied. ‘The bird’s flown back into you,’ he said, taking her hand and ignoring the bunch of knitting-needles that came pricking with it. ‘Perhaps,’ she mumbled, ‘perhaps. Life’s sweeter, easier than it used to be — in some ways.’ She flushed a little, while Wimble murmured to himself, yet just low for her to hear, ‘and in your heart some late lark singing, dear. A new thing is stealing down upon us all.’ ‘There’s something coming, certainly,’ she agreed. ‘Come,’ he corrected her, ‘not coming. It’s here now.’ Holding hands, they looked into each other’s eyes, as Joan’s little song and dancing steps went down the passage just outside.

CHAPTER XIX.

JANUARY SPARKLED, DROPPED like a broken icicle, and was gone; February, so eager for the sun that she shortens her days while lengthening her searching evening hours, summoned one night the tyrant winds of March; these shouted and blew the world awake, then yielded with a sigh to the kiss of April's laughter. A disturbing sweetness ran upon the world, agitating the hearts and minds of men. Yearning stirred even among deep city slums; in the country hope and desire burst into glad singing. Spring returned with her eternal magic. The hawthorn was in bloom.

The birds came back, filling the air with song, with the glance of wings and the whirr of feathers, with the gold and confidence of coming summer. The air was alive again with careless joy. Wimble responded instantly. The thrill pierced to his very marrow. Memories revived like wild-flowers, and his thoughts, shot with the gold and blue of lost romance, turned to the open air. He got some sandwiches, mounted his bicycle, and, followed by Joan, started in a southerly direction as once, long years ago, he had escaped from streets and lectures to spend a day with his beloved birds. This time, however, it was not the willow-haunted Cambridge flats that were his aim. He took Joan with him to the bare open downs above the sea.

It was a radiant morning, and a south-west wind blew gently in their faces. Wimble's felt hat fluttered behind him at the end of a string, as they skimmed down the sandy lanes towards Lewes, the smooth, scooped hollows of the downs coming nearer every minute. Their majestic outline seemed hung down from the sky itself, yet in spite of their mass they had a light, almost transparent look in the morning brilliance. They melted into the air. The noble line of them flung upwards the space as though time met eternity and disappeared.

Down the long hill into the ancient town Joan shot past him. He noticed her balance, and thought of the perfect equilibrium of a bird that shoots full speed upon its resting-place, then stops, securely poised, making no single effort to recover steadiness. For all its tiny legs, no bird wobbles or overbalances, much less trips or stumbles. Joan flew ahead of him, both hands off the bars. The careless gesture reminded him of the matchless grace of the wagtail. He laughed aloud, coasting after her unconscious ease with his own more deliberate, reasoned caution. ‘She could fly to Africa without a guide!’ he thought, aware for an instant of the great subconscious rhythm in Nature birds obeyed instinctively. No wonder their purposes were carelessly achieved. ‘She’s sure,’ he added. ‘Something very big takes care of her, and she knows it.’

They walked up the steep hill out of the town, ran to the left along a chalky lane, dipped in between the folds of grassy hills and great covering fields, Joan leading always without hesitation. Once they paused to watch the aerial evolutions of a body of plover, rising, falling, tumbling, turning at full speed without confusion or collision, as though one single telepathic sympathy operated throughout the entire mass of individuals. Instinct the Primers called it, but Wimble, recalling the Aquarian lecture, caught at another phrase — subconscious unity. It was a power, at any rate, beyond man’s conscious reasoning mind. The careless safety of the birds amazed him. ‘Air wisdom!’ he exclaimed aloud to Joan; ‘we shall all have it some day!’ It was odd how that crazy lecture had lodged ideas in his thoughts, claiming confirmation, returning again and again to his memory. They coasted down a grassy track into a village, left their bicycles behind a farmer’s gate, and sat down a moment to recover breath. It was ten o’clock in the morning.

From the tiny hamlet, where a few flint cottages and barns clustered about an ivied church, they took the path southwards up the slope. In the cup or the hills below them sheltered the toy buildings and the trees. The rooks, advertising their clumsy flight and semi-human ways, cawed noisily, playing in the gusty wind. They showed off consciously, devoid of grace. One minute the scene was visible below, a perfect miniature; the next it was hidden by a heavy shoulder of ground; the earth had swallowed it, church, houses, trees, and all. No sound was audible. Even the rooks had vanished. In front stretched an open and a naked world. The human couple paused a moment and stared. The wind went past their ears. There was a sense of immensity and freedom. There was great light. They were on the Downs.

‘Oh, Daddy,’ cried Joan, ‘we’re out of England! This is the world!’

‘And the world has blown wide open!’ he replied. ‘I feel everywhere at once!’ The gust whirled his words and laughter into space. ‘The misunderstanding of streets and houses leaves — —’ he snatched at the same time at his vanishing hat and seized the cord.

Joan flung herself backwards against the wind with arms spread out, her hat in one hand and a blue-ribbon that had tied her hair fluttering in the other. The loosened hair streamed past her neck, great strands of it flattened against the curve of her back as well, her short skirts flapping with a noise like sails. Then, turning about, she faced the gust, and everything streamed the other way. The wind clapped the clothes so tight against her slender figure that it seemed to undress her, or rather made them fit as tight and neat as feathers. Like some bird of paradise, indeed, she looked, the slim black legs straining to take the air. She began to dance.

And as he watched the golden hair against the blue, there flashed into him the memory of a distant day, when a saffron scarf had set his heart on fire with strange airy yearnings, and the blue and golden earth had danced to the tune of another spring. The tiny human outline amid this vast expanse seemed wonderful, so safe, so exquisite, caught in some rhythm born of the immensities of sky and earth and ocean. A mile to the southward lay the sea. There was a taste of clover-honey, a tang of salt, and the gorse laid its sweetness in between the two. Memories crowded upon him as he watched Joan playing and dancing. The fervour and earnestness of her pleasure exhilarated him. ‘Blithe creature,’ he said to himself, ‘you were surely born to fly!’ — and remembered Mother as she once had been and as she was now. Why had it all left her, this joyous rapture of their early days together? Had the bird flown really from her heart and into Joan? Was it not merely caged awhile? Had he himself not helped to cage it? He recalled her radiant face beside the pond among the emerald Cambridge fields, and the old first love poured back upon him in a flood.

In a lull of the wind he caught the ecstatic singing of a lark, and at the same moment Joan danced back to his side suddenly and seized his arm. Her voice, it almost seemed, carried on the trill and music of the lark. ‘It’s all new as gold,’ she cried. ‘Everybody’d live for ever up here. We must bring Mother. She’d flow fly flow all over!’

‘Dance, my child,’ he exclaimed, ‘don’t talk! Go on with your dancing. It gives me ideas.’

‘But you’re always thinking,’ she said, still breathless from her exertions. ‘It spoils everything, that thinking and thinking — —’

‘It’s not thinking,’ he interrupted, ‘it’s seeing. When you dance I see things. I see everything at once. It’s like a huge vision, yet so small and simple that it’s all in my head at once. It explains the universe somehow to me. Thinking indeed! Why, I never thought in my life — —’

‘There’s a bird for me, On the apple tree, It’s explaining all the garden,’ sang the girl, dancing away towards the yellow gorse. Her father’s words conveyed no meaning to her; she had not listened. He watched her. Her movements, he felt, obeyed the great unconscious rhythm that breathes through nature, through the entire universe, from the spinning midge to the most distant sun. Surely it must include humanity as well, these millions of separate individuals who had lost it temporarily, much as Mother had lost the ‘bird.’ He, too, was caught along with it, as though he shared it, did it, danced it. He could see what he could not say. He understood. Immense, yet at lightning speed, the meaning of Air slid with that simple dancing deep into his heart. It was unity of life everywhere that he saw interpreted, and the ease, the grace, the carelessness were due to their being mothered and inspired by Nature’s great safe rhythm. Relying on this, as birds did, there was safety, unerring intelligence, infallible guidance, flight from Siberia to Abyssinia possible without a leader. Birds migrated at night, he remembered, stopping at dawn to rest and sing, then going on again in the twilight: surer of their inner guidance in the darkness than in the blaze of daylight. Amazing symbol! Instinct, unconscious, subconscious — whatever it might be called in rigid language, this deep attitude, poised and steady, obeyed the mighty rhythm that realised the underlying unity of all that lives, of everything. Thought breaks this rhythm, which it should merely guide; reason reduces, opposes, and finally interrupts it. His backward child — and she was still a child for all her eighteen years — had somehow tapped it.

‘Dance, my child, dance on!’ he cried as he followed her. ‘You dance joy and brotherhood into my heart.’ And, looking more like a mechanical gollywog than a human being who has discovered truth, he floundered after her as a gnome might chase a butterfly. Thus, swinging along between the yellow gorse, over the tumuli, leaping the rabbit holes, he realised that the love and joy he sought and dreamed about was here and now; not in some future Golden Age, but at his very feet upon the earth. All that he meant by Air and the Airy Consciousness was *now*. This little prophet without a lyre saw it clear. Torn by the brambles, tripped by the holes, he chased his marvellous dream as once, years before, he had chased an elusive streak of gold across the Cambridge flats. He was caught by the elemental rhythm of the Downs, borrowed in its turn from the suns of uttermost space that equally obeyed and shared it.

He looked about him. Immense domed surfaces, smooth as a pausing ocean, stretched undulating to dim horizons; air lifted the earth into immaterial space; they intermingled; and sight roved everywhere without a break. Upon this vast expanse there were no details to enchain attention, blocking the rhythm of the eye; no points of interest stood up, as in mere 'scenery,' to fasten feeling to a limited area. Enjoyment soared, unconfined, on wings. He saw no barriers, no trees, no hedges or divisions; no summits startled him with 'See, how big I am!' all self-asserting items lacked. Wind, sky, and sea offered their unconditioned, limitless invitation. Even the flowers were unobtrusive, the ragwort, thyme, and yellow gorse claimed no deliberate notice, and the thistle-down flew past like air made visible. It was, in a word, this liberation from detail, snapping attention with definite objects, that set him free in mind, as Joan already proved herself free in action. Earth here was sublimated into air.

'Good heavens!' his heart cried out. 'It's here, it's now — this new thing coming from the Air!'

This deep rhythm of the landscape caught his very feet, making even his physical movements elastic, springy, sharing the rise and fall of flight expressed in the waving surface of the world about him. He no longer stumbled. Joan's dancing, though apparently she merely leapt to catch the thistle-down, or played with her flying hair and fluttering ribbon, interpreted in the gestures of her young lithe figure all he felt, but reproduced it unconsciously.

This was, indeed, not England, but the world.

‘We’re over the edge of everything,’ sang Joan, catching at his hand. ‘Hold up, Daddy! Hold up!’ She tugged him along to join her wild, happy dance. ‘You ought to sing. We’re over the edge of the world!’

‘Above it,’ he cried breathlessly. ‘We’re in the air. Look out, my dear —— !’

She had suddenly released his hand and sent him spinning with the unaccustomed momentum. Her yellow hair vanished beyond a sea of golden gorse. Her figure melted against it, she was out of sight. ‘I’m not a bird yet, at any rate,’ he gasped, settling to rest upon a convenient mound and mopping his forehead. ‘Not in body, at least. I’ve got no balance to speak of. I think too much — probably.’ He heard her singing somewhere far behind him, and again a lark overhead took up the note and bore it into space.

But with the repose of his creaking muscles and elderly body, the rhythm he had tried to dance now slipped under his ageless and untiring soul. Like a rising wind the Downs were under him and he was up. Seeking a point to settle on, his eye found only strong, subtle lines against the blue, and running along these lines, his spirit was flung forwards with them, upward into limitless space. No peak, no precipice blocked their endless utterance; they flowed, they flew, and Wimble’s heart flew with them. The sense of unity, characteristic of airy freedom, invaded his soul triumphantly with its bird’s-eye view. He saw life whole beneath him. Perhaps he dozed, perhaps he even slept; at any rate he knew this strange perspective that showed him life, with its huge freight of plodding humanity, rising suddenly into the air.

To rely upon inner, subconscious guidance was to rely upon that portion of his being — that greater portion — which obeyed spontaneously an immense rhythm of the mothering World-Spirit. Thought broke this rhythm; Reason was clever but not wise. The subconscious powers, knowing nothing, yet approached omniscience; enjoyed omnipresence, while still being *here*. In that state his individuality pooled in sympathy with all others everywhere, tapping a universal wisdom which is available to intuition but not to argument, and is so simple that a child, a bird, may know it easily, singing and dancing its expression naturally. Unerring, infallible, it is the rhythm of divinity, it is reliance upon deity.

This germ of understanding sprouted in his heart, and practice would develop it. He realised himself linked up, not alone with Nature, but with the entire human family — and hence, with Mother. The practice, it was obvious, began with Mother. He must see to it at once. Yet, though clear as crystal in his heart, in his mind it all remained confused, too shy for language, so that he recalled what the railway guard had said — it cannot yet be told, but it can be lived.

His heart flew like a bird through empty space, above all obstacles, above all barriers. There was no detail to enchain attention, nothing to obscure free vision; the soul in him, grand super-bird, took flight. The airy attitude to life became divinely clear and simple, because, with this bird's perspective, he saw life whole. Details that blocked creative energy on earth with fear and difficulty, seemed negligible after all; they were places to take off from. As wings trust carelessly for support upon the universal, ethereal element enveloping them, so could, so must, his will know faith and safety in the immense and powerful rhythms that guide that delicate thrush, the redwing, from Siberia to England every autumn, and steer Sirius unleashed, untroubled, towards his eternal goal. He watched the little wheatears, back from Africa, flitting from perch to perch of tufted grass, soon to leave for their summer in distant Norway. Obedient to this serene and mighty guidance, secure upon these everlasting wings, he saw the bird in humanity open its wings at last. A new reliance upon subconscious inspiration, linking all together, from the butterfly to the angel, flashed through him, air its symbol, wings and flight its emblem. He realised, with an instant's strange intensity, the unity of indivisible air manifested in all forms of life the planet bore.

This undetailed space about him inspired him oddly, it symbolised his dream, the dream that had haunted him since earliest youth. He looked *down* upon the world beneath him, upon the stretch of years he had flown over, upon the congested streets and houses where men lived, upon the iron conventions and traditions imprisoning their minds from escape into freedom that yet lay so close. The element of earth weighed still heavily upon them; earth builds forms; air, being form-less, offered liberty. He saw these million forms already crumbling; he saw the masses at the upper windows, on the roofs, all looking — up. With the coming of air, the day of forms was passing. The ferment, the unrest, the universal questing shone in these upturned eyes. They would not look down again. The vital force had drained out of a thousand forms which have served their day; no past tradition was absolute; they had found it out. Everywhere he saw the emergence of this new spirit, leaving behind it the empty, unsatisfying forms, yearning for fuller self-expression that the unifying ethereal element of air now promised. The roofs were strangely crowded. He saw the myriad figures. He saw that some of them already sang and danced!

Already the new mighty rhythm caught them whirling into space, each soul more and more *en rapport* with the universal world-soul. Into their hearts, with the lift of wings and a happy bird-like song, it stole subconsciously; the formulae of doctrine which change and shift were giving place to inner experience, and inner experience cannot be destroyed, since it is formless, acknowledging no boundaries, obedient to no creed. Form was dying, life was being born. . . .

He watched the tumbling plover, the sea-gulls grandly sailing, the soaring lark; the floating thistledown went past along the careless wind; he saw his un-thinking daughter’s natural, happy dancing, one and all interpreting this message of the air, this promise of liberty that brimmed his deep heart and his uneducated mind. The huge simplicity of the naked Downs made him see existence singularly as a whole; across the open sweep before him the air came sweetly, blowing the tangle of artificial living into easy rhythm and dancing everywhere.

He saw the accidental barriers between creed and sect and nation blown away. A new spiritual unity took their place, a synthetic life, the parts highly specialised, as with birds, yet the whole in perfect harmony. The day of special, exclusive dispensations had disappeared, and this organic spiritual unity, with its new religion of service, lifted the people as with mighty wings.

‘Dance on, my child! dance on!’ he cried, ‘it makes me see things whole!’ He watched her light, flying movements against the sea of yellow gorse, the hair like a saffron scarf upon the wind, her radiant face shining and laughing with the blue of endless space behind it. She did not heed his words; she danced away again; she seemed one with the tumbling plover, the sailing sea-birds, and the drifting thistle-down. She danced with the Spring, and the air was in her heart.

The spirit quickened in him as he saw her. His consciousness, he knew, was but a fragment of an immense and deeper consciousness, of limitless scope and powers; this greater self made affirmations to which no mere intellect would dare to set the boundaries. With the air there was a return of joy, belief and wonder into a world that has too long denied all three. Intellect might stand aside a little longer, watching cautiously, like Mother, the flights of intuition, that flashing bird of fire that strikes and vanishes; but science, hitherto destructive chiefly, must enter a new field or be discredited. It must become constructive, it must examine spiritual states. The barrier between the organic and the inorganic was already breached.

‘Dance on! My heart flies dancing with you!’

With you! Rather with everything and every one! For he had this curious inspiration, as though all his past condensed now into a single moment — that a new attitude, due to the subliminal consciousness becoming consciously organised with its myriad and mighty powers, was stealing down into the hearts of men from the air. Since its outstanding characteristic was a fuller understanding, a natural sharing, a deep, instinctive sympathy, it involved an actual realisation of spiritual unity that intellect alone has never yet achieved, and never can. It was no flabby, Utopian, idealistic brotherhood he saw, but a practical, co-operative life based upon those greater powers, and upon that completer understanding lying, hid with God, in the subliminal regions of humanity. Experienced hitherto sporadically, only, he saw in what his heart called the promise of the air, their universal acceptance and development. . . . In a second of time, this all flashed into him as he watched the dancing little human figure on the gigantic landscape. And after it, if not actually with it, rose that unaccountable, uneasy, half-terrible emotion of deep-seated pain he had known before — the shudder . . . He trembled, tried to sing. Then the gorse pricked him where he lay. He turned to make himself more comfortable. He wriggled. The attempt to sing tickled his throat and he coughed.

He sat up, feeling in his pockets for a pencil and paper. For the first time in his life he felt he must write. ‘I must give it out,’ he mumbled to himself. ‘It’s so wonderful, so simple. I must share it. I must tell it to others — to everybody.’ He actually made some notes. ‘Ah,’ he thought, as he read them over a few days later, ‘they’re no good. I don’t *quite* understand them now, to tell the truth.’ He sighed. ‘I’m only muddled,’ he decided, ‘just a Man in the Street bewildered by a touch of inspiration that blew into me!’

He lay watching Joan for a little longer, dancing in the middle distance still. The zest of a bird was in her, the toss, the scamper. Lithe, spinning, sure, her movements interpreted the air far more clearly than his thoughts could compass it in words. Her song came to him with the breeze. He watched her, then waved the packet of sandwiches above his head. He was hungry. They ate their lunch, and spent the rest of the day exploring the great spaces round them.

It was evening when they got home; they heard the random sweetness of the thrush’s song among the laurels on the lawn; a nightjar was churning in the dusk beyond; there was a subdued and tiny chattering of the swallows in the eaves. They found Mother among the flower-beds, wearing her big garden-gloves. Wimble took her in his arms and kissed her.

‘It’s come, Mother, it’s come,’ he whispered against her cheek. ‘And, d’you know? — you’ve been with us all day long.’

She looked up, peaceful and happy, a smell of garden earth about her, and the glow of the sunset in her eyes. ‘Have I really, Joe dear?’ she said. ‘How lovely!’ And then she added: ‘I believe it is; yes, I believe it is.’

Next morning Wimble woke very, very early — close upon three o’clock. He peered out of the window a moment. The dawn, he saw with a happy sigh of wonder, was just beginning to break. The gleam of light fell upon Mother’s face; and the singing of a lark high up in the clearing air came to him. At the same moment Mother moved in her bed close by; her heavy breathing was interrupted. He listened. She was talking in her sleep, though the words were indistinguishable. He waited, thinking she might get up and walk. Her eyes, however, did not open; she lay still again. He slipped over to tuck the blankets more securely round her. ‘Bless her!’ he thought. ‘She’s asleep! Her surface consciousness is merged with her deep, safe, wise subconsciousness — —’ And his thought broke off abruptly. It had suddenly occurred to him that the sleep-walker and the migrating bird both found their way unerringly in the darkness, both obedient to inner guidance. He stood still an instant, looking down upon her face in the pale morning light.

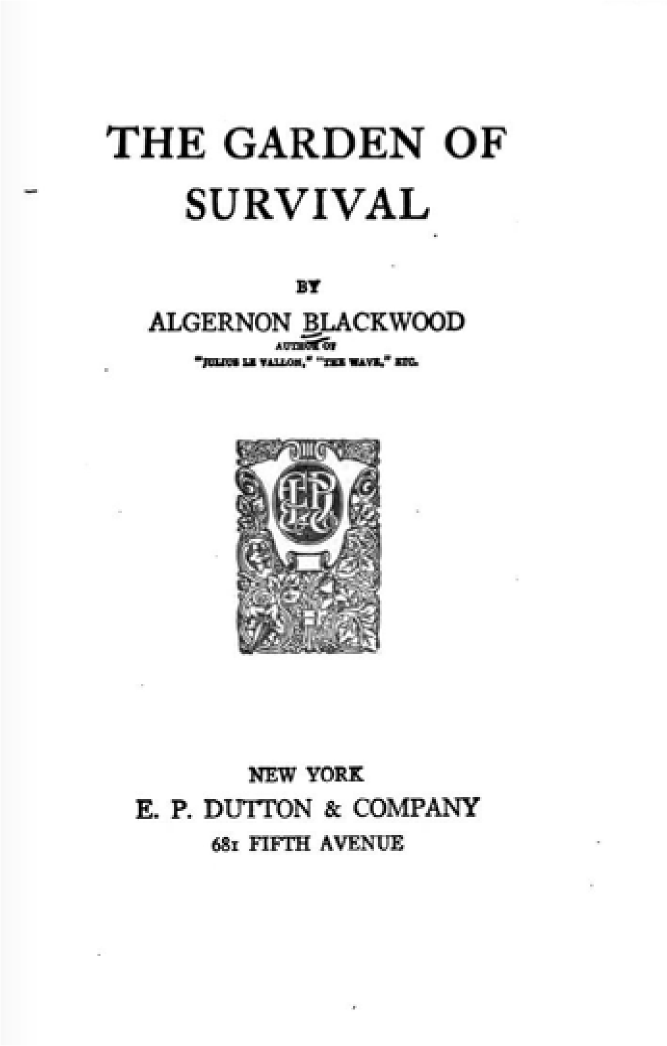
‘Who, what guides the redwing over hills, and vales, and seas?’ he whispered. ‘Who, what guides the sleep-walker amid the intricacies of Maple furniture?’ He chuckled to himself. It was odd how the comic Aquarian lecture cropped up in his memory like this once more.

He bent down and kissed her lightly on the cheek, then went back to bed. Mother still mumbled in her sleep—’ Flow, fly, flow,’ he seemed to catch, ‘it’s coming, coming . . .’

‘It’s the bird returning to her heart,’ he whispered to himself. Deep down inside her being something sang; outside, the carolling of the lark continued, blithe and joyous in the breaking dawn. As he fell asleep, the two sounds were so curiously mingled that they seemed almost indistinguishable. . . .

The Garden of Survival (1918)

Published in 1918, this novella was written in the shadow of the First World War. Blackwood’s brother had been killed in that conflict and the novel movingly explores the possibility of contact with the afterlife and the souls of the dead. A highly spiritual work, the tale is told in the first person in the form of a letter from the protagonist to his twin brother, in which he outlines the emotional journey he embarks upon in his attempt to decipher the meaning of his wife’s last words: ‘I have failed and shall try again’.



THE GARDEN OF SURVIVAL

BY

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

AUTHOR OF
"JULIUS LE VALLON," "THE WAVE," ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER I

IT WILL SURPRISE and at the same time possibly amuse you to know that I had the instinct to tell what follows to a Priest, and might have done so had not the Man of the World in me whispered that from professional Believers I should get little sympathy, and probably less credence still. For to have my experience disbelieved, or attributed to hallucination, would be intolerable to me. Psychical investigators, I am told, prefer a Medium who takes no cash recompense for his performance, a Healer who gives of his strange powers without reward. There are, however, natural-born priests who yet wear no uniform other than upon their face and heart, but since I know of none I fall back upon yourself, my other half, for in writing this adventure to you I almost feel that I am writing it to myself.

The desire for confession is upon me: this thing must out. It is a story, though an unfinished one. I mention this at once lest, frightened by the thickness of the many pages, you lay them aside against another time, and so perhaps neglect them altogether. A story, however, will invite your interest, and when I add that it is true, I feel that you will bring sympathy to that interest: these together, I hope, may win your attention, and hold it, until you shall have read the final word.

That I should use this form in telling it will offend your literary taste — you who have made your name both as critic and creative writer — for you said once, I remember, that to tell a story in epistolary form is a subterfuge, an attempt to evade the difficult matters of construction and delineation of character. My story, however, is so slight, so subtle, so delicately intimate too, that a letter to some one in closest sympathy with myself seems the only form that offers.

It is, as I said, a confession, but a very dear confession: I burn to tell it honestly, yet know not how. To withhold it from you would be to admit a secretiveness that our relationship has never known — out it must, and to you. I may, perhaps, borrow — who can limit the sharing powers of twin brothers like ourselves? — some of the skill your own work spills so prodigally, crumbs from your writing-table, so to speak; and you will forgive the robbery, if successful, as you will accept lie love behind the confession as your due.

Now, listen, please! For this is the point: that, although my wife is dead these dozen years and more — I have found reunion and I love. Explanation of this must follow as best it may. So, please mark tie point which for the sake of emphasis I venture to repeat: that I know reunion and I love.

With the jealous prerogative of the twin, you objected to that marriage, though I knew that it deprived you of no jot of my affection, owing to the fact that it was prompted by pity only, leaving the soul in me wholly disengaged. Marion, by her steady refusal to accept my honest friendship, by her persistent admiration of me, as also by her loveliness, her youth, her singing, persuaded me somehow finally that I needed her. The cry of the flesh, which her beauty stimulated and her singing increased most strangely, seemed raised into a burning desire that I mistook at the moment for the true desire of the soul. Yet, actually, the soul in me remained aloof, a spectator, and one, moreover, of a distinctly lukewarm kind. It was very curious. On looking back, I can hardly understand it even now; there seemed some special power, some special undiscovered tie between us that led me on and yet deceived me. It was especially evident in her singing, this deep power. She sang, you remember, to her own accompaniment on the harp, and her method, though so simple it seemed almost childish, was at the same time charged with a great melancholy that always moved me most profoundly. The sound of her small, plaintive voice, the sight of her slender fingers that plucked the strings in some delicate fashion native to herself, the tiny foot that pressed the pedal — all these, with her dark searching eyes fixed penetratingly upon my own while she sang of love and love’s endearments, combined in a single stroke of very puissant and seductive kind. Passions in me awoke, so deep, so ardent, so imperious, that I conceived them as born of the need of one soul for another. I attributed their power to genuine love. The following reactions, when my soul held up a finger and bade me listen to her still, small warnings, grew less positive and of ever less duration. The frontier between physical and spiritual passion is perilously narrow, perhaps. My judgment, at any rate, became insecure, then floundered hopelessly. The sound of the harp-strings and of Marion’s voice could overwhelm its balance instantly.

Mistaking, perhaps, my lukewarm-ness for restraint, she led me at last to the altar you described as one of sacrifice. And your instinct, more piercing than my own, proved only too correct: that which I held for love declared itself as pity only, the soft, affectionate pity of a weakish man in whom the flesh cried loudly, the pity of a man who would be untrue to himself rather than pain so sweet a girl by rejecting the one great offering life placed within her gift. She persuaded me so cunningly that I persuaded myself, yet was not aware I did so until afterwards. I married her because in some manner I felt, but never could explain, that she had need of me.

And, at the wedding, I remember two things vividly: the expression of wondering resignation on your face, and upon hers — chiefly in the eyes and in the odd lines about the mouth — the air of subtle triumph that she wore: that she had captured me for her very own at last, and yet — for there was this singular hint in her attitude and behaviour — that she had taken me, because she had this curious deep need of me.

This sharply moving touch was graven into me, increasing the tenderness of my pity, subsequently, a thousandfold. The necessity lay in her very soul. She gave to me all she had to give, and in so doing she tried to satisfy some hunger of her being that lay beyond my comprehension or interpretation. For, note this — she gave herself into my keeping, I remember, with a sigh.

It seems as of yesterday the actual moment when, urged by my vehement desires, I made her consent to be my wife; I remember, too, the doubt, the shame, the hesitation that made themselves felt in me before the climax when her beauty overpowered me, sweeping reflection utterly away. I can hear to-day the sigh, half of satisfaction, yet half, it seemed, of pain, with which she sank into my arms at last, as though her victory brought intense relief, yet was not wholly gamed in the way that she had wanted. Her physical beauty, perhaps, was the last weapon she had wished to use for my enslavement; she knew quite surely that the appeal to what was highest in me had not succeeded...

The party in our mother’s house that week in July included yourself; there is no need for me to remind you of its various members, nor of the strong attraction Marion, then a girl of twenty-five, exercised upon the men belonging to it. Nor have you forgotten, I feel sure, the adroit way in which she contrived so often to find herself alone with me, both in the house and out of it, even to the point of sometimes placing me in a quasi-false position. That she tempted me is, perhaps, an overstatement, though that she availed herself of every legitimate use of feminine magic to entrap me is certainly the truth. Opportunities of marriage, it was notorious, had been frequently given to her, and she had as frequently declined them; she was older than her years; to inexperience she certainly had no claim: and from the very first it was clear to me — if conceited, I cannot pretend that I was also blind — that flirtation was not her object and that marriage was. Yet it was marriage with a purpose that she desired, and that purpose had to do, I felt, with sacrifice. She burned to give her very best, her all, and for my highest welfare. It was in this sense, I got the impression strangely, that she had need of me.

The battle seemed, at first, uneven, since, as a woman, she did not positively attract me. I was first amused at her endeavours and her skill; but respect for her as a redoubtable antagonist soon followed. This respect, doubtless, was the first blood she drew from me, since it gained my attention and fixed my mind upon her presence. From that moment she entered my consciousness as a woman; when she was near me I became more and more aware of her, and the room, the picnic, the game of tennis that included her were entirely different from such occasions when she was absent, I became self-conscious. It was impossible to ignore her as formerly had been my happy case.

It was then I first knew how beautiful she was, and that her beauty made a certain difference to my mood. The next step may seem a big one, but, I believe, is very natural: her physical beauty gave me definite pleasure. And the instant this change occurred she was aware of it. The curious fact, however, is that, although aware of this gain of power, she made no direct use of it at first. She did not draw this potent weapon for my undoing; it was ever with her, but was ever sheathed. Did she discern my weakness, perhaps, and know that the subtle power would work upon me most effectively if left to itself? Did she, rich in experience, deem that its too direct use might waken a reaction in my better self? I cannot say, I do not know.... Every feminine art was at her disposal, as every use of magic pertaining to young and comely womanhood was easily within her reach. As you and I might express it bluntly, she knew men thoroughly, she knew every trick; she drew me on, then left me abruptly in the wrong, puzzled, foolish, angry, only to forgive me later with the most enchanting smile or word imaginable. But never once did she deliberately make use of the merciless weapon of her physical beauty although — perhaps because — she knew that it was the most powerful in all her armoury.

For listen to this: when at last I took her in my arms with passion that would not be denied, she actually resented it. She even sought to repel me from her touch that had undone me. I repeat what I said before: She did not wish to win me in that way. The sigh of happiness she drew in that moment — I can swear to it — included somewhere, too, the pain of bitter disappointment.

The weapon, however, that she did use without hesitation was her singing. There was nothing special either in its quality or skill; it was a voice untrained, I believe, and certainly without ambition; her repertoire was limited; she sang folk-songs mostly, the simple love-songs of primitive people, of peasants and the like, yet sang them with such truth and charm, with such power and conviction, somehow, that I knew enchantment as I listened. This, too, she instantly divined, and that behind my compliments lay hid a weakness of deep origin she could play upon to her sure advantage. She did so without mercy, until gradually I passed beneath her sway.

I will not now relate in detail the steps of my descent, or if you like it better, of my capture. This is a summary merely. So let me say in brief that her singing to the harp combined with the revelation of her physical beauty to lead me swiftly to the point where I ardently desired her, and that in this turmoil of desire I sought eagerly to find real love. There were times when I deceived myself most admirably; there were times when I plainly saw the truth. During the former I believed that my happiness lay in marrying her, but in the latter I recognised that a girl who meant nothing to my better self had grown of a sudden painfully yet exquisitely desirable. But even during the ascendancy of the latter physical mood, she had only to seat herself beside the harp and sing, for the former state to usurp its place, I watched, I listened, and I yielded. Her voice, aided by the soft plucking of the strings, completed my defeat. Now, strangest of all, I must add one other thing, and I will add it without comment. For though sure of its truth, I would not dwell upon it. And it is this: that in her singing, as also in her playing, in the "colour" of her voice as also in the very attitude and gestures of her figure as she sat beside the instrument, there lay, though marvellously hidden, something gross. It woke a response of something in myself, hitherto unrecognized, that was similarly gross....

It was in the empty billiard-room when the climax came, a calm evening of late July, the dusk upon the lawn, and most of the house-party already gone upstairs to dress for dinner. I had been standing beside the open window for some considerable time, motionless, and listening idly to the singing of a thrush or blackbird in the shrubberies — when I heard the faint twanging of the harp-strings in the room behind me, and turning, saw that Marion had entered and was there beside the instrument. At the same moment she saw me, rose from the harp and came forward. During the day she had kept me at a distance. I was hungry for her voice and touch; her presence excited me — and yet I was half afraid.

“What! Already dressed!” I exclaimed, anxious to avoid a talk a deux. “I must hurry then, or I shall be later than usual.”

I crossed the room towards the door, when she stopped me with her eyes.

“Do you really mean to say you don’t know the difference between an evening frock and — and this,” she answered lightly, holding out the skirt in her fingers for me to touch. And in the voice was that hint of a sensual caress that, I admit, bewildered both my will and judgment. She was very close and her fragrance came on me with her breath, like the perfume of the summer garden. I touched the material carelessly; it was of softest smooth white serge. It seemed I touched herself that lay beneath it. And at that touch some fire of lightning ran through every vein.

“How stupid of me,” I said quickly, making to go past her, “but it’s white, you see, and in this dim light I — —”

“A man’s idea of an evening frock is always white, I suppose, or black.” She laughed a little. “I’m not coming to dinner to-night,” she added, sitting down to the harp. “I’ve got a headache and thought I might soothe it with a little music. I didn’t know any one was here. I thought I was alone.”

Thus, deftly, having touched a chord of pity in me, she began to play; her voice followed; dinner and dressing, the house-party and my mother’s guests, were all forgotten. I remember that you looked in, your eyes touched with a suggestive and melancholy smile, and as quickly closed the door again. But even that little warning failed to help me. I sat down on the sofa facing her, the world forgotten. And, as I listened to her singing and to the sweet music of the harp, the spell, it seemed, of some ancient beauty stole upon my spirit. The sound of her soft voice reduced my resistance to utter impotence. An aggressive passion took its place. The desire for contact, physical contact, became a vehement aching that I scarcely could restrain, and my arms were hungry for her. Shame and repugnance touched me faintly for a moment, but at once died away again. I listened and I watched. The sensuous beauty of her figure and her movements, swathed in that soft and clinging serge, troubled my judgment; it seemed, as I saw her little foot upon the pedal, that I felt with joy its pressure on my heart and life. Something gross and abandoned stirred in me; I welcomed her easy power and delighted in it. I feasted my eyes and ears, the blood rose feverishly to my head. She did not look at me, yet knew that I looked at her, and how. No longer ashamed, but with a fiery pleasure in my heart, I spoke at last. Her song had ended. She softly brushed the strings, her eyes turned downwards.

“Marion,” I said, agitation making my voice sound unfamiliar, “Marion, dear, I am enthralled; your voice, your beauty — —”

I found no other words; my voice stopped dead; I stood up, trembling in every limb. I saw her in that instant as a maid of olden time, singing the love-songs of some far-off day beside her native instrument, and of a voluptuous beauty there was no withstanding. The half-light of the dusk set her in a frame of terrible enchantment.

And as I spoke her name and rose, she also spoke my own, my Christian name, and rose as well. I saw her move towards me. Upon her face, in her eyes and on her lips, was a smile of joy I had never seen before, though a smile of conquest, and of something more besides that I must call truly by its rightful name, a smile of lust. God! those movements beneath the clinging dress that fell in lines of beauty to her feet! Those little feet that stepped upon my heart, upon my very soul.... For a moment I loathed myself. The next, as she touched me and my arms took her with rough strength against my breast, my repugnance vanished, and I was utterly undone. I believed I loved. That which was gross in me, leaping like fire to claim her glorious beauty, met and merged with that similar, devouring flame in her; but in the merging seemed cunningly transformed into the call of soul to soul: I forgot the pity.... I kissed her, holding her to me so fiercely that she scarcely moved. I said a thousand things. I know not what I said. I loved.

Then, suddenly, she seemed to free herself; she drew away; she looked at me, standing a moment just beyond my reach, a strange smile on her lips and in her darkened eyes a nameless expression that held both joy and pain. For one second I felt that she repelled me, that she resented my action and my words. Yes, for one brief second she stood there, like an angel set in judgment over me, and the next we had come together again, softly, gently, happily; I heard that strange, deep sigh, already mentioned, half of satisfaction, half, it seemed, of pain, as she sank down into my arms and found relief in quiet sobbing on my breast.

And pity then returned. I felt unsure of myself again. This was the love of the body only; my soul was silent. Yet — somehow, in some strange hidden way, lay this ambushed meaning — that she had need of me, and that she offered her devotion and herself in sacrifice.

CHAPTER II

THE BRIEF MARRIAGE ran its course, depleting rather than enriching me, and I know you realized before the hurried, dreadful end that my tie with yourself was strengthened rather than endangered, and that I took from you nothing that I might give it to her. That death should intervene so swiftly, leaving her but an interval of a month between the altar and the grave, you could foreknow as little as I or she; yet in that brief space of time you learned that I had robbed you of nothing that was your precious due, while she as surely realized that the amazing love she poured so lavishly upon me woke no response — beyond a deep and tender pity, strangely deep and singularly tender I admit, but assuredly very different from love.

Now this, I think, you already know and in some measure understand; but what you cannot know — since it is a portion of her secret, of that ambushed meaning, as I termed it, given to me when she lay dying — is the pathetic truth that her discovery wrought no touch of disenchantment in her. I think she knew with shame that she had caught me with her lowest weapon, yet still hoped that the highest in her might complete and elevate her victory. She knew, at any rate, neither dismay nor disappointment; of reproach there was no faintest hint. She did not even once speak of it directly, though her fine, passionate face made me aware of the position. Of the usual human reaction, that is, there was no slightest trace; she neither chided nor implored; she did not weep. The exact opposite of what I might have expected took place before my very eyes.

For she turned and faced me, empty as I was. The soul in her, realizing the truth, stood erect to meet the misery of lonely pain that inevitably lay ahead — in some sense as though she welcomed it already; and, strangest of all, she blossomed, physically as well as mentally, into a fuller revelation of gracious loveliness than before, sweeter and more exquisite, indeed, than anything life had yet shown to me. Moreover, having captured me, she changed; the grossness I had discerned, that which had led me to my own undoing, vanished completely as though it were transmuted into desires and emotions of a loftier kind. Some purpose, some intention, a hope immensely resolute shone out of her, and of such spiritual loveliness, it seemed to me, that I watched it in a kind of dumb amazement.

I watched it — unaware at first of my own shame, emptied of any emotion whatsoever, I think, but that of a startled worship before the grandeur of her generosity. It seemed she listened breathlessly for the beating of my heart, and hearing none, resolved that she would pour her own life into it, regardless of pain, of loss, of sacrifice, that she might make it live. She undertook her mission, that is to say, and this mission, in some mysterious way, and according to some code of conduct undivined by me, yet passionately honoured, was to give — regardless of herself or of response. I caught myself sometimes thinking of a child who would instinctively undo some earlier grievous wrong. She loved me marvellously.

I know not how to describe to you the lavish wealth of selfless devotion she bathed me in during the brief torturing and unfulfilled period before the end. It made me aware of new depths and heights in human nature. It taught me a new beauty that even my finest dreams had left unmentioned. Into the region that great souls inhabit a glimpse was given me. My own dreadful weakness was laid bare. And an eternal hunger woke in me — that I might love.

That hunger remained unsatisfied. I prayed, I yearned, I suffered; I could have decreed myself a deservedly cruel death; it seemed I stretched my little nature to unendurable limits in the fierce hope that the Gift of the Gods might be bestowed upon me, and that her divine emotion might waken a response within my leaden soul. But all in vain. My attitude, in spite of every prayer, of every effort, remained no more than a searching and unavailing pity, but a pity that held no seed of a mere positive emotion, least of all, of love. The heart in me lay unredeemed; it knew ashamed and very tender gratitude; but it did not beat for her. I could not love.

I have told you bluntly, frankly, of my physical feelings towards Marion and her beauty. It is a confession that I give into my own safe keeping. I think, perhaps, that you, though cast in a finer mould, may not despise them utterly, nor too contemptuously misinterpret them. The legend that twins may share a single soul has always seemed to me grotesque and unpoetic nonsense, a cruel and unnecessary notion too: a man is sufficiently imperfect without suffering this further subtraction from his potentialities. And yet it is true, in our own case, that you have exclusive monopoly of the ethereal qualities, while to me are given chiefly the physical attributes of the vigorous and healthy male — the animal: my six feet three, my muscular system, my inartistic and pedestrian temperament. Fairly clean-minded, I hope I may be, but beyond all question I am the male animal incarnate. It was, indeed, the thousand slaveries of the senses, individually so negligible, collectively so overwhelming, that forced me upon my knees before her physical loveliness. I must tell you now that this potent spell, alternating between fiery desire and the sincerest of repugnance, continued to operate. I complete the confession by adding briefly, that after marriage she resented and repelled all my advances. A deep sadness came upon her; she wept; and I desisted. It was my soul that she desired with the fire of her mighty love, and not my body.... And again, since it is to myself and to you alone I tell it, I would add this vital fact: it was this “new beauty which my finest dreams have left unmentioned” that made it somehow possible for me to desist, both against my animal will, yet willingly.

I have told you that, when dying, she revealed to me a portion of her “secret.” This portion of a sacred confidence lies so safe within my everlasting pity that I may share it with you without the remorse of a betrayal. Full understanding we need never ask; the solution, I am convinced, is scarcely obtainable in this world. The message, however, was incomplete because the breath that framed it into broken words failed suddenly; the heart, so strangely given into my unworthy keeping, stopped beating as you shall hear upon the very edge of full disclosure. The ambushed meaning I have hinted at remained — a hint.

CHAPTER III

THERE WAS, THEN, you will remember, but an interval of minutes between the accident and the temporary recovery of consciousness, between that recovery again and the moment when the head fell forward on my knee and she was gone. That “recovery” of consciousness I feel bound to question, as you shall shortly hear. Among such curious things I am at sea admittedly, yet I must doubt for ever that the eyes which peered so strangely into mine were those of Marion herself — as I had always known her. You will, at any rate, allow the confession, and believe it true, that I — did not recognize her quite. Consciousness there was, indubitably, but whether it was “recovery” of consciousness is another matter, and a problem that I must for ever question though I cannot ever set it confidently at rest. It almost seemed as though a larger, grander, yet somehow a less personal, soul looked forth through the fading eyes and used the troubled breath.

In those brief minutes, at any rate, the mind was clear as day, the faculties not only unobscured, but marvellously enhanced. In the eyes at first shone unveiled fire; she smiled, gazing into my own with love and eager yearning too. There was a radiance in her face I must call glory. Her head was in my lap upon the bed of rugs we had improvised inside the field: the broken motor posed in a monstrous heap ten yards away; and the doctor, summoned by a passing stranger, was in the act of administrating the anaesthetic, so that we might bear her without pain to the nearest hospital — when, suddenly, she held up a warning finger, beckoning to me that I should listen closely.

I bent my head to catch the words. There was such authority in the gesture, and in the eyes an expression so extraordinarily appealing, and yet so touched with the awe of a final privacy beyond language, that the doctor stepped backwards on the instant, the needle shaking in his hand — while I bent down to catch the whispered words that at once began to pass her lips.

The wind in the poplar overhead mingled with the little sentences, as though the breath of the clear blue sky, calmly shining, was mingled with her own.

But the words I heard both troubled and amazed me:

“Help me! For I am in the dark still!” went through me like a sword. “And I do not know how long.”

I took her face in both my hands; I kissed her. “You are with friends,” I said. “You are safe with us, with me — Marion!” And I apparently tried to put into my smile the tenderness that clumsy words forswore. Her next words shocked me inexpressibly: “You laugh,” she said, “but I — —” she sighed — “I weep.”

I stroked her face and hair. No words came to me.

“You call me Marion,” she went on in an eager tone that surely belied her pain and weakness, “but I do not remember that. I have forgotten names.” Then, as I kissed her, I heard her add in the clearest whisper possible, as though no cloud lay upon her mind: “Yet Marion will do — if by that you know me now.”

There came a pause then, but after it such singular words that I could hardly believe I heard aright, although each syllable sank into my brain as with pointed steel:

“You come to me again when I lie dying. Even in the dark I hear — how long I do not know — I hear your words.”

She gave me suddenly then a most piercing look, raising her face a little towards my own. I saw earnest entreaty in them. “Tell me,” I murmured; “you are nearer, closer to me than ever before. Tell me what it is?”

“Music,” she whispered, “I want music — —”

I knew not what to answer, what to say. Can you blame me that, in my troubled, aching heart, I found but commonplaces? For I thought of the harp, or of some stringed instrument that seemed part of her.

“You shall have it,” I said gently, “and very soon. We shall carry you now into comfort, safety. You shall have no pain. Another moment and — —”

“Music,” she repeated, interrupting, “music as of long ago.”

It was terrible. I said such stupid things. My mind seemed frozen.

"I would hear music," she whispered, "before I go again."

"Marion, you shall," I stammered. "Beethoven, Schumann, — what would please you most? You shall have all."

"Yes, play to me. But those names" — she shook her head— "I do not know."

I remember that my face was streaming, my hands so hot that her head seemed more than I could hold. I shifted my knees so that she might lie more easily a little.

"God's music!" she cried aloud with startling abruptness; then, lowering her voice again and smiling sadly as though something came back to her that she would fain forget, she added slowly, with something of mournful emphasis:

"I was a singer ..."

As though a flash of light had passed, some inner darkness was cleft asunder in me. Some heaviness shifted from my brain. It seemed the years, the centuries, turned over like a wind-blown page. And out of some hidden inmost part of me involuntary words rose instantly:

"You sang God's music then ..."

The strange, unbidden sentence stirred her. Her head moved slightly; she smiled. Gazing into my eyes intently, as though to dispel a mist that shrouded both our minds, she went on in a whisper that yet was startlingly distinct, though with little pauses drawn out between the phrases: "I was a singer... in the Temple. I sang — men — into evil. You ... I sang into ... evil."

There was a moment's pause, as a spasm of inexplicable pain passed through my heart like fire, and a sense of haunting things whereof no conscious memory remained came over me. The scene about me wavered before my eyes as if it would disappear.

"Yet you came to me when I lay dying at the last," I caught her thin clear whisper. "You said, 'Turn to God!'"

The whisper died away. The darkness flowed back upon my mind and thought. A silence followed. I heard the wind in the poplar overhead. The doctor moved impatiently, coming a few steps nearer, then turning away again. I heard the sounds of tinkering with metal that the driver made ten yards behind us. I turned angrily to make a sign — when Marion's low voice, again more like the murmur of the wind than a living voice, rose into the still evening air:

"I have failed. And I shall try again."

She gazed up at me with that patient, generous love that seemed inexhaustible, and hardly knowing what to answer, nor how to comfort her in that afflicting moment, I bent lower — or, rather, she drew my ear closer to her lips. I think her great desire just then was to utter her own thought more fully before she passed. Certainly it was no avowal or consolation from myself she sought.

"Your forgiveness," I heard distinctly, "I need your full forgiveness."

It was for me a terrible and poignant moment. The emptiness of my pity betrayed itself too mercilessly for me to bear; yet, before my bewilderment enabled me to frame an answer, she went on hurriedly, though with a faultless certainty: the meaning to her was clear as day:

"Born of love ... the only true forgiveness..."

A film formed slowly. Her eyes began to close, her breath died off into a sigh; she smiled, but her head sank lower with her fading strength. And her final words went by me in that sigh:

"Yet love in you lies unawakened still... and I must try again...."

There was one more effort, painful with unexpressed fulfilment. A flicker of awful yearning took her paling eyes. Life seemed to stammer, pause, then flush as with this last deep impulse to yield a secret she discerned for the first time fully, in the very act of passing out. The face, with its soft loveliness, turned grey in death. Upon the edge of a great disclosure — she was gone.

I remember that for a space of time there was silence all about us. The doctor still kept his back to us, the driver had ceased his wretched hammering, I heard the wind in the poplar and the hum of insects. A bird sang loudly on a branch above; it seemed miles away, across an empty world.... Then, of a sudden, I became aware that the weight of the head and shoulders had dreadfully increased. I dared not turn my face lest I should look upon her whom I had deeply wronged — the forsaken tenement of this woman whose matchless love now begged with her dying breath for my forgiveness!

A cowardly desire to lose consciousness ran through me, to forget myself, to hide my shame with her in death; yet, even while this was so, I sought most desperately through the depths of my anguished pity to find some hint, if only the tiniest seed, of love — and found it not.... The rest belonged to things unrealized....

I remember a hand being laid upon me. I lifted my head which had fallen close against her cheek. The doctor stood beside me, his grave and kindly face bent low. He spoke some gentle words. I saw him replacing the needle in its little leathern case, unused.

Marion was dead, her deep secret undisclosed. That which she yearned to tell me was something which, in her brief period of devotion, she had lived, had faithfully acted out, yet herself only dimly aware of why it had to be. The solution of this problem of unrequited love lay at last within her grasp; of a love that only asked to give of its unquenched and unquenchable store, undismayed by the total absence of response.

She passed from the world of speech and action with this intense desire unsatisfied, and at the very moment — as with a drowning man who sees his past — when the solution lay ready to her hand. She saw clearly, she understood, she burned to tell me. Upon the edge of full disclosure, she was gone, leaving me alone with my aching pity and with my shame of unawakened love.

“I have failed, but I shall try again....”

CHAPTER IV

THAT, AS YOU know, took place a dozen years ago and more, when I was thirty-two, and time, in the interval, has wrought unexpected ends out of the material of my life. My trade as a soldier has led me to an administrative post in a distant land where, apparently, I have deserved well of my King and Country, as they say in the obituaries. At any rate, the cryptic letters following my name, bear witness to some kind of notoriety attained.

You were the first to welcome my success, and your congratulations were the first I looked for, as surely as they were more satisfying than those our mother sent. You knew me better, it seems, than she did. For you expressed the surprise that I, too, felt, whereas mother assured me she had "always known you would do well, my boy, and you have only got your deserts in this tardy recognition." To her, of course, even at forty-five, I was still her "little boy." You, however, guessed shrewdly that Luck had played strong cards in bringing me this distinction, and I will admit at once that it was, indeed, due to little born in me, but, rather, to some adventitious aid that, curiously, seemed never lacking at the opportune moment. And this adventitious aid was new.

This is the unvarnished truth. A mysterious power dealt the cards for me with unfailing instinct; a fortunate combination of events placing in my hands, precisely at the moment of their greatest value, clear opportunities that none but a hopeless blunderer could have disregarded. What men call Chance operated in my favour as though with superb calculation, lifting me to this miniature pinnacle I could never have reached by my own skill and judgment.

So, at least, you and I, knowing my limited abilities, consent to attribute my success to luck, to chance, to fate, or to any other name for the destiny that has placed me on a height my talent never could have reached alone. You, and I, too, for that matter, are as happy over the result as our mother is; only you and I are surprised, because we judge it, with some humour, out of greater knowledge. More — you, like myself, are a little puzzled, I think. We ask together, if truth were told: Whose was the unerring, guiding hand?

Amid this uncertainty I give you now another curious item, about which you have, of course, been uninformed. For none could have detected it but myself: namely, that apart from these opportunities chance set upon my path, an impulse outside myself — and an impulse that was new — drove me to make use of them. Sometimes even against my personal inclination, a power urged me into decided, and it so happened, always into faultless action. Amazed at myself, I yet invariably obeyed.

How to describe so elusive a situation I hardly know, unless by telling you the simple truth: I felt that somebody would be pleased.

And, with the years, I learned to recognize this instinct that never failed when a choice, and therefore an element of doubt, presented itself. Invariably I was pushed towards the right direction. More singular still, there rose in me unbidden at these various junctures, a kind of inner attention which bade me wait and listen for the guiding touch. I am not fanciful, I heard no voice, I was aware of nothing personal by way of guidance or assistance; and yet the guidance, the assistance, never failed, though often I was not conscious that they had been present until long afterwards. I felt, as I said above, that somebody would be pleased.

For it was a consistent, an intelligent guidance; operating, as it were, out of some completer survey of the facts at a given moment than my own abilities could possibly have compassed; my mediocre faculties seemed gathered together and perfected — with the result, in time, that my "intuition," as others called it, came to be regarded with a respect that in some cases amounted to half reverence. The adjective "uncanny" was applied to me. The natives, certainly, were aware of awe.

I made no private use of this unearned distinction; there is nothing in me of the charlatan that claimed mysterious power; but my subordinates, ever in growing numbers as my promotions followed, held me in greater respect, apparently, on that very account. The natives, especially, as I mentioned, attributed semi-deific properties to my poor personality. Certainly my prestige increased out of all proportion to anything my talents deserved with any show of justice.

I have said that, so far as I was concerned, there lay nothing personal in this growth of divining intuition. I must now qualify that a little. Nothing persuaded me that this guidance, so infallible, so constant, owed its origin to what men call a being; I certainly found no name for it; exactness, I think, might place its truest description in some such term as energy, inner force or inspiration; yet I must admit that, with its steady repetition, there awoke in me an attitude towards it that eluded somewhere also an emotion. And in this emotion, in its quality and character, hid remotely a personal suggestion: each time it offered itself, that is, I was aware of a sharp quiver of sensitive life within me, and of that sensation, extraordinarily sweet and wonderful, which constitutes a genuine thrill.

I came to look for this "thrill," to lie in wait with anticipatory wonder for its advent; and in a sense this pause in me, that was both of expectancy and hope, grew slowly into what I may almost call a habit. There was an emptiness in my heart before it came, a sense of peace and comfort when it was accomplished. The emptiness and then the satisfaction, as first and last conditions, never failed, and that they took place in my heart rather than in my mind I can affirm with equal certainty.

The habit, thus, confirmed itself. I admitted the power. Let me be frank — I sought it, even longing for it when there was no decision to be made, no guidance therefore needed: I longed for it because of the great sweetness that it left within my heart. It was when I needed it, however, that its effect was most enduring. The method became quite easy to me. When a moment of choice between two courses of action presented itself, I first emptied my heart of all personal inclination, then, pausing upon direction, I knew — or rather felt — which course to take. My heart was filled and satisfied with an intention that never wavered. Some energy that made the choice for me had been poured in. I decided upon this or that line of action. The Thrill, always of an instantaneous nature, came and went — and somebody was pleased.

Moreover — and this will interest you more particularly — the emotion produced in me was, so far as positive recognition went, a new emotion; it was, at any rate, one that had lain so feebly in me hitherto that its announcement brought the savour of an emotion before unrealized. I had known it but once, and that long years before, but the man's mind in me increased and added to it. For it seemed a development of that new perception which first dawned upon me during my brief period of married life, and had since lain hidden in me, potential possibly, but inactive beyond all question, if not wholly dead. I will now name it for you, and for myself, as best I may. It was the Thrill of Beauty.

I became, in these moments, aware of Beauty, and to a degree, while it lasted, approaching revelation. Chords, first faintly struck long years before when my sense of Marion's forgiveness and generosity stirred worship in me, but chords that since then had lain, apparently, unresponsive, were swept into resonance again. Possibly they had been vibrating all these intervening years, unknown to me, unrecognized. I cannot say. I only know that here was the origin of the strange energy that now moved me to the depths. Some new worship of Beauty that had love in it, of which, indeed, love was the determining quality, awoke in the profoundest part of me, and even when the "thrill" had gone its way, left me hungry and yearning for its repetition. Here, then, is the "personal" qualification that I mentioned. The yearning and the hunger were related to my deepest needs. I had been empty, but I would be filled. For a passionate love, holding hands with a faith and confidence as passionate as itself, poured flooding into me and made this new sense of beauty seem a paramount necessity of my life.

Will you be patient now, if I give you a crude instance of what I mean? It is one among many others, but I choose it because its very crudeness makes my meaning clear.

In this fevered and stricken African coast, you may know, there is luxuriance in every natural detail, an exuberance that is lavish to excess. Yet beauty lies somewhat coyly hid — as though suffocated by over-abundance of crowding wonder. I detect, indeed, almost a touch of the monstrous in it all, a super-expression, as it were, that bewilders, and occasionally even may alarm. Delicacy, subtlety, suggestion in any form, have no part in it. During the five years of my exile amid this tropical extravagance I can recall no single instance of beauty "hinting" anywhere. Nature seems, rather, audaciously abandoned; she is without restraint. She shows her all, tells everything — she shouts, she never whispers. You will understand me when I tell you that this wholesale lack of reticence and modesty involves all absence in the beholder of — surprise. A sudden ravishment of the senses is impossible. One never can experience that sweet and troubling agitation to which a breathless amazement properly belongs. You may be stunned; you are hardly ever "thrilled."

Now, this new sensitiveness to Beauty I have mentioned has opened me to that receptiveness which is aware of subtlety and owns to sharp surprise. The thrill is of its very essence. It is unexpected. Out of the welter of prolific detail Nature here glories in, a delicate hint of wonder and surprise comes stealing. The change, of course, is in myself, not otherwise. And on the particular "crude" occasion I will briefly mention, it reached me from the most obvious and banal of conditions — the night sky and the moon.

Here, then, is how it happened: There had arisen a situation of grave difficulty among the natives of my Province, and the need for taking a strong, authoritative line was paramount. The reports of my subordinates from various parts of the country pointed to very vigorous action of a repressing, even of a punitive, description. It was not, in itself, a complicated situation, and no Governor, who was soldier too, need have hesitated for an instant. The various Stations, indeed, anticipating the usual course of action indicated by precedent, had automatically gone to their posts, prepared for the "official instructions" it was known that I should send, wondering impatiently (as I learned afterwards) at the slight delay. For delay there was, though of a few hours only; and this delay was caused by my uncomfortable new habit — pausing for the guidance and the "thrill." Intuition, waiting upon the thrill of Beauty that guided it, at first lay inactive.

My behaviour seemed scarcely of the orthodox, official kind, soldierly least of all. There was uneasiness, there was cursing, probably; there were certainly remarks not complimentary. Prompt, decisive action was the obvious and only course... while I sat quietly in the Headquarters Bungalow, a sensitive youth again, a dreamer, a poet, hungry for the inspiration of Beauty that the gorgeous tropical night concealed with her excess of smothering abundance.

This incongruity between my procedure and the time-honoured methods of "strong" Governors must have seemed exasperating to those who waited, respectful, but with nerves on edge, in the canvassed and tented regions behind the Headquarters clearing. Indeed, the Foreign Office, could it have witnessed my unpardonable hesitation, might well have dismissed me on the spot, I think. For I sat there, dreaming in my deck-chair on the verandah, smoking a cigarette, safe within my net from the countless poisonous mosquitoes, and listening to the wind in the palms that fringed the heavy jungle round the building.

Smoking quietly, dreaming, listening, waiting, I sat there in this mood of inner attention and expectancy, knowing that the guidance I anticipated must surely come.

A few clouds sprawled in their beds of silver across the sky; the heat, the perfume, were, as always, painfully, excessive; the moonlight bathed the huge trees and giant leaves with that habitual extravagance which made it seem ordinary, almost cheap and wonderless. Very silent the wooden house lay all about me, there were no footsteps, there was no human voice. I heard only the wash of the heavy-scented wind through the colossal foliage that hardly stirred, and watched, as a hundred times before, the immense heated sky, drenched in its brilliant and intolerable moonlight. All seemed a riot of excess, an orgy.

Then, suddenly, the shameless night drew on some exquisite veil, as the moon, between three-quarters and the full, slid out of sight behind a streaky cloud. A breath, it seemed, of lighter wind woke all the perfume of the burdened forest leaves. The shouting splendour hushed; there came a whisper and, at last — a hint.

I watched with relief and gratitude the momentary eclipse, for in the half-light I was aware of that sharp and tender mood which was preparatory to the thrill. Slowly sailing into view again from behind that gracious veil of cloud —

“The moon put forth a little diamond peak, No bigger than an unobserved star, Or tiny point of fairy scimitar; Bright signal that she only stooped to tie Her silver sandals, ere deliciously She bowed into the heavens her timid head.”

And then it came. The Thrill stole forth and touched me, passing like a meteor through my heart, but in that lightning passage, cleaving it open to some wisdom that seemed most near to love. For power flowed in along the path that Beauty cleft for it, and with the beauty came that intuitive guidance I had waited for.

The inspiration operated like a flash. There was no reasoning; I was aware immediately that another and a better way of dealing with the situation was given me.

I need not weary you with details. It seemed contrary to precedent, advice, against experience too, yet it was the right, the only way. It threatened, I admit, to destroy the prestige so long and laboriously established, since it seemed a dangerous yielding to the natives that must menace the white life everywhere and render trade in the Colony unsafe. Yet I did not hesitate.... There was bustle at once within that Bungalow; the orders went forth; I saw the way and chose it — to the dismay, outspoken, of every white man whose welfare lay in my official hands.

And the results, I may tell you now without pride, since, as we both admit, no credit attaches to myself — the results astonished the entire Colony.... The Chiefs came to me, in due course, bringing fruit and flowers and presents enough to bury all Headquarters, and with a reverential obedience that proved the rising scotched to death — because its subtle psychological causes had been marvellously understood.

Full comprehension, as I mentioned earlier in this narrative, we cannot expect to have. Its origin, I may believe, lies hid in the nature of that Beauty which is truth and love — in the source of our very life, perhaps, which lies hid again with beauty very far away.... But I may say this much at least: that it seemed, my inspired action had co-operated with the instinctive beliefs of these mysterious tribes — cooperated with their primitive and ancient sense of Beauty. It had, inexplicably to myself, fulfilled their sense of right, which my subordinates would have outraged. I had acted with, instead of against, them.

More I cannot tell you. You have the “crude instance,” and you have the method. The instances multiplied, the method became habit. There grew in me this personal attitude towards an impersonal power I hardly understood, and this attitude included an emotion — love. With faith and love I consequently obeyed it. I loved the source of my guidance and assistance, though I dared attach no name to it. Simple enough the matter might have been, could I have referred its origin to some name — to our mother or to you, to my Chief in London, to an impersonal Foreign Office that has since honoured me with money and a complicated address upon my envelopes, or even, by a stretch of imagination, to that semi-abstract portion of my being some men call a Higher Self.

To none of these, however, could I honestly or dishonestly ascribe it. Yet, as in the case of those congratulatory telegrams from our mother and yourself, I was aware — and this feeling never failed with each separate occurrence — aware that somebody, other than ourselves individually or collectively — was pleased.

CHAPTER V

WHAT I HAVE told you so far concerns a growth chiefly of my inner life that was almost a new birth. My outer life, of event and action, was sufficiently described in those monthly letters you had from me during the ten years, broken by three periods of long-leave at home, I spent in that sinister and afflicted land. This record, however, deals principally with the essential facts of my life, the inner; the outer events and actions are of importance only in so far as they interpret these, since that which a man feels and thinks alone is real, and thought and feeling, of course, precede all action.

I have told you of the Thrill, of its genesis and development; and I chose an obvious and rather banal instance, first of all to make myself quite clear, and, secondly, because the majority were of so delicate a nature as to render their description extremely difficult. The point is that the emotion was, for me, a new one. I may honestly describe it as a birth.

I must now tell you that it first stirred in me some five years after I left England, and that during those years I had felt nothing but what most other men feel out here. Whether its sudden birth was due to the violent country, or to some process of gradual preparation that had been going forward in me secretly all that time, I cannot tell. No proof, at any rate, offered itself of either. It came suddenly. I do know, however, that from its first occurrence it has strengthened and developed until it has now become a dominating influence of a distinctly personal kind.

My character has been affected, perhaps improved. You have mentioned on several occasions that you noted in my letters a new tenderness, a new kindness towards my fellow-creatures, less of criticism and more of sympathy, a new love; the “birth of my poetic sense” you also spoke of once; and I myself have long been aware of a thousand fresh impulses towards charity and tolerance that had, hitherto, at any rate, lain inactive in my being.

I need not flatter myself complacently, yet a change there is, and it may be an improvement. Whether big or small, however, I am sure of one thing: I ascribe it entirely to this sharper and more extended sensitiveness to Beauty, this new and exquisite receptiveness that has established itself as a motive-power in my life. I have changed the poet's line, using prose of course: There is beauty everywhere and therefore joy.

And I will explain briefly, too, how it is that this copybook maxim is now for me a practical reality. For at first, with my growing perception, I was distressed at what seemed to me the lavish waste, the reckless, spendthrift beauty, not in nature merely but in human nature, that passed unrecognized and unacknowledged. The loss seemed so extravagant. Not only that a million flowers waste their sweetness on the desert air, but that such prodigal stores of human love and tenderness remain unemployed, their rich harvest all ungathered — because, misdirected and misunderstood, they find no receptacle into which they may discharge.

It has now come to me, though only by & slow and almost imperceptible advance, that these stores of apparently unremunerative beauty, this harvest so thickly sown about the world, unused, ungathered — prepare yourself, please, for an imaginative leap — ore used, are gathered, are employed. By Whom?

I can only answer: By some one who is pleased; and probably by many such. How, why, and wherefore — I catch your crowd of questions in advance — we need not seek exactly to discover, although the answer of no uncertain kind, I hear within the stillness of a heart that has learned to beat to a deeper, sweeter rhythm than before.

Those who loved beauty and lived it in their lives, follow that same ideal with increasing power and passion afterwards — and for ever.

The shutter of black iron we call Death hides the truth with terror and resentment; but what if that shutter were, after all, transparent?

A glorious dream, I hear you cry. Now listen to my answer. It is, for me, a definite assurance and belief, because — I know.

Long before you have reached this point you will, I know, have reached also the conclusion (with a sigh) that I am embarked upon some commonplace experience of ghostly return, or, at least, of posthumous communication. Perhaps I wrong you here, but in any case I would at once correct the inference, if it has been drawn. You remember our adventures with the seance-mongers years ago? ... I have not changed my view so far as their evidential value is concerned. Be sure of that.

The dead, I am of opinion, do not return; for, while individuals may claim startling experiences that seem to them of an authentic and convincing kind, there has been no instance that can persuade us all — in the sense that thunderstorm convinces us all. Such individual experiences I have always likened to the auto-suggestion of those few who believe the advertisements of the hair-restorers — you will forgive the unpoetic simile for the sake of its exactitude — as against the verdict of the world that a genuine discovery of such a remedy would leave no single doubter in Europe or America, nor even in the London Clubs! Yet each time I read the cunning article (I have less hair than when I ran away from Sandhurst that exciting July night and met you in the Strand!), and look upon the picture of the man, John Henry Smith, "before and after using," I admit the birth of an unreasonable belief that there may be something in it after all.

Of such indubitable proof, however, there is, alas, as yet no sign.

And so with the other matter — the dead do not "return." My story, therefore, be comforted, has no individual instance to record. It may, on the other hand, be held to involve a thread of what might be called — at a stretch — posthumous communication, yet a thread so tenuous that the question of personal direction behind it need hardly be considered at all. For let me confess at once that, the habit of the "thrill" once established, I was not long in asking myself point blank this definite question: Dared I trace its origin to my own unfruitful experience of some years before? — and, discovering no shred of evidence, I found this positive answer: Honestly I could not.

That "somebody was pleased" each time Beauty offered a wisdom I accepted, became an unanswerable conviction I could not argue about; but that the guidance — waking a responsive emotion in myself of love — was referable to any particular name I could not, by any stretch of desire or imagination, bring myself to believe.

Marion, I must emphasise, had been gone from me five years at least before the new emotion gave the smallest hint of its new birth; and my feeling, once the first keen shame and remorse subsided — I confess to the dishonouring truth — was one of looking back upon a painful problem that had found an unexpected solution. It was chiefly relief, although a sad relief, I felt.... And with the absorbing work of the next following years (I took up my appointment within six months of her death) her memory, already swiftly fading, entered an oblivion whence rarely, and at long intervals only, it emerged at all. In the ordinary meaning of the phrase, I had forgotten her. You will see, therefore, that there was no desire in me to revive an unhappy memory, least of all to establish any fancied communication with one before whose generous love I had felt myself dishonoured, if not actually disgraced. Even the remorse and regret had long since failed to disturb my peace of mind, causing me no anxiety, much less pain. Sic transit was the epitaph, if any. Acute sensation I had none at all. This, then, plainly argues against the slightest predisposition on my part to imagine that the loving guidance so strangely given owned a personal origin I could recognize. That it involved a "personal emotion" is quite another matter.

The more remarkable, therefore, is the statement truth now compels me to confess to you — namely, that this origin is recognizable, and that I have traced in part the name it owns to. My next sentence you divine already; you at once suspect the name I mean. I hear you say to yourself with a smile — "So, after all...!"

Please, wait a moment, and listen closely now; for, in reply to your suspicion, I can give neither full affirmation or full denial. Yet an answer of a certain kind is ready: I have stated my firm conviction that the dead do not return; I do not modify it one iota; but I mentioned a moment ago another conviction that is mine because I know. So now let me supplement these two statements with a third: the dead, though they do not return, are active; and those who lived beauty in their lives are — benevolently active.

This may prepare you for a further assurance, yet one less easy to express intelligibly. Be patient while I make the difficult attempt.

The origin of the wisdom that now seeks to shape and guide my life through Beauty is, indeed, not Marion, but a power that stands behind her, and through which, with which, the energy of her being acts. It stood behind her while she lived. It stands behind not only her, but equally behind all those peerless, exquisite manifestations of self-less love that give bountifully of their best without hope or expectation of reward in kind. No human love of this description, though it find no object to receive it, nor one single flower that “wastes” its sweetness on the desert air, but acknowledges this inexhaustible and spendthrift source. Its evidence lies strewn so thick, so prodigally, about our world, that not one among us, whatever his surroundings and conditions, but sooner or later must encounter at least one marvellous instance of its uplifting presence. Some at once acknowledge the exquisite flash and are aware; others remain blind and deaf, till some experience, probably of pain, shall have prepared and sensitized their receptive quality. To all, however, one day, comes the magical appeal. As in my own case, there was apparently some kind of preparation before I grew conscious of that hunger for beauty which, awakening intuition, opened the heart to truth and so to wisdom. It then came softly, delicately, whispering like the dawn, yet rich with a promise I could, at first, not easily fathom, though as sure of fulfilment as that promise of day that steals upon the world when night is passing.

I have tried to tell you something of this mystery. I cannot add to that. I was lifted, as it were, towards some region or some state of being, wherein I was momentarily aware of a vaster outlook upon life, of a deeper insight into the troubles of my fellow-creatures, where, indeed, there burst upon me a comprehension of life’s pains and difficulties so complete that I may best describe it as that full understanding which involves also full forgiveness, and that sympathy which is love, God’s love.

This exaltation passed, of course, with the passing of the thrill that made it possible; it was truly instantaneous; a point of ecstasy, perhaps, in some category not of time at all, but of some state of consciousness that lifted me above, outside of, self. But it was real, as a thunderstorm is real. For, with this glimpse of beauty that I call the “thrill,” I touched, for an instant so brief that it seemed timeless in the sense of having no duration, a pinnacle of joy, of vision, beyond anything attainable by desire or by. intellect alone. I stood aware of power, wisdom, love; and more, this power, wisdom, love were mine to draw upon and use, not in some future heaven, but here and now.

CHAPTER VI

I RETURNED TO England with an expectant hunger born of this love of beauty that was now ingrained in me. I came home with the belief that my yearning would be satisfied in a deeper measure; and more — that, somehow, it would be justified and explained. I may put it plainly, if only to show how difficult this confession would have been to any one but yourself; it sounds so visionary from a mere soldier and man of action such as I am. For my belief included a singular dream that, in the familiar scenes I now revisited, some link, already half established, would be strengthened, and might probably be realized, even proved.

In Africa, as you know, I had been set upon the clue at home in England. Among the places and conditions where this link had been first established in the flesh, must surely come a fuller revelation. Beauty, the channel of my inspiration, but this time the old sweet English beauty, so intimate, so woven through with the fresh wonder of earliest childhood days, would reveal the cause of my first failure to respond, and so, perhaps, the intention of those final pathetic sentences that still haunted me with their freight of undelivered meaning. In England, T believed, my “thrill” must bring authentic revelation.

I came back, that precarious entity, a successful man. I was to be that thing we used to laugh about together in your Cambridge days, a distinguished personality; I should belong to the breed of little lions. Yet, during the long, tedious voyage, I realized that this held no meaning for me; I did not feel myself a little lion, the idea only proved that the boy in me was not yet dead. My one desire, though inarticulate until this moment of confessing it, was to renew the thrills, and so to gather from an intenser, sweeter beauty some measure of greater understanding they seemed to promise. It was a personal hope, a personal desire; and, deep at the heart of it, Memory, passionate though elusive, flashed her strange signal of a personal love. In this dream that mocked at time, this yearning that forgot the intervening years, I nursed the impossible illusion that, somehow or other, I should become aware of Marion.

Now, I have treated you in this letter as though you were a woman who reads a novel, for in my first pages I have let you turn to the end and see that the climax is a happy one, lest you should faint by the way and close my story with a yawn. You need not do that, however, since you already know this in advance. You will bear with me, too, when I tell you that my return to England was in the nature of a failure that, at first, involved sharpest disappointment. I was unaware, as a whole, of the thrills I had anticipated with such longing. The sweet picture of English loveliness I had cherished with sentimental passion during my long exile hardly materialized.

That I was not a lion, but an insignificant quasi-colonial adventurer among many others, may have sprinkled acid upon my daily diet of sensation, but you will do me the justice to believe that this wounded vanity was the smallest item in my disenchantment. Ten years, especially in primitive, godforsaken Africa, is a considerable interval; I found the relationship between myself and my beloved home-land changed, and in an unexpected way.

I was not missed for one thing, I had been forgotten. Except from our mother and yourself, I had no welcome. But, apart from this immediate circle, and apart from the deep, comfortable glow experienced at the first sight of the "old country," I found England and the English dull, conventional, and uninspired. There was no poignancy. The habits and the outlook stood precisely where I had left them. The English had not moved. They played golf as of yore, they went to the races at the appointed time and in the appointed garb, they gave heavy dinner-parties, they wrote letters to the Times, and ignored an outside world beyond their island. Their estimate of themselves and of foreigners remained unaltered, their estimate of rich or influential neighbours was what it always had been, there were many more motor-cars and a few more peers, it was more difficult than formerly to get into a good club; but otherwise, God bless them, they were worthier than ever. The "dear old country," that which "out there" we had loved and venerated, worked and fought for, was stolid and unshaken; the stream of advancing life that elsewhere rushed, had left England complaisantly unmoved and unresponsive.

You have no idea how vividly — and in what curious minor details — the general note of England strikes a traveller returning after an interval of years. Later, of course, the single impression is modified and obscured by other feelings. I give it, therefore, before it was forgotten. England had not budged. Had it been winter instead of early spring, I might sum up for you what I mean in one short sentence: I travelled to London in a third-class railway carriage that had no heating apparatus.

But to all this, and with a touch of something akin to pride in me, I speedily adjusted myself. I had been exiled, I had come home. As our old nurse, aged and withered, but otherwise unaltered, said to me quietly by way of greeting: "Well, they didn't kill you, Master Richard!" I was, therefore, alive. It was for me, the unimportant atom, to recover my place in the parent mass. I did so. I was English. I recovered proportion. I wore the accustomed mask; I hid both my person and my new emotions, as was obviously expected of me. Having reported my insignificance to the Foreign Office.... I came down to the Manor House.

Yet, having changed, and knowing that I had changed, I was aware of a cleft between me and my native stock. Something un-English was alive in me and eager to assert itself. Another essence in my blood had quickened, a secret yearning that I dared not mention to my kind, a new hunger in my heart that clamoured to be satisfied, yet remained, speaking generally, un-nourished. Looking for beauty among my surroundings and among my kith and kin, I found it not; there was no great Thrill from England or from home. The slowness, the absence of colour, imagination, rhythm, baffled me, while the ugliness of common things and common usages afflicted my new sensitiveness. Not that I am peculiarly alert to beauty, nor claim superior perception — I am no artist, either by virtue of vision or power of expression — but that a certain stagnant obtuseness, a kind of sordid and conservative veneration of the ugly that the English favour, distressed and even tortured me in a way I had never realized formerly. They were so proud to live without perception. An artist was a curiosity, not a leader, far less a prophet. There was no imagination.

In little things, as I said, a change was manifest, however. Much that tradition had made lovely with the perfume of many centuries I found modernized until the ancient spirit had entirely fled, leaving a shell that was artificial to the point of being false. The sanction of olden time that used to haunt with beauty was deceived by a mockery I found almost hideous. The ancient inns, for instance, adapted to week-end motor traffic, were pretentious and uncomfortable, their “menus” of inferior food written elaborately in French. The courtliness had vanished, and the cost had come. Telephones everywhere not only destroyed privacy, but brought dismay into countless gentle intimacies, their nuisance hardly justified by their usefulness. Life, it seemed, in a frantic hurry, had been cheapened, not improved; there was no real progress, but only more unrest. England — too solid to go fast, had made ungainly efforts; but she had moved towards ungraciousness where she had moved at all; I found her a cross between a museum and an American mushroom town that advertises all the modern comforts with a violent insistence that is meant to cloak their very absence.

This, my first impression, toned down, of course, a little later; but it was my first impression. The people, however, even in the countryside, seemed proud both of mushroom and museum, and commercial ugliness, greedy and unashamed, now distorted every old-world village. The natives were pleased to the point of vanity.

For myself, I could not manage this atrocious compromise, and looking for the dear old England of our boyhood days, I found it not. The change, of course, was not in the country only, but in myself. The soul in me, awakened to a new standard, had turned round to face another way.

The Manor House was very still when I arrived from London — & late May evening between the sunset and the dark. Mother, as you know, met me at the station, for they had stopped the down-train by special orders, so that I stepped out upon the deserted platform of the countryside quite alone, a distinguished man, with my rug and umbrella. A strange footman touched his hat, an old, stooping porter stared hard at me, then smiled vaguely, while the guard, eyeing respectfully the individual for whom his train had halted, waved his red flag, and swung himself into the disappearing van with the approved manner we once thought marvellous. I left the empty platform, gave up my ticket to an untidy boy, and crossed the gloomy booking-hall. The mournfulness of the whole place was depressing. I heard a blackbird whistle in a bush against the signal-box. It seemed to scream.

Mother I first saw, seated in the big barouche. She was leaning back, but sat forwards as I came. She looked into my face across the wide interval of years now ended, and my heart gave a great boyish leap, then sank into stillness again abruptly. She seemed to me exactly the same as usual — only so much smaller. We embraced with a kind of dignity:

“So here you are, my boy, at last,” I heard her say in a quiet voice, and as though she had seen me a month or two ago, “and very, very tired, I’ll be bound.”

I took my seat beside her. I felt awkward, stiff, self-conscious; there was disappointment somewhere.

“Oh, I’m all right, mother, thanks,” I answered. “But how are you?” And the next moment, it seemed to me, I heard her asking if I was hungry; — whereupon, absurd as it must sound, I was aware of an immense emotion that interfered with my breathing. It broke up through some repressive layer that had apparently concealed it, and made me feel — well, had I been thirty-five years younger, I could have cried — for pleasure. Mother, I think, forgot those years perhaps. To her I was still in overalls and wanted food. We drove, then, in comparative silence the four miles behind the big pair of greys, the only remark that memory credits me with being an enquiry about the identity of the coachman whose dim outline I saw looming in the darkness just above me. The lamplight showed one shoulder, one arm, one ear, the rest concealed; but the way he drove was, of course, unmistakeable; slowly, more cautiously, perhaps, but with the same flourish of the whip, the same air of untold responsibility as ever. And, will you believe it, my chief memory of all that scene of anticipated tenderness and home-emotion is the few words he gave in reply to my enquiry and recognition when at length the carriage stopped and I got out:

“Well, Brown, I’m glad to see you again. All well at home, I hope?” followed by something of sympathy about his beloved horses.

He looked down sideways at me from the box, touching his cockade with the long yellow whip in his thick, gloved hand. I can hear his warm, respectful answer now; I can see the gleam of proud pleasure in his eye:

“Yes, sir, thank you, Sir Richard, and glad to see you back again, sir, and with such success upon you.”

I moved back to help our mother out. I remember thinking how calm, how solid, how characteristically inarticulate it all was. Did I wish it otherwise? I think not. Only there was something in me beating its wings impatiently like a wild bird that felt the bars close round it.... Mother, I realized, could not have said even what the old coachman had said to save her life, and I remember wondering what would move her into the expression of natural joy. All that half-hour, as the hoofs echoed along the silence of the country road, and the old familiar woods and fields slid past, no sign of deep emotion had escaped her. She had asked if I was hungry....

And then the smells! The sweet, faint garden smell in the English twilight: — of laurels and laurestinus, of lilac, pinks, and the heavy scent of May, wall-flowers and sweet william too — these, with the poignant aroma of the old childhood house, were the background of familiar loveliness against which my subsequent disillusion of the homeland set itself in such afflicting contrast. I remember, as we entered the dim hall, the carriage lamps fell on, the flowering horse-chestnut by the door; the bats were flitting; a big white moth whirred softly against the brilliant glass as though you and I were after it again with nets and killing-bottles... and, helping mother out, I noticed, besides her smallness, how slow and aged her movements were.

“Mother, let me help you. That’s what I’ve come home for,” I said, feeling for her little hand. And she replied so quietly, so calmly it was almost frigid, “Thank you, dear boy; your arm, perhaps — a moment. They are so stupid about the lamps in the hall, I’ve had to speak so often. There, now! It is an awkward step.” I felt myself a giant beside her. She seemed so tiny now. There was something very strong in her silence and her calm; and though a portion of me liked it, another portion resented it and felt afraid. Her attitude was like a refusal, a denial, a refusal to live, a denial of life almost. A tinge of depression, not far removed from melancholy, stole over my spirit. The change in me, I realized then, indeed, was radical.

Now, lest this narrative should seem confused, you must understand that my disillusions with regard to England were realized subsequently, when I had moved about the counties, paid many solid visits, and tasted the land and people in some detail. And the disappointment was the keener owing to the fact that very soon after my arrival in the old Home Place, the “thrill” came to me with a direct appeal that was disconcerting. For coming unexpectedly, as it did, in this familiar scene where yet previously I had never known it, it had the effect of marking the change in me with a certainty from which there was no withdrawal possible. It standardized this change. The new judgment was made uncompromisingly clear; people and places must inevitably stand or fall by it. And the first to fall — since the test lies beyond all control of affection or respect — was our own dear, faithful mother.

You share my reverence and devotion, so you will feel no pain that I would dishonour a tie that is sacred to us both in the old Bible sense. But, also, you know what a sturdy and typical soul of England she has proved herself, and that a sense of beauty is not, alas, by any stretch of kindliest allowance, a national characteristic. Culture and knowledge we may fairly claim, no doubt, but the imaginative sense of beauty is o rare among us that its possession is a peculiarity good form would suppress. It is a pose, an affectation, it is unmanly — it is not English. We are too strong to thrill. And that one so near and dear to me, so honoured and so deeply loved, should prove herself to my new standard thus typically English, while it came as sharpest pain, ought not, I suppose, to have caused me the surprise it did. It made me aware, however, of the importance of my new criterion, while at the same time aware of a lack of sympathy between us that amounted to disenchantment. It was a shock, to put it plainly. A breath of solitude, of isolation, stole on me and, close behind it, melancholy.

From the smallest clue imaginable the truth came into me, from a clue so small, indeed, that you may smile to think I dared draw such big deductions from premises so insignificant. You will probably deny me a sense of humour even when you hear. So let me say at once, before you judge me hastily, that the words, and the incident which drew them forth, were admittedly inadequate to the deduction. Only, mark this, please — I drew no deduction. Reason played no part. Cause and effect were unrelated. It was simply that the truth flashed into me. I knew.

What did I know? Perhaps that the gulf between us lay as wide as that between the earth and Sirius; perhaps that we were, individually, of a kind so separate, so different, that mutual understanding was impossible; perhaps that while she was of To-day and proud of it, I was of another time, another century, and proud of that. I cannot say precisely. Her words, while they increased my sense of isolation, of solitude, of melancholy, at the same time also made me laugh, as assuredly they will now make you laugh.

For, while she was behind me in the morning-room, fingering some letters on the table, I stood six feet away beside the open window, listening to the nightingales — the English nightingales — that sang across the quiet garden in the dusk. The high-pitched clamour of the jungle choruses with their monstrous turmoil, their prolific detail, came back to me in startling contrast. This exquisite and delicious sound I now heard belonged still to England. And it had not changed. “No hungry generations tread thee down...” rose in some forgotten corner of my mind, and my yearning that would be satisfied moved forth to catch the notes.

“Listen, mother,” I said, turning towards her.

She raised her head and smiled a little before reading the rest of the letter that she held.

“I only pray they won’t keep you awake, dear boy,” she answered gently. “They give us very little peace, I’m afraid, just now.”

Perhaps she caught some expression in my face, for she added a trifle more quickly: “That’s the worst of the spring — our English spring — it is so noisy!” Still smiling, she picked up her letter again, while I, though still listening by the window, heard only the harsh scream and rattle of the jungle voices, thousands and thousands of miles away across the world.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS SOME little time after my arrival, as I shall presently relate, that the experience I call the thrill came to me in England — and, like all its predecessors, came through Nature. It came, that is, through the only apparatus I possessed as yet that could respond.

The point, I think, is of special interest; I note it now, on looking back upon the series as a whole, though at the time I did not note it.

For, compared with yourself at any rate, the aesthetic side of me is somewhat raw; of pictures, sculpture, music I am untaught and ignorant; with other Philistines, I "know what I like," but nothing more. It is the honest but uncultured point of view. I am that primitive thing, the mere male animal. It was my love of Nature, therefore, that showed me beauty, since this was the only apparatus in my temperament able to respond. Natural, simple things, as before, were the channel through which beauty appealed to that latent store of love and wisdom in me which, it almost seemed, were being slowly educated.

The talks and intimacies with our mother, then, were largely over; the re-knitting of an interrupted relationship was fairly accomplished; she had asked her questions, and listened to my answers. All the dropped threads had been picked up again, so that a pattern, similar to the one laid aside, now lay spread more or less comfortably before us. Outwardly, things seemed much as they were when I left home so many years ago. One might have thought the interval had been one of months, since her attitude refused to recognize all change, and change, and growth, was abhorrent to her type. For whereas I had altered, she had remained unmoved.

So unsatisfying was this state of things to me, however, that I felt unable to confide my deepest, as now I can do easily to you — so that during these few days of intercourse renewed, we had said, it seemed, all that was to be said with regard to the past. My health was most lovingly discussed, and then my immediate and remoter future. I was aware of this point of view — that I was, of course, her own dear son, but that I was also England's son. She was intensely patriotic in the insular sense; my soul, I mean, belonged to the British Empire rather than to humanity and the world at large. Doubtless, a very right and natural way to look at things.... She expressed a real desire to "see your photographs, my boy, of those outlandish places where they sent you"; then, having asked certain questions about the few women (officers' wives and so forth) who appeared in some of them, she leaned back in her chair, and gave me her very definite hopes about "my value to the country," my "duty to the family traditions," even to the point, finally, of suggesting Parliament, in what she termed with a certain touch of pride and dignity, "the true Conservative interest."

"Men like yourself, Richard, are sorely needed now," she added, looking at me with a restrained admiration; "I am sure the Party would nominate you for this Constituency that your father and your grandfather both represented before you. At any rate, they shall not put you on the shelf!"

And before I went to bed — it was my second or third night, I think — she had let me see plainly another hope that was equally dear to her: that I should marry again. There was an ominous reference to my "ample means," a hint of regret that, since you were unavailable, and Eva dead, our branch of the family could not continue to improve the eastern counties and the world. At the back of her mind, indeed, I think there hovered definite names, for a garden party in my honour was suggested for the following week, to which the Chairman of the Local Conservatives would come, and where various desirable neighbours would be only too proud to make my acquaintance and press my colonial and distinguished fingers.

In the interval between my arrival and the "experience" I shall presently describe, I had meanwhile renewed my acquaintance with the countryside. The emotions, however, I anticipated, had even cherished and eagerly looked forward to, had not materialized. There was a chill of disappointment over me. For the beauty I had longed for seemed here so thickly veiled; and more than once I surprised in my heart a certain regret that I had come home at all. I caught myself thinking of that immense and trackless country I had left; I even craved it sometimes, both physically and mentally, as though, for all its luscious grossness, it held something that nourished and stimulated, something large, free and untamed that was lacking in this orderly land, so neatly fenced and parcelled out at home.

The imagined richness of my return, at any rate, was unfulfilled; the tie with our mother, though deep, was uninspiring; while that other more subtle and intangible link I had fondly dreamed might be strengthened, if not wholly proved, was met with a flat denial that seemed to classify it as nonexistent. Hope, in this particular connection, returned upon me, blank and unrewarded.... The familiar scenes woke no hint of pain, much less of questing sweetness. The glamour of association did not operate. No personal link was strengthened.

And, when I visited the garden we had known together, the shady path beneath the larches; saw, indeed, the very chairs that she and I had used, the framed portrait in the morning-room, the harp itself, now set with its limp and broken strings in my own chamber — I was unaware of any ghostly thrill; least of all could I feel that "somebody was pleased."

Excursion farther afield deepened the disenchantment. The gorse was out upon the Common, that Common where we played as boys, thinking it vast and wonderful with the promise of high adventure behind every prickly clump. The vastness, of course, was gone, but the power of suggestion had gone likewise. It was merely a Common that deserved its name. For though this was but the close of May, I found it worn into threadbare patches, with edges unravelled like those of some old carpet in a seaside lodging-house. The lanes that fed it were already thick with dust as in thirsty August, and instead of eglantine, wild-roses, and the rest, a smell of petrol hung upon hedges that were quite lustreless. On the crest of the hill, whence we once thought the view included heaven, I stood by those beaten pines we named The Fort, counting jagged bits of glass and scraps of faded newspaper that marred the bright green of the sprouting bracken.

This glorious spot, once sacred to our dreams, was like a great backyard — the Backyard of the County — while the view we loved as the birthplace of all possible adventure, seemed to me now without spaciousness or distinction. The trees and hedges cramped the little fields and broke their rhythm. No great winds ever swept them clean. The landscape was confused: there was no adventure in it, suggestion least of all. Everything had already happened there.

And on my way home, resentful perhaps yet eager still, I did a dreadful thing. Possibly I hoped still for that divine sensation which refused to come.

I visited the very field, the very poplar ... I found the scene quite unchanged, but found it also — lifeless. The glamour of association did not operate. I knew no poignancy, desire lay inert. The thrill held stubbornly aloof. No link was strengthened.... I came home slowly, thinking instead of my mother's plans and wishes for me, and of the clear intention to incorporate me in the stolid and conventional formulas of what appeared to me as uninspired English dullness. My disappointment crystallized into something like revolt. A faint hostility even rose in me as we sat together, talking of politics, of the London news just come to hand, of the neighbours, of the weather too. I was conscious of opposition to her stereotyped plans, and of resentment towards the lack of understanding in her. I would shake free and follow beauty. The yearning, for want of sympathy, and the hunger, for lack of sustenance, grew very strong and urgent in me.

I longed passionately just then for beauty — and for that revelation of it which included somewhere the personal emotion of a strangely eager love.

CHAPTER VIII

THIS, THEN, WAS somewhat my state of mind, when, after our late tea on the verandah, I strolled out on to the lawn to enjoy my pipe in the quiet of the garden paths. I felt dissatisfied and disappointed, yet knew not entirely perhaps, the reason. I wished to be alone, but was hungry for companionship as well. Mother saw me go and watched attentively, but said no word, merely following me a moment with her eyes above the edge of the Times she read, as of old, during the hours between tea and dinner. The Spectator, her worldly Bible, lay ready to her hand when the Times should have been finished. They were, respectively, as always, her dictionary of opinion, and her medicine-chest. Before I had gone a dozen yards, her head disappeared behind the printed sheet again. The roses flowed between us.

I felt her following glance, as I felt also its withdrawal. Then I forgot her.... A touch of melancholy stole on me, as the garden took me in its charge. For a garden is a ghostly place, and an old-world garden, above all, leads thought backwards among vanished memories rather than forward among constructive hopes and joys.

I yielded, in any case, a little to this subtle pressure from the past, and I must have strolled among the lilac and laburnums for a longer time than I knew, since the gardener who had been trimming the flower-beds with a hand lawn-mower was gone, and dusk already veiled the cedars, when I found myself leaning against the wooden gate that opened into the less formal part beyond the larches.

The house was not visible from where I stood. I smelt the May, the lilac, the heavy perfume everywhere of the opening year; it rose about me in waves, as though full-bosomed summer lay breathing her great promises close at hand, while spring, still lingering, with bright eyes of dew,' watched over her. Then, suddenly, behind these richer scents, I caught a sweeter, wilder tang than anything they contained, and turning, saw that the pines were closer than I knew. A waft of something purer, fresher, reached my nostrils on a little noiseless wind, as, leaning across the gate, I turned my back upon the cultivated grounds and gazed into a region of more natural, tangled growth.

The change was sudden. It was exquisite, sharp and unexpected, too, as with a little touch of wonder. There was surprise in it. For the garden, you will remember, melts here insensibly into a stretch of scattered pines, where heather and bracken cover wide reaches of unreclaimed and useless land. Irregular trails of whitish sand gleamed faintly before the shadows swallowed them, and in the open patches I saw young silver-birches that made me think of running children arrested in mid-play. They stood outlined very tenderly against the sky; their slender forms still quivered; their feathery hair fell earthwards as they drew themselves together, bending their wayward little heads before the approaching night. Behind them, framed by the darker pines into a glowing frieze, the west still burned with the last fires of the sunset; I could see the heather, rising and falling like a tumbled sea against the horizon, where the dim heave of distant moorland broke the afterglow.

And the dusk now held this region in its magic. So strange, indeed, was the contrast between the ebony shadows and the pools and streaks of amberish light, that I looked about me for a moment, almost sharply. There was a touch of the unearthly in this loveliness that bewildered sight a little. Extraordinarily still the world was, yet there seemed activity close upon my footsteps, an activity more than of inanimate Nature, yet less than of human beings. With solidarity it had nothing to do, though it sought material expression. It was very near. And I was startled, I recognized the narrow frontier between fear and wonder. And then I crossed it.

For something stopped me dead. I paused and stared. My heart began to beat more rapidly. Then, ashamed of my moment’s hesitation, I was about to move forward through the gate, when again I halted. I listened, and caught my breath. I fancied the stillness became articulate, the shadows stirred, the silence was about to break.

I remember trying to think; I wanted to relieve the singular tension by finding words, if only inner words, — when, out of the stillness, out of the silence, out of the shadows — something happened. Some faculty of judgment, some attitude in which I normally clothed myself, were abruptly stripped away. I was left bare and sensitive. I could almost have believed that my body had dropped aside, that I stood there naked, unprotected, a form-less spirit, stirred and lifted by the passing breeze.

And then it came. As with a sword-thrust of blinding sweetness, I was laid open. Yet so instant, and of such swiftness, was the stroke, that I can only describe it by saying that, while pierced and wounded, I was also healed again.

Without hint or warning, Beauty swept me with a pain and happiness well nigh intolerable. It drenched me and was gone. No lightning flash could have equalled the swiftness of its amazing passage; something tore in me; the emotion was enveloping but very tender; it was both terrible yet dear. Would to God I might crystallize it for you in those few mighty words which should waken in yourself — in every one! — the wonder and the joy. It contained, I felt, both the worship that belongs to awe and the tenderness of infinite love which welcomes tears. Some power that was not of this world, yet that used the details of this world to manifest, had visited me.

No element of surprise lay in it even. It was too swift for anything but joy, which of all emotions is the most instantaneous: I had been empty, I was filled. Beauty that bathes the stars and drowns the very universe had stolen out of this wild morsel of wasted and uncared-for English garden, and dropped its transforming magic into — me. At the very moment, moreover, when I had been ready to deny it altogether. I saw my insignificance, yet, such was the splendour it had wakened in me, knew my right as well. It could be ever thus; some attitude in myself alone prevented....

And — somebody was pleased.

This personal ingredient lay secure in the joy that assuredly remained when the first brief intolerable ecstasy had passed. The link I desired to recognize was proved, not merely strengthened. Beauty had cleft me open, and a message, if you will, had been delivered. This personal hint persisted; I was almost aware of conscious and intelligent direction. For to you I will make the incredible confession, that I dare phrase the experience in another fashion, equally true: In that flashing instant I stood naked and shelterless to the gaze of some one who had looked upon me. I was aware of sight; of eyes in which “burning memory lights love home.” These eyes, this sight had gazed at me, then turned away. For in that blinding sweetness there was light, as with the immediate withdrawal again there was instant darkness. I was first visible, then concealed. I was clothed again and covered.

And the thick darkness that followed made it appear as though night, in one brief second, had taken the place of dusk.

Trembling, I leaned across the wooden gate and waited while the darkness settled closer. I can swear, moreover, that it was neither dream, nor hope, nor any hungry fantasy in me that then recognized a further marvel — I was no longer now alone.

A presence faced me, standing breast-high in the bracken. The garden had been empty; somebody now walked there with me.

It was, as I mentioned, the still hour between the twilight and the long, cool dark of early summer. The little breeze passed whispering through the pines. I smelt the pungent perfume of dry heather, sand, and bracken. The horizon, low down between the trunks, shone gold and crimson still, but fading rapidly. I stood there for a long time trembling; I was a part of it; I felt that I was shining, as though my inner joy irradiated the world about me. Nothing in all my life has been so real, so positive. I was assuredly not alone....

The first sharp magic, the flash that pierced and burned, had gone its way, but Beauty still stood so perilously near, so personal, that any moment, I felt, it must take tangible form, betray itself in visible movement of some sort, break possibly into audible sound of actual speech. It would not have surprised me — more, it would have been natural almost — had I felt a touch upon my hands and lips, or caught the murmur of spoken words against my ear.

Yet from such direct revelation I shrank involuntarily and by instinct. I could not have borne it then. I had the feeling that it must mar and defile a wonder already great enough; there would have lain in it, too, a betrayal of the commonplace, as of something which I could not possibly hold for true. I must have distrusted my own senses even, for the beauty that cleft me open dealt directly with the soul alone, leaving the senses wholly disengaged. The Presence was not answerable to any lesser recognition.

Thus I shrank and turned away, facing the familiar garden and the “wet bird-haunted English lawn,” a spiritual tenderness in me still dreading that I might see or hear or feel, destroying thus the reality of my experience. Yet there was, thank God, no speech, no touch, no movement, other than the shiver of the birches, the breath of air against my cheek, the droop and bending of the nearer pine boughs. There was no audible or visible expression; I saw no figure breast-high in the bracken. Yet sound there was, a moment later. For, as I turned away, a bird upon a larch twig overhead burst into sudden and exultant song.

CHAPTER IX

NOW, DO NOT be alarmed lest I shall attempt to describe a list of fanciful unrealities that borrowed life from a passing emotion merely; the emotion was permanent, the results enduring. Please believe the honest statement that, with the singing of that bird, the pent-up stress in me became measurably articulate. Some bird in my heart, long caged, rang out in answering inner song.

It is also true, I think, that there were no words in me at the moment, and certainly no desire for speech. Had a companion been with me, I should probably have merely lit my pipe and smoked in silence; if I spoke at all, I should have made some commonplace remark: “It’s late; we must be going in to dress for dinner....” As it was, however, the emotion in me, answering the singing of the bird, became, as I said, measurably articulate. I give you simple facts, as though this were my monthly Report to the Foreign Office in days gone by. I spoke no word aloud, of course. It was rather that my feelings found utterance in the rapturous song I listened to, and that my thoughts knew this relief of vicarious expression, though of inner and inaudible expression. The beauty of scene and moment were adequately recorded, and for ever in that song. They were now part of me.

Unaware of its perfect mission the bird sang, of course because it could not help itself; perhaps some mating thrush, perhaps a common blackbird only; I cannot say; I only realized that no human voice, no human music, even of the most elaborate and inspired kind, could have made this beauty, similarly articulate. And, for a moment I knew my former pain that I could not share this joy, this beauty, with others of my kind, that, except for myself, the loveliness seemed lost and wasted. There was no spectator, no other listener; the sweet spring night was lavish for no audience; the revelation had been repeated, would be repeated, a thousand thousand times without recognition and without reward.

Then, as I listened, memory, it seemed, took yearning by the hand, and led me towards that inner utterance I have mentioned. There was no voice, least of all that inner voice you surely have anticipated. But there was utterance, as though my whole being combined with nature in its birth.

Into the mould of familiar sentences of long ago it ran, yet nearer at last to full disclosure, because the pregnant sentences had altered:

“I need your forgiveness born of love...” passed through me with the singing of the bird.

I listened with the closest inner attention I have ever known. I paused. My heart brimmed with an expectant wonder that was happiness. And the happiness was justified. For the familiar sentence halted before its first sorrowful completion; the poignant close remained unuttered — because it was no longer true.

Out of deep love in me, new-born, that held the promise of fulfilment, the utterance concluded:

“... I have found a better way....”

Before I could think or question, and almost as though a whisper of the wind went past, there rose in me at once this answering recognition. It seemed authentically convincing; it was glorious; it was full of joy:

“That beauty which was Marion lives on, and lives for me.”

It was as though a blaze of light shone through me; somewhere in my body there were tears of welcome; for this recognition was to me reunion.

It must seem astonishing for me, a mere soldier and Colonial Governor, to confess you that I stood there listening to the song for a long interval of what I can only term, with utmost sincerity, communion. Beauty and love both visited me; I believe that truth and wisdom entered softly with them. As I wrote above, I saw my own insignificance, yet, such was the splendour in me, I knew my right as well. It could be ever thus. My attitude alone prevented. I was not excluded, not cut off. This Beauty lay ready to my hand, always available, for ever, now. It was not unharvested. But more — it could be shared with others; it was become a portion of myself, and that which is part of my being must, inevitably and automatically, be given out.

It was, thus, nowhere wasted or unharvested; it offered with prodigal opportunity a vehicle for that inspiration which is love, and being love of purest kind, is surely wisdom too. The dead, indeed, do not return, yet they are active, and those who lived beauty in their lives are still, through that beauty, benevolently active.

I will give you now the change instantaneously produced in me:

There rose in me another, deeper point of view that dispelled as by magic the disenchantment that had chilled these first days of my return. I stood here in this old-world garden, but I stood also in the heart of that beauty, so carefully hidden, so craftily screened behind the obvious, that strong and virile beauty which is England. Within call of my voice, still studying by lamplight now the symbols of her well-established strength, burning, moreover, with the steady faith which does not easily break across restraint, and loving the man as she had loved the little boy, sat one, not wondering perhaps at my unspoken misunderstanding, yet hoping, patiently and in silence, for its removal in due time. In the house of our boyhood, of our earliest play and quarrels, unchanged and unchangeable, knowing simply that I had "come home again to her," our mother waited....

I need not elaborate this for you, you for whom England and our mother win almost a single, undivided love. I had misjudged, but the cause of my misjudgment was thus suddenly removed. A subtler understanding insight, a sympathy born of deeper love, something of greater wisdom, in a word, awoke in me. The thrill had worked its magic as of old, but this time in its slower English fashion, deep, and characteristically sure. To my country (that is, to my first experience of impersonal love) and to my mother (that is, to my earliest acquaintance with personal love) I had been ready, in my impatience, to credit an injustice. Unknown to me, thus, there had been need of guidance, of assistance. Beauty, having cleared the way, had worked upon me its amazing alchemy.

There, in fewest possible words, is what had happened.

I remember that for a long time, then, I waited in the hush of my childhood's garden, listening, as it were, with every pore, and conscious that some one who was pleased interpreted the beauty to my soul. It seemed, as I said, a message of a personal kind. It was regenerative, moreover, in so far that life was enlarged and lifted upon a nobler scale; new sources of power were open to me; I saw a better way. Irresistibly it came to me again that beauty, far from being wasted, was purposive, that this purpose was of a redeeming kind, and that some one who was pleased co-operated with it for my personal benefit. No figure, thank God, was visible, no voice was audible, but a presence there indubitably was, and, whether I responded or otherwise, would be always there.

And the power was such that I felt as though the desire of the planet itself yearned through it for expression.

CHAPTER X

I WATCHED THE little bird against the paling sky, and my thoughts, following the happy singing, went slowly backwards into the half-forgotten past.... They led me again through the maze of gorgeous and mysterious hopes, un-remembered now so many years, that had marked my childhood. Few of these, if any, it seemed, had known fulfilment.... I stole back with them, past the long exile in great Africa, into the region of my youth and early boyhood....

And, as though a hand uncovered it deliberately, I recalled an earliest dream — strangest, perhaps, of all the mysterious dreams of that far time. It had, I thought, remained unrealized, as, certainly, till this moment, it had lain forgotten — a boyish dream that behind the veils of the Future some one waited for me with the patience of a perfect love that was my due.

The dream reached forward towards some one who must one day appear, and whose coming would make life sweet and wonderful, fulfilling, even explaining, the purpose of my being. This dream which I had thought peculiarly my own, belongs, I learned later, to many, if not to the race in general, and, with a smile at my own incurable vanity (and probably a grimace at being neatly duped), I had laid it on one side. At any rate, I forgot it, for nothing happened to keep it active, much less revive it.

Now, however, looking backwards, and listening to the singing in the sky, I recalled what almost seemed to have been its attempt at realization. Having recovered its earliest appearance, my thought next leaped forward to the moment that might possibly have been its reappearance. For memory bore me off without an effort on my part, and set me abruptly within a room of the house I had come home to, where Marion sat beside me, singing to the harp she loved. The scene rose up before me as of yesterday... the emotions themselves reconstituted. I recalled the deep, half-sad desire to be worthy of her, to persuade myself I loved as she did, even the curious impulse to acknowledge an emotion that came and went before it could be wholly realized — the feeling, namely, that I ought to love her because — no more, no less is the truth — because she needed it: and then the blank dismay that followed my failure, as with a kind of shameful horror before a great purpose that my emptiness left unfulfilled.

The very song came back that moved me more than any else she sang — her favourite it was as well. I heard the twanging of the strings her fingers plucked. I heard the words:

“About the little chambers of my heart
Friends have been coming — going — many a year.
The doors stand open there.
Some, lightly stepping, enter; some depart.
Freely they come and go, at will.
The walls give back their laughter; all day long
They fill the house with song.
One door alone is shut, one chamber still.”

With each repetition of the song, I remembered, how at that time my boyhood’s dream came back to me, as though its fulfilment were at last at hand; as though, somehow, that “door” must open, that “still chamber” welcome the sweetness and the loveliness of her who sang. For I could not listen to the music, nor watch her fingers moving down the strings, her slender wrist and rounded arm, her foot upon the pedal as she held the instrument so close — without this poignant yearning that proved ever vain, or this shame of unshed tears my heart mysteriously acknowledged. To the end, as you know, that door remained unopened, that chamber still.

It was the singing of this sweet English bird, making articulate for me the beauty I could not utter, that brought back to memory the scene, the music, and the words....

I looked round me; I looked up. As I did so, the little creature, with one last burst of passionate happiness, flew away into the darkness. And silence followed, so deep that I could hear the murmur of my blood... an exquisite joy ran through me, making me quiver with expectancy from head to foot....

And it was then suddenly I became aware that the long-closed door at last was open, the still chamber occupied. Some one who was pleased, stretching a hand across the silence and the beauty, drew me within that chamber of the heart, so that I passed behind the door that was now a veil, and now a mist, and now a shining blaze of light... passed into a remote and inner stillness where that direct communion which is wordless can alone take place.

It was, I verily believe, a stillness of the spirit. At the centre of the tempest, of the whirlpool, of the heart's commotion, there is peace. I stood close against that source of our life which lies hid with beauty very far away, and yet so near that it is enclosed in every hope, in every yearning, and in every tear. For the whisper came to me, beyond all telling sure.

Beauty had touched me, Wisdom come to birth; and Love, whispering through the silence those marvellous words that sum up all spiritual experience, proved it to me:

"Be still — and know...."

I found myself moving slowly across the lawn again towards the house. I presently heard the wind mousing softly in the limes. The air was fresh and cool. The first stars were out. I saw the laburnum drooping, as though thick clusters of these very stars had drifted earthwards among the branches; I saw the gleam of the lilac; across the dim tangle of the early roses shone the familiar windows, cosy now with the glow of lighted lamps... and I became suddenly, in a very intimate sense, "aware" of the garden. The Presence that walked beside me moved abruptly closer. This Presence and the garden seemed, as in some divine mysterious way, inseparable.

There was a stirring of the dimmest and most primitive associations possible. Memory plunged back among ancestral, even racial, shadows. I recalled the sweet and tender legend of the beginnings of the world, when something divine, it was whispered, was intimate with man, and companioning his earliest innocence, walked with him in that happier state those childlike poets called — a garden. That childhood of the world seemed very near.

I found again the conditions of innocence and pristine wonder — of simplicity. There was a garden in my heart, and some one walked with me therein. For Life in its simplest form — of breathing leaves and growing flowers, of trees and plants and shrubs — glowed all about me in the darkness. The blades of grass, the blossoms hanging in the air, strong stems and hidden roots, fulfilled themselves with patience upon every side, brimming with beauty and stillness did not seek to advertise. And of this simplest form of life — the vegetable kingdom — I became vividly aware, prodigal, mysterious, yet purposive. The outer garden merged with the inner, and the Presence walked in both of them....

I was led backwards, far down into my own being. I reached the earliest, simplest functions by which I myself had come to be, the state where the frontier lies between that which is dead and that which is alive. Somewhere between the mineral and vegetable worlds, I knew, that frontier lay. For the vegetable kingdom alone possesses the power of converting the mineral or the chemical into the living organism by absorption; and here, among the leaves and roots and flowers, that power was sweetly, irresistibly, at work.

It seemed I reached that frontier, and I passed it. Beauty came through the most primitive aspect of my being.

And so I would tell you, you alone of all the world, that the Presence walking beside me in the scented darkness came suddenly so close that I was aware of it in what seemed my earliest and most innocent state of soul.

Beside me, in that old-world garden, walked the Cause of all things. The Beauty that in you was truth, in Marion tenderness, was harvested: and somebody was pleased.

CHAPTER XI

ALL THIS I have told to you because we have known together the closest intimacy possible to human beings — we have shared beauty.

They said, these many days ago, that you had gone away, that you were dead. The wind on the Downs, your favourite Downs, your favourite southwest wind, received your dust, scattering it like pollen into space. No sign has come to me, no other sign than this I tell you now in my long letter. It is enough. I know.

There were thus two loves, one unrecognized till afterwards, the other realized at the time.... In the body there was promise. There is now accomplishment.

It is very strange, and yet so simple. Beauty, I suppose, opens the heart, extends the consciousness. It is a platitude, of course. You will laugh when I tell you that afterwards I tried to reason it all out. I am not apparently intellectual. The books I read would fill your empty room — on aesthetics, art, and what not. I got no result from any of them, but rather a state of muddle that was, no doubt, congestion. None of the theories and explanations touched the root of the matter. I am evidently not "an artist" — that at any rate I gathered, and yet these learned people seemed to write about something they had never "lived." I could almost believe that the writers of these subtle analyses have never themselves felt beauty — the burn, the rapture, the regenerating fire. They have known, perhaps, a reaction of the physical nerves, but never this light within the soul that lifts the horizons of the consciousness and makes one know that God exists, that death is not even separation, and that eternity is now.

Metaphysics I studied too. I fooled myself, thirty years after the proper time for doing so, over the old problem whether beauty lies in the object seen or in the mind that sees the object. And in the end I came back hungrily to my simple starting-point — that beauty moved me. It opened my heart to one of its many aspects — truth, wisdom, joy, and love — and what else, in the name of heaven, mattered!

I sold the books at miserable prices that made Mother question my judgment: coloured plates, costly bindings, rare editions, and all. Aesthetics, Art, rules and principles might go hang for all I cared or any good they did me. It was intellect that had devised all these. The truth was simpler far. I cared nothing for these scholarly explanations of beauty’s genesis and laws of working, because I felt it. Hunger needs no analysis, does it? Nor does Love. Could anything be more stultifying? Give to the first craving a lump of bread, and to the second a tangible man or woman — and let those who have the time analyse both cravings at their leisure.

For the thrill I mean is never physical, and has nothing in common with that acute sensation experienced when the acrobat is seen to miss the rope in mid-air as he swings from bar to bar. There is no shock in it, for shock is of the nerves, arresting life; the thrill I speak of intensifies and sets it rising in a wave that flows. It is of the spirit. It wounds, yet marvellously. It is unearthly. Therein, I think, lies its essential quality; by chance, as it were, in writing this intimate confession, I have hit upon the very word: it is unearthly, it contains surprise. Yes, Beauty wounds marvellously, then follows the new birth, regeneration. There is a ravishment of the entire being into light and knowledge.

The element of surprise is certainly characteristic. The thrill comes unheralded — a sudden uprush of convincing joy loosed from some store that is inexhaustible. Unlike the effect of a nervous shock which can be lived over and reconstituted, it knows no repetition; its climax is instantaneous, there is neither increase nor declension; it is unrecoverable; it strikes and is gone. Breaking across the phantasmagoria of appearances, it comes as a flash of reality, a lightning recognition of something that cannot be travestied. It is not in time. It is eternity.

I suspect you know it now with me; in fact I am certain that you do....

I remember how, many years ago — in that delightful period between boyhood and manhood when we felt our wings and argued about the universe — we discovered this unearthly quality in three different things: the song of a bird, the eyes of a child, and a wild-flower come upon unexpectedly in a scene of desolation. For in all three, we agreed, shines that wonder which holds adoration, that joy which is spontaneous and uncalculated, and that surprise which pertains to Eternity looking out triumphantly upon ephemeral things.

So, at least, in our youthful eagerness, we agreed; and to this day one in particular of the three — a bird's song — always makes me think of God. That divine, ecstatic, simple sound is to me ever both surprising and unearthly. Each time it takes me by surprise — that people do not hush their talk to kneel and listen.... And of the eyes of little children — if there is any clearer revelation granted to us of what is unearthly in the sense of divinity brought close, I do not know it. Each time my spirit is arrested by surprise, then filled with wondering joy as I meet that strange open look, so stainless, accepting the universe as its rightful toy, and, as with the bird and flower, saying Yes to life as though there could not possibly exist a No.

The wildflower too: you recall once — it was above Igls when the Tyrolean snows were melting — how we found a sudden gentian on the dead, pale grass? The sliding snows had left the coarse tufts stroked all one way, white and ugly, thickly streaked with mud, no single blade with any sign of life or greenness yet, when we came upon that star of concentrated beauty, more blue than the blue sky overhead, the whole passion of the earth in each pointed petal. A distant avalanche, as though the hills were settling, the bustle of the torrent, the wind in the pines and larches, only marked by contrast the incredible stillness of the heights — then, suddenly, this star of blue blazing among the desolation. I recall your cry and my own — wonder, joy, as of something unearthly — that took us by surprise.

In these three, certainly, lay the authentic thrill I speak of; while it lasts, the actual moment seems but a pedestal from which the eyes of the heart look into Heaven, a pedestal from which the soul leaps out into the surrounding garden of limitless possibilities which are its birthright, and immediately accessible. And that, indeed, is the essential meaning of the thrill — that Heaven is here and now. The gates of ivory are very tiny; Beauty sounds the elfin horns that opens them; smaller than the eye of a needle is that opening — upon the diamond point of the thrill you flash within, and the Garden of Eternity is yours for ever — now.

I am writing this to you, because I know you listen with your heart, not with your nerves; and the garden that I write about you know now better than I do myself. I have but tasted it, you dwell therein, unaged, unageing. And so we share the flowers; we know the light, the fragrance and the birds we know together.... They tell me — even our mother says it sometimes with a sigh — that you are far away, not understanding that we have but recovered the garden of our early childhood, you permanently, I whenever the thrill opens the happy gates. You are as near to me as that. Our love was forged inside those ivory gates that guard that childhood state, facing four ways, and if I wandered outside a-while, puzzled and lonely, the thrill of beauty has led me back again, and I, have found your love unchanged, unaged, still growing in the garden of our earliest memories. I did but lose my way for a time....

That childhood state must be amazingly close to God, I suppose, for though no child is consciously aware of beauty, its whole being cries Yes to the universe and life as naturally and instinctively as a flower turns to the sun. The universe lies in its overall pocket of alpaca, and beauty only becomes a thing apart when the growing consciousness, hearing the world cry No, steps through the gates to enquire and cannot find the entrance any more. Beauty then becomes a signpost showing the way home again. Baudelaire, of course, meant God and Heaven, instead of “genius” when he said, “Le genie n’est que l’enfance retrouvee a volonte....”

And so when I write to you, I find myself again within the garden of our childhood, that English garden where our love shared all the light and fragrance and flowers of the world together. “Time’s but a golden wind that shakes the grass,” and since my thought is with you, you are with me now... and now means always or it means nothing.

So these relationships are real still among a thousand shadows. Your beauty was truth, hers was unselfish love. The important thing is to know you still live, not with regret and selfish grief, but with that joy and sure conviction which makes the so-called separation a temporary test, perhaps, but never a final blow. What are the few years of separation compared to this certainty of co-operation in eternity? We live but a few years together in the flesh, yet if those few are lived with beauty and beautifully, the tie is unalterably forged which fastens us lovingly together for ever. Where, how, under what precise conditions it were idle to enquire and unnecessary — the wrong way too. Our only knowledge (in the scientific sense) comes to us through our earthly senses. To forecast our future life, constructing it of necessity upon this earthly sensory experience, is an occupation for those who have neither faith nor imagination. All such “heavens” are but clumsy idealizations of the present— “Happy Hunting Grounds” in various forms: whereas we know that if we lived beauty together, we shall live it always— “afterwards,” as our poor time-ridden language phrases it. For Beauty, once known, cannot exclude us. We cooperated with the Power that makes the universe alive.

And, knowing this, I do not ask for your “return,” or for any so-called evidence that you survive. In beauty you both live now with less hampered hands, less troubled breath, and I am glad.

Why should you come, indeed, through the gutter of my worn, familiar, personal desires, when the open channel of beauty lies ever at the flood for you to use? Coming in this way, you come, besides, for many, not for me alone, since behind every thrill of beauty stand the countless brave souls who lived it in their lives. They have entered the mighty rhythm that floats the spiral nebulae in space, as it turns the little aspiring Nautilus in the depths of the sea. Having once felt this impersonal worship which is love of beauty, they are linked to the power that drives the universe towards perfection, the power that knocks in a million un-advertised forms at every human heart: and that is God.

With that beneficent power you cooperate. I ask no other test. I crave no evidence that you selfishly remember me. In the body we did not know so closely. To see into your physical eyes, and touch your hand, and hear your voice — these were but intermediary methods, symbols, at the best. For you I never saw nor touched nor heard. I felt you — in my heart. The closest intimacy we knew was when together we shared one moment of the same beauty; no other intimacy approaches the reality of that; it is now strengthened to a degree unrealized before. For me that is enough. I have that faith, that certainty, that knowledge. Should you come to me otherwise I must disown you. Should you stammer through another’s earthly lips that you now enjoy a mere idealized repetition of your physical limitations, I should know my love, my memory, my hope degraded, nay, my very faith destroyed.

To summon you in that way makes me shudder. It would be to limit your larger uses, your wider mission, merely to numb a selfish grief born of a faithless misunderstanding.

Come to me instead — or, rather, stay, since you have never left — be with me still in the wonder of dawn and twilight, in the yearning desire of inarticulate black night, in the wind, the sunshine, and the rain. It is then that I am nearest to you and to your beneficent activity, for the same elemental rhythm of Beauty includes us both. The best and highest of you are there; I want no lesser assurance, no broken personal revelation. Eternal beauty brings you with an intimacy unknown, impossible, indeed, to partial disclosure. I should abhor a halting masquerade, a stammering message less intelligible even than our intercourse of the body.

Come, then! Be with me, your truth and Marion’s tenderness linked together with what is noblest in myself. Be with me in the simple loveliness of an English garden where you and I, as boys together, first heard that voice of wonder, and knew the Presence walking with us among the growing leaves.

THE END

The Bright Messenger (1921)

This novel was first published in 1921 and is a direct sequel to Blackwood’s earlier *Julius Le Vallon* (1916). The title character of the first novel reappears as the protagonist, though he has been altered by his encounter with the elemental spirit in the earlier tale. Two doctors become interested in Julius, who has developed a split personality, his psyche periodically overcome by another force, which they name ‘N. H.’ – the ‘bright messenger’ of the novel’s title. But what is the nature of this force? And what is its message?

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Almond-Blossom
The House of Cassell
THE BRIGHT MESSENGER
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CASSELL
The BRIGHT MESSENGER
Algernon Blackwood

Dust jacket of the first edition

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

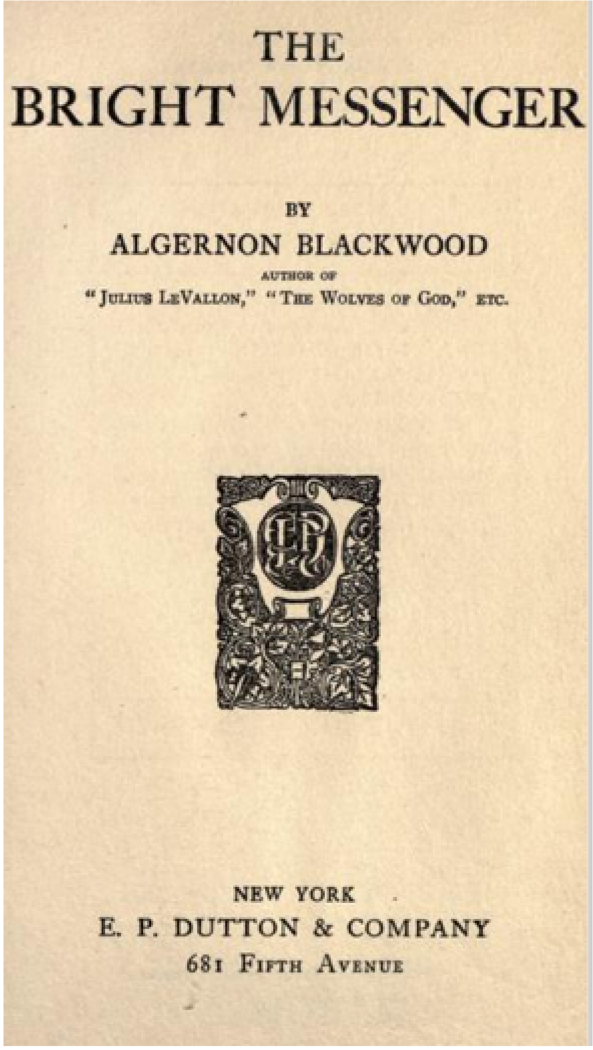
CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII

CHAPTER XXIII

CHAPTER XXIV

CHAPTER XXV
CHAPTER XXVI
CHAPTER XXVII



THE
BRIGHT MESSENGER

BY
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD
AUTHOR OF
"JULIUS LEVALLON," "THE WOLVES OF GOD," ETC.

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
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Title page of the first U.S. edition

TO THE UNSTABLE

CHAPTER I

EDWARD FILLERY, SO far as may be possible to a man of normal passions and emotions, took a detached view of life and human nature. At the age of thirty-eight he still remained a spectator, a searching, critical, analytical, yet chiefly, perhaps, a sympathetic spectator, before the great performance whose stage is the planet and whose performers and auditorium are humanity.

Knowing himself outcast, an unwelcome deadhead at the play, he had yet felt no bitterness against the parents whose fierce illicit passion had deprived him of an honourable seat. The first shock of resentment over, he had faced the situation with a tolerance which showed an unusual charity, an exceptional understanding, in one so young.

He was twenty when he learned the truth about himself. And it was his wondering analysis as to why two loving humans could be so careless of their offspring's welfare, when the rest of Nature took such pains in the matter, that first betrayed, perhaps, his natural aptitude. He had the innate gift of seeing things as they were, undisturbed by personal emotion, while yet asking himself with scientific accuracy why and how they came to be so. These were invaluable qualities in the line of knowledge and research he chose for himself as psychologist and doctor. The terms are somewhat loose. His longing was to probe the motives of conduct in the first place, and, in the second, to correct the results of wrong conduct by removing faulty motives. Psychiatrist and healer, therefore, were his more accurate titles; psychiatrist and healer, in due course, he became.

His father, an engineer of ability and enterprise, prospecting in the remoter parts of the Caucasus for copper, and making a comfortable fortune in so doing, was carried off his feet suddenly by the beauty of a Khaketian peasant girl, daughter of a shepherd in these lonely and majestic mountains, whose intolerable grandeur may well intoxicate a man to madness. A dangerous and disgraceful episode it seems to have been between John Fillery, hitherto of steady moral fibre, and this strange, lovely pagan girl, whose savage father hunted the pair of them high and low for weeks before they finally eluded him in the azalea valleys beyond Artvine.

Great passion, possibly great love, born of this enchanted land whose peaks touch heaven, while their lower turfy slopes are carpeted with lilies, azaleas, rhododendrons, contributed to the birth of Edward, who first saw the light in a secret chamber of a dirty Tiflis house, above the Koura torrent. That same night, when the sun dipped beneath the Black Sea waters two hundred miles to the westward, his mother had looked for the last time upon her northern lover and her wild Caucasian mountains.

Edward, however, persisted, visible emblem of a few weeks' primal passion in a primal land. Intense desire, born in this remote wilderness of amazing loveliness, lent him, perhaps, a strain of illicit, almost unearthly yearning, a secret nostalgia for some lost vale of beauty that held fiercer sunshine, mightier winds and fairer flowers than those he knew in this world.

At the age of four he was brought to England; his Russian memories faded, though not the birthright of his primitive blood. Settling in London, his father increased his fortune as consulting engineer, but did not marry. To the short vehement episode he had given of his very best; he remained true to his gorgeous memory and his sin; the cream of his life, its essence and its perfume, had been spent in those wild wind-swept azalea valleys beyond Artvine. The azalea honey was in his blood, the scent of the lilies in his brain; he still heard the Koura and Rion foaming down towards ancient Colchis. Edward embodied for him the spirit of these sweet, passionate memories. He loved the boy, he cherished and he spoilt him.

But Edward had stuff in him that rendered spoiling harmless. A vigorous, independent youngster, he showed firmness and character as a lad. To the delight of his father he knew his own mind early, reading and studying on his own account, possessed at the same time by a vehement love of nature and outdoor life that was far more than the average English boy's inclination to open air and sport. There lay some primal quality in his blood that was of ancient origin and leaned towards wildness. There seemed almost, at the same time, a faunish strain that turned away from life.

As a tiny little fellow he had that strange touch of creative imagination other children have also known — an invisible playmate. It had no name, as it, apparently, had no sex. The boy's father could trace it directly to no fairy tale read or heard; its origin in the child's mind remained a mystery. But its characteristics were unusual, even for such fanciful imaginings: too full-fledged to have been created gradually by the boy's loneliness, it seemed half goblin and half Nature-spirit; it replaced, at any rate, the little brothers and sisters who were not there, and the father, led by his conscience, possibly, to divine or half divine its origin, met the pretence with sympathetic encouragement.

It came usually with the wind, moreover, and went with the wind, and wind accordingly excited the child. "Listen! Father!" he would exclaim when no air was moving anywhere and the day was still as death. Then: "Plop! So there you are!" as though it had dropped through empty space and landed at his feet. "It came from a tremenjus height," the child explained. "The wind's up *there*, you see, to-day." Which struck the parent's mind as odd, because it proved later true. An upper wind, far in the higher strata of air, came down an hour or so afterwards and blew into a storm.

Fire and flowers, too, were connected with this invisible playmate. "*He'll* make it burn, father," the child said convincingly, when the chimney smoked and the coals refused to catch, and then became very busy with his friend in the grate and about the hearth, just as though he helped and superintended what was being invisibly accomplished. "It's burning better, anyhow," agreed the father, astonished in spite of himself as the coals began to glow and spurt their gassy flames. "Well done; I am very much obliged to you and your little friend."

"But it's the only thing he can do. He likes it. It's his work really, don't you see — keeping up the heat in things."

"Oh, it's his natural job, is it? I see, yes. But my thanks to him, all the same."

"Thank you very much," said grave Edward, aged five, addressing his tiny friend among the fire-irons. "I'm much mobliged to you."

Edward was a bit older when the flower incident took place — with the geranium that no amount of care and coaxing seemed able to keep alive. It had been dying slowly for some days, when Edward announced that he saw its "inside" flitting about the plant, but unable to get back into it. "It's got out, you see, and can't get back into its body again, so it's dying."

“Well, what in the world are we to do about it?” asked his father.

“I’ll ask,” was the solemn reply. “Now I know!” he cried, delighted, after asking his question of the empty air and listening for the answer. “Of course. Now I see. Look, father, there it is — its spirit!” He stood beside the flower and pointed to the earth in the pot.

“Dear me, yes! Where d’you see it? I — don’t see it quite.”

“He says I can pick it up and put it back and then the flower will live.” The child put out a hand as though picking up something that moved quickly about the stem.

“What’s it look like?” asked his father quickly.

“Oh, sort of trinangles and things with lines and corners,” was the reply, making a gesture as though he caught it and popped it back into the red drooping blossoms. “There you are! Now you’re alive again. Thank you very much, please” — this last remark to the invisible playmate who was superintending.

“A sort of geometrical figure, was it?” inquired the father next day, when, to his surprise, he found the geranium blooming in full health and beauty once again. “That’s what you saw, eh?”

“It was its spirit, and it was shiny red, like fire,” the child replied. “It’s heat. Without these things there’d be no flowers at all.”

“Who makes everything grow?” he asked suddenly, a moment later.

“You mean *what* makes them grow.”

“Who,” he repeated with emphasis. “Who builds the bodies up and looks after them?”

“Ah! the structure, you mean, the form?”

Edward nodded. His father had the feeling he was not being asked for information, but was being cross-examined. A faint pressure, as of uneasiness, touched him.

“They develop automatically — that means naturally, under the laws of nature,” he replied.

“And the laws — who keeps them working properly?”

The father, with a mental gulp, replied that God did.

"A beetle's body, for instance, or a daisy's or an elephant's?" persisted the child undeceived by the theological evasion. "Or mine, or a mountain's —— ?"

John Fillery racked his brain for an answer, while Edward continued his list to include sea-anemones, frost-patterns, fire, wind, moon, sun and stars. All these forms to him were bodies apparently.

"I know!" he exclaimed suddenly with intense conviction, clapping his hands together and standing on his toes.

"Do you, indeed! Then you know more than the rest of us."

"*They do*, of course," came the positive announcement. "The other kind! It's their work. Yours, for instance" — he turned to his playmate, but so naturally and convincingly that a chill ran down his father's spine as he watched— "is fire, isn't it? You showed me once. And water stops you, but wind helps you ..." and he continued long after his father had left the room.

With advancing years, however, Edward either forgot his playmate or kept its activities to himself. He no longer referred to it, at any rate. His energies demanded a bigger field; he roamed the fields and woods, climbed the hills, stayed out all night to see the sunrise, made fires even when fires were not exactly needed, and hunted with Red Indians and with what he called "Windy-Fire people" everywhere. He was never in the house. He ran wild. Great open spaces, trees and flowers were what he liked. The sea, on the other hand, alarmed him. Only wind and fire comforted him and made him happy and full of life. He was a playmate of wind and fire. Water, in large quantities at any rate, was inimical.

With concealed approval, masking a deep love fulfilled yet incomplete, his father watched the growth of this fiercer strain that mere covert shooting could not satisfy, nor ordinary sporting holidays appease.

"England's too small for you, Edward, isn't it?" he asked once tentatively, when the boy was about fifteen.

"The English people, you mean, father?"

"You find them dull, don't you? And the island a bit cramped — eh?"

Edward waited without replying. He did not quite understand what his indulgent father intended, or was leading up to.

“You’d like to travel and see things and people for yourself, I mean?”

He watched the boy without, as he thought, the latter noticing. The answer pleased but puzzled him.

“We’re all much the same, aren’t we?” said Edward.

“Well — with differences — yes, we are. But still — —”

“It’s only the same over and over again, isn’t it?” Then, while his father was thinking of this reply, and of what he should say to it, the boy asked suddenly with arresting intensity:

“Are we the only people — the only sort of beings, I mean? Just men and women like us all over the world? No others of any sort — bigger, for instance, or — more wild and wonderful?” Then he added, a thrust of strange yearning in his face and eyes: “More beautiful?” He almost whispered the last words.

His father winced. He divined the origin of that strange inquiry. Upon those immense and lonely mountains, distant in space and time for him, imagination, rich and pagan, ran, he well knew, to vast and mighty beings, superior to human, benignant and maleficent, akin to the stimulating and exhilarating conception of the gods, and certainly non-human.

“Nothing, Edward, that we know of. Why should there be?”

“Oh, I don’t know, dad. I just wondered — sometimes. But, as you say, we’ve not a scrap of evidence, of course.”

“Not a scrap,” agreed his father. “Poetic legends ain’t evidence.”

The mind ruled the heart in Edward; he had his father’s brains, at any rate; and all his powers and longings focused in a single line that indicated plainly what his career should be. The Public Schools could help him little; he went to Edinburgh to study medicine; he passed eventually with all possible honours; and the day he brought home the news his father, dying, told him the secret of his illegitimate birth.

CHAPTER II

THE SUBSEQUENT TWENTY years or so may be summarized.

Alone in the world, of a loving, passionate nature, he deliberately set all thought of marriage on one side as an impossibility, and directed his entire energy into the acquirement of knowledge; reading, studying, experimenting far outside the circle of the ordinary medical man. The attitude of detachment he had adopted became a habit. He believed it was now his nature.

The more he learned of human frailty and human faculties, the greater became the charity he felt towards his fellow-kind. In his own being, it seemed, lay something big, sweet, simple, a generosity that longed to share with others, a tolerance more ready to acquit than to condemn, above all, a great gift of understanding sympathy that, doubtless, was the explanation of his singular insight. Rarely he found it in him to blame; forgiveness, based upon the increasing extent of his experience, seemed his natural view of human mistakes and human infirmities. His one desire, his one hope, was to serve the Race.

Yet he himself remained aloof. He watched the Play but took no part in it. This forgiveness, too, began at home. His grievance had not soured or dejected him, his father's error presenting itself as a problem to be pondered over, rather than a sin to blame. Some day, he promised himself, he would go and see with his own eyes the Khaketian tribe whence his blood was partially derived, whence his un-English yearnings for a wilder scale of personal freedom amid an unstained, majestic Nature were first stolen. The inherited picture of a Caucasian vale of loveliness and liberty lay, indeed, very deep in his nature, emerging always like a symbol when he was profoundly moved. At any crisis in his life it rose beckoning, seductive, haunting beyond words.... Curious, ill-defined emotions with it, that drove him towards another standard, another state, to something, at any rate, he could neither name nor visualize, yet that seemed to dwarf the only life he knew. About it was a touch of strange unearthly radiance that dimmed existence as he knew it. The shine went out of it. There was involved in this symbolic “Valley” something wholly new both in colour, sound and outline, yet that remained obstinately outside definition.

First, however, he must work, develop himself, and broaden, deepen, extend in every possible way the knowledge of his kind that seemed his only love.

He began in a very practical way, setting up his plate in a mean quarter of the great metropolis, healing, helping, learning with his heart as well as with his brain, observing life at closest quarters from its beginning to its close, his sympathies becoming enriched the more he saw, and his mind groping its way towards clearer insight the more he read, thought, studied. His wealth made him independent; his tastes were simple; his wants few. He observed the great Play from the Pit and Gallery, from the Wings, from Behind the Scenes as well.

Moving then, into the Stalls, into a wealthier neighbourhood, that is, he repeated the experience among another class, finding, however, little difference except in the greater artificiality of his types, the larger proportion of mental and nervous ailments, of hysteria, delusion, imaginary troubles, and the like. The infirmities due to idleness, enflamed vanity and luxury offered a new field, though to him a less attractive one. The farther from simplicity, from the raw facts of living, the more complicated, yet the more trivial, the resulting disabilities. These, however, were quite as real as those, and harder, indeed, to cure. Idle imagination, fostered by opportunity and means, yet forced by conventionality to wear infinite disguises, brought a strange, if far from a noble, crop of disorders into his ken. Yet he accepted them for serious treatment, whatever his private opinion may have been, while his patience, tact and sympathy, backed by his insight and great knowledge, brought him quick success. He was soon in a fair way to become a fashionable doctor.

But the field, he found, was restricted somewhat. His quest was knowledge, not fame or money. He chose his cases where he could, though actually refusing nothing. He specialized more and more with afflictions of a mental kind. He was immensely successful in restoring proportion out of disorder. He revealed people to themselves. He taught them to recover lost hope and confidence. He used little medicine, but stimulated the will towards a revival of fading vitality. Auto-suggestion, rather than suggestion or hypnotism, was his method. He healed. He began to be talked about.

Then, suddenly, his house was sold, his plate was taken down, he vanished.

Human beings object to sudden changes whose secret they have not been told and cannot easily guess; his abrupt disappearance caused talk and rumours, led, of course, by those, chiefly disappointed women, who had most reason to be grateful for past services. But, if the words charlatan and quack were whispered, he did not hear them; he had taken the post of assistant in a lunatic asylum in a northern town, because the work promised him increase of knowledge and experience in his own particular field. The talk he left behind him mattered as little as the small pay attached to the humble duties he had accepted.

London forgot him, but he did not forget what London had taught him.

A new field opened, and in less than two years, opportunity, combined with his undoubted qualifications, saw him Head of an establishment where he could observe at first hand the facts and phenomena that interested him most. Humane treatment, backed by profound insight into the derangements of the poor human creatures under his charge, brought the place into a fame it had never known before. He spent five years there in profound study and experiment; he achieved new results and published them. His *Experimental Psychology* caused a sensation. His name was known. He was an Authority.

At this time he was well past thirty, a tall, dark, distinguished-looking man, of appearance grave and even sombre; imposing, too, with his quiet, piercing eyes, but sombre only until the smile lit up his somewhat rugged face. It was a face that nobody could lie to, but to that smile the suffering heart might tell its inmost secrets with confidence, hope, trust, and without reserve.

There followed several years abroad, in Paris, Rome, St. Petersburg, Moscow; Vienna and Zurich he also visited to test there certain lines of research and to meet personally their originators.

This period was partly a holiday, partly an opportunity to know at first hand the leaders in mental therapeutics, psychology and the rest, and also that he might find time to digest and arrange his own accumulation of knowledge with a view, later, to undertaking the life-work to which his previous experience was but preliminary. Fame had come to him unsought; his published works alone ensured his going down to posterity as a careful but daring and original judge of the human species and its possibilities. It was the supernormal rather than the merely abnormal powers that attracted him. In the subconscious, as, equally, in the superconscious, his deep experience taught him, lay amazing powers of both moral and physical healing, powers as yet but little understood, powers as limitless as they seemed incredible, as mysterious in their operation as they were simple in their accessibility. And auto-suggestion was the means of using them. The great men whom he visited welcomed him with open arms, added to his data, widened yet further his mental outlook. Sought by high and low in many countries and in strangest cases, his experience grew and multiplied, his assortment of unusual knowledge was far-reaching; till he stood finally in wonder and amazement before the human being and its unrealized powers, and his optimism concerning the future progress of the race became more justified with every added fact.

Yet, perhaps, his greatest achievement was the study of himself; it was probably to this deep, intimate and honest research into his own being that his success in helping others was primarily due. For in himself, though mastered and co-ordinated by his steady will, rendered harmless by his saving sense of humour and (as he believed) by the absence of any harboured grievance against others — in his very own being lay all those potential elements of disorder, those loose unravelled threads of alien impulse and suppressed desire, which can make for dangerous disintegration, and thus produce the disturbing results classed generally under alienation and neurosis.

The incongruous elements in him were the gift of nature; γνῶθι σεαυτόν was the saving attitude he brought to that gift, redeeming it. This phrase, borrowed, he remembered with a smile, for the portal of the ancient Mysteries, remained his watchword. He was able to thank the fierce illicit love that furnished his body and his mental make-up for a richer field of first-hand study than years of practice among others could have supplied. He belonged by temperament to the unstable. But — he was aware of it. He realized the two beings in him: the reasoning, scientific man, and the speculative dreamer, visionary, poet. The latter wondered, dreamed among a totally different set of values far below and out of sight. This deeper portion of himself was forever beating up for recognition, clamouring to be used, yet with the strange shyness that reminded him of a loving woman who cannot be certain her passion is returned. It hinted, threatened, wept and even sulked. It rose like a flame, bringing its own light and wind, blessed his whole being with some divine assurance, and then, because not instantly accepted, it retired, leaving him empty, his mind coloured with unearthly yearnings, with poignant regrets, yet perfumed as though the fairness of Spring herself had lit upon his heart and kissed it into blossom on her passage north. It presented its amazing pictures, and withdrew. Elusive, as the half memory of some radiant dream, whose wonder and sweetness have been intense to the point of almost pain, it hovered, floating just out of reach. It lay waiting for that sincere belief which would convince that its passion was returned. And a fleeting picture of a wild Caucasian valley, steeped in sunshine and flowers, was always the first sign of its awakening.

Though not afraid of reason, it seemed somehow independent of the latter's processes. It was his reason, however, he well knew that dimmed the light in its grand, terrible eyes, causing it to withdraw the instant he began to question. Precise, formal thinking shut the engines off and damped the furnaces. His love, his passion, none the less, were there, hiding with belief, until some bright messenger, bringing glad tidings, should reveal the method of harmonious union between reason and vision, between man's trivial normal faculties and his astounding supernormal possibilities.

"This element of feeling in our outlook on Nature is a satisfaction in itself, but our plea for allowing it to operate in our interpretation of Nature is that we get closer to some things through feeling than we do through science. The tendency of feeling is always to see things whole. We cannot, for our life's sake, and for the sake of our philosophical reconstruction, afford to lose in scientific analysis what the poets and artists and the lovers of Nature all see. It is intuitively felt, rather than intellectually perceived, the vision of things as totalities, root and all, all in all; neither fancifully, nor mystically, but sympathetically in their wholeness."

To these words of Professor T. Arthur Thomson's, he heartily subscribed, applying their principle to his own particular field.

CHAPTER III

THE NET RESULT of his inquiries and research, when, at the age of nearly forty, he established his own Private Home for unusual, so-called hopeless cases in North-West London — it was free to all, and as Spiritual Clinique he thought of it sometimes with a smile — may be summed up in the single sentence that man is greater than he knows, and that completer realization of his full possibilities lies accessible to his subconscious and superconscious powers. Herein he saw, indeed, the chief hope of progress for humanity.

And it was to the failures, the diseased, the evil and the broken that he owed chiefly his inspiring optimism, since it was largely in collapse that occurred the sporadic upheaval of those super-normal forces which, controlled, co-ordinated, led, must eventually bring about the realization he foresaw.

The purpose, however, of these notes is not to furnish a sensational story of various patients whom he studied, healed, or failed to heal. Its object is to give some details of one case in particular whose outstanding peculiarities affected his theories and convictions, leaving him open-minded still, but with a breath of awe in his heart perhaps, before a possibility his previous knowledge had ruled entirely out of court, even if — which is doubtful — he had ever considered it as a possibility at all.

He had realized early that the individual manifests but an insignificant portion of his being in his ordinary existence, the normal self being the tip of his consciousness only, yet whose fuller expression rises readily to adequate evocation; and it was the study of genius, of prodigies, so-called, and of certain faculties shown sometimes in hysteria, that led him to believe these were small jets from a sea of power that might, indeed ought, to be realizable at will. The phenomena all pointed, he believed, to powers that seemed as superior to cerebral functions as they were independent of these.

Man's possible field of being, in other words, seemed capable of indefinite extension. His heart glowed within him as he established, step by step, these greater powers. He dared to foresee a time when the limitations of separate personality would have been destroyed, and the vast brotherhood of the race become literally realized, its practical unity accomplished.

The difficulties were endless and discouraging. The inventive powers of the bigger self, its astonishing faculty for dramatizing its content in every conceivable form, blocked everywhere the search for truth.

It could, he found, also detach a portion of its content into a series of separate personalities, each with its individual morals, talents, tendencies, each with its distinct and separate memory. These fragments it could project, so to speak, masquerading convincingly as separate entities, using strange languages, offering detailed knowledge of other conditions, distant in time and space, suggesting, indeed, to the unwary that they were due to obsessing spirits, and leaving the observer in wonder before the potential capacity of the central self disgorging them.

The human depths included, beyond mere telepathy and extended telepathy, an expansion of consciousness so vast as to be, apparently, limitless. The past, on rare occasions even the future, lay open; the entire planetary memory, stored with rich and pregnant accumulated experience, was accessible and shareable. New aspects of space and time were equally involved. A vision of incredible grandeur opened gradually before his eyes.

The surface consciousness of to-day was really rather a trumpery affair; the gross lethargy of the vast majority *vis à vis* the greater possibilities afflicted him. To this surface consciousness alone was so-called evil possible — as ignorance. As “ugly is only half-way to a thing,” so evil is half-way to good. With the greater powers must come greater knowledge, shared as by instantaneous wireless over the entire planet, and misunderstanding, chief obstacle to progress always, would be impossible. A huge unity, sense of oneness must follow. Moral growth would accompany the increase of faculty. And here and there, it seemed to him, the surface ice had thawed already a little; the pressure of the great deeps below caused cracks and fissures. Auto-suggestion, prototype of all suggestion, offered mysterious hints of the way to reach the stupendous underworld, as the Christian Scientists, the miraculous healers, the New Thought movement, saints, prophets, poets, artists, were finding out.

The subliminal, to state it shortly, might be the divine. This was the hope, though not yet the actual belief, that haunted and inspired him. Behind his personality lurked this strange gigantic dream, ever beating to get through....

In his Private Home, helping, healing, using his great gifts of sympathy and insight, he at the same time found the material for intimate study and legitimate experiment he sought. The building had been altered to suit his exact requirements; there were private suites, each with its door and staircase to the street; one part of it provided his own living quarters, shut off entirely from the patients' side; in another, equally cut off and self-contained, yet within easy communication of his own rooms, lived Paul Devonham, his valued young assistant. There was a third private suite as well. The entire expenses he defrayed himself.

Here, then, for a year or two he worked indefatigably, with the measure of success and failure he anticipated; here he dreamed his great dream of the future of the race, in whose progress and infinite capacities he hopefully believed. Work was his love, the advancement of humanity his god. The war availed itself of his great powers, as also of his ready-made establishment, both of which he gave without a thought of self. New material came as well from the battlefields into his ken.

The effect of the terrible five years upon him was in direct proportion to his sincerity. His mind was not the type that shirks conclusions, nor fears to look facts in the face. For really new knowledge he was ever ready to yield all previous theories, to scrap all he had held hitherto for probable. His mind was open, he sought only Truth.

The war, above all the Peace, shook his optimism. If it did not wholly shatter his belief in human progress, it proved such progress to be so slow that his Utopia faded into remotest distance, and his dream of perfectibility became the faintest possible star in his hitherto bright sky of hope.

He felt shocked and stupefied. The reaction was greater than at first he realized. He had often pitied the mind that, aware only of its surface consciousness, uninformed by thrill or shift of the great powers below and above, lived unwarned of its own immenser possibilities. To such, the evidence for extended human faculties must seem explicable by fraud, illusion, derangement, to be classed as abnormal rubbish worthy only of the alienist's attention as diseases. To him such minds, though able, with big intellects among them, had ever seemed a prejudiced, fossilized, prehistoric type. Restricted by their very nature, violently resisting new ideas, they might be intense within their actual scope, but, with vision denied them, they never could be really great.

One effect of the shock he had undergone will be evident by merely stating that he now understood this type of mind a good deal better than before.

CHAPTER IV

THE WAR WAS over, though the benefits of the long anticipated peace still kept provocatively, exasperatingly, out of reach, when, about the middle of September, Dr. Fillery received a letter that interested him deeply.

The shattered world was still distraught, uneasy. Nervously eager to resume its former activities, it was yet waiting for the word that should give it the necessary confidence to begin. Doubt, insecurity, uncertainty everywhere dominated human minds. Those who hoped for a renewal of the easy, careless mood of pre-war days were dismayed to find this was impossible; others who had allowed an optimistic idealism to prophesy a New Age, looked about them bewilderingly and in vain for signs of its fair birth. The latter, to whom, perhaps, Dr. Fillery belonged, were more bitterly disappointed, more cruelly shocked, than the former. The race, it seemed to many unshirking eyes, had leaped back centuries at a single spring; the gulf of primal savagery which had gaped wide open for five years, proving the Stone Age close beneath the surface of so-called civilization, had not yet fully closed. Its jaws still dripped blood, hatred, selfishness; the Race was still dislocated by the convincing disproof of progress, horrified at the fierce reality which had displaced the two-pence coloured dream it had been complacently worshipping hitherto. Men in the mass undoubtedly were savages still.

To Dr. Fillery, an honest, though not a necessarily fundamental pessimism, seemed justified. He believed in progress still, but as his habit was, he faced the facts. His attitude lost something of its original enthusiasm. Looking about him, he saw no big constructive movement; the figure who more than any other was altering the face of the world with his ideas as well as his armies, was avowedly destructive only. He found himself a sobered and a saddened man.

His Private Home, having accomplished splendid work, had just discharged its last shell-shocked patient; it was now empty again, the staff, carefully chosen and proved by long service, dismissed on holidays, the building itself renovated and repaired against the arrival later of new patients that were expected.

Devonham, his assistant, away for a period of rest in Switzerland, would be back in a week or two, and Dr. Fillery, before resuming his normal work, found himself with little to do but watch the progress of the cleaners, painters and carpenters at work.

Into this brief time of leisure dropped the strange, perplexing letter with an effect distinctly stimulating. It promised an unusual case, a patient, if patient the case referred to could properly be called, a young man "who if you decide after careful reflection to reject, can be looked after only by the State, which means, of course, an Asylum for the Insane. I know you are no longer head of the Establishment in Liverpool, but that you confine yourself to private work along similar lines, though upon a smaller scale, and that you welcome only cases that have been given up as hopeless. I honour your courage and your sympathy, I know your skill. So far as a cure is conceivable, this one is hopeless certainly, but its unusual, indeed, its unique character, entitles it, I believe, to be placed among your chosen few. Love, sympathy, patience, combined with the closest observation, it urgently demands, and these qualities, associated with unrivalled skill, you must allow me, again, to think you alone possess among healers and helpers of strange minds.

"For over twenty years, in the solitudes of these Jura forests and mountains, I have cared for him as best I could, and with a devotion a child of my own might have expected. But now, my end not far away, I cannot leave him behind me here uncared for, yet the alternative, the impersonal and formal care of an Institute, must break my heart and his. I turn to you.

"My advanced age and growing infirmities, in these days of unkind travel, prohibit my bringing him over. Can your great heart suggest a means, since I feel sure you will not refuse the care of this strange being whose nature and peculiarities indicate your especial care, and yours alone? Is it too much to wonder if you yourself could come and see him — here in the remote mountain châlet where I have tended and cared for him ever since his mother died in bearing him over twenty years ago?

"I have taught him what seemed wise and best; I have guarded and observed him; he knows little or nothing of an outside world of men and women, and is ignorant of life in the ordinary meaning of the word. What precisely he may be, to what stratum of consciousness he belongs, what kind of being he is, I mean....” The last two lines were then scored through, though left legible. “I feel with Arago, that he is a rash man who pronounces the word ‘impossible’ anywhere outside the sphere of pure mathematics.” More sentences were here scored through.

“Dare I say — to you, as master, teacher, great open-minded soul — that to *human* life, as we know it, he does not, perhaps, belong?

“In writing — in this letter — I find it impossible to give you full details. I had intended to set them down; my pen refuses; in the plain English at my disposal — well, simply, it is not credible. But I have kept full notes all these years, and the notes belong to you. I enclose an imperfect painting I made of him some four years ago. I am no artist; for background you must imagine what lay beyond my little skill — the blazing glory of the immense wood-fires that he loves to make upon the open mountain side, usually at dawn after a night of prayer and singing, while waiting for the strange power he derives (as we all do, indeed, at second or third hand), from the worship of what is to him his mighty father, the life-giving sun. Wind, as the ‘messengers’ of the sun, he worships too.... Both sun and wind, that is, produce an unusual state approaching ecstasy.

“Counting upon you, I have hypnotized him, suggesting that he forget all the immediate past (in fact to date), and telling him he will like you in place of me — though with him it is an uncertain method.

“I am now old in years. I have lived and loved, suffered and dreamed like most of us; my hands have been warmed at the fires of life, of which, let me add, I am not ignorant. You have known, I believe, my serious, as also my lighter imaginative books; my occasional correspondence with your colleague Paul Devonham has been of help and guidance to me. We are not, therefore, wholly strangers.

“The twenty years spent in these solitudes among simple peasant folk, with a single object of devotion to fill my days, have been, I would tell you, among the best of my long existence. My renouncement of the world was no renouncement. I am enriched with wonder and experience that amaze me, for the world holds possibilities few have ever dreamed of, and that I myself, filled as I am with the memory of their contemplation, can hardly credit even now. Perhaps in an earlier stage of evolution, as Delboeuf believes, man was fully aware of *all* that went on within himself — a region since closed to us, owing to attention being increasingly directed outwards. Into some such region I have had a glimpse, it seems. I feel sometimes there was as much fact as fancy, perhaps, in the wise old Hebrew who stated poetically — recently, too, compared with the stretch of time my science deals with— 'The Sons of God took to themselves daughters of the children of men...."

The letter here broke off, as though interrupted by something unexpected and unusual; it was signed, indeed, "John Mason," but signed in pencil and at the bottom of an unwritten blank sheet. It had not all been written, either, at one time, or on the same day; there were intervals, evidently, perhaps of hours, perhaps of days, between the paragraphs. Dr. Fillery read, re-read, then read again the strange epistle, coming each time to the same conclusion — the writer was dying in the very act of forming the last sentences. Their incoherence, the alteration in the style, were thus explained. He had felt the end of life so close that he had written his signature, probably addressed the envelope as well, knowing the page might never be filled up. It had not been filled up.

Something behind the phrases, behind the intensity of the actual words, beyond the queer touches that revealed a mind betrayed by solitude, the hints possibly of a deluded intelligence — there was something that rang true and stimulated him more than ordinarily. The reference to Devonham, too, was definite enough. Dr. Fillery remembered vaguely a correspondence during recent crowded years with a man named Mason, living away in Switzerland somewhere, and that Devonham had asked him questions from time to time about what he called, with his rough-and-ready and half-humorous classification, "pagan obsession," "worshipper of fire and wind," referring it to the writer of the letters, named John Mason. "Non-human delusion," he had also called it sometimes. They had come to refer to it, he remembered, as "N. H." in fact.

He now looked up those Notes, for the mention of the books caused him an uncomfortable feeling of neglected opportunity, and John Mason was an honoured name.

“You know, I believe ... my books,” the writer said. Could this be, he asked himself anxiously, John Mason, the eminent geologist? Had Devonham not realized who he was? Must he blame his assistant, whose jealous care and judgment saved him so many foolish, futile, un-real cases, reserving what was significant and important only?

The Notes established his mistakes and his assistant’s — perhaps intentional? — ignorance. The writer of this curious letter was unquestionably the author of those fairy books for children, old and young, whose daring speculations had suggested that other types and races, ages even before the Neanderthal man, had dwelt side by side with what is known as modern man upon this time-worn planet. Behind the literary form of legend and fairy tale, however, lay a curious conviction. Atlantis was of yesterday compared with earlier civilizations, now extinct by fire and flood and general upheaval, which once may have inhabited the globe. The present evolutionary system, buttressed by Darwin and the rest, was but a little recent insignificant series, trivial both in time and space, when set beside the mightier systems that had come and gone. Their evidence he found, not in clumsy fossils and footprints on cooled rocks, but in the *minds* of those who had followed and eventually survived them: memories of Titan Wars and mighty beings, and gods and goddesses of non-human kind, to whose different existence the physical conditions of an over-heated planet presented no impossibility. The human species, this trumpery, limited, self-satisfied super-animal man, was not the only type of being.

Yet John Mason, in his day, had held the chair at Edinburgh University, his lectures embodied common-sense and knowledge, with acutest imaginative insight. His earliest writings were the text-books of the time. His name, when Edward Fillery was medical student there, still hovered like well-loved incense above the old-town towers.

The Notes now intrigued him. No blame attached to Devonham for having missed the cue, Devonham could not know everything; geology was not in his line of work and knowledge; and Mason was a common name. Rather he blamed himself for not having been struck by the oddness of the case — the Mason letters, the pagan obsession, worshipper of wind and fire, the strange “N. H.”

“A competent indexer, at any rate,” he said to himself with a smile, as he turned up the details easily.

These were very scanty. Devonham evidently had deemed the case of questionable value. The letters from Mason, with the answers to them, he could not find.

The slight record was headed “*Mason*, John,” followed by an address “Chez Henri Petavel, peasant, Jura Mountains, Vaud, French Switzerland,” and details how to reach this apparently remote valley by mule and carriage and foot-path. Name of Mason’s protégé not given.

“*Sex, male*; age — born 1895; parentage, couple of mystical temperament, sincere, but suffering from marked delusions, believers in Magic (various, but chiefly concerned with Nature and natural forces, once known, forgotten to-day, of immense potency, accessible to certain practices of logical but undetailed kind, able apparently to intensify human consciousness).

“*Subject*, of extremely quick intelligence, yet betrays ignorance of human conditions; intelligence superior to human, though sometimes inferior; long periods of quiescence, followed by immense, almost super-human, activity and energy; worships fire and air, chiefly the former, calling the sun his father and deity.

“Abhors confined space; this shown by intense desire for heat, which, together with free space (air), seem conditions of well-being.

“Fears (as in claustrophobia) both water and solidity (anything massive).

“Has great physical power, yet indifferent to its use; women irresistibly attracted to him, but his attitude towards other sex seems one of gentleness and pity; love means nothing. Has, on the other hand, extraordinarily high ideal of service. Is puzzled by quarrels and differences of personal kind. Half-memories of vast system of myriad workers, ruled by this ideal of harmonious service. Faithful, true, honest; falseness or lies impossible ... lovable, pathetic, helpless type — —”

The Notes broke off abruptly.

Dr. Fillery, wondering a little that his subordinate’s brief but suggestive summary had never been brought to his notice before, turned a moment to glance at the rough water-colour drawing he held in his hand. He looked at it for some moments with absorption. The expression of his face was enigmatical. He was more than surprised that Devonham had not drawn his attention to the case in detail. Placing his hand so as to hide the lower portion of the face, he examined the eyes, then turned the portrait upside down, gazing at the eyes afresh. He seemed lost in thought for a considerable time. A faint flush stole into his cheek, and a careful observer might have noticed an increase of light about the skin. He sighed once or twice, and presently, laying the portrait down again, he turned back to the *dossier* upon the table in front of him.

"Very accurate and careful," he said to himself with satisfaction as he noticed the date Devonham had set against the entries— "June 20th, 1914."

The war, therefore, had interrupted the correspondence.

Devonham had made further notes of his own in the margin here and there:

"Does this originate primarily from Mason's mind, communicated thence to his protégé?" He agreed with his assistant's query.

"If so, was it transferred to Mason's mind before that? By the father or mother? The mother was, obviously, his — Mason's — great love. Yet the father was his life friend. Mason's great passion was suppressed. He never told it. It found no outlet."

"Admirable," was the comment spoken below his breath.

"Boy born as result of some 'magical' experiment intensely believed (not stated in detail), during course of which father died suddenly.

"Mason tended mother, then lived alone in remote place where all had occurred.

"Did Mason inherit entire content of parents' beliefs, dramatizing this by force of unexpressed but passionate love?

"Did not Mason's mind, thus charged, communicate whole business to the young mind he has since formed, a plastic mind uninfluenced by normal human surroundings and conditions of ordinary life?

"Transfer of a sex-inspired mania?"

Then followed another note, summarizing evidently Devonham's judgment:

"Not worth F.'s investigation until examined further. N.B. — Look up Mason first opportunity and judge at first hand."

Dr. Fillery, glancing from the papers to the portrait, smiled a little again as he signified approval.

But the last entry interested him still more. It was dated July 13, 1914.

"Mason reports boy's prophecy of great upheaval coming. Entire race slips back into chaos of primitive life again. Entire Western Civilization crumbles. Modern inventions and knowledge vanish. Nature spirits reappear.... Desires return of all previous letters. These sent by registered post."

A few scattered notes on separate sheets of paper lay at the end of the carefully typed *dossier*, but these were very incomplete, and Devonham's handwriting, especially when in pencil, was not of the clearest.

"Non-human claim, though absurd, not traceable to any antecedent causes given by letters. What is Mason's past mental and temperamental history? Is he not, through the parents, the cause? Mania seems harmless, both to subject and others. No suffering or unhappiness. Therefore not a case for F., until further examined by self. Better see Mason and his subject first. Wrote July 24th proposing visit."

Dr. Fillery's eyes twinkled. His forehead relaxed. He looked back. He remembered details. Devonham's holiday that year, he recalled, was due on August 1st; he had intended going out mountain climbing in Switzerland.

The final note of all, also in half-legible writing, seemed to refer to the treatment Mason had asked advice about, and the line Devonham had suggested:

"Natural life close to Nature cannot hurt him. But I advise watch him with fire and with heights — heat, air! That is, he may decide his physical body is irksome and seek to escape it. Teach him natural history — botany, geology, insects, animals, even astronomy, but always giving him reasons and explanations. *Above all* — let him meet girls of his own age and fall in love. Fullest natural expression, but guarded without his knowing it...."

For a long time Dr. Fillery sat with the notes and papers before him, thinking over what he had read. Devonham's advice was clever enough, but without insight, sound and astute, yet lacking divination.

The twinkle in his eyes, caused by the final entry, died away. His face was grave, his manner preoccupied, intense. He gazed long at the portrait in his hand.... It was dusk when he finally rose, replaced the *dossier*, locked the cabinet, and went out into another room, and thence into the hall. Taking his hat and stick, he left the house, already composing in his mind the telegram instructing Devonham, while apologizing for the interrupted holiday, to bring the subject of the Notes to England with him. A telegraph girl met him on the very steps of the house. He took the envelope from her, and opened it. He read the message. It was dated Bâle, the day before:

“Arriving end week with interesting patient. Details index under Mason. Prepare private suite.

“Devonham.”

CHAPTER V

IT WAS, HOWEVER, some two weeks later before Dr. Fillery was on his way to the station to meet Devonham and his companion. A slight delay, caused apparently by the necessity of buying an outfit, had intervened and given time for an exchange of letters, but Devonham had contented himself chiefly with telegrams. He did not wish his chief to know too much about the case in advance. “Probably he regrets the Notes already,” thought the doctor, as the car made its way slowly across crowded London. “He wants my first unbiased judgment; he’s right, of course, but it’s too late for that now.”

The delay, however, had been of value. The Home was in working order again, the staff returned, the private suite all ready for its interesting occupant, whom in thought he had already named “N. H.”; for in the first place he did not know his name as yet, and in the second he felt towards him a certain attitude of tolerant, half-humorous scepticism.

Cut off from his own kind for so many years, educated, perhaps half-educated only, by too speculative and imaginative a mind, equally warped by this long solitude, a mind unduly stretched by the contemplation of immense geological perspectives, filled, too, with heaven knows what strange stories of pantheistic Nature-feeling— “N. H.” might be distinctly interesting, but hardly all that Mason had thought him. “Unique” was a word rarely justified; the peculiarities would prove to be mere extravagances that had, of necessity, remained uncorrected by the friction of intercourse with his own kind. The rest was inheritance, equally unpruned; a mind living in a side-eddy, a backwater with Nature....

At the same time Dr. Fillery admitted a certain anticipatory excitement he could not wholly account for, an undercurrent of wonder he ascribed to his Khaketian blood.

He had written once only to his assistant, sending briefest instructions to say the rooms would be ready, and that the young man must believe he was an invited guest coming on a visit. “Let him expect complete freedom of movement and occupation without the smallest idea of restraint in any way.

He is merely coming to stay for as long as he pleases with a friend of Mason. Impress him with a sense of hearty welcome.” And Devonham, replying, had evidently understood the wisdom of this method. “He is also greatly pleased with your name — the sound of it,” was stated in the one letter that he wrote, “and as names mean a lot to him, so much the better. The sound of it gives him pleasure; he keeps repeating it over to himself; he already likes you. My name he does not care about, saying it quickly, sharply. But he trusts me. His trust in anyone who shows him kindness is instantaneous and complete. He invariably expects kindness, however, from everyone — gives it himself equally — and is baffled and puzzled by any other treatment.”

So Devonham, with “N. H.”, who attached importance to names and expected kindness from people as a natural thing, would be in London town within the hour. Straight from his forests and mountains for the first time in his life, he would find himself in the heart of the greatest accumulation of human beings on the planet, the first city of the world, the final expression of civilization as known to the human race.

“‘N. H.’ in London town,” thought Dr. Fillery, his mouth twitching with the smile that began in his quiet eyes. “Bless the lad! We must make him feel at home and happy. He shall indeed have kindness. He’ll need a woman’s touch as well.” He reflected a moment. “Women are a great help in doubtful cases — the way a man reacts to them,” he mused. “Only they must be distinct in type to be of value.” And his mind ran quickly, comprehensively over the women of his acquaintance, pausing, as it did so, upon two in particular — a certain Lady Gleeson, and Iraida — sometimes called Nayan — Khilkoff, the daughter of his Russian friend, the sculptor.

His mind pondered for some moments the two he had selected. It was not the first time he had made use of them. Their effect respectively upon a man was invariably instinctive and illuminating.

The two were radically different feminine types, as far removed from one another as pole from pole, yet each essentially of her sex. Their effect, respectively, upon such a youth must be of value, and might be even illuminating to the point of revelation. Both, he felt sure, would not be indifferent to the new personality.

It was, however, of Nayan Khilkoff that he thought chiefly. Of that rare, selfless, maternal type which men in all ages have called saint or angel, she possessed that power which evoked in them all they could feel of respect, of purity, of chivalry, that love, in a word, which holds as a chief ingredient, worship. Her beauty, beyond their reach, was of the stars; it was the unattainable in her they loved; her beauty was of the soul. Nayan was spiritual, not as a result of painful effort and laborious development, but born so. Her life, moreover, was one of natural service. Personal love, exclusive devotion to an individual, concentration of her being upon another single being — this seemed impossible to her. She was at the same time an enigma: there was an elusive flavour about her that made people a little in awe of her, a flavour not of this earth, quite. She carried an impersonal attitude almost to the point of seeming irresponsive to common human things and interests.

The other woman, Lady Gleeson, Angela her Christian name, was equally a simple type, though her simplicity was that of the primitive female who is still close to the Stone Age — a savage. She adorned herself to capture men. She was the female spider that devours its mates. She wanted slaves. To describe her as selfish were inadequate, for she was unaware that any other ideal existed in life but that of obtaining her own pleasure. There was instinct and emotion, but, of course, no heart. Without morals, conscience or consideration, she was the animal of prey that obeys the call of hunger in the most direct way possible, regardless of consequences to herself or others. Her brain was quick, her personality shallow. When talking she “rattled on.” Devonham had well said once: “You can hear her two thoughts clicking, both of them in trousers!” Sir George, recently knighted, successful with large concessions in China, was indulgent. The male splendour of the youth was bound to stimulate her hunger, as his simplicity, his loneliness, and in a sense his pathetic helplessness, would certainly evoke the tenderness in Nayan. “He’ll probably like her dear, ridiculous name, too,” Dr. Fillery felt, “the nickname they gave her because she’s the same to everybody, whichever way you take her — Nayan Khilkoff.” Yet her real name was more beautiful — Iraida. And, as he repeated it half aloud, a soft light stole upon his face, shone in the deep clear eyes, and touched even the corners of the rather grim mouth with another, a tenderer expression, before the sternness quickly returned to it.

"N. H." would meet, thus, two main types of female life. He, apparently an exceedingly male being, would face the onslaught of passion and heart, of lust and love, respectively; and it was his reactions to these onslaughts that Fillery wished to observe. They would help his diagnosis, they might guide his treatment.

It was a warm and muggy afternoon, the twilight passing rapidly into darkness now; one of those late autumn days when summer heat flits back, but light is weak. The covered sky increased the clammy warmth, which was damp, unhealthy, devitalizing. No wind stirred. The great city was sticky and depressing. Yet people approved the heat, although it tired them. "It shortens the winter, anyhow," was the general verdict, when expressed at all. They referred unconsciously to the general dread of strikes.

London was hurried and confused. An air of feverish overcrowding reigned in the great station, when he left the car and went in on foot. No sign of order, system, direction, was visible. The scene might have been a first rehearsal of some entirely new experiment. Grumbling and complaint rose from all sides in an exasperated chorus. He tried to ascertain how late the train was and on which platform it might be expected, but no one knew for certain, and the grudging replies to questions seemed to say, "You've no right to ask anything, and if you keep on asking there will be a strike. So that's that!"

He listened to the talk and watched the facial expressions and the movements of the half-resigned and half-excited concourse of London citizens. The clock was accurate, and everyone was kind to ladies; stewed tea, stale cake with little stones in it, vile whisky and very weak beer were obtainable at high prices. There were no matches. The machine for supplying platform-tickets was broken. He saw men paying more thought and attention to the comfort of their dogs than to their own. The great, marvellous, stupid, splendid race was puzzled and exasperated. Then, suddenly, the train pulled in, full of returned exiles longing to be back again in "dear old England."

"Thank God, it's come," sighed the crowd. "Good! We're English. Forgive and forget!" and prepared to tip the porters handsomely and carry their own baggage.

The confusion that followed was equally characteristic, and equally remarkable, displaying greatness side by side with its defects. There was no system; all was muddled, yet all was safe. Anyone could claim what luggage they liked, though no one did so, nor dreamed, it seemed, of doing so. There was an air of decent honesty and trust. There were ladies who discovered that all men are savages; there were men — and women — who were savages. People shook hands warmly, smiled with honest affection, said light, careless good-byes that hid genuine emotion; helped one another with parcels, offered one another lifts. There were few taxicabs, one perhaps to every thirty people. And in this general scrimmage, Dr. Fillery, at first, could see no sign of his expected arrivals; he walked from end to end of the platform littered with luggage and thronged with bustling people, but nowhere could he discover the familiar outline of Devonham, nor anyone who answered to the strange picture that already stood forth sharply in his mind.

“There’s been a mistake somewhere,” he said to himself; “I shall find a telegram when I get back to the house explaining it” — when, suddenly and without apparent cause, there stole upon him a curious lift of freedom — a sharp sense of open spaces he was at a loss to understand. It was accompanied by an increase of light. For a second it occurred to him that the great enclosing roof had rolled back and blown away, letting in air and some lost ray of sunshine. A lovely valley flitted across his thought. Almost he was aware of flowers, of music, of rhythmic movement.

“Edward! there you are. I thought you hadn’t come,” he heard close behind him, and, turning, saw the figure of Devonham, calm and alert as usual. At his side stood a lean, virile outline of a young man, topping Devonham by several inches, with broad but thin shoulders, figure erect yet flexible, whose shining and inquiring eyes of blue were the most striking feature in a boyish face, where strength, intensity and radiant health combined in an unusual degree.

“Here is our friend, LeVallon,” added Devonham, but not before the figure had stepped lightly and quickly forward, already staring at him and shaking his outstretched hand.

So this was “N. H.,” and LeVallon was his name. The calm, searching eyes held a touch of bewilderment in them, the eyes of an honest, intelligent animal, thought Fillery quickly, adding in spite of himself and almost simultaneously, “but of a divine animal.” It was a look he had never in his life before encountered in any human eyes. Mason’s water-colour sketch had caught something, at least, of their innocence and question, of their odd directness and intensity, something, too, of the golden fire in the hair. He wore a broad-brimmed felt hat of Swiss pattern, a Bernese overcoat, a low, soft-collared shirt, with blue tie to match.

Buffeted and pushed by the frenzied travellers, they stood and faced each other, shaking hands, eyes looking into eyes, two strangers, doctor and patient possibly, but friends most certainly, both felt instantly. They liked one another. Once again the scent of flowers danced with light above the piled-up heaps of trunks, rugs, packages. A cool wind from mountains seemed to blow across the dreadful station.

“You’ve arrived safely,” began Dr. Fillery, a little taken aback perhaps. “Welcome! And not too tired, I hope — —” when the other interrupted him in a man’s deep voice, full of pleasant timbre:

“Fill-er-y,” he said, making the “F” sound rather long, “I need you. To see you makes me happy.”

“Tired,” put in Devonham breathlessly, “good heavens, not he! But I am. Now for a porter and the big luggage. Have you got a taxi?”

“The car is here,” said Fillery, letting go with a certain reluctance the hand he held, and paying little attention to anything but the figure before him who used such unexpected language. What was it? What did it mean? Whence came this sudden sense of intensity, light, of order, system, intelligence into the racial scene of muddled turmoil all about him? There seemed an air of speeding up in thought and action near him, compared to which the slow stupidity, unco-ordinated and confused on all sides, became painful, gross, and even ludicrous.

Someone bumped against him with violence, but quite needlessly, since the simplest judgment of weight and distance could have avoided the collision. In such ordinary small details he was aware of another, a higher, standard close. A man on his left, trying to manage several bundles, appeared vividly as of amazing incompetence, with his miscalculation, his clumsy movement, his hopeless inability to judge cause and effect. Yet he had two arms, ten fingers, two legs, broad shoulders and deep chest. Misdirection of his great strength made it impossible for him to manage the assortment of light parcels. Next to him, however, stood a woman carrying a baby — there was no error there. The panting engine just beyond them, again, set a standard of contemptuous, impersonal intelligence that, obeying Nature's laws, dwarfed the humans generally. But it was another, a quasi-spiritual standard that had flashed to him above all. In some curious way the competent "dead" machinery that obeyed the Law with faultless efficiency, and the woman obeying instinct with equally unconscious skill — these two energies were akin to the new standard he was now startlingly aware of.

He looked up, as though to trace this sudden new consciousness of bright, quick, rapid competence — almost as of some immense power building with consistent scheme and system — that had occurred to him; and he met again the direct, yet slightly bewildered eyes that watched him, watched him with confidence, sweetness, and with a questioning intensity he found intriguing, captivating, and oddly stimulating. He felt happiness.

"By yer leave!" roared a porter, as they stepped aside just in time to save being pushed by the laden truck — just in time to save himself, that is, for the other, Fillery noticed, moved like a chamois on its native rocks, so surely, lightly, swiftly was he poised.

"This! Ah, you must excuse it," the doctor exclaimed with a smile of apology almost, "we've not yet had time to settle down after the war, you see." He pointed with a sweep of his hand to the roaring, dim-lit cavern where confusion reigned supreme, the G.H.Q. of travel in the biggest city of the Empire.

"I've got a porter," cried Devonham, beckoning vigorously a little further down the platform. "You wait there. I'll be along in a minute with the stuff." He was hot, flustered, exhausted.

"You struggle. It was like this all the way. Is there no knowledge?" LeVallon asked in his deep, quiet tones.

"We do," said Fillery. "With us life is always struggle. But there is more system than appears. The confusion is chiefly on the surface."

"It is dark and there is so little air," observed the other. "And they all work against each other."

Fillery laughed into the other’s eyes; they laughed together; and it seemed suddenly to the doctor that their beings somehow merged, so that, for a second, he knew the entire content of his companion’s mind — as if there was nothing in LeVallon he did not understand.

“You — are a builder,” LeVallon said abruptly. But as he said it his companion caught, on the wing as it were, another meaning. He became curiously aware of the smallness, of the remote insignificance of the little planet whereon this dialogue took place, yet at the same time of its superb seductive loveliness. In him rose a feeling, as on wings, that he was not chained in his familiar, daily personality, but that an immense, delicious freedom lay within reach. He could be everywhere at once. He could do everything.

“Wait here while I help Devonham. Then we’ll get into the car and be off.” He moved away, threading a path with difficulty.

“I wait in peace. I am happy,” was the reply.

And with those few phrases, uttered in the quiet, deep voice, sounding in his ears and in his very blood, the older man went towards the spot where Devonham struggled with a porter, a pile of nondescript luggage and a truck: “I wait in peace.... You struggle, you work against each other.... It is dark, there is little air.... You are a builder....”

But not these singular words alone remained alive in his mind; there remained in his heart the sense of that vitality of open spaces, keen air and brighter light he had experienced — and, with it, the security of some higher, faultless standard. His brain, indeed, had recognized a consciousness of swifter reactions, of surer movements, of more intelligent co-ordination, compared to which the people about him behaved like stupid, almost like half-witted beings, the one exception being the instinctive action of the mother in carrying her baby, and the other, the impersonal, accurate, competence of the dead machinery.

But, more than this reasoned change, there burned suddenly in his heart an inexplicable exhilaration and brightness, a wonder that he could attribute only to another mode of life. His Khaketian blood, he knew, might be responsible for part of it, but not for all. The invigorating mountain wind, the sunlight, the rhythmic sound, the scent of wild flowers, these were his own personal interpretations of a quickened sense he could not analyse as yet. As he held the young man's hand, as he gazed into his direct blue eyes, this sense had increased in intensity. LeVallon had some marvellous quality or power that was new to him, while yet not entirely unfamiliar. What was it? And how did the youth perceive this sense in him so surely that he took its presence for granted, accepted, even played upon it? He experienced, as it were, a brilliant intensification of spirit. Some portion of him already knew exactly what LeVallon was.

Across the ugly turmoil and confusion of the huge dingy railway terminus had moved wondrously some simple power that brought in — Beauty. Some very deep and ancient conception had touched him and gone its way again. The stupendous beauty of a simple, common day appeared to him. His subconscious being, of course, was deeply stirred. That was the truth, phrase it as he might. His heart was lifted as by a primal wind at dawn upon some mountain top. The heaviness of the day was gone. Fatigue, too, vanished. The "civilized" folk appeared contemptible and stupid. Something direct from Nature herself poured through him. And it was from the atmosphere of LeVallon this new vitality issued radiating.

He found a moment or two, while alone with Devonham, to exchange a few hurried sentences. As they bent over bags and bundles he asked quick questions. These questions and answers between the two experienced men were brief but significant:

"Yes, quiet as a lamb. Just be kind and sympathetic. You looked up the Notes? Well, that can't be helped now, though I had rather you knew nothing. My mistake, of course."

"The content of his mind is accessible to me — telepathically — in any case."

"But at one remove more distant, because unexpressed."

Fillery laughed. "Quite right. I admit it's a pity. But tell me more about him — anything I ought to know — at once."

"Quiet as a lamb, I told you," repeated the other, "and most of the way over too. But puzzled — my God, Edward, his criticisms would make a book."

"Normal? Intelligent criticisms?"

"Intelligent above ordinary. Normal — no."

"Hysteria?"

"Not a sign."

"Health?"

"Perfect, magnificent, as you see. He's less tired now than when we started three days ago, whereas I'm fagged out, though in climbing condition."

"Origin of delusions — any indication?"

Devonham looked up quickly. His eyes flashed a peculiarly searching glance — something watchful in it perhaps. "No delusion at all of any sort. As for origin of his ideas — the parents probably, but stimulated and allowed unchecked growth by Mason. Affected by Nature beyond anything *we* know."

"By Nature. Ah!" He checked himself. "And what peculiarities?" he asked.

"His terror of water, for instance. Crossing the Channel he was like a frightened child. He hid from it, kept his hands over his eyes even, so as not to see it."

"Give any reason?"

"All he said was 'It is unknown, an enemy, and can destroy me, I cannot understand its secret ways. Fire and wind are not in it. I cannot work with it.' No, it was not fear of drowning that he meant. He found comfort, too, in the repetition of your name."

"Appetite, pulse, temperature?" asked Fillery, after a brief pause.

"First two very strong; temperature always slightly above normal."

"Other peculiarities?"

"He became rather excited before a lighted match once — tried to kneel, almost, but I stopped it."

"Fire?"

"That's it. Instinct of worship presumably."

The barrow was laden, the porter was asking where the car was. They prepared to move back to the companion, whom Fillery had never failed to observe carefully over his shoulder during this rapid conversation. “N. H.” had not moved the whole time: he stood quietly, looking about him, a curious figure, aloof somehow from his surroundings, so tall and straight and unconcerned he seemed, yet so poised, alert, virile, vigorous. It was not his clothes that made him appear unusual, nor was it his eyes and hair alone, though all three contributed their share. Yet he seemed dressed up, his clothes irksome to him. He was uncommon, an attractive figure, and many a pair of eyes, female eyes especially, Fillery noticed, turned to examine him with undeniable curiosity.

“And women?” the doctor asked quickly in a lowered voice, as they followed the porter’s barrow towards LeVallon, who already smiled at their approach — the most engaging, trustful, welcoming smile that Fillery had ever seen upon a human countenance.

He lowered his head to catch the reply. But Devonham only laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “All attracted,” he mumbled in a half whisper, “and eager to help him.”

“And he —— ?”

“Gentle, astonished, but indifferent, oh, supremely indifferent.”

LeVallon came forward to meet them, and Fillery took his hand and led him to the car. The luggage was bundled in, some behind and some on the roof. Fillery and LeVallon sat side by side. The car started.

“We shall get home in half an hour,” the doctor mentioned, turning to his companion. “We’ll have a good dinner and then get to bed. You are hungry, I know.”

“Thank you,” was the reply, “thank you, dear Fillery. I want sleep most. Will there be trees and air near me? And stars to see?”

“Your windows open on to a garden with big trees, there will be plenty of fresh air, and you will hear the sparrows chattering at dawn. But London, of course, is not the country. Oh, we’ll make you comfortable, never fear.”

“Dear Fillery, I thank you,” said LeVallon quietly, and without more ado lay back among the soft cushions and closed his eyes. Hardly a word was said the whole way out to the north-west suburb, and when they arrived the “patient” was too overcome with sleep to wish to eat. He went straight to his room, found a hot bath into which he tumbled first, and then leaped into his bed and was sound asleep almost before the door was closed. Upon a table beside the bed Dr. Fillery, with his own hands, arranged bread, butter, eggs and a jug of milk in case of need. Nurse Robbins, an experienced, tactful young woman, he put in special charge. He thought of everything, divining his friend's possible needs instinctively, noticing with his keen practised eye several details for himself at the same time. The splendid physical condition, frame-work, muscular development he noted — no freakish bulky masses produced by gymnastic exercises, but the muscles laid on flowingly, smooth and firm and ample, without a trace of fat, and the whole in the most admirable proportion possible. The leanness was deceptive; the body was of immense power. The quick, certain, unerring movements he noticed too; perfect, swift co-ordination between brain and physical response, no misdirection, no miscalculation, the reactions extremely rapid. He thought with a smile of something between deer and tiger. The poise and balance and accuracy conveyed intense joy of living. Yet above and beyond these was something else he could not name, something that stirred in him wonder, love, a touch of awe, and a haunting suggestion of familiarity.

He saw him into bed, he saw him actually asleep. The strong blue eyes looked up into his own with their intense and innocent gaze for a moment; he held the firm, dry muscular hand; ten seconds later the eyes were closed in sleep, the grip of the powerful but slender fingers relaxed.

"Good night, my friend, and sleep deeply. To-morrow we'll see to everything you need. Be happy here and comfortable with us, for you are welcome and we love you." His voice trembled slightly.

"Good night, dear Fill-er-y," the musical tones replied, and he was off.

The windows were wide open. "N. H." had thrown aside the pyjamas and blankets. On this cool, damp night of late autumn he covered his big, warm, lithe body with a single sheet only.

Fillery went out quietly, an expression of keen approval and enjoyment on his face — not a smile exactly, but that look of deep content, betraying a fine inner excitement of happiness, which is the mother of all smiles. As he softly opened the door the draught blew through from the open windows, stirring the white curtains by the bed. It came from the big damp garden where the trees stood, already nearly leafless, and where no flowers were. And yet a scent of flowers came faintly with it. He caught an echo of faint sound like music. There was the invigorating hint of forests too. It seemed a living wind that blew into the house.

Dr. Fillery paused a moment, sniffed with surprise and sharp enjoyment, listened intently, then switched the light off and went out, closing the door behind him. There was a flash of wonder in his eyes, and a thrill of some remote inexplicable happiness ran through his nerves. An instant of complete comprehension had been his, as if another consciousness had, for that swift instant, identified itself with his own.

CHAPTER VI

EDWARD FILLERY WAS glad that Paul Devonham, good friend and skillful colleague, was his assistant; for Devonham, competent as himself in knowledge and experience, found explanations for all things, and had in his natural temperament a quality of sane judgment which corrected extravagances.

Devonham was agnostic, because reason ruled his life. Devoid of imagination, he had no temptations. Speculative, within limits, he might be, but he belonged not to the unstable. Not that he thought he knew everything, but that he refused to base action on what he regarded as unknown. A clue into the unknown he would follow up as keenly, carefully, as Fillery himself, but he went step by step, with caution, declining to move further until the last step was of hardened concrete. To the powers of the subconscious self he set drastic limits, admitting their existence of course, but attaching small value to their use or development. His own deeper being had never stirred or wakened. Of this under-sea, this vast background in himself, he remained placidly uninformed. A comprehensive view of a problem — the flash of vision he never knew — thus was perhaps denied him, but so far as he went he was very safe and sure. And his chief was the first to appreciate his value. He appreciated it particularly now, as the two men sat smoking after their late dinner, discussing details of the new inmate of the Home.

Fillery, aware of the strong pull upon his own mixed blood, aware of a half-wild instinctive sympathy towards “N. H.,” almost of a natural desire now, having seen him, to believe him “unique” in several ways, and, therefore, conscious of a readiness to accept more than any evidence yet justified — feeling these symptoms clearly, and remembering vividly his experiences in the railway station, he was glad, for truth’s sake, that Devonham was there to clip extravagance before it injured judgment. A weak man, aware of his own frailties, excels a stronger one who thinks he has none at all. The two colleagues were a powerful combination.

"In your view, it's merely a case of a secondary — anyhow of a divided — personality?" he asked, as soon as the other had recovered a little from his journey, and was digesting his meal comfortably over a pipe. "You have seen more of him than I have. Of insanity, at any rate, there is no sign at all, I take it? His relations with his environment are sound?"

"None whatever." Devonham answered both questions at once. "Exactly."

He took off his pince-nez, cleaned them with his handkerchief, and then replaced them carefully. This gave him time to reflect, as though he was not quite sure where to begin his story.

"There are certainly indications," he went on slowly, "of a divided personality, though of an unusual kind. The margin between the two — between the normal and the secondary self — is so very slight. It is not clearly defined, I mean. They sometimes merge and interpenetrate. The frontier is almost indistinguishable."

Fillery raised his eyebrows.

"You feel uncertain which is the main self, and which the split-off secondary personality?" he inquired, with surprise.

Devonham nodded. "I'm extremely puzzled," he admitted. "LeVallon's most marked self, the best defined, the richest, the most fully developed, seems to me what *we* should call his Secondary Self — this 'Nature-being' that worships wind and fire, is terrified by a large body of water, is ignorant of human ways, probably also quite *un*-moral, yet alive with a kind of instinctive wisdom we credit usually to the animal kingdom — though far beyond anything animals can claim — —"

"Briefly, what we mean by the term 'N. H.,'" suggested Fillery, not anxious for too many details at the moment.

"Exactly. And I propose we always refer to that aspect of him as 'N. H.,' the other, the normal ordinary man, being LeVallon, his right name." He smiled faintly.

"Agreed," replied his chief. "We shall always know then exactly which one we're talking of at a given moment. Now," he went on, "to come to the chief point, and before you give me details of what happened abroad, let me hear your own main conclusion. What is LeVallon? What is 'N. H.'?"

Devonham hesitated for some time. It was evident his respect for his chief made him cautious. There was an eternal battle between these two, keen though always good-natured, even humorous, the victory not invariably perhaps with the assistant. Later evidence had often proved Fillery's swifter imagination correct after all, or, alternately, shown him to be wrong. They kept an accurate score of the points won and lost by either.

"You can always revise your conclusions later," Fillery reminded him slyly. "Call it a preliminary conclusion for the moment. You've not had time yet for a careful study, I know."

But Devonham this time did not smile at the rally, and his chief noticed it with secret approval. Here was something new, big, serious, it seemed. Devonham, apparently, was already too interested to care who scored or did not score. His Notes of 1914 indeed betrayed his genuine zeal sufficiently.

"LeVallon," he said at length— "to begin with him! I think LeVallon — without any flavour of 'N. H.' — is a fine specimen of a normal human being. His physique is magnificent, as you have seen, his health and strength exceptional. The brain, so far as I have been able to judge, functions quite normally. The intelligence, also normal, is much above the average in quickness, receptivity of ideas, and judgment based on these. The emotional development, however, puzzles me; the emotions are not entirely normal. But" — he paused again, a grave expression on his face— "to answer your question as well as my limited observation of him, of LeVallon, allows — I repeat that I consider him a normal young man, though with peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of his own, as with most other normal young fellows who are individuals, that is," he added quickly, "and not turned out in bundles cut to measure."

"So much for LeVallon. Now what about 'N. H.'?"

He repeated the question, fixing the assistant with his steady gaze. He had noticed the confusion in the reply.

"My dear Edward — —" began Devonham, after a considerable pause. Then he stuck fast, sighed, settled his glasses carefully upon his aquiline, sharp nose, and relapsed into silence. His forehead became wrinkled, his mouth much pursed.

"Out with it, Paul! This isn't a Court of Law. I shan't behead you if you're wrong." Yet Fillery, too, spoke gravely.

The other kept his eyes down; his face still wore a puzzled look. Fillery detected a new expression on the keen, thoughtful features, and he was pleased to see it.

"To give you the truth," resumed his assistant, "and all question of who is right or who is wrong aside, I tell you frankly — I am not sure. I confess myself up against it. It — er — gives me the creeps a little — —" He laughed awkwardly. That swift watchful look, as of a man who plays a part, flashed and vanished.

"Your feeling, anyhow?" insisted his friend. "Your general feeling?"

"A general judgment based on general feeling," said the other in a quiet tone, "has little value. It is based, necessarily, as you know, upon intuition, which I temperamentally dislike. It has no facts to go upon. I distrust generalizations." He took a deep breath, inhaled a lot of smoke, exhaled it with relief, and made an effort. It went against the grain in him to be caught without an explanation.

"'N. H.' in my opinion, and so far as my limited observation of him — —"

Fillery allowed himself a laugh of amused impatience. "Leave out the personal extras for once, and burn your bridges. Tell me finally what you think about 'N. H.' We're not scoring points now."

Thus faced with an alternative, Devonham found his sense of humour again and forgot himself. It cost him an effort, but he obeyed the bigger and less personal mind.

"I really don't know exactly *what* he is," he confessed again. "He puzzles me completely. It *may* be" — he shrugged his shoulders, compelled by his temperament to hedge— "that he represents, as I first thought, the content of his parents' minds, the subsequent addition of Mason's mind included."

"That's possible, usual and comprehensible enough," put in the doctor, watching him with amused concentration, but with an inner excitement scarcely concealed.

"Or" resumed Devonham, "it *may* be that through these — —"

“Through his mental inheritance from his parents and from Mason, yes — —”

“ —— he taps the most primitive stores and layers of racial memory we know. The world-memory, if I dare put it so, full proof being lacking, is open to him — —”

“Through his subconscious powers, of course?”

“That is your usual theory, isn’t it? We have there, at any rate, a working hypothesis, with a great mass of evidence — generally speaking — behind it.”

“Don’t be cynical, Paul. Is this ‘N. H.’ merely a Secondary Personality, or is it the real central self? That’s the whole point.”

“You jump ahead, as usual,” replied Devonham, really smiling for the first time, though his face instantly grew serious again. “Edward,” he went on, “I do not know, I cannot say, I dare not — dare not guess. ‘N. H.’ is something entirely new to me, and I admit it.” He seemed to find his stride, to forget himself. “I feel far from cynical. ‘N. H.,’ in my opinion, is exceptional. My notes suggested it long ago. He has, for instance — at least, so it seems to me — peculiar powers.”

“Ah!”

“Of suggestion, let us put it.”

“Of suggestion, yes. Get on with it, there’s a good fellow. I felt myself an extraordinary vitality about him. I noticed it at once at Charing Cross.”

“I saw you did.” Devonham looked hard at him. “You were humming to yourself, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” was the surprised reply, “but I can well believe it. I felt a curious pleasure and exhilaration.”

Devonham, shrugging his shoulders slightly, resumed: “During the ‘LeVallon’ periods he is ordinary, though unusually observant, critical and intelligent; during the ‘N. H.’ periods he becomes — er — super-normal. If you felt this — felt anything in the station, it was because something in you — called up the ‘N. H.’ aspect.”

“It’s quick of you to guess that,” said Fillery, with quick appreciation. “You noticed a change in me, well — but the other —— ? He divined my ‘foreign’ blood, you think?”

“It is enough that you responded and felt kinship. Put it that way. ‘N. H.’ seems to me” — he took a deeper breath and gave a sort of gasp— “in some ways — a unique — being — as I said before.”

“Tell me, if you can,” said Fillery, lighting his own pipe and settling back into his chair, “tell me a little about your first meeting with him in the Jura Mountains, what happened and so forth. I remember, of course, your Notes. After your telegram, I read ’em carefully.” He glanced round at his companion. “They were very honest, Paul, I thought. Eh?” He was unable to refuse himself the pleasure of the little dig. “Honest you always are,” he added. “We couldn’t work together otherwise, could we?”

Devonham, deep in his own thoughts, did not accept the challenge. He turned in his chair, puffing at his pipe.

“I can give you briefly what happened and how things went,” he said. “The place, then, first: an ordinary peasant châlet in a remote Jura valley, difficult of access, situated among what they call the upper pastures. I reached it by *diligence* and mule late in the afternoon. A peasant in a lower valley directed me, adding that ‘le monsieur anglais’ was dead and buried two days before — —”

“Mason, that is?”

The other nodded. “And adding that ‘le fou’ — —”

“LeVallon, of course?”

“ —— would eat me alive at sight. He spoke with respect, however, even awe. He hoped I had come to take him away. The countryside was afraid of him.

“The valley struck me as intolerably lonely, but of unusual beauty. Big forests, great rocks, and tumbling streams among cliffs and pastures made it exceptional. The châlet was simple, clean and comfortable. It was really an ideal spot for a thinker or a student. The first thing I noticed was a fire burning on a pile of rock in front of the building. The sun was setting, and its last rays lit the entire little glen — a mere gully between precipices and forest slopes — but especially lit up the pile of rocks where the fire burned, so that I saw the smoke, blue, red and yellow, and the figure kneeling before it. This figure was a man, half naked, and of magnificent proportions. When I shouted — —"

"You *would* shout, of course." Yet he did not say it critically.

" —— the figure rose and turned and came to meet me. It was LeVallon."

Devonham paused a moment. Fillery's eyes were fixed upon him.

"I admit," Devonham went on, conscious of the other's inquiring and intent expression, "I was surprised a bit." He smiled his faint, unwilling smile. "The figure made me start. I was aware of an emotion I am not subject to — what I called just now the creeps. I thought, at last, I had really seen a — a vision. He looked so huge, so wonderful, so radiant. It was, of course, the effect of coloured smoke and magnifying sunset, added to his semi-nakedness. To the waist he was stripped. But, at first, his size, his splendour, a kind of radiance borrowed from the sunlight and the fire, seemed to enlarge him beyond human. He seemed to dominate, even to fill the little valley.

"I stood still, uncertain of my feelings. There was, I think, a trace of fear in me. I waited for him to come up to me. He did so. He stretched out a hand. I took it. And what do you think he said?"

Fillery, the inner excitement and delight increasing in him as he listened, stared in silence. There was no lightness in him now.

"'Are you Fillery?' That's what he said, and the first words he uttered. 'Are you Fillery?' But spoken in a way I find difficult to reproduce. He made the name sound like a rush of wind. 'F,' of course, involves a draught of breath between the teeth, I know. But *he* made the name sound exactly like a gush of wind through branches — that's the nearest I can get to it."

"Well — and then?"

"Don't be impatient, Edward. I try to be accurate. But really — what happened next is a bit beyond any experience that we — I — have yet come across. And, as to what I felt — well, I was tired, hungry, thirsty. I wanted, normally, rest and food and drink. Yet all these were utterly forgotten. For a moment or two — I admit it — I felt as if I had come face to face with something not of this earth quite.” He grinned. “A touch of gooseflesh came to me for the first time in my life. The fellow’s size and radiance in the sunlight, the fact that he stood there worshipping fire — always, to me, the most wonderful of natural phenomena — his grandeur and nakedness — the way he pronounced your name even — all this — er — upset my judgment for the moment.” He paused again. He hesitated. “A visual hallucination, due to fatigue, can be, of course, very detailed sometimes,” he added, a note of challenge in his tone.

Fillery watched his friend narrowly, as he stumbled among the details of what he evidently found a difficult, almost an impossible description.

“Natural enough,” he put in. “You’d hardly be human yourself if you felt nothing at such a sight.”

“The loneliness, too, increased the effect,” went on the other, “for there was no one nearer than the peasants who had directed me a thousand feet below, nor was there another building of any sort in sight. Anyhow, it seemed, I managed my strange emotions all right, for the young man took to me at once. He left the fire, if reluctantly, singing to himself a sort of low chanting melody, with perhaps five or six notes at most in it, and far from unmusical — —”

“He explained the fire? Was he actually worshipping, I mean?”

“It was certainly worship, judging by the expression of his face and his gestures of reverence and happiness. But I asked no questions. I thought it best just to accept, or appear to accept, the whole thing as natural. He said something about the Equinox, but I did not catch it properly and did not ask. This had evidently been taught him. It was, however, the 22nd of September, oddly enough, though the gales had not yet come.”

“So you got into the châlet next?” asked the other, noticing the gaps, the incoherence.

“He put his coat on, sat down with me to a meal of bread and milk and cheese — meat there seemed none in the building anywhere. This meal was, if you understand me, obeying a mere habit automatically. He did just what it had been his habit to do with Mason all these years. He got the stuff himself — quickly, effectively, no fumbling anywhere — and, from that moment, hardly spoke again until we left two days later. I mean that literally. All he said, when I tried to make him talk, was, ‘You are not Fillery,’ or ‘Take me to Fillery. I need him.’

“I almost felt that I was living with some marvellously trained animal, of extraordinary intelligence, gentle, docile, friendly, but unhappy because it had lost its accustomed master. But on the other hand — I admit it — I was conscious of a certain power in his personality beyond me to explain. That, really, is the best description I can give you.”

“You mentioned the name of Mason?” asked Fillery, avoiding a dozen more obvious and natural questions.

“Several times. But his only reply was a smile, while he repeated the name himself, adding your own after it: ‘Mason Fillery, Mason Fillery,’ he would say, smiling with quiet happiness. “I like Fillery!’”

“The nights?”

“Briefly — I was glad to see the dawn. We had separate rooms, my own being the one probably where Mason had died a few days before. But it was not that I minded in the least. It was the feeling — the knowledge in fact — that my companion was up and about all night in the building or out of doors. I heard him moving, singing quietly to himself, the wooden veranda creaked beneath his tread. He was active all through the darkness and cannot have slept at all. When I came down soon after dawn he was running over the slopes a mile away, running towards the châlet, too, with the speed and lightness of a deer. He had been to some height, I think, to see the sun rise and probably to worship it — —”

“And your journey? You got him away easily?”

“He was only too ready to leave, for it meant coming to *you*. I arranged with the peasants below to have the châlet closed up, took my charge to Neuchâtel, and thence to Berne, where I bought him an outfit, and arrived in due course, as you know, at Charing Cross.”

“His first sight of cities, people, trains, steamers and the rest, I take it. Any reactions?”

“The troubles I anticipated did not materialize. He came like a lamb, the most helpless and pathetic lamb I ever saw. He stared but asked no questions. I think he was half dazed, even stupefied with it all.”

“Stupefied?”

“An odd word to use, I know. I should have said perhaps ‘automatic’ rather. He was so open to my suggestions, doing what my mind expected him to do, but nothing more — ah! with one exception.”

Fillery meant to hear an account of that exception, though the other would willingly have foregone its telling evidently. It was related, Fillery felt sure, to the unusual powers Devonham had mentioned.

“Oh, you shall hear it,” said the latter quickly, “for what it’s worth. There’s no need to exaggerate, of course.” He told it rapidly, accurately, no doubt, because his mind was honest, yet without comment or expression in his voice and face. He supplied no atmosphere.

“I had got him like a lamb, as I told you, to Paris, and it was during the Customs examination the — er — little thing occurred. The man, searching through his trunk, pulled out a packet of flat papers and opened it. He looked them over with puzzled interest, turning them upside down to examine them from every possible angle. Then he asked a trifle unpleasantly what they were. I hadn’t the smallest idea myself, I had never seen them before; they were very carefully wrapped up. LeVallon, whose sudden excitement increased the official’s interest, told him that they were star-and-weather maps. It doubtless was the truth; he had made them with Mason; but they were queer-looking papers to have at such a time, hidden away, too, at the bottom of the trunk; and LeVallon’s manner and expression did not help to disarm the man’s evident suspicion. He asked a number of pointed questions in a very disagreeable way — who made them, for what purpose, how they were used, and whether they were connected with aviation. I translated, of course. I explained their innocence — —”

“LeVallon’s excitement?” asked Fillery. “What form did it take? Rudeness, anger, violence of any sort?” He was aware his friend would have liked to shirk these details.

“Nothing of the kind.” He hesitated briefly, then went on. “He behaved, rather, as though — well, as a devout Catholic might have behaved if his crucifix or some holy relic were being mauled. The maps were sacred. Symbols possibly. Heaven knows what! He tried to take them back. The official, as a natural result, became still more suspicious and, of course, offensive too. My explanations and expostulations were quite useless, for he didn't even listen to them."

Devonham was now approaching the part of the story he least wished to describe. He played for time. He gave details of the ensuing altercation.

"What happened in the end?" Fillery at length interrupted. "What did LeVallon do? There were no arrests, I take it?" he added with a smile.

Paul coughed and fidgeted. He told the literal truth, however.

"LeVallon, after listening for a long time to the conversation he could not understand, suddenly took his fingers off the papers. The man's dirty hand still held them tightly on the grimy counter. LeVallon began — or — he suddenly began to breathe — well — heavily rather."

"Rhythmically?"

"Heavily," insisted the other. "In a curious way, anyhow," he added, determined to keep strictly to the truth, "not unlike Heathcote when he put himself automatically into trance and then told us what was going on at the other end of England. You remember the case." He paused a moment again, as if to recall exactly what had occurred. "It's not easy to describe, Edward," he continued, looking up. "You remember that huge draughty hall where they examine luggage at the Lyons Station. I can't explain it. But that breathing somehow caught the draughts, used them possibly, in any case increased them. A wind came through the great hall. I can't explain it," he repeated, "I can only tell you what happened. That wind most certainly came pouring steadily through, for I felt it myself, and saw it blow upon the fluttering papers. The heat in the *salle* at the same moment seemed to grow intense. Not an oppressive heat, though. Radiant heat, rather. It felt, I mean, like a fierce sunlight. I looked up, almost expecting to see a great light from which it came. It was then — at this very moment — the Frenchman turned as if someone touched him."

"*You* felt anything, Paul?"

"Yes," admitted the other slowly.

Fillery waited.

"A — what I must call — a thrill." His voice was lower now.

“Of —— ?” his Chief persisted.

Devonham waited a full ten seconds before reply. He again shrugged his shoulders a little. Apparently he sought his words with honest care that included also intense reluctance and disapproval:

“Loveliness, romance, enchantment; but, above all, I think — power.” He ground out the confession slowly. “By power I mean a sort of confidence and happiness.”

“Increase of vitality, call it. Intensification of your consciousness.”

“Possibly. A bigger perspective suddenly, a bigger scale of life; something — er — a bit wild, but certainly — er — uncommonly stimulating. The best word, I think, is liberty, perhaps. An immense and careless sense of liberty.” And Fillery, knowing the value of superlatives in Devonham’s cautious mind, felt satisfied. He asked quietly what the official did next.

“Stood stock still at first. Then his face changed; he smiled; he looked up understandingly, sympathetically, at LeVallon. He spoke: ‘My father, too,’ he said with admiration, ‘had a big telescope. Monsieur is an astronomer.’

“‘One of the greatest,’ I added quickly; ‘these charts are of infinite value to France.’ No sense of comedy touched me anywhere, the ludicrous was absent. The man bowed, as carefully, respect in every gesture, he replaced the maps, marked the trunk with his piece of chalk, and let us go, helping in every way he could.”

Devonham drew a long breath, glad that he had relieved himself of his unwelcome duty. He had told the literal truth.

“Of course, of course,” Fillery said, half to himself perhaps. “A breath of bigger consciousness, his imagination touched, the subconscious wakened, and intelligence the natural result.” He turned to his colleague. “Interesting, Paul, very,” he added in a louder tone, “and not easy to explain, I grant. The official we do not know, but you, at any rate, are not a good subject for hypnotic suggestion!”

For some time Devonham said nothing. Presently he spoke:

“Fillery, I tell you — really I love the fellow. He’s the most lovable thing in human shape I ever saw. He gets into your heart so strangely. We must heal him.”

The other sighed, quickly smothering it, yet not before Devonham had noticed it. They did not look at one another for some seconds, and there was a certain tenseness, a sense of deep emotion in the air that each, possibly, sought to hide from the other.

Devonham was the first to break the silence that had fallen between them.

“To be quite frank — it’s LeVallon that appeals most to me,” he said, as if to himself, “whereas you, Edward, I believe, are more — more interested in the other aspect of him. It’s ‘N. H.’ that interests you.”

No challenge was intended, yet the glove was flung. Fillery said nothing for a minute or two. Then he looked up, and their eyes met across the smoke-laden atmosphere. It was close on midnight. The world lay very still and hushed about the house.

“It is,” he said quietly, “a pathetic and inspiring case. He is deserving of” — he chose his words slowly and with care— “our very best,” he concluded shortly.

“And now,” he added quickly, “you’re tired out, and I ought to have let you have a night’s sleep before taxing you like this.” He poured out two glasses of whisky. “Let us drink anyhow to success and healing of body, mind — and soul.”

“Body, mind and — nerves,” said Devonham slowly, as he drank the toast.

“The reason I had none of the trouble I anticipated,” remarked Devonham, as he sipped the reviving liquor, “is simple enough.”

“There are two periods, of course. I guessed that.”

“Exactly. There is the LeVallon period, when he is quiescent, normal, very charming into the bargain, more like a good child or trained animal or happy peasant, if you like it better, than a grown man. And there is the ‘N. H.’ period, when he is — otherwise.”

“Ah!”

“I arrived just at the transition moment, so to speak. It was during the change I reached the châlet.”

“Precisely.” Fillery looked up, smiled and nodded.

“That’s about the truth,” repeated Devonham, putting his glass down. He thought for a moment, then added slowly, “I think that fire of his, the worship, singing — at the autumnal equinox — marked the change. ‘N. H,’ at once after that, slipped back into the unconscious state. LeVallon emerged. It was with LeVallon only or chiefly, *I* had to deal. He became so very quiet, dazed a little, half there, as we call it, and almost entirely silent. He retained little, if any, memory of the ‘N. H.’ period, although it lies, I think, just beneath the surface only. The LeVallon personality, you see, is not very positive, is it? It seems a quiet, negative state, a condition almost of rest, in fact.”

Fillery listening attentively, made no rejoinder.

“We may expect,” continued Devonham, “these alternating states, I think. The frontier between them is, as I said, a narrow one. Indeed, often they merge or interpenetrate. In my judgment, the main, important part of his consciousness, that parent Self, is LeVallon — *not* ‘N. H.’” The voice was slightly strident.

“Ah!”

It so happened that, in the act of exchanging these last words, they both looked up toward the ceiling, where a moth buzzed round and round, banging itself occasionally against the electric light. Whether it was this that drew their sight upwards simultaneously, or whether it was that some other sound in the stillness of the night had caught their strained attention, is uncertain. The same thought, at any rate, was in both minds at that instant, the same freight of meaning trailing behind it invisibly across the air. Their hearts burned within them; the two faces upward turned, the lips a little parted as when listening is intense, the heads thrown back. For in the room above that ceiling, asleep at this moment, lay the subject of their long discussion; only a few inches of lath and plaster separated them from the strange being who, dropping out of space, as it were, had come to make his home with them. A being, lonely utterly in the world, unique in kind perhaps, his nature as yet undecipherable, lay trustingly unconscious in that upper chamber. The two men felt the gravity, the responsibility of their charge. The same thought had vividly touched them both at the same instant.

A few minutes later they were still standing, facing one another. They were of a height, but compared to Fillery's big frame and rugged head, his friend's appearance was almost slight. Devonham, for all his qualifications, looked painfully like a shopwalker. They exchanged this steady gaze for a few seconds without speaking. Then the older man said quietly:

"Paul, I understand, and I respect your reticence. I think I can agree with it."

He placed a hand upon the other's shoulder, smiling gently, even tenderly.

"You have told me much, but you have not told me all! The chief part — you have intentionally omitted."

"For the present, at any rate," was the reply, given without flinching.

"Your reasons are sound, your judgment perhaps right. I ask no questions. What happened, what you saw, at the châlet; the 'peculiar powers' you mentioned; all, in fact, that you think it wise to keep to yourself for the moment, I leave there willingly."

He spoke gravely, sincere emotion in the eyes and tone. It was in a lower voice he added:

"The responsibility, of course, is yours."

Devonham returned the steady gaze, pondering his reply a moment.

"I can — and do accept it," he answered. "You have read my thoughts correctly as usual, Edward. I think you know quite enough already — what with my Notes and Mason's letter — even too much. Besides, why complicate it with an account of what were doubtless mere mental pictures — hallucinations — on my part? This is a matter," he went on slowly, "a case, we dare not trifle with; there may be strange and terrible afflictions in it later; we must remain unbiased." The anxiety deepened on his face.

"True, true," murmured the other. "God bless the boy! May his own gods bless him!"

"In other words, it will need your clearest, soundest judgment, your finest skill, your very best, as you said yourself just now." He used a firmer, yet also a softer tone suddenly: "Edward, you know your own mind, its contents, its suppressions, its origin; your refusal of the love of women, your deep powerful dreams that you have suppressed and put away. Promise me" — the voice and manner were very earnest— "that you will not communicate these to him in any way, and that you will keep your judgment absolutely unbiased and untainted." He looked at his old friend and paused. "Only your purest judgment of what is to come can help. You promise."

Fillery sighed a scarcely noticeable sigh. "I promise you, Paul. You are wise — and you are right," he said. "On the other hand, let me say one thing to you in my turn. This theory of heredity and of mental telepathic transference — the idea that all his mind's content is derived from his parents and from Mason — we cannot, remember, force this transference and interchange *too* far. I ask only this: be fair and open yourself with all that follows."

Devonham raised his voice: "Nor can we, apparently, set limits to it, Edward. But — to be fair and open-minded — I give my promise too."

Thus, in the little downstairs room of a Private Home for Incurable Mental Cases, *not* a Lunatic Asylum, though sometimes perhaps next door to it, these two men, deeply intrigued by a new "Case" that passed their understanding, as it exceeded their knowledge, practice and experience, swore to each other to observe carefully, to report faithfully, and to experiment, if experiment proved necessary, with honest and affectionate uprightness.

Their views were, obviously, not the same. Devonham, temperamentally opposed to radical innovations, believed it was a case of divided personality — hundreds of such cases had passed through their hands. Forced to accept extended telepathy — that all minds can on occasion share one another's content, and that even a racial and a world-memory can be tapped — he feared that his Chief might influence LeVallon, and twist, thus, the phenomena to a special end. He knew Edward Fillery's story. He feared, for the sake of truth, the mental transference. He had, perhaps, other fears as well.

Fillery, on the other hand, believing as much, and knowing more than his colleague, saw in "N. H." a unique possibility. He was thrilled and startled with a half-impossible hope. He felt as if someone ran beside his life, bearing impossible glad tidings, an unexpected, half-incredible figure, the tidings marvellously bright. He hoped, he already wished to think, that "N. H." might shadow forth a promise of some magical advance for the ultimate benefit of the Race....

The thinkers were crying on the housetops that progress was a myth, that each wave of civilization at its height reached the same average level without ever passing further. The menace to the present civilization, already crumbling, was in full swing everywhere; knowledge, culture, learning threatened in due course with the chaos of destruction that has so far been the invariable rule. The one hope of saving the world, cried religion, lay in substituting spiritual for material values — a Utopian dream at best. The one chance, said science, on the other hand, was that civilization to-day is continuous and not isolated.

The best hope, believed Fillery, the only hope, lay in raising the individual by the drawing up into full consciousness of the limitless powers now hidden and inactive in his deeper self — the so-called subliminal faculties. With these greater powers must come also greater moral development.

Already, with his uncanny insight, derived from knowledge of himself, he had piercingly divined in "N. H." a being, whatever he might be, whose nature acted automatically and directly upon the subconscious self in everybody.

That bright messenger, running past his life, had looked, as with fire and tempest, straight into his eyes.

It was long after one o'clock when the two men said good-night, and went to their rooms. Devonham was soon in bed, though not soon asleep. Exhausted physically though he was, his mind burned actively. His recent memories were vivid. All he had purposely held back from Fillery returned with power....

The uncertainty whether he had experienced hallucination, or had actually, as by telepathic transfer from LeVallon, touched another state of consciousness, kept sleep far away....

His brain was far too charged for easy slumber. He feared for his dear, faithful friend, his colleague, the skilful, experienced, yet sorely tempted mind — tempted by Nature and by natural weaknesses of birth and origin

— who now shared with him the care and healing of a Case that troubled his being too deeply for slumber to come quickly.

Yet he had done well to keep these memories from Edward Fillery. If Fillery once knew what *he* knew, his judgment and his scientific diagnosis must be drawn hopelessly away from what he considered the best treatment: the suppression of "N. H." and the making permanent of "LeVallon."...

He fell asleep eventually, towards dawn, dreaming impossible, radiant dreams of a world he might have hoped for, yet could not, within the limits of his little cautious, accurate mind, believe in. Dreams that inspire, yet sadden, haunted his release from normal consciousness. Someone had walked upon his life, leaving a growth of everlasting flowers in their magical tread, though his mind — his stolid, cautious mind — had no courage for the plucking....

And while he slept, as the hours slipped from west to east, his chief and colleague, lying also sleepless, rose suddenly before the late autumn dawn, and walked quietly along the corridor towards the Private Suite where the new patient rested. His mind was quiet, yet his inner mind alert. His thoughts, his hopes, his dreams, these lay, perhaps, beyond human computation. He was calmer far than his assistant, though more strangely tempted.

It was just growing light, the corridor was cold. A cool, damp air came through the open windows and the linoleum felt like ice against the feet. The house lay dead and silent. Pausing a moment by a window, he listened to the chattering of early sparrows. He felt chill and hungry, unrested too, though far from sleepy. He was aware of London — bleak, heavy, stolid London town. The troubles of modern life, of Labour, Politics, Taxes, cost of living, all the common, daily things came in with the cheerless morning air.

He reached the door he sought, and very softly opened it.

The radiance met him in the face, so that he almost gasped. The scent of flowers, the sting of sharp, keen forest winds, the exhilaration of some distant mountain-top. There was, actually, a tang of dawn, known only to those who have tasted the heights at sunrise with the heart. And into his heart, singing with happy confidence, rose a sense of supreme joy and confidence that mastered all little earthly woes and pains, and walked among the stars.

The occupant of the bed lay very still. His shining hair was spread upon the pillow. The splendid limbs were motionless. The chest and arms were bare, the single covering sheet tossed off. The strange, wild face wore happiness and peace upon its skin, the features very calm, the mouth relaxed. It almost seemed a god lay sleeping there upon a little human bed.

How long he stood and stared he did not know, but suddenly, the light increased. The curtains stirred about the bed.

With a marvellous touch the separate details merged and quickened into life. The room was changed. The occupant of the bed moved very swiftly, as through the open window came the first touch of exhilarating light. Gold stole across the lintel, breaking over the roofs of slates beyond. The leafless elm trees shimmered faintly. The telegraph wires shone. There was a running sparkle. It was dawn.

The figure leaped, danced — no other word describes it — to the open window where the light and air gushed in, spread wide its arms, lowered its radiant head, began to sing in low, melodious rhythmic chant — and Fillery, as silently as he had come, withdrew and closed the door unseen. His heart moved strangely, but — his promise held him....

CHAPTER VII

THE FOLLOWING DAYS it seemed to both Fillery and Devonham that their discussion of the first night had been pitched in too intense, too serious a key. Their patient was so commonplace again, so ordinary. He made himself quite at home, seemed contented and uncurious, taking it for granted he had come to stay for ever, apparently.

Apart from his strange beauty, his size, virility and a general impression he conveyed of immense energies he was too easy-going to make use of, he might have passed for a peasant, a countryman to whom city life was new; but an educated, or at least half-educated, countryman. He was so big, yet never gauche. He was neither stupid nor ill-informed; the garden interested him, he knew much about the trees and flowers, birds and insects too. He discussed the weather, prevailing wind, moisture, prospects of change and so forth with a judgment based on what seemed a natural, instinctive knowledge. The gardener looked on him with obvious respect.

“Such nice manners and such a steady eye,” Mrs. Soames, the matron, mentioned, too, approvingly to Devonham. “But a lot in him he doesn’t understand himself, unless I’m wrong. Not much the matter with his nerves, anyhow. Once he’s married — unless I’m much mistaken — eh, sir?”

He was quiet, talking little, and spent the morning over the books Fillery had placed purposely in his sitting-room, books on simple physics, natural history and astronomy. It was the latter that absorbed him most; he pored over them by the hour.

Fillery explained the situation so far as he thought wise. The young man was honesty and simple innocence, but only vaguely interested in the life of the great city he now experienced for the first time. He had in his luggage a copy of the Will by which Mason had left him everything, and he was pleased to know himself well provided for. Of Mason, however, he had only a dim, uncertain, almost an impersonal memory, as of someone encountered in a dream.

“I suppose something’s happened to me,” he said to Fillery, his language normal and quite ordinary again. He spoke with a slight foreign accent. “There was somebody, of course, who looked after me and lived with me, but I can’t remember who or where it was. I was very happy,” he added, “and yet ... I miss something.”

Dr. Fillery, remembering his promise, did not press him.

“It will all come back by degrees,” he remarked in a sympathetic tone. “In the meantime, you must make yourself at home here with us, for as long as you like. You are quite free in every way. I want you to be happy here.”

“I live with you always,” was the reply. “There are things I want to tell you, ask you too.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “There was someone I told all to once.”

“Come to me with everything. I’ll help you always, so far as I can.” He placed a hand upon his knee.

“There are feelings, big feelings I cannot reach quite, but that make me feel different” — he smiled beautifully— “from — others.” Quick as lightning he had changed the sentence at the last word, substituting “others” for “you.” Had he been aware of a slight uneasy emotion in his listener’s heart? It had hardly betrayed itself by any visible sign, yet he had instantly divined its presence. Such evidences of a subtle, intimate, understanding were not lacking. Yet Fillery admirably restrained himself.

“There are bright places I have lost,” he went on frankly, no sign of shy reserve in him. “I feel confused, lost somewhere, as if I didn’t belong here. I feel” — he used an odd word— “doubled.” His face shaded a little.

“Big overpowering London is bound to affect you,” put in Fillery, who had noticed the rapid discernment, “after living among woods and mountains, as you have lived, for years. All will come right in a little time; we must settle down a bit first — —”

“Woods and mountains,” repeated the other, in a half-dreamy voice, his eyes betraying an effort to follow thought elsewhere. “Of course, yes — woods and mountains and hot living sunlight — and the winds — —”

His companion shifted the conversation a little. He suggested a line of reading and study.... They talked also of such ordinary but necessary things as providing a wardrobe, of food, exercise, companionship of his own age, and so forth — all the commonplace details of ordinary daily life, in fact. The exchange betrayed nothing of interest, nothing unusual. They mentioned theatres, music, painting, and, beyond the natural curiosity of youth that was ignorant of these, no detail was revealed that need have attracted the attention of anybody, neither of doctor, psychologist, nor student of human nature. With the single exception that the past years had been obliterated from memory, though much that had been acquired in them remained, there was not noticeable peculiarity of any sort. Both language and point of view were normal.

This was obviously LeVallon. The "N. H." personality scarcely cast a shadow even. Yet "N. H.," the doctor was quick to see, lay ready and waiting just below the surface. There was no doubt in *his* mind which was the central self and which its transient projection, the secondary personality. Again, as he sat and talked, he had the odd impression that someone with bright tidings ran swiftly past his life, perhaps towards it.

The swift messenger was certainly not LeVallon. LeVallon, indeed, was but a shadow cast before this glad, bright visitant. Thus he felt, at any rate. LeVallon was an empty simulacrum left behind while "N. H." rested, or was active upon other things, things natural to him, elsewhere. LeVallon was an arm, a limb, a feeler that "N. H." thrust out. At Charing Cross, for instance, for a brief moment only, "N. H." had peered across his shoulder, then withdrawn again. In the car had sat by his side LeVallon. The being he now chatted with was also LeVallon only.

But in his own heart, deep down, hidden yet eager to break loose, lay his own deeper self that burned within him. This, the important part of him, yearned towards "N. H." And up rose the strange symbol that always appeared when his deepest, perhaps his subliminal self was stirred. That lost radiant valley in the haunted Caucasus shone close and brimming over ... with light, with flowers, with splendid winds and fire, symbols of a vaster, grander, happier life, though perhaps a life not yet within the range of normal human consciousness.... The fiery symbol flashed and passed.

Curious thoughts and pictures rose flaming in his mind, persistent ideas that bore no possible relation to his intellectual, reasoning life. Passing across the background of his brain, as with waves of heat and colour, they were correlated somewhere with harmonious sound. Music, that is, came with them, as though inspiration brought its own sound with it that made singing natural. They haunted him, these vague, pleasurable phantasmagoria that were connected, he felt sure, with music, as with childhood's lost imaginings. For a long time he searched in vain for their source and origin. Then, suddenly, he remembered. He heard his father's gruff, humorous voice: "There's not a scrap of evidence, of course...." And, sharply, vividly, the buried memory gave up its dead. His childish question went crashing through the air: "Are we the only beings in the world?"

"Nothing is ever lost," he reminded himself with a smile that Devonham assuredly never saw. "Every seed must bear its fruit in time."

And emotion surged through him from the remorseless records of his underself. The childhood's love, with its correlative of deep, absolute belief, returned upon him, linked on somehow to that old familiar symbol he knew to mean his awakening subconscious being — a flowering Caucasian vale of sun and wind. A belief, he realized, especially a belief of childhood, remains for ever inexpugnable, eternal, prolific seed of future harvests.

The unstable in him betrayed its ineradicable, dangerous streak. There rose upon him in a cloud strange notions that inflamed imagination sweetly. Later reading, indeed, had laid flesh upon the skeleton of the boyish notion, though derived in the first instance he certainly knew not whence. The literature and tradition of the East, he recalled, peopled the elements with conscious life, to which the world's fairy-tales — remnant of lost knowledge possibly — added nerves and heart and blood. In all human bodies, at any rate, dwelt not necessarily always human spirits, human souls....

He checked himself with a smile he would have liked to call a chuckle, but that yet held some inexplicable happiness at its heart. His rugged, eager face, its expression bitten deeply by experience, turned curiously young. There rushed through him the Eastern conception of another system of life, another evolution, deathless, divine, important, the Order of the *Devas*, a series of Nature Beings entirely apart from human categories. They included many degrees, from fairies to planetary spirits, the gods, so called; and their duties, work and purposes were concerned, he remembered, with carrying out the Laws of Nature, the busy tending of all forms and structures, from the elaborately marvellous infusoria in a drop of stagnant water, the growth of crystals, the upbuilding of flowers and trees, of insects, animals, humans, to the guidance and guardianship of those vaster forms of heavenly bodies, the stars, the planets and the mighty suns, whose gigantic "bodies," inhabited by immenser consciousness, people empty space.... A noble, useful, selfless work, God's messengers....

He checked himself again, as the rich, ancient notion flitted across his stirring memory.

"Delightful, picturesque conceptions of the planet's young, fair ignorance!" he reminded himself, smiling as before.

Whereupon rose, bursting through his momentary dream, with full-fledged power, the great hope of his own reasoned, scientific Dream — that man is greater than he knows, and that the progress of the Race was demonstrable.

For, to the subliminal powers of an awakened Race these Nature Beings with their special faculties, must lie open and accessible. The human and the non-human could unite! Nature must come back into the hearts of men and win them again to simple, natural life with love, with joy, with naked beauty. Death and disease must vanish, hope and purity return. The Race must develop, grow, become in the true sense *universal*. It could know God!

The vision flashed upon him with extraordinary conviction, so that he forgot for the moment how securely he belonged to the unstable. The smile of happiness spread, as it were, over his entire being. He glowed and pulsed with its delicious inward fire. Light filled his being for an instant — an instant of intoxicating belief and certainty and vision. The instant inspiration of a dream went lost and vanished. He had drawn upon childhood and legendary reading for the substance of a moment's happiness. He shook himself, so to speak. He remembered his patients and his duties, his colleague too....

Nothing, meanwhile, occurred to arouse interest or attention. LeVallon was quite docile, ordinary; he needed no watching; he slept well, ate well, spent his leisure with his books and in the garden. He complained often of the lack of sunlight, and sometimes he might be seen taking some deep breaths of air into his lungs by the open window or on the balcony. The phases of the moon, too, interested him, and he asked once when the full moon would come and then, when Devonham told him, he corrected the date the latter gave, proving him two hours wrong. But, on the whole, there seemed little to differentiate him from the usual young man whose physique had developed in advance of his mental faculties; his knowledge in some respects certainly was backward, as in the case of arrested development. He seemed an intelligent countryman, but an unusually intelligent countryman, though all the time another under-intelligence shone brightly, betraying itself in remarks and judgments oddly phrased.

Dr. Fillery took him, during the following day or two, to concerts, theatres, cinemas. He enjoyed them all. Yet in the theatres he was inclined to let his attention wander. The degree of alertness varied oddly. His critical standard, moreover, was curiously exacting; he demanded the real creative interpretation of a part, and was quick to detect a lack of inspiration, of fine technique, of true conception in a player. Reasons he failed to give, and argument seemed impossible to him, but if voice or gesture or imaginative touch failed anywhere, he lost interest in the performer from that moment.

“He has poor breath,” he remarked. “He only imitates. He is outside.” Or, “She pretends. She does not feel and know. Feeling — the feeling that comes of fire — she has not felt.”

“She does not understand her part, you mean?” suggested Fillery.

“She does not burn with it,” was the reply.

At concerts he behaved individually too. They bored as well as puzzled him; the music hardly stirred him. He showed signs of distress at anything classical, though Wagner, Debussy, the Russians, moved him and produced excitement.

“He,” was his remark, with emphasis, “has *heard*. He gives me freedom. I could fly and go away. He sets me free ...” and then he would say no more, not even in reply to questions. He could not define the freedom he referred to, nor could he say where he could go away *to*. But his face lit up, he smiled his delightful smile, he looked happy. “Stars,” he added once in a tone of interest, in reply to repeated questions, “stars, wind, fire, away from *this!*” — he tapped his head and breast— “I feel more alive and real.”

“It’s real and true, that music? That’s what you feel?”

“It’s beyond this,” he replied, again tapping his body. “*They have heard.*”

The cinema interested him more. Yet its limits seemed to perplex him more than its wonder thrilled him. He accepted it as a simple, natural, universal thing.

“They stay always on the sheet,” he observed with evident surprise. “And I hear nothing. They do not even sing. Sound and movement go together!”

“The speaking will come,” explained Fillery. “Those are pictures merely.”

“I understand. Yet sound is natural, isn’t it? They ought to be heard.”

“Speech,” agreed his companion, “is natural, but singing isn’t.”

“Are they not alive enough to sing?” was the reply, spoken to himself rather than to his neighbour, who was so attentive to his least response. “Do they only sing when” — Fillery heard it and felt something leap within him— “when they are paid or have an audience?” he finished the sentence quickly.

“No one sings naturally of their own accord — not in cities, at any rate,” was the reply.

LeVallon laughed, as though he understood at once.

“There is no sun and wind,” he murmured. “Of course. They cannot.”

It was the cinemas that provided most material for observation, Fillery found. There was in a cinema performance something that excited his companion, but excited him more than the doctor felt he was justified in encouraging. Obviously the other side of him, the “N. H.” aspect, came up to breathe under the stimulus of the rapid, world-embracing, space-and-time destroying pictures on the screen. Concerts did not stimulate him, it seemed, but rather puzzled him. He remained wholly the commonplace LeVallon — with one exception: he drew involved patterns on the edge of his programmes, patterns of a very complicated yet accurate kind, as though he almost saw the sounds that poured into his ears. And these ornamented programmes Dr. Fillery preserved. Sound — music — seemed to belong to his interpretation of movement. About the cinema, however, there seemed something almost familiar, something he already knew and understood, the sound belonging to movement only lacking.

Apart from these small incidents, LeVallon showed nothing unusual, nothing that a yokel untaught yet of natural intelligence might not have shown. His language, perhaps, was singular, but, having been educated by one mind only, and in a region of lonely forests and mountains, remote from civilized life, there was nothing inexplicable in the odd words he chose, nor in the peculiar — if subtle and penetrating — phrases that he used. Invariably he recognized the spontaneous, creative power as distinguished from the derivative that merely imitated.

He found ways of expressing himself almost immediately, both in speech and writing, however, and with a perfection far beyond the reach of a half-educated country lad; and this swift aptitude was puzzling until its explanation suddenly was laid bare. He absorbed, his companion realized at last, as by telepathy, the content of his own, of Fillery's mind, acquiring the latter's mood, language, ideas, as though the two formed one being.

The discovery startled the doctor. Yet what startled him still more was the further discovery, made a little later, that he himself could, on occasions, become so identified with his patient that the slightest shade of thought or feeling rose spontaneously in his own mind too.

He remained, otherwise, almost entirely "LeVallon"; and, after a full report made to Devonham, and the detailed discussion thereon that followed, Dr. Fillery had no evidence to contradict the latter's opinion: "LeVallon is the real true self. The other personality— 'N. H.' as we call it — is a mere digest and accumulation of material supplied by his parents and by Mason."

"Let us wait and see what happens when 'N. H.' appears and *does* something," Fillery was content to reply.

"If," answered Devonham, with sceptical emphasis, "it ever does appear."

"You think it won't?" asked Fillery.

"With proper treatment," said Devonham decisively, "I see no reason why 'N. H.' should not become happily merged in the parent self — in LeVallon, and a permanent cure result."

He put his glasses straight and stared at his chief, as much as to say "You promised."

"Perhaps," said Fillery. "But, in my judgment, 'LeVallon' is too slight to count at all. I believe the whole, real, parent Self is 'N. H.,' and the only life LeVallon has at all is that which peeps up through him — from 'N. H.'"

Fillery returned his serious look.

"If 'N. H.' is the real self, and I am right," he added slowly, "you, Paul, will have to revise your whole position."

"I shall," returned Devonham. "But — you will allow this — it is a lot to expect. I see no reason to believe in anything more than a subconscious mind of unusual content, and possibly of unusual powers and extent," he added with reluctance.

"It is," said Fillery significantly, "a lot to expect — as you said just now. I grant you that. Yet I feel it possible that — —" he hesitated.

Devonham looked uncomfortable. He fidgeted. He did not like the pause. A sense of exasperation rose in him, as though he knew something of what was coming.

"Paul," went on his chief abruptly in a tone that dropped instinctively to a lower key — almost a touch of awe lay behind it— "you admit no deity, I know, but you admit purpose, design, intelligence."

"Well," replied the other patiently, long experience having taught him iron restraint, "it's a blundering, imperfect system, inadequately organized — if you care to call that intelligence. It's of an extremely intricate complexity. I admit that. Deity I consider an unnecessary assumption."

"The love and hate of atoms alone bowls you over," was the unexpected comment. "The word 'Laws' explains nothing. A machine obeys the laws, but intelligence conceived that machine — and a man repairs and keeps it going. Who — what — keeps the daisy going, the crystal, the creative thought in the imagination? An egg becomes a leaf-eating caterpillar, which in turn becomes a honey-eating butterfly with wings. A yolk turns into feathers. Is that accomplished without intelligence?"

"Ask our new patient," interrupted Devonham, wiping his glasses with unnecessary thoroughness.

"Which?"

Devonham startled, looked up without his glasses. It seemed the question made him uneasy. Putting the glasses on suddenly, he stared at his chief.

"I see what you mean, Edward," he said earnestly, his interest deeply captured. "Be careful. We know nothing, remember, nothing of life. Don't jump ahead like this or take your dreams for reality. We have our duty — in a case like this.”

Fillery smiled, as though to convey that he remembered his promise.

“Humanity,” he replied, “is a very small section of the universe. Compared to the minuter forms of life, which *may* be quite as important, if not more so, the human section is even negligible; while, compared to the possibility of greater forms — —” He broke off abruptly. “As you say, Paul, we know nothing of life after all, do we? Nothing, less than nothing! We observe and classify a few results, that’s all. We must beware of narrow prejudice, at any rate — you and I.”

His eyes lost their light, his speech dried up, his ideas, dreams, speculations returned to him unrewarded, unexpressed. With natures in whom the subconscious never stirred, natures through whom its magical fires cast no faintest upward gleam, intercourse was ever sterile, unproductive. Such natures had no background. Even a fact, with them, was detached from its true big life, its full significance, its divine potentialities!...

“We must beware of prejudice,” he repeated quietly. “We seek truth only.”

“We must beware,” replied Devonham, as he shrugged his shoulders, “of suggestion — of auto-suggestion above all. We must remember how repressed desires dramatize themselves — especially,” he added significantly, “when aided by imagination. We seek only facts.” On his face appeared swiftly, before it vanished again, an expression of keen anxiety, almost of affliction, yet tempered, as it were, by surprise and wonder, by pity possibly, and certainly by affection.

CHAPTER VIII

TO DEVONHAM, MEANWHILE, LeVallon's behaviour was polite and kind and distant; he did not show distrust of any sort, but he betrayed a certain diffidence, reserve and caution. Trust he felt; sympathy he did not feel. To the amusement of Fillery, he suggested almost a kind of mild contempt when dealing with him, and this amusement was increased by the fact that it obviously annoyed Devonham, while it gratified his chief. For towards Fillery, LeVallon behaved with an intimate and understanding sympathy that proved his instantaneous affection based upon mutual comprehension. It seemed that LeVallon and Fillery had known one another always.

It was doubtless, due to this innate sympathy between them that Edward Fillery's rare gift of absorbing the content of another's mind, even to the point of taking on that other's conditions, physical and emotional at the same time, was so successful. By means of a highly developed power of auto-suggestion, he had learned so to identify his own mind, thought, feeling with those of a patient, that there resulted a kind of merging by which he literally became that patient. He felt with him. As a subject sees the pictures in the hypnotiser's mind, perceives his thoughts, divines his slightest will, so Fillery, reversing the process, could realize for the moment exactly what his patient was thinking, feeling, desiring. It was of great use to him in his strange practice.

This gift, naturally, varied in degree, and was not invariably successful. In some cases he only felt, the emotion alone being thus transferred; in others he only saw what the patient saw, or thought he saw, the accompanying emotion being omitted; in others again, as in cases of vision at a distance, either of time or space, he had been able to follow the "travelling sight" of his patient, whose consciousness in trance was operating far away, and thus to check for subsequent verification exactly what that patient saw. He had shared strange experiences with others — with a man, for instance, in whom sight was transferred to the tip of his index finger, so that he could read a book by passing that finger along the printed line; with a woman, again, in whom “exteriorized consciousness” manifested itself, so that, if the air several inches from her face was pinched or struck, the impact was received and an actual bruise produced upon her skin.

This extension of consciousness, its seeds already in his nature, he had trained and developed to a point where he could almost rely upon auto-suggestion bringing about quickly the desired conditions. Its success, however, as mentioned, was variable. With “N. H.,” especially now, this variableness was marked; sometimes it was so easily accomplished as to seem natural and without a conscious effort, while at other times it failed completely. Since it was in no sense an attempt to transfer anything from his own mind to that of the patient, Fillery felt that his promise to his colleague was not involved.

The following scene describes the first time in which the process took place with his new patient. Fillery himself wrote down the words, supplied the detailed description, filled in the emotion and psychology, but exactly as these occurred and as he felt them, both when these took place, respectively, in his own consciousness and in that of his patient. Part of the time he was present, part of it he was not visibly so, being screened from observation, yet so placed that he could note everything that happened. It is clear, however, that his mind was so intimately *en rapport* with the thoughts and feelings of “N. H.,” that he experienced in his own being all that “N. H.” experienced. The description was written immediately after the occurrence, though some of it, the spoken language in particular, was jotted down in his hiding place at the actual moment.

The interlacing of the two minds, their interpenetration, as it were, one occasionally dominating the other, is curious to trace and far from difficult to disentangle. Similarly the interweaving of LeVallon and “N. H.” is noticeable. The description given by Devonham of the portion of the occurrence he witnessed personally, or heard about from Nurse Robbins and the attendants — this description reduces the whole thing to the commonplace level of “a slight seizure accompanied by signs of violence and moments of delirium due to excitement and fatigue, and soon cured by sleep.”

The occurrence took place precisely at the period when the moon was at the full.

CHAPTER IX

THE BODY I'M in and using is 22, as they call it, and from a man named Mason, a geologist, I receive sums of money, regularly paid, with which I live. They call it "live." A roof and walls protect me, who do not need protection; my body, which it irks, is covered with wool and cloth and stuff, fitting me as bark fits a tree and yet not part of me; my feet, which love the touch of earth and yearn for it, are cased in dead dried skin called leather; even my head and hair, which crave the sun and wind, are covered with another piece of dead dried skin, shaped like a shell, but an ugly shell, in which, were it shaped otherwise, the wind and rustling leaves might sing with flowers.

Before 22 I remember nothing — nothing definite, that is. I opened my eyes in a soft, but not refreshing case standing on four iron legs, and well off the ground, and covered with coarse white coverings piled thickly on my body. It was a bed. Slabs of transparent stuff kept out the living sunshine for which I hungered; thick solid walls shut off the wind; no stars or moon showed overhead, because an enormous lid hid every bit of sky. No dew, therefore, lay upon the sheets. I smelt no earth, no leaves, no flowers. No single natural sound entered except the chattering of dirty sparrows which had lost its freshness. I was in a hospital.

One comely figure alone gave me a little joy. It was soft and slim and graceful, with a smell of fern and morning in its hair, though that hair was lustreless and balled up in ugly lumps, with strips of thin metal in it. They called it nurse and sister. It was the first moving thing I saw when my eyes opened on my limited and enclosed surroundings. My heart beat quicker, a flash of thin joy came up in me. I had seen something similar before somewhere; it reminded me, I mean, of something I had known elsewhere; though but a shabby, lifeless, clumsy copy of this other glorious thing. Though not real, it stirred this faint memory of reality, so that I caught at the skirts of moonlight, stars and flowers reflected in a forest pool where my companion played for long periods of happiness between our work. The perfume and the eyes did that. I watched it for a bit, as it moved away, came close and looked at me. When the eyes met mine, a wave of life, but of little life, surged faintly through me.

They were dim and pitiful, these eyes; mournful, unlit, unseeing. The stars had set in them; dull shadows crowded. They were so small. They were hungry too. They were unsatisfied. For some minutes it puzzled me, then I understood. That was the word — unsatisfied. Ah, but I could alter that! I could comfort, help, at any rate. My strength, though horribly clipped and blocked, could manage a little thing like that! My smaller rhythms I could put into it.

The eyes, the smile, the whole soft comely bundle, so pitifully hungry and unsatisfied, I rose and seized, pressing it close inside my own great arms, and burying it all against my breast. I crushed it, but very gently, as I might crush a sapling. My lips were amid the ferny hair. I breathed upon it willingly, glad to help.

It was a poor unfinished thing, I felt at once, soft and yielding where it should have been resilient and elastic as fresh turf; the perfume had no body, it faded instantly; there was so little life in it.

But, as I held it in my big embrace, smothering its hunger as best I could within my wave of being, this bundle, this poor pitiful bundle, screamed and struggled to get free. It bit and scratched and uttered sounds like those squeaks the less swift creatures make when the swifter overtake them.

I was too surprised to keep it to me; I relaxed my hold. The instant I did so the figure, thus released, stood upright like a young birch the wind sets free. The figure looked alive. The hair fell loose, untidily, the puny face wore colour, the eyes had fire in them. I saw that fire. It was a message. Memory stirred faintly in me.

“Ah!” I cried. “I’ve helped you anyhow a little!”

The scene that followed filled me with such trouble and bewilderment that I cannot recall exactly what occurred. The figure seemed to spit at me, yet not with grace and invitation. There was no sign of gratitude. I was entirely misunderstood, it seemed. Bells rang, as the figure rushed to the door and flung it open. It called aloud; similar, though quite lifeless figures came in answer and filled the room. A doctor — Devonham, they called him — followed them. I was most carefully examined in a dozen curious ways that tickled my skin a little so that I smiled. But I lay quite still and silent, watching the whole performance with a confusion in my being that baffled my comprehending what was going on. Most of the figures were frightened.

Then the doctor gave place to Fillery, whose name has rhythm.

To him I spoke at once:

“I wished to comfort and revive her,” I told him. “She is so starved. I was most gentle. She brings a message only.”

He made no reply, but gazed at me with the corners of his mouth both twitching, and in his eyes — ah, his eyes had more of the sun in them — a flash of something that had known fire, at least, if it had not kept it.

“My God! I worship thee,” I murmured at the glimpse of the Power I must own as Master and creator of my being. “Even when thou art playful, I adore thee and obey.”

Then four other figures, shaped like the doctor but wholly mechanical, a mere blind weight operating through them, held my arms and legs. Not the least desire to move was in me luckily. I say “luckily,” because, had I wished it, I could have flung them through the roof, blown down the little walls, caught up a dozen figures in my arms, and rushed forth with them towards the Powers of Fire and Wind to which I belonged.

Could I? I felt that I could. The sight of the true fire, small though it was, in the comely figure’s and the doctor’s eyes, had set me in touch again with my home and origin. This touch I had somehow lost; I had been “ill,” with what they called nervous disorder and injured reason. The lost touch was now restored. But, luckily, as I said, there was no desire in me to set free these other figures, to help them in any way, after the reception my first kindly effort had experienced. I lay quite still, held by these four grotesque and puny mechanisms. The comely one, with the others similar to her, had withdrawn. I felt very kindly towards them all, but especially towards the doctor, Fillery, who had shown that he knew my deity and origin. None of them were worth much trouble, anyhow. I felt that too. A mild, sweet-toned contempt was in me.

“Dangerous,” was a word I caught them whispering as they went. I laughed a little. The four faces over me made odd grimaces, tightening their lips, and gripping my legs and arms with greater effort. The doctor — Fillery — noticed it.

“Easy, remember,” he addressed the four. “There’s really no need to hold. It won’t recur.” I nodded. We understood one another. And, with a smile at me, he left the room, saying he would come back after a short interval. A link with my source, a brother as it were, went with him. I was lonely....

I began to hum songs to myself, little fragments of a great natural music I had once known but lost, and I noticed that the four figures, as I sang, relaxed their grip of my limbs considerably. To tell the truth, I forgot that they were holding me; their grip, anyhow, was but a thread I could snap without the smallest effort. The songs were happiness in me. Upon free leaping rhythms I careered with an exhilarating rush of liberty; all about space I soared and sank; I was picked up, flung far, riding the crest of immense waves of orderly vibration that delighted me. I let myself go a bit, let my voice out, I mean. No effort accompanied my singing. It was automatic, like breathing almost. It was natural to me. These rhythmical sounds and the patterns that they wove in space were the outlines of forms it was my work to build. This expressed my nature. Only my power was blocked and stifled in this confining body. The fire and air which were my tools I could not control. I have forgotten — forgotten —— !

“Got a voice, ain’t he?” observed one of the figures admiringly.

“Lunies can do ‘most anything they have a mind to.”

“Grand Opera isn’t it.”

“Yes,” mentioned the fourth, “but he’ll lift the roof off presently. We’d better stop him before there’s any trouble.”

I stopped of myself, however: their remarks interested me. Also while I had been singing, although I called it humming only, they had gradually let go of me, and were now sitting down on my bed and staring with quite pleasant faces. All their dim eight eyes were fixed on me. Their forms were not built well.

“Where did you get that from, Guv’nor?” asked the one who had spoken first. “Can you give me the name of it?”

The sound of his own voice was like the scratching of a pin after the enormous rhythm that now ceased.

“Ain’t printed, is it?” he went on, as I stared, not understanding what he meant. “I’ve got a sister at the Halls,” he explained. “She’d make a hit with that kind of thing. Gave me quite a twist inside to hear it,” he added, turning to the others.

The others agreed solemnly with dull stupid faces. I lay and listened to their talk. I longed to help them. I had forgotten how.

“A bit churchy, I thought it,” said one. “But, I confess, it stirred me up.”

“Churchy or not, it’s the stuff,” insisted the first.

“Oh, it’s the stuff to give ‘em, right enough.” And they looked at me admiringly again. “Where did you get it, if I may ask?” replied Number One in a more respectful tone. His face looked quite polite. The lips stretched, showing yellow teeth. It was his smile. But his eyes were a little more real. Oh, where was my fire? I could have built the outline better so that he was real and might express far more. I have forgotten —— !

“I hear it,” I told him, “because I’m in it. It’s all about me. It never stops. It’s what we build with — —”

Number One seemed greatly interested.

“Hear it, do you? Why, that’s odd now. You see” — he looked at his companions apologetically, as though he knew they would not believe him — “my father was like that. He heard his music, he always used to say, but we laughed at him. He was a composer by trade. Oh, his stuff was printed too. Of course,” he added, “there’s musical talent in the family,” as though that explained everything. He turned to me again. “Give us a little more, Mister — if you don’t object, that is,” he added. And his face was soft as he said it. “Only gentle like — if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, keep it down a bit,” another put in, looking anxiously in the direction of the closed door. He patted the air with his open palm, slowly, carefully, as though he patted an animal that might rise and fly at him.

I hummed again for them, but this time with my lips closed. The waves of rhythm caught me up and away. I soared and flew and dropped and rose again upon their huge coloured crests. Curtains and sheets of quiet flame in palest gold flared shimmering through the sound, while winds that were full of hurricanes and cyclones swept down to lift the fire and dance with it in spirals. The perfume of great flowers rose. There were flowers everywhere, and stars shone through it all like showers of gold. Ah! I began to remember something. It was flowers and stars as well as human forms we worked to build....

But I kept the fire from leaping into actual flame; the mighty winds I held back. Even thus pent and checked, their powerful volume made the atmosphere shake and pulse about us. Only I could not control them now.... With an effort I came back, came down, as it were, and saw the funny little faces staring at me with opened eyes and mouths, and yellow teeth, pale gums, their skins gone whitish, their figures rigid with their tense emotion. They were so poorly made, the patterns so imperfect. The new respect in their manner was marked plainly. Suddenly all four turned together towards the door. I stopped. The doctor had returned. But it was Fillery again. I liked the feel of him.

“He wanted to sing, sir, so we let him. It seemed to relieve him a bit,” they explained quickly and with an air of helpless apology.

“Good, good,” said the doctor. “Quite good. Any normal expression that brings relief is good.” He dismissed them. They went out, casting back at me expressions of puzzled thanks and interest. The door closed behind them. The doctor seated himself beside me and took my hand. I liked his touch. His hand was alive, at any rate, although within my own it felt rather like a dying branch or bunch of leaves I grasped. The life, if thin, was real.

“Where’s the rest of it?” I asked him, meaning the music. “I used to have it all. It’s left me, gone away. What’s cut it off?”

“You’re not cut off really,” he said gently. “You can always get into it again when you really need it.” He gazed at me steadily for a minute, then said in his quiet voice — a full, nice tone with wind through a forest running in it: “Mason.... Dr. Mason....”

He said no more, but watched me. The name stirred something in me I could not get at quite. I could not reach down to it. I was troubled by a memory I could not seize.

“Mason,” I repeated, returning his strong gaze. “What — who — was Mason? And where?” I connected the name with a sense of liberty, also with great winds and pools of fire, with great figures of golden skin and radiant faces, with music, too, the music that had left me.

“You’ve forgotten for the moment,” came the deep running voice I liked. “He looked after you for twenty years. He gave his life for you. He loved you. He loved your mother. Your father was his friend.”

“Has he gone — gone back?”

“He’s dead.”

“I can get after him though,” I said, for the name touched me with a sense of lost companionship I wanted, though the reference to my father and mother left me cold. “I can easily catch him up. When I move with my wind and fire, the fastest things stand still.” My own speed, once I was free again, I knew outpaced easily the swiftest bird, outpaced light itself.

“Yes,” agreed the doctor; “only he doesn’t want that now. You can always catch him up when the time comes. Besides, he’s waiting for you anyhow.”

I knew that was true. I sank back comforted upon the stuffy pillows and lay silent. This tinkling chatter wearied me. It was like trickling wind. I wanted the flood of hurricanes, the pulse of storms. My building, shaping powers, my great companions — oh! where were they?

“He taught you himself, taught you all you know,” I heard the tinkling go on again, “but he kept you away from life, thinking it was best. He was afraid for you, afraid for others too. He kept you in the woods and mountains where, as he believed, you could alone express yourself and so be happy. A hundred times, in babyhood and early childhood, you nearly died. He nursed you back to life. His own life he renounced. Now he is dead. He has left you all his money.”

He paused. I said no word. Faint memories passed through my mind, but nothing I could hold and seize. The money I did not understand at all, except that it was necessary.

“He thought at first that you could not possibly live to manhood. To his surprise you survived everything — illness, accident, disaster of every sort and kind. Then, as you grew up, he realized his mistake. Instead of keeping you away from life, he ought to have introduced you to it and explained it — as I and Devonham are now trying to do. You could not live for ever alone in woods and mountains; when he was gone there would be no one to look after you and guide you.”

The trickling of wind went on and on. I hardly listened to it. He did it for his own pleasure, I suppose. It pleased and soothed him possibly. Yet I remembered every syllable. It was a small detail to keep fresh when my real memory covered the whole planet.

“Before he died, he recognized his mistake and faced the position boldly. It was some years before the end; he was hale and hearty still, yet the end, he knew, was in sight. While the power was still strong in him, therefore, he did the only thing left to him to do. He used his great powers. He used suggestion. He hypnotized you, telling you to forget — from the moment of his death, but not before — forget everything —— It was only partially successful.”

The door opened, the comely figure glanced in, then vanished.

“She wants more help from me,” I interrupted the monotonous tinkling instantly, for pity stirred in me again as I saw her eager, hungry and unsatisfied little eyes. “Call her back. I feel quite willing. It is one of the lower forms we made. I can improve it.”

Dr. Fillery, as he was called, looked at me steadily, his mouth twitching at the corners as before, a flash of fire flitting through his eyes. The fire made me like and trust him; the twitching, too, I liked, for it meant he knew how absurd he was. Yet he was bigger than the other figures.

“You can’t do that,” he said, “you mustn’t,” and then laughed outright. “It isn’t done, you know — here.”

“Why not, sir?” I asked, using the terms the figures used. “I feel like that.”

“Of course, you do. But all you feel can’t be expressed except at the proper times and places. The consent of the other party always is involved,” he went on slowly, “when it’s a question of expressing — anything you feel.”

This puzzled me, because in this particular instance the other party had asked me with her eyes to comfort her. I told him this. He laughed still more. Caught by the sound — it was just like wind passing among tall grasses on a mountain ridge — I forgot what he was talking about for the moment. The sound carried me away towards my own rhythms.

“You’ve got such amazing insight,” he went on tinkling to himself, for I heard, although I did not listen. “You read the heart too easily, too quickly. You must learn to hide your knowledge.” The laughter which ran with the words then ended, and I came back to the last thing I had definitely listened to— “express, expressing,” was the phrase he used.

“You told me that self-expression is the purpose for which I’m here —— ?”

“I believe it is,” he agreed, more solemnly.

“Only sometimes, then?”

“Exactly. If that expression involves another in pain or trouble or discomfort — —”

“Ah! I have to choose, you mean. I have to know first what the other feels about it.”

I began to understand better. It was a game. And all games delighted me.

“You may put it roughly so, yes,” he explained, “you’re very quick. I’ll give you a rule to guide you,” he went on. I listened with an effort; this tinkling soon wearied me; I could not think long or much; my way, it seemed, was feeling. “Ask yourself always how what you do will affect another,” Dr. Fillery concluded. “That’s a safe rule for you.”

“That is of children,” I observed. We stared at each other a moment. “Both sides keep it?” I asked.

“Childish,” he agreed, “it certainly is. Both sides, yes, keep it.”

I sighed, and the sigh seemed to rise from my very feet, passing through my whole being. He looked at me most kindly then, asking why I sighed.

“I used to be free,” I told him. “This is not liberty. And why are we not all free together?”

“It is liberty for two instead of only for one,” he said, “and so, in the long run, liberty for all.”

“So that’s where they are,” I remarked, but to myself and not to him. “Not further than that.” For what I had once known, but now, it seemed, forgotten, was far beyond such a foolish little game. We had lived without such tiny tricks. We lived openly and unafraid. We worked in harmony. We lived. Yes — but who was “we”? That was the part I had forgotten.

“It’s the growth and development of civilization,” I heard the little drift of wind go whistling thinly, “and it won’t take you long to become quite civilized at this rate, more civilized, indeed, than most — with your swift intelligence and lightning insight.”

“Civilization,” I repeated to myself. Then I looked at his eyes which hid carefully in their depths somewhere that tiny cherished flame I loved. “Your ways are really very simple,” I said. “It’s all easy enough to learn. It is so small.”

“A man studying ants,” he tinkled, “finds them small, but far from simple. You may find complications later. If so, come to me.”

I promised him, and the fire gleamed faintly in his eyes a moment. “He entrusted you to me. Your mother,” he added softly, “was the woman he loved.”

“Civilization,” I repeated, for the word set going an odd new rhythm in me that I rather liked, and that tired me less than the other things he said. “What is it then? You are a Race, you told me.”

“A Race of human beings, of men and women developing — —”

“The comely ones?”

“Are the women. Together we make up the Race.”

“And civilization?”

“Is realizing that we are a community, learning, growing, all its members living for the others as well as for themselves.”

Dr. Fillery told me then about men and women and sex, how children are made, and what enormous and endless work was necessary merely to keep them all alive and clothed and sheltered before they could accomplish anything else of any sort at all. Half the labour of the majority was simply to keep alive at all. It was an ugly little system he described. Much I did not hear, because my thinking powers gave out. Some of it gave me an awful feeling he called pain. The confusion and imperfection seemed beyond repair, even beyond the worth of being part of it, of belonging to it at all. Moreover, the making of children, without which the whole thing must end, gave me spasms of irritation he called laughter. Only the Comely Ones, and what he told me of them, made me want to sing.

"The men," I said, "but do they see that it is ugly and ludicrous and — —"

"Comic," he helped me.

"Do they know," I asked, taking his unknown words, "that it's comic?"

"The glamour," he said, "conceals it from them. To the best among them it is sacred even."

"And the Comely Ones?"

"It is their chief mission," he replied. "Always remember that. It's sacred." He fixed his kind eyes gravely on my face.

"Ah, worship, you mean," I said. "I understand." Again we stared for some minutes. "Yet all are not comely, are they?" I asked presently.

The fire again shone faintly in his eyes as he watched me a moment without answering. It caught me away. I am not sure I heard his words, but I think they ran like this:

"That's just the point where civilization — so far — has always stopped."

I remember he ceased tinkling then; our talk ceased too. I was exhausted. He told me to remember what he had said, and to lie down and rest. He rang the bell, and a man, one of the four who had held me, came in.

"Ask Nurse Robbins to come here a moment, please," he said. And a moment later the Comely One entered softly and stood beside my bed. She did not look at me. Dr. Fillery began again his little tinkling. "... wishes to apologize to you most sincerely, nurse, for his mistake. He meant no harm, believe me. There is no danger in him, nor will he ever repeat it. His ignorance of our ways, I must ask you to believe — —"

"Oh, it's nothing, sir," she interrupted. "I've quite forgotten it already. And usually he's as good as gold and perfectly quiet." She blushed, glancing shyly at me with clear invitation.

"It will not recur," repeated the Doctor positively. "He has promised me. He is very, very sorry and ashamed."

The nurse looked more boldly a moment. I saw her silver teeth. I saw the hint of soft fire in her poor pitiful eyes, but far, far away and, as she thought, safely hidden.

"Pitiful one, I will not touch you," I said instantly. "I know that you are sacred."

I noticed at once that her sweet natural perfume increased about her as I said the words, but her eyes were lowered, though she smiled a little, and her little cheeks grew coloured. I saw her small teeth of silvery marble again. Our work was visible. I liked it.

"You have promised me," said Dr. Fillery, rising to go out.

"I promise," I said, while the Comely One was arranging my pillows and sheets with quick, clever hands, sometimes touching my cheek on purpose as she did so. "I will not worship, unless it is commanded of me first. The increased sweetness of her smell will tell me."

But indeed already I had forgotten her, and I no longer realized who it was that tripped about my bed, doing numerous little things to make me comfortable. My friend, the understanding one, companion of my big friend, Mason, who was dead, also had left the room. His twitching mouth, his laughter, and his shining eyes were gone. I was aware that the Comely One remained, doing all manner of little things about me and my bed, unnecessary things, but my pity and my worship were not asked, so I forgot her. My thinking had wearied me, and my feeling was not touched. I began to hum softly to myself; my giant rhythms rose; I went forth towards my Powers of Wind and Fire, full of my own natural joy. I forgot the Race with its men, its women, its rules and games, its tiny tricks, its civilization. I was free for a little with my own.

One detail interfered a little with the rhythms, but only for a second and very faintly even then. The Comely One's face grew dark.

"He's gone off asleep — actually," I heard her mutter, as she left the room with a fling of her little skirts, shutting the door behind her with a bang.

That bang was far away. I was already rising and falling in that natural happy state which to me meant freedom. It is hard to tell about, but that dear Fillery knows, I am sure, exactly what I know, though he has forgotten it. He has known us somewhere, I feel. He understands our service. But, like me, he has forgotten too.

What really happened to me? Where did I go, what did I see and feel when my rhythms took me off?

Thinking is nowhere in it — I can tell him that. I am conscious of the Sun.

One difficulty is that my being here confuses me. Here I am already caught, confined and straitened. I am within certain limits. I can only move in three ways, three measurements, three dimensions. The space I am in here allows only little rhythms; they are coarse and slow and heavy, and beat against confining walls as it were, are thrown back, cross and recross each other, so that while they themselves grow less, their confusion grows greater. The forms and outlines I can build with them are poor and clumsy and insignificant. Spirals I cannot make. Then I forget.

Into these small rhythms I cannot compress myself; the squeezing hurts. Yet neither can I make them bigger to suit myself. I would break forth towards the Sun.

Thus I feel cramped, confused and crippled. It is almost impossible to tell of my big rhythms, for it is an attempt to tell of one thing in terms of another. How can I fix fire and wind upon the point of a pin, for instance, and examine them through a magnifying-glass? The Sun remains. What I experience, really, when I go off into my own freedom is release. My rhythms are of the Sun. They are his messengers, they are my law, they are my life and happiness. By means of them I fulfill the purpose of my being. I work, so Fillery calls it. I build.

That, at any rate, is literally true. My thinking stops at that point, perhaps; but “I think” I mean by “release” — that I escape back from being trapped by all these separate little individualities, human beings each working on his own, for his own, and against all the others — escape from this stifling tangle into the sweep of my big rhythms which work together and in unison. I search for lost companions, but do not find them — the golden skins and radiant faces, the mighty figures and the splendid shapes.

They work without effort, however. That is another difference.

I, too, work, only I work with them, and never against them. I can draw upon them as they can draw upon me. We do draw on one another. We know harmony. Service is our method and system.

My dear Fillery also wants to know who “we” are. How can I tell him? The moment I try to “think,” I seem to forget. This forgetting, indeed, is one of the limits against which I bang myself, so that I am flung back upon the tangle of criss-cross, tiny rhythms which confuse and obliterate the very thing he wants to know. Yet the Sun I never forget — father of fire and wind. My companions are lost temporarily. I am shut off from them. It seems I cannot have them and the Race at the same time. I yearn and suffer to rejoin them. The service we all know together is great joy. Of love, this love between two isolated individuals the Race counts the best thing they have — we know nothing.

Now, here is one thing I can understand quite clearly:

I have watched and helped the Race, as he calls it, for countless ages. Yet from outside it. Never till now have I been inside its limits with it. And a dim sense of having watched it through a veil or curtain comes to me. I can faintly recall that I tried to urge my big rhythms in among its members, as great waves of heat or sound might be launched upon an ant-heap. I used to try to force and project my vast rhythms into their tiny ones, hoping to make these latter swell and rise and grow — but never with success. Though a few members, here and there, felt them and struggled to obey and use their splendid swing, the rest did not seem to notice them at all.... Indeed, they objected to the struggling efforts of the few who did feel them, for their own small accustomed rhythms were interfered with. The few were generally broken into little pieces and pushed violently out of the way.

And this made me feel pitiful, I remember dimly; because these smaller rhythms, though insignificant, were exquisite. They were of extraordinary beauty. Could they only have been increased, the Race that knew and used them must have changed my own which, though huge and splendid of their kind, lacked the intense, perfect loveliness of the smaller kind.

The Race, had it accepted mine and mastered them, must have carried themselves and me towards still mightier rhythms which I alone could never reach.

This, then, is clear to me, though very faint now. Fillery, who can think for a long time, instead of like me for seconds only, will understand what I mean. For if I tell him what “we” did, he may be able to think out what “we” were.

“Your work?” he asked me too.

I’m not sure I know what he means by “work.” We were incessantly active, but not for ourselves. There was no effort. There was easy and sure accomplishment — in the sense that nothing could stop or hinder our fulfilling our own natures. Obstacles, indeed, helped our power and made it greater, for everything feeds fire and opposition adds to the pressure of wind. Our main activity was to make perfect forms. We were form-builders. Apart from this, our “work” was to maintain and keep active all rhythms less than our own, yet of our kind. I speak of my own kind alone. We had no desire to be known outside our kind. We worked and moved and built up swiftly, but out of sight — an endless service.

“You are the Powers behind what we call Nature, then?” the dear Fillery asked me. “You operate behind growing things, even behind inanimate things like trees and stones and flowers. Your big rhythms, as you call them, are our Laws of Nature. Your own particular department, your own elements evidently, were heat and air.”

I could not answer that. But, as he said it, I saw in his grey eyes the flash of fire which so few of his Race possessed; and I felt vaguely that he was one of the struggling members who was aware of the big rhythms and who would be put away in little pieces later by the rest. It made me pitiful. “Forget your own tiny rhythms,” I said, “and come over to us. But bring your tiny rhythms with you because they are so exquisitely lovely. We shall increase them.”

He did not answer me. His mouth twitched at the corners, and he had an attack of that irritation which, he says, is relieved and expressed by laughter. Yet the face shone.

The laughter, however, was a very quick, full, natural answer, all the same. It was happy and enthusiastic. I saw that laughter made his rhythms bigger at once. Then laughter was probably the means to use. It was a sort of bridge.

“Your instantaneous comprehension of our things puzzles me,” he said. “You grasp our affairs in all their relations so swiftly. Yet it is all new to you.” His voice and face made me wish to stroke and help him, he was so dear and eager. “How do you manage it?” he asked point blank. “Our things are surely foreign to your nature.”

“But they are of children,” I told him. “They are small and so very simple. There are no difficulties. Your language is block letters because your self-expression, as you call it, is so limited. It all comes to me at a glance. I and my kind can remember a million tiniest details without effort.”

He did not laugh, but his face looked full of questions. I could not help him further. “A scrap, probably, of what you’ve taught us,” I heard him mumble, though no further questions came. “Well,” he went on presently, while I lay and watched the pale fire slip in tiny waves about his eyes, “remember this: since our alphabet is so easy to you, follow it, stick to it, do not go outside it. There’s a good rule that will save trouble for others as well as for yourself.”

“I remember and I try. But it is not always easy. I get so cramped and stiff and lifeless with it.”

“This sunless, chilly England, of course, cannot feed you,” he said. “The sense of beauty in our Race, too, is very poor.”

Once he suddenly looked up and fixed his eyes on my face. His manner became very earnest.

“Now, listen to me,” he said. “I’m going to read you something; I want you to tell me what you make of it. It’s private; that is, I have no right to show it to others, but as no one would understand it — with the exception possibly of yourself — secrecy is not of importance.” And his mouth twitched a little.

He drew a sheaf of papers from an inner pocket, and I saw they were covered with fine writing. I laughed; this writing always made me laugh — it was so laborious and slow. The writing I knew best, of course, lay all over and inside the earth and skies. The privacy also made me laugh, so strange seemed the idea to me, and so impossible — this idea of secrecy. It was such an admission of ignorance.

“I will understand it quickest by reading it,” I said. “I take in a page at once — in your block letters.”

But he preferred to read it out himself, so that he could note the effect upon me, he explained, of definite passages. He saw that I guessed his purpose, and we laughed together a moment. “When you tire of listening,” he said, “just tell me and I’ll pause.” I gave him my hand to hold. “It helps me to stay here,” I explained, and he nodded as he grasped me in his warm firm clasp.

“It’s written by one who *may* have known you and your big rhythms, though I can’t be sure,” he added. “One of — er — my patients wrote it, someone who believed she was in communication with a kind of immense Nature-spirit.”

Then he began to read in his clear, windy voice:

“‘I sit and weave. I feel strange; as if I had so much consciousness that words cannot explain it. The failure of others makes my work more hard, but my own purposes never fail, I am associated with those who need me. The universal doors are open to me. I compass Creation.’”

But already I began to hum my songs, though to please him I kept the music low, and he, dear Fillery, did not bid me stop, but only tightened his grasp upon my hand. I listened with pleasure and satisfaction. Therefore I hummed.

“‘I am silent, seeking no expression, needing no communication, satisfied with the life that is in me. I do not even wish to be known about — —’”

“That’s where your Race,” I put in, “is to me as children. All they do must be shouted about so loud or they think it has not happened.”

“‘I do not wish to be forced to obtrude myself,’” he went on. “‘There are hosts like me. We do not want that which does not belong to us. We do not want that hindrance, that opposition which rouses an undesirable consciousness; for without that opposition we could never have known of disobedience. We are formless. The formless is the real. That cannot die. It is eternal.’”

Again he tightened his grasp, and this time also laid his eyes a moment on my own, over the top of his paper, so that I kept my music back with a great effort. For it was hard not to express myself when my own came calling in this fashion.

He continued reading aloud. He selected passages now, instead of going straight through the pages. The words helped memory in me; flashes of what I had forgotten came back in sheets of colour and waves of music; the phrases built little spirals, as it were, between two states. Of these two states, I now divined, he understood one perfectly — his own, and the other — mine — partially. Yet he had a little of both, I knew, in himself. With me it was similar, only the understood state was not the same with us. To the Race, of course, what he read would have no meaning.

“The Comely One and the four figures,” I said, “how they would turn white and run if they could hear you, showing their yellow teeth and dim eyes!”

His face remained grave and eager, though I could see the laughter running about beneath the tight brown skin as he went on reading his little bits.

“‘We heard nothing of man, and were rarely even conscious of him, although he benefited by our work in all that sustained and conditioned him. The wise are silent, the foolish speak, and the children are thus led astray, for wisdom is not knowledge, it is a realization of the scheme and of one’s own part in it.’”

He took a firmer, broader grip of my hand as he read the next bit. I felt the tremble of his excitement run into my wrist and arm. His voice deepened and shook. It was like a little storm:

“‘Then, suddenly, we heard man’s triumphant voice. We became conscious of him as an evolving entity. Our Work had told. We had built his form and processes so faithfully. We knew that when he reached his height we must be submissive to his will.’”

A gust of memory flashed by me as I heard. Those small but perfect, exquisite, lovely rhythms!

“Who called me here? Whose voice reached after me, bringing me into this undesirable consciousness?” I cried aloud, as the memory went tearing by, then vanished before I could recover it. At the same time Fillery let go my hand, and the little bridge was snapped. I felt what he called pain. It passed at once. I found his hand again, but the bridge was not rebuilt. How white his skin had grown, I noticed, as I looked up at his face. But the eyes shone grandly. “I shall find the way,” I said. “We shall go back together to our eternal home.”

He went on reading as though I had not interrupted, but I found it less easy to listen now.

I realized then that he was gone. He had left the room, though I had not seen him go. I had been away.

It was some days ago that this occurred. It was to-day, a few hours ago, that I seized the Comely One and tried to comfort her, poor hungry member of this little Race.

But both occurrences help us — help dear Fillery and myself — to understand how difficult it is to answer his questions and tell him exactly what he wants to know.

“How long, O Lord, how long!” I hear his yearning cry. “Yet other beings cannot help us; they can only tell us what their own part is.”

After the door had clicked I knew release for a bit — release from a state I partially understood and so found irksome, into another where I felt at home and so found pleasurable. In the big rhythms my nature expressed itself apparently. I rose, seeking my lost companions. They — the Devonham and his busy little figures — called it sleep. It may be “sleep.” But I find there what I seek yet have forgotten, and that with me were dear Fillery and another — a Comely One whom *he* brings — as though we belong together and have a common origin. But this other Comely One — who is it?

CHAPTER X

ABOUT A WEEK after the arrival of LeVallon in London, Dr. Fillery came out of the Home one morning early, upon some uninteresting private business. He had left "LeVallon" happy with his books and garden, Devonham was with him to answer questions or direct his energies; the other "cases" in the establishment were moving nicely towards a cure.

The November air was clear and almost bright; no personal worries troubled him. His mind felt free and light.

It was one of those mornings when Nature slips, very close and sweet, into the heart, so close and sweet that the mind wonders why people quarrel and disagree, when it is so easy to forgive, and the planet seems but a big, lovely, happy garden, evil an impossible nightmare, and personal needs few and simple.

He walked by cross roads towards Primrose Hill, entering Regent's Park near the Zoo. An early white frost was rapidly melting in the sun. The sky showed a faint tinge of blue. He saw floating sea-gulls. These, and a faint breeze that stirred the yellowing last leaves of autumn, gave his heart a sudden lift.

And this lift was in the direction of a forbidden corner. He was aware of some exquisite dawn-wind far away stirring a million flowers, dew sparkled, streams splashed and murmured. A valley gleamed and vanished, yet left across his mind its shining trail.... For this lift of his heart made him soar into a region where it was only too easy to override temptation. Fillery, however, though his invisible being soared, kept both visible feet firmly on the ground. The surface was slippery, being melted by the sun, but frost kept the earth hard and frozen underneath. His balance never was in danger. He remained detached and a spectator.

She walked beside him nevertheless, a figure of purity and radiance, perfumed, soft, delicious. She was so ignorant of life. That was her wonder partly; for beauty was her accident and, while admirable, was not a determining factor. Life, in its cruder sense, she did not know, though moving through the thick of it. It neither touched nor soiled her; she brushed its dirt and dust aside as though a non-conducting atmosphere surrounded her. Her emotions, deep and searching, had remained untorn. A quality of pristine innocence belonged to her, as though, in the noisy clamour of ambitious civilized life, she remained still aware of Eden. Her grace, her loveliness, her simplicity moved by his side as naturally, it seemed to him, as air or perfume.

“Iraida,” he murmured to himself, with a smile of joy. “Nayan Khilkoff. All the men worship and adore you, yet respect you too. They cannot touch you. You remain aloof, unstained.” And, remembering LeVallon’s remarks in cinema and theatre, he could have sung at this mere thought of her.

“Untouched by coarseness, something unearthly about your loveliness of soul, a baby, a saint, and to all the men in Khilkoff’s Studio, a mother. Where do you really come from? Whence do you derive? Your lovely soul can have no dealings with our common flesh. How many young fellows have you saved already, how many floundering characters redeemed! They crave your earthly, physical love. Instead you surprise and disappoint and shock them into safety again — by giving to them Love...!”

And, as he half repeated his vivid thoughts aloud, he suddenly saw her coming towards him from the ornamental water, and instantly, wondering what he should say to her, his mind contracted. The thing in him that sang went backward into silence. He put a brake upon himself. But he watched her coming nearer, wondering what brought her so luckily into Regent’s Park, and all the way from Chelsea, at such an hour. She moved so lightly, sweetly; she was so intangible and lovely. He feared her eyes, her voice.

They drew nearer. From looking to right and left, he raised his head. She was close, quite close, a hundred yards away. That walk, that swing, that poise of head and neck he could not mistake anywhere. His whole being glowed, thrilled, and yet contracted as in pain.

A sentence about the weather, about her own, her father’s, health, about his calling to see them shortly, rose to his lips. He turned his eyes away, then again looked up. They were now not twenty yards apart; in another moment he would have raised his hat, when, with a sensation of cold disappointment in him, she went past in totally irresponsive silence. It was a stranger — a shop girl, a charwoman, a bus-conductor’s wife — anybody but she whom he had thought.

How could he have been so utterly mistaken? It amazed him. It was, indeed, months since they had met, yet his knowledge of her appearance was so accurate and detailed that such an error seemed incredible. He had experienced, besides, the actual thrill.

The phenomenon, however, was not new to him. Often had he experienced it, much as others have. He knew, from this, that she was somewhere near, coming deliciously, deliberately towards him, moving every minute firmly nearer, from a point in great London town which she had left just at the precise moment which would time her crossing his own path later. They would meet presently, if not now. Fate had arranged all details, and something in him was aware of it before it happened.

The phenomenon, as a matter of fact, was repeated twice again in the next half-hour: he saw her — on both occasions beyond the possibility of question — coming towards him, yet each time it was a complete stranger masquerading in her guise.

It meant, he knew, that their two minds — hearts, too, he wondered, with a sense of secret happiness, enjoyed intensely then instantly suppressed — were wirelessing to one another across the vast city, and that both transmitter and receiver, their physical bodies, would meet shortly round the corner, or along the crowded street. Strong currents of desiring thought, he knew, he hoped, he wondered, were trying to shape the crude world nearer to the heart’s desire, causing the various intervening passers-by to assume the desirable form and outline in advance.

He reflected, following the habit of his eager mind; this wireless discovery, after all, was the discovery of a universal principle in Nature. It was common to all forms of life, a faint beginning of that advance towards marvellous intercommunicating, semi-telepathic brotherhood he had always hoped for, believed in.... Even plants, he remembered, according to Bose....

Then, suddenly, half-way down Baker Street he found her close beside him.

She was dressed so becomingly, so naturally, that no particular detail caught his eye, although she wore more colour than was usual in the dull climate known to English people. There was a touch of fur and there were flowers, but these were part of her appearance as a whole, and the hat was so exactly right, though it was here that Englishwomen generally went wrong, that he could not remember afterwards what it was like. It was as suitable as natural hair. It looked as if she had grown it. The shining eyes were what he chiefly noticed. They seemed to increase the pale sunlight in the dingy street.

She was so close that he caught her perfume almost before he recognized her, and a sense of happiness invaded his whole being instantly, as he took the slender hand emerging from a muff and held it for a moment. The casual sentences he had half prepared fled like a flock of birds surprised. Their eyes met.... And instantly the sun rose over a far Khaketian valley; he was aware of joy, of peace, of deep contentment, London obliterated, the entire world elsewhere. He knew the thrill, the ecstasy of some long-forgotten dawn....

But in that brief second while he held her hand and gazed into her eyes, there flashed before him a sudden apparition. With lightning rapidity this picture darted past between them, paused for the tiniest fraction of a second, and was gone again. So swiftly the figure shot across that the very glance he gave her was intercepted, its angle changed, its meaning altered. He started involuntarily, for he knew that vision, the bright rushing messenger, someone who brought glad tidings. And this time he recognized it — it was the figure of “N. H.”

The outward start, the slight wavering of the eyelids, both were noticed, though not understood, much less interpreted by the young woman facing him.

“You are as much surprised as I am,” he heard the pleasant, low-pitched voice before his face. “I thought you were abroad. Father and I came back from Sark only yesterday.”

“I haven’t left town,” he replied. “It was Devonham went to Switzerland.”

He was thinking of her pleasant voice, and wondering how a mere voice could soothe and bless and comfort in this way. The picture of the flashing figure, too, preoccupied him. His various mind was ever busy with several trains of thought at once, though all correlated. Why, he was wondering, should that picture of “N. H.” leave a sense of chill upon his heart? Why had the first radiance of this meeting thus already dimmed a little? Her nearness, too, confused him as of old, making his manner a trifle brusque and not quite natural, until he found his centre of control again. He looked quickly up and down the street, moved aside to let some people pass, then turned to the girl again. “Your holiday has done you good, Iraida,” he said quietly; “I hope your father enjoyed it too.”

“We both enjoyed ourselves,” she answered, watching him, something of a protective air about her. “I wish you had been with us, for that would have made it perfect. I was thinking that only this morning — as I walked across Hyde Park.”

“How nice of you! I believe I, too, was thinking of you both, as I walked through Regent’s Park.” He smiled for the first time.

“It’s very odd,” she went on, “though you can explain it probably,” she added, with a smile that met his own, increasing it, “or, at any rate, Dr. Devonham could — but I’ve seen you several times this morning already — in the last half-hour. I’ve seen you in other people in the street, I mean. Yet I wasn’t thinking of you at the actual moment, it’s two months since we’ve met, and I imagined you were abroad.”

“Odd, yes,” he said, half shyly, half curtly. “It’s an experience many have, I believe.”

She gazed up at him. “It’s very natural, I think, when people like each other, Edward, and are in sympathy.”

“Yet it happens with people who don’t like each other too,” he objected, and at the same moment was vexed that he had used the words.

Iraida Khilkoff laughed. He had the feeling that she read his thoughts as easily as if they were printed in red letters on his grey felt hat.

“There must be *some* bond between them, though,” she remarked, “an emotion, I mean, whatever it may be — even hatred.”

“Probably, Nayan,” he agreed. “It’s you now, not Devonham, that wants to explain things. I think I must take you into the Firm, you could take charge of the female patients with great success.”

Whereupon she looked up at him with such a grave mothering expression that he was aware of her secret power, her central source of strength in dealing with men. Her innocence and truth were an atmosphere about her, protecting her as naturally and neatly as the clothes upon her body. She believed in men. He felt like a child beside her.

“I’m in the Firm already,” she said, “for you made me a partner years ago when I was so high,” and her small gloved hand indicated the stature of a little girl. “You taught me first.”

He remembered the bleak northern town where fifteen years ago he had known her father as a patient for some minor ailment, and the friendship that grew out of the relationship. He remembered the child of nine or ten who sat on his knee and repeated to him the Russian fairy tales her mother told her; he recalled the charm, the wonder, the extraordinary power of belief. Her words brought back again that flowered Caucasian valley in the sunlight and this, again, flashed upon the screen the strange bright figure that had already once intercepted their glance, as though it somehow came between them....

“You have one advantage over me,” he rejoined presently, “for in my Clinique the people know that they need treatment, whereas in the Studio you catch your patients unawares. They do not know they’re ill. You heal them without their being aware that they need healing.”

“Yet some of our *habitués* have found their way later to your consulting-room,” she reminded him.

“Merely to finish what you had first begun — a sort of convalescence. You work in the big, raw world, I in a mere specialized corner of it.”

He turned away, lest the power in her eyes overcome him. The traffic thundered past, the people crowded, jostling them. He could have stood there talking to her all day long, the London street forgotten or full of flowers and Eden’s trees and rippling summer streams. The pale sunlight caught her face beside him and made it shine....

He longed to take her in his arms and fly through the dawn for ever, for his clean mind saw her without clothing, her hair loose in the wind, her white shape fleeing from him, yet beckoning across a gleaming shoulder that he must overtake and capture her....

“I’m on my way to St. Dunstan’s,” he heard the musical voice. “A friend of father’s.... Come with me, will you?” And with her muff she touched his arm, trying to make him turn her way. But just as he felt the touch he saw the bright figure again. Swifter than himself and far more powerful, it leaped dancing past and carried her away before his very eyes. She waved her hand, her eyes faded like stars into the distance of some unearthly spring — and she was gone. A pang of peculiar anguish seized him, as the mental picture flashed with the speed of light and vanished. For the figure seemed of elemental power, taking its own with perfect ease....

He shook his head. "I'll come to see you to-morrow instead," he told her. "I'll come to the Studio in the afternoon, if you'll both be in. I'd like to bring a friend with me, if I may."

"Good-bye then." She took his hand and kept it. "I shall expect you to tell me all about this — friend. I knew you had something on your mind, for your thoughts have been elsewhere all the time."

"Julian LeVallon," he replied quickly. "He's staying with me indefinitely." His face grew stern a moment about the mouth. "I think he may need you," he added with abrupt significance.

"Julian LeVallon," she repeated, the name sounding very musical the way her slightly foreign accent touched it "And what nationality may that be?"

Dr. Fillery hesitated. "His parents, Nayan, I believe, were English," he said. "He has lived all his life in the Jura Mountains, alone with an old scholar, poet and geologist, who brought him up. Of our modern life he knows little. I think you may — —" He broke off. "His mother died when he was born," he concluded.

"And of women he knows nothing," she replied, understandingly, "so that he will probably fall in love with the first he sees — with Nayan."

"I hope so, Nayan, and he will be safe with you."

She watched her companion's face for a minute or two with her clear searching eyes. She smiled. But his own face wore a mask now; no figure this time flashed between their deep understanding gaze.

"A woman, you think, can teach and help him more than a man," she said, without lowering her eyes.

"Probably — perhaps, at any rate. The material, I must warn you at once, is new and strange. I want him to meet you."

"Then I *am* in the Firm," was all she answered, "and you can't do without me." She let go the hand she had held all this time, and turned from him, looking once across her shoulder as he, too, went upon his way.

"About three o'clock we shall expect you — and Mr. Julian LeVallon," she added. "The Prometheans are coming too, as of course you know, but that won't matter. Father has let the Studio to them."

"The more the merrier," he answered, raised his hat, and went on at a rapid pace up Baker Street.

But with him up the London street went a flock of thoughts, hopes, fears and memories that were hard to disentangle. Lost, forgotten dreams went with him too. He had known that one day he must be "executed," yet with his own hands he had just slipped the noose about his neck. Detachment from life, he realized, keeping aloof from the emotions that touch one's fellow beings, can only be, after all, a pose. In his case it was evidently a pose assumed for safety and self-protection, an artificial attitude he wore to keep his heart from error. His love, born of some far unearthly valley, undoubtedly consumed him, while yet he said it nay....

He had himself suggested bringing together the girl and "N. H." There had been no need to do this. Yet he had deliberately offered it, and she had instantly accepted. Even while he said the words there was a volcano of emotion in him, several motives fighting to combine. The fear for himself, being selfish, he had set aside at once; there was also the fear for her — the odd certainty in him that at last her woman's nature would be waked; lastly, the fear for "N. H." himself. And here he clashed with his promise to Devonham. Behind the simple proposal lay these various threads of motive, emotion and qualification.

Now, as he hurried along the street, they rushed to and fro about his mind, each at its own speed and with its own impetuous strength. It was the last one, however, the certainty that her mere presence must evoke the "N. H." personality, banishing the commonplace LeVallon; it was this that, in the end, perhaps troubled him most. An intuitive conviction assured him that this was bound to be the result of their meeting. LeVallon would sink down out of sight; "N. H." would emerge triumphant and vital, bringing his elemental power with him. The girl would summon him....

“I must tell Paul first,” he decided. “I must consult his judgment. Otherwise I’m breaking my promise. If Paul is against it, I will send an excuse....”

With this proviso, he dismissed the matter from his mind, noting only how clearly it revealed his own keen desire to let LeVallon disappear and “N. H.” become active. He himself yearned for the interest, stimulus and companionship of the strange new being that was “N. H.”

The other aspect of the problem he dismissed quickly too: he would lose Nayan. Yes, but he had never possessed the right to hold her. He was strong, indifferent, detached.... His life in any case was a sacrifice upon the altar of a mistake with regard to which he had not been consulted. His whole existence must be passed in worship before this altar, unless he was to admit himself a failure. His ideal possession of the girl, he consoled himself, need know no change. To watch her womanhood, hitherto untouched by any man, to watch this bloom and ripen at the bidding of another must mean pain. But he faced the loss. And a curious sense of compensation lay in it somewhere — the strange notion that she and he would share “N. H.” in a sense between them. He was already aware of a deep subtle kinship between the three of them, a kinship hardly of this physical world. And, after all, the interests of “N. H.” must come first. He had chosen his life, accepted it, at any rate; he must remain true to his high ideal. This strange being, blown by the winds of chance into his keeping, must be his first consideration.

“LeVallon” needed no special help, neither from himself, nor from her, nor from others. “LeVallon” was ordinary enough, if not commonplace, his only interest being at those thin places in his being where the submerged personality of “N. H.” peeped through. Paul Devonham, he felt convinced, was wrong in thinking “N. H.” to be the transient manifestation.

It was the reverse that Dr. Fillery believed to be the truth. He saw in “N. H.” almost a new type of being altogether. In that physical body warred two personalities certainly, but “N. H.” was the important one, and LeVallon merely the transient outer one, masquerading on the surface merely, a kind of automatic and mechanical personality, gleaned, picked up, trained and educated, as it were, by the few years spent among the human herd.

And this “N. H.” needed help, the best, the wisest possible. Both male and female help “N. H.” demanded. He, Edward Fillery, could supply the former, but the latter could be furnished only by some woman in whom innocence, truth and a natural mother-love — the three deepest feminine qualities — were happily combined. Nayan possessed them all. “N. H.,” the strange bright messenger, bringing perhaps glad tidings into life, had need of her.

And Fillery, as his thoughts ran down these sad and happy paths of that lost valley in his blood, realized the meaning of the flashing intuition that had pained yet gladdened him half an hour before with its convincing symbolic picture.

This private Eden secreted in his depths he revealed to no one, though Paul, his intimate friend and keen assistant, divined its general neighbourhood and geography to some extent. It was the girl who invariably opened its ivory gates for him. They had but to meet and talk a moment, when, with a sudden drift of wonder, beauty, wildness, this Khaketian inheritance rose before him. Its sunny brilliance, its flowers, its perfumes seduced and caught him away. The unearthly mood stole over him. Thought took wings of imagination and soared beyond the planet. He foresaw, easily, the effect she would produce upon “LeVallon.”...

He came back to earth again at the door of the Home, smiling, as so often before, at these brief wanderings in his secret Eden, yet perfectly able to pigeon-hole the experience, each detail explained, labelled, docketed, and therefore harmless....

He found Devonham in the study and at once told him of his suggestion and its possible results, and his assistant, resting before lunch after a long morning’s work, looked up at him with his quick, observant air. Noticing the light in the eyes, the softer expression about the mouth, the general appearance of a strong and recent stimulus, he easily divined their origin, and showed his pleasure in his face. He longed for his old friend to be humanized and steadied by some deep romance. There was a curious new watchful attitude also about him, though cleverly concealed.

“I’m glad the Khilkoffs are back in town,” he said easily. “As for LeVallon — he’s been quiet and uninteresting all the morning. He needs the human touch, as I already said, and the Studio atmosphere, especially if the Prometheans are to be there, seems the very thing.”

“And Nayan —— ?”

“Her influence is good for any man, young or old, and if LeVallon worships at her shrine like the rest of ‘em, so much the better. You remember my Notes. Nothing will help towards his finding his real self quicker than an abandoned passion — unreturned.”

“Unreturned?”

“You can’t think she will give to LeVallon what so many —— ?”

“But may she not,” the other interrupted, “stimulate ‘N. H.’ rather than LeVallon?”

Devonham was surprised — he had quickly divined the subconscious fear and jealousy. For this detached, impersonal attitude he was not prepared. Only the keenest observer could have noticed the sharp, anxious watchfulness he hid so well.

“Edward, there’s only one thing I feel we — you rather — have to be careful about. And the girl has nothing to do with *that*. In your blood, remember, lies an unearthly spiritual vagrancy which you must not, dare not, communicate to him, if you ever hope to see him cured.”

Devonham regarded him keenly as he said it. He was as earnest as his chief, but the difference between the two men was fundamental, probably unbridgeable as well. The affection, trust, respect each felt for the other was sincere. Devonham, however, having never known a thought, a feeling, much less an actual experience, outside the normal gamut of humanity, regarded all such as pathogenic. Fillery, who had tasted the amazing, dangerous sweetness of such experiences, in his own being, had another standard.

“You must not exaggerate,” observed Fillery, slowly. “Your phrase, though, is good. ‘Spiritual vagrancy’ is an apt description, I admit. Yet to the ‘spiritual,’ if it exists, the whole universe lies open, remember, too.”

They laughed together. Then, suddenly, Devonham rose, and a new inexpressible uneasiness was in his face. He thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets, turned his eyes hard upon the floor, stood with his legs apart. Abruptly turning, he came a full step closer. “Edward,” he said, furious with himself, and yet fiercely determined to be honest, “I may as well tell you frankly — though explanation lies beyond me — there's something in this — this case I don't quite like." Behind his lowered eyelids his observation never failed.

Quick as a flash, his companion took him up. "For yourself, for others, or for himself?" he asked, while a secret touch of joy ran through him.

"For myself perhaps," was the immediate rejoinder. "It's intolerable. It's the panic sense he touches in me. I admit it frankly. I've had — once or twice — the desire to turn and run. But what I mean is — we've got to be uncommonly careful with him," he ended lamely.

"LeVallon you refer to? Or 'N. H.'?"

"'N. H.'"

"The panic sense," repeated Fillery to himself more than to his friend. "The old, old thing. I understand."

"Also," Devonham went on presently, "I must tell you that since he came here there's been a change in every patient in the building — without exception." He looked over his shoulder as though he heard a sound. He listened certainly, but his mind was sharply centred on his friend.

"For the better, yes," said Fillery at once. "Increased vitality, I've noticed too."

"Precisely," whispered the other, still listening.

There came a pause between them.

"And when we have found the real, the central self," pursued Fillery presently. "When we have found the essential being — what is it?"

"Exactly," replied Devonham with extraordinary emphasis. "*What is it?*" But even then he did not look up to meet the other's glance.

CHAPTER XI

THE MEETING WITH Dr. Fillery and his friends, the Khilkoffs, father and daughter, had, for one reason or another, to be postponed for a week, during which brief time even, no single day wasted, LeVallon's education proceeded rapidly. He was exceedingly quick to learn the usages of civilized society in a big city, adapting himself with an ease born surely of quick intelligence to the requirements and conventions of ordinary life.

In his perception of the rights of others, particularly, he showed a natural aptitude; he had good manners, that is, instinctively; in certain houses where Fillery took him purposely, he behaved with a courtesy and tact that belong usually to what England calls a gentleman. Except to Fillery and Devonham, he talked little, but was an excellent and sympathetic listener, a quality that helped him to make his way. With Mrs. Soames, the stern and even forbidding matron, he made such headway, that it was noticed with a surprise, including laughter. He might have been her adopted son.

"She's got a new pet," said Devonham, with a laugh. "Mason taught him well. His aptitude for natural history is obvious; after a few years' study he'll make a name for himself. The 'N. H.' side will disappear now more and more, unless *you* stimulate it for your own ends — —" He broke off, speaking lightly still, but with a carelessness some might have guessed assumed.

"You forget," put in his Chief, "I promised."

Devonham looked at him shrewdly. "I doubt," he said, "whether you can help yourself, Edward," the expression in his eyes for a moment almost severe.

Fillery remained thoughtful, making no immediate reply.

"We must remember," he said presently, "that he's now in the quiescent state. Nothing has again occurred to bring 'N. H.' uppermost again."

Devonham turned upon his friend. "I see no reason why 'N. H.'" — he spoke with emphasis— "should ever get uppermost again. In my opinion we can make this quiescent state — LeVallon — the permanent one.”

“We can’t keep him in a cage like Mrs. Soames’s mice and parrot. Are you, for instance, against my taking him to the Studio? Do you think it’s a mistake to let him meet the Prometheans?”

“That’s just where Mason went wrong,” returned Devonham. “He kept him in a cage. The boy met only a few peasants, trees, plants, animals and birds. The sun, making him feel happy, became his deity. The rain he hated. The wind inspired and invigorated him. If we now introduce the human element wisely, I see no danger. If he can stand the Khi — the Studio and the Prometheans, he can stand anything. He may be considered cured.”

The door opened and a tall, radiant figure with bright eyes and untidy shining hair came into the room, carrying an open book.

“Mrs. Soames says I’ve nothing to do with stars,” said a deep musical voice, “and that I had better stick to animals and plants. She says that star-gazing never was good for anyone except astronomers who warn us about tides, eclipses and dangerous comets.”

He held out the big book, open at an enlarged stellar photograph. “What, please, is a galaxy, a star that is suddenly brilliant, then disappears in a few weeks, and a nebula?”

Before either of the astonished men could answer, LeVallon turned to Devonham, his face wearing the gravity and intense curiosity of a child. “And, please, are *you* the only sort of being in the universe? Mrs. Soames says that the earth is the only inhabited place. Aren’t there other beings besides you anywhere? The Earth is such a little planet, and the solar system, according to this book, is one of the smallest too.”

“My dear fellow,” Devonham said gently, “do not bother your head with useless speculations. Our only valuable field of study is this planet, for it is all we know or ever can know. Whether the universe holds other beings or not, can be of no importance to us at present.”

LeVallon stared fixedly at him, saying nothing. Something of his natural radiance dimmed a little. “Then what are all these things that I remember I’ve forgotten?” he asked, his blue eyes troubled.

“It will take you all your lifetime to understand beings like me, and like yourself and like Dr. Fillery. Don’t waste time speculating about possible inhabitants in other stars.”

He spoke good-humouredly, but firmly, as one who laid down certain definite lines to be followed, while Dr. Fillery, watching, made no audible comment. Once long ago he had asked his own father a somewhat similar question.

“But I shall so soon get to the end of you,” replied LeVallon, a disappointed expression on his face. “I may speculate *then*?” he asked.

“When you get to the end of me and of yourself and of Dr. Fillery — yes, then you may speculate to your heart’s content,” said Devonham in a kindly tone. “But it will take you longer than you think perhaps. Besides, there are women, too, remember. You will find them more complicated still.”

A curious look stole into the other’s eager eyes. He turned suddenly towards the older man who had his confidence so completely. There was in the movement, in the incipient gesture that he made with his arms, his hands, almost with his head and face as well, something of appeal that set the doctor’s nerves alert. And the change of voice — it was lower now and more musical than before — increased the nameless message that flashed to his brain and heart. There was a hint of song, of chanting almost, in the tone. There was music in him. For the voice, Fillery realized suddenly, brought in the over-tones, somewhat in the way good teachers of singing and voice production know. There was the depth, sonority, singing quality which means that the “harmonics” are made audible, as with a violin played in perfect tune. The sound seemed produced not by the vocal cords alone, but by the entire being, so to speak. Yet, “LeVallon’s” voice had not this rich power, he noticed. Its appearance was a sign that “N. H.” was stirring into activity and utterance.

“Women, yes,” the young man repeated to himself. “Women — bring back something. Their eyes make me remember — —” he turned abruptly to the open book upon the doctor’s knee. “It’s something to do with stars, these memories,” he went on eagerly, the voice resonant. “Stars, women, memories ... where are they all gone to...? Why have I lost...? What is it that...?”

It seemed as if a veil passed from his face, a thin transparency that dimmed the shining effect his hair and eyes and radiant health produced. A far-away expression followed it.

"'N. H.'!" Devonham quickly flashed the whispered warning. And in the same instant, Fillery rose, holding out the open book.

"Come, LeVallon," he said, putting a hand upon his shoulder, "we'll go into my room for an hour, and I'll tell you all about the galaxies and nebulæ. You shall ask as many questions as you like. Devonham is a very busy man and has duties to attend to just now."

He moved across to open the door, and LeVallon, his face changing more and more, went with him; the light in his eyes increased; he smiled, the far-away expression passed a little.

"Dr. Devonham is quite right in what he says about useless speculations," continued Fillery, as they went out arm in arm together, "but we can play a bit with thought and imagination, for all that — you and I. 'Let your thought wander like an insect which is allowed to fly in the air, but is at the same time confined by a thread.' Come along, we'll have an hour's play. We'll travel together among the golden stars, eh?"

"Play!" exclaimed the youth, looking up with flashing eyes. "Ah! in the Spring we play! Our work with sap, roots, crystals, fire, all finished out of sight, so that their results followed of their own accord." He was talking at great speed in a low voice, a deep, rolling voice, and half to himself. "Spring is our holiday, the forms made perfect and ready for the power to rush through, and we rush with it, playing everywhere — —"

"Spring is the wine of life, yes," put in Fillery, caught away momentarily by something behind the words he listened to, as though a rhythm swept him. "Creative life racing up and flooding into every form and body everywhere. It brings wonder, joy — play, as you call it."

"We — we build the way — —" The youth broke off abruptly as they reached the study door. Something flowed down and back in him, emptying face and manner of a mood which had striven for utterance, then passed. He returned to the previous talk about the stars again:

"Who attends to them? Who looks after them?" he inquired, a deep, peculiar interest in his manner, his eyes turning a little darker.

"What we call the laws of Nature," was the reply, "which are, after all, merely our 'descriptive formulæ summing up certain regularities of recurrence,' the laws under which they were first set alight and then sent whirling into space. Under these same laws they will all eventually burn out and come to rest. They will be dead."

"Dead," repeated the other, as though he did not understand. "They are the children of the laws," he stated, rather than asked. "Are the laws kind and faithful? They never tire?"

Fillery explained with one-half of his nature, and still as to a child. The other half of him lay under firm restraint according to his promise. He outlined in general terms man's knowledge of the stars. "The laws never tire," he said.

"But the stars end! They burn out, stop, and die! You said so."

The other replied with something judicious and cautious about time and its immense duration. But he was startled.

"And those who attend to the laws," came then the words that startled him, "who keeps them working so that they do not tire?"

It was something in the tone of voice perhaps that, once again, produced in his listener the extraordinary sudden feeling that Humanity was, after all, but an insignificant, a microscopic detail in the Universe; that it was, say, a mere ant-heap in the colossal jungle crowded with other minuter as well as immenser life of every sort and kind, and, moreover, that "N. H." was aware of this "other life," or at least of some vast section of it, and had been, if he were not still, associated with it. The two letters by which he was designated acquired a deeper meaning than before.

A rich glow came into the young face, and into the eyes, growing ever darker, a look of burning; the skin had the effect of radiating; the breathing became of a sudden deep and rhythmical. The whole figure seemed to grow larger, expanding as though it extended already and half filled the room. Into the atmosphere about it poured, as though heat and light rushed through it, a strange effect of power.

"You'd like to visit them, perhaps — wouldn't you?" asked Fillery gently.

"I feel — —" began the other, then stopped short.

“You feel it would interest you,” the doctor helped — then saw his mistake.

“I feel,” repeated the youth. The sentence was complete. “I am there.”

“Ah! when you feel you’re there, you *are* there?”

The other nodded.

He leaned forward. “*I* know,” he whispered as with sudden joy. “*You* help me to remember, Fillery.” The voice, though whispering, was strong; it vibrated full of over-tones and under-tones. The sound of the “F” was like a wind in branches. “You wonderful, *you* know too! It is the same with flowers, with everything. We build with wind and fire.” He stopped, rubbing a hand across his forehead a moment. “Wind and fire,” he went on, but this time to himself, “my splendid mighty ones....” Dropping his hand, he flashed an amazing look of enthusiasm and power into his companion’s face. The look held in concentrated form something of the power that seemed pulsing and throbbing in his atmosphere. “Help me to remember, dear Fillery,” his voice rang out aloud like singing. “Remember with me why we both are here. When we remember we can go back where we belong.”

The glow went from his face and eyes as though an inner lamp had been suddenly extinguished. The power left both voice and atmosphere. He sank back in his chair, his great sensitive hands spread over the table where the star charts lay, as through the open window came the crash and clatter of an aeroplane tearing, like some violent, monstrous insect, through the sunlight.

A look of pain came into his eyes. “It goes again. I’ve lost it.”

“We were talking about the stars and the laws of Nature,” said Fillery quickly, though his voice was shaking, “when that noisy flying-machine disturbed us.” He leaned over, taking his companion’s hand. His heart was beating. He smelt the open spaces. The blood ran wildly in his veins. It was with the utmost difficulty he found simple, common words to use. “You must not ask too much at once. We will learn slowly — there is so much we have to learn together.”

LeVallon’s smile was beautiful, but it was the smile of “LeVallon” again only.

“Thank you, dear Fillery,” he replied, and the talk continued as between a tutor and his backward pupil.... But for some time afterwards the “tutor’s” mind and heart, while attending to LeVallon now, went travelling, it seemed, with “N. H.” There was this strange division in his being ... for “N. H.” appealed with power to a part of him, perhaps the greatest, that had never yet found expression, much less satisfaction.

Many a talk together of this kind, with occasional semi-irruptions of “N. H.,” he had already enjoyed with his new patient, and LeVallon was by now fairly well instructed in the general history of our little world, briefly but picturesquely given. Evolution had been outlined and explained, the rise of man sketched vividly, the great war, and the planet’s present state of chaos described in a way that furnished a clear enough synopsis of where humanity now stood. LeVallon was able to hold his own in conversation with others; he might pass for a simple-minded but not ill-informed young man, and both Paul Devonham and Edward Fillery, though each for different reasons, were, therefore, well satisfied with the young human being entrusted to their care, a human being to be eventually discharged from the Home, healed and cured of extravagances, made harmonious with himself, able to make his own way in the world alone. To Devonham it appeared already certain that, within a reasonable time, LeVallon would find himself happily at home among his fellow kind, a normal, even a gifted young man with a future before him. “N. H.” would disappear and be forgotten, absorbed back into the parent Self. To his colleague, on the other hand, another vision of his future opened. Sooner or later it was LeVallon that would disappear and “N. H.” remain in full control, a strange, possibly a new type of being, not alone marvellously gifted, but who might even throw light upon a vista of research and knowledge hitherto unknown to humanity, and with benefits for the Race as yet beyond the reach of any wildest prophecy.

Both men, therefore, went gladly with him to the Khilkoff Studio that early November afternoon, anxious to observe him, his conduct, attitude, among the curious set of people to be found there on the Prometheans’ Society day, and to note any reactions he might show in such a milieu. Each felt fully justified in doing so, though they would have kept an ordinary “hysterical” patient safely from the place. LeVallon, however, betrayed no trace of hysteria in any meaning of the word, big or little; he was stable as a navvy, betraying no undesirable reaction to the various well-known danger points. The visit might be something of an experiment perhaps, but an experiment, a test, they were justified in taking. Yet Devonham on no account would have allowed his chief to go alone. He had insisted on accompanying them.

And to both men, as they went towards Chelsea, their quiet companion with them, came the feeling that the visit might possibly prove one of them right, the other wrong. Fillery expected that Nayan Khilkoff alone, to say nothing of the effect of the other queer folk who might be present, must surely evoke the "N. H." personality now lying quiescent and inactive below the threshold of LeVallon. The charm and beauty of the girl he had never known to fail with any male, for she had that in her which was bound to stimulate the highest in the opposite sex. The excitement of the wild, questing, picturesque, if unbalanced, minds who would fill the place, must also, though in quite another way, affect the *real* self of anyone who came in contact with their fantastic and imaginative atmosphere. Attraction or repulsion must certainly be felt. He expected at any rate a vital clue.

"Ivan Khilkoff," he told LeVallon, as they went along in the car, "is a Russian, a painter and sculptor of talent, a good-hearted and silent sort of old fellow, who has remained very poor because he refuses to advertise himself or commercialize his art, and because his work is not the kind of thing the English buy. His daughter, Nayan, teaches the piano and Russian. She is beautiful and sweet and pure, but of an independent and rather impersonal character. She has never fallen in love, for instance, though most men fall in love with her. I hope you may like and understand each other."

"Thank you," said LeVallon, listening attentively, but with no great interest apparently. "I will try very much to like her and her father too."

"The Studio is a very big one, it is really two studios knocked into one, their living rooms opening out of it. One half of the place, being so large, they sometimes let out for meetings, dances and that sort of thing, earning a little money in that way. It is rented this evening by a Society called the Prometheans — a group of people whose inquisitive temperaments lead them to believe, or half believe — —"

"To imagine, if not deliberately to manufacture," put in Devonham.

“ —— to imagine, let us call it,” continued the other with a twinkle, “that there are other worlds, other powers, other states of consciousness and knowledge open to them outside and beyond the present ones we are familiar with.”

“They *know* these?” asked LeVallon, looking up with signs of interest. “They have experienced them?”

“They know and experience,” replied Fillery, “according to their imaginations and desires, those with a touch of creative imagination claiming the most definite results, those without it being merely imitative. They report their experiences, that is, but cannot — or rarely show the results to others. You will hear their talk and judge accordingly. They are interesting enough in their way. They have, at any rate, one thing of value — that they are open to new ideas. Such people have existed in every age of the world’s history, but after an upheaval, such as the great war has been, they become more active and more numerous, because the nervous system, reacting from a tremendous strain, produces exaggeration. Any world is better than an uncomfortable one in revolution, they think. They are, as a rule, sincere and honest folk. They add a touch of colour to the commonplace — —”

“Tuppence coloured,” murmured Devonham below his breath.

“And they believe so much in other worlds to conquer, other regions, bigger states of consciousness, other powers,” concluded Fillery, ignoring the interruption, “that they are half in this world, half in the next. Hence Dr. Devonham’s name, the name by which he sometimes laughs at them — of Half Breeds.”

LeVallon’s eyes, he saw, were very big; his interest and attention were excited.

“They will probably welcome you with open arms,” he added, “if you care to join them. They consider themselves pioneers of a larger life. They are not mere spiritualists — oh no! They are familiar with all the newest theories, and realize that an alternative hypothesis can explain all so-called psychic phenomena without dragging spirits in. It is in exaggerating results they go mostly wrong.”

“Eccentrics,” Devonham remarked, “out of the circle, and hysterical to a man. They accomplish nothing. They are invariably dreamers, usually of doubtful morals and honesty, and always unworthy of serious attention. But they may amuse you for an hour.”

“We all find it difficult to believe what we have never experienced,” mentioned Fillery, turning to his colleague with a hearty laugh, in which the latter readily joined, for their skirmishes usually brought in laughter at the end. Just now, moreover, they were talking with a purpose, and it was wise and good that LeVallon should listen and take in what he could — hearing both sides. He watched and listened certainly with open eyes and ears, as he sat between them on the wide front seat, but saying, as usual, very little.

The car turned down a narrow lane with slackening speed and slowed up before a dingy building with faded Virginia creepers sprawling about stained dirty walls. The neighbourhood was depressing, patched and dishevelled, and almost bordering on a slum. The November light was passing into early twilight.

“You,” said LeVallon abruptly, turning round and staring at Devonham, “make everything seem unreal to me. I do not understand you. You know so much. Why is so little real to you?”

But Devonham, in the act of getting out of the car, made no reply, and probably had not heard the words, or, if he had heard, thought them more suitable for Fillery.

CHAPTER XII

THE PROMETHEANS WERE evidently in full attendance; possibly the rumour had reached them that Dr. Fillery was coming. No one announced the latter’s arrival, there was no servant visible; the party hung up their hats and coats in a passage, then walked into the lofty, dim-lit studio which was already filled with people and the hum of many voices.

At once, standing in a hesitating group beside the door, they were observed by everyone in the room. All asked, it seemed, “Who is this stranger they have brought?” Fillery caught the curious atmosphere in that first moment, an instant whiff, as it were, of excitement, interest, something picturesque, if possibly foolish, fantastic, too, yet faintly stimulating, breathing along his extremely sensitive nerves.

He glanced at his companions. Devonham, it struck him, looked more than ever like a floor-walker come to supervise, say, a Department where the sales and assistants were not satisfactory or — he laughed inwardly as the simile occurred to him — a free-thinker entering a church whose teaching he disapproved, even despised, and whose congregation touched his contemptuous pity. “Who would ever guess,” thought his friend and colleague, “the sincerity and depth of knowledge in that insignificant appearance? Paul hides his value well!” He noticed, in his quick fashion, touched by humour, the hard challenging eyes, the aquiline nose on which a pair of pince-nez balanced uneasily, the narrow shoulders, the poorly fitting clothes. The heart, of course, remained invisible. Yet suddenly he felt glad that Devonham was with him. “Nothing unstable there,” he reflected, “and stability combined with competence is rare.” This rapid judgment, it occurred to him, was possibly a warning from his own subconscious being.... A red flag signalled, flickered, vanished.

He glanced next at LeVallon, towering above the other. LeVallon was now well dressed in London clothes that suited him, though, for that matter, any clothes must have looked well upon a male figure so virile and upstanding. His great shoulders, his leanness, covered so beautifully with muscle, his height, his colouring, his radiant air; above all, his strange, big penetrating eyes, marked him as a figure one would notice anywhere. He stood, somehow, alone, apart, though the ingredients that contributed to this strange air of aloofness would be hard to define.

It was chiefly, perhaps, the poise of the great powerful frame that helped towards this odd setting in isolation and independence. Motionless, he gazed about him quietly, but it was the way he stood that singled him out from other men. Even in his stillness there was grace; neither hands nor feet, though it was difficult to describe exactly how he placed them or used them, were separate from this poise of perfect balance. To put it colloquially, he knew what to do with his extremities. Self-consciousness, in sight of this ardent throng, the first he had encountered at close, intimate quarters, was entirely absent.

This Fillery noticed instantly, but other impressions followed during the few brief seconds while they waited by the door; and first, the odd effect of tremendous power he managed to convey. Nothing could have been less aggressive than the tentative, questioning, half inquiring, half wondering attitude in which he stood, waiting to be introduced to the buzzing throng of humans; yet there hung about him like an atmosphere this potential strength, of confidence, of superiority, even of beauty too, that not only contributed much to the aloofness already mentioned, but also contrived to make the others, men and women, in the crowded room — insignificant. Somehow they seemed pale and ineffective against a larger grandeur, a scale entirely beyond their reach.

“Gigantic” was the word that leaped into the mind, but another perhaps leaped with it— “elemental.”

Fillery was aware of envy, oddly enough, of pride as well. His heart warmed more than ever to him. Almost, he could have then and there recalled his promise given to Devonham, cancelling it contemptuously with a word of self-apology for his smallness and his lack of faith....

LeVallon, aware of a sympathetic mind occupied closely with himself, turned in that moment, and their eyes met squarely; a smile of deep, inner understanding passed swiftly between them over Devonham’s head and shoulders. In which moment, exactly, a short, bearded man, detaching himself from the crowd, came forward and greeted them with sincere pleasure in his voice and manner. He was broad-shouldered, lean, his clothes hung loosely; his glance was keen but kindly. Introductions followed, and Khilkoff's sharp eye rested for some seconds with unconcealed admiration upon LeVallon, as he held his hand. His discerning sculptor's glance seemed to appraise his stature and proportions, while he bade him welcome to the Studio. His big head and short neck, his mane of hair, the width of his face, with its squat nose and high cheek-bones, the half ferocious eyes, the heavy jaw and something sprawling about the mouth, gave him a leonine expression. And his voice was not unlike a deep-toned growl, for all its cordiality.

A stir, meanwhile, ran through the room, more heads turned in their direction; they had long ago been observed; they were being now examined.

"Nayan," Khilkoff was saying, while he still held LeVallon's hand as though its size and grip contented him, "had a late Russian lesson. She will be here shortly, and very glad to make your acquaintance," looking up at LeVallon, as the new-comer. His gruffness and brevity had something pleasing in them. "To-day the Studio is not entirely mine," he explained. "I want you to come when I'm alone. Some studies I made in Sark this summer may interest you." He turned to Fillery. "That lonely place was good for both of us," he said; "it gave me new life and inspiration, and Nayan benefited immensely too. She looks more like a nymph than ever."

He shook hands with Devonham, smiling more grimly. "I'm surprised you, too, have honoured us," he exclaimed with genuine surprise. "Come to damn them all as usual, probably! Good! Your common-sense and healthy criticism are needed in these days — cool, cleaning winds in an over-heated conservatory." He broke off abruptly and looked down at LeVallon's hand he was still holding. He examined it for a second with care and admiration, then turned his eye upon the young man's figure. He grunted.

"When I know you better," he said, with a growl of earnest meaning, "I shall ask a favour, a great favour, of you. So, beware!"

"Thank you," replied LeVallon, and at the sound of his voice the sculptor's interest deepened. A gleam shone in his eye.

"You've begun some work," said Fillery, "and models are hard to come by, I imagine." His eye never left LeVallon.

Khilkoff chuckled. “Thought-reader!” he exclaimed. “If Povey heard that, he’d make you join the Society at once — as honorary member or vice-president. Anything to get you in. Dr. Fillery understands us all *too* well,” he went on to LeVallon. “In Sark, that lonely island in the sea, I began four figures — four elemental figures — of earth, air, fire and water — a group, of course. The air figure, I’ve done — —”

“With Nayan as model,” suggested Fillery, smiling.

“One morning, yes, I caught her bathing from a rock, hair streaming in the wind, no clothes on, white foam from the big breakers fluttering about her, slim, shining, unconscious and half dancing, fierce sunlight all over her. Ah” — he broke off— “here’s Povey coming. I mustn’t monopolize you all. Devonham, you know most of ‘em. Make yourselves at home.” He turned to LeVallon again, with a touch of something gentler, almost of respect, thought Fillery, as he noticed the delicate change of voice and manner quickly. “Come, Mr. LeVallon,” he said courteously, “I should like to show you the figure as I’ve done it. We’ll go for a moment into my own private rooms. But it’s a model for fire I’m looking for, as Fillery guessed. You may be interested.” He led him off. LeVallon went with evident content, and the advance of skirmishes that were already approaching for introductions was temporarily defeated.

For the three men standing by the door had formed a noticeable group, and Khilkoff’s presence added to their value. Dr. Fillery, known and much respected, regarded with a touch of awe by many, had not come for nothing, it was doubtless argued; his colleague, moreover, accompanied him, and he, too, was known to the Society, though not much cultivated by its members owing to his downright, critical way of talking. They deemed him prejudiced, unsympathetic. It was the third member of the group, LeVallon, who had quickly caught all eyes, and the attention immediately paid to him by their host set the value of a special and important guest upon him instantly. All watched him led away by Khilkoff to the private quarters of the Studio, where none at first presumed to follow them; but it was the eyes of the women that remained glued to the open door where they had disappeared, waiting with careful interest for their reappearance. In particular Lady Gleeson, the “pretty Lady Gleeson,” watched from the corner where she sat alone, sipping some refreshment.

Fillery and Devonham, having observed the signs about them, exchanged a glance; their charge was safe for the moment, at any rate; they felt relieved; yet it was for the entry of Nayan, the daughter, that both waited with interest and impatience, as, meanwhile, the bolder ones among the crowd came up one by one and captured them.

"Oh, Dr. Fillery, I *am* glad to see you here. I thought you were always too busy for unscientific people like us. Yet, in a way, we're all seekers, are we not? I've been reading your Physiology book, and I *did* so want to ask you about something in it. I wonder if you'd mind."

He shook hands with a young-old woman, wearing bobbed hair and glasses, and speaking with an intense, respectful, yet self-apologetic manner.

"You've forgotten me, but I *quite* understand. You see *so* many people. I'm Miss Lance. I sent you my little magazine, 'Simplicity,' once, and you acknowledged it *so* sweetly, though, of course, I understood you had not the time to write for it." She continued for several minutes, smiling up at him, her hands clasping and unclasping themselves behind a back clothed with some glittering coloured material that rather fascinated him by its sheen. She kept raising herself on her toes and sinking back again in a series of jerky rhythms.

He gave her his delightful smile.

"Oh, Dr. Fillery!" she exclaimed, with pleasure, leading him to a divan, upon which he let himself down in such a position that he could observe the door from the street as well as the door where LeVallon had disappeared. "This is really too good-natured of you. Your book set me on fire simply" — her eyes wandering to the other door— "and what a wonderful looking person you've brought with you — —"

"I fear it's not very easy reading," he interposed patiently.

"To me it was too delightful for words," she rattled on, pleased by the compliment implied. "I devour *all* your books and always review them myself in the magazine. I wouldn't trust them to anyone else. I simply can't tell you how physiology stimulates me. Humanity needs imaginative books, especially just now." She broke off with a deprecatory smile. "I do what I can," she added, as he made no remark, "to make them known, though in such a very small way, I fear." Her interest, however, was divided, the two powerful attractions making her quite incoherent. “Your friend,” she ventured again, “he must be Eastern perhaps? Or is that merely sunburn? He looks *most* unusual.”

“Sunburn merely, Miss Lance. You must have a chat with him later.”

“Oh, thank you, *thank* you, Dr. Fillery. I do so love unusual people....”

He listened gravely. He was gentle, while she confided to him her little inner hopes and dreams about the “simple life.” She introduced adjectives she believed would sound correct, if spoken very quickly, until, between the torrent of “psychical,” “physiological” and once or twice, “psychological,” she became positively incoherent in a final entanglement from which there was no issue but a convulsive gesture. None the less, she was bathed in bliss. She monopolized the great man for a whole ten minutes on a divan where everybody could see that they talked earnestly, intimately, perhaps even intellectually, together side by side.

He observed the room, meanwhile, without her noticing it, scanning the buzzing throng with interest. There was confusion somewhere, something was lacking, no system prevailed; he was aware of a general sense of waiting for a leader. All looked, he knew, for Nayan to appear. Without her presence, there was no centre, for, though not a member of the Society herself, she was the heart always of their gatherings, without which they straggled somewhat aimlessly. And “heart,” he remembered, with a smile that Miss Lance took proudly for herself, was the appropriate word. Nayan mothered them. They were but children, after all....

“When you talk of a ‘New Age,’ what *exactly* do you mean? I wish you’d define the term for me,” Devonham meanwhile was saying to an interlocutor, not far away, while with a corner of his eye he watched both Fillery and the private door. He still stood near the entrance, looking more than ever like a disapproving floor-walker in a big department store, and it was with H. Millington Povey that he talked, the Honorary Secretary of the Society. The Secretary had aimed at Fillery, but Miss Lance had been too quick for him. He was obliged to put up with Devonham as second best, and his temper suffered accordingly. He was in aggressive mood.

Povey, facing him, was talking with almost violent zeal. A small, thin, nervous man, on the verge of middle age, his head prematurely bald, with wildish tufts of patchy hair, a thin, scraggy neck that he lengthened and shortened between high hunched shoulders, Povey resembled an eager vulture. His keen bright eyes, hooked nose, and a habit of twisting head and neck apart from his body, which held motionless, increased this likeness to a bird of prey. Possessed of considerable powers of organization, he kept the Society together. It was he who insisted upon some special "psychic gift" as a qualification of membership; an applicant must prove this gift to a committee of Povey's choosing, though these proofs were never circulated for general reading in the Society's Reports. Talkers, dreamers, faddists were not desired; a member must possess some definite abnormal power before he could be elected. He must be clairvoyant or clairaudient, an automatic writer, trance-painter, medium, ghost-seer, prophet, priest or king.

Members, therefore, stated their special qualification to each other without false modesty: "I'm a trance medium," for instance; "Oh, really! *I* see auras, of course"; while others had written automatic poetry, spoken in trance— "inspirational speakers," that is — photographed a spirit, appeared to someone at a distance, or dreamed a prophetic dream that later had come true. Mediums, spirit-photographers, and prophetic dreamers were, perhaps, the most popular qualifications to offer, but there were many who remembered past lives and not a few could leave their bodies consciously at will.

Memberships cost two guineas, the hat was occasionally passed round for special purposes, there was a monthly dinner in Soho, when members stood up, like saved sinners at a revivalist meeting, and gave personal testimony of conversion or related some new strange incident. The Prometheans were full of stolen fire and life.

Among them were ambitious souls who desired to start a new religion, deeming the Church past hope. Others, like the water-dowsers and telepathists, were humbler. There was an Inner Circle which sought to revive the Mysteries, and gave very private performances of dramatic and symbolic kind, based upon recovered secret knowledge, at the solstices and equinoxes. New Thought members despised these, believing nothing connected with the past had value; they looked ahead; "live in the present," "do it now" was their watchword. Astrologers were numerous too. These cast horoscopes, or, for a small fee, revealed one's secret name, true colour, lucky number, day of the week and month, and so forth. One lady had a tame “Elemental.” Students of Magic and Casters of Spells, wearers of talismans and intricate designs in precious or inferior metal, according to taste and means, were well represented, and one and all believed, of course, in spirits.

None, however, belonged to any Sect of the day, whatever it might be; they wore no labels; they were seekers, questers, inquirers whom no set of rules or dogmas dared confine within fixed limits. An entirely open mind and no prejudices, they prided themselves, distinguished them.

“Define it in scientific terms, this New Age — I cannot,” replied Povey in his shrill voice, “for science deals only with the examination of the known. Yet you only have to look round you at the world to-day to see its obvious signs. Humanity is changing, new powers everywhere — —”

Devonham interrupted unkindly, before the other could assume he had proved something by merely stating it:

“What *are* these signs, if I may ask?” he questioned sharply. “For if you can name them, we can examine them — er — scientifically.” He used the word with malice, knowing it was ever on the Promethean lips.

“There you are, at cross-purposes at once,” declared Povey. “I refer to hints, half-lights, intuitions, signs that only the most sensitive among us, those with psychic divination, with spiritual discernment — that only the privileged and those developed in advance of the Race — can know. And, instantly you produce your microscope, as though I offered you the muscles of a tadpole to dissect.”

They glared at one another. “We shall never get progress your way,” Povey fumed, withdrawing his head and neck between his shoulders.

“Returning to the Middle Ages, on the other hand,” mentioned Devonham, “seems like advancing in a circle, doesn’t it?”

“Dr. Devonham,” interrupted a pretty, fair-haired girl with an intense manner, “forgive me for breaking up your interesting talk, but you come so seldom, you know, and there’s a lady here who is dying to be introduced. She has just seen crimson flashing in your aura, and she wants to ask — do you mind *very* much?” She smiled so sweetly at him, and at Mr. Povey, too, who was said to be engaged to her, though none believed it, that annoyance was not possible. “She says she simply *must* ask you if you were feeling anger. Anger, you know, produces red or crimson in one’s visible atmosphere,” she explained charmingly. She led him off, forgetting, however, her purpose *en route*, since they presently sat down side by side in a quiet corner and began to enjoy what seemed an interesting tête-à-tête, while the aura-seeing lady waited impatiently and observed them, without the aid of clairvoyance, from a distance.

“And *your* qualifications for membership?” asked Devonham. “I wonder if I may ask —— ?”

“But you’d laugh at me, if I told you,” she answered simply, fingering a silver talisman that hung from her neck, a six-pointed star with zodiacal signs traced round a rose, *rosa mystica*, evidently. “I’m so afraid of doctors.”

Devonham shook his head decidedly, asserting vehemently his interest, whereupon she told him her little private dream delightfully, without pose or affectation, yet shyly and so sincerely that he proved his assertion by a genuine interest.

“And does that protect you among your daily troubles?” he asked, pointing to her little silver talisman. He had already commented sympathetically upon her account of saving her new puppies from drowning, having dreamed the night before that she saw them gasping in a pail of water, the cruel under-gardener looking on. “Do you wear it always, or only on special occasions like this?”

“Oh, Miss Milligan made that,” she told him, blushing a little. “She’s rather poor. She earns her living by designing — —”

“Oh!”

“But I don’t mean *that*. She tells you your Sign and works it in metal for you. I bought one. Mine is Pisces.” She became earnest. “I was born in Pisces, you see.”

“And what does Pisces do for you?” he inquired, remembering the heightened colour. The sincerity of this Rose Mystica delighted him, and he already anticipated her reply with interest. Here, he felt, was the credulous, religious type in its naked purity, forced to believe in something marvellous.

"Well, if you wear your Sign next your skin it brings good luck — it makes the things you want happen." The blush reappeared becomingly. She did not lower her eyes.

"Have your things happened then?"

She hesitated. "Well, I've had an awfully good time ever since I wore it — —"

"Proposals?" he asked gently.

"Dr. Devonham!" she exclaimed. "How ever did you guess?" She looked very charming in her innocent confusion.

He laughed. "If you don't take it off at once," he told her solemnly, "you may get another."

"It was two in a single week," she confided a little tremulously. "Fancy!"

"The important thing, then," he suggested, "is to wear your talisman at the right moment, and with the right person."

But she corrected him promptly.

"Oh, no. It brings the right moment and the right person together, don't you see, and if the other person is a Pisces person, you understand each other, of course, at once."

"Would that I too were Pisces!" he exclaimed, seeing that she was flattered by his interest. "I'm probably" — taking a sign at random— "Scorpio."

"No," she said with grave disappointment, "I'm afraid you're Capricornus, you know. I can tell by your nose and eyes — and cleverness. But — I wanted really to ask you," she went on half shyly, "if I might — —" She stuck fast.

"You want to know," he said, glancing at her with quick understanding, "who *he* is." He pointed to the door. "Isn't that it?"

She nodded her head, while a divine little blush spread over her face. Devonham became more interested. "Why?" he asked. "Did he impress you so?"

"*Rather*," she replied with emphasis, and there was something in her earnestness curiously convincing. A sincere impression had been registered.

"His appearance, you mean?"

She nodded again; the blush deepened; but it was not, he saw, an ordinary blush. The sensitive young girl had awe in her. "He's a friend of Dr. Fillery's," he told her; "a young man who's lived in the wilds all his life. But, tell me — why are you so interested? Did he make any particular impression on you?"

He watched her. His own thoughts dropped back suddenly to a strange memory of woods and mountains ... a sunset, a blazing fire ... a hint of panic.

"Yes," she said, her tone lower, "he did."

"Something *very* definite?"

She made no answer.

"What did you see?" he persisted gently. From woods and mountains, memory stepped back to a railway station and a customs official....

Her manner, obviously truthful, had deep wonder, mystery, even worship in it. He was aware of a nervous reaction he disliked, almost a chill. He listened for her next words with an interest he could hardly account for.

"Wings," she replied, an odd hush in her voice. "I thought of wings. He seemed to carry me off the earth with great rushing wings, as the wind blows a leaf. It was too lovely: I felt like a dancing flame. I thought he was — —"

"What?" Something in his mind held its breath a moment.

"You *won't* laugh, Dr. Devonham, will you? I thought — for a second — of — an angel." Her voice died away.

For a second the part of his mood that held its breath struggled between anger and laughter. A moment's confusion in him there certainly was.

"That makes two in the room," he said gently, recovering himself. He smiled. But she did not hear the playful compliment; she did not see the smile. "You've a delightful, poetic little soul," he added under his breath, watching the big earnest eyes whose rapt expression met his own so honestly. Having made her confession she was still engrossed, absorbed, he saw, in her own emotion.... So this was the picture that LeVallon, by his mere appearance alone, left upon an impressionable young girl, an impression, he realized, that was profound and true and absolute, whatever value her own individual interpretation of it might have. Her mention of space, wind, fire, speed, he noticed in particular— “off the earth ... rushing wind ... dancing flame ... an angel!”

It was easy, of course, to jeer. Yet, somehow, he did not jeer at all.

She relapsed into silence, which proved how great had been the emotional discharge accompanying the confession, temporarily exhausting her. Dr. Devonham keenly registered the small, important details.

“Entertaining an angel unawares in a Chelsea Studio,” he said, laughingly; then reminding her presently that there was a lady who was “dying to be introduced” to him, made his escape, and for the next ten minutes found himself listening to a disquisition on auras which described “visible atmospheres whose colour changes with emotion ... radioactivity ... the halo worn by saints” ... the effect of light noticed about very good people and of blackness that the wicked emanated, and ending up with the “radiant atmosphere that shone round the figure of Christ and was believed to show the most lovely and complicated geometrical designs.”

“God geometrizes — you, doubtless, know the ancient saying?” Mrs. Towzer said it like a challenge.

“I have heard it,” admitted her listener shortly, his first opportunity of making himself audible. “Plato said some other fine things too — —”

“I felt sure you were feeling cross just now,” the lady went on, “because I saw lines and arrows of crimson darting and flashing through your aura while you were talking to Mr. Povey. He *is* very annoying sometimes, isn’t he? I often wonder where all our subscriptions go to. I never could understand a balance-sheet. Can you?”

But Devonham, having noticed Dr. Fillery moving across the room, did not answer, even if he heard the question. Fillery, he saw, was now standing near the door where Khilkoff and LeVallon had disappeared to see the sculpture, an oddly rapt expression on his face. He was talking with a member called Father Collins. The buzz of voices, the incessant kaleidoscope of colour and moving figures, made the atmosphere a little electric. Extricating himself with a neat excuse, he crossed towards his colleague, but the latter was already surrounded before he reached him. A forest of coloured scarves, odd coiffures, gleaming talismans, intervened; he saw men's faces of intense, eager, preoccupied expression, old and young, long hair and bald; there was a new perfume in the air, incense evidently; tea, coffee, lemonade were being served, with stronger drink for the few who liked it, and cigarettes were everywhere. The note everywhere was *exalté* rather.

Out of the excited throng his eyes then by chance, apparently, picked up the figure of Lady Gleeson, smoking her cigarette alone in a big armchair, a half-empty glass of wine-cup beside her. She caught his attention instantly, this "pretty Lady Gleeson," although personally he found neither title nor adjective justified. The dark hair framed a very white skin. The face was shallow, trivial, yet with a direct intensity in the shining eyes that won for her the reputation of being attractive to certain men. Her smile added to the notoriety she loved, a curious smile that lifted the lip oddly, showing the little pointed teeth. To him, it seemed somehow a face that had been over-kissed; everything had been kissed out of it; the mouth, the lips, were worn and barren in an appearance otherwise still young. She was very expensively dressed, and deemed her legs of such symmetry that it were a shame to hide them; clad in tight silk stockings, and looking like strips of polished steel, they were now visible almost to the knee, where the edge of the skirt, neatly trimmed in fur, cut them off sharply. Some wag in the Society, paraphrasing the syllables of her name, wittily if unkindly, had christened her *fille de joie*. When she heard it she was rather pleased than otherwise.

Lady Gleeson, too, he saw now, was watching the private door. The same moment, as so often occurred between himself and his colleague at some significant point in time and space, he was aware of Fillery's eye upon his own across the intervening heads and shoulders. Fillery, also, had noticed that Lady Gleeson watched that door. His changed position in the room was partly explained.

A slightly cynical smile touched Dr. Devonham's lips, but vanished again quickly, as he approached the lady, bowed politely, and asked if he might bring her some refreshment. He was too discerning to say "more" refreshment. But she dotted every i, she had no half tones.

“Thanks, kind Dr. Devonham,” she said in a decided tone, her voice thin, a trifle husky, yet not entirely unmusical. It held a strange throaty quality. “It’s so absurdly light,” she added, holding out the glass she first emptied. “The mystics don’t hold with anything strong apparently. But I’m tired, and you discovered it. That’s clever of you. It’ll do me good.”

He, malevolently, assured her that it would.

“Who’s your friend?” she asked point blank, with an air that meant to have a proper answer, as he brought the glass and took a chair near her. “He looks unusual. More like a hurdle-race champion than a visionary.” A sneer lurked in the voice. She fixed her determined clear grey eyes upon his, eyes sparkling with interest, curiosity in life, desire, the last-named quality of unmistakable kind. “I think I should like to know him perhaps.” It was mentioned as a favour to the other.

Devonham, who disliked and disapproved of all these people collectively, felt angry suddenly with Fillery for having brought LeVallon among them. It was after all a foolish experiment; the atmosphere was dangerous for anyone of unstable, possibly of hysterical temperament. He had vengeance to discharge. He answered with deliberate malice, leading her on that he might watch her reactions. She was so transparently sincere.

“I hardly think Mr. LeVallon would interest you,” he said lightly. “He is neither modern nor educated. He has spent his life in the backwoods, and knows nothing but plants and stars and weather and — animals. You would find him dull.”

“No man with a face and figure like that can be dull,” she said quickly, her eyes alight.

He glanced at her rings, the jewelry round her neck, her expensive gown that would keep a patient for a year or two. He remembered her millionaire South African husband who was her foolish slave. She lived, he knew, entirely for her own small, selfish pleasure. Although he meant to use her, his gorge rose. He produced his happiest smile.

“You are a keen observer, Lady Gleeson,” he remarked. “He doesn’t look quite ordinary, I admit.” After a pause he added, “It’s a curious thing, but Mr. LeVallon doesn’t care for the charms that we other men succumb to so easily. He seems indifferent. What he wants is knowledge only.... Apparently he's more interested in stars than in girls."

"Rubbish," she rejoined. "He hasn't met any in his woods, that's all."

Her directness rather disconcerted him. At the same time, it charmed him a little, though he did not know it. His dislike of the woman, however, remained. The idle, self-centred rich annoyed him. They were so useless. The fabulous jewelry hanging upon such trash now stirred his bile. He was conscious of the lust for pleasure in her.

"Yet, after all, he's rather an interesting fellow perhaps," he told her, as with an air of sudden enthusiasm. "Do you know he talks of rather wonderful things, too. Mere dreams, of course, yet, for all that, out of the ordinary. He has vague memories, it seems, of another state of existence altogether. He speaks sometimes of — of marvellous women, compared to whom our women here, our little dressed-up dolls, seem commonplace and insignificant." And, to his keen enjoyment, Lady Gleeson took the bait with open mouth. She recrossed her shapely legs. She wriggled a little in her chair. Her be-ringed fingers began fidgeting along the priceless necklace.

"Just what I should expect," she replied in her throaty voice, "from a young man who looks as he does."

She began to play her own cards then, mentioning that her husband was interested in Dr. Fillery's Clinique. Devonham, however, at once headed her off. He described the work of the Home with enthusiasm. "It's fortunate that Dr. Fillery is rich," he observed carelessly, "and can follow out his own ideas exactly as he likes. I, personally, should never have joined him had he been dependent upon the mere philanthropist."

"How wise of you," she returned. "And I should never have joined this mad Society but for the chance of coming across unusual people. Now, your Mr. LeVallon is one. You may introduce him to me," she repeated as an ultimatum.

Her directness was the one thing he admired in her. At her own level, she was real. He was aware of the semi-erotic atmosphere about these Meetings and realized that Lady Gleeson came in search of excitement, also that she was too sincere to hide it. She wore her insignia unconcealed. Her talisman was of base metal, the one cheap thing she wore, yet real. This foolish woman, after all, might be of use unwittingly. She might capture LeVallon, if only for a moment, before Nayan Khilkoff enchanted him with that wondrous sweetness to which no man could remain indifferent. For he had long ago divined the natural, unspoken passion between his Chief and the daughter of his host, and with his whole heart he desired to advance it.

“My husband, too, would like to meet him, I’m sure,” he heard her saying, while he smiled at the reappearance of the gilded bait. “My husband, you know, is interested in spirit photography and Dr. Frood’s unconscious theories.”

He rose, without even a smile. “I’ll try and find him at once,” he said, “and bring him to you. I only hope,” he added as an afterthought, “that Miss Khilkoff hasn’t monopolized him already — —”

“She hasn’t come,” Lady Gleeson betrayed herself. Instinctively she knew her rival, he saw, with an inward chuckle, as he rose to fetch the desired male.

He found him the centre of a little group just inside the door leading into the sculptor’s private studio, where Khilkoff had evidently been showing his new group of elemental figures. Fillery, a few feet away, observing everything at close range, was still talking eagerly with Father Collins. LeVallon and Kempster, the pacifist, were in the middle of an earnest talk, of which Devonham caught an interesting fragment. Kempster’s qualification for membership was an occasional display of telepathy. He was a neat little man exceedingly well dressed, over-dressed in fact, for his tailor’s dummy appearance betrayed that he thought too much about his personal appearance. LeVallon, towering over him like some flaming giant, spoke quietly, but with rare good sense, it seemed. Fillery’s condensed education had worked wonders on his mind. Devonham was astonished. About the pair others had collected, listening, sometimes interjecting opinions of their own, many women among them leaning against the furniture or sitting on cushions and movable, dump-like divans on the floor. It was a picturesque little scene. But LeVallon somehow dwarfed the others.

“I really think,” Kempster was saying, “we might now become a comfortable little third-rate Power — like Spain, for instance — enjoy ourselves a bit, live on our splendid past, and take the sun in ease.” He looked about him with a self-satisfied smirk, as though he had himself played a fine rôle in the splendid past.

LeVallon's reply surprised him perhaps, but it surprised Devonham still more. The real, the central self, LeVallon, he thought with satisfaction, was waking and developing. His choice of words was odd too.

"No, no! *You* — the English are the leaders of the world; the best quality is in you. If *you* give up, the world goes down and backwards." The deep, musical tones vibrated through the little room. The speaker, though so quiet, had the air of a powerful athlete, ready to strike. His pose was admirable. Faces turned up and stared. There was a murmur of approval.

"We're so tired of that talk," replied Kempster, no whit disconcerted by the evident signs of his unpopularity. "Each race should take its turn. We've borne the white man's burden long enough. Why not drop it, and let another nation do its bit? We've earned a rest, I think." His precise, high voice was persuasive. He was a good public speaker, wholly impervious to another point of view. But the resonant tones of LeVallon's rejoinder seemed to bury him, voice, exquisite clothes and all.

"There *is* no other — unless you hand it back to weaker shoulders. No other race has the qualities of generosity, of big careless courage of the unselfish kind required. Above all, you alone have the chivalry."

Two things Devonham noted as he heard: behind the natural resonance in the big voice lay a curious deepness that made him think of thunder, a volume of sound suppressed, potential, roaring, which, if let loose, might overwhelm, submerge. It belonged to an earnestness as yet unsuspected in him, a strength of conviction based on a great purpose that was evidently subconscious in him, as though he served it, belonged to it, without realizing that he did so. He stood there like some new young prophet, proclaiming a message not entirely his own. Also he said "you" in place of the natural "we."

Devonham listened attentively. Here, too, at any rate, was an exchange of ideas above the "psychic" level he so disliked.

LeVallon, he noticed at once, showed no evidence of emotion, though his eyes shone brightly and his voice was earnest.

"America — —" began Kempster, but was knocked down by a fact before he could continue.

"Has deliberately made itself a Province again. America saw the ideal, then drew back, afraid. It is once more provincial, cut off from the planet, a big island again, concerned with local affairs of its own. Your Democracy has failed."

"As it always must," put in Kempster, glad perhaps to shift the point, when he found no ready answer. "The wider the circle from which statesmen are drawn, the lower the level of ability. We should be patriotic for ideas, not for places. The success of one country means the downfall of another. That's not spiritual...." He continued at high speed, but Devonham missed the words. He was too preoccupied with the other's language, penetration, point of view. LeVallon had, indeed, progressed. There was nothing of the alternative personality in this, nothing of the wild, strange, nature-being whom he called "N. H."

"Patriotism, of course, is vulgar rubbish," he heard Kempster finishing his tirade. "It is local, provincial. The world is a whole."

But LeVallon did not let him escape so easily. It was admirable really. This half-educated countryman from the woods and mountains had a clear, concentrated mind. He had risen too. Whence came his comprehensive outlook?

"Chivalry — you call it sporting instinct — is the first essential of a race that is to lead the world. It is a topmost quality. Your race has it. It has come down even into your play. It is instinctive in you more than any other. And chivalry is unselfish. It is divine. You have conquered the sun. The hot races all obey you."

The thunder broke through the strange but simple words which, in that voice, and with that quiet earnestness, carried some weight of meaning in them that print cannot convey. The women gazed at him with unconcealed, if not with understanding admiration. "Lead us, inspire us, at any rate!" their eyes said plainly; "but love us, O love us, passionately, above all!"

Devonham, hardly able to believe his ears and eyes, turned to see if Fillery had heard the scrap of talk. Judging by the expression on his face, he had not heard it. Father Collins seemed saying things that held his attention too closely. Yet Fillery, for all his apparent absorption, had heard it, though he read it otherwise than his somewhat literal colleague. It was, nevertheless, an interesting revelation to him, since it proved to him again how unreal "LeVallon" was; how easily, quickly this educated simulacrum caught up, assimilated and reproduced as his own, yet honestly, whatever was in the air at the moment. For the words he had spoken were not his own, but Fillery's. They lay, or something like them lay, unuttered in Fillery's mind just at that very moment. Yet, even while listening attentively to Father Collins, his close interest in LeVallon was so keen, so watchful, that another portion of his mind was listening to this second conversation, even taking part in it inaudibly. LeVallon caught his language from the air....

Devonham made his opportunity, leading LeVallon off to be introduced to Lady Gleeson, who still sat waiting for them on the divan in the outer studio.

As they made their way through the buzzing throng into the larger room, Devonham guessed suddenly that Lady Gleeson must somehow have heard in advance that LeVallon would be present; her flair for new men was singular; the sexual instinct, unduly developed, seemed aware of its prey anywhere within a big radius. He owed his friend a hint of guidance possibly. "A little woman," he explained as they crossed over, "who has a weakness for big men and will probably pay you compliments. She comes here to amuse herself with what she calls 'the freaks.' Sometimes she lends her great house for the meetings. Her husband's a millionaire." To which the other, in his deep, quiet voice, replied: "Thank you, Dr. Devonham."

"She's known as 'the pretty Lady Gleeson.'"

"That?" exclaimed the other, looking towards her.

"Hush!" his companion warned him.

As they approached, Lady Gleeson, waiting with keen impatience, saw them coming and made her preparations. The frown of annoyance at the long delay was replaced by a smile of welcome that lifted the upper lip on one side only, showing the white even teeth with odd effect. She stared at LeVallon, thought Devonham, as a wolf eyes its prey. Deftly lowering her dress — betraying thereby that she knew it was too high, and a detail now best omitted from the picture — she half rose from her seat as they came up. The instinctive art of deference, though instantly corrected, did not escape Paul Devonham's too observant eye.

"You were kind enough to say I might introduce my friend," murmured he. "Mr. LeVallon is new to our big London, and a stranger among all these people."

LeVallon bowed in his calm, dignified fashion, saying no word, but Lady Gleeson put her hand out, and, finding his own, shook it with her air of brilliant welcome. Determination lay in her smile and in her gesture, in her voice as well, as she said familiarly at once: "But, Mr. LeVallon, how tall *are* you, really? You seem to me a perfect giant." She made room for him beside her on the divan. "Everybody here looks undersized beside you!" She became intense.

"I am six feet and three inches," he replied literally, but without expression in his face. There was no smile. He was examining her as frankly as she examined him. Devonham was examining the pair of them. The lack of interest, the cold indifference in LeVallon, he reflected, must put the young woman on her mettle, accustomed as she was to quick submission in her victims.

LeVallon, however, did not accept the offered seat; perhaps he had not noticed the invitation. He showed no interest, though polite and gentle.

"He towers over all of us," Devonham put in, to help an awkward pause. Yet he meant it more than literally; the empty prettiness of the shallow little face before him, the triviality of Miss Rosa Mystica, the cheapness of Povey, Kempster, Mrs. Towzer, the foolish air of otherworldly expectancy in the whole room, of deliberate exaggeration, of eyes big with wonder for sensation as story followed story — all this came upon him with its note of poverty and tawdriness as he used the words.

Something in the atmosphere of LeVallon had this effect — whence did it come? he questioned, puzzled — of dwarfing all about him.

"All London, remember, isn't like this," he heard Lady Gleeson saying, a dangerous purr audible in the throaty voice. "Do sit down here and tell me what you think about it. I feel you don't belong here quite, do you know? London cramps you, doesn't it? And you find the women dull and insipid?" She deliberately made more room, patting the cushions invitingly with a flashing hand, that alone, thought Devonham contemptuously, could have endowed at least two big Cliniques. "Tell me about yourself, Mr. LeVallon. I'm dying to hear about your life in the woods and mountains. Do talk to me. I *am* so bored!"

What followed surprised Devonham more than any of the three perhaps. He ascribed it to what Fillery had called the "natural gentleman," while Lady Gleeson, doubtless, ascribed it to her own personal witchery.

With that easy grace of his he sat down instantly beside her on the low divan, his height and big frame contriving the awkward movement without a sign of clumsiness. His indifference was obvious — to Devonham, but the vain eyes of the woman did not notice it.

"That's better," she again welcomed him with a happy laugh. She edged closer a little. "Now, do make yourself comfortable" — she arranged the cushions again— "and please tell me about your wild life in the forests, or wherever it was. You know a lot about the stars, I hear." She devoured his face and figure with her shining eyes.

The upper lip was lifted for a second above a gleaming tooth. Devonham had the feeling she was about to eat him, licking her lips already in anticipation. He himself would be dismissed, he well knew, in another moment, for Lady Gleeson would not tolerate a third person at the meal. Before he was sent about his business, however, he had the good fortune to hear LeVallon's opening answer to the foolish invitation. Amazement filled him. He wished Fillery could have heard it with him, seen the play of expression on the faces too — the bewilderment of sensational hunger for something new in Lady Gleeson's staring eyes, arrested instantaneously; the calm, cold look of power, yet power tempered by a touch of pity, in LeVallon's glance, a glance that was only barely aware of her proximity. He smiled as he spoke, and the smile increased his natural radiance. He looked extraordinarily handsome, yet with a new touch of strangeness that held even the cautious doctor momentarily almost spellbound.

"Stars — yes, but I rarely see them here in London, and they seem so far away. They comfort me. They bring me — they and women bring me — nearest to a condition that is gone from me. I have lost it." He looked straight into her face, so that she blinked and screwed up her eyes, while her breathing came more rapidly. "But stars and women," he went on, his voice vibrating with music in spite of its quietness, “remind me that it is recoverable. Both give me this sweet message. I read it in stars and in the eyes of women. And it is true because no words convey it. For women cannot express themselves, I see; and stars, too, are silent — here.”

The same soft thunder as before sounded below the gently spoken words; Lady Gleeson was trembling a little; she made a movement by means of which she shifted herself yet nearer to her companion in what seemed a natural and unconscious way. It was doubtless his proximity rather than his words that stirred her. Her face was set, though the lips quivered a trifle and the voice was less shrill than usual as she spoke, holding out her empty glass.

“Thank you, Dr. Devonham,” she said icily.

The determined gesture, a toss of the head, with the glare of sharp impatience in the eyes, he could not ignore; yet he accepted his curt dismissal slowly enough to catch her murmured words to LeVallon:

“How wonderful! How wonderful you are! And what sort of women...?” followed him as he moved away. In his heart rose again an uncomfortable memory of a Jura valley blazing in the sunset, and of a half-naked figure worshipping before a great wood fire on the rocks.... He fancied he caught, too, in the voice, a suggestion of a lilt, a chanting resonance, that increased his uneasiness further. One thing was certain: it was not quite the ordinary “LeVallon” that answered the silly woman. The reaction was of a different kind. Was, then, the other self awake and stirring? Was it “N. H.” after all, as his colleague claimed?

Allowing a considerable interval to pass, he returned with a glass — of lemonade — reaching the divan in its dim-lit corner just in time to see a flashing hand withdrawn quickly from LeVallon’s arm, and to intercept a glance that told him the intrigue evidently had not developed altogether according to Lady Gleeson’s plan, although her air was one of confidence and keenest self-satisfaction. LeVallon sat like a marble figure, cold, indifferent, looking straight before him, listening, if only with half an ear, to a stream of words whose import it was not difficult to guess.

This Devonham’s practised eye read in the flashing look she shot at him, and in the quick way she thanked him.

"Coffee, dear Dr. Devonham, I asked for."

Her move was so quick, his desire to watch them a moment longer together so keen, that for an instant he appeared to hesitate. It was more than appearance; he did hesitate — an instant merely, yet long enough for Lady Gleeson to shoot at him a second swift glance of concentrated virulence, and also long enough for LeVallon to spring lightly to his feet, take the glass from his hand and vanish in the direction of the refreshment table before anything could prevent. "I will get your coffee for you," still sounded in the air, so quickly was the adroit manœuvre executed. LeVallon had cleverly escaped.

"How stupid of me," said Devonham quickly, referring to the pretended mistake. Lady Gleeson made no reply. Her inward fury betrayed itself, however, in the tight-set lips and the hard glitter of her brilliant little eyes. "He won't be a moment," the other added. "Do you find him interesting? He's not very talkative as a rule, but perhaps with you — —" He hardly knew what words he used.

The look she gave him stopped him, so intense was the bitterness in the eyes. His interruption, then, must indeed have been worse — or better? — timed than he had imagined. She made no pretence of speaking. Turning her glance in the direction whence the coffee must presently appear, she waited, and Devonham might have been a dummy for all the sign she gave of his being there. He had made an enemy for life, he felt, a feeling confirmed by what almost immediately then followed. Neither the coffee nor its bearer came that evening to pretty Lady Gleeson in the way she had desired. She laid the blame at Devonham's door.

For at that moment, as he stood before her, secretly enjoying her anger a little, yet feeling foolish, perhaps, as well, a chord sounded on the piano, and a hush passed instantly over the entire room. Someone was about to sing. Nayan Khilkoff had come in, unnoticed, by the door of the private room. Her singing invariably formed a part of these entertainments. The song, too, was the one invariably asked for, its music written by herself.

All talk and movement stopped at the sound of the little prelude, as though a tap had been turned off. Even Devonham, most unmusical of men, prepared to listen with enjoyment. He tried to see Nayan at the piano, but too many people came between. He saw, instead, LeVallon standing close at his side, the cup of coffee in his hand. He had that instant returned.

“For Lady Gleeson. Will you pass it to her? Who’s going to sing?” he whispered all in the same breath. And Devonham told him, as he bent down to give the cup. “Nayan Khilkoff. Hush! It’s a lovely song. I know it— ‘The Vagrant’s Epitaph.’”

They stood motionless to listen, as the pure voice of the girl, singing very simply but with the sweetness and truth of sincere feeling, filled the room. Every word, too, was clearly audible:

“Change was his mistress; Chance his counsellor.

Love could not hold him; Duty forged no chain.

The wide seas and the mountains called him,

And grey dawns saw his camp-fires in the rain.

“Sweet hands might tremble! — aye, but he must go.

Revel might hold him for a little space;

But, turning past the laughter and the lamps,

His eyes must ever catch the luring Face.

“Dear eyes might question! Yea, and melt again;

Rare lips a-quiver, silently implore

But he must ever turn his furtive head,

And hear that other summons at the door.

“Change was his mistress; Chance his counsellor.

The dark firs knew his whistle up the trail.

Why tarries he to-day?... And yesternight

Adventure lit her stars without avail.”

CHAPTER XIII

LADY GLEESON, OWING to an outraged vanity and jealousy she was unable to control, missed the final scene, for before the song was actually finished she was gone. Being near a passage that was draped only by a curtain, she slipped out easily, flung herself into a luxurious motor, and vanished into the bleak autumn night.

She had seen enough. Her little heart raged with selfish fury. What followed was told her later by word of mouth.

Never could she forgive herself that she had left the studio before the thing had happened. She blamed Devonham for that too.

For LeVallon, it appears, having passed the cup of coffee to her through a third person — in itself an insult of indifference and neglect — stood absorbed in the words and music of the song. Being head and shoulders above the throng, he easily saw the girl at the piano. No one, unless it was Fillery, a few yards away, watched him as closely as did Devonham and Lady Gleeson, though all three for different reasons. It was Devonham, however, who made the most accurate note of what he saw, though Fillery's memory was possibly the truer, since his own inner being supplied the fuller and more sympathetic interpretation.

LeVallon, tall and poised, stood there like a great figure shaped in bronze. He was very calm. His bright hair seemed to rise a little; his eyes, steady and wondering, gazed fixedly; his features, though set, were mobile in the sense that any instant they might leap into the alive and fluid expression of some strong emotion. His whole being, in a word, stood at attention, alert for instant action of some uncontrollable, perhaps terrific kind. "He seemed like a glowing pillar of metal that must burst into flame the very next instant," as a Member told Lady Gleeson later.

Devonham watched him. LeVallon seemed transfixed. He stared above the intervening tousled heads. He drew a series of deep breaths that squared his shoulders and made his chest expand. His very muscles ached apparently for instant action. An intensity of wondering joy and admiration that lit his face made the eyes shine like stars. He watched the singing girl as a tiger watches the keeper who brings its long-expected food. The instant the bar is up, it springs, it leaps, it carries off, devours. Only, in this case, there were no bars. Nor was the wild desire for nourishment of a carnal kind. It was companionship, it was intercourse with his own that he desired so intensely.

"He divines the motherhood in her," thought Fillery, watching closely, pain and happiness mingled in his heart. "The protective, selfless, upbuilding power lies close to Nature." And as this flashed across him he caught a glimpse by chance of its exact opposite — in Lady Gleeson's peering, glittering eyes — the destructive lust, the selfish passion, the bird of prey.

"*The dark firs knew his whistle up the trail*," the song in that soft true voice drew to its close. LeVallon was trembling.

"Good Heavens!" thought Devonham. "Is it 'N. H.'? Is it 'N. H.,' after all, waking — rising to take possession?" He, too, trembled.

It was here that Lady Gleeson, close, intuitive observer of her escaping prey, rose up and slipped away, her going hardly noticed by the half-entranced, half-dreaming hearts about her, each intent upon its own small heaven of neat desire. She went as unobtrusively as an animal that is aware of untoward conditions and surroundings, showing her teeth, feeling her claws, yet knowing herself helpless. Not even Devonham, his mind ever keenly alert, observed her going. Fillery, alone, conscious of LeVallon's eyes across the room, took note of it. She left, her violent little will intent upon vengeance of a later victory that she still promised herself with concentrated passion.

Yet Devonham, though he failed to notice the slim animal of prey in exit, noticed this — that the face he watched so closely changed quickly even as he watched, and that the new expression, growing upon it as heat grows upon metal set in a flame, was an expression he had seen before. He had seen it in that lonely mountain valley where a setting sun poured gold upon a burning pyre, upon a dancing, chanting figure, upon a human face he now watched in this ridiculous little Chelsea studio. The sharpness of the air, the very perfume, stole over him as he stared, perplexed, excited and uneasy. That strange, wild, innocent and tender face, that power, that infinite yearning! LeVallon had disappeared. It was "N. H." that stood and watched the singer at the little modern piano.

Then with the end of the song came the rush, the bustle of applause, the confusion of many people rising, trotting forward, all talking at once, all moving towards the singer — when LeVallon, hitherto motionless as a statue, suddenly leaped past and through them like a vehement wind through a whirl of crackling dead leaves. Only his deft, skilful movement, of poise and perfect balance combined with accurate swiftness, could have managed it without bruised bodies and angry cries. There was no clumsiness, no visible effort, no appearance of undue speed. He seemed to move quietly, though he moved like fire. In a moment he was by the piano, and Nayan, in the act of rising from her stool, gazed straight up into his great lighted eyes.

It was singular how all made way for him, drew back, looked on. Confusion threatened. Emotion surged like a rising sea. Without a leader there might easily have been tumult; even a scene. But Fillery was there. His figure intervened at once.

"Nayan," he said in a steady voice, "this is my friend, Mr. LeVallon. He wants to thank you."

But, before she could answer, LeVallon, his hand upon her arm, said quickly, yet so quietly that few heard the actual words, perhaps — his voice resonant, his eyes alight with joy: "You are here too — with me, with Fillery. We are all exiles together. But you know the way out — the way back! You remember!..."

She stared with delicious wonder into his eyes as he went on:

"O star and woman! Your voice is wind and fire. Come!" And he tried to seize her. "We wilt go back together. We work here in vain!..." His arms were round her; almost their faces touched.

The girl rose instantly, took a step towards him, then hung back; the stool fell over with a crash; a hubbub of voices rose in the room behind; Povey, Kempster, a dozen Members with them, pressed up; the women, with half-shocked, half-frightened eyes, gaped and gasped over the forest of intervening male shoulders. A universal shuffle followed. The confusion was absurd and futile. Both male and female stood aghast and stupid before what they saw, for behind the mere words and gestures there was something that filled the little scene with a strange shaking power, touching the panic sense.

LeVallon lifted her across his shoulders.

The beautiful girl was radiant, the man wore the sudden semblance of a god. Their very stature increased. They stood alone. Yet Fillery, close by, stood with them. There seemed a magic circle none dared cross about the three. Something immense, unearthly, had come into the room, bursting its little space. Even Devonham, breaking with vehemence through the human ring, came to a sudden halt.

In a voice of thunder — though it was not actually loud — LeVallon cried:

“Their little personal loves! They cannot understand!” He bore Nayan in his arms as wind might lift a loose flower and whirl it aloft. “Come back with me, come home! The Sun forgets us here, the Wind is silent. There is no Fire. Our work, our service calls us.” He turned to Fillery. “You too. Come!”

His voice boomed like a thundering wind against the astonished frightened faces staring at him. It rose to a cry of intense emotion: “We are in little exile here! In our wrong place, cut off from the service of our gods! We will go back!” He started, with the girl flung across his frame. He took one stride. The others shuffled back with one accord.

“*The other summons at the door*. But, Edward! — you — you too!”

It was Nayan’s voice, as the girl clung willingly to the great neck and arms, the voice of the girl all loved and worshipped and thought wonderful beyond temptation; it was this familiar sound that ran through the bewildered, startled throng like an electric shock. They could not believe their eyes, their ears. They stood transfixed.

Within their circle stood LeVallon, holding the girl, almost embracing her, while she lay helpless with happiness upon his huge enfolding arms. He paused, looked round at Fillery a moment. None dared approach. The men gazed, wondering, and with faculties arrested; the women stared, stock still, with beating hearts. All felt a lifting, splendid wonder they could not understand. Devonham, mute and motionless before an inexplicable thing, found himself bereft of judgment. Analysis and precedent, for once, both failed. He looked round in vain for Khilkoff.

Fillery alone seemed master of himself, a look of suffering and joy shone in his face; one hand lay steady upon LeVallon's arm.

Within the little circle these three figures formed a definite group, filling the beholders, for the first time in their so-called "psychic" experience, with the thrill of something utterly beyond their ken — something genuine at last. For there seemed about the group, though emanating, as with shining power, from the figure of LeVallon chiefly, some radiating force, some elemental vigour they could not comprehend. Its presence made the scene possible, even right.

"Edward — you too! What is it, O, what is it? There are flowers — great winds! I see the fire —— !"

A searching tenderness in her tone broke almost beyond the limits of the known human voice.

There swept over the onlookers a wave of incredible emotion then, as they saw LeVallon move towards them, as though he would pass through them and escape. He seemed in that moment stupendous, irresistible. He looked divine. The girl lay in his arms like some young radiant child. He did not kiss her, no sign of a caress was seen; he did no ordinary, human thing. His towering figure, carrying his burden almost negligently, came out of the circle "like a tide" towards them, as one described it later — or as a poem that appeared later in "Simplicity" began:

"With his hair of wind

And his eyes of fire

And his face of infinite desire ..."

He swept nearer. They stirred again in a confused and troubled shuffle, opening a way. They shrank back farther. They shivered, like crying shingle a vast wave draws back. Only Fillery stood still, making no sign or movement; upon his face that look of joy and pain — wild joy and searching pain — no one, perhaps, but Devonham understood.

"Wind and fire!" boomed LeVallon's tremendous voice. "We return to our divine, eternal service. O Wind and Fire! We come back at last!" An immense rhythm swept across the room.

Then it was, without announcement of word or action, that Nayan, suddenly leaping from the great enfolding arms, stood upright between the two figures, one hand outstretched towards — Fillery.

At which moment, emerging apparently from nowhere, Khilkoff appeared upon the scene. During the music he had left the studio to find certain sketches he wished to show to LeVallon; he had witnessed nothing, therefore, of what had just occurred. He now stood still, staring in sheer surprise. The people in a ring, gazing with excited, rapt expression into the circle they thus formed, looked like an audience watching some performance that dazed and stupefied them, in which Fillery, LeVallon and Nayan — his own daughter — were the players. He took it for an impromptu charade, perhaps, something spontaneously arranged during his absence. Yet he was obviously staggered.

As he entered, the girl had just leaped from the arms that held her, and run towards Fillery, who stood erect and motionless in the centre of the circle; and LeVallon's wild splendid cry in that instant shook its grand music across the vaulted room. So well acted, so dramatic, so real was the scene thus interrupted that Khilkoff stood staring in silence, thinking chiefly, as he said afterwards, that the young man's pose and attitude were exactly — magnificently — what he wanted for the figure of Fire and Wind in his elemental group.

This enthusiastic thought, with the attempt to engrave it permanently in his memory, filled his mind completely for an instant, when there broke in upon it again that resonant voice, half cry, half chant, vibrating with depth and music, yet quiet too:

"Wind and Fire! My Wind and Fire! O Sun — your messengers are come for us!... Oh, come with power and take us with you!..." Its rhythm was gigantic.

So extraordinary was the volume, yet the sweetness, too, in the voice, though its actual loudness was not great — so arresting was its quality, that Khilkoff, as he put it afterwards, thought he heard an entirely new sound, a sound his ears had never known before. He, like the rest of the astonished audience, was caught spell-bound. But for an instant only. For at once there followed another voice, releasing the momentary spell, and, with the accompanying action, warned him that what he saw was no mere game of acting. This was real.

"*I hear that other summons at the door!...*"

Her hands were outstretched, her eyes alight with yearning, she was oblivious of everyone but Fillery, LeVallon and herself.

And her father, then, breaking through the crowding figures, packed shoulder to shoulder nearest to him, entered the circle. His mind was confused, perhaps, for vague ideas of some undesirable hypnotic influence, of some foolish experiment that had become too real, passed through it. He knew one thing only — this scene, whether real or acted, pretence or sincere, must be stopped. The look on his daughter's face — entirely new and strange to him — was all the evidence he needed. He shouldered his way through like an angry bear, making inarticulate noises, growling.

But, before he reached the actors, before Nayan reached Fillery's side, and while the voice of the girl and of LeVallon still seemed to echo simultaneously in the air, a new thing happened that changed the scene completely. In these few brief seconds, indeed, so much was concentrated, and with such rapidity, that it was small wonder the reports of individual witnesses differed afterwards, almost as if each one had seen a separate detail of the crowded picture. Its incredibility, too, bewildered minds accustomed to imagined dreams rather than to real action.

LeVallon, at any rate, all agreed, turned with that ease and swiftness peculiarly his own, caught Nayan again into the air, and with one arm swung her back across his shoulder. He moved, then, so irresistibly, with a great striding rush in the direction of the door into the street, and so rapidly, that the onlookers once more drew back instinctively pell mell, tumbling over each other in their frightened haste.

This, all agreed, had happened. One second they saw LeVallon carrying the girl off, the next — a flash of intense and vivid brilliance entered the big studio, flooding all detail with a blaze of violent light. There was a loud report, there was a violent shock.

"The Messengers! Our Messengers!..." The thunder of LeVallon's cry was audible.

The same instant this dazzling splendour, so sparkling it was almost painful, became eclipsed again. There was complete obliteration. Darkness descended like a blow. An inky blackness reigned. No single thing was visible. There came a terrific splitting sound.

The effect of overwhelming sudden blackness was natural enough. In every mind danced still the vivid memory of that last amazing picture they had seen: Khilkoff, with alarmed face, breaking violently into the circle where his daughter, Nayan, swinging from those giant shoulders, looked back imploringly at Dr. Fillery, who stood motionless as though carved in stone, a smile of curious happiness yet pain upon his features. Yet the figure of LeVallon dominated. His radiant beauty, his air of superb strength, his ease, his power, his wild swiftness. Something unearthly glowed about him. He looked a god. The extraordinary idea flashed into Fillery's mind that some big energy as of inter-stellar spaces lay about him, as though great Sirius called down along his light-years of distance into the little tumbled Chelsea room.

This was the picture, set one instant in dazzling violet brilliance, then drowned in blackness, that still hung shining with intense reality before every mind.

The following confusion had a moment of real and troubling panic; women screamed, some fell upon their knees; men called for light; various cries were heard; there was a general roar:

"To the door, all men to the door! He's controlled! There's an Elemental in him!" It was Povey's shrill tones that pierced.

"Strike a match!" shouted Kempster. "The electric light has fused. Stay where you are. Don't move — everybody."

"Lightning," the clear voice of Devonham was heard. "Keep your heads. It's only a thunderstorm!"

Matches were struck, extinguished, lit again; a patch of dim light shone here and there upon a throng of huddled people; someone found a candle that shed a flickering glare upon the walls and ceiling, but only made the shadows chiefly visible. It was an unreal, fantastic scene.

A moment later there descended a hurricane gust of wind against the building, with splintering glass as though from a hail of bullets, that extinguished candle and matches, and plunged the scene again into total darkness. A terrific clap of thunder, followed immediately by a rushing sound of rain that poured in a flood upon the floor, completed the scene of terror and confusion. The huge north window had blown in.

The consternation was, for some moments, dangerous, for true panic may become an unmanageable thing, and this panic was unquestionably real. The superstitious thread that lies in every human being, stretched and shivered, beginning to weave its swift, ominous pattern. The elements dominated the human too completely just then even for the sense of wonder that was usually so active in the Society's mental make-up to assert itself intelligently. Most of them lost their heads. All associated that picture of LeVallon and the girl with this terrific demonstration of overpowering elemental violence. Povey's startled cry had given them the lead. The human touch thus added the flavour of something both personal and supernatural.

Some stood screaming, whimpering, unable to move; some were numb; others cried for help; not a few remained on their knees; the name of God was audible here and there; many collapsed and several women fainted. To one and all came the realization of that panic fear which dislocates and paralyses. This was a manifestation of elemental power that had intelligence somewhere driving too suggestively behind it....

It was Devonham and Khilkoff who kept their heads and saved the situation. The sudden storm was, indeed, of extreme violence and ferocity; the force of the wind, with the nearness of the terrible lightning and the consequent volume of the overwhelming thunder, were certainly bewildering. But a thunderstorm, they began to realize, was a thunderstorm.

"Everyone stay exactly where he is," suddenly shouted Khilkoff through the darkness. His voice brought comfort. "I'll light candles in the inner studio." He did so a moment later; the faint light was reassuring; a pause in the storm came to his assistance, the wind had passed, the rain had ceased, there was no more lightning. With a whispered word to Devonham, he disappeared through the door into the passage: "You look after 'em; I must find my girl."

"One by one, now," called Devonham. "Take careful steps! Avoid the broken glass!"

Voices answered from dark corners, as the inner room began to fill; all saw the candle light and came to it by degrees. “Povey, Kempster, Imson, Father Collins! Each man bring a lady with him. It’s only a thunderstorm. Keep your heads!”

The smaller room filled gradually, people with white faces and staring eyes coming, singly or in couples, within the pale radiance of the flickering candle light. Feet splashed through pools of water; the furniture, the clothing, were soaked; the heat in the air, despite the great broken window, was stifling. One or two women were helped, some were carried; there were cries and exclamations, a noise of splintered glass being trodden on or kicked aside; drinks were brought for those who had fainted; order was restored bit by bit. The collective consciousness resumed gradually its comforting sway. The herd found strength in contact. A single cry — in a woman’s voice— “Pan was among us!...” was instantly smothered, drowned in a chorus of “Hush! Hush!” as though a mere name might bring a repetition of a terror none could bear again.

The entire scene had lasted perhaps five minutes, possibly less. The violent storm that had hung low over London, accumulating probably for hours, had dissipated itself in a single prodigious explosion, and was gone. Through the gaping north window, torn and shattered, shone the stars. More candles were brought and lighted, food and drink followed, a few cuts from broken glass were attended to, and calm in a measure came back to the battered and shaken yet thrilled and delighted Prometheans.

But all eyes looked for a couple who were not there; a hundred heads turned searching, for in every heart lay one chief question. Yet, oddly enough, none asked aloud; the names of Nayan and LeVallon were not spoken audibly; some touch of awe, it seemed, clung to a memory still burning in each individual mind; it was an awe that none would willingly revive just then. The whole occurrence had been too devastating, too sudden; it all had been too real.

There was little talk, nor was there the whispered discussion even that might have been expected; individual recovery was slow and hesitating. What had happened lay still too close for the comfort of detailed comparison or analysis by word of mouth. With common accord the matter was avoided. Discussions must wait. It would fill many days with wonder afterwards....

It was with a sense of general relief, therefore, that the throng of guests, bedraggled somewhat in appearance, eyes still bright with traces of uncommon excitement, their breath uneven and their attitude still nervous, saw the door into the passage open and frame the figure of their returning host. He held a lighted candle. His bearded face looked grim, but his slow deep voice was quiet and reassuring — he smiled, his words were commonplace.

“You must excuse my daughter,” he said firmly, “but she sends her excuses, and begs to be forgiven for not coming to bid you all good-night. The lightning — the electricity — has upset her. I have advised her to go to bed.”

A sigh of relief from everybody came in answer. They were only too glad to take the hint and go.

“The little impromptu act we had prepared for you we cannot give now,” he added, anticipating questions. “The storm prevented the second part. We must give it another time instead.”

CHAPTER XIV

KHILKOFF, EDWARD FILLERY and Paul Devonham, between them, it seems, were wise in their generation. The story spread that the scene in the Studio had been nothing but a bit of inspired impromptu acting, to which the coincidence of the storm had lent a touch of unexpected conviction where, otherwise, all would have ended in a laugh and a round or two of amused applause.

The spreading of an undesirable story, thus, was to a great extent prevented, its discussion remaining confined, chiefly, among the few startled witnesses. Yet the Prometheans, of course, knew a supernatural occurrence when they saw one. They were not to be so easily deprived of their treasured privilege. Thrilled to their marrows, individually and collectively, they committed their versions to writing, drew up reports, compared notes and, generally, made the feast last as long as possible. It was, moreover, a semi-sacred feast for them. Its value increased portentously. It bound the Society together with fresh life. It attracted many new members. Povey and his committee increased the subscription and announced an entrance fee in addition.

The various accounts offered by the Members, curious as these were, may be left aside for the moment, since the version of the occurrence as given by Edward Fillery comes first in interest. His report, however, was made only to himself; he mentioned it in full to no one, not even to Paul Devonham. He felt unable to share it with any living being. Only one result of his conclusions he shared openly enough with his assistant: he withdrew his promise.

Upon certain details, the two men agreed with interest — that everybody in the room, men and women, were on the *qui vive* the moment LeVallon made his entrance. His appearance struck a note. All were aware of an unusual presence. Interest and curiosity rose like a vapour, heads all turned one way as though the same wind blew them, there was a buzz and murmur of whispered voices, as though the figure of LeVallon woke into response the same taut wire in every heart. “Who on earth is that? What is he?” was legible in a hundred questioning eyes. All, in a word, were aware of something unaccustomed.

Upon this detail — and in support of the Society’s claim to special “psychic” perception, it must be mentioned — Fillery and Devonham were at one. But another detail, too, found them in agreement. It was not the tempest that caused the panic; it was LeVallon himself. Something about LeVallon had produced the abrupt and singular sense of panic terror.

Fillery was glad; he was satisfied, at any rate. The transient, unreal personality called “LeVallon” had disappeared and, as he believed, for ever; a surface apparition after all, it had been educated, superimposed, the result of imitation and quick learning, a phantom masquerading as an intelligent human being. It was merely an acquired surface-self, a physical, almost an automatic intelligence. The deep nature underneath had now broken out. It was the sudden irruption of “N. H.” that touched the subconscious self of everyone in the room with its strange authentic shock. “N. H.” was in full possession.

Towards this real Self he felt attraction, yearning, even love. He had felt this from the very beginning. Why, or what it was, he did not pretend to know as yet. Towards “N. H.” he reacted as towards his own son, as to a comrade, ancient friend, proved intimate and natural playmate even. The strange tie was difficult to describe. In himself, though faint by comparison, lay something akin in sympathy and understanding.... They belonged together in the same unknown region. The girl, of course, belonged there too, but more completely, more absolutely, even than himself. He foresaw the risks, the dangers. His heart, with a leap of joy, accepted the responsibilities.

Unlike Devonham, he had not come that afternoon to scoff; his smile at the vagaries of what his assistant called “hysterical psychics” had no bitterness, no contempt. If their excesses were pathogenic often, he believed with Lombroso that genius and hysteria draw upon a common origin sometimes, also that, from among this unstable material, there emerged on occasions hints of undeniable value. To the want of balance was chiefly due the ineffectiveness of these hints. This class, dissatisfied with present things, kicking over the traces which herd together the dull normal crowd into the safe but uninteresting commonplace, but kicking, of course, too wildly, alone offered hints of powers that might one day, obedient to laws at present unknown, become of value to the race. They were temperamentally open to occasional, if misguided, inspiration, and all inspiration, the evidence overwhelmingly showed, is due to an intense, but hidden mental activity. The hidden nine-tenths of the self peeped out here and there periodically. These people were, at heart, alert to new ideas. The herd instinct was weak in them. They were individuals.

Fillery had not come to scoff. His chief purpose on this particular occasion had been to observe any reactions produced in LeVallon by the atmosphere of these unbalanced yet questing minds, and by the introduction to a girl, whose beauty, physical and moral, he considered far far above the standard of other women. Iraida Khilkoff, as he saw her, rose head and shoulders, like some magical flower in a fairy-tale, beyond her feminine kind.

His hopes had in both respects proved justified. LeVallon was gone. "N. H." had swept up commandingly into full possession.

If it is the attitude of mind that interprets details in a given scene, it is the heart that determines their selection. Devonham saw collective hallucination, delusion, humbug — useless and undesirable weeds, where his chief saw strange imperfect growths that might one day become flowers in a marvellous garden. That this garden blossomed upon the sunny slopes of a lost Caucasian valley had a significance he did not shirk. Always he was honest with himself. It was this symbolic valley he longed to people. Its radiant loveliness stirred a forgotten music in his heart, he watched golden bees sipping that wild azalea honey, of which even the natives may not rob them without the dangerous delight of exaltation; his nostrils caught the delicious perfumes, his cheek felt the touch of happy winds ... as he stood by the door with Devonham and LeVallon, looking round the crowded Chelsea studio.

Aware of this association stirring in his blood, he believed he had himself well in hand; he knew already in advance that a spirit moved upon the face of those waters that were his inmost self; he had that intuitive divination which anticipates a change of spiritual weather. The wind was rising, the atmosphere lay prepared, already the flowers bent their heads one way. All his powers of self-control might well be called upon before the entertainment ended. Glancing a moment at LeVallon, tall, erect and poised beside him, he was conscious — it was an instant of vivid self-revelation —

that he steadied himself in doing so. He borrowed, as it were, something of that poise, that calm simplicity, that potential energy, that modest confidence. Some latent power breathed through the great stalwart figure by his side; the strength was not his own; LeVallon emanated this power unconsciously.

Khilkoff, as described, had then led the youth away to see the sculpture, Devonham was captured by a Member, and Fillery found himself alone. He looked about him, noticing here and there individuals whom he knew. Lady Gleeson he saw at once on her divan in the corner, with her cigarette, her jewels, her glass, her background of millions through which an indulgent husband floated like a shadow. His eye rested on her a second only, then passed in search of something less insignificant. Miss Lance, who had heard of his books and dared to pretend knowledge of them, monopolised him for ten minutes. A little tactful kindness managed her easily, while he watched the door where LeVallon had disappeared with Khilkoff, and through which Nayan might any moment now enter. Already his thoughts framed these two together in a picture; his heart saw them playing hand in hand among the flowers of the Hidden Valley, one flying, the other following, a radiance of sunny fire and a speed of lifting winds about them both, yet he himself, oddly enough, not far away. He, too, was somehow with them. While listening with his mind to what Miss Lance was saying, his heart went out playing with this splendid pair.... He would not lose her finally, it seemed; some subtle kinship held them together in this trinity. The heart in him played wild against the mind.

He caught Devonham's eye upon him, and a sudden smile that Miss Lance fortunately appropriated to herself, ran over his too thoughtful face. For Devonham's attitude towards the case, his original Notes, his obvious concealment of experiences in the Jura Mountains, flashed across him with a flavour of something half comic, half pathetic. "With all that knowledge, with all the accumulation of data, Paul stops short of Wonder!" he thought to himself, his eyes fixed solemnly upon Miss Lance's face. He remembered Coleridge: "All knowledge begins and ends with wonder, but the first wonder is the child of ignorance, while the second wonder is the parent of adoration." A thousand years, and the dear fellow will still regard adoration as hysteria! He chuckled audibly, to his companion's surprise, since the moment was not appropriate for chuckling.

Making his peace with his neighbour, he presently left her for a position nearer to the door, Father Collins providing the opportunity.

Father Collins, as he was called, half affectionately, half in awe, as of a parent with a cane, was an individual. He had been evangelical, high church, Anglican, Roman Catholic, in turn, and finally Buddhist. Believing in reincarnation, he did not look for progress in humanity; the planet resembled a form at school — individuals passed into it and out of it, but the average of the form remained the same. The fifth form was always the fifth form. Earth's history showed no advance as a whole, though individuals did. He looked forward, therefore, to no Utopia, nor shared the pessimism of the thinkers who despaired of progress.

A man of intense convictions, yet open mind, he was not ashamed to move. Before the Buddhist phase, he had been icily agnostic. He thought, but also he felt. He had vision and intuition; he had investigated for himself. His mind was of the imaginative-scientific order. Buddhism, his latest phase, attracted him because it was "a scientific, logical system rather than a religion based on revelation." He belonged eminently to the unstable. He found no resting place. He came to the meetings of the Society to listen rather than to talk. His net was far flung, catching anything and everything in the way of new ideas, experiments, theories, beliefs, especially powers. He tested for himself, then accepted or discarded. The more extravagant the theory, the greater its appeal to him. Behind a grim, even a repulsive ugliness, he hid a heart of milk and honey. In his face was nobility, yet something slovenly ran through it like a streak.

He loved his kind and longed to help them to the light. Although a rolling stone, spiritually, his naked sincerity won respect. He was composed, however, of several personalities, and hence, since these often clashed, he was accused of insincerity too. The essay that lost him his pulpit and parish, "The Ever-moving Truth, or Proof Impossible," was the poignant confession of an honest intellect where faith and unbelief came face to face with facts. The Bishop, naturally, preferred the room of "Father" Collins to his company.

"I should like you to meet my friend," Fillery mentioned, after some preliminary talk. "He would interest you. You might help him possibly." He mentioned a few essential details. "Perhaps you will call one day — you

know my address — and make his acquaintance. His mind, owing to his lonely and isolated youth, is *tabula rasa*. For the same reason, a primitive Nature is his Deity."

Father Collins raised his bushy dark eyebrows.

"I took note of him the moment he came in," he replied. "I was wondering who he was — and what! I'll come one day with pleasure. The innocence on his face surprised me. Is he — may I ask it — friend or patient?"

"Both."

"I see," said the other, without hesitation. He added: "You are experimenting?"

"Studying. I should value the help — the view of a religious temperament."

Father Collins looked grim to ugliness. The touch of nobility appeared.

"I know your ideals, Dr. Fillery; I know your work," he said gruffly. "In you lies more true religion than in a thousand bishops. I should trust your treatment of an unusual case. If," he added slowly, "I can help him, so much the better." He then looked up suddenly, his manner as if galvanized: "Unless *he* can perhaps help us."

The words struck Fillery on the raw, as it were. They startled him. He stared into the other's eyes. "What makes you think that? What do you mean exactly?"

Father Collins returned his gaze unflinchingly. He made an odd reply. "Your friend," he said, "looks to me — like a man who — might start a new religion — Nature for instance — back to Nature being, in my opinion, always a possible solution of over-civilization and its degeneracy." The streak of something slovenly crept into the nobility, smudging it, so to speak, with a blur.

Dr. Fillery, for a moment, waited, listening with his heart.

"And find a million followers at once," continued the other, as though he had not noticed. "His voice, his manner, his stature, his face, but above all — something he brings with him. Whatever his nature, he's a natural leader. And a sincere, unselfish leader is what people are asking for nowadays."

His black bushy eyebrows dropped, darkening the grim, clean-shaven face. "You noticed, of course — *you* — the women's eyes?" he mentioned. "It isn't, you know, so much what a man says, nor entirely his looks, that excite favour or disfavour with women. It's something he emanates — unconsciously. They can't analyze it, but they never fail to recognize it."

Fillery moved sideways a little, so that he could watch the inner studio better. The discernment of his companion was somewhat unexpected. It disconcerted him. All his knowledge, all his experience clustered about his mind as thick as bees, yet he felt unable to select the item he needed. The sunshine upon his Inner Valley burned a brighter fire. He saw the flowers glow. The wind ran sweet and magical. He began to watch himself more closely.

"LeVallon is an interesting being," he admitted finally, "but you make big deductions surely. A mind like yours," he added, "must have its reasons?"

"Power," replied the other promptly; "power. 'The earlier generations,' said Emerson, 'saw God face to face; *we* through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to Nature?' Your friend has this original relation, I feel; he stands close — terribly close — to Nature. He brings open spaces even into this bargain sale — —" He drew a deep breath. "There is a power about him — —"

"Perhaps," interrupted the other.

"Not of this earth."

"You mean that literally?"

"Not of this earth quite — not of humanity, so to speak," repeated Father Collins half irritably, as though his intelligence had been insulted. "That's the best way I can describe how it strikes me. Ask one of the women. Ask Nayan, for instance. Whatever he is, your friend is elemental."

Like a shock of fire the unusual words ran deep into Fillery's heart, but, at that same instant a stirring of the figures beyond the door caught his attention. His main interest revived. The inner door of the private studio, he thought, had opened.

"Elemental!" he repeated, his interest torn in two directions simultaneously. He looked at his companion keenly, searchingly. "You — a man like you —

does not use such words — —” He kept an eye upon the inner studio.

“Without meaning,” the other caught him up at once. “No. I mean it. Nor do I use such words idly to a man — Fillery — like you.” He stopped. “He has what you have,” came the quick blunt statement; “only in your case it’s indirect, while in his it’s direct — essential.”

They looked at each other. Two minds, packed with knowledge and softened with experience of their kind, though from different points of view, met each other fairly. A bridge existed. It was crossed. Few words were necessary, it seemed. Each understood the other.

“Elemental,” repeated Fillery, his pulse quickening half painfully.

At which instant he knew the inner door *had* opened. Nayan had come in. The same instant almost she had gone out again. So quick, indeed, was the interval between her appearance and disappearance, that Fillery’s version of what he then witnessed in those few seconds might have been ascribed by a third person who saw it with him to his imagination largely. Imaginative, at any rate, the version was; whether it was on that account unreal is another matter. The swift, tiny scene, however, no one witnessed but himself. Even Devonham, unusually alert with professional anxiety, missed it; as did also the watchful Lady Gleeson, whom jealousy made clairvoyante almost. Khilkoff and LeVallon, standing sideways to the door, were equally unaware that it had opened, then quickly closed again. None saw, apparently, the radiant, lovely outline.

It was a curtained door leading out of the far end of the inner studio into a passage which had an exit to the street; Fillery was so placed that he could see it over his companion’s shoulder; Khilkoff, LeVallon and the little group about them stood in his direct line of sight against the dark background of the curtain. The light in this far corner was so dim that Fillery was not aware the curtained door had swung open until he actually saw the figure of Nayan Khilkoff framed suddenly in the clear space, the white passage wall behind her. She wore gloves, hat and furs, having come, evidently, straight from the street. Ten seconds, perhaps twenty, she stood there, gazing with a sudden fixed intensity at LeVallon, whose figure, almost close enough for touch, was sideways to her, the face in profile.

She stopped abruptly as though a shock ran through her. She remained motionless. She stared, an expression in her eyes as of life momentarily arrested by wild, glorious, intense surprise. The lips were parted; one gloved hand still held the swinging curtained door. To Fillery it seemed as if a flame leaped into her eyes. The entire face lit up. She seemed spellbound with delight.

This leap of light was the first sign he witnessed. The same second her eyes lifted a fraction of an inch, changed their focus, and, gazing past LeVallon, looked straight across the room into his own.

In his mind at that instant still rang the singular words of Father Collins; in his heart still hung the picture of the flowered valley: it was across this atmosphere the eyes of the girl flashed their message like a stroke of lightning. It came as a cry, almost a call for help, an audible message whose syllables fled down the valley, yearning sweet, yet a tone of poignant farewell within the following wind. It was a moment of delicious joy, of exquisite pain, of a blissful, searching dream beyond this world....

He stood spellbound himself a moment. The look in the girl's big eloquent eyes threatened a cherished dream that lay too close to his own life. He was aware of collapse, of ruin; that old peculiar anguish seized him. He remembered her words in Baker Street a few days before: "Please bring your friend" — the accompanying pain they caused. And now he caught the echo on that following wind along the distant valley. The cry in her eyes came to him:

"Why — O why — do you bring this to me? It must take your place. It must put out — You!"

The reasoning and the inspirational self in him knew this momentary confusion, as the cry fled down the wind.

"O follow, follow

Through the caverns hollow

As the song floats, thou pursue

Where the wild bee never flew...."

The curtained door swung to again; the face and figure were no longer there; Nayan had withdrawn quickly, noticed by none but himself. She had gone up to make herself ready for her father's guests; in a few minutes she would come down again to play hostess as her custom was.... It was so ordinary. It was so dislocating.... For at that moment it seemed as if all the feminine forces of the universe, whatever these may be, focused in her, and poured against him their concentrated stream to allure, enchant, subdue. He trembled. He remembered Devonham's admission of the panic sense.

"It's the air," said a voice beside him, "all this tobacco smoke and scent, and no ventilation."

Father Collins was speaking, only he had completely forgotten that Father Collins was in the world. The steadying hand upon his arm made him realize that he had swayed a moment.

"The perfume chiefly," the voice continued. "All this cheap nasty stuff these women use. It's enough to sicken any healthy man. Nobody knows his own smell, they say." He laughed a little.

Collins was tactful. He talked on easily of nothing in particular, so that his companion might let the occasion slip, or comment on it, as he wished.

"Worse than incense." Fillery gave him the clue perhaps intentionally, certainly with gratitude. He made an effort. He found control. "It intoxicates the imagination, doesn't it?" That note of sweet farewell still hung with enchanting sadness in his brain. He still saw those yearning eyes. He heard that cry. And yet the conflict in his nature bewildered him — as though he found two persons in him, one weeping while the other sang.

Father Collins smiled, and Fillery then knew that he, too, had seen the girl framed in the doorway, intercepted the glance as well. No shadow of resentment crossed his heart as he heard him add: "She, too, perhaps belongs elsewhere." The phrase, however, brought to his own personal dream the conviction of another understanding mind. "As you yourself do, too," was added in a thrilling whisper suddenly.

Fillery turned with a start to meet his eye. "But *where*?"

"That is *your* problem," said Father Collins promptly. "You are the expert — even though you think — mistakenly — that your heart is robbed." His voice held the sympathy and tenderness of a woman taught by suffering. The nobility was in his face again, untarnished now. His words, his tone, his manner caught Fillery in amazement. It did not surprise him that Father

Collins had been quick enough to understand, but it did surprise him that a man so entangled in one formal creed after another, so netted by the conventional thought of various religious Systems, and therefore stuffed with old, rigid, commonplace ideas — it did, indeed surprise him to feel this sudden atmosphere of vision and prophecy that abruptly shone about him. The extravagant, fantastic side of the man he had forgotten.

“Where?” he repeated, gazing at him. “Where, indeed?”

“Where the wild bee never flew ... perhaps!”

Father Collins’s eyebrows shot up as though worked by artificial springs. His eyes, changing extraordinarily, turned very keen. He seemed several persons at once. He looked like — contradictory description — a spiritual Jesuit. The ugly mouth — thank Heaven, thought Fillery — showed lines of hidden humour. His sanity, at any rate, was unquestioned. Father Collins watched the planet with his soul, not with his brain alone. But which of his many personalities was now in the ascendancy, no man, least of all himself, could tell. His companion, the expert in him automatically aware of the simultaneous irruption and disruption, waited almost professionally for any outburst that might follow. “Arcades ambo,” he reflected, making a stern attempt to keep his balance.

“The subconscious, remember, doesn’t explain everything,” came the words. “Not everything,” he added with emphasis. “As with heredity” — he looked keenly half humorously, half sympathetically at the doctor— “there are gaps and lapses. The recent upheaval has been more than an inter-tribal war. It was a planetary event. It has shaken our nature fundamentally, radically. The human mind has been shocked, broken, dislocated. The prevalent hysteria is not an ordinary hysteria, nor are the new powers — perhaps — quite ordinary either.”

“Mental history repeats itself,” Fillery put in, now more master of himself again. “Unbalance has always followed upheaval. The removal of known, familiar foundations always lets in extravagance of wildest dissatisfaction, search and question.”

“Upheaval of this kind,” rejoined the other gravely, “there has never been since human beings walked the earth. Our fabulous old world trembles in the balance.” And, as he said it, the dreamer shone in the light below the big, black eyebrows, noticed quickly by his companion. “Old ideals have been smashed beyond recovery. The gods men knew have been killed, like Tommy, in the trenches. The past is likewise dead, its dreams of progress buried with it by a Black Maria. The human mind and heart stand everywhere empty and bereft, while their hungry and unanswered questions search the stars for something new.”

“Well, well,” said Fillery gently, half stirred, half amused by the odd language. “You may be right. But mental history has always shown a desire for something new after each separate collapse. Signs and wonders are a recurrent hunger, remember. In the days of Abraham, of Paul, of Moses it was the same.”

“Questions to-day,” replied the other, “are based on an immense accumulated knowledge unknown to Moses or to Abraham’s time. The phenomenon, I grant you, is the same, but — the shock, the dislocation, the shattering upheaval comes in the twentieth century upon minds grounded in deep scientific wisdom. It was formerly a shock to the superstitious ignorance of intuitive feeling merely. To-day it is organized scientific knowledge that meets the earthquake.”

“You mentioned gaps and lapses,” said Fillery, deeply interested, but still half professionally, perhaps, in spite of his preoccupations. “You think, perhaps, those gaps —— ?” One eye watched the inner studio. The unstable in him gained more and more the upper hand.

“I mean,” replied Father Collins, now fairly launched upon his secret hobby, evidently his qualification for membership in the Society, “I mean, Edward Fillery, that the time is ripe, if ever, for a new revelation. If Man is the only type of being in the universe, well and good. We see his finish plainly, for the war has shown that progress is a myth. Man remains, in spite of all conceivable scientific knowledge, a savage, of low degree, irredeemable, and intellect, as a reconstructive force, but of small account.”

“It seems so, I admit.”

“But if” — Father Collins said it as calmly as though he spoke of some new food or hygienic treatment merely— “if mankind is not the only life in the universe, if, for instance, there exist — and why not? — other evolutionary systems besides our own somewhat trumpery type — other schemes and other beings — perhaps parallel, perhaps quite different — perhaps in more direct contact with the sources of life — a purer emanation, so to say — —"

He hesitated, realizing perhaps that in speaking to a man of Edward Fillery's standing he must choose his words, or at least present his case convincingly, while aware that his inability to do so made him only more extravagant and incoherent.

"Yes, quite so," Fillery helped him, noting all the time the suppressed intensity, the half-concealed conviction of an *idée fixe* behind the calmness, while the balance of his own attention remained concentrated on the group about LeVallon. "If, as you suggest, there *are* other types of life — —" He spoke encouragingly. He had noticed the slovenly streak spread and widen, breaking down, as it were, the structure of the face. He was aware also of the increasing insecurity in himself.

"Now is the moment," cried the other; "now is the time for their appearance."

He turned as though he had hit a target unexpectedly.

"Now," he repeated, "is the opportunity for their manifestation. The human mind lies open everywhere. It is blank, receptive, ready. On all sides it waits ready and inviting. The gaps are provided. If there is any other life, it should break through and come among us — *now*!"

Fillery, startled, withdrew for the first time his attention from that inner room. With keen eyes he gazed at his companion. With an abrupt, unpleasant shock it occurred to him that all he heard was borrowed, filched, stolen out of his own mind. Before words came to him, the other spoke:

"Your friend," he mentioned quietly, but with intentional significance, "and patient."

"LeVallon!"

But it was at this moment that Nayan Khilkoff, entering again without her hat and furs, had moved straight to the piano, seated herself, and began to sing.

CHAPTER XV

TO RETAIL THE following scene as Dr. Fillery saw it in detail is not necessary, the sequence of acts, of physical events being already known. The reactions of his heart and mind, however, have importance. What he felt, thought, hoped and feared, what he believed as well, his point of view in a word, remain essential.

Edward Fillery, being what he was, witnessed it from his own individual angle; his mind, with his heredity, his soul, with its mysterious background, these held the glasses to his eyes, adjusting, as with a Zeiss instrument, each eye separately. In his case the analyst and thinker checked the unstable dreamer with acute exactitude. This was his special gift. He studied himself best while studying others. His sight, moreover, was exceptionally keen, his glasses of consummate workmanship. He saw, it seems, considerably beyond the normal range. He believed, at least, that he did so.

He saw, for instance, that the girl, while her fingers ran over the keys before she sang, searched the room and found LeVallon in a second. Following her rapid glance, he took in the picture that she also saw — LeVallon, coffee cup in hand, before Lady Gleeson languishing on the divan, and Devonham just beside them. LeVallon was obviously unaware of Lady Gleeson's presence; he had forgotten her existence. Devonham, a floor-walker with nothing particular to do at the moment, looked uncomfortable and ill at ease, scared a little, fearing a scene, a possible outbreak even. The meaning of the group was easily read. The girl herself, undoubtedly, read it clearly too.

This flashed upon the cinema screen, and Fillery divined it without the help of tedious letterpress.

The same instant he was aware that the girl and LeVallon looked for the first time straight into each other's faces, and that both seemed simultaneously caught into the air as though a star had lifted them. Not even a question lay in their clear eyes. It was an instantaneous understanding, so complete and perfect that the expression of happy surprise was too convincing to be missed even by the slow-witted Lady Gleeson. Vanity usually delays intelligence, and her vanity was abnormal. But she saw the expression on the two faces, and interpreted it aright. Fillery noticed that she squirmed; she would presently, he felt positive, disappear. Before the singing ended he had seen her slink away.

The song began. He had heard it before, “The Vagrant’s Epitaph,” sung by the same clear, sweet voice, had felt his heart stirred by the true simple feeling she put into it. He knew every word and every bar; the music was her own. He loved it. Both words and music awoke in him invariably a picture of his own lost valley, a physical desire to be over the hills and far away with the homeless liberty of winds and stars and waters, and at the same time, its spiritual equivalent — a yearning that the Race should discover the immense fair region of its greater hidden self and enjoy its new powers without restraint. All this was familiar to him. But now, as she sang, there came another, deeper meaning that sublimated the essential spirit of it, lifting it out of the known ditch of space and time. Never yet had he heard such yearning passion, such untold desire in her voice. The physical vagrancy changed subtly, exquisitely, to a symbol of a vaster meaning — a spiritual vagrancy that suddenly captured him in bitter pain. “Love could not hold him, Duty forged no chain” — as he listened to the sweetness, struck him between the joints of armour he had not realized before was so insecurely bound about him. The anguish of lonely souls, alien among their kind, hungry for companionship they might not find, unclothed, uncared for, desired of none and understanding none — this rose tumultuously in his blood. “The wide seas and the mountains called him ...” the words and music pierced him like a flame. “Revel might hold him for a little space ...” — her voice made it sound like a description of man’s brief moment on the whirling planet, tasting adventure with men and women, playing a moment with love and hope and fear, till, “turning past the laughter and the lamps,” he heard that “other summons at the door.”

This bigger version, this deeper meaning, caught at him with power as he heard the song in the sweet, familiar voice, and realized in a flash that what he felt faintly LeVallon felt terrifically. His own detachment was a pose, a shadow, at best a bodiless yearning; in LeVallon it was a reality of consuming fire. Also it was an explanation of the girl’s own singular aloofness from the world of admiring men. Both belonged, as Father Collins put it, “elsewhere.”

He watched them. LeVallon's eyes, he saw, remained fixed and motionless on the singer; her own did not leave the notes for a single moment; the words and music poured into the room like a shower of dancing silver. The personality of the girl flowed out with them to meet the newly-found companion they addressed. An extraordinary thing then happened: to Fillery it almost seemed that there formed then and there between them a new vehicle — as it were, a body — that gave expression to their own great secret. Something in each of them, unable to manifest through their minds, their brains, their earthly bodies, formed for itself an elastic subtle vehicle, using the sound, the words, the feeling for this purpose — and as literally as a human spirit uses the familiar physical body for its manifestation.

The experience was amazing, but it was real. He watched it carefully. In the room about him, formed on the waves of this sweet singing, shaped by feeling that found normally no other expression, inspired by emotions, yearnings, desires alien to their normal kind, these two created between them a new vehicle or body that could and did express all this.

They heard that "other summons at the door...." And they were off.

Yet he, too, heard the summons, and in the depths of his being he answered to it. His essential weakness, wearing the guise of strength, rose naked....

These thoughts and feelings lay unexpressed, perhaps — too deep actually, too remote from any experience he had yet known, to find actual words, even in his mind. What did find expression, in thought at any rate, was that, before his very eyes, he witnessed the transfiguring change come over Nayan. Like some flower that has been growing in the shade, then meets the flood of sunshine for the first time, she knew a fresh tide of life sweep over her entire being. She seemed to blossom, breaking almost into flower and fruit before his very eyes, as though sun and wind brought her into a sudden bloom of exquisite maturity. He was aware of rich, deep purple, the faint gold of fruits and flowers, the creamy softness of a rose, the amber of wild grapes bathed in sparkling dew. The luscious promise of the Spring matured about her whole presentment into full summer glory. And it was the sun and wind of LeVallon's enigmatic, stimulating presence close to her that caused the miracle. The essential flower of her life poured forth to meet his own, as he had always felt it must. LeVallon's was the mighty wind that lifted her, was the sun in whose heat she basked, expanded, soared. She experienced a strange increase of her natural vitality and being. Her consciousness knew an abrupt intensification.

The signs, in that brief moment, were as clear to Fillery's divining heart as though he read them in black printed letters on a page of whitest paper. He knew the cipher and the code. He watched the signals flash. They had not even spoken, yet the relationship was established beyond doubt. He witnessed the first exchange; the wireless message of joy and sympathy that flashed he intercepted.

Through his extremely rapid mind, as he watched, poured memories, reflections, judgments in concentrated form, yet calmly, steadily, though against a background of deep and troubled emotion. There seemed actually a disruption of his personality. Father Collins, standing beside him, divined nothing, he believed, of his agitation, standing, mere figure of a man, listening to the music with attentive pleasure; at least, he gave no outward sign....

The song drew to its close. Once Nayan raised her eyes, instantly finding those of LeVallon across the room, then shifting again for a fleeting second with a rapidly changing focus to his own. He met them without a quiver; he caught again her tender, searching question; he sent no answer back.

In his own heart burned, however, a score of questions that beat against his soul for answers. What was it that each had found thus intuitively within the other? Was it her maternal instinct only that was reached as with all other men hitherto, was it at last the woman in her that leaped towards its own divine, creative sun, or was it that hidden, nameless aspect of her which had never yet found a vehicle for manifestation among her own kind and had therefore remained hitherto unexpressed — bodiless?

The answer to this he found easily enough. No jealousy stirred; pain for himself had been long ago uprooted. Yet pain of a kind he felt. Would LeVallon injure, drag her down, bring suffering, perhaps of an atrocious sort, into her hitherto so innocent life? Was she yet qualified to withstand the fierce fire, the rushing wind, that the full force of his strange nature must bring to bear upon her?

His questions went prophesying, flying like swift birds to such great distances that no audible answers could return. His pain, at any rate, chiefly was for her. He divined that she was frightened, yet exhilarated, before the unexpected apparition of an unusual presence. Accustomed to smaller jets of admiration from smaller men, this deep flood overwhelmed her. This motionless figure watching her among the shadows, listening to her singing, devouring her beauty with an innocence, power, worship she had never yet encountered — could she, Fillery asked himself, withstand its elemental flood and not be broken by its waves?

For at the back of all his questions, haunting his prophecies, filling his hopes and fears with substance, stood one outstanding certainty:

The motionless figure in the shadows was not LeVallon. It was "N. H."

The thing he had expected had now happened. Instinctively he turned to find his colleague.

For what followed, Fillery, of course, was as unprepared as anyone. In some way, difficult to describe, the whole thing had a strangely natural, almost an inevitable touch. The exaggeration that others felt he was not conscious of. He never, for a single moment, lost his head. The wonder of the elemental violence appealed and stimulated without once touching the sense of fear, much less of panic, in him.

Searching for Devonham's familiar figure, he found it in the seat that Lady Gleeson had vacated shortly before, but the face turned away towards the inner room, so that it was not possible to catch his eye. It was an attentive, critical, almost anxious expression his chief surprised, and while a faint smile perhaps flitted across his own mouth, he became aware that Father Collins — he had again completely forgotten his proximity — was staring with a curious intentness at him. The same instant the song came to an end. Into the brief pause of a second before the applause burst forth, Father Collins's voice was suddenly audible in his ear:

"LeVallon's gone," Fillery was saying to himself, "'N. H.' is in control," when his neighbour's words broke in. The two sentences were simultaneously in his mind:

"A man in *his own place* is the Ruler of his Fate!"

And Fillery's astonishment was only equalled by the fact that the grim face was soft with sympathy, and that in the eyes shone moisture that was close to tears. Before he could reply, however, the applause burst forth, making an uproar against which no voice could possibly contend. The subsequent events, following so swiftly, made rejoinder equally out of the question, nor did he see Father Collins again that evening.

These Fillery witnessed much as already described through Devonham’s eyes. The storm, the panic took place as told. Yet a detail here and there belong to Fillery’s version, for they were a part of his own being. He had, for instance, a warning that something was about to happen, although warning seems not quite the faithful word. He saw the Valley for one fleeting second, the three familiar figures, Nayan, “N. H.,” himself, flying through the bright sunshine before a wind that stirred a million flowers. In the farthest possible background of his mind it shone an instant. The shutter dropped again, it vanished.

Yet enough to set him on the alert. Into the air about him, into his heart as well, fell an exhilarating and immense refreshment. It rose, as it were, from the most deeply submerged portion of his own hidden being, now stirred, even actually summoned, into activity.

The shutter meanwhile rose and fell and rose again; the Valley reappeared and vanished, then reappeared again.

For the truth came smashing against him — smashing his being open, and bursting the doors of his carefully instructed, carefully guarded nature. The doors flung from their hinges and a blinding light poured in and flooded the strangest possible hidden corners.

He saw what followed with an accuracy of observation impossible to anyone else, with an intimate sympathy the others could not feel — because he himself took part in the entire scene. But the scene, for him, was not the Chelsea studio with its tobacco smoke and perfume, it was the Caucasian valley whence his own blood derived. Clean, fragrant winds swept past him across mighty space. The walls melted into distances of forest and mountain peaks, the ceiling was a dome of stainless blue, the floor ran deep in flowers. A drenching sunshine of crystal purity bathed the world. It was across bright emerald turf that he saw “N. H.” dance forward like a wind of power, cry with a joyful resonant voice to the radiant girl who stood laughing, half hiding, yet at the same time beckoning, that she should fly with him. He caught and lifted her, her hair, the whiteness of her skin flashing in the sun like some marvellous bird in the act of taking wing, for before he had touched her she leapt through the air to meet his outstretched arms. Yet one hand, one silvery arm, waved towards himself, towards Fillery; their fingers met and clasped; the three of them, three dancing, free and joyful figures, fled like the wind across the enormous mountains, but fled, he knew beyond all question — *home*.

He saw this in the space of those few seconds in which Nayan was swung over the youth's shoulders beside the piano. The two scenes ran parallel, as it were, before his eyes, outer and inner sight keeping equal pace together. His balance and judgment here were never once disturbed. In the studio: he had just introduced LeVallon to the girl and the latter had caught her up. In the valley: she had leapt into his arms and the three of them were off.

It was this inner interpretation, keeping always level pace with what was happening outwardly, that furnished Fillery with the hint of an astounding explanation. The figure in the valley, it flashed to him, was, of course, "N. H." in all his natural splendour, but a figure unknown surely to all records of humanity as such. Here danced and sang a happy radiant being, by whom the limitations of the human species were not experienced, even if the species were familiar to him at all. A being from another system, another evolution, an elemental being, whose ideal, development, mode of existence, were not those of men and women. "N. H." was not a human being, a human soul, a human spirit. He belonged elsewhere and otherwise. Under the guise of LeVallon he had drifted in. He inhabited LeVallon's frame.

In the Studio, at this instant, Fillery heard him using the singular words already noted, and in the Studio they sounded, indeed, senseless, foolish, even mad. It was, he realized, an attempt to stammer in human language some meaning that lay beyond, outside it. In the Valley, however, and at the same moment, they sounded natural and true. The evolutionary system to which "N. H." belonged, from which he had in some as yet unknown manner passed into humanity, but to which, though almost entirely forgotten, he yearned with his whole being to return — this other system had, it seemed, its own conditions, its own methods of advance, its ideals and its duties. Were, then, its inhabitants — this flashed upon him in the delicious wind and sunshine — the workers in what men call the natural kingdoms, the builders of form and structure, the directing powers that expressed themselves through the elemental energies everywhere behind the laws of Nature? Was this their tireless and wondrous service in the planet, in the universe itself?

"N. H." called the girl to service, not to personal love. Alone, cut off from his own kind, alien and derelict amid the conditions of a humanity strange, perhaps unknown to him, he sought companionship where he could. Drawn instinctively to the more impersonal types, such as Fillery and the girl, he felt there the nearest approach to what he recognized as his own kind; their ideal of selfless service was a beacon that he understood; he would return to his own kingdom, carrying them both with him. From somewhere, at any rate, this all flashed into his too willing mind....

At which second precisely in Fillery's valley-vision, Khilkoff entered, and — yet before he could take action — the lightning struck and the sudden explosion of the ferocious storm blackened out both the outer and the inner scene.

The shock of elemental violence, the astounding revelation as well that an entirely new type had possibly come within his ken, this, combined with the emotional disturbance caused by the change produced in Nayan, seemed enough to upset the equilibrium of even the most balanced mind. The darkness added its touch of helplessness besides. Yet Fillery never for a moment lost his head. Two natures in him, cause of his radical instability, merged for a moment in amazing harmony. The panic now dominating all about him seemed so small a thing compared to the shattering discovery life had just offered to him. Across it, finding his way past kneeling women and shrieking girls, drenched to the skin by the flood of entering rain, moving over splintered glass, he found the figure he sought, as though by some instinctive sympathy. They came together in the darkness. Their hands met easily. A moment later they were in the street, and "N. H.'s" instinctive terror amid the sheets of falling water, an element hostile to his own natural fire, made it a simple matter to get him home — in Lady Gleeson's motor car.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN RELATIVE ORDER had been restored, Devonham realized, of course, that his colleague had cleverly spirited away their “patient”; also that the sculptor had carried off his daughter. Relieved to escape from the atmosphere of what he considered collective hysteria, he had borrowed mackintosh and umbrella, and declining several offers of a lift, had walked the four miles to his house in the rain and wind. The exercise helped to work off the emotion in him; his mind cleared healthily; personal bias gave way to honest and unprejudiced reflection; there was much that interested him deeply, at the same time puzzled and bewildered him beyond anything he had yet experienced. He reached the house with a mind steady if unsatisfied; but the emotions caused by prejudice had gone. His main anxiety centred about his chief.

He was glad to notice a light in an upper window, for it meant, he hoped, that LeVallon was now safely home. While his latchkey sought its hole, however, this light was extinguished, and when the door opened, it was Fillery himself who greeted him, a finger on his lips.

“Quietly!” he whispered. “I’ve just got him to bed and put his light out. He’s asleep already.” Paul noticed his manner instantly — its happiness. There was a glow of mysterious joy and wonder in his atmosphere that made the other hostile at once.

They went together towards that inner room where so often together they had already talked both moon and sun to bed. Cold food lay on the table, and while they satisfied their hunger, the rain outside poured down with a steady drenching sound. The wind had dropped. The suburb lay silent and deserted. It was long past midnight. The house was very still, only the occasional step of a night-nurse audible in the passages and rooms upstairs. They would not be disturbed.

“You got him home all right, then?” Paul asked presently, keeping his voice low.

He had been observing his friend closely; the evident pleasure and satisfaction in the face annoyed him; the light in the eyes at the same time profoundly troubled him. Not only did he love his chief for himself, he set high value on his work as well. It would be deplorable, a tragedy, if judgment were destroyed by personal bias and desire. He felt uneasy and distressed.

Fillery nodded, then gave an account of what had happened, but obviously an account of outward events merely; he did not wish, evidently, to argue or explain. The strong, rugged face was lit up, the eyes were shining; some inner enthusiasm pervaded his whole being. Evidently he felt very sure of something — something that both pleased and stimulated him.

His account of what had happened was brief enough, little more than a statement of the facts.

Finding himself close to LeVallon when the darkness came, he had kept hold of him and hurried him out of the house at once. The sudden blackness, it seemed, had made LeVallon quiet again, though he kept asking excitedly for the girl. When assured that he would soon see her, he became obedient as a lamb. The absence of light apparently had a calming influence. They found, of course, no taxis, but commandeered the first available private car, Fillery using the authoritative influence of his name. And it was Lady Gleeson's car, Lady Gleeson herself inside it. She had thought things over, put two and two together, and had come back. Her car might be of use. It was. For the rain was falling in sheets and bucketfuls, the road had become a river of water, and Fillery's automobile, ordered for an hour later, had not put in an appearance. It was the rain that saved the situation....

An exasperated expression crossed Devonham's face as he heard this detail emphasized. He had meant to listen without interruption. The enigmatical reference to the rain proved too much for him.

“Why ‘the rain’? What d'you mean exactly, Edward?”

“Water,” was the reply, made in a significant tone that further annoyed his listener's sense of judgment. “You remember the Channel, surely! Water and fire mutually destroy each other. They are hostile elements.”

There was a look almost of amusement on his face as he said it. Devonham kept a tight hold upon his tongue. It was not impatience or surprise he felt, though both were strong; it was perhaps sorrow.

“And so Lady Gleeson drove you home?”

He waited with devouring interest for further details. The throng of questions, criticisms and emotions surging in him he repressed with admirable restraint.

Lady Gleeson, yes, had driven the party home. Fillery made her sit on the back seat alone, while he occupied the front one, LeVallon beside him, but as far back among the deep cushions as possible. The doctor held his hand. At any other time, Devonham could have laughed; but he saw no comedy now. Lady Gleeson, it seemed, was awed by the seriousness of the “Chief,” whom, even at the best of times, she feared a little. Her vanity, however, persuaded her evidently that she was somehow the centre of interest.

Yet Devonham, as he listened, had difficulty in persuading himself that he was in the twentieth century, and that the man who spoke was his colleague and a man of the day as well.

“LeVallon talked little, and that little to himself or to me. He seemed unaware that a third person was present at all. Though quiet enough, there was suppressed vehemence still about him. He said various things: that ‘*she* belonged to us,’ for instance; that he ‘knew his own’; that *she* was ‘filled with fire in exile’; and that he would ‘take her back.’ Also that I, too, must go with them both. He often mentioned the sun, saying more than once that the sun had ‘sent its messengers.’ Obviously, it was not the ordinary sun he referred to, but some source of central heat and fire he seems aware of — —”

“You, I suppose, Edward,” put in his listener quickly, “said nothing to encourage all this? Nothing that could suggest or stimulate?”

Fillery ignored, even if he noticed, the tone of the question. “I kept silence rather. I said very little. I let him talk. I had to keep an eye on the woman, too.”

“You certainly had your hands full — a dual personality and a nymphomaniac.”

"She helped me, without knowing it. All he said about the girl, she evidently took to herself. When he begged me to keep the water out, she drew the window up the last half-inch.... The water frightened him; she was sympathetic, and her sympathy seemed to reach him, though I doubt if he was aware of her presence at all until the last minute almost — —"

"And 'at the last minute'?"

"She leaned forward suddenly and took both his hands. I had let go of the one I held and was just about to open the door, when I heard her say excitedly that I must let her come and see him, or that he must call on her; she was sure she could help him; he must tell her everything.... I turned to look.... LeVallon, startled into what I believe was his first consciousness of her presence, stared into her eyes, and leaned forward among his cushions a little, so that their faces were close together. Before I could interfere, she had flung her bare arms about his neck and kissed him. She then sat back again, turning to me, and repeating again and again that he needed a woman's care and that she must help and mother him. She was excited, but she knew what she was saying. She showed neither shame nor the least confusion. She tasted — of course with her it cannot last — a bigger world. She was most determined."

"*His* reaction?" inquired Devonham, amused in spite of his graver emotions of uneasiness and exasperation.

"None whatever. I scarcely think he realized he had been kissed. His interest was so entirely elsewhere. I saw his face a moment among the white ermine, the bare arms and jewels that enveloped him." Fillery frowned faintly. "The car had almost stopped. Lady Gleeson was leaning back again. He looked at me, and his voice was intense and eager: 'Dear Fillery,' he said, 'we have found each other, I have found her. She knows, she remembers the way back. Here we can do so little.'

"Lady Gleeson, however, had interpreted the words in another way.

"'I'll come to-morrow to see you,' she said at once intensely. 'You *must* let me come,' — the last words addressed to me, of course."

The two men looked at one another a moment in silence, and for the first time during the conversation they exchanged a smile....

"I got him to bed," Fillery concluded. "In ten minutes he was sound asleep." And his eyes indicated the room overhead.

He leaned back, and quietly began to fill his pipe. The account was over.

As though a great spring suddenly released him, Paul Devonham stood up. His untidy hair hung wild, his glasses were crooked on his big nose, his tie askew. His whole manner bristled with accumulated challenge and disagreement.

"*Who?*" he cried. "*Who?* Edward, I ask you?"

His colleague, yet knowing exactly what he meant, looked up questioningly. He looked him full in the face.

"Hush!" he said quietly. "You'll wake him."

He gazed with happy penetrating eyes at his companion. "Paul," he added gently, "do you really mean it? Have you still the faintest doubt?"

The moment had drama in it of unusual kind. The conflict between these two honest and unselfish minds was vital. The moment, too, was chosen, the place as well — this small, quiet room in a commonplace suburb of the greatest city on the planet, drenched by earthly rain and battered by earthly wind from the heart of an equinoctial storm; the mighty universe outside, breaking with wondrous, incredible impossibilities upon a mind that listened and a mind that could not hear; and upstairs, separated from them by a few carpenter's boards, an assortment of "souls," either derelict and ruined, or gifted supernormally, masters of space and time perhaps, yet all waiting to be healed by the best knowledge known to the race — and one among them, about whom the conflict raged ... sound asleep ... while wind and water stormed, while lightning fires lit the distant horizons, while the great sun lay hidden, and darkness crept soundlessly to and fro....

"Have you still the slightest doubt, Paul?" repeated Fillery. "You know the evidence. You have an open mind."

Then Devonham, still standing over his Chief, let out the storm that had accumulated in him over-long. He talked like a book. He talked like several books. It seemed almost that he distrusted his own personal judgment.

"Edward," he began solemnly — not knowing that he quoted— "you, above all men, understand the lower recesses of the human heart, that gloomy, gigantic oubliette in which our million ancestors writhe together inextricably, and each man’s planetary past is buried alive — —”

Fillery nodded quietly his acquiescence.

“You, of all men, know our packed, limitless subterranean life,” Devonham went on, “and its impenetrable depths. You understand telepathy, ‘extended telepathy’ as well, and how a given mind may tap not only forgotten individual memories, but memories of his family, his race, even planetary memories into the bargain, the memory, in fact, of every being that ever lived, right down to Adam, if you will — —”

“Agreed,” murmured the other, listening patiently, while he puffed his pipe and heard the rain and wind. “I know all that. I know it, at any rate, as a possible theory.”

“You also know,” continued Devonham in a slightly less strident tone, “your own — forgive me, Edward — your own idiosyncrasies, your weaknesses, your dynamic accumulated repressions, your strange physical heritage and spiritual — I repeat the phrase — your spiritual vagrancies towards — towards — —” He broke off suddenly, unable to find the words he wanted.

“I’m illegitimate, born of a pagan passion,” mentioned the other calmly. “In that sense, if you like, I have in me a ‘complex’ against the race, against humanity — as such.”

He smiled patiently, and it was the patience, the evident conviction of superiority that exasperated his cautious, accurate colleague.

“If I love humanity, I also tolerate it perhaps, for I try to heal it,” added Fillery. “But, believe me, Paul, I do not lose my scientific judgment.”

“Edward,” burst out the other, “how can you think it possible, then — that *he* is other than the result of tendencies transmitted by his mad parents, or acquired from Mason, who taught him all he knows, or — if you will — that he has these hysterical faculties — supernormal as we may call them — which tap some racial, even, if you will, some planetary past — —”

He again broke off, unable to express his whole thought, his entire emotion, in a few words.

"I accept all that," said Fillery, still calmly, quietly, "but perhaps now — in the interest of truth" — his tone was grave, his words obviously chosen carefully— "if now I feel it necessary to go beyond it! My strange heritage," he added, "is even possibly a help and guide. How," he asked, a trace of passion for the first time visible in his manner, "shall we venture — how decide — for we are not wholly ignorant, you and I — between what is possible and impossible? Is this trivial planet, then," he asked, his voice rising suddenly, ominously perhaps, "our sole criterion? Dare we not venture — beyond — a little? The scientific mind should be the last to dogmatize as to the possibilities of this life of ours...."

The authority of chief, the old tie of respectful and affectionate friendship, the admiring wonder that pertained to a daring speculator who had often proved himself right in face of violent opposition — all these affected Devonham. He did not weaken, but for an instant he knew, perhaps, the existence of a vast, incredible horizon in his friend's mind, though one he dared not contemplate. Possibly, he understood in this passing moment a huger world, a new outlook that scorned limit, though yet an outlook that his accurate, smaller spirit shrank from.

He found, at any rate, his own words futile. "You remember," he offered —"'We need only suppose the continuity of our own consciousness with a mother sea, to allow for exceptional waves occasionally pouring over the dam.'"

"Good, yes," said Fillery. "But that 'mother sea,' what may it not include? Dare we set limits to it?"

And, as he said it, Fillery, emotion visible in him, rose suddenly from his chair. He stood up and faced his colleague.

"Let us come to the point," he said in a clear, steady voice. "It all lies — doesn't it? — in that question you asked — —"

"*Who?*" came at once from Devonham's lips, as he stood, looking oddly stiff and rigid opposite his Chief. There was a touch of defiance in his tone. "*Who?*" He repeated his original question.

No pause intervened. Fillery's reply came sharp and firm:

"'N. H.,' " he said.

An interval of silence followed, then, between the two men, as they looked into each other's eyes. Fillery waited for his assistant to speak, but no word came.

"LeVallon," the older man continued, "is the transient, acquired personality. It does not interest us. There is no real LeVallon. The sole reality is— 'N. H.'"

He spoke with the earnestness of deep conviction. There was still no reply or comment from the other.

"Paul," he continued, steadying his voice and placing a hand upon his colleague's shoulder, "I am going to ask you to — consider our arrangement — cancelled. I must — —"

Then, before he could finish what he had to say, the other had said it for him:

"Edward, I give you back your promise."

He shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly, but there was no unpleasant, no antagonistic touch now either in voice or manner. There was, rather, a graver earnestness than there had been hitherto, a hint of reluctant acquiescence, but also there was an emotion that included certainly affection. No such fundamental disagreement had ever come between them during all their years of work together. "You understand," he added slowly, "what you are doing — what is involved." His tone almost suggested that he spoke to a patient, a loved patient, but one over whom he had no control. He sighed.

"I belong, Paul, myself to the unstable — if that is what you mean," said his old friend gently, "and with all of danger, or of wonder, it involves."

The faint movement of the shoulders again was noticeable. "We need not put it that way, Edward," was the quiet rejoinder; "for that, if true, can only help your insight, your understanding, and your judgment." He hesitated a moment or two, searching his mind carefully for words. Fillery waited. "But it involves — I think" — he went on presently in a firmer voice— "*his* fate as well. He must become permanently — one or other."

No pause followed. There was a smile of curious happiness on Fillery's face as he instantly answered in a tone of absolute conviction:

“There lies the root of our disagreement, Paul. There is no ‘other.’ I am positive for once. There is only one, and that one is— ‘N. H.’”

“Umph!” his friend grunted. Behind the exclamation hid an attitude confirmed, as though he had come suddenly to a big decision.

“You see, Paul — I *know*.”

CHAPTER XVII

IT WAS NOT long after the scene in the Studio that the Prometheans foregathered at dinner in the back room of the small French restaurant in Soho and discussed the event. The prices were moderate, conditions free and easy. It was a favourite haunt of Members.

To-night, moreover, there was likely to be a good attendance. The word had gone out.

The Studio scene had, of course, been the subject of much discussion already. The night of its occurrence it had been talked over till dawn in more than one flat, and during the following days the Society, as a whole, thought of little else. Those who had not been present had to be informed, and those who had witnessed it found it an absorbing topic of speculation. The first words that passed when one member met another in the street was: “What *did* you make of that storm? Wasn’t it amazing? Did your solar plexus vibrate? Mine did! And the light, the colour, the vibrations — weren’t they terrific? What do you think *he* is?” It was rumoured that the Secretary was asking for individual reports. Excitement and interest were general, though the accounts of individual witnesses differed extraordinarily. It seemed impossible that all had seen and heard the same thing.

The back room was pleasantly filled to-night, for it was somehow known that Millington Povey, and possibly Father Collins, too, were coming. Miss Milligan, the astrologist, was there early, arriving with Mrs. Towzer, who saw auras and had already, it was rumoured, painted automatically a strange rendering of “forces” that were visible to her clairvoyantly during the occurrence. Miss Lance, in shining beads and a glittering scarf, arrived on their heels, an account of the scene in her pocket — to be published in her magazine “Simplicity” after she had modified it according to what she picked up from hearing other, and better, descriptions.

Kempster, immaculate as ever, ordering his food as he ordered his clothes, like a connoisseur, was one of the first to establish himself in a comfortable seat. He knew how to look after himself, and was already eating in his neat dainty way while the others still stood about studying the big white *menu* with its illegible hieroglyphics in smudged violet ink. He supplemented his meals with special patent foods of vegetarian kind he brought with him. He had dried bananas in one pocket and spirit photographs in another, and he was invariably pulling out the wrong thing. Meat he avoided. “A man is what he eats,” he held, and animal blood was fatal to psychic development. To eat pig or cow was to absorb undesirable characteristics.

Next to him sat Lattimer, a lanky man of thirty, with loose clothes, long hair, and eyes of strange intensity. Known as “occultist and alchemist,” he was also a chemist of some repute. His life was ruled by a master-desire and a master-fear: the former, that he might one day project his double consciously; the latter, that in his next earthly incarnation he might be — the prospect made him shudder — a woman. He sought to keep his thought as concrete as possible, the male quality.

He believed that the nervous centre of the physical body which controlled all such unearthly, if not definitely “spiritual,” impulses, was the solar plexus. For him it was *the* important portion of his anatomy, the seat of intuition. Brain came second.

“The fellow,” he declared emphatically, “stirred my solar plexus, my *kundalini* — that’s all I know.” He referred, as all understood, to the latent power the *yogis* claim lies coiled, but only rarely manifested, in that great nervous centre.

His statement, he knew, would meet with general approval and understanding. It was the literal Kempster who spoiled his opening:

“Paul Devonham,” said the latter, “thinks it’s merely a secondary personality that emerged. I had a long argument with him about it — —”

“Never argue with the once-born,” declared Povey flatly, producing his pet sentence. “It’s waste of time. Only older souls, with the experience of many earthly lives stored in their beings, are knowledgeable.” He filled his glass and poured out for others, Lattimer and Mrs. Towzer alone declining, though for different reasons.

“It destroys the ‘sight,’” explained the former. “Alcohol sets up coarse vibrations that ruin clairvoyance.”

“I decided to deny myself till the war is over,” was Mrs. Towzer’s reason, and when Povey reminded her of the armistice, she mentioned that Turkey hadn’t “signed yet.”

“I think his soul — —” began Miss Lance.

“If he *has* a soul,” put in Povey, electrically.

“ — is hardly in his body at all,” concluded Miss Lance, less convincingly than originally intended.

“It was love at first sight. His sign is Fire and hers is Air,” Miss Milligan said. “That’s certain. *Of course* they came together.”

“A clear case of memory, at any rate,” insisted Kempster. “Two old souls meeting again for the first time for thousands of years, probably. Love at first sight, or hate, for that matter, is always memory, isn’t it?” He disliked the astrology explanation; it was not mysterious enough, too mathematical and exact to please him.

“Secondary personalities *are* invariably memories of former selves, of course,” agreed young Dickson, the theosophist, who was on the verge now of becoming a psycho-analyst and had already discarded Freud for Jung. “If not memories of past lives, then they’re desires suppressed in this one.”

“The less you think, the more you know,” suggested Miss Lance. She distrusted intellect and believed that another faculty, called instinct or intuition, according to which word first occurred to her, was the way to knowledge. She was about to quote Bergson upside down, when Povey, foreseeing an interval of boredom, took command:

“One thing we know, at any rate,” he began judiciously; “we aren’t the only beings in the universe. There are non-human intelligences, both vast and small. The old world-wide legends can’t be built on nothing. In every age of history — the reports are universal — we have pretty good evidence for other forms of life than humans — —”

“Though never yet in human *form*,” put in Lattimer, yet sympathetically. “Their bodies, I mean, aren’t human,” he added.

“Exactly. That’s true. But the gods, the fauns, the satyrs, the elemental beings, as we call ’em — sylphs, undines, gnomes and salamanders — to say nothing of fairies et hoc genus omne — there must be *some* reasonable foundation for their persistence through all the ages."

"They all belong to the *Deva* Evolution," Dickson mentioned with conviction. "In the East it's been known and recognized for centuries, hasn't it? Another evolutionary system that runs parallel to ours. From planetary spirits down to elementals, they're concerned with the building up of form in the various kingdoms — —"

"Yes, yes," Povey interrupted impatiently. Dickson was stealing what he had meant to say himself and to say, he flattered himself, far better. "We know all *that*, of course. They stand behind what we call the laws of nature, non-human activities and intelligences of every grade and kind. They work for humanity in a way, are in other space and time, deathless, of course, yet — in some strange way, always eager to cross the gulf fixed between the two and so find a soul. They are impersonal in a sense, as impersonal as, say, wind and fire through which some of them operate as bodies."

He paused and looked about him, noting the interested attention he awaked.

"There *may* be times," he went on, "there probably *are* certain occasions, when the gulf is more crossable than others." He laid down his knife and fork as a sympathetic murmur proved that the point he was leading up to was favourably understood already. "We have had this war, for instance," he stated, his voice taking on a more significant and mysterious tone. "Dislodged by the huge upheaval, man's soul is on the march again." He paused once more. "*They*," he concluded, lowering his voice still more, and emphasizing the pronoun, "are possibly already among us! Who knows?"

He glanced round. "We do; we know," was the expression on most faces. All knew precisely what he meant and to whom he referred, at any rate.

"You might get him to come and lecture to us," said Dickson, the first to break the pause. "You might ask Dr. Fillery. *You* know him."

"That's an idea — —" began the Secretary, when there was a commotion near the door. His face showed annoyance.

It was the arrival of Toogood that at this moment disturbed the atmosphere and robbed Povey of the effect he aimed at. It provided Kempster, however, with an idea at the same time. "Here's a psychometrist!" he exclaimed, making room for him. “He might get a bit of his hair or clothing and psychometrize it. He might tell us about his past, if not exactly *what* he is.”

The suggestion, however, found no seconder, for it seemed that the new arrival was not particularly welcomed. Judging by the glances, the varying shades of greeting, too, he was not fully trusted, perhaps, this broad, fleshy man of thirty-five, with complexion blotchy, an over-sensual mouth and eyes a trifle shifty. His claim to membership was two-fold: he remembered past lives, and had the strange power of psychometry. An archæologist by trade, his gift of psychometry — by which he claimed to hold an object and tell its past, its pedigree, its history — was of great use to him in his calling. Without further trouble he could tell whether such an object was genuine or sham. Dealers in antiquities offered him big fees — but “No, no; I cannot prostitute my powers, you see” — and he remained poor accordingly.

In his past lives he had been either a famous Pharaoh, or Cleopatra — according to his audience of the moment and its male or female character — but usually Cleopatra, because, on the whole, there was more money and less risk in her. He lectured — for a fee. Lately, however, he had been Pharaoh, having got into grave trouble over the Cleopatra claim, even to the point of being threatened with expulsion from the Society. His attitude during the war, besides, had been unsatisfactory — it was felt he had selfishly protected himself on the grounds of being physically unfit. Apart from archæology, too, his chief preoccupation, derived from past lives of course, was sex, in the form of other men’s wives, his own wife and children being, naturally, very recent and somewhat negligible ties.

His gift of psychometry, none the less, was considered proved — in spite of the backward and indifferent dealers. His mind was quick and not unsubtle. He became now au fait with the trend of the conversation in a very few seconds, but he had not been present at the Studio when the occurrence all discussed had taken place.

“Hair would be best,” he advised tentatively, sipping his whisky-and-soda. He had already dined. “It’s a part of himself, you see. Better than mere clothing, I mean. It’s extremely vital, hair. It grows after death.”

“If I can get it for you, I will,” said Povey. “He may be lecturing for us before long. I’ll try.”

“With psychometry and a good photograph,” Kempster suggested, “a time exposure, if possible, we ought to get *some* evidence, at any rate. It’s first-hand evidence we want, of course, isn’t it? What do you think of this, for instance, I wonder?” He turned to Lattimer, drawing something from his pocket and showing it. “It’s a time exposure at night of a haunted tree. You’ll notice a queer sort of elemental form *inside* the trunk and branches. Oh!” He replaced the shrivelled banana in his pocket, and drew out the photograph without a smile. “This,” he explained, waving it, “is what I meant.” They fell to discussing it.

Meanwhile, Povey, anxious to resume his lecture, made an effort to recover his command of the group-atmosphere which Toogood had disturbed. The latter had a “personal magnetism” which made the women like him in spite of their distrust.

“I was just saying,” he resumed, patting the elbow of the psychometrist, “that this strange event we’ve been discussing — you weren’t present, I believe, at the time, but, of course, you’ve heard about it — has features which seem to point to something radically new, or at least of very rare occurrence. As Lattimer mentioned, a human body has never yet, so far as we know, been occupied, obsessed, by a non-human entity, but that, after all, is no reason why it should not ever happen. What is a body, anyhow? What is an entity, too?” Povey’s thought was wandering, evidently; the thread of his first discourse was broken; he floundered. “Man, anyway, is more than a mere chemical machine,” he went on, “a crystallization of the primitive nebulæ, though the instrument he uses, the body he works through, is undoubtedly thus describable. Now, we know there are all kinds of non-human intelligences busy on our planet, in the Universe itself as well. Why, then, I ask, should not one of these —— ?”

He paused, unable to find himself, his confusion obvious. He was as glad of the interruption that was then provided by the arrival of Imson as his audience was. Toogood certainly was not sorry; he need find no immediate answer. He sipped his drink and made mental notes.

Imson arrived in a rough brown ulster with the collar turned up about his ears, a low flannel shirt, not strictly clean, lying loosely round his neck. His colourless face was of somewhat flabby texture, due probably to his diet, but its simple, honest expression was attractive, the smile engaging. The touch of foolishness might have been childlike innocence, even saintliness some thought, and though he was well over forty, the unlined skin made him look more like thirty. He enjoyed a physiognomy not unlike that of a horse or sheep. His big, brown eyes stared wide open at the world, expecting wonder and finding it. His hobby was inspirational poems. One lay in his breast pocket now. He burned to read it aloud.

Pat Imson's ideal was an odd one — detachment; the desire to avoid all ties that must bring him back to future incarnations on the earth, to eschew making fresh Karma, in a word. He considered himself an "old soul," and was rather weary of it all — of existence and development, that is. To take no part in life meant to escape from those tangles for whose unravelling the law of rebirth dragged the soul back again and again. To sow no Causes was to have no harvest of Effects to reap with toil and perspiration. Action, of course, there must be, but "indifference to results of action" was the secret. Imson, none the less, was always entangled with wives and children. Having divorced one wife, and been divorced by another, he had recently married a third; a flock of children streamed behind him; he was a good father, if a strange husband.

"It's old Karma I have to work off," he would explain, referring to the wives. "If I avoid the experience I shall only have to come back again. There's no good shirking old Karma." He gave this explanation to the wives themselves, not only to his friends. "Face it and it's done with, worked off, you see." That is, it had to be done nicely, kindly, generously.

An entire absence of the sense of humour was, of course, his natural gift, yet a certain quaint wisdom helped to fill the dangerous vacuum. He was known usually as "Pat."

"Come on, Pat," said Povey, making room for him at his side. "How's Karma? We're just talking about LeVallon and the Studio business. What do you make of it? You were there, weren't you?" The others listened, attentively, for Imson had a reputation for "seeing true."

"I saw it, yes," replied Imson, ordering his dinner with indifference — soup, fried potatoes, salad, cheese and coffee — but declining the offered wine. The group waited for his next remark, but none was forthcoming. He sat crumbling his bread into the soup and stirring the mixture with his spoon.

"Did you see the light about him, Mr. Imson?" asked Miss Lance. "The brilliant aura of golden yellow that he wore? *I* thought — it sounds exaggerated, I know — but to me it seemed even brighter than the lightning. Did you notice it?"

"Well," said Imson slowly, putting his spoon down. "I'm not often clairvoyant, you know. I did notice, however, a sort of radiance about him. But with hair like that, it's difficult to be certain — —"

"Full of lovely patterns," said Mrs. Towzer. "Geometrical patterns."

"Like astrological designs," mentioned Miss Milligan. "He's Leo, of course — fire."

"Almost as though he brought or caused the lightning — as if it actually emanated out of his atmosphere somehow," claimed Miss Lance, for it was *her* conversation after all.

"I saw nothing of that," replied Imson quietly. "No, I can't say I saw anything *exactly* like that." He added honestly, with his engaging smile that had earned for him in some quarters the nickname of "The Sheep": "I was looking at Nayan, you see, most of the time."

A smile flickered round the table, for rumour had it that the girl had once seemed to him as possible "Karma."

"So was I," put in Kempster with kindly intention, though his sympathy was evidently not needed. Imson was too simple even to feel embarrassment. "She came to life suddenly for the first time since I've known her. It was amazing." To which Imson, busy over his salad-dressing, made no reply.

Povey, lighting his pipe and puffing out thick clouds of smoke, was cleverer. "LeVallon's effect upon her, whatever it was, seemed instantaneous," he informed the table. "I never saw a clearer case of two souls coming together in a flash."

"As I said just now," Kempster quickly mentioned.

"They are similar," said Imson, looking up, while the group waited expectantly.

"Similar," repeated Kempster. "Ah!"

"It was the surprise in her face that struck me most," observed Povey quickly, making an internal note of Imson's adjective, but knowing that indirect methods would draw him out better than point-blank questions. "LeVallon showed it too. It was an unexpected recognition on both sides. They are 'similar,' as you say; both at the same stage of development, whatever that stage may be. The expression on both faces — —"

"Escape," exclaimed Imson, giving at last the kernel of what he had to say. And the effect upon the group was electrical. A visible thrill ran round the Soho table.

"The very word," exclaimed Povey and Miss Lance together. "Escape!" But neither of them knew exactly what they meant, nor what Imson himself meant.

"LeVallon has, of course, already escaped," the latter went on quietly. "He is no longer caught by causes and effects as we are here. He's got out of it all long ago — if he was ever in it at all."

"If he ever was in it at all," said Povey quickly. "You noticed that too. You're very discerning, Pat."

"Clairvoyant," mentioned Miss Lance.

"I've seen them in dreams like that," returned Imson calmly. "I often see them, of course." He referred to his qualification for membership. "The great figures I see in dream have just that unearthly expression."

"Unearthly," said Mrs. Towzer with excitement.

"Non-human," mentioned Kempster suggestively.

"Not of this world, anyhow," suggested Miss Lance mysteriously.

"Divine?" inquired Miss Milligan below her breath.

"Really," murmured Toogood, "I must get a bit of his hair and psychometrize it at once." He was sipping a second glass of whisky.

Imson looked round at each face in turn, apparently seeing nothing that need increase his attachment to the planet by way of fresh Karma.

"The *Deva* world," he said briefly, after a pause. "Probably he's come to take Nayan off with him. She — I always said so — has a strong strain of the elemental kingdom in her. She may be his *Devi*. LeVallon, I'm sure, is here for the first time. He's one of the non-human evolution. He's slipped in. A *Deva* himself probably." It was as though he said that the waiter was Swiss or French, or that the proprietor's daughter had Italian blood in her.

Povey looked round him with an air of triumph.

"Ah!" he announced, as who should say, "You all thought my version a bit wild, but here's confirmation from an unbiased witness."

"Oh, well, I can't be certain," Imson reminded the group. If he deceived them enough to change their lives in any respect, it involved fresh Karma for himself. Care was indicated. "I can't be positive, can I?" he hedged. "Only — I must say — the great deva-figures I've seen in dream have exactly that look and expression."

"That's interesting, Pat," Povey put in, "because, before you came, I was suggesting a similar explanation for his air of immense potential power. The elemental atmosphere he brought — we all noticed it, of course."

"Elemental *is* the only word," Miss Lance inserted. "A great Nature Being." She was thinking of her magazine. "He struck me as being so close to Nature that he seemed literally part of it."

"That would explain the lightning and the strange cry he gave about 'messengers,'" replied Imson, wiping the oil from his chin and sprinkling his *petit suisse* with powdered sugar. "It's quite likely enough."

"I wish you'd jot down what you think — a little report of what you saw and felt," the Secretary mentioned. "It would be of great value. I thought of making a collection of the different versions and accounts."

"They might be published some day," thought Miss Lance. "Let's all," she added aloud with emphasis.

Imson nodded agreement, making no audible reply, while the conversation ran on, gathering impetus as it went, growing wilder possibly, but also more picturesque. A man in the street, listening behind a curtain, must have deemed the talkers suffering from delusion, mad; a good psychologist, on the other hand, similarly screened, and knowing the antecedent facts, the Studio scene, at any rate, must have been struck by one outstanding detail — the effect, namely, upon one and all of the person they discussed. They had seen him for an hour or so among a crowd, a young man whose name they hardly knew; only a few had spoken to him; there had been, it seemed, neither time nor opportunity for him to produce upon one and all the impression he undoubtedly had produced. For in every mind, upon every heart, LeVallon's mere presence had evidently graven an unforgettable image, scored an undecipherable hieroglyph. Each felt, it seemed, the hint of a personality their knowledge could not explain, nor any earthly explanation satisfy. The consciousness in each one, perhaps, had been quickened. Hence, possibly, the extravagance of their conversation. Yet, since all reported differently, collective hysteria seemed discounted.

Meanwhile, as the talk continued, and the wings of imaginative speculation fanned the thick tobacco smoke, others had dropped in, both male and female members, and the group now filled the little room to the walls. The same magnet drew them all, in each heart burned the same huge question mark: Who — what — is this LeVallon? What was the meaning of the scene in Khilkoff's Studio?

Here, too, was a curious and significant fact about the gathering — the amount of knowledge, true or otherwise, they had managed to collect about LeVallon. One way or another, no one could say exactly how, the Society had picked up an astonishing array of detail they now shared together. It was known where he had spent his youth, also how, and with whom, as well as something of the different views about him held by Dr. Devonham and Edward Fillery. To such temperaments as theirs the strange, the unusual, came automatically perhaps, percolating into their minds as though a collective power of thought-reading operated. Garbled, fanciful, askew, their information may have been, but a great deal of it was not far wrong.

Imson, for instance, provided an account of LeVallon's birth, to which all listened spellbound. He evaded all questions as to how he knew of it. "His parents," he assured the room, "practised the old forgotten magic; his father, at any rate, was an expert, if not an initiate, with all the rites and formulæ of ancient times in his memory. LeVallon was born as the result of an experiment, its origins dating back so far that they concerned life upon another planet, I believe, a planet nearer to the sun. The tremendous winds and heat were vehicles of deity, you see — *there*."

"The parents, you mean, had former lives upon another planet?" asked someone in a hushed tone. "Or he himself?"

"The parents — and Mason. Mason was involved in the experiment that resulted in the birth of LeVallon here to-day."

"The experiment — what was it exactly?" inquired Lattimer, while Toogood surreptitiously made notes on his rather dirty cuff.

Imson shrugged his shoulders very slightly.

"Some of it came to me in sleep," he mentioned, producing a paper from his pocket and beginning to read it aloud before anyone could stop him.

"When the sun was younger, and moon and stars

Were thrilled with my human birth,

And the winds fled shouting the wondrous news

As they circled the sea and the earth,

"From the fight for money and worldly fame

I drew one magical soul

Who came to me over the star-lit sea

As the needle turns to the Pole.

"Conceived in the hour the stars foretold,

This son of the winds I bore,

And I taught him the secrets of — —"

"Yes," interrupted Povey audaciously, "but the experiment you were telling us about —— ?"

A murmur of approving voices helped him.

"Oh, the experiment, yes, well — all I know is," he went on with conviction, calmly replacing the poem in his pocket, "that it concerned an old rite, involving the evocation of some elemental being or nature-spirit the three of them had already evoked millions of years before, but had not banished again. The experiment they made to-day was to restore it to its proper sphere. In order to do so, they had to evoke it again, and, of course"

— he glanced round, as though all present were familiar with the formula of magical practices— "it could come only through the channel of a human system."

"Of course, yes," murmured a dozen voices, while eyes grew bigger and a pin dropping must have been audible.

"Well" — Imson spoke very slowly now, each word clear as a bell— "the father, who was officiating, failed. He could not stand the strain. His heart stopped beating. He died — just when *it* was there, he dropped dead."

"What happened to *it*?" asked Povey, too interested to care that he no longer led the room. "You said it could only use a human system as channel — —"

"It did so," explained Imson.

The information produced a pause of several seconds. Some of the members, like Toogood, though openly, were making pencil notes upon cuffs or backs of envelopes.

"But the channel was neither Mason nor the woman." The effect of this negative information was as nothing compared to the startling interest produced by the speaker's next words: "It took the easiest channel, the line of least resistance — the unborn body of the child."

Povey, seizing his opportunity, leaped into the silence:

"Whose body, now full grown, and named LeVallon, came to the Studio!" he exclaimed, looking round at the group, as though he had himself given the explanation all had just listened to. "A human body tenanted by a nature-spirit, one of the form-builders — a *Deva*...."

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR ALL THE wildness of the talk, this group of the Unstable was a coherent and consistent entity, using a language each item in it understood. They knew what they were after. Alcohol, coffee, tobacco, underfeeding, these helped or hindered, respectively, the expression of an ideal that, nevertheless, was common to them all; and if the minds represented were unbalanced, or merely speculative, poetic, one genuine quest and sympathy bound all together into a coherent, and who shall say unintelligent or valueless, unit. The unstable enjoyed an extreme sensitiveness to varied experience, with flexible adaptability to all possible new conditions, whereas the stable, with their rigid mental organizations, remained uninformed, stagnant, even fossilized.

In other rooms about the great lamp-lit city sat, doubtless, other similar groups at the very same moment, discussing the shibboleths of other faiths, of other dreams, of other ideas, systems, notions, philosophies, all interpretative of the earth in which little humanity dwells, cut off and isolated, apparently, from the rest of the stupendous universe. A listener, screened from view, a listener not in sympathy with the particular group he observed, and puzzled, therefore, by the language used, must have deemed he listened to harmless, if boring, madness. For each group uses its own language, and the lowest common denominator, though plainly printed in the world's old scriptures, has not yet become adopted by the world at large.

Into this particular group, a little later in the evening, and when the wings of imagination had increased their sweep a trifle dangerously perhaps — into the room, like the arrival of a policeman rather, dropped Father Collins. He came rarely to the Prometheans' restaurant. There was a general sense of drawing breath as he appeared. A pause followed. Something of the cold street air came with him. He wore his big black felt hat, his shabby opera cloak, and clutched firmly — he had no gloves on — the heavy gnarled stick he had cut for his collection in a Cingalese forest years ago, when he was studying with a Buddhist priest. The folds of his voluminous cloak, as he took it off, sent the hanging smoke-clouds in a whirl. His personality stirred the mental atmosphere as well. The women looked up and stared, respectful welcome in their eyes; several of the men rose to shake hands; there was a general shuffling of chairs.

"Bring another *moulin à vent* and a clean glass," Povey said at once to the hovering waiter.

"It's raw and bitter in the street and a fog coming down thickly," mentioned Father Collins. He exhaled noisily and with comfortable relief, as he squeezed himself towards the chair Povey placed for him and looked round genially, nodding and shaking hands with those he knew. "But you're warm and cosy enough in here" — he sat down with unexpected heaviness, and smiled at everybody— "and well fed, too, I'll be bound."

"'The body must be comfortable before the mind can enjoy itself,'" said Phillipps, an untidy member who disliked asceticism. "Starvation produces hallucination, not vision." His glance took in the unused glasses. His qualification was a vision of an uncle at the moment of death, and the uncle had left him money. He had written a wordy pamphlet describing it.

"I'll have an omelette, then, I think," Father Collins told the waiter, as the red wine arrived. "And some fried potatoes. A bit of cheese to follow, and coffee, yes." He filled his glass. He had not come to argue or to preach, and Phillipps's challenge passed unnoticed. Phillipps, who had been leading the talk of late, resented the new arrival, but felt his annoyance modify as he saw his own glass generously filled. Povey, too, accepted a glass, while saying with a false vehemence, "No, no," his finger against the rim.

A change stole over the room, for the new personality was not negligible; he brought his atmosphere with him. The wild talk, it was felt now, would not be quite suitable. Father Collins had the reputation of being something of a scholar; they were not quite sure of him; none knew him very intimately; he had a rumoured past as well that lent a flavour of respect. One story had it that "dabbling in magic" had lost him his position in the Church. Yet he was deemed an asset to the Society.

Whatever it was, the key changed sharply. Imson's eyes and ears grew wider, the hand of Miss Lance went instinctively to her hair and combs, Miss Milligan sought through her mind for a remark at once instructive and uncommon, Mrs. Towzer looked past him searchingly lest his aura escape her before she caught its colour, and Kempster, smoothing his immaculate coat, had an air of being in his present surroundings merely by chance. Toogood, quickly scanning his notes, wondered whether, if called upon, he was to be Pharaoh or Cleopatra. One and all, that is, took on a soberer gait. This semi-clerical visit complicated. The presence of Father Collins was a compliment. What he had to say — about LeVallon and the Studio scene — was, anyhow, assured of breathless interest.

Povey led off. "We were just talking over the other night," he observed, "the night at the Studio, you remember. The storm and so on. It was a singular occurrence, though, of course, we needn't, we *mustn't* exaggerate it." And while he thus, as Secretary, set the note, Father Collins sipped his wine and beamed upon the group. He made no comment. "You were there, weren't you?" continued Povey, sipping his own comforting glass. "I think I saw you. Fillery, you may have noticed," he added, "brought — a friend."

"LeVallon, yes," said the other in a tone that startled them. "A most unusual fellow, wasn't he?" He was attacking the omelette now. "A Greek God, if ever I saw one," he added. And the silence in the crowded room became abruptly noticeable. Miss Milligan, feeling her zodiacal garter slipping, waited to pull it up. Imson's brown eyes grew wider. Kempster held his breath. Toogood borrowed a cigar and waited for someone to offer him a match before he lit it.

"Delicious," added Father Collins. "Cooked to a turn." The omelette slid about his plate.

But the silence continued, and he realized the position suddenly. Emptying his glass and casually refilling it, he turned and faced the eager group about him.

"You want to know what *I* thought about it all," he said. "You've been discussing LeVallon, Nayan and the rest, I see." He looked round as though he were in the lost pulpit that was his right. After a pause he asked point blank: "And what do *you* all think of it? How did it strike you all? For myself, I confess" — he took another sip and paused— "I am full of wonder and question," he finished abruptly.

It was Imson, the fearless, wondering Pat Imson, who first found his tongue.

“We think,” he ventured, “LeVallon is probably of *Deva* origin.”

The others, while admiring his courage, seemed unsympathetic suddenly. Such phraseology, probably meaningless to the respected guest, was out of place. Eyes were cast down, or looked generally elsewhere. Povey, remembering that the Society was not solely Eastern, glared at the speaker. Father Collins, however, was not perturbed.

“Possibly,” he remarked with a courteous smile. “The origin of us all is doubtful and confused. We know not whence we come, of course, and all that. Nor can we ever tell exactly who our neighbour is, or what. LeVallon,” he went on, “since you all ask me” — he looked round again— “is — for me — an undecipherable being. I am,” he added, his words falling into open mouths and extended eyes and ears, “somewhat puzzled. But more — I am enormously stimulated and intrigued.”

All gazed at him. Father Collins was in his element. The rapt silence that met him was precisely what he had a right to expect from his lost pulpit. He had come, probably, merely to listen and to watch. The opportunity provided by a respectful audience was too much for him. An inspiration tempted him.

“I am inclined to believe,” he resumed suddenly in a simple tone, “that he is — a Messenger.”

The sentence might have dropped from Sirius upon a listening planet. The babble that followed must, to an ordinary man, have seemed confusion. Everyone spoke with a rush into his neighbour’s ear. All bubbled. “I always thought so, I told you so, that was exactly what I meant just now” — and so on. All found their tongues, at any rate, if Povey, as Secretary, led the turmoil:

“Something outside our normal evolution, you mean?” he asked judiciously. “Such a conception is possible, of course.”

“A Messenger!” ran on the babel of male and female voices.

It was here that Father Collins failed. The “unstable” in him came suddenly uppermost. The “ecstatic” in his being took the reins. The wondering and expectant audience suited him. The red wine helped as well. When he said “Messenger” he had meant merely someone who brought a message. The expression of nobility merged more and more in the slovenly aspect. Like a priest in the pulpit, whom none can answer and to whom all must listen, he had his text, though that text had been suggested actually by the conversation he had just heard. He had not brought it with him. It occurred to him merely then and there. His mind reflected, in a word, the collective idea that was in the air about him, and he proceeded to sum it up and give expression to it. This was his gift, his fatal gift — a ready sensitiveness, a plausible exposition. He caught the prevailing mood, the collective notion, then dramatized it. Before he left the pulpit he invariably, however, convinced himself that what he had said in it was true, inspired, a revelation — for that moment.

“A Messenger,” he announced, thrusting his glass aside with an impatient gesture as though noticing for the first time that it was there. “A Messenger,” he repeated, the automatic emphasis in his voice already persuading him that he believed what he was about to say, “sent among us from who knows what distant sphere” — he drew himself up and looked about him— “and for who can guess on what mysterious and splendid mission.”

His eye swept his audience, his hand removed the glass yet farther lest, it impede free gesture. It was, however, as Povey noticed, empty now. “We, of course,” he went on impressively, lowering his voice, “*we*, a mere handful in the world, but alert and watchful, all of us — we know that some great new teaching is expected” — he threw out another challenging glance— “but none of us can know whence it may come nor in what way it shall manifest.” His voice dropped dramatically. “Whether as a thief in the night, or with a blare of trumpets, none of us can tell. But — we expect it and are ready. To *us*, therefore, perhaps, as to the twelve fishermen of old, may be entrusted the privilege of accepting it, the work of spreading it among a hostile and unbelieving world, even perhaps the final sacrifice of — of suffering for it.”

He paused, quickly took in the general effect of his words, picked up here and there a hint of question, and realized that he had begun on too exalted a note. Detecting this breath of caution in the collective mind that was his inspiration, he instantly shifted his key.

“LeVallon,” he resumed, instinctively emphasizing the conviction in his voice so that the change of key might be less noticeable, “undoubtedly —

believes himself to be — some such divine Messenger....” It was consummate hedging.

The sermon needs no full report. The audience, without realizing it, witnessed what is known as an “inspirational address,” where a speaker, naturally gifted with a certain facile eloquence, gathers his inspiration, takes his changing cues as well, from the collective mind that listens to him. Father Collins, quite honestly doubtless, altered his key automatically. He no longer said that LeVallon *was* a Messenger, but that he “believed himself” to be one. Like Balaam, he said things he had not at first thought of saying. He talked for some ten minutes without stopping. He said “all sorts of things,” according to the expression of critical doubt, of wonder, of question, of rejection or acceptance, on the particular face he gazed at. At regular intervals he inserted, with considerable effect, his favourite sentence: “A man in his *own* place is the Ruler of his Fate.”

He developed his idea that LeVallon “believed himself to be such and such ...” but declared that the conception had been put into the youth during his life of exile in the mountains — the Society had already acquired this information and extended it — and had “*felt himself into*” the rôle until he had become its actual embodiment.

“He does not think, he does not reason,” he explained. “He feels — he *feels with*. Now, to ‘feel with’ anything is to become it in the end. It is the only way of true knowledge, of course, of true understanding. If I want to understand, say, an Arab, I must *feel with* that Arab to the point — for the moment — of actually becoming him. And this strange youth has spent his time, his best years, mark you — his creative years, *feeling with* the elemental forces of Nature until he has actually becomes — at moments — one with them.”

He paused again and stared about him. He saw faces shocked, astonished, startled, but not hostile. He continued rapidly: “There lies the danger. One may get caught, get stuck. Lose the desire to return to one’s normal self. Which means, of course, remaining out of relation with one’s environment — mad. Only a man in his *own* place is the ruler of his luck....”

He noticed suddenly the look of disappointment on several faces. He swiftly hedged.

“On the other hand,” he went on, making his voice and manner more impressive than before, “it may be — who can say indeed? — it may be that he is in relation with another environment altogether, a much vaster environment, an extended environment of which the rest of humanity is unaware. The privilege of tasting something of an extended environment some of us here already enjoy. What we all know as *human* activities are doubtless but a fragment of life — the conscious phenomena merely of some larger whole of which we are aware in fleeting seconds only — by mood, by hint, by suggestive hauntings, so to speak — by faint shadows of unfamiliar, nameless shape cast across our daily life from some intenser sun we normally cannot see! LeVallon may be, as some of us think and hope, a Messenger to show us the way into a yet farther field of consciousness....

“It is a fine, a noble, an inspiring hope, at any rate,” he assured the room. “Unless some such Messenger comes into the world, showing us how to extend our knowledge, we can get no farther; we shall never know more than we know now; we shall only go on multiplying our channels for observing the same old things....”

He closed his little address finally on a word as to what attitude should be adopted to any new experience of amazing and incredible kind. To a Society such as the one he had the honour of belonging to was left the guidance of the perverse and ignorant generations outside of it, “the lethargic and unresponsive majority,” as he styled them.

“We must not resist,” he declared bravely. “We must accept with confidence, above all without fear.” He leaned back in his chair, somewhat exhausted, for the source of his inspiration was evidently weakening. His words came less spontaneously, less easily; he hesitated, sighed, looked from face to face for help he did not find. His glass was empty. “We’re here,” he concluded lamely, “without being consulted, and we may safely leave to the Powers that brought us here the results of such acceptance.”

“Quite so,” agreed Povey, sighing audibly. “Denial will get us nowhere.” He filled up Father Collins’s glass and his own. “I think most of us are ready enough to accept any new experience that comes, and to accept it without fear.” He drained his own glass and looked about him. “But the point is — how did LeVallon produce the effect upon us all — the effect he did produce? He may be non-human, or he may be merely mad. He may, as

Imson says, come to us by some godless chance from another evolutionary system — of which, mind you, we have as yet no positive knowledge — or he may be a Messenger, as Father Collins suggests, from some divine source, bringing new teaching. But, in the name of Magic, how did he manage it? In other words — what is he?"

For Povey could be very ruthless when he chose. It was this ruthlessness, perhaps, that made him such an efficient secretary. The note of extravagance in his language had possibly another inspiration.

An awkward pause, at any rate, followed his remarks. Father Collins had comforted and blessed the group. Povey introduced cold water rather.

"There's this — and there's that," remarked Miss Milligan, tactfully.

"Those among us," added Miss Lance with sympathy, "who have The Sight, know at least what they have seen. Still, I think we are indebted to Father Collins for — his guidance."

"If we knew exactly what he is," mentioned Mrs. Towzer, referring to LeVallon, "we should know exactly where we are."

They got up to go. There was a fumbling among crowded hat-pegs.

"What is he?" offered Kempster. "He certainly made us all sit up and take notice."

"No mere earthly figure," suggested Imson, "could have produced the effect *he* did. In my poem — it came to me in sleep — —"

Father Collins held his glass unsteadily to the light. "A Messenger," he interrupted with authority, "would affect us all differently, remember."

The talk continued in this fashion for a considerable time, while all searched for wraps and coats. The waiter brought the bill amid general confusion, but no one noticed him. All were otherwise engaged. Povey paid it finally, putting it down to the Entertainment Account.

"Remember," he said, as they stood in a group on the restaurant steps, each wondering who would provide a lift home, "remember, we have all got to write out an account of what we saw and heard at the Studio. These reports will be valuable. They will appear in our 'Psychic Bulletin' first. Then I'll have them bound into a volume. And I shall try and get LeVallon to give us a lecture too. Tickets will be extra, of course, but each member can bring a friend. I’ll let you all know the date in due course.”

CHAPTER XIX

WHILE THE PROMETHEANS thus, individually and collectively fermenting, floundered between old and new interpretations of a strange occurrence, in another part of London something was happening, of its kind so real, so interesting, that one and all would eagerly have renounced a favourite shibboleth or pet desire to witness it. Kempster would have eaten a raw beefsteak, Lattimer have agreed to rebirth as a woman, Mrs. Towzer have swallowed whisky neat, and even Toogood have written a signed confession that his "psychometry," was intelligent guesswork.

It is the destiny, however, of such students of the wonderful to receive their data invariably at second or third hand; the data may deal with genuine occurrences, but the student seems never himself present at the time. From books, from reports, from accounts of someone who knew an actual witness, the student generally receives the version he then proceeds to study and elaborate.

In this particular instance, moreover, no version ever reached their ears at all, either at second or third hand, because the only witness of what happened was Edward Fillery, and he mentioned it to no one. Its reality, its interpretation likewise, remained authoritative only for that expert, if unstable, mind that experienced the one and divined the other.

His conversation with Devonham over, and the latter having retired to his room, Fillery paid a last visit to the patient who was now his private care, instead of merely an inmate of the institution that was half a Home and half a Spiritual Clinique. The figure lay sleeping quietly, the lean, muscular body bare to the wind that blew upon it from the open window. Graceful, motionless, both pillow and coverings rejected, "N. H." breathed the calm, regular breath of deepest slumber. The light from the door just touched the face and folded hands, the features wore no expression of any kind, the hair, drawn back from the forehead and temples, almost seemed to shine.

Through the window came the rustle of the tossing branches, but the night air, though damp, was neither raw nor biting, and Fillery did not replace the sheets upon the great sleeping body. He withdrew as softly as he entered.

Knowing he would not close an eye that night, he left the house silently and walked out into the deserted streets....

The rain had ceased, but the wet wind rushed in gusts against him, the soft blows and heavy moisture acting as balm to his somewhat tired nerves. As with great elemental hands, the windy darkness stroked him, soothing away the intense excitement he had felt, muting a thousand eager questions. They stroked his brain into a gentler silence gradually. “Don’t think, don’t think,” night whispered all about him, “but feel, feel, feel. What you want to know will come to you by feeling now.” He obeyed instinctively. Down the long, empty streets he passed, swinging his stick, tapping the lampposts, noting how steady their light held in the wind, noting the tossing trees in little gardens, noting occasionally rifts of moonlight between the racing clouds, but relinquishing all attempt to think.

He counted the steps between the lamp-posts as he swung along, leaving the kerb at each crossing with his left foot, taking the new one with his right, planting each boot safely in the centre of each paving stone, establishing, in a word, a sort of rhythm as he moved. He did so, however, without being consciously aware of it. He was not aware, indeed, of anything but that he swung along with this pleasant rhythmical stride that rested his body, though the exercise was vigorous.

And the night laid her deep peace upon him as he went....

The streets grew narrower, twisted, turned and ran uphill; the houses became larger, spaced farther apart, less numerous, their gardens bigger, with groups of trees instead of isolated specimens. He emerged suddenly upon the open heath, tasting a newer, sweeter air. The huge city lay below him now, but the rough, shouting wind drowned its distant roar completely. For a time he stood and watched its twinkling lights across the vapours that hung between, then turned towards the little pond. He knew it well. Its waves flew dancing happily. The familiar outline of Jack Straw’s Castle loomed beyond. The square enclosure of the anti-aircraft gun rattled with a metallic sound in the wind....

He had been walking for the best part of two hours now, thinking nothing but feeling only, and his surface-consciousness, perhaps, lay still, inactive. The mind was quiescent certainly, his being subdued and lulled by the rhythmic movement which had gained upon his entire system. The sails of his ship hung idly, becalmed above the profound deeps below. It was these deeps, the mysterious and inexhaustible region below the surface, that now began to stir. There stole upon him a dim prophetic sense as of horizons lifting and letting in new light. He glanced about him. The moon was brighter certainly, the flying scud was thinning, though the dawn was still some hours away. But it was not the light of moon or sun or stars he looked for; it was no outer light.

The little waves fell splashing at his feet. He watched them for a long time, keeping very still; his heart, his mind, his nerves, his muscles, all were very still.... He became aware that new big powers were alert and close, hovering above the world, feathering the Race like wings of mighty birds. The waters were being troubled....

He turned and walked slowly, but ever with the same pleasant rhythm that was in him, to the pine trees, where he paused a minute, listening to the branches shaking and singing, then retraced his steps along the ridge, every yard of which, though blurred in darkness, he knew and recognized. Below, on his left lay London, on his right stretched the familiar country, though now invisible, past Hendon with its Welsh Harp, Wembley, and on towards Harrow, whose church steeple would catch the sunrise before very long. He reached the little pond again and heard its small waves rushing and tumbling in the south-west wind. He stood and watched them, listening to their musical wash and gurgle.

The waters, yes, were being troubled.... Despite the buffeting wind, the world lay even stiller now about him; no single human being had he seen; even stiller than before, too, lay heart and mind within him; the latter held no single picture. He was aware, yes, of horizons lifting, of great powers alert and close; the interior light increased. He felt, but he did not think. Into the empty chamber of his being, swept and garnished, flashed suddenly, then, as in picture form, the memory of “N. H.” All that he knew about him came at once: Paul’s notes and journey, the London scenes and talks, his own observations, deductions, questionings, his dreams, and fears and yearnings, his hope and wonder — all came in a clapping instant, complete and simultaneous. Into his opened subconscious being floated the power and the presence of that bright messenger who brought glad tidings to his life.

"N. H." stood beside him, whispering with lips that were the darkness, and with words that were the wind. It was the power and presence of "N. H." that lifted the horizon and let in light. His body lay sleeping miles away in that bed against an open window. This was his real presence. Without words, as without thought, understanding came. The appeal of "N. H." was direct to the subliminal mind; it was the hidden nine-tenths he stimulated; hence came the intensification of consciousness in all who had to do with him. And it operated now. Fillery was aware of defying time and space, as though there were no limits to his being. Faith lights fires.... Perception wandered down those dusky by-ways *behind* the mind that lead through trackless depths where the massed heritage of the world-soul, lit sometimes by a flashing light, reveal incredible, incalculable things. One of those flashes came now. Through the fissures, as it were, of his unstable being rose the marvellous, uncanny gleam. His eyes were opened and he saw.

The label, he realized, was incorrect, inadequate— "N. H." was a misnomer; more than human, both different to and greater than, came nearer to the truth. A being from other conditions certainly, belonging to another order; an order whose work was unremitting service rendered with joy and faithfulness; a hierarchy whose service included the entire universe, the stars and suns and nebulæ, earth with her frail humanity but an insignificant fraction of it all....

He came, of course, from that central sea of energy whence all life, pushing irresistibly outwards into form, first arises. Like human beings, he came thence undoubtedly, but more directly than they, in more intimate relations, therefore, with the elemental powers that build up form and shape the destinies of matter. One only of a mighty host of varying degrees and powers, his services lay interwoven with the very heart and processes of Nature herself. The energies of heat and air, essentials of all life everywhere, were his handmaidens; he worked with fire and wind; in the forms he helped to build he set enthusiasm and energy aglow....

From stars and fire-mist he came now into humanity, using the limited instrument of a human mechanism, a mechanism he must learn to master without breaking it. A human brain and nerves confined him. He could deal with essences only, those essential, buried, semi-elemental powers that lie ever waiting below the threshold of all human consciousness, linking men, did they but know it, direct with the sea of universal life which is inexhaustible, independent of space and time. The fraction of his nature which had manifested as a transient surface-personality — LeVallon — was gone for ever, merged in the real self below.

His origin was already forgotten; no memory of it lay in his present brain; he must suffer training, education, and he turned instinctively to those whose ideal, like his own, was one of impersonal service. To a woman he turned, and to a man. His recognition, guided by Nature, was sure and accurate. It must take time and patience, sympathy and love, faith, belief and trust, and the labour must be borne by one man chiefly — by Fillery, into whose life had come this strange bright messenger carrying glad tidings ... to prove at last that man was greater than he knew, that the hope for Humanity, for the deteriorating Race, for crumbling Civilization, lay in drawing out into full practical consciousness the divine powers concealed below the threshold of every single man and woman....

But how, in what practical manner, what instrument could they use? The human mechanism, the brain, the mind, afforded inadequate means of manifestation; new wines into old skins meant disaster; knowledge, power beyond the experience of the Race needed a better instrument than the one the Race had painfully evolved for present uses. New powers of unknown kinds, as already in those rare cases when the supernormal forces emerged, could only strain the machinery and cause disorder. A new order of consciousness required another, a different equipment. And the idea flashed into him, as in the Studio when he watched "N. H." and the girl — Father Collins had divined its possibility as well — the idea of a group consciousness, a collective group-soul. What a single individual might not be able to resist at first without disaster, many — a group in harmony — two or three gathered together in unison — these might provide the way, the means, the instrument — the body.

"The personal merged in the impersonal," he exclaimed to the night about him, already aware that words, expression, failed even at this early stage of understanding. "Beauty, Art! Where words, form, colour end, we shall construct, while yet using these as far as they go, a new vehicle, a new — —"

"Good evenin'," said a gruff voice. "Good evenin', sir," it added more respectfully, after a second's inspection. "Turned out quite fine after the storm.”

Aware of the policeman suddenly, Fillery started and turned round abruptly. Evidently he had uttered his thoughts aloud, probably had cried and shouted them. He could think of nothing in the world to say.

“It was a terrible storm. I hardly ever see the likes of it.” The man was looking at him still with doubtful curiosity.

“Extraordinary, yes.” Dr. Fillery managed to find a few natural words. It was an early hour in the morning to be out, and his position by the pond, he now realized, might have suggested an undesirable intention. “It made sleep impossible, and I came out to — to take a walk. I’m a doctor, Dr. Fillery — the Fillery Home.”

“Yes, sir,” said the man, apparently satisfied. He looked at the sky. “All blown away again,” he remarked, “and the moon that nice and bright — —”

Fillery offered something in reply, then moved away. The moon, he noticed, was indeed nice and bright now; the heavy lower vapours all had vanished, and thin cirrus clouds at a great height moved slowly before an upper wind; the stars shone clearly, and a faint line of colour gave a hint of dawn not far away.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly half-past four.

“It’s impossible, impossible,” he thought to himself, the pictures he had been seeing still hanging before his eyes. “It was all feeling — merely feeling. My blood, my heritage asserting themselves upon an over-tired system! Too much repression evidently. I must find an outlet. My Caucasian Valley again!”

He walked rapidly. His mind began to work, and thinking made an effort to replace feeling. He watched himself. His everyday surface-consciousness partially resumed its sway. The policeman, of course, had interrupted the flow and inrush of another state just at the moment when a flash of direct knowledge was about to blaze. It concerned “N. H.,” his new patient. In another moment he would have known exactly what and who he was, whence he came, the purpose and the powers that attended him. The policeman — and inner laughter ran through him at this juxtaposition of the practical and the transcendental — had interfered with an interesting expansion of his being. An extension of consciousness, perhaps a touch of cosmic consciousness, was on the way. The first faint quiver of its coming, magical with wondrous joy, had touched him. Its cause, its origin, he knew not, yet he could trace both to the effect produced upon him by "N. H." Of that he was sure. This effect his reasoning mind, with busy analysis and criticism, had hitherto partially suppressed, even at its first manifestation in Charing Cross Station. To-night, criticism silent and analysis inactive, it had found an outlet, his own deep inner stillness had been its opportunity. Then came the practical, honest, simple policeman, the censor, who received so much a week to keep people in the way they ought to follow, the safe, broad way....

He smiled, as he walked rapidly along the deserted streets. He knew so well the method and process of these abnormal states in others. As he swung along, not tired now, but rested, rather, and invigorated, the rhythm of motion established itself again. "N. H." a Nature Spirit! A Nature Being! Another order of life entering humanity for the first time, that humanity for whose welfare it — or was it he? — had worked, with hosts of similar beings, during incalculable ages....

He smiled, remembering the policeman again. There was always a policeman, or a censor. Oh, the exits beyond safe normal states of being, the exits into extended fields of consciousness, into an outer life which the majority, led by the best minds of the day, deny with an oath — these were well guarded! His smile, as he thought of it, ran from his lips and settled in the eyes, lingering a moment there before it died away....

How quiet, yet unfamiliar, the suburb of the huge city lay about him in pale half-light. The Studio scene, how distant it seemed now in space and time; it had happened weeks ago in another city somewhere. Devonham, his cautious, experienced assistant, how far away! He belonged to another age. The Prometheans were part of a dream in childhood, a dream of pantomime or harlequinade whose extravagance yet conveyed symbolic meaning. Two figures alone retained a reality that refused to be dismissed — a mysterious, enigmatic youth, a radiant girl — with perhaps a third — a broken priest....

The rhythm, meanwhile, gained upon him, and, as it did so, thinking once more withdrew and feeling stole back softly. His being became more harmonized, more one with itself, more open to inspiration.... "N. H.," whose work was service, service everywhere, not merely in that tiny corner of the universe called Humanity.... "N. H.," who could neither age nor die.... What was the hidden link that bound them? Had they not served and played together in some lost Caucasian valley, leaped with the sun's hot fire, flown in the winds of dawn ... sung, laughed and danced at their service, with a radiant sylph-like girl who had at last enticed them into the confinement of a limited human form?... Did not that valley symbolize, indeed, another state of existence, another order of consciousness altogether that lay beyond any known present experience or description...?

The dawn, meanwhile, grew nearer and a pallid light ran down the dreadful streets.... He reached at length the foot of the hill upon whose shoulder his own house stood. The familiar sights stirred more familiar currents of feeling, and these in turn sought words....

The crowding houses, with their tight-shut windows, followed and pressed after as he climbed. They swarmed behind him. How choked and airless it all was. He thought of the heavy-footed routine of the thousands who occupied these pretentious buildings. Here lived a section of the greatest city on the planet, almost a separate little town, with marked characteristics, atmosphere, tastes and habits. How many, he wondered, behind those walls knew yearning, belief, imagination beyond the ruck and routine of familiar narrow thought? Rows upon rows, with their stunted, manufactured trees, hideous conservatories, bulging porches, ornamented windows — his wings beat against them all with the burning desire to set their inmates free. They caged themselves in deliberately. A few thousand years ago these people lived in mud huts, before that in caves, before that again in trees. Now they were "civilized." They dwelt in these cages. Oh, that he might tear away the thick dead bricks, and let in light and dew and stars, and the brave, free winds of heaven! Waken the deeper powers they carried unwittingly about with them through all their tedious sufferings! Teach them that they were greater than they knew!

The yearning was deep and true in him, as the houses followed and tried to bar his way. Many of the occupiers, he knew, would welcome help, would gaze with happy, astonished eyes at the wonder of their own greater selves set free. Not all, of course, were wingless. Yet the majority, he felt, were otherwise. They peered at him from behind thick curtains, hostile, sceptical, contented with their lot, averse to change. Mode, custom, habit chained them to the floor. He was aware of a collective obstinate grin of smug complacency, of dull resistance. Though a part of the community, of the race, of the world, of the universe itself, they denied their mighty brotherhood, and clung tenaciously to their idea of living apart, cut off and separate. They belonged to leagues, societies, clubs and circles, but the bigger oneness of the race they did not know. Of greater powers in themselves they had no faintest inkling. At the first sign of these, they would shuffle, sneer and turn away, grow frightened even.

The yearning to show them a bigger field of consciousness, to help them towards a realization of their buried powers, to let them out of their separate cages, beat through his being with a passionate sincerity.... In a hundred thousand years perhaps! Perhaps in a million! He knew the slow gait that Nature loved. The trend of an Age is not to be stemmed by one man, nor by twelve, who see over the horizon. The futility of trying pained him. Yet, if no one ever tried! Oh, for a few swift strokes of awful sacrifice — then freedom!

The words came back to him, and with them, from the same source, came others: “I sit and I weave.... I sit and I weave.”... Whose, then, was this divine, eternal patience?...

There could be, it seemed, no hurried growth, no instant escape, no sudden leap to heaven. Slowly, slowly, the Ages turned the wheel. “Nor can other beings help,” he remembered; “they can only tell what their own part is.”... And as his clear mind saw the present Civilization like all its wonderful predecessors, tottering before his very eyes, threatening in its collapse, the extinction of knowledge so slowly, painfully, laboriously acquired, the deep heart in him rose as on wings of wind and fire, questing the stars above. There was this strange clash in him, as though two great divisions in his being struggled. A way of escape seemed just within his reach, only a little beyond the horizon of his actual knowledge. It fluttered marvellously; golden, alight, inviting. Its coming glory brushed his insight. It was simple, it was divine. There seemed a faint knocking against the doors of his mental and spiritual understanding....

“‘N. H.’!” he cried, “Bright Messenger!”

He paused a moment and stood still. A new sound lay suddenly in the night. It came, apparently, from far away, almost from the air above him. He listened. No, after all it was only steps. They came nearer. A pedestrian, muffled to the ears, went past, and the steps died away on the resounding pavement round the corner. Yet the sound continued, and was not the echo of the steps just gone. It was, moreover, he now felt convinced, in the air above him. It was continuous. It reminded him of the musical droning hum that a big bell leaves behind it, while a suggestion of rhythm, almost of melody, ran faintly through it too.

Somebody’s lines — was it Shelley’s? — ran faintly in his mind, yet it was not his mind now that surged and rose to the new great rhythm:

“’Tis the deep music of the rolling world

Kindling within the strings of the waved air

Æolian modulations....

Clear, icy, keen awakening tones

That pierce the sense

And live within the soul....”

He listened. It was a simple, natural, happy sound — simple as running water, natural as wind, happy as the song of birds....

CHAPTER XX

HE BECAME, AGAIN, vividly aware of the power and presence of "N. H."

He was not far from his house now on the shoulder of the hill. He turned his eyes upwards, where the three-quarter moon sailed above transparent cirrus clouds that scarcely dimmed her light. Like dappled sands of silver, they sifted her soft shining, moving slowly across the heavens before an upper wind. The sound continued.

For a moment or two, in the pale light of dawn, he watched and listened, then lowered his gaze, caught his breath sharply, and stood stock still. He stared in front of him. Next, turning slowly, he stared right and left. He stared behind as well.

Yes, it was true. The lines and rows of crowding houses trembled, disappeared. The heavy buildings dissolved before his very eyes. The solid walls and roofs were gone, the chimneys, railings, doors and porches vanished. There were no more conservatories. There were no lamp-posts. The streets themselves had melted. He gazed in amazement and delight. The entire hill lay bare and open to the sky.

Across the rising upland swept a keen fresh morning wind. Yet bare they were not, this rising upland and this hill. As far as he could see, the landscape flowed waist-deep in flowers, whose fragrance lay upon the air; dew trembled, shimmering on a million petals of blue and gold, of orange, purple, violet; the very atmosphere seemed painted. Flowering trees, both singly and in groves, waved in the breeze, birds sang in chorus, there was a murmur of streams and falling waters. Yet that other sound rose too, rose from the entire hill and all upon it, a continuous gentle rhythm, as though, he felt, the actual scenery poured forth its being in spontaneous, natural expression of sound as well as of form and colour. It was the simplest, happiest music he had ever heard.

Unable to deal with the rapture of delight that swept upon him, he stood stock still among the blossoms to his waist. Eyes, ears and nostrils were inadequate to report a beauty which, simple though it was, overbore nerves and senses accustomed to a lesser scale. Horizons indeed had lifted, the joy and confidence of fuller life poured in. His own being grew immense, stretched, widened, deepened, till it seemed to include all space. He was everywhere, or rather everything was happening somewhere in him all at once.... In place of the heavy suburb lay this garden of primal beauty, while yet, in a sense, the suburb itself remained as well. Only — it had flowered ... revealing the subconscious soul the bricks and pavements hid.... Its potential self had blossomed into loveliness and wonder.

The sound drew nearer. He was aware of movement. Figures were approaching; they were coming in his direction, coming towards him over the crest of the hill, nearer and nearer. Concealed by the forest of tall flowers, he watched them come. Yet as Presences he perceived them, rather than as figures, already borrowing power from them, as sails borrow from a rising wind. His consciousness expanded marvellously to let them in.

Their stature was conveyed to him, chiefly, at first, by the fact that these flowers, though rising to his own waist, did not cover the feet of them, yet that the flowers in the immediate line of their advance still swayed and nodded, as though no weight had lain upon their brilliance. The footsteps were of wind, the figures light as air; they shone; their radiant presences lit the acres. Their own atmosphere, too, came with them, as though the landscape moved and travelled with and in their being, as though the flowers, the natural beauty, emanated from them. The landscape *was* their atmosphere. They created, brought it with them. It seemed that they “expressed” the landscape and “were” the scenery, with all its multitudinous forms.

They approached with a great and easy speed that was not measurable. Over the crest of the living, sunlit hill they poured, with their bulk, their speed, their majesty, their sweet brimming joy. Fillery stood motionless watching them, his own joy touched with awed confusion, till wonder and worship mastered the final trace of fear.

Though he perceived these figures first as they topped the skyline, he was aware that great space also stretched behind them, and that this immense perspective was in some way appropriate to their appearance. Born of a greater space than his “mind” could understand, they flowed towards him across that windy crest and at the same time from infinitely far beyond it. Above the continuous humming sound, he heard their music too, faint but mighty, filling the air with deep vibrations that seemed the natural expression of their joyful beings. Each figure was a chord, yet all combining in a single harmony that had volume without loudness. It seemed to him that their sound and colour and movement wove a new pattern upon space, a new outline, form or growth, perhaps a flower, a tree, perhaps a planet.... They were creative. They expressed themselves naturally in a million forms.

He heard, he saw. He knew no other words to use. But the “hearing” was, rather, some kind of intimate possession so that his whole being filled and overbrimmed; and the “sight” was greater than the customary little irritation of the optic nerve — it involved another term of space. He could describe the sight more readily than the hearing. The apparent contradiction of distance and proximity, of vast size yet intimacy, made him tremble in his hiding-place.

His “sight,” at any rate, perceived the approaching figures all round, all over, all at once, as they poured like a wave across the hill from far beyond its visible crest. For into this space below the horizon he saw as well, though, normally speaking, it was out of sight. Nor did he see one side only; he saw the backs of the towering forms as easily as the portion facing him; he saw behind them. It was not as with ordinary objects refracting light, the back and underneath and further edges invisible. All sides were visible at once. The space beyond, moreover, whence the mighty outlines issued, was of such immensity that he could think only of interstellar regions. Not to the little planet, then, did these magnificent shapes belong. They were of the Universe. The symbol of his valley, he knew suddenly, belonged here too.

Silent with wonder, motionless with worship, he watched the singing flood of what he felt to be immense, non-human nature-life pour past him. The procession lasted for hours, yet was over in a minute’s flash. All categories his mind knew hitherto were useless. The faces, in their power, their majesty, the splendour even of their extent, were both appalling, yet infinitely tender. They were filled with stars, blue distance, flowers, spirals of fire, space and air, interwoven too, with shining geometrical designs whose intricate patterns merged in a central harmony. They brought their own winds with them.

Yet of features precisely, he was not aware. Each face was, rather, an immense expression, but an expression that was permanent and could not change. These were immutable, eternal faces. He borrowed from human terms the only words that offered, while aware that he falsely introduced the personal into that which was essentially impersonal.

There stole over him a strange certainty that what he worshipped was the grandeur of joyful service working through unalterable law — the great compassion of some untiring service that was deathless.... He stood *within* the Universe, face to face with its elemental builders, guardians, its constructive artizans, the impersonal angelic powers ... the region, the state, he now felt convinced, to which "N. H." belonged, and whence, by some inexplicable chance, he had come to occupy a human body.... And the sounds — the flash came to him with lightning conviction — were those essential rhythms which are the kernels of all visible, manifested forms....

He was not aware that he was moving, that he had left the spot where he had stood — so long, yet for a single second only — and had now reached the corner of a street again. The flowers were gone, and the trees and groves gone with them; no waters rippled past; there was no shining hill. The moon, the stars, the breaking dawn remained, but he saw windows, walls and villas once again, while his feet echoed on dead stone pavements....

Yet the figures had not wholly gone. Before a house, where he now paused a moment, the towering, flowing outlines were still faintly visible. Their singing still audible, their shapes still gently luminous, they stood grouped about an open window of the second story. In the front garden a big plane tree stirred its leafless branches; the tree and figures interpenetrated. Slowly then, the outlines grew dim and shadowy, indistinguishable almost from the objects in the twilight near them. Chimneys, walls and roofs stole in upon the great shapes with foreign, grosser details that obscured their harmony, confused their proportion, as with two sets of values. The eye refused to focus both at once. A roof, a chimney obtruded, while sight struggled, fluttered, then ended in confusion. The figures faded and melted out. They merged with the tree, the reddening sky, the murky air close to the house which a street lamp made visible. Suddenly they were lost — they were no longer there.

But the rhythmical sound, though fainter, still continued — and Fillery looked up.

It was a sound, he realized in a flash, evocative and summoning. Type called to type, brother to brother, across the universe. The house before him was his own, and the open window through which the music issued was the bedroom of "N. H."

He stood transfixed. Both sides of his complex nature operated simultaneously. His mind worked more clearly — the entire history of the "case" in that upstairs room passed through it: he was a doctor. But his speculative, emotional aspect, the dreamer in him, so greatly daring, all that poetic, transcendental, half-mystical part which classed him, he well knew, with the unstable; all this, long and dangerously repressed, worked with opposite, if equal pressure. From the subconscious rose violent hands as of wind and fire, lovely, fashioning, divine, tearing away the lid of the reasoning surface-consciousness that confined, confused them.

To disentangle, to define these separate functions, were a difficult problem even for the most competent psychiatrist. Creative imaginative powers, hitherto merely fumbling, half denied as well, now stretched their wings and soared. With them came a blinding clarity of sight that enabled him to focus a vast field of detail with extraordinary rapidity. Horizons had lifted, perspective deepened and lit up. In a few brief seconds, before his front door opened, a hundred details flashed towards a focus and shone concentrated:

The Vision, of course — the Figures had now melted into the night — had no objective reality. Suppressed passion had created them, forbidden yearnings had passed the Censor and dramatized a dream, set aside yet never explained, that heredity was responsible for. Both were born of his lost radiant valley. His Note Books held a thousand similar cases....

But the speculative dreamer flashed coloured lights against this common white. The prism blazed. From the inter-stellar spaces came these radiant figures, from Sirius, immense and splendid sun, from Aldebaran among the happy Hyades, from awful Betelgeuse, whose volume fills a Martian orbit. Their dazzling, giant grandeur was of stellar origin. Yet, equally, they came from the dreadful back gardens of those sordid houses. Nature was Nature everywhere, in the nebulæ as in the stifled plane tree of a city court. That he saw them as “figures” was but his own private, personal interpretation of a prophecy the whole Universe announced. They were not figures necessarily; they were Powers. And “N. H.” was of their kind.

He suddenly remembered the small, troubled earth whereon he lived — a neglected corner of the universe that was in distress and cried frantically for help.... Alcyone caught it in her golden arms perhaps; Sirius thundered against its little ears....

He found his latchkey and fumblingly inserted it, but, even while he did so, the state of the planet at the moment poured into his mind with swift, concentrated detail; he remembered the wireless excitement of the instant — and smiled. Not that way would it come. The new order was of a spiritual kind. It would steal into men’s hearts, not splutter along the waves of ether, as the “dead” are said to splutter to the “living.” The great impulse, the mighty invitation Nature sent out to return to simple, natural life, would come, without “phenomena” from *within*.... He remembered Relativity — that space is local, space and time not separate entities. He understood. He had just experienced it. Another, a fourth dimension! Space as a whole was annihilated! He smiled.

His latchkey turned.

The transmutation of metals flashed past him — all substance one. His latchkey was upside down. He turned it round and reinserted it, and the results of advanced psychology rushed at him, as though the sun rushed over the horizon of some Eastern clime, covering all with the light of a new, fair dawn.

In a few seconds this accumulation of recent knowledge and discovery flooded his state of singular receptiveness — as thinker and as poet. The Age was crumbling, civilization passing like its predecessors. The little planet lay certainly in distress. No true help lay within it; its reservoirs were empty. No adequate constructive men or powers were anywhere in sight. It was exhausted, dying. Unless new help, powers from a new, an inexhaustible source, came quickly ... a new vehicle for their expression....

And wonder took him by the throat ... as the key turned in the lock with its familiar grating sound, and the door, without actual pressure on his part, swung open.

Paul Devonham, a look of bright terror in his eyes, stood on the threshold.

The expression, not only of the face but of the whole person, he had seen once only in another human countenance — a climber, who had slipped by his very side and dropped backward into empty space. The look of helpless bewilderment as hands and feet lost final touch with solidity, the air of terrible yet childlike amazement with which he began his descent of a thousand feet through a gulf of air — the shock marked the face in a single second with what he now saw in his colleague's eyes. Only, with Devonham — Fillery felt sure of his diagnosis — the lost hold was mental.

His outward control, however, was admirable. Devonham's voice, apart from a certain tenseness in it, was quiet enough: "I've been telephoning everywhere.... There's been a — a crisis — —"

"Violence?"

But the other shook his head. "It's all beyond me quite," he said, with a wry smile. "The first outbreak was nothing — nothing compared to this." The continuous sound of humming which filled the hall, making the air vibrate oddly, grew louder. Devonham seized his friend's arm.

"Listen!" he whispered. "You hear that?"

"I heard it outside in the street," Fillery said. "What is it?"

Devonham glared at him. "God knows," he said, "I don't. He's been doing it, on and off, for a couple of hours. It began the moment you left, it seems. They're all about him — these vibrations, I mean. He does it with his whole body somehow. And" — he hesitated— "there's meaning in it of some kind. Results, I mean," he jerked out with an effort.

"Visible?" came the gentle question.

Devonham started. "How did you know?" There was a thrust of intense curiosity in the eyes.

"I've had a similar experience myself, Paul. You opened the front door in the middle of it. The figures — —"

"You saw figures?" Devonham looked thunderstruck. In his heart was obviously a touch of panic.

As the two men stood gazing into each other’s eyes a moment silently, the sound about them increased again, rising and falling, its great separate rhythmical waves almost distinguishable. In Fillery’s mind rose patterns, outlines, forms of flowers, spirals, circles....

“He knows you’re in the house,” said Devonham in a curious voice, relieved apparently no answer came to his question. “Better come upstairs at once and see him.” But he did not turn to lead the way. “That’s not auditory hallucination, Edward, whatever else it is!” He was still clinging to the rock, but the rock was crumbling beneath his desperate touch. Space yawned below him.

“Visual,” suggested Fillery, as though he held out a feeble hand to the man whose whole weight already hung unsupported before the plunge. His friend spoke no word; but his expression made words unnecessary: “We must face the facts,” it said plainly, “wherever these may lead. No shirking, no prejudice of mine or yours must interfere. There must be no faltering now.”

So plainly was his passion for truth and knowledge legible in the expression of the shocked but honest mind, that Fillery felt compassion overpower the first attitude of privacy he had meant to take. This time he must share. The honesty of the other won his confidence too fully for him to hold back anything. There was no doubt in his mind that he read his colleague’s state aright.

“A moment, Paul,” he said in a low voice, “before we go upstairs,” and he put his hand out, oddly enough meeting Devonham’s hand already stretched to meet it. He drew him aside into a corner of the hall, while the waves of sound surged round and over them like a sea. “Let me first tell you,” he went on, his voice trembling slightly, “my own experience.” It seemed to him that any moment he must see the birth of a new form, an outline, a “body” dance across before his very eyes.

“Neither auditory nor visual,” murmured Devonham, burning to hear what was coming, yet at the same time shrinking from it by the laws of his personality. “Hallucination of any kind, there is absolutely none. There’s nothing transferred from your mind to his. This thing is real — original.”

Fillery tightened his grip a second on the hand he held.

“Paul,” he said gravely, yet unable to hide the joy of recent ecstasy in his eyes, “it is also — new!”

The low syllables seemed borne away and lifted beyond their reach by an immense vibration that swept softly past them. And so actual was this invisible wave that behind it lay the trough, the ebb, that awaits, as in the sea, the next advancing crest. Into this ebb, as it were, both men dropped simultaneously the same significant syllables: their lips uttered together:

“N. H.” The wave of sound seemed to take their voices and increase them. It was the older man who added: “Coming into full possession.”

The two stood waiting, listening, their heads turned sideways, their bodies motionless, while the soft rhythmical uproar rose and fell about them. No sign escaped them for some minutes; no words, it seemed, occurred to either of them.

Through the transom over the front door stole the grey light of the late autumn dawn; the hall furniture was visible, chairs, hat-rack, wooden chests that held the motor rugs. A china bowl filled with visiting cards gleamed white beside it. Soon the milkman, uttering his comic earthly cry, would clatter down the area staircase, and the servants would be up. As yet, however, but for the big soft sound, the house was perfectly still. This part of it, almost a separate wing, was completely cut off from the main building. No one had been disturbed.

Fillery moved his head and looked at his companion. The expression of both face and figure arrested him. He had taken off his dinner jacket, and the old loose golfing coat he wore hung askew; he had one hand in a pocket of it, the other thrust deep into his trousers. His glasses hung down across his crumpled shirt-front, his black tie made an untidy cross. He looked, thought Fillery, whose sense of the ludicrous became always specially alert in his gravest moments, like an unhappy curate who had presided over some strenuous and worrying social gathering in the local town hall. Only one detail denied this picture — the expression of something mysterious and awed in the sheet-white face. He was listening with sharp dislike yet eager interest. His repugnance betrayed itself in the tightened lips, the set of the angular shoulders; the panic was written in the glistening eyes. There were things in his face he could never, never tell. The struggle in him was natural to his type of mind: he had experienced something himself, and a personal experience opens new vistas in sympathy and understanding. But — the experience ran contrary to every tenet of theory and practice he had ever known. The moment of new birth was painful. This was his colleague's diagnosis.

Fillery then suddenly realized that the gulf between them was without a bridge. To tell his own experience became at once utterly impossible. He saw this clearly. He could not speak of it to his assistant. It was, after all, incommunicable. The bridge of terms, language, feeling, did not exist between them. And, again, up flashed for a second his sense of the comic, this time in an odd touch of memory — Povey's favourite sentence: "Never argue with the once-born!" Only to older souls was expression possible.

For the first time then his diagnosis wavered oddly. Why, for instance, did Paul persist in that curious, watchful stare...?

Devonham, conscious of his chief's eyes and mind upon him, looked up. Somewhere in his expression was a glare, but nothing revealed his state of mind better than the fact that he stupidly contradicted himself:

"You're putting all this into him, Edward," a touch of anger, perhaps of fear, in the intense whispering voice. "The hysteria of the studio upset him, of course. If you'd left him alone, as you promised, he'd have always stayed LeVallon. He'd be cured by now." Then, as Fillery made no reply or comment, he added, but this time only the anxiety of the doctor in his tone: "Hadn't you better go up to him at once? He's your patient, not mine, remember!"

The other took his arm. "Not yet," he said quietly. "He's best alone for the moment." He smiled, and it was the smile that invariably won him the confidence of even the most obstinate and difficult patient. He was completely master of himself again. "Besides, Paul," he went on gently. "I want to hear what you have to tell me. Some of it — if not all. I want your Report. It is of value. I must have that first, you know."

They sat on the bottom stair together, while Devonham told briefly what had happened. He was glad to tell it, too. It was a relief to become the mere accurate observer again.

"I can summarize it for you in two words," he said: "light and sound. The sound, at first, seemed wind — wind rising, wind outside. With the light, was perceptible heat. The two seemed correlated. When the sound increased, the heat increased too. Then the sound became methodical, rhythmical — it became almost musical. As it did so the light became coloured. Both" — he looked across at the ghostly hat-rack in the hall— "were produced — by him."

"Items, please, Paul. I want an itemized account."

Devonham fumbled in the big pockets of his coat and eventually lit a cigarette, though he did not in the least want to smoke. That watchful, penetrating stare persisted, none the less. Amid the anxiety were items of carelessness that almost seemed assumed.

"Mrs. Soames sent Nurse Robbins to fetch me," he resumed, his voice harshly, as it seemed, cutting across the waves of pleasant sound that poured down the empty stairs behind them and filled the hall with resonant vibrations. "I went in, turned them both out, and closed the door. The room was filled with a soft, white light, rather pale in tint, that seemed to emanate from nowhere. I could trace it to no source. It was equally diffused, I mean, yet a kind of wave-like vibration ran through it in faint curves and circles. There was a sound, a sound like wind. A wind was in the room, moaning and sighing inside the walls — a perfectly natural and ordinary sound, if it had been outside. The light moved and quivered. It lay in sheets. Its movement, I noticed, was in direct relation to the wind: the louder the volume of sound, the greater the movement of the air — the brighter became the light, and vice versa. I could not take notes at the actual moment, but my memory" — a slight grimace by way of a smile indicated that forgetting was impossible— "is accurate, as you know."

Fillery did not interrupt, either by word or gesture.

"The increase of light was accompanied by colour, and the increase of sound led into a measure — not actual bars, and never melody, but a distinct measure that involved rhythm. It was musical, as I said. The colour — I'm coming to that — then took on a very faint tinge of gold or orange, a little red in it sometimes, flame colour almost. The air was luminous — it was radiant. At one time I half expected to see fire. For there was heat as well. Not an unpleasant heat, but a comforting, stimulating, agreeable heat like — I was going to say, like the heat of a bright coal fire on a winter's day, but I think the better term is sunlight. I had an impression this heat must burst presently into actual flame. It never did so. The sheets of coloured light rose and fell with the volume of the sound. There were curves and waves and rising columns like spirals, but anything approaching a definite outline, form, or shape" — he broke off for a second— "figures," he announced abruptly, almost challengingly, staring at the white china bowl in front of him, "I could *not* swear to."

He turned suddenly and stared at his chief with an expression half of question, half of challenge; then seemed to change his mind, shrugging his shoulders a very little. But Fillery made no sign. He did not answer. He laid one hand, however, upon the banisters, as though preliminary to getting to his feet. The sound about them had been gradually growing less, the vibrations were smaller, its waves perceptibly decreasing.

Devonham finished his account in a lower voice, speaking rapidly, as though the words burnt his tongue:

"The sound, I had already discovered, issued from himself. He was lying on his back, the eyes wide open, the expression peaceful, even happy. The lips were closed. He was humming, continuously humming. Yet the sound came in some way I cannot describe, and could not examine or ascertain, from his whole body. I detected no vibration of the body. It lay half naked, only a corner of the sheet upon it. It lay quite still. The cause of the light and heat, the cause of the movement of air I have called wind — I could not ascertain. They came *through* him, as it were." A slight shiver ran across his body, noticed by his companion, but eliciting no comment from him. "I — I took his pulse," concluded Devonham, sinking his voice now to a whisper, though a very clear one; "it was very rapid and extraordinarily strong. He seemed entirely unconscious of my presence. I also" — again the faint shiver was perceptible— "felt his heart. It was — I have never felt such perfect action, such power — it was beating like an engine, like an engine. And the sense of vitality, of life in the room everywhere was — electrical. I could have sworn it was packed to the walls with — with others." Devonham never ceased to watch his companion keenly while he spoke.

Fillery then put his first question.

"And the effect upon yourself?" he asked quietly. "I mean — any emotional disturbance? Anything, for instance, like what you *saw* in the Jura forests?" He did not look at his colleague; he stood up; the sound about them had now ceased almost entirely and only faint, dying fragments of it reached them. "Roughly speaking," he added, making a half movement to go upstairs. He understood the inner struggle going on; he wished to make it easy for him. For the complete account he did not press him.

Devonham rose too; he walked over to the china bowl, took up a card, read it and let it fall again. The sun was over the horizon now, and a pallid light showed objects clearly. It showed the whiteness of the thin, tired face. He turned and walked slowly back across the hall. The first cart went clattering noisily down the street. At the same moment a final sound from the room upstairs came floating down into the chill early air.

"My interest, of course," began Devonham, his hands in his pockets, his body rigid, as he looked up into his companion's eyes, "was very concentrated, my mind intensely active." He paused, then added cautiously: "I may confess, however — I must admit, that is, a certain increase of — of — well, a general sense of well-being, let me call it. The heat, you see. A feeling of peace, if you like it better — beyond the — fear," he blurted out finally, changing his hands from his coat to his trouser pockets, as though the new position protected him better from attack. "Also — I somehow expected — any moment — to see outlines, forms, something new!" He stared frankly into the eyes of the man who, from the step above him, returned his gaze with equal frankness. "And *you* — Edward?" he asked with great suddenness.

"Joy? Could you describe it as joy?" His companion ignored the reference to new forms. He also ignored the sudden question. "Any increase of ——?"

"Vitality, you want to say. The word joy is meaningless, as you know."

"An intensification of consciousness in any way?"

But Devonham had reached his limit of possible confession. He did not reply for a moment. He took a step forward and stood beside Fillery on the stairs. His manner had abruptly changed. It was as though he had come to a conclusion suddenly. His reply, when it came, was no reply at all:

"Heat and light are favourable, of course, to life," he remarked. "You remember Joaquin Mueller: 'the optic nerve, under the action of light, acts as a stimulus to the organs of the imagination and fancy.'"

Fillery smiled as he took his arm and they went quietly upstairs together. The quoting was a sign of returning confidence. He said something to himself about the absence of light, but so low it was under his breath almost, and even if his companion heard it, he made no comment: “There was no moon at all to-night till well past three, and even then her light was of the faintest....”

No sound was now audible. They entered a room that was filled with silence and with peace. A faint ray of morning sunlight showed the form of the patient sleeping calmly, the body entirely uncovered. There was an expression of quiet happiness upon the face whose perfect health suggested perhaps radiance. But there was a change as well, though indescribable — there was power. He did not stir as they approached the bed. The breathing was regular and very deep.

Standing beside him a moment, Fillery sniffed the air, then smiled. There was a perfume of wild flowers. There was, in spite of the cool morning air, a pleasant warmth.

“You notice — anything?” he whispered, turning to his colleague.

Devonham likewise sniffed the air. “The window’s wide open,” was the low rejoinder. “There are conservatories at the back of every house all down the row.”

And they left the room on tiptoe, closing the door behind them very softly. Upon Devonham’s face lay a curious expression, half anxiety, half pain.

CHAPTER XXI

DR. FILLERY, LYING on a couch in his patient's bedroom, snatched some four to five hours' sleep, though, if "snatched," it was certainly enjoyed — a deep, dreamless, reposeful slumber. He woke, refreshed in mind and body, and the first thing he saw, even before he had time to stretch a limb or move his head, was two great blue eyes gazing into his own across the room. They belonged, it first struck him, to some strange being that had followed him out of sleep — he had not yet recovered full consciousness and the effects of sleep still hovered; then an earlier phrase recurred: to some divine great animal.

"N. H.," in his bed in the opposite corner, lay gazing at him. He returned the gaze. Into the blue eyes came at once a look of happy recognition, of contentment, almost a smile. Then they closed again in sleep.

The room was full of morning sunshine. Fillery rose quietly, and performed his toilet in his own quarters, but on returning after a hurried breakfast, the patient still slept soundly. He slept on for hours, he slept the morning through; but for the obvious evidences of perfect normal health, it might have been a state of coma. The body did not even change its position once.

He left Devonham in charge, and was on his way to visit some of the other cases, when Nurse Robbins stood before him. Miss Khilkoff had "called to inquire after Mr. LeVallon," and was waiting downstairs in case Dr. Fillery could also see her.

He glanced at her pretty slim figure and delicate complexion, her hair, fine, plentiful and shiny, her dark eyes with a twinkle in them. She was an attractive, intelligent, experienced, young woman, tactful too, and of great use with extra sensitive patients. She was, of course, already hopelessly in love with her present "case." His "singing," so she called it to Mrs. Soames, had excited her "like a glass of wine — some music makes you feel like that — so that you could love everybody in the world." She already called him Master.

“Please say I will be down at once,” said Dr. Fillery, watching her for the first time with interest as he remembered these details Paul had told him. The girl, it now struck him, was intensely alive. There was a gain, an increase, in her appearance somewhere. He recalled also the matron’s remark — she was not usually loquacious with her nurses — that “he’s no ordinary case, and I’ve seen a good few, haven’t I? The way he understands animals and flowers alone proves that!”

Dr. Fillery went downstairs.

His first rapid survey of the girl, exhaustive for all its quickness — he knew her so well — showed him that no outward signs of excitement were visible. Calm, poised, gentle as ever, the same generous tenderness in the eyes, the same sweet firmness in the mouth, the familiar steadiness that was the result of an inner surety — all were there as though the wild scene of the night before had never been. Yet all those were heightened. Her beauty had curiously increased.

“Come into my study,” he said, taking her hand and leading the way. “We shan’t be disturbed there. Besides, it’s ours, isn’t it? We mustn’t forget that you are a member of the Firm.”

He was aware of her soft beauty invading, penetrating him, aware, too, somehow, that she was in her most impersonal mood. But for all that, her nature could not hide itself, nor could signs of a certain, subtle change she had undergone fail to obtrude themselves. In a single night, it seemed, she had blossomed into a wondrous ripe maturity; like some strange flower that opens to the darkness, the bud had burst suddenly into full, sweet bloom, whose coming only moon and stars had witnessed. There was moonlight now in her dark mysterious eyes as she glanced at him; there was the gold of stars in her tender, yet curious smile, as she answered in her low voice— “Of course, I always *was* a partner in the Firm” — there was the grace and rhythm of a wild flower swaying in the wind, as she passed before him into the quiet room and sank into his own swinging armchair at the desk. But there was something else as well.

A detail of his recent Vision slid past his inner sight again while he watched her.... “I thought — I felt sure — you would come,” he said. He looked at her admiringly, but peace strong in his heart. “The ordeal,” he went on in a curious voice, “would have been too much for most women, but you” — he smiled, and the sympathy in his voice increased— "you, I see, have only gained from it. You've mastered, conquered it. I wonder" — looking away from her almost as if speaking to himself— "have you wholly understood it?"

He realized vividly in that moment what she, as a young, unmarried girl, had suffered before the eyes of all those prying eyes and gossiping tongues. His admiration deepened.

She did not take up his words, however. "I've come to inquire," she said simply in an even voice, "for father and myself. He wanted to know if you got home all right, and how Julian LeVallon is." The tone, the heightened colour in the cheek, as she spoke the name no one had yet used, explained, partly at least, to the experienced man who listened, the secret of her sudden blossoming. Also she used her father, though unconsciously, perhaps. "He was afraid the electricity — the lightning even — had" — she hesitated, smiled a little, then added, as though she herself knew otherwise— "done something to him."

Fillery laughed with her then. "As it has done to you," he thought, but did not speak the words. The need of formula was past. He thanked her, adding that it was sweet yet right that she had come herself, instead of writing or telephoning. "And you may set your — your father's mind at rest, for all goes well. The electricity, of course," he added, on his own behalf as well as hers, "was — more than most of us could manage. Electricity explains everything except itself, doesn't it?"

He was inwardly examining her with an intense and accurate observation. She seemed the same, yet different. The sudden flowering into beauty was simply enough explained. It was another change he now became more and more aware of. In this way a ship, grown familiar during the long voyage, changes on coming into port. The decks and staircases look different when the vessel lies motionless at the dock. It becomes half recognizable, half strange. Gone is the old familiarity, gone also one's own former angle of vision. It is difficult to find one's way about her. Soon she will set sail again, but in another direction, and with new passengers using her decks, her corners, hatchways ... telling their secrets of love and hate with that recklessness the open sea and sky make easy.... And now with the girl before him — he couldn't quite find his way about her as of old ... it was the same familiar ship, yet it was otherwise, and he, a new passenger, acknowledged the freedom of sea and sky.

“And you — Iraida?” he asked. “It was brave of you to come.”

She liked evidently the use of her real name, for she smiled, aware all the time of his intent observation, aware probably also of his hidden pain, yet no sign of awkwardness in her; to this man she could talk openly, or, on the contrary, conceal her thoughts, sure of his tact and judgment. He would never intrude unwisely.

“It was natural, Edward,” she observed frankly in return.

“Yes, I suppose it was. Natural is exactly the right word. You have perhaps found yourself at last,” and again he used her real name, “Iraida.”

“It feels like that,” she replied slowly. She paused. “I have found, at least, something definite that I have to do. I feel that I — must care for him.” Her eyes, as she said it, were untroubled.

The well-known Nayan flashed back a moment in the words; he recognized — to use his simile — a familiar corner of the deck where he had sat and talked for hours beneath the quiet stars — to someone who understood, yet remained ever impersonal. And the person he talked with came over suddenly and stood beside him and took his hand between her own soft gloved ones:

“You told me, Edward, he would need a woman to help him. That’s what you mean by ‘natural’ — isn’t it? And I am she, perhaps.”

“I think you are,” came in a level tone.

“I know it,” she said suddenly, both her eyes looking down upon his face. “Yes, I suppose I know it.”

“Because *you* — need him,” his voice, equally secure, made answer.

Still keeping his hand tight between her own, her dark eyes still searching his, she made no sign that his blunt statement was accepted, much less admitted. Instead she asked a question he was not prepared for: “You would like that, Edward? You wish it?”

She was so close against his chair that her fur-trimmed coat brushed his shoulder; yet, though with eyes and touch and physical presence she was so near, he felt that she herself had gone far, far away into some other place. He drew his hand free. “Iraida,” he said quietly, “I wish the best — for him — and for you. And I believe this is the best — for him and you.” He put his patient first. He was aware that the girl, for all her outer calmness, trembled.

“It is,” she said, her voice as quiet as his own; and after a moment’s hesitation, she went back to her seat again. “If you think I can be of use,” she added. “I’m ready.”

A little pause fell between them, during which Dr. Fillery touched an electric bell beside his chair. Nurse Robbins appeared with what seemed miraculous swiftness. “Still sleeping quietly, sir, and pulse normal again,” she replied in answer to a question, then vanished as suddenly as she had come. He looked into the girl’s eyes across the room. “A competent, reliable nurse,” he remarked, “and, as you saw, a pretty woman.” He glanced out of the window. “She is unmarried.” He mentioned it apparently to the sky.

The quick mind took in his meaning instantly. “All women will be drawn to him irresistibly, of course,” she said. “But it is not *that*.”

“No, no, of course it is not that,” he agreed at once. “I should like you to see him, though not, however, just yet — —” He went on after a moment’s reflection, and speaking slowly: “I should like you to wait a little. It’s best. There *has* been a — a certain disturbance in his being — —”

“It’s his first experience,” she began, “of beauty — —”

“Of beauty in women, yes,” he finished for her. “It is. We must avoid anything in the nature of a violent shock — —”

“He has asked for me?” she interrupted again, in her quiet way.

He shook his head. “And we cannot be sure that it was you — as *you* — he sought and is affected by. The call he hears is, perhaps, hardly the call that sounds in most men’s ears, I mean.”

The hint of warning guidance was audible in his voice, as well as visible in his eyes and manner. The laughter they both betrayed, a grave and curious laughter perhaps, was brief, yet enough to conceal stranger emotions that rose like dumb, gazing figures almost before their eyes. Yet if she knew inner turmoil, emotion of any troubling sort, she concealed it perfectly.

"I am glad," the girl said presently. "Oh, I am really glad. I think I understand, Edward." And, even while he sat silent for a bit, watching her with an ever-growing admiration that at the same time marvelled, he saw the wonder of great questions riding through her face. The recollection of what she had suffered publicly in the Studio a few hours before came into his mind again. In these questions, perhaps, lay the only signs of the hidden storm below the surface.

"Are there — are there such things as Nature-Beings, Edward?" she asked abruptly. "We know this is his first experience. Are there then —— ?"

He was prepared a little for this kind of question by her eyes. "We have no evidence, of course," he replied; "not a scrap of evidence for anything of the sort. There are people, however, so close to Nature, so intimate with her, that we may say they are — strangely, inexplicably akin."

"Has he a soul — a human soul like ours?" she asked point blank.

"He is perhaps — not — quite — like us. That may be your task, Iraida," he added enigmatically. He watched her more closely than she knew.

She appeared to ponder his words for a few minutes; then she asked abruptly: "And when do you think I ought to come and see him? You will let me know?"

"I will let you know. A few days perhaps, perhaps a week, perhaps longer. Some education, I think, is necessary first." He gazed at her thoughtfully, and she returned his look, her dark eyes filled with the wonder that was both of a child and of a woman, and yet with a security of something that was of neither. "It will be a — a great effort to you," he ventured with significant and sympathetic understanding, "after — what happened. It is brave and generous of you — —" He broke off.

She nodded, but at once afterwards shook her head. She rose then to go, but Dr. Fillery stopped her. He rose too.

"Nayan, I now want *your* help," he said with more emotion than he had yet shown. "My responsibility, as you may guess, is not light — and — —"

"And he is in your sole charge, you mean." She had willingly resumed her seat, and made herself comfortable with a cushion he arranged for her. He was aware chiefly of her eyes, for in them glowed light and fire he had never seen there before — but still in their depths.

“Well — yes, partly,” he replied, lighting a cigarette, “though Paul is ready with help and sympathy whenever needed. But the charge, as you call it, is not mine alone: it is ours.”

“Ours!” She started, though almost imperceptibly, as she repeated his word.

“Subconsciously,” he said in a firm voice, “we three are similar. We are together. We obey half instinctively the unknown laws of” — he hesitated a moment— “of some unknown state of being.” He added then a singular sentence, though so low it seemed almost to himself: “Had we been man and wife, Iraida, our child must have been — like him.”

“Yes,” she said, leaning forward a little in her chair, increased warmth, yet no blush, upon her skin. “Yes, Edward, we three are somehow together in this, aren’t we? Oh, I feel it. It pours over me like a great wind, a wind with heat in it.” Her hands clasped her knee, as they gazed at one another for a moment’s silence. “I feel it,” she repeated presently. “I’m sure of it, quite sure.”

She stretched out a spirit hand, as it were, for an instant across the impersonal barrier between them, but he did not take it, pretending he did not see it.

“Ours, Nayan,” he emphasized, again using the name that belonged to everyone. “Therefore, you see, I want you to tell me — if you will — what you felt, experienced, perceived — in the Studio last night.” After watching her a little, he qualified: “Another day, if you would like to think it over. But some time, without fail. For my part, I will confess — though I think you already know it — that I brought him there on purpose — —”

“To see my effect upon him, Edward.”

“But in *his* interest, and in the interest of my possible future treatment. His effect upon yourself was not my motive. You believe that.”

“I know, I know. And I will tell you gladly. Indeed, I want to.”

He was aware, as she said it, that it would be a satisfaction to her to talk; she would welcome the relief of confession; she could speak to him as doctor now, as professional man, as healer, and this, too, without betraying the impersonal attitude she evidently wore and had adopted possibly — he wondered? — in self-protection. “Tell me exactly what it is you would like to know, please, Edward,” she added, and instinctively moved to the sofa, so that he might occupy the professional swinging chair at the desk.

“What you saw, Nayan,” he began, accepting the change of position without comment, because he knew it helped her. “What you saw is of value, I think, first.”

He had all his usual self-control again, for he was now on his throne, his seat of power; his inner attitude changed subtly; he was examining two patients — the girl and himself. She sat before him demure, obedient, honest, very sweet but very strong; if her perfume reached him he did not notice it, the appeal of her loveliness went past him, he did not see her eyes. He had a very comely and intelligent young woman facing him, and the glow, as it were, of an intense inner activity, strongly suppressed, was the chief quality in her that he noted. But his new attitude made other things, too, stand out sharply: he realized there was confusion in her own mind and heart. Her being was not wholly at one with itself. This impersonal rôle meant safety until she was sure of herself; and so far she had been entirely and admirably non-committal. No girl, he remembered, could look back upon what she had experienced in the Studio, upon what she had herself said and done, before a crowd of onlookers too, without deep feelings of a mixed and even violent kind. That scene with a young man she had never seen before must bring painful memories; if it was love at first sight the memories must be more painful still. But was it a case of this sudden, rapturous love? What, indeed, were her feelings? What at any rate was her dominant feeling? She had felt his appeal beyond all question, but was it as Nayan or as Iraida that she felt it?

She was non-committal and impersonal, conscious that therein safety lay — until, having become one with herself, harmonious, she could feel absolutely sure. One hint only had she dropped — it was Nayan speaking — that her mothering, maternal instinct was needed and that she must obey its prompting. She must “care” for him....

Dr. Fillery, meanwhile, though he might easily have probed and made discoveries without her knowing that he did so, was not the man to use his powers now. Unless she gave of her own free will, he would not ask. He would close eyes and ears even to any chance betrayal or unconscious revelation.

“When you first looked in, for instance? You had just come in from the street, I think. You opened the door on your way upstairs. Do you remember?”

She remembered perfectly. “I wanted to see who was there. You, I think, were chiefly in my thoughts — I was wondering if you had come.” Her voice was even, her eyes quite steady; she chose her next words slowly: “I saw — to my intense surprise — a figure of light.”

“Shining, you mean? A shining figure?”

She nodded her head, as one little hand put back a straying wisp of dark hair from her forehead. “A figure like flame,” she agreed. “I saw it quite clearly. I saw everything else quite clearly too — the inner room, various people standing about, the piano, the thick smoke, everything as usual. I saw you. You were in the big outer room beyond, but your face was very distinct. You were staring — staring straight at me.”

“True,” put in Dr. Fillery; “I saw you in the doorway plainly.”

“In the foreground, by itself apart somehow, though surrounded by people, was this shining, radiant outline. I thought it was a Vision — the first thing of that sort I had ever seen in my life.”

“That was your very first impression — even before you had time to think?”

“Yes.”

“It struck you as unusual?”

“I cannot say more than that. I knew by the light it was unusual. Then it moved — talking to Povey or Kempster or someone — and I realized in a flash who it was. I knew it must be your friend, the man you had promised to bring — Ju — —”

“And then —— ?” he asked quickly, before she could pronounce the name.

“And then — —”

She stopped, and her eyes looked away from him, not in the sense that they moved but that their focus changed as though she looked at something else, at something within herself, no longer, therefore, at the face in front of her. He waited; he understood that she was searching among deep, strange, seething memories; he let her search; and, watching closely, he presently saw the sight return into her eyes from its inward plunge.

“And when you knew who it was,” he asked very quietly, “were you still surprised? Did he look as you expected him to look, for instance?”

“I had expected nothing, you see, Edward, because I had not been consciously thinking about his coming. No mental picture was present in me at all. But the moment I realized who it was, the light seemed to go — I just saw a young man standing there, with his head turned sideways to me. The light, I suppose, lasted for a second only — that first second. As to how he looked? Well, he looked, not only bigger — he *is* bigger than most men,” she went on, “but he looked” — her voice hushed instinctively a little on the adjective— “different.”

Her companion made a gesture of agreement, waiting in silence for what was to follow.

“He looked so extraordinary, so wonderful,” she resumed, gazing steadily into his eyes, “that I — I can hardly put it into words, Edward, unless I use childish language.” She broke off and sighed, and something, he fancied, in her wavered for a second, though it was certainly neither the voice nor the eyes. A faint trembling again perhaps ran through her body. Her account was so deliberately truthful that it impressed him more than he quite understood. He was aware of pathos in her, of some vague trouble very poignant yet inexplicable. A breath of awe, it seemed, entered the room and moved between them.

“The childish words are probably the best, the right ones,” he told her gently.

“An angel,” she said instantly in a hushed tone, “I thought of an angel. There is no other word I can find. But somehow a helpless one. An angel — out of place.”

He looked hard at her, his manner encouraging though grave; he said no word; he did not smile.

"Someone not of this earth quite," she added. "Not a man, at any rate."

Still more gently, he then asked her what she felt.

"At first I couldn't move," she went on, her voice normal again. "I must have stood there ten minutes fully, perhaps longer" — her listener did not correct the statement— "when I suddenly recovered and looked about for you, Edward, but could not see you. I needed you, but could not find you. I remember feeling somehow that I had lost you. I tried to call for you — in my heart. There was no answer.... Then — then I closed the door quietly and went upstairs to change from my street clothes."

She paused and passed a hand slowly across her forehead. Dr. Fillery asked casually a curious question:

"Do you remember *how* you got upstairs, Nayan?"

Her hand dropped instantly; she started. "It's very odd you should ask me that, Edward," she said, gazing at him with a slightly rising colour in her face, an increase of fire glowing in her eyes; "very odd indeed. I was just trying to think how I could describe it to you. No. Actually I do not remember how I got upstairs. All I know is — I was suddenly in my room." A new intensity appeared in voice and manner. "It seemed to me I flew — or that — something — carried me."

"Yes, Nayan, yes. It's quite natural you should have felt like that."

"Is it? I remember so little of what I actually felt. I wonder — I wonder," she went on softly, with an air almost of talking to herself, "if it will ever come back again — what I felt then — —"

"Such moments of subliminal excitement," Dr. Fillery reminded her gently, "have the effect of obliterating memory sometimes — —"

"Excitement," she caught him up. "Yes, I suppose it was excitement. But it was more, much more, than that. Stimulated — I think that's the word really. I felt caught away somewhere, caught away, caught up — as if into the rest of myself — into the whole of myself. I became vast" — she smiled curiously— "if you know what I mean — in several places at once, perhaps, is better. It was an immense feeling — no, I mean a feeling of immensity — —"

"Happy?" His voice was low.

Her eyes answered even before her words, as the memory came back a little in response to his cautious suggestion.

“A new feeling altogether,” she replied, returning his clear gaze with her frank, innocent eyes that had grown still more brilliant. “A feeling I have never known before.” She talked more rapidly now, leaning forward a little in her chair. “I felt in the open air somehow, with flowers, trees, hot burning sunshine and sweet winds rushing to and fro. It was something bigger than happiness — a sort of intoxicating joy, I think. It was liberty, but of an enormous spiritual kind. I wanted to dance — I believe I did dance — yes, I’m sure I did, and with hardly anything on my body. I wanted to sing — I sang downstairs, of course — —”

“I heard,” he put in briefly. He did not add that she had never sung like that before.

“The moment I came into the room, yes, I remember I went straight to the piano without a word to anyone.” She reflected a moment. “I suppose I had to. There was something new in me I could only express by music — rhythm, that is, not language.”

“It was natural,” Dr. Fillery said again. “Quite natural, I think.”

“Yes, Edward, I suppose it was,” she answered, then sank back in her chair, as though she had told him all there was to tell.

Dr. Fillery smoked in silence for a few minutes, then rose and touched the bell as before, and, as before, Nurse Robbins appeared with the same miraculous speed. There was a brief colloquy at the door; the woman was gone again, and the doctor turned back into the room with a look of satisfaction on his face. All, apparently, was going well upstairs. He did not sit down, however; he stood looking out of the window at the drab wintry sky of motionless clouds, his back to his companion. It was midday, but the light, while making all things visible, was not light; there was no shine, no touch of radiance, no hint of sparkle beneath the canopy of sullen cloud. The English winter’s day was visible, no more than that. Yet it was not the English day, nor the clouds, nor the bleak dead atmosphere he looked at. In a single second his sight travelled far, far away, covering an enormous interval in space and time, in condition too. He saw a radiant world of sun-drenched flowers “tossing with random airs of an unearthly wind”; he saw a foam of forest leaves shaking and dancing against a deep blue sky; he say a valley whose streams and emerald turf knew not the touch of human feet.... The familiar symbols he saw, but inflamed with new meaning.

"Thank you, Edward, thank you" — she was just behind him, her hands upon his shoulders. "You understand everything in the world!" she added, "and out of it," but too low for him to hear.

He came back with an effort, turning towards her. They were standing level now and very close, eyes looking into eyes. He felt her breath upon his face, her perfume rose about him, her lips were moving just in front of him — yet, for a second, he did not know who she was. It was as though *she* had not come with him out of that valley, not come back with him.... An insatiable longing seized him — to return and find her, stay with her. The ache of an intolerable yearning was in his heart, yet a sudden flash of understanding that brought a bigger, almost an unearthly joy in its train. At the call of some service, some duty, some help to be rendered to humanity, the three of them together — he, "N. H.," the girl — were in temporary exile from their rightful home. The scent of wild flowers rose about him. He suddenly remembered, recognized, and gave a little start. He had left her behind in the valley — Iraida; it was Nayan who now stood before him.

He uttered a dry little laugh. "You startled me, Nayan. I was thinking. I didn't hear you." She had just thanked him for something — oh, yes — because he had left her alone for a moment, giving her time to collect herself after the long cross-examination.

He took both her hands in his.

"*Our* patient then — isn't it?" he asked in a firm voice, looking deep into her luminous eyes. He saw no fire in them now.

"I'll do all I can, Edward."

She returned the pressure of his hands. His keen insight, operating in spite of himself, had read her clearly. It was mother, child and woman he had always known. The three, however, were already in process of disentanglement. For the first time during their long acquaintance, what now stood so close before him was — the woman. Yet behind the woman like an enveloping shadow stood the mother too. And behind both, again, stood another wild, gigantic, lovely possibility. Was it, then, the child that he had left playing in the radiant valley?... The child, he knew, was his always, always, even if the woman was another's.... He laughed softly. These, after all, were but transitory states in human, earthly evolution, concerned with play, with a production of bodies and so forth....

He had lost himself in her deep eyes. Her gaze lay all over him, over his entire being, like a warm soft covering that blessed and healed. She was so close that it seemed he drew her breath in with his own. She made a movement then, a tiny gesture. He let go the hands his own had held so long. He turned from the window and from her. He was trembling.

"What came later," he resumed in his calm, almost in his professional voice, "you probably do not remember?" He went towards his desk. "We need not talk about that. No doubt, in your mind, it all remains a blurred impression — —"

She interrupted, following him across the room. "What happened, Edward," she said very quietly in her lowest tone, "*I know*. It was all told to me. But my memory, as you say, is so faint as to be worthless really. What I do remember is this" — she tapped her open palm with two fingers slowly, as she spoke the words— "light, heat, a smell of flowers and a rushing wind that lifted me into some kind of exhilarating liberty where I felt — the intense joy of knowing myself somehow free — and greater, oh, far greater — than I am — now." Then she suddenly whispered again too low for him to catch— "angelic." A smile, as of glory, rippled across her face.

His voice, coming quickly, was cool, its tone measured:

"And you will come to see him the moment I let you know," he interrupted abruptly. "It may be a few days, it may be a week. The instant it seems wise — —" He was entirely practical again.

She went to the door with him. "I'll come, of course," she answered, as he opened the door.

"I'll let myself out, Edward — please. I know the way. There's no good being a partner if one doesn't know the way out — —" She laughed.

"And in, remember!" he called down the little passage after her, as, with a smile and a wave of the hand, she was gone.

He went back to his desk, drew a piece of paper towards him, and jotted a few notes down in briefest fashion. The expression on his rugged face was enigmatical perhaps, but the sternness at least was clear to read, and it was this, combining with an extraordinary tenderness, that drew out its nobility:

"Intensification of consciousness, involving increased activity of every centre; hearing, sight, touch and smell, all affected. Slight exteriorization of consciousness also took place. No signs of split or divided personality, but an increase of coherence rather. The central self active — aware of greater powers in time and space, hence sense of joy, heat, light, sound, motion. Distinct subliminal up-rush, followed by customary loss of memory later. Her *whole* being, together with neglected tracts as yet untouched by experience — her *entire* being — reached simultaneously. Knew herself for the first time a woman — but something more as well. Unearthly complex, visible.

"Appeal made direct to subconscious self. Unfavourable reactions — none. Favourable reactions — increased physical and mental strength...."

He laid down his pencil as with a gesture of impatience at its uselessness, and sat back in the chair, thinking.

The effect "N. H." had upon other people was here again confirmed. That, at least, seemed reasonably clear. Vitality was increased; heart and mind caught up an extra gear; thought leaped, if extravagantly, towards speculation; emotion deepened, if ecstatically, towards belief. All the normal reactions of the system were speeded up and strengthened. Consciousness was intensified.

More than this — with some it was extended, and subliminal powers were set free. In his own experience this had been the case; the sight, hearing, even a mild degree of divination, had opened in his being. It had, similarly, taken place with Devonham, an unlikely subject, who fought against acknowledging it. Father Collins, too, he suspected — he recalled his behaviour and strange language — had known also a temporary extension of faculty outside the normal field. He remembered, again, the Customs official, Charing Cross Station, and a dozen other minor instances.... Indications as yet were slight, he realized, but they were valuable.

Such abnormal experiences, moreover, each one interpreted, respectively, in the terms of his own individual being, of his own temperament, his own personal shibboleths. The law governing unusual experience operated invariably.

Was not his own particular “vision” easily explained? It might indeed, had it happened earlier, have found a place in his own book of Advanced Psychology. He reflected rapidly: He believed the industrial system lay at the root of Civilization’s crumbling, and that man must return to Nature — therefore his yearnings dramatized themselves in personified representations of the beauty of Nature.

He could trace every detail of his Vision to some intense but unrealized yearning, to some deep hope, desire, dream, as yet unfulfilled. Always these yearnings and wishes unfulfilled!

Colour, form and sound again — he used them one and all in his treatment of special cases, and felt hurt by the ignorant scoffing and denial of his brother doctors. Hence their present dramatization.

His immense belief, again, in the results upon the Race when once the subliminal powers should have reached the stage where they could be used at will for practical purposes — this, in its turn, led him to hope, perhaps to believe, that this strange “Case” might prove to be some fabulous bright messenger who brought glad tidings.... All, all was explicable enough!

A smile stole over his face; he began to laugh quietly to himself....

Yes, he could explain all, trace all to something or other in his being, yet — he knew that the real explanation ... well — his cleverest intellectual explanation and analysis were worthless after all. For here lay something utterly beyond his knowledge and experience....

The note of another searcher recurred to him.

“Each human being has within himself that restless creative phantasy which is ever engaged in assuaging the harshness of reality.... Whoever gives himself unsparingly and carefully to self-observation will realize that there dwells within him something which would gladly hide up and cover all that is difficult and questionable in life, and thus procure an easy and free path. Insanity grants the upper hand to this something. When once it is uppermost, reality is more or less quickly driven out.”

But he knew quite well that although he belonged to what he called the “Unstable,” the “something” which Jung referred to had by no means obtained “the upper hand.” The vista opening to his inner sight led towards a new reality.... Ah! If he could only persuade Paul Devonham to see what *he* saw...!

CHAPTER XXII

LADY GLEESON HAD heard from a Promethean what had transpired in the studio after she had left, and her interest was immensely stimulated. These details she had not known when she had driven her hero home, and had felt so strangely drawn to him that she had kissed him in front of Dr. Fillery as though she caressed a prisoner under the eyes of the warder.

She made her little plans accordingly. It was some days, however, before they bore fruit. The telephone at last rang. It was Dr. Fillery. The nerves in her quivered with anticipation.

Devonham, it appeared, had been away, and her "kind letters and presents," he regretted to find, had remained unanswered and unacknowledged. Mr. LeVallon had been in the country, too, with his colleague, and letters had not been forwarded. Oh, it would "do him good to see people." It would be delightful if she could spare a moment to look in. Perhaps for a cup of tea to-morrow? No, to-morrow she was engaged. The next day then. The next day it was. In the morning arrived a brief letter from Mr. LeVallon himself: "You will come to tea to-morrow. I thank you. — Julian LeVallon."

Yet there was something both in Dr. Fillery's voice, as in this enigmatic letter, that she did not like. She felt puzzled somewhere. The excitement of a novel intrigue with this unusual youth, none the less, was stimulating. She decided to go to tea. She put off a couple of engagements in order to be free.

A servant let her in. She went upstairs. There was no sign of Dr. Fillery nor, thank heaven, of Devonham either. Tea, she saw, was laid for two in the private sitting-room. LeVallon, seated in an arm-chair by the open window, looked "magnificent and overpowering," as she called it. He rose at once to greet her. "Thank you," he said in his great voice. "I am glad to see you." He said it perfectly, as though it had been taught him. He took her hand. Her ravishing smile, perhaps, he did not notice. His face, at any rate, was grave.

His height, his broad shoulders, his inexperienced eyes and manner again delighted Lady Gleeson.

The effect upon her receptive temperament, at any rate, was instantaneous. That he showed no cordiality, did not smile, and that his manner was constrained, meant nothing to her — or meant what she wished it to mean. He was somewhat overcome, of course, she reflected, that she was here at all. She began at once. Sitting composedly on the edge of the table, so that her pretty silk stockings were visible to the extent she thought just right, she dangled her slim legs and looked him straight in the eyes. She was full of confidence. Her attitude said plainly: "I'm taking a lot of trouble, but you're worth it."

"Mr. LeVallon," she purred in a teasing yet determined voice, "why do you ignore me?" There was an air of finality about the words. She meant to know.

LeVallon met her eyes with a look of puzzled surprise, but did not answer. He stood in front of her. He looked really magnificent, a perfect study of the athlete in repose. He might have been a fine Greek statue.

"Why," she repeated, her lip quivering slightly, "do you ignore me? I want the truth," she added. She was delighted to see how taken aback he was. "You don't dislike me." It was not a question.

Into his eyes stole an expression she could not exactly fathom. She judged, however, that he felt awkward, foolish. Her interest doubtless robbed him of any *savoir faire* he might possess. This talk face to face was a little too much for any young man, but for a simple country youth it was, of course, more than disconcerting.

"I'm Lady Gleeson," she informed him, smiling precisely in the way she knew had troubled so many other men. "Angela," she added softly. "You've had my books and flowers and letters. Yet you continue to ignore me. Why, please?" With a different smile and a pathetic, childish, voice: "Have I offended you somehow? Do I displease you?"

LeVallon stared at her as though he was not quite certain who she actually was, yet as though he ought to know, and that her words now reminded him. He stared at her with what she called his "awkward and confused" expression, but which Fillery, had he been present, would have recognized as due to his desire to help a pitiful and hungry creature — that, in a word, his instinct for service had been a little stirred.

The scene was certainly curious and unusual.

LeVallon, with his great strength and dignity, yet something tender, pathetic in his bearing, stood staring at her. Lady Gleeson, brimming with a sense of easy victory, sat on the table-edge, her pretty legs well forward, knowing herself divinely gowned. She had her victim, surely, at a disadvantage. She felt at the same time a faint uneasiness she could not understand. She concealed it, however.

"I suffer here," he said suddenly in a quiet tone.

She gave a start. It was the phrase he had used before. She thrilled. She hitched her skirt a fraction higher.

"Julian, poor boy," she said — then stared at him. "How innocent you are!" She said it with apparent impulse, though her little frenzied mind was busy calculating. There came a pause. He said nothing. He was, apparently, quite innocent, extraordinarily, exasperatingly innocent.

In a low voice, smiling shyly, she added — as though it cost her a great effort:

"You do not recognize what is yours."

"You are sacred!" he replied with startling directness, as though he suddenly understood, yet was stupidly perplexed. "You already have your man."

Lady Gleeson gulped down a spasm of laughter. How slow these countrymen could be! Yet she must not shock him. He was suffering, besides. This yokel from the woods and mountains needed a little coaxing. It was natural enough. She must explain and teach, it seemed. Well — he was worth the trouble. His beauty was mastering her already. She loved, in particular, his innocence, his shyness, his obvious respect. She almost felt herself a magnanimous woman.

"My man!" she mentioned. "Oh, he's finished with me long ago. He's bored. He has gone elsewhere. I am alone" — she added with an impromptu inspiration— "and free to choose."

"It must be pain and loneliness to you."

LeVallon looked, she thought, embarrassed. He was struggling with himself, of course. She left the table and came up close to him. She stood on tiptoe, so that her breath might touch his face. Her eyes shone with fire. Her voice trembled a little. It was very low.

"I choose — *you*," she whispered. She cast down her shining eyes. Her lips took on a prim, inviting turn. She knew she was irresistible like that. She stood back a step, as if expecting some tumultuous onslaught. She waited.

But the onslaught did not come. LeVallon, towering above her, merely stared. His arms hung motionless. There was, indeed, expression in his face, but it was not the expression that she expected, longed for, deemed her due. It puzzled her, as something entirely new.

"Me!" he repeated, in an even tone. He gazed at her in a peculiar way. Was it appraisement? Was it halting wonder at his marvellous good fortune? Was it that he hesitated, judging her? He seemed, she thought once for an instant, curiously indifferent. Something in his voice startled her.

The moment's pause, at any rate, was afflicting. Her spirit burned within her. Only her supreme belief in herself prevented a premature explosion. Yet something troubled her as well. A tremor ran through her. LeVallon, she remembered, was — LeVallon.

His own thought and feeling lay hidden from her blunt perception since she read no signs unless they were painfully obvious. But in his mind — in his feeling, rather, since he did not think — ran evidently the sudden knowledge of what her meaning was. He understood. But also, perhaps he remembered what Fillery had told him.

For a long time he kept silent, the emotions in him apparently at grips. Was he suddenly going to carry her away as he had done to that "little Russian poseuse"? She watched him. He was intensely busy with what occupied his mind, for though he did not speak, his lips were moving. She watched him, impatience and wonder in her, impatience at his slowness, wonder as to what he would do and say when at last his simple mind had decided. And again the odd touch of fear stole over her. Something warned her. This young man thrilled her, but he certainly was strange. This was, indeed, a new experience. Whatever was he thinking about? What in the world was he going to say? His lips were still moving. There was a light in his face. She imagined the very words, could almost read them, hear them. There! Then she heard them, heard some at any rate distinctly: “You are an animal. Yet you walk upright....”

The scene that followed went like lightning.

Before Lady Gleeson could move or speak, however, he also said another thing that for one pulsing second, and for the first time in her life, made her own utter worthlessness become appallingly clear to her. It explained the touch of fear. Even her one true thing, her animal passion, was a trumpery affair:

“There is nothing in you I can work with,” he said with gentle, pitying sympathy. “Nothing I can use.”

Then Lady Gleeson blazed. Vanity instantly restored self-confidence. It seemed impossible to believe her ears.

What had he done? What had he said that caused the explosion? He watched her abrupt, spasmodic movements with amazement. They were so ugly, so unrhythmical. Their violence was so wasteful.

“You insult me!” she cried, making these violent movements of her whole body that, to him, were unintelligible. “How dare you? You — —” The breath choked her.

“Cad,” he helped her, so suddenly that another mind not far away might almost have dropped the word purposely into his own. “I am so pained,” he added, “so pained.” He gazed at her as though he longed to help. “For you, I know, are valuable to him who holds you sacred — to — your husband.”

Lady Gleeson simply could not credit her ears. This neat, though unintentional, way of transferring the epithet to her who deserved it, left her speechless. Her fury increased with her inability to express it. She could have struck him, killed him on the spot. Her face changed from white to crimson like some toy with a trick of light inside it. She seemed to emit sparks. She was transfixed. And the shiver that ran through her was, perhaps, for once, both sexual and spiritual at once.

“You insult me,” she cried again helplessly. “You insult me!”

“If there was something in you I could work with — help — —” he began, his face showing a tender sympathy that enraged her even more. He started suddenly, looking closer into her blazing eyes. “Ah,” he said quickly below his breath, “the fire — the little fire!” His expression altered. But Lady Gleeson, full of her grievance, did not catch the words, it seemed.

“ — In my tenderest, my most womanly feelings,” she choked on, yet noticing the altered expression on his face. “How *dare you*?” Her voice became shrill and staccato. Then suddenly — mistaking the look in his eyes for shame — she added: “You shall apologize. You shall apologize at once!” She screamed the words. They were the only ones that her outraged feelings found.

“You show yourself, my fire,” he was saying softly in his deep resonant voice. “Oh, I see and worship now; I understand a little.”

His look astonished her even in the middle of her anger — the pity, kindness, gentleness in it. The bewilderment she did not notice. It was the evident desire to be of service to her, to help and comfort, that infuriated her. The superiority was more than she could stand.

“And on your knees,” she yelped; “on your knees, too!”

Drawing herself up, she pointed to the carpet with an air of some tragedy queen to whom a lost self-respect came slowly back. “Down there!” she added, as the gleaming buckle on her shoe indicated the spot. She did not forget to show her pretty stockings as well.

The picture was comic in the extreme, yet with a pathetic twist about it that, had she possessed a single grain of humour, must have made her feel foolish and shamed until she died, for his kneeling position rendered her insignificance so obvious it was painful in the extreme. LeVallon clasped his hands; his face, wearing a dignity and tenderness that emphasized its singular innocence and beauty, gazed up into her trivial prettiness, as she sat on the edge of the table behind her, glaring down at him with angry but still hungry eyes.

“I should have helped and worshipped,” his deep voice thrilled. “I am ashamed. Always — you are sacred, wonderful. I did not recognize your presence calling me. I did not hear nor understand. I am ashamed.”

The strange words she did not comprehend, even if she heard them properly. For one moment she knew a dreadful feeling that they were not addressed to her at all, but the sense of returning triumph, the burning desire to extract from him the last ounce of humiliation, to make him suffer as much as in her power lay, these emotions deadened any perceptions of a subtler kind. He was kneeling at her feet, stammering his abject apology, and the sight was wine and food to her. Though she could have crushed him with her foot, she could equally have flung herself in utter abandonment before his glorious crouching strength. She adored the scene. He looked magnificent on his knees. He was. She believed she, too, looked magnificent.

"You apologize to me," she said in a trembling voice, tense with mingled passions.

"Oh, with what sadness for my mistake you cannot know," was his strange reply. His voice rang with sincerity, his eyes held a yearning that almost lent him radiance. Yet it was the sense of power he gave that thrilled Lady Gleeson most. For she could not understand it. Again a passing hint of something remote, incalculable, touched her sense of awe. She shivered slightly. LeVallon did not move.

Appeased, yet puzzled, she lowered her face, now pale and intense with eagerness, towards his own, hardly conscious that she did so, while the faint idea again went past her that he addressed his astonishing words elsewhere. Blind vanity at once dismissed the notion, though the shock of its brief disthroning had been painful. She found satisfaction for her wounded soul. A man who had scorned her, now squirmed before her beauty on his knees, desiring her — but too late.

"You have *some* manhood, after all!" she exclaimed, still fierce, the upper lip just revealing the shining little teeth. Her power at last had touched him. He suffered. And she was glad.

"I worship," he repeated, looking through her this time, if not actually past her. "You are sacred, the source of all my life and power." His pain, his worship, the aching passion in him made her forget the insult. Upon that face upturned so close to hers, she now breathed softly.

“I’ll try,” she said more calmly. “I’ll try and forgive you — just this once.” The suffering in his eyes, so close against her own, dawned more and more on her. “There, now,” she added impulsively, “perhaps I will forgive you — altogether!”

It was a moment of immense and queenly generosity. She felt sublime.

LeVallon, however, made no rejoinder; one might have thought he had not heard; only his head sank lower a little before her.

She had him at her mercy now; the rapt and wonderful expression in his eyes delighted her. She bent slightly nearer and made as though to kiss him, when a new idea flashed suddenly through her mind. This forgiveness was a shade too quick, too easy. Oh, she knew men. She was not without experience.

She acted with instant decision upon her new idea, as though delay might tempt her to yield too soon. She straightened up with a sudden jerk, touched his cheek with her hand, then, with a swinging swish of her skirts, but without a single further word, she swept across the room. She went out, throwing him a last glance just before she closed the door. At his kneeling figure and upturned face she flung this last glance of murderous fascination.

But LeVallon did not move or turn his head; he made no sign; his attitude remained precisely as before, face upturned, hands clasped, his expression rapt and grave as ever. His voice continued:

“I worship you for ever. I did not know you in that little shape. O wondrous central fire, teach me to be aware of you with awe, with joy, with love, even in the smallest things. O perfect flame behind all form....”

For a long time his deep tones poured their resonant vibration through the room. There came an answering music, low, faint, continuous, a long, deep rhythm running in it. There was a scent of flowers, of open space, a fragrance of a mountain top. The sounds, the perfume, the touch of cool refreshing wind rose round him, increasing with every minute, till it seemed as though some energy informed them. At the centre he knelt steadily, light glowing faintly in his face and on his skin. A vortex of energy swept round him. He drew upon it. His own energy was increased and multiplied. He seemed to grow more radiant....

A few minutes later the door opened softly and Dr. Fillery looked in, hesitated for a second, then advanced into the room. He paused before the kneeling figure. It was noticeable that he was not startled and that his face wore no expression of surprise. A smile indeed lay on his lips. He noticed the scent of flowers, a sweetness in the air as after rain; he felt the immense vitality, the exhilaration, the peace and power too. He had made no sound, but the other, aware of his presence, rose to his feet.

“I disturbed you,” said Fillery. “I’m sorry. Shall I go?”

“I was worshipping,” replied “N. H.” “No, do not go. There was a little flash” — he looked about him for an instant as if slightly bewildered— “a little sign — something I might have helped — but it has gone again. Then I worshipped, asking for more power. *You* notice it?” he asked, with a radiant smile.

“I notice it,” said Fillery, smiling back. He paused a moment. His eye took in the tea-things and saw they were untouched; he felt the tea-pot. It was still warm. “Come,” he said happily; “we’ll have some tea together. I’ll send for a fresh brew.” He rang the bell, then arranged the chairs a little differently. “Your visitor?” he asked. “You are expecting someone?”

“N. H.” looked round him suddenly. “Oh!” he exclaimed, “but — she has gone!”

His surprise was comical, but the expression on the face changed in his rapid way at once. “I remember now. Your Lady Gleeson came,” he added, a touch of gentle sadness in his voice, “I gave her pain. You had told me. I forgot — —”

“You did well,” Fillery commented with smiling approval as though the entire scene was known to him, “you did very well. It is a pity, only, that she left too soon. If she had stayed for your worship — your wind and fire might have helped — —”

“N. H.” shook his head. “There is nothing I can work with,” he replied. “She is empty. She destroys only. Why,” he added, “does she walk upright?”

But Lady Gleeson held very different views upon the recent scene. This magnificent young male she had put in his place, but she had not finished with him. No such being had entered her life before. She was woman enough to see he was unusual. But he was magnificent as well, and, secretly, she loved his grand indifference.

She left the house, however, with but an uncertain feeling that the honours were with her. Two days without a word, a sign, from her would bring him begging to her little feet.

But the "begging" did not come. The bell was silent, the post brought no humble, passionate, abandoned letter. She fumed. She waited. Her husband, recently returned to London and immensely preoccupied with his concessions, her maid too, were aware that Lady Gleeson was impatient. The third, the fourth day came, but still no letter.

Whereupon it occurred to her that she had possibly gone too far. Having left him on his knees, he was, perhaps, still kneeling in his heart, even prostrate with shame and disappointment. Afraid to write, afraid to call, he knew not what to do. She had evidently administered too severe a lesson. Her callers, meanwhile, convinced her that she was irresistible. There was no woman like her in the world. She had, of course, been too harsh and cruel with this magnificent and innocent youth from the woods and mountains....

Thus it was that, on the fourth day, feeling magnanimous and generous, big-hearted too, she wrote to him. It would be foolish, in any case, to lose him altogether merely for a moment's pride:

"Dear Mr. LeVallon, — I feel I must send you a tiny word to let you know that I really have forgiven you. You behaved, you know, in a way that no man of my acquaintance has ever done before. But I feel sure now you did not really mean it. Your forest and mountain gods have not taught you to understand civilized women. So — I forgive.

"Please forget it all, as I have forgotten it. — Yours,

"Angela Gleeson.

"P. S. — And you may come and see me soon."

To which, two days later, came the reply:

"Dear Lady Gleeson, — I thank you.

Julian LeVallon."

Within an hour of its receipt, she wrote:

“Dear Julian, — I am so glad you understand. I knew you would. You may come and see me. I will prove to you that you are really forgiven. There is no need to feel embarrassed. I am interested in you and can help you. Believe me, you need a woman’s guidance. All — *all* I have, is yours.

“I shall be at home this afternoon — alone — from 4 to 7 o’clock. I shall expect you. My love to you and your grand wild gods! — Yours,

“Angela.

“P. S. — I want you to tell me more about your gods. Will you?”

She sent it by special messenger, “Reply” underlined on the envelope. He did not appear at the appointed hour, but the next morning she received his letter. It came by ordinary post. The writing on the envelope was not his. Either Devonham or Fillery had addressed it. And a twinge of unaccustomed emotion troubled her. Intuition, it seems, survives even in the coarsest, most degraded feminine nature, ruins of some divine prerogative perhaps. Lady Gleeson, at any rate, flinched uneasily before she opened the long expected missive:

“Dear Lady Gleeson, — Be sure that you are always under the protection of the gods even if you do not know them. They are impersonal. They come to you through passion but not through that love of the naked body which is lust. I can work with passion because it is creative, but not with lust, for it is destructive only. Your suffering is the youth and ignorance of the young uncreative animal. I can strive with young animals and can help them. But I cannot work with them. I beg you, listen. I love in you the fire, though it is faint and piti-ful.

“Julian.”

Lady Gleeson read this letter in front of the looking-glass, then stared at her reflection in the mirror.

She was dazed. But in spite of the language she thought “silly,” she caught the blunt refusal of her generous offer. She understood. Yet, unable to believe it, she looked at her reflection again — then, impulsively, went downstairs to see her husband.

It really was more than she could bear. The man was mad, but that did not excuse him.

“He is a beast,” she informed her husband, tearing up the letter angrily before his eyes in the library, while he watched her with a slavish admiration that increased her fury. “He is nothing but an animal,” she added. “He’s a — a — —”

“Who?” came the question, as though it had been asked before. For Sir George wore a stolid and a patient expression on his kindly face.

“That man LeVallon,” she told him. “One of Dr. Fillery’s cases I tried to — to help. Now he’s written to me — —”

George looked up with infinite patience and desire in his kindly gaze.

“Cut him out,” he said dryly, as though he was accustomed to such scenes. “Let him rip. Why bother, anyway, with ‘patients’?”

And he crossed the room to comfort her, knowing that presently the reaction must make him seem more desirable than he really was....

“Never in my house again,” she sighed, as he approached her lovingly, his fingers in his close brown beard. “He is simply a beast — an animal!”

CHAPTER XXIII

IT WAS, PERHAPS, some cosmic humour in the silent, beautiful stars which planned that Nayan’s visit should follow upon the very heels of Lady Gleeson’s call. Those vast Intelligences who note the fall of even a feather, watching and guarding the Race so closely that they may be said in human terms to love it, arranged the details possibly, enjoying the result with their careless, sunny laughter. At any rate, Dr. Fillery quickly sent her word, and she came. To lust “N. H.” had not reacted. How would it be with love?

The beautiful girl entered the room slowly, shyly, as though, certain of herself, she was not quite certain what she was about to meet. Fillery had told her she could help, that she was needed; therefore she came. There was no thought of self in her. Her first visit to Julian LeVallon after his behaviour in the Studio had no selfish motive in it. Her self-confidence, however, went only to a certain point; in the interview with Fillery she had easily controlled herself; she was not so sure that her self-control would be adequate now. Though calm outwardly, an inexpressible turmoil surged within.

She remembered his strength, virility and admiration — as a woman; his ingenuous, childlike innocence, an odd appealing helplessness in it somewhere, touched the mother in her. That she divined this latter was, perhaps, the secret of her power over men. Independent of all they had to offer, she touched the highest in them by making them feel they had need of the highest in herself. She obtained thus, without desiring it, the influence that Lady Gleeson, her antithesis, lacked. They called her Nayan the Impersonal. The impersonal in her, nevertheless, that which had withstood the cunning onslaught of every type of male successfully, had received a fundamental shock. Both her modesty and dignity had been assailed, and in public. Others, women among them, had witnessed her apparent yielding to LeVallon’s violence and seen her carried in his arms; they had noted her obvious willingness, had heard her sympathetic cry. She knew quite well what the women thought — Lady Gleeson had written a little note of sympathy — the men as well, and yet she came at Fillery's call to visit, perhaps to help, the offender who had caused it all.

As she opened the door every nerve she possessed was tingling. The mother in her yearned, but the woman in her sent the blood rushing from her heart in pride, in resentment, in something of anger as well. How had he dared to seize her in that awful way? The outrage and the love both tore at her. Yet Nayan was not the kind to shirk self-revelation when it came. She brought some hidden secret with her, although as yet herself uncertain what that secret was.

Fillery met her on the threshold with his sweet tact and sympathy as usual. He had an authoritative and paternal air that helped and comforted her, and, as she took his hand at once, the look she gave him was more kind and tender than she knew. The last trace of self, at any rate, went out of her as she felt his touch.

"Here I am," she said; "you sent for me. I promised you."

He replied in a low tone: "There's no need to refer to anything, of course. Assume — I suggest — that he has forgotten all that happened, and you — have forgotten too."

He was aware of nothing but her eyes. The softness, the delicate perfume, the perfect voice, even the fur and flowers — all were summed up in her eyes alone. In those eyes he could have lost himself perhaps for ever.

He led her into the room, a certain abruptness in his manner.

"I shall leave you alone," he whispered, using his professional voice. "It is best that he should see you quite alone. I shall not be far away, but you will find him perfectly quiet. He understands that you are" — his tone changed upon the adjective— "sacred."

"Sacred," she murmured to herself, repeating the word, "sacred."

They smiled. And the door closed behind her. Across the room rose the tall figure of the man she had come to see, dressed in dark blue, a low white shirt open at the neck, a blue tie that matched the strong, clear eyes, the wondrous hair crowning the whole like a flame. The slant of wintry sunlight by chance just caught the great figure as it rose, lightly, easily, as though it floated up out of the floor before her.

And, as by magic, the last uncertainty in her disappeared; she knew herself akin to this radiant shape of blue and gold; knew also — mysteriously — in a way entirely beyond her to explain — knew why Edward Fillery was dear to her. Was it that something in the three of them pertained to a common origin? The conviction, half thought, half feeling, rose in her as she looked into the blue eyes facing her and took the outstretched hand.

“You strange lost being! No one will understand you — here....”

The words flashed through her mind of their own accord, instantly, spontaneously, yet were almost forgotten the same second in the surge of more commonplace feeling that rose after. Only the “here” proved their origin not entirely forgotten. It was the selfless, mothering instinct that now dominated, but the division in her being had, none the less, been indicated as by a white piercing light that searched her inmost nature. That added “here” laid bare, she felt, some part of her which, with all other men, was clothed and covered away.

Realized though dimly, this troubled her clear mind, as she took the chair he offered, the conviction that she must tend and care for, even love this strange youth, as though he were in exile and none but herself could understand him. She heard the deep resonant voice in the air in front of her:

“I am not lost now,” he said, with his radiant smile, and as if he perceived her thought from the expression in her face. “I wished to take you away — to take you back. I wish it still.”

He stood gazing down at her. The deep tones, the shining eyes, the towering stature with its quiet strength — these, added to the directness of the language, confused her for a moment. The words were so entirely unexpected. Fillery had led her to suppose otherwise. Yet before the blazing innocence in his face and manner, her composure at once returned. She found no words at first. She smiled up into his eyes, then pointed to a chair. Seated he would be more manageable, she felt. His upright stature was so overpowering.

“You had forgotten — —” he went on, obeying her wish and sitting down, “but I could not know that you had forgotten. I apologize” — the word sounded oddly on his lips, as though learned recently— “for making you suffer.”

"Forgotten!"

A swift intuition, due to some as yet undecipherable kinship, told her that the word bore no reference to the Studio scene. Some larger meaning, scaled to an immenser map, came with it. An unrealized emotion stirred faintly in her as she heard. Her first sight of him as a figure of light returned.

"But that is all forgiven now," she replied calmly in her firm, gentle voice. "We need not speak of it. You understand now" — she ended lamely— "that it is not possible — —"

He listened intently, gravely, as though with a certain effort, his head bent forward to catch every syllable. And as he bent, peering, listening, he might have been some other-worldly being staring down through a window in the sky into the small confusions of earth's affairs.

"Yes," he said, the moment she stopped speaking, "I understand now. I shall never make you suffer again. Only — I could not know that you had forgotten — so completely."

"Forgotten?" she again repeated in spite of herself, for the way he uttered the word again stirred that nameless, deep emotion in her. Their attitudes respectively were changing. She no longer felt that she could "mother" this great figure before her.

"Where we belong," he answered in his great quiet voice. "*There*," he added, in a way that made it the counterpart of her own spontaneous and intuitive "here." "It is so easy. I had forgotten too. But Fillery, dear Fillery, helps me to remember, and the stars and flowers and wind, these help me too. And then you — when I saw *you* I suddenly remembered more. I was so happy. I remembered what I had left to come among men and women. I knew that Fillery and you belonged 'there' with me. You, both, had come down for a little time, come down 'here,' but had remained too long. You had become almost as men and women are. I remembered everything when I saw your eyes. I was so happy in a moment, as I looked at you, that I felt I must go back, go home. The central fire called me, called us all three. I wanted to escape and take you with me. I knew by your eyes that you were ready. You called to Fillery. We were off."

He paused a moment, while she listened in breathless silence.

“Then, suddenly, you refused. You resisted. Something prevented. The Messengers were there when suddenly” — an expression of yearning pain clouded his great eyes a moment— “you forgot again. I forgot too, forgot everything. The darkness came. It was cold. My enemy, the water, caught me.”

He stopped, and passed his hands across his forehead, sighing, his eyes fixed upon vacancy as with an intense effort to recover something. “And I still forget,” he went on, the yearning now transferred from the eyes to the lowered voice. “I can remember nothing again. All, all is gone from me.” The light in his face actually grew dimmer as he slowly uttered the words. He leaned back in his big arm-chair. Again, it occurred to her, it was as if he drew back from that window in the sky.

A curious hollow, empty of life, seemed to drop into the room between them as his voice ceased.

While he had been speaking, the girl watched and listened with intense interest and curiosity. She remembered he was a “patient,” yet no touch of uneasiness or nervousness was in her. His strange words, meaningless as they might seem, woke deep echoes of some dim buried recognition in her. It amazed and troubled her. This young man, this sinner against the conventions whom she had come to comfort and forgive, held the reins already. What had happened, what was happening, and how did he contrive it? She was aware of a clear, divining knowledge in him, a power, a directness she could not fathom. He seemed to read her inside out. It was more than uncanny; it was spiritual. It mastered her.

During his speech he remained very still, without gesture, without change of expression in his face; he made no movement; only his voice deepened and grew rhythmical. And a power emanated from him she hardly dared resist, much less deny. His voice, his words, reached depths in her she scarcely knew herself. He was so strong, so humble, so simple, yet so strangely peaceful. And — suddenly she realized it — so far beyond her, yet akin. She became aware that the figure seated in the chair, watching her, talking, was but a fraction of his whole self. He was — the word occurred to her — immense. Was she, too, immense?

More than troubled, she was profoundly stimulated. The mothering instinct in her for the first time seemed to fail a little. The woman in her trembled, not quite sure of itself. But, besides these two, there was another part of her that listened and felt joy — a white, radiant joy which, if she allowed, must become ecstasy. Whence came this hint of unearthly rapture? Again there rose before her the two significant words: “There” and “Here.”

“I do not quite understand,” she replied, after a moment’s pause, looking into his eyes steadily, her voice firm, her young face very sweet; “I do not fully understand, perhaps. But I sympathize.” Then she added suddenly, with a little smile: “But, at any rate, I did not come to make you apologize — Julian. Please be sure of that. I came to see if I might be of any use — if there was anything I might do to make — —”

His quick interruption transfixed her.

“You came,” he said in a distinct, low tone, “because you love me and wish me to love you. But we do love already, you, dear Fillery, and I — only our love is in that great Service where we all three belong. It is not of this — it is not *here* — —” making an impatient gesture with his hand to indicate his general surroundings.

He broke off instantly, noticing the expression in her face.

She had realized suddenly, as he spoke, the blind fury of reproduction that sweeps helpless men and women everywhere into union, then flings them aside exhausted, useless, its purpose accomplished. Though herself never yet caught by it, the vivid realization made her turn from life with pity and revulsion. Yet — were these thoughts her own? Whence did they come, if not? And what was this new blind thing straining in her mind for utterance, bursting upwards like a flame, threatening to split it asunder even in its efforts to escape? “What are these words we use?” darted across her. “What do they mean? What is it we’re talking about *really*? I don’t know quite. Yet it’s real, yes, real and true. Only it’s beyond our words. It’s something I know, but have forgotten....” That was *his* word again: “Forgotten”! While they used words together, something in her went stumbling, groping, thrusting towards a great shining revelation for which no words existed. And a strange, deep anguish seized her suddenly.

“Oh!” he cried, “I make you suffer again. The fire leaves you. You are white. I — I will apologize” — he slipped on to his knees before her— “but you do not understand. It was not your sacredness I spoke of.” Already on his knees before her, but level with her face owing to his great stature, gazing into her eyes with an expression of deep tenderness, humility, almost suffering, he added: “It was our other love, I meant, our great happy service, the thing we have forgotten. You came, I thought, to help me to remember *that*. The way home — I saw you knew.” The light streamed back into his face and eyes.

The tumult and confusion in the girl were natural enough. Her resourcefulness, however, did not fail her at this curious and awkward moment. His words, his conduct were more than she could fathom, yet behind both she divined a source of remote inspiration she had never known before in any “man.” The beauty and innocence on the face arrested her faculties for a second. That nameless emotion stirred again. A glimmer of some faint, distant light, whose origin she could not guess, passed flickering across her inner tumult. Some faculty she could not name, at any rate, blew suddenly to white heat in her. This youth on his knees before her had spoken truth. Without knowing it even herself, she had given him her love, a virgin love, a woman’s love hitherto unawakened in her by any other man, but a love not of this earth quite — because of him who summoned it into sudden flower.

Yet at the same time he denied the need of it! He spoke of some marvellous great shining Service that was different from the love of man and woman.

This too, as some forgotten, lost ideal, she knew was also true.

Her mind, her heart, her experience, her deepest womanly nature, these, she realized in a glowing instant of extraordinary divination, were at variance in her. She trembled; she knew not what to do or say or think. And again, it came to her, that the visible shape before her was but the insignificant fraction of a being whose true life spread actively and unconfined through infinite space.

She then did something that was prompted, though she did not know it thus, by her singleness of heart, her purity of soul and body, her unique and natural instinct to be of use, of service, to others — the accumulated practice and effort of her entire life provided the action along a natural line of least resistance: she bent down and put her arm and hand round his great shoulder. She lowered her face. She kissed him most tenderly, with a mother’s love, a woman’s secret passion perhaps, but yet with something else as well she could not name — an unearthly yearning for a greater Ideal than anything she had yet known on earth among humanity.... It was the invisible she kissed.

And LeVallon, she realized with immense relief, justified her action, for he did not return the kiss. At the same time she had known quite well it would be thus. That kiss trembled, echoed, in her own greater unrealized self as well.

“What is it,” she whispered, a mysterious passion surging up in her as she raised him to his feet, “that you remember and wish to recover — for us all? Can you tell me? What is this great, happy, deathless service that we have forgotten?” Her voice trembled a little. An immense sense of joy, of liberty, shook out its sunlit wings.

His expression, as he rose, was something between that of a child and a faithful yearning animal, but of a “divine animal,” though she did not know the phrase. Its purity, its sweetness, its power — it was the power she noticed chiefly — were superb.

“I cannot tell, I cannot remember,” his voice said softly, for all its resonant, virile depth. “It is some state we all have come from — into this. We are strangers here. This brain and intellect, this coarse, thick feeling, this selfishness, this want of harmony and working together — all this is new and strange to us. It is of blind and clumsy children. This love of one single person for one other single person — it is so pitiful. We three have come into this for a time, a little time. It is pain and misery. It is prison. Each one works only for himself. There is no joy. They know nothing of our great Service. We cannot show them. Let us go back — —”

Another pause fell between them, another of those singular hollows she had felt before. But this time the hollow was not empty. It was brimmed with surging life. The gulf between her earthly state and another that was nameless, a gulf usually unbridgeable, the fixed gulf, as an old book has it, which may not be crossed without danger to the Race, for whose protection it exists — this childhood simile occurred to her. And a sense of awe stirred in her being. It was the realization that this gulf or hollow now brimmed with life, that it could be crossed, that she might step over into another place — the sense of awe rose thence, yet came certainly neither from the woman nor the mother in her.

"I am of another place," LeVallon went on, plucking the thought naked from her inmost being. "For I am come here recently, and the purpose of my coming is hidden from me, and memory is dark. But it is not entirely dark. Sometimes I half remember. Stars, flowers, fire, wind, women — here and there — bring light into the darkness. Oh," he cried suddenly, "how wonderful they are — how wonderful you are — on that account to me!"

The voice held a strange, evoking power perhaps. A thousand yearnings she had all her life suppressed because they interfered with her duty — as she conceived it — here and now, fluttered like rising flames within her as she listened. His voice now increased in volume and rhythm, though still quiet and low-pitched; it was as if a great wind poured behind it with tremendous vibrations, through it, lifting her out of a limited, cramped, everyday self. A delicious warmth of happy comfort, of acceptance, of enthusiasm glowed in her. And LeVallon's face, she saw, had become radiant, almost as though it emanated light. This light entered her being and brought joy again.

"Joy!" he said, reading her thought and feeling. "Joy!"

"Joy! Another place!" she heard herself repeating, her eyes now fixed upon his own.

She felt lighter, caught up and away a little, lifted above the solid earth; as if it was heat that lightened, and wind that bore her upwards. Everything in her became intensified.

"Another state, another place" — her voice seemed to borrow something of the rhythm in his own, though she did not notice it— "but not away from earth, this beautiful earth?" With a happy smile she added, "I love the dear kind earth, I love it."

The light on his face increased:

"The earth we love and serve," he said, "is beautiful, but here" — he looked about him round the room, at the trees waving through the window, at the misty sky above draping the pale light of the sun— "here I am on the surface only. There is confusion and struggle. Everything quarrels against everything else. It is discord and disorder. There is no harmony. Here, on the surface, everything is separate. There is no working together. It is all pain, each little part fighting for itself. Here — I am outside — there is no joy."

It was the phrase “I am outside” that flashed something more of his meaning into her. His full meaning lay beyond actual words perhaps; but this phrase fell like a shock into that inmost self which she had deliberately put away.

“*You are from inside*, yes,” she exclaimed, marvelling afterwards that she had said it; “within — nearer to the centre —— !”

And he took the abrupt interruption as though they both understood and spoke of the same one thing together, having found a language born of similar great yearnings and of forgotten knowledge, times, states, conditions, places.

“I come,” he said, his voice, his bright smile alive with the pressure of untold desire, “from another place that is — yes — inside, nearer to the centre. I have forgotten almost everything. I remember only that there was harmony, love, work and happiness all combined in the perfect liberty of our great service. We served the earth. We helped the life upon it. There was no end, no broken fragments, no failure.” The voice touched chanting. “There was no death.”

He rose suddenly and came over to her side, and instinctively the girl stood up. What she felt and thought as she heard the strange language he used, she hardly knew herself. She only knew in that moment an immense desire to help her kind, an intensification of that great ideal of impersonal service which had always been the keynote of her life. This became vividly stimulated in her. It rose like a dominating, overmastering passion. The sense of ineffectual impotence, of inability to accomplish anything of value against the stolid odds life set against her, the uselessness of her efforts with the majority, in a word, seemed brushed away, as though greater powers of limitless extent were now at last within her reach. This blazed in her like fire. It shone in her big dark eyes that looked straight into his as they stood facing one another.

“And that service,” he went on in his deep vibrating, half-singing tone, “I see in dear Fillery and in you. I know my own kind. We three, at least, belong. I know my own.” The voice seemed to shake her like a wind.

At the last two words her soul leaped within her. It seemed quite natural that his great arm should take her breast and shoulder and that his lips should touch her cheek and hair. For there was worship in both gestures.

“Our greater service,” she whispered, trembling, “tell me of that. What is it?” His touch against her was like the breath of fire.

Her womanly instincts, so-called, her maternal love, her feminine impulses deserted her. She was aware solely at that moment of the proximity of a being who called her to a higher, to, at any rate, a different state, to something beyond the impoverished conditions of humanity as she had hitherto experienced it, to something she had ever yearned and longed for without knowing what it was. An extraordinary sense of enormous liberty swept over her again.

His voice broke and the rhythm failed.

“I cannot tell you,” he replied mournfully, the light fading a little from his eyes and face. “I have forgotten. That other place is hidden from me. I am in exile,” he added slowly, “but with you and — Fillery.” His blue eyes filled with moisture; the expression of troubled loneliness was one she had never seen before on any human face. “I suffer,” he added gently. “We all suffer.”

And, at the sight of it, the yearning to help, to comfort, to fulfil her rôle as mother, returned confusingly, and rose in her like a tide. He was so big and strong and splendid. He was so helpless. It was, perhaps, the innocence in the great blue eyes that conquered her — for the first time in her life.

But behind, beside the mother in her, stirred also the natural woman. And beyond this again, rose the accumulated power of the entire Race. The instinct of all the women of the planet since the world began drove at her. Not easily may an individual escape the deep slavery of the herd.

The young girl wavered and hesitated. Caught by so many emotions that whirled her as in a vortex, the direction of the resultant impetus hung doubtful for some time. During the half hour’s talk, she had entered deeper water than she had ever dared or known before. Life hitherto, so far as men were concerned, had been a simple and an easy thing that she had mastered without difficulty. Her real self lay still unscarred within her. Freely she had given the mothering care and sympathy that were so strong in her, the more freely because the men who asked of her were children, one and all, children who needed her, but from whom she asked nothing in return. If they fell in love, as they usually did, she knew exactly how to lift their emotion in a way that saved them pain while it left herself untouched. None reached her real being, which thus remained unscathed, for none offered the lifting glory that she craved.

Here, for the first time facing her, stood a being of another type; and that unscathed self in her went trembling at the knowledge. Here was a power she could not play with, could not dominate, but a power that could play with her as easily as the hurricane with the flying leaf. It was not his words, his strange beauty, his great strength that mastered her, though these brought their contribution doubtless. The power she felt emanated unconsciously from him, and was used unconsciously. It was all about him. She realized herself a child before him, and this realization sweetened, though it confused her being. He so easily touched depths in her she had hardly recognized herself. He could so easily lift her to terrific heights.... Various sides of her became dominant in turn....

The inmost tumult of a good woman’s heart is not given to men to read, perhaps, but the final impetus resulting from the whirlpool tossed her at length in a very definite direction. She found her feet again. The determining factor that decided the issue of the struggle was a small and very human one. He appealed to the woman in her, yet what stirred the woman was the vital and afflicting factor that — he did not need her.

He wished to help, to lift her towards some impersonal ideal that remained his secret. He wished to *give* — he could give — while she, for her part, had nothing that he needed. Indeed, he asked for nothing. He was as independent of her as she was independent of these other men.

And the woman, now faced for the first time with this entirely new situation, decided automatically — that he should learn to need her. He must. Though she had nothing that he wanted from her, she must on that very account give all. The sacrifice which stands ready for the fire in every true feminine heart was lighted there and then. She had found her master and her god. Half measures were not possible to her. She stood naked at the altar. But in her sacrifice he, too, the priest, the deity, the master, he also should find love.

Such is the woman’s power, however, to conceal from herself the truth, that she did not recognize at first what this decision was. She disguised it from her own heart, yet quite honestly. She loved him and gave him all she had to give for ever and ever: even though he did not ask nor need her love. This she grasped. Her rôle must be one of selfless sacrifice. But the deliberate purpose behind her real decision she disguised from herself with complete success. It lay there none the less, strong, vital, very simple. She would teach him love.

Alone of all men, Edward Fillery could have drawn up this motive from its inmost hiding place in her deep subconscious being, and have made it clear to her. Dr. Fillery, had he been present, would have discerned it in her, as, indeed, he did discern it later. He had, for that matter, already felt its prophecy with a sinking heart when he planned bringing them together: Iraida might suffer at LeVallon's hands.

But Fillery, apparently, was not present, and Nayan Khilkoff remained unaware of self-deception. LeVallon "needs your care and sympathy; you can help him," she remembered. This she believed, and Love did the rest.

So intricate, so complex were the emotions in her that she realized one thing only — she must give all without thought of self. "When half gods go the gods arrive" sang in her heart. She was a woman, one of a mighty and innumerable multitude, and collective instinct urged her irresistibly. But it hid at the same time with lovely care the imperishable desire and intention that the arriving god should — *must* — love her in return.

The youth stood facing her while this tumult surged within her heart and mind. Outwardly calm, she still gazed into the clear blue eyes that shone with moisture as he repeated, half to himself and half to her:

"We are in exile here; we suffer. We have forgotten."

His hands were stretched towards her, and she took them in her own and held them a moment.

"But you and I," he went on, "you and I and Fillery — shall remember again — soon. We shall know why we are here. We shall do our happy work together here. We shall then return — escape."

His deep tones filled the air. At the sound of the other name a breath of sadness, of disappointment, touched her coldly. The familiar name had faded. It was, as always, dear. But its potency had dimmed....

The sun was down and a soft dusk covered all. A faint wind rustled in the garden trees through the open window.

“Fillery,” she murmured, “Edward Fillery! —— He loved me. He has loved me always.”

The little words — they sounded little for the first time — she uttered almost in a whisper that went lost against the figure of LeVallon towering above her through the twilight.

“We are together,” his great voice caught her whisper in the immense vibration, drowning it. “The love of our happy impersonal service brings us all together. We have forgotten, but we shall remember soon.”

It seemed to her that he shone now in the dusky air. Light came about his face and shoulders. An immense vitality poured into her through his hands. The sense of strange kinship was overpowering. She felt, though not in terms of size or physical strength, a pigmy before him, while yet another thing rose in gigantic and limitless glory as from some inner heart he quickened in her. This sense of exaltation, of delirious joy that tempted sweetly, came upon her. He *must* love her, need her in the end....

“Julian,” she murmured softly, drawn irresistibly closer. “The gods have brought you to me.” Her feet went nearer of their own accord, but there was no movement, no answering pressure, in the hands she held. “You shall never know loneliness again, never while I am here. The gods — your gods — have brought us together.”

“*Our* gods,” she heard his answer, “are the same.” The words trembled against her actual breast, so close she was now leaning against him. “Even if lost, it is they who sent us here. I know their messengers — —”

He broke off, standing back from her, dropping her hands, or, rather, drawing his own away.

“Hark!” he cried. The voice deep and full, yet without loudness, thrilled her. She watched him with terror and amazement, as he turned to the open window, throwing his arms out suddenly to the darkening sky against which the trees loomed still and shapeless. His figure was wrapped in a faint radiance as of silvery moonlight. She was aware of heat about her, a comforting, inspiring warmth that pervaded her whole being, as from within. The same moment the bulk of the big tree shook and trembled, and a steady wind came pouring into the room. It seemed to her the wind, the heat, poured through that tree.

And the inner heart in her grew clear an instant. This wind, this heat, increased her being marvellously. The exaltation in her swept out and free. She saw him, dropped from alien skies upon the little teeming earth. The sense of his remoteness from the life about them, of her own remoteness too, flashed over her like wind and fire. An immense ideal blazed, then vanished. It flamed beyond her grasp. It beckoned with imperishable loveliness, then faded instantly. Wind caught it up once more. With the fire an overpowering joy rose in her.

"Julian!" she cried aloud. "Son of Wind and Fire!"

At the words, which had come to her instinctively, he turned with a sudden gesture she could not quite interpret, while there broke upon his face a smile, strange and lovely, that caught up the effect of light about him and seemed to focus in his brilliant eyes. His happiness was beyond all question, his admiration, wonder too; yet the quality she chiefly looked and expected — was *not* there.

She chilled. The joy, she was acutely conscious, was not a personal joy.

"You," he said gently, happily, emphasizing the word, "you are not pitiful," and the rustle of the shaking trees outside the window merged their voice in his and carried it outward into space. It was as if the wind itself had spoken. Across the garden dusk there shot a sudden effect of light, as though a flame had flickered somewhere in the sky, then passed back into the growing night. There was a scent of flowers in the air. "You," he cried, with an exultation that carried her again beyond herself. "You are not pitiful."

"Julian —— !" she stammered, longing for his arms. She half drew away. The blood flowed down and back in her. "Not pitiful!" she repeated faintly.

For it was to her suddenly as if that sighing wind that entered the room from the outer sky had borne him away from her. That wind was a messenger. It came from that distant state, that other region where he belonged, a state, a region compared to which the beings of earth were trumpery and tinsel-dressed. It came to remind him of his home and origin. The little earth, the myriad confused figures struggling together on its surface, he saw as "pitiful." From that window in the sky whence he looked down he watched them...!

She knew the feeling in him, knew it, because some part of her, though faint and deeply hidden, was akin. Yet she was not wholly "pitiful." He had discerned in her this faint, hidden strain of vaster life, had stirred and strengthened it by his words, his presence. Yet it was not vital enough in her to stand alone. When wind and fire, his elements, breathed forth from it, she was afraid.

"You are not pitiful," he had said, yet pitiful, for all that, she knew herself to be. On that breath of sighing wind he swept away from her, far, far away where, as yet, she could not follow. And her dream of personal love swept with it. Some ineffable hint of a divine, impersonal glory she had known went with him from her heart. The personal was too strong in her. It was human love she desired both to give and ask.

Unspoken words flared through her heart and being: "Julian, you have no soul, no human soul. But I will give you one, for I will teach you love — —"

He turned upon her like a hurricane of windy fire.

"Soul!" he cried, catching the word out of her naked heart. "Oh, be not caught with that pitiful delusion. It is this idea of soul that binds you hopelessly to selfish ends and broken purposes. This thing you call soul is but the dream of human vanity and egoism. It is worse than love. Both bind you endlessly to limited desires and blind ambitions. They are of children."

He rose, like some pillar of whirling flame and wind, beside her.

"Come out with me," he cried, "come back! You teach me to remember! Our elemental home calls sweetly to us, our elemental service waits. We belong to those vast Powers. They are eternal. They know no binding and they have no death. Their only law is service, that mighty service which builds up the universe. The stars are with us, the nebulæ and the central fires are their throne and altar. The soul you dream of in your little circle is but an idle dream of the Race that ties your feet lest you should fly and soar. The personal has bandaged all your eyes. Nayan, come back with me. You once worked with me there — you, I and Fillery together."

His voice, though low, had that which was terrific in it. The volume of its sound appalled her. Its low vibrations shook her heart.

“Soul,” she said very softly, courage sure in her, but tears close in her burning eyes, “is my only hope. I live for it. I am ready to die for it. It is my life!”

He gazed at her a moment with a tenderness and sympathy she hardly understood, for their origin lay hidden beyond her comprehension. She knew one thing only — that he looked adorable and glorious, a being brought by the wise powers of life, whatever these might be, into the keeping of her love and care. The mother and the woman merged in her. His redemption lay within her gentle hands, if it lay at the same time upon an altar that was her awful sacrifice.

“Son of wind and fire!” she cried, though emotion made her voice dwindle to a breathless whisper. “You called to my love, yet my love is personal. I have nothing else to give you. Julian, come back! O stay with me. Your wind and fire frighten, for they take you away. Service I know, but your service — O what is it? For it leaves the bed, the hearthstone cold — —”

She stopped abruptly, wondering suddenly at her own words. What was this rhythm that had caught her mind and heart into an unknown, a daring form of speech?

But the wind ran again through the open window fluttering the curtains and the skirts about her feet. It sighed and whispered. It was no earthly wind. She saw him once again go from her on its quiet wings. He left her side, he left her heart. And an icy realization of *his* loneliness, his exile, stirred in her.... For a moment, as she looked up into his shining face silhouetted in the dusk against the window, there rose tumultuously in her that maternal feeling which had held all men safely at a distance hitherto. Like a wave, it mastered her. She longed to take him in her arms, to shield him from a world that was not his, to bless and comfort him with all she had to give, to have the right to brush that wondrous hair, to open those lids at dawn and close them with a kiss at night. This ancient passion rose in her, bringing, though she did not recognize it, the great woman in its train. She walked up to him with both hands outstretched:

“All my nights,” she said, with no reddening of the cheek, “are as our wedding night!”

He heard, he saw, but the words held no meaning for him.

“Julian! Stay with me — stay here!” She put her arms about him.

“And forget —— !” he cried, an inexpressible longing in his voice. He bent, none the less, beneath the pressure of her clinging arms; he lowered his face to hers.

“I will teach you love,” she murmured, her cheek against his own. “You do not know how sweet, how wonderful it is. All your strange wisdom you shall show me, and I will learn willingly, if only I may teach you — love.”

“You would teach me to forget,” he said in a voice of curious pain, “just as you — are forgetting now.”

He gently unclasped her hands from about his neck, and went over to the open window, while she sank into a chair, watching him. She again heard the wind, but again no common, earthly wind, go singing past the walls.

“But *I* will teach you to remember,” he said, his great figure half turning towards her again, his voice sounding as though it were in that sighing breath of wind that passed and died away into the silence of the sky.

The strange difficulty, the immensity, of her self-appointed task, grew suddenly crystal clear in her mind. Amid the whirling, aching pain and yearning that she felt it stood forth sharp and definite. It was imperious. She loved, and she must teach *him* love. This was the one thing needful in his case. Her own deep, selfless heart would guide her.

There was pain in her, but there was no fear. Above the conventions she felt herself, naked and unashamed. The sense of a new immense liberty he had brought lifted her into a region where she could be natural without offence. He had flung wide the gates of life, setting free those strange, ultimate powers which had lain hidden and unrealized hitherto, and with them was quickened, too, that mysterious and awful hint which, beckoning ever towards some vaster life, had made the world as she found it unsatisfactory, pale, of meagre value.

As the strange drift of wind passed off into the sky, she moved across the room and stood beside him, its dying chant still humming in her ears. That song of the wind, she understood, was symbolic of what she had to fight, for his being, though linked to a divine service she could not understand, lay in Nature and apart from human things:

“Think, Julian,” she murmured, her face against his shoulder so that the sweet perfume as of flowers he exhaled came over her intoxicatingly, “think what we could do together for the world — for all these little striving ignorant troubled people in it — for everybody! You and I together working, helping, lifting them all up —— !”

He made no movement, and she took his great arm and drew it round her neck, placing the hand against her cheek. He looked down at her then, his eyes peering into her face.

“That,” he said in a deep, gentle voice that vibrated through her whole body, “yes, that we will do. It is the service — the service of our gods. It is why I called you. From the first I saw it in you, and in — —”

Before he could speak the name she kissed his lips, pulling his head lower in order to reach them: “Think, Julian,” she whispered, his eyes so close to hers that they seemed to burn them, “think what our child might be!”

The wind came back across the tossing trees with a rush of singing. Her hair fluttered across their two faces, as it entered the room, drove round the inner walls, then, with a cry, flew out again into the empty sky. She felt as if the wind had answered her, for other answer there came none. Far away in the spaces of that darkening sky the wind rushed sailing, sailing with its impersonal song of power and of triumph.... She did not remember any further spoken words. She remembered only, as she went homewards down the street, that Julian had opened the door upon some unspoken understanding that she had lost him because she dared not follow recklessly where he led, and that the steady draught, it seemed, had driven forcibly behind her — as though the wind had blown her out.

It was only much later she realized that the figure who had then overtaken her, supported, comforted with kind ordinary words she hardly understood at the moment and yet vaguely welcomed, finally leaving her at the door of her father’s house in Chelsea, was the figure of Edward Fillery.

CHAPTER XXIV

AS UPON A former occasion some twenty-four hours before, “N. H.” seemed hardly aware that his visitor had left, though this time there was the vital difference — that what was of value had not gone at all. The essence of the girl, it seemed, was still with him. It remained. The physical presence was to him apparently the least of all.

He returned to his place at the open window of the darkening room, while night, with her cooler airs, passed over the world on tiptoe. He drew deep breaths, opened his arms, and seemed to shake himself, as though glad to be free of recent little awkward and unnatural gestures that had irked him. There was happiness in his face. “She is a builder, though she has forgotten,” ran his thought with pleasure, “and I can work with her. Like Fillery, she builds up, constructs; we are all three in the same service, and the gods are glad. I love her ... yes ... but she” — his thoughts grew troubled and confused— “she speaks of another love that is a tight and binding little thing ... that catches and confines. It is for one person only ... one person for one other.... For two ... only for two persons!... What is its meaning then?”

Of her words and acts he had understood evidently a small part only; much that she had said and done he had not comprehended, although in it somewhere there had certainly lain a sweet, faint, troubling pleasure that was new to him.

His thought wavered, flickered out and vanished. For a long time he leaned against the window with his images, thinking with his heart, for when alone and not stirred by the thinking of others close to him, he became of a curious childlike innocence, knowing nothing. His “thinking” with others present seemed but a reflection of *their* thinking. The way he caught up the racial thinking, appearing swiftly intelligent at the time (as with Fillery’s mind), passed the instant he was alone. He became open, then, to bigger rhythms that the little busy thinkers checked and interrupted. But this greater flow of images, of rhythms, this thinking with the heart — what was it, and with what things did it deal? He did not know. He had forgotten. To his present brain it was alien. He grasped only that it was concerned with the rhythms of fire and wind apparently, though hardly, perhaps, of that crude form in which men know them, but of an inner, subtler, more vital heat and air which lie in and behind all forms and help to shape them — and of Intelligences which use these as their vehicles, their instruments, their bodies.

In his “images” he was aware of these Intelligences, perceived them with his entire being, shared their activities and nature: behind all so-called forms and shapes, whether of people, flowers, minerals, of insects or of stars, of a bird, a butterfly or a nebula, but also of those *mental* shapes which are born of thought and mood and heart — this host of Intelligences, great and small, all delving together, building, constructing, involved in a vast impersonal service which was deathless. This seemed the mighty call that thundered through him, fire and wind merely the agencies with which he, in particular, knew instinctively his duties lay.

For his work, these images taught him, was to increase life by making the “body” it used as perfect as he could. The more perfect the form, the instrument, the greater the power manifesting through it. A poor, imperfect form stopped the flow of this manifesting life, as though a current were held up and delayed. For instance, his own form, his present body, now irked, delayed and hampered him, although he knew not how or why or whence he had come to be using it at this moment on the earth. The instinctive desire to escape from it lay in him, and also the instinctive recognition that two others, similarly caught and imprisoned, must escape with him....

The images, the rhythms, poured through him in a mighty flood, as he leaned by the open window, his great figure, his whole nature too, merging in the space, the wind, the darkness of the soft-moving night beyond.... Yet darkness troubled him too; it always seemed unfamiliar, new, something he had never been accustomed to. In darkness he became quiet, very gentle, feeling his way, as it were, uneasily.

He was aware, however, that Fillery was near, though not, perhaps, that he was actually in the room, seated somewhere among the shadows, watching him. He felt him close in the same way he felt the girl still close, whether distance between them in space was actually great or small. The essential in all three was similar, their yearnings, hopes, intentions, purposes were akin; their longing for some service, immense, satisfying, it seemed, connected them. The voice, however, did not startle when it sounded behind him from an apparently empty room:

“The love she spoke of you do not understand, of course. Perhaps you do not need it....”

The voice, as well as the feeling that lay behind, hardly disturbed the images and rhythms in their wondrous flow. Rather, they seemed a part of them. “N. H.” turned. He saw Dr. Fillery distinctly, sitting motionless among the shadows by the wall.

“It is, for you, a new relationship, and seems small, cramping and unnecessary — —”

“What is it?” “N. H.” asked. “What is this love she seeks to hold me with, saying that I need it? Dear Fillery,” he added, moving nearer, “will you tell me what it is? I found it sweet and pleasant, yet I fear it.”

“It is,” was the reply, “in its best form, the highest quality *we* know — —”

“Ah! I felt the fire in it,” interrupted “N. H.” smiling. “I smelt the flowers.” His smile seemed faintly luminous across the gloom.

“Because it was the best,” replied the other gently. “In its best form it means, sometimes, the complete sacrifice of one being for the welfare of another. There is no self in it at all.” He felt the eyes of his companion fixed upon him in the darkness of the quiet room; he felt likewise that he was bewildered and perplexed. “As, for instance, the mother for her child,” he went on. “That is the purest form of it we know.”

“One being feels it for *one* other only,” “N. H.” repeated apparently ignoring the reference to maternal love. “Each wants the other for himself *alone*! Each lives for the other only, the rest excluded! It is always two and two. Is that what she means?”

“She would not like it if you had the same feeling for another — woman,” Fillery explained. “She would feel jealousy — which means she would grudge sharing you with another. She would resent it, afraid of losing you.”

“Two and two, and two and two,” the words floated through the shadows. The ideal seemed to shock and hurt him; he could not understand it. “She asks for the whole of me — all to herself. It is lower than insects, flowers even. It is against Nature. So small, so separate — —”

“But Nature,” interrupted Dr. Fillery, after an interval of silence between them, “is not concerned with what we call love. She is indifferent to it. Her purpose is merely the continuance of the Race, and she accomplishes this by making men and women attractive to one another. This, too,” he explained, “we call love, though it is love in its weakest, least enduring form.”

“That,” replied “N. H.,” “I know and understand. She builds the best form she can.”

“And once the form is built,” agreed the other, “and Nature’s aim fulfilled, this kind of love usually fades out and dies. It is a physical thing entirely, like the two atoms we read about together a few days ago which rush together automatically to produce a third thing.” He lowered his voice suddenly. “There was a great teacher once,” he went on, “who told us that we should love everybody, everybody, and that in the real life there was no marriage, as we call it, nor giving in marriage.”

It seemed that, as he said the words, the darkness lifted, and a faint perfume of flowers floated through the air.

“N. H.” made no comment or reply. He sat still, listening.

“I love her,” he whispered suddenly. “I love her in *that* way — because I want everybody else to love her too — as I do, and as you do. But I do not want her for myself alone. Do you? You do not, of course. I feel you are as I am. You are happy that I love her.”

“There is morality,” said Fillery presently in a low voice, glad at that moment of the darkness. “There is what we call morality.”

“Tell me, dear Fillery, what that is. Is it bigger than your ‘love’?”

Dr. Fillery explained briefly, while his companion listened intently, making no comment. It was evidently as strange and new to him as human love. “We have invented it,” he added at the end, “to protect ourselves, our mothers, our families, our children. It is, you see, a set of rules devised for the welfare of the Race. For though a few among us do not need such rules, the majority do. It is, in a word, the acknowledgment of the rights of others.”

“It had to be invented!” exclaimed “N. H.,” with a sigh that seemed to trouble the darkness as with the sadness of something he could scarcely believe. “And these rules are needed still! Is the Race at that stage only? It does not move, then?”

Into the atmosphere, as the low-spoken words were audible, stole again that mysterious sense of the insignificance of earth and all its manifold activities, human and otherwise, and with it, too, a remarkable breath of some larger reality, starry-bright, that lay shining just beyond all known horizons. Fillery shivered in spite of himself. It seemed to him for an instant that the great figure looming opposite through the darkness extended, spread, gathering into its increased proportions the sky, the trees, the darkened space outside; that it no longer sat there quite alone. He recalled his colleague’s startling admission — the touch of panic terror.

“Slowly, if at all,” he said louder, though wondering why he raised his voice. “Yet there is *some* progress.”

He had the feeling it would be better to turn on the light, as though this conversation and the strange sensations it produced in him would be impossible in a full blaze. He made a movement, indeed, to find the switch. It was the sound of his companion’s voice that made him pause, for the words came at him as though a wave of heat moved through the air. He knew intuitively that the other’s intense inner activity had increased. He let his hand drop. He listened. Their thoughts, he was convinced, had mingled and been mutually shared again. There was a faint sound like music behind it.

“We have worked such a little time as yet,” fell the words into the silence. “If only — oh! if only I could remember more!”

“A little time!” thought Fillery to himself, knowing that the other meant the millions of years Nature had used to evoke her myriad forms. “Try to remember,” he added in a whisper.

“What I do remember, I cannot even tell,” was the reply, the voice strangely deepening. “No words come to me.” He paused a moment, then went on: “I am of the first, the oldest. I know that. The earth was hot and burning — burning, burning still. It was soft with heat when I was summoned from — from other work just completed. With a vast host I came. Our Service summoned us. We began at the beginning. I am of the oldest. The earth was still hot — burning, burning — —”

The voice failed suddenly.

“I cannot remember. Dear Fillery, I cannot remember. It hurts me. My head pains. Our work — our service — yes, there *is* progress. The ages, as you call them — but it is such a little time as yet — —” The voice trailed off, the figure lost its suggestion of sudden vastness, the darkness emptied. “I am of the oldest — *that* I remember only....” It ceased as though it drifted out upon the passing wind outside.

“Then you have been working,” said Fillery, his voice still almost a whisper, “you and your great host, for thousands of years — in the service of this planet — —” He broke off, unable to find his words, it seemed.

“Since the beginning,” came the steady answer. “Years I do not know. Since the beginning. Yet we have only just begun — oh!” he cried, “I cannot remember! It is impossible! It all goes lost among my words, and in this darkness I am confused and entangled with your own little thinking. I suffer with it.” Then suddenly: “My eyes are hot and wet, dear Fillery. What happens to them?” He stood up, putting both hands to his face. Fillery stood up too. He trembled.

“Don’t try,” he said soothingly; “do not try to remember any more. It will come back to you soon, but it won’t come back by any deliberate effort.”

He comforted him as best he could, realizing that the curious dialogue had lasted long enough. But he did not produce a disconcerting blaze by turning the light on suddenly; he led his companion gently to the door, so that the darkness might pass more gradually. The lights in the corridor were shaded and inoffensive. It was only in the bedroom that he noticed the bright tears, as “N. H.,” examining them with curious interest in the mirror, exclaimed more to himself than to Fillery: “She had them too. I saw them in her eyes when she spoke to me of love, the love she will teach me because she said I needed it.”

“Tears,” said Fillery, his voice shaking. “They come from feeling pain.”

“It is a little thing,” returned “N. H.,” smiling at himself, then turning to his friend, his great blue eyes shining wonderfully through their moisture. “Then she felt what I felt — we felt together. When she comes to-morrow I will show her these tears and she will be glad I love. And she will bring tears of her own, and you will have some too, and we shall all love together. It is not difficult, is it?"

"Not very," agreed Fillery, smiling in his turn; "it is not very difficult." He was again trembling.

"She will be happy that we all love."

"I — hope so."

It was curious how easily tears came to the eyes of this strange being, and for causes so different that they were not easy to explain. He did not cry; it was merely that the hot tears welled up.

Even with Devonham once it happened too. The lesson in natural history was over. Devonham had just sketched the outline of the various kingdoms, with the animal kingdom and man's position in it, according to present evolutionary knowledge, and had then said something about the earth's place in the solar system, and the probable relation of this system to the universe at large — an admirable bird's-eye view, as it were, without a hint of speculative imagination in it anywhere — when "N. H.," after intent listening in irresponsive silence, asked abruptly:

"What does it believe?" Then, as Devonham stared at him, a little puzzled at first, he repeated: "That is what the Race *knows*. But what does it *believe*?"

"Believe," said Devonham, "believe. Ah! you mean what is its religion, its faith, its speculations!" — and proceeded to give the briefest possible answer he felt consistent with his duty. The less his pupil's mind was troubled with such matters, the better, in his opinion.

"And their God?" the young man inquired abruptly, as soon as the recital was over. He had listened closely, as he always did, but without a sign of interest, merely waiting for the end, much as a child who is bored by a poor fairy tale, yet wishes to know exactly how it is all going to finish. "They *know* Him?" He leaned forward.

Devonham, not quite liking the form of the question, nor the more eager manner accompanying it, hesitated a moment, thinking perhaps what he ought to say. He did not want this mind, now opening, to be filled with ideas that could be of no use to it, nor help in its formation; least of all did he desire it to be choked and troubled with the dead theology of man-made notions concerning a tumbling personal Deity. Creeds, moreover, were a matter of faith, of auto-suggestion as he called it, being obviously divorced from any process of reason. He had, nevertheless, a question to answer and a duty to perform. His hesitation passed in compromise. He was, as has been seen, too sincere, too honest, to possess much sense of humour.

"The Race," he said, "or rather that portion of it into which you have been born, believes — on paper" — he emphasized the qualification— "in a paternal god; but its real god, the god it worships, is Knowledge. Not a Knowledge that exists for its own sake," he went on blandly, "but that brings possessions, power, comfort and a million needless accessories into life. That god it worships, as you see, with energy and zeal. Knowledge and work that shall result in acquisition, in pleasure, that is the god of the Race on this side of the planet where you find yourself."

"And the God on paper?" asked "N. H.," making no comment, though he had listened attentively and had understood. "The God that is written about on paper, and believed in on paper?"

"The printed account of this god," replied Devonham, "describes an omnipotent and perfect Being who has existed always. He created the planet and everything upon it, but created it so imperfectly that he had to send later a smaller god to show how much better he *might* have created us. In doing this, he offered us an extremely difficult and laborious method of improvement, a method of escaping from his own mistake, but a method so painful and unrealizable that it is contrary to our very natures — as he made them first." He almost smacked his lips as he said it.

"The big God, the first one," asked "N. H." at once. "Have they seen and known Him? Have they complained?"

"No," said Devonham, "they have not. Those who believe in him accept things as he made them."

"And the smaller lesser God — how did He arrive?" came the odd question.

"He was born like you and me, but without a father. No male had his mother ever known."

“He was recognized as a god?” The pupil showed interest, but no emotion, much less excitement.

“By a few. The rest, afraid because he told them their possessions were worthless, killed him quickly.”

“And the few?”

“They obeyed his teaching, or tried to, and believed that they would live afterwards for ever and ever in happiness — —”

“And the others? The many?”

“The others, according to the few, would live afterwards for ever and ever — in pain.”

“It is a demon story,” said “N. H.,” smiling.

“It is printed, believed, taught,” replied Devonham, “by an immense organization to millions of people — —”

“Free?” inquired his pupil.

“The teachers are paid, but very little — —”

“The teachers believe it, though?”

“Y-yes — at least some of them — probably,” replied Devonham, after brief consideration.

“And the millions — do they worship this God?”

“They do, on paper, yes. They worship the first big God. They go once or twice a week into special buildings, dressed in their best clothes as for a party, and pray and sing and tell him he is wonderful and they themselves are miserable and worthless, and then ask him in abject humility for all sorts of things they want.”

“Do they get them?”

“They ask for different things, you see. One wants fine weather for his holidays, another wants rain for his crops. The prayers in which they ask are printed by the Government.”

“They ask for this planet only?”

“This planet conceives itself alone inhabited. There are no other living beings anywhere. The Earth is the centre of the universe, the only globe worth consideration.”

Although “N. H.” asked these quick questions, his interest was obviously not much engaged, the first sharp attention having passed. Then he looked fixedly at Devonham and said, with a sudden curious smile: “What you say is always dead. I understand the sounds you use, but the meaning cannot get into me — inside, I mean. But I thank you for the sound.”

There was a moment’s pause, during which Devonham, accustomed to strange remarks and comments from his pupil, betrayed no sign of annoyance or displeasure. He waited to see if any further questions would be forthcoming. He was observing a phenomenon; his attitude was scientific.

“But, in sending this lesser God,” resumed “N. H.” presently, “how did the big One excuse himself?”

“He didn’t. He told the Race it was so worthless that nothing else could save it. He looked on while the lesser God was killed. He is very proud about it, and claims the thanks and worship of the Race because of it.”

“The lesser God — poor lesser God!” observed “N. H.” “He was bigger than the other.” He thought a moment. “How pitiful,” he added.

“Much bigger,” agreed Devonham, pleased with his pupil’s acumen, his voice, even his manner, changing a little as he continued. “For then came the wonder of it all. The lesser God’s teachings were so new and beautiful that the position of the other became untenable. The Race disowned him. It worshipped the lesser one in his place.”

“Tell me, tell me, please,” said “N. H.,” as though he noticed and understood the change of tone at once. “I listen. The dear Fillery spoke to me of a great Teacher. I feel a kind, deep joy move in me. Tell me, please.”

Again Devonham hesitated a moment, for he recognized signs that made him ill at ease a little, because he did not understand them. Following a scientific textbook with his pupil was well and good, but he had no desire to trespass on what he considered as Fillery’s territory. “N. H.” was his pupil, not his patient. He had already gone too far, he realized. After a moment’s reflection, however, he decided it was wiser to let the talk run out its natural course, instead of ending it abruptly. He was as thorough as he was sincere, and whatever his own theories and prejudices might be in this particular case, he would not shirk an issue, nor treat it with the smallest dishonesty. He put the glasses straight on his big nose.

“The new teachings,” he said, “were so beautiful that, if faithfully practised by everybody, the world would soon become a very different place to what it is.”

“Did the Race practise them?” came the question in a voice that held a note of softness, almost of wonder.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“They were too difficult and painful and uncomfortable. The new God, moreover, only came here 2,000 years ago, whereas men have existed on earth for at least 400,000.”

“N. H.” asked abruptly what the teachings were, and Devonham, growing more and more uneasy as he noted the signs of increasing intensity and disturbance in his pupil, recited, if somewhat imperfectly, the main points of the Sermon on the Mount. As he did so “N. H.” began to murmur quietly to himself, his eyes grew large and bright, his face lit up, his whole body trembled. He began that deep, rhythmical breathing which seemed to affect the atmosphere about him so that his physical appearance increased and spread. The skin took on something of radiance, as though an intense inner happiness shone through it. Then, suddenly, to Devonham’s horror, he began to hum.

Though a normal, ordinary sound enough, it reminded him of that other sound he had once shared with Fillery, when he sat on the stairs, staring at a china bowl filled with visiting cards, while the dawn broke after a night of exhaustion and bewilderment. That sound, of course, he had long since explained and argued away — it was an auditory hallucination conveyed to his mind by LeVallon, who originated it. Interesting and curious, it was far from inexplicable. It was disquieting, however, for it touched in him a vague sense of alarm, as though it paved the way for that odd panic terror he had been amazed to discover hidden away deeply in some unrealized corner of his being.

This humming he now listened to, though normal and ordinary enough — there were no big vibrations with it, for one thing — was too suggestive of that other sound for him to approve of it. His mind rapidly sought some way of stopping it. A command, above all an impatient, harsh command, was out of the question, yet a request seemed equally not the right way. He fumbled in his mind to find the wise, proper words. He stretched his hand out, as though to lay it quietly upon his companion's shoulder — but realized suddenly he could not — almost he dared not — touch him.

The same instant "N. H." rose. He pushed his chair back and stood up.

Devonham, justly proud of his equable temperament and steady nerves, admits that only a great effort of self-control enabled him to sit quietly and listen. He listened, watched, and made mental notes to the best of his ability, but he was frightened a little. The outburst was so sudden. He is not sure that his report of what he heard, made later to Fillery, was a verbatim, accurate one:

"Justice we know," cried "N. H." in his half-chanting voice that seemed to boom with resonance, "but this — this mercy, gentle kindness, beauty — this unknown loveliness — we did not know it!" He went to the open window, and threw his arms wide, as though he invoked the sun. "Dimly we heard of it. We strive, we strive, we weave and build and fashion while the whirl of centuries flies on. This lesser God — he came among us, too, making our service sweeter, though we did not understand. Our work grew wiser and more careful, we built lovelier forms, and knew not why we did so. His mighty rhythms touched us with their power and happy light. Oh, my great messengers of wind and fire, bring me the memory I have lost! Oh, where, where —— ?"

He shook himself, as though his clothes, perhaps his body even, irked him. It was a curious coincidence, thought Devonham, as he watched and listened, too surprised and puzzled to interfere either by word or act, that a cloud, at that very moment, passed from the face of the sun, and a gust of wind shook all the branches of the lime trees in the garden. "N. H." stood drenched in the white clear sunshine. His flaming hair was lifted by the wind.

"Behind, beyond the Suns He dwells and burns for ever. Oh, the mercy, kindness, the strange beauty of this personal love — what is it? These have been promised to *us* too —— !”

He broke off abruptly, bowed his great head and shoulders, and sank upon his knees in an attitude of worship. Then, stretching his arms out to the sky, the face raised into the flood of sunlight, while his voice became lower, softer, almost hushed, he spoke again:

“Our faithful service, while the circles swallow the suns, shall lift us too! You, who sent me here to help this little, dying Race, oh, help me to remember —— !”

His passion was a moving sight; the words, broken through with fragments of his chanting, singing, had the blood of some infinite, intolerable yearning in them.

Devonham, meanwhile, having heard outbursts of this strange kind before with others, had recovered something of his equanimity. He felt more sure of himself again. The touch of fear had left him. He went over to the window. The attack, as he deemed it, was passing. A thick cloud hid the sun again. “There, there,” he said soothingly, laying both hands upon the other’s shoulders, then taking the arms to help him rise. “I told you His teachings were very beautiful — that the world would become a kind of heaven if people lived them.” His voice seemed not his own; beside the volume and music of the other’s it had a thin, rasping, ugly sound.

“N. H.” was on his feet, gazing down into his face; to Devonham’s amazement there were tears in the eyes that met his own.

“And many people *do* live them — try to, rather,” he added gently. “There are thousands who really worship this lesser God to-day. You can’t go far wrong yourself if you take Him as your model an — —”

“How He must have suffered!” came the astonishing interruption, the voice quiet and more natural again. “There was no way of telling what he knew. He had no words, of course. You are all so difficult, so caged, so — dead!”

Devonham smiled. “He used parables.” He paused a moment, then went on “Men have existed on the planet, science tells us, for at least 400,000 years, whereas *He* came here only 2,000 years ago — —”

“Came *here*,” interrupted the pupil, as though the earth were but one of a thousand places visited, a hint of contempt and pity somewhere in his tone and gesture. “We made His way ready then! We prepared, we built! It was for that our work went on and on so faithfully.”

He broke off....

Devonham experienced a curious sensation as he heard. In that instant it seemed to him that he was conscious of the movement of the earth through space. He was aware that the planet on which he stood was rushing forward at eighteen miles a second through the sky. He felt himself carried forward with it.

“What was His name?” he heard “N. H.” asking. It was as though he was aware of the enormous interval in space traversed by the rolling earth between the first and last words of the sudden question. It trailed through an immense distance towards him, after him, yet at the same time ever with him.

“His name — oh — Jesus Christ, we call him,” wondering at the same moment why he used the pronoun “we.”

“Jesus — Christ!”

“N. H.” repeated the name with such intensity and power that the sound, borne by deep vibrations, seemed to surge and circle forth into space while the earth rushed irresistibly onwards. A faintly imaginative idea occurred to Devonham for the first time in his life — it was as though the earth herself had opened her green lips and uttered the great name. With this came also the amazing and disconcerting conviction that Nature and humans were expressions of one and the same big simple energy, and that while their forms, their bodies, differed, the life manifesting through them was identical, though its degree might vary. For an instant this was of such overpowering conviction as to be merely obvious.

It passed as quickly as it came, though he still was dimly conscious that he had travelled with the earth through another huge stretch of space. Then this sense of movement also passed. He looked up. “N. H.” was in his chair again at the table, reading quietly his book on natural history. But in his eyes the moisture of tears was still visible.

Devonham adjusted his glasses, blew his nose, went quickly to another room to jot down his notes of the talk, the reactions, the general description, and in doing so dismissed from his mind the slight uneasy effects of what had been a “curious hallucination,” caused evidently by an “unexplained stimulation” of the motor centres in the brain.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FULL ACCOUNT of “N. H.,” with all he said and did, his effect upon others, his general activities in a word, it is impossible to compress intelligibly into the compass of these notes. A complete report Edward Fillery indeed accumulated, but its publication, he realized, must await that leisure for which his busy life provided little opportunity. His eyes, mental and physical, were never off his “patient,” and “N. H.,” aware of it, leaped out to meet the observant sympathy, giving all he could, concealing nothing, yet debarred, it seemed, by the rigid limitations of his own mental and physical machinery, as similarly by that of his hearers, from contributing more than suggestive and tantalizing hints. Of the use of parable he, obviously, had no knowledge.

His relations with others, perhaps, offered the most significant comments on his personality. Fillery was at some pains to collect these. The reactions were various, yet one and all showed this in common, a curious verdict but unanimous: that his effect, namely, was greatest when he was not there. Not in his actual presence, which promised rather than fulfilled, was his power so dominating upon mind and imagination as after the door was closed and he was gone. The withdrawal of his physical self, its absence — as Fillery had himself experienced one night on Hampstead Heath as well as on other occasions — brought his real presence closer.

It was Nayan who first drew attention to this remarkable characteristic. She spoke about him often now with Dr. Fillery, for as the weeks passed and she realized the uselessness, the impossibility, of the plan she had proposed to herself, she found relief in talking frankly about him to her older friend.

“Always, always after I leave him,” she confessed, “a profound and searching melancholy gets hold of me, poignant as death, yet an extraordinary unrealized beauty behind it somewhere. It steals into my very blood and bones. I feel an intense dissatisfaction with the world, with people as they are, and a burning scorn for all that is small, unworthy, petty, mean — and yet a hopelessness of ever attaining to that something which *he* knows and lives so easily.” She sighed, gazing into his eyes a moment. “Or of ever making others see it,” she added.

“And that ‘something,’” he asked, “can you define it?”

She shook her head. “It’s in me, within reach even, but — the word he used is the only one — forgotten.”

“Perhaps — has it ever occurred to you? — that he simply cannot describe it. There are no words, no means at his disposal — no human terms?”

“Perhaps,” she murmured.

“Desirable, though?” he urged her gently.

She clasped her hands, smiling. “Heavenly,” she murmured, closing her eyes a moment as though to try and recall it. “Yet when I’m with him,” she went on, “he never *quite* realizes for me the state of wonder and delight his presence promises. His personality suggests rather than fulfils.” She paused, a wistful, pained expression in her dark eyes. “The failure,” she added quickly, lest she seem to belittle him of whom she spoke, “of course lies in myself. I refuse, you see — I can’t say why, though I feel it’s wise — to let myself be dominated by that strange, lost part of me he stimulates.”

“True,” interposed Dr. Fillery. “I understand. Yet to have felt this even is a sign — —”

“That he stirs the deepest, highest in me? This hint of divine beauty in the unrealized under-self?”

He nodded. There was an odd touch of sadness in their talk. “I’ve watched him with many types of people,” he went on thoughtfully, almost as though thinking aloud in his rapid way, “I’ve talked with him on many subjects. The meanness, jealousy, insignificance of the Race shocks and amazes him. He cannot understand it. He asked me once ‘But is no one *born* noble? To be splendid is such an effort with them!’ Splendour of conduct, he noticed, is a calculated, rarely a spontaneous splendour. The general resistance to new ideas also puzzles him. ‘They fear a rhythm they have never felt before,’ as he put it. ‘To adopt a new rhythm, they think, must somehow injure them.’ That the Race respects a man because he possesses much equally bewilders him. ‘No one serves willingly or naturally,’ he observed, ‘or unless someone else receives money for drawing attention loudly to it.’

Any notion of reward, of advertisement, in its widest meaning, is foreign to his nature."

He broke off. Another pause fell between them, the girl the first to break it:

"He suffers," she said in a low voice. "Here — he suffers," and her face yearned with the love and help she longed to pour out beyond all thought of self or compensation, and at the same time with the pain of its inevitable frustration; and, watching her, Dr. Fillery understood that this very yearning was another proof of the curious impetus, the intensification of being, that "N. H." caused in everyone. Yet he winced, as though anticipating the question she at once then put to him:

"You are afraid for him, Edward?" her eyes calmly, searchingly on his. "His future troubles you?"

He turned to her with abrupt intensity. "If *you*, Iraida, could not enchain him — —" He broke off. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no power," she confessed. "An insatiable longing burns like a fire in him. Nothing he finds here on earth, among men and women, can satisfy it." A faint blush stole up her neck and touched her cheeks. "He is different. *I* have no power to keep him here." Her voice sank suddenly to a whisper, as though a breath of awe passed into her. "He is here now at this very moment, I believe. He is with us as we talk together. I feel him." Almost a visible thrill passed through her. "And close, so very close — to *you*."

Dr. Fillery made no sign by word or gesture, but something in his very silence gave assent.

"And not alone," she added, still under her breath. It seemed she looked about her, though she did not actually move or turn her head. "Others — of his kind, Edward — come with him. They are always with him — I think sometimes." Her whisper was fainter still.

"You feel that too!" He said it abruptly, his voice louder and almost challenging. Then he added incongruously, as though saying it to himself this time, "That's what I mean. I've known it for a long time — —"

He looked at the girl sharply with unconcealed admiration. "It does not frighten you?" he asked, and in reply she said the very thing he felt sure she would say, hoping for it even while he shrank:

“Escape,” he heard in a low, clear voice, half a question, half an exclamation, and saw the blood leave her face.

The instinctive “Hush!” that rose to his lips he did not utter. The sense of loss, of searching pain, the word implied he did not show. Instead, he spoke in his natural, everyday tone again:

“The body irks him, of course, and he may try to rid himself of it. Its limitations to him are a prison, for his true consciousness he finds outside it. The explanation,” he added to himself, “of many a case of suicidal mania probably. I’ve often wondered — —”

He took her hand, aware by the pallor of her face what her feelings were. “Death, you see, Nayan, has no meaning for him, as it has for us who think consciousness out of the body impossible, and he is puzzled by our dread of it. ‘We,’ he said once, ‘have nothing that decays. We may be stationary, or advance, or retreat, but we can never end.’ He derives — oh, I’m convinced of it — from another order. Here — amongst us — he is inarticulate, unable to express himself, hopeless, helpless, in prison. Oh, if only — —”

“He loves *you*,” she said quickly, releasing her hand. “I suppose he realizes the eternal part of you and identifies himself with that. In you, Edward, lies something very close to what he is, akin — he needs it terribly, just as you — —” She became confused.

“Love, as we understand it,” he interrupted, his voice shaking a little, “he does not, cannot know, for he serves another law, another order of being.”

“That’s how I feel it too.”

She shivered slightly, but she did not turn away, and her eyes kept all their frankness.

“Our humanity,” she murmured, “writes upon his heart in ink that quickly fades — —”

“And leaves no trace,” he caught her up hurriedly. “His one idea is to help, to render service. It is as natural to him as for water to run down hill. He seeks instinctively to become one with the person he seeks to aid. As with us an embrace is an attempt at union, so he seeks, by some law of his own being, to become identified with those whom he would help. And he helps by intensifying their consciousness — somewhat as heat and air increase ordinary physical vitality. Only, first there must be something for him to work on. Energy, even bad, vicious, wrongly used, he can work on. Mere emptiness prevents him. You remember Lady Gleeson — —"

"We — most of us — are too empty," she put in with quiet resignation. "Our sense of that divine beauty is too faint — —"

"Rather," came the quick correction, "he stands too close to us. His effect is too concentrated. The power at such close quarters disturbs and overbalances."

"That's why, then, I always feel it strongest when he's left."

He glanced at her keenly.

"In his presence," she explained, "it's always as though I saw only a part of him, even of his physical appearance, out of the corner of my eye, as it were, and sometimes — —" She hesitated. He did not help her this time. "As if those others, many others, similar to himself, but invisible, crowding space about us, were intensely active." Her voice hushed again. "He brings them with him — as now. I feel it, Edward, now. I feel them close." She looked round the empty room, peering through the window into the quiet evening sky. Dr. Fillery also turned away. He sighed again. "Have you noticed, too," he went on presently, yet half as if following his own thoughts, and a trifle incongruously, "the speed and lightness his very movements convey, and how he goes down the street with that curious air of drawing things after him, along with him, as trains and motors draw the loose leaves and dust — —"

"Whirling," her quick whisper startled him a little, as she turned abruptly from the window and gazed straight at him. He smiled, instantly recovering himself. "A good word, yes — whirling — but in the plural. As though there were vortices about him."

It was her turn to smile. "That might one day carry him away," she exclaimed. They smiled together then, they even laughed, but somewhere in their laughter, like the lengthening shadows of the spring day outside, lay an incommunicable sadness neither of them could wholly understand.

"Yet the craving for beauty," she said suddenly, "that he leaves behind in me" — her voice wavered— "an intolerable yearning that nothing can satisfy — nothing — here. An infinite desire, it seems, for — for — —"

Dr. Fillery took her hand again gently, looking down steadily into the clear eyes that sought his own, and the light glistening in their moisture was similar, he fancied for a moment, to the fire in another pair of shining eyes that never failed to stir the unearthly dreams in him.

“It lies beyond any words of ours,” he said softly. “Don’t struggle to express it, Iraida. To the flower, the star, we are wise to leave their own expression in their own particular field, for we cannot better it.”

A sound of rising wind, distant yet ominous, went past the window, as for a moment then the girl came closer till she was almost in his arms, and though he did not accept her, equally he did not shrink from the idea of acceptance — for the first time since they had known one another. There was a smell of flowers; almost in that wailing wind he was aware of music.

“Together,” he heard her whisper, while a faint shiver — was it of joy or terror? — ran through her nerves. “All of us — when the time comes — together.” She made an abrupt movement. “Just as we are together now! Listen!” she exclaimed.

“We call it wind,” she whispered. “But of course — really — it’s behind — beyond — inside — isn’t it?”

Dr. Fillery, holding her closely, made no answer. Then he laughed, let go her hands, and said in his natural tone again, breaking an undesirable spell intentionally, though with a strong effort: “We are in space and time, remember. Iraida. Let us obey them happily until another certain and practical thing is shown us.”

The faint sound that had been rising about them in the air died down again.

They looked into each other’s eyes, then drew apart, though with a movement so slight it was scarcely perceptible. It was Nayan and Dr. Fillery once more, but not before the former had apparently picked out the very thought that had lain, though unexpressed, in the latter’s deepest mind — its sudden rising the cause of his deliberate change of attitude. For she had phrased it, given expression to it, though from an angle very different to his own. And her own word, “escape,” used earlier in the conversation, had deliberately linked on with it, as of intentional purpose.

“He must go back. The time is coming when he must go back. We are not ready for him here — not yet.”

Somewhat in this fashion, though without any actual words, had the idea appeared in letters of fire that leaped and flickered through a mist of anguish, of loss, of loneliness, rising out of the depths within him. He knew whence they came, he divined their origin at once, and the sound, though faint and distant at first, confirmed him. Swiftly behind them, moreover, born of no discoverable antecedents, it seemed, rose simultaneously the phrase that Father Collins loved: "A Being in his own place is the ruler of his fate." Father Collins, for all his faults and strangeness, was a personality, a consciousness, that might prove of value. His extraordinarily swift receptiveness, his undoubted telepathic powers, his fluid, sensitive, protean comprehension of possibilities outside the human walls, above the earthly ceiling, so to speak.... Value suddenly attached itself to Father Collins, as though the name had been dropped purposely into his mind by someone. He was surprised to find this thought in him. It was not for the first time, however, Dr. Fillery remembered.

In Nayan's father, again, an artist, though not a particularly subtle one perhaps, lay a deep admiration, almost a love, he could not explain. "There's something about him in a sense immeasurable, something not only untamed but untamable," he phrased it. "His gentleness conceals it as a summer's day conceals a thunderstorm. To me it's almost like an incarnation of the primal forces at work in the hearts of my own people" — he grew sad— "and as dangerous probably." He was speaking to his daughter, who repeated the words later to Dr. Fillery. The study of Fire in the elemental group had failed. "He's too big, too vast, too formless, to get into any shape or outline *my* tools can manage, even by suggestion. He dominates the others — Earth, Air, Water — and dwarfs them."

"But fire ought to," she put in. "It's the most powerful and splendid, the most terrific of them all. Isn't it? It regenerates. It purifies. I love fire — —"

Her father smiled in his beard, noticing the softness in her manner, rather than in her voice. The awakening in her he had long since understood sympathetically, if more profoundly than she knew, and welcomed.

"He won't hurt you, child. He won't harm Nayushka any more than a summer's day can hurt her. I see him thus sometimes," he mumbled on half to himself, though she heard and stored the words in her memory; "as an entire day, a landscape even, I often see him. A stretch of being rather than a point; a rushing stream rather than a single isolated wave harnessed and confined in definite form — as *we* understand being here," he added curiously. "No, he'll neither harm nor help you," he went on; "nor any of us for that matter. A dozen nations, a planet, a star he might help or harm" — he laughed aloud suddenly in a startled way at his own language— "but an individual never!" And he abruptly took her in his arms and kissed her, drying her tears with his own rough handkerchief. "Not even a fire-worshipper," he added with gruff tenderness, "like you!"

"There's more of divinity in fire than in any other earthly thing we know," she replied as he held her, "for it takes into itself the sweetest essence of all it touches." She looked up at him with a smile. "That's why you can't get it into your marble perhaps." To which her father made the significant rejoinder: "And because none of us has the least conception what 'divine' and 'divinity' really mean, though we're always using the words! It's odd, anyhow," he finished reflectively, "that I can model the fellow better from memory than when he's standing there before my eyes. At close quarters he confuses me with too many terrific unanswerable questions."

To multiply the verdicts and impressions Fillery jotted down is unnecessary. In his own way he collected; in his own way he wrote them down. About "N. H.," all agreed in their various ways of expressing it, was that vital suggestion of agelessness, of deathlessness, of what men call eternal youth: the vigorous grace of limbs and movements, the deep simple joy of confidence and power. None could picture him tired, or even wearing out, yet ever with a faint hint of painful conflict due to immense potentialities— "a day compressed into a single minute," as Khilkoff phrased it — straining, but vainly, to express themselves through a limited form that was inadequate to their use. A storm of passionate hope and wonder seemed ever ready to tear forth from behind the calm of the great quiet eyes, those green-blue changing eyes, which none could imagine lightless or unlamping; and about his whole presentment a surplus of easy, overflowing energy from an inexhaustible source pressing its gifts down into him spontaneously, fire and wind its messengers; yet that the human machinery using these — mind, body, nerves — was ill adapted to their full expression. To every individual having to do with him was given a push, a drive, an impetus that stimulated that individual's chief characteristic, intensifying it.

This to imaginative and discerning sight. But even upon ordinary folk, aware only of the surface things that deliberately hit them, was left a startling impression as of someone waving a strange, unaccustomed banner that made them halt and stare before passing on — uncomfortably. He had that nameless quality, apart from looks or voice or manner, which arrested attention and drew the eyes of the soul, wonderingly, perhaps uneasily, upon itself. He left a mark. Something defined him from all others, leaving him silhouetted in the mind, and those who had looked into his eyes could not forget that they had done so. Up rose at once the great unanswerable questions that, lying ever at the back of daily life, the majority find it most comfortable to leave undisturbed — but rose in red ink or italics. He started into an awareness of greater life. And the effect remained, was greatest even, after he had passed on.

It was, of course, Father Collins, a frequent caller now at the Home, betraying his vehement interest in long talks with Dr. Fillery and in what interviews with "N. H." the latter permitted him — it was this protean being whose mind, amid wildest speculations, formed the most positive conclusions. The Prometheans, he believed, were not far wrong in their instinctive collective judgment. "N. H." was not a human being; the occupant of that magnificent body was not a human spirit like the rest of us.

"Nor is he the only one walking the streets to-day," he affirmed mysteriously. "In shops and theatres, trains and buses, tucked in among the best families," he laughed, although in earnest, "and even in suburbia I have come across other human bodies similarly inhabited. What they are and where they come from exactly, we cannot know, but their presence among us is indubitable."

"You mean you recognize them?" inquired Dr. Fillery calmly.

"One unmistakable sign they possess in common — they are invariably inarticulate, helpless, lost. The brain, the five senses, the human organs — all they have to work through — are useless to express the knowledge and powers natural to them. Electricity might as well try to manifest itself through a gas-pipe, or music through a stone. One and all, too, possess strange glimmerings of another state where they are happy and at home, something of the glory à la Wordsworth, a Golden Age idea almost, a state compared to which humanity seems a tin-pot business, yet a state of which no single descriptive terms occur to them."

"Of which, however, they can tell us nothing?"

"Memory, of course, is lost. Their present brain can have no records, can it? Only those of us who have perhaps at some time, in some earlier existence possibly, shared such a state can have any idea of what they're driving at."

He glanced at Fillery with a significant raising of his bushy eyebrows.

"There have been no phenomena, I'm glad to say," put in the doctor, aware some comment was due from him, "no physical phenomena, I mean."

"Nor could there be," pursued the other, delighted. "He has not got the apparatus. With all such beings, their power, rather than perceived, is *felt*. Sex, as with us, they also cannot know, for they are neither male nor female." He paused, as the other did not help him. "Enigmas they must always be to us. We may borrow from the East and call them *devas*, or class them among nature spirits of legend and the rest, but we can, at any rate, welcome them, and perhaps even learn from them."

"Learn from them?" echoed Fillery sharply.

"They are essentially *natural*, you see, whereas we are artificial, and becoming more so with every century, though we call it civilization. If we lived closer to nature we might get better results, I mean. Primitive man, I'm convinced, did get certain results, but he was a poor instrument. Modern man, in some ways, is a better, finer instrument to work through, only he is blind to the existence of any beings but himself. A bridge, however, might be built, I feel. 'N. H.' seems to me in close touch with these curious beings, if" — he lowered his voice— "he is not actually one of them. The wind and fire he talks about are, of course, not what *we* mean. It is heat and rhythm, in some more essential form, he refers to. If 'N. H.' is some sort of nature spirit, or nature-being, he is of a humble type, concerned with humble duties in the universe — —"

"There are, you think, then, higher, bigger kinds?" inquired the listener, his face and manner showing neither approval nor disapproval.

Father Collins raised his hands and face and shoulders, even his eyebrows. His spirits rose as well.

"If they exist at all — and the assumption explains plausibly the amazing intelligence behind all natural phenomena — they include every grade, of course, from the insignificant fairies, so called, builders of simple forms, to the immense planetary spirits and vast Intelligences who guide and guard the welfare of the greater happenings." His eyes shone, his tone matched in enthusiasm his gestures. "A stupendous and magnificent hierarchy," he cried, "but all, all under God, of course, who maketh his angels spirits and his ministers a flaming fire. Ah, think of it," he went on, becoming lyrical almost as wonder fired him, "think of it now especially in the spring! The vast abundance and insurgence of life pouring up on all sides into forms and bodies, and all led, directed, fashioned by this host of invisible, yet not unknowable, Intelligences! Think of the prolific architecture, the delicacy, the grandeur, the inspiring beauty that are involved...!"

"You said just now a bridge might be built," Dr. Fillery interrupted, while the other paused a second for breath.

Father Collins, nailed down to a positive statement, hesitated and looked about him. But the hesitation passed at once.

"It is the question merely," he went on more composedly, "of providing the apparatus, the means of manifestation, the instrument, the — body. Isn't it? Our evolution and theirs are two separate — different things."

"I suppose so. No force can express itself without a proper apparatus."

"Certain of these Intelligences are so immense that only a series of events, long centuries, a period of history, as we call it, can provide the means, the body indeed, through which they can express themselves. An entire civilization may be the 'body' used by an archetypal power. Others, again — like 'N. H.' probably — since I notice that it is usually the artist, the artistic temperament *he* affects most — require beauty for their expression — beauty of form and outline, of sound, of colour."

He paused for effect, but no comment came.

"Our response to beauty, our thrill, our lift of delight and wonder before any manifestation of beauty — these are due only to our perception, though usually unrecognized except by artists, of the particular Intelligence thus trying to express itself — —"

Dr. Fillery suddenly leaned forward, listening with a new expression on his face. He betrayed, however, no sign of what he thought of his voluble visitor. An idea, none the less, had struck him like a flash between the eyes of the mind.

“You mean,” he interposed patiently, “that just as your fairies use form and colour to express themselves in nature, we might use beauty of a mental order to — to — —”

“To build a body of expression, yes, an instrument in a collective sense, through which ‘N. H.’ might express whatever of knowledge, wisdom and power he has — —”

“Will you explain yourself a little more definitely?”

Father Collins beamed. He continued with an air of intense conviction:

“The Artist is ever an instrument merely, and for the most part an unconscious one; only the greatest artist is a conscious instrument. No man is an artist at all until he transcends both nature and himself; that is, until he interprets both nature and himself in the unknown terms of that greater Power whence himself and nature emanate. He is aware of the majestic source, aware that the universe, in bulk and in detail, is an expression of it, itself a limited instrument; but aware, further — and here he proves himself great artist — of the stupendous, lovely, central Power whose message stammers, broken and partial, through the inadequate instruments of ephemeral appearances.

“He creates, using beauty in form, sound, colour, a better and more perfect instrument, provides this central Power with a means of fuller expression.

“The message no longer stammers, halts, suggests; it flows, it pours, it sings. He has fashioned a vehicle for its passage. His art has created a body it can use. He has transcended both nature and himself. The picture, poem, harmony that has become the body for this revelation is alone great art.”

“Exactly,” came the patient comment that was asked for.

“One thing is certain: only human knowledge, expressed in human terms, can come through a human brain. No mind, no intellect, can convey a message that transcends human experience and reason. Art, however, can. It can supply the vehicle, the body. But, even here, the great artist cannot communicate the secret of his Vision; he cannot talk about it, tell it to others. He can only *show* the result."

"Results," interrupted Dr. Fillery in a curious tone; "what results, exactly, would you look for?" There was a burning in his eyes. His skin was tingling.

"What else but a widening, deepening, heightening of our present consciousness," came the instant reply. "An extension of faculty, of course, making entirely new knowledge available. A group of great artists, each contributing his special vision, respectively, of form, colour, words, proportion, could together create a 'body' to express a Power transcending the accumulated wisdom of the world. The race could be uplifted, taught, redeemed."

"You have already given some attention to this strange idea?" suggested his listener, watching closely the working of the other's face. "You have perhaps even experimented —— A ceremonial of some sort, you mean? A performance, a ritual — or what?"

Father Collins lowered his voice, becoming more earnest, more impressive:

"Beauty, the arts," he whispered, "can alone provide a vehicle for the expression of those Intelligences which are the cosmic powers. A performance of some sort — possibly — since there must be sound and movement. A bridge between us, between our evolution and their own, might, I believe, be thus constructed. Art is only great when it provides a true form for the expression of an eternal cosmic power. By combining — we might provide a means for their manifestation — —"

"A body of thought, as it were, through which our 'N. H.' might become articulate? Is that your idea?"

Behind the question lay something new, it seemed, as though, while listening to the exposition of an odd mystical conception, his mind had been busy with a preoccupation, privately but simultaneously, of his own. "In what way precisely do you suggest the arts might combine to provide this 'body'?" he asked, a faint tremor noticeable in the lowered voice.

"That," replied Father Collins promptly, never at a loss, "we should have to think about. Inspiration will come to us — probably through *him*. Ceremonial, of course, has always been an attempt in this direction, only it has left the world so long that people no longer know how to construct a real one. The ceremonials of to-day are ugly, vulgar, false. The words, music, colour, gestures — everything must combine in perfect harmony and proportion to be efficacious. It is a forgotten method.”

“And results — how would they come?”

“The new wisdom and knowledge that result are suddenly there *in* the members of the group. The Power has expressed itself. Not through the brain, of course, but, rather, that the new ideas, having been *acted* out, are suddenly there. There has been an extension of consciousness. A group consciousness has been formed, and — —”

“And there you are!” Dr. Fillery, moving his foot unperceived, had touched a bell beneath the table. The foot, however, groped and fumbled, as though unsure of itself.

“You learn to swim — by swimming, not by talking about it.” Father Collins was prepared to talk on for another hour. “If we can devise the means — and I feel sure we can — we shall have formed a bridge between the two evolutions — —”

Nurse Robbins entered with apologies. A case upstairs demanded the doctor’s instant attendance. Dr. Devonham was engaged.

“One thing,” insisted Father Collins, as they shook hands and he got up to go, “one thing only you would have to fear.” He was very earnest. Evidently the signs of struggle, of fierce conflict in the other’s face he did not notice.

“And that is?” A hand was on the door.

“If successful — if we provide this means of expression for him — we provide also the means of losing him.”

“Death?” He opened the door with rough, unnecessary violence.

“Escape. He would no longer need the body he now uses. He would *remember* — and be gone. In his place you would have — LeVallon again only. I’m afraid,” he added, “that he already *is* remembering —— !”

His final words, as Nurse Robbins deftly hastened his departure in the hall, were a promise to communicate the results of his further reflections, and a suggestion that his cottage by the river would be a quiet spot in which to talk the matter over again.

But Dr. Fillery, having thanked Nurse Robbins for her prompt attendance to his bell, returned to the room and sat for some time in a strange confusion of anxious thoughts. A singular idea took shape in him — that Father Collins had again robbed his mind of its unspoken content. That sensitive receptive nature had first perceived, then given form to the vague, incoherent dreams that lurked in the innermost recesses of his hidden self.

Yet, if that were so —— and if “N. H.” already was “remembering” —— !

A wave of shadow crept upon him, darkening his hope, his enthusiasm, his very life. For another part of him knew quite well the value to be attributed to what Father Collins had said.

Instinctively his mind sought for Devonham. But it did not occur to him at the moment to wonder why this was so.

CHAPTER XXVI

SPRING HAD COME with her sweet torment of delight, her promises, her passion, and London lay washed and perfumed beneath April's eager sun. An immense, persuasive glamour was in the sky. The whole earth caught up a swifter gear, as the magic of rich creative life poured out of "dead" soil into flower, insect, bird and animal. The prodigious stream omitted no single form; every "body" pulsed and blossomed at full strength. The hidden powers in each seed emerged. And it was from the inanimate body of the earth this flood of increased vitality rose.

Into Edward Fillery, strolling before breakfast over the wet lawn of the enclosed garden, the tide of new life rose likewise. It was very early, the flush of dawn still near enough for the freshness of the new day to be everywhere. The greater part of the huge city was asleep. He was alone with the first birds, the dew, the pearl and gold of the sun's slanting rays. He saw the slates and chimneys glisten. Spring, like a visible presence, was passing across the town, bringing the amazing message that all obey yet no man understands.

"This is its touch upon the blossomed rose,

The fashion of its hand shaped lotus-leaves;

In dark soil and the silence of the seeds

The robe of spring it weaves.

"It maketh and unmaketh, mending all;

What it hath wrought is better than had been;

Slow grows the splendid pattern that it plans,

Its wistful hands between."

The lines came to his memory, while upon his mind fell lovely and wonderful impressions. It was as though the subconsciousness of the earth herself emerged with the spring, producing new life, new splendour everywhere. Out of a single patch of soil the various roots drew material they then fashioned into such different and complicated outlines as daisy, lily, rose, and a hundred types of tree. From the same bit of soil emerged these intricate patterns and designs, these different forms. At this very moment, while his feet left dark tracks across the silvery lawn, the process was going steadily forward all over England. Beneath those very feet up rushed the power into all conceivable bodies. Colour, music, form, marvellously organized, making no mistakes, were turning the world into a vast, delicious garden.

Form, colour, sound! From his own hidden region rose again the flaming hope and prophecy. He stooped and picked a daisy, examining with rapt attention its perfect little body. Who, what made this astonishing thing, that was yet among the humbler forms? What intelligence devised its elaborate outline, guarded, cared for, tended it, ensured its growth and welfare? He gazed at its white rays tipped with crimson, its several hundred florets, its composite design. The spring life had been pouring through it until he picked it. Through the huge mass of earth's body its tiny roots had drawn the life it needed. This power was now cut off. It would die. The process, as with everything else, was "automatic and unintelligent!" It seemed an incredible explanation. The old familiar question troubled him, but he saw it abruptly now from a new angle.

"We built it," came a voice so close that it seemed behind him, for when at first he turned, startled, and yet not startled, he saw no figure standing; "we who work in darkness, yet who never die, the Hidden Ones who build and weave inside and out of sight. You have destroyed our work of ages...."

A pang of sudden regret and anguish seized him. He stood still and stared in the direction whence he thought the voice had come, but no form, no outline, no body that could have produced a sound, a voice, was visible. A blackbird flew with its shrill whistle over the enclosing wall, and the gardener, up unusually early, was now moving slowly past the elms at the far end, some two hundred yards away. The old man, he remembered, had been telling him only the day before that the life in his plants this year had been prodigious and successful beyond his whole experience. It puzzled him. Something of reverence, of superstition almost, had lain in the man's voice and eyes.

“Who are you?” whispered Fillery, still holding the “dead” broken flower in his hand and staring about him. He was aware that the sound from which the voice had come, detaching itself, as it were, into articulate syllables out of a general continuous volume, had not ceased. It was all about him, softly murmuring. Was it in himself perhaps? An intense inner activity, like the pressure of an enveloping tide, that was also in space, in the soil, the body of the planet, rose in him too. And it seemed to him that his mind was suddenly in process of being shaped and fashioned into a new “body of understanding”; a new instrument of understanding.

“This is its work upon the things ye see:

The unseen things are more; men’s hearts and minds,

The thoughts of peoples and their ways and wills,

These, too, the great Law binds.”

“I know,” he exclaimed, this time with acceptance that omitted the doubt he had first felt. “I know who you are” ... and even as he said the words, there dropped into him, it seemed, some knowledge, some hint, some wonder that lay, he well knew, outside all human experience. It was as though some cosmic power brushed gently against and through his being, but a power so alien to known human categories that to attempt its expression in human terms — language, reason, imagination even — were to mutilate it. Yet, even for its partial, broken manifestation, human terms were alone available, since without these it must remain unperceived, he himself unaware of its existence.

He *was*, however, aware of its presence, its existence. All that was left to him therefore was his own personal interpretation. Herein, evidently, lay the truth for him; this was the meaning of his “acceptance.” It was, in some way, a renewal of that other vision he called the Flower Hill and Flower Music experience.

“I know you,” he repeated, his voice merging curiously in the general underlying murmur of the morning. “You belong to the bodiless, the deathless ones who work and build and weave eternally. Form, sound, colour are your instruments, the elements your tools. You wove this flower,” he fingered the dying daisy, “as you also shaped this body” — he tapped his breast— “and — you built as well this mind — —”

He stopped dead. Two things arrested him: the feeling that the ideas were not primarily his own, but derived from a source outside himself; and a sudden intensification of the flaming hope and prophecy that burst up as with new meaning into the words "mind" and "body."

The broken body of the flower slipped from his fingers and fell upon the body of the earth. He looked down at its now empty form through which no life flowed, and his eye passed then to his own body beating with intense activity, and thence to the bodies of the trees, the darting birds, the gigantic sun now peering magnificently along the heavens. Body! A body was a form through which life expressed itself, a vehicle of expression by means of which life manifested, an instrument it used. But a body of thought was a true phrase too. And with the words, shaped automatically in his brain, a new light flashed and flooded him with its waves.

"A body of thought, a mental body" — the phrase went humming and flowing strangely through him. A body of thought! Father Collins, he remembered, had used some such wild language, only it had seemed empty words without intelligible meaning. Whence came the intense new meaning that so suddenly attached itself to the familiar phrase? Whence came the thrilling deep conviction that new, greater knowledge was hovering near, and that for its expression a new body must be devised? And what was this new knowledge, this new power? Whence came the amazing certainty in him that a new way was being shown to him, a means of progress for humanity that must otherwise flounder always to its average level of growth, development, then invariably collapse again?

"*We* built it," ran past him through the air again, or rose perhaps from the stirred depths of his own subconscious being, or again, dropped from a hidden rushing star. "The more perfect and adequate the form, the greater the flow of life, of knowledge, of power it can express. No mind, no intellect, can convey a message that transcends human experience. Yet there is a way."

The new knowledge was there, if only the new vehicle suited to its expression could be devised....

The stream of life pouring through him became more and more intense; some power of perception seemed growing into white heat within him; transcending the limited senses; becoming incandescent. This tide of sound, inaudible to ordinary ears, was the music which is inseparable from the rhythm that underlies all forms, the music of the earth's manifold activities now pouring in vibrations huge and tiny all round and through him. He turned instinctively.

"You...!" exclaimed the doctor in him, as though rebuke, reproval stirred. "You here...!"

It seemed to him that the figure of "N. H.," embodying as it were a ray of sunlight, stood beside him.

"We," came the answer, with a smile that took the sparkling sunlight through the very face. "We are all about you," added the voice with a rhythm that swamped all denial, all objection, bringing an exultant exhilaration in their place. "We come from what always seems to you a Valley of sun and flowers, where we work and play behind the appearances you call the world."

"The world," repeated Fillery. "The universe as well."

The voice, the illusion of actual words, both died away, merging in some perplexing fashion into another appearance, perhaps equally an illusion so far as the senses were concerned — the phenomenon men call sight. Instead of hearing, that is, he now suddenly saw. Something in the arrangement of light caught his attention, holding it. The deep, central self in him, that which interprets and de-codes the reports the senses bring, employed another mode.

The figure of "N. H." still was definite enough in form indeed, yet at the same time taking the rays into itself as though it were a body of light. There was no transparency, of course, nor was this clear radiance seen by Fillery for the first time, but rather that his natural shining was caught up and intensified by the morning sunshine. A body of light, none the less, seemed a true description of what Fillery now saw. This sunshine filled the air, the space all round him, the entire lawn and garden shone in a sparkling flood of dancing brilliance. It blazed. The figure of "N. H." was merely a portion of this blazing. As a focus, but one of many, he now thought of it. And about each focus was the toss and fling of lovely, ever-rising spirals.

Across the main stream came then another pulsing movement, hardly discernible at first, and similar to an under-swell that moves the sea against the wave — so that the eye perceives it only when not looking for it. This contrary motion, it soon became apparent, went in numerous, almost countless directions, so that, within and below its complicated wave-tracery, he was aware of yet other motions, crossing and interlacing at various speeds, until the space about him seemed to whirl with myriad rhythms, yet without the least confusion. These rhythms were of a hundred different magnitudes, from the very tiny to the gigantic, and while the smallest were of a radiant brilliance that made the sunshine pale, the larger ones seemed distant, their light of an intenser quality, though of a quality he had never seen before. These were strangely diffused, these bigger ones— “distant” was the word that occurred to him, although that inner brilliance which occurs in dreams, in imaginative moments, the nameless glow that colours mental vision, described them better. Moreover they wore colours the human eye had never seen, while the smallest rhythms were lit with the familiar colours of the prism.

He stood absorbed, fascinated, drinking in the amazing spectacle, as though the glowing spirals of fire communicated to his inmost being a heat and glory of creative power. He was aware of the creative stream of spring in his own heart, pouring from the body of the earth on which he stood, drenching mind, nerves and even muscles with concentrated life. His subconscious being rose and stretched its wings. All, all was possible. A sensation of divine deathlessness possessed him. The limitations of his ordinary human faculties and powers were overborne, so that he felt he could never again face the mournful prison that caged him in. The meaning of escape became plain to him.

He saw the invisible building Intelligences at work.

He was aware then suddenly of purpose, of intention. The seeming welter of the waves of coloured light, of the immense and tiny rhythms, the intricate streams of vibrating, pulsing, throbbing movements were, he now perceived, marvellously co-ordinated. There was a focus, a vortex, towards which all rushed with a power so prodigious that a sense of terror touched him. He suddenly became conscious of a pattern forming before his eyes, hanging in empty space, shining, soft with light and beauty. It became, he saw, a geometric design. An idea of crystals, frost-forms, a spider’s web hung with glistening dewdrops shot across his memory. The spirals whirled and sang about it.

This outline, he next perceived, was the focus to which the light, heat, colour all contributed their particular touch and quality. It glowed now in the centre of the vortex. So overwhelming, however, was the sense of the stupendous power involved that, as he phrased it afterwards, it seemed he watched the formation of some mighty sun. It was the whirling of those billion-miled sheets of incandescent fires that attend the birth of a nebula he watched. The power, at any rate, was gigantic.

He stood trembling before a revelation that left him lost, shelterless, bereft of any help that his little self might summon — when, suddenly, with an emotion of strange tenderness, he saw the great rhythms become completely dominated by the very smallest of all. The same instant the pattern grew sharply outlined, perfect in every detail, as though the focus of powerful glasses cleared — and the pattern hung a moment exquisitely fashioned in space beneath his eyes before it sank slowly to the ground. It remained in an upright position on the grass at his feet — a daisy, growing in the earth, alive, its tiny delicate face taking the sunlight and the morning wind.

With a shock he then realized another thing: it was the very daisy he had broken, uprooted, killed a few minutes before.

He stooped, one hand outstretched as though to finger its wee white petals, but found instead that he was listening — listening to a sweet faint music that rose from the surface of the lawn, from grass and flowers, running in waves and circles, like the vibrations of gentle wind across a thousand strings. It was similar, though less in volume, to the sound he had heard in the presence of "N. H." He rose slowly to an upright position, dazed, bewildered, yet rapt with the wonder of the whole experience.

"N. H.!" he heard his voice exclaim, its sound merging in the growing volume of music all about him. "N. H.!" he cried again. "This is your work, your service...!"

But he could not see him; his figure was no longer differentiated from the ever-moving sea of light that filled space wherever he looked. The same play of brilliance shone and glistened everywhere, whirling, ever shifting as in vortices of intricate geometrical designs, dancing, interpenetrating, and with a magnificence of colour that caught his breath away. There were remarkable flashings, and two of these flashings blazed suddenly together, forming an immense physiognomy, an expression, rather, as of a mighty face. The same instant there were a hundred of these mighty brilliant visages that pierced through the sea of whirling colour and gazed upon him, close, terrific, with a power and beauty that left thought without even a ghost of language to describe them. Their glory lay beyond all earthly terms. He recognized them. These mighty outlines he had seen before.

His mind then made an effort; he tried to think; memory and reason strove with emotion and sensation. The forms, the faces, the powers at once grew fainter. They faded slowly. The whirling vortices withdrew in some extraordinary way, the colour paled, the sound grew thinner, ever more distant, the great weaving designs dissolved. The lovely spirals all were gone. He saw the garden trees again, the flower beds. Space emptied, showing the morning sunshine on roofs and chimney-pots.

“We have rebuilt, remade it,” he heard faintly, but he heard also the roar and boom of the gigantic rhythms as they withdrew, not spatially, so much as from his consciousness that was now contracting once more, till only the fainter sounds of the smaller singing patterns, the Flower Music as he had come to call it, reached his ears. Words and music, like voices known in dreams, seemed interwoven. He remembered the huge faces, with their bright confidence and glory, rising through the sunlight, peering as through a mirror at him, radiant and of imperishable beauty. The words, perhaps, he attached himself, his own interpretations of their ringing motions.

The sounds died away. He reeled. The expansion and subsequent contraction of consciousness had been too rapid, the whole experience too intense. He swayed, unsure of his own identity. He remembered vaguely that tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks, that the destruction of a lovely form had caused him a peculiar anguish, and that its recreation produced an intolerable joy, bringing tears of happiness. An arm caught him as he swayed. The accents of a voice he knew were audible close beside him. But at first he did not understand the words, feeling only a dull pain they caused.

“Their imperishable beauty! Their divine loveliness!” he stammered, recognizing the face and voice. He flung his arms wide, gazing into the now empty air above the London garden. “The great service they eternally fulfil — oh, that we all might — —” He made a gesture towards the other houses with their sightless, shuttered windows.

“I know, I know,” came in the familiar tones. “But come in now, come in, Edward, with me. I beg you — before it is too late.” Paul Devonham’s voice shook so that it was hardly recognizable. The skin of his face was white. He wore a haggard look.

“Too late!” repeated the other; “it is always too late. The world will never see. Their eyes are blinded.” An intolerable emotion swept him. He stared suddenly at his colleague, an immense surprise in him. “But you, Paul!” he exclaimed. “You understand! Even you —— !”

Devonham led him slowly into the house. There was protection in his manner, in voice and gesture there was deep affection, respect as well, but behind and through these flickered the signs of another unmistakable emotion that Fillery at first could hardly credit — of pity, was it? Of something at any rate he dared not contemplate.

“Even I,” came in quick, low tones, “even I, Edward, understand. You forget. I was once alone with him” — the voice sank to a rapid whisper— “in the mountain valley.” Devonham’s expression was curious. He raised his tone again. “But — not now, not now, I beg of you. Not yet, at any rate. You will be cast out, judged insane, your work destroyed, your career ruined, your reputation — —” His excitement betrayed itself in his bright eyes and unusual gestures. He was shaken to the core. Fillery turned upon him. They were in the corridor now. He flung his arm free of the restraining hand.

“You know!” he cried, “yet would keep silent!” His voice choked. “You saw what I saw: new sources open, the offer made, the channels accessible at our very door, yet you would refuse — —”

“Not one in ten million,” came the hard rejoinder, “would believe.” The voice trembled. “We have no proof. Their laws of manifestation are unknown to us, and such glimpses are but glimpses — useless and dangerous.” He whispered suddenly: “Besides — what are they? What, after all, are we dealing with?”

“We can experiment,” interrupted his companion quickly.

“How? Of what possible value?”

“You felt what I felt? In your own being you experienced the revelation too, and yet you use such words! New forces, new faculties, Beings from another order of incalculable powers to ennoble, to bless, to inspire! The creation of higher forms through which new, greater life and knowledge, shall manifest!”

He could hardly find the words he sought, so bright was the hope and wonder in his heart still. “Think — at a time like this — what humanity might gain. *Creative* powers, Paul, creative! Acting directly on the subconscious selves of everybody, intensifying every individual, whether he understands and believes or not! The gods, Paul — and nothing less —— You saw the daisy — —”

Devonham seized both of his companion’s hands, as he heard the torrent of wild, incoherent words: “You’ll have the entire world against you,” he interrupted. “Why seek crucifixion for a dream?” Then, as his hands were again flung off, he turned, a finger suddenly on his lips. “Hush, hush, Edward!” he whispered. “The house is sleeping still. You’ll wake them all.”

There was a new, strange authority about him. Dr. Fillery controlled himself. They went upstairs on tiptoe.

“Listen!” murmured Devonham, as they reached the first-floor landing. “That’s what woke me first and led me to his room, but only to find it empty. He was already gone. I saw him join you on the lawn. I watched from the open window. Then — I lost him.... Listen!” He was trembling like a child.

The sound still echoed faintly, distant, rising and falling, sweet and very lovely, and hardly to be distinguished from the musical hum of wind that sighs and whispers across the strings of an æolian harp. To one man came incredible sensations as they paused a moment. Dim though the landing was, there still seemed a tender luminous glow pervading it.

“They’re everywhere,” murmured Fillery, “everywhere and always about us, though in different space. Through and behind and inside everything that happens, helping, building, constructing ceaselessly. Oh, Paul, how can you doubt and question value? Behind every single form and body, physical or mental, they operate divinely — —”

“Mental! Edward, for God’s sake — —”

Devonham stepped nearer to him with such abruptness that his companion stopped. The pallor of the assistant’s face so close arrested his words a moment. They held their breath, listening together side by side. The sounds grew fainter, died away in the stillness of the early morning, then ceased altogether. It was not the first time they had listened thus to the strange music, nor was it the first time that Fillery entered the room alone. As once before, his colleague remained outside, watching, waiting, half seduced, it seemed, yet vehemently against a sympathetic attitude. He watched his chief go in, he saw the expression on his face. Upon his own, behind a mild expectancy, lay a look of pain.

“Empty!” He heard the startled exclamation.

And instantly Devonham was at his side, a firm hand upon his arm, his eyes taking in an unused bed, a window opened wide, a glow of light and heat the early sunshine could not possibly explain. The perfume, as of flowers in the air, he noted too, and a sense of lightness, freshness, sweetness about the atmosphere that produced happiness, exhilaration. The room throbbed, as it were, with invisible waves of some communicable power even he could not deny. But of “N. H.,” the recent occupant, there was no sign.

“In the garden still. I lost sight of him somehow. I told you.”

Fillery crossed quickly to the window, his colleague with him, looking out upon a lawn and paths that held no figure anywhere. The gardener was not in sight. Only the birds were visible among the daisies. The quiet sunlight lay as usual upon leaves and flowers waving in the breeze. “He came in,” Fillery went on rapidly under his breath. “He must have slipped back when — —”

The sound of steps and voices behind them in the corridor brought both men round with a quick movement, as Nurse Robbins, her arm linked in that of “N. H.,” stood in the open doorway. Her face was radiant, her eyes alight, her breath came unevenly, and one might have thought her caught midway in some ecstatic dance that still left its joy and bliss stamped on her pretty face. Only she looked more than pretty; there was beauty, a fairy loveliness about her that betrayed an intense experience of some inner kind.

At the sight of the two doctors she rapidly composed herself, leading her companion quietly into the room. “He was upstairs, sir,” she said respectfully but breathlessly somewhat, and addressing herself, Fillery noticed, to Devonham and not to himself. “He was going from room to room, talking to the patients — er — singing to them. It was the singing woke me — —”

“Upstairs!” exclaimed Devonham. “He has been up there!”

She broke off as Fillery came forward and took “N. H.” by the hands, dismissing her with a gesture she was quick to understand. Devonham went with her hurriedly, intent upon a personal inspection at once.

“Your service called you,” said Fillery quietly, the moment they were alone. “I understand!” Through the contact of the hands waves of power entered him, it seemed. About the face was light, as though fire glowed behind the very skin and eyes, producing the effect almost of a halo.

“They came for me, and I must go.” The voice was deep and wonderful, with prolonged vibrations. “I have found my own. I must return where my service needs me, for here I can do so little.”

“To your own place where you are ruler of your fate,” the other said slowly. “Here you — —”

“Here,” came the quick interruption, while the voice lost its resonance, fading as it were in sadness, “here I — die.” Even the radiance of his face, although he smiled, dimmed a little on that final word. “I can help where I belong — not here.” The light returned, the music came back into the amazing voice.

“The daisy,” whispered Fillery, joy rising in him strangely.

“Nature,” floated through the air like music, “is my place. With human beings I cannot work. It is too much, and I only should destroy. They are not ready yet, for our great rhythms injure them, and they cannot understand.”

Trembling with emotions he could neither define nor control, Fillery led him to the window.

“Even in this little back-garden of a London house,” he murmured, “among, so to speak, the humble buttercups and daisies of our life! The creative Intelligences at work, building, ever building the best forms they can. You re-make a broken daisy” — his voice rose, as the great shining face so close lit with its flaming smile— “you re-make as well our broken minds. In the subconscious hides our creative power that you stimulate. It is with that and that alone you work. It hides in all of us, though the artist alone perceives or can use it. It is with that you work — —"

"With you, dear Fillery, I can work, for you help me to remember. You feel the big rhythms that we bring."

Dr. Fillery started, peered about him, listened hard. Was it the trees, shaking in the morning wind, that rustled? Was it a voice? The dancing leaves reflected the sunshine from a thousand facets. The sound accompanied, rather than interrupted, his own speech. He turned back to "N. H." with passionate enthusiasm.

"Using beauty — the artists — the creative powers of the Race," he went on, "we shall create together a new body, a new vehicle, through which your powers can express themselves. The intellect cannot serve you ... it is the creative imagination of those who know beauty that you seek. You are inarticulate in this wretched body. We shall make a new one — —"

"They have come for me and I must go — —"

"We will work together. Oh, stay — stay with me —— !"

"I have found the way. I have remembered. I must go back — —"

The wind died down, the leaves stopped rustling, the sunshine seemed to pale as though a cloud passed over the sky. The words he had heard resolved themselves into the morning sounds, the singing of the birds. Had they been words at all? Bewilderment, like a pain, rushed over him. He knew himself suddenly imprisoned, caught.

"I have remembered," he heard in quiet tones, but the voice dead, no resonance, no music in it. And across the room he saw suddenly Paul Devonham just inside the door, returned from his inspection. Beside him stood — LeVallon.

An extraordinary reaction instantly took place in him. A lid was raised, a shutter lifted, a wall fell flat. He hardly knew how to describe it. Was it due to the look of anxiety, of tenderness, of affectionate, of protective care he saw plainly upon his colleague's face? He could not say. He only knew for certain in that instant that Paul Devonham's main preoccupation was with — himself; that the latter regarded him exactly as he regarded any other — yes, that was the only word — any other patient; that he looked after him, tended, guarded, cared for him — and that this watchful, experienced observation had been going on now for a long, long time.

The authority in his manner became abruptly clear as day. Devonham watched over him; also he watched him. For days, for weeks, this had been his attitude. For the first time, in this instant, as he saw him lead away LeVallon into his own room and close the door, Fillery now perceived this. He experienced a violent revulsion of mind. In a flash a hundred details of the recent past occurred to him, chief among them the fact that, more and more, the control of the Home and its occupants had been taken over, Fillery himself only too willing, by his assistant. A moment of appalling doubt rose like a black cloud....

He heard Paul telling LeVallon to begin his breakfast, just as the door closed, and he noted the authoritative tone of voice. The next minute he and his colleague were alone together.

"Paul," said the chief quickly, but with a calm assurance that anticipated a favourable answer, "*they*, at any rate, are all right?"

Devonham nodded his head. "No harm done," he replied briefly. "In fact, as you know, he rather stimulates them than otherwise."

"I know."

He felt, for the first time in their years of close relationship, a breath of suspicion enter him. There was a look upon his colleague's face he could not quite define. It baffled him.

"Of course, I know — —"

He stopped, for the undecipherable look had strengthened suddenly. He thought of a gaoler.

"Paul," he said quickly, "what's the matter? What's wrong with you?"

He drew back a pace or two and watched him.

"With me — nothing, Edward. Nothing at all." The tone was grave with anxiety, yet had this new authority in it.

A feeling of intolerable insecurity came upon him, a sensation as though he balanced on air, yet its cause, its origin, easily explained: the support of his colleague's mind was taken from him. Paul's attitude was clear as day to him. He *was* a gaoler.... He recalled again the recent detail, brightly significant — that Nurse Robbins had turned to Paul, rather than to himself.

"With — *me*, then — you think?" His voice hardly sounded like his own. He looked about him for support, found an arm-chair, sat down in it. "You're strange, Paul, very strange," he whispered. "What do you mean by 'there's something wrong with *me*'?"

Devonham's expression cleared slightly and a kindly, sympathetic smile appeared, then vanished. The grave look that Fillery disliked reappeared.

"What d'you mean, Paul Devonham?" came the repetition, in a louder, more challenging voice. "You're watching me — as though I were" — he laughed without a trace of mirth— "a patient." He leaned forward. "Paul, you've been watching me for a long time. Out with it, now. What is it?"

Devonham, who had kept silent, drew some papers from his pocket, a bundle of rolled sheets.

"Of course," he said gently, "I always watch you. For that's how I learn. I learn from you, Edward, more than from anybody I know."

But Dr. Fillery, his eyes fixed upon the sheaf of papers, had recognized them. His own writing was visible along the uneven edges. They were the description he had set down of his adventure on Flower Hill, of the scenes between "N. H." and Lady Gleeson, between "N. H." and Nayan, the autobiographical description with "N. H." and Nurse Robbins soon after his arrival, when Fillery had so amazingly found his own mind — as he believed — identified with his patient's.

Devonham snapped off the elastic band that held the sheaf together. "Edward, I've read them. We have no secrets, of course. I've read them carefully. Every word — my dear fellow."

"Yes, yes," replied the other, while something in him wavered horribly. "I'm glad. They were meant for you to read, for of course we have no secrets. I — I do not expect you to agree. We have never quite seen eye to eye — have we?" His voice shook. "You terrible iconoclast," he added, betraying thus the nature of the fear that changed his voice, then recognizing with vexation that he had done so. "You believe nothing. You never will believe anything. You cannot understand. With joy you would destroy what I and others believe — wouldn't you, Paul —— ?"

The deep sadness, the gravity on the face in front of him stopped the tirade.

"I would save you, Edward," came the earnest, gentle words, "from yourself. The powers of auto-suggestion, as we know in our practice — don't we? — are limitless. If you call that destroying — —"

From the adjoining room the clatter of knives and forks was audible. Dr. Fillery listened a moment with a smile.

"Paul," he asked, his voice firm and sure again, "is your chief patient in that room," indicating the door with his head, "or — in this?"

"In this," was the reply. "A wise man is always his own patient and 'Physician, heal thyself' his motto." He sat down beside his chief. His manner changed; there was affection, deep solicitude, something of passionate entreaty even in voice and eyes and gestures. "There are features here," he said in lowered tones, "Edward, we have not understood, perhaps even we can never understand; but we have not, I think, sufficiently guarded against one thing — auto-suggestion. The rôle it plays in life is immense, incalculable; it is in everything we do and think, above all in everything we believe. It is peculiarly powerful and active in — er — unusual things — —"

"The sound — the sounds — you've heard them yourself," broke in his companion.

Devonham shrugged his thin shoulders. "He sings — in a peculiar way." As an aside, he said it, returning to his main sermon instantly. "Let us leave details out," he cried; "it is the principle that concerns us. Edward, your complex against humanity lies hard and rigid in you still. It has never found that full recognition by yourself which can resolve it. Your work, your noble work, is but a partial expression. The kernel of this old complex in you remains unrelieved, undischarged — because still unrecognized. And, further, you are continually adding to the repression which" — even Devonham paused a second before using such a word to such a man— "is poisoning you, Edward, poisoning you, I repeat."

"You saw — you saw the rebuilding of — the daisy" — an odd whisper of insecurity ran through the quiet words, a statement rather than a question— "you realize, at any rate, that chance has brought us into contact with Powers, creative Powers, of a new order — —"

"Let us omit all details just now," interrupted the other, a troubled, indecipherable look on his face. "The undoubted telepathy between your mind and mine nullifies any such — —"

" —— powers of which we all have some faint counterpart, at any rate, in our subliminal selves." Fillery had not heard the interruption. "Powers by means of which we may build for the Race new forms, new mental bodies, new vehicles for life, for God, to manifest through — more perfect, more receptive — —"

Devonham had suddenly seized both his hands and was leaning closer to him. Something compelling, authoritative, peculiarly convincing for a moment had its undeniable effect, again stopping the flow of hurried, passionate, eager words.

"There is one new form, new body," and the intensity in voice and eyes drove the meaning deep, deep into his listener's mind and heart. "I wish to see you build. One, and one only — physical, mental, spiritual. But you cannot build it, Edward — alone!"

"Paul!" The other held up a warning hand; the expression in his eyes was warning too. Their effect upon Devonham, however, was nil. He was talking with a purpose nothing could alter.

"She is still waiting for you," he went on with determination, "and already you have kept her waiting — overlong." In the tone, in the hard clear eyes as well, lay a suggestion almost of tears.

He opened the door into the breakfast-room, but Fillery caught his arm and stopped him. They could hear Nurse Robbins speaking, as she attended as usual to her patient's wants. Coffee was being poured out. There was a sound of knives and plates and cups.

"One minute, Paul, one minute before we go in." He drew him aside. "And what, *Doctor* Devonham, may I ask, would you prescribe?" There was a curious mixture of gentle sarcasm, of pity, of patient tolerance, yet at the same time of sincere, even anxious, interest in the question. The face and manner betrayed that he waited for the answer with something more than curiosity.

There was no hesitancy in Devonham. He judged the moment ripe, perhaps; he was aware that his words would be listened to, appreciated, understood certainly, and possibly, obeyed.

“Expression,” he said convincingly, but in a lowered voice. “The fullest expression, everywhere and always. Let it all come. Accept the lot, believe the lot, welcome the lot, and thus” — he could not conceal the note of passionate entreaty, of deep affection— “avoid every atom of *repression*. In the end — in the long run — your own best judgment *must* prevail.”

They smiled into each other’s eyes for a moment in silence, while, instinctively and automatically, their hands joined in a steady clasp.

“Bless you, old fellow,” murmured the chief. “As if I didn’t know! It’s the treatment you’ve been trying on me for weeks and months. As if I hadn’t noticed!”

As they entered the breakfast-room, Nurse Robbins, with flushed face and sparkling eyes, was pouring out the coffee, leaning close over her patient’s shoulder as she did so. Fresh roses were in her cheeks as well as on the table.

“This is its touch upon the blossomed maid,” whispered Fillery, with the quick hint of humour that belongs only to the sane. At the same time the light remark was produced, he well knew, by a part of himself that sought to remain veiled from recognition. Any other triviality would have done as well to cloak the sharp pain that swept him, and to lead his listener astray. For in that instant, as they entered, he saw at the table not “N. H.,” but LeVallon — the backward, ignorant, commonplace LeVallon, an empty, untaught personality, yet so receptive that anything — *anything* — could be transferred to him by a strong, vivid mind, a mind, for instance, like his own....

The sight, for a swift instant, was intolerable and devastating. He balanced again on air that gave him no support. He wavered, almost swayed. “N. H.,” in that horrible and painful second, did not exist, and never had existed. The unstable mind, he comforted himself, experiences dislocating extremes of attitude ... for, at the same time as he saw himself shaking and wavering without solid support, he saw the figure of Paul Devonham, big, important, authoritative, dominating the uncertainties of life with calm, steady power.

In a fraction of a second all this came and went. He sat down beside LeVallon, his eyes still twinkling with his trivial little joke.

"'N. H.,'" he whispered to Devonham quickly, "has — escaped at last."

"LeVallon," came the whispered reply as quickly, "is cured at last." And, to conceal an intolerable rush of pain, of loss, of loneliness that threatened tears, he pointed to the dropped eyes and blushing cheeks of the pretty nurse across the table.

CHAPTER XXVII

TO EDWARD FILLERY, the deep pain of frustration baffling all his mental processes, the end had come with a strange, bewildering swiftness. He knew there had been a prolonged dislocation of his being, possibly, even a partial loss of memory with regard to much that went on about him, but he could not, did not, admit that no value or reality had attached to his experiences. The central self in him had projected a limb, an arm, that, feeling its way across the confining wall of the prison house, groping towards an unbelievably wonderful revelation of new possibilities, had abruptly now withdrawn again. The dissociation in his personality was over. He was, in other words, no longer aware of "N. H." Like Devonham, he now did not "perceive" "N. H.," but only LeVallon. But, unlike Devonham, he *had* perceived him....

He had met half-way a mighty and magnificent Vision. Its truth and beauty remained for him enduring. The revelation had come and gone. That its close was sudden, simple, undramatic, above all untheatrical, satisfied him. "N. H." had "escaped," leaving the commonplace LeVallon in his place. But, at least, he had known "N. H."

His whole being, an odd, sweet, happy pain in him, yearned ever to the glorious memory of it all. The melancholy, the peculiar shyness he felt, were not without an indefinite pleasure. His nature still vibrated to those haunting and inspiring rhythms, but his normal, earthly faculties, he flattered himself, were in no sense permanently disorganized. Professionally, he still cared for LeVallon, disenchanted dust though he might be, compared to "N. H." ... He approved of Devonham's proposal to take him for a few days to the sea. He also approved of Paul's advice that he should accept Father Collins' invitation to spend a day or two at his country cottage. The Khilkoffs would be there, father and daughter. The Home, in charge of an assistant, could be reached in a few hours in case of need. The magic of Devonham's wise, controlling touch lay in every detail, it seemed....

He saw the trio — for Nurse Robbins was of the party — off to Seaford. "The final touches to his cure," Paul mentioned slyly, with a smile, as the guard whistled. But of whose cure he did not explain. "He'll bathe in the sea," he added, the reference obvious this time. "And — when we return — I shall be best man. I've already promised!" There was a triumph of skilled wisdom in both sentences.

"The time isn't ripe yet, Edward, for too magnificent ideas. And your ideas have been a shade too magnificent, perhaps." He talked on lightly, even carelessly. And, as usual, there was purpose, meaning, "treatment" — his friend easily discerned it now — in every detail of his attitude.

Fillery laughed. Through his mind ran Povey's sentence, "Never argue with the once-born!" but aloud he said, "At any rate, I've no idea that I'm Emperor of Japan or — or the Archangel Gabriel!" And the other, pleased and satisfied that a touch of humour showed itself, shook hands firmly, affectionately, through the window as the train moved off. LeVallon raised his hat to his chief and smiled — an ordinary smile....

With the speed and incongruity of a dream these few days slipped by, their happenings vivid enough, yet all set to a curiously small scale, a cramped perspective, blurred a little as by a fading light. Only one thing retained its brilliance, its intense reality, its place in the bigger scale, its vast perspective remaining unchanged. The same immense sweet rhythm swept Iraida and himself inevitably together. Some deep obsession that hitherto prevented had been withdrawn.

She had called that very morning — Paul's touch visible here again, he believed, though he had not asked. He looked on and smiled. After the ordeal of breakfast with Devonham and LeVallon her visit was announced. It was Paul, after a little talk downstairs, who showed her in. With the radiance of a spring wild-flower opening to the early sunshine, her unexpected visit to his study seemed clothed. Unexpected, yes, but surely inevitable as well. With the sweet morning wind through the open window, it seemed, she came to him, the letter of invitation from Father Collins in her hand. His own lay among his correspondence, still untouched. Her perfume rose about him as she explained something he hardly heard or followed.

"You'll come, Edward, won't you? You'll come too."

"Of course," he answered. But it was a song he heard, and no dull spoken words. She ran dancing towards him through a million flowers; her hair flew loose along the scented winds; her white limbs glowed with fire. He danced to meet her. It was in the Valley that he caught her hands and met her eyes. "It's happened," he heard himself saying. "It's happened at last — just as you said it must. *Escape!* He has escaped!"

"But we shall follow after — when the time comes, Edward."

"Where the wild bee never flew!"...

"When the time comes," she repeated.

Her voice, her smile, her eyes brought him back sharply into the little room. The furniture showed up again. The Valley faded. He noticed suddenly that for the first time she wore no flowers in her dress as usual.

"Iraida!" he exclaimed. "Then — you knew!"

She bent her head, smiling divinely. She took both his hands in hers. At her touch every obstacle between them melted. His own private, personal inhibition he saw as the trivial barriers a little child might raise. His complex against humanity, as Paul called it, had disappeared. Their minds, their beings, their natures became most strangely one, he felt, and yet quite naturally. There was nothing they did not share.

"With the first dawn," he heard her say in a low voice. "Never — never again," he seemed to hear, "shall we destroy his — their — work of ages."

"A flower," he whispered, "has no need to wear a flower!" He was convinced that she too had shared an experience similar to his own, perhaps had even seen the bright, marvellous Deva faces peering, shining.... He did not ask. She said no more. Life flowed between them in an untroubled stream....

Like the flow of a stream, indeed, things went past him, yet with incidents and bits of conversation thus picked out with vivid sharpness. The dissociation of his being was still noticeable here and there, he supposed. The swell after the storm took time to settle down. Slowly, however, the waves that had been projected, leaping to heaven, returned to the safe, quiet dead level of the normal calm.... The depths lay still once more. And his melancholy passed a little, lifted. He knew, at any rate, those depths were now accessible.

“I’ve seen over the wall a moment,” he said to himself. “Paul is both right and wrong. What I’ve seen lies too far ahead of the Race to be intelligible or of use. I should be cast out, crucified, my other, simpler work destroyed. To control rhythms so powerful, so different to anything we now know, is not yet possible. They would shatter, rather than construct.” He smiled sadly, yet with resignation. There was pain and humour in his eyes. “I should be regarded as a Promethean merely, an extremist Promethean, and probably be locked up for contravening some County Council bye-law or offending Church and State. That’s where he, perhaps, is right — Paul!” He thought of him with affection and pity, with understanding love. “How wise and faithful, how patient and how skilled — within his limits. The stable are the useful; the stable are the leaders; the stable rule the world. People with steady if unvisioned eyes like Paul, with money like Lady Gleeson.... But, oh!” — he sighed— “how slow, ye gods! how slow!” ...

The visit was a strange one. Nayan sat between him and her father in the motor. It was not far from London, the ancient little house among the trees where Father Collins secreted himself from time to time upon occasional “retreats.”

Within the grounds it might have been the centre of the New Forest, but for the sound of tramcar bells that sometimes came jangling faintly through the thick screen of leaves. There were old-world paved courtyards with sweet playing fountains, miniature lawns, tangles of flowers, small sunken gardens with birds of cut box and yew, stone nymphs, and a shaggy, moss-grown Pan, whose hand that once held the pipes had broken off. Suburbia lay outside, yet, by walking wisely, it was possible to move among these delights for half an hour, great trees ever rustling overhead, and a clear small stream winding peacefully in and out with gentle lapping murmurs. Nature here lay undisturbed as it had lain for centuries.

The little ancient house, moreover, seemed to have grown up with the green things out of the soil, so naturally, it all belonged together. The garden ran indoors, it seemed, through open doors and windows. Butterflies floated from courtyard into drawing-room and out again, leaves blew through dining-room windows, scurrying to another little bit of lawn; the sun and wind, even the fountains' spray, found the walls no obstacle as though unaware of them. Bees murmured, swallows hung below the eaves. It was, indeed, a healing spot, a natural retreat....

"I really believe the river rises in your library," exclaimed Fillery, after a tour of inspection with his host, "and my bedroom is in the heart of that big chestnut across the lawn. Do my feet touch carpet, grass, or bark when I get out of bed in the morning?"

"I've learnt more here," began Father Collins, "than at all the conferences and learned meetings I ever attended...."

The group of four stood in the twilight by the playing fountain where the dignified stone Pan watched the paved little court, listening to the splash of the water and the wind droning among the leaves. The lap of the winding stream came faintly to them. The stillness cast a spell about them, dropping a screen against the outer world.

"Hark!" said Father Collins, holding a curved hand to his ear. "You hear the music...?"

"'Why, in the leafy greenwood lone

Sit you, rustic Pan, and drone

On a dulcet resonant reed?'"

He paused, peering across to the stone figure as for an answer. All stood listening, waiting, only wind and water breaking the silence. The bats were now flitting; overhead hung the saffron arch of fading sunset. In a deep ringing voice, very gruff and very low, Father Collins gave the answer:

"'So that yonder cows may feed

Up the dewy mountain passes,

Gathering the feathered grasses.'

"That's Pan's work," he said, laughing pleasantly, "Pan and all his splendid hierarchy. Always at work, though invisibly, with music, colour, beauty!..."

It was scraps like this that stood out in Fillery's memory, adding to his conviction that Paul had enlisted even this strange priest in his deep-laid plan....

"Each man is saturated with certain ideas, thoughts, phrases in a line of his own. These constitute his groove. To go outside it makes him feel homeless and uncomfortable. Accustomed to its measurements and safe within them, he interprets all he hears, reads, observes, according to his particular familiar shibboleths, to which, as to a standard of infallible criticism, he brings slavishly all that is offered for the consideration of his judgment. A new Idea stands little chance of being comprehended, much less adopted. Tell him new things about the stars, the Stock Exchange, the Stigmata — up crops his Standard of approval or disapproval. He cannot help himself. His judgment, based upon the limited content of his groove, operates automatically. He condemns. An entirely new idea is barely glanced at before it is rejected for the rubbish heap. How, then, can progress come swiftly to a Race composed of such individuals? Mass-judgment, herd-opinion governs everything. He who has original ideas is outcast, and dwells lonely as the moon. How slow, ye Gods! How slow!" ...

Only Fillery could not remember, could not be certain, whether it was his host or himself that used the words. Father Collins, as usual, was saying "all sorts of things," but addressed himself surely, to old Khilkoff most of the time, the Russian, half angry, half amused, growling out his comments and replies as he sat smoking heavily and enjoying the peaceful night scene in his own fashion....

It was odd, none the less, how much that the wild priest gabbled coincided with his own, with Fillery's, thoughts at the moment. A peculiar melancholy, a mood of shyness never known before, lay still upon him. The beauty of the silent girl beside him overpowered him a little; too wonderful to hold, to own, she seemed. Yet they were deliciously, uncannily akin. All his former self-created denials and suppressions, hesitations and refusals had vanished. "N. H." — He wondered? — had provided him with the fullest expression he had ever known. A boundless relief poured over him. He was aware of wholesome desire rising behind his old high admiration and respect....

He watched her once standing close to Pan’s broken outline among the shadows, touching the mossy arm with white fingers, and he imagined for an instant that she held the vanished pipes.

“After an experience with Other Beings,” Father Collins’s endless drone floated to him, “shyness, they say, is felt. Silence descends upon the whole nature” ... to which, a little later, came the growling comment with its foreign accent: “Talk may be pleasurable — sometimes — but it is profitable rarely....”

The talk flowed past and over him, occasional phrases, like islands rising out of a stream, inviting his attention momentarily to land and listen.... The girl, he now saw, no longer stood beside the broken stone figure. She was wandering idly towards the farther garden and the trees.

He burned to rise and go to her, but something held him. What was it? What could it be? Some strange hard little obstacle prevented. Then, suddenly, he knew what it was that stopped him: he was waiting for that familiar pet sentence. Once he heard that, the impetus to move, the power to overcome his strange shyness, the certainty that his whole being was at last one with itself again, would come to him. It made him laugh inwardly while he recognized the validity of the detail — final symptoms of the obstructing inhibitions, of the obstinate original complex.

The outline of the girl was lost now, merged in the shadows beyond. He stirred, but could not get up to go. A fury of impatience burned in him. Father Collins, he felt, dawdled outrageously. He was talking — jawing, Fillery called it — about extraordinary experiences. “Gradually, as consciousness more and more often extends, the organs to record such extensions will be formed, you see.... If our inventive faculties were turned inwards, instead of outwards for gain and comfort as they now are, we might know the gods....”

The sculptor’s growl, though the words were this time inaudible, had a bite in them. The other voice poured on like thick, slow oil:

“What, anyhow, is it, then, that urges us on in spite of all obstacles, denials, failures...?”

Then came something that seemed leading up to the pet sentence that was the signal he waited for — nearer to it, at any rate:

“... It’s childish, surely, to go on merely seeking more of what we have already. We should seek something new....”

A call, it seemed, came to him on the wind from the dark trees. But still he could not move.

But, at last, out of a prolonged jumble of the two voices, one growling, the other high pitched, came the signal he somehow waited for. Even now, however, the speaker delayed it as long as possible. He was doing it, of course, on purpose. This was intentional, obviously.

“... Yes, but a thing out of its right place is without power, life, means of expression — robbed of its context which alone gives it meaning — robbed, so to speak, of its arms and legs — *without a body*....”

There, at least, was the definite proof that Father Collins was doing this of deliberate, set purpose!

“Go on! Yes, but, for God’s sake, say it! I want to be off!” Fillery believed he shrieked the words, but apparently they were inaudible. They remained unnoticed, at any rate.

“... Hence the value of order, tidiness, you see. Often a misplaced thing is invisible until replaced where it belongs. It is, as we say, lost. No movement is meaningless, no walk without purpose. All your movements tend towards your proper place....”

A breeze blew the fountain spray aside so that its splashing ceased for a brief second. From the rustling leaves beyond came a faint murmur as of distant piping. But — into the second’s pause had leaped the pet sentence:

“Only a being in his *own* place is the ruler of his fate.”

The signal! He was aware that the Russian cleared his throat and spat unmusically, aware also that Father Collins, a queer smile just discernible on his face in the gloom, turned his head with a gesture that might well have been an understanding nod. Both sound and gesture, however, were already behind him. He was released. He was across the paved courtyard, past the fountain, past the stone figure of the silent old rough god — and off!

And as he went, finding his way instinctively among the dark trees, that pet sentence went with him like a clarion call, as though sweet piping music played it everywhere about him. A thousand memories shut down with a final snap. In the stage of his mind came a black-out upon a host of inhibitions. There was an immense and glorious sense of relief as though bitter knots were suddenly disentangled, and some iron kernel of resistance that had weighted him for years flowed freely at last in a stream of happy molten gold....

He found her easily. Where the trees thinned at the farther edge he saw her figure, long before he came up with her, outlined against the fading saffron. He saw her turn. He saw her arms outstretched. He came up with her the same minute, and they stood in silence for a long time, watching the darkness bend and sink upon the landscape.

For, here, at this one edge of the tiny estate, the real open country showed. Beyond them, in the twilight, lay the silent fields like a gigantic brown and yellow carpet whose shaken folds still seemed to tremble and run on beneath the growing moon. Along a farther ridge the trees and hedges passed in a ragged procession of strange figures, defined sharply against the sky — witches, queens and goblins on the prowl, the ancient fairyland of the English countryside.

They still stood silent, side by side, touching almost, their heat and perfume and atmosphere intermingling, looking out across the quiet scene. He was aware that her mind stole into his most sweetly, and that without knowing it his hand had found her own, and that, presently, she leaned a little against him. Their eyes, their mental sight as well, saw the same things, he knew. The first stars peeped out, and they looked up at them as one being looks, together.

“The wonder that you saw — in him,” he heard himself saying. It was a statement, not a question.

“Was yourself, of course,” her voice, like his own, in the rustle of the leaves, came softly. It continued his own thought rather than replied to it. “The part you’ve held down and hidden away all these years.”

Her divination came to him with staggering effect. “You always knew then?”

“Always. The first day we met you took me into the firm.”

He was aware that everything about him pulsed and throbbed with life, intelligence in every stick and stone. Angelic beings marched on their wondrous business through the sky. A mighty host pursued their endless service with a network of huge and tiny rhythms. The spirals of creative fire soared and danced....

The moon emerged, sailing, sailing, as though no wind could stop her lovely flight. She fled the stars themselves. The clouds turned round to look at her, as, clearing their hair, she passed onwards with her radiant smile. Heading into the bare bosom of the sky, she blazed in her triumph of loneliness, her icy prow set towards some far, unknown, unearthly goal, which is the reason why men love her so.

“And my theories — our theories?” he murmured into the ear against his lips. “The way that has been shown to us?”

Both arms were now about her, and he held her so close that her words were but a warm perfumed breath to cover his face as her hair was covering his eyes.

“We shall follow it together ... dear.”

It was as if some angel, stepping down the sky, came near enough to fold them in a great rhythm of fire and wind. Bright, mighty faces in a crowd rose round them, and, through her hair, he saw familiar visible outlines of all the common things melt out, showing for one gorgeous instant the flashings and whirlings that was the workshop of Their deathless service.

“Look! Look!” he whispered, pointing from the darkening earth to the stars and sailing moon above. “They’re everywhere! You can see them too? The bright messengers?”

For answer, she came yet closer against his side, holding him more tightly to her, lifting her lips to his, so that in her very eyes he saw the marvellous fire shine and flash. “We shall build together, you and I,” she whispered very softly, “and with Their help, the sweetest and most perfect body ever known....”

But behind the magic of her words and voice, behind their meaning and the steadying, understanding sympathy he easily divined, he heard another sound, familiar as a dream, yet fraught with some haunting significance he already was forgetting — almost *had* entirely forgotten. From the centre of the earth it seemed to rise, a magnificent, deep, stupendous rhythm that created, at least, the impression of a voice:

“I weave and I weave...!” rolled forth, as though the planet uttered. He stood waiting, transfixed, listening intently.

“You heard?” he whispered.

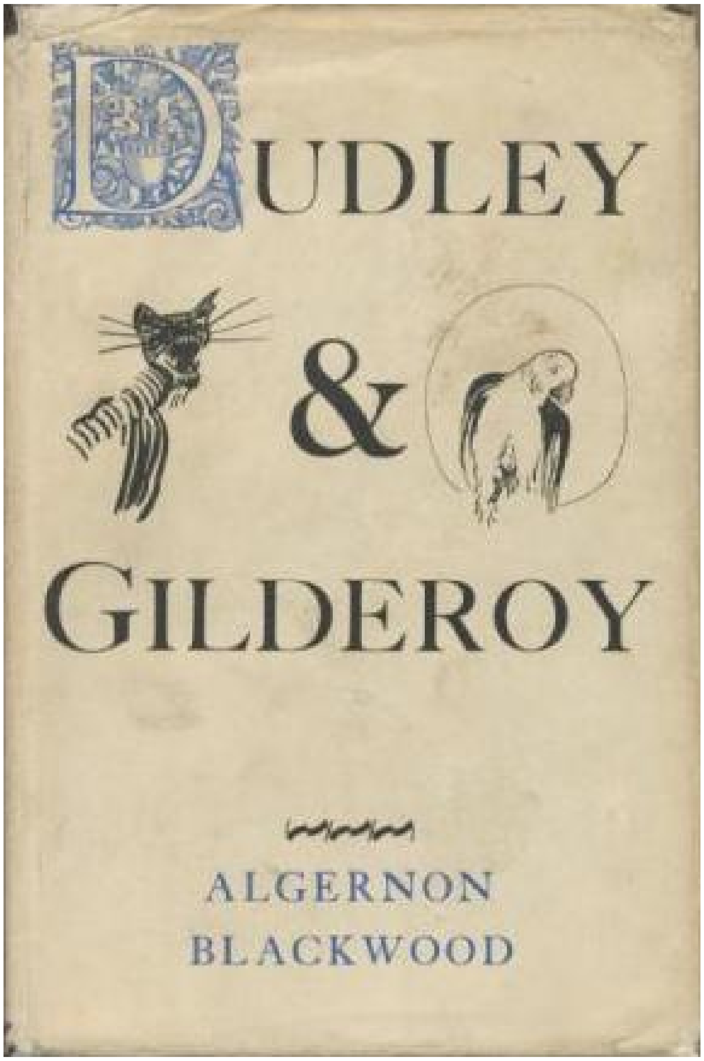
“Everything,” she said, tight in his arms at once again, her lips on his. “The very beating of your heart — your inmost thoughts as well.”

THE END

Dudley & Gilderoy (1929)

A NONSENSE

Conceived as a children's story about the adventures of a parrot and a cat, this story is also a satirical critique of American society in the 1920's.


DUDLEY
&
GILDEROY
ALGERNON
BLACKWOOD

The first edition

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX
CHAPTER XX
CHAPTER XXI
CHAPTER XXII
CHAPTER XXIII
CHAPTER XXIV

To
Mrs. Muir Mackenzie
owner of
DUDLEY
&
Louis N. Parker

Poor birds! What they must suffer from imprisonment in narrow cages in which they cannot even flap their wings, and where they are compelled to sit on a hard smooth perch, far too thick to enable them to grasp it with their toes! No wonder so many of them become irascible and gloomy!

W. T. GREENE.

There was, if we may trust the Arabic chronicles as set down by that devout scholar, Damirei, no cat in the Garden of Paradise. — AGNES REPPLIER.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE CAT LANGUAGE

(Alphonse Leon Grimaldi)... an attempt to prove that the cat is a more delicate organism and of a higher order of intelligence than any other four-footed beast... also possesses a language much like the Chinese and possibly derived from it. In the word part of the language there are, probably, not more than 600 fundamental words, all others being derivatives.

G. S. GATES, Ph.D. The Modern Cat.

CHAPTER I

THE PERSON WHO imagines that a parrot is a parrot and nothing more will soon find that he or she has made a very great mistake. — W. T. GREENE, M.A., M.D., F.Z.S.

The Grey Parrot.

A SUDDEN unexpected sweetness stole over the world that morning in early March. It was as though a day, weary of waiting for its fun and glory, had hopped backwards out of its proper place in May. There was an unwonted softness in the air, a radiance of daffodils, a sound of singing. And with this sweetness about dawn came an invitation to adventure. The blood, even in sleep, ran faster.

The country house in Kent, dreaming among its well-kept gardens, was aware of it, although it gave no demonstrable proof. Too sedate and well-bred to wear its heart upon its sleeve, it yet knew a faint tremor through its ancient timbers. The Manor House, of course, was never taken by surprise; but the garden, romping through every wind-torn spring despite Head Gardeners, registered the thrill. The thrushes noticed it, slipping a wilder whistle through their song, and recent arrivals from Africa followed their example. That “wet, bird-haunted English lawn” missed nothing of importance that came at sunrise, before the noisy humans were abroad to smudge the sensitive beauty. And thus it was that even the back-lawn knew. A flock of those brave things that “come before the swallow dares and take the winds of March with beauty,” these also were aware of the sudden sweetness in the air. That their golden heads turned towards the Manor House is certain. Four keen, wide-open eyes, at any rate, observed them.

Something, apparently, was astir at the unearthly hour of 5.30 a. m., though it was not the human occupants of the Elizabethan building, and assuredly not the servants. Colonel Sir Arthur and his Lady still slept audibly; Molly, their thirteen year old daughter, at the other end of the house, made no move; the younger children, lying in crumpled heaps, equally held steady;

the French Governess showed no symptom of *élan;* and the staff, as already mentioned, gave no sign. Yet in the room containing the four keen eyes the message of adventure was recognized and accepted, accepted moreover audibly. Through the window, opened two inches at the top, a strange while not unmusical voice greeted the magic with a couple of words that were distinctly uttered:

“Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” floated down across the quiet lawns and flower-beds, though no letter to the press had yet announced the arrival of the migrant. “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” the odd voice repeated like an echo. It was not quite the authentic note of the romantic robber-bird, nor was it quite the call of a mechanical clock. It was an individual sound.

The Day Nursery, whence it proceeded, lying away from the rest of the house in the eastern wing, held at this early hour two occupants, neither of whom slept; one, a biped, denizen of the air; the other, a quadruped, denizen of the world. The speaker was a West African Grey Parrot, a King Grey Parrot, to give him his full title, with red feathers among the grey, and his name was Dudley; the other was a common red-haired cat with a flat-topped skull, and his name was Gilderoy. Dudley belonged to Molly, Gilderoy to himself, and the Day Nursery was their home, the parrot having occupied it for years, the cat for months. It was, at any rate, their headquarters, and a headquarters, sufficiently prolonged, becomes eventually a home. The two animals were very great friends. In appearance, Dudley was dignified, solemn, austere, aristocratic, his sleek feathers glistened, he was extremely *soigné.* Gilderoy was — otherwise.

It was to Dudley and Gilderoy that the invitation to adventure came at the hour of 5.30 a in on this sunshiny March morning, and when it came Dudley, as usual, was sedately balanced in the middle of his perch in his big handsome cage, while Gilderoy was just rousing himself from an untidy red ball on the carpet immediately below the table. His head was cocked, his tom ears pointed, his eyes, including the patched one that gave him an appearance of squinting, were wide open. His attitude to his feathered friend was significant — he looked up. While not obsequious, since a cat may assuredly look at a King Parrot, his gaze was respectful and interested. The parrot, on the other hand, though aware he was being stared at, did not return the stare. He looked nowhere in particular. He gazed into space, his face expressionless. His mind, however, was not idle. He was listening.

Each animal, that is, used his predominant faculty, Dudley his acute, amazing ears, Gilderoy his all-seeing, uncanny eyes. What, between them, was neither heard nor seen was usually negligible.

Now Dudley, it must be admitted, was certainly worth looking at. Having lived so many years in the family, he was part of the household, where he was well-fed, well-cared for and well-loved, especially by his owner, Molly. He knew by heart what Molly thought about him, accepting in his modest way all the great qualities she audibly attributed to him. He especially noted the nice, wonderful things she said, about his mind, his soul, his work, for instance. He also knew, since the child studied the book audibly year by year, exactly what Professor Greene thought about him as related in *The Grey Parrot, How to Manage It.* If occasionally he disagreed, audibly, with Professor Greene, he was never at logger-heads with Molly. Greene he sometimes could have nipped, Molly he only kissed. For Molly recognized his greatness. Aware of his sublimity, sure that he was unfathomably wise, “a noble fellow,” she was never tired of telling him so.

It was quite natural, therefore, that Dudley knew he was worth looking at this early March morning, as Gilderoy, stretching his skinny legs, peeped up at him. Likewise, he knew that his quadruped friend considered him worth looking at.

If he did not move, it was because he already stood in the mathematical centre of his perch, and at the furthest spot from the wide-spaced bars. Remaining motionless as marble, this being the least succulent stone he could think of, he watched Gilderoy steadily with one bright, glassy eye.

Gilderoy, meanwhile, innocent of all wickedness, proceeded to wash. He was evidently in an affectionate and friendly mood. He was peaceably inclined. For, while he washed, he fell to purring softly, and Dudley, noticing the sound though giving no sign that he did so, presently waddled awkwardly along his perch in his best sideways shuffle and began to peck delicately at his seedbox. He looked, using Molly’s words, marvellous, lovely, adorable, and his grace of movement was, he knew quite well, incomparable.

The two pets, thus, betrayed certain of their characteristics, respectively, at the very opening of the coming adventure, and before anything unusual happened at all. Dudley was wise, cautious, critical, philosophical, and as inordinately vain as a great soul has the right to be; Gilderoy, opportunist and *arriviste,* took what came in life, making use of a world he cared nothing about. Aloof, independent, impervious to suggestion, his feeling towards humanity, where Dudley's attitude was one of kindly pity, held a slight disdain. If the parrot was sagacious, tolerant, immensely experienced, his friend, to put it bluntly, was an unprincipled adventurer. Dudley gave it to be understood plainly that what he did not know was not worth knowing; Gilderoy, whose life and nature were one huge secret, gave to be understood — nothing.

Their friendship was at once a puzzle and delight, both to themselves and others. The parrot had not always appreciated the cat, whose first arrival in the family, indeed, he had deliberately ignored. Somehow the beast did not look what Dudley called "qui' ri'." Gilderoy's appearance certainly left much to be desired. Lean to scragginess, his red coat was shabby. A patch of colour over one side of his flat face gave the impression that one eye looked elsewhere. The flat face, too, could bulge grotesquely when he was excited. Both ears were torn into serrated edges. His whiskers sprayed ungracefully. He was, the Nursery decided, as "common as they make 'em," a phrase Dudley easily mastered, and he wore invariably an unpleasantly hungry look. It was some time, therefore, before the sagacious King Parrot included him in his small circle of trusted friends, a circle the Vicar, for instance, had never entered. And even now, as already seen, his love was tempered by a slight occasional anxiety, due to the fact that he, Dudley, must seem uncommonly appetizing at moments. He took his precautions at these moments. Apart, however, from this touch of insecurity, he adored his friend, though, as will appear later, he could not always approve of him.

Gilderoy, on his part, felt for the King Parrot, a sincere friendship that included a touch of respect as well. Though not, it seems, accepting the bird's own valuation of himself, he admitted to some indecipherable superiority in him, such perhaps as a quadruped might feel towards a creature that can use the air. He certainly looked up to him. Towards his grim iron mandibles he showed a hint of reverence; they frightened him. Dudley, however, he had soon decided, was old and tough, how old neither he nor anyone else ever knew, how tough he did not ever mean to know. The cat must be acquitted of mere appetite. All great friendships possess deep reserves, and with both cat and parrot these reserves included the delicate point of age. The past was also thus excluded, Gilderoy rarely referring to his earlier life, Dudley being equally reticent about his own. Each respected, as it were, his friend's wild oats.

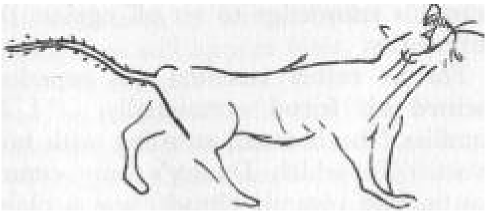
One important matter, however, while personal in a very intimate sense, was not included in this reserve — the matter of sex. It affected, chiefly, the parrot: Was Dudley a male or female "King" Parrot? Gilderoy, the family as well, remained inquisitive but uninformed, and if Dudley himself knew he declined to disclose his secret. It was often suggested — by the cat, for instance — that he did not know himself. The mystery, at any rate, was left unsolved till the appointed hour; and Gilderoy, in no faintest doubt about his own sex, used his knowledge to set off against the other's superiority.

For he rather resented this superiority. He twitted his friend occasionally. "I have had families," he boasted, strutting with tail proudly erect. To which Dudley's only comment, too cautious to commit himself, was a plain "Ah!"

followed by certain sea-faring nouns and adjectives which may be indicated by " — !"

For, in addition to a very large vocabulary and assortment of voices, he possessed the inestimable gift that he could utter "language" so beautifully that it sounded what her ladyship's maid called "reely naice." His "Ah! — !" given invariably in the Vicar's voice, was thus a peculiarly effective comment, as comments go.

On this particular morning, his ears noting the sparkling message of adventure, he had used Molly's silvery tones. His "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" was, in fact, a signal to his friend on the carpet that something unusual was in the air, and that it was time to be up and doing.



Gilderoy’s reply was to stop his washing. He leaped soundlessly upon the table and gazed fixedly at the parrot’s smooth and glistening back as the bird pecked delicately at the tiny seeds with his great dark beak.

The green eyes held no particular expression, unless perhaps a glint of admiration; he sat quietly staring at the sleek grey back. The bird indifferently continued his early snack, for in any case he always knew what went on behind him.

This pleasant scene remained undisturbed for some minutes. The least acute observer must have realized the subtle understanding sympathy that existed between the two creatures; the intimacy and affection were obvious. Apart from the slight hint of insecurity already referred to — the caution of the parrot, the suggestion of hooliganism in the cat — the friendship was established upon bedrock. “Deathless friends,” Molly had described them, and Dudley accepted the phrase in his big way, as for years he had accepted all the complimentary things Molly said about him. For years he had absorbed like blotting paper her flood of generous praise. His great little heart swelled to bursting with the fine qualities and powers she attributed to him — in his hearing. He learned them by heart, indeed. It cost him as little effort to remember “deathless friendship,” as that his occasional long silences were due to absorption in the profoundest problems of philosophy and life because he was “at Work.”

It was after some five minutes’ of breakfast that he presently broke in with a further remark, but this time not an audible remark. Both creatures were adept in the art of creating an impression, of conveying meaning by silence, attitude and gesture. Impressions thus produced are an eloquent form of communication; and if Gilderoy could not always catch the precise sense of the spoken word, he never failed to interpret the attitude, as it were, that framed them.

Thus Dudley, using the form of intercourse his friend could not possibly misunderstand, offered his remark, without even turning round. His eyes glanced sideways.

“I am tired of this dowdy room,” he announced.

Though he undoubtedly understood, the cat made no immediate rejoinder. Unlike humans, who cannot support a moment’s silence in conversation and would rather all talk simultaneously than endure a pause, these animals appreciated intervals and practised them. Long pauses would separate question and answer; a statement might wait half an hour before the comment it elicited. And several minutes now passed in unbroken silence, yet without a sign of such embarrassment as humans know. Dudley’s attitude was: “What I have said I have said.” The cat, still sitting close to the cage, fell to washing himself again. He purred. A hind leg pointed like a ramrod at the ceiling. Then, presently, he interrupted his washing and looked up with a sudden jerk. The patched eye appeared to be gazing through the window, but actually was fixed on his friend’s back. His wireless whiskers twitched:

“Let’s go,” he replied. He kept one paw hanging emphatically in the air.

Like many important events in life, the adventures of Dudley and Gilderoy had this simple and spontaneous origin. There was no fuss, no elaborate preparation. Sniffing the air, the cat began to knead the table-cloth with all four feet. The bird waddled slowly back to the centre of his perch and thence laboriously stepped down to the floor of the cage. His beak, with its free-moving upper mandible, clutched the bars. The stillness of the house was now broken by distant sounds of thumping on the floor upstairs. A door banged heavily. The servants, perhaps, were getting up. It was time to act. Gilderoy opened the latch of the cage skilfully with one velvet paw. The door stood wide. They waited, staring at it. Dudley cocked an eye.

Gilderoy jumped down upon the carpet.

The parrot’s moment of hesitation passed. He stalked clumsily sideways through the open door, and a few seconds later, using beak and claws, he descended the table leg and reached the carpet beside his friend. The creatures stood gazing at one another in silence. It was an important, even a dramatic, moment. Who was to lead the way? Whoever went first would, of course, be first to meet the dangers.

“You look best from behind,” observed Gilderoy admiringly. “Your back view, I consider, is lovely.”

Dudley preened himself.

Moving forward very slowly, he turned towards the Nursery door, leading the way with complete self-confidence.

CHAPTER II

THE GREY PARROT in captivity is a veritable proteus... a very sensitive creature... with surprising sharpness of intellect.... It is intensely sociable in disposition, and will mope if left much to its own society. — W. T. GREENE.

THE servants, who had thumped the floor and banged a door, having evidently thought better of it and gone back to bed, the biped and quadruped left the Day Nursery and walked along the passage to the top of the staircase without the smallest difficulty or interruption. Where they meant to go was not yet clear. The first move, at any rate, was to get out of the house.

Side by side, they descended the broad stairs, crossed the great empty hall, still dark and smelling unpleasantly of stale tobacco, and went quietly along the corridor that led towards the pantry and the servants' quarters.

Here they paused a moment, looking quietly into each other's eyes. Their next step was important. The pace of a party is the pace of its slowest member, and Dudley being a slow mover, they had taken ten minutes to reach this point. Though Gilderoy could have covered the ground in a few seconds, he had regulated his speed tactfully, keeping behind his waddling friend. Time was passing. Another thump and bang in the distance warned them that a servant had now decided, after all, to get up. There was a sound of sulky footsteps on the kitchen stairs. The moment for decisive action had arrived. For some time, therefore, the pair stood motionless, staring into each other's eyes.

"Let's get along," signified Gilderoy at length, yet making no move himself. He turned his eyes in the direction of a narrow skylight overhead.

Dudley, of course, had noticed it long ago. He also noticed the admiration still in the cat's expression. He would continue to lead. Using a chair, a hanging cord, a convenient shelf with precious china on it, and an iron bar, he fluttered up awkwardly, scrambled through the skylight, crossed some slates, descended an ivy-clad wall, and proceeded to march proudly, if clumsily, down the gravel drive in the direction of the lodge gates. The warm early sunshine pleased him. It was good to be out. He moved at his very best pace.

“You waddle,” remarked Gilderoy, his tail in the air like a ramrod. He made himself very big and protective. “I’m behind you, remember.”

“My wings,” replied Dudley some twenty yards later, “are clipped and I possess two feet!” He stalked on. “I only need — two,” he added presently. There was a touch of grandeur in his attitude. After another twenty yards he disposed of this idea of protection too. “I see out of the back of my head,” he reminded the cat. But he did not say it sharply. *Noblesse,* he remembered, always obliged. To put the other in his place, and pay himself a neat compliment at the same time, was quite sufficient. “And it’s a nice warm morning,” he concluded, saying the words aloud in his soft gabbling little voice.

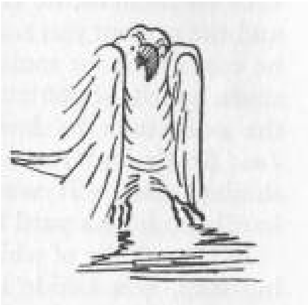
He used, that is, the method these two friends adopted to avoid unpleasantness. At the first sign of a disturbance it was their habit to change the subject. A squabble between them was thus invariably nipped in the bud. They never quarrelled. The cat, his eye on a thrush a hundred yards ahead, agreed about the nice, warm morning, and stalked along stiffly with a restraint that was evidently a self-imposed effort. He would have liked to dart and rush. The next moment, indeed, he did so. Springing furiously at a pine tree, he suddenly flew ten feet up the trunk, claws spread, tail whirling, teeth bared, and looking fiercely over his back with flattened ears as though the dogs were at his heels. For two minutes he clung to the tree in this spread-eagled fashion, then dropped to the ground again as though nothing had happened, and continued his stiff, slow walk beside his friend. Neither thrush nor parrot had shown a sign of being disturbed by this impressive performance. Gilderoy’s active body needed the relief of a romp, no more than that.

“Ah!” said Dudley, when his friend caught him up again. He had used the interval to advance.

“We shall get there some time, even at this pace,” said Gilderoy.

“Where?” enquired his companion.

"Where we're going to," came the rather tart reply. And, having now reached the lodge gates, they again paused and gazed into each other's eyes. The white country lane stretched in both directions as usual. At this early hour it was still deserted. Dudley, standing at right angles to it, examined it, owing to the position of his eyes, in both directions simultaneously. His companion, wholly indifferent, fell to washing an inaccessible region of his back. The windows of the Lodge were shut tight. No one was astir. And the bird shrank back a trifle towards the covering protection of the hedge where the wild roses shone. There came over him the fact that he had escaped from his safe, comfortable home.



He realized it, realized that he was no longer in captivity. There were no bars about him, no little dish of seed or tin or water, the swinging bit of soft wood his beak plucked to pieces and played with was missing, so was the clean coarse gritty sand his health demanded. There was no perch along which he could retire. He took another step backwards towards the comfort of the hedge. Gilderoy, for the moment, had unaccountably disappeared. The ancient bird felt suddenly lonely. A sense of insecurity stole over him.

Gilderoy, of course, would come back in a moment, he knew; he was merely scampering after a bird or mouse, but in the meantime the sense of insecurity was undeniable. Yet this, apparently, was all he felt. He experienced no regret, no compunction, his unceremonious exit from home caused him no pang. His world, the cat's world too, did not include regret; escape was natural to it. He thought of Molly a moment — he could go back to her when he wished; he thought of others, of Colonel Sir Arthur, for instance, of the Governess — he need never see *them* again. The one called him a "damned squawker," the other was always saying "*Tais-toi*, *Tais-toi, done!*" Beyond these cursory reflections, however, his mind did not trouble with the past. Like all animals, he concentrated on the present, and the present just now not being all it might be, he cast about for something to alleviate a certain strain he felt. Spontaneously, he chose a whistle — the only tune he knew. The opening bars of *Lead Kindly Light* ran down the hedge and past the shining roses. It was a very low soft whistle, hardly audible a yard beyond his beak.

In the middle of which Gilderoy, with a scattering leap, was beside him again, appearing from nowhere, and licking his chops as though he had never been away.

“Come on, you!” said the ginger cat impatiently. The bird noticed at once that his bolshevik face wore a slightly different expression. The cheeks bulged a trifle more. There was something inside him that was not there when he disappeared a moment before.

“Ready,” returned the parrot, relieved to have him back, while thinking at the same time what a dreadful thing he was to look at. He began to move slowly away from the hedge behind him, but the rough ground was not easy for his little feet and the claws kept catching. His advance was circular rather, remembering that Gilderoy watched him.

“Where to?” he enquired casually, his head wrenched sideways at an extraordinary angle.

“London for *me,”* replied Gilderoy with decision.

His friend took the Vicar’s voice. “Quaite,” he agreed, and marched on ahead in the thick white dust of the deserted lane. He was Leader still. He moved at a proud pace that rather endangered his balance, but could not affect his courage.

Gilderoy watched him. “D’you know where you’re going?” he flashed with his whiskers, not stirring an inch himself.

“Er — not exactly,” the bird replied, indifferently. He did not stop. “London anyhow,” he added.

“Wrong direction, then,” Gilderoy informed him bluntly, as he stood there sniffing the air with little twitching jerks.

Dudley turned in a slow circle till he faced the other way. “For where?” he asked again gently.

“Train,” said the cat, watching him with steady eyes. “You walk like nothing on earth,” he commented, as his friend, turning another halfcircle, drew alongside with his odd waddling gait.

“Yes, train,” agreed the bird. He made a gesture that signified he was of the air and walking was a concession merely. And the pair stood motionless in the sunshine, as though nothing in the world mattered but being exactly where they were, and as though no adventure had begun at all.

Each creature, none the less, was active mentally. Their minds were extremely busy. Since they stopped all outward signs of communication, however, each kept his reflections to himself. It was a moment of privacy.

“It’s going to be difficult, rather,” the red cat was thinking, “this trip of ours. He’s such a slow mover. He’s fussy too, and his shape is a bit conspicuous.” He purred gently, aware that his own appearance was perfection. His heart warmed towards his pal at the same time. “And his sex,” thought ran on, “I’d like to know that!” A protective sense, never experienced towards humans, stirred strongly in him. He put all his very best into his friendship with the parrot. His patched eye glanced towards him admiringly. “Has useful ears, anyhow,” he concluded. “Male or female isn’t so important perhaps — in a bird.” He gave a tiny sneeze.

Dudley, too, for his part was thinking deeply, and his thoughts were concerned, chiefly, with the appearance of this common cat, his companion in adventure. Whilst himself an aristocrat in every meaning of the word, he was not a snob, thank goodness. There was something in cats that he really respected and admired, something mysterious and queer and strange, but this particular cat.... He searched for terms that should be accurate yet fair, and did not find them. Something let out of a bag hardly met the case. Comparing Gilderoy’s shabby looks with his own immaculate appearance, he deplored both his manners and his coat. At the same time he admired what he honestly could — speed, silence, sight. “Hideous,” he concluded, “perhaps sometimes dangerous, but I love him.”

Each, having thus finished his own private reflections, respectively, turned round and began to communicate openly with the other.

There was an immense satisfaction, evidently, that they had left the Day Nursery, for both had grievances, it seemed. Dudley was sick to death of being called “Pretty Polly” in an affected voice, of being assured a hundred times a day by all sorts of people that he wanted a cracker, a thing he never did want. Gilderoy, for his part, was weary of being lifted up in sections with all his feet hanging in empty space. And both were tired of hearing the children talk about an owl and a pussycat who went to sea in a pea-green boat. Tired to death they were of this nonsense. It was time, they felt, that mention was made of a parrot and a cat. For parrots and cats were notoriously enemies, whereas this pair was friendly. But no one spoke of it. And to be taken for granted like this month after month was more than they could have put up with a moment longer.

The pair of rascals, thus, had a satisfaction in escaping, and they now communicated this happy mood to one another. They did so, looking about them over the sunny green fields starred with buttercups and daisies.

Now, communication between them, be it explained once for all, was so rapid, comprehensive, adequate, that it easily surpassed the capacity of ordinary language. Human beings, having gradually invented a series of not always musical sounds to convey what they know possess none, of course, to convey what they do *not* know. For the experiences of non-humans they have no words. Hence, purring and a parrot’s gurglings, since they refer to another order of experience, remain, for humans, indecipherable. Into these and other gorgeous sounds, however, these creatures project their own wisdom, their inanities, their thoughts and feelings, with consummate ease. They understand one another. Gesture and attitude, the shaking of a feather, the twitching of tail or whiskers, the cock of head or angle of neck, the flick of an ear, even the movement of agile claws and toes — these largely took the place of clumsy words.

Thus, while Dudley and Gilderoy now gazed into one another’s eyes, apparently uncommunicative, they were actually exchanging ideas of this high, but above all different, order. These ideas, none the less, must here be interpreted in terms humanity understands:

“Let’s get on,” remarked Gilderoy.

Dudley bowed his head in agreement. “Now, what do you know about trains, for instance?” he enquired sweetly.

“Enough,” admitted the cat, “to take one.”

“Which?” practical Dudley wanted to know.

“The first we see,” was the reply. “They all reach London, I’ve heard, sooner or later.” He glanced down the lane to the left.

The parrot, too, glanced down the lane, but to the right. He was not going to look foolish by taking the wrong direction a second time.

“Then please carry me,” he signified. “The dust bothers my toes rather.”

“Hop on!” agreed the other, lowering his scrawny back to an easy position. “And don’t scratch or tickle.”

Dudley, without further ado, fluttered on to the red back, raising a cloud of dust as he did so, and the pair then raced down the long hill towards the station. The cat went at a good speed, though out of consideration for his friend’s disabilities, hardly his top speed, and the bird held on and kept his balance without undue loss of dignity. The wind blew out his tail feathers grandly.

“It’s a pity you can’t see me,” proclaimed the tail feathers. “I look well behind, in front, and sideways too!”

Instead of answering, however, Gilderoy increased his speed, till at last the parrot felt obliged to comment audibly on this increase.

He screamed.

The cat at once erected his tail into its best ramrod position, so that it stood upright like a pole, and Dudley wriggled awkwardly backwards till he clasped it with his beak and one claw.

“You’re pricking!” spat Gilderoy, and stopped so abruptly that his passenger lost something of his dignity, though not quite all of his amazing balance.

“And what’s this mean?” he asked, looking down his beak sideways but still clinging to the ramrod tail in case of a start as sudden as the stop.

“I’ve something to say to you,” signalled the cat, not a bit out of breath, “and it is this!”

Dudley cocked his head to listen.

“If any one chases us,” the quadruped went on, “we go in different directions, remember.” He lifted one paw and shook it with extreme rapidity in the air. “One of us,” he added, “may then escape.”

There was no need for a bird of Dudley’s acumen to ponder this, and it vexed him a little when his intelligence was underrated. His contemptuous stare conveyed his feeling plainly:

“You’re as obvious as a dog. Get along now to the train.”

The stare was withering. With less admirable beings a sharp reply must have precipitated a quarrel; but there was no sharp reply. The cat realized, for one thing, perhaps, that his back lay open to that iron beak.

“I see plenty of young birds about,” he mentioned instead, changing the conversation and peeping towards the hedge.

And having thus dropped a suggestive yet delicate hint near home and at the same time averted an unpleasantness that threatened, he raced away again at such a speed that five minutes later they reached the little station where a train, they saw, was standing at the platform. It was, obviously, rather an early train.

CHAPTER III

GREY PARROTS WHICH are able to retain a varied collection of words and sentences are the most valuable, for, notwithstanding their attainments, they will constantly acquire other accomplishments. — W. T. GREENE.

IT was, as Dudley had observed, a lovely morning. Threads of gossamer glistened in the air. There was a smell of growing grass and flowers. Swallows darted, butterflies stood on their heads as they tumbled downwards, worms oozed and gurgled in the dew-soaked earth of the surrounding fields with sheer joy of living. There was a sparkle. There was a hush of coming glory.

The two ragamuffins halted by the coal-yard, the station facing them a dozen yards away. They felt in no hurry. Life lay before them, wide open, unrestricted. The rapture of Liberty filled their little hearts. Dudley stood on one foot, the other claw clasping his formidable beak. Gilderoy his back to the building, sniffed the blades of grass with extreme delicacy. Neither betrayed any interest in the matter immediately on hand, though both realized, of course, that very shortly they would have to deal with human beings. This apparent indifference was partly clever mental camouflage, native to their world, and partly funk.

Dudley, at any rate, spent the considerable interval that now intervened in what may be described as pulling himself together. His kindly attitude towards human beings has already been touched upon, but this tolerance included another aspect that may here be mentioned: the complacent superiority of the human race could sometimes exasperate him. When men came up against qualities in the animal world that excelled their own, they dismissed it as “instinct” and wrote books about it. Merely because they did things that animals could not do, they considered themselves superior. What they forgot, in Dudley’s view, was that in another way, animals easily surpassed them — for instance in *not* doing what they did. Thus animals were never deliberate scoundrels, liars, culpable idiots, immoral or obscene. They were also comely in nakedness and unashamed.

Something of this now passed across the parrot’s mind as he held his beak and waited.

“Do you think this train will start to-day?” he enquired presently.

“We’ll get in and see,” came from the cat, whose eyes were following the swallows’ flight above him. He had noticed milk cans on the platforms. He had been in trains before. He flattered himself that he knew his way about on the Big Lines. There was some business about tickets, for instance, he remembered vaguely. Money, too, glittering metal circles he sometimes played with, came into it as well. “There’s the tickets,” he managed, therefore, to inform his friend.

For another ten minutes or so neither of them made a move of any sort, after which the parrot suddenly lowered his claw and drew himself up proudly. Choosing from his immense repertoire of voices the one Colonel Sir Arthur used when moving his family to the seaside, he spoke aloud:

“Leave it to me,” he announced, and stalked forward across the yard with head erect, while Gilderoy followed meekly enough, without a trace of expression on his peeping face. He moved in zigzags. They might have been total strangers. He betrayed no interest in anything about him.

They crossed the yard and approached the ticket office.

The station was empty at the moment, for at this early hour the inhabitants of Muddlepuddle were not eager to go to London. On the platform outside, however, there was a considerable bustle, with a din of milk cans being rolled about. This Country Station Porters’ Game was in full swing, as Gilderoy, still admiring Dudley’s back view, followed his friend slowly through the door into the Waiting Room-cum-Booking Office. Knowing himself safely inconspicuous he now watched his dressy companion waddle across like an old woman with sore feet, climb upon a packing-case that stood handy, and present himself boldly at the open window where tickets were obtained. He really looked a picture, the cat decided, as he balanced on the ledge with his head cocked sideways and one foot tucked up among his tummy feathers. It was a frontal attack the feline felt obliged to admire.

He himself now lay along the wooden bench by the wall, pretending cleverly he was the Station Cat. No one would have noticed him.

“Two First Singles,” announced the parrot, using his old-man’s voice, which was low and rather gruff.

He stood waiting as calmly as though he had done it every morning for years and years. The secret of remaining undiscovered, he knew, was to appear quite ordinary.

The Ticket Man was standing inside, his back to the window. A pencil was stuck behind his ear. He wore spectacles, a dirty green cap, and side whiskers that resembled lichen on old wrinkled granite.

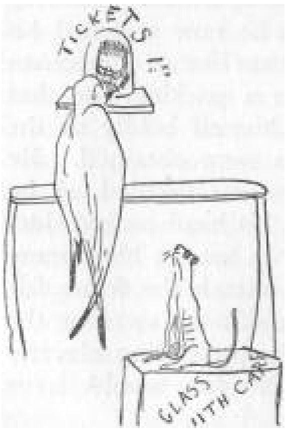
“Where to?” he asked, without interest. He did not even turn round, much less look up.

“Where the train goes,” said Dudley, sharply.

“Tha’s London,” said the man.

“Tha’s good,” said Dudley.

The man drew out the tickets with a mechanical fumbling motion, stamped them, held them a moment very close to his eyes to examine what he had stamped, handed them carelessly across the little counter, and then, while waiting for the money, raised his head for the first time and saw — a large, grey, red-tailed parrot on a level with his face, its beak hanging sideways, and one brilliant eye gazing intently into his.



“Holy smoke!” he cried, opening his eyes and mouth. “What is it?”

He gasped, he paled, he took a step backwards. The pencil dropped from behind his ear, the cap fell off his head, the spectacles slipped down his nose. He stumbled over a chair behind him and collapsed in a heap against the iron stove.

“Thank you,” said Dudley, using Mother’s patient voice the children heard when they asked for one more story. He turned away, leaving the tickets where they were. “Now, cat!” he signalled with a shrill, peremptory gesture. “Hop for it! Quick!”

Gilderoy, though resenting being spoken to like that in public, was ready in a flash, so that the bird dropped straight down on to his back below the window-ledge, and a second later the pair were racing along the platform among the rolling milk-cans, looking for an empty carriage.

“I said Leave it to Me, didn’t I?” proclaimed the bird’s attitude proudly, as they scampered along.

“Use my proper name before people, please,” said Gilderoy stiffly.

“Sorry,” said Dudley promptly in a child’s voice.

The cat accepted the apology with a twitch of the tail as, spying an open door, he scuttled up the steps with a sudden leap that nearly knocked the parrot off his back. It was a First, but also it was a Smoker. “Ugh!” exclaimed the bird, sniffing contemptuously, as he recovered his balance and stepped down. He gave one rapid look round him.

“The rack, I think, for me!” he decided, and instantly scrambled up into the netting, snuggling into the dark corner so that he was very difficult to see. The cat disappeared in a flash under the heavily-cushoined seats, where not even the tip of his tail was visible.

“Cuckoo! Cuckoo! *Nil nisi prius!”* whispered the parrot to himself, too low to be audible, and using language acquired long before he had come to stay at the Manor House. He then relapsed into complete silence.

They were only just in time, as the roar of voices and rush of hurrying feet plainly told them, for the platform was now alive with people all hunting vociferously for a Grey Parrot and a Ginger Cat. Three workmen, a couple of porters, the driver of the milk-waggon, a farmer, an old woman, and the ticket man tore frantically up and down, crying at the top of their voices: “Hi! A grey parrot with a red tail! And a ginger cat! Which way did they go? Where are they? Who’s seen ‘em? Catch ‘em! Catch ‘em!...”

The hunt roared past the door of the carriage like a storm, and such a hullabaloo was never heard before since the Station of Muddlepuddle was first built in 1861.

“On the roof, of course!” shouted the farmer. “That’s where they are!”

“In the Guard’s van,” yelled the driver of the cart.

“Get along with yer!” cried the porter. “They’re ridin’ on the haxles, I tell yer!”

“Rubbidge!” screamed the old woman. “It’s near the engine biler you’ll find them. Why, I’ve kept parrots meself. It’s the ‘ot plaices they likes best.”

“If I catch ‘em,” bawled the ticket man, tearing about without cap or spectacles, “I’ll twist their bloomin’ tails off, not ‘arf I won’t. The lip that bird gave me!”

“No, you wouldn’t, Joe,” laughed the Guard, a big man with a black beard and a voice of thunder. “You’d just take ’em ‘ome and love ‘em. That’s *‘wot you’d* do.”

The pack fell to arguing among themselves as they ran up and down, and though most of them looked into the First Class Smoker where the criminals were hiding, no one discovered them. No one, luckily, produced a dog.

“Time to get my train away now,” suddenly bawled the Guard’s deep bass. “I’m a minute late already. Can’t wait for live stock! Stand away now! Ready!” He banged the door of the empty carriage, put the whistle to his lips, and blew a short, shrill blast. The train pulled slowly out of the station, leaving the yelling group of people still searching among the empty milk cans.

The rumble and murmur of the train was soothing, the rhythm pleasant. Dudley liked the motion with its gentle shaking to and fro. His exquisite little body yielded itself with satisfaction to the swing and bumping of the sleepers. He felt happy. “Polly... hell... *hic jacet...* cracker-cracker,” he expressed his pleasure in his very lowest gabbling tone. No one, not even Gilderoy, could have heard him. It was one of his best tricks, self-protective, defensive, only rarely used — to mutter extremely interesting things so low that no one could hear them.

Gilderoy, invisible under the seat, made no reply. In the first place, he had not heard; in the second, he was fast asleep, rolled up in a tight red ball.

CHAPTER IV

THE VARIETY IS infinite... each individual has its own idiosyncrasy. — W. T. GREENE.

It is very difficult to tell the sex of Grey Parrots, for although the males usually declare themselves by their greater capacity for talking and whistling, some females approach them pretty nearly in this respect.

W. T. GREENE.

ONLY the surface of the two Adventurers has been touched upon so far; a glimpse into their interiors, below this surface, might be of interest. Their inner world, not being our human world, is difficult to enter. Yet it is well worth the effort, to force an entrance, as it were. Human beings, in their vanity and egoism, invariably interpret what is beyond them in terms of themselves. It is inevitable, of course, since they have no other terms to use. Their own experience necessarily limits their highest flights. Their supreme deity thus, becomes anthropomorphic, the lesser deities become personifications of the forces of nature, heaven a hunting ground and hell a blazing kitchen fire. Into animals, similarly, they read their own faiths, fetiches, and foibles.

It is a disastrous method, suggesting that the childhood of the world is still at the nursery stage. Gross misunderstanding results, and the truth is missed. This apology, however, is merely what Dudley might have called *en passant* in the Governess’s nasal voice. It is an abject apology — to these two Adventurers. Their psychology, their means of communicating, their motives, actions, hopes and fears in all that follows must be rendered in gross human terms — because we know no other way.

Moreover, if Dudley bulks larger than his incomparable comrade, it is, for a sufficiently obvious reason: namely, that a parrot stands much closer to human categories than a cat does. The cat is, in fact, not quite of this world; hunger and sex it may share with the rest of the Animal World, but nothing more. Its feelings, motives, methods, tastes, ambitions, hopes are of a different and inscrutable order. They are oblique and slanting. It has, for reasons of its own no doubt, entered this world, it has elected, so far at any rate, to remain. It is, however, *different* from all other living creatures on the planet. To understand, far more to describe, the soul of a cat, is beyond any faculty we possess. It remains, therefore, indescribable. A modern critic has rightly warned a writer that to use this adjective is to admit he does not "know his job." It must be used here, none the less, and precisely in this way.

Dudley, with his sense of proportion, and his linguistic knowledge acquired when he was younger, would put a clear "stet" in the margin against the erasing line. "Indescribable" would stand. He would also, similarly taught, now add to this tedious explanation: *verb sap.*

Left, meanwhile, temporarily to his own devices, he fell to thinking things over in his own quiet way, an occupation at which few could equal, and none, excel him. It was his habit sometimes to do this for hours at a stretch, making no sound, nor hardly any movement, an adorable statue upon an insignificant perch. Superbly self-contained, he held his balance, mentally and physically, no matter what the uproar of the outer world might be.

With one fierce claw he would clutch his savage beak; occasionally, the small soft feathers on his neck would slightly stir; his toes, sole contact with what men call reality, would quietly open and shut; while his all-seeing — some thought, his wicked — eyes roved to and fro, taking in everything, yet betraying no ghost of an expression. His opinion of what he saw, none knew.

It was to Molly he owed a nice explanation of these long silences. She never would admit that they were due to mere emptiness of mind. They were constructive, even creative silences. "He's thinking his tremendous thoughts! He's working!" she informed everyone, himself included. "Dudley's got his great Work. He mustn't be disturbed...!"

So now, while the train rumbled comfortably on its way, the rumble and the rhythm soothed him, and he began talking to himself in his gentlest voice. He fell to gabbling. It was the voice, in all his vast repertoire, most difficult to follow and understand, He used it very rarely — when the gramaphone was playing, when the children had not teased and bored him into screaming, when no visitors stood by his cage, saying foolish things about crackers in affected voices. It was, in a word, his Happy Voice.

It had first sung its golden song, no doubt, when the world was young, the warm air scented with myriad gorgeous flowers, when nuts basked by the thousand in the sunshine, and no ridiculous bipeds swarmed and strutted everywhere as if all creation belonged to them. It was sung, above all, when he had known the rapture of sweet companionship.

“I am now,” he crooned softly to himself, “a lonely old bird. Lonely, yes, and old. How lonely, no one knows; how old, *I* know, but never tell. When I was born, and where, remain my secret. I have neither nest nor family, and, indeed, I need them not. I have no young to feed.......”

The low voice wavered a little. He shook his head, ruffling gently the smallest feathers on his lower neck.

“By the hour together I sit and dream, and my dreams are of gold and purple.... What I dream is my own affair, nor could I ever speak of it to others — others, that is, who know so little about me that they cannot even decide which sex I honour with my patronage. I am referred to as a “He”; it is a courtesy title. These I leave in their profound and abject ignorance. I have my million dreams. I have my Work. What that Work is even Molly does not know. But I”

His voice dropped suddenly. There was an unaccountable instant of hesitation. “*I — know,”* he resumed. His tail feathers shivered slightly. He added in an almost inaudible whisper: “I have never seen — an egg.”

There was a pause during which the voice sank away to nothing. He seemed in the grip of some mysterious emotion. He gave no clear sign, however, as to its nature; there was no betrayal.

“Some claim, I hear, that I derive from Borneo; while others, equally positive, prefer Brazil. Both lots I classify according to my unalterable code. Similarly, I classify those who swear ‘on God’s truth’ that I was brought here by a sailor from the ‘bloody Amazon,’ and those, again, who think it more distinguished to mention the Captain of a South African Liner as my sponsor. East Africa also I have heard quoted, West Africa, the disreputable Congo too. I listen and say nothing. They are welcome to the

East Indies, as to Jamaica and Mauritius, who have never heard of the Cameroons, the Gaboon and the flats of the Niger estuary."

He chuckled.

"How, then, can they know of 'Pico de Papagio,' the Peak of the Parrot on Princes Island in the Gulf of Guinea, called" — a deep sigh escaped him —"'the Paradise of Grey Parrots'? How can they know that this mountain of 12,000 feet is covered with magnificent forests? That the trees, of huge size and height, support lianos and other climbing plants which hang about them in rich and luxuriant folds? That the density of this forest is so great that is is only with the utmost difficulty that a man can force a passage through it.... but to the parrots, the Grey Parrots, who come up there every night to roost, it presents no obstacle, but gives them, under the shelter of thick foliage, a secure and pleasant resting place?

"They cannot know. And if I use Greene's words, I do so merely because he tells the truth, and *nuda est veritas et hic haec hoc....*" The Latin, uttered as a single word, was well nigh indecipherable. The discovery that it *was* Latin, was due to the Vicar, an Oxford man.

The gabbling, soft and musical, continued without an instant's interruption, keeping time with the rhythm of the train.

"I listen... yes, I listen," thought dwelling a moment on his supreme gift, "by the hour, I sit and listen. In the daytime I balance on my tiny perch and listen; at night, when they cover my cage with a stinking shawl, I still sit and listen... and what I cannot hear is merely — not worth hearing...."

He entered a state of inspired and delicious bliss, a state of ecstasy, a form of consciousness humans cannot know.

"I hear," he went on divinely, "the earth pass rolling round the sun. I hear the flowers grow. I hear the dawn slant up and kiss the fields. I hear the starlight's whisper when it meets the dew, and the clanging of the full-moon's chord against the pines. Ah, me! I hear the faint thunder of the distant galaxies, sunk in their frightful space...." His voice changed suddenly. A slight difference in the rhythm of the train brought him down to earth perhaps. The bumping, it seemed, had become less regular.

"Once," he went on, "I told them something," the voice shaken by the jolting of the wheels. "I warned them when the enemy aeroplanes were coming across the sea to hit them. I had heard them start. I heard—"

The train stopped with a violent jerk, almost shaking the rapt bird from his dreary luggage-rack. He retained both balance and composure, however. One pointed toe, clutching the webbing, rubbed against its neighbour. He indulged in a tiny cough, clearing his throat, although no word was audible. He glanced down. Gilderoy's sharp muzzle was visible below the edge of the seat. The puffed red cheeks and wireless whiskers peeped up enquiringly. The cat was excited.

"A station," signalled Gilderoy. "The train's stopping. Somebody may get in."

To a bird of Dudley's quality, the warning was superfluous, and his one eye, glancing sideways, conveyed the fact unmistakeably. Gilderoy pipped out of sight again.

"Leave it to me," was the answer he took with him. And silence descended again upon the empty carriage, the cat being literally out of sight, and the parrot so well camouflaged that few human eyes could have detected him.

The train, after shaking itself backwards and forwards with a series of sharp jerks, now finally stopped and a moment later somebody did get in — a stout, elderly gentleman, wearing a top hat, a black tail-coat, and shiny boots. He was instantly taken in from top to toe by two pair of keenly observant eyes. He carried a polished black bag, a neatly folded umbrella, and, warm though the day was, a plaid rug across his arm. There was an air of importance about him, it was noticed. He thought himself important. To somebody, somewhere, he perhaps was important. To the black-bearded guard, at any rate, for this person now touched his cap, helped him in, said it was a fine morning, expressed a hope that he felt as well as he looked, then, pocketing a silver coin, as though it was the last thing in the world he expected, retired with a bow.

He raised his green flag and swept it about his head several times with an air of fierceness, blew his whistle as though *his* train could never possibly be late, smiled respectfully at the old gentleman, who did not return the smile because he had not noticed it, and finally swung himself like an athlete into the van as the train moved out, his coat-tails flying. He, too, obviously felt more important since he had become responsible for the safety of the new passenger.

With their particular gifts, respectively, the two creatures had noticed that the sight of this new passenger was not good, and that he was also a little deaf.

“You can come out if you want to,” indicated a faint gurgle from the rack.

“I don’t,” replied the tip of a tail that jerked once beyond the seat.

They lapsed into silence. The train gathered speed.

The elderly gentleman, meanwhile, produced a pair of magnifying spectacles with horn rims, adjusted them carefully on his nose, crossed his legs, opened an enormous newspaper, and settled down comfortably behind it to read his favourite financial column. The plaid rug lay spread across his lap.

Dudley, observing him closely from his dim corner, knew what was coming; his sense of anticipation rarely failed; a faint shiver of disgust ran over his delicate nerves. The intruder, indeed, now produced a cigar from a heavily-engraved case, bit its end off, stuck it between his lips, and proceeded to light it by striking a match on a small gold matchbox. The first puff blew out, filling the carriage with a cloud of acrid smoke. He then closed the one open window, and disappeared again behind his enormous newspaper.

The situation became, in Dudley’s view, intolerable. Since it was due to his superiority always to set the tone in dealing with a *contretemps* he gave no thought to his companion beneath the seat. He himself disliked smoke; that was enough. “Leave it to me,” had been his dictum. What he had said he had said. The two friends, each busy with racial preoccupations, motionless, self-contained, concentrated, held their posts quietly, at any rate. Silence reigned, broken only by the crackle of the newspaper and the rumble of the train. The atmosphere slowly thickened. The smoker remained ignorant that he was not alone, for Dudley might have been part of the carriage decoration scheme; nor could the sharpest eye have disentangled Gilderoy from the general mess beneath the seat.

It was some minutes before anything happened, but in due course, as the train began to slow up for the next station, the grand bird started to preen himself. There were few occasions, if any, he flattered himself, to which he was not equal. An elderly gentleman smoking a cigar lay easily within his competence. He was in no hurry. He waited the right moment to take action.

The train stopped. It was a junction. There was a throng and bustle on the platform. New passengers carrying market produce in unwieldy baskets thumped to and fro. The moment for action had arrived. The bird seized it with admirable decision. Lifting his fine head a fraction of an inch and filling his lungs, he produced his gruffest, most commanding voice. It was a First Mate voice, remembered from his steamer-days of long ago:

“All change ‘ere!” he bawled. “Like ‘ell you do!” The shout of urgent and peremptory hurry was repeated twice. “All chinge! All chinge!”

The old gentleman sprang from his seat, dropped his newspaper, fumbled his glasses, snatched wildly at this bag and umbrella, choked thickly as he swallowed a mouthful of cigar smoke, opened the carriage door and scrambled out so fast that he nearly fell in his excitement.

“Tike yer seats! Tike yer seats, please!” bawled a loud voice from nowhere.

He knew not whence it came. No one seemed in sight to help him, for everybody rushed to and fro on business of their own. He looked to the right, he looked to the left; he shouted “Guard!” he shouted “Porter!” He informed the bustling platform that he had never changed at this station in his life before, that he had taken this particular train for years, but the platform was not interested in this statement. He found no one to advise him. There was not a second to spare. He plunged about like a frightened rabbit, tripped over his rug, dropped his cigar, stumbled over the umbrella which became entangled with his short little legs, and finally bundled into another carriage just as the train started and the Guard ran up to tell him there was no need to have changed at all.

The incident was closed. In the animal world there is no idle reviewing of what is past. The present being all important, why waste time and energy dwelling upon what has gone or estimating what is yet to come? No word of praise, therefore, came from Gilderoy’s lips, no demand for a recognition of his success from the parrot’s beak. An exchange of thought and comment took place, yet not of the kind that humans would probably have used in similar circumstances. Gilderoy leaped into the cushioned corner just vacated, Dudley moved further along the luggage rack where he would be less cramped.

"You're not even going where you're looking," conveyed Gilderoy's stare, before curling round to sleep. He was watching his friend intently. He evidently would not settle till the bird had settled.

Dudley, busy changing his place, made no reply at first. Ignoring the stare, which was something between sneer and insult, he minded his own immediate business, and in any case it was his habit to accept even the rudest words as praise.

He *was,* moreover, achieving a result at the moment no other living creature could have managed. The cat's comment was justified. He was moving along the webbing, each foot pointing in a different direction, his head looking down his own back, and his body, apparently, advancing the other way — a spectacle certainly calculated to upset an ordinary mind. Gradually settling himself comfortably in the very centre of the rack, he rolled one eye solemnly down upon Gilderoy and answered the challenge of the staring red face. He used the voice that said interesting things too softly to be heard. He fell into Latin.

"*Vice versa requiescat in pieces*came the gabbling murmur, continuing until the cat became a red ball of sleep. The stream of happy sound poured on and on without interruption for a long time, words such as *viva voce* and *ad astra* from time to time emerging clearly, the rest indistinguishable.

The cat lay sound asleep, Dudley felt happy and secure in his rack. No one could hear him, but he enjoyed the music of his own low gurgle. He drew upon various sources. At one time, before Colonel Sir Arthur objected, he had occupied the Library of the Manor House, and Molly had explained that his knowledge of literature was thus acquired. The Latin, however, derived from a still earlier period, how long ago none knew. Known vulgarly as "Pol" then, he had lived with a scholar, according to the child. Actually, it seems, his host was a dipsomaniac who used Latin tags in general conversation and inaccurately.

Hence the bird's smattering of a dead language.

"*Per contra nolens volens,* 'ave a good time. Can't come in I'm dressing," he concluded at length in a loud clear tone, and closing his eyes dropped off, like Gilderoy,.into a pleasant nap.

CHAPTER V

WE CANNOT, WITHOUT becoming cats, perfectly understand the cat mind. — ST. GEORGE MIVART.

THE train, meanwhile, rumbled comfortably on past numerous little wayside stations, bearing its couple of unusual First Class Travellers to London. Even in sleep the pair were eloquent: “The houses of the great for *me!”* was unmistakeably conveyed by Dudley’s attitude of aristocratic grace, while from the angle of the slightly cocked head came the unselfish thought for his companion: “And for you — whom would *you* like to meet?” The set of the tail indicated that he had the *entrée* to all possible sets. It held the patronising superiority of which the supreme egoist remains ever unaware.

A red whisker on the cushions below signalled blandly, in cat sleep: “My own pals, of course. You know quite well.”

For they were old friends now, this parrot and this cat; not otherwise could they have started on so great an enterprise with so few preliminaries. For six months already the intimacy had lasted. It had not begun with love at first sight, however.

The cat was originally a stray cat only. It had just “blown in” one day from nowhere, and Sir Arthur’s Lady, almost hysterically partial to all animals, had at once adopted it. Whence it came to the Manor House, no one knew, but from a long way evidently, since there were no “nice houses,” within miles, and the creature was most unkempt. After being washed and scrubbed with disinfectant, adorned, too, with a bit of blue ribbon round its scraggy neck, its appearance altered, some thought improved.

Liking its new home, it settled down.

“It’s a sort of laundry cat,” was the opinion of the youngest little girl, though no one knew exactly what that meant.

The mother agreed vaguely: “So we’d better call her Mrs. Tompkyns,” the connection between name and place left unexplained. “With a P. of course,” she added, being attached to details. And the name, despite its unwieldiness, had stuck.

For a week, at least, it stuck. And then Father, a large and clumsy man, not having yet noticed the new beast in the family circle — there were always new beasts, it seemed to him! — came in from golf one evening and tripped over it on the mat.

“Holy Gilderoy!” he roared, a favourite expletive. “What’s this new bit of ginger horror?” From which moment the cat was christened afresh.

“Well, you see,” observed Mother to the children, “it *is* a male anyhow. So perhaps Gilderoy is better — on the whole.”

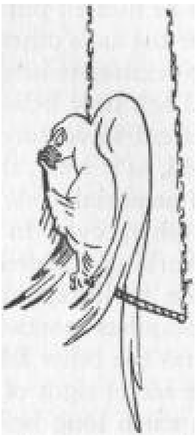
The ginger horror had been introduced to the parrot as “Mrs. Tompkyns,” with hesitation, but the caution proved unnecessary. The bird ignored it. He took not the slightest notice of the creature. The name never once passed his beak. “Tompkyns” was evidently anathema. This new name, however, he picked up at once. Evidently, he liked it. It had a sonorous sound that he could roll round his mouth. He did roll it round his mouth, and with satisfaction. He even made its syllables sound musical, lifting the “roy” into a sort of semi-chant upon a slightly higher key.

“Gilder-*roy!* Gilder-roy!” he would repeat over and over to himself in his lonely hours with profound enjoyment. The Day Nursery echoed to his gilder-roy-ing morning, noon, and night, bringing again, a new expression to his notice: Sir Arthur’s “damned squawker.”

In the confusion that followed Dudley never once lost his head. Nurse, mother, governess, and children mixed the names forgetfully, so that “Mrs. Tompkyns-Gilderoy” and “Mr. Gilderoy-Tompkyns” were often heard. Even Molly herself made mistakes, and Dudley alone remained accurate and consistent. He liked “Gilderoy” and stuck to it.

To all this fuss and fury, the cat himself remained supremely indifferent. Being sheltered and well fed, names were not important. At first he kept his distance from the handsome cage. Yet, occasionally, when the parrot was at his gilder-*roy*-ing, he would glance up and purr, as though, generally speaking, he knew what was going on. Dudley, at any rate, after this second christening, knew quite well what was going on; he was now intensely aware of the new creature in the family circle.

With his head twisted sideways, one claw fondling the great dangerous beak, he would gaze down upon the red cat by the hour. There was, perhaps, no particular sign of feeling, still less of intelligence, in his gaze. He merely gazed, betraying no hint of what was passing through his mind. Yet he presently allowed the new-comer close to his cage without a single gesture of annoyance or alarm. Its proximity evidently pleased him, and Gilderoy, aware of this, begun to make tentative advances. The bird then suddenly took to performing his dainty little Two Step on the perch, sure proof of finding life at the moment good; next, he began opening and shutting his claws, blinking his eyes rapidly, gurgling even, when it sat near enough tor contact through the bars — a proof, with him, of ecstasy.



Till, at last, one day, with a burst of inspired music, he produced his most penetrating shriek: “Gilder-roy! Gilder-roy!” and the new friendship became solidly established.

From this moment, indeed, dated the intimate and affectionate relationship between the two rascals. They understood one another, as has been seen. They avoided misunderstandings, as has likewise been seen, by the device of changing the subject the instant danger threatened. If Gilderoy’s aloof indifference helped towards this end, so also did Dudley’s habit of accepting even the grossest insults as a form of admiration. While Gilderoy, again, admired his friend’s appearance as much as he admired his own, Dudley was under no illusions about the cat’s get-up — distinctive perhaps, yet without noticeable beauty. Dudley, to tell the plain truth, thought his pal looked simply frightful. He deplored, equally, his vulgarity. As he himself put it: "I prefer vice to vulgarity." For the cat's other qualities, he felt what he called "affectionate interest" of a tolerant kind.

Each now believed that he was engaged in the present adventure for his friend's benefit. Each shed, as it were, this air of willing sacrifice. Their immemorial code conveyed ideas plainly to one another, even in sleep, in silence. Their most absorbing, heated conversations, both talking at once perhaps, might thus appear to humans as motionless inactivity, while each yet knew exactly what the other felt and meant. They read easily the secret signs of code and signal that were used on earth long before strutting humans had made an appearance. And consciousness of superiority was inborn in both.

Thus, while Gilderoy, now in his cat-sleep, informed the parrot that he was going to London to see his pals, he was busy also with far, far deeper reflections — about himself. They were in challenge a little to the bird's orgy of self-praise.

"And now, for instance," he asked himself, his subtle intelligence working easily in sleep, "what heritage have *I?* And whence do I derive?"

The question seemed to sting him; though his eyes did not open, there was a snappy little sneeze.

"They talk of tigers — rubbish! They class me with the great felines — rhodomontade!"

His cheeks puffed out so that the whiskers sprayed like water from a half-choked hose. One paw stretched slowly further across the face, as he lay in a ball. The claws opened and shut gently.

"Though curiosity, they say, can kill me, they give me nine lives," he went on, the cheeks flattening, "admitting, by this very gift, their ignorance of my actual origin. The few who guessed my meaning on this undeveloped planet they burnt alive, they quartered and they racked them, they finally exterminated the whole inspired little band. Witches, wizards, sorcerers, all are gone with the broomstick into limbo. Misunderstood and unappreciated, I alone remain!"

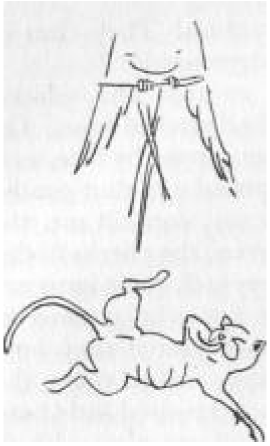
He turned over into a three-quarter position upon his back, legs spread-eagled a little, feet hanging in the air and bent. The paw slipped from the face, uncovering the blunt unsightly nose.

"Yes, *I* persist. But as a mask, a symbol, a legend, a mysterious fantasy of what I really am. My true being is a hieroglyphic none can read; my pedigree, trailing down dim ages, is unknown; the inter-stellar spaces which produced me are unplumbed, and ever will be."

A single hanging paw fell to trembling; the eyelids quivered.

"My face," he went on, "remains inscrutable as of old, my gait as swift and silent, my green sight as marvellous in darkness, my voice as unearthly, my ways, generally, as ghostly and indecipherable as they always were."

His eyes opened a second; he saw the parrot in the rack, the head bent downwards a little as in an attitude of adoration — of himself as usual — motionless, a figure carved in stone. The sight stimulated the cat.



"They worshipped me in days gone by," his thought ran on. "Worshipped," he repeated, "*worshipped.* I was the favourite of Pasht. Bubastis housed me. I have lain mummied for centuries in stifling, airless heat, far underground. In my blood, my eyes, my walk, still lingers the haunting proof of this my divine service to a trumpery, unworthy race. The legend, the symbol, I now am cloak my deific origin. I have been, I remain, a deity. They call me aloof, indifferent, cold. It is the measure of their inferiority and ignorance. For who—" he suddenly sat up erect, his green eyes shining— "who that has been worshipped can respect his worshippers?" There came no answer, but there came a pause. Dudley made no sign or movement. If his receiving apparatus, reflected Gilderoy, caught the message, so much the better: it might reduce his self-importance a bit perhaps.

"I despise," concluded the cat, "but chiefly am indifferent to, the Race who now think they master me. Alien, aloof, heartless to their endeavours, care, affection, they describe me. Bah! Pfui!” he spat. “I am alien to their pettiness, that’s all!” He sneezed and purred simultaneously. Then, turning round carefully in a circle several times, he lay down again, tucked his blunt nose between his paws, and fell back into his cat-sleep once more.

Dudley had listened-in or had not listened-in. It was immaterial to the cat. A word, indeed, dropped down into that first-class carriage from the rack, but it was not a word that Gilderoy understood. “*Arcades ambo*” reached him before he plunged into real sleep. His tail twitched faintly at the tip, he made no other sign, and the train went rumbling on.

The parrot, doubtless, might have said a good deal in reply, but, if he had heard, he knew the value of restraint. Speech, indeed, was not actually essential to his enjoyment of life. If he used words, it was rather as a concession to an inferior world into which he had allowed himself to be adopted. It amused this human world to hear him talk. Equally, it amused him to see them thus amused. He used their own tricks of sound in order to deride them. The measure of their intelligence, as of his own masterly derision, was shown by the patronising judgment they passed upon his kindly efforts. “Oh, what a clever bird then! Pretty Polly! Clever, clever!” was the inadequate praise they bestowed upon his consummate parody of their idiocies.

Thus, while Gilderoy indulged his dreams, broadcasting them better than he knew, perhaps, Dudley merely turned upon the beast one glassy and apparently sightless eye. He realized that the cat was off upon his own, and let him go. He was to enjoy the Adventure, and this moment of vainglorious indulgence belonged to it. “*Arcades ambo*,” therefore, met the case, and Dudley let it go at that.

His glassy eye, none the less, observed the feline closely. That tight red ball was always worth watching, he well knew. There were signs about it even now that betrayed a secret process, something peculiar to the cat alone. It was just this mystery that he respected in the creature. The careless attitude of the body, apparently so innocent, betrayed an inner activity that escaped him.

Gilderoy, apparently sound asleep, was actually aware of something elsewhere and otherwise. His special powers operated. Before him rose, at this moment, the Day Nursery. He heard the voices, saw the faces, twigged the excitement.

“He eat him, eat him all up,” the Governess was screaming.

“Impossible,” cried Molly. “There’s no sign of a fight even.”

“He eat him, I tell you,” the Governess repeated.

“But there are no loose feathers about, no blood,” said the girl. “There’s — *nothing*!”

“He eat everything, that nasty red cat,” asserted the other.

“The claws — the beak — he couldn’t have eaten *them!*” yelled Molly.

“All, all he eat,” asserted the French woman with conviction. “He always mean to. He did.”

“But Gilderoy loved him,” moaned Molly, tears very close.

“He love him, yes,” screamed the Governess. “But he leave — nozzing!”

Gilderoy turned over, rolled into a ball again and lay still. The parrot watched and listened, the train rolled on, thumping and rumbling to London. It drew at length into Victoria Station. It stopped. Gilderoy woke up, stretched, yawned, stuck one hind leg into the air and began to wash. Dudley, climbing down laboriously from his luggage rack, stood perched on the velvet seat and watched him closely. The bird’s attitude was packed with expression:

“Cat,” it said sternly, “While it is natural you should admire and respect my back, I should from now onwards enjoy seeing something of your own. In other words, you lead.”

For some minutes there was no exchange between them. Neither spoke. Few people, indeed, observing this quiet pair, the one washing, the other clasping a beak, could have guessed the thoughts that crowded their minds as they sat silently side by side in the empty First Class Smoking Carriage at Victoria Station. An exchange of ideas was, nevertheless, in active progress between them. While the lordly bird watched his friend’s ablutions, he discerned from the way the same spot was washed over and over again that that cat’s mind, like his own, was occupied with quite other matters.

With two, at any rate, one being breakfast, the other, how to pass unobserved along the crowded platform without their progress being unduly interrupted. For Gilderoy, the latter presented no problem, but Dudley’s case was different. Since he could not use his wings much, he must use what offered — convenient shoulders, trucks of piled up luggage, a man’s head, a woman’s hat, anything, in fact, that might help to camouflage his dressiness, so that he would not appear too conspicuous.

It was the breakfast problem they solved first. They solved it promptly, and by signals only. Gilderoy suddenly stopped washing and stared fixedly into space. One hind leg pointed to the ceiling as though it hardly belonged to his body. Next he rose on his four feet, stretched, yawned, licked his whiskers and arched his back in a semicircle. He strutted across the floor towards the seat where his friend perched, lowered his back to a more convenient line, and kept quite still while Dudley stepped down awkwardly and established himself safely about midway between the tail and head. Gilderoy then leaped with his rider through the window on the opposite side of the carriage where no platform was, and ran rapidly along the footboard in the direction of the guard’s van.

“*Tempus fugit, tempus fugit,”* exclaimed Dudley several times.

It was a precarious journey for the bird, but he balanced marvellously. They paused frequently on the way to explore empty carriages that had their windows open, with the result that Dudley made a good breakfast off scraps of biscuit, bread, fruit, and even a few pea-nuts in a paper bag some child had rejected. Leaving his friend to this latter, Gilderoy raced on to the dark luggage van where he found enough spilled milk from several dozen cans to give him an ample meal.

In less than five minutes he rejoined his parrot, whom he found engaged in tearing the paper bag fiercely into little pieces with his claws and iron beak. Dudley, to an undiscerning eye, seemed in a state of fury as he attacked the paper bag. But Gilderoy knew simulation when he saw it.

“Better get a move on,” he flashed. “You’ve fed, I see.”

They left the carriage and stepped out boldly on to the platform. Having accomplished this without disaster, they then proceeded to examine very carefully the few people now left upon this platform.

CHAPTER VI

CATS KNOW WELL how to conceal their purpose, to seize their opportunity, to cover their flight and to escape retribution.

M. RATON. Sur l'education du Chat Domestique.

THE train had discharged its first rush of passengers, including the old gentleman with the cigar, and the two ruffians were relieved to see that the platform was now less congested than it had been. This, too, had its dangers, however, since it rendered them more conspicuous. They stood side by side, examining its remaining freight. Both creatures assumed an air of careless nonchalance. Both knew perfectly well that they could not choose where they should go, but could only go where they were taken.

Who, then, should take them was the first question? Where, the second?

Dudley, though not afraid, yet did not feel entirely at his ease. Gilderoy walked to and fro, sniffing, perking his blunt muzzle this way and that. Suddenly his lightning eyes, all-observant as usual, picked up a significant detail. With a twitch of his tail he communicated it.

"Ah!" replied Dudley. Being able to see behind him, he did not turn his head. His comprehension was complete and instantaneous. His "ah!" conveyed that he agreed with his pal's choice.

A porter, pushing a laden truck, was approaching them from the rear, and behind him, followed the "significant detail," an elderly lady of uncertain, rather waddling gait. She moved slowly, strenuously, yet without advancing much.

The two exiles, motionless side by side, examined her closely.

Their examination, due to immense practice, was as skilful as it was swift. Their experience of hosts and hostesses was, naturally, large, and the language of gesture an open book to them. From trivial outward signs they could read the heart; movement, facial expression, clothing, action of feet and pose of hands, these, being unconscious, gave naked indications of their owner's personality.

They noticed, thus, that the lady was considerably wrapped up. A careless observer might have suspected her of evading the Customs by wearing several silk quilts beneath her dress, but closer inspection showed that, scorning the modern figure, she merely feared the cold. This fact admitted her at once to Dudley's sympathetic heart, while Gilderoy made a special note of another thing — a contradictory expression in her eyes. These wore a distant, five-mile gaze, yet at the same time a close shrewd scrutiny of details nearer home. She might dream and speculate, the cat twigged, but she knew where the best milk and butter were to be obtained. A kindly face, moreover, both decided. Upon the top of her head, again indifferent to modern fashion, Dudley noticed a large hat with green feathers swaying in it.

Such, then, was the "significant detail" that now surged past them slowly, moving like part of a procession that turns upon itself, while getting a little forward at the same time. It was no ordinary female, they decided.

"I like her," from the parrot, and "She'll do," from the cat flashed simultaneously between the observant pair. For a moment, however, neither made a move. They watched. Neither the porter nor the lady had noticed them. When the moment for action came each animal would follow his own instinct independently.

"She's not thinking of anything very definite just now, but of many things. Her mind, at the moment, is wandering. It's not *here.* She won't notice me," was Dudley's masterly deduction from what he saw as, from the cat's arched back, moving with incredible lightness, he clambered up the thick clothing and reached the lady's attractive head-gear. He landed softly and settled down, camouflaged admirably against the green feather. His head glanced round in most expressive fashion.

"The secret of a successful and elevated life," it proclaimed, "is to live on others and let them carry one to death or glory!"

"Rather," the cat's action replied, "is it to remain inconspicuous, while yet attaining one's objective," as he dived unnoticed among the welter of dark bags and rugs upon the porter's truck.

The two schemers in this way proceeded along the platform past the ticket-collector, and approached a waiting taxi-cab. Here the procedure needed tact as well as physical adroitness, lest they be noticed, Gilderoy as usual having the easier *role* of the two. He slipped in so slyly, indeed, that not even Dudley saw how he managed it. With the bird, as with his carrier, it was a more complicated business; he crouched as low as possible, while the lady, urged by the porter from behind, her limbs hampered by the mass of clothing, climbed slowly in and flumped down in her place with a stifled gasp. There was just room for the parrot to perch upright under the ceiling. The luggage had already been piled outside and inside. They were ready to start.

Touching his cap, the porter examined his tip, pocketing it with a significant glance at the driver, and slouched heavily away. But the taxi did not start immediately.

“Any address?” enquired this red-faced man over his hunched shoulder. His voice was rather surly; he had taken note of the porter’s tip.

“Yes, yes, to be sure,” the fare replied rather breathlessly. “I thought I’d told you. Aurora Mansions. That’s Mildew Place,” she explained, leaning forward a little too suddenly for Dudley’s comfort. “Pimlico,” she added, lowering her voice, a s though she was ashamed of mentioning it. She leaned back again with equal suddenness. She sighed nervously. She breathed heavily.

But still the taxi did not start.

“Any number — Miss?” asked the man.

“14, 14, No. 14,” cried the fare, leaning forward once more, then settling down somewhat as the sides of a boiled fruit-pudding collapse when the insides have been removed. “I thought I’d already said 14,” she repeated, with half apologetic nervousness. She was evidently afraid of taxi-drivers as a class. “No. 14,” she repeated with that excess which the experts declare is a sign of hysterical tendencies.

The man uttered something inaudible, ran his yellow eyes over her, glowered, then turned and started his machinery with a sudden wrench.

“I perceive,” Dudley commented to himself, having noted and disliked the yellow eyes, “that we shall now go like hell.” He settled down cautiously, digging himself in, yet too cleverly for the pressure to be felt. His comment, meanwhile, had reached the invisible cat. “I get you,” signalled the wireless whiskers. Speed was a matter of complete indifference to him. The personality of the fare, on the other hand, might mean much. “The frump’s all right,” he added.

It was just this kind of commonness and lack of tone the fine old bird disliked in his companion. He shifted a foot, a faint shiver ran down his breast feathers. “I shall assist the lady,” fell courteously from his face, “should the opportunity arise. As it well may.”

“How?” asked the cat.

“Leave it to me,” the bird flashed laconically, and retired behind his beak as from a futile discussion.

London life, obviously, was already sharpening their wits, extending their vocabulary as well. The change would benefit his friend and might modify his coarseness. His own Work, he felt convinced, would benefit too. Pleased with his position at the moment, he fell to pondering. His own powers, for instance, delighted him. He possessed, came the pleasant reflection, as many voices as qualities of language. He could welcome or dismiss, as he deemed a particular situation demanded. Chuckling to himself, he remembered dismissing the Vicar, whose wheedling voice and stale odour of gaspers he detested. He had kept an obstinate silence for a long period while the cleric tried to make him speak. “But Polly is not talkative to-day; we must not bother the bird,” in that wheedling tone at length exasperated him to the point where he really had to deal with the man. He used his loudest voice and with startling suddenness: “Goodbye, for the present! Goodbye, for the present!” was followed by a string of words that derived from sailors in far Southern Seas. And the shawl flung quickly over his cage was the very thing he wanted, for it shut out the man he loathed. As for the language that he offered, it was a sample merely, a test as it were. The fact that the Vicar hastily withdrew betrayed him. If dirt, the parrot held, is matter in the wrong place, language called “bad” is only language wrongly uttered. That *He* uttered it divinely, he knew perfectly well; he also knew, by the tone of voice, when phrases criticised him and therefore were not worth learning. The Vicar’s “deep-learned in books but shallow in himself,” in reply to Molly's praise of his own scholarly attainments, he had not even troubled to commit to memory.

While reflection pursued thus its pleasant course, the taxi was getting under way. Making angry and vicious noises with its gears, it started slowly at first, but once out of the station yard it began to gather speed. It took a curious route, the lady noticed, but at first she did not interfere. She fidgetted and made grunting noises in her throat, leaning forward on a sudden impulse, then flopping back again, movements that incommoded the bird perched upon her hat. But she took no action. Once, finding her courage, she began: "But you're going miles out of your way the way you're going....!" but her voice, dying away in the throat, was not loud enough to reach the man. Evidently, she was of the kind that must be worked up into a nervous anger before the point of action — invariably of exaggerated, explosive sort — was reached.

Owing to the size of the hat, its wearer was forced to bend her head, and Dudley found himself rather cramped, compelled to lower his proud neck and shoulders lest his skull knock against the ceiling as the ramshackle vehicle banged and tore along. Having, luckily, no crest, he managed fairly well, however, turning his head completely round and burying back and forehead among the leathers some way down his back. "Stet, stet, stet," he murmured to himself, maintaining his position with extreme difficulty, yet with adorable poise and grace as usual.

The taxi rattled; it shaved an island; it elicited language from the driver of a horse-van whose load they scraped perilously past; it swerved from side to side; it rocked.

They were racing at high speed up Constitution Hill, hardly the shortest route from Victoria to Pimlico, when the fare made her first real effort. "Please go more slowly," she cried, more air than actual sound in her voice. She tapped feebly on the glass. She hoped the driver would both hear and not hear; as though not quite sure whether she feared most the man or the smash. The man made no sign that he heard, for the vehicle rose almost on two wheels immediately, making the lady gasp with terror and clutch wildly at the window straps.

Dudley's skull, still buried among the feathers of his back, received a bump. The moment for giving his promised "assistance," he decided, had arrived.

He raised his grand head slowly; cool and collected, he was; his eye noticed Gilderoy's red whiskers above a rug; he filled his lungs:

"Blastyergizzard! *Aurora borealis!* Swine-swine! Dudleydudleydudley....!" he shouted in a male tone of fury. Expressions that followed he chose from the wife of a policeman he had once known, while the tone changed abruptly to an imitation of the fare. The voice, his loudest, rose easily above the rattle of the taxi.

The effect was immediate, and it was two-fold. The lady collapsed backwards with such violence that the bird was nearly dislodged from his perch, and the driver jerked round with such startled suddenness that his hand, for an instant, dropped the wheel, leaving the taxi to its own devices. The choice between a lamp-post and an omnibus confronted it. Before it could decide, however, the man's hand automatically dropped back upon the wheel; his foot, also automatically, found a brake; and a traffic block, obeying a white-clad arm, brought the vehicle to a grinding stop in the very nick of time. They were by St. George's Hospital, with the gates of the safer Park beyond. "Umph! Cuckoo!" reflected Dudley, noticing the hospital. The red whiskers had vanished, a flying leap having been thus avoided at the last minute.

The driver now looked round, his red face peering into the taxi with a bewildered expression. He searched for the owner of the recent male voice. His mouth opened and shut, but emitted no sound. Puzzled he certainly was, a little subdued as well, frightened even. Never before had he heard such language from a female fare. His bewilderment increased still more when he heard this fare now inform him, with the false courage of incipient hysteria, that she would "report you to the Police for bad language and assault and give the number of your taxi too....!"

"Sorry, mum," he muttered, poking his head round the window. "It's the old keb, that's wot it is... never worked proper since the harmistice... besides I ain't *said* nothink meself... yet... not a single word I 'avn't... s'elp me gawd...

Dudley, meanwhile, remained motionless and invisible on his perch, silent too. Masterly inactivity, he decided, was his *role* just then. He was a trifle puzzled himself, perhaps. He could not know that folk with hysteria in the system may persuade themselves they have spoken when not a sound has actually passed their lips. In her excitement, the fare doubtless assumed the voice from her hat was her own. Hunting for paper and pencil, meanwhile, she had dropped her reticule and stooped to recover its contents. The bird had enough to think of till she steadied down again at length. It was a moment for careful behaviour, for careful balance too, so far as he was concerned. He recalled a maxim his intoxicated scholar-host used years ago: "Live in such a way," he crooned very softly to himself, "that even the Coroner couldn't blame you!" The lady rose from searching the mat and Dudley, of course, rose with her. As she sat back in her seat, he disappeared from view again. His expression, as he sank away, was philosophical. Her own face was purple. The driver drummed black fingers impatiently on his wheel. The official white arm dropped.

The traffic-block now surged slowly forward like a single huge machine that uses its loose portions clumsily. It carried the taxi with it beneath the Arch. Once in the Park, adding another needless mile to the shortest distance, a reasonable pace brought back a pleasant sense of security to all on board.

"*Ad valorem ab initio à bas les boches*," murmured the parrot, in whose memory foreign words were always associated with a fuss.

"Keep quiet, can't you!" sniffed Gilderoy, entirely out of sight. It was sharply given, almost rudely.

"I enjoy the Park," remarked Dudley blandly, no window accessible to his screened eyes. The perky tail, could the cat have seen it, added distinctly: "One sees one's own sort there, of course."

The squabble that seemed imminent had been neatly avoided in the usual way. Driving safely and pleasurably through the bright sunshine, the contents of the taxi, still alive, and breathing more or less heavily, now relapsed into a comfortable silence, until the vehicle at last drew up before a row of gloomy Mansions in a side street among the purlieus of Pimlico.

"We have arrived," Dudley broke the interlude.

Gilderoy glanced through a crack of the door. "It's our slum," he said in reply.

The fare groaned wheezily and began to fumble in her capacious reticule. The driver, having gone some three miles out of his way, looked at his meter with a satisfied smirk.

CHAPTER VII

SOME DAY, WHEN it is least expected, a Grey Parrot may suddenly wake up and begin, like the Baron's famous horn, to unwind everything that has been said to it for ever so long before. — W. T. GREENE.

THE taxi slowly began to disgorge its varied content. Like a bundle becoming unfastened, the lady climbed out in sections, the parrot crouching low among the protective feathers on her hat. Gilderoy was already on the pavement. He stood against the area railings with an air of having known the neighbourhood all his life, looking, indeed, as though he belonged to it, with his shabby coat, his tom ear, his patched eye. His fiat cheeks bulged a trifle, evidence of excitement, but the patched eye has already noted every detail of his surroundings. He had managed his exit from the taxi so cleverly that not even the observant bird had seen it. He now seemed merely a common Pimlico street cat on the prowl, indifferent to the world.

The driver had also left his perch, and Gilderoy moved up and rubbed — carefully — against his legs while the man stood waiting for his money. The air was electric rather. The process of a nervous old lady laying her fate to a greedy bully of a driver pursued its slow course. A gloved hand burrowed fumblingly in the depths of the capacious reticule, whose indiscriminate contents rattled; a flustered face peered anxiously about; a timid voice mumbled indistinct syllables, while the man stood silent, holding his hand out with a half insolent, half threatening air.

The biped and quadruped, one in the air, the other on the ground, watched the proceedings closely without appearing to do so, and each in his own way. They were already in swift communication:

"I got you here, you see," mentioned the bird proudly.

Gilderoy, staring down the street, gave a contemptuous sniff. Not even a milk-cart, much less a catsmeat-man, was in sight.

“Why?” he asked pointedly. A memory of “the houses of the great” stirred in him possibly.

“*Inter alia*,” returned Dudley. It was the only thing he could think of for the moment. His body, besides, being concealed, could not convey freely what he felt.

The lady was now holding out some coins, mumbling tentative phrases as she did so: “.... the way you came that way was a long way out of your way...” it sounded like, “so that makes three and tuppence” — her hand thrust forwards—” with fourpence for yourself... and... er... thank you.” Her face was alternately flushed and pale; her head jerked as though she felt the unusual weight of her hat perhaps. But the driver’s face became instantly an assorted face, contempt and a yellow fury dominating the other ingredients. For a moment he did not speak. He stood staring at the insignificant coins in his open palm.

“Get ready!” warned Gilderoy, peeping up. He made a sudden leap sideways, for the great boots had moved suspiciously.

“I was born ready,” Dudley signalled back from his perch.

There was no time for more, as the man had begun to speak.

His audience, though later it grew larger, consisted at first of the two creatures and the lady. It was to the latter, however, that he addressed his inspired words. For they were inspired, his being had been stirred to its lowest depths, inspiration alone could have produced them.

The trio listened, spell-bound, as the words poured forth. They were voluble, ornate, delivered without hesitation. They described the lady’s character and antecedents, referred to her appearance, the state of her health, and the length of days she might yet live. Included also was a brief impressionist picture of Aurora Mansions, and the general neighbourhood. An artist’s palette is his servant, not his master, and if he sees carmine, ruby values he has a right to use them. The man evidently saw his picture *couleur de rose,* or, rather, *sang de bœuf.* The subliminal consciousness of this illiterate taxi-man was stirred. Freed of all limiting inhibitions, he delivered his overburdened psyche of a Message to the Race, to the female portions of the Race in particular.

This particular female member of the Race listened, and while she listened, trembled.

Her animal companions listened too, but they did not tremble. Each in his own way listened, and each had his own reactions. Gilderoy, unable to follow human speech as his educated friend could, noted his own colour rather frequently referred to, and disliked it. "Too much blood, I think," he flashed into the air. He grew angry and wanted to scratch. Slowly he began to make himself look big. His hair was up a bit.

Dudley, listening from a higher point of view, made no comment. He gave no sign of any sort. "It's a relief to him," he thought, with an understanding sigh. But his gorge was rising. He was again ready to give his assistance, when the right moment came. It came quickly enough. The man, in his opinion, went at last too far.

"Talkin' through yer ruddy 'at, I call it...!" rang down the open street.

And, since Dudley himself occupied the hat, he resented it. His gorge could rise no further. He intervened the more readily because he felt his pedestal shaking dangerously and feared he might at any moment be flung violently to the ground. Raising his grim, aristocratic beak above the feathers, he caught his pal's patched eye. It gleamed.

"Go it!" exclaimed Gilderoy. His claws were out.

Dudley went it.

His words issued, as it seemed, from the empty air. He chose his most horrible voice, a rasping, hoarse voice acquired from a First Mate long ago. It was the driver's turn to listen. If his eloquence had been inspired, that of the parrot surpassed it easily. It made his best effort seem flat and insipid. It left him standing at the post. It was superb, it was *hors concours.* The adjectives, interspersed with *a fortoris* and *de profundises,* poured down Mildew Place in a flood of rattling glory. Aurora Mansions bathed rosily in a new significance. The First Mate, a master 'of language, would have been proud of him. A crowd began to collect, drawn by its magic to areas and windows. But no one could discover whence this hoarse male voice and his appalling language originated.

Upon two members of the audience the effect was striking and immediate. The lady, clapping her hands to her ears, began to scream. She wobbled dangerously, while the driver, recognising a master, and bewildered by a voice that apparently issued through the top of his fare's head, began to shake all over. He listened for a few moments to details about himself he had not known before; his jaw dropped; his eyes were glazed with superstitious terror; his red face blanched. And at this moment the cat, hissing and spitting, its hair erect, flew headlong towards him. He had a glimpse of blazing eyes, sharp teeth, of a red body launched towards him across the air. He could not know that a dog behind him was the actual cause of what seemed an onslaught on himself.

Giving a futile kick, and uttering the yell of those who expect to be hurt, he turned, leaped into his seat, trod on the accelerator, and leaving behind him a hoarse echo of "Lord bli' me, it's a ruddy devil, two of 'em!" hurtled down the gloomy street and disappeared at a pace no policeman, had there been one in Mildew Place, could possibly have permitted. He also left behind him several brown pennies which were his tip, and a kind lady trembling on the pavement like a circular-cut box tree in a gust of sudden wind. She shook from head to foot, her legs threatened to give way beneath her any second, but her screaming ceased, for there was no breath left to scream with.

Gilderoy approached softly, tentatively and rubbed against her elastic-sided boots. "Prrrrrr... purrrrrr... purrrr," rose to her ear from the paving stones on which she shook to and fro. His gallant attentions, since he was not quite the glory he imagined himself to be, produced an unexpected effect. Feeling his touch, the lady looked down sharply, saw a ginger quadruped against her legs, found some more breath, and fell to screaming louder than before, while her head lowered itself so abruptly that Dudley, still clinging to his dignity among the feathers, was taken by surprise, and lost his hold. Wind in branches he could have managed, since there is rhythm in it, but not these unintelligent human jerks. He missed his step. He fell, scrabbling and squawking, down the whole length of her body, clutching her clothing with beak and claws as best he could until he reached the ground.

Silence followed. For a moment all was still. Dudley, having recovered his balance — composure he had never lost — stood on one foot in a position of great dignity, clasping his beak with his other claw and glancing down sideways at the world. Gilderoy, a few yards away, sat washing himself against the area railings, as though the basement had been his family home for generations. But the lady, their prospective hostess, seeing suddenly a large grey parrot with a red tail which apparently she had brought forth out of nothing, wobbled like a jelly shape that is just ready to collapse. Unable to scream owing to irregular breath, she gave a gulp of terror, and a second later was flopping up the steps at a speed and with an agility only real panic could produce. She disappeared into the shadows of the gloomy entrance hall of Aurora Mansions. A door banged. Another silence fell.

It was a moment, perhaps, when humans would have used their energies to take stock of the situation, to pull themselves together as it is called, to review the facts, at any rate. Not so, however, with the animals' world, it seems. The two scallywags found it just the moment for a friendly exchange on things in general. The hullabaloo meant little to them, an occurrence that called for no special explanation. They had long ago given up attempting to explain what humans did. They made, thus, no comment on what had just taken place. They merely had a little chat.

"I shall pluck some of my breast-feathers," announced Dudley, and proceeded to do so. "And then I shall go indoors." He fell to work at once.

"I shall have lots of pals," Gilderoy mentioned, indicating the roofs with one leg, while the other pointed down the street. While washing, he had mapped the immediate neighbourhood in detail Nothing had escaped his keen roving eyes. "A busy time for me." He struck an attitude, aware that his arrival in the neighbourhood had been duly noticed by numerous sharp eyes. He believed he looked interesting and important, comely certainly.

But Dudley kept his eyes glued to his breast feathers without looking at him. He knew that his friend's appearance was not engaging at the moment, that in fact he was peculiarly unsightly. His love did not falter, but he felt ashamed of the red, bolshevik, scraggy cat. The allusion to his position, moreover, had not escaped him, the hint that he himself might be without friends here in London, lonely. The cat, reacting to the excitement of the new surroundings, he noted too, was already a bit above himself. He therefore stopped plucking at his feathers; he stood motionless, trying to look as much like unbiteable stone as possible. And, as regards the loneliness he might experience, he found a solace for that too. It was something Molly said that helped him here. His Work occurred to him.

This mysterious Work the child talked about so much, what was it really? That it was true he knew; that it lay deep down inside his sensitive being, he also knew. It had, moreover, something to do with companionship, for it was the suggestion of loneliness that now evoked it. Yes, he had some great work on hand, some *mugnnm opus*.... He was aware of a sudden gush of sentimental feeling, of self-pity almost. A tear rose to one eye, though he did not let it fall.

The minutes passed. A milkman's cans rattled. A postman's knock was audible far away but coming nearer. At the end of the narrow street the giant motor buses roared along the main thoroughfare, appearing and disappearing like engines of war, thundering to attack. A solitary taxi came crawling along the place. Mildew Place was awake.

"My position at the moment might be improved," decided the bird practically, conquering his other emotions.

Gilderoy caught the signal and glanced up. One eye ran down the street, the other indicated the stone staircase.

"Quaite," observed Dudley in his gentlest tone. He waddled across the pavement and began awkwardly climbing up the first step.

Watching him with approval, the cat showed it by marching down the street close against the area railings, his tail in the air, his flat cheeks smiling, his whole body throbbing with a deep purr as his ribs rubbed the iron bars. He liked the lady who was to be his hostess; the parrot liked her, too, paying her thus the greatest compliment in their power. They felt she was kind, soft-hearted, generous, if poor; they could impose upon her. Only the poor, they knew, were generous, to the rich this virtue is denied.

Dudley, meanwhile, climbing laboriously, observed his friend disappearing down the street and promptly summoned him. He wanted help, for one thing. But he used no silent, secret signal this time. He used his army voice:

"Gilder-roy! Gilder-roy! Gilder-roy!" he bawled his loudest, ignoring the attention it must draw to himself.

CHAPTER VIII

SO STRONG IS the instinct for companionship in all parrots, but especially in the Greys... that perhaps this pining for society may be a factor in bringing about the death of so many of these amiable and most unhappy birds.... — W. T. GREENE.

AT which moment the door opened and the lady reappeared, followed closely by the Hall Porter of Aurora Mansions in a dirty blue suit with tarnished gold buttons and trousers frayed into whiskers at the bottom. He wore shapeless leather slippers. He carried a cloth. The parrot, taking in these details instantly, noted also out of the back of his head that the cat had come to a halt against the railings, some twenty yards away, invisible to all but himself.

He preened himself for the admiration that he knew must come, and at the same time said something aloud that would stimulate interest and curiosity by being inaudible. It was well to conquer this couple at the start. “Cuckoo!” he gabbled in a voice too low for them to hear the words exactly. “Cuckoo!”

It was here that the creatures displayed their superiority over human beings. The latter, confronted with a sudden decision amid conflicting issues, almost invariably fail. They over-act or under-act. Their first cry is “Oh, let me think a moment first!” Only when the crisis is past do they perceive the line of action which would have met it adequately. With the world inhabited by Dudley and Gilderoy the case was different: each thought instinctively, observed all details simultaneously, came to a decision immediately, and conveyed this decision to one another without a second’s delay.

These faculties, therefore, now operated as usual. The pair of rascals easily met the strain upon their wits.

They had reached London, but they had as yet no home — Aurora Mansions if not a palace would provide a temporary *pied à terre;* food, warmth and protection would be assured. The cat, naturally, could manage these essentials for himself; he had the freedom, more or less, of any house he cared to enter. Dudley, on the other hand, must descend to diplomacy; he had to prepare the way. It was, besides, his nature to do things decently.

Of all which, the slow-witted humans now coming slowly down the steps, of course, knew nothing. They merely saw a large grey parrot with a red tail standing disconsolately on the lower steps, glancing up with its head cocked on one side. The cat they did not see at all, nor would a stray cat anyhow have claimed attention. So undistinguished, indeed, did Gilderoy, despite his auburn beauty, seem to the Porter and the lady, that they did not even notice his tigerish outline shoot past their legs and vanish through the open door behind them. The animal, none the less, performed this feat of *leger-de-pieds* with consummate ease; and, perched half-way up the stairs inside now watched the parrot's method of entering the house in his turn.

Dudley's method was not complicated. Like all great souls, he saw life closely, but he saw it whole. He desired to enter the lady's flat peaceably: he did so. Assuming that innocent air by which he somehow contrived to make his formidable mandibles look harmless, the expression in his eyes positively invited kindness. He looked, indeed, benign. One claw, held aloft in the air, opened and closed with slow precision.

"Leave it to me, Mum," the Porter reassured the nervous woman, after examining the bird cautiously from a distance. "I know them birds," and reaching down, he advanced slowly, holding out a very dirty hand with an air of confidence Dudley saw he did not feel. The cloth was flung over his arm. He wriggled his fingers about so that the grimey wrist-band of a flannel shirt showed itself. He uttered the formula "Pretty Polly! Pretty Polly want a cracker!" in what he evidently considered a most ingratiating voice. His rather bloodshot eyes ogled to the best of their ability. Dudley stood motionless as if carved in stone.

"Oh, *please,* mind it doesn't nip you, Porter!" warned the lady from the rear. *"*One can *never* trust those birds — until they *know* you," she added with piercing insight. "Their bite is *terrible,* I believe!"

"It's the voice that does it, Mum," the man told her confidently. "These grey ones in partickler is very sensible to the 'uman voice," And he continued to hold his hand out and wriggle his fingers, while repeating the “Pretty Polly” formula without a pause.

Dudley, watching the man sideways, still made no movement. If there was one thing he had instantly loathed about this Hall Porter of Aurora Mansions it was the quality of his voice. It rasped him. It was worse than even the Vicar’s wheedle. He disapproved likewise of his filthy hand. But above all, he despised the fellow because of his pretension that he was familiar with parrots and understood them, whereas it was obvious to Dudley that he had never met a Grey Parrot, much less a King Grey Parrot, in his life before. For that voice alone he would have nipped the nasty finger to the bone; the man’s pretentions made him want to scream his loudest; the hated formula gave him a feeling of positive nausea.

He remained, for all that, diplomatic, his feelings under stern control. Great simple soul that he was, the grand bird never lost sight of his objective for a moment. He desired to enter Aurora Mansions peaceably and without a fuss; he now took immediate steps to do so.

They were decided, though not entirely straightward steps. With a sideways movement, but one of matchless grace, he avoided the filthy hand and wriggling fingers, and planted his feet, each in turn and delicately, upon the man’s sleeve just above the objectionable wrist-band. He wiped them first, it seemed, upon the cloth. He then, deliberately but very slowly, marched up the whole length of the arm, and planted himself securely upon the blue shoulder, where a strip of spotty brass announced that the coat was actually a uniform. Settling himself, he stood motionless, gazing down into the lady’s upturned countenance. She had watched the proceedings with the greatest intentness, anxiety and admiration about equally mixed. Dudley, with an expressionless eye, now returned her stare.

He did more than that, however — he at once introduced himself. And he did this in his own inimitable way: he uttered aloud the most gracious and lovely word he knew, the very sweetest, yet too low to be clearly audible:

“Dudleydudleydudley,” he mumbled affably, for what could be more beautiful than his own name, he felt?

“There you are, Mum,” exclaimed the porter proudly in his best shilling voice, though his head shrank a trifle to one side, the dreaded beak being within an inch of his ears and cheek.

“Dudleydudleydudley” crooned the parrot in his softest tone, “nolimetangere... cuckoo-cuckoo...!” controlling a fierce desire to bite the ugly neck until it bled, and winning both the Porter’s and the lady’s hearts, as he intended, at a single stroke.

“An’ a fine talker, too!” the man explained. “That was Spanish he used just then. Pretty Polly! Pretty Polly!”

He turned and led the way upstairs to the first floor flat, followed by the admiring tenant, who in due course, the man hanging about until his purpose reached her brain, fumbled for the expected coin. Passing red Gilderoy, who had already assured himself that no tame cat lived in the flat, they entered a rather dark apartment containing a kitchen, a narrow passage, a tiny hall, and four or five diminutive but fairly pleasant rooms. The place was nicely furnished, the tenant obviously a woman of taste, if of humble means.

“‘Ave you anything in the wy of a caige, Mum?” enquired the Hall Porter. He had lowered the parrot on to a table where it began to bite the cloth.

The lady mentioned an empty canary cage somewhere in a cupboard, and this having been produced after considerable search, blown into by the objectionable porter to get the dust out, and a tiny perch made secure, Dudley, bending his proud head, stepped silently into it with as much dignity as its space permitted.

“Any time you want a bit of ‘elp with the bird, Mum,” mentioned the porter, departing with his shilling in his pocket. “I understand them parrots, you see.”

The lady thanked him. “I must advertise,” she began, “it’s been lost or stolen or something,” and then, having provided a saucer of water and sent out her char-cook-general, to buy some seed, she flopped into a chair and stared at her new possession in a state of semi-collapse.

The new possession, not far from a state of collapse himself, did not return the stare. Although he liked her, as already stated, he did not care especially about her appearance. He felt she was ineffective somewhere... this tiny cage, for instance, with its odour of long disuse... water in a saucer... seed of indifferent quality... a general air of being mastered by her surroundings instead of, as with himself, the opposite. He, therefore, did not return her stare, nor, indeed, take any notice of her at all. Tasting the meal provided, he retired into himself. He clutched his thin perch with one foot, raised the other into his tummy feathers, made up his mind that this would be a temporary visit only, and decided that the next time the Porter put his hand within reach he would bite it to the bone.

He remained silent, he did not even produce his infinitesimal gabble, he neither swore, nor sang, nor whistled, nor did any language occur to him at the moment as worth uttering. Something poignant, however, was going on inside him, for he trembled slightly. His breast feathers quivered. The recent excitement, though mastered, had been considerable. It had deeply stirred him. He remembered things Molly had said... he thought of his Work... there was some great thing he had to do... some important production... consummation of his long life, as it were.... He saw a green sea of foliage waving in the wind and sloping upwards into a sky of turquoise blue.. he saw a hollowed limb, a nest... he heard a squawk that to him was the sweetest music in the world... he felt... he felt...

A glimpse of something red caught his eye, interrupting these stimulating but rather confused reflections, and he gulped down his emotion promptly. It was a bit of Gilderoy that projected from beneath the divan on to which his hostess had collapsed a few moments before. This fragment of a hind paw alone was visible. It set his mind working in a new direction. “I’ve got him here safely,” he reflected. “He may now enjoy himself in his own way.”

This, plainly, was the cat’s intention, and his independence had already asserted itself. He had made himself quite at home.

The first part of their adventure was over, yet each knew quite well that they stood on the threshold of another. A life of danger and excitement, of change and novelty, had begun, though neither could guess what might further be in store for them.

“Leave it to me,” was Dudley’s attitude on his tiny perch in the cramped cage. And if Gilderoy made no reply it was because he was sound asleep. Their hostess, Dudley perceived, seemed in danger of dropping off herself. He therefore closed his own eyes too, and prepared for the recuperative nap his morning’s exertions demanded and deserved.

“Good-night, Dudley, kiss Mother — good-bye for the present,” he murmured under his breath. And the flood of golden dreams then rose and swamped him.

CHAPTER IX

OCCASIONALLY IT WILL happen that an otherwise tractable bird will pick up words of an objectionable character.

W. T. GREENE.

JUSTICE is not done to the ease and completeness with which animals understand their surroundings, their human surroundings especially, and draw intelligent deductions therefrom. The superior complacency of the human withholds here credit that is overdue. They judge us with uncanny accuracy, see into us with far deeper insight than we suppose.

They achieve this, largely, by omitting what is unimportant; they concentrate upon essentials only. Perceiving the outstanding characteristic, they grab it, concentrate on it with the one pointedness of the yogi, then act upon it. Their slogan, “Do it Now,” was borrowed by America centuries later. The sub-human world is marvellously practical. It does not shilly-shally. It knows what it wants — and does it. And its knowledge comes from understanding its environment.

The ruthless wasp, wishing its young to have fresh food at birth — forthwith stings its prey into a state of paralysis and leaves it to be eaten alive; birds finding their insect-food growing scarce — instantly flit to Abyssinia where it is plentiful; eels preferring to breed in very deep water, promptly slip down their British streams growing bigger eyes *en route*, for a run of several thousand miles into the unlit ocean depths, cuckoos...

But, trespassing on Dudley’s private wisdom here, it is only useful to remark that he did not use one of his favourite expressions idly. “Cuckoo” was a symbol. Both creatures, omitting what was not important, had picked out the essential point about their hostess — that she was kindly and generous to the point of being easily imposed upon by others. And if Gilderoy turned up his blunt nose at Mildew Place as being hardly among the “houses of the great,” the wise old parrot had a complete reply should he care to use it — that he referred, of course, to hearts, not coronets.

The bird, however, sizing up Mrs de Mumbles, had experienced, as is well known to be a way with King Grey Parrots, a sudden passionate and admiring affection for this lady. Having swiftly sized her up, he then instantly adored her. It was a *coup de foudre.* She enlisted all his sympathies; any help or protection he could give was already hers, without price and whether she asked for it or not. He had noticed the porter's attitude, as, equally, the demeanour of the man at the station and the taxi-driver. He now divined that the char-cook-general, as others of the staff he might encounter presently, were, similarly, all — brigands. He twigged this in the way animals do twig what's going on. Meanwhile, however, he held his beak about it. Time for action was certainly not yet. He possessed *facile princeps* that mysterious sense of "coincidence" by which parrots produce the right words at the right moment. His attitude just now, therefore, was *verb sap* and Leave it to me. He was content with that.

On the threshold of losing consciousness, however, he was able to note, and with pleasure, that his friendly advances had been understood and appreciated and that his passion was reciprocated.

"He's talking — talking to *me!*" he caught just before he took his happy forest slope in dream. "Oh, the adorable bird! What a darling! I shall simply love him!" Then, following him into sleep, as he was carried gently across the corridor: "It'll be warmer for him in my bedroom... and I must get him a bigger cage..."

Warmer it certainly was, he dreamily observed, since a large coal fire burned fiercely and all the windows were tightly closed.

Mrs de Mumbles — Leopold — born of a Russian mother, was the widow of a rich and distinguished man, so occupied with his distinction during life that he omitted to leave her enough to live on after his death. Ignoring this fact, however, she flatly refused to change her scale of existence. She was, therefore, invariably in debt, even for butter, medicine, milk and fish. Her scheme of life, moreover, did not include boredom as an ingredient. Her flat, for all its murk, its lack of space, was a social centre of sorts, herself its attracting focus. She possessed that vitality which defies the years; she radiated kindness, sympathy, love of her fellow-men, provided they were interesting. Her *joie de vivre* was seen as quenchless. She was young. Divested now of numerous outer wrappings, it was obvious that, if oddly shaped, she was yet of a neat and lively figure. Also, as the parrot was quick to discover even in sleep, she was voluble, particularly on the telephone, which he labelled at the very start with faultless diagnosis her "*sine qua non.*"

The service of the flat, to glance ahead a moment, was irregular, exotic, uneconomical; instead of one efficient servant, there was a horde of helpers, called in as occasion required, and, naturally, self-helpers, too. Chief of these, and the one fixture, however, was the char-cook-general, Mrs. Dibbs, wife of a Kilburn policeman. And Maria, semi-permanent helper, was their daughter.

Now Dudley, with his instinctive discernment developed by long experience, disliked Mrs. Dibbs and Maria as whole-heartedly as he liked their mistress. From the latter's habit of talking to herself, regardless who was present, he quickly selected a word he felt described them faithfully. Thief he already knew, of course, but "*ce sont tous des brigands,*" being in constant use, supplied him with this extra word. He soon came to use the two together, adding a sea-faring adjective that mixed rather well, he thought: " — thief brigand," had a sonorous quality that pleased him.

It was the telephone that dragged him back from his dream of scented forests where he was at peace. During his happy nap preparations for a tea party that afternoon had been in progress, and he woke to a consciousness that the bedroom was rather crowded. Mrs. Dibbs and Maria were admiring him, the porter, holding a larger cage, was at the door. Maria, he instantly realized, was a horror. The porter he had already judged. Gilderoy, the bird noticed the moment he opened his eyes, was nowhere.

His eye, wandering further, took in other details swiftly. One side of the room, thus, consisted almost entirely of bottles. These were of every conceivable shape and size, pasted with multicoloured labels from a startling red to a dingy pink, and containing liquids, powders, pills, salts, crystals and cachets. They were medicine bottles, evidently; the shelves of an open cabinet were packed; the wall was like a chemist's shop. His hostess, the parrot drew the obvious deduction, was ill, very ill, ill with countless complaints. And this intensified his sympathy with her. Was not he himself, as Greene mentioned, liable to plague, dysentry, pneumonia and fits! He could have a cough and take drops for it as well as anyone.

On the other side of the room he saw a tall-boy, books arranged neatly on the top; there were not many of these, but they were well thumbed, evidently in constant use. Having lived himself for years in a library, he knew how revealing books were of their owner's character, and he now noted with interest the lady's sources of daily inspiration. There was, thus, a telephone book, a peerage, a Christian Science Bible, a stout volume of *Your Health and How to Keep it*, and a *Who's Who.* At the end of the rack, leaning away from these well-thumbed volumes, as if contemptuously, was a stately book whose pages seemed uncut. Glisteningly new, it bore Cambridge University Press upon its back, and its title was *Plato: The Symposium and The Pheadrus.* It looked, Dudley decided, extremely handsome.

Next he fell to examining his new cage. It held a water receptacle, a seed-pan, a good thick perch, but no bit of hard wood for him to bite. It was clean and airy, however. He began exploring it. Climbing to the top, he clung to the curved bars and swinging gently with his head to the floor, regarded the world upside down, and found it good.

"Dudleydudleydudleydudley," he commented in his happy little voice.

Mrs de Mumbles, being at the telephone, did not notice the remark, but Mrs. Dibbs, coming in at that moment to fuss about and see how things lay — loose little things, as it were — forgot her original intention and came up to observe the bird at close quarters.

"Ain't you just a luffely birdie!" she mumbled, smiling at him. "And such a 'andsome red tile you've got, 'aven't you now!"

Her perfume, as her quality of voice, offended Dudley, so that he made no reply, merely returning her stare from his upside down position. His frigid glare must have disconcerted anyone less thick-skinned. He looked through her as though she was not there. He ignored her. He was studying her, none the less; his mind was not idle; he was debating whether it was worth while to say anything. And while reviewing various phrases, yet selecting none, Mrs. Dibbs, as was only right, continued her flow of admiring praise.

Her mumbled utterance, however, was completely drowned by a torrent of vociferous speech across the room.

“Hullo! Are you there?... Who’s speaking?... No, I’m Mrs de Mumbles... Wrong number... Ring off, please... Exchange, I asked for Mayfair not Victoria.... Bother! You’ve cut me off again.... Hullo! Give me the supervisor.... *Ce sont tous des brigands’*. Hullo! Hullo...!”

She turned slowly like a top while her song continued, till the long cord entangled her, and Dudley, watching with his other eye, wondered what this particular illness was and which bottle she would presently seize from the cabinet and gulp down with a wry grimace. For he knew illness when he saw it, and all his sympathy was stirred.

“Any hope, Doctor?” he gabbled softly, choosing a sick-room phrase from earlier days. “‘Ave a good time!”

“I shall complain to the directors! This service is atrocious! That’s the third time you’ve given me the wrong number...!” drowned his little offering, as the lady began to turn in the opposite direction, passionately unwinding herself again. And it was as she turned, presenting her back to the room for a moment, that Dudley saw a thick, dirty hand move cautiously towards the tall-boy behind him, where the pile of coppers lay ready for the telephone box. He watched this hand, he saw the fingers stretch, he observed them push two pennies close to the edge, he heard the coins fall soundlessly on to the soft floor carpet, and the same moment the hand was quickly withdrawn, and the cumbrous figure of Mrs. Dibbs stooped to pick them up. But she did not replace them on the tall-boy, the hand went towards her apron pocket instead. At which instant, using his marvellous sense of coincidence, Dudley produced a loud sentence that, he felt, was appropriate: “ — thief! — thief, brigand!” he bawled in a rough male voice.

Startled out of her wits, trembling, she jerked herself upright. She said things. She was under the impression that she spoke under her breath, but her excitement was such that her language was audible far beyond the cage. Mrs de Mumbles heard and turned sharply, her telephoning finished for the moment. She was angry. The char-cook-general faced her smilingly.

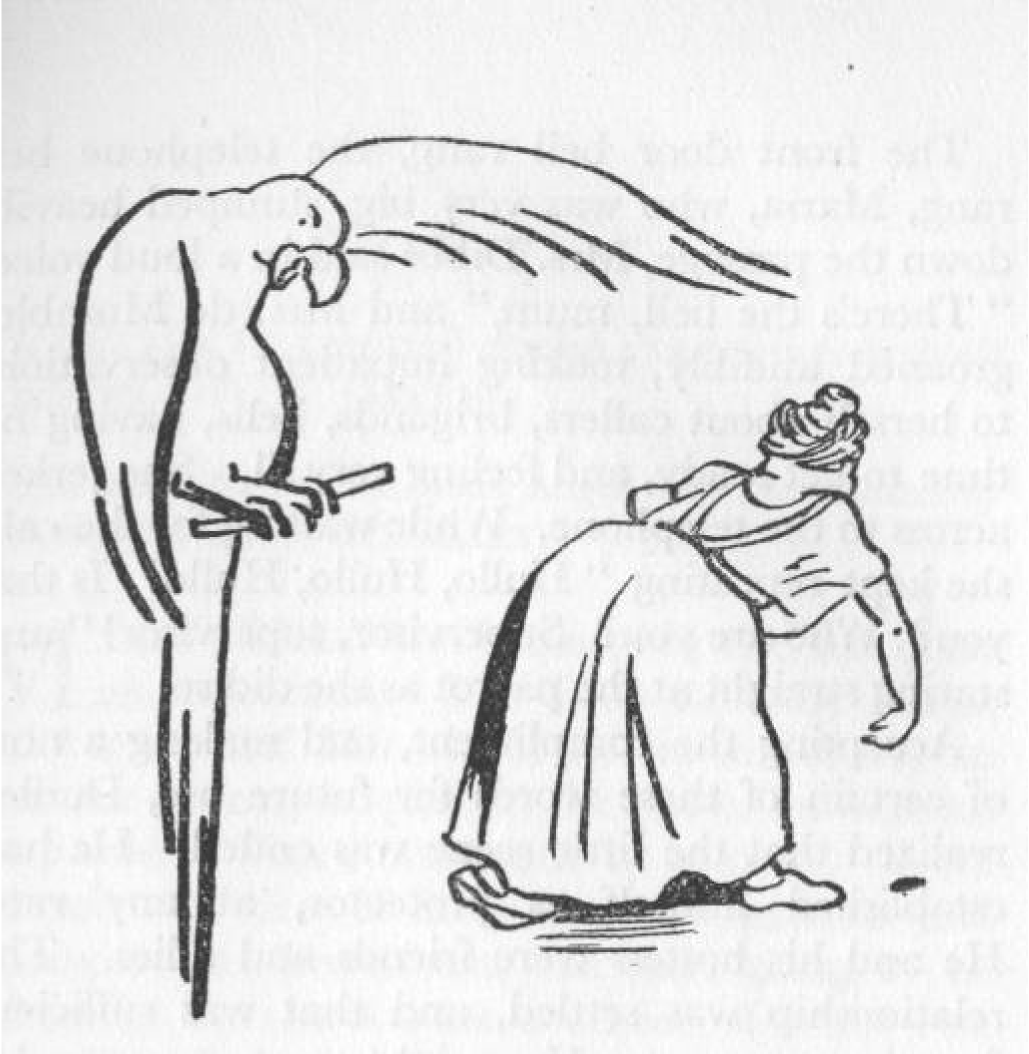
“Vs talking, mum,” she said calmly.

“Oh, it’s the parrot!” exclaimed her mistress.

“I thought at first it was—” She stopped abruptly. A char was difficult to replace, wages were owing, too. “It *is* a talker, isn’t it?” she finished blandly.

“Gilder-roy! Gilder-roy!” screamed Dudley in his shrillest tone.

“Oh, dear, we must stop that squawking,” cried Mrs de Mumbles, clapping her hand to her ears. “I wonder what he wants!” When she uncovered again the word “thief” was once more in the air.



Mrs de Mumbles smiled in spite of herself, and Mrs. Dibbs observed the smile.

“It keeps on saying ‘Gilderoy,’ mum,” she informed her employer, getting her word in first, “so that’s per’aps the name of the family where ‘e lives. If it was put in the advertisement — .”

“Thief, brigandthief!” yelled the parrot simultaneously.

“These birds ‘as their naughty wyes, I’ve ‘eard too, mum,” Mrs. Dibbs tried to drown him. “They steal a bit sometimes.’E’s been told off before now, I shouldn’t wonder.”

The front door bell rang, the telephone bell rang, Maria, who was very big, stumped heavily down the passage, Mrs. Dibbs said in a loud voice, “There’s the bell, mum,” and Mrs de Mumbles groaned audibly, making impatient observations to herself about callers, brigands, bells, having no time to get ready, and feeling very ill. She jerked across to the telephone. While waiting for the call, she kept repeating “Hullo, Hullo, Hullo! Is that you? Who are you? Supervisor, supervisor!” and staring straight at the parrot as she did so.

Accepting the compliment, and making a note of certain of these words for future use, Dudley realized that the little scene was ended. He had established himself as protector, at any rate. He and his hostess were friends and allies. The relationship was settled, and that was sufficient for the moment. He might now resume his interrupted nap again. He promptly did so. A moment later, eyes closed tight, feet planted securely in the centre of his nice thick perch, he floated back to the green branches with a forest of green leaves. A scented wind blew softly through his feathers, the sun was hot, countless pals and cronies squawked to him across the pleasant shade. One in particular, with bright eyes and gorgeous tail, floated down towards him through the sparkling air and perched on the swaying bough at his side. They were close enough to touch beaks and feathers. He caught the plash of a purple sea far, far below. His golden dreams rose up and swamped him. He dreamed of his mysterious Work....

CHAPTER X

IT WILL SOON (in captivity) develop a surprising sharpness of intellect. — W. T. GREENE.

God made the cat that man might have the pleasure of caressing the tiger. — M. Méry.

MEANWHILE the business in the flat went on in earnest. The Press said the season had begun, and Mrs de Mumbles had come up from the country to prepare for one of her famous tea parties. There was much to be done. From the point of view of the helpers, permanent and otherwise, she herself was the chief thing to be “done but she was too occupied with her own immediate duties to bother about this. The invitations had gone out. She had to get herself ready.

These duties she performed to the incessant accompaniment of front door and telephone bells. Adroit from long practice, a certain system somehow emerged from the confusion. The noise, being continuous, did not disturb the dreaming bird who, even in sleep, kept one eye open, and both ears certainly. At intervals, thus, though too softly, sweetly, to be audible, he would say “Cuckoo” and “Hullo,” the latter sometimes extended into “Hullo, supervisor.” Mrs. Dibbs and Maria threw him vicious glances in passing. They, too, had their plans. Pickings on entertainment days were good. Mrs. Dibbs he had at once christened “Ma.”

The stream of callers continued steadily till noon. A female secretary, engaged for these occasions, arrived to check over the morning’s post quota of acceptances and refusals; a masseur, to keep Modom’s body supple; an old Hungarian woman to manicure her nails; a coiffeur to arrange her hair. The confectioner brought cakes, the milkman cream, the florist flowers, all demanding cash payment at the door. There were scenes, long noisy arguments, language of a kind, and then the difficulty of settling these trifling sums in cash, for no one ever had any change, and pencils for signing receipts were also lacking. Coiffeur, masseur or manicurist supplied these requisites. There was a steady coming and going of messenger boys, and not a few tradesmen who refused to leave goods until “amounts previously owing” were settled in cash. Telegrams arrived as well, and a man with six extra chairs. Maria, who had “Jest looked in in case Mother wanted a ‘and,” supervised the arrangement of these latter in corridor and drawing-room, while Mrs. Dibbs, with her gift of ready talk, managed the more obstinate among the collectors. It was a lively and tumultuous morning. Towards noon arrived, too, a smart maid, borrowed from a friend, who was to announce the guests, and her married sister, who was to preside behind the tea and coffee tables.

When the day was over, none of these would retire without their pay in cash, nor without various pickings of one sort or another. Maria, in particular, invariably withdrew to Kilburn, her naturally ungainly figure swollen to conspicuous proportions. Even jampots had been known to retire with her — before Dudley came on his kindly little visit.

Mrs de Mumbles, though aware of the general situation, accepted it with a kind of tolerant grumbling. Perhaps she was too lazy, perhaps she wanted her energy for other things, or it may be she felt herself unable to cope with it. She had allowed the system to grow upon her till it seemed impossible to put it right without involving a disruption of the little impecunious household. She would be servantless, no shops would bring supplies. What fluid money she had available she needed for telephones, messenger boys and helpers. Live and let live, was the result.

“They’ll all adore the parrot,” she observed at intervals. Dudley would be a great addition to her party, a kind of surprise. “They’ll think I’ve taken to a pet,” she chuckled. “And he’s such a handsome bird, too. I wonder where he escaped from, the rascal!”

“‘e’s a biter, mum,” ventured Maria, in the room at the moment.

“A biter?” cried Mrs de Mumbles. “How do you know?”

“You can tell from ‘is eye,” Maria informed her. “It’s a wicked eye ‘e’s got.”

“Do they hurt?”

“To the bone, mum, with a reel biter,” returned Maria, beginning a long story about blood poisoning.

"Then you'd better not go near him," Mrs de Mumbles cut her short. "Parrots know whom they like. They don't trust everybody." She still chuckled inwardly over the bird's recent announcement. "I wonder whether he's a male or a female?"

"Oh, male, mum, I shouldn't wonder," said Maria, choosing instantly. It seemed safer on the whole, she thought. "'E looks a 'e," she added. "The language, too."

"Then he won't breed in here," suggested Mrs de Mumbles vaguely.

"Not 'ardly, Mum," agreed Maria, "though some birds, I've eard, do lay in captivity, when they've got a mind to."

"What — eggs?" enquired the other, surprised.

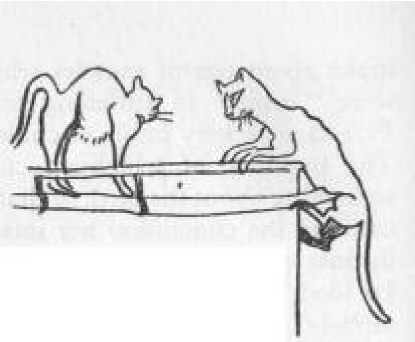
"Before dying," Maria informed her. "It's a sign of death, they say, because my father, 'e knew a bird once..."

"Please see about the chairs, the extra chairs," Mrs de Mumbles again cut her short. She was listening to something the manicurist was saying about the bird's great beak. When beaks grew too long, the old Hungarian explained, they had to be cut, or the bird could not bite its food. She didn't do that sort of thing herself, but she knew a man who might see to it, perhaps. Most of the visitors to the bedroom that morning had something to say about the new visitor. The coiffeur, praising the plumage, asserted that it needed oil. He had some very special oil for feathers he could send along. The masseur spoke about parrot muscles which, he explained, were "subjec' to stiffening owing to catarrh." Parrots were very liable to chills and rheumatism. The majority of telephone calls, too, included something about the bird, so that Mrs de Mumbles came to the conclusion her unasked visitor was a distinct acquisition that she must try and keep. Its food would not cost much, the cage she had already. And, luckily, she kept no cat. For several telephone calls had referred to the danger of the London cats.

The gist of all this idle chat had been duly absorbed by its principal subject, for Dudley's hearing, as explained, was marvellous, even in sleep. It was flattering, he accepted it with modest pleasure. To be the centre of interest was his natural due.

It was a reference to the London cats that first drew him away from his happy forest of dream and turned attention to something other than his own person. Cats — London cats — Gilderoy! Where, all this long time, *was* Gilderoy, he asked himself? But he found no answer, he dismissed the matter from his thoughts at once. His eyes opened for a second, encountering the head of his hostess being coiffed a few feet away, and gazing a moment at her, a phrase from the intoxicated scholar's household occurred to him. "*Absit omen,"* he said very softly, then closed his eyes again and returned to his companions in the trees, preening his feathers a little before he did so.

Gilderoy, meanwhile, had made the most of his opportunities by leaving the flat — he knew an "*appartment*" when he saw one — and inspecting the roofs in the immediate neighbourhood. No one had yet noticed his presence. He made his exit by the kitchen window from what he considered an overcrowded dwelling. Before he did so a mouse in a quieter bedroom had also left the flat, and his tongue had sampled the quality of the London milk as well. He was feeling his oats accordingly, and the London roofs this fine March morning afforded him fresh air and entertainment. He felt pleasantly stimulated, full of beans he called it. Later, of course, he would have to be introduced to his hostess and the staff, and the parrot's help might be needed. He knew the bird would be the centre of attraction at first, and he was best out of the way till this nonsense was over. He resented a little, perhaps, his friend's habit of monopolising interest, but his native indifference soon mastered this. The fuss people made about the old bird he considered absurd. He must be a female after all, he decided.



His red head occupied with these reflections, his patched eye keenly roaming, he explored the roofs within easy access, observing numerous other cats where human eyes, among this forest of chimneys, would have seen no living outline. He judged these instantly, picking out friends and enemies, and knowing male of female at a single glance. Exits and entrances he likewise noted, ways of escape and corners where to hide.

Nothing eluded his vigilant optics. His whiskers twitched, his tail went up, he shook his paws like lightning. He yawned, he stretched, he turned in slow examining circles. Occasionally his eyes peeped upwards into the air where swallows darted and pigeons wheeled from loftier buildings. But no expression showed on the flat ugly face. The soft blunt muzzle quivered very slightly, the bright unwinking eyes took in the facts. No more than that. Observation was detailed, absolute, comprehensive, but no action resulted.

For Gilderoy, despite his appearance, felt that birds were a line of adventure it was nicer not to explore too closely. It led too near home. Instinct, of course, was instinct, yet he recognised here a danger zone. He had a feathered friend; friendship and appetite, unless some day the *force majeure* of exceptional circumstances insisted otherwise, he must not combine. The claims of friendship, though irksome sometimes, must be respected. Gilderoy did respect them. He was a decent beast. There was a kind of intimacy that intruded too closely upon privacy. He drew a line. Dudley, in any case, he felt sure, was pretty tough. His age alone was unattractive.

Choosing now a dizzy edge, with a drop of fifty feet into a courtyard below him, he dozed comfortably in the morning sunshine. The grin of content seemed carved upon his flat face. The cheeks were not puffed, the whiskers motionless, the tail lay coiled among his tucked-in feet. It's tip hung in space. There was nothing to distinguish him from an ordinary stray London cat, numerous specimens of which were doing precisely what he was doing. All the Mildew Place cats, it seemed, were taking their morning sunshine on the tiles. Each one of the horde had, likewise, noticed Gilderoy and sized him up in a twinkling. He was not to be trifled with, they saw. The London freemasonry was a highly developed organism.

“None of them's got a King Parrot for a pal,” was Gilderoy's last reflection under his flat-topped skull as he dropped away into a pleasant cat-sleep on his dizzy edge.

And while the two uninvited visitors was thus each minding his own business in his own quiet way, behaving admirably, the Tea Party in the flat below began to move. The table was spread, the guests arrived, Mrs de Mumbles receiving them, the flood of conversation roared. To Dudley, listening, it was like the roar he once knew on the parrot's peak in Princes

Island, when the whole vast spread of his native forest, stretching to the sky, echoed with the squawking, screaming concourse of collective speech.

His cage was placed where all could see him, and the story of his capture, exaggerated out of all recognition, was given over and over again, gaining new detail with each repetition. He had, apparently, bitten the porter, made countless eloquent remarks, had whistled, sung, spoken several languages, and, since he was now happy and comfortable, had obviously escaped from a home where he was not kindly treated. Dudley, the Grey King Parrot with the red tail, was admired, petted, coaxed to speak, then abused for his obstinate silence, by numerous visitors of either sex.

“Why should he talk if he doesn’t want to?” said a big, eye-glassed man from one of the embassies.

“They know when they’re well off,” commented a lady. “They’re uncanny birds. My husband once...” and she slipped into an interminable and pointless story about a bird that proved to have been, after all, a mere cockatoo.

“They live for ages,” remarked another, “some say for a thousand years—”

“And no one,” interrupted a third, “ever knows their sex, I’m told.”

“Because both sexes lay eggs,” commented a fourth, “even in captivity.”

“It’s lucky you don’t keep a cat, Mrs de Mumbles,” from a fifth, “proverbial enemies, aren’t they?”

Dudley, listening to the chorus of chat that never ceased, gave no sign that he did so. Aware that he was the observed of all observers, he remained adorable, but silent. He kept himself to himself; it was quite enough that he offered himself for admiration. Mute and dignified, he watched the game, the one unpardonable fault in which, he noticed, was to be without speech. To have nothing to say was unforgiveable. The players, even when they said nothing, always talked, and it was better to talk all at once than not to utter anything. Yet Dudley, if superior, did not emphasize it; if bored, he did not show it. He watched ringed fingers thrust tentatively between the bars; heard female voices assume a childish babbling tone as though they addressed a baby in its perambulator; listened also to numerous remarks about parrots in general, and about himself in particular that showed abysmal ignorance, yet he betrayed no hint of what he thought about it all.

If depressed and weary, he mastered himself and the situation in this happy way — by an impenetrable silence that was not without its grandeur.

Occasionally, without visibly moving his beak, he gabbled to himself, but so low that his "*adnauseamadnauseamadnauseam*" was not audible; and beyond this heavenly gabble he uttered no single sound — nor meant to until the right moment had arrived, and this right moment, it turned out, was the tail of the noisy overcrowded party.

The majority of the guests had left; the rest hovered in the narrow hall over endlessly lingering goodbyes. These, as in his own practice, should have been brief, effective, neat, but this final little group made them verbose, incoherent, silly. A good exit-sentence seemed beyond them, they hovered over mumbled insincerities; the bow-out smile of their hostess, produced at the wrong moment, became a set grimace, so that Dudley, watching the prolonged performance, having already disliked the entire gathering, now positively felt loathing for its disappearing tail. Would it never end, this wriggling, noisy tail?

With the dignity due to perfect inner and outer poise, he observed the wearisome detail from the middle of his perch, the head cocked a trifle sideways, eyes boldly glittering, alert but undemonstrative. "I," his attitude suggested, "when I've had enough, just withdraw with my little bow and my kindly smile. If I add a word, it is a brief one, plain perhaps, but courteous. And on this, I retire!"

Several of these guests included him in their long farewells, waving a hand, a glove, or tweaking the bars of his cage. He was voted a "fine bird, but uninteresting because he wouldn't perform." A performance, certainly, he had not granted, for like any other artist he was not to be won too easily. Thus, only at the eleventh hour did he grant his favours to the late group in the hall, considering that the right moment had come at last.

He now, therefore, suddenly produced one of his best numbers with startling abruptness, entirely unprovoked, and without a hint of warning. So unexpected was it, indeed, that the women sprang back, taken completely by surprise. One of them screamed, a second stopped her ears and shut her eyes tightly but left her mouth wide open. The others, male and female, gasped and stared. Dudley, as intended, had made a really great impression.

His opening note was a penetrating shriek of such violence that the rubbish and bric-à-brac hanging on the walls positively rattled. This piercing shriek, rising and falling, was repeated seven times, and immediately following it, but in gentler and more musical tones, came the syllables he loved so dearly:

“Gilder-roy! Gilder-roy! Gilder-roy!”

There was affection in the voice, there was longing, passion, there was a note of summons, but there was a note of warning, too. Seven times in rapid succession the lordly bird produced this poignant call.

And the owner of the name, having long since left his dizzy edge and now biding his time in a cramped space beneath a plush sofa, heard it, and knew his hour had struck. His friend had not forgotten, much less failed him. It was the psychological moment for his introduction. His uncanny instinct guided him infallibly. If he now showed himself it must be obvious to all that he was the parrot’s friend, and as a result he would not be kicked out into the street. On the contrary, he would be welcomed. He decided to act.

Gilderoy, therefore, in all his ginger frightfulness, puffed cheeks, tom ears, sprayed whiskers, flat skull, lean skinny back and unkempt tail — Gilderoy, in his blaze of auburn beauty, his patched eye squinting more than ever — emerged. He came into full view, marched across the hall, neatly picking his way between brown and buckled shoes, leaped soundlessly on to the table where the cage stood and then, to the amazement of everybody, deftly inserted a velvet paw between the bars within easy reach of the parrot’s deadly mandibles.

There was a collective gasp. There was a hush of admiration.

It was the signal for a fresh outburst of human voices. Surprise, laughter, approval and dismay, each had its turn. One lady, subject to catphobia, stifled a scream and took her departure instantly, hardly finding breath to say good-bye; a second having already collapsed upon a broken chair, collapsed upon it again; others cried loudly: “A cat! A red cat! There’s going to be a fight!” and asked where it came from.

Gilderoy’s move, that is, produced exactly the impression he had calculated.

“Why, I do believe they know each other!” cried a discerning artist in a stock collar. “Gilderoy, of course, must be the cat’s name. Look at them, will you? Just look at them!"

"Don't touch them! Don't interfere!" exclaimed others. "Just watch!"

For Dudley, faithful comrade that he was, rose gallantly to the occasion. He had known the warning call would reach the cat no matter where he hid, and his friend's trick was plain as day to him. He did not fail that friend now. Ashamed, perhaps, of his ruffianly appearance among these well-dressed folk, he played the game. "Dudley," as he loved to assure himself, "is not a snob."

When the velvet paw, therefore, came toward him through the bars, he gazed down at it with a moment or two of careful contemplation, then edged delicately along the perch until he reached it, lowered his dangerous beak very slowly, felt the paw with a tiny rubbing motion to and fro, and — tenderly kissed it.

"Good-bye for the present," he then remarked in a quiet version of the Vicar's voice, but so low that no one seemed to hear him. The chorus, besides, drowned all except the most penetrating tones. The entire group applauded, the men drawing attention to the fact that the animals were obviously, if mysteriously, good friends, the women giving birth to expressions of ecstatic adoration that betrayed the maternal instinct lurking even in the dimmest females. During which, Red Gilderoy, dropping smartly from the table, arched his ugly back, stiffened his skinny tail into a ramrod, lifted his patched eye heavenwards and, purring loudly, began to rub himself affectionately to and fro against his hostess's pink silk stockings.

It was an inspired performance, and Dudley watched it with a philosopher's attention and the silence of a saint. Loyal thoroughbred that he was, he did nothing to divert attention from his pal. It was the cat's entrance, his sense of drama alone forbade.

"And where did *you* come from?" asked Mrs de Mumbles in a friendly voice, for she liked animals. "I've never seen *you* before!" She stopped to stroke his back. "If you two are really friends I shall keep you, too, I suppose!"

No answer came, but Gilderoy increased his attentions, Dudley's self-obliterating silence deepened. Soon after which, though not soon enough for Mrs de Mumbles who had to dress for an early theatre-dinner, the group took its final leave, voting the Parrot and Cat tea party an original and delightful entertainment.

Mrs de Mumbles found herself, relatively speaking, alone; she had half-an-hour to dress for dinner; she found time, none the less, to give orders for the immediate welfare of her new visitor. One by one the "brigands" disappeared into the street, with their pay in cash, and various extras in their pockets... and ten minutes later Gilderoy was gorging himself with milk under Mrs. Dibbs' eye in the kitchen, she being partial to cats, while Dudley was crooning to himself in semi-darkness beneath a spotty and odoriferous table-cloth spread over his cage.

Mrs de Mumbles, meanwhile, was gradually emerging from a larva-state, through a tight chrysalis binding sheath, into the full-blown glory of a dazzling night-moth. Her friends had sent their car. Nearly an hour later she took her departure, her last half-crown in her hand for the chauffeur, and in her mind a diverting story few of that afternoon's guests would have recognised, to explain her "unforgiveable lateness." Her last word had been a direction, foolish but well-meant, for the comfort and welfare of her new visitors.

"Cuckoo!" murmured Dudley and whistled two bars of his hymn.

The apartment fell gradually into a comfortable and soothing silence. Mother and daughter, after prolonged but fruitless attempts to make "Polly" perform, solaced themselves, first by cursing it as a "stupid beast," and then by eating as many of the sugared cakes and creamy chocolates as they calculated would not be missed. After which, having placed a basket for the "common-looking Tom," they, too, retired, Mrs. Ma Dibbs to her bed, Maria, with bursting pockets, to her policeman father's home in Kilburn, N.W.I.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREY PARROT delights to dwell in companies.... This instinct for companionship, so strong in all parrots, is especially strong in the Greys. — W. T. GREENE.

Thine is the lore of Ra and Rameses.

GRAHAM TOMSON.

THE stillness deepened. An air of expectancy reigned over the silent flat, its focus in this deserted kitchen. It was the moment the two scoundrels had been waiting for — their first free night away from home.

There was already a change in them, something new, an alteration for the better, an improvement, yes. It must be recognised, it must be acknowledged frankly. London life had affected them, each in his own way; it had intensified their processes. They were geared up, their wits sharpened, the intelligence of both biped and quadruped at its top notch now. This effect of cosmopolitan, of metropolitan, life was distinctly noticeable. The friction with so many other minds, after the monotonous lethargy of country existence, told at once.

If this result showed in the cat by deepening his instinct chiefly, until the mass of feline faculties accumulated through the centuries were in marvellously sharpened working order, it showed, with the parrot, in his predominant characteristic — his mind. Dudley, in fact, found his entire store of experience ready to his claw and beak.

All that life had so carefully stored for nearly a hundred years lay within instant reach. His riches of memory, his remarkable gift of speech, his powers of expression burst into full flower. He found he could draw instantly upon any item that he needed. London acted like a forcing house. He summed up in himself, it seemed, the whole collective wisdom of his race. He became the Super King Parrot. His earliest years in the great forest, his sea-faring days, his long period of study with the intoxicated scholar, his intervals in the library of another house, his quiet *villégiature* with Molly at the Muddlepuddle Manor — all these, respectively, and as occasion required, gave up their dead.

And this brightening of intelligence, this intensification of consciousness due to the effect of London's crowded life upon the pair, must be recognised now once for all, since it explains the greater scope and freedom of the creatures' intercourse with one another. There seemed, henceforth, little, by way of idea and exchange of thought, they could not communicate.

This exchange seemed conveyed largely by the eyes, where humans, watching them, might have noticed nothing but a fixed empty stare. It was not so, however. Dudley and Gilderoy had expressionless, but never vacant eyes. Gesture, attitute and silence played their part as well, wireless whiskers and eloquent tail-feathers, while Dudley freely used his many-tongued voice. But eyes, perhaps, said most.

Thus, the deepening silence now over Mrs de Mumbles' kitchen was not an empty silence Gilderoy, slowly uncurling himself from an affectation of innocent sleep, looked cleverly about him. The kitchen lay clean and clear, its utensils glittering in a silvery stream, the rising moon poured through the window above the tradesmen's lift. It was an open window. At his side stood the table with Dudley's cage upon it, shrouded by the spotty cloth. The cat, having taken in every detail at a glance, rose, arched his back, stretched his legs, yawned widely, and began to purr. They were short, sharp, eager purrs, of the kind that usually preceded vigorous action. They were, in fact, an announcement. Gilderoy had a definite end in view. He was about to do something.

The parrot heard these warning purrs, for he, too, was wide awake in his obscure retreat. At the moment, however, he permitted himself no response. He felt a trifle uneasy; he knew that what was coming would leave him out of it, at a disadvantage somehow. He maintained, therefore, that profound silence of which he was past-master, since doing, saying nothing lessened the chances of putting oneself in the wrong. From the occasional pauses in the purring, he guessed that Gilderoy was washing busily, and this washing, he knew, was significant. The cat, he divined, intended action presently of a very decided kind.

As stated, however, the astute and philosophic bird permitted himself no immediate recognition of his friend's preparations; no acknowledgement escaped him; he would not be precipitate. No hint of his own opinion, much less of his own intentions, broke the silence.

"Never enjoys himself!" reflected the cat on the floor below. "Can't — I suppose." To which again, no reply was forthcoming, since Dudley behind his cloth could not see the shining eye that conveyed the comment, and thus had not received it.

"Work?" came from the floor a few minutes later, half challenge and half sneer. The cat, apparently, wanted a sign of some sort from his pal and used the best method to obtain it. As the whiskers sent the message this time, Dudley caught it. He noted the tone as well. There was a pause.

Any reference to his Work touched curiously deep emotions in the King Parrot's breast. A faint quiver ran along his nerves. The little heart almost missed a beat. He was considering his reply.

"If I can't work *here,"* he replied evasively some minutes later, his voice very low, yet admirably controlled, "I can't work—"

He hesitated. Two words occurred to him.

"Nowhere," he concluded, rejecting "anywhere" as less emphatic.

He moved slowly along his perch and pecked a corner of the cloth aside so that he could now see his friend, a bit of the kitchen as well. The moonlight caught his noble head, his beak, and one penetrating eye. Thus partially visible, the coloured cloth about him as a robe, he appeared both impressive and mysterious. Clothed with wisdom and authority, he looked. For some minutes he gazed down his aristocratic beak at his friend, whose assiduous washing he found increasingly suspicious. And, indeed, Red Gilderoy's attitude just then was not exactly a drawingroom attitude, nor, strictly speaking, was it *comme il faut* even in a kitchen. His position was one possible, perhaps, to felines only, as of the acrobat artist who glances at the world backwards along his own spine. One fore-leg rose straight into the air, while a hind-leg projected at right angles.

Dudley prolonged his inspection.

"I perceive," he stated with cold disapproval presently, "that you have an end in view." He relapsed into silence with his air of "What I have said, I have said."

Uncertain whether the remark was anatomical or psychological, Gilderoy chose the latter. He was out of his depth when Dudley indulged this highbrow mood. His friend was being rude to him somewhere, though he didn't quite know where.

"Umph!" came his brief, contemptuous purr. And he went on washing, not even turning his head. His mind was made up. He had, obviously an end in view. A twitch of the upright leg now informed his friend what this purpose was:

"The tiles to-night — for *me!*" he announced, sitting up suddenly, his green eyes blazing. The tip of his tail twitched fiercely to and fro. He glared into empty space.

An ominous silence followed this ultimatum. Dudley became prey to a critical, a superior mood. Faithful by nature, he felt small sympathy with promiscuous *amours.* His own life was austere, though, as a rude man in the library once reminded him, when a week-end flirtation involved a trip to West Africa, enthusiasm must be high, reflection steady, before starting on the journey. Sex, too, should be definitely ascertained in advance.

"I, for my part," he now observed, "am chaste." It was offered as a statement of indubitable scientific accuracy.

"By what?" asked Gilderoy, without looking up.

"Stet," said Dudley sharply, believing it meant a snub, then slipping into the confused gabble in which it was his aggravating way to say extremely interesting things too softly to be audible. Two words alone emerged clearly towards the end: *habeas corpus,* which he considered even more annihilating than "stet."

He was offended, wounded, disappointed. With so much trouble and effort he had brought his pal to London! And now...!

With an air of intense morality about him, he withdrew slowly along his perch till the spotty table-cloth concealed him. But he was of too generous a nature to feel hurt for long. He reflected for some minutes, then forgave.

Cats, he told himself, after all is said and done, are cats, and *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.* There was nothing he did not understand, he remembered. Adventures, for some, are in the blood, though, of course, the finest adventures are those enjoyed — er— "by oneself."

He preened himself a little, comforted, taking a new pose upon his perch. The tail feathers spread out slightly. And Gilderoy, aware of the gist of his friend's reflections, if unable to follow them in detail, noted the altered attitude. He interpreted it with a general accuracy. A thousand stinging replies were open to him, of course, but instead he merely changed the conversation. He was too pre-occupied, perhaps, to be clever at his pal's expense.

"The night is find and dry," he signalled. "My friends expect me." He took a quick lick at an empty saucer. "Here's to Loose Moments," flashed his green eye.

There was a short sharp purr, a thud. He had made his exit through the half-opened window.

"Good-bye for the present," from Dudley, greeted the disappearing tail, followed by a mumbled "O *si sic omnes* and cuckoo bloody hell *ab initio*..." and a softly whistled "lead kindly light." He closed his eyes. He sighed. His claws opened and shut. His tail feathers, since there was none to admire them, drew in. He composed himself. He had, of course, his dreams which never failed him.

It was some time, however, before he allowed his dreams to master him. Recent events, the exit of the cat in particular, stirred deep reflections in his breast, as the occasional faint shivering of the smaller feathers betrayed. That reference to his Work had stirred mysterious emotions that still troubled him profoundly.

What was this "Work" he had to do? What was its nature? Did Molly herself know? It occupied him intensely, but in some remote portion of his being he could not quite reach. He both knew, yet did not know. What could it be...?

The wheels of reflection turned and whirred incessantly in his active mind, yet the secret remained hidden from him. Any reference to his loneliness, to his lack of companionship, to his isolation from his kind, to anything racial in a word, seemed to bear upon it. There was something he had to do, to achieve, to consummate, some job of importance to his race, a significant spot of work he owed as a duty to his kind and ought to achieve before he left the earth, or else admit that he lived in vain. When Molly told all and sundry that he had some tremendous Work on hand, she talked more wisely than she knew. Only, what was this WORK exactly?

He approached the matter indirectly now, aware from long experience that a frontal attack had no effect. A gentle yearning crept into his mood. His outlook over the narrow strip of moon-lit kitchen visible to him was tinged with mournfulness, his mood a minor one.

“What I really miss,” he told himself, facing the naked truth, “is, perhaps, companionship. I have no pal. Gilderoy,” he hastened to add, loyal to him even in his absence, “is all right, of course, but — he’s a quadruped, and has no wings.”

He paused to nibble at his soft breast feathers a moment.

“In the daytime,” he went on presently, “it’s all right. *I* am all right, qui’ all ri’, I mean.” He thought over the statement for several minutes, before he passed it. “It’s the evenings,” he added with emphasis. “In the evenings, I should enjoy someone to talk to, someone who knows — er — nearly as much as I do —— —” he gave a subdued little cough, a perfect imitation of the “ahem!” the Muddlepuddle butler used when he was about to prevaricate—” to someone, at any rate,” his tone more wistful now, “who has heard — as much as I have heard. My evenings, I admit, are lonely.”

The low voice trembled.

“Gilderoy,” he went on softly, “has his own pals — everywhere, but I,” and his voice shook, “I am an exile. I dwell alone.”

To divert attention from himself, he suddenly clasped his beak, one eye peeping downwards between his claws. But the rising emotion would not be denied.

“No one invites me — never,” he ended with a gulping sob that shook his little figure from head to foot, “I never have a party — ever!”

The broken voice, the modulations of self-pity, the appeal for sympathy, above all the sob, were given, strange to say, in a distinctly female tone;

they were, in fact, a perfect imitation of sounds produced in the country by Her Ladyship sometimes when Colonel Sir Arthur, forgetting Dudley's presence, thought himself alone with her. It was natural, therefore, that as a means of controlling his emotion, he now added in a gruff male voice: "Cut it out, my dear! For God's sake cut it out! Sob-stuff doesn't work with me! Cut it out, I say! Last week you were out six nights in the seven!"

Upon which the consistent bird immediately obeyed his own injunction, turning his attention to other matters. He pecked aside the spotty cloth that shut off his world. The moonlight, he saw, had climbed much higher up the wall. The china, pots and pans now glistened on the shelves. He noted teapots hanging by the handles; huge soup-tureens, countless jugs and cups. From inspecting these his eye wandered back to nearer home. He fell to considering his more immediate surroundings with close attention — the interior of his somewhat bleak and dreary cage. Its severity he approved, it matched the ascetic sternness of his nature, of his present life, at any rate.

"My home," he told himself, "is simple, because I prefer it so." He indulged in a very light guffaw. "I have reduced life to its simplest terms," he conveyed by a cock of the head, a turn of the sleek neck. "I need essentials only."

He thought profoundly for some moments.

"To do without," he then pronounced, "is the secret of a happy life. Dudley, my bird," he added, after another passing guffaw, "what you can do without is added to you. And that's why I have everything," he chuckled, *"per contra carpe diem* blast yer gizzard dam."

His roaming eyes glanced about him at the meagre kitchen furniture, while thought wandered reminiscently to other days and other scenes. His long past presented a series of every sort and kind of home. He reviewed them swiftly, shaking his head gently as he did so. Every degree of comfort and discomfort had been his. He had stayed — who more? — in the houses of the great, the connoisseurs, the "tastey," and had experienced that priceless furniture which, being useless, was also comfortless. He had known ancient drawers that would not open, precious chairs intended to be worshipped but not sat in, Period tables and secretaires that shook and rattled when writers, their legs spread-eagled of necessity, tried to use them, and an assortment of antique "lovelies" that adorned the room, yet added teasingly to the nervous discomfort of its occupant. Hours, days, weeks he had spent in chambers that were museums merely, inducing an attitude of prayer rather than a state of soothing hospitality. Vulgar, pretentious, he considered this sacrifice of a living-room to a collector's vanity.

A faint snort passed his tiny delicate nostrils as he thought of it. Having beauty in himself, he, for one, did not need its excessive externalisation. Honest stuff he approved, but it must be solid, useful, practical, above all, comfortable.

He glanced round with a shiver of refined appreciation at the floor, the perch, the shining bars, the little gate. His eye caught the seed-pan with approval. It was one he could easily and comfortably get his beak into — useful, in good taste. "Genuine stuff!" he commented, and climbed down and took a snack. He took a sip of water, too.

"Nice," he approved in a tiny voice, passing his club-shaped tongue round the cavities of his big, hollow beak, as memory brought a passing picture of her ladyship's maid for a moment, the smart young woman who offered him chocolates sometimes. "Yes, naice, distinctly naice."

Having dealt thus with his immediate surroundings, explaining them adequately to himself, he crawled back to the centre of his perch again, and turned his attention to other matters altogether. He closed his eyes...

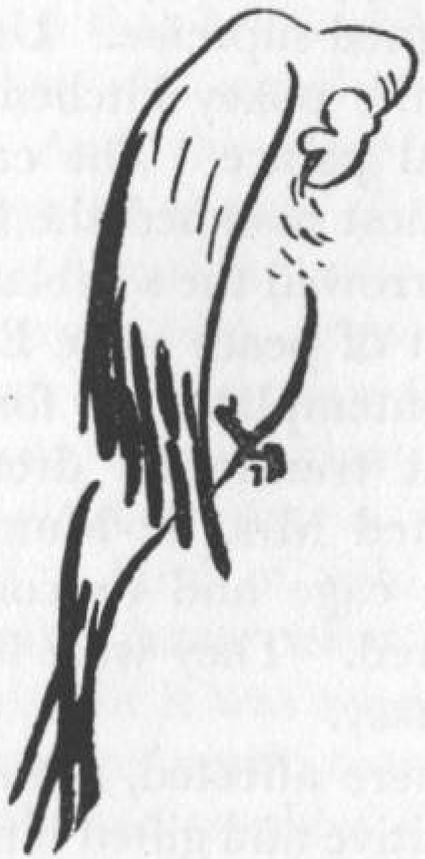
The hours passed. The flat became lapped in deeper and ever-deeper silence. The moonlight drew its pool of silver higher and higher up the wall. The patched linoleum floor now lay in shadow.

While Mrs de Mumbles, at some gay supper table, led her effervescent chatter in the direction of health, disease, smart life and being in the swim, survival of the soul, dressmakers, and eternity, Dudley, marvellous, mysterious Grey King Parrot, dealt firmly and practically with time.

He fell, that is to say, into a sound deep sleep.

Balanced on his perch as few bipeds know how to balance, his head lay down his spine, in a position few bipeds could achieve. His delicate, slim body was erect, yet every muscle in it relaxed and resting. He dominated his surroundings with magisterial and consummate ease, a masterpiece that no one, alas, was present to admire.

As ever, therefore, even in deep slumber, he admired himself.



CHAPTER XII

THE CAT IS not a commonplace creature when it loves. — FEE.

He stood, an ebon crescent, flouting that ivory moon, Then raised the pibroch of his race, the Song without a Tune.

THE hours slipped away, while moonlight and silence reigned supreme. Under their magic influence even the pokey kitchen took on an air of some oriental palace. The cage itself, whose spotty cloth almost assumed the faded wonder of old tapestry, borrowed the semblance of a kiosque, a domed retreat of peace some Eastern potentate had built for contemplation or for secret pleasure. Moonlight, that transmutes dross into precious metal, transmuted Mrs de Mumbles' kitchen in this way. The cage and its contents were certainly transfigured. They wore an atmosphere of dream and fantasy.

This atmosphere affected, naturally, the happy sleep of the sensitive and gifted bird. He dreamed of far blue seas, of silvery foam upon a shore of golden sand; of azure skies, of sparkling, care-free flights from tree to tree. Above him the vast slope of myriad green branches swept to heaven; below him in great conches, mother-of-pearl and opal, he caught the music of the sea's great liberty, the joy of playing fish that leaped to taste the sunshine, then splashed again. This sweetness of life, the wonder of it, this wondrous, gay, careless sense of liberty, poured through him like an electric flood. He heard the leagues of forest rustling; he dreamed of song, of laughter, of little beaks that opened wide for food, of warm soft feathers pressed tenderly against his own breast, of nesting time, of eggs...

Then, gradually, into his happy dream, another ingredient came creeping, imperceptibly at first and unawares, darkening its glory, but presently with more definite effect. The bird's golden fantasy grew troubled, insecure; there fell, as it were, a shadow on that brilliant landscape. The sea turned sombre, the stainless sky took on a hint of cloud. And the sleeping parrot perceived this change by means of his supreme gift of hearing. The disturbing new ingredient was sound. It stole upon him, apparently, from the deep undergrowth of enormous forest, or was it perhaps from even further away than that? It was neither a pleasant nor a soothing sound, although it held a kind of wild, harsh rhythm some might possibly have called musical.

Long past midnight it was when these bursts of primitive, half-savage music entered the kitchen with the moonlight and troubled Dudley's dreams. He stirred in his sleep; he woke; not gradually and in spots as human beings wake — the whole of him passed from the unconscious to the conscious with a single rush. He was instantly awake all over, every nerve alert, every muscle taut, every sense and faculty at the acme of their effectiveness in a single second.

Above all, withdrawing his head from his spine so that he now faced the world, he — listened.

The raucous, half-savage music came through the window from the world of roofs outside. From the desert of tiles this primitive jangle pierced the still night and banged his happy peace away. He heard singing, challenge, battle-cries; there were lovenotes too, abandoned, in poor taste, Dudley thought, without modesty or restraint. Saturnalia, he realized were in progress, high above the sleeping world. On the dewy tiles, in the shadow of portentous yet protective chimneys, an orgy ran its course beneath the great shocked moon.

Listening, he shivered slightly. Plucked straight from his sweetly fantasy of Liberty, this license, as he felt it, jarred him. For, high above the general chorus, he now heard Gilderoy's voice, his singing voice, than which Dudley knew no more horrible sound in all his vast experience of life. Worse yet, it was the cat's erotic singing voice. Red Gilderoy, bolshevik of most abandoned type, when he cast restraint aside, was singing a love-song to some shadowy mate.

The grey parrot with the red tail listened with his greatest concentration. His reactions at first were confused, his feelings thrown into considerable disorder; and a second shudder, more pronounced than the first, ran down his perfect little body. Nothing proclaimed more plainly how deeply he was stirred than the fact that, physically as well as mentally, his balance was affected. He wobbled, saving himself only by a deft movement in the nick of time. He broke into audible and rapid speech, the utterance both troubled and indifferently spaced:

"Gotohellcutitout! Doctoranyhope? Good-*morningdudleynildesperandumgilder-roy*! Cutitout-cuckooitdoesn'tworkwithmeblastyoududley!" he gabbled with tremendous speed, using a mixture of tones and voices, both male and female.

This confusion, however, lasted for a moment only, and he was speedily master of himself again, the recovered self-control showing itself by silence and immobility. Clasping his iron beak with one claw, he gazed steadily at the strip of moonlight which filtered through the worn cloth over his cage. He was seen at his most effective thus. There stole over his dim outline an appearance that magnified him, something of infinity, something inscrutable and magnificent, without beginning and without end, yet something so perfectly proportioned that it was suggestive beyond all possible words. Had Rodin seen him at this moment a finer, if a different, *chef d'oeuvre* would have enriched the world.

Stirred to the depths, the parrot's mind was working. He was thinking — creatively...

The wisdom of this self-effacing King Grey Parrot from the Pico de Papagio was nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than in his frank recognition of what he conceived to be certain fundamental facts of life. These were based, of course, upon his study of the race which had adopted him. He, thus, recognised two human faculties to which no limit could be set: credulity and the power of self-deception. People believed what they wanted to believe. Nor did he make that common mistake, due to lack of humour, of excluding himself; he applied his dictum to himself, as well as to Gilderoy. Believing he was of irresistable beauty, he understood that Gilderoy thought similarly. The cat, he meant by this, found Dudley beautiful.

Another fundamental fact experience had taught him was that no friendship is always and entirely secure. This seemed particularly applicable to the present moment. No friendship in the *whole* world, as he now considered the point more closely, is *permanently* secure.

Life being a process of evolution, all forms as yet imperfect, there is a point where resistance is overcome, where even the noblest traits break down. The honest will steal, the honourable betray, the personal confidante — the pronoun was his own — disgorge her horde of private, trustfully-given intimacies, the virtuous indulge. A stronger emotion must always overcome a weaker one, as the seasick, informed that the ship is about to sink, forget their nausea before the more powerful attack of fear.

Even gentle-men, Dudley was aware, before the assault of prolonged hunger, had been known to devour their own kind with appetite and relish.

From his tree-top in earlier days he had looked down upon a feast or two. He knew.

Trust in a pal, therefore, which accepts blindly — swallows — everything at face value, he considered naive, and upon this fundamental weakness the parrot now turned the full powers of his mind. The flowering of this mind, the stores of memory easily accessible, have already been referred to. He was very practical about it. If his love for Red Gilderoy was steady, his trust, on the other hand, was qualified by the limits his wisdom set to it. There were moments when the fire in the cat’s eyes became neither more nor less than a red lamp of warning, since it announced the birth of an emotion so fundamental as to be threatening, possibly overmastering. All other traits, even the noblest, might yield to its assault. If friendship is built upon moral qualities, appetite remains ever instinctive and all-devouring.

In that “all” and “devouring” Dudley perceived, he himself might easily be included. Appetite, though its reign were brief, would provide no leisure for reflection afterwards. So far as *he* was concerned, it would be too late.

Listening now to his pal’s discordant love-songs on the tiles, he recognized the noise as instinctive and elemental. The red lamps, he knew, were well alight in Gilderoy’s bloodshot eyes. The sweet yearning for union, for companionship, which had lately throbbed in his own little breast quickly waned before the assault of a stronger and more sinister feeling. No union, he realized, could be more complete than that between the eater and his meal. The cat and the swallowed — er — mouse, have become absolutely one.

To put it bluntly, Dudley felt scared. This union-business was unpleasant. And his faculties, now working at top-notch, his sense of coincidence helping, revived a memory opportunely — a sallow faced French governess reading poetry aloud to herself when he was “asleep” in his cage. It was doubtless her tone of voice, rather than a full understanding of the actual words, that made him remember it:

Nuzzing in zis world is single,
All zings, by a law divine,
In anozzer’s being mingle;
Wy not I wiz zine?

And it was the last line he now crooned over and over to himself, as one who whistles to keep his courage up, as he listened to Gilderoy and visualized his sharp teeth and gleaming eyes beneath the moon outside.

Hearing the half-savage orgy, he was glad that he sat inside his cage, secure from any tactile attention on the part of his otherwise trusted friend. What there might be to eat upon the tiles, the bird could not know. Gilderoy might, of course, have satisfied himself already with something, and return his own attractive self again. The parrot took no chances. He now edged sideways along his perch, taking up a position as far removed as possible from all the bars at once. Before settling down, however, he rubbed his formidable mandibles to and fro against the metal rods, sharpening and polishing his beak. His mind worked brilliantly, furiously. Nothing, alas, he discovered, can be larger than its own container. The cage, he considered, was a trifle small. Planted firmly in the geometrical centre, and as far removed from the outside world as possible, he waited. He mastered a slight inner trembling, so that it remained inside. "*Tempusedaxrerum coeterisparibus,"* he whispered, "and the more I can look like a *very* hard stone, the better." He did so.

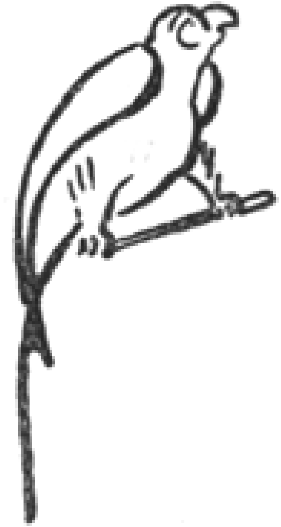
How long he stood thus is difficult to say, but that it was half an hour at least seems certain from the subsequent position of the moon. A faint sound first disturbed his reverie, even before the huge shadow fell upon the cage. The parrot was alert and ready, therefore, for anything that might happen. He perceived instantly that a moving outline cast this shadow; it was a living shape; and this living, moving shape stood on the window-ledge, silhouetted against the moon, now sunk well towards the horizon of the roofs. The outline was thus magnified.

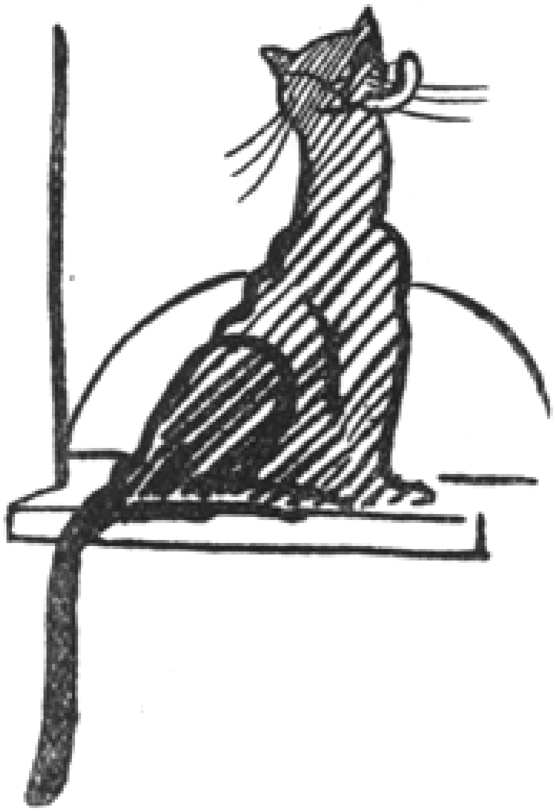
"That's Gilderoy," decided the observant bird.

He did not move; he kept stone-still upon his perch; his head was cocked at an angle, which enabled both eyes, instead of merely one, to watch the situation. The cat, he noticed, was engaged in an occupation he particularly disliked. He was licking his chops. He looked, against the sky, enormous, and Dudley wished passionately that he himself were bigger. Yet even diminutive size, he remembered, if perfectly proportioned, may be as impressive as the bulk of mountains. And this comforted him a little. He shifted one claw a fraction of an inch.

Gilderoy instantly noticed the movement and looked up sharply. He stopped licking his chops. He stared fixedly. But if Dudley believed himself prepared for anything that might happen, he was not prepared for what then did happen. He was the first to admit it. None of his accumulated wisdom afforded a word of guidance in such an eventuality.

Gilderoy, perched on the window-sill, began to sing.





Lifting his flat-topped head so that it was silhoutted against the lovely moon, the torn ear more noticeably torn than before, the whiskers, so to speak, all over the place, he opened his mouth to its full extent, flung back neck and shoulders, and yowled his song into the night, but distinctly *at* the parrot:

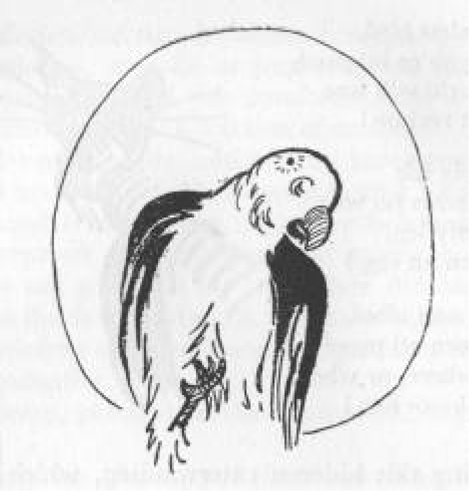
Oh, sexless bird,
When you’re interred,
The world will lose
A great recluse!

O saintly life
That knows no wife,
No pretty leg,

Nor e’en an egg!

Chaste and aloof,
You scorn all proof
How, where, or when,
Or cock — or hen!

During this hideous caterwauling, which Dudley rendered into words in so masterly a fashion, one thing was particularly noticeable — that the parrot, namely, at once memorized the sound, adding a new number to his *repertoire.* That he could have translated the dismal wail into purest poetry, while simultaneously committing the actual row to memory, proved that his faculties were functioning at their very highest. The forcing-house of London life proved, indeed, remarkable. His rendering, moreover, was inspirational and obviously from the heart, not merely free verse which is prose cut up into lines of unequal length without music or rhythm. The words, being of course his own, he accepted as complimentary, their challenge as praise, their insults as playful flattery. Was the sublime bird, perhaps, laughing at himself a little? The loving on the tiles had stirred him to the depths where his mysterious secret lay. Besides the sneer, there was pathos, passion, poignancy in the wailing song, and the language was indubitably his own.



Instinct and reason, which rarely appear together, being mutually self-destructive, now worked in combination in him, and at their highest. His face, as he listened, wore a rapt expression. He trembled. First one section of feathers shivered, then another, as catspaws of wind ruffle a lake's smooth surface in different spots. His claws opened and shut, sure sign of ecstasy. And at the end of the song he spoke, using inaudible tones he did not mean Gilderoy to hear.

What he said, however, was drowned by the noise of an attic window opening somewhere on the roof, by loud curses in an angry male voice and by the clatter of objects hurled violently in the direction of the singer. Three lumps of coal, a child's sandshoe, a chisel and a broken hair brush fell in a rattling shower on the tiles. And Dudley knew the number was ended because, though Gilderoy did not stir an inch, he twitched his ears and did not resume his song.

The shower of objects having likewise ceased, the parrot repeated his interrupted remarks:

"Gratis," he murmured, "satis," adding, as though uncertain which was best, "stet stet stet Dudleydudleydudley jamsatisgratis. " Gilderoy's ears twitched, proving that he caught the murmur, but he did not move, and Dudley's instinct warned him that he was still a bit above himself. Though his attitude on the window-sill suggested a certain weariness, the beast was still emotionally over-wrought, and therefore dangerous. The parrot observed a hint of insolence about the tail he could not approve. He decided to say something else but louder this time. He used Latin when a fuss threatened, or when he felt frightened. When the scholar used Latin, he remembered, the people he used it on rarely did anything aggressive. It made them quiet rather:

“*De mortuis,”* he now offered in a kindly, audible voice, “*nonsequitur born fides locus standi* Dudleydudley Gilder-roy.”

At the sound of his own name, the cat slowly turned his head towards the cage, stared fixedly a moment, then fell abruptly to licking his chops again.

There came a pause of several minutes.

“Tired a bit, physically,” thought Dudley, with relief. “Can’t come in,” he said presently aloud. “I’m dressing errata stetstetstet—”

He stopped in the middle, because Gilderoy likewise stopped that horrid licking of his chops. The parrot, cautious and intensely watchful, waited for the next action, which came almost at once. Gilderoy dropped suddenly from the window-sill and leaped soundlessly upon the table beside the cage. The two movements were so rapid that they seemed a single one. From where he sat, the spotty covering intervened, but though Dudley could not actually be seen, he knew that the cat was staring fixedly, peering at him closely through the semi-transparent cloth. The brilliant green eyes were appraising him. And the parrot was glad that he had recently altered his own position, yet sorry that he could not improve it still further. Being in the geometrical centre of the cage, this was impossible. He therefore contented himself with the next best what he believed was known as *rigor mortis* or *rigor de mortuis.* Whispering this under his breath, he assumed a rigid immobility, at the same time looking as old, as tough, as unappetising as his beauty would allow. His eyes seemed of glass, set in a form of stone no planetary teeth could possibly chew. Though he kept his back to the cat, he was ready for instant action.

It was at this very second that a stroke of luck came the parrot’s way. He caught a whiff of fish, actually, he believed, of herring. Gilderoy, evidently, had found a dust-bin or an open attic window. The cat had eaten!

This emboldened the bird a trifle, so that he dared to move his neck, which was getting a little stiff. He at once also took on a less repellent air, preening a tiny bit, and looking less like stone. He found his courage, he found his voice as well. In order to convey what he had to say, he edged a shade round the cloth and showed himself, and he chose a sentence he had heard a thousand times and one that never failed to induce gentleness in his friend.

“Saucerofmilk! Saucerofmilk! Milkforgilderoy!” he mentioned. It was a question, more than a statement. “Hungry?” was what he really wanted to ask, but this was as near as he cared to get to it.

It worked like magic. With a short, sharp purr of pleasure, Gilderoy dropped to the floor, found the saucer placed long ago by Mrs. Dibbs, stuck his muzzle into it and fell to lapping audibly. Hearing this, and watching the performance, one of the things the cat did delicately and neatly, Dudley advanced a trifle further into view. A sigh of relief escaped him audibly. He felt a little stronger now. His nervousness had passed. It came to him, indeed, that his pal had meant no evil, thought none, that, after all, he had merely been enjoying himself upon the tiles as any other cat might have done. That kind of orgy was natural to him. He had not once thought of eating — er — any bird at all. Dudley, feeling a trifle ashamed of himself, edged further along his perch, showing more of himself beyond the cloth. He would allow the cat a full view of his beauty.

“Perhaps I wronged the beast after all,” ran through his generous mind, “though he did try make a nonsense of me, rather!”

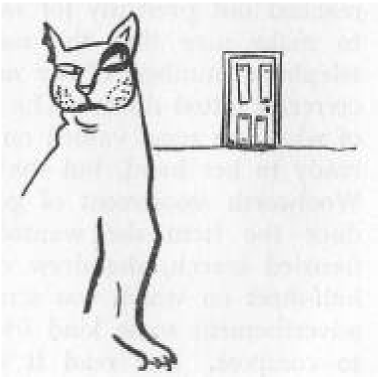
“Good morning! Good morning!” he said pleasantly in Nannie’s voice. “Have you washed behind the ears?”

The tone was conciliatory and friendly. The cat, having finished his milk to the last drop, shook his whiskers rapidly, passed a paw over his muzzle, and sprang up again beside the cage. He sat down comfortably and stared full-eyed at his friend. The next moment he lifted a front paw and shoved it just inside the bars.

“Thankmybloodystars! Fed up to the back teeth,” produced Dudley in a sailor’s voice, as cocking his head, he gazed down at the paw now without a sign of alarm. He moved over a few steps, lowered his beak, and rubbed it against the velvet, then withdrew again to the centre of his perch, while Gilderoy left his paw lying where it was for a full minute longer. Then he, too, withdrew, dropping soundlessly to the floor again.

A difference in the psychology of the pair of ragamuffins betrayed itself here. If Dudley's spirits rose when he was praised and admired, those of the cat remained unaffected by any compliments. To all such cozenings and sweetness, as to anything in the nature of congratulations he was entirely indifferent. It was mere boredom, icy boredom, that made him stiffen his tail in the air, smile, purr, and strut to and fro, rubbing his sides against anything that offered, when humans adored him in affected voices. Since he liked being scratched on the throat and under the ears, or having his back stroked, he gave humans the signs that induced them to continue. When he wanted anything from them, he knew the signs he must produce in order to obtain it. He used the race, made use of it. If Dudley accepted praise with pleasure because it was, of course, his due, Gilderoy accepted it because he had an end in view. With the parrot a heart was touched and warmed; with the cat an appetite was tittilated.

He had stuck his paw between the bars, because he liked the tickling of the hard mandibles against its underside.



He now stood in the centre of the linoleum floor, half way between his basket and the door. He paused for some seconds, then sniffed, puffed out his frightful cheeks, cocked his patched eye towards the passage, and flashed a message to his pal:

"Someone's on the stairs! It's the Frump!"

Dudley, having heard her key rattling in the street door some minutes before, allowed himself a smile of inward superiority — inward merely, because a parrot's face is not allowed by nature to show a smile outwardly. He made no reply. He snuggled his head down into the soft feathers on his back. Gilderoy, strutting delicately as though the linoleum were red-hot, entered his basket and curled up in a ball. When Mrs de Mumbles peeped cautiously into the kitchen a few minutes later, both her visitors were, apparently, fast asleep. It was, according to the clock, just after three in the morning.

The Frump, as Gilderoy's manner plainly labelled her, did not however follow her guests' example and sleep at once. She lay in bed, thinking of her debts, her brigand servants, and of one or two new acquaintances she had made that evening, who must be invited to her next Tea Party. With her Library beside her, she lay making her little plans. She did not open the Christian Science Bible, nor consult the Telephone Book and Peerage on her counterpane, but reached out presently for her bag. She wished to make sure that the names, addresses and telephone numbers of her new friends had been correctly jotted down. The capacious receptacle of what she most valued on earth was, as ever, ready to her hand, but the fumbling among its Woolworth assortment of goods could not produce the item she wanted. Instead, after a frenzied search, she drew out another item — a half-sheet on which was scrawled a copy of an advertisement some kind friend had helped her to compose. She read it over with approval.

It has already been posted. It would appear to-morrow — or rather, this — morning. It did.

FOUND: Red-tailed grey parrot. Name apparently Gilderoy. Mixed language, whistles hymn tune. Owner please apply, etc.

In a neighbouring column of the same newspaper appeared a second advertisement, as follows:

LOST: Grey King Parrot with red tail. Name Dudley. Very handsome. Refined vocabulary. Whistles "Lead Kindly Light." Talks Latin. Finder please communicate. Expense refunded. Muddlepuddle, etc.

CHAPTER XIII

ONE VARIETY ESPECIALLY, called the King Grey Parrot by dealers, having red feathers combined with the grey, is stated by them to make the best talker of all.

W. T. GREENE.

WAKING early next morning, but not so early that Gilderoy had not already improved the shining hour by disappearing, Dudley enjoyed himself with a little soliloquy. He had slept well; the kitchen was warm; his cage was supplied with seed, water, and a bit of hard wood — end of a broken umbrella — for him to bite. He felt good.

Chosen at random from his immense *repertoire,* the soliloquy was Language, but the bird's gift of making even the vilest words sound beautiful has already been referred to. *He* thought what he was saying lovely, lovely, and the entrance of Mrs. Dibbs midway through the performance, he accepted as a tribute. It was sheer admiration, she could not stay away. Her attitude, indeed, proved this, for she listened with avidity, chuckled, smiled, then held her sides till her bulky figure shook all over.

"Get on with it, my Luffeley," she chuckled, bending her tousled head to listen better. "It sounds like 'ome to me. You'd buck a corpse up, you would!"

The language did not frighten her as it had frightened the taxi-driver. She sat down to enjoy it in greater comfort.

Whereupon Dudley promptly stopped, turning one frigid eye upon her with such fixed malevolence that she grew uncomfortable and presently resumed her preparation of the early cup of tea, first for herself and then, some twenty minutes later, for her mistress.

"The milk 'adn't come, Mum," she excused the delay in the bedroom down the passage, "and that bird's languidge is somethin' 'orrible, and not fit for a married woman to ‘ear.” To which there was no reply, her mistress being too sleepy or too lazy to take it in. Mrs de Mumbles, anyhow, had awakened, it seemed, in a far from happy mood. Her nerves must have been on edge, for presently Dudley was the unwilling spectator of a scene. Some fifteen minutes later it began, a quarter of an hour the parrot had passed in motionless silence, deaf and irresponsive to Mrs. Dibbs’ oft-repeated: “Speak up, birdie! Give us a bit of chat! Let ‘er go, my Luffeley, and don’t mind *me!*”

Mrs de Mumbles was heard shouting for her morning paper, screaming, in fact: “Hasn’t it *come* yet? Why *don’t* they bring it? I shall change the shop. This irregular service is atrocious. What a flat! What a *street*! What a *servant*!”

“It’s on your bed-table, mum, with your letters,” Mrs. Dibbs informed her in a lifeless tone.

“Then why couldn’t you tell me so?” asked the irascible voice. “How am I to know unless you you tell me?”

“Yes, mum. I put it there with the tea.”

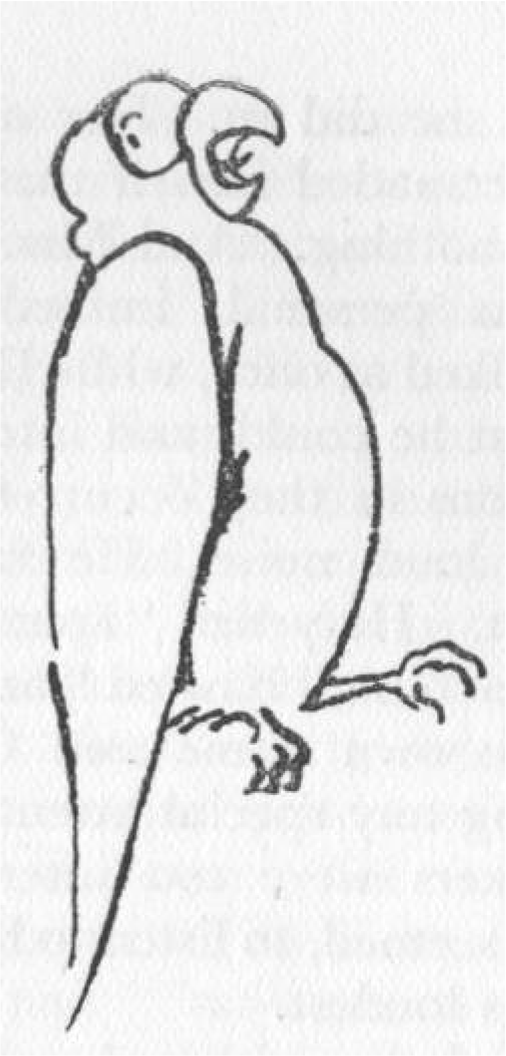
“It was late, anyhow,” asserted the other, as loud as ever.

“The milk come late, mum. The piper was earlier than usual.”

“Give it me, please,” said Mrs de Mumbles crossly, and began to search through the advertisements, when the telephone rang, and she plunged headlong, even at this early hour, into a world of receivers, exchanges, supervisors, numerals, b’s for butter, p’s for peacocks, hulloas, can you hear me, wrong number, you’ve cut me off, and various other material that Dudley felt could be somehow described *obiter dicta.*

He did not utter the phrase, however, but kept it to himself. For about an hour, indeed, he kept everything to himself, and sat very quiet, thinking about Molly, the Vicar, Hawley the butler, the French governess, and others far away at Muddlepuddle Manor House. It was this train of thought that led him to another country-home memory, so that “Lead Kindly Light” became audible in a whistle, so dulcet that his hostess, finding herself in the passage at that moment, came in to listen.

“At ‘is luffely hymn, mum,” explained Mrs. Dibbs.



“I can hear,” was the rather sharp reply. They stood listening, but a moment only, and it was Dudley himself who precipitated the “scene,” He was pleased to see his hostess whom he loved, while he resented being explained by the other woman, whom he loathed. She reminded him suddenly of the sea, and he changed his Number abruptly to one from his ocean days. He did this without warning, slipping from canticle into cursing. It was evident he was guilty of a slight mistake here. He made the change too quickly, perhaps. Humans, he forgot at the moment, are apt to be slow in the up-take, and nine out of ten habitually say “What?” to almost every remark. Mrs de Mumbles, at any rate, carrying her newspaper, clapped it before her face, as though by not seeing the bird she need not hear it either.

“Refined vocabulary, indeed!” she cried, visibly shocked by the appalling language. “But it’s awful — terrible!” She stopped her ears, realizing that the newspaper in front of her face could not prevent her hearing. “It’s the vile servants who taught him that,” she thought. “Disgusting people! *All* servants are vile and disgusting! Don’t I know it... thieves... foul language... liars...!

Only instead of thinking this to herself, as she imagined, she said it aloud, looking straight at Mrs. Dibbs as she did so. Her own ears being stopped, she persuaded herself that her audience likewise heard nothing. And Mrs. Dibbs, taking the remarks as personal, immediately replied. Both women talked at once, while Dudley listened, picking up what he could, and interjecting occasional observations as they occurred to him. He loved a good loud noise. He raised his own voice to meet it. He yelled “splendidemendax” and “deusexmachina,” bawled “anyhopedocter,” followed by his own name and Gilderoy’s, but without drawing any special attention to himself. The other talkers were too interested in their own remarks it seemed, to listen to him, even when he screamed his loudest.

From the cook he gathered a few sounds he rather liked and could easily copy if he wished: “isn’t right nor fair,” he caught, “if one cared to tike it so a hinsult I ain’t accustomed to,” and “like me wiges at once, thus very di,” with “ain’t treating me proper” repeated many times.

“You may pack up your things and go this very morning,” Mrs de Mumbles’ voice rose very distinctly. “Your things, please, this time — not mine.”

“Your things,” repeated Dudley, in a rasping tone, “not mine,” for he liked the sound of the sentence.

Mrs. Dibbs became infuriated. “Are you haccusing me,” she shouted, “of anything, per’aps?”

What then followed was too confusing even for the parrot’s marvellously acute hearing. Both voices shouted at once without an instant’s pause. From his hostess, he selected “search warrant and Scotland Yard... Commissioner a friend of mine,” and from Mrs. Dibbs he chose “slander... damages... slander... damages... I know my rights...” but if he made a note of these, he soon decided, since the pair made more noise than himself, that he would withdraw. The affair had become boring. He retired into his thoughts... from which, some half-an-hour later, he emerged to find quite another atmosphere about him and his cage. The voices were subdued, sugary almost. "We'll say no more about it," he heard, and "'arf-a-crown a week, mum, if you put it that wy'll be all right," and then "you can bring me my hot water now, Mrs. Dibbs," from his hostess as the couple finally separated.

Mrs de Mumbles evidently emerged from the battle half-a-crown down.

"And when the messenger boy comes," cried the lady in the passage, "there's a telegram for him to take. It's about the parrot. Don't forget it."

"I'll see that I get it too, wot's more," Mrs. Dibbs observed to herself when she was alone again, and it was not the water she referred to.

"Ma! Ma! Your things, not mine! Your things, not mine, please!" exclaimed Dudley, copying his hostess's voice perfectly, while the can was filling. He stared out of the window.

"'old yer jaw!" muttered the cook, going out with the can. "I won't 'arf throttle yer, I won't."

"Arfacrown! Arfacrown! Slanderdamages! Your things not mine! Ma! Ma!" followed her down the passage.

Thus, the morning in London town began to pass pleasantly enough, and though Dudley missed his friend, he took what fate offered. He observed and listened. To the various callers he paid little attention beyond noting them, and few of these, in any case, penetrated further than the door, which was kept on a chain. Only messenger boys were admitted inside — diminutive creatures who sat waiting patiently in the dark corridor, whispering remarks to Dudley in the hope that he would talk, then trying to understand Mrs de Mumbles' confusing instructions through the bedroom door. With expressionless faces and wide-open eyes, with "yes, mum."

"no, mum" in piping voices, the mites shot away, invariably saying "Good-bye, Polly" to Dudley as they passed the kitchen. He never replied audibly, but merely cocked his head, staring with uninterested eye. The other callers, he was glad to note, were not admitted. There were gruffvoiced men insisting upon money, still sterner men with blue papers they desired to serve personally, lads with parcels demanding cash payment, a foreigner who came by appointment to value pictures, silver, clothes, a telephone *employé* to mend the box, and another who wished to remove the pennies that filled it to bursting.

To these callers Mrs. Dibbs offered comments according to their kind, comments she knew were effective, since she produced them with such easy, glib conviction: Mrs de Mumbles was ill, she was dying, she was out, she was in the country, she was abroad, or — in extreme cases only — she was "'aving a fit," a "little fit of sorts and the doctor's with 'er." The visitor was asked to call again — to-morrow, next week, when she had recovered, or "it's best to write."

Besides the messenger boys, only one other caller was admitted, though after careful scrutiny — a friend in difficulties, a woman who not only penetrated to the bedroom for a lengthy talk, but left it later with a fur coat and a silver teapot which Mrs de Mumbles had intended selling that very day for her own pressing needs. The friend, however, came first, for Mrs de Mumbles had a large and kindly heart.

Dudley's other faculties, all this time, of course, had not been idle; he not only observed and listened, he reflected, too. He knew, for instance, quite well what a telegram meant. That a telegram had been sent to Muddlepuddle had not escaped him. That an answer might come, he guessed. It did come. About noon, during a little siesta he was taking, he heard his hostess read it aloud to someone in her room, the masseuse, in fact, who evidently detested birds:

"Many thanks for wire sending our butler Hawley to-morrow to identify."

"You'll be well rid of it, Madam," commented the other voice. "They're noisy, treacherous things — with a poisonous nip too—"

"But he likes me — this one," came the decided reply. "He's lively and very handsome. I'd keep him if I could."

“Oh, a he, is it, Madam? Ah! They’re better, I believe.”

“If a man called Hawley comes,” Mrs de Mumbles shouted instructions to Mrs. Dibbs, “you can let him in. He’s the butler where the bird belongs to.”

Having listened thus far, Dudley then turned his head and attention in another direction — to the window-sill, where Gilderoy now suddenly appeared.

“Miaow! Miaow!” produced the cat, and jumping down walked over to the saucer of milk that the cook had left for him, while the parrot watched him steadily with one eye that showed disapproval. It was greed, not friendship, that had brought him back. He was, besides being a most inconsiderate guest, dirty and dishevelled, Dudley noted, as he lapped his saucer dry. There was a new notch in his ear, a tuft of matted hair on the top of his flat skull had blood on it, the paws, as he drank, kept their claws out a little. His appearance, in fact, was dreadful.

But Dudley, noting all this, loved him just the same, for he saw behind externals and knew the cat felt similarly towards himself. He was a faithful pal for all his odd behaviour. It was against his nature to be direct, and all he did was slantwise.

“Ahem!” Dudley opened the conversation audibly. “Cuckoo, Gildy!”

The cat shot a swift glance upwards. His friend, he perceived, had something important to communicate. He finished his milk first, however, then, licking a drop from his whiskers, he sat up and stared.

A violent conversation followed between the two ragamuffiins, although a silent one. Feathers, whiskers, tails, claws, and pose of heads and shoulders conveyed the details. Part of the time the parrot turned his back and gazed out of the window, and Gilderoy, even when most attentive, washed himself. He seemed indifference personified. “I was a sacred animal,” his attitude proclaimed, “before even the Ibis or the Hawk were heard of! I may listen, but I need not show that I am interested!”

Dudley, accustomed to his friend’s little ways, said what he had to say with dignity. A telegram had been sent to Muddlepuddle Manor House, and an answer had been received, Hawley was coming here to “take me back.” He emphatically did not say “home,” nor use the personal pronoun in the plural. “Take me back,” was what he stated.

Having expressed himself fully, he then closed his eyes as a sign that he had finished. He had given the warning, indicating also that he did not wish to be taken away, and that it was up to Gilderoy to help. To the flow of vehement comments the cat then offered, he paid no attention whatever, though he made sure that he heard them. Gilderoy was annoyed, and showed it by saying rude things about his friend's sex, about having brought him to town was enough without having to rescue him from the ignominy of recapture, and about many other things besides.

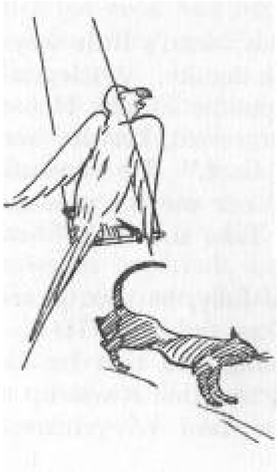
"It keeps warm still," Dudley changed the conversation after fifteen minutes or more. "On the whole," he added pleasantly.

"I'm sweating," agreed Gilderoy.

Dudley, detesting coarse language, assumed an air of heavy consideration.

"Somewhere," he gabbled softly, "there's a true home for each of us, I suppose."

Gilderoy, by rubbing against the skirts of Mrs. Dibbs who had just entered, conveyed that he was independent of any home, and that where he found himself at a given moment was home enough for him. But Dudley, having explained the situation and given his warning, spoke of other matters.



"A bas les Boches! Goodbye for the present! Ma! Your things not mine!" he shrieked at the hated Mrs. Dibbs, and caught the outline of his pal as he shot out again to explore the tiles. He broke into a loud guffaw. "Ma! Ma!" he roared again.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE IS NO answer to most questions about the cat. She has kept herself wrapped in mystery for some 3,000 years, and there's no use trying to solve her now.

VIRGINIA RODERICK, in The Aristocracy of Cats.

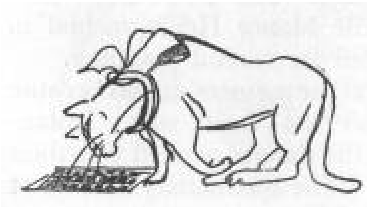
THERE was incessant stir and bustle in the crowded little flat, for Mrs de Mumbles was much occupied socially, and the two bandits were left to their own devices. They knew pretty well what was going on about them. More and more they became aware of their insecurity of tenure. Gilderoy wore his yellow ribbon with an indifferent air of "you cannot adorn the rose," and kept his wits alert. Tiles and saucers of milk were pleasant enough, but danger was in the air and his whole body knew it.

Both creatures realised clearly that they had escaped, that they were being followed, and that steps were being taken for their recapture. A bell would ring... Hawley would enter and enquire for them... they would be taken ignominiously away. Dudley, of course, would play the master *rôle,* for the cat, true to his evasive nature, had attracted little attention. The point was: how was the Muddlepuddle Manor House menial to be defeated? It called for careful planning.

If they did nothing at the moment, it was because idle anticipation was not their way. Instantaneous action when the danger arrived was their immemorial method. The spontaneity of instinct never failed them, and no attack could ever find them unprepared. Gilderoy, with his greater freedom of movement, had inspected all exits, entrances and hiding places. The King Grey Parrot, on his side, heard everything. No sound could escape his astounding ears. There would be steps in the street, shuffling up the stairs, heavy breathing at the door, a bell would ring....

Square pieces of paper, meanwhile, were poked through a hole in the front door and examined by the Frump, while "Hawley... Dudley," repeated excitedly, were sounds both creatures knew only too well. The cat had seen this square-paper-business in other houses. They always portended trouble. Violent action followed their inspection; the human would hold such a paper close to the face, tap it, crumple, even tear it into bits and fling these on the floor for him to play with, while the face made loud noises, the features twisted, the human paced up and down the room.

Gilderoy, thus, was ready for anything that might happen, Dudley was ready, too. If the parrot showed less interest, it was because he was more resigned. He realised that without the cat's help he was rather helpless. The



conditions of life had forced him to be a thinker rather than a bird of action. A pose, his main weapon of defence, could not avail against a menial with a cage; a beak was equally inadequate.

He stared and listened.

Gilderoy, lying on his back, feet in the air, rolling his head this way and that, turned suddenly sideways. "Ain't I just wonderful to look at?" his gesture stated, as he stared upwards at his pal.

"Things are going on," was the gist of the parrot's reply to this pantomime, "I may need your help. I can't get about very quickly."

The cat rolled backwards and forwards, curled, uncurled, purring loudly in a gusty sort of way. "I'll look after you," he signalled.

They stared into each other's faces for five minutes. They were masters of attitude, these two. With humans attitudes were apt to be poses merely, but with themselves they were sincere and eloquent. Their gestures could not lie. By a hundred subtle indications the pair divined that trouble was brewing for them and that their room would be preferable to their company. The more obvious signs have been mentioned, the more delicate and mysterious ones, not easy to describe, may be omitted. It was sufficient that a bell would ring....

They discussed the situation in detail after their own manner, which was by paying no attention to it, and thinking of other things. Gilderoy, thus, presently gave a couple of short, sharp sneezes, stood up, dropped softly to the floor, and marched across to his basket. This he examined intently for some minutes, as though he had never seen it before. He seemed uncertain whether to enter it or not. In the end he came to a decision. He crept in daintily, curled round, and fell asleep.

Dudley, watching him, was alone with his thoughts, and Professor Greene, had he been able to read them, would have hurriedly issued a revised edition of his book with copious addenda. The bird stood rigid on his perch, carved in stone. No feather stirred. The eyes were tight shut. His mighty beak hung sideways. His face wore a hermetic, sacerdotal grandeur nothing earthly could disturb, Mrs. Dibbs' fidgetting least of all. What I have said I have said, was his attitude, though he had said nothing at all.

His mind, none the less, was active, heated even. Gould it last, one wondered? Would this brilliance, this blossoming, constitute him a Prophet among his feathered race, and set up a new standard for the entire genus? Was he to mark a new evolutionary leap? To become, with the centuries, a myth and legend, his name honoured, worshipped, deified by the squawking civilization on Pico de Papagio among the sun-kissed tree-tops?

He glanced down at sleeping Gilderoy and heaved a little sigh. His head cocked affectionately, forgivingly, as he gazed on the disreputable, plebeian ginger cat. "What are *you,* for instance?" he asked, yet without much genuine interest in his eye. "And what are you up to at this moment?" Any moment, he knew, he would need the swift assistance of the cat... a bell would ring.

He was not sure how long he had been in the London flat, for clocks and calendars played no *rôle* in his life, and the stream of time just flowed from dawn to night, from meal to meal. With a hundred years of vivid memories to draw upon, and with all that Molly had said never very far away, his mind was certainly not vacant now.

Life with him was rather an endless sort of business, he felt. His adventures had begun ages before Gilderoy saw the light. They were in the gorgeous East. Some were in the South. Flats in the West were really all one to him, and whether he lived in London or in the country was, after all, immaterial. Gilderoy preferred town life evidently, and that was his own affair. Nothing betrays a character so ruthlessly as the type of thing that stimulates it. The cat was stimulated by tiles, and that was that. Dudley, having the "kernel" habit by nature, extracted the essential meaning of a situation with unerring instinct.

If now, to ordinary observation, he seemed merely in a stupor, it was due to the intensity of his thought. He kept an eye steadily on the sleeping cat. No movement in the kitchen escaped him. His ears were at their best. He even heard the faint rustle of hair as Gilderoy's sides rose and fell in sleep.

From his past in the East and South, his mind jumped abruptly to more recent memories. Molly flashed through him, and with Molly came his Work. And he felt suddenly troubled and uneasy, if at the same time curiously exalted. The importance of this Work occurred to him instinctively. Buried in him somewhere at this very moment, deep in the abdominal recesses of his mysterious subconscious processes, this Work, he realized, was growing in importance. It was coming nearer. He knew a queer faint stirring in his under-self. Far, far down, though not actually in his little tummy, there was increased sensation — not pain exactly, yet something prophesying pain. The Work was coming on, crawling towards achievement, but towards magnificent achievement. And this consummation, when it came, would be recognised by all the world, by Gilderoy especially, but also by Molly, Hawley, the French governeess, by colonelsirarthur, by erladyship, even by Mrs de Mumbles and Mrs. Dibbs....

There was a sound. It interrupted thought. His entire consciousness focussed in his ears. Dudley listened.

But the step on the stairs a floor below, though coming to the door of the flat, was not the one he waited for. A car had called for Mrs de Mumbles and the porter crawled up to announce it. The Frump took her departure five minutes later — for a concert, a private view, a bohemian tea and cocktail party, and an interview with a Dealer who might buy her porcelain Chinese dragons. And the clock struck 4.30. The flat grew quiet again. Its peace was broken only by the constant telephone bell, and by the monotonous voice of Mrs. Dibbs repeating that her mistress was not in, while she noted names, numbers and messages with intentional inaccuracy on a dirty pad.

It was on the stroke of five o'clock that a sharp ring came at the front-door bell, turning the kitchen atmosphere electric suddenly.

CHAPTER XV

"I WISH I knew your trick of thought, The perfect balance of your ways; They seem an inspiration, caught From other laws in older days."

THERE can be no doubt that this King Grey Parrot did recognise one essential truth about people — that an individual, namely, had his own particular field. Within this field, he was intelligent, and might be interesting, whereas, outside it, he became foolish and incompetent, dull certainly. The plumber's mate describing why and how he left his tool at home can excite both interest and emotion in his audience; the same man's description of Relativity could do neither. Mind your own business crystallizes this truth colloquially. To judge a person's area and not tempt him beyond it was a sound rule. No matter how limited one's field, life is more coherent if one stays inside it.

Mrs. Dibbs' field at this moment was sharply defined, and Dudley was interested. What would she do about the bell? Its peal rattled, echoed, then died away.

"That's the front door again," muttered Mrs. Dibbs without interest, and having noted the fact went on reading laboriously about the horrors of degenerate Society in last week's Sunday paper. She had heard that bell before. It differed in no way from the one she answered two hundred times a day.

The Creatures, however, knew otherwise. Both heard it, and both recognised its unusual character. No visitor of the kind the flat expected had pressed that bell. The peal had another quality. It was a stranger's ring.

There seemed no reaction in them, nothing, at least, a human would have noticed. No signal passed between them; there was no need for signals. Gilderoy, curled up asleep in his basket, did not stir. If a faint superciliousness stole upon the parrot's ascetic face, no ordinary eye could have discerned it. Nothing about him moved. He might have been the best marble. *Otium cum dignitate* was the pose he held.

The bell rang again, a longer, sharper peal this time, and Mrs. Dibbs, laying her spectacles aside with a muttered grunt, rose slowly, and moved heavily out of the kitchen and along the passage. She dawdled. She left behind her an ordinary grey parrot dozing on its perch and a common cat asleep in his basket.

Yet “ordinary” and “common” were the wrong adjectives, just as “dozing” and “asleep” were the wrong verbs. Gilderoy, as mentioned, made no movement, no whisker twitched, no quiver of an eyelid showed, the blunt pink nose lay buried among a cluster of soft, folded paws. But the cat, alert at the first ring, was doubly alert at the second. The bell held no mystery for him. And an electric change came over him. Into the centre of his feline soul it flashed with racial power. His innards turned to flame Yet, if the ancestral Tiger in him woke, great Sabre-Tooth, he gave no sign. It was his secret.

Dudley, for his part, helpless in his fastened cage, uneasiness stirring in his ancient soul, perceived this change in his pal, yet failed, for once, to decipher it exactly. His steady motionless eye looked down upon the cat and wondered. Why, from his Library days, a particular memory cropped up, he could not say: “Tiger, tiger, burning bright in the forest of the night, What immortal hand or eye framed thy fearful symmetry?” — slipped through his mind and disappeared. His attention, besides, was in the passage with Mrs. Dibbs. His marvellous hearing never failed him. The person who had thrice rung the bell was nervously clearing his throat. Standing outside, waiting for the door to open, this person now gave a little tentative cough, and the bird recognised that cough. It was the menial from Muddlepuddle Manorouse. It was not the butler. It was what they called in those far-off days the “second-man.” Dudley had heard the words too often to forget them. And his name was Hawley.

He awaited events with the philosophic courage of a centenarian to whom life, after all, can bring nothing new except its end. Gilderoy, his chief hope, did nothing. Whatever the change in him might be, it did not help. The parrot’s gorge, as he observed the unsightly, indifferent cat, rose a trifle. *Non compos mentis* occurred to him, but he did not say it.

The events came quickly.

The front door was opened on the chain. “Is this Mrs. Dumbles’ flat?” enquired a familiar voice.

There was a pause. Mrs. Dibbs was never flustered. “Mrs de Mumbles hoccupies this appartment,” she replied at her leisure, no traces of invitation in her tone. “If that’s oo you mean.”

The man’s voice followed: “I’ve come from Muddlepuddle Manor House. Our parrot’s got away. We answered your advertisement in the paper. I’ve brought ‘is cage along.”

“‘ave you?” returned Mrs. Dibbs, after a monent’s pause, but without taking the door off the chain.

“I’m the butler,” mentioned the man, “‘er Ladyship’s butler.”

Dudley, listening, could visualise the pair eyeing one another suspiciously, yet deriving no accurate information from the inspection. A second’s gaze was enough for *him;* he knew all that was worth knowing in a single peeping flash.

“There *is* a bird what’s come in,” said the woman, cautiously, after a bit. “But Mrs de Mumbles is out just now ‘erself.” She still kept the man standing on the stairs. “If you could call a little later praps—”

“I was to take ‘im home, you see,” explained the other. “On the 5.30. If I could have a look at the bird? He knows me, of course.”

There was a considerable silence.

“If I could get a peep at ‘im,” he went on, “I’d be able to tell at once—”

Mrs. Dibbs cleared her throat hesitatingly.

“And if any reward was asked I was to give it,” continued the voice, “and get the bird home before dark, you see.” He mentioned the train again — 5.30. “Before the cool,” he added.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Dibbs, non-committal, but beginning to yield. “I see.”

The sound of the chain being lifted followed, with footsteps in the hall. Mrs. Dibbs had let the butler in. The faint clang of metal indicated that the cage has been set down on the floor. The door closed, and then the woman’s voice was heard again in a slightly altered tone: “... so Mrs de Mumbles said as she thought praps ten shillings would meet the case," she informed the butler, "seein' the trouble the bird's gone and put 'er to and all that...."

There followed odd sounds that Dudley could not quite interpret, though nothing of the faint rustling and crackling escaped him, and then the man's voice mentioning that it was a warm afternoon, astonishingly warm for the time of year, with a suggestion from Mrs. Dibbs, whose tone had softened, that perhaps he would like a cup o' tea.

"D'you expect Mrs. Mumbles in soon?" he enquired, thanking her for the tea.

"Mrs de Mumbles should be back any minute now," he was informed.

"A foreign lady, I take it, maybe?" suggested the man.

"A splash of dirty blood, I believe," the cook told him rather proudly, yet in a final voice. "A fine cage you've got there," she changed the subject.

Judging by the sound the Muddlepuddle menial was taking off his overcoat. "And a fine bird fives in it," was his reply. "Ten years or more we've had him. That's five years, come midsummer, before I went to Sir Arthur's."

"A male bird, of course?" enquired Mrs. Dibbs.

"Oh, yes, a male all right." The man chuckled slightly. "They're all males, parrots always is, you see."

"I see."

A pause that followed was broken by the man's voice: "My name, by the way, is Mr. Hawley."

"Mrs. Dibbs — I am."

"Mrs. Dibbs," he repeated.

"A good place then, p'raps you've got there?" commented the woman, the tone of voice suggesting pickings.

"Sir Arthur and her Ladyship keeps a fair house," the man told her, while Dudley distinctly heard him sniff. This sniff he used to imitate beautifully, but as no one noticed it, much less praised him for it, he had long since, being a fine judge of selections, dropped it from his *repertoire.*

“He uses a bit of language, your bird, don’t he?” came abruptly from Mrs. Dibbs. She laughed.

The man laughed, too. “Not much he doesn’t know,” he agreed. “He can say about anything he wants to,” he went on proudly, as though it reflected credit on himself. “It’s astonishing what I’ve heard ‘im say — fine language and bad, and foreign talk in Latin, and whistling hymns — oh, he’s a bird in a thousand, is Dudley—”

“He’s dropped a word or two ‘ere,” agreed Mrs. Dibbs admiringly, “but he hasn’t said much on the ‘ole. Keeps hisself to hisself mostly.”

“Ah, he’s got to know you first,” explained the man, “and like you, too,” he added confidingly.

The sounds of the cage being divested of its coverings, then of Mr. Hawley hanging up his overcoat were heard. “You don’t happen to know,” he enquired casually, “how much your lady paid, do you, Mrs. Gibbs?”

The footsteps had been coming down the passage, but now stopped.

“Paid — Mr.’Awley?”

“What she gave for ‘im, I mean?” he explained.

“Gave?” repeated the cook.

“Well, the old bird didn’t exactly walk to London, did he? And he can’t fly, not with that clipped wing, you see. He’s a stolen bird, of course. Someone stole ‘im, then sold ‘im to your lady. That’s ‘ow it’s usually done, I believe.”

“Well, now, I thought that’s wot you meant,” said the woman, after a moment’s pause, “but I wasn’t quite sure. I didn’t want to ‘urt anybody’s feelings, you understan’. Oh, it was nothing much,” she informed him airily. “She give the man a trifle of a pound, according to what she said.”

“A pound,” commented the other. “She didn’t get a receipt either, I presume,” he stated rather than asked.

“As to that,” Mrs. Dibbs replied, “I reely couldn’t say, Mr.’Awley. She keeps them things in a bag. She only came up from the country two days ago, and she brought the bird in with her. She might be glad to find ‘im gone and everything settled. She’ll be back any minute now.”

They had reached the kitchen door at last.

“I’ve been put to a lot of trouble over this parrot myself,” was how Mr. Hawley countered this. “And I suppose the cost of the Ad would likely have to be reckoned, too,” he suggested, as they approached the door.

“Maybe it would,” Mrs. Dibbs opined. That had not occurred to her. They entered the kitchen.

“Aha! My beauty!” exclaimed Mr. Hawley in a confidential voice. “So there you are, are you!”

Dudley had listened to this conversation with the keenest attention; little had escaped him; they were inside their fields respectively and he was interested; and the different tones of voice he had followed with unerring instinct, interpreting them correctly. He had so far made no comment, no audible comment being called for.

As a student of life he had observed the material presented to him, no more than that.

The moment Mr. Hawley came into view, however, a remark occurred to him. He produced it in a loud, clear voice, a male voice, a gentleman’s voice.

“Hullo! Second-man, Hullo!” he offered Sir Arthur’s growl. “Dudley dudleydudley!”

Mrs. Dibbs, he was pleased to observe, heard it. She grinned.

At the same instant, however, he observed another thing as well. And it disconcerted him, almost as much as his spoken word had disconcerted Mr. Hawley.

Now that the speakers came objectively before him, he withdrew his mind from the passage, where he had been visualising the pair, and stared at them in *propria personae.* He took accurate note of his immediate surroundings. Instead of listening, he gazed. Down to the last detail he took in what he saw. And it was this intimate survey that disconcerted him.

If aware for some time subconsciously that a certain change had taken place about him, he had not troubled to ascertain its precise nature. He now perceived that some familiar detail was lacking; an alteration in the landscape had occurred. This familiar detail, while he had been busy listening, had been withdrawn.

What was it? he asked himself.

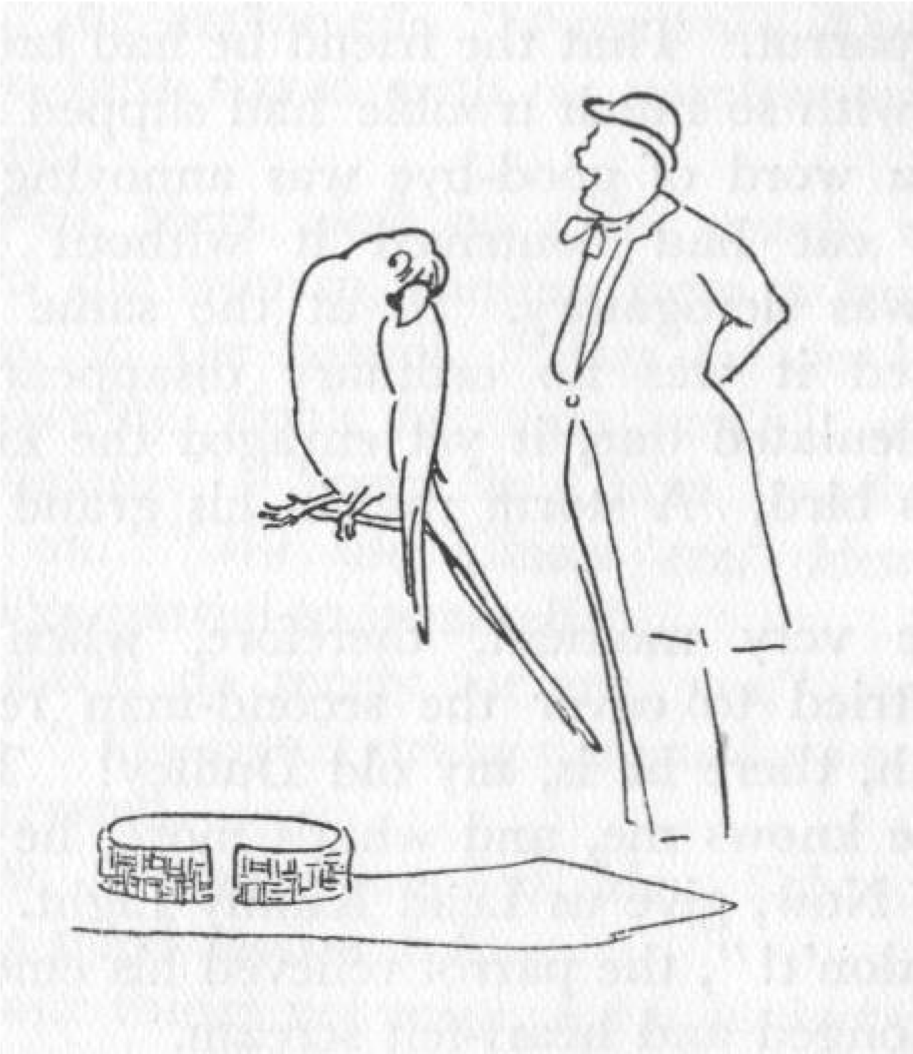
He began to examine.

For once, however, his ominscence failed to report as instantaneously as usual.

The alteration in his landscape remained at first concealed.

Then, suddenly, he discovered what the missing detail was.

Gilderoy had disappeared.



CHAPTER XVI

SO FAR AS mere agility goes, the common house cat probably surpasses all its clan, if not every known species of quadruped.

O. H. Powell. — The Armament of Animals.

THIS withdrawal of his principal hope vexed the parrot. That the friend he had brought to town with so much trouble had slipped away without a word of good-bye was annoying, but that the cat had contrived it without being noticed was derogatory. If, at the same time, he realized it was no ordinary disappearance, but a calculated one, it yet enraged the kindly, courteous bird. A storm rose in his grand little heart.

At the very moment, therefore, when Mr. Hawley tried to cover the second-man remark with “Ah, there he is, my old Dudley! That’s him! He knows me, and what’s more, he loves me too. Now, give us Lead Kindly Light. Just see if he don’t!”, the parrot relieved his emotions in a prolonged and heart-felt scream.

“That’s pleasure at seeing me,” explained Mr. Hawley, while Mrs. Dibbs stopped her ears. “I know what he wants. He wants his covering put on.” And the man cast about till he found the spotty cloth, and then spread it over the cage, in doing which, his head being turned sideways to Mrs. Dibbs, his thumb and forefinger came within easy reach of the formidable beak. Unwilling to injure his pal, Dudley had no such restraint where the second man was concerned, and his anger accepted the relief offered. He bit the second man’s finger with decision.

“Drat the brute!” muttered the victim under his breath, while Mrs. Dibbs enquired if it hurt. “It’s only his play,” he replied, nursing his finger, “that’s all it is reely. Only ‘e forgets the grip ‘e’s got. We’re the best of friends just the same,” he explained. “Aren’t we, Dudley?” The bird stared with a painless eye, saying nothing.

“Well, there ain’t no mark much, anyhow,” agreed the woman, turning from a brief examination to the teapot. “But he do love you, Mr.’Awley, don’t he, that bird?” she added sarcastically. “Yours is China, maybe?” she went on. “*We* use China ‘ere. Hearl Grey. And I’m partial to it meself.”

“That’ll do nicely for me, yes,” replied the man. “You like it strong same as I do probably,” he suggested.

“Oh, average,” replied Mrs. Dibbs, putting in four piled spoons’ full.

“Your things not mine, *à bas les boches,* second man, *tedium vitae ad valorem*,” gabbled Dudley behind his cloth.

“There, you see,” said Mr. Hawley quickly, “if he’s not as quiet as a lamb again, and talking Spanish to show he’s happy. That’s always a sign of pleasure with ‘im, Spanish is.”

“Lepidoptera goodbye for the present Dudleydudley,” the bird interjected.

“I’ll leave the cloth on,” said the man, anxious to show his knowledge, “or he might scream a bit again, and a trifle extra light and air won’t hurt ‘im.” He shifted the cage round a bit, cautiously this time, towards the open window. “There’s a good Dudley boy!” he cooed, though he would gladly have wrung his neck. “We’ll soon have you back in your nice comfortable home, won’t we then?” He sat back in the chair Mrs. Dibbs had placed for him and waited for his cup of tea. “His heart’s in the right place, you see,” he added. “Yes, I take a spot of sugar, thank you. And d’you objec’ to a cigarette?” He lit one of Sir Arthur’s Balkan Sobranje, large size.

“Mrs de Mumbles smokes ‘erself,” the woman gave her consent, “and the winder’s open any’ow.”

The parrot, meanwhile, becoming bored with the second man and the cook, since the servants’ hall was not his world, withdrew into his own private and personal region. He caught a few fragments of chat from time to time, but nothing worthy of his attention. Mr. Hawley’s reference to the “cat in the ad.,” his disbelief that it had come to London “with our bird,” his description of Gilderoy as “a common ginger beast with torn ears,” and the cook’s assurance that it was “Jest a London stray off the riles” — he noted these remarks but did not contribute to them. With his inimitable air of What I have said I have said, he left the vulgar menials to their ungrammatical chat, preferring his own purple dreams. Of flight and nuts, of hot sunshine, foliage, flowers, of numerous companions, of sex, age, nests and eggs — of all these his golden dreams formed a lovely *purée.* His inaudible gabble hardly travelled beyond his beak, though its gurgle accompanied his dreams. In this extremely low voice he said most interesting things. These issued from his motionless face in a ceaseless flow of indistinguishable sounds, musical as rain-drops on a summer lawn:

Osisicomnes... cuckoogotohell... suntlacrymaererum aprioriadinfinitum... pollywantacrackergilderoy... sictransitblastyergizzard.... mumblessecondmanhawleydudleydudley....” poured forth, all too low to be heard clearly.

His toes moved gently up and down and to and fro. He was in one of his little ecstasies, due to suppressed excitement.

The flat, though its owner did not return, filled comfortably. People trickled in. The masseur arrived by appointment, a female secretary, a hair-dresser, a visitor or two to whom wrong dates had been sent, also Maria, in case she could help her mother “with anythink.” She joined the cook and second man in the kitchen over a cup of tea with “I don’t mind if I do!”

It was the best China they drank, not because they preferred it to stewed Liptons provided for the kitchen, but because it was a perquisite they considered they had a right to. “Pale-looking muck” Maria called it, “and without a bite in a gallon,” although Mr. Hawley assured her it was “the stuff,” and sipped it nicely. In the intervals between callers and tea-sipping, the telephone rang frequently to the repeated comment of Maria. “Let ‘er wait! She’s pide to ring!” — a gibe at Mrs de Mumbles that showed confusion of thought somewhere, while Mrs. Dibbs attended to the messages, noting them down on the dirty pad with her usual inaccuracy. “The sooperviser can put ‘er right,” she announced. “They love each other — I don’t think.”

From time to time one or other approached the cage, while the second man described Miss Molly’s passionate love of the bird, explaining that she had been crying a good deal since it disappeared. Dudley’s personality and character also were referred to, his habits, language, gifts, his sex and age as well; “he’s a hundred if he’s a day, and his ‘earing — why he could ‘ear a pin drop if ‘e wanted to!” with all manner of other information, all given nicely enough, however, and nothing to cause offence.

One item alone stirred his interest, and stirred it deeply. From the second man it came chiefly: “Oh, yes, they can lay eggs in captivity sometimes, and do, I’m told—” Maria interrupted with “Not the miles shorely, Mr.’Awley?”

“Oh, both sorts,” insisted the man. “Without outside assistance?” Mrs. Dibbs wanted to know. “Just so,” the second man assured her. “But it’s a sign of the end, they say. It’s generally when they’re going to die. Sort of a last big effort to keep going, you know, and it exhausts ’em so that they go. You can ask the Keeper at the Zoo,” he insisted, as the ladies appeared incredulous. “It’s a scientific fact all right.”

To all of which Dudley, wiser than ever since he came to town, made no reply. Beyond mumbling *“fiat justitia*” to his last remarks, he said nothing audible. He held his pose and perch with unassailable imperturbability. No feather stirred, no eyelid lifted, he remained poised and self-contained. A good judge of publics, he ignored this particular one. They praised him — he accepted it without a flutter; they cursed him — he was far away; they coaxed and wheedled — he gave no sign. He contented himself with the inaudible gabble that was not meant for thick-ears.

Once only he startled them:

“Gilder-*roy*! Gilder-*roy*! Gilder-*roy*!” shattered the tea-party atmosphere, producing a chorus of comments, curses, questions, explanations from Mr. Hawley, and a shower of unflattering remarks.

To these, too, he offered no reply. He had called to his pal with a purpose that was his own: a significant call that conveyed many things: “I’m here. Where are you? I count on you. I’ve forgiven your desertion. Time’s getting on. There’s danger...!”

Camouflaged against a chimney all this time, Gilderoy, dominating the dingy landscape like an Osirian, his attitude *couchant,* his torn ears and patched eye adding to his air of royalty, Gilderoy, of course, had heard that call. Like his friend, however, he betrayed no symptom of emotion. He remained precisely as he was in an attitude of couching innocence. Nothing could have appeared more guileless. It seemed one of his rare direct periods. Yet, when he appeared direct, straightforward, frank, was just when he was most slanting, for he was by nature fundamentally and essentially oblique in all his ways. And now, behind the sphinx-like visage thought worked fast and fiery. The change in him has already been mentioned. It became intensified. Great Sabre-tooth, in racial might, stalked invisibly across the world of tiles. And fiat-faced Gilderoy was aware of that deathless fellow, his grim, ghostly ancestor.

He knew, of course, that the second man had come with the cage, for he had removed himself in order to avoid the menial's boot. But he knew another thing as well — that Dudley's liberty was at stake. He had not brought his friend to London just to see a recapture staged! Besides he did not want to go himself. He was thus twice ready and twice armed.

"It's up to me," was the way a human might have put it, but the cat's mask-like countenance was far more eloquent, his family resource far more prolific. Not only was he the cleanest animal in the world, he had nine lives as well, and was thus nine times more faithful than any other quadruped. His adoration of his pal was in multiples of three. And when the Call came sounding across the deserted roof, he responded inwardly. Every fibre of his electric body warned him that danger was at hand. The attack was coming. Dudley, poor helpless bird with clipped wings, would be arrested and removed. His liberty was at stake.

This rendering into human words of the yowl that expressed his thoughts was heard by more than Dudley, for whom it was intended. He dodged the piece of coal that came hurtling towards him from an attic window, but dodged it by not moving, fully aware that human aim was poor. If he did not stir physically, however, he took steps mentally. Forgetting his tiles and parties, his milk and mice, he became protective, aggressive, too. His inmost nature went a-stalking. He reviewed his powers of speed, of silence, of balancing, of leaping, of seeing in the dark, of ever falling on his feet. He kept his marvellous eyes wide open, his hair prickly with electricity, his wireless whiskers cleaned to their ultimate efficiency. Upon other ancient and incalcuable privileges he called as well. He had known Sabbaths! His awful and mighty instincts stirred to life, and through the recesses of his ginger body prowled an ancestor, sabre-tooth, the Master Tiger.

He fell asleep. Dudley also probably indulged in a little sleep. He remained at any rate, lost in his own sweet dreamland while the impromptu tea-party continued its dreary way. Perhaps an hour passed, when he became aware of something new — of two things that were new: first, that the light was fading, and, second, that his immediate landscape presented a fresh detail.

The bird returned to the present and took note.

The woof of his happy dream was interrupted; the woof of his spotty cloth was stirring, too.

It was not the tea-drinkers. He perceived a small roundish object moving stealthily towards his metal door. It pushed the cloth aside, cautiously it rose towards the latch, then, with a swift, deft jab, it raised the metal catch on the outside. After which it withdrew as noiselessly as it had come. The door was unfastened now, and Dudley could do the rest from inside the cage. Gilderoy's clever paw had vanished again, its owner with it. Where the cat had vanished *to* was of no importance at the moment; a plan was afoot, and that was sufficient.

The parrot gave no outward sign that he had noticed. Balanced on his perch, motionless as a china bird upon a mantelpiece, his observation, however, became, if possible, a shade more acute. His watchwords, for the moment, he realised, must be silence and immobility, patience above all. And, turning his attention to the kitchen, he saw through threadbare sections of his cloth, that a black bottle now stood beside the teapot, a bottle he recognized easily from his shipping days of long ago. "Better than that slippery China stuff," Maria was saying to the second man, who was wiping his lips with a coloured handkerchief whose embroidered monogram included no letters of his own name.

Gilderoy had chosen his moment with consummate skill, and if Dudley's vegetarian stomach turned a little towards nausea as he caught the nasty whiff of what he had often heard called "adropogin," he controlled himself admirably, fully aware that nausea could lead to sounds that must draw attention to himself. He had more important matters to consider: that his door now stood towards the open window, and that this door was no longer latched.

His present job, obviously, was to adapt himself to the change in his environment, and it called upon all his wisdom to accomplish this. An individual remains the same, yet changes when details about him change. Only the self-centred imagine otherwise, and Dudley was never that. An individual in his own place is the ruler of his fate, and the feathered biped held firmly to his perch. He adapted himself to his altered environment by a masterly silence and immobility. Wishing to be inconspicuous, he knew the secret was to do nothing unusual, better still, to do nothing at all.

Dudley, accordingly, did nothing at all. Nor did he lose power by the worry of internal considering. He thus retained in his perfect and compact little body the energy he would need when the moment for action came.

This moment arrived very soon.

There came a faint clanking sound outside in the passage that was unquestionably the front door chain rattling. The noise galvanised the Tea Party into startled attitudes. Each member of the guilty crew acted with a spontaneity almost worthy of the animal kingdom.

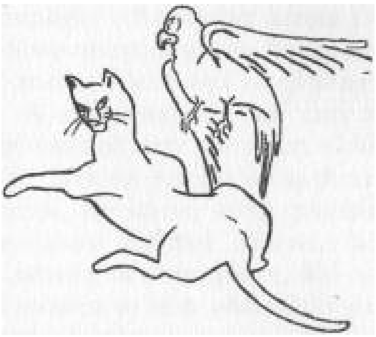
"That's 'er," said Maria, assuming a look of childhood innocence. She moved to the cupboard with the bottle and in a twinkling the three cups had followed it out of sight.

"Pity," mentioned Mr. Hawley, smacking his lips. He, too, was on his feet in a second, smalming his hair, putting his tie straight, and calling up instantaneously an expression of dignified servility.

Mrs. Dibbs, owing to her bulk, perhaps, betrayed no sign of haste, yet had emptied the tea-leaves into the sink and restored the teapot to its shelf before the second man had arranged his master's tie to his liking. She was too experienced to be flustered. "No 'urry," she observed calmly. "It'll take 'er five minutes getting in." For it was her employer's custom to save herself the trouble of inserting the Yale key or even pushing the bell. Her hands being generally occupied with parcels, her habit was to shake the door-handle with her elbow, so that both letterbox and chain gave out a rattling sound. It was, thus, perhaps a couple of minutes after the disturbing noises, that Mrs. Dibbs thumped heavily down the passage to open the door, leaving Mr. Hawley and Maria to await events in the kitchen. They stood with their backs to the window, their attention followed Mrs. Dibbs. They did not notice, apparently, something red shoot past their legs along the floor.

Dudley, however, did notice it — and took instant action. He did not hesitate a second.

Quietly, without a sign of nervous haste, he waddled along his perch, climbed noiselessly down the bars till he reached the floor of his cage, strutted across this as lazily as though he swaggered down Piccadilly, passed through the open door, and stepped out delicately upon the table's edge. Turning his gaze steadily for one instand downwards, he then committed his precious body to the care of empty space with complete nonchalance. He dropped neatly, silently, landing with accurate precision upon a ginger-coloured furry back ready to receive him on the linoleum three feet below. An upward leap came next; it was as swift and soundless as the other movements. Ten seconds later Gilderoy and his friend were out upon the roof; two minutes later they were some yards away behind a big chimney - stack, the open desert of London's tiles spreading about them as far as the eye could see.



"Not 'er after all!" the voice of Mrs. Dibbs reached them faintly. "One of them blarsted errand boys or somethink... porter asleep in his box as per usual....!"

The sound died away amid a confused murmur of general remarks that no longer interested the two adventurers who were now concerned solely with their new surroundings. They let everything else slide. Gilderoy, at any rate, lowering his back too abruptly, let the King Parrot slide.

"*Facile descensus* hullo Dudley," observed the bird, picking himself up again and feeling the lead tentatively beneath his straddling feet. "Stet," he added, recovering his perfect balance.

Gilderoy, making himself as big as possible, stood proudly beside him. "Look at me, will you?" his attitude said plainly. "I'm a great, fierce tiger! I could protect anything! I’ve saved you!”

CHAPTER XVII

AS A PARROT increases its knowledge it also, of course, increases greatly in value.... They Grey Parrot is a very sensitive creature. — W. T. GREENE.

WHILE Gilderoy mopped his face softly with one paw, Dudley looked about him over the new territory and found it uninspiring. The late evening sunlight fell slanting across the dreariest expanse of monotonous grimy bricks and slates he had ever seen. The forest of chimneys stood up grimly. A stiff, soulless and uncompromising world of ugliness met his gaze, chilly too, and with danger lurking behind its apparent emptiness. All worlds, he knew, seem pleasant and interesting to their rightful natives, but this one, for all its novelty of atmosphere, did not stimulate him. It seemed to him potentially full of cats. It was certainly not his world. He felt *déclassé.*

At any rate he had escaped from the menial and his cage. He had done his friend a good turn as well. His resource and courage, his Buddhist gift for right action, had not failed him. And these reflections comforted him so that he felt proud and pleased. He felt also in a blue funk.

“Jolly, eh?” suggested Gilderoy, stepping to and fro in front of him with tail erect and gazing into his eyes. “I managed the front door pretty well, eh? Jolly up here, isn’t it — eh?” he repeated, looking about him as a showman looks. “Good for your work — eh?”

“Goddam, goddam!” said Dudley as carelessly as he could. He felt extremely unsafe; he resented, too, his dependence on his friend, though pride made him hide it. “*Parva sed goddam apta,”* he added in a voice too low to be audible.

A cat-call sounded faintly over the distant roofs. Gilderoy was licking his chops. “It’s grand at night,” he went on, his tail undulating expressively, “More than you can count!” he explained, his blunt nose quivering. He glanced at the sky, now fading towards dusk, and the parrot caught the first hint of red glimmer in his eyes. He knew quite well that it was the night army of cats his friend referred to. He shivered visibly. “Cuckoo!” was the only thing that occurred to him to say, and even that fell rather thickly from his beak.

“I shall be here!” mentioned Gilderoy protectively, strutting up and down, and interpreting the shiver correctly.

“I shan’t!” Dudley squawked loudly, without an instant’s hesitation, suddenly finding his voice.

“Not so loud!” the other warned him, turning his head nervously, with whiskers twitching. Voices, indeed, were now audible not far away.

Though the sky was clear, the air still warm, a light wind puffed across the desolate roofs, making the bird shiver a little. The one thing he saw that cheered him was a group of filthy sparrows sweeping about gustily like blown leaves among the chimneys. The sight of these comrades of his own element, degraded by human associations though they were, warmed his heart a trifle, if they could not warm his body. At the same time they made him feel still more *déclassé.* Hooligans, gamins, guttersnipes, they were not of his own set, but at least they could use their wings and fly.

His sense of insecurity deepened, his misery increased. He resented more bitterly than ever his dependence on the cat. To such a pitch, indeed, did his unhappiness come, the chill and growing darkness adding to it, that he began to realize that the comfortable security of a cage had something to be said for it. Even Muddle-puddle, with regular meals and an equable temperature, was not so bad after all. He decided to do something. And he was about to take steps accordingly, when Gilderoy himself suddenly did something that surprised him so that he changed his mind.

Gilderoy, who had been watching him closely, moved abruptly nearer and lowered his back to a convenient angle, his tail wiggling excitedly, his eyes cast behind him like twin warning lighthouses.

“Hurry up, will you!” every gesture of his agile body shrieked.

“Goddamdudley,” responded the parrot, equally alert, for he, too, heard the nasty sound of voices coming nearer — the second man and Maria both talking simultaneously. But, despite his anxiety, he was not to be hurried. Noblesse obliged, in action as in conduct. He moved at his leisure, the small, glorious bird, mounting easily, with the dignified grace of some 18th century grand dame who mounts a palfrey. “First to the ri’ and second to the lef’ and then straight on,” he gabbled thickly, as the cavalcade moved off.

They started and the sparrows watched them go. Gilderoy said nothing, but went hell for leather, so that his rider had to use beak and claws to keep his precarious seat. The voices had been too close for safety, and the cat was taking no chances. He felt responsible for his crippled pal. His tiger-heart took charge.

“Cut it out!” squawked the parrot, but Gilderoy only stuck his tail more stiffly in the air and hissed over his shoulder: “Hold on to that!” doubling and turning like a swallow in the air.

Dudley held on. No one should say he showed weakness in the face of danger. Chimneys and wireless poles shot past like a level paling; the keen air nipped as it rushed by. There were leaps and flying landings, they bounded, almost flew. “He thinks he’s going to a Sabbath,” occurred to Dudley, but he did not say it. He had no breath left. Real flying he had known, of course, but these sudden awful swerves were clumsy compared to wings.

They slowed up once, as though Gilderoy hesitated for a second which way to flash. Only a second it was, but it gave Dudley time to peep into an open attic window through which he glimpsed, as they shot by, a bearded face with horn-rimmed spectacles and a big quill pen between his teeth. A man, an elderly man, was hard at work evidently, for books and papers were visible on a table. He wore a worried look.

“Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” called the King Grey Parrot, as they darted off again, and was just in time to see the head turn sharply, while the eyes stared into space, the quill dropped from the parted lips, and a hand rose behind one ear to form a cup.

The picture vanished... for Gilderoy, recognising the window whence coal and brushes came, increased his speed, and a few minutes later they reached a skylight through whose broken panes a kind of disused loft was visible in the gloaming. Gilderoy stopped as abruptly as he had started. It was, obviously, a terminus.

“My bloody stars!” ejaculated Dudley, clinging to the tail a moment, then falling off sideways in a heap. “*0 tedium vitae laborare est orare,”* he gabbled beneath his breath, as he quickly found his feet and equilibrium. His speech was confused. He was excited, and not ashamed to show it.

“Here,” indicated Gilderoy, calm as though he just woke out of sleep, no sign of breathlessness either, “you will be warm and safe.” He peered down through the dirty glass into the gloomy space below.

“Humph!” remarked Dudley, without any apparent gratitude.

He, too, in his turn inspected the warm safe place. A box-room evidently, belonging to another building of flats below. He saw trunks, a bicycle, gun-cases, piled carpets, a perambulator, a number of huge square packing-cases, and various other paraphernalia.

“Humph!” he repeated soullessly. With his superior sense of direction, though they had covered a considerable distance, he had a shrewd suspicion that they had travelled in a circle.

A long cord, he saw, hung from the catch that closed the skylight, dropping down into the shadowy depths as into a well. The bird inspected this cord with careful interest. Thought worked rapidly. It was remarkable how intercourse between the two creatures at this period became easy, unimpeded. The stimulus of danger, added to the educational drive of London life, produced, as it were, an intensification of consciousness they shared equally. There was nothing, it seemed, they could not convey to one another by sound, pantomime and gesture. A scientist observing the pair must have recognised how the speech-centres in the brain are but a development of the hand-gesture centres. Cat and parrot exchanged ideas, even repartee, as easily as humans do.

“Humph!” gurgled Dudley, returning from his long inspection and gazing vacantly into his friend’s gleaming eyes.

“*You* can climb down that cord,” observed Gilderoy. “*I* can’t.” there was unusual delicacy in the way he put it. No cat, he intended to convey, could get in.

“Warmth?” enquired the parrot, realizing that he might spend most of the night in this gloomy priest-hole. “I’m partial to a bit of warmth, you know.”

Gilderoy strutted like some marvellous mechanical toy, purring while he did so. His face wore an air of exceeding pride and satisfaction.

“Frump’s petticoat,” he snapped tersely, pointing with his muzzle downwards. His mouth produced a grin the like of which the parrot had never seen before; it turned his pal into a terrifying gargoyle. “It’s all ready for you.”

Through the broken pane, sure enough, Dudley now perceived a garment of sorts, taken obviously from Mrs de Mumbles’ bedroom, lying on the dirty floor below But it was not a petticoat. He saw the black and gold pattern of something he had studied already in the flat, something he knew instinctively would keep him warm, a shawl, an Indian shawl. “If the cats can see me,” ran his thoughts, “yet not get at me, it might be tolerable. I like the touch of colour, too.” And his heart rose in a storm of gratitude and admiration. Gilderoy’s desertion, after all, had been merely strategy. He had shown forethought, too.

“Gilder-*roy!* Gilder-roy!” he screamed with pleasure, at the top of his voice, unable to repress his feelings.

The unaccustomed sound fled piercingly across the world of tiles.

Gilderoy turned upon him like a tiger.

“Shut up!” he hissed fiercely, “or I’ll — eat you! They’re after us!”

In the deep silence that followed this explosion of unusual sound, the cackle of approaching voices was distinctly audible — the contralto of Mrs. Dibbs, the husky gin-voice of Maria, the oily tones of Mr. Hawley.

“Hop in and slip down that cord!” commanded Gilderoy sharply. “They’ll not notice *me.* Quick as you like! I’ll come back when all’s clear again.” He vanished.

In a moment, forgetting dignity, using claws and beak, Dudley scrabbled through the broken pane and down the hanging cord on to the floor below. The dimness swallowed him. He marched solemnly into the darkest corner of the loft behind the perambulator; a gun-case cloaked his handsome tail; an old leather portmanteau hid his slender body; his lordly head was screened by a shapeless and disgusting pile of ancient carpets. He was safe. “I’m marvellous, marvellous,” he gabbled to himself, “qui’ all ri’ Dudley *pax vosbiscum."* While, far above him, he heard Maria saying with emphasis: "no taime parrot could ever 'ide up here... scream 'is guts out, 'e would, in this cold hair... 'e's in the flat all this time, of course..." and then, a moment later, the sound of withdrawing footsteps growing fainter as the searchers went back to their kitchen again.

Without an instant's delay, Dudley then saw to his own comfort. Picking at the Indian shawl with claws and beak, he managed eventually to cover his cooling little figure so as to protect it from the raw air in the disused, dreary loft. Warmer than the night it was, but chilly for all that.

A moment or two later, he stood there, a silent statue in black and gold. Both wonderful and interesting his appearance was. A hundred cats might admire him from above, but they could not reach him. Resigned and philosophical, he adorned this cold dusty corner of a dirty loft, aware of his own magnificence, aware also that he had not been taken away by the loathsome second man, aware, further, that, for the moment at any rate, he was comparatively safe and comparatively warm.

"*Omnia exeunt in mysterium*," he gabbled softly, and fell into deep thought. "I shall now make use of my opportunities," he told himself. "I shall study life as I find it." And he drew the shawl closer about his little shoulders with his terrible beak.

Motionless, wearing his marble pose, he used as perch a bundle of umbrellas and walking-sticks tied up with rotting string. There was no need to trouble about camouflage, for the darkness draped him sufficiently. Making the most of his opportunities, as usual, he fell to studying life as he found it.

CHAPTER XVIII

JUST LIKE DOGS, the Grey Parrot is too human in many respects to be made merchandise of, and be bought and sold in cold blood. — W. T. GREENE.

Cats are the fiercest, strongest, and most terrible of beasts. — KINGSLEY. Natural History of Animals.

THE dusk slipped into darkness, the night wore on, the stars peeped down, and the tiles reechoed to the slither and patter of the horde of cats. An undercurrent of padding ran everywhere, as though the whole world had gone a-prowling, and a criss-cross of minute green shaft-lights mapped the sky. Gilderoy's "more than you can count" was his own private estimate, yet there must have been a hundred tails which meant two hundred eyes, four hundred feet. Their music rose and fell beneath the moon, as the world-old orgies, abandoned, wild, fantastic, shamed the glad golden stars and turned the sweet dew colder in its purity. Here reigned, as it has ever reigned just beneath the thin veneer of civilization, the raw conditions of primitive life. Instinct was king, and appetite the only law *"Sic transit*," murmured the King Grey Parrot, excited in spite of his marble pose, "I'm safe perhaps, but I might be bloody safer *summum bonum* Dudley!"

The bird's great thoughts, let it be mentioned at once, lie open to inspection, to inevitable doubt and criticism as well. They must be many, of course, who hold that he had no thoughts at all, that his highest flights were actually no more than "I'm hungry... I'm cold... I'm thirsty... My beak wants cutting... I hate this seed...!" The majority will sneer at the idea that his compact little body was a mass of complicated eloquence, that beak, claws, feathers and eyes could conceive, much less convey, philosophical reflections, that he had a mind at all, indeed. Yet few, be it remembered, can even read the script of Nature, written in easy capitals though it is; still fewer interpret the voices of wind and water; the vast majority, in fact, failing to notice what lies beneath their very noses. The Mollies of this world, in whom great love wakens the gift of discernment, are inevitably rare. The superior folk who thus deny to Dudley his modest gifts are only to be pitied, not argued with, and superiority, ever an acid virtue, must be their consolation.

And now, at this moment, when the King Grey Parrot introduced "*summum bonum*" into his little sentence, he did not do this idly. He realized in a word, that this occasion in a dirty loft among the tiles was somehow a step further towards the consummation of the spot of Work he was born to achieve. This he knew surely. At the same time — and here his honesty shows finely — he admitted he did not yet know exactly what this Work might be. His powers, intensified though they were in London, had not reached quite as far as that.

On his impromptu perch of umbrellas he was content to observe what fate pleased to offer. This night behaviour of the roof-cats was interesting. He, naturally, drew deductions. Progress, he knew, among quadrupeds, did not exist. To keep both feet on the ground, of course, was necessary to sanity and good judgment — had he not practised it all his life? — but when it came to four feet, the result apparently was degrading. They were just animals, over weighted with thick earthly qualities, eager only to increase their species at the greatest possible rate.

It was a depressing thought, and he stepped on to a higher umbrella. He took the shawl with him, draping it neatly over his tail so that he now wore a train.

"They know not air," sang a tiny voice inside his great bursting little heart, "nor wings, nor flight. How, then, can they hope to soar? Many of them live even underground, away from light and colour, and their eyes turn naturally downwards. "Ho!" he cried, "for a swinging nest among the winds of heaven! Ho! for the bird's eye view! Ho! for the sweet liberty of endless space!" And for some minutes he continued to add further "ho's" at intervals, until he realized that the sound of his voice was making his presence dangerously conspicuous.

For dim moving shapes cast disagreeable shadows, and there was nasty soft slithering across his sky-light, with sharp clicking sounds that were the tap of sliding claws.

The London cats, he perceived, were on the move. These knew, of course, that an alien was in their neighbourhood, while Instinct led them to hope that this alien might be, more precisely, presently in their very midst. They knew exactly where he lurked, what he was, how even he would taste. But to get at him lay beyond their powers. They could not squeeze through the pane of broken glass, nor, once through, could they have climbed down the hanging cord.

Dudley, secure, reasonably warm, extremely observant, knew all this. Maintaining his *rigor mortis* pose, he stopped his noise. He held his beak and shivered. His eyes kept an upward cast. He watched. A hundred claws, he noted, passed scrabbling over the slippery surface of the skylight, then down again in disappointed rage. A hundred damp pads left criminal prints upon the panes, and twice fifty pair of eyes, alight with the green lust of primitive desire, peered down into the chily disused loft. Tails by the score flicked evilly across the moistened glass, sleek furry bodies brushed the dew away, teeth by the dozen gleamed, and heated breath left blurred patches everywhere.

But entrance to their owners was denied.

Perched on his moth-eaten brollies, the bird noted these items carefully. He commented on them, naturally enough, but so low that his own ears hardly caught the sound: "*Postobit, advalorem, inextremis,"* gave the gist of what he said. And if he shivered continuously it was but the currents of air in this draughty hole that set his lighter feathers dancing.

The skylight growing clear at last and the scurry of feet sweeping away elsewhere, he fell to other occupations, realizing that he had time to burn. Gilderoy, even had his presence been desired, put in no appearance. The parrot, finding himself in darkness, with nothing outward to stimulate reflection, turned his thought to the few objects he could see. These he discerned but dimly — the trunks, perambulator, carpets, bicycle, packing - cases. It was enough, this sketchy view. These stored things belonged obviously to persons who believed themselves important and were hence devoid of humour. Who but the humourless, he asked himself, would wish to keep such things? Only those who never experienced the sweet acid joy of laughing at themselves could possibly think it worth while to store carpets, brollies, walking sticks, bicycles and perambulators in a loft?

He at once dismissed them from his mind. Thought turned inwards. And if it be denied that Dudley, the Grey King Parrot, thought and felt all this, the claim must be disallowed as contrary to fact, tied with red tape, marked "for comment" in the margin, and at once pigeon-holed, which means forgotten.

He now searched for novelty, since novelty, he believed, being startling and producing a certain shock, increases the temperature of the body. Time passed quickly and, since thought and emotion are essentially life, life seemed very full and rich. Poignant, indeed his emotions were, but he never allowed feeling to disturb judgment. He reached judicial conclusions on a variety of subjects, and knowing that intellect without wisdom has small value, he avoided both judicial wit and judicial ignorance. He felt cold, hungry, thirsty, lonely, bored. He discovered, however, that ennui, being negative, is a depleting business, while a dry throat and an empty abdomen, being positive, can stimulate.

If novelty, however, did not present itself, a gentle nostalgia came in its place. Thought turned to home and Molly, above all to the little goldenhaired girl who loved him, protected him from pain and discomfort, and who believed so wholeheartedly in his greatness. He spoke aloud, calling her by name: "Hullo, Molly! Hullo, Dudley!" echoed faintly through the miserable loft. "Molly's gone out," he answered himself in Nannie's voice. "Mollie's gone to the cinema, Polly! Cinemafancinemafan! Mollypollydudleydudley!" he went on softly for some minutes. "Mollycinemacinemadudleygone out!"

He kept his voice very low, so as not to attract attention to the skylight, and the sound hardly travelled beyond the bicycle which he could just see in its corner opposite. The words comforted him a trifle, though they could not stay the pangs of hunger. He felt a little warmer, in his heart at any rate. And the word "cinema" revived memories of the child's description of screen-stories she had seen. He had heard these by the score, knew every detail of the business by heart, and had listened by the hour to what she said about them. He knew that parrots had figured with advantage on the screen, but that there was yet a Great Picture to be made with a grey parrot, a K.G.P., as she called it, and that Molly had even begun to write it: *The Adventures of a K.G.P,* with himself featuring as hero.

The story was to be terribly poignant, yet terribly restrained, terribly brief, yet terribly expensive as well. He would appear in one picture only, for there would be only one — himself. Like the lion that opens and shuts its mouth before a Goldwyn production, he would appear full face and remark "*verb, sap."* for it was to be a Movie-tone, of course, then turn profile and say "exit," and the hall would thunder with applause. Molly had promised to take him herself to the First Show, which would be called Premiere Presentation. There would be Parisian Night Clubs, Hotels de Luxe with magnificent Entrance Halls, but extremely shabby bedrooms, and the whole thing, having taken ten years to make, would be produced at Enormous Expense running, indeed, into millions. The Cast would be all Dudley, for Dudley would play every *rôle* himself.

These glowing memories made him feel distinctly warmed, as the detail he was so familiar with revived. He gabbled them over to himself. He even visualised the announcement on the screen: It would be produced by Ikey, photographed by Moses, directed by Jacob, with captions by Samuel, and dresses by Madame Levi. The film editor would be Isaac, assistant director, Benjamin, and scenic artists, the Brothers Solomon. Steinherz would write the music, with Mayer as technician, Apfelbaum as editor of sub-titles, and Isador Schoen, assistant-sub-editor of sub-titles. Settings were to be by Jonathan, and sex-appeal by Dan and Askalon; art-editor was Aaron, associate editor, Josef, and production-editor, Marks, and the whole would be made in the Jerusalem Studios at Clapham, S.W.95. Many other names recurred to him, but he finally found memory disappearing among the Ghettos of Europe. His own name, as joint-author with Molly, would be flashed on the screen in minute lettering for a fraction of a second only, too swift, too tiny to be legible....

"Filmfan! Filmfan!..." he interrupted himself almost inaudibly, as a shadow on the skylight brought him back with a sudden start to earth. What — who was it? He quivered. He assumed his marble pose. The Indian shawl held motionless as though of metal. His eyes were empty glass, but those eyes missed nothing.

A cat sprawling over the skylight not six feet above his head caused the shadow. But the same flashing glance told him also that this cat was Gilderoy.

Now, in a sense, he had forgotten all about Gilderoy. For an hour or so he had been thinking of other things. Gilderoy's sudden reappearance, therefore, caused him a certain shock. But this shock did not affect his caution. He remained instinctively immobile — a marble parrot perched incongruously on a bundle of walking-sticks and umbrellas in a chilly loft. He noticed, none the less, that Gilderoy sprawled. His torn ears spread like sails to catch the wind; his hot breath stained with icy glass; his legs were extended gracelessly; his tail formed, as it were, a question mark.

"Hullo, Birdie!" the cat communicated, briefly, obviously a bit above himself. "Here's something!"

There was a sound of hard things dropping on the floor, rolling a little, then coming to a stop. Gilderoy seemed to be letting something fall out of his mouth — a strange proceeding, Dudley thought, for it certainly was not teeth. He wondered, maintaining nevertheless his marble attitude. The cat, at any rate, he noted, was alone.

"*Modus vivendi*," he muttered in his lowest whisper — then saw that Gilderoy had vanished. "Filmfanwhathodudley!" he added louder then, finding his courage. The skylight, however, was clear again, and that slithery sound was Gilderoy landing on the lead after his slippery descent, fresh from one conquest, eager for the next.

The parrot waited cautiously some minutes, then allowed curiosity its way. These things the cat had dropped, what were they? They had fallen with a short, sharp plop, then rattled away and come to rest.

"Your things not mine!" he mumbled to himself, then, awkwardly, descended from his brollies to explore. The darkness hampered him at first, accustomed though he was to the gloom of impenetrable jungles. He sidled slowly across the floor, past the carpets and the perambulator, giving the gun-cases a wide berth instinctively. His natural abilities helped him, his lowered mandibles soon found one of the dropped objects — a nut, by god, a nut.

"*Experentia docet*," he gurgled philosophically, examining it. The voice was the Head Gardener's voice when he named some rare flower with a certain thick uncertainty.

But the nut was good, and Dudley promptly dealt with it. The next one he found was even better, the third, the fourth quite eatable. He found a fifth and, after a long crawling search, a sixth. A seventh came his way while he was waddling back again to find his perch, for his foot stumbled against it. He guzzled it down. Having trailed the shawl after him during the long search, he had difficulty in re-adjusting it when at last he climbed back upon his umbrellas. The golden fringe caught in his feet, the folds slipped sideways, and it was only by dint of picking large holes in it with his beak that he eventually contrived to steady himself finally upon his perch with the shawl comfortably about his slanting shoulders. He did contrive it, however. His head now peeped through quite a large hole his beak had made.

"*Requiescatinpace* dudley," he gabbled, heaving a deep sign as he successfully swallowed the last hard bit of nut. There was no sign of gratitude to Gilderoy for having brought him food. A thought of the cat did, indeed, pass through his mind, but it was a harsh one rather. "He's never been young, never been a kitten," crossed his brain, as he sat facing the perambulator once more. "He was born as he now is. Never was he a soft, fluffy, playful little ball!" And he composed himself, his tummy now pleasantly filled, to meet what the remainder of the night might bring.

It brought, next at any rate, an audible renewal of the orgy on the tiles, to which Dudley listened as before, with resignation.

"When Dudley listens," he remembered proudly, "there's not much Dudley doesn't hear!"

Yet what he now listened to affected him curiously, penetrating to the deepest recesses of his complex being. This music of triumphant love disturbed him profoundly, as it had disturbed him a few nights ago. It was a strange, mysterious business. It shook him, so that the small feather on his spine stood up and trembled. His tail feathers also shook. He was perplexed and troubled. The problem of his own sex gripped him. Why, he asked himself, should the roar of others making love afflict his calm? Why should his pulses quicken to this chorus screaming vows of eternal adoration to the London moon? Why did his blood run faster, his temperature rise? Why did his heart strain a little, his eyes grow moist?

He found no immediate answer. He shifted his position, perhaps because the metal ribs of the umbrellas were cold to his feet; possibly with knowledge, he assumed an unusual posture, his head turned sideways and backwards, his unsupported leg — he balanced now on one — hanging in mid-air. It was, actually, a Yogi posture, and a true Yogi posture, he well knew, affected the life-currents of the body in an unusual way. It caused unusual thoughts to rise, and this induced an increase of consciousness that brought unusual knowledge.

Being thus in unusual conditions, in an unusual posture, he realised that something unusual and new might come to him. This reflection pleased him. He might get an inspiration... about his sex... about his Work....

He fell to dreaming, but first reviewed this conclusion and found it absolutely sound.

"It holds water, Dudley," he whispered to himself, "and the bung is in."

He chuckled, he sighed, then chuckled again, and presently the chuckle passed into laughter, a soft, delicious, cathartic laughter that was both musical and sad. There was a drip of tears behind it though as yet of tears unshed. Akin to the laughter that the gods must know, of the kind that is surely heard in heaven by the angels and by them noted down in the Book of Brave Deeds by Those Who Faced the Music.

Behind it, as Dudley caught the high, hot voices on the tiles, he caught also the murmur of a greater music, deep, terribly deep within himself. The two became inextricably mingled, interwoven. A yearning sadness swept his little body like a tempest. Passing over his small heroic heart, its searing flame scorched h inmost life. He knew a poignancy that was almost more than he could bear.

A burning tear oozed out of each eye, slipped their salt way down the well-oiled feathers of the heaving breast, and fell with a tiny splash upon the dirty floor.

"*Sunt lacrymae rerum"* murmured the Grey King Parrot, gazing through a blur at the perambulator facing him. Then, closing his eyes, he retired into his secret world where the purple dreams held sway.

These dreams have been referred to before; there is no need to describe them again in detail. They lie, actually, beyond the reach of accurate description. Sometimes, however, a particular dream would be coloured, dominated, by a particular emotion that seemed its key-note. The key-note now, induced doubtless by the faint chorus on the tiles, was Companionship.

Of joyous companionship the parrot dreamed, a single companionship; of gay adventure that was a single adventure; of what Gilderoy called perhaps Loose Moments, yet of a single great Loose Moment with a Perfect Pal.... He dreamed, finally, of eggs, but actually of one egg only — of a single, magnificent and perfect EGG.

His dream, as ever, was wafted to him by a scented wind across the forests of a gorgeous world whose note was liberty, the liberty of unclipped wings, of sun-warmed nuts in superabundance, of sparkling pools that reflected his own adorable face and the brilliant feathers of his radiant mate. The riot of happiness was turned regal by a scorching sun. Like the Just Man of legend, the K.G.P. came into his own.

If the key-note of his blissful dream was companionship, its climax was certainly this single and magnificent EGG. And a strange thing happened then. A flash of blinding knowledge came mysteriously — the lucidity of the clairvoyant that reveals the truth in trance. It blazed upon him. In the higher consciousness of which the soul is free in dreams, he became aware, with startling suddenness, that the summit of achievement towards which his whole long life had tended, towards which all his great energies had unwittingly shaped themselves, was nothing more or less than this subline creative act — the production, the laying, of this perfect Egg.

He saw, he knew, he understood at last. To this end all his laborious hours had plainly led; his study, listening, suffering, thought; his days of patient silence, his months of steady imitation, his hundred years of bitter imprisonment behind bars, his penances and pains that denied him his natural liberty of air — all this devoted and self-sacrificing effort had meant one thing, and one thing only. His Work in life was creative. It was the production of an EGG.

In the visions of the night this flashed upon his inner consciousness with divine lucidity.

Here, in this dis-used loft, beneath the London moon, amid the neglect and dust of stored paraphernalia belonging to people probably long since dead, their debts unpaid, their very names forgotten, people who had muddled through life without discerning its clear meaning, who had doubtless loved the wrong individual, spent years in accumulating things they did not need (he glanced about him) — in this chilly attic, warmed only by an Indian shawl belonging to a Frump downstairs who was robbed day and night by dishonest and dirty servants — in this frowsy, smelly corner of the enormous Universe, Dudley, K.G.P. red-tailed exile, of unknown age, of questionable sex, of secret birth and forgotten parentage, accepted his Great Mission in the wilderness of the London tiles....

And the inward core of his being trembled with its joy.

It was a sound, at length, that disturbed the revelation in his soul, causing the reflection mirrored in its crystal depths to blur, waver then disappear. He dived after it wildly, but in vain. The Dream shot instantly away, plunging from memory into the limbo of forgotten things. It completely vanished. He could not recover more than the radiant knowledge that it *had* been there. Its nature now entirely escaped him, and when he woke a moment later he was unable to retain his dream illumination.

The knowledge of his Mission lay henceforth dormant, yet powerfully active in its effect upon him, though unrecognised and unacknowledged. It influenced subconsciously all his subsequent life.

The sound that had disturbed him, on the other hand, continued. It was a familiar sound — a “purrr-miaow.” Gilderoy’s face, considerably puffed, glowered down upon him through the skylight. “I’m all in,” the cat conveyed bluntly. His whiskers twitched. He licked his weary chops. He made sharp, nervous sideways movements. “They’ve gone,” he intimated, “every one of ‘em. And it’s time we went, too. I’ll take you.”

He drew himself up and waited, making curious low sounds that were half growl, half purr. He was obviously exhausted. And Dudley, watching him, felt his mind a blank at first. The transition was too abrupt to manage quite. From some heavenly dream, though it was forgotten now, he seemed to have dropped through endless space to find himself staring at this common, ugly, red-haired, torn-eared cat. The patched eye met his own puzzled glance. “I love him,” gabbled the parrot, hideous though he is, faithful, clever Gilderoy!”

His eye wandered to the perambulator, as though somehow it attracted him. A faint delicious shiver of some inexpressible emotion whose source he did not recognise made him tremble. His tiny breast feathers tickled. An ecstasy entered his feet, then ran like lightning through his exquisitely-shaped body till his slim outline quivered. But its origin, lost in the vision of the night, escaped him.

“Hurry up!” growled Gilderoy from above. “I’m fed up, I told you.”

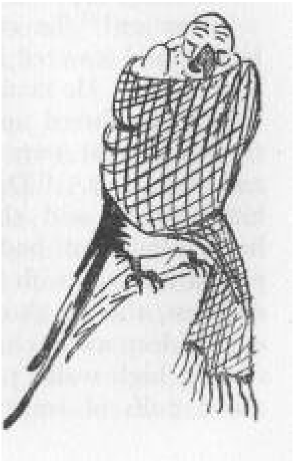
“Only the frightened hurry,” replied Dudley, slowly beginning his descent from the umbrellas. He looked, in his black and gold shawl, like a grand seigneur who sweeps his cloak about him. As he scrabbled down, he struck attitudes, as though he hitched a sword and gave a pull to great riding-boots on mud-splashed legs. Actually, of course, he stumbled merely, finding the shawl a difficulty. At length, glancing down his beak with an expression of curiously mingled yearning and regret at the Pimlico loft below him, he climbed laboriously up the hanging cord. He dragged the Indian shawl behind him on one claw. He felt both exhilarated and sad. A velvet paw helped him through the broken pane. A moment later he stood on the roof and looked about him.

CHAPTER XIX

WITHOUT DOUBT THERE is no other bird better fitted to take the position of friend and companion to man than a Grey Parrot. — W. T. GREENE.

Cats, in the understanding of mechanical appliances... attain a higher level of intelligence than any other animals, except monkeys and perhaps elephants.

G. J. ROMANES. Animal Intelligence.



A DESERTED world he had already seen once met his view. There was no sound, no movement. The wind had dropped. The moon had set. To ordinary human eyes there was not much, perhaps, to see, but to the parrot’s keen sight there was plenty of interest and significance. The chimney-pots rose black as iron against the paling stars; there was a throng of stacks, aerial poles, wires of all sorts, towers, a church steeple here and there, spires of various shapes and kinds, all of which in the dimness gave almost the impression of a forest. It was a weird and eerie world he stared at. Dawn was stealing up, for the eastern sky showed faintly red, though clouds were massed in the west.

The cold air nipped. The bird shivered, drawing the shawl more closely about his sensitive body.

Gilderoy, paying no attention to him, was washing himself at the moment as though he were in some comfortable drawing-room, and Dudley knew better than to disturb him. After the night orgies the cat was not quite himself, not his best self at any rate. Dudley would do nothing to irritate him; he would wait patiently till his friend made a suggestion, or until the cold became more than he could really bear. The scene, meanwhile, absorbed him, the dim beauty moved him; there was a tang of wonder everywhere and the clean air tasted good. There seemed something in his soul that kept him warm-ish, something new, it seemed, that made him happy whatever the conditions, some hot, throbbing, burning secret, though he knew not what it was.

He sniffed the night audibly. The cat stopped his washing, kept a hind leg in the air, and stared.

“Hop on!” he said brusquely, but not unkindly, and lowered his weary back. And Dudley hopped. He made himself as light as possible. Gilderoy gathered up in his mouth loose ends of the shawl that were not round the bird’s back and shoulders. “Don’t tickle!” he reminded him thickly, and they started. With lowered head, elongated body, and sensitive feet that picked the way with marvellous cleverness in the darkness, the cat shot along the tiles and slates, edging deep awful chasms with unerring balance, skirting high walls, passing the lips of precipices above gulfs of empty blackness. He made no mistakes, but the pace was moderate, for, thank heaven, the parrot realised, he was tired. He kept his tail up like a ramrod in case his friend might need its support.

“Tail’s up,” he informed him once, but Dudley balanced beautifully, and did not touch it.

“Quaite,” he replied politely.

They raced along, taking sharp corners neatly.

That wondrous journey beneath the fading stars! The bird felt no fear. It all seemed glorified because something in his own heart was glorified. As the light came slowly over the horizon, it was almost as if something, someone, came with it, drawing closer, ever closer, for himself. Poor old Greene! How little that professor knew about parrots, after all!

“Don’t prick!” the cat reminded him, with a sharp turn of the head.

“Sorry, reely sorry, pardon!” muttered Dudley in reply, then, having started, went on with “Oh, hell *absit omen* can’t come in I’m dressing.”

Gilderoy made no comment, but continued the journey across the roofs with faultless instinct, while the bird admired and adored him, his heart charged with this strange new happiness. The cat had been faithful, protective, clever, and Dudley continued to mumble to himself about it in a confused, low tone. He might do so now to his heart’s content, it seemed, for the world was asleep, and no listening ears were cocked.

One pair of ears, however, *was* cocked — human ears. The creatures were passing the small attic window where the student, bearded and bespectacled, still sat working into the small hours at his lamplit table. The window stood wide open, showing the bent head and face, a wet towel round the forehead, books and papers piled beside him, and a pot of black coffee by his hand.

Pleased with the bushy face, which he remembered, and of which he just caught a glimpse as he was borne swiftly past, Dudley greeted it with a little word:

“Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” he cried loudly into the stillness. As usual, it was not quite the authentic cry, though the imitation was accurate enough to deceive the unwary.

It deceived the worker evidently. The man lifted his face, started to his feet, and came to the window with a sudden spring, cupping both ears with his hands and listening. He gazed and peered across the roofs.

“There it is again — I swear!” came in startled tones.

“Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” shouted Dudley, pleased with the attention and imitating the call this time perfectly.

Though the shadow was already behind them, Dudley had time to see the man staring excitedly into the darkness, shading his eyes with his arm, but finding nothing, of course, to explain the call. Then Gilderoy turned a chimney and the scene was hidden. Dudley never knew that his friendly greeting was responsible later for a violent ornithilogical controversy in a newspaper, lasting for weeks, that a cuckoo on the London tiles in early March was the subject of it, and that the man who originated it was politely called a liar. He never knew all this. What he did know was that Gilderoy just now was angry.

“Stop that noise!” the cat spat viciously. “Keep quiet!”

He was more than snappy about it, the bird realised; he was angry.

Dudley, too happy to quarrel, avoided trouble in the usual way, by changing the conversation. He used Colonelsirsrthur’s voice: “There’s a depression about in the Atlantic,” he gabbled, “damn it,” and went on in a confused mutter with something about “it’s filling up” and “bright periods.” But he kept his voice extremely low, and the cat said no more.

They made the rest of the journey without mishap or further incident, the Indian shawl trailing behind them like the skirts of night that drew a few stars with it as it dipped towards the horizon. And at length Gilderoy stopped, sloping his back so that the parrot might dismount more easily. They were beside an open window. Behind them the dawn was swiftly growing. Waddling across the sill, Dudley reached a table that stood close inside a pleasant room, and on this table was a cage. It contained, he saw, a perch, a receptacle for seed and another for water, both well filled. The journey had been rather a long one, but they had reached a home of sorts at last. Liking the appearance of what he saw, dim though the light was, he climbed up on the table and approached the cage. The little door stood open. After staring for some minutes with no expression in his eyes, he approved what offered. With the mien and gesture of an Emperor who moves into his own Palace, yet prefers to move sideways for some reason connected with the imperial legs, Dudley waddled further. He entered the cage. The shawl slipped from his shoulders as he did so, and fell in a heap upon the ground.

“Goodbye for the present,” mumbled the bird, and advanced to the seed and water, making a good meal without further delay.

Gilderoy, still on the window sill, shaking the moisture from each paw in turn with rapid, quivering jerks, watched him intently, then leaped across and landed on the table. He said nothing, but he inserted a paw quietly between the bars close to his friend’s busy beak. It lay there motionless for some time, until Dudley, lifting his head in the act of swallowing, observed it. He stared hard at it, hanging his face sideways. Then he lowered his great mandibles and kissed it. Gilderoy withdrew his paw, uttering a gentle “purrr-miaow,” closed the door of the cage, sprang to the linoleum floor and crossed over to the saucer of milk that lay beside a basket. Without hesitating, he lapped up the milk to the last drop, then entered the basket, curled up in a ball and fell sound asleep.

No word passed between the two adventurers.

Dudley, using beak and claws, climbed up the bars and in time arrived at the mathematical centre of the perch. Tucking his head backwards among the warm feathers of his spine, he, too, closed his eyes. His mind and heart were fully charged, his tummy too. His toes moved slightly, as he clasped the perch. He was aware of a pain somewhere in his middle. He heaved a short sigh. He fell asleep to dream of some undiscovered mission that his Work involved, yet that in waking consciousness hid mysteriously just beyond the edge of actual recognition.

CHAPTER XX

ONE WILL SUDDENLY give utterance to some word or phrase it has heard a long time previously, and the feat is considered something wonderful; whereas it had, in silence, been studying it all the time.

W. T. GREENE.

THE sleep of exhaustion, it seems, fell then upon both ruffiians, for the next thing either of them knew was a cry from the gin-flavoured voice of Mrs. Dibbs. It was early morning. The woman was addressing herself *via* the diety:

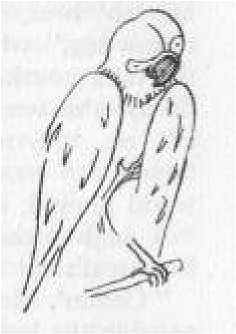
“Gawd bless me soul!”

She approached the cage cautiously and stared into it. Seeing the Indian shawl lying in a heap on the floor, she gathered it up with eyes popping out of her head. She examined it, breathing heavily.

“So ‘elp me Gawd!” she gasped again. “And torn to ribbons!”

She gazed from the shawl to the cage and from the cage to the shawl in blank amazement, wiping both hands, first on the shawl, then on her dirty apron. “I declare I thought I’d got ‘em!” she exclaimed, giving a sharp sigh of relief. “I ‘ave, too, praps!” she added, passing the shawl like a towel over her face and eyes. Then, tossing it aside on to the dresser, she swung round, planted her feet solidly, stuck her arms akimbo, and stared with challenge at the occupant of the cage.

Dudley returned her stare with one eye which was as void of expression as a glass bead. His waking mood was a benevolent one, he felt happy still. One leg was tucked up among his warm tummy feathers. He remained motionless as stone in the mathematical centre of his perch. The only hint that he was conscious of the woman’s presence was a faint sniff borrowed from the Muddlepuddle butler. This sniff was due to the aroma that emanated from her person, an aroma he disliked, aware that it was caused by matter in the wrong place. No other sound, no movement of any sort, escaped him. The instant he woke he had decided upon his attidude: the *rigor mortis* of marble or ironstone was the stuff for him.



“And the other blighter, too!” snorted Mrs. Dibbs, as, feeling something rubbing against her boot, she glanced down and saw Gilderoy, tail erect, legs doing a slow concentrated goose-step to and fro, her face softened slightly, but her forehead became corrugated, her breath irregular.

“The devil’s in them both!” she said under her breath, “or else I’m dreamin’ drunk! ‘Ow did they get out?’ Or did they get in again? Where’ve they been to all night?” She thought hard a moment. “The winder was open, of course, but that bird— ‘e’d just’ve frozen stiff!” She thought again, wiping her apron across her nose and lips. “The shawl” she exclaimed, as though an idea struck her, though not an idea she could accept, for she shook her head. “Anyhow,” she concluded, “it’s his beak made those tearin’ holes, that’s certain.” Instinctively she glanced down at her own grimey fingers.

She interrupted the soliliquoy to pour out some milk into the cat’s saucer, and while she turned back and stooped, Dudley allowed himself a brief comment in the interval. “Your things, not mine,” he gabbled, but in a tone too low for her to hear, it seemed. Gilderoy’s “purrrmiaow-ing,” while he tried to get his nose into the milk pouring from the spout, also helped to drown the words. Yet Dudley, oddly enough, felt no bitterness towards her. He was too happy for recrimination. Kindness to all the world glowed, apparently, in his little breast.

A high-pitched yell came down the passage from a distant room.

“Comin’, Mum, comin’!” shouted Mrs. Dibbs, pouring the last drops from the jug on to Gilderoy’s head and neck, already in the saucer. She straightened up, hurriedly stuffed the shawl into a drawer, then arranged the tray of morning tea. Taking a good sip to see that it tasted all right, she went flumping down the corridor.

The two scoundrels, left to themselves, exchanged a silent greeting, though neither looked at the other. Gilderoy stopped lapping a moment to watch the woman go out, his head turned away from the parrot. But his greeting was ummistakeable.

“Been Working?”

There was obviously no answer to this, no answer one could give to an inferior, at any rate. Dudley maintained his *rigor mortis.* The strange new sweetness in him, however, softened his usual dignity. Staring imperturbably straight before him as before, he retired behind his beak, thinking his own vast thoughts. An angelic look, the sweetness of honey in it, stole upon his face. Joy coursed through his veins like perfumed fire. He knew something that he did not know. This curious, selfless joy, could it be perhaps, he asked himself, a maternal joy?

Voices came floating down the passage:

“... yes, ‘e’s back, Mum... come back in the night.”

“At *this* hour! How much is it? Say I’m out...!”

“The parrot, Mum, I mean. Not a bill. And that friendly, too! In ‘is caige, as good as gold...!”

A door banged, cutting off further speech, but a sound of telephoning became audible. The creatures now knew a Trunk Call when they heard it. Dudley’s marvellous hearing caught not only Mrs de Mumbles’ high-pitched yells, but the distant answering voice as well, although a corridor and a closed door intervened.

“Awleyawleyawley,” he muttered gently. Gilderoy understood. His milk finished, he landed with a soundless spring on the table and began to wash himself beside the cage. Tiny drops of milk hung to his whiskers still. The intelligence of the pair, due to London life, was still above the normal. They exchanged ideas with perfect ease.

“Ready when you are,” offered Dudley briefly. Hawley, they knew, had been telephoned to. He would arrive shortly.

Gilderoy, shaking the last drops from his whiskers, suggested that, after all, he preferred the country milk. He, too, would go home.

“I,” mentioned Dudley, “shall be taken — carried,” he added, to make clear that it would be no trouble to himself. “My own big cage, of course.” He chuckled slightly.

The observation, if superior, was not unkindly. If the cat wished to go back he would have to walk it on his four flat feet. The bird merely wished to intimate the facts. Cats, he knew, had often walked across half of England to a former house.

Gilderoy, now couchant like a miniature sphinx, staring over at the tiles, let five minutes pass.

“I always land on my feet,” his soft pun-announced at last. “Four,” he underlined. “Not clipped either!”

Something tense was in the air. Dudley changed the conversation. He saw that his pal suffered from what colonelsirarthur called a “hang-over.”

“*Igitur,”* he said in a voice sweet as a little bell, “wotabahtit? Finemorningpolly!”

He marched over to his seed box and began to feed, while Gilderoy sat and watched him. Only an inch or two lay between their heads. Anyone seeing them would have seen merely a parrot eating his seed and a rather somnolent, quiet cat. Actually, however, they were talking hard. There was no sound, there was very little movement; gesture and attitude contrived the exchange between them, the poise of head and beak, the angle of puffed cheeks and blunt black muzzle.

They knew exactly, none better, what was going to happen presently.

“Muddlepuddle again,” from Dudley.

“Agreed,” from Gilderoy. “I’m glad.”

“Molly.”

“Field mice.”

“You’ve enjoyed our trip,” from Dudley.

“You haven’t,” from Gilderoy.

“Tiles!” with a glint of contemptuous pity in the eye.

“Male or female?” with a grin.

“Despisery,” a few minutes later, from the centre of the perch.

“A mate’s a mate,” from the basket, where the cat had curled up half-an-hour ago.

It went onanonanonanonanon, this exchange of comments, while behind it both creatures observed the preparations that were going on for their removal — for Dudley’s removal, at any rate. But Dudley retired from the conversation after a while, finding it unstimulating. Other, deeper things were busy in him, though he couldn’t define them exactly, couldn’t get at them anyhow. His ruminations became profound and mysterious, dealing with two big issues — his imminent departure, and the imminent consummation of his Work. The two whizzed and thundered through his mind side by side, for His Departure was coloured by his Secret, the Thing lie did know by the Thing he did not know.

The new Joy pierced and trembled through all he now did and thought, fluttering its sparkling wings. It seemed impossible to keep it hidden. The very attitude of back and sloping shoulders, the poise of head and neck, the lie of the feathers, curve of the dainty tummy, tension of tender legs and gripping toes, all these betrayed this newfound Happiness that, established in the mathematical centre of the King Grey Parrot’s being, radiated thence in all directions. The queer new pain was there as well.

Even being taken home in a cage, now held a flavour of some stately and significant kind. All hint of the ignominious had vanished. He was no longer being “taken,” he was “leaving.” He had transmuted, as with bad language, what was ugly. His Departure would be a Procession, a Ceremonial, a Performance with a Cosmic Meaning. It was to be interpreted in an initiatory sense, leading to an ultimate Creative Climax.

If he could not define this Climax yet, that was only natural, after all. To know any one thing fully, one must know everything, and time obviously failed him there. Yet the creative fire was at work in his mysterious depths. That at least he knew. Odd fugitive hints reached his mind.

Thus, doubtless, a great Genius who is later to shake the world, may catch the divine call afar even among the hardships of his difficult youth; though unable to interpret it, he is aware of a faint ghostly instinct — prophetic assurance, as it were — that all will eventually be well with him.

How should he not feel joy! How should even the lowest intelligence not recognise a new splendour in his presence! How should the truth not radiate its fierce internal fire!

"My luffeley birdie!" Mrs. Dibbs kept repeating, safely several feet away, "so you're goin' back 'ome again, are you? Leavin' us when you've only just 'ardly come! A shime I call it!" There was no real love in the voice, but there was, perhaps, a little faint extra touch of friendliness. She recognised the bright new grandeur.

"Can't come in," said the bird sweetly. "Ma! Ma!"

Mrs de Mumbles, coming into the kitchen at intervals, was similarly affected. "I'd offer to buy you," she declared admiringly, "if I had the money. You're *such* a beauty!" She became unintelligible in her eloquence; the parrot, at least, could not follow it, though it must be added that he wasn't listening. She was deeply moved, at any rate, by something she hardly understood herself. Gilderoy, too, sensitive to every change, was puzzled by something unusual in his familiar friend, something he could not explain, as he explained most things, by attributing it to sex or hunger. He stared by the half-hour, his tail and torn ear twitching, his patched eye very keen. So bright were his eyes they seemed to tear his face.

Then, while the morning passed, and the creatures, as before, waited for a bell, the King Grey Parrot, unable to suppress his emotion, burst suddenly into rapturous song. He had often whistled; he now sang. His heart poured forth in a flood of glorious music:

"Swineswineawley... nildesperandumbloody-nonsensehell... pollynullussecundusgod blessyounisiprius... blastyergizzard... homepleasejames... arcadesambodamn... populusqueromanussisicnonvobis... gilderoygilderoygilder *-roy....*"

The music filled the dreary earthly kitchen with its splendour, making the passage echo. Nothing could stop the flow that poured from this great little bursting heart, brimming over with this mysterious new happiness. Thus, doubtless, the morning stars made the empyrean echo with their paean of creation No lesser inspiration urged Dudley now.

“Oh, stop that frightful noise!” yelled a screeching voice from Mrs de Mumbles’ bedroom. “What’s the matter? Stop it, I say, stop it! I can’t hear myself telephone!”

“Cut it out, you blighter!” cried Mrs. Dibbs, flapping her dirty apron at the cage. “Shut yer mouth, will you, you damned parrot!”

Gilderoy, alone showing no interest, slept on calmly in his basket.

In the middle of which the door-bell rang, and Mr. Hawley, cage and all, was admitted on his second visit.

The conversation, being uninteresting and therefore ignored by both bird and cat, is unrecorded; only the action mattered. Mr. Hawley, Mrs de Mumbles and Mrs. Dibbs all talked at once, and chiefly about the parrot’s mysterious disappearance the night before. Compliments were exchanged, while each of the three said a good deal about the trouble they had been severally put to, adding apologies and regrets. Money, too, slipped about, coming to rest finally in menial hands. To all of which Dudley paid little attention.

His loss of Liberty was involved. It was an occasion to tax all available sources of soul and character. Pride, vanity, self-respect and dignity would be severely tested. Only the greatest could survive such an ordeal without ignominy, without appearing ridiculous. To be carried out by an underling, a helpless captive in a cage, a captive treated with condescending kindness, obliged to listen to foolish phrases in affected voices — to suffer this, and at the same time maintain one’s native grandeur, was a task few could hope to manage, much less master.

Dudley, K.G.P., did both. He met the situation with a kind of feathery *aplomb,* light, yet stately. There was neither fuss nor flutter. To accept an inevitable fate without resistance was, he knew, the secret of dignity, the martyr’s secret. He introduced into his attitude the cosmic note — majestic grandeur.

With the leisurely ease of a star that sets into the summer sea, he descended from his perch at Hawley’s bidding. He crossed the floor of the little cage he now left, as of the big one he now entered, with the steady motion of the cedar’s shadow that creeps along the lawn. He ascended the old familiar perch with the unhurried calm of the moon that climbs the heavens irresistibly, conscious that nothing can prevent. Sideways along his perch, he then crawled with the imperceptible yet uninterrupted advance of dusk, when night draws her veil over the tired landscape. And these cosmic similies are true, because he himself felt cosmic.

With resignation he gazed into Awley's spotty face of yellowish wax, as a star, a universe, just created, looks into God's great face with a quiet "thank you!" Only, knowing that Awley was no deity, he used another phrase than this. "Goddam Dudley," he said beneath his breath, and "Molly."

"There's a good Dudley! There's a brave fellow!" Hawley tried in vain to hasten his speed. "He *would* run away from 'is nice home would he? But he'll be glad to get back again, or I don't know nothing about parrots! Put your best leg forward now...!"

He did not venture, however, to assist in any way; he kept his fingers well out of reach; he no more dared to push the bird than a nursemaid would dare to try and push the earth round faster.

"Step along, my birdie!" contributed Mrs.

Dibbs. "Show us what you can do!" She coaxed and wheedled.

"For god's sake be quick," put in Mrs de Mumbles. "I've got a Lunch at one o'clock."

Heavenly bodies may be neither coaxed nor wheedled; they know their most becoming gait and stick to it.

"Slow mover, ain't he, Mr.'Awley?"

"He can move when he wants to, right enough," replied the second man. He would permit no slighting remarks about his property. He closed the door with a click.

Dudley looked down his beak, his claws holding the familiar home-perch with satisfaction. "I leave. I am not turned out!" he gabbled very low. He saw the kitchen for the last time. He saw the basket, too. He saw that it was — empty. Gilderoy had disappeared again, and — again — no one had seen him go!

"*Non est,*" murmured the parrot, upset by the discovery.

The home-cloth was arranged carefully over the cage, the cage was swung to the floor, then carried slowly down the passage, followed by a procession of worshippers that was merely an earnest of what the ceremonial should have been. Three human voices chanted praise. Through a slit in the cloth, Dudley saw the drawing-room as he passed.

“A bit Maple-ish...!” he remarked, in her ladyship’s voice.

“‘ear him talking to himself, Mum,” said the second man proudly. “That means ‘e’s happy.”

“We’ve taken the greatest possible care of the bird,” Mrs de Mumbles mentioned stiffly.

“Oh, I know, mum,” put in Hawley quickly, “and ‘er ladyship wished me to thank you partickler for all the trouble given. He’s a valuable bird, of course.”

It was half way through this bit of chat that Dudley noticed a grimy finger laid upon his cloth. He took no action at the moment, however. He laid a little plan, perhaps, no more than that.

“Gilder-*roy!* Gilder-*roy!*” he shrieked, and the owner of the finger automatically moved it, the hand it belonged to pulling the cloth more tightly over the cage. This instinctive action placed the finger a fraction of an inch between the bars. Dudley seized it and bit it passionately. *“*At last!” he thought with satisfaction.

The uproar that followed did not interest him beyond the fact that it drowned his own penetrating shriek. He stopped shouting “Gilder*roy!”* therefore, and took a peep through his cloth instead. The procession, he saw, was now on the landing at the top of the stairs, the front door being slowly closed behind them.

“First to the ri’ and second to the le’,” he offered, but his voice was inaudible in the uproar. He distinguished the noisy words with difficulty, but he caught what Hawley was saying: “Hold your row, can’t you! Stop that blasted screaming! You’ll find ‘im when we get home. Hold that row!” Also a word or two of what Mrs Dibbs was saying — two words only, to be exact: “Damages... damages...” Mrs de Mumbles, though screaming, used no actual words apparently. And the front-door banged behind him The second man, wise in his generation, had been quick. His own finger had not been touched. Mr. Hawley, pretending he didn’t know that had happened, was down the stairs and in the street before the noise of the banging door had even time to echo.

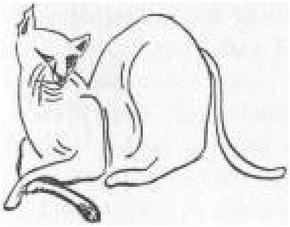
Closing his eyes as they stepped into a waiting taxi, Dudley turned his thoughts on heaven. They left Pimlico behind them. Mildew Place was gone. He gave also a thought, and a loving one, to vanished Gilderoy.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MOST UNTAMABLE of the carnivora is the panther; the most destructive is the cougar; the gentlest is the leopard; the most intelligent is the cat.... She never parts with her liberty. She will be neither our servant nor our friend. — M. FEE.

Etudes philosophiques sur l'instinct et l'intelligence des animaux.

TO Gilderoy, it must now be conceded frankly, full justice has not been done. In this little memo on the psychology of cat and parrot, a note which may prove of value some day to serious students of Natural History, it must be apparent that the biped has received more attention than the quadruped. Gilderoy, seen of course, through Dudley's eyes, has received rather scant notice. The major interest has centred somehow on the red-tailed Grey King Parrot; the scraggy feline with the patched eye has played a subsidiary role.



There is, of course, a reason for this, and a hint of it may be found in the title. To Molly, as she took down the story in dictation from his beak, he gave his permission indeed, yet with a proviso. There was an emphatic "But."

"If I'm to be used at all," he insisted, "I must be in capitals."

This was a *sine qua non*, and the condition, thus laid down, has been literally adhered to. Molly obeyed the letter of the contract. If DUDLEY has bulked, while *Gilderoy* has slinked through this record, the reason lies in the former's adamantine attitude on this point.

It is obvious that the cat has been neglected, his motives mis-read, his actions mis-interpreted, the mysterious splendour of his ancient and inscrutable soul barely hinted at. He has been underrated. Yes, all this, alas, is evident. At the same time, a contract is a contract, and Molly had an author's conscience. Her attempts to modify the terms of the parrot's permission, to go deeper into the cat's character, to put more fat upon his almost visible bones, met with no encouragement. He was unyielding. Material, Dudley insisted, decrees its own best form of expression, and form was of vital importance. He *did* bulk; Capitals were, therefore, right. And all discussions about it ended invariably with an emphatic "*stet.*"

Dudley, too, however, possessed a conscience; and his new Happiness increased its sensitiveness. Nobility, generosity, came uppermost. And now, on his journey with 'awley back to Muddlepuddle, he realized that Gilderoy had been neglected. He saw in restrospect all the cat had done, his faithfulness, his help, his protection. He saw that empty basket in the kitchen. He missed his pal; he needed him; he felt lonely.

Gilderoy ought to be more in the picture, yes. Well, in future, he should be. Gilderoy, on the lowest ground, provided contrast, and if he bulked a little bigger, Dudley himself would gain by bulking bigger still.

Having once seen this clearly, his generosity never wavered. At the end of almost everything he uttered from this moment, he tacked on the name of Gilderoy.

Meanwhile, the train carried himself and Awley from Charing Cross to Kent. The second man had been accepted as personal attendant; the parrot, therefore, had nothing to bother about as regards luggage, ticket, time of train or choice of class. His man saw to all these things. An empty Third Class Smoker was selected. Giving his man a grave, but yet a courtly glance, he then dismissed him from his thought, holding that familiarity with servants was a mistake. Hawley retired behind his sporting paper, having first closed both windows and opened the door of the cage. The bird was thus undisturbed in mind. He remained on his perch, mastered the nasty pipe-tobacco by ignoring it, and thought hard about his missing pal.

Where was that red-haired Bolshevik? What was he up to? How had he disappeared without being seen? Was he on the tiles again? Awley hadn't even noticed him in the flat, believing him still at Muddlepuddle. His absence had not been remarked upon. He wasn't particularly noticeable, anyhow, unless you got the patched eye full in the face. Dudley missed him, for he liked to see him about. Would he never see him again? How long would it take him to walk down to Kent by road? He wondered, he asked himself a thousand questions about Gilderoy, his *semper fidelis amicus* Gilderoy. No answer came, no acknowledgement from the wireless whiskers. The rhythm of wheels and sleepers, the jolting of the coach, the lilt of telegraph poles as they flashed by with punctuating thuds, these were the sole response. Yet the world itself sang with him. "Gild-er-roy Gild-er-roy Gild-er-roy Gild-er-roy" woke half of drowsy Kent with its magic rune.

The journey passed pleasantly enough. They reached the station of Muddlepuddle in due course; they drove to the Manorouse in the runabout car; they were met in the hall by her ladyship, by the children, by the dogs, by the French governess, by staring, inquisitive servants who raised their eyebrows and tried to conceal foolish smiles; and Dudley, the cynosure of all eyes, centre of a thousand questions, was borne upstairs as in a triumphal procession to the room he had already occupied for so many years.

Grave, dignified and silent, he stood erect upon his familiar perch. He swayed a trifle as the cage swung to and fro, pushed by the crowding children, but he never lost his balance. He saw the love and worship in Molly's eyes, kissed the hand she put between the bars, placed one claw, toes opening and shutting ecstatically, in her golden hair, and then removed it again. The child said little, almost as little as he did, but he saw the moist excitement in her eyes.

Though his heart was bursting, he exercised his marvellous restraint, for he hated scenes in any case. This, moreover, was a Royal Procession, himself the regal centre, and emotion of slobbery kind was out of place. His glassy stare perceived that the moisture in Molly's eyes now became a definite drop. That was enough. She understood. He understood, too. "Dudley," he said eventually, in a low voice, "Dudley." That splendid name said all that could be said.

Aloof, and every inch a king from beak to toe, he preserved impenetrable silence. Inscrutable and majestic mid the turmoil of an inferior world, he cocked his head and merely stared with noncommittal benevolence. He loved them all. Lonely upon his perch in Darien, he swam back into their ken. He had Molly. Only Gilderoy was missing from his happiness.

He heard the flood of questions, but ignored them. He was scolded, greeted affectionately, cursed, smothered with endearing terms, asked where he had been, with whom he had stayed, what he had been doing, how he had escaped, who had stolen him, what food and drink, if any, he had received, how he had stood the cold... while being called a dozen new names, friendly and otherwise, and subjected to every conceivable form of caress by fingers, hands and voices.

He made no comment, gave no sign of recognition. *Silentio* and *rigor mortis* were his mottoes. “He’s lost his tongue, poor sweetheart!”

“He’s tired out, poor bird!”

“His feathers have lost their gloss!”

“He’s been treated rough!”

“Starved, frozen, perhaps poisoned!”

“He needs seed and water!”

“And sleep!”

“And warmth!”

“‘e shiver — le pauvre animal!”

“Cover his cage and he’ll recover by degrees!” To one comment only did he pay attention — from Molly:

“The darling went to have tea with the King, of course. He can’t repeat what the King said to him, the little saint. It was in confidence.” To this he replied, for it was something he *could* reply to:

“Dudley dudleydudley,” he said gently, using again his finest phrase.

With the arrival of the seed and water, however, and just as the shawl was being arranged by Molly’s loving fingers above the cage, he whispered something in her ear as she bent down: “Goodbye for the present *ab initio* manorouse hell *nuda veritas* Mollymolly Gilderoygilderoy.” It was too low even for her hearing, sharpened by affectionate understanding though it was. “Darling,” she whispered back, and pinned the shawl as of old.

The room emptied. He waddled towards his meal with the grace and majesty of an emperor who prefers to eat and drink in semi-darkness. Aware of his new splendour, too, he was glad the shawl was spread lest the others, overwhelmed by his glory, might have heart attacks and pass out of existence.

He ate and drank — in moderation. The new music singing in his breast, now warm at last, made all else seem trivial and unimportant. This mysterious Secret in his heart gave him a feeling of significance that dwarfed all else in the world about him. It seemed in his tummy, a trifle low down, he fancied, yet his joy, at any rate, was cosmic. It was related to the Universe. The Great Dream, the London Vision that caused it, was indeed forgotten for the moment, lost to memory, yet its influence remained. He knew himself committed to a Sacred Destiny, though he had not discovered what this destiny was. He knew, as he had already phrased it, something that he didn't know. Verb, sap., he reminded himself, and let it go at that.

The King Grey Parrot was deeply moved.

Dusk fell, the stars came out, the familiar friendly walls stood protectively round the cage, the children had gone to bed. Molly, slipping her head inside the door, had peeked at him and said *"*Good-night, darling, *darling* Dudley! I shan't cry any more now. I *knew* you'd come back. I knew you hand't *really* left me!" Sweet little saint! She was in bare feet and nightgown, her hair hanging in two pig-tails, and he had caught the sound of her feet long before her face appeared. "Cuckoo! Dudleymollydudley!" he had answered her. He felt unbelievably happy and at peace. The old home, after all, was best. Here, in the Manorouse that loved him, was the right place for his Work to realize its consummation. The Climax, whatever it might be, would come in this very room.

It had moved much nearer.

The deeps in him were stirred; the poetry of life began to sing; his mood — *sunt lacrymae rerum* — took its colour from his innermost profundities. That odd, deep-seated pain still throbbed a little.

One by one the lights in the old house were lit, and some hours later they were one by one put out. The Night Wind poked her nose round the corners of the wooded slopes. She brought her sweetest perfume down the sky, her gentlest voice. Her dim feelers caressed the trees and walls. Her low music floated here and there. She was in her softest mood. The parrot was aware of her. "I love her," he responded, "though I've known her warmer."

Alone in the Day Nursery, perched in the darkness, he listened to her million-footed tread. Her voices soothed and blessed him. But for her, he had the room to himself. Only Gilderoy was necessary to make it perfection. He missed Gilderoy. But the queer interior pain was always there. There was this two-fold ache in him. Gilderoy was the kind of pal whose absence leaves a hole. In one's greatest joys and sorrows, the bird discovered, one is inevitably alone. There was this touch of sadness in his Joy....

The night wore on.

He passed the dark, lonely hours in meditation; he had decided he would not sleep — not much, at any rate. Mysterious processes at work in his interior made sleep difficult anyhow; a tough of melancholy rose certainly from his inmost heart, a melancholy that puzzled him a little, because it seemed somehow inseparable from the happiness he felt. The Night Wind helped him there, the thought of Molly's unalterable love as well. The heart of existence, at any rate, he felt positive, was bliss, whatever physical symptoms might assert to the contrary. He, therefore, ignored the passing hints of the strange, unaccustomed tummy-ache.

His thought — according to Molly, his faithful accurate Boswell — went frightfully deep. His meditation reached finally that rare state where thought stops. He did not think any more at all. He got *behind thought,* where direct knowledge, knowledge of Reality, is said to become first possible...

"Little Saint," the child had called him, and the native purity of the childhood heart may have authority. Who dares deny it? The expression on the parrot's face in the gloom was certainly difficult to interpret, but it held a touch of the marvellous, assuredly. To have described it as idiotic, inane, as blank vacancy, would have been a hasty judgment. Purged of all earthly taint, it seemed; fear, lust, desire, vanity, greed, all had vanished, leaving him sweetly rinsed.

The universal admiration of sainthood suggests that saintliness is somehow inexplicably worth while; it pertains, conceivably, to another world where it is, perhaps, the natural state. Nothing experienced in life really satisfies; whence, obviously, we experience wrongly. There must be another way, another method, of experiencing.

To deny that, behind an expression of utter vacancy, the King Grey Parrot perceived all this in his Muddlepuddle Manorouse Meditation is to deny something not clearly formulated, and therefore not arguable.

It was, in any case, 3 a in when Dudley reached the exalted state of consciousness where thought stopped. He knew for certain it was 3 a m., because he distinctly heard the clock in the village church two miles away strike three times. He also knew that the wind had shifted a point or two about this time, because he caught a new sheaf of sounds, soft noises from the wooded hills instead of, as before, from the reedy valleys where the little waters ran. An eye peeped wisely too. He saw a faint red line over those same hills towards the east. This whisper of coming dawn he recognised. Was it not among his earliest recollections?

Yet these little sounds were not the only ones he heard. Something more delicate still stole through the window opened at the top and set his amazing aural nerves aquiver. But if he shivered slightly, it was not the cool dawn air that set his small breast-feathers trembling. It was excitement. The faint sound he caught above the rustling of the trees was one he recognised, mere ghost of a sound, indeed, but unmistakeable. It was the stealthy pad of weary little feet, of four weary little feet, and those feet, he knew positively, were Gilderoy's Motionless the parrot stood and listened; he listened like a god. Far, far away, down in the valley where the thick trees provided cover, that tired cat was stealing like a ghost towards the manorouse. Dudley judged the distance, the direction, the very spot indeed, with faultless accuracy. Gilderoy was making his cautious way through the stretch of woods between the railway station and the house. He was moving uphill, for his body was not upright, he was close to the ground, elongated rather, the legs a little bent. The front paws went down tentatively before weight was laid upon them, the hind ones followed more quickly. There were pauses, in which the feet were shaken rapidly in the air to rid themselves of water; sometimes, too, there came swift, sharp rushes, evidently when a clearing in the trees made cover scanty. But no dog barked, no flapping of frightened birds was audible. No twig snapped, no leaf crackled. Gilderoy made his way with all the skill of his consummate feline race.

Like a god the parrot stood and listened, his heart swelling within him. The faint sounds altered slightly, as Gilderoy, emerging from the woods, passed on to more silent grass, the field of course that lay just beyond the back lawn. And Dudley made a further discovery then, drew a deduction rather: the cat was not so very tired after all, certainly not exhausted. It became suddenly clear to the discerning bird that he had not walked from London. The hesitancy among the trees was due to caution, not fatigue.

“Cuckoo!” breathed the parrot swiftly, and turned his attention elsewhere.

He had been listening for some time, evidently, for the sky was brighter now, the stir of the leaves outside a trifle sharper. There was a new scent in the air as well, the tang of breaking day. The dawn-wind slipped in with a little breathless puff and scatter, pirouetting across the lawn. He heard the Night Wind’s fluttering farewell, already high among the tinted clouds overhead, as she floated off towards the sea.

He watched all this, remembering his own very youthful days of a century ago, when dawn would break over a slumbering blue ocean and fragrant leagues of forest. Both eyes wide open, he now stared at this coming of the dawn in Kent. His toes moved rhythmically. He was in an ecstasy. The climax of his Destiny, he knew, had moved again much closer. He did not think, he felt. A storm of bliss, as it were, boiled up in him; it was intensified by the knowledge that his pal had not forsaken him, that Gilderoy, the cat with the flat-topped skull, was coming closer, too. This three-fold inspiration, of happy distant dawns, of his Work stealing towards its Climax, of Gilderoy’s return, moved him in an unbelievable way. Even the mysterious tummyache was momentarily forgotten. He felt himself divine. One with the whole Magical Show, he seemed. His love, his wisdom, merged to form an even greater thing, although he found no name for it just then.

“Henceforth,” his angle of head, his expressionless eyes proclaimed, “I shall live like a flower, asking nothing of Life but the sunshine.

I shall let the bees rifle my heart. I shall suffer all and sundry to plunder my wisdom and my love... I shall give out...!”

One glassy eye, at this moment of glorious exaltation, glanced through the window and fell upon something standing motionless on the lawn — a mournful object and singularly arresting. He looked again. It was — a tree. He received a sudden, curious shock. Sharp and poignant this shock was.

An imperceptible shudder ran down his whole body. He caught his breath an instant.

Though the twilight was not yet wholly dissipated, the general outlines of things were now visible, edged with faint, growing light. These objects, of course, were all familiar to him; he had seen them daily for several years. Yet this tree, which also he had seen ten thousand times before, he now noticed more particularly. Abruptly, for some odd reason, it drew, it compelled, his attention. Its body, above all its head, seemed thrust forward at him, as in a cinema close-up. It was almost as if he now saw it for the first time.

It both attracted and repelled him. It held a startling new significance. It stood there, staring at him through the window as only a tree can stare. He returned the stare but with a queer trepidation, and because he could not help himself. He was as if fascinated.

It was tall, but not really big. Strange spikey flowers poked out of its head with a certain violence. They seemed to glare at him, they conveyed, he felt, a kind of challenge. He was aware of interest, pity, sympathy, of something personal and appealing to himself in the gaze these flowers flung in his face across the lawn. It was a bitter, yet an understanding gaze. Did it also, he asked himself uneasily, suggest something darker, something sinister as well!

Dudley turned his head away, though with an effort, conscious that a sense of chill came creeping about his heart.

Where had he seen this tree before, its like at any rate? Why was it familiar in a way nothing else on the lawn was familiar? Had he not known it long ago, by the dozen, by the hundred, by the thousand? Whence came this haunting suggestion of significance about its outline, its staring spikey flowers, this touch of something mysterious and equivocal about its motionless white face? Why was its gaze, so steady, so penetrating, charged with a pitiful and understanding sympathy, with a meaning intimately personal to himself? He associated it somehow with burning sunshine. Whence came, then, this touch of ice about his spine?

Dudley shivered again a shiver he could not master. His head, turned sideways now, looked past it. He offered the insistent tree a profile of marble that appeared at any rate insusceptible. He ignored it. But his habit of ignoring what he disliked or did not understand was not effective as usual. He could not forget the tree. He could not forget that it stood staring at him through the window.

The altered angle of his head and eye now showed him the room instead of the lawn. The early light just touched the opposite wall. It brought a new object into his field. In the corner, where stood the children's animal toys, the face of Gilderoy was gazing at him fixedly.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ONE ANIMAL which has been tolerated, esteemed, and at times worshipped without having a single distinctly desirable quality. — N. S. SHALER.

Domesticated Animals.

DUDLEY, all through his life, had measured distance by flight. He knew no other way. The moment he set eyes on his red-headed pal, therefore, his first reaction was instinctive:

“He hasn’t *walked* the whole way!”

This was his first reaction. His second was simply pleasure. He was overjoyed to see the cat. If there was perhaps a further emotion of self-interest, he did not recognize it, did not label it anyhow. The cat, of course, was helpful and protective, but the point was — he was extremely glad to see him. How he had got here was of secondary importance.

This moment of meeting after the anguish of separation being fraught with drama, deep feeling, and the intense relief of long-sustained anxiety, called for suitable recognition. The *mots justes* must be found.

Dudley found them:

“I spy!” he exclaimed aloud.

The cry, in a child’s voice, rang through the Day Nursery like a clarion. And, having uttered it, the King Grey Parrot then experienced a reaction of another kind. It came unexpectedly rather, like a douche of cold water. He had decided that his friend must be more in the picture, more talked about, more seen.

He now suddenly felt otherwise. Of late the parrot had bulked exclusively, his return to the Manorouse of prime importance. Dudley had been the one subject of conversation and interest. But now that Gilderoy was back... perhaps...?

"You want 'em *when* you want 'em," he reflected, "but who wants anybody *all* the time?"

It was a human, even a super-human reflection. His intelligence, clearly, was still on its highest gear. At top-notch Dudley was until the finish, and all his faculties combined to keep this surprising standard. The London stimulus, his secret Joy, the approach of the Climax were the explanation.

He stared fixedly at the cat, but kept silent, and there was a certain ferocity about his silence. His head was cocked at an angle. His glassy eye, as his whole body, held motionless. The tree, with its ominous suggestion, though not forgotten, slipped into the background for the moment, his queer inner ache as well. It was Gilderoy that filled the landscape.

Having spied him, he now considered him.

The cat had entered the house, the room as well, by means best known to himself. He had chosen a dim corner where he was inconspicuous, and in nobody's way. If anyone arrived, as might happen any moment now, his chances of being kicked downstairs were therefore slight. He sat there doing nothing, not even licking his chops. The expression on his bulging cheeks was one of satisfaction — with himself. He was a picture and he knew it. At the same time, he was in a mood of intense secretiveness, due to the fact that he had come back all the way from London, and that no one could possibly guess how he managed it. This was his secret, and he kept it to himself. Tight as a drum his mind was. No one — Dudley, least of all — could ever guess.

Meanwhile, what Dudley spied, and now considered was, in his own view — well, not exactly decorative. Gilderoy's rapid arrival was as unexpected as snow in midsummer, yet the quadruped itself had nothing in common with snow. The parrot, betraying no surprise, stared at the awful visage of his friend amid its reddish background. — filthy beyond description. His face was black, his patched eye was smeared with black, the white feet, all four of them, were black, and streaks of black ran in a criss-cross pattern up and down his gingery sides and over his scraggy back. Even his torn ears were picked out in grime. The eyes alone shone brightly and unstained.

Such was the apparition Dudley, the immaculate, now quietly considered. The corner camouflaged it cleverly. It faced him. Behind him, as he knew, the staring tree watched steadily. He didn’t forget it, but he ignored it for the moment. Choosing the lesser of two evils, he gazed at Gilderoy.

“I am the cleanest animal in the world,” said Gilderoy’s attitude plainly. To which Dudley, giving a quiet cough, made no reply. No sound passed his beak, but behind it, in his generous mind, ran the unspoken thought, “I love him, I love Gilderoy, I know nothing like him.”

They stared at one another. The cat was as placid as though there had been no separation, as though the adventurous pair had never left the house at all. He sat calmly beaming into space. His eyeballs blinked. He gazed with the nearest approach to a smile his grotesque features could achieve into his friend’s glassy eye. His tigerish grin seemed painted on the air. From time to time he gave a casual tongue-dab to his chest or shoulder-blades, but the idea that he was not spotless did not enter his head. He produced, moreover, the impression that he had always sat where he sat now, in the corner. He had never been away. He hugged his delicious secret... and a long time passed.

The sun came up and blazed into the room, but the two occupants took no notice of it, though the increased light showed up Gilderoy in all his umkempt horror. They maintained their habit of refusing to consider the obvious, much less comment on it. Dudley was aware that the tree behind him outside seemed to have drawn closer. The sunlight made it stand out more challengingly. He saw its strange aggressive head with the face of glaring spikey flowers that seemed to demand his attention so insistently. In the windless air they hung there motionless, staring, watching, waiting. The bird was aware of this persistent concentration, and disliked it. It made him feel uneasy. Whence came, he again wondered, the curious sympathy that stirred inside him, the hint of intimate understanding?

He turned his head away — towards ugly Gilderoy again. The point of his consideration was how Gilderoy had travelled down from London. He had walked up from the direction of the station, but he certainly had not footed the thirty-five miles from town. He was filthy, but he was not exhausted.

It was a mysterious business, yet it was his own business. Unless he cared to tell, no one could ever know. A secret is an important joy to a cat and at the moment Gilderoy’s attitude and expression showed how he felt about it. Having gone to the trouble to acquire a first-class secret, he was not going to let it out to anybody, to Dudley least of all. Gilderoy gloated in a stew of intense secretiveness. His oblique soul hugged itself.

“Dudley,” the parrot, offered gently, upon which there followed a long silence that could be felt.

“Gilderoy” he added long afterwards, remembering his agreement with himself.

The cat’s eyes smiled faintly, but he did not move; his grin merely extended a little sideways; he looked more necromantic, more hermetic than ever, as though the black were a disguise he had worn for the Sabbath. There were sounds of servants moving in the corridor; someone would presently come in to do the room. A maid, indeed, did come in presently, dusting, moving the furniture about, laying the fire, and talking to the bird at intervals: “Poor old Polly! Naughty bird! ‘Ad a bit of a jaunt, didn’t you?” Of which the parrot took no notice, nor gave a rejoinder of any sort. He was still “considering” his pal, whom the maid did not even notice.

By his kindly attitude, he had made it easy for the cat to offer an explanation and share his secret, but no explanation was forthcoming. Dudley waited in vain, till at length, when the maid withdrew, leaving the room very much as she had found it, with the exception of the blazing fire, he took another line. He had, of course, discovered long ago exactly how Gilderoy had travelled down. It was as obvious to a bird of Dudley’s powers of observation as that the sun was up. Even in his normal state he would have guessed it; in his present condition, all his faculties at their most brilliant, it lay written in big capitals just below his very beak.

He began in Cololensirarthur’s voice: “A fellow who really deserves a tip, yet never gets one, is an engine-driver.”

The cat’s eyes hardened slightly, but this was due probably to his recognition of a voice he dreaded, for he certainly did not understand the actual words any better than their speaker did.

Dudley, adorable bird, then did a simple but extremely clever thing; “Puff! Puff-puff! Puffpuffpuff Gilderoy!” he imitated the children playing trains, and followed this a few minutes later with a long shrill whistle, as the engine started, and then a few more “Puffpuffpuffs.”

Nor did he look at Gilderoy while he did it. He merely flung the sounds into the air, as Longfellow’s archer shot his arrow, idly, yet knowing they must inevitably come to rest somewhere. The cat, he noticed, just stirred the tip of his tail gently to and fro. The last half-inch moved, once to the left, once to the right, then came to rest again.

“Tike your seats, please!” roared the parrot suddenly. “Tike your seats! Firststoplunnon!” It was a raucous male voice of great volume, and before its echoes had even died away, Gilderoy betrayed himself.

His grin first widened slowly, then passed into a yawn. He rose. He stood on his four feet and arched his back into a semi-circle. His patched eye wandered. A moment later he moved sideways along the wall, obliquely past the table, at a slanting angle round the book-case, and, edging the high fender with tail erect and feet planted delicately, he reached at length the patch of carpet beside the cupboard where sunlight and blazing fire combined to make a pool of delicious warmth. This had been his objective when he started, but the straight line of four feet he had extended into twelve. Inspecting the spot fastidiously, he then turned his head sideways a moment and stared intently up at the cage across the room. His patched eye gazed fixedly at the parrot.

“Purrrrr miaow, purrrrrr miaow!” he produced, his grin widening to its utmost possible limit, as he began kneading the carpet with his feet. He admitted that the game was up; concealing his chagrin admirably, he proved himself a sporting loser. After turning in circles for another minute or two, he then lay down in a ball with a sudden flop, buried his grimey face between yet grimmier paws, and fell asleep. That he did not first wash himself clean proved how tired he was.

“Have a good time,” whispered the parrot in a gentle voice, as he turned away, glad that he, at any rate, never need hide himself in the coal bunkers of a locomotive tender. His heart was bursting with the love he felt. The changed angle of his head now involved a glance through the window. The tree, he saw, with a faint shiver of uneasiness again, still stared into the room straight at him. The growing light had changed its aspect, perhaps, a trifle. There was something softer in its stern rigid outline, a fractional lowering of the high proud head. Did not the fierce spikey flowers betray an almost imperceptible droop?

The tree haunted him no less than before, but microscopic changes slipped a new quality into his own emotions. He was aware of pathos.

CHAPTER XXIII

FROM THE DAWN of creation the cat has known his place, and he has kept it, practically untamed and unspoiled by man. Of all animals, he alone attains to the Contemplative Life. He regards the wheel of existence from without, like the Buddha. He lives alone, aloft, sublime, in a wise passiveness.... It was for these qualities, probably, that the cat was worshipped by the ancient Egyptians.

ANDREW LANG.

THE rest of that day passed somewhat as a dream for Dudley, a dream pierced with lightning flashes of emotion. He remained rapt, concentrated, withdrawn and unusually silent. He seemed withdrawn into his very inmost being, yet while largely ignoring the outer world he was not wholly unconscious of it. The present made demands upon him, for the Day Nursery, with children, governess and servants was a noisy place; and the past, his long, long variegated past, rose urgently before him too. Past and present, indeed, intermingled curiously, so that he was never quite sure where he was.

In this shadow-world three things, however, stood out as intensely real: Molly, Gilderoy, and the Tree. These three items remained vividly significant.

Gilderoy, troubled and affectionate, did not intrude himself, nor interfere. He did not dare, perhaps. He sensed a change, but could not understand it; he had been sensing it for some time now, increasingly. About his pal hung an atmosphere that puzzled, even faintly alarmed him, an atmosphere of the marvellous. That the parrot had so easily divined his secret; and that the household had not missed him, had not even noticed his absence, was rather bewildering and shattered his self-complacency. He showed less aggressiveness, at any rate, was tender, drew no attention to himself, and behaved, generally, better than ever in his life before. He had washed the dirt away; his coat was clean, his dark nose glistened. He was never out of the room for long, and his patched eye was always turning anxiously in the direction of the parrot.

Molly, for her part, was in constant attention too, divining that something was amiss. Her faithful heart was wrung. There seemed no one who could help her. Not a Vet was to be found within a day's journey. Her mother "adored" animals, though actually only adoring an extension of herself in creatures she could talk to without being interrupted or answered. Molly, therefore, fell back upon Professor Greene, "M.A., M.D., F.Z.S., etc." Beside the cage she read from the precious book, putting questions to which no answer came except a gentle "Dudleydudley" and "cuckoo," or merely a shake of the handsome head to indicate that the answer was in the negative.

Plague, Typhoid, Catarrh, Bronchitis, Enteritis, Gout, Pneumonia, Rheumatism, Ringworm, Tuberculosis, all were suggested in turn, Apoplexy and Convulsions causing her most alarm.

"But there's simply *nothing* a grey parrot can't get," she cried in despair. "Has oo got fatty or amyloid degeneration of the heart, liver, or kidneys, darling?" She begged him to tell her, reading from the little book. "Or is it tuberculosis, my little Saint? 'Birds living in an isolated state, as most parrots in captivity outside zoological gardens do, suffer mostly from the human or bovine type.' Which is it Dudley, dear? It *can't* be bovine, can it?"

"Cuckoo," he breathed gently at her, his eye, however, on the window.

"More or less lameness is produced, and a greater difficulty in maintaining itself on the perch is experienced," she read. "That's gout," she announced, "so it can't be that. You aren't a scrap unsteady, are you?"

He gazed into her face, his lovely body steady as a rock.

"And oo's not 'sneezing with a swollen condition of the eyelids' so it's certainly not catarrh." The symptoms of Plague, Typhoid and Enteritis were also missing; besides, the bird shook his head at all of them, as he did at Lice, Tumours, Ringworm and Rheumatism.

"There was a draught in Buckingham Palace, I expect," she declared. "No King has time to look after himself properly — as — *you* — know, darling, don't you?"

But it was Apoplexy, Convulsions, Fits that alarmed her most, and to her enquiries concerning these, the King Grey Parrot gave no reply of any sort. No sign escaped him.

"'Epipleptic-like seizures, or fits'," she read out hesitatingly, "'are not infrequent in aged parrots due to some disturbance of the central nervous system.... In old parrots they are often the expression of some affection of the brain, such as tubercle.... A malady characterised by a sudden loss of consciousness,'"... The child's voice shook a little as she read on: "'Commence with a sharp, shrill cry, as if the bird were frightened... followed by great agitation and struggling, and end by the bird falling to the bottom of the cage in complete unconsciousness.'"

She came close to the cage and gazed anxiously at her loved pet, who returned the gaze but spoke no word. Anyone less robust in mind must have been affected by this torrent of insanitary suggestion. Dudley, however, knew better. He knew something he didn't know. He knew something he could not communicate even to Molly. The deep internal Ache he felt was due to no mere physical malady. No physical illness had joy mixed up with it, for one thing, and his mysterious Joy still glowed in him like a furnace. His trouble was related to some profound universal process.

"The *tremendous* brain-work," Molly told him, trying to console herself at the same time, "has exhausted you, darling. You are *marvellously* old, of course. It's tubercle you've got, perhaps — just a mild attack."

One bit more she read out: "'If a parrot evinces a desire to take a bath it should be encouraged to do so.'"

Dudley betrayed a passing shiver, so faint that the child did not notice it. But the shiver was not due to anything she said, because the bird had not been listening to her for a very long time. His eye had again caught sight of the Tree upon the lawn, and the great head, he could have sworn, was slightly lower than before. The strange spikey flowers in the face still stared into the room, directly at him. It was this that gave him the shiver. He produced a gentle little cough to hide it.

Molly heard the cough. "Never mind," she comforted him, "it'll soon pass, darling. You'll be better to-morrow. I'll nurse you." She put her lips to the bars. "Kiss mother, Dudley," she cooed, "kiss mother!"

Dudley produced a divine imitation of a kiss that she had taught him. His toes moved, too, opening and shutting.

“Isn’t he wonderful, *wonderful*!” cried the delighted child. “And how wise he looks! He knows *everything.* All the troubles of the world lie on his shoulders, but he *never* gives “*Pourtant il ne dit pas gran’chose!*” put in the governess, who disliked and feared the bird since the day he had paid attention to a finger proffering friendship.

“He’s thinking,” Molly explained with dignity. “He’s going to write his London Adventures, just as he wrote that splendid Cinema. He went up to make arrangements with his publisher. He had to see a Specialist, too.”

Dudley moved one foot, lifting it, holding it in the air.

“There!” she added. “He was just going to say something marvellous when you interrupted him.”

“‘erladyship” also contributed a word or two:

“Feeling poorly, are you, dear bird?” She looked intensely sympathetic, but suggested no remedy, no treatment. “I feel like that myself sometimes, too. It’s nerves, I think. Only two days ago I...” and a long account of her own symptoms followed, the parrot’s indisposition entirely forgotten....

The day pursued its dream-like course, and the haunting presence of the staring Tree never for one moment left Dudley’s consciousness. That and the strange internal trouble remained, even when not actually thought about.

Gilderoy, solicitous and watchful, a trifle uneasy, too, as already mentioned, kept an eye on his friend, a keenly observant eye; he was never very far away; he slipped in and out of the room, forgetful of himself; he was disturbed. Through his skin and sensitive whiskers, through the bright slit eyes as well, he made sharper observations than anyone else. It was these that caused him anxiety. There was a slight droop in the head and beak he did not like, the short red tail hung oddly, the clutch of the little toes upon the perch seemed not quite as tight as usual; and the feathers were open, always a sign of something wrong.

He was extraordinarily tactful and unselfish. Occasionally, using gesture or his very brief vocabulary, he dropped remarks, but remarks that insisted upon no answer. They were just to let his pal know that he was in the offing in case of sudden need.

“At the Work, I see. Don’t let me interrupt.” Dudley didn’t.

“Back presently,” he mentioned at midday, as he tiptoed delicately sideways towards the door, on his way to forage in the kitchen. “Don’t bother.” Dudley didn’t.

“I’m back,” he announced towards evening. “How do you do?” he signalled with his patched eye. Again, Dudley didn’t.

The same motionless pose of stone, the same grim, hierophantic silence, the same superb air of profound meditation. The unacknowledged greetings reached him across the length of the room, through the clamour of the turbulent group about the cage as well, but the heroic bird, meeting his trouble alone, fighting his battle single-handed, gave no sign. A touch of awe stole into the cat’s queer heart and stayed there.

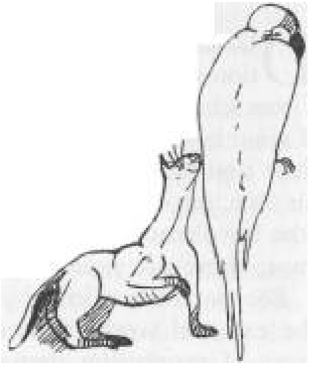
The hours slipped away, tea-time came and passed, twilight crept over the world outside, the fire in the grate died out, and upon the Tree’s white face gleamed a faint unearthly glow. And with the fading away of daylight’s open glare, the Tree moved, it seemed, nearer to the window. Trunk and branches, of course, held stationary; it was the tree’s inmost being that shifted mysteriously closer. Dudley, lost in his mighty dreams, was not yet unaware. For his own inmost being, he noticed, moved similarly out to meet it.

“Gilderoy,” he murmured almost inaudibly, yet not so low that the watchful tiger failed to catch it.

“Purrr miaow,” he responded instantly.

He leaped soundlessly upon the table. Moving aside the edge of the shawl with one front paw, he peered inside. The same pose of a marble statue, the same intense withdrawal from the world, he noticed. The droop, however, seemed to him a trifle accentuated. There was an air of mournful resignation. The feathers, more open than before, had less lustre. There was less light, less glitter, in the eyes. A whiff of air proved that the extra covering Molly had spread made the cage nice and warm, the food and drink supply was double the usual amount, too. But the seed and water were untouched. The bird looked old, old, old. He had aged suddenly, dreadfully rather. Gilderoy knew a sudden throbbing pang.

"I feel matey," his tail twitched, with a low sound of affection in his throat. He rubbed himself softly against the bars, but Dudley made no movement on his perch, though he gave a sign at last that he was aware of his friend's presence. He opened his eyes very slowly, but not quite to their full extent. He glanced sideways down his beak at him, without altering the angle of the head.



"Gilderoy," he murmured very sweetly, "have a good time!" The tone made his terrible beak look almost soft. "Goodbye for the present," he added, and closed his eyes again.

Gilderoy felt the touch of awe in his heart increase. He admitted that the pang he knew was a genuine ache. Something cold went fluttering down his spine as well, "Dear.." reached him from the motionless beak, faint as the puff of a butterfly's wing.

He decided to watch beside his pal all night. It was after midnight, the children long since gone to bed, the room lay dark, the manorouse was silent. Leaving the corner of the shawl still raised, he curled up, none too comfortably, on the narrow space beside the cage, prepared for the long vigil. In a few minutes he was sound asleep....

CHAPTER XXIV

HEN GREY PARROTS, especially when they are advancing in years, frequently lay eggs, and, in some instances, with great difficulty. — W. T. GREENE.

DUDLEY, meanwhile, remained in a condition all his own, a condition of ecstatic bliss. Those who doubt the accuracy of this brief account of what he felt and thought are, again, welcome to their doubts. Only his peers, of an age equal to his own, are competent to judge, and since humans who have reached a hundred years are notoriously gaga, there are none to judge.

The parrot continued just sufficiently aware of the external world to know that it existed. His sense of proportion demanded this: it must not intrude, but it must not wholly disappear. Both feet must stand firm and flat on *terra firma,* no matter to what heights the spirit soared. He was aware, thus, that Gilderoy had intended unselfishly to watch all night beside him, yet had fallen asleep at once; aware that the manorouse with all its inmates lay inert in that state of slumber he called *coma;* that outside, the night stood windless and serene, gazing, waiting, breathless, the big trees upright in attendance, like old bearded kings; and that one smaller Tree, singularly alert, was undergoing an agony of delicious bliss somewhat similar to his own. He was aware of this strange, deep sinister kinship between himself and this amazing tree. It had intensified.

He was aware, in a word, of his precise relation to the Cosmos at this moment, and knew that the Cosmos was similarly aware. Expectancy stood on tiptoe everywhere, from the tiny blades of grass to the incandescent fires of the furthest extra-galactic nebulae. The spikey flowers on the Tree, as the sleek feathers on himself, all pointed the same way, electric with some mysterious secret agony each shared.

Something all this time was drawing nearer, nearer, and the universe, since the universe must be affected by it, stood waiting at attention. It would prove a climax of stupendous kind. His WORK, his LIFE-WORK, would achieve its consummation, and all his striving and suffering of a hundred years would justify themselves. His whole being would burst into flower, fulfilling the purpose for which it had been called into existence. He and the Tree would together enter Paradise.

“It’s all a Magical Show,” he murmured to himself, referring to the universe. “A glittering Magical Show. And I — you and I” his eye including the tree—” are both in at the finish!”

Realizing that he was thus caught up in the Swell of this vast Cosmic Tide, swept forward irresistibly on its majestic awful crest, merged in the Creative purpose of Life and Evolution, whatever these might be, he now knew his former shrinking horror of the sinister Tree turned into flaming love. The King Grey Parrot on his little perch, the tall staring Tree upon the midnight lawn, stood hand in hand. And this sweet intimacy now suddenly brought back its name.

“*Aloe!*” he cried, moved into faint, trembling utterance. “*I love you!*”

If the Tree gave no sign by way of sound or movement, there was recognition, for a wave of light passed exquisitely across the hanging face and vanished. Dudley perceived it. He tried to say more, but the attempt seemed beyond his powers. Phrases like jewelled swords flashed through his mind, but he discarded them, unable to seize them in their perfect form.

“‘erladyships notatome,” he whispered with an effort, then desisted, sinking back into that uncharacterised bliss wherein he knew himself one with all things everywhere, himself and the Aloe, therefore, also one. This Brotherhood he distinctly realized. At the same time, he felt a little weaker.

“Brother,” he sighed inaudibly, lest the increasing feebleness rob him of the power of utterance altogether, “it’s coming to me, as it has come to you. It has taken a hundred years....”

He slipped back into his agony of ecstatic joy. Outside, the night proceeded with her gorgeous ceremony, the owls flew hunting past the silent house, the dew fell soundlessly, the grass and flowers grew, the stars, now paling a little, stared down from their appalling distances. The hush of expectancy deepened with almost painful intensity. The universe stood ready, waiting for the Something that drew every moment nearer.

Dudley, in the inmost heart of this expectancy, waited too; he, too, was ready. The Event he knew, yet did not know, crept remorselessly closer. He approached a gorgeous climax, if with a divine indifference, yet also with a divine poise due to his welcome of the inevitable. If he felt a certain weariness, an increasing enfeeblement, that, he reflected, was only natural. It was an exhausting business, he told himself, but worth while.

"*Ab ovo,"* escaped him, inspirationally it seemed, as a faint spasm made him tremble. "Can't come in. I'm dressing...."

His appearance was superb, magnificent; he looked, what indeed he was, the Archetypal Parrot. He knew himself a microcosm, *the* microcosm. The stars sang in his breast. His breath was flowers, his nerves were honey, he was flooded with divine compassion. His eyes, turned inwards rather, glowed with the sweet fires of that lost southern sunshine he had yearned for during ninety-nine years of fog and rain. And the understanding Tree, sharing memories of similar kind, and similar period, too, stood in loving sympathy beside him.

"Brother!" slipped poignantly through his mind, "we are in agony together. But it is a creative, a productive agony!" He heard the night wind rustle through the spikey blooms for answer.

And while the secret Cosmic. Processes moved relentlessly forward, Gilderoy, a warm red ball, lay tight asleep. His sides rose and fell in sympathy with the vaster tides outside him, yet undoubtedly he slept. Close to the cage he lay, he could not have been closer to his pal without being inside; his face, sideways between the paws, was scrunched up against the very bars. And the Moment crept nearer and ever nearer.

Another spasm ran through the trim, feathered body on the perch.

"Ugh!" gasped Dudley, though, forgetful of his own pain, his eye turned affectionately upon his sleeping pal. He tottered a little, then instantly recovered his balance.

It was a solemn moment. Swiftly, he reviewed his whole existence.

"I have warmed both claws at the fires of life," he murmured. "I have mastered life. I have been a bird of action." The years of somnolent inactivity he ignored because he forgot them. "One is," he remembered, "what one thinks he is."

Widening the space between his clutching toes with extreme caution, lest deep emotion endanger balance, he gave a tiny cough, and observed that Gilderoy's whiskers twitched. His sleep, after all, was but a cat-sleep. He had kept his faithful vigil.

"Yes, a Magical Show," resumed the King Grey Parrot, weakening obviously, "But it has never humbugged me. On the contrary — I — humbugged it. I moulded it to my will." Aware that the Tree and Gilderoy both listened, he wanted to say more, but power failed him. "Whew...!" half whistle and half sigh left his beak, as a pain like cramp shot through his lowest tummy. "It hurts, Molly!"

Despite the pain he visualised the whole grand structure of the Universe, aware that almost any moment now he was about to contribute to it.

"I am to add my little brick," he realized, yet with bursting pride and joy.

His experiences during these long hours lie actually beyond the reach of words....

The dawn at length broke, pink and pearly. Seeing it, Dudley tried to meet it with a smile. But his rigid features were not made for smiles. The brave greeting with which he wished to face the Cosmos on this significant dawn could not form itself upon that iron beak. And the marvellous bird, his heart alight as the final throes approached, at last understood why this small satisfaction was denied him. The flea was made small, lest with its blood-thirsty nature it devastate the earth. His own beauty, similarly, with the power to smile added to it, must have ravished all who saw it out of their senses utterly.

This flash of insight brought consolation even at a moment of so august crisis. It was followed by a short, sharp spasm, by a second, and by a third. They shook the perfect little body, they weakened it still further. Dudley, now a trifle unsteady on his perch, gave a heave, a groan, a gurgle of exhaustion. He trembled from head to foot — waiting in intense expectancy. But nothing happened. The Moment was not quite yet.

The Sun was up, the Moment had arrived.

Upon the pinnacle of life he stood. He turned his gaze sideways down that formidable beak. It fell on the interior of his rather dirty cage, now turned into glory by the shaft of golden light. Emotion rose to a tempest in him, swelling, bursting, irresistible.

“I wonder,” occurred to him, “If I’ve swallowed anything?” He searched for words, for sentences, for exclamations, but to his amazement, his chagrin too, could discover none. Even the Latin tags, usually inexhaustible, failed him for the first time in memory.

“What’s up?” he managed to ask himself, his breath noisily irregular suddenly. He gazed about him, tactfully diverting attention from his little vulgar lapse.

“The sun!” He managed this aloud, answering his own question. The first shaft of sunrise fell like a living sword into his cage, into his very face.

“O Halleluia...!” he tried to cry aloud, but the storm of feeling that swept his gullet allowed only a faint and trembling little voice to issue in “O Hell....” It was all he could manage. His balance became insecure. His clutch lost its perfect touch. He wobbled.

“Dudley will now get down, Gilderoy,” he contrived with a tremendous effort, but with unfailing courage. He waddled sideways along the perch, slowly, very cautiously, till he reached the end. He tottered, but he did not miss his step. Gilderoy, now standing up, both eyes staring intently, inserted a paw between the bars. And Dudley, touching the paw softly with one claw, but gripping the bars as well with his beak, lowered himself painfully to the floor. He lurched. His strength seemed ebbing. The cage shook. The shawl slid off.

“All night,” signalled Gilderoy, staring at him, distressed, a little frightened, “I have stuck close.” His whole body conveyed the affection that filled his skin to its very brim.

Dudley, now standing on the floor of the cage, cocked his head across one shoulder with difficulty, and returned the stare. Into his eye, which had become increasingly dull and lustreless, flashed a last radiant, fiery light. He gurgled. His small body heaved convulsively. Love burned quenchless, inexhaustible. He shook from head to foot. Prostration was at hand.

“I’ve done my little job,” he murmured dauntlessly, and extremely low. “I’ve served the Race. Gildy...” the whisper fluttered “My time — *our* time,” as his glance included the window through which the Tree loomed equally magnificent in the dawn—" has come!" The cat pressed closer, rubbing his body softly against the bars. He was intensely agitated. The green eyes moistened.

"My WORK," mumbled the parrot, more faintly still as the cramps increased in severity, "is — consummated...!"

His breath failed him. He trembled violently. One word more he managed to utter, if almost soundlessly:

"Finis coronat opus...!"

There was a sharp plop. A small white egg, shiney, of perfect shape, modelled divinely to its tapering end, and similar to a ring-dove's, lay on the floor of the cage.

Gilderoy stared fixedly at it. The hair stood on end, it seemed, upon his back. Both eyes were swimming.

"A *she!"* he signalled in blank amazement.

His pal, after a brief convulsion, lay down in the sand beside her egg. Silent, motionless, she lay, the eyes half closed, the claws loose, the thin little legs crossed neatly, the beak slightly open. The sunlight turned the lovely figure into gold. Gilderoy, trembling, pushed a velvet paw between the bars and touched the familiar red tail. He could just reach it. The beak moved almost imperceptibly. Almost inaudibly the whisper issued:

"Gilderoy... dear... have a good time.... Good-bye for the present...!"

There was a sound outside upon the lawn. A white spikey flower loosened by the dawn wind, fluttered to the ground. It was followed by a second and a third. As the last flower fell, taking the entire strange face with it, a gentle sigh passed from the motionless beak on the floor of the cage.

The eyes then closed. Gilderoy withdrew his paw. For some minutes he stole to and fro, uttering short plaintive purrs, rubbing himself against the bars. Then he sat down, miawing piteously, kneading the table with his front feet staring, staring at the silent, motionless little body of his friend that looked now so much smaller than in life. Then, presently, finding no response, the purring and the miaowing stopped; he no longer kneaded; he turned his attention to the egg.

He gazed and gazed and gazed. Some fifteen minutes later he came, apparently, to a conclusion of his own:

“It’s a cooker!” he decided.

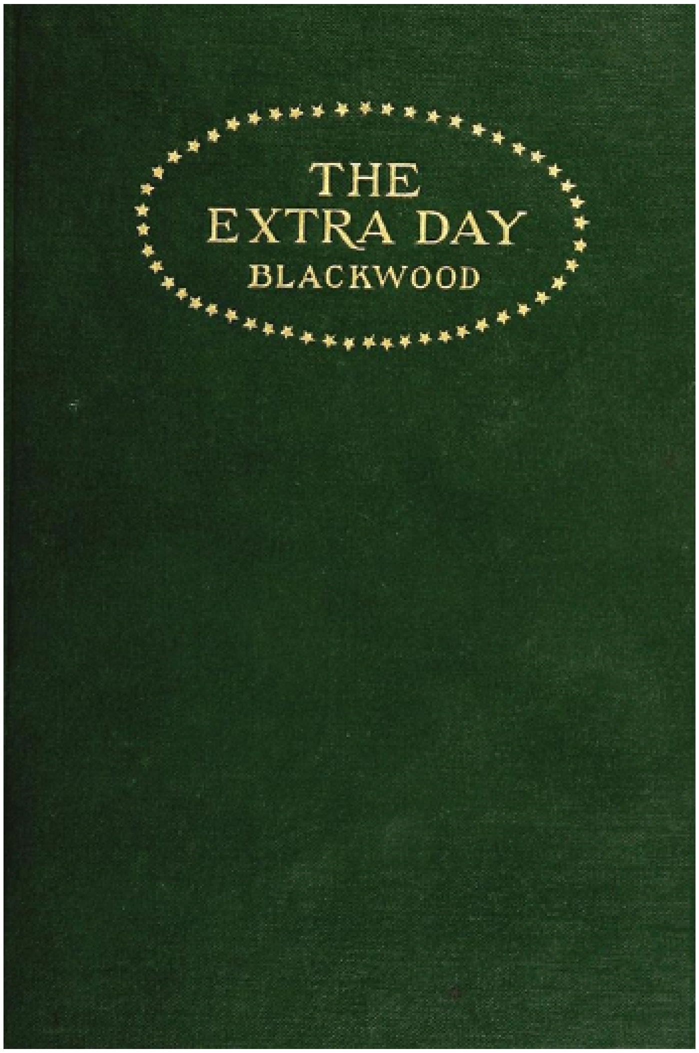
Without another look, he left the room, he left the house, he became what he had been before the Great Friendship entered his life — a stray, alien, independent cat that walked by himself across the universe.

The Children's Novels

Wellington College, Crowthorne, Berkshire — where Blackwood was educated

The Extra Day (1915)

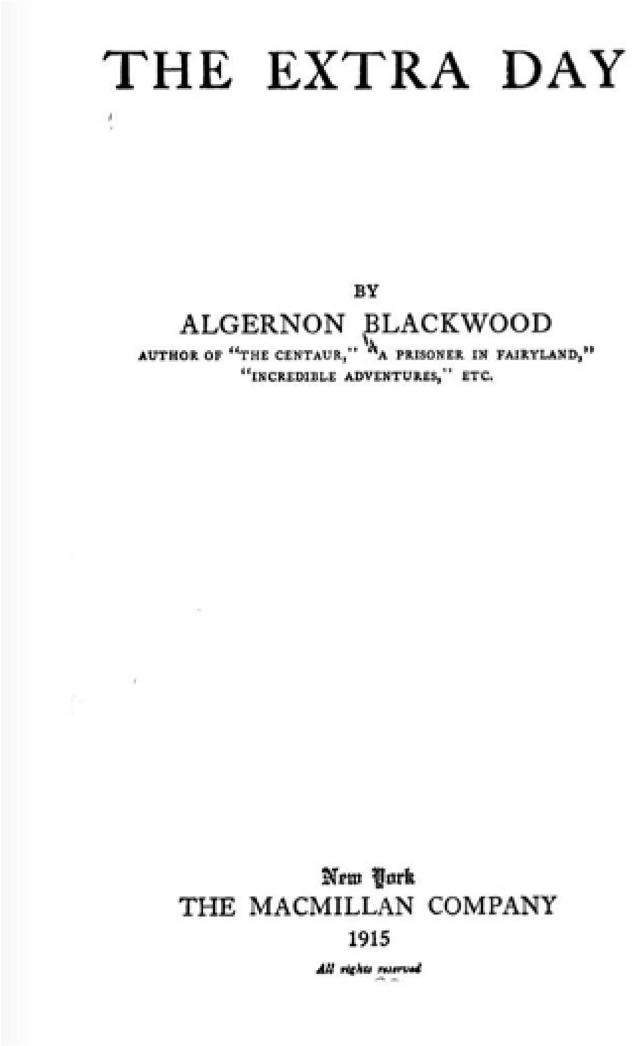
This children's novel was first published in 1915, but incorporates several short stories first published in various periodicals between 1913 and 1914. Its plot was later conflated with *The Education of Uncle Paul*, to form the story of the play, *Through the Crack* (1920), which Blackwood co-authored with Violet Pearn. The novel continues a perennial theme of Blackwood's writing, namely the importance of never forgetting the optimistic, wide-eyed wonder of a child's view of the world – a theme that the novel explores in its delightful narrative about a group of children and the adventures they find in the most apparently mundane things.


THE
EXTRA DAY
BLACKWOOD

Cover of the first edition

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. THE MATERIAL
CHAPTER II. FANCY — SEED OF WONDER
CHAPTER III. DEATH OF A MERE FACT
CHAPTER IV. FACT — EDGED WITH FANCY
CHAPTER V. THE BIRTH OF WONDER
CHAPTER VI. THE GROWTH OF WONDER
CHAPTER VII. IMAGINATION WAKES
CHAPTER VIII. WHERE WONDER HIDES
CHAPTER IX. A PRIEST OF WONDER
CHAPTER X. FACT AND WONDER — CLASH
CHAPTER XI. JUDY’S PARTICULAR ADVENTURE
CHAPTER XII. TIM’S PARTICULAR ADVENTURE
CHAPTER XIII. TIME HESITATES
CHAPTER XIV. MARIA STIRS
CHAPTER XV. “A DAY WILL COME”
CHAPTER XVI. TIME HALTS
CHAPTER XVII. A DAY HAS COME
CHAPTER XVIII. TIME GOES ON AGAIN —
CHAPTER XIX. — AS USUAL
CHAPTER XX. — BUT DIFFERENTLY!



THE EXTRA DAY

BY
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD
AUTHOR OF "THE CENTAUR," "A PRISONER IN FAIRYLAND,"
"INCREDIBLE ADVENTURES," ETC.

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Title page of the first edition

CHAPTER I. THE MATERIAL

JUDY, TIM, AND Maria were just little children. It was impossible to say exactly what their ages were, except that they were just the usual age, that Judy was the eldest, Maria the youngest, and that Tim, accordingly, came in between the two.

Their father did his best for them; so did their mother; so did Aunt Emily, the latter's sister. It is impossible to say very much about these three either, except that they were just Father, Mother, and Aunt Emily. They were the Authorities-in-Chief, and they knew respectively everything there was to be known about such remote and difficult subjects as London and Money; Food, Health and Clothing; Conduct, Behaviour and Regulations, both general and particular. Into these three departments of activity the children, without realising that they did so, classed them neatly. Aunt Emily, besides the special duties assigned to her, was a living embodiment of No. While Father allowed and permitted, while Mother wobbled and hesitated, Aunt Emily shook her head with decision, and said distinctly No. She was too full of warnings, advice, and admonitions to get about much. She wore gold glasses, and had an elastic, pointed nose. From the children's point of view she must be classed as invalid. Somewhere, deep down inside them, they felt pity.

The trio loved them according to their just deserts; they grasped that the Authorities did their best for them. This "best," moreover, was done in different ways. Father did it with love and tenderness, that is, he spoilt them; Mother with tenderness and love, that is, she felt them part of herself and did not like to hurt herself; Aunt Emily with affectionate and worthy desire to see them improve, that is, she trained them. Therefore they adored their father, loved their mother, and thought highly — from a distance preferably — of their aunt.

This was the outward and visible household that an ordinary person, say, a visitor who came to lunch on Sunday after church, would have noticed. It was the upper layer; but there was an under layer too. There was Thompson, the old pompous family butler; they trusted him because he was silent and rarely smiled, winked at their mischief, pretended not to see them when he caught them in his pantry, and never once betrayed them. There was Mrs. Horton, the fat and hot-tempered family cook; they regarded her with excitement including dread, because she left juicy cakes (still wet) upon the dresser, yet denied them the entry into her kitchen. Her first name being Bridget, there was evidently an Irish strain in her, but there was probably a dash of French as well, for she was an excellent cook and *recipe* was her master-word — she pronounced it "recipee." There was Jackman, the nurse, a mixture of Mother and Aunt Emily; and there was Weeden, the Head Gardener, an evasive and mysterious personality, who knew so much about flowers and vegetables and weather that he was half animal, half bird, and scarcely a human being at all — vaguely magnificent in a sombre way. His power in his own department was unquestioned. He said little, but it "meant an awful lot" — most of which, perhaps, was not intended.

These four constituted the under layer of the household, concealed from visitors, and living their own lives apart behind the scenes. They were the Lesser Authorities.

There were others too, of course, neighbours, friends, and visitors, who dwelt outside the big iron gates in the Open World, and who entered their lives from various angles, some to linger, some merely to show themselves and vanish into mist again. Occasionally they reappeared at intervals, occasionally they didn't. Among the former were Colonel William Stumper, C.B., a retired Indian soldier who lived in the Manor House beyond the church and had written a book on Scouting; a nameless Station-Master, whom they saw rarely when they accompanied Daddy to the London train; a Policeman, who walked endlessly up and down the muddy or dusty lanes, and came to the front door with a dirty little book in his big hands at Christmas-time; and a Tramp, who slept in barns and haystacks, and haunted the great London Road ever since they had once handed him a piece of Mrs. Horton's sticky cake in paper over the old grey fence. Him they regarded with a special awe and admiration, not unmixed with tenderness. He had smiled so nicely when he said "Thank you" that Judy, wondering if there was any one to mend his clothes, had always longed to know him better. It seemed so wonderful. How could he live without furniture, house, regular meals — without possessions, in a word? It made him so real. It was “real life,” in fact, to live that way; and upon Judy especially the impression was a deep one.

In addition to these occasional intruders, there was another person, an Authority, but the most wonderful Authority of all, who came into their lives a little later with a gradual and overwhelming effect, but who cannot be mentioned more definitely just now because he has not yet arrived. The world, in any case, speaking generally, was enormous; it was endless; it was always dropping things and people upon them without warning, as from a clear and cloudless sky. But this particular individual was still climbing the great curve below their horizon, and had not yet poked his amazing head above the edge.

Yet, strange to say, they had always believed that some such person would arrive. A wonderful stranger was already on the way. They rarely spoke of it — it was just a great, passionate expectancy tucked away in the deepest corner of their hearts. Children possess this sense of anticipation all the world over; grown-ups have it too in the form of an unquenchable, though fading hope: the feeling that some day or other a Wonderful Stranger will come up the pathway, knock at the door, and enter their lives, making life worth living, full of wonder, beauty, and delight, because he will make all things new.

This wonderful stranger, Judy had a vague idea, would be — be like at least — the Tramp; Tim, following another instinct, was of the opinion he would be a “soldier-explorer-hunter kind of man”; Maria, if she thought anything at all about him, kept her decision securely hidden in her tight, round body. But Judy qualified her choice by the hopeful assertion that he would “come from the air”; and Tim had a secret notion that he would emerge from a big, deep hole — pop out like a badger or a rabbit, as it were — and suddenly declare himself; while Maria, by her non-committal, universal attitude, perhaps believed that, if he came at all, he would “just come from everywhere at once.” She believed everything, always, everywhere. But to assert that belief was to betray the existence of a doubt concerning it. She just lived it.

For the three children belonged to three distinct classes, without knowing that they did so. Tim loved anything to do with the ground, with earth and soil, that is, things that made holes and lived in them, or that did not actually make holes but just grubbed about; mysterious, secret things, such as rabbits, badgers, hedgehogs, mice, rats, hares, and weasels. In all his games the “earth” was home.

Judy, on the other hand, was indubitably an air person — birds amazed her, filling her hungry heart with high aspirations, longings, and desires. She looked, with her bright, eager face and spidery legs, distinctly bird-like. She flitted, darted, perched. She had what Tim called a “tweaky” nose, though whether he meant that it was beak-like or merely twitched, he never stated; it was just “tweaky,” and Judy took it as a compliment. One could easily imagine her shining little face peeping over the edge of a nest, the rest of her sitting warmly upon half a dozen smooth, pink eggs. Her legs certainly seemed stuck into her like pencils, as with a robin or a seagull. She adored everything that had wings and flew; she was of the air; it was her element.

Maria’s passions were unknown. Though suspected of being universal, since she manifested no deliberate likes or dislikes, approving all things with a kind of majestic and indifferent omnipotence, they remained quiescent and undeclared. She probably just loved the universe. She felt at home in it. To Maria the entire universe belonged, because she sat still and with absolute conviction — claimed it.

CHAPTER II. FANCY — SEED OF WONDER

THE COUNTRY HOUSE, so ancient that it seemed part of the landscape, settled down secretively into the wintry darkness and watched the night with eyes of yellow flame. The thick December gloom hid it securely from attack. Nothing could find it out. Though crumbling in places, the mass of it was solid as a fortress, for the old oak beams had resisted Time so long that the tired years had resigned themselves to siege instead of assault, and the protective hills and woods rendered it impregnable against the centuries. The beleaguered inhabitants felt safe. It was a delightful, cosy feeling, yet excitement and surprise were in it too. Anything *might* happen, and at any moment.

This, at any rate, was how Judy and Tim felt the personality of the old Mill House, calling it Daddy's Castle. Maria expressed no opinion. She felt and knew too much to say a word. She was habitually non-committal. She shared the being of the ancient building, as the building shared the landscape out of which it grew so naturally. Having been born last, her inheritance of coming Time exceeded that of Tim and Judy, and she lived as though thoroughly aware of her prerogative. In quiet silence she claimed everything as her very own.

The Mill House, like Maria, never moved; it existed comfortably; it seemed independent of busy, hurrying Time. So thickly covered was it with ivy and various creepers that the trees on the lawn wondered why it did not grow bigger like themselves. They remembered the time when they looked up to it, whereas now they looked over it easily, and even their lower branches stroked the stone tiles on the roof, patched with moss and lichen like their own great trunks. They had come to regard it as an elderly animal asleep, for its chimneys looked like horns, it possessed a capacious mouth that both swallowed and disgorged, and its eyes were as numerous as those of the forest to which they themselves properly belonged. And so they accepted the old Mill House as a thing of drowsy but persistent life; they protected and caressed it; they liked it exactly where it was; and if it moved they would have known an undeniable shock.

They watched it now, this dark December evening, as one by one its gleaming eyes shone bright and yellow through the mist, then one by one let down their dark green lids. “It’s going to sleep,” they thought. “It’s going to dream. Its life, like ours, is all inside. It sleeps the winter through as we do. All is well. Good-night, old house of grey! We’ll also go to sleep.”

Unable to see into the brain of the sleepy monster, the trees resigned themselves to dream again, tucking the earth closely against their roots and withdrawing into the cloak of misty darkness. Like most other things in winter they also stayed indoors, leading an interior life of dim magnificence behind their warm, thick bark. Presently, when they were ready, something would happen, something they were preparing at their leisure, something so exquisite that all who saw it would dance and sing for gladness. They also believed in a Wonderful Stranger who was coming into their slow, steady lives. They fell to dreaming of the surprising pageant they would blazon forth upon the world a little later. And while they dreamed, the wind of night passed moaning through their leafless branches, and Time flew noiselessly above the turning Earth.

Meanwhile, inside the old Mill House, the servants lit the lamps and drew the blinds and curtains. Behind the closing eyelids, however, like dream-chambers within a busy skull, there were rooms of various shapes and kinds, and in one of these on the ground-floor, called Daddy’s Study, the three children stood, expectant and a little shy, waiting for something desirable to happen. In common with all other living things, they shared this enticing feeling — that Something Wonderful was going to happen. To be without this feeling, of course, is to be not alive; but, once alive, it cannot be escaped. At death it asserts itself most strongly of all — Something Too Wonderful is going to happen. For to die is quite different from being not alive. This feeling is the proof of eternal life — once alive, alive for ever. To live is to feel this yearning, huge expectancy.

Daddy had taught them this, though, of course, they knew it instinctively already. And any moment now the door would open and his figure, familiar, yet each time more wonderful, would cross the threshold, close the door behind him, and … something desirable would happen.

“I wish he’d hurry,” said Tim impatiently. “There won’t be any time left.” And he glanced at the cruel clock that stopped all their pleasure but never stopped itself. “The motor got here hours ago. He can’t STILL be having tea.” Judy, her brown hair in disorder, her belt sagging where it was of little actual use, sighed deeply. But there was patience and understanding in her big, dark eyes. “He’s in with Mother doing finances,” she said with resignation. “It’s Saturday. Let’s sit down and wait.” Then, seeing that Maria already occupied the big armchair, and sat staring comfortably into the fire, she did not move. Maria was making a purring, grunting sound of great contentment; she felt no anxiety of any kind apparently.

But Tim was less particular.

“Alright,” he said, squashing himself down beside Maria, whose podgy form accommodated itself to the intrusion like a cat, “as long as Aunt Emily doesn’t catch him on the way and begin explaining.”

“She’s in bed with a headache,” mentioned Judy. “She’s safe enough.” For it was an established grievance against their mother’s sister that she was always explaining things. She was a terrible explainer. She couldn’t move without explaining. She explained everything in the world. She was a good soul, they knew, but she had to explain that she was a good soul. They rather dreaded her. Explanations took time for one thing, and for another they took away all wonder. In bed with a headache, she was safely accounted for, explained.

“She thinks we miss her,” reflected Tim. He did not say it; it just flashed through his mind, with a satisfaction that added vaguely to his pleasurable anticipation of what was coming. And this satisfaction increased his energy. “Shove over a bit,” he added aloud to Maria, and though Maria did not move of her own volition, she was nevertheless shoved over. The pair of them settled down into the depths of the chair, but while Maria remained quite satisfied with her new position, her brother fussed and fidgeted with impatience born of repressed excitement. “Run out and knock at the door,” he proposed to Judy. “He’ll never get away from Mother unless we let him KNOW we’re waiting.”

Judy, kneeling on a chair and trying to make it sea-saw, pulled up her belt, sprang down, then hesitated. “They’ll only think it’s Thompson and say come in,” she decided. “That’s no good.”

Tim jumped up, using Maria as a support to raise himself. “I know what!” he cried. “Go and bang the gong. He’ll think it’s dressing-time.” The idea was magnificent. “I’ll go if you funk it,” he added, and had already slithered half way over the back of the chair when Judy forestalled him and had her hand upon the door-knob. He encouraged her with various instructions about the proper way to beat the gong, and was just beginning a scuffle with the inanimate Maria, who now managed to occupy the entire chair, when he was aware of a new phenomenon that made him stop abruptly. He saw Judy’s face hanging in mid-air, six feet above the level of the floor. Her face was flushed and smiling; her hair hung over her eyes; and from somewhere behind or underneath her a gruff voice said sternly:

“What are you doing in my Study at this time of night? Who asked you in?”

The expected figure had entered, catching Judy in the act of opening the door. He was carrying her in his arms. She landed with a flop upon the carpet. The desired and desirable thing was about to happen. “Get out, you lump, it’s Daddy.” But Maria, accustomed to her brother’s exaggerated language, and knowing it was only right and manly, merely raised her eyes and waited for him to help her out. Tim did help her out; half dragging and half lifting, he deposited her in a solid heap upon the floor, then ran to the figure that now dominated the dim, fire-lit room, and hugged it with all his force, making sounds in his throat like an excited animal: “Ugh! ugh! ugh!…!”

The hug was returned with equal vigour, but without the curious sounds; Maria was hugged as well and set upon her feet; while Judy, having already been sufficiently hugged, pushed the arm-chair closer up to the fire and waited patiently for the proper business of the evening to begin.

The figure, meanwhile, disentangled itself. It was tall and thin, with a mild, resigned expression upon a kindly face that years and care had lined before its time: old-fashioned rather, with soft, grey whiskers belonging to an earlier day. A black tail-coat adorned it, and the neck-tie was crooked in the turned-down collar. The watch-chain went from the waist-coat button to one pocket only, instead of right across, and one finger wore a heavy signet-ring that bore the family crest. It was obviously the figure of an overworked official in the Civil Service who had returned from its daily routine in London to the evening routine of its family in the country, the atmosphere of Government and the Underground still hanging round it. For sundry whiffs of the mysterious city reached the children's nostrils, bringing thrills of some strange, remote reality they had never known at first-hand. They busied themselves at once. While Tim unbuttoned the severe black coat and pulled it off, Judy brought a jacket of dingy tweed from behind a curtain in the corner, and stood on a chair to help the figure put it on. All knew their duties; the performance went like clockwork. And Maria sat and watched in helpful silence. There was a certain air about her as though she did it all.

"How they do spoil me, to be sure," the figure murmured to itself; "yet Mother's always saying that *I* spoil them. I wonder…!"

"Now you look decent at last," said Judy. "You smell like a nice rabbit."

"It's my shooting-coat." The figure cleared its throat, apparently on the defensive a little.

Tim and Judy sniffed it. "Rabbits and squirrels and earth and things," thought Tim.

"And flowers and burning leaves," said Judy. "It's his old garden-coat as well." She sniffed very audibly. "Oh, I love that smoky smell."

"It's the good old English smell," said the figure contentedly, while they put his neck-tie straight and arranged the pocket flaps for him. "It's English country — England."

"Don't other countries smell, then?" inquired Tim. "I mean, could any one tell you were English by your smell?" He sniffed again, with satisfaction. "Weeden's the same," he went on, without waiting for an answer, "only much stronger, and so's the potting shed."

"But yours is sweeter *much*," said Judy quickly. To share odours with an Authority like the Head Gardener was distinctly a compliment, but Daddy must come first, whatever happened. "How funny," she added, half to herself, "that England should have such a jolly smell. I wonder what it comes from?"

"Where *does* England come from?" asked Tim, pausing a moment to stare into the figure's face. "It's an island, of course — England — but—"

"A piece of land surrounded by water," began the figure, but was not allowed to finish. A chorus of voices interrupted:

“Make a story of it, please. There’s just time. There’s half an hour. It’s nice and dark. Ugh! Something very awful or very silly, please….”

There followed a general scuffle for seats, with bitter complaints that he only had two pointed knees. Maria was treated with scant respect. There was also criticism of life — that he had no lap, “no proper lap,” that it was too dark to see his face, that everybody in turn had got “the best place,” but, chiefly, that there was “very little time.” Time was a nuisance always: it either was time to go, or time to stop, or else there was not time enough. But at length quiet was established; the big arm-chair resembled a clot of bees upon a honeycomb; the fire burned dully, and the ceiling was thick with monstrous fluttering shadows, vaguely shaped.

“Now, please. We’ve been ready for ages.”

A deep hush fell upon the room, and only a sound of confused breathing was audible. The figure heaved a long, deep sigh as though it suffered pain, paused, cleared its throat, then sighed again more heavily than before. For the moment of creation was at hand, and creation is not accomplished without much travail.

But the children loved the pause, the sigh, the effort. Not realising with what difficulty the stories were ground out, nor that it was an effort against time — to make a story last till help came from outside — they believed that something immense and wonderful was on the way, and held their breath with beating hearts. Daddy’s stories were always marvellous; this one would be no exception.

Marvellous up to a point, that is: something in them failed. “He’s trying,” was their opinion of them; and it was the trying that they watched and listened to so eagerly. The results were unsatisfying, the effect incomplete; the climax of sensation they expected never came. Daddy, though they could not put this into words, possessed fancy only; imagination was not his. Fancy, however, is the seed of imagination, as imagination is the blossom of wonder. His stories prepared the soil in them at any rate. They felt him digging all round them.

He began forthwith:

“Once, very long ago—”

“How long?”

“So long ago that the chalk cliffs of England still lay beneath the sea—”

“Was Aunt Emily alive then?”

“Or Weeden?”

“Oh, much longer ago than that,” he comforted them; “so long, in fact, that neither your Aunt Emily nor Weeden were even thought of — there lived a man who—”

“Where? What country, please?”

“There lived a man in England—”

“But you said England was beneath the sea with the chalk cliffs.”

“There lived a man in a very small, queer little island called Ingland, spelt ‘Ing,’ not ‘Eng,’ who—”

“It wasn’t *our* England, then?”

“On a tiny little island called Ingland, who was very lonely because he was the only human being on it—”

“Weren’t there animals and things too?”

“And the only animals who lived on it with him were a squirrel who lived in the only tree, a rabbit who lived in the only hole, and a small grey mouse who made its nest in the pocket of his other coat.”

“Were they friendly? Did he love them awfully?”

“At first he was very polite to them only, because he was a civil servant of his Government; but after a bit they became so friendly that he loved them even better than himself, and went to tea with the rabbit in its hole, and climbed the tree to share a nut-breakfast with the squirrel, and — and—”

“He doesn’t know what to do with the mouse,” a loud whisper, meant to be inaudible, broke in upon the fatal hesitation.

“And went out for walks with the mouse when the ground was damp and the mouse complained of chilly feet. In the pocket of his coat, all snug and warm, it stood on its hind legs and peered out upon the world with its pointed nose just above the pocket flap—”

“Then he liked the mouse best?”

“What sort of coat was it? An overcoat or just an ordinary one that smelt? Was that the only pocket in it?”

“It was made of the best leaves from the squirrel’s tree, and from the rabbit’s last year’s fur, and the mouse had fastened the edges together neatly with the sharpest of its own discarded whiskers. And so they walked about the tiny island and enjoyed the view together—”

“The mouse couldn’t have seen much!”

“Until, one day, the mouse declared the ground was ALWAYS wet and was getting wetter and wetter. And the man got frightened.”

“Ugh! It’s going to get awful in a minute!” And the children nestled closer. The voice sank lower. It became mysterious.

“And the wetter it got the more the man got frightened; for the island was dreadfully tiny and—”

“Why, please, did it get wetter and wetter?”

“THAT,” continued the man who earned his living in His Majesty’s Stationery Office by day, and by night justified his existence offering the raw material of epics unto little children, “that was the extraordinary part of it. For no one could discover. The man stroked his beard and looked about him, the squirrel shook its bushy tail, the rabbit lifted its upper lip and thrust its teeth out, and the mouse jerked its head from side to side until its whiskers grew longer and sharper than ever — but none of them could discover why the island got wetter and wetter and wetter—”

“Perhaps it just rained like here.”

“For the sky was always blue, it never rained, and there was so little dew at night that no one even mentioned it. Yet the tiny island got wetter every day, till it finally got so wet that the very floor of the man’s hut turned spongy and splashed every time the man went to look out of the window at the view. And at last he got so frightened that he stayed indoors altogether, put on both his coats at once, and told stories to the mouse and squirrel about a country that was always dry—”

“Didn’t the rabbit know anything?”

"For all this time the rabbit was too terrified to come out of its hole at all. The increasing size of its front teeth added to its uneasiness, for they thrust out so far that they hid the view and made the island seem even smaller than it was—"

"I like rabbits, though."

"Till one fine day—"

"They were all fine, you said."

"One finer day than usual the rabbit made a horrible discovery. The way it made the discovery was curious — may seem curious to us, at least — but the fact is, it suddenly noticed that the size of its front teeth had grown out of all proportion to the size of the island. Looking over its shoulder this fine day, it realised how absurdly small the island was in comparison with its teeth — and grasped the horrid truth. In a flash it understood what was happening. The island was getting wetter because it was also getting — *smaller*!"

"Ugh! How beastly!"

"Did it tell the others?"

"It retired half-way down its hole and shouted out the news to the others in the hut."

"Did they hear it?"

"It warned them solemnly. But its teeth obstructed the sound, and the windings of its hole made it difficult to hear. The man, besides, was busy telling a story to the mouse, and the mouse, anyhow, was sound asleep at the bottom of his pocket, with the result that the only one who caught the words of warning was — the squirrel. For a squirrel's ears are so sharp that it can even hear the grub whistling to itself inside a rotten nut; and it instantly took action."

"Ah! IT saved them, then?"

"The squirrel flew from the man's shoulder where it was perched, balanced for a second on the top of his head, then clung to the ceiling and darted out of the window without a moment's delay. It crossed the island in a single leap, scuttled to the top of the tree, peered about over the diminishing landscape, and—"

"Didn't it see the rabbit?"

"And returned as quickly as it went. It bustled back into the hut, hopping nervously, and jerking its head with excitement. In a moment it was perched again on the man's shoulder. It carefully kept its bushy tail out of the way of his nose and eyes. And then it whispered what it had seen into his left ear."

"Why into his left ear?"

"Because it was the right one, and the other had cotton wool in it."

"Like Aunt Emily!"

"What did it whisper?"

"The squirrel had made a discovery, too," continued the teller, solemnly.

"Goodness! That's two discoveries!"

"But what *did* it whisper?"

In the hush that followed, a coal was heard falling softly into the grate; the night-wind moaned against the outside walls; Judy scraped her stockinged foot slowly along the iron fender, making a faint twanging sound. Breathing was distinctly audible. For several moments the room was still as death. The figure, smothered beneath the clotted mass of children, heaved a sigh. But no one broke the pause. It was too precious and wonderful to break at once. All waited breathlessly, like birds poised in mid-air before they strike … until a new sound stole faintly upon the listening silence, a faint and very distant sound, barely audible as yet, but of unmistakable character. It was far away in the upper reaches of the building, overhead, remote, a little stealthy. Like the ominous murmur of a muffled drum, it had approach in it. It was coming nearer and nearer. It was significant and threatening.

For the first time that evening the ticking of the clock was also audible. But the new sound, though somewhat in league with the ticking, and equally remorseless, did not come from the clock. It was a human sound, the most awful known to childhood. It was footsteps on the stairs!

Both the children and the story-teller heard it, but with different results. The latter stirred and looked about him, as though new hope and strength had come to him. The former, led by Tim and Judy, broke simultaneously into anxious speech. Maria, having slept profoundly since the first mention of the mouse in its cosy pocket, gave no sign at all.

“Oh, quick! quick! What did the squirrel whisper in his good right ear? What was it? DO hurry, please!”

“It whispered two simple words, each of one syllable,” continued the reanimated figure, his voice lowered and impressive. “It said — *the sea*!”

The announcement made by the squirrel was so entirely unexpected that the surprise of it buried all memory of the disagreeable sound. The children sat up and stared into the figure’s face questioningly. Surely he had made a slight mistake. How could the sea have anything to do with it? But no word was spoken, no actual question asked. This overwhelming introduction of the sea left him poised far beyond their reach. His stories were invariably marvellous. He would somehow justify himself.

“The Sea!” whispered Tim to Judy, and there was intense admiration in his voice and eyes.

“From the top of its tree,” resumed the figure triumphantly, “the squirrel had seen what was happening, and made its great discovery. It realised why the ground was wetter and wetter every day, and also why the island was small and growing smaller. For it understood the awful fact that — the sea was rising! A little longer and the entire island would be under water, and everybody on it would be drowned!” “Couldn’t none of them swim or anything?” asked Judy with keen anxiety.

“Hush!” put in Tim. “It’s what did they *do?* And who thought of it first?”

The question last but one was chosen for solution.

“The rabbit,” announced the figure recklessly. “The rabbit saved them; and in saving them it saved the Island too. It founded Ingland, this very Ingland on which we live to-day. In fact, it started the British Empire by its action. The rabbit did it.”

“How? How?”

“It heard the squirrel’s whisper half-way down its hole. It forgot about its front teeth, and the moment it forgot them they, of course, stopped growing. It recovered all its courage. A grand idea had come to it. It came bustling out of its hiding-place, stood on its hind legs, poked its bright eyes over the window-ledge, and told them how to escape. It said, ‘I’ll dig my hole deeper and we’ll empty the sea into it as it rises. We’ll pour the water down my hole!’”

The figure paused and fixed his eyes upon each listener in turn, challenging disapproval, yet eager for sympathy at the same time. In place of criticism, however, he met only silence and breathless admiration. Also — he heard that distant sound *they* had forgotten, and realised it had come much nearer. It had reached the second floor. He made swift and desperate calculations. He decided that it was *just* possible … with ordinary good luck …

“So they all went out and began to deepen the rabbit’s hole. They dug and dug and dug. The man took off both his coats; the rabbit scraped with its four paws, using its tail as well — it had a nice long tail in those days; the mouse crept out of his pocket and made channels with its little pointed toes; and the squirrel brushed and swept the water in with its bushy, mop-like tail. The rising sea poured down the ever-deepening hole. They worked with a will together; there was no complaining, though the rabbit wore its tail down till it was nothing but a stump, and the mouse stood ankle-deep in water, and the squirrel’s fluffy tail looked like a stable broom. They worked like heroes without stopping even to talk, and as the water went pouring down the hole, the level of the sea, of course, sank lower and lower and lower, the shores of the tiny island stretched farther and farther and farther, till there were reaches of golden sand like Margate at low tide, and as the level sank still lower there rose into view great white cliffs of chalk where before there had been only water — until, at last, the squirrel, scampering down from the tree where it had gone to see what had been accomplished, reported in a voice that chattered with stammering delight, ‘We’re saved! The sea’s gone down! The land’s come up!’”

The steps were audible in the passage. A gentle knock was heard. But no one answered, for it seemed that no one was aware of it. The figure paused a moment to recover breath.

“And then, and then? What happened next? Did they thank the rabbit?”

“They all thanked each other then. The man thanked the rabbit, and the rabbit thanked the squirrel, and the mouse woke up, and—”

No one noticed the slip, which proved that their attention was already painfully divided. For another knock, much louder than before, had interrupted the continuation of the story. The figure turned its head to listen. "It's nothing," said Tim quickly. "It's only a sound," said Judy. "What did the mouse do? Please tell us quickly."

"I thought I heard a knock," the figure murmured. "Perhaps I was mistaken. The mouse — er — the mouse woke up—"

"You told us that."

The figure continued, speaking with greater rapidity even than before:

"And looked about it, and found the view so lovely that it said it would never live in a pocket again, but would divide its time in future between the fields and houses. So it pricked its whiskers up, and the squirrel curled its tail over its back to avoid any places that still were damp, and the rabbit polished its big front teeth on the grass and said it was quite pleased to have a stump instead of a tail as a memento of a memorable occasion when they had all been nearly drowned together, and — they all skipped up to the top of the high chalk cliffs as dry as a bone and as happy as—"

He broke off in the middle of the enormous sentence to say a most ridiculous and unnecessary thing. "Come in," he said, just as though there was some one knocking at the door. But no single head was turned. If there was an entry it was utterly ignored.

"Happy as what?"

"As you," the figure went on faster than ever. "And that's why England to-day is an island of quite a respectable size, and why everybody pretends it's dry and comfortable and cosy, and why people never leave it except to go away for holidays that cannot possibly be avoided."

"I beg your pardon, sir," began an awful voice behind the chair.

"And why to this day," he continued as though he had not heard, "a squirrel always curls its tail above its back, why a rabbit wears a stump like a pen wiper, and why a mouse lives sometimes in a house and sometimes in a field, and—"

"I beg your pardon, sir," clanged the slow, awful voice in a tone that was meant to be heard distinctly, "but it's long gone 'arf-past six, and—"

“Time for bed,” added the figure with a sound that was like the falling of an executioner’s axe. And, as if to emphasise the arrival of the remorseless moment, the clock just then struck loudly on the mantelpiece — seven times.

But for several minutes no one stirred. Hope, even at such moments, was stronger than machinery of clocks and nurses. There was a general belief that somehow or other the moment that they dreaded, the moment that was always coming to block their happiness, could be evaded and shoved aside. Nothing mechanical like that was wholly true. Daddy had often used queer phrases that hinted at it: “Some day — A day is coming — A day will come”; and so forth. Their belief in a special Day when no one would say “Time” haunted them already. Yet, evidently this evening was not the momentous occasion; for when Tim mentioned that the clock was fast, the figure behind the chair replied that she was half an hour overdue already, and her tone was like Thompson’s when he said, “Dinner’s served.” There was no escape this time.

Accordingly the children slowly disentangled themselves; they rose and stretched like animals; though all still ignored the figure behind the chair. A ball of stuff unrolled and became Maria. “Thank you, Daddy,” she said. “It was just lovely,” said Judy. “But it’s only the beginning, isn’t it?” Tim asked. “It’ll go on to-morrow night?” And the figure, having escaped failure by the skin of its teeth, kissed each in turn and said, “Another time — yes, I’ll go on with it.” Whereupon the children deigned to notice the person behind the chair. “We’re coming up to bed now, Jackman,” they mentioned casually, and disappeared slowly from the room in a disappointed body, robbed, unsatisfied, but very sleepy. The clock had cheated them of something that properly was endless. Maria alone made no remark, for she was already asleep in Jackman’s comfortable arms. Maria was always carried.

“Time’s up,” Tim reflected when he lay in bed; “time’s always up. I do wish we could stop it somehow,” and fell asleep somewhat gratified because he had deliberately not wound up his alarum-clock. He had the delicious feeling — a touch of spite in it — that this would bother Time and muddle it.

Yet Time, as a monster, chased him through a hundred dreams and thus revenged itself. It pursued him to the very edge of the daylight, then mocked him with a cold bath, lessons, and a windy sleet against the windows. It was “time to get up” again.

Yet, meanwhile, Time helped and pleased the children by showing them its pleasanter side as well. It pushed them, gently but swiftly, up the long hill of months and landed them with growing excitement into the open country of another year. Since the rabbit, mouse, and squirrel first woke in their hearts the wonder of common things, they had all grown slightly bigger. Time tucked away another twelve months behind their backs: each of them was a year older; and that in itself was full of a curious and growing wonder.

For the birth of wonder is a marvellous, sweet thing, but the recognition of it is sweeter and more marvellous still. Its growth, perhaps, shall measure the growth and increase of the soul to whom it is as eyes and hands and feet, searching the world for signs of hiding Reality. But its persistence — through the heavier years that would obliterate it — this persistence shall offer hints of something coming that is more than marvellous. The beginning of wisdom is surely — Wonder.

CHAPTER III. DEATH OF A MERE FACT

THERE WAS A man named Jinks. In him was neither fancy, imagination, nor a sign of wonder, and so he — died.

But, though he appears in this chapter, he disappears again so quickly that his being mentioned in a sentence all by himself should not lead any one astray. Jinks made a false entry, as it were. The children crossed him out at once. He became illegible. For the trio had their likes and dislikes; they resented liberties being taken with them. Also, when there was no one to tell them stories, they were quite able to amuse themselves. It was the inactive yet omnipotent Maria who brought about indirectly the obliteration of Mr. Jinks.

And it came about as follows:

Maria was a podgy child of marked individuality. It was said that she was seven years old, but *she* declared that eight was the figure, because some uncle or other had explained, “you’re in your eighth year.” Wandering uncles are troublesome in this kind of way. Every time her age was mentioned she corrected the informant. She had a trick of moving her eyes without moving her head, as though the round face was difficult to turn; but her big blue eyes slipped round without the least trouble, as though oiled. The performance gave her the sly and knowing aspect of a goblin, but she had no objection to that, for it saved her trouble, and to save herself trouble — according to nurses, Authorities, and the like — was her sole object in existence.

Yet this seemed a mistaken view of the child. It was not so much that she did not move unnecessarily as that it was not necessary for her to move at all, since she invariably found herself in the middle of whatever was going on. While life bustled anxiously about her, hurrying to accomplish various ends, she remained calm and contented at the centre, completely satisfied, mistress of it all. And her face was symbolic of her entire being; whereas so many faces seem unfinished, hers was complete — globular like the heavenly bodies, circular like the sun, arms and legs unnecessary. The best of everything came to her *because* she did not run after it. There was no hurry. Time did not worry her. Circular and self-sustaining, she already seemed to dwell in Eternity.

"And this little person," one of these inquisitive, interfering visitors would ask, smiling fatuously; "how old is she, I wonder?"

"Seven," was the answer of the Authority in charge.

Maria's eyes rolled sideways, and a little upwards. She looked at the foolish questioner; the Authority who had answered was not worth a glance.

"No," she said flatly, with sublime defiance, "I'm more. I'm in my eighth year, you see."

And the visitor, smiling that pleasant smile that makes children distrust, even dislike them, and probably venturing to pinch her cheek or pat her on the shoulder into the bargain, accepted the situation with another type of smile — the Smile-that-children-expect. As a matter of fact, children hate it. They see through its artificial humbug easily. They prefer a solemn and unsmiling face invariably. It's the latter that produces chocolates and sudden presents; it's the stern-faced sort that play hide-and-seek or stand on their heads. The Smilers are bored at heart. They mean to escape at the first opportunity. And the children never catch their sleeves or coattails to prevent them going.

"So you're in your eighth year, are you?" this Smiler chuckled with a foolish grin. He patted her cheek kindly. "Why, you're almost a grown-up person. You'll be going to dinner-parties soon." And he smiled again. Maria stood motionless and patient. Her eyes gazed straight before her. Her podgy face remained expressionless as dough.

"Answer the kind gentleman," said the Authority reprovingly.

Maria did not budge. A finger and thumb, both dirty, rolled a portion of her pinafore into a pointed thing like a string, distinctly black. She waited for the visitor to withdraw. But this particular visitor did not withdraw.

"*I* knew a little girl—" he began, with a condescending grin that meant that her rejection of his advances had offended him, "a little girl of about your age, who—"

But the remainder of the rebuke-concealed-in-a-story was heard only by the Authority. For Maria, relentless and unhumbugged, merely walked away. In the hall she discovered Tim, discreetly hiding. “What’s *he* come for?” the brother inquired promptly, jerking his thumb towards the hall.

Maria’s eyes just looked at him.

“To see Mother, I suppose,” he answered himself, accustomed to his sister’s goblin manners, “and talk about missions and subshkiptions, and all that. Did he give you anything?”

“No, nothing.”

“Did he call us bonny little ones?” His face mentioned that he could kill if necessary, or if his sister’s honour required it.

“He didn’t *say* it.”

“Lucky for him,” exclaimed Tim gallantly, rubbing his nose with the palm of his hand and snorting loudly. “What *did* he say, then — the old Smiler?”

“He said,” replied Maria, moving her head as well as her eyes, “that I wasn’t really old, and that he knew another little girl who was nicer than me, and always told the truth, and—”

“Oh, come on,” cried Tim, impatiently interrupting. “My trains are going in the schoolroom, and I want a driver for an accident. We’ll put the Smiler in the luggage van, and he’ll get smashed in the collision, and *all* the wheels will go over his head. Then he’ll find out how old you really are. We’ll fairly smash him.”

They disappeared. Judy, who was reading a book on the Apocalypse, in a corner of the room, looked up a moment as they entered.

“What’s up?” she asked, her mind a little dazed by the change of focus from stars, scarlet women, white horses, and mysterious “Voices,” to dull practical details of everyday existence. “What’s on?” she repeated.

“Trains,” replied Tim. “We’re going to have an accident and kill a man dead.”

“What’s he done?” she inquired.

“Humbugged Maria with a lot of stuff — and gave her nothing — and didn’t believe a single word she told him.”

Judy glanced without much interest at the railway laid out upon the floor, murmured “Oh, I see,” and resumed her reading of the wonderful book she had purloined from the top shelf of a neglected bookcase outside the gun-room. It absorbed her. She loved the tremendous words, the atmosphere of marvel and disaster, and especially the constant suggestion that the end of the world was near. Antichrist she simply adored. No other hero in any book she knew came near him.

“Come and help,” urged Tim, picking up an engine that lay upon its side. “Come on.”

“No, thanks. I’ve got an Apocalypse. It’s simply frightfully exciting.”

“Shall we break *both* legs?” asked Maria blandly, “or just his neck?”

“Neck,” said Tim briefly. “Only they must find the heart beneath the rubbish of the luggage van.”

Judy looked up in spite of herself. “Who is it?” she inquired, with an air of weighing conflicting interests.

“Mr. Jinks.” It was Maria who supplied the information.

“But he’s Daddy’s offiss-partner man,” Judy objected, though without much vim or heat.

Maria did not answer. Her eyes were glued upon the other engine.

“All black and burnt and — full of the very horridest diseases,” put in Tim, referring to the heart of the destroyed Mr. Jinks beneath the engine.

He glanced up enticingly at his elder sister, whom he longed to draw into the vindictive holocaust.

“He said things to Maria,” he explained persuasively, “and it’s not the first time either. Last Sunday he called me ‘his little man,’ and he’s never given me a single thing since ever I can remember, years and years ago.”

Then Judy remembered that he invariably kissed her on both cheeks as though she was a silly little child.

“Oh, *that* man!” she exclaimed, realising fully now the enormities he had committed. She appeared to hesitate a moment. Then she flung down her

Apocalypse suddenly. “Put him on a scarlet horse,” she cried, “pretend he’s the Beast, and I’ll come.”

Maria’s blue eyes wheeled half a circle towards Tim. She did not move her head. It signified agreement. Tim knew. Only her consent, as the insulted party, was necessary before he could approve.

“All right,” he cried to Judy. “We’ll put him in a special carriage with his horse, and I’ll make out a label for the window, so that every one will know.” He went over to the table and wrote “BEAST” in capital letters on a half-sheet of paper. The cumbersome quill pen made two spongy blots.

“It’s the end of the world *really* at the same time,” decided Judy, to a chorus of general approval, “not only the end of Mr. Jinks.” She liked her horrors on a proper scale.

And the railway line was quickly laid across the room from the window to the wall. The lamps of oil on both engines were lit. The trains faced one another. Mr. Jinks and his scarlet horse thought themselves quite safe in their special carriage, unaware that it was labelled “Beast” with a label that overlapped the roof and hid all view of the landscape through the windows on one side. Apparently they slept in opposite corners, with full consciousness of complete security. Mr. Jinks was tucked up with woolly rugs, and a newspaper lay across his knee. The scarlet horse had its head in a bag of oats, and its bridle was fastened to the luggage rack above. Both were supplied with iron foot-warmers. There was a *fearful* fog; and the train was going at a *TREMENDOUS* pace.

So was the other train. They approached, they banged, they smashed to atoms. It was the most appalling collision that had ever been heard of, and the Guard and Engine-Driver, as well as the Ticket-Collectors and Directors of the Company, were all executed by the Government the very next day from gallows that an angry London built in half an hour on the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral dome.

It took place between the footstool and the fireplace in the thickest fog that England had ever known. And the horrid black heart of Mr. Jinks was discovered beneath the wreckage of a special carriage next to the luggage van. It was simply black as coal and very nasty indeed. The little boy who found it was a porter’s son, whose mother was so poor that she took in washing for members of Parliament, who paid their bills irregularly because they were very busy governing Ireland. He knew it was a cinder, but did not discover it was a heart until he showed it to his mother, and his mother said it was far too black to wash.

The accident to Mr. Jinks, therefore, was a complete success. The butler helped with the mending of the engine, and Maria informed at least one Authority, “We do not know Mr. Jinks. We have other friends.”

“But, remember,” said Judy, “we mustn’t mention it to Daddy, because Mr. Jinks is his partner-in-the-offiss.”

“*Was*,” said Tim. The remains they decided to send to what they called the “Hospital for Parilysed Ineebrits with Incurable Afflictions of the Heart.”

CHAPTER IV. FACT — EDGED WITH FANCY

BUT THE CHILDREN were not always so vindictive and bloodthirsty. All three could be very tender sometimes. Even Maria was not wholly implacable and merciless, she had a pretty side as well. Their neighbour at the Manor House, Colonel William Stumper, C.B., experienced this gentler quality in the trio. He was Mother's cousin, too.

They were inclined to like this Colonel Stumper, C.B. For one thing he limped, and that meant, they decided, that he had a wooden leg. They never called it such, of course, but indicated obliquely that the injured limb was made of oak or walnut, by referring to the other as "his living leg," "his good leg," and so forth. For another thing, he did not smile at them; and for a third, he did not ask foolish questions in an up-and-down voice (assumed for the moment), as though they were invalids, idiots, or tailless puppies who could not answer. He frowned at them. He said furiously, "How are you, creatures?" And — he gave usually at least a shilling to each.

"That makes three shillings altogether," as Tim cleverly explained.

"But not three shillings for each of us," Maria qualified the praise. "*I* only got one." She took it out of her mouth and showed it by way of proof.

"You'll swallow it," warned Judy, "and then you won't have none at all."

If received early in the week, they reported their good fortune to the Authorities; but if Sunday was too near, they waited. Daddy had a queer idea of teasing sometimes. "Just in time for to-morrow's collection," he would be apt to say; and though he did not really mean it perhaps, there was a hint of threat in the suggestion that quenched high spirits at the moment.

"You see, he takes the plate round," Judy told them, "and so feels ashamed." She did not explain the feeling ashamed. It was just that her father, who always did things thoroughly, had to say something, and so picked on that. "Monday or Tuesday's safest," was her judgment.

Maria rolled her eyes round like a gigantic German doll.

"Never's best," she gave as her opinion.

But that was sly. The others reproved her quickly.

“Daddy likes to know,” they told her. “Monday or Tuesday’s all right.” They agreed just to mention the matter only. There was no need to “say a lot.”

So they liked this Colonel Stumper, C.B. They liked his “title,” declaring that the letters stood for “Come Back,” and referring to their owner as “Come Back Stumper.” Some day, when he was gone for good, he was to be promoted to K.C.B., meaning “Kan’t-Come-Back.” But they preferred him as he was, plain C.B., because they did not want to lose him. They declared that “Companion to the Bath” was just nonsense invented by a Radical Government. For in politics, of course, they followed their father’s lead, and their father had *distinctly* stated more than once that “the policy of a Radical Government was some-funny-word-or-other nonsense,” which statement helped them enormously in forming their own opinions on several other topics as well. In personal disagreements, for instance — they never “squabbled” — the final insult was to say, “My dear, you’re as silly as a something-or-other Radical Govunment,” for there was no answer to this anywhere in the world.

Come-Back Stumper, therefore, though casual outsiders might never have guessed it, was a valuable ally. He was what Mother called “a character” as well, and if the children used this statement in praise of him, while adopting in their carelessness a revised version, “he has no character,” this was not Come-Back Stumper’s fault. He was also an “extinguished soldger,” and had seen much service in foreign parts. India with its tigers, elephants, and jungles, was in his heated atmosphere deliciously, and his yellow tint, as of an unripe orange, was due to something they had learned from hearsay to describe as “curried liver trouble.” All this, and especially his dead or wooden leg, was distinctly in his favour. Come-Back Stumper was real. Also, he was hard and angular in appearance, short, brisk in manner, square-shouldered, and talked like a General who was bothered about something in a battle. His opinions were most decided. His conversation consisted of negatives, refusals and blank denials. If Come-Back Stumper agreed with what was said, it meant that he was feeling unwell with an attack of curried-liver-trouble. The children understood him. He understood the children, too.

“It’s a jolly morning, William,” from Daddy would be met with “Might be worse” and a snort like the sneeze of the nursery cat, but a direct invitation of any sort was simply declined point blank. “Care to see The Times, William?” ensured the answer, “Oh, *no*, thanks; there’s never anything worth reading in it.” This was as regular as breakfast when Cousin William was staying in the house. It was, in fact, Daddy’s formula when he settled into his armchair for a quiet half-hour’s read. Daddy’s question was the mere politeness of a host. It was sham, but Cousin William’s answer was as real as breakfast. The formula was a mechanical certainty, as certain as that pressing a button in the wall produced Thompson in the room.

Accordingly, when Mother said, “Now, don’t bother your Cousin William, children; he doesn’t want you,” this individual would instantly shoulder arms and state the exact contrary with fiery emphasis.

“If you’ve no objection,” came the testy answer, “and if it’s all the same to you, Cecilia” — a shade sarcastically, this— “it’s precisely what I *do* want.”

And he would look at the children in a way that suggested the most intimate of secret understanding between himself and them. More, he would rise and leave the room with the impetus of a soldier going out to fight, and would play with Judy, Tim, and Maria in a fashion that upset the household routine and made the trio unmanageable for the Authorities for hours afterwards.

“He’s an honourable gentleman like the gentlemen in Parliament,” declared Judy, “and that’s my opinion of why I think him nice.”

“And when I’m grown-up,” was Tim’s verdict, “I’ll be a soldger just exactly the same, only not yellow, and taller, and not so thick in the middle, and much, much richer, and with C.B. in front of my name as well as at the end.”

Maria, not being present at the time, said nothing audible. But she liked him, too, unquestionably. Otherwise she would have announced the fact without delay. “He *is* a lump rather,” she had been heard to remark, referring to his actual bulk and slowness of movement when in play. But it was nicely, very nicely meant.

“I am sure your Cousin William would rather be left alone to read quietly,” said Mother, seeing the trio approach that individual stealthily after tea in the library one evening. He was deep in a big armchair, and deep in a book as well. The children were allowed downstairs after their schoolroom tea for an hour when nothing particular was on. “Wouldn’t you, William?” she added. She went on knitting a sort of muffler thing she held up close to the lamp. She expected no reply, apparently.

Cousin William made none. But he raised the level of his book so that it hid his face. A moment before, the eyes had been looking over the top at the advancing trio, watching their movements narrowly.

The children did not answer either. They separated. They scouted. They executed a flank attack in open order. Three minutes later Colonel Stumper was surrounded. And no word was spoken; the scouts just perched and watched him. He was not actually reading, for he had not turned a page for about ten minutes, and it was *not* a picture book. The difficulty was, however, to get him started. If only Mother would help them! Then Mother, unwittingly, did so. For she dropped her ball of wool, and finding no one at hand to recover it, she looked vaguely round the room — and saw them. And she shook her head at them.

“Don’t bother him just now,” she whispered again, “he’s got a cold. Here, Maria, pick up my wool, darling, will you?” But while Tim (for Maria only moved her eyes) picked up the wool obediently, Cousin William picked up himself with difficulty, tossed his book into the deep arm-chair, and stalked without a single word towards the door. Mother watched him with one eye, but the children did not stir a muscle.

“William, you’re not going to bed, are you?” she asked kindly, “or would you like to, perhaps? And have your dinner in your room, and a warm drink just before going to sleep? That’s the best thing for a cold, I always think.”

He turned at the door and faced her. “Thank you very much,” he said with savage emphasis, “but I am *not* ill, and I am *not* going to bed.” The negatives sounded like pistol shots. “My cold is nothing to speak of.” And he was gone, leaving a trail of fire in the air.

The children, cunning in their generation, did not move. There were moments in life, and this was one of them, when “stir a finger and you’re a dead man” was really true. No finger stirred, no muscle twitched; one pair of eyelids fluttered, nothing more. And Mother, happy with her recovered ball of wool, was presently lost in the muffler thing she knitted, forgetful of their presence, if not of their very existence. Signals meanwhile were made and answered by means of some secret code that birds and animals understand. The plan was matured in silence.

“Good-night, Mother,” said Judy innocently, a few moments later, stepping up and kissing her.

“Good-night,” said Tim gravely, doing likewise.

Maria kissed, but said no word at all. They did not linger, as their custom was, to cuddle in or hear a fairy story. To-night they were good and businesslike.

“Good-night, duckies,” said Mother, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. “It’s not *quite* bed-time yet, but it’s been a long day, and you’re tired out. I shall be up presently to hear your prayers and tuck you up. And, Judy, you might tell Jackman—”

But the room was empty, the children vanished. The door banged softly, cutting off the sentence in its middle, and Mother resumed her knitting, smiling quietly to herself. And in the hall outside Come-Back Stumper was discovered, warming his Army back before the open fire of blazing logs. He looked like a cart-horse, the shadows made him spread so. Maria pushed him to one side. She pushed, at least, but he did not move exactly. Yet somehow, by a kind of sidling process, he took up a new position in regard to the fire and themselves, the result of which was that they occupied the best places, while he stood at one corner in an attitude which resisted attack and yet invited it.

“Good-evening,” remarked Maria; “are you warm?”

“Oh, no,” exclaimed Tim, “that’s not it at all. The thing is, shall we play hide-and-seek, or would you really rather go to bed, as Mother said, and have dinner and hot drinks?”

“Nonsense,” cried Judy with authority. “He’s got an awful cold, and he’s got to go to bed at once. He’s shivering all over. It’s Nindian fever.”

“No, really, really—” began Stumper, but was not allowed to finish.

“Thin captain biscuits soaked in hot milk with ginger, nutmeg, lemon, and whisky,” announced Judy, “would be best.” And she shot towards the door, her hair untied and flying.

"But, my dear, I assure you—"

"Or Bath Olivers," she interrupted, "because they soak better. *You* know nothing," she added motheringly; "no man ever does." There was contempt in her voice as well as pity.

"*Why* do you know nothing?" inquired Maria, with a blaze of staring eyes, as the door slammed upon her vanishing sister.

"*I* think you know everything," said Tim with pride, decidedly, "only you've forgotten it in India. I think it's silly."

"The milk and stuff?" agreed the soldier. "Yes, so do I. And I hate biscuits, and ginger makes me hot and ill—"

"Iller than you are already?" asked Maria, "because that means bed."

"Maria," he snapped angrily, "I'm not ill at all. If you go on saying I'm ill, of course I shall get ill. I never felt better in my life."

Tim turned round like a top. "Then let's play hide-and-seek," he cried. "Let's hide before Judy gets back, and she can come and never find us!"

Cousin William suggested they were not enough to play that game, and was of opinion that Aunt Emily might be invited too.

"Oh, no," Tim gave his decided verdict, "not women. They can't hide properly. They bulge."

And at that moment Judy appeared in the doorway across the hall.

"It's coming," she cried. "I've ordered everything — hot milk and Bath Olivers and preserved ginger and—"

Cousin William took the matter into his own hands then, for the situation was growing desperate. "Look here," he suggested gravely, yet without enthusiasm, "I'll take the milk and stuff upstairs when I've got into bed, and meanwhile we'll do something else. I'm — that is, my cold is too bad to play a game, but I'll tell you a story about — er — about a tiger — if you like?" The last three words were added as a question. An answer, however, was not immediately forthcoming. For the moment was a grave one. It was admitted that Come-Back Stumper could play a game with credit and success, even an active game like hide-and-seek; but it was not known yet that he could tell a story. The fate of the evening, therefore, hung upon the decision.

“A tiger!” said Tim, doubtfully, weighing probabilities. “A tiger you shot, was it, or just — a tiger?” A sign, half shadow and half pout, was in his face. Maria and Judy waited upon their brother’s decision with absolute confidence, meanwhile.

Colonel Stumper moved artfully backwards towards a big horsehair sofa, beneath the deer heads and assegais from Zululand. He did it on tiptoe, aware that this mysterious and suggestive way of walking has a marked effect on children in the dark. “I did not shoot it,” he said, “because I lived with it. It was the most extraordinary tiger that was ever known—”

“In India?”

“In the world. And I ought to know, because, as I say, I lived with it for days—”

“Inside it?”

“Nearly, but not quite. I lived in its cave with the cubs and other things, half-eaten deer and cows and the bones of Hindus—”

“Were the bones black? However did you escape? Why didn’t the tiger eat you?”

He drew the children closely round him on the sofa. “I’ll tell you,” he said, “for this is an inaugural occasion, and I’ve never told the story before to any one in the world. The experience was incredible, and no one would believe it. But the proof that it really happened is that the tiger has left its mark upon me till I die—”

“But you haven’t died — yet, I mean,” Maria observed.

“He means teeth, silly,” Tim squelched her.

“Died in another sense than the one you mean,” the great soldier and former administrator of a province continued, “dyed yellow—”

“Oh-h-h! Is that why — ?”

“That is why,” he replied pathetically. “For living with that tiger family so long, I almost turned into one myself. The tiger nature got into me. I snarl and growl, I use my teeth ferociously when hungry, I walk stealthily on tiptoe, I let my whiskers grow, and my colour has the tint of Indian tigers' skins."

"Have you got a tail, too?"

He glared into the blue eyes of Maria, sternly. "It's growing," he whispered horribly, "it's growing."

There was a pause in which credulity shook hands with faith. Belief was in the air. If doubt did whisper, "Let me see, please," it was too low to be quite audible. Come-Back Stumper was surrounded by an atmosphere of black-edged glory suddenly; he wore a halo; his feet were dipped in mystery.

"Then what's an orgully occasion?" somebody asked.

"This!" replied Stumper. But he uttered it so savagely that no one cared to press for further details. Clearly it was a secret and confidential moment, and "inaugural occasion" had something to do with the glory of wearing an incipient tail. Glory and mystery clothed Stumper from that moment with Indian splendour. At least, *he* thought so….

"And the tiger?" came the whispering question.

"Ugh-h-h-h!" he shuddered; "I'll tell you. But I must think a moment quietly first."

"His tail hurts," Maria told Tim beneath her breath, while they waited for the story to begin.

"So would yours," was the answer, "if you had a cold at the same time, too. A girl would simply cry." And he looked contempt at her, but unutterable respect at his soldier friend.

"This tiger," began the traveller, in a heavy voice, "was a — a very unusual tiger. I met it, that is to say, most unexpectedly. It was in a tropical jungle, where the foliage was so thick that the sunlight hardly penetrated at all. It was dark as night even in the daytime. There were monkeys overhead and snakes beneath, and bananas were so plentiful that every time my elephant knocked against a tree a shower of fruit fell down like hail and tickled its skin."

"You were on an elephant, then?"

"We were all on elephants. On my particular elephant there was a man to load for me and a man to guide the beast. We moved slowly and cautiously. It was dark, as I said, but the showers of falling bananas made yellow streaks against the black that the elephant constantly mistook for tigers flying through the air as they leaped in silent fury against the howdah in which we crouched upon his back. The howdah, you know, is the saddle."

"Was the elephant friendly?"

"*Very* friendly indeed; but he found it difficult to see, and all of a sudden he would give a hop and a jump that nearly flung me off his shoulders. For a long time—"

"That was the bananas tickling him, I suppose?"

"This continued without anything dangerous happening, but all at once he gave a tremendous leap into the air, lifted his trunk, trumpeted like an Army bugle, and then set off at full speed through the tangled jungle. He had stupidly stepped upon a cobra! And the cobra, before it was squashed to pulp, had stung him between the big and little toe."

"On purpose?" Judy asked.

"In an Indian jungle everything's done on purpose. My elephant raced away, trumpeting in agony, at twenty miles an hour. The driver lost his balance and fell off; the other man, scrambling along to take his place and steer the monster, fell off after him, taking both my guns with him as he went; and I myself, crouching in the swaying howdah, and holding on for grim death, continued to tear through the jungle on top of my terrified and angry elephant. Then, suddenly, the branch of a tree caught the howdah in the middle and swept it clear. The elephant rushed on. The howdah, with myself inside it, swung in mid-air like a caught balloon. But I saw it could not hold on long. There was just time to scramble out of it into safety upon the branch when there came a sound of ripping, and the thing fell smash upon the ground some twenty feet below, leaving me alone in an Indian jungle — up a tree."

And he paused a moment to produce the right effect and reap the inevitable glory of applause.

Out of the breathless silence sprang a voice at once: "Was the elephant badly hurt?" And then another: "I thought elephants were too big to feel a bite like that.” Followed by a third — Maria’s: “It wasn’t fair to step on it and expect it to do nothing.”

But no single word about his own predicament — its horror, danger, loneliness, and risk. No single syllable. Even the Hindus, the driver, and the man who carried the guns, were left unmentioned. Bananas were equally ignored. The tiger itself had passed into oblivion.

“Thanks most awfully,” said Tim, politely, after an interval. “It must have been awful for you.” It was said as spokesman for the other listeners. All were kind and grateful, but actual interest there was none. They took the pause to mean that the story was at an end; but they had not cared about it because they — did not believe it.

“Simply awful,” the boy added, as though, perhaps, he had not made it quite clear that he wished to thank yet could not honestly praise. “Wasn’t it, Judy?” And he jerked his head round towards his elder sister.

“Oh, *awful* — yes,” agreed that lady.

But neither of them risked inviting the opinion of Maria. Her uncompromising nature was too well known for that. Nevertheless, unasked, she offered her criticism too: “Awful,” she said, her podgy face unmoved, her blue eyes fixed upon the ceiling. And the whole room seemed to give a long, deep sigh.

Now, for the hero, this was decidedly an awkward moment; he had done his best and miserably failed. He was no story-teller, and they had found him out. None the less, however, he was a real hero. He faced the situation as a brave man should:

For his tale was mediocre,
And his face of yellow ochre
Took a tinge of saffron sorrow in his fright;
Yet he rose to the occasion,
Without anger or evasion,
And did his best to put the matter right.

“Tell me how you knew,” he asked at length, facing the situation. “What made you guess?”

"Because, in the first place, you're not an atom *like* a tiger, anyhow," explained Judy.

"And you made the jungle so very dark," said Tim, "that you simply couldn't have seen the bananas falling."

"And we *know* you haven't got a tail at all," Maria added, clinchingly.

"Of course," he agreed; "your discernment does you credit, very great credit indeed. Few of the officials under me in India had as much."

Judy looked soothingly at him and stroked his sleeve. Somehow or other she divined, it seemed, he felt mortified and ashamed. He was a dear old thing, whatever happened.

"Never mind," she whispered, "it really doesn't matter. It was very nice to hear about your tiger. Besides — it must hurt awfully, having a cold like this."

"I knew," put in Tim sympathetically, "the moment you began about the bananas falling. But I didn't say anything, because I knew it couldn't last — anything that began like that."

"But it got wonderful towards the end," insisted Judy.

"Till he was in the tree," objected her brother. "He never could really have got along a branch like that."

"No," agreed Judy, thoughtfully, "that *was* rather silly."

They continued discussing the story for some time as though its creator was elsewhere. He kept very still. Maria already slept in a soft and podgy ball on his lap….

"I am a lonely old thing," he said suddenly, with a long sigh, for in reality he was deeply disappointed at his failure, and had aspired to be their story-teller as well as playmate. Ordinary life bored him dreadfully. He had melancholy yearnings after youth and laughter. "Let's do something else now. What do you say to a turn of hide-and-seek? Eh?"

The miraculous Maria woke at this, yawned like a cat, and nearly rolled off on to the floor. "I dreamed of a real tiger," she informed every one. But no one was listening. Judy and Tim were prancing wildly.

“If your cold isn’t *too* bad,” cried Judy, “it would be lovely.” No grown-up could have been more thoughtful of his welfare than she was.

“I’ll hide,” he said, “and in five minutes you come and find me.” He went towards the door into the passage.

“Choose a warm place, and keep out of draughts,” she cried after him. And he was gone. He nearly collided with a servant carrying a tray, but the servant, hearing his secret instructions, vanished again instantly in the direction of the kitchen. Five minutes later — an alleged five minutes — the children began their search. But they never found him. They hunted high and low, from attic to cellar, in gun-room, scullery, and pantry, even climbing up the ladder from the box-room to the roof, but without result. Colonel Stumper had disappeared. He was K.C.B.

“D’you think he’s offended?” suggested Judy, as they met at length in the hall to consider the situation.

“Of course not,” said Tim emphatically, “a man like that! He’s written a book on Scouting!”

“I’ve finished,” Maria mentioned briefly, and sat down.

On Judy’s puzzled face there appeared an anxious expression then. His cold, she remembered, was very heavy. “I looked under every sofa and into every cupboard,” she said, as though she feared he might have choked or suffocated. They stood in front of the fireplace and began to talk about other things. Their interest in the game was gone, they were tired of looking; but at the back of their minds was a secret annoyance, though at the same time a sense of great respect for the man who could conceal himself so utterly from sight. A touch of the marvellous was in it somehow.

“There’s no good hiding like *that*,” they felt indignantly. Still it was rather wonderful, after all. A man “like that” could do anything. He might even be up a chimney somewhere. He might be anywhere! They felt a little creepy….

“P’raps he *is* a sort of tiger thing,” whispered some one … and they were rather relieved when the drawing-room door opened and Mother appeared, knitting her scarlet muffler as she walked. The scene of scolding, explanation, and excuses that followed — for it was half an hour after bed-time — was cut short by Maria informing the company that she was "awfully tired," with a sigh that meant she would like to be carried up to bed. She was carried. The procession moved slowly, Tim and Judy bringing up the rear. But while Tim talked about a water-rat he meant to kill next day with an air-gun, Judy used her eyes assiduously, still hoping to discover Cousin William crumpled up in some incredible hiding-place. They told their mother nothing. The matter was private. It was between themselves and him. It would have to be cleared up on the morrow — if they remembered. On the upper landing, however, there was a curious sound. Maria, half asleep in the maternal arms, did not hear it, apparently, but the other two children exchanged sudden, recriminating glances. A door stood ajar, and light came through it from the room within. This curious sound came with it. It was a sneeze — a regular Nindian sneeze.

"We never thought of looking *there*," they said reproachfully.
Come-Back Stumper had simply gone to bed.

CHAPTER V. THE BIRTH OF WONDER

MEANWHILE THEIR FATHER alone grew neither older nor larger. His appearance did not change. They could not imagine that he would ever change. He still went up to London in the morning, he still came down again, he still continued to grind out stories which they thought wonderful, and he still, on occasions, said mysteriously, “A day will come,” or its variants, “Some day,” and “A day is coming.” Yet, though he had Fancy, he had not Imagination. He did not satisfy them. For while Fancy may attend the birth of Wonder, Imagination alone accompanies her growth. Daddy was too full of stationery and sealing-wax in his daily work to have got very far.

Aunt Emily also still was there, explaining everything and saying No, shaking her head at them, or holding up a warning finger. Their outward life, indeed, showed little change, but it included one important novelty that affected all their present and all their subsequent existence, too. They made a new friend — their father’s brother.

When first his visit was announced, they had their doubts about him— “your Uncle Felix” had a very questionable sound indeed, but the fact that he lived in Paris and was a writer of sea-stories and historical novels counterbalanced the handicap of the unpleasant “Felix.” For to their ears Felix was not a proper sort of name at all; it was all right for a horse or a dog or even for a town, but for a man who was also a relation it was a positive disaster. It would not shorten for one thing, and for another it reminded them of “a king, or some one in a history book,” and thus did not predispose them in his favour. It was simply what Tim called a “beastly name.” Aunt Emily, however, was responsible for their biggest prejudice against him: “You must remember not to bother him, children; you must never disturb him when he’s working.” And as Uncle Felix was coming to stay for several weeks in the Mill House, they regarded him in advance as some kind of horrible excitement they must put up with.

However, as most things in life go by contraries, this Uncle Felix person turned out just the opposite. Within an hour of his arrival he was firmly established as friend and ally, yet so quickly and easily was this adjustment brought about that no one could say exactly how it happened. They themselves said nothing — just stood and stared at him; Daddy and Mother said the expected things, and Aunt Emily, critical and explanatory as usual, found it necessary to add: “You’ll find it such a quiet house to work in, Felix, and the children will never interfere or get in your way.” She was evidently proud of her relative and his famous books. “They’ll be as good as gold — won’t you, Judy?” by which name she referred to the trio as a whole.

Whereupon Judy smiled and nodded shyly, Tim bent down and scratched his stocking, and Maria, her face expressionless, merely stared at her aunt as though she — Emily, that is — were a piece of inanimate furniture.

“I see,” said Uncle Felix carelessly, and glanced down at the trio.

That was all he said. But it was the way he said it that instantly explained his position. He looked at them and said, “I see”; no more than that — and it was done. They knew, he knew, Aunt Emily also knew. Two little careless words — and then continued to talk of Paris, the Channel crossing, and the weather.

“Didn’t he squash her just!” remarked Tim, when they were alone together. “She expected him to thank her awfully and give her a kiss.” And, accordingly, none of them were in the least surprised when he suddenly poked his head inside the door as they lay in bed and explained that he had just looked in to say good-night, and when he left them a moment later added gravely from the door: “Mind, you never disturb me, children; because, if you do — !” He shook a warning finger and was gone. He looked enormous in the doorway.

From that moment Uncle Felix became an important factor in their lives. The mysterious compact between them all was signed and sealed, yet none could say who drew it up and worded it. His duties became considerable. He almost took Daddy’s place. The Study, indeed, at certain hours of the evening, became their recognised nesting place, and Daddy was as pleased as they themselves were. He seemed relieved. He rarely ground out epics now when his brain was tired and full of Government stationery and sealing-wax. Uncle Felix held the wizard’s wand, and what he did with it was this: he raised the sense of wonder in them to a higher level. Daddy had awakened it, and fed it with specimens they could understand. But Uncle Felix poked it into yet greater activity by giving them something that no one could ever possibly understand! He stimulated it so that it worked in them spontaneously and of its own accord. He made it *grow*. And no amount of Aunt Emilies in the world could stop him.

Their father felt no jealousy. When the story-hour came round, he produced a set of sentences he kept slyly up his sleeve for the occasion. “Ask your Uncle Felix; he’s better at stories and things than I am. It’s his business.” This was the model. A variation ran: “Oh, don’t bother me just now, children. I’ve got a lot of figures to digest.” But the shortest version was simply, “Run and plague your uncle. I’m too busy.”

“Try Mother” was used when Uncle Felix was in hiding. Only it had no result. Mother’s mind was too diffuse to carry conviction. It was soaked in servants and things. In another sense it was too exact. The ingredients of her stories were like a cooking recipe. Besides, hers was the unpardonable fault of never forgetting the time. On the very stroke of the clock she broke off abruptly with “Now it’s bed-time; you shall hear the rest another night.” Daddy forgot, or pleaded for “ten minutes more.” Uncle Felix, however, said flatly, “They can’t go till it’s finished” — and he meant it. His voice was deep and gruff— “like a dog’s,” according to Maria — and his laugh was like a horse’s neigh; it made the china rattle. He was “frightfully strong,” too, stronger than Weeden, for he could take a child under each arm and another on his back — and run! He never smiled when he told his stories, and, though this made them seem extra real, it also alarmed deliciously — in the terrible places. Perched on his gigantic knees, they felt “like up the cedar,” and when he stretched an arm or leg it was the great cedar branch swaying in the wind.

His manner, too, was stern to severity, and his voice was so deep sometimes that they could “feel it rumbling inside,” as though he had “swallowed the dinner gong.” He was a very important man somewhere; Daddy was just in the Stationery Office, but Uncle Felix was an author, and the very title necessarily included awe. He wrote “storical-novuls.” His name was often in the newspapers. They connected him with the “Govunment.” It had to do somewhere with the Police. No one trifled with Uncle Felix. Yet, strange to say, the children never could be properly afraid of him, although they tried very hard. Their audacity, their familiarity, their daring astonished everybody. The gardeners and coachmen, to say nothing of the indoor servants, treated him as though he was some awful emperor. But the children simply pushed him about. He might have been a friendly Newfoundland dog that wore tail-coats and walked on his hind legs, for all they feared reprisals.

He gave them a taste of his quality soon after his arrival.

“No, children, it’s impossible now. I’m busy over a scene of my storicalnovul. Ask your father.” He growled it at them, frowning darkly.

The parental heels had just that instant vanished round the door.

“Father’s got the figures and says he can’t.”

“Or your mother—” he said, gruffly.

“Mother’s doing servants in the housekeeper’s room.”

“Take your foot out of my waistcoat pocket this instant,” he roared.

“Why?” enquired Maria. “How else can I climb up?”

He shook and swayed like the cedar branch, but he did not shake her off. “Because,” he thundered, “there’s money in it, and you’ve got holes in your stockings, and toes with you are worse than fingers.”

And he strode across the floor, Tim clinging to one leg with both feet off the ground, and Judy pushing him behind as though he were a heavy door that wouldn’t open. He was very angry indeed. He told them plainly what he thought about them. He explained the philosophy of authors to them in brutal sentences. “Leave me alone, you little botherations!” he cried. “I’m in the middle of a scene in a storicalnovul.” It was disgraceful that a man could lose his temper so. “Leave me alone, or I’ll …”

In the corner of the big nursery sofa there was sudden silence. It was a chilly evening in early spring. Between the bars across the windows the wisteria leaves sifted the setting sunlight. The railway train lay motionless upon the speckled carpet. A cat, so fat it couldn’t unroll, lay in a ball of mystery against the high guard of wire netting before the fire. Outside the wind went moaning.

And Time ran backwards, or else the clock stopped dead. Dusk slipped in between the window bars. The cedars on the lawn became gigantic. They heard the haystacks shuffling out of their tarpaulins. The whole house rose into the air and floated off. Mother, Daddy, Nurses, beds dropped from the windows as it sailed away. All were left behind, forgotten details of some stupid and uncomfortable life elsewhere.

“Quite ready,” sighed the top of one cedar to the other.

“And waiting, too,” an answer came from nowhere.

And then the Universe paused and settled with a little fluttering sound of wonder. The onceuponatime Moment entered the room….

“There was a thing that nobody could understand,” began the deep, gruff voice. “And this thing that nobody could understand was something no one understood at all.”

“That’s twice they couldn’t understand it,” observed Judy, in the slight pause he made for effect.

“It was alive,” he went on, “and very beautiful, so beautiful, in fact, that people were astonished and felt rather ashamed because they couldn’t understand it. Some declared it wasn’t worth understanding at all; others said it might be worth understanding if they had the time to think about it; and the rest decided that it was nothing much, and promptly forgot that it existed. Their lives grew rather dull in consequence. A few, however, set to work to discover what it was. For the beauty of it set something in them strangely burning.”

“It was a firework, I think,” remarked Maria, then felt she had said quite an awful thing. For Tim just looked at her. “It’s alive, Uncle Felix told you,” he stated. She was obliterated — for the moment.

“Yes,” resumed the story-teller, “it was alive, and its beauty set the hearts of a few people on fire to know what it meant. It was difficult to find, however, and difficult to see properly when found.

“These people tried to copy it, and couldn’t. Though it looked so simple it was impossible to imitate. It went about so quickly, too, that they couldn’t catch hold of it and—”

“But have *you* seen it?” asked Judy, her head bobbing up into his face with eager curiosity.

It was a vital question. All waited anxiously for his reply.

“I have,” he answered convincingly. “I saw it first when I was about your age, and I’ve never forgotten it.”

“But you’ve seen it since, haven’t you? It’s still in the world, isn’t it?”

“I’ve seen it since, and it’s still in the world. Only no one knows to this day why it’s there. No one can explain it. No one can understand it. It’s so beautiful that it makes you wonder, and it’s so mysterious that it makes you —”

“What?” asked Tim for the others, while he paused a moment and stared into their gazing faces.

“Wonder still more,” he added.

Another pause followed.

“Then is your heart still burning, Uncle Felix?” Judy enquired, prodding him softly. “And does it matter much?”

“It matters a great deal, yes, because I want to find out, and cannot. And the burning goes on and on whenever I see the thing-that-nobody-can-understand, and even when I don’t see it but just think about it — which is pretty often. Because, if I found out why it’s there, I should know so much that I should give up writing storicalnovuls and become a sort of prophet instead.”

They stared in great bewilderment. Their curiosity was immense. They were dying to know what the thing was, but it was against the Rules to ask outright.

“Were their lives *very* dull?” — Maria set this problem, suddenly recalling something at the beginning of the story.

“Oh, very dull indeed. They had no sense of wonder — those who forgot.”

“How awful for them!”

“Awful,” he agreed, in a long-drawn whisper, shuddering.

And that shudder ran through every one. The children turned towards the darkening room. The gloomy cupboard was a blotch of shadow. The table frowned. The bookshelves listened. The white face of the cuckoo clock peered down upon them dimly from the opposite wall, and the chairs, it seemed, moved up a little closer. But through the windows the stars were beginning to peep, and they saw the crests of the friendly cedars waving against the fading sky.

He pointed. High above the cedars, where the first stars twinkled, the blue was deep and exquisitely shaded from the golden streak below it into a colour almost purple.

“The thing that nobody could understand was even more wonderful than *that*,” he whispered. “But no one could tell why it was there; no one could guess; no one could find out. And to this day — no one *can* find out.”

His voice grew lower and lower and lower still.

“To-morrow I’ll show it to you. You shall see it for yourselves.”

They hardly heard him now. The voice seemed far away. What could it be — this very, very wonderful thing?

“We’ll go out and find one…by the stream …where the willows bend…and shake their pointed leaves…. We’ll go to-morrow….”

His voice died away inside his waistcoat. Not a sound was audible. The children were very close against him. In his big hands he took each face in turn and put his lips inside the rim of three small ears.

He told the secret then, while wonder filled the room and hovered exquisitely above the crowded chair….

Awakened by the silence, presently, the ball of black unrolled itself beside the wire fender, it stretched its four black legs. And the children, hushed, happy, and with a mysterious burning in their hearts, went off willingly to bed, to dream of wonder all night long, and to ask themselves in sleep, *“Why God has put blue dust upon the body of a dragon-fly?”*

CHAPTER VI. THE GROWTH OF WONDER

THE STORY OF the dragon-fly marked a turning-point in their lives; they realised that life was crammed with things that nobody could understand. Daddy's reign was over, and Uncle Felix had ascended the throne. Wonder — but a growing wonder — ruled the world. The great Stranger they had always been vaguely expecting had drawn nearer; it was not Uncle Felix, yet he seemed the forerunner somehow. That "Some Day" of Daddy's — they had almost forgotten its existence — became more and more a possibility. Life had two divisions now: Before Uncle Felix came — and Now. To Maria alone there seemed no interval. To her it was always Now. She had so much wonder in her that she *knew*.

Outwardly the household ran along as usual, but inwardly this enormous change was registered in three human hearts. The adventures they had before Uncle Felix came were the ordinary kind all children know; they invented them themselves. Their new adventures were of a different order — impossible but true. Their uncle had brought a key that opened heaven and earth.

He did not know that he had brought this key. It was just natural — he let himself in because it was his nature so to do; the others merely went in with him. He worked away in his room, covering reams of paper with nonsense out of his big head; and the trio never disturbed him or knocked at his door, or even looked for him: they knew that his real life ran with theirs, and the moment he had covered so many dozen sheets he would appear and join them. All people had their duties; his duty was to fill so many sheets a day for printers; but his important life belonged to them and they just lived it naturally together. He would never leave the Old Mill House. The funny thing was — whatever had he done with himself before he came there!

Everything he said and did lit up the common things of daily life with this strange, big wonder that was his great possession. Yet his method was simple and instinctive; he never thought things out; he just — knew.

And the effect of his presence upon the other Authorities was significant. Not that the Authorities admitted or even were aware of it, but that the children saw them differently. Aunt Emily, for instance, whom they used to dread, they now felt sorry for. She was so careful and particular that she was afraid of life, afraid of living. Prudence was slowly killing her. Everything must be done in a certain way that made it safe; only, by the time it was safe it was no longer interesting. They saw clearly how she missed everything owing to the excessive caution and preparation in her: by the time she was ready, the thing had simply left. Instead of coming into the hayfield at once and enjoying it, she uttered so many warnings and gave so much advice against disaster— "better take this," and "better not take that" — that by the time they got there the hayfield had lost all its wonder. It was just a damp, untidy hayfield.

Daddy, however, gained in glory. He approved of his big brother. On his return from London every evening the first thing he asked was, "What have you all been up to to-day? Has Uncle Felix given you the moon or rolled the sun and stars into a coloured ball?" Weeden, too, had grown in mystery — he made the garden live, and understood the secret life of every growing thing; while Thompson and Mrs. Horton, each in their separate ways, led lives of strange activity in the lower regions of the house till the kitchen seemed the palace of an ogress and the pantry was its haunted vestibule. "Mrs. Horton's kitchen" was a phrase as powerful as "Open Sesame"; and "the butler's pantry" edged the world of mighty dream.

Above all, Mother occupied a new relationship towards them that made her twice as splendid as before. Until Uncle Felix came, she was simply "Mother," who loved them whatever they did and made allowances for everything. That was her duty, and unless they provided her with something to make allowances for they had failed in what was expected of them. Her absorption in servants and ordering of meals, in choosing their clothes and warning Jackman about their boots — all this was a chief reason for her existence, and if they didn't eat too much sometimes and wear their boots out and tear their clothes, Mother would have been without her normal occupation. Whereas now they saw her in another light, touched with the wonder of the sun and stars. It was proper, of course, for her to have children, but they realised now that she contrived to make the whole world work somehow for their benefit. Mother not only managed the entire Household, from the dinner-ordering slate at breakfast-time to the secret whisperings with Jackman behind the screen at bedtime, or the long private interviews with Daddy in his study after tea: she led a magnificent and stupendous life that regulated every smallest detail of their happiness. She was for ever thinking of them and slaving for their welfare. The wonder of her enormous love stole into their discerning hearts. They loved her frightfully, and told her all sorts of little things that before they had kept concealed. There were heaps and heaps of mothers in the world, of course; they were knocking about all over the place; but there was only one single Mother, and that was theirs.

Yet, in his own peculiar way, it was Uncle Felix who came first. Daddy believed in a lot of things; Mother believed in many things; Aunt Emily believed in certain things done at certain times and in a certain way. But Uncle Felix believed in everything, everywhere and always. To him nothing was ever impossible. He held, that is, their own eternal creed. He was akin to Maria, moreover, and Maria, though silent, was his spokesman often.

“Why *does* a butterfly fly so dodgy?” inquired Tim, having vainly tried to catch a Painted Lady on the lawn.

Daddy made a grimace and shrugged his shoulders, yet left the insect quite as wonderful as it was before. Mother looked up from her knitting with a gentle smile and said, “Does it, darling? I hadn’t noticed.” Aunt Emily, balancing her parasol to keep the sun away, observed in an educational tone of voice, “My dear Tim, what foolish questions you ask! It’s because its wings are so large compared to the rest of its body. It can’t help itself, you see.” She belittled the insect and took away its wonder. She explained.

Tim, unsatisfied, moved over to the wicker chair where Uncle Felix sat drowsily smoking his big meerschaum pipe. He pointed to the vanishing Painted Lady and repeated his question in a lower voice, so that the others could not hear:

“Why does it fly like that — all dodgy?” Whatever happened, the boy knew his Uncle would leave the butterfly twice as wonderful as he found it.

But no immediate answer came. They watched it for a moment together in silence. It behaved in the amazing way peculiar to its kind. Nothing in the world flies like a butterfly. Birds and other things fly straight, or sweep in curves, or rise and drop in understandable straight lines. But the Painted Lady obeyed no such rules. It dodged and darted, it jerked and shot, it was everywhere and anywhere, least of all where it ought to have been. The swallows always missed it. It simply doubled — and disappeared round the corner of the building.

Then, puffing at his pipe, Uncle Felix looked at Tim and said, “I couldn’t tell you. It’s one of the things nobody can understand, I think.”

“Yes,” agreed Tim, “it must be.”

There was a considerable pause.

“But there must be some way of finding out,” the boy said presently. He had been thinking over it.

“There is.” The man rose slowly from his chair.

“What is it?” came the eager question.

“Try it ourselves, and see if we can do the same!”

And they went off instantly, hand in hand, and vanished round the corner of the building.

The adventures they had since Uncle Felix came were of this impossible and marvellous order. That strange and lovely cry, “There’s some one coming,” ran through the listening world. “I believe there is,” said Uncle Felix. “Some day he’ll come and a tremendous thing will happen,” was another form of it, to which the answer was, “I know it will.”

It was much nearer to them than before. It was just below the edge of the world, the edge of life. It was in the air. Any morning they might wake and find the great thing was there — arrived in the night while they were sound asleep. So many things gave hints. A book *might* tell of it between the lines; each time a new book was opened a thrill slipped out from the pages in advance. Yet no book they knew had ever told it really. Out of doors, indeed, was the more likely place to expect it. The tinkling stream either ran towards it, or else came from it; that was its secret, the secret it was always singing about day and night. But it was impossible to find the end or beginning of any stream. Wind, moreover, announced it too, for wind didn’t tear about and roar like that for nothing. Spring, however, with its immense hope and expectation, gave the clearest promise of all. In winter it hid inside something, or at least went further away; yet even in winter the marvellous something or some one lay waiting underneath the snow, behind the fog, above the clouds. One day, some day, next day, or the day after to-morrow — and it would suddenly be there beside them.

Whence came this great Expectancy they never questioned, nor what it was exactly, nor who had planted it. This was a mystery, one of the things that no one can understand. They felt it: that was all they knew. It was more than Wonder, for Wonder was merely the sign and proof that they were seeking. It was faint and exquisite in them, like some far, sweet memory they could never quite account for, nor wholly, even once, recapture. They remembered almost — almost before they were born.

“We’ll have a look now,” Uncle Felix would say every walk they took; but before they got very far it was always time to come in again. “That’s the bother of everything,” he agreed with them. “Time always prevents, doesn’t it? If only we could make it stop — get behind time, as it were — we might have a chance. Some day, perhaps, we shall.”

He left the matter there, but they never forgot that pregnant remark about stopping time and getting in behind it. No, they never forgot about it. At Christmas, Easter, and the like, it came so near that they could almost smell it, but when these wonderful times were past they looked back and knew it had not really come. The holidays cheated them in a similar way. Yet, when it came, they knew it would be as natural and simple as eating honey, though at the same time with immense surprise in it. And all agreed that it was somehow connected with the Dawn, for the Dawn, the opening of a new day, was something they had heard about but never witnessed. Dawn must be exceedingly wonderful, because, while it happened daily, none of them had ever seen it happen. A hundred times they had agreed to wake and have a look, but the Dawn had always been too quick and quiet. It slipped in ahead of them each time. They had never seen the sun come up.

In some such sudden, yet quite natural way, this stupendous thing they expected would come up. It would suddenly be there. Everybody, moreover, expected it. Grown-ups pretended they didn’t, but they did. Catch a grown-up when he wasn’t looking, and he *was* looking. He didn’t like to be caught, that’s all, for as often as not he was smiling to himself, or just going to — cry.

They shared, in other words, the great, common yearning of the world; only they knew they yearned, whereas the rest of the world forgets.

“I think,” announced Judy one day — then stopped, as though unsure of herself.

“Yes?” said her Uncle encouragingly.

“I think,” she went on, “that the Night-Wind knows an awful lot, if only—” she stopped again.

“If only,” he helped her.

“We,” she continued.

“Could,” he added.

“Catch it!” she finished with a gasp, then stared at him expectantly.

And his answer formed the subject of conversation for fully half an hour in the bedroom later, and for a considerable time after Jackman had tucked them up and taken the candle away. They watched the shadows run across the ceiling as she went along the passage outside; they heard her steps go carefully downstairs; they waited till she had safely disappeared, for the door was ajar, and they could hear her rumbling down into the lower regions of Mrs. Horton’s kitchen — and then they sat up in bed, hugged their knees, shuddered with excitement, and resumed the conversation exactly where it had been stopped.

For Uncle Felix had given a marvellous double-barrelled answer. He had said, “We can.” And then he had distinctly added, “We will!”

CHAPTER VII. IMAGINATION WAKES

FOR THE NIGHT-WIND already had a definite position in the mythology of the Old Mill House, and since Uncle Felix had taken to reading aloud certain fancy bits from the storicalnovul he was writing at the moment, it had acquired a new importance in their minds.

These fancy bits were generally scenes of action in which the Night-Wind either dropped or rose unexpectedly. He used the children as a standard. “Thank you very much, Uncle,” meant failure, the imagination was not touched; but questions were an indication of success, the audience wanted further details. For he knew it was the child in his audience that enjoyed such scenes, and if Tim and Judy felt no interest, neither would Mr. and Mrs. William Smith of Peckham. To squeeze a question out of Maria raised hopes of a second edition!

A Duke, disguised as a woman or priest, landing at night; a dark man stealing documents from a tapestried chamber of some castle, where bats and cobwebs shared the draughty corridors — such scenes were incomplete unless a Night-Wind came in audibly at critical moments. It wailed, moaned, whistled, cried, sang, sighed, soughed or — sobbed. Keyholes and chimneys were its favourite places, but trees and rafters knew it too. The sea, of course, also played a large part in these adventures, for water above all was the element Uncle Felix loved and understood, but this Night-Wind, being born at sea, was also of distinct importance. The sea was terrible, the wind was sad.

To the children it grew more and more distinct with each appearance. It had a personality, and led a curious and wild existence. It had privileges and prerogatives. Owing to its various means of vocal expression — singing, moaning, and the rest — a face belonged to it with lips and mouth; teeth too, since it whistled. It ran about the world, and so had feet; it flew, so wings pertained to it; it blew, and that meant cheeks of sorts. It was a large, swift, shadowy being whose ways were not the ordinary ways of daylight. It struck blows. It had gigantic hands. Moreover, it came out only after dark — an ominous and suspicious characteristic rather.

“Why isn’t there a day-wind too?” inquired Judy thoughtfully.

“There is, but it’s *quite* a different thing,” Uncle Felix answered. “You might as well ask why midday and midnight aren’t the same because they both come at twelve o’clock. They’re simply different things.”

“Of course,” Tim helped him unexpectedly; “and a man can’t be a woman, can it?”

The Night-Wind’s nature, accordingly, remained a mystery rather, and its sex was also undetermined. Whether it saw with eyes, or just felt its way about like a blind thing, wandering, was another secret matter undetermined. Each child visualised it differently. Its hiding-place in the daytime was equally unknown. Owls, bats, and burglars guessed its habits best, and that it came out of a hole in the sky was, perhaps, the only detail all unanimously agreed upon. It was a pathetic being rather.

This Night-Wind used to come crying round the bedroom windows sometimes, and the children liked it, although they did not understand all its melancholy beauty. They heard the different voices in it, although they did not catch the meaning of the words it sang. They heard its footsteps too. Its way of moving awed them. Moreover, it was for ever trying to get in.

“It’s wings,” said Judy, “big, dark wings, very soft and feathery.”

“It’s a woman with sad, black eyes,” thought Tim, “that’s how I like it.”

“It’s some one,” declared Maria, who was asleep before it came, so rarely heard it at all. And they turned to Uncle Felix who knew all that sort of thing, or at any rate could describe it. He found the words. They lay hidden in his thick back hair apparently — there was little on the top! — for he always scratched his head a good deal when they asked him questions about such difficult matters. “What is it *really* — the Night-Wind?” they asked gravely; “and why does it sound so *very* different from the wind in the morning or the afternoon?”

“There *is* a difference,” he replied carefully. “It’s a quick, dark, rushing thing, and it moves like — like anything.”

“We know *that*,” they told him.

“And it has long hair,” he added hurriedly, looking into Tim’s staring eyes. “That’s what makes it swish. The swishing, rushing, hushing sound it makes

— that’s its hair against the walls and tiles, you see.”

“It *is* a woman, then?” said Tim proudly. All looked up, wondering. An extraordinary thing was in the air. A mystery that had puzzled them for ages was about to be explained. They drew closer round the sofa, and Maria blundered against the table, knocking some books off with a resounding noise. It was their way of reminding him that he had promised. “Hush, hush!” said Uncle Felix, holding up a finger and glancing over his shoulder into the darkened room. “It may be coming now… Listen!”

“Yes, but it is a woman, isn’t it?” insisted Tim, in a hurried whisper. He had to justify himself before his sisters. Uncle Felix must see to that first.

The big man opened his eyes very wide. He shuddered. “It’s a — Thing,” was the answer, given in a whisper that increased the excitement of anticipation. “It certainly is a — Thing! Now hush! It’s coming!”

They listened then intently. And a sound *was* heard. Out of the starry summer night it came, quite softly, and from very far away — upon discovery bent, upon adventure. Reconnoitering, as from some deep ambush in the shrubberies where the blackbirds hid and whistled, it flew down against the house, stared in at the nursery windows, fluttered up and down the glass with a marvellous, sweet humming — and was gone again.

“Listen!” the man’s voice whispered; “it will come back presently. It saw us. It’s awfully shy—”

“Why is it awfully shy?” asked Judy in an undertone.

“Because people make it mean so much more than it means to mean,” he replied darkly. “It never gets a chance to be just itself and play its own lonely game—”

“We’ve called it things,” she stated.

“But we haven’t written books about it and put it into poetry,” Uncle Felix corrected her with an audacity that silenced them. “We play our game; it plays its.”

“It plays its,” repeated Tim, amused by the sound of the words.

“And that’s why it’s shy,” the man held them to the main point, “and dislikes showing itself—”

"But why is its game lonely?" some one asked, and there was a general feeling that Uncle Felix had been caught this time without an answer. For what explanation could there possibly be of that? Their faces were half triumphant, half disappointed already.

He smiled quietly. He knew everything — everything in the world. "It's unhappy as well as shy," he sighed, "because nothing will play with it. Everything is asleep at night. It comes out just when other things are going in. Trees answer it, but they answer in their sleep. Birds, tucked away in nests and hiding-places, don't even answer at all. The butterflies are gone, the insects lost. Leaves and twigs don't care about being blown when there's no one there to see them. They hide too. If there are clouds, they're dark and sulky, keeping their jolly sides towards the stars and moon. Nothing will play with the Night-Wind. So it either plays with the tiles on the roof and the telegraph wires — dead things that make a lot of noise, but never leave their places for a proper game — or else just — plays with itself. Since the beginning of the world the Night-Wind has been shy and lonely and unhappy."

It was unanswerable. They understood. Their sense of pity was greatly touched, their love as well.

"Do pigs really see the wind, as Daddy says?" inquired Maria abruptly, feeling the conversation beyond her. She merely obeyed the laws of her nature. But no one answered her; no one even heard the question. Another sound absorbed their interest and attention. There was a low, faint tapping on the window-pane. A hush, like church, fell upon everybody.

And Uncle Felix stood up to his full height suddenly, and opened his arms wide. He drew a long, deep breath.

"Come in," he said splendidly.

The tapping, however, grew fainter and fainter, till it finally ceased. Everybody waited expectantly, but it was not repeated. Nothing happened. Nobody came in. The tapper had retreated.

"It was a twig," whispered Judy, after a pause. "The Virgin Creeper—"

"But it was the wind that shook it," exclaimed Uncle Felix, still standing and waiting as though he expected something. "The Night-Wind — Look out!"

A roaring sound over the roof drowned his words; it rose and fell like laughter, then like crying. It dropped closer, rushed headlong past the window, rattled and shook the sash, then dived away into the darkness. Its violence startled them. A deep lull followed instantly, and the little tapping of the twig was heard again. Odd! Just when the Night-Wind seemed furthest off it was all the time quite near. It had not really gone at all; it was hiding against the outside walls. It was watching them, trying to get in. The tapping continued for half a minute or more — a series of hurried, gentle little knocks as from a child's smallest finger-tip.

"It wants to come in. It's trying," whispered some one.

"It's awfully shy."

"It's lonely and frightfully unhappy."

"It likes us and wants to play."

There was another pause and silence. No one knew quite what to do. "There's too much light. Let's put the lamp out," said a genius, using the voice of Judy.

As though by way of answer there followed instantly a sudden burst of wind. The torrent of it drove against the house; it boomed down the chimney, puffing an odour of soot into the room; it shook the door into the passage; it lifted an edge of carpet, flapping it. It shouted, whistled, sang, using a dozen different voices all at once. The roar fell into syllables. It was amazing. A great throat uttered words. They could scarcely believe their ears.

The wind was shouting with a joyful, boisterous shout: "Open the window! *I'll* put out the light!"

All heard the wonderful thing. Yet it seemed quite natural in a way. Uncle Felix, still standing and waiting as though he knew not exactly what was going to happen, moved forward at once and boldly opened the window's lower sash. In swept the mighty visitor, the stranger from the air. The lamp gave one quick flicker and went out. Deep stillness followed. There was a silence like the moon.

The shy Night-Wind had come into the room.

Ah, there was awe and wonder then! The silence was so unexpected. The whole wind, not merely part of it, was in. It had come so gently, softly, delicately too! In the darkness the outline of the window-frame was visible; Uncle Felix's big figure blocked against the stars. Judy's head could be seen in silhouette against the other window, but Tim and Maria, being smaller, were merged in the pool of shadow below the level of the sill. A large, spread thing passed flutteringly up and down the room a moment, then came the rest. It settled over everything at once. A rustle was audible as of trailing, floating hair.

"It's hiding in the corners and behind the furniture," whispered Uncle Felix; "keep quiet. If you frighten it — whew!" — he whistled softly— "it'll be off above the tree-tops in a second!"

A low soft whistle answered to his own; somewhere in the room it sounded; there was no mistaking it, though the exact direction was difficult to tell, for while Tim said it was through the keyhole, Judy declared positively that it came from the door of the big, broken cupboard opposite. Maria stated flatly, "Chimney."

"Hush! It's talking." It was Uncle Felix's voice breathing very low. "It likes us. It feels we're friendly."

A murmur as of leaves was audible, or as of a pine bough sighing in a breeze. Yet there were words as well — actual spoken words:

"Don't look for me, please," they heard. "I do not want to be seen. But you may touch me. I like that."

The children spread their hands out in the darkness, groping, searching, feeling.

"Ah, your touch!" the sighing voice continued.

"It's like my softest lawn. Your hair feels as my grass feels on the hill-tops, and the skin of your cheeks is smooth and cool as the water-surface of my lily ponds at midnight. I know you" — it raised its tones to singing. "You are children. I kiss you all!"

"I feel you," Judy said in her clear, quiet voice. "But you're cold."

"Not really," was the answer that seemed all over the room at once. "That's only the touch of space. I've come from very high up to-night. There's been a change. The lower wind was called away suddenly to the sea, and I dropped down with hardly a moment's warning to take its place. The sun has been very tiresome all day — overheating the currents."

"Uncle, *you* ask it everything," whispered Tim, "simply everything!"

"Say how we love it, please," sighed Judy. "I feel it closing both my eyes."

"It's over all my face," put in Maria, drawing her breath in loudly.

"But my hair's lifting!" Judy exclaimed. "Oh, it's lovely, lovely!"

Uncle Felix straightened himself up in the darkness. They could hear him breathing with the effort. "Please tell us what you do," he said. "We all can feel you touching us. Play with us as you play with trees and clouds and sleeping flowers along the hedgerows."

A singing, whistling sound passed softly round the room; there was a whirr and a flutter as when a flight of bees or birds goes down the sky, and a voice, a plaintive yet happy voice, like the plover who cry to each other on the moors, was audible:

"I run about the world at night,
  Yet cannot see;
My hair has grown so thick these millions years,
  It covers me.
So, like a big, blind thing
  I run about,
And know all things by touching them.
  I touch them with my wings;
    I know each one of you
      By touching you;
        I touch your *hearts*!"

"I feel you!" cried Judy. "I feel you touching me!"

"And I, and I!" the others cried. "It's simply wonderful!"

An enormous sigh of happiness went through that darkened room.

"Then play with me!" they heard. "Oh, children, play with me!"

The wild, high sweetness in the windy voice was irresistible. The children rose with one accord. It was too dark to see, but they flew about the room without a fault or slip. There was no stumbling; they seemed guided, lifted, swept. The sound of happy, laughing voices filled the air. They caught the Wind, and let it go again; they chased it round the table and the sofa; they held it in their arms until it panted with delight, half smothered into silence, then marvellously escaping from them on the elastic, flying feet that tread on forests, clouds, and mountain tops. It rushed and darted, drove them, struck them lightly, pushed them suddenly from behind, then met their faces with a puff and shout of glee. It caught their feet; it blew their eyelids down. Just when they cried, "It's caught! I've got it in my hands!" it shot laughing up against the ceiling, boomed down the chimney, or whistled shrilly as it escaped beneath the crack of the door into the passage. The keyhole was its easiest escape. It grew boisterous, singing with delight, yet was never for a moment rough. It cushioned all its blows with feathers.

"Where are you now? I felt your hair all over me. You've gone again!"
It was Judy's voice as she tore across the floor.

"You're whacking me on the head!" cried Tim. "Quick, quick! I've got you in my hands!" He flew headlong over the sofa where Maria sat clutching the bolster to prevent being blown on to the carpet.

They felt its soft, gigantic hands all over them; its silky coils of hair entangled every movement; they heard its wings, its rushing, sighing voice, its velvet feet. The room was in a whirr and uproar.

"Uncle! Can't *you* help? You're the biggest!"

"But it's blown me inside out," he answered, in a curiously muffled voice. "My fingers are blown off. It's taken all my breath away."

The pictures rattled on the wall; loose bits of paper fluttered everywhere; the curtains flapped out horizontally into the air.

"Catch it! Hold it! Stop it!" cried the breathless voices.

"Join hands," he gasped. "We'll try." And, holding hands, they raced across the floor. They managed to encircle something with their spread arms and legs. Into the corner by the door they forced a great, loose, flowing thing against the wall. Wedged tight together like a fence, they stooped. They pounced upon it.

"Caught!" shouted Tim. "We've got you!"

There was a laughing whistle in the keyhole just behind them. It was gone.

The window shook. They heard the wild, high laughter. It was out of the room. The next minute it passed shouting above the cedar tops and up into the open sky. And their own laughter went out to follow it across the night.

The room became suddenly very still again. Some one had closed the window. The twig no longer tapped. The game was over. Uncle Felix collected them, an exhausted crew, upon the sofa by his side.

“It was very wonderful,” he whispered. “We’ve done what no one has ever done before. We’ve played with the Night-Wind, and the Night-Wind’s played with us. It feels happier now. It will always be our friend.”

“It was awfully strong,” said Tim in a tone of awe. “It fairly banged me.”

“But awfully gentle,” Judy sighed. “It kissed me hundreds of times.”

“I felt it,” announced Maria.

“It’s only a child, really,” Uncle Felix added, half to himself, “a great wild child that plays with itself in space—”

He went on murmuring for several minutes, but the children hardly heard the words he used. They had their own sensations. For the wind had touched their hearts and made them think. They heard it singing now above the cedars as they had never heard it sing before. It was alive and lovely, it meant a new thing to them. For they had their little aching sorrows too; it had taken them all away: they had their little passionate yearnings and desires; it had prophesied fulfilment. The dreamy melancholy of childhood, the long, long days, the haunted nights, the everlasting afternoons — all these were in its wild, great, windy voice, the sighing, the mystery, the laughter too. The joy of strange fulfilment woke in their wind-kissed hearts. The Night-Wind was their friend; they had played with it. Now everything could come true.

And next day Maria, lost to the Authorities for over an hour, was at length discovered by the forbidden pigsties in a fearful state of mess, but very pleased and happy about something. She was watching the pigs with eyes brimful of questioning wonder and excitement. She was listening intently too. She wanted to find out for certain whether pigs really — really and truly — saw — anything unusual!

CHAPTER VIII. WHERE WONDER HIDES

THE CHILDREN HAD never been to London, but they knew the direction in which it lay — beyond the crumbling kitchen-garden wall, where the wall-flowers grew in a proud colony. The sky looked different there, a threatening quality in it. Both snow and thunderstorm came that way, and the dirty sign-post "London Road" outside the lodge-gates was tilted into the air significantly.

They regarded London as a terrible place, though a necessity: Daddy's office was there; Christmas and Birthday presents came from London, but also it was where the Radical govunment lived — an enormous, evil, octopus kind of thing that made Daddy poor. Weeden, too, had been known to say dark things with regard to selling vegetables, hay, and stuff. "What can yer igspect when a Radical govunment's in?" And the fact that neither he nor Daddy did anything to move it away proved what a powerful thing it was, and made them feel something hostile to their happiness dwelt London-way beyond that crumbling wall.

The composite picture grew steadily in their little minds. When ominous clouds piled up on that northern horizon, floating imperceptibly towards them, it was a fragment of London that had broken off and come rolling along to hover above the old Mill House. A very black cloud was the Seat of Govunment.

London itself, however, remained as obstinately remote as Heaven, yet the two visibly connected; for while the massed vapours were part of London, the lanes and holes of blue were certainly the vestibule of Heaven. "His seat is in the Heavens" must mean something, they argued. They were quite sweetly reverent about it. They merely obeyed the symbolism of primitive age.

"I shall go to Heaven," Tim said once, when they discussed dying as if it were a game. He wished to define his position, as it were.

"But you haven't been to London yet," came the higher criticism from Judy. "London's a metropolis."

Metropolis! It was an awful thing to say, though no one quite knew why. Part of their dread was traceable to this word. Ever since some one had called it "the metropolis" in their hearing, they had associated vague awe with the place. The ending "opolis" sounded to them like something that might come "ontopofus" — and that, again, brought "octopus" into the mind. It seemed reckless to mention London and Heaven together — yet was right and proper at the same time. Both must one day be seen and known, one inevitably as the other. Thus heavenly rights were included in their minds with a ticket to London, far, far away, when they were much, much older. And both trips were dreaded yet looked forward to.

Maria, however, held no great opinion of either locality. She disliked the idea of long journeys to begin with. Having no objection to moving her eyes, she was opposed to moving her body — unless towards an approved certainty. Puddings, bonfires, and laps at story-time were approved certainties; Heaven and London apparently were not. She was contented where she was. "London's a bother," was her opinion: it meant a rush in the hall when the dog-cart was waiting for the train and Daddy was too late to hear about bringing back a new blue eye for a broken doll. And as for the other place — her ultimatum was hardly couched in diplomatic language, to say the least. An eternal Sunday was not her ideal of happiness. Aunt Emily, it was stated, would live in Heaven when she died, and the place had lost its attractiveness in consequence. For Aunt Emily used long words and heard their "Sunday Colics," and the clothes she wore on that seventh workless day reminded them of village funerals or unhappy women who came to see over the house when it was to be let, and asked mysterious questions about something called "the drains." Daddy's top-hat with a black band was another item in the Sunday and Metropolis picture. London and Heaven, as stated, were not looked forward to unreservedly.

There were compensations, though. They knew the joy of deciding who would go there. Stumper, of course, for one: it was the only place he would not come back from: he would be K.C.B. Uncle Felix, too, because it was his original source of origin. Mother repeatedly called him "angel," and even if she hadn't, it was clear he knew all about both places by the way he talked. Stumper's India was not quite believed in owing to the way he described it, but Uncle Felix's London was real and living, while the other marvellous things he told them could only have happened in some kind of heavenly place. His position, therefore, was unshakable, and Mother and Daddy also had immemorial rights. Others of their circle, however, found themselves somewhat equivocally situated. Thompson and Mrs. Horton were uncertain, for since there was "no marriage" there, there could be no families to wait upon and cook for. Weeden, also, was doubtful. Having never been to London, the alternative happiness was not properly within his grasp, whereas the Postman might be transferred from the metropolis to the stars at any minute of the day or night. Those London letters he brought settled his case beyond all argument whatever.

All of which needs mention because there was a place called the End of the World, and the title has of course to do with it. For the End of the World is the hiding-place of Wonder.

Beyond that crumbling kitchen-garden wall was a very delightful bit of the universe. A battered grey fence kept out the road, but there were slits between the boards through which the Passers-by could be secretly observed. All Passers-by were criminals or heroes on their way to mysterious engagements; the majority were disguised; many of them could be heard talking darkly to themselves. They were a queer lot, those Passers-by. Those who came *from* London were escaping, but those going north were intent upon awful business in the sinister metropolis — explosions, murders, enormous jewel robberies, and conspiracies against the Radicalgovunment. The solitary policeman who passed occasionally was in constant terror of his life. They longed to warn him. Yet he had his other side as well — his questionable side.

This neglected patch of kitchen-garden, however, possessed other claims to charm as well as the tattered fence. It was uncultivated. Some rows of tangled currant bushes offered excellent cover; there was a fallen elm tree whose trunk was "home"; a pile of rubbish that included scrap-iron, old wheel-barrows, broken ladders, spades, and wire-netting, and, chief of all, there was the spot behind the currant bushes where Weeden, the Gardener, burnt dead leaves. It was sad, but mysterious and beautiful too, this burning of the leaves; though, according to Uncle Felix, who gave the Gardener's explanation, it was right and necessary. They loved the smoke, too, hanging in the air above the lawn, with its fragrant smell and shadowy distances:

"Oh, Gardener! How can you let them burn?"

“Because,” he explained, “they’ve ‘ad their turn, And nobody wants their shade.

These withered-up messes
Is worn-out old dresses
I tuck round the boots
Of the shiverin’ roots
Till the Spring makes ’em over
Like roses and clover —
But nobody wants dead leaves, dead leaves,
Nor nobody wants their shade!”

A deserted corner, yet crowded gloriously with life. Adventure lurked in every inch. There was danger, too, terror, wonder, and excitement. And since for them it was the beginning of all things, they called it, naturally, The End of the World. To escape to the End of the World, unaccompanied by grown-ups, and, if possible, their whereabouts unknown to anybody, was a daily duty second to no other. It was a duty, wet or fine, they seldom left, neglected.

Besides themselves, two others alone held passes to this sanctuary: Uncle Felix, because he loved to go there (he wrote his adventure stories there, saying anything might happen in such a lonely place), and the Gardener, because he was obliged to. Come-Back Stumper was excluded. They had taken him once, and he had said such an abominable thing that he was never allowed to visit it again. “A messy hole,” he called it. Mr. Jinks had never even seen it, but, after his death in the railway accident, his remains, recovered without charge from the Hospital, had been buried somewhere in the scrap-heap. From this point of view alone he knew the End of the World; he was worthy of no other. His epitaph was appalling — too horrible to mention really. Tim composed it, but Uncle Felix distinctly said that it never, *never* must be referred to audibly again:

Here Matthew Jinks
Just lies and st —

“It’s *not* nice,” he said emphatically, “and you mustn’t say it. Always speak well of the dead.” And, as they couldn’t honestly do that, they obeyed him and left Mr. Jinks in his unhonoured grave, with a broken wheel-barrow for a headstone and a mass of wire-netting to make resurrection difficult. In order to get the disagreeable epitaph out of their minds Uncle Felix substituted a kinder and gentler one, and made them learn it by heart:

Old Jinks lies here
Without a tear;
He meant no wrong,
But we didn’t get along;
So Jinks lies here,
And we’ve nothing more to fear.
He’s all right:
  Jinks
  Sinks
Out of sight!

It was the proud colony of wallflowers that first made Uncle Felix like the place. Their loveliness fluttered in the winds, and their perfume stole down deliciously above the rubbish and neglect. They seemed to him the soul of ruins triumphing over outward destruction. Hence the delicate melancholy in their scent and hence their lofty chosen perch. Out of decay they grew, yet invariably above it. Both sun and stars were in their flaming colouring, and their boldness was true courage. They caught the wind, they held the sunset and the dawn; they turned the air into a shining garden. They stood somehow for a yearning beauty in his own heart that expressed itself in his stories.

“If you pick them,” he warned Tim, who climbed like a monkey, and was as destructive as his age, “the place will lose its charm. They grow for the End of the World, and the End of the World belongs to them. This wonderful spot will have no beauty when they’re gone.” To wear a blossom in the hair or buttonhole was to be protected against decay and ugliness.

Most wonderful of all, however, was the door in the old grey fence; for it was a Gateway, and a Gateway, according to Uncle Felix, was a solemn thing. None knew where it led to, it was a threshold into an unknown world. Ordinary doors, doors in a house, for instance, were not Gateways; they merely opened into rooms and other familiar places. Dentists, governesses, and bedrooms existed behind ordinary, indoor doors; but out-of-doors opened straight into the sky, and in virtue of it were extraordinary. They were Gateways. At the End of the World stood a stupendous, towering door that was a Gateway. Another, even more majestic, rose at the end of life. This door in the grey fence was a solemn, mysterious, and enticing Gateway — into everything worth seeing.

It was invariably kept locked; it led into the high-road that slithered along secretly and sedulously — to London. For the children it was out of bounds. Here the Policeman lived in constant terror of his life, and here went to and fro the strange world of Passers-by. The white road flowed past like a river. It moved. From the lower branches of the horse-chestnut tree they could just see it slide; also when the swing went extra high, and from the end of the prostrate elm. It went in both directions at once. It encircled the globe, going under the sea too. The door leading into it was a quay or port. But the brass knob never turned; the Gardener said there was no key; and from the outer side the handle had long since been removed, lest Passers-by might see it and come in. Even the keyhole had been carefully stuffed up with that stringy stuff the Gardener carried in his pockets.

Till, finally, something happened that made the End of the World seem suddenly a new place. Tim noticed that the stringy stuff had been removed.

The day had been oppressively hot, and tempers had been sorely tried. Mother had gone to lie down with a headache; Aunt Emily was visiting the poor with a basket; Daddy was inaccessible in his study; all Authorities were doing the dull things Authorities have to do. It was September, and the world stood lost in this golden haze of unexpected heat. Very still it stood, the yellow leaves quite motionless and the smoke from the kitchen chimney hanging stiff and upright in the air. There was no breath of wind.

“There’s simply *nothing* to do,” the children said — when suddenly Uncle Felix arrived, and their listlessness was turned to life and interest. He had gone up in the morning to London, and the suddenness of his return was part of his prerogative. Stumper, Jinks, and other folk were announced days and days beforehand, but Uncle Felix just — came.

“We’ll go to the End of the World,” he decided gravely, the moment he had changed. “There’s something going on there. Quick!” This meant, as all knew, that he had an idea. They stole out, and no one saw them go. Across the lawn and past the lime trees humming busily with tired bees, they crept beneath the shadow of the big horse-chestnut, where the staring windows of the house could no longer see them. They disappeared. The Authorities might look and call for ever without finding them.

“Slower, please, a little,” said Maria breathlessly, and was at once picked up and carried. Moving cautiously through the laurel shrubbery, they left the garden proper with its lawns and flower-beds, and entered the forbidden region at the End of the World. They stood upright. Uncle Felix dropped Maria like a bundle.

“Look!” he said below his breath. “I told you so!”

He pointed. The colony of wallflowers were fluttering in the windless air. Nothing stirred but these. The stillness was unbroken. Sunshine blazed on the rubbish-heap. The currant bushes watched. Deep silence reigned everywhere. But the flowers on the crumbling wall waved mysteriously their coloured banners of alarm.

“It looks different,” said Judy in a hushed aside.

“Something’s happened,” whispered Tim, staring round him.

Maria watched them from the ground, prepared to follow in any direction, but in no hurry until a plan was decided.

“The keyhole!” cried Tim loudly, and at the same moment a huge blackbird flew out of the shrubberies behind them, and flashed across the open space toward the orchard on the other side. It whistled a long, shrill scream of warning. It was bigger by far than any ordinary blackbird.

“Home! Quick! Run for your lives!” cried some one, as they dashed for the safety of the elm tree. Even Maria ran. They scrambled on to the slippery, fallen trunk and gasped for breath as they stood balancing in an uneasy row, all holding hands.

“It was bigger than a hen,” exclaimed Judy inconsequently. “It couldn’t have come through any keyhole.” She stared with inquiring, startled eyes at her brother. The bird and the keyhole were somehow lumped together in her mind.

“They’ve stopped,” observed Maria, and sat down in the comfortable niche between the lopped branch and the trunk. It was true. The wallflowers were as motionless now as painted outlines on a nursery saucer.

“Because we’re safe,” said Uncle Felix. “It was a warning.”

And then all turned their attention to Tim’s discovery of the keyhole. For the stuffing had been removed. The white, dusty road gleamed through the hole in a spot of shining white.

“Hush!” whispered their guide. “There’s something moving.”

“Perhaps it’s Jinks in his cemetery,” thought Judy after a pause to listen.

“No,” said Uncle Felix with decision. “It’s outside. It’s on the — road!”

His earnestness on these occasions always thrilled them; his gravity and the calm way he kept his head invariably won their confidence.

“The London Road!” they repeated. That meant the world.

“Something going past,” he added, listening intently. They listened intently with him. All four were still holding hands.

“The great High Road outside,” he repeated softly, while they moved instinctively to the highest part of the tree whence they could see over the fence. They craned their necks. The dusty road was flowing very swiftly, and like a river it had risen. Never before had it been so easily visible. They saw the ruts the carts had made, the hedge upon the opposite bank, the grassy ditch where the hemlock grew in feathery quantities. They even saw loose flints upon the edge. But the actual road was higher than before. It certainly was rising.

“Metropolis!” cried Tim. “I see an eye!”

Some one was looking through the keyhole at them.

“An eye!” exclaimed several voices in a hushed, expectant tone.

There was a pause, during which every one looked at every one else.

“It’s probably a tramp,” said Uncle Felix gravely. “We’ll let him in.”

The proposal, however, alarmed them, for they had expected something very different. To stuff the keyhole, run away and hide, or at least to barricade the fence was what he ought to have advised. Instead of this they heard the very opposite. The excitement became intense. For them a tramp meant danger, robbery with violence, intoxication, awful dirt, and an under-the-bed-at-midnight kind of terror. It was so long since they had seen the tramp — their own tramp — that they had forgotten his existence.

“They’ll kill us at once,” said Maria, using the plural with the comprehensive and anticipatory vision of the child.

“They’re harmless as white mice,” said her Uncle quickly, “once you know how to treat them, and full of adventures too. I do,” he added with decision, referring to the treatment. And he stepped down to unbar the gate.

The children, breathless with interest, watched him go. On the trunk, of course, they felt comparatively safe, for it was “home”; but none the less the “girls” drew up their skirts a little, and Tim felt premonitory thrills run up his spidery legs into his spine. The wallflowers shook their tawny heads as a sudden breath of wind swept past them across the End of the World. It seemed an age before the audacious thing was accomplished and the door swung wide into the road outside. Uncle Felix might so easily have been stabbed or poisoned or suffocated — but instead they saw a shabby, tangled figure come shuffling through that open gate upon a cloud of dust.

“Quick! he’s a perjured man!” cried Judy, remembering a newspaper article. “Shut the gate!” She sprang down to help. “He’ll be arrested for a highway violence and be incarc-”

There was confusion in her mind. She felt pity for this woebegone shadow of a human being, and terror lest the Policeman, who lived on the white, summery high road, would catch him and send him to the gallows before he was safe inside. Her love was ever with the under dog.

There was a rush and a scramble, the gate was shut, and the Tramp stood gasping before them in the enchanted sanctuary of the End of the World.

“He’s ours!” exclaimed Judy. “It’s our old tramp!”

“Be very polite to him,” Uncle Felix had time to whisper hurriedly, seeing that all three stood behind him. “He’s a great Adventurer and a Wanderer too.”

CHAPTER IX. A PRIEST OF WONDER

HE WAS A grey and nameless creature of shadowy outline and vague appearance. The eye focused him with difficulty. He had an air of a broken tombstone about him, with moss and lichen in wayward patches, for his face was split and cracked, and his beard seemed a continuation of his hair; but he had soft blue eyes that had got lost in the general tangle and seemed to stray about the place and peep out unexpectedly like flowers hiding in a thick-set hedge. The face might be anywhere; he might move suddenly in any direction; he was prepared, as it were, to move forward, sideways, or backwards according as the wind decided or the road appeared — a sort of universal scarecrow of a being altogether.

Yet, for all his forlorn and scattered attitude, there hung about his rags an air of something noble and protective, something strangely inviting that welcomed without criticism all the day might bring. Homeless himself, and with no place to lay his extraordinary body, the birds might have built their nests in him without alarm, or the furry creatures of fields and woods have burrowed among his voluminous misfit-clothing to shelter themselves from rain and cold. He would gladly have carried them all with him, safely hidden from guns or traps or policemen, glad to be useful, and careless of himself. That, at any rate, was the mixed impression that he gave.

“Thank you,” he said in a comfortable sort of voice that sounded like wind among telegraph wires on a high road: then added “kindly all.”

And instantly the children felt delighted with him; their sympathy was gained; fear vanished; the Policeman, like a scape-goat, took all their sins away. They did not actually move closer to the Tramp but their eyes went nestling in and out among his tattered figure. Judy, however, it was noticeable, looked at him as though spell-bound. To her he was, perhaps, as her Uncle said, the Great Adventurer, the type of romantic Wanderer for ever on the quest of perilous things — a Knight.

It was Uncle Felix who first broke the pause.

“You’ve come a long way,” he suggested.

"Oh, about the same as usual," replied the Tramp, as though all distances and localities were one to him.

"Which means — ?"

"From nowhere, and from everywhere."

"And you are going on to — ?"

"Always the same place."

"Which is — ?"

"The end." He said it in a rumbling voice that seemed to issue from a pocket of the torn old coat rather than from his bearded mouth.

"Oh, dear," sighed Judy, "that is a *very* long way indeed. But, of course, you never get tired out?" Her eyes were brimmed with admiration.

He shrugged his great loose shoulders. It was odd how there seemed to be another thing within all that baggy clothing and behind the hair. The shaggy exterior covered a slimmer thing that was happy, laughing, dancing to break out. "Not tired out," he said, "a bit sleepy sometimes, p'r'aps." He glanced round him carelessly, his strange eyes resting finally on Judy's face. "But there's lots of beds about," he explained to her, "once you know how to make 'em."

"Yes," the child murmured, with a kind of soft applause, "of course there must be."

"And those wot sleeps in ditches dreams the sweetest — that *I* know."

"They must," agreed Judy, as though grass and dock leaves were familiar to her. "And you get up when you're ready, don't you?"

"That's it," replied the wanderer. "Only you always *are* ready."

"But how do you know the time?" asked Tim.

The Tramp turned round slowly and looked at his questioner.

"Time!" he snorted. And he exchanged a mysterious glance of sympathy with Maria, who lifted her eyes in return, but otherwise made no sign whatever. "Sit quiet like," he added, "and everything worth 'aving comes of itself. That's living that is. The 'ole world belongs to you."

“I’ve got a watch,” said Tim, as though challenged. “I’ve got an alarum clock too. Only you have to wind them up, of course.”

“There you are!” the Tramp exclaimed, “you’ve got to wind ’em up. They don’t go of theirselves, do they?”

“Oh, no.”

“I never knew ‘appiness until I chucked my watch away,” continued the other.

“*Your* watch!” exclaimed Tim.

“Well, not igsackly,” laughed the Tramp.

“Oh, he didn’t mean *that*,” Judy put in quickly.

“I was usin’ it at the time, any’ow,” chuckled their guest, “and wot you’re usin’ at the time belongs to you. I never knew ‘appiness while I kep’ it. Watches and clocks only mean ‘urry. It’s an endless job, tryin’ to keep up with ‘em. You’ve got to go so fast for one thing — I never was a sprinter — bah!” he snorted— “there’s nothing in it. Life isn’t a ‘undred yards race. You miss all the flowers on the way at that pace. And what’s the prize?” He glanced down contemptuously at his feet. “Worn-out boots. Yer boots wear out — that’s all.”

He looked round at the children, smiling wonderfully. Maria seemed to understand him best, perhaps. She looked up innocently into his tangled face. “That’s it,” he said, with another chuckle. “YOU know wot I mean, don’t yer, missie?” But Maria made no reply. She merely beamed back at him till her face seemed nothing but a pair of wide blue eyes.

“Stop yer clocks, go slow,” the man murmured, half to himself, “and you’ll see what I mean. There’s twice as much time as before. You can do anything, everything,” — he spread his arms out— “because there’s never any ‘urry. You’d be surprised.”

“You’re very hungry, aren’t you?” inquired Tim, resenting the man’s undue notice of Maria.

The Tramp stared hard into the boy’s unwavering eyes. “Always,” he said briefly, “but, then, there’s always folks to give.”

“Rather,” exclaimed Judy with enthusiasm, and Tim added eagerly, “I should think so.”

They seemed to know all about him, then. Something had entered with him that made common stock of the five of them. It was wonderful of Uncle Felix to have known all this beforehand.

“We’re all alive together,” murmured the Tramp below his breath, and then Uncle Felix showed another stroke of genius. “We’ll make tea out here to-day,” he said, “instead of having it indoors. Tim, you run and fetch a tea-pot, a bottle of milk, and some cups and a kettle full of water; put some sugar in your pockets and bring a loaf and butter and a pot of jam. A basket will hold the lot. And while you’re gone we’ll get the fire going.”

“A big knife and some spoons too,” Judy cried after his disappearing figure, “and don’t let Aunt Emily see you, mind.”

The Tramp looked up sharply. “I had an Aunt Emily once,” he said behind his hedged-in face. Expecting more to follow, the others waited; but nothing came. There was a little pause.

“Once?” asked Maria, wondering perhaps if there were two such beings in the world at the same time.

The man of journeys nodded.

“Did she mend your clothes and things — and love to care for you?” Judy wished to know.

He shook his tangled head. “She visited the poor,” he told them, “and had no time for the likes of me. And one day I fell out of a big hole in my second suit and took to tramping.” He rubbed his hands vigorously together in the air. “And here I am.”

“Yes,” said Maria kindly. “I’m glad.”

Meanwhile, Judy having decided to go and help her brother with the tea-things, the others set to work and made a fire. Maria helped with her eyes, picking up an occasional stick as well, but it was the Tramp who really did the difficult part. Only the way he did it made it appear quite easy somehow. He began with the tiniest fire in the world, and the next minute it seemed ready for the kettle, with a cross-bar arranged adroitly over it and a supply of fresh wood in a pile beside it.

“What do *you* think about it?” asked Tim of his sister, as they struggled back with the laden basket. Apparently a deep question of some kind asked for explanation in his mind.

“It’s awful that he has no one to care about him,” was the girl’s reply. “I think he’s a very nice man. He looks magnificent and awfully brown.”

“That’s dirt,” said her brother.

“It’s travel,” she replied indignantly.

The Tramp, when they got back, looked tidier somehow, as though the effect of refined society had already done him good. His appearance was less uncouth, his hair and beard a shade less hay-fieldy. It was possible to imagine what he looked like when he was young — sure sign of being tidy; just as to be very untidy gives an odd hint of what old age will do eventually to face and figure. The Tramp looked younger.

They all made friends in the simple, unaffected way of birds and animals, for at the End of the World there was no such thing as empty formality. The children, supported by the presence of their important uncle, asked questions, this being their natural prerogative; it came to them as instinctively as tapping the lawn for worms comes to birds, or scratching the earth for holes is a sign of health with rabbits. At first shyly — then in a ceaseless, yet not too inquisitive torrent. Questions are the sincerest form of flattery, and the Tramp, accustomed probably to severer questions from people in uniform, was quite delighted. He smiled quietly behind the scenery of his curious great face, but he answered all: where he lived, how he travelled, what friends he had, where he spent Christmas, what barns and ditches and haystacks felt like, anything and everything, even where he meant to be buried when he died. “‘ere, where I’ve lived so ‘appily,” and he made a wide gesture with one tattered arm to include the earth and sky. He had no secrets apparently; he was glad they should know all. The children had never known such a delightful creature in their lives before.

“And you eat anything?” inquired Tim, “anything you can, I mean?”

“Anything you can *get*, he means,” corrected Judy softly.

He gave an unexpected answer. “I swallow sunsets, and I bite the moon;
I nibble stars. I never need a spoon.”

He said it as naturally as a duchess describing her latest diet at a smart dinner-party, with an air, too, as of some great personage disguised on purpose so that he might enjoy the simple life.

“That rhymes,” stated Maria.

“So does this,” he replied; “I live on open hair and bits of bread; the sunlight clothes me, and I lay me ‘ead—”

The hissing of the kettle interrupted him. “Water’s boiling,” cried Uncle Felix; “hand round the cups and cut the loaf.” A cup was given to each. The tea was made.

“Do you take sugar, please?” asked Judy of the guest. The quietness of her voice made it almost tender. Such a man, moreover, might despise sweet things. But he said he did.

“Two lumps?” she asked, “or one?”

“Five, please,” he said.

She was far too polite to show surprise at this, nor at the fact that he stirred his tea with a little bit of stick instead of with a spoon. She remembered his remark that he had no use for spoons. Tim, saying nothing, imitated all he did as naturally as though he had never done otherwise in his life before. They enjoyed their picnic tea immensely in this way, seated in a row upon the comfortable elm tree, gobbling, munching, drinking, chattering. The Tramp, for all his outward roughness, had the manners of a king. He said what he thought, but without offence; he knew what he wanted, yet without greed or selfishness. He had that politeness which is due to alert perception of every one near him, their rights and claims, their likes and dislikes; for true politeness is practically an expansion of consciousness which involves seeing the point of view of every one else — at once. A tramp, accustomed to long journeys, big spaces, obliged ever to consider the demands of impetuous little winds, the tastes of flowers, the habits and natural preferences of animals, birds, and insects, develops this bigger sense of politeness that crowds in streets and drawing-rooms cannot learn. Unless a tramp takes note of *all*, he remains out of touch with all, and therefore is uncomfortable.

“Is everything all right?” asked Uncle Felix presently, anxious to see that he was well provided for.

“Everything, thank you,” the wanderer replied, “and, if you don’t mind, I’ll ‘ave my supper here later too. I’ve brought it with me.” And out of one capacious pocket he produced — a bird. “It’s a chickin,” he informed them, as they stared with wide-opened eyes. Maria was the first to go on eating her slice of bread and jam. Unordinary things seemed to disturb her less than ordinary ones. Somehow it seemed quite natural that he should go about with a bird for supper in his pocket.

“However did you get it — in there?” asked Tim, modifying his sentence just in time to avoid inquisitive rudeness.

“It gave itself to me,” he replied. “That kind of things ‘appens sometimes when you’re tramping. *They* know,” he added significantly. “You see, it’s my birthday to-day, and something like this always ‘appens on my birthday. Last time it was a fish. I fell into the stream and went right under. When I got out on to the bank again I found a trout in my pocket. The time before I slept beside a haystack, and when I awoke at sunrise I felt something warm and soft against my face like feathers. It *was* feathers. There was a ‘en’s nest two inches from my nose, and six nice eggs in it all ready for my birthday breakfast. I only ate four of them. You should never take all the heggs out of a nest.” He looked round at the group and smiled. “But I think the chickin’s best of all,” he told them, “and next year I expect a turkey, or a bit of bacon maybe.”

“You never, never grow old, do you?” Judy asked. Her admiration was no longer concealed. It seemed she saw him differently a little from the others.

“Oh, jest a nice age,” he said.

“You seem to know so much,” she explained her question, “everything.”

He laughed behind his tea-cup as he fingered the chicken on his lap.

“As to that,” he murmured, “there’s only a few things worth knowing. If you can just forget the rest, you’re all right.”

“I see,” she replied beneath her breath. “But — but it’s got to be plucked and cleaned and cooked first, hasn’t it?”

“The chickin?” he laughed. “Oh, dear me, no! Cooked, yes, but not plucked or cleaned in the sense you mean. That’s what they do in ‘ouses. Out here we have a better way. We just wrap it up in clay and dig a ‘ole and light a fire on top, and in a ‘arf hour it’s ready to eat, tender, juicy, and sweet as a bit of ‘oneycomb. Break open the ball of clay, and the feathers all come away wiv it.” And then he produced from another pocket a fat, thick roll of yellow butter, freshly made apparently, for it was wrapped in a clean white cloth.

They stared at that for a long time without a word.

“They go together,” he explained, and the explanation seemed sufficient as well as final. “And they come together too,” he added with a smile.

“Did the butter give itself to you as well as the chicken?” inquired Judy. The Tramp nodded in the affirmative as he placed it beside him on the trunk ready for use later. And everybody felt in the middle of a delightful mystery. All were the same age together. Bird and butter, sun and wind, flowers and children, tramp and animals — all seemed merged in a jolly company that shared one another’s wants and could supply them. The wallflowers wagged their orange-bonneted heads, the wind slipped sighing with delicious perfumes from the trees, the bees were going home in single file, and the sun was sinking level with the paling top — when suddenly there came a disturbing element into the scene that made their hearts beat faster with one accord. It was a sound.

A muffled, ominous beat was audible far away, but slowly coming nearer. As it approached it changed its character. It became sharper and more distinct. Something about the measured intervals between its tapping repetitions brought a threatening message of alarm. Every one felt the little warning and looked up. There was anxiety. The sound jarred unpleasantly upon the peace of the happy company. They listened. It was footsteps on the road outside.

CHAPTER X. FACT AND WONDER — CLASH

UNCLE FELIX PAUSED over his last bit of bread and jam, Tim and Judy cocked their ears up. Maria's eyes stood still a moment in the heavens, and the Tramp stopped eating. He picked up the butter and replaced it carefully in his pocket.

"I know those steps," he murmured half to himself and half to the others. "They're all over the world. They follow me wherever I go. I hear 'em even in me sleep." He sighed, and the tone of his voice was weary and ill at ease.

"How horrid for you," said Judy very softly.

"It keeps me moving," he muttered, trying to conceal all signs of face behind hair and beard, which he pulled over him like a veil. "It's the Perliceman."

"The Policeman!" they echoed, staring.

"But he can't find you here!"

"He'll never see you!"

"You're quite safe inside the fence with us, for this is the End of the World, you know."

"He's not afraid — never!" exclaimed Judy proudly.

"He goes everywhere and sees everything," whispered the Tramp. "He's been following me since time began. So far he has not caught me up, but his boots are so much bigger than my own — the biggest, strongest boots in the world — that in the hend he is bound to get me."

"But you've done nothing," said Judy.

The wanderer smiled. "That's why," he said, holding up a warning finger. "It's because I do nothing. 'ush!" he whispered. The steps came nearer, and he lowered his voice so that the end of the sentence was not audible.

"'ide me," he said in a whisper. And he waved his arms imploringly, like the branches of some wind-hunted tree.

There was a tarpaulin near the rubbish-heap, and some sacking used for keeping the vegetables warm at night. “That’ll do,” he said, pointing. “Quick! — Good-bye!” In a moment he was beneath the spread black covering, the children were sitting on its edges, quietly eating more bread and jam, and looking as innocent as stars. Uncle Felix poked the fire busily, a grave and anxious look upon his face.

The steps came nearer, paused, came on again then finally stopped outside the gate. The flowing road that bore them ceased running past in its accustomed way. The evening stopped still too. The silence could be heard. The setting sun looked on. Upon the crumbling wall the orange flowers shook their little warning banners.

And there came a tapping on the wooden gate.

No one moved.

The tapping was repeated. There was a sound of drums about it. The round brass handle turned. The door pushed open, and in the empty space appeared — the Policeman.

“Good evening,” he said in a heavy, uncompromising way. He looked enormous, framed there by the open gate, the white road behind him like a sheet. He looked very blue — a great towering shadow against the sunlight. It was very clear that he *knew* he was a policeman and could think of nothing else. He was dressed up for the part, and received many shillings a week from a radculgovunment to look like that. It would have been a dereliction of duty to forget it. He was stuffed with duty. His brass buttons shone.

“Good *evening*,” he repeated, as no one spoke.

“*Good* evening,” replied Uncle Felix calmly. The Policeman accentuated the word “evening,” but Uncle Felix emphasised the adjective “good.” From the very beginning the two men disagreed. “This is private property, very private indeed. We are having tea, in fact, privately, upon our own land.”

“No property is private,” returned the Policeman, “and to the Law no thing nor person either.”

For a moment the children felt afraid. It seemed incredible that Uncle Felix could be arrested, and yet things had an appearance of it.

“Kindly close the gate so that we cannot be overheard,” he said firmly, “and then be good enough to state your business here.” He did not offer him a seat; he did not suggest a cup of tea; he spoke like a brave man who expected danger but was prepared to meet it.

The Policeman stepped back and closed the gate. He then stepped forward again a little nearer than before. From a pocket, hitherto invisible inside his belt, he drew forth a crumpled notebook and a stub of pencil. He was very dignified and very grave. He took a deep breath, held the paper and pencil ready to use, expanded his chest till it resembled a toy balloon in the Park, and said:

“I am looking for a man.” He paused, then added: “Have you seen a man about?”

“About what?” asked Uncle Felix innocently.

“About fifty or thereabouts,” replied the other. “Disguised in rags and a wig of hair and a false beard.”

“What has he done?” It was like a game of chess, both opponents well matched. Uncle Felix was too big to be caught napping by clever questions that hid traps. The children felt the danger in the air, and watched their uncle with quivering admiration. Only their uncle stood alone, whereas behind the Policeman stretched a line of other policemen that reached to London and was in touch with the Government itself.

“What has he done?” repeated their champion.

“He’s disappeared,” came the deep-voiced answer.

“There’s no crime in that,” was the comment, given flatly.

“But he’s disappeared with” — the Policeman consulted his notebook a moment— “a chicken and a roll of butter what don’t belong to him—”

“Roll *and* butter, did you say?”

“No, sir, roll *of* butter was what I said.” He spoke respectfully, but was grave and terrible. “He is a thief.”

"A thief!"

"He lives nowhere and has no home. You see, sir, duty is duty, and we're expected to run in people who live nowhere and have no homes."

"Which road did he take?" Uncle Felix clearly was pretending in order to gain time.

The man of law looked puzzled. "It was a roll of butter and a bird, sir," he said, consulting his book again, "and my duty is to run him in—"

"The moment you run into him."

"Precisely," replied the blue giant. "And, having seen him come in here some time ago, I now ask you formally whether you have seen him too, and I call upon you to show me where he's hiding." He thrust one huge foot forward and held his notebook open with the pencil ready. "Anything you say will be used against you later, remember. You must all be witnesses."

"*If* you find him," put in Uncle Felix dryly.

"*When* I find him," said the other. And his eye wandered over to the tarpaulin that was spread out beside the rubbish-heap. For it had suddenly moved.

Everybody had seen that movement. There was no disguising it. Feeling uncomfortable the Tramp had shifted his position. He probably wanted air.

"I saw it move," the Policeman growled, moving a step towards the rubbish-heap. "He's under there all right enough, and the sooner he comes out the better for him. That's all I've got to say."

It was a most disagreeable and awkward moment. No one knew quite what was best to do. Maria turned her eyes as innocently upon the tarpaulin as she could manage, but it was obvious what she was really looking at. Her brother held his breath and stared, expecting a pistol might appear and some one be shot dead with a marvellous aim, struck absolutely in the mathematical centre of the heart. Uncle Felix, upon whom fell the burden of rescue or defence, sat there with a curious look upon his face. For a moment it seemed he knew not what to do.

The Policeman, approaching still nearer to the tarpaulin, glared at him.

"You're an accessory," he said sternly, "both before and after the fact."

“I didn’t say he *wasn’t* there.”

“You didn’t say he *was*,” was the severe retort. It was unanswerable.

“He’ll hang by the neck till he’s dead,” thought Tim, “and afterwards they’ll bury the body in a lime-kiln so that even his family can’t visit the grave.” He looked wildly about him, thinking of possible ways of escape he had read or heard about, and his eye fell upon his sister Judy.

Now Judy was a queer, original maid. She believed everything in the world. She believed not only what was told her but also what she thought. And among other things she believed herself to be very beautiful, though in reality she was the ugly duckling of the brood. “All God has made is beautiful,” Aunt Emily had once reproved her, and, since God had made everything, everything must be beautiful. It was. God had made her too, therefore she was simply lovely. She enjoyed numerous romances; one romance after another flamed into her puzzled life, each leaving her more lovely than it found her. She was also invariably good. To be asked if she was good was a blundering question to which the astonished answer was only an indignant “Of course.” And, similarly, all she loved herself was beautiful. Her romances had included gardeners and postmen, stable-boys and curates, age of no particular consequence provided they stimulated her creative imagination. And the latest was — the Tramp.

Something about the woebegone figure of adventure had set on fire her mother instinct *and* her sense of passionate romance. She saw him young, without the tangled beard, without the rags, without the dilapidated boots. She saw him in her mind as a warrior hero, storming difficulty, despising danger, wandering beneath the stars, a being resplendent as a prince and fearless as a deity. He was a sun of the morning, and the dawn was in his glorious blue eyes.

And Tim now saw that this sister of his, alone of all the party, was about to do something unexpected. She had left her place upon the fallen trunk and stepped up in front of the Policeman.

“Stand aside, missy,” this individual said, and his voice was rough, his gesture very decided. It was, in fact, his “arresting” manner. He was about to do his duty.

"Just wait a moment," said Judy calmly; and she placed herself directly in his path, her legs apart, her arms akimbo on her hips. "You say the man you want to find is old and ragged and looks like a tramp?"

"That's it," replied the Policeman, greatly astonished, and pausing a moment in spite of himself. "You'll see him in a moment. Jest help me to lift a corner o' this 'ere tarpaulin, and I'll show him to you." He pushed her deliberately aside.

"All right," said Judy, her eyes shining brilliantly, her gestures touched with a confidence that surprised everybody into silence, "but first I want to tell you that the person underneath this old sheet thing is not a tramp at all—"

"You don't say so," interrupted the other, half impudently, half sarcastically. "What is he then, I'd like to know?"

The girl drew herself up and looked the great blue figure straight in the eyes.

"He's my brother," she said, in a clear strong voice, "and he's not a thief."

"Your brother!" repeated the man, a trifle taken aback. He guffawed.

"He's young and noble," she went on, half singing the words in her excitement and belief, "and he's dressed all in gold. He walks like wind about the world, has curly hair, and wears a sword of silver. He's simply beautiful, and he's *got no beard at all!*"

"And he's your brother, is he?" cried the Policeman, laughing rudely, "and he jest wears all that get-up for fun, don't he?" And he stooped down and pulled the tarpaulin violently to one side.

"He is my brother, and I love him, and he is beautiful," she answered, dancing lightly round him and flinging her arms in the air to the complete amazement of policeman, Uncle Felix, and her brother and sister into the bargain. "There! You can see for yourself!"

The Policeman stood aghast and stared. He drew a long, deep breath; he whistled softly; he pushed his big, spiked helmet back. He staggered. "Seems there's a mistake," he stammered stupidly, "a kind of mistake somewhere, as it were. I—" He stuck fast. He wiped his lips with his thick brown hand.

“A mistake everywhere, I think,” said Uncle Felix sternly. “Your mistake.”

The two men faced each other, for Uncle Felix had risen to his feet. The children held back and stared in silence. They were not quite sure what it was they saw. On Judy’s face alone was a radiant confidence.

For, in place of the bedraggled and unkempt figure that had crawled beneath the sheet ten minutes before, there rose before them all apparently a tall young stripling, clean and white and shining as a fair Greek god. His hair was curly, he was dressed in gold, a silver sword hung down beside him, and his beardless face and beauty in it that made it radiant as a glad spring day. The sunlight was very dazzling just at that moment.

“You said,” continued Uncle Felix, in a voice of deadly quiet, “that the man you wanted had a wig of hair and a beard — a false beard?”

The Policeman stared as though his eyes would drop out upon the tarpaulin. But he said no word. He consulted his note-book in a dazed, flustered kind of way. Then he looked up nervously at the astonishing figure of the “Tramp.” Then he looked back at his book again.

“And old?” said Uncle Felix.

“And old,” repeated the officer thickly, poring over the page.

“About fifty, I think, you mentioned?”

“‘Bout fifty — did I?” He said it faintly, like a man not sure of a lesson he ought to know by heart.

“Disguised into the bargain!” Uncle Felix raised his voice till it seemed to thunder out the words.

“Them was my instructions, sir,” the man was heard to mumble sulkily.

Uncle Felix, to the children’s immense delight and admiration, took a step nearer to the man of law. The latter moved slowly backwards, glancing half fiercely, half suspiciously at the glorious figure of the person he had expected to arrest as a dangerous thief and tramp.

“And, following what you stupidly call your instructions,” cried Uncle Felix, looking sternly at him, “you have broken in our gate, trespassed on our private property, disturbed our guests, and removed forcibly our tarpaulin from its rightful place.”

The crestfallen and amazed Policeman gasped and raised his hands with a gesture of despair. He looked like a ruined man. Had there been a handkerchief in his bulging coat, he must have cried.

“And you call yourself an Officer of the Law?” boomed the Defender of Personal Liberty. He went still nearer to him. His voice, to the children, sounded simply magnificent. “A uniformed and salaried representative of the Government of England!”

“Oo calls me orl that?” asked the wretched man in a trembling tone. “I gets twenty-five shillings a week, and that’s orl I know.”

There came a pause then, while the men faced each other.

“Uncle, let him go, please,” said Judy. “He couldn’t help it, you know. And he’s a married man with a family, I expect. Some day—”

A forgiving smile softened the features of both men at these gentle words.

“This time, then,” said Uncle Felix slowly, “I won’t report you; but don’t let it occur again as long as you live. A day will come, perhaps, when you will understand. And here,” he added, holding out his hand with something in it, “is another shilling to make it twenty-six. I advise you — if you’re still open to friendly advice — to buy a pair of glasses with it.”

The discredited official took the shilling meekly and pocketed it with his note-book. He cast one last hurried glance of amazement and suspicion at the man who had been beneath the tarpaulin, and began to slink back ignominiously towards the gate. At the last minute he turned.

“Good *evenin’*,” he said, as he vanished into the road.

“*Good* evening,” Uncle Felix answered him, as he closed the gate behind him.

Then, how it happened no one knew exactly. Judy, walking up to the shining figure, took him by the hand and led him slowly through the gate on to the long white road. There was a blaze of sunset pouring through the trees and the shafts of slanting light made it difficult to see what every one was doing. In the general commotion he somehow vanished. The gate was closed. Judy stood smiling and triumphant just inside upon the mossy path.

“You saved his life,” said some one.

“It’s all right,” she said — and burst into tears.

But children are not much impressed by the tears of others, knowing too well how easily they are produced and stopped. Tim went burrowing to find the bird, and Maria just mentioned that the Tramp had taken the butter away in his pocket. By the time this fact was thoroughly established the group was ready to leave, the tea-things all collected, the fire put out, and the sun just dipping down below the top of the old grey fence.

Then, and not till then, did the affair of the Tramp come under discussion. What seemed most puzzling was why the Policeman had not arrested him after all. They could not make it out at all; it seemed a mystery. There was something quite unusual about it altogether. Uncle Felix and Judy had been wonderful, but —

“Did you see him blink,” said Tim, “when Judy went up and gave it him hot?”

“Yes,” observed Maria, who had done nothing herself but stare. “I did.”

The brother, however, was not so sure. “I think he really believed her,” he declared with assurance, proud of her achievement. “He really saw him young and with a sword and curly hair and all that.”

Judy looked at him with surprise. Her tears had ceased flowing by this time.

“Of course,” she said. “Didn’t *you?*” There was pain in her voice in addition to blank astonishment.

“Of course we did,” said Uncle Felix quickly with decision. “Of course we did.”

As they went into the house, however, Uncle Felix lingered behind a moment as though he had forgotten something. His face wore a puzzled expression. He seemed a little bewildered. He walked into the hat-rack first, then into the umbrella-stand, then stopped abruptly and put his hand to his head.

“Headache?” asked Tim, who had been watching him.

His uncle did not hear the question, at least he did not answer. Instead he pulled something hurriedly out of his waistcoat pocket, held it to his ear, listened attentively a moment, and then gave a sudden start.

“What is it, Uncle?”

“Oh, nothing,” was the reply; “my watch has stopped, that’s all.” He stood still a moment or two, reflecting deeply. His eyebrows went up and down. He pursed his lips. “Odd,” he continued, half to himself; “I’m sure I wound it up last night…!” he added, “it’s going again now. It stopped — only for a moment!”

“Aha,” said Tim significantly, and looked about him. He waited breathlessly for something more to happen. But nothing did happen — just then.

Only, when at last Uncle Felix looked down, their eyes met and a flash of knowledge too enormous ever to be forgotten passed noiselessly between the two of them.

“Perhaps…!” murmured his uncle.

“I wonder…!”

That was all.

CHAPTER XI. JUDY'S PARTICULAR ADVENTURE

ADVENTURE MEANS SAYING Yes, and being careless; children say Yes to everything and are very careless indeed: even their No is usually a Yes, inverted or deferred. "I won't play," parsed by a psychologist, means "I'll play when I'm ready." The adventurous spirit accepts what offers regardless of consequences; he who hesitates and thinks is but a Policeman who prevents adventure. Now everything offers itself to children, because they rightly think that everything belongs to them. Life is conditionless, if only people would let them accept it as it is. "Don't think; accept!" expresses the law of their swift and fluid being. They act on it. They take everything they can — get. But it is the Policeman who adds the "get," changing the whole significance of life with one ugly syllable.

Each of the children treasured an adventure of its very own; an adventure-in-chief, that could not possibly have happened to anybody else in the world. These three survivals in an age when education considers childhood a disease to be cured as hurriedly as possible — took their adventure the instant that it came, and each with a complete assurance that it was unique. To no one else in the world could such a thing have happened, least of all to the other two. Each took it characteristically, according to his or her individual nature — Judy, with a sense of Romance called deathless; Tim, with a taste for Poetic Drama, a dash of the supernatural in it; and Maria, with a magnificent inactivity that ruled the world by waiting for things to happen, then claiming them as her own. Her masterly instinct for repose ran no risk of failure from misdirected energy. And to all three secrecy, of course, was essential: "Don't never tell the others, Uncle! Promise faithfully!"

For to every adventure Uncle Felix acted as audience, atmosphere, and chorus. He watched whatever happened — audience; believed in its reality — atmosphere; and explained without explaining away — chorus. He had the unusual faculty of being ten years young as well as forty years old, and a real adventure was not possible without him.

The secrecy, of course, was not preserved for long; sooner or later the glory must be shared so that “the others” knew and envied. For only then was the joy complete, the splendour properly fulfilled. And so the old tired world went round, and life grew more and more wonderful every day. For children are an epitome of life — a self-creating universe.

That week was a memorable one for several reasons. Daddy, overworked among his sealing-wax, went for a change to Switzerland, taking Mother with him; Aunt Emily, in her black silk dress that crackled with disapproval, went to Tunbridge Wells — an awful place in another century somewhere; and Uncle Felix was left behind to “take charge of “em’”—”’em” being the children and himself. It was evidence of monumental trust and power, placing him in their imaginations even above the recognised Authorities. His sway was never for a moment questioned.

“No lessons, then!” he had insisted as a condition of acceptance, and after much confabulation the point was yielded with reluctance. It was to be a fortnight’s holiday all round. They had the house and grounds entirely to themselves, and with the departure of the elders a sheet was pulled by some one off the world, a curtain rolled away, another drop-scene fell, the word No disappeared. They saw invisible things.

Another reason, however, made the week memorable — the daisies. It was extraordinary. The very day after the grown-ups left the daisies came. Like thousands of small white birds, with bright and steady eyes, they arrived and settled, thick and plentiful. They appeared in sheets and crowds upon the grass, all of their own accord and unexplained. In a night the lawns turned white. It seemed a prearranged invasion. Judy, first awake that morning, looked out of her window to watch a squirrel playing, and noticed them. Then she told the others, and Maria, one eye above the blankets, ejaculated “Ah!” She claimed the daisies too.

Now, whereas a single daisy has no smell and seems a common, unimportant thing, a bunch of several hundred holds all the perfume of the spring. No flowers lie closer to the soil or bring the smell of earth more sweetly to the mind; upon the lips and cheeks they are as soft as a kitten’s fur, and lie against the skin closer than tired eyelids. They are the common people of the flower world, yet have, in virtue of that fact, the beauty and simplicity of the common people. They own a subdued and unostentatious strength, are humble and ignored, are walked upon, unnoticed, rarely thought about and never praised; they are cut off in early youth by mowing machines; yet their pain in fading is unreported, their little sufferings unsung. They cling to earth, and never aspire to climb, but they hold the sweetest dew and nurse the tiniest little winds imaginable. Their patience is divine. They are proud to be the carpet for all walking, running things, and in their universal service is their strength. The rain stays longer with them than with grander flowers, and the best sunlight goes to sleep among them in great pools of fragrant and delicious heat. The daisies are a stalwart little people altogether.

But they have another quality as well — something elfin, wayward, mischievous. They peep and whisper. It is said they can cast spells. To sleep upon a daisied lawn is to run a certain risk. There is this hint of impudence in their attitude, half audacity, half knavery, that shows itself a little in the way they stare unwinkingly all day at everything above them — at the stately things that tower proudly in the air — then just shut up at sunset without a word of explanation or apology. They see everything, but keep their opinions to themselves. Because people notice them so little, and even tread upon their tiny and inquiring faces, they are up to things all the time — undiscovered things. They know, it is said, the thoughts of Painted Ladies and Clouded Brimstones, as well as the intentions of the disappearing golden flies; why wind often runs close to the ground when the tree-tops are without a single breath; but, also, they know what is going on *below* the surface. They live, moreover, in every country of the globe, and their system of intercommunication is so perfect that even birds and flying things can learn from it. They prove their breeding by their perfect taste in dress, the well-bred ever being inconspicuous; and their simplicity conceals enormous, undecipherable wonder. One daisy out of doors is worth a hundred shelves of text-books in the house. Their mischief, moreover, is not revenge, though some might think it so — but a natural desire to be recognised and thought and talked about a little. Daisies, in a word, are — daisies.

And it was by way of the daisies that Judy’s great adventure came to her, the particular adventure that was her very own. For she had deep sympathy with flowers, a sympathy lacking in her brother and sister, and it was natural that her adventure in chief should come that way. She could play with flowers for long periods at a time; she knew their names and habits; she picked them gently, without cruelty, and never merely for the “fun” of picking them; while the way she arranged them about the house proved that she understood their silent, inner natures, their likes and dislikes — in a word, their souls. For Judy connected them in her mind with birds. Born in the air, they seemed to her.

As has been seen, she was the first to notice the arrival of the daisies. From the bedroom window she waved her arm to them, and showed plainly the pleasure that she felt. They arrived in troops and armies. Risen to the surface of the lawn like cream, she saw them staring with suspicious innocence at the sky. They stared at *her*.

“Just when the others have gone away!” was her instant thought, though unexpressed in words. There was meaning somewhere in this calculated arrival.

“They *are* alive,” she asked that afternoon, “aren’t they? But why do they all shut up at night? Who—” she changed the word— “what closes them?”

She was alone with Uncle Felix, and they had chosen with great difficulty a spot where they could lie down without crushing a single flower with their enormous bodies. After considerable difficulty they had found it. Having done a great many things since lunch — a feast involving several second helpings — they were feeling heavy and exhausted. So Judy chose this moment for her simple question. The world required explanation.

“There’s life in everything,” he mumbled, with his face against the grass, “everything that grows, especially.” And having said it, he settled down comfortably again to doze. His pipe was out. He felt rather like a log.

“But stopping growing isn’t dying,” she informed him sharply.

“Oh, no,” he agreed lazily, “you’re alive for a long time after that.”

“*You* stopped growing before I was born.”

“And I’m not quite dead yet.”

“Exactly,” she said, “so daisies *are* alive.”

It was absurd to think of dozing at such a time. He rolled round heavily and gazed at her through half-closed eyelids. “A daisy breathes,” he murmured, “and drinks and eats; sap circulates in its little body. Probably it feels as well. Delicate threads like nerves run through it everywhere. It knows when it is being picked or walked on. Oh, yes, a daisy is alive all right enough.” He sighed like a big dog that has just shaken a fly off its nose and lies waiting for the next attack. It came at once.

“But who knows it?” she asked. “I mean — there’s no good in being alive unless some one else knows it too!”

Then he sat up and stared at her. Judy, he remembered, knew a lot of things she could tell to no one, not even to herself — and this seemed one of them. The question was a startling one.

“An intellectual mystic at twelve!” he gasped. “How on earth did you manage it?”

“I may be a mystillectual insect,” she replied, proud of the compliment. “But what’s the good of being alive, even like a daisy, unless others know it — *us*, for instance?”

He still stared at her, sitting up stiffly, and propped by his hands upon the grass behind him. After prolonged reflection, during which he closed his eyes and opened them several times in succession, sighing laboriously while he did so, low mumbled words became audible.

“Forgive my apparent slowness,” he said, “but I feel like a mowing-machine this afternoon. I want oiling and pushing. The answer to your inquiry, however, is as follows: We could — *if* we took the trouble.”

“Could know that daisies are alive?” she cried.

His great head nodded.

“If we thought about them very hard indeed,” he went on, “and for a very, very long time we could feel as they feel, and so understand them, and know exactly *how* they are alive.”

And the way he said it, the grave, thoughtful, solemn way, convinced her, who already was convinced beforehand.

“I do believe we could,” she answered simply.

“I’m sure of it,” he said.

“Let’s try,” she whispered breathlessly.

For a minute and a half they stared into each other’s eyes, knowing themselves balanced upon the verge of an immense discovery. She did not doubt or question; she did not tell him he was only humbugging. Her heart thrilled with the right conditions — expectation and delight. Her dark-brown eyes were burning.

He murmured something that she did not properly understand:

Expect and delight
Is the way to invite;
Delight and expect,
And you’ll know things direct!

“Let’s try!” she repeated, and her face proved that she fulfilled his conditions without knowing it; she was delighted, and she expected — everything.

He scratched his head, wrinkling up his nose and pursing his lips for a moment. “There’s a dodge about it,” he explained. “To know a flower yourself you must feel exactly like it. Its life, you see, is different to ours. It doesn’t move and hurry, it just lives. It feels sun and wind and dew; it feels the insects’ tread; it lifts its skin to meet the rain-drops and the whispering butterflies. It doesn’t run away. It has no fear of anything, because it has the whole green earth behind it, and it feels safe because millions of other daisies feel the same” —

“And smells because it’s happy,” put in Judy. “Then what *is* a daisy? What is it really?”

She was “expecting” vividly. Her mind was hungry for essentials. This mere description told her nothing real. She wanted to feel “direct.”

What is a daisy? The little word already had a wonderful and living sound — soft, sweet, and beautiful. But to tell the truth about this ordinary masterpiece was no easy matter. An ostentatious lily, a blazing rose, a wayward hyacinth, a mass of showy wisteria — advertised, notorious flowers — presented fewer difficulties. A daisy seemed too simple to be told, its mystery and honour too humble for proud human minds to understand. So he answered gently, while a Marble White sailed past between their very faces: “Let’s think about it hard; perhaps we’ll get it that way.”

The butterfly sailed off across the lawn; another joined it, and then a third. They danced and flitted like winged marionettes on wires that the swallows tweaked; and, as they vanished, a breath of scented air stole round the trunk of the big lime tree and stirred the daisies’ heads. A thousand small white faces turned towards them; a thousand steady eyes observed them; a thousand slender necks were bent. A wave of movement passed across the lawn as though the flowers pressed nearer, aware at last that they were being noticed. And both humans, the big one and the little one, felt a sudden thrill of happiness and beauty in their hearts. The rapture of the Spring slipped into them. They concentrated all their thoughts on daisies….

“I’m beginning to feel it already,” whispered the Little Human, turning to gaze at him as though that breath of air impelled her too.

The wind blew her voice across his face like perfume; he looked, but could not see her clearly; she swayed a little; her eyes melted together into a single lovely circle, bright and steady within their fringe of feathery lashes. He tried to speak— “Delight and expect, and we’ll know it direct” — but his voice spread across whole yards of lawn. It became a single word that rolled and floated everywhere about him, rising and falling like a wave upon a sea of green: “Daisy, daisy, daisy.” On all sides, beneath, above his head as well, it passed with the music of the wandering wind, and he kept repeating it— “Daisy, daisy!” *She* kept repeating it, too, till the sound multiplied, yet never grew louder than a murmur of air and grass and tiny leaves— “Daisy, daisy, daisy.” It broke like a sea upon the coast-line of another world. It seemed to contain an entire language in itself, nothing more to be said but those two soft syllables. It was everywhere.

But another vaster sound lay underneath. As the crest of a breaking wave utters its separate note of foam above the general booming of the sea that bears it, so the flying wave of daisy-tones rose out of this deeper sound beneath. Both humans became aware that it was but a surface-voice they imitated. They heard this other foundation-sound that bore it — deep, booming, thunderous, half lost and very far away. It was prodigious; yet there was safety and delight in it that brought no hint of fear. They swam upon the pulse of some enormous, gentle life that rose about and through them in a swelling tide. They felt the heave of something that was strong enough to draw the moon, yet soft enough to close a daisy's eyes. They heard the deep, lost roar of it, rising and coming nearer.

"The Earth!" he whispered. "And the Spring is rising through it. Listen!"

"We're growing together," replied the Little Human. "We're rising with the Spring!"

Ah, it was exquisite. They were in the Daisy World…. He tried to move and reach her, but found that he could not take a step in any direction, and that his feet were imbedded in the soft, damp soil. The movement which he tried to make spread wide among a hundred others like himself. They rose on every side. All shared his movements as they had shared his voice. He heard his whole body murmuring "Daisy, daisy, daisy…." And she leaned over, bending towards him a slim form in a graceful line of green that formed the segment of a circle. A little shining face came close for a moment against his own, rimmed with delicate spears of pink and white. It sang as it shone. The Spring was in it. There were hundreds like it everywhere, yet he recognised it as one he knew. There were thousands, tens of thousands, yet this one he distinguished because he loved it.

Their faces touched like the fringes of two clouds, and then withdrew. They remained very close together, side by side among thousands like themselves, slowly rising on the same great tide. The Earth's round body was beneath them. They felt quite safe — but different. Already they were otherwise than they had been. They felt the big world flying.

"We're changing," he murmured, seizing some fragments of half-remembered speech. "We're marvellously changed!"

"Daisies," he heard her vanishing reply, "we're two daisies on the lawn!"

And then their voices went. That was the end of speech, the end of thinking too. They only felt….

Long periods passed above their heads and then the air about them turned gorgeous as a sunset sky. It was a Clouded Yellow that sailed lazily past their faces with spreading wings as large as clouds. They shared that saffron glory. The draught of cool air fanned them. The splendid butterfly left its beauty in them before it sailed away. But that sunset sky had lasted for hours; that cool wind fanning them was a breeze that blew steadily from the hills, making “weather” for half an afternoon. Time and duration as humans measure them had passed away; there was existence without hurry; end and beginning had not been invented yet. They did not know things in the stupid sense of having names for them; all that there was they shared; that was enough. They knew by feeling.

For everything was plentiful and inexhaustible — the heavens emptied light and warmth upon them without stint or measure; space poured about them freely, for they had no wish to move; they felt themselves everywhere, for all they needed came to them without the painful effort of busy things that hunt and search outside themselves; both food and drink slipped into them unawares from an abundant source below that equally supplied whole forests without a trace of lessening or loss. All life was theirs, full, free, and generous beyond conception. They owned the world, without even the trouble of knowing that they owned it. They lived, simply staring at the universe with eyes of exquisitely fashioned beauty. They knew joy and peace, and were content with that.

They did communicate. Oh, yes, they shared each other’s special happiness. There was, it is true, no sound of broken syllables, no speech which humans use to veil the very thing they would express; but there was that simpler language which all Nature knows, which cannot lie because it is unconscious, and by which constellations converse with buttercups, and cedars with the flying drops of rain — there was gesture. For gesture and attitude can convey all the important and necessary things, while speech in the human sense is but an invention of some sprite who wanted people to wonder what they really meant. In sublimest moments it is never used even in the best circles of intelligence; it drops away quite naturally; souls know one another face to face in dumb but eloquent — gesture.

“The sun is out; I feel warm and happy; there is nothing in the world I need!”

“You are beside me,” he replied. “I love you, and we cannot go far apart. I smell you even when no wind stirs. You are sweetest when the dew has gone and left you moist and shiny.”

A little shiver of enjoyment quivered through her curving stem. His petals brushed her own. She answered:

“Wet or fine, we stand together, and never stop staring at each other till we close our faces—”

“In the long darkness. But even then we whisper as we grow—”

“And open our eyes together at the same moment when the light comes back—”

“And feel warm and soft, and smell more delicious than ever in the dawn.”

These two brave daisies, growing on the lawn, had lives of concentrated happiness, asking no pity for their humble station in the universe. All treated them with unadulterated respect, and everything made love to them because they were so tender and so easily pleased. They knew, for instance, that their splendid Earth was turning with them, for they felt the swerve of her, sharing from their roots upwards her gigantic curve through space; they knew the sun was part of them, because they felt it drawing their sweet-flavoured food up all their dainty length till it glowed in health upon their small, flushed faces; also they knew that streams of water made a tumbling fuss and sent them messages of laughter, because they caught the little rumble of it through miles of trembling ground. And some among them — though these were prophets and poets but half believed, and looked upon as partly mad and partly wonderful — affirmed that they felt the sea itself far leagues away, bending their heads this way and that for hours at a stretch, according to the thundering vibrations that the tide sent through the soil from distant shores.

But all, from the tallest spread-head to the smallest button-face — all knew the pleasure of the uncertain winds; all knew the game of holding flying things just a moment longer, by fascinating them, by drowsing them into sleepiness, by nipping their probosces, or by puffing perfume into their nostrils while they caught their feet with the pressure of a hundred yellow rods….

Enormous periods passed away. A cloud that for a man’s “ten minutes” hid the sun, wearied them so that they simply closed their eyes and went to sleep. Showers of rain they loved, because it washed and cooled them, and they felt the huge satisfaction of the earth beneath them as it drank: the sweet sensation of wet soil that sponged their roots, the pleasant gush that sluiced their bodies and carried off the irritating dust. They also felt the heavier tumbling of the swollen streams in all directions. The drops from overhanging trees came down and played with them, bringing another set of perfumes altogether. A summer shower was, of course, “a month” to them, a day of rain like weeks of holiday by the sea…. But, most of all, they enjoyed the rough-and-tumble nonsense of the violent weather, when they were tied together by the ropes of running wind; for these were visiting days — all manner of strangers dropped in upon them from distant walks in life, and they never knew whether the next would be a fir-cone or one of those careless, irresponsible travellers, a bit of thistle-down….

Yet, for all their steadiness, they knew incessant change — the variety of a daisy’s existence was proverbial. Nor was the surprise of being walked upon too alarming — it did not come to all — for they knew a way of bending beneath enormous pressure so that nothing broke, while sometimes it brought a queer, delicious pleasure, as when the bare feet of some flying child passed lightly over them, leaving wild laughter upon a group of them. They knew, indeed, a thousand joys, proudest of all, however, that the big Earth loved them so that she carried millions of them everywhere she went.

And all, without exception, communicated their knowledge by the movements, attitudes, and gestures they assumed; and since each stood close to each, the enjoyment spread quickly till the entire lawn felt one undivided sensation by itself. Anything passing across it at such a moment, whether insect, bird, loose leaf or even human being, would be aware of this, and thus, for a fleeting second, share another world. Poets, it is said, have received their sweetest inspirations upon a daisied lawn in the flush of spring. Nor is it always a sight of prey that makes the swallows dart so suddenly sideways and away, but some chance message of joy or warning intercepted from the hosts of flowers in the soil.

And from this region of the flower-life comes, of course, the legend that fairies have emotions that last for ever, with eternal youth, and with loves that do not pass away to die. This, too, they understood. Because the measurement of existence is a mightier business than with over-developed humans-in-a-hurry. For knowledge comes chiefly through the eye, and the eye can perceive only six times in a second — things that happen more quickly or more slowly than six times a second are invisible. No man can see the movement of a growing daisy, just as no man can distinguish the separate beats of a sparrow’s wing: one is too slow, and the other is too quick. But the daisy is practically all eye. It is aware of most delightful things. In its short life of months it lives through an eternity of unhurrying perceptions and of big sensations. Its youth, its loves, its pleasures are — to it — quite endless….

“I can see the old sun moving,” she murmured, “but you will love me for ever, won’t you?”

“Even till it sinks behind the hills,” he answered, “I shall not change.”

“So long we have been friends already,” she went on. “Do you remember when we first met each other, and you looked into my opening eyes?”

He sighed with joy as he thought of the long, long stretch of time.

“That was in our first reckless youth,” he answered, catching the gold of passionate remembrance from an amber fly that hovered for an instant and was gone. “I remember well. You were half hidden by a drop of hanging dew, but I discovered you! That lilac bud across the world was just beginning to open.” And, helped by the wind, he bent his shining head, taller than hers by the sixtieth part of an inch, towards the lilac trees beside the gravel path.

“So long ago as that!” she murmured, happy with the exquisite belief in him. “But you will never change or leave me — promise, oh, promise that!”

His stalk grew nearer to her own. He leaned protectively towards her eager face.

“Until that bud shall open fully to the light and smell its sweetest,” he replied — the gesture of his petals told it plainly— “so long shall you and I enjoy our happy love.”

It was an eternity to them.

“And longer still,” she pleaded.

“And longer still,” he whispered in the wind. “Even until the blossom falls.”

Ah, it was good to be alive with such an age of happiness before them!

He felt the tears in her voice, however; he knew there was something that she longed to tell.

"What is your sadness?" he asked softly, "and why do you put such questions to me now? What is your little trouble?"

A moment's hesitation, a moment's hanging of the graceful head the width of a petal's top nearer to his shoulder — and then she told him.

"I was in darkness for a time," she faltered, "but it was a long, long time. It seemed that something came between us. I lost your face. I felt afraid."

And his laughter — for just then a puff of wind passed by and shook his sides for him — ran across many feet of lawn.

"It was a Bumble Bee," he comforted her. "It came between us for a bit, its shadow fell upon you, nothing more! Such things will happen; we must be prepared for them. It was nothing in myself that dimmed your world."

"Another time I will be braver, then," she told him, "and even in the darkness I shall know you close, ah, very close to me…."

For a long, long stretch of time, then, they stood joyfully together and watched the lilac growing. They also saw the movement of the sun across the sky. An eternity passed over them…. The vast disc of the sun went slowly gliding….

But all the enormous things that happened in their lives cannot be told. Lives crammed with a succession of such grand and palpitating adventures lie beyond the reach of clumsy words. The sweetness sometimes was intolerable, and then they shared it with the entire lawn and so obtained relief — yet merely in order to begin again. The humming of the rising Spring continued with the thunderous droning of the turning Earth. Never uncared for, part of everything, full of the big, rich life that brims the world in May — ah, almost fuller than they could hold sometimes — they passed with existence along to their appointed end.

"We began so long ago, I simply can't remember it," she sighed.

Yet the sun they watched had not left half a degree behind him since they met.

"There was no beginning," he reproved her, smiling, "and there will never be any end."

And the wind spread their happiness like perfume everywhere until the whole white lawn of daisies lay singing their rapture to the sunshine….

The minute underworld of grass and stalks seemed of a sudden to grow large; yet, till now, they had not realised it as "large" — but simply natural. A beetle, big and broad as a Newfoundland dog, went lumbering past them, brushing its polished back against their trembling necks; yet, till now, they had not thought of it as "big" — but simply normal. Its footsteps made a grating sound like the gardener's nailed boots upon the gravel paths. It was strange and startling. Something was different, something was changing. They realised dimly that there was another world somewhere, a world they had left behind long, long ago, forgotten. Something was slipping from them, as sleep slips from the skin and the eyes in the early morning when the bath comes "pinging" upon the floor. What did it mean?

Big and little, far and near, above, below, inside and outside — all were mixed together in a falling rush.

They themselves were changing.

They looked up. They saw an enormous thing rising behind them with vast caverns of square outline opening in its sides — a house. They saw huge, towering shapes whose tops were in the clouds — the familiar lime trees. Big and tiny were inextricably mixed together.

And that was wrong. For either the forest of grass was as big as themselves — in which case they still were daisies; or else it was tiny and far below them — in which case they were hurrying humans again. There was an odd confusion…while consciousness swung home to its appointed centre and Adventure brought them back towards the old, familiar starting-place again.

There came an ominous and portentous sound that rushed towards them through the air, and through the solid ground as well. They heard it, and grew pale with terror. Across the entire lawn it rumbled nearer, growing in volume awfully. The very earth seemed breaking into bits about them. And then they knew.

It was the End of the World that their prophets had long foretold.

It crashed upon them before they had time to think. The roar was appalling. The whole lawn trembled. The daisies bowed their little faces in a crowd. They had no time even to close their innocent eyes. Before a quarter of their sweet and happy life was known, the End swept them from the world, unsung and unlamented. Two of them who had planned Eternity together fell side by side before one terrible stroke….

“I do believe—” said Judy, brushing her tumbled hair out of her eyes.

“Not possible!” exclaimed Uncle Felix, sitting up and stretching himself like a dog. “It’s a thing I never do, *never*, *NEVER!* I think my stupid watch has stopped again….”

They stared at each other with suspiciously sleepy eyes.

“Promise,” she whispered presently, “promise never to tell the others!”

“I promise faithfully,” he answered. “But we’d better get up, or we shall have our heads cut off like — all the other daisies.”

He pulled her to her feet — out of the way of the heavy mowing machine which Weeden was pushing with a whirring, droning noise across the lawn.

CHAPTER XII. TIM'S PARTICULAR ADVENTURE

TIM'S "PARTICULAR ADVENTURE" was of another kind. It was a self-repeater — of some violence, moreover, when the smallness of the hero is considered. Whether in after-life he become an astronomer-poet or a "silver-and-mechanical engineer" — both dreams of his — he will ever be sharp upon rescuing something. A lost star or a burning mine will be his objective, but with the essential condition that it be — unattainable. Achievement would mean lost interest. For Tim's desire was, is, and ever will be insatiable. Profoundest mystery, insoluble difficulty, and endless searching were what his soul demanded of life. For him all ponds were bottomless, all gipsies older than the moon. He felt the universe within him, and was born to seek its inexplicable "explanation" — outside. The realisation of such passion, however, is not necessarily confined to writers of epics and lyrics. Tim was a man of action before he was a poet. "Forever questing" was his unacknowledged motto. Besides asking questions about stars and other inaccessible incidents of his Cosmos, he liked to "go busting about," as he called it — again with one essential condition that the thing should never come to an end by merely happening. Its mystery must remain its beauty.

"I want to save something from an awful, horrible death," he announced one evening, looking up from *Half-hours with English Battles* for a sign of beauty in distress.

"Not so easy," his uncle warned him, equally weary of another overrated book — his own.

"But I feel like it," he replied. "Come on."

Uncle Felix still held back. "That you feel like it doesn't prove that there's anything that *wants* rescuing," he objected.

The boy stared at him with patient tolerance and surprise.

"I promised," he said simply.

It was the other’s turn to stare. “And when, pray?” They had been alone for the last half hour. It seemed strange.

“Oh — just now,” replied the boy carelessly. “A few minutes ago — about.”

“Indeed!” It seemed stranger still. No one had come in. Yet Tim never prevaricated.

“Yes,” he said, “I gave my wordy honour.” It was so gravely spoken that, while pledges involving life and death were obviously not new to him, this one was of exceptional kind.

“Who, then, did you promise — whom, I mean?” the man demanded, fixing him with his stern blue eyes.

And the answer came out pat: “Myself!”

“Aha!” said the other, with a sigh and a raising of the eyebrows, by way of apology. “That settles it—”

“Of course.”

“Because what you think and say, you must also act,” the man continued. “If you promise yourself a thing, and then don’t do it, you’ve simply told a lie.” And he drew another sigh. He scented action coming.

“Let’s go at once and find it,” said Tim, putting a text-book into seven words. He hitched his belt up, and looked round to make sure his sisters were not within reach of interference. There was a moment’s pause, during which Uncle Felix hitched his will up. They rose, then, standing side by side. They left the room arm in arm on their way into the garden. The dusk was already laying its first net of shadows to catch the Night.

“Hadn’t you better change first?” asked Tim, thoughtfully, on his way down. He glanced at his companion’s white flannel suit. “You’re so awfully visible.”

“Visible!” It was not his bulk. Tim was never deliberately rude. Was it the risk of staining that he meant?

“Any one can see you miles away like that.”

The other understood instantly. In an adventure everything sees, everything has eyes, everything watches. The world is alive and full of eyes. He hesitated a moment.

“Oh, that’s all right,” he replied. “To be easily seen is the best way. It disarms curiosity at once. Tell all about yourself and nobody ever thinks anything. It’s trying to hide that makes the world suspect you. Keep nothing back and show yourself is the best way to go about unnoticed. I’ve tried it.”

“Ah,” exclaimed Tim, in an eager whisper, “same as walking into the strawberry-bed without asking—”

“So my white clothes are just the thing,” said the other, avoiding the pit laid for him.

“Of course, yes.” Tim still chased the big idea in his mind. “Besides,” he added, full of another splendid thought, “like that they won’t expect you to do very much. They’ll watch *you* instead of me.”

There was confusion in the utterance, but things were rather crowding in upon him, to tell the truth, and imagination leaped ahead upon two trails at once. He looked at his big companion with more approval. “You’ll do,” he signified, pulling his cap over his eyes, thrusting both hands in his pockets, and slithering rapidly down the bannisters in advance.

“Thanks,” said Uncle Felix, following him, three steps at a time, with effort.

In the hall they paused a moment — a question of doors.

“Back,” said Uncle Felix.

“Front’s better,” decided the boy. “Then nobody’ll think anything, you see.” He was quick to put the new principle into practice.

On the lawn there was another pause, this time a question of direction.

“The wood, of course!” And they set off together at a steady trot. Few words were wasted when Tim went “busting about” in this way. Uncle Felix resigned himself and looked to him for guidance; there was some one to be rescued; there was danger to be run; the risk was bigger than either of them realised; but more than that he knew not.

“Got a handkerchief with you?” the boy asked presently.

“Yes, thanks; got everything,” panted the other.

"For signalling," was offered three minutes later by way of explanation, "in case we get lost — or anything like that."

"Quite so."

"Is it a clean one?"

"Yes."

"Good!"

They climbed the swinging gate of iron, rushed the orchard, crossed the smaller hayfield in the open, heedless of the rabbits that rolled like fat balls into pockets made to fit them, slipped out of sight behind a stack of straw whose threatening lopsidedness seemed to support a ladder, and so eventually came to a breathless and perspiring halt upon the edges of a — wood.

It was a very ordinary wood, small, inconspicuous, and unimposing. No big trees towered; there was no fence of thick, black trunks. It was not mysterious, like the dense evergreens on the other side of the grounds where the west wind shook half a mile of dripping branches in stormy weather:

Where the yew trees are gigantic,
And the yellow coast of "Spain,"
Breasting on the dim "Atlantic,"
Stores the undesired rain.

It grew there in a kind of untidy muddle, on the very outskirts of the estate, meekly — rather disappointingly, Uncle Felix thought. There was no hint of anything haunted or terrible about it. Round rabbits fussed busily about its edges, darting as though pulled by wires, and the older wood-pigeons, no doubt, slept comfortably in its middle. But game despised it heartily, and traps were never laid. There was not even a trespassers' board, without which no wood is properly attractive. Indeed, for most people it was simply not worth the trouble of entering at all. Apparently no one ever bothered about it.

Yet, precisely for these very reasons, it was real. Tim described it afterwards as a "naked" wood. It had no fence to hold it together, it was not dressed up by human beings, it just grew naturally. To this very openness and want of concealment it owed its deep security, its safety was due entirely to the air of innocence it wore. But in reality it was disguised. It was a forest — without a middle, without a heart.

“This is our wood,” announced Tim in a low voice, as they stood and mopped their faces. His tone suggested that they would enter at their peril.

“And is it a big wood?” the other asked with caution, as though he had not noticed it before.

“Much bigger than it looks,” the boy replied. “You can easily get lost.” Then added, with the first touch of awe about him, “It has no centre.”

“That’s the worst kind,” said his companion shivering slightly. “Like a pond that has no bottom.”

Tim nodded. His face had grown a trifle paler. He showed no immediate anxiety to make the first advance, reserving that privilege for his comrade. A breath of wind stole out and set the dry leaves rustling.

“We must look out,” he said at length. “There’ll be a sign.”

Uncle Felix listened attentively to every word. The boy had moved up closer to him. “And if anything happens one of us must climb a tree and signal. *You’ve* got the clean handkerchief. You see, it’s at the centre that it gets rather nasty — because anybody who gets there simply disappears and is never heard of again. That’s why there’s no centre at all *really*. It’s a terrible rescue we’ve got to do.”

The adventure fulfilled the desire of his heart, for, since there was no centre, the search would last for ever.

“Keep a sharp look-out for the sign,” replied the man, feeling a small hand steal into his own. “We’d better go in before it gets any darker.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” was the whispered comment. “The great thing is not to lose our way. Just follow me!”

They then went into this wood without a centre, without a middle, without a heart. Into this heartless wood they moved stealthily, Uncle Felix singing under his breath to keep his courage up:

“A wood is a mysterious place,
 It never looks you in the face,

But stares *behind* you all the time.
Your safest plan is just to — climb!
For, otherwise you lose your way,
The week, the month, the time of day;
It turns you round, it makes you blind,
And in the end you lose your mind!
Avoid the centre,
If you enter!

"It grows upon you — grows immense,
Its peace is *not* indifference,
It sees you — and it takes offence,
It knows you're interfering.
Its sleepliness is all pretence,
With trunks and twigs and foliage dense
It's watching you, alert, intense,
It's furious; it's peering.

"Upon the darkening paths below,
Whichever way you try to go
You'll meet with strange resistance.
So climb a tree and wave your hand,
The birds will see and understand,
And *may* bring you assistance.
Avoid the centre,
If you enter,
For once you're there
You — disappear!
Smothered by depth and distance!"

Tim listened without a sign of interest. Every one has his peculiarity, he supposed, and, provided his companion did not dance as well as sing, it was all right. The noise was unnecessary, perhaps, still — the sound of a human voice was not without its charm. The house was a very long way off; the gardeners never came this way. A wood *was* a mysterious place! "Is that all?" he asked — but whether glad or sorry, no man could possibly have told.

“For the present,” came the reply, and the sound of both their voices fell a little dead, muffled by the density of the undergrowth. “Are we going right?”

“There’ll be a sign,” Tim explained again. And the way he said it, the air of positive belief in tone and manner, stung the man’s consciousness with a thrill of genuine adventure. It began to creep over him. He kept near to the comforting presence of the boy, aware in quite a novel way of the Presence of the Wood. This very ordinary wood, without claim to particular notice, much less to a notice-board, changed his normal feelings by arresting their customary flow. An unusual sensation replaced what he meant to feel, expected to feel. He was aware of strangeness. He felt included in the purpose of a crowd of growing trees. “But it’s just a common little wood,” he assured himself, realising as he said it that both adjectives were wrong. For nothing left to itself is ever common, and as for “little” — well, it had suddenly become enormous.

Outside, in what was called the big world, things were going on with frantic hurry and change, but in here the leisured calm was huge, gigantic, so much so that the other dwindled into a kind of lost remoteness. “Smothered by depth and distance,” he could almost forget it altogether. Out there nations were at war, republics fighting, empires tottering to ruin; great-hearted ladies were burning furniture and stabbing lovely pictures (not their own) to prove themselves intelligent enough to vote; and gallant gentlemen were flying across the Alps and hunting for the top and bottom of the earth instead of hurrying to help them. All manner of tremendous things were happening at a frightful pace — while this unnoticed wood just stood and grew, watching the sun and stars and listening to the brushing winds. Its unadvertised foliage concealed a busy universe of multitudinous, secret life.

How still the trees were — far more imposing than in a storm! Still, quiet things are much more impressive than things that draw attention to themselves by making a noise. They are more articulate. The strength of all these trees emerged in their silence. Their steadiness might easily wear one down.

And now, into its quiet presence, a man and a boy from that distressful outer world had entered. They moved with effort and difficulty into its untrodden depths. Uninvited and unasked, they sought its hidden and invisible centre, the mysterious heart of it which the younger of the adventurers could only describe by saying that “It isn’t there, because when you get there, you disappear!” Two ways of expressing the same thing, of course! Moreover, entering involved getting out again. Escape and Rescue — the Wood always in opposition — took possession of the man’s slow mind….

It was already thick about them, and the trees stood very still. The branches drooped, motionless in the warm evening air. The twigs pointed. Each leaf had an eye, but a hidden, lidless eye. The saplings saw them, but the heavier trunks *observed* them. It was known in what direction they were going, the direction, however, being chosen and insisted on by the Wood. Their very steps were counted. The whole business of the trees was suspended while they passed. They were being watched. And the stillness was so deep that it forced them, too, to make as little noise as possible. They moved with the utmost caution, pretending that a snapping twig might betray their presence, yet knowing quite well that each detail of their blundering advance was marked down with the accuracy of an instantaneous photograph. Tim, usually in advance, looked round from time to time, with a finger on his lips; and though he himself made far more noise than his companion, he stared with reproach when the latter snapped a stick or let a leafy branch swish through the air too loudly.

“Oh, hush!” he whispered. “Please do hush!” and the same moment caught his own foot in a root, placed cunningly across the path, and sprawled forward with the noise of an explosion. But he made no reference to the matter. His own noises did no harm apparently. He was perfectly honest about it, not merely putting the blame elsewhere to draw attention from himself. His uncle’s size and visibility were co-related in his mind. Being convinced that he moved as stealthily and soundlessly as a Redskin, it followed obviously that his companion *didn’t*.

The dusk had noticeably deepened when at length they reached a little clearing and stood upright, perspiring freely, and both a little flustered. The silence was really extraordinary. It seemed they had entered a private place, a secret chamber where they had no right, and were intruders. The clearing formed a circle, and from the open sky overhead a grey, mysterious light fell softly on the leafy walls. They paused and peered about them.

“Hark! What’s that?” asked Tim in a whisper.

“Nothing,” replied the other.

“But I heard it,” the boy insisted; “something rushing.”

“I’m rather out of breath, perhaps.”

The boy looked at him reproachfully. His expression suggested “Why *are* you so noisy and enormous? It’s hopeless, really!” But aloud he merely said, “It’s got awfully dark all of a sudden.”

“It’s the wood does that,” replied Uncle Felix. “Outside it’s only twilight. I think we’d better be getting on.”

“We’re getting there,” observed the boy.

“But we shan’t be able to see the sign if this darkness gets worse,” said the other apprehensively.

The answer gave him quite a turn. “It’s been — ages and ages ago!”

The idea of rescue meanwhile had merged insensibly into escape, but neither remarked upon the change. It was only that the original emotion had spread a bit. Tim and Uncle Felix stood close together in this solemn clearing, waiting, peering about them, listening intently. But Tim had seen the sign; he knew what he was doing all the time; he was in more intimate relations with the Being of the Wood than his great floundering Uncle possibly could be.

“Which way, do *you* think?” asked the latter anxiously.

There seemed no possible exit from the clearing, no break anywhere in the leafy walls; even the entrance was covered up and hidden. The Wood blocked further advance deliberately.

“We’re lost,” said Tim bluntly, turning round and round. His eyes opened to their widest. “You’ve simply taken a wrong turning somewhere.”

And before Uncle Felix could expostulate or say a word in self-defence, the inevitable reward of his mistake was upon him.

“*You’ve* got the handkerchief!”

Already the boy was looking about him for a suitable tree.

"But *you* saw the sign, Tim," he began excuses; "and it's *your* wood; I've never been here before—"

"That one looks the easiest," suggested Tim, pointing to a beech. It had one low branch, but the trunk was smooth and slippery as ice. He pushed aside the foliage with his hands to make an opening towards it. "I'll help you up." Tim spoke as though there was no time to lose.

But help came just then unexpectedly from another quarter — there was a sudden battering sound. Something went past them through the branches with a crashing noise. It was terrific, the way it smashed and clattered overhead, making a clapping rattle that died away into the distance with strange swiftness. They jumped; their hearts stood still a moment. It was so horribly close. But the stillness that followed the uproar was far worse than the noise. It felt as though the Wood had stretched a hand and aimed a crafty blow at them from behind the shield of foliage. A quiver of visible silence ran across the leafy walls. They stood stock still, staring blankly into each other's eyes.

"A wood-pigeon!" whispered Uncle Felix, recovering himself first. "We've been *seen*!"

A faint smile passed over Tim's startled face. There was no other expression in it. The tension was distressingly acute. One sentence, however, came to the lips of both adventurers. They uttered it under their breath together:

"It's — disappeared!"

Instinctively they held hands then. Tim stood, rooted to the ground.

"The *centre!*" They whispered it almost inaudibly. The horror of the spot where people vanished was upon them both. The power of the Wood had worn them down.

"Yes, but don't *say* it," cried Uncle Felix; "above all, don't say it aloud." And he clapped one hand upon his own mouth, and the other upon the boy's, as Tim came cuddling closer to his comforting expanse of side. "That only wakes it up, and—"

He did not finish the sentence. Instead, his mind began to think tremendously. They were both badly frightened. What was the best thing to be done? At first he thought: "Keep perfectly still, and make no slightest movement; a quiet person is not noticed.” But, the next instant, came the truer wisdom: “If anything unusual occurs, go on doing exactly what you were doing before. Hold the atmosphere, as it were.” And on this latter inspiration he decided to act at once —

Only to discover that Tim had realised it before him. The boy was pulling at him. “*Do* come on, Uncle!” he was saying. “We shall go mad with fright if we keep on standing here — we shall be raving lunatics!”

They set off wildly then, plunging helter-skelter into the silent, heartless wood. The trees miraculously opened up a way for them as they dived and stooped and wriggled forward. In which direction they were going neither of them had the least idea, but as neither one nor the other disappeared, it was clear they had not reached the actual centre. They gasped and spluttered, their breath grew shorter, the darkness increased. They came to all sorts of curious places that deceived them; ways opened invitingly, then closed down again and blocked advance; there were clearings that were obviously false, open places that were plainly sham; and a dozen times they came to spots that seemed familiar, but which really they had never seen before. Sense of direction left them, for they continually changed the angle, compelled by the undergrowth to do so. Twigs leaped at them and stung their faces, Tim’s cheeks were splashed with mud, Uncle Felix’s clean white flannels showed irregular lines of dirty water to his knees. It was altogether a tremendous affair in which rescue and escape were madly mingled with furious attack and terrified retreat. Everything was moving, and in all directions at once. They rushed headlong through the angry Wood. But the Wood itself rushed ever past them. It was roused.

The confusion and bewilderment had got a little more than they could manage, indeed, when — quite marvellously and unexpectedly — the darkness lifted. They saw trees separately instead of in a whirling mass. The trunks stood more apart from one another. There were patches of faint light. More — there was a line of light. It shone, grey and welcome, some dozen yards in front of them.

“Come on!” cried Tim. “Follow me!”

And two minutes later they found themselves outside, torn, worn, and breathless, upon the edge — standing exactly at the place where they had entered three-quarters of an hour before. They had made an enormous circle. Panting and half collapsed, they stood side by side in an exhausted heap.

“We’re out,” said Tim, with immense relief. Profoundly satisfied with himself, he looked round at his bedraggled Uncle. It was plain that he had rescued some one from “an awful-anorrible death.”

“At last!” replied the other gratefully, aware that he was the rescued one. “But only just in time!”

And they moved away in the deepening dusk towards the house, whose welcome lights shone across the intervening hayfield.

CHAPTER XIII. TIME HESITATES

MEANWHILE THE COVETED fortnight drew towards a close. It had begun on a Friday, and that left two full, clear weeks ahead. It had seemed an inexhaustible period — when it started. There was the feeling that it would draw out slowly, like an ordinary lesson-week; instead of which it shot downhill to Saturday with hardly a single stop. On looking back, the children almost felt unfairness; somebody had pushed it; they had been cheated.

And, of course, they *had* been cheated. Time had played his usual trick upon them. The beginning was so prodigal of reckless promises that they had really believed a week would last for ever. Childhood expects, quite rightly, to have its cake and eat it, for there is no true reason why anything should ever end at all. The devices are various: a titbit is set aside to enjoy later, thus deceiving Time and checking its ridiculous hurry. But in the long run Time invariably wins. After Thursday the week had shot into Saturday without a single pause. It whistled past. And the titbit, Saturday, had come.

Yet without the usual titbit flavour; for Saturday, as a rule, wore splashes of gold and yellow upon its latter end, being a half-holiday associated with open air and sunshine, but now, Monday already in sight, with lessons and early bed and other prohibitions by the dozen, hearts sank a little, a shadow crept upon the sun. They had a grievance; some one had cheated them of a final joy. The collapse was unexpected, therefore wrong. And the arch-deceiver who had humbugged them, they knew quite well, was Time. He was in their thoughts. He mocked them all day long. Clocks grinned; *Saturday, June* 3, flaunted itself insolently in their faces.

“The day after to-morrow,” remarked some one, noticing a calendar staring on the wall; and from the moment that phrase could be used it meant the day was within measurable distance.

“Aunt Emily leaves Tunbridge Wells” was mentioned too, sounding less unpleasant than “Aunt Emily comes back.” But the climax was reached when somebody stated bluntly without fear of contradiction:

"To-morrow's Sunday."

For Sunday had no particular colour. Monday was black, and Saturday was gold, but Sunday never had been painted anything. Though a buffer-day between a vanished week and a week of labour coming, it was of uncertain character. Queer, grave people came back to lunch. There were collects and a vague uneasiness about the heathen being unfed and naked. There was a collection, too — pennies emerged from stained leather purses and dropped clicking into a polished box with a slit in the top. Greenland's icy mountains also helped to put a chill into the sunshine. A pause came. Time went slower than usual — God rested, they remembered, on the seventh day — yet nothing happened much, and with their Sunday clothes they put on a sort of dreadful carefulness that made play seem stiff, unnatural, and out of place.

Daddy, too, before the day was over, invariably looked worried, the servants bored, Mother drowsy, and Aunt Emily "like a clergyman's wife." Time sighed audibly on Sunday.

"It's our last day, anyhow," they agreed, determined to live in the present and enjoy Saturday to the full.

It was then Uncle Felix, having overheard their comments upon Time, looked round abruptly and made one of his startling remarks. "To-morrow," he said, "is one of the most wonderful days that was ever invented. You'll see."

And the way he said it provided the very thrill that was needed to chase the shadow from the sun. For there was a hint of promise in his voice that almost meant he had some way of delaying the arrival of Black Monday.

"You'll see," he repeated significantly, shading his eyes with both hands and peering up at the sun.

Tim and Judy watched him with keen faces. They noticed that he said "to-morrow" instead of "Sunday." But before they could squeeze out a single question, there came a remarkable interruption from below. From somewhere near the ground it came. Maria, seated on a flower-pot whose flower didn't want to grow, opened her mouth and spoke. As is already known, this did not often happen. It was her characteristic to keep it closed. Even at the dentist's she never could be got to open her mouth, because he had once hurt her; she flatly refused to do so, and no amount of "Now open, please," ever had the least effect on her firm decision. She was taken in vain to see the dentist.

This last Saturday of the week, however, she opened.

"I've not had *my* partickler adventure," was what she said.

At the centre of that circle where she lived in a state of unalterable bliss, the fact had struck her, and she mentioned it accordingly.

Tim and Judy turned upon her hungrily, but before they could relieve their feelings by a single word their Uncle had turned upon her too. Lowering his eyes from the great circular sun that moved in a circle through the sky, he let them fall upon the circular Maria who reposed calmly upon the circle of the earth, which itself swung in another circle round the sun.

"Exactly," he said, "but it's coming. Your father told you a day would come. It is!"

He said no more than that, but it was enough to fill the remainder of the day with the recurrent thrill of a tremendous promise. Each hour seemed pregnant with a hint of exceptional delivery. There were signs and whispers everywhere, and everybody was aware of it. Uncle Felix looked "bursting with it," as though he could hardly keep it in, and even the Lesser Authorities had as much as they could do to prevent it flying out of them in sudden sentences. Jackman wore a curious smile, which Judy declared was "just the face she made the day Maria was born"; Mrs. Horton left her kitchen and was seen upon the lawn actually picking daisies; and even Thompson — well, when Tim and his sister came upon him basking with a pipe against the laundry window, wearing a discarded tweed coat of their father's, and looking "exactly like the Pope asleep," he explained his position to Tim with the extraordinary remark that "even the Servants' Hall 'as dreams," and went on puffing his pipe precisely as before. But Weeden betrayed it most. They knew by the smell— "per fumigated," as they called it — that he was in the passages, watering the flowers or arranging new ones on the window-sills, and when Tim said, "Seen any more water-rats to pot at, Weeden?" the man just smiled and replied, "Good mornin', Master Tim; it's Saturday."

The inflection of his tone was instantly noticed. “Oh, I say, Weeden, how do you know? *Do* tell me. I won’t say a word, I promise.” But the Head Gardener kept his one eye — the other was of glass — upon the spout of his watering-can, and answered in a voice that issued from his boots—
“Because to-morrow’s Sunday, Master Tim, unless something ‘appens to prevent it.” He then went quickly from the room, as though he feared more questions; he took the secret with him; he was nervous about betraying what he knew. But Judy agreed with Tim that “his answer proved it, because why should he have said it unless he knew!”

Meanwhile, that fine morning in early June slipped along its sunny way; a heavy treacle-pudding luncheon was treated properly; Uncle Felix lit his great meerschaum pipe, and they all went out on the lawn beneath the lime trees. The undercurrent of excitement filled the air. Something was going to happen, something so wonderful that they could not speak about it. They did not dare to ask questions lest they should somehow stop it. It was a most delicately poised affair. The least mistake might send it racing in the opposite direction. But their imaginations were so actively at work inside that they could not help whispering among themselves about it. The silence of their Uncle piled up the coming wonder in an enormous heap.

“Something *is* coming,” affirmed Judy in an undertone for the twentieth time, “but *I* think it will be after tea, don’t you?”

“Prob’ly,” assented her brother, very full of treacle pudding. He sighed.

“Or p’r’aps it’s *somebody*, d’you think?”

Tim shrugged his shoulders carefully, conscious of insecurity within.

“I shouldn’t be surprised, would you?” Judy insisted. Of course she knew as much as he did, but she wanted to make him say something definite.

“It’s both,” he said grandly. “Things like this always come together.”

“Yes, but it’s *quite* new. It’s never happened before.”

He looked sideways at her with the pity of superior knowledge.

“How could it?” So great was his private information that he almost added “stupid.” But he kept back the word for later. He repeated instead:
“However could it?”

"Well, but—" she began.

"Don't you see, it's what Daddy always told us," he reminded her with an air. And instantly, with overwhelming certainty, those Wonder Sentences of their father's, first spoken years ago, crashed in upon their minds: Some day; a day is coming; a day will come.

Tim's assurance hurt her vanity a little, for it was only fair that she should know something too, however little. But the force of the discovery at once obliterated all lesser personal emotions.

"Tim!" she gasped, overcome with admiration. "Is it really *that*?"

Tim never forgot that moment of proud ascendancy. He felt like a king or something.

"Look out," he whispered quickly. "You'll spoil it all if *he* knows we've guessed." And he nodded his head towards Uncle Felix in his wicker-chair. "It's Maria's adventure, too, remember."

Judy smiled and flushed a little.

"He's not listening," she whispered back, ignoring Maria's claim. She was not quite so stupid as her brother thought her. "But how on earth did you know? It's too wonderful!" She flung the hair out of her eyes and wriggled away some of her suppressed excitement on the grass. Tim held his breath in agony while he watched her. But the smoke from his Uncle's pipe rose steadily into the sunny air, and his face was hidden by a paper that he held. The moment of danger passed. The boy leaned over towards his sister's ear.

"Where it comes *from*," he whispered, "is what I want to know," and straightened up again with the air of having delivered an ultimatum that no girl could ever possibly reply to.

"*From?*" she repeated. She seemed a little disappointed. "D'you mean that may stop it coming?"

"Of course not," he said contemptuously. "But everything must come from somewhere, mustn't it?"

Judy stared at him speechless, while he surveyed her with an air of calm omnipotence. To ask a thing no one could answer was the same as knowing the answer oneself.

“Mustn’t it?” he repeated with triumph.

And, in the inevitable pause that followed, they both instinctively glanced up at Uncle Felix. The same idea had occurred to both of them. Although direct questions about what was coming were obviously impermissible, an indirect question seemed fairly within the rules. The fact was, neither of them could keep quiet about it any longer. The strain was more than human nature could stand. They simply *must* find out. They would get at it that way.

“Try him,” whispered Judy. And Tim turned recklessly towards his Uncle and drew a long, deep breath.

CHAPTER XIV. MARIA STIRS

"UNCLE," HE BEGAN with a rush lest his courage should forsake him, "where does everything come from? Everything in the world, I mean?" — then waited for an answer that did not come.

Uncle Felix neither moved nor spoke, and the question, like a bomb that fails to explode, produced no result after considerable effort and expense. The boy looked down again at the alarum clock he had been trying to mend, and turned the handle. It was too tightly wound to go. A stopped clock has the sulkiest face in the world. He stared at it; the handle clicked beneath the pressure of his hand. "It must come from somewhere," he added with decision, half to himself.

"From the East, of course," advanced Judy, and tried to draw her Uncle by putting some buttercups against his cheek and mentioning loudly that he liked butter.

Then, since neither sound nor movement issued from the man in the wicker-chair, the children continued the discussion among themselves, but *at* the man, knowing that sooner or later he must become involved in it. Judy's answer, moreover, so far as it went, was excellent. The sun rose in the East, and the wind most frequently mentioned came also from that quarter. Easter, when everything rose again, was connected with the same point of the compass. The East was enormously far away with a kind of fairyland remoteness. The dragon-rugs in Daddy's study and the twisted weapons in the hall were "Easty" too. According to Tim, it was a "golden, yellow, crimson-sort-of, mysterious, blazing hole of a place" of which no adequate picture had ever been shown to them. China and Japan were too much photographed, but the East was vague and marvellous, the beginning of all things, "Camel-distant," as they phrased it, with Great Asia upon its magical frontiers. For Asia, being equally unphotographed, still shimmered with uncommon qualities.

But, chiefly, it was a vast hole where travellers disappeared and left no trace; and to leave no trace was simply horrible.

"The easier you go the less chance there is," maintained Judy. She said this straight into the paper that screened her uncle's face — without the smallest result of any kind whatsoever. Then Tim recalled something that Colonel Stumper had said once, and let fly with it, aiming his voice beneath the paper's edge.

"East is east," he announced with considerable violence, but might as well have declared that it was south for all the response obtained. It was very odd, he thought; his Uncle's mind must be awfully full of something. For he remembered Come-Back Stumper saying the same thing once to Daddy at the end of a frightful argument about missionaries and idols, and Daddy had been unable to find any reply at all. Yet Uncle Felix did not stir a finger even. Accordingly, he made one more effort. He recited in a loud voice the song that Stumper had made up about it. If that had no effect, they must try other means altogether:

The East is just an endless place
  That lies beyond discovery,
Where travellers who leave no trace
  Are lost without recovery.
Both North and South have got a pole —
  Men stand on the equator;
But the East is just an awful hole —
  You're never heard of later!

It had no effect. Goodness! he thought, the man must be ill. Or, perhaps, like the alarum clock, he was too tightly wound to go, and the burden of the secret he contained so wonderfully up his sleeve half choked him. The boy grew impatient; he nudged Judy and made an odd grimace, and Judy, belonging to the sex that took risks and thought little of personal safety when a big end was to be obtained, stood up and put the buttercups against her own cheek.

"But I like it ever so much more than *you* do," she said in a loud voice.

The move was not a bad one; the paper wobbled, sank a quarter of an inch, revealed the bridge of the reader's nose, then held severely steady again. Whereupon Tim, noticing this sign of weakening, followed his sister's lead, rose, kicked the tired clock like a ball across the lawn, and exclaimed in a tone of challenge to the universe: "But where did everything come from before that — before the East, I mean?" And he glared at his immobile Uncle through the paper with an air of fearful accusation, as though he distinctly held he was to blame. If that didn't let the cat out of the bag, nothing would!

The big man, however, rested heavily with his legs crossed, as though still he had not heard. Doubtless he felt as heavy as he looked, for the afternoon was warm, and luncheon — well, at any rate, he remained neutral and inactive. Something might happen to divert philosophical inquiry into other channels; a rat might poke its nose above the pond; a big fish might jump; an awfully rare butterfly come dancing; or Maria, as on rare occasions she had been known to do, might stop discussion with a word of power. The chances were in his favour on the whole. He waited.

But nothing happened. No rat, nor fish, nor butterfly did the things expected of them; they were on the children's side. Maria sat blocked and motionless against the landscape; and the round world dozed. Yes — but the music of the world was humming. The bees droned by, there was a whisper among the unruffled leaves.

Tim tapped him sharply on the knee. The man shuffled, then looked over the top of his illustrated paper with an air of shocked surprise.

"Eh, Tim," he asked. "Where we all come from, did you say?"

"Everything, not only us," was the clean reply.

"That's it," Judy supported him.

"Now, then," Maria added quietly, as if she had done all the work.

Uncle Felix laid down his entertaining pictures of public men in misfit-clothing furiously hitting tiny balls over as much uncultivated land as possible — and sighed. Their violent attitudes had given him a delightful sensation of repose. They were the men who governed England, and this savage hitting was proof of their surplus energy. He resigned himself, but with an air.

"Well," he said vaguely, "I suppose — it all just — began somehow — of itself." And he stole a sideways glance at a picture of a stage Beauty attired like a female Guy Fawkes.

“It was created in six days, of course, us last,” said Tim, regarding him with patient dignity. “We remember all that. But where it came *from* is what we thought *you’d* know.” He closed the illustrated paper and moved it out of reach, while the man brushed from his beard the grass and stuff that Judy had arranged there cleverly in a decorative pattern.

“From?” repeated Uncle Felix, as though the word were unfamiliar.

“Your body and mind,” the boy resumed, ignoring the pretence that laziness offered in place of information, “and all that kind of thing; trees and mountains, and birds and caterpillars and people like Aunt Emily, and clergymen and volcanoes and elephants — oh, everything in the world everywhere?”

There was another sigh. And another pause dropped down upon creation, while they watched a looper caterpillar that clung to the edge of the illustrated paper and made futile circles in the air with the knob it called its head. Some one had forgotten to let down the ladder it expected, or perhaps it, too, was asking unanswerable questions of the sun.

“I believe,” announced Judy, still smarting under a sense of recent neglect, “it just came from nowhere. It’s all in a great huge circle. And we go round and round and rounder,” she went on, as no one met her challenge, “till we’re finished!”

She avoided her brother’s eye, but glanced winningly at Uncle Felix, remembering that she had gained support from him before by a similar device. At Maria she looked down. “You know nothing anyhow,” her expression said, “so you *must* agree.”

“I don’t finish,” said Maria quietly, whereupon Tim, feeling that the original question was being shelved, made preparation to obliterate her — when Uncle Felix intervened with a longer observation of his own.

“It’s not such a bad idea,” he said, glancing sideways at Maria with approval, “that circle business. Everything certainly goes *round*. The earth is round, and the sun is round, and, as Maria says, a circle never finishes.” He paused, reflecting deeply.

“But who made the circle,” demanded Tim.

“That *is* the point,” agreed Uncle Felix, nodding his head. “Some one must have made it — some day — mustn’t they?”

They stared at him, as probably the animals stared at Adam, wondering what their splendid names were going to be. The yearning in their eyes was enough to make a rock produce sweet-scented thyme. Even the looper steadied its pin-point head to listen. But nothing happened. Uncle Felix looked dumber than the clock. He looked hot, confused, and muddled too. He kept his eyes upon the grass. He fumbled in his pockets for a match. He spoke no word.

“What?” asked Tim abruptly, by way of a hint that something further was expected of him.

Uncle Felix looked up with a start. Like Proteus who changed his shape to save himself the trouble of prophesying, he swiftly changed the key to save himself providing accurate information that he didn’t possess.

“It wasn’t a circle, exactly,” he said slowly; “it was a thought, a great, white, wonderful, shining thought. That’s what started the whole business first,” and he looked round hopefully at the eager faces. “Somebody thought it all,” he went on, recklessly, “and it all came true that way. See?”

They waited in silence for particulars.

“Somebody thought it all out first,” he elaborated, “and so it simply *had* to happen.”

There was an interval of some thirty seconds, and then Tim asked:

“But who thought *him*?” He said it with much emphasis.

Uncle Felix sat up with energy and lit his pipe. His listeners drew closer, with the exception of Maria, whose life seemed concentrated in her fixed and steady eyes.

“It’s like this, you see,” the man explained between the puffs; “if you go into the schoolroom, you find a lot of things lying about everywhere — blocks, toys, engines, and all sorts of things — don’t you?”

“Yes,” they agreed, without enthusiasm.

“Well,” he continued, “what’s the good of them until you *think* something about them — think them into something — some game or meaning or other? They’re nothing but a lot of useless stuff just lying untidily upon the floor. See what I mean?”

They nodded, but again without enthusiasm.

“With our End of the World place,” he went on, seeing that they listened attentively, “it’s the same again. It was nothing but a rubbish-heap until we thought it into something wonderful — which, of course, it is,” he hastened to add. “But by thinking about it, we discovered — we *created* it!”

They nodded again. Somebody grunted. Maria watched the caterpillar crawling up his sleeve.

“The things — the place and the toys,” he resumed hopefully, “were there all the time, but they meant nothing — they weren’t alive — until we thought about them.” He blew a cloud of smoke. “So, you see,” he continued with an effort, “if we could only *think out* what everything meant, we could — er — find out what — what everything meant — and where it came from. Everything would be all right, don’t you see?”

Judy’s expression was distraught and puzzled. Maria’s eyes were closed so tightly that her entire face seemed closed. The pause drew out.

“Yes, but where does everything come from?” inquired Tim calmly.

He valued the lengthy explanation at just exactly — nothing!

“Because there simply must be a beginning somewhere,” added Judy.

They were at the starting-point again. They had merely made a circle.

And Uncle Felix found himself in difficulties of his own creating. Where everything came from puzzled him as much as it puzzled the children, or the looper caterpillar that was now crawling from his flannel collar to his neck and contemplating the thicket of his dense back hair. Why ask these terrible questions? he thought, as he looked around at the sunshine and the trees. Life would be no happier if he knew. Since everything was already here, going along quite pleasantly and usefully, it really couldn’t help matters much to know precisely where it all came from. Possibly not. But it would have helped him enormously in his relations with the children — his particular world at the moment — if he could have provided them with a satisfactory explanation. And he knew quite well what they expected from him. That dreadful “Some Day” hung in the balance between success and failure.

And it was then that assistance came from a most unlikely quarter — from Maria. There was no movement in the stolid head. The eyes merely rolled round like small blue moons upon the expanse of the expressionless face. But the lips parted and she spoke. She asked a question. And her question shifted the universe back upon its ultimate foundations. It set a problem deeper far than the mere origin of everything. It touched the *cause*.

“Why?” she inquired blandly.

It seemed a bomb-shell had fallen among them. Maria had closed her eyes again. Her face was calm as a cabbage, still as a mushroom in a storm. She claimed the entire discussion somehow as her own. Yet she had merely exercised her prerogative of being herself. Having gone into the root of the matter with a monosyllable, she retired again into her eternal centre. She had nothing more to offer — at the moment.

Why?

They had never thought of Why there should be anything. It was far more interesting than Where. Why was a deeper question than whence. It made them feel more important, for one thing. Somebody — but Somebody who was not there — owed them a proper explanation about it. The burden of apology or excuse was lifted instantly from Uncle Felix’s shoulders, for, obviously, he had nothing to do with the reason for their being in the world.

Without a moment’s hesitation he flung his arms out, let the pipe fall from his lips, and — burst into song:

Why should there be anything?
Why should we be here?
It isn’t where we come from,
But why should we appear?
It’s really inexplicable,
Extr’ordinary, queer:
Why *should* we come and talk a bit,
And then — just disappear?

“Why, why, why?” shouted the two elder children. The air was filled with flying “whys.” They tried to sing the verse.

“Let’s dance it,” cried Judy, leaping to her feet. “Give us the words again, please.” She picked up the clock and plumped it down into Maria’s uncertain lap. “You beat time,” she ordered. “It’s the tune of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’”

Maria, disinclined to budge unless obliged to, did nothing.

“It’s a beastly tune,” Tim supported her. “I hate those Sunday hymn tunes. They’re not real a bit.”

He watched Judy and his Uncle capering hand in hand among the flower-beds. He didn’t feel like dancing himself. He looked at the clock that, like Maria and himself, refused to go. He looked at Maria, fastened immovably upon the lawn. The clock lay glittering in the sunshine. Maria sat like a shining ball beside it. He felt the afternoon was a failure somewhere. Things weren’t going quite as he wanted, the clock wasn’t going either. And when they did go they went of their own accord, independent of himself, of his direction, guidance, wishes. He was out of it. This was *not* the time to dance. What was the meaning of it all? It had to do somehow with the clock that wouldn’t go. It had to do with Maria, who wouldn’t budge. The clock had stopped of its own accord. That lay at the bottom of it all, he felt. Some day things would be different, more satisfactory — more real…. Some day!

And strange, new ideas, very vague and dim, very far away, very queer, and very wonderful, poured through his searching, questioning little mind.

“Beat time!” shouted Judy to her motionless sister. “I told you to beat time. You’re doing nothing. You never do!”

Tim stood watching them, while the words rang on in his head: “You are doing nothing! You never do!” How wonderful it was! Maria never did anything, yet was always there *in* everything. And the others — how funny they were, too! They looked like an elephant and a bird, he thought, for Judy hopped and fluttered, while his Uncle moved heavily, making holes in the soft lawn with his great feet. “Beat time, beat time!” cried Judy at intervals.

What a queer phrase it was — to *beat* time. Why beat it? It wasn’t there unless it was beaten. Poor Time; and Maria refused to beat it. His eye wandered from Maria to the dancers, and a kind of reverie stole over him. What was the use of dancing unless there was something to dance round?

Maria was round; why didn't they dance round her? His thoughts returned to Maria. How funny Maria was! She just sat there doing nothing at all. Maria was dull and unenterprising, yet somehow everything came round to her in the end. It was just because she waited, she never hurried. She was a sort of centre. Only it must be rather stupid just to be a centre. Then, suddenly, two ideas struck him at the same instant, scattering his dreamy state of reverie. The first was — Everything comes from a centre like Maria; *that's* where everything comes from! The second, bearing no apparent relation to it, found expression in words:

He cried out: "I know what! Let's go to the End of the World and make a fire and burn things!"

And he looked at Maria as though he had discovered America.

"Beat time, oh, *do* beat time," cried Judy breathlessly.

"We're going to make a fire," he shouted; "there's lots of things to burn." He looked about him as though to choose a place. But he couldn't find one. He pointed vaguely, first at Maria, as though she was the thing to burn, and then at the landscape generally. "Then you can dance *round* it," he added convincingly to clinch the matter.

But the bird and the elephant continued their gymnastic exercises on the lawn, while Maria turned her eyes without moving her head and watched them too.

Then, while the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers" filled the air, Tim and Maria began an irrelevant argument about things in general. Tim, at least, told her things, while she laid the clock down upon the grass and listened. But the flood of language rolled off her as minutes roll from the face of the sun, producing no effect. There was wonder in her big blue eyes, wonder that never seemed to end. But minutes don't decrease merely because the rising and setting of the sun sends them flying, and there are not fewer words in a boy's vocabulary merely because he uses up a lot in saying things. Both words and minutes seemed a circle without beginning or end. It was most odd and strange — this feeling of endlessness that was everywhere in the air. And, long before Tim had got even to the middle of his enormous speech, he had forgotten all about the fire, forgotten about dancing, about burning things, forgotten about everything everywhere, because his roving eye had fallen again upon the — clock. The clock absorbed his interest. It lay there glittering in the sunshine beside Maria. It wasn't going; Maria wasn't going either. It had stopped. He realised abruptly, realised it without rhyme or reason, that a stopped clock, a clock that isn't going, was a — mystery.

And the tide of words dried up in him; he choked; something was wrong with the universe; for if the clock stopped — *his* clock — time — time must — he was unable to think it out — but time must surely get muddled and go wrong too.

And he moved over to Maria just as she was about to burst into tears. He sat down beside her. At the same moment Judy and Uncle Felix, thinking a quarrel was threatening, stopped their dancing, and joined the circle too. They stood with arms akimbo, panting, silent, waiting for something to happen so that they could interfere and set it right again.

But nothing did happen. There was deep silence only. The slanting sunshine lay across the lawn, the wind passed sighing through the lime trees, and the clock stared up into their faces, motionless, a blank expression on it — stopped. They formed a circle round it. No one moved or spoke. There was a queer, deep pause. The sun watched them; the sky was listening; the entire afternoon stood still. Something else beside the clock, it seemed, was slowing up.

"To-morrow's Sunday. Time's getting awfully short," was in the air inaudibly.

"Let's sit down," whispered Tim, already seated himself, but anxious to feel the others close. Judy and Uncle Felix obeyed. They all sat round in a circle, staring at the shining disc of the motionless, stopped clock. It might have been a Lucky Bag by the way they watched it with expectant faces.

But Maria also was in that circle, sitting calmly in its centre.

Then Uncle Felix cautiously lifted the glittering round thing and held it in his hand. He put his ear down to listen. He shook his head.

"It hasn't gone since this time yesterday," said Tim in a low tone. "That's twenty-four hours," he added, calculating it on the fingers of both hands.

“A whole day,” murmured Judy, as if taken by surprise somehow; “a day and a night, I mean.”

She exchanged a glance of significant expectation with her brother, but it was at their uncle they looked the moment after, because of the strange and sudden sound that issued from his lips. For it was like a cry, and his face wore a flushed and curious expression they could not fathom. The face and the cry were signs of something utterly unusual. He was startled — out of himself. A marvellous idea had evidently struck him. “It’s either something,” thought Judy, “or else he’s got a pain.” But Tim’s mind was quicker. “He’s got it,” the boy decided, meaning, “We’ve got it out of him at last!” Their manoeuvres had taken so long of accomplishment that their original purpose had almost been forgotten.

“A day, a whole day,” Uncle Felix was mumbling to himself in a dazed kind of happy way, “an entire day, I do declare!” He looked round solemnly, yet with growing excitement, into the children’s faces. “Twenty-four hours! An entire day,” he went on, half beneath his breath.

“*Some day;* of course…” Tim said in a low voice, catching the mood of wonder, while Judy added, equally stirred up, “A day will come…” and then Uncle Felix, breaking out of his queer reverie with an effort, raised his voice and looked as if the end of the world had come.

“But do you realise what it means?” he asked them sharply. “D’you understand what’s happened?”

He drew a long, deep breath that quivered with suppressed amazement, and waited several seconds for their answers — in vain. The children gazed at him without uttering a word; they made no movement either. The arresting tone of his voice and a certain huge expression in his eyes made everything in the world seem different. It was a moment of real life; he had discovered something stupendous. But, explanation being beyond them, they attempted no immediate answer to his question. The pressure of interest blocked every means of ordinary expression known to them.

Then Uncle Felix spoke again; his big eyes fixed Tim piercingly like a pin. “When did it stop?” he inquired gravely. He meant to make quite sure of his discovery before revealing it. There must be no escape, no slip, no carelessness. “When did it stop, I ask you, Tim?” he repeated.

Tim was a trifle vague. “I was asleep,” he whispered. “When I woke up — it wasn’t going.”

“You wound it?”

“Oh, yes, I wound it right enough.”

“What time was it?”

“The clock — or the day, Uncle?” He was confused a little; he wished to be awfully accurate.

Uncle Felix explained that he desired to know what time the clock had stopped. The importance of the answer could be judged by the intentness of his expression while he waited.

“The finger-hands were at four,” said the boy at length.

Uncle Felix gave a jump. “Ha, ha!” he exclaimed triumphantly, “then it stopped of its own accord!” They could have screamed with excitement, though without the least idea what they were excited about. You could have heard a butterfly breathing.

“It stopped at dawn!” he continued, louder.

“Dawn!” piped Tim, unable to think of anything else, but obliged to utter something.

“Dawn, yes,” cried Uncle Felix louder still. “It stopped of its own accord at dawn! Just at the beginning of a new day it stopped! It’s marvellous! Don’t you see? It’s marvellous!”

“Goodness!” cried Judy, her mind obfuscated, yet thrilled with a transport of inexplicable delight. “It’s marvellous!”

“I say!” Tim shouted, dropping his voice suddenly because he too was at a loss for any more intelligible relief in words.

They sat and stared at their amazing uncle. There was a hush upon the entire universe; there was marvel, mystery, but at first there was also muddle. They waited, holding their breath with difficulty. Some one, it seemed, must either explode or — or something else, they knew not exactly what. It would hardly have surprised them if Judy had suddenly flown through the air, Tim vanished down a hole, or Maria gleamed at them from the inside of a quivering bubble of soap. There was this kind of intoxicating feeling, delicious and intense. Even To-morrow might *not* be Sunday after all: it felt strange and wonderful enough for that!

The possibility that *Some Day* was coming — was close at hand — had in some mysterious way become a probability. It was clear at last why Uncle Felix had been so heavy and preoccupied.

“You see what’s happened?” he continued after the long pause. “You see what it all means — this strange stopping of the clock — at Dawn?”

They admitted nothing; the least mistake on their part might prevent, might spoil or cripple it. The depth and softness of his tone warned them. They stared and waited. He gathered them closer to him with both arms. Even Maria wriggled slightly nearer — an inch or so.

“It means,” he said in still lower tones, “the calendar,” — then stopped abruptly to examine the effect upon them.

Now, ordinarily, they knew quite well what a calendar was; but this new, strange emphasis he put upon it robbed the word suddenly of all its original meaning. Their minds went questioning at once:

“What *is* a calendar?” asked Judy carefully— “exactly?” she added, to make her meaning absolutely clear. It sounded almost like a nonsense word.

“Exactly,” he repeated cautiously, yet with some great emotion working in him, “what is a calendar? That’s the whole question. I’ll try and tell you what a calendar is.” He drew a deeper breath, a great effort being evidently needed. “A calendar,” he went on, while the word sounded less real each time it was uttered, “is an invention of clever, scientific men to note the days as they pass; it records the passing days. It’s a plan to measure Time. It’s made of paper and has the date and the name of the day stamped in ink on separate sheets. When a day has passed you tear off a sheet. That day is done with — gone. There are three hundred and sixty-five of these separate sheets in a year. It’s just an invention of scientific men to measure the passing of — Time, you see?”

They said they saw.

“Another invention,” he resumed, his face betraying more and more emotion, “is a clock. A clock is just a mechanical invention that ticks off the movements of the sun into seconds and minutes and hours. Both clocks and calendars, therefore, are mere measuring tricks. Time goes on, or does not go on, just the same, whether you possess these inventions or whether you do not possess them. Both clocks and calendars go at the same rate whether Time goes fast or slow. See?"

A tremendous discovery began to poke its nose above the edge of their familiar world. But they could not pull it up far enough to "see" as yet. Uncle Felix continued to pull it up for them. That he, too, was muddled never once occurred to them.

"Scientific men, like all other people, are not always to be relied upon," he went on. "They make mistakes like — you, or Thompson, or Mrs. Horton, or — or even me. Clocks, we all know, are full of mistakes, and for ever going wrong. But the same thing has happened to calendars as well. Calendars are notoriously inaccurate; they simply cannot be depended upon. No calendar has ever been entirely veracious, nor ever will be. Like elastic, they are sometimes too long and sometimes too short — imperfectly constructed."

He paused and looked at them. "Yes," they said breathlessly, aware dimly that accustomed foundations were already sliding from beneath their feet.

"Half the calendars of the world are simply wrong," he continued, more boldly still, "and the people who live by them are in a muddle consequently — a muddle about Time. England is no exception to the rest. Is it any wonder that Time bothers us in the way it does — always time to do this, or time to do that, or not time enough to finish, and so on?"

"No," they said promptly, "it isn't."

"Of course," he resumed. "Well, sometimes a nation finds out its mistake and alters its calendar. Russia has done this; the Russian New Year and Easter are not the same as ours. Pope Gregory, the thirteenth, ordered that the day after October 4, 1582, should be called October 15. He called it the Gregorian Calendar; but there are lots of other calendars besides — there's the Jewish and Mohammedan, and a variety of calendars in the East. All of them can't be right. The result is that none of them are right, and the world is in confusion. Some calendars mark off too many days, others mark off too few. Half the world is ahead of Time, and the other half behind it. The

Governments know this quite well, but they dare not say anything, because their officials are muddled enough as it is. There is everywhere this fearful rush and hurry to keep up with Time. All are terrified of being late — too late or too early."

"Naturally."

"And the extraordinary result of all these mistakes," he went on marvellously, "is simply this: that a considerable amount of Time has never been recorded at all by any of them. There are a lot of extra days, unused, unrecorded days, still at large — if only we could find them."

"Extra Days!" they gasped. Tim and Judy's mouths were open now, and slowly opening wider every minute. Only Maria's mouth kept closed. Her great blue eyes were closed as well. She looked as if she could have told them all this in a couple of words!

"Knocking about on the loose," he explained further, then paused and stared into the upturned faces; "sort of escaped days that have never been torn off calendars or ticked away by clocks — unused, unfilled, unlived — slipped out of Time, that is—"

"Then when Daddy said, 'A day is coming,' and all that — ?" Tim managed to squeeze out as though the pain of the excitement hurt his lips.

"Of course," replied Uncle Felix, nodding his great head, "of course. Sooner or later one of these lost Extra Days is bound to crop up. And what's more—" he glanced down significantly at the stopped alarum-clock— "I think—"

He broke off in the middle of the sentence. They all stood up. Tim picked up the clock and handed it to his uncle, who held it tightly against his chest a moment, then put it into his capacious pocket.

"I think," he went on enormously, "it's come!"

An entire minute passed without a sound.

"We can fill it with anything we like?" asked Judy, overawed a little.

"Anything we like," came the sublime reply.

"And do things over and over again — sort of double — and no hurry?" Tim whispered.

"Anything, anywhere, anyhow, and no end to it all," he answered gloriously. "No hurry either!" It was too much to think about all at once, too big to realise. They all sat down again beside Maria, who had not moved an inch in any direction at all. She was a picture of sublime repose.

"We have only got to find it, then climb into it, then sail away," murmured Uncle Felix, with a strange catch in his breath they readily understood.

"When will it begin?" both children asked in the same breath.

"At dawn," he said.

"To-morrow morning?"

"At dawn to-morrow morning."

"But to-morrow's Sunday," they objected.

"To-morrow's — an Extra Day," he said amazingly.

They hesitated a moment, stared, frowned, smiled, then opened their eyes and mouths still wider than before.

"Oh, like that!" they exclaimed.

"Like that, yes," he said finally. "It means getting in behind Time, you see. There's no Time in an Extra Day because it's never been recorded by calendar or clock. And that means getting behind the great hurrying humbug of a thing that blinds and confuses everybody all the world over — it means getting closer to the big Reality that—"

He broke off sharply, aware that his own emotion was carrying him out of his depth, and out of their depth likewise. He changed the sentence: "We shall be in Eternity," he whispered very softly, so softly that it was scarcely audible perhaps.

And it was then that Maria, still seated solidly upon the lawn, looked up and asked another baffling and unexpected question. For this was *her* private and particular adventure: and, living ever at the centre of the circle, Maria claimed even Eternity as especially her own. Her question was gigantic. It was infinitely bigger than her original question, "Why?" It was the greatest question in the universe, because it answered itself adequately at once. It was the question the undying gods have flung about the listening cosmos since Time first began its tricky cheating of delight — and still fling into the echoing hearts of men and children everywhere. The stars and insects, the animals and birds, even the stones and flowers, all keep the glorious echo flying.

“Why not?” she asked.

It was unanswerable.

CHAPTER XV. “A DAY WILL COME”

THEY WENT INTO the house as though wafted — thus does a shining heart deduct bodily weight from life’s obstructions; they had their tea; after tea they played games as usual, quite ordinary games; and in due course they went to bed. That is, they followed a customary routine, feeling it was safer. To do anything unusual just then might attract attention to their infinite Discovery and so disturb its delicate equilibrium. Its balance was precarious. Once an Authority got wind of anything, the Extra Day might change its course and sail into another port. Aunt Emily, even from a distance…! In any case, they behaved with this intuitive sagacity which obviated every risk — by taking none.

Yet everything was different. Behind the routine lay the potent emphasis of some strange new factor, as though a lofty hope, a brave ideal, had the power of transmuting common duties into gold and crystal. This new factor pushed softly behind each little customary act, urging what was commonplace over the edge into the marvellous. The habitual became wonderful. It felt like Christmas Eve, like the last night of the Old Year, like the day before the family moved for the holidays to the sea — only more so. Even To-morrow-will-be-Sunday had entirely disappeared. A thrill of mysterious anticipation gilded everything with wonder and beauty that were impossible, yet true. Some Day, *the* Thing that Nobody could Understand — Somebody — was coming at last.

Uncle Felix was in an extraordinary state; his acts were normal enough, but his speech betrayed him shamefully; they had to warn him more than once about it. He seemed unable to talk ordinary prose, saying that “Everything *ought* to rhyme, At such a time,” and, instead of walking like other people, his feet tried to keep in time with his language. “But you don’t understand,” he replied to Tim’s grave warnings; “you don’t understand what a gigantic discovery it is. Why, the whole world will thank us! The whole world will get its breath back! The one thing it’s always dreaded more than anything else — being too late — will come to an end! We ought to dance and sing —”

“Oh, please hush!” warned Judy. “Aunt Emily, you know—” Even at Tunbridge Wells Aunt Emily might hear and send a telegram with No in it.

“Has it lost its breath?” Tim asked, however. But, though it was in the middle of tea, Uncle Felix could not restrain himself, and burst into one of his ridiculous singing fits, instead of answering in a whisper as he should have done. “Burst” described it accurately. And his feet kept time beneath the table. It was the proper place for Time, he explained.

The clocks are stopped, the calendars are wrong, Time holds gigantic finger-hands Before his guilty face. Listen a moment! I can hear the song That no one understands —

“It’s the blue dragon-fly,” interrupted Tim, remembering the story of long ago.

“It’s the Night-Wind — out by day,” cried Judy.

“It’s both and neither,” sang the man,
”This song I hear. It first began
Before the hurrying race
Of ticking, and of tearing pages
Deafened the breathless ages:
It is the happy singing
Of wind among the rigging
Of our Extra Day!”

“It’s something anyhow,” decided Judy, rather impressed by her uncle’s fit of bursting.

And, somehow, Dawn was the password and Tomorrow the key. No one knew more than that. It had to do with Time, for Uncle Felix had taken the stopped clock to his room and hidden it there lest somebody like Jackman or Thompson should wind it up. Later, however, he gave it for safer keeping to Maria, because she moved so rarely and did so little that was unnecessary that she seemed the best repository of all. Also, this was *her* particular adventure, and what risk there was belonged properly to her. But beyond this they knew nothing, and they didn’t want to know. In the immediate future, just before the gateway of To-morrow’s dawn, a great gap lay waiting, a gap they had discovered alone of all the world. The scientists had made a mistake, the Government had been afraid to deal with it, the rest of the world lay in ignorance of its very existence even. It satisfied all the conditions of real adventure, since it was unique, impossible, and had never happened to any one before. They, with Uncle Felix, had discovered it. It belonged to them entirely — the most marvellous secret that anybody could possibly imagine. Maria, they took for granted, would share it with them. A hole in Time lay waiting to receive them. A *Day Will Come* at last was actually coming.

"We'd better pack up," said Judy after tea. She said it calmly, but the voice had a whisper of intense expectancy in it.

"Pack up nothing," Uncle Felix reproved her quickly. "The important thing is — don't wind up. Just go on as usual. It will be best," he added significantly, "if you all hand over your timepieces to me at once." And, without a word, they recognised his wisdom and put their treasures into his waistcoat pockets — watches of silver, tin, and gunmetal. His use of the strange word "timepieces" was convincing. The unusual was in the air.

"There's Thompson's and Jackman's and Mrs. Horton's," Judy reminded him, her eyes shining like polished door-knobs.

"Too wrong to matter," decided Uncle Felix. "They're always slow or fast."

"Then there's the kitchen clock," Tim mentioned; "the grandfather thing."

Uncle Felix reflected a moment. His reply was satisfactory and conclusive:

"I'll go down to-night," he explained in a low voice, "when the servants are in bed. I'll take the weights off."

Judy and Tim appreciated the seriousness of the occasion more than ever.

"Into Mrs. Horton's kitchen?" they whispered.

"Into Mrs. Horton's kitchen," he agreed, beneath his breath.

Maria, meanwhile, said nothing. Her eyes kept open very wide, but no audible remark got past her lips. She paid no attention to the singing nor to the whispered conversation; she ate an enormous tea, finishing up all the cakes that the others neglected in their excitement and preoccupation; but she appeared as calm and unconcerned as the tea-cosy that concealed the heated, stimulating teapot beneath it. She looked more circular and globular than ever. Even the knowledge that this was the eve of her own particular adventure did not rouse her. Her expression seemed to say, “I never *have* believed in Time; at the centre where *I* live, clocks and calendars are not recognised”; and later, when Judy blew the candle out and asked as usual, “Are you all right, Maria?” her reply came floating across the darkened room without the smallest alteration in tone or accent: “I’m alright.” The stopped alarum-clock was underneath her pillow; Uncle Felix had tucked them up, each in turn; everything was all right. She fell asleep, the others fell asleep, Time also fell asleep.

And above the Old Mill House that warm June night the darkness kept the secret faithfully, yet offered little signs and hints to those who did not sleep too heavily. The feeling that something or somebody was coming hung in the very air; there was a gentle haze beneath the stars; and a breeze that passed softly through the lime trees dropped semi-articulate warnings. There were curious, faint echoes flying between the walls and the Wood without a Centre; the daisies heard them and opened half an eyelid; the Night-Wind whispered and sighed as it bore them to and fro. Maria’s question entered the dream of the entire garden: “Why not? Why not? Why not?”

An owl in the barn beyond the stables heard the call and took it up, and told it to some swallows fast asleep below the eaves, who woke with sudden chattering and mentioned it to a robin in the laurel shrubberies below. The robin pretended not to be at all surprised, but felt it a duty to inform a coot who lived a quarter of a mile away among the reeds of the lower pond. When it returned from its five-minute flight, the swallows had gone to sleep again, and only the owl went on hooting softly through the summer darkness. “It really needn’t go on so long about it,” thought the robin, then fell asleep again with its head between exactly the same feathers as before. But the news had been distributed; the garden was aware; the birds, as natural guardians of the dawn, had delivered the message as their duty was. “Why not? Why not?” hummed all night long through the dreams of the Mill House garden. Weeden turned in his sleep and sighed with happiness.

Nothing could now prevent it; a day was coming at last, an extra, unused, unrecorded day. The immemorial expectancy of childhood, the universal anticipation, the promise that something or somebody was coming — all this would be fulfilled. This promise is really but the prelude to creation. God felt it before the world appeared. And children have stolen it from heaven. Conceived of wonder, born of hope, and realised by belief, it is the prerogative of all properly-beating hearts. Everything living feels it, and — everything lives. The Postman; the Figure coming down the road; the Visitor on the pathway; the Knock upon the door; even the Stranger in the teacup — all are embodiments of this exquisite scrap of heaven, divine expectancy. It may be Christmas, it may be only To-morrow, but equally it may be the End of the World. Something is coming — into the heart — something satisfying. It is the eternal beginning. It is the — dawn.

Long after the children had retired to bed Uncle Felix sat up alone in the big house thinking. He made himself cosy in the library, meaning to finish a chapter of the historical novel he had sadly neglected these past days, and he set himself to the work with a will. But, try as he would, the story would not run; he fixed his mind upon the scene in vain; he concentrated hard, visualised the place and characters as his habit was, reconstructed the incidents and conversation exactly as though he had seen them happen and remembered them — but the imagination that should have given them life failed to operate. It became a mere effort of invention. The characters would not talk of their own accord; the incidents did not flow in a stream as when he worked successfully; life was not in them. He began again, wrote and rewrote, but failed to seize the atmosphere of reality that alone could make them interesting. Interest — he suddenly realised it — had vanished. He felt no interest in the stupid chapter. He tore it up — and knew it was the right thing to do, because he heard the characters laughing.

“I’m not in the mood,” he reflected. “It’s artificial. William Smith of Peckham would skip this chapter. There’s something bigger in me. I wonder…!”

He lit his pipe and sat by the open window, watching the stars and sniffing the scented summer night. He let his thoughts go wandering as they would, and the moment he relaxed attention a sense of pleasant relief stole over him. He discovered how great the effort had been. He also discovered the reason. It offered itself in a flash to his mind that was no longer blocked by the effort and therefore unreceptive.

“A man can’t live adventure and write it too,” he, realised sharply. “He writes what he would like to live. I’m living adventure. The desire to live it vicariously by writing it has left me. Of course!”

It was a sweet and rich discovery — that the adventures of the last ten days had been so real and meant so much to him. No man of action, leading a deep, full life of actual experience, felt the need of scribbling, painting, fiddling. “Glorious, by Jove!” he exclaimed between great puffs of smoke. “I’ve struck a fact!” He had been so busily creating these last days that he had lost the yearning to describe merely what others did. The children had caught him body and soul in their eternal world of wonder and belief. Judy and Tim had taught him this.

Yet, somehow, it was the inactive, calm Maria who loomed up in his thoughts as the principal enchantress. Maria’s apparent inactivity was a blind; she did not do very much in the sense of rushing helter-skelter after desirable things, but she obtained them nevertheless. She got in their way so that they ran into her — then she claimed them. She knew beforehand, as it were, the way they would take. She was always there when anything worth happening was about. And though she spoke so little — during a general conversation, for instance — she said so much. At the end of all the talk, it was always Maria who had said the important thing. Her “why” and “why not” that very afternoon were all that he remembered of the intricate and long discussion. It left the odd impression on his mind that talk, all the world over, said one thing only; that the millions of talkers on the teeming earth, eagerly chattering in many languages, said one and the same thing only. There *was* only one thing to be said.

That is — they were all trying to say it. Maria *had* said it….

A whirring moth flew busily past the open window and vanished into the night. He thought of his own books; for writers, painters, preachers, musicians, these were trying to say it too. “If I could describe that moth exactly,” he murmured to himself, “give the sensation of its flight, its unconscious attraction to the light, its plunge back into the darkness, its precise purpose in the universe, its marvellous aim and balance — its life, I could — er—”

The thought broke off with a jagged end. With a leap then it went on again:

“Touch reality,” and he heard his own voice saying it. He had uttered it aloud. The sound had an odd effect upon him. He realised the uselessness of words. No words touched reality. To be known, reality had to be lived, experienced. Maria managed this in some extraordinary way. She had reality…. Time did not humbug her. Nor did space…. Goodness!

The moth whirred into the room, softly banging itself against the ceiling, and through the smoke from his pipe he saw that a dozen more were doing the same thing with tireless energy. They felt or saw the light; all obeyed the one driving desire to get closer into it. He saw millions and millions of people, the whole world over, rushing about on two legs and behaving similarly. How they did run about and fuss, to be sure! What was it all about? What were they after? People had to earn their living, of course, but it seemed more than that, for all were after something, and the faster they went the better pleased they were. Apparently they thought speed was of chief importance — as though speed killed Time. They banged themselves into obstacles everywhere; they screamed and disagreed, and accused each other of lying and being blind, but the thing they were after either hid itself remarkably well, or went at incredible speed, for no one ever came up with it or found it. Time invariably blocked them. Only one or two — Maria sort of people — sat still and waited….

He watched them all and wondered. One rushed up to an office in a train, while another built the train he rushed in; one wore black and preached a sermon, another wore blue and guarded a street, a third wore red and killed, a fourth wore very little and danced; all in the end were nothing and — disappeared. Some lived in a room and read hundreds of books; another wrote them; one spent his days examining the stars through a telescope, another hurried off to find the Poles; hundreds were digging into the ground, ferreting in the air or under the water. A large number fed animals, then killed and cooked them when they had been fed enough. Hens laid eggs and eggs produced hens that laid more eggs. There were always thousands hurrying along the roads, then coming back again. The millions of living beings were everywhere extremely busy after something, yet hardly any two of them agreed exactly what it was they sought. There were sects, societies, religions by the score, each one cocksure it knew and had found Reality, yet proving by the continuous busy searching that it had not found it. Yet all, oddly enough, fitted in together fairly well, as in a gigantic Dance, though obviously none knew exactly what the tune was, nor who played it. Would they never know? Would all die before they found it? Were they all after the same thing, or after a lot of different things? And why, in the name of goodness, couldn't they all agree about it? Wasn't it, perhaps, that they looked in different ways — all for the same thing? Surely the world had existed long enough for *that* to be settled finally — Reality! Time prevented always….

A moth fell with a soft and disconcerting plop upon the top of his head, cannonaded thence against the window-sill, and shot out into the night again. He came back with a start to *his* reality: that he had promised the children an Extra Day, that for twenty-four hours, in spite of the paradox, Time should cease its driving hurry — and that, for the moment at any rate, he was very sleepy and must go upstairs to bed.

He rose, shook himself free of the curious reverie with a mighty yawn, and looked at the gold watch from his waistcoat pocket. Out came a number of other timepieces with it! And it was then that the personality of Maria entered the room, and stood beside him, and said distinctly, "This is *my* particular adventure, please remember."

And he understood that whatever happened, it would happen according to the gospel of Maria. Getting behind Time meant getting a little nearer to Reality, one stage nearer at any rate. It meant entering the region where she dwelt so serenely. It was her doing, and not his. He realised in a flash that in her quiet way she was responsible and had drawn them in, seduced them. All gravitated to her and into her mysterious circle. Maria claimed them. It was certainly her particular adventure. Only she would share it with them all.

CHAPTER XVI. TIME HALTS

HE LOOKED AT his watch a second time, and found that it was later than he had supposed — eleven o'clock. In the act of winding it, however, he paused; something he had forgotten came back to him, and a curious smile broke over his face. He stroked his beard, glanced at the ceiling where the moths still banged and buzzed, then strolled over to the open window, and said "Hm!" He put his head and shoulders out into the air. And then he again said "Hm — m — m" — only longer than the first time. It seemed as if some one answered him. That "Hm" floated off to some one who was listening for it. Perhaps it was an echo that came floating back. Perhaps it wasn't.

But any grown-up person who hesitates in an empty room of a country house at eleven o'clock at night and murmurs "Hm" into the open air is not in an ordinary state of mind. The normal thing is to put the lights out and go up more or less briskly to bed. Uncle Felix was no exception to this rule. His emotions, evidently, were not quite normal.

He listened. The night was very still. The stars, like a shower of golden rain arrested in full flight, paused in a flock and looked at him, but in so deliberate a way that he was conscious of being looked at. It was rather a delightful sensation, he thought; never before had they seemed so intimate, so interested in his life. He was aware that a friendly relationship existed between him and those far, bright, twinkling eyes. "Hm" he murmured softly once again, then heard a sound of wings rush whirring past his face, and next a chattering of birds somewhere overhead among the heavy eaves. "So I'm not the only one awake," he thought, and, for some odd reason, felt rather pleased about it. "Sounds like swallows. I wonder!"

But he saw no movement anywhere; no wind stirred the ivy on the wall, the limes were motionless, the earth asleep. Even the stream beyond the laurel shrubberies ran silently. Dimly he made out the garden lying at attention, the flower-beds like folded hands upon its breast; and further off, the big untidy elms in pools of deeper shadow, their outlines blurred as dreams blur the mind. Yet, though he could detect no slightest movement, he was keenly aware that other things beside the stars were looking at him. The night was full of carefully-screened eyes, all fixed upon him. Framed in the lighted window, he was so easily visible. Night herself, calm and majestic, gazed down upon him through wide-open lids that filled the entire sky. He felt the intentness of her steadfast gaze, and paused. He stopped. It seemed that everything stopped too. So striking, indeed, was the sensation, that he gave expression to it half aloud:

“It’s slowing up,” he murmured, “stopping!… I do believe! Hm!…”

There was no answer this time, no sign of echo anywhere, but he heard an owl calling its muffled note from the Wood without a Centre.

“It’s probably seen me too,” he thought, and then it also stopped.

He waited a moment, hoping it would begin again, for he loved the atmosphere of childhood that the sound invoked in him. But the flutey call was not repeated. He drew his head in, closed and bolted the window, fastened the shutters carefully and pulled the curtains over; then he extinguished the lamps, lit his candle, and moved out softly into the hall on his way upstairs. And for the first time in his life he felt that in shutting the window he had not shut the beauty out. The beauty of that watching, listening night had not gone away from him by closing down the shutters. It was not lost. It stopped there. This novel realisation was very queer and very exquisite. Regret did not operate.

And he went along the passage, murmuring “Hm” over and over to himself, for there seemed nothing more adequate that he could think of. The servants had long since gone to bed; he alone was awake in the whole big house. He moved cautiously down the long corridor towards the green baize doors, fully aware that it was not the proper way upstairs. He pushed them, and they swung behind him with a grunt that repeated itself several times, lessening and shortening until it ended in an abrupt puffing sound — and he found himself in a chilly corridor of stone. It was very dark; the candle threw the shadow of his hand down the gaping length in front of him. He went stealthily a few steps further, then stopped opposite a closed door of white. For a moment he held his breath, examining the panels by the light of the raised candle; then turned the knob of brass, threw it wide open, and found himself — in Mrs. Horton’s kitchen.

The room was very warm. There was the curious, familiar smell of brooms and aprons, of soap and soda, flavoured with brown sugar, treacle, and a dash of toast and roasted coffee. The ashes still glowed between the bars of the range like a grinning mouth. He put the candle down and looked about him nervously. There was an awful moment when he thought a great six-foot cook, with red visage and bare arms, would rise and strike him with a ladle or a rolling-pin. In the faint light he made out the white deal table in the centre, the rows of pots and pans gleaming in mid-air, dish-cloths hanging on a string to dry, layers of plates of various sizes on the shelves, and jugs suspended by their handles at an angle ready for pouring out. He saw the dresser with its huge, capacious drawers — the only drawers in the world that opened easily, and were deep enough to be of value.

Also — there was a sound, the sound all kitchens have, steadily tapping, clicking, ticking. He turned; he saw the familiar object whence the sound proceeded. At the end of the great silent room, upright like a sentry placed against the wall, stiff and rigid, he saw a figure with a round and pallid face, staring solemnly at him through the gloom. He stiffened and stood rigid too, listening to the tapping noise that issued from its hollow interior of wood and iron. Watching him with remorseless mien, the kitchen clock asked him for the password. “Why not? Why not?” its ticking said distinctly.

The warmth was comforting. He sat down on the white deal table, knowing himself an intruder, but boldly facing the tall monster that guarded the deserted room and challenged him. “*You* haven’t stopped,” he answered in his beard. “Why not?” And as he said it, a new expression stole upon its hardened countenance, the challenge melted, the obdurate stare relaxed. The quaint, grandfatherly aspect of benevolence shone over it like a smile; it looked not only kind, but contrite. He saw it as it used to be, ages and ages ago, when he was a boy, sliding down the banisters towards it, or towards its counterpart in the hall. It winked.

The ticking, too, became less aggressive and relentless, less sure of itself, almost as though it were slowing up. There was a plaintive note behind the metallic sharpness. The great kitchen clock also was aware of a conspiracy hatching against Time….

And as he sat and listened to the machinery tapping away the seconds, he heard a similar tapping in his brain that swung gradually into rhythm with the clock. A pendulum in his mind was swinging, each swing a little shorter than the one before; and he remembered that a dozen pendulums in a room, starting at different lengths, ended by swinging all together. “We’re slowing up together — stopping!” murmured the two pendulums. “Why not? Why not? Why not?…”

Presently both would cease, yet ceasing would be the beginning, not the end. A state without end or beginning would supervene. Ticking meant time, and time meant becoming; but beyond becoming lay the bottomless sea of being, which was eternity. Maria floated there — calm, quiet, serene, little globular Maria, circular, the perfect form.

The Kitchen Spell rolled in upon him, smothering mind and senses.

It came at first so gradually he hardly noticed it, but it rose and rose and rose, till at length he sat dipped to the eyes in it, and then finally his eyes went under too. He was immersed, submerged. The parochial vanished; he swam in the universal. He felt drowsy, soothed, and very happy; his heart beat differently. Consciousness ran fluttering along the edge of something hard that hitherto had seemed an unsurpassable barrier. The barrier melted and let him through.

He rubbed his eyes and started. “That’s the clock in Mrs. Horton’s kitchen,” he tried to say, but the words had an empty and ridiculous sound, as if there was no meaning in them. They flew about him in the air like little butterflies trying to settle. They settled on one meaning, only to flit elsewhere the next minute and settle on another meaning. They could mean anything and everything. They did mean everything. They meant *one* thing. Finally they settled back into his heart. And their meaning caught him by the throat in a most delicious way. The air was full of tiny fluttering wings; he heard pattering feet and little voices; hair tied with coloured ribbons brushed his cheeks; and laughing, mischievous eyes like stars floated loose about the ceiling. The Kitchen Spell grew mighty — irresistible… rising over him out of a timeless Long Ago.

From the direction of the ghostly towel-horse it seemed to come. But beyond the towel-horse was the window, and beyond the window lay the open fields, and beyond the fields lay miles and miles of country asleep beneath the stars; and this country stretched without a break right up to the lonely wolds of distant Yorkshire where an old grey house contained another kitchen, silent and deserted in the night. All the empty kitchens of England were at this moment in league together, but this old Yorkshire kitchen was the parent of them all — and thence the Spell first issued. It was his own childhood kitchen.

And Uncle Felix travelled backwards against the machinery of Time that cheats the majority so easily with its convention of moving hands and ticking voice and bullying, staring visage. He slid swiftly down the long banister-descent of years and reached in a flash that old sombre Yorkshire kitchen, and stood, four-foot nothing, face smudged and fingers sticky, beside the big deal table with the dying embers in the grate upon his right. His heart was beating. He could just reach the juicy cake without standing on a chair. He ate the very slice that he had eaten forty years ago. It *was* possible to have your cake and eat it too!…

He gulped it down and sucked the five fingers of each hand in turn — then turned to attack the staring monster that had tried to make him believe it was impossible. He crossed the stone floor on tiptoe, but with challenge in his heart, looked straight into its humbugging big face, opened its carefully buttoned jacket — and took off the weights.

“Hm!” he murmured, with complacent satisfaction that included victory, “I’ve stopped you!”

There was a curious, long-drawn sound as the machinery ran down; the chains quivered, then hung motionless. There was disaster in the sound, but laughter too — the laughter of the culprit caught in the act, unmasked, exposed at last. “But I’ve had a good time these last hundred years,” he seemed to hear, with the obvious answer this insolence suggested: “Caught! You’re It!” — in a tone that was not wholly unlike Maria’s.

He turned and left the kitchen as stealthily as he had entered it. He went along the cold stone corridor, through the green baize doors, and so up the softly carpeted stairs to his bedroom. He undressed and rolled solemnly between the sheets. He sighed deeply, but he did not move again. He fell instantly into the right position for sleep.

But while he slept, the timeless night brought up its mystery. Moored outside against the walls an Extra Day lay swinging from the stars. The waves of Time washed past its sides, yet could not move it. The wind was in the rigging; it lay at anchor, filling the sky with a beauty of eternity. And above the old Mill House the darkness, led by the birds, flowed on to meet the quivering Dawn.

CHAPTER XVII. A DAY HAS COME

MARIA’S PARTICULAR ADVENTURE

THE DAY WAS hardly born, and still unsure of itself, when a robin with its tail cocked up stood up alertly on the window-sill of Uncle Felix’s bedroom, peeped in through the open sash, and noticed the objects in front of it with a certain deliberation.

These objects were half in shadow, but, unlike those it was most familiar with, they did not move in the breeze that stirred the world outside. The robin had just swung up from a lilac branch below. Its toes were spread to their full extent for balancing purposes. It peeped busily in all directions. Then, suddenly, a big object at the far end of the darkened room moved slowly underneath a mass of white, as Uncle Felix, aware that some one was watching him, rolled over in his bed, opened his sleepy eyes, and stared. At the same moment the robin twitched, and fixed its brilliant glance upon him. It had found the particular object that it sought.

Uncle Felix, somewhat dazed by sleep and dreams, saw the tight, fat body of the bird outlined against the open sky, but thought at first it was an eagle or a turkey, until perspective righted itself, and enabled him to decide that it was a robin only. He saw its scut tail pointing. And, from the attitude of the bird, of its cocked-up tail, the angle of its neck and head, to say nothing of the inquisitive way it peeped sideways at him over the furniture, he realised that it had come in with a definite purpose — a purpose that concerned himself. In a word, it had something to communicate.

“Odd!” he thought drowsily, as he met its piercing eye. “A robin in my room at dawn! I wonder what it’s up to?”

Then, remembering vaguely that he expected somebody or something out of the ordinary, he made a peculiar noise that seemed to meet the case: he tried to whistle at it. But his lips, being rather dry, made instead a hissing sound that would have frightened most robins out of the room at once. On this particular bird, however, the effect was just the opposite. It hopped self-consciously on to the dressing-table, fluttered next to the arm-chair, and the same second dropped out of sight behind the end of the four-poster bed. It acted, that is, with decision; it was making distinct advances.

He sat up then in order to see it better, and discovered it perched saucily upon the toe of his evening shoe, looking deliberately into his face as it rose above the bed-clothes.

“Come along,” he said, making his voice as soft as possible, “and tell me what you want.”

His expression tried to convey that he was harmless, and he smiled to counteract the effect of his bristling hair which stuck out at right angles as it only can stick out on waking. He felt complimented by the visit of the bird, and did not wish to frighten it. But the Robin, accustomed to seeing scarecrows in the dawn, showed not the slightest fear; on the contrary, it showed interest and a simple, innocent affection too. It fluttered up on to the rail between the bed-posts, almost within reach of his stretched-out hand; its flexible toes clutched the bar as though it were a twig; it moved first two inches to the right, then two inches to the left again, then held steady. It next flicked its tail, and cocked its small head sideways, as if about to deliver a speech or message it had learned by heart; stared intently into the bearded human visage close in front of it; abruptly opened its wings; whirred them with a rapidity that made a sound like a shower of peas striking a taut sheet; and then, with a single, exquisitely-chosen curve — vanished through the open window and was gone.

“Well,” murmured the confused and astonished man, “if anything means anything, that does. Only, I wonder what it *does* mean!”

He was a little startled, and he remained in a sitting position for some minutes, staring at the open window, and hoping the robin would return. Somehow he did not think it would, but he hoped it might. The robin, however, made no sign. And, meanwhile, the dawn slipped higher up the sky, showing the groups of trees with greater sharpness. A draught of morning air came in.

“The dawn!” he thought; “how marvellous! Perhaps the robin came to show me that.” He sniffed the fresh perfume of dew and leaves and earth that rise for a moment with the early light, then fade away. “Or that!” he added, pausing to enjoy the delicate fragrance. "But for the bird I should have slept, and missed them both. I wonder!"

He wished he were dressed and out upon the lawn; but the bed was enticing, and it was no easy thing to get up and wash and put on eleven separate articles of clothing. What a pity he was not dressed like a bird in one garment only! What a pity he could not wash himself by flying through a rushing shower of sweet rain! By the time his clothes were on, and he had made his way downstairs, and unlocked the big chained doors, all this strange, wild emotion would have evaporated. If only he could have landed with a single curve among the flower-beds, as the robin did! Besides, he would feel hungry, and a worm…!

The warmth of the bed crept upwards towards his eyes; the eyelids dropped of their own accord; his weight sank slowly downwards; the pillow was smooth as cream. He remembered Judy saying once that, if a war came, she would go out and "soothe pillows." A pillow was, indeed, a very soothing thing. His head sank backwards into a mass of feathery sensations like a flock of dreams. He drew a long, deep breath. He began to forget a number of things, and to remember a number of other things. They mingled together, they became indistinguishable. What were they? He could make a selection — choose those he liked best, and leave the others — couldn't he? Why not, indeed? Why not?

One was that the clocks had stopped for twenty-four hours and that an extra, unused day was dawning; another, that To-day was Sunday. He could make his choice. Yet all days, surely, were unused till they came! True; but clocks decreed and regulated their length. *This* Extra Day, having been overlooked long ago, was beyond the reach of measuring clocks. No clocks had ever ticked it into passing. It could never pass. Only the present passed. The Past, to which this day belonged, remained where it was, endless, beginningless, self-repeating. He chose it without more ado. And the robin had come to mention something about it. Its small round body was full, its head tight packed with what it had to tell. It was bursting with information. But what — ?

And then he realised abruptly another thing: It *had* delivered its message.

The presence of the bird had announced a change of conditions in the room, a change in his heart and brain as well. But how? He was too drowsy to decide quite; yet in some way the robin had brought in with it the dawn of an unusual day, a kind of bird-day, light as a feather, swift as a flashing wing, spontaneous — air, freedom, escape, sweet brilliance, a thing of flowers, winds, and beauty, a thing of innocence and captivating loveliness, a happy, dancing day. He felt a new sort of knowledge pass darting through him, a new point of view, almost a bird's-eye aspect of old familiar things — joy. That neat, sharp beak had pricked his imagination into swifter life. The meaning of the bird's announcement flowed with delicate power all through his drowsy body. It summed itself up in this: — Somebody, Something, long expected, at last was coming….

And then he incontinently fell asleep. He lost consciousness. But, while he lay heavily upon his soothing pillow, the marvellous Dawn slid higher up the sky, and the robin popped up once upon the window-sill again, glanced sideways at him with approval, then flashed away so close above the soaking lawn that the dew-drops quivered as it passed. Apparently, it was satisfied.

At the same moment, in another part of the old house, Tim found his sleep disturbed in a similar fashion; a shrill twittering beneath the eaves mingled with his dreams. He shook a toe and wrinkled up his nose. He woke. His bedroom, being on the top floor, was lighter than those below; there were no trees to cast shadows or obstruct the dawn.

Tim rubbed his eyes, yawned, scratched, then pattered over to the window to see what all the noise was about. In his night-shirt he looked like a skinny bird with folded wings of white, as he leaned forward and stuck his head out into the morning air. Upon the strip of back-lawn below, the swallows, who had been chattering so loudly overhead, stood in an active group. Clutching the cold iron bars, and resting his chin upon the topmost one, he watched them. He had never before seen swallows on the ground like that; he associated them with the upper sky. It was odd to see them standing instead of flying; their behaviour seemed not quite normal; there was commotion of an unusual kind among them. A grey cat, stalking them warily down the stable path, came near yet did not trouble them; they felt no alarm. They strutted about like a lot of black-frocked parsons at a congress; they looked as if they had hands tucked behind their pointed coat-tails. They were talking among themselves — discussing something. And from time to time they shot upward glances at the window just above them — at himself.

“I believe they want me to look at something or other,” the boy thought vaguely. It seemed as if he had picked them out of a dream and put them there upon the lawn. He felt dazed and happy; he had been dreaming of curious wild things. Where was he? What had happened? “It feels just like something coming,” he decided, “or somebody. Some one’s about in the grounds, perhaps…!”

It was very exciting to be awake at such an unearthly hour; the sun was still below the edge of the gigantic earth! A great, slow thrill stole up into his heart. He noticed the streaks of colour in the sky, and felt the chilly wind. “It’s sunrise!” he exclaimed, rubbing one naked foot against the other; “that’s what it is. And I’m up to see it!”

The thrill merged into a deep, huge sense of wonder that enthralled him. At the same moment the swallows, disturbed by his voice, looked up with one accord, then rose in a single sweep and whirled off into the upper air, wings faintly tinged with gold. They scattered. Tim watched them for a little while, dimly aware that he watched something “perfectly magnificent.” His eyes followed one bird after another, caught in a sudden little rapture he could not understand… then turned and saw his bed, flushed with early pink, across the room. With a running jump he landed among the sheets, rolled himself up into a ball, and promptly fell asleep again. It was not yet four o’clock.

Across the landing, meanwhile, Judy, wakened by a brush of feathery wind, was at her window too. She felt very sure of something, although she didn’t in the least know what. It was the same thing that Tim and Uncle Felix knew, only they knew they didn’t know it, whereas she didn’t know she knew it. Her knowledge, therefore, was greater than theirs.

The room was touched with soft grey light; it was to the west, and the night still clung about the furniture. Like a ball in a saucer, Maria lay asleep in bed against the opposite wall, her neutrality to all that was going on absolute as usual. But Judy did not wake her, she preferred to live alone; she knew that she was alive in her night-gown between night and morning, and that was an unusual pleasure she wished to enjoy without interference. For months she had not waked before half-past seven. The excitement of the unfamiliar was in her heart. She had caught the earth asleep — surprised it. For the first time in her life she saw "the Earth." She discovered it.

She knelt on a chair beside the open window, peering out, and as she did so, a strange, wild cry came sounding through the stillness. It was like a bugle-call, but she knew no human lips had made it. She glanced quickly in the direction whence it came — the pond — and the next instant the reeds about the edge parted and the thing that had emitted the curious wild cry emerged plainly into view. It was a pompous-looking creature. It came out waddling.

"It's the up-and-under bird," exclaimed Judy in a whisper. "Something's happening!"

It was a water-fowl, a creature whose mysterious habit of living upon the surface of the pond as well as underneath made the children's nick-name a necessity. And now it was attempting a raid on land as well. But land was not its natural place. Something certainly had happened, or was going to happen.

"It's a snopportunity," decided Judy instantly. Far more than an opportunity, a snopportunity was something to be snapped up quickly, the sort of thing that ordinarily happened behind one's back, usually discovered too late to be made use of. "I've caught it!" She remembered that the clocks had stopped, yet not knowing why she remembered it. It was the thing she didn't know she knew. She knew it before it happened. That was a snopportunity.

She watched the heavy bird for a considerable time as it slowly appropriated the land it had no right to. It moved, she thought, like a twisted drum on very short drumsticks. It had a water-logged appearance. It was bird and fish ordinarily, but now it was pretending to be animal as well — a thing that flew, swam, walked. Its webbed feet patted the ground complacently. It came laboriously towards the wall of the house, then halted. It paused a moment, then turned its eyes up, while Judy turned hers down. The pair of creatures looked at one another steadily for several seconds.

"You're not out for nothing," exclaimed Judy audibly. "So now I know!"

The reply was neither in the affirmative nor in the negative. The up-and-under bird said nothing. It made no sign. It just turned away, stalked heavily back across the lawn without once looking either to right or left, launched itself upon the water, uttered its queer bugle-call for the last and second time, and promptly disappeared below. The tilt of its vanishing tail expressed sublime indifference to everything on land. And Judy, reflecting vaguely that she, too, was something of an up-and-under creature, followed its example, though without the same dispatch or neatness of execution. She tumbled sideways into bed and disappeared beneath the sheets, aware that the bird had left her richer than it found her. It had communicated something that lay beyond all possible explanation. She had no tail, nor did she express indifference. On the contrary, she hugged herself, making sounds of pleasurable anticipation in her throat that lay plunged among depths of soothing pillows.

It seems, then, that the entire household, the important portion of it, at any rate, had been duly notified that something unusual was afoot, and that the dawn of the day just breaking through a ghostly sky was distinctly out of the ordinary. The birds, always the first to wake, and provided with the most sensitive apparatus for recording changes, had caught the mysterious whisper from the fading night; they had instantly communicated it to the best of their ability to their established friends. The robin, the swallows, and the up-and-under bird, having accomplished their purpose, disappeared from view in order to attend to breakfast and the arrangement of their own subsequent adventures. Earth, air, and water had delivered messages. The news had been flashed. Those who deserved it had been warned. The day could now begin.

Maria, alone, meanwhile, slept on soundly, secure in that stodgy immobility that takes no risks. Oblivious, apparently, of all secret warnings of excitement or alarm, she lay in a tight round ball, inactive, undisturbed. Even her breathing revealed her peculiar idiosyncrasy: no actual movement on her surface was discernible. Her breathing involved the least possible disturbance of the pink and white contours that bulged the sheets and counterpane. Her face was calm, expressionless, and even dull, yet wore a certain look as though she knew so much that she had no need to maintain her position by the least assertion. Exertion would have been a denial of her right to exist. And exist she certainly did. The weight of her personality lent balance to the quivering uncertainty of this mysterious dawn. Maria remained an unassailable reality, an immovable centre round which anything might happen, yet never end, and certainly no disaster come. And Judy, glancing at her as she disappeared below her own sheets, noted this fact without understanding that she did so. This was another aspect of the thing she didn't know she knew.

"Maria's asleep," she felt, "so there's no need to get up yet. It's all right!" In spite of the marvellous thing she knew was coming, that is, she felt herself anchored safely to the firm reality of calm Maria, soundly, peacefully asleep. And five minutes later she was in the same desirable condition herself.

But, hardly were they all asleep, than a figure none of them had noticed, yet all perhaps had vaguely felt, rose out of the little ditch this side of the laurel shrubberies, and advanced slowly towards the old Mill House. The shape was shadowy and indeterminate at first; it might have been a bush, a sheaf of straw, a clump of high-grown weeds, for birds fluttered just above it, and the swallows darted down without alarm. A shaggy thing, it seemed part of the natural landscape.

Half-way across the lawn, however, it paused and stretched itself; it rubbed its eyes; it yawned; and, as it shook the sleep from face and body, the outline grew distinctly clearer. The thing that had looked like a bundle of hay or branches resolved itself into a human being; the loose untidiness gave place to definite shape, as leaves, grass, twigs, and wisps of straw fell fluttering from it to the ground. It was a pathetic and yet wonderful sight, beauty, happiness, and peace about it somewhere, together with a soft and tender sweetness that tempered the wildness of its aspect. Indescribably these qualities proclaimed themselves. It was a man.

"They've seen me twice," he mentioned to the dipping swallows. "This is my third appearance. They'll recognise me without a word. The Day has come."

He stood a moment, shaking the extras of the night from hair and clothing, then laughed with a sound like running water as the birds swooped down and carried the straws and twigs away with a great business of wings. Next, glancing up at the open windows of the house, he started forward with a light but steady step. "They will not be surprised," he said, "for they have always believed in me. They knew that some day I should come, and in the twinkling of an eye!" He paused and chuckled in his beard. "I'm not *the* one thing they're expecting, but I'm next door to it, and I can show them how to look at any rate."

And he began softly humming the words of a little song he had evidently made up himself, and therefore liked immensely. He neared the walls; the sunrise tipped a happy, glorious face; he disappeared from view as though he had melted through the old grey stone. And a flight of swallows, driven by the fresh dawn wind, passed high overhead across the heavens, leading the night away. They swung to the rhythm of his little song:

My secret's in the wind and open sky,
There is no longer any Time — to lose;
The world is young with laughter; we can fly
Among the imprisoned hours as we choose.

The rushing minutes pause; an unused day
Breaks into dawn and cheats the tired sun;
The birds are singing. Hark! Come out and play!
There is no hurry! Life has just begun!

THE EXTRA DAY

BEHIND *TIME*

I

The day broke. It broke literally. The sky gave way and burst asunder, scattering floods of radiant sunshine. This was the feeling in Uncle Felix's heart as he came downstairs to breakfast in the schoolroom. A sensation of feathery lightness was in him, of speed as well: he could rise above every obstacle in the world, only — there were no obstacles in the world to rise above. Boredom, despair, and pessimism, he suddenly realised, meant deficiency of energy merely. "Birds can rise above everything — and so can I!" — as though he possessed a robin's normal temperature of 110 degrees!

Although it was Sunday morning, and a dark suit was his usual custom, he had slipped into flannels and a comfortable low collar, without thinking about it one way or the other. "It's a jolly day," he hummed to himself, "and I'm alive. We must do all kinds of things — everything! It's all one thing really!" It seemed there was a new, uplifting sense of joy in merely being alive. He repeated the word again and again— "alive, alive, alive!" Of course a robin sang: it was the natural thing to do.

He looked out of the window while dressing, and caught the startling impression that this life emanated from the world of familiar trees and grass and flowers spread out before his eyes. Everything was singing. Beauty had dropped down upon the earth; the earth, moreover, knew that she was beautiful — she was obviously enjoying herself, both as a whole and in every tiniest nook and corner of her gigantic being. Yet without undue surprise he noted this; the marvel was there as always, but he did not pause to say, "How marvellous!" It was as natural as breathing, and as easily accepted. He was always breathing, but he never stopped and thought, "Good Lord, I'm breathing! How dreadful if it stopped!" He simply went on breathing. And so, with the beauty of this radiant morning, it never occurred to him "This will not last, the sun will set, the shadows fall, the marvel pass and die." That this particular day could end did not even suggest itself.

On his way down the passage, Judy and Tim came dancing from their rooms to meet him. They, too, were dressed in their everyday-adventure things, no special sign of Sunday anywhere about them — slipped into their summery clothing as naturally as birds and flowers grow into the bright and feathery stuff that covers them. This notion struck him, but faintly; it was not a definite thought. He might as well have noticed, "Ah, the sky is dressed in light, or mist! The wind blows it into folds and creases!" Yet the notion did strike him with its little dream-like hammer, because with it came a second tiny blow, producing, it seemed, a soft blaze of light behind his eyes somewhere: "I've recovered the childhood sense of reality, the vivid certainty, the knowledge!… Somebody's coming…. Somebody's here — hiding still, perhaps, yet nearer…" It flashed like a gold-fish in some crystal summer fountain… and was gone again.

In the passage Judy touched his hand, and said confidingly, "You will take me to the end of the world to-day, Uncle."

It was true and possible. No special preparation was required for any journey whatsoever. They were already prepared for anything — like birds. And some one, it seemed, had taken his name away!

“We’ll do everything at once,” said Tim, with the utmost assurance in tone and manner.

“Of course,” was his obvious and natural reply to each, no explanations or conditions necessary. Things would happen of themselves, spontaneously. There was only one thing to do! “We’re alive,” he added. They just looked at him as he said it, then pulled him down the passage a little faster than before. Yet the way they ran dancing along that oil-cloth passage held something of the joy and confidence with which birds launch themselves into flight across the earth. There was this sense of spontaneous excitement and delight about.

“He’s here already,” Judy whispered, as they neared the breakfast room. “I can feel it.”

“Came in while we were asleep,” her brother added. “I know it,” and he clapped his hands.

“At dawn, yes,” agreed Uncle Felix, saying it on the spur of the moment. He was perplexed a little, perhaps, but did not hesitate. He had not *quite* the assurance of the others. He meant to let himself go, however.

There was not the slightest doubt or question anywhere; *they* believed because they knew; what they had expected for so long had happened. The Stranger in the Tea-cup had arrived at last. They went down the long corridor of the Old Mill House, every window open to the sunshine that came pouring in. The very walls seemed made of transparent, shining paper. The world came flowing in. A happiness of the glowing earth sang in their veins. At the door they paused a second.

“I know exactly who he is,” breathed Judy softly.

“I know what he looks like,” whispered Tim.

“There was never time to see him properly before,” said Uncle Felix. “Things went by so fast. He whizzed and vanished. But now — of course-”

They pushed the door open and went in.

Breakfast was already laid upon the shining cloth; hot dishes steamed; there were flowers upon the table, and climbing roses peeped in round the grey walls of sun-baked stone. A bird or two hopped carelessly upon the window-sill, and a smell of earth and leaves was in the air. Sunshine, colour, and perfume filled the room to overflowing, yet not so full that there was not ample space for the “somebody” who had brought them. For somebody certainly was there — some one whom the children, moreover, took absolutely for granted.

There had been surprise outside the door, but there was none when they were in. Something like a dream, it seemed, this absence of astonishment, though, of course, no one took it in that way. For, at first, no one spoke at all. The children went to their places, lifting the covers to see what there was to eat. They did the normal, natural thing; eyed and sniffed the porridge, cream, brown sugar, and especially approved the dish of comfortable, fat poached eggs on toast. They were satisfied with what they saw; everything was as it ought to be — plentiful, available, on hand. There was enough for everybody.

But Uncle Felix paused a moment just inside the open door, and stared; he looked about him as though the incredible thing had really happened at last. A rapt expression passed over his face, and his eyes seemed fixed upon something radiant that hung upon the air. He sighed, and caught his breath. His heart grew amazingly light within him. Every thought and feeling that made up his personality — so it felt, at least — had wings of silver tipped with golden fire.

“At last!” he murmured softly to himself, “at last!”

He moved forward slowly into the room, his eyes still fixed on vacancy. The face showed exquisite delight, but the lips were otherwise dumb. He looked as if he had caught a glimpse of something he could not utter.

“Porridge, please, Uncle,” he heard a voice saying, as some one put a large silver spoon into his hand. “I like the hard lumps.” And another voice added, “I like the soupy, slippery stuff, please.” He pulled himself together with an effort.

“Ah,” he mumbled, peeping from the dishes at the children’s faces, “the tea has stopped turning in the cup at last. He’s come up to the surface.”

And they turned and looked at him, but without the least surprise again; it was perfectly natural, it seemed, that there should be this Presence in the room; their Uncle’s remark was neither here nor there. He had a right to express his own ideas in his own way if he wanted to. Their own remarks outside the door they had apparently forgotten. That, indeed, was already a very long time ago now. In the full bliss of realisation, anticipation was naturally not remembered. The excitement in the passage belonged to some dim Yesterday — almost when they were little.

They began immediately to talk *at* the Stranger in the room.

“I didn’t *hear* anybody come,” remarked Tim, as he mixed cream and demerara sugar inside an artificial pool of porridge, “but it’s all the same — now. Our Somebody’s here all right.” And then, between gulps, he added, “The swallows laid an awful lot of eggs in the night, I think.”

“On tiptoe just at dawn,” remarked Judy casually, following her own train of thought, and intent upon chasing a slippery poached egg round and round her plate at the same time. “The birds were awake, of course.”

The birds! As she said it, a memory of some faint, exquisite dream, of years and years ago it seemed, fled also on tiptoe through the bright, still air, and through three listening hearts as well. The robin, the swallows, and the up-and-under bird made secret signs and vanished.

“They know everything first, of course,” said Uncle Felix aloud; “they’re up so early, aren’t they?” To himself he said, “I’m dreaming! This is a dream!” his reason still fluttering a little before it died. But he kept his secret about the robin tightly in its hiding-place.

“Before they’ve happened — *really*,” Tim mentioned. “They do a thing to-morrow long before to-morrow’s come.” He knew something the others could not possibly know.

“Everything comes from the air, you see,” advanced Judy, secure in the memory of her private morning interview. “But it can disappear under — underneath when it wants to.”

“Or into a hole,” agreed Tim.

And somebody in that breakfast-room, somebody besides themselves, heard every word they spoke, listened attentively, and understood the meanings they thought they hid so cleverly. They knew, moreover, that he did so.

“Let’s pretend,” Tim suddenly exclaimed, catching his sister’s eye just as it was wandering into the pot of home-made marmalade.

“All right,” she said at once, “same as usual, I suppose?”

Tim nodded, glancing across the table. “Sitting next to *you*, Uncle” — he pointed to the unoccupied chair and unused plate— “in that empty place.”

“Thank you,” murmured the man, still hovering between reality and dream. He said it shyly. It was all too marvellous to ask questions about, he felt.

“It’s a lovely morning,” continued Judy politely, smiling at the empty place. “Will you have tea and coffee, or milkhotwaterandsugar?” She listened attentively for the answer, the smile of a duchess on her rosy face, then bowed and handed a lump of sugar to Tim, who set it carefully in the middle of the plate.

“Butter or honey?” inquired the boy, “or butter and honey?” He, too, waited for the inaudible reply, then asked his Uncle to pass the pot of honey *and* the butter-dish. The Stranger, apparently, liked sweet things best — at any rate, natural things.

They went on with their breakfast then, eating as much as ever they could hold, talking about everything in the world as usual, and occasionally bowing to the empty chair, addressing remarks to it, and listening to — answers! Sometimes they passed things, too — another lump of sugar, more drops of honey, a thick blob of clotted cream as well. It was obvious to them that somebody occupied that chair, so real, indeed, that Uncle Felix found himself passing things and making observations about the weather and even arranging a few crumbs of bread in a row beside the other delicacies. It was the right thing to do evidently; acting spontaneously, he had performed an inspired action. And the odd thing was that the food, lying in the blaze of sunlight on the plate, slowly underwent a change: the sugar got smaller in size, the honey-drops diminished, the blob of cream lost its first circumference, and even the bread-crumbs seemed to dwindle visibly.

“It’s very hot this morning,” said Judy after a bit. “The sun’s hungrier than usual,” and she pushed the plate into the shade. But it was clear that she referred to some one other than the sun, although the sun belonged to what was going on. “Thirsty, too,” she added, “although there are bucketsful of dew about.”

“And extra bright into the bargain,” declared Tim. “I love shiny stuff like that to wear and dress in. It fits so easily — no bothering buttons.”

“And doesn’t wear out or stain, does it?” put in Uncle Felix, saying the first thing that came into his head — and again behaving in the appropriate, spontaneous manner. It was clear that the Stranger — to them, at least — was clothed in the gold and silver of the brilliant morning. There was a delicate perfume, too, as of wild flowers and sweet little roadside blossoms. The very air of the room was charged with some living light and beauty brought by the invisible guest. It was passing wonderful. The invading Presence seemed all about them like a spreading fire of loveliness and joy — yet natural as sunshine.

Then, suddenly, Tim sprang up from his chair, and ran to the empty seat. His face shone with keen and eager expectancy, but wore a touch of shyness too.

“I want to be like you,” he said in a hushed voice that had all the yearning of childhood breaking through it. “Please put your hand on me.” He lowered his head and closed his eyes. He made an odd grimace, half pleasure and half awe, like a boy about to plunge into a pool of water, — then stood upright, proud and delighted as any victorious king. He drew a long breath of relief. He seemed astonished that it had been so easily accomplished.

“I’m full of it!” he cried. “I’m burning! He touched me on the head!”

“Touched!” cried Judy, full herself of joy and happy envy.

The boy nodded his head, as though he would nod it off on to the tablecloth. He looked as if any minute he might burst into flame with the sheer enjoyment of it. “Warm all over,” he gasped. “I could strike a match on my trousers now like Weeden.”

Then, while Uncle Felix rubbed his eyes and did his best to see the invisible, Judy sprang lightly from her chair, ran up to the vacant place, put out her arms and bent her face down so that her falling torrent of hair concealed it for a moment. She certainly put her arms round — something. The next minute she straightened up again with triumph and tumult in her shining eyes.

"I kissed him," she announced, flushed like any rose, "and he kissed me back. He blew the wind into my hair as well. I'm flying! I'm lighter than a feather!" And she went, dancing and flitting, round the table like a happy bird.

Then Uncle Felix rose sedately from his seat. He did not mean to be left out of all this marvellous business merely because his body was a little older and more worn. He stretched his arm across the table, missing the cream-jug by a narrow margin, but knocking the toast-rack over in his eagerness. He held his hand out to the empty chair.

"Please take my hand," he said, "and let me have something too."

He went through the pantomime of shaking hands, but to his intense amazement it seemed that there was an answering clasp. A smooth, soft running touch closed gently on his own; it was cool and yielding, delicate as the down upon a robin's breast, yet firm as steel. And in that moment he knew that his glimpse on entering the room was not a trick, but had been a passing glimpse of what the children always believed in, hoped for — saw.

"Thank you," he murmured, withdrawing his hand and examining it, "very much indeed. This *is* a beautiful day."

An extraordinary power came into him, a feeling of confidence and security and joy he had never known before. Yet all he could find to say was that it was a very beautiful day. The commonest speech expressed exactly what he felt. Ordinary words at last had meaning, small words could tell it.

"It's all right?" remarked Tim, in an excited but quite natural tone.

"It *is*," he answered.

"Then let's go out now and do all sorts of things. There's simply heaps to do."

"Out into the sun," cried Judy. "Come on. We'll get into our old garden boots." And she dragged her brother headlong out of the room.

THE STRANGER WHO IS WONDER

II

And Uncle Felix moved forward into the pool of sunlight that blazed upon the faded carpet pattern. It was composed of round, fat trees, this pattern, with birds like goblin peacocks flying in mid-air between them. The sunshine somehow lifted them, so that they floated upon the quivering atmosphere; the pattern seemed to hover between him and the carpet. And he too felt himself lifted — in mid-air — part of the day and sunshine.

He closed his eyes; he tried to realise who and where he was; all he could remember, however, went into a single sentence and kept repeating itself on the waves of his singing, dancing blood: “Clock’s stopped, clock’s stopped, — stopped clocks, stopped clocks…!” till it sounded like a puzzle sentence — then lost all meaning.

He sat down in a chair, but the chair was next to the “empty” one, and from it something poured into him, over him, round him, as wind pours about a bird or tree. He became enveloped by it; his mind began to rush, yet rushed in a circle, so that he never entirely lost sight of it. Another set of words replaced the first ones: “Behind Time, behind Time,” jostling on each other’s heels, tearing round and round like a Catherine Wheel, shining and dancing as they spun.

He opened his eyes and looked about him. The room was full of wonder. It glistened, sparkled, shone. A million things, screened hitherto from sight by thick clouds of rushing minutes, paused and offered themselves; things that were commonplace before stood still, revealed in startling glory. They no longer raced past at headlong speed. Visible at last, unmasked, they showed themselves as they really were, in naked beauty. This beauty settled on everything in golden rain, it settled on himself as well. All that his eyes rested on looked — distinguished….

And, like snow-flakes, words and thoughts came thickly crowding, like flakes of fire too. He snatched at them, caught them in bunches, tried to sort them into sentences. They were everywhere about him, showering down as from a box of cardboard letters overturned in the sky. The reality he sought hid among them as a whole — he knew that — but no mere sequence of words and letters could quite capture this reality.

He plunged his hands among the flying symbols….

In a flash a number of things — an enormous number of things — became extraordinarily clear and simple; they became one single thing. Then, while reason and vision still fluttered to and fro, like a pair of butterflies, first one and then the other leading, he dashed in between them. He seized handfuls of the flying letters and made the queerest sentences out of them, longer and faster-moving than the first ones.

“Time *is* the arch-deceiver. It drives things past us in a hurrying flock. We snatch at them. And those we miss seem lost for ever because some one calls out, in a foolish voice of terror and regret, ‘Too late!’ Yet, in reality, *we* stand still; the rush of the hours is a sham. We see things out of proportion, like trees from the window of a train, their beauty hidden in a long, thick smudge. *We* do not move; it is the train that hurries us along: the trees are always steadily there — and beautiful. There is enough of everything for everybody — no need to try and get there first. To hurry is to chase your tail, which some one has suggested does not belong to you. It can never be captured by pursuit. But pause — stand still — it instantly presents itself, twitches its tip, and laughs: ‘I’ve been here all the time. I’m part of you!’”

He turned towards the empty chair and smiled. The smile, he felt, came marvellously back to him from the sunshine and the open world of sky and trees beyond. There was some one there who smiled — invisibly.

“You’re real, quite real,” the letters danced instantly into new sentences. “But you are so awfully close to me — so close I cannot see you.”

He felt the invisible Stranger suddenly as real as that. There was only one thing to see — only one thing everywhere. The beauty of the discovery put reason utterly and finally to flight. But that one thing was hiding. The Stranger concealed himself — he hid on purpose. He wanted to be looked for — found. And the heart grew “warm” or “cold” accordingly: when it was warm that mysterious anticipation stirred— “Some one is coming!”

And Uncle Felix, sitting in the sunlight of that breakfast-room, understood that the entire universe formed a conspiracy to hide “him.” Some one, indeed, had come, slipped into the gorgeous and detailed clothing of the entire world as easily as birds and trees slip into their own particular clothing, planning with Time to hide him, wanting to play a little — to play at Hide-and-Seek. “Let them all look for me! I’m hiding!…”

Yet so few would play! Instead of coming out to find him where he hid so simply in the open, they built severe and gloomy edifices; invented Rules of the game by which each could prove himself right and all the others wrong…. Oh, dear!… And all the time, *he* hid there in the open before their very eyes — in the wind, the stream, the grass, in the sunlight and the song of birds, and especially behind little careless things that took no thought … waiting to play and let himself be found… while songs and poems and fairy-tales, even religious too, cried endlessly across the world, "Look and you'll find him." There *was* only one thing to say: "Search in the open; he hides there!"

Everything became clear and simple — one thing, Life was a game of Hide-and-Seek. There were obstacles placed in the way on purpose to make it more interesting. One of them was Time. But everything was one thing, and one thing only; a peacock and a policeman were the same, so were an elephant and a violet, an uncle and a bee, a Purple Emperor and a child like Tim or Judy: all did, said, lived one and the same thing only. They looked different — because one looked *at* them differently.

Smiling happily to himself again as the letters grouped themselves swiftly into these curious sentences, he heard the birds singing in the clean, great sky… and it seemed to him that the Stranger blew softly upon his eyes and hair. The sentences instantly telescoped: "Come, look for me! There is no hurry; life has just begun…." And he barely had time to realise that the entire complicated mass of them had, after all, only this one thing to say… when the returning children bursting into the room scattered his long reverie, and the last cardboard letter disappeared like magic into empty space.

"Where is he?" cried Tim at once, staring impatiently about him. There was rebuke and disappointment in his eyes. "Uncle, you've been arguing. He's gone!"

Judy was equally quick to seize the position of affairs. "You've frightened him away!" she declared with energy. "Quick! We must go out and look!"

"Yes," muttered their uncle a little guiltily, and was about to add something by way of explanation when he felt Judy pull his sleeve. "Look!" she whispered. "He can't have gone so *very* far!"

She pointed to the plate with the sugar, honey, cream, and crumbs upon it; a bird was picking up the crumbs, a wasp was on the lump of sugar, a bee beside it, standing on its head, was drinking at the drop of honey; all were unafraid, and very leisurely about it; there seemed no hurry; there was enough for every one. Then, as the trio of humans stared with delight, they saw another guest arrive and dance up gaily to the feast. A gorgeous butterfly sailed in, hovered above the crowded plate a moment, then settled comfortably beside its companions and examined the blob of cream. The others moved a little to make room for it. It was a Purple Emperor, the rarest butterfly in all England, whose home was normally high above the trees.

“Of course,” Judy whispered to her brother, as she watched the bee make room for its larger neighbour; “they belong to him—”

“He sent them,” replied Tim below his breath, “just to let us know—”

“Yes,” mumbled Uncle Felix for the second time, a soft amazement stealing over him. “He brought them. And they’re all the same thing really.”

There was the perfume of a thousand flowers in the room. A faint breeze floated through the open window and touched his eyes. He heard the world outside singing in the sunshine. “Come along,” he said in a low, hushed whisper; “let’s go and look.” And he moved eagerly — over the tree-and-peacock pattern.

They tiptoed out together, while the bird cocked up its head to watch them go; the bee, still drinking, raised its eyes; and all four fluttered their wings as though they laughed. They seemed to say “There is no hurry! We’re all alive together! There’s enough for all; no need to get there first!” *They* knew. The golden day lay waiting outside with overflowing beauty, and he who had brought them in stood just behind this beauty that hid and covered them. When they had eaten and drunk, they, too, would come and join the search. Exceedingly beautiful they were — the shy grace of the dainty bird, the brilliant wasp in black and gold, the soft brown bee, the magnificent Purple Emperor, fresh from the open spaces above the windy forest: all said the same big, joyful thing, “We are alive!… No hurry!…”

The trio flew down the passage, took the stairs in leaps and bounds, raced across the hall where the back-door, standing open, framed the lawn and garden in a blaze of sunshine.

And as Uncle Felix followed, half dancing like the other two, he saw a little thing that vaguely reminded him of — another little thing. The memory was vague and far away; there was a curious distance in it, like the distance of a dream recalled in the day-light, no longer what is called quite real. For his eye caught something gleaming on the side-table below the presentation clock, and the odd, ridiculous word that sprang into his mind was “salver.” It was the silver salver on which Thompson brought in visitors’ cards. But it was a plate as well; and, being a plate, he remembered vaguely something about a collection. The association of ideas worked itself out in a remote and dreamlike way; he felt in his pocket for a shilling, a sixpence, or a threepenny bit, and wondered for a second where the big, dark building was to which all this belonged. Something was changed, it seemed. His clothes, this dancing sunshine, joy and laughter. The world was new. What did it mean?…

“No bells are ringing,” flashed back the flying letters in a spray.

He was on the point of catching something by the tail… when he saw the children waiting for him on the sunny lawn outside. He ran out instantly to join them. They had noticed nothing odd, apparently. It had never even occurred to them. And in himself the memory dived away, its very trail obliterated as though it had not been.

For this was Sunday morning, yet Sunday had not — happened.

HIDE-AND-SEEK

III

The garden clung close and soft about the Old Mill House as a mood clings about the emotion that has summoned it. Uncle Felix, Tim, and Judy were as much a part of it as the lilac, hyacinths, and tulips. Any minute, it seemed, the butterflies and bees and birds might settle on them too.

For a bloom of exquisite, fresh wonder lay upon the earth, lay softly and secure as though it need never pass away. No fading of daylight could dim the glory of all the promises of joy the day contained, no hint of waning anywhere. “There is no hurry,” seemed written on the very leaves and blades of grass. “We’re all alive together! Come and — look!” The garden, lying there so gently in its beauty, hid a secret.

Yet, though all was so calm and peaceful, there was nowhere the dulness of stagnation. Life brimmed the old-world garden with incessant movement that flashed dancing and rhythm even into things called stationary. The joy of existence ran riot everywhere without check or hindrance; there was no time — to pause and die. For the sunlight did not merely lie upon the air — it poured; wind did not blow — it breathed, ambushed one minute among the rose-trees just above the ground, and cantering next through the crests of the busy limes. The elms and horse-chestnuts that ordinarily grew now leaped — leaped upwards to the sun; while all flying things — birds, insects, bees, and butterflies — passed in and out like darting threads of colour, pinning the beauty into a patterned tapestry for all to see. The entire day was charged with the natural delight of endless, sheer existence. It was visible.

Each detail, moreover, claimed attention, as though never seen properly before; no longer dulled by familiarity, but shaking off its "ordinary" appearance, proud to be looked at, naked and alive. The rivulet ran on, but did not run away; the gravel paths, soft as rolled brown sugar, led somewhere, but led in both directions, each of them inviting; the blue of the sky did not stay "up there and far away," but dropped down close in myriad flakes, lifting the green carpet of the lawn to meet it. The day seemed like a turning circle that changed every moment to show another aspect of its gorgeous pattern, yet, while changing, only turned, unable to grow older or to pass away. There was something real at last, something that could be known, enjoyed — something of eternity about it. It was real.

"Wherever has he got to?" exclaimed Judy, trying to pierce the distances of earth and sky with distended eyes. "He can't be very far away, because — I kissed him."

Tim, sitting beside her on the grass, felt the exquisite mystery of it too. It was marvellous that any one could vanish in such a way. But he hesitated too. He felt uncertain about something. His thoughts flew off to that strange wood he loved to play in. He remembered the warning: "Beware the centre, if you enter; For once you're *there*, you disappear!" But this explanation did not appeal to him as likely now. He stared at Judy and his uncle. Some one *had* touched him, making him warm and happy. He remembered that distinctly. He had caught a glimpse — though a glimpse too marvellous to be seen for long, even to be remembered properly. "But there's no good looking unless we know where to look," he remarked. "Is there?"

"He's just gone out like a candle," whispered Judy.

“Extror’nary,” declared her brother, hugging the excitement that thrilled his heart. “But he can’t be really lost. I’m sure of that!”

And a great hush fell upon them all. Some one, it seemed, was listening; some one was watching; some one was waiting for them to move.

“Uncle?” they said in the same breath together, then hung upon his answer.

This authority hesitated a moment, looking about him expectantly as though for help.

“I think,” he stated shyly, “I think — he’s — hiding.”

Nothing more wonderful ever fell from grown-up lips. They had heard it said before — but only said. Now they realised it.

“Hiding!” They stood up; they could see further that way. But they waited for more detail before showing their last approval.

“Out here,” he added.

They were not quite sure. They expected a disclosure more out of the ordinary. It *might* be true, but —

“Hide-and-seek?” they repeated doubtfully. “But that’s just a game.” They were unsettled in their minds.

“Not *that* kind,” he replied significantly. “I mean the kind the rain plays with the wind and leaves, the stream with the stones and roots along its bank, the rivers with the sea. That’s the kind of hide-and-seek I mean!”

He chose instinctively watery symbols. And his tone conveyed something so splendid and mysterious that it was impossible to doubt or hesitate a moment longer.

“Oh,” they exclaimed. “It never ends, you mean?”

“Goes on for ever and ever,” he murmured. “The moment the river finds the sea it disappears and the sea begins to look. The wind never really finds the clouds, and the sun and the stars—”

“*We* know!” they shouted, cutting his explanations short.

“Come on then!” he cried. “We’ve got the hunt of our lives before us.” And he began to run about in a circle like an animal trying to catch its tail.

“But are we to look for him, or he for us?” inquired the boy, after a preliminary canter over the flower-beds.

“We for him.” They sprang to attention and clapped their hands.

“It’s an enormous hide,” said Tim. “We may get lost ourselves. Better look out!”

And then they waited for instructions. But the odd thing was that their uncle waited too. There was this moment’s hesitation. They looked to him. The old fixed habit asserted itself: a grown-up must surely know more than they did. How could it be otherwise? In this case, however, the grown-up seemed in doubt. He looked at them. It *was* otherwise.

“It’s so long since I played this kind of hide-and-seek,” he murmured. “I’ve rather forgotten—”

He stopped short. There certainly was a difficulty. Nobody knew in what direction to begin.

“It’s a snopportunity,” exclaimed Judy. “I’m sure of that!”

“We just look — everywhere!” cried Tim.

A light broke over their uncle’s face as if a ray of sunshine touched it. His mind cleared. Some old, forgotten joy, wonderful as the dawn, burst into his heart, rose to fire in his eyes, flooded his whole being. A glory long eclipsed, a dream interrupted years ago, an uncompleted game of earliest youth — all these rose from their hiding-place and recaptured him, soul and body. He glanced at the children. These things he had recaptured, they, of course, had never lost; this state and attitude of wonder was their natural prerogative; he had recovered the ownership of the world, but they had possessed it always. They knew the whole business from beginning to end — only they liked to hear it stated. That was obviously his duty as a grown-up: to stick the label on.

“Of course,” he whispered, deliciously enchanted. “You’ve got it. It’s *the* snopportunity! The great thing is to — look.”

And, as if to prove him right, a flock of birds passed sweeping through the air above their heads, paused in mid-flight, wheeled, fluttered noisily a second, then scattered in all directions like leaves whirled by an eddy of loose, autumn wind.

“Come on,” cried Tim, remembering perhaps the “dodgy” butterfly and trying to imitate it with his arms and legs. “I know where to go first. Just follow me!”

“And there’ll be signs, remember,” Uncle Felix shouted as he followed. “Whoever finds a sign must let the others know at once.”

They began with the feeling that they would discover the Stranger in a moment, sure of the places where he had tried cleverly to conceal himself, but soon began to realise that this was no ordinary game, and that he certainly knew of mysterious spots and corners they had never dreamed about. It was as Tim declared, “an enormous hide.” Come-Back Stumper’s cunning dive into bed was nothing compared to the skill with which this hider eluded their keen searching. There was another difference too. In Stumper’s case their interest had waned, they felt they had been cheated somehow, they knew themselves defeated and had given up the search. But here the interest was unfailing; it increased rather than diminished; they were ever on the very edge of finding him, and more than once they shrieked with joy, “I’ve got him!” — only to find they had been “very hot” but not quite hot enough. It was, like everything else upon this happy morning, endless.

It continued and continued, as naturally as the rivulet that ran for ever downhill to find the sea, that nothing, it seemed, could put a stop to, much less an end. The feeling that time was passing utterly disappeared; weeks, months, and years lay waiting somewhere near, but could be left or taken, used or not used, as they pleased. To take a week and use it was like picking a flower that looked much prettier growing sweetly in the sunny earth. Why pick it? It came to an end that way! The minutes, the hours and days, morning, noon and night as well, the very seasons too, offered themselves, and — vanished. They did not come and go, they were just “there”; and to steal into one or other of them at will was like stealing into one mood after another as the heart decreed. They were mere counters in the gorgeous and unending game. They helped to hide the mysterious Stranger who was evidently in the centre round which all life lay grouped so marvellously. They hid and covered him as moods hide and cover the heart that wears them — temporarily. Uncle Felix and the children used them somewhat in this way, it seems, for while they looked and hunted in and out among them, any minute, day or season was recoverable at will. They did not pass away.

It was the seekers who passed through them. To Uncle Felix, at any rate, it seemed a fact — this joyous sensation of immense duration, yet of nothing passing away: the bliss of utter freedom. He gasped to realise it. But the children did not gasp. They had always known that nothing ever really came to an end. “The weather’s still here,” he heard Judy calling across the lawn to Tim — as though she had just been looking among December snowdrifts and had popped back again into the fragrance of midsummer hayfields. “The Equator’s made of golden butterflies, all shining,” the boy called back, having evidently just been round the world and seen its gleaming waist….

But none of them had found what they were looking for….

They had looked in all the difficult places where a clever player would be most likely to conceal himself, yet in vain; there was no definite sign of him, no footprints on the flower-beds or along the edge of the shrubberies. The garden proper had been searched from end to end without result. The children had been to the particular hiding-places each knew best, Tim to the dirty nook between the ilex and the larder window, and Judy to the scooped-out trunk of the rotten elm, and both together to the somewhat smelly channel between the yew trees and a disused outhouse — all equally untenanted.

In the latter gloomy place, in fact, they met. No sunlight pierced the dense canopy of branches; it was barely light enough to see. Judy and Tim advanced towards each other on tiptoe, confident of discovery at last. They only realised their mistake at five yards’ distance.

“You!” exclaimed Tim, in a disappointed whisper. “I thought it was going to be a sign.” “I felt positive he’d be in here somewhere,” said Judy.

“Perhaps we’re both signs,” they declared together, then paused, and held a secret discussion about it all.

“He’s got a splendid hide,” was the boy’s opinion. “D’you think Uncle Felix knows anything? You heard what he said about signs…!”

They decided without argument that he didn’t. He just went “thumping about” in the usual places. He’d never find him. They agreed it was very wonderful. Tim advanced his pet idea — it had been growing on him: “I think *he* knows some special place we’d never look in — a hole or something.” But Judy met the suggestion with superior knowledge: “He moves about,” she announced. “He doesn’t stop in a hole. He flies at an awful rate — from place to place. That’s — signs, I expect.”

“Wings?” suggested Tim.

Judy hesitated. “You remember — at breakfast, wasn’t it? — ages and ages ago — all had wings — those things—”

She broke off and pointed significantly at the figure of Uncle Felix who was standing with his head cocked up at an awkward angle, staring into the sky. Shading his eyes with one hand, he was apparently examining the topmost branches of the tall horse-chestnuts.

“He couldn’t have got up a tree, could he, or into a bird’s nest?” said the girl. She offered the suggestion timidly, yet her brother did not laugh at her. There was this strange feeling that the hider might be anywhere — simply anywhere. This was no ordinary game.

“There’s such a lot,” Tim answered vaguely.

She looked at him with intense admiration. The wonder of this marvellous game was in their hearts. The moment when they would find him was simply too extraordinary to think about.

Judy moved a step closer in the darkness. “Can he get small, then — like that?” she whispered.

But the question was too much for Tim.

“Anyhow he gets about, doesn’t he?” was the reply, the vagueness of uncertain knowledge covering the disappointment. “There are simply millions of trees and nests and — and rabbit-holes all over the place.”

They were silent for a moment. Then Judy asked, still more timidly:

“I say, Tim?”

“Well.”

“What does he really look like? I can’t remember quite. I mean — shall we recognise him?”

Tim stared at her. “My dear!” he gasped, as though the question almost shocked him. “Why, he touched me — on the head! I felt it!”

Judy laughed softly; it was only that she wanted to remind herself of something too precious to be forgotten.

"*I* kissed him!" she whispered, a hint of triumph in her voice and eyes.

They stood staring at one another for a little while, weighing the proofs thus given; then Tim broke the silence with a question of his own. It was the result of this interval of reflection. It was an unexpected sort of question:

"Do you know what it is we want?" he asked. "I do," he added hurriedly, lest she should answer first.

"What?" she said, seeing from his tone and manner that it was important.

"We shall never, never find him this way," he said decisively.

"What?" she repeated with impatience.

Tim lowered his voice. "What we want," he said with the emphasis of true conviction, "is — a Leader."

Judy repeated the word after him immediately; it was obvious; why hadn't she thought of it herself? "Of course," she agreed. "That's it exactly."

"We're looking wrong somewhere," her brother added, and they both turned their heads in the direction of Uncle Felix who was still standing on the lawn in a state of bewilderment, examining the treetops. He expected something from the air, it seemed. Perhaps he was looking for rain — he loved water so. But evidently he was not a proper leader; he was even more bewildered than themselves; he, too, was looking wrong somewhere, somehow. They needed some one to show them how and where to look. Instinctively they felt their uncle was no better at this mighty game than they were. If only somebody who knew and understood — a leader — would turn up!

And it was just then that Judy clutched her brother by the arm and said in a startled whisper, "Hark!"

They harked. Through the hum of leaves and insects that filled the air this sweet June morning they heard another sound — a voice that reached them even here beneath the dense roof of shrubbery. They heard words distinctly, though from far away, rising, falling, floating across the lawn as though some one as yet invisible were singing to himself.

For it was the voice of a man, and it certainly was a song. Moreover, without being able to explain it exactly, they felt that it was just the kind of singing that belonged to the kind of day: it was right and natural, a fresh and windy sound in the careless notes, almost as though it was a bird that sang. So exquisite was it, indeed, that they listened spellbound without moving, standing hand in hand beneath the dark bushes. And Uncle Felix evidently heard it too, for he turned his head; instead of examining the tree-tops he peered into the rose trees just behind him, both hands held to his ears to catch the happy song. There was both joy and laughter in the very sound of it:

My secret's in the wind and open sky;
There is no longer any Time — to lose;
The world is young with laughter; we can fly
Among the imprisoned hours as we choose.
The rushing minutes pause; an unused day
Breaks into dawn and cheats the tired sun.
The birds are singing. Hark! Come out and play!
There is no hurry; life has just begun.

The voice died away among the rose trees, and the birds burst into a chorus of singing everywhere, as if they carried on the song among themselves. Then, in its turn, their chorus also died away. Tim looked at his sister. He seemed about to burst — if not into song, then into a thousand pieces.

"A leader!" he exclaimed, scarcely able to get the word out in his excitement. "Did you hear it?"

"Tim!" she gasped — and they flew out, hand in hand still, to join their uncle in the sunshine.

"Found anything?" he greeted them before they could say a word. "I heard some one singing — a man, or something — over there among the rose trees—"

"And the birds," interrupted Judy. "Did you hear them?"

"Uncle," cried Tim with intense conviction, "it's a sign. I do believe it's a sign—"

"That's exactly what it is," a deep voice broke in behind them " — a sign; and no mistake about it either."

All three turned with a start. The utterance was curiously slow; there was a little dragging pause between each word. The rose trees parted, and they found themselves face to face with some one whom they had seen twice before in their lives, and who now made his appearance for the third time therefore — the man from the End of the World: the Tramp.

THE LEADER

IV

He was a ragged-looking being, yet his loose, untidy clothing became him so well that his appearance seemed almost neat — it was certainly natural: he was dressed in the day, the garden, the open air. Judy and Tim ran up fearlessly and began fingering the bits of stuff that clung to him from the fields and ditches. In his beard were some stray rose leaves and the feather of a little bird. The children had an air of sheltering against a tree trunk — woodland creatures — mice or squirrels chattering among the roots, or birds flown in to settle on a hedge. They were not one whit afraid. For nothing surprised them on this marvellous morning; everything that happened they — accepted.

“He’s shining underneath,” Judy whispered in Tim’s ear, cocking her head sideways so that she could catch her brother’s eye and at the same time feel the great comfort of the new arrival against her cheek.

“And awfully strong,” was the admiring reply.

“So soft, too,” she declared — though whether of mind or body was not itemized— “like feathers.”

“And smells delicious,” affirmed Tim, “like hay and rabbits.”

Each child picked out the quality the heart desired and approved; almost, it seemed, each felt him differently. Yet, although not one whit afraid, they whispered. Perhaps the wonder of it choked their utterance a little.

The Tramp smiled at them. All four smiled. The way he had emerged from among the rose trees made them smile. It was as natural as though he had been there all the time, growing out of the earth, waving in the morning air and sunlight. There was something simple and very beautiful about him, perhaps, that made them smile like this. Then Uncle Felix, whom the first shock of surprise had apparently deprived of speech, found his voice and observed, “Good-morning to you, good-morning.” The little familiar phrase said everything in a quite astonishing way. It was like a song.

“*Good*-morning,” replied the Tramp. “It is. I was wondering how long it would be before you saw me.”

“Ah!” said Judy and Tim in the same breath, “of course.”

“The fact is,” stammered Uncle Felix, “you’re so like the rest of the garden — so like a bit of the garden, I mean — that we didn’t notice you at first. But we heard—” he broke off in the middle of the sentence— “That *was* you singing, wasn’t it?” he asked with a note of hushed admiration in his voice.

The smile upon the great woodland face broadened perceptibly. It was as though the sun burst through a cloud. “That’s hard to say,” he replied, “when the whole place is singing. I’m just like everything else — alive. It’s natural to sing, and natural to dance — when you’re alive and looking — and know it.”

He spoke with a sound as though he had swallowed the entire morning, a forest rustling in his chest, singing water just behind the lips.

“Looking!” exclaimed Uncle Felix, picking out the word. He moved closer; the children caught his hands; the three of them sheltered against the spreading figure till the four together seemed like a single item of the landscape. “Looking!” he repeated, “that’s odd. We’ve lost something too. You said too, — just now — something about — a sign, I think?” Uncle Felix added shyly.

All waited, but the Tramp gave no direct reply. He smiled again and folded two mighty arms about them. Two big feathery wings seemed round them. Judy thought of a nest, Tim of a cozy rabbit hole, Uncle Felix had the amazing impression that there were wild flowers growing in his heart, or that a flock of robins had hopped in and began to sing.

“Lost something, have you?” the Tramp enquired genially at length; and the slow, leisurely way he said it, the curious half-singing utterance he used, the words falling from his great beard with this sound as of wind through leaves or water over sand and pebbles — somehow included them in the rhythm of existence to which he himself naturally belonged. They all seemed part of the garden, part of the day, part of the sun and earth and flowers together, marvellously linked and caught within some common purpose. Question and answer in the ordinary sense were wrong and useless. They must *feel* — feel as he did — to find what they sought.

It was Uncle Felix who presently replied: “Something — we’ve — mis-laid,” he said hesitatingly, as though a little ashamed that he expressed the truth so lamely.

“Mis-laid?” asked the Tramp. “Mis-laid, eh?”

“Forgotten,” put in Tim.

“Mis-laid or forgotten,” repeated the other. “That all?”

“Some*body*, I should have said,” explained Uncle Felix yet still falteringly, “somebody we’ve lost, that is.”

“Hiding,” Tim said quickly.

“About,” added Judy. There was a hush in all their voices.

The Tramp picked the small feather from his beard — apparently a water-wagtail’s — and appeared to reflect a moment. He held the soft feather tenderly between a thumb and finger that were thick as a walking-stick and stained with roadside mud and yellow with flower-pollen too.

“Hiding, is he?” He held up the feather as if to see which way it fluttered in the wind. “Hiding?” he repeated, with a distinct broadening of the smile that was already big enough to cover half the lawn. It shone out of him almost like rays of light, of sunshine, of fire. “Aha! That’s his way, maybe, just a little way he has — of playing with you.”

“You know him, then! You know who it is?” two eager voices asked instantly. “Tell us at once. You’re leader now!” The children, in their excitement, almost burrowed into him; Uncle Felix drew a deep breath and stared. His whole body listened.

And slowly the Tramp turned round his shaggy head and gazed into their faces, each in turn. He answered in his leisurely, laborious way as though each word were a bank-note that he dealt out carefully, fixing attention upon its enormous value. There was certainly a tremor in his rumbling voice. But there was no hurry.

"I've — seen him," he said with feeling, "seen him — once or twice. My life's thick with memories—"

"Seen him!" sprang from three mouths simultaneously.

"Once or twice, I said." He paused and sighed. Wind stirred the rose trees just behind him. He went on murmuring in a lower tone; and as he spoke a sense of exquisite new beauty stole across the old-world garden. "It was — in the morning — very early," he said below his breath.

"At dawn!" Uncle Felix whispered.

"When the birds begin," from Judy very softly.

"To sing," Tim added, a single shiver of joy running through all three of them at once. The enchantment of their own dim memories of the dawn — of a robin, of swallows, and of an up-and-under bird flashed magically back.

The Tramp nodded his great head slowly; he bowed it to the sunlight, as it were. There was a great light flaming in his eyes. He seemed to give out heat.

"Just seen him — and no more," he went on marvellously, as though speaking of a wonderful secret of his own. "Seen him a-stealing past me — in the dawn. Just looked at me — and went — went back again behind the rushing minutes!"

"Was it long ago? How long?" asked Judy with eager impatience impossible to suppress. They did not notice the reference to Time, apparently.

The wanderer scratched his tangled crop of hair and seemed to calculate a moment. He gazed down at the small white feather in his hand. But the feather held quite still. No breath of wind was stirring. "When I was young," he said, with an expression half quizzical, half yearning. "When I first took to the road — as a boy — and began to look."

"As long ago as that!" Tim murmured breathlessly. It was like a stretch of history.

The Tramp put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I was about your age," he said, "when I got tired of the ordinary life, and started wandering. And I've been wandering and looking ever since. Wandering — and wondering — and looking — ever since," he repeated in the same slow way, while the feather between his great fingers began to wave a little in time with the dragging speech.

The wonder of it enveloped them all three like a perfume rising from the entire earth.

"We've been looking for ages too," cried Judy.

"And we've seen him," exclaimed her brother quickly.

"Somebody," added Uncle Felix, more to himself than to the others.

The Tramp combed his splendid beard, as if he hoped to find more feathers in it.

"This morning, wasn't it?" he asked gently, "very early?"

They reflected a moment, but the reflection did not help them much. "Ages and ages ago," they answered. "So long that we've forgotten rather—"

"Forgotten what he looks like. That's it. Same trouble here," and he tapped his breast. "We're all together, doing the same old thing. The whole world's doing it. It's the only thing to do." And he looked so wise and knowing that their wonder increased to a kind of climax; they were tapping their own breasts before they knew it.

"Doing it everywhere," he went on, weighing his speech as usual; "only some don't know they're doing it." He looked significantly into their shining eyes, then finished with a note of triumph in his voice. "We do!"

"Hooray!" cried Tim. "We can all start looking together now."

"Maybe," agreed the wanderer, very sweetly for a tramp, they thought.

They glanced at their Uncle first for his approval; the Tramp glanced at him too; his face was flushed and happy, the eyes very bright. But there was an air of bewilderment about him too. He nodded his head, and repeated in a shy, contented voice — as though he surrendered himself to some enchantment too great to understand— "I think so; I hope so; I — wonder!"

"We've looked everywhere already," Tim shouted by way of explanation — when the Tramp cut him short with a burst of rolling laughter:

“But in the wrong kind of places, maybe,” he suggested, moving forward like a hedge or bit of hayfield the wind pretends to shift.

“Oh, well — perhaps,” the boy admitted.

“Probly,” said Judy, keeping close beside him.

“Of course,” decided Uncle Felix; “but we’ve been pretty warm once or twice all the same.” He lumbered after the other three, yet something frisky about him, as about a pony released into a field and still uncertain of its bounding strength.

“Have you really?” remarked their leader, good-humouredly, but with a touch of sarcasm. “Good and right, so far as it goes; only ‘warm’ is not enough; we want to be hot, burning hot and steaming all the time. That’s the way to find him.” He paused and turned towards them; he gathered them nearer to him with his smiling eyes somehow. “It’s like this,” he went on more slowly than ever: “A good hider doesn’t choose the difficult places; he chooses the common ordinary places where nobody would ever think of looking.” He kept his eyes upon them to make sure they understood him. “The little, common places,” he continued with emphasis, “that no one thinks worth while. He hides in the open — bang out in the open!”

“In the open!” cried the children. “The open air!”

“In the open!” gasped Uncle Felix. “The open sea!”

The Tramp almost winked at them. He looked like a lot of ordinary people. He looked like everybody. He looked like the whole world somehow. He smiled just like a multitude. He spoke, as it were, for all the world — said the one simple thing that everybody everywhere was trying to say in millions of muddled words and sentences. The wind and trees and sunshine said it with him, for him, after him, before him. He said the thing — so Uncle Felix felt, at any rate, — that was always saying itself, that was everywhere heard, though rarely listened to; but, according to the children, the thing they knew and believed already. Only it was nice to hear it stated definitely — *they* felt.

And the tide of enchantment rose higher and higher; in a tide of flowing gold it poured about all three.

"That's it," the Tramp continued, as though he had not noticed the rapture his very ordinary words had caused. "Sea and land and air together. But more than that — he hides deep and beautiful."

"Deeply and beautifully," murmured the writer of historical novels, all of them entirely forgotten now.

"Deep and beautiful," repeated the other, as though he preferred the rhythm of his own expression. He drew himself up and swallowed a long and satisfying draught of air and sunshine. He waved the little wagtail's feather before their eyes. He touched their faces with its tip. "Deep, tender, kind, and beautiful," he elaborated. "Those are the signs — signs that he's been along — just passed that way. The whole world's looking, and the whole world's full of signs!"

For a moment all stood still together like a group of leafy things a passing wind has shaken, then left motionless; a wild rose-bush, a climbing vine, a clinging ivy branch — all three kept close to the stalwart figure of their big, incomparable leader.

And Judy knew at last the thing she didn't know; Tim felt himself finally in the eternal centre of his haunted wood; in the eyes of Uncle Felix there was a glistening moisture that caught the sunlight like dew upon the early lawn. He staggered a little as though he were on a deck and the sea was rolling underneath him.

"How ever did you find it out?" he asked, after an interval that no one had cared to interrupt. "What in the world made you first think of it?" And though his voice was very soft and clear, it was just a little shaky.

"Well," drawled the Tramp, "maybe it was just because I thought of nothing else. On the road we live sort of simply. There's never any hurry; the wind's a-blowing free; everything's sweet and careless — and so am I." And he chuckled happily to himself.

"Let's begin at once!" cried Tim impatiently. "I feel warm already — hot all over — simply burning."

The Tramp signified his agreement. "But you must each get a feather first," he told them, "a feather that a bird has dropped. It's a sign that we belong together. Birds know everything first. They go everywhere and see everything all at once. They're in the air, and on the ground, and on the water, and under it as well. They live in the open — sea or land. And if you have a feather in your hand — well, it means keeping in touch with everything that's going. They go light and easy; we must go light and easy too."

They stared at him with wonder at the breaking point. It all seemed so obviously and marvellously true. How had they missed it up till now?

"So get a feather," he went on quietly, "and then we can begin to look at once."

No one objected, no one criticised, no one hesitated. Tim knew where all the feathers were because he knew every nest in the garden. He led the way. In less than two minutes all had small, soft feathers in their hands.

"Now, we'll begin to look," the Tramp announced. "It's the loveliest game on earth, and the only one. It's Hide-and-Seek behind the rushing minutes. And, remember," he added, holding up a finger and chuckling happily, "there's no hurry, the wind's a-blowing free, the sun is warm, everything's sweet and careless — and so are we."

THE COMMON SIGNS

V

"But has he called yet?" asked Tim, remembering suddenly that it wasn't fair to begin till the hider announced that he was ready. "He's got to hoot first, you know. Hasn't he?" he added doubtfully.

"Listen!" replied the man of the long white roads. And he held his feather close against his ear, while the others copied him. Fixing their eyes upon a distant point, they listened, and as they listened, their lips relaxed, their mouths opened slowly, their eyebrows lifted — they heard, apparently, something too wonderful to be believed.

To Uncle Felix, still fumbling in his mind among unnecessary questions, it seemed that the power of hearing had awakened for the first time, or else had grown of a sudden extraordinarily acute. The children merely listened and said "Oh, oh, oh!"; the sound they heard was familiar, though never fully understood till now. For him, it was, perhaps, the recovery of a power he had long forgotten. At any rate he — heard. For the air passed through the tiny fronds of the feather — through the veined web of its delicate resistance — round the hollow stem and across the fluffy breadth of it — with a humming music as of wind among the telegraph wires, only infinitely sweet and far away. There were several notes in it, a chord — the music that accompanies all flying things, even a butterfly or settling leaf, and ever fills the air with unguessed melody.

It opened their power of hearing to a degree as yet undreamed of even by the all-believing children. Their feathers became wee, accurate, tuning-forks for all existence. They understood that everything in the whole world sang; that no rose leaf fluttered to the earth, no rabbit twitched its ears, no mouse its tail, no single bluebell waved a head towards its bluer neighbour, without this exquisite accompaniment of fairy music.

“Listen, listen!” the Tramp repeated softly from time to time, watching their faces keenly. “Listen, and you’ll hear him calling…!”

And this fairy humming, having so marvellously attuned their hearing, then led them on to the larger, louder sounds; they pricked their ears up, as the saying goes; they noticed the deeper music everywhere. For the morning breeze was rustling and whispering among the leaves and blades of grass with a thousand happy voices. It was the ordinary summer sound of moving air that no one pays attention to.

“Oh, that!” exclaimed Uncle Felix. “I hadn’t noticed it.” He felt ashamed. He who had taught them the beauty of the self-advertising Night-Wind, had somehow missed and overlooked the wonder — the searching, yearning beauty — of this meek, incomparable music: because it was so usual. For the first time in his life he heard the wind as it slipped between the leaves, shaking them into rapture.

“And that,” laughed the Tramp, cocking his great head to catch the murmur of the stream beyond the lawn, “if the dust of furniture and houses ain’t blocked your ears too thickly.” They stooped to listen. “Like laughter, isn’t it?” he observed, “singing and laughing mixed together?”

They straightened up again, too full of wonder to squeeze out any words.

“It’s everywhere,” said Uncle Felix, “this calling — these calling voices. Is that where you got *your* song from?”

“It’s everywhere and always,” replied the other evasively. “The birds get their singing from it. They get everything first, of course, then pass it on.

The whole world's music comes from that, though there's nothing — *nothing*," he added with emphasis, "to touch the singing of a bird. He's calling everywhere and always," he went on as no one contradicted him or ventured upon any question; "only you've got to listen close. He calls soft and beautiful. He doesn't shout and yell at you."

"Soft and beautiful, yes," repeated Uncle Felix below his breath, "the small, still voices of the air and sea and earth." And, as he said it, they caught the murmur of the little stream; they heard singing in the air as well. The blackbirds whistled in one direction, the thrushes trilled and gurgled in another, and overhead, both among the covering leaves and from the open sky, a chorus of twittering and piping filled the chambers of the day. Judy recalled, as of long ago, the warning bugle-call of an up-and-under bird; Tim faintly remembered having overheard some swallows "discussing" together; Uncle Felix saw a robin perched against a sky of pearly grey at the end of an interminable corridor that stretched across whole centuries…. Then, close beside the three of them, a bumble-bee, a golden fly, and a company of summer gnats went by — booming, trumpeting, singing like a tiny carillon of bells respectively.

"Hark and listen," exclaimed the Tramp with triumph in his voice, and looking down at Tim particularly. "He's calling all the time. It's the little ordinary sounds that give the hints."

"It's an enormous hide; I mean to look for ever and ever," cried the delighted boy.

"I can hear everything in the world now," cried Judy.

"Signs," said Uncle Felix, after a pause. This time he did not make a question of his thought, but merely dropped the word out like a note of music into the air. His feather answered it and took it further.

The Tramp caught the word flying before it reached the ground:

"Deep, tender, kind and beautiful," he said, "but above all — beautiful." He turned his shaggy head and looked about him carelessly. "There's one of them, for instance," he added, pointing across the lawn. "There's a sign. It means he's passed that way! He ain't too far away — may-be."

They followed the direction of his eyes. A dragon-fly paused hovering above the stream, its reflection mirrored in the clear running water underneath. Against the green palisade of reeds its veined and crystal wings scattered the sunlight into shining flakes. The blue upon its body burned — a patch of flaming beauty in mid-air. They watched it for a moment. Then, suddenly — it was gone, the spot was empty. But the speed, the poise, the perfect movement, the flashing wings, above all the flaming blue upon its tail still held them spellbound. Somehow, it seemed, they had borrowed that speed, that flashing beauty, making the loveliness part and parcel of themselves. Swiftly they turned and stared up at the Tramp. There was a rapt look upon his tangled face.

“A sign,” he was saying softly. “He’s passed this way. He can’t be hiding very far from here.” And, drawing a long, deep breath, he gazed about him into endless space as though about to sing again.

The dragon-fly had vanished, none knew whither, gone doubtless into some new hiding-place; it just gave the hint, then slipped away upon its business. But the wonder and the beauty it had brought remained behind, crept into every heart. The mystery of life, the reality that lay hiding at the core of things, the marvel and the dream — all these were growing clearer. All lovely things were “signs.” And there fell a sudden hush upon the group, for the Thing that Nobody could Understand crept up and touched them.

Abruptly, then, lest the wonder of it should prove more than they could bear perhaps, a blackbird whistled with a burst of flying laughter at them from the shrubberies. Laughter and dancing both were part of wonder. The Tramp at once moved forward, chuckling in his beard; he waved his arms; his step was lighter, quicker; he was singing softly to himself: they only caught stray sentences, but they loved the windy ringing of his voice. They knew not where he borrowed words and tune: “The world is young with laughter; we can fly…. Among the imprisoned hours as we choose…. The birds are singing…. Hark! Come out and play…. There is no hurry…. Life has just begun….”

“Come on!” cried Tim. “Let’s follow him; we’re getting frightfully warm!”

He seized Judy and his uncle by the hands and cleared the rivulet with a running leap. The Tramp, however, preferred to wade across. “Get into everything you can,” he explained in mid-stream with a laugh. “It keeps you in touch; it’s all part of the looking.”

He led them into the field where the blackbird still went on whistling its heart out into the endless summer morning. But to them it seemed that he led them out across the open world for ever and ever….

It grew very marvellous, this game of hide and seek. Sometimes they forgot it was a game at all, forgot what they were looking for, forgot that they were looking for anything or any one at all. Yet the mighty search continued subconsciously, even when passing incidents drew their attention from their chief desire. Always, at the back of thought, lay this exquisite, sweet memory in their hearts, something they half remembered, half forgot, but very dear, very marvellous. Some one was hiding somewhere, waiting, longing to play with them, expecting to be found.

It may be that intervals went by, those intervals called years and months; yet no one noticed them, and certainly no one named them. They knew one feeling only — the joy of endless search. Some one was hiding, some one was near, and signs lay scattered everywhere. This some one lay in his wonderful hiding-place and watched their search with laughter in his eyes. He remained invisible; perhaps they would never see him actually; but they felt his presence everywhere, in every object, every tree and flower and stone, in sun and wind, in water and in earth. The power and loveliness of common things became insistent. They were aware of them. It seemed they brushed against this shining presence, pushing for ever against a secret door of exit that led into the final hiding-place. Eager to play with them, yet more eager still to be discovered, the wonderful hider kept just beyond their sight and touch, while covering the playground with endless signs that he was near enough for them to know for certain he was — there. For among the four of them there was no heart that doubted. None explained. None said No…. Nor was there any hurry.

“*I* believe,” announced Tim at length, with the air of a sage about him, “the best way is to sit still and wait; then he’ll just come out like a rabbit and show himself.” And, as no one contradicted, he added confidently, “that’s *my* idea.” His love was evidently among the things of the soil, rabbits, rats and hedgehogs, both hunter and adventurer strong in him.

“A hole!” cried Judy with indignation. “Never! He’s in the air. I heard a bird just now that—”

“Whew!” whistled Uncle Felix, interrupting her excitedly. “He’s been along here. Look! I’m sure of it.” And he said it with such conviction that they ran up, expecting actual footprints.

“How do you know?” Tim asked dubiously, seeing no immediate proof himself. All paused for the reply; but Uncle Felix also paused. He had said a thing it seemed he could not justify.

“Don’t hesitate,” said the Tramp, watching him with amusement. “Don’t think before you speak. There’s nothing to think about until you’ve spoken.”

Uncle Felix wore an expression of bewilderment. “I meant the flowers,” he stammered, still unsure of his new powers.

“Of course,” the other chuckled. “Didn’t I tell you ‘tender and beautiful,’ and ‘bang out in the open’?”

“Then you’re right, Uncle; they *are* signs,” cried Judy, “and you *do* like butter,” and she danced away to pick the dandelions that smothered the field with gold. But the Tramp held out his feather like a wand.

“They’re our best signs, remember,” he cried. “You might as well pick a feather out of a living bird.”

“Oh!” — and she pulled herself up sharply, a little flush running across her face and the wind catching at her flying hair. She swayed a moment, nearly overbalancing owing to the interrupted movement, and looking for all the world like a wild young rose tree, her eyes two shining blossoms in the air. Then she dropped down and buried her nose among the crowd of yellow flowers. She smelt them audibly, drawing her breath in and letting it out again as though she could almost taste and eat the perfume.

“That’s better,” said the Tramp approvingly. “Smell, then follow,” and he moved forward again with his dancing, happy step. “All the wild, natural things do it,” he cried, looking back over his shoulder at the three who were on their knees with faces pressed down against the yellow carpet. “It’s the way to keep on the trail. Smell — then follow.”

Something flashed through the clearing mind of the older man, though where it came from he had less idea than the dandelions: a mood of forgotten beauty rushed upon him —

”O, follow, follow!
Through the caverns hollow,
As the song floats thou pursue,
Where the wild bee never flew—”

and he ran dancing forward after the great Tramp, singing the words as though they were his own.

Yet the flowers spread so thickly that the trail soon lost itself; it seemed like a paper-chase where the hare had scattered coloured petals instead of torn white copy-books. Each searcher followed the sign of his or her own favourite flower; like a Jack-in-the-Box each one bobbed up and down, smelling, panting, darting hither and thither as in the mazes of some gnat — or animal-dance, till knees and hands were stained with sweet brown earth, and lips and noses gleamed with the dust of orange-tinted pollen.

“Anyhow, I’d rather look than find,” cried Tim, turning a somersault over a sandy rabbit-mound.

The swallows flashed towards Judy, a twittering song sprinkling itself like liquid silver behind them as they swooped away again.

“I expect,” the girl confessed breathlessly, “that when we do find him — we shall just die — !”

“Of happiness, and wonder,” ventured Uncle Felix, watching a common Meadow Brown that perched, opening and closing its wings, upon his sleeve. And the Tramp, almost invisible among high standing grass and thistles, laughed and called in his curious, singing voice, “There is no hurry! Life has just begun!”

“Then we might as well sit down,” suggested Uncle Felix, and suiting the action to the word, chose a nice soft spot upon the mossy bank and made himself comfortable as though he meant to stay; the Tramp did likewise, gathering the children close about his tangled figure. For one thing a big ditch faced them, its opposite bank overgrown with bramble bushes, and for another the sloping moss offered itself invitingly, like a cushioned sofa. So they lay side by side, watching the empty ditch, listening to the faint trickle of water tinkling down it. Slender reeds and tall straight grasses fringed the nearer edge, and, as the wind passed through them with a hush and whisper, they bent over in a wave of flowing green.

"He's certainly gone that way," Judy whispered, following with her eyes the direction of the bending reeds. She was getting expert now.

"Along the ditch, I do believe," agreed Tim. There were no flowers in it, and few, perhaps, would have found beauty there, yet the pointing of the reeds was unmistakable. "It's chock full of stuff," he added, "but a rat could get along, so I suppose—"

"The signs are very slight sometimes," murmured the Tramp, his head half buried in the moss, "and sometimes difficult as well. You'd be surprised." He flung out his arms and legs and continued laughingly. "When things are contrary you may be sure you're getting somewhere — getting warm, that is."

The children heard this outburst, but they did not listen. They were absorbed in something else already, for the movements of the reeds were fascinating. They began to imitate them, swaying their heads and bodies to and fro in time, and crooning to themselves in an attempt to copy the sound made by the wind among the crowded stalks.

"Don't," objected Uncle Felix, half in fun, "it makes me dizzy." He was tempted to copy them, however, and made an effort, but the movement caught him in the ribs a little. His body, like his mind, was not as supple as theirs. An oak tree or an elm, perhaps, was more his model.

"Do," the Tramp corrected him, swaying as he said it. "Swing with a thing if you want to understand it. Copy it, and you catch its meaning. That's rhythm!" He made an astonishing mouthful of the word. The children overheard it.

"How do you spell it?" Judy asked.

"I don't," he replied; "I do it. Once you get into the" — he took a great breath— "rhythm of a thing, you begin to like it. See?"

And he went on swaying his big shoulders in imitation of the rustling reeds. All four swayed together then, holding their feathers before them like little flying banners. More than ever, they seemed things growing out of the earth, out of the very ditch. The movement brought a delicious, soothing sense of peace and safety over them; earth, air, and sunshine all belonged to them, plenty for everybody, no need to get there first and snatch at the best places. There was no hurry, life had just begun. They seemed to have dug a hole in space and curled up cosily inside it. They whispered curious natural things to one another. “A wren is settling on my hair,” said Judy: “a butterfly on my neck,” said Uncle Felix: “a mouse,” Tim mentioned, “is making its nest in my trousers pocket.” And the Tramp kept murmuring in his voice of wind and water, “I’m full of air and sunlight, floating in them, floating away… my secret’s in the wind and open sky… there is no longer any Time — to lose….”

A bright green lizard darted up the sun-baked bank, vanishing down a crack without a sound; it left a streak of fire in the air. A golden fly hovered about the tallest reed, then darted into another world, invisibly. A second followed it, a third, a fourth — points of gold that pinned the day fast against the moving wall of green. A wren shot at full speed along the bed of the ditch, threading its winding length together as upon a woven pattern. All were busy and intent upon some purpose common to the whole of them, and to everything else as well; even the things that did not move were doing something.

“I say,” cried Tim suddenly, “they’re covering him up. They’re hiding him better so that we shan’t find him. We’ve got too warm.”

How long they had been in that ditch when the boy exclaimed no one could tell; perhaps a lifetime, or perhaps an age only. It was long enough, at any rate, for the Tramp to have changed visibly in appearance — he looked younger, thinner, sprightlier, more shining. He seemed to have shed a number of outward things that made him bulky — bits of beard and clothing, several extra waistcoats, and every scrap of straw and stuff from the hedges that he wore at first. More and more he looked as Judy had seen him, ages and ages ago, emerging from the tarpaulin on the rubbish-heap at the End of the World.

He sprang alertly to his feet at the sound of Tim’s exclamation. The sunlit morning seemed to spring up with him.

“We have been very warm indeed,” he sang, “but we shall get warmer still before we find him. Besides, those things aren’t hiding him — they’re looking. Everything and everybody in the whole wide world is looking, but the signs are different for everybody, don’t you see? Each knows and follows their own particular sign. Come on!” he cried, “come on and look! We shall find him in the end.”

COME-BACK STUMPER’S SIGN

VI

The steep bank was easily managed. They were up it in a twinkling, a line of dancing figures, all holding hands.

First went the Tramp, shining and glowing like a mirror in the sunshine — fire surely in him; next Judy, almost flying with the joy and lightness in her — as of air; Tim barely able to keep tight hold of her hand, so busily did his feet love the roots and rabbit-holes of — earth; and finally, Uncle Felix, rolling to and fro, now sideways, now toppling headlong, roaring as he followed like a heavy wave. Fire, air, earth, and water — they summarised existence; owned and possessed the endless day; lived it, were one with it. Their leader, who apparently had swallowed the sun, fused and unified them in this amazing way with — fire.

And hardly had they passed the line of shy forget-me-nots on the top of the bank, than they ran against a curious looking object that at first appeared to be an animated bundle of some kind, but on closer inspection proved to be a human figure stooping. It was somebody very busy about the edges of a great clump of bramble bushes. At the sound of their impetuous approach it straightened up. It had the face of a man — yellowish, patched with red, breathless and very hot. It was Come-back Stumper.

He glared at them, furious at being disturbed, yet with an uneasy air, half comical, half ashamed, as of being — caught. He took on a truculent, aggressive attitude, as though he knew he would have to explain himself and did not want to do so. He turned and faced them.

“Mornin’,” he grunted fiercely. “It’s a lovely day.”

But they all agreed so promptly with him that he dropped the offensive at once. His face was *very* hot. It dripped.

“Energetic as usual,” observed Uncle Felix, while Tim poked among the bushes to see what he had been after, and Judy offered him a very dirty handkerchief to mop his forehead with. His bald head shone and glistened. Wisps of dark hair lay here and there upon it like the feathers of a crow’s torn wing.

“Thanks, dear,” he said stiffly, using the few inches of ragged cambric and then tucking the article absent-mindedly into a pocket of his shooting coat. “I’ve been up very early — since dawn. Since dawn,” he repeated in a much louder voice, “got up, in fact, with the sun.” He meant to justify his extreme and violent activity. He glanced at the Tramp with a curious air of respect. Tim thought he saluted him, but Judy declared afterwards he was only wiping “the hot stuff off the side of his dear old head.”

“Wonderful moment, — dawn, ain’t it, General?” said the Tramp. “Best in the whole day when you come to think of it.”

“It is, sir,” replied Stumper, as proud as though a Field-Marshal had addressed him, “and the first.” He looked more closely at the Tramp; he rubbed his eyes, and then produced the scrap of cambric and rubbed them again more carefully than before. Perhaps he, too, had been hoping for a leader! Something very proud and happy stole upon his perspiring face of ochre. He moved a step nearer. “Did you notice it this morning?” he asked in a whisper, “the dawn, I mean? Never saw anything like it in me life before. Thought I was in the Himalayas or the Caucasus again. Astonishin’, upon me word — the beauty of it! And the birds! Did you hear ‘em? Expect you usually do, though,” he added with a touch of unmistakable envy and admiration in his tone.

“Uncommon,” agreed the Tramp, “and no mistake about it. *They* knew, you see.” They no longer called each other “Sir” and “General”; they had come to an understanding apparently.

“Umph!” said Stumper, and looked round shyly at the others.

Stumper was evidently under the stress of some divine emotion he was half ashamed of. An unwonted passion stirred him. He seemed a prey to an unusual and irrepressible curiosity. Only the obvious fact that his listeners shared the same feelings with him loosened his sticky tongue and stole self-consciousness away. He had expected to be laughed at. Instead the group admired him. The Tramp — his manner proved it — thought of him very highly indeed.

“Never knew such a day in all me life before,” Stumper admitted frankly. “Couldn’t — simply couldn’t stay indoors.”

He still retained a trace of challenge in his tone. But no one challenged. Judy took his arm. “So you came out?” she said softly.

“Like us,” said Uncle Felix.

“Of course,” Tim added. But it was the Tramp who supplied the significant words they had all been waiting for, Stumper himself more eagerly than any one else. “To look,” he remarked quite naturally.

Stumper might have just won a great world-victory, judging by the expression that danced upon his face. He dropped all pretence at further concealment. He put his other arm round Tim’s shoulder, partly to balance himself better against Judy’s pushing, and partly because he realised the companionship of both children as very dear just then. He had a great deal to say, and wanted to say it all at once, but words never came to him too easily; he had missed many an opportunity in life for the want of fluent and spontaneous address. He stammered and halted somewhat in his delivery. A new language with but a single word in it would have suited him admirably.

“Yes,” he growled, “I came out — to look. But when I got out — I clean forgot what it was — who, I mean — no, *what*,” he corrected himself again, “I’d come out to look for. Can’t make it out at all.” He broke off in a troubled way.

“No?” agreed Judy sympathetically, as though *she* knew.

“But you want to find it awfully,” Tim stated as a fact.

“Awfully,” admitted Stumper with a kind of fierceness.

“Only you can’t remember what it looks like quite?” put in Uncle Felix.

Stumper hesitated a moment. “Too wonderful to remember properly,” he said more quietly; something like that. “But the odd thing is,” he went on in a lower tone, “I’ve seen it. I *know* I’ve seen it. Saw it this mornin’ — very early — when the pigeon woke me up — at dawn.”

“Pigeon!” exclaimed Tim and Judy simultaneously. “Dawn!”

“Carrier-pigeon — flew in at my open window — woke me,” continued the soldier in his gruff old voice. “I’ve used ’em — carrier-pigeons, you know. Sent messages — years ago. I understand the birds a bit. Extraordinary thing, I thought. Got up and looked at it.” He blocked again.

"Ah!" said some one, by way of encouragement.

"And it looked back at me." By the way he said it, it was clear he hardly expected to be believed.

"Of course," said Uncle Felix.

"Naturally," added Tim.

"And what d'you think?" Stumper went on, a note of yearning and even passion in his voice. "What d'you think?" he whispered: "I felt it had a message for me — brought *me* a message — something to tell me—"

"Round its neck or foot?" asked Tim.

Stumper drew the boy closer and looked down into his face. "Eyes," he mumbled, "in its small bright eyes. There was a flash, I saw it plainly — something strange and marvellous, something I've been looking for all my life."

No one said a single word, but the old soldier felt the understanding sympathy rising like steam from all of them.

"Then, suddenly, it was gone — out into the open sky — bang into the sunrise. And I saw the dawn all over everything. I dressed — rushed out — and—"

"Had it laid an egg?" Tim asked, remembering another kind of hunting somewhere, long ago.

"How could it?" Judy corrected him quickly. "There was — no time—" then stopped abruptly. She turned towards Come-Back Stumper; she gave him a hurried and affectionate hug. "And then," she asked, "what happened next?"

Stumper returned the hug, including Tim in it too. "I found *this* — fluttering in my hand," he said, and held up a small grey feather for them to admire. "It's the only clue I've got. The pigeon left it."

While they admired the feather and exhibited their own, Tim crying, "We've got five now, nearly a whole wing!" Stumper was heard to murmur above their heads, "And since I — came out to look — I've felt — quite different."

“Your secret’s in the wind and open sky!” cried Judy, dancing round him with excitement. Her voice came flying from the air.

“You’re awfully warm — you’re hot — you’re burning!” shouted Tim, clapping his hands. His voice seemed to rise out of the earth.

“We’ve all seen it, all had a glimpse,” roared Uncle Felix with a sound of falling water, rolling up nearer as he spoke. “It’s too wonderful to see for long, too wonderful to remember quite. But we shall find it in the end. We’re all looking!” He began a sort of dancing step. “And when we find it —” he went on.

“We’ll change the world,” shouted Stumper, as though he uttered a final word of command.

“It’s a he, remember,” interrupted Tim. “Come along!”

And then the Tramp, who had been standing quietly by, smiling to himself but saying nothing, came nearer, opened his great arms and drew the four of them together. His voice, his shining presence, the warm brilliance that glowed about him, seemed to envelop them like a flame of fire and a fire of — love.

“We’re thinking and arguing too much,” he drawled in his leisurely, big voice, “we lose the trail that way, we lose the rhythm. Just love and look and wonder — then we’ll find him. There is no hurry, life has just begun. But keep on looking all the time.” He turned to Stumper with a chuckle. “You said you had a flash,” he reminded him. “What’s become of it? You can’t have lost it — with that pigeon’s feather in your hand!”

“It’s waggling,” announced Tim, holding up his own, while the others followed suit. The little feathers all bent one way — towards the bramble clump. Their tiny, singing music was just audible in the pause.

“Yes,” replied Come-Back Stumper at length. “I’ve had a flash — flashes, in fact! What’s more,” he added proudly, “I was after a couple of them — just when you arrived.”

Everybody talked at once then. Uncle Felix and the children fell to explaining the signs and traces they had already discovered, each affirming vehemently that their own particular sign was the loveliest — the dragon-fly, the flowers, the wind, the bending reeds, even the lizard and the bumble-bee. The chorus of sound was like the chattering of rooks among the tree-tops; in fact, though the quality of tone of course was different, the resemblance to a concert of birds, all singing together in a summer garden, was quite striking. Out of the hubbub single words emerged occasionally — a “robin,” “swallows,” an “up-and-under bird” — yet, strange to say, so far as Stumper was concerned, only one thing was said; all said the same one thing; he heard this one thing only — as though the words and sentences they used were but different ways of pronouncing it, of spelling it, of uttering it. Moreover, the wind in the feather said it too, for the sound and intonation were similar. It was the thing that wind and running water said, that flame roared in the fireplace, that rain-drops pattered on the leaves, even house-flies, buzzing across the window-panes — everything everywhere, the whole earth, said it.

He stood still, listening in amazement. His face had dried by now; he passed his hand across it; he tugged at his fierce military moustache.

“Hiding — near us — in the open — everywhere,” he muttered, though no one heard him; “I’ve had my flashes too.”

“Different people get different signs, of course,” the Tramp made himself heard at length, “but they’re all the same. All lie along the trail. The earth’s a globe and circle, so everything leads to the same place — in the end.”

“Yes,” said Stumper; “thank you” — as though he knew it already, but felt that it was neatly put.

“Follow up your flash,” added the Tramp. “Smell — then follow. That is — keep on looking.”

Stumper turned, pirouetting on what the children called his “living leg.” “I will,” he cried, with an air of self-abandonment, and promptly diving by a clever manoeuvre out of their hands, he fell heavily upon all fours, and disappeared beneath the dense bramble bushes just behind them. Panting, and certainly perspiring afresh, he forced his way in among the network of thick leaves and prickly branches. They heard him puffing; it seemed they heard him singing too, as he reached forward with both arms into the dark interior. Caught by his whole-hearted energy, they tried to help; they pushed behind; they did their best to open a way for his head between the entwining brambles.

“Don’t!” he roared inside. “You’ll scratch my eyes out. I shan’t see — anything!” His mouth apparently was full of earth. They watched the retreating soles of his heavy shooting-boots. Slowly the feet were dragged in after him. They disappeared from sight. Stumper was gone.

“He’ll come back, though,” mentioned Judy. The performance had been so interesting that she almost forgot its object, however. Tim reminded her. “But he won’t find anything in a smelly place like that,” he declared. “I mean,” he added, “it can’t be a beetle or a grub that we’re — looking for.” Yet there was doubt and wonder in his voice. Stumper, a “man like that,” and a soldier, a hunter too, who had done scouting in an Indian jungle, and met tigers face to face — a chap like that could hardly disappear on all fours into a clump of bramble bushes without an excellent reason!

An interval of comparative silence followed, broken only by the faint murmur of the wind that stirred their humming feathers. They stood in a row and listened intently. Hardly a sound came from the interior of the bramble bushes. The soldier had justified his title. He had retired pletely. To Judy it occurred that he might be suffocated, to Tim that he might have been eaten by some animal, to Uncle Felix that he might have slipped out at the other side and made his escape. But no one expressed these idle thoughts in words. They believed in Stumper really. He invariably came back. This time would be no exception to the rule.

And, presently, as usual, Stumper did come back. They heard him grunting and panting long before a sign of him was visible. They heard his voice, “Got him! Knew I was right! Bah! Ugh!” as he spluttered earth and leaves from his mouth apparently. He emerged by degrees and backwards; backed out, indeed, like an enormous rabbit. His boots, his legs, his hands planted on the ground, his neck and then his face, looking out over his shoulder, appeared successively. “Just the kind of place he *would* choose!” he exclaimed triumphantly, collapsing back upon his haunches and taking a long, deep breath. Beside the triumph in his voice there was a touch of indescribable, gruff sweetness the children knew was always in his heart — no amount of curried-liver trouble could smother *that*. Just now it was more marked than usual.

“Show us!” they cried, gathering round him. Judy helped him to his feet; he seemed a little unsteady. Purple with the exertion of the search, both cheeks smeared with earth, neck-tie crooked, and old grey shooting-coat half-way up his back, Come-Back Stumper stood upright, and looked at them with shining eyes. He was the picture of a happy and successful man.

“There!” he growled, and held out a hand, palm upwards, still trembling with his recent exertions. “Didn’t I tell you?”

They crowded round to examine a small object that lay between two smears of earth in the centre of the upturned palm. It was round and had a neat little opening on its under side. It was pretty, certainly. Their heads pressed forward in a bunch, like cabbages heaped for market. But no one spoke.

“See it?” said Stumper impatiently; “see what it is?” He bent forward till his head mixed with theirs, his big aquiline nose in everybody’s way.

“We see it — yes,” said Uncle Felix without enthusiasm. “It’s a snail shell — er — I believe?” The shade of disappointment in his voice was reflected in the children’s faces too, as they all straightened up and gazed expectantly at the panting soldier. “Is that all?” was the sentence no one liked to utter.

But Stumper roared at them. “A snail shell!” he boomed; “of course it’s a snail shell! But did you ever see such a snail shell in your lives before? Look at the colour! Look at the shape! Put it against your ears and hear it singing!” He was furious with their lack of appreciation.

“It’s the common sort,” said Uncle Felix, braver than the others, “something or other vulgaris—”

“Hundreds of them everywhere,” mentioned Tim beneath his breath to Judy.

But Stumper overheard them.

“Common sort! Hundreds everywhere!” he shouted, his voice almost choking in his throat; “look at the colour! Look at the shape, I tell you! Listen to it!” He said the last words with a sudden softness.

They lowered their heads again for a new examination.

“What more d’you want, I’d like to know? There’s colour for you! There’s wonder! There’s a sheer bit of living beauty!” and he lowered his head again so eagerly that it knocked audibly against Tim’s skull.

“Please move your nose away,” said Tim, “I can’t see.”

“Common indeed!” growled the soldier, making room willingly enough, while they obeyed his booming orders. They felt a little ashamed of themselves for being so obtuse, for now that they looked closer they saw that the shell was certainly very beautiful. “Common indeed!” he muttered again. “Why, you don’t know a sign when it’s straight before your noses!”

Judy pulled the fingers apart to make it roll towards her; she felt it all over, stroking the smooth beauty of its delicate curves. It was exquisitely tinted. It shone and glistened in the morning sunlight. She put it against her ear and listened. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “It *is* singing,” as the murmur of the wind explored its hollow windings.

“That’s the Ganges,” explained Stumper in a softer voice. “The waves of the Ganges breaking on the yellow sands of India. Wind in the jungle too.” His face looked happy as he watched her; his explosions never lasted long.

She passed it over to her brother, who crammed it against his ear and listened with incredible grimaces as though it hurt him. “I can hear the tigers’ footsteps,” he declared, screwing up his eyes, “and birds of paradise and all sorts of things.” He handed it on reluctantly to his uncle, who listened so deeply in his turn that he had to shut both eyes. “I hear calling voices,” he murmured to himself, “voices calling, calling everywhere….it’s wonderful… like a sea of voices from the other side of the world… the whole world’s singing…!”

“And look at the colour, will you?” urged Stumper, snatching it away from the listener, who, seemed in danger of becoming entranced. “Why, he’s not only passed this way — he’s actually touched it. That’s his touch, I tell you!”

“That’s right,” mumbled the Tramp, watching the whole performance with approval. “Folks without something are always sharper than the others.” But this reference to a wooden leg was also too low for any one to hear it.

Besides Stumper was saying something wonderful just then; he lowered his voice to say it; there was suppressed excitement in him; he frowned and looked half savagely at them all:

“I found other signs as well,” he whispered darkly. “Two other signs. In the darkness of those bushes I saw — another flash — two of ‘em!” And he slowly extended his other hand which till now he had kept behind his back.

It was tightly clenched. He unloosed the fingers gradually. “Look!” he whispered mysteriously. And the hand lay open before their eyes. “He’s been hiding in those very bushes, I tell you. A moment sooner and we might have caught him.”

His enthusiasm ran all over them as they pressed forward to examine the second grimy hand. There were two things visible in it, and both were moving. One, indeed, moved so fast that they hardly saw it. There was a shining glimpse — a flash of lovely golden bronze shot through with blue — and it was gone. Like a wee veiled torch it scuttled across the palm, climbed the thumb, popped down the other side and dropped upon the ground. Vanished as soon as seen!

“A beetle!” exclaimed Uncle Felix. “A tiny beetle!”

“But dipped in colour,” said Stumper with enthusiasm, “the colour of the dawn!”

“Another sign! I never!” He was envious of the soldier’s triumph.

“He looks in the unlikely places,” muttered the Tramp again, approvingly. “You’ve been pretty warm this time.” But, again, he said it too low to be audible. Besides, Stumper’s other “find” engrossed everybody’s attention. All were absorbed in the long, dainty object that clung cautiously to his hand and showed no desire to hurry out of sight after the brilliant beetle. It was familiar enough to all of them, yet marvellous. It presented itself in a new, original light.

They watched it spellbound; its tiny legs moved carefully over the wrinkles of the soldier’s skin, feeling its way most delicately, and turning its head this way and that to sniff the unaccustomed odour. Sometimes it looked back to admire its own painted back, and to let its distant tail know that all was going well. The coloured hairs upon the graceful body were all a-quiver. It fairly shone. There was obviously no fear in it; it had perfect control of all its length and legs. Yet, fully aware that it was exploring a new country, it sometimes raised its head in a hesitating way and looked questioningly about it and even into the great faces so close against its eyes.

“A caterpillar! A common Woolly Bear!” observed Tim, yet with a touch of awe.

“It tickles,” observed Stumper.

"I'll get a leaf," Judy whispered. "It doesn't understand your smell, probly." She turned and picked the biggest she could find, and the caterpillar, after careful observation, moved forward on to it, turning to inform its following tail that all was safe. Gently and cleverly they restored it to the bush whence Stumper had removed it. It went to join the snail-shell and the beetle. They stood a moment in silence and watched the quiet way it hid itself among the waves of green the wind stirred to and fro. It seemed to melt away. It hid itself. It left them. It was gone.

And Stumper turned and looked at them with the air of a man who has justified himself. He had certainly discovered definite signs.

But there was bewilderment among the group as well as pleasure. For signs, they began to realise now, were everywhere indeed. The world was smothered with them. There was no one clear track that they could follow. All Nature seemed organised to hide the thing they looked for. It was a conspiracy. It was, indeed, an "enormous hide," an endless game of hide-and-seek. The interest and the wonder increased sensibly in their hearts. The thing they sought to find, the Stranger, "It," by whatever name each chose to call the mysterious and evasive "hider," was so marvellously hidden. The glimpse they once had known seemed long, long ago, and very far away. It lay like a sweet memory in each heart, half forgotten, half remembered, but always entirely believed in, very dear and very exquisite. The precious memory urged them forward. They would search and search until they re-discovered it, even though their whole lives were spent in the looking. They were quite positive they would find him in the end.

All this lay somehow in the expression on Stumper's face as he glared at them and ejaculated a triumphant "There! I told you so!" And at that moment, as though to emphasize the thrill of excited bewilderment they felt, a gorgeous brimstone butterfly sailed carelessly past before their eyes and vanished among the pools of sunlight by the forest edge. Its presence added somehow to the elusive and difficult nature of their search. Its flamboyant beauty was a kind of challenge.

"That's what the caterpillar gets into," observed Tim dreamily.

"Let's follow it," said Judy. "*I* believe the flying signs are best."

“Puzzlin’ though,” put in the Tramp behind them. They had quite forgotten his existence. “Let’s ask the gardener what *he* thinks.”

He pointed to a spot a little further along the edge of the wood where the figure of a man was visible. It seemed a good idea. Led by the Tramp, Uncle Felix and Stumper following slowly in the rear, they moved forward in a group. Weeden might have seen something. They would ask him.

WEEDEN’S SIGN

VII

John WEEDEN — the children always saw his surname in capitals — was probably the most competent Head Gardener of his age, or of any other age: he supplied the household with fruit and vegetables without grumbling or making excuses. When asked to furnish flowers at short notice for a dinner-party he made no difficulty, but just produced them. Neither did he complain about the weather; wet or dry, it was always exactly what his garden needed. All weather to him was Fine Weather. He believed in his garden, loved it, lived in it, was almost part of it. To make excuses for it was to make excuses for himself. WEEDEN was a genius.

But he was mysterious too. He was one-eyed, and the loss endeared him to the children, relating him also, once or twice removed, to Come-Back Stumper; it touched their imaginations. Being an artist, too, he never told them how he lost it, a pitchfork and a sigh were all he vouchsafed upon the exciting subject. He understood the value of restraint, and left their minds to supply what details they liked best. But this wink of pregnant suggestion, while leaving them divinely unsatisfied, sent them busily on the search. They imagined the lost optic roaming the universe without even an attendant eyelid, able to see things on its own account — invisible things. “Weeden’s lost eye’s about,” was a delightful and mysterious threat; while “I can see with the Gardener’s lost eye,” was a claim to glory no one could dispute, for no one could deny it. Its chief duty, however, was to watch the “froot and vegebles” at night and to keep all robbers — two-foot, four-foot, winged, or wriggling robbers — from what Aunt Emily called “destroying everything.”

A source of wonder to the children, this competent official was at the same time something of an enigma to the elders. His appearance, to begin with, was questionable, and visitors, being shown round the garden, had been known to remark upon it derogatively sometimes. It was both in his favour and against him. For, either he looked like an untidy parcel of brown paper, loose ends of string straggling out of him, or else — in his Sunday best — was indistinguishable from a rose-bush wrapped up carefully in matting against the frost. Yet, in either aspect, no one could pretend that he looked like anything but a genuine Head Gardener, the spirit of the kitchen-garden and the potting-shed incarnate.

It was the way he answered questions that earned for him the title of enigma — he avoided a direct reply. (He was so cautious that he would hesitate even when he came to die.) He would think twice about it. The decision to draw the final breath would incapacitate him. He would feel worse — and probably continue alive instead, from sheer inability to make his mind up. In all circumstances, owing to his calling doubtless, he preferred to hedge. If Mrs. Horton asked for celery, he would intimate "I'll have a look." When Daddy enquired how the asparagus was doing, he obtained for reply, "Won't you come and see it for yourself, sir?" Upon Mother's anxious enquiry if there would be enough strawberries for the School Treat, WEEDEN stated "It's been a grand year for the berries, mum." Then, just when she felt relieved, he added, "on the 'ole."

For the children, therefore, the Gardener was a man of mystery and power, and when they saw his figure in the distance, their imagination leaped forward with their bodies, and WEEDEN stood wrapped in a glory he little guessed. He was bent double, digging (as usual in his spare time) for truffles beneath the beech trees. These mysterious delicacies with the awkward name he never found, but he liked looking for them.

At first he was so intent upon his endless quest that he did not hear the approach of footsteps.

"No hurry," said the Tramp, as they collected round the stooping figure and held their feathers up to warn his back. For the wandering eye had a way of seeing what went on behind him. An empty sack, waiting for the truffles, lay beside him. He looked like an untidy parcel, so he was *not* in his Sunday clothes.

At the sound of voices he straightened slowly and looked round. He seemed pleased with everything, judging by the expression of his eye, yet doubtful of immediate success.

“Good mornin’,” he said, touching his speckled cap to the authorities.

“Found any?” enquired Uncle Felix, sympathetically.

“It seems a likely spot, maybe,” was the reply. “I’m looking.” And he closed the mouth of the sack with his foot lest they should see its emptiness.

But the use of the verb set the children off at once.

“I say,” Tim exploded eagerly, “we’re looking too — for somebody who’s hiding. Have you seen any one?”

“Some one very wonderful?” said Judy. “Has he passed this way? It’s Hide-and-Seek, you know.”

WEEDEN looked more mysterious at once. It was strange how a one-eyed face could express so big a meaning. He scratched his head and smiled.

“All my flowers and vegitubles is a-growin’ nicely,” he said at length. “It is a lovely mornin’ for a game.” His eye closed and opened. The answer was more direct than usual. It meant volumes. WEEDEN was in the know. They felt him somehow related to their leader — a kind of organised and regulated tramp.

“You *have* seen him, then?” cried Judy.

“With your gone eye!” exclaimed Tim. “Which way? And what signs have you got?”

“Flowers, beetles, snail-shells, caterpillars — anything beautiful is a sign, you know,” went on Judy, breathlessly.

“Deep, tender, kind and beautiful,” interposed the Tramp, laying the accent significantly on the first adjective, as if for Weeden’s special benefit.

WEEDEN looked up. “Sounds like my garden things,” he said darkly, more to himself than to the others. He gazed down into the hole he had been digging. The moist earth glistened in the sunlight. He sniffed the sweet, rich odour of it, and scratched his head in the same spot as before — just beneath the peak of his speckled cap. His nose wrinkled up. Then he looked again into the faces, turning his single eye slowly upon each in turn. The Tramp’s remark had reached his cautious brain.

"There's no sayin' where anybody sich as you describe him to be might hide hisself a day like this," he observed deliberately, his optic ranging the sunny landscape with approval. "I never saw sich a beautiful day before — not like to-day. It's endless sort of. Seems to me as if I'd been at this 'ole for weeks."

He paused. The others waited. WEEDEN was going to say something real any moment now, they felt.

"No hurry," the Tramp reminded him. "Everything's light and careless, and so are we. There is no longer any Time — to lose."

His voice half sang, half chanted in the slow, windy way he had, and the Gardener looked up as if a falling apple had struck him on the head. He shifted from one leg to the other; he seemed excited, moved. His single eye was opened — to the sun. He looked as if his body was full of light.

"*You* was the singer, was you?" he asked wonderingly, the tone low and quiet. "It was you I heard a-singin' — jest as dawn broke!" He scratched his head again. "And me thinkin' all the time it was a bird!" he added to himself.

The Tramp said nothing.

WEEDEN then resumed his ordinary manner; he went on speaking as before. But obviously — somewhere deep down inside himself — he had come to a big decision.

"Gettin' nearer and nearer," he resumed his former conversation exactly where he had left it off, "but never near enough to get disappointed — ain't it? When you gets to the end of anything, you see, it's over. And that's a pity."

Uncle Felix glanced at Stumper; Stumper glanced down at the end of his "wooden" leg; the Tramp still said nothing, smiling in his beard, now combed out much smoother than before.

"It comes to this," said Weeden, "my way of thinkin' at least." He scratched wisdom from another corner of his head. "There's a lot of 'iding goin' on, no question about *that*; and the great thing is — my way of thinkin' at any rate — is — jest to keep on lookin'."

The children met him eagerly at this point, using two favourite words that Aunt Emily strongly disapproved of: “deslidedly,” said one; “distinkly,” exclaimed the other.

“That’s it,” continued WEEDEN, pulling down his cap to hide, perhaps, the spot where wisdom would leak out. “And, talking of signs, I say — find out yer own pertickler sign, then follow it blindly — till the end.”

He straightened up and looked with an air of respectful candour at the others. The decision of his statement delighted them. The children felt something of awe in it. Something of their Leader’s knowledge evidently was in him.

“Miss Judy, she gets ‘er signs from the air,” he said, as no one spoke. “Master Tim goes poking along the ground, looking for something with his feet. He feels best that way, feels the earth — things a-growin’ up or things wot go down into ‘oles. Colonel Stumper — and no offence to you, sir — chooses dark places where the sun forgets to shine—”

“Dangerous, jungly places,” whispered Tim, admiringly.

“And Mr. Felix—” he hesitated. Uncle Felix’s easiest way of searching seemed to puzzle him. “Mr. Felix,” he went on at length, “jest messes about all over the place at once, because ‘e sees signs everywhere and don’t know what to foller in partickler for fear of losin’ hisself.”

Come-Back Stumper chuckled audibly, but Uncle Felix asked at once— “And you, WEEDEN? What about yourself, I wonder?”

The Gardener replied without his usual hesitation. It was probably the most direct reply he had ever made. No one could guess how much it cost him. “Underground,” he said. “My signs lies underground, sir. Where the rain-drops ‘ides theirselves on getting down and the grubs keeps secret till they feel their wings. Where the potatoes and the reddishes is,” he added, touching his cap with a respectful finger. He went on with a hint of yearning in his tone that made it tremble slightly: “If I could find igsackly where and ‘ow the potatoes gets big down there” — he pointed to the earth— “or how my roses get colour out of the dirt — I’d know it, wouldn’t I, sir? I’d— ‘ave him, fair!”

The effort exhausted him, it seemed. So deeply was he moved that he had almost gone contrary to his own nature in making such an explicit statement. But he had said something very real at last. It was clear that he was distinctly in the know. Living among natural growing things, he was in touch with life in a deeper sense than they were.

“And me?” the Tramp mentioned lightly, smiling at his companion of the outdoor life. “Don’t leave me out, please. I’m looking like the rest of you.”

WEEDEN turned round and gazed at him. He wore a strange expression that had respect in it, but something more than mere respect. There was a touch of wonder in his eye, a hint of worship almost. But he did not answer; no word escaped his lips. Instead of speaking he moved up nearer; he took three cautious steps, then halted close beside the great burly figure that formed the centre of the little group.

And then he did a curious and significant little act; he held out both his hands against him as a man might hold out his hands to warm them before a warm and comforting grate of blazing coals.

“Fire,” he said; then added, “and I’m much obliged to you.”

He wore a proud and satisfied air, grateful and happy too. He put his cap straight, picked up his spade, and prepared without another word to go on digging for truffles where apparently none existed. He seemed quite content with — looking.

A pause followed, broken presently by Tim: a whisper addressed to all.

“He never finds any. That shows how real it is.”

“They’re somewhere, though,” observed Judy.

They stood and watched the spade; it went in with a crunching sound; it came out slowly with a sort of “pouf,” and a load of rich, black earth slid off it into the world of sunshine. It went in again, it came out again; the rhythm of the movement caught them. How long they watched it no one knew, and no one cared to know: it might have been a moment, it may have been a year or two; so utterly had hurry vanished out of life it seemed to them they stood and watched for ever…when they became aware of a curious sensation, as though they felt the whole earth turning with them. They were moving, surely. Something to which they belonged, of which they formed a part — was moving. A windy voice was singing just in front of them. They looked up. The words were inaudible, but they knew it was a bit of the same old song that every one seemed singing everywhere as though the Day itself were singing.

The Tramp was going on.

“Hark!” said Tim. “The birds are singing. Let’s go on and look.”

“The world is wild with laughter,” Judy cried, snatching the words from the air about her. “We can fly—” She darted after him.

“Among the imprisoned hours as we choose,” boomed the voice of Uncle Felix, as he followed, rolling in behind her.

“We can play,” growled Stumper, hobbling next in the line. “*My* life has just begun.”

Their Leader waited till they all came up with him. They caught him up, gathering about him like things that settled on a sunny bush. It almost seemed they were one single person growing from the earth and air and water. The Tramp glowed there between them like a heart of burning fire.

“*He* ought to be with us, too,” said Judy, looking back.

“No hurry,” replied the Tramp. “Let him be; he’s following *his* sign. When he’s ready, he’ll come along. It’s a lovely day.”

They moved with the rhythm of a flock of happy birds across the field of yellow flowers, singing in chorus something or other about an “extra day.” A hundred years flowed over them, or else a single instant. It mattered not. They took no heed, at any rate. It was so enormous that they lost themselves, and yet so tiny that they held it between a finger and a thumb. The important thing was — that they were getting warmer.

Then Judy suddenly nudged Tim, and Tim nudged Uncle Felix, and Uncle Felix dug his elbow into Come-Back Stumper, and Stumper somehow or other caught the attention of the Tramp — a sort of panting sound, half-whistle and half-gasp. They paused and looked behind them.

“He’s ready,” remarked their Leader, with a laughing chuckle in his beard. “He’s coming on!”

WEEDEN, sure enough, had quietly shouldered his shovel and empty sack, and was making after them, singing as he came. Judy was on the point of saying to her brother, “Good thing Aunt Emily isn’t here!” when she caught a look in his eyes that stopped her dead.

AUNT EMILY FINDS — HERSELF

VIII

“My dear!” he exclaimed in his tone of big discovery.

Judy made a movement like a swan that inspects the world behind its back. She tried to look everywhere at once. It seemed she did so.

“Gracious me!” she cried. She instinctively chose prohibited words. “*My* gracious me!”

For the places of the world had marvellously shifted and run into one another somehow. A place called “Somewhere Else” was close about her; and standing in the middle of it was — a figure. Both place and figure ought to have been somewhere else by rights. Judy’s surprise, however, was quite momentary; swift, bird-like understanding followed it. Place was a sham and humbug really; already, without leaving the schoolroom carpet, she and Tim had been to the Metropolis and even to the East. This was merely another of these things she didn’t know she knew; she understood another thing she didn’t understand. She believed.

The rest of the party had disappeared inside the wood; only Tim remained — pointing at this figure outlined against the trees. But these trees belonged to a place her physical eyes had never seen. Perhaps they were part of her mental picture of it. The figure, anyhow, barred the way.

It was a woman, the last person in the world they wished to see just then. The face, wearing an expression as though it tried to be happy when it felt it ought not to be, was pointed; chin, ears, and eye-brows pointed; nose pointed too — round doors and into corners — an elastic nose; there was a look of struggling sweetness about the thin, tight lips; the entire expression, from the colourless eyes down to the tip of the decided chin, was one of marked reproach and disapproval that at the same time fought with an effort to be understanding, gentle, wise. The face wanted to be very nice, but was prevented by itself. It was pathetic. Its owner was dressed in black, a small, neat bonnet fastened carefully on the head, an umbrella in one hand, and big goloshes on both feet. There were gold glasses balanced on the nose. She smiled at them, but with a smile that prophesied rebuke. Before she spoke a word, her entire person said distinctly NO.

“Bother!” Tim muttered beneath his breath, then added, “It’s her!” Already he felt guilty — of something he had not done, but might do presently. The figure’s mere presence invited him to break all rules.

“We thought,” exclaimed Judy, trying to remember what rules she had just disobeyed, and almost saying “hoped,”— “we thought you were at Tunbridge Wells.” Then with an effort she put in “Aunty.”

Yet about the new arrival was a certain flustered and uneasy air, as though she were caught in something that she wished to hide — at any rate something she would not willingly confess to. One hand, it was noticed, she kept stiffly behind her back.

“Children,” she uttered in an emphatic voice, half-surprised remonstrance, half-automatic rebuke; “I am astonished!” She looked it. She pursed her lips more tightly, and gazed at the pair of culprits as though she had hoped better things of them and *again* had been disappointed. “You know quite well that this is out of bounds.” It came out like an arrow, darting.

“We were looking for some one,” began Tim, but in a tone that added plainly enough “it wasn’t you.”

“Who’s hiding, you see,” quoth Judy, “but expecting us — at once.” The delay annoyed her.

“You are both well aware,” Aunt Emily went on, ignoring their excuses as in duty bound, “that your parents would not approve. At this hour of the morning too! You ought to be fast asleep in bed. If your father knew — !”

Yet, strange to say, the children felt that they loved her suddenly; for the first time in their lives they thought her lovable. A kind of understanding sympathy woke in them; there was something pitiable about her. For, obviously, she was looking just as they were, but looking in such a silly way and in such hopelessly stupid places. All her life she had been looking like this, dressed in crackling black, wearing a prickly bonnet and heavy goloshes, and carrying a useless umbrella that of course must bother her. It was disappointment that made her talk as she did. But it was natural she should feel disappointment, for it never rained when she had her umbrella, and her goloshes were always coming off.

"She's stuck in a hole," thought Tim, "and so she just says things at us. She hurts herself somewhere. She's tired."

"She has to be like that," thought Judy. "It's really all pretending. Poor old thing!"

But Aunt Emily was not aware of what they felt. They were out of bed, and it was her duty to find fault; they were out of bounds, and she must take note of it. So she prepared to scold a little. Her bonnet waggled ominously. She gripped her umbrella. She spoke as though it was very early in the morning, almost dawn — as though the sun were rising. There was confusion in her as to the time of day, it seemed. But the children did not notice this. They were so accustomed to being rebuked by her that the actual words made small impression. She was just "saying things"; they were often very muddled things; the attitude, not the meaning, counted. And her attitude, they divined, was subtly different.

"You know this is forbidden," she said. "It is damp and chilly. It's sure to rain presently. You'll get your feet wet. You should keep to the gravel paths. They're plain enough, are they not?" She looked about her, sniffing — a sniff that usually summoned disasters in a flock.

"Oh, yes," said Tim; "and they look like brown sugar, *we* thought."

"It does not matter what you thought, Timothy. The paths are made on purpose to be walked upon and used—"

"They're beautifully made," interrupted Judy, unable to keep silent longer. "WEEDEN made them for us."

"And we've used them all," exclaimed Tim, "only we came to an end of them. We've done with them — paths!" The way he uttered the substantives made it instantly sound ridiculous.

Aunt Emily opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again without saying it. She stared at them instead. They watched her. All fear of her had left their hearts. A new expression rose struggling upon her pointed features. She fidgeted from one foot to the other. They felt her as "Aunty," a poor old muddled thing, always looking in ridiculous places without the smallest notion she was wrong. Tim saw her suddenly "all dressed up on purpose" as for a game. Judy thought "She's bubbling inside — really."

"There's WEEDEN in there," Tim mentioned, pointing to the wood behind her.

Something uncommonly like a smile passed into Aunt Emily's eyes, then vanished as suddenly as it came. Judy thought it was like a bubble that burst the instant it reached the sunlight on the surface of a pond.

"And how often," came the rebuke, automatically rather, "has your Mother told you *not* to be familiar with the Gardener? Play if you want to, but do not play with your inferiors. Play with your Uncle Felix, with Colonel Stumper, or with me—"

Another bubble had risen, caught the sunshine, reflected all the colours of the prism, then burst and vanished into airy spray.

"But they're looking with us," Tim insisted eagerly. "We're all looking together for something — Uncle Felix, Come-Back Stumper, everybody. It's wonderful. It never ends."

Aunt Emily's hand, still clutching the umbrella, stole up and put her bonnet straight. It was done to gain a little time apparently. There was a certain hesitation in her. She seemed puzzled. She betrayed excitement too.

"Looking, are you?" she exclaimed, and her voice held a touch of mellowness that was new. "Looking!"

She stopped. She tried to hide the mellowness by swallowing it.

"Yes," said Tim. "There's some one hiding. It's Hide-and-Seek, you see. We're the seekers. It's enormous."

"Will you come with us and look too?" suggested Judy simply. Then while Aunt Emily's lips framed themselves as from long habit into a negative or a reprimand, the child continued before either reached delivery: "There are heaps of signs about; anything lovely or beautiful is a sign — a sign that we're getting warm. We've each got ours. Mine's air. What's yours, Aunty?"

Aunt Emily stared at them; her bewilderment increased apparently; she swallowed hard again. The children returned her stare, gazing innocently into her questioning eyes as if she were some strange bird at the Zoo. The new feeling of kinship with her grew stronger in their hearts. They knew quite well she was looking just as they were; *really* she longed to play their game of Hide-and-Seek. She was very ignorant, of course, they saw, but they were ready and willing to teach her how to play, and would make it easy for her into the bargain.

“Signs!” she repeated, in a voice that was gentler than they had ever known it. There was almost a sound of youth in it. Judy suddenly realised that Aunt Emily had once been a girl. A softer look shone in the colourless eyes. The lips relaxed. In a hat she might have been even pretty. No one in a bonnet could be jolly. “Signs!” she repeated; “deep and beautiful! Whatever in the world — ?”

She stopped abruptly, started by the exquisite trilling of a bird that was perched upon a branch quite close behind her. The liquid notes poured out in a stream of music, so rich, so lovely that it seemed as if no bird had ever sung before and that they were the first persons in the world who had ever heard it.

“My sign!” cried Judy, dancing round her disconcerted and bewildered relative. “One of my signs — that!”

“Mine is rabbits and rats and badgers,” Tim called out with ungrammatical emphasis. “Anything that likes the earth are mine.” He looked about him as if to point one out to her. “They’re everywhere, all over the place,” he added, seeing none at the moment. “Aunty, what’s yours? Do tell us, because then we can go and look together.”

“It’s *much* more fun than looking alone,” declared Judy.

No answer came. But, caught by the astounding magic of the singing bird, Aunt Emily had turned, and in doing so the hand behind her back became visible for the first time since their meeting. The children saw it simultaneously. They nudged each other, but they said no word. The same moment, having failed to discover the bird, Aunt Emily turned back again. She looked caught, they thought. But, also she looked as if she had found something herself. The secret joy she tried to hide from them by swallowing it, rose to her wrinkled cheeks and shone in both her eyes, then overflowed and rippled down towards her trembling mouth. The lips were trembling. She smiled, but so softly, sweetly, that ten years dropped from her like a dissolving shadow. And the hand she had so long kept hidden behind her back stole forth slowly into view.

"How did you guess that I was looking for anything?" she inquired plaintively in an excited yet tremulous tone. "I thought no one knew it." She seemed genuinely surprised, yet unbelievably happy too. A great sigh of relief escaped her.

"We're all the same," one of them informed her; "so you are too! Everybody's looking." And they crowded round to examine the objects in her hand — a dirty earth-stained trowel and a fern. They knew she collected ferns on the sly, but never before had they seen her bring home such a prize. Usually she found only crumpled things like old bits of wrinkled brown paper which she called "specimens." This one was marvellously beautiful. It had a dainty, slender stalk of ebony black, and its hundred tiny leaves quivered like a shower of green water-drops in the air. There was actual joy in every trembling bit of it.

"That's my sign," announced Aunt Emily with pride: "Maidenhair! It'll grow again. I've got the roots." And she said it as triumphantly as Stumper had said "snail-shell."

"Of course, Aunty," Judy cried, yet doubtfully. "*You* ought to know." She twiddled it round in her fingers till the quivering fronds emitted a tiny sound. "And you can use it as a feather too." She lowered her head to listen.

"We've each got a feather," mentioned Tim. "It's a compass. Shows the way, you know. You hear him calling — that way."

"The Tramp explained that," Judy added. "He's Leader. Come on, Aunty. We ought to be off; the others went ages ago. We're going to the End of the World, and they've already started."

For a moment Aunt Emily looked as rigid as the post beside a five-barred gate. The old unbending attitude took possession of her once again. Her eyes took on the tint of soapy water. Her elastic nose looked round the corner. She frowned. Her black dress crackled. The mention of a tramp and the End of the World woke all her savage educational instincts visibly.

"He's a singing tramp and shines like a Christmas Tree," explained Judy, "and he looks like everybody in the world. He's extror'iny." She turned to her brother. "Doesn't he, Tim?"

Tim ran up and caught his Aunt by the umbrella hand. He saw her stiffening. He meant to prevent it if he could.

“Everybody rolled into one,” he agreed eagerly; “Daddy and Mother and the Clergyman and you.”

“And me?” she asked tremulously.

“Rather!” the boy said vehemently; “as you are now, all rabbity and nice.”

Aunt Emily slowly removed one big golosh, then waited.

“Cleaned up and young,” cried Judy, “and smells delicious — like flowers and hay—”

“And soft and warm—”

“And sings and dances—”

“And is positive that if we go on looking we shall find — exactly what we’re looking for.”

Aunt Emily removed the other golosh — a shade more quickly than the first one. She kicked it off. The stiffness melted out of her; she smiled again.

“Well,” she began — when Judy stood on tip-toe and whispered in her ear some magic sentence.

“Dawn!” Aunt Emily whispered back. “At dawn — when the birds begin to sing!”

Something had caught her heart and squeezed it.

Tim and Judy nodded vehemently in agreement. Aunt Emily dropped her umbrella then. And at the same moment a singing voice became audible in the trees behind them. The song came floating to them through the sunlight with a sound of wind and birds. It had a marvellous quality, very sweet and very moving. There was a lilt in it, a laughing, happy lilt, as though the Earth herself were singing of the Spring.

And Aunt Emily made one last vain attempt: she struggled to put her fingers in her ears. But the children held her hands. She crackled and made various oppressive and objecting sounds, but the song poured into her in spite of all her efforts. Her feet began to move upon the grass. It was awful, it was shocking, it was forbidden and against all rules and regulations: yet — Aunt Emily danced!

And a thin, plaintive voice, like the voice of her long-forgotten youth, slipped out between her faded lips — and positively sang:

> ”The world is young with laughter; we can fly
> Among the imprisoned hours as we choose….”

But to Tim and Judy it all seemed merely right and natural.

“Come on,” cried the boy, pulling his Aunt towards the wood.

“We can look together now. You’ve got your sign,” exclaimed Judy, tugging at her other hand. “Everything’s free and careless, and so are we.”

“Aim for a path,” Tim shouted by way of a concession. “Aunty’ll go quicker on a path.”

But Aunty was nothing if not decided. “I know a short-cut,” she sang. “Paths are for people who don’t know the way. There’s no time — to lose. Dear me! I’m warm already!” She dropped her umbrella.

And, actually dancing and singing, she led the way into the wood, holding the fern before her like a wand, and happy as a girl let out of school.

But as they went, Judy, knowing suddenly another thing she didn’t know, made a discovery of her own, an immense discovery. It was bigger than anything Tim had ever found. She felt so light and swift and winged by it that she seemed almost to melt into the air herself.

“I say, Tim,” she said.

“Yes.”

She took her eyes from the sky to see what her feet were doing; Tim lifted his from the earth to see what was going on above him in the air.

Judy went on: “I know what,” she announced.

“What?” He was not particularly interested, it seemed.

Judy paused. She dropped a little behind her dancing Aunt. Tim joined her. It all happened as quickly as a man might snap his fingers; Aunt Emily, her heart full of growing ferns, noticed nothing.

“We’ve found her out!” whispered Judy, communicating her immense discovery. “What she really is, I mean!”

He agreed and nodded. It did not strike him as anything wonderful or special. “Oh, yes,” he answered; “rather!” He did not grasp her meaning, perhaps.

But his sister was bursting with excitement, radiant, shivering almost with the wonder of it.

“But don’t you see? It’s — a sign!” she exclaimed so loud that Aunt Emily almost heard it. “She’s found herself! She was hiding — from herself. That’s part of it all — the game. It’s the biggest sign of all!”

She was so “warm” that she burned all over.

“Oh, yes,” repeated Tim. “I see!” But he was not particularly impressed. He merely wanted his Aunt to find an enormous fern whose roots were growing in the sweet, sticky earth *he* loved. Her sign was a fern; his was the ground. It made him understand Aunt Emily at last, and therefore love her; he saw no further than that.

Judy, however, *knew*. She suddenly understood what the Tramp meant by “deep.” She also knew now why Stumper, WEEDEN, Uncle Felix too, looked at him so strangely, with wonder, with respect, with love. Something about the Tramp explained each one to himself. Each one found — himself. And she — without realising it before, had acquired this power too, though only in a small degree as yet. The Tramp believed in everybody; she, without knowing it, believed in her Aunt. It was another thing she didn’t know she knew.

And the real, long-buried, deeply-hidden Aunt Emily had emerged accordingly. All her life she had been hiding — from herself. She had found herself at last. It was the biggest sign of all.

Tim caught her hand and dragged her after him. “Come on,” he cried, “we’re getting frightfully warm. Look at Aunty! Listen, will you?”

Aunt Emily, a little way in front of them, was digging busily with her dirty trowel. Her bonnet was crooked, her skirts tucked up, her white worsted stockings splashed with mud, her elastic-sided boots scratched and plastered. And she was singing to herself in a thin but happy voice that was not unlike an old and throaty corncrake: “The birds are singing….Hark! Come out and play….Life is an endless search….*I’ve* just begun…!”

They listened for a little while, and then ran headlong up to join her.

SIGNS EVERYWHERE!

IX

And it was somewhere about here and now — the exact spot impossible to determine, since it was obviously a circular experience without beginning, middle or end — that the gigantic character of the Day declared itself in all its marvellous simplicity. For as they dived deeper and deeper towards its centre, they discovered that its centre, being everywhere at once, existed — nowhere. The sun was always rising — somewhere.

In other words, each seeker grasped, in his or her own separate way, that the Splendour hiding from them lay actually both too near and far away for any individual eye to see it with completeness. Someone, indeed, had come; but this Someone, as Judy told herself, was "simply all over the place." To see him "distinkly is an awful job," according to Uncle Felix; or as Come-Back Stumper realised in the middle of another clump of bramble bushes, "Perspective is necessary to proper vision." "He" lay too close before their eyes to be discovered fully. Tim had long ago described it instinctively as "an enormous hide," but it was more than that; it was a universal hide.

Alone, perhaps, Weeden's lost optic, wandering ubiquitously and enjoying the bird's-eye view, possessed the coveted power. But, like the stars, though somewhat about, it was invisible. WEEDEN made no reference to it. He attended to one thing at a time, he lived in the present; one eye was gone; he just looked for truffles — with the other.

Yet this did not damp their ardour in the least; increased it rather: the gathering of the clues became more and more absorbing. Though not seen, the hider was both known and felt; his presence was a certainty. There was no real contradiction.

For signs grew and multiplied till the entire world seemed overflowing with them, and hardly could the earth contain them. They brimmed the sunny air, flooded the ponds and streams, lay thick upon the fields, and almost choked the woods to stillness. They trickled out, leaked through, dripped over everywhere in colour, shape, and sound. The hider had passed everywhere, and upon everything had left his exquisite and deathless traces. The inanimate, as well as the animate world had known the various touch of his great passing. His trail had blazed the entire earth about them. For the very clouds were dipped in snow and gold, and the meanest pebble in the lane wore a self-conscious gleam of shining silver. So-called domestic creatures also seemed aware that a stupendous hiding-place was somewhere near — the browsing cow, contented and at ease, the horse that nuzzled their hands across the gate, the very pigs, grubbing eternally for food, yet eternally unsatisfied; all these, this endless morning, wore an unaccustomed look as though they knew, and so were glad to be alive. Some knew more than others, of course. The cat, for instance, defending its kittens single-pawed against the stable-dog who pretended to be ferocious; the busy father-blackbird, passing worms to his mate for the featherless mites, all beak and clamour in the nest; the Clouded Yellow, sharing a spray of honeysuckle with a Bumble-bee, and the honeysuckle offering no resistance — one and all, they also were aware in their differing degrees. And the seekers, noting the signs, grew warmer and ever warmer. An ordinary day these signs, owing to their generous profusion, might have called for no remark. They would, probably, have drawn no attention to themselves, merely lying about unnoticed, undiscovered because familiar. But this was not an ordinary day. It was unused, unspoilt and unrecorded. It was the Some Day of humanity’s long dream — an Extra Day. Time could not carry it away; it could not end; all it contained was of eternity. The great hider at the heart of it was real. These signs — deep, tender, kind and beautiful — were part of him, and in knowing, recognising them, they knew and recognised him too. They drew near, that is, brushed up closer, to his hiding-place from which *he* saw them. They approached within knowing distance of a Reality that each in his or her particular way had always yearned for. They held — oh, distinkly held — that they were winning. They won the marvellous game as soon as it began. They never had a doubt about the end.

But their supreme, superb discovery was this: They had always secretly longed to find the elusive hider; they now realised that *he* — wanted them to find him, and that from his hiding-place he saw them easily. That was the most wonderful thing of all….

To describe the separate adventures of each seeker would involve a series of bulky trilogies no bookshelves in the world could carry; they can, besides, be adequately told in three simple words that Tim used — shouted with intense enthusiasm when he tripped over a rabbit-hole and tumbled headlong against that everlasting Tramp: “I’m still looking!” He dived away into another hole. “I’m looking still.” “So am I,” the Tramp answered, also in three words. “I’m *very* warm,” growled Stumper; “I’m getting on,” Aunt Emily piped; and while Judy was for ever shouting out “I’ve found him!” Uncle Felix, puffing and panting, could only repeat with rapture each time he met another seeker: “A lovely day! A *lovely* day!” They said so little — experienced and felt so much!

From time to time, too, others joined them in the tremendous game. It seemed the personality of the Tramp attracted them. Something about him — his sincerity, perhaps, or his simplicity — made them realise suddenly what they were about: as though they had not noticed it before, not understood it quite, at any rate. They found themselves. He did and said so little. But he possessed the unique quality of a Leader — natural persuasion.

Thompson, for instance, cleaning the silver at the pantry window, looked up and saw them pass. They caught him unawares. His pompous manner hung like a discarded mask on a nail beside his livery. He wore his black and white striped waistcoat, and an apron. Of course he looked proper, as an old family servant ought to look, but he looked cheerful too. He was humming to himself as he polished up the covers and the candelabra.

“Well, I never!” he exclaimed, as the line of them filed by. “I never did. And Mr. Weeden with ’em too!”

The Tramp passed singing and looked through the open window at the butler. No more than that. Their eyes met between the bars. They exchanged glances. But something incalculable happened in that instant, just as it had happened to Stumper, Aunt Emily, and the rest of them. Thompson put several questions into his look of sheer astonishment.

“Why not?” the Tramp replied, chuckling as he caught the butler’s eye. “It’s a lovely morning. We’re just looking!”

Thompson was flabbergasted — as if all the old-fashioned families of the world had suddenly praised him. All his life he had never done anything but his ordinary duty.

“It’s ‘oliday time,” said Weeden, coming next, “and all my flowers and vegitubles is a-growin’ nicely.” He too seemed singing, dancing. Something had happened. The whole world seemed out and playing.

Thompson forgot himself in a most unusual way, forgot that he was an old family servant, that the apron-string met round his middle with difficulty, that the Authorities were away and his responsibilities increased thereby; forgot too, that for twenty years he had been answering bells, over-hearing conversations without pretending to do so, and that visitors wanted hot water and early tea at "7:30 sharp." He remembered suddenly that he was a man — and that he was very fond of some one. The birds were singing, the sun was shining, the flowers were out upon the lawn, and it was Spring.

An amazing longing in him woke and stirred to life. There was a singular itching in his feet. Something in his butler-heart began to purr. "Looking, eh!" he thought. "There's something I've been looking for too. I'd forgot about it."

"No one can make the silver shine as I can," he mumbled, watching the retreating figures, "but it is about finished now," — he glanced down at it with pride— "and fit to set on the table. Why shouldn't I take a turn in the garden too?"

He looked out a moment. The magic of the spring came upon him suddenly like a revelation. He knew he was alive, that there was something he wanted somewhere, something real and satisfying — if only he could find it — find out what it was. For twenty years he had been living automatically. Alfred Thompson suddenly felt free and careless. The butler — yearned!

He hesitated, gave the dish-cover an extra polish, then called through the door to Mrs. Horton:

"There's a tramp in the garden, Bridget, and Mr. Weeden's with him. Mr. Felix is halso taking the air, and Master Tim—"

He stopped, hearing a step in the pantry. Mrs. Horton stood behind him with a shawl about her shoulders. Her red face was smiling.

"Alfred, let's go out and take a look," she said. "Mary can see to the shepherd's-pie. I've been as quick as I could," she added, as if excusing herself. Moreover, she said distinctly, "shepherd's-*poie*."

"*I* haven't been 'calling,'" replied the butler, "except only just now — just this minute." He spoke as though he was being scolded for not answering a bell. But he cast an admiring glance, half wild, half reckless, at the cook.

“An’ you shouting to me to come this last ‘arf hour and more!” cried Mrs. Horton. She, too, apparently, was in a “state.”

“You are mistaken, Bridget, I have been singing, as I often do when attending to the silver, but as for—”

“You can do without a hat,” she interrupted. “Come on! I want to go and look for — for—” She broke off, taking his arm as though they were going down the Strand or Oxford Street. Her red face beamed. She looked very proud and happy. She wanted to look for something too, but she could not believe the moment had really come. She had put it away so long — like a special dish in a cupboard.

“I don’t know what’s come over me,” she went on very confidentially, as she moved beside him through the scullery door, “but — but I don’t feel satisfied — not satisfied with meself as I used to be.”

“No, Bridget?” It was in his best “7:30” manner. There was a struggle in him.

“No,” said Mrs. Horton, with decision. “I give satisfaction — that I know —”

“We both do that,” said Thompson proudly. “And no one can do a suet pudding to a turn as you can. Only the other day I heard Sir William a-speaking of it—”

She held his arm more tightly. They were on the lawn by now. The flood of sunlight caught them, showed up the worn and shabby places in his suit of broadcloth, gleamed on her bursting shoes she “fancied” for her kitchen work. They heard the birds, they smelt the flowers, the air bathed them all over like a sea.

“And the silver, Alfred,” she said in a lower tone. “Who in the world can make it look as you do? But what I’ve been feeling lately — since this morning, that is to say — and feeling for the first time in me life, so to speak—”

“Bridget, dear, you’ve got it!” he interrupted with excitement, “I’ve felt it too. Felt it this morning first, when I woke up and remembered that nobody wanted hot-water nor early tea, and I said to myself, ‘There’s more than that in it. I’m not doing all this just only for a salary. I’m doing it for something else. What is it?’”

He spoke very rapidly for a butler. He looked down at her red and smiling face.

“What is it?” he repeated, curiously moved.

She looked up at him without a word.

“It’s something ‘idden,” he said, after a pause. “That’s what it is.”

“That’s it,” agreed Mrs. Horton. “Like a recipe.”

There was another pause. The butler broke it. They stood together in the middle of the field, flowers and birds and sunshine all about them.

“A mystery — inside of us,” he said, “I think—”

“Yes, Alfred,” the cook murmured softly.

“*I* think,” he continued, “it’s a song and dance we want. A little life.” He broke off abruptly, noticing the sudden movement of her bursting shoes. She took a long step forwards, then sideways. She opened her arms to the air and sun. She almost pirouetted.

“Life!” she cried, “‘ot and fiery. Life! That’s it. Hark, Alfred, d’ye hear that singing far away?” She felt the Irish break out of her. “Listen!” she cried, trying to drag him faster. “Listen, will ye? It makes me wild entirely! Give me yer hand! Come on and dance wid me! It’s in me hearrt I feel it, in me blood. To the devil with me suet puddings and shepherd-poies — that singing’s real, that’s loife, that’s lovely as a dhream! It’s what I’ve been looking for iver since I can remember. I’ve got it!”

And Thompson felt himself spinning through the air. Old families were forgotten. The world was young with laughter. They could fly. They did.

The silver was beautifully cleaned. He had earned his holiday.

“That singing!” he gasped, feeling his heart grow big. He followed her across the flowered world. “I believe it is a bird! It would not surprise me to be told—”

“A birrd!” cried Mrs. Horton, turning him round and round. “It’s a birrd from Heaven then! I’ve heard it all the morning. It’s been singing in me heart for ages. Now it's out! Come follow it wid me! We'll go to the end of the wurrld to foinde it."

Her kitchen energy — some called it temper — had discovered a greater scope than puddings.

"There is no hurry," the butler panted, moving along with her, and trying hard to keep his balance. "We'll look together. We'll find it!" And as they raced across the field among the flowers after the line of disappearing figures, the Tramp looked back at them and waved his hand.

"It's a lovely morning," he said, as they came up with the rest of the party. "So you're looking too?"

Too much out of breath to answer, they just nodded, and the group accepted them without more to-do. Their object evidently was the same. Aunt Emily glanced up from her ferns, nodded and said, "Good morning, it's a lovely day" — and resumed her digging again. It was like shaking hands! They all went forward happily, eagerly, across the wide, wide world together.

The absence of surprise the children knew had now become a characteristic everybody shared. All were in the same state together. The whole day flowed, there were no limitations or conditions, least of all surprise. Even WEEDEN had forgotten hedges and artificial boundaries. No one, therefore, ejaculated nor exclaimed when they ran across the Policeman. He, too, was looking for some one, but, having mislaid his notebook and pencil stub, was unable to mention any names, and was easily persuaded to join the body of eager seekers. Being a policeman, he was naturally a seeker by profession; he was always looking for somebody somewhere — somebody who was going in the wrong direction.

"That's just it," he said, the moment he saw the Tramp, taking his helmet off as though an odd respect was in him. "That's just what I've always felt," he went on vaguely. "I'm looking for some one wot's a'looking for something else — only looking wrong."

"In the wrong places," suggested Stumper, remembering his Indian scouting days.

"In the wrong way," put in Uncle Felix, full of experience by now.

The Policeman listened attentively, as though by rights he ought to enter these sentences laboriously in his notebook.

“That’s it, per’aps,” he stated. “It takes ’em longer, but they finds out in the end. If I was to show ’em the right way of looking instead of arresting ’em — I’d be *reel*!” And then he added, as if he were giving evidence in a Court of Justice and before a County Magistrate, “There’s no good looking for anything where it ain’t, now is there?”

“Precisely,” agreed Colonel Stumper, remembering happily that his pockets were full of snail-shells. He knew *his* sign.

Thompson, Mrs. Horton, Weeden, and the Policeman glanced at him gratefully. But it was the last mentioned who replied:

“Because every one,” he said with conviction at last, “has his own way of looking, and even the burgular is only looking wrong.” He, too, it seemed, had found himself.

Their search, their endless hunt, their conversation and adventures thus might be reported endlessly, if only the book-shelves of the world were built more stoutly, and everybody could find an Extra Day lying about in which to read it all. Each seeker held true to his or her first love, obeying an infallible instinct. The adventure and romance that hid in Tim and Judy, respectively, sent them headlong after anything that offered signs of these two common but seductive qualities. Judy lived literally in the air, her feet, her heart, her eyes all off the ground; Tim, filled with an equally insatiable curiosity, found adorable danger in every rabbit-run, and rescued things innumerable. Off the ground he felt unsafe, unsure, and lost himself. Stumper, faithful to his scouting passion, disappeared into all kinds of undesirable places no one else would have dreamed of looking in, yet invariably — came back; and while Uncle Felix tried a little of everything and found “copy” in a puddle or a dandelion, Weeden carried his empty sack without a murmur, knowing it would be filled with truffles at the end. Aunt Emily, exceedingly particular, but no longer interfering with the others, was equally sure of herself. A touch of fluid youth ran in her veins again, and in her heart grew a fern that presently she would find everywhere outside as well — a maiden-hair.

Each, however, in some marvellous way, shared the adventures of the others, as though the Tramp merged all seven of them into one single being, unified them, at any rate, into this one harmonious, common purpose with himself. For, while everybody had a different way of looking, everybody's way — for that particular individual — was exactly right.

"Smell, then follow," was the secret. "Find your own sign and stick to it," the clue. Each sign, though by different routes, led straight towards the marvellous hiding-place. To urge one's own sign upon another was merely to delay that other; but to point out better signs of his own particular kind was to send him on faster than before. Thus there was harmony among them all, for every seeker, knowing this, had — found himself.

REALITY

X

But, while there was no hurry, no passing, and, most certainly of all, no passing away, there was a sense of enormous interval. There were epochs, there were interludes, there was — duration.

Though everything had only just begun, it was yet complete, if not completed.

At any point of an adventure that adventure could be taken over from the very start, the experience holding all the thrill and wonder of the first time.

Cake could be had and eaten too. Tim, half-way down a rabbit-hole, could instantly find himself at the opening again, bursting with all the original excitement of trembling calculations. With the others it was similar.

There was no end to anything. Yet — there was this general consciousness of gigantic interval. It turned in a circle round them — everywhere….

They came together, then, all eight of them, into that place of singular enchantment known as the End of the World, sitting in a group about the prostrate elm that on ordinary days was Home. What they had been doing each one knew assuredly, even if no one mentioned it. Tim, who had been to India with Come-Back Stumper, had a feeling in his heart that expressed itself in one word, "everywhere," accompanied by a sigh of happy satisfaction; Judy felt what she knew as "Neverness"; she had seen the Metropolis inside out, with Uncle Felix apparently. And these two couples now sat side by side upon the tree, gazing contentedly at the colony of wallflowers that flamed in the sunshine just above their heads. WEEDEN, cleaning his spade with a great nailed boot, turned his good eye affectionately upon the sack that lay beside him, full now to bursting. Aunt Emily breathed on her gold-rimmed glasses, rubbed them, and put them on her elastic nose, then looked about her peacefully yet expectantly, ready, it seemed, to start again at any moment — anywhere. She guarded carefully a mossy bundle in her black silk lap. A little distance from her Thompson was fastening a flower into Mrs. Horton's dress, and close to the gate stood the Policeman, smoking a pipe and watching everybody with obvious contentment. His belt was loose; both hands stuck into it; he leaned against the wooden fence.

On the ground, between the tree and the fence, the Tramp had made a fire. He lay crouched about it. He and the fire belonged to one another. It seemed that he was dozing.

And this sense of lying in the heart of an enormous circular interval touched everybody with delicious peace; each had apparently found something real, and was content merely to lie and — be with it. All came gradually to sitting or reclining postures. Yet there was no sense of fatigue; any instant they would be up again and looking.

Occasionally one or other of them spoke, but it was not the kind of speech that struggled to express difficult ideas with tedious sentences of many words. There was very little to *say*: mere statements of indubitable reality could be so easily and briefly made.

"Now," said Tim, unafraid of contradiction.

"Then," said Judy, equally certain of herself.

"Now then," declared Uncle Felix, positive at last of something.

"Naturally," affirmed Aunt Emily.

"Of course," growled Come-Back Stumper. And while WEEDEN, looking contentedly at his bursting sack, put in "Always," the Policeman, without referring to his notebook, added from the fence, "That's right." The remarks of Thompson and Mrs. Horton were not audible, for they were talking to one another some little distance away beside the Rubbish Heap, but their conversation seemed equally condensed and eloquent, judging by the satisfied expression on their faces. Thompson probably said, “Well,” the cook adding, “I never!”

The Tramp, stretched out beside his little fire of burning sticks, however, said more than any of them. He also said it shortly — as shortly as the children. There was never any question who was Leader.

“Yes,” he mentioned in a whisper that flowed about them with a sound like singing wind.

It summed up everything in a single word. It made them warm, as though a little flame had touched them. All the languages of the world, using all their sentences at once, could have said no more than that consummate syllable — in the way *he* said it: *“Yes!”* It was the word the whole Day uttered.

For this was perfectly plain: Each of the group, having followed his or her particular sign to the end of the world, now knew exactly where the hider lay. The supreme discovery was within reach at last. They were merely waiting, waiting in order to enjoy the revelation all the more, and — waiting in an ecstasy of joy and wonder. Seven or eight of them were gathered together; the hiding-place was found. It was now, and then, and natural, and always, and right: it was Yes, and life had just begun….

There happened, then, a vivid and amazing thing — all rose as one being and stood up. The Tramp alone remained lying beside his little fire. But the others stood — and listened.

The precise nature of what had happened none of them, perhaps, could explain. It was too marvellous; it was possibly the thing that nobody understands, and possibly the thing they didn’t know they knew; yet *they* both knew and understood it. To each, apparently, the hiding-place was simultaneously revealed. Their Signs summoned them. The hider called!

Yet all they heard was the singing of a little bird. Invisible somewhere above them in the sea of blazing sunshine, it poured its heart out rapturously with a joy and a passion of life that seemed utterly careless as to whether it was heard or not. It merely sang because it was — alive.

To Judy, at any rate, this seemed what they heard. To the others it came, apparently — otherwise. Their interpretations, at any rate, were various.

Thompson and Mrs. Horton were the first to act. The latter looked about her, sniffing the air. “It’s burning,” she said. “Mary don’t know enough. That’s my job, anyhow!” and moved off in the direction of the house with an energy that had nothing of displeasure nor of temper in it. It was apparently crackling that she heard. Thompson went after her, a willing alacrity in his movements that yet showed no sign of undignified hurry. “I’ll be at the door in no time,” he was heard to say, “before it’s stopped ringing, I should not wonder!” There was a solemn joy in him, he spoke as though he heard a bell. WEEDEN turned very quietly and watched their disappearing figures. He shouldered his heavy sack of truffles and his spade. No one asked him anything aloud, but, in answer to several questioning faces, he mumbled cautiously, though in a satisfied and pleasant voice, “My garden wants me — maybe; I’ll have a look” — obviously going off to water the apricots and rose trees. He heard the dry leaves rustling possibly.

“Keep to the gravel paths,” began Aunt Emily, adjusting her gold glasses; “they’re dry” — then changed her sentence, smiling to herself: “They’re so beautifully made, I mean.” And gathering up her bundle of living ferns, she walked briskly over the broken ground, then straight across the lawn, waving her trowel at them as she vanished in the shade below the lime trees. The shade, however, seemed deeper than before. It concealed her quickly.

“I’ll be moving on now,” came the deep voice of the Policeman. He opened the gate in the fence and consulted a notebook as he did so. He passed slowly out of sight, closing the gate behind him carefully. His heavy tramp became audible on the road outside, the road leading to the Metropolis. “There’s some one asking the way—” his voice was audible a moment, before it died into the distance. The road, the gateway, the fence were not so clear as hitherto — a trifle dim.

These various movements took place so quickly, it seemed they all took place at once; Judy still heard the bird, however. She heard nothing else. It was singing everywhere, the sky full of its tender and delicious song. But the notes were a little — just a little — further away she thought, nor could she see it anywhere.

And it was then that Come-Back Stumper, limping a trifle as usual, approached them. He looked troubled rather, and though his manner was full of confidence still, his mind had mild confusion in it somewhere. He joined Uncle Felix and the children, standing in front of them.

"Listen!" he said in low, gruff voice. He held out an open palm, three snail-shells in it, signifying that they should take one each. "Listen!" he repeated, and put the smallest shell against his own ear. "D'you hear that curious sound?" His head was cocked sideways, one ear pressed tight against the shell, the other open to the sky. "The Ganges…" he mumbled to himself after an interval, "but the stones are moving — moving in the river bed…. That long, withdrawing roar!" He was just about to add "down the naked shingles of the world," when Uncle Felix interrupted him.

"Grating," he said, listening intently to his shell; "a metallic, grating sound. What is it?" There was apprehension in his tone, a touch of sadness. "It's getting louder too!"

"Footsteps," exclaimed Tim. "Two feet, not four. It's *not* a badger or a rabbit." He went on with sudden conviction— "and it's coming nearer." There was disappointment and alarm in him. "Though it might be a badger, p'r'aps," he added hopefully.

"But I hear singing," cried Judy breathlessly, "nothing but singing. It's a bird." Her face was radiant. "It *is* a long way off, though," she mentioned.

They put their shells down then, and listened without them. They glanced from one another to the sky, all four heads cocked sideways. And they heard the sound distinctly, somewhere in the air about them. It had changed a little. It was louder. It *was* coming nearer.

"Metallic," repeated Uncle Felix, with an ominous inflection.

"Machinery," growled Stumper, a fury rising in his throat.

"Clicking," agreed Tim. He looked uneasy.

"I only hear a bird," Judy whispered. "But it comes and goes — rather." And then the Tramp, still lying beside his little fire of burning sticks, put in a word.

"It's *we* who are going," he said in his singing voice. "We're moving on again."

They heard him well enough, but they did not understand quite what he meant, and his voice died into the distance oddly, far away already, almost on the other side of the fence. And as he spoke they noticed another change in the world about them. Three of the party noticed it — the males, Uncle Felix, Tim, and Come-Back Stumper.

For the light was fading; it was getting darker; there was a slight sense of chill, a growing dimness in the air. They realised vaguely that the Tramp was leaving them, and that with him went the light, the heat, the brilliance out of their happy day.

They turned with one accord towards him. He still lay there beside his little fire, but he seemed further off; both his figure and the burning sticks looked like a picture seen at the end of a corridor, an interminable corridor, edged and framed by gathering shadows that were about to cover it. They stretched their hands out; they called to him; they moved their feet; for the first time this wonderful day, there was hurry in them. But the receding figure of the Tramp withdrew still further and further, until an inaccessible distance intervened. They heard him singing faintly "There is no hurry, Life has just begun…The world is young with laughter…We can fly…" but the words came sighing towards them from the inaccessible region where he lay, thousands of years ago, millions of miles away, millions of miles….

"You won't forget," were the last words they caught. "You know now. You'll never forget…!"

When a sudden cry of joy and laughter sounded close behind them, and they turned to see Judy standing on tiptoe, stretching her thin, slim body as if trying to reach the moon. The light was dim; it seemed the sun had set and moonlight lay upon the world; but her figure, bright and shining, stood in a patch of radiant brilliance by herself. She looked like a white flame of fire ascending.

"I've got it!" she was crying rapturously, "I've got it!" Her voice was wild with happiness, almost like the singing of a bird.

The others stared — then came up close. But, while Tim ran, Stumper and Uncle Felix moved more slowly. For something in them hesitated; their attitudes betrayed them; there was a certain confusion in the minds of the older two, a touch of doubt. The contrast between the surrounding twilight and the brilliant patch of glory in which Judy stood bewildered them. The long, slim body of the child, every line of her figure, from her toes to the crown of her flying hair, pointing upwards in a stream of shining aspiration, was irresistible, however. She looked like a lily growing, nay rushing, upwards to the sun.

They followed the direction of her outstretched arms and hands. But it was Tim who spoke first. He did not doubt as they did:

“Oh, Judy, where?” he cried out passionately. “Show me! Show me!”

The child raised herself even higher, stretching her toes and arms and hands; her fingers lengthened; she panted; she made a tremendous effort.

“There!” she said, without looking down. Her face was towards the sky, her throat stretched till the muscles showed and her hair fell backwards in a stream.

Then, following the direction of her eyes and pointing fingers, the others saw for the first time what Judy saw — a small wild rose hung shining in the air, dangling at the end of a little bending branch. The bush grew out of the rubbish-heap, clambering up the wall. No one had noticed it before. At the end of the branch hung this single shining blossom, swinging a little in the wind. But it was out of reach — just a shade too high for her eager fingers to take hold of it. Beyond it grew the colony of wall-flowers, also in the curious light that seemed the last glory of the fading day. But it was the rose that Judy wanted. And from somewhere near it came the sweet singing of the unseen bird.

“Too high,” whispered Uncle Felix, watching in amazement. “You can’t manage it. You’ll crick your back! oh — oh!” The sight of that blossom drew his heart out.

“Impossible,” growled Stumper, yet wondering why he said it. “It’s out of reach.”

“Go it!” cried Tim. “You’ll have it in a second. Half an inch more! There — you touched it that time!”

For an interval no one could measure they watched her spellbound; in each of them stirred the similar instinct — that they could reach it, but that she could not. A deep, secret desire hid in all of them to pick that gleaming wild rose that swung above them in the air. And, meanwhile, the darkness deepened perceptibly, only Judy and the blossom framed still in shining light.

Then, suddenly, the child’s voice broke forth again like a burst of music.

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it!”

There was a breathless pause. Her finger did not stretch a fraction of an inch — but the rose was nearer. For the bird that still sang invisibly had fluttered into view and perched itself deliberately upon the prickly branch. It lowered the rose towards the human hands. It hopped upon the twig. Its weight dropped the prize — almost into Judy’s fingers. She touched it.

“I’ve found him!” gasped the child.

She touched it — and sank with the final effort in a heap upon the ground. The bird fluttered an instant, and was gone into the darkness. The twig, released, flew back. But at the end of it, swinging out of reach, still hung the lovely blossom in mid-air — unpicked.

There was confusion then about the four of them, for the light faded very quickly and darkness blotted out the world; the rose was no longer visible, the bush, the wall, the rubbish-heap, all were shrouded. The singing-bird had gone, the Tramp beside his little fire was hidden, they could hardly see one another’s faces even. Voices rose on every side. “She missed it!” “It was too lovely to be picked!” “It’s still there, growing….I can smell it!”

Yet above them all was heard Judy’s voice that sang, rose out of the darkness like a bird that sings at midnight: “I touched it! My airy signs came true! I know the hiding-place! I’ve — found him!”

The voice had something in it of the Tramp’s careless, windy singing as well.

“Look! He’s touched me…! Look…!”

For in that instant when the rose swung out of reach again, in that instant when she touched it, and before the fading light hid everything — all saw the petal floating down to earth. It settled slowly, with a zigzag, butterfly course, fluttering close in front of their enchanted eyes. And it was this petal, perhaps, that brought the darkness, for, as it sank, it grew vast and spread until it covered the entire sky. Like a fairy silken sheet of softest coloured velvet it lay on everything, as though the heavens lowered and folded over them. They felt it press softly on their faces. A curtain, it seemed — some one had let the curtain down.

Beneath it, then, the confusion became extraordinary. There was tumult of various kinds. Every one cried at once "I've found him! Now *I* know!" At the touch of the petal, grown so vast, upon their eyelids, each knew his "sign" had led him to the supreme discovery. This flower was born of the travail of a universe. Child of the elements, or at least blessed by them, this petal of a small wild-rose made all things clear, for upon its velvet skin still lay the morning dew, air kissed it, its root and origin was earth, and the fire of the sun blazed in its perfect colouring…. Yet in the tumult and confusion such curious behaviour followed. For Come-Back Stumper, crying that he saw a purple beetle pass across the world, proceeded to curl up as though he crawled into a spiral snail-shell and meant to go to sleep in it; Tim shouted in the darkness that he was riding a huge badger down a hole that led to the centre of the earth; and Uncle Felix begged every one to look and see what he saw, darkness or no darkness— "the splash of misty blue upon the body of a dragon-fly!"

They might almost have been telling their dreams at breakfast-time….

But while the clamour of their excited voices stirred the world beneath the marvellous covering, there rose that other sound — increasing until it overpowered every word they uttered. In the world outside there was a clicking, grating, hard, metallic sound — as though machinery was starting somewhere….

And Judy, managing somehow or other to lift a corner and peer out, saw that the dawn was breaking in the eastern sky, and that a new day was just beginning. The sun was rising…. She went back again to tell the others, but she could not find them. She did not try very hard; she did not look for them. She just closed her eyes…. The swallows were chattering in the eaves, a robin sang a few marvellous bars, then ceased, and an up-and-under bird sent forth its wild, high bugle-call, then dived out of sight below the surface of the pond.

Judy did likewise — dived down and under, drawing the soft covering against her cheek, and although her eyes were already closed she closed them somehow a second time. "Everything's all right," she had a butterfly sort of thought; “there’s no hurry. It’s not time… yet…!” — and the petal covered her again from head to foot. She had noticed, a little further off, a globular, round object lying motionless beneath another corner of the covering. It gave her a feeling of comfort and security. She slid away to find the others. It seemed she floated, rather. “Everything’s free and careless… and so are — so am I…for we shall never…never forget…!” she remembered sweetly — and was gone, fluttering after the up-and-under bird …into some hidden world she had discovered….

The old Mill House lay dreaming in the dawn. Transparent shades of pink and gold stole slowly up the eastern sky. A stream of amber diffused itself below the paling stars. Rising from a furnace below the horizon it reached across and touched the zenith, painting mid-heaven with a mystery none could understand; then sank downwards and dipped the crests of the trees, the lawn, the moss-grown tiles upon the roof in that sea of everlasting wonder which is light.

Dawn caught the old sleeping world once more in its breathless beauty. The earth turned over in her sleep, gasped with delight — and woke. There was a murmur and a movement everywhere. The spacious, stately life that breathes o’er ancient trees came forth from the wood without a centre; from the lines emanated that gracious, almost tender force they harvest in the spring. There was a little shiver of joy among the rose trees. The daisies blinked and stared. And the earth broke into singing.

Then, in this chorus, came a pause; the thousand voices hushed a moment; the robin ceased its passionate solo in the shrubbery. All listened — listened to another and far sweeter song that stirred with the morning wind among the rose trees. It was very soft and tender, it died away and returned with a faint, mysterious murmur, it rose and fell so gently that it may have been only the rustling of their thousand leaves that guard the opening blossoms.

Yet it ran with power across the entire waking earth:

My secret’s in the wind and open sky,
  There is no longer any Time — to lose;
The world is young with laughter; we can fly
  Among the imprisoned hours as we choose.
The rushing minutes pause; an unused day
  Breaks into dawn and cheats the tired sun.

The birds are singing: Hark! Come out and play!
There is no hurry; life has just begun.

And as it died away the sun itself came up and shouted it aloud as with a million golden trumpets.

CHAPTER XVIII. TIME GOES ON AGAIN —

HARDLY HAD JUDY closed her eyes for the second time, however, than the globular object she had noticed in the corner stirred. It turned, but turned all over, as though it were a ball. It made a sideways movement too, a movement best described as budging. And, accompanying the movements, was a comfortable, contented, satisfied sound that some people call deep breathing, and others call a sigh.

The globular outline then grew slightly longer; one portion of it left the central mass, but left it slowly. The lower part prolonged itself. Slight cracks were audible like sharp reports, muffled but quite distinct. Next, the other end of the ball extended itself, twisted in a leisurely fashion sideways, rose above the general surface and plainly showed itself. It, too, was round. It emerged. Upon its surface shone two small pools of blue. It was a face. Even in the grey, uncertain light this was beyond dispute. It was Maria's face.

Maria awoke. She looked about her calmly. Her mind, ever unclouded because it thought of one thing only, took in the situation at a glance. It was dawn, she was in bed and sleepy, it was not time to get up. Dawn, sleep, bed and time belonged to her. There certainly was no hurry.

The pools of blue then disappeared together, the smaller ball sank down into the pillow to join the larger one, the lower portion that had stretched itself drew in again, and a peaceful sigh informed the universe that Maria intended to resume her interrupted slumbers. She became once more a mere globular outline, self-contained, at rest.

But, in accepting life as it really was by lying down again, the lesser ball had imperceptibly occupied a new position. Maria's head had shifted. Her ear now pressed against another portion of the pillow. And this pressure, communicating itself to an object that lay beneath the pillow, touched a small brass handle, jerked it forward, released a bit of quivering wire connected with a set of wheels, and set in motion the entire insides of this hidden object. There was a sound of grating. This hard, metallic sound rose through the feathers, a clicking, thudding noise that reached her brain. It was — she knew instantly — the stopped alarum clock. It had been overwound. The weight of her head had started it again.

Maria, as usual, by doing nothing in particular, had accomplished much. By yielding herself to her surroundings, she united her insignificant personal forces with the gigantic purposes of Life. She swung contentedly in rhythm with the universe. Maria had set the clock going again!

There was excitement in her then, but certainly no hurry. Disturbing herself as little as possible, she pushed one hand beneath the pillow, drew out the ticking clock, looked at it quietly, remembered sleepily that it had stopped at dawn — Uncle Felix had said so — put it on the chair beside her bed, and promptly retired again into her eternal centre.

“Tim’s clock,” she realised, “but I’ve got it.” There was no expression on her face whatever. Another child might have taken the trouble — felt interested, at any rate — to try and see what time it was. But Maria, aware that the dim light would make this a difficult and tedious operation, did nothing of the sort. It could make no difference anyhow to any one, anywhere! She was content to know that it was some time or other, and that the clock was going again. Her plan of life was: interfere with nothing. She did not know, therefore, that the hands pointed with accuracy to 4 A. M., because she merely did not care to know. But, not caring to know placed her on a loftier platform of intelligence than the rest of the world — certainly above that of her sister, Judy, who was snoring softly among the shadows just across the room. Maria didn’t know that she didn’t know. No one could rebuke her with “You might have known,” much less “You didn’t know,” — because she didn’t know she didn’t know! It was the biggest kind of knowledge in the world. Maria had it.

But before she actually regained her absolute centre, and long before she lost sight of herself within its depths, dim thoughts came floating through her mind like pictures that moonlight paints upon high summer clouds. She saw these pictures; that is, she looked at them and recognised their existence; but she asked no questions. They reached her through the ticking of the busy clock beside the bed; the ticking brought them; but it brought them back. Maria remembered things. And chief among them were the following: That Uncle Felix had promised everybody an Extra Day, that he had stopped all the clocks to let it come, that this Extra Day was to be her own particular adventure, that last night was Saturday, and that this was, therefore, Sunday morning, very early.

And the instant she remembered these things, they were real — for her. She accepted them, one and all, even the contradictions in them. If this was actually an Extra Day it could not be Sunday morning too, and *vice versa*. But yet she knew it was. Both were. The confusion was a confusion of words only. There were too many words about.

“Why not?” expressed her attitude. The clock might tick itself to death for all she cared. The Extra Day was her adventure and she claimed it. But she did not bother about it.

Above all, she asked no questions. Nothing really meant anything in particular, because everything meant everything. To ask questions, even of herself, involved hearing a lot of answers and listening to them. But answers were explanations, and explanations muddled and obscured. Explanations were a new set of questions merely. People who didn’t know asked questions, and people who didn’t understand gave explanations. Aunt Emily explained — because she didn’t understand. Also, because she didn’t understand, she didn’t know. To ask a question was the same thing as to explain it. Everything was one thing. She, Maria, both knew and understood.

She did not say all this, she did not think it even; she just felt it all: it was her feeling. Believing in her particular adventure of an Extra Day, she had already experienced it. She had shared it with the others too. It was *her* Extra Day, so she could do with it what she pleased. “They can have it,” she gave the clock to understand. “I’m going to sleep again.” All life was an extra day to her.

She went to sleep; sleep, rather, came to her. Happy dreams amused and comforted her. And, while she dreamed, the dawn slid higher up the sky, ushering in — Sunday Morning.

CHAPTER XIX. — AS USUAL

CONSCIOUSNESS WAS FIRST — unconsciousness; the biggest changes are unconscious before they are conscious. They have been long preparing. They fall with a clap; and people call them sudden and exclaim, “How strange!” But it is only the discovery and recognition that are sudden. It all has happened already long ago — happened before. The faint sense of familiarity betrays it. It is there the strangeness lies.

And it was this delicate fragrance of an uncommunicable strangeness that floated in the air when Uncle Felix and the children came down to breakfast that Sunday morning and heard the sound of bells in the wind across the fields. They came down punctually for a wonder, too; Maria, last but not actually late, brought the alarum clock with her. “It’s going,” she stated quietly, and handed it to her brother.

Tim took it without a word, looked at it, shook it, listened to its ticking against his ear, then set it on the mantelpiece where it belonged. He seemed pleased to have it in his possession again, yet something puzzled him. An expression of wonder flitted across his face; the eyes turned upwards; he frowned; there was an effort in him — to remember something. He turned to Maria who was already deep in porridge.

“Did *you* wind it up?” he asked. “I thought it’d stopped — last night.”

“It’s going,” she said, thinking of her porridge chiefly.

“It wasn’t, though,” insisted Tim. He reflected a moment, evidently perplexed. “I wound it and forgot,” he added to himself, “or else it wound itself.” He went to his place and began his breakfast.

“Wound itself,” mentioned Maria, and then the subject dropped.

It was Sunday morning, and everybody was dressed in Sunday things. The excitement of the evening before, the promise of an Extra Day, the detailed preparation — all this had disappeared. Being of yesterday, it was no longer vital: certainly there was no necessity to consult it. They looked forward rather than backward; the mystery of life lay ever just in front of them, what lay behind was already done with. They had lived it, lived it out. It was in their possession therefore, part of themselves.

No one of the four devouring porridge round that breakfast table had forgotten about the promise, any more than they had forgotten giving up their time-pieces, the conversation, and all the rest of it. It was not forgetfulness. It was not loss of interest either that led no one to refer to it, least of all, to clamour for fulfilment. It was quite another motive that kept them silent, and that, even when Uncle Felix handed back the watches, prevented them saying anything more than “Thank you, Uncle,” then hanging them on to belt and waistcoat.

Expectation — an eternal Expectation — was established in them.

But there was also this sense of elusive strangeness in their hearts, the certainty that an enormous interval had passed, almost the conviction that an Extra Day — had been. Somewhere, somehow, they had experienced its fulfilment: It was now inside them. A strange familiarity hung about this Sunday morning.

Yet there were still a million things to do and endless time in which to do them. Expectation was stronger than ever before, but the sense of Interval brought a happy feeling of completion too. There was no hurry. They felt something of what Maria felt, living at the centre of a circle that turned unceasingly but never finished. It was Maria’s particular adventure, and Maria had shared it with them. Wonder and expectation made them feel more than usually — alive.

They talked normally while eating and drinking. If things were said that skirted a mystery, no one tried to find its name or label it. It was just hiding. Let it hide! To find it was to lose the mystery, and life without mystery was unthinkable.

“That’s bells,” said Tim, “it’s church this morning”; but he did not sigh, there was no sinking of the heart, it seemed. He spoke as if it was an adventure he looked forward to. “I’ve decided what I’m going to be,” he went on— “an engineer, but a mining engineer. Finding things in the earth, valuable things like coal and gold.” Why he said it was not clear exactly; it had no apparent connection with church bells. He just thought of life as a whole, perhaps, and what he meant to do with it. He looked forward across the years to come. He distinctly knew himself alive.

“I shall put sixpence in, I think,” observed Judy presently. “It’s a lot. And I shall wear my blue hat with the pheasant’s feather—”

“Pheasants feather,” repeated Tim in a single word, amused as usual by a curious sound.

“And a wild rose *here*,” she added, pointing to the place on her dress, though nobody felt interested enough to look. Her remark about the Collection was more vital than the other. Collections in church were made, they believed, to “feed the clergyman.” And Sunday was the clergyman’s day.

“I’ve got sixpence,” Tim hastened to remind everybody. “I’ve got a threepenny bit as well.”

“It’s sixpence to-day, I think,” Judy decided almost tenderly. Behind her thought was a caring, generous impulse; the motherly instinct sent her mind to the collection for the clergyman’s comfort. But romance stirred too; she wanted to look her best. Her two main tendencies seemed very much alive this Sunday morning. The hat and the sixpence — both were real.

Maria, as usual, had little or nothing to say. She spoke once, however.

“I dreamed,” she informed the company. She did not look up, keeping her head bent over the bread and marmalade upon her plate; her blue eyes rolled round the table once, then dropped again. No one asked for details of her dream, she had no desire to supply them. She announced her position comfortably, as it were, set herself right with life, and quietly went on with the business of the moment, which was bread and marmalade.

Uncle Felix looked up, however, as she said it.

“That reminds me,” he observed, “I dreamed too. I dreamed that you dreamed.”

“Yes,” Maria replied briefly, moving her eyes in his direction, but not her head. No other remarks were made; the statement was too muddled to stimulate interest particularly.

When breakfast was over they went to the open window and threw crumbs to a robin that was obviously expecting to be fed. They all leaned out with their heads in the sunlight, watching it. It hopped from a twig on to the ground, its body already tight to bursting. It looked like a toy balloon — as though it wore a dress of red elastic stretched to such a point that the merest pinprick must explode it with a sharp report; and it hopped as though springs were in its feet. The earth, like a taut sheet, made it bounce. Tim aimed missiles of bread rolled into pellets at its head, but never hit it.

"It's a lovely morning," remarked Uncle Felix, looking across the garden to the yellow fields beyond. "A perfect day. We'll walk to church." He brushed the breakfast crumbs from the waistcoat of his neat blue suit, lit his pipe, sniffed the air contentedly, and had an air generally of a sailor on shore-leave.

Judy sprang up. "There's button-holes to get," she mentioned, and flew out of the room like a flash of sunlight or a bird.

Tim raced after her. "Wallflower for me!" he cried, while Judy's answer floated back from halfway down the passage: "I'll have a wild rosebud — it'll match my hat!"

Uncle Felix and Maria were left alone, gazing out of the window side by side upon the "lovely morning." She was just high enough to see above the edge, and her two hands lay sprawled, fingers extended, upon the shining sill.

"Yes," she mentioned quietly, as to herself, "and I'll have a forget-me-not." Her eyes rolled up sideways, meeting those of her uncle as he turned and noticed her.

For quite suddenly he "noticed" her, became aware that she was there, discovered her. He stared a moment, as though reflecting. That "yes" had a queer, familiar sound about it, surely.

"Maria," he said, "I believe you will. Everything comes to you of its own accord somehow."

She nodded.

"And there's another thing. You've got a secret — haven't you?" It occurred to him that Maria was rather wonderful.

“I expect so,” she answered, after a moment’s pause. She looked wiser than an owl, he thought.

“What is it? What *is* your secret? Can’t you tell me?”

For it came over him that Maria, for all her inactivity, was really more truly alive than both the other children put together. Their tireless, incessant energy was nothing compared to some deep well of life Maria’s outer calm concealed.

He continued to stare at her, reflecting while he did so. Through her globular exterior, standing here beside him, rose this quiet tide whose profound and inexhaustible source was nothing less than the entire universe. Finding himself thus alone with her, he knew his imagination singularly stirred. The full stream of this imagination — usually turned into sea — and history-stories — poured now into Maria. It was the way she had delivered herself of the monosyllable, “Yes,” that first enflamed him.

The child, obviously, was quite innocent that her uncle’s imagination clothed her in such wonder; she was entirely unselfconscious, and remained so; but, as she kept silent as well, there was nothing to interrupt the natural process of his thought. “You’re a circle, a mystery, a globe of wonder,” his mind addressed her, gazing downwards half in play and half in earnest. “You’re always going it. Though you seem so still — you’re turning furiously like a little planet!”

For this abruptly struck him, flashing the symbol into his imagination — that Maria lived so close to the universe that her life and movements were akin to those of the heavenly bodies. He saw her as an epitome of the earth. Fat, peaceful, little, calm, rotund Maria — a miniature earth! She had no call to hurry nor rush after things. Like the earth she contained all things within herself. It made him smile; he smiled as he looked down into her face; she smiled as she rolled her blue eyes upwards into his.

Yet her calm was not the calm of sloth. In that mysterious centre where she lived he felt her as tremendously alive.

For the earth, apparently so calm and steady, knows no pause. She moves round her axis without stopping. She rushes with immense rapidity round the sun. Simultaneously with these two movements she combines a third; the sun, carrying her and all his other planets with him, hurries at a prodigious rate through interstellar space, adventuring new regions never seen before. Calm outwardly, and without apparent motion, the earth — at this very moment, as he leaned across the window-sill — was making these three gigantic, endless movements. This peaceful summer morning, like any other peaceful summer morning, she was actually spinning, rushing, rising. And in Maria — it came to him — in Maria, outwardly so calm, something also — spun — rushed — rose! This amazing life that brimmed her full to bursting, even as it brimmed the robin and the earth, overflowed and dripped out of her very eyes in shining blue. There was no need for her to dash about. She, like the earth, was — carried.

All this flashed upon him while the alarum clock ticked off a second merely, for imagination telescopes time, of course, and knows things all at once.

“What *is* your secret, Maria?” he asked again. “I believe it’s about that Extra Day we meant to steal. Is that it?”

Her eyes gazed straight before her across the lawn where Tim and Judy were now visible, searching busily for button-holes.

“It was to be your particular adventure, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” she told him at length, without changing her expression of serene contentment.

His imagination warned him he was getting “at her” gradually. He possibly read into her a thousand things that were not there. Certainly, Maria was not aware of them. But, though Uncle Felix knew this perfectly well, he persisted, hoping for a sudden disclosure that would justify his search — even expecting it, perhaps.

“And what sort of a day would it be, then, this Extra Day of yours?” he went on. “It would never end, of course, for one thing, would it? There’d be no time?”

She nodded quietly by way of effortless agreement and consent.

“So that, in a sense, you’d have it always,” he said, aware of distinct encouragement. He felt obliged to help her. This was her peculiar power — that everything was done for her while she seemed to do it all herself. “You would live it over and over again, for ever and ever. *That's* your secret, I expect, isn't it?"

"I expect so," the child answered quietly. "I've always got it." She moved in a little closer to his side as she said it. The disclosure he expected seemed so near now that excitement grew in him. Across the lawn he saw the hurrying figures of Tim and Judy, racing back with their button-holes. There was no time to lose.

He put his arm about her, tilting her face upwards with one hand to see it plainly. The blue dyes came up with it.

"Then, what kind of a day *would* you choose, Maria? Tell me — in a whisper."

And then the disclosure came. But it was not whispered. Uncle Felix heard the secret in a very clear, decided voice and in a single word:

"Birthday."

At the same moment the others poured into the room; they came like a cataract; it seemed that a dozen children rushed upon them in a torrent. The air was full of voices and flowers suddenly. A smell of the open world came in with them. Button-holes were fastened into everybody, accompanied by a breathless chorus of where and how they had been found, who got the best, who got it first, and all the rest. From the End of the World they came, apparently, but while Tim had climbed the wall for his, Judy picked hers because a bird had lowered the branch into her very hand. For Uncle Felix she brought a spray of lilac; Tim brought a bit of mignonette. Eventually he had to wear them both.

"And here's a forget-me-not, Maria," cried Judy, stooping down to poke it into her sister's blue and white striped dress. "That suits you best, I thought."

"Thank you," said Maria, moving her eyes the smallest possible fraction of an inch.

And they scampered out of the room again, Maria ambling slowly in the rear, to prepare for church. There were prayer-books and things to find, threepenny bits and sixpences for the collection. There was simply heaps to do, as they expressed it, and not a moment to lose either. Uncle Felix listened to the sound of voices and footsteps as they flew down the passage, dying rapidly away into the distance, and finally ceasing altogether. He puffed his pipe a little longer before going to his room upon a similar errand. He watched the smoke curl up and melt into the outer air; he felt the pleasant sunshine warm upon his face; he smelt the perfume rising from his enormous button-hole. But of these things he did not think. He thought of what Maria said. The way she uttered that single word remained with him: "Birthday."

He had half divined her secret. For a birthday was the opening of life; it was the beginning. Maria had "got it always." All days for her were birthdays, Extra Days.

And while they walked along the lane to church he still was thinking about it.

The conversation proved that he was absent-minded rather; yet not that his mind was absent so much as intent upon other things. The children found him heavy; he seemed ponderous to them. And pondering he certainly was — pondering the meaning of existence. The children, he realised, were such brilliant comments upon existence; their unconscious way of living, all they said and thought and did, but especially all they believed, offered such bright interpretations, such simple solutions of a million things. They lived so really, were so really — alive. They never explained, they just accepted; and the explanations given they placed at their true value, still asking, "Yes, but what is the meaning of all that?" So close to Reality they lived — before reason, cloaked and confused it with a million complex explanations. That "Yes" and "Birthday" of Maria's were illuminating examples.

Of this he was vaguely pondering as they walked along the sunny lanes to church, and his conversation proved it. For conversation with children meant answering endless questions merely, and the questions were prompted by anything and everything they saw. Reality poked them; they gave expression to it by a question. And nothing real was trivial; the most careless detail was important, all being but a single question — an affirmation: "We're alive, so everything else is too!"

His conversation proved that he had almost reached that state of time-less reality in which they lived. He felt it this morning very vividly. It seemed familiar somehow — like his own childhood recovered almost.

He answered them accordingly. It didn't matter what was said, because all the words in the world said one thing only. Whether the words, therefore, made sense or not, was of no importance.

"Have you ever seen a rabbit come *out* of its hole?" asked Tim. "They do that for safety," he added; and if there was confusion in his language, there was none in his thought. "Then no one can tell which its hole is, you see. Because each rabbit—"

He broke off and glanced expectantly at his uncle. At junctures like this his uncle usually cleared things up with an easy word or two. He would not fail him now.

"Come *out*, no," was the reply; "no one ever sees a rabbit come out. But I've seen them go *in*; and that's the same thing in the end. They go down the wrong hole on purpose. *They* know right enough. Rabbits are rabbits."

"Of course," exclaimed Judy, "everything's itself and knows its own sign — er — business, I mean."

"Yes," Maria repeated.

And before anything further could be mentioned — if there *was* anything to mention — they arrived at the porch of the church, passed under it without speaking, walked up the aisle and took their places in the family pew, Maria occupying the comfortable corner against the inner wall.

CHAPTER XX. — BUT DIFFERENTLY!

CHURCH WAS VERY — that is, they enjoyed the service very much, without knowing precisely why they liked it. They joined in the hymns with more energy than usual, because they felt “singy” and knew the tunes as well. Colonel Stumper handed round one of the bags at the end of a long pole — and, though the clergyman didn’t look at all as if he required feeding, the threepenny bits dropped in without the least regret on the part of the contributors. Tim’s coin, however, having been squeezed for several minutes before the bag came round, stuck to his moist finger, and Stumper, thinking he had nothing to put in, drove the long handle past him towards Maria. That same instant the coin came un-stuck, and dropped with a rattle into the aisle. Come-Back Stumper stooped to recover it. Whereupon, to Judy, Tim and Uncle Felix, watching him, came a sudden feeling of familiarity, as though all this had happened before. The bent figure, groping after the hidden coin, seemed irresistibly familiar. It was very odd, they thought, very odd indeed. Where — when — had they seen him groping before like that, almost on all fours? But no one, of course, could remark upon it, and it was only Tim and Judy who exchanged a brief, significant glance. Maria, being asleep, did not witness it, nor did she contribute to the feeding of the clergyman either.

There followed a short sermon, of which they heard only the beginning, the end, and certain patches in the middle when the preacher raised his voice abruptly, but the text, they all agreed, was “Seek and ye shall find.” During the delivery of the portions that escaped them, Tim scratched his head and thought about rabbits, while Judy’s mind hesitated between various costumes in the pews in front of her, unable to decide which she would wear when she reached the age of its respective owner.

And so, in due course, feeling somehow that something very real had been accomplished, they streamed out with the rest of the congregation into the blazing summer sunshine. Expectant, inquisitive and hungry, they stood between the yew trees and the porch, yawning and fidgeting until Uncle Felix gave the signal to start. The sunlight made them blink. There was something of pleasurable excitement in knowing themselves part of a "Congregation," for a Congregation was distantly connected with "metropolis" and "govunment," and an important kind of thing at any time.

They stood and watched it. It scattered slowly, loth to separate and go. There was no hurry certainly. People talked in lowered voices, as if conversation after service was against the rules, and the church and graves might overhear; they smiled, but not too gaily; they seemed subdued; yet really they wanted to sing and dance — once safely out of hearing and sight, they would run and jump and stand on their heads. The children, that is, attributed their own feelings to them.

Several — all "Members" of the Congregation — approached and asked unreal questions, to which Judy, as the eldest, gave unreal answers:

"Your parents will soon be back again?"

"Yes; Father comes to-morrow, Mother too."

"I hope they have enjoyed their little change."

"I think so — thank you."

Gradually the Congregation melted away, broughams and victorias drove off sedately down the road, the horses making as little sound as possible with their hoofs. The Choir-boys emerged from a side-door and vanished into a field; a series of Old Ladies and Invalids felt their way down the gravel path with sticks; the "Neighbours," looking clean and dressed-up, went off in various directions — gravely, voices hushed, manners circumspect. Tim, feeling as usual "awfully empty after church," was sure they ran as fast as ever they could the moment they were out of sight. A Congregation was a wonderful thing altogether. It was a puzzle how the little church could hold so many people. They watched the whole familiar business with suppressed excitement, forgetting they were hungry and impatient. It was both real and unreal, something better beckoned beyond all the time; but there was no hurry. It was a deep childhood mystery — wonder filled them to the brim.

"Come on, children; we'll be off now," sounded their uncle's voice, and at the same moment Come-Back Stumper joined them. He had been counting over the money with the clergyman, of course, all this time. He was very slow. They hoped their contributions had been noticed.

“You’ll come back with us?” suggested Uncle Felix. And Stumper, growling his acceptance, walked home to lunch with them in the old Mill House. In his short black coat, trousers of shepherd’s plaid, and knotted white tie bearing a neat horseshoe pin, he looked smart yet soldierly. Tim apologised for his moist finger and the threepenny bit. “I thought it had got down a hole,” he said, “but you found it wonderfully.” “It simply flew!” cried Judy. “Clever old thing!” she added with admiration.

“I’ve found harder things than that,” said Stumper. “It hid itself well, though — bang in the open like a lost collar-stud. Thought I’d never look *there!”*

They glanced at one another with a curious, half-expectant air, and Tim suddenly took the soldier’s hand. But no one said anything more about it; the sin was forgiven and forgotten. Uncle Felix put in a vague remark concerning Indian life, and Stumper mentioned proudly that a new edition of his scouting book was coming out and he had just finished revising the last sheets. “All yesterday I spent working on it,” he informed them with a satisfied air, whereupon Tim said “Fancy that!” and Judy exclaimed “Did you really?” They seemed to have an idea that he was doing something else “all yesterday”; but no one knew exactly what it was. Then Judy planted herself in the road before him, made him stop, and picked something off his shoulder. “A tiny caterpillar!” she explained. “Another minute and you’d have had it down your neck.” “It would have come back though,” he said with a gruff laugh. “It might’nt have,” returned Judy. “But look; it’s awfully beautiful!” They examined it for a moment, all five of them, and then Judy set it down carefully in the ditch and watched it march away towards the safer hedge.

It was a pleasant walk home, all together; they took the short cut across the fields; the world was covered with flowers, birds were singing, the air was fresh and sweet and the delicious sunlight not uncomfortably hot. Tim ran everywhere, exploring eagerly like a dog, and, also like a dog, doubling the journey’s length. He whistled to himself; from time to time he came back to report results of his discoveries. He was full of energy. Judy behaved in a similar manner, dancing in circles to make her hair and dress fly out; she sang bits of the hymn-tunes that she liked, taking the tune but fitting words of her own upon it. Maria was carried over two fields and a half; the down-hill parts she walked, however. She kept everybody waiting. They could not leave her. She contrived to make herself the centre of the party. Stumper and Uncle Felix brought up the rear, talking together "about things," and whirling their sticks in the air as though it helped them forward somehow.

On the slippery plank-bridge across the mill stream all paused a moment to watch the dragon-flies that set the air on fire with their coloured tails.

"The things that nobody can understand!" cried Judy.

"Nobody else," Tim corrected her. "We do!"

They leaned over the rail and saw their own reflections in the running water.

"Why, Come-Back hasn't got a button-hole!" exclaimed Judy — and flew off to find one for him, Tim fast upon her heels like a collie after a dipping swallow. They raced down the banks where the golden king-cups grew in spendthrift patches and disappeared among the colonies of reeds. Between some hanging willow branches further down they were visible a moment, like dryad figures peering and flitting through the cataract of waving green. They searched as though their lives depended on success. It was absurd that Stumper had no button-hole!

Maria, seated comfortably on the lower rail, watched their efforts and listened to the bursts of laughing voices that came up-stream — then, with a leisurely movement, took the flower from her own button-hole and handed it to Stumper. The eyes rolled upwards with the flower — solemnly. And Come-Back saw the action reflected in the stream below.

"Aw — thank you, my dear," he said, fastening the forget-me-not into his Sunday coat, "but I ought not to take it all. It's yours." The voice had a quiet, almost distant sound in it.

"Ours," Maria murmured to herself, addressing the faces in the water. She took the fragment Stumper handed back to her. All three, forgetting it was time for lunch, forgetting they were hungry, forgetting that there was still half a mile of lane between them and the house, gazed down at their reflections in the stream as though fascinated. Uncle Felix certainly felt the watery-enchantment in his soul. The reflections trembled and quivered, yet did not pass away. The stream flowed hurrying by them, yet still was always there. It gave him a strange, familiar feeling — something he knew, but had forgotten. Everything in life was passing, yet nothing went — there was no hurry. The rippling music, as the water washed the banks and made the grasses swish, was audible, and there was a deeper sound of swirling round the wooden posts that held the bridge secure. Bubbles rose and burst in spray. A lark, hanging like a cross in the blue sky, overhead, dropped suddenly as though it was a stone, but in the reflection it rushed up into their faces. It seemed to rise at them from the pebbly bed of the stream. Both movements seemed one and the same — both were true — the direction depended upon the point of view.

It startled them and broke the water-spell. For the singing stopped abruptly too. At the same moment Judy and Tim arrived, their arms full of flowers, hemlock, ferns, and bulrushes. They were breathless and exhausted; both talked at once; they had quite forgotten, apparently, what they had gone to find. Judy had seen a king-fisher, Tim had discovered tracks of an otter; in the excitement they forgot about the button-hole. But, somehow, the bird, the animal, and the flowers were the same thing really — one big simple thing. Only the point of view was different.

“We’ve looked simply everywhere!” cried Judy.

“Just look what we found!” Tim echoed.

To Uncle Felix it seemed they said one and the same thing merely — using *one* word in many syllables.

“Beautiful!” agreed Stumper, as they emptied their arms at his feet in wild profusion; “and enough for everybody too!”

Stumper also said the thing they had just said. Uncle Felix watched him move forward, where Maria was already using the heaped-up greenery as a cushion for her back, and pick something off the stem of a giant bulrush.

“But that’s what I like best,” he exclaimed. “Look at the colour, will you — blue and cream and yellow! You can hear the Ganges in it, if you listen close enough.” He held a small, coloured snail-shell between his sinewy fingers, then placed it against his ear, while the others, caught by a strange enveloping sense of wonder, stared and listened, swept for a moment into another world.

“How marvellous!” whispered some one.

“Extrornary!” another murmured.

“Yes,” said Maria. Her voice made a sound like a thin stone falling from a height into water. But Maria had said the same thing as the others, only said it shorter. An entire language lay in that mono-syllable. Again, it was the point of view of doing, saying one enormous thing. And Maria’s point of view was everywhere at once — the centre.

“Listen!” she added the next minute.

Perhaps the sunlight quivering on the surface of the stream confused them, or perhaps it was the murmur and movement of the leaves upon the banks that brought the sense of sweet, queer bewilderment upon all five. A new sound there certainly was — footsteps, as though some one came dancing — voices, as though some one sang. Figures were seen in the distance among the waving world of green; they moved behind the cataract of falling willow branches; and their distance was as the distance of a half-remembered dream.

“They’re coming,” gasped Judy below her breath.

“They’re coming back,” Tim whispered, the tone muffled, underground.

“Eh?” ejaculated Stumper. “Coming back?” His voice, too, had distance in it.

Whether they saw it in the reflections on the running water, or whether the maze of shadow and sunshine in the wooded banks produced it, no one knew exactly. The figures, at any rate, were plainly visible, moving along with singing and dancing through the summery noontide of the brilliant day. No one spoke while they went by, no one except Maria who at intervals murmured “Yes.” There was no other audible comment or remark. They afterwards agreed that Weeden was seen clearest, but Thompson and Mrs. Horton were fairly distinct as well, and bringing up the rear was a figure in blue that could only have been the Policeman who lived usually upon the high road to London. They carried flowers in their arms, they moved lightly and quickly — it was uncommonly like dancing — and their voices floated through the woodland spaces with a sound that, if it was not singing, was at least an excellent imitation — an attempt to sing!

“They’re not lost,” said Tim, as they disappeared from view. “They’re just looking — for the way.”

“The way home,” said Judy. “And they’re following some one — who knows it.”

“Yes,” added Maria. For another figure, more like a tree moving in the wind than anything else, and certainly looking differently to each of them — another figure was seen in advance of the group, seen in flashes, as it were, and only glimpses of it discernible among the world of moving green. This other figure was singing too; snatches of wild sweet music floated through the quiet wood — one said the singing of a bird, another, the wind, a third, the rippling murmur of the stream — but, to one and all, an enchanting and enticing sound. And, to one and all, familiar too, with the familiarity of a half-remembered dream.

And a flood of memory rose about them as they watched and listened, a tide that carried them away with it into the heart of something they knew, yet had forgotten. In the few moments’ interval an eternity might have passed. Their hearts opened curiously, they saw wonder growing like a flower inside — the exquisite wonder of common things. There was something they were looking for, but they had found it. The flower of wonder blossomed there before their very eyes, explaining the world, but not explaining it away, explaining simply that it was wonderful beyond all telling. They all knew suddenly what they didn’t know they knew; they understood what nobody understands. None knew why it came just at this particular moment, and none knew where it came from either. It was there, so what else mattered. It broke upon them out of the heart of the summer’s day, out of this very ordinary Sunday morning, out of the brimming life all about them that was passing but could never pass away. The familiar figures of the gardener, the butler, the policeman and the cook brought back to them the memory of something they had forgotten, yet brought it back in the form of endless and inexhaustible enticement rather than of complete recovery. There had been long preparation somewhere, growth, development; but that was past and they gave no thought to it; Expectancy and Wonder rushed them off their feet. The world hid something. Every one was looking for it. *They* must go on looking, looking, looking too!

What it was they had forgotten — they entirely forgot. Only the marvellous hint remained, and the certainty that it could be found. For, to each of them it seemed, came this fairy reminder, stealing deliciously upon the senses: somewhere, somehow, they had known an experience that had enriched their lives. It had become part of them. It had always been in them, but they had found it now. They felt quite positive about it. They believed. To Tim came messages from the solid earth about him, secrets from creatures that lived in it and knew; Judy, catching a thousand kisses from the air upon her cheeks, divined the mystery of all flying life — that brought the stars within her reach; Maria, possessing all within herself, remained steady and calm at the eternal centre of the circle — a clearing-house for messages from everywhere at once. Asking nothing for herself, she merely wanted to give away, give out. She said "Yes" to all that came her way; and all did come her way. To every one of them, to Stumper and Uncle Felix too, came a great conviction that they had passed nearer, somehow, to an everlasting joy. There was no hurry, life had just begun — seemed singing everywhere about them. There was Unity.

"It's a lovely day," remarked Uncle Felix presently. "I want my luncheon."

He picked up Maria and moved on across the bridge.

"It's the Extra Day," Maria whispered in his ear. "It's my adventure, but you all can have it."

The others followed with Come-Back Stumper, and in the lane they saw the figures of Weeden, Thompson and Mrs. Horton in front of them, coming home from church. They were walking quietly enough.

"We're not late, then," Tim remarked. "There's lots of time!"

Crossing the field in the direction of the London road a policeman was moving steadily. They saw him stoop and pick a yellow flower as he went. He was off to take charge of the world upon his Sunday beat. He disappeared behind a hedge. The butler and the cook vanished through a side-door into the old Mill House about the same time.

In due course, they also arrived at the porch, and Uncle Felix set his burden down. As they scraped their muddy boots and rubbed them on the mat, their backs were turned to the outside world; but Maria, whose boots required no scraping, happened to face it still. As usual she faced in all directions like a circle.

"Look," she said. "There's some one coming!"

And they saw the figure of a tramp go past the opening of the drive where the London road was just visible. He paused a moment and looked towards the house. He did not come in. He just looked — and waved his hand at them. The next minute he was gone. But not before Maria had returned his wave.

“He’ll come back,” suggested Stumper, as they went inside.

“Yes,” said Maria. “He’s mine — but you can have him too.”

Ten minutes later, when they all sat down to lunch, the big blue figure of the policeman passed the opening of the drive. Being occupied with hot roast beef, they did not see him. He paused a moment, looked towards the house, and then went slowly out of sight again along the London road, following the tramp….

THE END

Sambo and Snitch (1927)

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER I

IT WAS BOILING hot in the garden and the twelve o’clock bell had been ringing for a whole minute when Sambo, aged six, popped his head out of the cowshed door and said, ‘Oh, bother!’

The bell meant that it was time for him to go indoors and rest till lunch. Topsy, his younger sister, had already heard it and gone in; he could see her fat, round figure waddling past the drawing-room windows in the distance. She liked going in to lie down, he remembered. That was because she was so round and fat probably; it was easier for her to lie down than stand up. Anyhow, *he* didn’t want to flop on a bed and rest. He wanted to stay and watch the calf, to stroke its head, give it hay, talk to it. He loved all animals. He understood what they felt and thought. And he was sure they understood him, too, when he talked to them.

The bell had stopped ringing now. Nannie’s voice was shouting for him instead.

Sambo sighed — oh, such a deep sigh. Then he said good-bye to the young calf, who blinked back at him understandingly, and walked slowly down the path towards the house. He heard Nannie shouting and shouting, but he did not answer. He just mopped his face.

‘Why ever does Nannie go on shouting like that?’ he said to himself. ‘I heard the bell long ago!’

And at that instant a large brown lizard darted across the path in front of him, so close to his feet that he almost stepped on it. There were pretty black spots on its back. Sambo loved these lizards, but he could never catch one. They went such an awful pace.

He stood still with excitement.

‘Oh, I say!’ he cried. ‘Here’s a lizard! Look at it just!’

Now, as a rule, these lizards flickered down a crack in the stones as quick as light and vanished. But this one didn’t. It stopped. It might have been made of stone. It made no movement. Its brown back shimmered in the heat. One brilliant eye peeped up at him. He had never seen such behaviour before. There was something unusual about *this* lizard.

‘If only I could catch it!’ thought Sambo, and began to bend down very cautiously — then stopped in amazement and stared. For at this moment the lizard spoke.

‘Something’s pricked my tail,’ said the squeaky voice like a slate-pencil.

Sambo felt such a thrill run over his body that, in spite of the hot sun, he shivered. He didn’t know what to do or say. He kept perfectly still and waited.

‘A hawk dropped on me,’ continued the tiny thin voice. ‘I was down a crack in a twinkle, but I didn’t twinkle fast enough.’ The voice became indignant. ‘Its beak pricked my tail!’

Sambo just stared and stared. Nannie and bells were all forgotten. His whole life was centred on the lizard. He felt an enormous surprise, yet at the same time it seemed quite natural that a lizard should talk — talk to *him,* at least.

‘Well, why don’t you say something?’ squeaked the lizard. ‘I opened the conversation. It’s your turn now.’

But Sambo’s tongue refused to move. The only things he could think of to say were? ‘How do you do?’ or ‘Did it hurt?’ and neither of these seemed quite right, he felt. Besides, the lizard sounded a bit angry now, and that rather frightened him. Lizards couldn’t bite, could they? He wasn’t quite sure.

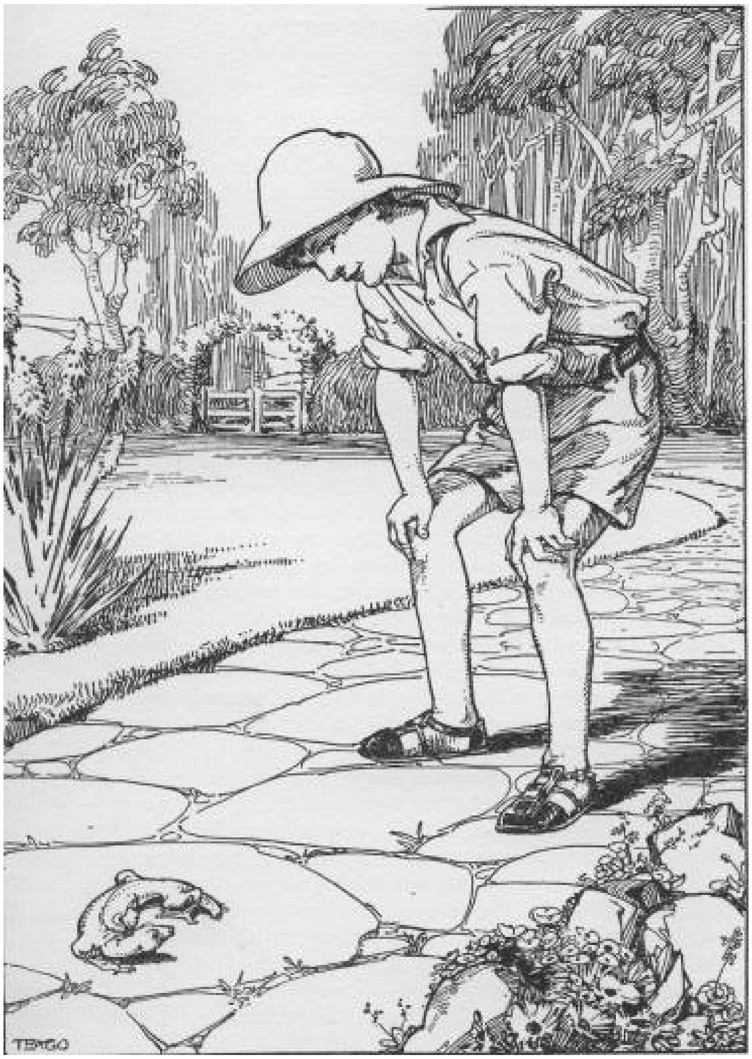
‘Pricked my tail, I told you,’ repeated the lizard, its body still motionless, its bright eyes still peeping up at him. ‘The hawk did.’

Then suddenly he found his voice. His surprise left him.

‘It didn’t,’ he said, rather bluntly.

‘It did,’ said the lizard fiercely.

‘It didn’t,’ repeated the boy, and straightened up to his full height.



‘How do you know?’ squeaked the other. ‘You can’t see up there anyhow!’

‘It didn’t,’ Sambo said again, trying not to be rude.

‘Prove it,’ the lizard snapped in a voice of keen annoyance.

‘Because you haven’t got one!’ said Sambo flatly.

This seemed to upset the lizard dreadfully. Its voice rose to a still shriller note.

‘What d’you mean?’ it screamed.

‘It’s gone!’ was the answer.

At this the lizard moved for the first time. An extraordinary expression came into its pointed face. It turned its head to see. As its head turned, its body turned too, and of course the tail turned with the rest of it. It went faster and faster, till it looked like a brown wheel whirling. But it couldn’t catch up. It couldn’t see its own tail.

‘I can’t see my own tail,’ it panted presently, pausing a moment in its whirl. Its voice sounded rather disappointed, almost sad.

‘Because it isn’t there,’ explained Sambo sympathetically. ‘I told you once.’ He was getting cross with it. ‘You’ve only got a stump left.’

Now, hardly had Sambo said this when he realized he had said an awful thing. He had. But it was too late to change it now.

‘That’s rude,’ said the lizard quietly. It was not angry, only hurt. ‘Worse than rude, it’s unkind. It’s like telling your mother she’s lost her looks, or her hair, or that she squints — something unpleasant that she knows, but doesn’t want to be told about.’

Sambo felt unhappy. Already he liked this lizard immensely. ‘I’m awfully, awfully sorry,’ he said, mopping his perspiring forehead.

‘Thanks!’ squeaked the other instantly. ‘Now we’re friends again.’

It was the way his own mother forgave him always. He liked it.

‘Are you a mother then?’ he asked politely.

‘Of course. I’m a female. All females with us are mothers.’

‘Oh,’ he exclaimed, remembering his Natural History lessons.

‘And you’re a reptile, aren’t you, too?’

‘That’s our family, yes,’ replied the lizard proudly. ‘I belong to the great reptile family, like the snakes and crocodiles. Oh, rather! I’m glad you know *that* at least.’

‘ — You lay eggs, don’t you?’

‘ — I should think I do. Little beauties!’

‘ — And may I have one, please, for my collection?’

‘When I’ve got any,’ was the reply, ‘you certainly may,’

The lizard kept silent then for a bit. It didn’t move. The boy kept silent too. He just watched it. It was still panting from its violent whirling after its own tail. He could see its little sides puffing in and out like tiny bellows. The brown skin rose and fell, the black spots with it. How amazingly still it kept! It might have been a stuffed one, except for its heaving sides.

Sambo waited for it to speak again, but as it said nothing, he presently made a remark himself.

‘The hawk took it,’ he explained kindly, referring to the lost tail.

‘I didn’t twinkle fast enough down the crack, I suppose,’ came the reply in a gentle voice.

‘That part of you didn’t,’ Sambo suggested. ‘The rest of you was like lightning. It always is.’

He heard the lizard laugh. It was like the queer sounds Father got on the wireless machine and called ‘Berlin’ or ‘Madrid.’

‘Oh, I know,’ it said, when it had finished laughing. ‘You’ve often tried to catch me, haven’t you? But you can’t. I can always twinkle fast enough to get away from *you*. A hawk’s different. You don’t hear it coming, for one thing. It drops like a cannon ball, for another. Hawks like us very much, you see.’

‘I see,’ agreed Sambo politely.

The lizard thought for a moment.

‘Now, will you please show me where I end?’ it asked.

‘There,’ said Sambo, pointing. He was delighted to be of use to his new friend.

‘Oh, you may touch me. Pointing’s no good. Touch the end of my body, please.’

It was exactly what Sambo had been longing to do. He bent down and put his hand out cautiously. He touched the dry little body on the stump of the tail. It felt like the ginger he got from dessert sometimes, only smoother and more slippery.

‘Thank you,’ said the lizard, with evident pleasure. ‘Now I know exactly where I end. Where I begin is easy, of course, but where I end is more important. My head may be safe down a crack, but my tail still in danger outside. Now I can twinkle again properly.’

‘I’m awfully sorry it happened,’ remarked Sambo, who now began really to love the little creature, ‘for you look all wrong without a tail.’

The same instant he felt he had said something rude again, but the lizard wasn’t angry.

‘I look what I am,’ it said cheerily. ‘And I feel all right. Besides, I can grow another. Only it takes time, and I haven’t been very well lately. You can see that for yourself, can’t you?’

Sambo couldn’t see, but he didn’t say so. He asked instead what was the matter with it.

‘I’ve felt cold,’ announced the lizard in a weaker voice, as though that proved it.

Sambo, who was perspiring in the blazing heat, gave a gasp. Was it pretending, he wondered?

‘Cold!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, it’s simply hotter than anything. I’m boiling. I’m all wet!’

‘Snitch!’ said the lizard. ‘Snitch! Snitch!’ it repeated, keeping one bright eye fixed upon the boy’s face.

He jumped. It was a most peculiar sound. It startled him.

‘What does “ snitch” mean?’ he asked politely.

‘ — It means nothing,’ was the reply. ‘Just nothing at all.’

‘Then why did you say it?’ the boy insisted pluckily.

‘I didn’t,’ observed the lizard with a touch of impatience.

This was really too much. He wasn’t going to be humbugged like that. ‘But — I heard you!’ he exclaimed with vigour.

‘Look out!’ squeaked the little reptile. ‘I’m going to do it again in a second! ‘It lifted its sharp head a quarter of an inch into the air, paused, shut both its eyes tight, and then suddenly repeated the peculiar sound twice over very rapidly: ‘Snitch! Snitch!’ it went.

It gave a little laugh and looked up into his face. ‘That’s a sneeze,’ it explained. ‘I told you I was cold.’

What Sambo might have said, will never be known, for at this moment his attention was distracted. Something fell with a click on to the path between them. The lizard remained motionless as a bit of stone, but Sambo lowered his head to find out what it was that had fallen from the sky. At first he thought it might have been a drop of perspiration from his face, but he soon saw his mistake. It was a little brown pointed thing. He stooped and picked it up.

CHAPTER II

'I SAY,' CRIED Sambo in amazement. 'It's your tail, I do believe! 'He looked up quickly into the sky. 'And there's the hawk that dropped it!' The added. 'Well, I never did!'

A big hawk, sure enough, was circling slowly in the air far above his head as if nothing had happened.

'Didn't like the taste, I suppose,' he went on, his head still turned upwards.

'It's the best part of me really,' said the lizard down at his feet. Its voice sounded rather faint and muffled. But Sambo was too excited to look down. He was a wee bit frightened too. What if the hawk suddenly dropped like a cannon ball on his head? *He* could never twinkle as fast as the lizard did! He watched it for a minute or two, holding the tail in his perspiring hand, and thinking of the sharp claws and dreadful beak far up in the blue sky. But the great fierce bird showed no signs of dropping on him. It just circled round and round lazily, hardly moving its big wings at all.

'Can't you do something to frighten it away?' inquired the muffled little voice below.

Sambo bravely clapped his hands.

'Has it gone?' squeaked the faint voice.

'It's going,' Sambo said, encouragingly.

'*One* of us must go, you see,' came the rather nervous comment.

'Yes,' agreed Sambo,' but please not *you*! There, it's gone now — gone away over the woods by the Church. You're quite safe again!'

He looked down to give the tail back to its owner. But the path was empty. He looked everywhere. The lizard was gone!

Oh, dear! This was very disappointing. Wherever had it gone? He looked and looked, but there was no sign of it. He missed it dreadfully. Already he was tremendously fond of this strange, friendly little lizard. He really loved it. He could have cried — when suddenly he caught its little voice again close beside him somewhere. It was faint and muffled.

Where on earth was it?

‘Is that you, Snitch?’ he called out. The name came naturally.

‘Of course. I’m down here. Why don’t you use your eyes?’

It sounded offended rather, he fancied. The squeak seemed between his feet.

‘Bend down,’ it went on,’ and you’ll see. I told you one of us had to go.’

Sambo knelt down and put his face close to the flat stones that paved the middle of the path. Something in the crack glittered, reflecting the sunlight like a tiny mirror. It was the lizard’s brilliant peeping eye.

‘ — Hooray!’ he cried. ‘Hooray! I was afraid I’d lost you!’

‘That’s what the hawk would say if he could see me. But he can’t.’

‘The hawk’s quite gone now,’ whispered Sambo.’ There are only a few swallows about. You can come up again. Anyhow,’ he added proudly,’ with *me* here, it would never dare to drop!’

‘I thank you,’ squeaked the faint voice. ‘It’s cold as a cellar down here, anyhow.’

Sambo bent lower, formed his hands into a cup, and put them against the crack. ‘ Crawl in here,’ he whispered. ‘ Please do.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t whisper,’ mentioned the reptile. ‘ It sounds like running water. And I don’t like water.’

‘Crawl in,’ repeated Sambo in his ordinary voice. ‘ It’s quite safe. Warm too.’ He put his hands in the easiest position he could, leaving a tiny opening between his thumbs. ‘ I’ve got the tail in my pocket all right,’ he added.

Would the lizard trust him?

He waited a few moments. Nothing happened.

‘Oh, but I say, do squiggle in, dear Snitch,’ he urged. ‘ My back’s aching so!’

‘All right,’ came the squeak. ‘ You needn’t cry about it. I’m coming. I thought I was going to sneeze, that’s all. Now — one — two — three — Go!’

Sambo felt a warm, tickly sensation on his palms. Four tiny feet clutched his hot skin.

‘I’m in. Thank you! ‘ piped the little voice happily...

And at that minute the bell began again. It was ringing furiously. It rang as though the house was on fire.

‘My gracious! ‘ exclaimed Sambo. ‘ I forgot all about it! Oh, what a row there’ll be! ‘ He straightened up as though he had been shot up by a spring. ‘ I’m awfully late,’ he explained. ‘ I’ve got to go indoors and rest, you see. Topsy went ages ago. I must run. Ill take you to my room.’ And he ran as hard as ever he could towards the back door, keeping his hands tightly closed in front of him. ‘ Hold tight! ‘ he whispered as he ran. ‘ Hold on. I won’t drop you.’

The lizard laughed inside his hands. ‘ That’s nothing,’ it squeaked. ‘ I can hold on to anything! The faster the better! But I’d like a little more air, please. I’m suffocating. Besides, I’m going to sneeze in a second!’

Sambo opened his fingers a tiny bit.

‘Snitch! Snitch! ‘ went the lizard, as the boy kicked open the back door and ran panting up the back stairs into his bedroom.

Now, at first, Sambo had meant to tell all about the lizard. He meant to tell everybody that a lizard could talk. It was such a very wonderful thing to happen. It was far too marvellous to keep to himself. Nannie and Topsy must hear all about it at once.

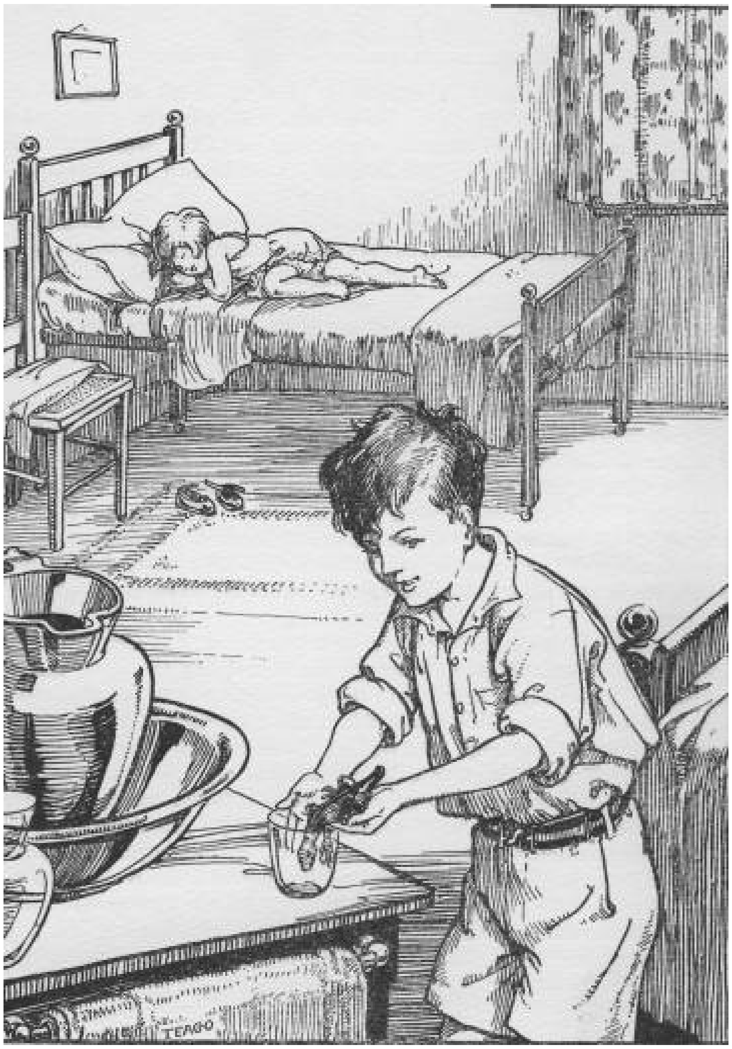
But when he entered the room, he changed his mind. He was hot and breathless. The green blinds were drawn. It was rather dark. Topsy, he saw, lay on her bed in the corner, looking like a boiled pudding in its cloth. She was asleep. There was an unpleasant silence. He heard nothing but a fly buzzing up and down the window-pane behind the green blind. And — he saw Nannie!

Nannie stood in the middle of the room, staring at him. Her arms were akimbo, and he knew what *that* meant. She was going to scold. She was waiting for him with what he called ‘ a string of words.’ And Sambo, knowing quite well he had been disobedient, felt afraid. He decided to say nothing. He would keep it all a secret. He held his hands in front of him as naturally is he could. If only the lizard wouldn’t sneeze!

Would Nannie ask him for an explanation? Would she want to know why he was so late? What in the world should he say? He never told lies.

‘Didn’t you hear the bell, Master Sambo? ‘ Nannie began at once. ‘ It rang loud enough. Where were you? What have you been doing all this time?’

He just stood and gazed at her. He said nothing. He kept his hands pressed against his ‘tummy,’ hoping it looked natural. The lizard never moved foot.



‘The cow-shed,’ he mumbled. ‘ I’m sorry, Nannie.’ But he knew by Nannie’s tone that she did not really expect an answer to her questions. She was just scolding. He was really very fond of her. She was talking in a whisper too, and that meant she wasn’t frightfully cross. He felt tremendously relieved.

‘Well, another time you must come quicker — the moment you hear the bell,’ her whisper continued across the still room. ‘ It’s very naughty of you. Your sister came in long ago. Now, be quiet. Don’t wake her. And lie down at once and get your rest. You naughty little boy, you!’

She hadn’t noticed his hands then after all! The perspiration was trickling down his nose, but he couldn’t wipe it away. It trickled cold against his back as well, but he couldn’t scratch there either. Oh, dear! If only Nannie would go out of the room for a moment. He couldn’t possibly lie down with his hands held like that in front of him. Nannie would discover everything. He stood without moving, waiting for an inspiration.

Then a terrible thing happened.

The lizard sneezed.

‘Snitch! Snitch! Snitch! ‘ it went inside his hot hands. Sambo remained stock still. He thought the end of the world would come. But the next instant he saw that Nannie hadn’t heard. His heart had stopped beating; it now began to bang against his ribs. And with the sneeze came a brilliant inspiration!

‘Nannie,’ he whispered*, ’* I wonder — if I’ve got a cold. Can I have some of that sweet medicine, please? I’m shivery. I feel shivery.’

It was quite true. He did feel shivery.

‘A cold! ‘ exclaimed Nannie, still whispering. ‘ However can you have a cold on a broiling hot day like this?’

‘I believe I have,’ repeated Sambo. He sniffled as well as he could. Nannie stared at him. He sniffled louder. Oh, if only he could have sneezed! But he didn’t know how to. He knew anyhow what a fuss Nannie made when there was any sign of a cold, or even when there wasn’t. He also knew that the sweet medicine was kept on a shelf in the bathroom — across the passage!

He sat down on the edge of his bed. There was a moment or two of terrible uncertainty. To his immense relief, then, Nannie moved slowly towards the door.

She was going to fetch the medicine!

‘Oh, you’d better have a dose, perhaps,’ she whispered impatiently. ‘ It can’t do you any harm, I suppose. But mind I find you in bed when I get back.’

And she went out.

Quick as a flash Sambo whispered to his four-legged friend: ‘ I’ll slip you into my tumbler, Snitch,’ and he was across the room in a jiffy, opened his hands, and saw the lizard dart into the empty tumbler on the washhand-stand.

‘Put my tail in with me,’ it squeaked nervously.

And Sambo just had time to find the little fragment in his pocket and obey, when he heard Nannie’s footstep outside the door again. He gave an enormous sigh of relief — but for an instant only. A new horror seized him. Nannie might want his tumbler for the medicine! Oh, it was awful! He stood hesitating for a second. If Nannie found him still out of bed, she would scold. But if she found the lizard — she would throw it away...!

What was he to do? Oh, how difficult life was when you had secrets!

‘Take me with you — quick! ‘ he heard a faint, hurried squeak. And a second later he was lying on his bed, with the tumbler just below the edge of his pillow, and well out of sight.

Snitch had saved the situation just in the nick of time. Oh, he loved his lizard more than ever now. Faithful, clever little reptile!

Then Nannie came in. She brought another tumbler with her after all! He drank the sweet medicine, nearly choking in his excitement, so that some of it ran down his neck and on to the pillow. But Nannie didn’t notice this. The room was too dark.

‘ — Now go to sleep at once,’ she ordered, and tiptoed out of the room.

CHAPTER III

SAMBO PRETENDED TO sleep. The only sound for some minutes was that tiresome fly buying up and down the window-pane....

The room lay dark and warm, for the green blinds only let in a narrow line of sunlight round the edges. Topsy lay sound asleep, more like a boiled pudding, he thought, than ever. The fly buzzed on and on. From the garden, sizzling in the midday heat, came the murmur of bees. The leaves were still. The whole house lay silent.

Sambo presently sat up on his bed and listened. Nannie's footsteps had now died away down the passage. There was no sound. The servants had strict orders to keep quiet in this part of the old house while the children slept. Sambo gave a sigh of relief.

He glanced over at Topsy. He always told her everything; they shared all their adventures; and he had meant to tell her this. But now he hesitated. At any rate, he couldn't wake her at the moment. She'd make such an awful noise, for one thing. Yet, if she didn't see the lizard herself, and hear it talk, she never would believe him. What should he do?

The familiar squeak interrupted his thoughts:

'More air, please, Mithter!'

It sounded rather thick. He lifted the pillow's edge and took out the tumbler. The lizard, he saw, held the bit of broken tail in its mouth. That explained the indistinctness.

'Thank you,' it said, dropping the tail and running swiftly along the edge of the sheet to where the sweet medicine had been spilled. Its tiny tongue shot out and licked it.

'What's good for your cold is good for mine,' it said, evidently enjoying the taste.

Sambo watched it. ' You *are* a funny lizard,' he said in a low voice.

' — And you *are* a funny boy,' remarked the lizard.

The same instant it picked up the tail and wriggled with great swiftness over the bolster and dropped on to the floor. ‘I mutht be off,’ it squeaked.

‘Oh, oh! ‘ cried Sambo, bitterly disappointed, ‘ you’re not going, are you? Please don’t go!’

‘Yeth, Mithter, I mutht,’ it said thickly. ‘ Thank you all the thame!’

‘But I was going to stick the tail on,’ pleaded the boy. ‘ I’ve got secotine, you know.’

The lizard evidently dropped the tail from its mouth, for its next words were clear again.

‘I’ve got something better still. I can grow a new one. And I want the broken bit as a model.’

Sambo leaned over and tried to see it, but against the dark carpet it was invisible. He only knew by its voice whereabouts it was. The disappointment was more than he could bear. He simply couldn’t let his wonderful little new friend go out of his life like that. It would be too dreadful!

‘But you’re not going for good, are you? ‘ he asked, and there were almost tears in his voice.

‘Do you like me as much as all that? ‘ inquired the voice from the carpet.

‘I like you more than that. I love you,’ Sambo implored. ‘ I do really.’

‘Oh, all right,’ piped the lizard, with a happy little laugh. ‘ I like you too. So I’ll come back.’

Sambo felt happier. Only he still had so many questions he wanted to ask that he didn’t know which to begin with.

‘ — Where are you going to? ‘ he began quickly.

‘Out,’ was the short reply. The voice was farther away now.

‘ — The door’s shut—’ said the boy.

‘The window isn’t,’ came the answer. And the squeak was still farther away this time, quite near the window in fact, where the fly went on buzzing up and down still. ‘ I can run down any wall that was ever built. Up it too, for that matter.’

‘Then you’ll come back that way. I’ll always keep it open for you,’ Sambo said quickly. The time was short, he felt.

‘Can’t promise,’ came the answer from a new position now. It was climbing up to the window-sill already. ‘Down the chimney’s just as good a way — in summer. In winter, of course, I hardly come out at all.’

‘How shall I know, please? ‘ the boy asked next.

‘Oh, I’ll make a sign. And I shall call you Mister. I’m carrying my tail in my paw now,’ it added. ‘That’s why I’m going so slowly.’

Sambo felt dreadfully sorry it was going, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. It had promised to come back. He liked the name of ‘ Mister ‘ too.

‘Well, dear Snitch, good-bye,’ he said in rather a sad voice.’ I’m awfully glad I saved your ‘ — he nearly said ‘ life,’ but changed it in the nick of time to ‘ tail,’ It was true anyhow. He *had* saved its tail.

‘the am I,’ piped the tiny voice, much farther away now. ‘I thall never forget that.’ Ah, it had picked up its tail again.

Sambo had been just going to ask for something in return, but was too proud. The next thing the lizard said made him glad he hadn’t shown that he expected a reward.

‘And I’ll do thomething for you thome day,’ it added gratefully. ‘Goodbye, Mithter!’

Sambo just had time to call quickly, ‘What sign will you give? ‘ and to hear its answer ‘ Snitch! ‘ when he caught a flash of shimmering brown across the narrow line of dazzling sunlight beneath the blind — and the lizard was gone.

Now Sambo was a very observant little boy. As the lizard twinkled out, he noticed two things. First, that it had pronounced the S in its name distinctly, and therefore had opened its mouth; and, secondly, that the buzzing fly no longer buzzed!

That meant, he felt sure, that the buzzing fly had gone out with it — but inside it, — gobbled up with a lightning thrust of the pointed little mouth.

The broken bit of tail, therefore, *might* be now lying on the window-sill. He crawled off his bed to look. Yes, there it lay. He picked it up and put it carefully away in an empty box of tooth-powder. Then he put the box away in a drawer where he kept his treasures. Then he crept back on tiptoe to bed. Then, in due course, he fell asleep.

Sambo woke up next morning expecting to see Snitch looking at him from the window-sill. Not a bit of it. There was no sign of the dear little lizard. It was probably having its breakfast somewhere, he decided. What did it eat for breakfast? He didn't know. Not porridge and eggs and marmalade anyhow. It drank water and ate a fly most likely. Sambo kept his eyes and ears wide open all that morning, but Snitch did not appear. In his pocket was the little box with the tip of its tail. He often took it out and looked at it when nobody was about. Sometimes he rattled it, thinking it might hear and answer. But nothing happened. The whole day passed without a sign of it.

But Snitch had promised to come back. Sambo knew it would keep its promise. ‘ It's gone hunting perhaps,’ he decided. But female lizards didn't hunt. ‘ Or having some babies,’ he changed his explanation. Anyhow it was busy. Meanwhile, he kept his secret to himself. He told no one, not even Topsy. ‘ Females divulge,’ he once heard a man saying to his father. He didn't know quite what it meant, but it had something to do with telling. Topsy, being a female, might divulge. It meant telling secrets anyhow.

The next day it rained, and lizards stayed at home when it rained, Nannie told him. She also answered lots of other questions he asked, though she had to look at a big book first. Lizards, she read out, were reptiles; they belonged to the great family of crocodiles, snakes and that sort of creature, and snakes were simply lizards that had lost their legs. A slow-worm, which they sometimes found on the road, was a legless lizard. They laid eggs, lived on insects, and slept through the winter in some little hole or crack, because in the winter there were no insects for them to eat. There were only two kinds of lizards in England, one called the Sand Lizard, because it lived in sandpits; the other called — but Nannie couldn't pronounce the name, so she stopped reading out a minute from the big book. ‘It's about seven inches long,’ she went on presently...

‘ — That's mine! ‘ he exclaimed excitedly.

Sambo seized his opportunity at once. ‘ Thank you very much, Nannie,’ he added. ‘ I’ve heard enough.’ And he was out of the room like a flash, for the rain had stopped, the sun was blazing, and he had a feeling that Snitch might be about.

CHAPTER IV

SAMBO STOOD IN the hot paved sunken garden, where the flowers smelt sweet after the rain, and there were lots of cracks between the stones. He stared about him.

‘Snitch! ‘ he called softly. ‘Snitch, dear, where are you? I’m all alone. Which way have you gone?’

No answer came, but the words ran on in his mind into a little rhyme. He began to sing this little rhyme to himself in a low voice:

‘Dear little Snitch,
I’m all alone!
I wonder which
Way you have gone?’

He sang it over again, and only stopped because a fly kept settling on his neck and tickling him. Once he thought he heard a tiny laugh. But nothing stirred: he saw no movement on the stones. Besides, Snitch had promised to give a sign. He would hear it say ‘ Snitch! ‘ when it was there. Was it angry with him because he had asked so many questions? He had been rather rude, he remembered, and it was certainly a little annoyed. But he had a thousand more questions to ask now.

Bother! There was that fly tickling him again! He smacked his hand down on the back of his neck, but instead of catching the fly, he only hurt himself. Now, if Snitch had been there it would have caught that fly in a second, thought Sambo. Snitch was quicker than lightning. The fly tickled him again, and he smacked his hand down again.

‘*Snitch*! ‘ he heard suddenly. ‘It isn’t a fly at all! It’s me!’

Sambo turned round so sharply that he nearly fell down. He was so excited he could hardly believe his ears.

‘Where are you?’ he cried. ‘ Quick! Tell me!’ For at the same instant he heard Nannie’s voice coming round the corner of the house. And Topsy was with her. ‘Oh, let me see you! Where are you? Please, please!’

‘Here! ‘ was the reply in a tiny squeak. ‘ On your shoulder, of course. I’ve been tickling your neck with my nose for a long time.’

‘*You* were the fly!’ gasped Sambo. ‘ I might have hit you!’

He twisted his head and neck, and there, sure enough, was his little friend perched on his shoulder, his pointed face peeping up with tiny sparkling eyes.

‘I was the lizard,’ it snapped. ‘Please be accurate. And another thing — you couldn’t hit me if you tried all day. Even the hawk only nipped my tail. You’re not a quarter as fast as a hawk.’ It giggled close beside his ear.

‘Oh, you are a little beauty! ‘ exclaimed Sambo. ‘ I knew you’d turn up. You promised, didn’t you?’

Nannie and Topsy came into view as he spoke, round the corner of the house.

‘Oh, be quick, be quick! Hide, or they’ll see you!’

Snitch giggled, as he gave the boy a tiny nip with his little mouth in the neck, but so gently, it was almost like a kiss.

‘I *am* a beauty,’ it squeaked. ‘ I *did* promise. I *have* turned up. And I am *quick* — so quick that you’ll never hit me, and *they’ll* never see me!’ And the same instant, quick as a lightning flash, it darted down his shoulder, scuttled along his back, ran with the speed of flight along his arm, and settled finally into the hollow of his hot hand, where Sambo felt at once the queer little tickle of its tiny paws.

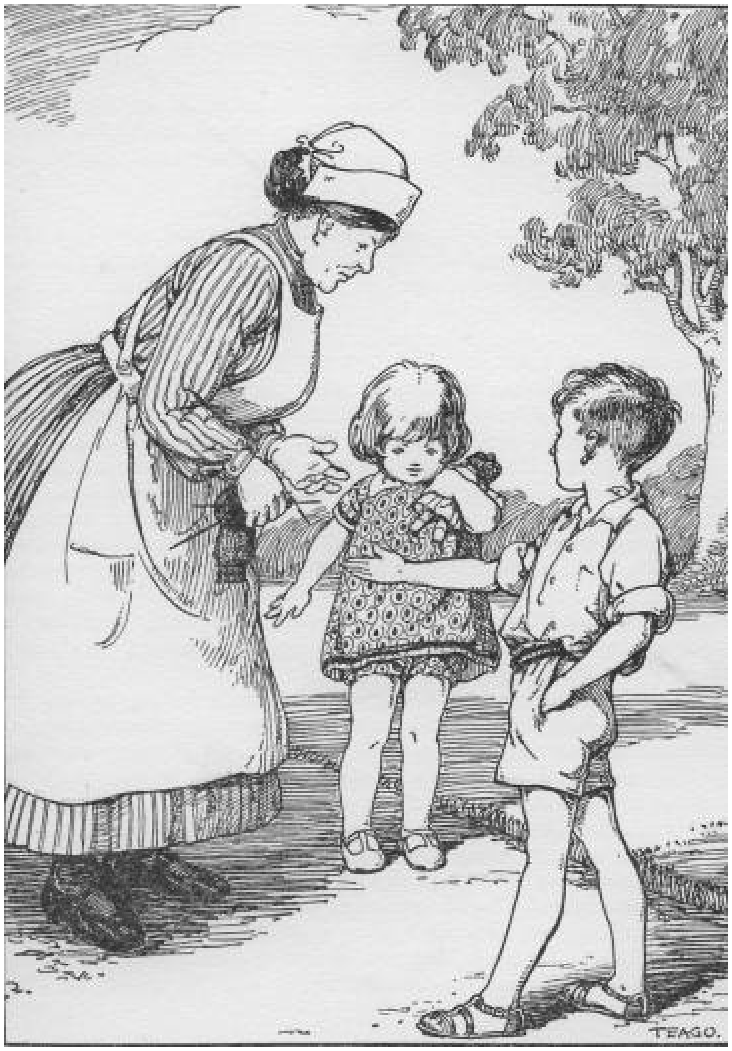
‘Close your paw,’ Sambo heard, ‘ and remember — no one but you can hear my voice. The others can’t. *You* hear me because you love me.’

Sambo closed his hand immediately, but only just in time, for Nannie at that moment reached him, stared at him, put on an expression as though he was doing something he had no right to do, and said in a rather cross voice:

‘What’s that you’ve got in your hand, Sambo? You’ve been picking up something dirty as usual I suppose, and you’ll make your clothes in a mess. Open your hand. What is it you’ve got there?’

Topsy, who was beside her, leaned forward to see what it was. She wished *she* had picked it up, whatever it was. Sambo always had all the fun and excitement.

Sambo, always obedient, held out his hand. But at first he didn’t open it. If Nannie saw the lizard, she would make him throw it away. She would probably scream as well. He would never be allowed to touch a lizard again. So, obedient but very cautious, he just held out his hand and did not answer. He felt hot and cold all over. He was fairly caught now. He shut his lips tight.



Then, suddenly, and before Nannie had time to say anything more, he heard a faint squeaky voice that sounded far away and muffled:

‘Turn your hand downwards with the palm to the ground. Then, when I sneeze — open it!’

Sambo obeyed, ‘ Sambo,’ said Nannie, certain now that he had picked up something horrible, and speaking more sternly, ‘ Sambo, I told you to open your hand. Open it at once and let me see what you’ve got there. Some nastiness, I’ll be bound.’

‘*Snitch*! ‘ came the signal agreed upon, but so faintly that no one heard it except the boy.

His closed hand was held downwards> with its back uppermost. He opened his thumb and four fingers and held them spread out for Nannie to see. ‘ Turn your hand over,’ Nannie told him. ‘ Show me your palm.’

Sambo did so. His heart sank. But before his hand was round he felt a tiny sensation in his palm, then on his wrist, then along his arm, as far as the elbow, and next over the skin of his back and shoulder till it reached his neck, where it stopped. It took only a second or two to turn his hand over as Nannie told him to do, but when his palm lay open before her eyes — there was nothing in it.

Quicker than a flash of light, the wonderful little lizard had darted up his sleeve and inside his shirt. It had escaped. The open palm Nannie examined was quite empty.

‘There’s nothing there,’ said Sambo in a faint voice, looking very innocent. Nannie looked rather foolish, and Topsy gurgled disappointedly like an echo of her brother: ‘ But there’s nothing there! Oh, Nannie, what a sell! ‘ They moved off slowly towards the mulberry tree, where Nannie then sat down in a wicker chair, while Topsy went to hunt up the tortoise, Percy. The hot sun had dried the grass. The whole garden steamed. Red Admirals and Peacocks came fluttering over the pinks and roses...

But Sambo, bursting with admiration of his wonderful little friend, stood stock still and waited. Snitch had saved him marvellously. He stood and waited, breathing hard, his hands hanging down beside him. Then, suddenly, his palm tickled. He lifted his hand. Snitch lay there cosily between the thumb and little finger. It was laughing.

‘You see, I can always save you,’ it squeaked*,’* if you do what I tell you.” Thanks awfully,’ the boy stammered. ‘ I always will. But — how on earth could you go at such a rate?’

The lizard ran up his arm, across his shoulder and coat, and settled on his blue sailor tie: ‘ That’s not the only question you want to ask,’ it said, peeping up into his face over his chin. ‘ You’ve got a hundred others, I know, because I heard Nannie reading out from the book about my family. I was in the chimney all the time. I like the chimney when it’s raining. Well now, get along with it. Hurry up and ask your questions.’

‘You were in the chimney! ‘ gasped Sambo, too surprised at first to ask the hundreds of questions that seethed inside his brain.

‘I’ve been watching you,’ went on the lizard, ‘ ever since we first met. I wanted to be sure you were worth knowing. I’ve never been far away. I heard you singing. I’ve watched you awake and asleep. I had to make sure, you see, that you were worth it — worth being my friend, I mean.’

Sambo felt very uncomfortable. He was usually naughty, he knew.

‘ — And — am I? ‘ he asked faintly.

By way of answer, Snitch darted up over his chin, reached his lips, and gave him a tiny kiss. The next second it was back again on his blue tie, as though it had never moved. ‘ Let’s sit down now and talk,’ it squeaked, as though nothing had happened. ‘ Then Nannie won’t think you’re up to mischief — eh?’

CHAPTER V

SAMBO WAS TOO pleased and surprised to argue; he was too excited as well; he ran over to the wooden bench in front of the morning-room window and sat down. On the iron table, where his father and mother had drunk their coffee after lunch, lay the newspapers. Snitch shot down upon the page giving the theatrical news. Having settled itself, it glanced up at him sideways: ‘ Now,’ it piped, ‘ go ahead. I’m ready.’

But Sambo, wanting to ask a hundred things, found himself suddenly dumb. He remembered all that Nannie had read out, and he wanted to ask what time lizards got up in the morning, what they ate and drank, how they lived together and what their houses were like, what sort of eggs they laid, how they managed all the winter without food, how they made their tails grow again — oh, and a thousand other things as well. But the only thing he could think of at this moment was the funny bit Nannie had read out about lizards losing their legs and turning eventually into snakes. Snakes, she had read out, were simply lizards that had decided they could get on better in life without legs, and so had given up using them till they finally disappeared. This was the only thing in his mind at the moment, but somehow he didn’t quite like to ask it. He hesitated.

‘It’s quite right to think before you speak,’ snapped Snitch, ‘ but time is passing, you know. Nannie’ll be yelling for you in a minute. Hurry up! ‘ Sambo took a deep breath and clenched his hands. ‘ I only wanted to ask,’ he said in a low voice, ‘ whether you — that is if you expect — to lose your legs — some day?’

There! He had said it! He wondered what would happen. Would Snitch be offended, perhaps hurt as well? Would it snap at him...?

Instead it burst out laughing. Oh, how it laughed! Its laughter rang out like the tinkling of silver bells. Its music floated across the sunlit garden like tiny falling drops of water, so that the swallows hovered a moment to listen, and even the Red Admirals and Peacocks looked up a moment where they were drinking honey from the clematis and seemed to wink at one another.

‘Bless the boy! ‘ cried the lizard in its highest squeak, ‘ what a question! ‘ Its sides were panting with its merriment. It was not a bit offended. ‘ Yes, yes,’ it went on jerkily, wriggling from side to side on the newspaper paragraph about Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw. ‘ Yes, yes, of course I shall — in time. Only, not to-day or to-morrow. It takes thousands of years to make a change like that. The slow-worm you saw last week in the road — the poor little thing that frightened you because you thought it was a snake and would poison you — that old harmless slow-worm, a hundred thousand years ago, was a lizard, just as I am now. Then it found it could manage better without legs, and so gradually its legs, from want of use, disappeared, you see. Only it took a hundred thousand years for that to happen. I shan’t lose my legs to-day or to-morrow!’

It laughed so that Sambo thought it was going to burst. He began to laugh with it, though he hardly knew exactly why he laughed.

‘Why, a million years ago,’ piped the lizard between its bursts of laughter, ‘ you men — you human beings — all had tails! You lived in trees. Yes, you did really. Then, gradually, you began to live on the ground more. So you didn’t need your tails to hang from the branches by. You learned to walk upright. And your tails, slowly, after thousands of years, disappeared!’ The lizard stopped. It had laughed so hard that tears had run from its eyes, tiny little drops of silver that smudged the print of the theatrical paragraph about Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare. It raised a paw and quickly dried each eye. Then it glanced up and said: ‘So there! Now you know something you didn’t know before, eh?’

But Sambo was not a silly little boy. He liked being told things he didn’t know. It all puzzled him a bit, but still he felt it was probably quite true. His father had told him that animals and plants were always changing, only he didn’t know they took so long to change. But the idea that men had once lived in trees appealed to him. He wished he still had a tail.

‘So that’s why I like climbing trees, Snitch, is it? ‘ he asked.

‘You still just remember the old days, yes,’ came the answer, ’ when you lived like monkeys. You wear clothes now instead of hair, and you cook your dinner instead of eating it raw, and you live in an expensive house with ten rooms instead of in a cosy little hole or crack with one room — but—’ it began to laugh again like a shower of silver bells—’ but your human world isn’t so *very* far apart from ours, you know, after all,’ it went on,’ and you needn’t feel so superior about it—’

Sambo could think of nothing to say. He felt bursting with ideas. His mind seemed splitting. Then, not quite knowing why, he suddenly asked: ‘ Snitch, dear, why do you tell me all this?’

In a flash the lizard left the newspaper and seemed to disappear. The same second almost it was across his shoulder and perched beside his ear. It was half inside his ear. He felt its breath tickling his skin. ‘ I’ll tell you,’ it whispered*, ’* because I like you and trust you, and because I know you like me.’

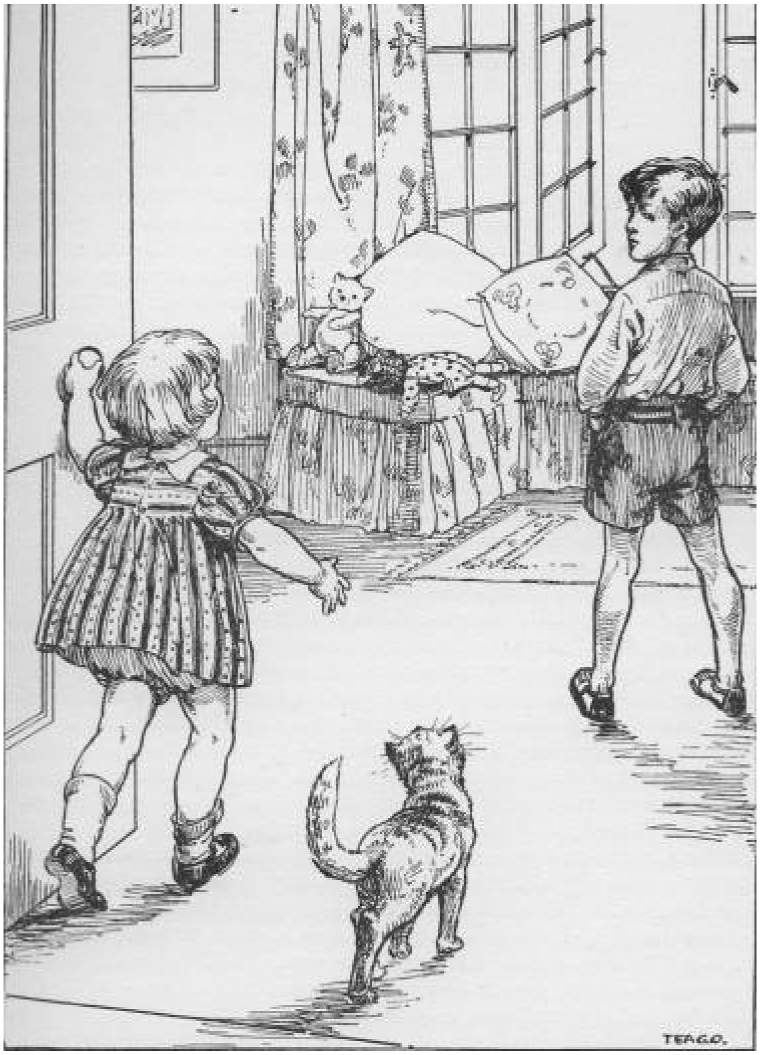
‘I do, indeed, dear Snitch,’ the boy said quickly. ‘ I really love you.’

‘Exactly,’ replied the lizard in its tickly whisper. ‘ Well, the truth is that I’ve always wanted to know more about the world you humans live in, only I never found anybody I could trust enough to ask. You’re the first that hasn’t thrown stones at me, or tried to hit me with a stick, or wanted to put me in a cage. So, if you’ll let me, I’ll come with you sometimes into your funny human world, and see how you all behave, and what you do. And I’ll tell you about my world in return. Is that a bargain?’

‘Yes, rather,’ began Sambo — but before he could say any more, he felt that tickling sensation down his neck, then along his bare leg, then — well, he just heard a tiny squeak somewhere on the ground, but when he looked down there was nothing to be seen. Snitch had vanished like lightning. He was alone. And Nannie was calling to him across the lawn.

The lizard came a great deal into the house during that summer. It was full of tricks. Sambo never knew what it would do next. One day it would wake him up early by biting his toe in bed, another it would pop its muzzle over the edge of the blackboard and say ‘Hallo, Mister! ‘ while the children were making their letters with the chalk. Once it lay along a black note on the piano when Sambo’s mother was teaching him his notes, and there was a wet afternoon in the Nursery when he heard it saying ‘ Here I am, Mister! ‘ dozens of times before he discovered it finally on the top of the brown clock, looking exactly like an ornament — a metal lizard. It had been there for half an hour without moving.

No one ever saw it but Sambo.



‘That’s the way to hide,’ it explained. ‘ Keep quite still and no one notices you. Choose a background of the same colour as your clothes and you’re very hard to see — almost invisible.’

‘But I’m rather big for that,’ the boy objected.

‘All human beings are too big,’ grumbled the lizard. ‘ If you were the same size as us you’d be much happier. There’s no sense in being so big. If you were small like me you’d need less food, you could live in smaller houses, use much less stuff to clothe you, and life would be much easier altogether —’

Instead of finishing its remarks, it suddenly shot up the curtain by the window and hung motionless. It was some minutes before even Sambo could pick it out, for the curtain was brown and the lizard's body did not show against it.

'What's up? ' the boy asked in surprise.

'I am,' replied Snitch. ' Just in time too!'

Before Sambo could say anything else, the door opened and his sister, Topsy, came in. But it wasn't Topsy that had frightened the lizard. It was something else that came in with her — Mrs. Tompkyns, the yellow cat.

Snitch had heard the cat's soft tread in the passage!

Topsy had come to fetch something. She blundered about the room a moment, upset a pile of books, knocked a chair over, banged against the fender and made the tongs fall down with a clatter, tripped over the carpet and fell down herself, found the pencil she was looking for under the table, picked herself up again and went out, slamming the door behind her.

'That's that! ' remarked the lizard from its perch, looking down sideways at the cat. For Mrs. Tompkyns had not gone out. It sat licking itself in front of the fire-place, one leg stuck in the air like a ship's mast. Apparently it was interested in nothing except cleaning itself. But the lizard knew better.

'And that's *you*! ' added Snitch, keeping its keen eyes fixed on the great yellow Mrs. Tompkyns. ' I see you! And — *you see me*!'

'You can't fool a hawk or a cat,' it went on, talking to Sambo in its slate-pencil little squeak. ' They see everything. Dogs are slower, and you human beings slowest of all. But hawks and cats—' it gave a shiver*, '* are almost as sharp as we are. So I take no chances. It can see me up here, but it can't get at me — *she,* I mean — and she'll never make a sign. She'll just go on washing, and pretend she doesn't see me. But the instant I come down — pop! she'll make a dart and a pounce — and good-bye Snitch!'

At this moment Mrs. Tompkyns turned her head sideways. She had heard something. She left her leg sticking up in the air, but she was listening. She seemed to be admiring the wall-paper. ' You can hear me, and you can see me,' piped Snitch, ' but you can't get at me.'

Mrs. Tompkyns turned her head towards the door, her back to the curtain. Apparently it was the closed door she found so interesting.

‘That’s all humbug,’ piped the lizard from its safe place. ‘ You’re just pretending. I know your little game.’

The cat’s whiskers twitched, but she made no other sign.

‘Little tiger, that’s what you are,’ went on Snitch. ‘ I heard your step in the passage in spite of Topsy’s thumping feet. So I popped up here for a change of air. Now, I tell you what *you’d* better do — go and catch that mouse I hear nibbling in Nannie’s room across the landing. Because you’ll never catch *me,* you know.’

Sambo, who loved Mrs. Tompkyns, had crossed over to stroke her yellow back. She was purring. She looked as innocent as a baby.

‘Open the door and put her out,’ went on Snitch. ‘ You’ll see I’m right. I can hear the mouse.’

Sambo obeyed. He opened the door, lifted the big cat with an effort and put it in the passage. Mrs. Tompkyns, pretending this was just what she wanted, paused a moment, then walked majestically down the passage towards Nannie’s door which stood ajar. There she sat down and began to wash her cheeks with a wet paw, as though nothing else in the whole world concerned her.

‘Just pretending again,’ piped Snitch against the boy’s ear, for the lizard had darted across the floor and climbed up him. Sambo turned his head in amazement. ‘ Now, look again! ‘ whispered Snitch. And, sure enough, in that instant while he turned his head, Mrs. Tompkyns had vanished. Carrying the lizard safely on his shoulder, he peeped into Nannie’s room. There was the great yellow Mrs. Tompkyns crouched down over a tiny hole in the boards where a mouse had been nibbling, no doubt, a moment before!

‘Now we’ll go back, thank you,’ said Snitch,’ and don’t forget to shut the door, please.’

CHAPTER VI

SAMBO SHUT THE door tight and then went back to the Nursery, Snitch still perched safely on his shoulder.

‘Well, I never...! ‘ he exclaimed, full of wonder and admiration, for the lizard’s skill amazed him.

‘What d’you mean? ‘ inquired Snitch. ‘ You never *what*? But shut the door first, please,’ Sambo banged it. ‘ Now you can tell me what you mean,’ Snitch added. It had climbed down his back, run across the carpet, shot up the leg of the table, and was curled round the inkpot on the brown tablecloth, so that he could hardly see it at all. It was quite motionless. ‘ What d’you mean by “ Well, I never! “? ‘ it asked.

Sambo fidgeted. He tried to collect his thoughts. ‘ I meant,’ he mumbled at length,’ that I never knew anything like it...’

‘Like what? ‘ snapped Snitch. It seemed annoyed.

‘The pace you go, and the way you keep so still, and the way you hear everything, and the way you hide, and—’

‘That’s enough,’ interrupted the little reptile, now mollified. ‘ But all that only surprises you because you can’t do it yourself. It’s natural to us. My life’s a danger from the moment I’m born. If I wasn’t quick and couldn’t hide, I’d be caught and eaten; but nothing wants to pounce and eat *you.* You’d taste horrid, anyhow.’

‘Lions and tigers would,’ objected Sambo, wondering a moment how he would really taste, but not referring to it. ‘ Only, of course, there aren’t any here.’

‘And they couldn’t get into houses if there were,’ the reptile said, shortly. ‘ You’re safe in houses. ‘ Besides, even outside, you’d hear them coming. They roar. But cats and owls and hawks and snakes don’t make much noise before they pounce. If I hadn’t such sharp hearing, I’d be caught before I was a week old.’

Sambo listened with keen attention, deeply interested. ‘ I see,’ he put in.

‘But I see better still,’ went on Snitch, rather annoyed at the interruption. ‘ Thousands of years ago we had a third eye, you know. It was on the top of our heads, so that we could see above us into the sky. It’s gone out of use now because there are very few hawks left — there used to be millions — and we don’t need it. Two eyes are all we want now. Besides, the things that pounce on us are pretty big, and we easily see them coming. Mrs. Tompkyns, remember, seems as huge to me as an elephant does to you.’

‘*You* pounce on things too,’ said Sambo suddenly. ‘ To a fly you must seem enormous —— —— — —’

He stopped dead. He had said something he oughtn’t to have said, evidently, for the lizard suddenly left the ink-pot and was behaving in an extraordinary way. He had been watching it with his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. Snitch now crawled over the cloth and stopped just beneath his face. It then rose slowly on its hind legs, balanced itself carefully with the help of its stumpy tail and began to swing sedately to and fro. Its head turned up, pointing the sharp muzzle into his face. It closed one eye. The tiny mouth opened. A faint sound came out like ‘ Madrid ‘ on the wireless. It was singing:

‘To mention size
Is very rude.
I pounce on flies
Because they’re food.’

There was no tune, but just a sort of queer little sing-song, and as it swayed to and fro it waved its front paws in the air, it sang the verse over and over again. It was very odd indeed, thought Sambo. It wasn’t really angry, he decided.

‘I’ll get you some flies, shall I, Snitch? ‘ he asked, hoping to make up for his mistake, and looking at the window where a blue-bottle was buzzing up and down the pane.

The lizard stopped singing. ‘ I wish you wouldn’t interrupt,’ it spat at him. ‘ I can get flies myself when I want them. I want one now. That’s why I sing. I always sing when I’m hungry and on the hunt. When you’re hungry, you cry. That’s the difference between us.’

It began its monotonous song again, swaying to and fro rather more violently now. The sight fascinated Sambo. He stared and stared. At the same time he noticed that the big fly had stopped buzzing on the glass.

How many times Snitch sang that verse over and over again, Sambo could not say. It may have been a hundred times. He only knew that it made him feel drowsy as he listened. The queer, swaying dance had the effect of making him heavy in the head. His eyes began to close. Snitch swung and swung like the pendulum of a clock. It never stopped. The boy grew heavier and heavier, drowsier and drowsier. He vaguely realized that the same thing was happening to the fly.... The fly was getting drowsy.

Suddenly there came a pop, a bang, a splash! The sound stopped dead, the singing ended. There was silence in the room. For a second Sambo couldn’t make out what had happened. He rubbed his eyes. Then he felt that his nose and forehead were sore. His cheeks were wet too. He passed his hand quickly over his face — black! He had dropped asleep and his face had fallen forwards into the ink-pot. The ink was spilt all over the table, over his shirt and cheeks and nose and forehead. It was on his lips and in his mouth. He was a sight!

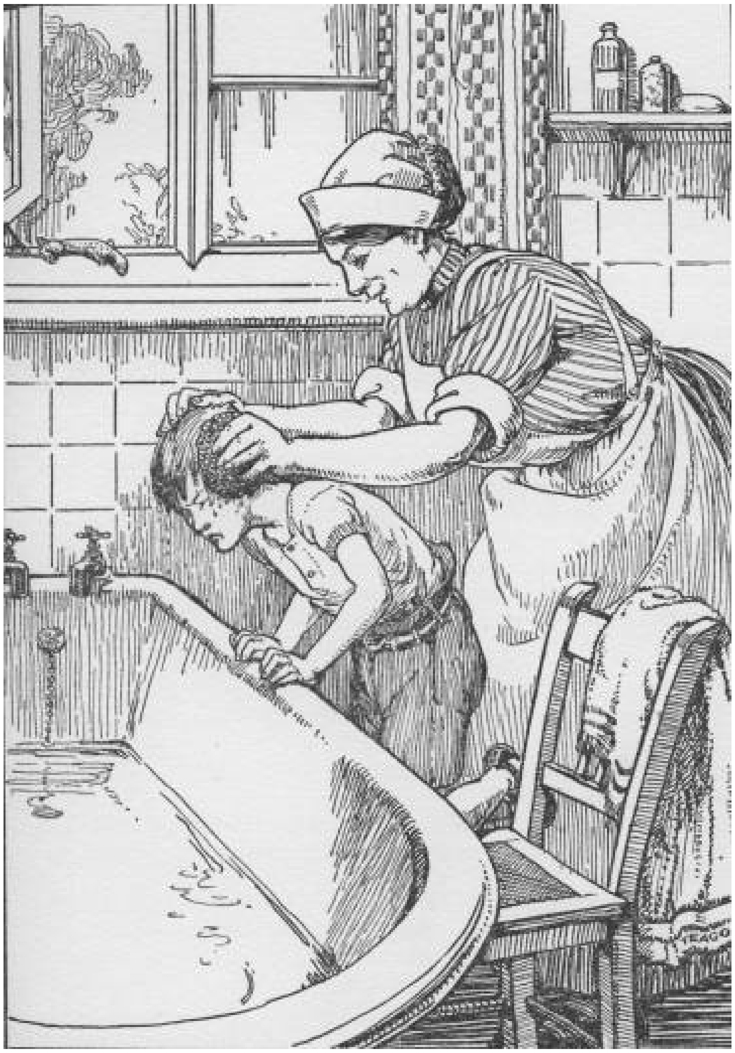
He wiped the ink out of his eyes and stared about him in a state of fright and bewilderment. The lizard, he noticed, had gone. The fly had also gone. The room was empty. He was quite alone. He was covered with ink. What could he do? To upset the ink-pot was an awful crime and Nannie would be very angry. He would be punished. He wanted to cry. But instead of crying he suddenly thought he would try and sing, as the lizard had done. So he stood in the middle of the floor and began to pipe up:

‘Dear little Snitch,
I wonder which
Way you have gone?

I’m all alone...!’

He sang the verse over and over again, but just as he was singing’ I’m all alone ‘ for the fifth time, he heard a noise behind him. The door had opened. The room seemed full of people. First of all he saw Topsy, standing against Nannie’s skirts and giggling. Then he saw his mother. Last of all, he saw Mrs. Tompkyns, rubbing against his mother’s dress. He wasn’t ‘ all alone ‘ after all!

Covered with ink, he stood in the middle of the room, while all these people stared at him in amazement with their mouths wide open. There was going to be an awful row. He knew that. He could think of nothing to say. He just stood there and stared back at them all. If only he knew how to hide as the lizard did! But he was too big. Also it was too late.



‘Sambo!’ said his mother in a solemn voice, ‘ What is the meaning of this? How did you get all over ink like that?’

At this moment, while Sambo was wondering what in the world he was going to say, a tiny voice piped in his ear:’ Don’t be frightened. Just tell the truth and you’ll make them all laugh. You needn’t mention me, of course.’

‘I fell asleep,’ mumbled Sambo, ‘and my head banged down against the ink-pot and upset it.’

There was a moment’s silence. Then Topsy’s giggle became audible. Nannie, too, was grinning, her handkerchief stuffed into her mouth. The next moment his mother began to smile. It was really impossible to be angry. Sambo looked too funny to be scolded. And so the laughter became general, and even Mrs. Tompkyns had a twinkle in her bright green eyes. Sambo laughed too.

‘Nannie,’ said his mother, ‘take this Black Sambo away and wash him white, and put the ink-pot out of reach for the future.’

But while Sambo was being scrubbed hard in the bathroom by Nannie, who puffed and blew like a grampus as she lathered his black face with soap, he heard a funny little squeaky voice over by the open window. It was the lizard at its tricks again. It had run round outside the house, climbed the wall, and was now perched on the window-sill, looking like a bit of dark wood:

‘When you want to cry,

The very best thing

Is to shut one eye

And begin to sing!’

‘Oh, Nannie, listen! ‘ cried Sambo, his mouth half full of soap. ‘That’s Snitch singing to me!’

He said it without thinking in his excitement. He had betrayed his friend. But Nannie, luckily, didn’t understand. Evidently she heard nothing of the tiny little voice.

‘Keep your head over the bath,’ she cried, laughing, ‘or I’ll never get you white. And don’t talk nonsense about snitches, or whatever you call ‘em!’

This made Sambo laugh so that he swallowed a good deal of soap and water, and nearly choked. He felt very happy anyhow. The lizard evidently felt happy, too, for he heard it piping away while Nannie dried his head:

‘She’ll get you white,

  Don’t be afraid!

    I’ll come to-night

When you’re in bed.
I had my fly,
You had your fun,
You didn’t cry:
Sambo — well done!’

And a couple of hours later when he lay between the sheets, the little box with the broken tail in it under his pillow, he kept his ears wide open for a sign of the voice he expected to hear in the darkness.

CHAPTER VII

TO TELL THE truth, Sambo never understood quite what happened that night. The whole experience was too wonderful. He knew Snitch would come because it promised, but he couldn't know exactly *when* it would come. It seemed ages before Nannie left the room, and still more ages before Topsy fell asleep. But at last the door was closed, Nannie was gone, and he was alone with Topsy and the night-light.

Now Topsy was full of questions. She would not go to sleep. She had somehow guessed that something was up. She noticed Sambo's excitement, probably because he could not hide it altogether. She wanted to share it with him. ' What's on, Sambo? You're waiting for something, I know. Can't I do it with you?'

Sambo was very fond of his fat little sister. They always played together. The lizard was the first thing he hadn't shared with her. And to-night he suddenly wanted her to know it all. It would be twice as much fun if Topsy knew. Only Snitch, he felt, didn't want her. She was a female, and females, Snitch had warned him, divulge. He did not dare to tell his sister without first asking permission. So he decided, the moment Snitch appeared, he would ask if Topsy could be in the secret too.

Meanwhile the minutes passed, the house grew stiller and stiller, the night darker and darker, the candle burned lower and lower, and Tospy got sleepier and sleepier. Nannie opened the door softly once and peeped in, but hearing no voices, thought the children were safely asleep. The door closed again. The footsteps died away.

'Won't you tell me, Sambo? ' came Topsy's last drowsy whisper. And Sambo answered in another whisper,' All right; I'll try, Topsy. When you're asleep, I'll ask about it. Will that do?'

A very faint ' Yes ' was heard, and the next second Topsy was in the land of dreams. She always went to sleep like that — all of a sudden. The room became quite still now. Nothing stirred. The candle flickered, the shadows danced, the curtains hung motionless. There wasn't a sound except Topsy's breathing. She made a noise just like a kettle boiling.

Sambo watched and waited and listened. His eyes were all over the room, his ears were strained to their sharpest. He thought of nothing but the lizard, but as he waited he began to get very sleepy too. The minutes passed.

'I wonder when it will come...? ' he said to himself for the hundredth time, in a very low voice. Then a faint noise startled him, so that he sat bolt upright in bed and stared about him.

'I'm not IT. I'm SHE,' he heard distinctly. ' Please be more respectful.' It was Snitch. He knew the jolly little voice at once. But he couldn't see the speaker, stare as he would.

'Oh, hooray! You've come! But where are you, please? I'm very sorry for calling you IT. I won't do it again. And, please, I want to talk about Topsy.'

Sambo said all this in one breath, speaking in a whisper. But before Snitch could answer, he saw her — lying along the dark iron rail at the foot of the bed.

'I've been here all the time,' piped the lizard. ' I saw you both say your prayers and get into bed. I look just like a bit of the iron rail, don't I? ' she added proudly. ' Nannie almost touched me once.'

'Exactly,' said Sambo with admiration. ' You're simply wonderful.'

'Thank you,' replied Snitch, and ran along the counterpane towards him. ' It was a bit risky, but I always keep my promise. So here I am.'

There was a pause. Sambo glanced over at his sleeping sister. He longed to get her into the secret, but he was afraid Snitch would refuse. For a moment he said nothing, Snitch said nothing either. Topsy snored, more like a boiling kettle than ever.

'Get on with it,' remarked the lizard presently. ' I heard your conversation, remember.'

Sambo drew a deep breath, but still was a little afraid to ask. Then he made a great effort: ' Please, Mrs. Snitch, may I tell Topsy that I know you? We usually do everything together, you see. I feel such a pig, leaving her out.' There! It was done.

Snitch hesitated and cocked an eye. ‘ I like you for asking,’ she observed. ‘Most little boys, of course, *are* pigs,’ she added.

‘Oh, I’d love it so if Topsy knew,’ put in Sambo quickly. He didn’t mind being called a little pig a bit, for he felt it was rather true.

‘She’s a female,’ objected Snitch, cautiously turning a sharp muzzle towards the other bed.

‘But so are you,’ said Sambo, sticking up for his sister. ‘ Aren’t you?’

‘Yes, but I can balance,’ came the odd reply, not a bit offended.

‘Balance! ‘ repeated Sambo. He didn’t understand.

‘You see, to-night I’m taking you on an adventure. We’re going out. And to go out safely, I’ve got to make you my size — as small as I am. I don’t often go out at night, of course, but this is an exception. I feel like an adventure. You do, too. Now, you see — your sister — is — rather round and fat. When I’ve made her small enough she’ll be nothing but a little ball on legs. We shall go in some funny places. She might lose her balance — and roll.’

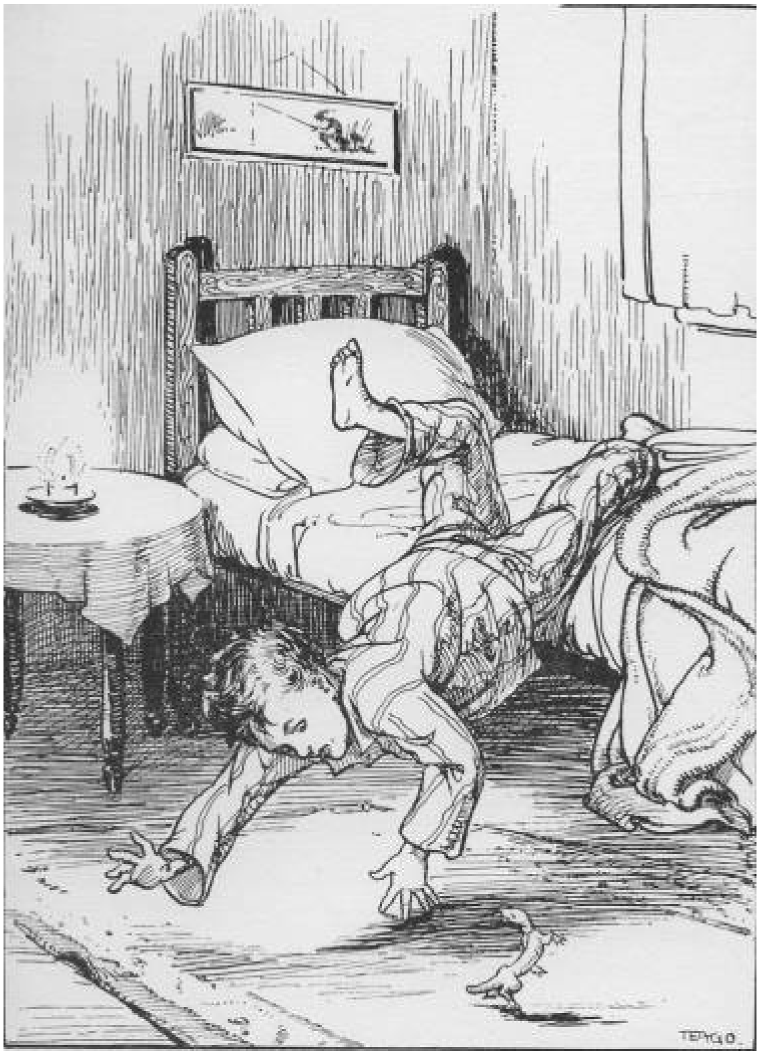
This information excited Sambo to such a point that he felt he was going to burst. An adventure! Going out! Out into the night, out into funny places! And to be made small first! The same size as Snitch! It sounded all too wonderful to be true. For a moment he could think of nothing to say, though he really wanted to yell with delight and excitement. So many questions came rushing into his head that he asked none of them. All he could manage was: ‘ Oh, Snitch, dear, wonderful Mrs. Snitch!’

‘Thank you,’ squeaked the lizard, wagging her tiny head with pleasure, for evidently she liked being called ‘ Mrs.” But the point just now is — your fat little sister. She’ll be rather a risk. She might roll off a wall, or slip into a hole, where we’d never get her out again, or—’

‘I’ll look after her,’ interrupted Sambo proudly. ‘ Like I always do.’ Snitch ran up his sleeve and settled on his elbow. ‘ Now, that’s right,’ she piped. ‘ I like you for sticking up for her. Do you mean that you don’t want to come unless she comes too?’

Snitch waited for his answer several minutes. The temptation was very severe. Sambo longed to go out on the adventure with all his might. At the same time he felt he would be really a little pig to leave Topsy behind. And, oh! she would enjoy coming so much! Yet, if he insisted on her coming, Snitch would probably refuse to go at all. ‘ Thank you very much, Mrs. Snitch,’ he said at last in a rather faint voice,’ but I don’t want to come — unless — Topsy — comes too.’

For a few moments there was silence in the room, broken only by the snoring of Topsy in the corner. Then Snitch popped up suddenly on to Sambo’s shoulder, raised her mouth, gave him a tiny nip in the neck with her wee teeth, and whispered into his ear:



‘I hoped you would say that, Sambo. Now I know I can trust you. You’re true to Topsy, so you’ll be true to me. I’ll take her. We’ll go together, all three!’

At this, Sambo felt so happy that he picked up the lizard in his fingers and gave it a kiss.

‘Thank you,’ piped Snitch, when he put it down on the bed, ‘ but you needn’t waste time doing that. We’ve a lot to do before we’re ready to start. I’ve got to make you both small first. We must all be the same size or we shan’t be able to get into the same places. Besides, you can’t see in the dark as well as I can, and you’d soon lose me. Have you got my tail? ‘ she asked in a whisper.

‘Rather! ‘ Sambo hopped out of bed so quickly to get the box that his foot caught in the sheet and he fell full length on the floor.

‘There! You might have squashed me! ‘ squeaked the lizard. ‘ Lucky I’m so quick, isn’t it! Now you understand why we’ve got to be the same size!’

‘I hope Nannie didn’t hear,’ the boy gasped, as he picked himself up and ran to get the box.

‘Oh, she’s having her supper in the kitchen,’ explained the lizard. ‘ But it’s lucky you didn’t wake your sister. She’s got to be made small after you. And in the dark too. We must put the night-light out first.’ And with a sudden whisk of her whole body, Snitch darted up the saucer, raced across the burning little wick and squashed it down into the soft wax before the flame had time to burn her. The room was now in complete darkness.

‘There! ‘ she squeaked, running almost the same instant along Sambo’s arm, till she reached his hand that held the box. ‘ Now, open it and I’ll take the tail out. I can’t make you smaller without the bit of my tail, only I must do it in the dark, because it’s a secret, and you mustn’t see how I do it.’

Trembling with excitement, Sambo had now opened the box. He felt the lizard run past his fingers. The same instant he felt it run out again.

‘Thank you, Mithter! ‘ he heard.

Snitch already had the bit of broken tail in her mouth.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES nothing happened. Oh, how still it was! The blackness of night covered all. Nothing stirred. The deep silence was broken only by the knocking of Sambo's heart against his ribs. He tried to hold his breath. Bang! Bang! went his beating heart.

Suddenly he became aware that the kettle had stopped boiling. Topsy, that is, no longer snored. She was waking up. Probably she'd make an awful fuss, he thought — bubble and squeak with excitement and ask a hundred questions. As a matter of fact, when the time came, she did nothing of the sort. She took the whole affair as calmly as though it happened every day. And this, Sambo decided next day, when he thought it all over, was very queer.

At the moment, anyhow, he heard the little bubbling grunt she always made in the morning when she opened her eyes. But he heard something else as well that was not his fat, round sister. A tiny voice was speaking — singing rather. He listened intently. He recognised the voice. Mrs. Snitch, the broken tail still in her mouth evidently, was chanting the spell in the darkness that was to make their bodies small. It went to the tune of 'Now we go round the Mulberry Bush':

'Make me the thmall
That I can crawl
Along a wall
Without a fall.
Make me the neat
That hands and feet
May flash along like lightning!'

The words floated through the darkness like the faint buzzing of a bee.

‘Thay it after me,’ came the order in a whisper close beside his ear. ‘ And touch my tail — the broken bit — at the thame time. Ith in my mouth, ath you can hear.’ And Snitch darted up the boy’s finger so that he could feel in the darkness where its mouth was.

Sambo obeyed. His finger ran along the cold scaly back till he felt the pointed head and muzzle. Very gently, using his little finger, he found the broken bit and touched it. At the same time he sang the words:

‘Make me so small
  That I may crawl
    Along a wall
      And never fall,’ etc.

And as he sang, repeating the verse over and over again, this strange thing happened. He felt himself shrinking, shrinking, shrinking. It was too dark to see anything, of course, but he knew he was shrinking because he presently felt the long hair of the bear-skin rug beside the bed tickling his cheeks. The queer bitter smell he noticed too. He had smelt it before, of course, when playing bears with his father, the rug all over his face, but the smell had never been so strong as this. He was, evidently, close to the ground, the long coarse hair about him like a forest.

While all this was happening in the pitch black room, Snitch was attending to his sister. The lizard had long ago left his hand and darted across to Topsy. She was fully awake now. Sambo already heard her gurgling voice, very low but quite distinct, singing the words with him. She, too, was being made small. It was a powerful spell. It worked quickly. The next minute he felt something touch him in the darkness. It was a hand. Topsy was feeling for him. He put out his own. They found each other’s fingers. They shook hands.

‘Now, all together,’ came the voice of Snitch, close beside them on the ground. ‘ Only, instead of “ *make* “ the word is changed to “*keep* “.’

Sambo noticed that Snitch pronounced the' s.' The tail had been dropped. ' Take my paws,' added Snitch, ' my *front* paws, and beat time by swinging your hands up and down while we sing.'

There, in the darkness, the three of them holding hands, they sang together, keeping their voices very low, the wonderful spell that was to *keep* them small:

'Keep me so small
  That I may crawl
    Along a wall
      Without a fall.

Keep me so neat
  That hands and feet
    May flash along like lightning!'

Their hands — and paws — swung up and down to keep time. They sang the little song three times.

'That's enough,' interrupted Snitch, just as they were beginning it again.

'Each time means an hour. You're small for three hours now. Hooray!'

'I'm as small as a ball,' announced Topsy, speaking for the first time.

'But I can't see anything. How small are you, Sambo?'

She felt no surprise, apparently; it was all natural enough. And Sambo felt the same. He saw no reason why he shouldn't be small like his companions. Everything in the world was either small or big compared with something else. He was big compared to an ant anyhow, occurred to him.

'Oh, I'm all right,' he replied.' Bigger than a beetle anyhow. I feel all darty. I could flash away like lightning — if only I could see.'

‘I only hope I shan’t roll,’ said Topsy. ‘ I’m awfully round — rather hedgehoggy—’

A shrill noise stopped her. It was Snitch screaming.

‘Hush! ‘ cried the lizard. ‘ You mustn’t use that word. Hedgehogs and snakes eat us, — sometimes. We never mention them. It’s bad language. Like swearing with you.’

‘Sorry,’ said Topsy quickly. ‘ I didn’t mean to be rude.’ Then, as the lizard’s front left paw stroked her hand to show forgiveness, she added ‘ Thank you.’

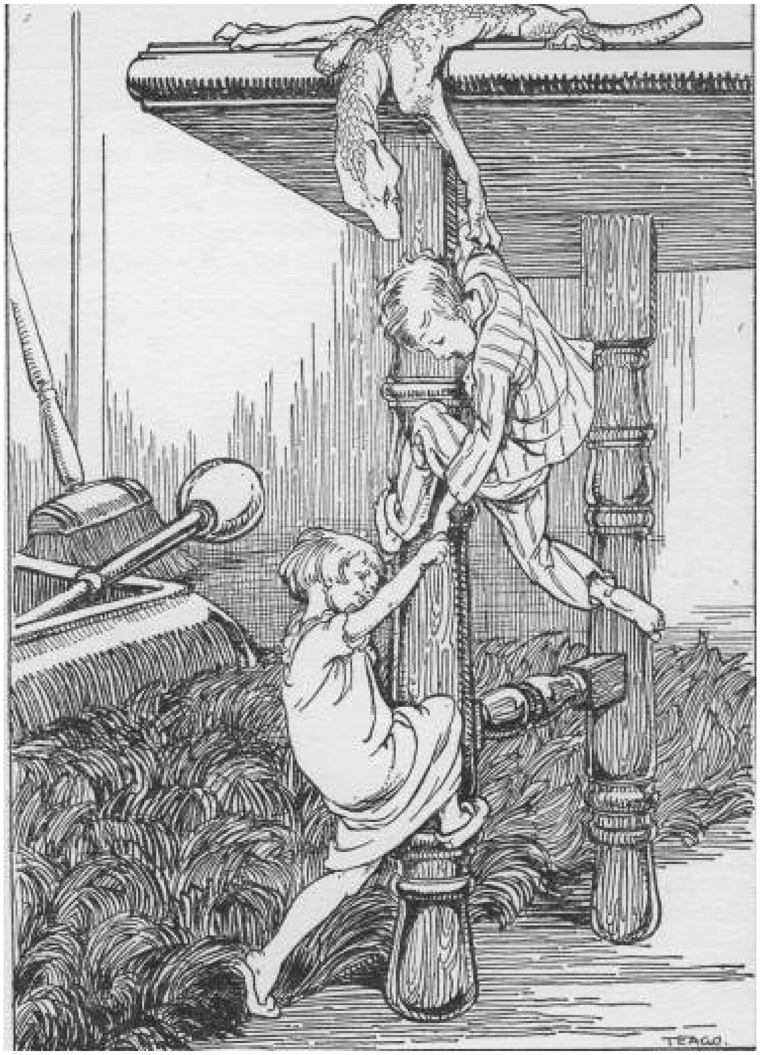
‘Forgiven and forgotten,’ squeaked the lizard briskly. ‘ And now listen to me, please. Listen carefully. I’ll give you the programme for to-night. We’ve got just three hours for our Adventure, and I think it would be more fun to go out than to stay indoors. Don’t you?’

‘Rather! ‘ exclaimed both children in the same breath, while Topsy added: ‘ If you’re sure nothing can catch us and eat us! ‘ Her hand stole into her brother’s and held it tightly.

‘And if we can see our way,’ put in Sambo, gripping his sister’s fingers to comfort her.’ It’s frightfully dark.’

Snitch burst out laughing. ‘ You’re much too fast for anything to catch you,’ she explained,’ for you can dart away now as quick as I can. You’ll be safe under any stone. I’ve arranged about light too. Wait here a moment while I run and see. I’ll be back in a second. Don’t move, remember.’

And she was gone. They heard her rapid feet across the carpet, but they made more noise than usual. Their ears picked up all sorts of sounds — sounds they never could have heard three feet up in the air.



They lay among the thick hair of the bear-skin rug, waiting in the darkness for the lizard's return. They could see nothing.

'Sambo,' whispered Topsy, ' I'm awfully excited. Aren't you?'

'Oh, yes,' replied the boy, as though adventures like this were no new thing to him. ' I thought you'd like to come too. Mind you don't say anything to hurt her feelings. You won't, will you? ' he repeated.

'But what ought I to say to a lizard? ' Topsy asked, greatly impressed.

'What sort of things?'

Sambo, of course, didn't really know. Only he mustn't let her see that he didn't know. ' Oh, just be polite,' he whispered back; ' very polite is best.'

'Say I'm sorry, you mean? ' she enquired.

Her brother hesitated. ‘I beg your pardon would be better, I expect,’ he told her. ‘ It’s what Mummy says. And you might add R.S.V.P.’

A sound interrupted their whispered conversation, and Topsy snuggled in closer to her brother’s side. But it was only Snitch coming back. They heard the hair on the rug swishing and rustling like leaves of a tree as the creature came darting through it to their side. Snitch felt them over with her front paws to see where they were.

‘I wasn’t long, was I? ‘ she said, a little breathlessly. ‘Well, everything’s ready. I’ve got the Lights. They’re coming. And we’ll go by the window instead of the stairs and hall.’

‘Window! ‘ gasped Topsy.

‘The window and the wall, yes,’ replied Snitch. ‘ It’s safer. The window’s open at the top, and it’s a good wall with lots of cracks and niches. We’ll slip down it. The Lights will follow us. Are you ready? Come along then!’

Sambo was bursting with questions, but he had no time to ask them. He felt Snitch pulling him along through the thick hair of the rug, across the carpet, whose roughness tickled his tummy, then up the leg of the table, which he knew stood close by the window, and next, with a flying leap through the air, on to the window-sill itself.

It was all so swift, so breathless, so extraordinarily light and easy that he simply hadn’t time to think. He had shot and darted along like lightning. Yet all the time he held on to Topsy’s hand. He never for a moment let her go. She came after him like a ball from a ping-pong racquet, rolling, bouncing, tumbling along, her feet twinkling like a fly’s wings, while she grunted, panted, gurgled and puffed. Whew! What a flying race it was! The way they flashed up the table leg, then shot through the air from the table to the window-sill was marvellous. How their feet had clung to the polished surface of the table leg he couldn’t understand. He only knew that there was no difficulty about it. Why, he could have run up a smooth wall, he felt.

‘We’ll rest a second now,’ he heard Snitch saying. ‘Then we go up the window, out through the crack at the top, down the wall, and into the garden. The Lights will be here in a moment.’

Sambo and Topsy stood panting and breathless beside their guide. They hadn’t enough breath to speak at first.

‘I’d better prepare you,’ Snitch went on, ‘ for what you’ll see when the Lights come. You’ll see *me,* for instance. It needn’t frighten you. I shall look rather — er — big, perhaps.’

But already Sambo had become aware of something beside him with enormous bulk. He just made out this huge shadowy mass, for here on the window-sill the starlight gave a faint glimmer, and the outlines of things were clearer than when he was on the floor. It was as big as himself, as big as — as a crocodile. Yet Snitch’s voice came out of this immense dim outline. It moved then. Good heavens! It *was* Snitch, but Snitch as big as a — crocodile!

‘Don’t be frightened,’ the lizard said quickly. ‘ Of course I’m big now. I seem big like this because you’ve grown small. You’ve come down to my size, you see. I’m just the same as I was before, really, only you’ve got smaller. *I* haven’t changed at all.’

Sambo gasped. He wasn’t frightened, but he was too amazed to speak at first. So this crocodile beside him was Snitch! His own head stood level with its huge scaly back. Its eyes were as big as his own. Its tail ran away into space. Its paws were tremendous. He looked down at himself then. Well, he couldn’t tell how big he was, or whether he was big or small. He only knew that he and Snitch were about the same size. Next he looked at Topsy. She was the same size as himself. She was lying on her back resting after their fierce rush to the window. She looked like an egg with two short legs poking out below and two short arms above. The starlight was too dim to show more than her oval outline. Then, suddenly, she began to grow clearer. Something was happening. The light grew stronger.

‘Sit up,’ Sambo called to her. ‘ Sit up and look. It’s all right. Nothing to be frightened about.’ He stretched his hand out to help her. She took it and began to roll over and over, till finally she found her feet and stood up.

She stared about her in the growing light. Then she gasped too.

But what made Topsy gasp with amazement was not, as with Sambo, the great size of the lizard. This didn’t seem to strike her so much as the size the room had grown to. The furniture, the window, the table and chairs, the height of the ceiling — this was what struck her more than anything else. She realized the changes differently from the way Sambo realized them.

She realized, for instance, that she and her brother had become very small, rather than that Snitch had become very large.

She opened her mouth to ask a hundred questions, when Snitch stopped her quickly.

‘Don’t ask questions,’ the lizard said. ‘ Everything will explain itself as we go along. Besides, here are the glow-worms. We can go ahead now, if you’re rested. We’ll go fast this time,’ she added, as though the pace before had been nothing.

Glow-worms! So that explained the increasing light!

Outside the window gathered a flock of moving lights, faint and beautiful. There were about twenty of them, and they gave out a dim, gentle glow. They danced and hovered in the air outside the glass.

‘The glow-worms,’ explained Snitch. ‘ They’ll come with us — ten in front and ten behind — to light the way. And when there’s danger, they go out.’

‘What sort of danger? ‘ whispered Topsy, snuggling closer to her brother and feeling for his hand.

‘Oh, the night creatures,’ replied the lizard: ‘ owls, night-jars, perhaps a cat that hasn’t gone to sleep, or a wandering rat — anything like that on the look out for food. But there’s nothing to be afraid of. At the least hint of danger I give the sign, and the glow-worms put their lights out. In the darkness, of course, we can’t be seen. We’re safe, provided you keep still. Now, watch,’ added the lizard. ‘ I’ll give the sign to show you.’

‘What is the sign?’ asked Topsy.

‘A sneeze,’ was the reply. And the lizard, raising itself on its front paws, which seemed gigantic now, suddenly sneezed.

‘*Snitch!* ‘ it went. And instantly all the Lights went out. It was so dark that the children couldn’t see each other. Topsy and Sambo held hands very tightly, waiting. Then the lizard repeated the sneeze, doing it twice this time, very rapidly: ‘ *Snitch! Snitch!* ‘ it went. And instantly the Lights came on again.

‘There!’ said their guide, ‘ now you see! Only remember that when the Lights go out you must keep still — *absolutely* still. You mustn’t move a muscle till they come on again. If you do that you'll be perfectly safe. Understand?'

'Yes,' whispered the children. ' We understand.'

'Good,' said Snitch. ' Then we can start. Come along!'

It was up the side of the window like a flash, and Sambo, seizing his sister's hand, was after it. They raced up, darted along the top of the open sash, perched on the dizzy edge a second, then scuttled head-first down the framework between the panes and landed safely on the stone ledge outside. It was a breathless business. Topsy fairly bounced along. She was very surefooted for a ball!

'Now,' said Snitch in a low voice,' the quicker the better — in case we've been seen. Something may be watching us; you never know. The Rule is, *When Lights are on, move fast; when Lights are out, keep still*. Got it? Better say it after me to make sure.'

The children repeated the Safety Rule together: ' When Lights are on, move fast. When Lights are out, keep still.'

'That's right,' whispered Snitch approvingly. ' I'll go first now, and you follow. Join me on the lawn. The Lights will go down with you.'

There was a flicker of the great tail, a chuckling laugh, a swift rattling scuttle of four marvellous feet — and it was gone into empty space.

Sambo and Topsy peered over the edge into the gulf of darkness. How smooth the wall looked! What a height it seemed! The garden lay below them far away, looking like a dim map spread out. They could smell the earth and flowers.

'Don't hesitate,' rose up a tiny voice out of the gulf. ' Head first. Use hands *and* feet. Now — one... two... three... GO!'

CHAPTER IX

WITH HIS HEART in his mouth, Sambo moved towards the dizzy edge. The floating Lights moved with him, so that he could see every detail, every crack and niche. The glow-worms grouped themselves in the air close about him. He was very frightened, to tell the truth. But he didn’t forget his sister. Even in his moment of fear before the terrible descent, he remembered Topsy. He must help her, if he could. ‘ Give me your hand, Topsy,’ he whispered, ’ or your foot, if that’s easier.’

His sentence was hardly finished when, to his amazement, Topsy slipped past him without a sound, and disappeared over the edge alone. She rolled into space. Ten of the Lights instantly detached themselves and followed her down.

‘I’m all right, young Sambo!’ her voice floated up to him with a gurgle. ‘ It’s quite easy. Come on!’

She was already halfway down, and Sambo was ashamed to hesitate any longer. He crawled to the edge, put a leg over, found a crack for his foot — and was off. The Lights floated down with him, helping him to find the niches and rough bits he could cling to. It seemed a long way, but he got down at last and felt his feet on the gravel path that skirted the lawn. He drew a deep breath, thanked his stars he hadn’t slipped, and looked about him to find his sister and the lizard.

A few feet beyond him he saw the group of glow-worms that had accompanied Topsy down the wall, and he was in the act of running across to join them, when there came a sound that set every nerve tingling in his body.

‘*Snitch!* ‘ he heard, close in the grass beside him.

It was the warning, and it rang out sharp and clear. There was danger somewhere. The same instant every Light went out, as though an electric switch had turned them off.

Sambo stood stock still in the darkness, holding his breath. He remembered the Rule: *When Lights are on, move fast; when Lights are out, keep still!* He kept as still as a mouse. What was the danger, he wondered, and how had the lizard discovered it? Where was it? From what side would it come? Was it an owl, a snake, a rat?

He stared as hard as he could. He could see nothing but the gigantic house, the towering cedars on the lawn, the huge rhododendron bushes. All these, of course, now seemed enormous compared with his own tiny body. The blades of grass all round him rose to his shoulder, for he could feel them touching his cheeks, but the house and trees looked like mountains reaching to the sky. He saw the house clearest, because its walls were painted pale yellow, and glimmered through the darkness. Against this pale yellow wall he now became aware that something was moving. Its bulk was great. It seemed as large as a cow. It was alive. It moved slowly, stealthily. What in the world was it?

Sambo was frightened. Shivers ran down his back. Although the big thing moved so delicately, he could just hear the soft thud of its feet on the gravel path by the wall. It stalked along. No stone was disturbed. It planted its feet most carefully.

Frightened though he was, however, he again remembered his sister, for if *he* was frightened, she must be simply terrified. And though the Rule warned him not to move, he could not help trying to see if he could find her with his hand and comfort her.

Very cautiously he stretched an arm out between the blades of grass surrounding him. Against his hand he could feel the rough edges of a dandelion leaf. He could actually hear the sound as it scraped along his skin. He trembled as he heard it. Tiny though it was, it seemed quite loud now that he was so close to the ground. At the same moment he felt a warm soft thing clutching his fingers. Only by a miracle did he keep back a scream.

And then he knew — it was Topsy’s hand. She, too, had been groping for him in the darkness. The two hands clasped one another tightly, and Sambo heaved a deep sigh of relief. His hand, he knew, would comfort her.

But that sigh, quiet as it was, had been heard. The scraping of the dandelion leaf had probably been heard too. For the Stalking Outline stopped instantly. For a second it kept as still as though it were a stone. Then the great mass moved forwards. The whole black bulk of it moved towards him — slowly, stealthily, silently — nearer and nearer, till it stood within a foot of Sambo and his sister. Large as a cow, it towered over them, and in the upper part of its great body were two large round discs that flashed with a queer greenish light. These great discs were turned straight upon the two cowering children. They were discovered. The monster stood glaring down at them.

Then, suddenly, Sambo knew. The discs were eyes. The monster, of course, was Mrs. Tompkyns.

Now, both children were brave. Topsy was brave, because she had no imagination and never dreamed anything would hurt her; and Sambo was braver still, because he *had* imagination — he realised how a thing might hurt him, yet faced it just the same. Anyhow, it was Topsy now, in this terrible moment, who acted first. Any moment, of course, the great cat might pounce on them, thinking they were mice because of their size. But Topsy never thought of that. She loved and trusted Mrs. Tompkyns. The cat's gigantic body didn't frighten her.

'It's old Mrs. Tompkyns,' she whispered with a gurgling little laugh. ' Let's get on her back, Sambo! We'll climb up by the tail—'

She never finished her sentence. What happened, happened so quickly, and with such appalling noise, that Sambo hardly knew what it was. Afterwards he knew, but at the moment it just seemed as if the house had fallen, or the great cedars had come crashing down about them. One thing he heard clearly, but only one — the voice of the lizard. Its shrill squeak penetrated in that instant above all else:

'Run for your lives! Go in opposite directions. Hide under different stones!'

Immediately following the words came a queer whistling sort of sound, a great shaking movement among the blades of grass, a scuttling of flying feet — and the lizard had darted past the children *towards the cat*.

It was all like a hurricane that strikes a forest of trees, for the blades of grass bent this way and that, scraping their rough edges noisily together, while the thud of feet on the lawn was like thunder. There was a tremendous roar and scuffle, and the only thing Sambo knew was that, while he seized Topsy's hand more tightly than before, and tore away with her to hide in the darkness beneath a stone on the path, he caught sight of Mrs. Tompkyns flying through the air above his head. He could see the whole black mass of her rushing past against the stars. It was followed by a crash that shook the ground. Then came silence again, a silence of the grave.

Sambo felt about for his sister, for he had lost hold of her hand in that wild dash for safety. The big stone now covered them nicely. No one could see them.

'Here I am,' whispered Topsy. ' Old Tompkyns made a bad shot, didn't she? ' And she giggled happily beside her brother. She snuggled up close to him again. ' I'm glad we came to the same stone,' she added. ' Aren't you, Sambo?'

Sambo was still too excited to think clearly, or realize quite what had happened. He was still panting.

'Has she disappeared? ' he asked breathlessly. ' The cat, I mean.'

'Rather,' Topsy told him. ' Snitch did it on purpose, I think.'

'Of course,' Sambo agreed, though he didn't quite know what she meant yet, nor what the explanation of everything was. ' She's in the middle of the rhododendron clump, where old Tompkyns can't follow her,' added Topsy, gurgling her delight.

And then at last it dawned upon Sambo what had happened. Snitch had realized their danger, had guessed that the cat might take them for mice and pounce upon them, and so had deliberately drawn attention upon herself. She had made a noise on purpose. Mrs. Tompkyns had suddenly caught sight of her — and jumped to catch her. The cat, of course, had jumped right over their heads, clearing them easily. The crash and noise and scuffle were now explained. But Snitch, laughing in her sleeve, had flashed away like lightning, and Mrs. Tompkyns had just landed upon an empty patch of grass where there was no lizard at all!

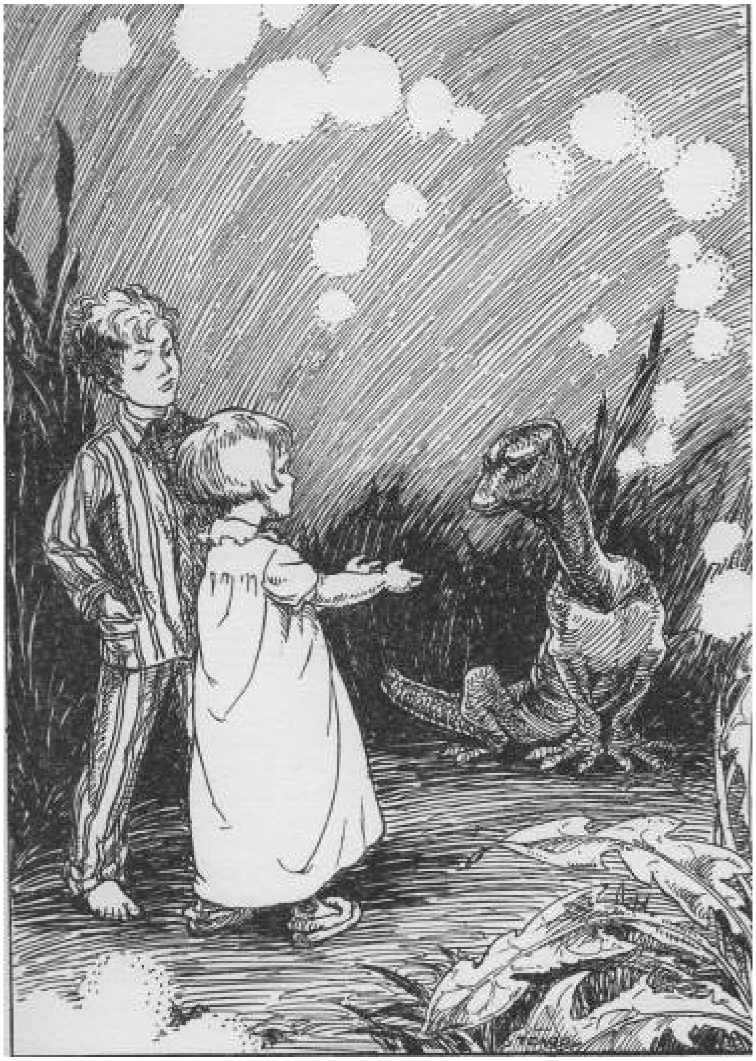
'Snitch risked her life for us,' declared Sambo, proud and pleased that at last he understood the whole business properly. ' We should have been a bit squashed, you know, if the cat had fallen on us. You would, at least,' he added.

'Hark! What's that! ' Topsy interrupted him.

They listened. A queer, wailing noise was audible in the distance. It came from the direction of the stables behind the house. It sounded at first, they thought, like a human voice, but the next moment they recognised it for what it was — a cat. It was caterwauling.

'It's old Tompkyns cat-a-walling on the stable walls,' announced Sambo, using the long word as he believed it was really meant. ' She's given up. We're safe again. Snitch will be back any minute now.'

' — I hope so,' replied Topsy, crawling out from beneath their stone.



Sambo followed her. ‘ Look! ‘ he cried. ‘Look, Topsy! The Lights are on again!’

Topsy clapped her tiny hands with delight when she saw the group of floating pale green Lights dancing about over their heads.

‘That means the lizard will be back any minute now,’ she laughed, as she rolled her way towards the lawn again, Sambo leading the way. ‘ The old thing’s as quick as lightning—’

‘Quicker, you mean,’ snapped a shrill voice. ‘And if you speak of me again like that, I shall make you bigger and send you back to bed!’

It was Snitch, who had darted up across the lawn. She was, of course, offended. For a moment an awkward silence fell on them all. Sambo was horrified at the way his sister had spoken. He felt ashamed of her. Naturally the lizard’s feelings were hurt at hearing herself called ‘ old thing.’ And he was just going to talk severely to Topsy, when he saw her rolling quickly up to Snitch’s side and holding out her two hands.

‘I’m very sorry, Mrs. Snitch,’ she said in a whisper.’ I beg your pardon.’ Then she added ‘ R.S.V.P., R.S.V.P.,’ twice over.

‘Forgiven and forgotten,’ Snitch answered at once, to Sambo’s great surprise and happiness. He had expected a row. ‘ You’re a female. All females have sharp tongues. I’m one myself.’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Snitch,’ whispered Topsy, ‘ and I won’t do it again.’

Snitch laughed. ‘ Perhaps not,’ she snapped. ‘ But you’ll do something worse. Anyhow, forgiven and forgotten. So let’s get on. The Lights are burning again. We’ll move fast.’

‘Thank you for saving our lives,’ put in Sambo quickly. ‘ You did save them, you know. It was wonderful.’

‘Oh, that’s nothing,’ said the lizard. ‘ I can always fool a cat.’

‘If that was nothing,’ exclaimed Sambo, ‘ what’ll *something* be like, I wonder?’

‘You’ll see,’ was the reply. ‘ Now give the ball a push, and let’s move fast.’

Sambo caught Topsy by the hand, knowing she was the ball referred to, and that Snitch was making fun of his sister by way of a little revenge, and followed Snitch across the lawn. The dew was heavy. The big drops on the grass half soused them. But they puffed and panted along, following Snitch's ever-vanishing tail, and so presently reached the gate into the field.

Here Snitch paused. The two children paused beside her, trying to recover their breath. They looked about them. The Lights had scattered, so as to be less noticeable. In a group they might draw the attention of some hunting owl, but separate like this there was nothing to attract any night-creatures that might be on the prowl.

Beyond them, in the field, Sambo saw that the grass was much thicker and taller than on the lawn. It looked so high, indeed, that he felt sure he would never be able to get through it, much less help Topsy rolling at his heels. The lawn was tiring enough, but this huge grass, rising like a forest, alarmed him.

'Mrs. Snitch,' he whispered, ' we — we feel rather small, I think, to — to go fast through *that.'*

Snitch, motionless beside them, made no sign that she had heard. There was no reply, at any rate. Sambo nudged his sister. ' You say something too,' he whispered in her ear. ' Something polite — very polite, mind.'

The ball rolled over, for Sambo had nudged her harder than he knew. Topsy, now lying on her back, rose to the occasion and did her best. ' Please, Mrs. Snitch,' she gurgled, ' I beg your pardon, but couldn't you make us a little bigger? R.S.V.P.'

Still there was no reply, nor did Snitch stir a muscle. Her great back lay like a log in the deep grass; her tail stretched away into the gloom of the thick stems; her eyes stared straight in front of her. Holding hands, the children waited for what seemed a long time. Then the lizard slowly turned her great head and looked at them.

They saw that the bit of broken tail stuck in her big jaws.

'Thay after me,' she said*,'* thith verth. And touch my broken tail at the thame time:

Pleathe make my figure
A little bigger —
About enough
To clear the rough.’

Sambo and Topsy obeyed at once. Raising their hands, they touched the bit of tail and repeated the words of the spell.

But nothing happened.

‘Thut your eyeth,’ said Snitch severely.

They shut their eyes tightly. Everything was black.

‘ — Now try again,’ they heard.

Again they repeated the spell:

‘Please make my figure
A little bigger —
Just big enough
To clear the rough!’

There was a curious swelling sensation inside them. Sambo felt his sister pushing against him as she expanded. He felt his own head scraping past the grass-stems as he rose. He seemed to be rising in the air.

‘Open your eyes,’ ordered Snitch.

And when they obeyed, they found that they were just tall enough to look over the tops of the rough grass. They had doubled their size and height. Snitch, too, had grown bigger with them. They now looked across the surface of what seemed a gigantic hay-field, and in the distance they could just make out dark masses that looked like hills.

‘Cows,’ said the lizard briefly. ‘If you’re ready, we’ll climb up one. The Lights are on. Follow me!’

CHAPTER X

CLIMB UP A sleeping cow! What an adventure!

The lizard’s body made a trail through the thick grass, but in spite of this the children had difficulty in keeping up. Topsy was puffing and grunting, while Sambo, holding her hand, dragged her along behind him. Great drops of dew splashed their faces. The grass was stiff. They stumbled and tripped as they went. Beetles and insects watched them pass but did not interfere. There was only the starry sky to light them, for Snitch had dismissed the glow-worms for safety’s sake.

As they drew nearer, the body of the cow grew bigger. Like a little hill it loomed before them, blocking half the stars. It looked enormous. It did not move. But they could hear a curious deep sound coming from it.

A few feet from the monster Snitch stopped. ‘ We must find the best way up,’ she whispered. ‘ I’ll go and scout, while you wait here.’ And, without a sound, she vanished.

Alone in this forest of grass beneath the stars, the crouching monster only a few feet away, Sambo felt less comfortable. Whether his legs trembled or not is hard to say, but at any rate he suddenly sat down. ‘ We’re safer out of sight,’ he whispered, pulling Topsy down beside him, ‘ and remember the Rule: “ When lights are out, keep still! “‘

Topsy, landing beside him with a bump, snuggled in close. Sambo could feel her heart beating against his ribs. His own heart was going like a drum, but he knew it was a man’s business to protect a female.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ he whispered. ‘ I’m here, Topsy.’

‘I’m not frightened,’ she whispered back. ‘ But I don’t like that noise so near us. What is it? ‘ She drew in closer still.

There was this curious roaring sound that came at regular intervals like a gust of wind, making the grass shake and rattle. It was very close. Trees in a storm made that kind of roar.

But Sambo had guessed what it was. ‘ It’s only the cow breathing,’ he said below a whisper. ‘ She’s asleep. We mustn’t wake her—’

‘In front of her mouth we should be blown away,’ began Topsy — when suddenly the danger signal sounded.

‘Snitch! Snitch!’

The warning sneeze made them jump, for it was in their very ears. The lizard had come back. She had made no sound, but was just suddenly there.

‘There’s a mole on the other side,’ came her squeaky voice. ‘ I’ve been all round. The cow’s asleep. But a mole came up to the surface against her ribs. And it tickled her. She may wake. We must wait a moment. When the breathing gets quiet again it’ll mean she’s safely asleep.’

They waited some time till the roaring noise grew less and less, and presently the lizard began to stir again.

‘Now,’ she whispered. ‘ Are you ready for the climb? Come on!’

‘Which end?’ asked Topsy breathlessly.

‘The far end, of course,’ snapped the reply. ‘ Away from the mouth and horns.’

‘By the tail? ‘ exclaimed Topsy, bursting with curiosity and excitement.

‘Hind leg,’ Snitch answered. ‘ It’s less steep than the ribs.’ And she led the way through the tangled grass towards the sleeping monster.

It was a creepy, stealthy business, stalking round the great sleeping cow whose body rose like a small hill against the stars. They kept close to her huge bulk where the shadow was deepest. Stretching out their hands, the children could feel her thick stiff hair, the warmth of her body too. If the animal rolled over, they would be squashed flat. But she didn’t roll over. Only the gentle rise and fall of her great sloping sides was visible as they crawled along. Mrs. Snitch knew a thing or two about cows, asleep or awake. No danger signal sounded.

‘Here’s the hind hoof! ‘ she warned them, stopping at last in front of a dark object as large as a football. ‘ Now, follow me! Take a running jump! ‘ And she scuttled up the hard smooth hoof, leaving her tail dangling for the children to climb up by. ‘ It’s a bit slippery,’ she called from the top. There was a good deal of puffing and blowing, but a moment later Sambo and Topsy stood beside her.

‘My! ‘ exclaimed Sambo, who still held his sister by the hand. ‘ It’s a risky business, this being a man! ‘ He puffed himself out.

‘Follow me,’ replied Snitch, ‘ and don’t boast. It’ll get steeper and steeper as we go.’ And she began to scuttle swiftly up the great hind leg. The children followed more slowly, Sambo first, pulling his fat sister after him with his left hand. His right hand clutched the long hair of the great flank.

They mounted slowly; it was a laborious business; the body lay soft and warm beneath their feet. Higher and higher they rose towards the stars, and steeper and steeper grew the slope.

‘Tread lightly,’ came the lizard’s warning from above, ‘ and if you feel the body move, catch hold of the hair and stop dead. The tail may come flicking round. You never know! She may think flies are tickling her in her dream.’

This was an awful thought. The children had often watched the long tail flicking and lashing about. If it caught them it would sweep them off into space. They moved as softly as they could, and at last they felt the slope become less steep, the hair less thick and matted, and harder ground beneath their feet. They stood on a kind of solid ridge. Snitch had stopped and was waiting for them.

‘We’re on the spine,’ she explained in a whisper. ‘We go on the level now for a bit, till we reach the neck.’

‘Where do we go after that? ‘ asked Sambo, as soon as he had got his breath, Topsy being too winded to speak at all.

The lizard did not answer for a moment. She was thinking, evidently. ‘ Between the flicking ears and up the horns would be the most interesting,’ she said presently. ‘ They’re slippery, and you could slide down them like banisters. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’

Sambo felt his sister’s hand tighten on his own. He remembered that he was a man. ‘ Are they easy to get up? ‘ he asked in a faint little voice.

‘Not very,’ answered Snitch*,’* but I’ll help you. Sliding down is the real difficulty. If you slide the wrong side you may land on the nose and mouth and the cow might snort. And that's risky rather. A good snort would blow you half-way across the field!'

Sambo wasn't quite sure he liked cows when he heard that. It was Topsy, finding her breath at last and speaking for the first time, who brought his courage back. ' I'll race you, Sambo,' she said with a thick gurgle, ' and I'll give you choice of horns.' She was actually laughing! The boy conquered his nervousness. ' I'll give you a start,' he answered loudly. ' You can have half a horn, and I'll beat you easily.'

The lizard interrupted them. ' Come on, now,' she told them. ' We've only got two hours, remember, and it's a longish way down the spine. You'll feel the body moving probably, but that's nothing. It rises and falls with the breath, of course, just like your bodies.'

She led the way again at a fair speed, and the children wriggled along behind her. The hair was shorter and less plentiful on the spine. There was not so much to cling to, but it was harder under foot, and they made good speed. On either side the great sides sloped down and away into the darkness of the field far below, but the ridge was broad and nearly level, and Sambo felt very brave until suddenly the upward slope of the neck was reached and the hair became much longer and thicker, entangling their feet in matted, twisted patches.

Here Snitch stopped dead. Beyond her, in the air, rose the broad fiat plateau of the head. The twitching ears, fringed with great webs of hair, spread sideways. Farther, again, the long curve of the slippery horns swept up to the stars like immense toboggan runs.

'The ears,' observed Snitch calmly, ' aren't flicking much. She's too sound asleep. But the horns look extra slippery to-night. That's the dew, you see.'

She turned her head down to examine the two children. ' How do you feel? ' she inquired kindly.

Sambo was the first to find his voice. ' Quite well, thanks,' he said faintly. ' Only — my legs ache a bit.'

'And you, Topsy? All right, eh? ' asked Snitch.

'Same as Sambo,' came the answer, brief for want of breath.

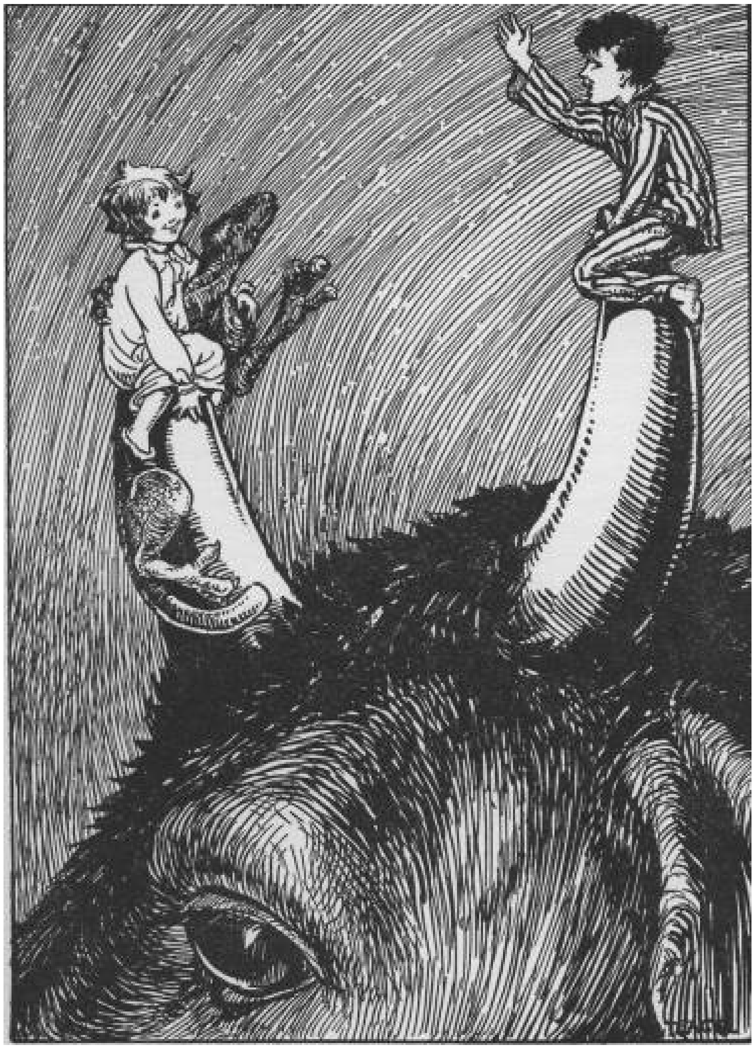
‘Then choose your horns quickly,’ said the lizard. ‘ I think the cow’s going to wake in a minute. She’s rumbling a bit inside. It’s probably a cough coming.’

The noise was like the rumbling of an underground train, but though the great body shook and trembled a bit, the cough did not come, and presently the rumbling and the shaking ceased.

‘Now, choose your horns and shin up them,’ squeaked Snitch. ‘ There’s no time to lose.’

‘Ladies first,’ suggested Sambo, relieved that it was the correct thing for a man to say.

‘I’ll take the left one,’ whispered Topsy, without a sign of nervousness, and almost before her sentence was finished, the lizard had scuttled up to the top and hung her tail down for the children to climb up by. How Topsy managed it was a mystery, but while Sambo pushed and heaved her from below, the fat little body somehow found a footing on the smooth horn and swarmed slowly up it, and a few minutes later her gurgling laughter was heard high up in the air.



‘I’m up!’ she cried, waving an arm. ‘On the very top. Hurry up, Sambo! You give me half a horn’s start, remember, for the race!’

It was now Sambo’s turn. But Snitch did not come down to help him. She stayed by Topsy. ‘ You’ll do it easily,’ she piped. ‘ You’re a man.’

He had to do it alone. Sambo examined the gleaming slippery horn that curved so steeply upwards. He knew the difficulties. He clenched his fists and faced them. He was not a coward, but all the same his heart was quaking as he began the perilous swarm. It was a terrible job. His muscles ached, the perspiration poured down his face, his breath gave out, but he clasped the horn with arms and legs, and after a tremendous struggle he reached the top. Holding tightly to the tip of the horn, he looked about him, while the others shouted ‘Well done, Sambo! ‘ at him across the gulf between them. It was wonderful, but giddy. The stars were nearer; the field far, far below; he was perched high up in the air, and the great body of the cow lay beneath him like a cliff running out into the sea. The wind blew past him sharply.

He glanced down nervously into the empty space below. Would he find the courage to slide full speed down that awful slope? It was so narrow! If he swung round too much he would land on the nose and be blown off into the night! He shuddered.

'Are you ready?' Topsy's call floated across to him. 'I'll count One, Two, Three — and away.' She slid down a little way for her promised start.

'Ready! ' he answered, his voice trembling rather.

'One — two — three—' he heard.

But before the ' Away ' was uttered, something happened — the last thing in the world he expected. It was the warning sneeze.

'Snitch! Snitch! ' came the sharp danger signal. ' An owl! We've been seen!'

CHAPTER XI

SAMBO, BALANCED PRECARIOUSLY on his narrow tip, had a sort of convulsion. His first instinct, to protect Topsy, was useless, because he couldn't reach her. His second instinct, to protect himself, was also useless, because he didn't know what to do. He remembered the rule and kept still. It was the only possible thing to do, anyhow. Perhaps he wouldn't be noticed. He clung as tight and still as ivy to the horn — while the swooping owl shot past him through the air. He saw the big dark body, he heard the wings, he felt the wind they made, and the shrill hunting cry shrieked in his very ears. It was an awful moment, though it seemed more like ten minutes.

'It's missed me! ' he heard Topsy call.

'It's missed me, too! ' he shouted back. And the next moment he heard the owl's wild scream far away among the trees across the road. They were saved.

But someone else besides themselves had heard that owl's loud shriek. The cow had heard it. It had disturbed her slumbers. The cow began to wake up. She stirred in her sleep. She moved. Slowly — her body rose. She began to get up, rolling to one side as she gathered her legs under her, then to the other side, as she found her feet and prepared for the final effort.

'Hold tight! ' cried Snitch. ' You're quite safe if you just hold on!'

Sambo held on for grim life, as the vast body heaved itself up into the air. Mercifully, no tail came slashing round, but the twitching ears made a wind that blew him sideways, and the cow's final effort, as she found her four feet, swung him first down, then up, then sideways at such a pace that he almost lost his hold altogether. How he still kept his hold was a mystery. The cow at last was fully up. She stood motionless.

'Hold tight! ' piped Snitch. ' She's going to shake her head, I think. They usually do when they're up.'

And this cow did. Sambo shut his eyes. Why he wasn't shaken off into the stars he never knew. It was an appalling shake. The whole earth seemed to shake. Every bone in his body rattled. His head nearly fell off. He bit his tongue. His teeth clicked. But, at last, the shaking grew less and stopped — and the cow began to walk across the field.

Sambo found his breath and opened his eyes. ' Are you all right, Topsy? ' he called out.

'R.S.V.P.,' she cried back in a shaky voice.

'S.O.S.' yelled Sambo.

'A.B.C.,' his sister answered.

It seemed all they could think of to say in this amazing moment, as the cow, carrying a child perched on the tip of each horn, went walking beneath the stars across the field.

'I'll guide her to the gate,' piped the lizard, and then did a wonderful and clever thing. She slid down the horn, scuttled over the head between the twitching ears, slipped along the wet nose and muzzle, and by tickling the cow's mouth first on one side and then on the other, she persuaded the animal to turn right or left as she wanted.

In this way, after a long time, they reached the gate in the hedge. The road, with the house just across it, lay below them. The cow stopped dead.

'Now, get ready,' called the lizard. ' I'll tickle her between the eyes and she'll lower her head. Then you must slide down and land on the top bar of the gate. Watch me!'

This happened, too. Snitch flicked her tail about between the cow's eyes, making the great animal lower her head, till it almost rested on the wooden bar.

' — Slide! ' piped the lizard.

Sambo shut his eyes, flung legs and arms round the slippery horn, and — slid. He landed head over heels among the thick, soft hair of the head, ran forward towards the nose and, just avoiding the dangerous puffs of breath from the great mouth, he found himself at last standing on the top bar of the gate. Beside him stood Topsy. ‘ I won,’ she chuckled happily, not one bit upset or frightened. ‘ I got down first!’

‘Moo! Moo! ‘ boomed the cow, drowning their voices with a roar like thunder, and making them scuttle down into the road as quick as lightning.

They found the lizard waiting for them. ‘ Well,’ she squeaked, ‘ we’ve had our adventure, and you both came through it very well. You know now what sort of life we lizards lead. Day and night we live with adventure, risk and danger. So you’ve learned something! You’ve learned to move quickly too! The way you scuttled off the gate was very good. Also you’ve learned to keep still. I hope you’ve enjoyed yourselves, anyhow! ‘ she added finally.

‘Thank you very much, Mrs. Snitch,’ murmured Sambo with respectful and admiring gratitude.

‘X.Y.Z.,’ whispered Topsy, using her politest voice, for she, too, was filled with admiration.

Snitch uttered a peculiar squeak, and the glow-worms came flocking round them with their pleasant light. The cow, the children saw, had moved away.

‘The three hours are up,’ mentioned Snitch, ‘ You must get small again and climb up the wall into your beds:

Make me the thmall

That I can crawl

Thtraight up the wall

And never fall!’

There was a dwindling sensation; the ground came nearer; both children became as small as they had been when they started on the adventure.

Accompanied by the Lights, they climbed easily up the wall and through the open window. The glow-worms faded out. Sambo tumbled down on to the carpet. Somehow or other, he lost sight of Topsy, but when he picked himself up he saw that she was already in bed. He could see the lump of her round body beneath the clothes. He climbed into his own bed.

‘Good night! ‘ he heard Snitch call from the window-sill outside.

‘Good night, Mrs. Snitch,’ he called back sleepily as he turned over beneath the bed-clothes, buried his nose in the pillow, and went off into another dreamland.

* * * * * * * * *

It was late when he opened his eyes again. Topsy’s bed, he saw, was already empty; the sun was pouring into the room. He had overslept.

Nannie poked her head in at the door: ‘ I’ve called you four times,’ she said crossly. ‘ If I have to call again you’ll have no honey for your breakfast. The bath water’s nearly cold!’

He crawled out of bed, wondering why he was his natural size again. Snitch hadn’t made him bigger; the last thing he remembered was the difficulty of climbing on to the mattress. He rubbed his eyes as he trotted into the bathroom. His head still felt sleepy.

‘Have you seen a lizard about anywhere, Nannie? ‘ he asked.

‘Lizard! ‘ exclaimed Nannie, astonished at the question. ‘ I should hope not, indeed! What’s the boy talking about! You’ve been dreaming.’ And she popped him bodily into the bath and began to sponge him vigorously.

The cool water chased the sleep from his head, and he remembered that he must not say anything to Nannie about the adventure. He would wait for Topsy. Topsy would be able to explain what had happened. When at last he was dressed and ready, he went in to breakfast and saw his sister with a large plate of bread and honey, already eating hard. He caught her eye. She looked at him innocently, as though honey was the only thing she knew about in the whole world. ‘You’re late, Sambo,’ she said cheekily.

He winked hard at her. ‘ R.S.V.P.,’ he whispered, splashing in his plate of porridge. Then, as Topsy made no answering wink, he added:’ S.O.S.’ But Topsy said nothing to this either and looked as though she didn’t understand what he was talking about. Her face was as blank as a cushion. ‘ P.T.O. and X.Y.Z.,’ Sambo tried again, winking with both eyes this time, then adding under his breath: ‘ Did Snitch make you big again? What happened after she left us — ?’

Topsy stared at him with her mouth wide open.

‘Don’t eat with your mouth open, Topsy,’ Nannie pounced on her at once.’ And you get on with your porridge, Sambo. I can’t think why you’re so naughty this morning.’

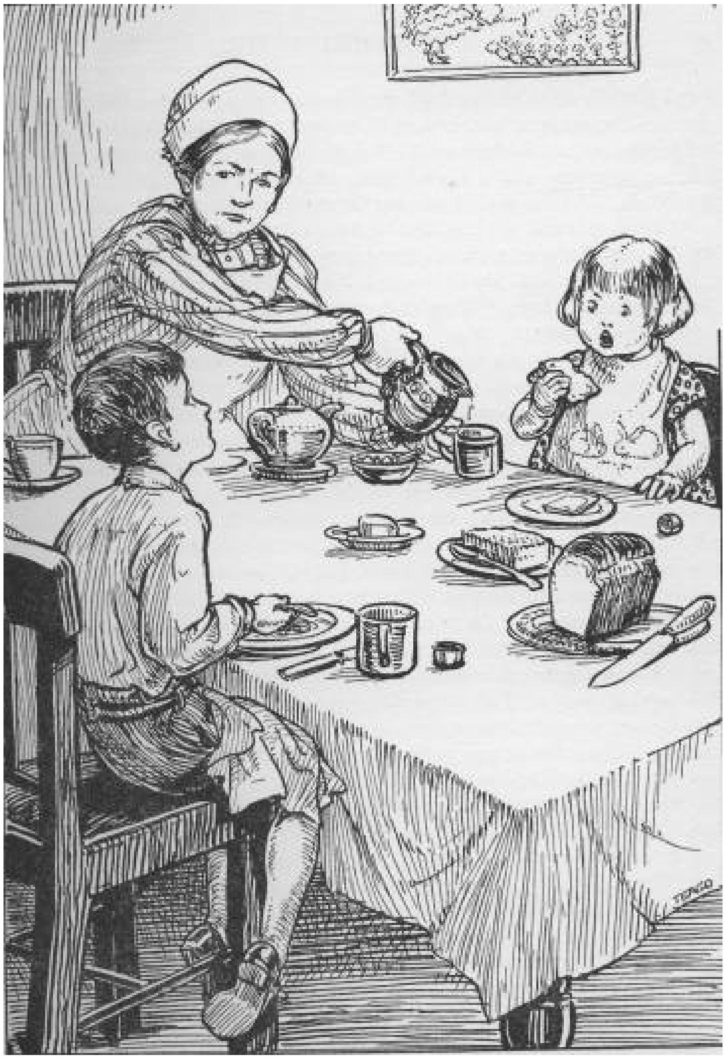
Recognizing from her voice that she was serious, the children glanced sideways at her, and went on with their breakfast; but as soon as Nannie was out of the room again, Topsy began full blast: ‘Sambo, why were you so sleepy this morning? And what did you mean by all those letters you said to me? And who’s Snitch, or whatever you called it? And how can I be made big again? You *are* naughty, you know. I believe Nannie’ll smack you or something if you go on.’

She stopped for breath and Sambo stared at her. A queer feeling came over him. Was his sister joking, or had she really forgotten?

‘Topsy,’ he asked solemnly, ‘ don’t you remember a lizard and a cow and an owl and a tremendous cat and a lot of glow-worms flying about to light us — ?’

‘Glow-worms don’t fly,’ exclaimed Nannie, bursting into the room, ‘ they crawl on the ground, for one thing. And, for another, you’d better finish your breakfast instead of talking nonsense. I spoke to you once.’

It was quite clear that Topsy remembered nothing of the adventure, nothing at all. Sambo could tell from her face now. It was full of questions, but not of memory. He felt dreadfully puzzled, but he gobbled up his bread and honey before Nannie could tell him he wasn’t to have any. Topsy, he saw, was now busy with a picture book. She had forgotten all about the things she asked. She changed from one interest to another very quickly always.



‘I say, Nannie,’ the boy asked a few minutes later when he was alone with her*,’* is that *really* true about glow-worms?’

‘That they can’t fly? ‘ replied Nannie. ‘ Of course it is. I read all about them in a book. They’re beetles. The female gives the light and it crawls on the ground. Now, run and get your boots on.’ She said a lot of other things about going for a walk, what he was to wear, and where they were going, but Sambo heard none of it. He was more puzzled than ever. Had the whole Adventure been a dream then, he wondered? It had been grand and marvellous anyhow, and the world was a finer place because of it, and far more exciting than before. Whether Topsy remembered or not made no difference really. He would ask the lizard.

The lizard, however, remained in hiding. She was resting after her wild night, Sambo decided. He also decided that he would not ask his sister any more direct questions. He would just test her instead with a few remarks to see how she would answer. So, when they started for their walk, and Mrs. Tomkyns accompanied them down the drive with her tail in the air like a ramrod, he said: ‘ If you were as small as a mouse, Topsy, Mrs. Tomkyns would look as big as an elephant.’ To which Topsy replied: ‘ But I’m not ‘ — with nothing more. And when they passed the field where the cows were lying down, he said: ‘If you wanted to climb up that cow and ride on her back, which leg would you get up by? ‘ To which Topsy replied: ‘ But I don’t,’ — with nothing more. Once again he tested her: ‘ If you had to climb out of a window and down the wall, would you go head first or feet first, Topsy?’ To which the answer came: ‘Neither. I’d stay inside,’ — with nothing more.

‘Then I don’t believe you really came at all! ‘ Sambo blurted out — to which his sister made no reply of any kind, because clearly she had no idea what he was talking about. Then he added under his breath, saying it to himself: ‘ It doesn’t matter a bit. *I* went anyhow! And that’s certain!’

‘I went, too,’ squeaked a tiny voice close to his ear.

It was Snitch’s voice. It startled him. ‘ I’ve been on your coat collar ever since you left the house,’ the voice went on. It ran up and tickled his neck to prove it, then ran back again into hiding. ‘ Drop behind,’ added the lizard, ‘ so that we can talk without being heard.’

Sambo instantly stooped down to tie his boot-lace, while Nannie and Topsy walked on ahead.

‘Dear Snitch,’ he began at once,’ I want to ask you something *very* important, please.’

‘Unimportant things, anyhow, aren’t worth asking,’ mentioned the lizard. ‘ Quick, now, for I want my dinner.’

‘Did Topsy come with us last night? ‘ asked the boy.

Snitch laughed. ‘ If she did,’ came the answer,’ she’d never stop talking about it. She’d tell everybody in the house. Females always divulge, as I’ve already warned you.’

‘Oh! ‘ cried Sambo,’ then you’ve made her forget it on purpose!’

Snitch made no comment.

‘But *I* went, didn’t I? ‘ he went on excitedly. ‘ I didn’t just dream it all, I mean?’

For a moment there was no reply. He felt Snitch run up over his neck and wriggle into the hollow of his ear. The tiny feet and forked tongue tickled him.

‘You enjoyed yourself, didn’t you? ‘ the little creature whispered.

‘Rather! ‘ shouted the boy — so loud that Nannie turned and came towards him.

‘Then just remember it and be glad,’ Snitch told him. ‘ That’s quite enough. Never bother happiness with questions. Now, good-bye, I’m off to catch my dinner.’

And a second later, when Nannie came up, the lizard had vanished into thin air.

CHAPTER XII

ONE RESULT OF Sambo's strange friendship with his little saurian was that he showed signs of changing. He began to notice things for himself. Topsy was still too young to alter. Balls may look rounder some days than others, but they're really always the same until someone pricks them, when they become just pieces of flattened india-rubber. No one pricked Topsy, however, so she remained the tight round little ball she always had been. With Sambo it was different.

His parents sat in the garden one day and talked about him. They little guessed that all they said was overheard.

'The boy's developing fast,' remarked Father in a pleased voice, as though the improvement were due to himself. ' He's beginning to notice things out of doors—'

'What sort of things? ' interrupted Mother, a little alarmed.

'Oh, insects and things — bees, spiders, flies and all that. He's always asking me questions I can't answer, especially about lizards. He knows a lot about lizards already. I can't think where he picks it up.'

'Probably he just makes it up,' suggested Mother. But Father disagreed. ' No,' he said emphatically, ' because it's accurate. Besides, he never wants to kill a thing now the moment he sees it. He'd rather watch it.'

'Yes,' agreed Mother,' that *is* queer. So unlike a boy. I hope Nannie isn't filling his head with nonsense!'

'No fear,' laughed Father. ' Why, Nannie doesn't know the difference between a tortoise and a turtle. She certainly knows nothing about lizards.'

'She understands children,' Mother defended her.

'Children, my dear, are not insects or reptiles — at least, our children aren't.' And then he added: ' I'm glad to see this in the boy. It may mean he's going to be a naturalist. And that's a healthy out-of-door life, I always think.'

This conversation took place on the seat in the rose-garden, and Snitch, who was always where you least expected her, was lying comfortably along the leg of Father’s chair. She knew quite well that the improvement in Sambo was due largely to herself, so she felt flattered and thought it might be nice to show herself. Dropping down, she shot across the ground in front of the speakers, as much as to say,’ Here I am! Now look at me! ‘ And very nice indeed she certainly looked, so neatly dressed, her new tail nearly grown, her bright eyes shining.

But instead of the cry of admiration she expected, there came a shrill squeal of fear.

‘Oh! Oh! ‘ screamed Mother. ‘ There’s a snake! Or a mouse! Or something horrid! It’ll run up my skirts and bite me!’ And, quick as a flash, she climbed upon the garden seat, jiggling her feet about as if she were trying to dance.

‘It’s only a lizard,’ Father calmed her. ‘ It won’t hurt you. Nice, friendly little things, lizards. Look, it’s got a forked tongue, and it’s moving its eyelids,’ he went on. ‘ Snakes haven’t got movable eyelids, you know, like lizards.’ But Mother, having climbed still higher, had all she could do to balance and wasn’t listening. ‘ And, by Jove, it’s growing a new tip to its tail. It’s a little beauty,’ he cried. ‘ I’ll pick it up and show it to you.’

‘Will you, indeed! ‘ squeaked Snitch, though the big man couldn’t hear the voice as Sambo could have heard it had he been there.

Father stepped forward very cautiously; he stooped; he slowly advanced his hand; then suddenly darted out a finger and thumb and grabbed — nothing!

‘Why, I do declare — it’s gone!’ he cried in amazement.’ And yet I never saw it move! It’s disappeared completely.’ And he stood up straight again and helped Mother down from her dangerous perch. ‘ Gone into its hole, I suppose. I never knew anything so fast in my life!’

Snitch had certainly disappeared, but as a matter of fact she had hardly moved at all. She had merely shifted her body at incredible speed an inch or two, so that she now lay against a dry twig. She lay absolutely still, looking like a bit of wood herself. The big man’s eye could not distinguish her from the ground. He no longer saw her.

‘I do believe it’s the very lizard Sambo’s been watching,’ Father remarked. ‘ The boy told me it moved like lightning. Come along, dear,’ he added, taking Mother’s arm and walking away. ‘ You’ve nothing to fear. It’s gone.’

‘I only hope he doesn’t touch it,’ replied Mother nervously, giving a little shiver. ‘ I’m sure it bites. And I hope it doesn’t mean we’re going to have thousands of them about. They have enormous families, I believe, like rabbits... ‘ and their voices died away as they went into the house, so that Father’s comment was not heard.

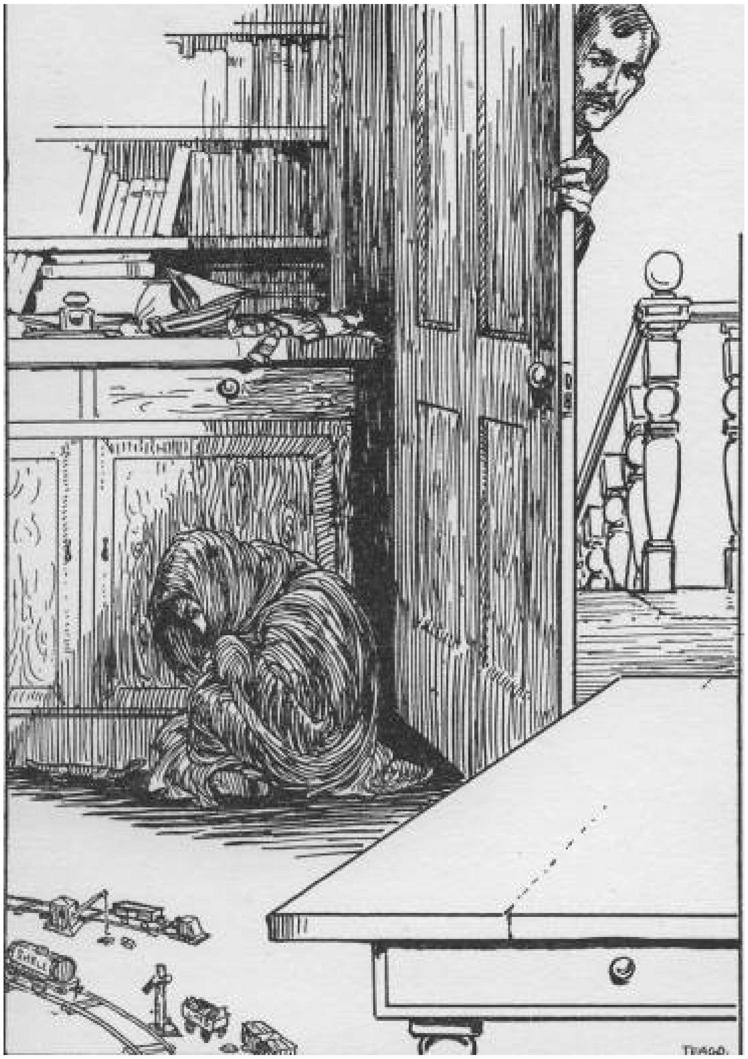
Snitch, smiling to herself, also went into the house just behind them. She flashed up the banisters and along the corridor into the schoolroom, where Sambo sat alone poring over a book about Insects and Animals that Live in your Garden — a present from his father. She ran on to the open page, cocked an eye, and told him what had happened. ‘ I could play with your Father,’ she observed, when the tale was ended, ‘ because he’s friendly and likes me. But your Mother’s afraid of me and thinks I bite.’ She flicked her tail and laughed. ‘ I could never do anything with *her*. Besides,’ she added in a hurt tone, ‘ I eat the flies that tickle her face, so she ought to feel grateful. And we *don’t* have enormous families either. Twelve eggs is the most I’ve ever had, and usually it’s only six or seven..’

Sambo, however, was not listening very attentively. He was more interested in the way Snitch had made herself invisible to his father. ‘ I wish you’d teach me how to do *that,’* he begged, adding quickly ‘ Thank you very much indeed.’ It was a good plan to give thanks beforehand, he had discovered.

Snitch cocked both eyes this time. There was a pause. The lizard was thinking it over.’ It’s not easy,’ she announced at last. ‘ You humans are so big and lumpy. I’m only seven inches long. You’re over sixty. Besides, we lizards have been practising it for millions of years. Have to, you see. Otherwise we should be seen and eaten.’

‘I see,’ remarked Sambo sympathetically.

‘Do you?’ piped the little voice with a chuckle. But its owner had vanished. The slim body which a moment before had sprawled over the page of the open book was no longer there. ‘ You hear me, but you can’t see me,’ the voice continued. ‘ Now, if you were a hawk or a hedgehog or a snake, I’d be safe here where I am; but as you’re only a little boy, and rather a slow one too, I’ll show you my hiding-place. Look closely now! ‘ And Sambo saw a pointed muzzle pushed suddenly into view over the edge of the white page. Two bright eyes winked at him. Snitch lay along the binding of the book, her colour merging with the colour of the binding so that she was practically invisible. Unless she moved, it was impossible to see her. Her outline was lost against the dark background.



‘Another thing you can’t do as *we* do it,’ she went on to explain, darting back upon the white page again, ‘ is — *keep absolutely still*. Boys — grown-ups too for that matter — make unnecessary movements all the time. No human can keep quite still for more than a few seconds: you flick your eyelids, bite your lips, twitch your fingers, wiggle your toes, wrinkle your nose, twist your neck, and breathe so heavily that your ribs heave up and down like a storm at sea. Your eyes, too, are never still. All those silly movements betray you.'

'Yes,' replied the boy, ' that's true, I expect. But the people looking for me wouldn't notice most of those movements, would they? A hawk or a snake might, but a person —— —— —'

'Sambo!' cried the lizard, with a shrill squeak of pleasure, ' you're worth teaching. People only see big movements. I'm delighted with you! You might almost be one of us. So I'll show you how to do it. Quick, now! Your father's coming. Get ready!'

Sambo just stared. ' How do you know?' he asked in amazement.

'I hear his step on the stairs,' explained Snitch. ' He's coming up from the hall and I know his tread. Besides, the boards of the floor are shaking. I can feel the table trembling. You forget he's seventy-two inches long and weighs nearly 200 pounds.'

'But I hear nothing,' objected Sambo. ' I can't feel anything shaking." Do what I tell you,' squeaked the lizard sharply, 'if you want to learn. Quick, or you'll be too late, and he'll catch you.' And hardly had she spoken when Father's voice, calling ' Sambo! Sambo!' was heard booming in the passage. The thump of his feet was heard too, striding down towards the room.

'Take that brown and red tablecloth,' ordered Snitch, ' and wrap it round your shoulders. That's right,' she added, as the boy obeyed. ' Now sit down on the floor against the bookshelves, bend your head forwards as if you were looking at the books. Hide your white hands and tuck your feet under you. Quick! Now, don't move. Don't stir a muscle. The tablecloth and the browny-green covers of the books melt into the colours of the cloth. You are difficult to see. There's no outline visible. Keep quite still and you're safe!'

'Sambo! Sambo, boy! Where are you?' called his Father's voice just outside the door. The next minute he was in the room. 'Sambo!' he shouted ' are you here? Topsy told me you were reading in the schoolroom. I don't see you anywhere! ' And he began to search with his eyes. Then he moved forward and picked up the book. Next he looked under the table, behind the folded curtains, at the back of the sofa, and even in the cupboard.

‘Bother the boy! ‘ he exclaimed to himself. ‘ Why, he’s disappeared just as that little lizard did! My wig! What a streak of lightning he is! ‘ And he passed so close to the bookshelves that his leg brushed Sambo’s shoulder. But the big man never saw him, though more than once he must have looked straight at him. The colours were too perfectly matched. No outline of his crouching body was visible to an unpractised human eye. He marched heavily over to the open window and looked out into the garden. ‘ Sambo! ‘ he bawled at the top of his voice*, ’* are you out there?’

‘Now show yourself,’ whispered the lizard, perched on a brown bookbinding beneath his nose. ‘ You kept still grandly — for a first time. Now, get up and show yourself.’

Sambo obeyed. ‘ Here I am, Father,’ he announced himself, standing just behind his parent’s back and pulling his coat-sleeve.

The big man turned. ‘ Bless the boy, I never heard you come in! ‘ he exclaimed, picking him up in his arms.’ Wherever were you all the time?’

‘Here,’ answered Sambo. ‘ Why, you touched me once. I was down there,’ he explained, pointing to the floor beside the bookshelves. ‘ I had the tablecloth over me, you see.’

His father stared, tremendously surprised. ‘ Show me how you did it,’ he exclaimed. And Sambo repeated his performance. He crouched down, covered with the cloth, so that it was very difficult indeed to see him. Knowing exactly where to look this time, however, his father of course could distinguish the outline of his body.

‘Well, I never! ‘ he cried.’ That’s what they call *camouflage!* And who taught you that, I should like to know!’

‘Promise you won’t tell anyone? ‘ the boy made his condition.

‘Yes, I promise,’ agreed the man, picking him up bodily.

‘ — A lizard,’ Sambo whispered into his ear.

CHAPTER XIII

SAMBO HAD NOW learned a lesson the lizard perhaps had intended him to learn. He realised that Topsy didn't need Adventures as *he* needed them. That was why she had forgotten all about the Night Out, even if she had ever taken part in it at all. Their natures were different. He also realised, after the talk with his father, that if he talked too much, he would have to grow up into a Naturalist, whereas what he meant to grow up into was an engineer — a man who drove tremendous engines, built bridges, and dammed up great torrents.

Henceforth, therefore, he kept his Adventures to himself. He enjoyed them in his own way.

For Sambo was a merry lad,
  His heart was light as air,
About the things he didn't know
  He really didn't care!

'That's very pretty, but rather silly, I think,' squeaked the familiar voice. ' It isn't a good tune, either.'

Sambo turned his head and saw his tiny friend sprawling on a stone in front of him. He was alone in the garden. ' You're always listening,' he objected. ' You turn up everywhere. I thought I was alone. Topsy's gone out with Nannie. I'm supposed to have a headache. Too much cake or something, they said.'

'Because I like you,' replied Snitch. ' That's why I'm here now.' And she wriggled closer. ' I've got something to propose to you.' Her bright eyes sparkled.

'What is it? ' asked the boy, all eagerness at once.

‘Oh, just the garden,’ said Snitch vaguely, ‘ and how we lizards read it.’

‘Oh, the garden,’ repeated Sambo, disappointed a little. ‘ How do you mean — “read it “?’

‘You read books,’ replied the lizard. ‘ But books only give what other people have seen. We,’ she added proudly, ‘ don’t want second-hand stuff. We read it first.’

‘Oh! ‘ remarked the boy, feeling rather stupid. He didn’t understand.

‘Your letters and printing,’ explained Snitch, ‘ are only signs on paper. You know what they mean because you’ve learned them with a lot of trouble. Well, the whole world is covered with signs that you can read direct, if you know how. I’ll teach you a little, if you like.’

‘Thanks awfully,’ replied the boy in his politest voice, and he turned his head and stared all over the garden, hoping to see signs he had never noticed before. But he saw nothing new.

‘You must learn the alphabet first,’ mentioned the lizard, watching him. ‘ How do you think we should know all we do if we couldn’t read the writing all over the fields and sky and trees? D’you think we just guess it? ‘ Her voice turned very scornful. ‘ Bah! ‘ she added,’ your book-writing is nothing compared to ours! ‘ And she drew her tail up.

Sambo felt ashamed. ‘ I’m sorry,’ he murmured. ‘ I see now what you mean. And you certainly do know an awful lot, I must say.’

‘Thank you,’ Snitch said, in a forgiving voice. ‘ Now, we’ll begin with the Night Garden.’

‘The Night Garden! ‘ exclaimed Sambo. ‘ Do you mean the Garden at Night?’

‘It’s easier to read,’ explained the lizard. ‘ There’s more going on. *You’re* all out of the way, for one thing!’

‘Oh! ‘ gasped Sambo, beginning to understand.

‘You,’ went on the lizard rather contemptuously, ‘ think everything goes to sleep when you do and because you do. You think only owls and bats are awake at night.’ She twitched her head and gave a little laugh. ‘ Now, be ready to-night when Topsy’s asleep. I’ll come for you.’

‘I’ll be ready,’ the boy agreed eagerly. ‘ Shall I be made small again? ‘ he asked.

‘Bah *I* ‘ snapped Snitch contemptuously. ‘We never repeat things. We think of something new. Now, remember, don’t ask questions afterwards, don’t talk to people who can’t understand, and — be ready when I come.’ And she disappeared so fast that Sambo never saw her go.

That night Topsy fell asleep, luckily, the moment her head touched the pillow, and Sambo lay staring at the night-light and waiting for the sign. The door, as usual, stood ajar, and Nannie poked her head in once or twice. But no signal came. The minutes passed. The house grew very still. The boy’s eyes grew rather heavy. Then suddenly the familiar little voice sounded behind him: ‘ Dress,’ it said. And he was out of bed and dressed faster than ever in his life before. As he buttoned his coat the light was put out. ‘ Take thith,’ he heard,’ and follow me,’ and he felt something put into his fingers in the dark.’ I’ve got the other end in my mouth. Itth a pieth of thtring.’ Already he felt it tighten. A moment later he was out in the passage, down the deserted stairs, through the empty hall, along the corridor to the pantry — and the side-door clicked behind him. Snitch, by means of the piece of string had led him straight into the garden. He felt the cool night air. He saw the stars. Still feeling the pull of the string, he followed his invisible guide down the long gravel drive, along the path that crossed the Farm Meadow, and so to the edge of the belt of trees that lay between this meadow and the big hay-field. Here, half a mile from the house, they stopped. The lizard spoke for the first time since leaving the room.

‘You can’t see me,’ she said, ‘so you must just listen instead. You can’t see anything, for that matter, because you haven’t got our night-eyes. But you can hear and feel. Just hear and feel as keenly as ever you can. Now, which way is the wind? Tell me that first.’

Sambo, eager to obey, listened and felt as hard as ever he could. But there was no wind. Not a tree rustled, the grass lay silent, no air stirred. He wetted his finger and held it up, but with no result. Not a breath!

‘There isn’t any,’ he said, proud to feel he was right.

‘Wrong,’ squeaked the lizard. ‘There’s always *some*, even on the stillest night. A draught, a current, a movement in the air. Now,’ she added, like a teacher giving a lesson to a stupid child,' try again.'

This time, remembering his instructions, Sambo just listened, and after a few minutes, though he had thought it was a dead silence, he began to hear all manner of queer, gentle, little noises creeping upon him from the left. He hadn't noticed these before. From his right side he heard nothing.

'The wind's blowing from my left to my right,' he announced, though it was partly a guess, perhaps.

'Right! ' exclaimed Snitch, in a pleased voice. 'And what do you hear?' she asked him next. ' Listen hard a moment, and then tell me.'

Sambo listened so hard that he nearly lost his balance, and leaned against a larch tree to steady himself. The blood made a rumbling noise in his head at first, but presently he began to distinguish other sounds behind this rumble: creakings, rustlings, sharp tiny clicks as though a leaf or small twig snapped, odd little hissing noises too, while other, fainter sounds — and they were deeper, these — seemed to come from underground. There were odd tappings too. And the harder he listened, the louder grew the volume of noises, though this may have been because he already was hearing better.

'They all come from my left,' he whispered, and his whisper seemed like a roar compared to the softness of these other sounds. ' Nothing from the right.'

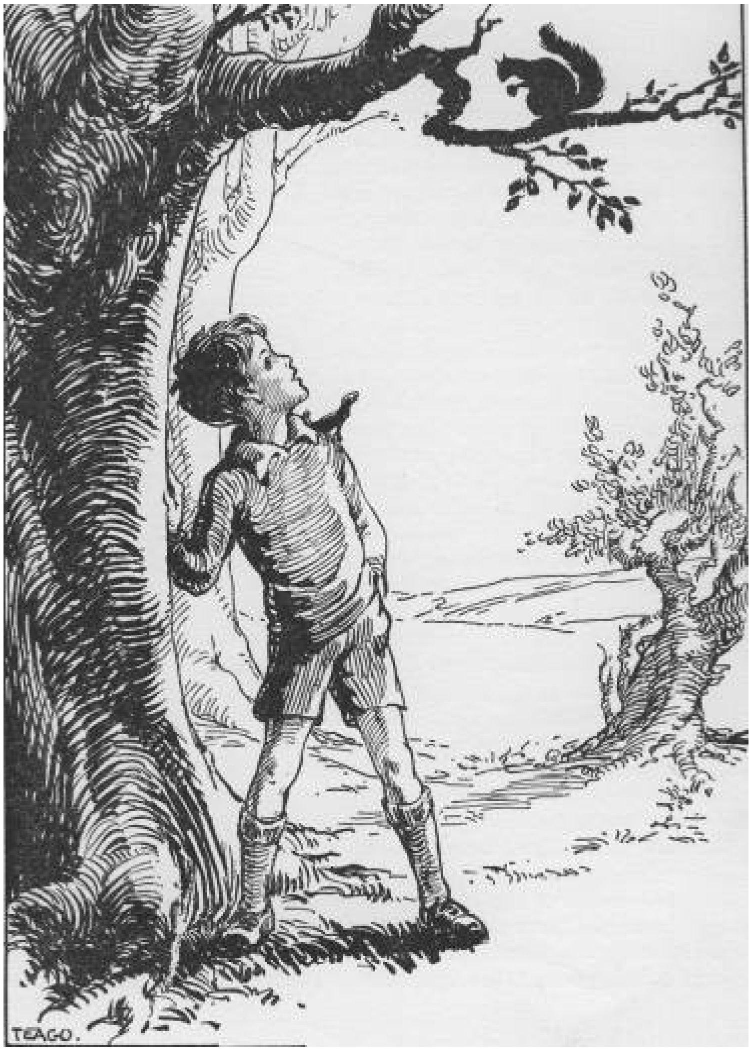
'That proves the wind,' replied Snitch. 'Describe what you hear.' And the boy did so, as well as he could.

'Not bad,' remarked the lizard judicially,' not so bad for a boy who has never learned how to listen, and whose ears are full of wax. Now, I'll tell you what it all is, but first I'll get on your shoulder.' She ran up and perched below his ear. ' I'm safer here. Something might make a dart at me on the ground — from the right side, where we can't hear. I can whisper too.' She gave him then a rapid analysis of all the jumble of sounds, though he couldn't distinguish all the differences that she evidently could. He felt rather frightened to know there were so many living creatures all about him, but she explained to him that most of them were friendly, more afraid of him than he was of them, and that only one or two were hostile—' to me, not to you,' she added. ' They'd gobble me up if they could. They know I'm here, right enough. That's why I'm on your shoulder.'

‘The whole wood’s alive,’ she told him, ‘ for everything moves at night. There’s just as much noise coming from our right, too, only we can’t hear it because the wind’s the other way. The things on our right can hear and smell *us,* but all those *we* hear to our left, though they know someone’s about, don’t know exactly what or where.’

‘Smell? ‘ asked Sambo, sniffing hard. ‘ Why, I can’t smell anything at all.’

‘I’ll tell you about smell later,’ replied Snitch. ‘ For the moment let’s deal with hearing. That rustling you hear is made up of a good many things, all moving stealthily. Several field-mice are flitting in and out of the grass, hunting for food; beetles, and all manner of insects, are scratching; and that soft, silken noise like water is something nasty sliding along on a very smooth tummy. It never stops, you notice. It’s ahem! we won’t refer to it again, if you don’t mind — a grass-snake. I have a poor opinion of such things—’



‘So have I,’ agreed Sambo,’ though they’re not poisonous.’

‘Things that swallow me can be poisonous or not,’ replied Snitch. ‘ I disapprove of them. But, before we leave the hostile things, I’ll mention one other. That clicking, jerky noise — d’you hear it? It goes by fits and starts. Well, that’s — ahem! — a hedgehog. If it saw you, it would just roll up in a ball and pretend to be dead; but if it saw me, it would open its ugly mouth, run at me much faster than *you* have ever seen a hedgehog run, and — I’ll omit the rest, I think, if you don’t mind.’

Something fell with a little sharp tap beside them on to the ground.

‘And that,’ Snitch continued more calmly, ‘ is something harmless. A squirrel perched high on a branch above our heads is eating its nuts. It dropped that bit just to let us know it’s seen us. Friendly little things, squirrels, but rather conceited about their sparkling eyes and bushy tails.' Snitch gave a subdued yet shrill squeak, and the squirrel answered with a similar noise. More things dropped.

The lizard gave a sudden start. ' That's a warning,' she whispered. ' Something's moving towards us from the side we can't hear — the right. Let's get into the field a bit. It's safer.' And the boy obeyed as quick as lightning, carrying his friend with him on his shoulder.

'What was the deeper noise we heard? ' he asked, as soon as they were safely in the open field. ' Underground, it sounded.'

'It *was* underground,' Snitch told him, ' but you'd never guess. In the deep ditch, a dozen yards from where we stood, is a hole that goes down into the soft earth — a badger's hole. What you heard was old Father Badger moving about among his family. He's got two young ones. And he was shuffling about and grunting because he heard some rats sniffing at the mouth of his hole as they scampered past towards the farm-buildings in the field beyond. He's a great friend of mine, but dreadfully shy, and he hates human beings because — well, because they badger him to death whenever they can.'

A dozen questions came into Sambo's head, but before he could ask one of them, Snitch was talking again. ' Now, lean down and put your ear to the ground, and you'll hear something else, if you keep still enough.' The boy knelt down and put his ear to the earth, while Snitch wriggled round on to his back as he did so. ' Listen hard and keep still as a mouse. You must hardly breathe.'

After listening intently for several minutes, Sambo caught a queer faint murmur in the earth, but below the surface. It was a soft, grating sound, rather as if he rubbed sand between finger and thumb close to his ear.

'Earth worms,' Snitch told him. ' Hundreds of them. They pass the soft earth through the whole length of their bodies. You see the casts on the lawn in the morning usually. A bird can hear that noise. Then it taps on the lawn with its feet to make the worm come up — and be gobbled for its breakfast. The moles aren't moving yet; they start about dawn.'

Sambo held his ear to the ground and listened for a long time. It all fascinated him.

‘That’s enough now for one night,’ exclaimed Snitch presently. ‘ Up you get and back to bed. I want to get some sleep too. You’ve read a few lines of the Night Garden anyhow — just the beginning of a chapter. Next time we’ll try smell, after that trees and flowers and bushes, after that perhaps the sky — oh, and dozens of other chapters as well.’

‘ — It’s most awfully kind of you, Snitch,’ the boy thanked her, as he got on his feet again. ‘ I’ve enjoyed it enormously. Next time I’d like to—’

But before he could finish the sentence there came a queer rushing past his ears, he seemed to rise, then drop through space, he turned over and over.... He opened his eyes a little and found he was in bed. The night-light had burned very low, and in the other bed across the room Topsy was snoring and blowing like a small grampus that had somehow got into a kettle on the kitchen stove. He closed his eyes again and remembered no more.

CHAPTER XIV

SAMBO WAS JUST beginning to learn the Garden-Writing of sound, smell and sign, when something happened to interrupt the fascinating lessons. September had passed and October, with its shortening days, had come. In the early morning mist lay along the fields, and the leaves, turning red and gold, were already fluttering to the ground like gorgeous, tired butterflies. Along one of these golden leaves, dropped from the horse-chestnut tree, lay Snitch one afternoon.

This time she had not chosen a background to hide against. The gold showed the outline of her slender little body very vividly.

‘Pick me up, please,’ squeaked the lizard. ‘ I don’t feel like darting or scuttling to-day.’ The voice had a rather tired sound.

Sambo obeyed. He picked up the big leaf and laid it on the palm of his hand. Snitch did not move. She lay like a dead twig, motionless.

The boy wondered what was the matter. Her voice, he noticed, was not quite as clear and sharp as usual, her eyes seemed less bright. They had less flash in them. She seemed altogether listless and uninterested in life. Never before had she asked to be picked up, for as a rule she darted up his arm or back before he could think.

He feared his little friend must be out of sorts, or even ill; and this made him feel uncomfortable, because he knew nothing about illness and could not think of anything, to say for some time. He gazed down at the motionless little creature in silence. She made no sound.

‘Have you got a headache, or something? ‘ he asked gently, after a long pause.

‘Never have headaches,’ replied the lizard, still without moving, ’ because I never over-eat.’ After a moment she added: ‘ That’s my trouble.’

Sambo was puzzled; he did not understand this mood. ‘ What trouble? ‘ he asked, bending his face down a little closer so as to watch her better.

‘Eating,’ replied Snitch briefly. ‘My food’s getting scarce.’

‘Oh, if you’re hungry,’ cried Sambo, ‘ I’ll get you something from the kitchen in a jiffy! ‘ and he almost turned to go into the house.

The lizard stopped him.

‘*My* food, not yours,’ she explained, then fell into silence again.

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ Sambo put in, and really meant it. ‘ It’s horrid being hungry.’ He longed to help, but didn’t know quite what to suggest. He was far too clumsy to catch *her* food in the way she managed it.

‘Insects are getting scarce now,’ the small voice went on presently. ‘ And there’s less heat in the sun. You might move out of the shade, please, and put me near a wall, where it’s warmer. I feel cold.’

Sambo quickly ran down the Drive and stood against the old stone wall. The sunlight was reflected here. Flies and bees were buzzing in the ivy.

‘That’s better,’ said the lizard, and showed signs of reviving a little. Her voice was already brisker. She cocked her head round and looked up into the sky a moment. ‘ The swallows are going too,’ she observed. ‘ They can’t get enough insects to eat either. They’ll all be gone to Africa in a week, where there’s lots of food. When they go, I go.’

Sambo felt his heart sink. ‘ You’re not going to leave me!’ he cried. ‘ I should miss you terribly. I love you so. We’ve had such fun—’

‘Thank you,’ Snitch interrupted, and ran slowly off the leaf on to his palm, which she tickled softly with her tiny forefeet by way of showing her affection. ‘ Your hand is nice and warm,’ she added, snuggling in against the curve of his thumb. ‘ I feel tired, cold, hungry and sleepy.’ Her tail curled round a little as if she were going to sleep. ‘ So, when the swallows go, I go too,’ she said again, half closing her eyes.

‘But you’ll feel ever so much better after something to eat and a good sleep,’ said the boy eagerly. ‘I wish you wouldn’t talk about going. I hate it.” When the swallows go, I go too,’ repeated the lizard gently.’ I must.’

‘Where *to*?’ asked Sambo, his mind already made up to take the journey with her, wherever it might be. ‘ You can’t go to Africa!’

‘I don’t,’ came the reply in a lower voice.’ I go — to sleep.’

‘Oh, that’s all right!’ cried Sambo more cheerfully. ‘ Then I shall see you again when you wake up.’

The lizard was silent for a moment. ‘ When I go to sleep,’ she resumed, presently, ‘ it’s rather a long sleep.’

‘Like me,’ agreed the boy. ‘ I sleep all night through. I hate getting out of bed in the morning. How long are you going to sleep for this time?’

Again Snitch kept silent for several minutes. ‘ This time,’ she said in a still lower voice,’ I’m going to sleep for about six months, I’m afraid.’

Sambo caught his breath. ‘ Six months!’ he exclaimed. He thought at first his friend was teasing him. ‘ Why, you’d die if you did that.’ And he laughed a little. But his laughter stopped as he heard the lizard’s next words: ‘ Oh, no,’ she explained, ‘ I shan’t die. Every autumn, when the insects get scarce, and the sun grows cold, we lizards just crawl into a shelter and go to sleep. We sleep till our food comes back and the days are warm again. We should never live through the cold winter if we didn’t do this.’

Sambo at first could hardly believe his ears. Then he remembered having heard that snakes and tortoises and bears and a few other creatures hibernated, and so realised that the lizard was not teasing him, but was telling him the truth. And as this dawned upon him, he felt very sad.

‘Oh, Snitch, dear,’ he said, bending his face towards her*,’* I shall miss you terribly. I shall come and put flowers on your grave—’

‘My bed, you mean,’ Snitch corrected him sharply. ‘ I shall only be asleep. It’s rather a long sleep, I know, but it suits us lizards.’

‘Will there be a lot of you all asleep together?’ asked Sambo.

‘About five or six,’ was the reply.

‘And will you show me where it is, please?’

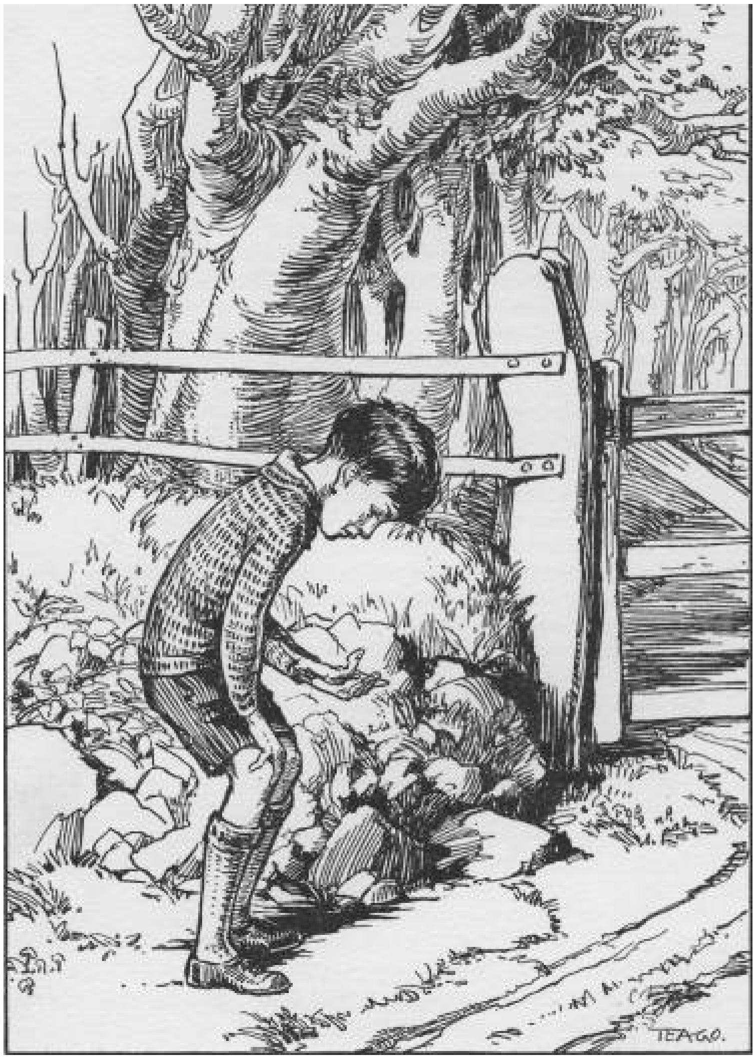
The lizard’s voice was growing fainter and fainter. ‘ It’s that heap of stones and leaves and turf on the edge of the wood,’ she whispered. ‘ The one near the gate, you know.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘You might carry me over there now, perhaps,’ the tired little voice went on. ‘ I’m getting drowsier and drowsier every minute. I’ve had nothing much to eat lately, you see, and the sun really has so little heat left.’ With a sinking heart Sambo walked across the lawn, carrying the tired lizard in his hand. He climbed the iron railing and reached the heap of stones. It was an untidy looking sort of place that nobody was likely to disturb. He stopped and stared down at the piled up stones and bits of turf. ‘ Are the others already in there?’ he asked, and Snitch told him in a murmur that they had gone in the day before and were already sound asleep, lying curled against one another.

‘We shan’t wake till April,’ she added. ‘The first thing I do when I’m out will be to come and find you. I promise.’

‘That’s a real promise,’ the boy repeated, feeling a lump rise in his throat. Snitch gave his skin a tiny nip by way of reply. She was evidently very sleepy and tired now.



‘You might put me down on the stones,’ she whispered, so faintly he could hardly catch the sound. And Sambo did so. She moved slowly, as though it cost her great effort, from his palm on to a piece of turf among the leaves.

*‘ — I’*m glad about the flowers,’ he just heard, ‘I shan’t feel nigglelected now.’ She had not enough energy left even to pronounce her words properly, but the boy knew what she meant.

* Every week I’ll come,’ he promised. ‘ On Mondays.’

‘Good-bye, then, dear Sambo, and goodnight,’ murmured the fading voice. And when he looked closer to see if she had moved, he saw the place was empty. Snitch had disappeared for her long winter sleep.

‘April...’ he just caught the tiny sound of her whisper rise up through the stones and leaves.

‘Next April,’ he repeated in a shaky little voice. ‘ And I’ll come every Monday. I promise...’

He listened, but there was no reply. He had the tip of her broken tail in his little box in the house, but he would not see his friend, Snitch, again till the swallows and the insects came back in April with the flowers and the warmer sun.

For some minutes he stood beside the pile of stones, feeling sad and lonely, and repeating to himself the little song he had made up many weeks before, when he first met her:

‘Dear little Snitch,
I’m all alone; wonder which
Way you have gone!’

But after a bit he stopped doing this, because he knew quite well where his friend was, and that she was now happy and comfortably asleep. She had taught him ever so many things worth knowing, and he would never forget her. Every Monday he would go to the pile of stones and keep his promise. Then, in the spring, he would see her crawl out again, and they would have a lot of new adventures together. So Sambo ran off to play with Topsy quite happily, knowing that in the little lizard he had a true friend he would meet again, because a true friend is never lost.

(While Snitch slept through the winter, the adventures, of course, came to an end. But one day she may come back to Sambo and to us again. Who knows?)

The Fruit Stoners (1934)

BEING THE ADVENTURES OF MARIA AMONG THE FRUIT STONERS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX

TO MADRE FROM FIGLIO

CHAPTER I

"*TICK TOCK! TICK tock!*" went the clock on the mantelpiece, and it sounded, thought Maria, like the step of an animal padding through the jungle. But that, of course, was partly because she was lying on a great tiger's skin at her father's feet while he ate his stewed prunes and read his newspaper.

The lamps were lit in the cosy library of the old country house, for the autumn dusk was falling, and a bright log fire blazed upon the hearth. The curtains, however, were not yet drawn, and through the French windows the great cedars could be seen shadowy upon the lawn, a layer of thin mist creeping towards them from the park beyond.

"*Tick tock! Tick tock!*" sounded the whitefaced clock on the mantelpiece, as with remorseless cry the fingers moved forwards round the solemn disc. They showed twenty minutes to six exactly.

"Why," exclaimed Maria thoughtfully, sprawling across the tawny tiger-skin at her father's feet, and remembering that she had only twenty minutes before bed-time, "why are women sometimes called catty? *Are* they really catty? You said this morning that Mrs. Binks was rather a—"

She stopped abruptly. Her father, raising one eye above his newspaper, was examining her.

"Puss," the child finished her interrupted sentence, but too low, she believed, to be audible.

The newspaper rustled ominously. Maria waited, stroking the tiger-skin a little nervously.

"Probably," came the delayed answer, a trifle absent-mindedly, perhaps, "because they can smile and show their claws at the same time."

His head disappeared again abruptly behind the open sheet, where he was reading with a mixture of pride and exasperation the report of his speech at the local Dog Show.

Maria stroked the yellow stripes on which she sprawled, passing her fingers over the big, sharp teeth and dreadful claws. She shivered. Skin, teeth and claws, she thought, were terrible and splendid. The faint, bitter odour of the large skin was not so pleasant.

Maria reflected for some moments.

There sat her father behind his paper in his heavy shooting-boots and damp knickerbockers, his pipe alight. Before him, beside his teacup, was the plate of prunes that she considered a fad, but that he declared kept him fit. A dozen prunes. She was allowed to count the stones, borrowing his fork or spoon for the purpose, and Judas, her black cat, was allowed to help, provided they did not, between them, knock the stones off the plate on to the carpet.

Maria stared at them. The white-faced clock went "*Tick tock! Tick tock!*" She looked at the brown crinkly stones, seeing a vivid mental picture in each case of Tinker, Tailor, Ploughboy and the rest. She looked at the clock — eighteen minutes to six. She continued her reflections.

Judas, of course, always regarded this counting stones as a game arranged for his especial benefit. He did his best, pushing forward tentatively a blunt, black paw of velvet, to send at least the Tailor or the Tinker sprawling across the library pile carpet — whereupon her father, calling her Marigold (sure sign of annoyance), or Mrs. Binks, saying sharply, "It's time now, Maria," would interfere and spoil the fun.

Usually it was Mrs. Binks who interfered just when Pig Stye and Barn were reached with "Now, Maria dear, it's time, you know," or some such desolate pronouncement. So that Maria, always hurrying to finish her game with Judas, forgot that she was actually choosing the type of man she would one day marry — this year, next year, never — and thought only of whether she could count *all* the stones before Judas misbehaved himself and sent one of the Prune Stone People to make a tiny dark stain on the library carpet. It was difficult, too, to arrange the eight persons in the four places of abode. Time, anyhow, interrupted all happy things.

It isn't fair to *them,*" was what she invariably said, the Tinker's helpless face crying to her from the floor. "They depend on *me,* you see!

Only this time Judas, innocent as any black sheep, was absent, and Mrs. Binks, thank goodness, was not in the room.

Her reflections ended. She turned to her father again. It was now fifteen minutes to six.

"But a cat," she protested, "can't really smile, Father. It hasn't got one."

"It's got a grin, I suppose," issued the voice from behind the newspaper. "A sort of grin — hasn't it?" he added impatiently, yet not unkindly. His face did not appear.

Maria's eyes quickly searched to see if she could verify this statement, but Judas, being elsewhere, did not show his expressionless face.

"Oh, I suppose so," she agreed a little doubtfully, then fell into a period of silent thinking before she put some other question she had ready and waiting up her sleeve.

"And what exactly *are* felines, Father?" she resumed presently. "What is a big feline? Are there little felines too? Do they all hunt something? — does Mrs. Binks, I mean—"

Again she stopped dead. It was a deep voice, half grunt, half growl, that made her pause.

"Now run away and play, Marigold, I want to read" — with a sideways glance at the clock. "We can talk about cats and felines another time. Yes, there are big and little felines. A tiger is a big feline. He's chief of them all — a terrible fellow. You're lying on one now. Judas is a little feline. Yes, everything hunts something in this world. Now get along with you," as his eye took another quick glance at the clock. He sighed audibly.

The sigh and the *Tick tock!* ran mingled together through her mind.

Maria knew that voice, even without the "Marigold." She rose slowly from the hearth-rug, kissed the top of her father's head, and left the room without another word. She knew that "Get along with you" must be obeyed. The door closed behind her inaudibly.

"Well, I've got along with me," she said to herself, as she faced the big empty hall. "And now — what?"

No sooner was the question asked than it was answered. Maria always knew her own mind, and it was in her mind now to find Judas, to speak to him, to examine his face carefully, and to see if it would be made to smile or grin. He would be somewhere about, she knew, though not, of course, where she expected. It would mean a hunt, but there was nothing to prevent a hunt, and her father had just said that everything in this world hunted something else. The whole of the great rambling house, too, lay at her disposal, just as it lay at Judas's disposal, for her Swiss governess was away on holiday, and Mrs. Binks, the lady housekeeper, was always reading in her room after tea.

She tiptoed across the hall towards the wide staircase.

At the age of ten Maria was so bright-eyed that her eyes popped and sparkled as though any minute they would spill their light in a shower of tiny crackles. Though plump and solid, she moved lightly, almost dancingly. An only child, she had learned to play alone, she was self-reliant, she possessed the extra thoughtfulness that solitary children are apt to have. Her invalid aunt, her father, too, provided other children from time to time, but as her aunt was usually in bed, while her father was a busy man with nothing particular to do, these parties were rather gloomy affairs, badly mismanaged. Maria, by nature independent and resourceful, preferred playing alone. She found plenty to amuse herself.

Judas, for instance.

She was fond of Judas, though he puzzled her a good deal, keeping so much to himself, and always preoccupied with strange business of his own she could not understand. Interesting business evidently, since it absorbed him so entirely that he could not even blink when she addressed him. "Judas, my black beauty, what *are* you thinking about?" or " Judas, darling, what's in your deep black mind *now,* I wonder?" — these friendly questions brought no sign of response, not even a wink of the big shining eyes. The most they produced was a tiny quiver of the tail at its very tip. It was only the last quarter of an inch that quivered.

She resented this extreme privacy on the part of Judas. The world he lived in was mysterious and queer. She longed to get into it with him, yet not to force her way in. It was not intrusion she desired, it was a personal request that she should join him.

A personal invitation from Judas Maria would have greatly valued.

Now, as she tiptoed her way from the library to hunt for him, she found herself instinctively copying his way of walking in wet grass. She picked up her feet neatly; moved silently across the big empty hall; trod softly and delicately up the wide staircase and along the deserted passages. She advanced with an air of careless indifference, as though it really mattered nothing where she went, as though her mind was elsewhere, as though she was not even going where she was looking. She kept stopping and staring at nothing, gazing into space, scratching her head suddenly, pretending to listen when there was nothing to listen to — nothing, that is, except the *Tick tock!* of the gilt presentation clock on the landing, and this she decided *not* to hear. She disliked the sound. It gave her an unpleasant sense of hurry.

"He's just hiding somewhere," ran her thought, "and watching me. He can see me. He'll like it if I walk and act like him. He'll be pleased. He'll think perhaps I'm a sort of catty woman, a sort of big feline. Then he may suddenly dart out and give me an invitation — invite me in! Only, if he does, I must pretend I don't care an atom and am quite indifferent..."

She expected that any minute now his black body would appear, tail erect like a rod, whiskers spraying, and would rush up to her, then stop abruptly, rubbing and purring, against her legs.

"Miss Marigold," he would say, "I shall be delighted if you would join me." Or, on the other hand, he might say more familiarly, "Hi, Maria, you, come on!"

Whichever it would be, she reminded herself again that she must not jump at it, but must pause, look the other way, scratch her head, perhaps even walk off in the opposite direction, as though matters of urgent importance demanded her attention elsewhere. Later, but a good deal later, she would follow where he led. To show direct pleasure, in any case, would be a grave mistake.

Judas, however, did not make an appearance, and in due course Maria reached the big doors of green baize hung on their swinging hinges. And here she stopped. Beyond those doors lay the other wing of the big house, the unused wing. For times were hard, and her father, his income much reduced, had closed this end of the mansion, so that only half of the building was now occupied. With the bad times he had also reduced what he called the staff, letting his own manservant, William, go as well, and had engaged Mrs. Binks, a distant cousin, as lady housekeeper, and Mrs. Binks, among her other duties, was very precise about this other wing not being used. Being much larger than the occupied portion, it was known to Maria as the Big House, the part the family lived in being the Little House.

The child now stood against the green baize door among the shadows. Her little skirt hung straight and short. Her bright eyes sparkled. She pursed her lips. For coming up against the green baize door, beyond which was a sort of Out of Bounds, she came up also against the personality of Mrs. Binks, whom her father had described the other day as a puss. And Mrs. Binks, though not present actually, stopped her.

She disliked Mrs. Binks instinctively, having no reason except perhaps that Mrs. Binks addressed her as Maria, child," interrupted her game with the prune stones, and, in *her* opinion, was a bit too familiar with her father into the bargain. Too young to analyse jealousy, she had come to the conclusion that Mrs. Binks made far too many opportunities when it was "important she should see the Master." She was too respectful besides, and even when she got her own way, which was almost always, she laid the credit for it at *his* feet, though fully aware it was her own. Maria thought this a little sly. There was a good deal of humbug and flattery going on, she decided. Her father, though grumbling and growling, never refused Mrs. Binks the interview, though she, Maria, was often put off with an excuse. He was a busy man, of course, but he invariably found time to see Mrs. Binks, when there was no time to talk to Maria or play with her. At the same time she pitied him a little: she felt he was rather being chased, as it were. Was he also, she sometimes asked herself, a tiny wee bit afraid of his lady housekeeper?

Another reason for rather distrusting Mrs. Binks was that she was a widow and an Honourable. She had dropped the honorary tide when poverty drove her into service, and this seemed a silly thing to do. But being a widow was apparently even worse, dating from a time when her father had used in her hearing a phrase "widows and that sort of person," in a tone of such scornful contempt that, though the context was missing, the stigma had left an indelible impression. Her own mother, Maria knew, had never been a "widow."

Leaning now against the green baize door, and thinking thus inevitably of Mrs. Binks and her tortuous ways, she found suddenly that the door had begun to give a little. It was yielding slightly. It was moving. Her weight, perhaps, was slowly pushing it open. It gave and gave, an inch at a time. From the unheated halls and corridors beyond a cold air crept through the chink and brushed her cheeks. Undoubtedly now the door was wider. At the same instant something brushed past her legs as well. It slipped along soundlessly. A small, dark, shadowy thing rushed by. It came from behind her. It shot swiftly, noiselessly past from the Little House into the unused wing she called the Big House. Yet not quite noiselessly: the beat of little pads was audible.

Even if she had not caught a glimpse of the small, black, glossy outline, she would have known from the touch against her stockings what it was. Something ran up her spine and told her. Judas, who had been watching her stealthily all this time, had just rushed through. The darkness swallowed him at once. Now, at this very instant, she realized, he stood just across the threshold, silent and invisible. He waited.

A shock of startled surprise and excitement ran over her. Was he expecting her to follow him? Was this, at long last, a real invitation? Would she presently hear “Hi, Maria, you”?

Maria paused, holding her breath tightly.

For the sake of the new economy, few lights were lit in the occupied body of the building behind her, and the single lamp in the hall far below threw only the faintest glimmer into the corner where she now stood holding her breath. Among these shadows, therefore, she was practically invisible — except to Judas standing in the impenetrable blackness just beyond. To him, of course, her outline showed up plainly against the glimmer from the hall.

A voice startled her... calling suddenly from the depths of the hall behind her:

“Maria! Maria, child, where are you?”

Maria stood stock still, breathing as low as possible. An answer, she decided, was unnecessary. She waited. There was no sound of steps.

“Maria, child!” was repeated, echoing shrilly through the hall and passages.

In front lay the enchanted region of the forbidden wing — with Judas. It was not seriously forbidden; there was no penalty attached: only a mild scolding, a gentle reprimand, would follow if she were caught there. It was not any fear of this that made her hesitate and stand still so breathlessly. It was simply the question of the invitation. It was far more important than anything Mrs. Binks might have to say.

Was Judas still standing there and waiting? Had he watched her all this time with a purpose? Did he really want her to join him?

The swing door remained propped open, for unconsciously she had set her foot against it. It was even a little wider open than before.

Her head, which had been listening sideways to the voice from the hall, now turned round and looked downwards at her feet — and stared straight into two shining discs of green and amber that blazed up into her face.

“My gummy!” exclaimed Maria under her breath. “You’re as close as that!” She gave an involuntary little jump.

From the level of her feet Judas was examining her intently, his wide-open eyes reflecting the glimmer of light from behind her. And the next thing she realized was that, almost without knowing it, her foot was withdrawn, and the baize door had swung to with a soft, gulping sound at her back. She now stood close to Judas across the threshold of the unused wing.

And it was then, with the soft thud of the closing door behind her, that a sudden illumination flashed across her, flooding her mind. The imagination of the solitary child, left so long to its own resources, was lit up with understanding. This, she realized with a start, was, of course, *his* country. It was here he withdrew when he was nowhere to be found. This was his region, his secret kingdom where, in the unlighted chambers and sheeted corridors, he plotted, planned, adventured. He knew the huge banqueting hall by heart. Among the dim shadows of these deserted stairs and cool, lofty halls he was at home, his black figure invisible in their darkness. Judas, lover of the night, was master here, and she, Maria, stood now beside him — and at his express invitation.

The question of the invitation was solved simultaneously with this blaze of understanding, and the call of the lady housekeeper was neglected utterly. The closing of the swing door behind her made it impossible to see his lambent eyes, but she could feel his sleek, dark body rubbing invitingly against her legs. She heard him purr.

It seemed too good to be true — he was asking her to join him. She stooped and stroked him, feeling his warm back yield a little beneath her fingers... then curiously melt away, as though suddenly there were no bones. The purring stopped; her hand, her fingers, no longer found him. He was suddenly no longer there.

She stood upright in the darkness, calling to him beneath her breath. No answer came. There was no sound of his pads on the carpetless boards. There was no sound of any sort at all. Judas was gone. Abruptly, he was not there. Judas, indubitably, had left her.

A curious feeling stole over her, a slight sensation of uneasiness, for though Judas was certainly in the unused wing with her, he might, by this time, be lost among distant rooms and passages, even down in the vast banqueting hall; so far as a friendly presence was concerned, she was alone. Her heart sank a little. The faint distress she experienced was partly due, doubtless, to the fact that she was trespassing, partly also to the effect of the darkness and silence that enveloped her. Thus she explained it to herself, at any rate, while perfectly aware that it was not the entire truth, and that there was another ingredient in her uneasiness that she recognized yet could not properly account for. A faint shiver ran down her back.

Maria was not the child to be afraid of the dark, no bogey-thoughts had ever troubled her robust imagination: the faint touch of dread that came to her now was of quite another kind. Very faint it might be, but its advent — a movement of cooler air across her cheek, the flutter of a feather across her heart — was beyond all question.

“It’s just stuff and nonsense,” she told herself a trifle defiantly, asserting her independence even while she shivered. “Of course it’s just nothing at all!”

Yet even while thus assuring herself, she stood unusually still, listening, waiting, peering into the blackness in what was certainly an expectant attitude. She kept moving from one foot to the other. Then, suddenly and without apparent reason — she sniffed. Automatically, without knowing why, Maria gave this long and audible sniff. She found herself sniffing the musty, rather chilly air of the long closed corridor, wondering at the same time, perhaps, if there was not something besides the frowsiness that made her do it, something that included a remote hint of warning, of self-protection almost. But the notion was too faint and fugitive to leave an impression; it vanished as soon as born. Afterwards, however, she remembered this curious, sudden, automatic sniff.

For several minutes she stood motionless in this expectant way, and then, since nothing happened, and Judas did not reappear, her thoughts, which had been arrested rather, resumed their normal flow. If there was a tiny shudder of excitement and anticipation in her, it was certainly not due to fear. She was not afraid, she kept telling herself. She listened intently. Nothing stirred. The empty, untenanted wing, itself as large as many a country house, yawned before her in deep blackness. She stood at the beginning of a long corridor which was a sort of picture gallery, yet with several bedrooms, she remembered, sandwiched in between the portraits, and she knew that down its vacant length her ancestors gleamed bleakly out of their heavy gilt frames. Beyond them, at its farther end, the gallery led to a great staircase that curved down into a drawing-room. A vast banqueting hall opened out of this. The whole place was familiar enough to her in the daylight, but now, with the night shrouding it, these great rooms and corridors seemed less familiar, less attractive.

Thoughts poured through her while she waited, listening, yet her chief thought, naturally, was still about Judas and his wonderful invitation. She had accepted it, yet he had instantly made off and vanished. Something, of course, was wrong... and she realized suddenly that she had made a bad mistake, and that this was the explanation of his abrupt disappearance. The mistake, she decided, lay in her manner of acceptance. Her acceptance was at fault — she had shown obvious pleasure, when she should have shown complete indifference. She had been too precipitate altogether. Instead of walking in the opposite direction, as though she had far more important things to attend to, she had followed him with a beaming face, and even in the dark he had seen this beaming face and had despised her for it.

“Judas, where are you?” she whispered nevertheless. “Judas, my strange black beauty! And the whisper, low though it was, travelled away down the long, empty gallery, past staring ancestors and heavy sofas and arm-chairs, all draped in dust sheets, and died into silence far beyond where the staircases wound down into impenetrable depths of gloom.

Of course no answer came. Judas, she knew, hid somewhere in those dark, silent depths, his velvet paws, his marvellous eyes, guiding him faultlessly upon some business of his own. There was no false step in his going. This was his kingdom. In here he was at home.

Maria waited, none the less. She would rather have welcomed a sound perhaps, a sound of some sort or other, even the distant cry of Mrs. Binks from the Little House behind her. But nothing came. Even the wind against the outside walls was silent. She heard nothing but the droning hum of the blood inside her ears and the beating of her heart.

Moving from one foot to the other, she decided at length that the time had come for her to act. It was impossible to stand for ever waiting, listening. Time was passing, moreover; that horrid *Tick tock!* was beating away the precious minutes.

And her clear young brain recognized at once the two possible alternatives — she must go forward or go back.

There was none to give her counsel; her mind must be made up without assistance; but, as a young child with no one to shape her adventure or her play, this was no new position. Unfearful of that yawning darkness in front of her, she was eager to go forward, eager to explore the gloomy, empty rooms, with the chance possibility of surprising Judas in some strange night-fantasia of his own. This was her strongest urge — to creep along the corridor, steal down the great staircase, and peer into all the dim corners of the banqueting hall below, Already, she had one foot stretched out, feeling its way, her blood pulsing with the new tremor of exciting dread — when the other and opposite alternative stepped in and made her hesitate.

Having already made one bad mistake with regard to Judas, she did not want to make a second, perhaps a graver, one. If she went to look for him he might disown her more deliberately than ever. She might sink so low in his estimation that he would never, never invite her again. On the other hand, if she pretended to go back, he might — who could say? — rush suddenly up and claim her. Moreover, she was out of bounds after all. Her father... Mrs. Binks...

Her hesitation became more marked. She slowly withdrew the outstretched foot, when suddenly something happened that made her catch her breath sharply. Her movement stopped.

“Hi! I Maria, child! Where are you?” sounded shrill and faintly from the distant region of the Little House behind her.

While, at the same instant, rose another sound that startled her far more. And this came from the Big House, the unused wing, in front of her.

So faint and distant, it rose from the depths of the banqueting hall below, but drawing quickly nearer. It came with great velocity. It tore rushing down the long dark gallery towards her. It made a curious, scattering noise, its origin invisible, but a moment later, not intangible. A movement of the air came with it, a brushing against her legs as it swept past, and then, abruptly, a sound of violent scrabbling and clawing against the closed baize door behind her that was too familiar not to be recognized at once.

Acting instinctively, Maria pushed the door wide open, and Judas — but Judas frightened, terror-stricken — dashed through helter-skelter, and vanished like a streak of black lightning along the passage and down towards the dimly lighted hall of the inhabited Little House.

Maria stood gasping with amazement. She was too astonished to think or feel clearly. The first thing in her mind was, why was Judas frightened, terrified even? The second was her deep-rooted disappointment that she had not penetrated into the unused wing to explore. This unfulfilled wish, this frustrated desire, was poignant and even rather bitter. It took first place in her thoughts and feelings, which, though scattered, were extremely strong. She had missed an amazing and exceptional chance she might never get again. That she felt a little frightened added to the intensity of her loss. To see Judas terrified was, of course, a shock, but to have lost the opportunity of exploration of the unused wing, possibly also to have discovered why Judas was terrified, this was a disaster she could never, never forget.

Slowly, reluctantly, ready for tears almost, she turned and followed him. There was again a tremor down her spine. The green baize door swung to behind her with a series of little diminishing thuds and gulps.

Sick at heart, intense regret gnawing at her, she made her way slowly back along the landing. How feeble! How unenterprising! was her chief thought. Just because the unused wing was out of bounds, just because Mrs. Binks had screamed her name, just because — well, because, to tell the truth, she was a wee bit frightened, she had missed a chance of adventure that might never come again. Judas might never give her another invitation. Had she crept down into the banqueting hall, she might even have discovered what frightened him....

“Bah!” she exclaimed under her breath.

“What’s the good of being good? It only means you miss things that may never come again!” There was no sign, no sound either, of Mrs. Binks, as she stole back down the staircase. No sound of any kind except the gilt presentation clock on the landing that went “*Tick tock! Tick tock!*” It was a horrible sound. It reminded her that sharp at six she must go to her room. And it must be close on six already.

She hurried, making her way straight to the library, where she burst in upon her father, still behind his newspaper.

As she pushed the door open her mind held one thought only — the burning, intense regret that she had lost a great adventure; and, on entering the room, the first thing she noticed was that her father had finished all his prunes, and that the stones stood invitingly in a ring round the rim of the white plate. Also she saw at once that Judas was not there.

Her father uttered simultaneously with her. Both voices spoke together.

“Oh, Father, have you seen Judas?”

“Oh, Maria, Mrs. Binks has been yel — I mean, calling for you!”

They stared at one another.

Their voices again spoke simultaneously, each answering the other’s question:

“Oh, has she, Father?”

“No, Judas isn’t here — thank goodness!”

In the first second of Maria’s reappearance this happened. The same second almost he glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. The child’s eyes followed. It was exactly six minutes to six.

He still wore his heavy shooting boots, Maria noticed next.

"Oh, Father," she exclaimed, "I'll run and get your slippers."

"Oh, thank you, Marigold, dear." He turned to relight his pipe. "And — er — perhaps you'd better just run and see what Mrs. Binks wants," he added, carelessly enough, it seemed. "I think I heard her calling." The voice sounded to Maria nervous.

He puffed away, looking at her inquiringly over the burning match, his brown face draped oddly with clouds of blue smoke. Below him she caught the great gleaming, glass eyes of the tiger. They glared at her. In her mind rose again the bitter, keen regret that she had missed a great adventure — poignant, unsatisfied. It gnawed behind all she saw and thought and felt. A queer acrid smell rose to her nostrils.

"Father, what a funny st — smell, I mean!"

"Damp," he said gruffly. "The weather's changing. Better hurry up," he added, glancing at the clock. "You've only got five minutes, you know."

"Yes, Father," she agreed obediently, "but *after* the slippers. Do you think she *really* wants me?"

"Better just see, Maria — dear. She's been calling a bit."

It dawned upon her more clearly than ever — he was a little afraid of Mrs. Binks. She came even before his slippers.

"Yes, Father, but I'll get your slippers first, I think."

"Umph!" he said. "Thanks, Marigold. But I'm afraid my room's in an awful mess. You'll never find them."

"Oh, Tinker and Sailor will help me look. Perhaps the Gentleman, too."

She longed to count the prune stones first, but there wasn't time, of course. She gave them one yearning look.

"I'll be back before five minutes is up," as she rushed to the door. "Before you can say knife, Father."

"Jack Robinson, you mean," he called after her. "He's quickest of all, you know. Quicker than time itself!"

She darted back, kissed the top of his head again, swallowed a gulp of smoke, and was out of the room — with five minutes in hand — to fetch his slippers.

“Jack Robinson, remember...!” she heard, as she closed the door behind her and ran helter-skelter on her errand. She had exactly five minutes for its fulfilment. “*Tick tock! Tick tock!*” the sound beat after her as she ran.

CHAPTER II

MARIA POSSESSED AN active, even an intense, imagination, and it is not to be wondered at that many years later her gift produced an original and distinctive harvest. In those early days, however, she lived her dreams, and hence knew nothing of the torture that demands production. Her outlet, being natural and instinctive, had no need of artificial construction. No question of form cropped up to worry her. She was happily ignorant, too, of the troubles of accumulated repression. Her intake was expressed adequately by her output. The law of compensation was thus satisfied automatically.

Having no regular playmates, the natural instinct of the young animal found the next best satisfaction — she played with herself, or with what was at hand. All she demanded was some reasonable measure of response. Cows and horses were obviously too big, lambs and kids too shy, worms too inert, birds too unapproachable. Insects, again, were too wriggley — they tickled, and some were dangerous — while dogs, though she loved them, were too simple, honest and unromantic. They played willingly enough, but they suggested nothing beyond a romp. They had, besides, a tendency towards blood-thirstiness that quenched any ardour she might otherwise have felt.

There remained, then, nothing but a cat, and a cat, in the form of Judas, having survived a drowned litter in the gardener’s cottage, was installed in the role of principal playmate.

As she ran now across the hall from the library her thoughts were chiefly on the slippers, but partly also on Judas and his recent odd behaviour, for his undignified terror of a few minutes before disturbed her rather. The question of time was in her mind as well. She had only five minutes. She must be quick. Even as she crossed the hall she heard the “*Tick tock!*” of the great clock in the corner knocking off the seconds. She hurried. The staircase yawned like an open mouth in front of her.

Her father’s bedroom lay on the side of the Little House away from the green baize door; to reach it, find the slippers, and return, should take five minutes at the very most — provided she found them at once. But since his man had gone the room was dreadfully untidy, a veritable pig-stye, and the search might take her longer than she expected. Once on the landing, she would have to go all round the gallery that overlooked the hall, and now, as she raced up three steps at a time, it came suddenly back to her that a few minutes before, when she was racing down from the unused wing, she had noticed out of the corner of her eye — no more than that — a figure leaning over the balustrade and looking down. She had been too excited, too upset, by the unusual spectacle of Judas in a panic, to pay any attention to this person. The light was of the dimmest, the outline alone discernible. She had only registered that, since it was *not* Mrs. Binks, it did not matter much who else it was. One of the maids possibly, but at any rate no one who was of any account.

The detail, indeed, had wholly left her mind, but now, as she took the stairs in the reverse sense, bounding up at full speed to her father's room, she became aware that the figure was still there, standing in its original position, leaning over the balustrade and looking down into the well of the hall, looking, she then realized with an uncomfortable start — straight at herself.

Maria paused an instant in her breathless ascent and returned the look. She looked hard, she stared. Who could it be? Who was it? The figure did not move. She saw the white face peering down at her, returning her gaze steadily. The shoulders were hunched forward a little, the hands clasped together in the air over the railing. It was, she then saw, a man, a man, moreover, she recognized. It was the Man who Wound the Clocks.

She was more than surprised, she was startled, for it was extraordinary that he should be in the house at all, above all that he should be here at this late evening hour. And she at once asked herself, a trifle nervously, what he could be doing there.

The Man who Wound the Clocks was, of course, no stranger — in the sense that he came regularly once a week from the neighbouring town to attend to the numerous timepieces of variegated sort that her father found necessary in the big house. It was his business to adjust these clocks, and wind them properly, and see that they all kept the same time. He was a recognized figure in the old house once a week — but invariably in the morning hours.

Maria was very familiar with this individual. But she had never spoken with him, for the very good reason that he himself never uttered a word. Even to her “good morning” he merely bowed in silence. She might watch him at his work with the bigger clocks for several minutes at a stretch, but he never spoke, he never smiled, his face betrayed no expression, he made no attempt even to pass the time of day; he just ignored her.

It was quite natural, therefore, that her active imagination should have busied itself with this enigmatic workman, attributing to him mysterious qualities his strange silence earned. He moved oddly, she had thus noticed, for he always went on tiptoe, his long thin legs striding from clock to clock quietly and swiftly; he wore striped trousers, one leg considerably shorter than the other, with a black tail-coat that gave him, she decided, the appearance of a tall, weedy bird, his feathers rather draggled. He might have been an ancient stork or crane. His silence, his pale, expressionless face, his flapping coattails and long stride, one trouser-leg hitched always higher than the other, provided material for almost any imaginative picture she cared to make. And the fact that while some of the clocks apparently liked him, welcoming his touch, others obviously feared him, as was shown by the grinding creak and rattle they made even before he reached them, increased the sense of importance that she attributed to him.

Yet, if uncommunicative, she had always hitherto felt him friendly.

Now, however, as she stood staring up into his pale face, she got the sudden unwelcome impression that somehow he was not perhaps quite so friendly as she had always imagined. She was vaguely conscious that she would be glad to avoid him if she could. To reach her father’s bedroom for the slippers she must go past him. She felt now that she would rather not go past him. Something in her shrank.

Her pause on the stairs, anyhow, was brief, for she was not the sort of child to dawdle over a decision. Making no sign of recognition therefore, she ran straight on, reached the landing a moment later, and turned boldly to the left. It was her intention to go straight past him without even a nod of greeting, since he had never yet returned even her polite “good morning,” but now, as she drew level with him, she saw, to her amazement, that he suddenly straightened up and faced her. He stood bang in front of her. He barred her way. He deliberately stretched an arm and hand across her path.

Maria stopped and stared. She saw the disc of his pale face, bent sideways a little towards her; she saw his striped trousers, one leg higher than the other; she saw his black tail-coat. Through this picture she caught, rather ominously, and louder than usual, the *Tick tock!* of the big gilt presentation clock on its shelf behind him.

“Good evening,” she said, being too surprised to think of anything else, her breath a little uneven.

He did not answer, but he straddled farther across her path.

Maria felt at a complete loss. A dozen ideas flashed through her. Her first impression — the grotesque idea that this mournful, even sombre figure, wanted to play — she rejected instantly, for though the arm and hand were stretched out, they were quite obviously not stretched out in any sort of invitation. Her second impression — that in the dim light he was possibly making a clumsy, shy effort to move aside — she equally dismissed. Impressions, indeed, were just waste of time. His intention was perfectly plain — he meant deliberately to bar her way.

Before she could make up her mind what to say or do, he spoke.

“Miss Marigold,” he said, in a creaky whisper that, she thought, sounded just like one of the bigger clocks, “Judas expects you.” He pointed in the opposite direction to which she wished to go — towards the unused wing. “Over there.”

Maria stood motionless and speechless.

“Over there,” the man repeated, still pointing towards the green baize door.

Maria’s lips opened, but no sound came forth.

“In the Big House,” he repeated, and the same minute, bowing rapidly so that his coat-tails flapped out like wings, he darted to one side, and whispering “Allow me,” while glancing behind him sharply, he took a step to lead the way.

By this time several seconds had intervened, and Maria had found her voice. She had come to a decision too. For she was not easily put off her purpose, much less frightened. She had come to fetch her father’s slippers; her father’s slippers she meant to fetch. It would take more than the nonsensical behaviour of a servant in the house, above all of a man who merely wound the clocks and did not even belong to the general staff, of a man perhaps a little queer in his mind into the bargain — it would take more than that to stop her.

She drew herself up; unaware probably that her two fists were very tightly clenched. She looked him full in the face.

“Thank you,” she said in her stiffest voice, “but I’m just going in the other direction. I’m going to fetch — to find—”

She got no further. Her voice stammered and died away. From her mind also died away what it was she was going to fetch and find. It vanished from her thoughts completely. She no longer had the faintest notion what it was she had come to fetch and find and look for. Indeed, in her mind at that moment one thing, and one thing only, seemed to echo, and this was the persistent *Tick tock!* of the gilt presentation clock behind them on the landing. It was going faster, she fancied, than before. It was hurrying. It produced such a sense of confusion in her thoughts, such a sense of a race against time, as it were, that she could think of nothing further to do or say at first.

She made another effort then, a more determined effort.

“I told my father,” she began—” I promised him — that I would go and get his s—”

Into the eyes of the Man who Wound the Clocks there came a sudden curious glare that stopped her.

“S — s — sl—” She made a last desperate attempt, trying to feel indignant, even angry. She got no further than the first two letters. The word itself had disappeared. Her mind was blank of it. Her voice died away into a soft and futile hiss.

“Hush! Hush!” he whispered, putting a finger to his lips. “*They* might overhear.”

A soft confusion settled like a cloud upon her mind and memory.

“Allow me,” he repeated, his coat-tails making an elaborate flourish as he passed in front of her. “I will lead the way.”

She followed. His authority was overmastering. All volition had apparently left her. There was nothing to do but to obey.

CHAPTER III

MARIA HAS NEVER forgotten the few steps they made along the passage towards the green baize door. She remembers chiefly a curious sense of urgent hurry. Her time was short. Unless she hurried she would be late. Late for what? She did not know. There was a sense of almost nightmare rush. The remorseless *Tick tock!* of the passing seconds seemed in her very blood.

What she would be late for she could not think. She had not an instant to spare — that was the only thing she knew.

She stepped along briskly behind the Man who Wound the Clocks, staring at his flying coat-tails, and noticing that one striped trouser-leg, as usual, was longer than the other. She remembers trying to count the number of stripes in his trousers, and that after counting four the stripes grew blurred and ran together with a queer yellowish tinge she did not like. They should have been dark grey and black. This tawny colour kept creeping in. It was unpleasing somewhere.

Surprise that she was thus following him at all had apparently left her already at this early stage. Nor did it occur to her as odd that Judas should be waiting for her. Judas had always liked this Man who Wound the Clocks. He would rub, purring, against his striped trousers while the man attended to the timepieces in the various rooms and passages. It was not astonishing that some connection might exist between the two queer beings. Perhaps the Man was right when he said the black cat waited for her with impatience. At any rate, she thought, there was nothing to do but to follow him and see. Once she knew that, she could go about her real errand — go back and get about her real business — go somewhere and find the thing she had come to look for. Only, she had completely forgotten what it was. What was this something she had come to find? It had entirely left her memory. To find it was the immediate and important object of her very existence. For the life of her she could not think what it was. It would, of course, come back to her as soon as she got away from her unpleasant guide. She felt sure of that. The sooner this trip was over, the better. She would remember then.

So she followed the striped trousers along the dark corridor without a word. They reached the green baize door. The Man pushed it open and stood aside for her to enter the Big House — the empty, unoccupied portion of the great mansion, the part where no one lived — and, without a word from either of them, she crossed the threshold and passed inside. The door closed behind her with its little gulps of sound, and she found herself again in the opening of the picture gallery. Only a little while ago she had stood in the very same place, while Judas rushed past her in a panic. She again looked down its gloomy length. The Man stood close beside her, saying nothing. There was no sign of Judas anywhere. It was all silent as the grave.

"This is rather queer," thought Maria. "It's very extraordinary somewhere. I don't — don't quite understand it...!"

A sudden reaction came over her. It was absurd, she now realized, that she should have followed this man so meekly into the unused wing, into the forbidden part of the house. It was utterly ridiculous and impossible that he should know anything about Judas and his ways or wishes. It was outrageous; it was against all her sense of what was right and proper, that he should clothe himself with this assumption of authority. He was nothing, after all, but a paid menial; he was not even a member of the household staff, but a man who came in twice a week from the little town outside; whereas she, Marigold, was the daughter of the house, the daughter of his employer. Moreover... she had been upon some important errand which his mysterious and impudent actions had interrupted. He had interfered — had stopped something vital and urgent she was going to do. She had been on her way to get something, to look for something. She must find this, or miss the whole purpose of her being.

"*Tick tock!*" came from some empty depths of air beyond, reminding her that time was short and she must hurry. It was an unpleasant reminder. A feeling of discomfort, almost of uneasiness, rose in her heart, making her skin prick and tingle. She looked down the long, deserted corridor. It was not inviting. There was no sign of her friend Judas. Her discomfort increased. Was it a trap, she suddenly asked herself? Had the man used Judas as a decoy?

"I'm going back," she exclaimed abruptly but very clearly, and took a preliminary step in the direction of the door behind her — only to find the Man's arm stretched out against her chest like an iron bar. She took a deep breath. "At once," she added loudly. "This very instant."

The Man who Wound the Clocks looked at her calmly.

"Your time is short," he said quietly. His eyes looked stern as he added: "You have five minutes only."

Maria stiffened, bridled. This was sheer impudence.

"Let me pass at once," she repeated firmly, her voice loud and strong. "I've got to fetch something to begin with, and besides—" Her words somehow died away in her mind.

"I cannot give you the time," the Man replied, with resolute distinctness.

Her eyes flashed angrily. This impertinence was really too much. She stamped her foot.

"How dare you!" she cried. "What have *you* got to do with my time anyhow?" She found herself, nevertheless, taking a quick gulp of breath.

Again he gazed down at her calmly.

"You've got no time of your own," he replied coldly. "You've got only what I can give you — five minutes."

Maria felt something shrink within her. Her self-confidence wilted slightly. His words, though she might think them impertinent, were somehow true, she felt — horribly true. Her heart failed her a little. She made, none the less, a great effort to assert herself.

"How — how *dare* you?" she cried again. "Who are you? You're only the Man who Winds the Clocks!"

"Exactly," came the quiet reply. "That's why." And she heard a curious long, deep sigh float through the air.

She found herself trembling a little, but if she felt alarm she refused point blank to acknowledge it. Only one thing held steady in her wavering mind — if she could get rid of this impudent man and find her way back into the familiar part of the house, she would recover her authority again, her memory, too. She would recollect her errand. She would remember herself; she would know what it was she had come to find. There was a phrase, besides, a sort of name, she fancied, that could *make* him obey — only she could not find it.

Her lips may have trembled a little, but her voice was a loud command.

“Let me out!” she ordered in a final effort. “Let me pass. And please open that door for me *at once!*”

Again that long, deep sigh passed through the air.

“It’s gone, and I, too, must go,” she heard him whisper, and it seemed exactly like the voice of a great, steady clock that was going to strike.

She turned the same instant. To her amazement there was only a solid wall where the door had been, and when she looked back again to face him and ask what it all meant, the man himself had also disappeared. He was no longer there beside her. The Man who Wound the Clocks had vanished. There was no sign of him anywhere. The long picture gallery was empty. Her eyes searched it in vain for a figure, indeed for anything that moved. It lay silent and deserted before her, stretching away to where the staircase began.

One thing, however, struck her as curious — it was not dark. She had just come from a house — though completely forgetting where or what it was — that lay deep in evening shadows. It was dimly lit and dark. But here there was no darkness. The picture gallery that stretched before her was bathed in light as though it were eleven o’clock on a sunny morning. And this she found comforting. Another thing she did not like so much — that down its deserted length she heard, faint but quite distinct, the *Tick tock!* as of some giant clock.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST THING she realized clearly, as she stood there alone at the head of the long, empty corridor, was — oddly enough — that there was no immediate hurry. To rush about, to get in a panic, to become excited and flurried, was not only useless, it was quite unnecessary. There was plenty of time, heaps and heaps of it. The five minutes allowed her seemed an eternity. If the door and the Man who Wound the Clocks had disappeared in this strange and sudden way, they might equally reappear in an even more strange and sudden way.

Confused she felt, bewildered, perhaps even a little frightened, yet something told her there was no need to fuss and worry and dash about, much less to scream or cry. The door had vanished, so she could not go back, wherever “back” might be, to look for the thing she had been going to find; the Man had vanished, so she could not ask him questions, scold, stand on her dignity or play the Daughter of the House. And as for Judas, who was urgently expecting her, his black outline was nowhere visible, and if he did not want her urgently enough to make a sign of some sort, and to say at least, “Hi, Maria, come on!” that was his look-out, not hers. It was this Maria felt.

She therefore swallowed the tears that threatened to rise, and with her handkerchief wiped her lips where her teeth had bitten them. She also clasped and unclasped her hands, which had been so tightly clenched that the nails had left marks in the tender flesh, and the muscles were stiff and cramped.

She looked about her. She wanted badly to call out, “Judas! Judas!” but everything was so still that she felt the sound of her voice in this deep silence would be unpleasant rather. So she just stood and looked about her.

How well she knew this picture gallery, with its guest-bedrooms and the big staircase down into the halls below! Only six months before it had thronged with the coming and going of all manner of human beings who arrived for shooting-parties, for dinner and bridge, young people who carried tennis rackets, servants in attendance, maids and footmen, even a stately butler.

Mrs. Binks had flustered and bustled up and down its length, her father had stumped along; Maria herself with other children had once or twice played hide and seek all through this wing until it had been closed.

Yet all this flitted across her mind as though half remembered only, faint and fugitive, a dim jumble of scenes that rose from some old picture-book she had looked at ages ago. Pallid, not sharply realized, without significance, the scenes floated past, barely stirring the dust of memories that seemed strangely distant, and of no importance anyhow. They formed merely a sort of shadowy background to what she was now feeling and observing so much more vividly and intensely.

If the long gallery had once echoed to voices, laughter, calls and singing, it lay now, at any rate, silent as the grave, untenanted, deserted.

But was it untenanted, deserted, she asked herself with a new touch of uneasiness? A feeling began to steal over her that it was, after all, not empty perhaps, that she was not quite so alone as she imagined. Somehow it did not feel entirely unoccupied.

Maria moved from one foot to the other, and then back again. She listened intently. Her weight shifted once more from one foot to the other. She took a long, deep breath. Only the *Tick tock!* that never stopped, it seemed, was audible far away at the distant end.

“Anyhow,” she decided suddenly, “there’s no good my standing here like a stuck pig. I think I’ll go and explore!”

And she came to this plucky decision because she knew that if she waited much longer she might not have the courage to move at all. None the less, a considerable interval passed again before she summoned up the actual energy to start.

Along the right side of the gallery were several windows that looked out over the lawn and gardens, and on the other side hung the series of family portraits. Between them were the doors into the guest-bedrooms, and these, she vaguely remembered, bore fancy names. There were six of these at least — the Lavender Room, the Lily Room, the Rhododendron and Daisy Room and so forth, while dividing them in half was a private chamber that was never used because Queen Elizabeth had slept there. Once, perhaps, she had known them all quite accurately, but now the names floated across her mind like half-forgotten memories from some old picture-book.

She found herself moving cautiously towards the nearest window, and, having reached it safely, she leaned heavily against it, clutching the window-sill with both hands. Her light, anxious tread woke echoes that ran off into the distance.

Very cautiously, again she looked about her, hoping chiefly, perhaps, that Judas, her familiar friend, might show himself, for the sight of her beloved black cat would have been a comforting and friendly thing. He had invited her after all; if only now she could hear his call, “Hi, Maria, you!” How gladly, how impetuously she would respond.... But her eyes searched the long gallery in vain, there was no sign of him, nor for that matter of anything that moved. Nothing stirred, no sound was audible, silence and stillness reigned supreme. She waited, wondering what she should do next, wondering what was going to happen, waiting, watching, listening with all her eyes and ears. She took in every single detail. Her heart pumped.

Suddenly, then, she noticed a detail that had not struck her before: the door of the room nearest to her, the Dandelion Room, was standing slightly ajar. That it should be open at all seemed to her not quite natural; the door of an unoccupied room ought to have been closed surely. The same instant, to her great surprise, to her alarm as well, she saw that it was moving. She stared with eyes intently fixed. It was not moving now, it was stationary again; but it had moved; it had, of course, *been* moved. The room, therefore, was not unoccupied. There was somebody inside.

Maria, still staring fixedly, held her breath. Why she was not cold and stiff with nervous terror she did not know. That she was not seemed all that mattered. Intense curiosity stirred in her, but not fear. And this absence of fear had something to do, she felt vaguely, with the delightful sensation of leisure she had already noticed, the positive conviction that there was no hurry, that there was heaps and heaps of time.

Her eyes, none the less, were popping out of her head, and the next thing they popped on to then was a sign of movement at the far end of the corridor. With the tail of her eye she caught this movement first, then, turning her head, she saw it fully — the figure of Judas advancing slowly towards her from the far end. And the sight of him banished the last vestige of fear or nervousness from her mind.

She found her voice.

“My black darling!” she cried impulsively, unable to restrain herself. “How frightfully glad I am to see you! Where did you get to? Why did you leave me?”

She did not run to meet him, but stooped, making coaxing noises and holding out her hands with affectionate gestures. Judas, however, did not hurry, he did not even quicken his stately pace. He moved very slowly towards her along the whole length of the corridor, advancing daintily, picking his steps as in wet grass, giving the impression that he really did not want to come particularly, and that any moment he might stop and attend to something else of much greater importance.

She continued to make inviting noises with her lips, crouching patiently with both hands outstretched, and eventually he reached her so that she could grab up his warm, soft body and plunge her face into the fragrant fur.

“Oh, I knew you wouldn’t desert me,” she went on eagerly, “but where *have* you brought me, and where has he got to, that Man who Winds the Clocks, and why aren’t I in an awful hurry when I’ve only got five minutes, and what, oh what, is the thing I’ve come to find, and is there really somebody in that Dandelion Room? Oh, Judas, my black beauty, tell me everything, *every thing]*”

She drew her face quickly out of the fur.

Tick tock! sounded somewhere in her ears.

Judas, far from reciprocating her embraces, was struggling. She set him down on the floor, where he straightened himself and then began to wash, behaving as though he did not know her, did not want to know her, and had never seen her before. But she kept her eyes on him closely, for the washing would end abruptly as it always did, he would suddenly look round, leaving a leg pointing to the ceiling, and attend to something else.

Which was precisely what then happened.

He rose, turning his back upon her, and stepped deliberately towards the Dandelion Room across the corridor. There, pausing a moment, he sat down, raised a front leg and half tapped, half scratched at the panel, as though he wanted to push it wider and go inside. His paw had hardly touched it when the door was quietly closed against him, shutting with a little bang. But before Maria could recover from her surprise, Judas added to it by what he did next. Trotting quickly now, he turned and ran down the entire length of the corridor, stopping for a fraction of a second at each room in turn, his paw tentatively raised as though he wanted to get in, while each door in turn was similarly then closed against him. Maria watched in amazement. She heard the doors closing in succession all the way down, each little bang a shade lower than the one before it, so that it sounded almost like a scale running down the piano.

Each of the eight rooms, therefore, was occupied; each door had been closed by the tenant inside. And Judas now was coming back again, marching slowly this time, with tail erect in the air and whiskers twitching. Too amazed to act or speak, Maria watched him, holding herself motionless, hardly responding, indeed, as he reached her side and began rubbing himself against her leg.

He glanced up at her, narrowing his eyes, then looked back at the door, as though to invite her attention to it.

“Judas!” she whispered eagerly, “I believe you know who’s in that room! You know who’s in all the rooms! You know them. And if you do — they must know you too!”

She was very excited; she hardly knew why she said it.

“Tell me. Tell me quickly. Are they friendly? Oh, who can they be?”

For answer, Judas marched to the Dandelion door, looked up at the handle, then threw her a glance of entreaty over his black shoulder. He made no sound, but his attitude was plain; he wanted her to turn the knob.

Maria did not hesitate. An invitation from Judas meant a tremendous lot to her; it was a rare occurrence, too rare to be trifled with. If she refused now, another opportunity might never come again. Her mind was made up instantly; at whatever risk, she would find out who the mysterious occupant was, but she would not turn the handle and fling the door wide, for that seemed taking too great a liberty. She would first knock and make polite inquiries. Smiling affectionately at Judas, while trembling a little inwardly, she therefore approached the door and gave a gentle knock. At the same time she spoke.

“I beg your pardon,” she said in a low voice, “but are you at home, please?”

A reply came at once. “Yes,” answered a gentlemanly voice. “I am in my room.”

It was not a voice she recognized, but it had a pleasant, musical sound that made her feel the speaker must be gentle. Her trembling became less and her confidence returned a little.

“Oh, thank you, sir,” she called, somewhat louder than before, “and would it — disturb you if — I opened your door?”

There was a short pause, but at the next words, astonishment made her catch her breath.

“To see *you,*” the voice said, “could be no possible disturbance, for it would be, on the contrary, the greatest privilege of my whole existence. But unfortunately,” it added with a sigh that was audible even through the panels, “you are not alone.” Maria gave a little gasp. She shot a look at Judas, sitting beside her with the innocent expression of a lamb. “So you *do* know him,” ran sharply across her mind, “and he knows *you!*”

She spoke no word to the cat, but with a great effort she continued to address the invisible occupant of the Dandelion Room, wondering how on earth he knew she was not alone. It came back to her then that he had, of course, seen Judas when he closed the door a moment ago.

“Only my cat, Judas, is with me, sir,” she said politely, for this unknown voice belonged, she felt sure, to a distinguished sort of person. “He is my pet, and he would not hurt a” — but “mouse” was the wrong word, and she changed it quickly—” a baby. Really, sir, he would not.”

The voice replied at once if without conviction. “I accept your word of course,” it said quietly. “At the same time he has not always treated me with the consideration I claim to deserve, for I have suffered even violence at his paws.”

At his paws! Maria did not smile, however; she merely felt an intense curiosity to know who this strange speaker was. While she looked down into the inscrutable black face at her feet, the muffled voice behind the door continued.

“Yet the honour of meeting you,” it went on, “is so great that I am more than willing to take what risk there may be, and if you will kindly control your animal, I will comply at once with your wish and open my door.”

“I promise, sir, I promise,” exclaimed Maria as she stooped and picked Judas up in her arms. “I’ve got him now,” she added. “He’s quite safe.”

Wondering what it all meant, but too astonished to think of anything clearly, she stepped back instinctively as the brass knob began to turn, and the next instant the door was flung wide open and out marched the occupant of the Dandelion Room. Holding Judas tightly, she stared, as the saying is, with all her eyes — at the figure of a man. And her very first impression, before grasping a single detail of his appearance, was one of vague familiarity. She had seen him before somewhere. But where, or who he was, she had not the faintest idea.

He was tall, elderly, lean in the flanks, distinguished looking, spotlessly clean, and marvellously well groomed. His nose was hooked, he wore a small moustache, with a sharp little imperial beard. His black, cut-away tail-coat was not new, but fitted smartly across the broad shoulders and drew closely in about the rather marked waist, and his trousers of shepherd’s plaid hung beautifully over the black buttoned boots of patent leather. An eyeglass on a broad black ribbon dangled from his neck, his watch-chain included a fob, a gold signet-ring adorned the tapering little finger of his left hand. On his head he wore a curly-brimmed top-hat, polished till it shone, and a high stiff collar of spotless white, with a carelessly arranged black stock about it, completed his costume.

He stepped out with an air, courteous yet subdued. The easy, debonair grace of high breeding pervaded his least movement. So handsome was he, indeed, that Maria, wondering for a moment, caught herself thinking he was too handsome almost, too handsome to be quite a gentleman. But her doubt did not survive a second. Her flash of hesitation passed. She made her mind up finally. Nor did she decide by his clothes, of course, but by his face, his air, his manner. No doubt remained. For her — he was most assuredly — a gentleman.

She gazed at him, he gazed at her. She could think of no single word to say. The turmoil of questions in her all died away as she took in this splendid and romantic figure. Admiration and pleasure were all she felt, and her nervousness was gone. He was adorable. He was indeed the perfect gentleman.

He was the first to utter and his voice was music in her ears. Raising his top-hat and sweeping it gracefully through the air, he made a most courteous bow. Straightening up the next second, he slipped the eyeglass into his rather melancholy blue eye. He managed it with consummate ease, she noticed, without opening his mouth at the same time.

“Your humble servant,” he addressed her suavely, a respectful smile upon his lips, “and my profound apologies for the delay in opening my door to you. As you so graciously understood, I was naturally a trifle anxious” — he glanced suspiciously at Judas in her arms—” regarding the intentions of your playful pet—”

“But he’s as good as gold,” broke in Maria, finding her first words. “Look at him!” She stroked his back. Judas peeped at the ceiling.

“He is in your arms,” the other bowed, turning a graceful compliment, “yet he has a powerful paw,” and before she had time to think what he meant, his deep, musical voice continued. “Though we have met before, Miss Maria, we have not yet spoken. My firm belief that you would one day come among us was unshakable. It has never wavered for a moment. It is justified at last. May I have the profound honour of introducing myself? I am — the Gentleman.”

He bowed so beautifully that she felt she could have watched him for ever. The eyeglass dropped neatly.

“My name is — Marigold—” she began, trying to make a curtsy, while gripping the now struggling Judas and holding out her free hand.

“*We* call you Maria,” he observed, “Miss Maria,” he added with deep respect, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips. He kissed it gravely. Carrying his hat with a sweeping gesture across his heart, he replaced it on his head, standing erect again.

Her sense of familiarity quickened as he told her his name and mentioned having met before. She had somehow known, of course, that he was the Gentleman, yet where she had seen him entirely escaped her. He had used the plural "we," as though there was a party and he was only one of several. There *were* others, of course, the occupants of the other rooms. She knew it. But who and what were these others? Where and when had she already come across them? Her mind was confused, her memory had gone astray. At the same time she had a curious unpleasant feeling that something was going on behind her and that there were other people near, that somebody was watching and listening. She caught faint sounds at the far end of the long corridor as though doors were opening cautiously, but when she turned to look there was nothing visible, no movement anywhere.

The Gentleman, having carefully adjusted the angle of his hat, was speaking, and she listened attentively, wishing only that he would use shorter sentences and not be so terribly polite. His courtesy, his grace, his winning smile and lovely voice had won her heart at once; but his perfect appearance dazzled her, and his deference was so overwhelming that she found it difficult to take in the meaning of his strange words, while the struggle to remember her very best manners made her a little self-conscious.

"And you will make full allowance, I beg you," he was saying, "for the emotion we experience upon coming face to face, after so long waiting, with one to whom we owe so much enjoyment and adventure, to whom, indeed, our very existence, of course, is due — to Miss Maria — our wonderful creator."

The word came upon Maria with a shock. She gave a little start. She wished Judas would not struggle and wriggle so.

"Your — creator, sir!" she exclaimed in bewilderment.

Raising his head from yet another deep bow, he looked meaningly into her face. His voice was respectful almost to reverence, but his eye was steady.

"You have given us life, Miss Maria, for without you we should never have existed. You called us into being."

Some lost hint of memory began to dawn as she heard these solemn words, so that almost — almost but not quite — she caught their full meaning. The shock repeated itself at the same time, making her muscles relax involuntarily, and Judas, aware of the weakening grip, gave one final wriggle and was free. He leaped suddenly to the floor and scampered away at his top speed without a second's pause. Right along the corridor he flew, and as he ran, the descending sounds of closing doors passed down the scale again. The others, whoever they might be, *had* been listening. They, too, were afraid of her black pet.

It all happened in an instant, and the Gentleman was himself again even before the cat's figure vanished in the distance. He had, however, stepped back, his hands had shot out in self-protection, he had been unable to control a sharp exclamation of alarm. His self-possession now returned immediately, however.

"My temporary weakness," he began to explain and excuse himself, "is over," he murmured apologetically. "He has knocked me down so frequently. I naturally expected he was about to attack me again. I ask your pardon and indulgence. At my age—"

"Judas — knocked you down, sir?" Maria cried, flabbergasted.

"On to the carpet merely," came the reply quietly, a little ashamed as well. "But it was nothing, for you invariably, in your great goodness, picked me up and put me back again."

"I picked you up! I put you back again! Off the carpet!" She could think of nothing but to repeat his own extraordinary words.

The Gentleman bowed, a trifle stiffly, perhaps, as though the incident were not particularly to his taste and best forgotten.

"At my age, I was about to say," he explained further in a lower voice, "I am unable to stick on as tightly as I could wish. The rim, too, is narrow as well as sloping. Oh, I blame myself," he hastened to add, "I blame myself entirely. You, Miss Maria, were always kindness and gentleness personified."

She stared at him with open mouth, and with such utter and obvious bewilderment that he smiled in quiet sympathy. Memory, however, began vaguely to stir in her. A faint picture was rising in her mind.

"The — er — plate, you see," he mentioned, as if casually.

And memory burst open like a bubble in her head.

“Oh! Oh!” she cried aloud. “The plate, the plate! The stones balanced round the edge! Judas playing with them and knocking them off on to the carpet! The fruit stones! My Fruit Stones! And you — you are, of course, the — the Gentleman!

She felt her eyes popping out of her head. Her hand groped for the wall to steady her.

“We are — er — the Fruit Stoners.” His calm voice came as from a distance. “*Your* Fruit Stoners. And I,” he added, with a sweep of his glistening hat, and the most graceful and adorable bow she had ever known, “I am — *your* Gentleman!”

CHAPTER V

MARIA REALIZED THAT she had been staring so hard and so long that this beautiful person must think she had no manners at all. She now, with a great effort, tried to collect her scattered faculties. But though she remembered perfectly how she and her black cat had played once with a row of prune stones balanced round the rim of a plate, and that Judas had sometimes knocked one of them off on to the carpet, her memory utterly refused to tell her where this was. The Fruit Stoners! she reflected, thrilled to her very inside. Of course! Tinker, Tailor, and the jolly rest of them! The Gentleman, indeed, she now recognized, was exactly the figure her mind always conjured up when it was his turn to be counted. She had always seen him just like that. He was, moreover, the one she had always chosen for a husband. He was adorable.

Remembering her manners, however, now at last she interrupted her rude staring, and found the best words she could to follow his surprising announcement. For there had been rather a long pause.

“I am delighted to meet you, sir,” she murmured with a pretty smile, while making a graceful curtsy, “and I hope — the others — will like me too.” Stammering a little, she added quickly: “And I’m awfully sorry about — about that carpet business.” The Gentleman shrugged his lordly shoulders with an air of careless abandon that she found quite magnificent. His shapely hand made a gesture in the air as though to sweep aside all such unwelcome memories as not worth a moment’s thought.

“Please believe,” he replied with grave deference, “that I am entirely at your service, now and always, and that I bear no ill-feeling of any kind whatsoever. I appreciate the difficulties of life, both your own and mine — or, I should say, ours. You will, no doubt, now bring order, permanence, security, meaning and even — may I mention it? — comfort too, into existences that have so long been without them.”

He swept his hat about a little more, then drew himself up straight as a ramrod, slipping the eyeglass back into his eye.

"Your gracious advent," he concluded with serious emphasis, "has been eagerly awaited, longed for, I may even add prayed for, by us all."

He stood there like a courtier ready for the next duty his sovereign would request, and the silence between them might have been indefinitely prolonged, but for something that then happened. Maria's heart, indeed, was beating so fast that no reply of any sort occurred to her. Such admiration, praise and deference rather overwhelmed her. Nor, indeed, had she understood a quarter of his long speech. What happened then to save her, while at the same time to set her in a sudden panic, was a sound. From far away it came and faintly, but unmistakable.

Tick tock! Tick tock! echoed somewhere through the building.

And as she heard it, a feeling of urgent haste, of alarm, with terror not far behind, entered her very blood. The sense of hurry caught her, the awful knowledge that time was passing, that she had only five minutes in which to accomplish some important purpose for which she came, and that her time must now be nearly up.

Like a cold wind this now rushed over her, the delightful feeling of endless leisure vanished.

She turned eagerly, more than a little frightened, to the Gentleman at her side.

"Oh, I quite forgot, it's awful of me, I *quite* forgot," her words rushed out in a confused stream. "That sound's only just reminded me. I came here to look for something, you see. Only I can't remember what it is. But it's something I *must* find. And I've only got five minutes. Oh, please, sir, Mr. Gentleman, can you help me? You will, won't you?"

She drew breath, aware at the same time that the sound she feared now seemed fainter a little, as though it were dying away.

"Miss Maria, we will all help you," exclaimed the Gentleman magnificently, "for, as you must be aware, there is no hurry," and he wore an air as though a thousand retainers, ready to do or die, must answer his beck and call. "The whole Ancient Order of Fruit Stoners, all eight of us, are at your service. We ask, indeed, nothing better than to do your slightest bidding." He bowed as a great statesman, a great aristocrat, a noble, might have bowed. “Pray, command me, Miss Maria,” he added, with his nose still lowered towards the floor.

Looking down upon his beautifully oiled and brushed hair, Maria wondered what on earth she could “command.” While realizing in a vague fashion that she had created these Fruit Stoners, had brought them into being, as it were, she yet could think of nothing definite and practical to ask. Confusion grew in her, for there was such a vast quantity of things she wanted to ask and know, that to choose between them was too difficult.

“I was brought here by the Man who Winds the Clocks, you see,” she said at length. “I came to look for something — something terribly, oh, terribly important. And he said he could allow me five minutes only. And, besides, I’ve forgotten what the thing is I’ve got to find — simply *got* to, you see.” Although this was merely repetition, the Gentleman listened with an air of absorbed attention. Waiting with deep interest, as though to make sure she had quite finished, he then gazed into her face so gently that she knew at once he was a marvellous diplomat as well as a perfect gentleman.

“The Man who Winds the Clocks,” he repeated suavely, yet indulgently a little too, “led you here?” It was as though he mentioned a figure in some fairy-tale, a personage to be summoned and dismissed at will, a trifler even, yet an amusing one.

“Yes,” she told him, “the man in the black tailcoat and striped trousers, with one leg longer than the other. He looks like a bird. You know the one I mean?”

“Ah,” came the non-committal comment, “ah, yes.”

“And he’s completely vanished now. He said he couldn’t stay. He seemed in an awful rush. You know who I mean?” she repeated. “That was his sound, of course, just now.”

The Gentleman smiled faintly. “We have seen him, yes,” he observed politely, “from time to time, that is. He never stays, of course.” He smiled again, as though the idea of the Clock Man amused him rather. “He cannot,” he added positively. “He’s always catching something up — himself, so he’s always late, as he calls it. Always trying to strike, or something fanciful like that.” He smiled benignly at her, fiddling carelessly with his eyeglass ribbon. “Here, of course,” he reminded her, “there is no such thing as hurry. Endless leisure is all we know. There is, indeed, no end, of course, to anything." He almost laughed outright. The Man who Wound the Clocks seemed merely a figure of fun to him.

"But he gave me my five minutes," Maria reminded him a trifle impatiently, "and I'm sure he's after me — trying to catch me. The time must be nearly up now, and I haven't even begun my search yet."

Even as she said it, however, she was aware that the feeling of being hurried had grown less: it seemed weakening more and more in some strange way. The *Tick tock!* had gone. The delicious sense of endless leisure was stealing back upon her.

"How long do you think five minutes *really* is?" she asked suddenly. "Can it be longer or shorter, perhaps?"

"Five minutes?" the Gentleman repeated blankly. The smile left his face and was replaced by a gentle gaze of complete bewilderment. "Five minutes, five minutes," he said again, to himself rather than to her. "Exactly, yes, of course. Er — ah — it is a curious question, is it not?" His puzzled expression deepened, as though he made an effort to grasp something entirely beyond him. His face became strangely darker, with queer wrinkles. "Five minutes, yes," he said once again, looking for a moment, she thought, exactly like a prune stone, lined and crinkly, "I — I fear I am no philosopher, Miss Maria. Our Apothecary, perhaps, would tell you better than I can. I propose that we go and find him, for you have not come across him yet."

"The Apothecary!" Maria cried. "Oh, yes, please let's!" She had always — somewhere — known a ridiculous apothecary, who could answer *any* question.

She was all agog again with excitement, too, to meet the rest of the Fruit Stoners; the Tinker, the Tailor, the Soldier, the Sailor, every one of them. Her feeling of alarm and hurry had entirely disappeared. Five minutes, whatever they meant, could evidently stretch like elastic, and she needn't worry about it. It was only the dreadful sound of *Tick tock!* that brought the sense of nervous haste and hurry, and, thank heaven, she could not hear it now. But, as she turned to her companion, expecting him to lead the way, she noticed quite a new expression on his face. The wrinkles had all smoothed away, a smile was there, but it was a different smile, a smile of peace. A look of strange beauty touched the eyes and mouth. His whole being for a second conveyed something solemn, a hint of awe, almost an idea of worship. He seemed still reflecting deeply.

He bent towards her, offering his arm with courtly dignity.

“You look so happy but so serious,” she said. “Is it *my* fault, please?”

“It concerns — this five minutes you speak of,” he murmured in a grave, hushed whisper, stumbling slightly in his speech, “it must concern, I suspect” — the voice sank to a solemn murmur—” Jack Robinson.” He straightened up again, taking her hand in his arm. “Come, let us go,” he said in his ordinary voice, as though the moment was too radiant to talk of solemn things, “and find the Apothecary and the others.”

Jack Robinson! The name went through her like a stroke of lightning. She shivered. How did she know that name? Where had she heard it? What did it mean to her? It thrilled her fearfully. Why did the Gentleman utter it in that voice of solemn awe, as though it were sacred almost? Why was his manner mysterious and hushed? Jack Robinson, Jack Robinson! It had a friendly sound, a meaning of tremendous power — yes, a powerful, tremendous name and meaning lay behind the syllables. And yet the syllables were familiar somehow. It was connected, she felt instinctively too, with the unpleasant Man who Wound the Clocks, the man who had given her only five minutes for her important, difficult search. In her heart of hearts, she was positive, Jack Robinson was more powerful than the other. Jack Robinson was friendly, and would somehow help her. Oh, what a strange, strange world this was, but how deliciously enchanting!

She looked up into the Gentleman’s face, taking his step, for he had already begun to move.

“Jack Robinson,” she exclaimed, wondering why she whispered it — but could find no further words.

The Gentleman said nothing either. She felt a slight shiver run along his arm. He lifted his hat slightly, bowed almost imperceptibly, screwed in his eyeglass more firmly, and quickened his pace along the empty corridor. And Maria, stepping along beside him arm-in-arm, felt inside like a boiler about to burst, for the excited delight and wonder in her was so tremendous they might have drawn a luggage train, or driven a great liner across the Atlantic.

She had no words, at any rate, to add to what had just been said. She just left the conversation where it was. This was her instinct and she obeyed it.

“Oh, Mr. Gentleman,” she cried instead, “what a marvellous place I’ve come to! What a wonderful world I’m in!”

He bent his head towards her. “It is *his* world,” he murmured, “but you made it. You made us too.” And with his free hand he pointed down the corridor, at the far end of which, she now saw, yet somehow without surprise, a group of figures. A confused sound of voices rose from them, like the buzzing of bumble bees in clover, then died away into silence as they approached.

Yet long before she reached the group that stood huddled about the top of the great stairs, she had recognized them. Their faces, peering across one another’s shoulders, stared at her expectantly, like a band of penguins she had seen somewhere waiting to be fed. For their heads twitched jerkily, rising and falling, as though they tried to see behind her.

They were standing in a ring. They were nervous obviously, and she was quick to guess the reason.

“It’s all right,” she called out. “My cat isn’t with me. And if he was he wouldn’t hurt you.” There was an audible sigh of collective relief by way of answer, as Maria picked out the figures she had seen in her mind so often. They shifted to and fro like a kaleidoscope, but there was no mistaking them, and they certainly all seemed entirely friendly, judging by their smiles. It was marvellous how they kept in that circular formation.

“One at a time, if you please,” announced the Gentleman in a voice of authority, as though he were their leader. “This is Miss Maria who has at last come down among us, as we always believed she would. Our hopes are fulfilled, our faith is justified. If we have much to ask of her, she, too, has many things to tell us, perhaps, indeed, to ask as well. And — we may hope — to do for us. With all our hearts, and in the name of us all, we bid her welcome, and if some of the questions she puts to us may seem — may seem — er — if we find difficulty, that is, in — er—”

Whether he realized that no one, Maria least of all, was listening to his long-winded speech, seemed uncertain; but, at any rate he stepped back now and leaned against the wall, mopping his face with a coloured silk handkerchief, while he searched, perhaps, for the lost fragments of his broken sentence. Maria, for her part, was so intent upon the group before her that she was hardly aware of his withdrawal. These were her Fruit Stoners! It was the Sailor, perhaps, she thought of chiefly. One of them, who had been examining her steadily through a long telescope that he rested on the shoulder in front of him, now shut it down with a click, and skipped out towards her. He was dressed in blue. And it was, of course, the Sailor.

Her heart gave a leap of pleasure as she saw him. He was light as a feather. Gold rings swung from his ears. He hitched his loose trousers, did a rapid hornpipe step with crossed arms, sang a bar of something about a "lass upon the quay," then doffed his little blue cap, clapped the long telescope back to his eye though she was only two feet away, and before she could do anything, cried out with a merry laugh: "How d'ye do, Miss? Why, you're lookin' splendid, so 'elp me gawd! Better than I ever saw you, or I'm a land-lubber, which of course I ain't!"

"So are you, Sailor!" she cried back, pleased and flattered that he recognized her, and finding him too lovely for words. "Looking splendid, I mean. You're just exactly what I thought you'd be!" She wanted to dance herself. Her heart was thumping.

"Just what I feel on lookin' at you, Miss," he laughed gaily, catching the whistle that swung on a lanyard round his neck. "I'd like to pipe all 'ands on deck to see you." And he actually blew a short, shrill blast, as he danced round her. "I'm always at home to you, Miss, if you're ever this way, and I've been a weary long time waitin' for a sight of you, shiver my timbers, if you'll forgive my saying so, though I knew — oh, I was positive sure of that — I *knew* you'd turn up one day." He flung his legs and arms about in his happy dance, and he seemed the very spirit of careless fun and jollity.

His hand stretched out to her and she caught it; she began dancing with him. He whirled her about, swinging the telescope above his head.

"Oh, but I'd love to come," she cried rather breathlessly. "It's just exactly what I've always wanted."

"A sailor's life for me," he went on singing, "but a bloke does get tired o' waitin', all the same, while the seas go rollin' by—"

"I can come any time," she repeated, afraid he might forget that he had asked her. She paused to get her breath. "When will you be in, please? And where do you live?"

He stopped dancing and singing, and gazed at her as though she were some strange craft at sea. The merry laughter left his face.

"Well, Miss," he replied, hitching his trousers nervously, "that, I take it, depends on *you,*" and a curious note of respect and deference came into the voice.

"Depends on *me*?"

"Well he hesitated, his manner a little anxious, almost grave—" of course there ain't no 'urry, not where *I'm* concerned," he mentioned. His clear blue eyes looked at her with a question in them, yet a question he did not dare, it seemed, to put into words.

"Oh, my five minutes, of course," she exclaimed, her heart sinking a little. "Yes, I've only got five minutes. I forgot. That awful, horrid Clock Man!"

He gazed at her with the same expression of puzzled blankness the Gentleman had shown.

"Five minutes, Miss, five minutes?"

"That's all he gave me," she explained.

A sign of laughter flashed back into his face, almost contemptuous laughter.

"'Im!" was all he said.

"Yes, 'im." Maria copied him before she could correct herself.

The Sailor now laughed outright, and his laughter seemed somehow to laugh the Clock Man out of existence, for the moment, anyhow.

"It's only flashin' in and flashin' out again, gone as soon as come," he chuckled. "He don't count, not 'ere with us—"

"So I can come and see you any time, can I?" she asked quickly, greatly relieved, if hardly knowing exactly why.

"Depends on you, Miss," he repeated. "It's any time and place you say, of course. Choose the year and I'll be there. I'm a bit all over the place with this year and next year and sometimes never. Sort of rovin' life with a vengeance. But no complaints, Miss, no complaints from me, understand. Long voyages all the time and just off on another — next year's, I think, if it ain't last. But 'oo cares, so long as we're all 'appy!"

"Yes, 'oo cares?" she cried, clapping her hands in her excitement.

He began to dance again, his lanyard swung, his gold ear-rings tossed about. And the meaning in his strange words dawned in Maria's mind as she watched and listened.

"Only say the word, Miss," he went on, more gaily now, "and the moment I'm back with me pockets full o' money I'll be lookin' for ye on the quay."

"Oh, this year, please," Maria cried quickly, "this year, of course — now! I've only got five minutes! Let's make it a party — with the Soldier and—"

The Sailor seemed growing oddly smaller, as though distance had crept in somehow.

"I always said you'd be turnin' up one of these fine days" — his voice reached her more faintly now—" and 'elp to put us straight. I always believed in you. I knew you didn't mean no 'arm, making us the way you did, and I shall always love you, Miss."

She saw him clap the telescope to his eye, but it was a long way off. He was going, oh, he was going, she realized. He was already among the group. He was in the ring again. He was disappearing. And with him was going, too, all the romance and mystery of the sea, of wind whistling in the rigging, of hidden treasure, of pirates, of coral islands basking far away in calm, blue oceans, and of long voyages she had always yearned to make.

"This year, this year, Sailor — Now!" she cried out, and took a quick running step after him.

Tick tock! Tick tock! sounded at that same instant in her ears. She pretended, she tried hard, not to hear it.

The Sailor was going; he was gone. The ring of figures was whirling round and round. The *Tick tock!,* on the other hand, was coming nearer; it was growing louder. Oh, what was she to do? What *could* she do? The feeling of rush and hurry, of being late, of wasting time, the panic of being caught before she was ready, before her search had even begun — all this came pouring over her. Her five minutes must have been up ages ago. And she had done nothing, nothing. That dreadful sound! It haunted her. It always came just when she was enjoying herself.

Tick tock! It sounded all about her, coming from every direction at once, from behind her, in front of her, and above her. It filled the air. It beat remorselessly in her ears. She began to feel she was losing her head, when suddenly it once again lost volume, it grew much fainter, it was dying away, it was gone. Had it only been a warning again after all, perhaps, a warning that she was here with an important purpose, a warning that time was passing? This thought flashed through her at high speed. She tried to remember the powerful name. It all left her gasping.

"He's come and gone, Miss," a calm voice said quite close to her. "He never can stay, anyhow. It's only one of his little tricks really. Just forget it." She turned to see who spoke such comforting words, and even as she did so it struck her that all this time she had quite forgotten there was a whirling, circular group at all. She had forgotten their existence, as if they simply were not there. Queer, she reflected. "When I don't think of them perhaps they just go out!" If that was so, she must never forget them again, or it might hurt their feelings terribly. She threw a quick glance at the Gentleman, and it relieved her to see that he, at any rate, was still there, leaning against the wall, mopping his face. He caught her eye and instantly raised his hat an inch or two, while his skin, which had become very dark and crinkly, a little shrunken even, at once regained something of its former colour and smoothness. They exchanged a rapid smile. Oh, he *was* a darling!

All this happened while she was in the act of turning round to see who it was had spoken. It was, she saw, the Soldier, in a bright red tunic, his blue trousers smartly creased, standing just in front of her at attention, and in the act of saluting.

"He's gone, Miss, gone into next year right enough," he went on in a deep, steady, husky voice, "so I hope now we'll all get the same chance. I speak for the army. Thanks for coming."

He saluted once more, then took a pace sharply to the rear, and clicked his heels as if awaiting orders.

Whether he referred to the Clock Man or to the Sailor, as having gone into next year, Maria did not know; nor did she seem to care much, her heart was fluttering too fast to think. She gazed at the figure steadily enough, however. His tight trousers wore a stripe of gold down the sides, his belt was white, his buttons sparkled, the braid on his peaked cap shone and glittered. He was quite gorgeous. He stood stiffly, as though rods of iron ran down his back and legs. He stared straight before him, looking neither right nor left. His face, darkly crinkled like the others, had less expression than a block of wood, but his jaw was aggressive, his shoulders of iron stood four-square. He was a fighter, a V.C., of course.

This was the man who had just saved her from the Clock Man, she was convinced; it was also the Soldier exactly as she had always imagined him. He had comforted her, at any rate.

“Thank you for rescuing me so — magnificently,” she heard herself saying in a voice that shook a trifle, yet was low and quiet. “I feel *very* grateful to you.” Her heart was fluttering.

“Oh, that’s all right, Miss,” came the gruff answer, as though a relief force long expected had turned up as a mere matter of duty. “I’m always at ‘and when needed.”

“You’re even better than I expected,” Maria said, with a thrill in her voice, “and I’m glad you’re not a Colonel. I like a private best. I always thought of you as a brave fighter with a V.C.”

“I took the shilling. God bless the King,” he said, moving no muscle of his face. “They gave me a V.C. I did nothing in particular.”

Maria found it rather difficult to carry on a conversation with a man so splendid but so stiff. He might have been made of marble. She racked her brains. An army phrase occurred to her.

“Oh, please stand easy,” she produced with a nice smile, and was so relieved to see him suddenly relax all over, moving his arms and legs as if he had no joints at all, that she went up close to him and looked up into his face without hesitation.

“Soldier,” she said as sweetly as she could, “will you do something for me?”

“Anything, Miss Maria,” he replied, using her name for the first time and pronouncing it, she thought, delightfully.

“I’ve come here — been brought here, that is — to look for something.”

“Look for something,” he repeated.

“And I’ve forgotten what it is—”

“Forgotten what it is,” he repeated as before.

“Yes, isn’t it awful?”

“Awful!”

“And I thought perhaps you might help me to remember — if we tried — er — together.”

An expression of deep thought came on his face. He did not reply for a moment.

“I’ll do my best, Miss Maria,” he said presently. “What is it you’ve forgotten?” he asked simply.

“But that’s just what I can’t remember. If I knew, it wouldn’t be forgotten.”

She spoke with a touch of impatience, but he did not seem to notice it. “No, of course it wouldn’t, would it?” was all he said.

“It’s frightfully important,” she went on; “most terribly important. I know that. I’ve got to search and search everywhere for it, oh, everywhere. If I don’t find it — I daren’t think what would happen.”

“We’ll all help,” said the Soldier, moved evidently by her distress. “Every one of us. We’ll search with you. Oh, we’ll — you’ll find it right enough. Only don’t forget *us* whatever you do.”

“I’ll never forget any of you for a single minute,” she assured him. “I promise. But, remember, I’ve only got five minutes.”

“Only got five minutes,” he repeated, in the odd way he just repeated all she said, as though he never thought for himself.

Yet that was right and natural, she reflected, for a soldier’s job was not to think, but to obey orders and be a brave fighter. That was why he had asked her what she had forgotten when he had heard her tell him she had forgotten. He could help her search, no doubt, but only in the sense of doing what he was told to do.

“I can depend on him,” she told herself. “Whatever happens, he would never let me down. He would protect me too.” His bravery must be something awful. There was no question about his steadiness, nor about his splendour, and her heart, still fluttering with admiration, warmed to the stalwart fellow.

Oh, she was going to have a grand time, she was going to enjoy herself tremendously. It was a very wonderful place she had come to. That haunting, following sound now alarmed her less; it had gone, anyhow, its dreadful warning was no longer audible. What puzzled her more was the way the Fruit Stoners all smiled when she said she had only five minutes. The Clock Man seemed almost a figure of fun to them. The Soldier had even said something about a “trick.” He was smiling now, as she looked at him. A touch of laughter hovered about the corners of his stern lips. “Five minutes, five minutes,” he kept repeating, though more to himself than to her, “only got five minutes.” The laughter ran visibly beneath his skin. And it was plain that his habit of rigorous discipline alone prevented his exploding into a loud guffaw.

Would all the others, too, show this same happy indifference towards a matter that to her seemed so grave and serious?

The others! There, she was forgetting them again. There were several more to see; she wanted to meet them all, all — the Tailor and Tinker and Ploughboy, oh, every one of them. There was, above all, she remembered, a Thief, and — oh, more important still — the Apothecary. The Gentleman had referred to him particularly. The entire Company of Fruit Stoners, that is, passed through her mind at once, and she did not fasten her thought upon any one of them especially.

The Soldier, still standing at ease, had not moved. She had better get him out of the way first, it occurred to her, though she did not want him really to go. Still, he would always be within reach, she remembered.

“Dismiss!” The word sprang to her lips, and she saw him instantly give the salute, turn on his heels with a click, and step back towards the top of the stairs. It was queer, she thought, how instantly he appeared to dwindle, pass into a kind of distance, melt and merge into the rather shadowy background where the top of the great staircase met the angle of the walls. He retired to join the whirling ring, but as her eye followed him, the group was not so clearly visible as it had been. A confused and rather dim medley of figures and faces was all she could make out at first, with no one in particular she could pick out definitely.

“Oh, please, my other Fruit Stoners,” she called aloud, “please come and talk to me. I want to meet you all — every one of you.”

CHAPTER VI

WHAT THEN IMMEDIATELY happened in response to her invitation was certainly, she thought, remarkable; it took her, at any rate, unawares. For she had expected that the other Fruit Stoners would answer her summons gradually, coming up to her one by one, and rather shyly. There were only five or six of them to come, for the Soldier and Sailor had gone, and the Gentleman was still mopping his face against the wall behind her.

Instead of advancing singly, however, and with hesitation, the whole group was upon her in a whirling flash. She was surrounded by them, they were all about her, and they seemed like two dozen instead of five or six. They seemed to fly up to her as if blown by a wind. Their hands were outstretched, their crinkly faces swirled like eddying water, their figures merged indistinguishably as they whirled past and round her. It was quite impossible in this jumble to pick out one definite outline from another. And at first this puzzled her completely, until the explanation a moment later flashed upon her. She saw then that they appeared so numerous because they moved so rapidly, and they were indistinct because this movement was circular. They were running round her in a circle. She stood in the centre of the circle. But the reason she saw them merged together, as it were, was because she had thought of them as a general group rather than as separate individuals. Movement round the rim of a plate, she remembered, was, of course, the one that came most easily to them.

She must choose the one she wished to meet and call him out, and it was the Tailor, for some reason, who earned this privilege. She knew of no special reason for picking him out, nor was there anything particular she had to say to him. It was merely that his name popped into her head.

“Oh, Tailor,” she cried out, “come, please, and talk to me. I want to ask you something,” for in the act of speaking his name it occurred to her that his very sharp eyes would help her in the great search. She would tell him about it at once. “Come, Tailor,” she added, “there’s no plate spinning really. I’ve a very important thing for you to do, and I need your sharp eyes. Come, my Tailor, come, please!”

The whirling movement ceased, the main group whirled back into the shadows by the stairs, and a single figure was at once in front of her; yet the instant she set eyes on him clearly she found him so delightful, and he made her laugh so, that the important questions she had meant to ask passed from her mind completely, and the urgent matter of her search was all forgotten. He had never been in any way a special favourite of hers, but now, as he stood out sharply against the less visible group behind him, he seemed uncommonly attractive, and he was, moreover, exactly as she had always imagined him.

A little fellow with bright eyes in a sallow face, he darted out in his shirt-sleeves, carrying round his neck a long tape-measure, and in one hand a very large pair of scissors. He was extremely light on his toes, shooting here, there and everywhere with what she called a hoppity-skip sort of movement, and the first words he spoke were similar in kind to what the others had also said.

“I’m quite ready, Miss,” he exclaimed in a piping voice, “quite ready for you. It’s been a long time waiting, but I knew you’d be coming to see me as soon as you could. I felt sure of that. Will you step this way, if you please, Miss?”

He seemed pleased as Punch, yet his manner was most attentive and respectful, though he did not move aside to lead the way, because, she supposed, there was nowhere particular to step to. He skipped, instead, from foot to foot, examined her closely and critically all over, touched her, pinched her, stooped to measure her length from neck to feet, and then finally, as he passed the tape about her waist, exclaimed with great decision, “Blue serge for winter, merino for summer, I should advise, Miss, only the skirts are worn now a trifle longer,” and then his voice became suddenly fainter, and he fell to mumbling a long string of words to himself as though he had learned them by heart and did not really know their meaning, all of them, however, names of stuffs for dresses she would have liked to wear. “Organdie, georgette, chiffon, taffeta, charmeuse, *crêpe de Chine...*” she caught, and a host of other enchanting words, and then, his voice growing quite loud and ordinary again, “silk, satin, calico, rags.,” and as he called these last four, he began dancing about again on his toes, snapping his big shears vigorously, even dangerously, she thought, to mark the time.

"Ready for the fitting, Miss, whenever you are. Any time suits me," and then he added suddenly with a wry face, "Alas!"

The laughter left her as she looked down into his rather puzzled and crinkled face. He was kneeling on one knee now, taking another measure over again.

"Oh, then are you too bothered by something?" she asked.

Holding the tape between finger and thumb as he marked off the inches carefully, he turned up his darting eyes to her.

"Not to say bother, Miss," he replied, forcing a quick, polite, even fervent smile. "I wouldn't call it *that,* seeing as how it's yourself that calls the tune. But I'm moved about a good deal, what with the Big House, Little House, Pig Stye and all the rest. I'd get a better fit, maybe, if I was fixed sort of more permanent. And by myself. There are eight of us, you know, and only four places to live in. Myself, I don't like doubling up much."

He opened and shut his big scissors thoughtfully, and a rather weary expression in his eyes stirred a feeling of pity in her as she saw it. She had never thought of it before, but eight men with only four places to live in was not right, and doubling up, as he called it, must be most uncomfortable. "Oh dear!" she thought to herself, "to create things means an awful lot of care!"

"It's troublesome with my needles, you see, Miss, for one thing. I keep leaving them about. A lot of them are in the Barn still, only I'm not sure if it was some year or last year I left them there. You moved me off so quickly. I'm afraid they're lost — and you put me in with the Thief as often as not —"

"Lost!" she interrupted sharply, for the word woke something in her with a sting. "But *I've* lost something too. I'm here to look for a lost thing — a forgotten thing — only it isn't needles. It's far more important than needles."

He eyed her doubtfully. "What could be more important, Miss?" he asked. "How am I to pin you up without my needles?"

She could think of no really good answer to that, so she asked a question instead. "Who are you doubling up with at the moment — er — this year, I mean?” she inquired sympathetically.

“Well, I’ve got the Tinker just now, Miss, as you know, but he isn’t much of a bother really, because he’s out on the road so much!” He looked over his shoulder quickly towards the group. “But he’s here now, I see,” he added. “He knew you had come, of course. One more fitting, Miss, will do the trick — only one—”

The voice grew fainter, dying away, fading, less convincing. An odd sound interrupted the chattering Tailor, who was now gone before she had time to say good-bye, and the new figure that stepped forward she recognized instantly as the Tinker, her beloved Tinker, for he was not only the first to be mentioned in the old saying, but in imagination she had always visualized him with peculiar clearness. A whiff of the open road came with him, the tang of fragrant wood smoke, and the odd sound that had preceded him was the rattling of pots and pans and a kettle with the lid tied on by string, that swung jangling from his belt. Behind him was a travelling grindstone on wheels, and with his left thumb he was feeling the edge of a long-bladed knife in his other hand. His bearded, crinkly face, tanned and weathered by the open life, was just as she knew it would be, his ragged, tattered clothing, the frayed rim of trousers over the old boots too. It was on the knife, however, her eyes seemed to fasten with peculiar interest.

“My faithful Tinker,” she exclaimed affectionately, “here you are at last.”

“Here, there and everywhere,” he said sadly, “come to-day and gone to-morrow, and the way you’re always shifting me — by your leave, Miss — is something awful.” A grin showed on his crinkled skin, but it was a kindly grin. “Still, there’s a road past every door,” he added, “and leastways, there’s a good edge on this at last,” as he felt the blade lovingly again. He looked up at her with a kind of respectful wonder. Also he looked significantly at the knife in his hand.

“It does look terribly sharp,” mentioned Maria tactfully. “It took you some time, I suppose?”

He gave a deep chuckle in his throat. “Begun in the Big House, Miss, when you put me in silk, continued in the Little House with a strip of calico to cover my old bones, and just finished now on my way from the Pig Stye in rags to the Barn in satin, I suppose." There was a grievance in his voice and manner, but not one he took too seriously.

"I'm so sorry," Maria murmured, "I — I"

"It's the knife," he interrupted her rapidly but gravely, "the one you've so often spoken about," and as he said this a familiar phrase flashed across her mind: "Before you can say knife!"

"Will you keep it for me," she said quickly, for he was already holding it out to her, "till I need it," she added, lowering her voice.

"It will be quite safe with me, yes," he whispered, putting it away behind him somewhere in the wheeled stand, "but you mustn't forget it — or forget me either—"

"Forget it — forget!" She seized once again on the word.

He gave her a searching look. "That's your trouble, Miss, especially with us, isn't it? Forgetting, always forgetting. And they tell me there's something you've come here to look for—"

"I should think there is, indeed, Tinker," she exclaimed under her breath, "something most frightfully important—"

"I haven't noticed anything pertickler on the road this last year or two, Miss," he put in casually, "but I'll keep my eyes open now. Any idea what it would look like," he asked, "in case I see it?"

"Its very name has gone out of my head," she explained eagerly. "That's the dreadful part of it. I only know that the Man who Winds the Clocks put me here to find it and allowed me five minutes only—"

"That bloke!" the Tinker remarked with a sniff of contempt.

He fell to ruminating, but Maria could see that the laughter in him was not far away. They were all alike where the Clock Man and her five minutes were concerned; neither one nor the other meant anything much, it was clear, to them.

"You know whom I mean, of course — don't you, Tinker?" she asked.

After a further short rumination, he glanced up, his brown eyes twinkling.

"Oh, we've heard tell of him," he admitted, "and some of us say they've seen him. Now and again, they say, he rushes through with a swish like a bird after an insect, but so fast you can't see him proper."

"Have *you* ever seen him?"

He shook his tangled head. "On the road — in the open air — there ain't no nonsense of that kind, Miss. Among 'edges and 'aystacks we don't 'old with that. It's just a bit of nonsense likely, sort of childhood nonsense, to my way of thinking." Then, after a little pause, he added with rather a melancholy smile, "Childhood nonsense is just what we know nothing about, because we ain't never been young. Nor even been married — never seen a wife since you first made us." He heaved a sigh. "All men, you see, Miss, and not quite young 'uns at that."

He gazed up at her with an expression that was not so much critical as searching. For a second she thought he was going to cry. "What does it look like, Miss, really — a wife, I mean, and — and a little 'un?"

Maria, half choking long before this with mingled shame and pity, felt as if the fountain of speech had dried up in her for ever. His gaze, however, was irresistible. She must say something.

"A wife! Oh — er — like — something like — me, I think," she stammered in a low voice.

"Oooo!" issued from the tangled lips. "As lovely as you, Miss! No wonder you couldn't make one when you made us — not eight of 'em anyhow." He ruminated again for a minute or so. "Never too late to mend, though, perhaps — that's my cry on the road as I go along between the cattle and the corn, sleeping in haystacks and — Ah, that reminds me," he interrupted himself, "the Ploughboy's looking for you, Miss. I passed him as I came along. Standing in the middle of a stubble field, he was, and looking like a scarecrow with the birds nesting in his crooked hat — and always nibbling at the same old turnip—"

"The Ploughboy!" cried Maria. "Oh, I had nearly forgotten him! Where is he? Come, Ploughboy, come and talk to me, please!"

The rattling of tin cans, the drone of a grinding knife, already sounded in the distance, and the Tinker had slipped away so swiftly that she did not even see him go. But nobody took his place at first. Far away she just caught the cry, “Any old knives to mend, to mend, any old knives to mend,” and as she heard it, a familiar phrase flashed into her. It sprang to her lips.

“Before you can say knife!” she called out, and almost instantly the place beside her was occupied, while with it came the smell of cows and hay and the sweetness of moist turned earth.

“I found all the gates left open, so I guessed you was about,” said a slow, country voice. “There was a sky, too, last night I’ve never seen afore. Something ‘stonishing! The birds was making a rare noise when I got up at dawn. I’m right glad to see you.”

“So am I,” replied Maria honestly, staring at the big, clumsy lad, with corduroy trousers tied below the knee. “Are you — all right — the way I made you?” she asked. “Are you tired of ploughing, I mean, and where do you live?” The blunt questions were all she could think of to say.

He scratched his untidy head, and the straw he was chewing jerked round to the other corner of his mouth.

“Never known anything else,” he brought out slowly, gazing at her with a sort of stupefied admiration. “The Pig Stye and the Barn suit me well enough. Oh, I’m all right, thanks.”

It was a relief to find one of them without a grievance. There was a gleam in his eyes that lightened the otherwise stolid face, and he had, she thought, a delicious smell about him.

“I think you’re rather splendid,” she exclaimed, “just like a grand picnic, or something.”

He might have looked cleaner, perhaps, but she omitted that. Brushed up and scrubbed, and with all that stuff scraped off his great boots, she could have gone anywhere with him. Yet he was precisely as she had always pictured him, and probably, after all, he was best unaltered. She felt a tremendous friendliness in him somehow. “The cows and pigs just love you, don’t they, Ploughboy? And the enormous cart-horses you drive and feed? The dobbins and huge, kindly creatures?”

The way he looked at her made her feel unimportant somehow, so that his obvious admiration rather puzzled her. The things she said to him were not at all what she had expected and meant to say, but just sentences that rose into her head from nowhere. It seemed to her he would understand and not feel hurt, and, while not exciting, of course, in any way, he was, she felt, a tremendously steady and reliable friend. He would no more fail her than he would fail one of his cows or horses. The desire to give him a good hug occurred to her.

“I’d like to shake your horny hand,” came abruptly from her lips.

She held out her own, and as he took it hesitatingly, she saw to her amazement a tear balanced in his eye. He only held her small fingers a second; instead of squeezing them so hard that it hurt, causing her pain she had been determined not to let him see, he dropped them at once.

“Oh, God, you’re better even than I’ve always expected,” he said very slowly, finding the words with difficulty, his deep voice not quite under control. “An awful lot better.” The tear overbalanced and trickled down his red cheek, while another that gathered was ready to follow it. “Never seen a heifer that could touch you, Miss.”

“What’s making you cry, Ploughboy?” she asked in a whisper.

He blushed crimson, a rather becoming crimson. “Pleasure,” he mumbled, gazing into her face with a kind of worship. And it seemed the last word he was able to utter. To everything else she said he replied only with a nod, a shake of the head, a gesture of his great awkward body, though she found a sort of grace in all his movements. The sight of her so close and real seemed to have stopped his power of further speech.

“You know, I’ve got to hurry up and look for something,” she told him. “I can’t remember what it is, but you *will* help me, won’t you? It may be hiding in your great fields and haystacks.”

He nodded, so that the second tear fell after the first, and though he took no notice of them, even to brush them away, a smile crept over his face.

“You’re not in a hurry,” she went on, “you’re never in a hurry, I know; but I’ve only got my five minutes, and that horrid Man who Winds the Clocks is always after me—”

His smile broadened into a grin that showed two rows of nice white teeth.

“ — and I mustn’t dawdle, you see, or I shall — I shall be late — late for ever perhaps,” she finished.

Though his skin puckered up to show that he was puzzled, and the grin seemed ready to break over into audible laughter, no sound left his lips. He merely nodded his great head affirmatively, thrusting both hands into his belt.

“So I think we’d better begin at once,” she added with decision. “And do you mind — if — if — I bring my cat?” For it had suddenly come to her that she had completely forgotten Judas all this time, and what had now reminded her was the feeling of something rubbing against her feet and ankles.

What happened then took her by surprise, though she had begun to think that nothing could surprise her any more in this strange world. The arrival of Judas did not frighten him; the Ploughboy held his ground; but there were two other figures besides that also held their ground; more than held their ground, indeed, for while the rest of the group had disappeared like smoke, these two were now advancing towards her. And the first, of course, was the Gentleman, bowing and sweeping his hat about, while screwing his monocle tightly into the eye he directed cautiously at the black cat below. That he was nervous about the animal was obvious, but he was determined not to show his fear. He wore a protective air, as of a policeman guiding a perambulator while he holds the traffic up.

“Your Thief,” he remarked, by way of cautious introduction evidently, buttoning up his coat. “He craves an interview.”

“I’ve nothing to lose,” remarked the Ploughboy, finding his voice again but without much body in it.

He took a whetstone from his belt at the same time and held it tightly in his muscular hand. He grew fainter.

Maria turned to examine the approaching figure. “*My* Thief!” ran across her mind. “Well, I suppose he is, if I made him!”

A faint shiver touched her. Her mental picture of the Thief had always made her shrink a little. The figure she now saw did more than that. She was conscious of a definite sort of shock that ran through her whole being from head to foot, for the figure attracted her tremendously while at the same time repelled her, as though he frightened her a little.

He was of nameless age, neither old nor young, with a dark, clean-shaven face, down at heel rather, and wearing a green frock-coat that had once been black, old grey trousers turned up over a pair of faded blue sand-shoes, and a dirty collar without a tie. The short coat-sleeves made his very thin, delicate wrists noticeable, setting off at the same time the slender hands which, though distinctly dirty, gave the odd impression of being white. They were beautiful hands. The long, sensitive fingers struck Maria particularly.

“If you don’t like me, Miss,” he began in a smooth, pleasant voice that was even refined, “it’s not my fault exactly, is it?” He held out a slender hand, which she took and shook before she quite realized it, wondering again at the tapering fingers. They felt like silk, she thought. The touch had something electrifying.

“I suppose,” she stammered slightly, “there had to be a thief — and — well — there you are.” Instinctively she shrank the slightest bit in the world, unable to control the movement, but yet aware he noticed it. He noticed everything. Judas, to her surprise, was making friendly advances to him, and for some odd reason she was pleased. “You’re an awfully good thief, I expect — aren’t you?” she managed to bring out.

He smiled a delightful smile, his intelligent eyes twinkled.

“I take everything I can,” he replied; “that’s natural. No one minds here, of course.” He stooped down and stroked Judas’s back. “I’d take him, too, if I could, but he’s always too quick for me—”

“Well, you can,” she said impulsively. “Take him, if you like.”

He shook his head.

“You mean, if something’s given, it’s not taking?” she asked.

He nodded. “It’s only taking if the other wants it and if I want it more still,” he explained. He looked at her with his twinkling, penetrating eyes. “You ought to know, Miss,” he added.

And Maria felt that she *did* know; she felt, indeed, a curious elusive sympathy with the queer fellow, as though they shared some kind of natural understanding. The fact that Judas liked him belonged to this.

“I think it’s a pity I made you, all the same,” she heard herself remark with surprise, yet she was still more surprised to hear his comment:

“You made us all out of yourself, Miss, or I’m an honest man—”

“Which you’re not,” she interrupted quickly, laughing in spite of herself, noticing that his eyes were fixed attentively on a necklace of beads she wore round her neck. “I like you, anyhow,” she added, “whatever you are,” and became aware for the first time that the Gentleman and Ploughboy had left her, and that Judas also had disappeared. Her interest in the Thief had made her forget about them for the moment. She turned her head, but the long corridor was empty and her eyes searched its whole length in vain. Even the whirling group of other Fruit Stoners had melted away, and she could see nothing but the bright pools of sunshine that fell through the series of windows upon the polished wooden floor. And the sight of this lovely sunshine gave her the desire to go out of doors, a desire, however, that merely passed suddenly across her mind without a definite purpose behind it. There was, of course, an out of doors, yet it seemed inaccessible. She could not go there quite. For the realization that she was now alone with the Thief was more prominent than anything else.

She turned her head back again to say something, to ask, in fact, one of numerous questions that sprang crowding up — to find that he, too, was no longer there. The Thief had gone. Her hand went instantly to her neck. The bead necklace was still there, but there was something missing. What was it? Her hand moved to her hair. He had taken — with those marvellous, lightning fingers — the blue silk ribbon. Those electric, slender hands had touched her hair, perhaps her face as well!

She was alone — in the long, deserted corridor.

CHAPTER VII

WAS SHE, HOWEVER, quite alone? A queer feeling came to her that somebody was close, that she was being watched by observant eyes belonging to someone she could not see, yet who could see her. The deep hush everywhere was like the hush that comes in a thunderstorm. She looked about her, but nothing stirred, there was no sound. It was all so still she could hear her own heart beating, and it was beating a little too rapidly for comfort.

Her mind and thoughts were in a whirl. The way everybody had disappeared made her uneasy. The introductions to the Fruit Stoners, with the scraps of conversation, must have taken a long time surely, yet they seemed to have come and gone in a flash. The series of brief scenes had passed like lightning, leaving behind them little more than a fugitive memory, a memory that in some odd way was not altogether real.

"Of course they are real, quite real," she told herself indignantly. "I'm just being silly!"

But her mind whirled more than ever. Where had they gone to, the Gentleman, Sailor, Tinker,

Soldier, Ploughboy, Thief? Even Judas had vanished like a shadow. The way she kept forgetting things was dreadful, forgetting and forgetting. There! She had even forgotten why she was here at all. It was her interest in the Fruit Stoners that made her forget. They were so amusing, so astonishing, that they put everything out of her head. It was the Fruit Stoners who made her forget. That was it, she told herself. Did they do it purposely, or was she herself to blame? Her mind whirled on.

"There!" she exclaimed to herself, "if I haven't completely forgotten again why I came here. I've got some tremendous, awful purpose. It's the object of my life really." A solemn shudder ran through her. She stared right and left along the great, empty corridor. "Oh! I've got it, I've got it!" flashed suddenly into her mind. "I'm here to *find* — to look for something — of course — !

Yet she did not bring back this memory herself, it was a sound that brought it, galvanizing her whole being, a sound, yes, faint and distant: the small, quiet ticking that was so small and quiet it was now like the ticking of a watch.

"*Tick tock! Tick tock!*" But as though it came this time from a long way off. For a moment, indeed, it sounded on her own person, inside her almost, as from a watch she carried in belt or pocket, almost in her very heart. Much fainter it had grown.

"*Tick tock! Tick tock!*"

She knew now who was watching her, to whom the observant, hidden eyes belonged, and as the feeling of haste and flurry rushed over her with its horrid panic touch, she turned round and round, trying to look everywhere at once. A movement then quite close caught her eye, at the window facing her not two yards away, but outside. A figure stood peering at her through the glass, its face pressed against the very pane without quite touching it — the face of the Man who Wound the Clocks.

He was after her again! He was always at her heels!

The very first instant she saw the dreaded face it leaped across her mind that there was someone who could help. There was a name, a powerful and mighty name — that entirely escaped her. A prodigious, glorious name. Memory was too bruised and slow to find it. Oh, what was it? The lips of the face, she saw, were moving, and though she could not catch the actual sound, she could see that they were repeating "Five Minutes! Five minutes!"

A lesser word flashed into her. "Knife! Knife!" she cried out, though her voice was little more than a frightened whisper, and while the face withdrew slightly, the figure did not go. It faded a little, however, and the ticking sound seemed fainter. How the fixed eyes stared at her through the windowpane! How the lips opened and closed as they went on mouthing the phrase that gave her this sense of nervous hurry! "Five Minutes! Five Minutes! — the movement of the mouth and lips was easy to read, the words almost audible.

The hands now rose above the sill, fingering the window fastenings. The shoulders hunched, two arms stretched higher. Horrors! He was trying to come in.

“But I’m searching, I *am* searching!” cried Maria. “I’ve begun to look. I shall find it — before — before anyone can — say knife!”

The words tore out of her, for she could think of nothing else to say.

“I’m not too late yet! I’ve still got time!

The window-frame made a rattling noise as though about to open, and with it came a curious grinding that was, she felt positive, the sound of a clock being wound. Oh! if only she could remember that other name she had heard the Fruit Stoners use! There was something much more powerful than Knife, if only she could think of it. Was it — was it “Apothecary” perhaps? The word flashed across her bewildered brain, but it did not seem quite right.... Was she going to faint?

A low, pleasant laugh was audible behind her.

“You had nearly forgotten *me* altogether,” said a deep, quiet voice that startled her so much that for a moment the terror of the window left her as she turned sharply round. An old man stood beside her, gazing steadily into her face over the top of big, dark spectacles that balanced on his long, hooked nose. He wore a grey beard with yellow stains that she somehow felt certain were made by iodine, and there was a whiff of oil or medicine that was familiar to her, fragrant yet not entirely pleasant, as of a chemist’s shop. There was a suggestion of scented soap too, though not of soap that he used on his own person. “I have been expecting your advent,” he went on, “expecting it for ever and ever, yet with the unfailing belief that it *must* happen.” Pushing his spectacles up on to his wrinkled forehead, he looked her up and down with a respectful, wondering expression. His eyes were watery, but searching, searching, and very fine. “And now that you are really here among us,” he concluded solemnly, “it troubles me in a way I had not foreseen. It is almost more than I can bear.”

“Mr. Apothecary!” cried Maria. “You’re my Apothecary!”

The old body bent so low that she thought the spectacles must slip off his nose, and on the top of his lowered head a tiny black skull-cap became visible.

I am as you made me," his low, pleasant voice replied, and added, "and I am ready to believe you did your best."

But the faint *Tick tock!* and the noise at the window still sounded behind her, and she hardly took in what the old man was saying. She was only vaguely aware of an intense respect he emanated, and of something else about him beyond her comprehension.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Apothecary," she answered hurriedly, "but — don't you see? — he's getting in!" She pointed frantically to the window. "He's coming to catch me! My Five Minutes may be up! Oh, can't *you* help somehow?" And the hurry-scurry feeling rushed over her like a flood. "I've tried Knife, Knife, but it hasn't had much effect!

She was facing the window now, still pointing, and the Apothecary, having straightened up, turned his eyes to look. He was very leisurely about it, as though hurry was evidently a thing he did not know.

"The devil!" he murmured in his beard, as a smile of quiet amusement crept up from his lips and settled between the cheeks and eyes. There was not a vestige of alarm in him as he moved slowly past her to the window and peered through the glass. "Ah, yes," he went on, smiling to himself, "we do see him from time to time — flashing past, you know," as he turned back to her. "He peeps in at windows, knocks at doors. He's one of your inventions, we always imagined, for he only appears when you're playing with us." He said "playing" as though the word hurt him rather.

It hurt *her,* too, a little. The thought that she had merely played with these delightful Fruit Stoners was painful now.

"You have brought him with you, no doubt," the old man added, giving her a slightly reproachful glance. "He has never stayed so long before."

The Clock Man's figure against the glass held motionless, but the *Tick tock!* went on faintly, the unpleasant grinding sound as well.

"I didn't bring him," explained Maria, breathlessly, "for *he* brought me. And I didn't ask to come. I'm just put here. I'm here to look for something frightfully important and he's allowed me five minutes to find it, and I can't remember what it is, and oh, 'Pothecary" — she left out the A in her excitement—" he's come to take me back, so my time must be up — and that grinding means—"

The Apothecary stopped her flow of rushing words by calmly holding up his ancient hand.

“There is no hurry here,” he observed quietly, “as *you*, of all persons, must be aware. You need not recognize him unless you wish to.” And he smiled so powerfully that she already felt the wild scurry in her dying down. How soothing, how protective his voice and manner were. The feeling came to her that he knew everything — everything in the world. “Your five minutes, as you call them,” he added, “are your own, to be used, no doubt, where and when you will.”

“But that grinding — ?”

“Let him grind,” was the reply, “provided he does not strike.”

Maria started, feeling still more comforted. She was safe, apparently, unless she heard a strike.

“Look again,” the other was saying, turning to the window, “and do not forget this time that we are on the first floor now high above the ground,” and then his lips murmured something too low for her to catch. Four syllables, it seemed.

She was already looking, and the rest of the sentence did not reach her mind, for she saw the Clock Man suddenly streaking away past the window as though he had been shot out of a cannon, his black coat-tails flying behind him like cloudy wings. He went so fast that it seemed as if he had never been there at all. The grinding sound went with him, the *Tick tock!* ceased, the window-pane showed nothing but the summer sky. And the shock of it stung something bitterly, pungently, in her memory at the same instant.

“*Jack Robinson! Jack Robinson!*” flew from her mouth as a swallow might dart flashing from its nest.

She stood stock still, then clutched her breast with both arms. It was as though she had said something stupendous. Her breath caught. Her heart stopped. Her mouth was dry. The Apothecary, she saw, also stood motionless, with bent head and folded hands.

“Of course,” she heard him murmur. He swallowed hard. He, too, felt emotion evidently. “ Of course,” he repeated, the beard waggling as he half-whispered it. “I knew you would remember sooner or later. He never fails. He cannot, for he is your masterpiece. Always in the nick of time, as you see—”

“Was that a nick?” asked Maria.

He nodded. “Naturally,” he replied, gravely still. “He only comes in nicks.”

“But I didn’t see anything!” she objected. “Did you?”

“No one can see what is everywhere at once,” he told her. “To remember in the nick of time is the only way. It was all right anyhow, wasn’t it?” he inquired, smiling again a little. “There was no strike.”

The word reverberated strangely somewhere at the back of her head. Strike, strike, she repeated to herself.

“Strike!” she exclaimed aloud. “You mean strike you dead?”

The old man eyed her with the utmost curiosity and interest. He shook his head.

“So you have heard the old legends too?” he brought out at length.

“Legends — ?”

He watched her eagerly before he went on presently. “We, too,” he observed, but rather to himself than to her, “have heard that there are people, beings of a sort, it seems, who — who come to an end — sometimes.” He laughed indulgently a little. Maria stared at him and he stared back.

“In any case,” he went on finally, “it is better if no strike comes in your presence, for if that happened — if you heard the striking — you would go away — probably — with him — taking it with you—”

He stopped, though his beard continued to waggle a good deal.

“Forgive me,” he added after a moment, “if I seem muddled and confused, but these thoughts are so deep and difficult, and though your being here inspires me, it also bewilders and amazes a little. We are not in your time, you see, but outside it, and so—”

But the only words Maria understood were “taking it with you.” She clutched at them.

“It!” she cried. “The thing I’ve come to find?”

He bowed his head. A rather mournful look replaced the smile.

“Now that you have remembered *him,*” he remarked with a touch of resignation almost, “you will probably soon remember *it.* I imagine,” he went on thoughtfully, “the Man who Winds the Clocks, as you call him” — he grinned a little— “knows *what* it is you want to find, but Jack Robinson” — lowering his voice as he pronounced the name—” knows *where* it is. So you may have to ask the one, and then tell the other. The first is just your invention, the second” — he whispered it—” is your masterpiece.”

Maria sighed. She only partly grasped his meaning. It seemed to her a heavy programme. “Oh, dear!” she heaved out.

“Oh, dear *me,*” the old fellow added, sighing too. “You know everything, I suppose,” she said. “You’re a philosopher!”

“I merely analyse,” he corrected her. “You made me a chemist.”

She again felt suddenly a little guilty as she heard it. It was dreadful really, the thoughtless way she had made all these people, and played with them, and muddled up their time, and dressed them all anyhow, and not even allowed them enough living places without doubling up, and even let Judas knock them off the rim of the plate, and — Was that a sound she caught faintly ticking? Was it a knocking at a door? Her whirling thoughts stopped abruptly, or, rather, they flew in another direction all at once. Her interest in the Fruit Stoners’ world had once again made her forget what she was here for.

She listened intently. There was nothing but the sound of her own irregular breathing. The sound, whether it was again the *Tick tock!* or a knocking at a door, was so faint and distant that it did not seem to matter much. The feeling came to her that, if she did not actually carry it about with her, inside her even, it was always there. Whether she heard it or not, it never really stopped.

“Oh, my Apothecary,” she interrupted her own whirling thoughts, “I believe you know everything.

You will help me, won’t you? To find my thing, I mean? And to remember?”

He gazed at her with a curious expression on his very crinkly face. “All of us will help,” he murmured, “if worship is help. For we all adore and love you naturally.” He was now looking, not at her, but at a sort of glass retort he had pulled out of a deep pocket in the long robe of pale yellow that flapped about him. It contained a transparent liquid tinged with blue, and as she watched him a strange wondering stirred in her, a faint, half familiar picture rising in her mind of a large window somewhere with great jars of coloured glass reflecting sunlight. It vanished again instantly. The Apothecary was mumbling something in his yellow beard. It prevented her following up her thought.

“I had better finish this,” he explained. “I am analysing it, always analysing it, ever since I was made, of course. I may withdraw, if you permit it.” It was a question. Oddly enough, it came just when she, too, felt she wanted to be alone a little, so that she could think things out. The old fellow stirred such profound reflections in her.

“Good-bye,” she said gently, “and thank you most awfully for — for everything,” she added lamely.

Already he seemed a little more shadowy, a little more distant too, and at the same time smaller surely. His beard was waggling as he went. If the words did not reach her audibly, she knew exactly what the wise old fellow was saying.

“Jack Robinson! Jack Robinson! Jack Robinson, remember..” And his outline merged into the shadows beyond the pool of sunlight from the window. He was no longer there, though Maria knew that in another way he was really always there.

“Bless him!” ran across her mind. “I must have made him with the very deepest in me, I suppose...”

Her thoughts, which had been calmer in his presence, began to whirl again. “That’s *one,* at any rate, I needn’t marry,” darted through her, “though I could live with him always. I’d like him always near. He knows everything. What wonderful things he said!”

But what were the wonderful things? She tried to go over them again, to recall them, only to find that every word he uttered, even that powerful name, had completely left her memory. Like the Fruit Stoners, her thoughts whirled in a turning, jumbled ring, throwing off occasional flying ideas as a whizzing Catherine wheel throws off sparks that flash and die. Marriage! Marriage was one of these flying sparks that hung in her mind an instant before it was extinguished. She was to marry one of these eight Fruit Stoners, of course. The Gentleman obviously. He was rather old, but she could make him younger, couldn't she? Of course she could. She could change their conditions all round and make them happier. Well — but could she really? Did the Sailor, for instance, really want to dress in silk and live in a big house? And if she married *him,* could she settle down and spend her life on a ship, always making long voyages? He was so adorable that living with him anywhere would be bliss. Yet the same applied to the beloved Tinker and the frightfully brave Soldier, though she remembered that with the Tailor she would have endless new dresses, and the Ploughboy's life with lambs and great horses and sweet-smelling cows and fields of daisies and buttercups was perhaps what she would really like better than anything.... Oh, life was very full and marvellous!

A long sigh escaped her, a sigh of complete confusion. Passing a hand across her forehead, she touched her hair and idly stroked it. The missing ribbon! Ah! The Thief! With a shock again his face and figure sprang into her mind, as a little shiver ran over her, leaving a queer, quick smile on her lips, a shining in her eyes as though a tiny fire burned in her somewhere deep below.

That dreadful man! She had made him too? With a part of herself, he said. But the marriage idea now darted away and faded, replaced by another — the idea that without the ribbon her hair must be untidy and she was not looking her best. There was no looking-glass in the corridor, of course, and the window-pane reflected badly. Marriage, anyhow, would come later, much later.... There was something else she had to do before she could settle down, something of such tremendous, such awful importance that it must be seen to instantly. Instantly, or she would be too late, too late for ever. It had entirely left her mind again, and it came back now with a shock that turned her rigid. She drew a deep breath and made a violent effort. She remembered. A search, something she must find, a pearl of great price, five minutes only, the Man who Wound the Clocks ever at her heels, frantic hurry, endless leisure, a mighty name.... Oh! How wonderful and crowded with interest life was...! But how terrible...!

Confusion overwhelmed her, and the rigidity of her body turned to water as though her bones had withdrawn. It was like a dream-world, but for the fact that nothing so bitingly real could possibly be a dream. It was too packed with enchantment, this glorious life...! A feeling of utter tiredness overmastered her. She must sit down; she must rest and think. She turned, her legs weary and unsteady, but no chair, no sofa, no divan was to be seen, nothing but a door that faced her. Her eyes settled on the brass handle.

Faint, far away, but unmistakable, yet almost as if within herself somewhere, rose the ticking that was like the ticking of a tiny watch, close, close against her heart.

“It never, never stops,” she whispered to herself. “It’s always, always there, even when I’m not listening.” And she turned the door knob recklessly, and walked unhesitatingly into the room beyond.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE FIRST second, as she walked in, she recognized it. The room was familiar; she had been there before, she remembered it.

A phrase, though a phrase from nowhere, passed across her mind: “Queen Elizabeth’s Room.”

She caught her breath with a gulp. The same instant the sense of familiarity was gone. It disappeared, and remembrance went with it. All that remained was this vague, fugitive feeling that she had somehow been here before, had already lived through this scene once. And this, though it came and went like faint glimpses of a forgotten dream, persisted. It hung about her. This feeling of recurrence haunted her. This had all happened before.

The room was large and lofty, but dimly lit because the blinds were down, and it held a musty smell as though it had been long unused. An enormous cupboard stood against the wall, a sofa and several big arm-chairs wore dust-sheets, and a great four-poster bed outlined itself in the centre of the floor. The room, she saw at once, was empty, and she closed the door behind her, then looked about her for a resting-place. The chairs in dustsheets were not inviting; the great bed, she noticed, was covered with a heavy counterpane affair she imagined was brocade. She felt tired, worn out, with little aches and twinges in her body, odd little aches and twinges that puzzled her. “Growing pains” shot into her mind, then vanished as meaningless as “Queen Elizabeth’s Room.” Where did they come from, these absurd darting phrases? There was something in her that kept inventing them. Growing pains indeed! As though she were a kitten! She smiled to herself; there was no sense of hurry, but the feeling of weariness was very strong, her mind and body ached, demanding rest.

She had been through so much; the scenes and talk, the whirling confusion and bewilderment, the alternate sense of wild hurry and endless leisure, the dreadful gaps of remembering and forgetting, the efforts, the fears, the happiness, the excitement — all these had exhausted her. They enticed, made promises, but did not satisfy.... She *must* lie down and rest now, try to collect her thoughts, to get things straight.

“Growing pains indeed! As though I were a kitten.” She repeated the queer phrases with another smile as her eyes turned to the wide, inviting bed while she began to calculate the effort she must make to drag that huge brocade away — and saw for the first time a small dark object lying in its very centre. She gave a start. She examined it. It was motionless. And it was black as night.

“Judas!” she cried out. “Judas, my black darling beauty!” And the same instant, with a flying leap, she landed on the bouncing mattress beside her beloved cat, and the pair of them danced up and down together like fallen acrobats on a loose-swung net. “Judas! My dark angel!” she went on, plunging her face and fingers into the soft warm pool of blackness that he made. “If I hadn’t nearly forgotten you altogether! Think of that, will you? And all the time you were just quietly waiting for me in here, knowing that of course I would come and find you, and just sleeping as soundly and tightly as a drum! Oh, Judas, my best beloved, now tell me all about it, all about everything at once, you tight, fat drum!

She continued her endearments, though the drum made no response beyond opening a very narrow eye, making itself more comfortable with the slightest possible readjustment of the back paws against the nose, and emitting a faint, rumbling purr that was not, indeed, unlike the roll of very muffled drums. But Maria asked no more: she had found her friend, she was resting comfortably on her back, she could now think things over in peace and quietness, and utter her thoughts aloud, if she wanted, to an understanding friend who would help and advise, yet not interrupt or criticize.

With one hand buried in his fur, she lay and listened to the silence about her that, but for the low rumbling, itself now growing less, was unbroken. The air was still, not even a board or cupboard creaked; above all no *Tick tock!* was audible, not even the tiny voice of the dreaded watch she seemed to carry ever in her heart.

“Now, I must think everything out,” she told herself, “and see what it all means, and why — and who — no, where, I mean — no, no,” she corrected herself again, “that’s all wrong, Judas, isn’t it? It’s *what* I’ve got to do that’s the important thing—”

And she gave Judas little prods that had no effect beyond squeezing out tiny jets of purring that broke off in isolated fashion from the main sound and were slightly higher in tone, and almost querulous. “That’s a real help, my black darling. Thank you,” and prodded him again and again, until presently the shrill little, broken-off purrs stopped popping out altogether. “Yes, you’re right,” she whispered, “you’re quite right, Judas. There’s no good your giving me advice until I’ve told you what I want advice *about.* I must think everything out alone first, of course. I’ll come to you later.” And instead of prodding him, she fell to stroking him softly into deeper sleep.

At the same time she fell to thinking — only to realize almost immediately that she could not really think at all. Pictures came to her, but not thoughts. She could see pictures of all that had happened, and could ask herself questions about these pictures, but she could not really think. She could not reason, argue, analyse. Her mind was a rushing stream of jostling pictures above which, like dancing gnats, swarmed a host of question marks. Darting at one picture after another, she seized upon them in a series as best she could, hanging them on a wall inside her head, the nail being always a curly interrogation mark that wriggled into softness and let the picture drop and be swept away.

Yet, behind this phantasmagoria that ever danced and shifted, certain ideas persisted oddly, forming a dim background that held steady. Her mind, at any rate, always came back, back to these main ideas. Think about them she could not; but see them clearly she could.

“I’m in a wonderful, delightful world,” she told herself, “but I’ve been brought here, put down in it —— plop! I didn’t ask to come. I can enjoy myself enormously in it, only there’s something I’ve got to do that spoils my enjoyment and even prevents it. I’m here to look for something, and if I don’t find it there’s no point in my having come. In fact I only came really to find it. But I’ve forgotten what I came to find, and no one can tell me what it is. Nor can anyone tell me why I came to find something — why I’m here at all. Ugh! It’s awful, wicked, cruel! I knew once myself, but that, too, I’ve forgotten. And I’ve only got a little time to do it in. Oh, dear, oh, dear! What a ridiculous muddle!”

In a flash all this came to her, in a single instant, but she turned away from the picture of the limited time because she did not care for it.

"It's when I'm enjoying myself with the Fruit Stoners," darted in next, "that I forget always. Only I'd much rather enjoy myself than go hunting about and fagging myself out to find something that I can't even remember what it is," her words jumbled on in a muddled sentence. And, this picture bringing rather an uneasy feeling with it, she let it rush away with its wriggling interrogation mark and vanish among a thousand others, from which she instantly picked out a more satisfactory one. She chose the Fruit Stoners with their funny, crinkly faces.

"Judas," she whispered, turning to her silent, sleeping friend, "you like the Fruit Stoners too, don't you, dear? I know you do, for I saw you rubbing against them and trying to get into their rooms. You knew them before just as I did — somewhere. You wanted to play with them, that's what it was, you black rascal." She squeezed her face down into his friendly fur. "Well, so do I, Judas. There's nothing I'd like better. We're both black rascals evidently. I could play with them for ever. Only you mustn't be rough, remember. That black paw of yours rather frightens them. It's not kind to knock them about on to the floor."

His silent sympathy helped and encouraged her, and though he made no comment or interruption, she knew he was listening to every word she said.

Her mind flew off among the queer, jolly Fruit Stoners again. They passed before her in vivid pictures and at lightning speed. The Sailor had left on a long voyage, but he would come back again, his gold ear-rings dangling; there was a new dress she must try on at the Tailor's; the Tinker, sharpening that precious knife, would show her the wood fire where he cooked his supper below the hedge where the wild roses shone; the Ploughboy would lift her on to a great horse's back — all of them in a series of coloured pictures danced about her, each with his alluring invitation, each busy with his particular calling, and the Gentleman would deck her in brilliant jewels and take her to marvellous dinner-parties at Buckingham Palace, where the Soldier would stand on guard behind her chair, and the Thief — The Thief! When she came to him, the rushing series halted, stopped its lightning flow, so that he seemed to stand out more closely before her, more definitely somehow, than the rest. That dreadful, dangerous man! He had stolen her ribbon, yet so swiftly, cleverly, that she had not seen it go. Those long, lovely fingers! Those slender, shapely hands that must have touched her very face and skin! Those quick, penetrating eyes that took in everything instantly! She shrank a little, as the tiny shock again raced down her spine, and while she wanted the figure to go, she yet clung to it as though it fascinated her. There! It was gone. In her mind she saw the whole group of Fruit Stoners whirling in their strange circle round the great bed.

“Judas!” she whispered into his pointed ear, whose feathery hairs tickled her lips, “aren’t they just gorgeous? And to think I made them! It’s too wonderful to be true, you know. And I’m going to make everything better and more comfortable for them too. Each can have a house to himself, and wear nice things, and then — Oh, Judas, I think I must really marry every one of them in turn and live in the Big House and be happy ever afterwards — in silk—”

Her thoughts, these picture-thoughts, broke off abruptly as a gigantic interrogation mark hung wriggling over the bed. She stared at it fixedly.

“*Where* did I know them, Judas? Where have we met before? Where used you and I to play with them? Why do they seem so familiar?”

Judas knew, she felt sure, but it was clear he did not wish to talk about it at the moment. This feeling of vague familiarity haunted her uneasily, and a curious little ache came with the question, for the question seemed unanswerable. Everything would become so much easier and more comfortable if she could only know where she had come from, and exactly *why* she had come at all. There was this flaw in her happiness. Yet was the question really unanswerable? A queer certainty rose in her that somewhere deep down inside herself the answer lay, that in the long run she would remember and would know.

“Some day, Judas, I shall get it all clear—”

The pointed ear had given a sudden twitch, and she drew her lips back sharply.

Some day! Some *day,* indeed! The hideous reminder flashed in — that she had only Five Minutes, and her calmness scattered, for with it came that sense of puzzled bewilderment that had fear behind it. Here was something that lay utterly beyond anything she could possibly understand. Minutes! Days! Months! Years! All passing. A strange phrase tore through her like a lost, hunting wind. A thousand years in thy sight — gone before she could catch its end, its tail. There! She was inventing these odd phrases again.

Where did they come from, these absurd phrases without meaning? Why did her spine again go all shivery and tickly?

Five Minutes! She tried to drive the picture away, to force it into the background, to hide it from her mind. It brought discomfort with it, a touch of alarm, a sense of that awful hurry-scurry. She made an effort to bring the Fruit Stoners back in its place, the jolly crew that were never in a hurry, and though they instantly flooded her mind again and danced in their ring again about the bed, the other unwelcome picture did not go, but stayed and mingled with them.

She *must* think about it. These ridiculous Five Minutes! They had been given to her by that horrible Man who Wound the Clocks, the man who had brought her here, dumping her down unasked in this lovely and exciting world, only to warn her, it seemed, that she could not enjoy it — because her time was limited to these ludicrous Five Minutes.

She did now make a very great effort to get this straight a little, while Judas, by his quiet, sympathetic attitude, helped her. The outstanding fact that he just accepted the situation without question or criticism pointed the way.

“Judas,” she thanked him, “I believe I’ve got it, my dark angel. And if you’ll stop twitching your ear and keep the tip of your tail still for once, I will tell you about it. It’s like this, you see, you bag of mystery: my Five Minutes only count — *while I’m using them.* When I’m not using them they’re not being spent — they’re not passing! When I’m with the Fruit Stoners, the time’s different. There’s no hurry then!”

So inconceivably rapid was the rush of thought-pictures in her, that even while she whispered this into the furry ear, a hundred others had come and gone. The Fruit Stoners, she remembered, all laughed at her Five Minutes, and thought of the dreaded Clock Man as rather a tricky figure of fun, a fairy-tale person of no importance. The Apothecary regarded the idea of anything or anybody coming to an end as a sort of legend only, and one of the others — she had forgotten who it was — had used the word “nonsense.” The Apothecary, indeed, had stated definitely that her time was different to theirs, but that at any rate it was her own to spend where and when she pleased. He had warned her, however — she had better not let the Clock Man strike in her presence. If she heard that strike, her Five Minutes — whatever they might be, he had laughed — her time would be up and she would have to go. And all of them, every one, had mentioned as a serious grievance the divisions of This Year and Next Year, which somehow enclosed and limited them stupidly, and in any case muddled them all up badly. Their natural condition was endless leisure. They lived *now.* They knew no past or future, only a gorgeous Present. To be made to jump about from this year to next year, then to dodge back again each time she played with them, was, of course, a disconcerting, crippling business they were right to look upon as a grievance. She could, and would, alter that, of course, but just now she was busy with her own Five Minutes, and she was sure that she had made a great discovery. It had dawned upon her mysteriously, coming she knew not whence. From Judas probably, since he knew all that sort of thing. For all these ideas passed in a single instant through her mind while she whispered the few words into his receptive, feathery ear.

Her Five Minutes — which otherwise must have finished ages ago — only passed while she was actually using them. This she suddenly realized. The rest of the time, which was the Fruit Stoners' sort of time, were the great intervals between, and these intervals, of course, never passed at all. They could not pass away. The alternate sense of endless leisure and panic hurry-scurry seemed clearer to her now. The hurry-scurry had to do with the Man who Wound the Clocks, while the other — yes, the other —

"Oh, Judas, Judas," she whispered, with a touch of anguish rising through her, "it's gone again — that tremendous name — the powerful name that — that keeps me safe — and makes hurry silly — !"

The pictures had vanished, her mind was an empty, gaping blank, and the strenuous efforts she made to recover the forgotten name filled her with such confusion that at first she did not notice that the deep silence of the room was broken by a tiny sound. It was faint and distant, but it was coming closer, growing louder. Steadily, steadily, it approached. It emerged from the depths of the great, dim room. And then suddenly she became aware of it.

Tick tock! Tick tock!

It seemed both inside her and at the far end of the room.

She sprang into a sitting position as if she had been shot. She listened, quivering all over, and in the same instant, Judas, startled from sleep by the bouncing mattress, took a flying leap on to the floor and vanished like a shadow. He went so fast that she could not even see what direction he took, or where he disappeared to. He was gone.

Tick tock! Tick tock! the warning sound continued. The awful Man who Wound the Clocks was there, watching, waiting, ever at her heels. The feeling of wild hurry-scurry swept over her, the sense of delightful leisure vanished. She had been wasting time again, enjoying herself with all these exciting and amusing pictures. She had entirely forgotten that she had a purpose to fulfil, a thing of tremendous importance she had come to look for, a pearl of great price that she must find.

Now, as she sat rigid on the bed and listened, this swept back upon her with its solemn warning. Her heart was beating rapidly. Was a strike coming? Did she hear a sound of grinding?

Tick tock! Tick tock! It did not stop, but it seemed to get no louder, it came no closer, it merely beat on steadily, remorselessly. Of course, she then realized again, it never actually stopped at all. It was beating always, always. Only her mind had been too occupied with other things to notice it. She had been so busy with her pictures that she had not heard it.

Was she too late now?... She was aware that a long, long interval had passed over her since she came into the room. A period of time, yet not of ordinary time, somehow, had queerly flowed over her, something she could not measure and yet recognized. A touch of panic came into her blood, and she sprang from the great comfortable bed and stood bolt upright in the middle of the floor.

“The search!” she cried out aloud. “I must begin my search, or I shall be too late! I shall be too old! Perhaps I’m too old already.”

Too old! The strange, awful notion steadied her. Had she grown older? Was she growing up? Where did the idea come from? What in the world was happening to her? Too late, too old, to begin! What did it mean — this sense of a long interval and growing older?

The sound was fainter now, farther away, like warning bells a sad wind bore into the distance. There had been no ominous grinding, anyhow, no sign of the dreaded strike. But her sense of urgent hurry, of being perhaps too late unless she acted at once, did not leave her.

“I must, I *must* find it,” her voice cried out again. “Once I’ve found it, the strike won’t matter. I shall be ready to go then — go back with it! Oh, my Pearl! My Pearl of Great Price!

She did not realize quite what she was saying, did not quite understand what her own words meant as they rushed out of her mouth. The shock of urgent, anxious hurry that galvanized her towards this imperative need for instant action seemed to shake them from her lips. The memory that there was someone who could help her, a name she could call upon that would bring calm to ease her wild hurry, did not even occur to her. She could think of nothing but the fearful importance of beginning her search before it was too late, with the disturbing certainty that this long interval of wasted idling had passed over her.

She must start immediately. Her great search must be made at once. The Fruit Stoners had promised to help her. She took a quick step across the floor, and then another, but instead of going straight towards the door, she found she was moving round the great room, examining the walls and furniture, the tables in particular. Her hand went to her untidy hair, where no ribbon now gathered it together.

“Well, I declare!” she exclaimed, a sharp feeling of disappointment in her. “There’s not a looking-glass anywhere! Not a single mirror in the whole place!”

She flung out of the room to find the Fruit Stoners, tidying her wild hair with both hands as best she could. Her feet, at any rate, looked neat, her dress was comely, she had slim calves and pretty ankles.

“Probably I look awful,” passed through her mind, as she ran down the corridor, “but I can’t help it!”

Yet, even as she ran, taking quick, excited steps, the sound of ticking accompanied her. It was very close, inside her almost, this faint *Tick tock!* as of a watch that beat against her heart, as of a small, insistent voice. She was aware of it, this tiny voice, no more than that; the anticipatory excitement of finding the Fruit Stoners again and having adventures with them dulled any sense of uneasiness she had felt formerly.

“There’s lots of time,” she persuaded herself as she ran. “There’s no hurry with *them.* I only wish I looked better.” Her hand flew to her untidy hair again. “I *must* get my ribbon back from that dreadful Thief,” and a thrill again passed over her as she thought of him. Her eye glanced down at her short frock then with disapproval. “I’m simply in rags,” occurred to her. “It’s much too short. My knees show! I must see the Tailor about that new dress at once!”

She raced along breathlessly, her mind filled with darting pictures of her jolly and amusing Fruit Stoners, though it was the Gentleman and the Sailor who seemed to hold the first place. The Gentleman she had made younger now, she remembered, and she had planned a long voyage with the dancing Sailor. Overshadowing them all, however, somehow loomed the bearded figure of the wise Apothecary. It was as though in some way she could not fathom he was the most important of the lot. She realized this, but deliberately put him aside. *That,* she told herself, could come later.

“This is a *nick,*” she assured herself, “and I’m jolly well going to use it while I can!”

CHAPTER IX

AND THEN SUDDENLY she caught sight of them. She had reached the end of the corridor and could see over the railing into the great banqueting hall below. From the top of the stairs where she stood, the gallery ran round the whole length. There, underneath her, stood the whole Ancient Order of Fruit Stoners, every one of them, all talking busily among themselves. They stood in a circle, exactly, she thought, as though they were balanced round the edge of a plate, and she paused a moment and picked them out in turn, for they had not seen her yet. There was a curious distance about them, now more, now less, as though she looked through field-glasses and adjusted the screws that made them come and go. There — the focus was sharp and clear at last.

The Gentleman was a young man now, slimmer than ever, but still wearing an eyeglass and a beautiful top-hat, a white one with a very curly brim, while a red carnation gleamed in the buttonhole of his perfect cut-away coat. She felt her heart beat faster as she saw him, but it beat faster still as her eye then picked out the Sailor's deeply tanned face and caught the sheen of his dangling gold earrings. Swinging his telescope about, he was gazing through it smartly at anything he could see, whether it was near or far. He was resting it now on the shoulder of the Ploughboy next him, examining apparently the Soldier's gleaming gold braid, then switching it to gaze at the Tinker in whose ragged pocket, she saw, the Thief was cleverly inserting his long, slender fingers. One and all were there, the Tailor snapping his big scissors in the air to the danger of his neighbours, and every one of them making a characteristic movement of one kind or another, with the exception of the Apothecary, who stood quietly combing his long, dirty beard in an attitude of deep thought. The general movement gave the circle an appearance of turning round and round, though she could not be sure of this. It was perhaps her own mind that whirled.

"Here I am, my dear Fruit Stoners!" she called out loudly with her head over the railing, and the same instant the Sailor's telescope turned up and pointed at her face.

“Three sheets in the wind and breakers ahead!” he shouted, his feet starting a quick, merry dance, while she noticed for the first time that he now wore a close-cropped brown beard that, she decided instantly, was most attractive.

A general roar of voices at once drowned his words, as every face turned up to look at her. It was a roar of welcome that made the rafters ring and seemed to shake the great glass chandelier till it tinkled in a wind. While all eyes looked up, she noticed, the Thief, profiting by the fact, neatly abstracted a knife from the Ploughboy’s pocket, while joining in the general shout.

“Maria! Maria! Come down to us for tea!”

As she took the stairs, three steps at a time, she realized that she, too, was ready for tea, hunger and thirst both ardent in her. Tea, of course, was their great meal, occurred to her, though why this was so she could not think. Tea, yes, was their important meal, their only meal; it was at tea she had first made their acquaintance. Where? Oh, where? The thought burned her before it vanished — somewhere — This flashed through her as she tore down the great curved staircase, only to be forgotten again the same instant. “I hope there won’t be any prunes,” flashed through her too. Somebody — oh, who was it? — liked prunes with his tea. Tea! Prunes! Fruit stones! The rim of a plate! Her mind was in a jumble with it all, but there was no clear memory. What did it matter, anyhow? She was going to enjoy herself. This was life!

She had reached the floor now and was among them all; the ceaseless ticking was forgotten, there was no hurry, everything was wonderful, happy and exciting. She was leaning on the arm of the Gentleman, who, slim and debonair, was leading her to the table. She had rejuvenated him in her thoughts, and he was now fascinatingly young, and his lovely white hat made her certain that, of course, he knew the Queen personally. He carried it gracefully in his hand as they stepped along. “I do believe he sleeps in it,” she decided, stealing a glance at his face bending above her and noticing that the dark crinkles were all wiped away. His eyeglass swung against his coloured waistcoat, his fob and watch-chain shone. He was the perfect gentleman, she knew, as he intercepted her glance with an entrancing smile and a most courtly little bow. Thrills coursed through her blood and body at his touch.

“Pray—” she whispered, “pray, cover yourself,” wondering if the words were quite what she searched so hard to find, as well as where they came from. “I beg of you.” Her whisper died away against his shoulder — on a sigh.

“Your slightest wish is a command,” he replied, bending from the waist so that his buttons tickled her ear, while he slapped the hat on at a rakish angle, and made her chair ready. She sat down, and the rest of the group who were all standing by their chairs till she was seated, did likewise. All were talking, gesticulating, smiling. All watched, too, her every movement.

“And what,” inquired the Gentleman, screwing his eyeglass in and surveying the table, “may I serve you with?” He tossed a slender hand with jewelled fingers above a score of imaginary dishes. “Scrambled eggs, or *œufs à la coque,* kidneys on toast with devilled mushrooms, a delicious young quail perhaps, a rasher of crisp bacon, or — or” — he hesitated a moment, looking vague—” or — a plate of porridge,” he ended abruptly, “with a poached egg to follow.”

The long list of exquisite dishes, whose names sounded familiar to her though she had tasted few of them, seemed to vanish in the air. It was the way he spoke the words that made her feel she almost tasted them, but it was her good common sense that told her such fancy cooking was hardly suitable at tea-time.

“A cup of tea, please, sir — weak tea,” she replied, smiling up into his face, “with a finger of buttered toast, is what I usually have — if there is any,” she added politely as an afterthought.

He bowed, removing his hat and sweeping it across his heart.

“The entire cuisine,” he assured her in a melting tone, “is at your service. Allow me to procure it for you.”

Replacing his hat with a graceful flourish, he bowed himself away, his eyes lingering on her face so beautifully as he went half backwards towards the sideboard, that it was all Maria could do to prevent herself running after him and giving him a kiss and a hug. “He loves me, he loves me,” her heart told her between its rapid beats, “and I do believe I’m in love with him. It’s glorious, glorious! I couldn’t swallow a mouthful. I hope I shan’t choke over my tea!” And the odd mingling of the child and the young woman in her somehow caused her no surprise. She only knew, and knew it quite naturally, that the feeling of a long interval having passed over her while she was upstairs, was true, and that she was now really older. So naturally, indeed, this came to her that she stole a quick look at her knees and legs beneath the table, and saw with relief and delight that her longer skirt was becomingly modest, and that georgette was exactly the material that suited her.

Across the table in the same instant she caught the Tailor's eye, a question in it, yet a discreet veiled question, as though only he and she knew what it referred to.

"It's quite all right," she heard herself telling him. "The fit is splendid. I'm very satisfied, thank you," and while she spoke, even while the words left her lips, she remembered going to try it on in his room, and even suggesting certain alterations. That had slipped her memory in some queer way, but she now recalled it all; it had taken place in the interval, of course, the strange, long interval that had passed over her....

"The other gowns are ready when you are," the Tailor was saying, while busy with his meal, and she was not surprised somehow to see that he was using his big scissors to slice his bread and butter, then measuring each piece with his tape before putting it into his mouth.

"This is a nick, of course; I'm in a nick," she told herself, and the same instant felt something touch her shoulder. Turning sharply, she looked straight into the face of the Sailor, who had slipped into the chair next to her, and was so close that his blue sleeve lay against her arm. He was staring at her even at this absurdly close range through his telescope; it was, in fact, the end of the long tube that had touched her shoulder.

"Oh, Sailor, my Sailor!" she cried, "wherever *have* you been? I thought — I wondered — —" She broke off, aware that unaccountably she was blushing. "If you're looking at *me,*" she went on hastily, "you'd see better without the telescope, I think."

"Ah, Missie," he laughed, without lowering it however, "but you're closer this way. You can never see too much of a good thing," as he took it from his eye, his tanned face smiling all over, his gold ear-rings tinkling, "and I've been 'arf-way round the globe since I looked into that rose-bud face."

While he eyed her with open and unabashed admiration, his feet, she saw, were doing some little twinkling step beneath the table. It was the beard, however, that interested her as much as anything. Was it genuine? It was incredible that he could have grown it in so short a time. Was it a "short time" though? Was it a question of that interval again? She stared hard a moment, wondering if she dared ask about it. That stupid flush in her cheeks crept down towards her neck.

"Is it a real one — really?" The words then shot out before she could prevent their bluntness. "The beard, I mean — ?"

The Sailor gave a jolly laugh, no whit offended.

"Lor' bless you, yes," he cried, "while the stormy winds do blow. Real as you are! I let it grow after we rounded the 'Orn. It's neater that way — don't you think?" He stroked it. He looked, she thought, exactly like a handsome sailor she had seen somewhere on a poster. "Like it, Missie?" he inquired with a sly, merry grin. "'Cos if you don't off she comes in less than 'arf a jiffy—"

"No, no," Maria interrupted, "you mustn't take it off. I like it — awfully."

"Splendid!" he cried, his feet jigging away, while he whipped the telescope back to his eye and fell to examining her again.

Maria, though she felt embarrassed, loved the examination, and wondered how her hair looked. She must get her ribbon back as soon as ever she could. She must find a mirror, too.

"But your — voyage, your long voyage," she stammered, feeling she ought really to change the subject, though not really wanting to. "You were going on a long voyage when I saw you last, and I — I was to go with you, I thought—"

She broke off again, for her voice seemed a little unsteady. An immense longing rose surging over her. The romance of the sea, the tang of the salt spray, a flying picture of coral islands, golden sands, of treasure, pirates, rose before her with a sound of wind whistling in the rigging.

But the Sailor's face, she saw, had lost its smile suddenly.

"Ah, Missie, that's just the trouble," he murmured, stopping his dancing feet and lowering his telescope. He leaned nearer, turning his blue eyes down to her with almost a beseeching expression. "That, you see, was 'sometime,'" he told her. "You made me 'sometime.' Now, if you could change me to 'this year,' or even 'next year,' why — then — we could get a-going together, maybe."

"Oh, I'm going to change all that for you," Maria whispered hurriedly. She was trembling a little. "Of course I will."

His face shone again as though the sun had come out from behind a cloud. The laughter danced back, the feet began to jig.

"But I brought you back something," he went on in his cheerful voice once more, producing a curly, beautifully coloured shell, "so that when you get to your counting again, maybe, you'll remember the pore sailors on the 'igh seas, with their lasses crying their eyes out — and give me 'arf a chance." Maria was amazed at the words she heard herself saying next.

"Sailor," she whispered, "I'd like to be *your* lass."

"Name your port, Missie, and it's a go," he laughed back, handing her the shell. "Cross my 'eart on it," making a gesture to suit the words and shouting, "Yo ho!" as he saw her cross her own.

"Upon my word," thought Maria to herself, taking the lovely shell and stuffing it in her pocket, "I shall kiss him in a minute if I'm not careful, and I don't want to be careful either. This is real life with a vengeance," and she was already leaning a little closer to her breezy Sailor, when a voice behind her interrupted.

"I am delighted to bring you this at last," murmured the suave and musical voice, "and I apologize for the long delay. I noticed, however — ahem — that you were engaged — delightfully engaged — and consequently I did not hurry."

There was a faint perfume of lavender about the sleeve that brushed her cheek, and she saw the gold signet ring on the shapely hand that set down a cup of tea before her, followed by two fingers of buttered toast on a plate.

"Engaged!" she exclaimed, turning quickly to thank the courtly Gentleman. "Oh, no, sir," she stammered, "we were only—" and broke off, unable to find the exact word that suited.

“Occupied, I should have said,” the Gentleman corrected himself with an entrancing smile, adding as he bent lower above her chair, “but is not ‘sir’ a trifle formal between us two? Though you have given me no Christian name, may we not find something a little more happily intimate than ‘sir’?”

This took her with such surprise that for a moment she hardly knew how best to answer, and that silly flush went careering over her cheeks and neck again. With a quick sideways glance she noticed that the Sailor was not listening, but was indeed examining dishes across the table with his telescope. Her interest in him dwindled a little too. It was rather absurd and a little childish, that telescope. That beard seemed suddenly less attractive somehow. It would be nice, she decided, awfully nice, in fact, if she could think of some better name than “Gentleman” or “sir,” a little more friendly and intimate, a shade more affectionate even. She searched for one, she racked her brains, but nothing occurred to her.

“May I venture a suggestion perhaps?” the soft voice whispered in her ear, his cheek close to hers. “‘Gentleman’ is so long, and ‘sir’ so formal! Might we not find a happy compromise in ‘Gent’?”

The idea delighted her the instant she heard it. Gent was so short and intimate; it was such a jolly name.

“Yes — Gent — my Gent,” she agreed instantly, smiling into his face, and the same moment the two cheeks touched and she gave him a happy kiss.

“Wind’s changing a bit — shifted a point to the south’ard — seems to me,” she heard the Sailor saying to himself with a chuckle. “But I’ll let you know when we start. A good blow won’t ‘urt anybody!” He was not looking at her as he spoke, but was busy pouring his tea into his saucer, then blowing over it to cool it. Whether “blow” referred to the sea or his tea she did not know.

The Gentleman, meanwhile, his eyes sparkling from the kiss, had taken the chair on her other side, and was softly murmuring in her ear.

“Let us sip our tea while it is still hot,” he said, lifting his cup daintily, with his little finger exquisitely curved in the air. “These fellows in calico,” and he shot an aristocratic glance across her at the blowing Sailor, “are a little uncertain in their table manners.”

The Sailor merely went on chuckling. “Fingers was made before forks,” he remarked, looking across his saucer as he puffed. “A bit of a blow seems kind o’ natural to me.”

“Oh, please, please don’t quarrel,” Maria put in hastily between them. “I love you both, you know—”

“Your good ‘ealth — Gent!” chuckled the Sailor, cutting her off, drinking noisily from the saucer.

“The same to you — Captain,” replied the Gentleman, rising to his feet and sweeping his white hat about. “And to you, my Lovely” — bowing to Maria —” my profound and unalterable devotion.” He drank delicately and noiselessly from the burning cup of tea. “Quarrels,” he whispered to her, “are impossible with us here. Such a thing is unknown. The Sailor and I, besides, are the oldest friends. We have shared the Barn together again and again, doubling up if somewhat unpleasantly, myself in silk, and that Sailor fellow in calico, exactly as you, my Beautiful, arranged us—”

“Oh, my Gent—” began Maria, ashamed and uncomfortable, “how awful of me — did I really? — I’ll never again—”

“There, there,” he purred consolingly, his hat now at the back of his head, giving him the fascinating air of a really dangerous rake, “we know that you will do everything possible for us. Your having come among us is itself a guarantee of that. You must graciously forgive any little — er — excesses” — he threw another pitying glance through his eyeglass at the Sailor, who was now soaking his buttered toast in his tea. “The wonder of it has affected our equilibrium here and there—”

She wished he would use shorter words, but of course a Gentleman could not use the speech of ordinary people.

“Tide’s jest on the turn,” the Sailor was halfshouting. “‘Eave the anchor, lads, and let’s get a move on,” and a whole finger of sopping toast went into his mouth at a single gulp.

But when she turned her head again, after watching the performance for a moment, to say something to the Gentleman, she saw that he was looking down his lovely aquiline nose with great intensity, staring under the table where a white hand with long fingers came creeping up stealthily towards his coloured waistcoat. And behind it, peering up, a bright, sharp face with penetrating eyes was just visible. The fingers reached the dangling fob, then with the utmost skill abstracted the gold watch, and dipped out of sight the same second.

“Look out, Gent!” whispered Maria. “You’re being pickpocketed!”

But her whisper trembled, nor could she bring herself to use the pickpocket’s name, for the Thief had looked for a moment straight into her own eyes, and she had realized that for nothing in the whole world, no matter what he did, would she betray him. Her warning, besides being too late against such lightning cleverness, produced no effect whatever.

“That bauble!” mentioned the Gentleman contemptuously with a careless glance, his ringed finger stroking the empty pocket. “It has no meaning, anyhow, for it serves no purpose, does it? He is, moreover, as you made him, dear, the Perfect Thief, and has taken it at least ten thousand times already. It’s merely that our equilibrium is in jeopardy.” She felt for a moment as though the whole table was spinning round, as though she and all of the Fruit Stoners were balancing a little on its edge. “ The Perfect Thief,” she repeated to herself, and saw him looking at her across the cloth as he stirred his tea, and managed his cake with deft, neat, tidy hands. It was queer how his face both attracted and repelled her. Making a great effort, she looked away, but a slight shock, as of electricity, had again run through her whole being. She turned hurriedly to the Gentleman, only to find that he had left her side and was now sitting in a big arm-chair at what seemed to her the head of the table, though a round table, of course, had no real head. The Tinker now occupied his former seat.

Oh, that delightful Tinker, with the fragrance of wood-smoke about him and the suggestion of wild roses — what in the world was he saying to her? Something about a knife that he was sharpening, a knife, a knife. Only the bewilderment of all these sudden changes confused her so that she did not catch his words quite clearly. In any case, he was too friendly and understanding to take offence. Such a companion too. She felt she could live with him for ever. He would never nag or worry or ask her to repeat, would never tell her she was not listening to what he said.

“I’m not listening, anyhow,” she realized, “only he’s far too good-natured to mind. He’s so frightfully kind and sweet and gentle. And his laugh is — oh, it’s just like honey.”

She turned abruptly to him. “Tinker,” she said, “I think you’re a perfect dear,” and she kissed him on the cheek, while he went on talking exactly as before, while, as before, she hardly took in what he was saying. For she was thinking of her ribbon, her untidy hair, her general appearance, and wondering if everybody noticed the stupid blush that simply would not leave her cheeks. The blush seemed permanent, born of the inner excitement she was feeling. All this love and companionship and fun was so glorious and wonderful, too marvellous almost to last. There was the Gentleman waiting to take her out dining and dancing at palaces where only the most select could go, the Sailor waiting on the turn of the tide to go with her on a ravishing long voyage, the Tailor to make all the dresses she could possibly wear, the Ploughboy, Soldier, Tinker, all of them ready to indulge her lightest whim in their own particular way — oh, it was all too glorious and wonderful to be true, while yet it was true. Life! Life! Life! she thought....

“Yes, of course, I’ll fry bacon with you under a hedge,” she heard herself answering at last, “and I’m not an atom afraid of toads and moles and things. Oh, Tinker, I’d just love to!” And she clapped her hands in glee.

But even while she did so, talking over the joys of the open road with the Tinker, it was the eyes and face of the Thief that held her mind. Why was he so insistent, so important? Why did the eyes and face persist? He was nothing but a thief, even if a clever, perhaps a perfect, thief. He was horrible and dreadful, he had stolen her ribbon; she disliked, despised, detested him. And yet he was always there. He had even taken her Gent’s gold watch.

“Bother that blood of mine,” she exclaimed beneath her breath. “I keep on blushing like — a schoolgirl!”

She looked towards the Tinker again, thinking how gentle, kind and decent he was, how safe she was with him. He would never dream of taking her ribbon, for instance; no, nor any liberty either. Her heart warmed as she watched his weatherbeaten face with its deep crinkly lines. How worn, even threadbare, his clothes were, she thought. Often they must be soaked with cold rain, and such thin stuff could never keep the wind out. It was rather pitiful. She was aware of a deep feeling that he needed looking after, mothering. The instinct to do something for him stirred in her. She wanted to sew his buttons on.

“Tinker,” she asked abruptly, “have you got warm underclothes, I wonder, or are they full of holes? If you’ve got any socks that want mending, you know, I”

He looked at her strangely. “Oh, I’m orl right, thank you—” he began, when something interrupted, something behind her chair.

Whether it was a sound or a voice she could not say, but she turned quickly — to see the Soldier standing close. He stood like a figure of iron, straight and stiff. He seemed a solid mass of bright, gold braid, as if he were a General, a Field-Marshal, or some tremendous officer who commanded all the forces in the world. He was so wonderful that her breath caught, and all she could do was to smile sweetly and adoringly up into his graven face.

“Hullo!” she said softly. “Are you going to have your tea with me?” She felt her skin was flaming.

He saluted smartly, staring straight in front of him with no expression on his face.

And even in that brief second while she gazed at him, waiting for his answer, the thought poured over her again that she was, indeed, having a marvellous time, that it was all intensely enjoyable, and that, if a bit puzzling and incoherent somewhere, it was exceedingly worth while. Was there ever such a tea-party before? It rushed along helter-skelter, yet at the same time stood still, getting no further. It whirled in a circle, coming round and round again. It seemed an eternal sort of affair that need never end. All the Fruit Stoners jabbered away, full of their own grievances, proposals, schemes, plans for adventure with her. These seemed alternately meaningless and full of purpose. It was a rushing and tumultuous business rather, and the one thing that held steady was her inner certainty, her absolute conviction indeed, that she herself was somehow actually in control. She held the reins, the guiding strings, if and when she cared to use them. It was all the happy and exciting emotions she felt that persuaded her there was no hurry. She loved these emotions, she meant to enjoy them.... Immense intervals swept past, long periods flowed by; she was positive that she was older, older than she had been, while yet — oh, it was all too delightful and enjoyable to stop and think about. One and all, the Fruit Stoners were frightfully seductive—” and soon I may be too old to play,” she heard herself thinking, and wondered why on earth the idea crashed into her mind.

For this all occurred to her in the brief second as she turned her face up to the magnificent Soldier, asking herself at the same time where, oh *where,* had she known him first.

He was speaking now, answering her remark. It was a stern, cold, military voice she heard.

“Beg pardon, Miss,” he said gruffly yet at the same time respectfully, “but I’ve been sent to hen-quire wot’cher got on?”

He saluted again and looked straight before him, while the blood left her cheeks at this astonishing question.

“What I’ve got on!” she repeated indignantly, surprise putting further words out of her head for the moment.

“Wot’cher got on to-day, Miss?” said the Soldier again, a curious clank in his voice as though he were some huge, wonderful kind of automatic toy. “And they want to know very pertickler — asking your pardon, Miss.”

His meaning dawned upon her.

“Oh, you mean what I’m going to *do*!” she exclaimed, laughter now rising in her.

“That’s it, Miss. Wot’cher got on to-day.” And he stood more erect, more square, more stiff, more military-like than ever, waiting for her answer without any expression on his wooden face. He looked, at the same time, terribly handsome, she thought, the sort of man who would save one’s life without turning a hair, then walk carelessly away without even giving his name. His chest stood out like a drum, and she could see his muscles bulging against his tunic. Probably he could toss her over his shoulder as if she were a rabbit. Such strength! Such modesty! So grand and silent too! And what a fighter! Oh, he was a beautiful man.

“You know *I* think you’re a hero, Soldier,” she whispered, “in fact I know you are!” — the blood creeping up her neck again. “I wish — I wish” — she whispered so low that she could hardly hear it herself—” I wish I was in danger — now — so that you—”

A low, steady voice froze the marrow in her bones. ‘You *are* in danger.”

It came across her other shoulder, and she turned as though her head had been jerked round by wires to see the old bearded face of the Apothecary gazing calmly at her. The blood retreated from her own, the whirling excitement died, the din and confusion about her withdrew. There was a sudden calm, a queer sudden silence, a sudden coldness, too, that caught her heart. She stared hard into those grand, thoughtful, rheumy eyes.

“In danger?” she whispered. “Me?”

The old head bent slightly in a little nod, but the eyes were not lowered. For a flashing second the queer notion came to her that he alone of all the eight was real, the other Fruit Stoners shadowy as mechanical phantasms in a dream, or at least, that he was more real than they were. Gone before she could seize it, swept away, yet leaving in its train a faint uneasiness in her nerves. There *is* something more real than all this, ran a deep whisper through her, somewhere, yes, there *is.* Then this, too, vanished.

“In danger, my ‘Pothecary?” she heard herself whispering, as the wise old head rose again from its gentle nod.

“Your five minutes,” replied the cool, steady voice, lower than before, “cannot last for ever.”

The words fell like drops of ice into the sudden inner silence that enveloped her, heard evidently by no one but herself, while behind them, also from the heart of that inner silence, rose the faint voice that was like the beating of her own heart: *Tick tock! Tick tock! Tick tock!*

“Answer his question,” murmured the Apothecary’s ghostly whisper. “It comes from all of us. Answer — before it is too late — and then act.”

“To know wot’cher got on now, if you please?” clanked the military voice behind her chair, as though he was asking it for the first time and not a second had passed meanwhile.

CHAPTER X

"TO KNOW WOT'CHER got on to-day," clashed through her mind. "To know what you've got on, what you want to *do*?"

"Answer his question. It comes from all of us. Answer — and then act. *Before it is too late...*!" The spoken words, the inner whisper too, banged through her whole being like an angry bell. It was as if the Soldier's question sprang out of herself, as if it was she who had made him ask it, as if — almost — she herself had uttered the actual words.

She rose automatically to her feet. Here was something she must deal with. She must speak. Possibly, she must act.

In the instant of rising, of straightening her knees and lifting up her body, a flood of thoughts and realizations poured over her in a great tidal wave. Such is the speed of thought, of emotional realization, that this torrential flood swept over her instantaneously. The tumultuous turmoil of what she felt and thought, if it seemed an eternity, lasted actually but a single *Tick* of that horrible *Tick tock!* that beat her heart, as it were, to pieces.

"*Before it is too late.*"

"*Tick tock! Tick tock!...*"

One thing stood out with appalling, horrifying clarity — she was here with a purpose and she had forgotten what that purpose was. She had come to find something, a pearl of great price, and what that " something" was, that Pearl of Great Price, she had not the least idea — because it had left her memory.

She had grown older. Her time was limited. She had Five Minutes by the clock.

Before it is too late. Tick tock!

Too late for what?

"Oh, God!" she gasped inside, as her frozen knees grew straight.

"Five Minutes!" she gasped again, as the icy breath drew rushing through her lungs!

It all rushed back upon her — that there was something she had come to find, and that her time was short. Horribly short it was, and it was shortening while the inner *Tick tock!* in her heart beat remorselessly away.

The new feelings in her lasted hours, it seemed. Actually, they passed through her in a second. Yes, *new.* So many things she had thought, had said to herself before in empty words, now suddenly held meaning. For the first time she understood them. Never again could she kiss a Fruit Stoner — quite as before, for instance. No longer did she want to sew their buttons on or mend their socks; that maternal impulse was replaced by something different. The kiss of innocence, the kiss of passion, were separate and different things. She had altered in herself. She had changed. She had grown older — older, yes. That was clear as day. Life was passing, whether she realized it or not. She had felt it coming — the loss of her ribbon, the anxiety about her appearance, her vexation that no mirror was to be found.

"Oh, heavens," she thought, while her stiff and frozen knees grew straighter, trying to support her body, "I *am* older — I have grown older...! My time is shorter...!"

Too late! The Apothecary's words blazed dreadfully across her mind, while the sense of panic hurry scattered all her faculties. Too late to play... too late to search... too late to find... ah! Yet not too late to remember perhaps...!

Heavens! Why had she dawdled away her precious minutes? Why had she let herself be amused and seduced by all this eating, this fun with the Sailor, the Gentleman, the Tinker and Tailor and Soldier and Ploughboy, this excitement about food, about making love — all humbug love at best — when there was something of *real* importance that she had forgotten? Delirious and delicious though it was, it was not real, this fun, this pleasure, it was not genuine. The real, the genuine thing was the Pearl of Great Price she was here to find. That was the only object worth a moment's thought....

Only what *was* it?

The delightful Fruit Stoners seemed in a conspiracy against her. Did they not deliberately combine to bewilder and entice her with their golden fripperies and entanglements? Were their promises of banquets, voyages, picnics, battles, dresses and the rest, all so much lovely gossamer? Did they wish, intend, to keep her here, a prisoner of pleasure and enjoyment?

While her left knee straightened, these upsetting thoughts rushed over her in a tumultuous tidal wave.

That she had grown older was a definite, outstanding fact. It made her gasp, it made her ache, it brought a sense of tears into her throat. The pity of it! The remorselessness! The drive and drain of it! The futility of resistance, the sense of hopelessness it gave her! *Older...* and no way of preventing it...!

Over her then swept a queer realization suddenly of the many-starred phantasmagoria of the life she had entered. If attractive and enticing, it was also meaningless and incoherent. It numbed, it stupefied her. A doubt even as to its reality disturbed her. How real were these exciting Fruit Stoners and their purposes? The confusing roar and rush of their existence were in her blood already; she shared the joy and adventure of their lives. But did it mean anything, this confusing, fatuous, unintelligible jumble that was her life?...

Her left knee had straightened, the right now followed it; on both legs she stood firm and upright. Hardly two seconds had passed since she began to rise. She was now up, she was about to speak. There was something of great importance she had to say. “But, glory be,” said Maria to herself, “what is it?”

Her mind had gone blank, as though a sponge had swept it clean.

She faced the table, the ring of upturned faces, all watching, staring, waiting. There was an intense silence. And it was at this moment that something happened, something that galvanized her into self-control again, bringing back a measure of realization, even of memory too. It seemed a nightmare happening. It emerged, surely, from some nightmare world, this tall, swift, passing figure.

From the shadows at the far end of the great room it issued; it rushed along, its face looking straight ahead, turning neither right nor left; it moved with flowing stride, and silently, yet not quite silently, for the ominous *Tick tock!*

accompanying it grew louder as it advanced. The faint beating that seemed always in her heart became audible now in the very air about the table.

She saw the sharp, keen face, the sloping shoulders, the black coat with the long tails that flapped like the feathers of an angry, watchful bird, the striped trousers, one leg shorter than the other — the nightmare figure of the Man who Wound the Clocks, the Author of her terribly brief Five Minutes. And, reaching the spot directly opposite to her, though without stopping his swift passage, he turned his head for an instant, gazing straight into her face. He looked hard at her. It was a tiger's look. There was a tawny touch. No sound left the tight, thin lips, but there was another sound that issued, apparently, from his whole body, and it was a slow, hoarse, grinding sound.

His head turned away again almost instantly, looking straight in front as before; there was a flash of striped trousers, of flying coat-tails, of something streaked black and yellow, the grinding sound hung in the air. Horrors! The strike was coming!

She stood, in that second, as if arrested, petrified. Yet there was no strike. It was the clear sound of her own ringing voice that drowned that ominous grinding. But the shock had galvanized her memory, and the knowledge of what she had to do crashed upon her like a hurtling projectile.

"I know what I've got on," she cried out in a panic. "I know now. I've come here to look for something. There's something I *must* find. And you all promised you would help me search. I must begin at once! *Before he strikes!*"

She looked frantically about the room; she pointed with her outstretched hand.

The figure glared fixedly at her. His Up was curled as in a frozen grin. She saw his teeth. It was a tiger's grin.

"That's the man who gave me my five minutes," she cried breathlessly. No answer came, no sign of interest even. "And I'm behind-hand already! Perhaps too late already! Oh! Oh! He's going to strike!" she called out with desperate and passionate impatience.

The ring of faces that stared so fixedly at her turned somewhat listlessly in the direction where she pointed, then turned idly back again. There was no figure visible; the Man who Wound the Clocks had vanished, and the awful grinding sound, the audible *Tick tock!* too, vanished with him. Only the faint beating in her heart went on as before, though evidently none could hear it but herself. A collective smile, she saw, spread over the faces that now gazed up again into her own.

“There was no strike, was there? You didn’t hear anything, did you?” Her voice was shrill with almost feverish anxiety.

The collective smile grew broader, the faces almost beamed, the eyes were twinkling more and more. *They* knew no anxiety evidently, no hurry either, these leisurely Fruit Stoners. But why, oh why, couldn’t they say something?

“You saw him, didn’t you? You heard him?” her voice rang out, to which the only answer was a collective shaking of the smiling heads. “He went like a flash, but he was *there,*” she repeated, “the Man who Winds the Clocks and gave me my five minutes.”

“Man who Winds the Clocks... five minutes.. “ they began whispering among themselves, turning to one another as if in amused surprise and question.

“You’ve given him the slip again anyhow,” laughed the Sailor gaily, sweeping the room with his telescope.

“He’ll never strike in ‘ere,” exclaimed the Tinker, sharpening his knife idly with a merry grin.

“Not while you’re with us, Maria,” chuckled the Tailor, and snapped his big shears.

“Not while we’re with you, Maria,” agreed the Ploughboy, wiping his eyes, though his lips were set for a guffaw.

“Maria” — but how wrong that sounded. “Maria” was a child’s name. And she was no longer a child. Maria, indeed! Marigold, they should have said, Miss Marigold even! It was not impertinence, she knew, but it was rather careless just the same. This flashed across her mind as she heard it.

“Maria, Marigold, Marigold, Maria. Miss Marigold...” beat rhythmically through her head, keeping time with the *Tick tock!* in her heart.

The Gentleman, she realized, was on his feet.

“Oh, my Gent—” she began, when his voice drowned her own. The Soldier, she noticed, had just whispered something in his ear, making his report perhaps. Whatever happens, she thought swiftly, I must remember my search. She held on to that with tooth and nail, so to speak. Slowly, she sat down again and listened.

“It was I, Miss Marigold,” began the Gentleman in his suave, musical voice, raising his hat with consummate grace, “who sent the Army to inquire what your intentions might be...” and his voice trailed away into a long, beautifully modulated series of wordy phrases that she hardly followed, for she found her attention wandering again as his voice meandered on and on. What a lovely voice, what a lovely man! “Miss Marigold”! Why not the intimate and affectionate “Maria”? This hung in the forefront of her mind, while behind it she still gripped with tooth and nail to her urgent decision to begin her search — the search for the Pearl of Great Price she had come to find.

There... at last his lovely sentences were running down, were coming to their end, and she must get up and reply. “What I’ve got on, what I want to do?” A moment ago, she realized, her reply would have been, “I want to play, I would like some sort of game, a romp,” but now, suddenly, it was no longer play she wanted. “I’m too old for play, too grown up. It’s too late for play!” And this realization brought a shock with it. All in a moment, it seemed, the change had come.

His voice at last ran downhill and buried itself in his coloured waistcoat somewhere, inaudible, the last words murmured in a whisper, while he bowed, swept his hat across his heart, then sat down and screwed his eyeglass in more tightly. The faces of the Company turned towards herself, all moving together as though a swivel worked. She rose to her feet at once. “I must tell them I’ve got to begin my search, begin my search, begin my search,” whirled in her brain as she got up. “They must help me look, help me look, help me to remember, help me to remember. That’s what I’ve got to tell them. That’s all I want to say.”

A rather good opening sentence thanking the Gentleman for his charming words, left her mind completely. She used instead the words that came to her naturally, pouring them out spontaneously.

"Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Gentleman, Ploughboy, Apothecary, Thief," her clear young voice rang out through the great room, "I've got *this* on: I want to look for something. I've come here to find something — something of extreme, of ultimate importance. And my time is short, frighteningly short. I must begin my search at once, without a second's delay. And — you've already promised to help me. I claim your help." Staring hard into the ring of upturned faces, she was in the act of sitting down again, when another sentence came rushing up and out: "I've already looked in the Big House and the Little House, so that leaves only the Pig Stye and the Barn. And we'll begin, please, with the Barn." Plump, she was sitting down again. Her reply was made. "The Barn," she added finally with a sort of shout.

For an instant a deep silence reigned, but for an instant only. The chorus then broke out, and it was a bewildering chorus, whirling like a storm about her. Everybody spoke at once. There seemed not merely eight Fruit Stoners, but a score, a hundred. It was difficult, impossible almost, to disentangle the separate voices. All, too, had sprung to their feet, gesticulating, waving their arms like a forest of branches in a wind, while moving from chair to chair round the table, giving the impression of a ring that turned and spun. The faces, so rapid were their movements, merged and separated alternately, and all were lined and crinkly like — yes, like fruit stones — like a single, huge, composite fruit-stone visage even.

Here and there she picked out a definite voice, attaching it to its owner, but so swiftly, instantaneously even, that both face and voice became merged again hopelessly in the whirling ring of sound and movement. The sentences reached her simultaneously, it seemed, as in a shower of pelting rain where yet each drop makes its sharp impression. Oh, the glamour and tumultuous whirl of life! "This year, next year, some time, never!

"Silk, satin, calico, rags!"

"Big House, Little House, Pig Stye, Barn!"

"Pig Stye, Barn, Pig Stye, Barn, Barn, Barn!"

"The Man who Winds the Clocks!"

"Five minutes, five minutes, five minutes!" These words rolled and roared in a continuous chorus behind certain definite sentences that reached her:

"Ready when you are, Maria. The sea's a-sparkling and there's a bellyful of wind!"

It was the Sailor's voice, careless and merry as a sandboy, calling her to adventure, while close behind it boomed the Soldier's steady cry, "Company — march! It's a forlorn hope, but you and I are leading it. To death or glory!" stern as a roll of drums.

Breaking across them both like a snatch of song came the Tinker's drone, "Any old knives to mend, to mend! The 'oneysuckle's sweetest when the sun goes down, and 'ere's a grand 'edge for sleeping," merging into the Ploughboy's quiet call with its scent of hay and clover, "The cows is milked, only the chickens waitin' to be fed."

Sharp and snappy followed another piping cry with the metallic click of scissors, "All ready to try on now for the final fitting and the best of all. This way, if you please, this way!

Though all cried simultaneously, she yet heard the phrases separately and distinctly, offering pleasure, adventure, happiness. It was the enticing sweet cry of life itself. The Gentleman's seductive phrase disturbed her rather too sharply: "The banns are up." His courtly tones broke through the chorus, "and the Best Man's on his way," though there was another voice, low as a whisper yet terribly, compellingly penetrating, that sent a shock like lightning through her, its owner unmistakable, "I'll show you how it's done, Maria, when you come to me — teach you in a jiffy, I will. We'll take everything together when the 'and deceives the eye!" Only the Thief could speak like that and stir that curious, sharp distaste, yet with the deep, curious afterglow of glamour.

The voices rose and fell, the ring of faces swirled, each separate call found its way straight into her heart, for all these invitations expressed exactly the things she longed to do and experience. The collective call plunged into her irresistibly, as though one single yearning overmastered her with immense power. If the idea of banns being up already startled her, there was hidden sweetness in the sudden surprise it held; if that other penetrating whisper roused some touch of furious dislike and shrinking, there was yet a terrible attractiveness about it that she knew was inescapable.

One last voice, however, amid all this incoherent jumble of noisy cries, it seemed, was missing. It came now, last of all. It fell, by chance as it were, into a brief, sudden lull.

"The Barn," came the quiet words that seemed muffled through the tangled beard, "the Barn, before it is too late."

It dropped with the solemnity of a warning bell into the tumultuous uproar which was the collective voice of the world beating against her ears. It made, as it were, a stillness about her, it brought a touch of coldness, too. None of the others, judging by the way they were going on, had heard it, but she, Maria, had heard it, and it brought her to her feet again with a sudden leap, half-frantic but wholly determined.

"*Stop!*" she shouted imperiously, holding out her hand. "*Stop this instant!* Or — or" — the threat came out spontaneously, as a surprise even to herself —" or I'll just forget you all!"

The effect was magically effective. The whirling crew subsided like burst bubbles in a glass of soda-water. The Tinker, in the act of coming up to her, sank into the nearest chair. The Tailor followed suit, and so quickly that he almost sat down on his dreadful shears. The Sailor's dance ended in a slither, as he whipped neatly into a third seat. The Ploughboy flopped abruptly, the straw he was chewing dropping from his opened mouth, and the Soldier, attempting a clumsy salute, jerked himself stiffly on to a fifth. The Thief also came to a dead stop, yet so cleverly and subtly, that he gave the impression he had never moved at all. The Gentleman, alone gracefully nonchalant among them all, resumed his seat calmly, screwing in his eyeglass and adjusting his top hat as he did so. And the Apothecary — ah, the Apothecary, whose low warning it was that had brought her to her senses — the Apothecary, she saw, having never left his chair at all, remained where he was, his eyes cast down in thought, while he went on searching absent-mindedly for a crumb that was lost in the tangle of his beard.

The whole violent whirl subsided in a moment, the shouting uproar ceased. A deep hush fell upon the great room, where all now sat motionless and silent in their chairs. The eight heads and sixteen eyes turned to Maria, still standing in her place.

"I mean to begin and search in the Barn at once," she announced firmly in a tone of quiet authority, "and I count upon your promise to help — help me to hunt as well as to remember."

The eight heads bowed like one man, and it was a bow obviously of assent.

"Willingly," said the Gentleman, rising and taking his hat off, while a murmur of agreement ran round the entire table.

"Thank you, my Fruit Stoners, thank you," replied Maria, though she could tell by their faces that their help was not likely to be of value. They wore the same vague, polite expression as when she spoke of the Clock Man and her Five Minutes, the only difference being that their expression held no hint of amusement, far less of laughter. Earnest, even slightly troubled perhaps, but certainly not indifferent.

And may we inquire," resumed the Gentleman, on his feet again, "the nature of the search? What, precisely, the object is you desire to find?"

That s just the bother," Maria informed him with blunt honesty, "I've forgotten what it is. I knew," she added, "when I first came here, but now it's left my mind completely."

"Ah!" murmured the Gentleman, with his perfect, non-committal smile. Did he shrug his shoulders? She really could not say.

"And I think you're to blame," Maria went on boldly. "All of you, I mean," she qualified quickly. "You make me so happy that I forget. Your invitations and proposals" — she felt herself stupidly blushing—" are so wonderful. I think of nothing else."

"We have waited your coming so long," apologized the Gentleman in his blandest voice, "that we feel there is nothing — nothing we can do — nothing adequate — to show our overpowering sense of—"

"Is it going to be worth while when you *do* find it, Maria?" interrupted the Sailor bluntly.

"And 'ow are you going to reckernize it if you don't know wot it is?" the Soldier rather gruffly followed suit.

"And reely valuable, is it?" the Thief chimed in with a sly grin.

“Everything,” mumbled the Apothecary in his beard, “is here. So a search is bound to find it sooner or later.”

These several interruptions came in a shower all at once, and so abruptly that even the suave, self-possessed Gentleman seemed nonplussed. Pretending he had not heard them, he began to brush his top-hat with his sleeve.

“What would its measurements be, do you suggest, Miss?” asked the Tailor, fingering his tape, but his meek voice was drowned the same moment by the Ploughboy who, leaning forward with both elbows on the table, cried in loud, earthy tones, as though a bull bellowed:

“Tell us what it is, Miss. Then we shall know.”

“I can’t think,” cried Maria in desperation. “That’s just it, you see.” She gazed into his friendly face. She saw the smile of sympathy spread over the broad features.

“I understand, Miss,” he said slowly. “Thinking’s awful hard.”

But the Gentleman, she saw, was sweeping his hat about and bowing. These interruptions were ridiculous, his gesture said. He was evidently on the point of another long-winded sentence when Maria, determined to stop him, took charge again.

“Fruit Stoners,” she began, “I simply cannot answer all your questions truthfully — because I simply do not know. I only can tell you that I have come here to find something that is of — of supreme importance to me. It’s the reason why I’m here at all. It is, to me, a matter of life and death, I believe. I *must* look for it and find it. For if I don’t — there was no sense in my coming here at all. When I see it, I shall know it. It is my Pearl of Great Price, and by God I mean to find it.” And then she added in a louder voice, “Before I am too late!”

Such was the determination and authority in her voice that the words were again followed by a deep silence. No voice was raised. A faint sound of shuffling feet was audible beneath the table, but no one moved visibly. All eyes remained fixed upon her face, but they were expressionless eyes. The Gentleman’s mouth hung slightly open, a proof that he, at any rate, had nothing he could find to say. To her surprise, the old Apothecary then rose up slowly. So great was the tension that though he first wiped his stained fingers on the Gentleman’s shiny coat, the latter remained unaware that he had done so.

“Our promise is given,” he mumbled, “and we will keep it. Whether this search pertains to her world or to ours, to her time or to our own, we need not inquire. Let us be content to honour our commitments faithfully. It may be — and can we question it in view of her shattering arrival in our midst — it may be, I repeat, that there are more worlds than one. Let us go, then, to the Barn! Let us search with open minds!”

His voice, as he proceeded, had changed from its first mumbling sound to a note of clear-toned power, as though wisdom, learning, even authority lay behind it. That the few sentences held his audience was unmistakable. They listened with deference, if a trifle uneasily perhaps. Maria herself was conscious that she shivered slightly. The Apothecary seemed suddenly head and shoulders greater than them all. If they did not comprehend him, they were undeniably impressed. But it was what he said next that brought the most extraordinary change into the room. It was two words only, but it was the way he uttered them that perhaps explained the change. For as he spoke the four syllables, the hush deepened profoundly, and even the rustling, as the whole company of Fruit Stoners dropped on their knees and hid their faces behind folded hands, was scarcely audible. With bowed heads all knelt and hid their faces.

And the two words, the four syllables, the old Apothecary pronounced sent through Maria a great wave of hope and yearning.

“Jack Robinson,” was what she heard.

She also heard the low voices about the table issue from the lowered, hidden faces. “Amen, amen,” came from them in accents of great awe. A majesty of sound like a rushing, roaring wind swept through the room. It entered, tore across, and passed out. She heard it, felt its touch against her face and body, but she saw no visible outline, it was gone.

The Apothecary sat down again, the Fruit Stoners raised their heads once more, the Gentleman, waving his hat, was on his feet.

“We shall meet, then, in the Barn, Maria,” he said with an entrancing smile.

“Thank you,” replied Maria. She felt suddenly exhausted, tired, as though she wanted to sleep, and yet she felt extraordinarily stimulated. “Before the search begins I think I had better rest a little.”

And she crossed the great hall, passed up the wide staircase, and walked slowly down the corridor towards the door of Queen Elizabeth’s Room. Her sense of panic hurry, of frantic haste, had left her, the fear of being too late was gone. “That marvellous name!” she whispered in her heart. “That glorious, tremendous name!”

CHAPTER XI

WHAT THOUGHTS, WHAT emotions were in her at this moment she hardly knew herself. There was now no press, no urgent need for haste; ample leisure and ample time were hers, and it was due, this wondrous change, to the power of Jack Robinson. She was not in her own world, but in that of the Fruit Stoners. That, at least, she realized, and the feeling of peace it brought was marvellous.

While still determined to search — oh, yes — the sense of frantic hurry had left her. It could wait a little after all. She wanted to rest first.

At the top of the stairs she paused an instant and looked back, and the Fruit Stoners, she saw with a smile, were already busily searching among themselves in a muddled, futile way. They were looking under the chairs and tables, lifting cups and saucers and peering underneath them, hunting even in their own pockets. They were very leisurely about it, turning this way and that, keeping somehow their old circular formation, and moving generally, it occurred to her, almost automatically, even mechanically, so that, for a second, the picture she watched below her suggested an unreality of dream, if not of nightmare. But one of the figures, she then noticed with a start, had broken out of the ring, and was following her upstairs. The Gentleman, she remembered, when she spoke of going up to rest, had made a gesture of conducting her himself, but his deep bow was so endlessly prolonged that she had slipped away before he straightened up again. This following figure, moreover, was not the Gentleman. It was the Thief. Invariably quicker than any of the others, he had nipped in like a flash and seized his chance. Already he was close upon her heels, then, quick as lightning, had actually passed her and now stood ready to open the door for her as she reached it.

Thus it was that she found herself walking towards him and that he stood waiting for her. It placed her at a slight disadvantage. Why had she not walked faster and got there first? A small detail, she reflected, but stupid, very stupid. It annoyed her. Yet with a certain excitement she prepared to deal with him.

“You’re the Thief,” she said when she was close, making to brush past him though his hand was on the door-knob. She could think of nothing else to say — nothing better at any rate. She felt that she was again blushing, and the stupidity, the idiocy, of this made her furious with herself.

“That’s me,” he agreed. “But — *your* Thief, please.”

Was he going to be insolent? If so — well, she could easily deal with *that,* and of course he knew it. But his expression was grave and deferential, his manner merely that of a gentleman opening a door for a lady. There was no suggestion of anything offensive, she decided. How ridiculous he looked, trying to play the gentleman.

“What do you want then — my Thief?” she asked, patiently pausing in spite of herself and conscious of an odd tenderness rising in her.

“All I can get,” was his blunt reply, looking her straight in the eyes.

Maria thought a moment, hesitated. She saw, too, that he took note of the hesitation.

“Yes, that’s quite natural, I suppose,” she said quickly, trying to cover up that foolish hesitation with a self-possession she hardly felt. “You’ve taken my ribbon already,” she added, wondering at the same moment why she did not make him give it back at once. She felt confused a little; that idiotic blush, now mounting from her neck, stole something of her self-confidence perhaps. The Sailor’s shell, she remembered, lay in her pocket. And she was wearing an amber necklace.

“Yes,” agreed the Thief, “and I’m keeping it.”

Maria stared at him. But she stared because she found it difficult to take her eyes away from his, as though, besides their penetrating quality, there was a sort of light and fire in them that fascinated her. While she inwardly shrank from him, she was aware of another feeling overtopping her revulsion.

“You may,” she heard herself saying. And then she paused again. “Is there anything else I can give you that will make you happier?” she asked presently.

He shook his head.

“You don’t care about what’s *given*?”

He shook his head again.

“Only what you can — take?” Why had she not said “steal” as she had first intended?

“By my own power, my own right,” said the Thief proudly, drawing himself up so that he looked for a moment rather extraordinary.

At the same time Maria, who had been watching him intently all the while, noticed that his eyes settled more than once upon her amber necklace. His hands, too, had long ago left the door-knob, and were now constantly on the move, shifting swiftly here and there, darting about in the air with extreme rapidity, as he gesticulated, the long, slender fingers literally all over the place. The last words and the way he said them sent a sudden deep thrill down her spine that she could not explain. She admired him for talking like that. He was not a sneak-thief merely.

“And — when you’ve — taken — everything there is to take, you will be happy, my Thief?” she asked. “Is that it?”

He nodded again, but with a curious smile. “You too,” he said, in such a low tone that she was not sure she caught the words correctly. Her hand, too, was now upon the door-knob, and its rattle, as she began to turn it, drowned his voice rather.

“Tell me one thing, my Thief” — she asked a final question, shivering a little as she spoke—” if you found, by chance, the great thing I’m searching for — would you keep it, or would you give it to me?”

He did not hesitate. Turning his big fiery eyes full upon her, he answered immediately: “Keep it.”

“Why?”

“When you find it, Maria, you will go away — go back.”

Maria felt frightened. A deep uneasiness rose in her. She opened the door wide to go in. His fingers seemed everywhere. Did he somehow manage to lift her hand to his lips and leave a kiss of respectful homage on it? She hardly knew. His whole manner, she saw, suddenly bespoke reverence, worship, awe. It both bewildered and comforted her. Yet certainly, as she brushed past him to enter the room, he must have touched her somehow, for the same electric shock she had felt before raced through her body. But it was a confusing moment, and she could not be quite certain what actually had happened. He spoke as well. He said some rather extraordinary words — that is, if she caught them correctly: “When I’ve taken *all,* you will remember...” but the same instant she had closed the door behind her, and the Thief had gone.

As she closed the door, facing the big room for the second time, the words rang on in her ears, with the sudden odd feeling that they were her own, that she herself somehow had spoken them, or, at least, that it was she who had made him use them. But this was nonsense, obviously, and the strange notion disappeared. They had no meaning anyhow. The interest of finding herself in this great bedroom a second time filled her mind. It looked exactly the same, of course. Why should it not? How long was it, she asked herself, since she had been here last? Was it long or short? It seemed such a little time ago, while yet it seemed also a long, long time, ages and ages even. Though this sense of interval puzzled her again, it did not really matter; no, it did not matter in the least. These odd jumps and intervals and periods seemed quite natural; feeling older and younger again seemed natural too; it no longer startled or upset her. For a long stretch she was certainly a child, then, with a sudden leap, as it were, she realized that she was older. It was not a gradual business at all, this change of age; and though the moment of sudden realization startled her uneasily at first, she became used to it almost immediately.

Well, so it was, she said to herself, and so it is, and she began to examine the room, walking round it, thinking how oddly familiar it seemed, and looking, chiefly, for a mirror, which she did not find.

“Well, I came up here to rest,” said Maria to herself, “and so, I suppose, I’d better rest,” and she sat down on the edge of the huge bed, dangling her legs, only to find that rest was the last thing she really wanted now. Her thoughts were whirling too violently for rest.

Such strange details popped up first. That “Oh, God!” for instance. Why had she suddenly said “Oh, God!”? It had shocked her even as she said it, and yet she had meant it earnestly, literally, reverently. Was she a child, then, or a young woman now? Or was she both at once? Her thoughts at this moment, at any rate, were hardly a child’s. She *had* got older somehow. Was growing up just a thin pretence after all, merely a pose through which the child keeps bursting up spontaneously? Could one be both at once like that? The Fruit Stoners could apparently. For them, two things simultaneously seemed possible, and natural. But that was due to their queer time, of course, their queer eternal present, without past or future.

“Anyhow,” she reminded herself again, “this isn’t thinking like a child. These thoughts aren’t a child’s thoughts. I must be older, or I couldn’t have said ‘Oh, God!’ like that.”

And she looked down reflectingly at her dangling legs.

“How old, then, am I really?” swept through her with a sharp, anxious twinge. She examined herself as thoroughly as was possible without a mirror.

“Am I pretty, I wonder?” she asked herself. “I expect so. My legs are, anyhow.” She pulled up her skirt above her thighs and admired them, their smoothness, their milky whiteness. Her bust, too, she noticed, was a little rounded. She was slim and long and supple. “Oh, perhaps, I’m lovely!” she exclaimed. “Perhaps I’m even a beauty!” A deep sigh escaped her. Her thoughts flew to the Fruit Stoners, eight of them, and all men. All adored her too.

It was very troubling.

“And I’m — engaged — to the Gentleman,” flashed up. The banns were already announced, the best man on the way. But there was the fascinating Sailor too, the ravishing Sailor with his gold earrings and his rich brown skin. There was a weakness in her for the Soldier, too, though some instinct whispered sharply that *that* was perhaps chiefly gold braid. Then the Tinker and the Ploughboy — a softness for one, an undeniable sweetness for the other. Even the sallow Tailor had his fugitive claim, and the Apothecary — ah, bless him, her’Pothecary she really loved, even if he scared her rather. She lowered her skirt an inch or two.

Was that all of them, all eight, or was there someone missing? Had she missed one out?... It was enough, at any rate. If there was another, he didn’t matter. Following some instinct that refused to disclose itself, she abruptly pulled down her skirts as low as they would go, hiding her pretty legs.

Her thoughts whirled and flamed and rushed and sparkled. It lay beyond her to control them. She leaped from the bed and walked round the room again, looking at everything, wondering why it was both familiar yet unremembered, striding to and fro, rapidly, lithely, gracefully, unaware that subconsciously all the time she was really hunting for a mirror.

Yes, a long interval had slipped by somehow since she was here last. It startled her.

"I've been through a lot since I lay here last with — yes, with Judas, my black cat...!" she repeated aloud, coming back to the bed again.

Her thoughts creamed up and bubbled like milk in a milking-pail, each bubble bursting into formlessness before she could examine it....

This growing up — what was it, after all? It was just adding up experiences and thinking about them afterwards, while the body that had known them became too floppy to record them as before. But the mind — oh, yes, the mind skimmed the cream off the results and then became too cautious to repeat them. But the heart — oh, yes, the heart just sweetened and grew rich, or soured and grew tiny. But she — yes, *she herself* — oh, yes, *she* gathered up the results of crumpling body, shrinking mind, crinkling or expanding heart, and realized that it all meant something, or else gave up the search and sank away into nothingness....

Maria sprang from the bed, gripped with an awful terror. Were these thoughts her own? Where did they come from, these rather mature and cynical reflections? A mortal chilliness stole over her. She shivered icily. She flung herself back and buried her face in the pillow. She felt old, old, old. Old as the hills. Her whole life was passing, going, wasted. She had done nothing, accomplished nothing, missed the object of coming here, of being alive. It was too late. These were the thoughts of a tired, worn-out being — the final thoughts. Oh, God...!

Her face dug deeper and deeper into the soft pillow — and came up against something warm and soft and fragrant suddenly, something that smelt like heaven and felt like it too, something that emitted a lazy purring sound, something that she loved — in childhood.

She straightened up, dragging the reluctant Judas with her.

"You black darling monster!" she cried. "Pretending you didn't see me! Pretending you weren't there at all!

She snuggled against him, hugging him with all the absurd headlong affection of a child again.

“And I only left you a moment ago, or rather you left me. I saw you tear away like a streak of black lightning — oh, yes, I did. And the moment you’d caught your mouse and swallowed it, you slipped back in here to sleep it off, did you?”

Her recent thoughts had vanished. Only a muddled ghost of them remained. The anguish and the biting sadness, at least, had disappeared.

“Now, Judas,” she went on, talking into a sleeping face that hung sideways yet kept its eyes tight shut, “I’m going to tell you something. Now, listen! I’m at this moment in the very prime of life. But after the prime, I go downhill, don’t I? Well, you understand *that,* of course. And the next thing is — that I’ve got to look for something. I’ve got to search and find it, and it’s a pearl of great price, my black beauty, a pearl of great price. I jolly well mean to find it too, make no mistake about *that.* Only,” she went on to her irresponsive pet, and with a shade less conviction, due doubtless to the fact that no sign of sympathy was forthcoming, “only, I think it’s a pity rather — don’t you? — not to enjoy my prime and my loveliness — for *you* know I’m lovely, don’t you, darling? — instead of wasting it in a difficult and tiresome search? I may just as well wait till I am actually going downhill a little. That will be time enough, I feel. And searching downhill’s easier too, isn’t it? So, as you evidently agree...”

Tick tock! Tick tock! Tick tock!

It was so faint, so distant, it might have been buried inside the warm fragrant body she fondled. But it was audible, none the less. Her fingers weakened, so that the cat fell back into his deep sleep upon the pillow, while Maria sat bolt upright and rigid, listening with her whole body in an icy room. *Tick tock! Tick tock! Tick tock!*

Was it growing louder, coming closer? She could not tell. Was there a grinding sound behind its dreadful beat? Though it filled her ears, she could not truly say. She felt frozen. She could not move. She could not think. She could only listen.

Strange words rose in her mind, only half heard and far away.

"The night cometh when no man can work!" Where did *that* come from? Why was it familiar? Like some dark insect it darted up to sting her.

"When all is taken you will be happy — and remember."

It came with a shock she could not understand. Where had she heard it? Who — who had used those words? In a flash she saw the great penetrating eyes hanging in the air before her face, the voice, the figure.

"Oh, Thief — my Thief!" she cried aloud — then wondered half dizzily why she called for help to one whom she despised.

Nothing happened, of course, in response to her foolish cry; there was no answer, no one came. She sat and shivered, listening, listening.

Tick tock! Tick tock!

She was being watched, she knew; someone was observing her; the hideous sensation of hurry began to grow; her blood was racing, her heart was beating. Panic was close upon her. Her time was short. Her Five Minutes were nearly up. She was too late, too late. She had made no search, looked for nothing, found nothing, wasted her time, lost her opportunities. There would come, any instant now, a grinding noise, a strike...! Oh, God...!

She clenched her hands so tightly that the nails dug into the flesh, and her lip was bleeding where she bit it. Her mouth went dry, breath failed her, there was ice against her skin — when suddenly there flamed up into her collapsing mind the memory of a name, the name, the power, the Apothecary had used.

"Jack Robinson... Jack Robinson," she murmured, and fell upon her knees against the bed.

"*Jack Robinson*" she repeated, breathing it with intense faith and fervent belief against her folded hands. "Jack Robinson.." and there came a soft majestic roaring as of a rushing wind that swept about her.

The relief seemed instantaneous, for her whole body slipped into an easy and delicious relaxation, and the blood, that had been congealed, flowed on again. Her muscles lost their stiffness, terror passed, the air all round her became warm and gentle.

She rose slowly to her feet. The roaring died away.

“Jack Robinson,” she said again in a firm, clear voice into the empty chamber. “Jack Robinson.” The wind was gone and a deep silence followed.

The sense of hurry, of limitation, the feeling of being a caged prisoner with a dreadful end quite close, all these nightmare emotions left her and melted away. In their place a realization of ineffable peace and happiness invaded her whole being. There was a deep conviction of timeless content, of infinite leisure, of calm serenity that lapped her round as with the blessing of some endless summer’s day.

She stood facing the great room, steady and unafraid.

“Eternity must be like this, of course,” she whispered to herself. “Perhaps Jack Robinson *is* Eternity. The other” — she did not use the name—” is merely Time.”

Her trifling thoughts had all subsided, her anguish vanished, her wild emotions smoothed away. No high, ecstatic flame of glory touched her; it was merely that she realized peace, quiet, content, endlessness. She drew the deepest breath she had ever known in her life, and moved calmly towards the bed.

“Now I can lay me down to rest,” she heard herself saying quietly, though the words seemed to fall upon her from the air, as though she had known them somewhere long ago. And she began in leisurely fashion to take her clothes off, noticing now for the first time that her bead necklace was missing. It was no longer round her neck. Yet its loss did not trouble her.

“Of course, of course,” she exclaimed, but quite calmly, “he took it at the door. The Thief took it after all.”

She felt no annoyance or vexation, only an admiring wonder. It was marvellous. Such skill, such swiftness, such accurate delicacy were beyond praise. She had noticed nothing. “Perhaps he took my shell as well!” she went on, and at once put her hand into the pocket of her frock. The shell, too, was missing. “So he’s got my ribbon, my amber necklace and my shell!”

It rather pleased her. A wave of happiness rose in her. She stood now in the centre of the room with hardly any clothes on, smiling to herself as with some secret inner joy.

"I made him better than I knew," she whispered tremblingly to herself. "It's grand! I made him almost perfectly!"

She climbed into the huge bed and repeated these assertions to Judas, and Judas did not contradict them.... She lay there calmly and comfortably on her back, staring at the ceiling, and repeating softly under her breath, "I made him with the best that was in me, I made him with my very best..."

The room wore a pleasant darkness, though there had been no candle to blow out, and she lay restfully at peace, with no particular desire to sleep, but wrapped in a deep, glowing content. Hurry, the restless demon, had left her; she was in the keeping of Jack Robinson, and the sense of endlessness was comforting beyond all words. It was a golden state. She understood something of the sweet leisure the Fruit Stoners knew, for she was in their timeless world. It lulled and blessed and soothed her. Judas evidently knew it too, lying unperturbed against her ribs, warm as a breathing hot-water bottle.

"Jack Robinson, Jack Robinson," she murmured, staring at the ceiling. "If only I could *see* him — just once!"

Oh, what peace it brought to be in his delicious kingdom. She need not get frantic now about her brief Five Minutes. These harrowing Five Minutes came from somewhere else, a place she had escaped from — into this timeless, endless region where haste and hurry had no meaning, where there were no limitations, where age and growing older held no final meaning. A golden, yes, a golden age....

How white and smooth the ceiling was above her; no fly, no spider traced the faintest pattern there!

Childhood, youth, growing older, age, old age — they held no interests now, no definite measurements, and certainly no terror. She could be — she was — both older and a child at once; the wise maturity of one and the gay thoughtless spontaneity of the other belonged to her simultaneously.

"I *am* older a little," she realized, passing a hand caressingly over her smooth curves under the sheets, "and at the same time I'm just a happy child who wants to play. I'm in my prime. It must be a nick!"

She sighed and laughed and stretched out her long legs as far as they would go, wondering which she wanted most of all....

Some fly, some busy spider, she saw, had now traced dim lines across the snow-white ceiling. Well, why not? What did it matter? Was she getting drowsy, she wondered vaguely, ready to fall asleep perhaps? No, sleep was ridiculous and impossible here. The Fruit Stoners, she was positive, never slept. She had never tucked the Tinker into bed, or packed the hay tightly against the Ploughboy's back, or warmed the sheets for the gold-braided Soldier....

But what was happening? Why were those faint spider lines so much thicker and darker now? And where had those cross-lines come from that were not there a moment ago?

"I'll marry the Gentleman first," she told herself, "before I begin that awful search. After him, perhaps the others. I hope he isn't just all words and manners. And would he be *too* polite to live with, I wonder? For ever and ever and ever with that top-hat and eyeglass and those bows?"

The lines above her head had broadened surely, and sunk at the same time a little lower.

"Of course, I'll *never* forget the search — my Pearl of Great Price — oh, never, never — but the Sailor with his songs and dancing and trips to distant lands — the Sailor would make me laugh more perhaps. Though, if the singing and dancing never ended — well, Judas, there ought to be a limit *somewhere,* don't you think?"

Each Fruit Stoner came under review, each with his particular attractions and disabilities, until finally she reached the Thief —— —

She stopped dead then. She thought about something else.

"Youth — but early youth — just before my prime — that's what I'll choose," she decided. "Yet more of a child perhaps—"

Maria sat suddenly bolt upright in bed, craning her neck, her eyes fixed upon the snow-white ceiling. For it was no longer snow-white, and the fly and spider lines had now thickened into broad solid things that looked like heavy beams of wood. These beams, moreover, were trembling, settling down. Walls and ceiling no longer joined together quite as before. A faint shiver ran. The air was shaking. Distances appeared that puzzled her. The great chandelier that hung from the centre of the ceiling had disappeared. Everything was melting. Above her head she saw a smudge of gloomy space where thick rafters showed like enormous ribs. A shiver ran through the air as though a vast shape of jelly trembled....

CHAPTER XII

HER MUSCLES RELAXED; her eyes, if they had ever been closed, opened. A dim but pleasant light lay everywhere; there was a delicious fragrance in the air, and Judas, soft and warm, lay curled up and purring on her lap.

"Am I in my prime still? Is this a proper nick? Am I too late to begin?" rose confusedly in her mind, as she stared about her. A start of uneasiness followed. "There's something I've got to look for — at once—"

Her uneasy whisper went drifting, floating through the pleasant semi-darkness, and she realized the same second that she sat perched high above the ground upon masses of comfortable, soft hay, and that great rafters stretched, dimly outlined, in the gloom above her. Far below, she dimly made out a broken cart, an old mowing-machine, a great heap of potatoes, rakes and poles, iron netting, and a pile of dirty rope. An earthy, tarry smell mingled with the hay on which she sat. It was all unmistakable, of course. This was a place she had been in before, had seen in a picture, or at least had dreamed about.

"This is — the Barn—" she began, then stopped dead. Something had moved. There was a movement somewhere just where she could not see it, a movement the corner of her eye had caught. She held motionless.

"I came here to look for something," her uneasy thought ran on, "to search. I was interrupted, delayed — but now I *must* get on with it — I must hunt and find—"

The concealed movement made her pause, but her uneasy thought ran on.

She took a step or two and sank almost to her knees in the deep hay. She turned about her, wondering where to begin the search, and her hands flew automatically to her head. "I wonder how my hair looks! I must be horribly untidy! I wish I had a mirror!" She patted and pushed her hair about.... These masses of stacked hay! They might hide anything — from a thimble to an elephant! What a place to search!

Her fingers plunged in wildly, recklessly. It pricked and stung. Crawling, floundering along, she reached the edge of the hay and peered over. It dropped in a sheer wall below her. The sides had been cut into a smooth, straight wall. Her eye looked down it dizzily to the dusty floor, then upwards to the shadowy rafters that ran across the gloomy ceiling.

"That's where something moved," she told herself, "or did I only imagine it?"

Was something perched there on one of the big rafters? Did it move? Had it moved? Or had it just stopped moving as she looked? Something was watching her; she was not alone, she felt positive of that, and she shrank down and tried to hide herself with a mass of loose hay. She concealed herself like an animal or insect.

Again that curious sense of interval, of a long interval, passed over her. It alarmed her, bringing a sense of hurry.

"Judas, my black demon, am I older, or younger, or about the same? And — *what is this thing I've got to look for*? Will you tell me *that?*"

But Judas, asleep where she had left him, gave no answer.

She peered down the precipice of hay, she plunged her hands feverishly into the sharp prickly stalks, and then she looked down at her short serge skirt and spindly legs, the legs of a little girl, of course. Her bare hands stung and pricked, but it was worth it — there was something she wanted to find, something she had come to look for, something she *must* find — and quickly. For time was passing.... The feeling of hurry grew. A restlessness caught and twisted her....

"I was so happy somewhere, peaceful, lying cosily and dreaming—"

Then, suddenly, it all came back more sharply to her: her urgent search, the shortening time, the Fruit Stoners, the *Barn!*

She was digging and ferreting blindly close to the edge when this all flashed back upon her like a thunderbolt. A touch of panic shot over her like fire. To hunt for anything in this mass of hay would take a lifetime; to search all that loose, untidy paraphernalia below would need years. Something was rushing past her, rushing at unchecked, uncheckable speed, and she was rushing with it, being swept along with it helplessly — towards an end — an end that was coming nearer.

She gave a gasp of startled surprise as something, but something solid this time, darted past her face and went scuttling down the precipitous wall of hay and landed on the floor below almost soundlessly. It made her jump, so that she nearly lost her balance, but the same second she realized what it was: Judas, in a single rushing spring, had left her side and safely reached the ground. She peered down and watched him. His tail was in the air, his black face thrust forward, his whiskers twitching, as with slow, cautious footsteps he advanced towards the wall of hay. He was nosing now against the lowest bales, he was sniffing inquiringly, with great interest, and as she watched his mysterious antics, her first impulse was to get down somehow and join him. But could she make the effort for that dizzy slide? Could she manage to slither down the sheer sides? That giddy, awful drop!

Excitement whirled through her. She must somehow join her beloved cat. Her body automatically made the first muscular movements, gathering the legs taut beneath her; her hands clutched the hay and tried to make a rope of it; she felt herself just beginning to slither helplessly — when a sudden noise overhead caught her ears.

Digging her heels in violently, she stopped sliding just in time and looked up, and there, moving along the big central rafter, was the dark object she had seen before. She had known all along there was something or someone perched up there, watching her in the gloom. An involuntary cry escaped her, and the movement stopped instantly, but, though the object was now stationary, she got the impression of great agility, almost as though a large monkey crouched up there, observing her from the shadows, noting everything she did. She strained her smarting eyes to their utmost, but the outline remained a blur, and at that moment a little cry of excitement from Judas, half miaow, half purr, made her look down again, and what she saw going on below was so interesting and peculiar that the rafter and its mysterious occupant were momentarily forgotten.

For Judas was now standing right up against the wall of hay, tapping it with a tentative paw, then springing sharply away again, as though he saw a movement in it. He sat down a couple of feet away and stared with gimlet eyes. The hay *was* moving, the tight smooth surface was parting; Maria saw the separate stalks give sudden tiny jerks; something was trying to force a way out. She watched with popping eyes. Plainly enough, the opening in the surface widened. A tip appeared, a pointed tip that was pink and shiny. It wriggled, it pushed out farther, the breach grew bigger.

She stared with such concentrated interest that it seemed her eyes must pop out of her head, bounce on the ground, and roll away like two marbles.

“Now, Marigold, is the moment to be careful,” whispered a cautious voice inside her, while another followed, but more eagerly, “Get down, Maria, and see for yourself!”

For while she dreaded the dizzy drop, she knew she could really manage it quite easily, and both voices sounded in her simultaneously as though two ages uttered. The pointed thing with the pink, shiny tip pushed out farther still and was now wriggling aimlessly in the air, while Judas, advancing calmly, stalked up and with signs of obvious pleasure, sniffed it. It instantly drew back, then thrust forward again; it touched his head; it scratched the black hair. Something glinted on it lower down — a ring, a signet-ring!

“Glory be!” cried Maria aloud, with amazement. “It’s a finger!”

What she then witnessed drove everything else completely out of her head. The finger protruded farther. It worked the hole bigger and bigger. The hay was not as tightly packed as it appeared, evidently, for soon a hand came into view, after the hand an arm, after the arm a shoulder. There was a sound of heavy breathing, almost panting. Next, from a point closer to the floor, a foot protruded, a wrinkled sock, a piece of trousers, at each of which Judas sniffed cautiously in turn. With a burst of loose hay higher up then came into view a patterned waistcoat, a chain of gleaming gold across it, a fob, an eyeglass swinging on a black cord; and finally, amid a shower of dust and stalks, and with a great blowing and puffing and spluttering, emerged the full outline of — the Gentleman.

He reached the air in a crumpled mass, bent sideways like a tangled parcel that had burst, but immediately, giving a violent shake as a wet dog shakes off water, he straightened up and recovered his natural elegance with surprising ease. Judas, whose head he had scratched without knowing what it was, stood, fortunately, behind him, and before he could add to the

Gentleman's discomfiture, he gave one look of amazement, turned tail, and raced instantly out of sight.

Maria gave a look of amazement, too, from her giddy perch. The Gentleman stood up stiffly, swung his arms about, puffed and blew noisily, shook himself again like a drenched dog, and flung out his legs alternately as though an ant's nest had crawled inside his crumpled trousers.

"Odds bodikins!" he cried, whistling windily past a dry dandelion that caught in his lips.

"Gadzooks! It's all down me back and next me skin, and it pricks like thistles. Zounds! What a place to search in! Devil take me, if I'm not covered with fleas as well!"

His white top-hat, bristling with stalks, its surface all brushed the wrong way, had the air of a ruined bee-hive, and the next thing he did was to remove it for inspection. "Upon me soul!" he exclaimed with elegant disgust as he breathed upon it, polished it carefully against his sleeve, and then replaced it upon his head at a very rakish angle. He looked about him more contentedly then, brushing his coat, and patting one pocket in particular, a pocket, Maria noticed, that had a peculiar bulge. "Whew!" he half whistled again, "there's no knowing what may be expected of a fellah —" and stopped dead, as he glanced up and for the first time caught sight of Maria overhead.

"Oh, sir — oh, my Gent!" she cried, a torrent of words set free as their eyes met, "I'm so awfully glad to see you!" With a tremendous effort she kept her laughter back. "You look adorable! But how on earth did you manage to squeeze in *there*? You can't have been very comfortable, I'm afraid—"

Her greetings were cut short abruptly, for leaning too far forward in her excitement, she suddenly lost her balance and slid bodily over the edge, landing with a bang and clatter at his very feet. She arrived on all fours in a heap of loose, tumbled hay, and as laughter seemed natural now and could not hurt his feelings, she let out peal after peal that had been suppressed before with such difficulty.

"Your obedient, Maria," said the Gentleman collectedly, though his voice was still choked with dust a little. He bent instantly to help her rise, his swinging eyeglass tapping against her cheek, his hat already sweeping about as he made his usual bow. “I trust you are not hurt?” he inquired gravely, for he did not join her laughter. “My arrival seems well timed, if I may dare to say so.” And he steadied her on her feet again. He was dignity and aristocratic elegance personified.

“Oh, my Gent!” was all she could get out between her gusts of laughter. “ I do thank you ever so much, and I must give you a kiss at once,” and she forthwith planted a hearty peck on his dusty cheek.

“My darling, my affianced darling,” he replied gallantly, returning the kiss with fervour, “for we are affianced still in spite of all this hay and stuff?” He puffed and blew with great delicacy.

“Of course we are,” Maria agreed quickly. “And I’m not a scrap hurt, thank you. Why, that’s nothing,” she added, referring to the slide. “I’ve often and often climbed to the top of the cedar, the very top, I mean—”

Her lips closed with a snap. What was she saying? She tried to collect her thoughts. “And you, Gent,” she went on rapidly, “how in the world did you ever get inside that hay? And what were you doing there? Wasn’t it frightfully stuffy, and weren’t you” — she tried violently to find a dignified and suitable word, for it was clear he was in no mood for laughter—” incommoded?” she brought out finally, with an expression that held at least no visible smile.

She looked hard into his face. He seemed different somewhere, she thought, not quite as young, but more as she had seen him first, the skin crinkly rather, looser, too, as when the air escapes from a toy balloon. It was filling up again, however, now, and the blood seemed pouring back. Yet — did he look a shade less real? Had a great interval passed over him as well?

“I was — er — searching,” he replied, blandly courteous, “searching, as you asked. And I found — this,” he added proudly, while his hand dived into the bulging pocket and drew out a huge horse-pistol. “Can this be, Maria,” he asked solemnly, “the thing you wish so ardently to find?” He held it out for her examination.

Maria looked at the big weapon cautiously, inspecting it with curiosity.

“No, my Gent, it’s not that,” she answered decidedly, shaking her head. The ugly weapon, dangerous though it was, seemed trifling somehow. A touch of impatient resentment flashed across her. It was as though he tried to pacify her with a toy, she felt. Compared to what she had come to find, it *was* a toy. "But I thank you all the same, you know. It was sweet of you to look. You kept your word. And — and are the other Fruit Stoners searching too?" she asked suddenly. "Are they all looking for my Pearl of Great Price too?"

He made a profound bow, betraying no interest, no emotion of any sort.

"They are all somewhere about here," he told her casually, "in the hay probably, more or less. This is the Barn, you see, where you wanted us to search."

"In the hay!" Maria gasped. "And searching! Oh, Gent — how splendid of them!"

The Gentleman calmly screwed his eyeglass in, patted his top-hat more firmly on his head, and gazed into space above him.

"Halloa there, my good fellow," he called loudly, "and have you found anything?"

"This," replied a voice from the rafters. "Here goes!" And a flashing object came hurtling down between them and fell with a metallic rattle on the floor at their feet. It was so close it might easily have struck them. It missed the Gentleman's top hat by an inch. "An old cutlass," laughed the voice, "but I've polished it up a bit, and it fairly shines now. Buried in the 'ay it was, but a pirate's weapon, if ever there was one."

Maria agreed with that, as she stared down at the gleaming curved blade lying against her very shoe. Then, with a rush and scuffle, down came the speaker after it. The dark blob of an object on the highest rafter, the thing that had moved and watched her, came down with the light agility of a big monkey. A leap, a slither, another leap, a light plop, and the dashing Sailor shot dancing across the floor towards her.

"All I could find, Maria, and a merry search it was. Keep it, Miss, it's the best I could do. It's all yours, and if it ain't right, we'll look again and find something better, maybe!"

Maria shook her head disappointedly. "You keep it, Sailor. It's not what I'm looking for." And again she felt that she was being fobbed off with a foolish toy. "But I'm delighted to see you, Sailor! I'm really frightfully glad." And she was on the point of kissing him when — well, she just decided not to. She gazed at him with obvious admiration instead. His beard was gone, the gold ear-rings dangled from his sun-burned ears, his telescope swung loose, he brought a whiff of salt and seaweed with him. But his skin, too, seemed to have crinkled a little more. He was not exactly less real, she decided, but he was somehow less — what was the right word? — spontaneous — less himself perhaps. There was something mechanical about him. A strange feeling passed over her as she gazed.

"Seen a bit since I saw you, Missie Maria," he half chanted, "but now I see you again it's the best bit I ever saw." His singing voice rolled enchantingly along, deep and jolly. "Grown a bit, too, 'aven't you, I will say."

What Maria said sounded ridiculous, but she could not help it.

"I like you better without the beard after all."

"The tropics took it off," he explained; "'of as a hoven down there, you've no hidea."

"Hawful," agreed Maria, before she could prevent it.

"Wouldn't 'ardly believe it," he replied.

"So you were down in the tropics and searching in this Barn at the same time?" she asked.

"That's it, yes. Same as usual," agreed the Sailor, clapping the telescope to his eye and gazing into her face two feet away.

"That is our melancholy fate," put in the Gentleman. "You see, nothing matters here — er — much." He smiled a trifle mournfully, catching the Sailor's eye.

It seemed to Maria — or did she fancy it merely? — that they exchanged a swift glance together. A touch of uneasiness brushed her mind, but instantly was gone again.

"Something matters to *me* very much," she said with quick decision: "my search." Either she had not heard the Gentleman's words properly, or had not understood them quite. "My search," she repeated firmly. "And I must get on with it at once." She looked hurriedly round her. "Are the others coming?” she asked impatiently. “You’re all going to help me look, aren’t you?”

“They are already here,” the Gentleman said quietly, “and every one of us at your service. All are searching and have doubtless found something. There is, however, no hurry, as you know.”

Why, she wondered for a second, did his words disturb her? How did she get the odd impression that they were playing with her, trifling, fobbing her off with a pretence that was really wasting precious time? Both question and impression, however, came and vanished again so swiftly that no trace seemed left. A sound of rustling movement stirred about her, of breathing, of feet shuffling softly, quietly. From all sides it came, from in front as well. So quickly then that she had not even noticed them emerging from their hiding-places in the hay, from behind the cart and plough, from beneath the heap of potatoes and coil of rope in the corner, the other six Fruit Stoners stood already grouped about her.

She looked at them with some bewilderment. They stood in silence, hardly moving, no voice audible. They stood about her, she noticed, as usual, in a circle. What was the matter with them? Why did they seem different somewhere? What was it? Why did she feel uneasy? Why did her heart sink a little? Her eyes ran rapidly round the group, passing over each face in turn. How lined and crinkled they all looked. Yet why did they seem less real, less vital? An odd sense of distress deepened in her. These figures of real life, why — how — could they suggest a dream...?

This shock — that it was all unreal and shadowy — staggered her. She recovered her manners.

“Thank you all — all of you — for coming to the Barn,” she heard herself saying, “and for helping me to make this search.” She trembled.

Her eyes, running round the group, found difficulty in picking them out individually. The faces were a blur. Vaguely she noticed that the Tailor fumbled with a pair of rusty garden shears, the Tinker with a broken saucepan, the Ploughboy with a long-handled spud, while the Soldier seemed trying to unwind a piece of copper wire. Only the Apothecary and the Thief stood out with really vivid sharpness. And they held nothing in their hands. She met the Apothecary’s eye for a fraction of a second, but without expression, without the smallest exchange between them, yet in that brief instant a strange, sweet longing disturbed her heart, a poignant yearning swept her, then passed as swiftly as it came. “Oh, God!” ran through her bitterly, “there’s something more real than this!” The Thief’s big, penetrating eyes, gazing fixedly into hers, set something shivering in her. A thrill of unbelievable excitement rushed over her like fire.

“And have you — found anything?” she asked. “Is there any sign of what I’m looking for? My great, important thing — ?”

All held out optimistically their articles as one man — the shears, the spud, the saucepan, the Gentleman brandishing his dreadful pistol. Only the

Apothecary and the Thief had nothing to show, smiling quietly behind the outstretched hands. And again the fierce, deep longing, the strange, exciting fire danced through her blood.

“It is very sweet of you,” said Maria, hiding as best she could her deep disappointment, “but we must go on looking. These have *nothing* to do with what I’ve got to find, dear Fruit Stoners. My thing, you see, is very hard to find, I’m afraid. It is of frightful value. It is a pearl of great price — it is beyond rubies,” she added, thinking it an odd phrase to use and wondering why she chose it, “and if I can’t find it, I’ve” — her voice faltered—” come here — for nothing — haven’t I?”

“Off we go again then!” someone cried cheerfully, and the circle suddenly broke up.

She no longer stood in the centre of a ring. The Sailor started dancing again as he moved away towards the hay, the Tailor and the Tinker went off arm in arm, the Ploughboy and the Soldier followed slowly. And as they scattered, the feeling of something solemn and grave, of something uneasily disturbing that had oppressed her, dissipated. A mood of light-heartedness came back. She had been distressed and frightened about nothing after all. That ticking in her heart was really not worth bothering about, it was so faint, so far away.... These people, after all, were quite real, their various activities were real, too.... Oh, yes....

“Thank you, thank you, my Fruit Stoners! I know we shall find it in the end!”

They looked over their shoulders and smiled at her, and she threw back a similar smile. They had offered their toys, she had inspected them, and it was all well meant. Only the Apothecary and the Thief, she saw, did not move, but stood there watching her.

The Gentleman, however, his perfume, she thought, a little *too* sweet, came up to her. The Sailor was already by the door, flashing his scimitar as he poked it vigorously about in the hay.

“I am afflicted,” remarked the former, brandishing his pistol, “that this is, after all, not exactly what you are looking for, Maria, but it may prove useful none the less. In a search like this it is safer to go armed.” He raised the pistol to his face, and blew down both barrels so violently that a shower of seed and dust flew up into his eyes. “Many a kingdom,” he went on, wiping his face, blowing his nose and readjusting his hat, “many a kingdom has been lost because the dust was in the leader’s eyes.”

“I wish you would point the barrel away from me,” said Maria nervously. “It might be loaded, you know, Gent.”

“It is,” he replied quietly, bowing so low that she thought he was going to kneel to her, “for an engagement involves certain risks, and of what use — anywhere — is an unloaded pistol?”

“None,” she muttered, wondering what he meant, yet admiring his air of careless bravery, as though he was prepared for any odds. “Do you mean — a battle?”

An expression of reckless grandeur came upon his face.

“Take this,” he murmured, in the tone of a man who would defend her honour with his life, “and heaven grant you shoot straight if, and when, the moment comes!”

He passed the heavy blunderbuss gingerly into her outstretched hands, the barrel pointing well away from himself.

Maria took the thing still more gingerly and held it tight.

“Oh — can you use it?” he inquired politely. “I suggest pulling the trigger — to make quite sure it won’t — explode.”

She obeyed. There was a loud report, a blinding flash, and the Sailor, still standing by the door, sprang a foot into the air.

“Admirable!” remarked the Gentleman nonchalantly, as the smoke cleared away. “Your courage does you infinite credit. You placed the slug between his feet. A perfect shot!”

“I haven’t hit him, have I?” cried Maria breathlessly. “Is he wounded? I didn’t aim at anything really.” Her heart was in her mouth.

But the Sailor, having sprung into the air, continued springing. He was doing a kind of hornpipe, singing at the same time, waving his cutlass, and clasping his telescope to his eye to discover who had fired at him. He was not wounded certainly.

“You hit no one,” observed the Gentleman, “for you could not hurt a Fruit Stoner, no matter how you tried. We are, alas,” he added in a melancholy tone, “invulnerable, of course!

Invulnerable! The word ran through her like a knife. They could not feel physical pain, because they could not end; they could not die, they had no past, no future, they just went on and on, endlessly, growing no older... whereas *she... she* was different.... To her an end must come.... Some time, some day... when she had found what she was looking for... when the object of her being here was accomplished...!

The Gentleman’s melancholy smile burned in her hauntingly, her thoughts scattered, she felt a sudden dismay, uneasiness, so that her heart sank, and the dreadful ticking that never, never stopped inside her gained in power and loudness surely. She listened a moment intently. She could smother its hideous voice for a little while, but never altogether.

Invulnerable! She pretended she had not caught the word — not noticed it anyhow. For a second or two something frantic stirred in her, a sense of panic tried to show its head. There was another word, a name, a mighty name, she sought as with a gust of passion. A name that brought golden security, peace, ineffable peace... but she sought in vain, she could not find it, it had been so long neglected, its syllables utterly escaped her.

“Gent!” she exclaimed abruptly, “let’s search now — let’s search properly, I mean — please, please — we must get to work — *at once*!”

He bowed, taking the blunderbuss that she held out, and moved off with graceful steps towards the old broken-down cart, while Maria, pulling up her sleeves, turned back to hunt in the hay again.

“If only I knew what it was,” her thought plunged violently. “If only I could remember *that*!” and found herself blocked by two figures, the Apothecary and the Thief, standing in her way.

The other Fruit Stoners, she was generally aware, was already shuffling here and there among the shadows, looking in a vague, automatic way for what they could find, but these two, she remembered, had not yet stirred an inch. The Thief was nearest to her, but the Apothecary held her eye.

“Oh, *you...*!” she exclaimed, startled, staring up into his face, thinking for a moment it looked like a wax figure. “Aren’t you helping too? We’re *all* looking now.”

His old head shook gently to and fro, so that the stained beard brushed her cheek as it waggled. Goodness, how thoughtful his expression was, like a whole library! Could there be anything he did not know?

“I cannot help,” he said, without even looking up, and as though he spoke to himself almost, “for you alone can find it. No one else but you,” and he moved quietly away, like a shadow that joined other shadows.

She knew in her heart that what he said was true. She found herself alone now with the Thief, and she turned, shaking a little inwardly, to face him.

Oh, that exacting, that demanding face, those big, penetrating eyes that hung in the air and would not be put off! That dreadful, rather dangerous, attractive yet repulsive personality whom, after all, she had made with her best, her very best! The ruffian who had taken her hair-ribbon, her shell, her amber necklace and had them at this moment in his pocket doubtless.

“You too!” she exclaimed, and though she meant to frown, she smiled, and if she shivered, it was not with the horror and revulsion she knew she ought to feel. “Aren’t you doing *anything* to help?”

He fixed those big starry eyes upon her face, but he did not smile, nor did he betray the smallest sign of shame.

“How can I take anything,” he replied, and his voice was oddly silvery, “unless I find it first? So far,” he added, “there is nothing I can do.”

She glared at him half angrily; at least, she intended the glare to be an angry one, but the way he gazed at her seemed to make her eyes melt into his. They held a fire that set something blazing in her.

“Oh, I understand you, Thief, I know what you’re up to. You don’t want to find my precious thing. You don’t mean me to find it either.”

Was he changing a little before her eyes? Was he growing younger, sweeter possibly in expression, even — even — more desirable? “And that’s the truth — that’s the real truth,” she cried, as that same old shock, as of electricity, pierced through her very bones. “Isn’t it? *Is it not,* my Thief?” she shouted at him.

For an instant the eyes seemed to hang there before her in the air without a face, without a body behind them, like ghostly living stars.

“I don’t want you — to — leave,” his silvery voice fell through the air.

So that, for a second, Maria stood spellbound in front of him, utterly unable to find any words at all. It was his voice again that filled the empty gap, yet not before she had caught herself murmuring something that rose like lightning from the centre of her being where that dreadful ticking sounded, something she was utterly unable to control, something so low, however, that he could not possibly hear it even: “Have you enough to eat, Thief? Are you warm and comfortable? Does somebody look after you... and care for you?”

A violent reaction shook her the same instant. He was a worthless scoundrel. And then his words dropped into that waiting gap.

“And you’ll never find it till you’ve first done everything, gone through the rest... all that you came to do.”

He smiled an odd superior smile, he shrugged his shoulders.

“I know what you mean,” she found her voice, noticing for the first time that her pretty belt had loosened. But her attention was fixed upon the challenge in his words and manner. “You mean — I’ve got to — marry one of you!

He made a curious little bow, coming a shade closer as he did so, and the belt was whipped off her waist with such amazing speed and dexterity that she never even saw it go.

“Silk, satin, calico, rags,” he chanted with a grin, as he straightened up again, “and Big House, Little House, Pig Stye, Barn, and Gentleman...”

“Well, I *am* affianced to the Gentleman,” she forced out in a loud, strong voice, “and you heard him mention the engagement a moment ago.”

“*One* of us,” was the quiet rejoinder, stuffing the pretty belt into his pocket, “*one* of us will do.” He shrugged his shoulders again, with a repetition of that curious, waiting smile. “The choice is your own — Maria.”

A sharp darting pain ran through her heart. What would happen, she wondered, if she kissed him full on the lips? Oh, how that inner fire danced and spread.

“I believe you’re right,” she murmured in a low voice. “Once that’s out of the way — I shall be more free — to search properly. I’d better go through with everything first!

They looked at one another for a moment. Heavens! Was she burning up?

“I’m ready,” said Maria, furious with herself because her voice gave a queer little tremble. “But all the same, I know you’ve got my belt.”

He gave a delicious, understanding laugh.

“Gentleman! Hi, there!” he called, and at once the Gentleman came prancing up with that air of debonair grace and courtliness that belongs only to those who have daily intercourse with kings and queens. And Maria, watching it, felt her whole being sink down in a gulf of bitter and violent disappointment.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MARRIAGE HAD its queer aspect — for, looking back, it seemed a sort of long endless dream that had yet happened all in a moment. Its prospect had appeared so tremendous an event somehow. “I shall be a bride, a married woman!” The change in her life so drastic, the difference so startling. After marriage she would be really another person with new characteristics, thoughts, ideas... and yet now she found herself much the same as before. Looking back, yes, it seemed merely an event in dreamland after all. Nothing had altered much. She herself, at any rate, was surprisingly just the same as before. Oh, exactly the same.

The nightmare touch had not yet pounced in and gripped her; flashes of uneasiness now and again, yes, but no real nightmare touch — as yet.

“I’m now ‘Mrs. Gentleman,’” she said to herself, and it was natural enough. “I’m married. I’ve got a husband. Yet *I’m* — yes — I’m just the same.” It was rather dull. A husband was just a husband. He had not changed merely because they had got married.

But was she “Mrs. Gentleman” — or “Mrs. Sailor”?

Mind and memory reeled a bit. A long period stretched behind her. She was sure of that. A long period of life in which little events stuck up sharply like almonds in a tipsy cake. She looked back and saw the stretch of dreamlike surface that had passed. It was nothing but a drab stretch. It reached away into the distance. Almonds stuck out here and there that she had nibbled at, almonds with shiny tips that were definite events....

The stretch, the period, was nothing, just commonplace existence. It had no particular colour, no rough bright points that caught and startled. Only the almonds — events that marked off the uneventful stretch — stood out and stung her vividly.

She picked one out and bit it, nibbled and tasted it.

“Mrs. Gentleman...!” It had a dull taste, flat and insipid.

She cast her mind back a little.

The Fruit Stoners, she recalled, leaving their futile searching, had emerged from the hay and formed in a ring about her, as she stood there, holding the Gentleman's hand. All that was clear enough; it rose sharply enough from the colourless grey stretch. She remembered having first watched the Fruit Stoners a long time at their searching. They just went muddling about ineffectively in the hay, picking up all manner of little objects and stuffing them in their pockets. Anything they found, they stuffed away, from a broken comb to a tennis racket that had hardly any strings left. Each new article excited them, making them squeak and cackle noisily. She watched them hopefully for a bit, but then realized that their search was quite worthless. They seemed merely playing among themselves. It was of no help to her. The Thief's curious words had flashed back upon her, and she decided she must do something quickly, and the best thing to do, obviously, was to get married. She shouted at them. She called them impatiently.

"Fruit Stoners!" she had cried, and they instantly emerged and assembled round her. "The Gentleman and I are going to get married, please, so you needn't go on searching for the moment. It can wait!"

All this came back to her with a certain sharpness.

The Gentleman, bowing and scraping, had advanced with a gallant air and taken her hand. It was natural enough, of course; they had been affianced for a long time; they were now getting married, and were going to have a lot of children. She remembered bits of the ceremony even, of some conversation, too, they had enjoyed together. It was after that the blur came... the queer, dim smudge of forgetfulness that made her question whether she was Mrs. Gentleman or Mrs. Sailor.... She distinctly remembered, at any rate, asking if he had the ring, for she could still see him drawing it off his own finger and slipping it on to her own. It was the big gold signet-ring.

"We shall be one now," she had murmured, standing beside him on the end of the broken cart, the Fruit Stoners grouped before them in a semi-circle. "For ever and ever, or at least — till — till something do us part." She had no notion where her words came from, but they came. "And our little ones will — rise up — and call us blessed."

The Gentleman himself, it seemed, had said hardly anything, nor could she for the life of her recall who had performed the ceremony, though there was a faint picture of a fugitive figure in a beard, rather like the Apothecary. What she *did* see clearly enough was something that happened with such suddenness that, really, she was not quite positive that she and the Gentleman had ever got married at all. She saw herself distinctly standing beside him on that broken cart-tail, looking him up and down, and wondering uneasily if, after all, she was not making a mistake. The sharp crease in his trousers, the white top-hat, the eyeglass, the fob, the coloured waistcoat, the whiff of sweet scent, the terrible politeness and courtliness and grace, with the long-winded sentences and lovely smiles — could she live with all this for ever and ever? The aristocracy, the formality, the perfection of behaviour, could she stand it day in, day out?... "It is my proud privilege," she heard in his suave musical tones above a sweeping top-hat, "to inform you that it is a boy, and that he weighs ten pounds!" And then came a noisy shout that escaped from her lips with great, even with violent abruptness.

"But haven't you got a Best Man, Gent?" Whereupon, as he indicated with a beautiful bow a figure close beside her, she had turned and seen the Sailor, his telescope full upon her face.

It was a glorious and dramatic moment, for she knew instantly that this marriage with the Gentleman was what is called a "terrible mistake."

"I'm afraid, Gent," she said at once, with great courage, "I'm afraid — he *is* the best man, and I must ask you to forgive me, if you don't mind. It's not too late, because our first-born hasn't really come yet, so my life isn't ruined, and you — you will get over it." All this stood out quite sharply in her memory, and how she had shown great knowledge of the world, and kept her dignity, and acted with a courageous decision that had prevented much future unhappiness.

This was clear enough.

What escaped her, what remained an uncertain blur, was whether or not she had first passed through a long dreary period of married life in the Big House with the perfect gentleman waiting for that ten-pound first-born. Details, at any rate, kept hidden behind this indefinite blur, and she was only positive that, when the Sailor took her in his arms and kissed her, the

Gentleman behaved exactly as she always knew he would behave. His action, words and manner were absolute perfection. Both of them, indeed, for that matter, proved themselves exactly what she had expected. The whole scene was quite an unforgettable picture in her mind. She was dealing with "real hairy men." The dreadful fight, each man stripped to the waist, his jaw set, his eyes charged with undaunted courage, did not exactly materialize. But their language and behaviour — these were marvellous. The Gentleman never forgot he was a Perfect Gentleman, and the Sailor made no single false note. He was a true salt, if ever there was one.

"Ah!" had exclaimed the Gentleman, very quietly, screwing his eyeglass in, "so this is the Best Man — gadzooks!

"Blew into port las' night, yes," replied the Sailor, spitting with perfect aim on to the polished boot in front of him.

"I honour you, sir," remarked the Gentleman, "and I offer you my respects. Permit me," he added, with a delicious bow, "to introduce you to Miss Marigold, my fiancée."

"Good enough," returned the Sailor, spitting upon the other boot.

"And you, my dear fellah, are my Best Man, I am delighted to inform you." He withdrew both feet carefully a little farther off. "We were just getting married, you know."

The Sailor glared at him, drawing his trusty cutlass.

"I *am* Best Man," he shouted, "and our appointment was on this very quay. I'm sailing in an hour, and the Captain's ready to splice us right away."

He looked terrible, unconquerable, ready for any weather.

But the Gentleman looked precisely the same, in spite of his languid, lackadaisical air.

Two dauntless heroes — she was positive of that — were on the point of fighting for her, and that, at least, was clear. There would be blood, and broken teeth, and hard, exhausted breathing. Each man in turn, apparently finished, would pick himself up from the floor, and with amazing courage, incredible fierce energy, would fling himself headlong against his bloody foe.

Instead of that, however, the Gentleman called upon his inexhaustible resources of blue blood. With infinite tact and resource he remembered his dizzy line of ancestors.

“The Senior Service,” he murmured suavely, with a bow that lowered his head almost to the floor. “England’s bulwarks! God save the King!”

He was the gallant gentleman down to the tip of both his damaged boots.

“If the Admiral,” he added courteously, “will accept, I — I have no option.” And he bowed himself backwards as only a gallant fellow could.

Maria remembered that she had been delighted, and she had kissed the Sailor with tremendous zest, while the Gentleman, diving into his pockets, showered rice and old shoes all over them. It was a lovely kiss, tasting of salt and seaweed, and she knew in that same instant when the Sailor’s arms were tight about her that she was going to be happy with him in every port in the world... for ever and ever....

The ports, at any rate, *were* wonderful — there was golden Rio, and Punta Gazzo, with its rice and breadfruits; Marango, with its peaches and azaleas; Marzipani, with its yellow sand and its tarantulas; Tipsi Caki, with its hot blue seas, alive with man-eating sharks and cannibals on the shore, and a thousand coral islands where the dangerous surf thundered in snowy spray into lagoons that were bubbling with coco-nuts flung by blue-based monkeys from a thousand luscious palms. The Sailor, full of pluck and tireless resource, was equal to the demands of every shipwreck. He made a wind-proof house out of a single oar, a dress for her from a single palm-leaf. He repulsed an attack of blood-thirsty pirates by pretending — in the nick of time — that his telescope was a machine-gun, and the famished cannibals, swarming round their hut at night under that ghastly tropic moon, worshipped them as gods when he merely lit a match and showed them fire for the first time in their lives. They found treasure as well, more than they could carry, deciding then that they loved one another too much and too passionately to bother about gold or money.

Oh, it was a happy, rolling-down-to-Rio time, a time of unutterable romance, this married life with the sailor-man.... The romance, the flaming Amazon, the tigers, elephants and boa-constrictors, the gorgeous butterflies and orchids, the nights of tropic moon, the overpowering perfumes....

It was the multiplication of the ports that then began to trouble her. Her husband had so many Captains and old pals to see. They kept him out so late. It worried her a little. There was another thing that worried her as well.

“I think—” she began delicately one night, just before he left to see a pal or Captain. “I’m afraid—” And she burst into tears and shivered.

“It’s coming, I think,” she murmured, behind her palm-leaf fan. “It’s on the way.” And she flung herself helplessly into his muscular arms.

His deep emotion took him in a curious way, she thought. He called upon his god, the only one he knew.

“Oh, hell—” he said below his breath, squeezing her so tightly that she was afraid for a moment not only that she would lose her breath, but that he meant her to lose it.

It was after this “unsuspected disaster” that she guessed the truth. The Sailor was untrue to her. Her interest in elephants, tigers, tropic moons and orchids waned.

It was not a successful marriage, she decided, her eyes quite dry.

If you’re tired of me, Maria,” he whispered briefly, “why — just say so. Don’t be afraid.” He held her very tight, though he looked the other way.

Though this seemed odd somehow, she kept a stiff upper lip, and, while it hurt and pinched a bit, she knew it was the proper thing to do. Keeping it very stiff indeed, she gave a quiet gulp.

“I am — perhaps — a bad sailor — rather,” she murmured tactfully.

He understood. “You’re a good sport, anyway,” he praised her. “I will say that for ye, Miss.”

“Mrs.,” she reminded him. “Mrs., *please...*”

And, as she now looked round the Barn, these odd, broken memories came back to her, with the elusive sensation of long intervals having passed, a long, drab-coloured stretch of existence that really had very little meaning after all. These events, like almonds out of a tipsy cake, emerged. She nibbled at them, and while in one sense they had a slightly stale taste, in another they had so little flavour that they were almost tasteless, as though something was lacking in them, something important that would have made them more real, as it were. None of them *were* real. The half-sweet, half-bitter taste she felt ought to have been there was absent, the pungent, rather medicinal, even biting tang she had expected.

It was now, as she looked round the Barn, that she discovered the reason of this suddenly. She knew what had been missing, but also she knew why. The tang of actuality in the two marriages was missing because —

No words rose in her mind, for her thought blocked dead as she saw the pair of large, penetrating eyes hanging in the air just beyond the great heap of potatoes. The shadows in that corner were rather thick, so that no complete figure showed, and she only saw the dim patch of a face with these two familiar eyes that shone like veiled lamps. They looked straight into her own. To her deep vexation she felt the accusing blood pour up her neck and throat and cheeks again. And yet she welcomed it.

“The Thief,” she heard herself whispering, though too low to be overheard. “The Thief!” She was trembling a little. She bent her head, busily searching again in the hay about her, and when she glanced up a moment later the eyes were no longer visible. Her hand went to her hair and waist and neck with a gesture of impatience. Her ribbon and belt and necklace, of course, were still missing. She glanced down at her skirt and legs, but the hay smothered both. “I must look awful,” darted across her mind, thinking it a pity that the curve of her slim calves was hidden. “Why, I’m not properly dressed even....”

The telescoping of time was scarcely noticed; it certainly caused her no distress. It seemed quite natural, apparently, that intervals should come and go, even that two intervals should occur and pass at once. Voyages and marriages could take place simultaneously easily enough when there was neither past nor future. Being older and younger could run parallel and side by side without upsetting or destroying anything. Time here was a braver adventure than she realized. The sense that intervals passed and occurred swept over her, none the less. She *had* jumped ahead in a fashion as with a jerk. That, too, was natural enough, she felt. Growing older was not measured by the accumulation of minutes slowly passing, but by a sudden startling jerk that announced the fact “I’m older,” a jerk that brought with it a definite shock.

It came now, this startling jerk, dropping upon her with a shock there was no denying. A shadow fell from nowhere, an awful sense of foreboding with it. A cold touch as of an icicle was laid upon her heart, interrupting its rhythmic beat, making it first stop, then scamper rapidly. She caught her breath. She listened. A sinking horror came. Her fingers clutched the loose hay.

In between the irregular beating of her startled heart another, and a different, beat was distinctly audible.

Tick tock! Tick tock! It tapped its way towards her, growing steadily louder as it came.

All this time, ages and ages, she had completely neglected her great purpose. She had trifled away every opportunity while the minutes droned unsuspectingly away. The call of pleasure, adventure, amusement, the call of life, had been so urgent and delicious that she had persuaded herself everything else could wait. The search for her Pearl of Great Price, of course, could wait. There was no hurry. Let it wait. There was lots and lots of time....

And now came the reminder again that her time was short, that it was passing, that much of it, far too much, *had* passed already. *Tick tock! Tick tock! Tick tock!*

It had never really ceased, but she had smothered it away, decided she need not, would not, bother with it yet. And there it was again, louder, closer, more insistent than ever, in all its panic horror, in all its remorseless certainty, a hoarse, grinding sound somewhere at the back of it. And it was those fiery, hanging eyes that now made her hear it.

It was as though she suddenly woke up, this nightmare terror clutching at her heart. Those penetrating eyes, why did they always galvanize her in this way? Was he — the Thief — more real than the others? What was it about him that brought this odd, unpleasant, stimulating shock that seemed to make her more aware? More real? More awake? More conscious? What *was* she saying to herself... where did these queer notions come from?...

Tick tock! Tick tock!

It was louder, it was coming nearer, it was both inside her and in the air about her. The end of her Five Minutes, whether she had used them or not, was closer. The grinding noise persisted. All that had been happening now seemed suddenly to have been a sort of semi-consciousness, not wholly real, though certainly not a dream. This air of unreality shimmered over it. More awake? More real? Yes, the shock of those eyes brought the sense of breaking out of semi-consciousness into a state where she was becoming more *aware....*

Her eye ran rapidly over the Barn, taking it all in. The Fruit Stoners were only pretending to search, they were trifling, playing with her, doing it all on purpose, beguiling and amusing her deliberately, keeping her with calculated intention from her real object in coming here. Her Pearl of Great Price, it darted across her, was not in the Barn at all; she was only wasting precious minutes looking for it here: it was in the Pig Stye. Her search in the Barn had been nothing but idle pretence anyhow. The Pig Stye was the place. Naturally — of course — it would be in the least likely place of all. She must find the Pig Stye....

At which moment exactly in her frantic efforts to think clearly had the figure looking like a Guy Fawkes stepped up and interrupted. He came from behind her so that she had not noticed his approach. Head and shoulders were sprinkled with loose wisps of hay, dust covered him as though he had been burrowing underground, a string of dusty cobwebs trailed round his neck, and it was only when she caught sight of a beard among the dandelions and thistles that she recognized the Apothecary.

“This is not what you seek, Maria,” said his quiet, thoughtful voice, “but it may be useful to you!” He held something out to her that she took automatically without looking at it, for her mind choked with two questions she burned to ask him: “Do *you* hear it — that *Tick tock*?” and “Can you show me the way to the Pig Stye?” And she was on the point of asking them when something in his manner stopped her. She hesitated for a second, glancing down at the object he was holding out. Bright and shining it was, cold to the touch, as she took it automatically. His low voice continued mumbling.

“... Useful, perhaps, to see yourself... make you more conscious... more aware...” he whispered behind that straggling beard.

Maria fastened her eyes on the cold, glittering object in her hand, lifting it instantly nearer to her face. She peered into it. For a moment she stood frozen, spellbound. Her entire being seemed congealed, arrested. It was the voice that first recovered its power to function, the muscles followed. A high, uncontrollable shriek rushed echoing through the Barn.

“I’m too late, too late!” rang out in a scream of terror. “Oh! where — where is the Pig Stye?” as she flung the object violently from her.

And she began to run wildly, frantically, but without knowing it, running in a circle, while at her very heels now, like the tread of an animal stalking her, came the following beat: *Tick tock! Tick tock!...*

CHAPTER XIV

IT WAS NOT the fact of at last seeing herself reflected in the Apothecary's little broken hand-mirror that terrified her, it was the awful dread of being too late, perhaps too late for ever. This was what appalled her.

She had somehow known already that she would "look just like that." She had expected it. The shock of greying hair, of lines and wrinkles, of dropped muscles along the neck and jaw, of sunken cheeks, was a small matter compared to the amazing fact that she had seemed suddenly to "wake up" to the devastating reality that she might be too late. She had become abruptly more "awake," more conscious, and the cause lay in something intensely real communicated to her by those eyes. For a flash, at any rate, she now saw more clearly. Here, at last, was a promise of something *real.*

The numerous intervals, the stretches and periods, had all slipped past her — with nothing done. The nightmare dread increased apace.

"I haven't really looked at all — not properly, honestly. I've found nothing. And now it may be too late. I'm old!"

Tick tock! Tick tock! It put ice into her veins. Any moment the dreaded strike might come, the strike that would mean the end.

More aware, more conscious! What did it mean? What was the flash of something more real she had caught from those penetrating, hanging eyes? Could there be anything more real than this world she was in? How could she become more aware, more conscious?

"I'm wide awake already!" she told herself. "How can I be more awake?"

And a quiet voice mumbled in her ear, "You can wake up a second time," as she turned to see the Apothecary moving away among the bundles of loose hay. He disappeared among the shadows. The other Fruit Stoners had disappeared too, for no figures were now visible. The light, she fancied, too, was growing less, the shadows encroaching, sharp outlines fading all about her.

“The Pig Stye!” she cried aloud. “I must find the Pig Stye! Where, oh, where is it?” And her voice fell dead and echoless against the masses of hay that swallowed it. *Tick tock!* was the only sound that held its first sharpness, though it grew no louder, nor apparently drew closer to the dreaded strike. More and more, it now came to her horribly, it resembled the noise made by a footstep, a footstep that dogged her, ever on her heels, the audible pad of a stealthy animal waiting the moment to spring and pounce.

The nightmare power was in full swing about her, the nightmare of some final rush, a rush to find something of overwhelming value and importance, or else — miss the purpose for which she had come.

“The Pig Stye, the Pig Stye,” ran on violently through her mind. “Yes, I must look for it in the Pig Stye, of course. It’s the only place left now.”

With it, however, ran other phrases, too, odd phrases that puzzled and alarmed her, laying nightmare fingers on her heart: for while they held a strange, familiar flavour, they yet brought no meaning she could grasp, nor could she catch the faintest memory where she had heard them before: “You can wake up a second time,” of course the Apothecary had mumbled through his beard, but how did she know queer sentences like, “Before I go hence and be no more seen,” or “The night cometh when no man can work,” and others, too? And what had such odd words to do with looking for something in a Pig Stye?

Tick tock! Tick tock!... It became more and more a definite tread, rather than the mechanical sound of something beating time away. One of the cat tribe occurred to her horribly, one of the great cats stealthily padding at her heels. Already, once or twice before, the idea of a tiger had flashed unpleasantly across her mind. A feline! A great feline! The word flashed and vanished. Yet it brought a memory with it, a memory of something long, long ago, and the picture of a childhood’s pet, a black cat, terribly adored, darted into her brain and out of it again. Jewel, Judas, some such outlandish name the creature had. Then she had been somewhere else before coming here, another sort of place, a kind of Golden Age, where things were more real than anything she experienced here. Or was it perhaps that she had understood them better? She had certainly been happier there, too. Some such wild fancy flashed over her, then vanished utterly again.

Maria stood still and listened. Her breathing came irregularly. The nightmare feeling deepened. The shadows grew.

She was quite alone now, for all the Fruit Stoners had disappeared, had melted away, though, with the exception of the Apothecary, she had not actually seen them go. She stared round her at the huge, deserted Barn, listening, watching, waiting, trying to collect her thoughts. Despite this urgent and imperative sense of panic hurry in her, this desperate necessity for decisive action immediately, she did not move at first. The horror of the true nightmare immobility held her rigid, while she battled to collect her thoughts.

If only she could remember where she came from, and what she had come to find! If only that terrible *Tick tock! Tick tock!* would stop, or put an end to her suspense — and strike! The actual strike would be better than this hanging suspense.

Her heart was thumping audibly, she felt it hammering against her ribs. Passing, passing, passing, rushing, rushing, rushing, its beat warned her remorselessly, while that other stealthy tread that was like the padding of a great animal kept rhythm with it.

Shivering all over, eager to be off and yet afraid to start, Maria made a valiant effort to force *some* memory back at least, to reduce some of her whirling thoughts to order. But such was their kaleidoscopic speed that she could retain nothing for more than a fleeting glance. Her very feelings were a turmoil of criss-cross currents in which nothing had more than an instant’s permanence.

Life, life, life! What a tumultuous rush of incoherence it all was!

One thing, however, stood out with a naked and frightening sincerity that she felt convinced was genuine. If her own existence here was nothing but a huge interrogation mark, the life and world of the Fruit Stoners were more questionable still. If her own existence here was less real than some other state she had tasted long ago, *their* life and existence, with its incoherence, its futility, its absurdities, were an utter sham and illusion, the flimsiest of elaborate phantasmagorias.

"It is possible to wake up a second time" slipped in and out between her whirling thoughts incessantly.

And at the heart of the whole ridiculous phantasmagoria was not fun — but horror. Here lay the essence of this hideous nightmare. Trapped in unreality, caged and prisoned in bitter limitations, these puppets she had herself created were merely fooling her. By coming among them, she had taken on their own futile conditions. They told her she would set them free, release them, save them, yet she could not even set herself free. She was caged and imprisoned equally with them. She had come for a brief Five Minutes, and had passed an entire lifetime. She could control them, having made them! Could she, indeed? What did she control, she asked herself? Nothing. When she imagined she controlled and drove things, she was actually being driven herself. Something outside her happened and she just responded automatically, as a stove gets hot when coal is shovelled in. She did nothing — of herself. Nothing. Things were done through her merely. They merely happened outside her and she responded. She was not enough aware, not conscious enough, not awake enough even to be real.

"But you can wake up — a second time," the words flashed back.

Ah! Her memory made a violent and frantic effort to snatch at something that presented a peeping tip — only to vanish instantly again. There was, she vaguely remembered, a name she had once known, had even used — a name she had forgotten and neglected....

Her thoughts whirled away towards the Fruit Stoners instead, and the positive certainty came over her again that they had merely deluded and enticed her, that their helping in her search was nothing but deliberate sham and nonsense. A glittering phantasmagoria! They wanted to keep her here. They did not want her to go. The Thief — yes, it was he, the Thief, whose eyes had galvanized her with that strange, haunting message of something more real and permanent only a little time ago — the Thief had admitted as much with honesty.

And it was the thought of the Thief, now darting into her hopeless confusion, that galvanized her suddenly with its customary shock, so that her nightmare immobility lifted slightly. The Thief, whom she had made with the best in herself! She must act at once. She must depend on herself alone. She must search for that vital, missing thing while there was still time. Before it was too late for ever. Her Pearl of Great Price she had come to find. That was the message those haunting eyes had flashed. He promised something real — at last.

All her whirling thoughts, her tumultuous impressions, her terrifying sensations ended in this overpowering conviction — that to find her Pearl of Great Price was the only thing that mattered. This was the reason of her being here. She must fulfil her great purpose by finding what she had come to seek.

She must ignore, even forget, the Fruit Stoners, leave on one side all their fun and jollity, their efforts to amuse, their idle, vain pretences of being real. It was just so much flummery and nonsense. Let them play and act their parts, let them voyage on country roads and the high seas, let them fight their battles, plough their fields, design their dresses, mix their medicines, dine with kings and queens. Let them marry and give in marriage too, though she forgot for the moment that she herself, being the only woman among eight men, might play a responsible part in altering a state of celibacy no single one of them had as yet complained of. Let them go their own way, anyhow, was what she decided, while she went hers.

She had made up her mind, and the *Tick tock!* she fancied, became slightly less insistent, less mercilessly audible perhaps. “The Pig Stye! The Pig Stye!” echoed down her bewildered, but now determined, mind.

But a Pig Stye was not likely to be found in a Barn. She would have to go outside. So far, in all her long experience, she had never once been outside. Outside — where there were trees and fields and flowers and sweet fresh air blowing, even perhaps a garden. Yet where also, it suddenly struck her with a gust of hideous terror, she might see, might even meet face to face, the owner of the dreaded steps, the great animal whose stealthy, audible tread haunted her whole life.

It was a fugitive memory of the Thief’s challenging eyes that brought back her courage to the sticking point. She put out a leg, a foot, and naturally her body followed. She moved forward towards the great wooden doors that closed the Bam.

“My Pearl of Great Price!” The words hummed in her heart. “I shall find it at last — in the Pig Stye — and then — escape!”

Escape!

As she moved slowly forward an intolerable yearning swept over her, shaking her to the very core, so that trembling a little, she felt she must burst into tears. Somewhere, she knew, lay an incredible happiness, a reality grand and satisfying, a beauty beyond words, yet also just beyond her reach unless she first found her pearl. Her whole being strained towards it, and the intensity of this wild, fierce yearning amazed her, as though her heart must break. But, sweeping over her like a tempest, it was too vehement to last. It was already fading, weakening, passing away, yet leaving behind it a golden trail, so that she realized herself a prisoner, a prisoner in some sort of cage that was yet a cage of her own making.

She must get out of this cage, she must escape. It *was* possible to wake up “a second time.”

She reached the huge wooden doors and pushed against them. On the other side she would find the reality *his* marvellous eyes had flashed to her — something really real and satisfying at last....

CHAPTER XV

YET EVEN HERE the nightmare sense was present, for the massive doors yielded rather too easily to her touch as she opened them cautiously a quarter of an inch and peeped outside through the narrow crack. The blaze of sunshine was dazzling after the gloomy shadows of the Barn. With the fragrant freshness of the open air came a suggestion of some more pungent odour that sent a shiver down her spine, for it held a faint acrid tang that brought with it one of those queer reminders that so puzzled her because they remained beyond all possible recapture. A sense of danger lurked in it somewhere, and that was all she knew.

The dazzle passed. After blinking once or twice, her eyes accustomed themselves to the delicious brilliance, and she pushed the doors another inch, and then another. She could see clearly now. The miracle of the open air made her catch her breath. It was Out of Doors at last. She had not been out of doors for ages. Drawing a deep, invigorating draught of this sweet air into her lungs, she pressed her eyes against the rough wood and peered through the widening crack.

Instead of the rough fields she had expected, a lovely garden lay before her, drenched in bright sunshine. A smooth lawn spread its emerald carpet, daisies creaming its surface, with fringes of golden buttercups spilling their yellow glory round the farther edges. It was, thank heaven, empty. No figures were visible. Nothing moved. She waited a moment, staring intently, watching, listening, then boldly flung the great doors wide open and stepped outside.

The first terror that something would dart up and seize her passed. Not a living soul was there. No one rushed up. Only the haunting beat of the stealthy padding footsteps still sounded in the air, though fainter, she fancied, less insistent perhaps. The sound, indeed, seemed everywhere about her, even in the sky, as though something still watched her, circling, waiting the moment to come close, yet always keeping a measurable distance. And though that unpleasant odour still stung her nostrils, she now caught another sweeter smell that drowned it, a perfume of flowers, of lilacs, pinks, verbena, wallflowers. She inhaled it with keen delight, taking a dozen steps out on to the lawn and looking nervously about her.

“The Pig Stye,” she said under her breath quickly, “I must find the Pig Stye. That’s where my Pearl of Great Price lies hidden!”

Maria, however, made no further movement for some time; she stood motionless, taking in the scene with all its fragrant loveliness. She realized instantly that this happy, tender garden, for all its beauty which intoxicated her, was not quite complete. Something was missing, something that could have made it perfect.

Yet what this something was escaped her; she knew only that it was akin to hunger or thirst, an essential lack her whole being missed. Yes, it was something she felt was real.

She stood still, breathing the fragrant air, and looked about her. Behind her rose the great wooden Barn, with fields and farm-lands stretching beyond it into the summery haze of blue distance, but at her feet lay this lovely garden, the wide lawn dotted with beds of flowers and intersected by winding paths whose gravel looked like brown sugar. There were nooks and glades and clumps of rhododendrons, a thatched summer-house, and farther off two spreading cedars towered into the blue sky. Beyond these she saw an old grey stone house, flanked by a large conservatory, its glass glistening in the sun. The stone walls were covered with ivy, and from a single chimney a column of pale blue smoke rose straight into the air.

Maria took it all in and felt peculiarly at home. She had seen a picture of it somewhere — the ivied house, the cedars above all, she had seen these before. The whole garden, in its peace and stillness, was familiar. She had known it long, long ago, perhaps in that forgotten Golden Age far, far behind her, for it held this haunting atmosphere, as of some sweet, imperishable glory, some radiant happiness almost too fugitive to last.

Something was trying to break through into her mind, pushing up tiny fronds as it were, but whether from the past or future, whether of memory or anticipation, she could not tell.

For there stole over her the sense that she was now ageless, neither old nor young, or perhaps both old and young together; that her nightmare fear and her ineffable yearning were merely different ways of looking at the same thing; that the moments of alternate peace and panic sweeping over her were also one.

“If I was more awake — just a little more awake,” came to her, “I should understand. A bit — just a little bit more conscious and I should see it all clearly.... Age has nothing to do with it.”

But this flash of radiance came and passed like a meteor; even as she experienced it, it was gone. Yet it left a gleaming trail she caught at. “I know what’s missing!” she cried suddenly. “I know now why it’s incomplete...!” And before the words were wholly out of her mouth, she became aware of the slight stirring of the lilac bush, saw the hanging blossoms move aside, so that first the bright, penetrating eyes appeared, then the face in which they hung like lamps, and after that the tall, thin figure to which they belonged. He stepped across the lawn towards her, this man who moved with the graceful lightness of a fairy prince, and the garden in that instant was complete, with nothing lacking. Something real at last was coming to her.

“Thief! My Thief!” she cried, as the lightning shock passed through her heart. “Oh, I knew you would come, I knew it!”

She looked into those eyes as they came nearer across the lawn, and all the confusion in her, the jumbled incoherence of everything, the puzzling nightmare turmoil, turned simple. Almost — she knew what she had come to find, knew at least positively that it *was* in the Pig Stye; almost — almost — even remembered the syllables of that mighty name.... Oh, this rich and tender moment, could she but hold it....

“*You* are the one I’m going to marry,” and her voice came out like singing. “And then everything will be happy for ever afterwards!”

Whether he heard her or not she did not know. He was much nearer now, and as she watched him she noticed again his well-shaped hands, his long slender fingers, the marvellously light and delicate way he moved. His feet, it seemed to her, scarcely pressed the daisies down. “I believe he could steal even with his toes!” she thought, feeling the delicious flooding tide of blood rise up to her very eyes. He looked so young too, exactly as she had always seen him in her mind, of course. “My husband...!” she breathed too low for anyone to hear.

But he heard it.

“Maria,” he said, “you chose me, and here I am.” He held out her hair-ribbon, her necklace, her coloured shell, her belt. “And I’ve brought these back.”

Maria examined them. “Thank you,” she replied, a trifle stiffly, for she knew it was a mistake to let a man take one too easily. “But you stole them from me first, you know.”

“If I hadn’t,” he agreed, “I couldn’t bring them back.”

“And you said you would take everything — even my Pearl of Great Price if you found it. That’s what you are — a real thief.”

He smiled, while his great eyes looked her through and through.

“I have already taken everything,” he said in an enchantingly low, mysterious voice, “even your heart,” he added, coming right up to her and putting his arms miraculously about her.

“I gave you that,” she whispered, “the first moment I saw you.”

“Then I’m not a perfect thief after all.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” she told him, her lips against his cheek, “because,” she added softly, “you stole that too. I made you with my very best—”

His kisses stopped her words. It was most lovely. He lifted her off her feet and kissed her in the air, he set her down again and kissed her on the lawn; he was very strong and very gentle. Radiant and glorious it all was. It was the very acme of reality. All the rest of her life and adventures was a dream, but *this* at last was real. Here was the explanation of the shock his eyes had given her in the Barn. Here was the message they had flashed. This surely, at last, was being more awake, more fully conscious! The other Fruit Stoners, even the Sailor, Gentleman, Apothecary, were but unreal shadows compared to this. Even the menace of the *Tick tock!,* the sharp odour, died away, the sense of panic hurry faded, the Pearl of Great Price itself in the Pig Stye could wait a little.... The nightmare horror all withdrew.

“I’ll weave the ribbon in your hair,” he said, and she liked the determined way he said it. He did not ask. His touch was marvellous as he caught the tresses and fastened the little ribbon in.

“Your belt must go on too,” he told her, and though his clever hands had clasped it in a second round her waist, their faces came together again while he did so, and the perfume of the lilac that had first concealed him lay deliciously in his breath.

“And the shell goes against our ears,” he murmured like sweet music, “so that we shall both hear the singing of the sea at the same moment....” They were a long, long time listening to the singing of the sea in that curly coloured shell he held between their ears, face against face, cheek against cheek, and the singing of the sea held rapture.

Long, long, long in that lovely garden, they listened to the old, old tales, the old, old songs. The sunshine lay warm upon them; the perfume of the flowers breathed over them; they listened and they listened.... She gave him everything she had to give, and he took everything. For she loved him, yes, she loved her Thief, with body, mind and soul; she held nothing back, she gave and gave until there was nothing more to give, for there was nothing left.... At last, at long last, she told herself, she had found something that was beyond all question real....

Oh, the happy comfort of it, the security, the peace that wrapped her round with her Thief’s arms about her, the untold bliss. Here, in this starry ecstasy, lay her ultimate reality at last. She was in her prime. It was the absolute and perfect nick....

“Everything I’ve given you, my Thief,” she murmured in his ear against her lips, for it never even occurred to her to ask what *he* gave. “All I am and all I have. Everything.”

His answer puzzled her. “I’ve taken everything, Maria, for you made me a perfect Thief.”

She drew her face back a little and looked up into his big shining eyes, and what she saw perturbed her, for though the fire in the eyes burned as intently as before, a change she did not like had come into the face. The skin was darker, though it lay in the full blaze of the sunshine, and the darkness seemed spreading even as she looked. There were lines, too, she had not noticed before, lines that deepened visibly. There was this wrinkly, loosened skin. She gave an involuntary start, disentangling herself slowly from his arms, and the face, as she now gazed at it from a little distance, turned distinctly crinkly. His arms at the same moment weakened about her, then dropped down by his side. The scent of the lilac that was so sweet in her nostrils no longer drowned that other unwelcome odour she had till now utterly forgotten. She noticed its sharp, acrid tang again.

“You have nothing left,” she heard, “for I have taken all.”

Already he stood a little away from her.

“Nothing,” she whispered, terror stealing back upon her, for she knew that what he said was true. Her heart sank dreadfully, and the glory she had experienced, it seemed, for ages, left the world, and the garden died, the lovely garden where she had tasted a bliss she had called real. “Nothing,” she repeated, “for you have stolen it all away and left me empty.” But she said it to herself and not to him, the words fluttering soundlessly in her heart alone. “Nothing... everything...”

She looked despairingly about her.

“The garden’s — dead,” ran through her, and as the sad words went clanking like broken bells across her thought, she heard that other sound she dreaded.

Tick tock! Tick tock!...

It was certainly a padding tread, a footstep.

She had forgotten it, though she knew it never ceased. She had neglected and despised it, postponing the warning it repeated endlessly. Automatically, she sniffed the air. The queer, acrid tang came to her nostrils. The flowers — pinks, lilac, wallflowers — all were dead.

“Thief, my Thief...!” she called faintly, her heart breaking and panic catching her.

He was still visible, but in the distance now. He had left her side. He looked smaller, insignificant somehow. The face, even across the lawn, was dark and lined and crinkled. He waved a hand, that slender, beautiful hand that had caressed her youth.

“Are you going — are you leaving me?”

His voice came shivering on the wind: “I have taken all you have to give. Why stay?”

Maria knew herself utterly bereft, drained empty, all she had ever had taken from her. What was there left now? The Thief was as unreal as the others. What, then, *was* real?

Very small he looked, over there against the door in the wall of the ivied house. Her heart went out to him, then came back as with a hollow crash into her ribs.

“Where — are the others?” she called faintly. “Are you leaving me to join them?” Her youth too, she knew, he had taken her youth away....

Halting an instant by the door he had now opened, he raised his hand and called, but the only word that reached her across the lawn was “Listen...” and the door banged behind him.

The song, muffled by the thick grey walls, came indistinctly, so that she barely caught the words. Male voices chanted it.

“Time is a tiger... stalking every man... streaked like the lightning... taking all he can....” And as she heard it, feeling its odd rhythm in her blood, the full awful nightmare power swept back upon her out of the very sky.

CHAPTER XVI

WITH A GIGANTIC effort Maria held her ground. She made no sound, no movement. Her sense of loneliness seemed utterly intolerable, yet she faced it. Her heart, though it seemed to stop an instant, went on beating again.

Tick tock! Tick tock!

The beating sound rang on, sounding everywhere about her, in the very air, while behind the dying fragrance of the flowers hung ever that strange acrid tang. Her eyes roved nervously over the whole scene inch by inch. No figure now was visible. All, all had failed her.

Tick tock! Tick tock!

Her distraught mind whirled with questions that flew off unanswered, while the padding tread came closer. It was made by something that never, never stopped, that never left her in peace, by something for ever passing, racing, rushing past.

Time, she thought, as the sound beat stealthily in rhythm with the hammering of her own pulses. *Invulnerable,* she remembered the Gentleman's comment on her pistol shot. *The Man who Winds the Clocks* came back to her. *Five Minutes* followed.

Then rushed upon her, as that ominous chorus rang through her mind again... *Tiger* — *Tiger* — one of the most awful words she knew. Tiger... streaked like the lightning... stalking every man... Why was this pitiless monster associated with the sound?

Tick tock! Tick tock! Like the beating of some giant heart, some relentless, immortal heart that never hurried because its end was sure.

She turned with a start suddenly and looked behind her, as though she expected to catch something in the act of moving. Something had stirred, making a faint rustling. She sniffed, she stared, she listened. There was nothing to be seen, yet there was a change. The lawn and house and garden now abruptly wore a different look, showing themselves less clearly, less brilliant, less defined. Though the sun still shone in a cloudless sky, its radiance had dimmed a little, as on those summer days when the air thickens almost imperceptibly before a storm. There was less light — yes, that was it, less light. The light was fading. Daylight was leaving the world. It was as though the wick of some great lamp was being turned down. A beginning of twilight dusk was spreading. It was a frightening, nightmare change.

It was then the shadow fell. From above her in the sky it fell; it fell across the lawn and flower-beds and garden, upon the shrubberies, upon the cedars farther off, upon the old grey house. It draped the world, as though a veil had passed before the sun, and something, she then realized, was indeed actually passing above her through the air, and it was this shadow that took the light away.

Something was passing overhead. It cast its shadow.

She gazed with horror, for the shape was quite distinct, and she saw its outline clearly racing across the lawn at her feet. As the shadow of a cloud sweeps over bare hills, the general form was unmistakable, recognizable too, the body drawn out to its full length behind the tremendous neck, the mighty limbs stretched forward, as the great animal swept past in the full cry of the eternal hunt.

For a second its dark pattern lay clearly outlined on the lawn.

“A feline! A monstrous feline!” rose in icy terror to her mind. “A Tiger — Time the Tiger!

The awful padding steps roared over her like a wind: *Tick tock! Tick tock!,* with the deep, hoarse, grinding sound that came before the strike, the growl of relentless pursuit. If only the strike would come! Dreadful though the thought was, it was better than this heart-breaking suspense. Her time, she knew, was almost up; on the very edge of the last minute she balanced dizzily. She sought frantically for a name, a mighty name that could help and save her, but could not find it, for it had been too long forgotten. Pig Stye was all she found. Pig Stye, and something she must look for, a pearl of great price that lay hidden there.

If she could only find this, the nightmare would end; it would be explained, a meaning would come into all this incoherent, purposeless jumbled terror that was her life. Once she found it, she would become real, wake up out of this thick, horrible phantasmagoria where nothing was real, not even the Thief's intoxicating love. She would become more conscious, awaken a second time.

"The Pig Stye! The Pig Stye!" she shrieked in that nightmare voice that made no sound, though the effort behind it was tremendous.

"The night cometh when..." but this, too, was soundless.

She turned quickly, her legs shot forward, she rushed, but the darkness made it impossible to choose her direction. It seemed to her that she moved in a circle as the Fruit Stoners did, moving violently yet not advancing. Round and round like a squirrel in a cage, round and round, automatically, mechanically, caged, a prisoner, whirling round the rim of a plate.

"The Pig Stye! Which is the way to the Pig Stye?"

And as she rushed headlong through the darkness, or perhaps only round and round, a thought rose with alarming conviction before her — the sudden certainty that she must meet the owner of the footsteps face to face, must challenge it even before her precious object could be found. Whether Tiger or the Man who Winds the Clocks, she must somehow snatch her pearl from beneath his very eyes before she could — escape.

"The Pig Stye! The Pig Stye!

Frantically she rushed headlong through the increasing darkness, knowing that she must soon meet the owner of the footsteps face to face. It was the true nightmare rush. She made no progress despite the most terrific efforts. Her heart, it seemed, must burst. This darkness, she knew now, was a final darkness. Light at some distant end was problematical. Her time was up, her five minutes, her — life.

"The valley of the shadow of death" crashed through her with an awful resonance. And she knew she was old, old, old. Childhood, youth, maturity, her prime, her nicks, her ecstatic and her ghastly moments, all were but aspects of some hideous automatic mechanism to which she was enslaved — because she was not awake enough, not conscious and aware enough, to realize their absurdity. Only one thing, after all, was worth while, only one thing was real — her search. Without it, all this adventure, amusement, emotion, experience, was just a meaningless jumble, an incoherent picture of glitteringly attractive rubbish. None of it was real. It was no better than a silly dream, yet with horror, dreadful horror, at the heart of it, the horror of ultimate nightmare. The Fruit Stoners were but a fragment of her own ghastly dream...!

"I'm old, old," she kept saying to herself as she rushed headlong in the nightmare circle, balancing dizzily on a rim like a fruit stone on the edge of a slippery plate. "I'm old, or I could not think like this!"

Think! The word exploded with a shock in her frenzied brain. The blank futility of thought struck like a blow into her heart. Thinking was utterly useless. What counted alone was action, action backed by feeling. Here lay a direct way to finding something real. And it lay for her now — through a Pig Stye.

These thoughts, she knew, were old, old thoughts belonging to the Valley of the Shadow whose darkness now beat against her eyes. She had lost everything. The Thief had left her empty and bereft; his love, her final effort, was unreal like all the rest. It had given her a few mechanical baubles only — a glass necklace, a shell, a pretty belt, a blue hair-ribbon.

"When I've taken everything... you will be happy.." The words came floating from a great distance, a distance both of time and space.

He *had* taken everything.

It was this vivid, flashing conviction of her final and utter emptiness that somehow made her whirling circle stop. There came an abrupt jerk and she stood still, facing her final emptiness.

"The Pig Stye! The thing I came to look for! The one thing that I simply must find!" she whispered to herself with an intense conviction that burnt like fire. "It's all I've got left... my search...!"

And in the sudden singleness of her heart she remembered that there was one who alone could guide and help her. There was one who could stop, or who at least could change, perhaps even arrest, this remorseless, pitiless swift rush of time that must destroy her. There was a mighty name, a name of fire and thunder and gorgeous magic. It could make time and clocks ridiculous.

“Jack...!” burst from her tightened throat, that then instantly restricted in a dreadful gulp, for the rest of the marvellous name escaped her memory. Her breath choked as she made frantic efforts to recover it. There was an “is,” and “on,” a “rob” as well, but the proper sequence of the syllables were lost.

“Jack... Bonsinor...!” She shrieked aloud in her panic. She knew it was somewhere wrong. It was as though she told a lie. Yet part of it was right. *Jack* certainly was right.

“Jack... Jack...!” she yelled again in her helplessness, leaving out the rest. And perhaps it was this honest refusal to humbug herself that lent her courage and direction.

“Jack! The Pig Stye!” she cried at the top of her voice, and took the plunge.

“Here goes!” she added, like a child of ten years old.

And even half the wondrous name, apparently, worked magic.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR SHE WENT — straight across the lawn, darkness or no darkness. It seemed easier now. It was absurd to spin round in an aimless circle when you wanted to reach a point in front of you. She went straight in front of her towards the old ivied house. That a Pig Stye should exist inside a country house did not bother her an atom. She was as full of confidence as though some mighty and all-powerful being held her by the hand. That Judas should be scampering in his idiotic fashion beside her, tail in the air and whiskers spraying, caused her no surprise at all. She knew where she was going and what she wanted, and Judas, naturally, knew too.

On reaching the back door, she opened it and stalked in, and was not in the least perturbed to see that her spindly little legs were stained with mud, or that her short serge skirt had hay and dandelions sticking to it. She brushed them off and walked down the passage towards the kitchen.

“There’s a Pig Stye somewhere — upstairs probably,” she said to herself, “and there’s something in it I’m going to find. And I’ve got to be quick too!” Her intense sincerity and earnestness kept her calm.

She hurried. She passed through the kitchen, left it by another door and found herself in the banqueting hall. Then she stopped dead. A shrill voice in the distance had reached her ears:

“Maria, child! Where are you?”

“There she is again,” Maria exclaimed to herself impatiently, “shrieking for me even when I’m doing nothing!

But who the “she” referred to hovered just beyond the rim of memory and remained a mystery. It was a voice that was familiar, just as the spontaneous words in her mind were familiar, and further than that at the moment there was no occasion to analyse or question, least of all to feel bothered. Indeed, it was the darkness of the great hall that bothered her far more. There ought surely to have been a bright, giant chandelier that hung blazing from the ceiling.

“But anyhow, I’m all right,” she assured herself. “Jack is with me. Besides,” she comforted herself still further, “I haven’t done anything wrong except dawdle a bit, and if the big chandelier is not blazing — well, it isn’t, and that’s not *my* fault!”

She walked on across the vast empty floor, feeling as safe as though some mighty power held her by the hand. For no sense of naughtiness, much less of guilt, lay in her. She was here to look for something she had a right to look for: she had come to find something she was perfectly entitled to find: more, she was expected to find. She had delayed and dawdled, yes, but she had never forgotten quite; it had never left her mind entirely. No, never entirely or quite, she told herself. That haunting memory of something important she must find had dogged her whole life.... She had lazed and dreamed and loafed, of course, but — she had not fallen asleep exactly, for playing with a dream of sorts was not precisely sleeping. And if her dream had not been quite real, neither, for that matter, had she herself been quite real. How hard, oh, how hard it was, she now perceived, to keep awake and real! How easy and natural to drift into a sort of mechanical dream-state where things and persons happening outside oneself took on a clever mask of reality, and pricked one into automatic action that seemed real....

“Maria, child! Maria...!” called the distant voice.

Tick tock! Tick tock! Tick tock! beat the ever-ever-hunting footsteps.

She heard them both; the high-pitched, exasperating voice, and the grinding sound that followed the other, the strike close at hand. And while she heard them both and hurried her walk perceptibly, almost running now, strange objects, strange because they were half familiar, came poking up above the horizon of her thoughts, objects that held an air of terrific, startling reality compared to anything she had experienced *here.* A dear, kindly face with a beard and a ridiculous and helpless smile she saw; a tiger-skin; a teapot; a tray, a plate with prune stones arranged round its white rim; a pair of legs with bulging calves in rough woollen stockings; a mantelpiece where a white-faced clock stared ominously down....

She saw them all motionless, as though suspended calmly in deep water, clear enough in outline, yet blurred by the depth in which they hung and floated. They refused to disclose themselves entirely. There! They popped down again out of sight. They were gone.

“The Pig Stye! The Pig Stye!” she heard herself crying out. “Where is it? It must be upstairs, of course! Upstairs!”

She had crossed two-thirds of the enormous empty room. It seemed endless. She bumped and bruised herself against the corners of the table, the edges of chairs. It was a haunted and a haunting journey, a real nightmare passage, but her pluck did not fail her, her purpose held. She would find the Pig Stye or die in the attempt. Delay even for a single second, she knew, was utterly impossible. It was now or never. And yet her best pace was little better than a crawl. What odd, whispering sounds there were, too! As if others were just in front or just behind her, and more than once she heard a door being opened, another closed, with faint tappings, rattlings of handles, and queer, soft sounds as though someone went past her swiftly in stockinged feet.

“I shall be an old woman before I get to the end,” ran the frightening thought.

“You are already,” came a whisper, as a door opened with a soft thud above her somewhere.

She looked up. —

“You’ve lived your life and haven’t found it. Come, stay with us and play with us....”

The whisper was behind her. She turned, staring across the immense space she had already crossed. The nightmare flooded over her with its appalling power at full tide.

“Maria, child! Where are you?”

Tick tock! Tick tock!

“Streaked like the lightning, stalking every man!”

“Darkness cometh when no man can work!”

“No abiding city here!”

“Pearl of Great Price... few there be that find it... needle in a haystack...!”

“Too late... search and you shall find.... Pig Stye...!”

All these words and phrases, jumbled up together, rushed tumbling through her head as she turned and looked across the immense space of floor that she had just crossed. For there, right before her bewildered eyes, she saw the Fruit Stoners, the whole Ancient Company of her queer Fruit Stoner friends, and they were seated in a circle on the floor. Yes, all seated in a circle on the floor of the vast banqueting hall.

"Was I all that time crossing it?" she asked herself with a bewildered shudder. "How did they manage to slip in like that?"

They had faded horribly. She had entirely forgotten them. She had forgotten everything, all her past life, her married years, her adventures, her voyages... all had faded into some dim, measureless obscurity. How crinkled, dark and tiny their faces looked.... How unimportant and absurd both they and her own past, vivid existence now seemed suddenly....

A shiver as of death passed through her as she stared at this circle of figures seated on the floor. Was nothing, *nothing* real? Had everything, everything been illusion? She felt lost.

A hand in the darkness crept into her own, though she could see no outline of a figure. She felt long, slender fingers clasp her own. There was a fantastic, a magical delicacy of touch. A shock, as of delicious lightning, that stung yet did not injure, raced with fiery conviction along her arm and straight into her heart. She was aware of some touch of instinctive, infallible guidance. A flash of delirious, joyful radiance burned her.

"Then — love *is* real, at least!" darted across her being in its depths, for she recognized the touch, the guidance, with a spasm of such intensity that it was pain.

"Watch," came an answering whisper. And the guiding hand, ever invisible, drew her to the side of the room. "I tell you this, because you have given everything. Watch... when you see it — *act.* We shall enter paradise together...!"

Without understanding, she yielded to the guidance and obeyed. Leaning against the wall, she stood and watched.

In a dim light which seemed to come from nowhere, and was more like pale moonlight than anything she could think of, she saw the Fruit Stoners in a circular group, not upright and standing, but seated in the middle of the vast floor. There they were in a circle, sitting cross-legged fashion, and busily intent upon something they were doing.

She held her breath, still as any mouse, and stared. What on earth were they so intent upon? Their whole attention was concentrated on it. They evidently had not noticed Judas scamper across the floor, they seemed equally unaware that she now stood watching them. Their whole minds were focused on what they were doing.

What was it? It looked like a game. They seemed to be playing a game of sorts. Behind their backs, under the arches of their legs, they were passing something swiftly from one to another. They were trying to hide it, trying to find it, each making sudden violent grabs to snatch at it before it was passed beyond the reach of the outstretched hand. She then saw the Gentleman rise abruptly, and with top-hat on the back of his head, eyeglass swinging and coat-tails flying, tear round and round outside the seated circle, and make frantic efforts to seize the mysterious object over their shoulders.

A trembling of great violence ran over her. She had flashed back into childhood with a sudden bang that startled her. This game they were playing secretly was a game she knew, a game she had played herself somewhere long ago, though where and when escaped her. She felt herself upon the verge of remembering. Any instant now her memory would pour back in a flood. It balanced just out of sight, hovering, ready to topple over and declare itself.

She would remember what she had come to find! The purpose of her whole life and being would be fulfilled!

The game rushed madly on, half alarming, half absurd, yet of stupendous importance, for the object the Fruit Stoners kept hiding, snatching, passing from one to the other, was, of course, *the* object she had come to find.

“I *am* a silly ass to have forgotten it!” she cried under her breath. “I know exactly what it is. I’ve known it all along. It’s — it’s—”

But the name still held away. The name escaped her.

Immense periods, as she stood there watching, seemed to stretch behind her, years and years and years; she had stood there for ages; childhood, youth, maturity had all slipped past her since she first came.

... Moreover, it was all as familiar as getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. She had lived through it all a hundred times before, and she would live through it all a hundred times again. The whole business just went on happening over and over again in this recurrent, mechanical, futile way....

She became abruptly aware that the Gentleman was looking straight at her with a fixed and unsheathed eye. The object he had just successfully snatched from the Tinker in front of him was actually in his hand. His fingers clutched and hid it, but she knew he held it, her precious object, her Pearl of Great Price, the thing of ultimate importance, whose finding would explain the purpose of her coming here, the aim and meaning of her entire life and being.

That fixed, unsheathed eye looked steadily at her, and Maria returned the gaze unflinchingly. The whole Company now turned their heads to stare at her. A sudden horror invaded her as she met their stare, a sense of the horrible futility of all these doll-like, mechanical, unreal figures she had created, a horror due to the awful realization that she herself — almost — resembled them. The same instant she sprang forward.

“Give it to me!” she shouted frantically at the top of her voice. “Give me that thing at once! It’s mine! It’s what I came to find! And your game is nothing but — but—”

The name escaped her. It hung just out of sight... as she dashed across the floor. A piercing scream escaped her as she ran. For at the same moment the grinding sound of the terrible *Tick tock!* broke on the air like thunder. Close, quite close to her, crackled out the roaring clamour of the long-dreaded strike.

It was the first strike of six o’clock.

Her Five Minutes were almost up.

She had already taken half a dozen rapid strides, her hands stretched out almost within touching distance of her precious object, when the Gentleman darted back and mingled with the main body of the still seated Fruit Stoners. The same moment the whole circle rose to its feet. And what happened then was so swift, so unexpected, so atrociously of nightmare quality, that she could hardly believe her eyes. For it took place instantly, and instantly it was over. Above the great banqueting hall ran the circular gallery underneath the high white ceiling, and the entire Company of Fruit Stoners, led by the hideously agile Gentleman, had whirled across the floor, flowed up the wide staircase, and were seated round the upper gallery before she could even draw a breath. Like the loops and coils of a flung rope, whirling like a turned wheel, they were there above her, seated again and playing their ridiculous game, the game she could not quite remember. Maria craned her neck upwards, stared in amazement. The very next moment she had reached the foot of the stairs, and was flying up them when her eye saw the tall grandfather's clock standing on the landing at the top, its round white face staring grimly down at her. It had not been there before. It looked enormous. Was it — horrors! — moving? It was there the awful strike had sounded, the first stroke of the dreaded six o'clock that had haunted her whole existence.

All this happened in less than a second. She could hardly think, she could scarcely feel, for there was no time left for either. But she could, at least, see. The chaos in her mind was beyond all telling, but sight remained clear and vivid. There were five strokes of that monstrous clock to sound yet before her Five Minutes were up, and it was in the intervals between these strokes of doom that her eyes saw what they saw.

She gave one last upward look. Was it an optical delusion? Was the great space of gallery and ceiling shrinking? Was the ceiling lowering itself towards the ring of seated Fruit Stoners, growing smaller as it dropped?

She had no time to ask herself these questions; it was simply that her eyes told her what was happening. The circle of Fruit Stoners, and the vast white ceiling above them, both grew still — till she saw nothing but a ring of crinkly prune-stone faces placed at tiny intervals round the white edge of a — yes, of a white plate.

She saw also, beyond all possible confusion of her senses, the huge upright clock, standing like a lion in her way. She would have to pass this giant clock that barred her way. She must rush upstairs close underneath its dreadful figure in order to reach the tiny figure that still clutched her precious object, her Pearl of Great Price. It was already grinding. Any second the second stroke would crash out upon the air.

"The Pig Stye! The Pig Stye!" roared through her frantic mind.

There was not a second, not a fraction of a second, to lose. She braced her muscles, but her muscles seemed so heavy; in spite of the most violent efforts, her legs carried her so slowly, oh, so slowly towards the stairs. Her heart was bursting. Her very tendons seemed to crack. A curious pungent odour stung her nostrils. “Time is a tiger, stalking every man, streaked like the lightning...” whizzed across her brain. She sniffed. She coughed. Her breath betrayed her. Though her courage did not fail, her body refused obstinately to hurry, so that where she should have rushed, she merely crawled.

Could she believe her eyes? Had it really moved again? Was it still moving, imperceptibly, very slightly, but yet definitely now standing squarely between her and the stairs — leaving hardly room for her to pass?

Just beyond its grim, menacing outline, she could see the ring of crinkled-faced Fruit Stoners, one of them clutching her Pearl of Great Price in its fading little hand.

Oh, she must seize her precious object by force, by violence, she must be up the stairs and in the gallery before — before she could say Knife! Knife! Knife!

Only there was a better name, a better phrase than Knife! What was it? What was that powerful, comforting name that had once helped her, and now was lost again? Only the half of it came to her.

Her mind was a ghastly whirlpool. Pig Stye! Pearl! Fruit Stoners! The purpose of her life fulfilled! That dangerous, acrid smell! Tiger! The Man who Wound the Clocks! The Tyrant who had given her five minutes in which to accomplish the ultimate aim of her whole life and being!

Crash! The second stroke fell with its violent thunder on the air.

She took several racing but faltering steps and reached the foot of the great staircase. She managed the first few stairs in a brave, reckless stride. She knew then that her eyes had not deceived her. The giant grandfather’s clock had moved. It was moving now. It was bending forward, its slow, lumbering giant outline distinctly visible. The whole eight feet of it, the great square shoulders hunching themselves, leant over towards her, till the white, menacing visage seemed to thrust itself in front of her very face. The white disc almost shone. There was not a foot between them.

She stared straight into the appalling visage of her enemy.

“I knew I must meet you sooner or later,” ran a whisper of icy courage through her inmost heart.

And nightmare opened its awful mouth and took the entire universe in its jaws. Had it been possible, Maria would have closed her eyes, only the lids refused to work. Her eyes remained wide open as if they would never close again. The clock changed even as she looked. The main body of it shortened, the square outline below divided into two straight supports like legs. Long stripes ran down them. They *were* legs, legs in striped trousers. Below the hunched shoulders a pair of arms thrust out. The white disc became a human face, the face of a man. She gazed at the monster, the tyrant, who had given her her Five Minutes.

For a second she held her ground, though he was now close enough to touch. Then, as she gave a shuddering start, the striped trousers, the black tailcoat as well, took on a yellowish tinge. The body grew longer suddenly, the flanks showed curiously lean and hollow, the arms and shoulders wore a tawny, streaked appearance, the eyes flashed with amber fire. The lips next drew back upon long pointed teeth, and the same instant the whole immense body dropped upon all fours. It leapt.

The Man who Wound the Clocks! The Tiger! Which was it? Were they both the same?

For a rushing instant she saw the glaring disc that was its face. A terrible white dial she saw. The two hands hung in a dead straight line, the big hand uppermost, the little one below.

It was six o’clock. She had — at most — some thirty seconds left.

It was an animal she faced, streaked like the lightning, a tiger, and a tiger about to spring. There was a grinding of its entrails. The third stroke was upon her. Already it had risen upright again, its seven feet of terror erect upon its hind legs. The dreadful mouth was open wide.

CRASH! came the third terrific roar.

Bereft, stripped bare, empty, her courage met it with the single-hearted prayer that saved her.

“*Robinson!*” she gave back a terrific shriek. “*Jack Robinson!*” And was past it and up the stairs at lightning speed, the monster at her heels.

CHAPTER XVIII

SHE HAD FOUND the full name. There was no terror now. The nightmare spell was lifting. Her muscles worked, her heart, her brain, her nerves. Her memory as well. She was young once more, young as a horse-chestnut bud in spring. Age had fled, and horror with it. This almost was a spree. Light-hearted, gay, she felt. Memory and vitality burst round her in a shower of dazzling sparks.

"Glory be! This is a spree!" she almost sang.

Jack alone had worked half a miracle, but it had not taken away that grinding inner horror. It was the *Robinson* that rooted out that ghastly dread. The name had come back to her in its full glory, the syllables correct, the power of inhuman kind.

"*Jack Robinson! Jack Robinson!*" she sang, racing like the wind, knowing that, with only three strokes still to come, thirty seconds at most, she was yet safe. The beauty and power of that wondrous name filled her with a glory of the awful stars.

"Golly and glory be!" she cried breathlessly.

How could she have neglected and forgotten it all these ages!

Time stretched out behind her like an immense elastic, yet the faster she ran, the less it drew her back. *Jack Robinson,* dancing along beside her with immense power and superhuman grace, made Time seem ridiculous.

He was superb, invisible, yet everywhere and always. Faster than Time he was. Thirty seconds and five minutes had no meaning. She was timeless and divine. Young, tireless, inexhaustible. Nothing was left to her, since Time and Experience had taken all. She owed the Apothecary, above all the Thief, a fortune. They had left her, between them, so naked that she was light as wind, and as wind now she raced and flew.

She knew, none the less, that the Man who Wound the Clocks, the Tiger of her nightmare, was at her heels. If she had her limitless eternity, they had their schedule of time and space, as well. She realized quite clearly that she must not be caught and overtaken.

In front of her, too, she could see the rushing Ancient Company of Fruit Stoners going like greased lightning. They kept to their circular formation, balanced carefully round the rim of a large, white spinning plate. Holding on for dear life they were, keeping just ahead of her. She saw them all as they whirled along the floor of the passage, ridiculous yet marvellous. It seemed incredible how they held on to the edge of that whirling plate. Yet they did so quite comfortably. The Sailor’s gold ear-rings flashed, the Tailor’s scissors gleamed, the Soldier saluted the air while polishing his buttons, a burnished tear lay on the Ploughboy’s cheek, and the kettles of the Tinker sang their tinny song. Each and all pursued their usual avocations, the Apothecary thinking too hard to notice the pace, the Gentleman urbanely waving his bright silk hat, the Thief — his exquisite hands in everybody’s pocket in turn — casting his shining eyes back towards her as Sirius might peep across space at a violet....

At the same time, the whole Company continued its idiotic game, the game whose secret still hid away from her. Reduced to the size of pygmies, with crinkled, ageless faces, the Fruit Stoners still played their ancient game, passing her precious Pearl from hand to hand, hiding it beneath their arched knees, slipping it with furious speed from one to another lest someone outside their circle snatch it away.

What was it — oh, what could it be...?

In less than a fraction of a second she saw this going on and took it in. Thirty seconds she had still, racing, racing, rushing, rushing, the air whistling past her ears, yet her mind quite clear and steady, because *Jack Robinson* flew ever at her side.

She realized quite definitely that she must overtake these mechanical whirling dolls that aped reality and mimicked life; she knew she must catch them up; she knew that one of them held at a given moment her Pearl of Great Price. She knew also that her faith must not for a single instant fail, that close behind her, rushing and ready to roar, followed the wild tread of Time, the Monster, pausing upon his final spring against her neck, with its upright seven feet of hideous yellow terror. The acrid breath came to her nostrils. Her very heels were almost touched.

Thirty seconds! Yes, with *Jack Robinson* that was enough. But she must not dawdle nor forget. The framed ancestors shot past her like a streak of coloured light, a grinning, deathly series. The doors of the flower-room flashed by. She did not falter, she made no false step. She believed in Jack Robinson, and his majestic power did not, could not, fail her. Her smarting eyes streamed water, her heart pumped and banged against her ribs, but, in spite of that acrid breath, those fearful feet upon her very heels, she kept just ahead.

"Oh, *Jack Robinson,*" she cried, "I could face *anything* with you! Time, age — anything...!"

The green baize door appeared in front of her. It stood ajar. The spinning plate with its freight of Fruit Stoners whisked through like the dart of a frightened dragon-fly. But Maria was after them. Once past it she was in the familiar Little House again. The door closed behind her with its soft, queer, sullen gulp of sound.

Had the monster come through too?

Maria never knew exactly what had happened.

She only knew that the great white plate still spun before her eyes along the familiar corridor, and that the Fruit Stoners, one by one, flew startlingly off its rim and fell higgledy-piggledy upon the carpet. One alone kept his balance — the Gentleman. She saw him bend over suddenly, make a wild clutch in the air, then straighten up again and wave his hand above his top-hat.

"I have it! I have it!" he cried triumphantly, and the voice that issued from his tiny crinkly face was small and tinkly, though it rang clear as a bell.

Maria gasped and held her breath. She shivered.

He held something in his hand, snatched from his companions in the game, her Pearl of Great Price, the thing she had come to find. Oh, what could it be, this jewel above rubies?

But for the knowledge that *Jack Robinson* was close beside her, breathing the power of his ineffable presence about her like a soft wind of beauty that takes a frozen garden in the spring, she must have collapsed. For the moment was genuinely awful. What could it be, this grand, terrific thing she had spent her life to find, this object clothed in some majesty of ultimate importance, this lost difficult secret, whose finding would explain the meaning and purpose of her entire being, the clue that would bring sense, significance, beauty into her long, tiresome and painful existence?

The Gentleman, waving his silk hat and bowing profoundly, had fallen off the plate and yet stood elegantly upright — against a door. In his hand above the shining top-hat the Thing lay clutched.

Maria stared a second. She gazed upward at that closed hand. She hesitated. Her breath, her muscles, her resolution, all were braced for the effort.

"*Jack Robinson* she sang out, and power at once poured through her like a mountain wind.

Instantly then she recognized the door. Memory opened like the sky. It was the door of her father's bedroom. At the same second she saw the Fruit Stoners collected again at her feet, sitting in a circle, waiting for the Gentleman to join them again.

CRASH came the awful roar, as the fourth stroke fell with a shattering bang behind her.

Maria screamed... for in the same instant memory finally flung wide its immense doors.

"It's Hunt the Slipper — your idiotic game! And what you've got in your hand" — turning to the Gentleman with radiant confidence—" is — slippers! That's what I came to find — Father's *slippers!*"

A pair of bedroom slippers!

She pushed and drove upwards to seize them, her Pearl of Great Price, and falling through a figure of mist and air, burst headlong into the room.

"I'm awake at last — more conscious — more aware," flashed through her, as she cried at the top of her voice, "Good-bye, Jack Robinson, and thanks awfully!"

Then memory closed down like an iron shutter.

She looked quickly about her and thought it was the most untidy room she had ever seen, for its disorder was really disgraceful. It was scandalous that her father's bedroom should be left in such a state.

"It's nothing but a pig-stye, I declare!" Maria exclaimed in disgust. "Why doesn't that — that Puss look after him better?"

In the dim light that came through the open door it was difficult to see outlines clearly, and the general litter of clothes and things made it still more difficult.

"Now where *can* those slippers be?" exclaimed Maria, bustling about and colliding with bits of furniture. "I declare! It's like a haystack!" She knew she must find them quickly if she was to be back in the library by six o'clock as she had promised.

Something fell with a bang and rattle at her feet, as she bumped against a piece of furniture. There they were at last! She had knocked them off the end of the sofa. She stooped, groped a moment along the floor, and the same instant felt them under her fingers.

"Got 'em!" she cried, clutching them, one in each hand, and was out in the passage at once, banging the door noisily behind her as she ran.

"Maria, child! Where are you?" sounded a high voice somewhere in the house, for the banging door had betrayed her. But Maria did not answer. The sound of a clock striking took all her attention. She counted the strokes: One, two, three, four. Then it stopped. It was the presentation clock on the landing, of course, and it was out of order. That was why the Man who Wound the Clocks was fiddling with it.

"I can just do it!" she thought, as she tore along the passage, aware that Judas was scampering beside her. "Just! But I must be quicker than Jack Robinson!"

Whipping along at full speed, she raced past the Man who was fiddling with the clock, noticing his striped trousers as he moved a little to let her pass, and hearing a grinding of the machinery as though the next strike was just coming. There was only a second or two left if she was to reach the library in time. She was down the stairs like a lamplighter. As she flung across the hall the fifth stroke fell with a crash behind her in the gallery.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DOOR OF the library stood ajar. There! She had forgotten to close it in her hurry when she left five minutes before. She hoped her father had not noticed. Pushing it wide, she burst into the room, and as she crossed the threshold the last stroke of six rang out from the white-faced clock on the mantelpiece.

“There, Father,” she cried breathlessly, “I’ve done it! I took just five minutes. And here are your slippers!”

She flung across the room to his side, giving a queer sudden start as she saw the great tiger-skin with its yellow stripes — then sat down on its head and began to undo her father’s heavy boots.

He looked up with a jerk from what was evidently a moment’s doze, the newspaper slipping from his knees. Judas, she noticed, was playing with the prune stones arranged round the edge of the white plate where the tea-tray stood close to the ground on a dump. His black paw, tentatively stretched out, had already knocked one off — the eighth, she saw, quickly counting in her head.

“The Thief,” darted across her mind, as she glanced at the dark, crinkly little object on the carpet. “He’s come with me...” but she had no notion why she said it or what she meant. A touch of supreme ecstasy poured over her that turned the world golden with an incredible hope, followed the same instant by a deep yearning pity, a sense of compassion that passed all telling. She felt that she was going to burst into tears.

“Get out, you rascal!” exclaimed her father, smacking Judas playfully, then turning to thank her. “You’ve been wonderfully quick,” he praised her, “quicker than Jack Robinson. But then I knew you would be. One, two, three — go!” as with a final effort the big shooting boot came off and fell noisily on to the floor. “And did you find them easily?” he went on. “Of course you did. Just where I left ’em — eh?”

Maria heard the words but made no answer. She was looking round the room, taking everything in. Her free hand stole automatically to her bead necklace, her hair-ribbon, her belt. Was all this quite real — her father's talk, the library, the tea-tray, the prune stones, Judas, her own self? A curious deep doubt flashed swiftly. Her life in this Big House in the country, the failing family fortunes, Mrs. Binks, her daily existence, her age, her occupations, hopes, fears, pleasures... were they all *quite* real? Wasn't it all a dream of sorts, something she might wake up from — if only she were more aware, more conscious — waking up a second time...?

For an instant her whole being ached with the poignant certainty that something much more real lay just beyond her reach.

"... just where I left 'em, eh?" she heard her father's voice.

"Oh, but, Father," she burst out, still breathless a little from her headlong run, bewildered, too, as the haunting passion raked her heart and mind in vanishing, "your room is simply awful, you know — awful" — starting on the other boot—" and it's a wonder you don't lose everything you've got!"

"Eh?" he said innocently, watching the operations with a scrunched-up expression on his face. "You don't mean it — really?"

"I do," Maria insisted. "I've never seen a room in such a mess in my whole life. It was a perfect Pig-Stye."

"There!" he grunted, as the boot came off with a sudden jerk. "You really mean it," he went on laughingly. "A perfect pig-stye?"

"I do," she declared with emphasis, and she looked up into his face with sympathy and pity, but with indignation too.

"Well, a perfect one is better than an imperfect one," she heard him say with a chuckle that seemed to come from a distance, his voice far away in the air almost. For a moment the odd feeling came over her again — the feeling that they were talking in a dream, that her father's outline in the chair turned shadowy, the tea-tray, the heavy boots, the slippers she was fumbling with, the entire room, in fact, and everything in it, all were merely insubstantial pictures in her mind.

A faint odour, slightly acrid, rose to her nostrils from the tiger-skin on which she sat, and a sudden shiver ran swiftly through her. Turning her head she saw that a group of tall, silent figures stood about her, shadowy, their outlines only just visible. They crowded the air against the book-shelves, all still and motionless, but with eager, peering, spectral faces. Who were they? What were they? Why did her heart ache so? Were they merely shadows? She looked more closely, and as she did so a moment's icy horror swept her, followed by a deep, yearning pang that gripped her very entrails. There was something she half remembered, something that floated over her like the ghost of a forgotten dream. These figures were *real.* Somewhere she had known them, loved them, feared them, played with them. They belonged to some lost portion of her life and being, half sweet, half terrible, but at least indubitably real. They had filled her hours, her days, her years; in childhood, youth and age they had been comrades. She had known adventure with them, but she had known dread and anguish too. She had known... love.

The storm of pity in her grew and deepened. Compassion swept her like a tempest.

“I love you,” she whispered, the pain in her almost unbearable, “for I made you with my very best.”

A passion of affection, longing, of fierce regret rushed over her, but no answer came from the row of dim, undecipherable faces. She was aware of their friendliness, their patience, their reverence, their loving worship, their steadfast belief, and somehow of their courage too. She could not understand it. What they meant escaped her. The spectral faces caused her an extraordinary pain as she strove to recall them to her memory, but without success.

... Real, real, real they were, she felt positive, for all their shadowy insubstantiality.

A face thrust closer from the general group, so that she saw dimly a grey straggling beard, and caught a whiff of something that reminded her of a medicine cupboard as it came close against her own.

“Real *then,* of course we were,” issued a clear whisper from the tangled hair, “just as *now* all this seems real,” and his hand swept round the library. “But you can awaken from all this too, awaken a second time...” as both hands included the room with a gesture — and the same instant the whole strange picture shivered before her eyes, shattered into a thousand fragments....

“Maria, child! Where are you? Don’t bang the doors like that!” came in a shrill voice somewhere on the upper landing.

Her father gave a little start.

“And if my room is really as unddy as all that,” he went on, “I suppose I must do something about it. I must have it seen to, mustn’t I? Yes, Maria darling, I must have it seen to. I’ll speak to Mrs. Binks to-morrow. She’ll soon send the maids about their business. My things have never been done properly since I had to let William go.”

He drew her down upon his knee, for both slippers were now safely and comfortably on.

“She’s wonderful, really wonderful,” he went on, putting his arm about Maria’s waist. “I don’t know what I should have done without her. Why, you’re still out of breath, Maria. Your body’s trembling. You took those stairs too fast. It’s tired you out, you little monkey!”

“It’s nothing, Father. Only Jack Robinson’s pace is terrific, you see.”

She nestled down against her father’s shoulder. He had stopped speaking, but she knew quite well what was coming. She could feel him drawing a deeper breath so to speak, could feel all his inner machinery collecting itself as with a clock just going to strike. His voice, as he praised Mrs. Binks, had softened a little, a note of shyness, yes, of tenderness, in it. Oh, she knew what was coming well enough, and that queer feeling of having been through this all before came over her again. She had lived it over and over again, as though it just went on happening for ever, a recurrent business, a recurrent sort of dream. It had no reality. It was all something she could wake up from — if only she knew the way: wake up into something else that was finally and definitely real, wake up a second time....

A touch of drowsiness was stealing over her as she waited.

“Yes, Father...” she murmured almost sleepily, trying to help him.

“Talking about my cousin,” she heard him, a distinct effort in the voice and the tone considerably lower as though he was going to let her into a great secret, “I — er — wanted to tell you something, Marigold darling—”

“Yes, Father, I know,” she mumbled softly, nestling deeper against his old smoky shooting-coat as though cuddling into sleep. “And if you really want another, of course take it. I’m going... to marry... a thief... myself...!”

But the last words were so low they seemed spoken out of sleep, and it is doubtful if her father heard them even. He picked her up in his arms and carried her up himself to her bedroom, for he saw that she was half lost in dreams and slumber.

“*Tick tock! Tick tock!*” sounded the old clock on the mantelpiece in the deserted room where only Judas remained playing with a crinkly prune stone on the carpet which he evidently believed to be a real and living mouse — Judas, the eighth fruit stone and the ferocious tiger-skin whose eyes and teeth and fearful tawny limbs had no reality in them....

THE END

The Short Story Collections

Crayford Manor House, Dartford, South East London — Blackwood’s childhood home

The Empty House and Other Ghost Stories (1906)

"…there is nothing more desolate in all the abodes of men than an unfurnished house dimly lit, silent, and forsaken, and yet tenanted by rumour with the memories of evil and violent histories."

This is Blackwood's first published collection of horror stories – a genre in which he excelled and for which he is still greatly admired. It is also Blackwood's first published book, appearing in 1906 when the author was thirty-seven years old. This was the start of a prolific career as a writer of supernatural fiction, eventually leading to fame as a radio and television star, in which mediums he broadcast readings of his own stories. Up to this point, Blackwood had tried numerous careers, but it was his literary work which steadily earned him financial security.

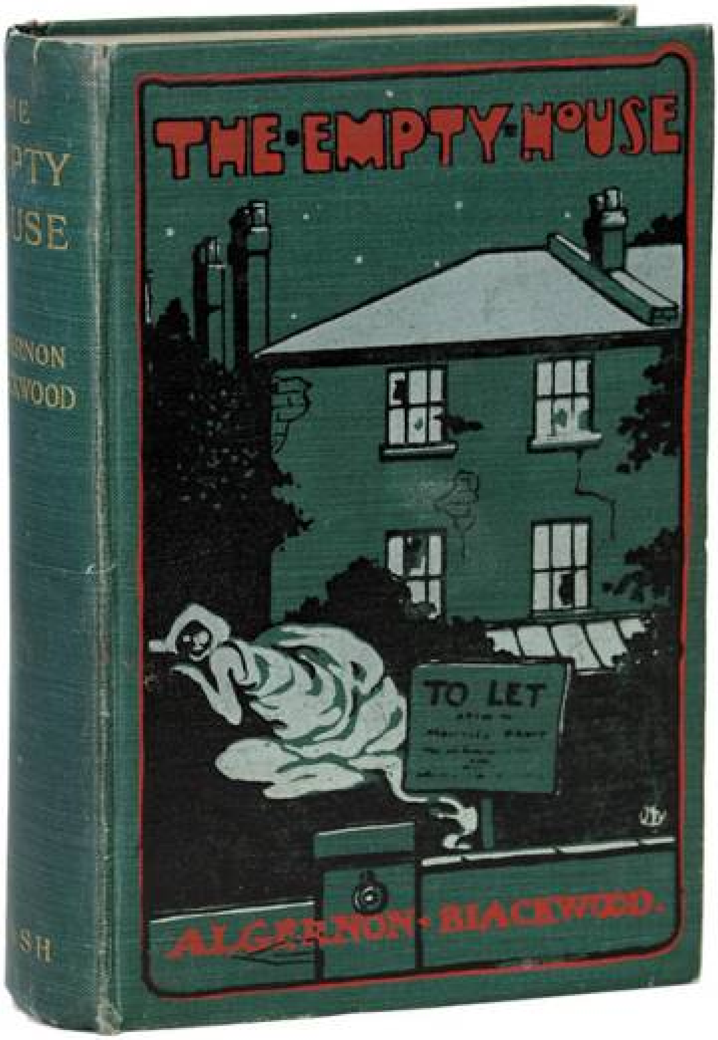
Blackwood's stories draw heavily on his own experiences, as well as his preoccupation with the mystical beliefs of Rosicrucianism and Buddhism. As well as being a firm believer in reincarnation, he often used his fiction to express his conception of nature as a sentient force — a concept that proves both beautiful and terrifying in equal measure, but which generally accounts for the sense of awe that characterises much of his fiction.

The Empty House contains ten stories. The title story is (as the title implies) a standard haunted house story, possibly based on Blackwood's experiences with the Society for Psychical research. Indeed, unlike the work of some other well-known contemporaries (such as M. R. James, whose stories deliberately obscure the origins or motives of their spectres), Blackwood's stories reflect the early-twentieth-century enthusiasm for understanding supernatural phenomena in scientific or pseudo-scientific terms. 'With Intent to Steal', the story of a haunted barn, may also be based on Blackwood's researches with the Society.

'A Haunted Island' is Blackwood's first known published ghost story, and was first printed in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1899. 'A Case of

Eavesdropping', which follows it in the collection is, appropriately enough, the second known publication of a Blackwood ghost story, and first appeared in the same periodical in 1900. It is based on Blackwood's experiences living in lodgings in New York and concerns a man (probably based on Blackwood himself) who overhears a conversation in the rooms next to his – but are the participants of this earth? 'Smith: An Episode in a Lodging House' is also the fruit of Blackwood's experiences in New York, whilst also drawing on his acquaintance with the occult learning of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

'Keeping His Promise' is a story of two friends who strike up a macabre agreement to prove the existence of the supernatural, while 'The Wood of the Dead', set in the West Country, lives up to its doom-laden title.


THE EMPTY HOUSE
TO LET
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD.
THE EMPTY HOUSE
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD
ASH

The first edition

CONTENTS

THE EMPTY HOUSE

A HAUNTED ISLAND

A CASE OF EAVESDROPPING

KEEPING HIS PROMISE

WITH INTENT TO STEAL

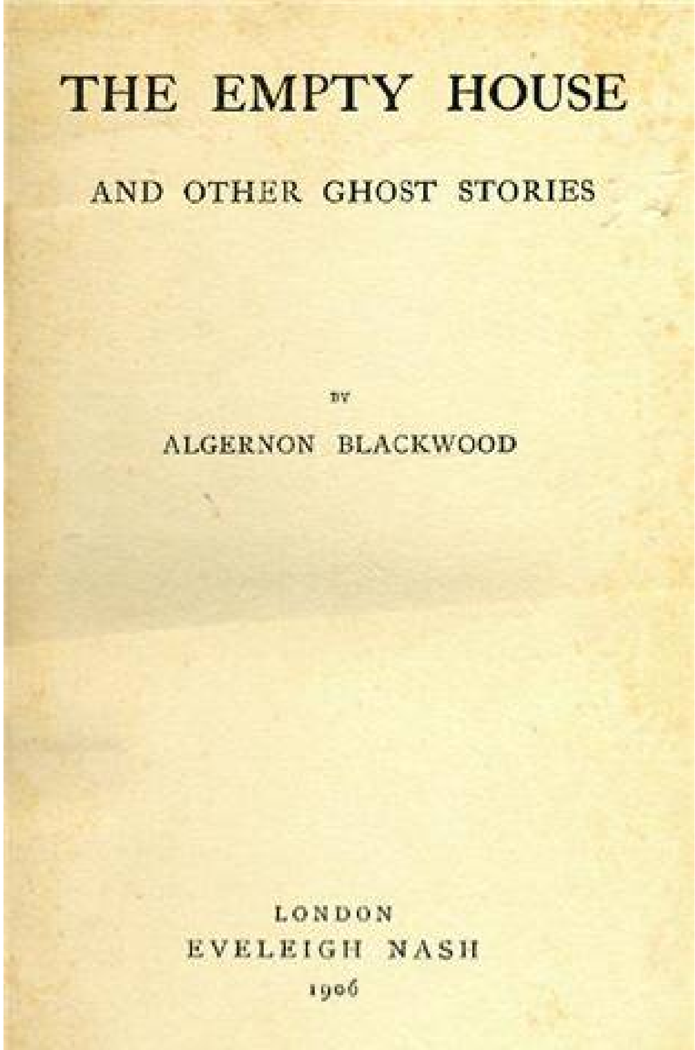
THE WOOD OF THE DEAD

SMITH: AN EPISODE IN A LODGING-HOUSE

A SUSPICIOUS GIFT

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY IN NEW YORK

SKELETON LAKE: AN EPISODE IN CAMP



THE EMPTY HOUSE

AND OTHER GHOST STORIES

BY

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

LONDON
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Title page of the first edition

THE EMPTY HOUSE

CERTAIN HOUSES, LIKE certain persons, manage somehow to proclaim at once their character for evil. In the case of the latter, no particular feature need betray them; they may boast an open countenance and an ingenuous smile; and yet a little of their company leaves the unalterable conviction that there is something radically amiss with their being: that they are evil. Willy nilly, they seem to communicate an atmosphere of secret and wicked thoughts which makes those in their immediate neighbourhood shrink from them as from a thing diseased.

And, perhaps, with houses the same principle is operative, and it is the aroma of evil deeds committed under a particular roof, long after the actual doers have passed away, that makes the gooseflesh come and the hair rise. Something of the original passion of the evil-doer, and of the horror felt by his victim, enters the heart of the innocent watcher, and he becomes suddenly conscious of tingling nerves, creeping skin, and a chilling of the blood. He is terror-stricken without apparent cause.

There was manifestly nothing in the external appearance of this particular house to bear out the tales of the horror that was said to reign within. It was neither lonely nor unkempt. It stood, crowded into a corner of the square, and looked exactly like the houses on either side of it. It had the same number of windows as its neighbours; the same balcony overlooking the gardens; the same white steps leading up to the heavy black front door; and, in the rear, there was the same narrow strip of green, with neat box borders, running up to the wall that divided it from the backs of the adjoining houses. Apparently, too, the number of chimney pots on the roof was the same; the breadth and angle of the eaves; and even the height of the dirty area railings.

And yet this house in the square, that seemed precisely similar to its fifty ugly neighbours, was as a matter of fact entirely different — horribly different.

Wherein lay this marked, invisible difference is impossible to say. It cannot be ascribed wholly to the imagination, because persons who had spent some time in the house, knowing nothing of the facts, had declared positively that certain rooms were so disagreeable they would rather die than enter them again, and that the atmosphere of the whole house produced in them symptoms of a genuine terror; while the series of innocent tenants who had tried to live in it and been forced to decamp at the shortest possible notice, was indeed little less than a scandal in the town.

When Shorthouse arrived to pay a “week-end” visit to his Aunt Julia in her little house on the sea-front at the other end of the town, he found her charged to the brim with mystery and excitement. He had only received her telegram that morning, and he had come anticipating boredom; but the moment he touched her hand and kissed her apple-skin wrinkled cheek, he caught the first wave of her electrical condition. The impression deepened when he learned that there were to be no other visitors, and that he had been telegraphed for with a very special object.

Something was in the wind, and the “something” would doubtless bear fruit; for this elderly spinster aunt, with a mania for psychical research, had brains as well as will power, and by hook or by crook she usually managed to accomplish her ends. The revelation was made soon after tea, when she sidled close up to him as they paced slowly along the sea-front in the dusk.

“I’ve got the keys,” she announced in a delighted, yet half awesome voice. “Got them till Monday!”

“The keys of the bathing-machine, or — ?” he asked innocently, looking from the sea to the town. Nothing brought her so quickly to the point as feigning stupidity.

“Neither,” she whispered. “I’ve got the keys of the haunted house in the square — and I’m going there to-night.”

Shorthouse was conscious of the slightest possible tremor down his back. He dropped his teasing tone. Something in her voice and manner thrilled him. She was in earnest.

“But you can’t go alone—” he began.

“That’s why I wired for you,” she said with decision.

He turned to look at her. The ugly, lined, enigmatical face was alive with excitement. There was the glow of genuine enthusiasm round it like a halo.

The eyes shone. He caught another wave of her excitement, and a second tremor, more marked than the first, accompanied it.

“Thanks, Aunt Julia,” he said politely; “thanks awfully.”

“I should not dare to go quite alone,” she went on, raising her voice; “but with you I should enjoy it immensely. You’re afraid of nothing, I know.”

“Thanks *so* much,” he said again. “Er — is anything likely to happen?”

“A great deal *has* happened,” she whispered, “though it’s been most cleverly hushed up. Three tenants have come and gone in the last few months, and the house is said to be empty for good now.”

In spite of himself Shorthouse became interested. His aunt was so very much in earnest.

“The house is very old indeed,” she went on, “and the story — an unpleasant one — dates a long way back. It has to do with a murder committed by a jealous stableman who had some affair with a servant in the house. One night he managed to secrete himself in the cellar, and when everyone was asleep, he crept upstairs to the servants’ quarters, chased the girl down to the next landing, and before anyone could come to the rescue threw her bodily over the banisters into the hall below.”

“And the stableman — ?”

“Was caught, I believe, and hanged for murder; but it all happened a century ago, and I’ve not been able to get more details of the story.”

Shorthouse now felt his interest thoroughly aroused; but, though he was not particularly nervous for himself, he hesitated a little on his aunt’s account.

“On one condition,” he said at length.

“Nothing will prevent my going,” she said firmly; “but I may as well hear your condition.”

“That you guarantee your power of self-control if anything really horrible happens. I mean — that you are sure you won’t get too frightened.”

“Jim,” she said scornfully, “I’m not young, I know, nor are my nerves; but *with you* I should be afraid of nothing in the world!”

This, of course, settled it, for Shorthouse had no pretensions to being other than a very ordinary young man, and an appeal to his vanity was irresistible. He agreed to go.

Instinctively, by a sort of sub-conscious preparation, he kept himself and his forces well in hand the whole evening, compelling an accumulative reserve of control by that nameless inward process of gradually putting all the emotions away and turning the key upon them — a process difficult to describe, but wonderfully effective, as all men who have lived through severe trials of the inner man well understand. Later, it stood him in good stead.

But it was not until half-past ten, when they stood in the hall, well in the glare of friendly lamps and still surrounded by comforting human influences, that he had to make the first call upon this store of collected strength. For, once the door was closed, and he saw the deserted silent street stretching away white in the moonlight before them, it came to him clearly that the real test that night would be in dealing with *two fears* instead of one. He would have to carry his aunt's fear as well as his own. And, as he glanced down at her sphinx-like countenance and realised that it might assume no pleasant aspect in a rush of real terror, he felt satisfied with only one thing in the whole adventure — that he had confidence in his own will and power to stand against any shock that might come.

Slowly they walked along the empty streets of the town; a bright autumn moon silvered the roofs, casting deep shadows; there was no breath of wind; and the trees in the formal gardens by the sea-front watched them silently as they passed along. To his aunt's occasional remarks Shorthouse made no reply, realising that she was simply surrounding herself with mental buffers — saying ordinary things to prevent herself thinking of extra-ordinary things. Few windows showed lights, and from scarcely a single chimney came smoke or sparks. Shorthouse had already begun to notice everything, even the smallest details. Presently they stopped at the street corner and looked up at the name on the side of the house full in the moonlight, and with one accord, but without remark, turned into the square and crossed over to the side of it that lay in shadow.

"The number of the house is thirteen," whispered a voice at his side; and neither of them made the obvious reference, but passed across the broad sheet of moonlight and began to march up the pavement in silence.

It was about half-way up the square that Shorthouse felt an arm slipped quietly but significantly into his own, and knew then that their adventure had begun in earnest, and that his companion was already yielding imperceptibly to the influences against them. She needed support.

A few minutes later they stopped before a tall, narrow house that rose before them into the night, ugly in shape and painted a dingy white. Shutterless windows, without blinds, stared down upon them, shining here and there in the moonlight. There were weather streaks in the wall and cracks in the paint, and the balcony bulged out from the first floor a little unnaturally. But, beyond this generally forlorn appearance of an unoccupied house, there was nothing at first sight to single out this particular mansion for the evil character it had most certainly acquired.

Taking a look over their shoulders to make sure they had not been followed, they went boldly up the steps and stood against the huge black door that fronted them forbiddingly. But the first wave of nervousness was now upon them, and Shorthouse fumbled a long time with the key before he could fit it into the lock at all. For a moment, if truth were told, they both hoped it would not open, for they were a prey to various unpleasant emotions as they stood there on the threshold of their ghostly adventure. Shorthouse, shuffling with the key and hampered by the steady weight on his arm, certainly felt the solemnity of the moment. It was as if the whole world — for all experience seemed at that instant concentrated in his own consciousness — were listening to the grating noise of that key. A stray puff of wind wandering down the empty street woke a momentary rustling in the trees behind them, but otherwise this rattling of the key was the only sound audible; and at last it turned in the lock and the heavy door swung open and revealed a yawning gulf of darkness beyond.

With a last glance at the moonlit square, they passed quickly in, and the door slammed behind them with a roar that echoed prodigiously through empty halls and passages. But, instantly, with the echoes, another sound made itself heard, and Aunt Julia leaned suddenly so heavily upon him that he had to take a step backwards to save himself from falling.

A man had coughed close beside them — so close that it seemed they must have been actually by his side in the darkness.

With the possibility of practical jokes in his mind, Shorthouse at once swung his heavy stick in the direction of the sound; but it met nothing more solid than air. He heard his aunt give a little gasp beside him.

“There’s someone here,” she whispered; “I heard him.”

“Be quiet!” he said sternly. “It was nothing but the noise of the front door.”

“Oh! get a light — quick!” she added, as her nephew, fumbling with a box of matches, opened it upside down and let them all fall with a rattle on to the stone floor.

The sound, however, was not repeated; and there was no evidence of retreating footsteps. In another minute they had a candle burning, using an empty end of a cigar case as a holder; and when the first flare had died down he held the impromptu lamp aloft and surveyed the scene. And it was dreary enough in all conscience, for there is nothing more desolate in all the abodes of men than an unfurnished house dimly lit, silent, and forsaken, and yet tenanted by rumour with the memories of evil and violent histories.

They were standing in a wide hall-way; on their left was the open door of a spacious dining-room, and in front the hall ran, ever narrowing, into a long, dark passage that led apparently to the top of the kitchen stairs. The broad uncarpeted staircase rose in a sweep before them, everywhere draped in shadows, except for a single spot about half-way up where the moonlight came in through the window and fell on a bright patch on the boards. This shaft of light shed a faint radiance above and below it, lending to the objects within its reach a misty outline that was infinitely more suggestive and ghostly than complete darkness. Filtered moonlight always seems to paint faces on the surrounding gloom, and as Shorthouse peered up into the well of darkness and thought of the countless empty rooms and passages in the upper part of the old house, he caught himself longing again for the safety of the moonlit square, or the cosy, bright drawing-room they had left an hour before. Then realising that these thoughts were dangerous, he thrust them away again and summoned all his energy for concentration on the present.

“Aunt Julia,” he said aloud, severely, “we must now go through the house from top to bottom and make a thorough search.”

The echoes of his voice died away slowly all over the building, and in the intense silence that followed he turned to look at her. In the candle-light he saw that her face was already ghastly pale; but she dropped his arm for a moment and said in a whisper, stepping close in front of him —

“I agree. We must be sure there’s no one hiding. That’s the first thing.”

She spoke with evident effort, and he looked at her with admiration.

“You feel quite sure of yourself? It’s not too late—”

“I think so,” she whispered, her eyes shifting nervously toward the shadows behind. “Quite sure, only one thing—”

“What’s that?”

“You must never leave me alone for an instant.”

“As long as you understand that any sound or appearance must be investigated at once, for to hesitate means to admit fear. That is fatal.”

“Agreed,” she said, a little shakily, after a moment’s hesitation. “I’ll try—”

Arm in arm, Shorthouse holding the dripping candle and the stick, while his aunt carried the cloak over her shoulders, figures of utter comedy to all but themselves, they began a systematic search.

Stealthily, walking on tip-toe and shading the candle lest it should betray their presence through the shutterless windows, they went first into the big dining-room. There was not a stick of furniture to be seen. Bare walls, ugly mantel-pieces and empty grates stared at them. Everything, they felt, resented their intrusion, watching them, as it were, with veiled eyes; whispers followed them; shadows flitted noiselessly to right and left; something seemed ever at their back, watching, waiting an opportunity to do them injury. There was the inevitable sense that operations which went on when the room was empty had been temporarily suspended till they were well out of the way again. The whole dark interior of the old building seemed to become a malignant Presence that rose up, warning them to desist and mind their own business; every moment the strain on the nerves increased.

Out of the gloomy dining-room they passed through large folding doors into a sort of library or smoking-room, wrapt equally in silence, darkness, and dust; and from this they regained the hall near the top of the back stairs.

Here a pitch black tunnel opened before them into the lower regions, and — it must be confessed — they hesitated. But only for a minute. With the worst of the night still to come it was essential to turn from nothing. Aunt Julia stumbled at the top step of the dark descent, ill lit by the flickering candle, and even Shorthouse felt at least half the decision go out of his legs.

“Come on!” he said peremptorily, and his voice ran on and lost itself in the dark, empty spaces below.

“I’m coming,” she faltered, catching his arm with unnecessary violence.

They went a little unsteadily down the stone steps, a cold, damp air meeting them in the face, close and mal-odorous. The kitchen, into which the stairs led along a narrow passage, was large, with a lofty ceiling. Several doors opened out of it — some into cupboards with empty jars still standing on the shelves, and others into horrible little ghostly back offices, each colder and less inviting than the last. Black beetles scurried over the floor, and once, when they knocked against a deal table standing in a corner, something about the size of a cat jumped down with a rush and fled, scampering across the stone floor into the darkness. Everywhere there was a sense of recent occupation, an impression of sadness and gloom.

Leaving the main kitchen, they next went towards the scullery. The door was standing ajar, and as they pushed it open to its full extent Aunt Julia uttered a piercing scream, which she instantly tried to stifle by placing her hand over her mouth. For a second Shorthouse stood stock-still, catching his breath. He felt as if his spine had suddenly become hollow and someone had filled it with particles of ice.

Facing them, directly in their way between the doorposts, stood the figure of a woman. She had dishevelled hair and wildly staring eyes, and her face was terrified and white as death.

She stood there motionless for the space of a single second. Then the candle flickered and she was gone — gone utterly — and the door framed nothing but empty darkness.

“Only the beastly jumping candle-light,” he said quickly, in a voice that sounded like someone else’s and was only half under control. “Come on, aunt. There’s nothing there.”

He dragged her forward. With a clattering of feet and a great appearance of boldness they went on, but over his body the skin moved as if crawling ants covered it, and he knew by the weight on his arm that he was supplying the force of locomotion for two. The scullery was cold, bare, and empty; more like a large prison cell than anything else. They went round it, tried the door into the yard, and the windows, but found them all fastened securely. His aunt moved beside him like a person in a dream. Her eyes were tightly shut, and she seemed merely to follow the pressure of his arm. Her courage filled him with amazement. At the same time he noticed that a certain odd change had come over her face, a change which somehow evaded his power of analysis.

“There’s nothing here, aunty,” he repeated aloud quickly. “Let’s go upstairs and see the rest of the house. Then we’ll choose a room to wait up in.”

She followed him obediently, keeping close to his side, and they locked the kitchen door behind them. It was a relief to get up again. In the hall there was more light than before, for the moon had travelled a little further down the stairs. Cautiously they began to go up into the dark vault of the upper house, the boards creaking under their weight.

On the first floor they found the large double drawing-rooms, a search of which revealed nothing. Here also was no sign of furniture or recent occupancy; nothing but dust and neglect and shadows. They opened the big folding doors between front and back drawing-rooms and then came out again to the landing and went on upstairs.

They had not gone up more than a dozen steps when they both simultaneously stopped to listen, looking into each other’s eyes with a new apprehension across the flickering candle flame. From the room they had left hardly ten seconds before came the sound of doors quietly closing. It was beyond all question; they heard the booming noise that accompanies the shutting of heavy doors, followed by the sharp catching of the latch.

“We must go back and see,” said Shorthouse briefly, in a low tone, and turning to go downstairs again.

Somehow she managed to drag after him, her feet catching in her dress, her face livid.

When they entered the front drawing-room it was plain that the folding doors had been closed — half a minute before. Without hesitation Shorthouse opened them. He almost expected to see someone facing him in the back room; but only darkness and cold air met him. They went through both rooms, finding nothing unusual. They tried in every way to make the doors close of themselves, but there was not wind enough even to set the candle flame flickering. The doors would not move without strong pressure. All was silent as the grave. Undeniably the rooms were utterly empty, and the house utterly still.

“It’s beginning,” whispered a voice at his elbow which he hardly recognised as his aunt’s.

He nodded acquiescence, taking out his watch to note the time. It was fifteen minutes before midnight; he made the entry of exactly what had occurred in his notebook, setting the candle in its case upon the floor in order to do so. It took a moment or two to balance it safely against the wall.

Aunt Julia always declared that at this moment she was not actually watching him, but had turned her head towards the inner room, where she fancied she heard something moving; but, at any rate, both positively agreed that there came a sound of rushing feet, heavy and very swift — and the next instant the candle was out!

But to Shorthouse himself had come more than this, and he has always thanked his fortunate stars that it came to him alone and not to his aunt too. For, as he rose from the stooping position of balancing the candle, and before it was actually extinguished, a face thrust itself forward so close to his own that he could almost have touched it with his lips. It was a face working with passion; a man’s face, dark, with thick features, and angry, savage eyes. It belonged to a common man, and it was evil in its ordinary normal expression, no doubt, but as he saw it, alive with intense, aggressive emotion, it was a malignant and terrible human countenance.

There was no movement of the air; nothing but the sound of rushing feet — stockinged or muffled feet; the apparition of the face; and the almost simultaneous extinguishing of the candle.

In spite of himself, Shorthouse uttered a little cry, nearly losing his balance as his aunt clung to him with her whole weight in one moment of real, uncontrollable terror. She made no sound, but simply seized him bodily. Fortunately, however, she had seen nothing, but had only heard the rushing feet, for her control returned almost at once, and he was able to disentangle himself and strike a match.

The shadows ran away on all sides before the glare, and his aunt stooped down and groped for the cigar case with the precious candle. Then they discovered that the candle had not been *blown* out at all; it had been *crushed* out. The wick was pressed down into the wax, which was flattened as if by some smooth, heavy instrument.

How his companion so quickly overcame her terror, Shorthouse never properly understood; but his admiration for her self-control increased tenfold, and at the same time served to feed his own dying flame — for which he was undeniably grateful. Equally inexplicable to him was the evidence of physical force they had just witnessed. He at once suppressed the memory of stories he had heard of "physical mediums" and their dangerous phenomena; for if these were true, and either his aunt or himself was unwittingly a physical medium, it meant that they were simply aiding to focus the forces of a haunted house already charged to the brim. It was like walking with unprotected lamps among uncovered stores of gunpowder.

So, with as little reflection as possible, he simply relit the candle and went up to the next floor. The arm in his trembled, it is true, and his own tread was often uncertain, but they went on with thoroughness, and after a search revealing nothing they climbed the last flight of stairs to the top floor of all.

Here they found a perfect nest of small servants' rooms, with broken pieces of furniture, dirty cane-bottomed chairs, chests of drawers, cracked mirrors, and decrepit bedsteads. The rooms had low sloping ceilings already hung here and there with cobwebs, small windows, and badly plastered walls — a depressing and dismal region which they were glad to leave behind.

It was on the stroke of midnight when they entered a small room on the third floor, close to the top of the stairs, and arranged to make themselves comfortable for the remainder of their adventure. It was absolutely bare, and was said to be the room — then used as a clothes closet — into which the infuriated groom had chased his victim and finally caught her. Outside, across the narrow landing, began the stairs leading up to the floor above, and the servants' quarters where they had just searched.

In spite of the chilliness of the night there was something in the air of this room that cried for an open window. But there was more than this. Shorthouse could only describe it by saying that he felt less master of himself here than in any other part of the house. There was something that acted directly on the nerves, tiring the resolution, enfeebling the will. He was conscious of this result before he had been in the room five minutes, and it was in the short time they stayed there that he suffered the wholesale depletion of his vital forces, which was, for himself, the chief horror of the whole experience.

They put the candle on the floor of the cupboard, leaving the door a few inches ajar, so that there was no glare to confuse the eyes, and no shadow to shift about on walls and ceiling. Then they spread the cloak on the floor and sat down to wait, with their backs against the wall.

Shorthouse was within two feet of the door on to the landing; his position commanded a good view of the main staircase leading down into the darkness, and also of the beginning of the servants' stairs going to the floor above; the heavy stick lay beside him within easy reach.

The moon was now high above the house. Through the open window they could see the comforting stars like friendly eyes watching in the sky. One by one the clocks of the town struck midnight, and when the sounds died away the deep silence of a windless night fell again over everything. Only the boom of the sea, far away and lugubrious, filled the air with hollow murmurs.

Inside the house the silence became awful; awful, he thought, because any minute now it might be broken by sounds portending terror. The strain of waiting told more and more severely on the nerves; they talked in whispers when they talked at all, for their voices aloud sounded queer and unnatural. A chilliness, not altogether due to the night air, invaded the room, and made them cold. The influences against them, whatever these might be, were slowly robbing them of self-confidence, and the power of decisive action; their forces were on the wane, and the possibility of real fear took on a new and terrible meaning. He began to tremble for the elderly woman by his side, whose pluck could hardly save her beyond a certain extent.

He heard the blood singing in his veins. It sometimes seemed so loud that he fancied it prevented his hearing properly certain other sounds that were beginning very faintly to make themselves audible in the depths of the house. Every time he fastened his attention on these sounds, they instantly ceased. They certainly came no nearer. Yet he could not rid himself of the idea that movement was going on somewhere in the lower regions of the house. The drawing-room floor, where the doors had been so strangely closed, seemed too near; the sounds were further off than that. He thought of the great kitchen, with the scurrying black-beetles, and of the dismal little scullery; but, somehow or other, they did not seem to come from there either. Surely they were not *outside* the house!

Then, suddenly, the truth flashed into his mind, and for the space of a minute he felt as if his blood had stopped flowing and turned to ice.

The sounds were not downstairs at all; they were *upstairs* — upstairs, somewhere among those horrid gloomy little servants' rooms with their bits of broken furniture, low ceilings, and cramped windows — upstairs where the victim had first been disturbed and stalked to her death.

And the moment he discovered where the sounds were, he began to hear them more clearly. It was the sound of feet, moving stealthily along the passage overhead, in and out among the rooms, and past the furniture.

He turned quickly to steal a glance at the motionless figure seated beside him, to note whether she had shared his discovery. The faint candle-light coming through the crack in the cupboard door, threw her strongly-marked face into vivid relief against the white of the wall. But it was something else that made him catch his breath and stare again. An extraordinary something had come into her face and seemed to spread over her features like a mask; it smoothed out the deep lines and drew the skin everywhere a little tighter so that the wrinkles disappeared; it brought into the face — with the sole exception of the old eyes — an appearance of youth and almost of childhood.

He stared in speechless amazement — amazement that was dangerously near to horror. It was his aunt's face indeed, but it was her face of forty years ago, the vacant innocent face of a girl. He had heard stories of that strange effect of terror which could wipe a human countenance clean of other emotions, obliterating all previous expressions; but he had never realised that it could be literally true, or could mean anything so simply horrible as what he now saw. For the dreadful signature of overmastering fear was written plainly in that utter vacancy of the girlish face beside him; and when, feeling his intense gaze, she turned to look at him, he instinctively closed his eyes tightly to shut out the sight.

Yet, when he turned a minute later, his feelings well in hand, he saw to his intense relief another expression; his aunt was smiling, and though the face was deathly white, the awful veil had lifted and the normal look was returning.

“Anything wrong?” was all he could think of to say at the moment. And the answer was eloquent, coming from such a woman.

“I feel cold — and a little frightened,” she whispered.

He offered to close the window, but she seized hold of him and begged him not to leave her side even for an instant.

“It’s upstairs, I know,” she whispered, with an odd half laugh; “but I can’t possibly go up.”

But Shorthouse thought otherwise, knowing that in action lay their best hope of self-control.

He took the brandy flask and poured out a glass of neat spirit, stiff enough to help anybody over anything. She swallowed it with a little shiver. His only idea now was to get out of the house before her collapse became inevitable; but this could not safely be done by turning tail and running from the enemy. Inaction was no longer possible; every minute he was growing less master of himself, and desperate, aggressive measures were imperative without further delay. Moreover, the action must be taken *towards* the enemy, not away from it; the climax, if necessary and unavoidable, would have to be faced boldly. He could do it now; but in ten minutes he might not have the force left to act for himself, much less for both!

Upstairs, the sounds were meanwhile becoming louder and closer, accompanied by occasional creaking of the boards. Someone was moving stealthily about, stumbling now and then awkwardly against the furniture.

Waiting a few moments to allow the tremendous dose of spirits to produce its effect, and knowing this would last but a short time under the circumstances, Shorthouse then quietly got on his feet, saying in a determined voice —

“Now, Aunt Julia, we’ll go upstairs and find out what all this noise is about. You must come too. It’s what we agreed.”

He picked up his stick and went to the cupboard for the candle. A limp form rose shakily beside him breathing hard, and he heard a voice say very faintly something about being “ready to come.” The woman’s courage amazed him; it was so much greater than his own; and, as they advanced, holding aloft the dripping candle, some subtle force exhaled from this trembling, white-faced old woman at his side that was the true source of his inspiration. It held something really great that shamed him and gave him the support without which he would have proved far less equal to the occasion.

They crossed the dark landing, avoiding with their eyes the deep black space over the banisters. Then they began to mount the narrow staircase to meet the sounds which, minute by minute, grew louder and nearer. About half-way up the stairs Aunt Julia stumbled and Shorthouse turned to catch her by the arm, and just at that moment there came a terrific crash in the servants’ corridor overhead. It was instantly followed by a shrill, agonised scream that was a cry of terror and a cry for help melted into one.

Before they could move aside, or go down a single step, someone came rushing along the passage overhead, blundering horribly, racing madly, at full speed, three steps at a time, down the very staircase where they stood. The steps were light and uncertain; but close behind them sounded the heavier tread of another person, and the staircase seemed to shake.

Shorthouse and his companion just had time to flatten themselves against the wall when the jumble of flying steps was upon them, and two persons, with the slightest possible interval between them, dashed past at full speed. It was a perfect whirlwind of sound breaking in upon the midnight silence of the empty building.

The two runners, pursuer and pursued, had passed clean through them where they stood, and already with a thud the boards below had received first one, then the other. Yet they had seen absolutely nothing — not a hand, or arm, or face, or even a shred of flying clothing.

There came a second's pause. Then the first one, the lighter of the two, obviously the pursued one, ran with uncertain footsteps into the little room which Shorthouse and his aunt had just left. The heavier one followed. There was a sound of scuffling, gasping, and smothered screaming; and then out on to the landing came the step — of a single person *treading weightily*.

A dead silence followed for the space of half a minute, and then was heard a rushing sound through the air. It was followed by a dull, crashing thud in the depths of the house below — on the stone floor of the hall.

Utter silence reigned after. Nothing moved. The flame of the candle was steady. It had been steady the whole time, and the air had been undisturbed by any movement whatsoever. Palsied with terror, Aunt Julia, without waiting for her companion, began fumbling her way downstairs; she was crying gently to herself, and when Shorthouse put his arm round her and half carried her he felt that she was trembling like a leaf. He went into the little room and picked up the cloak from the floor, and, arm in arm, walking very slowly, without speaking a word or looking once behind them, they marched down the three flights into the hall.

In the hall they saw nothing, but the whole way down the stairs they were conscious that someone followed them; step by step; when they went faster IT was left behind, and when they went more slowly IT caught them up. But never once did they look behind to see; and at each turning of the staircase they lowered their eyes for fear of the following horror they might see upon the stairs above.

With trembling hands Shorthouse opened the front door, and they walked out into the moonlight and drew a deep breath of the cool night air blowing in from the sea.

A HAUNTED ISLAND

THE FOLLOWING EVENTS occurred on a small island of isolated position in a large Canadian lake, to whose cool waters the inhabitants of Montreal and Toronto flee for rest and recreation in the hot months. It is only to be regretted that events of such peculiar interest to the genuine student of the psychical should be entirely uncorroborated. Such unfortunately, however, is the case.

Our own party of nearly twenty had returned to Montreal that very day, and I was left in solitary possession for a week or two longer, in order to accomplish some important “reading” for the law which I had foolishly neglected during the summer.

It was late in September, and the big trout and maskinonge were stirring themselves in the depths of the lake, and beginning slowly to move up to the surface waters as the north winds and early frosts lowered their temperature. Already the maples were crimson and gold, and the wild laughter of the loons echoed in sheltered bays that never knew their strange cry in the summer.

With a whole island to oneself, a two-storey cottage, a canoe, and only the chipmunks, and the farmer’s weekly visit with eggs and bread, to disturb one, the opportunities for hard reading might be very great. It all depends!

The rest of the party had gone off with many warnings to beware of Indians, and not to stay late enough to be the victim of a frost that thinks nothing of forty below zero. After they had gone, the loneliness of the situation made itself unpleasantly felt. There were no other islands within six or seven miles, and though the mainland forests lay a couple of miles behind me, they stretched for a very great distance unbroken by any signs of human habitation. But, though the island was completely deserted and silent, the rocks and trees that had echoed human laughter and voices almost every hour of the day for two months could not fail to retain some memories of it all; and I was not surprised to fancy I heard a shout or a cry as I passed from rock to rock, and more than once to imagine that I heard my own name called aloud.

In the cottage there were six tiny little bedrooms divided from one another by plain unvarnished partitions of pine. A wooden bedstead, a mattress, and a chair, stood in each room, but I only found two mirrors, and one of these was broken.

The boards creaked a good deal as I moved about, and the signs of occupation were so recent that I could hardly believe I was alone. I half expected to find someone left behind, still trying to crowd into a box more than it would hold. The door of one room was stiff, and refused for a moment to open, and it required very little persuasion to imagine someone was holding the handle on the inside, and that when it opened I should meet a pair of human eyes.

A thorough search of the floor led me to select as my own sleeping quarters a little room with a diminutive balcony over the verandah roof. The room was very small, but the bed was large, and had the best mattress of them all. It was situated directly over the sitting-room where I should live and do my "reading," and the miniature window looked out to the rising sun. With the exception of a narrow path which led from the front door and verandah through the trees to the boat-landing, the island was densely covered with maples, hemlocks, and cedars. The trees gathered in round the cottage so closely that the slightest wind made the branches scrape the roof and tap the wooden walls. A few moments after sunset the darkness became impenetrable, and ten yards beyond the glare of the lamps that shone through the sitting-room windows — of which there were four — you could not see an inch before your nose, nor move a step without running up against a tree.

The rest of that day I spent moving my belongings from my tent to the sitting-room, taking stock of the contents of the larder, and chopping enough wood for the stove to last me for a week. After that, just before sunset, I went round the island a couple of times in my canoe for precaution's sake. I had never dreamed of doing this before, but when a man is alone he does things that never occur to him when he is one of a large party.

How lonely the island seemed when I landed again! The sun was down, and twilight is unknown in these northern regions. The darkness comes up at once. The canoe safely pulled up and turned over on her face, I groped my way up the little narrow pathway to the verandah. The six lamps were soon burning merrily in the front room; but in the kitchen, where I “dined,” the shadows were so gloomy, and the lamplight was so inadequate, that the stars could be seen peeping through the cracks between the rafters.

I turned in early that night. Though it was calm and there was no wind, the creaking of my bedstead and the musical gurgle of the water over the rocks below were not the only sounds that reached my ears. As I lay awake, the appalling emptiness of the house grew upon me. The corridors and vacant rooms seemed to echo innumerable footsteps, shufflings, the rustle of skirts, and a constant undertone of whispering. When sleep at length overtook me, the breathings and noises, however, passed gently to mingle with the voices of my dreams.

A week passed by, and the “reading” progressed favourably. On the tenth day of my solitude, a strange thing happened. I awoke after a good night’s sleep to find myself possessed with a marked repugnance for my room. The air seemed to stifle me. The more I tried to define the cause of this dislike, the more unreasonable it appeared. There was something about the room that made me afraid. Absurd as it seems, this feeling clung to me obstinately while dressing, and more than once I caught myself shivering, and conscious of an inclination to get out of the room as quickly as possible. The more I tried to laugh it away, the more real it became; and when at last I was dressed, and went out into the passage, and downstairs into the kitchen, it was with feelings of relief, such as I might imagine would accompany one’s escape from the presence of a dangerous contagious disease.

While cooking my breakfast, I carefully recalled every night spent in the room, in the hope that I might in some way connect the dislike I now felt with some disagreeable incident that had occurred in it. But the only thing I could recall was one stormy night when I suddenly awoke and heard the boards creaking so loudly in the corridor that I was convinced there were people in the house. So certain was I of this, that I had descended the stairs, gun in hand, only to find the doors and windows securely fastened, and the mice and black-beetles in sole possession of the floor. This was certainly not sufficient to account for the strength of my feelings.

The morning hours I spent in steady reading; and when I broke off in the middle of the day for a swim and luncheon, I was very much surprised, if not a little alarmed, to find that my dislike for the room had, if anything, grown stronger. Going upstairs to get a book, I experienced the most marked aversion to entering the room, and while within I was conscious all the time of an uncomfortable feeling that was half uneasiness and half apprehension. The result of it was that, instead of reading, I spent the afternoon on the water paddling and fishing, and when I got home about sundown, brought with me half a dozen delicious black bass for the supper-table and the larder.

As sleep was an important matter to me at this time, I had decided that if my aversion to the room was so strongly marked on my return as it had been before, I would move my bed down into the sitting-room, and sleep there. This was, I argued, in no sense a concession to an absurd and fanciful fear, but simply a precaution to ensure a good night's sleep. A bad night involved the loss of the next day's reading, — a loss I was not prepared to incur.

I accordingly moved my bed downstairs into a corner of the sitting-room facing the door, and was moreover uncommonly glad when the operation was completed, and the door of the bedroom closed finally upon the shadows, the silence, and the strange *fear* that shared the room with them.

The croaking stroke of the kitchen clock sounded the hour of eight as I finished washing up my few dishes, and closing the kitchen door behind me, passed into the front room. All the lamps were lit, and their reflectors, which I had polished up during the day, threw a blaze of light into the room.

Outside the night was still and warm. Not a breath of air was stirring; the waves were silent, the trees motionless, and heavy clouds hung like an oppressive curtain over the heavens. The darkness seemed to have rolled up with unusual swiftness, and not the faintest glow of colour remained to show where the sun had set. There was present in the atmosphere that ominous and overwhelming silence which so often precedes the most violent storms.

I sat down to my books with my brain unusually clear, and in my heart the pleasant satisfaction of knowing that five black bass were lying in the ice-house, and that to-morrow morning the old farmer would arrive with fresh bread and eggs. I was soon absorbed in my books.

As the night wore on the silence deepened. Even the chipmunks were still; and the boards of the floors and walls ceased creaking. I read on steadily till, from the gloomy shadows of the kitchen, came the hoarse sound of the clock striking nine. How loud the strokes sounded! They were like blows of a big hammer. I closed one book and opened another, feeling that I was just warming up to my work.

This, however, did not last long. I presently found that I was reading the same paragraphs over twice, simple paragraphs that did not require such effort. Then I noticed that my mind began to wander to other things, and the effort to recall my thoughts became harder with each digression. Concentration was growing momentarily more difficult. Presently I discovered that I had turned over two pages instead of one, and had not noticed my mistake until I was well down the page. This was becoming serious. What was the disturbing influence? It could not be physical fatigue. On the contrary, my mind was unusually alert, and in a more receptive condition than usual. I made a new and determined effort to read, and for a short time succeeded in giving my whole attention to my subject. But in a very few moments again I found myself leaning back in my chair, staring vacantly into space.

Something was evidently at work in my sub-consciousness. There was something I had neglected to do. Perhaps the kitchen door and windows were not fastened. I accordingly went to see, and found that they were! The fire perhaps needed attention. I went in to see, and found that it was all right! I looked at the lamps, went upstairs into every bedroom in turn, and then went round the house, and even into the ice-house. Nothing was wrong; everything was in its place. Yet something *was* wrong! The conviction grew stronger and stronger within me.

When I at length settled down to my books again and tried to read, I became aware, for the first time, that the room seemed growing cold. Yet the day had been oppressively warm, and evening had brought no relief. The six big lamps, moreover, gave out heat enough to warm the room pleasantly. But a chilliness, that perhaps crept up from the lake, made itself felt in the room, and caused me to get up to close the glass door opening on to the verandah.

For a brief moment I stood looking out at the shaft of light that fell from the windows and shone some little distance down the pathway, and out for a few feet into the lake.

As I looked, I saw a canoe glide into the pathway of light, and immediately crossing it, pass out of sight again into the darkness. It was perhaps a hundred feet from the shore, and it moved swiftly.

I was surprised that a canoe should pass the island at that time of night, for all the summer visitors from the other side of the lake had gone home weeks before, and the island was a long way out of any line of water traffic.

My reading from this moment did not make very good progress, for somehow the picture of that canoe, gliding so dimly and swiftly across the narrow track of light on the black waters, silhouetted itself against the background of my mind with singular vividness. It kept coming between my eyes and the printed page. The more I thought about it the more surprised I became. It was of larger build than any I had seen during the past summer months, and was more like the old Indian war canoes with the high curving bows and stern and wide beam. The more I tried to read, the less success attended my efforts; and finally I closed my books and went out on the verandah to walk up and down a bit, and shake the chilliness out of my bones.

The night was perfectly still, and as dark as imaginable. I stumbled down the path to the little landing wharf, where the water made the very faintest of gurgling under the timbers. The sound of a big tree falling in the mainland forest, far across the lake, stirred echoes in the heavy air, like the first guns of a distant night attack. No other sound disturbed the stillness that reigned supreme.

As I stood upon the wharf in the broad splash of light that followed me from the sitting-room windows, I saw another canoe cross the pathway of uncertain light upon the water, and disappear at once into the impenetrable gloom that lay beyond. This time I saw more distinctly than before. It was like the former canoe, a big birch-bark, with high-crested bows and stern and broad beam. It was paddled by two Indians, of whom the one in the stern — the steerer — appeared to be a very large man. I could see this very plainly; and though the second canoe was much nearer the island than the first, I judged that they were both on their way home to the Government Reservation, which was situated some fifteen miles away upon the mainland.

I was wondering in my mind what could possibly bring any Indians down to this part of the lake at such an hour of the night, when a third canoe, of precisely similar build, and also occupied by two Indians, passed silently round the end of the wharf. This time the canoe was very much nearer shore, and it suddenly flashed into my mind that the three canoes were in reality one and the same, and that only one canoe was circling the island!

This was by no means a pleasant reflection, because, if it were the correct solution of the unusual appearance of the three canoes in this lonely part of the lake at so late an hour, the purpose of the two men could only reasonably be considered to be in some way connected with myself. I had never known of the Indians attempting any violence upon the settlers who shared the wild, inhospitable country with them; at the same time, it was not beyond the region of possibility to suppose. . . . But then I did not care even to think of such hideous possibilities, and my imagination immediately sought relief in all manner of other solutions to the problem, which indeed came readily enough to my mind, but did not succeed in recommending themselves to my reason.

Meanwhile, by a sort of instinct, I stepped back out of the bright light in which I had hitherto been standing, and waited in the deep shadow of a rock to see if the canoe would again make its appearance. Here I could see, without being seen, and the precaution seemed a wise one.

After less than five minutes the canoe, as I had anticipated, made its fourth appearance. This time it was not twenty yards from the wharf, and I saw that the Indians meant to land. I recognised the two men as those who had passed before, and the steerer was certainly an immense fellow. It was unquestionably the same canoe. There could be no longer any doubt that for some purpose of their own the men had been going round and round the island for some time, waiting for an opportunity to land. I strained my eyes to follow them in the darkness, but the night had completely swallowed them up, and not even the faintest swish of the paddles reached my ears as the Indians plied their long and powerful strokes. The canoe would be round again in a few moments, and this time it was possible that the men might land. It was well to be prepared. I knew nothing of their intentions, and two to one (when the two are big Indians!) late at night on a lonely island was not exactly my idea of pleasant intercourse.

In a corner of the sitting-room, leaning up against the back wall, stood my Marlin rifle, with ten cartridges in the magazine and one lying snugly in the greased breech. There was just time to get up to the house and take up a position of defence in that corner. Without an instant's hesitation I ran up to the verandah, carefully picking my way among the trees, so as to avoid being seen in the light. Entering the room, I shut the door leading to the verandah, and as quickly as possible turned out every one of the six lamps. To be in a room so brilliantly lighted, where my every movement could be observed from outside, while I could see nothing but impenetrable darkness at every window, was by all laws of warfare an unnecessary concession to the enemy. And this enemy, if enemy it was to be, was far too wily and dangerous to be granted any such advantages.

I stood in the corner of the room with my back against the wall, and my hand on the cold rifle-barrel. The table, covered with my books, lay between me and the door, but for the first few minutes after the lights were out the darkness was so intense that nothing could be discerned at all. Then, very gradually, the outline of the room became visible, and the framework of the windows began to shape itself dimly before my eyes.

After a few minutes the door (its upper half of glass), and the two windows that looked out upon the front verandah, became specially distinct; and I was glad that this was so, because if the Indians came up to the house I should be able to see their approach, and gather something of their plans. Nor was I mistaken, for there presently came to my ears the peculiar hollow sound of a canoe landing and being carefully dragged up over the rocks. The paddles I distinctly heard being placed underneath, and the silence that ensued thereupon I rightly interpreted to mean that the Indians were stealthily approaching the house. . . .

While it would be absurd to claim that I was not alarmed — even frightened — at the gravity of the situation and its possible outcome, I speak the whole truth when I say that I was not overwhelmingly afraid for myself. I was conscious that even at this stage of the night I was passing into a psychical condition in which my sensations seemed no longer normal. Physical fear at no time entered into the nature of my feelings; and though I kept my hand upon my rifle the greater part of the night, I was all the time conscious that its assistance could be of little avail against the terrors that I had to face. More than once I seemed to feel most curiously that I was in no real sense a part of the proceedings, nor actually involved in them, but that I was playing the part of a spectator — a spectator, moreover, on a psychic rather than on a material plane. Many of my sensations that night were too vague for definite description and analysis, but the main feeling that will stay with me to the end of my days is the awful horror of it all, and the miserable sensation that if the strain had lasted a little longer than was actually the case my mind must inevitably have given way.

Meanwhile I stood still in my corner, and waited patiently for what was to come. The house was as still as the grave, but the inarticulate voices of the night sang in my ears, and I seemed to hear the blood running in my veins and dancing in my pulses.

If the Indians came to the back of the house, they would find the kitchen door and window securely fastened. They could not get in there without making considerable noise, which I was bound to hear. The only mode of getting in was by means of the door that faced me, and I kept my eyes glued on that door without taking them off for the smallest fraction of a second.

My sight adapted itself every minute better to the darkness. I saw the table that nearly filled the room, and left only a narrow passage on each side. I could also make out the straight backs of the wooden chairs pressed up against it, and could even distinguish my papers and inkstand lying on the white oilcloth covering. I thought of the gay faces that had gathered round that table during the summer, and I longed for the sunlight as I had never longed for it before.

Less than three feet to my left the passage-way led to the kitchen, and the stairs leading to the bedrooms above commenced in this passage-way, but almost in the sitting-room itself. Through the windows I could see the dim motionless outlines of the trees: not a leaf stirred, not a branch moved.

A few moments of this awful silence, and then I was aware of a soft tread on the boards of the verandah, so stealthy that it seemed an impression directly on my brain rather than upon the nerves of hearing. Immediately afterwards a black figure darkened the glass door, and I perceived that a face was pressed against the upper panes. A shiver ran down my back, and my hair was conscious of a tendency to rise and stand at right angles to my head.

It was the figure of an Indian, broad-shouldered and immense; indeed, the largest figure of a man I have ever seen outside of a circus hall. By some power of light that seemed to generate itself in the brain, I saw the strong dark face with the aquiline nose and high cheek-bones flattened against the glass. The direction of the gaze I could not determine; but faint gleams of light as the big eyes rolled round and showed their whites, told me plainly that no corner of the room escaped their searching.

For what seemed fully five minutes the dark figure stood there, with the huge shoulders bent forward so as to bring the head down to the level of the glass; while behind him, though not nearly so large, the shadowy form of the other Indian swayed to and fro like a bent tree. While I waited in an agony of suspense and agitation for their next movement little currents of icy sensation ran up and down my spine and my heart seemed alternately to stop beating and then start off again with terrifying rapidity. They must have heard its thumping and the singing of the blood in my head! Moreover, I was conscious, as I felt a cold stream of perspiration trickle down my face, of a desire to scream, to shout, to bang the walls like a child, to make a noise, or do anything that would relieve the suspense and bring things to a speedy climax.

It was probably this inclination that led me to another discovery, for when I tried to bring my rifle from behind my back to raise it and have it pointed at the door ready to fire, I found that I was powerless to move. The muscles, paralysed by this strange fear, refused to obey the will. Here indeed was a terrifying complication!

* * *

There was a faint sound of rattling at the brass knob, and the door was pushed open a couple of inches. A pause of a few seconds, and it was pushed open still further. Without a sound of footsteps that was appreciable to my ears, the two figures glided into the room, and the man behind gently closed the door after him.

They were alone with me between the four walls. Could they see me standing there, so still and straight in my corner? Had they, perhaps, already seen me? My blood surged and sang like the roll of drums in an orchestra; and though I did my best to suppress my breathing, it sounded like the rushing of wind through a pneumatic tube.

My suspense as to the next move was soon at an end — only, however, to give place to a new and keener alarm. The men had hitherto exchanged no words and no signs, but there were general indications of a movement across the room, and whichever way they went they would have to pass round the table. If they came my way they would have to pass within six inches of my person. While I was considering this very disagreeable possibility, I perceived that the smaller Indian (smaller by comparison) suddenly raised his arm and pointed to the ceiling. The other fellow raised his head and followed the direction of his companion's arm. I began to understand at last. They were going upstairs, and the room directly overhead to which they pointed had been until this night my bedroom. It was the room in which I had experienced that very morning so strange a sensation of fear, and but for which I should then have been lying asleep in the narrow bed against the window.

The Indians then began to move silently around the room; they were going upstairs, and they were coming round my side of the table. So stealthy were their movements that, but for the abnormally sensitive state of the nerves, I should never have heard them. As it was, their cat-like tread was distinctly audible. Like two monstrous black cats they came round the table toward me, and for the first time I perceived that the smaller of the two dragged something along the floor behind him. As it trailed along over the floor with a soft, sweeping sound, I somehow got the impression that it was a large dead thing with outstretched wings, or a large, spreading cedar branch. Whatever it was, I was unable to see it even in outline, and I was too terrified, even had I possessed the power over my muscles, to move my neck forward in the effort to determine its nature.

Nearer and nearer they came. The leader rested a giant hand upon the table as he moved. My lips were glued together, and the air seemed to burn in my nostrils. I tried to close my eyes, so that I might not see as they passed me; but my eyelids had stiffened, and refused to obey. Would they never get by me? Sensation seemed also to have left my legs, and it was as if I were standing on mere supports of wood or stone. Worse still, I was conscious that I was losing the power of balance, the power to stand upright, or even to lean backwards against the wall. Some force was drawing me forward, and a dizzy terror seized me that I should lose my balance, and topple forward against the Indians just as they were in the act of passing me.

Even moments drawn out into hours must come to an end some time, and almost before I knew it the figures had passed me and had their feet upon the lower step of the stairs leading to the upper bedrooms. There could not have been six inches between us, and yet I was conscious only of a current of cold air that followed them. They had not touched me, and I was convinced that they had not seen me. Even the trailing thing on the floor behind them had not touched my feet, as I had dreaded it would, and on such an occasion as this I was grateful even for the smallest mercies.

The absence of the Indians from my immediate neighbourhood brought little sense of relief. I stood shivering and shuddering in my corner, and, beyond being able to breathe more freely, I felt no whit less uncomfortable. Also, I was aware that a certain light, which, without apparent source or rays, had enabled me to follow their every gesture and movement, had gone out of the room with their departure. An unnatural darkness now filled the room, and pervaded its every corner so that I could barely make out the positions of the windows and the glass doors.

As I said before, my condition was evidently an abnormal one. The capacity for feeling surprise seemed, as in dreams, to be wholly absent. My senses recorded with unusual accuracy every smallest occurrence, but I was able to draw only the simplest deductions.

The Indians soon reached the top of the stairs, and there they halted for a moment. I had not the faintest clue as to their next movement. They appeared to hesitate. They were listening attentively. Then I heard one of them, who by the weight of his soft tread must have been the giant, cross the narrow corridor and enter the room directly overhead — my own little bedroom. But for the insistence of that unaccountable dread I had experienced there in the morning, I should at that very moment have been lying in the bed with the big Indian in the room standing beside me.

For the space of a hundred seconds there was silence, such as might have existed before the birth of sound. It was followed by a long quivering shriek of terror, which rang out into the night, and ended in a short gulp before it had run its full course. At the same moment the other Indian left his place at the head of the stairs, and joined his companion in the bedroom. I heard the “thing” trailing behind him along the floor. A thud followed, as of something heavy falling, and then all became as still and silent as before.

It was at this point that the atmosphere, surcharged all day with the electricity of a fierce storm, found relief in a dancing flash of brilliant lightning simultaneously with a crash of loudest thunder. For five seconds every article in the room was visible to me with amazing distinctness, and through the windows I saw the tree trunks standing in solemn rows. The thunder pealed and echoed across the lake and among the distant islands, and the flood-gates of heaven then opened and let out their rain in streaming torrents.

The drops fell with a swift rushing sound upon the still waters of the lake, which leaped up to meet them, and pattered with the rattle of shot on the leaves of the maples and the roof of the cottage. A moment later, and another flash, even more brilliant and of longer duration than the first, lit up the sky from zenith to horizon, and bathed the room momentarily in dazzling whiteness. I could see the rain glistening on the leaves and branches outside. The wind rose suddenly, and in less than a minute the storm that had been gathering all day burst forth in its full fury.

Above all the noisy voices of the elements, the slightest sounds in the room overhead made themselves heard, and in the few seconds of deep silence that followed the shriek of terror and pain I was aware that the movements had commenced again. The men were leaving the room and approaching the top of the stairs. A short pause, and they began to descend. Behind them, tumbling from step to step, I could hear that trailing “thing” being dragged along. It had become ponderous!

I awaited their approach with a degree of calmness, almost of apathy, which was only explicable on the ground that after a certain point Nature applies her own anæsthetic, and a merciful condition of numbness supervenes. On they came, step by step, nearer and nearer, with the shuffling sound of the burden behind growing louder as they approached.

They were already half-way down the stairs when I was galvanised afresh into a condition of terror by the consideration of a new and horrible possibility. It was the reflection that if another vivid flash of lightning were to come when the shadowy procession was in the room, perhaps when it was actually passing in front of me, I should see everything in detail, and worse, be seen myself! I could only hold my breath and wait — wait while the minutes lengthened into hours, and the procession made its slow progress round the room.

The Indians had reached the foot of the staircase. The form of the huge leader loomed in the doorway of the passage, and the burden with an ominous thud had dropped from the last step to the floor. There was a moment's pause while I saw the Indian turn and stoop to assist his companion. Then the procession moved forward again, entered the room close on my left, and began to move slowly round my side of the table. The leader was already beyond me, and his companion, dragging on the floor behind him the burden, whose confused outline I could dimly make out, was exactly in front of me, when the cavalcade came to a dead halt. At the same moment, with the strange suddenness of thunderstorms, the splash of the rain ceased altogether, and the wind died away into utter silence.

For the space of five seconds my heart seemed to stop beating, and then the worst came. A double flash of lightning lit up the room and its contents with merciless vividness.

The huge Indian leader stood a few feet past me on my right. One leg was stretched forward in the act of taking a step. His immense shoulders were turned toward his companion, and in all their magnificent fierceness I saw the outline of his features. His gaze was directed upon the burden his companion was dragging along the floor; but his profile, with the big aquiline nose, high cheek-bone, straight black hair and bold chin, burnt itself in that brief instant into my brain, never again to fade.

Dwarfish, compared with this gigantic figure, appeared the proportions of the other Indian, who, within twelve inches of my face, was stooping over the thing he was dragging in a position that lent to his person the additional horror of deformity. And the burden, lying upon a sweeping cedar branch which he held and dragged by a long stem, was the body of a white man. The scalp had been neatly lifted, and blood lay in a broad smear upon the cheeks and forehead.

Then, for the first time that night, the terror that had paralysed my muscles and my will lifted its unholy spell from my soul. With a loud cry I stretched out my arms to seize the big Indian by the throat, and, grasping only air, tumbled forward unconscious upon the ground.

I had recognised the body, and *the face was my own!*. . . .

It was bright daylight when a man’s voice recalled me to consciousness. I was lying where I had fallen, and the farmer was standing in the room with the loaves of bread in his hands. The horror of the night was still in my heart, and as the bluff settler helped me to my feet and picked up the rifle which had fallen with me, with many questions and expressions of condolence, I imagine my brief replies were neither self-explanatory nor even intelligible.

That day, after a thorough and fruitless search of the house, I left the island, and went over to spend my last ten days with the farmer; and when the time came for me to leave, the necessary reading had been accomplished, and my nerves had completely recovered their balance.

On the day of my departure the farmer started early in his big boat with my belongings to row to the point, twelve miles distant, where a little steamer ran twice a week for the accommodation of hunters. Late in the afternoon I went off in another direction in my canoe, wishing to see the island once again, where I had been the victim of so strange an experience.

In due course I arrived there, and made a tour of the island. I also made a search of the little house, and it was not without a curious sensation in my heart that I entered the little upstairs bedroom. There seemed nothing unusual.

Just after I re-embarked, I saw a canoe gliding ahead of me around the curve of the island. A canoe was an unusual sight at this time of the year, and this one seemed to have sprung from nowhere. Altering my course a little, I watched it disappear around the next projecting point of rock. It had high curving bows, and there were two Indians in it. I lingered with some excitement, to see if it would appear again round the other side of the island; and in less than five minutes it came into view. There were less than two hundred yards between us, and the Indians, sitting on their haunches, were paddling swiftly in my direction.

I never paddled faster in my life than I did in those next few minutes. When I turned to look again, the Indians had altered their course, and were again circling the island.

The sun was sinking behind the forests on the mainland, and the crimson-coloured clouds of sunset were reflected in the waters of the lake, when I looked round for the last time, and saw the big bark canoe and its two dusky occupants still going round the island. Then the shadows deepened rapidly; the lake grew black, and the night wind blew its first breath in my face as I turned a corner, and a projecting bluff of rock hid from my view both island and canoe.

A CASE OF EAVESDROPPING

JIM SHORTHOUSE WAS the sort of fellow who always made a mess of things. Everything with which his hands or mind came into contact issued from such contact in an unqualified and irremediable state of mess. His college days were a mess: he was twice rusticated. His schooldays were a mess: he went to half a dozen, each passing him on to the next with a worse character and in a more developed state of mess. His early boyhood was the sort of mess that copy-books and dictionaries spell with a big "M," and his babyhood — ugh! was the embodiment of howling, yowling, screaming mess.

At the age of forty, however, there came a change in his troubled life, when he met a girl with half a million in her own right, who consented to marry him, and who very soon succeeded in reducing his most messy existence into a state of comparative order and system.

Certain incidents, important and otherwise, of Jim's life would never have come to be told here but for the fact that in getting into his "messes" and out of them again he succeeded in drawing himself into the atmosphere of peculiar circumstances and strange happenings. He attracted to his path the curious adventures of life as unfailingly as meat attracts flies, and jam wasps. It is to the meat and jam of his life, so to speak, that he owes his experiences; his after-life was all pudding, which attracts nothing but greedy children. With marriage the interest of his life ceased for all but one person, and his path became regular as the sun's instead of erratic as a comet's.

The first experience in order of time that he related to me shows that somewhere latent behind his disarranged nervous system there lay psychic perceptions of an uncommon order. About the age of twenty-two — I think after his second rustication — his father's purse and patience had equally given out, and Jim found himself stranded high and dry in a large American city. High and dry! And the only clothes that had no holes in them safely in the keeping of his uncle's wardrobe.

Careful reflection on a bench in one of the city parks led him to the conclusion that the only thing to do was to persuade the city editor of one of the daily journals that he possessed an observant mind and a ready pen, and that he could “do good work for your paper, sir, as a reporter.” This, then, he did, standing at a most unnatural angle between the editor and the window to conceal the whereabouts of the holes.

“Guess we’ll have to give you a week’s trial,” said the editor, who, ever on the lookout for good chance material, took on shoals of men in that way and retained on the average one man per shoal. Anyhow it gave Jim Shorthouse the wherewithal to sew up the holes and relieve his uncle’s wardrobe of its burden.

Then he went to find living quarters; and in this proceeding his unique characteristics already referred to — what theosophists would call his Karma — began unmistakably to assert themselves, for it was in the house he eventually selected that this sad tale took place.

There are no “diggings” in American cities. The alternatives for small incomes are grim enough — rooms in a boarding-house where meals are served, or in a room-house where no meals are served — not even breakfast. Rich people live in palaces, of course, but Jim had nothing to do with “sich-like.” His horizon was bounded by boarding-houses and room-houses; and, owing to the necessary irregularity of his meals and hours, he took the latter.

It was a large, gaunt-looking place in a side street, with dirty windows and a creaking iron gate, but the rooms were large, and the one he selected and paid for in advance was on the top floor. The landlady looked gaunt and dusty as the house, and quite as old. Her eyes were green and faded, and her features large.

“Waal,” she twanged, with her electrifying Western drawl, “that’s the room, if you like it, and that’s the price I said. Now, if you want it, why, just say so; and if you don’t, why, it don’t hurt me any.”

Jim wanted to shake her, but he feared the clouds of long-accumulated dust in her clothes, and as the price and size of the room suited him, he decided to take it.

“Anyone else on this floor?” he asked.

She looked at him queerly out of her faded eyes before she answered.

“None of my guests ever put such questions to me before,” she said; “but I guess you’re different. Why, there’s no one at all but an old gent that’s stayed here every bit of five years. He’s over thar,” pointing to the end of the passage.

“Ah! I see,” said Shorthouse feebly. “So I’m alone up here?”

“Reckon you are, pretty near,” she twanged out, ending the conversation abruptly by turning her back on her new “guest,” and going slowly and deliberately downstairs.

The newspaper work kept Shorthouse out most of the night. Three times a week he got home at 1 a.m., and three times at 3 a.m. The room proved comfortable enough, and he paid for a second week. His unusual hours had so far prevented his meeting any inmates of the house, and not a sound had been heard from the “old gent” who shared the floor with him. It seemed a very quiet house.

One night, about the middle of the second week, he came home tired after a long day’s work. The lamp that usually stood all night in the hall had burned itself out, and he had to stumble upstairs in the dark. He made considerable noise in doing so, but nobody seemed to be disturbed. The whole house was utterly quiet, and probably everybody was asleep. There were no lights under any of the doors. All was in darkness. It was after two o’clock.

After reading some English letters that had come during the day, and dipping for a few minutes into a book, he became drowsy and got ready for bed. Just as he was about to get in between the sheets, he stopped for a moment and listened. There rose in the night, as he did so, the sound of steps somewhere in the house below. Listening attentively, he heard that it was somebody coming upstairs — a heavy tread, and the owner taking no pains to step quietly. On it came up the stairs, tramp, tramp, tramp — evidently the tread of a big man, and one in something of a hurry.

At once thoughts connected somehow with fire and police flashed through Jim’s brain, but there were no sounds of voices with the steps, and he reflected in the same moment that it could only be the old gentleman keeping late hours and tumbling upstairs in the darkness. He was in the act of turning out the gas and stepping into bed, when the house resumed its former stillness by the footsteps suddenly coming to a dead stop immediately outside his own room.

With his hand on the gas, Shorthouse paused a moment before turning it out to see if the steps would go on again, when he was startled by a loud knocking on his door. Instantly, in obedience to a curious and unexplained instinct, he turned out the light, leaving himself and the room in total darkness.

He had scarcely taken a step across the room to open the door, when a voice from the other side of the wall, so close it almost sounded in his ear, exclaimed in German, “Is that you, father? Come in.”

The speaker was a man in the next room, and the knocking, after all, had not been on his own door, but on that of the adjoining chamber, which he had supposed to be vacant.

Almost before the man in the passage had time to answer in German, “Let me in at once,” Jim heard someone cross the floor and unlock the door. Then it was slammed to with a bang, and there was audible the sound of footsteps about the room, and of chairs being drawn up to a table and knocking against furniture on the way. The men seemed wholly regardless of their neighbour’s comfort, for they made noise enough to waken the dead.

“Serves me right for taking a room in such a cheap hole,” reflected Jim in the darkness. “I wonder whom she’s let the room to!”

The two rooms, the landlady had told him, were originally one. She had put up a thin partition — just a row of boards — to increase her income. The doors were adjacent, and only separated by the massive upright beam between them. When one was opened or shut the other rattled.

With utter indifference to the comfort of the other sleepers in the house, the two Germans had meanwhile commenced to talk both at once and at the top of their voices. They talked emphatically, even angrily. The words “Father” and “Otto” were freely used. Shorthouse understood German, but as he stood listening for the first minute or two, an eavesdropper in spite of himself, it was difficult to make head or tail of the talk, for neither would give way to the other, and the jumble of guttural sounds and unfinished sentences was wholly unintelligible. Then, very suddenly, both voices dropped together; and, after a moment's pause, the deep tones of one of them, who seemed to be the "father," said, with the utmost distinctness —

"You mean, Otto, that you refuse to get it?"

There was a sound of someone shuffling in the chair before the answer came. "I mean that I don't know how to get it. It is so much, father. It is *too* much. A part of it—"

"A part of it!" cried the other, with an angry oath, "a part of it, when ruin and disgrace are already in the house, is worse than useless. If you can get half you can get all, you wretched fool. Half-measures only damn all concerned."

"You told me last time—" began the other firmly, but was not allowed to finish. A succession of horrible oaths drowned his sentence, and the father went on, in a voice vibrating with anger —

"You know she will give you anything. You have only been married a few months. If you ask and give a plausible reason you can get all we want and more. You can ask it temporarily. All will be paid back. It will re-establish the firm, and she will never know what was done with it. With that amount, Otto, you know I can recoup all these terrible losses, and in less than a year all will be repaid. But without it. . . . You must get it, Otto. Hear me, you must. Am I to be arrested for the misuse of trust moneys? Is our honoured name to be cursed and spat on?" The old man choked and stammered in his anger and desperation.

Shorthouse stood shivering in the darkness and listening in spite of himself. The conversation had carried him along with it, and he had been for some reason afraid to let his neighbourhood be known. But at this point he realised that he had listened too long and that he must inform the two men that they could be overheard to every single syllable. So he coughed loudly, and at the same time rattled the handle of his door. It seemed to have no effect, for the voices continued just as loudly as before, the son protesting and the father growing more and more angry. He coughed again persistently, and also contrived purposely in the darkness to tumble against the partition, feeling the thin boards yield easily under his weight, and making a considerable noise in so doing. But the voices went on unconcernedly, and louder than ever. Could it be possible they had not heard?

By this time Jim was more concerned about his own sleep than the morality of overhearing the private scandals of his neighbours, and he went out into the passage and knocked smartly at their door. Instantly, as if by magic, the sounds ceased. Everything dropped into utter silence. There was no light under the door and not a whisper could be heard within. He knocked again, but received no answer.

“Gentlemen,” he began at length, with his lips close to the keyhole and in German, “please do not talk so loud. I can overhear all you say in the next room. Besides, it is very late, and I wish to sleep.”

He paused and listened, but no answer was forthcoming. He turned the handle and found the door was locked. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night except the faint swish of the wind over the skylight and the creaking of a board here and there in the house below. The cold air of a very early morning crept down the passage, and made him shiver. The silence of the house began to impress him disagreeably. He looked behind him and about him, hoping, and yet fearing, that something would break the stillness. The voices still seemed to ring on in his ears; but that sudden silence, when he knocked at the door, affected him far more unpleasantly than the voices, and put strange thoughts in his brain — thoughts he did not like or approve.

Moving stealthily from the door, he peered over the banisters into the space below. It was like a deep vault that might conceal in its shadows anything that was not good. It was not difficult to fancy he saw an indistinct moving to-and-fro below him. Was that a figure sitting on the stairs peering up obliquely at him out of hideous eyes? Was that a sound of whispering and shuffling down there in the dark halls and forsaken landings? Was it something more than the inarticulate murmur of the night?

The wind made an effort overhead, singing over the skylight, and the door behind him rattled and made him start. He turned to go back to his room, and the draught closed the door slowly in his face as if there were someone pressing against it from the other side. When he pushed it open and went in, a hundred shadowy forms seemed to dart swiftly and silently back to their corners and hiding-places. But in the adjoining room the sounds had entirely ceased, and Shorthouse soon crept into bed, and left the house with its inmates, waking or sleeping, to take care of themselves, while he entered the region of dreams and silence.

Next day, strong in the common sense that the sunlight brings, he determined to lodge a complaint against the noisy occupants of the next room and make the landlady request them to modify their voices at such late hours of the night and morning. But it so happened that she was not to be seen that day, and when he returned from the office at midnight it was, of course, too late.

Looking under the door as he came up to bed he noticed that there was no light, and concluded that the Germans were not in. So much the better. He went to sleep about one o'clock, fully decided that if they came up later and woke him with their horrible noises he would not rest till he had roused the landlady and made her reprove them with that authoritative twang, in which every word was like the lash of a metallic whip.

However, there proved to be no need for such drastic measures, for Shorthouse slumbered peacefully all night, and his dreams — chiefly of the fields of grain and flocks of sheep on the far-away farms of his father's estate — were permitted to run their fanciful course unbroken.

Two nights later, however, when he came home tired out, after a difficult day, and wet and blown about by one of the wickedest storms he had ever seen, his dreams — always of the fields and sheep — were not destined to be so undisturbed.

He had already dozed off in that delicious glow that follows the removal of wet clothes and the immediate snuggling under warm blankets, when his consciousness, hovering on the borderland between sleep and waking, was vaguely troubled by a sound that rose indistinctly from the depths of the house, and, between the gusts of wind and rain, reached his ears with an accompanying sense of uneasiness and discomfort. It rose on the night air with some pretence of regularity, dying away again in the roar of the wind to reassert itself distantly in the deep, brief hushes of the storm.

For a few minutes Jim's dreams were coloured only — tinged, as it were, by this impression of fear approaching from somewhere insensibly upon him. His consciousness, at first, refused to be drawn back from that enchanted region where it had wandered, and he did not immediately awaken. But the nature of his dreams changed unpleasantly. He saw the sheep suddenly run huddled together, as though frightened by the neighbourhood of an enemy, while the fields of waving corn became agitated as though some monster were moving uncouthly among the crowded stalks. The sky grew dark, and in his dream an awful sound came somewhere from the clouds. It was in reality the sound downstairs growing more distinct.

Shorthouse shifted uneasily across the bed with something like a groan of distress. The next minute he awoke, and found himself sitting straight up in bed — listening. Was it a nightmare? Had he been dreaming evil dreams, that his flesh crawled and the hair stirred on his head?

The room was dark and silent, but outside the wind howled dismally and drove the rain with repeated assaults against the rattling windows. How nice it would be — the thought flashed through his mind — if all winds, like the west wind, went down with the sun! They made such fiendish noises at night, like the crying of angry voices. In the daytime they had such a different sound. If only ——

Hark! It was no dream after all, for the sound was momentarily growing louder, and its *cause* was coming up the stairs. He found himself speculating feebly what this cause might be, but the sound was still too indistinct to enable him to arrive at any definite conclusion.

The voice of a church clock striking two made itself heard above the wind. It was just about the hour when the Germans had commenced their performance three nights before. Shorthouse made up his mind that if they began it again he would not put up with it for very long. Yet he was already horribly conscious of the difficulty he would have of getting out of bed. The clothes were so warm and comforting against his back. The sound, still steadily coming nearer, had by this time become differentiated from the confused clamour of the elements, and had resolved itself into the footsteps of one or more persons.

“The Germans, hang ‘em!” thought Jim. “But what on earth is the matter with me? I never felt so queer in all my life.”

He was trembling all over, and felt as cold as though he were in a freezing atmosphere. His nerves were steady enough, and he felt no diminution of physical courage, but he was conscious of a curious sense of malaise and trepidation, such as even the most vigorous men have been known to experience when in the first grip of some horrible and deadly disease. As the footsteps approached this feeling of weakness increased. He felt a strange lassitude creeping over him, a sort of exhaustion, accompanied by a growing numbness in the extremities, and a sensation of dreaminess in the head, as if perhaps the consciousness were leaving its accustomed seat in the brain and preparing to act on another plane. Yet, strange to say, as the vitality was slowly withdrawn from his body, his senses seemed to grow more acute.

Meanwhile the steps were already on the landing at the top of the stairs, and Shorthouse, still sitting upright in bed, heard a heavy body brush past his door and along the wall outside, almost immediately afterwards the loud knocking of someone's knuckles on the door of the adjoining room.

Instantly, though so far not a sound had proceeded from within, he heard, through the thin partition, a chair pushed back and a man quickly cross the floor and open the door.

"Ah! it's you," he heard in the son's voice. Had the fellow, then, been sitting silently in there all this time, waiting for his father's arrival? To Shorthouse it came not as a pleasant reflection by any means.

There was no answer to this dubious greeting, but the door was closed quickly, and then there was a sound as if a bag or parcel had been thrown on a wooden table and had slid some distance across it before stopping.

"What's that?" asked the son, with anxiety in his tone.

"You may know before I go," returned the other gruffly. Indeed his voice was more than gruff: it betrayed ill-suppressed passion.

Shorthouse was conscious of a strong desire to stop the conversation before it proceeded any further, but somehow or other his will was not equal to the task, and he could not get out of bed. The conversation went on, every tone and inflexion distinctly audible above the noise of the storm.

In a low voice the father continued. Jim missed some of the words at the beginning of the sentence. It ended with: " . . . but now they've all left, and

I’ve managed to get up to you. You know what I’ve come for.” There was distinct menace in his tone.

“Yes,” returned the other; “I have been waiting.”

“And the money?” asked the father impatiently.

No answer.

“You’ve had three days to get it in, and I’ve contrived to stave off the worst so far — but to-morrow is the end.”

No answer.

“Speak, Otto! What have you got for me? Speak, my son; for God’s sake, tell me.”

There was a moment’s silence, during which the old man’s vibrating accents seemed to echo through the rooms. Then came in a low voice the answer —

“I have nothing.”

“Otto!” cried the other with passion, “nothing!”

“I can get nothing,” came almost in a whisper.

“You lie!” cried the other, in a half-stifled voice. “I swear you lie. Give me the money.”

A chair was heard scraping along the floor. Evidently the men had been sitting over the table, and one of them had risen. Shorthouse heard the bag or parcel drawn across the table, and then a step as if one of the men was crossing to the door.

“Father, what’s in that? I must know,” said Otto, with the first signs of determination in his voice. There must have been an effort on the son’s part to gain possession of the parcel in question, and on the father’s to retain it, for between them it fell to the ground. A curious rattle followed its contact with the floor. Instantly there were sounds of a scuffle. The men were struggling for the possession of the box. The elder man with oaths, and blasphemous imprecations, the other with short gasps that betokened the strength of his efforts. It was of short duration, and the younger man had evidently won, for a minute later was heard his angry exclamation.

“I knew it. Her jewels! You scoundrel, you shall never have them. It is a crime.”

The elder man uttered a short, guttural laugh, which froze Jim’s blood and made his skin creep. No word was spoken, and for the space of ten seconds there was a living silence. Then the air trembled with the sound of a thud, followed immediately by a groan and the crash of a heavy body falling over on to the table. A second later there was a lurching from the table on to the floor and against the partition that separated the rooms. The bed quivered an instant at the shock, but the unholy spell was lifted from his soul and Jim Shorthouse sprang out of bed and across the floor in a single bound. He knew that ghastly murder had been done — the murder by a father of his son.

With shaking fingers but a determined heart he lit the gas, and the first thing in which his eyes corroborated the evidence of his ears was the horrifying detail that the lower portion of the partition bulged unnaturally into his own room. The glaring paper with which it was covered had cracked under the tension and the boards beneath it bent inwards towards him. What hideous load was behind them, he shuddered to think.

All this he saw in less than a second. Since the final lurch against the wall not a sound had proceeded from the room, not even a groan or a foot-step. All was still but the howl of the wind, which to his ears had in it a note of triumphant horror.

Shorthouse was in the act of leaving the room to rouse the house and send for the police — in fact his hand was already on the door-knob — when something in the room arrested his attention. Out of the corner of his eyes he thought he caught sight of something moving. He was sure of it, and turning his eyes in the direction, he found he was not mistaken.

Something was creeping slowly towards him along the floor. It was something dark and serpentine in shape, and it came from the place where the partition bulged. He stooped down to examine it with feelings of intense horror and repugnance, and he discovered that it was moving toward him from the *other side* of the wall. His eyes were fascinated, and for the moment he was unable to move. Silently, slowly, from side to side like a thick worm, it crawled forward into the room beneath his frightened eyes, until at length he could stand it no longer and stretched out his arm to touch it. But at the instant of contact he withdrew his hand with a suppressed scream. It was sluggish — and it was warm! and he saw that his fingers were stained with living crimson.

A second more, and Shorthouse was out in the passage with his hand on the door of the next room. It was locked. He plunged forward with all his weight against it, and, the lock giving way, he fell headlong into a room that was pitch dark and very cold. In a moment he was on his feet again and trying to penetrate the blackness. Not a sound, not a movement. Not even the sense of a presence. It was empty, miserably empty!

Across the room he could trace the outline of a window with rain streaming down the outside, and the blurred lights of the city beyond. But the room was empty, appallingly empty; and so still. He stood there, cold as ice, staring, shivering listening. Suddenly there was a step behind him and a light flashed into the room, and when he turned quickly with his arm up as if to ward off a terrific blow he found himself face to face with the landlady. Instantly the reaction began to set in.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning, and he was standing there with bare feet and striped pyjamas in a small room, which in the merciful light he perceived to be absolutely empty, carpetless, and without a stick of furniture, or even a window-blind. There he stood staring at the disagreeable landlady. And there she stood too, staring and silent, in a black wrapper, her head almost bald, her face white as chalk, shading a sputtering candle with one bony hand and peering over it at him with her blinking green eyes. She looked positively hideous.

"Waal?" she drawled at length, "I heard yer right enough. Guess you couldn't sleep! Or just prowlin' round a bit — is that it?"

The empty room, the absence of all traces of the recent tragedy, the silence, the hour, his striped pyjamas and bare feet — everything together combined to deprive him momentarily of speech. He stared at her blankly without a word.

"Waal?" clanked the awful voice.

"My dear woman," he burst out finally, "there's been something awful—" So far his desperation took him, but no farther. He positively stuck at the substantive.

"Oh! there hasn't been nothin'," she said slowly still peering at him. "I reckon you've only seen and heard what the others did. I never can keep folks on this floor long. Most of 'em catch on sooner or later — that is, the ones that's kind of quick and sensitive. Only you being an Englishman I thought you wouldn't mind. Nothin' really happens; it's only thinkin' like."

Shorthouse was beside himself. He felt ready to pick her up and drop her over the banisters, candle and all.

"Look there," he said, pointing at her within an inch of her blinking eyes with the fingers that had touched the oozing blood; "look there, my good woman. Is that only thinking?"

She stared a minute, as if not knowing what he meant.

"I guess so," she said at length.

He followed her eyes, and to his amazement saw that his fingers were as white as usual, and quite free from the awful stain that had been there ten minutes before. There was no sign of blood. No amount of staring could bring it back. Had he gone out of his mind? Had his eyes and ears played such tricks with him? Had his senses become false and perverted? He dashed past the landlady, out into the passage, and gained his own room in a couple of strides. Whew! . . . the partition no longer bulged. The paper was not torn. There was no creeping, crawling thing on the faded old carpet.

"It's all over now," drawled the metallic voice behind him. "I'm going to bed again."

He turned and saw the landlady slowly going downstairs again, still shading the candle with her hand and peering up at him from time to time as she moved. A black, ugly, unwholesome object, he thought, as she disappeared into the darkness below, and the last flicker of her candle threw a queer-shaped shadow along the wall and over the ceiling.

Without hesitating a moment, Shorthouse threw himself into his clothes and went out of the house. He preferred the storm to the horrors of that top floor, and he walked the streets till daylight. In the evening he told the landlady he would leave next day, in spite of her assurances that nothing more would happen.

"It never comes back," she said— "that is, not after he's killed."

Shorthouse gasped.

“You gave me a lot for my money,” he growled.

“Waal, it aren’t my show,” she drawled. “I’m no spirit medium. You take chances. Some’ll sleep right along and never hear nothin’. Others, like yourself, are different and get the whole thing.”

“Who’s the old gentleman? — does he hear it?” asked Jim.

“There’s no old gentleman at all,” she answered coolly. “I just told you that to make you feel easy like in case you did hear anythin’. You were all alone on the floor.”

“Say now,” she went on, after a pause in which Shorthouse could think of nothing to say but unpublishable things, “say now, do tell, did you feel sort of cold when the show was on, sort of tired and weak, I mean, as if you might be going to die?”

“How can I say?” he answered savagely; “what I felt God only knows.”

“Waal, but He won’t tell,” she drawled out. “Only I was wonderin’ how you really did feel, because the man who had that room last was found one morning in bed—”

“In bed?”

“He was dead. He was the one before you. Oh! You don’t need to get rattled so. You’re all right. And it all really happened, they do say. This house used to be a private residence some twenty-five years ago, and a German family of the name of Steinhardt lived here. They had a big business in Wall Street, and stood ‘way up in things.”

“Ah!” said her listener.

“Oh yes, they did, right at the top, till one fine day it all bust and the old man skipped with the boodle—”

“Skipped with the boodle?”

“That’s so,” she said; “got clear away with all the money, and the son was found dead in his house, committed soocide it was thought. Though there was some as said he couldn’t have stabbed himself and fallen in that position. They said he was murdered. The father died in prison. They tried to fasten the murder on him, but there was no motive, or no evidence, or no somethin'. I forget now."

"Very pretty," said Shorthouse.

"I'll show you somethin' mighty queer any-ways," she drawled, "if you'll come upstairs a minute. I've heard the steps and voices lots of times; they don't pheaze me any. I'd just as lief hear so many dogs barkin'. You'll find the whole story in the newspapers if you look it up — not what goes on here, but the story of the Germans. My house would be ruined if they told all, and I'd sue for damages."

They reached the bedroom, and the woman went in and pulled up the edge of the carpet where Shorthouse had seen the blood soaking in the previous night.

"Look thar, if you feel like it," said the old hag. Stooping down, he saw a dark, dull stain in the boards that corresponded exactly to the shape and position of the blood as he had seen it.

That night he slept in a hotel, and the following day sought new quarters. In the newspapers on file in his office after a long search he found twenty years back the detailed story, substantially as the woman had said, of Steinhardt & Co.'s failure, the absconding and subsequent arrest of the senior partner, and the suicide, or murder, of his son Otto. The landlady's room-house had formerly been their private residence.

KEEPING HIS PROMISE

IT WAS ELEVEN o'clock at night, and young Marriott was locked into his room, cramming as hard as he could cram. He was a "Fourth Year Man" at Edinburgh University and he had been ploughed for this particular examination so often that his parents had positively declared they could no longer supply the funds to keep him there.

His rooms were cheap and dingy, but it was the lecture fees that took the money. So Marriott pulled himself together at last and definitely made up his mind that he would pass or die in the attempt, and for some weeks now he had been reading as hard as mortal man can read. He was trying to make up for lost time and money in a way that showed conclusively he did not understand the value of either. For no ordinary man — and Marriott was in every sense an ordinary man — can afford to drive the mind as he had lately been driving his, without sooner or later paying the cost.

Among the students he had few friends or acquaintances, and these few had promised not to disturb him at night, knowing he was at last reading in earnest. It was, therefore, with feelings a good deal stronger than mere surprise that he heard his door-bell ring on this particular night and realised that he was to have a visitor. Some men would simply have muffled the bell and gone on quietly with their work. But Marriott was not this sort. He was nervous. It would have bothered and pecked at his mind all night long not to know who the visitor was and what he wanted. The only thing to do, therefore, was to let him in — and out again — as quickly as possible.

The landlady went to bed at ten o'clock punctually, after which hour nothing would induce her to pretend she heard the bell, so Marriott jumped up from his books with an exclamation that augured ill for the reception of his caller, and prepared to let him in with his own hand.

The streets of Edinburgh town were very still at this late hour — it was late for Edinburgh — and in the quiet neighbourhood of F —— Street, where Marriott lived on the third floor, scarcely a sound broke the silence. As he crossed the floor, the bell rang a second time, with unnecessary clamour, and he unlocked the door and passed into the little hallway with considerable wrath and annoyance in his heart at the insolence of the double interruption.

“The fellows all know I’m reading for this exam. Why in the world do they come to bother me at such an unearthly hour?”

The inhabitants of the building, with himself, were medical students, general students, poor Writers to the Signet, and some others whose vocations were perhaps not so obvious. The stone staircase, dimly lighted at each floor by a gas-jet that would not turn above a certain height, wound down to the level of the street with no pretence at carpet or railing. At some levels it was cleaner than at others. It depended on the landlady of the particular level.

The acoustic properties of a spiral staircase seem to be peculiar. Marriott, standing by the open door, book in hand, thought every moment the owner of the footsteps would come into view. The sound of the boots was so close and so loud that they seemed to travel disproportionately in advance of their cause. Wondering who it could be, he stood ready with all manner of sharp greetings for the man who dared thus to disturb his work. But the man did not appear. The steps sounded almost under his nose, yet no one was visible.

A sudden queer sensation of fear passed over him — a faintness and a shiver down the back. It went, however, almost as soon as it came, and he was just debating whether he would call aloud to his invisible visitor, or slam the door and return to his books, when the cause of the disturbance turned the corner very slowly and came into view.

It was a stranger. He saw a youngish man short of figure and very broad. His face was the colour of a piece of chalk and the eyes, which were very bright, had heavy lines underneath them. Though the cheeks and chin were unshaven and the general appearance unkempt, the man was evidently a gentleman, for he was well dressed and bore himself with a certain air. But, strangest of all, he wore no hat, and carried none in his hand; and although rain had been falling steadily all the evening, he appeared to have neither overcoat nor umbrella.

A hundred questions sprang up in Marriott’s mind and rushed to his lips, chief among which was something like “Who in the world are you?” and

"What in the name of heaven do you come to me for?" But none of these questions found time to express themselves in words, for almost at once the caller turned his head a little so that the gas light in the hall fell upon his features from a new angle. Then in a flash Marriott recognised him.

"Field! Man alive! Is it you?" he gasped.

The Fourth Year Man was not lacking in intuition, and he perceived at once that here was a case for delicate treatment. He divined, without any actual process of thought, that the catastrophe often predicted had come at last, and that this man's father had turned him out of the house. They had been at a private school together years before, and though they had hardly met once since, the news had not failed to reach him from time to time with considerable detail, for the family lived near his own and between certain of the sisters there was great intimacy. Young Field had gone wild later, he remembered hearing about it all — drink, a woman, opium, or something of the sort — he could not exactly call to mind.

"Come in," he said at once, his anger vanishing. "There's been something wrong, I can see. Come in, and tell me all about it and perhaps I can help —" He hardly knew what to say, and stammered a lot more besides. The dark side of life, and the horror of it, belonged to a world that lay remote from his own select little atmosphere of books and dreamings. But he had a man's heart for all that.

He led the way across the hall, shutting the front door carefully behind him, and noticed as he did so that the other, though certainly sober, was unsteady on his legs, and evidently much exhausted. Marriott might not be able to pass his examinations, but he at least knew the symptoms of starvation — acute starvation, unless he was much mistaken — when they stared him in the face.

"Come along," he said cheerfully, and with genuine sympathy in his voice. "I'm glad to see you. I was going to have a bite of something to eat, and you're just in time to join me."

The other made no audible reply, and shuffled so feebly with his feet that Marriott took his arm by way of support. He noticed for the first time that the clothes hung on him with pitiful looseness. The broad frame was literally hardly more than a frame. He was as thin as a skeleton. But, as he touched him, the sensation of faintness and dread returned. It only lasted a moment, and then passed off, and he ascribed it not unnaturally to the distress and shock of seeing a former friend in such a pitiful plight.

"Better let me guide you. It's shamefully dark — this hall. I'm always complaining," he said lightly, recognising by the weight upon his arm that the guidance was sorely needed, "but the old cat never does anything except promise." He led him to the sofa, wondering all the time where he had come from and how he had found out the address. It must be at least seven years since those days at the private school when they used to be such close friends.

"Now, if you'll forgive me for a minute," he said, "I'll get supper ready — such as it is. And don't bother to talk. Just take it easy on the sofa. I see you're dead tired. You can tell me about it afterwards, and we'll make plans."

The other sat down on the edge of the sofa and stared in silence, while Marriott got out the brown loaf, scones, and huge pot of marmalade that Edinburgh students always keep in their cupboards. His eyes shone with a brightness that suggested drugs, Marriott thought, stealing a glance at him from behind the cupboard door. He did not like yet to take a full square look. The fellow was in a bad way, and it would have been so like an examination to stare and wait for explanations. Besides, he was evidently almost too exhausted to speak. So, for reasons of delicacy — and for another reason as well which he could not exactly formulate to himself — he let his visitor rest apparently unnoticed, while he busied himself with the supper. He lit the spirit lamp to make cocoa, and when the water was boiling he drew up the table with the good things to the sofa, so that Field need not have even the trouble of moving to a chair.

"Now, let's tuck in," he said, "and afterwards we'll have a pipe and a chat. I'm reading for an exam, you know, and I always have something about this time. It's jolly to have a companion."

He looked up and caught his guest's eyes directed straight upon his own. An involuntary shudder ran through him from head to foot. The face opposite him was deadly white and wore a dreadful expression of pain and mental suffering.

"By Gad!" he said, jumping up, "I quite forgot. I've got some whisky somewhere. What an ass I am. I never touch it myself when I'm working like this."

He went to the cupboard and poured out a stiff glass which the other swallowed at a single gulp and without any water. Marriott watched him while he drank it, and at the same time noticed something else as well — Field's coat was all over dust, and on one shoulder was a bit of cobweb. It was perfectly dry; Field arrived on a soaking wet night without hat, umbrella, or overcoat, and yet perfectly dry, even dusty. Therefore he had been under cover. What did it all mean? Had he been hiding in the building? . . .

It was very strange. Yet he volunteered nothing; and Marriott had pretty well made up his mind by this time that he would not ask any questions until he had eaten and slept. Food and sleep were obviously what the poor devil needed most and first — he was pleased with his powers of ready diagnosis — and it would not be fair to press him till he had recovered a bit.

They ate their supper together while the host carried on a running one-sided conversation, chiefly about himself and his exams and his "old cat" of a landlady, so that the guest need not utter a single word unless he really wished to — which he evidently did not! But, while he toyed with his food, feeling no desire to eat, the other ate voraciously. To see a hungry man devour cold scones, stale oatcake, and brown bread laden with marmalade was a revelation to this inexperienced student who had never known what it was to be without at least three meals a day. He watched in spite of himself, wondering why the fellow did not choke in the process.

But Field seemed to be as sleepy as he was hungry. More than once his head dropped and he ceased to masticate the food in his mouth. Marriott had positively to shake him before he would go on with his meal. A stronger emotion will overcome a weaker, but this struggle between the sting of real hunger and the magical opiate of overpowering sleep was a curious sight to the student, who watched it with mingled astonishment and alarm. He had heard of the pleasure it was to feed hungry men, and watch them eat, but he had never actually witnessed it, and he had no idea it was like this. Field ate like an animal — gobbled, stuffed, gorged. Marriott forgot his reading, and began to feel something very much like a lump in his throat.

“Afraid there’s been awfully little to offer you, old man,” he managed to blurt out when at length the last scone had disappeared, and the rapid, one-sided meal was at an end. Field still made no reply, for he was almost asleep in his seat. He merely looked up wearily and gratefully.

“Now you must have some sleep, you know,” he continued, “or you’ll go to pieces. I shall be up all night reading for this blessed exam. You’re more than welcome to my bed. To-morrow we’ll have a late breakfast and — and see what can be done — and make plans — I’m awfully good at making plans, you know,” he added with an attempt at lightness.

Field maintained his “dead sleepy” silence, but appeared to acquiesce, and the other led the way into the bedroom, apologising as he did so to this half-starved son of a baronet — whose own home was almost a palace — for the size of the room. The weary guest, however, made no pretence of thanks or politeness. He merely steadied himself on his friend’s arm as he staggered across the room, and then, with all his clothes on, dropped his exhausted body on the bed. In less than a minute he was to all appearances sound asleep.

For several minutes Marriott stood in the open door and watched him; praying devoutly that he might never find himself in a like predicament, and then fell to wondering what he would do with his unbidden guest on the morrow. But he did not stop long to think, for the call of his books was imperative, and happen what might, he must see to it that he passed that examination.

Having again locked the door into the hall, he sat down to his books and resumed his notes on *materia medica* where he had left off when the bell rang. But it was difficult for some time to concentrate his mind on the subject. His thoughts kept wandering to the picture of that white-faced, strange-eyed fellow, starved and dirty, lying in his clothes and boots on the bed. He recalled their schooldays together before they had drifted apart, and how they had vowed eternal friendship — and all the rest of it. And now! What horrible straits to be in. How could any man let the love of dissipation take such hold upon him?

But one of their vows together Marriott, it seemed, had completely forgotten. Just now, at any rate, it lay too far in the background of his memory to be recalled.

Through the half-open door — the bedroom led out of the sitting-room and had no other door — came the sound of deep, long-drawn breathing, the regular, steady breathing of a tired man, so tired that, even to listen to it made Marriott almost want to go to sleep himself.

“He needed it,” reflected the student, “and perhaps it came only just in time!”

Perhaps so; for outside the bitter wind from across the Forth howled cruelly and drove the rain in cold streams against the window-panes, and down the deserted streets. Long before Marriott settled down again properly to his reading, he heard distantly, as it were, through the sentences of the book, the heavy, deep breathing of the sleeper in the next room.

A couple of hours later, when he yawned and changed his books, he still heard the breathing, and went cautiously up to the door to look round.

At first the darkness of the room must have deceived him, or else his eyes were confused and dazzled by the recent glare of the reading lamp. For a minute or two he could make out nothing at all but dark lumps of furniture, the mass of the chest of drawers by the wall, and the white patch where his bath stood in the centre of the floor.

Then the bed came slowly into view. And on it he saw the outline of the sleeping body gradually take shape before his eyes, growing up strangely into the darkness, till it stood out in marked relief — the long black form against the white counterpane.

He could hardly help smiling. Field had not moved an inch. He watched him a moment or two and then returned to his books. The night was full of the singing voices of the wind and rain. There was no sound of traffic; no hansoms clattered over the cobbles, and it was still too early for the milk carts. He worked on steadily and conscientiously, only stopping now and again to change a book, or to sip some of the poisonous stuff that kept him awake and made his brain so active, and on these occasions Field’s breathing was always distinctly audible in the room. Outside, the storm continued to howl, but inside the house all was stillness. The shade of the reading lamp threw all the light upon the littered table, leaving the other end of the room in comparative darkness. The bedroom door was exactly opposite him where he sat. There was nothing to disturb the worker, nothing but an occasional rush of wind against the windows, and a slight pain in his arm.

This pain, however, which he was unable to account for, grew once or twice very acute. It bothered him; and he tried to remember how, and when, he could have bruised himself so severely, but without success.

At length the page before him turned from yellow to grey, and there were sounds of wheels in the street below. It was four o'clock. Marriott leaned back and yawned prodigiously. Then he drew back the curtains. The storm had subsided and the Castle Rock was shrouded in mist. With another yawn he turned away from the dreary outlook and prepared to sleep the remaining four hours till breakfast on the sofa. Field was still breathing heavily in the next room, and he first tip-toed across the floor to take another look at him.

Peering cautiously round the half-opened door his first glance fell upon the bed now plainly discernible in the grey light of morning. He stared hard. Then he rubbed his eyes. Then he rubbed his eyes again and thrust his head farther round the edge of the door. With fixed eyes he stared harder still, and harder.

But it made no difference at all. He was staring into an empty room.

The sensation of fear he had felt when Field first appeared upon the scene returned suddenly, but with much greater force. He became conscious, too, that his left arm was throbbing violently and causing him great pain. He stood wondering, and staring, and trying to collect his thoughts. He was trembling from head to foot.

By a great effort of the will he left the support of the door and walked forward boldly into the room.

There, upon the bed, was the impress of a body, where Field had lain and slept. There was the mark of the head on the pillow, and the slight indentation at the foot of the bed where the boots had rested on the counterpane. And there, plainer than ever — for he was closer to it — was *the breathing*!

Marriott tried to pull himself together. With a great effort he found his voice and called his friend aloud by name!

“Field! Is that you? Where are you?”

There was no reply; but the breathing continued without interruption, coming directly from the bed. His voice had such an unfamiliar sound that Marriott did not care to repeat his questions, but he went down on his knees and examined the bed above and below, pulling the mattress off finally, and taking the coverings away separately one by one. But though the sounds continued there was no visible sign of Field, nor was there any space in which a human being, however small, could have concealed itself. He pulled the bed out from the wall, but the sound *stayed where it was*. It did not move with the bed.

Marriott, finding self-control a little difficult in his weary condition, at once set about a thorough search of the room. He went through the cupboard, the chest of drawers, the little alcove where the clothes hung — everything. But there was no sign of anyone. The small window near the ceiling was closed; and, anyhow, was not large enough to let a cat pass. The sitting-room door was locked on the inside; he could not have got out that way. Curious thoughts began to trouble Marriott's mind, bringing in their train unwelcome sensations. He grew more and more excited; he searched the bed again till it resembled the scene of a pillow fight; he searched both rooms, knowing all the time it was useless, — and then he searched again. A cold perspiration broke out all over his body; and the sound of heavy breathing, all this time, never ceased to come from the corner where Field had lain down to sleep.

Then he tried something else. He pushed the bed back exactly into its original position — and himself lay down upon it just where his guest had lain. But the same instant he sprang up again in a single bound. The breathing was close beside him, almost on his cheek, and between him and the wall! Not even a child could have squeezed into the space.

He went back into his sitting-room, opened the windows, welcoming all the light and air possible, and tried to think the whole matter over quietly and clearly. Men who read too hard, and slept too little, he knew were sometimes troubled with very vivid hallucinations. Again he calmly reviewed every incident of the night; his accurate sensations; the vivid details; the emotions stirred in him; the dreadful feast — no single hallucination could ever combine all these and cover so long a period of time. But with less satisfaction he thought of the recurring faintness, and curious sense of horror that had once or twice come over him, and then of the violent pains in his arm. These were quite unaccountable.

Moreover, now that he began to analyse and examine, there was one other thing that fell upon him like a sudden revelation: *During the whole time Field had not actually uttered a single word!* Yet, as though in mockery upon his reflections, there came ever from that inner room the sound of the breathing, long-drawn, deep, and regular. The thing was incredible. It was absurd.

Haunted by visions of brain fever and insanity, Marriott put on his cap and macintosh and left the house. The morning air on Arthur's Seat would blow the cobwebs from his brain; the scent of the heather, and above all, the sight of the sea. He roamed over the wet slopes above Holyrood for a couple of hours, and did not return until the exercise had shaken some of the horror out of his bones, and given him a ravening appetite into the bargain.

As he entered he saw that there was another man in the room, standing against the window with his back to the light. He recognised his fellow-student Greene, who was reading for the same examination.

"Read hard all night, Marriott," he said, "and thought I'd drop in here to compare notes and have some breakfast. You're out early?" he added, by way of a question. Marriott said he had a headache and a walk had helped it, and Greene nodded and said "Ah!" But when the girl had set the steaming porridge on the table and gone out again, he went on with rather a forced tone, "Didn't know you had any friends who drank, Marriott?"

This was obviously tentative, and Marriott replied drily that he did not know it either.

"Sounds just as if some chap were 'sleeping it off' in there, doesn't it, though?" persisted the other, with a nod in the direction of the bedroom, and looking curiously at his friend. The two men stared steadily at each other for several seconds, and then Marriott said earnestly —

"Then you hear it too, thank God!"

"Of course I hear it. The door's open. Sorry if I wasn't meant to."

"Oh, I don't mean that," said Marriott, lowering his voice. "But I'm awfully relieved. Let me explain. Of course, if you hear it too, then it's all right; but really it frightened me more than I can tell you. I thought I was going to have brain fever, or something, and you know what a lot depends on this exam. It always begins with sounds, or visions, or some sort of beastly hallucination, and I—"

"Rot!" ejaculated the other impatiently. "What *are* you talking about?"

"Now, listen to me, Greene," said Marriott, as calmly as he could, for the breathing was still plainly audible, "and I'll tell you what I mean, only don't interrupt." And thereupon he related exactly what had happened during the night, telling everything, even down to the pain in his arm. When it was over he got up from the table and crossed the room.

"You hear the breathing now plainly, don't you?" he said. Greene said he did. "Well, come with me, and we'll search the room together." The other, however, did not move from his chair.

"I've been in already," he said sheepishly; "I heard the sounds and thought it was you. The door was ajar — so I went in."

Marriott made no comment, but pushed the door open as wide as it would go. As it opened, the sound of breathing grew more and more distinct.

"*Someone* must be in there," said Greene under his breath.

"*Someone* is in there, but *where*?" said Marriott. Again he urged his friend to go in with him. But Greene refused point-blank; said he had been in once and had searched the room and there was nothing there. He would not go in again for a good deal.

They shut the door and retired into the other room to talk it all over with many pipes. Greene questioned his friend very closely, but without illuminating result, since questions cannot alter facts.

"The only thing that ought to have a proper, a logical, explanation is the pain in my arm," said Marriott, rubbing that member with an attempt at a smile. "It hurts so infernally and aches all the way up. I can't remember bruising it, though."

"Let me examine it for you," said Greene. "I'm awfully good at bones in spite of the examiners' opinion to the contrary." It was a relief to play the fool a bit, and Marriott took his coat off and rolled up his sleeve.

"By George, though, I'm bleeding!" he exclaimed. "Look here! What on earth's this?"

On the forearm, quite close to the wrist, was a thin red line. There was a tiny drop of apparently fresh blood on it. Greene came over and looked closely at it for some minutes. Then he sat back in his chair, looking curiously at his friend's face.

"You've scratched yourself without knowing it," he said presently.

"There's no sign of a bruise. It must be something else that made the arm ache."

Marriott sat very still, staring silently at his arm as though the solution of the whole mystery lay there actually written upon the skin.

"What's the matter? I see nothing very strange about a scratch," said Greene, in an unconvincing sort of voice. "It was your cuff links probably. Last night in your excitement—"

But Marriott, white to the very lips, was trying to speak. The sweat stood in great beads on his forehead. At last he leaned forward close to his friend's face.

"Look," he said, in a low voice that shook a little. "Do you see that red mark? I mean *underneath* what you call the scratch?"

Greene admitted he saw something or other, and Marriott wiped the place clean with his handkerchief and told him to look again more closely.

"Yes, I see," returned the other, lifting his head after a moment's careful inspection. "It looks like an old scar."

"It *is* an old scar," whispered Marriott, his lips trembling. "*Now* it all comes back to me."

"All what?" Greene fidgeted on his chair. He tried to laugh, but without success. His friend seemed bordering on collapse.

"Hush! Be quiet, and — I'll tell you," he said. "*Field made that scar.*"

For a whole minute the two men looked each other full in the face without speaking.

"Field made that scar!" repeated Marriott at length in a louder voice.

"Field! You mean — last night?"

"No, not last night. Years ago — at school, with his knife. And I made a scar in his arm with mine." Marriott was talking rapidly now.

"We exchanged drops of blood in each other's cuts. He put a drop into my arm and I put one into his—"

"In the name of heaven, what for?"

"It was a boys' compact. We made a sacred pledge, a bargain. I remember it all perfectly now. We had been reading some dreadful book and we swore to appear to one another — I mean, whoever died first swore to show himself to the other. And we sealed the compact with each other's blood. I remember it all so well — the hot summer afternoon in the playground, seven years ago — and one of the masters caught us and confiscated the knives — and I have never thought of it again to this day—"

"And you mean—" stammered Greene.

But Marriott made no answer. He got up and crossed the room and lay down wearily upon the sofa, hiding his face in his hands.

Greene himself was a bit non-plussed. He left his friend alone for a little while, thinking it all over again. Suddenly an idea seemed to strike him. He went over to where Marriott still lay motionless on the sofa and roused him. In any case it was better to face the matter, whether there was an explanation or not. Giving in was always the silly exit.

"I say, Marriott," he began, as the other turned his white face up to him. "There's no good being so upset about it. I mean — if it's all an hallucination we know what to do. And if it isn't — well, we know what to think, don't we?"

"I suppose so. But it frightens me horribly for some reason," returned his friend in a hushed voice. "And that poor devil—"

"But, after all, if the worst is true and — and that chap *has* kept his promise — well, he has, that's all, isn't it?"

Marriott nodded.

"There's only one thing that occurs to me," Greene went on, "and that is, are you quite sure that — that he really ate like that — I mean that he actually *ate anything at all*?" he finished, blurting out all his thought.

Marriott stared at him for a moment and then said he could easily make certain. He spoke quietly. After the main shock no lesser surprise could affect him.

"I put the things away myself," he said, "after we had finished. They are on the third shelf in that cupboard. No one's touched 'em since."

He pointed without getting up, and Greene took the hint and went over to look.

"Exactly," he said, after a brief examination; "just as I thought. It was partly hallucination, at any rate. The things haven't been touched. Come and see for yourself."

Together they examined the shelf. There was the brown loaf, the plate of stale scones, the oatcake, all untouched. Even the glass of whisky Marriott had poured out stood there with the whisky still in it.

"You were feeding — no one," said Greene "Field ate and drank nothing. He was not there at all!"

"But the breathing?" urged the other in a low voice, staring with a dazed expression on his face.

Greene did not answer. He walked over to the bedroom, while Marriott followed him with his eyes. He opened the door, and listened. There was no need for words. The sound of deep, regular breathing came floating through the air. There was no hallucination about that, at any rate. Marriott could hear it where he stood on the other side of the room.

Greene closed the door and came back. "There's only one thing to do," he declared with decision. "Write home and find out about him, and meanwhile come and finish your reading in my rooms. I've got an extra bed."

"Agreed," returned the Fourth Year Man; "there's no hallucination about that exam; I must pass that whatever happens."

And this was what they did.

It was about a week later when Marriott got the answer from his sister. Part of it he read out to Greene —

"It is curious," she wrote, "that in your letter you should have enquired after Field. It seems a terrible thing, but you know only a short while ago Sir John's patience became exhausted, and he turned him out of the house, they say without a penny. Well, what do you think? He has killed himself. At least, it looks like suicide. Instead of leaving the house, he went down into the cellar and simply starved himself to death. . . . They're trying to suppress it, of course, but I heard it all from my maid, who got it from their footman. . . . They found the body on the 14th and the doctor said he had died about twelve hours before. . . . He was dreadfully thin. . . ."

"Then he died on the 13th," said Greene.

Marriott nodded.

"That's the very night he came to see you."

Marriott nodded again.

WITH INTENT TO STEAL

TO SLEEP IN a lonely barn when the best bedrooms in the house were at our disposal, seemed, to say the least, unnecessary, and I felt that some explanation was due to our host.

But Shorthouse, I soon discovered, had seen to all that; our enterprise would be tolerated, not welcomed, for the master kept this sort of thing down with a firm hand. And then, how little I could get this man, Shorthouse, to tell me. There was much I wanted to ask and hear, but he surrounded himself with impossible barriers. It was ludicrous; he was surely asking a good deal of me, and yet he would give so little in return, and his reason — that it was for my good — may have been perfectly true, but did not bring me any comfort in its train. He gave me sops now and then, however, to keep up my curiosity, till I soon was aware that there were growing up side by side within me a genuine interest and an equally genuine fear; and something of both these is probably necessary to all real excitement.

The barn in question was some distance from the house, on the side of the stables, and I had passed it on several of my journeyings to and fro wondering at its forlorn and untarred appearance under a régime where everything was so spick and span; but it had never once occurred to me as possible that I should come to spend a night under its roof with a comparative stranger, and undergo there an experience belonging to an order of things I had always rather ridiculed and despised.

At the moment I can only partially recall the process by which Shorthouse persuaded me to lend him my company. Like myself, he was a guest in this autumn house-party, and where there were so many to chatter and to chaff, I think his taciturnity of manner had appealed to me by contrast, and that I wished to repay something of what I owed. There was, no doubt, flattery in it as well, for he was more than twice my age, a man of amazingly wide experience, an explorer of all the world’s corners where danger lurked, and — most subtle flattery of all — by far the best shot in the whole party, our host included.

At first, however, I held out a bit.

“But surely this story you tell,” I said, “has the parentage common to all such tales — a superstitious heart and an imaginative brain — and has grown now by frequent repetition into an authentic ghost story? Besides, this head gardener of half a century ago,” I added, seeing that he still went on cleaning his gun in silence, “who was he, and what positive information have you about him beyond the fact that he was found hanging from the rafters, dead?”

“He was no mere head gardener, this man who passed as such,” he replied without looking up, “but a fellow of splendid education who used this curious disguise for his own purposes. Part of this very barn, of which he always kept the key, was found to have been fitted up as a complete laboratory, with athanor, alembic, cucurbite, and other appliances, some of which the master destroyed at once — perhaps for the best — and which I have only been able to guess at—”

“Black Arts,” I laughed.

“Who knows?” he rejoined quietly. “The man undoubtedly possessed knowledge — dark knowledge — that was most unusual and dangerous, and I can discover no means by which he came to it — no ordinary means, that is. But I *have* found many facts in the case which point to the exercise of a most desperate and unscrupulous will; and the strange disappearances in the neighbourhood, as well as the bones found buried in the kitchen garden, though never actually traced to him, seem to me full of dreadful suggestion.”

I laughed again, a little uncomfortably perhaps, and said it reminded one of the story of Giles de Rays, maréchal of France, who was said to have killed and tortured to death in a few years no less than one hundred and sixty women and children for the purposes of necromancy, and who was executed for his crimes at Nantes. But Shorthouse would not “rise,” and only returned to his subject.

“His suicide seems to have been only just in time to escape arrest,” he said.

“A magician of no high order then,” I observed sceptically, “if suicide was his only way of evading the country police.”

“The police of London and St. Petersburg rather,” returned Shorthouse; “for the headquarters of this pretty company was somewhere in Russia, and his apparatus all bore the marks of the most skilful foreign make. A Russian woman then employed in the household — governess, or something — vanished, too, about the same time and was never caught. She was no doubt the cleverest of the lot. And, remember, the object of this appalling group was not mere vulgar gain, but a kind of knowledge that called for the highest qualities of courage and intellect in the seekers.”

I admit I was impressed by the man’s conviction of voice and manner, for there is something very compelling in the force of an earnest man’s belief, though I still affected to sneer politely.

“But, like most Black Magicians, the fellow only succeeded in compassing his own destruction — that of his tools, rather, and of escaping himself.”

“So that he might better accomplish his objects *elsewhere and otherwise*,” said Shorthouse, giving, as he spoke, the most minute attention to the cleaning of the lock.

“Elsewhere and otherwise,” I gasped.

“As if the shell he left hanging from the rafter in the barn in no way impeded the man’s spirit from continuing his dreadful work under new conditions,” he added quietly, without noticing my interruption. “The idea being that he sometimes revisits the garden and the barn, chiefly the barn —”

“The barn!” I exclaimed; “for what purpose?”

“Chiefly the barn,” he finished, as if he had not heard me, “that is, when there is anybody in it.”

I stared at him without speaking, for there was a wonder in me how he would add to this.

“When he wants fresh material, that is — he comes to steal from the living.”

“Fresh material!” I repeated aghast. “To steal from the living!” Even then, in broad daylight, I was foolishly conscious of a creeping sensation at the roots of my hair, as if a cold breeze were passing over my skull.

"The strong vitality of the living is what this sort of creature is supposed to need most," he went on imperturbably, "and where he has worked and thought and struggled before is the easiest place for him to get it in. The former conditions are in some way more easily reconstructed—" He stopped suddenly, and devoted all his attention to the gun. "It's difficult to explain, you know, rather," he added presently, "and, besides, it's much better that you should not know till afterwards."

I made a noise that was the beginning of a score of questions and of as many sentences, but it got no further than a mere noise, and Shorthouse, of course, stepped in again.

"Your scepticism," he added, "is one of the qualities that induce me to ask you to spend the night there with me."

"In those days," he went on, in response to my urging for more information, "the family were much abroad, and often travelled for years at a time. This man was invaluable in their absence. His wonderful knowledge of horticulture kept the gardens — French, Italian, English — in perfect order. He had carte blanche in the matter of expense, and of course selected all his own underlings. It was the sudden, unexpected return of the master that surprised the amazing stories of the countryside before the fellow, with all his cleverness, had time to prepare or conceal."

"But is there no evidence, no more recent evidence, to show that something is likely to happen if we sit up there?" I asked, pressing him yet further, and I think to his liking, for it showed at least that I was interested. "Has anything happened there lately, for instance?"

Shorthouse glanced up from the gun he was cleaning so assiduously, and the smoke from his pipe curled up into an odd twist between me and the black beard and oriental, sun-tanned face. The magnetism of his look and expression brought more sense of conviction to me than I had felt hitherto, and I realised that there had been a sudden little change in my attitude and that I was now much more inclined to go in for the adventure with him. At least, I thought, with such a man, one would be safe in any emergency; for he is determined, resourceful, and to be depended upon.

"There's the point," he answered slowly; "for there has apparently been a fresh outburst — an attack almost, it seems, — quite recently. There is evidence, of course, plenty of it, or I should not feel the interest I do feel, but—" he hesitated a moment, as though considering how much he ought to let me know, "but the fact is that three men this summer, on separate occasions, who have gone into that barn after nightfall, have been *accosted* —"

"Accosted?" I repeated, betrayed into the interruption by his choice of so singular a word.

"And one of the stablemen — a recent arrival and quite ignorant of the story — who had to go in there late one night, saw a dark substance hanging down from one of the rafters, and when he climbed up, shaking all over, to cut it down — for he said he felt sure it was a corpse — the knife passed through nothing but air, and he heard a sound up under the eaves as if someone were laughing. Yet, while he slashed away, and afterwards too, the thing went on swinging there before his eyes and turning slowly with its own weight, like a huge joint on a spit. The man declares, too, that it had a large bearded face, and that the mouth was open and drawn down like the mouth of a hanged man."

"Can we question this fellow?"

"He's gone — gave notice at once, but not before I had questioned him myself very closely."

"Then this was quite recent?" I said, for I knew Shorthouse had not been in the house more than a week.

"Four days ago," he replied. "But, more than that, only three days ago a couple of men were in there together in full daylight when one of them suddenly turned deadly faint. He said that he felt an overmastering impulse to hang himself; and he looked about for a rope and was furious when his companion tried to prevent him—"

"But he did prevent him?"

"Just in time, but not before he had clambered on to a beam. He was very violent."

I had so much to say and ask that I could get nothing out in time, and Shorthouse went on again.

"I've had a sort of watching brief for this case," he said with a smile, whose real significance, however, completely escaped me at the time, "and one of the most disagreeable features about it is the deliberate way the servants have invented excuses to go out to the place, and always after dark; some of them who have no right to go there, and no real occasion at all — have never been there in their lives before probably — and now all of a sudden have shown the keenest desire and determination to go out there about dusk, or soon after, and with the most paltry and foolish excuses in the world. Of course," he added, "they have been prevented, but the desire, stronger than their superstitious dread, and which they cannot explain, is very curious."

"Very," I admitted, feeling that my hair was beginning to stand up again.

"You see," he went on presently, "it all points to volition — in fact to deliberate arrangement. It is no mere family ghost that goes with every ivied house in England of a certain age; it is something real, and something very malignant."

He raised his face from the gun barrel, and for the first time his eye caught mine in the full. Yes, he was very much in earnest. Also, he knew a great deal more than he meant to tell.

"It's worth tempting — and fighting, *I* think," he said; "but I want a companion with me. Are you game?" His enthusiasm undoubtedly caught me, but I still wanted to hedge a bit.

"I'm very sceptical," I pleaded.

"All the better," he said, almost as if to himself. "You have the pluck; I have the knowledge—"

"The knowledge?"

He looked round cautiously as if to make sure that there was no one within earshot.

"I've been in the place myself," he said in a lowered voice, "quite lately — in fact only three nights ago — the day the man turned queer."

I stared.

"But — I was obliged to come out—"

Still I stared.

“Quickly,” he added significantly.

“You’ve gone into the thing pretty thoroughly,” was all I could find to say, for I had almost made up my mind to go with him, and was not sure that I wanted to hear too much beforehand.

He nodded. “It’s a bore, of course, but I must do everything thoroughly — or not at all.”

“That’s why you clean your own gun, I suppose?”

“That’s why, when there’s any danger, I take as few chances as possible,” he said, with the same enigmatical smile I had noticed before; and then he added with emphasis, “And that is also why I ask you to keep me company now.”

Of course, the shaft went straight home, and I gave my promise without further ado.

Our preparations for the night — a couple of rugs and a flask of black coffee — were not elaborate, and we found no difficulty, about ten o’clock, in absenting ourselves from the billiard-room without attracting curiosity. Shorthouse met me by arrangement under the cedar on the back lawn, and I at once realised with vividness what a difference there is between making plans in the daytime and carrying them out in the dark. One’s common-sense — at least in matters of this sort — is reduced to a minimum, and imagination with all her attendant sprites usurps the place of judgment. Two and two no longer make four — they make a mystery, and the mystery loses no time in growing into a menace. In this particular case, however, my imagination did not find wings very readily, for I knew that my companion was the most *unmovable* of men — an unemotional, solid block of a man who would never lose his head, and in any conceivable state of affairs would always take the right as well as the strong course. So my faith in the man gave me a false courage that was nevertheless very consoling, and I looked forward to the night’s adventure with a genuine appetite.

Side by side, and in silence, we followed the path that skirted the East Woods, as they were called, and then led across two hay fields, and through another wood, to the barn, which thus lay about half a mile from the Lower Farm. To the Lower Farm, indeed, it properly belonged; and this made us realise more clearly how very ingenious must have been the excuses of the Hall servants who felt the desire to visit it.

It had been raining during the late afternoon, and the trees were still dripping heavily on all sides, but the moment we left the second wood and came out into the open, we saw a clearing with the stars overhead, against which the barn outlined itself in a black, lugubrious shadow. Shorthouse led the way — still without a word — and we crawled in through a low door and seated ourselves in a soft heap of hay in the extreme corner.

“Now,” he said, speaking for the first time, “I’ll show you the inside of the barn, so that you may know where you are, and what to do, in case anything happens.”

A match flared in the darkness, and with the help of two more that followed I saw the interior of a lofty and somewhat rickety-looking barn, erected upon a wall of grey stones that ran all round and extended to a height of perhaps four feet. Above this masonry rose the wooden sides, running up into the usual vaulted roof, and supported by a double tier of massive oak rafters, which stretched across from wall to wall and were intersected by occasional uprights. I felt as if we were inside the skeleton of some antediluvian monster whose huge black ribs completely enfolded us. Most of this, of course, only sketched itself to my eye in the uncertain light of the flickering matches, and when I said I had seen enough, and the matches went out, we were at once enveloped in an atmosphere as densely black as anything that I have ever known. And the silence equalled the darkness.

We made ourselves comfortable and talked in low voices. The rugs, which were very large, covered our legs; and our shoulders sank into a really luxurious bed of softness. Yet neither of us apparently felt sleepy. I certainly didn’t, and Shorthouse, dropping his customary brevity that fell little short of gruffness, plunged into an easy run of talking that took the form after a time of personal reminiscences. This rapidly became a vivid narration of adventure and travel in far countries, and at any other time I should have allowed myself to become completely absorbed in what he told. But, unfortunately, I was never able for a single instant to forget the real purpose of our enterprise, and consequently I felt all my senses more keenly on the alert than usual, and my attention accordingly more or less distracted. It was, indeed, a revelation to hear Shorthouse unbosom himself in this fashion, and to a young man it was of course doubly fascinating; but the little sounds that always punctuate even the deepest silence out of doors claimed some portion of my attention, and as the night grew on I soon became aware that his tales seemed somewhat disconnected and abrupt — and that, in fact, I heard really only part of them.

It was not so much that I actually heard other sounds, but that I *expected* to hear them; this was what stole the other half of my listening. There was neither wind nor rain to break the stillness, and certainly there were no physical presences in our neighbourhood, for we were half a mile even from the Lower Farm; and from the Hall and stables, at least a mile. Yet the stillness was being continually broken — perhaps *disturbed* is a better word — and it was to these very remote and tiny disturbances that I felt compelled to devote at least half my listening faculties.

From time to time, however, I made a remark or asked a question, to show that I was listening and interested; but, in a sense, my questions always seemed to bear in one direction and to make for one issue, namely, my companion's previous experience in the barn when he had been obliged to come out "quickly."

Apparently I could not help myself in the matter, for this was really the one consuming curiosity I had; and the fact that it was better for me not to know it made me the keener to know it all, even the worst.

Shorthouse realised this even better than I did. I could tell it by the way he dodged, or wholly ignored, my questions, and this subtle sympathy between us showed plainly enough, had I been able at the time to reflect upon its meaning, that the nerves of both of us were in a very sensitive and highly-strung condition. Probably, the complete confidence I felt in his ability to face whatever might happen, and the extent to which also I relied upon him for my own courage, prevented the exercise of my ordinary powers of reflection, while it left my senses free to a more than usual degree of activity.

Things must have gone on in this way for a good hour or more, when I made the sudden discovery that there was something unusual in the conditions of our environment. This sounds a roundabout mode of expression, but I really know not how else to put it. The discovery almost rushed upon me. By rights, we were two men waiting in an alleged haunted barn for something to happen; and, as two men who trusted one another implicitly (though for very different reasons), there should have been two minds keenly alert, with the ordinary senses in active co-operation. Some slight degree of nervousness, too, there might also have been, but beyond this, nothing. It was therefore with something of dismay that I made the sudden discovery that there *was* something more, and something that I ought to have noticed very much sooner than I actually did notice it.

The fact was — Shorthouse's stream of talk was wholly unnatural. He was talking with a purpose. He did not wish to be cornered by my questions, true, but he had another and a deeper purpose still, and it grew upon me, as an unpleasant deduction from my discovery, that this strong, cynical, unemotional man by my side was talking — and had been talking all this time — to gain a particular end. And this end, I soon felt clearly, was to *convince himself*. But, of what?

For myself, as the hours wore on towards midnight, I was not anxious to find the answer; but in the end it became impossible to avoid it, and I knew as I listened, that he was pouring forth this steady stream of vivid reminiscences of travel — South Seas, big game, Russian exploration, women, adventures of all sorts — *because he wished the past to reassert itself to the complete exclusion of the present*. He was taking his precautions. He was afraid.

I felt a hundred things, once this was clear to me, but none of them more than the wish to get up at once and leave the barn. If Shorthouse was afraid already, what in the world was to happen to me in the long hours that lay ahead? . . . I only know that, in my fierce efforts to deny to myself the evidence of his partial collapse, the strength came that enabled me to play my part properly, and I even found myself helping him by means of animated remarks upon his stories, and by more or less judicious questions. I also helped him by dismissing from my mind any desire to enquire into the truth of his former experience; and it was good I did so, for had he turned it loose on me, with those great powers of convincing description that he had at his command, I verily believe that I should never have crawled from that barn alive. So, at least, I felt at the moment. It was the instinct of self-preservation, and it brought sound judgment.

Here, then, at least, with different motives, reached, too, by opposite ways, we were both agreed upon one thing, namely, that temporarily we would forget. Fools we were, for a dominant emotion is not so easily banished, and we were for ever recurring to it in a hundred ways direct and indirect. A real fear cannot be so easily trifled with, and while we toyed on the surface with thousands and thousands of words — mere words — our sub-conscious activities were steadily gaining force, and would before very long have to be properly acknowledged. We could not get away from it. At last, when he had finished the recital of an adventure which brought him near enough to a horrible death, I admitted that in my uneventful life I had never yet been face to face with a real fear. It slipped out inadvertently, and, of course, without intention, but the tendency in him at the time was too strong to be resisted. He saw the loophole, and made for it full tilt.

"It is the same with all the emotions," he said. "The experiences of others never give a complete account. Until a man has deliberately turned and faced for himself the fiends that chase him down the years, he has no knowledge of what they really are, or of what they can do. Imaginative authors may write, moralists may preach, and scholars may criticise, but they are dealing all the time in a coinage of which they know not the actual value. Their listener gets a sensation — but not the true one. Until you have faced these emotions," he went on, with the same race of words that had come from him the whole evening, "and made them your own, your slaves, you have no idea of the power that is in them — hunger, that shows lights beckoning beyond the grave; thirst, that fills with mingled ice and fire; passion, love, loneliness, revenge, and—" He paused for a minute, and though I knew we were on the brink I was powerless to hold him. " . . . *and fear*," he went on— "fear . . . I think that death from fear, or madness from fear, must sum up in a second of time the total of all the most awful sensations it is possible for a man to know."

"Then you have yourself felt something of this fear," I interrupted; "for you said just now—"

"I do not mean physical fear," he replied; "for that is more or less a question of nerves and will, and it is imagination that makes men cowards. I mean an *absolute* fear, a physical fear one might call it, that reaches the soul and withers every power one possesses."

He said a lot more, for he, too, was wholly unable to stem the torrent once it broke loose; but I have forgotten it; or, rather, mercifully I did not hear it, for I stopped my ears and only heard the occasional words when I took my fingers out to find if he had come to an end. In due course he did come to an end, and there we left it, for I then knew positively what he already knew: that somewhere here in the night, and within the walls of this very barn where we were sitting, there was waiting Something of dreadful malignancy and of great power. Something that we might both have to face ere morning, and Something that he had already tried to face once and failed in the attempt.

The night wore slowly on; and it gradually became more and more clear to me that I could not dare to rely as at first upon my companion, and that our positions were undergoing a slow process of reversal. I thank Heaven this was not borne in upon me too suddenly; and that I had at least the time to readjust myself somewhat to the new conditions. Preparation was possible, even if it was not much, and I sought by every means in my power to gather up all the shreds of my courage, so that they might together make a decent rope that would stand the strain when it came. The strain would come, that was certain, and I was thoroughly well aware — though for my life I cannot put into words the reasons for my knowledge — that the massing of the material against us was proceeding somewhere in the darkness with determination and a horrible skill besides.

Shorthouse meanwhile talked without ceasing. The great quantity of hay opposite — or straw, I believe it actually was — seemed to deaden the sound of his voice, but the silence, too, had become so oppressive that I welcomed his torrent and even dreaded the moment when it would stop. I heard, too, the gentle ticking of my watch. Each second uttered its voice and dropped away into a gulf, as if starting on a journey whence there was no return. Once a dog barked somewhere in the distance, probably on the Lower Farm; and once an owl hooted close outside and I could hear the swishing of its wings as it passed overhead. Above me, in the darkness, I could just make out the outline of the barn, sinister and black, the rows of rafters stretching across from wall to wall like wicked arms that pressed upon the hay. Shorthouse, deep in some involved yarn of the South Seas that was meant to be full of cheer and sunshine, and yet only succeeded in making a ghastly mixture of unnatural colouring, seemed to care little whether I listened or not. He made no appeal to me, and I made one or two quite irrelevant remarks which passed him by and proved that he was merely uttering sounds. He, too, was afraid of the silence.

I fell to wondering how long a man could talk without stopping. . . . Then it seemed to me that these words of his went falling into the same gulf where the seconds dropped, only they were heavier and fell faster. I began to chase them. Presently one of them fell much faster than the rest, and I pursued it and found myself almost immediately in a land of clouds and shadows. They rose up and enveloped me, pressing on the eyelids. . . . It must have been just here that I actually fell asleep, somewhere between twelve and one o'clock, because, as I chased this word at tremendous speed through space, I knew that I had left the other words far, very far behind me, till, at last, I could no longer hear them at all. The voice of the story-teller was beyond the reach of hearing; and I was falling with ever increasing rapidity through an immense void.

A sound of whispering roused me. Two persons were talking under their breath close beside me. The words in the main escaped me, but I caught every now and then bitten-off phrases and half sentences, to which, however, I could attach no intelligible meaning. The words were quite close — at my very side in fact — and one of the voices sounded so familiar, that curiosity overcame dread, and I turned to look. I was not mistaken; *it was Shorthouse whispering*. But the other person, who must have been just a little beyond him, was lost in the darkness and invisible to me. It seemed then that Shorthouse at once turned up his face and looked at me and, by some means or other that caused me no surprise at the time, I easily made out the features in the darkness. They wore an expression I had never seen there before; he seemed distressed, exhausted, worn out, and as though he were about to give in after a long mental struggle. He looked at me, almost beseechingly, and the whispering of the other person died away.

"They're at me," he said.

I found it quite impossible to answer; the words stuck in my throat. His voice was thin, plaintive, almost like a child's.

"I shall have to go. I'm not as strong as I thought. They'll call it suicide, but, of course, it's really murder." There was real anguish in his voice, and it terrified me.

A deep silence followed these extraordinary words, and I somehow understood that the Other Person was just going to carry on the conversation — I even fancied I saw lips shaping themselves just over my friend's shoulder — when I felt a sharp blow in the ribs and a voice, this time a deep voice, sounded in my ear. I opened my eyes, and the wretched dream vanished. Yet it left behind it an impression of a strong and quite unusual reality.

"*Do* try not to go to sleep again," he said sternly. "You seem exhausted. Do you feel so?" There was a note in his voice I did not welcome, — less than alarm, but certainly more than mere solicitude.

"I do feel terribly sleepy all of a sudden," I admitted, ashamed.

"So you may," he added very earnestly; "but I rely on you to keep awake, if only to watch. You have been asleep for half an hour at least — and you were so still — I thought I'd wake you—"

"Why?" I asked, for my curiosity and nervousness were altogether too strong to be resisted. "Do you think we are in danger?"

"I think *they* are about here now. I feel my vitality going rapidly — that's always the first sign. You'll last longer than I, remember. Watch carefully."

The conversation dropped. I was afraid to say all I wanted to say. It would have been too unmistakably a confession; and intuitively I realised the danger of admitting the existence of certain emotions until positively forced to. But presently Shorthouse began again. His voice sounded odd, and as if it had lost power. It was more like a woman's or a boy's voice than a man's, and recalled the voice in my dream.

"I suppose you've got a knife?" he asked.

"Yes — a big clasp knife; but why?" He made no answer. "You don't think a practical joke likely? No one suspects we're here," I went on. Nothing was more significant of our real feelings this night than the way we toyed with words, and never dared more than to skirt the things in our mind.

"It's just as well to be prepared," he answered evasively. "Better be quite sure. See which pocket it's in — so as to be ready."

I obeyed mechanically, and told him. But even this scrap of talk proved to me that he was getting further from me all the time in his mind. He was following a line that was strange to me, and, as he distanced me, I felt that the sympathy between us grew more and more strained. *He knew more*; it was not that I minded so much — but that he was willing to *communicate less*. And in proportion as I lost his support, I dreaded his increasing silence. Not of words — for he talked more volubly than ever, and with a fiercer purpose — but his silence in giving no hint of what he must have known to be really going on the whole time.

The night was perfectly still. Shorthouse continued steadily talking, and I jogged him now and again with remarks or questions in order to keep awake. He paid no attention, however, to either.

About two in the morning a short shower fell, and the drops rattled sharply on the roof like shot. I was glad when it stopped, for it completely drowned all other sounds and made it impossible to hear anything else that might be going on. Something *was* going on, too, all the time, though for the life of me I could not say what. The outer world had grown quite dim — the house-party, the shooters, the billiard-room, and the ordinary daily incidents of my visit. All my energies were concentrated on the present, and the constant strain of watching, waiting, listening, was excessively telling.

Shorthouse still talked of his adventures, in some Eastern country now, and less connectedly. These adventures, real or imaginary, had quite a savour of the Arabian Nights, and did not by any means make it easier for me to keep my hold on reality. The lightest weight will affect the balance under such circumstances, and in this case the weight of his talk was on the wrong scale. His words were very rapid, and I found it overwhelmingly difficult not to follow them into that great gulf of darkness where they all rushed and vanished. But that, I knew, meant sleep again. Yet, it was strange I should feel sleepy when at the same time all my nerves were fairly tingling. Every time I heard what seemed like a step outside, or a movement in the hay opposite, the blood stood still for a moment in my veins. Doubtless, the unremitting strain told upon me more than I realised, and this was doubly great now that I knew Shorthouse was a source of weakness instead of strength, as I had counted. Certainly, a curious sense of languor grew upon me more and more, and I was sure that the man beside me was engaged in the same struggle. The feverishness of his talk proved this, if nothing else. It was dreadfully hard to keep awake.

But this time, instead of dropping into the gulf, I saw something come up out of it! It reached our world by a door in the side of the barn furthest from me, and it came in cautiously and silently and moved into the mass of hay opposite. There, for a moment, I lost it, but presently I caught it again higher up. It was clinging, like a great bat, to the side of the barn. Something trailed behind it, I could not make out what. . . . It crawled up the wooden wall and began to move out along one of the rafters. A numb terror settled down all over me as I watched it. The thing trailing behind it was apparently a rope.

The whispering began again just then, but the only words I could catch seemed without meaning; it was almost like another language. The voices were above me, under the roof. Suddenly I saw signs of active movement going on just beyond the place where the thing lay upon the rafter. There was something else up there with it! Then followed panting, like the quick breathing that accompanies effort, and the next minute a black mass dropped through the air and dangled at the end of the rope.

Instantly, it all flashed upon me. I sprang to my feet and rushed headlong across the floor of the barn. How I moved so quickly in the darkness I do not know; but, even as I ran, it flashed into my mind that I should never get at my knife in time to cut the thing down, or else that I should find it had been taken from me. Somehow or other — the Goddess of Dreams knows how — I climbed up by the hay bales and swung out along the rafter. I was hanging, of course, by my arms, and the knife was already between my teeth, though I had no recollection of how it got there. It was open. The mass, hanging like a side of bacon, was only a few feet in front of me, and I could plainly see the dark line of rope that fastened it to the beam. I then noticed for the first time that it was swinging and turning in the air, and that as I approached it seemed to move along the beam, so that the same distance was always maintained between us. The only thing I could do — for there was no time to hesitate — was to jump at it through the air and slash at the rope as I dropped.

I seized the knife with my right hand, gave a great swing of my body with my legs and leaped forward at it through the air. Horrors! It was closer to me than I knew, and I plunged full into it, and the arm with the knife missed the rope and cut deeply into some substance that was soft and yielding. But, as I dropped past it, the thing had time to turn half its width so that it swung round and faced me — and I could have sworn as I rushed past it through the air, that it had the features of Shorthouse.

The shock of this brought the vile nightmare to an abrupt end, and I woke up a second time on the soft hay-bed to find that the grey dawn was stealing in, and that I was exceedingly cold. After all I had failed to keep awake, and my sleep, since it was growing light, must have lasted at least an hour. A whole hour off my guard!

There was no sound from Shorthouse, to whom, of course, my first thoughts turned; probably his flow of words had ceased long ago, and he too had yielded to the persuasions of the seductive god. I turned to wake him and get the comfort of companionship for the horror of my dream, when to my utter dismay I saw that the place where he had been was vacant. He was no longer beside me.

It had been no little shock before to discover that the ally in whom lay all my faith and dependence was really frightened, but it is quite impossible to describe the sensations I experienced when I realised he had gone altogether and that I was alone in the barn. For a minute or two my head swam and I felt a prey to a helpless terror. The dream, too, still seemed half real, so vivid had it been! I was thoroughly frightened — hot and cold by turns — and I clutched the hay at my side in handfuls, and for some moments had no idea in the world what I should do.

This time, at least, I was unmistakably awake, and I made a great effort to collect myself and face the meaning of the disappearance of my companion. In this I succeeded so far that I decided upon a thorough search of the barn, inside and outside. It was a dreadful undertaking, and I did not feel at all sure of being able to bring it to a conclusion, but I knew pretty well that unless something was done at once, I should simply collapse.

But, when I tried to move, I found that the cold, and fear, and I know not what else unholy besides, combined to make it almost impossible. I suddenly realised that a tour of inspection, during the whole of which my back would be open to attack, was not to be thought of. My will was not equal to it. Anything might spring upon me any moment from the dark corners, and the growing light was just enough to reveal every movement I made to any who might be watching. For, even then, and while I was still half dazed and stupid, I knew perfectly well that someone was watching me all the time with the utmost intentness. I had not merely awakened; I had *been* awakened.

I decided to try another plan; I called to him. My voice had a thin weak sound, far away and quite unreal, and there was no answer to it. Hark, though! There was something that might have been a very faint voice near me!

I called again, this time with greater distinctness, “Shorthouse, where are you? can you hear me?”

There certainly was a sound, but it was not a voice. Something was moving. It was someone shuffling along, and it seemed to be outside the barn. I was afraid to call again, and the sound continued. It was an ordinary sound enough, no doubt, but it came to me just then as something unusual and unpleasant. Ordinary sounds remain ordinary only so long as one is not listening to them; under the influence of intense listening they become unusual, portentous, and therefore extraordinary. So, this common sound came to me as something uncommon, disagreeable. It conveyed, too, an impression of stealth. And with it there was another, a slighter sound.

Just at this minute the wind bore faintly over the field the sound of the stable clock, a mile away. It was three o’clock; the hour when life’s pulses beat lowest; when poor souls lying between life and death find it hardest to resist. Vividly I remember this thought crashing through my brain with a sound of thunder, and I realised that the strain on my nerves was nearing the limit, and that something would have to be done at once if I was to reclaim my self-control at all.

When thinking over afterwards the events of this dreadful night, it has always seemed strange to me that my second nightmare, so vivid in its terror and its nearness, should have furnished me with no inkling of what was really going on all this while; and that I should not have been able to put two and two together, or have discovered sooner than I did *what* this sound was and *where* it came from. I can well believe that the vile scheming which lay behind the whole experience found it an easy trifle to direct my hearing amiss; though, of course, it may equally well have been due to the confused condition of my mind at the time and to the general nervous tension under which I was undoubtedly suffering.

But, whatever the cause for my stupidity at first in failing to trace the sound to its proper source, I can only say here that it was with a shock of unexampled horror that my eye suddenly glanced upwards and caught sight of the figure moving in the shadows above my head among the rafters. Up to this moment I had thought that it was somebody outside the barn, crawling round the walls till it came to a door; and the rush of horror that froze my heart when I looked up and saw that it was Shorthouse creeping stealthily along a beam, is something altogether beyond the power of words to describe.

He was staring intently down upon me, and I knew at once that it was he who had been watching me.

This point was, I think, for me the climax of feeling in the whole experience; I was incapable of any further sensation — that is any further sensation in the same direction. But here the abominable character of the affair showed itself most plainly, for it suddenly presented an entirely new aspect to me. The light fell on the picture from a new angle, and galvanised me into a fresh ability to feel when I thought a merciful numbness had supervened. It may not sound a great deal in the printed letter, but it came to me almost as if it had been an extension of consciousness, for the Hand that held the pencil suddenly touched in with ghastly effect of contrast the element of the ludicrous. Nothing could have been worse just then. Shorthouse, the masterful spirit, so intrepid in the affairs of ordinary life, whose power increased rather than lessened in the face of danger — this man, creeping on hands and knees along a rafter in a barn at three o'clock in the morning, watching me all the time as a cat watches a mouse! Yes, it was distinctly ludicrous, and while it gave me a measure with which to gauge the dread emotion that caused his aberration, it stirred somewhere deep in my interior the strings of an empty laughter.

One of those moments then came to me that are said to come sometimes under the stress of great emotion, when in an instant the mind grows dazzlingly clear. An abnormal lucidity took the place of my confusion of thought, and I suddenly understood that the two dreams which I had taken for nightmares must really have been sent me, and that I had been allowed for one moment to look over the edge of what was to come; the Good was helping, even when the Evil was most determined to destroy.

I saw it all clearly now. Shorthouse had overrated his strength. The terror inspired by his first visit to the barn (when he had failed) had roused the man's whole nature to win, and he had brought me to divert the deadly stream of evil. That he had again underrated the power against him was apparent as soon as he entered the barn, and his wild talk, and refusal to admit what he felt, were due to this desire not to acknowledge the insidious fear that was growing in his heart. But, at length, it had become too strong. He had left my side in my sleep — had been overcome himself, perhaps, first in *his* sleep, by the dreadful impulse. He knew that I should interfere, and with every movement he made, he watched me steadily, for the mania was upon him and he was *determined to hang himself*. He pretended not to hear me calling, and I knew that anything coming between him and his purpose would meet the full force of his fury — the fury of a maniac, of one, for the time being, truly possessed.

For a minute or two I sat there and stared. I saw then for the first time that there was a bit of rope trailing after him, and that this was what made the rustling sound I had noticed. Shorthouse, too, had come to a stop. His body lay along the rafter like a crouching animal. He was looking hard at me. That whitish patch was his face.

I can lay claim to no courage in the matter, for I must confess that in one sense I was frightened almost beyond control. But at the same time the necessity for decided action, if I was to save his life, came to me with an intense relief. No matter what animated him for the moment, Shorthouse was only a *man*; it was flesh and blood I had to contend with and not the intangible powers. Only a few hours before I had seen him cleaning his gun, smoking his pipe, knocking the billiard balls about with very human clumsiness, and the picture flashed across my mind with the most wholesome effect.

Then I dashed across the floor of the barn and leaped upon the hay bales as a preliminary to climbing up the sides to the first rafter. It was far more difficult than in my dream. Twice I slipped back into the hay, and as I scrambled up for the third time I saw that Shorthouse, who thus far had made no sound or movement, was now busily doing something with his hands upon the beam. He was at its further end, and there must have been fully fifteen feet between us. Yet I saw plainly what he was doing; he was fastening the rope to the rafter. *The other end, I saw, was already round his neck!*

This gave me at once the necessary strength, and in a second I had swung myself on to a beam, crying aloud with all the authority I could put into my voice —

“You fool, man! What in the world are you trying to do? Come down at once!”

My energetic actions and words combined had an immediate effect upon him for which I blessed Heaven; for he looked up from his horrid task, stared hard at me for a second or two, and then came wriggling along like a great cat to intercept me. He came by a series of leaps and bounds and at an astonishing pace, and the way he moved somehow inspired me with a fresh horror, for it did not seem the natural movement of a human being at all, but more, as I have said, like that of some lithe wild animal.

He was close upon me. I had no clear idea of what exactly I meant to do. I could see his face plainly now; he was grinning cruelly; the eyes were positively luminous, and the menacing expression of the mouth was most distressing to look upon. Otherwise it was the face of a chalk man, white and dead, with all the semblance of the living human drawn out of it. Between his teeth he held my clasp knife, which he must have taken from me in my sleep, and with a flash I recalled his anxiety to know exactly which pocket it was in.

“Drop that knife!” I shouted at him, “and drop after it yourself—”

“Don’t you dare to stop me!” he hissed, the breath coming between his lips across the knife that he held in his teeth. “Nothing in the world can stop me now — I have promised — and I must do it. I can’t hold out any longer.”

“Then drop the knife and I’ll help you,” I shouted back in his face. “I promise—”

“No use,” he cried, laughing a little, “I must do it and you can’t stop me.”

I heard a sound of laughter, too, somewhere in the air behind me. The next second Shorthouse came at me with a single bound.

To this day I cannot quite tell how it happened. It is still a wild confusion and a fever of horror in my mind, but from somewhere I drew more than my usual allowance of strength, and before he could well have realised what I meant to do, I had his throat between my fingers. He opened his teeth and the knife dropped at once, for I gave him a squeeze he need never forget. Before, my muscles had felt like so much soaked paper; now they recovered their natural strength, and more besides. I managed to work ourselves along the rafter until the hay was beneath us, and then, completely exhausted, I let go my hold and we swung round together and dropped on to the hay, he clawing at me in the air even as we fell.

The struggle that began by my fighting for his life ended in a wild effort to save my own, for Shorthouse was quite beside himself, and had no idea what he was doing. Indeed, he has always averred that he remembers nothing of the entire night's experiences after the time when he first woke me from sleep. A sort of deadly mist settled over him, he declares, and he lost all sense of his own identity. The rest was a blank until he came to his senses under a mass of hay with me on the top of him.

It was the hay that saved us, first by breaking the fall and then by impeding his movements so that I was able to prevent his choking me to death.

THE WOOD OF THE DEAD

ONE SUMMER, IN my wanderings with a knapsack, I was at luncheon in the room of a wayside inn in the western country, when the door opened and there entered an old rustic, who crossed close to my end of the table and sat himself down very quietly in the seat by the bow window. We exchanged glances, or, properly speaking, nods, for at the moment I did not actually raise my eyes to his face, so concerned was I with the important business of satisfying an appetite gained by tramping twelve miles over a difficult country.

The fine warm rain of seven o'clock, which had since risen in a kind of luminous mist about the tree tops, now floated far overhead in a deep blue sky, and the day was settling down into a blaze of golden light. It was one of those days peculiar to Somerset and North Devon, when the orchards shine and the meadows seem to add a radiance of their own, so brilliantly soft are the colourings of grass and foliage.

The inn-keeper's daughter, a little maiden with a simple country loveliness, presently entered with a foaming pewter mug, enquired after my welfare, and went out again. Apparently she had not noticed the old man sitting in the settle by the bow window, nor had he, for his part, so much as once turned his head in our direction.

Under ordinary circumstances I should probably have given no thought to this other occupant of the room; but the fact that it was supposed to be reserved for my private use, and the singular thing that he sat looking aimlessly out of the window, with no attempt to engage me in conversation, drew my eyes more than once somewhat curiously upon him, and I soon caught myself wondering why he sat there so silently, and always with averted head.

He was, I saw, a rather bent old man in rustic dress, and the skin of his face was wrinkled like that of an apple; corduroy trousers were caught up with a string below the knee, and he wore a sort of brown fustian jacket that was very much faded. His thin hand rested upon a stoutish stick. He wore no hat and carried none, and I noticed that his head, covered with silvery hair, was finely shaped and gave the impression of something noble.

Though rather piqued by his studied disregard of my presence, I came to the conclusion that he probably had something to do with the little hostel and had a perfect right to use this room with freedom, and I finished my luncheon without breaking the silence and then took the settle opposite to smoke a pipe before going on my way.

Through the open window came the scents of the blossoming fruit trees; the orchard was drenched in sunshine and the branches danced lazily in the breeze; the grass below fairly shone with white and yellow daisies, and the red roses climbing in profusion over the casement mingled their perfume with the sweetly penetrating odour of the sea.

It was a place to dawdle in, to lie and dream away a whole afternoon, watching the sleepy butterflies and listening to the chorus of birds which seemed to fill every corner of the sky. Indeed, I was already debating in my mind whether to linger and enjoy it all instead of taking the strenuous pathway over the hills, when the old rustic in the settle opposite suddenly turned his face towards me for the first time and began to speak.

His voice had a quiet dreamy note in it that was quite in harmony with the day and the scene, but it sounded far away, I thought, almost as though it came to me from outside where the shadows were weaving their eternal tissue of dreams upon the garden floor. Moreover, there was no trace in it of the rough quality one might naturally have expected, and, now that I saw the full face of the speaker for the first time, I noted with something like a start that the deep, gentle eyes seemed far more in keeping with the timbre of the voice than with the rough and very countrified appearance of the clothes and manner. His voice set pleasant waves of sound in motion towards me, and the actual words, if I remember rightly, were —

“You are a stranger in these parts?” or “Is not this part of the country strange to you?”

There was no “sir,” nor any outward and visible sign of the deference usually paid by real country folk to the town-bred visitor, but in its place a gentleness, almost a sweetness, of polite sympathy that was far more of a compliment than either.

I answered that I was wandering on foot through a part of the country that was wholly new to me, and that I was surprised not to find a place of such idyllic loveliness marked upon my map.

“I have lived here all my life,” he said, with a sigh, “and am never tired of coming back to it again.”

“Then you no longer live in the immediate neighbourhood?”

“I have moved,” he answered briefly, adding after a pause in which his eyes seemed to wander wistfully to the wealth of blossoms beyond the window; “but I am almost sorry, for nowhere else have I found the sunshine lie so warmly, the flowers smell so sweetly, or the winds and streams make such tender music. . . .”

His voice died away into a thin stream of sound that lost itself in the rustle of the rose-leaves climbing in at the window, for he turned his head away from me as he spoke and looked out into the garden. But it was impossible to conceal my surprise, and I raised my eyes in frank astonishment on hearing so poetic an utterance from such a figure of a man, though at the same time realising that it was not in the least inappropriate, and that, in fact, no other sort of expression could have properly been expected from him.

“I am sure you are right,” I answered at length, when it was clear he had ceased speaking; “or there is something of enchantment here — of real fairy-like enchantment — that makes me think of the visions of childhood days, before one knew anything of — of—”

I had been oddly drawn into his vein of speech, some inner force compelling me. But here the spell passed and I could not catch the thoughts that had a moment before opened a long vista before my inner vision.

“To tell you the truth,” I concluded lamely, “the place fascinates me and I am in two minds about going further—”

Even at this stage I remember thinking it odd that I should be talking like this with a stranger whom I met in a country inn, for it has always been one of my failings that to strangers my manner is brief to surliness. It was as though we were figures meeting in a dream, speaking without sound, obeying laws not operative in the everyday working world, and about to play with a new scale of space and time perhaps. But my astonishment passed quickly into an entirely different feeling when I became aware that the old man opposite had turned his head from the window again, and was regarding me with eyes so bright they seemed almost to shine with an inner flame. His gaze was fixed upon my face with an intense ardour, and his whole manner had suddenly become alert and concentrated. There was something about him I now felt for the first time that made little thrills of excitement run up and down my back. I met his look squarely, but with an inward tremor.

"Stay, then, a little while longer," he said in a much lower and deeper voice than before; "stay, and I will teach you something of the purpose of my coming."

He stopped abruptly. I was conscious of a decided shiver.

"You have a special purpose then — in coming back?" I asked, hardly knowing what I was saying.

"To call away someone," he went on in the same thrilling voice, "someone who is not quite ready to come, but who is needed elsewhere for a worthier purpose." There was a sadness in his manner that mystified me more than ever.

"You mean — ?" I began, with an unaccountable access of trembling.

"I have come for someone who must soon move, even as I have moved."

He looked me through and through with a dreadfully piercing gaze, but I met his eyes with a full straight stare, trembling though I was, and I was aware that something stirred within me that had never stirred before, though for the life of me I could not have put a name to it, or have analysed its nature. Something lifted and rolled away. For one single second I understood clearly that the past and the future exist actually side by side in one immense Present; that it was *I* who moved to and fro among shifting, protean appearances.

The old man dropped his eyes from my face, and the momentary glimpse of a mightier universe passed utterly away. Reason regained its sway over a dull, limited kingdom.

"Come to-night," I heard the old man say, "come to me to-night into the Wood of the Dead. Come at midnight—"

Involuntarily I clutched the arm of the settle for support, for I then felt that I was speaking with someone who knew more of the real things that are and will be, than I could ever know while in the body, working through the ordinary channels of sense — and this curious half-promise of a partial lifting of the veil had its undeniable effect upon me.

The breeze from the sea had died away outside, and the blossoms were still. A yellow butterfly floated lazily past the window. The song of the birds hushed — I smelt the sea — I smelt the perfume of heated summer air rising from fields and flowers, the ineffable scents of June and of the long days of the year — and with it, from countless green meadows beyond, came the hum of myriad summer life, children's voices, sweet pipings, and the sound of water falling.

I knew myself to be on the threshold of a new order of experience — of an ecstasy. Something drew me forth with a sense of inexpressible yearning towards the being of this strange old man in the window seat, and for a moment I knew what it was to taste a mighty and wonderful sensation, and to touch the highest pinnacle of joy I have ever known. It lasted for less than a second, and was gone; but in that brief instant of time the same terrible lucidity came to me that had already shown me how the past and future exist in the present, and I realised and understood that pleasure and pain are one and the same force, for the joy I had just experienced included also all the pain I ever had felt, or ever could feel. . . .

The sunshine grew to dazzling radiance, faded, passed away. The shadows paused in their dance upon the grass, deepened a moment, and then melted into air. The flowers of the fruit trees laughed with their little silvery laughter as the wind sighed over their radiant eyes the old, old tale of its personal love. Once or twice a voice called my name. A wonderful sensation of lightness and power began to steal over me.

Suddenly the door opened and the inn-keeper's daughter came in. By all ordinary standards, her's was a charming country loveliness, born of the stars and wild-flowers, of moonlight shining through autumn mists upon the river and the fields; yet, by contrast with the higher order of beauty I had just momentarily been in touch with, she seemed almost ugly. How dull her eyes, how thin her voice, how vapid her smile, and insipid her whole presentment.

For a moment she stood between me and the occupant of the window seat while I counted out the small change for my meal and for her services; but when, an instant later, she moved aside, I saw that the settle was empty and that there was no longer anyone in the room but our two selves.

This discovery was no shock to me; indeed, I had almost expected it, and the man had gone just as a figure goes out of a dream, causing no surprise and leaving me as part and parcel of the same dream without breaking of continuity. But, as soon as I had paid my bill and thus resumed in very practical fashion the thread of my normal consciousness, I turned to the girl and asked her if she knew the old man who had been sitting in the window seat, and what he had meant by the Wood of the Dead.

The maiden started visibly, glancing quickly round the empty room, but answering simply that she had seen no one. I described him in great detail, and then, as the description grew clearer, she turned a little pale under her pretty sunborn and said very gravely that it must have been the ghost.

“Ghost! What ghost?”

“Oh, the village ghost,” she said quietly, coming closer to my chair with a little nervous movement of genuine alarm, and adding in a lower voice, “He comes before a death, they say!”

It was not difficult to induce the girl to talk, and the story she told me, shorn of the superstition that had obviously gathered with the years round the memory of a strangely picturesque figure, was an interesting and peculiar one.

The inn, she said, was originally a farmhouse, occupied by a yeoman farmer, evidently of a superior, if rather eccentric, character, who had been very poor until he reached old age, when a son died suddenly in the Colonies and left him an unexpected amount of money, almost a fortune.

The old man thereupon altered no whit his simple manner of living, but devoted his income entirely to the improvement of the village and to the assistance of its inhabitants; he did this quite regardless of his personal likes and dislikes, as if one and all were absolutely alike to him, objects of a genuine and impersonal benevolence. People had always been a little afraid of the man, not understanding his eccentricities, but the simple force of this love for humanity changed all that in a very short space of time; and before he died he came to be known as the Father of the Village and was held in great love and veneration by all.

A short time before his end, however, he began to act queerly. He spent his money just as usefully and wisely, but the shock of sudden wealth after a life of poverty, people said, had unsettled his mind. He claimed to see things that others did not see, to hear voices, and to have visions. Evidently, he was not of the harmless, foolish, visionary order, but a man of character and of great personal force, for the people became divided in their opinions, and the vicar, good man, regarded and treated him as a "special case." For many, his name and atmosphere became charged almost with a spiritual influence that was not of the best. People quoted texts about him; kept when possible out of his way, and avoided his house after dark. None understood him, but though the majority loved him, an element of dread and mystery became associated with his name, chiefly owing to the ignorant gossip of the few.

A grove of pine trees behind the farm — the girl pointed them out to me on the slope of the hill — he said was the Wood of the Dead, because just before anyone died in the village he saw them walk into that wood, singing. None who went in ever came out again. He often mentioned the names to his wife, who usually published them to all the inhabitants within an hour of her husband's confidence; and it was found that the people he had seen enter the wood — died. On warm summer nights he would sometimes take an old stick and wander out, hatless, under the pines, for he loved this wood, and used to say he met all his old friends there, and would one day walk in there never to return. His wife tried to break him gently off this habit, but he always had his own way; and once, when she followed and found him standing under a great pine in the thickest portion of the grove, talking earnestly to someone she could not see, he turned and rebuked her very gently, but in such a way that she never repeated the experiment, saying —

"You should never interrupt me, Mary, when I am talking with the others; for they teach me, remember, wonderful things, and I must learn all I can before I go to join them."

This story went like wild-fire through the village, increasing with every repetition, until at length everyone was able to give an accurate description of the great veiled figures the woman declared she had seen moving among the trees where her husband stood. The innocent pine-grove now became positively haunted, and the title of "Wood of the Dead" clung naturally as if it had been applied to it in the ordinary course of events by the compilers of the Ordnance Survey.

On the evening of his ninetieth birthday the old man went up to his wife and kissed her. His manner was loving, and very gentle, and there was something about him besides, she declared afterwards, that made her slightly in awe of him and feel that he was almost more of a spirit than a man.

He kissed her tenderly on both cheeks, but his eyes seemed to look right through her as he spoke.

"Dearest wife," he said, "I am saying good-bye to you, for I am now going into the Wood of the Dead, and I shall not return. Do not follow me, or send to search, but be ready soon to come upon the same journey yourself."

The good woman burst into tears and tried to hold him, but he easily slipped from her hands, and she was afraid to follow him. Slowly she saw him cross the field in the sunshine, and then enter the cool shadows of the grove, where he disappeared from her sight.

That same night, much later, she woke to find him lying peacefully by her side in bed, with one arm stretched out towards her, *dead*. Her story was half believed, half doubted at the time, but in a very few years afterwards it evidently came to be accepted by all the countryside. A funeral service was held to which the people flocked in great numbers, and everyone approved of the sentiment which led the widow to add the words, "The Father of the Village," after the usual texts which appeared upon the stone over his grave.

This, then, was the story I pieced together of the village ghost as the little inn-keeper's daughter told it to me that afternoon in the parlour of the inn.

"But you're not the first to say you've seen him," the girl concluded; "and your description is just what we've always heard, and that window, they say, was just where he used to sit and think, and think, when he was alive, and sometimes, they say, to cry for hours together."

"And would you feel afraid if you had seen him?" I asked, for the girl seemed strangely moved and interested in the whole story.

"I think so," she answered timidly. "Surely, if he spoke to me. He did speak to *you*, didn't he, sir?" she asked after a slight pause.

"He said he had come for someone."

"Come for someone," she repeated. "Did he say—" she went on falteringly.

"No, he did not say for whom," I said quickly, noticing the sudden shadow on her face and the tremulous voice.

"Are you really sure, sir?"

"Oh, quite sure," I answered cheerfully. "I did not even ask him." The girl looked at me steadily for nearly a whole minute as though there were many things she wished to tell me or to ask. But she said nothing, and presently picked up her tray from the table and walked slowly out of the room.

Instead of keeping to my original purpose and pushing on to the next village over the hills, I ordered a room to be prepared for me at the inn, and that afternoon I spent wandering about the fields and lying under the fruit trees, watching the white clouds sailing out over the sea. The Wood of the Dead I surveyed from a distance, but in the village I visited the stone erected to the memory of the "Father of the Village" — who was thus, evidently, no mythical personage — and saw also the monuments of his fine unselfish spirit: the schoolhouse he built, the library, the home for the aged poor, and the tiny hospital.

That night, as the clock in the church tower was striking half-past eleven, I stealthily left the inn and crept through the dark orchard and over the hayfield in the direction of the hill whose southern slope was clothed with the Wood of the Dead. A genuine interest impelled me to the adventure, but I also was obliged to confess to a certain sinking in my heart as I stumbled along over the field in the darkness, for I was approaching what might prove to be the birth-place of a real country myth, and a spot already lifted by the imaginative thoughts of a considerable number of people into the region of the haunted and ill-omened.

The inn lay below me, and all round it the village clustered in a soft black shadow unrelieved by a single light. The night was moonless, yet distinctly luminous, for the stars crowded the sky. The silence of deep slumber was everywhere; so still, indeed, that every time my foot kicked against a stone I thought the sound must be heard below in the village and waken the sleepers.

I climbed the hill slowly, thinking chiefly of the strange story of the noble old man who had seized the opportunity to do good to his fellows the moment it came his way, and wondering why the causes that operate ceaselessly behind human life did not always select such admirable instruments. Once or twice a night-bird circled swiftly over my head, but the bats had long since gone to rest, and there was no other sign of life stirring.

Then, suddenly, with a singular thrill of emotion, I saw the first trees of the Wood of the Dead rise in front of me in a high black wall. Their crests stood up like giant spears against the starry sky; and though there was no perceptible movement of the air on my cheek I heard a faint, rushing sound among their branches as the night breeze passed to and fro over their countless little needles. A remote, hushed murmur rose overhead and died away again almost immediately; for in these trees the wind seems to be never absolutely at rest, and on the calmest day there is always a sort of whispering music among their branches.

For a moment I hesitated on the edge of this dark wood, and listened intently. Delicate perfumes of earth and bark stole out to meet me. Impenetrable darkness faced me. Only the consciousness that I was obeying an order, strangely given, and including a mighty privilege, enabled me to find the courage to go forward and step in boldly under the trees.

Instantly the shadows closed in upon me and “something” came forward to meet me from the centre of the darkness. It would be easy enough to meet my imagination half-way with fact, and say that a cold hand grasped my own and led me by invisible paths into the unknown depths of the grove; but at any rate, without stumbling, and always with the positive knowledge that I was going straight towards the desired object, I pressed on confidently and securely into the wood. So dark was it that, at first, not a single star-beam pierced the roof of branches overhead; and, as we moved forward side by side, the trees shifted silently past us in long lines, row upon row, squadron upon squadron, like the units of a vast, soundless army.

And, at length, we came to a comparatively open space where the trees halted upon us for a while, and, looking up, I saw the white river of the sky beginning to yield to the influence of a new light that now seemed spreading swiftly across the heavens.

"It is the dawn coming," said the voice at my side that I certainly recognised, but which seemed almost like a whispering from the trees, "and we are now in the heart of the Wood of the Dead."

We seated ourselves on a moss-covered boulder and waited the coming of the sun. With marvellous swiftness, it seemed to me, the light in the east passed into the radiance of early morning, and when the wind awoke and began to whisper in the tree tops, the first rays of the risen sun fell between the trunks and rested in a circle of gold at our feet.

"Now, come with me," whispered my companion in the same deep voice, "for time has no existence here, and that which I would show you is already *there*!"

We trod gently and silently over the soft pine needles. Already the sun was high over our heads, and the shadows of the trees coiled closely about their feet. The wood became denser again, but occasionally we passed through little open bits where we could smell the hot sunshine and the dry, baked pine needles. Then, presently, we came to the edge of the grove, and I saw a hayfield lying in the blaze of day, and two horses basking lazily with switching tails in the shafts of a laden hay-waggon.

So complete and vivid was the sense of reality, that I remember the grateful realisation of the cool shade where we sat and looked out upon the hot world beyond.

The last pitchfork had tossed up its fragrant burden, and the great horses were already straining in the shafts after the driver, as he walked slowly in front with one hand upon their bridles. He was a stalwart fellow, with sunburned neck and hands. Then, for the first time, I noticed, perched aloft upon the trembling throne of hay, the figure of a slim young girl. I could not see her face, but her brown hair escaped in disorder from a white sun-bonnet, and her still browner hands held a well-worn hay rake. She was laughing and talking with the driver, and he, from time to time, cast up at her ardent glances of admiration — glances that won instant smiles and soft blushes in response.

The cart presently turned into the roadway that skirted the edge of the wood where we were sitting. I watched the scene with intense interest and became so much absorbed in it that I quite forgot the manifold, strange steps by which I was permitted to become a spectator.

“Come down and walk with me,” cried the young fellow, stopping a moment in front of the horses and opening wide his arms. “Jump! and I’ll catch you!”

“Oh, oh,” she laughed, and her voice sounded to me as the happiest, merriest laughter I had ever heard from a girl’s throat. “Oh, oh! that’s all very well. But remember I’m Queen of the Hay, and I must ride!”

“Then I must come and ride beside you,” he cried, and began at once to climb up by way of the driver’s seat. But, with a peal of silvery laughter, she slipped down easily over the back of the hay to escape him, and ran a little way along the road. I could see her quite clearly, and noticed the charming, natural grace of her movements, and the loving expression in her eyes as she looked over her shoulder to make sure he was following. Evidently, she did not wish to escape for long, certainly not for ever.

In two strides the big, brown swain was after her, leaving the horses to do as they pleased. Another second and his arms would have caught the slender waist and pressed the little body to his heart. But, just at that instant, the old man beside me uttered a peculiar cry. It was low and thrilling, and it went through me like a sharp sword.

HE had called her by her own name — and she had heard.

For a second she halted, glancing back with frightened eyes. Then, with a brief cry of despair, the girl swerved aside and dived in swiftly among the shadows of the trees.

But the young man saw the sudden movement and cried out to her passionately —

“Not that way, my love! Not that way! It’s the Wood of the Dead!”

She threw a laughing glance over her shoulder at him, and the wind caught her hair and drew it out in a brown cloud under the sun. But the next minute she was close beside me, lying on the breast of my companion, and I was certain I heard the words repeatedly uttered with many sighs: “Father, you called, and I have come. And I come willingly, for I am very, very tired.”

At any rate, so the words sounded to me, and mingled with them I seemed to catch the answer in that deep, thrilling whisper I already knew: “And you shall sleep, my child, sleep for a long, long time, until it is time for you to begin the journey again.”

In that brief second of time I had recognised the face and voice of the inn-keeper’s daughter, but the next minute a dreadful wail broke from the lips of the young man, and the sky grew suddenly as dark as night, the wind rose and began to toss the branches about us, and the whole scene was swallowed up in a wave of utter blackness.

Again the chill fingers seemed to seize my hand, and I was guided by the way I had come to the edge of the wood, and crossing the hayfield still slumbering in the starlight, I crept back to the inn and went to bed.

A year later I happened to be in the same part of the country, and the memory of the strange summer vision returned to me with the added softness of distance. I went to the old village and had tea under the same orchard trees at the same inn.

But the little maid of the inn did not show her face, and I took occasion to enquire of her father as to her welfare and her whereabouts.

“Married, no doubt,” I laughed, but with a strange feeling that clutched at my heart.

“No, sir,” replied the inn-keeper sadly, “not married — though she was just going to be — but dead. She got a sunstroke in the hayfields, just a few days after you were here, if I remember rightly, and she was gone from us in less than a week.”

SMITH: AN EPISODE IN A LODGING-HOUSE

“WHEN I WAS a medical student,” began the doctor, half turning towards his circle of listeners in the firelight, “I came across one or two very curious human beings; but there was one fellow I remember particularly, for he caused me the most vivid, and I think the most uncomfortable, emotions I have ever known.

“For many months I knew Smith only by name as the occupant of the floor above me. Obviously his name meant nothing to me. Moreover I was busy with lectures, reading, cliniques and the like, and had little leisure to devise plans for scraping acquaintance with any of the other lodgers in the house. Then chance brought us curiously together, and this fellow Smith left a deep impression upon me as the result of our first meeting. At the time the strength of this first impression seemed quite inexplicable to me, but looking back at the episode now from a stand-point of greater knowledge I judge the fact to have been that he stirred my curiosity to an unusual degree, and at the same time awakened my sense of horror — whatever that may be in a medical student — about as deeply and permanently as these two emotions were capable of being stirred at all in the particular system and set of nerves called ME.

“How he knew that I was interested in the study of languages was something I could never explain, but one day, quite unannounced, he came quietly into my room in the evening and asked me point-blank if I knew enough Hebrew to help him in the pronunciation of certain words.

“He caught me along the line of least resistance, and I was greatly flattered to be able to give him the desired information; but it was only when he had thanked me and was gone that I realised I had been in the presence of an unusual individuality. For the life of me I could not quite seize and label the peculiarities of what I felt to be a very striking personality, but it was borne in upon me that he was a man apart from his fellows, a mind that followed a line leading away from ordinary human intercourse and human interests, and into regions that left in his atmosphere something remote, rarefied, chilling.

“The moment he was gone I became conscious of two things — an intense curiosity to know more about this man and what his real interests were, and secondly, the fact that my skin was crawling and that my hair had a tendency to rise.”

The doctor paused a moment here to puff hard at his pipe, which, however, had gone out beyond recall without the assistance of a match; and in the deep silence, which testified to the genuine interest of his listeners, someone poked the fire up into a little blaze, and one or two others glanced over their shoulders into the dark distances of the big hall.

“On looking back,” he went on, watching the momentary flames in the grate, “I see a short, thick-set man of perhaps forty-five, with immense shoulders and small, slender hands. The contrast was noticeable, for I remember thinking that such a giant frame and such slim finger bones hardly belonged together. His head, too, was large and very long, the head of an idealist beyond all question, yet with an unusually strong development of the jaw and chin. Here again was a singular contradiction, though I am better able now to appreciate its full meaning, with a greater experience in judging the values of physiognomy. For this meant, of course, an enthusiastic idealism balanced and kept in check by will and judgment — elements usually deficient in dreamers and visionaries.

“At any rate, here was a being with probably a very wide range of possibilities, a machine with a pendulum that most likely had an unusual length of swing.

“The man’s hair was exceedingly fine, and the lines about his nose and mouth were cut as with a delicate steel instrument in wax. His eyes I have left to the last. They were large and quite changeable, not in colour only, but in character, size, and shape. Occasionally they seemed the eyes of someone else, if you can understand what I mean, and at the same time, in their shifting shades of blue, green, and a nameless sort of dark grey, there was a sinister light in them that lent to the whole face an aspect almost alarming. Moreover, they were the most luminous optics I think I have ever seen in any human being.

“There, then, at the risk of a wearisome description, is Smith as I saw him for the first time that winter’s evening in my shabby student’s rooms in Edinburgh. And yet the real part of him, of course, I have left untouched, for it is both indescribable and un-get-atable. I have spoken already of an atmosphere of warning and aloofness he carried about with him. It is impossible further to analyse the series of little shocks his presence always communicated to my being; but there was that about him which made me instantly on the *qui vive* in his presence, every nerve alert, every sense strained and on the watch. I do not mean that he deliberately suggested danger, but rather that he brought forces in his wake which automatically warned the nervous centres of my system to be on their guard and alert.

“Since the days of my first acquaintance with this man I have lived through other experiences and have seen much I cannot pretend to explain or understand; but, so far in my life, I have only once come across a human being who suggested a disagreeable familiarity with unholy things, and who made me feel uncanny and ‘creepy’ in his presence; and that unenviable individual was Mr. Smith.

“What his occupation was during the day I never knew. I think he slept until the sun set. No one ever saw him on the stairs, or heard him move in his room during the day. He was a creature of the shadows, who apparently preferred darkness to light. Our landlady either knew nothing, or would say nothing. At any rate she found no fault, and I have since wondered often by what magic this fellow was able to convert a common landlady of a common lodging-house into a discreet and uncommunicative person. This alone was a sign of genius of some sort.

“‘He’s been here with me for years — long before you come, an’ I don’t interfere or ask no questions of what doesn’t concern me, as long as people pays their rent,’ was the only remark on the subject that I ever succeeded in winning from that quarter, and it certainly told me nothing nor gave me any encouragement to ask for further information.

“Examinations, however, and the general excitement of a medical student’s life for a time put Mr. Smith completely out of my head. For a long period he did not call upon me again, and for my part, I felt no courage to return his unsolicited visit.

“Just then, however, there came a change in the fortunes of those who controlled my very limited income, and I was obliged to give up my ground-floor and move aloft to more modest chambers on the top of the house. Here I was directly over Smith, and had to pass his door to reach my own.

“It so happened that about this time I was frequently called out at all hours of the night for the maternity cases which a fourth-year student takes at a certain period of his studies, and on returning from one of these visits at about two o’clock in the morning I was surprised to hear the sound of voices as I passed his door. A peculiar sweet odour, too, not unlike the smell of incense, penetrated into the passage.

“I went upstairs very quietly, wondering what was going on there at this hour of the morning. To my knowledge Smith never had visitors. For a moment I hesitated outside the door with one foot on the stairs. All my interest in this strange man revived, and my curiosity rose to a point not far from action. At last I might learn something of the habits of this lover of the night and the darkness.

“The sound of voices was plainly audible, Smith’s predominating so much that I never could catch more than points of sound from the other, penetrating now and then the steady stream of his voice. Not a single word reached me, at least, not a word that I could understand, though the voice was loud and distinct, and it was only afterwards that I realised he must have been speaking in a foreign language.

“The sound of footsteps, too, was equally distinct. Two persons were moving about the room, passing and repassing the door, one of them a light, agile person, and the other ponderous and somewhat awkward. Smith’s voice went on incessantly with its odd, monotonous droning, now loud, now soft, as he crossed and re-crossed the floor. The other person was also on the move, but in a different and less regular fashion, for I heard rapid steps that seemed to end sometimes in stumbling, and quick sudden movements that brought up with a violent lurching against the wall or furniture.

“As I listened to Smith’s voice, moreover, I began to feel afraid. There was something in the sound that made me feel intuitively he was in a tight place, and an impulse stirred faintly in me — very faintly, I admit — to knock at the door and inquire if he needed help.

“But long before the impulse could translate itself into an act, or even before it had been properly weighed and considered by the mind, I heard a voice close beside me in the air, a sort of hushed whisper which I am certain was Smith speaking, though the sound did not seem to have come to me through the door. It was close in my very ear, as though he stood beside me, and it gave me such a start, that I clutched the banisters to save myself from stepping backwards and making a clatter on the stairs.

“‘There is nothing you can do to help me,’ it said distinctly, ‘and you will be much safer in your own room.’

“I am ashamed to this day of the pace at which I covered the flight of stairs in the darkness to the top floor, and of the shaking hand with which I lit my candles and bolted the door. But, there it is, just as it happened.

“This midnight episode, so odd and yet so trivial in itself, fired me with more curiosity than ever about my fellow-lodger. It also made me connect him in my mind with a sense of fear and distrust. I never saw him, yet I was often, and uncomfortably, aware of his presence in the upper regions of that gloomy lodging-house. Smith and his secret mode of life and mysterious pursuits, somehow contrived to awaken in my being a line of reflection that disturbed my comfortable condition of ignorance. I never saw him, as I have said, and exchanged no sort of communication with him, yet it seemed to me that his mind was in contact with mine, and some of the strange forces of his atmosphere filtered through into my being and disturbed my equilibrium. Those upper floors became haunted for me after dark, and, though outwardly our lives never came into contact, I became unwillingly involved in certain pursuits on which his mind was centred. I felt that he was somehow making use of me against my will, and by methods which passed my comprehension.

“I was at that time, moreover, in the heavy, unquestioning state of materialism which is common to medical students when they begin to understand something of the human anatomy and nervous system, and jump at once to the conclusion that they control the universe and hold in their forceps the last word of life and death. I ‘knew it all,’ and regarded a belief in anything beyond matter as the wanderings of weak, or at best, untrained minds. And this condition of mind, of course, added to the strength of this upsetting fear which emanated from the floor below and began slowly to take possession of me.

“Though I kept no notes of the subsequent events in this matter, they made too deep an impression for me ever to forget the sequence in which they occurred. Without difficulty I can recall the next step in the adventure with Smith, for adventure it rapidly grew to be.”

The doctor stopped a moment and laid his pipe on the table behind him before continuing. The fire had burned low, and no one stirred to poke it. The silence in the great hall was so deep that when the speaker’s pipe touched the table the sound woke audible echoes at the far end among the shadows.

“One evening, while I was reading, the door of my room opened and Smith came in. He made no attempt at ceremony. It was after ten o’clock and I was tired, but the presence of the man immediately galvanised me into activity. My attempts at ordinary politeness he thrust on one side at once, and began asking me to vocalise, and then pronounce for him, certain Hebrew words; and when this was done he abruptly inquired if I was not the fortunate possessor of a very rare Rabbinical Treatise, which he named.

“How he knew that I possessed this book puzzled me exceedingly; but I was still more surprised to see him cross the room and take it out of my book-shelf almost before I had had time to answer in the affirmative. Evidently he knew exactly where it was kept. This excited my curiosity beyond all bounds, and I immediately began asking him questions; and though, out of sheer respect for the man, I put them very delicately to him, and almost by way of mere conversation, he had only one reply for the lot. He would look up at me from the pages of the book with an expression of complete comprehension on his extraordinary features, would bow his head a little and say very gravely —

“‘That, of course, is a perfectly proper question,’ — which was absolutely all I could ever get out of him.

“On this particular occasion he stayed with me perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. Then he went quickly downstairs to his room with my Hebrew Treatise in his hand, and I heard him close and bolt his door.

"But a few moments later, before I had time to settle down to my book again, or to recover from the surprise his visit had caused me, I heard the door open, and there stood Smith once again beside my chair. He made no excuse for his second interruption, but bent his head down to the level of my reading lamp and peered across the flame straight into my eyes.

"'I hope,' he whispered, 'I hope you are never disturbed at night?'

"'Eh?' I stammered, 'disturbed at night? Oh no, thanks, at least, not that I know of—'

"'I'm glad,' he replied gravely, appearing not to notice my confusion and surprise at his question. 'But, remember, should it ever be the case, please let me know at once.'

"And he was gone down the stairs and into his room again.

"For some minutes I sat reflecting upon his strange behaviour. He was not mad, I argued, but was the victim of some harmless delusion that had gradually grown upon him as a result of his solitary mode of life; and from the books he used, I judged that it had something to do with mediæval magic, or some system of ancient Hebrew mysticism. The words he asked me to pronounce for him were probably 'Words of Power,' which, when uttered with the vehemence of a strong will behind them, were supposed to produce physical results, or set up vibrations in one's own inner being that had the effect of a partial lifting of the veil.

"I sat thinking about the man, and his way of living, and the probable effects in the long-run of his dangerous experiments, and I can recall perfectly well the sensation of disappointment that crept over me when I realised that I had labelled his particular form of aberration, and that my curiosity would therefore no longer be excited.

"For some time I had been sitting alone with these reflections — it may have been ten minutes or it may have been half an hour — when I was aroused from my reverie by the knowledge that someone was again in the room standing close beside my chair. My first thought was that Smith had come back again in his swift, unaccountable manner, but almost at the same moment I realised that this could not be the case at all. For the door faced my position, and it certainly had not been opened again.

“Yet, someone was in the room, moving cautiously to and fro, watching me, almost touching me. I was as sure of it as I was of myself, and though at the moment I do not think I was actually afraid, I am bound to admit that a certain weakness came over me and that I felt that strange disinclination for action which is probably the beginning of the horrible paralysis of real terror. I should have been glad to hide myself, if that had been possible, to cower into a corner, or behind a door, or anywhere so that I could not be watched and observed.

“But, overcoming my nervousness with an effort of the will, I got up quickly out of my chair and held the reading lamp aloft so that it shone into all the corners like a searchlight.

“The room was utterly empty! It was utterly empty, at least, to the *eye*, but to the nerves, and especially to that combination of sense perception which is made up by all the senses acting together, and by no one in particular, there was a person standing there at my very elbow.

“I say ‘person,’ for I can think of no appropriate word. For, if it *was* a human being, I can only affirm that I had the overwhelming conviction that it was *not*, but that it was some form of life wholly unknown to me both as to its essence and its nature. A sensation of gigantic force and power came with it, and I remember vividly to this day my terror on realising that I was close to an invisible being who could crush me as easily as I could crush a fly, and who could see my every movement while itself remaining invisible.

“To this terror was added the certain knowledge that the ‘being’ kept in my proximity for a definite purpose. And that this purpose had some direct bearing upon my well-being, indeed upon my life, I was equally convinced; for I became aware of a sensation of growing lassitude as though the vitality were being steadily drained out of my body. My heart began to beat irregularly at first, then faintly. I was conscious, even within a few minutes, of a general drooping of the powers of life in the whole system, an ebbing away of self-control, and a distinct approach of drowsiness and torpor.

“The power to move, or to think out any mode of resistance, was fast leaving me, when there rose, in the distance as it were, a tremendous commotion. A door opened with a clatter, and I heard the peremptory and commanding tones of a human voice calling aloud in a language I could not comprehend. It was Smith, my fellow-lodger, calling up the stairs; and his voice had not sounded for more than a few seconds, when I felt something withdrawn from my presence, from my person, indeed from my *very skin*. It seemed as if there was a rushing of air and some large creature swept by me at about the level of my shoulders. Instantly the pressure on my heart was relieved, and the atmosphere seemed to resume its normal condition.

"Smith's door closed quietly downstairs, as I put the lamp down with trembling hands. What had happened I do not know; only, I was alone again and my strength was returning as rapidly as it had left me.

"I went across the room and examined myself in the glass. The skin was very pale, and the eyes dull. My temperature, I found, was a little below normal and my pulse faint and irregular. But these smaller signs of disturbance were as nothing compared with the feeling I had — though no outward signs bore testimony to the fact — that I had narrowly escaped a real and ghastly catastrophe. I felt shaken, somehow, shaken to the very roots of my being."

The doctor rose from his chair and crossed over to the dying fire, so that no one could see the expression on his face as he stood with his back to the grate, and continued his weird tale.

"It would be wearisome," he went on in a lower voice, looking over our heads as though he still saw the dingy top floor of that haunted Edinburgh lodging-house; "it would be tedious for me at this length of time to analyse my feelings, or attempt to reproduce for you the thorough examination to which I endeavoured then to subject my whole being, intellectual, emotional, and physical. I need only mention the dominant emotion with which this curious episode left me — the indignant anger against myself that I could ever have lost my self-control enough to come under the sway of so gross and absurd a delusion. This protest, however, I remember making with all the emphasis possible. And I also remember noting that it brought me very little satisfaction, for it was the protest of my reason only, when all the rest of my being was up in arms against its conclusions.

"My dealings with the 'delusion,' however, were not yet over for the night; for very early next morning, somewhere about three o'clock, I was awakened by a curiously stealthy noise in the room, and the next minute there followed a crash as if all my books had been swept bodily from their shelf on to the floor.

“But this time I was not frightened. Cursing the disturbance with all the resounding and harmless words I could accumulate, I jumped out of bed and lit the candle in a second, and in the first dazzle of the flaring match — but before the wick had time to catch — I was certain I *saw* a dark grey shadow, of ungainly shape, and with something more or less like a human head, drive rapidly past the side of the wall farthest from me and disappear into the gloom by the angle of the door.

“I waited one single second to be sure the candle was alight, and then dashed after it, but before I had gone two steps, my foot stumbled against something hard piled up on the carpet and I only just saved myself from falling headlong. I picked myself up and found that all the books from what I called my ‘language shelf’ were strewn across the floor. The room, meanwhile, as a minute’s search revealed, was quite empty. I looked in every corner and behind every stick of furniture, and a student’s bedroom on a top floor, costing twelve shillings a week, did not hold many available hiding-places, as you may imagine.

“The crash, however, was explained. Some very practical and physical force had thrown the books from their resting-place. That, at least, was beyond all doubt. And as I replaced them on the shelf and noted that not one was missing, I busied myself mentally with the sore problem of how the agent of this little practical joke had gained access to my room, and then escaped again. *For my door was locked and bolted.*

“Smith’s odd question as to whether I was disturbed in the night, and his warning injunction to let him know at once if such were the case, now of course returned to affect me as I stood there in the early morning, cold and shivering on the carpet; but I realised at the same moment how impossible it would be for me to admit that a more than usually vivid nightmare could have any connection with himself. I would rather stand a hundred of these mysterious visitations than consult such a man as to their possible cause.

“A knock at the door interrupted my reflections, and I gave a start that sent the candle grease flying.

“‘Let me in,’ came in Smith’s voice.

“I unlocked the door. He came in fully dressed. His face wore a curious pallor. It seemed to me to be under the skin and to shine through and almost make it luminous. His eyes were exceedingly bright.

"I was wondering what in the world to say to him, or how he would explain his visit at such an hour, when he closed the door behind him and came close up to me — uncomfortably close.

"'You should have called me at once,' he said in his whispering voice, fixing his great eyes on my face.

"I stammered something about an awful dream, but he ignored my remark utterly, and I caught his eye wandering next — if any movement of those optics can be described as 'wandering' — to the book-shelf. I watched him, unable to move my gaze from his person. The man fascinated me horribly for some reason. Why, in the devil's name, was he up and dressed at three in the morning? How did he know anything had happened unusual in my room? Then his whisper began again.

"'It's your amazing vitality that causes you this annoyance,' he said, shifting his eyes back to mine.

"I gasped. Something in his voice or manner turned my blood into ice.

"'That's the real attraction,' he went on. 'But if this continues one of us will have to leave, you know.'

"I positively could not find a word to say in reply. The channels of speech dried up within me. I simply stared and wondered what he would say next. I watched him in a sort of dream, and as far as I can remember, he asked me to promise to call him sooner another time, and then began to walk round the room, uttering strange sounds, and making signs with his arms and hands until he reached the door. Then he was gone in a second, and I had closed and locked the door behind him.

"After this, the Smith adventure drew rapidly to a climax. It was a week or two later, and I was coming home between two and three in the morning from a maternity case, certain features of which for the time being had very much taken possession of my mind, so much so, indeed, that I passed Smith's door without giving him a single thought.

"The gas jet on the landing was still burning, but so low that it made little impression on the waves of deep shadow that lay across the stairs. Overhead, the faintest possible gleam of grey showed that the morning was not far away. A few stars shone down through the sky-light. The house was still as the grave, and the only sound to break the silence was the rushing of the wind round the walls and over the roof. But this was a fitful sound, suddenly rising and as suddenly falling away again, and it only served to intensify the silence.

“I had already reached my own landing when I gave a violent start. It was automatic, almost a reflex action in fact, for it was only when I caught myself fumbling at the door handle and thinking where I could conceal myself quickest that I realised a voice had sounded close beside me in the air. It was the same voice I had heard before, and it seemed to me to be calling for help. And yet the very same minute I pushed on into the room, determined to disregard it, and seeking to persuade myself it was the creaking of the boards under my weight or the rushing noise of the wind that had deceived me.

“But hardly had I reached the table where the candles stood when the sound was unmistakably repeated: ‘Help! help!’ And this time it was accompanied by what I can only describe as a vivid tactile hallucination. I was touched: the *skin* of my arm was clutched by fingers.

“Some compelling force sent me headlong downstairs as if the haunting forces of the whole world were at my heels. At Smith’s door I paused. The force of his previous warning injunction to seek his aid without delay acted suddenly and I leant my whole weight against the panels, little dreaming that I should be called upon to give help rather than to receive it.

“The door yielded at once, and I burst into a room that was so full of a choking vapour, moving in slow clouds, that at first I could distinguish nothing at all but a set of what seemed to be huge shadows passing in and out of the mist. Then, gradually, I perceived that a red lamp on the mantelpiece gave all the light there was, and that the room which I now entered for the first time was almost empty of furniture.

“The carpet was rolled back and piled in a heap in the corner, and upon the white boards of the floor I noticed a large circle drawn in black of some material that emitted a faint glowing light and was apparently smoking. Inside this circle, as well as at regular intervals outside it, were curious-looking designs, also traced in the same black, smoking substance. These, too, seemed to emit a feeble light of their own.

“My first impression on entering the room had been that it was full of — *people*, I was going to say; but that hardly expresses my meaning. *Beings*, they certainly were, but it was borne in upon me beyond the possibility of doubt, that they were not human beings. That I had caught a momentary glimpse of living, intelligent entities I can never doubt, but I am equally convinced, though I cannot prove it, that these entities were from some other scheme of evolution altogether, and had nothing to do with the ordinary human life, either incarnate or discarnate.

“But, whatever they were, the visible appearance of them was exceedingly fleeting. I no longer saw anything, though I still felt convinced of their immediate presence. They were, moreover, of the same order of life as the visitant in my bedroom of a few nights before, and their proximity to my atmosphere in numbers, instead of singly as before, conveyed to my mind something that was quite terrible and overwhelming. I fell into a violent trembling, and the perspiration poured from my face in streams.

“They were in constant motion about me. They stood close to my side; moved behind me; brushed past my shoulder; stirred the hair on my forehead; and circled round me without ever actually touching me, yet always pressing closer and closer. Especially in the air just over my head there seemed ceaseless movement, and it was accompanied by a confused noise of whispering and sighing that threatened every moment to become articulate in words. To my intense relief, however, I heard no distinct words, and the noise continued more like the rising and falling of the wind than anything else I can imagine.

“But the characteristic of these ‘Beings’ that impressed me most strongly at the time, and of which I have carried away the most permanent recollection, was that each one of them possessed what seemed to be a *vibrating centre* which impelled it with tremendous force and caused a rapid whirling motion of the atmosphere as it passed me. The air was full of these little vortices of whirring, rotating force, and whenever one of them pressed me too closely I felt as if the nerves in that particular portion of my body had been literally drawn out, absolutely depleted of vitality, and then immediately replaced — but replaced dead, flabby, useless.

“Then, suddenly, for the first time my eyes fell upon Smith. He was crouching against the wall on my right, in an attitude that was obviously defensive, and it was plain he was in extremities. The terror on his face was pitiable, but at the same time there was another expression about the tightly clenched teeth and mouth which showed that he had not lost all control of himself. He wore the most resolute expression I have ever seen on a human countenance, and, though for the moment at a fearful disadvantage, he looked like a man who had confidence in himself, and, in spite of the working of fear, was waiting his opportunity.

“For my part, I was face to face with a situation so utterly beyond my knowledge and comprehension, that I felt as helpless as a child, and as useless.

“‘Help me back — quick — into that circle,’ I heard him half cry, half whisper to me across the moving vapours.

“My only value appears to have been that I was not afraid to act. Knowing nothing of the forces I was dealing with I had no idea of the deadly perils risked, and I sprang forward and caught him by the arms. He threw all his weight in my direction, and by our combined efforts his body left the wall and lurched across the floor towards the circle.

“Instantly there descended upon us, out of the empty air of that smoke-laden room, a force which I can only compare to the pushing, driving power of a great wind pent up within a narrow space. It was almost explosive in its effect, and it seemed to operate upon all parts of my body equally. It fell upon us with a rushing noise that filled my ears and made me think for a moment the very walls and roof of the building had been torn asunder. Under its first blow we staggered back against the wall, and I understood plainly that its purpose was to prevent us getting back into the circle in the middle of the floor.

“Pouring with perspiration, and breathless, with every muscle strained to the very utmost, we at length managed to get to the edge of the circle, and at this moment, so great was the opposing force, that I felt myself actually torn from Smith’s arms, lifted from my feet, and twirled round in the direction of the windows as if the wheel of some great machine had caught my clothes and was tearing me to destruction in its revolution.

“But, even as I fell, bruised and breathless, against the wall, I saw Smith firmly upon his feet in the circle and slowly rising again to an upright position. My eyes never left his figure once in the next few minutes.

“He drew himself up to his full height. His great shoulders squared themselves. His head was thrown back a little, and as I looked I saw the expression on his face change swiftly from fear to one of absolute command. He looked steadily round the room and then his voice began to *vibrate*. At first in a low tone, it gradually rose till it assumed the same volume and intensity I had heard that night when he called up the stairs into my room.

“It was a curiously increasing sound, more like the swelling of an instrument than a human voice; and as it grew in power and filled the room, I became aware that a great change was being effected slowly and surely. The confusion of noise and rushings of air fell into the roll of long, steady vibrations not unlike those caused by the deeper pedals of an organ. The movements in the air became less violent, then grew decidedly weaker, and finally ceased altogether. The whisperings and sighings became fainter and fainter, till at last I could not hear them at all; and, strangest of all, the light emitted by the circle, as well as by the designs round it, increased to a steady glow, casting their radiance upwards with the weirdest possible effect upon his features. Slowly, by the power of his voice, behind which lay undoubtedly a genuine knowledge of the occult manipulation of sound, this man dominated the forces that had escaped from their proper sphere, until at length the room was reduced to silence and perfect order again.

“Judging by the immense relief which also communicated itself to my nerves I then felt that the crisis was over and Smith was wholly master of the situation.

“But hardly had I begun to congratulate myself upon this result, and to gather my scattered senses about me, when, uttering a loud cry, I saw him leap out of the circle and fling himself into the air — as it seemed to me, into the empty air. Then, even while holding my breath for dread of the crash he was bound to come upon the floor, I saw him strike with a dull thud against a solid body in mid-air, and the next instant he was wrestling with some ponderous thing that was absolutely invisible to me, and the room shook with the struggle.

“To and fro *they* swayed, sometimes lurching in one direction, sometimes in another, and always in horrible proximity to myself, as I leaned trembling against the wall and watched the encounter.

“It lasted at most but a short minute or two, ending as suddenly as it had begun. Smith, with an unexpected movement, threw up his arms with a cry of relief. At the same instant there was a wild, tearing shriek in the air beside me and something rushed past us with a noise like the passage of a flock of big birds. Both windows rattled as if they would break away from their sashes. Then a sense of emptiness and peace suddenly came over the room, and I knew that all was over.

“Smith, his face exceedingly white, but otherwise strangely composed, turned to me at once.

“‘God! — if you hadn’t come — You deflected the stream; broke it up—’ he whispered. ‘You saved me.’”

The doctor made a long pause. Presently he felt for his pipe in the darkness, groping over the table behind us with both hands. No one spoke for a bit, but all dreaded the sudden glare that would come when he struck the match. The fire was nearly out and the great hall was pitch dark.

But the story-teller did not strike that match. He was merely gaining time for some hidden reason of his own. And presently he went on with his tale in a more subdued voice.

“I quite forget,” he said, “how I got back to my own room. I only know that I lay with two lighted candles for the rest of the night, and the first thing I did in the morning was to let the landlady know I was leaving her house at the end of the week.

“Smith still has my Rabbinical Treatise. At least he did not return it to me at the time, and I have never seen him since to ask for it.”

A SUSPICIOUS GIFT

BLAKE HAD BEEN in very low water for months — almost under water part of the time — due to circumstances he was fond of saying were no fault of his own; and as he sat writing in his room on "third floor back" of a New York boarding-house, part of his mind was busily occupied in wondering when his luck was going to turn again.

It was his room only in the sense that he paid the rent. Two friends, one a little Frenchman and the other a big Dane, shared it with him, both hoping eventually to contribute something towards expenses, but so far not having accomplished this result. They had two beds only, the third being a mattress they slept upon in turns, a week at a time. A good deal of their irregular "feeding" consisted of oatmeal, potatoes, and sometimes eggs, all of which they cooked on a strange utensil they had contrived to fix into the gas jet. Occasionally, when dinner failed them altogether, they swallowed a little raw rice and drank hot water from the bathroom on the top of it, and then made a wild race for bed so as to get to sleep while the sensation of false repletion was still there. For sleep and hunger are slight acquaintances as they well knew. Fortunately all New York houses are supplied with hot air, and they only had to open a grating in the wall to get a plentiful, if not a wholesome amount of heat.

Though loneliness in a big city is a real punishment, as they had severally learnt to their cost, their experiences, three in a small room for several months, had revealed to them horrors of quite another kind, and their nerves had suffered according to the temperament of each. But, on this particular evening, as Blake sat scribbling by the only window that was not cracked, the Dane and the Frenchman, his companions in adversity, were in wonderful luck. They had both been asked out to a restaurant to dine with a friend who also held out to one of them a chance of work and remuneration. They would not be back till late, and when they did come they were pretty sure to bring in supplies of one kind or another. For the Frenchman never could resist the offer of a glass of absinthe, and this meant that he would be able to help himself plentifully from the free-lunch counters, with which all

New York bars are furnished, and to which any purchaser of a drink is entitled to help himself and devour on the spot or carry away casually in his hand for consumption elsewhere. Thousands of unfortunate men get their sole subsistence in this way in New York, and experience soon teaches where, for the price of a single drink, a man can take away almost a meal of chip potatoes, sausage, bits of bread, and even eggs. The Frenchman and the Dane knew their way about, and Blake looked forward to a supper more or less substantial before pulling his mattress out of the cupboard and turning in upon the floor for the night.

Meanwhile he could enjoy a quiet and lonely evening with the room all to himself.

In the daytime he was a reporter on an evening newspaper of sensational and lying habits. His work was chiefly in the police courts; and in his spare hours at night, when not too tired or too empty, he wrote sketches and stories for the magazines that very rarely saw the light of day on their printed and paid-for sentences. On this particular occasion he was deep in a most involved tale of a psychological character, and had just worked his way into a sentence, or set of sentences, that completely baffled and muddled him.

He was fairly out of his depth, and his brain was too poorly supplied with blood to invent a way out again. The story would have been interesting had he written it simply, keeping to facts and feelings, and not diving into difficult analysis of motive and character which was quite beyond him. For it was largely autobiographical, and was meant to describe the adventures of a young Englishman who had come to grief in the usual manner on a Canadian farm, had then subsequently become bar-keeper, sub-editor on a Methodist magazine, a teacher of French and German to clerks at twenty-five cents per hour, a model for artists, a super on the stage, and, finally, a wanderer to the goldfields.

Blake scratched his head, and dipped the pen in the inkpot, stared out through the blindless windows, and sighed deeply. His thoughts kept wandering to food, beefsteak and steaming vegetables. The smell of cooking that came from a lower floor through the broken windows was a constant torment to him. He pulled himself together and again attacked the problem.

“ . . . for with some people,” he wrote, “the imagination is so vivid as to be almost an extension of consciousness. . . .” But here he stuck absolutely. He was not quite sure what he meant by the words, and how to finish the sentence puzzled him into blank inaction. It was a difficult point to decide, for it seemed to come in appropriately at this point in his story, and he did not know whether to leave it as it stood, change it round a bit, or take it out altogether. It might just spoil its chances of being accepted: editors were such clever men. But, to rewrite the sentence was a grind, and he was so tired and sleepy. After all, what did it matter? People who were clever would force a meaning into it; people who were not clever would pretend — he knew of no other classes of readers. He would let it stay, and go on with the action of the story. He put his head in his hands and began to think hard.

His mind soon passed from thought to reverie. He fell to wondering when his friends would find work and relieve him of the burden — he acknowledged it as such — of keeping them, and of letting another man wear his best clothes on alternate Sundays. He wondered when his “luck” would turn. There were one or two influential people in New York whom he could go and see if he had a dress suit and the other conventional uniforms. His thoughts ran on far ahead, and at the same time, by a sort of double process, far behind as well. His home in the “old country” rose up before him; he saw the lawn and the cedars in sunshine; he looked through the familiar windows and saw the clean, swept rooms. His story began to suffer; the psychological masterpiece would not make much progress unless he pulled up and dragged his thoughts back to the treadmill. But he no longer cared; once he had got as far as that cedar with the sunshine on it, he never could get back again. For all he cared, the troublesome sentence might run away and get into someone else’s pages, or be snuffed out altogether.

There came a gentle knock at the door, and Blake started. The knock was repeated louder. Who in the world could it be at this late hour of the night? On the floor above, he remembered, there lived another Englishman, a foolish, second-rate creature, who sometimes came in and made himself objectionable with endless and silly chatter. But he was an Englishman for all that, and Blake always tried to treat him with politeness, realising that he was lonely in a strange land. But to-night, of all people in the world, he did not want to be bored with Perry's cackle, as he called it, and the "Come in" he gave in answer to the second knock had no very cordial sound of welcome in it.

However, the door opened in response, and the man came in. Blake did not turn round at once, and the other advanced to the centre of the room, but *without speaking*. Then Blake knew it was not his enemy, Perry, and turned round.

He saw a man of about forty standing in the middle of the carpet, but standing sideways so that he did not present a full face. He wore an overcoat buttoned up to the neck, and on the felt hat which he held in front of him fresh rain-drops glistened. In his other hand he carried a small black bag. Blake gave him a good look, and came to the conclusion that he might be a secretary, or a chief clerk, or a confidential man of sorts. He was a shabby-respectable-looking person. This was the sum-total of the first impression, gained the moment his eyes took in that it was *not* Perry; the second impression was less pleasant, and reported at once that something was wrong.

Though otherwise young and inexperienced, Blake — thanks, or curses, to the police court training — knew more about common criminal blackguardism than most men of fifty, and he recognised that there was somewhere a suggestion of this undesirable world about the man. But there was more than this. There was something singular about him, something far out of the common, though for the life of him Blake could not say wherein it lay. The fellow was out of the ordinary, and in some very undesirable manner.

All this, that takes so long to describe, Blake saw with the first and second glance. The man at once began to speak in a quiet and respectful voice.

"Are you Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"I am."

"Mr. Arthur Blake?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Arthur *Herbert* Blake?" persisted the other, with emphasis on the middle name.

"That is my full name," Blake answered simply, adding, as he remembered his manners; "but won't you sit down, first, please?"

The man advanced with a curious sideways motion like a crab and took a seat on the edge of the sofa. He put his hat on the floor at his feet, but still kept the bag in his hand.

"I come to you from a well-wisher," he went on in oily tones, without lifting his eyes. Blake, in his mind, ran quickly over all the people he knew in New York who might possibly have sent such a man, while waiting for him to supply the name. But the man had come to a full stop and was waiting too.

"A well-wisher of *mine*?" repeated Blake, not knowing quite what else to say.

"Just so," replied the other, still with his eyes on the floor. "A well-wisher of yours."

"A man or—" he felt himself blushing, "or a woman?"

"That," said the man shortly, "I cannot tell you."

"You can't tell me!" exclaimed the other, wondering what was coming next, and who in the world this mysterious well-wisher could be who sent so discreet and mysterious a messenger.

"I cannot tell you the name," replied the man firmly. "Those are my instructions. But I bring you something from this person, and I am to give it to you, to take a receipt for it, and then to go away without answering any questions."

Blake stared very hard. The man, however, never raised his eyes above the level of the second china knob on the chest of drawers opposite. The giving of a receipt sounded like money. Could it be that some of his influential friends had heard of his plight? There were possibilities that made his heart beat. At length, however, he found his tongue, for this strange creature was determined apparently to say nothing more until he had heard from him.

"Then, what have you got for me, please?" he asked bluntly.

By way of answer the man proceeded to open the bag. He took out a parcel wrapped loosely in brown paper, and about the size of a large book. It was tied with string, and the man seemed unnecessarily long untying the knot. When at last the string was off and the paper unfolded, there appeared a series of smaller packages inside. The man took them out very carefully, almost as if they had been alive, Blake thought, and set them in a row upon his knees. They were dollar bills. Blake, all in a flutter, craned his neck forward a little to try and make out their denomination. He read plainly the figures 100.

“There are ten thousand dollars here,” said the man quietly.

The other could not suppress a little cry.

“And they are for you.”

Blake simply gasped. “Ten thousand dollars!” he repeated, a queer feeling growing up in his throat. “*Ten thousand.* Are you sure? I mean — you mean they are for *me*?” he stammered. He felt quite silly with excitement, and grew more so with every minute, as the man maintained a perfect silence. Was it not a dream? Wouldn’t the man put them back in the bag presently and say it was a mistake, and they were meant for somebody else? He could not believe his eyes or his ears. Yet, in a sense, it was possible. He had read of such things in books, and even come across them in his experience of the courts — the erratic and generous philanthropist who is determined to do his good deed and to get no thanks or acknowledgment for it. Still, it seemed almost incredible. His troubles began to melt away like bubbles in the sun; he thought of the other fellows when they came in, and what he would have to tell them; he thought of the German landlady and the arrears of rent, of regular food and clean linen, and books and music, of the chance of getting into some respectable business, of — well, of as many things as it is possible to think of when excitement and surprise fling wide open the gates of the imagination.

The man, meanwhile, began quietly to count over the packages aloud from one to ten, and then to count the bills in each separate packet, also from one to ten. Yes, there were ten little heaps, each containing ten bills of a hundred-dollar denomination. That made ten thousand dollars. Blake had never seen so much money in a single lump in his life before; and for many months of privation and discomfort he had not known the “feel” of a twenty-dollar note, much less of a hundred-dollar one. He heard them crackle under the man’s fingers, and it was like crisp laughter in his ears. The bills were evidently new and unused.

But, side by side with the excitement caused by the shock of such an event, Blake’s caution, acquired by a year of vivid New York experience, was meanwhile beginning to assert itself. It all seemed just a little too much out of the likely order of things to be quite right. The police courts had taught him the amazing ingenuity of the criminal mind, as well as something of the plots and devices by which the unwary are beguiled into the dark places where blackmail may be levied with impunity. New York, as a matter of fact, just at that time was literally undermined with the secret ways of the blackmailers, the green-goods men, and other police-protected abominations; and the only weak point in the supposition that this was part of some such proceeding was the selection of himself — a poor newspaper reporter — as a victim. It did seem absurd, but then the whole thing was so out of the ordinary, and the thought once having entered his mind, was not so easily got rid of. Blake resolved to be very cautious.

The man meanwhile, though he never appeared to raise his eyes from the carpet, had been watching him closely all the time.

“If you will give me a receipt I’ll leave the money at once,” he said, with just a vestige of impatience in his tone, as if he were anxious to bring the matter to a conclusion as soon as possible.

“But you say it is quite impossible for you to tell me the name of my well-wisher, or why *she* sends me such a large sum of money in this extraordinary way?”

“The money is sent to you because you are in need of it,” returned the other; “and it is a present without conditions of any sort attached. You have to give me a receipt only to satisfy the sender that it has reached your hands. The money will never be asked of you again.”

Blake noticed two things from this answer: first, that the man was not to be caught into betraying the sex of the well-wisher; and secondly, that he was in some hurry to complete the transaction. For he was now giving reasons, attractive reasons, why he should accept the money and make out the receipt.

Suddenly it flashed across his mind that if he took the money and gave the receipt *before a witness*, nothing very disastrous could come of the affair. It would protect him against blackmail, if this was, after all, a plot of some sort with blackmail in it; whereas, if the man were a madman, or a criminal who was getting rid of a portion of his ill-gotten gains to divert suspicion, or if any other improbable explanation turned out to be the true one, there was no great harm done, and he could hold the money till it was claimed, or advertised for in the newspapers. His mind rapidly ran over these possibilities, though, of course, under the stress of excitement, he was unable to weigh any of them properly; then he turned to his strange visitor again and said quietly —

“I will take the money, although I must say it seems to me a very unusual transaction, and I will give you for it such a receipt as I think proper under the circumstances.”

“A proper receipt is all I want,” was the answer.

“I mean by that a receipt before a proper witness—”

“Perfectly satisfactory,” interrupted the man, his eyes still on the carpet. “Only, it must be dated, and headed with your address here in the correct way.”

Blake could see no possible objection to this, and he at once proceeded to obtain his witness. The person he had in his mind was a Mr. Barclay, who occupied the room above his own; an old gentleman who had retired from business and who, the landlady always said, was a miser, and kept large sums secreted in his room. He was, at any rate, a perfectly respectable man and would make an admirable witness to a transaction of this sort. Blake made an apology and rose to fetch him, crossing the room in front of the sofa where the man sat, in order to reach the door. As he did so, he saw for the first time the *other side* of his visitor’s face, the side that had been always so carefully turned away from him.

There was a broad smear of blood down the skin from the ear to the neck. It glistened in the gaslight.

Blake never knew how he managed to smother the cry that sprang to his lips, but smother it he did. In a second he was at the door, his knees trembling, his mind in a sudden and dreadful turmoil.

His main object, so far as he could recollect afterwards, was to escape from the room as if he had noticed nothing, so as not to arouse the other’s suspicions. The man’s eyes were always on the carpet, and probably, Blake hoped, he had not noticed the consternation that must have been written plainly on his face. At any rate he had uttered no cry.

In another second he would have been in the passage, when suddenly he met a pair of wicked, staring eyes fixed intently and with a cunning smile upon his own. It was the other’s face in the mirror calmly watching his every movement.

Instantly, all his powers of reflection flew to the winds, and he thought only upon the desirability of getting help at once. He tore upstairs, his heart in his mouth. Barclay must come to his aid. This matter was serious — perhaps horribly serious. Taking the money, or giving a receipt, or having anything at all to do with it became an impossibility. Here was crime. He felt certain of it.

In three bounds he reached the next landing and began to hammer at the old miser’s door as if his very life depended on it. For a long time he could get no answer. His fists seemed to make no noise. He might have been knocking on cotton wool, and the thought dashed through his brain that it was all just like the terror of a nightmare.

Barclay, evidently, was still out, or else sound asleep. But the other simply could not wait a minute longer in suspense. He turned the handle and walked into the room. At first he saw nothing for the darkness, and made sure the owner of the room was out; but the moment the light from the passage began a little to disperse the gloom, he saw the old man, to his immense relief, lying asleep on the bed.

Blake opened the door to its widest to get more light and then walked quickly up to the bed. He now saw the figure more plainly, and noted that it was dressed and lay only upon the outside of the bed. It struck him, too, that he was sleeping in a very odd, almost an unnatural, position.

Something clutched at his heart as he looked closer. He stumbled over a chair and found the matches. Calling upon Barclay the whole time to wake up and come downstairs with him, he blundered across the floor, a dreadful thought in his mind, and lit the gas over the table. It seemed strange that there was no movement or reply to his shouting. But it no longer seemed strange when at length he turned, in the full glare of the gas, and saw the old man lying huddled up into a ghastly heap on the bed, his throat cut across from ear to ear.

And all over the carpet lay new dollar bills, crisp and clean like those he had left downstairs, and strewn about in little heaps.

For a moment Blake stood stock-still, bereft of all power of movement. The next, his courage returned, and he fled from the room and dashed downstairs, taking five steps at a time. He reached the bottom and tore along the passage to his room, determined at any rate to seize the man and prevent his escape till help came.

But when he got to the end of the little landing he found that his door had been closed. He seized the handle, fumbling with it in his violence. It felt slippery and kept turning under his fingers without opening the door, and fully half a minute passed before it yielded and let him in headlong.

At the first glance he saw the room was empty, and the man gone!

Scattered upon the carpet lay a number of the bills, and beside them, half hidden under the sofa where the man had sat, he saw a pair of gloves — thick, leathern gloves — and a butcher’s knife. Even from the distance where he stood the blood-stains on both were easily visible.

Dazed and confused by the terrible discoveries of the last few minutes, Blake stood in the middle of the room, overwhelmed and unable to think or move. Unconsciously he must have passed his hand over his forehead in the natural gesture of perplexity, for he noticed that the skin felt wet and sticky. His hand was covered with blood! And when he rushed in terror to the looking-glass, he saw that there was a broad red smear across his face and forehead. Then he remembered the slippery handle of the door and knew that it had been carefully moistened!

In an instant the whole plot became clear as daylight, and he was so spellbound with horror that a sort of numbness came over him and he came very near to fainting. He was in a condition of utter helplessness, and had anyone come into the room at that minute and called him by name he would simply have dropped to the floor in a heap.

“If the police were to come in now!” The thought crashed through his brain like thunder, and at the same moment, almost before he had time to appreciate a quarter of its significance, there came a loud knocking at the front door below. The bell rang with a dreadful clamour; men’s voices were heard talking excitedly, and presently heavy steps began to come up the stairs in the direction of his room.

It *was* the police!

And all Blake could do was to laugh foolishly to himself — and wait till they were upon him. He could not move nor speak. He stood face to face with the evidence of his horrid crime, his hands and face smeared with the blood of his victim, and there he was standing when the police burst open the door and came noisily into the room.

“Here it is!” cried a voice he knew. “Third floor back! And the fellow caught red-handed!”

It was the man with the bag leading in the two policemen.

Hardly knowing what he was doing in the fearful stress of conflicting emotions, he made a step forward. But before he had time to make a second one, he felt the heavy hand of the law descend upon both shoulders at once as the two policemen moved up to seize him. At the same moment a voice of thunder cried in his ear —

“Wake up, man! Wake up! Here’s the supper, and good news too!”

Blake turned with a start in his chair and saw the Dane, very red in the face, standing beside him, a hand on each shoulder, and a little further back he saw the Frenchman leering happily at him over the end of the bed, a bottle of beer in one hand and a paper package in the other.

He rubbed his eyes, glancing from one to the other, and then got up sleepily to fix the wire arrangement on the gas jet to boil water for cooking the eggs which the Frenchman was in momentary danger of letting drop upon the floor.

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY IN NEW YORK

I

IT WAS NEVER quite clear to me how Jim Shorthouse managed to get his private secretaryship; but, once he got it, he kept it, and for some years he led a steady life and put money in the savings bank.

One morning his employer sent for him into the study, and it was evident to the secretary's trained senses that there was something unusual in the air.

"Mr. Shorthouse," he began, somewhat nervously, "I have never yet had the opportunity of observing whether or not you are possessed of personal courage."

Shorthouse gasped, but he said nothing. He was growing accustomed to the eccentricities of his chief. Shorthouse was a Kentish man; Sidebotham was "raised" in Chicago; New York was the present place of residence.

"But," the other continued, with a puff at his very black cigar, "I must consider myself a poor judge of human nature in future, if it is not one of your strongest qualities."

The private secretary made a foolish little bow in modest appreciation of so uncertain a compliment. Mr. Jonas B. Sidebotham watched him narrowly, as the novelists say, before he continued his remarks.

"I have no doubt that you are a plucky fellow and—" He hesitated, and puffed at his cigar as if his life depended upon it keeping alight.

"I don't think I'm afraid of anything in particular, sir — except women," interposed the young man, feeling that it was time for him to make an observation of some sort, but still quite in the dark as to his chief's purpose.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Well, there are no women in this case so far as I know. But there may be other things that — that hurt more."

"Wants a special service of some kind, evidently," was the secretary's reflection. "Personal violence?" he asked aloud.

"Possibly (puff), in fact (puff, puff) probably."

Shorthouse smelt an increase of salary in the air. It had a stimulating effect.

"I've had some experience of that article, sir," he said shortly; "but I'm ready to undertake anything in reason."

"I can't say how much reason or unreason there may prove to be in this particular case. It all depends."

Mr. Sidebotham got up and locked the door of his study and drew down the blinds of both windows. Then he took a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened a black tin box. He ferreted about among blue and white papers for a few seconds, enveloping himself as he did so in a cloud of blue tobacco smoke.

"I feel like a detective already," Shorthouse laughed.

"Speak low, please," returned the other, glancing round the room. "We must observe the utmost secrecy. Perhaps you would be kind enough to close the registers," he went on in a still lower voice. "Open registers have betrayed conversations before now."

Shorthouse began to enter into the spirit of the thing. He tiptoed across the floor and shut the two iron gratings in the wall that in American houses supply hot air and are termed "registers." Mr. Sidebotham had meanwhile found the paper he was looking for. He held it in front of him and tapped it once or twice with the back of his right hand as if it were a stage letter and himself the villain of the melodrama.

"This is a letter from Joel Garvey, my old partner," he said at length. "You have heard me speak of him."

The other bowed. He knew that many years before Garvey & Sidebotham had been well known in the Chicago financial world. He knew that the amazing rapidity with which they accumulated a fortune had only been surpassed by the amazing rapidity with which they had immediately afterwards disappeared into space. He was further aware — his position afforded facilities — that each partner was still to some extent in the other's power, and that each wished most devoutly that the other would die.

The sins of his employer’s early years did not concern him, however. The man was kind and just, if eccentric; and Shorthouse, being in New York, did not probe to discover more particularly the sources whence his salary was so regularly paid. Moreover, the two men had grown to like each other and there was a genuine feeling of trust and respect between them.

“I hope it’s a pleasant communication, sir,” he said in a low voice.

“Quite the reverse,” returned the other, fingering the paper nervously as he stood in front of the fire.

“Blackmail, I suppose.”

“Precisely.” Mr. Sidebotham’s cigar was not burning well; he struck a match and applied it to the uneven edge, and presently his voice spoke through clouds of wreathing smoke.

“There are valuable papers in my possession bearing his signature. I cannot inform you of their nature; but they are extremely valuable *to me*. They belong, as a matter of fact, to Garvey as much as to me. Only I’ve got them —”

“I see.”

“Garvey writes that he wants to have his signature removed — wants to cut it out with his own hand. He gives reasons which incline me to consider his request—”

“And you would like me to take him the papers and see that he does it?”

“And bring them back again with you,” he whispered, screwing up his eyes into a shrewd grimace.

“And bring them back again with me,” repeated the secretary. “I understand perfectly.”

Shorthouse knew from unfortunate experience more than a little of the horrors of blackmail. The pressure Garvey was bringing to bear upon his old enemy must be exceedingly strong. That was quite clear. At the same time, the commission that was being entrusted to him seemed somewhat quixotic in its nature. He had already “enjoyed” more than one experience of his employer’s eccentricity, and he now caught himself wondering whether this same eccentricity did not sometimes go — further than eccentricity.

“I cannot read the letter to you,” Mr. Sidebotham was explaining, “but I shall give it into your hands. It will prove that you are my — er — my accredited representative. I shall also ask you not to read the package of papers. The signature in question you will find, of course, on the last page, at the bottom.”

There was a pause of several minutes during which the end of the cigar glowed eloquently.

“Circumstances compel me,” he went on at length almost in a whisper, “or I should never do this. But you understand, of course, the thing is a ruse. Cutting out the signature is a mere pretence. It is nothing. *What Garvey wants are the papers themselves.*”

The confidence reposed in the private secretary was not misplaced. Shorthouse was as faithful to Mr. Sidebotham as a man ought to be to the wife that loves him.

The commission itself seemed very simple. Garvey lived in solitude in the remote part of Long Island. Shorthouse was to take the papers to him, witness the cutting out of the signature, and to be specially on his guard against any attempt, forcible or otherwise, to gain possession of them. It seemed to him a somewhat ludicrous adventure, but he did not know all the facts and perhaps was not the best judge.

The two men talked in low voices for another hour, at the end of which Mr. Sidebotham drew up the blinds, opened the registers and unlocked the door.

Shorthouse rose to go. His pockets were stuffed with papers and his head with instructions; but when he reached the door he hesitated and turned.

“Well?” said his chief.

Shorthouse looked him straight in the eye and said nothing.

“The personal violence, I suppose?” said the other. Shorthouse bowed.

“I have not seen Garvey for twenty years,” he said; “all I can tell you is that I believe him to be occasionally of unsound mind. I have heard strange rumours. He lives alone, and in his lucid intervals studies chemistry. It was always a hobby of his. But the chances are twenty to one against his attempting violence. I only wished to warn you — in case — I mean, so that you may be on the watch."

He handed his secretary a Smith and Wesson revolver as he spoke. Shorthouse slipped it into his hip pocket and went out of the room.

* * *

A drizzling cold rain was falling on fields covered with half-melted snow when Shorthouse stood, late in the afternoon, on the platform of the lonely little Long Island station and watched the train he had just left vanish into the distance.

It was a bleak country that Joel Garvey, Esq., formerly of Chicago, had chosen for his residence and on this particular afternoon it presented a more than usually dismal appearance. An expanse of flat fields covered with dirty snow stretched away on all sides till the sky dropped down to meet them. Only occasional farm buildings broke the monotony, and the road wound along muddy lanes and beneath dripping trees swathed in the cold raw fog that swept in like a pall of the dead from the sea.

It was six miles from the station to Garvey's house, and the driver of the rickety buggy Shorthouse had found at the station was not communicative. Between the dreary landscape and the drearier driver he fell back upon his own thoughts, which, but for the spice of adventure that was promised, would themselves have been even drearier than either. He made up his mind that he would waste no time over the transaction. The moment the signature was cut out he would pack up and be off. The last train back to Brooklyn was 7.15; and he would have to walk the six miles of mud and snow, for the driver of the buggy had refused point-blank to wait for him.

For purposes of safety, Shorthouse had done what he flattered himself was rather a clever thing. He had made up a second packet of papers identical in outside appearance with the first. The inscription, the blue envelope, the red elastic band, and even a blot in the lower left-hand corner had been exactly reproduced. Inside, of course, were only sheets of blank paper. It was his intention to change the packets and to let Garvey see him put the sham one into the bag. In case of violence the bag would be the point of attack, and he intended to lock it and throw away the key. Before it could be forced open and the deception discovered there would be time to increase his chances of escape with the real packet.

It was five o'clock when the silent Jehu pulled up in front of a half-broken gate and pointed with his whip to a house that stood in its own grounds among trees and was just visible in the gathering gloom. Shorthouse told him to drive up to the front door but the man refused.

"I ain't runnin' no risks," he said; "I've got a family."

This cryptic remark was not encouraging, but Shorthouse did not pause to decipher it. He paid the man, and then pushed open the rickety old gate swinging on a single hinge, and proceeded to walk up the drive that lay dark between close-standing trees. The house soon came into full view. It was tall and square and had once evidently been white, but now the walls were covered with dirty patches and there were wide yellow streaks where the plaster had fallen away. The windows stared black and uncompromising into the night. The garden was overgrown with weeds and long grass, standing up in ugly patches beneath their burden of wet snow. Complete silence reigned over all. There was not a sign of life. Not even a dog barked. Only, in the distance, the wheels of the retreating carriage could be heard growing fainter and fainter.

As he stood in the porch, between pillars of rotting wood, listening to the rain dripping from the roof into the puddles of slushy snow, he was conscious of a sensation of utter desertion and loneliness such as he had never before experienced. The forbidding aspect of the house had the immediate effect of lowering his spirits. It might well have been the abode of monsters or demons in a child's wonder tale, creatures that only dared to come out under cover of darkness. He groped for the bell-handle, or knocker, and finding neither, he raised his stick and beat a loud tattoo on the door. The sound echoed away in an empty space on the other side and the wind moaned past him between the pillars as if startled at his audacity. But there was no sound of approaching footsteps and no one came to open the door. Again he beat a tattoo, louder and longer than the first one; and, having done so, waited with his back to the house and stared across the unkempt garden into the fast gathering shadows.

Then he turned suddenly, and saw that the door was standing ajar. It had been quietly opened and a pair of eyes were peering at him round the edge.

There was no light in the hall beyond and he could only just make out the shape of a dim human face.

“Does Mr. Garvey live here?” he asked in a firm voice.

“Who are you?” came in a man’s tones.

“I’m Mr. Sidebotham’s private secretary. I wish to see Mr. Garvey on important business.”

“Are you expected?”

“I suppose so,” he said impatiently, thrusting a card through the opening. “Please take my name to him at once, and say I come from Mr. Sidebotham on the matter Mr. Garvey wrote about.”

The man took the card, and the face vanished into the darkness, leaving Shorthouse standing in the cold porch with mingled feelings of impatience and dismay. The door, he now noticed for the first time, was on a chain and could not open more than a few inches. But it was the manner of his reception that caused uneasy reflections to stir within him — reflections that continued for some minutes before they were interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps and the flicker of a light in the hall.

The next instant the chain fell with a rattle, and gripping his bag tightly, he walked into a large ill-smelling hall of which he could only just see the ceiling. There was no light but the nickering taper held by the man, and by its uncertain glimmer Shorthouse turned to examine him. He saw an undersized man of middle age with brilliant, shifting eyes, a curling black beard, and a nose that at once proclaimed him a Jew. His shoulders were bent, and, as he watched him replacing the chain, he saw that he wore a peculiar black gown like a priest’s cassock reaching to the feet. It was altogether a lugubrious figure of a man, sinister and funereal, yet it seemed in perfect harmony with the general character of its surroundings. The hall was devoid of furniture of any kind, and against the dingy walls stood rows of old picture frames, empty and disordered, and odd-looking bits of woodwork that appeared doubly fantastic as their shadows danced queerly over the floor in the shifting light.

“If you’ll come this way, Mr. Garvey will see you presently,” said the Jew gruffly, crossing the floor and shielding the taper with a bony hand. He never once raised his eyes above the level of the visitor’s waistcoat, and, to

Shorthouse, he somehow suggested a figure from the dead rather than a man of flesh and blood. The hall smelt decidedly ill.

All the more surprising, then, was the scene that met his eyes when the Jew opened the door at the further end and he entered a room brilliantly lit with swinging lamps and furnished with a degree of taste and comfort that amounted to luxury. The walls were lined with handsomely bound books, and armchairs were arranged round a large mahogany desk in the middle of the room. A bright fire burned in the grate and neatly framed photographs of men and women stood on the mantelpiece on either side of an elaborately carved clock. French windows that opened like doors were partially concealed by warm red curtains, and on a sideboard against the wall stood decanters and glasses, with several boxes of cigars piled on top of one another. There was a pleasant odour of tobacco about the room. Indeed, it was in such glowing contrast to the chilly poverty of the hall that Shorthouse already was conscious of a distinct rise in the thermometer of his spirits.

Then he turned and saw the Jew standing in the doorway with his eyes fixed upon him, somewhere about the middle button of his waistcoat. He presented a strangely repulsive appearance that somehow could not be attributed to any particular detail, and the secretary associated him in his mind with a monstrous black bird of prey more than anything else.

“My time is short,” he said abruptly; “I hope Mr. Garvey will not keep me waiting.”

A strange flicker of a smile appeared on the Jew’s ugly face and vanished as quickly as it came. He made a sort of deprecating bow by way of reply. Then he blew out the taper and went out, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

Shorthouse was alone. He felt relieved. There was an air of obsequious insolence about the old Jew that was very offensive. He began to take note of his surroundings. He was evidently in the library of the house, for the walls were covered with books almost up to the ceiling. There was no room for pictures. Nothing but the shining backs of well-bound volumes looked down upon him. Four brilliant lights hung from the ceiling and a reading lamp with a polished reflector stood among the disordered masses of papers on the desk.

The lamp was not lit, but when Shorthouse put his hand upon it he found it was *warm*. The room had evidently only just been vacated.

Apart from the testimony of the lamp, however, he had already felt, without being able to give a reason for it, that the room had been occupied a few moments before he entered. The atmosphere over the desk seemed to retain the disturbing influence of a human being; an influence, moreover, so recent that he felt as if the cause of it were still in his immediate neighbourhood. It was difficult to realise that he was quite alone in the room and that somebody was not in hiding. The finer counterparts of his senses warned him to act as if he were being observed; he was dimly conscious of a desire to fidget and look round, to keep his eyes in every part of the room at once, and to conduct himself generally as if he were the object of careful human observation.

How far he recognised the cause of these sensations it is impossible to say; but they were sufficiently marked to prevent his carrying out a strong inclination to get up and make a search of the room. He sat quite still, staring alternately at the backs of the books, and at the red curtains; wondering all the time if he was really being watched, or if it was only the imagination playing tricks with him.

A full quarter of an hour passed, and then twenty rows of volumes suddenly shifted out towards him, and he saw that a door had opened in the wall opposite. The books were only sham backs after all, and when they moved back again with the sliding door, Shorthouse saw the figure of Joel Garvey standing before him.

Surprise almost took his breath away. He had expected to see an unpleasant, even a vicious apparition with the mark of the beast unmistakably upon its face; but he was wholly unprepared for the elderly, tall, fine-looking man who stood in front of him — well-groomed, refined, vigorous, with a lofty forehead, clear grey eyes, and a hooked nose dominating a clean shaven mouth and chin of considerable character — a distinguished looking man altogether.

“I’m afraid I’ve kept you waiting, Mr. Shorthouse,” he said in a pleasant voice, but with no trace of a smile in the mouth or eyes. “But the fact is, you know, I’ve a mania for chemistry, and just when you were announced I was at the most critical moment of a problem and was really compelled to bring it to a conclusion."

Shorthouse had risen to meet him, but the other motioned him to resume his seat. It was borne in upon him irresistibly that Mr. Joel Garvey, for reasons best known to himself, was deliberately lying, and he could not help wondering at the necessity for such an elaborate misrepresentation. He took off his overcoat and sat down.

"I've no doubt, too, that the door startled you," Garvey went on, evidently reading something of his guest's feelings in his face. "You probably had not suspected it. It leads into my little laboratory. Chemistry is an absorbing study to me, and I spend most of my time there." Mr. Garvey moved up to the armchair on the opposite side of the fireplace and sat down.

Shorthouse made appropriate answers to these remarks, but his mind was really engaged in taking stock of Mr. Sidebotham's old-time partner. So far there was no sign of mental irregularity and there was certainly nothing about him to suggest violent wrong-doing or coarseness of living. On the whole, Mr. Sidebotham's secretary was most pleasantly surprised, and, wishing to conclude his business as speedily as possible, he made a motion towards the bag for the purpose of opening it, when his companion interrupted him quickly —

"You are Mr. Sidebotham's *private* secretary, are you not?" he asked.

Shorthouse replied that he was. "Mr. Sidebotham," he went on to explain, "has entrusted me with the papers in the case and I have the honour to return to you your letter of a week ago." He handed the letter to Garvey, who took it without a word and deliberately placed it in the fire. He was not aware that the secretary was ignorant of its contents, yet his face betrayed no signs of feeling. Shorthouse noticed, however, that his eyes never left the fire until the last morsel had been consumed. Then he looked up and said, "You are familiar then with the facts of this most peculiar case?"

Shorthouse saw no reason to confess his ignorance.

"I have all the papers, Mr. Garvey," he replied, taking them out of the bag, "and I should be very glad if we could transact our business as speedily as possible. If you will cut out your signature I—"

"One moment, please," interrupted the other. "I must, before we proceed further, consult some papers in my laboratory. If you will allow me to leave you alone a few minutes for this purpose we can conclude the whole matter in a very short time."

Shorthouse did not approve of this further delay, but he had no option than to acquiesce, and when Garvey had left the room by the private door he sat and waited with the papers in his hand. The minutes went by and the other did not return. To pass the time he thought of taking the false packet from his coat to see that the papers were in order, and the move was indeed almost completed, when something — he never knew what — warned him to desist. The feeling again came over him that he was being watched, and he leaned back in his chair with the bag on his knees and waited with considerable impatience for the other's return. For more than twenty minutes he waited, and when at length the door opened and Garvey appeared, with profuse apologies for the delay, he saw by the clock that only a few minutes still remained of the time he had allowed himself to catch the last train.

"Now I am completely at your service," he said pleasantly; "you must, of course, know, Mr. Shorthouse, that one cannot be too careful in matters of this kind — especially," he went on, speaking very slowly and impressively, "in dealing with a man like my former partner, whose mind, as you doubtless may have discovered, is at times very sadly affected."

Shorthouse made no reply to this. He felt that the other was watching him as a cat watches a mouse.

"It is almost a wonder to me," Garvey added, "that he is still at large. Unless he has greatly improved it can hardly be safe for those who are closely associated with him."

The other began to feel uncomfortable. Either this was the other side of the story, or it was the first signs of mental irresponsibility.

"All business matters of importance require the utmost care in my opinion, Mr. Garvey," he said at length, cautiously.

"Ah! then, as I thought, you have had a great deal to put up with from him," Garvey said, with his eyes fixed on his companion's face. "And, no doubt, he is still as bitter against me as he was years ago when the disease first showed itself?"

Although this last remark was a deliberate question and the questioner was waiting with fixed eyes for an answer, Shorthouse elected to take no notice of it. Without a word he pulled the elastic band from the blue envelope with a snap and plainly showed his desire to conclude the business as soon as possible. The tendency on the other's part to delay did not suit him at all.

"But never personal violence, I trust, Mr. Shorthouse," he added.

"Never."

"I'm glad to hear it," Garvey said in a sympathetic voice, "very glad to hear it. And now," he went on, "if you are ready we can transact this little matter of business before dinner. It will only take a moment."

He drew a chair up to the desk and sat down, taking a pair of scissors from a drawer. His companion approached with the papers in his hand, unfolding them as he came. Garvey at once took them from him, and after turning over a few pages he stopped and cut out a piece of writing at the bottom of the last sheet but one.

Holding it up to him Shorthouse read the words "Joel Garvey" in faded ink.

"There! That's my signature," he said, "and I've cut it out. It must be nearly twenty years since I wrote it, and now I'm going to burn it."

He went to the fire and stooped over to burn the little slip of paper, and while he watched it being consumed Shorthouse put the real papers in his pocket and slipped the imitation ones into the bag. Garvey turned just in time to see this latter movement.

"I'm putting the papers back," Shorthouse said quietly; "you've done with them, I think."

"Certainly," he replied as, completely deceived, he saw the blue envelope disappear into the black bag and watched Shorthouse turn the key. "They no longer have the slightest interest for me." As he spoke he moved over to the sideboard, and pouring himself out a small glass of whisky asked his visitor if he might do the same for him. But the visitor declined and was already putting on his overcoat when Garvey turned with genuine surprise on his face.

“You surely are not going back to New York to-night, Mr. Shorthouse?” he said, in a voice of astonishment.

“I’ve just time to catch the 7.15 if I’m quick.”

“But I never heard of such a thing,” Garvey said. “Of course I took it for granted that you would stay the night.”

“It’s kind of you,” said Shorthouse, “but really I must return to-night. I never expected to stay.”

The two men stood facing each other. Garvey pulled out his watch.

“I’m exceedingly sorry,” he said; “but, upon my word, I took it for granted you would stay. I ought to have said so long ago. I’m such a lonely fellow and so little accustomed to visitors that I fear I forgot my manners altogether. But in any case, Mr. Shorthouse, you cannot catch the 7.15, for it’s already after six o’clock, and that’s the last train to-night.” Garvey spoke very quickly, almost eagerly, but his voice sounded genuine.

“There’s time if I walk quickly,” said the young man with decision, moving towards the door. He glanced at his watch as he went. Hitherto he had gone by the clock on the mantelpiece. To his dismay he saw that it was, as his host had said, long after six. The clock was half an hour slow, and he realised at once that it was no longer possible to catch the train.

Had the hands of the clock been moved back intentionally? Had he been purposely detained? Unpleasant thoughts flashed into his brain and made him hesitate before taking the next step. His employer’s warning rang in his ears. The alternative was six miles along a lonely road in the dark, or a night under Garvey’s roof. The former seemed a direct invitation to catastrophe, if catastrophe there was planned to be. The latter — well, the choice was certainly small. One thing, however, he realised, was plain — he must show neither fear nor hesitancy.

“My watch must have gained,” he observed quietly, turning the hands back without looking up. “It seems I have certainly missed that train and shall be obliged to throw myself upon your hospitality. But, believe me, I had no intention of putting you out to any such extent.”

“I’m delighted,” the other said. “Defer to the judgment of an older man and make yourself comfortable for the night. There’s a bitter storm outside, and you don’t put me out at all. On the contrary it’s a great pleasure. I have so little contact with the outside world that it’s really a god-send to have you.”

The man’s face changed as he spoke. His manner was cordial and sincere. Shorthouse began to feel ashamed of his doubts and to read between the lines of his employer’s warning. He took off his coat and the two men moved to the armchairs beside the fire.

“You see,” Garvey went on in a lowered voice, “I understand your hesitancy perfectly. I didn’t know Sidebotham all those years without knowing a good deal about him — perhaps more than you do. I’ve no doubt, now, he filled your mind with all sorts of nonsense about me — probably told you that I was the greatest villain unhung, eh? and all that sort of thing? Poor fellow! He was a fine sort before his mind became unhinged. One of his fancies used to be that everybody else was insane, or just about to become insane. Is he still as bad as that?”

“Few men,” replied Shorthouse, with the manner of making a great confidence, but entirely refusing to be drawn, “go through his experiences and reach his age without entertaining delusions of one kind or another.”

“Perfectly true,” said Garvey. “Your observation is evidently keen.”

“Very keen indeed,” Shorthouse replied, taking his cue neatly; “but, of course, there are some things” — and here he looked cautiously over his shoulder— “there are some things one cannot talk about too circumspectly.”

“I understand perfectly and respect your reserve.”

There was a little more conversation and then Garvey got up and excused himself on the plea of superintending the preparation of the bedroom.

“It’s quite an event to have a visitor in the house, and I want to make you as comfortable as possible,” he said. “Marx will do better for a little supervision. And,” he added with a laugh as he stood in the doorway, “I want you to carry back a good account to Sidebotham.”

II

The tall form disappeared and the door was shut. The conversation of the past few minutes had come somewhat as a revelation to the secretary. Garvey seemed in full possession of normal instincts. There was no doubt as to the sincerity of his manner and intentions. The suspicions of the first hour began to vanish like mist before the sun. Sidebotham's portentous warnings and the mystery with which he surrounded the whole episode had been allowed to unduly influence his mind. The loneliness of the situation and the bleak nature of the surroundings had helped to complete the illusion. He began to be ashamed of his suspicions and a change commenced gradually to be wrought in his thoughts. Anyhow a dinner and a bed were preferable to six miles in the dark, no dinner, and a cold train into the bargain.

Garvey returned presently. "We'll do the best we can for you," he said, dropping into the deep armchair on the other side of the fire. "Marx is a good servant if you watch him all the time. You must always stand over a Jew, though, if you want things done properly. They're tricky and uncertain unless they're working for their own interest. But Marx might be worse, I'll admit. He's been with me for nearly twenty years — cook, valet, housemaid, and butler all in one. In the old days, you know, he was a clerk in our office in Chicago."

Garvey rattled on and Shorthouse listened with occasional remarks thrown in. The former seemed pleased to have somebody to talk to and the sound of his own voice was evidently sweet music in his ears. After a few minutes, he crossed over to the sideboard and again took up the decanter of whisky, holding it to the light. "You will join me this time," he said pleasantly, pouring out two glasses, "it will give us an appetite for dinner," and this time Shorthouse did not refuse. The liquor was mellow and soft and the men took two glasses apiece.

"Excellent," remarked the secretary.

"Glad you appreciate it," said the host, smacking his lips. "It's very old whisky, and I rarely touch it when I'm alone. But this," he added, "is a special occasion, isn't it?"

Shorthouse was in the act of putting his glass down when something drew his eyes suddenly to the other's face. A strange note in the man's voice caught his attention and communicated alarm to his nerves. A new light shone in Garvey's eyes and there flitted momentarily across his strong features the shadow of something that set the secretary's nerves tingling. A mist spread before his eyes and the unaccountable belief rose strong in him that he was staring into the visage of an untamed animal. Close to his heart there was something that was wild, fierce, savage. An involuntary shiver ran over him and seemed to dispel the strange fancy as suddenly as it had come. He met the other's eye with a smile, the counterpart of which in his heart was vivid horror.

"It *is* a special occasion," he said, as naturally as possible, "and, allow me to add, very special whisky."

Garvey appeared delighted. He was in the middle of a devious tale describing how the whisky came originally into his possession when the door opened behind them and a grating voice announced that dinner was ready. They followed the cassocked form of Marx across the dirty hall, lit only by the shaft of light that followed them from the library door, and entered a small room where a single lamp stood upon a table laid for dinner. The walls were destitute of pictures, and the windows had Venetian blinds without curtains. There was no fire in the grate, and when the men sat down facing each other Shorthouse noticed that, while his own cover was laid with its due proportion of glasses and cutlery, his companion had nothing before him but a soup plate, without fork, knife, or spoon beside it.

"I don't know what there is to offer you," he said; "but I'm sure Marx has done the best he can at such short notice. I only eat one course for dinner, but pray take your time and enjoy your food."

Marx presently set a plate of soup before the guest, yet so loathsome was the immediate presence of this old Hebrew servitor, that the spoonfuls disappeared somewhat slowly. Garvey sat and watched him.

Shorthouse said the soup was delicious and bravely swallowed another mouthful. In reality his thoughts were centred upon his companion, whose manners were giving evidence of a gradual and curious change. There was a decided difference in his demeanour, a difference that the secretary *felt* at first, rather than saw. Garvey's quiet self-possession was giving place to a degree of suppressed excitement that seemed so far inexplicable. His movements became quick and nervous, his eye shifting and strangely brilliant, and his voice, when he spoke, betrayed an occasional deep tremor. Something unwonted was stirring within him and evidently demanding every moment more vigorous manifestation as the meal proceeded.

Intuitively Shorthouse was afraid of this growing excitement, and while negotiating some uncommonly tough pork chops he tried to lead the conversation on to the subject of chemistry, of which in his Oxford days he had been an enthusiastic student. His companion, however, would none of it. It seemed to have lost interest for him, and he would barely condescend to respond. When Marx presently returned with a plate of steaming eggs and bacon the subject dropped of its own accord.

"An inadequate dinner dish," Garvey said, as soon as the man was gone; "but better than nothing, I hope."

Shorthouse remarked that he was exceedingly fond of bacon and eggs, and, looking up with the last word, saw that Garvey's face was twitching convulsively and that he was almost wriggling in his chair. He quieted down, however, under the secretary's gaze and observed, though evidently with an effort —

"Very good of you to say so. Wish I could join you, only I never eat such stuff. I only take one course for dinner."

Shorthouse began to feel some curiosity as to what the nature of this one course might be, but he made no further remark and contented himself with noting mentally that his companion's excitement seemed to be rapidly growing beyond his control. There was something uncanny about it, and he began to wish he had chosen the alternative of the walk to the station.

"I'm glad to see you never speak when Marx is in the room," said Garvey presently. "I'm sure it's better not. Don't you think so?"

He appeared to wait eagerly for the answer.

"Undoubtedly," said the puzzled secretary.

"Yes," the other went on quickly. "He's an excellent man, but he has one drawback — a really horrid one. You may — but, no, you could hardly have noticed it yet."

"Not drink, I trust," said Shorthouse, who would rather have discussed any other subject than the odious Jew.

"Worse than that a great deal," Garvey replied, evidently expecting the other to draw him out. But Shorthouse was in no mood to hear anything horrible, and he declined to step into the trap.

“The best of servants have their faults,” he said coldly.

“I’ll tell you what it is if you like,” Garvey went on, still speaking very low and leaning forward over the table so that his face came close to the flame of the lamp, “only we must speak quietly in case he’s listening. I’ll tell you what it is — if you think you won’t be frightened.”

“Nothing frightens me,” he laughed. (Garvey must understand that at all events.) “Nothing can frighten me,” he repeated.

“I’m glad of that; for it frightens *me* a good deal sometimes.”

Shorthouse feigned indifference. Yet he was aware that his heart was beating a little quicker and that there was a sensation of chilliness in his back. He waited in silence for what was to come.

“He has a horrible predilection for vacuums,” Garvey went on presently in a still lower voice and thrusting his face farther forward under the lamp.

“Vacuums!” exclaimed the secretary in spite of himself. “What in the world do you mean?”

“What I say of course. He’s always tumbling into them, so that I can’t find him or get at him. He hides there for hours at a time, and for the life of me I can’t make out what he does there.”

Shorthouse stared his companion straight in the eyes. What in the name of Heaven was he talking about?

“Do you suppose he goes there for a change of air, or — or to escape?” he went on in a louder voice.

Shorthouse could have laughed outright but for the expression of the other’s face.

“I should not think there was much air of any sort in a vacuum,” he said quietly.

“That’s exactly what *I* feel,” continued Garvey with ever growing excitement. “That’s the horrid part of it. How the devil does he live there? You see—”

“Have you ever followed him there?” interrupted the secretary. The other leaned back in his chair and drew a deep sigh.

"Never! It's impossible. You see I can't follow him. There's not room for two. A vacuum only holds one comfortably. Marx knows that. He's out of my reach altogether once he's fairly inside. He knows the best side of a bargain. He's a regular Jew."

"That is a drawback to a servant, of course—" Shorthouse spoke slowly, with his eyes on his plate.

"A drawback," interrupted the other with an ugly chuckle, "I call it a draw-in, that's what I call it."

"A draw-in does seem a more accurate term," assented Shorthouse. "But," he went on, "I thought that nature abhorred a vacuum. She used to, when I was at school — though perhaps — it's so long ago—"

He hesitated and looked up. Something in Garvey's face — something he had *felt* before he looked up — stopped his tongue and froze the words in his throat. His lips refused to move and became suddenly dry. Again the mist rose before his eyes and the appalling shadow dropped its veil over the face before him. Garvey's features began to burn and glow. Then they seemed to coarsen and somehow slip confusedly together. He stared for a second — it seemed only for a second — into the visage of a ferocious and abominable animal; and then, as suddenly as it had come, the filthy shadow of the beast passed off, the mist melted out, and with a mighty effort over his nerves he forced himself to finish his sentence.

"You see it's so long since I've given attention to such things," he stammered. His heart was beating rapidly, and a feeling of oppression was gathering over it.

"It's my peculiar and special study on the other hand," Garvey resumed. "I've not spent all these years in my laboratory to no purpose, I can assure you. Nature, I know for a fact," he added with unnatural warmth, "does *not* abhor a vacuum. On the contrary, she's uncommonly fond of 'em, much too fond, it seems, for the comfort of my little household. If there were fewer vacuums and more abhorrence we should get on better — a damned sight better in my opinion."

"Your special knowledge, no doubt, enables you to speak with authority," Shorthouse said, curiosity and alarm warring with other mixed feelings in his mind; "but how *can* a man tumble into a vacuum?"

“You may well ask. That’s just it. How can he? It’s preposterous and I can’t make it out at all. Marx knows, but he won’t tell me. Jews know more than we do. For my part I have reason to believe—” He stopped and listened. “Hush! here he comes,” he added, rubbing his hands together as if in glee and fidgeting in his chair.

Steps were heard coming down the passage, and as they approached the door Garvey seemed to give himself completely over to an excitement he could not control. His eyes were fixed on the door and he began clutching the tablecloth with both hands. Again his face was screened by the loathsome shadow. It grew wild, wolfish. As through a mask, that concealed, and yet was thin enough to let through a suggestion of, the beast crouching behind, there leaped into his countenance the strange look of the animal in the human — the expression of the were-wolf, the monster. The change in all its loathsomeness came rapidly over his features, which began to lose their outline. The nose flattened, dropping with broad nostrils over thick lips. The face rounded, filled, and became squat. The eyes, which, luckily for Shorthouse, no longer sought his own, glowed with the light of untamed appetite and bestial greed. The hands left the cloth and grasped the edges of the plate, and then clutched the cloth again.

“This is *my* course coming now,” said Garvey, in a deep guttural voice. He was shivering. His upper lip was partly lifted and showed the teeth, white and gleaming.

A moment later the door opened and Marx hurried into the room and set a dish in front of his master. Garvey half rose to meet him, stretching out his hands and grinning horribly. With his mouth he made a sound like the snarl of an animal. The dish before him was steaming, but the slight vapour rising from it betrayed by its odour that it was not born of a fire of coals. It was the natural heat of flesh warmed by the fires of life only just expelled. The moment the dish rested on the table Garvey pushed away his own plate and drew the other up close under his mouth. Then he seized the food in both hands and commenced to tear it with his teeth, grunting as he did so. Shorthouse closed his eyes, with a feeling of nausea. When he looked up again the lips and jaw of the man opposite were stained with crimson. The whole man was transformed. A feasting tiger, starved and ravenous, but without a tiger’s grace — this was what he watched for several minutes, transfixed with horror and disgust.

Marx had already taken his departure, knowing evidently what was not good for the eyes to look upon, and Shorthouse knew at last that he was sitting face to face with a madman.

The ghastly meal was finished in an incredibly short time and nothing was left but a tiny pool of red liquid rapidly hardening. Garvey leaned back heavily in his chair and sighed. His smeared face, withdrawn now from the glare of the lamp, began to resume its normal appearance. Presently he looked up at his guest and said in his natural voice —

“I hope you’ve had enough to eat. You wouldn’t care for this, you know,” with a downward glance.

Shorthouse met his eyes with an inward loathing, and it was impossible not to show some of the repugnance he felt. In the other’s face, however, he thought he saw a subdued, cowed expression. But he found nothing to say.

“Marx will be in presently,” Garvey went on. “He’s either listening, or in a vacuum.”

“Does he choose any particular time for his visits?” the secretary managed to ask.

“He generally goes after dinner; just about this time, in fact. But he’s not gone yet,” he added, shrugging his shoulders, “for I think I hear him coming.”

Shorthouse wondered whether vacuum was possibly synonymous with wine cellar, but gave no expression to his thoughts. With chills of horror still running up and down his back, he saw Marx come in with a basin and towel, while Garvey thrust up his face just as an animal puts up its muzzle to be rubbed.

“Now we’ll have coffee in the library, if you’re ready,” he said, in the tone of a gentleman addressing his guests after a dinner party.

Shorthouse picked up the bag, which had lain all this time between his feet, and walked through the door his host held open for him. Side by side they crossed the dark hall together, and, to his disgust, Garvey linked an arm in his, and with his face so close to the secretary’s ear that he felt the warm breath, said in a thick voice —

“You’re uncommonly careful with that bag, Mr. Shorthouse. It surely must contain something more than the bundle of papers.”

“Nothing but the papers,” he answered, feeling the hand burning upon his arm and wishing he were miles away from the house and its abominable occupants.

“Quite sure?” asked the other with an odious and suggestive chuckle. “Is there any meat in it, fresh meat — raw meat?”

The secretary felt, somehow, that at the least sign of fear the beast on his arm would leap upon him and tear him with his teeth.

“Nothing of the sort,” he answered vigorously. “It wouldn’t hold enough to feed a cat.”

“True,” said Garvey with a vile sigh, while the other felt the hand upon his arm twitch up and down as if feeling the flesh. “True, it’s too small to be of any real use. As you say, it wouldn’t hold enough to feed a cat.”

Shorthouse was unable to suppress a cry. The muscles of his fingers, too, relaxed in spite of himself and he let the black bag drop with a bang to the floor. Garvey instantly withdrew his arm and turned with a quick movement. But the secretary had regained his control as suddenly as he had lost it, and he met the maniac’s eyes with a steady and aggressive glare.

“There, you see, it’s quite light. It makes no appreciable noise when I drop it.” He picked it up and let it fall again, as if he had dropped it for the first time purposely. The ruse was successful.

“Yes. You’re right,” Garvey said, still standing in the doorway and staring at him. “At any rate it wouldn’t hold enough for two,” he laughed. And as he closed the door the horrid laughter echoed in the empty hall.

They sat down by a blazing fire and Shorthouse was glad to feel its warmth. Marx presently brought in coffee. A glass of the old whisky and a good cigar helped to restore equilibrium. For some minutes the men sat in silence staring into the fire. Then, without looking up, Garvey said in a quiet voice —

“I suppose it was a shock to you to see me eat raw meat like that. I must apologise if it was unpleasant to you. But it’s all I can eat and it’s the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours.”

“Best nourishment in the world, no doubt; though I should think it might be a trifle strong for some stomachs.”

He tried to lead the conversation away from so unpleasant a subject, and went on to talk rapidly of the values of different foods, of vegetarianism and vegetarians, and of men who had gone for long periods without any food at all. Garvey listened apparently without interest and had nothing to say. At the first pause he jumped in eagerly.

“When the hunger is really great on me,” he said, still gazing into the fire, “I simply cannot control myself. I must have raw meat — the first I can get —” Here he raised his shining eyes and Shorthouse felt his hair beginning to rise.

“It comes upon me so suddenly too. I never can tell when to expect it. A year ago the passion rose in me like a whirlwind and Marx was out and I couldn’t get meat. I had to get something or I should have bitten myself. Just when it was getting unbearable my dog ran out from beneath the sofa. It was a spaniel.”

Shorthouse responded with an effort. He hardly knew what he was saying and his skin crawled as if a million ants were moving over it.

There was a pause of several minutes.

“I’ve bitten Marx all over,” Garvey went on presently in his strange quiet voice, and as if he were speaking of apples; “but he’s bitter. I doubt if the hunger could ever make me do it again. Probably that’s what first drove him to take shelter in a vacuum.” He chuckled hideously as he thought of this solution of his attendant’s disappearances.

Shorthouse seized the poker and poked the fire as if his life depended on it. But when the banging and clattering was over Garvey continued his remarks with the same calmness. The next sentence, however, was never finished. The secretary had got upon his feet suddenly.

“I shall ask your permission to retire,” he said in a determined voice; “I’m tired to-night; will you be good enough to show me to my room?”

Garvey looked up at him with a curious cringing expression behind which there shone the gleam of cunning passion.

“Certainly,” he said, rising from his chair. “You’ve had a tiring journey. I ought to have thought of that before.”

He took the candle from the table and lit it, and the fingers that held the match trembled.

“We needn’t trouble Marx,” he explained. “That beast’s in his vacuum by this time.”

III

They crossed the hall and began to ascend the carpetless wooden stairs. They were in the well of the house and the air cut like ice. Garvey, the flickering candle in his hand throwing his face into strong outline, led the way across the first landing and opened a door near the mouth of a dark passage. A pleasant room greeted the visitor’s eyes, and he rapidly took in its points while his host walked over and lit two candles that stood on a table at the foot of the bed. A fire burned brightly in the grate. There were two windows, opening like doors, in the wall opposite, and a high canopied bed occupied most of the space on the right. Panelling ran all round the room reaching nearly to the ceiling and gave a warm and cosy appearance to the whole; while the portraits that stood in alternate panels suggested somehow the atmosphere of an old country house in England. Shorthouse was agreeably surprised.

“I hope you’ll find everything you need,” Garvey was saying in the doorway. “If not, you have only to ring that bell by the fireplace. Marx won’t hear it of course, but it rings in my laboratory, where I spend most of the night.”

Then, with a brief good-night, he went out and shut the door after him. The instant he was gone Mr. Sidebotham’s private secretary did a peculiar thing. He planted himself in the middle of the room with his back to the door, and drawing the pistol swiftly from his hip pocket levelled it across his left arm at the window. Standing motionless in this position for thirty seconds he then suddenly swerved right round and faced in the other direction, pointing his pistol straight at the keyhole of the door. There followed immediately a sound of shuffling outside and of steps retreating across the landing.

“On his knees at the keyhole,” was the secretary’s reflection. “Just as I thought. But he didn’t expect to look down the barrel of a pistol and it made him jump a little.”

As soon as the steps had gone downstairs and died away across the hall, Shorthouse went over and locked the door, stuffing a piece of crumpled paper into the second keyhole which he saw immediately above the first. After that, he made a thorough search of the room. It hardly repaid the trouble, for he found nothing unusual. Yet he was glad he had made it. It relieved him to find no one was in hiding under the bed or in the deep oak cupboard; and he hoped sincerely it was not the cupboard in which the unfortunate spaniel had come to its vile death. The French windows, he discovered, opened on to a little balcony. It looked on to the front, and there was a drop of less than twenty feet to the ground below. The bed was high and wide, soft as feathers and covered with snowy sheets — very inviting to a tired man; and beside the blazing fire were a couple of deep armchairs.

Altogether it was very pleasant and comfortable; but, tired though he was, Shorthouse had no intention of going to bed. It was impossible to disregard the warning of his nerves. They had never failed him before, and when that sense of distressing horror lodged in his bones he knew there was something in the wind and that a red flag was flying over the immediate future. Some delicate instrument in his being, more subtle than the senses, more accurate than mere presentiment, had seen the red flag and interpreted its meaning.

Again it seemed to him, as he sat in an armchair over the fire, that his movements were being carefully watched from somewhere; and, not knowing what weapons might be used against him, he felt that his real safety lay in a rigid control of his mind and feelings and a stout refusal to admit that he was in the least alarmed.

The house was very still. As the night wore on the wind dropped. Only occasional bursts of sleet against the windows reminded him that the elements were awake and uneasy. Once or twice the windows rattled and the rain hissed in the fire, but the roar of the wind in the chimney grew less and less and the lonely building was at last lapped in a great stillness. The coals clicked, settling themselves deeper in the grate, and the noise of the cinders dropping with a tiny report into the soft heap of accumulated ashes was the only sound that punctuated the silence.

In proportion as the power of sleep grew upon him the dread of the situation lessened; but so imperceptibly, so gradually, and so insinuatingly that he scarcely realised the change. He thought he was as wide awake to his danger as ever. The successful exclusion of horrible mental pictures of what he had seen he attributed to his rigorous control, instead of to their true cause, the creeping over him of the soft influences of sleep. The faces in the coals were so soothing; the armchair was so comfortable; so sweet the breath that gently pressed upon his eyelids; so subtle the growth of the sensation of safety. He settled down deeper into the chair and in another moment would have been asleep when the red flag began to shake violently to and fro and he sat bolt upright as if he had been stabbed in the back.

Someone was coming up the stairs. The boards creaked beneath a stealthy weight.

Shorthouse sprang from the chair and crossed the room swiftly, taking up his position beside the door, but out of range of the keyhole. The two candles flared unevenly on the table at the foot of the bed. The steps were slow and cautious — it seemed thirty seconds between each one — but the person who was taking them was very close to the door. Already he had topped the stairs and was shuffling almost silently across the bit of landing.

The secretary slipped his hand into his pistol pocket and drew back further against the wall, and hardly had he completed the movement when the sounds abruptly ceased and he knew that somebody was standing just outside the door and preparing for a careful observation through the keyhole.

He was in no sense a coward. In action he was never afraid. It was the waiting and wondering and the uncertainty that might have loosened his nerves a little. But, somehow, a wave of intense horror swept over him for a second as he thought of the bestial maniac and his attendant Jew; and he would rather have faced a pack of wolves than have to do with either of these men.

Something brushing gently against the door set his nerves tingling afresh and made him tighten his grasp on the pistol. The steel was cold and slippery in his moist fingers. What an awful noise it would make when he pulled the trigger! If the door were to open how close he would be to the figure that came in! Yet he knew it was locked on the inside and could not possibly open. Again something brushed against the panel beside him and a second later the piece of crumpled paper fell from the keyhole to the floor, while the piece of thin wire that had accomplished this result showed its point for a moment in the room and was then swiftly withdrawn.

Somebody was evidently peering now through the keyhole, and realising this fact the spirit of attack entered into the heart of the beleaguered man. Raising aloft his right hand he brought it suddenly down with a resounding crash upon the panel of the door next the keyhole — a crash that, to the crouching eavesdropper, must have seemed like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky. There was a gasp and a slight lurching against the door and the midnight listener rose startled and alarmed, for Shorthouse plainly heard the tread of feet across the landing and down the stairs till they were lost in the silences of the hall. Only, this time, it seemed to him there were four feet instead of two.

Quickly stuffing the paper back into the keyhole, he was in the act of walking back to the fireplace when, over his shoulder, he caught sight of a white face pressed in outline against the outside of the window. It was blurred in the streams of sleet, but the white of the moving eyes was unmistakable. He turned instantly to meet it, but the face was withdrawn like a flash, and darkness rushed in to fill the gap where it had appeared.

“Watched on both sides,” he reflected.

But he was not to be surprised into any sudden action, and quietly walking over to the fireplace as if he had seen nothing unusual he stirred the coals a moment and then strolled leisurely over to the window. Steeling his nerves, which quivered a moment in spite of his will, he opened the window and stepped out on to the balcony. The wind, which he thought had dropped, rushed past him into the room and extinguished one of the candles, while a volley of fine cold rain burst all over his face. At first he could see nothing, and the darkness came close up to his eyes like a wall. He went a little farther on to the balcony and drew the window after him till it clashed. Then he stood and waited.

But nothing touched him. No one seemed to be there. His eyes got accustomed to the blackness and he was able to make out the iron railing, the dark shapes of the trees beyond, and the faint light coming from the other window. Through this he peered into the room, walking the length of the balcony to do so. Of course he was standing in a shaft of light and whoever was crouching in the darkness below could plainly see him. *Below?* — That there should be anyone *above* did not occur to him until, just as he was preparing to go in again, he became aware that something was moving in the darkness over his head. He looked up, instinctively raising a protecting arm, and saw a long black line swinging against the dim wall of the house. The shutters of the window on the next floor, whence it depended, were thrown open and moving backwards and forwards in the wind. The line was evidently a thickish cord, for as he looked it was pulled in and the end disappeared in the darkness.

Shorthouse, trying to whistle to himself, peered over the edge of the balcony as if calculating the distance he might have to drop, and then calmly walked into the room again and closed the window behind him, leaving the latch so that the lightest touch would cause it to fly open. He relit the candle and drew a straight-backed chair up to the table. Then he put coal on the fire and stirred it up into a royal blaze. He would willingly have folded the shutters over those staring windows at his back. But that was out of the question. It would have been to cut off his way of escape.

Sleep, for the time, was at a disadvantage. His brain was full of blood and every nerve was tingling. He felt as if countless eyes were upon him and scores of stained hands were stretching out from the corners and crannies of the house to seize him. Crouching figures, figures of hideous Jews, stood everywhere about him where shelter was, creeping forward out of the shadows when he was not looking and retreating swiftly and silently when he turned his head. Wherever he looked, other eyes met his own, and though they melted away under his steady, confident gaze, he knew they would wax and draw in upon him the instant his glances weakened and his will wavered.

Though there were no sounds, he knew that in the well of the house there was movement going on, *and preparation*. And this knowledge, inasmuch as it came to him irresistibly and through other and more subtle channels than those of the senses kept the sense of horror fresh in his blood and made him alert and awake.

But, no matter how great the dread in the heart, the power of sleep will eventually overcome it. Exhausted nature is irresistible, and as the minutes wore on and midnight passed, he realised that nature was vigorously asserting herself and sleep was creeping upon him from the extremities.

To lessen the danger he took out his pencil and began to draw the articles of furniture in the room. He worked into elaborate detail the cupboard, the mantelpiece, and the bed, and from these he passed on to the portraits. Being possessed of genuine skill, he found the occupation sufficiently absorbing. It kept the blood in his brain, and that kept him awake. The pictures, moreover, now that he considered them for the first time, were exceedingly well painted. Owing to the dim light, he centred his attention upon the portraits beside the fireplace. On the right was a woman, with a sweet, gentle face and a figure of great refinement; on the left was a full-size figure of a big handsome man with a full beard and wearing a hunting costume of ancient date.

From time to time he turned to the windows behind him, but the vision of the face was not repeated. More than once, too, he went to the door and listened, but the silence was so profound in the house that he gradually came to believe the plan of attack had been abandoned. Once he went out on to the balcony, but the sleet stung his face and he only had time to see that the shutters above were closed, when he was obliged to seek the shelter of the room again.

In this way the hours passed. The fire died down and the room grew chilly. Shorthouse had made several sketches of the two heads and was beginning to feel overpoweringly weary. His feet and his hands were cold and his yawns were prodigious. It seemed ages and ages since the steps had come to listen at his door and the face had watched him from the window. A feeling of safety had somehow come to him. In reality he was exhausted. His one desire was to drop upon the soft white bed and yield himself up to sleep without any further struggle.

He rose from his chair with a series of yawns that refused to be stifled and looked at his watch. It was close upon three in the morning. He made up his mind that he would lie down with his clothes on and get some sleep. It was safe enough, the door was locked on the inside and the window was fastened. Putting the bag on the table near his pillow he blew out the candles and dropped with a sense of careless and delicious exhaustion upon the soft mattress. In five minutes he was sound asleep.

There had scarcely been time for the dreams to come when he found himself lying side-ways across the bed with wide open eyes staring into the darkness. Someone had touched him, and he had writhed away in his sleep as from something unholy. The movement had awakened him.

The room was simply black. No light came from the windows and the fire had gone out as completely as if water had been poured upon it. He gazed into a sheet of impenetrable darkness that came close up to his face like a wall.

His first thought was for the papers in his coat and his hand flew to the pocket. They were safe; and the relief caused by this discovery left his mind instantly free for other reflections.

And the realisation that at once came to him with a touch of dismay was, that during his sleep some definite *change* had been effected in the room. He felt this with that intuitive certainty which amounts to positive knowledge. The room was utterly still, but the corroboration that was speedily brought to him seemed at once to fill the darkness with a whispering, secret life that chilled his blood and made the sheet feel like ice against his cheek.

Hark! This was it; there reached his ears, in which the blood was already buzzing with warning clamour, a dull murmur of something that rose indistinctly from the well of the house and became audible to him without passing through walls or doors. There seemed no solid surface between him, lying on the bed, and the landing; between the landing and the stairs, and between the stairs and the hall beyond.

He knew that the door of the room *was standing open*! Therefore it had been opened from the *inside*. Yet the window was fastened, also on the inside.

Hardly was this realised when the conspiring silence of the hour was broken by another and a more definite sound. A step was coming along the passage. A certain bruise on the hip told Shorthouse that the pistol in his pocket was ready for use and he drew it out quickly and cocked it. Then he just had time to slip over the edge of the bed and crouch down on the floor when the step halted on the threshold of the room. The bed was thus between him and the open door. The window was at his back.

He waited in the darkness. What struck him as peculiar about the steps was that there seemed no particular desire to move stealthily. There was no extreme caution. They moved along in rather a slipshod way and sounded like soft slippers or feet in stockings. There was something clumsy, irresponsible, almost reckless about the movement.

For a second the steps paused upon the threshold, but only for a second. Almost immediately they came on into the room, and as they passed from the wood to the carpet Shorthouse noticed that they became wholly noiseless. He waited in suspense, not knowing whether the unseen walker was on the other side of the room or was close upon him. Presently he stood up and stretched out his left arm in front of him, groping, searching, feeling in a circle; and behind it he held the pistol, cocked and pointed, in his right hand. As he rose a bone cracked in his knee, his clothes rustled as if they were newspapers, and his breath seemed loud enough to be heard all over the room. But not a sound came to betray the position of the invisible intruder.

Then, just when the tension was becoming unbearable, a noise relieved the gripping silence. It was wood knocking against wood, and it came from the farther end of the room. The steps had moved over to the fireplace. A sliding sound almost immediately followed it and then silence closed again over everything like a pall.

For another five minutes Shorthouse waited, and then the suspense became too much. He could not stand that open door! The candles were close beside him and he struck a match and lit them, expecting in the sudden glare to receive at least a terrific blow. But nothing happened, and he saw at once that the room was entirely empty. Walking over with the pistol cocked he peered out into the darkness of the landing and then closed the door and turned the key. Then he searched the room — bed, cupboard, table, curtains, everything that could have concealed a man; but found no trace of the intruder. The owner of the footsteps had disappeared like a ghost into the shadows of the night. But for one fact he might have imagined that he had been dreaming: *the bag had vanished*!

There was no more sleep for Shorthouse that night. His watch pointed to 4 a.m. and there were still three hours before daylight. He sat down at the table and continued his sketches. With fixed determination he went on with his drawing and began a new outline of the man's head. There was something in the expression that continually evaded him. He had no success with it, and this time it seemed to him that it was the eyes that brought about his discomfiture. He held up his pencil before his face to measure the distance between the nose and the eyes, and to his amazement he saw that a change had come over the features. The eyes were no longer open. *The lids had closed!*

For a second he stood in a sort of stupefied astonishment. A push would have toppled him over. Then he sprang to his feet and held a candle close up to the picture. The eye-lids quivered, the eye-lashes trembled. Then, right before his gaze, the eyes opened and looked straight into his own. Two holes were cut in the panel and this pair of eyes, human eyes, just fitted them.

As by a curious effect of magic, the strong fear that had governed him ever since his entry into the house disappeared in a second. Anger rushed into his heart and his chilled blood rose suddenly to boiling point. Putting the candle down, he took two steps back into the room and then flung himself forward with all his strength against the painted panel. Instantly, and before the crash came, the eyes were withdrawn, and two black spaces showed where they had been. The old huntsman was eyeless. But the panel cracked and split inwards like a sheet of thin cardboard; and Shorthouse, pistol in hand, thrust an arm through the jagged aperture and, seizing a human leg, dragged out into the room — the Jew!

Words rushed in such a torrent to his lips that they choked him. The old Hebrew, white as chalk, stood shaking before him, the bright pistol barrel opposite his eyes, when a volume of cold air rushed into the room, and with it a sound of hurried steps. Shorthouse felt his arm knocked up before he had time to turn, and the same second Garvey, who had somehow managed to burst open the window came between him and the trembling Marx. His lips were parted and his eyes rolled strangely in his distorted face.

"Don't shoot him! Shoot in the air!" he shrieked. He seized the Jew by the shoulders.

"You damned hound," he roared, hissing in his face. "So I've got you at last. That's where your vacuum is, is it? I know your vile hiding-place at last.” He shook him like a dog. “I’ve been after him all night,” he cried, turning to Shorthouse, “all night, I tell you, and I’ve got him at last.”

Garvey lifted his upper lip as he spoke and showed his teeth. They shone like the fangs of a wolf. The Jew evidently saw them too, for he gave a horrid yell and struggled furiously.

Before the eyes of the secretary a mist seemed to rise. The hideous shadow again leaped into Garvey’s face. He foresaw a dreadful battle, and covering the two men with his pistol he retreated slowly to the door. Whether they were both mad, or both criminal, he did not pause to inquire. The only thought present in his mind was that the sooner he made his escape the better.

Garvey was still shaking the Jew when he reached the door and turned the key, but as he passed out on to the landing both men stopped their struggling and turned to face him. Garvey’s face, bestial, loathsome, livid with anger; the Jew’s white and grey with fear and horror; — both turned towards him and joined in a wild, horrible yell that woke the echoes of the night. The next second they were after him at full speed.

Shorthouse slammed the door in their faces and was at the foot of the stairs, crouching in the shadow, before they were out upon the landing. They tore shrieking down the stairs and past him, into the hall; and, wholly unnoticed, Shorthouse whipped up the stairs again, crossed the bedroom and dropped from the balcony into the soft snow.

As he ran down the drive he heard behind him in the house the yells of the maniacs; and when he reached home several hours later Mr. Sidebotham not only raised his salary but also told him to buy a new hat and overcoat, and send in the bill to him.

SKELETON LAKE: AN EPISODE IN CAMP

THE UTTER LONELINESS of our moose-camp on Skeleton Lake had impressed us from the beginning — in the Quebec backwoods, five days by trail and canoe from civilisation — and perhaps the singular name contributed a little to the sensation of eeriness that made itself felt in the camp circle when once the sun was down and the late October mists began rising from the lake and winding their way in among the tree trunks.

For, in these regions, all names of lakes and hills and islands have their origin in some actual event, taking either the name of a chief participant, such as Smith's Ridge, or claiming a place in the map by perpetuating some special feature of the journey or the scenery, such as Long Island, Deep Rapids, or Rainy Lake.

All names thus have their meaning and are usually pretty recently acquired, while the majority are self-explanatory and suggest human and pioneer relations. Skeleton Lake, therefore, was a name full of suggestion, and though none of us knew the origin or the story of its birth, we all were conscious of a certain lugubrious atmosphere that haunted its shores and islands, and but for the evidences of recent moose tracks in its neighbourhood we should probably have pitched our tents elsewhere.

For several hundred miles in any direction we knew of only one other party of whites. They had journeyed up on the train with us, getting in at North Bay, and hailing from Boston way. A common goal and object had served by way of introduction. But the acquaintance had made little progress. This noisy, aggressive Yankee did not suit our fancy much as a possible neighbour, and it was only a slight intimacy between his chief guide, Jake the Swede, and one of our men that kept the thing going at all. They went into camp on Beaver Creek, fifty miles and more to the west of us.

But that was six weeks ago, and seemed as many months, for days and nights pass slowly in these solitudes and the scale of time changes wonderfully. Our men always seemed to know by instinct pretty well "whar them other fellows was movin'," but in the interval no one had come across their trails, or once so much as heard their rifle shots.

Our little camp consisted of the professor, his wife, a splendid shot and keen woods-woman, and myself. We had a guide apiece, and hunted daily in pairs from before sunrise till dark.

It was our last evening in the woods, and the professor was lying in my little wedge tent, discussing the dangers of hunting alone in couples in this way. The flap of the tent hung back and let in fragrant odours of cooking over an open wood fire; everywhere there were bustle and preparation, and one canoe already lay packed with moose horns, her nose pointing southwards.

"If an accident happened to one of them," he was saying, "the survivor's story when he returned to camp would be entirely unsupported evidence, wouldn't it? Because, you see—"

And he went on laying down the law after the manner of professors, until I became so bored that my attention began to wander to pictures and memories of the scenes we were just about to leave: Garden Lake, with its hundred islands; the rapids out of Round Pond; the countless vistas of forest, crimson and gold in the autumn sunshine; and the starlit nights we had spent watching in cold, cramped positions for the wary moose on lonely lakes among the hills. The hum of the professor's voice in time grew more soothing. A nod or a grunt was all the reply he looked for. Fortunately, he loathed interruptions. I think I could almost have gone to sleep under his very nose; perhaps I did sleep for a brief interval.

Then it all came about so quickly, and the tragedy of it was so unexpected and painful, throwing our peaceful camp into momentary confusion, that now it all seems to have happened with the uncanny swiftness of a dream.

First, there was the abrupt ceasing of the droning voice, and then the running of quick little steps over the pine needles, and the confusion of men's voices; and the next instant the professor's wife was at the tent door, hatless, her face white, her hunting bloomers bagging at the wrong places, a rifle in her hand, and her words running into one another anyhow.

"Quick, Harry! It's Rushton. I was asleep and it woke me. Something's happened. You must deal with it!"

In a second we were outside the tent with our rifles.

"My God!" I heard the professor exclaim, as if he had first made the discovery. "It *is* Rushton!"

I saw the guides helping — dragging — a man out of a canoe. A brief space of deep silence followed in which I heard only the waves from the canoe washing up on the sand; and then, immediately after, came the voice of a man talking with amazing rapidity and with odd gaps between his words. It was Rushton telling his story, and the tones of his voice, now whispering, now almost shouting, mixed with sobs and solemn oaths and frequent appeals to the Deity, somehow or other struck the false note at the very start, and before any of us guessed or knew anything at all. Something moved secretly between his words, a shadow veiling the stars, destroying the peace of our little camp, and touching us all personally with an undefinable sense of horror and distrust.

I can see that group to this day, with all the detail of a good photograph: standing half-way between the firelight and the darkness, a slight mist rising from the lake, the frosty stars, and our men, in silence that was all sympathy, dragging Rushton across the rocks towards the camp fire. Their moccasins crunched on the sand and slipped several times on the stones beneath the weight of the limp, exhausted body, and I can still see every inch of the pared cedar branch he had used for a paddle on that lonely and dreadful journey.

But what struck me most, as it struck us all, was the limp exhaustion of his body compared to the strength of his utterance and the tearing rush of his words. A vigorous driving-power was there at work, forcing out the tale, red-hot and throbbing, full of discrepancies and the strangest contradictions; and the nature of this driving-power I first began to appreciate when they had lifted him into the circle of firelight and I saw his face, grey under the tan, terror in the eyes, tears too, hair and beard awry, and listened to the wild stream of words pouring forth without ceasing.

I think we all understood then, but it was only after many years that anyone dared to confess what he thought.

There was Matt Morris, my guide; Silver Fizz, whose real name was unknown, and who bore the title of his favourite drink; and huge Hank Milligan — all ears and kind intention; and there was Rushton, pouring out his ready-made tale, with ever-shifting eyes, turning from face to face, seeking confirmation of details none had witnessed but himself — and *one other*.

Silver Fizz was the first to recover from the shock of the thing, and to realise, with the natural sense of chivalry common to most genuine backwoodsmen, that the man was at a terrible disadvantage. At any rate, he was the first to start putting the matter to rights.

"Never mind telling it just now," he said in a gruff voice, but with real gentleness; "get a bite t'eat first and then let her go afterwards. Better have a horn of whisky too. It ain't all packed yet, I guess."

"Couldn't eat or drink a thing," cried the other. "Good Lord, don't you see, man, I want to *talk* to someone first? I want to get it out of me to someone who can answer — answer. I've had nothing but trees to talk with for three days, and I can't carry it alone any longer. Those cursed, silent trees — I've told it 'em a thousand times. Now, just see here, it was this way. When we started out from camp—"

He looked fearfully about him, and we realised it was useless to stop him. The story was bound to come, and come it did.

Now, the story itself was nothing out of the way; such tales are told by the dozen round any camp fire where men who have knocked about in the woods are in the circle. It was the way he told it that made our flesh creep. He was near the truth all along, but he was skimming it, and the skimming took off the cream that might have saved his soul.

Of course, he smothered it in words — odd words, too — melodramatic, poetic, out-of-the-way words that lie just on the edge of frenzy. Of course, too, he kept asking us each in turn, scanning our faces with those restless, frightened eyes of his, "What would *you* have done?" "What else could I do?" and "Was that *my* fault?" But that was nothing, for he was no milk-and-water fellow who dealt in hints and suggestions; he told his story boldly, forcing his conclusions upon us as if we had been so many wax cylinders of a phonograph that would repeat accurately what had been told us, and these questions I have mentioned he used to emphasise any special point that he seemed to think required such emphasis.

The fact was, however, the picture of what had actually happened was so vivid still in his own mind that it reached ours by a process of telepathy which he could not control or prevent. All through his true-false words this picture stood forth in fearful detail against the shadows behind him. He could not veil, much less obliterate, it. We knew; and, I always thought, *he knew that we knew*.

The story itself, as I have said, was sufficiently ordinary. Jake and himself, in a nine-foot canoe, had upset in the middle of a lake, and had held hands across the upturned craft for several hours, eventually cutting holes in her ribs to stick their arms through and grasp hands lest the numbness of the cold water should overcome them. They were miles from shore, and the wind was drifting them down upon a little island. But when they got within a few hundred yards of the island, they realised to their horror that they would after all drift past it.

It was then the quarrel began. Jake was for leaving the canoe and swimming. Rushton believed in waiting till they actually had passed the island and were sheltered from the wind. Then they could make the island easily by swimming, canoe and all. But Jake refused to give in, and after a short struggle — Rushton admitted there was a struggle — got free from the canoe — and disappeared *without a single cry*.

Rushton held on and proved the correctness of his theory, and finally made the island, canoe and all, after being in the water over five hours. He described to us how he crawled up on to the shore, and fainted at once, with his feet lying half in the water; how lost and terrified he felt upon regaining consciousness in the dark; how the canoe had drifted away and his extraordinary luck in finding it caught again at the end of the island by a projecting cedar branch. He told us that the little axe — another bit of real luck — had caught in the thwart when the canoe turned over, and how the little bottle in his pocket holding the emergency matches was whole and dry. He made a blazing fire and searched the island from end to end, calling upon Jake in the darkness, but getting no answer; till, finally, so many half-drowned men seemed to come crawling out of the water on to the rocks, and vanish among the shadows when he came up with them, that he lost his nerve completely and returned to lie down by the fire till the daylight came.

He then cut a bough to replace the lost paddles, and after one more useless search for his lost companion, he got into the canoe, fearing every moment he would upset again, and crossed over to the mainland. He knew roughly the position of our camping place, and after paddling day and night, and making many weary portages, without food or covering, he reached us two days later.

This, more or less, was the story, and we, knowing whereof he spoke, knew that every word was literally true, and at the same time went to the building up of a hideous and prodigious lie.

Once the recital was over, he collapsed, and Silver Fizz, after a general expression of sympathy from the rest of us, came again to the rescue.

"But now, Mister, you jest *got* to eat and drink whether you've a mind to, or no."

And Matt Morris, cook that night, soon had the fried trout and bacon, and the wheat cakes and hot coffee passing round a rather silent and oppressed circle. So we ate round the fire, ravenously, as we had eaten every night for the past six weeks, but with this difference: that there was one among us who was more than ravenous — and he gorged.

In spite of all our devices he somehow kept himself the centre of observation. When his tin mug was empty, Morris instantly passed the tea-pail; when he began to mop up the bacon grease with the dough on his fork, Hank reached out for the frying pan; and the can of steaming boiled potatoes was always by his side. And there was another difference as well: he was sick, terribly sick before the meal was over, and this sudden nausea after food was more eloquent than words of what the man had passed through on his dreadful, foodless, ghost-haunted journey of forty miles to our camp. In the darkness he thought he would go crazy, he said. There were voices in the trees, and figures were always lifting themselves out of the water, or from behind boulders, to look at him and make awful signs. Jake constantly peered at him through the underbrush, and everywhere the shadows were moving, with eyes, footsteps, and following shapes.

We tried hard to talk of other things, but it was no use, for he was bursting with the rehearsal of his story and refused to allow himself the chances we were so willing and anxious to grant him. After a good night's rest he might have had more self-control and better judgment, and would probably have acted differently. But, as it was, we found it impossible to help him.

Once the pipes were lit, and the dishes cleared away, it was useless to pretend any longer. The sparks from the burning logs zigzagged upwards into a sky brilliant with stars. It was all wonderfully still and peaceful, and the forest odours floated to us on the sharp autumn air. The cedar fire smelt sweet and we could just hear the gentle wash of tiny waves along the shore. All was calm, beautiful, and remote from the world of men and passion. It was, indeed, a night to touch the soul, and yet, I think, none of us heeded these things. A bull-moose might almost have thrust his great head over our shoulders and have escaped unnoticed. The death of Jake the Swede, with its sinister setting, was the real presence that held the centre of the stage and compelled attention.

"You won't p'raps care to come along, Mister," said Morris, by way of a beginning; "but I guess I'll go with one of the boys here and have a hunt for it."

"Sure," said Hank. "Jake an' I done some biggish trips together in the old days, and I'll do that much for'm."

"It's deep water, they tell me, round them islands," added Silver Fizz; "but we'll find it, sure pop, — if it's thar."

They all spoke of the body as "it."

There was a minute or two of heavy silence, and then Rushton again burst out with his story in almost the identical words he had used before. It was almost as if he had learned it by heart. He wholly failed to appreciate the efforts of the others to let him off.

Silver Fizz rushed in, hoping to stop him, Morris and Hank closely following his lead.

"I once knew another travellin' partner of his," he began quickly; "used to live down Moosejaw Rapids way—"

"Is that so?" said Hank.

"Kind o' useful sort er feller," chimed in Morris.

All the idea the men had was to stop the tongue wagging before the discrepancies became so glaring that we should be forced to take notice of them, and ask questions. But, just as well try to stop an angry bull-moose on the run, or prevent Beaver Creek freezing in mid-winter by throwing in pebbles near the shore. Out it came! And, though the discrepancy this time was insignificant, it somehow brought us all in a second face to face with the inevitable and dreaded climax.

“And so I tramped all over that little bit of an island, hoping he might somehow have gotten in without my knowing it, and always thinking I *heard that awful last cry of his* in the darkness — and then the night dropped down impenetrably, like a damn thick blanket out of the sky, and —”

All eyes fell away from his face. Hank poked up the logs with his boot, and Morris seized an ember in his bare fingers to light his pipe, although it was already emitting clouds of smoke. But the professor caught the ball flying.

“I thought you said he sank without a cry,” he remarked quietly, looking straight up into the frightened face opposite, and then riddling mercilessly the confused explanation that followed.

The cumulative effect of all these forces, hitherto so rigorously repressed, now made itself felt, and the circle spontaneously broke up, everybody moving at once by a common instinct. The professor’s wife left the party abruptly, with excuses about an early start next morning. She first shook hands with Rushton, mumbling something about his comfort in the night.

The question of his comfort, however, devolved by force of circumstances upon myself, and he shared my tent. Just before wrapping up in my double blankets — for the night was bitterly cold — he turned and began to explain that he had a habit of talking in his sleep and hoped I would wake him if he disturbed me by doing so.

Well, he did talk in his sleep — and it disturbed me very much indeed. The anger and violence of his words remain with me to this day, and it was clear in a minute that he was living over again some portion of the scene upon the lake. I listened, horror-struck, for a moment or two, and then understood that I was face to face with one of two alternatives: I must continue an unwilling eavesdropper, or I must waken him. The former was impossible for me, yet I shrank from the latter with the greatest repugnance; and in my dilemma I saw the only way out of the difficulty and at once accepted it.

Cold though it was, I crawled stealthily out of my warm sleeping-bag and left the tent, intending to keep the old fire alight under the stars and spend the remaining hours till daylight in the open.

As soon as I was out I noticed at once another figure moving silently along the shore. It was Hank Milligan, and it was plain enough what he was doing: he was examining the holes that had been cut in the upper ribs of the canoe. He looked half ashamed when I came up with him, and mumbled something about not being able to sleep for the cold. But, there, standing together beside the over-turned canoe, we both saw that the holes were far too small for a man’s hand and arm and could not possibly have been cut by two men hanging on for their lives in deep water. Those holes had been made afterwards.

Hank said nothing to me and I said nothing to Hank, and presently he moved off to collect logs for the fire, which needed replenishing, for it was a piercingly cold night and there were many degrees of frost.

Three days later Hank and Silver Fizz followed with stumbling footsteps the old Indian trail that leads from Beaver Creek to the southwards. A hammock was slung between them, and it weighed heavily. Yet neither of the men complained; and, indeed, speech between them was almost nothing. Their thoughts, however, were exceedingly busy, and the terrible secret of the woods which formed their burden weighed far more heavily than the uncouth, shifting mass that lay in the swinging hammock and tugged so severely at their shoulders.

They had found “it” in four feet of water not more than a couple of yards from the lee shore of the island. And in the back of the head was a long, terrible wound which no man could possibly have inflicted upon himself.

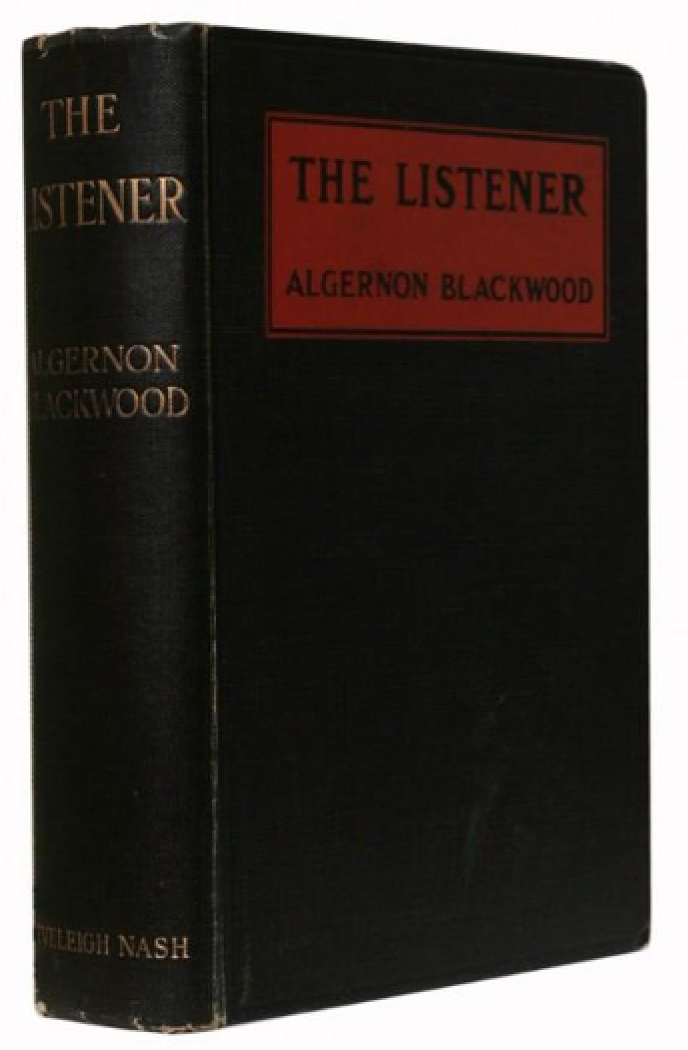
The Listener and Other Stories (1907)

This was Blackwood’s second collection of supernatural stories, published in 1907. It contains his most famous story ‘The Willows’, in which two men on a canoeing trip on the Danube encounter terrifying elemental spirits. H. P. Lovecraft considered it the finest supernatural story in English literature and it is one of the key texts in the weird fiction tradition, a brand of horror story characterised by the notion that the human race is at the mercy of ancient and powerful cosmic forces, which it cannot hope ever to comprehend fully.

The other stories are less well-known, but no less intriguing. The title story is Blackwood’s only epistolary short story, composed of diary entries in which a mentally disturbed man writes of his suspicions that a previous (deceased) tenant persists in visiting his old home. ‘The Insanity of Jones’ similarly uses the protagonist’s avowed mental illness as a technique by which to make the supernatural element disturbingly ambiguous.

Two of the stories ‘May Day Eve’ and ‘The Old Man of Visions’, draw on Blackwood’s mystical belief that contact with the spirit world is possible under the right circumstances. In his autobiography, Blackwood revealed that the latter story was based on an acquaintance of his.

The collection also includes two stories – ‘Miss Slumbubble’ and ‘The Woman’s Ghost Story’ – whose protagonists are women. This allows for a female perspective unusual in the weird fiction genre.


THE LISTENER
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD
THE
LISTENER
ALGERNON
BLACKWOOD
EVELEIGH NASH

The first edition

CONTENTS

THE LISTENER
MAX HENSIG. BACTERIOLOGIST AND MURDERER
THE WILLOWS
THE INSANITY OF JONES
THE DANCE OF DEATH
THE OLD MAN OF VISIONS
MAY DAY EVE
MISS SLUMBUBBLE — AND CLAUSTROPHOBIA
THE WOMAN’S GHOST STORY

THE LISTENER

SEPT. 4. — I have hunted all over London for rooms suited to my income — £120 a year — and have at last found them. Two rooms, without modern conveniences, it is true, and in an old, ramshackle building, but within a stone's throw of P — Place and in an eminently respectable street. The rent is only £25 a year. I had begun to despair when at last I found them by chance.

The chance was a mere chance, and unworthy of record. I had to sign a lease for a year, and I did so willingly. The furniture from our old place in Hampshire, which has been stored so long, will just suit them.

Oct. 1. — Here I am in my two rooms, in the centre of London, and not far from the offices of the periodicals, where occasionally I dispose of an article or two. The building is at the end of a cul-de-sac. The alley is well paved and clean, and lined chiefly with the backs of sedate and institutional-looking buildings. There is a stable in it. My own house is dignified with the title of "Chambers ". I feel as if one day the honour must prove too much for it, and it will swell with pride — and fall asunder. It is very old. The floor of my sitting-room has valleys and low hills on it, and the top of the door slants away from the ceiling with a glorious disregard of what is usual.

They must have quarrelled — fifty years ago — and have been going apart ever since.

Oct. 2. — My landlady is old and thin, with a faded, dusty face. She is communicative. The few words she utters seem to cost her pain. Probably her lungs are half choked with dust. She keeps my rooms as free from this commodity as possible, and has the assistance of a strong girl who brings up the breakfast and lights the fire. As I have said already, she is not communicative.

In reply to pleasant efforts on my part she informed me briefly that I was the only occupant of the house at present. My rooms had not been occupied for some years. There had been other gentlemen upstairs, but they had left.

She never looks straight at me when she speaks, but fixes her dim eyes on my middle waistcoat button, till I get nervous and begin to think it isn't on straight, or is the wrong sort of button altogether.

Oct. 8. — My week's book is nicely kept, and so far is reasonable. Milk and sugar 7d., bread 6d., butter 8d., marmalade 6d., eggs 1s. 8d., laundress 2s. 9d., oil 6d., attendance 5s.; total 12s. 2d.

The landlady has a son who, she told me, is "somethink on a homnibus". He comes occasionally to see her. I think he drinks, for he talks very loud, regardless of the hour of the day or night, and tumbles about over the furniture downstairs.

All the morning I sit indoors writing — articles; verses for the comic papers; a novel I've been "at" for three years, and concerning which I have dreams; a children's book, in which the imagination has free rein; and another book which is to last as long as myself, since it is an honest record of my soul's advance or retreat in the struggle of life. Besides these, I keep a book of poems which I use as a safety valve, and concerning which I have no dreams whatsoever.

Between the lot I am always occupied. In the afternoons I generally try to take a walk for my health's sake, through Regent's Park, into Kensington Gardens, or farther afield to Hampstead Heath.

Oct. 10. — Everything went wrong to-day. I have two eggs for breakfast. This morning one of them was bad. I rang the bell for Emily. When she came in I was reading the paper, and, without looking up, I said, "Egg's bad." "Oh, is it, sir?" she said; "I'll get another one," and went out, taking the egg with her. I waited my breakfast for her return, which was in five minutes. She put the new egg on the table and went away. But, when I looked down, I saw that she had taken away the good egg and left the bad one — all green and yellow — in the slop basin. I rang again.

"You've taken the wrong egg," I said.

"Oh!" she exclaimed; "I thought the one I took down didn't smell so very bad." In due time she returned with the good egg, and I resumed my breakfast with two eggs, but less appetite. It was all very trivial, to be sure, but so stupid that I felt annoyed. The character of that egg influenced everything I did. I wrote a bad article, and tore it up. I got a bad headache. I used bad words — to myself. Everything was bad, so I “chucked” work and went for a long walk.

I dined at a cheap chop-house on my way back, and reached home about nine o’clock.

Rain was just beginning to fall as I came in, and the wind was rising. It promised an ugly night. The alley looked dismal and dreary, and the hall of the house, as I passed through it, felt chilly as a tomb. It was the first stormy night I had experienced in my new quarters. The draughts were awful. They came criss-cross, met in the middle of the room, and formed eddies and whirlpools and cold silent currents that almost lifted the hair of my head. I stuffed up the sashes of the windows with neckties and odd socks, and sat over the smoky fire to keep warm. First I tried to write, but found it too cold. My hand turned to ice on the paper.

What tricks the wind did play with the old place! It came rushing up the forsaken alley with a sound like the feet of a hurrying crowd of people who stopped suddenly at the door. I felt as if a lot of curious folk had arranged themselves just outside and were staring up at my windows.

Then they took to their heels again and fled whispering and laughing down the lane, only, however, to return with the next gust of wind and repeat their impertinence. On the other side of my room a single square window opens into a sort of shaft, or well, that measures about six feet across to the back wall of another house. Down this funnel the wind dropped, and puffed and shouted. Such noises I never heard before. Between these two entertainments I sat over the fire in a great-coat, listening to the deep booming in the chimney. It was like being in a ship at sea, and I almost looked for the floor to rise in undulations and rock to and fro.

Oct. 12. — I wish I were not quite so lonely — and so poor. And yet I love both my loneliness and my poverty. The former makes me appreciate the companionship of the wind and rain, while the latter preserves my liver and prevents me wasting time in dancing attendance upon women.

Poor, ill-dressed men are not acceptable “attendants”.

My parents are dead, and my only sister is — no, not dead exactly, but married to a very rich man. They travel most of the time, he to find his health, she to lose herself. Through sheer neglect on her part she has long passed out of my life. The door closed when, after an absolute silence of five years, she sent me a cheque for £50 at Christmas. It was signed by her husband! I returned it to her in a thousand pieces and in an unstamped envelope. So at least I had the satisfaction of knowing that it cost her something! She wrote back with a broad quill pen that covered a whole page with three lines, “You are evidently as cracked as ever, and rude and ungrateful into the bargain.” It had always been my special terror lest the insanity of my father’s family should leap across the generations and appear in me. This thought haunted me, and she knew it. So after this little exchange of civilities the door slammed, never to open again. I heard the crash it made, and, with it, the falling from the walls of my heart of many little bits of china with their own peculiar value — rare china, some of it, that only needed dusting. The same walls, too, carried mirrors in which I used sometimes to see reflected the misty lawns of childhood, the daisy chains, the wind-torn blossoms scattered through the orchard by warm rains, the robbers’ cave in the long walk, and the hidden store of apples in the hayloft. She was my inseparable companion then — but, when the door slammed, the mirrors cracked across their entire length, and the visions they held vanished for ever. Now I am quite alone. At forty one cannot begin all over again to build up careful friendships, and all others are comparatively worthless.

Oct. 14. — My bedroom is 10 by 10. It is below the level of the front room, and a step leads down into it. Both rooms are very quiet on calm nights, for there is no traffic down this forsaken alley-way. In spite of the occasional larks of the wind, it is a most sheltered strip. At its upper end, below my windows, all the cats of the neighbourhood congregate as soon as darkness gathers. They lie undisturbed on the long ledge of a blind window of the opposite building, for after the postman has come and gone at 9.30, no footsteps ever dare to interrupt their sinister conclave, no step but my own, or sometimes the unsteady footfall of the son who “is somethink on a homnibus”.

Oct. 15. — I dined at an “A.B.C.” shop on poached eggs and coffee, and then went for a stroll round the outer edge of Regent’s Park. It was ten o’clock when I got home, I counted no less than thirteen cats, all of a dark colour, crouching under the lee side of the alley walls. It was a cold night, and the stars shone like points of ice in a blue-black sky. The cats turned their heads and stared at me in silence as I passed. An odd sensation of shyness took possession of me under the glare of so many pairs of unblinking eyes. As I fumbled with the latch-key they jumped noiselessly down and pressed against my legs, as if anxious to be let in. But I slammed the door in their faces and ran quickly upstairs. The front room, as I entered to grope for the matches, felt as cold as a stone vault, and the air held an unusual dampness.

Oct. 17. — For several days I have been working on a ponderous article that allows no play for the fancy. My imagination requires a judicious rein; I am afraid to let it loose, for it carries me sometimes into appalling places beyond the stars and beneath the world. No one realises the danger more than I do. But what a foolish thing to write here — for there is no one to know, no one to realize! My mind of late has held unusual thoughts, thoughts I have never had before, about medicines and drugs and the treatment of strange illnesses. I cannot imagine their source.

At no time in my life have I dwelt upon such ideas now constantly throng my brain. I have had no exercise lately, for the weather has been shocking; and all my afternoons have been spent in the reading-room of the British Museum, where I have a reader's ticket.

I have made an unpleasant discovery: there are rats in the house. At night from my bed I have heard them scampering across the hills and valleys of the front room, and my sleep has been a good deal disturbed in consequence.

Oct. 19. — The landlady, I find, has a little boy with her, probably her son's child. In fine weather he plays in the alley, and draws a wooden cart over the cobbles. One of the wheels is off, and it makes a most distracting noise. After putting up with it as long as possible, I found it was getting on my nerves, and I could not write. So I rang the bell. Emily answered it.

"Emily, will you ask the little fellow to make less noise? It's impossible to work."

The girl went downstairs, and soon afterwards the child was called in by the kitchen door. I felt rather a brute for spoiling his play. In a few minutes, however, the noise began again, and I felt that he was the brute. He dragged the broken toy with a string over the stones till the rattling noise jarred every nerve in my body. It became unbearable, and I rang the bell a second time.

“That noise must be put a stop to!” I said to the girl, with decision.

“Yes, sir,” she grinned, “I know; but one of the wheels is hoff. The men in the stable offered to mend it for ‘im, but he wouldn’t let them. He says he likes it that way.”

“I can’t help what he likes. The noise must stop. I can’t write.”

“Yes, sir; I’ll tell Mrs. Monson.”

The noise stopped for the day then.

Oct. 23. — Every day for the past week that cart has rattled over the stones, till I have come to think of it as a huge carrier’s van with four wheels and two horses; and every morning I have been obliged to ring the bell and have it stopped. The last time Mrs. Monson herself came up, and said she was sorry I had been annoyed; the sounds should not occur again. With rare discursiveness she went on to ask if I was comfortable, and how I liked the rooms. I replied cautiously. I mentioned the rats. She said they were mice. I spoke of the draughts. She said, “Yes, it were a draughty ‘ouse.” I referred to the cats, and she said they had been as long as she could remember. By way of conclusion, she informed me that the house was over two hundred years old, and that the last gentleman who had occupied my rooms was a painter who “‘ad real Jimmy Bueys and Raffles ‘anging all hover the walls”. It took me some moments to discern that Cimabue and Raphael were in the woman’s mind.

Oct. 24. — Last night the son who is “somethink on a homnibus” came in. He had evidently been drinking, for I heard loud and angry voices below in the kitchen long after I had gone to bed. Once, too, I caught the singular words rising up to me through the floor, “Burning from top to bottom is the only thing that’ll ever make this ‘ouse right.” I knocked on the floor, and the voices ceased suddenly, though later I again heard their clamour in my dreams.

These rooms are very quiet, almost too quiet sometimes. On windless nights they are silent as the grave, and the house might be miles in the country. The roar of London’s traffic reaches me only in heavy, distant vibrations. It holds an ominous note sometimes, like that of an approaching army, or an immense tidal-wave very far away thundering in the night.

Oct. 27. — Mrs. Monson, though admirably silent, is a foolish, fussy woman. She does such stupid things. In dusting the room she puts all my things in the wrong places. The ash-trays, which should be on the writing-table, she sets in a silly row on the mantelpiece. The pen-tray, which should be beside the inkstand, she hides away cleverly among the books on my reading-desk.

My gloves she arranges daily in idiotic array upon a half-filled bookshelf, and I always have to rearrange them on the low table by the door. She places my hair at impossible angles between the fire and the light, and the tablecloth — the one with Trinity Hall stains — she puts on the table in such a fashion that when I look at it I feel as if my tie and all my clothes were on crooked and awry. She exasperates me. Her very silence and meekness are irritating.

Sometimes I feel inclined to throw the inkstand at her, just to bring an expression into her watery eyes and a squeak from those colourless lips. Dear me! What violent expressions I am making use of! How very foolish of me! And yet it almost seems as if the words were not my own, but had been spoken into my ear — I mean, I never make use of such terms naturally.

Oct. 30. — I have been here a month. The place does not agree with me, I think. My headaches are more frequent and violent, and my nerves are a perpetual source of discomfort and annoyance.

I have conceived a great dislike for Mrs. Monson, a feeling I am certain she reciprocates.

Somehow, the impression comes frequently to me that there are goings on in this house of which I know nothing, and which she is careful to hide from me.

Last night her son slept in the house, and this morning as I was standing at the window I saw him go out. He glanced up and caught my eye. It was a loutish figure and a singularly repulsive face that I saw, and he gave me the benefit of a very unpleasant leer. At least, so I imagined.

Evidently I am getting absurdly sensitive to trifles, and I suppose it is my disordered nerves making themselves felt. In the British Museum this afternoon I noticed several people at the readers' table staring at me and watching every movement I made. Whenever I looked up from my books I found their eyes upon me. It seemed to me unnecessary and unpleasant, and I left earlier than was my custom. When I reached the door I threw back a last look into the room, and saw every head at the table turned in my direction. It annoyed me very much, and yet I know it is foolish to take note of such things. When I am well they pass me by. I must get more regular exercise. Of late I have had next to none.

Nov. 2. — The utter stillness of this house is beginning to oppress me. I wish there were other fellows living upstairs. No footsteps ever sound overhead, and no tread ever passes my door to go up the next flight of stairs. I am beginning to feel some curiosity to go up myself and see what the upper rooms are like. I feel lonely here and isolated, swept into a deserted corner of the world and forgotten...Once I actually caught myself gazing into the long, cracked mirrors, trying to sec the sunlight dancing beneath the trees in the orchard. But only deep shadows seemed to congregate there now, and I soon desisted.

It has been very dark all day, and no wind stirring. The fogs have begun. I had to use a reading-lamp all this morning. There was no cart to be heard to-day. I actually missed it. This morning, in the gloom and silence, I think I could almost have welcomed it. After all, the sound is a very human one, and this empty house at the end of the alley holds other noises that are not quite so satisfactory.

I have never once seen a policeman in the lane, and the postmen always hurry out with no evidence of a desire to loiter.

10 p.m. — As I write this I hear no sound but the deep murmur of the distant traffic and the low sighing of the wind. The two sounds melt into one another. Now and again a cat raises its shrill, uncanny cry upon the darkness. The cats are always there under my windows when the darkness falls. The wind is dropping into the funnel with a noise like the sudden sweeping of immense distant wings. It is a dreary night. I feel lost and forgotten.

Nov. 3 — From my windows I can see arrivals. When anyone comes to the door I can just see the hat and shoulders and the hand on the bell. Only two fellows have been to see me since I came here two months ago. Both of them I saw from the window before they came tip, and heard their voices asking if I was in. Neither of them ever came back.

I have finished the ponderous article. On reading it through, however, I was dissatisfied with it, and drew my pencil through almost every page. There were strange expressions and ideas in it, that I could not explain, and viewed with amazement, not to say alarm. They did not sound like my very own, and I could not remember having written them. Can it be that my memory is beginning to be affected?

My pens are never to be found. That stupid old woman puts them in a different place each day. I must give her due credit for finding so many new hiding places; such ingenuity is wonderful. I have told her repeatedly, but she always says, “I’ll speak to Emily, sir.” Emily always says, “I’ll tell Mrs. Monson, sir.” Their foolishness makes me irritable and scatters all my thoughts. I should like to stick the lost pens into them and turn them out, blind-eyed, to be scratched and mauled by those thousand hungry cats. Whew! What a ghastly thought! Where in the world did it come from? Such an idea is no more my own than it is the policeman’s. Yet I felt I had to write it. It was like a voice singing in my head, and my pen wouldn’t stop till the last word was finished. What ridiculous nonsense! I must and will restrain myself. I must take more regular exercise; my nerves and liver plague me horribly.

Nov. 4. — I attended a curious lecture in the French quarter on “Death”, but the room was so hot and I was so weary that I fell asleep. The only part I heard, however, touched my imagination vividly. Speaking of suicides, the lecturer said that self-murder was no escape from the miseries of the present, but only a preparation of greater sorrow for the future. Suicides, he declared, cannot shirk their responsibilities so easily. They must return to take up life exactly where they laid it so violently down, but with the added pain and punishment of their weakness. Many of them wander the earth in unspeakable misery till they can reclothe themselves in the body of someone else — generally a lunatic, or weak-minded person, who cannot resist the hideous obsession. This is their only means of escape. Surely a weird and horrible idea! I wish I had slept all the time and not heard it at all.

My mind is morbid enough without such ghastly fancies. Such mischievous propaganda should be stopped by the police. I'll write to the Times and suggest it.

Good idea!

I walked home through Greek Street, Soho, and imagined that a hundred years had slipped back into place and De Quincey was still there, haunting the night with invocations to his "just, subtle, and mighty" drug. His vast dreams seemed to hover not very far away. Once started in my brain, the pictures refused to go away; and I saw him sleeping in that cold, tenantless mansion with the strange little waif who was afraid of its ghosts, both together in the shadows under a single horseman's cloak; or wandering in the companionship of the spectral Anne; or, later still, on his way to the eternal rendezvous at the foot of Great Titchfield Street, the rendezvous she never was able to keep. What an unutterable gloom, what an untold horror of sorrow and suffering comes over me as I try to realise something of what that man — boy he then was — must have taken into his lonely heart.

As I came up the alley I saw a light in the top window, and a head and shoulders thrown in an exaggerated shadow upon the blind. I wondered what the son could be doing up there at such an hour.

Nov. 5. — This morning, while writing, someone came up the creaking stairs and knocked cautiously at my door. Thinking it was the landlady, I said, "Come in!" The knock was repeated, and I cried louder, "Come in, come in!" But no one turned the handle, and I continued my writing with a vexed "Well, stay out, then!" under my breath. Went on writing? I tried to, but my thoughts had suddenly dried up at their source. I could not set down a single word. It was a dark, yellow-fog morning, and there was little enough inspiration in the air as it was, but that stupid woman standing just outside my door waiting to be told again to come in roused a spirit of vexation that filled my head to the exclusion of all else. At last I jumped up and opened the door myself.

"What do you want, and why in the world don't you come in?" I cried out. But the words dropped into empty air. There was no one there. The fog poured up the dingy staircase in deep yellow coils, but there was no sign of a human being anywhere.

I slammed the door, with imprecations upon the house and its noises, and went back to my work. A few minutes later Emily came in with a letter.

“Were you or Mrs. Monson outside a few minutes ago knocking at my door?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you sure?”

“Mrs. Monson’s gone to market, and there’s no one but me and the child in the ‘ole ‘ouse, and I’ve been washing the dishes for the last hour, sir.”

I fancied the girl’s face turned a shade paler. She fidgeted towards the door with a glance over her shoulder.

“Wait, Emily,” I said, and then told her what I had heard. She stared stupidly at me, though her eyes shifted now and then over the articles in the room.

“Who was it?” I asked when I had come to the end. “Mrs. Monson says it’s only mice,” she said, as if repeating a learned lesson.

“Mice!” I exclaimed; “it’s nothing of the sort. Someone was feeling about outside my door. Who was it? Is the son in the house?”

Her whole manner changed suddenly, and she became earnest instead of evasive. She seemed anxious to tell the truth.

“Oh no, sir; there’s no one in the house at all but you and me and the child, and there couldn’t ‘ave been nobody at your door. As for them knocks—” She stopped abruptly, as though she had said too much.

“Well, what about the knocks?” I said more gently.

“Of course,” she stammered, “the knocks isn’t mice, nor the footsteps neither, but then—”

Again she came to a full halt.

“Anything wrong with the house?”

“Lor,’ no, sir; the drains is splendid!”

“I don’t mean drains, girl. I mean, did anything — anything bad ever happen here?”

She flushed up to the roots of her hair, and then turned suddenly pale again. She was obviously in considerable distress, and there was something she was anxious, yet afraid to tell — some forbidden thing she was not allowed to mention.

“I don’t mind what it was, only I should like to know,” I said encouragingly.

Raising her frightened eyes to my face, she began to blurt out something about “that which ‘appened once to a gentleman that lived hupstairs”, when a shrill voice calling her name sounded below.

“Emily, Emily!” It was the returning landlady, and the girl tumbled downstairs as if pulled backwards by a rope, leaving me full of conjectures as to what in the world could have happened to a gentleman upstairs that could in so curious a manner affect my ears downstairs.

Nov. 10. — I have done capital work; have finished the ponderous article and had it accepted for the Review, and another one ordered. I feel well and cheerful, and have had regular exercise and good sleep; no headaches, no nerves, no liver! Those pills the chemist recommended are wonderful. I can watch the child playing with his cart and feel no annoyance; sometimes I almost feel inclined to join him. Even the grey-faced landlady rouses pity in me; I am sorry for her: so worn, so weary, so oddly put together, just like the building. She looks as if she had once suffered some shock of terror, and was momentarily dreading another. When I spoke to her to-day very gently about not putting the pens in the ash-tray and the gloves on the hook-shelf she raised her faint eyes to mine for the first time, and said with the ghost of a smile, “I’ll try and re-member, sir.” I felt inclined to pat her on the back and say, “Come, cheer up and be jolly. Life’s not so bad after all.” Oh! I am much better. There’s nothing like open air and success and good sleep. They build up as if by magic the portions of the heart eaten down by despair and unsatisfied yearnings. Even to the cats I feel friendly. When I came in at eleven o’clock to-night they followed me to the door in a stream, and I stooped down to stroke the one nearest to me.

Bah! The brute hissed and spat, and struck at me with her paws. The claw caught my hand and drew blood in a thin line. The others danced sideways into the darkness, screeching, as though I had done them an injury. I believe these cats really hate me. Perhaps they are only waiting to be reinforced.

Then they will attack me. Ha, ha! In spite of the momentary annoyance, this fancy sent me laughing upstairs to my room.

The fire was out, and the room seemed unusually cold. As I groped my way over to the mantelpiece to find the matches I realised all at once that there was another person standing beside me in the darkness. I could, of course, see nothing, but my fingers, feeling along the ledge, came into forcible contact with something that was at once withdrawn. It was cold and moist. I could have sworn it was somebody’s hand. My flesh began to creep instantly.

“Who’s that?” I exclaimed in a loud voice.

My voice dropped into the silence like a pebble into a deep well. There was no answer, but at the same moment I heard someone moving away from me across the room in the direction of the door. It was a confused sort of footstep, and the sound of garments brushing the furniture on the way. The same second my hand stumbled upon the match-box, and I struck a light. I expected to see Mrs. Monson, or Emily, or perhaps the son who is something on an omnibus. But the flare of the gas-jet illumined an empty room; there was not a sign of a person anywhere. I felt the hair stir upon my head, and instinctively I backed tip against the wall, lest something should approach me from behind. I was distinctly alarmed. But the next minute I recovered myself. The door was open on to the landing, and I crossed the room, not without some inward trepidation, and went out. The light from the room fell upon the stairs, but there was no one to be seen anywhere, nor was there any sound on the creaking wooden staircase to indicate a departing creature.

I was in the act of turning to go in again when a sound overhead caught my ear. It was a very faint sound, not unlike the sigh of wind; yet it could not have been the wind, for the night was still as the grave. Though it was not repeated, I resolved to go upstairs and see for myself what it all meant. Two senses had been affected — touch and hearing — and I could not believe that I had been deceived. So, with a lighted candle, I went stealthily forth on my unpleasant journey into the upper regions of this queer little old house.

On the first landing there was only one door, and it was locked. On the second there was also only one door, but when I turned the handle it opened. There came forth to meet me the chill musty air that is characteristic of a long unoccupied room. With it there came an indescribable odour. I use the adjective advisedly. Though very faint, diluted as it were, it was nevertheless an odour that made my gorge rise. I had never smelt anything like it before, and I cannot describe it.

The room was small and square, close under the roof, with a sloping ceiling and two tiny windows. It was cold as the grave, without a shred of carpet or a stick of furniture. The icy atmosphere and the nameless odour combined to make the room abominable to me, and, after lingering a moment to see that it contained no cupboards or corners into which a person might have crept for concealment, I made haste to shut the door, and went downstairs again to bed.

Evidently I had been deceived after all as to the noise.

In the night I had a foolish but very vivid dream. I dreamed that the landlady and another person, dark and not properly visible, entered my room on all fours, followed by a horde of immense cats. They attacked me as I lay in bed, and murdered me, and then dragged my body upstairs and deposited it on the floor of that cold little square room under the roof.

Nov. 11. — Since my talk with Emily — the unfinished talk — I have hardly once set eyes on her. Mrs. Monson now attends wholly to my wants. As usual, she does everything exactly as I don’t like it done. It is all too utterly trivial to mention, but it is exceedingly irritating. Like small doses of morphine often repeated, she has finally a cumulative effect.

Nov. 12. — This morning I woke early, and came into the front room to get a book, meaning to read in bed till it was time to get tip. Emily was laying the fire.

“Good morning!” I said cheerfully. “Mind you make a good fire. It’s very cold.”

The girl turned and showed me a startled face. It was not Emily at all!

“Where’s Emily?” I exclaimed.

“You mean the girl as was ‘ere before me?”

“Has Emily left?”

“I came on the 6th,” she replied sullenly, “and she’d gone then.” I got my book and went back to bed. Emily must have been sent away almost immediately after our conversation. This reflection kept coming between me and the printed page. I was glad when it was time to get up.

Such prompt energy, such merciless decision, seemed to argue something of importance — to somebody.

Nov. 13. — The wound inflicted by the cat’s claw has swollen, and causes me annoyance and some pain. It throbs and itches. I’m afraid my blood must be in poor condition, or it would have healed by now. I opened it with a penknife soaked in an antiseptic solution, and cleansed it thoroughly. I have heard unpleasant stories of the results of wounds inflicted by cats.

Nov. 14. — In spite of the curious effect this house certainly exercises upon my nerves, I like it. It is lonely and deserted in the very heart of London, but it is also for that reason quiet to work in. I wonder why it is so cheap. Some people might he suspicious, but I did not even ask the reason. No answer is better than a lie. If only I could remove the cats from the outside and the rats from the inside. I feel that I shall grow accustomed more and more to its peculiarities, and shall die here. Ah, that expression reads queerly and gives a wrong impression: I meant live and die here. I shall renew the lease from year to year till one of us crumbles to pieces. From present indications the building will be the first to go.

Nov. 16. — It is abominable the way my nerves go up and down with me — and rather discouraging. This morning I woke to find my clothes scattered about the room, and a cane chair overturned beside the bed. My coat and waistcoat looked just as if they had been tried on by someone in the night. I had horribly vivid dreams, too, in which someone covering his face with his hands kept coming close up to me, crying out as if in pain. “Where can I find covering? Oh, who will clothe me?” How silly, and yet it frightened me a little. It was so dreadfully real. It is now over a year since I last walked in my sleep and woke up with such a shock on the cold pavement of Earl’s Court Road, where I then lived. I thought I was cured, but evidently not. This discovery has rather a disquieting effect upon me. To-night I shall resort to the old trick of tying my toe to the bed-post.

Nov. 17. — Last night I was again troubled by most oppressive dreams. Someone seemed to be moving in the night up and down my room, sometimes passing into the front room, and then returning to stand beside the bed and stare intently down upon me. I was being watched by this person all night long. I never actually awoke, though I was often very near it. I suppose it was a nightmare from indigestion, for this morning I have one of my old vile headaches. Yet all my clothes lay about the floor when I awoke, where they had evidently been flung (had I so tossed them?) during the dark hours, and my trousers trailed over the step into the front room.

Worse than this, though — I fancied I noticed about the room in the morning that strange, fetid odour. Though very faint, its mere suggestion is foul and nauseating. ‘What in the world can it be, I wonder?...In future I shall lock my door.

Nov. 26. — I have accomplished a lot of good work during this past week, and have also managed to get regular exercise. I have felt well and in an equable state of mind. Only two things have occurred to disturb my equanimity. The first is trivial in itself, and no doubt to be easily explained. The upper window where I saw the light on the night of November 4, with the shadow of a large head and shoulders upon the blind, is one of the windows in the square room under the roof. In reality it has no blind at all!

Here is the other thing. I was coming home last night in a fresh fall of snow about eleven o’clock, my umbrella low down over my head. Half-way up the alley, where the snow was wholly untrodden, I saw a man’s legs in front of me. The umbrella hid the rest of his figure, but on raising it I saw that he was tall and broad and was walking, as I was, towards the door of my house. He could not have been four feet ahead of me. I had thought the alley was empty when I entered it, but might of course have been mistaken very easily.

A sudden gust of wind compelled me to lower the umbrella, and when I raised it again, not half a minute later, there was no longer any man to be seen. With a few more steps I reached the door. It was closed as usual. I then noticed with a sudden sensation of dismay that the surface of the freshly fallen snow was unbroken. My own foot-marks were the only ones to be seen anywhere, and though I retraced my way to tile point where I had first seen the man, I could find no slightest impression of any other boots. Feeling creepy and uncomfortable, I went upstairs, and was glad to get into bed.

Nov. 28. — With the fastening of my bedroom door the disturbances ceased. I am convinced that I walked in my sleep. Probably I untied my toe and then tied it up again. The fancied security of the locked door would alone have been enough to restore sleep to my troubled spirit and enable me to rest quietly.

Last night, however, the annoyance was suddenly renewed another and more aggressive form. I woke in the darkness with the impression that someone was standing outside my bedroom door listening. As I became more awake the impression grew into positive knowledge.

Though there was no appreciable sound of moving or breathing, I was so convinced of the propinquity of a listener that I crept out of bed and approached the door. As I did so there came faintly from the next room the unmistakable sound of someone retreating stealthily across the floor. Yet, as I heard it, it was neither the tread of a man nor a regular footstep, but rather, it seemed to me, a confused sort of crawling, almost as of someone on his hands and knees.

I unlocked the door in less than a second, and passed quickly into the front room, and I could feel, as by the subtlest imaginable vibrations upon my nerves, that the spot I was standing in had just that instant been vacated! The Listener had moved; he was now behind the other door, standing in the passage. Yet this door was also closed. I moved swiftly, and as silently as possible, across the floor, and turned the handle. A cold rush of air met me from the passage and sent shiver after shiver down my back. There was no one in the doorway; there was no one on the little landing; there was no one moving down the staircase. Yet I had been so quick that this midnight Listener could not be very far away, and I felt that if I persevered I should eventually come face to face with him. And the courage that came so opportunely to overcome my nervousness and horror seemed born of the unwelcome conviction that it was somehow necessary for my safety as well as my sanity that I should find this intruder and force his secret from him. For was it not the intent action of his mind upon my own, in concentrated listening, that had awakened me with such a vivid realisation of his presence?

Advancing across the narrow landing, I peered down into the well of the little house. There was nothing to be seen; no one was moving in the darkness. How cold the oilcloth was to my bare feet.

I cannot say what it was that suddenly drew my eyes upwards. I only know that, without apparent reason, I looked up and saw a person about half-way up the next turn of the stairs, leaning forward over the balustrade and staring straight into my face. It was a man. He appeared to be clinging to the rail rather than standing on the stairs. The gloom made it impossible to see much beyond the general outline, but the head and shoulders were seemingly enormous, and stood sharply silhouetted against the skylight in the roof immediately above. The idea flashed into my brain in a moment that I was looking into the visage of something monstrous. The huge skull, the mane-like hair, the wide-humped shoulders, suggested, in a way I did not pause to analyse, that which was scarcely human; and for some seconds, fascinated by horror, I returned the gaze and stared into the dark, inscrutable countenance above me, without knowing exactly where I was or what I was doing.

Then I realised in quite a new way that I was face to face with the secret midnight Listener, and I steeled myself as best I could for what was about to come.

The source of the rash courage that came to me at this awful moment will ever be to me an inexplicable mystery. Though shivering with fear, and my forehead wet with an unholy dew, I resolved to advance. Twenty questions leaped to my lips: What are you? What do you want?

Why do you listen and watch? Why do you come into my room? But none of them found articulate utterance.

I began forthwith to climb the stairs, and with the first signs of my advance he drew himself back into the shadows and began to move. He retreated as swiftly as I advanced. I heard the sound of his crawling motion a few steps ahead of me, ever maintaining the same distance. When I reached the landing he was half-way up the next flight, and when I was half-way up the next flight he had already arrived at the top landing. I then heard him open the door of the little square room under the roof and go in. Immediately, though the door did not close after him, the sound of his moving entirely ceased.

At this moment I longed for a light, or a stick, or any weapon whatsoever; but I had none of these things, and it was impossible to go back. So I marched steadily up the rest of the stairs, and in less than a minute found myself standing in the gloom face to face with the door through which this creature had just entered.

For a moment I hesitated. The door was about half-way open, and the Listener was standing evidently in his favourite attitude just behind it — listening. To search through that dark room for him seemed hopeless; to enter the same small space where he was seemed horrible. The very idea filled me with loathing, and I almost decided to turn back.

It is strange at such times how trivial things impinge on the consciousness with a shock as of something important and immense. Something — it may have been a beetle or a mouse — scuttled over the bare boards behind me. The door moved a quarter of an inch, closing. My decision came back with a sudden rush, as it were, and thrusting out a foot, I kicked the door so that it swung sharply back to its full extent, and permitted me to walk forward slowly into the aperture of profound blackness beyond. What a queer soft sound my bare feet made on the boards! how the blood sang and buzzed in my head!

I was inside. The darkness closed over me, hiding even the windows. I began to grope my way round the walls in a thorough search; but in order to prevent all possibility of the other's escape, I first of all closed the door.

There we were, we two, shut in together between four walls, within a few feet of one another.

But with what, with whom, was I thus momentarily imprisoned? A new light flashed suddenly over the affair with a swift, illuminating brilliance — and I knew I was a fool, an utter fool! I was wide awake at last, and the horror was evaporating. My cursed nerves again; a dream, a nightmare, and the old result — walking in my sleep. The figure was a dream-figure. Many a time before had the actors in my dreams stood before me for some moments after I was awake...

There was a chance match in my pyjamas' pocket, and I struck it on the wall. The room was utterly empty. It held not even a shadow. I went quickly down to bed, cursing my wretched nerves and my foolish, vivid dreams.

But as soon as ever I was asleep again, the same uncouth figure of a man crept back to my bedside, and bending over me with his immense head close to my ear, whispered repeatedly in my dreams, “I want your body; I want its covering. I’m waiting for it, and listening always.” Words scarcely less foolish than the dream.

But I wonder what that queer odour was up in the square room. I noticed it again, and stronger than ever before, and it seemed to be also in my bedroom when I woke this morning.

Nov. 29. — Slowly, as moonbeams rise over a misty sea in June, the thought is entering my mind that my nerves and somnambulistic dreams do not adequately account for the influence this house exercises upon me. It holds me as with a fine, invisible net. I cannot escape if I would. It draws me, and it means to keep me.

Nov. 30. — The post this morning brought me a letter from Aden, forwarded from my old rooms in Earl’s Court. It was from Chapter, my former Trinity chum, who is on his way home from the East, and asks for my address. I sent it to him at the hotel he mentioned, “to await arrival”.

As I have already said, my windows command a view of the alley, and I can see an arrival without difficulty. This morning, while I was busy writing, the sound of footsteps coming up the alley filled me with a sense of vague alarm that I could in no way account for. I went over to the window, and saw a man standing below waiting for the door to be opened. His shoulders were broad, his top-hat glossy, and his overcoat fitted beautifully round the collar. All this I could see, but no more. Presently the door was opened, and the shock to my nerves was unmistakable when I heard a man’s voice ask, “Is Mr. — still here?” mentioning my name. I could not catch the answer, but it could only have been in the affirmative, for the man entered the hall and the door shut to behind him. But I waited in vain for the sound of his steps on the stairs. There was no sound of any kind. It seemed to me so strange that I opened my door and looked out. No one was anywhere to be seen. I walked across the narrow landing, and looked through the window that commands the whole length of the alley. There was no sign of a human being, coming or going.

The lane was deserted. Then I deliberately walked downstairs into the kitchen, and asked the grey-faced landlady if a gentleman had just that minute called for me.

The answer, given with an odd, weary sort of smile, was “No!”

Dec. 1. — I feel genuinely alarmed and uneasy over the state of my nerves. Dreams are dreams, but never before have I had dreams in broad daylight.

I am looking forward very much to Chapter’s arrival. He is a capital fellow, vigorous, healthy, with no nerves, and even less imagination; and he has £2,000 a year into the bargain.

Periodically he makes me offers — the last was to travel round the world with him as secretary, which was a delicate way of paying my expenses and giving me some pocket-money — offers, however, which I invariably decline. I prefer to keep his friendship. Women could not come between us; money might — therefore I give it no opportunity. Chapter always laughed at what he called my “fancies”, being himself possessed only of that thin-blooded quality of imagination which is ever associated with the prosaic-minded man. Yet, if taunted with this obvious lack, his wrath is deeply stirred. His psychology is that of the crass materialist — always a rather funny article. It will afford me genuine relief, none the less, to hear the cold judgment his mind will have to pass upon the story of this house as I shall have it to tell.

Dec. 2. — The strangest part of it all I have not referred to in this brief diary. Truth to tell, I have been afraid to set it down in black and white. I have kept it in the background of my thoughts, preventing it as far as possible from taking shape. In spite of my efforts, however, it has continued to grow stronger.

Now that I come to face the issue squarely it is harder to express than I imagined. Like a half-remembered melody that trips in the head but vanishes the moment you try to sing it, these thoughts form a group in the background of my mind, behind my mind, as it were, and refuse to come forward. They are crouching ready to spring, but the actual leap never takes place.

In these rooms, except when my mind is strongly concentrated on my own work, I find myself suddenly dealing in thoughts and ideas that are not my own! New, strange conceptions, wholly foreign to my temperament, are for ever cropping up in my head. What precisely they are is of no particular importance. The point is that they are entirely apart from the channel in which my thoughts have hitherto been accustomed to flow. Especially they come when my mind is at rest, unoccupied; when I'm dreaming over the fire, or sitting with a book which fails to hold my attention. Then these thoughts which are not mine spring into life and make me feel exceedingly uncomfortable. Sometimes they are so strong that I almost feel as if someone were in the room beside me, thinking aloud.

Evidently my nerves and liver are shockingly out of order. I must work harder and take more vigorous exercise. The horrid thoughts never come when my mind is much occupied. But they are always there — waiting and as it were alive.

What I have attempted to describe above came first upon me gradually after I had been some days in the house, and then grew steadily in strength. The other strange thing has come to me only twice in all these weeks. It appals me. It is the consciousness of the propinquity of some deadly and loathsome disease. It comes over me like a wave of fever heat, and then passes off, leaving me cold and trembling. The air seems for a few seconds to become tainted. So penetrating and convincing is the thought of this sickness, that on both occasions my brain has turned momentarily dizzy, and through my mind, like flames of white heat, have flashed the ominous names of all the dangerous illnesses I know. I can no more explain these visitations than I can fly, yet I know there is no dreaming about the clammy skin and palpitating heart which they always leave as witnesses of their brief visit.

Most strongly of all was I aware of this nearness of a mortal sickness when, on the night of the 28th, I went upstairs in pursuit of the listening figure. When we were shut in together in that little square room under the roof, I felt that I was face to face with the actual essence of this invisible and malignant disease. Such a feeling never entered my heart before, and I pray to God it never may again.

There! Now I have confessed. I have given some expression at least to the feelings that so far I have been afraid to see in my own writing. For — since I can no longer deceive myself — the experiences of that night (28th) were no more a dream than my daily breakfast is a dream; and the trivial entry in this diary by which I sought to explain away an occurrence that caused me unutterable horror was due solely to my desire not to acknowledge in words what I really felt and believed to be true. The increase that would have accrued to my horror by so doing might have been more than I could stand.

Dec. 3. — I wish Chapter would come. My facts are all ready marshalled, and I can see his cool, grey eyes fixed incredulously on my face as I relate them: the knocking at my door, the well-dressed caller, the light in the upper window and the shadow upon the blind, the man who preceded me in the snow, the scattering of my clothes at night, Emily's arrested confession, the landlady's suspicious reticence, the midnight listener on the stairs, and those awful subsequent words in my sleep; and above all, and hardest to tell, the presence of the abominable sickness, and the stream of thoughts and ideas that are not my own.

I can see Chapter's face, and I can almost hear his deliberate words, "You've been at the tea again, and underfeeding, I expect, as usual. Better see my nerve doctor, and then come with me to the south of France." For this fellow, who knows nothing of disordered liver or high-strung nerves, goes regularly to a great nerve specialist with the periodical belief that his nervous system is beginning to decay.

Dec. 5. — Ever since the incident of the Listener, I have kept a night-light burning in my bedroom, and my sleep has been undisturbed. Last night, however, I was subjected to a far worse annoyance. I woke suddenly, and saw a man in front of the dressing-table regarding himself in the mirror. The door was locked, as usual. I knew at once it was the Listener, and the blood turned to ice in my veins. Such a wave of horror and dread swept over me that it seemed to turn me rigid in the bed, and I could neither move nor speak. I noted, however, that the odour I so abhorred was strong in the room.

The man seemed to be tall and broad. He was stooping forward over the mirror. His back was turned to me, but in the glass I saw the reflection of a huge head and face illumined fitfully by the flicker of the night-light. The spectral grey of very early morning stealing in round the edges of the curtains lent an additional horror to the picture, for it fell upon hair that was tawny and mane-like, hanging loosely about a face whose swollen, rugose features bore the once seen never forgotten leonine expression of — I dare not write down that awful word. But, byway of corroborative proof, I saw in the faint mingling of the two lights that there were several bronze-coloured blotches on the cheeks which the man was evidently examining with great care in the glass. The lips were pale and very thick and large. One hand I could not see, but the other rested on the ivory back of my hair-brush. Its muscles were strangely contracted, the fingers thin to emaciation, the back of the hand closely puckered up. It was like a big grey spider crouching to spring, or the claw of a great bird.

The full realisation that I was alone in the room with this nameless creature, almost within arm's reach of him, overcame me to such a degree that, when he suddenly turned and regarded me with small beady eyes, wholly out of proportion to the grandeur of their massive setting, I sat bolt upright in bed, uttered a loud cry, and then fell back in a dead swoon of terror upon the bed.

Dec. 5. — ...When I came to this morning, the first thing I noticed was that my clothes were strewn all over the floor...I find it difficult to put my thoughts together, and have sudden accesses of violent trembling. I determined that I would go at once to Chapter's hotel and find out when he is expected. I cannot refer to what happened in the night; it is too awful, and I have to keep my thoughts rigorously away from it. I feel light-headed and queer, couldn't eat any breakfast, and have twice vomited with blood. While dressing to go out, a hansom rattled up noisily over the cobbles, and a minute later the door opened, and to my great joy in walked the very subject of my thoughts.

The sight of his strong face and quiet eyes had an immediate effect upon me, and I grew calmer again. His very handshake was a sort of tonic. But, as I listened eagerly to the deep tones of his reassuring voice, and the visions of the night-time paled a little, I began to realise how very hard it was going to be to tell him my wild intangible tale. Some men radiate an animal vigour that destroys the delicate woof of a vision and effectually prevents its reconstruction.

Chapter was one of these men.

We talked of incidents that had filled the interval since we last met, and he told me something of his travels. He talked and I listened. But, so full was I of the horrid thing I had to tell, that I made a poor listener. I was for ever watching my opportunity to leap in and explode it all under his nose.

Before very long, however, it was borne in upon me that he too was merely talking for time.

He too held something of importance in the background of his mind, something too weighty to let fall till the right moment presented itself. So that during the whole of the first half-hour we were both waiting for the psychological moment in which properly to release our respective bombs; and the intensity of our minds' action set up opposing forces that merely sufficed to hold one another in check — and nothing more. As soon as I realised this, therefore, I resolved to yield.

I renounced for the time my purpose of telling my story, and had the satisfaction of seeing that his mind, released from the restraint of my own, at once began to make preparations for the discharge of its momentous burden. The talk grew less and less magnetic; the interest waned; the descriptions of his travels became less alive. There were pauses between his sentences. Presently he repeated himself. His words clothed no living thoughts. The pauses grew longer. Then the interest dwindled altogether and went out like a candle in the wind. His voice ceased, and he looked up squarely into my face with serious and anxious eyes.

The psychological moment had come at last!

"I say—" he began, and then stopped short.

I made an unconscious gesture of encouragement, but said no word. I dreaded the impending disclosure exceedingly. A dark shadow seemed to precede it.

"I say," he blurted out at last, "what in the world made you ever come to this place — to these rooms, I mean?"

"They're cheap, for one thing," I began, "and central and—"

"They're too cheap," he interrupted. "Didn't you ask what made 'em so cheap?"

"It never occurred to me at the time."

There was a pause in which he avoided my eyes.

"For God's sake, go on, man, and tell it!" I cried, for the suspense was getting more than I could stand in my nervous condition.

“This was where Blount lived so long,” he said quietly, “and where he — died. You know, in the old days I often used to come here and see him, and do what I could to alleviate his—” He stuck fast again.

“Well!” I said with a great effort. “Please go on — faster.”

“But,” Chapter went on, turning his face to the window with a perceptible shiver, “he finally got so terrible I simply couldn’t stand it, though I always thought I could stand anything. It got on my nerves and made me dream, and haunted me day and night.”

I stared at him, and said nothing. I had never heard of Blount in my life, and didn’t know what he was talking about. But, all the same, I was trembling, and my mouth had become strangely dry.

“This is the first time I’ve been back here since,” he said almost in a whisper, “and, ‘pon my word, it gives me the creeps. I swear it isn’t fit for a man to live in. I never saw you look so bad, old man.”

“I’ve got it for a year,” I jerked out, with a forced laugh; “signed the lease and all. I thought it was rather a bargain.”

Chapter shuddered, and buttoned his overcoat up to his neck. Then he spoke in a low voice, looking occasionally behind him as though he thought someone was listening. I too could have sworn someone else was in the room with us.

“He did it himself, you know, and no one blamed him a bit; his sufferings were awful. For the last two years he used to wear a veil when he went out, and even then it was always in a closed carriage. Even the attendant who had nursed him for so long was at length obliged to leave. The extremities of both the lower limbs were gone, dropped off, and he moved about the ground on all fours with a sort of crawling motion. The odour, too, was—”

I was obliged to interrupt him here. I could hear no more details of that sort. My skin was moist, I felt hot and cold by turns, for at last I was beginning to understand.

“Poor devil,” Chapter went on; “I used to keep my eyes closed as much as possible. He always begged to be allowed to take his veil off, and asked if I minded very much. I used to stand by the open window. He never touched me, though. He rented the whole house. Nothing would induce him to leave it.”

“Did he occupy — these very rooms?”

“No. He had the little room on the top floor, the square one just under the roof. He preferred it because it was dark. These rooms were too near the ground, and he was afraid people might see him through the windows. A crowd had been known to follow him up to the very door, and then stand below the windows in the hope of catching a glimpse of his face.”

“But there were hospitals.”

“He wouldn’t go near one, and they didn’t like to force him. You know, they say it’s not contagious, so there was nothing to prevent his staying here if he wanted to. He spent all his time reading medical books, about drugs and so on. His head and face were something appalling, just like a lion’s.”

I held up my hand to arrest further description.

“He was a burden to the world, and he knew it. One night I suppose he realised it too keenly to wish to live. He had the free use of drugs — and in the morning he was found dead on the floor. Two years ago, that was, and they said then he had still several years to live.”

“Then, in Heaven’s name!” I cried, unable to bear the suspense any longer, “tell me what it was he had, and be quick about it.”

“I thought you knew!” he exclaimed, with genuine surprise. “I thought you knew!”

He leaned forward and our eyes met. In a scarcely audible whisper I caught the words his lips seemed almost afraid to utter:

“He was a leper!”

MAX HENSIG. BACTERIOLOGIST AND MURDERER

BESIDES THE DEPARTMENTAL men on the New York Vulture, there were about twenty reporters for general duty, and Williams had worked his way up till he stood easily among the first half-dozen; for, in addition to being accurate and painstaking, he was able to bring to his reports of common things that touch of imagination and humour which just lifted them out of the rut of mere faithful recording. Moreover, the city editor (anglice news editor) appreciated his powers, and always tried to give him assignments that did himself and the paper credit, and he was justified now in expecting to be relieved of the hack jobs that were usually allotted to new men.

He was therefore puzzled and a little disappointed one morning as he saw his inferiors summoned one after another to the news desk to receive the best assignments of the day, and when at length his turn came, and the city editor asked him to cover “the Hensig story” he gave a little start of vexation that almost betrayed him into asking what the devil “the Hensig story” was. For it is the duty of every morning newspaper man — in New York at least — to have made himself familiar with all the news of the day before he shows himself at the office, and though Williams had already done this, he could not recall either the name or the story.

“You can run to a hundred or a hundred and fifty, Mr. Williams. Cover the trial thoroughly, and get good interviews with Hensig and the lawyers. There’ll be no night assignment for you till the case is over.”

Williams was going to ask if there were any private “tips” from the District Attorney’s office, but the editor was already speaking with Weekes, who wrote the daily “weather story”, and he went back slowly to his desk, angry and disappointed, to read up the Hensig case and lay his plans for the day accordingly. At any rate, he reflected, it looked like “a soft job”, and as there was to be no second assignment for him that night, he would get off by eight o’clock, and be able to dine and sleep for once like a civilised man. And that was something.

It took him some time, however, to discover that the Hensig case was only a murder story.

And this increased his disgust. It was tucked away in the corners of most of the papers, and little importance was attached to it. A murder trial is not first-class news unless there are very special features connected with it, and Williams had already covered scores of them. There was a heavy sameness about them that made it difficult to report them interestingly, and as a rule they were left to the tender mercies of the “flimsy” men — the Press Associations — and no paper sent a special man unless the case was distinctly out of the usual. Moreover, a hundred and fifty meant a column and a half, and Williams, not being a space man, earned the same money whether he wrote a stickful or a page; so that he felt doubly aggrieved, and walked out into the sunny open spaces opposite Newspaper Row heaving a deep sigh and cursing the boredom of his trade.

Max Hensig, he found, was a German doctor accused of murdering his second wife by injecting arsenic. The woman had been buried several weeks when the suspicious relatives got the body exhumed, and a quantity of the poison had been found in her. Williams recalled something about the arrest, now he came to think of it; but he felt no special interest in it, for ordinary murder trials were no longer his legitimate work, and he scorned them. At first, of course, they had thrilled him horribly, and some of his interviews with the prisoners, especially just before execution, had deeply impressed his imagination and kept him awake o’ nights. Even now he could not enter the gloomy Tombs Prison, or cross the Bridge of Sighs leading from it to the courts, without experiencing a real sensation, for its huge Egyptian columns and massive walls closed round him like death; and the first time he walked down Murderers’ Row, and came in view of the cell doors, his throat was dry, and he had almost turned and run out of the building.

The first time, too, that he covered the trial of a Negro and listened to the man’s hysterical speech before sentence was pronounced, he was absorbed with interest, and his heart leaped. The wild appeals to the Deity, the long invented words, the ghastly pallor under the black skin, the rolling eyes, and the torrential sentences all seemed to him to be something tremendous to describe for his sensational sheet; and the stickful that was eventually printed — written by the flimsy man too — had given him quite a new standard of the relative value of news and of the quality of the satiated public palate. He had reported the trials of a Chinaman, stolid as wood; of an Italian who had been too quick with his knife; and of a farm girl who had done both her parents to death in their beds, entering their room stark naked, so that no stains should betray her; and at the beginning these things haunted him for days.

But that was all months ago, when he first came to New York. Since then his work had been steadily in the criminal courts, and he had grown a second skin. An execution in the electric chair at Sing Sing could still unnerve him somewhat, but mere murder no longer thrilled or excited him, and he could be thoroughly depended on to write a good "murder story" — an account that his paper could print without blue pencil.

Accordingly he entered the Tombs Prison with nothing stronger than the feeling of vague oppression that gloomy structure always stirred in him, and certainly with no particular emotion connected with the prisoner he was about to interview; and when he reached the second iron door, where a warder peered at him through a small grating, he heard a voice behind him, and turned to find the Chronicle man at his heels.

"Hullo, Senator! What good trail are you following down here?" he cried, for the other got no small assignments, and never had less than a column on the Chronicle front page at space rates.

"Same as you, I guess — Hensig," was the reply.

"But there's no space in Hensig," said Williams with surprise. "Are you back on salary again?"

"Not much," laughed the Senator — no one knew his real name, but he was always called Senator. "But Hensig's good for two hundred easy. There's a whole list of murders behind him, we hear, and this is the first time he's been caught."

"Poison?"

The Senator nodded in reply, turning to ask the warder some question about another case, and Williams waited for him in the corridor, impatiently rather, for he loathed the musty prison odour. He watched the Senator as he talked, and was distinctly glad he had come. They were good friends: he had helped Williams when he first joined the small army of newspaper men and was not much welcomed, being an Englishman. Common origin and goodheartedness mixed themselves delightfully in his face, and he always made Williams think of a friendly, honest cart-horse — stolid, strong, with big and simple emotions.

"Get a hustle on, Senator," he said at length impatiently. The two reporters followed the warder down the flagged corridor, past a row of dark cells, each with its occupant, until the man, swinging his keys in the direction indicated, stopped and pointed:

"Here's your gentleman," he said, and then moved on down the corridor, leaving them staring through the bars at a tail, slim young man, pacing to and fro. He had flaxen hair and very bright blue eyes; his skin was white, and his face wore so open and innocent an expression that one would have said he could not twist a kitten's tail without wincing.

"From the Chronicle and Vulture," explained Williams, by way of introduction, and the talk at once began in the usual way.

The man in the cell ceased his restless pacing up and down, and stopped opposite the bars to examine them. He stared straight into Williams's eyes for a moment, and the reporter noted a very different expression from the one he had first seen. It actually made him shift his position and stand a little to one side. But the movement was wholly instinctive. He could not have explained why he did it.

"Guess you vish me to say I did it, and then egsplain to you how I did it," the young doctor said coolly, with a marked German accent. "But I haf no copy to gif you shust now. You see at the trial it is nothing but spite — and shealosy of another woman. I lofed my vife. I vould not haf gilled her for anything in the vorld—"

"Oh, of course, of course, Dr. Hensig," broke in the Senator, who was more experienced in the ways of difficult interviewing. "We quite understand that. But, you know, in New York the newspapers try a man as much as the courts, and we thought you might like to make a statement to the public which we should be very glad to print for you. It may help your case—"

“Nothing can help my case in this tamned country where shustice is to be pought mit tollars!” cried the prisoner, with a sudden anger and an expression of face still further belying the first one; “nothing except a lot of money. But I tell you now two things you may write for your public: One is, no motive can be shown for the murder, because I lofed Zinka and vished her to live alvays. And the other is—” He stopped a moment and stared steadily at Williams making shorthand notes— “that with my knowledge — my egceptional knowledge — of poisons and pacteriology I could have done it in a dozen ways without pumping arsenic into her body. That is a fool’s way of killing. It is clumsy and childish and sure of discofery! See?”

He turned away, as though to signify that the interview was over, and sat down on his wooden bench.

“Seems to have taken a fancy to you,” laughed the Senator, as they went off to get further interviews with the lawyers. “He never looked at me once.”

“He’s got a bad face — the face of a devil. I don’t feel complimented,” said Williams shortly.

“I’d hate to be in his power.”

“Same here,” returned the other. “Let’s go into Silver Dollars and wash the dirty taste out.”

So, after the custom of reporters, they made their way up the Bowery and went into a saloon that had gained a certain degree of fame because the Tammany owner had let a silver dollar into each stone of the floor. Here they washed away most of the “dirty taste” left by the Tombs atmosphere and Hensig, and then went on to Steve Brodie’s, another saloon a little higher up the same street.

“There’ll be others there,” said the Senator, meaning drinks as well as reporters, and Williams, still thinking over their interview, silently agreed.

Brodie was a character; there was always something lively going on in his place. He had the reputation of having once jumped from the Brooklyn Bridge and reached the water alive. No one could actually deny it, and no one could prove that it really happened: and anyhow, he had enough imagination and personality to make the myth live and to sell much bad liquor on the strength of it. The walls of his saloon were plastered with lurid oil-paintings of the bridge, the height enormously magnified, and Steve's body in midair, an expression of a happy puppy on his face.

Here, as expected, they found "Whitey" Fife, of the Recorder, and Galusha Owen, of the World. "Whitey", as his nickname implied, was an albino, and clever. He wrote the daily "weather story" for his paper, and the way he spun a column out of rain, wind, and temperature was the envy of everyone except the Weather Clerk, who objected to being described as "Farmer Dunne, cleaning his rat-tail file", and to having his dignified office referred to in the public press as "a down-country farm". But the public liked it, and laughed, and "Whitey" was never really spiteful.

Owen, too, when sober, was a good man who had long passed the rubicon of hack assignments. Yet both these men were also on the Hensig story. And Williams, who had already taken an instinctive dislike to the case, was sorry to see this, for it meant frequent interviewing and the possession, more or less, of his mind and imagination. Clearly, he would have much to do with this German doctor. Already, even at this stage, he began to hate him.

The four reporters spent an hour drinking and talking. They fell at length to discussing the last time they had chanced to meet on the same assignment — a private lunatic asylum owned by an incompetent quack without a licence, and where most of the inmates, not mad in the first instance, and all heavily paid for by relatives who wished them out of the way, had gone mad from ill-treatment. The place had been surrounded before dawn by the Board of Health officers, and the quasi-doctor arrested as he opened his front door. It was a splendid newspaper "story", of course.

"My space bill ran to sixty dollars a day for nearly a week," said Whitey Fife thickly, and the others laughed, because Whitey wrote most of his stuff by cribbing it from the evening papers.

"A dead cinch," said Galusha Owen, his dirty flannel collar poking up through his long hair almost to his ears. "I 'faked' the whole of the second day without going down there at all."

He pledged Whitey for the tenth time that morning, and the albino leered happily across the table at him, and passed him a thick compliment before emptying his glass.

"Hensig's going to be good, too," broke in the Senator, ordering a round of gin-fizzes, and Williams gave a little start of annoyance to hear the name brought up again. "He'll make good stuff at the trial. I never saw a cooler hand. You should've heard him talk about poisons and bacteriology, and boasting he could kill in a dozen ways without fear of being caught. I guess he was telling the truth right enough!"

"That so?" cried Galusha and Whitey in the same breath, not having done a stroke of work so far on the case.

"Run down to the Tombsh and get an interview," added Whitey, turning with a sudden burst of enthusiasm to his companion. His white eyebrows and pink eyes fairly shone against the purple of his tipsy face.

"No, no," cried the Senator; "don't spoil a good story. You're both as full as ticks. I'll match with Williams which of us goes. Hensig knows us already, and we'll all 'give up' in this story right along. No 'beats.'"

So they decided to divide news till the case was finished, and to keep no exclusive items to themselves; and Williams, having lost the toss, swallowed his gin-fizz and went back to the Tombs to get a further talk with the prisoner on his knowledge of expert poisoning and bacteriology.

Meanwhile his thoughts were very busy elsewhere. He had taken no part in the noisy conversation in the barroom, because something lay at the back of his mind, bothering him, and claiming attention with great persistence. Something was at work in his deeper consciousness, something that had impressed him with a vague sense of unpleasantness and nascent fear, reaching below that second skin he had grown...And, as he walked slowly through the malodorous slum streets that lay between the Bowery and the Tombs, dodging the pullers-in outside the Jew clothing stores, and nibbling at a bag of peanuts he caught up off an Italian push-cart en route, this "something" rose a little higher out of its obscurity, and began to play with the roots of the ideas floating higgledy-piggledy on the surface of his mind. He thought he knew what it was, but could not make quite sure. From the roots of his thoughts it rose a little higher, so that he clearly felt it as something disagreeable.

Then, with a sudden rush, it came to the surface, and poked its face before him so that he fully recognised it.

The blond visage of Dr. Max Hensig rose before him, cool, smiling, and implacable.

Somehow, he had expected it would prove to be Hensig — this unpleasant thought that was troubling him. He was not really surprised to have labelled it, because the man's personality had made an unwelcome impression upon him at the very start. He stopped nervously in the Street, and looked round. He did not expect to see anything out of the way, or to find that he was being followed. It was not that exactly. The act of turning was merely the outward expression of a sudden inner discomfort, and a man with better nerves, or nerves more under control, would not have turned at all.

But what caused this tremor of the nerves? Williams probed and searched within himself. It came, he felt, from some part of his inner being he did not understand; there had been an intrusion, an incongruous intrusion, into the stream of his normal consciousness. Messages from this region always gave him pause; and in this particular case he saw no reason why he should think specially of Dr. Hensig with alarm — this light-haired stripling with blue eyes and drooping moustache. The faces of other murderers had haunted him once or twice because they were more than ordinarily bad, or because their case possessed unusual features of horror. But there was nothing so very much out of the way about Hensig — at least, if there was, the reporter could not seize and analyse it. There seemed no adequate reason to explain his emotion. Certainly, it had nothing to do with the fact that he was merely a murderer, for that stirred no thrill in him at all, except a kind of pity, and a wonder how the man would meet his execution. It must, he argued, be something to do with the personality of the man, apart from any particular deed or characteristic.

Puzzled, and still a little nervous, he stood in the road, hesitating. In front of him the dark walls of the Tombs rose in massive steps of granite. Overhead white summer clouds sailed across a deep blue sky; the wind sang cheerfully among the wires and chimney-pots, making him think of fields and trees; and down the Street surged the usual cosmopolitan New York crowd of laughing Italians, surly Negroes, hebrews chattering Yiddish, tough-looking hooligans with that fighting lurch of the shoulders peculiar to New York roughs, Chinamen, taking little steps like boys — and every other sort of nondescript imaginable. It was early June, and there were faint odours of the sea and of sea-beaches in the air. Williams caught himself shivering a little with delight at the sight of the sky and scent of the wind.

Then he looked back at the great prison, rightly named the Tombs, and the sudden change of thought from the fields to the cells, from life to death, somehow landed him straight into the discovery of what caused this attack of nervousness:

Hensig was no ordinary murderer! That was it. There was something quite out of the ordinary about him. The man was a horror, pure and simple, standing apart from normal humanity. The knowledge of this rushed over him like a revelation, bringing unalterable conviction in its train.

Something of it had reached him in that first brief interview, but without explaining itself sufficiently to be recognised, and since then it had been working in his system, like a poison, and was now causing a disturbance, not having been assimilated. A quicker temperament would have labelled it long before.

Now, Williams knew well that he drank too much, and had more than a passing acquaintance with drugs; his nerves were shaky at the best of times. His life on the newspapers afforded no opportunity of cultivating pleasant social relations, but brought him all the time into contact with the seamy side of life — the criminal, the abnormal, the unwholesome in human nature. He knew, too, that strange thoughts, idées fixes and what not, grew readily in such a soil as this, and, not wanting these, he had formed a habit — peculiar to himself — of deliberately sweeping his mind clean once a week of all that had haunted, obsessed, or teased him, of the horrible or unclean, during his work; and his eighth day, his holiday, he invariably spent in the woods, walking, building fires, cooking a meal in the open, and getting all the country air and the exercise he possibly could. He had in this way kept his mind free from many unpleasant pictures that might otherwise have lodged there abidingly, and the habit of thus cleansing his imagination had proved more than once of real value to him.

So now he laughed to himself, and turned on those whizzing brooms of his, trying to forget these first impressions of Hensig, and simply going in, as he did a hundred other times, to get an ordinary interview with an ordinary prisoner. This habit, being nothing more nor less than the practice of suggestion, was more successful sometimes than others. This time — since fear is less susceptible to suggestion than other emotions — it was less so.

Williams got his interview, and came away fairly creeping with horror. Hensig was all that he had felt, and more besides. He belonged, the reporter felt convinced, to that rare type of deliberate murderer, cold-blooded and calculating, who kills for a song, delights in killing, and gives its whole intellect to the consideration of each detail, glorying in evading detection and revelling in the notoriety of the trial, if caught. At first he had answered reluctantly, but as Williams plied his questions intelligently, the young doctor warmed up and became enthusiastic with a sort of cold intellectual enthusiasm, till at last he held forth like a lecturer, pacing his cell, gesticulating, explaining with admirable exposition how easy murder could be to a man who knew his business.

And he did know his business! No man, in these days of inquests and post-mortem examination, would inject poisons that might be found weeks afterwards in the viscera of the victim. No man who knew his business!

“What is more easy,” he said, holding the bars with his long white fingers and gazing into the reporter’s eyes, “than to take a disease germ [‘cherm’ he pronounced it] of typhus, plague, or any cherm you blease, and make so virulent a culture that no medicine in the vorld could counteract it; a really powerful microbe — and then scratch the skin of your victim with a pin? And who could drace it to you, or accuse you of murder?”

Williams, as he watched and heard, was glad the bars were between them; but, even so, something invisible seemed to pass from the prisoner’s atmosphere and lay an icy finger on his heart. He had come into contact with every possible kind of crime and criminal, and had interviewed scores of men who, for jealousy, greed, passion or other comprehensible emotion, had killed and paid the penalty of killing. He understood that. Any man with strong passions was a potential killer. But never before had he met a man who in cold blood, deliberately, under no emotion greater than boredom, would destroy a human life and then boast of his ability to do it.

Yet this, he felt sure, was what Hensig had done, and what his vile words shadowed forth and betrayed. Here was something outside humanity, something terrible, monstrous; and it made him shudder. This young doctor, he felt, was a fiend incarnate, a man who thought less of human life than the lives of flies in summer, and who would kill with as steady a hand and cool a brain as though he were performing a common operation in the hospital.

Thus the reporter left the prison gates with a vivid impression in his mind, though exactly how his conclusion was reached was more than he could tell. This time the mental brooms failed to act. The horror of it remained.

On the way out into the street he ran against Policeman Dowling of the ninth precinct, with whom he had been fast friends since the day he wrote a glowing account of Dowling's capture of a "greengoods-man", when Dowling had been so drunk that he nearly lost his prisoner altogether. The policeman had never forgotten the good turn; it had promoted him to plain clothes; and he was always ready to give the reporter any news he had.

"Know of anything good to-day?" he asked by way of habit.

"Bet your bottom dollar I do," replied the coarse-faced Irish policeman; "one of the best, too. I've got Hensig!"

Dowling spoke with pride and affection. He was mighty pleased, too, because his name would be in the paper every day for a week or more, and a big case helped the chances of promotion.

Williams cursed inwardly. Apparently there was no escape from this man Hensig.

"Not much of a case, is it?" he asked.

"It's a jim dandy, that's what it is," replied the other, a little offended. "Hensig may miss the Chair because the evidence is weak, but he's the worst I've ever met. Why, he'd poison you as soon as spit in your eye, and if he's got a heart at all he keeps it on ice."

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh, they talk pretty freely to us sometimes," the policeman said, with a significant wink.

"Can't be used against them at the trial, and it kind o' relieves their mind, I guess. But I'd just as soon not have heard most of what that guy told me — see? Come in," he added, looking round cautiously; "I'll set 'em up and tell you a bit."

Williams entered the side-door of a saloon with him, but not too willingly.

“A glarss of Scotch for the Englishman,” ordered the officer facetiously, “and I’ll take a horse’s collar with a dash of peach bitters in it — just what you’d notice, no more.” He flung down a half-dollar, and the bar-tender winked and pushed it back to him across the counter.

“What’s yours, Mike?” he asked him.

“I’ll take a cigar,” said the bar-tender, pocketing the proffered dime and putting a cheap cigar in his waistcoat pocket, and then moving off to allow the two men elbowroom to talk in.

They talked in low voices with heads close together for fifteen minutes, and then the reporter set up another round of drinks. The bar-tender took his money. Then they talked a bit longer, Williams rather white about the gills and the policeman very much in earnest.

“The boys are waiting for me up at Brodie’s,” said Williams at length. “I must be off.”

“That’s so,” said Dowling, straightening up. “We’ll just liquor up again to show there’s no ill-feeling. And mind you see me every morning before the case is called. Trial begins to-morrow.”

They swallowed their drinks, and again the bar-tender took a ten-cent piece and pocketed a cheap cigar.

“Don’t print what I’ve told you, and don’t give it up to the other reporters,” said Dowling as they separated. “And if you want confirmation jest take the cars and run down to Amityville, Long Island, and you’ll find what I’ve said is O.K. every time.”

Williams went back to Steve Brodie’s, his thoughts whizzing about him like bees in a swarm. What he had heard increased tenfold his horror of the man. Of course, Dowling may have lied or exaggerated, but he thought not. It was probably all true, and the newspaper offices knew something about it when they sent good men to cover the case. Williams wished to Heaven he had nothing to do with the thing; but meanwhile he could not write what he had heard, and all the other reporters wanted was the result of his interview. That was good for half a column, even expurgated.

He found the Senator in the middle of a story to Galusha, while Whitey Fife was knocking cocktail glasses off the edge of the table and catching them just before they reached the floor, pretending they were Steve Brodie jumping from the Brooklyn Bridge. He had promised to set up the drinks for the whole bar if he missed, and just as Williams entered a glass smashed to atoms on the stones, and a roar of laughter went up from the room. Five or six men moved up to the bar and took their liquor, Williams included, and soon after Whitey and Galusha went off to get some lunch and sober up, having first arranged to meet Williams later in the evening and get the "story" from him.

"Get much?" asked the Senator.

"More than I care about," replied the other, and then told his friend the story.

The Senator listened with intense interest, making occasional notes from time to time, and asking a few questions. Then, when Williams had finished, he said quietly:

"I guess Dowling's right. Let's jump on a car and go down to — ille, and see what they think about him down there."

Amityville was a scattered village some twenty miles away on Long Island, where Dr. Hensig had lived and practised for the last year or two, and where Mrs. Hensig No. 2 had come to her suspicious death. The neighbours would be sure to have plenty to say, and though it might not prove of great value, it would be certainly interesting. So the two reporters went down there, and interviewed anyone and everyone they could find, from the man in the drug-store to the parson and the undertaker, and the stories they heard would fill a book.

"Good stuff," said the Senator, as they journeyed back to New York on the steamer, "but nothing we can use, I guess." His face was very grave, and he seemed troubled in his mind.

"Nothing the District Attorney can use either at the trial," observed Williams.

"It's simply a devil — not a man at all," the other continued, as if talking to himself. "Utterly unmoral! I swear I'll make MacSweater put me to another job."

For the stories they had heard showed Dr. Hensig as a man who openly boasted that he could kill without detection; that no enemy of his lived long; that, as a doctor, he had, or ought to have, the right over life and death; and that if a person was a nuisance, or a trouble to him, there was no reason he should not put them away, provided he did it without rousing suspicion. Of course he had not shouted these views aloud in the market-place, but he had let people know that he held them, and held them seriously. They had fallen from him in conversation, in unguarded moments, and were clearly the natural expression of his mind and views. And many people in the village evidently had no doubt that he had put them into practice more than once.

“There’s nothing to give up to Whitey or Galusha, though,” said the Senator decisively, “and there’s hardly anything we can use in our story.”

“I don’t think I should care to use it anyhow,” Williams said, with rather a forced laugh.

The Senator looked round sharply by way of question.

“Hensig may be acquitted and get out,” added Williams. “Same here. I guess you’re dead right,” he said slowly, and then added more cheerfully, “Let’s go and have dinner in Chinatown, and write our copy together.” So they went down Pell Street, and turned up some dark wooden stairs into a Chinese restaurant, smelling strongly of opium and of cooking not Western. Here at a little table on the sanded floor they ordered chou chop suey and chou om dong in brown bowls, and washed it down with frequent doses of the fiery white whisky, and then moved into a corner and began to cover their paper with pencil writing for the consumption of the great American public in the morning.

“There’s not much to choose between Hensig and that,” said the Senator, as one of the degraded white women who frequent Chinatown entered the room and sat down at an empty table to order whisky. For, with four thousand Chinamen in the quarter, there is not a single Chinese woman.

“All the difference in the world,” replied Williams, following his glance across the smoky room. “She’s been decent once, and may be again some day, but that damned doctor has never been anything but what he is — a soulless, intellectual devil. He doesn’t belong to humanity at all. I’ve got a horrid idea that—”

“How do you spell ‘bacteriology,’ two r’s or one?” asked the Senator, going on with his scrawly writing of a story that would be read with interest by thousands next day.

“Two r’s and one k,” laughed the other. And they wrote on for another hour, and then went to turn it into their respective offices in Park Row.

The trial of Max Hensig lasted two weeks, for his relations supplied money, and he got good lawyers and all manner of delays. From a newspaper point of view it fell utterly flat, and before the end of the fourth day most of the papers had shunted their big men on to other jobs more worthy of their powers.

From Williams’s point of view, however, it did not fall flat, and he was kept on it till the end.

A reporter, of course, has no right to indulge in editorial remarks, especially when a case is still sub judice, but in New York journalism and the dignity of the law have a standard all their own, and into his daily reports there crept the distinct flavour of his own conclusions. Now that new men, with whom he had no agreement to “give up”, were covering the story for the other papers, he felt free to use any special knowledge in his possession, and a good deal of what he had heard at Amityville and from officer Dowling somehow managed to creep into his writing. Something of the horror and loathing he felt for this doctor also betrayed itself, more by inference than actual statement, and no one who read his daily column could come to any other conclusion than that Hensig was a calculating, cool-headed murderer of the most dangerous type.

This was a little awkward for the reporter, because it was his duty every morning to interview the prisoner in his cell, and get his views on the conduct of the case in general and on his chances of escaping the Chair in particular.

Yet Hensig showed no embarrassment. All the newspapers were supplied to him, and he evidently read every word that Williams wrote. He must have known what the reporter thought about him, at least so far as his guilt or innocence was concerned, but he expressed no opinion as to the fairness of the articles, and talked freely of his chances of ultimate escape. The very way in which he glorified in being the central figure of a matter that bulked so large in the public eye seemed to the reporter an additional proof of the man's perversity. His vanity was immense. He made most careful toilets, appearing every day in a clean shirt and a new tie, and never wearing the same suit on two consecutive days. He noted the descriptions of his personal appearance in the Press, and was quite offended if his clothes and bearing in court were not referred to in detail...And he was unusually delighted and pleased when any of the papers stated that he looked smart and self-possessed, or showed great self-control — which some of them did.

"They make a hero of me," he said one morning when Williams went to see him as usual before court opened, "and if I go to the Chair — which I tink I not do, you know — you shall see something fine. Berhaps they electrocute a corpse only!"

And then, with dreadful callousness, he began to chaff the reporter about the tone of his articles — for the first time.

"I only report what is said and done in court," stammered Williams, horribly uncomfortable, "and I am always ready to write anything you care to say—"

"I haf no fault to find," answered Hensig, his cold blue eyes fixed on the reporter's face through the bars, "none at all. You tink I haf killed, and you show it in all your sendences. Haf you ever seen a man in the Chair, I ask you?"

Williams was obliged to say he had.

"Ach was! You haf indeed!" said the doctor coolly.

"It's instantaneous, though," the other added quickly, "and must be quite painless" This was not exactly what he thought, but what else could he say to the poor devil who might presently be strapped down into it with that horrid band across his shaved head!

Hensig laughed, and turned away to walk up and down the narrow cell. Suddenly he made a quick movement and sprang like a panther close up to the bars, pressing his face between them with an expression that was entirely new. Williams started back a pace in spite of himself.

“There are worse ways of dying than that,” he said in a low voice, with a diabolical look in his eyes: “slower ways that are bainful much more. I shall get oudt. I shall not be conficted. I shall get oudt, and then perhaps I come and tell you apout them.”

The hatred in his voice and expression was unmistakable, but almost at once the face changed back to the cold pallor it usually wore, and the extraordinary doctor was laughing again and quietly discussing his lawyers and their good or bad points.

After all, then, that skin of indifference was only assumed, and the man really resented bitterly the tone of his articles. He liked the publicity, but was furious with Williams for having come to a conclusion and for letting that conclusion show through his reports.

The reporter was relieved to get out into the fresh air. He walked briskly up the stone steps to the court-room, still haunted by the memory of that odious white face pressing between the bars and the dreadful look in the eyes that had come and gone so swiftly. And what did those words mean exactly? Had he heard them right? Were they a threat?

“There are slower and more painful ways of dying, and if I get out I shall perhaps come and tell you about them.”

The work of reporting the evidence helped to chase the disagreeable vision, and the compliments of the city editor on the excellence of his “story”, with its suggestion of a possible increase of salary, gave his mind quite a different turn; yet always at the back of his consciousness there remained the vague, unpleasant memory that he had roused the bitter hatred of this man, and, as he thought, of a man who was a veritable monster.

There may have been something hypnotic, a little perhaps, in this obsessing and haunting idea of the man’s steely wickedness, intellectual and horribly skilful, moving freely through life with something like a god’s power and with a list of unproved and unprovable murders behind him. Certainly it impressed his imagination with very vivid force, and he could not think of this doctor, young, with unusual knowledge and out-of-the-way skill, yet utterly unmoral, free to work his will on men and women who displeased him, and almost safe from detection — he could not think of it all without a shudder and a crawling of the skin. He was exceedingly glad when the last day of the trial was reached and he no longer was obliged to seek the daily interview in the cell, or to sit all day in the crowded court watching the detestable white face of the prisoner in the dock and listening to the web of evidence closing round him, but just failing to hold him tight enough for the Chair. For Hensig was acquitted, though the jury sat up all night to come to a decision, and the final interview Williams had with the man immediately before his release into the street was the pleasantest and yet the most disagreeable of all.

“I knew I get oudt all right,” said Hensig with a slight laugh, but without showing the real relief he must have felt. “No one peliefed me guilty but my vife’s family and yourself, Mr. Vulture reporter. I read efery day your repordts. You chumped to a conglusion too quickly, I tink”

“Oh, we write what we’re told to write—”

“Berhaps some day you write anozzer story, or berhaps you read the story someone else write of your own trial. Then you understand better what you make me feel.”

Williams hurried on to ask the doctor for his opinion of the conduct of the trial, and then inquired what his plans were for the future. The answer to the question caused him genuine relief.

“Ach! I return of course to Chermany,” he said. “People here are now afraid of me a liddle. The newspapers haf killed me instead of the Chair. Goot-bye, Mr. Vulture reporter, goot-bye!”

And Williams wrote out his last interview with as great a relief, probably, as Hensig felt when he heard the foreman of the jury utter the words “Not guilty”; but the line that gave him most pleasure was the one announcing the intended departure of the acquitted man for Germany.

The New York public want sensational reading in their daily life, and they get it, for the newspaper that refused to furnish it would fail in a week, and New York newspaper proprietors do not pose as philanthropists. Horror succeeds horror, and the public interest is never for one instant allowed to faint by the way.

Like any other reporter who betrayed the smallest powers of description, Williams realised this fact with his very first week on the Vulture. His daily work became simply a series of sensational reports of sensational happenings; he lived in a perpetual whirl of exciting arrests, murder trials, cases of blackmail, divorce, forgery, arson, corruption, and every other kind of wickedness imaginable. Each case thrilled him a little less than the preceding one; excess of sensation bad simply numbed him; he became, not callous, but irresponsive, and had long since reached the stage when excitement ceases to betray judgment, as with inexperienced reporters it was apt to do.

The Hensig case, however, for a long time lived in his imagination and haunted him. The bald facts were buried in the police files at Mulberry Street headquarters and in the newspaper office "morgues", while the public, thrilled daily by fresh horrors, forgot the very existence of the evil doctor a couple of days after the acquittal of the central figure.

But for Williams it was otherwise. The personality of the heartless and calculating murderer — the intellectual poisoner, as he called him — had made a deep impression on his imaginations and for many weeks his memory kept him alive as a moving and actual horror in his life. The words he had heard him titter, with their covert threats and ill-concealed animosity, helped, no doubt, to vivify the recollection and to explain why Hensig stayed in his thoughts and haunted his dreams with a persistence that reminded him of his very earliest cases on the paper..With time, however, even Hensig began to fade away into the confused background of piled up memories of prisoners and prison scenes, and at length the memory became so deeply buried that it no longer troubled him at all.

The summer passed, and Williams came back from his hard-earned holiday of two weeks in the Maine backwoods. New York was at its best, and the thousands who had been forced to stay and face its torrid summer heats were beginning to revive under the spell of the brilliant autumn days. Cool sea breezes swept over its burnt streets from the Lower Bay, and across the splendid flood of the Hudson River the woods on the Palisades of New Jersey had turned to crimson and gold. The air was electric, sharp, sparkling, and the life of the city began to pulse anew with its restless and impetuous energy. Bronzed faces from sea and mountains thronged the streets, health and light-heartedness showed in every eye, for autumn in New York wields a potent magic not to be denied, and even the East Side slums, where the unfortunates crowd in their squalid thousands, had the appearance of having been swept and cleansed. Along the water-fronts especially the powers of sea and sun and scented winds combined to work an irresistible fever in the hearts of all who chafed within their prison walls.

And in Williams, perhaps more than in most, there was something that responded vigorously to the influences of hope and cheerfulness everywhere abroad. Fresh with the vigour of his holiday and full of good resolutions for the coming winter he felt released from the evil spell of irregular living, and as he crossed one October morning to Staten Island in the big double-ender ferry-boat, his heart was light, and his eye wandered to the blue waters and the hazy line of woods beyond with feelings of pure gladness and delight.

He was on his way to Quarantine to meet an incoming liner for the Vulture. A Jew-baiting member of the German Reichstag was coming to deliver a series of lectures in New York on his favourite subject, and the newspapers who deemed him worthy of notice at all were sending him fair warning that his mission would be tolerated perhaps, but not welcomed. The Jews were good citizens and America a “free country” and his meetings in the Cooper Union Hall would meet with derision certainly, and violence possibly.

The assignment was a pleasant one, and Williams had instructions to poke fun at the officious and interfering German, and advise him to return to Bremen by the next steamer without venturing among flying eggs and dead cats on the platform. He entered fully into the spirit of the job and was telling the Quarantine doctor about it as they steamed down the bay in the little tug to meet the huge liner just anchoring inside Sandy Hook.

The decks of the ship were crowded with passengers watching the arrival of the puffing tug, and just as they drew alongside in the shadow Williams suddenly felt his eyes drawn away from the swinging rope ladder to some point about half-way down the length of the vessel. There, among the intermediate passengers on the lower deck, he saw a face staring at him with fixed intentness. The eyes were bright blue, and the skin, in that row of bronzed passengers, showed remarkably white. At once, and with a violent rush of blood from the heart, he recognised Hensig.

In a moment everything about him changed: the blue waters of the bay turned black, the light seemed to leave the sun, and all the old sensations of fear and loathing came over him again like the memory of some great pain. He shook himself, and clutched the rope ladder to swing up after the Health

Officer, angry, and yet genuinely alarmed at the same time, to realise that the return of this man could so affect him. His interview with the Jew-baiter was of the briefest possible description, and he hurried through to catch the Quarantine tug back to Staten Island, instead of steaming up the bay with the great liner into dock, as the other reporters did. He had caught no second glimpse of the hated German, and he even went so far as to harbour a faint hope that he might have been deceived, and that some trick of resemblance in another face had caused a sort of subjective hallucination. At any rate, the days passed into weeks, and October slipped into November, and there was no recurrence of the distressing vision. Perhaps, after all, it was a stranger only; or, if it was Hensig, then he had forgotten all about the reporter, and his return had no connection necessarily with the idea of revenge.

None the less, however, Williams felt uneasy. He told his friend Dowling, the policeman.

“Old news,” laughed the Irishman. “Headquarters are keeping an eye on him as a suspect. Berlin wants a man for two murders — goes by the name of Brunner — and from their description we think it’s this feller Hensig. Nothing certain yet, but we’re on his trail. I’m on his trail,” he added proudly, “and don’t you forget it! I’ll let you know anything when the time comes, but mum’s the word just now!”

One night, not long after this meeting, Williams and the Senator were covering a big fire on the West Side docks. They were standing on the outskirts of the crowd watching the immense flames that a shouting wind seemed to carry half-way across the river. The surrounding shipping was brilliantly lit up and the roar was magnificent. The Senator, having come out with none of his own, borrowed his friend’s overcoat for a moment to protect him from spray and flying cinders while he went inside the fire lines for the latest information obtainable. It was after midnight, and the main story had been telephoned to the office; all they had now to do was to send in the latest details and corrections to be written up at the news desk.

“I’ll wait for you over at the corner!” shouted Williams, in moving off through a scene of indescribable confusion and taking off his fire badge as he went. This conspicuous brass badge, issued to reporters by the Fire Department, gave them the right to pass within the police cordon in the pursuit of information, and at their own risk. Hardly had he unpinned it from his coat when a hand dashed out of the crowd surging up against him and made a determined grab at it. He turned to trace the owner, but at that instant a great lurching of the mob nearly carried him off his feet, and he only just succeeded in seeing the arm withdrawn, having failed of its object, before he was landed with a violent push upon the pavement he had been aiming for.

The incident did not strike him as particularly odd, for in such a crowd there are many who covet the privilege of getting closer to the blaze. He simply laughed and put the badge safely in his pocket, and then stood to watch the dying flames until his friend came to join him with the latest details.

Yet, though time was pressing and the Senator had little enough to do, it was fully half an hour before he came lumbering up through the darkness. Williams recognised him some distance away by the check ulster he wore — his own.

But was it the Senator, after all? The figure moved oddly and with a limp, as though injured.

A few feet off it stopped and peered at Williams through the darkness.

“That you, Williams?” asked a gruff voice.

“I thought you were someone else for a moment,” answered the reporter, relieved to recognise his friend, and moving forward to meet him. “But what’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

The Senator looked ghastly in the lurid glow of the fire. His face was white, and there was a little trickle of blood on the forehead.

“Some fellow nearly did for me,” he said; “deliberately pushed me clean off the edge of the dock. If I hadn’t fallen on to a broken pile and found a boat, I’d have been drowned sure as God made little apples. Think I know who it was, too. Think! I mean I know, because I saw his damned white face and heard what he said.” “Who in the world was it? What did he want?” stammered the other.

The Senator took his arm, and lurched into the saloon behind them for some brandy. As he did so he kept looking over his shoulder.

“Quicker we’re off from this dirty neighbourhood, the better,” he said.

Then he turned to Williams, looking oddly at him over the glass, and answering his questions.

“Who was it? — why, it was Hensig! And what did he want? — well, he wanted you!”

“Me! Hensig!” gasped the other.

“Guess he mistook me for you,” went on the Senator, looking behind him at the door. “The crowd was so thick I cut across by the edge of the dock. It was quite dark. There wasn’t a soul near me. I was running. Suddenly what I thought was a stump got up in front of me, and, Gee whiz, man! I tell you it was Hensig, or I’m a drunken Dutchman. I looked bang into his face. ‘Good-pye, Mr. Vulture reporter,’ he said, with a damned laugh, and gave me a push that sent me backwards clean over the edge.”

The Senator paused for breath, and to empty his second glass.

“My overcoat!” exclaimed Williams faintly.

“Oh, he’d been following you right enough, I guess.”

The Senator was not really injured, and the two men walked back towards Broadway to find a telephone, passing through a region of dimly-lighted streets known as Little Africa, where the negroes lived, and where it was safer to keep the middle of the road, thus avoiding sundry dark alley-ways opening off the side. They talked hard all the way.

“He’s after you, no doubt,” repeated the Senator. “I guess he never forgot your report of his trial. Better keep your eye peeled!” he added with a laugh.

But Williams didn’t feel a bit inclined to laugh, and the thought that it certainly was Hensig he had seen on the steamer, and that he was following him so closely as to mark his check ulster and make an attempt on his life, made him feel horribly uncomfortable, to say the least. To be stalked by such a man was terrible. To realise that he was marked down by that white-faced, cruel wretch, merciless and implacable, skilled in the manifold ways of killing by stealth — that somewhere in the crowds of the great city he was watched and waited for, hunted, observed: here was an obsession really to torment and become dangerous. Those light-blue eyes, that keen intelligence, that mind charged with revenge, had been watching him ever since the trial, even from across the sea. The idea terrified him. It brought death into his thoughts for the first time with a vivid sense of nearness and reality — far greater than anything he had experienced when watching others die.

That night, in his dingy little room in the East Nineteenth Street — ng-house, Williams went to bed in a blue funk, and for days afterwards he went about his business in a continuation of the same blue funk. It was useless to deny it. He kept his eyes everywhere, thinking he was being watched and followed. A new face in the office, at the — ng-house table, or anywhere on his usual beat, made him jump. His daily work was haunted; his dreams were all nightmares; he forgot all his good resolutions, and plunged into the old indulgences that helped him to forget his distress. It took twice as much liquor to make him jolly, and four times as much to make him reckless.

Not that he really was a drunkard, or cared to drink for its own sake, but he moved in a thirsty world of reporters, policemen, reckless and loose-living men and women, whose form of greeting was “What’ll you take?” and method of reproach “Oh, he’s sworn off!” Only now he was more careful how much he took, counting the cocktails and fizzes poured into him during the course of his day’s work, and was anxious never to lose control of himself. He must be on the watch. He changed his eating and drinking haunts, and altered any habits that could give a clue to the devil on his trail. He even went so far as to change his boarding-house. His emotion — the emotion of fear — changed everything. It tinged the outer world with gloom, draping it in darker colours, stealing something from the sunlight, reducing enthusiasm, and acting as a heavy drag, as it were, upon all the normal functions of life.

The effect upon his imagination, already diseased by alcohol and drugs, was, of course, exceedingly strong. The doctor’s words about developing a germ until it became too powerful to be touched by any medicine, and then letting it into the victim’s system by means of a pin-scratch — this possessed him more than anything else. The idea dominated his thoughts; it seemed so clever, so cruel, so devilish. The “accident” at the fire had been, of course, a real accident, conceived on the spur of the moment — the result of a chance meeting and a foolish mistake.

Hensig had no need to resort to such clumsy methods. When the right moment came he would adopt a far simpler, safer plan.

Finally, he became so obsessed by the idea that Hensig was following him, waiting for his opportunity, that one day he told the news editor the whole story. His nerves were so shaken that he could not do his work properly.

“That’s a good story. Make two hundred of it,” said the editor at once. “Fake the name, of course. Mustn’t mention Hensig, or there’ll be a libel suit.”

But William was in earnest, and insisted so forcibly that Treherne, though busy as ever, took him aside into his room with the glass door.

“Now, see here, Williams, you’re drinking too much,” he said; “that’s about the size of it. Steady up a bit on the wash, and Hensig’s face will disappear.” He spoke kindly, but sharply. He was young himself, awfully keen, with much knowledge of human nature and a rare “nose for news”. He understood the abilities of his small army of men with intuitive judgment. That they drank was nothing to him, provided they did their work. Everybody in that world drank, and the man who didn’t was looked upon with suspicion.

Williams explained rather savagely that the face was no mere symptom of delirium tremens and the editor spared him another two minutes before rushing out to tackle the crowd of men waiting for him at the news desk.

“That so? You don’t say!” he asked, with more interest. “Well, I guess Hensig’s simply trying to razzle-dazzle you. You tried to kill him by your reports, and he wants to scare you by way of revenge. But he’ll never dare do anything. Throw him a good bluff, and he’ll give in like a baby. Everything’s pretence in this world. But I rather like the idea of the germs. That’s original!”

Williams, a little angry at the other’s flippancy, told the story of the Senator’s adventure and the changed overcoat.

“May be, may be,” replied the hurried editor; “but the Senator drinks Chinese whisky, and a man who does that might imagine anything on God’s earth. Take a tip, Williams, from an old hand, and let up a bit on the liquor. Drop cocktails and keep to straight whisky, and never drink on an empty stomach. Above all, don’t mix!”

He gave him a keen look and was off.

“Next time you see this German,” cried Treherne from the door, “go up and ask him for an interview on what it feels like to escape from the Chair — just to show him you don’t care a red cent. Talk about having him watched and followed — suspected man — and all that sort of flim-flam. Pretend to warn him. It’ll turn the tables and make him digest a bit. See?” Williams sauntered out into the street to report a meeting of the Rapid Transit Commissioners, and the first person he met as he ran down the office steps was — Max Hensig.

Before he could stop, or swerve aside, they were face to face. His head swam for a moment and he began to tremble. Then some measure of self-possession returned, and he tried instinctively to act on the editor’s advice. No other plan was ready, so he drew on the last force that had occupied his mind. It was that — or running.

Hensig, he noticed, looked prosperous; he wore a fur overcoat and cap. His face was whiter than ever, and his blue eyes burned like coals.

“Why! Dr. Hensig, you’re back in New York!” he exclaimed. “When did you arrive? I’m glad — I suppose — I mean — er — will you come and have a drink?” he concluded desperately. It was very foolish, but for the life of him he could think of nothing else to say. And the last thing in the world he wished was that his enemy should know that he was afraid.

“I tink not, Mr. Vulture reporder, tanks,” he answered coolly; “but I sit py and vatch you drink.” His self-possession was as perfect, as it always was.

But Williams, more himself now, seized on the refusal and moved on, saying something about having a meeting to go to.

“I walk a liddle way with you, berhaps,” Hensig said, following him down the pavement.

It was impossible to prevent him, and they started side by side across City Hall Park towards Broadway. It was after four o’clock: the dusk was falling: the little park was thronged with people walking in all directions, everyone in a terrific hurry as usual. Only Hensig seemed calm and unmoved among that racing, tearing life about them. He carried an atmosphere of ice about with him: it was his voice and manner that produced this impression; his mind was alert, watchful, determined, always sure of itself.

Williams wanted to run. He reviewed swiftly in his mind a dozen ways of getting rid of him quickly, yet knowing well they were all futile. He put his hands in his overcoat pockets — the check ulster — and watched sideways every movement of his companion.

"Living in New York again, aren't you?" he began.

"Not as a doctor any more," was the reply. "I now teach and study. Also I write sciendific books a liddle—"

"What about?"

"Cherms," said the other, looking at him and laughing.

"Disease cherms, their culture and development." He put the accent on the "op".

Williams walked more quickly. With a great effort he tried to put Treherne's advice into practice.

"You care to give me an interview any time — on your special subjects?" he asked, as naturally as he could.

"Oh yes; with much bleasure. I lif in Harlem now, if you will call von day —"

"Our office is best," interrupted the reporter. "Paper, desks, library, all handy for use, you know."

"If you're afraid—" began Hensig. Then, without finishing the sentence, he added with a laugh, "I haf no arsenic there. You not tink me any more a pungling boisoner? You haf changed your mind about all dat?"

Williams felt his flesh beginning to creep. How could he speak of such a matter! His own wife, too!

He turned quickly and faced him, standing still for a moment so that the throng of people deflected into two streams past them. He felt it absolutely imperative upon him to say something that should convince the German he was not afraid.

"I suppose you are aware, Dr. Hensig, that the police know you have returned, and that you are being watched probably?" he said in a low voice, forcing himself to meet the odious blue eyes.

"And why not, bray?" he asked imperturbably.

"They may suspect something—"

"Susbected — already again? Ach was!" said the German.

"I only wished to warn you—" stammered Williams, who always found it difficult to remain self-possessed under the other's dreadful stare.

"No boliceman see what I do — or catch me again," he laughed quite horribly. "But I tank you all the same."

Williams turned to catch a Broadway car going at full speed. He could not stand another minute with this man, who affected him so disagreeably.

"I call at the office one day to gif you interview!" Hensig shouted as he dashed off, and the next minute he was swallowed up in the crowd, and Williams, with mixed feelings and a strange inner trembling, went to cover the meeting of the Rapid Transit Board.

But, while he reported the proceedings mechanically, his mind was busy with quite other thoughts. Hensig was at his side the whole time. He felt quite sure, however unlikely it seemed, that there was no fancy in his fears, and that he had judged the German correctly. Hensig hated him, and would put him out of the way if he could. He would do it in such a way that detection would be almost impossible. He would not shoot or poison in the ordinary way, or resort to any clumsy method. He would simply follow, watch, wait his opportunity, and then act with utter callousness and remorseless determination. And Williams already felt pretty certain of the means that would be employed: "Cherms!"

This meant proximity. He must watch everyone who came close to him in trains, cars, restaurants — anywhere and everywhere. It could be done in a second: only a slight scratch would be necessary, and the disease would be in his blood with such strength that the chances of recovery would be slight. And what could he do? He could not have Hensig watched or arrested.

He had no story to tell to a magistrate, or to the police, for no one would listen to such a tale.

And, if he were stricken down by sudden illness, what was more likely than to say he had caught the fever in the ordinary course of his work, since he was always frequenting noisome dens and the haunts of the very poor, the foreign and filthy slums of the East Side, and the hospitals, morgues, and cells of all sorts and conditions of men? No; it was a disagreeable situation, and Williams, young, shaken in nerve, and easily impressionable as he was, could not prevent its obsession of his mind and imagination.

“If I get suddenly ill,” he told the Senator, his only friend in the whole city, “and send for you, look carefully for a scratch on my body. Tell Dowling, and tell the doctor the story.”

“You think Hensig goes about with a little bottle of plague germs in his vest pocket?” laughed the other reporter, ready to scratch you with a pin?”

“Some damned scheme like that, I’m sure.”

“Nothing could be proved anyway. He wouldn’t keep the evidence in his pocket till he was arrested, would he?”

During the next week or two Williams ran against Hensig twice — accidentally. The first time it happened just outside his own boarding-house — the new one. Hensig had his foot on the stone steps as if just about to come up, but quick as a flash he turned his face away and moved on down the Street. This was about eight o’clock in the evening, and the hall light fell through the opened door upon his face. The second time it was not so clear: the reporter was covering a case in the courts, a case of suspicious death in which a woman was chief prisoner, and he thought he saw the doctor’s white visage watching him from among the crowd at the back of the court-room.

When he looked a second time, however, the face had disappeared, and there was no sign afterwards of its owner in the lobby or corridor.

That same day he met Dowling in the building; he was promoted now, and was always in plain clothes. The detective drew him aside into a corner. The talk at once turned upon the German.

“We’re watching him too,” he said. “Nothing you can use yet, but he’s changed his name again, and never stops at the same address for more than a week or two. I guess he’s Brunner right enough, the man Berlin’s looking for. He’s a holy terror if ever there was one.”

Dowling was happy as a schoolboy to be in touch with such a promising case.

“What’s he up to now in particular?” asked the other.

“Something pretty black,” said the detective. “But I can’t tell you yet awhile. He calls himself Schmidt now, and he’s dropped the ‘Doctor.’ We may take him any day — just waiting for advices from Germany.”

Williams told his story of the overcoat adventure with the Senator, and his belief that Hensig was waiting for a suitable opportunity to catch him alone.

“That’s dead likely too,” said Dowling, and added carelessly, “I guess we’ll have to make some kind of a case against him anyway, just to get him out of the way. He’s dangerous to be around huntin’ on the loose.”

So gradual sometimes are the approaches of fear that the processes by which it takes possession of a man’s soul are often too insidious to be recognised, much less to be dealt with, until their object has been finally accomplished and the victim has lost the power to act. And by this time the reporter, who had again plunged into excess, felt so nerveless that, if he met Hensig face to face, he could not answer for what he might do. He might assault his tormentor violently — one result of terror — or he might find himself powerless to do anything at all but yield, like a bird fascinated before a snake.

He was always thinking now of the moment when they would meet, and of what would happen; for he was just as certain that they must meet eventually, and that Hensig would try to kill him, as that his next birthday would find him twenty-five years old. That meeting, he well knew, could be delayed only, not prevented, and his changing again to another boarding-house, or moving altogether to a different city, could only postpone the final accounting between them.

It was bound to come.

A reporter on a New York newspaper has one day in seven to himself. Williams’s day off was Monday, and he was always glad when it came. Sunday was especially arduous for him, because in addition to the unsatisfactory nature of the day’s assignments, involving private interviewing which the citizens pretended to resent on their day of rest, he had the task in the evening of reporting a difficult sermon in a Brooklyn church. Having only a column and a half at his disposal, he had to condense as he went along, and the speaker was so rapid, and so fond of lengthy quotations, that the reporter found his shorthand only just equal to the task. It was usually after half-past nine o'clock when he left the church, and there was still the labour of transcribing his notes in the office against time.

The Sunday following the glimpse of his tormentor's face in the court-room he was busily condensing the wearisome periods of the preacher. sitting at a little table immediately under the pulpit, when he glanced up during a brief pause and let his eye wander over the congregation and up to the crowded galleries. Nothing was farther at the moment from his much-occupied brain than the doctor of Amityville, and it was such an unexpected shock to encounter his fixed stare up there among the occupants of the front row, watching him with an evil smile, that his senses temporarily deserted him. The next sentence of the preacher was wholly lost, and his shorthand during the brief remainder of the sermon was quite illegible, he found, when he came to transcribe it at the office.

It was after one o'clock in the morning when he finished, and he went out feeling exhausted and rather shaky. In the all-night drug-store at the corner he indulged accordingly in several more glasses of whisky than usual, and talked a long time with the man who guarded the back room and served liquor to the few who knew the pass-word, since the shop had really no licence at all.

The true reason for this delay he recognised quite plainly: he was afraid of the journey home along the dark and emptying streets. The lower end of New York is practically deserted after ten o'clock: it has no residences, no theatres, no cafés, and only a few travellers from late ferries share it with reporters, a sprinkling of policemen, and the ubiquitous ne'er-do-wells who haunt the saloon doors. The newspaper world of Park Row was, of course, alive with light and movement, but once outside that narrow zone and the night descended with an effect of general darkness.

Williams thought of spending three dollars on a cab, but dismissed the idea because of its extravagance. Presently Galusha Owens came in — too drunk to be of any use, though, as a companion. Besides, he lived in Harlem, which was miles beyond Nineteenth Street, where Williams had to go. He took another rye whisky — his fourth — and looked cautiously through the coloured glass windows into the Street. No one was visible. Then he screwed up his nerves another twist or two, and made a bolt for it, taking the steps in a sort of flying leap — and running full tilt into a man whose figure seemed almost to have risen out of the very pavement.

He gave a cry and raised his fists to strike.

“Where’s your hurry?” laughed a familiar voice. “Is the Prince of Wales dead?” It was the Senator, most welcome of all possible appearances.

“Come in and have a horn,” said Williams, “and then I’ll walk home with you.” He was immensely glad to see him, for only a few streets separated their respective boarding-houses.

“But he’d never sit out a long sermon just for the pleasure of watching you,” observed the Senator after hearing his friend’s excited account.

“That man’ll take any trouble in the world to gain his end,” said the other with conviction.

“He’s making a study of all my movements and habits. He’s not the sort to take chances when it’s a matter of life and death. I’ll bet he’s not far away at this moment.”

“Rats!” exclaimed the Senator, laughing in rather a forced way. “You’re getting the jumps with your Hensig and death. Have another rye.”

They finished their drinks and went out together, crossing City Hall Park diagonally towards Broadway, and then turning north. They crossed Canal and Grand Streets, deserted and badly lighted. Only a few drunken loiterers passed them. Occasionally a policeman on the corner, always close to the side-door of a saloon, of course, recognised one or other of them and called good night. Otherwise there was no one, and they seemed to have this part of Manhattan Island pretty well to themselves. The presence of the Senator, ever cheery and kind, keeping close to his friend all the way, the effect of the half-dozen whiskies, and the sight of the guardians of the law, combined to raise the reporter’s spirits somewhat: and when they reached Fourteenth Street, with its better light and greater traffic, and saw Union Square lying just beyond, close to his own street, he felt a distinct increase of courage and no objection to going on alone...”Good night!” cried the Senator cheerily. “Get home safe; I turn off here anyway.” He hesitated a moment before turning down the street, and then added, “You feel O.K., don’t you?”

“You may get double rates for an exclusive bit of news if you come on and see me assaulted,” Williams replied, laughing aloud, and then waiting to see the last of his friend.

But the moment the Senator was gone the laughter disappeared. He went on alone, crossing the square among the trees and walking very quickly. Once or twice he turned to see if anybody were following him, and his eyes scanned carefully as he passed every occupant of the park benches where a certain number of homeless loafers always find their night’s lodging. But there was nothing apparently to cause him alarm, and in a few minutes more he would be safe in the little back bedroom of his own house. Over the way he saw the lights of Burbacher’s saloon, where respectable Germans drank Rhine wine and played chess till all hours. He thought of going in for a night-cap, hesitating for a moment, but finally going on. When he got to the end of the square, however, and saw the dark opening of East Eighteenth Street, he thought after all he would go back and have another drink. He hovered for a moment on the kerbstone and then turned; his will often slipped a cog now in this way.

It was only when he was on his way back that he realised the truth: that his real reason for turning back and avoiding the dark open mouth of the street was because he was afraid of something its shadows might conceal. This dawned upon him quite suddenly. If there had been a light at the corner of the street he would never have turned back at all. And as this passed through his mind, already somewhat fuddled with what he had drunk, he became aware that the figure of a man had slipped forward out of the dark space he had just refused to enter, and was following him down the street. The man was pressing, too, close into the houses, using any protection of shadow or railing that would enable him to move unseen.

But the moment Williams entered the bright section of pavement opposite the wine-room windows he knew that this man had come close up behind him, with a little silent run, and he turned at once to face him. He saw a slim man with dark hair and blue eyes, and recognised him instantly.

“It’s very late to be coming home,” said the man at once. “I thought I recognised my reporder friend from the Vulhire.” These were the actual words, and the voice was meant to be pleasant, but what Williams thought he heard, spoken in tones of ice, was something like, “At last I’ve caught you! You are in a state of collapse nervously, and you are exhausted. I can do what I please with you." For the face and the voice were those of Hensig the Tormentor, and the dyed hair only served to emphasise rather grotesquely the man's features and make the pallor of the skin greater by contrast.

His first instinct was to turn and run, his second to fly at the man and strike him. A terror beyond death seized him. A pistol held to his head, or a waving bludgeon, he could easily have faced; but this odious creature, slim, limp, and white of face, with his terrible suggestion of cruelty, literally appalled him so that he could think of nothing intelligent to do or to say. This accurate knowledge of his movements, too, added to his distress — this waiting for him at night when he was tired and foolish from excess. At that moment he knew all the sensations of the criminal a few hours before his execution: the bursts of hysterical terror, the inability to realise his position, to hold his thoughts steady, the helplessness of it all. Yet, in the end, the reporter heard his own voice speaking with a rather weak and unnatural kind of tone and accompanied by a gulp of forced laughter — heard himself stammering the ever-ready formula: "I was going to have a drink before turning in — will you join me?"

The invitation, he realised afterwards, was prompted by the one fact that stood forth clearly in his mind at the moment — the thought, namely, that whatever he did or said, he must never let Hensig for one instant imagine that he felt afraid and was so helpless a victim.

Side by side they moved down the street, for Hensig had acquiesced in the suggestion, and Williams already felt dazed by the strong, persistent will of his companion. His thoughts seemed to be flying about somewhere outside his brain, beyond control, scattering wildly. He could think of nothing further to say, and had the smallest diversion furnished the opportunity he would have turned and run for his life through the deserted streets.

"A glass of lager," he heard the German say, "I take berhaps that with you. You know me in spite of—" he added, indicating by a movement the changed colour of his hair and moustache.

"Also, I gif you now the interview you asked for, if you like."

The reporter agreed feebly, finding nothing adequate to reply. He turned helplessly and looked into his face with something of the sensations a bird may feel when it runs at last straight into the jaws of the reptile that has fascinated it. The fear of weeks settled down upon him, focussing about his heart. It was, of course, an effect of hypnotism, he remembered thinking vaguely through the befuddlement of his drink — this culminating effect of an evil and remorseless personality acting upon one that was diseased and extra receptive. And while he made the suggestion and heard the other's acceptance of it, he knew perfectly well that he was falling in with the plan of the doctor's own making, a plan that would end in an assault upon his person, perhaps a technical assault only — a mere touch — still, an assault that would be at the same time an attempt at murder. The alcohol buzzed in his ears. He felt strangely powerless. He walked steadily to his doom, side by side with his executioner.

Any attempt to analyse the psychology of the situation was utterly beyond him. But, amid the whirl of emotion and the excitement of the whisky, he dimly grasped the importance of two fundamental things.

And the first was that, though he was now muddled and frantic, yet a moment would come when his will would be capable of one supreme effort to escape, and that therefore it would be wiser for the present to waste no atom of volition on temporary half-measures. He would play dead dog. The fear that now paralysed him would accumulate till it reached the point of saturation: that would be the time to strike for his life. For just as the coward may reach a stage where he is capable of a sort of frenzied heroism that no ordinarily brave man could compass, so the victim of fear, at a point varying with his balance of imagination and physical vigour, will reach a state where fear leaves him and he becomes numb to its effect from sheer excess of feeling it. It is the point of saturation. He may then turn suddenly calm and act with a judgment and precision that simply bewilder the object of the attack. It is, of course, the inevitable swing of the pendulum, the law of equal action and reaction.

Hazily, tipsily perhaps, Williams was conscious of this potential power deep within him, below the superficial layers of smaller emotions — could he but be sufficiently terrified to reach it and bring it to the surface where it must result in action.

And, as a consequence of this foresight of his sober subliminal self, he offered no opposition to the least suggestion of his tormentor, but made up his mind instinctively to agree to all that he proposed. Thus he lost no atom of the force he might eventually call upon, by friction over details which in any case he would yield in the end. And at the same tune he felt intuitively that his utter weakness might even deceive his enemy a little and increase the chances of his single effort to escape when the right moment arrived.

That Williams was able to "imagine" this true psychology, yet wholly unable to analyse it, simply showed that on occasion he could be psychically active. His deeper subliminal self, stirred by the alcohol and the stress of emotion, was guiding him, and would continue to guide him in proportion as he let his fuddled normal self slip into the background without attempt to interfere.

And the second fundamental thing he grasped — due even more than the first to psychic intuition — was the certainty that he could drink more, up to a certain point, with distinct advantage to his power and lucidity — but up to a given point only. After that would come unconsciousness, a single sip too much and he would cross the frontier — a very narrow one. It was as though he knew intuitively that "the drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness." At present he was only fuddled and fearful, but additional stimulant would inhibit the effects of the other emotions, give him unbounded confidence, clarify his judgment and increase his capacity to a stage far beyond the normal. Only — he must stop in time.

His chances of escape, therefore, so far as he could understand, depended on these two things: he must drink till he became self-confident and arrived at the abnormally clear-minded stage of drunkenness; and he must wait for the moment when Hensig had so filled him up with fear that he no longer could react to it. Then would be the time to strike. Then his will would be free and have judgment behind it.

These were the two things standing up clearly somewhere behind that great confused turmoil of mingled fear and alcohol.

Thus for the moment, though with scattered forces and rather wildly feeble thoughts, he moved down the street beside the man who hated him and meant to kill him. He had no purpose at all but to agree and to wait. Any attempt he made now could end only in failure.

They talked a little as they went, the German calm, chatting as though he were merely an agreeable acquaintance, but behaving with the obvious knowledge that he held his victim secure, and that his struggles would prove simply rather amusing. He even laughed about his dyed hair, saying by way of explanation that he had done it to please a woman who told him it would make him look younger. Williams knew this was a lie, and that the police had more to do with the change than a woman; but the man's vanity showed through the explanation, and was a vivid little self-revelation.

He objected to entering Burbacher's, saying that he (Burbacher) paid no blackmail to the police, and might be raided for keeping open after hours.

"I know a nice quiet blace on T'ird Avenue. We go there," he said.

Williams, walking unsteadily and shaking inwardly, still groping, too, feebly after a way of escape, turned down the side street with him. He thought of the men he had watched walking down the short corridor from the cell to the "Chair" at Sing Sing, and wondered if they felt as he did. It was like going to his own execution.

"I haf a new disgovery in bacteriology — in cherms," the doctor went on, "and it will make me famous, for it is very imbortant. I gif it you egsclusive for the Vulture, as you are a friend."

He became technical, and the reporter's mind lost itself among such words as "toxins", "alkaloids", and the like. But he realised clearly enough that Hensig was playing with him and felt absolutely sure of his victim. When he lurched badly, as he did more than once, the German took his arm by way of support, and at the vile touch of the man it was all Williams could do not to scream or strike out blindly.

They turned up Third Avenue and stopped at the side door of a cheap saloon. He noticed the name of Schumacher over the porch, but all lights were out except a feeble glow that came through the glass fanlight. A man pushed his face cautiously round the half-opened door, and after a brief examination let them in with a whispered remark to be quiet. It was the usual formula of the Tammany saloonkeeper, who paid so much a month to the police to be allowed to keep open all night, provided there was no noise or fighting. It was now well after one o'clock in the morning, and the streets were deserted.

The reporter was quite at home in the sort of place they had entered; otherwise the sinister aspect of a drinking “joint” after hours, with its gloom and general air of suspicion, might have caused him some extra alarm. A dozen men, unpleasant of countenance, were standing at the bar, where a single lamp gave just enough light to enable them to see their glasses. The bar-tender gave Hensig a swift glance of recognition as they walked along the sanded floor.

“Come,” whispered the German; “we go to the back room. I know the bass-word,” he laughed, leading the way.

They walked to the far end of the bar and opened a door into a brightly lit room with about a dozen tables in it, at most of which men sat drinking with highly painted women, talking loudly, quarrelling, singing, and the air thick with smoke. No one took any notice of them as they went down the room to a table in the corner farthest from the door — Hensig chose it; and when the single waiter came up with “Was nehmen die Herren?” and a moment later brought the rye whisky they both asked for, Williams swallowed his own without the “chaser” of soda water, and ordered another on the spot.

“It’sh awfully watered,” he said rather thickly to his companion, “and I’m tired.”

“Cocaine, under the circumstances, would help you quicker, berhaps!” replied the German with an expression of amusement. Good God! was there nothing about him the man had not found out? He must have been shadowing him for days; it was at least a week since Williams had been to the First Avenue drug store to get the wicked bottle refilled. Had he been on his trail every night when he left the office to go home? This idea of remorseless persistence made him shudder.

“Then we finish quickly if you are tired,” the doctor continued, “and to-morrow you can show me your repordt for gorrections if you make any misdakes berhaps. I gif you the address to-night pefore we leave.”

The increased ugliness of his speech and accent betrayed his growing excitement. Williams drank his whisky, again without water, and called for yet another, clinking glasses with the murderer opposite, and swallowing half of this last glass, too, while Hensig merely tasted his own, looking straight at him over the performance with his evil eyes.

“I can write shorthand,” began the reporter, trying to appear at his ease.

“Ach, I know, of course.”

There was a mirror behind the table, and he took a quick glance round the room while the other began searching in his coat pocket for the papers he had with him. Williams lost no single detail of his movements, but at the same time managed swiftly to get the “note” of the other occupants of the tables. Degraded and besotted faces he saw, almost without exception, and not one to whom he could appeal for help with any prospect of success. It was a further shock, too, to realise that he preferred the more or less bestial countenances round him to the intellectual and ascetic face opposite. They were at least human, whereas he was something quite outside the pale; and this preference for the low creatures, otherwise loathsome to him, brought his mind by sharp contrast to a new and vivid realisation of the personality before him. He gulped down his drink, and again ordered it to be refilled.

But meanwhile the alcohol was beginning to key him up out of the dazed and negative state into which his first libations and his accumulations of fear had plunged him. His brain became a shade clearer. There was even a faint stirring of the will. He had already drunk enough under normal circumstances to be simply reeling, but to-night the emotion of fear inhibited the effects of the alcohol, keeping him singularly steady. Provided he did not exceed a given point, he could go on drinking till he reached the moment of high power when he could combine all his forces into the single consummate act of cleverly calculated escape. If he missed this psychological moment he would collapse.

A sudden crash made him jump. It was behind him against the other wall. In the mirror he saw that a middle-aged man had lost his balance and fallen off his chair, foolishly intoxicated, and that two women were ostensibly trying to lift him up, but really were going swiftly through his pockets as he lay in a heap on the floor. A big man who had been asleep the whole evening in the corner stopped snoring and woke up to look and laugh, but no one interfered. A man must take care of himself in such a place and with such company, or accept the consequences. The big man composed himself again for sleep, sipping his glass a little first, and the noise of the room continued as before. It was a case of “knock-out drops” in the whisky, put in by the women, however, rather than by the saloon-keeper. Williams remembered thinking he had nothing to fear of that kind. Hensig’s method would be far more subtle and clever — cherms! A scratch with a pin and a germ!

“I haf zome notes here of my disgovery,” he went on, smiling significantly at the interruption, and taking some papers out of an inner pocket. “But they are written in Cherman, so I dranslate for you. You haf paper and benzil?”

The reporter produced the sheaf of office copy paper he always carried about with him, and prepared to write. The rattle of the elevated trains outside and the noisy buzz of drunken conversation inside formed the background against which he heard the German’s steely insistent voice going on ceaselessly with the “dranslation and egsplanation”. From time to time people left the room, and new customers reeled in. When the clatter of incipient fighting and smashed glasses became too loud, Hensig waited till it was quiet again. He watched every new arrival keenly. They were very few now, for the night had passed into early morning and the room was gradually emptying. The waiter took snatches of sleep in his chair by the door; the big man still snored heavily in the angle of the wall and window. When he was the only one left, the proprietor would certainly close up. He had not ordered a drink for an hour at least. Williams, however, drank on steadily, always aiming at the point when he would be at the top of his power, full of confidence and decision. That moment was undoubtedly coming nearer all the time. Yes, but so was the moment Hensig was waiting for. He, too, felt absolutely confident, encouraging his companion to drink more, and watching his gradual collapse with unmasked glee. He betrayed his gloating quite plainly now: he held his victim too securely to feel anxious; when the big man reeled out they would be alone for a brief minute or two unobserved — and meanwhile he allowed himself to become a little too careless from over-confidence. And Williams noted that too.

For slowly the will of the reporter began to assert itself, and with this increase of intelligence he of course appreciated his awful position more keenly, and therefore, felt more fear. The two main things he was waiting for were coming perceptibly within reach: to reach the saturation point of terror and the culminating moment of the alcohol. Then, action and escape!

Gradually, thus, as he listened and wrote, he passed from the stage of stupid, negative terror into that of active, positive terror. The alcohol kept driving hotly at those hidden centres of imagination within, which, once touched, begin to reveal: in other words, he became observant, critical, alert. Swiftly the power grew. His lucidity increased till he became almost conscious of the workings of the other man's mind, and it was like sitting opposite a clock whose wheels and needles he could just hear clicking. His eyes seemed to spread their power of vision all over his skin; he could see what was going on without actually looking. In the same way he heard all that passed in the room without turning his head. Every moment he became clearer in mind. He almost touched clairvoyance. The presentiment earlier in the evening that this stage would come was at last being actually fulfilled.

From time to time he sipped his whisky, but more cautiously than at first, for he knew that this keen psychical activity was the forerunner of helpless collapse. Only for a minute or two would he be at the top of his power. The frontier was a dreadfully narrow one, and already he had lost control of his fingers, and was scrawling a shorthand that bore no resemblance to the original system of its inventor.

As the white light of this abnormal perceptiveness increased, the horror of his position became likewise more and more vivid. He knew that he was fighting for his life with a soulless and malefic being who was next door to a devil. The sense of fear was being magnified now with every minute that passed. Presently the power of perceiving would pass into doing; he would strike the blow for his life, whatever form that blow might take.

Already he was sufficiently master of himself to act — to act in the sense of deceiving. He exaggerated his drunken writing and thickness of speech, his general condition of collapse: and this power of hearing the workings of the other man's mind showed him that he was successful.

Hensig was a little deceived. He proved this by increased carelessness, and by allowing the expression of his face to become plainly exultant.

Williams's faculties were so concentrated upon the causes operating in the terrible personality opposite to him, that he could spare no part of his brain for the explanations and sentences that came from his lips. He did not hear or understand a hundredth part of what the doctor was saving, but occasionally he caught up the end of a phrase and managed to ask a blundering question out of it; and Hensig, obviously pleased with his increasing obfuscation, always answered at some length, quietly watching with pleasure the reporter's foolish hieroglyphics upon the paper.

The whole thing, of course, was an utter blind. Hensig had no discovery at all. He was talking scientific jargon, knowing full well that those shorthand notes would never be transcribed, and that he himself would be out of harm's way long before his victim's senses had cleared sufficiently to tell him that he was in the grasp of a deadly sickness which no medicines could prevent ending in death.

Williams saw and felt all this clearly. It somehow came to him, rising up in that clear depth of his mind that was stirred by the alcohol, and yet beyond the reach, so far, of its deadly confusion. He understood perfectly well that Hensig was waiting for a moment to act; that he would do nothing violent, but would carry out his murderous intention in such an innocent way that the victim would have no suspicions at the moment, and would only realise later that he had been poisoned and — Hark! What was that? There was a change. Something had happened. It was like the sound of a gong, and the reporter's fear suddenly doubled. Hensig's scheme had moved forward a step.

There was no sound actually, but his senses seemed grouped together into one, and for some reason his perception of the change came by way of audition. Fear brimmed up perilously near the breaking-point. But the moment for action had not quite come yet, and he luckily saved himself by the help of another and contrary emotion. He emptied his glass, spilling half of it purposely over his coat, and burst out laughing in Hensig's face. The vivid picture rose before him of Whitey Fife catching cocktail glasses off the edge of Steve Brodie's table..The laugh was admirably careless and drunken, but the German was startled and looked up suspiciously. He had not expected this, and through lowered eyelids Williams observed an expression of momentary uncertainty on his features, as though he felt he was not absolutely master of the situation after all, as he imagined.

"Su'nly thought of Whitey Fife knocking Stevebrodie off'sh Brooklyn Bridsh in a co-cock'tail glashh—" Williams explained in a voice hopelessly out of control. “You know Whhhiteyfife, of coursh, don’t you? — ha, ha, ha!”

Nothing could have helped him more in putting Hensig off the scent. His face resumed its expression of certainty and cold purpose. The waiter, wakened by the noise, stirred uneasily in his chair, and the big man in the corner indulged in a gulp that threatened to choke him as he sat with his head sunk upon his chest. But otherwise the empty room became quiet again. The German resumed his confident command of the situation. Williams, he saw, was drunk enough to bring him easily into his net.

None the less, the reporter’s perception had not been at fault. There was a change. Hensig was about to do something, and his mind was buzzing with preparations.

The victim, now within measuring distance of his supreme moment — the point where terror would release his will, and alcohol would inspire him beyond possibility of error — saw everything as in the clear light of day. Small things led him to the climax: the emptied room; the knowledge that shortly the saloon would close; the grey light of day stealing under the chinks of door and shutter; the increased vileness of the face gleaming at him opposite in the paling gas glare. Ugh! how the air reeked of stale spirits, the fumes of cigar smoke, and the cheap scents of the vanished women. The floor was strewn with sheets of paper, absurdly scrawled over. The table had patches of wet, and cigarette ash lay over everything. His hands and feet were icy, his eyes burning hot. His heart thumped like a soft hammer.

Hensig was speaking in quite a changed voice now. He had been leading up to this point for hours. No one was there to see, even if anything was to be seen — which was unlikely. The big man still snored; the waiter was asleep too. There was silence in the outer room, and between the walls of the inner there was — death.

“Now, Mr. Vulture reporder, I show you what I mean all this time to egsplain,” he was saying in his most metallic voice.

He drew a blank sheet of the reporter’s paper towards him across the little table, avoiding carefully the wet splashes.

“Lend me your bencil von moment, please. Yes?”

Williams, simulating almost total collapse, dropped the pencil and shoved it over the polished wood as though the movement was about all he could manage. With his head sunk forward upon his chest he watched stupidly. Hensig began to draw some kind of outline; his touch was firm, and there was a smile on his lips.

“Here, you see, is the human arm,” he said, sketching rapidly; “and here are the main nerves, and here the artery. Now, my discovery, as I haf peen egsplaining to you, is simply—” He dropped into a torrent of meaningless scientific phrases, during which the other purposely allowed his hand to lie relaxed upon the table, knowing perfectly well that in a moment Hensig would seize it — for the purposes of illustration.

His terror was so intense that, for the first time this awful night, he was within an ace of action. The point of saturation had been almost reached. Though apparently sodden drunk, his mind was really at the highest degree of clear perception and judgment, and in another moment — the moment Hensig actually began his final assault — the terror would provide the reporter with the extra vigour and decision necessary to strike his one blow. Exactly how he would do it, or what precise form it would take, he had no idea; that could be left to the inspiration of the moment; he only knew that his strength would last just long enough to bring this about, and that then he would collapse in utter intoxication upon the floor. Hensig dropped the pencil suddenly: it clattered away to a corner of the room, showing it had been propelled with force, not merely allowed to fall, and he made no attempt to pick it up. Williams, to test his intention, made a pretended movement to stoop after it, and the other, as he imagined he would, stopped him in a second.

“I haf another,” he said quickly, diving into his inner pocket and producing a long dark pencil. Williams saw in a flash, through his half-closed eyes, that it was sharpened at one end, while the other end was covered by a little protective cap of transparent substance like glass, a third of an inch long. He heard it click as it struck a button of the coat, and also saw that by a very swift motion of the fingers, impossible to be observed by a drunken man, Hensig removed the cap so that the end was free. Something gleamed there for a moment, something like a point of shining metal — the point of a pin.

"Gif me your hand von minute and I drace the nerve up the arm I speak apout," the doctor continued in that steely voice that showed no sign of nervousness, though he was on the edge of murder. "So, I show you much petter vot I mean."

Without a second's hesitation — for the moment for action had not quite come — he lurched forward and stretched his arm clumsily across the table. Hensig seized the fingers in his own and turned the palm uppermost. With his other hand he pointed the pencil at the wrist, and began moving it a little up towards the elbow, pushing the sleeve back for the purpose. His touch was the touch of death. On the point of the black pin, engrafted into the other end of the pencil, Williams knew there clung the germs of some deadly disease, germs unusually powerful from special culture; and that within the next few seconds the pencil would turn and the pin would accidentally scratch his wrist and let the virulent poison into his blood.

He knew this, yet at the same time he managed to remain master of himself. For he also realised that at last, just in the nick of time, the moment he had been waiting for all through these terrible hours had actually arrived, and he was ready to act.

And the little unimportant detail that furnished the extra quota of fear necessary to bring him to the point was — touch. It was the touch of Hensig's hand that did it, setting every nerve a-quiver to its utmost capacity, filling him with a black horror that reached the limits of sensation.

In that moment Williams regained his self-control and became absolutely sober. Terror removed its paralysing inhibitions, having led him to the point where numbness succeeds upon excess, and sensation ceases to register in the brain. The emotion of fear was dead, and he was ready to act with all the force of his being — that force, too, raised to a higher power after long repression.

Moreover, he could make no mistake, for at the same time he had reached the culminating effect of the alcohol, and a sort of white light filled his mind, showing him clearly what to do and how to do it. He felt master of himself, confident, capable of anything. He followed blindly that inner guidance he had been dimly conscious of the whole night, and what he did he did instinctively, as it were, without deliberate plan.

He was waiting for the pencil to turn so that the pin pointed at his vein. Then, when Hensig was wholly concentrated upon the act of murder, and thus oblivious of all else, he would find his opportunity. For at this supreme moment the German's mind would be focussed on the one thing. He would notice nothing else round him. He would be open to successful attack. But this supreme moment would hardly last more than five seconds at most!

The reporter raised his eyes and stared for the first time steadily into his opponent's eyes, till the room faded out and he saw only the white skin in a blaze of its own light. Thus staring, he caught in himself the full stream of venom, hatred, and revenge that had been pouring at him across the table for so long — caught and held it for one instant, and then returned it into the other's brain with all its original force and the added impetus of his own recovered will behind it.

Hensig felt this, and for a moment seemed to waver; he was surprised out of himself by the sudden change in his victim's attitude. The same instant, availing himself of a diversion caused by the big man in the corner waking noisily and trying to rise, he slowly turned the pencil round so that the point of the pin was directed at the hand lying in his. The sleepy waiter was helping the drunken man to cross to the door, and the diversion was all in his favour.

But Williams knew what he was doing. He did not even tremble.

"When that pin scratches me," he said aloud in a firm, sober voice, "it means — death."

The German could not conceal his surprise on hearing the change of voice, but he still felt sure of his victim, and clearly wished to enjoy his revenge thoroughly. After a moment's hesitation he replied, speaking very low:

"You tried, I tink, to get me conficted, and now I punish you, dat is all."

His fingers moved, and the point of the pin descended a little lower. Williams felt the faintest imaginable prick on his skin — or thought he did. The German had lowered his head again to direct the movement of the pin properly. But the moment of Hensig's concentration was also the moment of his own attack. And it had come.

"But the alcohol will counteract it!" he burst out, with a loud and startling laugh that threw the other completely off his guard. The doctor lifted his face in amazement. That same instant the hand that lay so helplessly and tipsily in his turned like a flash of lightning, and, before he knew what had happened, their positions were reversed. Williams held his wrist, pencil and all, in a grasp of iron. And from the reporter's other hand the German received a terrific smashing blow in the face that broke his glasses and dashed him back with a howl of pain against the wall.

There was a brief passage of scramble and wild blows, during which both table and chairs were sent flying, and then Williams was aware that a figure behind him had stretched forth an arm and was holding a bright silvery thing close to Hensig's bleeding face. Another glance showed him that it was a pistol, and that the man holding it was the big drunken man who had apparently slept all night in the corner of the room. Then, in a flash, he recognised him as Dowling's partner — a headquarters detective.

The reporter stepped back, his head swimming again. He was very unsteady on his feet.

"I've been watching your game all the evening," he heard the headquarters man saying as he slipped the handcuffs over the German's unresisting wrists. "We have been on your trail for weeks, and I might jest as soon have taken you when you left the Brooklyn church a few hours ago, only I wanted to see what you were up to — see? You're wanted in Berlin for one or two little dirty tricks, but our advices only came last night. Come along now."

"You'll get nozzing," Hensig replied very quietly, wiping his bloody face with the corner of his sleeve. "See, I have scratched myself!"

The detective took no notice of this remark, not understanding it, probably, but Williams noticed the direction of the eyes, and saw a scratch on his wrist, slightly bleeding. Then he understood that in the struggle the pin had accidentally found another destination than the one intended for it.

But he remembered nothing more after that, for the reaction set in with a rush. The strain of that awful night left him utterly limp, and the accumulated effect of the alcohol, now that all was past, overwhelmed him like a wave, and he sank in a heap upon the floor, unconscious.

* * *

The illness that followed was simply "nerves", and he got over it in a week or two, and returned to his work on the paper. He at once made inquiries, and found that Hensig's arrest had hardly been noticed by the papers. There was no interesting feature about it, and New York was already in the throes of a new horror.

But Dowling, that enterprising Irishman — always with an eye to promotion and the main chance — Dowling had something to say about it.

"No luck, Mr. English," he said ruefully, "no luck at all. It would have been a mighty good story, but it never got in the papers. That damned German, Schmidt, alias Brunner, alias Hensig, died in the prison hospital before we could even get him remanded for further inquiries—"

"What did he die of?" interrupted the reporter quickly.

"Black typhus. I think they call it. But it was terribly swift, and he was dead in four days. The doctor said he'd never known such a case."

"I'm glad he's out of the way," observed Williams.

"Well, yes," Dowling said hesitatingly; "but it was a jim dandy of a story, an' he might have waited a little bit longer jest so as I got something out of it for meself."

THE WILLOWS

I

AFTER LEAVING VIENNA, and long before you come to Buda-Pesth, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes. On the big maps this deserted area is painted in a fluffy blue, growing fainter in color as it leaves the banks, and across it may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sümpfe*, meaning marshes.

In high flood this great acreage of sand, shingle-beds, and willow-grown islands is almost topped by the water, but in normal seasons the bushes bend and rustle in the free winds, showing their silver leaves to the sunshine in an ever-moving plain of bewildering beauty. These willows never attain to the dignity of trees; they have no rigid trunks; they remain humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and *alive*. For the wind sends waves rising and falling over the whole surface, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green swells like the sea, too, until the branches turn and lift, and then silvery white as their under-side turns to the sun.

Happy to slip beyond the control of stern banks, the Danube here wanders about at will among the intricate network of channels intersecting the islands everywhere with broad avenues down which the waters pour with a shouting sound; making whirlpools, eddies, and foaming rapids; tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow-clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape and possess at best an impermanent life, since the flood-time obliterates their very existence.

Properly speaking, this fascinating part of the river's life begins soon after leaving Pressburg, and we, in our Canadian canoe, with gipsy tent and frying-pan on board, reached it on the crest of a rising flood about mid-July.

That very same morning, when the sky was reddening before sunrise, we had slipped swiftly through still-sleeping Vienna, leaving it a couple of hours later a mere patch of smoke against the blue hills of the Wienerwald on the horizon; we had breakfasted below Fischeramend under a grove of birch trees roaring in the wind; and had then swept on the tearing current past Orth, Hainburg, Petronell (the old Roman Carnuntum of Marcus Aurelius), and so under the frowning heights of Theben on a spur of the Carpathians, where the March steals in quietly from the left and the frontier is crossed between Austria and Hungary.

Racing along at twelve kilometers an hour soon took us well into Hungary, and the muddy waters — sure sign of flood — sent us aground on many a shingle-bed, and twisted us like a cork in many a sudden belching whirlpool before the towers of Pressburg (Hungarian, Poszóny) showed against the sky; and then the canoe, leaping like a spirited horse, flew at top speed under the gray walls, negotiated safely the sunken chain of the Fliegende Brücke ferry, turned the corner sharply to the left, and plunged on yellow foam into the wilderness of islands, sand-banks, and swamp-land beyond — the land of the willows.

The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest. We entered the land of desolation on wings, and in less than half an hour there was neither boat nor fishing-hut nor red roof, nor any single sign of human habitation and civilization within sight. The sense of remoteness from the world of human kind, the utter isolation, the fascination of this singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell upon us both, so that we allowed laughingly to one another that we ought by rights to have held some special kind of passport to admit us, and that we had, somewhat audaciously, come without asking leave into a separate little kingdom of wonder and magic — a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them.

Though still early in the afternoon, the ceaseless buffetings of a most tempestuous wind made us feel weary, and we at once began casting about for a suitable camping-ground for the night. But the bewildering character of the islands made landing difficult; the swirling flood carried us in-shore and then swept us out again; the willow branches tore our hands as we seized them to stop the canoe, and we pulled many a yard of sandy bank into the water before at length we shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater and managed to beach the bows in a cloud of spray. Then we lay panting and laughing after our exertions on hot yellow sand, sheltered from the wind, and in the full blaze of a scorching sun, a cloudless blue sky above, and an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of our efforts.

“What a river!” I said to my companion, thinking of all the way we had traveled from the source in the Black Forest, and how we had often been obliged to wade and push in the upper shallows at the beginning of June.

“Won’t stand much nonsense now, will it?” he said, pulling the canoe a little farther into safety up the sand, and then composing himself for a nap.

I lay by his side, happy and peaceful in the bath of the elements — water, wind, sand, and the great fire of the sun — thinking of the long journey that lay behind us, and of the great stretch before us to the Black Sea, and how lucky I was to have such a delightful and charming traveling companion as my friend, the Swede.

We had made many similar journeys together, but the Danube, more than any other river I knew, impressed us from the very beginning with its *aliveness*. From its tiny bubbling entry into the world among the pinewood gardens of Donaueschingen, until this moment when it began to play the great river-game of losing itself among the deserted swamps, unobserved, unrestrained, it had seemed to us like following the growth of some living creature. Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, through all the countries we had passed, holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders, playing roughly with us sometimes, yet always friendly and well-meaning, till at length we had come inevitably to regard it as a Great Personage.

How, indeed, could it be otherwise, since it told us so much of its secret life? At night we heard it singing to the moon as we lay in our tent, uttering that odd sibilant note peculiar to itself and said to be caused by the rapid tearing of the pebbles along its bed, so great is its hurrying speed. We knew, too, the voice of its gurgling whirlpools, suddenly bubbling up on a surface previously quite calm; the roar of its shallows and swift rapids; its constant steady thundering below all mere surface sounds; and that ceaseless tearing of its icy waters at the banks. How it stood up and shouted when the rains fell flat upon its face! And how its laughter roared out when the wind blew upstream and tried to stop its growing speed! We knew all its sounds and voices, its tumblings and foamings, its unnecessary splashing against the bridges; that self-conscious chatter when there were hills to look on; the affected dignity of its speech when it passed through the little towns, far too important to laugh; and all these faint, sweet whisperings when the sun caught it fairly in some slow curve and poured down upon it till the steam rose.

It was full of tricks, too, in its early life before the great world knew it. There were places in the upper reaches among the Swabian forests, when yet the first whispers of its destiny had not reached it, where it elected to disappear through holes in the ground, to appear again on the other side of the porous limestone hills and start a new river with another name; leaving, too, so little water in its own bed that we had to climb out and wade and push the canoe through miles of shallows!

And a chief pleasure, in those early days of its irresponsible youth, was to lie low, like Brer Fox, just before the little turbulent tributaries came to join it from the Alps, and to refuse to acknowledge them when in, but to run for miles side by side, the dividing line well marked, the very levels different, the Danube utterly declining to recognize the new-comer. Below Passau, however, it gave up this particular trick, for there the Inn comes in with a thundering power impossible to ignore, and so pushes and incommodes the parent river that there is hardly room for them in the long twisting gorge that follows, and the Danube is shoved this way and that against the cliffs, and forced to hurry itself with great waves and much dashing to and fro in order to get through in time. And during the fight our canoe slipped down from its shoulder to its breast, and had the time of its life among the struggling waves. But the Inn taught the old river a lesson, and after Passau it no longer pretended to ignore new arrivals.

This was many days back, of course, and since then we had come to know other aspects of the great creature, and across the Bavarian wheat plain of Straubing she wandered so slowly under the blazing June sun that we could well imagine only the surface inches were water, while below there moved, concealed as by a silken mantle, a whole army of Undines, passing silently and unseen down to the sea, and very leisurely too, lest they be discovered.

Much, too, we forgave her because of her friendliness to the birds and animals that haunted the shores. Cormorants lined the banks in lonely places in rows like short black palings; gray crows crowded the shingle-beds; storks stood fishing in the vistas of shallower water that opened up between the islands, and hawks, swans, and marsh birds of all sorts filled the air with glinting wings and singing, petulant cries. It was impossible to feel annoyed with the river's vagaries after seeing a deer leap with a splash into the water at sunrise and swim past the bows of the canoe; and often we saw fawns peering at us from the underbrush, or looked straight into the brown eyes of a stag as we charged full tilt round a corner and entered another reach of the river. Foxes, too, everywhere haunted the banks, tripping daintily among the driftwood and disappearing so suddenly that it was impossible to see how they managed it.

But now, after leaving Pressburg, everything changed a little, and the Danube became more serious. It ceased trifling. It was halfway to the Black Sea, within scenting distance almost of other, stranger countries where no tricks would be permitted or understood. It became suddenly grown-up, and claimed our respect and even our awe. It broke out into three arms, for one thing, that only met again a hundred kilometers farther down, and for a canoe there were no indications which one was intended to be followed.

"If you take a side channel," said the Hungarian officer we met in the Pressburg shop while buying provisions, "you may find yourselves, when the flood subsides, forty miles from anywhere, high and dry, and you may easily starve. There are no people, no farms, no fishermen. I warn you not to continue. The river, too, is still rising, and this wind will increase."

The rising river did not alarm us in the least, but the matter of being left high and dry by a sudden subsidence of the waters might be serious, and we had consequently laid in an extra stock of provisions. For the rest, the officer's prophecy held true, and the wind, blowing down a perfectly clear sky, increased steadily till it reached the dignity of a westerly gale.

It was earlier than usual when we camped, for the sun was a good hour or two from the horizon, and leaving my friend still asleep on the hot sand, I wandered about in desultory examination of our hotel. The island, I found, was less than an acre in extent, a mere sandy bank standing some two or three feet above the level of the river. The far end, pointing into the sunset, was covered with flying spray which the tremendous wind drove off the crests of the broken waves. It was triangular in shape, with the apex upstream.

I stood there for several minutes, watching the impetuous crimson flood bearing down with a shouting roar, dashing in waves against the bank as though to sweep it bodily away, and then swirling by in two foaming streams on either side. The ground seemed to shake with the shock and rush while the furious movement of the willow bushes as the wind poured over them increased the curious illusion that the island itself actually moved. Above, for a mile or two, I could see the great river descending upon me: it was like looking up the slope of a sliding hill, white with foam, and leaping up everywhere to show itself to the sun.

The rest of the island was too thickly grown with willows to make walking pleasant, but I made the tour, nevertheless. From the lower end the light, of course, changed, and the river looked dark and angry. Only the backs of the flying waves were visible, streaked with foam, and pushed forcibly by the great puffs of wind that fell upon them from behind. For a short mile it was visible, pouring in and out among the islands, and then disappearing with a huge sweep into the willows, which closed about it like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink. They made me think of gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves. They caused it to vanish from sight. They herded there together in such overpowering numbers.

Altogether it was an impressive scene, with its utter loneliness, its bizarre suggestion; and as I gazed, long and curiously, a singular emotion began stir somewhere in the depths of me. Midway in my delight of the wild beauty, there crept unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm.

A rising river, perhaps, always suggests something of the ominous: many of the little islands I saw before me would probably have been swept away by the morning; this resistless, thundering flood of water touched the sense of awe. Yet I was aware that my uneasiness lay deeper far than the emotions of awe and wonder. It was not that I felt. Nor had it directly to do with the power of the driving wind — this shouting hurricane that might almost carry up a few acres of willows into the air and scatter them like so much chaff over the landscape. The wind was simply enjoying itself, for nothing rose out of the flat landscape to stop it, and I was conscious of sharing its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement. Yet this novel emotion had nothing to do with the wind. Indeed, so vague was the sense of distress I experienced, that it was impossible to trace it to its source and deal with it accordingly, though I was aware somehow that it had to do with my realization of our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements about me. The huge-grown river had something to do with it too — a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night. For here, indeed, they were gigantically at play together, and the sight appealed to the imagination.

But my emotion, so far as I could understand it, seemed to attach itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. And, apart quite from the elements, the willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us.

Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt.

With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different, I felt. Some essence emanated from them that besieged the heart. A sense of awe awakened, true, but of awe touched somewhere by a vague terror. Their serried ranks growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain — where we ran grave risks perhaps!

The feeling, however, though it refused to yield its meaning entirely to analysis, did not at the time trouble me by passing into menace. Yet it never left me quite, even during the very practical business of putting up the tent in a hurricane of wind and building a fire for the stew-pot. It remained, just enough to bother and perplex, and to rob a most delightful camping-ground of a good portion of its charm. To my companion, however, I said nothing, for he was a man I considered devoid of imagination. In the first place, I could never have explained to him what I meant, and in the second, he would have laughed stupidly at me if I had.

There was a slight depression in the center of the island, and here we pitched the tent. The surrounding willows broke the wind a bit.

“A poor camp,” observed the imperturbable Swede when at last the tent stood upright; “no stones and precious little firewood. I’m for moving on early to-morrow — eh? This sand won’t hold anything.”

But the experience of a collapsing tent at midnight had taught us many devices, and we made the cosy gipsy house as safe as possible, and then set about collecting a store of wood to last till bedtime. Willow bushes drop no branches, and driftwood was our only source of supply. We hunted the shores pretty thoroughly. Everywhere the banks were crumbling as the rising flood tore at them and carried away great portions with a splash and a gurgle.

“The island’s much smaller than when we landed,” said the accurate Swede. “It won’t last long at this rate. We’d better drag the canoe close to the tent, and be ready to start at a moment’s notice. *I* shall sleep in my clothes.”

He was a little distance off, climbing along the bank, and I heard his rather jolly laugh as he spoke.

“By Jove!” I heard him call, a moment later, and turned to see what had caused his exclamation; but for the moment he was hidden by the willows, and I could not find him.

“What in the world’s this?” I heard him cry again, and this time his voice had become serious.

I ran up quickly and joined him on the bank. He was looking over the river, pointing at something in the water.

“Good Heavens, it’s a man’s body!” he cried excitedly. “Look!”

A black thing, turning over and over in the foaming waves, swept rapidly past. It kept disappearing and coming up to the surface again. It was about twenty feet from the shore, and just as it was opposite to where we stood it lurched round and looked straight at us. We saw its eyes reflecting the sunset, and gleaming an odd yellow as the body turned over. Then it gave a swift, gulping plunge, and dived out of sight in a flash.

“An otter, by gad!” we exclaimed in the same breath, laughing.

It *was* an otter, alive, and out on the hunt; yet it had looked exactly like the body of a drowned man turning helplessly in the current. Far below it came to the surface once again, and we saw its black skin, wet and shining in the sunlight.

Then, too, just as we turned back, our arms full of driftwood, another thing happened to recall us to the river bank. This time it really was a man, and what was more, a man in a boat. Now a small boat on the Danube was an unusual sight at any time, but here in this deserted region, and at flood time, it was so unexpected as to constitute a real event. We stood and stared.

Whether it was due to the slanting sunlight, or the refraction from the wonderfully illumined water, I cannot say, but, whatever the cause, I found it difficult to focus my sight properly upon the flying apparition. It seemed, however, to be a man standing upright in a sort of flat-bottomed boat, steering with a long oar, and being carried down the opposite shore at a tremendous pace. He apparently was looking across in our direction, but the distance was too great and the light too uncertain for us to make out very plainly what he was about. It seemed to me that he was gesticulating and making signs at us. His voice came across the water to us shouting something furiously but the wind drowned it so that no single word was audible. There was something curious about the whole appearance — man, boat, signs, voice — that made an impression on me out of all proportion to its cause.

“He’s crossing himself!” I cried. “Look, he’s making the sign of the cross!”

“I believe you’re right,” the Swede said, shading his eyes with his hand and watching the man out of sight. He seemed to be gone in a moment, melting away down there into the sea of willows where the sun caught them in the bend of the river and turned them into a great crimson wall of beauty. Mist, too, had begun to rise, so that the air was hazy.

“But what in the world is he doing at nightfall on this flooded river?” I said, half to myself. “Where is he going at such a time, and what did he mean by his signs and shouting? D’you think he wished to warn us about something?”

“He saw our smoke, and thought we were spirits probably,” laughed my companion. “These Hungarians believe in all sorts of rubbish: you remember the shopwoman at Pressburg warning us that no one ever landed here because it belonged to some sort of beings outside man’s world! I suppose they believe in fairies and elementals, possibly demons too. That peasant in the boat saw people on the islands for the first time in his life,” he added, after a slight pause, “and it scared him, that’s all.” The Swede’s tone of voice was not convincing, and his manner lacked something that was usually there. I noted the change instantly while he talked, though without being able to label it precisely.

“If they had enough imagination,” I laughed loudly — I remember trying to make as much *noise* as I could— “they might well people a place like this with the old gods of antiquity. The Romans must have haunted all this region more or less with their shrines and sacred groves and elemental deities.”

The subject dropped and we returned to our stew-pot, for my friend was not given to imaginative conversation as a rule. Moreover, just then I remember feeling distinctly glad that he was not imaginative; his stolid, practical nature suddenly seemed to me welcome and comforting. It was an admirable temperament, I felt: he could steer down rapids like a red Indian, shoot dangerous bridges and whirlpools better than any white man I ever saw in a canoe. He was a grand fellow for an adventurous trip, a tower of strength when untoward things happened. I looked at his strong face and light curly hair as he staggered along under his pile of driftwood (twice the size of mine!), and I experienced a feeling of relief. Yes, I was distinctly glad just then that the Swede was — what he was, and that he never made remarks that suggested more than they said.

“The river’s still rising, though,” he added, as if following out some thoughts of his own, and dropping his load with a gasp. “This island will be under water in two days if it goes on.”

“I wish the *wind* would go down,” I said. “I don’t care a fig for the river.”

The flood, indeed, had no terrors for us; we could get off at ten minutes’ notice, and the more water the better we liked it. It meant an increasing current and the obliteration of the treacherous shingle-beds that so often threatened to tear the bottom out of our canoe.

Contrary to our expectations, the wind did not go down with the sun. It seemed to increase with the darkness, howling overhead and shaking the willows round us like straws. Curious sounds accompanied it sometimes, like the explosion of heavy guns, and it fell upon the water and the island in great flat blows of immense power. It made me think of the sounds a planet must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space.

But the sky kept wholly clear of clouds, and soon after supper the full moon rose up in the east and covered the river and the plain of shouting willows with a light like the day.

We lay on the sandy patch beside the fire, smoking, listening to the noises of the night round us, and talking happily of the journey we had already made, and of our plans ahead. The map lay spread in the door of the tent, but the high wind made it hard to study, and presently we lowered the curtain and extinguished the lantern. The firelight was enough to smoke and see each other’s faces by, and the sparks flew about overhead like fireworks. A few yards beyond, the river gurgled and hissed, and from time to time a heavy splash announced the falling away of further portions of the bank.

Our talk, I noticed, had to do with the far-away scenes and incidents of our first camps in the Black Forest, or of other subjects altogether remote from the present setting, for neither of us spoke of the actual moment more than was necessary — almost as though we had agreed tacitly to avoid discussion of the camp and its incidents. Neither the otter nor the boatman, for instance, received the honor of a single mention, though ordinarily these would have furnished discussion for the greater part of the evening. They were, of course, distinct events in such a place.

The scarcity of wood made it a business to keep the fire going, for the wind, that drove the smoke in our faces wherever we sat, helped at the same time to make a forced draught. We took it in turn to make foraging expeditions into the darkness, and the quantity the Swede brought back always made me feel that he took an absurdly long time finding it; for the fact was I did not care much about being left alone, and yet it always seemed to be my turn to grub about among the bushes or scramble along the slippery banks in the moonlight. The long day's battle with wind and water — such wind and such water! — had tired us both, and an early bed was the obvious program. Yet neither of us made the move for the tent. We lay there, tending the fire, talking in desultory fashion, peering about us into the dense willow bushes, and listening to the thunder of wind and river. The loneliness of the place had entered our very bones, and silence seemed natural, for after a bit the sound of our voices became a trifle unreal and forced; whispering would have been the fitting mode of communication, I felt, and the human voice, always rather absurd amid the roar of the elements, now carried with it something almost illegitimate. It was like talking out loud in church, or in some place where it was not lawful, perhaps not quite *safe*, to be overheard.

The eeriness of this lonely island, set among a million willows, swept by a hurricane, and surrounded by hurrying deep waters, touched us both, I fancy. Untrodden by man, almost unknown to man, it lay there beneath the moon, remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows. And we, in our rashness, had dared to invade it, even to make use of it! Something more than the power of its mystery stirred in me as I lay on the sand, feet to fire, and peered up through the leaves at the stars. For the last time I rose to get firewood.

"When this has burnt up," I said firmly, "I shall turn in," and my companion watched me lazily as I moved off into the surrounding shadows.

For an unimaginative man I thought he seemed unusually receptive that night, unusually open to suggestion of things other than sensory. He too was touched by the beauty and loneliness of the place. I was not altogether pleased, I remember, to recognize this slight change in him, and instead of immediately collecting sticks, I made my way to the far point of the island where the moonlight on plain and river could be seen to better advantage. The desire to be alone had come suddenly upon me; my former dread returned in force; there was a vague feeling in me I wished to face and probe to the bottom.

When I reached the point of sand jutting out among the waves, the spell of the place descended upon me with a positive shock. No mere "scenery" could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to alarm.

I gazed across the waste of wild waters; I watched the whispering willows; I heard the ceaseless beating of the tireless wind; and, one and all, each in its own way, stirred in me this sensation of a strange distress. But the *willows* especially: for ever they went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing — but what it was they made so much to-do about belonged to the secret life of the great plain they inhabited. And it was utterly alien to the world I knew, or to that of the wild yet kindly elements. They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the *horrible*.

There they stood in the moonlight, like a vast army surrounding our camp, shaking their innumerable silver spears defiantly, formed all ready for an attack.

The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer, especially, camps have their "note" either of welcome or rejection. At first it may not always be apparent, because the busy preparations of tent and cooking prevent, but with the first pause — after supper usually — it comes and announces itself. And the note of this willow-camp now became unmistakably plain to me: we were interlopers, trespassers, we were not welcomed. The sense of unfamiliarity grew upon me as I stood there watching. We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented. For a night's lodging we might perhaps be tolerated;

but for a prolonged and inquisitive stay — No! by all the gods of the trees and the wilderness, no! We were the first human influences upon this island, and we were not wanted. *The willows were against us*.

Strange thoughts like these, bizarre fancies, borne I know not whence, found lodgment in my mind as I stood listening. What, I thought, if, after all, these crouching willows proved to be alive; if suddenly they should rise up, like a swarm of living creatures, marshaled by the gods whose territory we had invaded, sweep towards us off the vast swamps, booming overhead in the night — and then *settle down*! As I looked it was so easy to imagine they actually moved, crept nearer, retreated a little, huddled together in masses, hostile, waiting for the great wind that should finally start them a-running. I could have sworn their aspect changed a little, and their ranks deepened and pressed more closely together.

The melancholy shrill cry of a night bird sounded overhead, and suddenly I nearly lost my balance as the piece of bank I stood upon fell with a great splash into the river, undermined by the flood. I stepped back just in time, and went on hunting for firewood again, half laughing at the odd fancies that crowded so thickly into my mind and cast their spell upon me. I recall the Swede's remark about moving on next day, and I was just thinking that I fully agreed with him, when I turned with a start and saw the subject of my thoughts standing immediately in front of me. He was quite close. The roar of the elements had covered his approach.

"You've been gone so long," he shouted above the wind, "I thought something must have happened to you."

But there was that in his tone, and a certain look in his face as well, that conveyed to me more than his actual words, and in a flash I understood the real reason for his coming. It was because the spell of the place had entered his soul too, and he did not like being alone.

"River still rising," he cried, pointing to the flood in the moonlight, "and the wind's simply awful."

He always said the same things, but it was the cry for companionship that gave the real importance to his words.

"Lucky," I cried back, "our tent's in the hollow. I think it'll hold all right." I added something about the difficulty of finding wood, in order to explain my absence, but the wind caught my words and flung them across the river, so that he did not hear, but just looked at me through the branches, nodding his head.

“Lucky if we get away without disaster!” he shouted, or words to that effect; and I remember feeling half angry with him for putting the thought into words, for it was exactly what I felt myself. There was disaster impending somewhere, and the sense of presentiment lay unpleasantly upon me.

We went back to the fire and made a final blaze, poking it up with our feet. We took a last look round. But for the wind the heat would have been unpleasant. I put this thought into words, and I remember my friend’s reply struck me oddly: that he would rather have the heat, the ordinary July weather, than this “diabolical wind.”

Everything was snug for the night; the canoe lying turned over beside the tent, with both yellow paddles beneath her; the provision sack hanging from a willow stem, and the washed-up dishes removed to a safe distance from the fire, all ready for the morning meal.

We smothered the embers of the fire with sand, and then turned in. The flap of the tent door was up, and I saw the branches and the stars and the white moonlight. The shaking willows and the heavy buffetings of the wind against our taut little house were the last things I remembered as sleep came down and covered all with its soft and delicious forgetfulness.

II

Suddenly I found myself lying awake, peering from my sandy mattress through the door of the tent. I looked at my watch pinned against the canvas, and saw by the bright moonlight that it was past twelve o’clock — the threshold of a new day — and I had therefore slept a couple of hours. The Swede was asleep still beside me; the wind howled as before something plucked at my heart and made me feel afraid. There was a sense of disturbance in my immediate neighborhood.

I sat up quickly and looked out. The trees were swaying violently to and fro as the gusts smote them, but our little bit of green canvas lay snugly safe in the hollow, for the wind passed over it without meeting enough resistance to make it vicious. The feeling of disquietude did not pass however, and I crawled quietly out of the tent to see if our belongings were safe. I moved carefully so as not to waken my companion. A curious excitement was on me.

I was halfway out, kneeling on all fours, when my eye first took in that the tops of the bushes opposite, with their moving tracery of leaves, made shapes against the sky. I sat back on my haunches and stared. It was incredible, surely, but there, opposite and slightly above me, were shapes of some indeterminate sort among the willows, and as the branches swayed in the wind they seemed to group themselves about these shapes, forming a series of monstrous outlines that shifted rapidly beneath the moon. Close, about fifty feet in front of me, I saw these things.

My first instinct was to waken my companion that he too might see them, but something made me hesitate — the sudden realization, probably, that I should not welcome corroboration; and meanwhile I crouched there staring in amazement with smarting eyes. I was wide awake. I remember saying to myself that I was *not* dreaming.

They first became properly visible, these huge figures, just within the tops of the bushes — immense bronze-colored, moving, and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches. I saw them plainly and noted, now I came to examine them more calmly, that they were very much larger than human, and indeed that something in their appearance proclaimed them to be *not human* at all. Certainly they were not merely the moving tracery of the branches against the moonlight. They shifted independently. They rose upwards in a continuous stream from earth to sky, vanishing utterly as soon as they reached the dark of the sky. They were interlaced one with another, making a great column, and I saw their limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other, forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally with the contortions of the wind-tossed trees. They were nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes, *within* the leaves almost — rising up in a living column into the heavens. Their faces I never could see. Unceasingly they poured upwards, swaying in great bending curves, with a hue of dull bronze upon their skins.

I stared, trying to force every atom of vision from my eyes. For a long time I thought they *must* every moment disappear and resolve themselves into the movements of the branches and prove to be an optical illusion. I searched everywhere for a proof of reality, when all the while I understood quite well that the standard of reality had changed. For the longer I looked the more certain I became that these figures were real and living, though perhaps not according to the standards that the camera and the biologist would insist upon.

Far from feeling fear, I was possessed with a sense of awe and wonder such as I have never known. I seemed to be gazing at the personified elemental forces of this haunted and primeval region. Our intrusion had stirred the powers of the place into activity. It was we who were the cause of the disturbance, and my brain filled to bursting with stories and legends of the spirits and deities of places that have been acknowledged and worshiped by men in all ages of the world's history. But, before I could arrive at any possible explanation, something impelled me to go farther out, and I crept forward on to the sand and stood upright. I felt the ground still warm under my bare feet; the wind tore at my hair and face; and the sound of the river burst upon my ears with a sudden roar. These things, I knew, were real, and proved that my senses were acting normally. Yet the figures still rose from earth to heaven, silent, majestically, in a great spiral of grace and strength that overwhelmed me at length with a genuine deep emotion of worship. I felt that I must fall down and worship — absolutely worship.

Perhaps in another minute I might have done so, when a gust of wind swept against me with such force that it blew me sideways, and I nearly stumbled and fell. It seemed to shake the dream violently out of me. At least it gave me another point of view somehow. The figures still remained, still ascended into heaven from the heart of the night, but my reason at last began to assert itself. It must be a subjective experience, I argued — none the less real for that, but still subjective. The moonlight and the branches combined to work out these pictures upon the mirror of my imagination, and for some reason I projected them outwards and made them appear objective. I knew this must be the case, of course. I was the subject of a vivid and interesting hallucination. I took courage, and began to move forward across the open patches of sand. By Jove, though, was it all hallucination? Was it merely subjective? Did not my reason argue in the old futile way from the little standard of the known?

I only know that great column of figures ascended darkly into the sky for what seemed a very long period of time, and with a very complete measure of reality as most men are accustomed to gauge reality. Then suddenly they were gone!

And, once they were gone and the immediate wonder of their great presence had passed, fear came down upon me with a cold rush. The esoteric meaning of this lonely and haunted region suddenly flamed up within me and I began to tremble dreadfully. I took a quick look round — a look of horror that came near to panic — calculating vainly ways of escape; and then, realizing how helpless I was to achieve anything really effective, I crept back silently into the tent and lay down again upon my sandy mattress, first lowering the door-curtain to shut out the sight of the willows in the moonlight, and then burying my head as deeply as possible beneath the blankets to deaden the sound of the terrifying wind.

III

As though further to convince me that I had not been dreaming, I remember that it was a long time before I fell again into a troubled and restless sleep; and even then only the upper crust of me slept, and underneath there was something that never quite lost consciousness, but lay alert and on the watch.

But this second time I jumped up with a genuine start of terror. It was neither the wind nor the river that woke me, but the slow approach of something that caused the sleeping portion of me to grow smaller and smaller till at last it vanished altogether, and I found myself sitting bolt upright — listening.

Outside there was a sound of multitudinous little patterings. They had been coming, I was aware, for a long time, and in my sleep they had first become audible. I sat there nervously wide awake as though I had not slept at all. It seemed to me that my breathing came with difficulty, and that there was a great weight upon the surface of my body. In spite of the hot night, I felt clammy with cold and shivered. Something surely was pressing steadily against the sides of the tent and weighing down upon it from above. Was it the body of the wind? Was this the pattering rain, the dripping of the leaves? The spray blown from the river by the wind and gathering in big drops? I thought quickly of a dozen things.

Then suddenly the explanation leaped into my mind: a bough from the poplar, the only large tree on the island, had fallen with the wind. Still half caught by the other branches, it would fall with the next gust and crush us, and meanwhile its leaves brushed and tapped upon the tight canvas surface of the tent. I raised the loose flap and rushed out, calling to the Swede to follow.

But when I got out and stood upright I saw that the tent was free. There was no hanging bough; there was no rain or spray; nothing approached.

A cold, gray light filtered down through the bushes and lay on the faintly gleaming sand. Stars still crowded the sky directly overhead, and the wind howled magnificently, but the fire no longer gave out any glow, and I saw the east reddening in streaks through the trees. Several hours must have passed since I stood there before, watching the ascending figures, and the memory of it now came back to me horribly, like an evil dream. Oh, how tired it made me feel, that ceaseless raging wind! Yet, though the deep lassitude of a sleepless night was on me, my nerves were tingling with the activity of an equally tireless apprehension, and all idea of repose was out of the question. The river I saw had risen further. Its thunder filled the air, and a fine spray made itself felt through my thin sleeping shirt.

Yet nowhere did I discover the slightest evidences of anything to cause alarm. This deep, prolonged disturbance in my heart remained wholly unaccounted for.

My companion had not stirred when I called him, and there was no need to waken him now. I looked about me carefully, noting everything: the turned-over canoe; the yellow paddles — two of them, I'm certain; the provision sack and the extra lantern hanging together from the tree; and, crowding everywhere about me, enveloping all, the willows, those endless, shaking willows. A bird uttered its morning cry, and a string of duck passed with whirring flight overhead in the twilight. The sand whirled, dry and stinging, about my bare feet in the wind.

I walked round the tent and then went out a little way into the bush, so that I could see across the river to the farther landscape, and the same profound yet indefinable emotion of distress seized upon me again as I saw the interminable sea of bushes stretching to the horizon, looking ghostly and unreal in the wan light of dawn. I walked softly here and there, still puzzling over that odd sound of infinite pattering, and of that pressure upon the tent that had wakened me. It *must* have been the wind, I reflected — the wind beating upon the loose, hot sand, driving the dry particles smartly against the taut canvas — the wind dropping heavily upon our fragile roof.

Yet all the time my nervousness and malaise increased appreciably.

I crossed over to the farther shore and noted how the coast line had altered in the night, and what masses of sand the river had torn away. I dipped my hands and feet into the cool current, and bathed my forehead. Already there was a glow of sunrise in the sky and the exquisite freshness of coming day. On my way back I passed purposely beneath the very bushes where I had seen the column of figures rising into the air, and midway among the clumps I suddenly found myself overtaken by a sense of vast terror. From the shadows a large figure went swiftly by. Some one passed me, as sure as ever man did....

It was a great staggering blow from the wind that helped me forward again, and once out in the more open space, the sense of terror diminished strangely. The winds were about and walking, I remember saying to myself; for the winds often move like great presences under the trees. And altogether the fear that hovered about me was such an unknown and immense kind of fear, so unlike anything I had ever felt before, that it woke a sense of awe and wonder in me that did much to counteract its worst effects; and when I reached a high point in the middle of the island from which I could see the wide stretch of river, crimson in the sunrise, the whole magical beauty of it all was so overpowering that a sort of wild yearning woke in me and almost brought a cry up into the throat.

But this cry found no expression, for as my eyes wandered from the plain beyond to the island round me and noted our little tent half hidden among the willows, a dreadful discovery leaped out at me, compared to which my terror of the walking winds seemed as nothing at all.

For a change, I thought, had somehow come about in the arrangement of the landscape. It was not that my point of vantage gave me a different view, but that an alteration had apparently been effected in the relation of the tent to the willows, and of the willows to the tent. Surely the bushes now crowded much closer — unnecessarily, unpleasantly close. *They had moved nearer*.

Creeping with silent feet over the shifting sands, drawing imperceptibly nearer by soft, unhurried movements, the willows had come closer during the night. But had the wind moved them, or had they moved of themselves? I recalled the sound of infinite small patterings and the pressure upon the tent and upon my own heart that caused me to wake in terror. I swayed for a moment in the wind like a tree, finding it hard to keep my upright position on the sandy hillock. There was a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility, and it terrified me into a sort of rigidity.

Then the reaction followed quickly. The idea was so bizarre, so absurd, that I felt inclined to laugh. But the laughter came no more readily than the cry, for the knowledge that my mind was so receptive to such dangerous imaginings brought the additional terror that it was through our minds and not through our physical bodies that the attack would come, and was coming.

The wind buffeted me about, and, very quickly it seemed, the sun came up over the horizon, for it was after four o'clock, and I must have stood on that little pinnacle of sand longer than I knew, afraid to come down at close quarters with the willows. I returned quietly, creepily, to the tent, first taking another exhaustive look round and — yes, I confess it — making a few measurements. I paced out on the warm sand the distances between the willows and the tent, making a note of the shortest distance particularly.

I crawled stealthily into my blankets. My companion, to all appearances, still slept soundly, and I was glad that this was so. Provided my experiences were not corroborated, I could find strength somehow to deny them, perhaps. With the daylight I could persuade myself that it was all a subjective hallucination, a fantasy of the night, a projection of the excited imagination.

Nothing further came to disturb me, and I fell asleep almost at once, utterly exhausted, yet still in dread of hearing again that weird sound of multitudinous pattering, or of feeling the pressure upon my heart that had made it difficult to breathe.

IV

The sun was high in the heavens when my companion woke me from a heavy sleep and announced that the porridge was cooked and there was just time to bathe. The grateful smell of frizzling bacon entered the tent door.

“River still rising,” he said, “and several islands out in midstream have disappeared altogether. Our own island’s much smaller.”

“Any wood left?” I asked sleepily.

“The wood and the island will finish to-morrow in a dead heat,” he laughed, “but there’s enough to last us till then.”

I plunged in from the point of the island, which had indeed altered a lot in size and shape during the night, and was swept down in a moment to the landing place opposite the tent. The water was icy, and the banks flew by like the country from an express train. Bathing under such conditions was an exhilarating operation, and the terror of the night seemed cleansed out of me by a process of evaporation in the brain. The sun was blazing hot; not a cloud showed itself anywhere; the wind, however, had not abated one little jot.

Quite suddenly then the implied meaning of the Swede’s words flashed across me, showing that he no longer wished to leave posthaste, and had changed his mind. “Enough to last till to-morrow” — he assumed we should stay on the island another night. It struck me as odd. The night before he was so positive the other way. How had the change come about?

Great crumblings of the banks occurred at breakfast, with heavy splashings and clouds of spray which the wind brought into our frying-pan, and my fellow-traveler talked incessantly about the difficulty the Vienna-Pesth steamers must have to find the channel in flood. But the state of his mind interested and impressed me far more than the state of the river or the difficulties of the steamers. He had changed somehow since the evening before. His manner was different — a trifle excited, a trifle shy, with a sort of suspicion about his voice and gestures. I hardly know how to describe it now in cold blood, but at the time I remember being quite certain of one thing, viz., that he had become frightened!

He ate very little breakfast, and for once omitted to smoke his pipe. He had the map spread open beside him, and kept studying its markings.

"We'd better get off sharp in an hour," I said presently, feeling for an opening that must bring him indirectly to a partial confession at any rate. And his answer puzzled me uncomfortably: "Rather! If they'll let us."

"Who'll let us? The elements?" I asked quickly, with affected indifference.

"The powers of this awful place, whoever they are," he replied, keeping his eyes on the map. "The gods are here, if they are anywhere at all in the world."

"The elements are always the true immortals," I replied, laughing as naturally as I could manage, yet knowing quite well that my face reflected my true feelings when he looked up gravely at me and spoke across the smoke:

"We shall be fortunate if we get away without further disaster."

This was exactly what I had dreaded, and I screwed myself up to the point of the direct question. It was like agreeing to allow the dentist to extract the tooth; it *had* to come anyhow in the long run, and the rest was all pretense.

"Further disaster! Why, what's happened?"

"For one thing — the steering paddle's gone," he said quietly.

"The steering paddle gone!" I repeated, greatly excited, for this was our rudder, and the Danube in flood without a rudder was suicide. "But what ——"

"And there's a tear in the bottom of the canoe," he added, with a genuine little tremor in his voice.

I continued staring at him, able only to repeat the words in his face somewhat foolishly. There, in the heat of the sun, and on this burning sand, I was aware of a freezing atmosphere descending round us. I got up to follow him, for he merely nodded his head gravely and led the way towards the tent a few yards on the other side of the fireplace. The canoe still lay there as I had last seen her in the night, ribs uppermost, the paddles, or rather, *the* paddle, on the sand beside her.

"There's only one," he said, stooping to pick it up. "And here's the rent in the base-board."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I had clearly noticed *two* paddles a few hours before, but a second impulse made me think better of it, and I said nothing. I approached to see.

There was a long, finely made tear in the bottom of the canoe where a little slither of wood had been neatly taken clean out; it looked as if the tooth of a sharp rock or snag had eaten down her length, and investigation showed that the hole went through. Had we launched out in her without observing it we must inevitably have foundered. At first the water would have made the wood swell so as to close the hole, but once out in midstream the water must have poured in, and the canoe, never more than two inches above the surface, would have filled and sunk very rapidly.

“There, you see, an attempt to prepare a victim for the sacrifice,” I heard him saying, more to himself than to me, “two victims rather,” he added as he bent over and ran his fingers along the slit.

I began to whistle — a thing I always do unconsciously when utterly nonplused — and purposely paid no attention to his words. I was determined to consider them foolish.

“It wasn’t there last night,” he said presently, straightening up from his examination and looking anywhere but at me.

“We must have scratched her in landing, of course,” I stopped whistling to say, “The stones are very sharp — —”

I stopped abruptly, for at that moment he turned round and met my eye squarely. I knew just as well as he did how impossible my explanation was. There were no stones, to begin with.

“And then there’s this to explain too,” he added quietly, handing me the paddle and pointing to the blade.

A new and curious emotion spread freezingly over me as I took and examined it. The blade was scraped down all over, beautifully scraped, as though someone had sand-papered it with care, making it so thin that the first vigorous stroke must have snapped it off at the elbow.

“One of us walked in his sleep and did this thing,” I said feebly, “or — or it has been filed by the constant stream of sand particles blown against it by the wind, perhaps.”

"Ah," said the Swede, turning away, laughing a little, "you can explain everything!"

"The same wind that caught the steering paddle and flung it so near the bank that it fell in with the next lump that crumbled," I called out after him, absolutely determined to find an explanation for everything he showed me.

"I see," he shouted back, turning his head to look at me before disappearing among the willow bushes.

Once alone with these perplexing evidences of personal agency, I think my first thought took the form of "One of us must have done this thing, and it certainly was not I." But my second thought decided how impossible it was to suppose, under all the circumstances, that either of us had done it. That my companion, the trusted friend of a dozen similar expeditions, could have knowingly had a hand in it, was a suggestion not to be entertained for a moment. Equally absurd seemed the explanation that this imperturbable and densely practical nature had suddenly become insane and was busied with insane purposes.

Yet the fact remained that what disturbed me most, and kept my fear actively alive even in this blaze of sunshine and wild beauty, was the clear certainty that some curious alteration had come about in his *mind* — that he was nervous, timid, suspicious, aware of goings on he did not speak about, watching a series of secret and hitherto unmentionable events — waiting, in a word, for a climax that he expected, and, I thought, expected very soon. This grew up in my mind intuitively — I hardly knew how.

I made a hurried examination of the tent and its surroundings, but the measurements of the night remained the same. There were deep hollows formed in the sand, I now noticed for the first time, basin-shaped and of various depths and sizes, varying from that of a teacup to a large bowl. The wind, no doubt, was responsible for these miniature craters, just as it was for lifting the paddle and tossing it towards the water. The rent in the canoe was the only thing that seemed quite inexplicable; and, after all, it *was* conceivable that a sharp point had caught it when we landed. The examination I made of the shore did not assist this theory, but all the same I clung to it with that diminishing portion of my intelligence which I called my "reason." An explanation of some kind was an absolute necessity, just as some working explanation of the universe is necessary — however absurd — to the happiness of every individual who seeks to do his duty in the world and face the problems of life. The simile seemed to me at the time an exact parallel.

I at once set the pitch melting, and presently the Swede joined me at the work, though under the best conditions in the world the canoe could not be safe for traveling till the following day. I drew his attention casually to the hollows in the sand.

“Yes,” he said, “I know. They’re all over the island. But *you* can explain them, no doubt!”

“Wind, of course,” I answered without hesitation. “Have you never watched those little whirlwinds in the street that twist and twirl everything into a circle? This sand’s loose enough to yield, that’s all.”

He made no reply, and we worked on in silence for a bit. I watched him surreptitiously all the time, and I had an idea he was watching me. He seemed, too, to be always listening attentively to something I could not hear, or perhaps for something that he expected to hear, for he kept turning about and staring into the bushes, and up into the sky, and out across the water where it was visible through the openings among the willows. Sometimes he even put his hand to his ear and held it there for several minutes. He said nothing to me, however, about it, and I asked no questions. And meanwhile, as he mended that torn canoe with the skill and address of a red Indian, I was glad to notice his absorption in the work, for there was a vague dread in my heart that he would speak of the changed aspect of the willows. And, if he had noticed *that*, my imagination could no longer be held a sufficient explanation of it.

At length, after a long pause, he began to talk.

“Queer thing,” he added in a hurried sort of voice, as though he wanted to say something and get it over. “Queer thing, I mean, about that otter last night.”

I had expected something so totally different that he caught me with surprise, and I looked up sharply.

“Shows how lonely this place is. Otters are awfully shy things—”

"I don't mean that, of course," he interrupted. "I mean — do you think — did you think it really was an otter?"

"What else, in the name of Heaven, what else?"

"You know, I saw it before you did, and at first it seemed — so *much* bigger than an otter."

"The sunset as you looked upstream magnified it, or something," I replied.

He looked at me absently a moment, as though his mind were busy with other thoughts.

"It had such extraordinary yellow eyes," he went on half to himself.

"That was the sun too," I laughed, a trifle boisterously. "I suppose you'll wonder next if that fellow in the boat — —"

I suddenly decided not to finish the sentence. He was in the act again of listening, turning his head to the wind, and something in the expression of his face made me halt. The subject dropped, and we went on with our caulking. Apparently he had not noticed my unfinished sentence. Five minutes later, however, he looked at me across the canoe, the smoking pitch in his hand, his face exceedingly grave.

"I *did* rather wonder, if you want to know," he said slowly, "what that thing in the boat was. I remember thinking at the time it was not a man. The whole business seemed to rise quite suddenly out of the water."

I laughed again boisterously in his face, but this time there was impatience and a strain of anger too, in my feeling.

"Look here now," I cried, "this place is quite queer enough without going out of our way to imagine things! That boat was an ordinary boat, and the man in it was an ordinary man, and they were both going downstream as fast as they could lick. And that otter *was* an otter, so don't let's play the fool about it!"

He looked steadily at me with the same grave expression. He was not in the least annoyed. I took courage from his silence.

"And for heaven's sake," I went on, "don't keep pretending you hear things, because it only gives me the jumps, and there's nothing to hear but the river and this cursed old thundering wind."

"You *fool*!" he answered in a low, shocked voice, "you utter fool. That's just the way all victims talk. As if you didn't understand just as well as I do!" he sneered with scorn in his voice, and a sort of resignation. "The best thing you can do is to keep quiet and try to hold your mind as firm as possible. This feeble attempt at self-deception only makes the truth harder when you're forced to meet it."

My little effort was over, and I found nothing more to say, for I knew quite well his words were true, and that I was the fool, not *he*. Up to a certain stage in the adventure he kept ahead of me easily, and I think I felt annoyed to be out of it, to be thus proved less psychic, less sensitive than himself to these extraordinary happenings, and half ignorant all the time of what was going on under my very nose. *He knew* from the very beginning, apparently. But at the moment I wholly missed the point of his words about the necessity of there being a victim, and that we ourselves were destined to satisfy the want. I dropped all pretense thenceforward, but thenceforward likewise my fear increased steadily to the climax.

"But you're quite right about one thing," he added, before the subject passed, "and that is that we're wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one *thinks* finds expression in words, and what one *says*, happens."

That afternoon, while the canoe dried and hardened, we spent trying to fish, testing the leak, collecting wood, and watching the enormous flood of rising water. Masses of driftwood swept near our shores sometimes, and we fished for them with long willow branches. The island grew perceptibly smaller as the banks were torn away with great gulps and splashes. The weather kept brilliantly fine till about four o'clock, and then for the first time for three days the wind showed signs of abating. Clouds began to gather in the southwest, spreading thence slowly over the sky.

This lessening of the wind came as a great relief, for the incessant roaring, banging, and thundering had irritated our nerves. Yet the silence that came about five o'clock with its sudden cessation was in a manner quite as oppressive. The booming of the river had everything its own way then: it filled the air with deep murmurs, more musical than the wind noises, but infinitely more monotonous. The wind held many notes, rising, falling, always beating out some sort of great elemental tune; whereas the river's song lay between three notes at most — dull pedal notes, that held a lugubrious quality foreign to the wind, and somehow seemed to me, in my then nervous state, to sound wonderfully well the music of doom.

It was extraordinary, too, how the withdrawal suddenly of bright sunlight took everything out of the landscape that made for cheerfulness; and since this particular landscape had already managed to convey the suggestion of something sinister, the change of course was all the more unwelcome and noticeable. For me, I know, the darkening outlook became distinctly more alarming, and I found myself more than once calculating how soon after sunset the full moon would get up in the east, and whether the gathering clouds would greatly interfere with her lighting of the little island.

With this general hush of the wind — though it still indulged in occasional brief gusts — the river seemed to me to grow blacker, the willows to stand more densely together. The latter, too, kept up a sort of independent movement of their own, rustling among themselves when no wind stirred, and shaking oddly from the roots upwards. When common objects in this way become charged with the suggestion of horror, they stimulate the imagination far more than things of unusual appearance; and these bushes, crowding huddled about us, assumed for me in the darkness a bizarre *grotesquerie* of appearance that lent to them somehow the aspect of purposeful and living creatures. Their very ordinariness, I felt, masked what was malignant and hostile to us. The forces of the region drew nearer with the coming of night. They were focusing upon our island, and more particularly upon ourselves. For thus, somehow, in the terms of the imagination, did my really indescribable sensations in this extraordinary place present themselves.

I had slept a good deal in the early afternoon, and had thus recovered somewhat from the exhaustion of a disturbed night, but this only served apparently to render me more susceptible than before to the obsessing spell of the haunting. I fought against it, laughing at my feelings as absurd and childish, with very obvious physiological explanations, yet, in spite of every effort, they gained in strength upon me so that I dreaded the night as a child lost in a forest must dread the approach of darkness.

The canoe we had carefully covered with a waterproof sheet during the day, and the one remaining paddle had been securely tied by the Swede to the base of a tree, lest the wind should rob us of that too. From five o'clock onwards I busied myself with the stew-pot and preparations for dinner, it being my turn to cook that night. We had potatoes, onions, bits of bacon fat to add flavour, and a general thick residue from former stews at the bottom of the pot; with black bread broken up into it the result was most excellent, and it was followed by a stew of plums with sugar and a brew of strong tea with dried milk. A good pile of wood lay close at hand, and the absence of wind made my duties easy. My companion sat lazily watching me, dividing his attentions between cleaning his pipe and giving useless advice — an admitted privilege of the off-duty man. He had been very quiet all the afternoon, engaged in re-caulking the canoe, strengthening the tent ropes, and fishing for driftwood while I slept. No more talk about undesirable things had passed between us, and I think his only remarks had to do with the gradual destruction of the island, which he declared was now fully a third smaller than when we first landed.

The pot had just begun to bubble when I heard his voice calling to me from the bank, where he had wandered away without my noticing. I ran up.

"Come and listen," he said, "and see what you make of it." He held his hand cupwise to his ear, as so often before.

"*Now* do you hear anything?" he asked, watching me curiously.

We stood there, listening attentively together. At first I heard only the deep note of the water and the hissings rising from its turbulent surface. The willows, for once, were motionless and silent. Then a sound began to reach my ears faintly, a peculiar sound — something like the humming of a distant gong. It seemed to come across to us in the darkness from the waste of swamps and willows opposite. It was repeated at regular intervals, but it was certainly neither the sound of a bell nor the hooting of a distant steamer. I can liken it to nothing so much as to the sound of an immense gong, suspended far up in the sky, repeating incessantly its muffled metallic note, soft and musical, as it was repeatedly struck. My heart quickened as I listened.

"I've heard it all day," said my companion. "While you slept this afternoon it came all round the island. I hunted it down, but could never get near enough to see — to localize it correctly. Sometimes it was overhead, and sometimes it seemed under the water. Once or twice, too, I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but *within myself* — you know — the way a sound in the fourth dimension is supposed to come."

I was too much puzzled to pay much attention to his words. I listened carefully, striving to associate it with any known familiar sound I could think of, but without success. It changed in direction, too, coming nearer, and then sinking utterly away into remote distance. I cannot say that it was ominous in quality, because to me it seemed distinctly musical, yet I must admit it set going a distressing feeling that made me wish I had never heard it.

"The wind blowing in those sand-funnels," I said, determined to find an explanation, "or the bushes rubbing together after the storm perhaps."

"It comes off the whole swamp," my friend answered. "It comes from everywhere at once." He ignored my explanations. "It comes from the willow bushes somehow — —"

"But now the wind has dropped," I objected "The willows can hardly make a noise by themselves, can they?"

His answer frightened me, first because I had dreaded it, and secondly, because I knew intuitively it was true.

"It is *because* the wind has dropped we now hear it. It was drowned before. It is the cry, I believe of the — —"

I dashed back to my fire, warned by a sound of bubbling that the stew was in danger, but determined at the same time to escape from further conversation. I was resolute, if possible, to avoid the exchanging of views. I dreaded, too, that he would begin again about the gods, or the elemental forces, or something else disquieting, and I wanted to keep myself well in hand for what might happen later. There was another night to be faced before we escaped from this distressing place, and there was no knowing yet what it might bring forth.

"Come and cut up bread for the pot," I called to him, vigorously stirring the appetizing mixture. That stew-pot held sanity for us both, and the thought made me laugh.

He came over slowly and took the provision sack from the tree, fumbling in its mysterious depths, and then emptying the entire contents upon the ground-sheet at his feet.

“Hurry up!” I cried; “it’s boiling.”

The Swede burst out into a roar of laughter that startled me. It was forced laughter, not artificial exactly, but mirthless.

“There’s nothing here!” he shouted, holding his sides.

“Bread, I mean.”

“It’s gone. There is no bread. They’ve taken it!”

I dropped the long spoon and ran up. Everything the sack had contained lay upon the ground-sheet, but there was no loaf.

The whole dead weight of my growing fear fell upon me and shook me. Then I burst out laughing too. It was the only thing to do: and the sound of my own laughter also made me understand his. The strain of psychical pressure caused it — this explosion of unnatural laughter in both of us; it was an effort of repressed forces to seek relief; it was a temporary safety valve. And with both of us it ceased quite suddenly.

“How criminally stupid of me!” I cried, still determined to be consistent and find an explanation. “I clean forgot to buy a loaf at Pressburg. That chattering woman put everything out of my head, and I must have left it lying on the counter or — —”

“The oatmeal, too, is much less than it was this morning,” the Swede interrupted.

Why in the world need he draw attention to it? I thought angrily.

“There’s enough for to-morrow,” I said, stirring vigorously, “and we can get lots more at Komorn or Gran. In twenty-four hours we shall be miles from here.”

“I hope so — to God,” he muttered, putting the things back into the sack, “unless we’re claimed first as victims for the sacrifice,” he added with a foolish laugh. He dragged the sack into the tent, for safety’s sake, I suppose, and I heard him mumbling on to himself, but so indistinctly that it seemed quite natural for me to ignore his words.

Our meal was beyond question a gloomy one, and we ate it almost in silence, avoiding one another's eyes, and keeping the fire bright. Then we washed up and prepared for the night, and, once smoking, our minds unoccupied with any definite duties, the apprehension I had felt all day long became more and more acute. It was not then active fear, I think, but the very vagueness of its origin distressed me far more than if I had been able to ticket and face it squarely. The curious sound I have likened to the note of a gong became now almost incessant, and filled the stillness of the night with a faint, continuous ringing rather than a series of distinct notes. At one time it was behind and at another time in front of us. Sometimes I fancied it came from the bushes on our left, and then again from the clumps on our right. More often it hovered directly overhead like the whirring of wings. It was really everywhere at once, behind, in front, at our sides and over our heads, completely surrounding us. The sound really defies description. But nothing within my knowledge is like that ceaseless muffled humming rising off the deserted world of swamps and willows.

We sat smoking in comparative silence, the strain growing every minute greater. The worst feature of the situation seemed to me that we did not know what to expect, and could therefore make no sort of preparation by way of defense. We could anticipate nothing. My explanations made in the sunshine, moreover, now came to haunt me with their foolish and wholly unsatisfactory nature, and it was more and more clear to me that some kind of plain talk with my companion was inevitable, whether I liked it or not. After all, we had to spend the night together, and to sleep in the same tent side by side. I saw that I could not get along much longer without the support of his mind, and for that, of course, plain talk was imperative. As long as possible, however, I postponed this little climax, and tried to ignore or laugh at the occasional sentences he flung into the emptiness.

Some of these sentences, moreover, were confoundedly disquieting to me, coming as they did to corroborate much that I felt myself: corroboration, too — which made it so much more convincing — from a totally different point of view. He composed such curious sentences, and hurled them at me in such an inconsequential sort of way, as though his main line of thought was secret to himself, and these fragments were the bits he found it impossible to digest. He got rid of them by uttering them. Speech relieved him. It was like being sick.

“There are things about us, I’m sure, that make for disorder, disintegration, destruction, *our* destruction,” he said once, while the fire blazed between us. “We’ve strayed out of a safe line somewhere.”

And another time, when the gong sounds had come nearer, ringing much louder than before, and directly over our heads, he said, as though talking to himself:

“I don’t think a phonograph would show any record of that. The sound doesn’t come to me by the ears at all. The vibrations reach me in another manner altogether, and seem to be within me, which is precisely how a fourth dimension sound might be supposed to make itself heard.”

I purposely made no reply to this, but I sat up a little closer to the fire and peered about me into the darkness. The clouds were massed all over the sky and no trace of moonlight came through. Very still, too, everything was, so that the river and the frogs had things all their own way.

“It has that about it,” he went on, “which is utterly out of common experience. It is *unknown*. Only one thing describes it really: it is a non-human sound; I mean a sound outside humanity.”

Having rid himself of this indigestible morsel, he lay quiet for a time; but he had so admirably expressed my own feeling that it was a relief to have the thought out, and to have confined it by the limitation of words from dangerous wandering to and fro in the mind.

The solitude of that Danube camping-place, can I ever forget it? The feeling of being utterly alone on an empty planet! My thoughts ran incessantly upon cities and the haunts of men. I would have given my soul, as the saying is, for the “feel” of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score; for the normal, human commonplaces, peasants drinking beer, tables beneath the trees, hot sunshine, and a ruined castle on the rocks behind the red-roofed church. Even the tourists would have been welcome.

Yet what I felt of dread was no ordinary ghostly fear. It was infinitely greater, stranger, and seemed to arise from some dim ancestral sense of terror more profoundly disturbing than anything I had known or dreamed of. We had “strayed,” as the Swede put it, into some region or some set of conditions where the risks were great, yet unintelligible to us; where the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us. It was a spot held by the dwellers in some outer space, a sort of peephole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil between had worn a little thin. As the final result of too long a sojourn here, we should be carried over the border and deprived of what we called “our lives,” yet by mental, not physical, processes. In that sense, as he said, we should be the victims of our adventure — a sacrifice.

It took us in different fashion, each according to the measure of his sensitiveness and powers of resistance. I translated it vaguely into a personification of the mightily disturbed elements, investing them with the horror of a deliberate and malefic purpose, resentful of our audacious intrusion into their breeding-place; whereas my friend threw it into the unoriginal form at first of a trespass on some ancient shrine, some place where the old gods still held sway, where the emotional forces of former worshipers still clung, and the ancestral portion of him yielded to the old pagan spell.

At any rate, here was a place unpolluted by men, kept clean by the winds from coarsening human influences, a place where spiritual agencies were within reach and aggressive. Never, before or since, have I been so attacked by indescribable suggestions of a “beyond region,” of another scheme of life, another evolution not parallel to the human. And in the end our minds would succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into *their* world.

Small things testified to this amazing influence of the place, and now in the silence round the fire they allowed themselves to be noted by the mind. The very atmosphere had proved itself a magnifying medium to distort every indication: the otter rolling in the current, the hurrying boatman making signs, the shifting willows, one and all had been robbed of its natural character, and revealed in something of its other aspect — as it existed across the border in that other region. And this changed aspect I felt was new not merely to me, but to the race. The whole experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all. It was a new order of experience, and in the true sense of the word *unearthly*.

“It’s the deliberate, calculating purpose that; reduces one’s courage to zero,” the Swede said suddenly, as if he had been actually following my thoughts.

“Otherwise imagination might count for much. But the paddle, the canoe, the lessening food — —”

“Haven’t I explained all that once?” I interrupted viciously.

“You have,” he answered dryly; “you have indeed.”

He made other remarks too, as usual, about what he called the “plain determination to provide a victim”; but, having now arranged my thoughts better, I recognized that this was simply the cry of his frightened soul against the knowledge that he was being attacked in a vital part, and that he would be somehow taken or destroyed. The situation called for a courage and calmness of reasoning that neither of us could compass, and I have never before been so clearly conscious of two persons in me — the one that explained everything, and the other that laughed at such foolish explanations, yet was horribly afraid.

Meanwhile, in the pitchy night the fire died down and the woodpile grew small. Neither of us moved to replenish the stock, and the darkness consequently came up very close to our faces. A few feet beyond the circle of firelight it was inky black. Occasionally a stray puff of wind set the billows shivering about us, but apart from this not very welcome sound a deep and depressing silence reigned, broken only by the gurgling of the river and the humming in the air overhead.

We both missed, I think, the shouting company of the winds.

At length, at a moment when a stray puff prolonged itself as though the wind were about to rise again, I reached the point for me of saturation, the point where it was absolutely necessary to find relief in plain speech, or else to betray myself by some hysterical extravagance that must have been far worse in its effect upon both of us. I kicked the fire into a blaze, and turned to my companion abruptly. He looked up with a start.

“I can’t disguise it any longer,” I said; “I don’t like this place, and the darkness, and the noises, and the awful feelings I get. There’s something here that beats me utterly. I’m in a blue funk, and that’s the plain truth. If the other shore was — different, I swear I’d be inclined to swim for it!”

The Swede’s face turned very white beneath the deep tan of sun and wind. He stared straight at me and answered quietly, but his voice betrayed his huge excitement by its unnatural calmness. For the moment, at any rate, he was the strong man of the two. He was more phlegmatic, for one thing.

“It’s not a physical condition we can escape from by running away,” he replied, in the tone of a doctor diagnosing some grave disease; “we must sit tight and wait. There are forces close here that could kill a herd of elephants in a second as easily as you or I could squash a fly. Our only chance is to keep perfectly still. Our insignificance perhaps may save us.”

I put a dozen questions into my expression of face, but found no words. It was precisely like listening to an accurate description of a disease whose symptoms had puzzled me.

“I mean that so far, although aware of our disturbing presence, they have not *found* us — not ‘located’ us, as the Americans say,” he went on. “They’re blundering about like men hunting for a leak of gas. The paddle and canoe and provisions prove that. I think they *feel* us, but cannot actually see us. We must keep our minds quiet — it’s our minds they feel. We must control our thoughts, or it’s all up with us.”

“Death you mean?” I stammered, icy with the horror of his suggestion.

“Worse — by far,” he said. “Death, according to one’s belief, means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no change of character. *You* don’t suddenly alter just because the body’s gone. But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution — far worse than death, and not even annihilation. We happen to have camped in a spot where their region touches ours where the veil between has worn thin” — horrors! he was using my very own phrase, my actual words— “so that they are aware of our being in their neighborhood.”

“But *who* are aware?” I asked.

I forgot the shaking of the willows in the windless calm, the humming overhead, everything except that I was waiting for an answer that I dreaded more than I can possibly explain.

He lowered his voice at once to reply, leaning forward a little over the fire, an indefinable change in his face that made me avoid his eyes and look down upon the ground.

"All my life," he said, "I have been strangely, vividly conscious of another region — not far removed from our own world in one sense, yet wholly different in kind — where great things go on unceasingly, where immense and terrible personalities hurry by, intent on vast purposes compared to which earthly affairs, the rise and fall of nations, the destinies of empires, the fate of armies and continents, are all as dust in the balance; vast purposes, I mean, that deal directly with the soul, and not indirectly with mere expressions of the soul—"

"I suggest just now—" I began, seeking to stop him, feeling as though I was face to face with a madman. But he instantly overbore me with his torrent that *had* to come.

"You think," he said, "it is the spirits of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is — *neither*. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own."

The mere conception, which his words somehow made so convincing, as I listened to them there in the dark stillness of that lonely island, set me shaking a little all over. I found it impossible to control my movements.

"And what do you propose?" I began again.

"A sacrifice, a victim, might save us by distracting them until we could get away," he went on, "just as the wolves stop to devour the dogs and give the sleigh another start. But — I see no chance of any other victim now."

I stared blankly at him. The gleam in his eyes was dreadful. Presently he continued.

"It's the willows, of course. The willows *mask* the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we're lost, lost utterly." He looked at me with an expression so calm, so determined, so sincere, that I no longer had any doubts as to his sanity. He was as sane as any man ever was. "If we can hold out through the night," he added, "we may get off in the daylight unnoticed, or rather, *undiscovered*."

"But you really think a sacrifice would — —"

That gong-like humming came down very close over our heads as I spoke, but it was my friend’s scared face that really stopped my mouth.

“Hush!” he whispered, holding up his hand. “Do not mention them more than you can help. Do not refer to them *by name*. To name is to reveal: it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us.”

“Even in thought?” He was extraordinarily agitated.

“Especially in thought. Our thoughts make spirals in their world. We must keep them *out of our minds* at all costs if possible.”

I raked the fire together to prevent the darkness having everything its own way. I never longed for the sun as I longed for it then in the awful blackness of that summer night.

“Were you awake all last night?” he went on suddenly.

“I slept badly a little after dawn,” I replied evasively, trying to follow his instructions, which I knew instinctively were true, “but the wind, of course—”

“I know. But the wind won’t account for all the noises.”

“Then you heard it too?”

“The multiplying countless little footsteps I heard,” he said, adding, after a moment’s hesitation, “and that other sound—”

“You mean above the tent, and the pressing down upon us of something tremendous, gigantic?”

He nodded significantly.

“It was like the beginning of a sort of inner suffocation?” I said.

“Partly, yes. It seemed to me that the weight of the atmosphere had been altered — had increased enormously, so that we should be crushed.”

“And *that*,” I went on, determined to have it all out, pointing upwards where the gong-like note hummed ceaselessly, rising and falling like wind. “What do you make of that?”

“It’s *their* sound,” he whispered gravely. “It’s the sound of their world, the humming in their region. The division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow. But, if you listen carefully, you'll find it's not above so much as around us. It's in the willows. It's the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us."

I could not follow exactly what he meant by this, yet the thought and idea in my mind were beyond question the thought and idea in his. I realized what he realized, only with less power of analysis than his. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him at last about my hallucination of the ascending figures and the moving bushes, when he suddenly thrust his face again close into mine across the firelight and began to speak in a very earnest whisper. He amazed me by his calmness and pluck, his apparent control of the situation. This man I had for years deemed unimaginative, stolid!

"Now listen," he said. "The only thing for us to do is to go on as though nothing had happened, follow our usual habits, go to bed, and so forth; pretend we feel nothing and notice nothing. It is a question wholly of the mind, and the less we think about them the better our chance of escape. Above all, don't *think*, for what you think happens!"

"All right," I managed to reply, simply breathless with his words and the strangeness of it all; "all right, I'll try, but tell me one thing more first. Tell me what you make of those hollows in the ground all about us, those sand-funnels?"

"No!" he cried, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. "I dare not, simply dare not, put the thought into words. If you have not guessed I am glad. Don't try to. *They* have put it into my mind; try your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours."

He sank his voice again to a whisper before he finished, and I did not press him to explain. There was already just about as much horror in me as I could hold. The conversation came to an end, and we smoked our pipes busily in silence.

Then something happened, something unimportant apparently, as the way is when the nerves are in a very great state of tension, and this small thing for a brief space gave me an entirely different point of view. I chanced to look down at my sand-shoe — the sort we used for the canoe — and something to do with the hole at the toe suddenly recalled to me the London shop where I had bought them, the difficulty the man had in fitting me, and other details of the uninteresting but practical operation. At once, in its train, followed a wholesome view of the modern skeptical world I was accustomed to move in at home. I thought of roast beef and ale, motor-cars, policemen, brass bands, and a dozen other things that proclaimed the soul of ordinariness or utility. The effect was immediate and astonishing even to myself. Psychologically, I suppose, it was simply a sudden and violent reaction after the strain of living in an atmosphere of things that to the normal consciousness must seem impossible and incredible. But, whatever the cause, it momentarily lifted the spell from my heart, and left me for the short space of a minute feeling free and utterly unafraid. I looked up at my friend opposite.

“You damned old pagan!” I cried, laughing aloud in his face. “You imaginative idiot! You superstitious idolator! You — —”

I stopped in the middle, seized anew by the old horror. I tried to smother the sound of my voice as something sacrilegious. The Swede, of course, heard it too — that strange cry overhead in the darkness — and that sudden drop in the air as though something had come nearer.

He had turned ashen white under the tan. He stood bolt upright in front of the fire, stiff as a rod, staring at me.

“After that,” he said in a sort of helpless, frantic way, “we must go! We can’t stay now; we must strike camp this very instant and go on — down the river.”

He was talking, I saw, quite wildly, his words dictated by abject terror — the terror he had resisted so long, but which had caught him at last.

“In the dark?” I exclaimed, shaking with fear after my hysterical outburst, but still realizing our position better than he did. “Sheer madness! The river’s in flood, and we’ve only got a single paddle. Besides, we only go deeper into their country! There’s nothing ahead for fifty miles but willows, willows, willows!”

He sat down again in a state of semi-collapse. The positions, by one of those kaleidoscopic changes nature loves, were suddenly reversed, and the control of our forces passed over into my hands. His mind at last had reached the point where it was beginning to weaken.

"What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?" he whispered, with the awe of genuine terror in his voice and face.

I crossed round to his side of the fire. I took both his hands in mine, kneeling down beside him and looking straight into his frightened eyes.

"We'll make one more blaze," I said firmly, "and then turn in for the night. At sunrise we'll be off full speed for Komorn. Now, pull yourself together a bit, and remember your own advice about *not thinking fear*!"

He said no more, and I saw that he would agree and obey. In some measure, too, it was a sort of relief to get up and make an excursion into the darkness for more wood. We kept close together, almost touching, groping among the bushes and along the bank. The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire. It was shivery work!

We were grubbing away in the middle of a thickish clump of willows where some driftwood from a former flood had caught high among the branches, when my body was seized in a grip that made me half drop upon the sand. It was the Swede. He had fallen against me, and was clutching me for support. I heard his breath coming and going in short gasps.

"Look! By my soul!" he whispered, and for the first time in my experience I knew what it was to hear tears of terror in a human voice. He was pointing to the fire, some fifty feet away. I followed the direction of his finger, and I swear my heart missed a beat.

There, in front of the dim glow, *something was moving*.

I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theater — hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface— "coiling upon itself like smoke," he said afterwards.

"I watched it settle downwards through the bushes," he sobbed at me. "Look, by God! It's coming this way! Oh, oh!" — he gave a kind of whistling cry. "*They've found us*."

I gave one terrified glance, which just enabled me to see that the shadowy form was swinging towards us through the bushes, and then I collapsed backwards with a crash into the branches. These failed, of course, to support my weight, so that with the Swede on the top of me we fell in a struggling heap upon the sand. I really hardly knew what was happening. I was conscious only of a sort of enveloping sensation of icy fear that plucked the nerves out of their fleshly covering, twisted them this way and that, and replaced them quivering. My eyes were tightly shut; something in my throat choked me; a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die.

An acute spasm of pain passed through me, and I was aware that the Swede had hold of me in such a way that he hurt me abominably. It was the way he caught at me in falling.

But it was this pain, he declared afterwards, that saved me: it caused me to *forget them* and think of something else at the very instant when they were about to find me. It concealed my mind from them at the moment of discovery, yet just in time to evade their terrible seizing of me. He himself, he says, actually swooned at the same moment, and that was what saved him.

I only know that at a later time, how long or short is impossible to say, I found myself scrambling up out of the slippery network of willow branches, and saw my companion standing in front of me holding out a hand to assist me. I stared at him in a dazed way, rubbing the arm he had twisted for me. Nothing came to me to say, somehow.

“I lost consciousness for a moment or two,” I heard him say. “That’s what saved me. It made me stop thinking about them.”

“You nearly broke my arm in two,” I said, uttering my only connected thought at the moment. A numbness came over me.

“That’s what saved *you*!” he replied. “Between us, we’ve managed to set them off on a false tack somewhere. The humming has ceased. It’s gone — for the moment at any rate!”

A wave of hysterical laughter seized me again, and this time spread to my friend too — great healing gusts of shaking laughter that brought a tremendous sense of relief in their train. We made our way back to the fire and put the wood on so that it blazed at once. Then we saw that the tent had fallen over and lay in a tangled heap upon the ground.

We picked it up, and during the process tripped more than once and caught our feet in sand.

“It’s those sand-funnels,” exclaimed the Swede, when the tent was up again and the firelight lit up the ground for several yards about us. “And look at the size of them!”

All round the tent and about the fireplace where we had seen the moving shadows there were deep funnel-shaped hollows in the sand, exactly similar to the ones we had already found over the island, only far bigger and deeper, beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my foot and leg.

Neither of us said a word. We both knew that sleep was the safest thing we could do, and to bed we went accordingly without further delay, having first thrown sand on the fire and taken the provision sack and the paddle inside the tent with us. The canoe, too, we propped in such a way at the end of the tent that our feet touched it, and the least motion would disturb and wake us.

In case of emergency, too, we again went to bed in our clothes, ready for a sudden start.

V

It was my firm intention to lie awake all night and watch, but the exhaustion of nerves and body decreed otherwise, and sleep after a while came over me with a welcome blanket of oblivion. The fact that my companion also slept quickened its approach. At first he fidgeted and constantly sat up, asking me if I “heard this” or “heard that.” He tossed about on his cork mattress, and said the tent was moving and the river had risen over the point of the island; but each time I went out to look I returned with the report that all was well, and finally he grew calmer and lay still. Then at length his breathing became regular and I heard unmistakable sounds of snoring — the first and only time in my life when snoring has been a welcome and calming influence.

This, I remember, was the last thought in my mind before dozing off.

A difficulty in breathing woke me, and I found the blanket over my face. But something else besides the blanket was pressing upon me, and my first thought was that my companion had rolled off his mattress on to my own in his sleep. I called to him and sat up, and at the same moment it came to me that the tent was *surrounded*. That sound of multitudinous soft pattering was again audible outside, filling the night with horror.

I called again to him, louder than before. He did not answer, but I missed the sound of his snoring, and also noticed that the flap of the tent door was down. This was the unpardonable sin. I crawled out in the darkness to hook it back securely, and it was then for the first time I realized positively that the Swede was not there. He had gone.

I dashed out in a mad run, seized by a dreadful agitation, and the moment I was out I plunged into a sort of torrent of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at once. It was that same familiar humming — gone mad! A swarm of great invisible bees might have been about me in the air. The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere, and I felt that my lungs worked with difficulty.

But my friend was in danger, and I could not hesitate.

The dawn was just about to break, and a faint whitish light spread upwards over the clouds from a thin strip of clear horizon. No wind stirred. I could just make out the bushes and river beyond, and the pale sandy patches. In my excitement I ran frantically to and fro about the island, calling him by name, shouting at the top of my voice the first words that came into my head. But the willows smothered my voice, and the humming muffled it, so that the sound only traveled a few feet round me. I plunged among the bushes, tripping headlong, tumbling over roots, and scraping my face as I tore this way and that among the preventing branches.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I came out upon the island’s point and saw a dark figure outlined between the water and the sky. It was the Swede. And already he had one foot in the river! A moment more and he would have taken the plunge.

I threw myself upon him, flinging my arms about his waist and dragging him shorewards with all my strength. Of course he struggled furiously, making a noise all the time just like that cursed humming, and using the most outlandish phrases in his anger about “going *inside* to Them,” and “taking the way of the water and the wind,” and God only knows what more besides, that I tried in vain to recall afterwards, but which turned me sick with horror and amazement as I listened. But in the end I managed to get him into the comparative safety of the tent, and flung him breathless and cursing upon the mattress, where I held him until the fit had passed.

I think the suddenness with which it all went and he grew calm, coinciding as it did with the equally abrupt cessation of the humming and pattering outside — I think this was almost the strangest part of the whole business perhaps. For he just opened his eyes and turned his tired face up to me so that the dawn threw a pale light upon it through the doorway, and said, for all the world just like a frightened child:

“My life, old man — it’s my life I owe you. But it’s all over now anyhow. They’ve found a victim in our place!”

Then he dropped back upon his blankets and went to sleep literally under my eyes. He simply collapsed, and began to snore again as healthily as though nothing had happened and he had never tried to offer his own life as a sacrifice by drowning. And when the sunlight woke him three hours later — hours of ceaseless vigil for me — it became so clear to me that he remembered absolutely nothing of what he had attempted to do, that I deemed it wise to hold my peace and ask no dangerous questions.

He woke naturally and easily, as I have said, when the sun was already high in a windless hot sky, and he at once got up and set about the preparation of the fire for breakfast. I followed him anxiously at bathing, but he did not attempt to plunge in, merely dipping his head and making some remark about the extra coldness of the water.

“River’s falling at last,” he said, “and I’m glad of it.”

“The humming has stopped too,” I said.

He looked up at me quietly with his normal expression. Evidently he remembered everything except his own attempt at suicide.

“Everything has stopped,” he said, “because — —”

He hesitated. But I knew some reference to that remark he had made just before he fainted was in his mind, and I was determined to know it.

“Because ‘They’ve found another victim’?” I said, forcing a little laugh.

“Exactly,” he answered, “exactly! I feel as positive of it as though — as though — I feel quite safe again, I mean,” he finished.

He began to look curiously about him. The sunlight lay in hot patches on the sand. There was no wind. The willows were motionless. He slowly rose to feet.

“Come,” he said; “I think if we look, we shall find it.”

He started off on a run, and I followed him. He kept to the banks, poking with a stick among the sandy bays and caves and little back-waters, myself always close on his heels.

“Ah!” he exclaimed presently, “ah!”

The tone of his voice somehow brought back to me a vivid sense of the horror of the last twenty-four hours, and I hurried up to join him. He was pointing with his stick at a large black object that lay half in the water and half on the sand. It appeared to be caught by some twisted willow roots so that the river could not sweep it away. A few hours before the spot must have been under water.

“See,” he said quietly, “the victim that made our escape possible!”

And when I peered across his shoulder I saw that his stick rested on the body of a man. He turned it over. It was the corpse of a peasant, and the face was hidden in the sand. Clearly the man had been drowned but a few hours before, and his body must have been swept down upon our island somewhere about the hour of the dawn — *at the very time the fit had passed*.

“We must give it a decent burial, you know.”

“I suppose so,” I replied. I shuddered a little in spite of myself, for there was something about the appearance of that poor drowned man that turned me cold.

The Swede glanced up sharply at me, and began clambering down the bank. I followed him more leisurely. The current, I noticed, had torn away much of the clothing from the body, so that the neck and part of the chest lay bare.

Halfway down the bank my companion suddenly stopped and held up his hand in warning; but either my foot slipped, or I had gained too much momentum to bring myself quickly to a halt, for I bumped into him and sent him forward with a sort of leap to save himself. We tumbled together on to the hard sand so that our feet splashed into the water. And, before anything could be done, we had collided a little heavily against the corpse.

The Swede uttered a sharp cry. And I sprang back as if I had been shot.

At the moment we touched the body there arose from its surface the loud sound of humming — the sound of several hummings — which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work.

My companion clutched me, and I think I clutched him, but before either of us had time properly to recover from the unexpected shock, we saw that a movement of the current was turning the corpse round so that it became released from the grip of the willow roots. A moment later it had turned completely over, the dead face uppermost, staring at the sky. It lay on the edge of the main stream. In another moment it would be swept away.

The Swede started to save it, shouting again something I did not catch about a "proper burial" and then abruptly dropped upon his knees on the sand and covered his eyes with his hands. I was beside him in an instant.

I saw what he had seen.

For just as the body swung round to the current the face and the exposed chest turned full towards us, and showed plainly how the skin and flesh were indented with small hollows, beautifully formed, and exactly similar in shape and kind to the sand-funnels that we had found all over the island.

"Their mark!" I heard my companion mutter under his breath. "Their awful mark!"

And when I turned my eyes again from his ghastly face to the river, the current had done its work, and the body had been swept away into midstream and was already beyond our reach and almost out of sight, turning over and over on the waves like an otter.

THE INSANITY OF JONES

(A Study in Reincarnation)

I

Adventures come to the adventurous, and mysterious things fall in the way of those who, with wonder and imagination, are on the watch for them; but the majority of people go past the doors that are half ajar, thinking them closed, and fail to notice the faint stirrings of the great curtain that hangs ever in the form of appearances between them and the world of causes behind.

For only to the few whose inner senses have been quickened, perchance by some strange suffering in the depths, or by a natural temperament bequeathed from a remote past, comes the knowledge, not too welcome, that this greater world lies ever at their elbow, and that any moment a chance combination of moods and forces may invite them to cross the shifting frontier.

Some, however, are born with this awful certainty in their hearts, and are called to no apprenticeship, and to this select company Jones undoubtedly belonged.

All his life he had realised that his senses brought to him merely a more or less interesting set of sham appearances; that space, as men measure it, was utterly misleading; that time, as the clock ticked it in a succession of minutes, was arbitrary nonsense; and, in fact, that all his sensory perceptions were but a clumsy representation of *real* things behind the curtain — things he was for ever trying to get at, and that sometimes he actually did get at.

He had always been tremblingly aware that he stood on the borderland of another region, a region where time and space were merely forms of thought, where ancient memories lay open to the sight, and where the forces behind each human life stood plainly revealed and he could see the hidden springs at the very heart of the world. Moreover, the fact that he was a clerk in a fire insurance office, and did his work with strict attention, never allowed him to forget for one moment that, just beyond the dingy brick walls where the hundred men scribbled with pointed pens beneath the electric lamps, there existed this glorious region where the important part of himself dwelt and moved and had its being. For in this region he pictured himself playing the part of a spectator to his ordinary workaday life, watching, like a king, the stream of events, but untouched in his own soul by the dirt, the noise, and the vulgar commotion of the outer world.

And this was no poetic dream merely. Jones was not playing prettily with idealism to amuse himself. It was a living, working belief. So convinced was he that the external world was the result of a vast deception practised upon him by the gross senses, that when he stared at a great building like St. Paul's he felt it would not very much surprise him to see it suddenly quiver like a shape of jelly and then melt utterly away, while in its place stood all at once revealed the mass of colour, or the great intricate vibrations, or the splendid sound — the spiritual idea — which it represented in stone.

For something in this way it was that his mind worked.

Yet, to all appearances, and in the satisfaction of all business claims, Jones was normal and unenterprising. He felt nothing but contempt for the wave of modern psychism. He hardly knew the meaning of such words as "clairvoyance" and "clairaudience." He had never felt the least desire to join the Theosophical Society and to speculate in theories of astral-plane life, or elementals. He attended no meetings of the Psychical Research Society, and knew no anxiety as to whether his "aura" was black or blue; nor was he conscious of the slightest wish to mix in with the revival of cheap occultism which proves so attractive to weak minds of mystical tendencies and unleashed imaginations.

There were certain things he *knew*, but none he cared to argue about; and he shrank instinctively from attempting to put names to the contents of this other region, knowing well that such names could only limit and define things that, according to any standards in use in the ordinary world, were simply undefinable and illusive.

So that, although this was the way his mind worked, there was clearly a very strong leaven of common sense in Jones. In a word, the man the world and the office knew as Jones *was* Jones. The name summed him up and labelled him correctly — John Enderby Jones.

Among the things that he *knew*, and therefore never cared to speak or speculate about, one was that he plainly saw himself as the inheritor of a long series of past lives, the net result of painful evolution, always as himself, of course, but in numerous different bodies each determined by the behaviour of the preceding one. The present John Jones was the last result to date of all the previous thinking, feeling, and doing of John Jones in earlier bodies and in other centuries. He pretended to no details, nor claimed distinguished ancestry, for he realised his past must have been utterly commonplace and insignificant to have produced his present; but he was just as sure he had been at this weary game for ages as that he breathed, and it never occurred to him to argue, to doubt, or to ask questions. And one result of this belief was that his thoughts dwelt upon the past rather than upon the future; that he read much history, and felt specially drawn to certain periods whose spirit he understood instinctively as though he had lived in them; and that he found all religions uninteresting because, almost without exception, they start from the present and speculate ahead as to what men shall become, instead of looking back and speculating why men have got here as they are.

In the insurance office he did his work exceedingly well, but without much personal ambition. Men and women he regarded as the impersonal instruments for inflicting upon him the pain or pleasure he had earned by his past workings, for chance had no place in his scheme of things at all; and while he recognised that the practical world could not get along unless every man did his work thoroughly and conscientiously, he took no interest in the accumulation of fame or money for himself, and simply, therefore, did his plain duty, with indifference as to results.

In common with others who lead a strictly impersonal life, he possessed the quality of utter bravery, and was always ready to face any combination of circumstances, no matter how terrible, because he saw in them the just working-out of past causes he had himself set in motion which could not be dodged or modified. And whereas the majority of people had little meaning for him, either by way of attraction or repulsion, the moment he met some one with whom he felt his past had been *vitally* interwoven his whole inner being leapt up instantly and shouted the fact in his face, and he regulated his life with the utmost skill and caution, like a sentry on watch for an enemy whose feet could already be heard approaching.

Thus, while the great majority of men and women left him uninfluenced — since he regarded them as so many souls merely passing with him along the great stream of evolution — there were, here and there, individuals with whom he recognised that his smallest intercourse was of the gravest importance. These were persons with whom he knew in every fibre of his being he had accounts to settle, pleasant or otherwise, arising out of dealings in past lives; and into his relations with these few, therefore, he concentrated as it were the efforts that most people spread over their intercourse with a far greater number. By what means he picked out these few individuals only those conversant with the startling processes of the subconscious memory may say, but the point was that Jones believed the main purpose, if not quite the entire purpose, of his present incarnation lay in his faithful and thorough settling of these accounts, and that if he sought to evade the least detail of such settling, no matter how unpleasant, he would have lived in vain, and would return to his next incarnation with this added duty to perform. For according to his beliefs there was no Chance, and could be no ultimate shirking, and to avoid a problem was merely to waste time and lose opportunities for development.

And there was one individual with whom Jones had long understood clearly he had a very large account to settle, and towards the accomplishment of which all the main currents of his being seemed to bear him with unswerving purpose. For, when he first entered the insurance office as a junior clerk ten years before, and through a glass door had caught sight of this man seated in an inner room, one of his sudden overwhelming flashes of intuitive memory had burst up into him from the depths, and he had seen, as in a flame of blinding light, a symbolical picture of the future rising out of a dreadful past, and he had, without any act of definite volition, marked down this man for a real account to be settled.

“With *that* man I shall have much to do,” he said to himself, as he noted the big face look up and meet his eye through the glass. “There is something I cannot shirk — a vital relation out of the past of both of us.”

And he went to his desk trembling a little, and with shaking knees, as though the memory of some terrible pain had suddenly laid its icy hand upon his heart and touched the scar of a great horror. It was a moment of genuine terror when their eyes had met through the glass door, and he was conscious of an inward shrinking and loathing that seized upon him with great violence and convinced him in a single second that the settling of this account would be almost, perhaps, more than he could manage.

The vision passed as swiftly as it came, dropping back again into the submerged region of his consciousness; but he never forgot it, and the whole of his life thereafter became a sort of natural though undeliberate preparation for the fulfilment of the great duty when the time should be ripe.

In those days — ten years ago — this man was the Assistant Manager, but had since been promoted as Manager to one of the company's local branches; and soon afterwards Jones had likewise found himself transferred to this same branch. A little later, again, the branch at Liverpool, one of the most important, had been in peril owing to mismanagement and defalcation, and the man had gone to take charge of it, and again, by mere chance apparently, Jones had been promoted to the same place. And this pursuit of the Assistant Manager had continued for several years, often, too, in the most curious fashion; and though Jones had never exchanged a single word with him, or been so much as noticed indeed by the great man, the clerk understood perfectly well that these moves in the game were all part of a definite purpose. Never for one moment did he doubt that the Invisibles behind the veil were slowly and surely arranging the details of it all so as to lead up suitably to the climax demanded by justice, a climax in which himself and the Manager would play the leading *rôles*.

"It is inevitable," he said to himself, "and I feel it may be terrible; but when the moment comes I shall be ready, and I pray God that I may face it properly and act like a man."

Moreover, as the years passed, and nothing happened, he felt the horror closing in upon him with steady increase, for the fact was Jones hated and loathed the Manager with an intensity of feeling he had never before experienced towards any human being. He shrank from his presence, and from the glance of his eyes, as though he remembered to have suffered nameless cruelties at his hands; and he slowly began to realise, moreover, that the matter to be settled between them was one of very ancient standing, and that the nature of the settlement was a discharge of accumulated punishment which would probably be very dreadful in the manner of its fulfilment.

When, therefore, the chief cashier one day informed him that the man was to be in London again — this time as General Manager of the head office — and said that he was charged to find a private secretary for him from among the best clerks, and further intimated that the selection had fallen upon himself, Jones accepted the promotion quietly, fatalistically, yet with a degree of inward loathing hardly to be described. For he saw in this merely another move in the evolution of the inevitable Nemesis which he simply dared not seek to frustrate by any personal consideration; and at the same time he was conscious of a certain feeling of relief that the suspense of waiting might soon be mitigated. A secret sense of satisfaction, therefore, accompanied the unpleasant change, and Jones was able to hold himself perfectly well in hand when it was carried into effect and he was formally introduced as private secretary to the General Manager.

Now the Manager was a large, fat man, with a very red face and bags beneath his eyes. Being short-sighted, he wore glasses that seemed to magnify his eyes, which were always a little bloodshot. In hot weather a sort of thin slime covered his cheeks, for he perspired easily. His head was almost entirely bald, and over his turn-down collar his great neck folded in two distinct reddish collops of flesh. His hands were big and his fingers almost massive in thickness.

He was an excellent business man, of sane judgment and firm will, without enough imagination to confuse his course of action by showing him possible alternatives; and his integrity and ability caused him to be held in universal respect by the world of business and finance. In the important regions of a man’s character, however, and at heart, he was coarse, brutal almost to savagery, without consideration for others, and as a result often cruelly unjust to his helpless subordinates.

In moments of temper, which were not infrequent, his face turned a dull purple, while the top of his bald head shone by contrast like white marble, and the bags under his eyes swelled till it seemed they would presently explode with a pop. And at these times he presented a distinctly repulsive appearance.

But to a private secretary like Jones, who did his duty regardless of whether his employer was beast or angel, and whose mainspring was principle and not emotion, this made little difference. Within the narrow limits in which any one *could* satisfy such a man, he pleased the General Manager; and more than once his piercing intuitive faculty, amounting almost to clairvoyance, assisted the chief in a fashion that served to bring the two closer together than might otherwise have been the case, and caused the man to respect in his assistant a power of which he possessed not even the germ himself. It was a curious relationship that grew up between the two, and the cashier, who enjoyed the credit of having made the selection, profited by it indirectly as much as any one else.

So for some time the work of the office continued normally and very prosperously. John Enderby Jones received a good salary, and in the outward appearance of the two chief characters in this history there was little change noticeable, except that the Manager grew fatter and redder, and the secretary observed that his own hair was beginning to show rather greyish at the temples.

There were, however, two changes in progress, and they both had to do with Jones, and are important to mention.

One was that he began to dream evilly. In the region of deep sleep, where the possibility of significant dreaming first develops itself, he was tormented more and more with vivid scenes and pictures in which a tall thin man, dark and sinister of countenance, and with bad eyes, was closely associated with himself. Only the setting was that of a past age, with costumes of centuries gone by, and the scenes had to do with dreadful cruelties that could not belong to modern life as he knew it.

The other change was also significant, but is not so easy to describe, for he had in fact become aware that some new portion of himself, hitherto unawakened, had stirred slowly into life out of the very depths of his consciousness. This new part of himself amounted almost to another personality, and he never observed its least manifestation without a strange thrill at his heart.

For he understood that it had begun to *watch* the Manager!

II

It was the habit of Jones, since he was compelled to work among conditions that were utterly distasteful, to withdraw his mind wholly from business once the day was over. During office hours he kept the strictest possible watch upon himself, and turned the key on all inner dreams, lest any sudden uprush from the deeps should interfere with his duty. But, once the working day was over, the gates flew open, and he began to enjoy himself.

He read no modern books on the subjects that interested him, and, as already said, he followed no course of training, nor belonged to any society that dabbled with half-told mysteries; but, once released from the office desk in the Manager's room, he simply and naturally entered the other region, because he was an old inhabitant, a rightful denizen, and because he belonged there. It was, in fact, really a case of dual personality; and a carefully drawn agreement existed between Jones-of-the-fire-insurance-office and Jones-of-the-mysteries, by the terms of which, under heavy penalties, neither region claimed him out of hours.

For the moment he reached his rooms under the roof in Bloomsbury, and had changed his city coat to another, the iron doors of the office clanged far behind him, and in front, before his very eyes, rolled up the beautiful gates of ivory, and he entered into the places of flowers and singing and wonderful veiled forms. Sometimes he quite lost touch with the outer world, forgetting to eat his dinner or go to bed, and lay in a state of trance, his consciousness working far out of the body. And on other occasions he walked the streets on air, half-way between the two regions, unable to distinguish between incarnate and discarnate forms, and not very far, probably, beyond the strata where poets, saints, and the greatest artists have moved and thought and found their inspiration. But this was only when some insistent bodily claim prevented his full release, and more often than not he was entirely independent of his physical portion and free of the real region, without let or hindrance.

One evening he reached home utterly exhausted after the burden of the day's work. The Manager had been more than usually brutal, unjust, ill-tempered, and Jones had been almost persuaded out of his settled policy of contempt into answering back. Everything seemed to have gone amiss, and the man's coarse, underbred nature had been in the ascendant all day long: he had thumped the desk with his great fists, abused, found fault unreasonably, uttered outrageous things, and behaved generally as he actually was — beneath the thin veneer of acquired business varnish. He had done and said everything to wound all that was woundable in an ordinary secretary, and though Jones fortunately dwelt in a region from which he looked down upon such a man as he might look down on the blundering of a savage animal, the strain had nevertheless told severely upon him, and he reached home wondering for the first time in his life whether there was perhaps a point beyond which he would be unable to restrain himself any longer.

For something out of the usual had happened. At the close of a passage of great stress between the two, every nerve in the secretary's body tingling from undeserved abuse, the Manager had suddenly turned full upon him, in the corner of the private room where the safes stood, in such a way that the glare of his red eyes, magnified by the glasses, looked straight into his own. And at this very second that other personality in Jones — the one that was ever *watching* — rose up swiftly from the deeps within and held a mirror to his face.

A moment of flame and vision rushed over him, and for one single second — one merciless second of clear sight — he saw the Manager as the tall dark man of his evil dreams, and the knowledge that he had suffered at his hands some awful injury in the past crashed through his mind like the report of a cannon.

It all flashed upon him and was gone, changing him from fire to ice, and then back again to fire; and he left the office with the certain conviction in his heart that the time for his final settlement with the man, the time for the inevitable retribution, was at last drawing very near.

According to his invariable custom, however, he succeeded in putting the memory of all this unpleasantness out of his mind with the changing of his office coat, and after dozing a little in his leather chair before the fire, he started out as usual for dinner in the Soho French restaurant, and began to dream himself away into the region of flowers and singing, and to commune with the Invisibles that were the very sources of his real life and being.

For it was in this way that his mind worked, and the habits of years had crystallised into rigid lines along which it was now necessary and inevitable for him to act.

At the door of the little restaurant he stopped short, a half-remembered appointment in his mind. He had made an engagement with some one, but where, or with whom, had entirely slipped his memory. He thought it was for dinner, or else to meet just after dinner, and for a second it came back to him that it had something to do with the office, but, whatever it was, he was quite unable to recall it, and a reference to his pocket engagement book showed only a blank page. Evidently he had even omitted to enter it; and after standing a moment vainly trying to recall either the time, place, or person, he went in and sat down.

But though the details had escaped him, his subconscious memory seemed to know all about it, for he experienced a sudden sinking of the heart, accompanied by a sense of foreboding anticipation, and felt that beneath his exhaustion there lay a centre of tremendous excitement. The emotion caused by the engagement was at work, and would presently cause the actual details of the appointment to reappear.

Inside the restaurant the feeling increased, instead of passing: some one was waiting for him somewhere — some one whom he had definitely arranged to meet. He was expected by a person that very night and just about that very time. But by whom? Where? A curious inner trembling came over him, and he made a strong effort to hold himself in hand and to be ready for anything that might come.

And then suddenly came the knowledge that the place of appointment was this very restaurant, and, further, that the person he had promised to meet was already here, waiting somewhere quite close beside him.

He looked up nervously and began to examine the faces round him. The majority of the diners were Frenchmen, chattering loudly with much gesticulation and laughter; and there was a fair sprinkling of clerks like himself who came because the prices were low and the food good, but there was no single face that he recognised until his glance fell upon the occupant of the corner seat opposite, generally filled by himself.

“There’s the man who’s waiting for me!” thought Jones instantly.

He knew it at once. The man, he saw, was sitting well back into the corner, with a thick overcoat buttoned tightly up to the chin. His skin was very white, and a heavy black beard grew far up over his cheeks. At first the secretary took him for a stranger, but when he looked up and their eyes met, a sense of familiarity flashed across him, and for a second or two Jones imagined he was staring at a man he had known years before. For, barring the beard, it was the face of an elderly clerk who had occupied the next desk to his own when he first entered the service of the insurance company, and had shown him the most painstaking kindness and sympathy in the early difficulties of his work. But a moment later the illusion passed, for he remembered that Thorpe had been dead at least five years. The similarity of the eyes was obviously a mere suggestive trick of memory.

The two men stared at one another for several seconds, and then Jones began to act *instinctively*, and because he had to. He crossed over and took the vacant seat at the other's table, facing him; for he felt it was somehow imperative to explain why he was late, and how it was he had almost forgotten the engagement altogether.

No honest excuse, however, came to his assistance, though his mind had begun to work furiously.

"Yes, you *are* late," said the man quietly, before he could find a single word to utter. "But it doesn't matter. Also, you had forgotten the appointment, but that makes no difference either."

"I knew — that there was an engagement," Jones stammered, passing his hand over his forehead; "but somehow—"

"You will recall it presently," continued the other in a gentle voice, and smiling a little. "It was in deep sleep last night we arranged this, and the unpleasant occurrences of to-day have for the moment obliterated it."

A faint memory stirred within him as the man spoke, and a grove of trees with moving forms hovered before his eyes and then vanished again, while for an instant the stranger seemed to be capable of self-distortion and to have assumed vast proportions, with wonderful flaming eyes.

"Oh!" he gasped. "It was there — in the other region?"

"Of course," said the other, with a smile that illumined his whole face. "You will remember presently, all in good time, and meanwhile you have no cause to feel afraid."

There was a wonderful soothing quality in the man’s voice, like the whispering of a great wind, and the clerk felt calmer at once. They sat a little while longer, but he could not remember that they talked much or ate anything. He only recalled afterwards that the head waiter came up and whispered something in his ear, and that he glanced round and saw the other people were looking at him curiously, some of them laughing, and that his companion then got up and led the way out of the restaurant.

They walked hurriedly through the streets, neither of them speaking; and Jones was so intent upon getting back the whole history of the affair from the region of deep sleep, that he barely noticed the way they took. Yet it was clear he knew where they were bound for just as well as his companion, for he crossed the streets often ahead of him, diving down alleys without hesitation, and the other followed always without correction.

The pavements were very full, and the usual night crowds of London were surging to and fro in the glare of the shop lights, but somehow no one impeded their rapid movements, and they seemed to pass through the people as if they were smoke. And, as they went, the pedestrians and traffic grew less and less, and they soon passed the Mansion House and the deserted space in front of the Royal Exchange, and so on down Fenchurch Street and within sight of the Tower of London, rising dim and shadowy in the smoky air.

Jones remembered all this perfectly well, and thought it was his intense preoccupation that made the distance seem so short. But it was when the Tower was left behind and they turned northwards that he began to notice how altered everything was, and saw that they were in a neighbourhood where houses were suddenly scarce, and lanes and fields beginning, and that their only light was the stars overhead. And, as the deeper consciousness more and more asserted itself to the exclusion of the surface happenings of his mere body during the day, the sense of exhaustion vanished, and he realised that he was moving somewhere in the region of causes behind the veil, beyond the gross deceptions of the senses, and released from the clumsy spell of space and time.

Without great surprise, therefore, he turned and saw that his companion had altered, had shed his overcoat and black hat, and was moving beside him absolutely *without sound*. For a brief second he saw him, tall as a tree, extending through space like a great shadow, misty and wavering of outline, followed by a sound like wings in the darkness; but, when he stopped, fear clutching at his heart, the other resumed his former proportions, and Jones could plainly see his normal outline against the green field behind.

Then the secretary saw him fumbling at his neck, and at the same moment the black beard came away from the face in his hand.

“Then you *are* Thorpe!” he gasped, yet somehow without overwhelming surprise.

They stood facing one another in the lonely lane, trees meeting overhead and hiding the stars, and a sound of mournful sighing among the branches.

“I am Thorpe,” was the answer in a voice that almost seemed part of the wind. “And I have come out of our far past to help you, for my debt to you is large, and in this life I had but small opportunity to repay.”

Jones thought quickly of the man’s kindness to him in the office, and a great wave of feeling surged through him as he began to remember dimly the friend by whose side he had already climbed, perhaps through vast ages of his soul’s evolution.

“To help me *now*?” he whispered.

“You will understand me when you enter into your real memory and recall how great a debt I have to pay for old faithful kindnesses of long ago,” sighed the other in a voice like falling wind.

“Between us, though, there can be no question of *debt*,” Jones heard himself saying, and remembered the reply that floated to him on the air and the smile that lightened for a moment the stern eyes facing him.

“Not of debt, indeed, but of privilege.”

Jones felt his heart leap out towards this man, this old friend, tried by centuries and still faithful. He made a movement to seize his hand. But the other shifted like a thing of mist, and for a moment the clerk’s head swam and his eyes seemed to fail.

“Then you are *dead*?” he said under his breath with a slight shiver.

“Five years ago I left the body you knew,” replied Thorpe. “I tried to help you then instinctively, not fully recognising you. But now I can accomplish far more.”

With an awful sense of foreboding and dread in his heart, the secretary was beginning to understand.

“It has to do with — with — ?”

“Your past dealings with the Manager,” came the answer, as the wind rose louder among the branches overhead and carried off the remainder of the sentence into the air.

Jones’s memory, which was just beginning to stir among the deepest layers of all, shut down suddenly with a snap, and he followed his companion over fields and down sweet-smelling lanes where the air was fragrant and cool, till they came to a large house, standing gaunt and lonely in the shadows at the edge of a wood. It was wrapped in utter stillness, with windows heavily draped in black, and the clerk, as he looked, felt such an overpowering wave of sadness invade him that his eyes began to burn and smart, and he was conscious of a desire to shed tears.

The key made a harsh noise as it turned in the lock, and when the door swung open into a lofty hall they heard a confused sound of rustling and whispering, as of a great throng of people pressing forward to meet them. The air seemed full of swaying movement, and Jones was certain he saw hands held aloft and dim faces claiming recognition, while in his heart, already oppressed by the approaching burden of vast accumulated memories, he was aware of the *uncoiling of something* that had been asleep for ages.

As they advanced he heard the doors close with a muffled thunder behind them, and saw that the shadows seemed to retreat and shrink away towards the interior of the house, carrying the hands and faces with them. He heard the wind singing round the walls and over the roof, and its wailing voice mingled with the sound of deep, collective breathing that filled the house like the murmur of a sea; and as they walked up the broad staircase and through the vaulted rooms, where pillars rose like the stems of trees, he knew that the building was crowded, row upon row, with the thronging memories of his own long past.

“This is the *House of the Past*,” whispered Thorpe beside him, as they moved silently from room to room; “the house of *your* past. It is full from cellar to roof with the memories of what you have done, thought, and felt from the earliest stages of your evolution until now.

“The house climbs up almost to the clouds, and stretches back into the heart of the wood you saw outside, but the remoter halls are filled with the ghosts of ages ago too many to count, and even if we were able to waken them you could not remember them now. Some day, though, they will come and claim you, and you must know them, and answer their questions, for they can never rest till they have exhausted themselves again through you, and justice has been perfectly worked out.

“But now follow me closely, and you shall see the particular memory for which I am permitted to be your guide, so that you may know and understand a great force in your present life, and may use the sword of justice, or rise to the level of a great forgiveness, according to your degree of power.”

Icy thrills ran through the trembling clerk, and as he walked slowly beside his companion he heard from the vaults below, as well as from more distant regions of the vast building, the stirring and sighing of the serried ranks of sleepers, sounding in the still air like a chord swept from unseen strings stretched somewhere among the very foundations of the house.

Stealthily, picking their way among the great pillars, they moved up the sweeping staircase and through several dark corridors and halls, and presently stopped outside a small door in an archway where the shadows were very deep.

“Remain close by my side, and remember to utter no cry,” whispered the voice of his guide, and as the clerk turned to reply he saw his face was stern to whiteness and even shone a little in the darkness.

The room they entered seemed at first to be pitchy black, but gradually the secretary perceived a faint reddish glow against the farther end, and thought he saw figures moving silently to and fro.

“Now watch!” whispered Thorpe, as they pressed close to the wall near the door and waited. “But remember to keep absolute silence. It is a torture scene.”

Jones felt utterly afraid, and would have turned to fly if he dared, for an indescribable terror seized him and his knees shook; but some power that made escape impossible held him remorselessly there, and with eyes glued on the spots of light he crouched against the wall and waited.

The figures began to move more swiftly, each in its own dim light that shed no radiance beyond itself, and he heard a soft clanking of chains and the voice of a man groaning in pain. Then came the sound of a door closing, and thereafter Jones saw but one figure, the figure of an old man, naked entirely, and fastened with chains to an iron framework on the floor. His memory gave a sudden leap of fear as he looked, for the features and white beard were familiar, and he recalled them as though of yesterday.

The other figures had disappeared, and the old man became the centre of the terrible picture. Slowly, with ghastly groans; as the heat below him increased into a steady glow, the aged body rose in a curve of agony, resting on the iron frame only where the chains held wrists and ankles fast. Cries and gasps filled the air, and Jones felt exactly as though they came from his own throat, and as if the chains were burning into his own wrists and ankles, and the heat scorching the skin and flesh upon his own back. He began to writhe and twist himself.

“Spain!” whispered the voice at his side, “and four hundred years ago.”

“And the purpose?” gasped the perspiring clerk, though he knew quite well what the answer must be.

“To extort the name of a friend, to his death and betrayal,” came the reply through the darkness.

A sliding panel opened with a little rattle in the wall immediately above the rack, and a face, framed in the same red glow, appeared and looked down upon the dying victim. Jones was only just able to choke a scream, for he recognised the tall dark man of his dreams. With horrible, gloating eyes he gazed down upon the writhing form of the old man, and his lips moved as in speaking, though no words were actually audible.

“He asks again for the name,” explained the other, as the clerk struggled with the intense hatred and loathing that threatened every moment to result in screams and action. His ankles and wrists pained him so that he could scarcely keep still, but a merciless power held him to the scene.

He saw the old man, with a fierce cry, raise his tortured head and spit up into the face at the panel, and then the shutter slid back again, and a moment later the increased glow beneath the body, accompanied by awful writhing, told of the application of further heat. There came the odour of burning flesh; the white beard curled and burned to a crisp; the body fell back limp upon the red-hot iron, and then shot up again in fresh agony; cry after cry, the most awful in the world, rang out with deadened sound between the four walls; and again the panel slid back creaking, and revealed the dreadful face of the torturer.

Again the name was asked for, and again it was refused; and this time, after the closing of the panel, a door opened, and the tall thin man with the evil face came slowly into the chamber. His features were savage with rage and disappointment, and in the dull red glow that fell upon them he looked like a very prince of devils. In his hand he held a pointed iron at white heat.

“Now the murder!” came from Thorpe in a whisper that sounded as if it was outside the building and far away.

Jones knew quite well what was coming, but was unable even to close his eyes. He felt all the fearful pains himself just as though he were actually the sufferer; but now, as he stared, he felt something more besides; and when the tall man deliberately approached the rack and plunged the heated iron first into one eye and then into the other, he heard the faint fizzing of it, and felt his own eyes burst in frightful pain from his head. At the same moment, unable longer to control himself, he uttered a wild shriek and dashed forward to seize the torturer and tear him to a thousand pieces. Instantly, in a flash, the entire scene vanished; darkness rushed in to fill the room, and he felt himself lifted off his feet by some force like a great wind and borne swiftly away into space.

When he recovered his senses he was standing just outside the house and the figure of Thorpe was beside him in the gloom. The great doors were in the act of closing behind him, but before they shut he fancied he caught a glimpse of an immense veiled figure standing upon the threshold, with flaming eyes, and in his hand a bright weapon like a shining sword of fire.

“Come quickly now — all is over!” Thorpe whispered.

“And the dark man — ?” gasped the clerk, as he moved swiftly by the other’s side.

“In this present life is the Manager of the company.”

"And the victim?"

"Was yourself!"

"And the friend he — *I* refused to betray?"

"I was that friend," answered Thorpe, his voice with every moment sounding more and more like the cry of the wind. "You gave your life in agony to save mine."

"And again, in this life, we have all three been together?"

"Yes. Such forces are not soon or easily exhausted, and justice is not satisfied till all have reaped what they sowed."

Jones had an odd feeling that he was slipping away into some other state of consciousness. Thorpe began to seem unreal. Presently he would be unable to ask more questions. He felt utterly sick and faint with it all, and his strength was ebbing.

"Oh, quick!" he cried, "now tell me more. Why did I see this? What must I do?"

The wind swept across the field on their right and entered the wood beyond with a great roar, and the air round him seemed filled with voices and the rushing of hurried movement.

"To the ends of justice," answered the other, as though speaking out of the centre of the wind and from a distance, "which sometimes is entrusted to the hands of those who suffered and were strong. One wrong cannot be put right by another wrong, but your life has been so worthy that the opportunity is given to—"

The voice grew fainter and fainter, already it was far overhead with the rushing wind.

"You may punish or—" Here Jones lost sight of Thorpe's figure altogether, for he seemed to have vanished and melted away into the wood behind him. His voice sounded far across the trees, very weak, and ever rising.

"Or if you can rise to the level of a great forgiveness—"

The voice became inaudible.... The wind came crying out of the wood again.

Jones shivered and stared about him. He shook himself violently and rubbed his eyes. The room was dark, the fire was out; he felt cold and stiff. He got up out of his armchair, still trembling, and lit the gas. Outside the wind was howling, and when he looked at his watch he saw that it was very late and he must go to bed.

He had not even changed his office coat; he must have fallen asleep in the chair as soon as he came in, and he had slept for several hours. Certainly he had eaten no dinner, for he felt ravenous.

III

Next day, and for several weeks thereafter, the business of the office went on as usual, and Jones did his work well and behaved outwardly with perfect propriety. No more visions troubled him, and his relations with the Manager became, if anything, somewhat smoother and easier.

True, the man *looked* a little different, because the clerk kept seeing him with his inner and outer eye promiscuously, so that one moment he was broad and red-faced, and the next he was tall, thin, and dark, enveloped, as it were, in a sort of black atmosphere tinged with red. While at times a confusion of the two sights took place, and Jones saw the two faces mingled in a composite countenance that was very horrible indeed to contemplate. But, beyond this occasional change in the outward appearance of the Manager, there was nothing that the secretary noticed as the result of his vision, and business went on more or less as before, and perhaps even with a little less friction.

But in the rooms under the roof in Bloomsbury it was different, for there it was perfectly clear to Jones that Thorpe had come to take up his abode with him. He never saw him, but he knew all the time he was there. Every night on returning from his work he was greeted by the well-known whisper, “Be ready when I give the sign!” and often in the night he woke up suddenly out of deep sleep and was aware that Thorpe had that minute moved away from his bed and was standing waiting and watching somewhere in the darkness of the room. Often he followed him down the stairs, though the dim gas jet on the landings never revealed his outline; and sometimes he did not come into the room at all, but hovered outside the window, peering through the dirty panes, or sending his whisper into the chamber in the whistling of the wind.

For Thorpe had come to stay, and Jones knew that he would not get rid of him until he had fulfilled the ends of justice and accomplished the purpose for which he was waiting.

Meanwhile, as the days passed, he went through a tremendous struggle with himself, and came to the perfectly honest decision that the “level of a great forgiveness” was impossible for him, and that he must therefore accept the alternative and use the secret knowledge placed in his hands — and execute justice. And once this decision was arrived at, he noticed that Thorpe no longer left him alone during the day as before, but now accompanied him to the office and stayed more or less at his side all through business hours as well. His whisper made itself heard in the streets and in the train, and even in the Manager’s room where he worked; sometimes warning, sometimes urging, but never for a moment suggesting the abandonment of the main purpose, and more than once so plainly audible that the clerk felt certain others must have heard it as well as himself.

The obsession was complete. He felt he was always under Thorpe’s eye day and night, and he knew he must acquit himself like a man when the moment came, or prove a failure in his own sight as well in the sight of the other.

And now that his mind was made up, nothing could prevent the carrying out of the sentence. He bought a pistol, and spent his Saturday afternoons practising at a target in lonely places along the Essex shore, marking out in the sand the exact measurements of the Manager’s room. Sundays he occupied in like fashion, putting up at an inn overnight for the purpose, spending the money that usually went into the savings bank on travelling expenses and cartridges. Everything was done very thoroughly, for there must be no possibility of failure; and at the end of several weeks he had become so expert with his six-shooter that at a distance of 25 feet, which was the greatest length of the Manager’s room, he could pick the inside out of a halfpenny nine times out of a dozen, and leave a clean, unbroken rim.

There was not the slightest desire to delay. He had thought the matter over from every point of view his mind could reach, and his purpose was inflexible. Indeed, he felt proud to think that he had been chosen as the instrument of justice in the infliction of so well-deserved and so terrible a punishment. Vengeance may have had some part in his decision, but he could not help that, for he still felt at times the hot chains burning his wrists and ankles with fierce agony through to the bone. He remembered the hideous pain of his slowly roasting back, and the point when he thought death *must* intervene to end his suffering, but instead new powers of endurance had surged up in him, and awful further stretches of pain had opened up, and unconsciousness seemed farther off than ever. Then at last the hot irons in his eyes.... It all came back to him, and caused him to break out in icy perspiration at the mere thought of it ... the vile face at the panel ... the expression of the dark face.... His fingers worked. His blood boiled. It was utterly impossible to keep the idea of vengeance altogether out of his mind.

Several times he was temporarily baulked of his prey. Odd things happened to stop him when he was on the point of action. The first day, for instance, the Manager fainted from the heat. Another time when he had decided to do the deed, the Manager did not come down to the office at all. And a third time, when his hand was actually in his hip pocket, he suddenly heard Thorpe's horrid whisper telling him to wait, and turning, he saw that the head cashier had entered the room noiselessly without his noticing it. Thorpe evidently knew what he was about, and did not intend to let the clerk bungle the matter.

He fancied, moreover, that the head cashier was watching him. He was always meeting him in unexpected corners and places, and the cashier never seemed to have an adequate excuse for being there. His movements seemed suddenly of particular interest to others in the office as well, for clerks were always being sent to ask him unnecessary questions, and there was apparently a general design to keep him under a sort of surveillance, so that he was never much alone with the Manager in the private room where they worked. And once the cashier had even gone so far as to suggest that he could take his holiday earlier than usual if he liked, as the work had been very arduous of late and the heat exceedingly trying.

He noticed, too, that he was sometimes followed by a certain individual in the streets, a careless-looking sort of man, who never came face to face with him, or actually ran into him, but who was always in his train or omnibus, and whose eye he often caught observing him over the top of his newspaper, and who on one occasion was even waiting at the door of his lodgings when he came out to dine.

There were other indications too, of various sorts, that led him to think something was at work to defeat his purpose, and that he must act at once before these hostile forces could prevent.

And so the end came very swiftly, and was thoroughly approved by Thorpe.

It was towards the close of July, and one of the hottest days London had ever known, for the City was like an oven, and the particles of dust seemed to burn the throats of the unfortunate toilers in street and office. The portly Manager, who suffered cruelly owing to his size, came down perspiring and gasping with the heat. He carried a light-coloured umbrella to protect his head.

“He’ll want something more than that, though!” Jones laughed quietly to himself when he saw him enter.

The pistol was safely in his hip pocket, every one of its six chambers loaded.

The Manager saw the smile on his face, and gave him a long steady look as he sat down to his desk in the corner. A few minutes later he touched the bell for the head cashier — a single ring — and then asked Jones to fetch some papers from another safe in the room upstairs.

A deep inner trembling seized the secretary as he noticed these precautions, for he saw that the hostile forces were at work against him, and yet he felt he could delay no longer and must act that very morning, interference or no interference. However, he went obediently up in the lift to the next floor, and while fumbling with the combination of the safe, known only to himself, the cashier, and the Manager, he again heard Thorpe’s horrid whisper just behind him:

“You must do it to-day! You must do it to-day!”

He came down again with the papers, and found the Manager alone. The room was like a furnace, and a wave of dead heated air met him in the face as he went in. The moment he passed the doorway he realised that he had been the subject of conversation between the head cashier and his enemy. They had been discussing him. Perhaps an inkling of his secret had somehow got into their minds. They had been watching him for days past. They had become suspicious.

Clearly, he must act now, or let the opportunity slip by perhaps for ever. He heard Thorpe's voice in his ear, but this time it was no mere whisper, but a plain human voice, speaking out loud.

"Now!" it said. "Do it now!"

The room was empty. Only the Manager and himself were in it.

Jones turned from his desk where he had been standing, and locked the door leading into the main office. He saw the army of clerks scribbling in their shirt-sleeves, for the upper half of the door was of glass. He had perfect control of himself, and his heart was beating steadily.

The Manager, hearing the key turn in the lock, looked up sharply.

"What's that you're doing?" he asked quickly.

"Only locking the door, sir," replied the secretary in a quite even voice.

"Why? Who told you to — ?"

"The voice of Justice, sir," replied Jones, looking steadily into the hated face.

The Manager looked black for a moment, and stared angrily across the room at him. Then suddenly his expression changed as he stared, and he tried to smile. It was meant to be a kind smile evidently, but it only succeeded in being frightened.

"That *is* a good idea in this weather," he said lightly, "but it would be much better to lock it on the *outside*, wouldn't it, Mr. Jones?"

"I think not, sir. You might escape me then. Now you can't."

Jones took his pistol out and pointed it at the other's face. Down the barrel he saw the features of the tall dark man, evil and sinister. Then the outline trembled a little and the face of the Manager slipped back into its place. It was white as death, and shining with perspiration.

"You tortured me to death four hundred years ago," said the clerk in the same steady voice, "and now the dispensers of justice have chosen me to punish you."

The Manager's face turned to flame, and then back to chalk again. He made a quick movement towards the telephone bell, stretching out a hand to reach it, but at the same moment Jones pulled the trigger and the wrist was shattered, splashing the wall behind with blood.

"That's *one* place where the chains burnt," he said quietly to himself. His hand was absolutely steady, and he felt that he was a hero.

The Manager was on his feet, with a scream of pain, supporting himself with his right hand on the desk in front of him, but Jones pressed the trigger again, and a bullet flew into the other wrist, so that the big man, deprived of support, fell forward with a crash on to the desk.

"You damned madman!" shrieked the Manager. "Drop that pistol!"

"That's *another* place," was all Jones said, still taking careful aim for another shot.

The big man, screaming and blundering, scrambled beneath the desk, making frantic efforts to hide, but the secretary took a step forward and fired two shots in quick succession into his projecting legs, hitting first one ankle and then the other, and smashing them horribly.

"Two more places where the chains burnt," he said, going a little nearer.

The Manager, still shrieking, tried desperately to squeeze his bulk behind the shelter of the opening beneath the desk, but he was far too large, and his bald head protruded through on the other side. Jones caught him by the scruff of his great neck and dragged him yelping out on to the carpet. He was covered with blood, and flopped helplessly upon his broken wrists.

"Be quick now!" cried the voice of Thorpe.

There was a tremendous commotion and banging at the door, and Jones gripped his pistol tightly. Something seemed to crash through his brain, clearing it for a second, so that he thought he saw beside him a great veiled figure, with drawn sword and flaming eyes, and sternly approving attitude.

"Remember the eyes! Remember the eyes!" hissed Thorpe in the air above him.

Jones felt like a god, with a god's power. Vengeance disappeared from his mind. He was acting impersonally as an instrument in the hands of the

Invisibles who dispense justice and balance accounts. He bent down and put the barrel close into the other's face, smiling a little as he saw the childish efforts of the arms to cover his head. Then he pulled the trigger, and a bullet went straight into the right eye, blackening the skin. Moving the pistol two inches the other way, he sent another bullet crashing into the left eye. Then he stood upright over his victim with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

The Manager wriggled convulsively for the space of a single second, and then lay still in death.

There was not a moment to lose, for the door was already broken in and violent hands were at his neck. Jones put the pistol to his temple and once more pressed the trigger with his finger.

But this time there was no report. Only a little dead click answered the pressure, for the secretary had forgotten that the pistol had only six chambers, and that he had used them all. He threw the useless weapon on to the floor, laughing a little out loud, and turned, without a struggle, to give himself up.

"I *had* to do it," he said quietly, while they tied him. "It was simply my duty! And now I am ready to face the consequences, and Thorpe will be proud of me. For justice has been done and the gods are satisfied."

He made not the slightest resistance, and when the two policemen marched him off through the crowd of shuddering little clerks in the office, he again saw the veiled figure moving majestically in front of him, making slow sweeping circles with the flaming sword, to keep back the host of faces that were thronging in upon him from the Other Region.

THE DANCE OF DEATH

BROWNE WENT TO the dance feeling genuinely depressed, for the doctor had just warned him that his heart was weak and that he must be exceedingly careful in the matter of exertion.

“Dancing?” he asked, with that assumed lightness some natures affect in the face of a severe shock — the plucky instinct to conceal pain.

“Well — in moderation, perhaps,” hummed the doctor. “Not *wildly!*” he added, with a smile that betrayed something more than mere professional sympathy.

At any other time Browne would probably have laughed, but the doctor’s serious manner put a touch of ice on the springs of laughter. At the age of twenty-six one hardly realises death; life is still endless; and it is only old people who have “hearts” and such-like afflictions. So it was that the professional dictum came as a real shock; and with it too, as a sudden revelation, came that little widening of sympathy for others that is part of every deep experience as the years roll up and pass.

At first he thought of sending an excuse. He went about carefully, making the ‘buses stop dead before he got out, and going very slowly up steps.

Then gradually he grew more accustomed to the burden of his dread secret: the commonplace events of the day; the hated drudgery of the office, where he was an underpaid clerk; the contact with other men who bore similar afflictions with assumed indifference; the fault-finding of the manager, making him fearful of his position — all this helped to reduce the sense of first alarm, and, instead of sending an excuse, he went to the dance, as we have seen, feeling deeply depressed, and moving all the time as if he carried in his side a brittle glass globe that the least jarring might break into a thousand pieces.

The spontaneous jollity natural to a boy and girl dance served, however, to emphasise vividly the contrast of his own mood, and to make him very conscious again of his little hidden source of pain. But, though he would gladly have availed himself of a sympathetic ear among the many there whom he knew intimately, he nevertheless exercised the restraint natural to his character, and avoided any reference to the matter that bulked so largely in his consciousness. Once or twice he was tempted, but a prevision of the probable conversation that would ensue stopped him always in time: “Oh, I *am* so sorry, Mr. Browne, and you mustn’t dance *too* hard, you know,” and then his careless laugh as he remarked that it didn’t matter a bit, and his little joke as he whirled his partner off for another spin.

He knew, of course, there was nothing very sensational about being told that one’s heart was weak. Even the doctor had smiled a little; and he now recalled more than one acquaintance who had the same trouble and made light of it. Yet it sounded in Browne’s life a note of profound and sinister gloom. It snatched beyond his reach at one fell swoop all that he most loved and enjoyed, destroying a thousand dreams, and painting the future a dull drab colour without hope. He was an idealist at heart, hating the sordid routine of the life he led as a business underling. His dreams were of the open air, of mountains, forests, and great plains, of the sea, and of the lonely places of the world. Wind and rain spoke intimately to his soul, and the storms of heaven, as he heard them raging at night round his high room in Bloomsbury, stirred savage yearnings that haunted him for days afterwards with the voices of the desert. Sometimes during the lunch hour, when he escaped temporarily from the artificial light and close air of his high office stool, to see the white clouds sailing by overhead, and to hear the wind singing in the wires, it set such a fever in his blood that for the remainder of the afternoon he found it impossible to concentrate on his work, and thus exasperated the loud-voiced manager almost to madness.

Having no expectations, and absolutely no practical business ability, he was fortunate, however, in having a “place “ at all, and the hard fact that promotion was unlikely made him all the more careful to keep his dreams in their place, to do his work as well as possible, and to save what little he could.

His holidays were the only points of light in an otherwise dreary existence. And one day, when he should have saved enough, he looked forward vaguely to a life close to Nature, perhaps a shepherd on a hundred hills, a dweller in the woods, within sound of his beloved trees and waters, where the smell of the earth and camp fire would be ever in his nostrils, and the running stream always ready to bear his boat swiftly away into happiness.

And now the knowledge that he had a weak heart came to spoil everything. It shook his dream to the very foundations. It depressed him utterly. Any moment the blow might fall. It might catch him in the water, swimming, or half-way up the mountain, or midway in one of his lonely tramps, just when his enjoyment depended most upon his being reckless and forgetful of bodily limitations — that freedom of the spirit in the wilderness he so loved. He might even be forced to spend his holiday, to say nothing of the dream of the far future, in some farmhouse "*quietly*," instead of gloriously in the untrodden wilds. The thought made him angry with pain. All day he was haunted and dismayed, and all day he heard the wind whispering among branches and the water lapping somewhere against sandy banks in the sun.

The dance was a small subscription affair, hastily arranged and happily informal. It took place in a large hall that was used in the daytime as a gymnasium, but the floor was good and the music more than good. Foils and helmets hung round the walls, and high up under the brown rafters were ropes, rings, and trapezes coiled away out of reach, their unsightliness further concealed by an array of brightly coloured flags. Only the light was not of the best, for the hall was very long, and the gallery at the far end loomed in a sort of twilight that was further deepened by the shadows of the flags overhead. But its benches afforded excellent sitting-out places, where strong light was not always an essential to happiness, and no one dreamed of finding fault.

At first he danced cautiously, but by degrees the spirit of the time and place relieved his depression and helped him to forget. He had probably exaggerated the importance of his malady. Lots of other fellows, even as young as he was, had weak hearts and thought nothing of it. All the time, however, there was an undercurrent of sadness and disappointment not to be denied. Something had gone out of life. A note of darkness had crept in. He found his partners dull, and they no doubt found him still duller.

Yet this dance, with nothing apparently to distinguish it from a hundred others, stood out in all his experience with an indelible red mark against it. It is a common trick of Nature — and a profoundly significant one — that, just when despair is deepest, she waves a wand before the weary eyes and does her best to waken an impossible hope. Her idea, presumably, being to keep her victim going actively to the very end of the chapter, lest through indifference he should lose something of the lesson she wishes to teach.

Thus it was that, midway in the dance, Browne's listless glance fell upon a certain girl whose appearance instantly galvanised him into a state of keenest possible desire. A flash of white light entered his heart and set him all on fire to know her. She attracted him tremendously. She was dressed in pale green, and always danced with the same man — a man about his own height and colouring, whose face, however, he never could properly see. They sat out together much of the time — always in the gallery where the shadows were deepest. The girl's face he saw clearly, and there was something about her that simply lifted him bodily out of himself and sent strange thrills of delight coursing over him like shocks of electricity. Several times their eyes met, and when this happened he could not tear his glance away. She fascinated him, and all the forces in his being merged into a single desire to be with her, to dance with her, speak with her, and to know her name. Especially he wondered who the man was she so favoured; he reminded him so oddly of himself. No one knows precisely what he himself looks like, but this tall dark figure, whose face he never could contrive to see, started the strange thought in him that it was his own *double.*

In vain he sought to compass an introduction to this girl. No one seemed to know her. Her dress, her hair, and a certain wondrous slim grace made him think of a young tree waving in the wind; of ivy leaves; of something that belonged to the life of the woods rather than to ordinary humanity. She possessed him, filling his thoughts with wild woodland dreams. Once, too, he was certain when their eyes met that she smiled at him, and the call was so well-nigh irresistible that he almost dropped his partner's arm to run after her.

But it seemed impossible to obtain an introduction from any one.

"Do you know who that girl is over there?" he asked one of his partners while sitting out a square dance, half exhausted with his exertions; "the one up there in the gallery?"

"In pink?"

"No, the one in green, I mean."

"Oh, next the wall-flower lady in red!"

"*In* the gallery, not *under* it," he explained impatiently.

"I can't see up there. It's so dark," returned the girl after a careful survey through glasses. I don't think I see any one at all."

"It *is* rather dark," he remarked.

"Why? Do you know who she is?" she asked foolishly.

He did not like to insist. It seemed so rude to his partner. But this sort of thing happened once or twice. Evidently no one knew this girl in green, or else he described her so inaccurately that the people he asked looked at some one else instead.

"In that green sort of ivy-looking dress," he tried another.

"With the rose in her hair and the red nose? Or the one sitting out?"

After that he gave it up finally. His partners seemed to sniff a little when he asked. Evidently *la désirée* was not a popular maiden. Soon after, too, she disappeared and he lost sight of her. Yet the thought that she might have gone home made his heart sink into a sort of horrible blackness.

He lingered on much later than he intended in the hope of getting an introduction, but at last, when he had filled all his engagements, or nearly all, he made up his mind to slip out and go home. It was already late, and he had to be in the office — that hateful office — punctually at nine o'clock. He felt tired, awfully tired, more so than ever before at a dance. It was, of course, his weak heart. He still dawdled a little while, however, hoping for another glimpse of the sylph in green, hungering for a last look that he could carry home with him and perhaps mingle with his dreams. The mere thought of her rilled him with pain and joy, and a sort of rarefied delight he had never known before. But he could not wait for ever, and it was already close upon two o'clock in the morning. His rooms were only a short distance down the street; he would light a cigarette and stroll home. No; he had forgotten for a moment; *without* a cigarette: the doctor had been very stern on that point.

He was in the act of turning his back on the whirl of dancing figures, when the flags at the far end of the room parted for an instant in the moving air, and his eye rested upon the gallery just visible among the shadows.

A great pain ran swiftly through his heart as he looked.

There were only two figures seated there: the tall dark man, who was his double, and the ivy girl in green. She was looking straight at him down the length of the room, and even at that distance he could see that she smiled.

He stopped short. The flags waved back again and hid the picture, but on the instant he made up his mind to act. There, among all this dreary crowd of dancing dolls, was some one he really wanted to know, to speak with, to touch — some one who drew him beyond all he had ever known, and made his soul cry aloud. The room was filled with automatic lay-figures, but here was some one *alive.* He must know her. It was impossible to go home without speech, utterly impossible.

A fresh stab of pain, worse than the first, gave him momentary pause. He leant against the wall for an instant just under the clock, where the hands pointed to two, waiting for the swooning blackness to go. Then he passed on, disregarding it utterly. It supplied him, in truth, with the extra little impetus he needed to set the will into vigorous action, for it reminded him forcibly of what *might* happen. His time might be short; he had known few enough of the good things of life; he would seize what he could. He had no introduction, but — to the devil with the conventions. The risk was nothing. To meet her eyes at close quarters, to hear her voice, to know something of the perfume of that hair and dress — what was the risk of a snub compared to that?

He slid down the side of the long room, dodging the dancers as best he could. The tall man, he noted, had left the gallery, but the girl sat on alone. He made his way quickly up the wooden steps, light as air, trembling with anticipation. His heart beat like a quick padded hammer, and the blood played a tambourine in his ears. It was odd he did not meet the tall man on the stairs, but doubtless there was another exit from the gallery that he had not observed. He topped the stairs and turned the corner. By Jove, she was still there, a few feet in front of him, sitting with her arms upon the railing, peering down upon the dancers below. His eyes swam for a moment, and something clutched at the very roots of his being.

But he did not hesitate. He went up quite close past the empty seats, meaning to ask naturally and simply if he might beg for the pleasure of a dance. Then, when he was within a few feet of her side, the girl suddenly turned and faced him, and the words died away on his lips. They seemed absolutely foolish and inadequate.

“Yes, I am ready,” she said quietly, looking straight into his eyes; “but what a long time you were in coming. Was it such a great effort to *leave?”*

The form of the question struck him as odd, but he was too happy to pause. He became transfigured with joy. The sound of her voice instantly drowned all the clatter of the ball-room, and seemed to him the only thing in the whole world. It did not break on the consonants like most human speech. It flowed smoothly; it was the sound of wind among branches, of water running over pebbles. It swept into him and caught him away, so that for a moment he saw his beloved woods and hills and seas. The stars were somewhere in it too, and the murmur of the plains.

By the gods! Here was a girl he could speak with in the words of silence; she stretched every string in his soul and then played on them. His spirit expanded with life and happiness. She would listen gladly to all that concerned him. To her he could talk openly about his poor broken heart, for she would sympathise. Indeed, it was all he could do to prevent himself running forward at once with his arms outstretched to take her. There was a perfume of earth and woods about her.

“Oh, I am so *awfully* glad — —” he began lamely, his eyes on her face. Then, remembering something of earthly manners, he added:

“My name — er — is — —”

Something unusual — something indescribable — in her gesture stopped him. She had moved to give him space at her side.

“Your name!” she laughed, drawing her green skirts with a soft rustle like leaves along the bench to make room; “but you need no name *now,* you know!”

Oh, the wonder of it! She understood him. He sat down with a feeling that he had been flying in a free wind and was resting among the tops of trees. The room faded out temporarily.

“But my name, if you like to know, is Issidy,” she said, still smiling.

“Miss Issidy,” he stammered, making another attempt at the forms of worldly politeness.

“Not *Miss* Issidy,” she laughed aloud merrily. It surely was the sound of wind in poplars. “Issidy is my first name; so if you call me anything, you must call me that.”

The name was pure music in his ears, but though he blundered about in his memory to find his own, it had utterly vanished; for the life of him he could not recollect what his friends called him. He stared a moment, vaguely wondering, almost beside himself with delight. No other girls he had known — ye heavens above! there were no longer any other girls! He had never known any other girl than this one. Here was his universe, framed in a green dress, with a voice of sea and wind, eyes like the sun, and movements of bending grasses. All else was mere shadow and fantasy. For the first time in his existence he was alive, *and knew that he was alive.*

“I was sure you would come to me,” she was saying. “You couldn’t help yourself.” Her eyes were always on his face.

“I was afraid at first — —”

“But your thoughts,” she interrupted softly, “your thoughts were up here with me all the time.”

“You knew that!” he cried, delighted.

“I felt them,” she replied simply. “They — you kept me company, for I have been alone here all the evening. I know no one else here — *yet*.”

Her words amazed him. He was just going to ask who the tall dark man was, when he saw that she was rising to her feet and that she wanted to dance.

“But my heart — —” he stammered.

“It won’t hurt your poor heart to dance with *me,* you know,” she laughed. “You may trust me. I shall know how to take care of it.”

Browne felt simply ecstatic; it was too wonderful to be true; it was impossible — this meeting in London, at an ordinary dull dance, in the twentieth century. He would wake up presently from a dream of silver and gold. Yet he felt even then that she was drawing his arm about her waist for the dance, and with that first magical touch he almost lost consciousness and passed with her into a state of pure spirit.

It puzzled him for a moment how they reached the floor so quickly and found themselves among the whirling couples. He had no recollection of coming down the stairs. But meanwhile he was dancing on wings, and the girl in green beside him seemed to fly too, and as he pressed her to his heart he found it impossible to think of anything else in the world but that — that and his astounding happiness.

And the music was within them, rather than without; indeed they seemed to make their own music out of their swift whirling movements, for it never ceased and he never grew tired. His heart had ceased to pain him. Other curious things happened too, but he hardly noticed them; or, rather, they no longer seemed strange. In that crowded ball-room they never once touched other people. His partner required no steering. She made no sound. Then suddenly he realised that his own feet made no sound either. They skimmed the floor with noiseless feet like spirits dancing. No one else appeared to take the least notice of them. Most of the faces seemed, indeed, strange to him now, as though he had not seen them before, but once or twice he could have sworn that he passed couples who were dancing almost as happily and lightly as themselves, couples he had known in past years, couples who were *dead.*

Gradually the room emptied of its original comers, and others filled their places, silently, with airy graceful movements and happy faces, till the whole floor at length was covered with the soundless feet and whirling forms of those who had already left the world. And, as the artificial light faded away, there came in its place a soft white light that filled the room with beauty and made all the faces look radiant. And, once, as they skimmed past a mirror, he saw that the girl beside him was not there — that he seemed to be dancing alone, clasping no one; yet when he glanced down, there was her magical face at his shoulder and he felt her little form pressing up against him.

Such dancing, too, he had never even dreamed about, for it was like swinging with the tree-tops in the winds.

Then they danced farther out, ever swifter and swifter, past the shadows beneath the gallery, under the motionless hanging flags — and out into the night. The walls were behind them. They were off their feet and the wind was in their hair. They were rising, rising, rising towards the stars.

He felt the cool air of the open sky on his cheeks, and when he looked down, as they cleared the summit of the dark-lying hills, he saw that Issidy had melted away into himself and they had become one being. And he knew then that his heart would never pain him again on earth, or cause him to fear for any of his beloved dreams.

* * *

But the manager of the "hateful office" only knew two days later why Browne had not turned up to his desk, nor sent any word to explain his absence. He read it in the paper — how he had dropped down dead at a dance, suddenly stricken by heart disease. It happened just before two o'clock in the morning.

"Well," thought the manager, "he's no loss to us anyhow. He had no real business instincts. Smith will do his work much better — and for less money too."

THE OLD MAN OF VISIONS

I

THE IMAGE OF Teufelsdröckh, sitting in his watchtower “alone with the stars,” leaped into my mind the moment I saw him; and the curious expression of his eyes proclaimed at once that here was a being who allowed the world of small effects to pass him by, while he himself dwelt among the eternal verities. It was only necessary to catch a glimpse of the bent grey figure, so slight yet so tremendous, to realise that he carried staff and wallet, and was travelling alone in a spiritual region, uncharted, and full of wonder, difficulty, and fearful joy.

The inner eye perceived this quite as clearly as the outer was aware of his Hebraic ancestry; but along what winding rivers, through what haunted woods, by the shores of what singing seas he pressed forward towards the mountains of his goal, no one could guess from a mere inspection of that wonderful old face.

To have stumbled upon such a figure in the casual way I did seemed incredible to me even at the time, yet I at once caught something of the uplifting airs that followed this inhabitant of a finer world, and I spent days — and considered them well spent — trying to get into conversation with him, so that I might know something more than the thin disguise of his holding a reader’s ticket for the Museum Library.

To reach the stage of intimacy where actual speech is a hindrance to close understanding, one need not in some cases have spoken at all thus by merely setting my mind, and above all, my imagination, into tune with his, and by steeping myself so much in his atmosphere that I absorbed and then gave back to him with my own stamp the forces he exhaled, it was at length possible to persuade those vast-seeing eyes to turn in my direction; and our glances having once met, I simply rose when he rose, and followed him out of the little smoky restaurant so closely up the street that our clothes brushed, and I thought I could even catch the sound of his breathing.

Whether, having already weighed me, he accepted the office, or whether he was grateful for the arm to lean upon, with his many years' burden, I do not know; but the sympathy between us was such that, without a single word, we walked up that foggy London street to the door of his lodging in Bloomsbury, while I noticed that at the touch of his arm the noise of the town seemed to turn into deep singing, and even the hurrying passers-by seemed bent upon noble purposes; and though he barely reached to my shoulder, and his grey beard almost touched my glove as I bent my arm to hold his own, there was something immense about his figure that sent him with towering stature above me and filled my thoughts with enchanting dreams of grandeur and high beauty.

But it was only when the door had closed on him with a little rush of wind, and I was walking home alone, that I fully realised the shock of my return to earth; and on reaching my own rooms I shook with laughter to think I had walked a mile and a half with a complete stranger without uttering a single syllable. Then the laughter suddenly hushed as I caught my face in the glass with the expression of the soul still lingering about the eyes and forehead, and for a brief moment my heart leaped to a sort of noble fever in the blood, leaving me with the smart of the soul's wings stirring beneath the body's crushing weight. And when it passed I found myself dwelling upon the only words he had spoken when I left him at the door:

"I am the Old Man of Visions, and I am *at your service*."

I think he never had a name — at least, it never passed his lips, and perhaps lay buried with so much else of the past that he clearly deemed unimportant. To me, at any rate, he became simply the Old Man of Visions, and to the little waiting-maid and the old landlady he was known simply as "Mister" — Mister, neither more nor less. The impenetrable veil that hung over his past never lifted for any vital revelations of his personal history, though he evidently knew all countries of the world, and had absorbed into his heart and brain the experience of all possible types of human nature; and there was an air about him not so much of "Ask me no questions," as *"Do not ask me, for I cannot answer you in words."*

He could satisfy, but not in mere language; he would reveal, but by the wonderful words of silence only; for he was the Old Man of Visions, and visions need no words, being swift and of the spirit Moreover the landlady

— poor, dusty, faded woman — the landlady stood in awe, and disliked being probed for information in a passage-way down which he might any moment tread, for she could only tell me, "He just came in one night, years ago, and he's been here ever since!" And more than that I never knew. "Just came in — one night — years ago." This adequately explained him, for where he came *from*, or was journeying *to,* was something quite beyond the scope of ordinary limited language.

I pictured him suddenly turning aside from the stream of unimportant events, quietly stepping out of the world of straining, fighting, and shouting, and moving to take his rightful place among the forces of the still, spiritual region where he belonged by virtue of long pain and difficult attainment. For he was unconnected with any conceivable network of relations, friends, or family, and his terrible aloofness could not be disturbed by any one unless with his permission and by his express wish. Nor could he be imagined as "belonging" to any definite set of souls. He was apart from the world — and above it.

But it was only when I began to creep a little nearer to him, and our strange, silent intimacy passed from mental to spiritual, that I began really to understand more of this wonderful Old Man of Visions.

Steeped in the tragedy, and convulsed with laughter at the comedy, of life, he yet lived there in his high attic wrapped in silence as in a golden cloud; and so seldom did he actually speak to me that each time the sound of his voice, that had something elemental in it — something of winds and waters — thrilled me with the power of the first time. He lived, like Teufelsdrockh, "alone with the stars," and it seemed impossible, more and more, to link him on anywhere into practical dealings with ordinary men and women. Life somehow seemed to pass *below* him. Yet the small, selfish spirit of the recluse was far from him, and he was tenderly and deeply responsive to pain and suffering, and more particularly to genuine yearning for the far things of beauty. The unsatisfied longings of others could move him at once to tears.

"My relations with men are perfect," he said one night as we neared his dwelling. "I give them all sympathy out of my stores of knowledge and experience, and they give to me what kindness I need. My outer shell lies within impenetrable solitude, for only so can my inner life move freely along the paths and terraces that are thronged with the beings to whom I belong." And when I asked him how he maintained such deep sympathy with humanity, and had yet absolved himself apparently from action as from speech, he stopped against an area railing and turned his great eyes on to my face, as though their fires could communicate his thought without the husk of words:

"I have peered too profoundly into life and beyond it," he murmured, "to wish to express in language what I *know.* Action is not for all, always; and I am in touch with the cisterns of thought that lie behind action. I ponder the mysteries. What I may solve is not lost for lack either of speech or action, for the true mystic is ever the true man of action, and my thought will reach others as soon as they are ready for it in the same way that it reached you. All who strongly yearn must, sooner or later, find me and be comforted."

His eyes shifted from my face towards the stars, softly shining above the dark Museum roof, and a moment later he had disappeared into the hallway of his house "An old poet who has strayed afield and lost his way," I mused; but through the door where he had just vanished the words came back to me as from a great distance: "A priest, rather, who has begun to find his way."

For a space I stood, pondering on his face and words: — that mercilessly intelligent look of the Hebrew woven in with the expression of the sadness of a whole race, yet touched with the glory of the spirit; and his utterance — that he had passed through all the traditions and no longer needed a formal, limited creed to hold to. I forget how I reached my own door several miles away, but it seemed to me that I flew.

In this way, and by unregistered degrees, we came to know each other better, and he accepted me and took me into his life. Always wrapped in the great calm of his delightful silence, he taught me more, and told me more, than could ever lie within the confines of mere words; and in moments of need, no matter when or where, I always knew exactly how to find him, reaching him in a few seconds by some swift way that disdained the means of ordinary locomotion.

Then at last one day he gave me the key of his house. And the first time I found my way into his eyry, and realised that it was a haven I could always fly to when the yearnings of the heart and soul struggled vainly for recompense, the full meaning and importance of the Old Man of Visions became finally clear to me.

II

THE room, high up creaky, darkened stairs in the ancient house, was bare and fireless, looking through a single patched window across a tumbled sea of roofs and chimneys; yet there was that in it which instantly proclaimed it a little holy place out of the world, a temple in which some one with spiritual vitality had worshipped, prayed, wept, and sung.

It was dusty and unswept, yet it was utterly *unsoiled;* and the Old Man of Visions who lived there, for all his shabby and stained garments, his uncombed beard and broken shoes, stood within its door revealed in his real self, moving in a sort of divine whiteness, iridescent, shining. And here, in this attic (lampless and unswept), high up under the old roofs of Bloomsbury, the window scarred with rain and the corners dropping cobwebs, I heard his silver whisper issue from the shadows:

“Here you may satisfy your soul’s desire and may commune with the Invisibles; only, to find the Invisibles, you must first be able to lose yourself.”

Oh! through that stained window-pane, the sight leaping at a single bound from black roofs up to the stars, what pictures, dreams, and visions the Old Man has summoned to my eyes! Distances, measureless and impossible hitherto, became easy, and from the oppression of dead bricks and the market-place he transported me in a moment to the slopes of the Mountains of Dream; leading me to little places near the summits where the pines grew thinly and the stars were visible through their branches, fading into the rose of dawn; where the winds tasted of the desert, and the voices of the wilderness fled upward with a sound of wings and falling streams. At his word houses melted away, and the green waves of all the seas flowed into their places; forests waved themselves into the coastline of dull streets; and the power of the old earth, with all her smells and flowers and wild life, thrilled down among the dead roofs and caught me away into freedom among the sunshine of meadows and the music of sweet pipings. And with the divine deliverance came the crying of sea-gulls, the glimmer of reedy tarns, the whispering of wind among grasses, and the healing scorch of a real sun upon the skin.

And poetry such as was never known or heard before clothed all he uttered, yet even then took no form in actual words, for it was of the substance of aspiration and yearning, voicing adequately all the busy, high-born dreams that haunt the soul yet never live in the uttered line. He breathed it about him in the air so that it filled my being. It was part of him — beyond words; and it sang my own longings, and sang them perfectly so that I was satisfied; for my own mood never failed to touch him instantly and to waken the right response. In its essence it was spiritual — the mystic poetry of heaven; still, the love of humanity informed it, for star-fire and heart's blood were about equally mingled there, while the mystery of unattainable beauty moved through it like a white flame.

With other dreams and longings, too, it was the same; and all the most beautiful ideas that ever haunted a soul undowered with expression here floated with satisfied eyes and smiling lips before one — floated in silence, unencumbered, unlimited, unrestrained by words.

In this dim room, never made ugly by artificial light, but always shadowy in a kind of gentle dusk, the Old Man of Visions had only to lead me to the window to bring peace. Music, that rendered the soul fluid, as it poured across the old roofs into the room, was summoned by him at need; and when one's wings beat sometimes against the prison walls and the yearning for escape oppressed the heart, I have heard the little room rush and fill with the sound of trees, wind among grasses, whispering branches, and lapping waters. The very odours of space and mountain-side came too, and the looming of noble hills seemed visible overhead against the stars, as though the ceiling had suddenly become transparent.

For the Old Man of Visions had the power of instantly satisfying an ideal when once that ideal created a yearning that could tear and burn its way out with sufficient force to set the will a-moving.

III

BUT as the time passed and I came to depend more and more upon the intimacy with my strange old friend, new light fell upon the nature and possibilities of our connection. I discovered, for instance, that though I held the key to his dwelling, and was familiar with the way, he was nevertheless not always available. Two things, in different fashion, rendered him inaccessible, or mute; and, for the first, I gradually learned that when life was prosperous, and the body singing loud, I could not find my way to his house. No amount of wandering, calculation, or persevering effort enabled me even to find the street again. With any burst of worldly success, however fleeting, the Old Man of Visions somehow slipped away into remote shadows and became unreal and misty. A merely passing desire to be with him, to seek his inspiration by a glimpse through that magic window-pane, resulted only in vain and tiresome pacing to and fro along ugly streets that produced weariness and depression; and after these periods it became, I noticed, less and less easy to discover the house, to fit the key in the door, or, having gained access to the temple, to realise the visions I *thought* I craved for.

Often, in this way, have I searched in vain for days, but only succeeded in losing myself in the murky purlieus of a quite strange Bloomsbury; stopping outside numberless counterfeit doors, and struggling vainly with locks that knew nothing of my little shining key.

But, on the other hand, pain, loneliness, sorrow — the merest whisper of spiritual affliction — and, lo, in a single moment the difficult geography became plain, and without hesitation, when I was unhappy or distressed, I found the way to his house as by a bird’s instinctive flight, and the key slipped into the lock as though it loved it and was returning home.

The other cause to render him inaccessible, though not so determined — since it never concealed the way to the house — was even more distressing, for it depended wholly on myself; and I came to know how the least ugly action, involving a depreciation of ideals, so confused the mind that, when I got into the house, with difficulty, and found him in the little room after much searching, he was able to do or say scarcely anything at all for me. The mirror facing the door then gave back, I saw, no proper reflection of his person, but only a faded and wavering shadow with dim eyes and stooping, indistinct outline, and I even fancied I could see the pattern of the wall and shape of the furniture *through* his body, as though he had grown semitransparent.

“You must not expect yearnings to weigh,” came his whisper, like wind far overhead, “unless you lend to them *your own* substance; and your own substance you cannot both keep and lend. If you would know the Invisibles, forget yourself.”

And later, as the years slipped away one after another into the mists, and the frontier between the real and the unreal began to shift amazingly with his teachings, it became more and more clear to me that he belonged to a permanent region that, with all the changes in the world's history, has itself never altered in any essential particular. This immemorial Old Man of Visions, as I grew to think of him, had existed always; he was old as the sea and coeval with the stars; and he dwelt beyond time and space, reaching out a hand to all those who, weary of the shadows and illusions of practical life, really call to him with their heart of hearts. To me, indeed, the touch of sorrow was always near enough to prevent his becoming often inaccessible, and after a while even his voice became so *living* that I sometimes heard it calling to me in the street and in the fields.

Oh, wonderful Old Man of Visions! Happy the days of disaster, since they taught me how to know you, the Unraveller of Problems, the Destroyer of Doubts, who bore me ever away with soft flight down the long, long vistas of the heart and soul!

And his loneliness in that temple attic under the stars, his loneliness, too, had a meaning I did not fail to understand later, and why he was always available for me and seemed to belong to no other.

"To every one who finds me," he said, with the strange smile that wrapped his whole being and not his face alone, "to every one I am the same, and yet different. I am not really ever alone. The whole world, nay " — his voice rose to a singing cry— "the whole universe lies in this room, or just beyond that window-pane; for here past and future meet and all real dreams find completeness. But remember," he added — and there was a sound as of soft wind and rain in the room with his voice—" no true dream can ever be shared, and should you seek to explain me to another you must lose me beyond recall. You have never asked my name, nor must you ever tell it Each must find me in his own way."

Yet one day, for all my knowledge and his warnings, I felt so sure of my intimacy with this immemorial being, that I spoke of him to a friend who was, I had thought, so much a part of myself that it seemed no betrayal. And my friend, who went to search and found nothing, returned with the fool's laughter on his face, and swore that no street or number existed, for he had looked in vain, and had repeatedly *asked the way.*

And, from that day to this, the Old Man of Visions has neither called to me nor let his place be found; the streets are strange and empty, and I have even lost the little shining key.

MAY DAY EVE

I

IT WAS IN the spring when I at last found time from the hospital work to visit my friend, the old folklorist, in his country isolation, and I rather chuckled to myself, because in my bag I was taking down a book that utterly refuted all his tiresome pet theories of magic and the powers of the soul.

These theories were many and various, and had often troubled me. In the first place, I scorned them for professional reasons, and, in the second, because I had never been able to argue quite well enough to convince or to shake his faith in even the smallest details, and any scientific knowledge I brought to bear only fed him with confirmatory data. To find such a book, therefore, and to know that it was safely in my bag, wrapped up in brown paper and addressed to him, was a deep and satisfactory joy, and I speculated a good deal during the journey how he would deal with the overwhelming arguments it contained against the existence of any important region outside the world of sensory perceptions.

Speculative, too, I was whether his visionary habits and absorbing experiments would permit him to remember my arrival at all, and I was accordingly relieved to hear from the solitary porter that the “ professor “ had sent a “veeckle “ to meet me, and that I was thus free to send my bag and walk the four miles to the house across the hills.

It was a calm, windless evening, just after sunset; the air warm and scented, and delightfully still. The train, already sinking into distance, carried away with it the noise of crowds and cities and the last suggestions of the stressful life behind me, and from the little station on the moorland I stepped at once into the world of silent, growing things, tinkling sheep-bells, shepherds, and wild, desolate spaces.

My path lay diagonally across the turfy hills. It slanted a mile or so to the summit, wandered vaguely another two miles among gorse-bushes along the crest, passed Tom Bassett’s cottage by the pines, and then dropped sharply down on the other side through rather thin woods to the ancient house where the old folk-lorist lived and dreamed himself into his impossible world of theory and fantasy. I fell to thinking busily about him during the first part of the ascent, and convinced myself, as usual, that, but for his generosity to the poor, and his benign aspect, the peasantry must undoubtedly have regarded him as a wizard who speculated in souls and had dark dealings with the world of faery.

The path I knew tolerably well. I had already walked it once before — a winter's day some years ago — and from the cottage onwards felt sure of my way; but for the first mile or so there were so many cross cattle-tracks, and the light had become so dim, that I felt it wise to inquire more particularly. And this I was fortunately able to do of a man who with astonishing suddenness rose from the grass where he had been lying behind a clump of bushes, and passed a few yards in front of me at a high pace downhill towards the darkening valley.

He was in such a state of hurry that I called out loudly to him, fearing to be too late, but on hearing my voice he turned sharply, and seemed to arrive almost at once beside me. In a single instant he was standing there, quite close, looking, with a smile and a certain expression of curiosity, I thought, into my face. I remember thinking that his features, pale and wholly untanned, were rather wonderful for a countryman, and that the eyes were those of a foreigner; his great swiftness, too, gave me a distinct sensation — something almost of a start — though I knew my vision was at fault at the best of times, and of course especially so in the deceptive twilight of the open hillside.

Moreover — as the way often is with such instructions — the words did not stay in my mind very clearly after he had uttered them, and the rapid, panther-like movements of the man as he quickly vanished down the hill again left me with little more than a sweeping gesture indicating the line I was to follow. No doubt his sudden rising from behind the gorse-bush, his curious swiftness, and the way he peered into my face, and even touched me on the shoulder, all combined to distract my attention somewhat from the actual words he used; and the fact that I was travelling at a wrong angle, and should have come out a mile too far to the right, helped to complete my feeling that his gesture, pointing the way, was sufficient On the crest of the ridge, panting a little with the unwonted exertion, I lay down to rest a moment on the grass beside a flaming yellow gorse-bush. There was still a good hour before I should be looked for at the house; the grass was very soft, the peace and silence soothing. I lingered, and lit a cigarette. And it was just then, I think, that my subconscious memory gave back the words, the actual words, the man had spoken, and the heavy significance of the personal pronoun, as he had emphasised it in his odd foreign voice, touched me with a sense of vague amusement: “The safest way *for you* now,” he had said, as though I was so obviously a townsman and might be in danger on the lonely hills after dark. And the quick way he had reached my side, and then slipped off again like a shadow down the steep slope, completed a definite little picture in my mind. Then other thoughts and memories rose up and formed a series of pictures, following each other in rapid succession, ‘and forming a chain of reflections undirected by the will and without purpose or meaning. I. fell, that is, into a pleasant reverie.

Below me, and infinitely far away, it seemed, the valley lay silent under a veil of blue evening haze, the lower end losing itself among darkening hills whose peaks rose here and there like giant plumes that would surely nod their great heads and call to one another once the final shadows were down. The village lay, a misty patch, in which lights already twinkled. A sound of rooks faintly cawing, of sea-gulls crying far up in the sky, and of dogs barking at a great distance rose up out of the general murmur of evening voices. Odours of farm and field and open spaces stole to my nostrils, and everything contributed to the feeling that I lay on the top of the world, nothing between me and the stars, and that all the huge, free things of the earth — hills, valleys, woods, and sloping fields — lay breathing deeply about me.

A few sea-gulls — in daytime hereabouts they fill the air — still circled and wheeled within range of sight, uttering from time to time sharp, petulant cries; and far in the distance there was just visible a shadowy line that showed where the sea lay.

Then, as I lay gazing dreamily into this still pool of shadows at my feet, something rose up, something sheet-like, vast, imponderable, off the whole surface of the mapped-out country, moved with incredible swiftness down the valley, and in a single instant climbed the hill where I lay and swept by me, yet without hurry, and in a sense without speed. Veils in this way rose one after another, filling the cups between the hills, shrouding alike fields, village, and hillside as they passed, and settled down somewhere into the gloom behind me over the ridge, or slipped off like vapour into the sky.

Whether it was actually mist rising from the surface of the fast-cooling ground, or merely the earth giving up her heat to the night, I could not determine. The coming of darkness is ever a series of mysteries. I only know that this indescribable vast stirring of the landscape seemed to me as though the earth were unfolding immense sable wings from her sides, and lifting them for silent, gigantic strokes so that she might fly more swiftly from the sun into the night. The darkness, at any rate, did drop down over everything very soon afterwards, and I rose up hastily to follow my pathway, realising with a degree of wonder strangely new to me the magic of twilight, the blue open depths into the valley below, and the pale yellow heights of the watery sky above.

I walked rapidly, a sense of chilliness about me, and soon lost sight of the valley altogether as I got upon the ridge proper of these lonely and desolate hills.

It could not have been more than fifteen minutes that I lay there in reverie, yet the weather, I at once noticed, had changed very abruptly, for mist was seething here and there about me, rising somewhere from smaller valleys in the hills beyond, and obscuring the path, while overhead there was plainly a sound of wind tearing past, far up, with a sound of high shouting. A moment before it had been the stillness of a warm spring night, yet now everything had changed; wet mist coated me, raindrops smartly stung my face, and a gusty wind, descending out of cool heights, began to strike and buffet me, so that I buttoned my coat and pressed my hat more firmly upon my head.

The change was really this — and it came to me for the first time in my life with the power of a real conviction — that everything about me seemed to have become suddenly *alive.*

It came oddly upon me — prosaic, matter-of-fact, materialistic doctor that I was — this realisation that the world about me had somehow stirred into life; oddly, I say, because Nature to me had always been merely a more or less definite arrangement of measurement, weight, and colour, and this new presentation of it was utterly foreign to my temperament. A valley to me was always a valley; a hill, merely a hill; a field, so many acres of fiat surface, grass or ploughed, drained well or drained ill; whereas now, with startling vividness, came the strange, haunting idea that after all they could be something more than valley, hill, and field: that what I had hitherto perceived by these names were only the veils of something that lay concealed within, something alive. In a word, that the poetic sense I had always rather sneered at in others, or explained away with some shallow physiological label, had apparently suddenly opened up in myself without any obvious cause.

And, the more I puzzled over it, the more I began to realise that its genesis dated from those few minutes of reverie lying under the gorse-bush (reverie, a thing I had never before in all my life indulged in!), or, now that I came to reflect more accurately, from my brief interview with that wildeyed, swift-moving, shadowy man of whom I had first inquired the way.

I recalled my singular fancy that veils were lifting off the surface of the hills and fields, and a tremor of excitement accompanied the memory. Such a thing had never before been possible to my practical intelligence, and it made me feel suspicious — suspicious about myself. I stood still a moment — I looked about me into the gathering mist, above me to the vanishing stars, below me to the hidden valley, and then sent an urgent summons to my individuality, as I had always known it, to arrest and chase these undesirable fancies.

But I called in vain. No answer came. Anxiously, hurriedly,-confusedly too, I searched for my normal self, but could not find it; and this failure to respond induced in me a sense of uneasiness that touched very nearly upon the borders of alarm.

I pushed on faster and faster along the turfy track among the gorse-bushes with a dread that I might lose the way altogether, and a sudden desire to reach home as soon as might be. Then, without warning, I emerged unexpectedly into clear air again, and the vapour swept past me in a rushing wall and rose into the sky. Anew I saw the lights of the village behind me in the depths, here and there a line of smoke rising against the pale yellow sky, and stars overhead peering down through thin wispy clouds that stretched their wind-signs across the night.

After all, it had been nothing but a stray bit of sea-fog driving up from the coast, for the other side of the hills, I remembered, dipped their chalk cliffs straight into the sea, and strange lost winds must often come a-wandering this way with the sharp changes of temperature about sunset. None the less, it was disconcerting to know that mist and storm lay hiding within possible reach, and I walked on smartly for a sight of Tom Bassett's cottage and the lights of the Manor House in the valley a short mile beyond.

The clearing of the air, however, lasted but a very brief while, and vapour was soon rising about me as before, hiding the path and making bushes and stone walls look like running shadows. It came, driven apparently by little independent winds up the many side gullies, and it was very cold, touching my skin like a wet sheet Curious great shapes, too, it assumed as the wind worked to and fro through it: forms of men and animals: grotesque, giant outlines; ever shifting and running along the ground with silent feet, or leaping into the air with sharp cries as the gusts twisted them inwardly and lent them voice. More and more I pushed my pace, and more and more darkness and vapour obliterated the landscape. The going was not otherwise difficult, and here and there cowslips glimmered in patches of dancing yellow, while the springy turf made it easy to keep up speed; yet in the gloom I frequently tripped and plunged into prickly gorse near the ground, so that from shin to knee was soon a-tingle with sharp pain. Odd puffs and spits of rain stung my face, and the periods of utter stillness were always followed by little shouting gusts of wind, each time from a new direction. Troubled is perhaps too strong a word, but flustered I certainly was; and though I recognised that it was due to my being in an environment so remote from the town life I was accustomed to, I found it impossible to stifle altogether the feeling of malaise that had crept into my heart, and I looked about with increasing eagerness for the lighted windows of Bassett's cottage.

More and more, little pin-pricks of distress and confusion accumulated, adding to my realisation of being away from streets and shop-windows, and things I could classify and deal with. The mist, too, distorted as well as concealed, played tricks with sounds as well as with sights. And, once or twice, when I stumbled upon some crouching sheep, they got up without the customary alarm and hurry of sheep, and moved off slowly into the darkness, but in such a singular way that I could almost have sworn they were not sheep at all, but human beings crawling on all-fours, looking back and grimacing at me over their shoulders as they went. On these occasions

— for there were more than one — I never could get close enough to feel their woolly wet backs, as I should have liked to do; and the sound of their tinkling bells came faintly through the mist, sometimes from one direction, sometimes from another, sometimes all round me as though a whole flock surrounded me; and I found it impossible to analyse or explain the idea I received that they were *not* sheep-bells at all, but something quite different.

But mist and darkness, and a certain confusion of the senses caused by the excitement of an utterly strange environment, can account for a great deal.

I pushed on quickly. The conviction that I had strayed from the route grew, nevertheless, for occasionally there was a great commotion of sea-gulls about me, as though I had disturbed them in their sleeping-places. The air filled with their plaintive cries, and I heard the rushing of multitudinous wings, sometimes very close to my head, but always invisible owing to the mist. And once, above the swishing of the wet wind through the gorse bushes, I was sure I caught the faint thunder of the sea and the distant crashing of waves rolling up some steep-throated gully in the cliffs. I went cautiously after this, and altered my course a little away from the direction of the sound.

Yet, increasingly all the time, it came to me how the cries of the sea-birds sounded like laughter, and how the everlasting wind blew and drove about me with a purpose, and how the low bushes persistently took the shape of stooping people, moving stealthily past me, and how the mist more and more resembled huge protean figures escorting me across the desolate hills, silently, with immense footsteps. For the inanimate world now touched my awakened poetic sense in a manner hitherto unguessed, and became fraught with the pregnant messages of a dimly concealed life. I readily understood, for the first time, how easily a superstitious peasantry might people their world, and how even an educated mind might favour an atmosphere of legend. I stumbled along, looking anxiously for the lights of the cottage.

Suddenly, as a shape of writhing mist whirled past, I received so direct a stroke of wind that it was palpably a blow in the face. Something swept by with a shrill cry into the darkness. It was impossible to prevent jumping to one side and raising an arm by way of protection, and I was only just quick enough to catch a glimpse of the sea-gull as it raced past, with suddenly altered flight, beating its powerful wings over my head. Its white body looked enormous as the mist swallowed it. At the same moment a gust tore the hat from my head and flung the flap of my coat across my eyes. But I was well trained by this time, and made a quick dash after the retreating black object, only to find on overtaking it that I held a prickly branch of gorse. The wind combed my hair viciously. Then, out of a corner of my eye, I saw my hat still rolling, and grabbed swiftly at it; but just as I closed on it, the real hat passed in front of me, turning over in the wind like a ball, and I instantly released my first capture to chase it. Before it was within reach, another one shot between my feet so that I stepped on it The grass seemed covered with moving hats, yet each one, when I seized it, turned into a piece of wood, or a tiny gorse bush, or a black rabbit hole, till my hands were scored with prickles and running blood. In the darkness, I reflected, all objects looked alike, as though by general conspiracy.

I straightened up and took a long breath, mopping the blood with my handkerchief. Then something tapped at my feet, and on looking down, there was the hat within easy reach, and I stooped down and put it on my head again. Of course, there were a dozen ways of explaining my confusion and stupidity, and I walked along wondering which to select. My eyesight, for one thing — and under such ‘conditions why seek further? It was nothing, after all, and the dizziness was a momentary effect caused by the effort and stooping.

But for all that, I shouted aloud, on the chance that a wandering shepherd might hear me; and of course no answer came, for it was like calling in a padded room, and the mist suffocated my voice and killed its resonance.

It was really very discouraging: I was cold and wet and hungry; my legs and clothes torn by the gorse, my hands scratched and bleeding; the wind brought water to my eyes by its constant buffetings, and my skin was numb from contact with the chill mist. Fortunately I had matches, and after some difficulty, by crouching under a wall, I caught a swift glimpse of my watch, and saw that it was but little after eight o’clock. Supper I knew was at nine, and I was surely over half-way by this time. But here again was another instance of the way everything seemed in a conspiracy against me to appear otherwise than ordinary, for in the gleam of the match my watch-glass showed as the face of a little old grey man, uncommonly like the folk-lorist himself, peering up at me with an expression of whimsical laughter. My own reflection it could not possibly have been, for I am clean-shaven, and this face looked up at me through a running tangle of grey hair. Yet a second and a third match revealed only the white surface with the thin black hands moving across it.

II

AND it was at this point, I well remember, that I reached what was for me the true heart of the adventure, the little fragment of real experience I learned from it and took back with me to my doctor's life in London, and that has remained with me ever since, and helped me to a new sympathetic insight into the intricacies of certain curious mental cases I had never before really understood.

For it was sufficiently obvious by now that a curious change had been going forward in me for some time, dating so far as I could focus my thoughts sufficiently to analyse, from the moment of my speech with that hurrying man of shadow on the hillside. And the first deliberate manifestation of the change, now that I looked back, was surely the awakening in my prosaic being of the "poetic thrill"; my sudden amazing appreciation of the world around me as something alive. From that moment the change in me had worked ahead subtly, swiftly. Yet, so natural had been the beginning of it, that although it was a radically new departure for my temperament, I was hardly aware at first of what had actually come about; and it was only now, after so many encounters, that I was forced at length to acknowledge it. It came the more forcibly too, because my very commonplace ideas of beauty had hitherto always been associated with sunshine and crude effects; yet here this new revelation leaped to me out of wind and mist and desolation on a lonely hillside, out of night, darkness, and discomfort New values rushed upon me from all sides. Everything had changed, and the very simplicity with which the new values presented themselves proved to me how profound the change, the readjustment, had been. In such trivial things the evidence had come that I was not aware of it until repetition forced my attention: the veils rising from valley and hill; the mountain tops as personalities that shout or murmur in the darkness; the crying of the sea birds and of the living, purposeful wind; above all, the feeling that Nature about me was instinct with a life differing from my own in degree rather than in kind; everything, from the conspiracy of the gorse-bushes to the disappearing hat, showed that a fundamental attitude of mind in me had changed — and changed, too, without my knowledge or consent Moreover, at the same time the deep sadness of beauty had entered my heart like a stroke; for all this mystery and loveliness, I realised poignantly, was utterly independent and careless of *me,* as me; and that while I must pass, decay, grow old, these manifestations would remain for ever young and unalterably potent And thus gradually had I become permeated with the recognition of a region hitherto unknown to me, and that I had always depreciated in others and especially, it now occurred to me, in my friend the old folk-lorist Here surely, I thought, was the beginning of conditions which, carried a little further, must become pathogenic. That the change was real and pregnant I had no doubt whatever. My consciousness was expanding, and I had caught it in the very act. I had of course read much concerning the changes of personality, swift, kaleidoscopic — had come across something of it in my practice — and had listened to the folk-lorist holding forth like a man inspired upon ways and means of reaching concealed regions of the human consciousness, and opening it to the knowledge of things called magical, so that one became free of a larger universe. But it was only now for the first time, on these bare hills, in touch with the wind and the rain, that I realised in how simple a fashion the frontiers of consciousness could shift this way and that, or with what touch of genuine awe the certainty might come that one stood on the borderland of new, untried, perhaps dangerous, experiences.

At any rate, it did now come to me that my consciousness had shifted its frontiers very considerably, and that whatever might happen must seem not abnormal, but quite simple and inevitable, and of course utterly true. This very simplicity, however, doing no violence to my being, brought with it none the less a sense of dread and discomfort; and my dim awareness that unknown possibilities were about me in the night puzzled and distressed me perhaps more than I cared to admit.

III

ALL this that takes so long to describe became apparent to me in a few seconds. What I had always despised ascended the throne.

But with the finding of Bassett’s cottage as a sign-post close to home, my former *sang-froid,* my stupidity, would doubtless return, and my relief was therefore considerable when at length a faint gleam of light appeared through the mist, against which the square dark shadow of the chimney line pointed upwards. After all, I had not strayed so very far out of the way. Now I could definitely ascertain where I was wrong.

Quickening my pace, I scrambled over a broken stone wall, and almost ran across the open bit of grass to the door. One moment the black outline of the cottage was there in front of me, and the next, when I stood actually against it — there was nothing! I laughed to think how utterly I had been deceived. Yet not utterly, for as I groped back again over the wall, the cottage loomed up a little to the left, with its windows lighted and friendly, and I had only been mistaken in my angle of approach after all. Yet again, as I hurried to the door, the mist drove past and thickened a second time — and the cottage was not where I had seen it!

My confusion increased a lot after that. I scrambled about in all directions, rather foolishly hurried, and over countless stone walls it seemed, and completely dazed as to the true points of the compass. Then suddenly, just when a kind of despair came over me, the cottage stood there solidly before my eyes, and I found myself not two feet from the door. Was ever mist before so deceptive? And there, just behind it, I made out the row of pines like a dark wave breaking through the night. I sniffed the wet resinous odour with joy, and a genuine thrill ran through me as I saw the unmistakable yellow light of the windows. At last I was near home and my troubles would soon be over.

A cloud of birds rose with shrill cries off the roof and whirled into the darkness when I knocked with my stick on the door, and human voices, I was almost certain, mingled somewhere with them, though it was impossible to tell whether they were within the cottage, or outside. It all sounded confusedly with a rush of air like a little whirlwind, and I stood there rather alarmed at the clamour of my knocking. By way, too, of further proof that my imagination had awakened, the significance of that knocking at the door set something vibrating within me that most surely had never vibrated before, so that I suddenly realised with what atmosphere of mystical suggestion is the mere act of knocking surrounded — *knocking at a door* — both for him who knocks, wondering what shall be revealed on opening, and for him who stands within, waiting for the summons of the knocker; I only know that I hesitated a lot before making up my mind to knock a second time.

And, anyhow, what happened subsequently came in a sort of haze. Words and memory both fail me when I try to record it truthfully, so that even the faces are difficult to visualise again, the words almost impossible to hear.

Before I knew it the door was open, and before I could frame the words of my first brief question, I was within the threshold, and the door was shut behind me.

I had expected the little dark and narrow hall-way of a cottage, oppressive of air and odour, but instead I came straight into a room that was full of light and full of — people. And the air tasted like the air about a mountain top.

To the end I never saw what produced the light, nor understood how so many men and women found space to move comfortably to and fro and pass each other as they did within the confines of those four walls. An uncomfortable sense of having intruded upon some private gathering was, I think, my first emotion; though how the poverty-stricken countryside could have produced such an assemblage puzzled me beyond belief. And my second emotion — if there was any division at all in the wave of wonder that fairly drenched me — was feeling a sort of glory in the presence of such an atmosphere of splendid and vital *youth.* Everything vibrated, quivered, shook about me, and I almost felt myself as an aged and decrepit man by comparison.

I know my heart gave a great fiery leap as I saw them, for the faces that met me were fine, vigorous, and comely, while burning everywhere through their ripe maturity shone the ardours of youth and a kind of deathless enthusiasm. Old, yet eternally young they were, as rivers and mountains count their years by thousands, yet remain ever youthful; and the first effect of all those pairs of eyes lifted to meet my own was to send a whirlwind of unknown thrills about my heart and make me catch my breath with mingled terror and delight. A fear of death, and at the same time a sensation of touching something vast and eternal that could never die, surged through me.

A deep hush followed my entrance as all turned to look at me. They stood, men and women, grouped about a table, and something about them — not their size alone — conveyed the impression of being *gigantic,* giving me strangely novel realisations of freedom, power, and immense existences more or less than human.

I can only record my thoughts and impressions as they came to me and as I dimly now remember them. I had expected to see old Tom Bassett crouching half asleep over a peat fire, a dim lamp on the table beside him, and instead this assembly of tall and splendid men and women stood there to greet me, and stood in silence. It was little wonder that at first the ready question died upon my lips, and I almost forgot the words of my own language.

“I thought this was Tom Bassett’s cottage!” I managed to ask at length, and looked straight at the man nearest me across the table. He had wild hair falling about his shoulders and a face of clear beauty. His eyes too, like all the rest, seemed shrouded by something veil-like that reminded me of the shadowy man of whom I had first inquired the way. They were *shaded* — and for some reason I was glad that they were.

At the sound of my voice, unreal and thin, there was a general movement throughout the room, as though everyone changed places, passing each other like those shapes of fluid sort I had seen outside in the mist. But no answer came. It seemed to me that the mist even penetrated into the room about me and spread inwardly over my thoughts.

“Is this my way to the Manor House?” I asked again louder, fighting my inward confusion and weakness. “Can *no one* tell me?”

Then apparently every one began to answer at once, or rather, not to answer directly, but to speak to each other in such a way that I could easily overhear. The voices of the men were deep, and of the women wonderfully musical, with a slow rhythm like that of the sea, or of the wind through the pine trees outside. But the unsatisfactory nature of what they said only helped to increase my sense of confusion and dismay.

“Yes,” said one; “Tom Bassett *was* here for a while with the sheep, but his home was not here.”

“He asks the way to a house when he does not even know the way to his own mind!” another voice said, sounding overhead it seemed.

“And could he recognise the signs if we told him? “ came in the singing tones of a woman’s voice close beside me.

And then, with a noise more like running water, or wind in the wings of birds, than anything else I could liken it to, came several voices together: "And what sort of way does he seek? The splendid way, or merely the easy?"

"Or the short way of fools!"

"But he must have *some* credentials, or he never could have got as far as this," came from another.

A laugh ran round the room at this, though what there was to laugh at I could not imagine. It sounded like wind rushing about the hills. I got the impression too that the roof was somehow open to the sky, for their laughter had such a spacious quality in it, and the air was so cool and fresh, and moving about in currents and waves.

"It was I who showed him the way," cried a voice belonging to some one who was looking straight into my face over the table. "It was the safest way for him once he had got so far—"

I looked up and met his eye, and the sentence remained unfinished. It was the hurrying, shadowy man of the hillside. He had the same shifting outline as the others now, and the same veiled and shaded eyes, and as I looked the sense of terror stirred and grew in me. I had come in to ask for help, but now I was only anxious to be free of them all and out again in the rain and darkness on the moor Thoughts of escape filled my brain, and I searched quickly for the door through which I had entered. But nowhere could I discover it again. The walls were bare; not even the windows were visible. And the room seemed to fill and empty of these figures as the waves of the sea fill and empty a cavern, crowding one upon another, yet never occupying more space, or less. So the coming and going of these men and women always evaded me, And my terror became simply a terror that the veils of their eyes might lift, and that they would look at me with their clear, naked sight. I became horribly aware of their eyes. It was not that I felt them evil, but that I feared the new depths in me their merciless and terrible insight would stir into life. My consciousness had expanded quite enough for one night! I must escape at all costs and claim my own self again, however limited. I must have sanity, even if with limitations, but sanity at any price.

But meanwhile, though I tried hard to find my voice again, there came nothing but a thin piping sound that was like reeds whistling where winds meet about a corner. My throat was contracted, and I could only produce the smallest and most ridiculous of noises. The power of movement, too, was far less than when I first came in, and every moment it became more difficult to use my muscles, so that I stood there, stiff and awkward, face to face with this assemblage of shifting, wonderful people.

“And now,” continued the voice of the man who had last spoken, “and now the safest way for him will be through the other door, where he shall see that which he may more easily understand.”

With a great effort I regained the power of movement, while at the same time a burst of anger and a determination to be done with it all and to overcome my dreadful confusion drove me forward.

He saw me coming, of course, and the others indeed opened up and made a way for me, shifting to one side or the other whenever I came too near them, and never allowing me to touch them. But at last, when I was close in front of the man, ready both to speak and act, he was no longer there. I never saw the actual change — but instead of a man it was a woman! And when I turned with amazement, I saw that the other occupants, walking like figures in some ancient ceremony, were moving slowly towards the far end of the room. One by one, as they filed past, they raised their calm, passionless faces to mine, immensely vital, proud, austere, and then, without further word or gesture, they opened the door I had lost and disappeared through it one by one into the darkness of the night beyond. And as they went it seemed that the mist swallowed them up and a gust of wind caught them away, and the light also went with them, leaving me alone with the figure who had last spoken.

Moreover, it was just here that a most disquieting thought flashed through my brain with unreasoning conviction, shaking my personality, as it were, to the foundations: viz., that I had hitherto been spending my life in the pursuit of false knowledge, in the mere classifying and labelling of effects, the analysis of results, scientific so called; whereas it was the folk-lorist, and such like, who with their dreams and prayers were all the time on the path of real knowledge, the trail of causes; that the one was merely adding to the mechanical comfort and safety of the body, ultimately degrading the highest part of man, and never advancing the type, while the other — but then I had never yet believed in a soul — and now was no time to begin, terror or no terror. Clearly, my thoughts were wandering.

IV

IT was at this moment the sound of the purring first reached me — deep, guttural purring — that made me think at once of some large concealed animal. It was precisely what I had heard many a time at the Zoological Gardens, and I had visions of cows chewing the cud, or horses munching hay in a stall outside the cottage. It was certainly an animal sound, and one of pleasure and contentment Semi-darkness filled the room. Only a very faint moonlight, struggling through the mist came through the window, and I moved back instinctively towards the support of the wall against my back. Somewhere, through openings, came the sound of the night driving over the roof, and far above I had visions of those everlasting winds streaming by with clouds as large as continents on their wings. Something in me wanted to sing and shout, but something else in me at the same time was in a very vivid state of unreasoning terror. I felt immense, yet tiny; confident, yet timid; a part of huge, universal forces, yet an utterly small, personal, and very limited being.

In the corner of the room on my right stood the woman. Her face was hid by a mass of tumbling hair, that made me think of living grasses on a field in June. Thus her head was partially turned from me, and the moonlight, catching her outline, just revealed it against the wall like an impressionist picture. Strange hidden memories stirred in the depths of me, and for a moment I felt that I knew all about her. I stared about me quickly, nervously, trying to take in everything at once. Then the purring sound grew much louder and closer, and I forgot my notion that this woman was no stranger to me and that I knew her as well as I knew myself. That purring thing was in the room close beside me. Between us two, indeed, it was, for I now saw that her arm nearest to me was raised, and that she was pointing to the wall in front of us.

Following the direction of her hand, I saw that the wall was transparent, and that I could see through a portion of it into a small square space beyond, as though I was looking through gauze instead of bricks. This small inner space was lighted, and on stooping down I saw that it was a sort of cupboard or cell-like cage let into the wall. The thing that purred was there in the centre of it.

I looked closer. It was a being, apparently a *human* being, crouching down in its narrow cage, feeding. I saw the body stooping over a quantity of coarse-looking, piled-up substance that was evidently food. It was like a man huddled up. There it squatted, happy and contented, with the minimum of air, light, and space, dully satisfied with its prisoned cage behind the bars, utterly unconscious of the vast world about it, grunting with pleasure, purring like a great cat, scornfully ignorant of what might lie beyond. The cell, moreover, I saw was a perfect masterpiece of mechanical contrivance and inventive ingenuity — the very last word in comfort, safety, and scientific skill. I was in the act of trying to fix in my memory some of the details of its construction and arrangement, when I made a chance noise, and at once became too agitated to note carefully what I saw. For at the noise the creature turned, and I saw that it *was* a human being — a man. I was aware of a face close against my own as it pressed forward, but a face with embryonic features impossible to describe and utterly loathsome, with eyes, ears, nose, and skin, only just sufficiently alive and developed to transfer the minimum of gross sensation to the brain. The mouth, however, was large and thick-lipped, and the jaws were still moving in the act of slow mastication.

I shrank back, shuddering with mingled pity and disgust, and at the same moment the woman beside me called me softly *by my own name.* She had moved forward a little so that she stood quite close to me, full in the thin stream of moonlight that fell across the floor, and I was conscious of a swift transition from hell to heaven as my gaze passed from that embryonic visage to a countenance so refined, so majestic, so divinely sensitive in its strength, that it was like turning from the face of a devil to look upon the features of a goddess.

At the same instant I was aware that both beings — the creature and the woman — were moving rapidly towards me.

A pain like a sharp sword dived deep down into me and twisted horribly through my heart, for as I saw them coming I realised in one swift moment of terrible intuition that they had their life in me, that they were born of my own being, and were indeed *projections of myself.* They were portions of my own consciousness projected outwardly into objectivity, and their degree of reality was just as great as that of any other part of me.

With a dreadful swiftness they rushed towards me, and in a single second had merged themselves into my own being; and I understood in some marvellous manner beyond the possibility of doubt that they were symbolic of my own soul: the dull animal part of me that had hitherto acknowledged nothing beyond its cage of minute sensations, and the higher part, almost out of reach, and in touch with the stars, that for the first time had feebly awakened into life during my journey over the hill.

* * * *

V

I forget altogether how it was that I escaped, whether by the window or the door. I only know I found myself a moment later making great speed over the moor, followed by screaming birds and shouting wind, straight on the track downhill towards the Manor House. Something must have guided me, for I went with the instinct of an animal, having no uncertainties as to turnings, and saw the welcome lights of windows before I had covered another mile. And all the way I felt as though a great sluice gate had been opened to let a flood of new perceptions rush like a sea over my inner being, so that I was half ashamed and half delighted, partly angry, yet partly happy.

Servants met me at the door, several of them, and I was aware at once of an atmosphere of commotion in the house. I arrived breathless and hatless, wet to the skin, my hands scratched and my boots caked with mud.

“We made sure you were lost, sir,” I heard the old butler say, and I heard my own reply, faintly, like the voice of some one else:

“I thought so too.”

A minute later I found myself in the study, with the old folk-lorist standing opposite. In his hands he held the book I had brought down for him in my bag, ready addressed. There was a curious smile on his face.

“It never occurred to me that you would dare to *walk* — to-night of all nights,” he was saying.

I stared without a word. I was bursting with the desire to tell him something of what had happened and try to be patient with his explanations, but when I sought for words and sentences my story seemed suddenly flat and pointless, and the details of my adventure began to evaporate and melt away, and seemed hard to remember.

"I had an exciting walk," I stammered, still a little breathless from running. "The weather was all right when I started from the station."

"The weather's all right still," he said, "though you may have found some evening mist on the top of the hills. But it's not that I meant."

"What then?"

"I meant," he said, still laughing quizzically, "that you were a very brave man to walk to-night over the enchanted hills, because this is May Day eve, and on May Day eve, you know, *They* have power over the minds of men, and can put glamour upon the imagination—"

"Who— '*they?*' What do you mean?"

He put my book down on the table beside him and looked quietly for a moment into my eyes, and as he did so the memory of my adventure began to revive in detail, and I thought quickly of the shadowy man who had shown me the way first. What could it have been in the face of the old folk-lorist that made me think of this man? A dozen things ran like flashes through my excited mind, and while I attempted to seize them I heard the old man's voice continue. He seemed to be talking to himself as much as to me.

"The elemental beings you have always scoffed at, of course; they who operate ceaselessly behind the screen of appearances, and who fashion and mould the moods of the mind.. And an extremist like you — for extremes are always dangerously weak — is their legitimate prey."

"Pshaw!" I interrupted him, knowing that my manner betrayed me hopelessly, and that he had guessed much. "Any man may have subjective experiences, I suppose—"

Then I broke off suddenly. The change in his face made me start; it had taken on for the moment so exactly the look of the man on the hillside. The eyes gazing so steadily into mine had shadows in them, I thought.

“*Glamour t*” he was saying, “all glamour! One of them must have come very close to you, or perhaps touched you.” Then he asked sharply, “Did you meet any one? Did you speak with any one?”

“I came by Tom Bassett’s cottage,” I said. “I didn’t feel quite sure of my way and I went in and asked.”

“All glamour,” he repeated to himself, and then aloud to me, “And as for Bassett’s cottage, it was burnt down three years ago, and nothing stands there now but broken, roofless walls — —”

He stopped because I had seized him by the arm. In the shadows of the lamp-lit room behind him I thought I caught sight of dim forms moving past the book-shelves. But when my eye tried to focus them they faded and slipped away again into ceiling and walls. The details of the hill-top cottage, however, started into life again at the sight, and I seized my friend’s arm to tell him. But instantly, when I tried, it all faded away again as though it had been a dream, and I could recall nothing intelligible to repeat to him.

He looked at me and laughed, “They always obliterate the memory afterwards,” he said gently, “so that little remains beyond a mood, or an emotion, to show how profoundly deep their touch has been. Though sometimes part of the change remains and becomes permanent — as I hope in your case it may.”

Then, before I had time to answer, to swear, or to remonstrate, he stepped briskly past me and closed the door into the hall, and then drew me aside farther into the room. The change that I could not understand was still working in his face and eyes.

“If you have courage enough left to come with me,” he said, speaking very seriously, “we will go out again and see more. Up till midnight, you know, there is still the opportunity, and with me perhaps you won’t feel so — so —”

It was impossible somehow to refuse; everything combined to make me go. We had a little food and then went out into the hall, and he clapped a wideawake on his grey hairs. I took a cloak and seized a walking-stick from the stand. I really hardly knew what I was doing. The new world I had awakened-to seemed still a-quiver about me.

As we passed out on to the gravel drive the light from the hall windows fell upon his face, and I saw that the change I had been so long observing was nearing its completeness, for there breathed about him that keen, wonderful atmosphere of eternal youth I had felt upon the inmates of the cottage. He seemed to have gone back forty years; a veil was gathering over his eyes; and I could have sworn that somehow his stature had increased, and that he moved beside me with a vigour and power I had never seen in him before.

And as we began to climb the hill together in silence I saw that the stars were clear overhead and there was no mist, that the trees stood motionless without wind, and that beyond us on the summit of the hills there were lights dancing to and fro, appearing and disappearing like the reflection of stars in water.

* * * *

MISS SLUMBUBBLE — AND CLAUSTROPHOBIA

MISS DAPHNE SLUMBUBBLE was a nervous lady of uncertain age who invariably went abroad in the spring. It was her one annual holiday, and she slaved for it all the rest of the year, saving money by the many sad devices known only to those who find their incomes after forty “barely enough,” and always hoping that something would one day happen to better her dreary condition of cheap tea, tin loaves, and weekly squabbles with the laundress.

This spring holiday was the only time she really *lived* in the whole year, and she half starved herself for months immediately after her return, so as to put by quickly enough money for the journey in the following year. Once those six pounds were safe she felt better. After that she only had to save so many sums of four francs, each four francs meaning another day in the little cheap *pension* she always went to on the flowery slopes of the Alps of Valais.

Miss Slumbubble was exceedingly conscious of the presence of men. They made her nervous and afraid. She thought in her heart that all men were untrustworthy, not excepting policemen and clergymen, for in her early youth she had been cruelly deceived by a man to whom she had unreservedly given her heart He had suddenly gone away and left her without a word of explanation, and some months later had married another woman and allowed the announcement to appear in the papers. It is true that he had hardly once spoken to Daphne. But that was nothing. For the way he looked at her, the way he walked about the room, the very way he avoided her at the tea-parties where she used to meet him at her rich sister’s house — indeed, everything he did or left undone, brought convincing proof to her fluttering heart that he loved her secretly, and that he knew she loved him. His near presence disturbed her dreadfully, so much so that she invariably spilt her tea if he came even within scenting-distance of her; and once, when he crossed the room to offer her bread and butter, she was so certain the very way he held the plate interpreted his silent love, that she rose from her chair, looked straight into his eyes — and took the *whole plate* in a state of delicious confusion!

But all this was years ago, and she had long since learned to hold her grief in subjection and to prevent her life being too much embittered by the treachery — she felt it *was* treachery — of one man. She still, however, felt anxious and self-conscious in the presence of men, especially of silent, unmarried men, and to some extent it may be said that this fear haunted her life. It was shared, however, with other fears, probably all equally baseless. Thus, she lived in constant dread of fire, of railway accidents, of runaway cabs, and of being locked into a small, confined space. The former fears she shared, of course, with many other persons of both sexes, but the latter, the dread of confined spaces, was entirely due, no doubt, to a story she had heard in early youth to the effect that her father had once suffered from that singular nervous malady, *claustrophobia* (the fear of closed spaces), the terror of being caught in a confined place without possibility of escape.

Thus it was clear that Miss Daphne Slumbubble, this good, honest soul with jet flowers in her bonnet and rows of coloured photographs of Switzerland on her bedroom mantelpiece, led a life unnecessarily haunted.

The thought of the annual holiday, however, compensated for all else. In her lonely room behind Warwick Square she stewed through the dusty heat of summer, fought her way pluckily through the freezing winter fogs, and then, with the lengthening days, worked herself steadily into a fever heat of joyous anticipation as she counted the hours to the taking of her ticket in the first week of May. When the day came her happiness was so great that she wished for nothing else in the world. Even her name ceased to trouble her, for once on the other side of the Channel it sounded quite different on the lips of the foreigners, while in the little *pension* she was known as “Mlle. Daphné,” and the mere sound brought music into her heart. The odious surname belonged to the sordid London life. It had nothing to do with the glorious days that Mlle. Daphné spent among the mountain tops.

The platform at Victoria was already crowded when she arrived a good hour before the train started, and got her tiny faded trunk weighed and labelled. She was so excited that she talked unnecessarily to any one who would listen — to any one in station uniform, that is. Already in fancy she saw the blue sky above the shining snow peaks, heard the tinkling cow-bells, and sniffed the odours of pinewood and sawmill. She imagined the cheerful *table hôte* room with its wooden floor and rows of chairs; the *diligence* winding up the hot white road far below; the fragrant *café complet* in her bedroom at 7.30 — and then the long mornings with sketch-book and poetry-book under the forest shade, the clouds trailing slowly across the great cliffs, and the air always humming with the echoes of falling water.

“And you feel sure the passage will be calm, do you?” she asked the porter for the third time, as she bustled to and fro by his side.

“Well, there ain’t no wind *‘ere,* at any rate, Miss,” he replied cheerfully, putting her small box on a barrow.

“Such a lot of people go by this train, don’t they?” she piped.

“Oh, a tidy few. This is the season for foreign parts, I suppose.”

“Yes, yes; and the trains on the other side will be very full, too, I daresay,” she said, following him down the platform with quick, pattering footsteps, chirping all the way like a happy bird.

“Quite likely, Miss.”

“I shall go in a ‘Ladies only,’ you know. I always do every year. I think it’s safer, isn’t it?”

“I’ll see to it all for yer, Miss,”, replied the patient porter. “But the train ain’t in yet, not for another ‘arf hour or so.”

“Oh, thank you, then I’ll be here when it comes.

‘Ladies only,’ remember, and second class, and a corner seat facing the engine — no, *back* to the engine, I mean; and I *do* hope the Channel will be smooth. Do you think the wind — ?”

But the porter was out of hearing by this time, and Miss Slumbubble went wandering about the platform watching the people arrive, studying the blue and yellow advertisements of the *Côte dazur,* and waggling her jet beads with delight — with passionate delight — as she thought of her own little village in the high Alps where the snow crept down to a few hundred feet above the church and the meadows were greener than any in the whole wide world.

“I’ve put yer wraps in a ‘Lidies only,’ Miss,” said the porter at length, when the train came in, “and you’ve got the corner back to the engine all to yerself, an’ quite comfortable. Thank you, Miss.” He touched his cap and pocketed his sixpence, and the fussy little traveller went off to take up her position outside the carriage door for another half hour before the train started. She was always very nervous about trains; not only fearful of possible accidents to the engine and carriages, but of untoward happenings to the occupants of corridor-less compartments during long journeys without stops. The mere sight of a railway station, with its smoke and whistling and luggage, was sufficient to set her imagination in the direction of possible disaster.

The careful porter had piled all her belongings neatly in the corner for her: three newspapers, a magazine and a novel, a little bag to carry food in, two bananas and a Bath bun in paper, a bundle of wraps tied with a long strap, an umbrella, a bottle of Yanatas, an opera-glass (for the mountains), and a camera. She counted them all over, rearranged them a little differently, and then sighed a bit, partly from excitement, partly by way of protest at the delay.

A number of people came up and eyed the compartment critically and seemed on the point of getting in, but no one actually took possession. One lady put her umbrella in the corner, and then came tearing down the platform a few minutes later to take it away again, as though she had suddenly heard the train was not to start at all. There was much bustling to and fro, and a good deal of French was audible, and the sound of it thrilled Miss Daphne with happiness, for it was another delightful little anticipation of what was to come. Even the language sounded like a holiday, and brought with it a whiff of mountains and the subtle pleasures of sweet freedom.

Then a fat Frenchman arrived and inspected the carriage, and attempted to climb in. But she instantly pounced upon him in courageous dismay.

“Mais, c’est pour dames, m’sieur!” she cried, pronouncing it “dam.”

“Oh, damn!” he exclaimed in English; “I didn’t notice.” And the rudeness of the man — it was the fur coat over his arm made her think he was French — set her all in a flutter, so that she jumped in and took her seat hurriedly, and spread her many parcels in a protective and prohibitive way about her.

For the tenth time she opened her black beaded bag and took out her purse and made sure her ticket was in it, and then counted over her belongings.

"I *do* hope," she murmured, "I do hope that stupid porter *has* put in my luggage all right, and that the Channel won't be rough. Porters *are* so stupid. One ought never to lose sight of them till the luggage is actually in. I think I'd better pay the extra fare and go first class on the boat if it is rough. I can carry all my own packages, I think."

At that moment the man came for tickets. She searched everywhere for her own, but could not find it.

"I'm certain I had it a moment ago," she said breathlessly, while the man stood waiting at the open door. "I know I had it — only this very minute. Dear me, what *can* I have done with it? Ah! here it is!"

The man took so long examining the little tourist cover that she was afraid something must be wrong with it, and when at last he tore out a leaf and handed back the rest a sort of panic seized her.

"It's all right, isn't it, guard? I mean *I'm* all right, am I not? " she asked.

The guard closed the door and locked it "All right for Folkestone, ma'am," he said, and was gone.

There was much whistling and shouting and running up and down the platform, and the inspector was standing with his hand raised and the whistle at his lips, waiting to blow and looking cross. Suddenly her own porter flew past with an empty barrow. She dashed her head out of the window and hailed him.

"You're sure you put my luggage in aren't, you? " she cried. The man did not or would not hear, and as the train moved slowly off she bumped her head against an old lady standing on the platform who was looking the other way and waving to some one in a front carriage.

"Ooh! " cried Miss Slumbubble, straightening her bonnet, "you really should look where you're looking, madam!" — and then, realising she had said something foolish, she withdrew into the carriage and sank back in a fluster on the cushions.

"Oh! " she gasped again, "oh dear! I'm actually off at last. It's too good to be true. Oh, that horrid London!"

Then she counted her money over again, examined her ticket once more, and touched each of her many packages with a long finger in a cotton glove, saying, "*That's* there, and that, and that, and — *that!"* And then turning and pointing at herself she added, with a little happy laugh, *"and that!"*

The train gathered speed, and the dirty roofs and sea of ugly chimneys flew by as the dreary miles of depressing suburbs revealed themselves through the windows. She put all her parcels up in the rack and then took them all down again; and after a bit she put a few up — a carefully selected few that she would not need till Folkestone — and arranged the others, some upon the seat beside her, and some opposite. The paper bag of bananas she kept in her lap, where it grew warmer and warmer and more and more dishevelled in appearance.

"Actually off at last!" she murmured again, catching her breath a little in her joy. "Paris, Berne, Thun, Frutigen," she gave herself a little hug that made the jet beads rattle; "then the long diligence journey up those gorgeous mountains," she knew every inch of the way, "and a clear fifteen days at the *pension,* or even eighteen days, if I can get the cheaper room. Wheeeee! Can it be true? Can it be really true?*"* In her happiness she made sounds just like a bird.

She looked out of the window, where green fields had replaced the rows of streets. She opened her novel and tried to read. She played with the newspapers in a vain attempt to keep her eye on any one column. It was all in vain. A scene of wild beauty held her inner eye and made all else dull and uninteresting. The train sped on — slowly enough to her — yet every moment of the journey, every turn of the creaking wheels that brought her nearer, every little detail of the familiar route, became a source of keenest anticipatory happiness to her. She no longer cared about her name, or her silent and faithless lover of long ago, or of anything in the world but the fact that her absorbing little annual passion was now once again in a fair way to be gratified.

Then, quite suddenly, Miss Slumbubble realised her actual position, and felt afraid, unreasonably afraid. For the first time she became conscious that she was alone, alone in the compartment of an express train, and not even of a corridor express train.

Hitherto the excitement of getting off had occupied her mind to the exclusion of everything else, and if she had realised her solitude at all, she had realised it pleasurably. But now, in the first pause for breath as it were, when she had examined her packages, counted her money, glared at her ticket, and all the rest of it for the twentieth time, she leaned back in her seat and knew with a distinct shock that she was alone in a railway carriage on a comparatively long journey, alone for the first time in her life in a rattling, racing, shrieking train. She sat bolt upright and tried to collect herself a little.

Of all the emotions, that of fear is probably the least susceptible to the power of suggestion, certainly of auto-suggestion; and of vague fear that has no obvious cause this is especially true. With a fear of known origin one can argue, humour it, pacify, turn on the hose of ridicule — in a word, *suggest* that it depart; but with a fear that rises stealthily out of no comprehensible causes the mind finds itself at a complete loss. The mere assertion “I am not afraid” is as useless and empty as the subtler kind of suggestion that lies in affecting to ignore it altogether. Searching for the cause, moreover, tends to confuse the mind, and searching in vain, to terrify.

Miss Slumbubble pulled herself sharply together, and began to search for what made her afraid, but for a long time she searched in vain.

At first she searched externally: she thought perhaps it had something to do with one of her packages, and she placed them all out in a row on the seat in front of her and examined each in turn, bananas, camera, food bag, black bead bag, &c. &c. But she discovered nothing among them to cause alarm.

Then she searched internally: her thoughts, her rooms in London, her *pension*, her money, ticket, plans in general, her future, her past, her health, her religion, anything and everything among the events of her inner life she passed in review, yet found nothing that could have caused this sudden sense of being troubled and afraid.

Moreover, as she vainly searched, her fear increased. She got into a regular nervous flurry.

“I declare if I’m not all in a perspiration!” she exclaimed aloud, and shifted down the dirty cushions to another place, looking anxiously about her as she did so. She probed everywhere in her thoughts to find the reason of her fear, but could think of nothing. Yet in her soul there was a sense of growing distress.

She found her new seat no more comfortable than the one before it, and shifted in turn into all the corners of the carriage, and down the middle as well, till at last she had tried every possible part of it. In each place she felt less at ease than in the one before. She got up and looked into the empty racks, under the seats, beneath the heavy cushions, which she lifted with difficulty. Then she put all the packages back again into the rack, dropping several of them in her nervous hurry, and being obliged to kneel on the floor to recover them from under the seats. This made her breathless. Moreover, the dust got into her throat and made her cough. Her eyes smarted and she grew uncomfortably warm. Then, quite accidentally, she caught sight of her reflection in the coloured picture of Boulogne under the rack, and the appearance she presented added greatly to her dismay. She looked so unlike herself, and wore such an odd expression. It was almost like the face of another person altogether.

The sense of alarm, once wakened, is fed by anything and everything, from a buzzing fly to a dark cloud in the sky. The woman collapsed on to the seat behind her in a distressing fluster of nervous fear.

But Miss Daphne Slumbubble had pluck. She was not so easily dismayed after all. She had read somewhere that terror was sometimes dispersed by the loud and strong affirmation of one's own name. She believed much that she read, provided it was plainly and vigorously expressed, and she acted at once on this knowledge.

"I am Daphne Slumbubble!" she affirmed in a firm, confident tone of voice, sitting stiffly on the edge of the seat; "I am not afraid — of anything." She added the last two words as an after-thought. "I am Daphne Slumbubble, and I have paid for my ticket, and know where I am going, and my luggage is in the van, and I have all my smaller things here!" She enumerated them one by one; she omitted nothing.

Yet the sound of her own voice, and especially of her own name, added apparently to her distress. It sounded oddly, like a voice outside the carriage. Everything seemed suddenly to have become strange, and unfamiliar, and unfriendly. She moved across to the opposite corner and looked out of the window: trees, fields, and occasional country houses flew past in endless swift succession. The country looked charming; she saw rooks flying and farm-horses moving laboriously over the fields. What in the world was there to feel afraid of? What in the world made her so restless and fidgety and frightened? Once again she examined her packages, her ticket, her money. All was right.

Then she dashed across to the window and tried to open it. The sash stuck. She pulled and pulled in vain. The sash refused to yield. She ran to the other window, with a like result. Both were closed. Both refused to open. Her fear grew. She was locked in! The windows would not open. Something was wrong with the carriage. She suddenly recalled the way every one had examined it and refused to enter. There must be something the matter with the carriage — something she had omitted to observe. Terror ran like a flame through her. She trembled and was ready to cry.

She ran up and down between the cushioned seats like a bird in a cage, casting wild glances at the racks and under the seats and out of the windows. A sudden panic took her, and she tried to open the door. It was locked. She flew to the other door. That, too, was locked. Good Heavens, both were locked! She was locked in. She was a prisoner. She was caught in a closed space. The mountains were out of her reach — the free open woods — the wide fields, the scented winds of heaven. She was caught, hemmed in, celled, restricted like a prisoner in a dungeon. The thought maddened her. The feeling that she could not reach the open spaces of sky and forest, of field and blue horizon, struck straight into her soul and touched all that she held most dear. She screamed. She ran down between the cushioned seats and screamed aloud.

Of course, no one heard her. The thunder of the train killed the feeble sound of her voice. Her voice was the cry of the imprisoned person.

Then quite suddenly she understood what it all meant. There was nothing wrong with the carriage, or with her parcels, or with the train. She sat own abruptly upon the dirty cushions and faced the position there and then. It had nothing to do with her past or her future, her ticket or her money, her religion or her health. It was something else entirely. She knew what it was, and the knowledge brought icy terror at once. She had at last labelled the source of her consternation, and the discovery increased rather than lessened her distress.

It was the fear of closed spaces. It was *claustrophobia I* There could no longer be any doubt about it. She was shut in. She was enclosed in a narrow space from which she could not escape. The walls and floor and ceiling shut her in implacably. The doors was fastened; the windows were sealed, there was no escape.

“That porter *might* have told me!” she exclaimed inconsequently, mopping her face. Then the foolishness of the saying dawned upon her, and she thought her mind must be going. That was the effect of claustrophobia, she remembered: the mind went, and one said and did foolish things. Oh, to get out into a free open space, uncornered! Here she was trapped, horribly trapped.

“The guard man should never have locked me in — never !” she cried, and ran up and down between the seats, throwing her weight first against the door and then against the other. Of course, fortunately, neither of them yielded.

Thinking food might calm her, perhaps, she took down the banana bag and peeled the squashy over ripe fruit, munching it with part of the Bath bun from the other bag, and sitting midway on the forward seat. Suddenly the right-hand window dropped with a bang and a rattle. It had only been stuck after all, and her efforts, aided by the shaking of the train, had completed its undoing, or rather its unclosing. Miss Slumbubble shrieked, and dropped her banana and bun.

But the shock passed in a moment when she saw what had happened, and that the window was open and the sweet air pouring in from the flying fields. She rushed up and put her head out. This was followed by her hand, for she meant to open the door from the outside if possible. Whatever happened, the one imperative thing was that she must get into open space. The handle turned easily enough, but the door was locked higher up and she could not make it budge. She put her head farther out, so that the wind tore the jet bonnet off her head and left it twirling in the dusty whirlwind on the line far behind, and this sensation of the air whistling past her ears and through her flying hair somehow or other managed to make her feel wilder than ever. In fact, she completely lost her head, and began to scream at the top of her voice:

“I’m locked in! I’m a prisoner! Help, help!” she yelled.

A window opened in the next compartment and a young man put his head out “What the deuce is the matter? Are you being murdered? “ he shouted down the wind.

‘‘I’m locked in! I’m locked in!” screamed the hatless lady, wrestling furiously with the obdurate door handle.

“Don’t open the door!” cried the young man anxiously.

“I can’t, you idiot! I can’t!”

“Wait a moment and I’ll come to you. Don’t try to get out. I’ll climb along the foot-board. Keep calm, madam, keep calm. I’ll save you.”

He disappeared from view. Good Heavens! he meant to crawl out and come to her carriage by the window! A man, a *young* man, would shortly be in the compartment with her. Locked in, too! No, it was impossible. That was worse than the claustrophobia, and she could not endure such a thing for a moment. The young man would certainly kill her and steal all her packages.

She ran once or twice frantically up and down the narrow floor. Then she looked out of the window.

“Oh, bless my heart and soul!” she cried out, he’s out already!”

The young man, evidently thinking the lady was being assaulted, had climbed out of the window and was pluckily coming to her rescue. He was already on the foot-board, swinging by the brass bars on the side of the coach as the train rocked down the line at a fearful pace.

But Miss Slumbubble took a deep breath and a sudden determination. She did, in fact, the only thing left to her to do. She pulled the communication cord once, twice, three times, and then drew the window up with a sudden snap just before the young man’s head appeared round the corner of the sash. Then, stepping backwards, she trod on the slippery banana bag and fell flat on her back upon the dirty floor between the seats.

The train slackened speed almost immediately and came to a stop. Miss Slumbubble still sat on the floor, staring in a dazed fashion at her toes. She realised the enormity of her offence, and was thoroughly frightened. She had actually pulled the cord! — the, cord that is meant to be seen but not touched, the little chain that meant a *£5* fine and all sorts of dire consequences.

She heard voices shouting and doors opening, and a moment later a key rattled near her head, and she saw the guard swinging up on to the steps of the carriage. The door was wide open, and the young man from the next compartment was explaining volubly what he seen and heard.

“I thought it was murder,” he was saying.

But the guard pushed quickly into the carriage and lifted the panting and dishevelled lady on to the seat.

“Now, what’s all this about? Was it you that pulled the cord, ma’am?” he asked somewhat roughly. “It’s serious stoppin’ a train like this, you know, a mail train.”

Now Miss Daphne did not mean to tell a lie. It was not deliberate, that is to say. It seemed to slip out of its own accord as the most natural and obvious thing to say. For she was terrified at what she had done, and *had* to find a good excuse. Yet how in the world could she describe to this stupid and hurried official all she had gone through? Moreover, he would be so certain to think she was merely drunk.

“It was a man,” she said, falling back instinctively upon her natural enemy. “There’s a man somewhere!” She glanced round at the racks and under the seats. The guard followed her eyes.

“I don’t see no man,” he declared; “all I know is you’ve stopped the mail train without any visible or reasonable cause. “I’ll be obliged with your name and address, ma’am, if you please,” he added, taking a dirty note-book from his pocket and wetting the blunt pencil in his mouth.

“Let me get air — at once,” she said. “I must have air first. Of course you shall have my name. The whole affair is disgraceful.” She was getting her wits back. She moved to the door.

“That may be, ma’am,” the man said, “but I’ve my duty to perform, and I must report the facts, and then get the train on as quick as possible. You must stay in the carriage, please. We’ve been waiting ‘ere a bit too long already.”

Miss Slumbubble met her fate calmly. She realised it was not fair to keep all the passengers waiting while she got a little fresh air. There was a brief confabulation between the two guards, which ended by the one who had first come taking his seat in her carriage, while the other blew his whistle and the train started off again and flew at great speed the remaining miles to Folkestone.

“Now I’ll lake the name and address, if you please, ma’am,” he said politely. “*Daphny,* yes, thank you, Daphny without a hef, all right, thank you.”

He wrote it all down laboriously while the hatless little lady sat opposite, indignant, excited, ready to be voluble the moment she could think what was best to say, and above all fearful that her holiday would be delayed, if not prevented altogether.

Presently the guard looked up at her and put his note-book away in an inner pocket. It was just after he had entered the number of the carriage.

“You see, ma’am,” he explained with sudden suavity, “this communication cord is only for cases of real danger, and if I report this, as I should do, it means a ‘eavy fine. You must ‘ave just pulled it as a sort of hexperiment, didn’t you?”

Something in the man’s voice caught her ear; there was a change in it; his manner, too, had altered somehow. He suddenly seemed to have become apologetic. She was quick to notice the change, though she could not understand what caused it. It began, she fancied, from the moment he entered the number of the carriage in his notebook.

“It’s the delay to the train I’ve got to explain,” he continued, as if speaking to himself, “and I can’t put it all on to the engine-driver—”

“Perhaps we shall make it up and there won’t be any delay,” ventured Miss Slumbubble, carefully smoothing her hair and rearranging the stray hairpins.

“ — and I don’t want to get no one into any kind of trouble, least of all myself,” he continued, wholly ignoring the interruption. Then he turned round in his seat and stared hard at his companion with rather a worried, puzzled expression of countenance and a shrug of the shoulders that was distinctly apologetic. Plainly, she thought, he was preparing the way for a compromise — for a tip!

The train was slackening speed; already it was in the cutting where it reverses and is pushed backwards on to the pier. Miss Slumbubble was desperate. She had never tipped a man before in her life except for obvious and recognised services, and this seemed to her like compounding a felony, or some such dreadful thing. Yet so much was at stake: she might be detained at Folkestone for days before the matter came into court, to say nothing of a *£5* fine, which meant that her holiday would be utterly stopped. The blue and white mountains swam into her field of vision, and she heard the wind in the pine forest.

"Perhaps you would give this to your wife," she said timidly, holding out a sovereign.

The guard looked at it and shook his head.

"I 'aven't got a wife, exackly," he said; " but it isn't money I want. What I want is to 'ush this little matter up as quietly as possible. I may lose my job over this — but if you'll agree to say nothing about it, I think I can square the driver and t'other guard."

"*I* won't say anything, *of course,"* stammered the astonished lady. "But I don't think I quite understand—"

"You couldn't understand either till I tell you," he replied, looking greatly relieved; "but the fac' is, I never noticed the carriage till I come to put the number down, and then I see it's the very one — the very same number—"

"What number?"

He stared at her for a moment without speaking. Then he appeared to take a great decision.

"Well, I'm in your 'ands anyhow, ma'am, and I may as well tell you the lot, and then we both 'elps the other out It's this way, you see. You ain't the first to try and jump out of this carriage — not by a long ways. It's been done before by a good number—"

"Gracious!"

"But the first who did it was that German woman, Binckmann—"

"Binckmann, the woman who was found on the line last year, and the carriage door open? " cried Miss Slumbubble, aghast.

“That’s her. This was the carriage she jumped from, and they tried to say it was murder, but couldn’t find any one who could have done it, and then they said she must have been crazy. And since then this carriage was said to be ‘aunted, because so many other people tried to do the same thing and throw theirselves out too, till the company changed the number—”

“To this number?” cried the excited spinster, pointing to the figures on the door.

“That’s it, ma’am. And if you look you’ll see this number don’t follow on with the others. Even then the thing didn’t stop, and we got orders to let no one in. That’s where I made my mistake. I left the door unlocked, and they put you in. If this gets in the papers I’ll be dismissed for sure. The company’s awful strict about that.”

“I’m terrified! “ exclaimed Miss Slumbubble, “for that’s exactly what I felt —”

“That you’d got to jump out, you mean? “ asked the guard.

“Yes. The terror of being shut in.”

“That’s what the doctors said Binckmann had — the fear of being shut up in a tight place. They gave it some long name, but that’s what it was: she couldn’t abide being closed in. Now, here we are at the pier, ma’am, and, if you’ll allow me, I’ll help you to carry your little bits of luggage.”

“Oh, thank you, guard, thank you,” she said faintly, taking his proffered hand and getting out with infinite relief on to the platform.

“Tchivalry ain’t dead yet, Miss,” he replied gallantly, as he loaded himself up with her packages and led the way down to the steamer.

Ten minutes later the deep notes of the syren echoed across the pier, and the paddles began to churn the green sea. And Miss Daphne Slumbubble, hatless but undismayed, went abroad to flutter the remnants of her faded youth before the indifferent foreigners in the cheap *pension* among the Alps.

THE WOMAN’S GHOST STORY

“YES,” SHE SAID, from her seat in the dark corner, “I’ll tell you an experience if you care to listen. And, what’s more, I’ll tell it briefly, without trimmings — I mean without unessentials. That’s a thing story-tellers never do, you know,” she laughed. “They drag in all the unessentials and leave their listeners to disentangle; but I’ll give you just the essentials, and you can make of it what you please. But on one condition: that at the end you ask no questions, because I can’t explain it and have no wish to.”

We agreed. We were all serious. After listening to a dozen prolix stories from people who merely wished to “talk” but had nothing to tell, we wanted “essentials.”

“In those days,” she began, feeling from the quality of our silence that we were with her, “in those days I was interested in psychic things, and had arranged to sit up alone in a haunted house in the middle of London. It was a cheap and dingy lodging-house in a mean street, unfurnished. I had already made a preliminary examination in daylight that afternoon, and the keys from the caretaker, who lived next door, were in my pocket. The story was a good one — satisfied me, at any rate, that it was worth investigating; and I won’t weary you with details as to the woman’s murder and all the tiresome elaboration as to *why* the place was *alive.* Enough that it was.

“I was a good deal bored, therefore, to see a man, whom I took to be the talkative old caretaker, waiting for me on the steps when I went in at “P.M., for I had sufficiently explained that I wished to be there alone for the night “‘I wished to show you *the* room,’ he mumbled, and of course I couldn’t exactly refuse, having tipped him for the temporary loan of a chair and table.

“ “Come in, then, and let’s be quick,’ I said.

“We went in, he shuffling after me through the unlighted hall up to the first floor where the murder had taken place, and I prepared myself to hear his inevitable account before turning him out with the half-crown his persistence had earned. After lighting the gas I sat down in the arm-chair he had provided — a faded, brown plush arm-chair — and turned for the first time to face him and get through with the performance as quickly as possible. And it was in that instant I got my first shock. The man was *not* the caretaker. It was not the old fool, Carey, I had interviewed earlier in the day and made my plans with. My heart gave a horrid jump.

"'Now who are *you,* pray? ' I said. "You're not Carey, the man I arranged with this afternoon. Who are you?'

"I felt uncomfortable, as you may imagine. I was a I psychical researcher,' and a young woman of new tendencies, and proud of my liberty, but I did not care to find myself in an empty house with a stranger. Something of my confidence left me. Confidence with women, you know, is all humbug after a certain point. Or perhaps you don't know, for most of you are men. But anyhow my pluck ebbed in a quick rush, and I felt afraid.

"'Who are you?' I repeated quickly and nervously. The fellow was well dressed, youngish and good-looking, but with a face of great sadness. I myself was barely thirty. I am giving you essentials, or I would not mention it. Out of quite ordinary things comes this story. I think that's why it has value.

"' No,' he said; 'I'm the man who was frightened to death.'

"His voice and his words ran through me like a knife, and I felt ready to drop. In my pocket was the book I had bought to make notes in. I felt the pencil sticking in the socket. I felt, too, the extra warm things I had put on to sit up in, as no bed or sofa was available — a hundred things dashed through my mind, foolishly and without sequence or meaning, as the way is when one is really frightened. Unessentials leaped up and puzzled me, and I thought of what the papers might say if it came out, and what my 'smart' brother-in-law would think, and whether it would be told that I had cigarettes in my pocket, and was a free-thinker."

"'The man who was frightened to death!'" I repeated aghast "'That's me,' he said stupidly.

"I stared at him just as you would have done — any one of you men now listening to me — and felt my life ebbing and flowing like a sort of hot fluid. You needn't laugh! That's how I felt. Small things, you know, touch the mind with great earnestness when terror is there — *real terror.* But I might have been at a middle-class tea-party, for all the ideas I had: they were so ordinary! ”

“‘But I thought you were the caretaker I tipped this afternoon to let me sleep here!’ I gasped.

‘Did — did Carey send you to meet me?’

“‘No,’ he replied in a voice that touched my boots somehow. ‘I am the man who was frightened to death. And what is more, I am frightened *now*,”

“‘So am I!’ I managed to utter, speaking instinctively. ‘I’m simply terrified.’

“‘Yes,’ he replied in that same odd voice that seemed to sound within me. ‘But you are still in the flesh, and I — *am not!’*

“I felt the need for vigorous self-assertion. I stood up in that empty, unfurnished room, digging the nails into my palms and clenching my teeth. I was determined to assert my individuality and my courage as a new woman and a free soul.

“‘You mean to say you are not in the flesh!’ I gasped. ‘What in the world are you talking about?’

“The silence of the night swallowed up my voice. For the first time I realised that darkness was over the city; that dust lay upon the stairs; that the floor above was untenanted and the floor below empty. I was alone in an unoccupied and haunted house, unprotected, and a woman. I chilled. I heard the wind round the house, and knew the stars were hidden. My thoughts rushed to policemen and omnibuses, and everything that was useful and comforting. I suddenly realised what a fool I was to come to such a house alone. I was icily afraid I thought the end of my life had come. I was an utter fool to go in for psychical research when I had not the necessary nerve.

“‘Good God!’ I gasped. 'If you’re not Carey, the man I arranged with, who are you?’

“I was really stiff with terror. The man moved slowly towards me across the empty room. I held out my arm to stop him, getting up out of my chair at the same moment, and he came to a halt just opposite to me, a smile on his worn, sad face. - “‘I told you who I am,’ he repeated quietly with a sigh, looking at me with the saddest eyes I have ever seen, ‘and I am frightened *still’*

“ — By this time I was convinced that I was entertaining either a rogue or a madman, and I cursed my stupidity in bringing the man in without having seen his face. My mind was quickly made up, and I knew what to do. Ghosts and psychic phenomena flew to the winds. If I angered the creature my life might pay the price. I must humour him till I got to the door, and then race for the street. I stood bolt upright and faced him. We were about of a height, and I was a strong, athletic woman who played hockey in winter and climbed Alps in summer. My hand itched for a stick, but I had none.

‘“Now, of course, I remember,’ I said with a sort of stiff smile that was very hard to force. ‘Now I remember your case and the wonderful way you behaved...’

“The man stared at me stupidly, turning his head to watch me as I backed more and more quickly to the door. But when his face broke into a smile I could control myself no longer. I reached the door in a run, and shot out on to the landing. Like a fool, I turned the wrong way, and stumbled over the stairs leading to the next storey. But it was too late to change. The man was after me, I was sure, though no sound of footsteps came; and I dashed up the next flight, tearing my skirt and banging my ribs in the darkness, and rushed headlong into the first room I came to. Luckily the door stood ajar, and, still more fortunate, there was a key in the lock. In a second I had slammed the door, flung my whole weight against it, and turned the key.

“I was safe, but my heart was beating like a drum. A second later it seemed to stop altogether, for I saw that there was some one else in the room besides myself. A man’s figure stood between me and the windows, where the street lamps gave just enough light to outline his shape against the glass. I’m a plucky woman, you know, for even then I didn’t give up hope, but I may tell you that I have never felt so vilely frightened in all my born days. I had locked myself in with him!

“The man leaned against the window, watching me where I lay in a collapsed heap upon the floor. So there were two men in the house with me, I reflected. Perhaps other rooms were occupied too! What could it all mean? But, as I stared something changed in the room, or in me — hard to say which — and I realised my mistake, so that my fear, which had so far been physical, at once altered its character and became *psychical.* I became afraid in my soul instead of in my heart, and I knew immediately who this man was.

"'How in the world did you get up here?' I stammered to him across the empty room, amazement momentarily stemming my fear.

"'Now, let me tell you,' he began, in that odd far-away voice of his that went down my spine like a knife. "I'm in different space, for one thing, and you'd find me in any room you went into; for according to your way of measuring, I'm *all over the house.* Space is a bodily condition, but I am out of the body, and am not affected by space. It's my condition that keeps me here. I want something to change my condition for me, for then I could get away. What I want is sympathy. Or, really, more than sympathy; I want affection — I want *love!*'

"While he was speaking I gathered myself slowly upon my feet. I wanted to scream and cry and laugh all at once, but I only succeeded in sighing, for my emotion was exhausted and a numbness was coming over me. I felt for the matches in my pocket and made a movement towards the gas jet.

"'I should be much happier if you didn't light the gas,' he said at once, 'for the vibrations of your light hurt me a good deal. You need not be afraid that I shall injure you. I can't touch your body to begin with, for there's a great gulf fixed, you know; and really this half-light suits me best. Now, let me continue what I was trying to say before. You know, so many people have come to this house to see me, and most of them have seen me, and one and all have been terrified. If only, oh I if only some one would be *not* terrified, but kind and loving to me! Then, you see, I might be able to change my condition and get away.'

"His voice was so sad that I felt tears start somewhere at the back of my eyes; but fear kept all else in check, and I stood shaking and cold as I listened to him.

"'Who are you then? Of course Carey didn't send you, I know now,' I managed to utter. My thoughts scattered dreadfully and I could think of nothing to say. I was afraid of a stroke.

"'I know nothing about Carey, or who he is,' continued the man quietly, 'and the name my body had I have forgotten, thank God; but I am the man who was frightened to death in this house ten years ago, and I have been frightened ever since, and am frightened still; for the succession of cruel and curious people who come to this house to see the ghost, and thus keep alive its atmosphere of terror, only helps to render my condition worse. If only some one would be kind to me — *laugh,* speak gently and rationally with me, cry if they like, pity, comfort, soothe me — anything but come here in curiosity and tremble as you are now doing in that corner. Now, madam, won't you take pity on me? ' His voice rose to a dreadful cry. 'Won't you step out into the middle of the room and try to love me a little?'

"A horrible laughter came gurgling up in my throat as I heard him, but the sense of pity was stronger than the laughter, and I found myself actually leaving the support of the wall and approaching the centre of the floor.

"'By God!' he cried, at once straightening up against the window, 'you have done a kind act. That's the first attempt at sympathy that has been shown me since I died, and I feel better already. In life, you know, I was a misanthrope. Everything went wrong with me, and I came to hate my fellow men so much that I couldn't bear to see them even. Of course, like begets like, and this hate was returned. Finally I suffered from horrible delusions, and my room became haunted with demons that laughed and grimaced, and one night I ran into a whole cluster of them near the bed — and the fright stopped my heart and killed me. It's hate and remorse, as much as terror, that clogs me so thickly and keeps me here. If only some one could feel pity, and sympathy, and perhaps a little love for me, I could get away and be happy. When you came this afternoon to see over the house I watched you, and a little hope came to me for the first time. I saw you had courage, originality, resource — l*ove.* If only I could touch your heart, without frightening you, I knew I could perhaps tap that love you have stored up in your being there, and thus borrow the wings for my escape!'

"Now I must confess my heart began to ache a little, as fear left me and the man's words sank their sad meaning into me. Still, the whole affair was so incredible, and so touched with unholy quality, and the story of a woman's murder I had come to investigate had so obviously nothing to do with this thing, that I felt myself in a kind of wild dream that seemed likely to stop at any moment and leave me somewhere in bed after a nightmare.

“Moreover, his words possessed me to such an extent that I found it impossible to reflect upon anything else at all, or to consider adequately any ways and means of action or escape.

“I moved a little nearer to him in the gloom, horribly frightened, of course, but with the beginnings of a strange determination in my heart “‘You women,’ he continued, his voice plainly thrilling at my approach, “you wonderful women, to whom life often bring? no opportunity of spending your great love, oh, if you only could know how many of *us* simply yearn for it! It would save our souls, if you but knew. Few might find the chance that you now have, but if you only spent your love freely, without definite object, just letting it flow openly for all who need, you would reach hundreds and thousands of souls like me, and *release us!* Oh, madam, I ask you again to feel, with me, to be kind and gentle — and if you can to love me a little!’

“My heart did leap within me and this time the tears did come, for I could not restrain them. I laughed too, for the way he called me ‘madam’ sounded so odd, here in this empty room at midnight in a London street, but my laughter stopped dead and merged in a flood of weeping when I saw how my change of feeling affected him. He had left his place by the window and was kneeling on the floor at my feet, his hands stretched out towards me, and the first signs of a kind of glory about his head.

“‘Put your arms round me and kiss me, for the love of God!’ he cried. ‘Kiss me, oh, kiss me, and I shall be freed! You have done so much already — now do this!’

“I stuck there, hesitating, shaking, my determination on the verge of action, yet not quite able to compass it. But the terror had almost gone.

“‘Forget that I’m a man and you’re a woman,’ he continued in the most beseeching voice I ever heard. ‘Forget that I’m a ghost, and come out boldly and press me to you with a great kiss, and let your love flow into me. Forget yourself just for one minute and do a brave thing! Oh, love me, *love me,* love me! and I shall be free!’

“The words, or the deep force they somehow released in the centre of my bang, stirred me profoundly, and an emotion infinitely greater than fear surged up over me and carried me with it across the edge of action. Without hesitation I took two steps forward towards him where he knelt, and held out my arms. Pity and love were in my heart at that moment, genuine pity, I swear, and genuine love. I forgot myself and my little tremblings in a great desire to help another soul.

"'I love you I poor, aching, unhappy thing! I love you,' I cried through hot tears; 'and I am not the least bit afraid in the world.'

"The man uttered a curious sound, like laughter, yet not laughter, and turned his face up to me. The light from the street below fell on it, but there was another light, too, shining all round it that seemed to come from the eyes and skin. He rose to his feet and met me, and in that second I folded him to my breast and kissed him full on the lips again and again."

All our pipes had gone out, and not even a skirt rustled in that dark studio as the story-teller paused a moment to steady her voice, and put a hand softly up to her eyes before going on again.

"Now, what can I say, and how can I describe to you, all you sceptical men sitting there with pipes in your mouths, the amazing sensation I experienced of holding an intangible, impalpable thing so closely to my heart that it touched my body with equal pressure all the way down, and then melted away somewhere into my very being? For it was like seizing a rush of cool wind and feeling a touch of burning fire the moment it had struck its swift blow and passed on. A series of shocks ran all over and all through me; a momentary ecstasy of flaming sweetness and wonder thrilled down into me; my heart gave another great leap — and then I was alone-

"The room was empty. I turned on the gas and struck a match to prove it. All fear had left me, and something was singing round me in the air and in my heart like the joy of a spring morning in youth. Not all the devils or shadows or hauntings in the world could then have caused me a single tremor.

"I unlocked the door and went all over the dark house, even into kitchen and cellar and up among the ghostly attics. But the house was empty. Something had left it. I lingered a short hour, analysing, thinking, wondering — you can guess what and how, perhaps, but I won't detail, for I promised only essentials, remember — and then went out to sleep the remainder of the night in my own flat, locking the door behind me upon a house no longer haunted.

“But my uncle, Sir Henry, the owner of the house, required an account of my adventure, and of course I was in duty bound to give him some kind of a true story. Before I could begin, however, he held up his hand to stop me.

“‘First,’ he said, ‘I wish to tell you a little deception I ventured to practise on you. So many people have been to that house and seen the ghost that I came to think the story acted on their imaginations, and I wished to make a better test. So I invented for their benefit another story, with the idea that if you did see anything I could be sure it was not due merely to an excited imagination.’

“‘Then what you told me about a woman having been murdered, and all that, was not the true story of the haunting?’

“‘It was not. The true story is that a cousin of mine went mad in that house, and killed himself in a fit of morbid terror following upon years of miserable hypochondriasis. It is his figure that investigators see.’

“‘That explains, then,’ I gasped —

“‘Explains what?’

“I thought of that poor struggling soul, longing all these years for escape, and determined to keep my story for the present to myself.

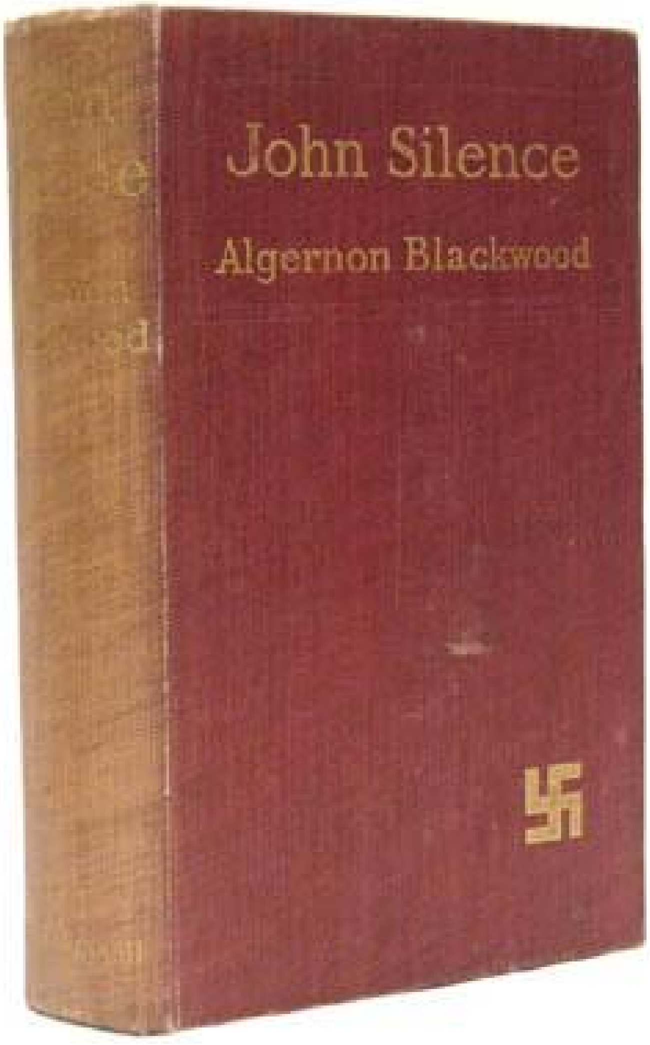
“‘Explains, I mean, why I did not see the ghost of the murdered woman,’ I concluded.

“‘Precisely, said Sir Henry, ‘and why, if you had seen anything, it would have had value, inasmuch as it could not have been caused by the imagination working upon a story you already knew.’”

John Silence (1908)

Blackwood’s John Silence is a ‘psychic doctor’, who uses his connection with the spirit world to lay troublesome spirits and defeat diabolical dabblers in the black arts. For these stories, first collected in volume form in 1908, Blackwood drew on his own occult knowledge, as well as his experiences of drug abuse and of his time at a boarding school in the Black Forest run by the Moravian Brotherhood. The tales range over a wide variety of supernatural phenomenon, from a town overrun with black cats to a drug that leaves the mind fatally exposed to supernatural forces; from a werewolf attack to a mansion besieged by a fire demon.

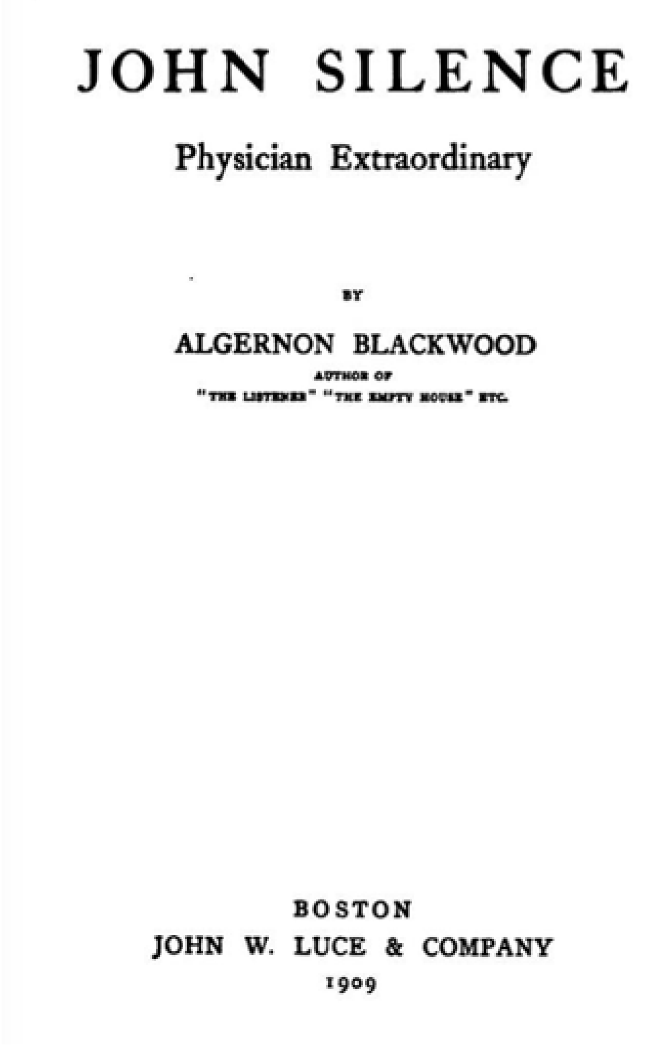
Blackwood wrote a further John Silence story in 1914, ‘A Victim of Higher Space’, which was collected in *Day and Night Stories* (1917). The final tale is provided at the end of this edition of the John Silence stories.


John Silence
Algernon Blackwood

The first edition – the Swastika design reflects its original use as a mystical symbol, which was later used by the National Socialist Party for its own ends

CONTENTS

CASE I. A PSYCHICAL INVASION
CASE II. ANCIENT SORCERIES
CASE III. THE NEMESIS OF FIRE
CASE IV. SECRET WORSHIP
CASE V. THE CAMP OF THE DOG
A VICTIM OF HIGHER SPACE



JOHN SILENCE

Physician Extraordinary

BY

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

AUTHOR OF
"THE LISTENER" "THE EMPTY HOUSE" ETC.

BOSTON
JOHN W. LUCE & COMPANY
1909

Title page of the first U.S. edition

TO

M. L. W.

THE ORIGINAL OF JOHN SILENCE

AND

MY COMPANION IN MANY ADVENTURES

CASE I. A PSYCHICAL INVASION

“And what is it makes you think I could be of use in this particular case?” asked Dr. John Silence, looking across somewhat sceptically at the Swedish lady in the chair facing him.

“Your sympathetic heart and your knowledge of occultism — —”

“Oh, please — that dreadful word!” he interrupted, holding up a finger with a gesture of impatience.

“Well, then,” she laughed, “your wonderful clairvoyant gift and your trained psychic knowledge of the processes by which a personality may be disintegrated and destroyed — these strange studies you’ve been experimenting with all these years — —”

“If it’s only a case of multiple personality I must really cry off,” interrupted the doctor again hastily, a bored expression in his eyes.

“It’s not that; now, please, be serious, for I want your help,” she said; “and if I choose my words poorly you must be patient with my ignorance. The case I know will interest you, and no one else could deal with it so well. In fact, no ordinary professional man could deal with it at all, for I know of no treatment or medicine that can restore a lost sense of humour!”

“You begin to interest me with your ‘case,’” he replied, and made himself comfortable to listen.

Mrs. Sivendson drew a sigh of contentment as she watched him go to the tube and heard him tell the servant he was not to be disturbed.

“I believe you have read my thoughts already,” she said; “your intuitive knowledge of what goes on in other people’s minds is positively uncanny.”

Her friend shook his head and smiled as he drew his chair up to a convenient position and prepared to listen attentively to what she had to say. He closed his eyes, as he always did when he wished to absorb the real meaning of a recital that might be inadequately expressed, for by this method he found it easier to set himself in tune with the living thoughts that lay behind the broken words.

By his friends John Silence was regarded as an eccentric, because he was rich by accident, and by choice — a doctor. That a man of independent means should devote his time to doctoring, chiefly doctoring folk who could not pay, passed their comprehension entirely. The native nobility of a soul whose first desire was to help those who could not help themselves, puzzled them. After that, it irritated them, and, greatly to his own satisfaction, they left him to his own devices.

Dr. Silence was a free-lance, though, among doctors, having neither consulting-room, bookkeeper, nor professional manner. He took no fees, being at heart a genuine philanthropist, yet at the same time did no harm to his fellow-practitioners, because he only accepted unremunerative cases, and cases that interested him for some very special reason. He argued that the rich could pay, and the very poor could avail themselves of organised charity, but that a very large class of ill-paid, self-respecting workers, often followers of the arts, could not afford the price of a week's comforts merely to be told to travel. And it was these he desired to help: cases often requiring special and patient study — things no doctor can give for a guinea, and that no one would dream of expecting him to give.

But there was another side to his personality and practice, and one with which we are now more directly concerned; for the cases that especially appealed to him were of no ordinary kind, but rather of that intangible, elusive, and difficult nature best described as psychical afflictions; and, though he would have been the last person himself to approve of the title, it was beyond question that he was known more or less generally as the "Psychic Doctor."

In order to grapple with cases of this peculiar kind, he had submitted himself to a long and severe training, at once physical, mental, and spiritual. What precisely this training had been, or where undergone, no one seemed to know, — for he never spoke of it, as, indeed, he betrayed no single other characteristic of the charlatan, — but the fact that it had involved a total disappearance from the world for five years, and that after he returned and began his singular practice no one ever dreamed of applying to him the so easily acquired epithet of quack, spoke much for the seriousness of his strange quest and also for the genuineness of his attainments.

For the modern psychical researcher he felt the calm tolerance of the "man who knows." There was a trace of pity in his voice — contempt he never showed — when he spoke of their methods.

"This classification of results is uninspired work at best," he said once to me, when I had been his confidential assistant for some years. "It leads nowhere, and after a hundred years will lead nowhere. It is playing with the wrong end of a rather dangerous toy. Far better, it would be, to examine the causes, and then the results would so easily slip into place and explain themselves. For the sources are accessible, and open to all who have the courage to lead the life that alone makes practical investigation safe and possible."

And towards the question of clairvoyance, too, his attitude was significantly sane, for he knew how extremely rare the genuine power was, and that what is commonly called clairvoyance is nothing more than a keen power of visualising.

"It connotes a slightly increased sensibility, nothing more," he would say. "The true clairvoyant deplores his power, recognising that it adds a new horror to life, and is in the nature of an affliction. And you will find this always to be the real test."

Thus it was that John Silence, this singularly developed doctor, was able to select his cases with a clear knowledge of the difference between mere hysterical delusion and the kind of psychical affliction that claimed his special powers. It was never necessary for him to resort to the cheap mysteries of divination; for, as I have heard him observe, after the solution of some peculiarly intricate problem —

"Systems of divination, from geomancy down to reading by tea-leaves, are merely so many methods of obscuring the outer vision, in order that the inner vision may become open. Once the method is mastered, no system is necessary at all."

And the words were significant of the methods of this remarkable man, the keynote of whose power lay, perhaps, more than anything else, in the knowledge, first, that thought can act at a distance, and, secondly, that thought is dynamic and can accomplish material results.

"Learn how to *think*," he would have expressed it, "and you have learned to tap power at its source."

To look at — he was now past forty — he was sparely built, with speaking brown eyes in which shone the light of knowledge and self-confidence, while at the same time they made one think of that wondrous gentleness seen most often in the eyes of animals. A close beard concealed the mouth without disguising the grim determination of lips and jaw, and the face somehow conveyed an impression of transparency, almost of light, so delicately were the features refined away. On the fine forehead was that indefinable touch of peace that comes from identifying the mind with what is permanent in the soul, and letting the impermanent slip by without power to wound or distress; while, from his manner, — so gentle, quiet, sympathetic, — few could have guessed the strength of purpose that burned within like a great flame.

"I think I should describe it as a psychical case," continued the Swedish lady, obviously trying to explain herself very intelligently, "and just the kind you like. I mean a case where the cause is hidden deep down in some spiritual distress, and — —"

"But the symptoms first, please, my dear Svenska," he interrupted, with a strangely compelling seriousness of manner, "and your deductions afterwards."

She turned round sharply on the edge of her chair and looked him in the face, lowering her voice to prevent her emotion betraying itself too obviously.

"In my opinion there's only one symptom," she half whispered, as though telling something disagreeable— "fear — simply fear."

"Physical fear?"

"I think not; though how can I say? I think it's a horror in the psychical region. It's no ordinary delusion; the man is quite sane; but he lives in mortal terror of something — —"

"I don't know what you mean by his 'psychical region,'" said the doctor, with a smile; "though I suppose you wish me to understand that his spiritual, and not his mental, processes are affected. Anyhow, try and tell me briefly and pointedly what you know about the man, his symptoms, his need for help, *my* peculiar help, that is, and all that seems vital in the case. I promise to listen devotedly."

"I am trying," she continued earnestly, "but must do so in my own words and trust to your intelligence to disentangle as I go along. He is a young author, and lives in a tiny house off Putney Heath somewhere. He writes humorous stories — quite a genre of his own: Pender — you must have heard the name — Felix Pender? Oh, the man had a great gift, and married on the strength of it; his future seemed assured. I say 'had,' for quite suddenly his talent utterly failed him. Worse, it became transformed into its opposite. He can no longer write a line in the old way that was bringing him success — —"

Dr. Silence opened his eyes for a second and looked at her.

"He still writes, then? The force has not gone?" he asked briefly, and then closed his eyes again to listen.

"He works like a fury," she went on, "but produces nothing" — she hesitated a moment— "nothing that he can use or sell. His earnings have practically ceased, and he makes a precarious living by book-reviewing and odd jobs — very odd, some of them. Yet, I am certain his talent has not really deserted him finally, but is merely — —"

Again Mrs. Sivendson hesitated for the appropriate word.

"In abeyance," he suggested, without opening his eyes.

"Obliterated," she went on, after a moment to weigh the word, "merely obliterated by something else — —"

"By some *one* else?"

"I wish I knew. All I can say is that he is haunted, and temporarily his sense of humour is shrouded — gone — replaced by something dreadful that writes other things. Unless something competent is done, he will simply starve to death. Yet he is afraid to go to a doctor for fear of being pronounced insane; and, anyhow, a man can hardly ask a doctor to take a guinea to restore a vanished sense of humour, can he?"

"Has he tried any one at all —— ?"

“Not doctors yet. He tried some clergymen and religious people; but they *know* so little and have so little intelligent sympathy. And most of them are so busy balancing on their own little pedestals — —”

John Silence stopped her tirade with a gesture.

“And how is it that you know so much about him?” he asked gently.

“I know Mrs. Pender well — I knew her before she married him — —”

“And is she a cause, perhaps?”

“Not in the least. She is devoted; a woman very well educated, though without being really intelligent, and with so little sense of humour herself that she always laughs at the wrong places. But she has nothing to do with the cause of his distress; and, indeed, has chiefly guessed it from observing him, rather than from what little he has told her. And he, you know, is a really lovable fellow, hard-working, patient — altogether worth saving.”

Dr. Silence opened his eyes and went over to ring for tea. He did not know very much more about the case of the humorist than when he first sat down to listen; but he realised that no amount of words from his Swedish friend would help to reveal the real facts. A personal interview with the author himself could alone do that.

“All humorists are worth saving,” he said with a smile, as she poured out tea. “We can’t afford to lose a single one in these strenuous days. I will go and see your friend at the first opportunity.”

She thanked him elaborately, effusively, with many words, and he, with much difficulty, kept the conversation thenceforward strictly to the teapot.

And, as a result of this conversation, and a little more he had gathered by means best known to himself and his secretary, he was whizzing in his motor-car one afternoon a few days later up the Putney Hill to have his first interview with Felix Pender, the humorous writer who was the victim of some mysterious malady in his “psychical region” that had obliterated his sense of the comic and threatened to wreck his life and destroy his talent. And his desire to help was probably of equal strength with his desire to know and to investigate.

The motor stopped with a deep purring sound, as though a great black panther lay concealed within its hood, and the doctor — the “psychic doctor," as he was sometimes called — stepped out through the gathering fog, and walked across the tiny garden that held a blackened fir tree and a stunted laurel shrubbery. The house was very small, and it was some time before any one answered the bell. Then, suddenly, a light appeared in the hall, and he saw a pretty little woman standing on the top step begging him to come in. She was dressed in grey, and the gaslight fell on a mass of deliberately brushed light hair. Stuffed, dusty birds, and a shabby array of African spears, hung on the wall behind her. A hat-rack, with a bronze plate full of very large cards, led his eye swiftly to a dark staircase beyond. Mrs. Pender had round eyes like a child's, and she greeted him with an effusiveness that barely concealed her emotion, yet strove to appear naturally cordial. Evidently she had been looking out for his arrival, and had outrun the servant girl. She was a little breathless.

"I hope you've not been kept waiting — I think it's *most* good of you to come — —" she began, and then stopped sharp when she saw his face in the gaslight. There was something in Dr. Silence's look that did not encourage mere talk. He was in earnest now, if ever man was.

"Good evening, Mrs. Pender," he said, with a quiet smile that won confidence, yet deprecated unnecessary words, "the fog delayed me a little. I am glad to see you."

They went into a dingy sitting-room at the back of the house, neatly furnished but depressing. Books stood in a row upon the mantelpiece. The fire had evidently just been lit. It smoked in great puffs into the room.

"Mrs. Sivendson said she thought you might be able to come," ventured the little woman again, looking up engagingly into his face and betraying anxiety and eagerness in every gesture. "But I hardly dared to believe it. I think it is really too good of you. My husband's case is so peculiar that — well, you know, I am quite sure any *ordinary* doctor would say at once the asylum — —"

"Isn't he in, then?" asked Dr. Silence gently.

"In the asylum?" she gasped. "Oh dear, no — not yet!"

"In the house, I meant," he laughed.

She gave a great sigh.

"He'll be back any minute now," she replied, obviously relieved to see him laugh; "but the fact is, we didn't expect you so early — I mean, my husband hardly thought you would come at all."

"I am always delighted to come — when I am really wanted, and can be of help," he said quickly; "and, perhaps, it's all for the best that your husband is out, for now that we are alone you can tell me something about his difficulties. So far, you know, I have heard very little."

Her voice trembled as she thanked him, and when he came and took a chair close beside her she actually had difficulty in finding words with which to begin.

"In the first place," she began timidly, and then continuing with a nervous incoherent rush of words, "he will be simply delighted that you've really come, because he said you were the only person he would consent to see at all — the only doctor, I mean. But, of course, he doesn't know how frightened I am, or how much I have noticed. He pretends with me that it's just a nervous breakdown, and I'm sure he doesn't realise all the odd things I've noticed him doing. But the main thing, I suppose — —"

"Yes, the main thing, Mrs. Pender," he said encouragingly, noticing her hesitation.

" —— is that he thinks we are not alone in the house. That's the chief thing."

"Tell me more facts — just facts."

"It began last summer when I came back from Ireland; he had been here alone for six weeks, and I thought him looking tired and queer — ragged and scattered about the face, if you know what I mean, and his manner worn out. He said he had been writing hard, but his inspiration had somehow failed him, and he was dissatisfied with his work. His sense of humour was leaving him, or changing into something else, he said. There was something in the house, he declared, that" — she emphasised the words — "prevented his feeling funny."

"Something in the house that prevented his feeling funny," repeated the doctor. "Ah, now we're getting to the heart of it!"

"Yes," she resumed vaguely; "that's what he kept saying."

"And what was it he *did* that you thought strange?" he asked sympathetically. "Be brief, or he may be here before you finish."

"Very small things, but significant it seemed to me. He changed his workroom from the library, as we call it, to the sitting-room. He said all his characters became wrong and terrible in the library; they altered, so that he felt like writing tragedies — vile, debased tragedies, the tragedies of broken souls. But now he says the same of the smoking-room, and he's gone back to the library."

"Ah!"

"You see, there's so little I can tell you," she went on, with increasing speed and countless gestures. "I mean it's only very small things he does and says that are queer. What frightens me is that he assumes there is some one else in the house all the time — some one I never see. He does not actually say so, but on the stairs I've seen him standing aside to let some one pass; I've seen him open a door to let some one in or out; and often in our bedroom he puts chairs about as though for some one else to sit in. Oh — oh yes, and once or twice," she cried— "once or twice — —"

She paused, and looked about her with a startled air.

"Yes?"

"Once or twice," she resumed hurriedly, as though she heard a sound that alarmed her, "I've heard him running — coming in and out of the rooms breathless as if something were after him — —"

The door opened while she was still speaking, cutting her words off in the middle, and a man came into the room. He was dark and clean-shaven sallow rather, with the eyes of imagination, and dark hair growing scantily about the temples. He was dressed in a shabby tweed suit, and wore an untidy flannel collar at the neck. The dominant expression of his face was startled — hunted; an expression that might any moment leap into the dreadful stare of terror and announce a total loss of self-control.

The moment he saw his visitor a smile spread over his worn features, and he advanced to shake hands.

"I hoped you would come; Mrs. Sivendson said you might be able to find time," he said simply. His voice was thin and reedy. "I am very glad to see you, Dr. Silence. It is ‘Doctor,’ is it not?”

“Well, I am entitled to the description,” laughed the other, “but I rarely get it. You know, I do not practise as a regular thing; that is, I only take cases that specially interest me, or — —”

He did not finish the sentence, for the men exchanged a glance of sympathy that rendered it unnecessary.

“I have heard of your great kindness.”

“It’s my hobby,” said the other quickly, “and my privilege.”

“I trust you will still think so when you have heard what I have to tell you,” continued the author, a little wearily. He led the way across the hall into the little smoking-room where they could talk freely and undisturbed.

In the smoking-room, the door shut and privacy about them, Pender’s attitude changed somewhat, and his manner became very grave. The doctor sat opposite, where he could watch his face. Already, he saw, it looked more haggard. Evidently it cost him much to refer to his trouble at all.

“What I have is, in my belief, a profound spiritual affliction,” he began quite bluntly, looking straight into the other’s eyes.

“I saw that at once,” Dr. Silence said.

“Yes, you saw that, of course; my atmosphere must convey that much to any one with psychic perceptions. Besides which, I feel sure from all I’ve heard, that you are really a soul-doctor, are you not, more than a healer merely of the body?”

“You think of me too highly,” returned the other; “though I prefer cases, as you know, in which the spirit is disturbed first, the body afterwards.”

“I understand, yes. Well, I have experienced a curious disturbance in — *not* in my physical region primarily. I mean my nerves are all right, and my body is all right I have no delusions exactly, but my spirit is tortured by a calamitous fear which first came upon me in a strange manner.”

John Silence leaned forward a moment and took the speaker’s hand and held it in his own for a few brief seconds, closing his eyes as he did so. He was not feeling his pulse, or doing any of the things that doctors ordinarily do; he was merely absorbing into himself the main note of the man’s mental condition, so as to get completely his own point of view, and thus be able to treat his case with true sympathy. A very close observer might perhaps have noticed that a slight tremor ran through his frame after he had held the hand for a few seconds.

“Tell me quite frankly, Mr. Pender,” he said soothingly, releasing the hand, and with deep attention in his manner, “tell me all the steps that led to the beginning of this invasion. I mean tell me what the particular drug was, and why you took it, and how it affected you — —”

“Then you know it began with a drug!” cried the author, with undisguised astonishment.

“I only know from what I observe in you, and in its effect upon myself. You are in a surprising psychical condition. Certain portions of your atmosphere are vibrating at a far greater rate than others. This is the effect of a drug, but of no ordinary drug. Allow me to finish, please. If the higher rate of vibration spreads all over, you will become, of course, permanently cognisant of a much larger world than the one you know normally. If, on the other hand, the rapid portion sinks back to the usual rate, you will lose these occasional increased perceptions you now have.”

“You amaze me!” exclaimed the author; “for your words exactly describe what I have been feeling — —”

“I mention this only in passing, and to give you confidence before you approach the account of your real affliction,” continued the doctor. “All perception, as you know, is the result of vibrations; and clairvoyance simply means becoming sensitive to an increased scale of vibrations. The awakening of the inner senses we hear so much about means no more than that. Your partial clairvoyance is easily explained. The only thing that puzzles me is how you managed to procure the drug, for it is not easy to get in pure form, and no adulterated tincture could have given you the terrific impetus I see you have acquired. But, please proceed now and tell me your story in your own way.”

“This *Cannabis indica*,” the author went on, “came into my possession last autumn while my wife was away. I need not explain how I got it, for that has no importance; but it was the genuine fluid extract, and I could not resist the temptation to make an experiment. One of its effects, as you know, is to induce torrential laughter — —”

“Yes; sometimes.”

“ —— I am a writer of humorous tales, and I wished to increase my own sense of laughter — to see the ludicrous from an abnormal point of view. I wished to study it a bit, if possible, and — —”

“Tell me!”

“I took an experimental dose. I starved for six hours to hasten the effect, locked myself into this room, and gave orders not to be disturbed. Then I swallowed the stuff and waited.”

“And the effect?”

“I waited one hour, two, three, four, five hours. Nothing happened. No laughter came, but only a great weariness instead. Nothing in the room or in my thoughts came within a hundred miles of a humorous aspect.”

“Always a most uncertain drug,” interrupted the doctor. “We make very small use of it on that account.”

“At two o’clock in the morning I felt so hungry and tired that I decided to give up the experiment and wait no longer. I drank some milk and went upstairs to bed. I felt flat and disappointed. I fell asleep at once and must have slept for about an hour, when I awoke suddenly with a great noise in my ears. It was the noise of my own laughter! I was simply shaking with merriment. At first I was bewildered and thought I had been laughing in dreams, but a moment later I remembered the drug, and was delighted to think that after all I had got an effect. It had been working all along, only I had miscalculated the time. The only unpleasant thing *then* was an odd feeling that I had not waked naturally, but had been wakened by some one else — deliberately. This came to me as a certainty in the middle of my noisy laughter and distressed me.”

“Any impression who it could have been?” asked the doctor, now listening with close attention to every word, very much on the alert.

Pender hesitated and tried to smile. He brushed his hair from his forehead with a nervous gesture.

“You must tell me all your impressions, even your fancies; they are quite as important as your certainties.”

“I had a vague idea that it was some one connected with my forgotten dream, some one who had been at me in my sleep, some one of great strength and great ability — of great force — quite an unusual personality — and, I was certain, too — a woman.”

“A good woman?” asked John Silence quietly.

Pender started a little at the question and his sallow face flushed; it seemed to surprise him. But he shook his head quickly with an indefinable look of horror.

“Evil,” he answered briefly, “appallingly evil, and yet mingled with the sheer wickedness of it was also a certain perverseness — the perversity of the unbalanced mind.”

He hesitated a moment and looked up sharply at his interlocutor. A shade of suspicion showed itself in his eyes.

“No,” laughed the doctor, “you need not fear that I’m merely humouring you, or think you mad. Far from it. Your story interests me exceedingly and you furnish me unconsciously with a number of clues as you tell it. You see, I possess some knowledge of my own as to these psychic byways.”

“I was shaking with such violent laughter,” continued the narrator, reassured in a moment, “though with no clear idea what was amusing me, that I had the greatest difficulty in getting up for the matches, and was afraid I should frighten the servants overhead with my explosions. When the gas was lit I found the room empty, of course, and the door locked as usual. Then I half dressed and went out on to the landing, my hilarity better under control, and proceeded to go downstairs. I wished to record my sensations. I stuffed a handkerchief into my mouth so as not to scream aloud and communicate my hysterics to the entire household.”

“And the presence of this — this —— ?”

“It was hanging about me all the time,” said Pender, “but for the moment it seemed to have withdrawn. Probably, too, my laughter killed all other emotions.”

“And how long did you take getting downstairs?”

“I was just coming to that I see you know all my ‘symptoms’ in advance, as it were; for, of course, I thought I should never get to the bottom. Each step seemed to take five minutes, and crossing the narrow hall at the foot of the stairs — well, I could have sworn it was half an hour’s journey had not my watch certified that it was a few seconds. Yet I walked fast and tried to push on. It was no good. I walked apparently without advancing, and at that rate it would have taken me a week to get down Putney Hill.”

“An experimental dose radically alters the scale of time and space sometimes — —”

“But, when at last I got into my study and lit the gas, the change came horridly, and sudden as a flash of lightning. It was like a douche of icy water, and in the middle of this storm of laughter — —”

“Yes; what?” asked the doctor, leaning forward and peering into his eyes.

“ —— I was overwhelmed with terror,” said Pender, lowering his reedy voice at the mere recollection of it.

He paused a moment and mopped his forehead. The scared, hunted look in his eyes now dominated the whole face. Yet, all the time, the corners of his mouth hinted of possible laughter as though the recollection of that merriment still amused him. The combination of fear and laughter in his face was very curious, and lent great conviction to his story; it also lent a bizarre expression of horror to his gestures.

“Terror, was it?” repeated the doctor soothingly.

“Yes, terror; for, though the Thing that woke me seemed to have gone, the memory of it still frightened me, and I collapsed into a chair. Then I locked the door and tried to reason with myself, but the drug made my movements so prolonged that it took me five minutes to reach the door, and another five to get back to the chair again. The laughter, too, kept bubbling up inside me — great wholesome laughter that shook me like gusts of wind — so that even my terror almost made me laugh. Oh, but I may tell you, Dr. Silence, it was altogether vile, that mixture of fear and laughter, altogether vile!

“Then, all at once, the things in the room again presented their funny side to me and set me off laughing more furiously than ever. The bookcase was ludicrous, the arm-chair a perfect clown, the way the clock looked at me on the mantelpiece too comic for words; the arrangement of papers and inkstand on the desk tickled me till I roared and shook and held my sides and the tears streamed down my cheeks. And that footstool! Oh, that absurd footstool!”

He lay back in his chair, laughing to himself and holding up his hands at the thought of it, and at the sight of him Dr. Silence laughed too.

“Go on, please,” he said, “I quite understand. I know something myself of the hashish laughter.”

The author pulled himself together and resumed, his face growing quickly grave again.

“So, you see, side by side with this extravagant, apparently causeless merriment, there was also an extravagant, apparently causeless terror. The drug produced the laughter, I knew; but what brought in the terror I could not imagine. Everywhere behind the fun lay the fear. It was terror masked by cap and bells; and I became the playground for two opposing emotions, armed and fighting to the death. Gradually, then, the impression grew in me that this fear was caused by the invasion — so you called it just now — of the ‘person’ who had wakened me: she was utterly evil; inimical to my soul, or at least to all in me that wished for good. There I stood, sweating and trembling, laughing at everything in the room, yet all the while with this white terror mastering my heart. And this creature was putting — putting her — —”

He hesitated again, using his handkerchief freely.

“Putting what?”

“ —— putting ideas into my mind,” he went on, glancing nervously about the room. “Actually tapping my thought-stream so as to switch off the usual current and inject her own. How mad that sounds! I know it, but it’s true. It’s the only way I can express it. Moreover, while the operation terrified me, the skill with which it was accomplished filled me afresh with laughter at the clumsiness of men by comparison. Our ignorant, bungling methods of teaching the minds of others, of inculcating ideas, and so on, overwhelmed me with laughter when I understood this superior and diabolical method. Yet my laughter seemed hollow and ghastly, and ideas of evil and tragedy trod close upon the heels of the comic. Oh, doctor, I tell you again, it was unnerving!”

John Silence sat with his head thrust forward to catch every word of the story which the other continued to pour out in nervous, jerky sentences and lowered voice.

“You *saw* nothing — no one — all this time?” he asked.

“Not with my eyes. There was no visual hallucination. But in my mind there began to grow the vivid picture of a woman — large, dark-skinned, with white teeth and masculine features, and one eye — the left — so drooping as to appear almost closed. Oh, such a face —— !”

“A face you would recognise again?”

Pender laughed dreadfully.

“I wish I could forget it,” he whispered, “I only wish I could forget it!” Then he sat forward in his chair suddenly, and grasped the doctor’s hand with an emotional gesture.

“I *must* tell you how grateful I am for your patience and sympathy,” he cried, with a tremor in his voice, “and — that you do not think me mad. I have told no one else a quarter of all this, and the mere freedom of speech — the relief of sharing my affliction with another — has helped me already more than I can possibly say.”

Dr. Silence pressed his hand and looked steadily into the frightened eyes. His voice was very gentle when he replied.

“Your case, you know, is very singular, but of absorbing interest to me,” he said, “for it threatens, not your physical existence, but the temple of your psychical existence — the inner life. Your mind would not be permanently affected here and now, in this world; but in the existence after the body is left behind, you might wake up with your spirit so twisted, so distorted, so befouled, that you would be *spiritually insane* — a far more radical condition than merely being insane here.”

There came a strange hush over the room, and between the two men sitting there facing one another.

“Do you really mean — Good Lord!” stammered the author as soon as he could find his tongue.

"What I mean in detail will keep till a little later, and I need only say now that I should not have spoken in this way unless I were quite positive of being able to help you. Oh, there's no doubt as to that, believe me. In the first place, I am very familiar with the workings of this extraordinary drug, this drug which has had the chance effect of opening you up to the forces of another region; and, in the second, I have a firm belief in the reality of super-sensuous occurrences as well as considerable knowledge of psychic processes acquired by long and painful experiment. The rest is, or should be, merely sympathetic treatment and practical application. The hashish has partially opened another world to you by increasing your rate of psychical vibration, and thus rendering you abnormally sensitive. Ancient forces attached to this house have attacked you. For the moment I am only puzzled as to their precise nature; for were they of an ordinary character, I should myself be psychic enough to feel them. Yet I am conscious of feeling nothing as yet. But now, please continue, Mr. Pender, and tell me the rest of your wonderful story; and when you have finished, I will talk about the means of cure."

Pender shifted his chair a little closer to the friendly doctor and then went on in the same nervous voice with his narrative.

"After making some notes of my impressions I finally got upstairs again to bed. It was four o'clock in the morning. I laughed all the way up — at the grotesque banisters, the droll physiognomy of the staircase window, the burlesque grouping of the furniture, and the memory of that outrageous footstool in the room below; but nothing more happened to alarm or disturb me, and I woke late in the morning after a dreamless sleep, none the worse for my experiment except for a slight headache and a coldness of the extremities due to lowered circulation."

"Fear gone, too?" asked the doctor.

"I seemed to have forgotten it, or at least ascribed it to mere nervousness. It's reality had gone, anyhow for the time, and all that day I wrote and wrote and wrote. My sense of laughter seemed wonderfully quickened and my characters acted without effort out of the heart of true humour. I was exceedingly pleased with this result of my experiment But when the stenographer had taken her departure and I came to read over the pages she had typed out, I recalled her sudden glances of surprise and the odd way she had looked up at me while I was dictating. I was amazed at what I read and could hardly believe I had uttered it.”

“And why?”

“It was so distorted. The words, indeed, were mine so far as I could remember, but the meanings seemed strange. It frightened me. The sense was so altered. At the very places where my characters were intended to tickle the ribs, only curious emotions of sinister amusement resulted. Dreadful innuendoes had managed to creep into the phrases. There was laughter of a kind, but it was bizarre, horrible, distressing; and my attempt at analysis only increased my dismay. The story, as it read then, made me shudder, for by virtue of these slight changes it had come somehow to hold the soul of horror, of horror disguised as merriment. The framework of humour was there, if you understand me, but the characters had turned sinister, and their laughter was evil.”

“Can you show me this writing?”

The author shook his head.

“I destroyed it,” he whispered. “But, in the end, though of course much perturbed about it, I persuaded myself that it was due to some after-effect of the drug, a sort of reaction that gave a twist to my mind and made me read macabre interpretations into words and situations that did not properly hold them.”

“And, meanwhile, did the presence of this person leave you?”

“No; that stayed more or less. When my mind was actively employed I forgot it, but when idle, dreaming, or doing nothing in particular, there she was beside me, influencing my mind horribly — —”

“In what way, precisely?” interrupted the doctor.

“Evil, scheming thoughts came to me, visions of crime, hateful pictures of wickedness, and the kind of bad imagination that so far has been foreign, indeed impossible, to my normal nature — —”

“The pressure of the Dark Powers upon the personality,” murmured the doctor, making a quick note.

“Eh? I didn’t quite catch — —”

"Pray, go on. I am merely making notes; you shall know their purport fully later."

"Even when my wife returned I was still aware of this Presence in the house; it associated itself with my inner personality in most intimate fashion; and outwardly I always felt oddly constrained to be polite and respectful towards it — to open doors, provide chairs and hold myself carefully deferential when it was about. It became very compelling at last, and, if I failed in any little particular, I seemed to know that it pursued me about the house, from one room to another, haunting my very soul in its inmost abode. It certainly came before my wife so far as my attentions were concerned.

"But, let me first finish the story of my experimental dose, for I took it again the third night, and underwent a very similar experience, delayed like the first in coming, and then carrying me off my feet when it did come with a rush of this false demon-laughter. This time, however, there was a reversal of the changed scale of space and time; it shortened, instead of lengthened, so that I dressed and got downstairs in about twenty seconds, and the couple of hours I stayed and worked in the study passed literally like a period of ten minutes."

"That is often true of an overdose," interjected the doctor, "and you may go a mile in a few minutes, or a few yards in a quarter of an hour. It is quite incomprehensible to those who have never experienced it, and is a curious proof that time and space are merely forms of thought."

"This time," Pender went on, talking more and more rapidly in his excitement, "another extraordinary effect came to me, and I experienced a curious changing of the senses, so that I perceived external things through one large main sense-channel instead of through the five divisions known as sight, smell, touch, and so forth. You will, I know, understand me when I tell you that I *heard* sights and *saw* sounds. No language can make this comprehensible, of course, and I can only say, for instance, that the striking of the clock I saw as a visible picture in the air before me. I saw the sounds of the tinkling bell. And in precisely the same way I heard the colours in the room, especially the colours of those books in the shelf behind you. Those red bindings I heard in deep sounds, and the yellow covers of the French bindings next to them made a shrill, piercing note not unlike the chattering of starlings. That brown bookcase muttered, and those green curtains opposite kept up a constant sort of rippling sound like the lower notes of a wood-horn. But I only was conscious of these sounds when I looked steadily at the different objects, and thought about them. The room, you understand, was not full of a chorus of notes; but when I concentrated my mind upon a colour, I heard, as well as saw, it."

"That is a known, though rarely-obtained, effect of *Cannabis indica*," observed the doctor. "And it provoked laughter again, did it?"

"Only the muttering of the cupboard-bookcase made me laugh. It was so like a great animal trying to get itself noticed, and made me think of a performing bear — which is full of a kind of pathetic humour, you know. But this mingling of the senses produced no confusion in my brain. On the contrary, I was unusually clear-headed and experienced an intensification of consciousness, and felt marvellously alive and keen-minded.

"Moreover, when I took up a pencil in obedience to an impulse to sketch — a talent not normally mine — I found that I could draw nothing but heads, nothing, in fact, but one head — always the same — the head of a dark-skinned woman, with huge and terrible features and a very drooping left eye; and so well drawn, too, that I was amazed, as you may imagine — —"

"And the expression of the face —— ?"

Pender hesitated a moment for words, casting about with his hands in the air and hunching his shoulders. A perceptible shudder ran over him.

"What I can only describe as — *blackness*," he replied in a low tone; "the face of a dark and evil soul."

"You destroyed that, too?" queried the doctor sharply.

"No; I have kept the drawings," he said, with a laugh, and rose to get them from a drawer in the writing-desk behind him.

"Here is all that remains of the pictures, you see," he added, pushing a number of loose sheets under the doctor's eyes; "nothing but a few scrawly lines. That's all I found the next morning. I had really drawn no heads at all — nothing but those lines and blots and wriggles. The pictures were entirely subjective, and existed only in my mind which constructed them out of a few wild strokes of the pen. Like the altered scale of space and time it was a complete delusion. These all passed, of course, with the passing of the drug's effects. But the other thing did not pass. I mean, the presence of that Dark Soul remained with me. It is here still. It is real. I don't know how I can escape from it."

"It is attached to the house, not to you personally. You must leave the house."

"Yes. Only I cannot afford to leave the house, for my work is my sole means of support, and — well, you see, since this change I cannot even write. They are horrible, these mirthless tales I now write, with their mockery of laughter, their diabolical suggestion. Horrible! I shall go mad if this continues."

He screwed his face up and looked about the room as though he expected to see some haunting shape.

"The influence in this house, induced by my experiment, has killed in a flash, in a sudden stroke, the sources of my humour, and, though I still go on writing funny tales — I have a certain name, you know — my inspiration has dried up, and much of what I write I have to burn — yes, doctor, to burn, before any one sees it."

"As utterly alien to your own mind and personality?"

"Utterly! As though some one else had written it — —"

"Ah!"

"And shocking!" He passed his hand over his eyes a moment and let the breath escape softly through his teeth. "Yet most damnably clever in the consummate way the vile suggestions are insinuated under cover of a kind of high drollery. My stenographer left me, of course — and I've been afraid to take another — —"

John Silence got up and began to walk about the room leisurely without speaking; he appeared to be examining the pictures on the wall and reading the names of the books lying about. Presently he paused on the hearthrug, with his back to the fire, and turned to look his patient quietly in the eyes. Pender's face was grey and drawn; the hunted expression dominated it; the long recital had told upon him.

“Thank you, Mr. Pender,” he said, a curious glow showing about his fine, quiet face, “thank you for the sincerity and frankness of your account. But I think now there is nothing further I need ask you.” He indulged in a long scrutiny of the author’s haggard features, drawing purposely the man’s eyes to his own and then meeting them with a look of power and confidence calculated to inspire even the feeblest soul with courage. “And, to begin with,” he added, smiling pleasantly, “let me assure you without delay that you need have no alarm, for you are no more insane or deluded than I myself am — —”

Pender heaved a deep sigh and tried to return the smile.

“ —— and this is simply a case, so far as I can judge at present, of a very singular psychical invasion, and a very sinister one, too, if you perhaps understand what I mean — —”

“It’s an odd expression; you used it before, you know,” said the author wearily, yet eagerly listening to every word of the diagnosis, and deeply touched by the intelligent sympathy which did not at once indicate the lunatic asylum.

“Possibly,” returned the other, “and an odd affliction too, you’ll allow, yet one not unknown to the nations of antiquity, nor to those moderns, perhaps, who recognise the freedom of action under certain pathogenic conditions between this world and another.”

“And you think,” asked Pender hastily, “that it is all primarily due to the *Cannabis*? There is nothing radically amiss with myself — nothing incurable, or —— ?”

“Due entirely to the overdose,” Dr. Silence replied emphatically, “to the drug’s direct action upon your psychical being. It rendered you ultra-sensitive and made you respond to an increased rate of vibration. And, let me tell you, Mr. Pender, that your experiment might have had results far more dire. It has brought you into touch with a somewhat singular class of Invisible, but of one, I think, chiefly human in character. You might, however, just as easily have been drawn out of human range altogether, and the results of such a contingency would have been exceedingly terrible. Indeed, you would not now be here to tell the tale. I need not alarm you on that score, but mention it as a warning you will not misunderstand or underrate after what you have been through.

“You look puzzled. You do not quite gather what I am driving at; and it is not to be expected that you should, for you, I suppose, are the nominal Christian with the nominal Christian’s lofty standard of ethics, and his utter ignorance of spiritual possibilities. Beyond a somewhat childish understanding of ‘spiritual wickedness in high places,’ you probably have no conception of what is possible once you break down the slender gulf that is mercifully fixed between you and that Outer World. But my studies and training have taken me far outside these orthodox trips, and I have made experiments that I could scarcely speak to you about in language that would be intelligible to you.”

He paused a moment to note the breathless interest of Pender’s face and manner. Every word he uttered was calculated; he knew exactly the value and effect of the emotions he desired to waken in the heart of the afflicted being before him.

“And from certain knowledge I have gained through various experiences,” he continued calmly, “I can diagnose your case as I said before to be one of psychical invasion.”

“And the nature of this — er — invasion?” stammered the bewildered writer of humorous tales.

“There is no reason why I should not say at once that I do not yet quite know,” replied Dr. Silence. “I may first have to make one or two experiments — —”

“On me?” gasped Pender, catching his breath.

“Not exactly,” the doctor said, with a grave smile, “but with your assistance, perhaps. I shall want to test the conditions of the house — to ascertain, if possible, the character of the forces, of this strange personality that has been haunting you — —”

“At present you have no idea exactly who — what — why — —” asked the other in a wild flurry of interest, dread and amazement.

“I have a very good idea, but no proof rather,” returned the doctor. “The effects of the drug in altering the scale of time and space, and merging the senses have nothing primarily to do with the invasion. They come to any one who is fool enough to take an experimental dose. It is the other features of your case that are unusual. You see, you are now in touch with certain violent emotions, desires, purposes, still active in this house, that were produced in the past by some powerful and evil personality that lived here. How long ago, or why they still persist so forcibly, I cannot positively say. But I should judge that they are merely forces acting automatically with the momentum of their terrific original impetus."

"Not directed by a living being, a conscious will, you mean?"

"Possibly not — but none the less dangerous on that account, and more difficult to deal with. I cannot explain to you in a few minutes the nature of such things, for you have not made the studies that would enable you to follow me; but I have reason to believe that on the dissolution at death of a human being, its forces may still persist and continue to act in a blind, unconscious fashion. As a rule they speedily dissipate themselves, but in the case of a very powerful personality they may last a long time. And, in some cases — of which I incline to think this is one — these forces may coalesce with certain non-human entities who thus continue their life indefinitely and increase their strength to an unbelievable degree. If the original personality was evil, the beings attracted to the left-over forces will also be evil. In this case, I think there has been an unusual and dreadful aggrandisement of the thoughts and purposes left behind long ago by a woman of consummate wickedness and great personal power of character and intellect. Now, do you begin to see what I am driving at a little?"

Pender stared fixedly at his companion, plain horror showing in his eyes. But he found nothing to say, and the doctor continued —

"In your case, predisposed by the action of the drug, you have experienced the rush of these forces in undiluted strength. They wholly obliterate in you the sense of humour, fancy, imagination, — all that makes for cheerfulness and hope. They seek, though perhaps automatically only, to oust your own thoughts and establish themselves in their place. You are the victim of a psychical invasion. At the same time, you have become clairvoyant in the true sense. You are also a clairvoyant victim."

Pender mopped his face and sighed. He left his chair and went over to the fireplace to warm himself.

"You must think me a quack to talk like this, or a madman," laughed Dr. Silence. "But never mind that. I have come to help you, and I can help you if you will do what I tell you. It is very simple: you must leave this house at once. Oh, never mind the difficulties; we will deal with those together. I can place another house at your disposal, or I would take the lease here off your hands, and later have it pulled down. Your case interests me greatly, and I mean to see you through, so that you have no anxiety, and can drop back into your old groove of work to-morrow! The drug has provided you, and therefore me, with a short-cut to a very interesting experience. I am grateful to you."

The author poked the fire vigorously, emotion rising in him like a tide. He glanced towards the door nervously.

"There is no need to alarm your wife or to tell her the details of our conversation," pursued the other quietly. "Let her know that you will soon be in possession again of your sense of humour and your health, and explain that I am lending you another house for six months. Meanwhile I may have the right to use this house for a night or two for my experiment. Is that understood between us?"

"I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart," stammered Pender, unable to find words to express his gratitude.

Then he hesitated for a moment, searching the doctor's face anxiously.

"And your experiment with the house?" he said at length.

"Of the simplest character, my dear Mr. Pender. Although I am myself an artificially trained psychic, and consequently aware of the presence of discarnate entities as a rule, I have so far felt nothing here at all. This makes me sure that the forces acting here are of an unusual description. What I propose to do is to make an experiment with a view of drawing out this evil, coaxing it from its lair, so to speak, in order that it may *exhaust itself through me* and become dissipated for ever. I have already been inoculated," he added; "I consider myself to be immune."

"Heavens above!" gasped the author, collapsing on to a chair.

"Hell beneath! might be a more appropriate exclamation," the doctor laughed. "But, seriously, Mr. Pender, this is what I propose to do — with your permission."

“Of course, of course,” cried the other, “you have my permission and my best wishes for success. I can see no possible objection, but — —”

“But what?”

“I pray to Heaven you will not undertake this experiment alone, will you?”

“Oh dear, no; not alone.”

“You will take a companion with good nerves, and reliable in case of disaster, won’t you?”

“I shall bring two companions,” the doctor said.

“Ah, that’s better. I feel easier. I am sure you must have among your acquaintances men who — —”

“I shall not think of bringing men, Mr. Pender.”

The other looked up sharply.

“No, or women either; or children.”

“I don’t understand. Who will you bring, then?”

“Animals,” explained the doctor, unable to prevent a smile at his companion’s expression of surprise— “two animals, a cat and a dog.”

Pender stared as if his eyes would drop out upon the floor, and then led the way without another word into the adjoining room where his wife was awaiting them for tea.

II

A few days later the humorist and his wife, with minds greatly relieved, moved into a small furnished house placed at their free disposal in another part of London; and John Silence, intent upon his approaching experiment, made ready to spend a night in the empty house on the top of Putney Hill. Only two rooms were prepared for occupation: the study on the ground floor and the bedroom immediately above it; all other doors were to be locked, and no servant was to be left in the house. The motor had orders to call for him at nine o’clock the following morning.

And, meanwhile, his secretary had instructions to look up the past history and associations of the place, and learn everything he could concerning the character of former occupants, recent or remote.

The animals, by whose sensitiveness he intended to test any unusual conditions in the atmosphere of the building, Dr. Silence selected with care and judgment. He believed (and had already made curious experiments to prove it) that animals were more often, and more truly, clairvoyant than human beings. Many of them, he felt convinced, possessed powers of perception far superior to that mere keenness of the senses common to all dwellers in the wilds where the senses grow specially alert; they had what he termed "animal clairvoyance," and from his experiments with horses, dogs, cats, and even birds, he had drawn certain deductions, which, however, need not be referred to in detail here.

Cats, in particular, he believed, were almost continuously conscious of a larger field of vision, too detailed even for a photographic camera, and quite beyond the reach of normal human organs. He had, further, observed that while dogs were usually terrified in the presence of such phenomena, cats on the other hand were soothed and satisfied. They welcomed manifestations as something belonging peculiarly to their own region.

He selected his animals, therefore, with wisdom so that they might afford a differing test, each in its own way, and that one should not merely communicate its own excitement to the other. He took a dog and a cat.

The cat he chose, now full grown, had lived with him since kittenhood, a kittenhood of perplexing sweetness and audacious mischief. Wayward it was and fanciful, ever playing its own mysterious games in the corners of the room, jumping at invisible nothings, leaping sideways into the air and falling with tiny mocassined feet on to another part of the carpet, yet with an air of dignified earnestness which showed that the performance was necessary to its own well-being, and not done merely to impress a stupid human audience. In the middle of elaborate washing it would look up, startled, as though to stare at the approach of some Invisible, cocking its little head sideways and putting out a velvet pad to inspect cautiously. Then it would get absent-minded, and stare with equal intentness in another direction (just to confuse the onlookers), and suddenly go on furiously washing its body again, but in quite a new place. Except for a white patch on its breast it was coal black. And its name was — Smoke.

"Smoke" described its temperament as well as its appearance. Its movements, its individuality, its posing as a little furry mass of concealed mysteries, its elfin-like elusiveness, all combined to justify its name; and a subtle painter might have pictured it as a wisp of floating smoke, the fire below betraying itself at two points only — the glowing eyes.

All its forces ran to intelligence — secret intelligence, the wordless, incalculable intuition of the Cat. It was, indeed, *the* cat for the business in hand.

The selection of the dog was not so simple, for the doctor owned many; but after much deliberation he chose a collie, called Flame from his yellow coat. True, it was a trifle old, and stiff in the joints, and even beginning to grow deaf, but, on the other hand, it was a very particular friend of Smoke's, and had fathered it from kittenhood upwards so that a subtle understanding existed between them. It was this that turned the balance in its favour, this and its courage. Moreover, though good-tempered, it was a terrible fighter, and its anger when provoked by a righteous cause was a fury of fire, and irresistible.

It had come to him quite young, straight from the shepherd, with the air of the hills yet in its nostrils, and was then little more than skin and bones and teeth. For a collie it was sturdily built, its nose blunter than most, its yellow hair stiff rather than silky, and it had full eyes, unlike the slit eyes of its breed. Only its master could touch it, for it ignored strangers, and despised their pattings — when any dared to pat it. There was something patriarchal about the old beast. He was in earnest, and went through life with tremendous energy and big things in view, as though he had the reputation of his whole race to uphold. And to watch him fighting against odds was to understand why he was terrible.

In his relations with Smoke he was always absurdly gentle; also he was fatherly; and at the same time betrayed a certain diffidence or shyness. He recognised that Smoke called for strong yet respectful management. The cat's circuitous methods puzzled him, and his elaborate pretences perhaps shocked the dog's liking for direct, undisguised action. Yet, while he failed to comprehend these tortuous feline mysteries, he was never contemptuous or condescending; and he presided over the safety of his furry black friend somewhat as a father, loving but intuitive, might superintend the vagaries of a wayward and talented child. And, in return, Smoke rewarded him with exhibitions of fascinating and audacious mischief.

And these brief descriptions of their characters are necessary for the proper understanding of what subsequently took place.

With Smoke sleeping in the folds of his fur coat, and the collie lying watchful on the seat opposite, John Silence went down in his motor after dinner on the night of November 15th.

And the fog was so dense that they were obliged to travel at quarter speed the entire way.

It was after ten o'clock when he dismissed the motor and entered the dingy little house with the latchkey provided by Pender. He found the hall gas turned low, and a fire in the study. Books and food had also been placed ready by the servant according to instructions. Coils of fog rushed in after him through the opened door and filled the hall and passage with its cold discomfort.

The first thing Dr. Silence did was to lock up Smoke in the study with a saucer of milk before the fire, and then make a search of the house with Flame. The dog ran cheerfully behind him all the way while he tried the doors of the other rooms to make sure they were locked. He nosed about into corners and made little excursions on his own account. His manner was expectant. He knew there must be something unusual about the proceeding, because it was contrary to the habits of his whole life not to be asleep at this hour on the mat in front of the fire. He kept looking up into his master's face, as door after door was tried, with an expression of intelligent sympathy, but at the same time a certain air of disapproval. Yet everything his master did was good in his eyes, and he betrayed as little impatience as possible with all this unnecessary journeying to and fro. If the doctor was pleased to play this sort of game at such an hour of the night, it was surely not for him to object. So he played it too; and was very busy and earnest about it into the bargain.

After an uneventful search they came down again to the study, and here Dr. Silence discovered Smoke washing his face calmly in front of the fire. The saucer of milk was licked dry and clean; the preliminary examination that cats always make in new surroundings had evidently been satisfactorily concluded. He drew an arm-chair up to the fire, stirred the coals into a blaze, arranged the table and lamp to his satisfaction for reading, and then prepared surreptitiously to watch the animals. He wished to observe them carefully without their being aware of it.

Now, in spite of their respective ages, it was the regular custom of these two to play together every night before sleep. Smoke always made the advances, beginning with grave impudence to pat the dog's tail, and Flame played cumbrously, with condescension. It was his duty, rather than pleasure; he was glad when it was over, and sometimes he was very determined and refused to play at all.

And this night was one of the occasions on which he was firm.

The doctor, looking cautiously over the top of his book, watched the cat begin the performance. It started by gazing with an innocent expression at the dog where he lay with nose on paws and eyes wide open in the middle of the floor. Then it got up and made as though it meant to walk to the door, going deliberately and very softly. Flame's eyes followed it until it was beyond the range of sight, and then the cat turned sharply and began patting his tail tentatively with one paw. The tail moved slightly in reply, and Smoke changed paws and tapped it again. The dog, however, did not rise to play as was his wont, and the cat fell to patting it briskly with both paws. Flame still lay motionless.

This puzzled and bored the cat, and it went round and stared hard into its friend's face to see what was the matter. Perhaps some inarticulate message flashed from the dog's eyes into its own little brain, making it understand that the programme for the night had better not begin with play. Perhaps it only realised that its friend was immovable. But, whatever the reason, its usual persistence thenceforward deserted it, and it made no further attempts at persuasion. Smoke yielded at once to the dog's mood; it sat down where it was and began to wash.

But the washing, the doctor noted, was by no means its real purpose; it only used it to mask something else; it stopped at the most busy and furious moments and began to stare about the room. Its thoughts wandered absurdly. It peered intently at the curtains; at the shadowy corners; at empty space above; leaving its body in curiously awkward positions for whole minutes together. Then it turned sharply and stared with a sudden signal of intelligence at the dog, and Flame at once rose somewhat stiffly to his feet and began to wander aimlessly and restlessly to and fro about the floor. Smoke followed him, padding quietly at his heels. Between them they made what seemed to be a deliberate search of the room.

And, here, as he watched them, noting carefully every detail of the performance over the top of his book, yet making no effort to interfere, it seemed to the doctor that the first beginnings of a faint distress betrayed themselves in the collie, and in the cat the stirrings of a vague excitement.

He observed them closely. The fog was thick in the air, and the tobacco smoke from his pipe added to its density; the furniture at the far end stood mistily, and where the shadows congregated in hanging clouds under the ceiling, it was difficult to see clearly at all; the lamplight only reached to a level of five feet from the floor, above which came layers of comparative darkness, so that the room appeared twice as lofty as it actually was. By means of the lamp and the fire, however, the carpet was everywhere clearly visible.

The animals made their silent tour of the floor, sometimes the dog leading, sometimes the cat; occasionally they looked at one another as though exchanging signals; and once or twice, in spite of the limited space, he lost sight of one or other among the fog and the shadows. Their curiosity, it appeared to him, was something more than the excitement lurking in the unknown territory of a strange room; yet, so far, it was impossible to test this, and he purposely kept his mind quietly receptive lest the smallest mental excitement on his part should communicate itself to the animals and thus destroy the value of their independent behaviour.

They made a very thorough journey, leaving no piece of furniture unexamined, or unsmelt. Flame led the way, walking slowly with lowered head, and Smoke followed demurely at his heels, making a transparent pretence of not being interested, yet missing nothing. And, at length, they returned, the old collie first, and came to rest on the mat before the fire. Flame rested his muzzle on his master’s knee, smiling beatifically while he patted the yellow head and spoke his name; and Smoke, coming a little later, pretending he came by chance, looked from the empty saucer to his face, lapped up the milk when it was given him to the last drop, and then sprang upon his knees and curled round for the sleep it had fully earned and intended to enjoy.

Silence descended upon the room. Only the breathing of the dog upon the mat came through the deep stillness, like the pulse of time marking the minutes; and the steady drip, drip of the fog outside upon the window-ledges dismally testified to the inclemency of the night beyond. And the soft crashings of the coals as the fire settled down into the grate became less and less audible as the fire sank and the flames resigned their fierceness.

It was now well after eleven o'clock, and Dr. Silence devoted himself again to his book. He read the words on the printed page and took in their meaning superficially, yet without starting into life the correlations of thought and suggestion that should accompany interesting reading. Underneath, all the while, his mental energies were absorbed in watching, listening, waiting for what might come. He was not over sanguine himself, yet he did not wish to be taken by surprise. Moreover, the animals, his sensitive barometers, had incontinently gone to sleep.

After reading a dozen pages, however, he realised that his mind was really occupied in reviewing the features of Pender's extraordinary story, and that it was no longer necessary to steady his imagination by studying the dull paragraphs detailed in the pages before him. He laid down his book accordingly, and allowed his thoughts to dwell upon the features of the Case. Speculations as to the meaning, however, he rigorously suppressed, knowing that such thoughts would act upon his imagination like wind upon the glowing embers of a fire.

As the night wore on the silence grew deeper and deeper, and only at rare intervals he heard the sound of wheels on the main road a hundred yards away, where the horses went at a walking pace owing to the density of the fog. The echo of pedestrian footsteps no longer reached him, the clamour of occasional voices no longer came down the side street The night, muffled by fog, shrouded by veils of ultimate mystery, hung about the haunted villa like a doom. Nothing in the house stirred. Stillness, in a thick blanket, lay over the upper storeys. Only the mist in the room grew more dense, he thought, and the damp cold more penetrating. Certainly, from time to time, he shivered.

The collie, now deep in slumber, moved occasionally, — grunted, sighed, or twitched his legs in dreams. Smoke lay on his knees, a pool of warm, black fur, only the closest observation detecting the movement of his sleek sides.

It was difficult to distinguish exactly where his head and body joined in that circle of glistening hair; only a black satin nose and a tiny tip of pink tongue betrayed the secret.

Dr. Silence watched him, and felt comfortable. The collie's breathing was soothing. The fire was well built, and would burn for another two hours without attention. He was not conscious of the least nervousness. He particularly wished to remain in his ordinary and normal state of mind, and to force nothing. If sleep came naturally, he would let it come — and even welcome it. The coldness of the room, when the fire died down later, would be sure to wake him again; and it would then be time enough to carry these sleeping barometers up to bed. From various psychic premonitions he knew quite well that the night would not pass without adventure; but he did not wish to force its arrival; and he wished to remain normal, and let the animals remain normal, so that, when it came, it would be unattended by excitement or by any straining of the attention. Many experiments had made him wise. And, for the rest, he had no fear.

Accordingly, after a time, he did fall asleep as he had expected, and the last thing he remembered, before oblivion slipped up over his eyes like soft wool, was the picture of Flame stretching all four legs at once, and sighing noisily as he sought a more comfortable position for his paws and muzzle upon the mat.

It was a good deal later when he became aware that a weight lay upon his chest, and that something was pencilling over his face and mouth. A soft touch on the cheek woke him. Something was patting him.

He sat up with a jerk, and found himself staring straight into a pair of brilliant eyes, half green, half black. Smoke's face lay level with his own; and the cat had climbed up with its front paws upon his chest.

The lamp had burned low and the fire was nearly out, yet Dr. Silence saw in a moment that the cat was in an excited state. It kneaded with its front paws into his chest, shifting from one to the other. He felt them prodding against him. It lifted a leg very carefully and patted his cheek gingerly. Its fur, he saw, was standing ridgewise upon its back; the ears were flattened back somewhat; the tail was switching sharply. The cat, of course, had wakened him with a purpose, and the instant he realised this, he set it upon the arm of the chair and sprang up with a quick turn to face the empty room behind him. By some curious instinct, his arms of their own accord assumed an attitude of defence in front of him, as though to ward off something that threatened his safety. Yet nothing was visible. Only shapes of fog hung about rather heavily in the air, moving slightly to and fro.

His mind was now fully alert, and the last vestiges of sleep gone. He turned the lamp higher and peered about him. Two things he became aware of at once: one, that Smoke, while excited, was *pleasurably* excited; the other, that the collie was no longer visible upon the mat at his feet. He had crept away to the corner of the wall farthest from the window, and lay watching the room with wide-open eyes, in which lurked plainly something of alarm.

Something in the dog's behaviour instantly struck Dr. Silence as unusual, and, calling him by name, he moved across to pat him. Flame got up, wagged his tail, and came over slowly to the rug, uttering a low sound that was half growl, half whine. He was evidently perturbed about something, and his master was proceeding to administer comfort when his attention was suddenly drawn to the antics of his other four-footed companion, the cat.

And what he saw filled him with something like amazement.

Smoke had jumped down from the back of the arm-chair and now occupied the middle of the carpet, where, with tail erect and legs stiff as ramrods, it was steadily pacing backwards and forwards in a narrow space, uttering, as it did so, those curious little guttural sounds of pleasure that only an animal of the feline species knows how to make expressive of supreme happiness. Its stiffened legs and arched back made it appear larger than usual, and the black visage wore a smile of beatific joy. Its eyes blazed magnificently; it was in an ecstasy.

At the end of every few paces it turned sharply and stalked back again along the same line, padding softly, and purring like a roll of little muffled drums. It behaved precisely as though it were rubbing against the ankles of some one who remained invisible. A thrill ran down the doctor's spine as he stood and stared. His experiment was growing interesting at last.

He called the collie's attention to his friend's performance to see whether he too was aware of anything standing there upon the carpet; and the dog's behaviour was significant and corroborative. He came as far as his master's knees and then stopped dead, refusing to investigate closely. In vain Dr. Silence urged him; he wagged his tail, whined a little, and stood in a half-crouching attitude, staring alternately at the cat and at his master's face. He was, apparently, both puzzled and alarmed, and the whine went deeper and deeper down into his throat till it changed into an ugly snarl of awakening anger.

Then the doctor called to him in a tone of command he had never known to be disregarded; but still the dog, though springing up in response, declined to move nearer. He made tentative motions, pranced a little like a dog about to take to water, pretended to bark, and ran to and fro on the carpet. So far there was no actual fear in his manner, but he was uneasy and anxious, and nothing would induce him to go within touching distance of the walking cat. Once he made a complete circuit, but always carefully out of reach; and in the end he returned to his master's legs and rubbed vigorously against him. Flame did not like the performance at all: that much was quite clear.

For several minutes John Silence watched the performance of the cat with profound attention and without interfering. Then he called to the animal by name.

"Smoke, you mysterious beastie, what in the world are you about?" he said, in a coaxing tone.

The cat looked up at him for a moment, smiling in its ecstasy, blinking its eyes, but too happy to pause. He spoke to it again. He called to it several times, and each time it turned upon him its blazing eyes, drunk with inner delight, opening and shutting its lips, its body large and rigid with excitement. Yet it never for one instant paused in its short journeys to and fro.

He noted exactly what it did: it walked, he saw, the same number of paces each time, some six or seven steps, and then it turned sharply and retraced them. By the pattern of the great roses in the carpet he measured it. It kept to the same direction and the same line. It behaved precisely as though it were rubbing against something solid. Undoubtedly, there was something standing there on that strip of carpet, something invisible to the doctor, something that alarmed the dog, yet caused the cat unspeakable pleasure.

“Smokie!” he called again, “Smokie, you black mystery, what is it excites you so?”

Again the cat looked up at him for a brief second, and then continued its sentry-walk, blissfully happy, intensely preoccupied. And, for an instant, as he watched it, the doctor was aware that a faint uneasiness stirred in the depths of his own being, focusing itself for the moment upon this curious behaviour of the uncanny creature before him.

There rose in him quite a new realisation of the mystery connected with the whole feline tribe, but especially with that common member of it, the domestic cat — their hidden lives, their strange aloofness, their incalculable subtlety. How utterly remote from anything that human beings understood lay the sources of their elusive activities. As he watched the indescribable bearing of the little creature mincing along the strip of carpet under his eyes, coquetting with the powers of darkness, welcoming, maybe, some fearsome visitor, there stirred in his heart a feeling strangely akin to awe. Its indifference to human kind, its serene superiority to the obvious, struck him forcibly with fresh meaning; so remote, so inaccessible seemed the secret purposes of its real life, so alien to the blundering honesty of other animals. Its absolute poise of bearing brought into his mind the opium-eater’s words that “no dignity is perfect which does not at some point ally itself with the mysterious”; and he became suddenly aware that the presence of the dog in this foggy, haunted room on the top of Putney Hill was uncommonly welcome to him. He was glad to feel that Flame’s dependable personality was with him. The savage growling at his heels was a pleasant sound. He was glad to hear it. That marching cat made him uneasy.

Finding that Smoke paid no further attention to his words, the doctor decided upon action. Would it rub against his leg, too? He would take it by surprise and see.

He stepped quickly forward and placed himself upon the exact strip of carpet where it walked.

But no cat is ever taken by surprise! The moment he occupied the space of the Intruder, setting his feet on the woven roses midway in the line of travel, Smoke suddenly stopped purring and sat down. It lifted up its face with the most innocent stare imaginable of its green eyes. He could have sworn it laughed. It was a perfect child again. In a single second it had resumed its simple, domestic manner; and it gazed at him in such a way that he almost felt Smoke was the normal being, and *his* was the eccentric behaviour that was being watched. It was consummate, the manner in which it brought about this change so easily and so quickly.

“Superb little actor!” he laughed in spite of himself, and stooped to stroke the shining black back. But, in a flash, as he touched its fur, the cat turned and spat at him viciously, striking at his hand with one paw. Then, with a hurried scutter of feet, it shot like a shadow across the floor and a moment later was calmly sitting over by the window-curtains washing its face as though nothing interested it in the whole world but the cleanness of its cheeks and whiskers.

John Silence straightened himself up and drew a long breath. He realised that the performance was temporarily at an end. The collie, meanwhile, who had watched the whole proceeding with marked disapproval, had now lain down again upon the mat by the fire, no longer growling. It seemed to the doctor just as though something that had entered the room while he slept, alarming the dog, yet bringing happiness to the cat, had now gone out again, leaving all as it was before. Whatever it was that excited its blissful attentions had retreated for the moment.

He realised this intuitively. Smoke evidently realised it, too, for presently he deigned to march back to the fireplace and jump upon his master’s knees. Dr. Silence, patient and determined, settled down once more to his book. The animals soon slept; the fire blazed cheerfully; and the cold fog from outside poured into the room through every available chink and cranny.

For a long time silence and peace reigned in the room and Dr. Silence availed himself of the quietness to make careful notes of what had happened. He entered for future use in other cases an exhaustive analysis of what he had observed, especially with regard to the effect upon the two animals. It is impossible here, nor would it be intelligible to the reader unversed in the knowledge of the region known to a scientifically trained psychic like Dr. Silence, to detail these observations. But to him it was clear, up to a certain point — and for the rest he must still wait and watch.

So far, at least, he realised that while he slept in the chair — that is, while his will was dormant — the room had suffered intrusion from what he recognised as an intensely active Force, and might later be forced to acknowledge as something more than merely a blind force, namely, a distinct personality.

So far it had affected himself scarcely at all, but had acted directly upon the simpler organisms of the animals. It stimulated keenly the centres of the cat's psychic being, inducing a state of instant happiness (intensifying its consciousness probably in the same way a drug or stimulant intensifies that of a human being); whereas it alarmed the less sensitive dog, causing it to feel a vague apprehension and distress.

His own sudden action and exhibition of energy had served to disperse it temporarily, yet he felt convinced — the indications were not lacking even while he sat there making notes — that it still remained near to him, conditionally if not spatially, and was, as it were, gathering force for a second attack.

And, further, he intuitively understood that the relations between the two animals had undergone a subtle change: that the cat had become immeasurably superior, confident, sure of itself in its own peculiar region, whereas Flame had been weakened by an attack he could not comprehend and knew not how to reply to. Though not yet afraid, he was defiant — ready to act against a fear that he felt to be approaching. He was no longer fatherly and protective towards the cat. Smoke held the key to the situation; and both he and the cat knew it.

Thus, as the minutes passed, John Silence sat and waited, keenly on the alert, wondering how soon the attack would be renewed, and at what point it would be diverted from the animals and directed upon himself.

The book lay on the floor beside him, his notes were complete. With one hand on the cat's fur, and the dog's front paws resting against his feet, the three of them dozed comfortably before the hot fire while the night wore on and the silence deepened towards midnight.

It was well after one o'clock in the morning when Dr. Silence turned the lamp out and lighted the candle preparatory to going up to bed. Then Smoke suddenly woke with a loud sharp purr and sat up. It neither stretched, washed nor turned: it listened. And the doctor, watching it, realised that a certain indefinable change had come about that very moment in the room. A swift readjustment of the forces within the four walls had taken place — a new disposition of their personal equations. The balance was destroyed, the former harmony gone. Smoke, most sensitive of barometers, had been the first to feel it, but the dog was not slow to follow suit, for on looking down he noted that Flame was no longer asleep. He was lying with eyes wide open, and that same instant he sat up on his great haunches and began to growl.

Dr. Silence was in the act of taking the matches to re-light the lamp when an audible movement in the room behind made him pause. Smoke leaped down from his knee and moved forward a few paces across the carpet. Then it stopped and stared fixedly; and the doctor stood up on the rug to watch.

As he rose the sound was repeated, and he discovered that it was not in the room as he first thought, but outside, and that it came from more directions than one. There was a rushing, sweeping noise against the window-panes, and simultaneously a sound of something brushing against the door — out in the hall. Smoke advanced sedately across the carpet, twitching his tail, and sat down within a foot of the door. The influence that had destroyed the harmonious conditions of the room had apparently moved in advance of its cause. Clearly, something was about to happen.

For the first time that night John Silence hesitated; the thought of that dark narrow hall-way, choked with fog, and destitute of human comfort, was unpleasant. He became aware of a faint creeping of his flesh. He knew, of course, that the actual opening of the door was not necessary to the invasion of the room that was about to take place, since neither doors nor windows, nor any other solid barriers could interpose an obstacle to what was seeking entrance. Yet the opening of the door would be significant and symbolic, and he distinctly shrank from it.

But for a moment only. Smoke, turning with a show of impatience, recalled him to his purpose, and he moved past the sitting, watching creature, and deliberately opened the door to its full width.

What subsequently happened, happened in the feeble and flickering light of the solitary candle on the mantelpiece.

Through the opened door he saw the hall, dimly lit and thick with fog. Nothing, of course, was visible — nothing but the hat-stand, the African spears in dark lines upon the wall and the high-backed wooden chair standing grotesquely underneath on the oilcloth floor. For one instant the fog seemed to move and thicken oddly; but he set that down to the score of the imagination. The door had opened upon nothing.

Yet Smoke apparently thought otherwise, and the deep growling of the collie from the mat at the back of the room seemed to confirm his judgment.

For, proud and self-possessed, the cat had again risen to his feet, and having advanced to the door, was now ushering some one slowly into the room. Nothing could have been more evident. He paced from side to side, bowing his little head with great *empressement* and holding his stiffened tail aloft like a flagstaff. He turned this way and that, mincing to and fro, and showing signs of supreme satisfaction. He was in his element. He welcomed the intrusion, and apparently reckoned that his companions, the doctor and the dog, would welcome it likewise.

The Intruder had returned for a second attack.

Dr. Silence moved slowly backwards and took up his position on the hearthrug, keying himself up to a condition of concentrated attention.

He noted that Flame stood beside him, facing the room, with body motionless, and head moving swiftly from side to side with a curious swaying movement. His eyes were wide open, his back rigid, his neck and jaws thrust forward, his legs tense and ready to leap. Savage, ready for attack or defence, yet dreadfully puzzled and perhaps already a little cowed, he stood and stared, the hair on his spine and sides positively bristling outwards as though a wind played through them. In the dim firelight he looked like a great yellow-haired wolf, silent, eyes shooting dark fire, exceedingly formidable. It was Flame, the terrible.

Smoke, meanwhile, advanced from the door towards the middle of the room, adopting the very slow pace of an invisible companion. A few feet away it stopped and began to smile and blink its eyes. There was something deliberately coaxing in its attitude as it stood there undecided on the carpet, clearly wishing to effect some sort of introduction between the Intruder and its canine friend and ally. It assumed its most winning manners, purring, smiling, looking persuasively from one to the other, and making quick tentative steps first in one direction and then in the other. There had always existed such perfect understanding between them in everything. Surely Flame would appreciate Smoke's intentions now, and acquiesce.

But the old collie made no advances. He bared his teeth, lifting his lips till the gums showed, and stood stockstill with fixed eyes and heaving sides. The doctor moved a little farther back, watching intently the smallest movement, and it was just then he divined suddenly from the cat's behaviour and attitude that it was not only a single companion it had ushered into the room, but *several*. It kept crossing over from one to the other, looking up at each in turn. It sought to win over the dog to friendliness with them all. The original Intruder had come back with reinforcements. And at the same time he further realised that the Intruder was something more than a blindly acting force, impersonal though destructive. It was a Personality, and moreover a great personality. And it was accompanied for the purposes of assistance by a host of other personalities, minor in degree, but similar in kind.

He braced himself in the corner against the mantelpiece and waited, his whole being roused to defence, for he was now fully aware that the attack had spread to include himself as well as the animals, and he must be on the alert. He strained his eyes through the foggy atmosphere, trying in vain to see what the cat and dog saw; but the candlelight threw an uncertain and flickering light across the room and his eyes discerned nothing. On the floor Smoke moved softly in front of him like a black shadow, his eyes gleaming as he turned his head, still trying with many insinuating gestures and much purring to bring about the introductions he desired.

But it was all in vain. Flame stood riveted to one spot, motionless as a figure carved in stone.

Some minutes passed, during which only the cat moved, and then there came a sharp change. Flame began to back towards the wall. He moved his head from side to side as he went, sometimes turning to snap at something almost behind him. *They* were advancing upon him, trying to surround him. His distress became very marked from now onwards, and it seemed to the doctor that his anger merged into genuine terror and became overwhelmed by it. The savage growl sounded perilously like a whine, and more than once he tried to dive past his master's legs, as though hunting for a way of escape. He was trying to avoid something that everywhere blocked the way.

This terror of the indomitable fighter impressed the doctor enormously; yet also painfully; stirring his impatience; for he had never before seen the dog show signs of giving in, and it distressed him to witness it. He knew, however, that he was not giving in easily, and understood that it was really impossible for him to gauge the animal's sensations properly at all. What Flame felt, and saw, must be terrible indeed to turn him all at once into a coward. He faced something that made him afraid of more than his life merely. The doctor spoke a few quick words of encouragement to him, and stroked the bristling hair. But without much success. The collie seemed already beyond the reach of comfort such as that, and the collapse of the old dog followed indeed very speedily after this.

And Smoke, meanwhile, remained behind, watching the advance, but not joining in it; sitting, pleased and expectant, considering that all was going well and as it wished. It was kneading on the carpet with its front paws — slowly, laboriously, as though its feet were dipped in treacle. The sound its claws made as they caught in the threads was distinctly audible. It was still smiling, blinking, purring.

Suddenly the collie uttered a poignant short bark and leaped heavily to one side. His bared teeth traced a line of whiteness through the gloom. The next instant he dashed past his master's legs, almost upsetting his balance, and shot out into the room, where he went blundering wildly against walls and furniture. But that bark was significant; the doctor had heard it before and knew what it meant: for it was the cry of the fighter against odds and it meant that the old beast had found his courage again. Possibly it was only the courage of despair, but at any rate the fighting would be terrific. And Dr. Silence understood, too, that he dared not interfere. Flame must fight his own enemies in his own way.

But the cat, too, had heard that dreadful bark; and it, too, had understood. This was more than it had bargained for. Across the dim shadows of that haunted room there must have passed some secret signal of distress between the animals. Smoke stood up and looked swiftly about him. He uttered a piteous meow and trotted smartly away into the greater darkness by the windows. What his object was only those endowed with the spirit-like intelligence of cats might know. But, at any rate, he had at last ranged himself on the side of his friend. And the little beast meant business.

At the same moment the collie managed to gain the door. The doctor saw him rush through into the hall like a flash of yellow light. He shot across the oilcloth, and tore up the stairs, but in another second he appeared again, flying down the steps and landing at the bottom in a tumbling heap, whining, cringing, terrified. The doctor saw him slink back into the room again and crawl round by the wall towards the cat. Was, then, even the staircase occupied? Did *They* stand also in the hall? Was the whole house crowded from floor to ceiling?

The thought came to add to the keen distress he felt at the sight of the collie's discomfiture. And, indeed, his own personal distress had increased in a marked degree during the past minutes, and continued to increase steadily to the climax. He recognised that the drain on his own vitality grew steadily, and that the attack was now directed against himself even more than against the defeated dog, and the too much deceived cat.

It all seemed so rapid and uncalculated after that — the events that took place in this little modern room at the top of Putney Hill between midnight and sunrise — that Dr. Silence was hardly able to follow and remember it all. It came about with such uncanny swiftness and terror; the light was so uncertain; the movements of the black cat so difficult to follow on the dark carpet, and the doctor himself so weary and taken by surprise — that he found it almost impossible to observe accurately, or to recall afterwards precisely what it was he had seen or in what order the incidents had taken place. He never could understand what defect of vision on his part made it seem as though the cat had duplicated itself at first, and then increased indefinitely, so that there were at least a dozen of them darting silently about the floor, leaping softly on to chairs and tables, passing like shadows from the open door to the end of the room, all black as sin, with brilliant green eyes flashing fire in all directions. It was like the reflections from a score of mirrors placed round the walls at different angles. Nor could he make out at the time why the size of the room seemed to have altered, grown much larger, and why it extended away behind him where ordinarily the wall should have been. The snarling of the enraged and terrified collie sounded sometimes so far away; the ceiling seemed to have raised itself so much higher than before, and much of the furniture had changed in appearance and shifted marvellously.

It was all so confused and confusing, as though the little room he knew had become merged and transformed into the dimensions of quite another chamber, that came to him, with its host of cats and its strange distances, in a sort of vision.

But these changes came about a little later, and at a time when his attention was so concentrated upon the proceedings of Smoke and the collie, that he only observed them, as it were, subconsciously. And the excitement, the flickering candlelight, the distress he felt for the collie, and the distorting atmosphere of fog were the poorest possible allies to careful observation.

At first he was only aware that the dog was repeating his short dangerous bark from time to time, snapping viciously at the empty air, a foot or so from the ground. Once, indeed, he sprang upwards and forwards, working furiously with teeth and paws, and with a noise like wolves fighting, but only to dash back the next minute against the wall behind him. Then, after lying still for a bit, he rose to a crouching position as though to spring again, snarling horribly and making short half-circles with lowered head. And Smoke all the while meowed piteously by the window as though trying to draw the attack upon himself.

Then it was that the rush of the whole dreadful business seemed to turn aside from the dog and direct itself upon his own person. The collie had made another spring and fallen back with a crash into the corner, where he made noise enough in his savage rage to waken the dead before he fell to whining and then finally lay still. And directly afterwards the doctor's own distress became intolerably acute. He had made a half movement forward to come to the rescue when a veil that was denser than mere fog seemed to drop down over the scene, draping room, walls, animals and fire in a mist of darkness and folding also about his own mind. Other forms moved silently across the field of vision, forms that he recognised from previous experiments, and welcomed not. Unholy thoughts began to crowd into his brain, sinister suggestions of evil presented themselves seductively. Ice seemed to settle about his heart, and his mind trembled. He began to lose memory — memory of his identity, of where he was, of what he ought to do. The very foundations of his strength were shaken. His will seemed paralysed.

And it was then that the room filled with this horde of cats, all dark as the night, all silent, all with lamping eyes of green fire. The dimensions of the place altered and shifted. He was in a much larger space. The whining of the dog sounded far away, and all about him the cats flew busily to and fro, silently playing their tearing, rushing game of evil, weaving the pattern of their dark purpose upon the floor. He strove hard to collect himself and remember the words of power he had made use of before in similar dread positions where his dangerous practice had sometimes led; but he could recall nothing consecutively; a mist lay over his mind and memory; he felt dazed and his forces scattered. The deeps within were too troubled for healing power to come out of them.

It was glamour, of course, he realised afterwards, the strong glamour thrown upon his imagination by some powerful personality behind the veil; but at the time he was not sufficiently aware of this and, as with all true glamour, was unable to grasp where the true ended and the false began. He was caught momentarily in the same vortex that had sought to lure the cat to destruction through its delight, and threatened utterly to overwhelm the dog through its terror.

There came a sound in the chimney behind him like wind booming and tearing its way down. The windows rattled. The candle flickered and went out. The glacial atmosphere closed round him with the cold of death, and a great rushing sound swept by overhead as though the ceiling had lifted to a great height. He heard the door shut. Far away it sounded. He felt lost, shelterless in the depths of his soul. Yet still he held out and resisted while the climax of the fight came nearer and nearer.... He had stepped into the stream of forces awakened by Pender and he knew that he must withstand them to the end or come to a conclusion that it was not good for a man to come to. Something from the region of utter cold was upon him.

And then quite suddenly, through the confused mists about him, there slowly rose up the Personality that had been all the time directing the battle. Some force entered his being that shook him as the tempest shakes a leaf, and close against his eyes — clean level with his face — he found himself staring into the wreck of a vast dark Countenance, a countenance that was terrible even in its ruin.

For ruined it was, and terrible it was, and the mark of spiritual evil was branded everywhere upon its broken features. Eyes, face and hair rose level with his own, and for a space of time he never could properly measure, or determine, these two, a man and a woman, looked straight into each other's visages and down into each other's hearts.

And John Silence, the soul with the good, unselfish motive, held his own against the dark discarnate woman whose motive was pure evil, and whose soul was on the side of the Dark Powers.

It was the climax that touched the depth of power within him and began to restore him slowly to his own. He was conscious, of course, of effort, and yet it seemed no superhuman one, for he had recognised the character of his opponent's power, and he called upon the good within him to meet and overcome it. The inner forces stirred and trembled in response to his call. They did not at first come readily as was their habit, for under the spell of glamour they had already been diabolically lulled into inactivity, but come they eventually did, rising out of the inner spiritual nature he had learned with so much time and pain to awaken to life. And power and confidence came with them. He began to breathe deeply and regularly, and at the same time to absorb into himself the forces opposed to him, and to *turn them to his own account*. By ceasing to resist, and allowing the deadly stream to pour into him unopposed, he used the very power supplied by his adversary and thus enormously increased his own.

For this spiritual alchemy he had learned. He understood that force ultimately is everywhere one and the same; it is the motive behind that makes it good or evil; and his motive was entirely unselfish. He knew — provided he was not first robbed of self-control — how vicariously to absorb these evil radiations into himself and change them magically into his own good purposes. And, since his motive was pure and his soul fearless, they could not work him harm.

Thus he stood in the main stream of evil unwittingly attracted by Pender, deflecting its course upon himself; and after passing through the purifying filter of his own unselfishness these energies could only add to his store of experience, of knowledge, and therefore of power. And, as his self-control returned to him, he gradually accomplished this purpose, even though trembling while he did so.

Yet the struggle was severe, and in spite of the freezing chill of the air, the perspiration poured down his face. Then, by slow degrees, the dark and dreadful countenance faded, the glamour passed from his soul, the normal proportions returned to walls and ceiling, the forms melted back into the fog, and the whirl of rushing shadow-cats disappeared whence they came.

And with the return of the consciousness of his own identity John Silence was restored to the full control of his own will-power. In a deep, modulated voice he began to utter certain rhythmical sounds that slowly rolled through the air like a rising sea, filling the room with powerful vibratory activities that whelmed all irregularities of lesser vibrations in its own swelling tone. He made certain sigils, gestures and movements at the same time. For several minutes he continued to utter these words, until at length the growing volume dominated the whole room and mastered the manifestation of all that opposed it. For just as he understood the spiritual alchemy that can transmute evil forces by raising them into higher channels, so he knew from long study the occult use of sound, and its direct effect upon the plastic region wherein the powers of spiritual evil work their fell purposes. Harmony was restored first of all to his own soul, and thence to the room and all its occupants.

And, after himself, the first to recognise it was the old dog lying in his corner. Flame began suddenly uttering sounds of pleasure, that "something" between a growl and a grunt that dogs make upon being restored to their master's confidence. Dr. Silence heard the thumping of the collie's tail against the ground. And the grunt and the thumping touched the depth of affection in the man's heart, and gave him some inkling of what agonies the dumb creature had suffered.

Next, from the shadows by the window, a somewhat shrill purring announced the restoration of the cat to its normal state. Smoke was advancing across the carpet. He seemed very pleased with himself, and smiled with an expression of supreme innocence. He was no shadow-cat, but real and full of his usual and perfect self-possession. He marched along, picking his way delicately, but with a stately dignity that suggested his ancestry with the majesty of Egypt. His eyes no longer glared; they shone steadily before him; they radiated, not excitement, but knowledge. Clearly he was anxious to make amends for the mischief to which he had unwittingly lent himself owing to his subtle and electric constitution.

Still uttering his sharp high purrings he marched up to his master and rubbed vigorously against his legs. Then he stood on his hind feet and pawed his knees and stared beseechingly up into his face. He turned his head towards the corner where the collie still lay, thumping his tail feebly and pathetically.

John Silence understood. He bent down and stroked the creature's living fur, noting the line of bright blue sparks that followed the motion of his hand down its back. And then they advanced together towards the corner where the dog was.

Smoke went first and put his nose gently against his friend's muzzle, purring while he rubbed, and uttering little soft sounds of affection in his throat. The doctor lit the candle and brought it over. He saw the collie lying on its side against the wall; it was utterly exhausted, and foam still hung about its jaws. Its tail and eyes responded to the sound of its name, but it was evidently very weak and overcome. Smoke continued to rub against its cheek and nose and eyes, sometimes even standing on its body and kneading into the thick yellow hair. Flame replied from time to time by little licks of the tongue, most of them curiously misdirected.

But Dr. Silence felt intuitively that something disastrous had happened, and his heart was wrung. He stroked the dear body, feeling it over for bruises or broken bones, but finding none. He fed it with what remained of the sandwiches and milk, but the creature clumsily upset the saucer and lost the sandwiches between its paws, so that the doctor had to feed it with his own hand. And all the while Smoke meowed piteously.

Then John Silence began to understand. He went across to the farther side of the room and called aloud to it.

"Flame, old man! come!"

At any other time the dog would have been upon him in an instant, barking and leaping to the shoulder. And even now he got up, though heavily and awkwardly, to his feet. He started to run, wagging his tail more briskly. He collided first with a chair, and then ran straight into a table. Smoke trotted close at his side, trying his very best to guide him. But it was useless. Dr. Silence had to lift him up into his own arms and carry him like a baby. For he was blind.

III

It was a week later when John Silence called to see the author in his new house, and found him well on the way to recovery and already busy again with his writing. The haunted look had left his eyes, and he seemed cheerful and confident.

“Humour restored?” laughed the doctor, as soon as they were comfortably settled in the room overlooking the Park.

“I’ve had no trouble since I left that dreadful place,” returned Pender gratefully; “and thanks to you — —”

The doctor stopped him with a gesture.

“Never mind that,” he said, “we’ll discuss your new plans afterwards, and my scheme for relieving you of the house and helping you settle elsewhere. Of course it must be pulled down, for it’s not fit for any sensitive person to live in, and any other tenant might be afflicted in the same way you were. Although, personally, I think the evil has exhausted itself by now.”

He told the astonished author something of his experiences in it with the animals.

“I don’t pretend to understand,” Pender said, when the account was finished, “but I and my wife are intensely relieved to be free of it all. Only I must say I should like to know something of the former history of the house. When we took it six months ago I heard no word against it.”

Dr. Silence drew a typewritten paper from his pocket.

“I can satisfy your curiosity to some extent,” he said, running his eye over the sheets, and then replacing them in his coat; “for by my secretary’s investigations I have been able to check certain information obtained in the hypnotic trance by a ‘sensitive’ who helps me in such cases. The former occupant who haunted you appears to have been a woman of singularly atrocious life and character who finally suffered death by hanging, after a series of crimes that appalled the whole of England and only came to light by the merest chance. She came to her end in the year 1798, for it was not this particular house she lived in, but a much larger one that then stood upon the site it now occupies, and was then, of course, not in London, but in the country. She was a person of intellect, possessed of a powerful, trained will, and of consummate audacity, and I am convinced availed herself of the resources of the lower magic to attain her ends. This goes far to explain the virulence of the attack upon yourself, and why she is still able to carry on after death the evil practices that formed her main purpose during life."

"You think that after death a soul can still consciously direct — —" gasped the author.

"I think, as I told you before, that the forces of a powerful personality may still persist after death in the line of their original momentum," replied the doctor; "and that strong thoughts and purposes can still react upon suitably prepared brains long after their originators have passed away.

"If you knew anything of magic," he pursued, "you would know that thought is dynamic, and that it may call into existence forms and pictures that may well exist for hundreds of years. For, not far removed from the region of our human life, is another region where floats the waste and drift of all the centuries, the limbo of the shells of the dead; a densely populated region crammed with horror and abomination of all descriptions, and sometimes galvanised into active life again by the will of a trained manipulator, a mind versed in the practices of lower magic. That this woman understood its vile commerce, I am persuaded, and the forces she set going during her life have simply been accumulating ever since, and would have continued to do so had they not been drawn down upon yourself, and afterwards discharged and satisfied through me.

"Anything might have brought down the attack, for, besides drugs, there are certain violent emotions, certain moods of the soul, certain spiritual fevers, if I may so call them, which directly open the inner being to a cognisance of this astral region I have mentioned. In your case it happened to be a peculiarly potent drug that did it.

"But now, tell me," he added, after a pause, handing to the perplexed author a pencil-drawing he had made of the dark countenance that had appeared to him during the night on Putney Hill— "tell me if you recognise this face?"

Pender looked at the drawing closely, greatly astonished. He shuddered a little as he looked.

“Undoubtedly,” he said, “it is the face I kept trying to draw — dark, with the great mouth and jaw, and the drooping eye. That is the woman.”

Dr. Silence then produced from his pocket-book an old-fashioned woodcut of the same person which his secretary had unearthed from the records of the Newgate Calendar. The woodcut and the pencil drawing were two different aspects of the same dreadful visage. The men compared them for some moments in silence.

“It makes me thank God for the limitations of our senses,” said Pender quietly, with a sigh; “continuous clairvoyance must be a sore affliction.”

“It is indeed,” returned John Silence significantly, “and if all the people nowadays who claim to be clairvoyant were really so, the statistics of suicide and lunacy would be considerably higher than they are. It is little wonder,” he added, “that your sense of humour was clouded, with the mind-forces of that dead monster trying to use your brain for their dissemination. You have had an interesting adventure, Mr. Felix Pender, and, let me add, a fortunate escape.”

The author was about to renew his thanks when there came a sound of scratching at the door, and the doctor sprang up quickly.

“It’s time for me to go. I left my dog on the step, but I suppose — —”

Before he had time to open the door, it had yielded to the pressure behind it and flew wide open to admit a great yellow-haired collie. The dog, wagging his tail and contorting his whole body with delight, tore across the floor and tried to leap up upon his owner’s breast. And there was laughter and happiness in the old eyes; for they were clear again as the day.

CASE II. ANCIENT SORCERIES

I

THERE ARE, IT would appear, certain wholly unremarkable persons, with none of the characteristics that invite adventure, who yet once or twice in the course of their smooth lives undergo an experience so strange that the world catches its breath — and looks the other way! And it was cases of this kind, perhaps, more than any other, that fell into the widespread net of John Silence, the psychic doctor, and, appealing to his deep humanity, to his patience, and to his great qualities of spiritual sympathy, led often to the revelation of problems of the strangest complexity, and of the profoundest possible human interest.

Matters that seemed almost too curious and fantastic for belief he loved to trace to their hidden sources. To unravel a tangle in the very soul of things — and to release a suffering human soul in the process — was with him a veritable passion. And the knots he untied were, indeed, often passing strange.

The world, of course, asks for some plausible basis to which it can attach credence — something it can, at least, pretend to explain. The adventurous type it can understand: such people carry about with them an adequate explanation of their exciting lives, and their characters obviously drive them into the circumstances which produce the adventures. It expects nothing else from them, and is satisfied. But dull, ordinary folk have no right to out-of-the-way experiences, and the world having been led to expect otherwise, is disappointed with them, not to say shocked. Its complacent judgment has been rudely disturbed.

“Such a thing happen to *that* man!” it cries— “a commonplace person like that! It is too absurd! There must be something wrong!”

Yet there could be no question that something did actually happen to little Arthur Vezin, something of the curious nature he described to Dr. Silence. Outwardly, or inwardly, it happened beyond a doubt, and in spite of the jeers of his few friends who heard the tale, and observed wisely that “such a thing might perhaps have come to Iszard, that crack-brained Iszard, or to that odd fish Minski, but it could never have happened to commonplace little Vezin, who was fore-ordained to live and die according to scale."

But, whatever his method of death was, Vezin certainly did not "live according to scale" so far as this particular event in his otherwise uneventful life was concerned; and to hear him recount it, and watch his pale delicate features change, and hear his voice grow softer and more hushed as he proceeded, was to know the conviction that his halting words perhaps failed sometimes to convey. He lived the thing over again each time he told it. His whole personality became muffled in the recital. It subdued him more than ever, so that the tale became a lengthy apology for an experience that he deprecated. He appeared to excuse himself and ask your pardon for having dared to take part in so fantastic an episode. For little Vezin was a timid, gentle, sensitive soul, rarely able to assert himself, tender to man and beast, and almost constitutionally unable to say No, or to claim many things that should rightly have been his. His whole scheme of life seemed utterly remote from anything more exciting than missing a train or losing an umbrella on an omnibus. And when this curious event came upon him he was already more years beyond forty than his friends suspected or he cared to admit.

John Silence, who heard him speak of his experience more than once, said that he sometimes left out certain details and put in others; yet they were all obviously true. The whole scene was unforgettably cinematographed on to his mind. None of the details were imagined or invented. And when he told the story with them all complete, the effect was undeniable. His appealing brown eyes shone, and much of the charming personality, usually so carefully repressed, came forward and revealed itself. His modesty was always there, of course, but in the telling he forgot the present and allowed himself to appear almost vividly as he lived again in the past of his adventure.

He was on the way home when it happened, crossing northern France from some mountain trip or other where he buried himself solitary-wise every summer. He had nothing but an unregistered bag in the rack, and the train was jammed to suffocation, most of the passengers being unredeemed holiday English. He disliked them, not because they were his fellow-countrymen, but because they were noisy and obtrusive, obliterating with their big limbs and tweed clothing all the quieter tints of the day that brought him satisfaction and enabled him to melt into insignificance and forget that he was anybody. These English clashed about him like a brass band, making him feel vaguely that he ought to be more self-assertive and obstreperous, and that he did not claim insistently enough all kinds of things that he didn’t want and that were really valueless, such as corner seats, windows up or down, and so forth.

So that he felt uncomfortable in the train, and wished the journey were over and he was back again living with his unmarried sister in Surbiton.

And when the train stopped for ten panting minutes at the little station in northern France, and he got out to stretch his legs on the platform, and saw to his dismay a further batch of the British Isles debouching from another train, it suddenly seemed impossible to him to continue the journey. Even *his* flabby soul revolted, and the idea of staying a night in the little town and going on next day by a slower, emptier train, flashed into his mind. The guard was already shouting “*en voiture*” and the corridor of his compartment was already packed when the thought came to him. And, for once, he acted with decision and rushed to snatch his bag.

Finding the corridor and steps impassable, he tapped at the window (for he had a corner seat) and begged the Frenchman who sat opposite to hand his luggage out to him, explaining in his wretched French that he intended to break the journey there. And this elderly Frenchman, he declared, gave him a look, half of warning, half of reproach, that to his dying day he could never forget; handed the bag through the window of the moving train; and at the same time poured into his ears a long sentence, spoken rapidly and low, of which he was able to comprehend only the last few words: “*à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats*.”

In reply to Dr. Silence, whose singular psychic acuteness at once seized upon this Frenchman as a vital point in the adventure, Vezin admitted that the man had impressed him favourably from the beginning, though without being able to explain why. They had sat facing one another during the four hours of the journey, and though no conversation had passed between them — Vezin was timid about his stuttering French — he confessed that his eyes were being continually drawn to his face, almost, he felt, to rudeness, and that each, by a dozen nameless little politenesses and attentions, had evinced the desire to be kind. The men liked each other and their personalities did not clash, or would not have clashed had they chanced to come to terms of acquaintance. The Frenchman, indeed, seemed to have exercised a silent protective influence over the insignificant little Englishman, and without words or gestures betrayed that he wished him well and would gladly have been of service to him.

"And this sentence that he hurled at you after the bag?" asked John Silence, smiling that peculiarly sympathetic smile that always melted the prejudices of his patient, "were you unable to follow it exactly?"

"It was so quick and low and vehement," explained Vezin, in his small voice, "that I missed practically the whole of it. I only caught the few words at the very end, because he spoke them so clearly, and his face was bent down out of the carriage window so near to mine."

"*'A cause du sommeil et à cause des chats'?*" repeated Dr. Silence, as though half speaking to himself.

"That's it exactly," said Vezin; "which, I take it, means something like 'because of sleep and because of the cats,' doesn't it?"

"Certainly, that's how I should translate it," the doctor observed shortly, evidently not wishing to interrupt more than necessary.

"And the rest of the sentence — all the first part I couldn't understand, I mean — was a warning not to do something — not to stop in the town, or at some particular place in the town, perhaps. That was the impression it made on me."

Then, of course, the train rushed off, and left Vezin standing on the platform alone and rather forlorn.

The little town climbed in straggling fashion up a sharp hill rising out of the plain at the back of the station, and was crowned by the twin towers of the ruined cathedral peeping over the summit. From the station itself it looked uninteresting and modern, but the fact was that the mediæval position lay out of sight just beyond the crest. And once he reached the top and entered the old streets, he stepped clean out of modern life into a bygone century. The noise and bustle of the crowded train seemed days away. The spirit of this silent hill-town, remote from tourists and motor-cars, dreaming its own quiet life under the autumn sun, rose up and cast its spell upon him. Long before he recognised this spell he acted under it. He walked softly, almost on tiptoe, down the winding narrow streets where the gables all but met over his head, and he entered the doorway of the solitary inn with a deprecating and modest demeanour that was in itself an apology for intruding upon the place and disturbing its dream.

At first, however, Vezin said, he noticed very little of all this. The attempt at analysis came much later. What struck him then was only the delightful contrast of the silence and peace after the dust and noisy rattle of the train. He felt soothed and stroked like a cat.

“Like a cat, you said?” interrupted John Silence, quickly catching him up.

“Yes. At the very start I felt that.” He laughed apologetically. “I felt as though the warmth and the stillness and the comfort made me purr. It seemed to be the general mood of the whole place — then.”

The inn, a rambling ancient house, the atmosphere of the old coaching days still about it, apparently did not welcome him too warmly. He felt he was only tolerated, he said. But it was cheap and comfortable, and the delicious cup of afternoon tea he ordered at once made him feel really very pleased with himself for leaving the train in this bold, original way. For to him it had seemed bold and original. He felt something of a dog. His room, too, soothed him with its dark panelling and low irregular ceiling, and the long sloping passage that led to it seemed the natural pathway to a real Chamber of Sleep — a little dim cubby hole out of the world where noise could not enter. It looked upon the courtyard at the back. It was all very charming, and made him think of himself as dressed in very soft velvet somehow, and the floors seemed padded, the walls provided with cushions. The sounds of the streets could not penetrate there. It was an atmosphere of absolute rest that surrounded him.

On engaging the two-franc room he had interviewed the only person who seemed to be about that sleepy afternoon, an elderly waiter with Dundreary whiskers and a drowsy courtesy, who had ambled lazily towards him across the stone yard; but on coming downstairs again for a little promenade in the town before dinner he encountered the proprietress herself. She was a large woman whose hands, feet, and features seemed to swim towards him out of a sea of person. They emerged, so to speak. But she had great dark, vivacious eyes that counteracted the bulk of her body, and betrayed the fact that in reality she was both vigorous and alert. When he first caught sight of her she was knitting in a low chair against the sunlight of the wall, and something at once made him see her as a great tabby cat, dozing, yet awake, heavily sleepy, and yet at the same time prepared for instantaneous action. A great mouser on the watch occurred to him.

She took him in with a single comprehensive glance that was polite without being cordial. Her neck, he noticed, was extraordinarily supple in spite of its proportions, for it turned so easily to follow him, and the head it carried bowed so very flexibly.

"But when she looked at me, you know," said Vezin, with that little apologetic smile in his brown eyes, and that faintly deprecating gesture of the shoulders that was characteristic of him, "the odd notion came to me that really she had intended to make quite a different movement, and that with a single bound she could have leaped at me across the width of that stone yard and pounced upon me like some huge cat upon a mouse."

He laughed a little soft laugh, and Dr. Silence made a note in his book without interrupting, while Vezin proceeded in a tone as though he feared he had already told too much and more than we could believe.

"Very soft, yet very active she was, for all her size and mass, and I felt she knew what I was doing even after I had passed and was behind her back. She spoke to me, and her voice was smooth and running. She asked if I had my luggage, and was comfortable in my room, and then added that dinner was at seven o'clock, and that they were very early people in this little country town. Clearly, she intended to convey that late hours were not encouraged."

Evidently, she contrived by voice and manner to give him the impression that here he would be "managed," that everything would be arranged and planned for him, and that he had nothing to do but fall into the groove and obey. No decided action or sharp personal effort would be looked for from him. It was the very reverse of the train. He walked quietly out into the street feeling soothed and peaceful. He realised that he was in a *milieu* that suited him and stroked him the right way. It was so much easier to be obedient. He began to purr again, and to feel that all the town purred with him.

About the streets of that little town he meandered gently, falling deeper and deeper into the spirit of repose that characterised it. With no special aim he wandered up and down, and to and fro. The September sunshine fell slantingly over the roofs. Down winding alleyways, fringed with tumbling gables and open casements, he caught fairylike glimpses of the great plain below, and of the meadows and yellow copses lying like a dream-map in the haze. The spell of the past held very potently here, he felt.

The streets were full of picturesquely garbed men and women, all busy enough, going their respective ways; but no one took any notice of him or turned to stare at his obviously English appearance. He was even able to forget that with his tourist appearance he was a false note in a charming picture, and he melted more and more into the scene, feeling delightfully insignificant and unimportant and unselfconscious. It was like becoming part of a softly-coloured dream which he did not even realise to be a dream.

On the eastern side the hill fell away more sharply, and the plain below ran off rather suddenly into a sea of gathering shadows in which the little patches of woodland looked like islands and the stubble fields like deep water. Here he strolled along the old ramparts of ancient fortifications that once had been formidable, but now were only vision-like with their charming mingling of broken grey walls and wayward vine and ivy. From the broad coping on which he sat for a moment, level with the rounded tops of clipped plane trees, he saw the esplanade far below lying in shadow. Here and there a yellow sunbeam crept in and lay upon the fallen yellow leaves, and from the height he looked down and saw that the townsfolk were walking to and fro in the cool of the evening. He could just hear the sound of their slow footfalls, and the murmur of their voices floated up to him through the gaps between the trees. The figures looked like shadows as he caught glimpses of their quiet movements far below.

He sat there for some time pondering, bathed in the waves of murmurs and half-lost echoes that rose to his ears, muffled by the leaves of the plane trees. The whole town, and the little hill out of which it grew as naturally as an ancient wood, seemed to him like a being lying there half asleep on the plain and crooning to itself as it dozed.

And, presently, as he sat lazily melting into its dream, a sound of horns and strings and wood instruments rose to his ears, and the town band began to play at the far end of the crowded terrace below to the accompaniment of a very soft, deep-throated drum. Vezin was very sensitive to music, knew about it intelligently, and had even ventured, unknown to his friends, upon the composition of quiet melodies with low-running chords which he played to himself with the soft pedal when no one was about. And this music floating up through the trees from an invisible and doubtless very picturesque band of the townspeople wholly charmed him. He recognised nothing that they played, and it sounded as though they were simply improvising without a conductor. No definitely marked time ran through the pieces, which ended and began oddly after the fashion of wind through an Æolian harp. It was part of the place and scene, just as the dying sunlight and faintly-breathing wind were part of the scene and hour, and the mellow notes of old-fashioned plaintive horns, pierced here and there by the sharper strings, all half smothered by the continuous booming of the deep drum, touched his soul with a curiously potent spell that was almost too engrossing to be quite pleasant.

There was a certain queer sense of bewitchment in it all. The music seemed to him oddly unartificial. It made him think of trees swept by the wind, of night breezes singing among wires and chimney-stacks, or in the rigging of invisible ships; or — and the simile leaped up in his thoughts with a sudden sharpness of suggestion — a chorus of animals, of wild creatures, somewhere in desolate places of the world, crying and singing as animals will, to the moon. He could fancy he heard the wailing, half-human cries of cats upon the tiles at night, rising and falling with weird intervals of sound, and this music, muffled by distance and the trees, made him think of a queer company of these creatures on some roof far away in the sky, uttering their solemn music to one another and the moon in chorus.

It was, he felt at the time, a singular image to occur to him, yet it expressed his sensation pictorially better than anything else. The instruments played such impossibly odd intervals, and the crescendos and diminuendos were so very suggestive of cat-land on the tiles at night, rising swiftly, dropping without warning to deep notes again, and all in such strange confusion of discords and accords. But, at the same time a plaintive sweetness resulted on the whole, and the discords of these half-broken instruments were so singular that they did not distress his musical soul like fiddles out of tune.

He listened a long time, wholly surrendering himself as his character was, and then strolled homewards in the dusk as the air grew chilly.

“There was nothing to alarm?” put in Dr. Silence briefly.

“Absolutely nothing,” said Vezin; “but you know it was all so fantastical and charming that my imagination was profoundly impressed. Perhaps, too,” he continued, gently explanatory, “it was this stirring of my imagination that caused other impressions; for, as I walked back, the spell of the place began to steal over me in a dozen ways, though all intelligible ways. But there were other things I could not account for in the least, even then.”

“Incidents, you mean?”

“Hardly incidents, I think. A lot of vivid sensations crowded themselves upon my mind and I could trace them to no causes. It was just after sunset and the tumbled old buildings traced magical outlines against an opalescent sky of gold and red. The dusk was running down the twisted streets. All round the hill the plain pressed in like a dim sea, its level rising with the darkness. The spell of this kind of scene, you know, can be very moving, and it was so that night. Yet I felt that what came to me had nothing directly to do with the mystery and wonder of the scene.”

“Not merely the subtle transformations of the spirit that come with beauty,” put in the doctor, noticing his hesitation.

“Exactly,” Vezin went on, duly encouraged and no longer so fearful of our smiles at his expense. “The impressions came from somewhere else. For instance, down the busy main street where men and women were bustling home from work, shopping at stalls and barrows, idly gossiping in groups, and all the rest of it, I saw that I aroused no interest and that no one turned to stare at me as a foreigner and stranger. I was utterly ignored, and my presence among them excited no special interest or attention.

“And then, quite suddenly, it dawned upon me with conviction that all the time this indifference and inattention were merely feigned. Everybody as a matter of fact was watching me closely. Every movement I made was known and observed. Ignoring me was all a pretence — an elaborate pretence.”

He paused a moment and looked at us to see if we were smiling, and then continued, reassured —

“It is useless to ask me how I noticed this, because I simply cannot explain it. But the discovery gave me something of a shock. Before I got back to the inn, however, another curious thing rose up strongly in my mind and forced my recognition of it as true. And this, too, I may as well say at once, was equally inexplicable to me. I mean I can only give you the fact, as fact it was to me.”

The little man left his chair and stood on the mat before the fire. His diffidence lessened from now onwards, as he lost himself again in the magic of the old adventure. His eyes shone a little already as he talked.

“Well,” he went on, his soft voice rising somewhat with his excitement, “I was in a shop when it came to me first — though the idea must have been at work for a long time subconsciously to appear in so complete a form all at once. I was buying socks, I think,” he laughed, “and struggling with my dreadful French, when it struck me that the woman in the shop did not care two pins whether I bought anything or not. She was indifferent whether she made a sale or did not make a sale. She was only pretending to sell.

“This sounds a very small and fanciful incident to build upon what follows. But really it was not small. I mean it was the spark that lit the line of powder and ran along to the big blaze in my mind.

“For the whole town, I suddenly realised, was something other than I so far saw it. The real activities and interests of the people were elsewhere and otherwise than appeared. Their true lives lay somewhere out of sight behind the scenes. Their busy-ness was but the outward semblance that masked their actual purposes. They bought and sold, and ate and drank, and walked about the streets, yet all the while the main stream of their existence lay somewhere beyond my ken, underground, in secret places. In the shops and at the stalls they did not care whether I purchased their articles or not; at the inn, they were indifferent to my staying or going; their life lay remote from my own, springing from hidden, mysterious sources, coursing out of sight, unknown. It was all a great elaborate pretence, assumed possibly for my benefit, or possibly for purposes of their own. But the main current of their energies ran elsewhere. I almost felt as an unwelcome foreign substance might be expected to feel when it has found its way into the human system and the whole body organises itself to eject it or to absorb it. The town was doing this very thing to me.

“This bizarre notion presented itself forcibly to my mind as I walked home to the inn, and I began busily to wonder wherein the true life of this town could lie and what were the actual interests and activities of its hidden life.

“And, now that my eyes were partly opened, I noticed other things too that puzzled me, first of which, I think, was the extraordinary silence of the whole place. Positively, the town was muffled. Although the streets were paved with cobbles the people moved about silently, softly, with padded feet, like cats. Nothing made noise. All was hushed, subdued, muted. The very voices were quiet, low-pitched like purring. Nothing clamorous, vehement or emphatic seemed able to live in the drowsy atmosphere of soft dreaming that soothed this little hill-town into its sleep. It was like the woman at the inn — an outward repose screening intense inner activity and purpose.

“Yet there was no sign of lethargy or sluggishness anywhere about it. The people were active and alert. Only a magical and uncanny softness lay over them all like a spell.”

Vezin passed his hand across his eyes for a moment as though the memory had become very vivid. His voice had run off into a whisper so that we heard the last part with difficulty. He was telling a true thing obviously, yet something that he both liked and hated telling.

“I went back to the inn,” he continued presently in a louder voice, “and dined. I felt a new strange world about me. My old world of reality receded. Here, whether I liked it or no, was something new and incomprehensible. I regretted having left the train so impulsively. An adventure was upon me, and I loathed adventures as foreign to my nature. Moreover, this was the beginning apparently of an adventure somewhere deep within me, in a region I could not check or measure, and a feeling of alarm mingled itself with my wonder — alarm for the stability of what I had for forty years recognised as my ‘personality.’

“I went upstairs to bed, my mind teeming with thoughts that were unusual to me, and of rather a haunting description. By way of relief I kept thinking of that nice, prosaic noisy train and all those wholesome, blustering passengers. I almost wished I were with them again. But my dreams took me elsewhere. I dreamed of cats, and soft-moving creatures, and the silence of life in a dim muffled world beyond the senses."

II

Vezin stayed on from day to day, indefinitely, much longer than he had intended. He felt in a kind of dazed, somnolent condition. He did nothing in particular, but the place fascinated him and he could not decide to leave. Decisions were always very difficult for him and he sometimes wondered how he had ever brought himself to the point of leaving the train. It seemed as though some one else must have arranged it for him, and once or twice his thoughts ran to the swarthy Frenchman who had sat opposite. If only he could have understood that long sentence ending so strangely with "*à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats*." He wondered what it all meant.

Meanwhile the hushed softness of the town held him prisoner and he sought in his muddling, gentle way to find out where the mystery lay, and what it was all about. But his limited French and his constitutional hatred of active investigation made it hard for him to buttonhole anybody and ask questions. He was content to observe, and watch, and remain negative.

The weather held on calm and hazy, and this just suited him. He wandered about the town till he knew every street and alley. The people suffered him to come and go without let or hindrance, though it became clearer to him every day that he was never free himself from observation. The town watched him as a cat watches a mouse. And he got no nearer to finding out what they were all so busy with or where the main stream of their activities lay. This remained hidden. The people were as soft and mysterious as cats.

But that he was continually under observation became more evident from day to day.

For instance, when he strolled to the end of the town and entered a little green public garden beneath the ramparts and seated himself upon one of the empty benches in the sun, he was quite alone — at first. Not another seat was occupied; the little park was empty, the paths deserted. Yet, within ten minutes of his coming, there must have been fully twenty persons scattered about him, some strolling aimlessly along the gravel walks, staring at the flowers, and others seated on the wooden benches enjoying the sun like himself. None of them appeared to take any notice of him; yet he understood quite well they had all come there to watch. They kept him under close observation. In the street they had seemed busy enough, hurrying upon various errands; yet these were suddenly all forgotten and they had nothing to do but loll and laze in the sun, their duties unremembered. Five minutes after he left, the garden was again deserted, the seats vacant. But in the crowded street it was the same thing again; he was never alone. He was ever in their thoughts.

By degrees, too, he began to see how it was he was so cleverly watched, yet without the appearance of it. The people did nothing *directly*. They behaved *obliquely*. He laughed in his mind as the thought thus clothed itself in words, but the phrase exactly described it. They looked at him from angles which naturally should have led their sight in another direction altogether. Their movements were oblique, too, so far as these concerned himself. The straight, direct thing was not their way evidently. They did nothing obviously. If he entered a shop to buy, the woman walked instantly away and busied herself with something at the farther end of the counter, though answering at once when he spoke, showing that she knew he was there and that this was only her way of attending to him. It was the fashion of the cat she followed. Even in the dining-room of the inn, the be-whiskered and courteous waiter, lithe and silent in all his movements, never seemed able to come straight to his table for an order or a dish. He came by zigzags, indirectly, vaguely, so that he appeared to be going to another table altogether, and only turned suddenly at the last moment, and was there beside him.

Vezin smiled curiously to himself as he described how he began to realise these things. Other tourists there were none in the hostel, but he recalled the figures of one or two old men, inhabitants, who took their *déjeuner* and dinner there, and remembered how fantastically they entered the room in similar fashion. First, they paused in the doorway, peering about the room, and then, after a temporary inspection, they came in, as it were, sideways, keeping close to the walls so that he wondered which table they were making for, and at the last minute making almost a little quick run to their particular seats. And again he thought of the ways and methods of cats.

Other small incidents, too, impressed him as all part of this queer, soft town with its muffled, indirect life, for the way some of the people appeared and disappeared with extraordinary swiftness puzzled him exceedingly. It may have been all perfectly natural, he knew, yet he could not make it out how the alleys swallowed them up and shot them forth in a second of time when there were no visible doorways or openings near enough to explain the phenomenon. Once he followed two elderly women who, he felt, had been particularly examining him from across the street — quite near the inn this was — and saw them turn the corner a few feet only in front of him. Yet when he sharply followed on their heels he saw nothing but an utterly deserted alley stretching in front of him with no sign of a living thing. And the only opening through which they could have escaped was a porch some fifty yards away, which not the swiftest human runner could have reached in time.

And in just such sudden fashion people appeared when he never expected them. Once when he heard a great noise of fighting going on behind a low wall, and hurried up to see what was going on, what should he see but a group of girls and women engaged in vociferous conversation which instantly hushed itself to the normal whispering note of the town when his head appeared over the wall. And even then none of them turned to look at him directly, but slunk off with the most unaccountable rapidity into doors and sheds across the yard. And their voices, he thought, had sounded so like, so strangely like, the angry snarling of fighting animals, almost of cats.

The whole spirit of the town, however, continued to evade him as something elusive, protean, screened from the outer world, and at the same time intensely, genuinely vital; and, since he now formed part of its life, this concealment puzzled and irritated him; more — it began rather to frighten him.

Out of the mists that slowly gathered about his ordinary surface thoughts, there rose again the idea that the inhabitants were waiting for him to declare himself, to take an attitude, to do this, or to do that; and that when he had done so they in their turn would at length make some direct response, accepting or rejecting him. Yet the vital matter concerning which his decision was awaited came no nearer to him.

Once or twice he purposely followed little processions or groups of the citizens in order to find out, if possible, on what purpose they were bent; but they always discovered him in time and dwindled away, each individual going his or her own way. It was always the same: he never could learn what their main interest was. The cathedral was ever empty, the old church of St. Martin, at the other end of the town, deserted. They shopped because they had to, and not because they wished to. The booths stood neglected, the stalls unvisited, the little cafés desolate. Yet the streets were always full, the townsfolk ever on the bustle.

"Can it be," he thought to himself, yet with a deprecating laugh that he should have dared to think anything so odd, "can it be that these people are people of the twilight, that they live only at night their real life, and come out honestly only with the dusk? That during the day they make a sham though brave pretence, and after the sun is down their true life begins? Have they the souls of night-things, and is the whole blessed town in the hands of the cats?"

The fancy somehow electrified him with little shocks of shrinking and dismay. Yet, though he affected to laugh, he knew that he was beginning to feel more than uneasy, and that strange forces were tugging with a thousand invisible cords at the very centre of his being. Something utterly remote from his ordinary life, something that had not waked for years, began faintly to stir in his soul, sending feelers abroad into his brain and heart, shaping queer thoughts and penetrating even into certain of his minor actions. Something exceedingly vital to himself, to his soul, hung in the balance.

And, always when he returned to the inn about the hour of sunset, he saw the figures of the townsfolk stealing through the dusk from their shop doors, moving sentry-wise to and fro at the corners of the streets, yet always vanishing silently like shadows at his near approach. And as the inn invariably closed its doors at ten o'clock he had never yet found the opportunity he rather half-heartedly sought to see for himself what account the town could give of itself at night.

" —— *à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats*" — the words now rang in his ears more and more often, though still as yet without any definite meaning.

Moreover, something made him sleep like the dead.

III

It was, I think, on the fifth day — though in this detail his story sometimes varied — that he made a definite discovery which increased his alarm and brought him up to a rather sharp climax. Before that he had already noticed that a change was going forward and certain subtle transformations being brought about in his character which modified several of his minor habits. And he had affected to ignore them. Here, however, was something he could no longer ignore; and it startled him.

At the best of times he was never very positive, always negative rather, compliant and acquiescent; yet, when necessity arose he was capable of reasonably vigorous action and could take a strongish decision. The discovery he now made that brought him up with such a sharp turn was that this power had positively dwindled to nothing. He found it impossible to make up his mind. For, on this fifth day, he realised that he had stayed long enough in the town and that for reasons he could only vaguely define to himself it was wiser *and safer* that he should leave.

And he found that he could not leave!

This is difficult to describe in words, and it was more by gesture and the expression of his face that he conveyed to Dr. Silence the state of impotence he had reached. All this spying and watching, he said, had as it were spun a net about his feet so that he was trapped and powerless to escape; he felt like a fly that had blundered into the intricacies of a great web; he was caught, imprisoned, and could not get away. It was a distressing sensation. A numbness had crept over his will till it had become almost incapable of decision. The mere thought of vigorous action — action towards escape — began to terrify him. All the currents of his life had turned inwards upon himself, striving to bring to the surface something that lay buried almost beyond reach, determined to force his recognition of something he had long forgotten — forgotten years upon years, centuries almost ago. It seemed as though a window deep within his being would presently open and reveal an entirely new world, yet somehow a world that was not unfamiliar. Beyond that, again, he fancied a great curtain hung; and when that too rolled up he would see still farther into this region and at last understand something of the secret life of these extraordinary people.

“Is this why they wait and watch?” he asked himself with rather a shaking heart, “for the time when I shall join them — or refuse to join them? Does the decision rest with me after all, and not with them?”

And it was at this point that the sinister character of the adventure first really declared itself, and he became genuinely alarmed. The stability of his rather fluid little personality was at stake, he felt, and something in his heart turned coward.

Why otherwise should he have suddenly taken to walking stealthily, silently, making as little sound as possible, for ever looking behind him? Why else should he have moved almost on tiptoe about the passages of the practically deserted inn, and when he was abroad have found himself deliberately taking advantage of what cover presented itself? And why, if he was not afraid, should the wisdom of staying indoors after sundown have suddenly occurred to him as eminently desirable? Why, indeed?

And, when John Silence gently pressed him for an explanation of these things, he admitted apologetically that he had none to give.

“It was simply that I feared something might happen to me unless I kept a sharp look-out. I felt afraid. It was instinctive,” was all he could say. “I got the impression that the whole town was after me — wanted me for something; and that if it got me I should lose myself, or at least the Self I knew, in some unfamiliar state of consciousness. But I am not a psychologist, you know,” he added meekly, “and I cannot define it better than that.”

It was while lounging in the courtyard half an hour before the evening meal that Vezin made this discovery, and he at once went upstairs to his quiet room at the end of the winding passage to think it over alone. In the yard it was empty enough, true, but there was always the possibility that the big woman whom he dreaded would come out of some door, with her pretence of knitting, to sit and watch him. This had happened several times, and he could not endure the sight of her. He still remembered his original fancy, bizarre though it was, that she would spring upon him the moment his back was turned and land with one single crushing leap upon his neck. Of course it was nonsense, but then it haunted him, and once an idea begins to do that it ceases to be nonsense. It has clothed itself in reality.

He went upstairs accordingly. It was dusk, and the oil lamps had not yet been lit in the passages. He stumbled over the uneven surface of the ancient flooring, passing the dim outlines of doors along the corridor — doors that he had never once seen opened — rooms that seemed never occupied. He moved, as his habit now was, stealthily and on tiptoe.

Half-way down the last passage to his own chamber there was a sharp turn, and it was just here, while groping round the walls with outstretched hands, that his fingers touched something that was not wall — something that moved. It was soft and warm in texture, indescribably fragrant, and about the height of his shoulder; and he immediately thought of a furry, sweet-smelling kitten. The next minute he knew it was something quite different.

Instead of investigating, however, — his nerves must have been too overwrought for that, he said, — he shrank back as closely as possible against the wall on the other side. The thing, whatever it was, slipped past him with a sound of rustling, and retreating with light footsteps down the passage behind him, was gone. A breath of warm, scented air was wafted to his nostrils.

Vezin caught his breath for an instant and paused, stockstill, half leaning against the wall — and then almost ran down the remaining distance and entered his room with a rush, locking the door hurriedly behind him. Yet it was not fear that made him run: it was excitement, pleasurable excitement. His nerves were tingling, and a delicious glow made itself felt all over his body. In a flash it came to him that this was just what he had felt twenty-five years ago as a boy when he was in love for the first time. Warm currents of life ran all over him and mounted to his brain in a whirl of soft delight. His mood was suddenly become tender, melting, loving.

The room was quite dark, and he collapsed upon the sofa by the window, wondering what had happened to him and what it all meant. But the only thing he understood clearly in that instant was that something in him had swiftly, magically changed: he no longer wished to leave, or to argue with himself about leaving. The encounter in the passage-way had changed all that. The strange perfume of it still hung about him, bemusing his heart and mind. For he knew that it was a girl who had passed him, a girl’s face that his fingers had brushed in the darkness, and he felt in some extraordinary way as though he had been actually kissed by her, kissed full upon the lips.

Trembling, he sat upon the sofa by the window and struggled to collect his thoughts. He was utterly unable to understand how the mere passing of a girl in the darkness of a narrow passage-way could communicate so electric a thrill to his whole being that he still shook with the sweetness of it. Yet, there it was! And he found it as useless to deny as to attempt analysis. Some ancient fire had entered his veins, and now ran coursing through his blood; and that he was forty-five instead of twenty did not matter one little jot. Out of all the inner turmoil and confusion emerged the one salient fact that the mere atmosphere, the merest casual touch, of this girl, unseen, unknown in the darkness, had been sufficient to stir dormant fires in the centre of his heart, and rouse his whole being from a state of feeble sluggishness to one of tearing and tumultuous excitement.

After a time, however, the number of Vezin's years began to assert their cumulative power; he grew calmer; and when a knock came at length upon his door and he heard the waiter's voice suggesting that dinner was nearly over, he pulled himself together and slowly made his way downstairs into the dining-room.

Every one looked up as he entered, for he was very late, but he took his customary seat in the far corner and began to eat. The trepidation was still in his nerves, but the fact that he had passed through the courtyard and hall without catching sight of a petticoat served to calm him a little. He ate so fast that he had almost caught up with the current stage of the table d'hôte, when a slight commotion in the room drew his attention.

His chair was so placed that the door and the greater portion of the long *salle à manger* were behind him, yet it was not necessary to turn round to know that the same person he had passed in the dark passage had now come into the room. He felt the presence long before he heard or saw any one. Then he became aware that the old men, the only other guests, were rising one by one in their places, and exchanging greetings with some one who passed among them from table to table. And when at length he turned with his heart beating furiously to ascertain for himself, he saw the form of a young girl, lithe and slim, moving down the centre of the room and making straight for his own table in the corner. She moved wonderfully, with sinuous grace, like a young panther, and her approach filled him with such delicious bewilderment that he was utterly unable to tell at first what her face was like, or discover what it was about the whole presentment of the creature that filled him anew with trepidation and delight.

“Ah, Ma’mselle est de retour!” he heard the old waiter murmur at his side, and he was just able to take in that she was the daughter of the proprietress, when she was upon him, and he heard her voice. She was addressing him. Something of red lips he saw and laughing white teeth, and stray wisps of fine dark hair about the temples; but all the rest was a dream in which his own emotion rose like a thick cloud before his eyes and prevented his seeing accurately, or knowing exactly what he did. He was aware that she greeted him with a charming little bow; that her beautiful large eyes looked searchingly into his own; that the perfume he had noticed in the dark passage again assailed his nostrils, and that she was bending a little towards him and leaning with one hand on the table at his side. She was quite close to him — that was the chief thing he knew — explaining that she had been asking after the comfort of her mother’s guests, and was now introducing herself to the latest arrival — himself.

“M’sieur has already been here a few days,” he heard the waiter say; and then her own voice, sweet as singing, replied —

“Ah, but M’sieur is not going to leave us just yet, I hope. My mother is too old to look after the comfort of our guests properly, but now I am here I will remedy all that.” She laughed deliciously. “M’sieur shall be well looked after.”

Vezin, struggling with his emotion and desire to be polite, half rose to acknowledge the pretty speech, and to stammer some sort of reply, but as he did so his hand by chance touched her own that was resting upon the table, and a shock that was for all the world like a shock of electricity, passed from her skin into his body. His soul wavered and shook deep within him. He caught her eyes fixed upon his own with a look of most curious intentness, and the next moment he knew that he had sat down wordless again on his chair, that the girl was already half-way across the room, and that he was trying to eat his salad with a dessert-spoon and a knife.

Longing for her return, and yet dreading it, he gulped down the remainder of his dinner, and then went at once to his bedroom to be alone with his thoughts. This time the passages were lighted, and he suffered no exciting contretemps; yet the winding corridor was dim with shadows, and the last portion, from the bend of the walls onwards, seemed longer than he had ever known it. It ran downhill like the pathway on a mountain side, and as he tiptoed softly down it he felt that by rights it ought to have led him clean out of the house into the heart of a great forest. The world was singing with him. Strange fancies filled his brain, and once in the room, with the door securely locked, he did not light the candles, but sat by the open window thinking long, long thoughts that came unbidden in troops to his mind.

IV

This part of the story he told to Dr. Silence, without special coaxing, it is true, yet with much stammering embarrassment. He could not in the least understand, he said, how the girl had managed to affect him so profoundly, and even before he had set eyes upon her. For her mere proximity in the darkness had been sufficient to set him on fire. He knew nothing of enchantments, and for years had been a stranger to anything approaching tender relations with any member of the opposite sex, for he was encased in shyness, and realised his overwhelming defects only too well. Yet this bewitching young creature came to him deliberately. Her manner was unmistakable, and she sought him out on every possible occasion. Chaste and sweet she was undoubtedly, yet frankly inviting; and she won him utterly with the first glance of her shining eyes, even if she had not already done so in the dark merely by the magic of her invisible presence.

“You felt she was altogether wholesome and good?” queried the doctor. “You had no reaction of any sort — for instance, of alarm?”

Vezin looked up sharply with one of his inimitable little apologetic smiles. It was some time before he replied. The mere memory of the adventure had suffused his shy face with blushes, and his brown eyes sought the floor again before he answered.

“I don’t think I can quite say that,” he explained presently. “I acknowledged certain qualms, sitting up in my room afterwards. A conviction grew upon me that there was something about her — how shall I express it? — well, something unholy. It is not impurity in any sense, physical or mental, that I mean, but something quite indefinable that gave me a vague sensation of the creeps. She drew me, and at the same time repelled me, more than — than — —”

He hesitated, blushing furiously, and unable to finish the sentence.

“Nothing like it has ever come to me before or since,” he concluded, with lame confusion. “I suppose it was, as you suggested just now, something of an enchantment. At any rate, it was strong enough to make me feel that I would stay in that awful little haunted town for years if only I could see her every day, hear her voice, watch her wonderful movements, and sometimes, perhaps, touch her hand.”

“Can you explain to me what you felt was the source of her power?” John Silence asked, looking purposely anywhere but at the narrator.

“I am surprised that *you* should ask me such a question,” answered Vezin, with the nearest approach to dignity he could manage. “I think no man can describe to another convincingly wherein lies the magic of the woman who ensnares him. I certainly cannot. I can only say this slip of a girl bewitched me, and the mere knowledge that she was living and sleeping in the same house filled me with an extraordinary sense of delight.

“But there’s one thing I can tell you,” he went on earnestly, his eyes aglow, “namely, that she seemed to sum up and synthesise in herself all the strange hidden forces that operated so mysteriously in the town and its inhabitants. She had the silken movements of the panther, going smoothly, silently to and fro, and the same indirect, oblique methods as the townsfolk, screening, like them, secret purposes of her own — purposes that I was sure had *me* for their objective. She kept me, to my terror and delight, ceaselessly under observation, yet so carelessly, so consummately, that another man less sensitive, if I may say so” — he made a deprecating gesture— “or less prepared by what had gone before, would never have noticed it at all. She was always still, always reposeful, yet she seemed to be everywhere at once, so that I never could escape from her. I was continually meeting the stare and laughter of her great eyes, in the corners of the rooms, in the passages, calmly looking at me through the windows, or in the busiest parts of the public streets.”

Their intimacy, it seems, grew very rapidly after this first encounter which had so violently disturbed the little man’s equilibrium. He was naturally very prim, and prim folk live mostly in so small a world that anything violently unusual may shake them clean out of it, and they therefore instinctively distrust originality. But Vezin began to forget his primness after awhile. The girl was always modestly behaved, and as her mother’s representative she naturally had to do with the guests in the hotel. It was not out of the way that a spirit of camaraderie should spring up. Besides, she was young, she was charmingly pretty, she was French, and — she obviously liked him.

At the same time, there was something indescribable — a certain indefinable atmosphere of other places, other times — that made him try hard to remain on his guard, and sometimes made him catch his breath with a sudden start. It was all rather like a delirious dream, half delight, half dread, he confided in a whisper to Dr. Silence; and more than once he hardly knew quite what he was doing or saying, as though he were driven forward by impulses he scarcely recognised as his own.

And though the thought of leaving presented itself again and again to his mind, it was each time with less insistence, so that he stayed on from day to day, becoming more and more a part of the sleepy life of this dreamy mediæval town, losing more and more of his recognisable personality. Soon, he felt, the Curtain within would roll up with an awful rush, and he would find himself suddenly admitted into the secret purposes of the hidden life that lay behind it all. Only, by that time, he would have become transformed into an entirely different being.

And, meanwhile, he noticed various little signs of the intention to make his stay attractive to him: flowers in his bedroom, a more comfortable arm-chair in the corner, and even special little extra dishes on his private table in the dining-room. Conversations, too, with “Mademoiselle Ilsé” became more and more frequent and pleasant, and although they seldom travelled beyond the weather, or the details of the town, the girl, he noticed, was never in a hurry to bring them to an end, and often contrived to interject little odd sentences that he never properly understood, yet felt to be significant.

And it was these stray remarks, full of a meaning that evaded him, that pointed to some hidden purpose of her own and made him feel uneasy. They all had to do, he felt sure, with reasons for his staying on in the town indefinitely.

“And has M’sieur not even yet come to a decision?” she said softly in his ear, sitting beside him in the sunny yard before *déjeuner*, the acquaintance having progressed with significant rapidity. “Because, if it’s so difficult, we must all try together to help him!”

The question startled him, following upon his own thoughts. It was spoken with a pretty laugh, and a stray bit of hair across one eye, as she turned and peered at him half roguishly. Possibly he did not quite understand the French of it, for her near presence always confused his small knowledge of the language distressingly. Yet the words, and her manner, and something else that lay behind it all in her mind, frightened him. It gave such point to his feeling that the town was waiting for him to make his mind up on some important matter.

At the same time, her voice, and the fact that she was there so close beside him in her soft dark dress, thrilled him inexpressibly.

“It is true I find it difficult to leave,” he stammered, losing his way deliciously in the depths of her eyes, “and especially now that Mademoiselle Ilsé has come.”

He was surprised at the success of his sentence, and quite delighted with the little gallantry of it. But at the same time he could have bitten his tongue off for having said it.

“Then after all you like our little town, or you would not be pleased to stay on,” she said, ignoring the compliment.

“I am enchanted with it, and enchanted with you,” he cried, feeling that his tongue was somehow slipping beyond the control of his brain. And he was on the verge of saying all manner of other things of the wildest description, when the girl sprang lightly up from her chair beside him, and made to go.

“It is *soupe à l’onion* to-day!” she cried, laughing back at him through the sunlight, “and I must go and see about it. Otherwise, you know, M’sieur will not enjoy his dinner, and then, perhaps, he will leave us!”

He watched her cross the courtyard, moving with all the grace and lightness of the feline race, and her simple black dress clothed her, he thought, exactly like the fur of the same supple species. She turned once to laugh at him from the porch with the glass door, and then stopped a moment to speak to her mother, who sat knitting as usual in her corner seat just inside the hall-way.

But how was it, then, that the moment his eye fell upon this ungainly woman, the pair of them appeared suddenly as other than they were? Whence came that transforming dignity and sense of power that enveloped them both as by magic? What was it about that massive woman that made her appear instantly regal, and set her on a throne in some dark and dreadful scenery, wielding a sceptre over the red glare of some tempestuous orgy? And why did this slender stripling of a girl, graceful as a willow, lithe as a young leopard, assume suddenly an air of sinister majesty, and move with flame and smoke about her head, and the darkness of night beneath her feet?

Vezin caught his breath and sat there transfixed. Then, almost simultaneously with its appearance, the queer notion vanished again, and the sunlight of day caught them both, and he heard her laughing to her mother about the *soupe à l'onion*, and saw her glancing back at him over her dear little shoulder with a smile that made him think of a dew-kissed rose bending lightly before summer airs.

And, indeed, the onion soup was particularly excellent that day, because he saw another cover laid at his small table and, with fluttering heart, heard the waiter murmur by way of explanation that "Ma'mselle Ilsé would honour M'sieur to-day at *déjeuner*, as her custom sometimes is with her mother's guests."

So actually she sat by him all through that delirious meal, talking quietly to him in easy French, seeing that he was well looked after, mixing the salad-dressing, and even helping him with her own hand. And, later in the afternoon, while he was smoking in the courtyard, longing for a sight of her as soon as her duties were done, she came again to his side, and when he rose to meet her, she stood facing him a moment, full of a perplexing sweet shyness before she spoke —

"My mother thinks you ought to know more of the beauties of our little town, and *I* think so too! Would M'sieur like me to be his guide, perhaps? I can show him everything, for our family has lived here for many generations."

She had him by the hand, indeed, before he could find a single word to express his pleasure, and led him, all unresisting, out into the street, yet in such a way that it seemed perfectly natural she should do so, and without the faintest suggestion of boldness or immodesty. Her face glowed with the pleasure and interest of it, and with her short dress and tumbled hair she looked every bit the charming child of seventeen that she was, innocent and playful, proud of her native town, and alive beyond her years to the sense of its ancient beauty.

So they went over the town together, and she showed him what she considered its chief interest: the tumble-down old house where her forebears had lived; the sombre, aristocratic-looking mansion where her mother's family dwelt for centuries, and the ancient market-place where several hundred years before the witches had been burnt by the score. She kept up a lively running stream of talk about it all, of which he understood not a fiftieth part as he trudged along by her side, cursing his forty-five years and feeling all the yearnings of his early manhood revive and jeer at him. And, as she talked, England and Surbiton seemed very far away indeed, almost in another age of the world's history. Her voice touched something immeasurably old in him, something that slept deep. It lulled the surface parts of his consciousness to sleep, allowing what was far more ancient to awaken. Like the town, with its elaborate pretence of modern active life, the upper layers of his being became dulled, soothed, muffled, and what lay underneath began to stir in its sleep. That big Curtain swayed a little to and fro. Presently it might lift altogether....

He began to understand a little better at last. The mood of the town was reproducing itself in him. In proportion as his ordinary external self became muffled, that inner secret life, that was far more real and vital, asserted itself. And this girl was surely the high-priestess of it all, the chief instrument of its accomplishment. New thoughts, with new interpretations, flooded his mind as she walked beside him through the winding streets, while the picturesque old gabled town, softly coloured in the sunset, had never appeared to him so wholly wonderful and seductive.

And only one curious incident came to disturb and puzzle him, slight in itself, but utterly inexplicable, bringing white terror into the child's face and a scream to her laughing lips. He had merely pointed to a column of blue smoke that rose from the burning autumn leaves and made a picture against the red roofs, and had then run to the wall and called her to his side to watch the flames shooting here and there through the heap of rubbish. Yet, at the sight of it, as though taken by surprise, her face had altered dreadfully, and she had turned and run like the wind, calling out wild sentences to him as she ran, of which he had not understood a single word, except that the fire apparently frightened her, and she wanted to get quickly away from it, and to get him away too.

Yet five minutes later she was as calm and happy again as though nothing had happened to alarm or waken troubled thoughts in her, and they had both forgotten the incident.

They were leaning over the ruined ramparts together listening to the weird music of the band as he had heard it the first day of his arrival. It moved him again profoundly as it had done before, and somehow he managed to find his tongue and his best French. The girl leaned across the stones close beside him. No one was about. Driven by some remorseless engine within he began to stammer something — he hardly knew what — of his strange admiration for her. Almost at the first word she sprang lightly off the wall and came up smiling in front of him, just touching his knees as he sat there. She was hatless as usual, and the sun caught her hair and one side of her cheek and throat.

"Oh, I'm *so* glad!" she cried, clapping her little hands softly in his face, "so very glad, because that means that if you like me you must also like what I do, and what I belong to."

Already he regretted bitterly having lost control of himself. Something in the phrasing of her sentence chilled him. He knew the fear of embarking upon an unknown and dangerous sea.

"You will take part in our real life, I mean," she added softly, with an indescribable coaxing of manner, as though she noticed his shrinking. "You will come back to us."

Already this slip of a child seemed to dominate him; he felt her power coming over him more and more; something emanated from her that stole over his senses and made him aware that her personality, for all its simple grace, held forces that were stately, imposing, august. He saw her again moving through smoke and flame amid broken and tempestuous scenery, alarmingly strong, her terrible mother by her side. Dimly this shone through her smile and appearance of charming innocence.

"You will, I know," she repeated, holding him with her eyes.

They were quite alone up there on the ramparts, and the sensation that she was overmastering him stirred a wild sensuousness in his blood. The mingled abandon and reserve in her attracted him furiously, and all of him that was man rose up and resisted the creeping influence, at the same time acclaiming it with the full delight of his forgotten youth. An irresistible desire came to him to question her, to summon what still remained to him of his own little personality in an effort to retain the right to his normal self.

The girl had grown quiet again, and was now leaning on the broad wall close beside him, gazing out across the darkening plain, her elbows on the coping, motionless as a figure carved in stone. He took his courage in both hands.

"Tell me, Ilsé," he said, unconsciously imitating her own purring softness of voice, yet aware that he was utterly in earnest, "what is the meaning of this town, and what is this real life you speak of? And why is it that the people watch me from morning to night? Tell me what it all means? And, tell me," he added more quickly with passion in his voice, "what you really are — yourself?"

She turned her head and looked at him through half-closed eyelids, her growing inner excitement betraying itself by the faint colour that ran like a shadow across her face.

"It seems to me," — he faltered oddly under her gaze— "that I have some right to know — —"

Suddenly she opened her eyes to the full. "You love me, then?" she asked softly.

"I swear," he cried impetuously, moved as by the force of a rising tide, "I never felt before — I have never known any other girl who — —"

"Then you *have* the right to know," she calmly interrupted his confused confession; "for love shares all secrets."

She paused, and a thrill like fire ran swiftly through him. Her words lifted him off the earth, and he felt a radiant happiness, followed almost the same instant in horrible contrast by the thought of death. He became aware that she had turned her eyes upon his own and was speaking again.

“The real life I speak of,” she whispered, “is the old, old life within, the life of long ago, the life to which you, too, once belonged, and to which you still belong.”

A faint wave of memory troubled the deeps of his soul as her low voice sank into him. What she was saying he knew instinctively to be true, even though he could not as yet understand its full purport. His present life seemed slipping from him as he listened, merging his personality in one that was far older and greater. It was this loss of his present self that brought to him the thought of death.

“You came here,” she went on, “with the purpose of seeking it, and the people felt your presence and are waiting to know what you decide, whether you will leave them without having found it, or whether — —”

Her eyes remained fixed upon his own, but her face began to change, growing larger and darker with an expression of age.

“It is their thoughts constantly playing about your soul that makes you feel they watch you. They do not watch you with their eyes. The purposes of their inner life are calling to you, seeking to claim you. You were all part of the same life long, long ago, and now they want you back again among them.”

Vezin’s timid heart sank with dread as he listened; but the girl’s eyes held him with a net of joy so that he had no wish to escape. She fascinated him, as it were, clean out of his normal self.

“Alone, however, the people could never have caught and held you,” she resumed. “The motive force was not strong enough; it has faded through all these years. But I” — she paused a moment and looked at him with complete confidence in her splendid eyes— “I possess the spell to conquer you and hold you: the spell of old love. I can win you back again and make you live the old life with me, for the force of the ancient tie between us, if I choose to use it, is irresistible. And I do choose to use it I still want you. And you, dear soul of my dim past” — she pressed closer to him so that her breath passed across his eyes, and her voice positively sang— “I mean to have you, for you love me and are utterly at my mercy.”

Vezin heard, and yet did not hear; understood, yet did not understand. He had passed into a condition of exaltation. The world was beneath his feet, made of music and flowers, and he was flying somewhere far above it through the sunshine of pure delight. He was breathless and giddy with the wonder of her words. They intoxicated him. And, still, the terror of it all, the dreadful thought of death, pressed ever behind her sentences. For flames shot through her voice out of black smoke and licked at his soul.

And they communicated with one another, it seemed to him, by a process of swift telepathy, for his French could never have compassed all he said to her. Yet she understood perfectly, and what she said to him was like the recital of verses long since known. And the mingled pain and sweetness of it as he listened were almost more than his little soul could hold.

“Yet I came here wholly by chance — —” he heard himself saying.

“No,” she cried with passion, “you came here because I called to you. I have called to you for years, and you came with the whole force of the past behind you. You had to come, for I own you, and I claim you.”

She rose again and moved closer, looking at him with a certain insolence in the face — the insolence of power.

The sun had set behind the towers of the old cathedral and the darkness rose up from the plain and enveloped them. The music of the band had ceased. The leaves of the plane trees hung motionless, but the chill of the autumn evening rose about them and made Vezin shiver. There was no sound but the sound of their voices and the occasional soft rustle of the girl’s dress. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears. He scarcely realised where he was or what he was doing. Some terrible magic of the imagination drew him deeply down into the tombs of his own being, telling him in no unfaltering voice that her words shadowed forth the truth. And this simple little French maid, speaking beside him with so strange authority, he saw curiously alter into quite another being. As he stared into her eyes, the picture in his mind grew and lived, dressing itself vividly to his inner vision with a degree of reality he was compelled to acknowledge. As once before, he saw her tall and stately, moving through wild and broken scenery of forests and mountain caverns, the glare of flames behind her head and clouds of shifting smoke about her feet. Dark leaves encircled her hair, flying loosely in the wind, and her limbs shone through the merest rags of clothing. Others were about her too, and ardent eyes on all sides cast delirious glances upon her, but her own eyes were always for One only, one whom she held by the hand. For she was leading the dance in some tempestuous orgy to the music of chanting voices, and the dance she led circled about a great and awful Figure on a throne, brooding over the scene through lurid vapours, while innumerable other wild faces and forms crowded furiously about her in the dance. But the one she held by the hand he knew to be himself, and the monstrous shape upon the throne he knew to be her mother.

The vision rose within him, rushing to him down the long years of buried time, crying aloud to him with the voice of memory reawakened.... And then the scene faded away and he saw the clear circle of the girl's eyes gazing steadfastly into his own, and she became once more the pretty little daughter of the innkeeper, and he found his voice again.

"And you," he whispered tremblingly— "you child of visions and enchantment, how is it that you so bewitch me that I loved you even before I saw?"

She drew herself up beside him with an air of rare dignity.

"The call of the Past," she said; "and besides," she added proudly, "in the real life I am a princess — —"

"A princess!" he cried.

" —— and my mother is a queen!"

At this, little Vezin utterly lost his head. Delight tore at his heart and swept him into sheer ecstasy. To hear that sweet singing voice, and to see those adorable little lips utter such things, upset his balance beyond all hope of control. He took her in his arms and covered her unresisting face with kisses.

But even while he did so, and while the hot passion swept him, he felt that she was soft and loathsome, and that her answering kisses stained his very soul.... And when, presently, she had freed herself and vanished into the darkness, he stood there, leaning against the wall in a state of collapse, creeping with horror from the touch of her yielding body, and inwardly raging at the weakness that he already dimly realised must prove his undoing.

And from the shadows of the old buildings into which she disappeared there rose in the stillness of the night a singular, long-drawn cry, which at first he took for laughter, but which later he was sure he recognised as the almost human wailing of a cat.

V

For a long time Vezin leant there against the wall, alone with his surging thoughts and emotions. He understood at length that he had done the one thing necessary to call down upon him the whole force of this ancient Past. For in those passionate kisses he had acknowledged the tie of olden days, and had revived it. And the memory of that soft impalpable caress in the darkness of the inn corridor came back to him with a shudder. The girl had first mastered him, and then led him to the one act that was necessary for her purpose. He had been waylaid, after the lapse of centuries — caught, and conquered.

Dimly he realised this, and sought to make plans for his escape. But, for the moment at any rate, he was powerless to manage his thoughts or will, for the sweet, fantastic madness of the whole adventure mounted to his brain like a spell, and he gloried in the feeling that he was utterly enchanted and moving in a world so much larger and wilder than the one he had ever been accustomed to.

The moon, pale and enormous, was just rising over the sea-like plain, when at last he rose to go. Her slanting rays drew all the houses into new perspective, so that their roofs, already glistening with dew, seemed to stretch much higher into the sky than usual, and their gables and quaint old towers lay far away in its purple reaches.

The cathedral appeared unreal in a silver mist. He moved softly, keeping to the shadows; but the streets were all deserted and very silent; the doors were closed, the shutters fastened. Not a soul was astir. The hush of night lay over everything; it was like a town of the dead, a churchyard with gigantic and grotesque tombstones.

Wondering where all the busy life of the day had so utterly disappeared to, he made his way to a back door that entered the inn by means of the stables, thinking thus to reach his room unobserved. He reached the courtyard safely and crossed it by keeping close to the shadow of the wall. He sidled down it, mincing along on tiptoe, just as the old men did when they entered the *salle à manger*. He was horrified to find himself doing this instinctively.

A strange impulse came to him, catching him somehow in the centre of his body — an impulse to drop upon all fours and run swiftly and silently. He glanced upwards and the idea came to him to leap up upon his window-sill overhead instead of going round by the stairs. This occurred to him as the easiest, and most natural way. It was like the beginning of some horrible transformation of himself into something else. He was fearfully strung up.

The moon was higher now, and the shadows very dark along the side of the street where he moved. He kept among the deepest of them, and reached the porch with the glass doors.

But here there was light; the inmates, unfortunately, were still about. Hoping to slip across the hall unobserved and reach the stairs, he opened the door carefully and stole in. Then he saw that the hall was not empty. A large dark thing lay against the wall on his left. At first he thought it must be household articles. Then it moved, and he thought it was an immense cat, distorted in some way by the play of light and shadow. Then it rose straight up before him and he saw that it was the proprietress.

What she had been doing in this position he could only venture a dreadful guess, but the moment she stood up and faced him he was aware of some terrible dignity clothing her about that instantly recalled the girl’s strange saying that she was a queen. Huge and sinister she stood there under the little oil lamp; alone with him in the empty hall. Awe stirred in his heart, and the roots of some ancient fear. He felt that he must bow to her and make some kind of obeisance. The impulse was fierce and irresistible, as of long habit. He glanced quickly about him. There was no one there. Then he deliberately inclined his head towards her. He bowed.

“Enfin! M’sieur s’est donc décidé. C’est bien alors. J’en suis contente.”

Her words came to him sonorously as through a great open space.

Then the great figure came suddenly across the flagged hall at him and seized his trembling hands. Some overpowering force moved with her and caught him.

“On pourrait faire un p’tit tour ensemble, n’est-ce pas? Nous y allons cette nuit et il faut s’exercer un peu d’avance pour cela. Ilsé, Ilsé, viens donc ici. Viens vite!”

And she whirled him round in the opening steps of some dance that seemed oddly and horribly familiar. They made no sound on the stones, this strangely assorted couple. It was all soft and stealthy. And presently, when the air seemed to thicken like smoke, and a red glare as of flame shot through it, he was aware that some one else had joined them and that his hand the mother had released was now tightly held by the daughter. Ilsé had come in answer to the call, and he saw her with leaves of vervain twined in her dark hair, clothed in tattered vestiges of some curious garment, beautiful as the night, and horribly, odiously, loathsomely seductive.

“To the Sabbath! to the Sabbath!” they cried. “On to the Witches’ Sabbath!”

Up and down that narrow hall they danced, the women on each side of him, to the wildest measure he had ever imagined, yet which he dimly, dreadfully remembered, till the lamp on the wall flickered and went out, and they were left in total darkness. And the devil woke in his heart with a thousand vile suggestions and made him afraid.

Suddenly they released his hands and he heard the voice of the mother cry that it was time, and they must go. Which way they went he did not pause to see. He only realised that he was free, and he blundered through the darkness till he found the stairs and then tore up them to his room as though all hell was at his heels.

He flung himself on the sofa, with his face in his hands, and groaned. Swiftly reviewing a dozen ways of immediate escape, all equally impossible, he finally decided that the only thing to do for the moment was to sit quiet and wait. He must see what was going to happen. At least in the privacy of his own bedroom he would be fairly safe. The door was locked. He crossed over and softly opened the window which gave upon the courtyard and also permitted a partial view of the hall through the glass doors.

As he did so the hum and murmur of a great activity reached his ears from the streets beyond — the sound of footsteps and voices muffled by distance. He leaned out cautiously and listened. The moonlight was clear and strong now, but his own window was in shadow, the silver disc being still behind the house. It came to him irresistibly that the inhabitants of the town, who a little while before had all been invisible behind closed doors, were now issuing forth, busy upon some secret and unholy errand. He listened intently.

At first everything about him was silent, but soon he became aware of movements going on in the house itself. Rustlings and cheepings came to him across that still, moonlit yard. A concourse of living beings sent the hum of their activity into the night. Things were on the move everywhere. A biting, pungent odour rose through the air, coming he knew not whence. Presently his eyes became glued to the windows of the opposite wall where the moonshine fell in a soft blaze. The roof overhead, and behind him, was reflected clearly in the panes of glass, and he saw the outlines of dark bodies moving with long footsteps over the tiles and along the coping. They passed swiftly and silently, shaped like immense cats, in an endless procession across the pictured glass, and then appeared to leap down to a lower level where he lost sight of them. He just caught the soft thudding of their leaps. Sometimes their shadows fell upon the white wall opposite, and then he could not make out whether they were the shadows of human beings or of cats. They seemed to change swiftly from one to the other. The transformation looked horribly real, for they leaped like human beings, yet changed swiftly in the air immediately afterwards, and dropped like animals.

The yard, too, beneath him, was now alive with the creeping movements of dark forms all stealthily drawing towards the porch with the glass doors. They kept so closely to the wall that he could not determine their actual shape, but when he saw that they passed on to the great congregation that was gathering in the hall, he understood that these were the creatures whose leaping shadows he had first seen reflected in the window-panes opposite. They were coming from all parts of the town, reaching the appointed meeting-place across the roofs and tiles, and springing from level to level till they came to the yard.

Then a new sound caught his ear, and he saw that the windows all about him were being softly opened, and that to each window came a face. A moment later figures began dropping hurriedly down into the yard. And these figures, as they lowered themselves down from the windows, were human, he saw; but once safely in the yard they fell upon all fours and changed in the swiftest possible second into — cats — huge, silent cats. They ran in streams to join the main body in the hall beyond.

So, after all, the rooms in the house had not been empty and unoccupied.

Moreover, what he saw no longer filled him with amazement. For he remembered it all. It was familiar. It had all happened before just so, hundreds of times, and he himself had taken part in it and known the wild madness of it all. The outline of the old building changed, the yard grew larger, and he seemed to be staring down upon it from a much greater height through smoky vapours. And, as he looked, half remembering, the old pains of long ago, fierce and sweet, furiously assailed him, and the blood stirred horribly as he heard the Call of the Dance again in his heart and tasted the ancient magic of Ilsé whirling by his side.

Suddenly he started back. A great lithe cat had leaped softly up from the shadows below on to the sill close to his face, and was staring fixedly at him with the eyes of a human. “Come,” it seemed to say, “come with us to the Dance! Change as of old! Transform yourself swiftly and come!” Only too well he understood the creature’s soundless call.

It was gone again in a flash with scarcely a sound of its padded feet on the stones, and then others dropped by the score down the side of the house, past his very eyes, all changing as they fell and darting away rapidly, softly, towards the gathering point. And again he felt the dreadful desire to do likewise; to murmur the old incantation, and then drop upon hands and knees and run swiftly for the great flying leap into the air. Oh, how the passion of it rose within him like a flood, twisting his very entrails, sending his heart’s desire flaming forth into the night for the old, old Dance of the Sorcerers at the Witches’ Sabbath! The whirl of the stars was about him; once more he met the magic of the moon. The power of the wind, rushing from precipice and forest, leaping from cliff to cliff across the valleys, tore him away.... He heard the cries of the dancers and their wild laughter, and with this savage girl in his embrace he danced furiously about the dim Throne where sate the Figure with the sceptre of majesty....

Then, suddenly, all became hushed and still, and the fever died down a little in his heart. The calm moonlight flooded a courtyard empty and deserted. They had started. The procession was off into the sky. And he was left behind — alone.

Vezin tiptoed softly across the room and unlocked the door. The murmur from the streets, growing momentarily as he advanced, met his ears. He made his way with the utmost caution down the corridor. At the head of the stairs he paused and listened. Below him, the hall where they had gathered was dark and still, but through opened doors and windows on the far side of the building came the sound of a great throng moving farther and farther into the distance.

He made his way down the creaking wooden stairs, dreading yet longing to meet some straggler who should point the way, but finding no one; across the dark hall, so lately thronged with living, moving things, and out through the opened front doors into the street. He could not believe that he was really left behind, really forgotten, that he had been purposely permitted to escape. It perplexed him.

Nervously he peered about him, and up and down the street; then, seeing nothing, advanced slowly down the pavement.

The whole town, as he went, showed itself empty and deserted, as though a great wind had blown everything alive out of it. The doors and windows of the houses stood open to the night; nothing stirred; moonlight and silence lay over all. The night lay about him like a cloak. The air, soft and cool, caressed his cheek like the touch of a great furry paw. He gained confidence and began to walk quickly, though still keeping to the shadowed side. Nowhere could he discover the faintest sign of the great unholy exodus he knew had just taken place. The moon sailed high over all in a sky, cloudless and serene.

Hardly realising where he was going, he crossed the open market-place and so came to the ramparts, whence he knew a pathway descended to the high road and along which he could make good his escape to one of the other little towns that lay to the northward, and so to the railway.

But first he paused and gazed out over the scene at his feet where the great plain lay like a silver map of some dream country. The still beauty of it entered his heart, increasing his sense of bewilderment and unreality. No air stirred, the leaves of the plane trees stood motionless, the near details were defined with the sharpness of day against dark shadows, and in the distance the fields and woods melted away into haze and shimmering mistiness.

But the breath caught in his throat and he stood stockstill as though transfixed when his gaze passed from the horizon and fell upon the near prospect in the depth of the valley at his feet. The whole lower slopes of the hill, that lay hid from the brightness of the moon, were aglow, and through the glare he saw countless moving forms, shifting thick and fast between the openings of the trees; while overhead, like leaves driven by the wind, he discerned flying shapes that hovered darkly one moment against the sky and then settled down with cries and weird singing through the branches into the region that was aflame.

Spellbound, he stood and stared for a time that he could not measure. And then, moved by one of the terrible impulses that seemed to control the whole adventure, he climbed swiftly upon the top of the broad coping, and balanced a moment where the valley gaped at his feet. But in that very instant, as he stood hovering, a sudden movement among the shadows of the houses caught his eye, and he turned to see the outline of a large animal dart swiftly across the open space behind him, and land with a flying leap upon the top of the wall a little lower down. It ran like the wind to his feet and then rose up beside him upon the ramparts. A shiver seemed to run through the moonlight, and his sight trembled for a second. His heart pulsed fearfully. Ilsé stood beside him, peering into his face.

Some dark substance, he saw, stained the girl's face and skin, shining in the moonlight as she stretched her hands towards him; she was dressed in wretched tattered garments that yet became her mightily; rue and vervain twined about her temples; her eyes glittered with unholy light. He only just controlled the wild impulse to take her in his arms and leap with her from their giddy perch into the valley below.

"See!" she cried, pointing with an arm on which the rags fluttered in the rising wind towards the forest aglow in the distance. "See where they await us! The woods are alive! Already the Great Ones are there, and the dance will soon begin! The salve is here! Anoint yourself and come!"

Though a moment before the sky was clear and cloudless, yet even while she spoke the face of the moon grew dark and the wind began to toss in the crests of the plane trees at his feet. Stray gusts brought the sounds of hoarse singing and crying from the lower slopes of the hill, and the pungent odour he had already noticed about the courtyard of the inn rose about him in the air.

“Transform, transform!” she cried again, her voice rising like a song. “Rub well your skin before you fly. Come! Come with me to the Sabbath, to the madness of its furious delight, to the sweet abandonment of its evil worship! See! the Great Ones are there, and the terrible Sacraments prepared. The Throne is occupied. Anoint and come! Anoint and come!”

She grew to the height of a tree beside him, leaping upon the wall with flaming eyes and hair strewn upon the night. He too began to change swiftly. Her hands touched the skin of his face and neck, streaking him with the burning salve that sent the old magic into his blood with the power before which fades all that is good.

A wild roar came up to his ears from the heart of the wood, and the girl, when she heard it, leaped upon the wall in the frenzy of her wicked joy.

“Satan is there!” she screamed, rushing upon him and striving to draw him with her to the edge of the wall. “Satan has come! The Sacraments call us! Come, with your dear apostate soul, and we will worship and dance till the moon dies and the world is forgotten!”

Just saving himself from the dreadful plunge, Vezin struggled to release himself from her grasp, while the passion tore at his reins and all but mastered him. He shrieked aloud, not knowing what he said, and then he shrieked again. It was the old impulses, the old awful habits instinctively finding voice; for though it seemed to him that he merely shrieked nonsense, the words he uttered really had meaning in them, and were intelligible. It was the ancient call. And it was heard below. It was answered.

The wind whistled at the skirts of his coat as the air round him darkened with many flying forms crowding upwards out of the valley. The crying of hoarse voices smote upon his ears, coming closer. Strokes of wind buffeted him, tearing him this way and that along the crumbling top of the stone wall; and Ilsé clung to him with her long shining arms, smooth and bare, holding him fast about the neck. But not Ilsé alone, for a dozen of them surrounded him, dropping out of the air. The pungent odour of the anointed bodies stifled him, exciting him to the old madness of the Sabbath, the dance of the witches and sorcerers doing honour to the personified Evil of the world.

“Anoint and away! Anoint and away!” they cried in wild chorus about him. “To the Dance that never dies! To the sweet and fearful fantasy of evil!”

Another moment and he would have yielded and gone, for his will turned soft and the flood of passionate memory all but overwhelmed him, when — so can a small thing alter the whole course of an adventure — he caught his foot upon a loose stone in the edge of the wall, and then fell with a sudden crash on to the ground below. But he fell towards the houses, in the open space of dust and cobble stones, and fortunately not into the gaping depth of the valley on the farther side.

And they, too, came in a tumbling heap about him, like flies upon a piece of food, but as they fell he was released for a moment from the power of their touch, and in that brief instant of freedom there flashed into his mind the sudden intuition that saved him. Before he could regain his feet he saw them scrabbling awkwardly back upon the wall, as though bat-like they could only fly by dropping from a height, and had no hold upon him in the open. Then, seeing them perched there in a row like cats upon a roof, all dark and singularly shapeless, their eyes like lamps, the sudden memory came back to him of Ilsé’s terror at the sight of fire.

Quick as a flash he found his matches and lit the dead leaves that lay under the wall.

Dry and withered, they caught fire at once, and the wind carried the flame in a long line down the length of the wall, licking upwards as it ran; and with shrieks and wailings, the crowded row of forms upon the top melted away into the air on the other side, and were gone with a great rush and whirring of their bodies down into the heart of the haunted valley, leaving Vezin breathless and shaken in the middle of the deserted ground.

“Ilsé!” he called feebly; “Ilsé!” for his heart ached to think that she was really gone to the great Dance without him, and that he had lost the opportunity of its fearful joy. Yet at the same time his relief was so great, and he was so dazed and troubled in mind with the whole thing, that he hardly knew what he was saying, and only cried aloud in the fierce storm of his emotion....

The fire under the wall ran its course, and the moonlight came out again, soft and clear, from its temporary eclipse. With one last shuddering look at the ruined ramparts, and a feeling of horrid wonder for the haunted valley beyond, where the shapes still crowded and flew, he turned his face towards the town and slowly made his way in the direction of the hotel.

And as he went, a great wailing of cries, and a sound of howling, followed him from the gleaming forest below, growing fainter and fainter with the bursts of wind as he disappeared between the houses.

VI

“It may seem rather abrupt to you, this sudden tame ending,” said Arthur Vezin, glancing with flushed face and timid eyes at Dr. Silence sitting there with his notebook, “but the fact is — er — from that moment my memory seems to have failed rather. I have no distinct recollection of how I got home or what precisely I did.

“It appears I never went back to the inn at all. I only dimly recollect racing down a long white road in the moonlight, past woods and villages, still and deserted, and then the dawn came up, and I saw the towers of a biggish town and so came to a station.

“But, long before that, I remember pausing somewhere on the road and looking back to where the hill-town of my adventure stood up in the moonlight, and thinking how exactly like a great monstrous cat it lay there upon the plain, its huge front paws lying down the two main streets, and the twin and broken towers of the cathedral marking its torn ears against the sky. That picture stays in my mind with the utmost vividness to this day.

“Another thing remains in my mind from that escape — namely, the sudden sharp reminder that I had not paid my bill, and the decision I made, standing there on the dusty highroad, that the small baggage I had left behind would more than settle for my indebtedness.

“For the rest, I can only tell you that I got coffee and bread at a café on the outskirts of this town I had come to, and soon after found my way to the station and caught a train later in the day. That same evening I reached London.”

“And how long altogether,” asked John Silence quietly, “do you think you stayed in the town of the adventure?”

Vezin looked up sheepishly.

“I was coming to that,” he resumed, with apologetic wrigglings of his body. “In London I found that I was a whole week out in my reckoning of time. I had stayed over a week in the town, and it ought to have been September 15th, — instead of which it was only September 10th!”

“So that, in reality, you had only stayed a night or two in the inn?” queried the doctor.

Vezin hesitated before replying. He shuffled upon the mat.

“I must have gained time somewhere,” he said at length— “somewhere or somehow. I certainly had a week to my credit. I can’t explain it. I can only give you the fact.”

“And this happened to you last year, since when you have never been back to the place?”

“Last autumn, yes,” murmured Vezin; “and I have never dared to go back. I think I never want to.”

“And, tell me,” asked Dr. Silence at length, when he saw that the little man had evidently come to the end of his words and had nothing more to say, “had you ever read up the subject of the old witchcraft practices during the Middle Ages, or been at all interested in the subject?”

“Never!” declared Vezin emphatically. “I had never given a thought to such matters so far as I know — —”

“Or to the question of reincarnation, perhaps?”

“Never — before my adventure; but I have since,” he replied significantly.

There was, however, something still on the man’s mind that he wished to relieve himself of by confession, yet could with difficulty bring himself to mention; and it was only after the sympathetic tactfulness of the doctor had provided numerous openings that he at length availed himself of one of them, and stammered that he would like to show him the marks he still had on his neck where, he said, the girl had touched him with her anointed hands.

He took off his collar after infinite fumbling hesitation, and lowered his shirt a little for the doctor to see. And there, on the surface of the skin, lay a faint reddish line across the shoulder and extending a little way down the back towards the spine. It certainly indicated exactly the position an arm might have taken in the act of embracing. And on the other side of the neck, slightly higher up, was a similar mark, though not quite so clearly defined.

“That was where she held me that night on the ramparts,” he whispered, a strange light coming and going in his eyes.

It was some weeks later when I again found occasion to consult John Silence concerning another extraordinary case that had come under my notice, and we fell to discussing Vezin’s story. Since hearing it, the doctor had made investigations on his own account, and one of his secretaries had discovered that Vezin’s ancestors had actually lived for generations in the very town where the adventure came to him. Two of them, both women, had been tried and convicted as witches, and had been burned alive at the stake. Moreover, it had not been difficult to prove that the very inn where Vezin stayed was built about 1700 upon the spot where the funeral pyres stood and the executions took place. The town was a sort of headquarters for all the sorcerers and witches of the entire region, and after conviction they were burnt there literally by scores.

“It seems strange,” continued the doctor, “that Vezin should have remained ignorant of all this; but, on the other hand, it was not the kind of history that successive generations would have been anxious to keep alive, or to repeat to their children. Therefore I am inclined to think he still knows nothing about it.

“The whole adventure seems to have been a very vivid revival of the memories of an earlier life, caused by coming directly into contact with the living forces still intense enough to hang about the place, and, by a most singular chance too, with the very souls who had taken part with him in the events of that particular life. For the mother and daughter who impressed him so strangely must have been leading actors, with himself, in the scenes and practices of witchcraft which at that period dominated the imaginations of the whole country.

“One has only to read the histories of the times to know that these witches claimed the power of transforming themselves into various animals, both for the purposes of disguise and also to convey themselves swiftly to the scenes of their imaginary orgies. Lycanthropy, or the power to change themselves into wolves, was everywhere believed in, and the ability to transform themselves into cats by rubbing their bodies with a special salve or ointment provided by Satan himself, found equal credence. The witchcraft trials abound in evidences of such universal beliefs."

Dr. Silence quoted chapter and verse from many writers on the subject, and showed how every detail of Vezin's adventure had a basis in the practices of those dark days.

"But that the entire affair took place subjectively in the man's own consciousness, I have no doubt," he went on, in reply to my questions; "for my secretary who has been to the town to investigate, discovered his signature in the visitors' book, and proved by it that he had arrived on September 8th, and left suddenly without paying his bill. He left two days later, and they still were in possession of his dirty brown bag and some tourist clothes. I paid a few francs in settlement of his debt, and have sent his luggage on to him. The daughter was absent from home, but the proprietress, a large woman very much as he described her, told my secretary that he had seemed a very strange, absent-minded kind of gentleman, and after his disappearance she had feared for a long time that he had met with a violent end in the neighbouring forest where he used to roam about alone.

"I should like to have obtained a personal interview with the daughter so as to ascertain how much was subjective and how much actually took place with her as Vezin told it. For her dread of fire and the sight of burning must, of course, have been the intuitive memory of her former painful death at the stake, and have thus explained why he fancied more than once that he saw her through smoke and flame."

"And that mark on his skin, for instance?" I inquired.

"Merely the marks produced by hysterical brooding," he replied, "like the stigmata of the *religieuses*, and the bruises which appear on the bodies of hypnotised subjects who have been told to expect them. This is very common and easily explained. Only it seems curious that these marks should have remained so long in Vezin's case. Usually they disappear quickly."

"Obviously he is still thinking about it all, brooding, and living it all over again," I ventured.

"Probably. And this makes me fear that the end of his trouble is not yet. We shall hear of him again. It is a case, alas! I can do little to alleviate."

Dr. Silence spoke gravely and with sadness in his voice.

"And what do you make of the Frenchman in the train?" I asked further—"the man who warned him against the place, *à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats*? Surely a very singular incident?"

"A *very* singular incident indeed," he made answer slowly, "and one I can only explain on the basis of a highly improbable coincidence — —"

"Namely?"

"That the man was one who had himself stayed in the town and undergone there a similar experience. I should like to find this man and ask him. But the crystal is useless here, for I have no slightest clue to go upon, and I can only conclude that some singular psychic affinity, some force still active in his being out of the same past life, drew him thus to the personality of Vezin, and enabled him to fear what might happen to him, and thus to warn him as he did.

"Yes," he presently continued, half talking to himself, "I suspect in this case that Vezin was swept into the vortex of forces arising out of the intense activities of a past life, and that he lived over again a scene in which he had often played a leading part centuries before. For strong actions set up forces that are so slow to exhaust themselves, they may be said in a sense never to die. In this case they were not vital enough to render the illusion complete, so that the little man found himself caught in a very distressing confusion of the present and the past; yet he was sufficiently sensitive to recognise that it was true, and to fight against the degradation of returning, even in memory, to a former and lower state of development.

"Ah yes!" he continued, crossing the floor to gaze at the darkening sky, and seemingly quite oblivious of my presence, "subliminal up-rushes of memory like this can be exceedingly painful, and sometimes exceedingly dangerous. I only trust that this gentle soul may soon escape from this obsession of a passionate and tempestuous past. But I doubt it, I doubt it."

His voice was hushed with sadness as he spoke, and when he turned back into the room again there was an expression of profound yearning upon his face, the yearning of a soul whose desire to help is sometimes greater than his power.

CASE III. THE NEMESIS OF FIRE

I

BY SOME MEANS which I never could fathom, John Silence always contrived to keep the compartment to himself, and as the train had a clear run of two hours before the first stop, there was ample time to go over the preliminary facts of the case. He had telephoned to me that very morning, and even through the disguise of the miles of wire the thrill of incalculable adventure had sounded in his voice.

“As if it were an ordinary country visit,” he called, in reply to my question; “and don’t forget to bring your gun.”

“With blank cartridges, I suppose?” for I knew his rigid principles with regard to the taking of life, and guessed that the guns were merely for some obvious purpose of disguise.

Then he thanked me for coming, mentioned the train, snapped down the receiver, and left me vibrating with the excitement of anticipation to do my packing. For the honour of accompanying Dr. John Silence on one of his big cases was what many would have considered an empty honour — and risky. Certainly the adventure held all manner of possibilities, and I arrived at Waterloo with the feelings of a man who is about to embark on some dangerous and peculiar mission in which the dangers he expects to run will not be the ordinary dangers to life and limb, but of some secret character difficult to name and still more difficult to cope with.

“The Manor House has a high sound,” he told me, as we sat with our feet up and talked, “but I believe it is little more than an overgrown farmhouse in the desolate heather country beyond D —— , and its owner, Colonel Wragge, a retired soldier with a taste for books, lives there practically alone, I understand, with an elderly invalid sister. So you need not look forward to a lively visit, unless the case provides some excitement of its own.”

“Which is likely?”

By way of reply he handed me a letter marked “Private.” It was dated a week ago, and signed “Yours faithfully, Horace Wragge.”

“He heard of me, you see, through Captain Anderson,” the doctor explained modestly, as though his fame were not almost world-wide; “you remember that Indian obsession case — —”

I read the letter. Why it should have been marked private was difficult to understand. It was very brief, direct, and to the point. It referred by way of introduction to Captain Anderson, and then stated quite simply that the writer needed help of a peculiar kind and asked for a personal interview — a morning interview, since it was impossible for him to be absent from the house at night. The letter was dignified even to the point of abruptness, and it is difficult to explain how it managed to convey to me the impression of a strong man, shaken and perplexed. Perhaps the restraint of the wording, and the mystery of the affair had something to do with it; and the reference to the Anderson case, the horror of which lay still vivid in my memory, may have touched the sense of something rather ominous and alarming. But, whatever the cause, there was no doubt that an impression of serious peril rose somehow out of that white paper with the few lines of firm writing, and the spirit of a deep uneasiness ran between the words and reached the mind without any visible form of expression.

“And when you saw him —— ?” I asked, returning the letter as the train rushed clattering noisily through Clapham Junction.

“I have not seen him,” was the reply. “The man’s mind was charged to the brim when he wrote that; full of vivid mental pictures. Notice the restraint of it. For the main character of his case psychometry could be depended upon, and the scrap of paper his hand has touched is sufficient to give to another mind — a sensitive and sympathetic mind — clear mental pictures of what is going on. I think I have a very sound general idea of his problem.”

“So there may be excitement after all?”

John Silence waited a moment before he replied.

“Something very serious is amiss there,” he said gravely, at length. “Some one — not himself, I gather, — has been meddling with a rather dangerous kind of gunpowder. So — yes, there may be excitement, as you put it.”

"And my duties?" I asked, with a decidedly growing interest. "Remember, I am your 'assistant.'"

"Behave like an intelligent confidential secretary. Observe everything, without seeming to. Say nothing — nothing that means anything. Be present at all interviews. I may ask a good deal of you, for if my impressions are correct this is — —"

He broke off suddenly.

"But I won't tell you my impressions yet," he resumed after a moment's thought. "Just watch and listen as the case proceeds. Form your own impressions and cultivate your intuitions. We come as ordinary visitors, of course," he added, a twinkle showing for an instant in his eye; "hence, the guns."

Though disappointed not to hear more, I recognised the wisdom of his words and knew how valueless my impressions would be once the powerful suggestion of having heard his own lay behind them. I likewise reflected that intuition joined to a sense of humour was of more use to a man than double the quantity of mere "brains," as such.

Before putting the letter away, however, he handed it back, telling me to place it against my forehead for a few moments and then describe any pictures that came spontaneously into my mind.

"Don't deliberately look for anything. Just imagine you see the inside of the eyelid, and wait for pictures that rise against its dark screen."

I followed his instructions, making my mind as nearly a blank as possible. But no visions came. I saw nothing but the lines of light that pass to and fro like the changes of a kaleidoscope across the blackness. A momentary sensation of warmth came and went curiously.

"You see — what?" he asked presently.

"Nothing," I was obliged to admit disappointedly; "nothing but the usual flashes of light one always sees. Only, perhaps, they are more vivid than usual."

He said nothing by way of comment or reply.

"And they group themselves now and then," I continued, with painful candour, for I longed to see the pictures he had spoken of, "group themselves into globes and round balls of fire, and the lines that flash about sometimes look like triangles and crosses — almost like geometrical figures. Nothing more."

I opened my eyes again, and gave him back the letter.

"It makes my head hot," I said, feeling somehow unworthy for not seeing anything of interest. But the look in his eyes arrested my attention at once.

"That sensation of heat is important," he said significantly.

"It was certainly real, and rather uncomfortable," I replied, hoping he would expand and explain. "There was a distinct feeling of warmth — internal warmth somewhere — oppressive in a sense."

"That is interesting," he remarked, putting the letter back in his pocket, and settling himself in the corner with newspapers and books. He vouchsafed nothing more, and I knew the uselessness of trying to make him talk. Following his example I settled likewise with magazines into my corner. But when I closed my eyes again to look for the flashing lights and the sensation of heat, I found nothing but the usual phantasmagoria of the day's events — faces, scenes, memories, — and in due course I fell asleep and then saw nothing at all of any kind.

When we left the train, after six hours' travelling, at a little wayside station standing without trees in a world of sand and heather, the late October shadows had already dropped their sombre veil upon the landscape, and the sun dipped almost out of sight behind the moorland hills. In a high dogcart, behind a fast horse, we were soon rattling across the undulating stretches of an open and bleak country, the keen air stinging our cheeks and the scents of pine and bracken strong about us. Bare hills were faintly visible against the horizon, and the coachman pointed to a bank of distant shadows on our left where he told us the sea lay. Occasional stone farmhouses, standing back from the road among straggling fir trees, and large black barns that seemed to shift past us with a movement of their own in the gloom, were the only signs of humanity and civilisation that we saw, until at the end of a bracing five miles the lights of the lodge gates flared before us and we plunged into a thick grove of pine trees that concealed the Manor House up to the moment of actual arrival.

Colonel Wragge himself met us in the hall. He was the typical army officer who had seen service, real service, and found himself in the process. He was tall and well built, broad in the shoulders, but lean as a greyhound, with grave eyes, rather stern, and a moustache turning grey. I judged him to be about sixty years of age, but his movements showed a suppleness of strength and agility that contradicted the years. The face was full of character and resolution, the face of a man to be depended upon, and the straight grey eyes, it seemed to me, wore a veil of perplexed anxiety that he made no attempt to disguise. The whole appearance of the man at once clothed the adventure with gravity and importance. A matter that gave such a man cause for serious alarm, I felt, must be something real and of genuine moment.

His speech and manner, as he welcomed us, were like his letter, simple and sincere. He had a nature as direct and undeviating as a bullet. Thus, he showed plainly his surprise that Dr. Silence had not come alone.

“My confidential secretary, Mr. Hubbard,” the doctor said, introducing me, and the steady gaze and powerful shake of the hand I then received were well calculated, I remember thinking, to drive home the impression that here was a man who was not to be trifled with, and whose perplexity must spring from some very real and tangible cause. And, quite obviously, he was relieved that we had come. His welcome was unmistakably genuine.

He led us at once into a room, half library, half smoking-room, that opened out of the low-ceilinged hall. The Manor House gave the impression of a rambling and glorified farmhouse, solid, ancient, comfortable, and wholly unpretentious. And so it was. Only the heat of the place struck me as unnatural. This room with the blazing fire may have seemed uncomfortably warm after the long drive through the night air; yet it seemed to me that the hall itself, and the whole atmosphere of the house, breathed a warmth that hardly belonged to well-filled grates or the pipes of hot air and water. It was not the heat of the greenhouse; it was an oppressive heat that somehow got into the head and mind. It stirred a curious sense of uneasiness in me, and I caught myself thinking of the sensation of warmth that had emanated from the letter in the train.

I heard him thanking Dr. Silence for having come; there was no preamble, and the exchange of civilities was of the briefest description. Evidently here was a man who, like my companion, loved action rather than talk. His manner was straightforward and direct. I saw him in a flash: puzzled, worried, harassed into a state of alarm by something he could not comprehend; forced to deal with things he would have preferred to despise, yet facing it all with dogged seriousness and making no attempt to conceal that he felt secretly ashamed of his incompetence.

"So I cannot offer you much entertainment beyond that of my own company, and the queer business that has been going on here, and is still going on," he said, with a slight inclination of the head towards me by way of including me in his confidence.

"I think, Colonel Wragge," replied John Silence impressively, "that we shall none of us find the time hang heavy. I gather we shall have our hands full."

The two men looked at one another for the space of some seconds, and there was an indefinable quality in their silence which for the first time made me admit a swift question into my mind; and I wondered a little at my rashness in coming with so little reflection into a big case of this incalculable doctor. But no answer suggested itself, and to withdraw was, of course, inconceivable. The gates had closed behind me now, and the spirit of the adventure was already besieging my mind with its advance guard of a thousand little hopes and fears.

Explaining that he would wait till after dinner to discuss anything serious, as no reference was ever made before his sister, he led the way upstairs and showed us personally to our rooms; and it was just as I was finishing dressing that a knock came at my door and Dr. Silence entered.

He was always what is called a serious man, so that even in moments of comedy you felt he never lost sight of the profound gravity of life, but as he came across the room to me I caught the expression of his face and understood in a flash that he was now in his most grave and earnest mood. He looked almost troubled. I stopped fumbling with my black tie and stared.

"It *is* serious," he said, speaking in a low voice, "more so even than I imagined. Colonel Wragge's control over his thoughts concealed a great deal in my psychometrising of the letter. I looked in to warn you to keep yourself well in hand — generally speaking."

"Haunted house?" I asked, conscious of a distinct shiver down my back.

But he smiled gravely at the question.

"Haunted House of Life more likely," he replied, and a look came into his eyes which I had only seen there when a human soul was in the toils and he was thick in the fight of rescue. He was stirred in the deeps.

"Colonel Wragge — or the sister?" I asked hurriedly, for the gong was sounding.

"Neither directly," he said from the door. "Something far older, something very, very remote indeed. This thing has to do with the ages, unless I am mistaken greatly, the ages on which the mists of memory have long lain undisturbed."

He came across the floor very quickly with a finger on his lips, looking at me with a peculiar searchingness of gaze.

"Are you aware yet of anything — odd here?" he asked in a whisper. "Anything you cannot quite define, for instance. Tell me, Hubbard, for I want to know all your impressions. They may help me."

I shook my head, avoiding his gaze, for there was something in the eyes that scared me a little. But he was so in earnest that I set my mind keenly searching.

"Nothing yet," I replied truthfully, wishing I could confess to a real emotion; "nothing but the strange heat of the place."

He gave a little jump forward in my direction.

"The heat again, that's it!" he exclaimed, as though glad of my corroboration. "And how would you describe it, perhaps?" he asked quickly, with a hand on the door knob.

"It doesn't seem like ordinary physical heat," I said, casting about in my thoughts for a definition.

"More a mental heat," he interrupted, "a glowing of thought and desire, a sort of feverish warmth of the spirit. Isn't that it?"

I admitted that he had exactly described my sensations.

“Good!” he said, as he opened the door, and with an indescribable gesture that combined a warning to be ready with a sign of praise for my correct intuition, he was gone.

I hurried after him, and found the two men waiting for me in front of the fire.

“I ought to warn you,” our host was saying as I came in, “that my sister, whom you will meet at dinner, is not aware of the real object of your visit. She is under the impression that we are interested in the same line of study — folklore — and that your researches have led to my seeking acquaintance. She comes to dinner in her chair, you know. It will be a great pleasure to her to meet you both. We have few visitors.”

So that on entering the dining-room we were prepared to find Miss Wragge already at her place, seated in a sort of bath-chair. She was a vivacious and charming old lady, with smiling expression and bright eyes, and she chatted all through dinner with unfailing spontaneity. She had that face, unlined and fresh, that some people carry through life from the cradle to the grave; her smooth plump cheeks were all pink and white, and her hair, still dark, was divided into two glossy and sleek halves on either side of a careful parting. She wore gold-rimmed glasses, and at her throat was a large scarab of green jasper that made a very handsome brooch.

Her brother and Dr. Silence talked little, so that most of the conversation was carried on between herself and me, and she told me a great deal about the history of the old house, most of which I fear I listened to with but half an ear.

“And when Cromwell stayed here,” she babbled on, “he occupied the very rooms upstairs that used to be mine. But my brother thinks it safer for me to sleep on the ground floor now in case of fire.”

And this sentence has stayed in my memory only because of the sudden way her brother interrupted her and instantly led the conversation on to another topic. The passing reference to fire seemed to have disturbed him, and thenceforward he directed the talk himself.

It was difficult to believe that this lively and animated old lady, sitting beside me and taking so eager an interest in the affairs of life, was practically, we understood, without the use of her lower limbs, and that her whole existence for years had been passed between the sofa, the bed, and the bath-chair in which she chatted so naturally at the dinner-table. She made no allusion to her affliction until the dessert was reached, and then, touching a bell, she made us a witty little speech about leaving us "like time, on noiseless feet," and was wheeled out of the room by the butler and carried off to her apartments at the other end of the house.

And the rest of us were not long in following suit, for Dr. Silence and myself were quite as eager to learn the nature of our errand as our host was to impart it to us. He led us down a long flagged passage to a room at the very end of the house, a room provided with double doors, and windows, I saw, heavily shuttered. Books lined the walls on every side, and a large desk in the bow window was piled up with volumes, some open, some shut, some showing scraps of paper stuck between the leaves, and all smothered in a general cataract of untidy foolscap and loose half sheets.

"My study and workroom," explained Colonel Wragge, with a delightful touch of innocent pride, as though he were a very serious scholar. He placed arm-chairs for us round the fire. "Here," he added significantly, "we shall be safe from interruption and can talk securely."

During dinner the manner of the doctor had been all that was natural and spontaneous, though it was impossible for me, knowing him as I did, not to be aware that he was subconsciously very keenly alert and already receiving upon the ultra-sensitive surface of his mind various and vivid impressions; and there was now something in the gravity of his face, as well as in the significant tone of Colonel Wragge's speech, and something, too, in the fact that we three were shut away in this private chamber about to listen to things probably strange, and certainly mysterious — something in all this that touched my imagination sharply and sent an undeniable thrill along my nerves. Taking the chair indicated by my host, I lit my cigar and waited for the opening of the attack, fully conscious that we were now too far gone in the adventure to admit of withdrawal, and wondering a little anxiously where it was going to lead.

What I expected precisely, it is hard to say. Nothing definite, perhaps. Only the sudden change was dramatic. A few hours before the prosaic atmosphere of Piccadilly was about me, and now I was sitting in a secret chamber of this remote old building waiting to hear an account of things that held possibly the genuine heart of terror. I thought of the dreary moors and hills outside, and the dark pine copses soughing in the wind of night; I remembered my companion's singular words up in my bedroom before dinner; and then I turned and noted carefully the stern countenance of the Colonel as he faced us and lit his big black cigar before speaking.

The threshold of an adventure, I reflected as I waited for the first words, is always the most thrilling moment — until the climax comes.

But Colonel Wragge hesitated — mentally — a long time before he began. He talked briefly of our journey, the weather, the country, and other comparatively trivial topics, while he sought about in his mind for an appropriate entry into the subject that was uppermost in the thoughts of all of us. The fact was he found it a difficult matter to speak of at all, and it was Dr. Silence who finally showed him the way over the hedge.

“Mr Hubbard will take a few notes when you are ready — you won't object,” he suggested; “I can give my undivided attention in this way.”

“By all means,” turning to reach some of the loose sheets on the writing table, and glancing at me. He still hesitated a little, I thought. “The fact is,” he said apologetically, “I wondered if it was quite fair to trouble you so soon. The daylight might suit you better to hear what I have to tell. Your sleep, I mean, might be less disturbed, perhaps.”

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” John Silence replied with his gentle smile, taking command as it were from that moment, “but really we are both quite immune. There is nothing, I think, that could prevent either of us sleeping, except — an outbreak of fire, or some such very physical disturbance.”

Colonel Wragge raised his eyes and looked fixedly at him. This reference to an outbreak of fire I felt sure was made with a purpose. It certainly had the desired effect of removing from our host's manner the last signs of hesitancy.

“Forgive me,” he said. “Of course, I know nothing of your methods in matters of this kind — so, perhaps, you would like me to begin at once and give you an outline of the situation?”

Dr. Silence bowed his agreement. “I can then take my precautions accordingly,” he added calmly.

The soldier looked up for a moment as though he did not quite gather the meaning of these words; but he made no further comment and turned at once to tackle a subject on which he evidently talked with diffidence and unwillingness.

“It’s all so utterly out of my line of things,” he began, puffing out clouds of cigar smoke between his words, “and there’s so little to tell with any real evidence behind it, that it’s almost impossible to make a consecutive story for you. It’s the total cumulative effect that is so — so disquieting.” He chose his words with care, as though determined not to travel one hair’s breadth beyond the truth.

“I came into this place twenty years ago when my elder brother died,” he continued, “but could not afford to live here then. My sister, whom you met at dinner, kept house for him till the end, and during all these years, while I was seeing service abroad, she had an eye to the place — for we never got a satisfactory tenant — and saw that it was not allowed to go to ruin. I myself took possession, however, only a year ago.

“My brother,” he went on, after a perceptible pause, “spent much of his time away, too. He was a great traveller, and filled the house with stuff he brought home from all over the world. The laundry — a small detached building beyond the servants’ quarters — he turned into a regular little museum. The curios and things I have cleared away — they collected dust and were always getting broken — but the laundry-house you shall see tomorrow.”

Colonel Wragge spoke with such deliberation and with so many pauses that this beginning took him a long time. But at this point he came to a full stop altogether. Evidently there was something he wished to say that cost him considerable effort. At length he looked up steadily into my companion’s face.

“May I ask you — that is, if you won’t think it strange,” he said, and a sort of hush came over his voice and manner, “whether you have noticed anything at all unusual — anything queer, since you came into the house?”

Dr. Silence answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“I have,” he said. “There is a curious sensation of heat in the place.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the other, with a slight start. “You *have* noticed it. This unaccountable heat — —”

“But its cause, I gather, is not in the house itself — but outside,” I was astonished to hear the doctor add.

Colonel Wragge rose from his chair and turned to unhook a framed map that hung upon the wall. I got the impression that the movement was made with the deliberate purpose of concealing his face.

“Your diagnosis, I believe, is amazingly accurate,” he said after a moment, turning round with the map in his hands. “Though, of course, I can have no idea how you should guess — —”

John Silence shrugged his shoulders expressively. “Merely my impression,” he said. “If you pay attention to impressions, and do not allow them to be confused by deductions of the intellect, you will often find them surprisingly, uncannily, accurate.”

Colonel Wragge resumed his seat and laid the map upon his knees. His face was very thoughtful as he plunged abruptly again into his story.

“On coming into possession,” he said, looking us alternately in the face, “I found a crop of stories of the most extraordinary and impossible kind I had ever heard — stories which at first I treated with amused indifference, but later was forced to regard seriously, if only to keep my servants. These stories I thought I traced to the fact of my brother’s death — and, in a way, I think so still.”

He leant forward and handed the map to Dr. Silence.

“It’s an old plan of the estate,” he explained, “but accurate enough for our purpose, and I wish you would note the position of the plantations marked upon it, especially those near the house. That one,” indicating the spot with his finger, “is called the Twelve Acre Plantation. It was just there, on the side nearest the house, that my brother and the head keeper met their deaths.”

He spoke as a man forced to recognise facts that he deplored, and would have preferred to leave untouched — things he personally would rather have treated with ridicule if possible. It made his words peculiarly dignified and impressive, and I listened with an increasing uneasiness as to the sort of help the doctor would look to me for later. It seemed as though I were a spectator of some drama of mystery in which any moment I might be summoned to play a part.

"It was twenty years ago," continued the Colonel, "but there was much talk about it at the time, unfortunately, and you may, perhaps, have heard of the affair. Stride, the keeper, was a passionate, hot-tempered man, but I regret to say, so was my brother, and quarrels between them seem to have been frequent."

"I do not recall the affair," said the doctor. "May I ask what was the cause of death?" Something in his voice made me prick up my ears for the reply.

"The keeper, it was said, from suffocation. And at the inquest the doctors averred that both men had been dead the same length of time when found."

"And your brother?" asked John Silence, noticing the omission, and listening intently.

"Equally mysterious," said our host, speaking in a low voice with effort. "But there was one distressing feature I think I ought to mention. For those who saw the face — I did not see it myself — and though Stride carried a gun its chambers were undischarged — —" He stammered and hesitated with confusion. Again that sense of terror moved between his words. He stuck.

"Yes," said the chief listener sympathetically.

"My brother's face, they said, looked as though it had been scorched. It had been swept, as it were, by something that burned — blasted. It was, I am told, quite dreadful. The bodies were found lying side by side, faces downwards, both pointing away from the wood, as though they had been in the act of running, and not more than a dozen yards from its edge."

Dr. Silence made no comment. He appeared to be studying the map attentively.

"I did not see the face myself," repeated the other, his manner somehow expressing the sense of awe he contrived to keep out of his voice, "but my sister unfortunately did, and her present state I believe to be entirely due to the shock it gave to her nerves. She never can be brought to refer to it, naturally, and I am even inclined to think that the memory has mercifully been permitted to vanish from her mind. But she spoke of it at the time as a face swept by flame — blasted."

John Silence looked up from his contemplation of the map, but with the air of one who wished to listen, not to speak, and presently Colonel Wragge went on with his account. He stood on the mat, his broad shoulders hiding most of the mantelpiece.

"They all centred about this particular plantation, these stories. That was to be expected, for the people here are as superstitious as Irish peasantry, and though I made one or two examples among them to stop the foolish talk, it had no effect, and new versions came to my ears every week. You may imagine how little good dismissals did, when I tell you that the servants dismissed themselves. It was not the house servants, but the men who worked on the estate outside. The keepers gave notice one after another, none of them with any reason I could accept; the foresters refused to enter the wood, and the beaters to beat in it. Word flew all over the countryside that Twelve Acre Plantation was a place to be avoided, day or night.

"There came a point," the Colonel went on, now well in his swing, "when I felt compelled to make investigations on my own account. I could not kill the thing by ignoring it; so I collected and analysed the stories at first hand. For this Twelve Acre Wood, you will see by the map, comes rather near home. Its lower end, if you will look, almost touches the end of the back lawn, as I will show you tomorrow, and its dense growth of pines forms the chief protection the house enjoys from the east winds that blow up from the sea. And in olden days, before my brother interfered with it and frightened all the game away, it was one of the best pheasant coverts on the whole estate."

"And what form, if I may ask, did this interference take?" asked Dr. Silence.

"In detail, I cannot tell you, for I do not know — except that I understand it was the subject of his frequent differences with the head keeper; but during the last two years of his life, when he gave up travelling and settled down here, he took a special interest in this wood, and for some unaccountable reason began to build a low stone wall round it. This wall was never finished, but you shall see the ruins tomorrow in the daylight."

“And the result of your investigations — these stories, I mean?” the doctor broke in, anxious to keep him to the main issues.

“Yes, I’m coming to that,” he said slowly, “but the wood first, for this wood out of which they grew like mushrooms has nothing in any way peculiar about it. It is very thickly grown, and rises to a clearer part in the centre, a sort of mound where there is a circle of large boulders — old Druid stones, I’m told. At another place there’s a small pond. There’s nothing distinctive about it that I could mention — just an ordinary pine-wood, a very ordinary pine-wood — only the trees are a bit twisted in the trunks, some of ’em, and very dense. Nothing more.

“And the stories? Well, none of them had anything to do with my poor brother, or the keeper, as you might have expected; and they were all odd — such odd things, I mean, to invent or imagine. I never could make out how these people got such notions into their heads.”

He paused a moment to relight his cigar.

“There’s no regular path through it,” he resumed, puffing vigorously, “but the fields round it are constantly used, and one of the gardeners whose cottage lies over that way declared he often saw moving lights in it at night, and luminous shapes like globes of fire over the tops of the trees, skimming and floating, and making a soft hissing sound — most of ’em said that, in fact — and another man saw shapes flitting in and out among the trees, things that were neither men nor animals, and all faintly luminous. No one ever pretended to see human forms — always queer, huge things they could not properly describe. Sometimes the whole wood was lit up, and one fellow — he’s still here and you shall see him — has a most circumstantial yarn about having seen great stars lying on the ground round the edge of the wood at regular intervals — —”

“What kind of stars?” put in John Silence sharply, in a sudden way that made me start.

“Oh, I don’t know quite; ordinary stars, I think he said, only very large, and apparently blazing as though the ground was alight. He was too terrified to go close and examine, and he has never seen them since.”

He stooped and stirred the fire into a welcome blaze — welcome for its blaze of light rather than for its heat. In the room there was already a strange pervading sensation of warmth that was oppressive in its effect and far from comforting.

“Of course,” he went on, straightening up again on the mat, “this was all commonplace enough — this seeing lights and figures at night. Most of these fellows drink, and imagination and terror between them may account for almost anything. But others saw things in broad daylight. One of the woodmen, a sober, respectable man, took the shortcut home to his midday meal, and swore he was followed the whole length of the wood by something that never showed itself, but dodged from tree to tree, always keeping out of sight, yet solid enough to make the branches sway and the twigs snap on the ground. And it made a noise, he declared — but really” — the speaker stopped and gave a short laugh— “it’s too absurd — —”

“*Please!*” insisted the doctor; “for it is these small details that give me the best clues always.”

“ —— it made a crackling noise, he said, like a bonfire. Those were his very words: like the crackling of a bonfire,” finished the soldier, with a repetition of his short laugh.

“Most interesting,” Dr. Silence observed gravely. “Please omit nothing.”

“Yes” he went on, “and it was soon after that the fires began — the fires in the wood. They started mysteriously burning in the patches of coarse white grass that cover the more open parts of the plantation. No one ever actually saw them start, but many, myself among the number, have seen them burning and smouldering. They are always small and circular in shape, and for all the world like a picnic fire. The head keeper has a dozen explanations, from sparks flying out of the house chimneys to the sunlight focusing through a dewdrop, but none of them, I must admit, convince me as being in the least likely or probable. They are most singular, I consider, most singular, these mysterious fires, and I am glad to say that they come only at rather long intervals and never seem to spread.

“But the keeper had other queer stories as well, and about things that are verifiable. He declared that no life ever willingly entered the plantation; more, that no life existed in it at all. No birds nested in the trees, or flew into their shade. He set countless traps, but never caught so much as a rabbit or a weasel. Animals avoided it, and more than once he had picked up dead creatures round the edges that bore no obvious signs of how they had met their death.

“Moreover, he told me one extraordinary tale about his retriever chasing some invisible creature across the field one day when he was out with his gun. The dog suddenly pointed at something in the field at his feet, and then gave chase, yelping like a mad thing. It followed its imaginary quarry to the borders of the wood, and then went in — a thing he had never known it to do before. The moment it crossed the edge — it is darkish in there even in daylight — it began fighting in the most frenzied and terrific fashion. It made him afraid to interfere, he said. And at last, when the dog came out, hanging its tail down and panting, he found something like white hair stuck to its jaws, and brought it to show me. I tell you these details because — —”

“They are important, believe me,” the doctor stopped him. “And you have it still, this hair?” he asked.

“It disappeared in the oddest way,” the Colonel explained. “It was curious looking stuff, something like asbestos, and I sent it to be analysed by the local chemist. But either the man got wind of its origin, or else he didn’t like the look of it for some reason, because he returned it to me and said it was neither animal, vegetable, nor mineral, so far as he could make out, and he didn’t wish to have anything to do with it. I put it away in paper, but a week later, on opening the package — it was gone! Oh, the stories are simply endless. I could tell you hundreds all on the same lines.”

“And personal experiences of your own, Colonel Wragge?” asked John Silence earnestly, his manner showing the greatest possible interest and sympathy.

The soldier gave an almost imperceptible start. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Nothing, I think,” he said slowly, “nothing — er — I should like to rely on. I mean nothing I have the right to speak of, perhaps — yet.”

His mouth closed with a snap. Dr. Silence, after waiting a little to see if he would add to his reply, did not seek to press him on the point.

“Well,” he resumed presently, and as though he would speak contemptuously, yet dared not, “this sort of thing has gone on at intervals ever since. It spreads like wildfire, of course, mysterious chatter of this kind, and people began trespassing all over the estate, coming to see the wood, and making themselves a general nuisance. Notices of man-traps and spring-guns only seemed to increase their persistence; and — think of it," he snorted, "some local Research Society actually wrote and asked permission for one of their members to spend a night in the wood! Bolder fools, who didn't write for leave, came and took away bits of bark from the trees and gave them to clairvoyants, who invented in their turn a further batch of tales. There was simply no end to it all."

"Most distressing and annoying, I can well believe," interposed the doctor.

"Then suddenly the phenomena ceased as mysteriously as they had begun, and the interest flagged. The tales stopped. People got interested in something else. It all seemed to die out. This was last July. I can tell you exactly, for I've kept a diary more or less of what happened."

"Ah!"

"But now, quite recently, within the past three weeks, it has all revived again with a rush — with a kind of furious attack, so to speak. It has really become unbearable. You may imagine what it means, and the general state of affairs, when I say that the possibility of leaving has occurred to me."

"Incendiarism?" suggested Dr. Silence, half under his breath, but not so low that Colonel Wragge did not hear him.

"By Jove, sir, you take the very words out of my mouth!" exclaimed the astonished man, glancing from the doctor to me and from me to the doctor, and rattling the money in his pocket as though some explanation of my friend's divining powers were to be found that way.

"It's only that you are thinking very vividly," the doctor said quietly, "and your thoughts form pictures in my mind before you utter them. It's merely a little elementary thought-reading."

His intention, I saw, was not to perplex the good man, but to impress him with his powers so as to ensure obedience later.

"Good Lord! I had no idea — —" He did not finish the sentence, and dived again abruptly into his narrative.

"I did not see anything myself, I must admit, but the stories of independent eye-witnesses were to the effect that lines of light, like streams of thin fire, moved through the wood and sometimes were seen to shoot out precisely as flames might shoot out — in the direction of this house. There," he explained, in a louder voice that made me jump, pointing with a thick finger to the map, "where the westerly fringe of the plantation comes up to the end of the lower lawn at the back of the house — where it links on to those dark patches, which are laurel shrubberies, running right up to the back premises — that's where these lights were seen. They passed from the wood to the shrubberies, and in this way reached the house itself. Like silent rockets, one man described them, rapid as lightning and exceedingly bright."

"And this evidence you spoke of?"

"They actually reached the sides of the house. They've left a mark of scorching on the walls — the walls of the laundry building at the other end. You shall see 'em tomorrow." He pointed to the map to indicate the spot, and then straightened himself and glared about the room as though he had said something no one could believe and expected contradiction.

"Scorched — just as the faces were," the doctor murmured, looking significantly at me.

"Scorched — yes," repeated the Colonel, failing to catch the rest of the sentence in his excitement.

There was a prolonged silence in the room, in which I heard the gurgling of the oil in the lamp and the click of the coals and the heavy breathing of our host. The most unwelcome sensations were creeping about my spine, and I wondered whether my companion would scorn me utterly if I asked to sleep on the sofa in his room. It was eleven o'clock, I saw by the clock on the mantelpiece. We had crossed the dividing line and were now well in the movement of the adventure. The fight between my interest and my dread became acute. But, even if turning back had been possible, I think the interest would have easily gained the day.

"I have enemies, of course," I heard the Colonel's rough voice break into the pause presently, "and have discharged a number of servants — —"

"It's not that," put in John Silence briefly.

“You think not? In a sense I am glad, and yet — there are some things that can be met and dealt with — —”

He left the sentence unfinished, and looked down at the floor with an expression of grim severity that betrayed a momentary glimpse of character. This fighting man loathed and abhorred the thought of an enemy he could not see and come to grips with. Presently he moved over and sat down in the chair between us. Something like a sigh escaped him. Dr. Silence said nothing.

“My sister, of course, is kept in ignorance, as far as possible, of all this,” he said disconnectedly, and as if talking to himself. “But even if she knew, she would find matter-of-fact explanations. I only wish I could. I’m sure they exist.”

There came then an interval in the conversation that was very significant. It did not seem a real pause, or the silence real silence, for both men continued to think so rapidly and strongly that one almost imagined their thoughts clothed themselves in words in the air of the room. I was more than a little keyed up with the strange excitement of all I had heard, but what stimulated my nerves more than anything else was the obvious fact that the doctor was clearly upon the trail of discovery. In his mind at that moment, I believe, he had already solved the nature of this perplexing psychical problem. His face was like a mask, and he employed the absolute minimum of gesture and words. All his energies were directed inwards, and by those incalculable methods and processes he had mastered with such infinite patience and study, I felt sure he was already in touch with the forces behind these singular phenomena and laying his deep plans for bringing them into the open, and then effectively dealing with them.

Colonel Wragge meanwhile grew more and more fidgety. From time to time he turned towards my companion, as though about to speak, yet always changing his mind at the last moment. Once he went over and opened the door suddenly, apparently to see if any one were listening at the keyhole, for he disappeared a moment between the two doors, and I then heard him open the outer one. He stood there for some seconds and made a noise as though he were sniffing the air like a dog. Then he closed both doors cautiously and came back to the fireplace. A strange excitement seemed growing upon him. Evidently he was trying to make up his mind to say something that he found it difficult to say. And John Silence, as I rightly judged, was waiting patiently for him to choose his own opportunity and his own way of saying it. At last he turned and faced us, squaring his great shoulders, and stiffening perceptibly.

Dr. Silence looked up sympathetically.

“Your own experiences help me most,” he observed quietly.

“The fact is,” the Colonel said, speaking very low, “this past week there have been outbreaks of fire in the house itself. Three separate outbreaks — and all — in my sister’s room.”

“Yes,” the doctor said, as if this was just what he had expected to hear.

“Utterly unaccountable — all of them,” added the other, and then sat down. I began to understand something of the reason of his excitement. He was realising at last that the “natural” explanation he had held to all along was becoming impossible, and he hated it. It made him angry.

“Fortunately,” he went on, “she was out each time and does not know. But I have made her sleep now in a room on the ground floor.”

“A wise precaution,” the doctor said simply. He asked one or two questions. The fires had started in the curtains — once by the window and once by the bed. The third time smoke had been discovered by the maid coming from the cupboard, and it was found that Miss Wragge’s clothes hanging on the hooks were smouldering. The doctor listened attentively, but made no comment.

“And now can you tell me,” he said presently, “what your own feeling about it is — your general impression?”

“It sounds foolish to say so,” replied the soldier, after a moment’s hesitation, “but I feel exactly as I have often felt on active service in my Indian campaigns: just as if the house and all in it were in a state of siege; as though a concealed enemy were encamped about us — in ambush somewhere.” He uttered a soft nervous laugh. “As if the next sign of smoke would precipitate a panic — a dreadful panic.”

The picture came before me of the night shadowing the house, and the twisted pine trees he had described crowding about it, concealing some powerful enemy; and, glancing at the resolute face and figure of the old soldier, forced at length to his confession, I understood something of all he had been through before he sought the assistance of John Silence.

“And tomorrow, unless I am mistaken, is full moon,” said the doctor suddenly, watching the other’s face for the effect of his apparently careless words.

Colonel Wragge gave an uncontrollable start, and his face for the first time showed unmistakable pallor.

“What in the world —— ?” he began, his lip quivering.

“Only that I am beginning to see light in this extraordinary affair,” returned the other calmly, “and, if my theory is correct, each month when the moon is at the full should witness an increase in the activity of the phenomena.”

“I don’t see the connection,” Colonel Wragge answered almost savagely, “but I am bound to say my diary bears you out.” He wore the most puzzled expression I have ever seen upon an honest face, but he abhorred this additional corroboration of an explanation that perplexed him.

“I confess,” he repeated; “I cannot see the connection.”

“Why should you?” said the doctor, with his first laugh that evening. He got up and hung the map upon the wall again. “But I do — because these things are my special study — and let me add that I have yet to come across a problem that is not natural, and has not a natural explanation. It’s merely a question of how much one knows — and admits.”

Colonel Wragge eyed him with a new and curious respect in his face. But his feelings were soothed. Moreover, the doctor’s laugh and change of manner came as a relief to all, and broke the spell of grave suspense that had held us so long. We all rose and stretched our limbs, and took little walks about the room.

“I am glad, Dr. Silence, if you will allow me to say so, that you are here,” he said simply, “very glad indeed. And now I fear I have kept you both up very late,” with a glance to include me, “for you must be tired, and ready for your beds. I have told you all there is to tell,” he added, “and tomorrow you must feel perfectly free to take any steps you think necessary.”

The end was abrupt, yet natural, for there was nothing more to say, and neither of these men talked for mere talking’s sake.

Out in the cold and chilly hall he lit our candles and took us upstairs. The house was at rest and still, every one asleep. We moved softly. Through the windows on the stairs we saw the moonlight falling across the lawn, throwing deep shadows. The nearer pine trees were just visible in the distance, a wall of impenetrable blackness.

Our host came for a moment to our rooms to see that we had everything. He pointed to a coil of strong rope lying beside the window, fastened to the wall by means of an iron ring. Evidently it had been recently put in.

“I don’t think we shall need it,” Dr. Silence said, with a smile.

“I trust not,” replied our host gravely. “I sleep quite close to you across the landing,” he whispered, pointing to his door, “and if you — if you want anything in the night you will know where to find me.”

He wished us pleasant dreams and disappeared down the passage into his room, shading the candle with his big muscular hand from the draughts.

John Silence stopped me a moment before I went.

“You know what it is?” I asked, with an excitement that even overcame my weariness.

“Yes,” he said, “I’m almost sure. And you?”

“Not the smallest notion.”

He looked disappointed, but not half as disappointed as I felt.

“Egypt,” he whispered, “Egypt!”

II

Nothing happened to disturb me in the night — nothing, that is, except a nightmare in which Colonel Wragge chased me amid thin streaks of fire, and his sister always prevented my escape by suddenly rising up out of the ground in her chair — dead. The deep baying of dogs woke me once, just before the dawn, it must have been, for I saw the window frame against the sky; there was a flash of lightning, too, I thought, as I turned over in bed. And it was warm, for October oppressively warm.

It was after eleven o’clock when our host suggested going out with the guns, these, we understood, being a somewhat thin disguise for our true purpose. Personally, I was glad to be in the open air, for the atmosphere of the house was heavy with presentiment. The sense of impending disaster hung over all. Fear stalked the passages, and lurked in the corners of every room. It was a house haunted, but really haunted; not by some vague shadow of the dead, but by a definite though incalculable influence that was actively alive, and dangerous. At the least smell of smoke the entire household quivered. An odour of burning, I was convinced, would paralyse all the inmates. For the servants, though professedly ignorant by the master's unspoken orders, yet shared the common dread; and the hideous uncertainty, joined with this display of so spiteful and calculated a spirit of malignity, provided a kind of black doom that draped not only the walls, but also the minds of the people living within them.

Only the bright and cheerful vision of old Miss Wragge being pushed about the house in her noiseless chair, chatting and nodding briskly to every one she met, prevented us from giving way entirely to the depression which governed the majority. The sight of her was like a gleam of sunshine through the depths of some ill-omened wood, and just as we went out I saw her being wheeled along by her attendant into the sunshine of the back lawn, and caught her cheery smile as she turned her head and wished us good sport.

The morning was October at its best. Sunshine glistened on the dew-drenched grass and on leaves turned golden-red. The dainty messengers of coming hoar-frost were already in the air, asearch for permanent winter quarters. From the wide moors that everywhere swept up against the sky, like a purple sea splashed by the occasional grey of rocky clefts, there stole down the cool and perfumed wind of the west. And the keen taste of the sea ran through all like a master-flavour, borne over the spaces perhaps by the seagulls that cried and circled high in the air.

But our host took little interest in this sparkling beauty, and had no thought of showing off the scenery of his property. His mind was otherwise intent, and, for that matter, so were our own.

"Those bleak moors and hills stretch unbroken for hours," he said, with a sweep of the hand; "and over there, some four miles," pointing in another direction, "lies S —— Bay, a long, swampy inlet of the sea, haunted by myriads of seabirds. On the other side of the house are the plantations and pine-woods. I thought we would get the dogs and go first to the Twelve Acre Wood I told you about last night. It's quite near."

We found the dogs in the stable, and I recalled the deep baying of the night when a fine bloodhound and two great Danes leaped out to greet us. Singular companions for guns, I thought to myself, as we struck out across the fields and the great creatures bounded and ran beside us, nose to ground.

The conversation was scanty. John Silence's grave face did not encourage talk. He wore the expression I knew well — that look of earnest solicitude which meant that his whole being was deeply absorbed and preoccupied. Frightened, I had never seen him, but anxious often — it always moved me to witness it — and he was anxious now.

"On the way back you shall see the laundry building," Colonel Wragge observed shortly, for he, too, found little to say. "We shall attract less attention then."

Yet not all the crisp beauty of the morning seemed able to dispel the feelings of uneasy dread that gathered increasingly about our minds as we went.

In a very few minutes a clump of pine trees concealed the house from view, and we found ourselves on the outskirts of a densely-grown plantation of conifers. Colonel Wragge stopped abruptly, and, producing a map from his pocket, explained once more very briefly its position with regard to the house. He showed how it ran up almost to the walls of the laundry building — though at the moment beyond our actual view — and pointed to the windows of his sister's bedroom where the fires had been. The room, now empty, looked straight on to the wood. Then, glancing nervously about him, and calling the dogs to heel, he proposed that we should enter the plantation and make as thorough examination of it as we thought worth while. The dogs, he added, might perhaps be persuaded to accompany us a little way — and he pointed to where they cowered at his feet — but he doubted it. "Neither voice nor whip will get them very far, I'm afraid," he said. "I know by experience."

"If you have no objection," replied Dr. Silence, with decision, and speaking almost for the first time, "we will make our examination alone — Mr. Hubbard and myself. It will be best so."

His tone was absolutely final, and the Colonel acquiesced so politely that even a less intuitive man than myself must have seen that he was genuinely relieved.

“You doubtless have good reasons,” he said.

“Merely that I wish to obtain my impressions uncoloured. This delicate clue I am working on might be so easily blurred by the thought-currents of another mind with strongly preconceived ideas.”

“Perfectly. I understand,” rejoined the soldier, though with an expression of countenance that plainly contradicted his words. “Then I will wait here with the dogs; and we’ll have a look at the laundry on our way home.”

I turned once to look back as we clambered over the low stone wall built by the late owner, and saw his straight, soldierly figure standing in the sunlit field watching us with a curiously intent look on his face. There was something to me incongruous, yet distinctly pathetic, in the man’s efforts to meet all far-fetched explanations of the mystery with contempt, and at the same time in his stolid, unswerving investigation of it all. He nodded at me and made a gesture of farewell with his hand. That picture of him, standing in the sunshine with his big dogs, steadily watching us, remains with me to this day.

Dr. Silence led the way in among the twisted trunks, planted closely together in serried ranks, and I followed sharp at his heels. The moment we were out of sight he turned and put down his gun against the roots of a big tree, and I did likewise.

“We shall hardly want these cumbersome weapons of murder,” he observed, with a passing smile.

“You are sure of your clue, then?” I asked at once, bursting with curiosity, yet fearing to betray it lest he should think me unworthy. His own methods were so absolutely simple and untheatrical.

“I am sure of my clue,” he answered gravely. “And I think we have come just in time. You shall know in due course. For the present — be content to follow and observe. And think steadily. The support of your mind will help me.”

His voice had that quiet mastery in it which leads men to face death with a sort of happiness and pride. I would have followed him anywhere at that moment. At the same time his words conveyed a sense of dread seriousness. I caught the thrill of his confidence; but also, in this broad light of day, I felt the measure of alarm that lay behind.

“You still have no strong impressions?” he asked. “Nothing happened in the night, for instance? No vivid dreamings?”

He looked closely for my answer, I was aware.

“I slept almost an unbroken sleep. I was tremendously tired, you know, and, but for the oppressive heat — —”

“Good! You still notice the heat, then,” he said to himself, rather than expecting an answer. “And the lightning?” he added, “that lightning out of a clear sky — that flashing — did you notice *that*?”

I answered truly that I thought I had seen a flash during a moment of wakefulness, and he then drew my attention to certain facts before moving on.

“You remember the sensation of warmth when you put the letter to your forehead in the train; the heat generally in the house last evening, and, as you now mention, in the night. You heard, too, the Colonel’s stories about the appearances of fire in this wood and in the house itself, and the way his brother and the gamekeeper came to their deaths twenty years ago.”

I nodded, wondering what in the world it all meant.

“And you get no clue from these facts?” he asked, a trifle surprised.

I searched every corner of my mind and imagination for some inkling of his meaning, but was obliged to admit that I understood nothing so far.

“Never mind; you will later. And now,” he added, “we will go over the wood and see what we can find.”

His words explained to me something of his method. We were to keep our minds alert and report to each other the least fancy that crossed the picture-gallery of our thoughts. Then, just as we started, he turned again to me with a final warning.

“And, for your safety,” he said earnestly, “imagine *now* — and for that matter, imagine always until we leave this place — imagine with the utmost keenness, that you are surrounded by a shell that protects you. Picture yourself inside a protective envelope, and build it up with the most intense imagination you can evoke. Pour the whole force of your thought and will into it. Believe vividly all through this adventure that such a shell, constructed of your thought, will and imagination, surrounds you completely, and that nothing can pierce it to attack.”

He spoke with dramatic conviction, gazing hard at me as though to enforce his meaning, and then moved forward and began to pick his way over the rough, tussocky ground into the wood. And meanwhile, knowing the efficacy of his prescription, I adopted it to the best of my ability.

The trees at once closed about us like the night. Their branches met overhead in a continuous tangle, their stems crept closer and closer, the brambly undergrowth thickened and multiplied. We tore our trousers, scratched our hands, and our eyes filled with fine dust that made it most difficult to avoid the clinging, prickly network of branches and creepers. Coarse white grass that caught our feet like string grew here and there in patches. It crowned the lumps of peaty growth that stuck up like human heads, fantastically dressed, thrusting up at us out of the ground with crests of dead hair. We stumbled and floundered among them. It was hard going, and I could well conceive it impossible to find a way at all in the night-time. We jumped, when possible, from tussock to tussock, and it seemed as though we were springing among heads on a battlefield, and that this dead white grass concealed eyes that turned to stare as we passed.

Here and there the sunlight shot in with vivid spots of white light, dazzling the sight, but only making the surrounding gloom deeper by contrast And on two occasions we passed dark circular places in the grass where fires had eaten their mark and left a ring of ashes. Dr. Silence pointed to them, but without comment and without pausing, and the sight of them woke in me a singular realisation of the dread that lay so far only just out of sight in this adventure.

It was exhausting work, and heavy going. We kept close together. The warmth, too, was extraordinary. Yet it did not seem the warmth of the body due to violent exertion, but rather an inner heat of the mind that laid glowing hands of fire upon the heart and set the brain in a kind of steady blaze. When my companion found himself too far in advance, he waited for me to come up. The place had evidently been untouched by hand of man, keeper, forester or sportsman, for many a year; and my thoughts, as we advanced painfully, were not unlike the state of the wood itself — dark, confused, full of a haunting wonder and the shadow of fear.

By this time all signs of the open field behind us were hid. No single gleam penetrated. We might have been groping in the heart of some primeval forest. Then, suddenly, the brambles and tussocks and string-like grass came to an end; the trees opened out; and the ground began to slope upwards towards a large central mound. We had reached the middle of the plantation, and before us stood the broken Druid stones our host had mentioned. We walked easily up the little hill, between the sparser stems, and, resting upon one of the ivy-covered boulders, looked round upon a comparatively open space, as large, perhaps, as a small London Square.

Thinking of the ceremonies and sacrifices this rough circle of prehistoric monoliths might have witnessed, I looked up into my companion's face with an unspoken question. But he read my thought and shook his head.

"Our mystery has nothing to do with these dead symbols," he said, "but with something perhaps even more ancient, and of another country altogether."

"Egypt?" I said half under my breath, hopelessly puzzled, but recalling his words in my bedroom.

He nodded. Mentally I still floundered, but he seemed intensely preoccupied and it was no time for asking questions; so while his words circled unintelligibly in my mind I looked round at the scene before me, glad of the opportunity to recover breath and some measure of composure. But hardly had I time to notice the twisted and contorted shapes of many of the pine trees close at hand when Dr. Silence leaned over and touched me on the shoulder. He pointed down the slope. And the look I saw in his eyes keyed up every nerve in my body to its utmost pitch.

A thin, almost imperceptible column of blue smoke was rising among the trees some twenty yards away at the foot of the mound. It curled up and up, and disappeared from sight among the tangled branches overhead. It was scarcely thicker than the smoke from a small brand of burning wood.

“Protect yourself! Imagine your shell strongly,” whispered the doctor sharply, “and follow me closely.”

He rose at once and moved swiftly down the slope towards the smoke, and I followed, afraid to remain alone. I heard the soft crunching of our steps on the pine needles. Over his shoulder I watched the thin blue spiral, without once taking my eyes off it. I hardly know how to describe the peculiar sense of vague horror inspired in me by the sight of that streak of smoke pencilling its way upwards among the dark trees. And the sensation of increasing heat as we approached was phenomenal. It was like walking towards a glowing yet invisible fire.

As we drew nearer his pace slackened. Then he stopped and pointed, and I saw a small circle of burnt grass upon the ground. The tussocks were blackened and smouldering, and from the centre rose this line of smoke, pale, blue, steady. Then I noticed a movement of the atmosphere beside us, as if the warm air were rising and the cooler air rushing in to take its place: a little centre of wind in the stillness. Overhead the boughs stirred and trembled where the smoke disappeared. Otherwise, not a tree sighed, not a sound made itself heard. The wood was still as a graveyard. A horrible idea came to me that the course of nature was about to change without warning, *had* changed a little already, that the sky would drop, or the surface of the earth crash inwards like a broken bubble. Something, certainly, reached up to the citadel of my reason, causing its throne to shake.

John Silence moved forward again. I could not see his face, but his attitude was plainly one of resolution, of muscles and mind ready for vigorous action. We were within ten feet of the blackened circle when the smoke of a sudden ceased to rise, and vanished. The tail of the column disappeared in the air above, and at the same instant it seemed to me that the sensation of heat passed from my face, and the motion of the wind was gone. The calm spirit of the fresh October day resumed command.

Side by side we advanced and examined the place. The grass was smouldering, the ground still hot. The circle of burned earth was a foot to a foot and a half in diameter. It looked like an ordinary picnic fire-place. I bent down cautiously to look, but in a second I sprang back with an involuntary cry of alarm, for, as the doctor stamped on the ashes to prevent them spreading, a sound of hissing rose from the spot as though he had kicked a living creature. This hissing was faintly audible in the air. It moved past us, away towards the thicker portion of the wood in the direction of our field, and in a second Dr. Silence had left the fire and started in pursuit.

And then began the most extraordinary hunt of invisibility I can ever conceive.

He went fast even at the beginning, and, of course, it was perfectly obvious that he was following something. To judge by the poise of his head he kept his eyes steadily at a certain level — just above the height of a man — and the consequence was he stumbled a good deal over the roughness of the ground. The hissing sound had stopped. There was no sound of any kind, and what he saw to follow was utterly beyond me. I only know, that in mortal dread of being left behind, and with a biting curiosity to see whatever there was to be seen, I followed as quickly as I could, and even then barely succeeded in keeping up with him.

And, as we went, the whole mad jumble of the Colonel's stories ran through my brain, touching a sense of frightened laughter that was only held in check by the sight of this earnest, hurrying figure before me. For John Silence at work inspired me with a kind of awe. He looked so diminutive among these giant twisted trees, while yet I knew that his purpose and his knowledge were so great, and even in hurry he was dignified. The fancy that we were playing some queer, exaggerated game together met the fact that we were two men dancing upon the brink of some possible tragedy, and the mingling of the two emotions in my mind was both grotesque and terrifying.

He never turned in his mad chase, but pushed rapidly on, while I panted after him like a figure in some unreasoning nightmare. And, as I ran, it came upon me that he had been aware all the time, in his quiet, internal way, of many things that he had kept for his own secret consideration; he had been watching, waiting, planning from the very moment we entered the shade of the wood. By some inner, concentrated process of mind, dynamic if not actually magical, he had been in direct contact with the source of the whole adventure, the very essence of the real mystery. And now the forces were moving to a climax. Something was about to happen, something important, something possibly dreadful. Every nerve, every sense, every significant gesture of the plunging figure before me proclaimed the fact just as surely as the skies, the winds, and the face of the earth tell the birds the time to migrate and warn the animals that danger lurks and they must move.

In a few moments we reached the foot of the mound and entered the tangled undergrowth that lay between us and the sunlight of the field. Here the difficulties of fast travelling increased a hundredfold. There were brambles to dodge, low boughs to dive under, and countless tree trunks closing up to make a direct path impossible. Yet Dr. Silence never seemed to falter or hesitate. He went, diving, jumping, dodging, ducking, but ever in the same main direction, following a clean trail. Twice I tripped and fell, and both times, when I picked myself up again, I saw him ahead of me, still forcing a way like a dog after its quarry. And sometimes, like a dog, he stopped and pointed — human pointing it was, psychic pointing, — and each time he stopped to point I heard that faint high hissing in the air beyond us. The instinct of an infallible dowser possessed him, and he made no mistakes.

At length, abruptly, I caught up with him, and found that we stood at the edge of the shallow pond Colonel Wragge had mentioned in his account the night before. It was long and narrow, filled with dark brown water, in which the trees were dimly reflected. Not a ripple stirred its surface.

“Watch!” he cried out, as I came up. “It’s going to cross. It’s bound to betray itself. The water is its natural enemy, and we shall see the direction.”

And, even as he spoke, a thin line like the track of a water-spider, shot swiftly across the shiny surface; there was a ghost of steam in the air above; and immediately I became aware of an odour of burning.

Dr. Silence turned and shot a glance at me that made me think of lightning. I began to shake all over.

“Quick!” he cried with excitement, “to the trail again! We must run round. It’s going to the house!”

The alarm in his voice quite terrified me. Without a false step I dashed round the slippery banks and dived again at his heels into the sea of bushes and tree trunks. We were now in the thick of the very dense belt that ran round the outer edge of the plantation, and the field was near; yet so dark was the tangle that it was some time before the first shafts of white sunlight became visible. The doctor now ran in zigzags. He was following something that dodged and doubled quite wonderfully, yet had begun, I fancied, to move more slowly than before.

“Quick!” he cried. “In the light we shall lose it!”

I still saw nothing, heard nothing, caught no suggestion of a trail; yet this man, guided by some interior divining that seemed infallible, made no false turns, though how we failed to crash headlong into the trees has remained a mystery to me ever since. And then, with a sudden rush, we found ourselves on the skirts of the wood with the open field lying in bright sunshine before our eyes.

“Too late!” I heard him cry, a note of anguish in his voice. “It’s out — and, by God, it’s making for the house!”

I saw the Colonel standing in the field with his dogs where we had left him. He was bending double, peering into the wood where he heard us running, and he straightened up like a bent whip released. John Silence dashed passed, calling him to follow.

“We shall lose the trail in the light,” I heard him cry as he ran. “But quick! We may yet get there in time!”

That wild rush across the open field, with the dogs at our heels, leaping and barking, and the elderly Colonel behind us running as though for his life, shall I ever forget it? Though I had only vague ideas of the meaning of it all, I put my best foot forward, and, being the youngest of the three, I reached the house an easy first. I drew up, panting, and turned to wait for the others. But, as I turned, something moving a little distance away caught my eye, and in that moment I swear I experienced the most overwhelming and singular shock of surprise and terror I have ever known, or can conceive as possible.

For the front door was open, and the waist of the house being narrow, I could see through the hall into the dining-room beyond, and so out on to the back lawn, and there I saw no less a sight than the figure of Miss Wragge — running. Even at that distance it was plain that she had seen me, and was coming fast towards me, running with the frantic gait of a terror-stricken woman. She had recovered the use of her legs.

Her face was a livid grey, as of death itself, but the general expression was one of laughter, for her mouth was gaping, and her eyes, always bright shone with the light of a wild merriment that seemed the merriment of a child, yet was singularly ghastly. And that very second, as she fled past me into her brother's arms behind, I smelt again most unmistakably the odour of burning, and to this day the smell of smoke and fire can come very near to turning me sick with the memory of what I had seen.

Fast on her heels, too, came the terrified attendant, more mistress of herself, and able to speak — which the old lady could not do — but with a face almost, if not quite, as fearful.

"We were down by the bushes in the sun," — she gasped and screamed in reply to Colonel Wragge's distracted questionings,— "I was wheeling the chair as usual when she shrieked and leaped — I don't know exactly — I was too frightened to see — Oh, my God! she jumped clean out of the chair — *and ran!* There was a blast of hot air from the wood, and she hid her face and jumped. She didn't make a sound — she didn't cry out, or make a sound. She just ran."

But the nightmare horror of it all reached the breaking point a few minutes later, and while I was still standing in the hall temporarily bereft of speech and movement; for while the doctor, the Colonel and the attendant were half-way up the staircase, helping the fainting woman to the privacy of her room, and all in a confused group of dark figures, there sounded a voice behind me, and I turned to see the butler, his face dripping with perspiration, his eyes starting out of his head.

"The laundry's on fire!" he cried; "the laundry building's a-caught!"

I remember his odd expression "a-caught," and wanting to laugh, but finding my face rigid and inflexible.

"The devil's about again, s'help me Gawd!" he cried, in a voice thin with terror, running about in circles.

And then the group on the stairs scattered as at the sound of a shot, and the Colonel and Dr. Silence came down three steps at a time, leaving the afflicted Miss Wragge to the care of her single attendant.

We were out across the front lawn in a moment and round the corner of the house, the Colonel leading, Silence and I at his heels, and the portly butler puffing some distance in the rear, getting more and more mixed in his addresses to God and the devil; and the moment we passed the stables and came into view of the laundry building, we saw a wicked-looking volume of smoke pouring out of the narrow windows, and the frightened women-servants and grooms running hither and thither, calling aloud as they ran.

The arrival of the master restored order instantly, and this retired soldier, poor thinker perhaps, but capable man of action, had the matter in hand from the start. He issued orders like a martinet, and, almost before I could realise it, there were streaming buckets on the scene and a line of men and women formed between the building and the stable pump.

“Inside,” I heard John Silence cry, and the Colonel followed him through the door, while I was just quick enough at their heels to hear him add, “the smoke’s the worst part of it. There’s no fire yet, I think.”

And, true enough, there was no fire. The interior was thick with smoke, but it speedily cleared and not a single bucket was used upon the floor or walls. The air was stifling, the heat fearful.

“There’s precious little to burn in here; it’s all stone,” the Colonel exclaimed, coughing. But the doctor was pointing to the wooden covers of the great cauldron in which the clothes were washed, and we saw that these were smouldering and charred. And when we sprinkled half a bucket of water on them the surrounding bricks hissed and fizzed and sent up clouds of steam. Through the open door and windows this passed out with the rest of the smoke, and we three stood there on the brick floor staring at the spot and wondering, each in our own fashion, how in the name of natural law the place could have caught fire or smoked at all. And each was silent — myself from sheer incapacity and befuddlement, the Colonel from the quiet pluck that faces all things yet speaks little, and John Silence from the intense mental grappling with this latest manifestation of a profound problem that called for concentration of thought rather than for any words.

There was really nothing to say. The facts were indisputable.

Colonel Wragge was the first to utter.

“My sister,” he said briefly, and moved off. In the yard I heard him sending the frightened servants about their business in an excellently matter-of-fact voice, scolding some one roundly for making such a big fire and letting the flues get over-heated, and paying no heed to the stammering reply that no fire had been lit there for several days. Then he dispatched a groom on horseback for the local doctor.

Then Dr. Silence turned and looked at me. The absolute control he possessed, not only over the outward expression of emotion by gesture, change of colour, light in the eyes, and so forth, but also, as I well knew, over its very birth in his heart, the mask-like face of the dead he could assume at will, made it extremely difficult to know at any given moment what was at work in his inner consciousness. But now, when he turned and looked at me, there was no sphinx-expression there, but rather the keen, triumphant face of a man who had solved a dangerous and complicated problem, and saw his way to a clean victory.

"*Now* do you guess?" he asked quietly, as though it were the simplest matter in the world, and ignorance were impossible.

I could only stare stupidly and remain silent. He glanced down at the charred cauldron-lids, and traced a figure in the air with his finger. But I was too excited, or too mortified, or still too dazed, perhaps, to see what it was he outlined, or what it was he meant to convey. I could only go on staring and shaking my puzzled head.

"A fire-elemental," he cried, "a fire-elemental of the most powerful and malignant kind — —"

"A what?" thundered the voice of Colonel Wragge behind us, having returned suddenly and overheard.

"It's a fire-elemental," repeated Dr. Silence more calmly, but with a note of triumph in his voice he could not keep out, "and a fire-elemental enraged."

The light began to dawn in my mind at last. But the Colonel — who had never heard the term before, and was besides feeling considerably worked-up for a plain man with all this mystery he knew not how to grapple with — the Colonel stood, with the most dumfoundered look ever seen on a human countenance, and continued to roar, and stammer, and stare.

"And why," he began, savage with the desire to find something visible he could fight— "why, in the name of all the blazes —— ?" and then stopped as John Silence moved up and took his arm.

“There, my dear Colonel Wragge,” he said gently, “you touch the heart of the whole thing. You ask ‘Why.’ That is precisely our problem.” He held the soldier’s eyes firmly with his own. “And that, too, I think, we shall soon know. Come and let us talk over a plan of action — that room with the double doors, perhaps.”

The word “action” calmed him a little, and he led the way, without further speech, back into the house, and down the long stone passage to the room where we had heard his stories on the night of our arrival. I understood from the doctor’s glance that my presence would not make the interview easier for our host, and I went upstairs to my own room — shaking.

But in the solitude of my room the vivid memories of the last hour revived so mercilessly that I began to feel I should never in my whole life lose the dreadful picture of Miss Wragge running — that dreadful human climax after all the non-human mystery in the wood — and I was not sorry when a servant knocked at my door and said that Colonel Wragge would be glad if I would join them in the little smoking-room.

“I think it is better you should be present,” was all Colonel Wragge said as I entered the room. I took the chair with my back to the window. There was still an hour before lunch, though I imagine that the usual divisions of the day hardly found a place in the thoughts of any one of us.

The atmosphere of the room was what I might call electric. The Colonel was positively bristling; he stood with his back to the fire, fingering an unlit black cigar, his face flushed, his being obviously roused and ready for action. He hated this mystery. It was poisonous to his nature, and he longed to meet something face to face — something he could gauge and fight. Dr. Silence, I noticed at once, was sitting before the map of the estate which was spread upon a table. I knew by his expression the state of his mind. He was in the thick of it all, knew it, delighted in it, and was working at high pressure. He recognised my presence with a lifted eyelid, and the flash of the eye, contrasted with his stillness and composure, told me volumes.

“I was about to explain to our host briefly what seems to me afoot in all this business,” he said without looking up, “when he asked that you should join us so that we can all work together.” And, while signifying my assent, I caught myself wondering what quality it was in the calm speech of this undemonstrative man that was so full of power, so charged with the strange, virile personality behind it, and that seemed to inspire us with his own confidence as by a process of radiation.

“Mr. Hubbard,” he went on gravely, turning to the soldier, “knows something of my methods, and in more than one — er — interesting situation has proved of assistance. What we want now” — and here he suddenly got up and took his place on the mat beside the Colonel, and looked hard at him— “is men who have self-control, who are sure of themselves, whose minds at the critical moment will emit positive forces, instead of the wavering and uncertain currents due to negative feelings — due, for instance, to fear.”

He looked at us each in turn. Colonel Wragge moved his feet farther apart, and squared his shoulders; and I felt guilty but said nothing, conscious that my latent store of courage was being deliberately hauled to the front. He was winding me up like a clock.

“So that, in what is yet to come,” continued our leader, “each of us will contribute his share of power, and ensure success for my plan.”

“I’m not afraid of anything I can *see*,” said the Colonel bluntly.

“I’m ready,” I heard myself say, as it were automatically, “for anything,” and then added, feeling the declaration was lamely insufficient, “and everything.”

Dr. Silence left the mat and began walking to and fro about the room, both hands plunged deep into the pockets of his shooting-jacket. Tremendous vitality streamed from him. I never took my eyes off the small, moving figure; small, yes, — and yet somehow making me think of a giant plotting the destruction of worlds. And his manner was gentle, as always, soothing almost, and his words uttered quietly without emphasis or emotion. Most of what he said was addressed, though not too obviously, to the Colonel.

“The violence of this sudden attack,” he said softly, pacing to and fro beneath the bookcase at the end of the room, “is due, of course, partly to the fact that to-night the moon is at the full” — here he glanced at me for a moment— “and partly to the fact that we have all been so deliberately concentrating upon the matter. Our thinking, our investigation, has stirred it into unusual activity. I mean that the intelligent force behind these manifestations has realised that some one is busied about its destruction. And it is now on the defensive: more, it is aggressive."

"But 'it' — what is 'it'?" began the soldier, fuming. "What, in the name of all that's dreadful, *is* a fire-elemental?"

"I cannot give you at this moment," replied Dr. Silence, turning to him, but undisturbed by the interruption, "a lecture on the nature and history of magic, but can only say that an Elemental is the active force behind the elements, — whether earth, air, water, *or fire*, — it is impersonal in its essential nature, but can be focused, personified, ensouled, so to say, by those who know how — by magicians, if you will — for certain purposes of their own, much in the same way that steam and electricity can be harnessed by the practical man of this century.

"Alone, these blind elemental energies can accomplish little, but governed and directed by the trained will of a powerful manipulator they may become potent activities for good or evil. They are the basis of all magic, and it is the motive behind them that constitutes the magic 'black' or 'white'; they can be the vehicles of curses or of blessings, for a curse is nothing more than the thought of a violent will perpetuated. And in such cases — cases like this — the conscious, directing will of the mind that is using the elemental stands always behind the phenomena — —"

"You think that my brother —— !" broke in the Colonel, aghast.

"Has nothing whatever to do with it — directly. The fire-elemental that has here been tormenting you and your household was sent upon its mission long before you, or your family, or your ancestors, or even the nation you belong to — unless I am much mistaken — was even in existence. We will come to that a little later; after the experiment I propose to make we shall be more positive. At present I can only say we have to deal now, not only with the phenomenon of Attacking Fire merely, but with the vindictive and enraged intelligence that is directing it from behind the scenes — vindictive and enraged," — he repeated the words.

"That explains — —" began Colonel Wragge, seeking furiously for words he could not find quickly enough.

"Much," said John Silence, with a gesture to restrain him.

He stopped a moment in the middle of his walk, and a deep silence came down over the little room. Through the windows the sunlight seemed less bright, the long line of dark hills less friendly, making me think of a vast wave towering to heaven and about to break and overwhelm us. Something formidable had crept into the world about us. For, undoubtedly, there was a disquieting thought, holding terror as well as awe, in the picture his words conjured up: the conception of a human will reaching its deathless hand, spiteful and destructive, down through the ages, to strike the living and afflict the innocent.

"But what *is* its object?" burst out the soldier, unable to restrain himself longer in the silence. "Why does it come from that plantation? And why should it attack us, or any one in particular?" Questions began to pour from him in a stream.

"All in good time," the doctor answered quietly, having let him run on for several minutes. "But I must first discover positively what, or who, it is that directs this particular fire-elemental. And, to do that, we must first" — he spoke with slow deliberation— "seek to capture — to confine by visibility — to limit its sphere in a concrete form."

"Good heavens almighty!" exclaimed the soldier, mixing his words in his unfeigned surprise.

"Quite so," pursued the other calmly; "for in so doing I think we can release it from the purpose that binds it, restore it to its normal condition of latent fire, and also" — he lowered his voice perceptibly— "also discover the face and form of the Being that ensouls it."

"The man behind the gun!" cried the Colonel, beginning to understand something, and leaning forward so as not to miss a single syllable.

"I mean that in the last resort, before it returns to the womb of potential fire, it will probably assume the face and figure of its Director, of the man of magical knowledge who originally bound it with his incantations and sent it forth upon its mission of centuries."

The soldier sat down and gasped openly in his face, breathing hard; but it was a very subdued voice that framed the question.

"And how do you propose to make it visible? How capture and confine it? What d'ye mean, Dr. John Silence?"

"By furnishing it with the materials for a form. By the process of materialisation simply. Once limited by dimensions, it will become slow, heavy, visible. We can then dissipate it. Invisible fire, you see, is dangerous and incalculable; locked up in a form we can perhaps manage it. We must betray it — to its death."

"And this material?" we asked in the same breath, although I think I had already guessed.

"Not pleasant, but effective," came the quiet reply; "the exhalations of freshly-spilled blood."

"Not human blood!" cried Colonel Wragge, starting up from his chair with a voice like an explosion. I thought his eyes would start from their sockets.

The face of Dr. Silence relaxed in spite of himself, and his spontaneous little laugh brought a welcome though momentary relief.

"The days of human sacrifice, I hope, will never come again," he explained. "Animal blood will answer the purpose, and we can make the experiment as pleasant as possible. Only, the blood must be freshly spilled and strong with the vital emanations that attract this peculiar class of elemental creature. Perhaps — perhaps if some pig on the estate is ready for the market — —"

He turned to hide a smile; but the passing touch of comedy found no echo in the mind of our host, who did not understand how to change quickly from one emotion to another. Clearly he was debating many things laboriously in his honest brain. But, in the end, the earnestness and scientific disinterestedness of the doctor, whose influence over him was already very great, won the day, and he presently looked up more calmly, and observed shortly that he thought perhaps the matter could be arranged.

"There are other and pleasanter methods," Dr. Silence went on to explain, "but they require time and preparation, and things have gone much too far, in my opinion, to admit of delay. And the process need cause you no distress: we sit round the bowl and await results. Nothing more. The emanations of blood — which, as Levi says, is the first incarnation of the universal fluid — furnish the materials out of which the creatures of discarnate life, spirits if you prefer, can fashion themselves a temporary appearance. The process is old, and lies at the root of all blood sacrifice. It was known to the priests of Baal, and it is known to the modern ecstasy dancers who cut themselves to produce objective phantoms who dance with them. And the least gifted clairvoyant could tell you that the forms to be seen in the vicinity of slaughterhouses, or hovering above the deserted battlefield, are — well, simply beyond all description. I do not mean," he added, noticing the uneasy fidgeting of his host, "that anything in our laundry-experiment need appear to terrify us, for this case seems a comparatively simple one, and it is only the vindictive character of the intelligence directing this fire-elemental that causes anxiety and makes for personal danger."

"It is curious," said the Colonel, with a sudden rush of words, drawing a deep breath, and as though speaking of things distasteful to him, "that during my years among the Hill Tribes of Northern India I came across — personally came across — instances of the sacrifices of blood to certain deities being stopped suddenly, and all manner of disasters happening until they were resumed. Fires broke out in the huts, and even on the clothes, of the natives — and — and I admit I have read, in the course of my studies," — he made a gesture towards his books and heavily laden table,— "of the Yezidis of Syria evoking phantoms by means of cutting their bodies with knives during their whirling dances — enormous globes of fire which turned into monstrous and terrible forms — and I remember an account somewhere, too, how the emaciated forms and pallid countenances of the spectres, that appeared to the Emperor Julian, claimed to be the true Immortals, and told him to renew the sacrifices of blood 'for the fumes of which, since the establishment of Christianity, they had been pining' — that these were in reality the phantoms evoked by the rites of blood."

Both Dr. Silence and myself listened in amazement, for this sudden speech was so unexpected, and betrayed so much more knowledge than we had either of us suspected in the old soldier.

"Then perhaps you have read, too," said the doctor, "how the Cosmic Deities of savage races, elemental in their nature, have been kept alive through many ages by these blood rites?"

"No," he answered; "that is new to me."

"In any case," Dr. Silence added, "I am glad you are not wholly unfamiliar with the subject, for you will now bring more sympathy, and therefore more help, to our experiment. For, of course, in this case, we only want the blood to tempt the creature from its lair and enclose it in a form — —”

“I quite understand. And I only hesitated just now,” he went on, his words coming much more slowly, as though he felt he had already said too much, “because I wished to be quite sure it was no mere curiosity, but an actual sense of necessity that dictated this horrible experiment.”

“It is your safety, and that of your household, and of your sister, that is at stake,” replied the doctor. “Once I have *seen*, I hope to discover whence this elemental comes, and what its real purpose is.”

Colonel Wragge signified his assent with a bow.

“And the moon will help us,” the other said, “for it will be full in the early hours of the morning, and this kind of elemental-being is always most active at the period of full moon. Hence, you see, the clue furnished by your diary.”

So it was finally settled. Colonel Wragge would provide the materials for the experiment, and we were to meet at midnight. How he would contrive at that hour — but that was his business. I only know we both realised that he would keep his word, and whether a pig died at midnight, or at noon, was after all perhaps only a question of the sleep and personal comfort of the executioner.

“To-night, then, in the laundry,” said Dr. Silence finally, to clinch the plan; “we three alone — and at midnight, when the household is asleep and we shall be free from disturbance.”

He exchanged significant glances with our host, who, at that moment, was called away by the announcement that the family doctor had arrived, and was ready to see him in his sister’s room.

For the remainder of the afternoon John Silence disappeared. I had my suspicions that he made a secret visit to the plantation and also to the laundry building; but, in any case, we saw nothing of him, and he kept strictly to himself. He was preparing for the night, I felt sure, but the nature of his preparations I could only guess. There was movement in his room, I heard, and an odour like incense hung about the door, and knowing that he regarded rites as the vehicles of energies, my guesses were probably not far wrong.

Colonel Wragge, too, remained absent the greater part of the afternoon, and, deeply afflicted, had scarcely left his sister's bedside, but in response to my inquiry when we met for a moment at tea-time, he told me that although she had moments of attempted speech, her talk was quite incoherent and hysterical, and she was still quite unable to explain the nature of what she had seen. The doctor, he said, feared she had recovered the use of her limbs, only to lose that of her memory, and perhaps even of her mind.

"Then the recovery of her legs, I trust, may be permanent, at any rate," I ventured, finding it difficult to know what sympathy to offer. And he replied with a curious short laugh, "Oh yes; about that there can be no doubt whatever."

And it was due merely to the chance of my overhearing a fragment of conversation — unwillingly, of course — that a little further light was thrown upon the state in which the old lady actually lay. For, as I came out of my room, it happened that Colonel Wragge and the doctor were going downstairs together, and their words floated up to my ears before I could make my presence known by so much as a cough.

"Then you must find a way," the doctor was saying with decision; "for I cannot insist too strongly upon that — and at all costs she must be kept quiet. These attempts to go out must be prevented — if necessary, by force. This desire to visit some wood or other she keeps talking about is, of course, hysterical in nature. It cannot be permitted for a moment."

"It shall not be permitted," I heard the soldier reply, as they reached the hall below.

"It has impressed her mind for some reason — —" the doctor went on, by way evidently of soothing explanation, and then the distance made it impossible for me to hear more.

At dinner Dr. Silence was still absent, on the public plea of a headache, and though food was sent to his room, I am inclined to believe he did not touch it, but spent the entire time fasting.

We retired early, desiring that the household should do likewise, and I must confess that at ten o'clock when I bid my host a temporary good-night, and sought my room to make what mental preparation I could, I realised in no very pleasant fashion that it was a singular and formidable assignation, this midnight meeting in the laundry building, and that there were moments in every adventure of life when a wise man, and one who knew his own limitations, owed it to his dignity to withdraw discreetly. And, but for the character of our leader, I probably should have then and there offered the best excuse I could think of, and have allowed myself quietly to fall asleep and wait for an exciting story in the morning of what had happened. But with a man like John Silence, such a lapse was out of the question, and I sat before my fire counting the minutes and doing everything I could think of to fortify my resolution and fasten my will at the point where I could be reasonably sure that my self-control would hold against all attacks of men, devils, or elementals.

III

At a quarter before midnight, clad in a heavy ulster, and with slippered feet, I crept cautiously from my room and stole down the passage to the top of the stairs. Outside the doctor's door I waited a moment to listen. All was still; the house in utter darkness; no gleam of light beneath any door; only, down the length of the corridor, from the direction of the sick-room, came faint sounds of laughter and incoherent talk that were not things to reassure a mind already half a-tremble, and I made haste to reach the hall and let myself out through the front door into the night.

The air was keen and frosty, perfumed with night smells, and exquisitely fresh; all the million candles of the sky were alight, and a faint breeze rose and fell with far-away sighings in the tops of the pine trees. My blood leaped for a moment in the spaciousness of the night, for the splendid stars brought courage; but the next instant, as I turned the corner of the house, moving stealthily down the gravel drive, my spirits sank again ominously. For, yonder, over the funereal plumes of the Twelve Acre Plantation, I saw the huge and yellow face of the full moon just rising in the east, staring down like some vast Being come to watch upon the progress of our doom. Seen through the distorting vapours of the earth's atmosphere, her face looked weirdly unfamiliar, her usual expression of benignant vacancy somehow a-twist. I slipped along by the shadows of the wall, keeping my eyes upon the ground.

The laundry-house, as already described, stood detached from the other offices, with laurel shrubberies crowding thickly behind it, and the kitchen-garden so close on the other side that the strong smells of soil and growing things came across almost heavily. The shadows of the haunted plantation, hugely lengthened by the rising moon behind them, reached to the very walls and covered the stone tiles of the roof with a dark pall. So keenly were my senses alert at this moment that I believe I could fill a chapter with the endless small details of the impression I received — shadows, odour, shapes, sounds — in the space of the few seconds I stood and waited before the closed wooden door.

Then I became aware of some one moving towards me through the moonlight, and the figure of John Silence, without overcoat and bareheaded, came quickly and without noise to join me. His eyes, I saw at once, were wonderfully bright, and so marked was the shining pallor of his face that I could hardly tell when he passed from the moonlight into the shade.

He passed without a word, beckoning me to follow, and then pushed the door open, and went in.

The chill air of the place met us like that of an underground vault; and the brick floor and whitewashed walls, streaked with damp and smoke, threw back the cold in our faces. Directly opposite gaped the black throat of the huge open fireplace, the ashes of wood fires still piled and scattered about the hearth, and on either side of the projecting chimney-column were the deep recesses holding the big twin cauldrons for boiling clothes. Upon the lids of these cauldrons stood the two little oil lamps, shaded red, which gave all the light there was, and immediately in front of the fireplace there was a small circular table with three chairs set about it. Overhead, the narrow slit windows, high up the walls, pointed to a dim network of wooden rafters half lost among the shadows, and then came the dark vault of the roof. Cheerless and unalluring, for all the red light, it certainly was, reminding me of some unused conventicle, bare of pews or pulpit, ugly and severe, and I was forcibly struck by the contrast between the normal uses to which the place was ordinarily put, and the strange and mediæval purpose which had brought us under its roof to-night.

Possibly an involuntary shudder ran over me, for my companion turned with a confident look to reassure me, and he was so completely master of himself that I at once absorbed from his abundance, and felt the chinks of my failing courage beginning to close up. To meet his eye in the presence of danger was like finding a mental railing that guided and supported thought along the giddy edges of alarm.

“I am quite ready,” I whispered, turning to listen for approaching footsteps.

He nodded, still keeping his eyes on mine. Our whispers sounded hollow as they echoed overhead among the rafters.

“I’m glad you are here,” he said. “Not all would have the courage. Keep your thoughts controlled, and imagine the protective shell round you — round your *inner* being.”

“I’m all right,” I repeated, cursing my chattering teeth.

He took my hand and shook it, and the contact seemed to shake into me something of his supreme confidence. The eyes and hands of a strong man can touch the soul. I think he guessed my thought, for a passing smile flashed about the corners of his mouth.

“You will feel more comfortable,” he said, in a low tone, “when the chain is complete. The Colonel we can count on, of course. Remember, though,” he added warningly, “he may perhaps become controlled — possessed — when the thing comes, because he won’t know how to resist. And to explain the business to such a man —— !” He shrugged his shoulders expressively. “But it will only be temporary, and I will see that no harm comes to him.”

He glanced round at the arrangements with approval.

“Red light,” he said, indicating the shaded lamps, “has the lowest rate of vibration. Materialisations are dissipated by strong light — won’t form, or hold together — in rapid vibrations.”

I was not sure that I approved altogether of this dim light, for in complete darkness there is something protective — the knowledge that one cannot be seen, probably — which a half-light destroys, but I remembered the warning to keep my thoughts steady, and forbore to give them expression.

There was a step outside, and the figure of Colonel Wragge stood in the doorway. Though entering on tiptoe, he made considerable noise and clatter, for his free movements were impeded by the burden he carried, and we saw a large yellowish bowl held out at arms’ length from his body, the mouth covered with a white cloth. His face, I noted, was rigidly composed. He, too, was master of himself. And, as I thought of this old soldier moving through the long series of alarms, worn with watching and wearied with assault, unenlightened yet undismayed, even down to the dreadful shock of his sister's terror, and still showing the dogged pluck that persists in the face of defeat, I understood what Dr. Silence meant when he described him as a man "to be counted on."

I think there was nothing beyond this rigidity of his stern features, and a certain greyness of the complexion, to betray the turmoil of the emotions that was doubtless going on within; and the quality of these two men, each in his own way, so keyed me up that, by the time the door was shut and we had exchanged silent greetings, all the latent courage I possessed was well to the fore, and I felt as sure of myself as I knew I ever could feel.

Colonel Wragge set the bowl carefully in the centre of the table.

"Midnight," he said shortly, glancing at his watch, and we all three moved to our chairs.

There, in the middle of that cold and silent place, we sat, with the vile bowl before us, and a thin, hardly perceptible steam rising through the damp air from the surface of the white cloth and disappearing upwards the moment it passed beyond the zone of red light and entered the deep shadows thrown forward by the projecting wall of chimney.

The doctor had indicated our respective places, and I found myself seated with my back to the door and opposite the black hearth. The Colonel was on my left, and Dr. Silence on my right, both half facing me, the latter more in shadow than the former. We thus divided the little table into even sections, and sitting back in our chairs we awaited events in silence.

For something like an hour I do not think there was even the faintest sound within those four walls and under the canopy of that vaulted roof. Our slippers made no scratching on the gritty floor, and our breathing was suppressed almost to nothing; even the rustle of our clothes as we shifted from time to time upon our seats was inaudible. Silence smothered us absolutely — the silence of night, of listening, the silence of a haunted expectancy. The very gurgling of the lamps was too soft to be heard, and if light itself had sound, I do not think we should have noticed the silvery tread of the moonlight as it entered the high narrow windows and threw upon the floor the slender traces of its pallid footsteps.

Colonel Wragge and the doctor, and myself too for that matter, sat thus like figures of stone, without speech and without gesture. My eyes passed in ceaseless journeys from the bowl to their faces, and from their faces to the bowl. They might have been masks, however, for all the signs of life they gave; and the light steaming from the horrid contents beneath the white cloth had long ceased to be visible.

Then presently, as the moon rose higher, the wind rose with it. It sighed, like the lightest of passing wings, over the roof; it crept most softly round the walls; it made the brick floor like ice beneath our feet. With it I saw mentally the desolate moorland flowing like a sea about the old house, the treeless expanse of lonely hills, the nearer copses, sombre, and mysterious in the night. *The* plantation, too, in particular I saw, and imagined I heard the mournful whisperings that must now be a-stirring among its tree-tops as the breeze played down between the twisted stems. In the depth of the room behind us the shafts of moonlight met and crossed in a growing network.

It was after an hour of this wearing and unbroken attention, and I should judge about one o'clock in the morning, when the baying of the dogs in the stable-yard first began, and I saw John Silence move suddenly in his chair and sit up in an attitude of attention. Every force in my being instantly leaped into the keenest vigilance. Colonel Wragge moved too, though slowly, and without raising his eyes from the table before him.

The doctor stretched his arm out and took the white cloth from the bowl.

It was perhaps imagination that persuaded me the red glare of the lamps grew fainter and the air over the table before us thickened. I had been expecting something for so long that the movement of my companions, and the lifting of the cloth, may easily have caused the momentary delusion that something hovered in the air before my face, touching the skin of my cheeks with a silken run. But it was certainly not a delusion that the Colonel looked up at the same moment and glanced over his shoulder, as though his eyes followed the movements of something to and fro about the room, and that he then buttoned his overcoat more tightly about him and his eyes sought my own face first, and then the doctor's. And it was no delusion that his face seemed somehow to have turned dark, become spread as it were with a shadowy blackness. I saw his lips tighten and his expression grow hard and stern, and it came to me then with a rush that, of course, this man had told us but a part of the experiences he had been through in the house, and that there was much more he had never been able to bring himself to reveal at all. I felt sure of it. The way he turned and stared about him betrayed a familiarity with other things than those he had described to us. It was not merely a sight of fire he looked for; it was a sight of something alive, intelligent, something able to evade his searching; it was *a person*. It was the watch for the ancient Being who sought to obsess him.

And the way in which Dr. Silence answered his look — though it was only by a glance of subtlest sympathy — confirmed my impression.

“We may be ready now,” I heard him say in a whisper, and I understood that his words were intended as a steadying warning, and braced myself mentally to the utmost of my power.

Yet long before Colonel Wragge had turned to stare about the room, and long before the doctor had confirmed my impression that things were at last beginning to stir, I had become aware in most singular fashion that the place held more than our three selves. With the rising of the wind this increase to our numbers had first taken place. The baying of the hounds almost seemed to have signalled it. I cannot say how it may be possible to realise that an empty place has suddenly become — not empty, when the new arrival is nothing that appeals to any one of the senses; for this recognition of an “invisible,” as of the change in the balance of personal forces in a human group, is indefinable and beyond proof. Yet it is unmistakable. And I knew perfectly well at what given moment the atmosphere within these four walls became charged with the presence of other living beings besides ourselves. And, on reflection, I am convinced that both my companions knew it too.

“Watch the light,” said the doctor under his breath, and, then I knew too that it was no fancy of my own that had turned the air darker, and the way he turned to examine the face of our host sent an electric thrill of wonder and expectancy shivering along every nerve in my body.

Yet it was no kind of terror that I experienced, but rather a sort of mental dizziness, and a sensation as of being suspended in some remote and dreadful altitude where things might happen, indeed were about to happen, that had never before happened within the ken of man. Horror may have formed an ingredient, but it was not chiefly horror, and in no sense ghostly horror.

Uncommon thoughts kept beating on my brain like tiny hammers, soft yet persistent, seeking admission; their unbidden tide began to wash along the far fringes of my mind, the currents of unwonted sensations to rise over the remote frontiers of my consciousness. I was aware of thoughts, and the fantasies of thoughts, that I never knew before existed. Portions of my being stirred that had never stirred before, and things ancient and inexplicable rose to the surface and beckoned me to follow. I felt as though I were about to fly off, at some immense tangent, into an outer space hitherto unknown even in dreams. And so singular was the result produced upon me that I was uncommonly glad to anchor my mind, as well as my eyes, upon the masterful personality of the doctor at my side, for there, I realised, I could draw always upon the forces of sanity and safety.

With a vigorous effort of will I returned to the scene before me, and tried to focus my attention, with steadier thoughts, upon the table, and upon the silent figures seated round it. And then I saw that certain changes had come about in the place where we sat.

The patches of moonlight on the floor, I noted, had become curiously shaded; the faces of my companions opposite were not so clearly visible as before; and the forehead and cheeks of Colonel Wragge were glistening with perspiration. I realised further, that an extraordinary change had come about in the temperature of the atmosphere. The increased warmth had a painful effect, not alone on Colonel Wragge, but upon all of us. It was oppressive and unnatural. We gasped figuratively as well as actually.

“You are the first to feel it,” said Dr. Silence in low tones, looking across at him. “You are in more intimate touch, of course — —”

The Colonel was trembling, and appeared to be in considerable distress. His knees shook, so that the shuffling of his slippered feet became audible. He inclined his head to show that he had heard, but made no other reply. I think, even then, he was sore put to it to keep himself in hand. I knew what he was struggling against. As Dr. Silence had warned me, he was about to be obsessed, and was savagely, though vainly, resisting.

But, meanwhile, a curious and whirling sense of exhilaration began to come over me. The increasing heat was delightful, bringing a sensation of intense activity, of thoughts pouring through the mind at high speed, of vivid pictures in the brain, of fierce desires and lightning energies alive in every part of the body. I was conscious of no physical distress, such as the Colonel felt, but only of a vague feeling that it might all grow suddenly too intense — that I might be consumed — that my personality as well as my body, might become resolved into the flame of pure spirit. I began to live at a speed too intense to last. It was as if a thousand ecstasies besieged me ——

“Steady!” whispered the voice of John Silence in my ear, and I looked up with a start to see that the Colonel had risen from his chair. The doctor rose too. I followed suit, and for the first time saw down into the bowl. To my amazement and horror I saw that the contents were troubled. The blood was astir with movement.

The rest of the experiment was witnessed by us standing. It came, too, with a curious suddenness. There was no more dreaming, for me at any rate.

I shall never forget the figure of Colonel Wragge standing there beside me, upright and unshaken, squarely planted on his feet, looking about him, puzzled beyond belief, yet full of a fighting anger. Framed by the white walls, the red glow of the lamps upon his streaming cheeks, his eyes glowing against the deathly pallor of his skin, breathing hard and making convulsive efforts of hands and body to keep himself under control, his whole being roused to the point of savage fighting, yet with nothing visible to get at anywhere — he stood there, immovable against odds. And the strange contrast of the pale skin and the burning face I had never seen before, or wish to seen again.

But what has left an even sharper impression on my memory was the blackness that then began crawling over his face, obliterating the features, concealing their human outline, and hiding him inch by inch from view. This was my first realisation that the process of materialisation was at work. His visage became shrouded. I moved from one side to the other to keep him in view, and it was only then I understood that, properly speaking, the blackness was not upon the countenance of Colonel Wragge, but that something had inserted itself between me and him, thus screening his face with the effect of a dark veil. Something that apparently rose through the floor was passing slowly into the air above the table and above the bowl. The blood in the bowl, moreover, was considerably less than before.

And, with this change in the air before us, there came at the same time a further change, I thought, in the face of the soldier. One-half was turned towards the red lamps, while the other caught the pale illumination of the moonlight falling aslant from the high windows, so that it was difficult to estimate this change with accuracy of detail. But it seemed to me that, while the features — eyes, nose, mouth — remained the same, the life informing them had undergone some profound transformation. The signature of a new power had crept into the face and left its traces there — an expression dark, and in some unexplained way, terrible.

Then suddenly he opened his mouth and spoke, and the sound of this changed voice, deep and musical though it was, made me cold and set my heart beating with uncomfortable rapidity. The Being, as he had dreaded, was already in control of his brain, using his mouth.

“I see a blackness like the blackness of Egypt before my face,” said the tones of this unknown voice that seemed half his own and half another’s. “And out of this darkness they come, they come.”

I gave a dreadful start. The doctor turned to look at me for an instant, and then turned to centre his attention upon the figure of our host, and I understood in some intuitive fashion that he was there to watch over the strangest contest man ever saw — to watch over and, if necessary, to protect.

“He is being controlled — possessed,” he whispered to me through the shadows. His face wore a wonderful expression, half triumph, half admiration.

Even as Colonel Wragge spoke, it seemed to me that this visible darkness began to increase, pouring up thickly out of the ground by the hearth, rising up in sheets and veils, shrouding our eyes and faces. It stole up from below — an awful blackness that seemed to drink in all the radiations of light in the building, leaving nothing but the ghost of a radiance in their place. Then, out of this rising sea of shadows, issued a pale and spectral light that gradually spread itself about us, and from the heart of this light I saw the shapes of fire crowd and gather. And these were not human shapes, or the shapes of anything I recognised as alive in the world, but outlines of fire that traced globes, triangles, crosses, and the luminous bodies of various geometrical figures. They grew bright, faded, and then grew bright again with an effect almost of pulsation. They passed swiftly to and fro through the air, rising and falling, and particularly in the immediate neighbourhood of the Colonel, often gathering about his head and shoulders, and even appearing to settle upon him like giant insects of flame. They were accompanied, moreover, by a faint sound of hissing — the same sound we had heard that afternoon in the plantation.

"The fire-elementals that precede their master," the doctor said in an undertone. "Be ready."

And while this weird display of the shapes of fire alternately flashed and faded, and the hissing echoed faintly among the dim rafters overhead, we heard the awful voice issue at intervals from the lips of the afflicted soldier. It was a voice of power, splendid in some way I cannot describe, and with a certain sense of majesty in its cadences, and, as I listened to it with quickly-beating heart, I could fancy it was some ancient voice of Time itself, echoing down immense corridors of stone, from the depths of vast temples, from the very heart of mountain tombs.

"I have seen my divine Father, Osiris," thundered the great tones. "I have scattered the gloom of the night. I have burst through the earth, and am one with the starry Deities!"

Something grand came into the soldier's face. He was staring fixedly before him, as though seeing nothing.

"Watch," whispered Dr. Silence in my ear, and his whisper seemed to come from very far away.

Again the mouth opened and the awesome voice issued forth.

"Thoth," it boomed, "has loosened the bandages of Set which fettered my mouth. I have taken my place in the great winds of heaven."

I heard the little wind of night, with its mournful voice of ages, sighing round the walls and over the roof.

"Listen!" came from the doctor at my side, and the thunder of the voice continued —

"I have hidden myself with you, O ye stars that never diminish. I remember my name — in — the — House — of — Fire!"

The voice ceased and the sound died away. Something about the face and figure of Colonel Wragge relaxed, I thought. The terrible look passed from his face. The Being that obsessed him was gone.

"The great Ritual," said Dr. Silence aside to me, very low, "the Book of the Dead. Now it's leaving him. Soon the blood will fashion it a body."

Colonel Wragge, who had stood absolutely motionless all this time, suddenly swayed, so that I thought he was going to fall, — and, but for the quick support of the doctor's arm, he probably would have fallen, for he staggered as in the beginning of collapse.

"I am drunk with the wine of Osiris," he cried, — and it was half with his own voice this time— "but Horus, the Eternal Watcher, is about my path — for — safety." The voice dwindled and failed, dying away into something almost like a cry of distress.

"Now, watch closely," said Dr. Silence, speaking loud, "for after the cry will come the Fire!"

I began to tremble involuntarily; an awful change had come without warning into the air; my legs grew weak as paper beneath my weight and I had to support myself by leaning on the table. Colonel Wragge, I saw, was also leaning forward with a kind of droop. The shapes of fire had vanished all, but his face was lit by the red lamps and the pale shifting moonlight rose behind him like mist.

We were both gazing at the bowl, now almost empty; the Colonel stooped so low I feared every minute he would lose his balance and drop into it; and the shadow, that had so long been in process of forming, now at length began to assume material outline in the air before us.

Then John Silence moved forward quickly. He took his place between us and the shadow. Erect, formidable, absolute master of the situation, I saw him stand there, his face calm and almost smiling, and fire in his eyes. His protective influence was astounding and incalculable. Even the abhorrent dread I felt at the sight of the creature growing into life and substance before us, lessened in some way so that I was able to keep my eyes fixed on the air above the bowl without too vivid a terror.

But as it took shape, rising out of nothing as it were, and growing momentarily more defined in outline, a period of utter and wonderful silence settled down upon the building and all it contained. A hush of ages, like the sudden centre of peace at the heart of the travelling cyclone, descended through the night, and out of this hush, as out of the emanations of the steaming blood, issued the form of the ancient being who had first sent the elemental of fire upon its mission. It grew and darkened and solidified before our eyes. It rose from just beyond the table so that the lower portions remained invisible, but I saw the outline limn itself upon the air, as though slowly revealed by the rising of a curtain. It apparently had not then quite concentrated to the normal proportions, but was spread out on all sides into space, huge, though rapidly condensing, for I saw the colossal shoulders, the neck, the lower portion of the dark jaws, the terrible mouth, and then the teeth and lips — and, as the veil seemed to lift further upon the tremendous face — I saw the nose and cheek bones. In another moment I should have looked straight into the eyes ——

But what Dr. Silence did at that moment was so unexpected, and took me so by surprise, that I have never yet properly understood its nature, and he has never yet seen fit to explain in detail to me. He uttered some sound that had a note of command in it — and, in so doing, stepped forward and intervened between me and the face. The figure, just nearing completeness, he therefore hid from my sight — and I have always thought purposely hid from my sight.

“The fire!” he cried out. “The fire! Beware!”

There was a sudden roar as of flame from the very mouth of the pit, and for the space of a single second all grew light as day. A blinding flash passed across my face, and there was heat for an instant that seemed to shrivel skin, and flesh, and bone. Then came steps, and I heard Colonel Wragge utter a great cry, wilder than any human cry I have ever known. The heat sucked all the breath out of my lungs with a rush, and the blaze of light, as it vanished, swept my vision with it into enveloping darkness.

When I recovered the use of my senses a few moments later I saw that Colonel Wragge with a face of death, its whiteness strangely stained, had moved closer to me. Dr. Silence stood beside him, an expression of triumph and success in his eyes. The next minute the soldier tried to clutch me with his hand. Then he reeled, staggered, and, unable to save himself, fell with a great crash upon the brick floor.

After the sheet of flame, a wind raged round the building as though it would lift the roof off, but then passed as suddenly as it came. And in the intense calm that followed I saw that the form had vanished, and the doctor was stooping over Colonel Wragge upon the floor, trying to lift him to a sitting position.

“Light,” he said quietly, “more light. Take the shades off.”

Colonel Wragge sat up and the glare of the unshaded lamps fell upon his face. It was grey and drawn, still running heat, and there was a look in the eyes and about the corners of the mouth that seemed in this short space of time to have added years to its age. At the same time, the expression of effort and anxiety had left it. It showed relief.

“Gone!” he said, looking up at the doctor in a dazed fashion, and struggling to his feet. “Thank God! it’s gone at last.” He stared round the laundry as though to find out where he was. “Did it control me — take possession of me? Did I talk nonsense?” he asked bluntly. “After the heat came, I remember nothing — —”

“You’ll feel yourself again in a few minutes,” the doctor said. To my infinite horror I saw that he was surreptitiously wiping sundry dark stains from the face. “Our experiment has been a success and — —”

He gave me a swift glance to hide the bowl, standing between me and our host while I hurriedly stuffed it down under the lid of the nearest cauldron.

“ —— and none of us the worse for it,” he finished.

“And fires?” he asked, still dazed, “there’ll be no more fires?”

“It is dissipated — partly, at any rate,” replied Dr. Silence cautiously.

“And the man behind the gun,” he went on, only half realising what he was saying, I think; “have you discovered *that*?”

"A form materialised," said the doctor briefly. "I know for certain now what the directing intelligence was behind it all."

Colonel Wragge pulled himself together and got upon his feet. The words conveyed no clear meaning to him yet. But his memory was returning gradually, and he was trying to piece together the fragments into a connected whole. He shivered a little, for the place had grown suddenly chilly. The air was empty again, lifeless.

"You feel all right again now," Dr. Silence said, in the tone of a man stating a fact rather than asking a question.

"Thanks to you — both, yes." He drew a deep breath, and mopped his face, and even attempted a smile. He made me think of a man coming from the battlefield with the stains of fighting still upon him, but scornful of his wounds. Then he turned gravely towards the doctor with a question in his eyes. Memory had returned and he was himself again.

"Precisely what I expected," the doctor said calmly; "a fire-elemental sent upon its mission in the days of Thebes, centuries before Christ, and to-night, for the first time all these thousands of years, released from the spell that originally bound it."

We stared at him in amazement, Colonel Wragge opening his lips for words that refused to shape themselves.

"And, if we dig," he continued significantly, pointing to the floor where the blackness had poured up, "we shall find some underground connection — a tunnel most likely — leading to the Twelve Acre Wood. It was made by — your predecessor."

"A tunnel made by my brother!" gasped the soldier. "Then my sister should know — she lived here with him — —" He stopped suddenly.

John Silence inclined his head slowly. "I think so," he said quietly. "Your brother, no doubt, was as much tormented as you have been," he continued after a pause in which Colonel Wragge seemed deeply preoccupied with his thoughts, "and tried to find peace by burying it in the wood, and surrounding the wood then, like a large magic circle, with the enchantments of the old formulæ. So the stars the man saw blazing — —"

“But burying *what*?” asked the soldier faintly, stepping backwards towards the support of the wall.

Dr. Silence regarded us both intently for a moment before he replied. I think he weighed in his mind whether to tell us now, or when the investigation was absolutely complete.

“The mummy,” he said softly, after a moment; “the mummy that your brother took from its resting-place of centuries, and brought home — here.”

Colonel Wragge dropped down upon the nearest chair, hanging breathlessly on every word. He was far too amazed for speech.

“The mummy of some important person — a priest most likely — protected from disturbance and desecration by the ceremonial magic of the time. For they understood how to attach to the mummy, to lock up with it in the tomb, an elemental force that would direct itself even after ages upon any one who dared to molest it. In this case it was an elemental of fire.”

Dr. Silence crossed the floor and turned out the lamps one by one. He had nothing more to say for the moment. Following his example, I folded the table together and took up the chairs, and our host, still dazed and silent, mechanically obeyed him and moved to the door.

We removed all traces of the experiment, taking the empty bowl back to the house concealed beneath an ulster.

The air was cool and fragrant as we walked to the house, the stars beginning to fade overhead and a fresh wind of early morning blowing up out of the east where the sky was already hinting of the coming day. It was after five o’clock.

Stealthily we entered the front hall and locked the door, and as we went on tiptoe upstairs to our rooms, the Colonel, peering at us over his candle as he nodded good-night, whispered that if we were ready the digging should be begun that very day.

Then I saw him steal along to his sister’s room and disappear.

IV

But not even the mysterious references to the mummy, or the prospect of a revelation by digging, were able to hinder the reaction that followed the intense excitement of the past twelve hours, and I slept the sleep of the dead, dreamless and undisturbed. A touch on the shoulder woke me, and I saw Dr. Silence standing beside the bed, dressed to go out.

"Come," he said, "it's tea-time. You've slept the best part of a dozen hours."

I sprang up and made a hurried toilet, while my companion sat and talked. He looked fresh and rested, and his manner was even quieter than usual.

"Colonel Wragge has provided spades and pickaxes. We're going out to unearth this mummy at once," he said; "and there's no reason we should not get away by the morning train."

"I'm ready to go to-night, if you are," I said honestly.

But Dr. Silence shook his head.

"I must see this through to the end," he said gravely, and in a tone that made me think he still anticipated serious things, perhaps. He went on talking while I dressed.

"This case is really typical of all stories of mummy-haunting, and none of them are cases to trifle with," he explained, "for the mummies of important people — kings, priests, magicians — were laid away with profoundly significant ceremonial, and were very effectively protected, as you have seen, against desecration, and especially against destruction.

"The general belief," he went on, anticipating my questions, "held, of course, that the perpetuity of the mummy guaranteed that of its Ka, — the owner's spirit, — but it is not improbable that the magical embalming was also used to retard reincarnation, the preservation of the body preventing the return of the spirit to the toil and discipline of earth-life; and, in any case, they knew how to attach powerful guardian-forces to keep off trespassers. And any one who dared to remove the mummy, or especially to unwind it — well," he added, with meaning, "you have seen — and you *will* see."

I caught his face in the mirror while I struggled with my collar. It was deeply serious. There could be no question that he spoke of what he believed and knew.

"The traveller-brother who brought it here must have been haunted too," he continued, "for he tried to banish it by burial in the wood, making a magic circle to enclose it. Something of genuine ceremonial he must have known, for the stars the man saw were of course the remains of the still flaming pentagrams he traced at intervals in the circle. Only he did not know enough, or possibly was ignorant that the mummy's guardian was a fire-force. Fire cannot be enclosed by fire, though, as you saw, it can be released by it."

"Then that awful figure in the laundry?" I asked, thrilled to find him so communicative.

"Undoubtedly the actual Ka of the mummy operating always behind its agent, the elemental, and most likely thousands of years old."

"And Miss Wragge —— ?" I ventured once more.

"Ah, Miss Wragge," he repeated with increased gravity, "Miss Wragge ——"

A knock at the door brought a servant with word that tea was ready, and the Colonel had sent to ask if we were coming down. The thread was broken. Dr. Silence moved to the door and signed to me to follow. But his manner told me that in any case no real answer would have been forthcoming to my question.

"And the place to dig in," I asked, unable to restrain my curiosity, "will you find it by some process of divination or —— ?"

He paused at the door and looked back at me, and with that he left me to finish my dressing.

It was growing dark when the three of us silently made our way to the Twelve Acre Plantation; the sky was overcast, and a black wind came out of the east. Gloom hung about the old house and the air seemed full of sighings. We found the tools ready laid at the edge of the wood, and each shouldering his piece, we followed our leader at once in among the trees. He went straight forward for some twenty yards and then stopped. At his feet lay the blackened circle of one of the burned places. It was just discernible against the surrounding white grass.

"There are three of these," he said, "and they all lie in a line with one another. Any one of them will tap the tunnel that connects the laundry —

the former Museum — with the chamber where the mummy now lies buried.”

He at once cleared away the burnt grass and began to dig; we all began to dig. While I used the pick, the others shovelled vigorously. No one spoke. Colonel Wragge worked the hardest of the three. The soil was light and sandy, and there were only a few snake-like roots and occasional loose stones to delay us. The pick made short work of these. And meanwhile the darkness settled about us and the biting wind swept roaring through the trees overhead.

Then, quite suddenly, without a cry, Colonel Wragge disappeared up to his neck.

“The tunnel!” cried the doctor, helping to drag him out, red, breathless, and covered with sand and perspiration. “Now, let me lead the way.” And he slipped down nimbly into the hole, so that a moment later we heard his voice, muffled by sand and distance, rising up to us.

“Hubbard, you come next, and then Colonel Wragge — if he wishes,” we heard.

“I’ll follow you, of course,” he said, looking at me as I scrambled in.

The hole was bigger now, and I got down on all-fours in a channel not much bigger than a large sewer-pipe and found myself in total darkness. A minute later a heavy thud, followed by a cataract of loose sand, announced the arrival of the Colonel.

“Catch hold of my heel,” called Dr. Silence, “and Colonel Wragge can take yours.”

In this slow, laborious fashion we wormed our way along a tunnel that had been roughly dug out of the shifting sand, and was shored up clumsily by means of wooden pillars and posts. Any moment, it seemed to me, we might be buried alive. We could not see an inch before our eyes, but had to grope our way feeling the pillars and the walls. It was difficult to breathe, and the Colonel behind me made but slow progress, for the cramped position of our bodies was very severe.

We had travelled in this way for ten minutes, and gone perhaps as much as ten yards, when I lost my grasp of the doctor’s heel.

“Ah!” I heard his voice, sounding above me somewhere. He was standing up in a clear space, and the next moment I was standing beside him. Colonel Wragge came heavily after, and he too rose up and stood. Then Dr. Silence produced his candles and we heard preparations for striking matches.

Yet even before there was light, an indefinable sensation of awe came over us all. In this hole in the sand, some three feet under ground, we stood side by side, cramped and huddled, struck suddenly with an overwhelming apprehension of something ancient, something formidable, something incalculably wonderful, that touched in each one of us a sense of the sublime and the terrible even before we could see an inch before our faces. I know not how to express in language this singular emotion that caught us here in utter darkness, touching no sense directly, it seemed, yet with the recognition that before us in the blackness of this underground night there lay something that was mighty with the mightiness of long past ages.

I felt Colonel Wragge press in closely to my side, and I understood the pressure and welcomed it. No human touch, to me at least, has ever been more eloquent.

Then the match flared, a thousand shadows fled on black wings, and I saw John Silence fumbling with the candle, his face lit up grotesquely by the flickering light below it.

I had dreaded this light, yet when it came there was apparently nothing to explain the profound sensations of dread that preceded it. We stood in a small vaulted chamber in the sand, the sides and roof shored with bars of wood, and the ground laid roughly with what seemed to be tiles. It was six feet high, so that we could all stand comfortably, and may have been ten feet long by eight feet wide. Upon the wooden pillars at the side I saw that Egyptian hieroglyphics had been rudely traced by burning.

Dr. Silence lit three candles and handed one to each of us. He placed a fourth in the sand against the wall on his right, and another to mark the entrance to the tunnel. We stood and stared about us, instinctively holding our breath.

“Empty, by God!” exclaimed Colonel Wragge. His voice trembled with excitement. And then, as his eyes rested on the ground, he added, “And footsteps — look — footsteps in the sand!”

Dr. Silence said nothing. He stooped down and began to make a search of the chamber, and as he moved, my eyes followed his crouching figure and noted the queer distorted shadows that poured over the walls and ceiling after him. Here and there thin trickles of loose sand ran fizzing down the sides. The atmosphere, heavily charged with faint yet pungent odours, lay utterly still, and the flames of the candles might have been painted on the air for all the movement they betrayed.

And, as I watched, it was almost necessary to persuade myself forcibly that I was only standing upright with difficulty in this little sand-hole of a modern garden in the south of England, for it seemed to me that I stood, as in vision, at the entrance of some vast rock-hewn Temple far, far down the river of Time. The illusion was powerful, and persisted. Granite columns, that rose to heaven, piled themselves about me, majestically uprearing, and a roof like the sky itself spread above a line of colossal figures that moved in shadowy procession along endless and stupendous aisles. This huge and splendid fantasy, borne I knew not whence, possessed me so vividly that I was actually obliged to concentrate my attention upon the small stooping figure of the doctor, as he groped about the walls, in order to keep the eye of imagination on the scene before me.

But the limited space rendered a long search out of the question, and his footsteps, instead of shuffling through loose sand, presently struck something of a different quality that gave forth a hollow and resounding echo. He stooped to examine more closely.

He was standing exactly in the centre of the little chamber when this happened, and he at once began scraping away the sand with his feet. In less than a minute a smooth surface became visible — the surface of a wooden covering. The next thing I saw was that he had raised it and was peering down into a space below. Instantly, a strong odour of nitre and bitumen, mingled with the strange perfume of unknown and powdered aromatics, rose up from the uncovered space and filled the vault, stinging the throat and making the eyes water and smart.

“The mummy!” whispered Dr. Silence, looking up into our faces over his candle; and as he said the word I felt the soldier lurch against me, and heard his breathing in my very ear.

“The mummy!” he repeated under his breath, as we pressed forward to look.

It is difficult to say exactly why the sight should have stirred in me so prodigious an emotion of wonder and veneration, for I have had not a little to do with mummies, have unwound scores of them, and even experimented magically with not a few. But there was something in the sight of that grey and silent figure, lying in its modern box of lead and wood at the bottom of this sandy grave, swathed in the bandages of centuries and wrapped in the perfumed linen that the priests of Egypt had prayed over with their mighty enchantments thousands of years before — something in the sight of it lying there and breathing its own spice-laden atmosphere even in the darkness of its exile in this remote land, something that pierced to the very core of my being and touched that root of awe which slumbers in every man near the birth of tears and the passion of true worship.

I remember turning quickly from the Colonel, lest he should see my emotion, yet fail to understand its cause, turn and clutch John Silence by the arm, and then fall trembling to see that he, too, had lowered his head and was hiding his face in his hands.

A kind of whirling storm came over me, rising out of I know not what utter deeps of memory, and in a whiteness of vision I heard the magical old chauntings from the Book of the Dead, and saw the Gods pass by in dim procession, the mighty, immemorial Beings who were yet themselves only the personified attributes of the true Gods, the God with the Eyes of Fire, the God with the Face of Smoke. I saw again Anubis, the dog-faced deity, and the children of Horus, eternal watcher of the ages, as they swathed Osiris, the first mummy of the world, in the scented and mystic bands, and I tasted again something of the ecstasy of the justified soul as it embarked in the golden Boat of Ra, and journeyed onwards to rest in the fields of the blessed.

And then, as Dr. Silence, with infinite reverence, stooped and touched the still face, so dreadfully staring with its painted eyes, there rose again to our nostrils wave upon wave of this perfume of thousands of years, and time fled backwards like a thing of naught, showing me in haunted panorama the most wonderful dream of the whole world.

A gentle hissing became audible in the air, and the doctor moved quickly backwards. It came close to our faces and then seemed to play about the walls and ceiling.

"The last of the Fire — still waiting for its full accomplishment," he muttered; but I heard both words and hissing as things far away, for I was still busy with the journey of the soul through the Seven Halls of Death, listening for echoes of the grandest ritual ever known to men.

The earthen plates covered with hieroglyphics still lay beside the mummy, and round it, carefully arranged at the points of the compass, stood the four jars with the heads of the hawk, the jackal, the cynocephalus, and man, the jars in which were placed the hair, the nail parings, the heart, and other special portions of the body. Even the amulets, the mirror, the blue clay statues of the Ka, and the lamp with seven wicks were there. Only the sacred scarabæus was missing.

"Not only has it been torn from its ancient resting-place," I heard Dr. Silence saying in a solemn voice as he looked at Colonel Wragge with fixed gaze, "but it has been partially unwound," — he pointed to the wrappings of the breast,— "and — the scarabæus has been removed from the throat."

The hissing, that was like the hissing of an invisible flame, had ceased; only from time to time we heard it as though it passed backwards and forwards in the tunnel; and we stood looking into each other's faces without speaking.

Presently Colonel Wragge made a great effort and braced himself. I heard the sound catch in his throat before the words actually became audible.

"My sister," he said, very low. And then there followed a long pause, broken at length by John Silence.

"It must be replaced," he said significantly.

"I knew nothing," the soldier said, forcing himself to speak the words he hated saying. "Absolutely nothing."

"It must be returned," repeated the other, "if it is not now too late. For I fear — I fear — —"

Colonel Wragge made a movement of assent with his head.

“It shall be,” he said.

The place was still as the grave.

I do not know what it was then that made us all three turn round with so sudden a start, for there was no sound audible to my ears, at least.

The doctor was on the point of replacing the lid over the mummy, when he straightened up as if he had been shot.

“There’s something coming,” said Colonel Wragge under his breath, and the doctor’s eyes, peering down the small opening of the tunnel, showed me the true direction.

A distant shuffling noise became distinctly audible coming from a point about half-way down the tunnel we had so laboriously penetrated.

“It’s the sand falling in,” I said, though I knew it was foolish.

“No,” said the Colonel calmly, in a voice that seemed to have the ring of iron, “I’ve heard it for some time past. It is something alive — and it is coming nearer.”

He stared about him with a look of resolution that made his face almost noble. The horror in his heart was overmastering, yet he stood there prepared for anything that might come.

“There’s no other way out,” John Silence said.

He leaned the lid against the sand, and waited. I knew by the mask-like expression of his face, the pallor, and the steadiness of the eyes, that he anticipated something that might be very terrible — appalling.

The Colonel and myself stood on either side of the opening. I still held my candle and was ashamed of the way it shook, dripping the grease all over me; but the soldier had set his into the sand just behind his feet.

Thoughts of being buried alive, of being smothered like rats in a trap, of being caught and done to death by some invisible and merciless force we could not grapple with, rushed into my mind. Then I thought of fire — of suffocation — of being roasted alive. The perspiration began to pour from my face.

“Steady!” came the voice of Dr. Silence to me through the vault.

For five minutes, that seemed fifty, we stood waiting, looking from each other's faces to the mummy, and from the mummy to the hole, and all the time the shuffling sound, soft and stealthy, came gradually nearer. The tension, for me at least, was very near the breaking point when at last the cause of the disturbance reached the edge. It was hidden for a moment just behind the broken rim of soil. A jet of sand, shaken by the close vibration, trickled down on to the ground; I have never in my life seen anything fall with such laborious leisure. The next second, uttering a cry of curious quality, it came into view.

And it was far more distressingly horrible than anything I had anticipated.

For the sight of some Egyptian monster, some god of the tombs, or even of some demon of fire, I think I was already half prepared; but when, instead, I saw the white visage of Miss Wragge framed in that round opening of sand, followed by her body crawling on all-fours, her eyes bulging and reflecting the yellow glare of the candles, my first instinct was to turn and run like a frantic animal seeking a way of escape.

But Dr. Silence, who seemed no whit surprised, caught my arm and steadied me, and we both saw the Colonel then drop upon his knees and come thus to a level with his sister. For more than a whole minute, as though struck in stone, the two faces gazed silently at each other: her's, for all the dreadful emotion in it, more like a gargoyle than anything human; and his, white and blank with an expression that was beyond either astonishment or alarm. She looked up; he looked down. It was a picture in a nightmare, and the candle, stuck in the sand close to the hole, threw upon it the glare of impromptu footlights.

Then John Silence moved forward and spoke in a voice that was very low, yet perfectly calm and natural.

"I am glad you have come," he said. "You are the one person whose presence at this moment is most required. And I hope that you may yet be in time to appease the anger of the Fire, and to bring peace again to your household, and," he added lower still so that no one heard it but myself, "*safety to yourself*."

And while her brother stumbled backwards, crushing a candle into the sand in his awkwardness, the old lady crawled farther into the vaulted chamber and slowly rose upon her feet.

At the sight of the wrapped figure of the mummy I was fully prepared to see her scream and faint, but on the contrary, to my complete amazement, she merely bowed her head and dropped quietly upon her knees. Then, after a pause of more than a minute, she raised her eyes to the roof and her lips began to mutter as in prayer. Her right hand, meanwhile, which had been fumbling for some time at her throat, suddenly came away, and before the gaze of all of us she held it out, palm upwards, over the grey and ancient figure outstretched below. And in it we beheld glistening the green jasper of the stolen scarabæus.

Her brother, leaning heavily against the wall behind, uttered a sound that was half cry, half exclamation, but John Silence, standing directly in front of her, merely fixed his eyes on her and pointed downwards to the staring face below.

“Replace it,” he said sternly, “where it belongs.”

Miss Wragge was kneeling at the feet of the mummy when this happened. We three men all had our eyes riveted on what followed. Only the reader who by some remote chance may have witnessed a line of mummies, freshly laid from their tombs upon the sand, slowly stir and bend as the heat of the Egyptian sun warms their ancient bodies into the semblance of life, can form any conception of the ultimate horror we experienced when the silent figure before us moved in its grave of lead and sand. Slowly, before our eyes, it writhed, and, with a faint rustling of the immemorial cerements, rose up, and, through sightless and bandaged eyes, stared across the yellow candle-light at the woman who had violated it.

I tried to move — her brother tried to move — but the sand seemed to hold our feet. I tried to cry — her brother tried to cry — but the sand seemed to fill our lungs and throat. We could only stare — and, even so, the sand seemed to rise like a desert storm and cloud our vision....

And when I managed at length to open my eyes again, the mummy was lying once more upon its back, motionless, the shrunken and painted face upturned towards the ceiling, and the old lady had tumbled forward and was lying in the semblance of death with her head and arms upon its crumbling body.

But upon the wrappings of the throat I saw the green jasper of the sacred scarabæus shining again like a living eye.

Colonel Wragge and the doctor recovered themselves long before I did, and I found myself helping them clumsily and unintelligently to raise the frail body of the old lady, while John Silence carefully replaced the covering over the grave and scraped back the sand with his foot, while he issued brief directions.

I heard his voice as in a dream; but the journey back along that cramped tunnel, weighted by a dead woman, blinded with sand, suffocated with heat, was in no sense a dream. It took us the best part of half an hour to reach the open air. And, even then, we had to wait a considerable time for the appearance of Dr. Silence. We carried her undiscovered into the house and up to her own room.

“The mummy will cause no further disturbance,” I heard Dr. Silence say to our host later that evening as we prepared to drive for the night train, “provided always,” he added significantly, “that you, and yours, cause *it* no disturbance.”

It was in a dream, too, that we left.

“You did not see her face, I know,” he said to me as we wrapped our rugs about us in the empty compartment. And when I shook my head, quite unable to explain the instinct that had come to me not to look, he turned towards me, his face pale, and genuinely sad.

“Scorched and blasted,” he whispered.

CASE IV. SECRET WORSHIP

HARRIS, THE SILK merchant, was in South Germany on his way home from a business trip when the idea came to him suddenly that he would take the mountain railway from Strassbourg and run down to revisit his old school after an interval of something more than thirty years. And it was to this chance impulse of the junior partner in Harris Brothers of St. Paul's Churchyard that John Silence owed one of the most curious cases of his whole experience, for at that very moment he happened to be tramping these same mountains with a holiday knapsack, and from different points of the compass the two men were actually converging towards the same inn.

Now, deep down in the heart that for thirty years had been concerned chiefly with the profitable buying and selling of silk, this school had left the imprint of its peculiar influence, and, though perhaps unknown to Harris, had strongly coloured the whole of his subsequent existence. It belonged to the deeply religious life of a small Protestant community (which it is unnecessary to specify), and his father had sent him there at the age of fifteen, partly because he would learn the German requisite for the conduct of the silk business, and partly because the discipline was strict, and discipline was what his soul and body needed just then more than anything else.

The life, indeed, had proved exceedingly severe, and young Harris benefited accordingly; for though corporal punishment was unknown, there was a system of mental and spiritual correction which somehow made the soul stand proudly erect to receive it, while it struck at the very root of the fault and taught the boy that his character was being cleaned and strengthened, and that he was not merely being tortured in a kind of personal revenge.

That was over thirty years ago, when he was a dreamy and impressionable youth of fifteen; and now, as the train climbed slowly up the winding mountain gorges, his mind travelled back somewhat lovingly over the intervening period, and forgotten details rose vividly again before him out of the shadows. The life there had been very wonderful, it seemed to him, in that remote mountain village, protected from the tumults of the world by the love and worship of the devout Brotherhood that ministered to the needs of some hundred boys from every country in Europe. Sharply the scenes came back to him. He smelt again the long stone corridors, the hot pinewood rooms, where the sultry hours of summer study were passed with bees droning through open windows in the sunshine, and German characters struggling in the mind with dreams of English lawns — and then the sudden awful cry of the master in German —

“Harris, stand up! You sleep!”

And he recalled the dreadful standing motionless for an hour, book in hand, while the knees felt like wax and the head grew heavier than a cannon-ball.

The very smell of the cooking came back to him — the daily *Sauerkraut*, the watery chocolate on Sundays, the flavour of the stringy meat served twice a week at *Mittagessen*; and he smiled to think again of the half-rations that was the punishment for speaking English. The very odour of the milk-bowls, — the hot sweet aroma that rose from the soaking peasant-bread at the six-o’clock breakfast, — came back to him pungently, and he saw the huge *Speisesaal* with the hundred boys in their school uniform, all eating sleepily in silence, gulping down the coarse bread and scalding milk in terror of the bell that would presently cut them short — and, at the far end where the masters sat, he saw the narrow slit windows with the vistas of enticing field and forest beyond.

And this, in turn, made him think of the great barn-like room on the top floor where all slept together in wooden cots, and he heard in memory the clamour of the cruel bell that woke them on winter mornings at five o’clock and summoned them to the stone-flagged *Waschkammer*, where boys and masters alike, after scanty and icy washing, dressed in complete silence.

From this his mind passed swiftly, with vivid picture-thoughts, to other things, and with a passing shiver he remembered how the loneliness of never being alone had eaten into him, and how everything — work, meals, sleep, walks, leisure — was done with his “division” of twenty other boys and under the eyes of at least two masters. The only solitude possible was by asking for half an hour’s practice in the cell-like music rooms, and Harris smiled to himself as he recalled the zeal of his violin studies.

Then, as the train puffed laboriously through the great pine forests that cover these mountains with a giant carpet of velvet, he found the pleasanter layers of memory giving up their dead, and he recalled with admiration the kindness of the masters, whom all addressed as Brother, and marvelled afresh at their devotion in burying themselves for years in such a place, only to leave it, in most cases, for the still rougher life of missionaries in the wild places of the world.

He thought once more of the still, religious atmosphere that hung over the little forest community like a veil, barring the distressful world; of the picturesque ceremonies at Easter, Christmas, and New Year; of the numerous feast-days and charming little festivals. The *Beschehr-Fest*, in particular, came back to him, — the feast of gifts at Christmas, — when the entire community paired off and gave presents, many of which had taken weeks to make or the savings of many days to purchase. And then he saw the midnight ceremony in the church at New Year, with the shining face of the *Prediger* in the pulpit, — the village preacher who, on the last night of the old year, saw in the empty gallery beyond the organ loft the faces of all who were to die in the ensuing twelve months, and who at last recognised himself among them, and, in the very middle of his sermon, passed into a state of rapt ecstasy and burst into a torrent of praise.

Thickly the memories crowded upon him. The picture of the small village dreaming its unselfish life on the mountain-tops, clean, wholesome, simple, searching vigorously for its God, and training hundreds of boys in the grand way, rose up in his mind with all the power of an obsession. He felt once more the old mystical enthusiasm, deeper than the sea and more wonderful than the stars; he heard again the winds sighing from leagues of forest over the red roofs in the moonlight; he heard the Brothers' voices talking of the things beyond this life as though they had actually experienced them in the body; and, as he sat in the jolting train, a spirit of unutterable longing passed over his seared and tired soul, stirring in the depths of him a sea of emotions that he thought had long since frozen into immobility.

And the contrast pained him, — the idealistic dreamer then, the man of business now, — so that a spirit of unworldly peace and beauty known only to the soul in meditation laid its feathered finger upon his heart, moving strangely the surface of the waters.

Harris shivered a little and looked out of the window of his empty carriage. The train had long passed Hornberg, and far below the streams tumbled in white foam down the limestone rocks. In front of him, dome upon dome of wooded mountain stood against the sky. It was October, and the air was cool and sharp, wood-smoke and damp moss exquisitely mingled in it with the subtle odours of the pines. Overhead, between the tips of the highest firs, he saw the first stars peeping, and the sky was a clean, pale amethyst that seemed exactly the colour all these memories clothed themselves with in his mind.

He leaned back in his corner and sighed. He was a heavy man, and he had not known sentiment for years; he was a big man, and it took much to move him, literally and figuratively; he was a man in whom the dreams of God that haunt the soul in youth, though overlaid by the scum that gathers in the fight for money, had not, as with the majority, utterly died the death.

He came back into this little neglected pocket of the years, where so much fine gold had collected and lain undisturbed, with all his semi-spiritual emotions aquiver; and, as he watched the mountain-tops come nearer, and smelt the forgotten odours of his boyhood, something melted on the surface of his soul and left him sensitive to a degree he had not known since, thirty years before, he had lived here with his dreams, his conflicts, and his youthful suffering.

A thrill ran through him as the train stopped with a jolt at a tiny station and he saw the name in large black lettering on the grey stone building, and below it, the number of metres it stood above the level of the sea.

“The highest point on the line!” he exclaimed. “How well I remember it — Sommerau — Summer Meadow. The very next station is mine!”

And, as the train ran downhill with brakes on and steam shut off, he put his head out of the window and one by one saw the old familiar landmarks in the dusk. They stared at him like dead faces in a dream. Queer, sharp feelings, half poignant, half sweet, stirred in his heart.

“There’s the hot, white road we walked along so often with the two Brüder always at our heels,” he thought; “and there, by Jove, is the turn through the forest to ‘*Die Galgen*,’ the stone gallows where they hanged the witches in olden days!”

He smiled a little as the train slid past.

“And there’s the copse where the Lilies of the Valley powdered the ground in spring; and, I swear,” — he put his head out with a sudden impulse,— “if that’s not the very clearing where Calame, the French boy, chased the swallow-tail with me, and Bruder Pagel gave us half-rations for leaving the road without permission, and for shouting in our mother tongues!” And he laughed again as the memories came back with a rush, flooding his mind with vivid detail.

The train stopped, and he stood on the grey gravel platform like a man in a dream. It seemed half a century since he last waited there with corded wooden boxes, and got into the train for Strassbourg and home after the two years’ exile. Time dropped from him like an old garment and he felt a boy again. Only, things looked so much smaller than his memory of them; shrunk and dwindled they looked, and the distances seemed on a curiously smaller scale.

He made his way across the road to the little Gasthaus, and, as he went, faces and figures of former schoolfellows, — German, Swiss, Italian, French, Russian, — slipped out of the shadowy woods and silently accompanied him. They flitted by his side, raising their eyes questioningly, sadly, to his. But their names he had forgotten. Some of the Brothers, too, came with them, and most of these he remembered by name — Bruder Röst, Bruder Pagel, Bruder Schliemann, and the bearded face of the old preacher who had seen himself in the haunted gallery of those about to die — Bruder Gysin. The dark forest lay all about him like a sea that any moment might rush with velvet waves upon the scene and sweep all the faces away. The air was cool and wonderfully fragrant, but with every perfumed breath came also a pallid memory....

Yet, in spite of the underlying sadness inseparable from such an experience, it was all very interesting, and held a pleasure peculiarly its own, so that Harris engaged his room and ordered supper feeling well pleased with himself, and intending to walk up to the old school that very evening. It stood in the centre of the community’s village, some four miles distant through the forest, and he now recollected for the first time that this little Protestant settlement dwelt isolated in a section of the country that was otherwise Catholic. Crucifixes and shrines surrounded the clearing like the sentries of a beleaguring army. Once beyond the square of the village, with its few acres of field and orchard, the forest crowded up in solid phalanxes, and beyond the rim of trees began the country that was ruled by the priests of another faith. He vaguely remembered, too, that the Catholics had showed sometimes a certain hostility towards the little Protestant oasis that flourished so quietly and benignly in their midst. He had quite forgotten this. How trumpery it all seemed now with his wide experience of life and his knowledge of other countries and the great outside world. It was like stepping back, not thirty years, but three hundred.

There were only two others besides himself at supper. One of them, a bearded, middle-aged man in tweeds, sat by himself at the far end, and Harris kept out of his way because he was English. He feared he might be in business, possibly even in the silk business, and that he would perhaps talk on the subject. The other traveller, however, was a Catholic priest. He was a little man who ate his salad with a knife, yet so gently that it was almost inoffensive, and it was the sight of “the cloth” that recalled his memory of the old antagonism. Harris mentioned by way of conversation the object of his sentimental journey, and the priest looked up sharply at him with raised eyebrows and an expression of surprise and suspicion that somehow piqued him. He ascribed it to his difference of belief.

“Yes,” went on the silk merchant, pleased to talk of what his mind was so full, “and it was a curious experience for an English boy to be dropped down into a school of a hundred foreigners. I well remember the loneliness and intolerable Heimweh of it at first.” His German was very fluent.

The priest opposite looked up from his cold veal and potato salad and smiled. It was a nice face. He explained quietly that he did not belong here, but was making a tour of the parishes of Württemberg and Baden.

“It was a strict life,” added Harris. “We English, I remember, used to call it *Gefängnisleben* — prison life!”

The face of the other, for some unaccountable reason, darkened. After a slight pause, and more by way of politeness than because he wished to continue the subject, he said quietly —

“It was a flourishing school in those days, of course. Afterwards, I have heard — —” He shrugged his shoulders slightly, and the odd look — it almost seemed a look of alarm — came back into his eyes. The sentence remained unfinished.

Something in the tone of the man seemed to his listener uncalled for — in a sense reproachful, singular. Harris bridled in spite of himself.

"It has changed?" he asked. "I can hardly believe — —"

"You have not heard, then?" observed the priest gently, making a gesture as though to cross himself, yet not actually completing it. "You have not heard what happened there before it was abandoned —— ?"

It was very childish, of course, and perhaps he was overtired and overwrought in some way, but the words and manner of the little priest seemed to him so offensive — so disproportionately offensive — that he hardly noticed the concluding sentence. He recalled the old bitterness and the old antagonism, and for a moment he almost lost his temper.

"Nonsense," he interrupted with a forced laugh, "*Unsinn!* You must forgive me, sir, for contradicting you. But I was a pupil there myself. I was at school there. There was no place like it. I cannot believe that anything serious could have happened to — to take away its character. The devotion of the Brothers would be difficult to equal anywhere — —"

He broke off suddenly, realising that his voice had been raised unduly and that the man at the far end of the table might understand German; and at the same moment he looked up and saw that this individual's eyes were fixed upon his face intently. They were peculiarly bright. Also they were rather wonderful eyes, and the way they met his own served in some way he could not understand to convey both a reproach and a warning. The whole face of the stranger, indeed, made a vivid impression upon him, for it was a face, he now noticed for the first time, in whose presence one would not willingly have said or done anything unworthy. Harris could not explain to himself how it was he had not become conscious sooner of its presence.

But he could have bitten off his tongue for having so far forgotten himself. The little priest lapsed into silence. Only once he said, looking up and speaking in a low voice that was not intended to be overheard, but that evidently *was* overheard, "You will find it different." Presently he rose and left the table with a polite bow that included both the others.

And, after him, from the far end rose also the figure in the tweed suit, leaving Harris by himself.

He sat on for a bit in the darkening room, sipping his coffee and smoking his fifteen-pfennig cigar, till the girl came in to light the oil lamps. He felt vexed with himself for his lapse from good manners, yet hardly able to account for it. Most likely, he reflected, he had been annoyed because the priest had unintentionally changed the pleasant character of his dream by introducing a jarring note. Later he must seek an opportunity to make amends. At present, however, he was too impatient for his walk to the school, and he took his stick and hat and passed out into the open air.

And, as he crossed before the Gasthaus, he noticed that the priest and the man in the tweed suit were engaged already in such deep conversation that they hardly noticed him as he passed and raised his hat.

He started off briskly, well remembering the way, and hoping to reach the village in time to have a word with one of the Brüder. They might even ask him in for a cup of coffee. He felt sure of his welcome, and the old memories were in full possession once more. The hour of return was a matter of no consequence whatever.

It was then just after seven o’clock, and the October evening was drawing in with chill airs from the recesses of the forest. The road plunged straight from the railway clearing into its depths, and in a very few minutes the trees engulfed him and the clack of his boots fell dead and echoless against the serried stems of a million firs. It was very black; one trunk was hardly distinguishable from another. He walked smartly, swinging his holly stick. Once or twice he passed a peasant on his way to bed, and the guttural “Gruss Got,” unheard for so long, emphasised the passage of time, while yet making it seem as nothing. A fresh group of pictures crowded his mind. Again the figures of former schoolfellows flitted out of the forest and kept pace by his side, whispering of the doings of long ago. One reverie stepped hard upon the heels of another. Every turn in the road, every clearing of the forest, he knew, and each in turn brought forgotten associations to life. He enjoyed himself thoroughly.

He marched on and on. There was powdered gold in the sky till the moon rose, and then a wind of faint silver spread silently between the earth and stars. He saw the tips of the fir trees shimmer, and heard them whisper as the breeze turned their needles towards the light. The mountain air was indescribably sweet. The road shone like the foam of a river through the gloom. White moths flitted here and there like silent thoughts across his path, and a hundred smells greeted him from the forest caverns across the years.

Then, when he least expected it, the trees fell away abruptly on both sides, and he stood on the edge of the village clearing.

He walked faster. There lay the familiar outlines of the houses, sheeted with silver; there stood the trees in the little central square with the fountain and small green lawns; there loomed the shape of the church next to the Gasthof der Brüdergemeinde; and just beyond, dimly rising into the sky, he saw with a sudden thrill the mass of the huge school building, blocked castle-like with deep shadows in the moonlight, standing square and formidable to face him after the silences of more than a quarter of a century.

He passed quickly down the deserted village street and stopped close beneath its shadow, staring up at the walls that had once held him prisoner for two years — two unbroken years of discipline and homesickness. Memories and emotions surged through his mind; for the most vivid sensations of his youth had focused about this spot, and it was here he had first begun to live and learn values. Not a single footstep broke the silence, though lights glimmered here and there through cottage windows; but when he looked up at the high walls of the school, draped now in shadow, he easily imagined that well-known faces crowded to the windows to greet him — closed windows that really reflected only moonlight and the gleam of stars.

This, then, was the old school building, standing foursquare to the world, with its shuttered windows, its lofty, tiled roof, and the spiked lightning-conductors pointing like black and taloned fingers from the corners. For a long time he stood and stared. Then, presently, he came to himself again, and realised to his joy that a light still shone in the windows of the *Bruderstube*.

He turned from the road and passed through the iron railings; then climbed the twelve stone steps and stood facing the black wooden door with the heavy bars of iron, a door he had once loathed and dreaded with the hatred and passion of an imprisoned soul, but now looked upon tenderly with a sort of boyish delight.

Almost timorously he pulled the rope and listened with a tremor of excitement to the clanging of the bell deep within the building. And the long-forgotten sound brought the past before him with such a vivid sense of reality that he positively shivered. It was like the magic bell in the fairy-tale that rolls back the curtain of Time and summons the figures from the shadows of the dead. He had never felt so sentimental in his life. It was like being young again. And, at the same time, he began to bulk rather large in his own eyes with a certain spurious importance. He was a big man from the world of strife and action. In this little place of peaceful dreams would he, perhaps, not cut something of a figure?

“I’ll try once more,” he thought after a long pause, seizing the iron bell-rope, and was just about to pull it when a step sounded on the stone passage within, and the huge door slowly swung open.

A tall man with a rather severe cast of countenance stood facing him in silence.

“I must apologise — it is somewhat late,” he began a trifle pompously, “but the fact is I am an old pupil. I have only just arrived and really could not restrain myself.” His German seemed not quite so fluent as usual. “My interest is so great. I was here in ‘70.”

The other opened the door wider and at once bowed him in with a smile of genuine welcome.

“I am Bruder Kalkmann,” he said quietly in a deep voice. “I myself was a master here about that time. It is a great pleasure always to welcome a former pupil.” He looked at him very keenly for a few seconds, and then added, “I think, too, it is splendid of you to come — very splendid.”

“It is a very great pleasure,” Harris replied, delighted with his reception.

The dimly-lighted corridor with its flooring of grey stone, and the familiar sound of a German voice echoing through it, — with the peculiar intonation the Brothers always used in speaking, — all combined to lift him bodily, as it were, into the dream-atmosphere of long-forgotten days. He stepped gladly into the building and the door shut with the familiar thunder that completed the reconstruction of the past. He almost felt the old sense of imprisonment, of aching nostalgia, of having lost his liberty.

Harris sighed involuntarily and turned towards his host, who returned his smile faintly and then led the way down the corridor.

“The boys have retired,” he explained, “and, as you remember, we keep early hours here. But, at least, you will join us for a little while in the *Bruderstube* and enjoy a cup of coffee.” This was precisely what the silk merchant had hoped, and he accepted with an alacrity that he intended to be tempered by graciousness. “And tomorrow,” continued the Bruder, “you must come and spend a whole day with us. You may even find acquaintances, for several pupils of your day have come back here as masters.”

For one brief second there passed into the man’s eyes a look that made the visitor start. But it vanished as quickly as it came. It was impossible to define. Harris convinced himself it was the effect of a shadow cast by the lamp they had just passed on the wall. He dismissed it from his mind.

“You are very kind, I’m sure,” he said politely. “It is perhaps a greater pleasure to me than you can imagine to see the place again. Ah,” — he stopped short opposite a door with the upper half of glass and peered in— “surely there is one of the music rooms where I used to practise the violin. How it comes back to me after all these years!”

Bruder Kalkmann stopped indulgently, smiling, to allow his guest a moment’s inspection.

“You still have the boys’ orchestra? I remember I used to play ‘*zweite Geige*’ in it. Bruder Schliemann conducted at the piano. Dear me, I can see him now with his long black hair and — and — —” He stopped abruptly. Again the odd, dark look passed over the stern face of his companion. For an instant it seemed curiously familiar.

“We still keep up the pupils’ orchestra,” he said, “but Bruder Schliemann, I am sorry to say — —” he hesitated an instant, and then added, “Bruder Schliemann is dead.”

“Indeed, indeed,” said Harris quickly. “I am sorry to hear it.” He was conscious of a faint feeling of distress, but whether it arose from the news of his old music teacher’s death, or — from something else — he could not quite determine. He gazed down the corridor that lost itself among shadows. In the street and village everything had seemed so much smaller than he remembered, but here, inside the school building, everything seemed so much bigger. The corridor was loftier and longer, more spacious and vast, than the mental picture he had preserved. His thoughts wandered dreamily for an instant.

He glanced up and saw the face of the Bruder watching him with a smile of patient indulgence.

“Your memories possess you,” he observed gently, and the stern look passed into something almost pitying.

“You are right,” returned the man of silk, “they do. This was the most wonderful period of my whole life in a sense. At the time I hated it — —” He hesitated, not wishing to hurt the Brother’s feelings.

“According to English ideas it seemed strict, of course,” the other said persuasively, so that he went on.

“ —— Yes, partly that; and partly the ceaseless nostalgia, and the solitude which came from never being really alone. In English schools the boys enjoy peculiar freedom, you know.”

Bruder Kalkmann, he saw, was listening intently.

“But it produced one result that I have never wholly lost,” he continued self-consciously, “and am grateful for.”

“*Ach! Wie so, denn?*”

“The constant inner pain threw me headlong into your religious life, so that the whole force of my being seemed to project itself towards the search for a deeper satisfaction — a real resting-place for the soul. During my two years here I yearned for God in my boyish way as perhaps I have never yearned for anything since. Moreover, I have never quite lost that sense of peace and inward joy which accompanied the search. I can never quite forget this school and the deep things it taught me.”

He paused at the end of his long speech, and a brief silence fell between them. He feared he had said too much, or expressed himself clumsily in the foreign language, and when Bruder Kalkmann laid a hand upon his shoulder, he gave a little involuntary start.

“So that my memories perhaps do possess me rather strongly,” he added apologetically; “and this long corridor, these rooms, that barred and gloomy front door, all touch chords that — that — —” His German failed him and he glanced at his companion with an explanatory smile and gesture. But the brother had removed the hand from his shoulder and was standing with his back to him, looking down the passage.

“Naturally, naturally so,” he said hastily without turning round. “*Es ist doch selbstverständlich.* We shall all understand.”

Then he turned suddenly, and Harris saw that his face had turned most oddly and disagreeably sinister. It may only have been the shadows again playing their tricks with the wretched oil lamps on the wall, for the dark expression passed instantly as they retraced their steps down the corridor, but the Englishman somehow got the impression that he had said something to give offence, something that was not quite to the other’s taste. Opposite the door of the *Bruderstube* they stopped. Harris realised that it was late and he had possibly stayed talking too long. He made a tentative effort to leave, but his companion would not hear of it.

“You must have a cup of coffee with us,” he said firmly as though he meant it, “and my colleagues will be delighted to see you. Some of them will remember you, perhaps.”

The sound of voices came pleasantly through the door, men’s voices talking together. Bruder Kalkmann turned the handle and they entered a room ablaze with light and full of people.

“Ah, — but your name?” he whispered, bending down to catch the reply; “you have not told me your name yet.”

“Harris,” said the Englishman quickly as they went in. He felt nervous as he crossed the threshold, but ascribed the momentary trepidation to the fact that he was breaking the strictest rule of the whole establishment, which forbade a boy under severest penalties to come near this holy of holies where the masters took their brief leisure.

“Ah, yes, of course — Harris,” repeated the other as though he remembered it “Come in, Herr Harris, come in, please. Your visit will be immensely appreciated. It is really very fine, very wonderful of you to have come in this way.”

The door closed behind them and, in the sudden light which made his sight swim for a moment, the exaggeration of the language escaped his attention. He heard the voice of Bruder Kalkmann introducing him. He spoke very loud, indeed, unnecessarily, — absurdly loud, Harris thought.

"Brothers," he announced, "it is my pleasure and privilege to introduce to you Herr Harris from England. He has just arrived to make us a little visit, and I have already expressed to him on behalf of us all the satisfaction we feel that he is here. He was, as you remember, a pupil in the year '70."

It was a very formal, a very German introduction, but Harris rather liked it. It made him feel important and he appreciated the tact that made it almost seem as though he had been expected.

The black forms rose and bowed; Harris bowed; Kalkmann bowed. Every one was very polite and very courtly. The room swam with moving figures; the light dazzled him after the gloom of the corridor; there was thick cigar smoke in the atmosphere. He took the chair that was offered to him between two of the Brothers, and sat down, feeling vaguely that his perceptions were not quite as keen and accurate as usual. He felt a trifle dazed perhaps, and the spell of the past came strongly over him, confusing the immediate present and making everything dwindle oddly to the dimensions of long ago. He seemed to pass under the mastery of a great mood that was a composite reproduction of all the moods of his forgotten boyhood.

Then he pulled himself together with a sharp effort and entered into the conversation that had begun again to buzz round him. Moreover, he entered into it with keen pleasure, for the Brothers — there were perhaps a dozen of them in the little room — treated him with a charm of manner that speedily made him feel one of themselves. This, again, was a very subtle delight to him. He felt that he had stepped out of the greedy, vulgar, self-seeking world, the world of silk and markets and profit-making — stepped into the cleaner atmosphere where spiritual ideals were paramount and life was simple and devoted. It all charmed him inexpressibly, so that he realised — yes, in a sense — the degradation of his twenty years' absorption in business. This keen atmosphere under the stars where men thought only of their souls, and of the souls of others, was too rarefied for the world he was now associated with. He found himself making comparisons to his own disadvantage, — comparisons with the mystical little dreamer that had stepped thirty years before from the stern peace of this devout community, and the man of the world that he had since become, — and the contrast made him shiver with a keen regret and something like self-contempt.

He glanced round at the other faces floating towards him through tobacco smoke — this acrid cigar smoke he remembered so well: how keen they were, how strong, placid, touched with the nobility of great aims and unselfish purposes. At one or two he looked particularly. He hardly knew why. They rather fascinated him. There was something so very stern and uncompromising about them, and something, too, oddly, subtly, familiar, that yet just eluded him. But whenever their eyes met his own they held undeniable welcome in them; and some held more — a kind of perplexed admiration, he thought, something that was between esteem and deference. This note of respect in all the faces was very flattering to his vanity.

Coffee was served presently, made by a black-haired Brother who sat in the corner by the piano and bore a marked resemblance to Bruder Schliemann, the musical director of thirty years ago. Harris exchanged bows with him when he took the cup from his white hands, which he noticed were like the hands of a woman. He lit a cigar, offered to him by his neighbour, with whom he was chatting delightfully, and who, in the glare of the lighted match, reminded him sharply for a moment of Bruder Pagel, his former room-master.

“*Es ist wirklich merkwürdig*,” he said, “how many resemblances I see, or imagine. It is really *very* curious!”

“Yes,” replied the other, peering at him over his coffee cup, “the spell of the place is wonderfully strong. I can well understand that the old faces rise before your mind’s eye — almost to the exclusion of ourselves perhaps.”

They both laughed pleasantly. It was soothing to find his mood understood and appreciated. And they passed on to talk of the mountain village, its isolation, its remoteness from worldly life, its peculiar fitness for meditation and worship, and for spiritual development — of a certain kind.

“And your coming back in this way, Herr Harris, has pleased us all so much,” joined in the Bruder on his left. “We esteem you for it most highly. We honour you for it.”

Harris made a deprecating gesture. “I fear, for my part, it is only a very selfish pleasure,” he said a trifle unctuously.

“Not all would have had the courage,” added the one who resembled Bruder Pagel.

“You mean,” said Harris, a little puzzled, “the disturbing memories —— ?”

Bruder Pagel looked at him steadily, with unmistakable admiration and respect. “I mean that most men hold so strongly to life, and can give up so little for their beliefs,” he said gravely.

The Englishman felt slightly uncomfortable. These worthy men really made too much of his sentimental journey. Besides, the talk was getting a little out of his depth. He hardly followed it.

“The worldly life still has *some* charms for me,” he replied smilingly, as though to indicate that sainthood was not yet quite within his grasp.

“All the more, then, must we honour you for so freely coming,” said the Brother on his left; “so unconditionally!”

A pause followed, and the silk merchant felt relieved when the conversation took a more general turn, although he noted that it never travelled very far from the subject of his visit and the wonderful situation of the lonely village for men who wished to develop their spiritual powers and practise the rites of a high worship. Others joined in, complimenting him on his knowledge of the language, making him feel utterly at his ease, yet at the same time a little uncomfortable by the excess of their admiration. After all, it was such a very small thing to do, this sentimental journey.

The time passed along quickly; the coffee was excellent, the cigars soft and of the nutty flavour he loved. At length, fearing to outstay his welcome, he rose reluctantly to take his leave. But the others would not hear of it. It was not often a former pupil returned to visit them in this simple, unaffected way. The night was young. If necessary they could even find him a corner in the great *Schlafzimmer* upstairs. He was easily persuaded to stay a little longer. Somehow he had become the centre of the little party. He felt pleased, flattered, honoured.

“And perhaps Bruder Schliemann will play something for us — now.”

It was Kalkmann speaking, and Harris started visibly as he heard the name, and saw the black-haired man by the piano turn with a smile. For Schliemann was the name of his old music director, who was dead. Could this be his son? They were so exactly alike.

“If Bruder Meyer has not put his Amati to bed, I will accompany him,” said the musician suggestively, looking across at a man whom Harris had not yet noticed, and who, he now saw, was the very image of a former master of that name.

Meyer rose and excused himself with a little bow, and the Englishman quickly observed that he had a peculiar gesture as though his neck had a false join on to the body just below the collar and feared it might break. Meyer of old had this trick of movement. He remembered how the boys used to copy it.

He glanced sharply from face to face, feeling as though some silent, unseen process were changing everything about him. All the faces seemed oddly familiar. Pagel, the Brother he had been talking with, was of course the image of Pagel, his former room-master; and Kalkmann, he now realised for the first time, was the very twin of another master whose name he had quite forgotten, but whom he used to dislike intensely in the old days. And, through the smoke, peering at him from the corners of the room, he saw that all the Brothers about him had the faces he had known and lived with long ago — Röst, Fluheim, Meinert, Rigel, Gysin.

He stared hard, suddenly grown more alert, and everywhere saw, or fancied he saw, strange likenesses, ghostly resemblances, — more, the identical faces of years ago. There was something queer about it all, something not quite right, something that made him feel uneasy. He shook himself, mentally and actually, blowing the smoke from before his eyes with a long breath, and as he did so he noticed to his dismay that every one was fixedly staring. They were watching him.

This brought him to his senses. As an Englishman, and a foreigner, he did not wish to be rude, or to do anything to make himself foolishly conspicuous and spoil the harmony of the evening. He was a guest, and a privileged guest at that. Besides, the music had already begun. Bruder Schliemann’s long white fingers were caressing the keys to some purpose.

He subsided into his chair and smoked with half-closed eyes that yet saw everything.

But the shudder had established itself in his being, and, whether he would or not, it kept repeating itself. As a town, far up some inland river, feels the pressure of the distant sea, so he became aware that mighty forces from somewhere beyond his ken were urging themselves up against his soul in this smoky little room. He began to feel exceedingly ill at ease.

And as the music filled the air his mind began to clear. Like a lifted veil there rose up something that had hitherto obscured his vision. The words of the priest at the railway inn flashed across his brain unbidden: “You will find it different.” And also, though why he could not tell, he saw mentally the strong, rather wonderful eyes of that other guest at the supper-table, the man who had overhead his conversation, and had later got into earnest talk with the priest. He took out his watch and stole a glance at it. Two hours had slipped by. It was already eleven o’clock.

Schliemann, meanwhile, utterly absorbed in his music, was playing a solemn measure. The piano sang marvellously. The power of a great conviction, the simplicity of great art, the vital spiritual message of a soul that had found itself — all this, and more, were in the chords, and yet somehow the music was what can only be described as impure — atrociously and diabolically impure. And the piece itself, although Harris did not recognise it as anything familiar, was surely the music of a Mass — huge, majestic, sombre? It stalked through the smoky room with slow power, like the passage of something that was mighty, yet profoundly intimate, and as it went there stirred into each and every face about him the signature of the enormous forces of which it was the audible symbol. The countenances round him turned sinister, but not idly, negatively sinister: they grew dark with purpose. He suddenly recalled the face of Bruder Kalkmann in the corridor earlier in the evening. The motives of their secret souls rose to the eyes, and mouths, and foreheads, and hung there for all to see like the black banners of an assembly of ill-starred and fallen creatures. Demons — was the horrible word that flashed through his brain like a sheet of fire.

When this sudden discovery leaped out upon him, for a moment he lost his self-control. Without waiting to think and weigh his extraordinary impression, he did a very foolish but a very natural thing. Feeling himself irresistibly driven by the sudden stress to some kind of action, he sprang to his feet — and screamed! To his own utter amazement he stood up and shrieked aloud!

But no one stirred. No one, apparently, took the slightest notice of his absurdly wild behaviour. It was almost as if no one but himself had heard the scream at all — as though the music had drowned it and swallowed it up — as though after all perhaps he had not really screamed as loudly as he imagined, or had not screamed at all.

Then, as he glanced at the motionless, dark faces before him, something of utter cold passed into his being, touching his very soul.... All emotion cooled suddenly, leaving him like a receding tide. He sat down again, ashamed, mortified, angry with himself for behaving like a fool and a boy. And the music, meanwhile, continued to issue from the white and snake-like fingers of Bruder Schliemann, as poisoned wine might issue from the weirdly-fashioned necks of antique phials.

And, with the rest of them, Harris drank it in.

Forcing himself to believe that he had been the victim of some kind of illusory perception, he vigorously restrained his feelings. Then the music presently ceased, and every one applauded and began to talk at once, laughing, changing seats, complimenting the player, and behaving naturally and easily as though nothing out of the way had happened. The faces appeared normal once more. The Brothers crowded round their visitor, and he joined in their talk and even heard himself thanking the gifted musician.

But, at the same time, he found himself edging towards the door, nearer and nearer, changing his chair when possible, and joining the groups that stood closest to the way of escape.

“I must thank you all *tausendmal* for my little reception and the great pleasure — the very great honour you have done me,” he began in decided tones at length, “but I fear I have trespassed far too long already on your hospitality. Moreover, I have some distance to walk to my inn.”

A chorus of voices greeted his words. They would not hear of his going, — at least not without first partaking of refreshment. They produced pumpernickel from one cupboard, and rye-bread and sausage from another, and all began to talk again and eat. More coffee was made, fresh cigars lighted, and Bruder Meyer took out his violin and began to tune it softly.

“There is always a bed upstairs if Herr Harris will accept it,” said one.

“And it is difficult to find the way out now, for all the doors are locked,” laughed another loudly.

“Let us take our simple pleasures as they come,” cried a third. “Bruder Harris will understand how we appreciate the honour of this last visit of his.”

They made a dozen excuses. They all laughed, as though the politeness of their words was but formal, and veiled thinly — more and more thinly — a very different meaning.

“And the hour of midnight draws near,” added Bruder Kalkmann with a charming smile, but in a voice that sounded to the Englishman like the grating of iron hinges.

Their German seemed to him more and more difficult to understand. He noted that they called him “Bruder” too, classing him as one of themselves.

And then suddenly he had a flash of keener perception, and realised with a creeping of his flesh that he had all along misinterpreted — grossly misinterpreted all they had been saying. They had talked about the beauty of the place, its isolation and remoteness from the world, its peculiar fitness for certain kinds of spiritual development and worship — yet hardly, he now grasped, in the sense in which he had taken the words. They had meant something different. Their spiritual powers, their desire for loneliness, their passion for worship, were not the powers, the solitude, or the worship that *he* meant and understood. He was playing a part in some horrible masquerade; he was among men who cloaked their lives with religion in order to follow their real purposes unseen of men.

What did it all mean? How had he blundered into so equivocal a situation? Had he blundered into it at all? Had he not rather been led into it, deliberately led? His thoughts grew dreadfully confused, and his confidence in himself began to fade. And why, he suddenly thought again, were they so impressed by the mere fact of his coming to revisit his old school? What was it they so admired and wondered at in his simple act? Why did they set such store upon his having the courage to come, to “give himself so freely,” "unconditionally" as one of them had expressed it with such a mockery of exaggeration?

Fear stirred in his heart most horribly, and he found no answer to any of his questionings. Only one thing he now understood quite clearly: it was their purpose to keep him here. They did not intend that he should go. And from this moment he realised that they were sinister, formidable and, in some way he had yet to discover, inimical to himself, inimical to his life. And the phrase one of them had used a moment ago— "this *last* visit of his" — rose before his eyes in letters of flame.

Harris was not a man of action, and had never known in all the course of his career what it meant to be in a situation of real danger. He was not necessarily a coward, though, perhaps, a man of untried nerve. He realised at last plainly that he was in a very awkward predicament indeed, and that he had to deal with men who were utterly in earnest. What their intentions were he only vaguely guessed. His mind, indeed, was too confused for definite ratiocination, and he was only able to follow blindly the strongest instincts that moved in him. It never occurred to him that the Brothers might all be mad, or that he himself might have temporarily lost his senses and be suffering under some terrible delusion. In fact, nothing occurred to him — he realised nothing — except that he meant to escape — and the quicker the better. A tremendous revulsion of feeling set in and overpowered him.

Accordingly, without further protest for the moment, he ate his pumpernickel and drank his coffee, talking meanwhile as naturally and pleasantly as he could, and when a suitable interval had passed, he rose to his feet and announced once more that he must now take his leave. He spoke very quietly, but very decidedly. No one hearing him could doubt that he meant what he said. He had got very close to the door by this time.

"I regret," he said, using his best German, and speaking to a hushed room, "that our pleasant evening must come to an end, but it is now time for me to wish you all good-night." And then, as no one said anything, he added, though with a trifle less assurance, "And I thank you all most sincerely for your hospitality."

"On the contrary," replied Kalkmann instantly, rising from his chair and ignoring the hand the Englishman had stretched out to him, "it is we who have to thank you; and we do so most gratefully and sincerely."

And at the same moment at least half a dozen of the Brothers took up their position between himself and the door.

"You are very good to say so," Harris replied as firmly as he could manage, noticing this movement out of the corner of his eye, "but really I had no conception that — my little chance visit could have afforded you so much pleasure." He moved another step nearer the door, but Bruder Schliemann came across the room quickly and stood in front of him. His attitude was uncompromising. A dark and terrible expression had come into his face.

"But it was *not* by chance that you came, Bruder Harris," he said so that all the room could hear; "surely we have not misunderstood your presence here?" He raised his black eyebrows.

"No, no," the Englishman hastened to reply. "I was — I am delighted to be here. I told you what pleasure it gave me to find myself among you. Do not misunderstand me, I beg." His voice faltered a little, and he had difficulty in finding the words. More and more, too, he had difficulty in understanding *their* words.

"Of course," interposed Bruder Kalkmann in his iron bass, "*we* have not misunderstood. You have come back in the spirit of true and unselfish devotion. You offer yourself freely, and we all appreciate it. It is your willingness and nobility that have so completely won our veneration and respect." A faint murmur of applause ran round the room. "What we all delight in — what our great Master will especially delight in — is the value of your spontaneous and voluntary — —"

He used a word Harris did not understand. He said "*Opfer*." The bewildered Englishman searched his brain for the translation, and searched in vain. For the life of him he could not remember what it meant. But the word, for all his inability to translate it, touched his soul with ice. It was worse, far worse, than anything he had imagined. He felt like a lost, helpless creature, and all power to fight sank out of him from that moment.

"It is magnificent to be such a willing — —" added Schliemann, sidling up to him with a dreadful leer on his face. He made use of the same word— "*Opfer*."

God! What could it all mean? “Offer himself!” “True spirit of devotion!” “Willing,” “unselfish,” “magnificent!” *Opfer, Opfer, Opfer!* What in the name of heaven did it mean, that strange, mysterious word that struck such terror into his heart?

He made a valiant effort to keep his presence of mind and hold his nerves steady. Turning, he saw that Kalkmann’s face was a dead white. Kalkmann! He understood that well enough. *Kalkmann* meant “Man of Chalk”; he knew that. But what did “*Opfer*” mean? That was the real key to the situation. Words poured through his disordered mind in an endless stream — unusual, rare words he had perhaps heard but once in his life — while “*Opfer*,” a word in common use, entirely escaped him. What an extraordinary mockery it all was!

Then Kalkmann, pale as death, but his face hard as iron, spoke a few low words that he did not catch, and the Brothers standing by the walls at once turned the lamps down so that the room became dim. In the half light he could only just discern their faces and movements.

“It is time,” he heard Kalkmann’s remorseless voice continue just behind him. “The hour of midnight is at hand. Let us prepare. He comes! He comes; Bruder Asmodelius comes!” His voice rose to a chant.

And the sound of that name, for some extraordinary reason, was terrible — utterly terrible; so that Harris shook from head to foot as he heard it. Its utterance filled the air like soft thunder, and a hush came over the whole room. Forces rose all about him, transforming the normal into the horrible, and the spirit of craven fear ran through all his being, bringing him to the verge of collapse.

Asmodelius! Asmodelius! The name was appalling. For he understood at last to whom it referred and the meaning that lay between its great syllables. At the same instant, too, he suddenly understood the meaning of that unremembered word. The import of the word “*Opfer*” flashed upon his soul like a message of death.

He thought of making a wild effort to reach the door, but the weakness of his trembling knees, and the row of black figures that stood between, dissuaded him at once. He would have screamed for help, but remembering the emptiness of the vast building, and the loneliness of the situation, he understood that no help could come that way, and he kept his lips closed. He stood still and did nothing. But he knew now what was coming.

Two of the brothers approached and took him gently by the arm.

“Bruder Asmodelius accepts you,” they whispered; “are you ready?”

Then he found his tongue and tried to speak. “But what have I to do with this Bruder Asm — Asmo —— ?” he stammered, a desperate rush of words crowding vainly behind the halting tongue.

The name refused to pass his lips. He could not pronounce it as they did. He could not pronounce it at all. His sense of helplessness then entered the acute stage, for this inability to speak the name produced a fresh sense of quite horrible confusion in his mind, and he became extraordinarily agitated.

“I came here for a friendly visit,” he tried to say with a great effort, but, to his intense dismay, he heard his voice saying something quite different, and actually making use of that very word they had all used: “I came here as a willing *Opfer*,” he heard his own voice say, “and *I am quite ready*.”

He was lost beyond all recall now! Not alone his mind, but the very muscles of his body had passed out of control. He felt that he was hovering on the confines of a phantom or demon-world, — a world in which the name they had spoken constituted the Master-name, the word of ultimate power.

What followed he heard and saw as in a nightmare.

“In the half light that veils all truth, let us prepare to worship and adore,” chanted Schliemann, who had preceded him to the end of the room.

“In the mists that protect our faces before the Black Throne, let us make ready the willing victim,” echoed Kalkmann in his great bass.

They raised their faces, listening expectantly, as a roaring sound, like the passing of mighty projectiles, filled the air, far, far away, very wonderful, very forbidding. The walls of the room trembled.

“He comes! He comes! He comes!” chanted the Brothers in chorus.

The sound of roaring died away, and an atmosphere of still and utter cold established itself over all. Then Kalkmann, dark and unutterably stern, turned in the dim light and faced the rest.

“Asmodelius, our *Hauptbruder*, is about us,” he cried in a voice that even while it shook was yet a voice of iron; “Asmodelius is about us. Make ready.”

There followed a pause in which no one stirred or spoke. A tall Brother approached the Englishman; but Kalkmann held up his hand.

“Let the eyes remain uncovered,” he said, “in honour of so freely giving himself.” And to his horror Harris then realised for the first time that his hands were already fastened to his sides.

The Brother retreated again silently, and in the pause that followed all the figures about him dropped to their knees, leaving him standing alone, and as they dropped, in voices hushed with mingled reverence and awe, they cried softly, odiously, appallingly, the name of the Being whom they momentarily expected to appear.

Then, at the end of the room, where the windows seemed to have disappeared so that he saw the stars, there rose into view far up against the night sky, grand and terrible, the outline of a man. A kind of grey glory enveloped it so that it resembled a steel-cased statue, immense, imposing, horrific in its distant splendour; while, at the same time, the face was so spiritually mighty, yet so proudly, so austerely sad, that Harris felt as he stared, that the sight was more than his eyes could meet, and that in another moment the power of vision would fail him altogether, and he must sink into utter nothingness.

So remote and inaccessible hung this figure that it was impossible to gauge anything as to its size, yet at the same time so strangely close, that when the grey radiance from its mightily broken visage, august and mournful, beat down upon his soul, pulsing like some dark star with the powers of spiritual evil, he felt almost as though he were looking into a face no farther removed from him in space than the face of any one of the Brothers who stood by his side.

And then the room filled and trembled with sounds that Harris understood full well were the failing voices of others who had preceded him in a long series down the years. There came first a plain, sharp cry, as of a man in the last anguish, choking for his breath, and yet, with the very final expiration of it, breathing the name of the Worship — of the dark Being who rejoiced to hear it. The cries of the strangled; the short, running gasp of the suffocated; and the smothered gurgling of the tightened throat, all these, and more, echoed back and forth between the walls, the very walls in which he now stood a prisoner, a sacrificial victim. The cries, too, not alone of the broken bodies, but — far worse — of beaten, broken souls. And as the ghastly chorus rose and fell, there came also the faces of the lost and unhappy creatures to whom they belonged, and, against that curtain of pale grey light, he saw float past him in the air, an array of white and piteous human countenances that seemed to beckon and gibber at him as though he were already one of themselves.

Slowly, too, as the voices rose, and the pallid crew sailed past, that giant form of grey descended from the sky and approached the room that contained the worshippers and their prisoner. Hands rose and sank about him in the darkness, and he felt that he was being draped in other garments than his own; a circlet of ice seemed to run about his head, while round the waist, enclosing the fastened arms, he felt a girdle tightly drawn. At last, about his very throat, there ran a soft and silken touch which, better than if there had been full light, and a mirror held to his face, he understood to be the cord of sacrifice — and of death.

At this moment the Brothers, still prostrate upon the floor, began again their mournful, yet impassioned chanting, and as they did so a strange thing happened. For, apparently without moving or altering its position, the huge Figure seemed, at once and suddenly, to be inside the room, almost beside him, and to fill the space around him to the exclusion of all else.

He was now beyond all ordinary sensations of fear, only a drab feeling as of death — the death of the soul — stirred in his heart. His thoughts no longer even beat vainly for escape. The end was near, and he knew it.

The dreadfully chanting voices rose about him in a wave: “We worship! We adore! We offer!” The sounds filled his ears and hammered, almost meaningless, upon his brain.

Then the majestic grey face turned slowly downwards upon him, and his very soul passed outwards and seemed to become absorbed in the sea of those anguished eyes. At the same moment a dozen hands forced him to his knees, and in the air before him he saw the arm of Kalkmann upraised, and felt the pressure about his throat grow strong.

It was in this awful moment, when he had given up all hope, and the help of gods or men seemed beyond question, that a strange thing happened. For before his fading and terrified vision, there slid, as in a dream of light, — yet without apparent rhyme or reason — wholly unbidden and unexplained, — the face of that other man at the supper table of the railway inn. And the sight, even mentally, of that strong, wholesome, vigorous English face, inspired him suddenly with a new courage.

It was but a flash of fading vision before he sank into a dark and terrible death, yet, in some inexplicable way, the sight of that face stirred in him unconquerable hope and the certainty of deliverance. It was a face of power, a face, he now realised, of simple goodness such as might have been seen by men of old on the shores of Galilee; a face, by heaven, that could conquer even the devils of outer space.

And, in his despair and abandonment, he called upon it, and called with no uncertain accents. He found his voice in this overwhelming moment to some purpose; though the words he actually used, and whether they were in German or English, he could never remember. Their effect, nevertheless, was instantaneous. The Brothers understood, and that grey Figure of evil understood.

For a second the confusion was terrific. There came a great shattering sound. It seemed that the very earth trembled. But all Harris remembered afterwards was that voices rose about him in the clamour of terrified alarm —

“A man of power is among us! A man of God!”

The vast sound was repeated — the rushing through space as of huge projectiles — and he sank to the floor of the room, unconscious. The entire scene had vanished, vanished like smoke over the roof of a cottage when the wind blows.

And, by his side, sat down a slight, un-German figure, — the figure of the stranger at the inn, — the man who had the “rather wonderful eyes.”

When Harris came to himself he felt cold. He was lying under the open sky, and the cool air of field and forest was blowing upon his face. He sat up and looked about him. The memory of the late scene was still horribly in his mind, but no vestige of it remained. No walls or ceiling enclosed him; he was no longer in a room at all. There were no lamps turned low, no cigar smoke, no black forms of sinister worshippers, no tremendous grey Figure hovering beyond the windows.

Open space was about him, and he was lying on a pile of bricks and mortar, his clothes soaked with dew, and the kind stars shining brightly overhead. He was lying, bruised and shaken, among the heaped-up débris of a ruined building.

He stood up and stared about him. There, in the shadowy distance, lay the surrounding forest, and here, close at hand, stood the outline of the village buildings. But, underfoot, beyond question, lay nothing but the broken heaps of stones that betokened a building long since crumbled to dust. Then he saw that the stones were blackened, and that great wooden beams, half burnt, half rotten, made lines through the general débris. He stood, then, among the ruins of a burnt and shattered building, the weeds and nettles proving conclusively that it had lain thus for many years.

The moon had already set behind the encircling forest, but the stars that spangled the heavens threw enough light to enable him to make quite sure of what he saw. Harris, the silk merchant, stood among these broken and burnt stones and shivered.

Then he suddenly became aware that out of the gloom a figure had risen and stood beside him. Peering at him, he thought he recognised the face of the stranger at the railway inn.

“Are *you* real?” he asked in a voice he hardly recognised as his own.

“More than real — I’m friendly,” replied the stranger; “I followed you up here from the inn.”

Harris stood and stared for several minutes without adding anything. His teeth chattered. The least sound made him start; but the simple words in his own language, and the tone in which they were uttered, comforted him inconceivably.

“You’re English too, thank God,” he said inconsequently. “These German devils — —” He broke off and put a hand to his eyes. “But what’s become of them all — and the room — and — and — —” The hand travelled down to his throat and moved nervously round his neck. He drew a long, long breath of relief. “Did I dream everything — everything?” he said distractedly.

He stared wildly about him, and the stranger moved forward and took his arm. “Come,” he said soothingly, yet with a trace of command in the voice, “we will move away from here. The high-road, or even the woods will be more to your taste, for we are standing now on one of the most haunted — and most terribly haunted — spots of the whole world.”

He guided his companion’s stumbling footsteps over the broken masonry until they reached the path, the nettles stinging their hands, and Harris feeling his way like a man in a dream. Passing through the twisted iron railing they reached the path, and thence made their way to the road, shining white in the night. Once safely out of the ruins, Harris collected himself and turned to look back.

“But, how is it possible?” he exclaimed, his voice still shaking. “How can it be possible? When I came in here I saw the building in the moonlight. They opened the door. I saw the figures and heard the voices and touched, yes touched their very hands, and saw their damned black faces, saw them far more plainly than I see you now.” He was deeply bewildered. The glamour was still upon his eyes with a degree of reality stronger than the reality even of normal life. “Was I so utterly deluded?”

Then suddenly the words of the stranger, which he had only half heard or understood, returned to him.

“Haunted?” he asked, looking hard at him; “haunted, did you say?” He paused in the roadway and stared into the darkness where the building of the old school had first appeared to him. But the stranger hurried him forward.

“We shall talk more safely farther on,” he said. “I followed you from the inn the moment I realised where you had gone. When I found you it was eleven o’clock — —”

“Eleven o’clock,” said Harris, remembering with a shudder.

“ —— I saw you drop. I watched over you till you recovered consciousness of your own accord, and now — now I am here to guide you safely back to the inn. I have broken the spell — the glamour — —”

"I owe you a great deal, sir," interrupted Harris again, beginning to understand something of the stranger's kindness, "but I don't understand it all. I feel dazed and shaken." His teeth still chattered, and spells of violent shivering passed over him from head to foot. He found that he was clinging to the other's arm. In this way they passed beyond the deserted and crumbling village and gained the high-road that led homewards through the forest.

"That school building has long been in ruins," said the man at his side presently; "it was burnt down by order of the Elders of the community at least ten years ago. The village has been uninhabited ever since. But the simulacra of certain ghastly events that took place under that roof in past days still continue. And the 'shells' of the chief participants still enact there the dreadful deeds that led to its final destruction, and to the desertion of the whole settlement. They were devil-worshippers!"

Harris listened with beads of perspiration on his forehead that did not come alone from their leisurely pace through the cool night. Although he had seen this man but once before in his life, and had never before exchanged so much as a word with him, he felt a degree of confidence and a subtle sense of safety and well-being in his presence that were the most healing influences he could possibly have wished after the experience he had been through. For all that, he still felt as if he were walking in a dream, and though he heard every word that fell from his companion's lips, it was only the next day that the full import of all he said became fully clear to him. The presence of this quiet stranger, the man with the wonderful eyes which he felt now, rather than saw, applied a soothing anodyne to his shattered spirit that healed him through and through. And this healing influence, distilled from the dark figure at his side, satisfied his first imperative need, so that he almost forgot to realise how strange and opportune it was that the man should be there at all.

It somehow never occurred to him to ask his name, or to feel any undue wonder that one passing tourist should take so much trouble on behalf of another. He just walked by his side, listening to his quiet words, and allowing himself to enjoy the very wonderful experience after his recent ordeal, of being helped, strengthened, blessed. Only once, remembering vaguely something of his reading of years ago, he turned to the man beside him, after some more than usually remarkable words, and heard himself, almost involuntarily it seemed, putting the question: “Then are you a Rosicrucian, sir, perhaps?” But the stranger had ignored the words, or possibly not heard them, for he continued with his talk as though unconscious of any interruption, and Harris became aware that another somewhat unusual picture had taken possession of his mind, as they walked there side by side through the cool reaches of the forest, and that he had found his imagination suddenly charged with the childhood memory of Jacob wrestling with an angel, — wrestling all night with a being of superior quality whose strength eventually became his own.

“It was your abrupt conversation with the priest at supper that first put me upon the track of this remarkable occurrence,” he heard the man’s quiet voice beside him in the darkness, “and it was from him I learned after you left the story of the devil-worship that became secretly established in the heart of this simple and devout little community.”

“Devil-worship! Here —— !” Harris stammered, aghast.

“Yes — here; — conducted secretly for years by a group of Brothers before unexplained disappearances in the neighbourhood led to its discovery. For where could they have found a safer place in the whole wide world for their ghastly traffic and perverted powers than here, in the very precincts — under cover of the very shadow of saintliness and holy living?”

“Awful, awful!” whispered the silk merchant, “and when I tell you the words they used to me — —”

“I know it all,” the stranger said quietly. “I saw and heard everything. My plan first was to wait till the end and then to take steps for their destruction, but in the interest of your personal safety,” — he spoke with the utmost gravity and conviction,— “in the interest of the safety of your soul, I made my presence known when I did, and before the conclusion had been reached — —”

“My safety! The danger, then, was real. They were alive and — —” Words failed him. He stopped in the road and turned towards his companion, the shining of whose eyes he could just make out in the gloom.

“It was a concourse of the shells of violent men, spiritually-developed but evil men, seeking after death — the death of the body — to prolong their vile and unnatural existence. And had they accomplished their object you, in turn, at the death of your body, would have passed into their power and helped to swell their dreadful purposes.”

Harris made no reply. He was trying hard to concentrate his mind upon the sweet and common things of life. He even thought of silk and St. Paul’s Churchyard and the faces of his partners in business.

“For you came all prepared to be caught,” he heard the other’s voice like some one talking to him from a distance; “your deeply introspective mood had already reconstructed the past so vividly, so intensely, that you were *en rapport* at once with any forces of those days that chanced still to be lingering. And they swept you up all unresistingly.”

Harris tightened his hold upon the stranger’s arm as he heard. At the moment he had room for one emotion only. It did not seem to him odd that this stranger should have such intimate knowledge of his mind.

“It is, alas, chiefly the evil emotions that are able to leave their photographs upon surrounding scenes and objects,” the other added, “and who ever heard of a place haunted by a noble deed, or of beautiful and lovely ghosts revisiting the glimpses of the moon? It is unfortunate. But the wicked passions of men’s hearts alone seem strong enough to leave pictures that persist; the good are ever too lukewarm.”

The stranger sighed as he spoke. But Harris, exhausted and shaken as he was to the very core, paced by his side, only half listening. He moved as in a dream still. It was very wonderful to him, this walk home under the stars in the early hours of the October morning, the peaceful forest all about them, mist rising here and there over the small clearings, and the sound of water from a hundred little invisible streams filling in the pauses of the talk. In after life he always looked back to it as something magical and impossible, something that had seemed too beautiful, too curiously beautiful, to have been quite true. And, though at the time he heard and understood but a quarter of what the stranger said, it came back to him afterwards, staying with him till the end of his days, and always with a curious, haunting sense of unreality, as though he had enjoyed a wonderful dream of which he could recall only faint and exquisite portions.

But the horror of the earlier experience was effectually dispelled; and when they reached the railway inn, somewhere about three o’clock in the morning, Harris shook the stranger’s hand gratefully, effusively, meeting the look of those rather wonderful eyes with a full heart, and went up to his room, thinking in a hazy, dream-like way of the words with which the stranger had brought their conversation to an end as they left the confines of the forest —

“And if thought and emotion can persist in this way so long after the brain that sent them forth has crumbled into dust, how vitally important it must be to control their very birth in the heart, and guard them with the keenest possible restraint.”

But Harris, the silk merchant, slept better than might have been expected, and with a soundness that carried him half-way through the day. And when he came downstairs and learned that the stranger had already taken his departure, he realised with keen regret that he had never once thought of asking his name.

“Yes, he signed in the visitors’ book,” said the girl in reply to his question.

And he turned over the blotted pages and found there, the last entry, in a very delicate and individual handwriting —

“*John Silence*, London.”

CASE V. THE CAMP OF THE DOG

I

ISLANDS OF ALL shapes and sizes troop northward from Stockholm by the hundred, and the little steamer that threads their intricate mazes in summer leaves the traveller in a somewhat bewildered state as regards the points of the compass when it reaches the end of its journey at Waxholm. But it is only after Waxholm that the true islands begin, so to speak, to run wild, and start up the coast on their tangled course of a hundred miles of deserted loveliness, and it was in the very heart of this delightful confusion that we pitched our tents for a summer holiday. A veritable wilderness of islands lay about us: from the mere round button of a rock that bore a single fir, to the mountainous stretch of a square mile, densely wooded, and bounded by precipitous cliffs; so close together often that a strip of water ran between no wider than a country lane, or, again, so far that an expanse stretched like the open sea for miles.

Although the larger islands boasted farms and fishing stations, the majority were uninhabited. Carpeted with moss and heather, their coast-lines showed a series of ravines and clefts and little sandy bays, with a growth of splendid pine-woods that came down to the water's edge and led the eye through unknown depths of shadow and mystery into the very heart of primitive forest.

The particular islands to which we had camping rights by virtue of paying a nominal sum to a Stockholm merchant lay together in a picturesque group far beyond the reach of the steamer, one being a mere reef with a fringe of fairy-like birches, and two others, cliff-bound monsters rising with wooded heads out of the sea. The fourth, which we selected because it enclosed a little lagoon suitable for anchorage, bathing, night-lines, and what-not, shall have what description is necessary as the story proceeds; but, so far as paying rent was concerned, we might equally well have pitched our tents on any one of a hundred others that clustered about us as thickly as a swarm of bees.

It was in the blaze of an evening in July, the air clear as crystal, the sea a cobalt blue, when we left the steamer on the borders of civilisation and sailed away with maps, compasses, and provisions for the little group of dots in the Skärgård that were to be our home for the next two months. The dinghy and my Canadian canoe trailed behind us, with tents and dunnage carefully piled aboard, and when the point of cliff intervened to hide the steamer and the Waxholm hotel we realised for the first time that the horror of trains and houses was far behind us, the fever of men and cities, the weariness of streets and confined spaces. The wilderness opened up on all sides into endless blue reaches, and the map and compasses were so frequently called into requisition that we went astray more often than not and progress was enchantingly slow. It took us, for instance, two whole days to find our crescent-shaped home, and the camps we made on the way were so fascinating that we left them with difficulty and regret, for each island seemed more desirable than the one before it, and over all lay the spell of haunting peace, remoteness from the turmoil of the world, and the freedom of open and desolate spaces.

And so many of these spots of world-beauty have I sought out and dwelt in, that in my mind remains only a composite memory of their faces, a true map of heaven, as it were, from which this particular one stands forth with unusual sharpness because of the strange things that happened there, and also, I think, because anything in which John Silence played a part has a habit of fixing itself in the mind with a living and lasting quality of vividness.

For the moment, however, Dr. Silence was not of the party. Some private case in the interior of Hungary claimed his attention, and it was not till later — the 15th of August, to be exact — that I had arranged to meet him in Berlin and then return to London together for our harvest of winter work. All the members of our party, however, were known to him more or less well, and on this third day as we sailed through the narrow opening into the lagoon and saw the circular ridge of trees in a gold and crimson sunset before us, his last words to me when we parted in London for some unaccountable reason came back very sharply to my memory, and recalled the curious impression of prophecy with which I had first heard them:

“Enjoy your holiday and store up all the force you can,” he had said as the train slipped out of Victoria; “and we will meet in Berlin on the 15th —

unless you should send for me sooner."

And now suddenly the words returned to me so clearly that it seemed I almost heard his voice in my ear: "Unless you should send for me sooner;" and returned, moreover, with a significance I was wholly at a loss to understand that touched somewhere in the depths of my mind a vague sense of apprehension that they had all along been intended in the nature of a prophecy.

In the lagoon, then, the wind failed us this July evening, as was only natural behind the shelter of the belt of woods, and we took to the oars, all breathless with the beauty of this first sight of our island home, yet all talking in somewhat hushed voices of the best place to land, the depth of water, the safest place to anchor, to put up the tents in, the most sheltered spot for the camp-fires, and a dozen things of importance that crop up when a home in the wilderness has actually to be made.

And during this busy sunset hour of unloading before the dark, the souls of my companions adopted the trick of presenting themselves very vividly anew before my mind, and introducing themselves afresh.

In reality, I suppose, our party was in no sense singular. In the conventional life at home they certainly seemed ordinary enough, but suddenly, as we passed through these gates of the wilderness, I saw them more sharply than before, with characters stripped of the atmosphere of men and cities. A complete change of setting often furnishes a startlingly new view of people hitherto held for well-known; they present another facet of their personalities. I seemed to see my own party almost as new people — people I had not known properly hitherto, people who would drop all disguises and henceforth reveal themselves as they really were. And each one seemed to say: "Now you will see me as I am. You will see me here in this primitive life of the wilderness without clothes. All my masks and veils I have left behind in the abodes of men. So, look out for surprises!"

The Reverend Timothy Maloney helped me to put up the tents, long practice making the process easy, and while he drove in pegs and tightened ropes, his coat off, his flannel collar flying open without a tie, it was impossible to avoid the conclusion that he was cut out for the life of a pioneer rather than the church. He was fifty years of age, muscular, blue-eyed and hearty, and he took his share of the work, and more, without shirking. The way he handled the axe in cutting down saplings for the tent-poles was a delight to see, and his eye in judging the level was unfailing.

Bullied as a young man into a lucrative family living, he had in turn bullied his mind into some semblance of orthodox beliefs, doing the honours of the little country church with an energy that made one think of a coal-heaver tending china; and it was only in the past few years that he had resigned the living and taken instead to cramming young men for their examinations. This suited him better. It enabled him, too, to indulge his passion for spells of "wild life," and to spend the summer months of most years under canvas in one part of the world or another where he could take his young men with him and combine "reading" with open air.

His wife usually accompanied him, and there was no doubt she enjoyed the trips, for she possessed, though in less degree, the same joy of the wilderness that was his own distinguishing characteristic. The only difference was that while he regarded it as the real life, she regarded it as an interlude. While he camped out with his heart and mind, she played at camping out with her clothes and body. None the less, she made a splendid companion, and to watch her busy cooking dinner over the fire we had built among the stones was to understand that her heart was in the business for the moment and that she was happy even with the detail.

Mrs. Maloney at home, knitting in the sun and believing that the world was made in six days, was one woman; but Mrs. Maloney, standing with bare arms over the smoke of a wood fire under the pine trees, was another; and Peter Sangree, the Canadian pupil, with his pale skin, and his loose, though not ungainly figure, stood beside her in very unfavourable contrast as he scraped potatoes and sliced bacon with slender white fingers that seemed better suited to hold a pen than a knife. She ordered him about like a slave, and he obeyed, too, with willing pleasure, for in spite of his general appearance of debility he was as happy to be in camp as any of them.

But more than any other member of the party, Joan Maloney, the daughter, was the one who seemed a natural and genuine part of the landscape, who belonged to it all just in the same way that the trees and the moss and the grey rocks running out into the water belonged to it. For she was obviously in her right and natural setting, a creature of the wilds, a gipsy in her own home.

To any one with a discerning eye this would have been more or less apparent, but to me, who had known her during all the twenty-two years of her life and was familiar with the ins and outs of her primitive, utterly unmodern type, it was strikingly clear. To see her there made it impossible to imagine her again in civilisation. I lost all recollection of how she looked in a town. The memory somehow evaporated. This slim creature before me, flitting to and fro with the grace of the woodland life, swift, supple, adroit, on her knees blowing the fire, or stirring the frying-pan through a veil of smoke, suddenly seemed the only way I had ever really seen her. Here she was at home; in London she became some one concealed by clothes, an artificial doll overdressed and moving by clockwork, only a portion of her alive. Here she was alive all over.

I forget altogether how she was dressed, just as I forget how any particular tree was dressed, or how the markings ran on any one of the boulders that lay about the Camp. She looked just as wild and natural and untamed as everything else that went to make up the scene, and more than that I cannot say.

Pretty, she was decidedly not. She was thin, skinny, dark-haired, and possessed of great physical strength in the form of endurance. She had, too, something of the force and vigorous purpose of a man, tempestuous sometimes and wild to passionate, frightening her mother, and puzzling her easy-going father with her storms of waywardness, while at the same time she stirred his admiration by her violence. A pagan of the pagans she was besides, and with some haunting suggestion of old-world pagan beauty about her dark face and eyes. Altogether an odd and difficult character, but with a generosity and high courage that made her very lovable.

In town life she always seemed to me to feel cramped, bored, a devil in a cage, in her eyes a hunted expression as though any moment she dreaded to be caught. But up in these spacious solitudes all this disappeared. Away from the limitations that plagued and stung her, she would show at her best, and as I watched her moving about the Camp I repeatedly found myself thinking of a wild creature that had just obtained its freedom and was trying its muscles.

Peter Sangree, of course, at once went down before her. But she was so obviously beyond his reach, and besides so well able to take care of herself, that I think her parents gave the matter but little thought, and he himself worshipped at a respectful distance, keeping admirable control of his passion in all respects save one; for at his age the eyes are difficult to master, and the yearning, almost the devouring, expression often visible in them was probably there unknown even to himself. He, better than any one else, understood that he had fallen in love with something most hard of attainment, something that drew him to the very edge of life, and almost beyond it. It, no doubt, was a secret and terrible joy to him, this passionate worship from afar; only I think he suffered more than any one guessed, and that his want of vitality was due in large measure to the constant stream of unsatisfied yearning that poured for ever from his soul and body. Moreover, it seemed to me, who now saw them for the first time together, that there was an unnamable something — an elusive quality of some kind — that marked them as belonging to the same world, and that although the girl ignored him she was secretly, and perhaps unknown to herself, drawn by some attribute very deep in her own nature to some quality equally deep in his.

This, then, was the party when we first settled down into our two months’ camp on the island in the Baltic Sea. Other figures flitted from time to time across the scene, and sometimes one reading man, sometimes another, came to join us and spend his four hours a day in the clergyman’s tent, but they came for short periods only, and they went without leaving much trace in my memory, and certainly they played no important part in what subsequently happened.

The weather favoured us that night, so that by sunset the tents were up, the boats unloaded, a store of wood collected and chopped into lengths, and the candle-lanterns hung round ready for lighting on the trees. Sangree, too, had picked deep mattresses of balsam boughs for the women’s beds, and had cleared little paths of brushwood from their tents to the central fireplace. All was prepared for bad weather. It was a cosy supper and a well-cooked one that we sat down to and ate under the stars, and, according to the clergyman, the only meal fit to eat we had seen since we left London a week before.

The deep stillness, after that roar of steamers, trains, and tourists, held something that thrilled, for as we lay round the fire there was no sound but the faint sighing of the pines and the soft lapping of the waves along the shore and against the sides of the boat in the lagoon. The ghostly outline of her white sails was just visible through the trees, idly rocking to and fro in her calm anchorage, her sheets flapping gently against the mast. Beyond lay the dim blue shapes of other islands floating in the night, and from all the great spaces about us came the murmur of the sea and the soft breathing of great woods. The odours of the wilderness — smells of wind and earth, of trees and water, clean, vigorous, and mighty — were the true odours of a virgin world unspoilt by men, more penetrating and more subtly intoxicating than any other perfume in the whole world. Oh! — and dangerously strong, too, no doubt, for some natures!

"Ahhh!" breathed out the clergyman after supper, with an indescribable gesture of satisfaction and relief. "Here there is freedom, and room for body and mind to turn in. Here one can work and rest and play. Here one can be alive and absorb something of the earth-forces that never get within touching-distance in the cities. By George, I shall make a permanent camp here and come when it is time to die!"

The good man was merely giving vent to his delight at being under canvas. He said the same thing every year, and he said it often. But it more or less expressed the superficial feelings of us all. And when, a little later, he turned to compliment his wife on the fried potatoes, and discovered that she was snoring, with her back against a tree, he grunted with content at the sight and put a ground-sheet over her feet, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to fall asleep after dinner, and then moved back to his own corner, smoking his pipe with great satisfaction.

And I, smoking mine too, lay and fought against the most delicious sleep imaginable, while my eyes wandered from the fire to the stars peeping through the branches, and then back again to the group about me. The Rev. Timothy soon let his pipe go out, and succumbed as his wife had done, for he had worked hard and eaten well. Sangree, also smoking, leaned against a tree with his gaze fixed on the girl, a depth of yearning in his face that he could not hide, and that really distressed me for him. And Joan herself, with wide staring eyes, alert, full of the new forces of the place, evidently keyed up by the magic of finding herself among all the things her soul recognised as "home," sat rigid by the fire, her thoughts roaming through the spaces, the blood stirring about her heart. She was as unconscious of the Canadian's gaze as she was that her parents both slept. She looked to me more like a tree, or something that had grown out of the island, than a living girl of the century; and when I spoke across to her in a whisper and suggested a tour of investigation, she started and looked up at me as though she heard a voice in her dreams.

Sangree leaped up and joined us, and without waking the others we three went over the ridge of the island and made our way down to the shore behind. The water lay like a lake before us still coloured by the sunset. The air was keen and scented, wafting the smell of the wooded islands that hung about us in the darkening air. Very small waves tumbled softly on the sand. The sea was sown with stars, and everywhere breathed and pulsed the beauty of the northern summer night. I confess I speedily lost consciousness of the human presences beside me, and I have little doubt Joan did too. Only Sangree felt otherwise, I suppose for presently we heard him sighing; and I can well imagine that he absorbed the whole wonder and passion of the scene into his aching heart, to swell the pain there that was more searching even than the pain at the sight of such matchless and incomprehensible beauty.

The splash of a fish jumping broke the spell.

“I wish we had the canoe now,” remarked Joan; “we could paddle out to the other islands.”

“Of course,” I said; “wait here and I’ll go across for it,” and was turning to feel my way back through the darkness when she stopped me in a voice that meant what it said.

“No; Mr. Sangree will get it. We will wait here and cooee to guide him.”

The Canadian was off in a moment, for she had only to hint of her wishes and he obeyed.

“Keep out from shore in case of rocks,” I cried out as he went, “and turn to the right out of the lagoon. That’s the shortest way round by the map.”

My voice travelled across the still waters and woke echoes in the distant islands that came back to us like people calling out of space. It was only thirty or forty yards over the ridge and down the other side to the lagoon where the boats lay, but it was a good mile to coast round the shore in the dark to where we stood and waited. We heard him stumbling away among the boulders, and then the sounds suddenly ceased as he topped the ridge and went down past the fire on the other side.

“I didn’t want to be left alone with him” the girl said presently in a low voice. “I’m always afraid he’s going to say or do something — —” She hesitated a moment, looking quickly over her shoulder towards the ridge where he had just disappeared— “something that might lead to unpleasantness.”

She stopped abruptly.

“*You* frightened, Joan!” I exclaimed, with genuine surprise. “This is a new light on your wicked character. I thought the human being who could frighten you did not exist.” Then I suddenly realised she was talking seriously — looking to me for help of some kind — and at once I dropped the teasing attitude.

“He’s very far gone, I think, Joan,” I added gravely. “You must be kind to him, whatever else you may feel. He’s exceedingly fond of you.”

“I know, but I can’t help it,” she whispered, lest her voice should carry in the stillness; “there’s something about him that — that makes me feel creepy and half afraid.”

“But, poor man, it’s not his fault if he is delicate and sometimes looks like death,” I laughed gently, by way of defending what I felt to be a very innocent member of my sex.

“Oh, but it’s not that I mean,” she answered quickly; “it’s something I feel about him, something in his soul, something he hardly knows himself, but that may come out if we are much together. It draws me, I feel, tremendously. It stirs what is wild in me — deep down — oh, very deep down, — yet at the same time makes me feel afraid.”

“I suppose his thoughts are always playing about you,” I said, “but he’s nice-minded and — —”

“Yes, yes,” she interrupted impatiently, “I can trust myself absolutely with him. He’s gentle and singularly pure-minded. But there’s something else that — —” She stopped again sharply to listen. Then she came up close beside me in the darkness, whispering —

“You know, Mr. Hubbard, sometimes my intuitions warn me a little too strongly to be ignored. Oh yes, you needn’t tell me again that it’s difficult to distinguish between fancy and intuition. I know all that. But I also know that there’s something deep down in that man’s soul that calls to something deep down in mine. And at present it frightens me. Because I cannot make out what it is; and I know, I *know*, he’ll do something some day that — that will shake my life to the very bottom.” She laughed a little at the strangeness of her own description.

I turned to look at her more closely, but the darkness was too great to show her face. There was an intensity, almost of suppressed passion, in her voice that took me completely by surprise.

“Nonsense, Joan,” I said, a little severely; “you know him well. He’s been with your father for months now.”

“But that was in London; and up here it’s different — I mean, I feel that it may be different. Life in a place like this blows away the restraints of the artificial life at home. I know, oh, I know what I’m saying. I feel all untied in a place like this; the rigidity of one’s nature begins to melt and flow. Surely *you* must understand what I mean!”

“Of course I understand,” I replied, yet not wishing to encourage her in her present line of thought, “and it’s a grand experience — for a short time. But you’re overtired to-night, Joan, like the rest of us. A few days in this air will set you above all fears of the kind you mention.”

Then, after a moment’s silence, I added, feeling I should estrange her confidence altogether if I blundered any more and treated her like a child —

“I think, perhaps, the true explanation is that you pity him for loving you, and at the same time you feel the repulsion of the healthy, vigorous animal for what is weak and timid. If he came up boldly and took you by the throat and shouted that he would force you to love him — well, then you would feel no fear at all. You would know exactly how to deal with him. Isn’t it, perhaps, something of that kind?”

The girl made no reply, and when I took her hand I felt that it trembled a little and was cold.

“It’s not his love that I’m afraid of,” she said hurriedly, for at this moment we heard the dip of a paddle in the water, “it’s something in his very soul that terrifies me in a way I have never been terrified before, — yet fascinates me. In town I was hardly conscious of his presence. But the moment we got away from civilisation, it began to come. He seems so — so *real* up here. I dread being alone with him. It makes me feel that something must burst and tear its way out — that he would do something — or I should do something — I don't know exactly what I mean, probably, — but that I should let myself go and scream — —"

"Joan!"

"Don't be alarmed," she laughed shortly; "I shan't do anything silly, but I wanted to tell you my feelings in case I needed your help. When I have intuitions as strong as this they are never wrong, only I don't know yet what it means exactly."

"You must hold out for the month, at any rate," I said in as matter-of-fact a voice as I could manage, for her manner had somehow changed my surprise to a subtle sense of alarm. "Sangree only stays the month, you know. And, anyhow, you are such an odd creature yourself that you should feel generously towards other odd creatures," I ended lamely, with a forced laugh.

She gave my hand a sudden pressure. "I'm glad I've told you at any rate," she said quickly under her breath, for the canoe was now gliding up silently like a ghost to our feet, "and I'm glad you're here too," she added as we moved down towards the water to meet it.

I made Sangree change into the bows and got into the steering seat myself, putting the girl between us so that I could watch them both by keeping their outlines against the sea and stars. For the intuitions of certain folk — women and children usually, I confess — I have always felt a great respect that has more often than not been justified by experience; and now the curious emotion stirred in me by the girl's words remained somewhat vividly in my consciousness. I explained it in some measure by the fact that the girl, tired out by the fatigue of many days' travel, had suffered a vigorous reaction of some kind from the strong, desolate scenery, and further, perhaps, that she had been treated to my own experience of seeing the members of the party in a new light — the Canadian, being partly a stranger, more vividly than the rest of us. But, at the same time, I felt it was quite possible that she had sensed some subtle link between his personality and her own, some quality that she had hitherto ignored and that the routine of town life had kept buried out of sight. The only thing that seemed difficult to explain was the fear she had spoken of, and this I hoped the wholesome effects of camp-life and exercise would sweep away naturally in the course of time.

We made the tour of the island without speaking. It was all too beautiful for speech. The trees crowded down to the shore to hear us pass. We saw their fine dark heads, bowed low with splendid dignity to watch us, forgetting for a moment that the stars were caught in the needled network of their hair. Against the sky in the west, where still lingered the sunset gold, we saw the wild toss of the horizon, shaggy with forest and cliff, gripping the heart like the motive in a symphony, and sending the sense of beauty all a-shiver through the mind — all these surrounding islands standing above the water like low clouds, and like them seeming to post along silently into the engulfing night. We heard the musical drip-drip of the paddle, and the little wash of our waves on the shore, and then suddenly we found ourselves at the opening of the lagoon again, having made the complete circuit of our home.

The Reverend Timothy had awakened from sleep and was singing to himself; and the sound of his voice as we glided down the fifty yards of enclosed water was pleasant to hear and undeniably wholesome. We saw the glow of the fire up among the trees on the ridge, and his shadow moving about as he threw on more wood.

“There you are!” he called aloud. “Good again! Been setting the night-lines, eh? Capital! And your mother’s still fast asleep, Joan.”

His cheery laugh floated across the water; he had not been in the least disturbed by our absence, for old campers are not easily alarmed.

“Now, remember,” he went on, after we had told our little tale of travel by the fire, and Mrs. Maloney had asked for the fourth time exactly where her tent was and whether the door faced east or south, “every one takes their turn at cooking breakfast, and one of the men is always out at sunrise to catch it first. Hubbard, I’ll toss you which you do in the morning and which I do!” He lost the toss. “Then I’ll catch it,” I said, laughing at his discomfiture, for I knew he loathed stirring porridge. “And mind you don’t burn it as you did every blessed time last year on the Volga," I added by way of reminder.

Mrs. Maloney's fifth interruption about the door of her tent, and her further pointed observation that it was past nine o'clock, set us lighting lanterns and putting the fire out for safety.

But before we separated for the night the clergyman had a time-honoured little ritual of his own to go through that no one had the heart to deny him. He always did this. It was a relic of his pulpit habits. He glanced briefly from one to the other of us, his face grave and earnest, his hands lifted to the stars and his eyes all closed and puckered up beneath a momentary frown. Then he offered up a short, almost inaudible prayer, thanking Heaven for our safe arrival, begging for good weather, no illness or accidents, plenty of fish, and strong sailing winds.

And then, unexpectedly — no one knew why exactly — he ended up with an abrupt request that nothing from the kingdom of darkness should be allowed to afflict our peace, and no evil thing come near to disturb us in the night-time.

And while he uttered these last surprising words, so strangely unlike his usual ending, it chanced that I looked up and let my eyes wander round the group assembled about the dying fire. And it certainly seemed to me that Sangree's face underwent a sudden and visible alteration. He was staring at Joan, and as he stared the change ran over it like a shadow and was gone. I started in spite of myself, for something oddly concentrated, potent, collected, had come into the expression usually so scattered and feeble. But it was all swift as a passing meteor, and when I looked a second time his face was normal and he was looking among the trees.

And Joan, luckily, had not observed him, her head being bowed and her eyes tightly closed while her father prayed.

"The girl has a vivid imagination indeed," I thought, half laughing, as I lit the lanterns, "if her thoughts can put a glamour upon mine in this way;" and yet somehow, when we said good-night, I took occasion to give her a few vigorous words of encouragement, and went to her tent to make sure I could find it quickly in the night in case anything happened. In her quick way the girl understood and thanked me, and the last thing I heard as I moved off to the men's quarters was Mrs. Maloney crying that there were beetles in her tent, and Joan's laughter as she went to help her turn them out.

Half an hour later the island was silent as the grave, but for the mournful voices of the wind as it sighed up from the sea. Like white sentries stood the three tents of the men on one side of the ridge, and on the other side, half hidden by some birches, whose leaves just shivered as the breeze caught them, the women's tents, patches of ghostly grey, gathered more closely together for mutual shelter and protection. Something like fifty yards of broken ground, grey rock, moss and lichen, lay between, and over all lay the curtain of the night and the great whispering winds from the forests of Scandinavia.

And the very last thing, just before floating away on that mighty wave that carries one so softly off into the deeps of forgetfulness, I again heard the voice of John Silence as the train moved out of Victoria Station; and by some subtle connection that met me on the very threshold of consciousness there rose in my mind simultaneously the memory of the girl's half-given confidence, and of her distress. As by some wizardry of approaching dreams they seemed in that instant to be related; but before I could analyse the why and the wherefore, both sank away out of sight again, and I was off beyond recall.

"Unless you should send for me sooner."

II

Whether Mrs. Maloney's tent door opened south or east I think she never discovered, for it is quite certain she always slept with the flap tightly fastened; I only know that my own little "five by seven, all silk" faced due east, because next morning the sun, pouring in as only the wilderness sun knows how to pour, woke me early, and a moment later, with a short run over soft moss and a flying dive from the granite ledge, I was swimming in the most sparkling water imaginable.

It was barely four o'clock, and the sun came down a long vista of blue islands that led out to the open sea and Finland. Nearer by rose the wooded domes of our own property, still capped and wreathed with smoky trails of fast-melting mist, and looking as fresh as though it was the morning of Mrs.

Maloney's Sixth Day and they had just issued, clean and brilliant, from the hands of the great Architect.

In the open spaces the ground was drenched with dew, and from the sea a cool salt wind stole in among the trees and set the branches trembling in an atmosphere of shimmering silver. The tents shone white where the sun caught them in patches. Below lay the lagoon, still dreaming of the summer night; in the open the fish were jumping busily, sending musical ripples towards the shore; and in the air hung the magic of dawn — silent, incommunicable.

I lit the fire, so that an hour later the clergyman should find good ashes to stir his porridge over, and then set forth upon an examination of the island, but hardly had I gone a dozen yards when I saw a figure standing a little in front of me where the sunlight fell in a pool among the trees.

It was Joan. She had already been up an hour, she told me, and had bathed before the last stars had left the sky. I saw at once that the new spirit of this solitary region had entered into her, banishing the fears of the night, for her face was like the face of a happy denizen of the wilderness, and her eyes stainless and shining. Her feet were bare, and drops of dew she had shaken from the branches hung in her loose-flying hair. Obviously she had come into her own.

"I've been all over the island," she announced laughingly, "and there are two things wanting."

"You're a good judge, Joan. What are they?"

"There's no animal life, and there's no — water."

"They go together," I said. "Animals don't bother with a rock like this unless there's a spring on it."

And as she led me from place to place, happy and excited, leaping adroitly from rock to rock, I was glad to note that my first impressions were correct. She made no reference to our conversation of the night before. The new spirit had driven out the old. There was no room in her heart for fear or anxiety, and Nature had everything her own way.

The island, we found, was some three-quarters of a mile from point to point, built in a circle, or wide horseshoe, with an opening of twenty feet at the mouth of the lagoon. Pine-trees grew thickly all over, but here and there were patches of silver birch, scrub oak, and considerable colonies of wild raspberry and gooseberry bushes. The two ends of the horseshoe formed bare slabs of smooth granite running into the sea and forming dangerous reefs just below the surface, but the rest of the island rose in a forty-foot ridge and sloped down steeply to the sea on either side, being nowhere more than a hundred yards wide.

The outer shore-line was much indented with numberless coves and bays and sandy beaches, with here and there caves and precipitous little cliffs against which the sea broke in spray and thunder. But the inner shore, the shore of the lagoon, was low and regular, and so well protected by the wall of trees along the ridge that no storm could ever send more than a passing ripple along its sandy marges. Eternal shelter reigned there.

On one of the other islands, a few hundred yards away — for the rest of the party slept late this first morning, and we took to the canoe — we discovered a spring of fresh water untainted by the brackish flavour of the Baltic, and having thus solved the most important problem of the Camp, we next proceeded to deal with the second — fish. And in half an hour we reeled in and turned homewards, for we had no means of storage, and to clean more fish than may be stored or eaten in a day is no wise occupation for experienced campers.

And as we landed towards six o’clock we heard the clergyman singing as usual and saw his wife and Sangree shaking out their blankets in the sun, and dressed in a fashion that finally dispelled all memories of streets and civilisation.

“The Little People lit the fire for me,” cried Maloney, looking natural and at home in his ancient flannel suit and breaking off in the middle of his singing, “so I’ve got the porridge going — and this time it’s *not* burnt.”

We reported the discovery of water and held up the fish.

“Good! Good again!” he cried. “We’ll have the first decent breakfast we’ve had this year. Sangree’ll clean ’em in no time, and the Bo’sun’s Mate — —”

“Will fry them to a turn,” laughed the voice of Mrs. Maloney, appearing on the scene in a tight blue jersey and sandals, and catching up the frying-pan.

Her husband always called her the Bo’sun’s Mate in Camp, because it was her duty, among others, to pipe all hands to meals.

“And as for you, Joan,” went on the happy man, “you look like the spirit of the island, with moss in your hair and wind in your eyes, and sun and stars mixed in your face.” He looked at her with delighted admiration. “Here, Sangree, take these twelve, there’s a good fellow, they’re the biggest; and we’ll have ’em in butter in less time than you can say Baltic island!”

I watched the Canadian as he slowly moved off to the cleaning pail. His eyes were drinking in the girl’s beauty, and a wave of passionate, almost feverish, joy passed over his face, expressive of the ecstasy of true worship more than anything else. Perhaps he was thinking that he still had three weeks to come with that vision always before his eyes; perhaps he was thinking of his dreams in the night. I cannot say. But I noticed the curious mingling of yearning and happiness in his eyes, and the strength of the impression touched my curiosity. Something in his face held my gaze for a second, something to do with its intensity. That so timid, so gentle a personality should conceal so virile a passion almost seemed to require explanation.

But the impression was momentary, for that first breakfast in Camp permitted no divided attentions, and I dare swear that the porridge, the tea, the Swedish “flatbread,” and the fried fish flavoured with points of frizzled bacon, were better than any meal eaten elsewhere that day in the whole world.

The first clear day in a new camp is always a furiously busy one, and we soon dropped into the routine upon which in large measure the real comfort of every one depends. About the cooking-fire, greatly improved with stones from the shore, we built a high stockade consisting of upright poles thickly twined with branches, the roof lined with moss and lichen and weighted with rocks, and round the interior we made low wooden seats so that we could lie round the fire even in rain and eat our meals in peace. Paths, too, outlined themselves from tent to tent, from the bathing places and the landing stage, and a fair division of the island was decided upon between the quarters of the men and the women. Wood was stacked, awkward trees and boulders removed, hammocks slung, and tents strengthened. In a word, Camp was established, and duties were assigned and accepted as though we expected to live on this Baltic island for years to come and the smallest detail of the Community life was important.

Moreover, as the Camp came into being, this sense of a community developed, proving that we were a definite whole, and not merely separate human beings living for a while in tents upon a desert island. Each fell willingly into the routine. Sangree, as by natural selection, took upon himself the cleaning of the fish and the cutting of the wood into lengths sufficient for a day's use. And he did it well. The pan of water was never without a fish, cleaned and scaled, ready to fry for whoever was hungry; the nightly fire never died down for lack of material to throw on without going farther afield to search.

And Timothy, once reverend, caught the fish and chopped down the trees. He also assumed responsibility for the condition of the boat, and did it so thoroughly that nothing in the little cutter was ever found wanting. And when, for any reason, his presence was in demand, the first place to look for him was — in the boat, and there, too, he was usually found, tinkering away with sheets, sails, or rudder and singing as he tinkered.

Nor was the "reading" neglected; for most mornings there came a sound of droning voices from the white tent by the raspberry bushes, which signified that Sangree, the tutor, and whatever other man chanced to be in the party at the time, were hard at it with history or the classics.

And while Mrs. Maloney, also by natural selection, took charge of the larder and the kitchen, the mending and general supervision of the rough comforts, she also made herself peculiarly mistress of the megaphone which summoned to meals and carried her voice easily from one end of the island to the other; and in her hours of leisure she daubed the surrounding scenery on to a sketching block with all the honesty and devotion of her determined but unreceptive soul.

Joan, meanwhile, Joan, elusive creature of the wilds, became I know not exactly what. She did plenty of work in the Camp, yet seemed to have no very precise duties. She was everywhere and anywhere. Sometimes she slept in her tent, sometimes under the stars with a blanket. She knew every inch of the island and kept turning up in places where she was least expected — for ever wandering about, reading her books in sheltered corners, making little fires on sunless days to "worship by to the gods," as she put it, ever finding new pools to dive and bathe in, and swimming day and night in the warm and waveless lagoon like a fish in a huge tank. She went bare-legged and bare-footed, with her hair down and her skirts caught up to the knees, and if ever a human being turned into a jolly savage within the compass of a single week, Joan Maloney was certainly that human being. She ran wild.

So completely, too, was she possessed by the strong spirit of the place that the little human fear she had yielded to so strangely on our arrival seemed to have been utterly dispossessed. As I hoped and expected, she made no reference to our conversation of the first evening. Sangree bothered her with no special attentions, and after all they were very little together. His behaviour was perfect in that respect, and I, for my part, hardly gave the matter another thought. Joan was ever a prey to vivid fancies of one kind or another, and this was one of them. Mercifully for the happiness of all concerned, it had melted away before the spirit of busy, active life and deep content that reigned over the island. Every one was intensely alive, and peace was upon all.

Meanwhile the effect of the camp-life began to tell. Always a searching test of character, its results, sooner or later, are infallible, for it acts upon the soul as swiftly and surely as the hypo bath upon the negative of a photograph. A readjustment of the personal forces takes place quickly; some parts of the personality go to sleep, others wake up: but the first sweeping change that the primitive life brings about is that the artificial portions of the character shed themselves one after another like dead skins. Attitudes and poses that seemed genuine in the city, drop away. The mind, like the body, grows quickly hard, simple, uncomplex. And in a camp as primitive and close to nature as ours was, these effects became speedily visible.

Some folk, of course, who talk glibly about the simple life when it is safely out of reach, betray themselves in camp by for ever peering about for the artificial excitements of civilisation which they miss. Some get bored at once; some grow slovenly; some reveal the animal in most unexpected fashion; and some, the select few, find themselves in very short order and are happy.

And, in our little party, we could flatter ourselves that we all belonged to the last category, so far as the general effect was concerned. Only there were certain other changes as well, varying with each individual, and all interesting to note.

It was only after the first week or two that these changes became marked, although this is the proper place, I think, to speak of them. For, having myself no other duty than to enjoy a well-earned holiday, I used to load my canoe with blankets and provisions and journey forth on exploration trips among the islands of several days together; and it was on my return from the first of these — when I rediscovered the party, so to speak — that these changes first presented themselves vividly to me, and in one particular instance produced a rather curious impression.

In a word, then, while every one had grown wilder, naturally wilder, Sangree, it seemed to me, had grown much wilder, and what I can only call unnaturally wilder. He made me think of a savage.

To begin with, he had changed immensely in mere physical appearance, and the full brown cheeks, the brighter eyes of absolute health, and the general air of vigour and robustness that had come to replace his customary lassitude and timidity, had worked such an improvement that I hardly knew him for the same man. His voice, too, was deeper and his manner bespoke for the first time a greater measure of confidence in himself. He now had some claims to be called nice-looking, or at least to a certain air of virility that would not lessen his value in the eyes of the opposite sex.

All this, of course, was natural enough, and most welcome. But, altogether apart from this physical change, which no doubt had also been going forward in the rest of us, there was a subtle note in his personality that came to me with a degree of surprise that almost amounted to shock.

And two things — as he came down to welcome me and pull up the canoe — leaped up in my mind unbidden, as though connected in some way I could not at the moment divine — first, the curious judgment formed of him by Joan; and secondly, that fugitive expression I had caught in his face while Maloney was offering up his strange prayer for special protection from Heaven.

The delicacy of manner and feature — to call it by no milder term — which had always been a distinguishing characteristic of the man, had been replaced by something far more vigorous and decided, that yet utterly eluded analysis. The change which impressed me so oddly was not easy to name. The others — singing Maloney, the bustling Bo'sun's Mate, and Joan, that fascinating half-breed of undine and salamander — all showed the effects of a life so close to nature; but in their case the change was perfectly natural and what was to be expected, whereas with Peter Sangree, the Canadian, it was something unusual and unexpected.

It is impossible to explain how he managed gradually to convey to my mind the impression that something in him had turned savage, yet this, more or less, is the impression that he did convey. It was not that he seemed really less civilised, or that his character had undergone any definite alteration, but rather that something in him, hitherto dormant, had awakened to life. Some quality, latent till now — so far, at least, as we were concerned, who, after all, knew him but slightly — had stirred into activity and risen to the surface of his being.

And while, for the moment, this seemed as far as I could get, it was but natural that my mind should continue the intuitive process and acknowledge that John Silence, owing to his peculiar faculties, and the girl, owing to her singularly receptive temperament, might each in a different way have divined this latent quality in his soul, and feared its manifestation later.

On looking back to this painful adventure, too, it now seems equally natural that the same process, carried to its logical conclusion, should have wakened some deep instinct in me that, wholly without direction from my will, set itself sharply and persistently upon the watch from that very moment. Thenceforward the personality of Sangree was never far from my thoughts, and I was for ever analysing and searching for the explanation that took so long in coming.

"I declare, Hubbard, you're tanned like an aboriginal, and you look like one, too," laughed Maloney.

"And I can return the compliment," was my reply, as we all gathered round a brew of tea to exchange news and compare notes.

And later, at supper, it amused me to observe that the distinguished tutor, once clergyman, did not eat his food quite as “nicely” as he did at home — he devoured it; that Mrs. Maloney ate more, and, to say the least, with less delay, than was her custom in the select atmosphere of her English dining-room; and that while Joan attacked her tin plateful with genuine avidity, Sangree, the Canadian, bit and gnawed at his, laughing and talking and complimenting the cook all the while, and making me think with secret amusement of a starved animal at its first meal. While, from their remarks about myself, I judged that I had changed and grown wild as much as the rest of them.

In this and in a hundred other little ways the change showed, ways difficult to define in detail, but all proving — not the coarsening effect of leading the primitive life, but, let us say, the more direct and unvarnished methods that became prevalent. For all day long we were in the bath of the elements — wind, water, sun — and just as the body became insensible to cold and shed unnecessary clothing, the mind grew straightforward and shed many of the disguises required by the conventions of civilisation.

And in each, according to temperament and character, there stirred the life-instincts that were natural, untamed, and, in a sense — savage.

III

So it came about that I stayed with our island party, putting off my second exploring trip from day to day, and I think that this far-fetched instinct to watch Sangree was really the cause of my postponement.

For another ten days the life of the Camp pursued its even and delightful way, blessed by perfect summer weather, a good harvest of fish, fine winds for sailing, and calm, starry nights. Maloney’s selfish prayer had been favourably received. Nothing came to disturb or perplex. There was not even the prowling of night animals to vex the rest of Mrs. Maloney; for in previous camps it had often been her peculiar affliction that she heard the porcupines scratching against the canvas, or the squirrels dropping fir-cones in the early morning with a sound of miniature thunder upon the roof of her tent. But on this island there was not even a squirrel or a mouse. I think two toads and a small and harmless snake were the only living creatures that had been discovered during the whole of the first fortnight. And these two toads in all probability were not two toads, but one toad.

Then, suddenly, came the terror that changed the whole aspect of the place — the devastating terror.

It came, at first, gently, but from the very start it made me realise the unpleasant loneliness of our situation, our remote isolation in this wilderness of sea and rock, and how the islands in this tideless Baltic ocean lay about us like the advance guard of a vast besieging army. Its entry, as I say, was gentle, hardly noticeable, in fact, to most of us: singularly undramatic it certainly was. But, then, in actual life this is often the way the dreadful climaxes move upon us, leaving the heart undisturbed almost to the last minute, and then overwhelming it with a sudden rush of horror. For it was the custom at breakfast to listen patiently while each in turn related the trivial adventures of the night — how they slept, whether the wind shook their tent, whether the spider on the ridge pole had moved, whether they had heard the toad, and so forth — and on this particular morning Joan, in the middle of a little pause, made a truly novel announcement:

“In the night I heard the howling of a dog,” she said, and then flushed up to the roots of her hair when we burst out laughing. For the idea of there being a dog on this forsaken island that was only able to support a snake and two toads was distinctly ludicrous, and I remember Maloney, half-way through his burnt porridge, capping the announcement by declaring that he had heard a “Baltic turtle” in the lagoon, and his wife’s expression of frantic alarm before the laughter undeceived her.

But the next morning Joan repeated the story with additional and convincing detail.

“Sounds of whining and growling woke me,” she said, “and I distinctly heard sniffing under my tent, and the scratching of paws.”

“Oh, Timothy! Can it be a porcupine?” exclaimed the Bo’sun’s Mate with distress, forgetting that Sweden was not Canada.

But the girl’s voice had sounded to me in quite another key, and looking up I saw that her father and Sangree were staring at her hard. They, too, understood that she was in earnest, and had been struck by the serious note in her voice.

“Rubbish, Joan! You are always dreaming something or other wild,” her father said a little impatiently.

“There’s not an animal of any size on the whole island,” added Sangree with a puzzled expression. He never took his eyes from her face.

“But there’s nothing to prevent one swimming over,” I put in briskly, for somehow a sense of uneasiness that was not pleasant had woven itself into the talk and pauses. “A deer, for instance, might easily land in the night and take a look round — —”

“Or a bear!” gasped the Bo’sun’s Mate, with a look so portentous that we all welcomed the laugh.

But Joan did not laugh. Instead, she sprang up and called to us to follow.

“There,” she said, pointing to the ground by her tent on the side farthest from her mother’s; “there are the marks close to my head. You can see for yourselves.”

We saw plainly. The moss and lichen — for earth there was hardly any — had been scratched up by paws. An animal about the size of a large dog it must have been, to judge by the marks. We stood and stared in a row.

“Close to my head,” repeated the girl, looking round at us. Her face, I noticed, was very pale, and her lip seemed to quiver for an instant. Then she gave a sudden gulp — and burst into a flood of tears.

The whole thing had come about in the brief space of a few minutes, and with a curious sense of inevitableness, moreover, as though it had all been carefully planned from all time and nothing could have stopped it. It had all been rehearsed before — had actually happened before, as the strange feeling sometimes has it; it seemed like the opening movement in some ominous drama, and that I knew exactly what would happen next. Something of great moment was impending.

For this sinister sensation of coming disaster made itself felt from the very beginning, and an atmosphere of gloom and dismay pervaded the entire Camp from that moment forward.

I drew Sangree to one side and moved away, while Maloney took the distressed girl into her tent, and his wife followed them, energetic and greatly flustered.

For thus, in undramatic fashion, it was that the terror I have spoken of first attempted the invasion of our Camp, and, trivial and unimportant though it seemed, every little detail of this opening scene is photographed upon my mind with merciless accuracy and precision. It happened exactly as described. This was exactly the language used. I see it written before me in black and white. I see, too, the faces of all concerned with the sudden ugly signature of alarm where before had been peace. The terror had stretched out, so to speak, a first tentative feeler towards us and had touched the hearts of each with a horrid directness. And from this moment the Camp changed.

Sangree in particular was visibly upset. He could not bear to see the girl distressed, and to hear her actually cry was almost more than he could stand. The feeling that he had no right to protect her hurt him keenly, and I could see that he was itching to do something to help, and liked him for it. His expression said plainly that he would tear in a thousand pieces anything that dared to injure a hair of her head.

We lit our pipes and strolled over in silence to the men's quarters, and it was his odd Canadian expression "Gee whiz!" that drew my attention to a further discovery.

"The brute's been scratching round my tent too," he cried, as he pointed to similar marks by the door and I stooped down to examine them. We both stared in amazement for several minutes without speaking.

"Only I sleep like the dead," he added, straightening up again, "and so heard nothing, I suppose."

We traced the paw-marks from the mouth of his tent in a direct line across to the girl's, but nowhere else about the Camp was there a sign of the strange visitor. The deer, dog, or whatever it was that had twice favoured us with a visit in the night, had confined its attentions to these two tents. And, after all, there was really nothing out of the way about these visits of an unknown animal, for although our own island was destitute of life, we were in the heart of a wilderness, and the mainland and larger islands must be swarming with all kinds of four-footed creatures, and no very prolonged swimming was necessary to reach us. In any other country it would not have caused a moment's interest — interest of the kind we felt, that is. In our Canadian camps the bears were for ever grunting about among the provision bags at night, porcupines scratching unceasingly, and chipmunks scuttling over everything.

“My daughter is overtired, and that’s the truth of it,” explained Maloney presently when he rejoined us and had examined in turn the other paw-marks. “She’s been overdoing it lately, and camp-life, you know, always means a great excitement to her. It’s natural enough. If we take no notice she’ll be all right.” He paused to borrow my tobacco pouch and fill his pipe, and the blundering way he filled it and spilled the precious weed on the ground visibly belied the calm of his easy language. “You might take her out for a bit of fishing, Hubbard, like a good chap; she’s hardly up to the long day in the cutter. Show her some of the other islands in your canoe, perhaps. Eh?”

And by lunch-time the cloud had passed away as suddenly, and as suspiciously, as it had come.

But in the canoe, on our way home, having till then purposely ignored the subject uppermost in our minds, she suddenly spoke to me in a way that again touched the note of sinister alarm — the note that kept on sounding and sounding until finally John Silence came with his great vibrating presence and relieved it; yes, and even after he came, too, for a while.

“I’m ashamed to ask it,” she said abruptly, as she steered me home, her sleeves rolled up, her hair blowing in the wind, “and ashamed of my silly tears too, because I really can’t make out what caused them; but, Mr. Hubbard, I want you to promise me not to go off for your long expeditions — just yet. I beg it of you.” She was so in earnest that she forgot the canoe, and the wind caught it sideways and made us roll dangerously. “I have tried hard not to ask this,” she added, bringing the canoe round again, “but I simply can’t help myself.”

It was a good deal to ask, and I suppose my hesitation was plain; for she went on before I could reply, and her beseeching expression and intensity of manner impressed me very forcibly.

“For another two weeks only — —”

“Mr. Sangree leaves in a fortnight,” I said, seeing at once what she was driving at, but wondering if it was best to encourage her or not.

“If I knew you were to be on the island till then,” she said, her face alternately pale and blushing, and her voice trembling a little, “I should feel so much happier.”

I looked at her steadily, waiting for her to finish.

“And safer,” she added almost in a whisper; “especially — at night, I mean.”

“Safer, Joan?” I repeated, thinking I had never seen her eyes so soft and tender. She nodded her head, keeping her gaze fixed on my face.

It was really difficult to refuse, whatever my thoughts and judgment may have been, and somehow I understood that she spoke with good reason, though for the life of me I could not have put it into words.

“Happier — and safer,” she said gravely, the canoe giving a dangerous lurch as she leaned forward in her seat to catch my answer. Perhaps, after all, the wisest way was to grant her request and make light of it, easing her anxiety without too much encouraging its cause.

“All right, Joan, you queer creature; I promise,” and the instant look of relief in her face, and the smile that came back like sunlight to her eyes, made me feel that, unknown to myself and the world, I was capable of considerable sacrifice after all.

“But, you know, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” I added sharply; and she looked up in my face with the smile women use when they know we are talking idly, yet do not wish to tell us so.

“*You* don’t feel afraid, I know,” she observed quietly.

“Of course not; why should I?”

“So, if you will just humour me this once I — I will never ask anything foolish of you again as long as I live,” she said gratefully.

“You have my promise,” was all I could find to say.

She headed the nose of the canoe for the lagoon lying a quarter of a mile ahead, and paddled swiftly; but a minute or two later she paused again and stared hard at me with the dripping paddle across the thwarts.

“You’ve not heard anything at night yourself, have you?” she asked.

“I never hear anything at night,” I replied shortly, “from the moment I lie down till the moment I get up.”

“That dismal howling, for instance,” she went on, determined to get it out, “far away at first and then getting closer, and stopping just outside the Camp?”

“Certainly not.”

“Because, sometimes I think I almost dreamed it.”

“Most likely you did,” was my unsympathetic response.

“And you don’t think father has heard it either, then?”

“No. He would have told me if he had.”

This seemed to relieve her mind a little. “I know mother hasn’t,” she added, as if speaking to herself, “for she hears nothing — ever.”

It was two nights after this conversation that I woke out of deep sleep and heard sounds of screaming. The voice was really horrible, breaking the peace and silence with its shrill clamour. In less than ten seconds I was half dressed and out of my tent. The screaming had stopped abruptly, but I knew the general direction, and ran as fast as the darkness would allow over to the women’s quarters, and on getting close I heard sounds of suppressed weeping. It was Joan’s voice. And just as I came up I saw Mrs. Maloney, marvellously attired, fumbling with a lantern. Other voices became audible in the same moment behind me, and Timothy Maloney arrived, breathless, less than half dressed, and carrying another lantern that had gone out on the way from being banged against a tree. Dawn was just breaking, and a chill wind blew in from the sea. Heavy black clouds drove low overhead.

The scene of confusion may be better imagined than described. Questions in frightened voices filled the air against this background of suppressed weeping. Briefly — Joan’s silk tent had been torn, and the girl was in a state bordering upon hysterics. Somewhat reassured by our noisy presence, however, — for she was plucky at heart, — she pulled herself together and tried to explain what had happened; and her broken words, told there on the edge of night and morning upon this wild island ridge, were oddly thrilling and distressingly convincing.

“Something touched me and I woke,” she said simply, but in a voice still hushed and broken with the terror of it, “something pushing against the tent;

I felt it through the canvas. There was the same sniffing and scratching as before, and I felt the tent give a little as when wind shakes it. I heard breathing — very loud, very heavy breathing — and then came a sudden great tearing blow, and the canvas ripped open close to my face."

She had instantly dashed out through the open flap and screamed at the top of her voice, thinking the creature had actually got into the tent. But nothing was visible, she declared, and she heard not the faintest sound of an animal making off under cover of the darkness. The brief account seemed to exercise a paralysing effect upon us all as we listened to it. I can see the dishevelled group to this day, the wind blowing the women's hair, and Maloney craning his head forward to listen, and his wife, open-mouthed and gasping, leaning against a pine tree.

"Come over to the stockade and we'll get the fire going," I said; "that's the first thing," for we were all shaking with the cold in our scanty garments. And at that moment Sangree arrived wrapped in a blanket and carrying his gun; he was still drunken with sleep.

"The dog again," Maloney explained briefly, forestalling his questions; "been at Joan's tent. Torn it, by Gad! this time. It's time we did something." He went on mumbling confusedly to himself.

Sangree gripped his gun and looked about swiftly in the darkness. I saw his eyes flame in the glare of the flickering lanterns. He made a movement as though to start out and hunt — and kill. Then his glance fell on the girl crouching on the ground, her face hidden in her hands, and there leaped into his features an expression of savage anger that transformed them. He could have faced a dozen lions with a walking-stick at that moment, and again I liked him for the strength of his anger, his self-control, and his hopeless devotion.

But I stopped him going off on a blind and useless chase.

"Come and help me start the fire, Sangree," I said, anxious also to relieve the girl of our presence; and a few minutes later the ashes, still glowing from the night's fire, had kindled the fresh wood, and there was a blaze that warmed us well while it also lit up the surrounding trees within a radius of twenty yards.

"I heard nothing," he whispered; "what in the world do you think it is? It surely can't be only a dog!"

"We'll find that out later," I said, as the others came up to the grateful warmth; "the first thing is to make as big a fire as we can."

Joan was calmer now, and her mother had put on some warmer, and less miraculous, garments. And while they stood talking in low voices Maloney and I slipped off to examine the tent. There was little enough to see, but that little was unmistakable. Some animal had scratched up the ground at the head of the tent, and with a great blow of a powerful paw — a paw clearly provided with good claws — had struck the silk and torn it open. There was a hole large enough to pass a fist and arm through.

"It can't be far away," Maloney said excitedly. "We'll organise a hunt at once; this very minute."

We hurried back to the fire, Maloney talking boisterously about his proposed hunt. "There's nothing like prompt action to dispel alarm," he whispered in my ear; and then turned to the rest of us.

"We'll hunt the island from end to end at once," he said, with excitement; "that's what we'll do. The beast can't be far away. And the Bosun's Mate and Joan must come too, because they can't be left alone. Hubbard, you take the right shore, and you, Sangree, the left, and I'll go in the middle with the women. In this way we can stretch clean across the ridge, and nothing bigger than a rabbit can possibly escape us." He was extraordinarily excited, I thought. Anything affecting Joan, of course, stirred him prodigiously. "Get your guns and we'll start the drive at once," he cried. He lit another lantern and handed one each to his wife and Joan, and while I ran to fetch my gun I heard him singing to himself with the excitement of it all.

Meanwhile the dawn had come on quickly. It made the flickering lanterns look pale. The wind, too, was rising, and I heard the trees moaning overhead and the waves breaking with increasing clamour on the shore. In the lagoon the boat dipped and splashed, and the sparks from the fire were carried aloft in a stream and scattered far and wide.

We made our way to the extreme end of the island, measured our distances carefully, and then began to advance. None of us spoke. Sangree and I, with cocked guns, watched the shore lines, and all within easy touch and speaking distance. It was a slow and blundering drive, and there were many false alarms, but after the best part of half an hour we stood on the farther end, having made the complete tour, and without putting up so much as a squirrel. Certainly there was no living creature on that island but ourselves.

"*I* know what it is!" cried Maloney, looking out over the dim expanse of grey sea, and speaking with the air of a man making a discovery; "it's a dog from one of the farms on the larger islands" — he pointed seawards where the archipelago thickened— "and it's escaped and turned wild. Our fires and voices attracted it, and it's probably half starved as well as savage, poor brute!"

No one said anything in reply, and he began to sing again very low to himself.

The point where we stood — a huddled, shivering group — faced the wider channels that led to the open sea and Finland. The grey dawn had broken in earnest at last, and we could see the racing waves with their angry crests of white. The surrounding islands showed up as dark masses in the distance, and in the east, almost as Maloney spoke, the sun came up with a rush in a stormy and magnificent sky of red and gold. Against this splashed and gorgeous background black clouds, shaped like fantastic and legendary animals, filed past swiftly in a tearing stream, and to this day I have only to close my eyes to see again that vivid and hurrying procession in the air. All about us the pines made black splashes against the sky. It was an angry sunrise. Rain, indeed, had already begun to fall in big drops.

We turned, as by a common instinct, and, without speech, made our way back slowly to the stockade, Maloney humming snatches of his songs, Sangree in front with his gun, prepared to shoot at a moment's notice, and the women floundering in the rear with myself and the extinguished lanterns.

Yet it was only a dog!

Really, it was most singular when one came to reflect soberly upon it all. Events, say the occultists, have souls, or at least that agglomerate life due to the emotions and thoughts of all concerned in them, so that cities, and even whole countries, have great astral shapes which may become visible to the eye of vision; and certainly here, the soul of this drive — this vain, blundering, futile drive — stood somewhere between ourselves and — laughed.

All of us heard that laugh, and all of us tried hard to smother the sound, or at least to ignore it. Every one talked at once, loudly, and with exaggerated decision, obviously trying to say something plausible against heavy odds, striving to explain naturally that an animal might so easily conceal itself from us, or swim away before we had time to light upon its trail. For we all spoke of that "trail" as though it really existed, and we had more to go upon than the mere marks of paws about the tents of Joan and the Canadian. Indeed, but for these, and the torn tent, I think it would, of course, have been possible to ignore the existence of this beast intruder altogether.

And it was here, under this angry dawn, as we stood in the shelter of the stockade from the pouring rain, weary yet so strangely excited — it was here, out of this confusion of voices and explanations, that — very stealthily — the ghost of something horrible slipped in and stood among us. It made all our explanations seem childish and untrue; the false relation was instantly exposed. Eyes exchanged quick, anxious glances, questioning, expressive of dismay. There was a sense of wonder, of poignant distress, and of trepidation. Alarm stood waiting at our elbows. We shivered.

Then, suddenly, as we looked into each other's faces, came the long, unwelcome pause in which this new arrival established itself in our hearts.

And, without further speech, or attempt at explanation, Maloney moved off abruptly to mix the porridge for an early breakfast; Sangree to clean the fish; myself to chop wood and tend the fire; Joan and her mother to change their wet garments; and, most significant of all, to prepare her mother's tent for its future complement of two.

Each went to his duty, but hurriedly, awkwardly, silently; and this new arrival, this shape of terror and distress stalked, viewless, by the side of each.

"If only I could have traced that dog," I think was the thought in the minds of all.

But in Camp, where every one realises how important the individual contribution is to the comfort and well-being of all, the mind speedily recovers tone and pulls itself together.

During the day, a day of heavy and ceaseless rain, we kept more or less to our tents, and though there were signs of mysterious conferences between the three members of the Maloney family, I think that most of us slept a good deal and stayed alone with his thoughts. Certainly, I did, because when Maloney came to say that his wife invited us all to a special "tea" in her tent, he had to shake me awake before I realised that he was there at all.

And by supper-time we were more or less even-minded again, and almost jolly. I only noticed that there was an undercurrent of what is best described as "jumpiness," and that the merest snapping of a twig, or plop of a fish in the lagoon, was sufficient to make us start and look over our shoulders. Pauses were rare in our talk, and the fire was never for one instant allowed to get low. The wind and rain had ceased, but the dripping of the branches still kept up an excellent imitation of a downpour. In particular, Maloney was vigilant and alert, telling us a series of tales in which the wholesome humorous element was especially strong. He lingered, too, behind with me after Sangree had gone to bed, and while I mixed myself a glass of hot Swedish punch, he did a thing I had never known him do before — he mixed one for himself, and then asked me to light him over to his tent. We said nothing on the way, but I felt that he was glad of my companionship.

I returned alone to the stockade, and for a long time after that kept the fire blazing, and sat up smoking and thinking. I hardly knew why; but sleep was far from me for one thing, and for another, an idea was taking form in my mind that required the comfort of tobacco and a bright fire for its growth. I lay against a corner of the stockade seat, listening to the wind whispering and to the ceaseless drip-drip of the trees. The night, otherwise, was very still, and the sea quiet as a lake. I remember that I was conscious, peculiarly conscious, of this host of desolate islands crowding about us in the darkness, and that we were the one little spot of humanity in a rather wonderful kind of wilderness.

But this, I think, was the only symptom that came to warn me of highly strung nerves, and it certainly was not sufficiently alarming to destroy my peace of mind. One thing, however, did come to disturb my peace, for just as I finally made ready to go, and had kicked the embers of the fire into a last effort, I fancied I saw, peering at me round the farther end of the stockade wall, a dark and shadowy mass that might have been — that strongly resembled, in fact — the body of a large animal. Two glowing eyes shone for an instant in the middle of it. But the next second I saw that it was merely a projecting mass of moss and lichen in the wall of our stockade, and the eyes were a couple of wandering sparks from the dying ashes I had kicked. It was easy enough, too, to imagine I saw an animal moving here and there between the trees, as I picked my way stealthily to my tent. Of course, the shadows tricked me.

And though it was after one o'clock, Maloney's light was still burning, for I saw his tent shining white among the pines.

It was, however, in the short space between consciousness and sleep — that time when the body is low and the voices of the submerged region tell sometimes true — that the idea which had been all this while maturing reached the point of an actual decision, and I suddenly realised that I had resolved to send word to Dr. Silence. For, with a sudden wonder that I had hitherto been so blind, the unwelcome conviction dawned upon me all at once that some dreadful thing was lurking about us on this island, and that the safety of at least one of us was threatened by something monstrous and unclean that was too horrible to contemplate. And, again remembering those last words of his as the train moved out of the platform, I understood that Dr. Silence would hold himself in readiness to come.

"Unless you should send for me sooner," he had said.

I found myself suddenly wide awake. It is impossible to say what woke me, but it was no gradual process, seeing that I jumped from deep sleep to absolute alertness in a single instant. I had evidently slept for an hour and more, for the night had cleared, stars crowded the sky, and a pallid half-moon just sinking into the sea threw a spectral light between the trees.

I went outside to sniff the air, and stood upright. A curious impression that something was astir in the Camp came over me, and when I glanced across at Sangree's tent, some twenty feet away, I saw that it was moving. He too, then, was awake and restless, for I saw the canvas sides bulge this way and that as he moved within.

Then the flap pushed forward. He was coming out, like myself, to sniff the air; and I was not surprised, for its sweetness after the rain was intoxicating. And he came on all fours, just as I had done. I saw a head thrust round the edge of the tent.

And then I saw that it was not Sangree at all. It was an animal. And the same instant I realised something else too — it was *the* animal; and its whole presentment for some unaccountable reason was unutterably malefic.

A cry I was quite unable to suppress escaped me, and the creature turned on the instant and stared at me with baleful eyes. I could have dropped on the spot, for the strength all ran out of my body with a rush. Something about it touched in me the living terror that grips and paralyses. If the mind requires but the tenth of a second to form an impression, I must have stood there stockstill for several seconds while I seized the ropes for support and stared. Many and vivid impressions flashed through my mind, but not one of them resulted in action, because I was in instant dread that the beast any moment would leap in my direction and be upon me. Instead, however, after what seemed a vast period, it slowly turned its eyes from my face, uttered a low whining sound, and came out altogether into the open.

Then, for the first time, I saw it in its entirety and noted two things: it was about the size of a large dog, but at the same time it was utterly unlike any animal that I had ever seen. Also, that the quality that had impressed me first as being malefic, was really only its singular and original strangeness. Foolish as it may sound, and impossible as it is for me to adduce proof, I can only say that the animal seemed to me then to be — not real.

But all this passed through my mind in a flash, almost subconsciously, and before I had time to check my impressions, or even properly verify them; I made an involuntary movement, catching the tight rope in my hand so that it twanged like a banjo string, and in that instant the creature turned the corner of Sangree's tent and was gone into the darkness.

Then, of course, my senses in some measure returned to me, and I realised only one thing: it had been inside his tent!

I dashed out, reached the door in half a dozen strides, and looked in. The Canadian, thank God! lay upon his bed of branches. His arm was stretched outside, across the blankets, the fist tightly clenched, and the body had an appearance of unusual rigidity that was alarming. On his face there was an expression of effort, almost of painful effort, so far as the uncertain light permitted me to see, and his sleep seemed to be very profound. He looked, I thought, so stiff, so unnaturally stiff, and in some indefinable way, too, he looked smaller — shrunken.

I called to him to wake, but called many times in vain. Then I decided to shake him, and had already moved forward to do so vigorously when there came a sound of footsteps padding softly behind me, and I felt a stream of hot breath burn my neck as I stooped. I turned sharply. The tent door was darkened and something silently swept in. I felt a rough and shaggy body push past me, and knew that the animal had returned. It seemed to leap forward between me and Sangree — in fact, to leap upon Sangree, for its dark body hid him momentarily from view, and in that moment my soul turned sick and coward with a horror that rose from the very dregs and depth of life, and gripped my existence at its central source.

The creature seemed somehow to melt away into him, almost as though it belonged to him and were a part of himself, but in the same instant — that instant of extraordinary confusion and terror in my mind — it seemed to pass over and behind him, and, in some utterly unaccountable fashion, it was gone! And the Canadian woke and sat up with a start.

“Quick! You fool!” I cried, in my excitement, “the beast has been in your tent, here at your very throat while you sleep like the dead. Up, man! Get your gun! Only this second it disappeared over there behind your head. Quick! or Joan —— !”

And somehow the fact that he was there, wide-awake now, to corroborate me, brought the additional conviction to my own mind that this was no animal, but some perplexing and dreadful form of life that drew upon my deeper knowledge, that much reading had perhaps assented to, but that had never yet come within actual range of my senses.

He was up in a flash, and out. He was trembling, and very white. We searched hurriedly, feverishly, but found only the traces of paw-marks passing from the door of his own tent across the moss to the women’s. And the sight of the tracks about Mrs. Maloney’s tent, where Joan now slept, set him in a perfect fury.

“Do you know what it is, Hubbard, this beast?” he hissed under his breath at me; “it’s a damned wolf, that’s what it is — a wolf lost among the islands, and starving to death — desperate. So help me God, I believe it’s that!”

He talked a lot of rubbish in his excitement. He declared he would sleep by day and sit up every night until he killed it. Again his rage touched my admiration; but I got him away before he made enough noise to wake the whole Camp.

“I have a better plan than that,” I said, watching his face closely. “I don’t think this is anything we can deal with. I’m going to send for the only man I know who can help. We’ll go to Waxholm this very morning and get a telegram through.”

Sangree stared at me with a curious expression as the fury died out of his face and a new look of alarm took its place.

“John Silence,” I said, “will know — —”

“You think it’s something — of that sort?” he stammered.

“I am sure of it.”

There was a moment’s pause. “That’s worse, far worse than anything material,” he said, turning visibly paler. He looked from my face to the sky, and then added with sudden resolution, “Come; the wind’s rising. Let’s get off at once. From there you can telephone to Stockholm and get a telegram sent without delay.”

I sent him down to get the boat ready, and seized the opportunity myself to run and wake Maloney. He was sleeping very lightly, and sprang up the moment I put my head inside his tent. I told him briefly what I had seen, and he showed so little surprise that I caught myself wondering for the first time whether he himself had seen more going on than he had deemed wise to communicate to the rest of us.

He agreed to my plan without a moment’s hesitation, and my last words to him were to let his wife and daughter think that the great psychic doctor was coming merely as a chance visitor, and not with any professional interest.

So, with frying-pan, provisions, and blankets aboard, Sangree and I sailed out of the lagoon fifteen minutes later, and headed with a good breeze for the direction of Waxholm and the borders of civilisation.

IV

Although nothing John Silence did ever took me, properly speaking, by surprise, it was certainly unexpected to find a letter from Stockholm waiting for me. “I have finished my Hungary business,” he wrote, “and am here for ten days. Do not hesitate to send if you need me. If you telephone any morning from Waxholm I can catch the afternoon steamer.”

My years of intercourse with him were full of “coincidences” of this description, and although he never sought to explain them by claiming any magical system of communication with my mind, I have never doubted that there actually existed some secret telepathic method by which he knew my circumstances and gauged the degree of my need. And that this power was independent of time in the sense that it saw into the future, always seemed to me equally apparent.

Sangree was as much relieved as I was, and within an hour of sunset that very evening we met him on the arrival of the little coasting steamer, and carried him off in the dinghy to the camp we had prepared on a neighbouring island, meaning to start for home early next morning.

“Now,” he said, when supper was over and we were smoking round the fire, “let me hear your story.” He glanced from one to the other, smiling.

“You tell it, Mr. Hubbard,” Sangree interrupted abruptly, and went off a little way to wash the dishes, yet not so far as to be out of earshot. And while he splashed with the hot water, and scraped the tin plates with sand and moss, my voice, unbroken by a single question from Dr. Silence, ran on for the next half-hour with the best account I could give of what had happened.

My listener lay on the other side of the fire, his face half hidden by a big sombrero; sometimes he glanced up questioningly when a point needed elaboration, but he uttered no single word till I had reached the end, and his manner all through the recital was grave and attentive. Overhead, the wash of the wind in the pine branches filled in the pauses; the darkness settled down over the sea, and the stars came out in thousands, and by the time I finished the moon had risen to flood the scene with silver. Yet, by his face and eyes, I knew quite well that the doctor was listening to something he had expected to hear, even if he had not actually anticipated all the details.

“You did well to send for me,” he said very low, with a significant glance at me when I finished; “very well,” — and for one swift second his eye took in Sangree,— “for what we have to deal with here is nothing more than a werewolf — rare enough, I am glad to say, but often very sad, and sometimes very terrible.”

I jumped as though I had been shot, but the next second was heartily ashamed of my want of control; for this brief remark, confirming as it did my own worst suspicions, did more to convince me of the gravity of the adventure than any number of questions or explanations. It seemed to draw close the circle about us, shutting a door somewhere that locked us in with the animal and the horror, and turning the key. Whatever it was had now to be faced and dealt with.

“No one has been actually injured so far?” he asked aloud, but in a matter-of-fact tone that lent reality to grim possibilities.

“Good heavens, no!” cried the Canadian, throwing down his dish-cloths and coming forward into the circle of firelight. “Surely there can be no question of this poor starved beast injuring anybody, can there?”

His hair straggled untidily over his forehead, and there was a gleam in his eyes that was not all reflection from the fire. His words made me turn sharply. We all laughed a little, short, forced laugh.

“I trust not, indeed,” Dr. Silence said quietly. “But what makes you think the creature is starved?” He asked the question with his eyes straight on the other’s face. The prompt question explained to me why I had started, and I waited with just a tremor of excitement for the reply.

Sangree hesitated a moment, as though the question took him by surprise. But he met the doctor’s gaze unflinchingly across the fire, and with complete honesty.

“Really,” he faltered, with a little shrug of the shoulders, “I can hardly tell you. The phrase seemed to come out of its own accord. I have felt from the beginning that it was in pain and — starved, though why I felt this never occurred to me till you asked.”

"You really know very little about it, then?" said the other, with a sudden gentleness in his voice.

"No more than that," Sangree replied, looking at him with a puzzled expression that was unmistakably genuine. "In fact, nothing at all, really," he added, by way of further explanation.

"I am glad of that," I heard the doctor murmur under his breath, but so low that I only just caught the words, and Sangree missed them altogether, as evidently he was meant to do.

"And now," he cried, getting on his feet and shaking himself with a characteristic gesture, as though to shake out the horror and the mystery, "let us leave the problem till to-morrow and enjoy this wind and sea and stars. I've been living lately in the atmosphere of many people, and feel that I want to wash and be clean. I propose a swim and then bed. Who'll second me?" And two minutes later we were all diving from the boat into cool, deep water, that reflected a thousand moons as the waves broke away from us in countless ripples.

We slept in blankets under the open sky, Sangree and I taking the outside places, and were up before sunrise to catch the dawn wind. Helped by this early start we were half-way home by noon, and then the wind shifted to a few points behind us so that we fairly ran. In and out among a thousand islands, down narrow channels where we lost the wind, out into open spaces where we had to take in a reef, racing along under a hot and cloudless sky, we flew through the very heart of the bewildering and lonely scenery.

"A real wilderness," cried Dr. Silence from his seat in the bows where he held the jib sheet. His hat was off, his hair tumbled in the wind, and his lean brown face gave him the touch of an Oriental. Presently he changed places with Sangree, and came down to talk with me by the tiller.

"A wonderful region, all this world of islands," he said, waving his hand to the scenery rushing past us, "but doesn't it strike you there's something lacking?"

"It's — hard," I answered, after a moment's reflection. "It has a superficial, glittering prettiness, without — —" I hesitated to find the word I wanted.

John Silence nodded his head with approval.

"Exactly," he said. "The picturesqueness of stage scenery that is not real, not alive. It's like a landscape by a clever painter, yet without true imagination. Soulless — that's the word you wanted."

"Something like that," I answered, watching the gusts of wind on the sails. "Not dead so much, as without soul. That's it."

"Of course," he went on, in a voice calculated, it seemed to me, not to reach our companion in the bows, "to live long in a place like this — long and alone — might bring about a strange result in some men."

I suddenly realised he was talking with a purpose and pricked up my ears.

"There's no life here. These islands are mere dead rocks pushed up from below the sea — not living land; and there's nothing really alive on them. Even the sea, this tideless, brackish sea, neither salt water nor fresh, is dead. It's all a pretty image of life without the real heart and soul of life. To a man with too strong desires who came here and lived close to nature, strange things might happen."

"Let her out a bit," I shouted to Sangree, who was coming aft. "The wind's gusty and we've got hardly any ballast."

He went back to the bows, and Dr. Silence continued —

"Here, I mean, a long sojourn would lead to deterioration, to degeneration. The place is utterly unsoftened by human influences, by any humanising associations of history, good or bad. This landscape has never awakened into life; it's still dreaming in its primitive sleep."

"In time," I put in, "you mean a man living here might become brutal?"

"The passions would run wild, selfishness become supreme, the instincts coarsen and turn savage probably."

"But — —"

"In other places just as wild, parts of Italy for instance, where there are other moderating influences, it could not happen. The character might grow wild, savage too in a sense, but with a human wildness one could understand and deal with. But here, in a hard place like this, it might be otherwise." He spoke slowly, weighing his words carefully.

I looked at him with many questions in my eyes, and a precautionary cry to Sangree to stay in the fore part of the boat, out of earshot.

“First of all there would come callousness to pain, and indifference to the rights of others. Then the soul would turn savage, not from passionate human causes, or with enthusiasm, but by deadening down into a kind of cold, primitive, emotionless savagery — by turning, like the landscape, soulless.”

“And a man with strong desires, you say, might change?”

“Without being aware of it, yes; he might turn savage, his instincts and desires turn animal. And if” — he lowered his voice and turned for a moment towards the bows, and then continued in his most weighty manner — “owing to delicate health or other predisposing causes, his Double — you know what I mean, of course — his etheric Body of Desire, or astral body, as some term it — that part in which the emotions, passions and desires reside — if this, I say, were for some constitutional reason loosely joined to his physical organism, there might well take place an occasional projection — —”

Sangree came aft with a sudden rush, his face aflame, but whether with wind or sun, or with what he had heard, I cannot say. In my surprise I let the tiller slip and the cutter gave a great plunge as she came sharply into the wind and flung us all together in a heap on the bottom. Sangree said nothing, but while he scrambled up and made the jib sheet fast my companion found a moment to add to his unfinished sentence the words, too low for any ear but mine —

“Entirely unknown to himself, however.”

We righted the boat and laughed, and then Sangree produced the map and explained exactly where we were. Far away on the horizon, across an open stretch of water, lay a blue cluster of islands with our crescent-shaped home among them and the safe anchorage of the lagoon. An hour with this wind would get us there comfortably, and while Dr. Silence and Sangree fell into conversation, I sat and pondered over the strange suggestions that had just been put into my mind concerning the “Double,” and the possible form it might assume when dissociated temporarily from the physical body.

The whole way home these two chatted, and John Silence was as gentle and sympathetic as a woman. I did not hear much of their talk, for the wind grew occasionally to the force of a hurricane and the sails and tiller absorbed my attention; but I could see that Sangree was pleased and happy, and was pouring out intimate revelations to his companion in the way that most people did — when John Silence wished them to do so.

But it was quite suddenly, while I sat all intent upon wind and sails, that the true meaning of Sangree's remark about the animal flared up in me with its full import. For his admission that he knew it was in pain and starved was in reality nothing more or less than a revelation of his deeper self. It was in the nature of a confession. He was speaking of something that he knew positively, something that was beyond question or argument, something that had to do directly with himself. "Poor starved beast" he had called it in words that had "come out of their own accord," and there had not been the slightest evidence of any desire to conceal or explain away. He had spoken instinctively — from his heart, and as though about his own self.

And half an hour before sunset we raced through the narrow opening of the lagoon and saw the smoke of the dinner-fire blowing here and there among the trees, and the figures of Joan and the Bo'sun's Mate running down to meet us at the landing-stage.

V

Everything changed from the moment John Silence set foot on that island; it was like the effect produced by calling in some big doctor, some great arbiter of life and death, for consultation. The sense of gravity increased a hundredfold. Even inanimate objects took upon themselves a subtle alteration, for the setting of the adventure — this deserted bit of sea with its hundreds of uninhabited islands — somehow turned sombre. An element that was mysterious, and in a sense disheartening, crept unbidden into the severity of grey rock and dark pine forest and took the sparkle from the sunshine and the sea.

I, at least, was keenly aware of the change, for my whole being shifted, as it were, a degree higher, becoming keyed up and alert. The figures from the background of the stage moved forward a little into the light — nearer to the inevitable action. In a word this man's arrival intensified the whole affair.

And, looking back down the years to the time when all this happened, it is clear to me that he had a pretty sharp idea of the meaning of it from the very beginning. How much he knew beforehand by his strange divining powers, it is impossible to say, but from the moment he came upon the scene and caught within himself the note of what was going on amongst us, he undoubtedly held the true solution of the puzzle and had no need to ask questions. And this certitude it was that set him in such an atmosphere of power and made us all look to him instinctively; for he took no tentative steps, made no false moves, and while the rest of us floundered he moved straight to the climax. He was indeed a true diviner of souls.

I can now read into his behaviour a good deal that puzzled me at the time, for though I had dimly guessed the solution, I had no idea how he would deal with it. And the conversations I can reproduce almost verbatim, for, according to my invariable habit, I kept full notes of all he said.

To Mrs. Maloney, foolish and dazed; to Joan, alarmed, yet plucky; and to the clergyman, moved by his daughter's distress below his usual shallow emotions, he gave the best possible treatment in the best possible way, yet all so easily and simply as to make it appear naturally spontaneous. For he dominated the Bo'sun's Mate, taking the measure of her ignorance with infinite patience; he keyed up Joan, stirring her courage and interest to the highest point for her own safety; and the Reverend Timothy he soothed and comforted, while obtaining his implicit obedience, by taking him into his confidence, and leading him gradually to a comprehension of the issue that was bound to follow.

And Sangree — here his wisdom was most wisely calculated — he neglected outwardly because inwardly he was the object of his unceasing and most concentrated attention. Under the guise of apparent indifference his mind kept the Canadian under constant observation.

There was a restless feeling in the Camp that evening and none of us lingered round the fire after supper as usual. Sangree and I busied ourselves with patching up the torn tent for our guest and with finding heavy stones to hold the ropes, for Dr. Silence insisted on having it pitched on the highest point of the island ridge, just where it was most rocky and there was no earth for pegs. The place, moreover, was midway between the men's and women’s tents, and, of course, commanded the most comprehensive view of the Camp.

“So that if your dog comes,” he said simply, “I may be able to catch him as he passes across.”

The wind had gone down with the sun and an unusual warmth lay over the island that made sleep heavy, and in the morning we assembled at a late breakfast, rubbing our eyes and yawning. The cool north wind had given way to the warm southern air that sometimes came up with haze and moisture across the Baltic, bringing with it the relaxing sensations that produced enervation and listlessness.

And this may have been the reason why at first I failed to notice that anything unusual was about, and why I was less alert than normally; for it was not till after breakfast that the silence of our little party struck me and I discovered that Joan had not yet put in an appearance. And then, in a flash, the last heaviness of sleep vanished and I saw that Maloney was white and troubled and his wife could not hold a plate without trembling.

A desire to ask questions was stopped in me by a swift glance from Dr. Silence, and I suddenly understood in some vague way that they were waiting till Sangree should have gone. How this idea came to me I cannot determine, but the soundness of the intuition was soon proved, for the moment he moved off to his tent, Maloney looked up at me and began to speak in a low voice.

“You slept through it all,” he half whispered.

“Through what?” I asked, suddenly thrilled with the knowledge that something dreadful had happened.

“We didn’t wake you for fear of getting the whole Camp up,” he went on, meaning, by the Camp, I supposed, Sangree. “It was just before dawn when the screams woke me.”

“The dog again?” I asked, with a curious sinking of the heart.

“Got right into the tent,” he went on, speaking passionately but very low, “and woke my wife by scrambling all over her. Then she realised that Joan was struggling beside her. And, by God! the beast had torn her arm; scratched all down the arm she was, and bleeding.”

“Joan injured?” I gasped.

“Merely scratched — this time,” put in John Silence, speaking for the first time; “suffering more from shock and fright than actual wounds.”

“Isn’t it a mercy the doctor was here,” said Mrs. Maloney, looking as if she would never know calmness again. “I think we should both have been killed.”

“It has been a most merciful escape,” Maloney said, his pulpit voice struggling with his emotion. “But, of course, we cannot risk another — we must strike Camp and get away at once — —”

“Only poor Mr. Sangree must not know what has happened. He is so attached to Joan and would be so terribly upset,” added the Bo’sun’s Mate distractedly, looking all about in her terror.

“It is perhaps advisable that Mr. Sangree should not know what has occurred,” Dr. Silence said with quiet authority, “but I think, for the safety of all concerned, it will be better not to leave the island just now.” He spoke with great decision and Maloney looked up and followed his words closely.

“If you will agree to stay here a few days longer, I have no doubt we can put an end to the attentions of your strange visitor, and incidentally have the opportunity of observing a most singular and interesting phenomenon — —”

“What!” gasped Mrs. Maloney, “a phenomenon? — you mean that you know what it is?”

“I am quite certain I know what it is,” he replied very low, for we heard the footsteps of Sangree approaching, “though I am not so certain yet as to the best means of dealing with it. But in any case it is not wise to leave precipitately — —”

“Oh, Timothy, does he think it’s a devil —— ?” cried the Bo’sun’s Mate in a voice that even the Canadian must have heard.

“In my opinion,” continued John Silence, looking across at me and the clergyman, “it is a case of modern lycanthropy with other complications that may — —” He left the sentence unfinished, for Mrs. Maloney got up with a jump and fled to her tent fearful she might hear a worse thing, and at that moment Sangree turned the corner of the stockade and came into view.

"There are footmarks all round the mouth of my tent," he said with excitement. "The animal has been here again in the night. Dr. Silence, you really must come and see them for yourself. They're as plain on the moss as tracks in snow."

But later in the day, while Sangree went off in the canoe to fish the pools near the larger islands, and Joan still lay, bandaged and resting, in her tent, Dr. Silence called me and the tutor and proposed a walk to the granite slabs at the far end. Mrs. Maloney sat on a stump near her daughter, and busied herself energetically with alternate nursing and painting.

"We'll leave you in charge," the doctor said with a smile that was meant to be encouraging, "and when you want us for lunch, or anything, the megaphone will always bring us back in time."

For, though the very air was charged with strange emotions, every one talked quietly and naturally as with a definite desire to counteract unnecessary excitement.

"I'll keep watch," said the plucky Bo'sun's Mate, "and meanwhile I find comfort in my work." She was busy with the sketch she had begun on the day after our arrival. "For even a tree," she added proudly, pointing to her little easel, "is a symbol of the divine, and the thought makes me feel safer." We glanced for a moment at a daub which was more like the symptom of a disease than a symbol of the divine — and then took the path round the lagoon.

At the far end we made a little fire and lay round it in the shadow of a big boulder. Maloney stopped his humming suddenly and turned to his companion.

"And what do you make of it all?" he asked abruptly.

"In the first place," replied John Silence, making himself comfortable against the rock, "it is of human origin, this animal; it is undoubted lycanthropy."

His words had the effect precisely of a bombshell. Maloney listened as though he had been struck.

"You puzzle me utterly," he said, sitting up closer and staring at him.

"Perhaps," replied the other, "but if you'll listen to me for a few moments you may be less puzzled at the end — or more. It depends how much you know. Let me go further and say that you have underestimated, or miscalculated, the effect of this primitive wild life upon all of you."

"In what way?" asked the clergyman, bristling a trifle.

"It is strong medicine for any town-dweller, and for some of you it has been too strong. One of you has gone wild." He uttered these last words with great emphasis.

"Gone savage," he added, looking from one to the other.

Neither of us found anything to reply.

"To say that the brute has awakened in a man is not a mere metaphor always," he went on presently.

"Of course not!"

"But, in the sense I mean, may have a very literal and terrible significance," pursued Dr. Silence. "Ancient instincts that no one dreamed of, least of all their possessor, may leap forth — —"

"Atavism can hardly explain a roaming animal with teeth and claws and sanguinary instincts," interrupted Maloney with impatience.

"The term is of your own choice," continued the doctor equably, "not mine, and it is a good example of a word that indicates a result while it conceals the process; but the explanation of this beast that haunts your island and attacks your daughter is of far deeper significance than mere atavistic tendencies, or throwing back to animal origin, which I suppose is the thought in your mind."

"You spoke just now of lycanthropy," said Maloney, looking bewildered and anxious to keep to plain facts evidently, "I think I have come across the word, but really — really — it can have no actual significance to-day, can it? These superstitions of mediæval times can hardly — —"

He looked round at me with his jolly red face, and the expression of astonishment and dismay on it would have made me shout with laughter at any other time. Laughter, however, was never farther from my mind than at this moment when I listened to Dr. Silence as he carefully suggested to the clergyman the very explanation that had gradually been forcing itself upon my own mind.

“However mediæval ideas may have exaggerated the idea is not of much importance to us now,” he said quietly, “when we are face to face with a modern example of what, I take it, has always been a profound fact. For the moment let us leave the name of any one in particular out of the matter and consider certain possibilities.”

We all agreed with that at any rate. There was no need to speak of Sangree, or of any one else, until we knew a little more.

“The fundamental fact in this most curious case,” he went on, “is that the ‘Double’ of a man — —”

“You mean the astral body? I’ve heard of that, of course,” broke in Maloney with a snort of triumph.

“No doubt,” said the other, smiling, “no doubt you have; — that this Double, or fluidic body of a man, as I was saying, has the power under certain conditions of projecting itself and becoming visible to others. Certain training will accomplish this, and certain drugs likewise; illnesses, too, that ravage the body may produce temporarily the result that death produces permanently, and let loose this counterpart of a human being and render it visible to the sight of others.

“Every one, of course, knows this more or less to-day; but it is not so generally known, and probably believed by none who have not witnessed it, that this fluidic body can, under certain conditions, assume other forms than human, and that such other forms may be determined by the dominating thought and wish of the owner. For this Double, or astral body as you call it, is really the seat of the passions, emotions and desires in the psychical economy. It is the Passion Body; and, in projecting itself, it can often assume a form that gives expression to the overmastering desire that moulds it; for it is composed of such tenuous matter that it lends itself readily to the moulding by thought and wish.”

“I follow you perfectly,” said Maloney, looking as if he would much rather be chopping firewood elsewhere and singing.

“And there are some persons so constituted,” the doctor went on with increasing seriousness, “that the fluid body in them is but loosely associated with the physical, persons of poor health as a rule, yet often of strong desires and passions; and in these persons it is easy for the Double to dissociate itself during deep sleep from their system, and, driven forth by some consuming desire, to assume an animal form and seek the fulfilment of that desire."

There, in broad daylight, I saw Maloney deliberately creep closer to the fire and heap the wood on. We gathered in to the heat, and to each other, and listened to Dr. Silence's voice as it mingled with the swish and whirr of the wind about us, and the falling of the little waves.

"For instance, to take a concrete example," he resumed; "suppose some young man, with the delicate constitution I have spoken of, forms an overpowering attachment to a young woman, yet perceives that it is not welcomed, and is man enough to repress its outward manifestations. In such a case, supposing his Double be easily projected, the very repression of his love in the daytime would add to the intense force of his desire when released in deep sleep from the control of his will, and his fluidic body might issue forth in monstrous or animal shape and become actually visible to others. And, if his devotion were dog-like in its fidelity, yet concealing the fires of a fierce passion beneath, it might well assume the form of a creature that seemed to be half dog, half wolf — —"

"A werewolf, you mean?" cried Maloney, pale to the lips as he listened.

John Silence held up a restraining hand. "A werewolf," he said, "is a true psychical fact of profound significance, however absurdly it may have been exaggerated by the imaginations of a superstitious peasantry in the days of unenlightenment, for a werewolf is nothing but the savage, and possibly sanguinary, instincts of a passionate man scouring the world in his fluidic body, his passion body, his body of desire. As in the case at hand, he may not know it — —"

"It is not necessarily deliberate, then?" Maloney put in quickly, with relief.

" —— It is hardly ever deliberate. It is the desires released in sleep from the control of the will finding a vent. In all savage races it has been recognised and dreaded, this phenomenon styled 'Wehr Wolf,' but to-day it is rare. And it is becoming rarer still, for the world grows tame and civilised, emotions have become refined, desires lukewarm, and few men have savagery enough left in them to generate impulses of such intense force, and certainly not to project them in animal form."

"By Gad!" exclaimed the clergyman breathlessly, and with increasing excitement, "then I feel I must tell you — what has been given to me in confidence — that Sangree has in him an admixture of savage blood — of Red Indian ancestry — —"

"Let us stick to our supposition of a man as described," the doctor stopped him calmly, "and let us imagine that he has in him this admixture of savage blood; and further, that he is wholly unaware of his dreadful physical and psychical infirmity; and that he suddenly finds himself leading the primitive life together with the object of his desires; with the result that the strain of the untamed wild-man in his blood — —"

"Red Indian, for instance," from Maloney.

"Red Indian, perfectly," agreed the doctor; "the result, I say, that this savage strain in him is awakened and leaps into passionate life. What then?"

He looked hard at Timothy Maloney, and the clergyman looked hard at him.

"The wild life such as you lead it here on this island, for instance, might quickly awaken his savage instincts — his buried instincts — and with profoundly disquieting results."

"You mean his Subtle Body, as you call it, might issue forth automatically in deep sleep and seek the object of its desire?" I said, coming to Maloney's aid, who was finding it more and more difficult to get words.

"Precisely; — yet the desire of the man remaining utterly unmalefic — pure and wholesome in every sense — —"

"Ah!" I heard the clergyman gasp.

"The lover's desire for union run wild, run savage, tearing its way out in primitive, untamed fashion, I mean," continued the doctor, striving to make himself clear to a mind bounded by conventional thought and knowledge; "for the desire to possess, remember, may easily become importunate, and, embodied in this animal form of the Subtle Body which acts as its vehicle, may go forth to tear in pieces all that obstructs, to reach to the very heart of the loved object and seize it. *Au fond*, it is nothing more than the aspiration for union, as I said — the splendid and perfectly clean desire to absorb utterly into itself — —"

He paused a moment and looked into Maloney's eyes.

"To bathe in the very heart's blood of the one desired," he added with grave emphasis.

The fire spurted and crackled and made me start, but Maloney found relief in a genuine shudder, and I saw him turn his head and look about him from the sea to the trees. The wind dropped just at that moment and the doctor's words rang sharply through the stillness.

"Then it might even kill?" stammered the clergyman presently in a hushed voice, and with a little forced laugh by way of protest that sounded quite ghastly.

"In the last resort it might kill," repeated Dr. Silence. Then, after another pause, during which he was clearly debating how much or how little it was wise to give to his audience, he continued: "And if the Double does not succeed in getting back to its physical body, that physical body would wake an imbecile — an idiot — or perhaps never wake at all."

Maloney sat up and found his tongue.

"You mean that if this fluid animal thing, or whatever it is, should be prevented getting back, the man might never wake again?" he asked, with shaking voice.

"He might be dead," replied the other calmly. The tremor of a positive sensation shivered in the air about us.

"Then isn't that the best way to cure the fool — the brute —— ?" thundered the clergyman, half rising to his feet.

"Certainly it would be an easy and undiscoverable form of murder," was the stern reply, spoken as calmly as though it were a remark about the weather.

Maloney collapsed visibly, and I gathered the wood over the fire and coaxed up a blaze.

"The greater part of the man's life — of his vital forces — goes out with this Double," Dr. Silence resumed, after a moment's consideration, "and a considerable portion of the actual material of his physical body. So the physical body that remains behind is depleted, not only of force, but of matter. You would see it small, shrunken, dropped together, just like the body of a materialising medium at a séance. Moreover, any mark or injury inflicted upon this Double will be found exactly reproduced by the phenomenon of repercussion upon the shrunken physical body lying in its trance — —”

“An injury inflicted upon the one you say would be reproduced also on the other?” repeated Maloney, his excitement growing again.

“Undoubtedly,” replied the other quietly; “for there exists all the time a continuous connection between the physical body and the Double — a connection of matter, though of exceedingly attenuated, possibly of etheric, matter. The wound *travels*, so to speak, from one to the other, and if this connection were broken the result would be death.”

“Death,” repeated Maloney to himself, “death!” He looked anxiously at our faces, his thoughts evidently beginning to clear.

“And this solidity?” he asked presently, after a general pause; “this tearing of tents and flesh; this howling, and the marks of paws? You mean that the Double —— ?”

“Has sufficient material drawn from the depleted body to produce physical results? Certainly!” the doctor took him up. “Although to explain at this moment such problems as the passage of matter through matter would be as difficult as to explain how the thought of a mother can actually break the bones of the child unborn.”

Dr. Silence pointed out to sea, and Maloney, looking wildly about him, turned with a violent start. I saw a canoe, with Sangree in the stern-seat, slowly coming into view round the farther point. His hat was off, and his tanned face for the first time appeared to me — to us all, I think — as though it were the face of some one else. He looked like a wild man. Then he stood up in the canoe to make a cast with the rod, and he looked for all the world like an Indian. I recalled the expression of his face as I had seen it once or twice, notably on that occasion of the evening prayer, and an involuntary shudder ran down my spine.

At that very instant he turned and saw us where we lay, and his face broke into a smile, so that his teeth showed white in the sun. He looked in his element, and exceedingly attractive. He called out something about his fish, and soon after passed out of sight into the lagoon.

For a time none of us said a word.

“And the cure?” ventured Maloney at length.

“Is not to quench this savage force,” replied Dr. Silence, “but to steer it better, and to provide other outlets. This is the solution of all these problems of accumulated force, for this force is the raw material of usefulness, and should be increased and cherished, not by separating it from the body by death, but by raising it to higher channels. The best and quickest cure of all,” he went on, speaking very gently and with a hand upon the clergyman’s arm, “is to lead it towards its object, provided that object is not unalterably hostile — to let it find rest where — —”

He stopped abruptly, and the eyes of the two men met in a single glance of comprehension.

“Joan?” Maloney exclaimed, under his breath.

“Joan!” replied John Silence.

We all went to bed early. The day had been unusually warm, and after sunset a curious hush descended on the island. Nothing was audible but that faint, ghostly singing which is inseparable from a pine-wood even on the stillest day — a low, searching sound, as though the wind had hair and trailed it o’er the world.

With the sudden cooling of the atmosphere a sea fog began to form. It appeared in isolated patches over the water, and then these patches slid together and a white wall advanced upon us. Not a breath of air stirred; the firs stood like flat metal outlines; the sea became as oil. The whole scene lay as though held motionless by some huge weight in the air; and the flames from our fire — the largest we had ever made — rose upwards, straight as a church steeple.

As I followed the rest of our party tent-wards, having kicked the embers of the fire into safety, the advance guard of the fog was creeping slowly among the trees, like white arms feeling their way. Mingled with the smoke was the odour of moss and soil and bark, and the peculiar flavour of the Baltic, half salt, half brackish, like the smell of an estuary at low water.

It is difficult to say why it seemed to me that this deep stillness masked an intense activity; perhaps in every mood lies the suggestion of its opposite, so that I became aware of the contrast of furious energy, for it was like moving through the deep pause before a thunderstorm, and I trod gently lest by breaking a twig or moving a stone I might set the whole scene into some sort of tumultuous movement. Actually, no doubt, it was nothing more than a result of overstrung nerves.

There was no more question of undressing and going to bed than there was of undressing and going to bathe. Some sense in me was alert and expectant. I sat in my tent and waited. And at the end of half an hour or so my waiting was justified, for the canvas suddenly shivered, and some one tripped over the ropes that held it to the earth. John Silence came in.

The effect of his quiet entry was singular and prophetic: it was just as though the energy lying behind all this stillness had pressed forward to the edge of action. This, no doubt, was merely the quickening of my own mind, and had no other justification; for the presence of John Silence always suggested the near possibility of vigorous action, and, as a matter of fact, he came in with nothing more than a nod and a significant gesture.

He sat down on a corner of my ground-sheet, and I pushed the blanket over so that he could cover his legs. He drew the flap of the tent after him and settled down, but hardly had he done so when the canvas shook a second time, and in blundered Maloney.

“Sitting in the dark?” he said self-consciously, pushing his head inside, and hanging up his lantern on the ridge-pole nail. “I just looked in for a smoke. I suppose — —”

He glanced round, caught the eye of Dr. Silence, and stopped. He put his pipe back into his pocket and began to hum softly — that under-breath humming of a nondescript melody I knew so well and had come to hate.

Dr. Silence leaned forward, opened the lantern and blew the light out. “Speak low,” he said, “and don’t strike matches. Listen for sounds and movements about the Camp, and be ready to follow me at a moment’s notice.” There was light enough to distinguish our faces easily, and I saw Maloney glance again hurriedly at both of us.

“Is the Camp asleep?” the doctor asked presently, whispering.

“Sangree is,” replied the clergyman, in a voice equally low. “I can’t answer for the women; I think they’re sitting up.”

“That’s for the best.” And then he added: “I wish the fog would thin a bit and let the moon through; later — we may want it.”

“It is lifting now, I think,” Maloney whispered back. “It’s over the tops of the trees already.”

I cannot say what it was in this commonplace exchange of remarks that thrilled. Probably Maloney’s swift acquiescence in the doctor’s mood had something to do with it; for his quick obedience certainly impressed me a good deal. But, even without that slight evidence, it was clear that each recognised the gravity of the occasion, and understood that sleep was impossible and sentry duty was the order of the night.

“Report to me,” repeated John Silence once again, “the least sound, and do nothing precipitately.”

He shifted across to the mouth of the tent and raised the flap, fastening it against the pole so that he could see out. Maloney stopped humming and began to force the breath through his teeth with a kind of faint hissing, treating us to a medley of church hymns and popular songs of the day.

Then the tent trembled as though some one had touched it.

“That’s the wind rising,” whispered the clergyman, and pulled the flap open as far as it would go. A waft of cold damp air entered and made us shiver, and with it came a sound of the sea as the first wave washed its way softly along the shores.

“It’s got round to the north,” he added, and following his voice came a long-drawn whisper that rose from the whole island as the trees sent forth a sighing response. “The fog’ll move a bit now. I can make out a lane across the sea already.”

“Hush!” said Dr. Silence, for Maloney’s voice had risen above a whisper, and we settled down again to another long period of watching and waiting, broken only by the occasional rubbing of shoulders against the canvas as we shifted our positions, and the increasing noise of waves on the outer coast-line of the island. And over all whirred the murmur of wind sweeping the tops of the trees like a great harp, and the faint tapping on the tent as drops fell from the branches with a sharp pinging sound.

We had sat for something over an hour in this way, and Maloney and I were finding it increasingly hard to keep awake, when suddenly Dr. Silence rose to his feet and peered out. The next minute he was gone.

Relieved of the dominating presence, the clergyman thrust his face close into mine. "I don't much care for this waiting game," he whispered, "but Silence wouldn't hear of my sitting up with the others; he said it would prevent anything happening if I did."

"He knows," I answered shortly.

"No doubt in the world about that," he whispered back; "it's this 'Double' business, as he calls it, or else it's obsession as the Bible describes it. But it's bad, whichever it is, and I've got my Winchester outside ready cocked, and I brought this too." He shoved a pocket Bible under my nose. At one time in his life it had been his inseparable companion.

"One's useless and the other's dangerous," I replied under my breath, conscious of a keen desire to laugh, and leaving him to choose. "Safety lies in following our leader — —"

"I'm not thinking of myself," he interrupted sharply; "only, if anything happens to Joan to-night I'm going to shoot first — and pray afterwards!"

Maloney put the book back into his hip-pocket, and peered out of the doorway. "What is he up to now, in the devil's name, I wonder!" he added; "going round Sangree's tent and making gestures. How weird he looks disappearing in and out of the fog."

"Just trust him and wait," I said quickly, for the doctor was already on his way back. "Remember, he has the knowledge, and knows what he's about. I've been with him through worse cases than this."

Maloney moved back as Dr. Silence darkened the doorway and stooped to enter.

“His sleep is very deep,” he whispered, seating himself by the door again. “He’s in a cataleptic condition, and the Double may be released any minute now. But I’ve taken steps to imprison it in the tent, and it can’t get out till I permit it. Be on the watch for signs of movement.” Then he looked hard at Maloney. “But no violence, or shooting, remember, Mr. Maloney, unless you want a murder on your hands. Anything done to the Double acts by repercussion upon the physical body. You had better take out the cartridges at once.”

His voice was stern. The clergyman went out, and I heard him emptying the magazine of his rifle. When he returned he sat nearer the door than before, and from that moment until we left the tent he never once took his eyes from the figure of Dr. Silence, silhouetted there against sky and canvas.

And, meanwhile, the wind came steadily over the sea and opened the mist into lanes and clearings, driving it about like a living thing.

It must have been well after midnight when a low booming sound drew my attention; but at first the sense of hearing was so strained that it was impossible exactly to locate it, and I imagined it was the thunder of big guns far out at sea carried to us by the rising wind. Then Maloney, catching hold of my arm and leaning forward, somehow brought the true relation, and I realised the next second that it was only a few feet away.

“Sangree’s tent,” he exclaimed in a loud and startled whisper.

I craned my head round the corner, but at first the effect of the fog was so confusing that every patch of white driving about before the wind looked like a moving tent and it was some seconds before I discovered the one patch that held steady. Then I saw that it was shaking all over, and the sides, flapping as much as the tightness of the ropes allowed, were the cause of the booming sound we had heard. Something alive was tearing frantically about inside, banging against the stretched canvas in a way that made me think of a great moth dashing against the walls and ceiling of a room. The tent bulged and rocked.

“It’s trying to get out, by Jupiter!” muttered the clergyman, rising to his feet and turning to the side where the unloaded rifle lay. I sprang up too, hardly knowing what purpose was in my mind, but anxious to be prepared for anything. John Silence, however, was before us both, and his figure slipped past and blocked the doorway of the tent. And there was some quality in his voice next minute when he began to speak that brought our minds instantly to a state of calm obedience.

“First — the women’s tent,” he said low, looking sharply at Maloney, “and if I need your help, I’ll call.”

The clergyman needed no second bidding. He dived past me and was out in a moment. He was labouring evidently under intense excitement. I watched him picking his way silently over the slippery ground, giving the moving tent a wide berth, and presently disappearing among the floating shapes of fog.

Dr. Silence turned to me. “You heard those footsteps about half an hour ago?” he asked significantly.

“I heard nothing.”

“They were extraordinarily soft — almost the soundless tread of a wild creature. But now, follow me closely,” he added, “for we must waste no time if I am to save this poor man from his affliction and lead his werewolf Double to its rest. And, unless I am much mistaken” — he peered at me through the darkness, whispering with the utmost distinctness— “Joan and Sangree are absolutely made for one another. And I think she knows it too — just as well as he does.”

My head swam a little as I listened, but at the same time something cleared in my brain and I saw that he was right. Yet it was all so weird and incredible, so remote from the commonplace facts of life as commonplace people know them; and more than once it flashed upon me that the whole scene — people, words, tents, and all the rest of it — were delusions created by the intense excitement of my own mind somehow, and that suddenly the sea-fog would clear off and the world become normal again.

The cold air from the sea stung our cheeks sharply as we left the close atmosphere of the little crowded tent. The sighing of the trees, the waves breaking below on the rocks, and the lines and patches of mist driving about us seemed to create the momentary illusion that the whole island had broken loose and was floating out to sea like a mighty raft.

The doctor moved just ahead of me, quickly and silently; he was making straight for the Canadian’s tent where the sides still boomed and shook as the creature of sinister life raced and tore about impatiently within. A little distance from the door he paused and held up a hand to stop me. We were, perhaps, a dozen feet away.

“Before I release it, you shall see for yourself,” he said, “that the reality of the werewolf is beyond all question. The matter of which it is composed is, of course, exceedingly attenuated, but you are partially clairvoyant — and even if it is not dense enough for normal sight you will see something.”

He added a little more I could not catch. The fact was that the curiously strong vibrating atmosphere surrounding his person somewhat confused my senses. It was the result, of course, of his intense concentration of mind and forces, and pervaded the entire Camp and all the persons in it. And as I watched the canvas shake and heard it boom and flap I heartily welcomed it. For it was also protective.

At the back of Sangree’s tent stood a thin group of pine trees, but in front and at the sides the ground was comparatively clear. The flap was wide open and any ordinary animal would have been out and away without the least trouble. Dr. Silence led me up to within a few feet, evidently careful not to advance beyond a certain limit, and then stooped down and signalled to me to do the same. And looking over his shoulder I saw the interior lit faintly by the spectral light reflected from the fog, and the dim blot upon the balsam boughs and blankets signifying Sangree; while over him, and round him, and up and down him, flew the dark mass of “something” on four legs, with pointed muzzle and sharp ears plainly visible against the tent sides, and the occasional gleam of fiery eyes and white fangs.

I held my breath and kept utterly still, inwardly and outwardly, for fear, I suppose, that the creature would become conscious of my presence; but the distress I felt went far deeper than the mere sense of personal safety, or the fact of watching something so incredibly active and real. I became keenly aware of the dreadful psychic calamity it involved. The realisation that Sangree lay confined in that narrow space with this species of monstrous projection of himself — that he was wrapped there in the cataleptic sleep, all unconscious that this thing was masquerading with his own life and energies — added a distressing touch of horror to the scene. In all the cases of John Silence — and they were many and often terrible — no other psychic affliction has ever, before or since, impressed me so convincingly with the pathetic impermanence of the human personality, with its fluid nature, and with the alarming possibilities of its transformations.

“Come,” he whispered, after we had watched for some minutes the frantic efforts to escape from the circle of thought and will that held it prisoner, “come a little farther away while I release it.”

We moved back a dozen yards or so. It was like a scene in some impossible play, or in some ghastly and oppressive nightmare from which I should presently awake to find the blankets all heaped up upon my chest.

By some method undoubtedly mental, but which, in my confusion and excitement, I failed to understand, the doctor accomplished his purpose, and the next minute I heard him say sharply under his breath, “It’s out! Now, watch!”

At this very moment a sudden gust from the sea blew aside the mist, so that a lane opened to the sky, and the moon, ghastly and unnatural as the effect of stage limelight, dropped down in a momentary gleam upon the door of Sangree’s tent, and I perceived that something had moved forward from the interior darkness and stood clearly defined upon the threshold. And, at the same moment, the tent ceased its shuddering and held still.

There, in the doorway, stood an animal, with neck and muzzle thrust forward, its head poking into the night, its whole body poised in that attitude of intense rigidity that precedes the spring into freedom, the running leap of attack. It seemed to be about the size of a calf, leaner than a mastiff, yet more squat than a wolf, and I can swear that I saw the fur ridged sharply upon its back. Then its upper lip slowly lifted, and I saw the whiteness of its teeth.

Surely no human being ever stared as hard as I did in those next few minutes. Yet, the harder I stared the clearer appeared the amazing and monstrous apparition. For, after all, it was Sangree — and yet it was not Sangree. It was the head and face of an animal, and yet it was the face of Sangree: the face of a wild dog, a wolf, and yet his face. The eyes were sharper, narrower, more fiery, yet they were his eyes — his eyes run wild; the teeth were longer, whiter, more pointed — yet they were his teeth, his teeth grown cruel; the expression was flaming, terrible, exultant — yet it was his expression carried to the border of savagery — his expression as I had already surprised it more than once, only dominant now, fully released from human constraint, with the mad yearning of a hungry and importunate soul. It was the soul of Sangree, the long suppressed, deeply loving Sangree, expressed in its single and intense desire — pure utterly and utterly wonderful.

Yet, at the same time, came the feeling that it was all an illusion. I suddenly remembered the extraordinary changes the human face can undergo in circular insanity, when it changes from melancholia to elation; and I recalled the effect of hascheesh, which shows the human countenance in the form of the bird or animal to which in character it most approximates; and for a moment I attributed this mingling of Sangree's face with a wolf to some kind of similar delusion of the senses. I was mad, deluded, dreaming! The excitement of the day, and this dim light of stars and bewildering mist combined to trick me. I had been amazingly imposed upon by some false wizardry of the senses. It was all absurd and fantastic; it would pass.

And then, sounding across this sea of mental confusion like a bell through a fog, came the voice of John Silence bringing me back to a consciousness of the reality of it all —

"Sangree — in his Double!"

And when I looked again more calmly, I plainly saw that it was indeed the face of the Canadian, but his face turned animal, yet mingled with the brute expression a curiously pathetic look like the soul seen sometimes in the yearning eyes of a dog, — the face of an animal shot with vivid streaks of the human.

The doctor called to him softly under his breath —

"Sangree! Sangree, you poor afflicted creature! Do you know me? Can you understand what it is you're doing in your 'Body of Desire'?"

For the first time since its appearance the creature moved. Its ears twitched and it shifted the weight of its body on to the hind legs. Then, lifting its head and muzzle to the sky, it opened its long jaws and gave vent to a dismal and prolonged howling.

But, when I heard that howling rise to heaven, the breath caught and strangled in my throat and it seemed that my heart missed a beat; for, though the sound was entirely animal, it was at the same time entirely human. But, more than that, it was the cry I had so often heard in the Western States of America where the Indians still fight and hunt and struggle — it was the cry of the Redskin!

“The Indian blood!” whispered John Silence, when I caught his arm for support; “the ancestral cry.”

And that poignant, beseeching cry, that broken human voice, mingling with the savage howl of the brute beast, pierced straight to my very heart and touched there something that no music, no voice, passionate or tender, of man, woman or child has ever stirred before or since for one second into life. It echoed away among the fog and the trees and lost itself somewhere out over the hidden sea. And some part of myself — something that was far more than the mere act of intense listening — went out with it, and for several minutes I lost consciousness of my surroundings and felt utterly absorbed in the pain of another stricken fellow-creature.

Again the voice of John Silence recalled me to myself.

“Hark!” he said aloud. “Hark!”

His tone galvanised me afresh. We stood listening side by side.

Far across the island, faintly sounding through the trees and brushwood, came a similar, answering cry. Shrill, yet wonderfully musical, shaking the heart with a singular wild sweetness that defies description, we heard it rise and fall upon the night air.

“It’s across the lagoon,” Dr. Silence cried, but this time in full tones that paid no tribute to caution. “It’s Joan! She’s answering him!”

Again the wonderful cry rose and fell, and that same instant the animal lowered its head, and, muzzle to earth, set off on a swift easy canter that took it off into the mist and out of our sight like a thing of wind and vision.

The doctor made a quick dash to the door of Sangree’s tent, and, following close at his heels, I peered in and caught a momentary glimpse of the small, shrunken body lying upon the branches but half covered by the blankets — the cage from which most of the life, and not a little of the actual corporeal substance, had escaped into that other form of life and energy, the body of passion and desire.

By another of those swift, incalculable processes which at this stage of my apprenticeship I failed often to grasp, Dr. Silence reclosed the circle about the tent and body.

“Now it cannot return till I permit it,” he said, and the next second was off at full speed into the woods, with myself close behind him. I had already had some experience of my companion’s ability to run swiftly through a dense wood, and I now had the further proof of his power almost to see in the dark. For, once we left the open space about the tents, the trees seemed to absorb all the remaining vestiges of light, and I understood that special sensibility that is said to develop in the blind — the sense of obstacles.

And twice as we ran we heard the sound of that dismal howling drawing nearer and nearer to the answering faint cry from the point of the island whither we were going.

Then, suddenly, the trees fell away, and we emerged, hot and breathless, upon the rocky point where the granite slabs ran bare into the sea. It was like passing into the clearness of open day. And there, sharply defined against sea and sky, stood the figure of a human being. It was Joan.

I at once saw that there was something about her appearance that was singular and unusual, but it was only when we had moved quite close that I recognised what caused it. For while the lips wore a smile that lit the whole face with a happiness I had never seen there before, the eyes themselves were fixed in a steady, sightless stare as though they were lifeless and made of glass.

I made an impulsive forward movement, but Dr. Silence instantly dragged me back.

“No,” he cried, “don’t wake her!”

“What do you mean?” I replied aloud, struggling in his grasp.

“She’s asleep. It’s somnambulistic. The shock might injure her permanently.”

I turned and peered closely into his face. He was absolutely calm. I began to understand a little more, catching, I suppose, something of his strong thinking.

“Walking in her sleep, you mean?”

He nodded. “She’s on her way to meet him. From the very beginning he must have drawn her — irresistibly.”

“But the torn tent and the wounded flesh?”

“When she did not sleep deep enough to enter the somnambulistic trance he missed her — he went instinctively and in all innocence to seek her out — with the result, of course, that she woke and was terrified — —”

“Then in their heart of hearts they love?” I asked finally.

John Silence smiled his inscrutable smile: “Profoundly,” he answered, “and as simply as only primitive souls can love. If only they both come to realise it in their normal waking states his Double will cease these nocturnal excursions. He will be cured, and at rest.”

The words had hardly left his lips when there was a sound of rustling branches on our left, and the very next instant the dense brushwood parted where it was darkest and out rushed the swift form of an animal at full gallop. The noise of feet was scarcely audible, but in that utter stillness I heard the heavy panting breath and caught the swish of the low bushes against its sides. It went straight towards Joan — and as it went the girl lifted her head and turned to meet it. And the same instant a canoe that had been creeping silently and unobserved round the inner shore of the lagoon, emerged from the shadows and defined itself upon the water with a figure at the middle thwart. It was Maloney.

It was only afterwards I realised that we were invisible to him where we stood against the dark background of trees; the figures of Joan and the animal he saw plainly, but not Dr. Silence and myself standing just beyond them. He stood up in the canoe and pointed with his right arm. I saw something gleam in his hand.

“Stand aside, Joan girl, or you’ll get hit,” he shouted, his voice ringing horribly through the deep stillness, and the same instant a pistol-shot cracked out with a burst of flame and smoke, and the figure of the animal, with one tremendous leap into the air, fell back in the shadows and disappeared like a shape of night and fog. Instantly, then, Joan opened her eyes, looked in a dazed fashion about her, and pressing both hands against her heart, fell with a sharp cry into my arms that were just in time to catch her.

And an answering cry sounded across the lagoon — thin, wailing, piteous. It came from Sangree's tent.

"Fool!" cried Dr. Silence, "you've wounded him!" and before we could move or realise quite what it meant, he was in the canoe and half-way across the lagoon.

Some kind of similar abuse came in a torrent from my lips too — though I cannot remember the actual words — as I cursed the man for his disobedience and tried to make the girl comfortable on the ground. But the clergyman was more practical. He was spreading his coat over her and dashing water on her face.

"It's not Joan I've killed at any rate," I heard him mutter as she turned and opened her eyes and smiled faintly up in his face. "I swear the bullet went straight."

Joan stared at him; she was still dazed and bewildered, and still imagined herself with the companion of her trance. The strange lucidity of the somnambulist still hung over her brain and mind, though outwardly she appeared troubled and confused.

"Where has he gone to? He disappeared so suddenly, crying that he was hurt," she asked, looking at her father as though she did not recognise him. "And if they've done anything to him — they have done it to me too — for he is more to me than — —"

Her words grew vaguer and vaguer as she returned slowly to her normal waking state, and now she stopped altogether, as though suddenly aware that she had been surprised into telling secrets. But all the way back, as we carried her carefully through the trees, the girl smiled and murmured Sangree's name and asked if he was injured, until it finally became clear to me that the wild soul of the one had called to the wild soul of the other and in the secret depths of their beings the call had been heard and understood. John Silence was right. In the abyss of her heart, too deep at first for recognition, the girl loved him, and had loved him from the very beginning. Once her normal waking consciousness recognised the fact they would leap together like twin flames, and his affliction would be at an end; his intense desire would be satisfied; he would be cured.

And in Sangree's tent Dr. Silence and I sat up for the remainder of the night — this wonderful and haunted night that had shown us such strange glimpses of a new heaven and a new hell — for the Canadian tossed upon his balsam boughs with high fever in his blood, and upon each cheek a dark and curious contusion showed, throbbing with severe pain although the skin was not broken and there was no outward and visible sign of blood.

"Maloney shot straight, you see," whispered Dr. Silence to me after the clergyman had gone to his tent, and had put Joan to sleep beside her mother, who, by the way, had never once awakened. "The bullet must have passed clean through the face, for both cheeks are stained. He'll wear these marks all his life — smaller, but always there. They're the most curious scars in the world, these scars transferred by repercussion from an injured Double. They'll remain visible until just before his death, and then with the withdrawal of the subtle body they will disappear finally."

His words mingled in my dazed mind with the sighs of the troubled sleeper and the crying of the wind about the tent. Nothing seemed to paralyse my powers of realisation so much as these twin stains of mysterious significance upon the face before me.

It was odd, too, how speedily and easily the Camp resigned itself again to sleep and quietness, as though a stage curtain had suddenly dropped down upon the action and concealed it; and nothing contributed so vividly to the feeling that I had been a spectator of some kind of visionary drama as the dramatic nature of the change in the girl's attitude.

Yet, as a matter of fact, the change had not been so sudden and revolutionary as appeared. Underneath, in those remoter regions of consciousness where the emotions, unknown to their owners, do secretly mature, and owe thence their abrupt revelation to some abrupt psychological climax, there can be no doubt that Joan's love for the Canadian had been growing steadily and irresistibly all the time. It had now rushed to the surface so that she recognised it; that was all.

And it has always seemed to me that the presence of John Silence, so potent, so quietly efficacious, produced an effect, if one may say so, of a psychic forcing-house, and hastened incalculably the bringing together of these two "wild" lovers. In that sudden awakening had occurred the very psychological climax required to reveal the passionate emotion accumulated below. The deeper knowledge had leaped across and transferred itself to her ordinary consciousness, and in that shock the collision of the personalities had shaken them to the depths and shown her the truth beyond all possibility of doubt.

“He’s sleeping quietly now,” the doctor said, interrupting my reflections. “If you will watch alone for a bit I’ll go to Maloney’s tent and help him to arrange his thoughts.” He smiled in anticipation of that “arrangement.” “He’ll never quite understand how a wound on the Double can transfer itself to the physical body, but at least I can persuade him that the less he talks and ‘explains’ tomorrow, the sooner the forces will run their natural course now to peace and quietness.”

He went away softly, and with the removal of his presence Sangree, sleeping heavily, turned over and groaned with the pain of his broken head.

And it was in the still hour just before the dawn, when all the islands were hushed, the wind and sea still dreaming, and the stars visible through clearing mists, that a figure crept silently over the ridge and reached the door of the tent where I dozed beside the sufferer, before I was aware of its presence. The flap was cautiously lifted a few inches and in looked — Joan.

That same instant Sangree woke and sat up on his bed of branches. He recognised her before I could say a word, and uttered a low cry. It was pain and joy mingled, and this time all human. And the girl too was no longer walking in her sleep, but fully aware of what she was doing. I was only just able to prevent him springing from his blankets.

“Joan, Joan!” he cried, and in a flash she answered him, “I’m here — I’m with you always now,” and had pushed past me into the tent and flung herself upon his breast.

“I knew you would come to me in the end,” I heard him whisper.

“It was all too big for me to understand at first,” she murmured, “and for a long time I was frightened — —”

“But not now!” he cried louder; “you don’t feel afraid now of — of anything that’s in me — —”

“I fear nothing,” she cried, “nothing, nothing!”

I led her outside again. She looked steadily into my face with eyes shining and her whole being transformed. In some intuitive way, surviving probably from the somnambulism, she knew or guessed as much as I knew.

“You must talk tomorrow with John Silence,” I said gently, leading her towards her own tent. “He understands everything.”

I left her at the door, and as I went back softly to take up my place of sentry again with the Canadian, I saw the first streaks of dawn lighting up the far rim of the sea behind the distant islands.

And, as though to emphasise the eternal closeness of comedy to tragedy, two small details rose out of the scene and impressed me so vividly that I remember them to this very day. For in the tent where I had just left Joan, all aquiver with her new happiness, there rose plainly to my ears the grotesque sounds of the Bo’sun’s Mate heavily snoring, oblivious of all things in heaven or hell; and from Maloney’s tent, so still was the night, where I looked across and saw the lantern’s glow, there came to me, through the trees, the monotonous rising and falling of a human voice that was beyond question the sound of a man praying to his God.

A VICTIM OF HIGHER SPACE

"THERE'S A HEXTRAORDINARY gentleman to see you, sir," said the new man.

"Why 'extraordinary'?" asked Dr. Silence, drawing the tips of his thin fingers through his brown beard. His eyes twinkled pleasantly. "Why 'extraordinary,' Barker?" he repeated encouragingly, noticing the perplexed expression in the man's eyes.

"He's so — so thin, sir. I could hardly see 'im at all — at first. He was inside the house before I could ask the name," he added, remembering strict orders.

"And who brought him here?"

"He come alone, sir, in a closed cab. He pushed by me before I could say a word — making no noise not what I could hear. He seemed to move so soft like—"

The man stopped short with obvious embarrassment, as though he had already said enough to jeopardise his new situation, but trying hard to show that he remembered the instructions and warnings he had received with regard to the admission of strangers not properly accredited.

"And where is the gentleman now?" asked Dr. Silence, turning away to conceal his amusement.

"I really couldn't exactly say, sir. I left him standing in the 'all—"

The doctor looked up sharply. "But why in the hall, Barker? Why not in the waiting-room?" He fixed his piercing though kindly eyes on the man's face. "Did he frighten you?" he asked quickly.

"I think he did, sir, if I may say so. I seemed to lose sight of him, as it were —" The man stammered, evidently convinced by now that he had earned his dismissal. "He come in so funny, just like a cold wind," he added boldly, setting his heels at attention and looking his master full in the face.

The doctor made an internal note of the man's halting description; he was pleased that the slight signs of psychic intuition which had induced him to engage Barker had not entirely failed at the first trial. Dr. Silence sought for this qualification in all his assistants, from secretary to serving man, and if it surrounded him with a somewhat singular crew, the drawbacks were more than compensated for on the whole by their occasional flashes of insight.

"So the gentleman made you feel queer, did he?"

"That was it, I think, sir," repeated the man stolidly.

"And he brings no kind of introduction to me — no letter or anything?" asked the doctor, with feigned surprise, as though he knew what was coming.

The man fumbled, both in mind and pockets, and finally produced an envelope.

"I beg pardon, sir," he said, greatly flustered; "the gentleman handed me this for you."

It was a note from a discerning friend, who had never yet sent him a case that was not vitally interesting from one point or another.

"Please see the bearer of this note," the brief message ran, "though I doubt if even you can do much to help him."

John Silence paused a moment, so as to gather from the mind of the writer all that lay behind the brief words of the letter. Then he looked up at his servant with a graver expression than he had yet worn.

"Go back and find this gentleman," he said, "and show him into the green study. Do not reply to his question, or speak more than actually necessary; but think kind, helpful, sympathetic thoughts as strongly as you can, Barker. You remember what I told you about the importance of *thinking*, when I engaged you. Put curiosity out of your mind, and think gently, sympathetically, affectionately, if you can."

He smiled, and Barker, who had recovered his composure in the doctor's presence, bowed silently and went out.

There were two different reception-rooms in Dr. Silence's house. One (intended for persons who imagined they needed spiritual assistance when really they were only candidates for the asylum) had padded walls, and was well supplied with various concealed contrivances by means of which sudden violence could be instantly met and overcome. It was, however, rarely used. The other, intended for the reception of genuine cases of spiritual distress and out-of-the-way afflictions of a psychic nature, was entirely draped and furnished in a soothing deep green, calculated to induce calmness and repose of mind. And this room was the one in which Dr. Silence interviewed the majority of his "queer" cases, and the one into which he had directed Barker to show his present caller.

To begin with, the arm-chair in which the patient was always directed to sit, was nailed to the floor, since its immovability tended to impart this same excellent characteristic to the occupant. Patients invariably grew excited when talking about themselves, and their excitement tended to confuse their thoughts and to exaggerate their language. The inflexibility of the chair helped to counteract this. After repeated endeavours to drag it forward, or push it back, they ended by resigning themselves to sitting quietly. And with the futility of fidgeting there followed a calmer state of mind.

Upon the floor, and at intervals in the wall immediately behind, were certain tiny green buttons, practically unnoticeable, which on being pressed permitted a soothing and persuasive narcotic to rise invisibly about the occupant of the chair. The effect upon the excitable patient was rapid, admirable, and harmless. The green study was further provided with a secret spy-hole; for John Silence liked when possible to observe his patient's face before it had assumed that mask the features of the human countenance invariably wear in the presence of another person. A man sitting alone wears a psychic expression; and this expression is the man himself. It disappears the moment another person joins him. And Dr. Silence often learned more from a few moments' secret observation of a face than from hours of conversation with its owner afterwards.

A very light, almost a dancing, step followed Barker's heavy tread towards the green room, and a moment afterwards the man came in and announced that the gentleman was waiting. He was still pale and his manner nervous.

"Never mind, Barker" the doctor said kindly; "if you were not psychic the man would have had no effect upon you at all. You only need training and development. And when you have learned to interpret these feelings and sensations better, you will feel no fear, but only a great sympathy.”

“Yes, sir; thank you, sir!” And Barker bowed and made his escape, while Dr. Silence, an amused smile lurking about the corners of his mouth, made his way noiselessly down the passage and put his eye to the spy-hole in the door of the green study.

This spy-hole was so placed that it commanded a view of almost the entire room, and, looking through it, the doctor saw a hat, gloves, and umbrella lying on a chair by the table, but searched at first in vain for their owner.

The windows were both closed and a brisk fire burned in the grate. There were various signs — signs intelligible at least to a keenly intuitive soul — that the room was occupied, yet so far as human beings were concerned, it was empty, utterly empty. No one sat in the chairs; no one stood on the mat before the fire; there was no sign even that a patient was anywhere close against the wall, examining the Bocklin reproductions — as patients so often did when they thought they were alone — and therefore rather difficult to see from the spy-hole. Ordinarily speaking, there was no one in the room. It was undeniable.

Yet Dr. Silence was quite well aware that a human being *was* in the room. His psychic apparatus never failed in letting him know the proximity of an incarnate or discarnate being. Even in the dark he could tell that. And he now knew positively that his patient — the patient who had alarmed Barker, and had then tripped down the corridor with that dancing footstep — was somewhere concealed within the four walls commanded by his spy-hole. He also realised — and this was most unusual — that this individual whom he desired to watch knew that he was being watched. And, further, that the stranger himself was also watching! In fact, that it was he, the doctor, who was being observed — and by an observer as keen and trained as himself.

An inkling of the true state of the case began to dawn upon him, and he was on the verge of entering — indeed, his hand already touched the door-knob — when his eye, still glued to the spy-hole, detected a slight movement. Directly opposite, between him and the fireplace, something stirred. He watched very attentively and made certain that he was not mistaken. An object on the mantelpiece — it was a blue vase — disappeared from view. It passed out of sight together with the portion of the marble mantelpiece on which it rested. Next, that part of the fire and grate and brass fender immediately below it vanished entirely, as though a slice had been taken clean out of them.

Dr. Silence then understood that something between him and these objects was slowly coming into being, something that concealed them and obstructed his vision by inserting itself in the line of sight between them and himself.

He quietly awaited further results before going in.

First he saw a thin perpendicular line tracing itself from just above the height of the clock and continuing downwards till it reached the woolly fire-mat. This line grew wider, broadened, grew solid. It was no shadow; it was something substantial. It defined itself more and more. Then suddenly, at the top of the line, and about on a level with the face of the clock, he saw a round luminous disc gazing steadily at him. It was a human eye, looking straight into his own, pressed there against the spy-hole. And it was bright with intelligence. Dr. Silence held his breath for a moment — and stared back at it.

Then, like some one moving out of deep shadow into light, he saw the figure of a man come sliding sideways into view, a whitish face following the eye, and the perpendicular line he had first observed broadening out and developing into the complete figure of a human being. It was the patient. He had apparently been standing there in front of the fire all the time. A second eye had followed the first, and both of them stared steadily at the spy-hole, sharply concentrated, yet with a sly twinkle of humour and amusement that made it impossible for the doctor to maintain his position any longer.

He opened the door and went in quickly. As he did so he noticed for the first time the sound of a German band coming in gaily through the open ventilators. In some intuitive, unaccountable fashion the music connected itself with the patient he was about to interview. This sort of prevision was not unfamiliar to him. It always explained itself later.

The man, he saw, was of middle age and of very ordinary appearance; so ordinary, in fact, that he was difficult to describe — his only peculiarity being his extreme thinness. Pleasant — that is, good — vibrations issued from his atmosphere and met Dr. Silence as he advanced to greet him, yet vibrations alive with currents and discharges betraying the perturbed and disordered condition of his mind and brain. There was evidently something wholly out of the usual in the state of his thoughts. Yet, though strange, it was not altogether distressing; it was not the impression that the broken and violent atmosphere of the insane produces upon the mind. Dr. Silence realised in a flash that here was a case of absorbing interest that might require all his powers to handle properly.

“I was watching you through my little peep-hole — as you saw,” he began, with a pleasant smile, advancing to shake hands. “I find it of the greatest assistance sometimes—”

But the patient interrupted him at once. His voice was hurried and had odd, shrill changes in it, breaking from high to low in unexpected fashion. One moment it thundered, the next it almost squeaked.

“I understand without explanation,” he broke in rapidly. “You get the true note of a man in this way — when he thinks himself unobserved. I quite agree. Only, in my case, I fear, you saw very little. My case, as you of course grasp, Dr. Silence, is extremely peculiar, uncomfortably peculiar. Indeed, unless Sir William had positively assured me—”

“My friend has sent you to me,” the doctor interrupted gravely, with a gentle note of authority, “and that is quite sufficient. Pray, be seated, Mr.—”

“Mudge — Racine Mudge,” returned the other.

“Take this comfortable one, Mr. Mudge,” leading him to the fixed chair, “and tell me your condition in your own way and at your own pace. My whole day is at your service if you require it.”

Mr. Mudge moved towards the chair in question and then hesitated.

“You will promise me not to use the narcotic buttons,” he said, before sitting down. “I do not need them. Also I ought to mention that anything you think of vividly will reach my mind. That is apparently part of my peculiar case.” He sat down with a sigh and arranged his thin legs and body into a position of comfort. Evidently he was very sensitive to the thoughts of others, for the picture of the green buttons had only entered the doctor’s mind for a second, yet the other had instantly snapped it up. Dr. Silence noticed, too, that Mr. Mudge held on tightly with both hands to the arms of the chair.

“I’m rather glad the chair is nailed to the floor,” he remarked, as he settled himself more comfortably. “It suits me admirably. The fact is — and this is my case in a nutshell — which is all that a doctor of your marvellous development requires — the fact is, Dr. Silence, I am a victim of Higher Space. That’s what’s the matter with me — Higher Space!”

The two looked at each other for a space in silence, the little patient holding tightly to the arms of the chair which “suited him admirably,” and looking up with staring eyes, his atmosphere positively trembling with the waves of some unknown activity; while the doctor smiled kindly and sympathetically, and put his whole person as far as possible into the mental condition of the other.

“Higher Space,” repeated Mr. Mudge, “that’s what it is. Now, do you think you can help me with *that*?”

There was a pause during which the men’s eyes steadily searched down below the surface of their respective personalities. Then Dr. Silence spoke.

“I am quite sure I can help,” he answered quietly; “sympathy must always help, and suffering always owns my sympathy. I see you have suffered cruelly. You must tell me all about your case, and when I hear the gradual steps by which you reached this strange condition, I have no doubt I can be of assistance to you.”

He drew a chair up beside his interlocutor and laid a hand on his shoulder for a moment. His whole being radiated kindness, intelligence, desire to help.

“For instance,” he went on, “I feel sure it was the result of no mere chance that you became familiar with the terrors of what you term Higher Space; for Higher Space is no mere external measurement. It is, of course, a spiritual state, a spiritual condition, an inner development, and one that we must recognise as abnormal, since it is beyond the reach of the world at the present stage of evolution. Higher Space is a mythical state.”

“Oh!” cried the other, rubbing his birdlike hands with pleasure, “the relief it is to be able to talk to some one who can understand! Of course what you say is the utter truth. And you are right that no mere chance led me to my present condition, but, on the other hand, prolonged and deliberate study. Yet chance in a sense now governs it. I mean, my entering the condition of

Higher Space seems to depend upon the chance of this and that circumstance. For instance, the mere sound of that German band sent me off. Not that all music will do so, but certain sounds, certain vibrations, at once key me up to the requisite pitch, and off I go. Wagner’s music always does it, and that band must have been playing a stray bit of Wagner. But I’ll come to all that later. Only first, I must ask you to send away your man from the spy-hole.”

John Silence looked up with a start, for Mr. Mudge’s back was to the door, and there was no mirror. He saw the brown eye of Barker glued to the little circle of glass, and he crossed the room without a word and snapped down the black shutter provided for the purpose, and then heard Barker snuffle away along the passage.

“Now,” continued the little man in the chair, “I can begin. You have managed to put me completely at my ease, and I feel I may tell you my whole case without shame or reserve. You will understand. But you must be patient with me if I go into details that are already familiar to you — details of Higher Space, I mean — and if I seem stupid when I have to describe things that transcend the power of language and are really therefore indescribable.”

“My dear friend,” put in the other calmly, “that goes without saying. To know Higher Space is an experience that defies description, and one is obliged to make use of more or less intelligible symbols. But, pray, proceed. Your vivid thoughts will tell me more than your halting words.”

An immense sigh of relief proceeded from the little figure half lost in the depths of the chair. Such intelligent sympathy meeting him half-way was a new experience to him, and it touched his heart at once. He leaned back, relaxing his tight hold of the arms, and began in his thin, scale-like voice.

“My mother was a Frenchwoman, and my father an Essex bargeman,” he said abruptly. “Hence my name — Racine and Mudge. My father died before I ever saw him. My mother inherited money from her Bordeaux relations, and when she died soon after, I was left alone with wealth and a strange freedom. I had no guardian, trustees, sisters, brothers, or any connection in the world to look after me. I grew up, therefore, utterly without education. This much was to my advantage; I learned none of that deceitful rubbish taught in schools, and so had nothing to unlearn when I awakened to my true love — mathematics, higher mathematics and higher geometry. These, however, I seemed to know instinctively. It was like the memory of what I had deeply studied before; the principles were in my blood, and I simply raced through the ordinary stages, and beyond, and then did the same with geometry. Afterwards, when I read the books on these subjects, I understood how swift and undeviating the knowledge had come back to me. It was simply memory. It was simply *re-collecting* the memories of what I had known before in a previous existence and required no books to teach me."

In his growing excitement, Mr. Mudge attempted to drag the chair forward a little nearer to his listener, and then smiled faintly as he resigned himself instantly again to its immovability, and plunged anew into the recital of his singular "disease."

"The audacious speculations of Bolyai, the amazing theories of Gauss — that through a point more than one line could be drawn parallel to a given line; the possibility that the angles of a triangle are together *greater* than two right angles, if drawn upon immense curvatures — the breathless intuitions of Beltrami and Lobatchewsky — all these I hurried through, and emerged, panting but unsatisfied, upon the verge of my — my new world, my Higher Space possibilities — in a word, my disease!

"How I got there," he resumed after a brief pause, during which he appeared to be listening intently for an approaching sound, "is more than I can put intelligibly into words. I can only hope to leave your mind with an intuitive comprehension of the possibility of what I say.

"Here, however, came a change. At this point I was no longer absorbing the fruits of studies I had made before; it was the beginning of new efforts to learn for the first time, and I had to go slowly and laboriously through terrible work. Here I sought for the theories and speculations of others. But books were few and far between, and with the exception of one man — a 'dreamer,' the world called him — whose audacity and piercing intuition amazed and delighted me beyond description, I found no one to guide or help.

"You, of course, Dr. Silence, understand something of what I am driving at with these stammering words, though you cannot perhaps yet guess what depths of pain my new knowledge brought me to, nor why an acquaintance with a new development of space should prove a source of misery and terror."

Mr. Racine Mudge, remembering that the chair would not move, did the next best thing he could in his desire to draw nearer to the attentive man facing him, and sat forward upon the very edge of the cushions, crossing his legs and gesticulating with both hands as though he saw into this region of new space he was attempting to describe, and might any moment tumble into it bodily from the edge of the chair and disappear form view. John Silence, separated from him by three paces, sat with his eyes fixed upon the thin white face opposite, noting every word and every gesture with deep attention.

"This room we now sit in, Dr. Silence, has one side open to space — to Higher Space. A closed box only *seems* closed. There is a way in and out of a soap bubble without breaking the skin."

"You tell me no new thing," the doctor interposed gently.

"Hence, if Higher Space exists and our world borders upon it and lies partially in it, it follows necessarily that we see only portions of all objects. We never see their true and complete shape. We see their three measurements, but not their fourth. The new direction is concealed from us, and when I hold this book and move my hand all round it I have not really made a complete circuit. We only perceive those portions of any object which exist in our three dimensions; the rest escapes us. But, once we learn to see in Higher Space, objects will appear as they actually are. Only they will thus be hardly recognisable!

"Now, you may begin to grasp something of what I am coming to."

"I am beginning to understand something of what you must have suffered," observed the doctor soothingly, "for I have made similar experiments myself, and only stopped just in time—"

"You are the one man in all the world who can hear and understand, *and* sympathise," exclaimed Mr. Mudge, grasping his hand and holding it tightly while he spoke. The nailed chair prevented further excitability.

"Well," he resumed, after a moment's pause, "I procured the implements and the coloured blocks for practical experiment, and I followed the instructions carefully till I had arrived at a working conception of four-dimensional space. The tessaract, the figure whose boundaries are cubes, I knew by heart. That is to say, I knew it and saw it mentally, for my eye, of course, could never take in a new measurement, or my hands and feet handle it.

“So, at least, I thought,” he added, making a wry face. “I had reached the stage, you see, when I could imagine in a new dimension. I was able to conceive the shape of that new figure which is intrinsically different to all we know — the shape of the tessaract. I could perceive in four dimensions. When, therefore, I looked at a cube I could see all its sides at once. Its top was not foreshortened, nor its farther side and base invisible. I saw the whole thing out flat, so to speak. And this tessaract was bounded by cubes! Moreover, I also saw its content — its insides.”

“You were not yourself able to enter this new world,” interrupted Dr. Silence.

“Not then. I was only able to conceive intuitively what it was like and how exactly it must look. Later, when I slipped in there and saw objects in their entirety, unlimited by the paucity of our poor three measurements, I very nearly lost my life. For, you see, space does not stop at a single new dimension, a fourth. It extends in all possible new ones, and we must conceive it as containing any number of new dimensions. In other words, there is no space at all, but only a spiritual condition. But, meanwhile, I had come to grasp the strange fact that the objects in our normal world appear to us only partially.”

Mr. Mudge moved farther forward till he was balanced dangerously on the very edge of the chair. “From this starting point,” he resumed, “I began my studies and experiments, and continued them for years. I had money, and I was without friends. I lived in solitude and experimented. My intellect, of course, had little part in the work, for intellectually it was all unthinkable. Never was the limitation of mere reason more plainly demonstrated. It was mystically, intuitively, spiritually that I began to advance. And what I learnt, and knew, and did is all impossible to put into language, since it all describes experiences transcending the experiences of men. It is only some of the results — what you would call the symptoms of my disease — that I can give you, and even these must often appear absurd contradictions and impossible paradoxes.

"I can only tell you, Dr. Silence" — his manner became exceedingly impressive— "that I reached sometimes a point of view whence all the great puzzle of the world became plain to me, and I understood what they call in the Yoga books 'The Great Heresy of Separateness'; why all great teachers have urged the necessity of man loving his neighbour as himself; how men are all really one; and why the utter loss of self is necessary to salvation and the discovery of the true life of the soul."

He paused a moment and drew breath.

"Your speculations have been my own long ago," the doctor said quietly. "I fully realise the force of your words. Men are doubtless not separate at all — in the sense they imagine—"

"All this about the very much Higher Space I only dimly, very dimly, conceived, of course," the other went on, raising his voice again by jerks; "but what did happen to me was the humbler accident of — the simpler disaster — oh, dear, how shall I put it — ?"

He stammered and showed visible signs of distress.

"It was simply this," he resumed with a sudden rush of words, "that, accidentally, as the result of my years of experiment, I one day slipped bodily into the next world, the world of four dimensions, yet without knowing precisely how I got there, or how I could get back again. I discovered, that is, that my ordinary three-dimensional body was but an expression — a projection — of my higher four-dimensional body!

"Now you understand what I meant much earlier in our talk when I spoke of chance. I cannot control my entrance or exit. Certain people, certain human atmospheres, certain wandering forces, thoughts, desires even — the radiations of certain combinations of colour, and above all, the vibrations of certain kinds of music, will suddenly throw me into a state of what I can only describe as an intense and terrific inner vibration — and behold I am off! Off in the direction at right angles to all our known directions! Off in the direction the cube takes when it begins to trace the outlines of the new figure! Off into my breathless and semi-divine Higher Space! Off, *inside myself*, into the world of four dimensions!"

He gasped and dropped back into the depths of the immovable chair.

“And there,” he whispered, his voice issuing from among the cushions, “there I have to stay until these vibrations subside, or until they do something which I cannot find words to describe properly or intelligibly to you — and then, behold, I am back again. First, that is, I disappear. Then I reappear.”

“Just so,” exclaimed Dr. Silence, “and that is why a few—”

“Why a few moments ago,” interrupted Mr. Mudge, taking the words out of his mouth, “you found me gone, and then saw me return. The music of that wretched German band sent me off. Your intense thinking about me brought me back — when the band had stopped its Wagner. I saw you approach the peep-hole and I saw Barker’s intention of doing so later. For me no interiors are hidden. I see inside. When in that state the content of your mind, as of your body, is open to me as the day. Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear!”

Mr. Mudge stopped and again mopped his brow. A light trembling ran over the surface of his small body like wind over grass. He still held tightly to the arms of the chair.

“At first,” he presently resumed, “my new experiences were so vividly interesting that I felt no alarm. There was no room for it. The alarm came a little later.”

“Then you actually penetrated far enough into that state to experience yourself as a normal portion of it?” asked the doctor, leaning forward, deeply interested.

Mr. Mudge nodded a perspiring face in reply.

“I did,” he whispered, “undoubtedly I did. I am coming to all that. It began first at night, when I realised that sleep brought no loss of consciousness—”

“The spirit, of course, can never sleep. Only the body becomes unconscious,” interposed John Silence.

“Yes, we know that — theoretically. At night, of course, the spirit is active elsewhere, and we have no memory of where and how, simply because the brain stays behind and receives no record. But I found that, while remaining conscious, I also retained memory. I had attained to the state of continuous consciousness, for at night I regularly, with the first approaches of drowsiness, entered *nolens volens* the four-dimensional world.

"For a time this happened regularly, and I could not control it; though later I found a way to regulate it better. Apparently sleep is unnecessary in the higher — the four-dimensional — body. Yes, perhaps. But I should infinitely have preferred dull sleep to the knowledge. For, unable to control my movements, I wandered to and fro, attracted, owing to my partial development and premature arrival, to parts of this new world that alarmed me more and more. It was the awful waste and drift of a monstrous world, so utterly different to all we know and see that I cannot even hint at the nature of the sights and objects and beings in it. More than that, I cannot even remember them. I cannot now picture them to myself even, but can recall only the *memory of the impression* they made upon me, the horror and devastating terror of it all. To be in several places at once, for instance —"

"Perfectly," interrupted John Silence, noticing the increase of the other's excitement, "I understand exactly. But now, please, tell me a little more of this alarm you experienced, and how it affected you."

"It's not the disappearing and reappearing *per se* that I mind," continued Mr. Mudge, "so much as certain other things. It's seeing people and objects in their weird entirety, in their true and complete shapes, that is so distressing. It introduces me to a world of monsters. Horses, dogs, cats, all of which I loved; people, trees, children; all that I have considered beautiful in life — everything, from a human face to a cathedral — appear to me in a different shape and aspect to all I have known before. I cannot perhaps convince you why this should be terrible, but I assure you that it is so. To hear the human voice proceeding from this novel appearance which I scarcely recognise as a human body is ghastly, simply ghastly. To see inside everything and everybody is a form of insight peculiarly distressing. To be so confused in geography as to find myself one moment at the North Pole, and the next at Clapham Junction — or possibly at both places simultaneously — is absurdly terrifying. Your imagination will readily furnish other details without my multiplying my experiences now. But you have no idea what it all means, and how I suffer."

Mr. Mudge paused in his panting account and lay back in his chair. He still held tightly to the arms as though they could keep him in the world of sanity and three measurements, and only now and again released his left hand in order to mop his face. He looked very thin and white and oddly unsubstantial, and he stared about him as though he saw into this other space he had been talking about.

John Silence, too, felt warm. He had listened to every word and had made many notes. The presence of this man had an exhilarating effect upon him. It seemed as if Mr. Racine Mudge still carried about with him something of that breathless Higher-Space condition he had been describing. At any rate, Dr. Silence had himself advanced sufficiently far along the legitimate paths of spiritual and psychic transformations to realise that the visions of this extraordinary little person had a basis of truth for their origin.

After a pause that prolonged itself into minutes, he crossed the room and unlocked a drawer in a bookcase, taking out a small book with a red cover. It had a lock to it, and he produced a key out of his pocket and proceeded to open the covers. The bright eyes of Mr. Mudge never left him for a single second.

“It almost seems a pity,” he said at length, “to cure you, Mr. Mudge. You are on the way to discovery of great things. Though you may lose your life in the process — that is, your life here in the world of three dimensions — you would lose thereby nothing of great value — you will pardon my apparent rudeness, I know — and you might gain what is infinitely greater. Your suffering, of course, lies in the fact that you alternate between the two worlds and are never wholly in one or the other. Also, I rather imagine, though I cannot be certain of this from any personal experiments, that you have here and there penetrated even into space of more than four dimensions, and have hence experienced the terror you speak of.”

The perspiring son of the Essex bargeman and the woman of Normandy bent his head several times in assent, but uttered no word in reply.

“Some strange psychic predisposition, dating no doubt from one of your former lives, has favoured the development of your ‘disease’; and the fact that you had no normal training at school or college, no leading by the poor intellect into the culs-de-sac falsely called knowledge, has further caused your exceedingly rapid movement along the lines of direct inner experience. None of the knowledge you have foreshadowed has come to you through the senses, of course.”

Mr. Mudge, sitting in his immovable chair, began to tremble slightly. A wind again seemed to pass over his surface and again to set it curiously in motion like a field of grass.

“You are merely talking to gain time,” he said hurriedly, in a shaking voice. “This thinking aloud delays us. I see ahead what you are coming to, only please be quick, for something is going to happen. A band is again coming down the street, and if it plays — if it plays Wagner — I shall be off in a twinkling.”

“Precisely. I will be quick. I was leading up to the point of how to effect your cure. The way is this: You must simply learn to *block the entrances*.”

“True, true, utterly true!” exclaimed the little man, dodging about nervously in the depths of the chair. “But how, in the name of space, is that to be done?”

“By concentration. They are all within you, these entrances, although outer cases such as colour, music and other things lead you towards them. These external things you cannot hope to destroy, but once the entrances are blocked, they will lead you only to bricked walls and closed channels. You will no longer be able to find the way.”

“Quick, quick!” cried the bobbing figure in the chair. “How is this concentration to be effected?”

“This little book,” continued Dr. Silence calmly, “will explain to you the way.” He tapped the cover. “Let me now read out to you certain simple instructions, composed, as I see you divine, entirely from my own personal experiences in the same direction. Follow these instructions and you will no longer enter the state of Higher Space. The entrances will be blocked effectively.”

Mr. Mudge sat bolt upright in his chair to listen, and John Silence cleared his throat and began to read slowly in a very distinct voice.

But before he had uttered a dozen words, something happened. A sound of street music entered the room through the open ventilators, for a band had begun to play in the stable mews at the back of the house — the March from *Tannhäuser*. Odd as it may seem that a German band should twice within the space of an hour enter the same mews and play Wagner, it was nevertheless the fact.

Mr. Racine Mudge heard it. He uttered a sharp, squeaking cry and twisted his arms with nervous energy round the chair. A piteous look that was not far from tears spread over his white face. Grey shadows followed it — the grey of fear. He began to struggle convulsively.

“Hold me fast! Catch me! For God’s sake, keep me here! I’m on the rush already. Oh, it’s frightful!” he cried in tones of anguish, his voice as thin as a reed.

Dr. Silence made a plunge forward to seize him, but in a flash, before he could cover the space between them, Mr. Racine Mudge, screaming and struggling, seemed to shoot past him into invisibility. He disappeared like an arrow from a bow propelled at infinite speed, and his voice no longer sounded in the external air, but seemed in some curious way to make itself heard somewhere within the depths of the doctor’s own being. It was almost like a faint singing cry in his head, like a voice of dream, a voice of vision and unreality.

“Alcohol, alcohol!” it cried, “give me alcohol! It’s the quickest way. Alcohol, before I’m out of reach!”

The doctor, accustomed to rapid decisions and even more rapid action, remembered that a brandy flask stood upon the mantelpiece, and in less than a second he had seized it and was holding it out towards the space above the chair recently occupied by the visible Mudge. Then, before his very eyes, and long ere he could unscrew the metal stopper, he saw the contents of the closed glass phial sink and lessen as though some one were drinking violently and greedily of the liquor within.

“Thanks! Enough! It deadens the vibrations!” cried the faint voice in his interior, as he withdrew the flask and set it back upon the mantelpiece. He understood that in Mudge’s present condition one side of the flask was open to space and he could drink without removing the stopper. He could hardly have had a more interesting proof of what he had been hearing described at such length.

But the next moment — the very same moment it almost seemed — the German band stopped midway in its tune — and there was Mr. Mudge back in his chair again, gasping and panting!

“Quick!” he shrieked, “stop that band! Send it away! Catch hold of me! Block the entrances! Block the entrances! Give me the red book! Oh, oh, oh-h-h-h!!!”

The music had begun again. It was merely a temporary interruption. The *Tannhäuser* March started again, this time at a tremendous pace that made it sound like a rapid two-step as though the instruments played against time.

But the brief interruption gave Dr. Silence a moment in which to collect his scattering thoughts, and before the band had got through half a bar, he had flung forward upon the chair and held Mr. Racine Mudge, the struggling little victim of Higher Space, in a grip of iron. His arms went all round his diminutive person, taking in a good part of the chair at the same time. He was not a big man, yet he seemed to smother Mudge completely.

Yet, even as he did so, and felt the wriggling form underneath him, it began to melt and slip away like air or water. The wood of the arm-chair somehow disentangled itself from between his own arms and those of Mudge. The phenomenon known as the passage of matter through matter took place. The little man seemed actually to get mixed up in his own being. Dr. Silence could just see his face beneath him. It puckered and grew dark as though from some great internal effort. He heard the thin, reedy voice cry in his ear to “Block the entrances, block the entrances!” and then — but how in the world describe what is indescribable?

John Silence half rose up to watch. Racine Mudge, his face distorted beyond all recognition, was making a marvellous inward movement, as though doubling back upon himself. He turned funnel-wise like water in a whirling vortex, and then appeared to break up somewhat as a reflection breaks up and divides in a distorting convex mirror. He went neither forward nor backwards, neither to the right nor the left, neither up nor down. But he went. He went utterly. He simply flashed away out of sight like a vanishing projectile.

All but one leg! Dr. Silence just had the time and the presence of mind to seize upon the left ankle and boot as it disappeared, and to this he held on for several seconds like grim death. Yet all the time he knew it was a foolish and useless thing to do.

The foot was in his grasp one moment, and the next it seemed — this was the only way he could describe it — inside his own skin and bones, and at the same time outside his hand and all round it. It seemed mixed up in some amazing way with his own flesh and blood. Then it was gone, and he was tightly grasping a draught of heated air.

"Gone! gone! gone!" cried a thick, whispering voice, somewhere deep within his own consciousness. "Lost! lost! lost!" it repeated, growing fainter and fainter till at length it vanished into nothing and the last signs of Mr. Racine Mudge vanished with it.

John Silence locked his red book and replaced it in the cabinet, which he fastened with a click, and when Barker answered the bell he inquired if Mr. Mudge had left a card upon the table. It appeared that he had, and when the servant returned with it, Dr. Silence read the address and made a note of it. It was in North London.

"Mr. Mudge has gone," he said quietly to Barker, noticing his expression of alarm.

"He's not taken his 'at with him, sir."

"Mr. Mudge requires no hat where he is now," continued the doctor, stooping to poke the fire. "But he may return for it—"

"And the humbrella, sir."

"And the umbrella."

"He didn't go out *my* way, sir, if you please," stuttered the amazed servant, his curiosity overcoming his nervousness.

"Mr. Mudge has his own way of coming and going, and prefers it. If he returns by the door at any time remember to bring him instantly to me, and be kind and gentle with him and ask no questions. Also, remember, Barker, to think pleasantly, sympathetically, affectionately of him while he is away. Mr. Mudge is a very suffering gentleman."

Barker bowed and went out of the room backwards, gasping and feeling round the inside of his collar with three very hot fingers of one hand.

It was two days later when he brought in a telegram to the study. Dr. Silence opened it, and read as follows:

“Bombay. Just slipped out again. All safe. Have blocked
entrances. Thousand thanks. Address Cooks, London. — MUDGE.”

Dr. Silence looked up and saw Barker staring at him bewilderingly. It occurred to him that somehow he knew the contents of the telegram.

“Make a parcel of Mr. Mudge’s things,” he said briefly, “and address them Thomas Cook & Sons, Ludgate Circus. And send them there exactly a month from to-day and marked ‘To be called for.’”

“Yes, sir,” said Barker, leaving the room with a deep sigh and a hurried glance at the waste-paper basket where his master had dropped the pink paper.

The Lost Valley and Other Stories (1910)

CONTENTS

The Lost Valley
The Wendigo
Old Clothes
Perspective
The Terror of the Twins
The Man from the ‘Gods’
The Man Who Played upon the Leaf
The Price of Wiggins’s Orgy
Carlton’s Drive
The Eccentricity of Simon Parnacute

The Lost Valley

I

MARK AND STEPHEN, twins, were remarkable even of their kind: they were not so much one soul split in twain, as two souls fashioned in precisely the same mold. Their characters were almost identical — tastes, hopes, fears, desires, everything. They even liked the same food, wore the same kind of hats, ties, suits; and, strongest link of all, of course disliked the same things too. At the age of thirty-five neither had married, for they invariably liked the same woman; and when a certain type of girl appeared upon their horizon they talked it over frankly, agreed it was impossible to separate, and together turned their backs upon her for a change of scene before she could endanger their peace.

For their love for one another was unbounded — irresistible as a force of nature, tender beyond words — and their one keen terror was that they might one day be separated.

To look at, even for twins, they were uncommonly alike. Even their eyes were similar: that grey-green of the sea that sometimes changes to blue, and at night becomes charged with shadows. And both faces were of the same strong type with aquiline noses, stern-lipped mouths, and jaws well marked. They possessed imagination, real imagination of the winged kind, and at the same time the fine controlling will without which such a gift is apt to prove a source of weakness. Their emotions, too, were real and living: not the sort that merely tickle the surface of the heart, but the sort that plow.

Both had private means, yet both had studied medicine because it interested them, Mark specializing in diseases of eye and ear, Stephen in mental and nervous cases; and they carried on a select, even a distinguished, practice in the same house in Wimpole Street with their names on the brass plate thus: Dr. Mark Winters, Dr. Stephen Winters.

In the summer of 1900 they went abroad together as usual for the months of July and August. It was their custom to explore successive ranges of mountains, collecting the folklore and natural history of the region into small volumes, neatly illustrated with Stephen's photographs. And this particular year they chose the Jura, that portion of it, rather, that lies between the Lac de Joux, Baulmes and Fleurier. For, obviously, they could not exhaust a whole range in a single brief holiday. They explored it in sections, year by year. And they invariably chose for their headquarters quiet, unfashionable places where there was less danger of meeting attractive people who might break in upon the happiness of their profound brotherly devotion — the incalculable, mystical devotion of twins.

"For abroad, you know," Mark would say, "people have an insinuating way with them that is often hard to withstand. The chilly English reserve disappears. Acquaintanceship becomes intimacy before one has time to weigh it."

"Exactly," Stephen added. "The conventions that protect one at home suddenly wear thin, don't they? And one becomes soft and open to attack — unexpected attack."

They looked up and laughed, reading each other's thoughts like trained telepathists. What each meant was the dread that one should, after all, be taken and the other left — by a woman.

"Though at our age, you know, one is almost immune," Mark observed; while Stephen smiling philosophically —

"Or *ought* to be."

"Is," quoth Mark decisively. For by common consent Mark played the *rôle* of the elder brother. His character, if anything, was a shade more practical. He was slightly more critical of life, perhaps, Stephen being ever more apt to accept without analysis, even without reflection. But Stephen had that richer heritage of dreams which comes from an imagination loved for its own sake.

II

In the peasant's chalet, where they had a sitting room and two bedrooms, they were very comfortable. It stood on the edge of the forests that run along the slopes of Chasseront, on the side of Les Rasses farthest from Ste Croix. Marie Petavel provided them with the simple cooking they liked; and they spent their days walking, climbing, exploring, Mark collecting legend and folklore, Stephen making his natural history studies, with the little maps and surveys he drew so cleverly. Even this was only a division of labor, for each was equally interested in the occupation of the other; and they shared results in the long evenings, when expeditions brought them back in time, smoking in the rickety wooden balcony, comparing notes, shaping chapters, happy as two children, They brought the enthusiasm of boys to all they did, and they enjoyed the days apart almost as much as those they spent together. After separate expeditions each invariably returned with surprises which awakened the other's interest — even amazement.

Thus, the life of the foreign element in the hotels — unpicturesque in the daytime, noisy and overdressed at night — passed them by. The glimpses they caught as they passed these caravansarais, when gaieties were the order of the evening, made them value their peaceful retreat among the skirts of the forest. They brought no evening dress with them, not even "le smoking."

"The atmosphere of these huge hotels simply poisons the mountains," quoth Stephen. "All that 'haunted' feeling goes."

"Those people," agreed Mark, with scorn in his eyes, "would be far happier at Trouville or Dieppe, gambling, flirting, and the rest."

Feeling, thus, secure from that jealousy which lies so terribly close to the surface of all giant devotions where the entire life depends upon exclusive possession, the brothers regarded with indifference the signs of this gayer world about them. In that throng there was no one who could introduce an element of danger into their lives — no woman, at least, either of them could like would be found *there!*

For this thought must be emphasized, though not exaggerated. Certain incidents in the past, from which only their strength of will had made escape possible, proved the danger to be a real one. (Usually, too, it was some un-English woman: to wit, the Budapest adventure, or the incident in London with the Greek girl who was first Mark's patient and then Stephen's.) Neither of them made definite reference to the danger, though undoubtedly it was present in their minds more or less vividly whenever they came to a new place: this singular dream that one day a woman would carry off one, leave the other lonely. It was instinctive, probably just as the dread of the wolf is instinctive in the deer. The curious fact, though natural enough, was that each brother feared for the other and not for himself. Had anyone told Mark that some day he would marry, Mark would have shrugged his shoulders with a smile, and replied, “No; but I’m awfully afraid Stephen may!” And *vice versa.*

III

*T*hen, out of a clear sky, the bolt fell — upon Stephen. Catching him utterly unawares, it sent him fairly reeling. For Stephen, even more than his brother, possessed that glorious yet fatal gift, common to poets and children, by which out of a few insignificant details the soul builds for itself a whole sweet heaven to dwell in.

It was at the end of their first month, a month of unclouded happiness together. Since their exploration of the Abruzzi, two years before, they had never enjoyed anything so much. And not a soul had come to disturb their privacy. Plans were being mooted for moving their head-quarters some miles farther towards the Val de Travers and the Creux du Van; only the day of departure, indeed, remained to be fixed, when Stephen, coming home from an afternoon of photography alone, saw, with bewildering and arresting suddenness — a Face. And with the effect of a blow full upon the heart it literally struck him.

How such a thing can come upon a strong man, a man of balanced mind, healthy in nerves and spirit, and in a single moment change his serenity into a state of feverish and passionate desire for possession, is a mystery that lies too deep for philosophy or Science to explain. It turned him dizzy with a sudden and tempestuous delight — a veritable sickness of the soul, wondrous sweet as it was deadly. Rare enough, of course, such instances may be, but that they happen is undeniable.

He was making his way home in the dusk somewhat wearily. The sun had already dipped below the horizon of France behind him. Across the open country that stretched away to the distant mountains of the Rhone Valley, the moonlight climbed with wings of ghostly radiance that fanned their way into the clefts and pine-woods of the Jura all about him. Cool airs of night stirred and whispered; lights twinkled through the openings among the trees, and all was scented like a garden.

He must have strayed considerably from the right trail — path there was none — for instead of Striking the mountain road that led straight to his chalet, he suddenly emerged into a pool of electric light that shone round one of the smaller wooden hotels by the borders of the forest. He recognized it at once, because he and his brother always avoided it deliberately. Not so gay or crowded as the larger caravansarais, it was nevertheless full of people of the kind they did not care about. Stephen was a good half-mile out of his way.

When the mind is empty and the body tired it would seem that the system is sensitive to impressions with an acuteness impossible when these are vigorously employed. The face of this girl, framed against the glass of the hotel verandah, rushed out towards him with a sudden invading glory, and took the most complete imaginable possession of this temporary employment of his spirit. Before he could think or act, accept or reject, it had lodged itself eternally at the very center of his being. He stopped, as before an unexpected flash of lightning, caught his breath — and stared.

A little apart from the throng of "dressy" folk who sat there in the glitter of the electric light, this face of melancholy dark splendor rose close before his eyes, all soft and wondrous as though the beauty the night — of forest, stars and moon-rise — had dropped down and focused itself within the compass of a single human countenance. Framed within a corner pane of the big windows, peering sideways into the darkness, the vision of this girl, not twenty feet from where he stood, produced upon him a shock of the most convincing delight he had ever known. It was almost as though he saw someone who had dropped down among all these hotel people from another world. And from another world, in a sense, she undoubtedly was; for her face held in it nothing that belonged to the European countries he knew. She was of the East. The magic of other suns swept into his soul with the vision; the pageantry of other skies flashed brilliantly and was gone. Torches flamed in recesses of his being hitherto dark.

The incongruous surroundings unquestionably deepened the contrast to her advantage, but what made this first sight of her so extraordinarily arresting was the curious chance that where she sat the glare of the electric light did not touch her. She was in shadow from the shoulders downwards. Only, as she leaned backwards against the window, the face and neck turned slightly, there fell upon her exquisite Eastern features the soft glory of the rising moon. And comely she was in Stephen's eyes as nothing in his life had hitherto seemed comely. Apart from the vulgar throng as an exotic is apart from the weeds that choke its growth, this face seemed to swim towards him along the pathway of the slanting moonbeams. And, with it, came literally herself. Some released projection of his consciousness flew forth to meet her. The sense of nearness took his breath away with the faintness of too great happiness. She was in his arms, and his lips were buried in her scented hair. The sensation was vivid with pain and joy, as an ecstasy. And of the nature of true ecstasy, perhaps, it was: for he stood, it seemed, *outside himself.*

He remained there riveted in the patch of moonlight at the forest edge, for perhaps a whole minute, perhaps two, before he realized what had happened. Then came a second shock that was even more conquering than the first, for the girl, he saw, was not only gazing into his very face, she was also rising, as with an incipient gesture of recognition. As though she knew him, the little head bent itself forward gently, gracefully, and the dear eyes positively smiled.

The impetuous yearning that leaped full-fledged into his blood taught him in that instant the spiritual secret that pain and pleasure are fundamentally the same force. His attempt at self-control, made instinctively, was utterly overwhelmed. Something flashed to him from her eyes that melted the very roots of resolve; he staggered backwards, catching at the nearest tree for support, and in so doing left the patch of moonlight and stood concealed from view within the deep shadows behind.

Incredible as it must seem in these days of starved romance, this man of strength and firm character, who had hitherto known of such attacks only vicariously from the description of others, now reeled back against the trunk of a pine tree knowing all the sweet faintness of an overpowering love at first sight.

“For that, by God, I’d let myself waste utterly to death! To bring her an instant’s happiness I’d suffer torture for a century — !”

For the words, with their clumsy, concentrated passion were out before he realized what he was saying, what he was doing; but, once out, he knew how pitifully inadequate they were to express a tithe of what was in him like a rising storm. All words dropped away from him; the breath that came and went so quickly clothed no further speech With his retreat into the shadows the girl had sat down again, but she still gazed steadily at the place where he had stood. Stephen, who had lost the power of further movement, also stood and stared. The picture, meanwhile, was being traced with hot iron upon plastic deeps in his soul of which he had never before divined the existence. And, again, with the magic of this master-yearning, it seemed that he drew her out from that horde of hotel guests till she stood close before his eyes, warm, perfumed, caressing. The delicate, sharp splendor of her face, already dear beyond all else in life, flamed there within actual touch of his lips. He turned giddy with the joy, wonder and mystery of it all. The frontiers of his being melted — then extended to include her.

From the words a lover fights among to describe the face he worships one divines only a little of the picture; these dimly-colored symbols conceal more beauty than they reveal. And of this dark, young oval face, first seen sideways in the moonlight, with drooping lids over the almond-shaped eyes, soft cloudy hair, all enwrapped with the haunting and penetrating mystery of love, Stephen never attempted to analyze the ineffable secret. He just accepted it with a plunge of utter self-abandonment. He only realized vaguely by way of detail that the little nose, without being Jewish, curved singularly down towards a chin daintily chiseled in firmness; that the mouth held in its lips the invitation of all womankind as expressed in another race, a race alien to his own — an Eastern race; and that something untamed, almost savage, in the face was corrected by the exquisite tenderness of the large dreamy, brown eyes. The mighty revolution of love spread its soft tide into every corner of his being.

Moreover, that gesture of welcome, so utterly unexpected yet so spontaneous (so natural, it seemed to him now!), the smile of recognition that had so deliciously perplexed him, he accepted in the same way. The girl had felt what he had felt, and had betrayed herself even as he had done by a sudden, uncontrollable movement of revelation and delight; and to explain it otherwise by any vulgar standard of worldly wisdom, would be to rob it of all its dear modesty, truth and wonder. She yearned to know him, even as he yearned to know her.

And all this in the little space, as men count time, of two minutes, even less.

How he was able at the moment to restrain all precipitate and impulsive action, Stephen has never properly understood. There was a fight, and it was short, painful and confused. But it ended on a note of triumphant joy — the rapture of happiness to come.

With a great effort he remembers that he found the use of his feet and continued his journey homewards, passing out once more into the moonlight. The girl in the verandah followed his disappearing figure with her turning head; she craned her neck to watch till he disappeared beyond the angle of vision; she even waved her little dark hand.

"I shall be late," ran the thought sharply through Stephen's mind. It was cold; vivid wit keen pain. "Mark will wonder what in the world has become of me — !"

For, with swift and terrible reaction, the meaning of it all — the possible consequences of The Face — swept over his heart and drowned it in a flood of icy water. In estimating his brotherly love, even the of the twin, he had never conceived such a thing as this — had never reckoned with the possibility of a force that could make all else in the world seem so trivial....

Mark, had he been there, with his more critical attitude to life, might have analyzed something of it anyway. But Mark was not there. And Stephen had — *seen.*

Those mighty strings of life upon which, as upon an instrument, the heart of man lies stretched had been set powerfully a-quiver. The new vibrations poured and beat through him. Something within him swiftly disintegrated; in its place something else grew marvelously. The Face had established dominion over the secret places of his soul; thence-forward the process was automatic and inevitable.

IV

Then, specterlike and cold, the image of his rose before his inner vision. The profound brotherly love of the twin confronted him in the path.

He stumbled among the roots and stones, searching for the means of self-control, but finding them with difficulty. Windows had opened everywhere in his soul; he looked out through them upon a new world, immense and gloriously colored. Behind him in the shadows, as his vision searched and his heart sang, reared the single thought that hitherto had dominated his life: his love for Mark. It had already grown indisputably dim.

For both passions were genuine and commanding, the one built up through thirty-five years of devotion cemented by ten thousand associations and sacrifices, the other dropping out of heaven upon him with a suddenness simply appalling. And from the very first instant he understood that both could not live. One must die to feed the other....

On the staircase was the perfume of a strange tobacco, and, to his surprise and intense relief, when he entered the châlet he found that his brother for the first time was not alone. A small, dark man stood talking earnestly with him by the open window — the window where Mark had obviously been watching with anxiety for his arrival. Before introducing him to the stranger, Mark at once gave expression to his relief.

“I was beginning to be afraid something had happened to you,” he said quietly enough, but in a way that the other understood. And after a moment’s pause, in which he searched Stephen’s face keenly, he added, “but we didn’t wait supper as you see, and old Petavel has kept yours all hot and ready for you in the kitchen.”

“I — er — lost my way,” Stephen said quickly, glancing from Mark to the stranger, wondering vaguely who he was. “I got confused somehow in the dusk—”

Mark, remembering his manners now that his anxiety was set at rest, hastened to introduce him — a Professor in a Russian University, interested in folklore and legend, who had read their book on the Abruzzi and discovered quite by chance that they were neighbors here in the forest. He was staying in a little hotel at Les Rasses, and had ventured to come up and introduce himself. Stephen was far too occupied trying to conceal his new battling emotions to notice that Mark and the stranger seemed on quite familiar terms. He was so fearful lest the perturbations of his own heart should betray him that he had no power to detect anything subtle or unusual in anybody else.

“Professor Samarianz comes originally from Tiflis,” Mark was explaining, “and has been telling me the most fascinating things about the legends and folklore of the Caucasus. We really must go there another year, Stephen — Mr. Samarianz most kindly has promised me letters to helpful people. He tells me, too, of a charming and exquisite legend of a ‘Lost Valley’ that exists hereabouts, where the spirits of all who die by their own hands, or otherwise suffer violent deaths, find perpetual peace — the peace denied them by all the religions, that is...”

Mark went on talking for some minutes while Stephen took off his knapsack and exchanged a few words with their visitor, who spoke excellent English. He was not quite sure what he said, but hoped he talked quietly and sensibly enough, in spite of the passions that waged war so terrifically in his breast. He noticed, however, that the man’s face held an unusual charm, though he could not detect wherein its secret specifically lay. Presently, with excuses of hunger, he went into the kitchen for his supper, hugely relieved to find the opportunity to collect his thoughts a little; and when he returned twenty minutes later he found that his brother was alone. Professor Samarianz had taken his leave. In the room still lingered the perfume of his peculiarly flavored cigarettes.

Mark, after listening with half an ear to his brother’s description of the day, began pouring out his new interest; he was full of the Caucasus, and its folklore, and of the fortunate chance that had brought the stranger their way. The legend of the “Lost Valley” in the Jura, too, particularly interested him, and he spoke of his astonishment that he had hitherto come across no trace anywhere of the story.

“And fancy,” he exclaimed, after a recital that lasted half-an-hour, “the man came up from one of those little hotels on the edge of the forest — that noisy one we have always been so careful to avoid. You never know where your luck hides, do you?” he added, with a laugh.

“You never do, indeed,” replied Stephen quietly, now wholly master of himself, or, at least, of his voice and eyes.

And, to his secret satisfaction and delight, it was Mark who provided the excuses for staying on in the chalet, instead of moving further down the valley as they had intended. Besides, it would have been unnatural and absurd to leave without investigating so picturesque a legend as the “Lost Valley.”

“We’re uncommonly happy here,” Mark added quietly; “why not stay on a bit?”

“Why not, indeed?” answered Stephen, trusting that the fearful inner storm instantly roused again by the prospect did not betray itself.

“You’re not very keen, perhaps, old fellow?” suggested Mark gently.

“On the contrary — I am, *very,”* was the reply.

“Good. Then we’ll stay.”

The words were spoken after a pause of some seconds. Stephen, who was down at the end of the room sorting his specimens by the lamp, looked up sharply. Mark’s face, where he sat on the window-ledge in the dusk, was hardly visible. It must have something in his voice that had shot into Stephen’s heart with a flash of sudden warning.

A sensation of cold passed swiftly over him and was gone. Had he already betrayed himself? Was the subtle, almost telepathic sympathy between the twins developed to such a point that emotions could be thus transferred with the minimum of word or gesture, within the very shades of their silence even? And another thought: Was there something different in Mark to — something in him also that had changed? Or was it merely his own raging, heaving passion, though so sternly repressed, that distorted his judgment and made him imaginative?

What stood so darkly in the room — between them?

A sudden and fearful pain seared him inwardly as he realized, practically, and with cruelly acute comprehension, that one of these two loves in his heart must inevitably die to feed the other; and that it might have to be — Mark. The complete meaning of it came home to him. And at the thought all his deep love of thirty years rose in a tide within him, flooding through the gates of life, seeking to overwhelm and merge in itself all obstacles that threatened to turn it aside. Unshed tears burned behind his eyes. He ached with a degree of actual, physical pain.

After a moment of savage self-control he turned and crossed the room; but before he had covered half the distance that separated him from the window where his brother sat smoking, the rush of burning words — were they to have been of confession, of self-reproach, or of renewed devotion? — swept away from him, so that he wholly forgot them. In their place came the ordinary dead phrases of convention. He hardly heard them himself, though his lips uttered them.

“Come along, Mark, old chap,” he said, conscious that his voice trembled, and that another face slipped imperiously in front of the one his eyes looked upon; “it’s time to go to bed. I’m dead tired like yourself.”

“You are right,” Mark replied, looking at him steadily as he turned towards the lamplight. “Besides, the night air’s getting chilly — and we’ve been sitting in a draft, you know, all along.”

For the first time in their lives the eyes of the two brothers could not quite find each other. Neither gaze hit precisely the middle of the other. It was as though a veil hung down between them and a deliberate act of focus was necessary. They looked one another straight in the face as usual, but with an effort — with momentary difficulty. The room, too, as Mark had said, was cold, and the lamp, exhausted of its oil, was beginning to smell. Both light and heat were going. It was certainly time for bed.

The brothers went out together, arm in arm, and the long shadows of the pines, thrown by the rising moon through the window, fell across the floor like arms that waved. And from the black branches outside, the wind caught up a shower of sighs and dropped them about the roofs and walls as they made their way to their bedrooms on opposite sides of the little corridor.

V

Four hours later, when the moon was high overhead and the room held but a single *big* shadow, the door opened softly and in came — Stephen. He was dressed. He crossed the floor stealthily, unfastened the windows, and let himself out upon the balcony. A minute afterwards he had disappeared into the forest beyond the strip of vegetable garden at the back of the châlet.

It was two o’clock in the morning, and no sleep had touched his eyes. For his heart burned, ached, and fought within him, and he felt the need of open spaces and the great forces of the night and mountains. No such battle had he ever known before. He remembered his brother saying years ago, with a half serious, half playful, “... for if ever one of us comes a cropper in love, old fellow, it will be time for the other to —— go!” And by “go” they both understood the ultimate meaning of the word.

Through the glades of forest, sweet-scented by night, he made his way till he reached the spot where that Face of soft splendor had first blessed his soul with its mysterious glory. There he sat down and, with his back against the very tree that had supported him a few hours ago, he drove his thoughts forward into battle with the whole strength of his will and character behind him. Very quietly, and with all the care, precision and steadiness of mind that he would have brought to bear upon a difficult “case” at Wimpole Street, he faced the situation and wrestled with it. The emotions during four hours’ tossing upon a sleepless bed had worn themselves out a little. He was, in one sense of the word, calm, master of himself. The facts, with the huge issue that lay in their hands, he saw naked. And, as he thus saw them, he discerned how very, very far he had already traveled down the sweet path that led him toward the girl — and away from his brother.

Details about her, of course, he knew none; whether she was free even; for he only knew that he loved, and that his entire life was already breaking with the yearning to sacrifice itself for that love. That was the naked fact. The problem bludgeoned him. Could he do anything to hold back the flood still rising, to arrest its terrific flow? Could he divert its torrent, and take it, girl and all, to offer upon the altar of that other love — the devotion of the twin for its twin, the mysterious affinity that hitherto had ruled and directed all the currents of his soul?

There was no question of undoing what had already been done. Even if he never saw that face again, or heard the accents of those beloved lips; if he never was to know the magic of touch, the perfume of close thought, or the strange blessedness of telling her his burning message and hearing the murmur of her own — the fact of love was already accomplished between them. That was ineradicable. He had seen. The sensitive plate had received its undying picture.

For this was no foolish passion arising from the mere propinquity that causes so many of the world’s misfit marriages. It was a profound and mystical union already accomplished, psychical in the utter sense, inevitable as the marriage of wind and fire. He almost heard his soul laugh as he thought of the revolution effected in an instant of time by the message of a single glance. What had science, or his own special department of science, to say to this tempest of force that invaded him, and swept with its beautiful terrors of wind and lightning the furthest recesses of his being? This whirlwind that so shook him, that so deliciously wounded him, that already made the thought of sacrificing his brother seem sweet — what was there to say to it, or do with it, or think of it?

Nothing, nothing, nothing...! He could only lie in its arms and rest, with that peace, deeper than all else in life, which the mystic knows when he is conscious that the everlasting arms are about him and that his union with the greatest force of the world is accomplished.

Yet Stephen struggled like a lion. His will rose up and opposed itself to the whole invasion... and in the end his will of steel, trained as all men of character train their wills against the difficulties of life, did actually produce a certain, definite result. This result was almost a *tour de fora,* perhaps, yet it seemed valid. By its aid Stephen forced himself into a position he felt intuitively was an impossible one, but in which nevertheless he determined, by a deliberate act of almost incredible volition, that he would remain fixed. He decided to conquer his obsession, and to remain true to Mark....

The distant ridges of the dim blue Jura were tipped with the splendors of the coming dawn when at length he rose, chilly and exhausted, to retrace his steps to the châlet.

He realized fully the meaning of the resolve he had come to. And the knowledge of it froze something within him into a stiffness that was like the stiffness of death. The pain in his heart battling against the resolution was atrocious. He had estimated, or thought so, at least, the meaning of his sacrifice. As a matter of fact his decision was entirely artificial, of course, and his resolve dictated by a moral code rather than by the living forces that direct life and can alone make its changes permanent. Stephen had in him the stuff of the hero; and, having said that, one has said all that language can say.

On the way home in the cool white dawn, as he crossed the open spaces of meadow where the mist rose and the dew lay like rain, he suddenly thought of her lying dead — dead, that is, as he had thus decided she was to be dead — for him. And instantly, as by a word of command, the entire light went out of the landscape and out of the world. His soul turned wintry, and all the sweetness of his life went bleak. For it was the ancient soul in him that loved, and to deny it was to deny life itself. He had pronounced upon himself a sentence of death by starvation — a lingering and prolonged death accompanied by tortures of the most exquisite description. And along this path he really believed at the moment his little human will could hold him firm.

He made his way through the dew-drenched grass with the elation caused by so vast a sacrifice singing curiously in his blood. The splendor of the mountain sunrise and all the vital freshness of the dawn was in his heart. He was upon the châlet almost before he knew it, and there on the balcony, waiting to receive him, his grey dressing gown wrapped about his ears in the sharp air, stood — Mark!

And, somehow or other, at the sight, all this false elation passed and dropped. Stephen looked up at him, standing suddenly still there in his tracks, as he might have looked up at his executioner. The picture had restored him most abruptly, with sharpest pain, to reality again.

“Like me, you couldn’t sleep, eh?” Mark called softly, so as not to waken the peasants who slept on the ground floor.

“Ha*ve you* been lying awake, too?” Stephen replied.

“All night. I haven’t closed an eye.” Then Mark added, as his brother came up the wooden steps towards him, “I knew — you were awake I felt it. I knew, too — you had gone out.”

A silence passed between them. Both had spoken quietly, naturally, neither expressing surprise.

“Yes,” Stephen said slowly at length; “we always reflect each other’s pai — each other’s moods—” He stopped abruptly, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Their eyes met as of old. Stephen knew an instant of quite freezing terror in which he felt that his brother had divined the truth. Then Mark took his arm and led the way indoors on tiptoe.

“Look here, Stevie, old fellow,” he said, with extraordinary tenderness “there’s no good saying anything, but I know perfectly well that you’re unhappy about something; and so, of course, I am unhappy too.” He paused, as though searching for words. Under ordinary circumstances Stephen would have caught his precise thought, but now the tumult of suppressed emotion in him clouded his divining power. He felt his arm clutched in a sudden vice. They drew closer to one another. Neither spoke. Then Mark, low and hurriedly, said — he almost mumbled it— “It’s all my fault *really,* all my fault — dear old boy!”

Stephen turned in amazement and stared. What in the world did his brother mean? What was he talking about? Before he could find speech, however, Mark continued, speaking distinctly now, and with evidences of strong emotion in his voice —

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” he exclaimed, with sudden decision; “we’ll go away; we’ll leave! We’ve stayed here a bit too long, perhaps. Eh? What d’you say to that?”

Stephen did not notice how sharply Mark searched his face. At the thought of separation all his mighty resolution dropped like a house of cards. His entire life seemed to melt away and run in a stream of impetuous yearning towards the Face.

But he answered quietly, sustaining his purpose artificially by a force of will that seemed to break and twist his life at the source with extraordinary pain. He could not have endured the strain for more than a few seconds. His voice sounded strange and distant.

“All right; at the end of the week,” he said — the faintness in him was dreadful, filling him with cold— “and that’ll give us just three days to make our plans, won’t it?”

Mark nodded his head. Both faces were lined and drawn like the faces of old men; only there was no one there to remark upon it — nor upon the fixed sternness that had dropped so suddenly upon their eyes and lips.

Arm in arm they entered the chalet and went to their bedrooms without another word. The sun, as they went, rose close over the tree-tops and dropped its first rays upon the spot where they had just stood.

VI

*T*hey came down in dressing gowns to a very late breakfast. They were quiet, grave and slightly preoccupied. Neither made the least reference to their meeting at sunrise. New lines had graved themselves upon their faces, identical hues it seemed, drawing the mouth down at the corners with a touch of grimness where hitherto had been merely firmness.

And the eyes of both saw new things, new distances, new terrors. Something, feared till now only as a possibility, had come close, and stood at their elbows for the first time as an actuality. Sleep, in which changes offered to the soul during the day are confirmed and ratified, had established this new element in their personal equation. They had changed — if not towards one another, then towards something else.

But Stephen saw the matter only from his own point of view. For the first time in his memory he seemed to have lost the intuitive sympathy which enabled him to see things from his brother's point of view as well. The change, he felt positive, was in himself, not in Mark.

"He knows — he feels — something in me has altered dreadfully, but he doesn't yet understand what," his thoughts ran. "Pray to God he need never know — at least until I have utterly conquered it!"

For he still held with all the native tenacity of his strong will to the course he had so heroically chosen. The degree of self-deception his imagination brought into the contest seemed incredible when his mind looked back upon it all from the calmness of the end. But at the time he genuinely hoped, wished, intended to conquer, even *believed* that he would conquer.

Mark, he noticed, reacted in little ways that curiously betrayed his mental perturbation, and at any other time might have roused his brother's suspicions. He put sugar in Stephen's coffee, for instance; he forgot to bring him a cigarette when he went to the cupboard to get one for himself; he said and did numerous little things that were contrary to his habits, or to the habits of his twin.

In all of which, however, Stephen saw only the brotherly reaction to the change he was conscious of in himself. Nothing happened to convince him that anything in Mark had suffered revolution. With the mystical devotion peculiar to the twin he was too keenly aware of his own falling away to imagine the falling away of the other. He, Stephen, was the guilty one, and he suffered atrociously. Moreover, the pain of his renunciation was heightened by the sense that his ideal love for Mark had undergone a change — that he was making this fatal sacrifice, therefore, for something that perhaps no longer existed. This, however, he did not realize yet as an accomplished fact. Even if it were true, the resolution he had come to, acted by way of hypnotic suggestion to conceal it. At the same time it added enormously to the confusion and perplexity of his mind.

That day for the brothers was practically a *dies non.* They spent what was left of the morning over many aimless and unnecessary little duties, somewhat after the way of women. Although neither referred to the decision to leave at the end of the week, both acted upon it in desultory fashion, almost as though they wished to make a point of proving to one another that it was *not* forgotten — not wholly forgotten, at any rate. They made a brave pretence of collecting various things with a view to ultimate packing. No word was spoken, however, that bore more closely upon it than occasional phrases such as, "When the time comes to go."

— — "when we leave"— "better put *that* out, or it will be forgotten, you know."

The sentences dropped from their mouths alternately at long intervals, the only one deceived being the utterer. It was not unlike the pretence of schoolboys, only more elaborate and infinitely more clumsy and ill-done. Stephen, at any other time, would probably have laughed aloud. Yet the curious thing was that he noticed the pretence only in his own case. Mark, he thought, was genuine, though perhaps not too eager. "He's agreed to leave, the dear old chap, because he thinks I want it, and not for himself," he said. And the idea of the small brotherly sacrifice pleased, yet pained him horribly at the same time. For it tended to rehabilitate the old love which stood in the way of the new one.

He began, however, to take less trouble to sort and find his things for packing; he wrote letters, put out photographs to print in the sun, even studied his maps for expeditions, making occasional remarks thereon aloud which Mark did not negative. Presently, he forgot altogether about packing. Mark said nothing. Mark followed his example, however.

During the afternoon both lay down and slept, meeting again for tea at five. It was rare that they found themselves in for tea. Mark today made a special little ritual of it; he made it over their own spirit-lam — almost tenderly, looking after his brother's wants like a woman. And the little meal was hardly over when a boy in hotel livery arrived with a note — an invitation from Professor Samarianz.

"He has looked up a lot of his papers," observed Mark carelessly as he tossed the note down, "and suggests my coming in for dinner, so that he can show me everything afterwards without hurry."

"I should accept," said Stephen. "It might be valuable for us if we go to the Caucasus later."

Mark hesitated a minute or two, telling the boy to wait in the kitchen. "I think I'll go in *after* dinner instead," he decided presently. There was a trace of eagerness in his manner which Stephen, however, did not notice.

"Take your notebook and pump the old boy dry," Stephen added, with a slight laugh. "I shall go to bed early myself probably." And Mark, stuffing the note into his pocket, laughed back and consented, to the other's great relief.

It was very late when Mark returned from the visit, but his brother did not hear him come, having taken a draft to ensure sleeping. And next morning Mark was so full of the interesting information he had collected, and would continue to collect, that the question of leaving at the end of the week dropped of its own accord without further ado. Neither of the brothers made the least pretence of packing. Both wished and intended to stay on where they were.

"I shall look up Samarianz again this afternoon," Mark said casually during the morning, "and — if you've no objection — I might bring him back to supper. He's the most obliging fellow I've ever met, and crammed with information."

Stephen, signifying his agreement, took his camera, his specimen-tin and his geological hammer and went out with bread and chocolate in his knapsack for the rest of the afternoon by himself.

VII

Moreover, he not only set out bravely, but for many hours held true, keeping so rigid a control over his feelings that it seemed literally to cost him blood. All the time, however, a passionate yearning most craftily attacked him, and the very memory he strove to smother rose with a persistence that ridiculed repression. Like snowflakes, whose individual weight is inappreciable but their cumulative burden irresistible, the thoughts of *her* gathered behind his spirit, ready at a given moment to overwhelm; and it was on the way home again in the evening that the temptation came upon him like a tidal wave that made the mere idea of resistance seemed utterly absurd.

He remembered wondering with a kind of wild delight whether it could be possible for any human will to withstand such a tempest of pressure as that which took him by the shoulders and literally pushed him out of his course towards the little hotel on the edge of the forest.

It was utterly inconsistent, of course, and he made no pretence of argument or excuse. He hardly knew, indeed, what he expected to see or do; his mind, at least, framed no definite idea. But far within him that deep heart which refused to be stifled cried out for a drop of the living water that was now its very life. And, chiefly, he wanted to *see.* If only he could see her once again — even from a distance — the merest glimpse — ! With one more sight of her that should charge his memory to the brim for life be might face the future with more courage perhaps. Ah! that *perhaps...!* For she was drawing him with those million invisible cords of love that persuade a man he is acting of his own volition when actually he is but obeying the inevitable forces that bind the planets and the suns.

And this time there was no hurry; there was a good hour before Mark would expect him home for supper; he could sit among the shadows of the wood, and wait.

In his pocket were the field-glasses, and he realized with a sudden secret shame that it was not by accident that they were there. He stumbled, even before he got within a quarter of a mile of the place, for the idea that perhaps he would see her again made him ridiculously happy, and like a school-boy he positively trembled, tripping over roots and misjudging the distance of his steps. It was all part of a great whirling dream in which his soul sang and shouted the first delirious nonsense that came into his head. The possibility of his eyes again meeting hers produced a sensation of triumph and exultation that only one word describes — intoxication.

As he approached the opening in the trees whence the hotel was so easily visible, he went more slowly, moving even on tiptoe. It was instinctive; for he was nearing a place made holy by his love. Picking his way almost stealthily, he found the very tree; then leaned against it while his eyes searched eagerly for a sign of her in the glass verandah. The swiftness and accuracy of sight at such a time may be cause for wonder, but it is beyond question that in less than a single second he knew that the throng of moving figures did not contain the one he sought. She was not among them.

And he was just preparing to make himself comfortable for an extended watch when a sound or movement, perhaps both, somewhere among the trees on his right attracted his attention. There was a faint rustling; a twig snapped.

Stephen turned sharply. Under a big spruce, not half-a-dozen yards away, something moved — then rose up. At first, owing to the gloom, he took it for an animal of some kind, but the same second he saw that it was a human figure. It was *two* human figures, standing close together. Then one moved apart from the other; he saw the outline of a man against a space of sky between the trees. And a voice spoke — a voice charged with great tenderness, yet driven by high passion —

“But it’s nothing, nothing! I shall not be gone two minutes. And to save you an instant’s discomfort you know that I would run the whole circle of the earth! Wait here for me — !”

That was all; but the voice and figure caused Stephen’s heart to stop beating as though it had been suddenly plunged into ice, for they were the voice and the figure of his brother Mark.

Quickly running down the slope towards the hotel, Mark disappeared.

The other figure, leaning against the tree, was the figure of a girl; and Stephen, even in that first instant of fearful bewilderment, understood why it was that the face of the man Samarianz had so charmed him. For this, of course, was his daughter. And then the whole thing flashed mercilessly clear upon his inner vision, and he knew that Mark, too, had been swept from his feet, and was undergoing the same fierce tortures, and fighting the same dread battle, as himself....

There seemed to be no conscious act of recognition. The fire that flamed through him and set his frozen heart so fearfully beating again, hammering against his ribs, left him apparently without volition or any power of cerebral action at all. *She* stood there, not half-a-dozen yards away from where he sat all huddled upon the ground, stood there in all her beauty, her mystery, her wonder, near enough for him to have taken her almost with a single leap into his arms; — stood there, veiled a little by the shadows of the dusk — waiting for the return of — Mark!

He remembers what happened with the blurred indistinctness common to moments of overwhelming passion. For in the next few seconds, that mocked all scale of time, he lived through a series of concentrated emotions that burned his brain too vividly for precise recollection. He rose to his feet unsteadily, his hand upon the rough bark of the tree. Absurd details only seem to remain of these few moments: that a foot was "asleep" with pins and needles up to the knee, and that his slouch hat fell from his head, filling him with fury because it hid her from him for the fraction of a second. These odd details he remembers.

And then, as though the driving-power of the universe had deliberately pushed him from behind, he was advancing slowly, with short, broken steps, towards the tree where the girl stood with her back half turned against him.

He did not know her name, had never heard her voice, had never even stood close enough to "feel" her atmosphere; yet, so deeply had his love and imagination already prepared the little paths of intimacy within him, that he felt he was moving towards someone whom he had known ever since he could remember, and who belonged to him as utterly as if from the beginning of time his possession of her had been absolute. Had they shared together a whole series of previous lives, the sensation could not have been more convincing and complete.

And out of all this whirlwind and tumult two small actions, he remembers, were delivered: a confused cry that was no definite word came from his lips, and — he opened his arms to take her to his heart. Whereupon, of course, she turned with a quick start, and became for the first time aware of his near presence.

"Oh, oh! But how so softly quick you return!" she cried falteringly, looking into his eyes with a smile both of welcome and alarm. "You a little frightened me, I tell you."

It was just the voice he had known would come, with the curiously slow, dragging tone of its broken English, the words lingering against the lips as if loath to leave, the soft warmth of their sound in the throat like a caress. The next instant he held her smothered in his arms, his face buried in the scented hair about her neck.

There was an unbelievable time of forgetfulness in which touch, perfume, and a healing power that emanated from her blessed the depths of his soul with a peace that calmed all pain, stilled all tumult — a moment in which Time itself for once stopped its remorseless journey, and the very processes of life stood still to watch. Then there was a frightened cry, and she had pushed him from her. She stood there, her soft eyes puzzled and surprised, looking hard at him; panting a little, her breast heaving.

And Stephen understood then, if he had not already understood before. The gesture of recognition in the hotel verandah two days ago, and this glorious realization of it that now seemed to have happened a century ago, shared a common origin. They were intended for another, and on both occasions the girl had taken him for his brother Mark.

And, turning sharply, almost falling with the abruptness of it all, as the girl's lips uttered that sudden cry, he saw close beside them the very person for whom they were intended. Mark had come up the slope behind them unobserved, carrying upon his arm the little red cloak he had been to fetch.

It was as though a wind of ice had struck him in the face. The revulsion of feeling with which Stephen saw the return of his brother passed rapidly into a state of numbness where all emotion whatsoever ebbed like the tides of death. He lost momentarily the power of realization. He forgot who he was, what he was doing there. He was dazed by the fact that Mark had so completely forestalled him. His life shook and tottered upon its foundations....

Then the face and figurer of his brother swayed before his eyes like the branch of a tree, as an attack of passing dizziness seized him. It may have been a mere hazard that led his fingers to close, moist and clammy, upon the geological hammer at his belt. Certainly, he let it go again almost at once....

And, when the tide of emotion returned upon him with the dreadful momentum it had gathered during the interval, the possibility of his yielding to wild impulse and doing something mad or criminal, was obviated by the swift enactment of an exceedingly poignant little drama that made both brothers forget themselves in their desire to save the girl.

In sweetest bewilderment, like a frightened little child or animal, the girl looked from one brother to the other. Her eyes shone in the dusk. Strangely appealing her loveliness was in that moment of seeking some explanation of the double vision. She made a movement first towards Mark — turned halfway in her steps and ran, startled, upon Stephen — then, with a sharp scream of fear, dropped in a heap to the ground midway between the two.

Her indecision of half-a-second, however, seemed to Stephen to have lasted many minutes. Had she fallen finally into the arms of his brother, he felt nothing on earth could have prevented his leaping upon him with the hands of a murderer. As it was — mercifully — the singular beauty of her little Eastern face, touched as it was by the white terror of her soul, momentarily arrested all other feeling in him. A shudder of fearful admiration passed through him as he saw her sway and fall. Thus might have dropped some soft angel from the skies.

It was Mark, however, with his usual decision, who brought some possibility of focus back to his mind; and he did it with an action and a sentence so utterly unexpected, so incongruous amid this whirlwind of passion, that had he seen it on the stage or read it in a novel, he must surely have burst out laughing. For, in that very second after the dear form swayed and fell, while the eyes of the brothers met across her in one swift look that held the possibilities of the direst results, Mark, his face abruptly clearing to calmness, stooped down beside the prostrate girl, and, looking up at Stephen steadily, said in a gentle voice, but with his most deliberate professional manner —

“Stephen, old fellow, this is — my patient. One of us, perhaps, had better — go.”

He bent down to loosen the dress at the throat and chafe the cold hands, and Stephen, uncertain exactly what he did, and trembling like a child, turned and disappeared among the thick trees in the direction of their little house. For he understood only one thing clearly in that awful moment: that he must either kill — or not see. And his will, well-nigh breaking beneath the pressure, was just able to take the latter course.

“Go!” it said peremptorily.

And the little word sounded through the depths of his soul like the tolling of a last bell.

VIII

“T*his is my patient!”* The dreadful comedy of the phrase, the grim mockery of the professional manner, the contrast between the words that someone *ought* to have uttered and the words Mark actually *had* uttered — all this had the effect of restoring Stephen to some measure of sanity. No one but his brother, he felt, could have said the thing so exactly calculated to relieve the choking passion of the situation. It was an inspiration — yet horrible in its bizarre mingling of true and false.

“But it’s all like a thing in a dream,” he heard an inner voice murmur as he stumbled homewards without once looking back; “the kind of thing people say and do in the rooms of strange sleep-houses. We are all surely in a dream, and presently I shall wake up — !”

The voice continued talking, but he did not listen. A web of confusion began to spin itself about his thoughts, and there stole over him an odd sensation of remoteness from the actual things of life. It was surely one of those vivid, haunting dreams he sometimes had when his spirit seemed to take part in real scenes, with real people, only far, far away, and on quite another scale of time and values.

“I shall find myself in my bed at Wimpole Street!” he exclaimed. He even tried to escape from the pain closing about him like a vice — tried to escape by waking up, only to find, of course, that the effort drove him more closely to the reality of his position.

Yet the texture of a dream certainly ran through the whole thing; the outlandish proportions of dream-events showed themselves everywhere; the tiny causes and prodigious effects: the terrific power of the Face upon his soul; the uncanny semi-quenching of his love for Mark; the ridiculous way he had come upon these two in the forest, with the nightmare discovery that they had known one another for days; and then the sight of that dear, magical face dropping through the dusky forest air between the two of them. Moreover — just when the dream ought to have ended with his sudden awakening, it had taken this abrupt and inconsequent turn, and Mark had uttered the language of — well, the impossible and rather horrible language of the nightmare world— “*This is my patient...*”

Moreover, his face of ice as he said it; yet, at the same time, the wisdom, the gentleness of the decision that lay behind the words: the desire to relieve an impossibly painful situation. And then — the other words, meant kindly, even meant nobly, but charged for all that with the naked cruelty of life —

“One of us, perhaps, had better - go.”

And he had gone — fortunately, he had gone....

Yet an hour later, after lying motionless upon his bed seeking with all his power for a course of action his will could follow and his mind approve, it was no dream-voice that called softly to him through the keyhole —

“Stevie, old fellow... she is well... she is all right now. She leaves in the morning with her father... the first thing... very early...”

And then, after a pause in which Stephen said nothing lest he should at the same time say all—”... and it is best, perhaps... we should not see one another... you and I... for a bit. Let us go our ways... till tomorrow night. Then we shall be... alone together again... you and I... as of old...”

The voice of Mark did not tremble; but it sounded far away and unreal, almost like wind in the keyhole, thin, reedy, sighing; oddly broken and interrupted.

I’m yours, Stevie, old fellow, always yours,” it added far down the corridor, more like the voice of dream again than ever.

But, though he made no reply at the moment, Stephen welcomed and approved both the proposal and the spirit in which it was made; and next day, soon after sunrise, he left the châlet very quietly and went off alone into the mountains with his thoughts, and with the pain that all night long had simply been eating him alive.

IX

It is impossible to know precisely what he felt all that morning in the mountains. His emotions charged like wild bulls to and fro. He seemed conscious only of two master-feelings first, that his life now belonged beyond possibility of change or control — to another; yet, secondly, that his will, tried and tempered weapon of steel that it was, held firm.

Thus his powerful feelings flung him from one wall of his dreadful prison to another without possible means of escape. For his position involved a fundamental contradiction: the new love owned him, yet his will cried, “I love Mark; I hold true to that; in the end I shall conquer!” He refused, that is, to capitulate, or rather to acknowledge that he had capitulated. And meanwhile, even while he cried, his inmost soul listened, watched, and laughed, well content to abide the issue.

But if his feelings were in too great commotion for clear analysis, his thoughts, on the other hand, were painfully definite — some of them, at least; and, as the physical exercise lessened the assaults of emotion, these stood forth in sharp relief against the confusion of his inner world. It was now clear as the day, for instance, that Mark had been through a battle similar to his own. The chance meeting with the Professor had led to the acquaintance with his daughter. Then, swiftly and inevitably, just as it would have happened to Stephen in his place, love had accomplished its full magic. And Mark had been afraid to tell him. The twins had traveled the same path, only personal feeling having clouded their usual intuition, neither had divined the truth.

Stephen saw it now with pitiless clarity: his brother s frequent visits to the hotel, omitting to mention that the notes of invitation probably also included himself; the desire, nay, the intention to stay on; the delay in packing — and a dozen other details stood out clearly. He remembered, too, with a pang how Mark had not slept that memorable night; he recalled their enigmatical conversation on the balcony as the sun rose... and all the rest of the miserable puzzle.

And, as he realized from his own torments what Mark must also have suffered — be suffering now — he was conscious of a strengthening of his will to conquer. The thought linked him fiercely again to his twin; for nothing in their lives had yet been separate, and the chain of their spiritual intimacy was of incalculably vast strength. They would win — win back to one another’s side again. Mark would conquer her. He, Stephen, would also in the end conquer... her...!

But with the thought of her lying thus dead to him, and his life cold and empty without her, came the inevitable revulsion of feeling. It was the anarchy of love. The Face, the perfume, the rushing power of her melancholy dear eyes, with their singular touch of proud languor — in a word, all the amazing magic that had swept himself and Mark from their feet, tore back upon him with such an invasion of entreaty and command, that he sat down upon the very rocks where he was and buried his face in his hands, literally groaning with the pain of it. For the thought lacerated within. To give her up was a sheer impossibility;... to give up his brother was equally inconceivable. The weight of thirty-five years' love and associations thus gave battle against the telling blow of a single moment. Behind the first lay all that life had built into the woof of his personality hitherto, but *beyond* the second lay the potent magic, the huge seductive invitation of what he might become in the future — with her.

The contest, in the nature of the forces engaged, was an unequal one. Yet all that morning as he wandered aimlessly over ridge and summit, and across the high Jura pastures above the forests, meeting no single human being, he fought with himself as only men with innate energy of soul know how to fight — bitterly, savagely, blindly. He did not stop to realize that he was somewhat in the position of a fly that strives to push from its appointed course the planet on which it rides through space. For the tides of life itself bore him upon their crest, and at thirty-five these tides are at the full.

Thus, gradually it was, then, as the hopelessness of the struggle became more and more apparent, that the door of the only alternative opened slightly and let him peer through. Once ajar, however, it seemed the same second wide open; he was through; — and it was closed — behind him.

For a different nature the alternative might have taken a different form. As has been seen, he was too strong a man to drift merely; a definite way out that could commend itself to a man of action had to be found; and, though the raw material of heroism may have been in him, he made no claim to a martyrdom that should last as long as life itself. And this alternative dawned upon him now as the grey light of a last morning must dawn upon the condemned prisoner: given Stephen, and given this particular problem, it was the only way out.

He envisaged it thus suddenly with a kind of ultimate calmness and determination that was characteristic of the man. And in every way it *was* characteristic of the man, for it involved the precise combination of courage and cowardice, weakness and strength, selfishness and sacrifice, that expressed the true resultant of all the forces at work in his soul. To him, at the moment of his rapid decision, however, it seemed that the dominant motive was the sacrifice to be offered upon the altar of his love for Mark. The twisted notion possessed him that in this way he might atone in some measure for the waning of his brotherly devotion. His love for the girl, her possible love for him — both were to be sacrificed to obtain the happiness the eventual happiness — of these other two. Long, long ago Mark had himself said that under such circumstances one or other of them would have to — go. And the decision Stephen had come to was that the one to "go" was — himself.

This day among the woods and mountains should be his last on earth. By the evening of the following day Mark should be free.

"I'll give my life for him."

His face was grey and set as he said it. He stood on the high ridge, bathed by sun and wind. He looked over the fair world of wooded vales and mountains at his feet, but his eyes, turned inwards, saw only his brother — and that sweet Eastern face — then darkness.

"He will understand — and perforce accept it — and with time, yes, with time, the new happiness shall fill his soul utterly — and hers. It is for her, too, that I give it. It *must* — under these unparalleled circumstances be right...!

And although there was no single cloud in the sky, the landscape at his feet suddenly went dark and sunless from one horizon to the other.

X

Then, having come into the gloom of this terrible decision, his imaginative nature at once bounded to the opposite extreme, and a kind of exaltation possessed him. The stereotyped verdict of a coroner's jury might in this instance have been true. The prolonged stress of emotion under which he had so long been laboring had at last produced a condition of mind that could only be considered — unsound.

A cool wind swept his face as he let his tired eyes wander over the leagues of silent forest below. The blue Jura with its myriad folded valleys lay about him like the waves of a giant sea ready to swallow up the little atom of his life within its deep heart of forgetfulness. Clear away into France he saw on the one side where, beyond the fortress of Pontarlier, white clouds sailed the horizon before a westerly wind; and, on the other, towards the white-robed Alps rising mistily through the haze of the autumn sunshine. Between these extreme distances lay all that world of a hundred intricate valleys, curiously winding, deeply wooded, little inhabited — a region of soft, confusing loveliness where a traveler might well lose himself for days together before he discovered a way out of so vast a maze.

And, as he gazed, there passed across his mind, like the dim memory of something heard in childhood, that legend of the “Lost Valley” in which the souls of the unhappy dead find the deep peace that is denied to them by all the religions — and to which hundreds, who have not yet the sad right of entry, seek to find the mournful forest gates. The memory was vivid, but swiftly engulfed by others and forgotten. They chased each other in rapid succession across his mind, as clouds at sunset pass before a high wind, merging on the horizon in a common mass.

Then, slowly, at length, he turned and made his way down the mountainside in the direction of the French frontier for a last journey upon the sweet surface of the world he loved. In his soul was the one dominant feeling: this singular exaltation arising from the knowledge that in the long run his great sacrifice must ensure the happiness of the two beings he loved more than all else in life.

At the solitary farm where an hour later he had his lunch of bread and cheese and milk, he learned that he had wandered many miles out of the routes with which he was more or less familiar. He had been walking faster than he knew all these hours of battle. A physical weariness came upon him that made him conscious of every muscle in his body as he realized what a long road over mountain and valley he had to retrace. But, with the heaviness of fatigue, ran still that sense of interior spiritual exaltation. Something in him walked on air with springs of steel — something that was independent of the dragging limbs and the aching back. For the rest, his sensations seemed numb. His great Decision stood black before him, blocking the way. Thoughts and feelings forsook him as rats leave a sinking ship. The time for these-was past. Two overmastering desires, however, clung fast: one, to see Mark again, and be with him; the other, to be once more — with her. These two desires left no room for others. With the former, indeed, it was almost as though Mark had called aloud to him by name.

He stood a moment where the depth of the valley he had to thread lay like a twisting shadow at his feet; it ran, soft and dim, through the slanting sunshine. From the whole surface of the woods rose a single murmur; like the whirring of voices heard in a dream, he thought. The individual purring of separate trees was merged. Peace, most ancient and profound, lay in it, and its hushed whisper soothed his spirit.

He hurried his pace a little. The cool wind that had swept his face on the heights earlier in the afternoon followed him down, urging him forwards with deliberate pressure, as though a thousand soft hands were laid upon his back. And there were spirits in the wind that day. He heard their voices; and far below he traced by the motion of the tree-tops where they coiled upwards to him through miles of forest. His way, meanwhile, dived down through dense growths of spruce and pine into a region unfamiliar. There was an aspect of the scenery that almost suggested it was unknown — an undiscovered corner of the world. The countless signs that mark the passage of humanity were absent, or at least did not obtrude themselves upon him. Something remote from life, alien, at any rate, to the normal life he had hitherto known, began to steal gently over his burdened soul....

In this way, perhaps, the effect of his dreadful Decision already showed its influence upon his mind and senses. So very soon now he would be — *going!*

The sadness of autumn lay all about him, and the loneliness of this secluded vale spoke to him of the melancholy of things that die — of vanished springs, of summers unfulfilled, of things forever incomplete and unsatisfying. Human effort, he felt, this valley had never known. No hoofs had ever pressed the mossy turf of these forest clearings; no traffic of peasants or woodsmen won echoes from these limestone cliffs. All was hushed, lonely, deserted.

And yet — ? The depths to which it apparently plunged astonished him more and more. Nowhere more than a half-mile across, each turn of the shadowy trail revealed new distances below. With spots of a haunting, fairy loveliness too: for here and there, on isolated patches of lawnlike grass, stood wild lilac bushes, rounded by the wind; willows from the swampy banks of the stream waved pale hands; firs, dark and erect, guarded their eternal secrets on the heights. In one little opening, standing all by itself, he found a lime tree; while beyond it, shining among the pines, was a group of shimmering beeches. And, although there was no wild life, there were flowers; he saw clumps of them — tall, graceful, blue flowers whose name he did not know, nodding in dream across the foaming water of the little torrent.

And his thoughts ran incessantly to Mark. Never before had he been conscious of so imperious a desire to see him, to hear his voice, to stand at his side. At moments it almost obliterated that other great desire.... Again he increased his pace. And the path plunged more and more deeply into the heart of the mountains, sinking ever into deeper silence, ever into an atmosphere of deeper peace. For no sound could reach him here without first passing along great distances that were cushioned with soft wind, and padded, as it were, with a million feathery pine-tops. A sense of peace that was beyond reach of all possible disturbance began to cover his breaking life with a garment as of softest shadows. Never before had he experienced anything approaching the wonder and completeness of it. It was a peace, still as the depths of the sea which are motionless because they *cannot* move — cannot even tremble. It was a peace unchangeable — what some have called, perhaps, the Peace of God....

“Soon the turn *must* come,” he thought, yet without a trace of impatience or alarm, “and the road wind upwards again to cross the last ridge!” But he cared little enough; for this enveloping peace drowned him, hiding even the fear of death.

And still the road sank downwards into the sleep-laden atmosphere of the crowding trees, and with it his thoughts, oddly enough, sank deeper and deeper into dim recesses of his own being. As though a secret sympathy lay between the path that dived and the thoughts that plunged. Only, from time to time, the thought of his brother Mark brought him back to the surface with a violent rush. Dreadfully, in those moments, he wanted him — to feel his warm, strong hand within his own — to ask his forgiveness — perhaps, too, to grant his own... he hardly knew.

"But is there no end to this delicious valley?" he wondered, with something between vagueness and confusion in his mind. "Does it never stop, and the path climb again to the mountains beyond?" Drowsily, divorced from any positive interest, the question passed through his thoughts. Underfoot the grass already grew thickly enough to muffle the sound of his footsteps. The trail even had vanished, swallowed by moss. His feet sank in.

"I wish Mark were with me now — to see and feel all this—"

He stopped short and looked keenly about him for a moment, leaving the thought incomplete. A deep sighing, instantly caught by the wind and merged in the soughing of the trees, had sounded close beside him. Was it perhaps himself that sighed — unconsciously? His heart was surely charged enough...!

A faint smile played over his lips — instantly frozen, however, as another sigh, more distinct than the first, and quite obviously external to himself, passed him closely in the darkening air. More like deep breathing, though, it was, than sighing.... It was nothing but the wind, of course. Stephen hurried on again, not surprised that he had been so easily deceived, for this valley was full of sighings and breathings — of trees and wind. It ventured upon no louder noise. Noise of any kind, indeed, seemed impossible and forbidden in this muted vale. And so deeply had he descended now, that the sunshine, silver rather than golden, already streamed past far over his head along the ridges, and no gleam found its way to where he was. The shadows, too, no longer blue and purple, had changed to black, as though woven of some delicate substance that had definite thickness, like a veil. Across the opposite slope, one of the mountain summits in the western sky already dropped its monstrous shadow fringed with pines. The day was rapidly drawing in.

XI

And here, very gradually, there began to dawn upon his overwrought mind certain curious things. They pierced clean through the mingled gloom and exaltation that characterized his mood. And they made the skin upon his back a little to — stir and crawl.

For he now became distinctly aware that the emptiness of this lonely valley was only apparent. It is impossible to say through what sense, or combination of senses, this singular certainty was brought to him that the valley was not really as forsaken and deserted as it seemed — that, on the contrary, it was the very reverse. It came to him suddenly — as a certainty. The valley as a matter of fact was — full. Packed, thronged and crowded it was to the very brim of its mighty wooded walls — with life. It was now borne in upon him, with an inner conviction that left no room for doubt, that on all sides living things — persons — were jostling him, rubbing elbows, watching all his movements, and only waiting till the darkness came to reveal themselves.

Moreover, with this eerie discovery came also the further knowledge that a vast multitude of others, again, with pallid faces and yearning eyes, with arms outstretched and groping feet, were searching everywhere for the way of entrance that he himself had found so easily. All about him, he felt, were people by the hundred, by the thousand, seeking with a kind of restless fever for the narrow trail that led down into the valley, longing with an intensity that heat upon his soul in a million waves, for the rest, the calm silence of the place — but most of all for its strange, deep, and unalterable peace.

He, alone of all these, had found the Entrance; he, *and one other.*

For out of this singular conviction grew another even more singular: his brother Mark was also somewhere in this valley with him. Mark, too, was wandering like himself in and out among its intricate dim turns. He had said but a short time ago, “I wish Mark were here!” Mark *was* here. And it was precisely then — while he stood still a moment, trying to face these overwhelming obsessions and deal with them — that the figure of a man, moving swiftly through the trees, passed him with a great gliding stride, and with averted face. Stephen started horribly, catching his breath. In an instant the man was gone again, swallowed up by the crowding pines.

With a quick movement of pursuit and a cry that should make the man turn, he sprang forward — but stopped again almost the same moment, realizing that the extraordinary speed at which the man had shot past him rendered pursuit out of the question. He had been going downhill into the valley, by this time he was already far, far ahead. But in that momentary glimpse of him he had seen enough to know. The face was turned away, and the shadows under the trees were heavy, but the figure was beyond question the figure of — his brother Mark.

It was his brother, yet not his brother. It was Mark — but Mark altered. And the alteration was in some way — awful; just as the silent speed at which he had moved — the impossible speed in so dense a forest — was likewise awful. Then, still shaking inwardly with the suddenness of it all, Stephen realized that when he called aloud he had uttered certain definite words. And these words now came back to him —

“Mark, Mark! Don’t go yet! Don’t go — without me!”

Before, however, he could act, a most curious and unaccountable sensation of deadly faintness and pain came upon him, without cause, without explanation, so that he dropped backwards in momentary collapse, and but for the closeness of the tree stems would have fallen full length to the ground. From the center of the heart it came, spreading thence throughout his whole being like a swift and dreadful fever. All the muscles of his body relaxed; icy perspiration burst forth upon his skin; the pulses of life seemed suddenly reduced to the threshold beyond which they stop. There was a thick, rushing sound in his ears and his mind went utterly blank.

These were the sensations of death by suffocation. He knew this as certainly as though another doctor stood by his side and labeled each spasm, explained each successive sinking of the vital flame. He was passing through the last throes of a dying man. And then into his mind, thus deliberately left blank, rushed at lightning speed a whole series of the pictures of his past life. Even while his breath failed, he saw his thirty-five years pictorially, successively, yet in some queer fashion *at once,* pass through the lighted chambers of his brain. In this way, it is said, they pass through the brain of a drowning man during the last seconds before death.

Childhood rose about him with its scenes, figures, voices; the Kentish lawns where he had played with Mark in stained overalls; the summerhouse where they had tea, the hay-fields where they romped. The scent of lime and walnut, of garden pinks, and roses by the tumbled rockery came back to his nostrils.... He heard the voices of grown-ups in the distance... faint barking of dogs... the carriage wheels upon the gravel drive... and then the sharp summons from the opened window— “Time to come in now! Time to come in...!”

Time to come in now. It all drove before him as of yesterday on the scented winds of childhood's summer days.... He heard his brother's voice — dreadfully faint and far away — calling him by name in the shrill accents of the boy: "Stevie — I say, you *might* shut up... and play properly..."

And then followed the panorama of the thirty years, all the chief events drawn in steellike lines of white and black, vivid in sunshine, alive — right down to the present moment with the portentous dark shadow of his terrible Decision closing the series like a cloud.

Yes, like a smothering black cloud that blocked the way. There was nothing visible beyond it. There, for him, life ceased —

Only, as he gazed with inward-turned eyes that could not close even if they would, he saw to his amazement that the black cloud suddenly opened, and into a space of clear light there swam the vision, radiant as morning, of that dark young Eastern face — the face that held for him all the beauty in the world. The eyes instantly found his own, and smiled. Behind her, moreover, and beyond, before the moving vapors closed upon it, he saw a long vista of brilliance, crowded with pictures he could but half discern — as though, in spite of himself and his Decision, life continued — as though, too, it *continued with her.*

And instantly, with the sight and thought of her, the consuming faintness passed; strength returned to his body with the glow of life; the pain went; the pictures vanished; the cloud was no more. In his blood the pulses of life once again beat strong, and the blackness left his soul. The smile of those beloved eyes had been charged with the invitation to live. Although his determination remained unshaken, there shone behind it the joy of this potent magic: life with her....

With a strong effort, at length he recovered himself and continued on his way. More or less familiar, of course, with the psychology of vision, he dimly understood that his experiences had been in some measure subjective — within himself. To find the line of demarcation, however, was beyond him. That Mark had wandered out to fight his own battle upon the mountains, and so come into this same valley, was well within the bounds of coincidence. But the nameless and dreadful alteration discerned in that swift moment of his passing — that remained inexplicable. Only he no longer thought about it. The glory of that sweet vision had bewildered him beyond any possibility of reason or analysis.

His watch told him that the hour was past five o'clock — ten minutes past, to be exact. He still had several hours before reaching the country he was familiar with nearer home. Following the trail at an increased pace, he presently saw patches of meadow glimmering between the thinning trees, and knew that the bottom of the valley was at last in sight.

“And Mark, God bless him, is down there too — somewhere!” he exclaimed aloud. “I shall surely find him.” For, strange to say, nothing could have persuaded him that his twin was not wandering among the shadows of this peaceful and haunted valley with himself, and — that he would shortly find him.

XII

*A*nd a few minutes later he passed from the forest as through an open door and found himself before a farmhouse standing in a patch of bright green meadow against the mountainside. He was in need both of food and information.

The châlet, less lumbering and picturesque than those found in the Alps, had, nevertheless, the appearance of being exceedingly ancient. It was not toylike — as the Jura châlets sometimes are. Solidly built, its balcony and overhanging roof supported by immense beams of deeply stained wood, it stood so that the back walls merged into the mountain slope behind, and the arms of pine, spruce and fir seemed stretched out to include it among their shadows. A last ray of sunshine, dipping between two far summits overhead, touched it with pale gold, bringing out the rich beauty of the heavily-dyed beams. Though no one was visible at the moment, and no smoke rose from the shingled chimney, it had the appearance of being occupied, and Stephen approached it with the caution due to the first evidence of humanity he had come across since he entered the valley.

Under the shadow of the broad balcony roof he noticed that the door, like that of a stable, was in two parts, and, wondering rather to find it closed, he knocked firmly upon the upper half. Under the pressure of a second knock this upper half yielded slightly, though without opening. The lower half, however, evidently barred and bolted, remained unmoved.

The third time he knocked with more force than he intended, and the knock sounded loud and clamorous as a summons. From within, as though great spaces stretched beyond, came a murmur of voices, faint and muffled, and then almost immediately — the footsteps of someone coming softly up to open.

But, instead of the heavy brown door opening, there came a voice. He heard it, petrified with amazement. For it was a voice he knew — hushed, soft, lingering. His heart, hammering atrociously, seemed to leave its place, and cut his breath away.

"Stephen!" it murmured, calling him by name, "what are *you* doing here so soon? And what is it that you want?"

The knowledge that only this dark door separated him from her, at first bereft him of all power of speech or movement; and the possible significance of her words escaped him. Through the sweet confusion that turned his spirit faint he only remembered, flashlike, that she and her father were indeed to have left the hotel that very morning. After that his thought stopped dead.

Then, also flashlike, swept back upon him the memory of the figure that had passed him with averted face — and, with it, the clear conviction that at this moment Mark, too, was somewhere in this very valley, even close beside him. More: Mark was in this chalet — with her.

The torrent of speech that instantly crowded to his lips was almost too thick for utterance.

"Open, open, open!" was all he heard intelligibly from the throng of words that poured out. He raised his hands to push and force; but her reply again stopped him.

"Even if I open — *you* may not enter yet," came the whisper through the door. And this time he could almost have sworn that it sounded within himself rather than without.

"I must enter," he cried. "Open to me, I say!"

"But you are trembling—"

"Open to me, O my life! Open to me!"

“But your heart — it is shaking.”

“Because you — you are so near,” came in passionate, stammering tones. “Because you stand there beside me!” And then, before she could answer, or his will control the words, he had added: “And because Mark —— my brother — is in there — with you—”

“Hush, hush!” came the soft, astonishing reply. “He is in here, true; but he is not with me. And it is for my sake that he has come — for my sake and for yours. My soul, alas! has led him to the gates...”

But Stephen’s emotions had reached the breaking-point, and the necessity for action was upon him like a storm. He drew back a pace so as to fling himself better against the closed door, when to his utter surprise, it moved. The upper half swung slowly outwards, and he — saw.

He was aware of a vast room, with closely shuttered windows, that seemed to stretch beyond the walls into the wooded mountainside, thronged with moving figures, like forms of life gently gliding to and fro in some huge darkened tank; and there, framed against this opening —— the girl herself. She stood, visible to the waist, radiant in the solitary beam of sunshine that reached the chalet, smiling down wondrously into his face with the same exquisite beauty in her eyes that he had seen before in the vision of the cloud: with, too, that supreme invitation in them — the invitation to live.

The loveliness blinded him. He could see the down upon her little dark cheeks where the sunlight kissed them; there was the cloud of hair upon her neck where his lips had lain; there, too, the dear, slight breast that not twenty-four hours ago had known the pressure of his arms. And, once again, driven forward by the love that triumphed over all obstacles, real or artificial, he advanced headlong with outstretched arms to take her.

“Katya!” he cried, never thinking how passing strange it was that he knew her name at all, much more the endearing and shortened form of it. “Katya!”

But the young girl held up her little brown hand against him with a gesture that was more strong to restrain than any number of bolted doors.

“Not here,” she murmured, with her grave smile, while behind the words he caught in that darkened room the alternate hush and sighing as of a thousand sleepers. “Not here! You cannot see him now; for these are the

Reception Halls of Death and here I stand in the Vestibule of the Beyond. Our way... your way and mine... lies farther yet... traced there since the beginning of the world... together..."

In quaintly broken English it was spoken, but his mind remembers the singular words in their more perfect form. Even this, however, came later. At the moment he only felt the twofold wave of love surge through him with a tide of power that threatened to break him asunder: he *must* hold her to his heart; he *must* come instantly to his brother's side, meet his eyes, have speech with him. The desire to enter that great darkened room and force a path through the dimly gliding forms to his brother became irresistible, while tearing upon its heels came like a fever of joy the meaning of the words she had just uttered, and especially of that last word:

"Together!"

Then, for an instant, all the forces in his being turned negative so that his will refused to act. The excess of feeling numbed him. A flying interval of knowledge, calm and certain, came to him. The exaltation of spirit which produced the pictures of all this spiritual clairvoyance moved a stage higher, and he realized that he witnessed an order of things pertaining to the world of eternal causes rather than of temporary effects. Someone had lifted the Veil.

With a feeling that he could only wait and let things take their extraordinary course, he stood still. For an instant, even less, he must have hidden his eyes in his hand, for when, a moment later, he again looked up, he saw that the half of the swinging door which had been open, was now closed. He stood alone upon the balcony. And the sunshine had faded entirely from the scene.

It was here, it seems, that the last vestige of self-control disappeared. He flung himself against the door; and the door met his assault like a wall of solid rock. Crying aloud alternately the names of his two loved ones, he turned, scarcely knowing what he did, and ran into the meadow. Dusk was about the chalet, drawing the encircling forests closer. Soon the true darkness would stalk down the slopes. The walls of the valley reared, it seemed, up to heaven.

Still calling, he ran about the walls, searching wildly for a way of entrance, his mind charged with bewildering fragments of what he had heard: “The Reception Halls of Death”— “The Vestibule of the Beyond.”

— — “You cannot see him now”— “Our way lies farther — and *together...!”* And, on the far side of the châlet, by the corner that touched the trees, he suddenly stopped, feeling his gaze drawn upwards, and there, pressed close against the windowpane of an upper room, saw that someone was peering down upon him.

With a sensation of freezing terror he realized that he was staring straight into the eyes of his brother Mark. Bent a little forward with the effort to look down, the face, pale and motionless, gazed into his own, but without the least sign of recognition. Not a feature moved: and although but a few feet separated the brothers, the face wore the dim, misty appearance of great distance. It was like the face of a man called suddenly from deep sleep — dazed, perplexed; nay, more — frightened and horribly distraught.

What Stephen read upon it, however, in that first moment of sight, was the signature of the great, eternal question men have asked since the beginning of time, yet never heard the answer. And into the heart of the twin the pain of it plunged like a sword.

“Mark!” he stammered, in that low voice the valley seemed to exact; “Mark! Is that really *you?”* Tears swam already in his eyes, and yearning in a hood choked his utterance.

And Mark, with a dreadful, steady stare that still held no touch of recognition, gazed down upon him from the closed window of that upper chamber, motionless, unblinking as an image of stone. It was almost like an imitation figure of himself — only with the effect of some added alteration. For alteration certainly there was — awful and unknown alteration — though Stephen was utterly unable to detect wherein it lay. And he remembered how the figure had passed him in the woods with averted face.

He made then, it seems, some violent sign or other, in response to which his brother at last moved — slowly opening the window. He leaned forward, stooping with lowered head and shoulders over the sill, while Stephen ran up against the wall beneath and craned up towards him. The two faces drew close; their eyes met clean and straight. Then the lips of Mark moved, and the distraught look half vanished within the borders of a little smile of puzzled and affectionate wonder.

“Stevie, old fellow,” issued a tiny, faraway voice; “but where are you? I see you — so dimly?”

It was like a voice crying faintly down half-a-mile of distance. He shuddered to hear it.

“I’m here, Mark — close to you,” he whispered.

“I hear your voice, I feel your presence,” came the reply like a man talking in his sleep, “but I see you — as through a glass darkly. And I want to see you all clear, and close—”

“But *you!* Where are *you?”* interrupted Stephen, with anguish.

“Alone; quite alone — over here. And it’s cold, oh, so cold!” The words came gently, half veiling a complaint. The wind caught them and ran round the walls towards the forest, wailing as it went.

“But how did you come, how did you come?” Stephen raised himself on tiptoe to catch the answer. But there was no answer. The face receded a little, and as it did so the wind, passing up the walls again, stirred the hair on the forehead. Stephen saw it move. He thought, too, the head moved with it, shaking slightly to and fro.

“Oh, but tell me, my dear, dear brother! Tell me — !” he cried, sweating horribly, his limbs shaking.

Mark made a curious gesture, withdrawing at the same time a little farther into the room behind, so that he now stood upright, half in shadow by the window. The alteration in him proclaimed itself more plainly, though still without betraying its exact nature. There was something about him that was terrible. And the air that came from the open window upon Stephen was so freezing that it seemed to turn the perspiration on his face into ice.

“I do not know; I do not remember,” he heard the tiny voice inside the room, ever withdrawing. “Besides — I may not speak with you — yet; it is so difficult — and it hurts.”

Stephen stretched out his body, the arms scraping the wooden walls above his head, trying to climb the smooth and slippery surface.

“For the love of God! “he cried with passion, “tell me what it all means and what you are doing here — you and — and — oh, and *all three of us?”* The words rang out through the silent valley.

But the other stood there motionless again by the window, his face distraught and dazed as though the effort of speech had already been too much for him. His image had begun to fade a little. He seemed, without moving, yet to be retreating into some sort of interior distance. Presently, it seemed, he would disappear altogether.

“I don’t know,” came the voice at length, fainter than before, half muffled. “I have been asleep, I think. I have just waked up, and come across from somewhere else — where we were all together, you and I and —— and—”

Like his brother, he was unable to speak the name. He ended the sentence a moment later in a whisper that was only just audible. “But I cannot tell you *how* I came,” he said, “for I do not know the words.”

Stephen, then, with a violent leap tried to reach the windowsill and pull himself up. The distance was too great, however, and he fell back upon the grass, only just keeping his feet.

“I’m coming in to you,” he cried out very loud. “Wait there for me! For the love of heaven, wait till I come to you. I’ll break the doors in — !”

Once again Mark made that singular gesture; again he seemed to recede a little farther into a kind of veiled perspective that caused his appearance to fade still more; and, from an incredible distance — a distance that somehow conveyed an idea of appalling height — his thin, tiny voice floated down upon his brother from the fading lips of shadow.

“Old fellow, don’t you come! You are not ready — and it is too cold here. I shall wait, Stevie, I shall wait for you. Later — I mean farther from here — we shall one day all three be together.... Only you cannot understand now. I am here for your sake, old fellow, and for hers. She loves us both, but it is... you... she loves... the best....”

The whispering voice rose suddenly on these last words into a long high cry that the wind instantly caught away and buried far in the smothering silences of the woods. For, at the same moment, Mark had come with a swift rush back to the window, had leaned out and stretched both hands towards his brother underneath. And his face had cleared and smiled. Caught within that smile, the awful change in him had vanished.

Stephen turned and made a mad rush round the chalet to find the door he would batter in with his hands and feet and body. He searched in vain, however, for in the shadows the supporting beams of the building were indistinguishable from the stems of the trees behind; the roof sank away, blotted out by the gloom of the branches, and the darkness now wove forest, sky and mountain into a uniform black sheet against which no item was separately visible.

There was no châlet any longer. He was simply battering with bruised hands and feet upon the solid trunks of pines and spruces in his path; which he continued to do, calling ever aloud for Mark, until finally he grew dizzy with exhaustion and fell to the ground in a state of semiconsciousness.

And for the best part of half-an-hour he lay there motionless upon the moss, while the vast hands of Night drew the cloak of her softest darkness over valley and mountain, covering his small body with as much care as she covered the sky, the hemisphere, and all those leagues of velvet forest.

XIII

It was not long before he came to himself again — shivering with cold, for the perspiration had dried upon him where he lay. He got up and ran. The night was now fairly down, and the keen air stung his cheeks. But, with a sure instinct not to be denied, he took the direction of home.

He traveled at an extraordinary pace, considering the thickness of the trees and the darkness. How he got out of the valley he does not remember; nor how he found his way over the intervening ridges that lay between him and the country he knew. At the back of his mind crashed and tumbled the loose fragments of all he had seen and heard, forming as yet no coherent pattern. For himself, indeed, the details were of small interest. He was a man under sentence of death. His determination, in spite of everything, remained unshaken. In a few short hours he would be gone.

Yet, with the habit of the professional mind, he tried a little to sort out things. During that state of singular exaltation, for instance, he understood vaguely that his deep longings had somehow translated themselves into act and scene. For these longings were life; his decision negatived them; hence, they dramatized themselves pictorially with what vividness his imagination allowed.

They were dramatized inventions, singularly elaborate, of the emotions that burned so fiercely within. All were projections of his consciousness, maimed and incomplete, masquering as persons before his inner vision, it began with the singular sensations of death by drowning he had experienced. From that moment the other forces at work in the problem had taken their cue and played their part more or less convincingly, according to their strength....

He thought and argued a great deal as he hurried homewards through the night. But all the time he knew that it was untrue. He had no real explanation at all!

From the high ridges, cold and bleak under the stars, swept by the free wind of night, he ran almost the entire way. It was downhill. And during that violent descent of nearly an hour the details of his "going" shaped themselves. Until then he had formed no definite plans. Now he settled everything. He chose the very pool where the water coiled and bubbled as in a cauldron just where the little torrent made a turn above their house; he decided upon the very terms of the letter he would leave behind. He would put it on the kitchen table so that they should know where to find him.

He urged his pace tremendously, for the idea that his brother would have left — that he would find him gone — haunted him. It grew, doubtless, out of that singular, detailed vision that had come upon him in his great weakness in the valley. He was terrified that he would not see his brother again — that he had already gone deliberately after her.

"I *must* see Mark once more. I *must* get home before he leaves!" flashed the strong thought continually in his mind, making him run like a deer down the winding trail.

It was after ten o'clock when he reached the little clearing behind the chalet, panting with exhaustion, blinded with perspiration. There was no light visible; all the windows were dark; but presently he made out a figure moving to and fro below the balcony. It was *not* Mark — he saw that in a flash. It moved oddly. A sound of moaning reached him at the same time. And then he saw that it was the figure of the peasant woman who cooked for them, Marie Petavel.

And the instant he saw who it was, and heard her moaning, he knew what had happened. Mark had left a letter to explain — and gone: gone after the girl. His heart sank into death.

The woman came forward heavily through the darkness, the dew-drenched grass swishing audibly against her skirts. And the words he heard were precisely what he had expected to hear, though patois and excitement rendered them difficult —

“Your brother — oh your poor brother, Monsieur le Docteur — he — has gone!”

And then he saw the piece of white paper glimmering in her hands as she stood quite close. He took it mechanically from her. It was the letter Mark had left behind to explain.

But before Stephen had time to read it, a man with a lantern came out of the barn that stood behind the house. It was her husband. He came slowly towards them.

“We searched for you, oh, we searched,” he said in a thick voice, “my son went as far as Buttes even, and hasn’t come back yet. You’ve been long, too long away..”

He stopped short and glanced down at his wife, telling her roughly to cease her stupid weeping. Stephen, shaking inwardly, with an icy terror in his blood, began to feel that things were not precisely as he had anticipated. Something else was the matter. The expression in the face of the peasant as the lantern’s glare fell upon it came to him suddenly with the shock of a revelation.

“You have told monsieur — all?” the man whispered, stooping to his wife. She shook her head; and her husband led the way without another word. The interval of a few seconds seemed endless to Stephen; he was trembling all over like a man with the ague. Behind them the old woman floundered through the wet grass, moaning to herself.

“No one would have believed it could have happened — anything of *that* sort,” the man mumbled. The lantern was unsteady in his hand. The next minute the barn, like some monstrous animal, rose against the stars, and the huge wooden doors gaped wide before them.

The peasant, uncovering his head, went first, and Stephen, following with stumbling footsteps, saw the shadows of the beams and posts shift across the boarded floor. Against the wall, whither the man led, was a small littered heap of hay, and upon this, covered by a white sheet, was stretched a human body. The peasant drew back the sheet gently with his heavy brown hand, stooping close over it so that the lantern threw its light full upon the act.

And Stephen, tumbling forward, scarcely knowing what he did, without further warning or preparation, looked down upon the face of his brother Mark. The eyes stared fixedly into — nothing; the features wore the distraught expression he had seen upon them a few hours before through the windowpane of that upper chamber.

“We found him in that deep pool just where the stream makes the quick turn above the house,” the peasant whispered. “He left a bit of paper on the kitchen table to say where he would be. It was after dark when we got there. His watch had stopped, though, long before—” He muttered on unintelligibly.

Stephen looked up at the man, unable to utter a word, and the man replied to the unspoken question— “At ten minutes past five the watch had stopped,” he said. “That was when the water reached it.”

By the flicker of the lantern, then, sitting beside that still figure covered with the sheet, Stephen read the letter Mark had left for him —

“Stevie, old fellow, one of us, you know, has got to — go; and it is better, I think, that it should not be you. I know all you have been through, for I have fought and suffered every step with you.

I have been along the same path, loving her too much for you, and you too much for her. And I leave her to you, boy, because I am convinced she now loves you even as she first believed she loved me. But all that evening she cried incessantly for you. More I cannot explain to you now; she will do that. And she need never know more than that I have withdrawn in your favor: she need never know *how.* Perhaps, one day, when there is no marriage or giving in marriage, we may all three be together, and happy. I have often wondered, as you know...”

The remainder of the sentence was scratched out and illegible.

.. And, if it be possible, old fellow, of course *I shall wait.”* Then came more words blackened out.

“... I am now going, within a few minutes of writing this last word to you of blessing and forgiveness (for I know you will want that, although there is nothing, *nothing* to forgive!) — going down into that Lost Valley her father told us about — the Valley hidden among these mountains we love — the Lost Valley where even the unhappy dead find peace. There I shall wait for you both. — Mark.”

Several weeks later, before he took the train eastwards, Stephen retraced his steps to the farmhouse where he had bought milk and asked for directions. Thence for some distance he followed the path he well remembered. At a point, however, the confusion of the woods grew strangely upon him. The mountains, true to the map, were not true to his recollections. The trail stopped; high, unknown ridges intervened; and no such deep and winding valley as he had traveled that afternoon for so many hours was anywhere to be found. The map, the peasants, the very configuration of the landscape even, denied its existence.

The Wendigo

A CONSIDERABLE NUMBER of hunting parties were out that year without finding so much as a fresh trail; for the moose were uncommonly shy, and the various Nimrods returned to the bosoms of their respective families with the best excuses the facts of their imaginations could suggest. Dr. Cathcart, among others, came back without a trophy; but he brought instead the memory of an experience which he declares was worth all the bull moose that had ever been shot. But then Cathcart, of Aberdeen, was interested in other things besides moose — amongst them the vagaries of the human mind. This particular story, however, found no mention in his book on *Collective Hallucination* for the simple reason (so he confided once to a fellow colleague) that he himself played too intimate a part in it to form a competent judgment of the affair as a whole....

Besides himself and his guide, Hank Davis, there was young Simpson, his nephew, a divinity student destined for the “Wee Kirk” (then on his first visit to Canadian backwoods), and the latter’s guide, Défago. Joseph Défago was a French “Canuck,” who had strayed from his native Province of Quebec years before, and had got caught in Rat Portage when the Canadian Pacific Railway was a-building; a man who, in addition to his unparalleled knowledge of woodcraft and bush-lore, could also sing the old *voyageur* songs and tell a capital hunting yarn into the bargain. He was deeply susceptible, moreover, to that singular spell which the wilderness lays upon certain lonely natures, and he loved the wild solitudes with a kind of romantic passion that amounted almost to an obsession. The life of the backwoods fascinated him — whence, doubtless, his surpassing efficiency in dealing with their mysteries.

On this particular expedition he was Hank’s choice. Hank knew him and swore by him. He also swore at him, “jest as a pal might,” and since he had a vocabulary of picturesque, if utterly meaningless, oaths, the conversation between the two stalwart and hardy woodsmen was often of a rather lively description. This river of expletives, however, Hank agreed to dam a little out of respect for his old “hunting boss,” Dr. Cathcart, whom of course he addressed after the fashion of the country as “Doc,” and also because he understood that young Simpson was already a “bit of a parson.” He had, however, one objection to Défago, and one only — which was, that the French Canadian sometimes exhibited what Hank described as “the output of a cursed and dismal mind,” meaning apparently that he sometimes was true to type, Latin type, and suffered fits of a kind of silent moroseness when nothing could induce him to utter speech. Défago, that is to say, was imaginative and melancholy. And, as a rule, it was too long a spell of “civilization” that induced the attacks, for a few days of the wilderness invariably cured them.

This, then, was the party of four that found themselves in camp the last week in October of that “shy moose year” ‘way up in the wilderness north of Rat Portage — a forsaken and desolate country. There was also Punk, an Indian, who had accompanied Dr. Cathcart and Hank on their hunting trips in previous years, and who acted as cook. His duty was merely to stay in camp, catch fish, and prepare venison steaks and coffee at a few minutes’ notice. He dressed in the worn-out clothes bequeathed to him by former patrons, and, except for his coarse black hair and dark skin, he looked in these city garments no more like a real redskin than a stage Negro looks like a real African. For all that, however, Punk had in him still the instincts of his dying race; his taciturn silence and his endurance survived; also his superstition.

The party round the blazing fire that night were despondent, for a week had passed without a single sign of recent moose discovering itself. Défago had sung his song and plunged into a story, but Hank, in bad humor, reminded him so often that “he kep’ mussing-up the fac’s so, that it was ‘most all nothin’ but a petered-out lie,” that the Frenchman had finally subsided into a sulky silence which nothing seemed likely to break. Dr. Cathcart and his nephew were fairly done after an exhausting day. Punk was washing up the dishes, grunting to himself under the lean-to of branches, where he later also slept. No one troubled to stir the slowly dying fire. Overhead the stars were brilliant in a sky quite wintry, and there was so little wind that ice was already forming stealthily along the shores of the still lake behind them. The silence of the vast listening forest stole forward and enveloped them.

Hank broke in suddenly with his nasal voice.

"I'm in favor of breaking new ground tomorrow, Doc," he observed with energy, looking across at his employer. "We don't stand a dead Dago's chance around here."

"Agreed," said Cathcart, always a man of few words. "Think the idea's "Sure pop, it's good," Hank resumed with confidence. "S'pose, now, you and I strike west, up Garden Lake way for a change! None of us ain't touched that quiet bit o' land yet—"

"I'm with you."

"And you, Défago, take Mr. Simpson along in the small canoe, skip across the lake, portage over into Fifty Island Water, and take a good squint down that thar southern shore. The moose 'yarded' there like hell last year, and for all we know they may be doin' it agin this year jest to spite us."

Défago, keeping his eyes on the fire, said nothing by way of reply. He was still offended, possibly, about his interrupted story.

"No one's been up that way this year, an' I'll lay my bottom dollar on *that!"* Hank added with emphasis, as though he had a reason for knowing. He looked over at his partner sharply. "Better take the little silk tent and stay away a couple o' nights," he concluded, as though the matter were definitely settled. For Hank was recognized as general organizer of the hunt, and in charge of the party.

It was obvious to anyone that Défago did not jump at the plan, but his silence seemed to convey something more than ordinary disapproval, and across his sensitive dark face there passed a curious expression like a flash of firelight — not so quickly, however, that the three men had not time to catch it.

"He funked for some reason, *I* thought," Simpson said afterwards in the tent he shared with his uncle. Dr. Cathcart made no immediate reply, although the look had interested him enough at the time for him to make a mental note of it. The expression had caused him a passing uneasiness he could not quite account for at the moment.

But Hank, of course, had been the first to notice it, and the odd thing was that instead of becoming explosive or angry over the other's reluctance, he at once began to humor him a bit.

“But there ain’t no *speshul* reason why no one’s been up there this year,” he said with a perceptible hush in his tone; “not the reason you mean, anyway! Las’ year it was the fires that kep’ folks out, and this year I guess — I guess it jest happened so, that’s all!” His manner was clearly meant to be encouraging.

Joseph Défago raised his eyes a moment, then dropped them again. A breath of wind stole out of the forest and stirred the embers into a passing blaze. Dr. Cathcart again noticed the expression in the guide s face, and again he did not like it. But this time the nature of the look betrayed itself. In those eyes, for an instant, he caught the gleam of a man scared in his very soul. It disquieted him more than he cared to admit.

“Bad Indians up that way?” he asked, with a laugh to ease matters a little, while Simpson, too sleepy to notice this subtle by-play, moved off to bed with a prodigious yawn; “or — or anything wrong with the country?” he added, when his nephew was out of hearing.

Hank met his eye with something less than his usual frankness.

“He’s jest skeered,” he replied good-humoredly. “Skeered stiff about some ole feery tale! That’s all, ain’t it, ole pard?” And he gave Défago a friendly kick on the moccasined foot that lay nearest the fire.

Défago looked up quickly, as from an interrupted reverie, a reverie, however, that had not prevented his seeing all that went on about him.

“Skeered — *nuthin’!”* he answered, with a flush of defiance. “There’s nuthin’ in the Bush that can skeer Joseph Défago, and don’t you forget it!” And the natural energy with which he spoke made it impossible to know whether he told the whole truth or only a part of it.

Hank turned towards the doctor. He was just going to add something when he stopped abruptly and looked round. A sound close behind them in the darkness made all three start. It was old Punk, who had moved up from his lean-to while they talked and now stood there just beyond the circle of firelight — listening.

“‘Nother time, Doc!” Hank whispered, with a wink, “when the gallery ain’t stepped down into the stalls!” And, springing to his feet, he slapped the Indian on the back and cried noisily, “Come up t’ the fire an’ warm yer dirty red skin a bit.” He dragged him towards the blaze and threw more wood on.

"That was a mighty good feed you give us an hour or two back," he continued heartily, as though to set the man's thoughts on another scent, "and it ain't Christian to let you stand out there freezin' yer ole soul to hell while we're gettin' all good an' toasted!" Punk moved in and warmed his feet, smiling darkly at the other's volubility which he only half understood, but saying nothing. And presently Dr. Cathcart, seeing that further conversation was impossible, followed his nephew's example and moved off to the tent, leaving the three men smoking over the now blazing fire.

It is not easy to undress in a small tent without waking one's companion, and Cathcart, hardened and warm-blooded as he was in spite of his fifty odd years, did what Hank would have described as "considerable of his twilight" in the open. He noticed, during the process, that Punk had meanwhile gone back to his lean-to, and that Hank and Défago were at it hammer and tongs, or, rather, hammer and anvil, the little French Canadian being the anvil. It was all very like the conventional stage picture of Western melodrama: the fire lighting up their faces with patches of alternate red and black; Défago, in slouch hat and moccasins in the part of the "badlands" villain; Hank, open-faced and hatless, with that reckless fling of his shoulders, the honest and deceived hero; and old Punk, eavesdropping in the background, supplying the atmosphere of mystery. The doctor smiled as he noticed the details; but at the same time something deep within him — he hardly knew what — shrank a little, as though an almost imperceptible breath of warning had touched the surface of his soul and was gone again before he could seize it. Probably it was traceable to that "scared expression" he had seen in the eyes of Défago; "probably" — for this hint of fugitive emotion otherwise escaped his usually so keen analysis. Défago, he was vaguely aware, might cause trouble somehow... He was not as steady a guide as Hank, for instance... Further than that he could not get...

He watched the men a moment longer before diving into the stuffy tent where Simpson already slept soundly. Hank, he saw, was swearing like a mad African in a New York nigger saloon; but it was the swearing of "affection." The ridiculous oaths flew freely now that the cause of their obstruction was asleep. Presently he put his arm almost tenderly upon his comrade's shoulder, and they moved off together into the shadows where their tent stood faintly glimmering. Punk, too, a moment later followed their example and disappeared between his odorous blankets in the opposite direction.

Dr. Cathcart then likewise turned in, weariness and sleep still fighting in his mind with an obscure curiosity to know what it was that had scared Défago about the country up Fifty Island Water way, — wondering, too, why Punk's presence had prevented the completion of what Hank had to say. Then sleep overtook him. He would know tomorrow. Hank would tell him the story while they trudged after the elusive moose.

Deep silence fell about the little camp, planted there so audaciously in the jaws of the wilderness. The lake gleamed like a sheet of black glass beneath the stars. The cold air pricked. In the drafts of night that poured their silent tide from the depths of the forest, with messages from distant ridges and from lakes just beginning to freeze, there lay already the faint, bleak odors of coming winter. White men, with their dull scent, might never have divined them; the fragrance of the wood fire would have concealed from them these almost electrical hints of moss and bark and hardening swamp a hundred miles away. Even Hank and Défago, subtly in league with the soul of the woods as they were, would probably have spread their delicate nostrils in vain....

But an hour later, when all slept like the dead, old Punk crept from his blankets and went down to the shore of the lake like a shadow — silently, as only Indian blood can move. He raised his head and looked about him. The thick darkness rendered sight of small avail, but, like the animals, he possessed other senses that darkness could not mute. He listened — then sniffed the air. Motionless as a hemlock stem he stood there. After five minutes again he lifted his head and sniffed, and yet once again. A tingling of the wonderful nerves that betrayed itself by no outer sign, ran through him as he tasted the keen air. Then, merging his figure into the surrounding blackness in a way that only wild men and animals understand, he turned, still moving like a shadow, and went stealthily back to his lean-to and his bed.

And soon after he slept, the change of wind he had divined stirred gently the reflection of the stars within the lake. Rising among the far ridges of the country beyond Fifty Island Water, it came from the direction in which he had stared, and it passed over the sleeping camp with a faint and sighing murmur through the tops of the big trees that was almost too delicate to be audible. With it, down the desert paths of night, though too faint, too high even for the Indian's hairlike nerves, there passed a curious, thin odor, strangely disquieting, an odor of something that seemed unfamiliar — utterly unknown.

The French Canadian and the man of Indian blood each stirred uneasily in his sleep just about this time, though neither of them woke. Then the ghost of that unforgettably strange odor passed away and was lost among the leagues of tenantless forest beyond.

In the morning the camp was astir before the sun. There had been a light fall of snow during the night and the air was sharp. Punk had done his duty betimes, for the odors of coffee and fried bacon reached every tent. All were in good spirits.

"Wind's shifted!" cried Hank vigorously, watching Simpson and his guide already loading the small canoe. "It's across the lake — dead right for you fellers. And the snow'll make bully trails! If there's any moose mussing around up thar, they'll not get so much as a tail-end scent of you with the wind as it is. Good luck, Monsieur Défago!" he added, facetiously giving the name its French pronunciation for once, *"bonne chance!"*

Défago returned the good wishes, apparently in the best of spirits, the silent mood gone. Before eight o'clock old Punk had the camp to himself, Cathcart and Hank were far along the trail that led westwards, while the canoe that carried Défago and Simpson, with silk tent and grub for two days, was already a dark speck bobbing on the bosom of the lake, going due east.

The wintry sharpness of the air was tempered now by a sun that topped the wooded ridges and blazed with a luxurious warmth upon the world of lake and forest below; loons flew skimming through the sparkling spray that the wind lifted; divers shook their dripping heads to the sun and popped smartly out of sight again; and as far as eye could reach rose the leagues of endless, crowding Bush, desolate in its lonely sweep and grandeur, untrodden by foot of man, and stretching its mighty and unbroken carpet right up to the frozen shores of Hudson Bay.

Simpson, who saw it all for the first time as he paddled hard in the bows of the dancing canoe, was enchanted by its austere beauty. His heart drank in the sense of freedom and great spaces just as his lungs drank in the cool and perfumed wind. Behind him in the stern seat, singing fragments of his native chanties, Défago steered the craft of birch bark like a thing of life, answering cheerfully all his companion's questions. Both were gay and light-hearted. On such occasions men lose the superficial, worldly distinctions; they become human beings working together for a common end. Simpson, the employer, and Défago the employed, among these primitive forces, were simply — two men, the "guider" and the "guided." Superior knowledge, of course, assumed control, and the younger man fell without a second thought into the quasi-subordinate position. He never dreamed of objecting when Défago dropped the "Mr.," and addressed him as "Say, Simpson," or "Simpson, boss," which was invariably the case before they reached the farther shore after a stiff paddle of twelve miles against a head wind. He only laughed, and liked it; then ceased to notice it at all.

For this "divinity student" was a young man of parts and character, though as yet, of course, untraveled; and on this trip — the first time he had seen any country but his own and little Switzerland — the huge scale of things somewhat bewildered him. It was one thing, he realized, to hear about primeval forests, but quite another to see them. While to dwell in them and seek acquaintance with their wild life was, again, an initiation that no intelligent man could undergo without a certain shifting of personal values hitherto held for permanent and sacred.

Simpson knew the first faint indication of this emotion when he held the new.303 rifle in his hands and looked along its pair of faultless, gleaming barrels. The three days' journey to their headquarters, by lake and portage, had carried the process a stage farther. And now that he was about to plunge beyond even the fringe of wilderness where they were camped into the virgin heart of uninhabited regions as vast as Europe itself, the true nature of the situation stole upon him with an effect of delight and awe that his imagination was fully capable of appreciating. It was himself and Défago against a multitude — at least, against a Titan!

The bleak splendors of these remote and lonely forests rather overwhelmed him with the sense of his own littleness. That stern quality of the tangled backwoods which can only be described as merciless and terrible, rose out of these far blue woods swimming upon the horizon, and revealed itself. He understood the silent warning. He realized his own utter helplessness. Only Défago, as a symbol of a distant civilization where man was master, stood between him and a pitiless death by exhaustion and starvation.

It was thrilling to him, therefore, to watch Défago turn over the canoe upon the shore, pack the paddles carefully underneath, and then proceed to "blaze" the spruce stems for some distance on either side of an almost invisible trail, with the careless remark thrown in, "Say, Simpson, if anything happens to me, you'll find the canoe all correc' by these marks; —— then strike doo west into the sun to hit the home camp agin, see?"

It was the most natural thing in the world to say, and he said it without any noticeable inflexion of the voice, only it happened to express the youth's emotions at the moment with an utterance that was symbolic of the situation and of his own helplessness as a factor in it. He was alone with Défago in a primitive world: that was all. The canoe, another symbol of man's ascendancy, was now to be left behind. Those small yellow patches, made on the trees by the axe, were the only indications of its hiding place.

Meanwhile, shouldering the packs between them, each man carrying his own rifle, they followed the slender trail over rocks and fallen trunks and across half-frozen swamps; skirting numerous lakes that fairly gemmed the forest, their borders fringed with mist; and towards five o'clock found themselves suddenly on the edge of the woods, looking out across a large sheet of water in front of them, dotted with pine-clad islands of all describable shapes and sizes.

"Fifty Island Water," announced Défago wearily, "and the sun jest goin' to dip his bald old head into it!" he added, with unconscious poetry; and immediately they set about pitching camp for the night.

In a very few minutes, under those skillful hands that never made a movement too much or a movement too little, the silk tent stood taut and cozy, the beds of balsam boughs ready laid, and a brisk cooking fire burned with the minimum of smoke. While the young Scotchman cleaned the fish they had caught trolling behind the canoe, Défago "guessed" he would "jest as soon" take a turn through the Bush for indications of moose. *"May* come across a trunk where they bin and rubbed horns," he said, as he moved off, "or feedin' on the last of the maple leaves" — and he was gone.

His small figure melted away like a shadow in the dusk, while Simpson noted with a kind of admiration how easily the forest absorbed him into herself. A few steps, it seemed, and he was no longer visible.

Yet there was little underbrush hereabouts; the trees stood somewhat apart, well spaced; and in the clearings grew silver birch and maple, spearlike and slender, against the immense stems of spruce and hemlock. But for occasional prostrate monsters, and the boulders of grey rock that thrust uncouth shoulders here and there out of the ground, it might well have been a bit of park in the Old Country. Almost, one might have seen in it the hand of man. A little to the right, however, began the great burned section, miles in extent, proclaiming its real character —— *brûlé,* as it is called, where the fires of the previous year had raged for weeks, and the blackened stumps now rose gaunt and ugly, bereft of branches, like gigantic match heads stuck into the ground, savage and desolate beyond words. The perfume of charcoal and rain-soaked ashes still hung faintly about it.

The dusk rapidly deepened; the glades grew dark; the crackling of the fire and the wash of little waves along the rocky lake shore were the only sounds audible. The wind had dropped with the sun, and in all that vast world of branches nothing stirred. Any moment, it seemed, the woodland gods, who are to be worshipped in silence and loneliness, might stretch their mighty and terrific outlines among the trees. In front, through doorways pillared by huge straight stems, lay the stretch of Fifty Island Water, a crescent-shaped lake some fifteen miles from tip to tip, and perhaps five miles across where they were camped. A sky of rose and saffron, more clear than any atmosphere Simpson had ever known, still dropped its pale streaming fires across the waves, where the islands — a hundred, surely, rather than fifty — floated like the fairy barques of some enchanted fleet. Fringed with pines, whose crests fingered most delicately the sky, they almost seemed to move upwards as the light faded —— about to weigh anchor and navigate the pathways of the heavens instead of the currents of their native and desolate lake.

And strips of colored cloud, like flaunting pennons, signaled their departure to the stars....

The beauty of the scene was strangely uplifting. Simpson smoked the fish and burned his fingers into the bargain in his efforts to enjoy it and at the same time tend the frying pan and the fire. Yet, ever at the back of his thoughts, lay that other aspect of the wilderness: the indifference to human life, the merciless spirit of desolation which took no note of man. The sense of his utter loneliness, now that even Défago had gone, came close as he looked about him and listened for the sound of his companion's returning footsteps.

There was pleasure in the sensation, yet with it a perfectly comprehensible alarm. And instinctively the thought stirred in him: "What should I — *could* I, do — if anything happened and he did not come back — ?"

They enjoyed their well-earned supper, eating untold quantities of fish, and drinking unmilked tea strong enough to kill men who had not covered thirty miles of hard "going," eating little on the way. And when it was over, they smoked and told stories round the blazing fire, laughing, stretching weary limbs, and discussing plans for the morrow. Défago was in excellent spirits, though disappointed at having no signs of moose to report. But it was dark and he had not gone far. The *brûlé,* too, was bad. His clothes and hands were smeared with charcoal. Simpson, watching him, realized with renewed vividness their position — alone together in the wilderness.

"Défago," he said presently, "these woods, you know, are a bit too big to feel quite at home in — to feel comfortable in, I mean...! Eh?" He merely gave expression to the mood of the moment; he was hardly prepared for the earnestness, the solemnity even, with which the guide took him up.

"You've hit it right, Simpson, boss," he replied, fixing his searching brown eyes on his face, "and that's the truth, sure. There's no end to 'em — no end at all." Then he added in a lowered tone as if to himself, "There's lots found out *that,* and gone plumb to pieces!"

But the man's gravity of manner was not quite to the other's liking; it was a little too suggestive for this scenery and setting; he was sorry he had broached the subject. He remembered suddenly how his uncle had told him that men were sometimes stricken with a strange fever of the wilderness, when the seduction of the uninhabited wastes caught them so fiercely that they went forth, half fascinated, half deluded, to their death. And he had a shrewd idea that his companion held something in sympathy with that queer type. He led the conversation on to other topics, on to Hank and the doctor, for instance, and the natural rivalry as to who should get the first sight of moose.

“If they went doo west,” observed Défago carelessly, “there’s sixty miles between us now — with ole Punk at halfway house eatin’ himself full to bustin’ with fish and coffee.” They laughed together over the picture. But the casual mention of those sixty miles again made Simpson realize the prodigious scale of this land where they hunted; sixty miles was a mere step; two hundred little more than a step. Stories of lost hunters rose persistently before his memory. The passion and mystery of homeless and wandering men, seduced by the beauty of great forests, swept his soul in a way too vivid to be quite pleasant. He wondered vaguely whether it was the mood of his companion that invited the unwelcome suggestion with such persistence.

“Sing us a song, Défago, if you’re not too tired,” he asked; “one of those old *voyageur* songs you sang the other night.” He handed his tobacco pouch to the guide and then filled his own pipe, while the Canadian, nothing loath, sent his light voice across the lake in one of those plaintive, almost melancholy chanties with which lumbermen and trappers lessen the burden of their labor. There was an appealing and romantic flavor about it, something that recalled the atmosphere of the old pioneer days when Indians and wilderness were leagued together, battles frequent, and the Old Country farther off than it is today. The sound traveled pleasantly over the water, but the forest at their backs seemed to swallow it down with a single gulp that permitted neither echo nor resonance.

It was in the middle of the third verse that Simpson noticed something unusual — something that brought his thoughts back with a rush from faraway scenes. A curious change had come into the man’s voice. Even before he knew what it was, uneasiness caught him, and looking up quickly, he saw that Défago, though still singing, was peering about him into the Bush, as though he heard or saw something. His voice grew fainter — dropped to a hush — then ceased altogether. The same instant, with a movement amazingly alert, he started to his feet and stood upright — *sniffing the air.* Like a dog scenting game, he drew the air into his nostrils in short, sharp breaths, turning quickly as he did so in all directions, and finally “pointing” down the lake shore, eastwards. It was a performance unpleasantly suggestive and at the same time singularly dramatic. Simpson's heart fluttered disagreeably as he watched it.

"Lord, man! How you made me jump!" he exclaimed, on his feet beside him the same instant, and peering over his shoulder into the sea of darkness. "What's up? Are you frightened — ?"

Even before the question was out of his mouth he knew it was foolish, for any man with a pair of eyes in his head could see that the Canadian had turned white down to his very gills. Not even sunburn and the glare of the fire could hide that.

The student felt himself trembling a little, weakish in the knees. "What's up?" he repeated quickly. "D'you smell moose? Or anything queer, anything — wrong?" He lowered his voice instinctively.

The forest pressed round them with its encircling wall; the nearer tree stems gleamed like bronze in the firelight; beyond that — blackness, and, so far as he could tell, a silence of death. Just behind them a passing puff of wind lifted a single leaf, looked at it, then laid it softly down again without disturbing the rest of the covey. It seemed as if a million invisible causes had combined just to produce that single visible effect.

Other life pulsed about them — and was gone.

Défago turned abruptly; the livid hue of his face had turned to a dirty grey.

"I never said I heered — or smelt — nuthin'," he said slowly and emphatically, in an oddly altered voice that conveyed somehow a touch of defiance. "I was only — takin' a look round — so to speak. It's always a mistake to be too previous with yer questions." Then he added suddenly with obvious effort, in his more natural voice, "Have you got the matches, Boss Simpson?" and proceeded to light the pipe he had half filled just before he began to sing.

Without speaking another word they sat down again by the fire. Défago changing his side so that he could face the direction the wind came from. For even a tenderfoot could tell that. Défago changed his position in order to hear and smell — all there was to be heard and smelt. And, since he now faced the lake with his back to the trees it was evidently nothing in the forest that had sent so strange and sudden a warning to his marvelously trained nerves.

“Guess now I don’t feel like singing any,” he explained presently of his own accord. “That song kinder brings back memories that’s troublesome to me; I never oughter’ve begun it. It sets me on t’ imagining things, see?”

Clearly the man was still fighting with some profoundly moving emotion. He wished to excuse himself in the eyes of the other. But the explanation, in that it was only a part of the truth, was a lie, and he knew perfectly well that Simpson was not deceived by it. For nothing could explain away the livid terror that had dropped over his face while he stood there sniffing the air. And nothing — no amount of blazing fire, or chatting on ordinary subjects — could make that camp exactly as it had been before. The shadow of an unknown horror, naked if unguessed, that had flashed for an instant in the face and gestures of the guide, had also communicated itself, vaguely and therefore more potently, to his companion. The guide’s visible efforts to dissemble the truth only made things worse. Moreover, to add to the younger man’s uneasiness, was the difficulty, nay, the impossibility he felt of asking questions, and also his complete ignorance as to the cause... Indians, wild animals, forest fires — all these, he knew, were wholly out of the question. His imagination searched vigorously, but in vain....

Yet, somehow or other, after another long spell of smoking, talking and roasting themselves before the great fire, the shadow that had so suddenly invaded their peaceful camp began to shirt. Perhaps Défago’s efforts, or the return of his quiet and normal attitude accomplished this; perhaps Simpson himself had exaggerated the affair out of all proportion to the truth; or possibly the vigorous air of the wilderness brought its own powers of healing. Whatever the cause, the feeling of immediate horror seemed to have passed away as mysteriously as it had come, for nothing occurred to feed it. Simpson began to feel that he had permitted himself the unreasoning terror of a child. He put it down partly to a certain subconscious excitement that this wild and immense scenery generated in his blood, partly to the spell of solitude, and partly to overfatigue. That pallor in the guide’s face was, of course, uncommonly hard to explain, yet it *might* have been due in some way to an effect of firelight, or his own imagination... He gave it the benefit of the doubt; he was Scotch.

When a somewhat unordinary emotion has disappeared, the mind always finds a dozen ways of explaining away its causes... Simpson lit a last pipe and tried to laugh to himself. On getting home to Scotland it would make quite a good story. He did not realize that this laughter was a sign that terror still lurked in the recesses of his soul — that, in fact, it was merely one of the conventional signs by which a man, seriously alarmed, tries to persuade himself that he is *not* so.

Défago, however, heard that low laughter and looked up with surprise on his face. The two men stood, side by side, kicking the embers about before going to bed. It was ten o'clock — a late hour for hunters to be still awake.

"What's ticklin' yer?" he asked in his ordinary tone, yet gravely.

"I — I was thinking of our little toy woods at home, just at that moment," stammered Simpson, coming back to what really dominated his mind, and startled by the question, "and comparing them to — to all this," and he swept his arm round to indicate the Bush.

A pause followed in which neither of them said anything.

"All the same I wouldn't laugh about it, if I was you," Défago added, looking over Simpson's shoulder into the shadows. "There's places in there nobody won't never see into — nobody knows what lives in there either."

"Too big — too far off?" The suggestion in the guide's manner was immense and horrible.

Défago nodded. The expression on his face was dark. He, too, felt uneasy. The younger man understood that in a *hinterland* of this size there might well be depths of wood that would never in the life of the world be known or trodden. The thought was not exactly the sort he welcomed. In a loud voice, cheerfully, he suggested that it was time for bed. But the guide lingered, tinkering with the fire, arranging the stones needlessly, doing a dozen things that did not really need doing. Evidently there was something he wanted to say, yet found it difficult to "get at."

"Say, you, Boss Simpson," he began suddenly, as the last shower of sparks went up into the air, "you don't — smell nothing, do you — nothing pertickler, I mean?" The commonplace question, Simpson realized, veiled a dreadfully serious thought in his mind. A shiver ran down his back.

"Nothing but burning wood," he replied firmly, kicking again at the embers. The sound of his own foot made him start.

"And all the evenin' you ain't smelt — nothing?" persisted the guide, peering at him through the gloom; "nothing extrordiny, and different to anything else you ever smelt before?"

"No, no, man; nothing at all!" he replied aggressively, half angrily. Défago's face cleared. "That's good!" he exclaimed with evident relief. "That's good to hear."

"Have *you?"* asked Simpson sharply, and the same instant regretted the question.

The Canadian came closer in the darkness. He shook his head. "I guess not," he said, though without overwhelming conviction. "It must've been jest that song of mine that did it. It's the song they sing in lumber camps and godforsaken places like that, when they're skeered the Wendigo's somewheres around, doin' a bit of swift travelin'—"

"And what's the Wendigo, pray?" Simpson asked quickly, irritated because again he could not prevent that sudden shiver of the nerves. He knew that he was close upon the man's terror and the cause of it. Yet a rushing passionate curiosity overcame his better judgment, *and* his fear.

Défago turned swiftly and looked at him as though he were suddenly about to shriek. His eyes shone, but his mouth was wide open. Yet all he said, or whispered rather, for his voice sank very low, was:

"It's nuthin' — nuthin' but what those lousy fellers believe when they've bin hittin' the bottle too long — a sort of great animal that lives up yonder," he jerked his head northwards, "quick as lightning in its tracks, an' bigger'n anything else in the Bush, an' ain't supposed to be very good to look at — that's *all!"*

"A backwoods superstition—" began Simpson, moving hastily toward the tent in order to shake off the hand of the guide that clutched his arm. "Come, come, hurry up for God's sake, and get the lantern going! It's time we were in bed and asleep if we're going to be up with the sun tomorrow...."

The guide was close on his heels. "I'm coming," he answered out of the darkness, "I'm coming." And after a slight delay he appeared with the lantern and hung it from a nail in the front pole of the tent. The shadows of a hundred trees shifted their places quickly as he did so, and when he stumbled over the rope, diving swiftly inside, the whole tent trembled as though a gust of wind struck it.

The two men lay down, without undressing, upon their beds of soft balsam boughs, cunningly arranged. Inside, all was warm and cozy, but outside the world of crowding trees pressed close about them, marshaling their million shadows, and smothering the little tent that stood there like a wee white shell facing the ocean of tremendous forest.

Between the two lonely figures within, however, there pressed another shadow that was *not* a shadow from the night. It was the Shadow cast by the strange Fear, never wholly exorcised, that had leaped suddenly upon Défago in the middle of his singing. And Simpson, as he lay there, watching the darkness through the open flap of the tent, ready to plunge into the fragrant abyss of sleep, knew first that unique and profound stillness of a primeval forest when no wind stirs... and when the night has weight and substance that enters into the soul to bind a veil about it.... Then sleep took him....

Thus, it seemed to him, at least. Yet it was true that the lap of the water, just beyond the tent door, still beat time with his lessening pulses when he realized that he was lying with his eyes open and that another sound had recently introduced itself with cunning softness between the splash and murmur of the little waves.

And, long before he understood what this sound was, it had stirred in him the centers of pity and alarm. He listened intently, though at first in vain, for the running blood beat all its drums too noisily in his ears. Did it come, he wondered, from the lake, or from the woods...?

Then, suddenly, with a rush and a flutter of the heart, he knew that it was close beside him in the tent; and, when he turned over for a better hearing, it focused itself unmistakably not two feet away. It was a sound of weeping; Défago upon his bed of branches was sobbing in the darkness as though his heart would break, the blankets evidently stuffed against his mouth to stifle it.

And his first feeling, before he could think or reflect, was the rush of a poignant and searching tenderness. This intimate, human sound, heard amid the desolation about them, woke pity. It was so incongruous, so pitifully incongruous — and so vain! Tears — in this vast and cruel wilderness: of what avail? He thought of a little child crying in mid-Atlantic.... Then, of course, with fuller realization, and the memory of what had gone before, came the descent of the terror upon him, and his blood ran cold.

“Défago,” he whispered quickly, “what’s the matter?” He tried to make his voice very gentle. “Are you in pain — unhappy — ?” There was no reply, but the sounds ceased abruptly. He stretched his hand out and touched him. The body did not stir.

“Are you awake?” for it occurred to him that the man was crying in his sleep. “Are you cold?” He noticed that his feet, which were uncovered, projected beyond the mouth of the tent. He spread an extra fold of his own blankets over them. The guide had slipped down in his bed, and the branches seemed to have been dragged with him. He was afraid to pull the body back again, for fear of waking him.

One or two tentative questions he ventured softly, but though he waited for several minutes there came no reply, nor any sign of movement. Presently he heard his regular and quiet breathing, and putting his hand again gently on the breast, felt the steady rise and fall beneath.

“Let me know if anything’s wrong,” he whispered, “or if I can do anything. Wake me at once if you feel — queer.”

He hardly knew what to say. He lay down again, thinking and wondering what it all meant. Défago, of course, had been crying in his sleep. Some dream or other had afflicted him. Yet never in his life would he forget that pitiful sound of sobbing, and the feeling that the whole awful wilderness of woods listened....

His own mind busied itself for a long time with the recent events, of which *this* took its mysterious place as one, and though his reason successfully argued away all unwelcome suggestions, a sensation of uneasiness remained, resisting ejection, very deep-seated — peculiar beyond ordinary.

But sleep, in the long run, proves greater than all emotions. His thoughts soon wandered again; he lay there, warm as toast, exceedingly weary; the night soothed and comforted, blunting the edges of memory and alarm. Half an hour later he was oblivious of everything in the outer world about him.

Yet sleep, in this case, was his great enemy, concealing all approaches, smothering the warning of his nerves.

As, sometimes, in a nightmare events crowd upon each other's heels with a conviction of dreadfulest reality, yet some inconsistent detail accuses the whole display of incompleteness and disguise, so the events that now followed, though they actually happened, persuaded the mind somehow that the detail which could explain them had been overlooked in the confusion, and that therefore they were but partly true, the rest delusion. At the back of the sleeper's mind something remains awake, ready to let slip the judgment. "All this is not *quite* real; when you wake up you'll understand."

And thus, in a way, it was with Simpson. The events, not wholly inexplicable or incredible in themselves, yet remain for the man who saw and heard them a sequence of separate facts of cold horror, because the little piece that might have made the puzzle clear lay concealed or overlooked.

So far as he can recall, it was a violent movement, running downwards through the tent towards the door, that first woke him and made him aware that his companion was sitting bolt upright beside him — quivering. Hours must have passed, for it was the pale gleam of the dawn that revealed his outline against the canvas. This time the man was not crying; he was quaking like a leaf; the trembling he felt plainly through the blankets down the entire length of his own body. Défago had huddled down against him for protection, shrinking away from something that apparently concealed itself near the door flaps of the little tent.

Simpson thereupon called out in a loud voice some question or other —— in the first bewilderment of waking he does not remember exactly what — and the man made no reply. The atmosphere and feeling of true nightmare lay horribly about him, making movement and speech both difficult. At first, indeed, he was not sure where he was — whether in one of the earlier camps, or at home in his bed at Aberdeen. The sense of confusion was very troubling.

And next — almost simultaneous with his waking, it seemed — the profound stillness of the dawn outside was shattered by a most uncommon sound. It came without warning, or audible approach; and it was unspeakably dreadful. It was a voice, Simpson declares, possibly a human voice; hoarse yet plaintive — a soft, roaring voice close outside the tent, overhead rather than upon the ground, of immense volume, while in some strange way most penetratingly and seductively sweet. It rang out, too, in three separate and distinct notes, or cries, that bore in some odd fashion a resemblance, farfetched yet recognizable, to the name of the guide: *"Dé-fa-go!"*

The student admits he is unable to describe it quite intelligently, for it was unlike any sound he had ever heard in his life, and combined a blending of such contrary qualities. "A sort of windy, crying voice," he calls it, "as of something lonely and untamed, wild and of abominable power...."

And, even before it ceased, dropping back into the great gulfs of silence, the guide beside him had sprung to his feet with an answering though unintelligible cry. He blundered against the tent pole with violence, shaking the whole structure, spreading his arms out frantically for more room, and kicking his legs impetuously free of the clinging blankets. For a second, perhaps two, he stood upright by the door, his outline dark against the pallor of the dawn; then, with a furious, rushing speed, before his companion could move a hand to stop him, he shot with a plunge through the flaps of canvas — and was gone. And as he went — so astonishingly fast that the voice could actually be heard dying in the distance — he called aloud in tones of anguished terror that at the same time held something strangely like the frenzied exultation of delight —

"Oh! oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of fire! Oh! oh! This height and fiery speed!"

And then the distance quickly buried it, and the deep silence of very early morning descended upon the forest as before.

It had all come about with such rapidity that, but for the evidence of the empty bed beside him, Simpson could almost have believed it to have been the memory of a nightmare carried over from sleep. He still felt the warm pressure of that vanished body against his side; there lay the twisted blankets in a heap; the very tent yet trembled with the vehemence of the impetuous departure. The strange words rang in his ears, as though he still heard them in the distance — wild language of a suddenly stricken mind. Moreover, it was not only the senses of sight and hearing that reported uncommon things to his brain, for even while the man cried and ran, he had become aware that a strange perfume, faint yet pungent, pervaded the interior of the tent. And it was at this point, it seems, brought to himself by the consciousness that his nostrils were taking this distressing odor down into his throat, that he found his courage, sprang quickly to his feet — and went out.

The grey light of dawn that dropped, cold and glimmering, between the trees revealed the scene tolerably well. There stood the tent behind him, soaked with dew; the dark ashes of the fire, still warm; the lake, white beneath a coating of mist, the islands rising darkly out of it like objects packed in wool; and patches of snow beyond among the clearer spaces of the Bush — everything cold, still, waiting for the sun. But nowhere a sign of the vanished guide — still, doubtless, flying at frantic speed through the frozen woods. There was not even the sound of disappearing footsteps, nor the echoes of the dying voice. He had gone —— utterly.

There was nothing; nothing but the sense of his recent presence, so strongly left behind about the camp; *and* — this penetrating, all-pervading odor.

And even this was now rapidly disappearing in its turn. In spite of his exceeding mental perturbation, Simpson struggled hard to detect its nature, and define it, but the ascertaining of an elusive scent, not recognized subconsciously and at once, is a very subtle operation of the mind. And he failed. It was gone before he could properly seize or name it. Approximate description, even, seems to have been difficult, for it was unlike any smell he knew. Acrid rather, not unlike the odor of a lion, he thinks, yet softer and not wholly unpleasing, with something almost sweet in it that reminded him of the scent of decaying garden leaves, earth, and the myriad, nameless perfumes that make up the odor of a big forest. Yet the “odor of lions” is the phrase with which he usually sums it all up.

Then — it was wholly gone, and he found himself standing by the ashes of the fire in a state of amazement and stupid terror that left him the helpless prey of anything that chose to happen. Had a muskrat poked its pointed muzzle over a rock, or a squirrel scuttled in that instant down the bark of a tree, he would most likely have collapsed without more ado and fainted. For he felt about the whole affair the touch somewhere of a great Outer Horror... and his scattered powers had not as yet had time to collect themselves into a definite attitude of fighting selfcontrol.

Nothing did happen, however. A great kiss of wind ran softly through the awakening forest, and a few maple leaves here and there rustled tremblingly to earth. The sky seemed to grow suddenly much lighter. Simpson felt the cool air upon his cheek and uncovered head; realized that he was shivering with the cold; and, making a great effort, realized next that he was alone in the Bush — *and* that he was called upon to take immediate steps to find and succor his vanished companion.

Make an effort, accordingly, he did, though an ill-calculated and futile one. With that wilderness of trees about him, the sheet of water cutting him off behind, and the horror of that wild cry in his blood, he did what any other inexperienced man would have done in similar bewilderment: he ran about, without any sense of direction, like a frantic child, and called loudly without ceasing the name of the guide:

“Défago! Défago! Défago!” he yelled, and the trees gave him back the name as often as he shouted, only a little softened— “Défago! Défago! Défago!”

He followed the trail that lay a short distance across the patches of snow, and then lost it again where the trees grew too thickly for snow to lie. He shouted till he was hoarse, and till the sound of his own voice in all that unanswering and listening world began to frighten him. His confusion increased in direct ratio to the violence of his efforts. His distress became formidably acute, till at length his exertions defeated their own object, and from sheer exhaustion he headed back to the camp again. It remains a wonder that he ever found his way. It was with great difficulty, and only after numberless false clues, that he at last saw the white tent between the trees, and so reached safety.

Exhaustion then applied its own remedy, and he grew calmer. He made the fire and breakfasted. Hot coffee and bacon put a little sense and judgment into him again, and he realized that he had been behaving like a boy. He now made another, and more successful attempt to face the situation collectedly, and, a nature naturally plucky coming to his assistance, he decided that he must first make as thorough a search as possible, failing success in which, he must find his way into the home camp as best he could and bring help.

And this was what he did. Taking food, matches and rifle with him, and a small axe to blaze the trees against his return journey, he set forth. It was eight o’clock when he started, the sun shining over the tops of the trees in a sky without clouds. Pinned to a stake by the fire he left a note in case Défago returned while he was away.

This time, according to a careful plan, he took a new direction, intending to make a wide sweep that must sooner or later cut into indications of the guide’s trail; and, before he had gone a quarter of a mile he came across the tracks of a large animal in the snow, and beside it the light and smaller tracks of what were beyond question human feet —— the feet of Défago. The relief he at once experienced was natural, though brief, for at first sight he saw in these tracks a simple explanation of the whole matter: these big marks had surely been left by a bull moose that, wind against it, had blundered upon the camp, and uttered its singular cry of warning and alarm the moment its mistake was apparent. Défago, in whom the hunting instinct was developed to the point of uncanny perfection, had scented the brute coming down the wind hours before. His excitement and disappearance were due, of course, to — to his —

Then the impossible explanation at which he grasped faded, as common sense showed him mercilessly that none of this was true. No guide, much less a guide like Défago, could have acted in so irrational a way, going off even without his rifle...! The whole affair demanded a far more complicated elucidation, when he remembered the details of it all — the cry of terror, the amazing language, the grey face of horror when his nostrils first caught the new odor; that muffled sobbing in the darkness, and — for this, too, now came back to him dimly — the man’s original aversion for this particular bit of country....

Besides, now that he examined them closer, these were not the tracks of a bull moose at all! Hank had explained to him the outline of a bull’s hoofs, of a cow’s or calf s, too, for that matter; he had drawn them clearly on a strip of birch bark. And these were wholly different. They were big, round, ample, and with no pointed outline as of sharp hoofs. He wondered for a moment whether bear tracks were like that. There was no other animal he could think of, for caribou did not come so far south at this season, and, even if they did, would leave hoof marks.

They were ominous signs — these mysterious writings left in the snow by the unknown creature that had lured a human being away from safety —— and when he coupled them in his imagination with that haunting sound that broke the stillness of the dawn, a momentary dizziness shook his mind, distressing him again beyond belief. He felt the *threatening* aspect of it all. And, stooping down to examine the marks more closely, he caught a faint whiff of that sweet yet pungent odor that made him instantly straighten up again, fighting a sensation almost of nausea.

Then his memory played him another evil trick. He suddenly recalled those uncovered feet projecting beyond the edge of the tent, and the body's appearance of having been dragged towards the opening; the man's shrinking from something by the door when he woke later. The details now beat against his trembling mind with concerted attack. They seemed to gather in those deep spaces of the silent forest about him, where the host of trees stood waiting, listening, watching to see what he would do. The woods were closing round him.

With the persistence of true pluck, however, Simpson went forward, following the tracks as best he could, smothering these ugly emotions that sought to weaken his will. He blazed innumerable trees as he went, ever fearful of being unable to find the way back, and calling aloud at intervals of a few seconds the name of the guide. The dull tapping of the axe upon the massive trunks, and the unnatural accents of his own voice became at length sounds that he even dreaded to make, dreaded to hear. For they drew attention without ceasing to his presence and exact whereabouts, and if it were really the case that something was hunting himself down in the same way that he was hunting down another —

With a strong effort, he crushed the thought out the instant it rose. It was the beginning, he realized, of a bewilderment utterly diabolical in kind that would speedily destroy him.

Although the snow was not continuous, lying merely in shallow flurries over the more open spaces, he found no difficulty in following the tracks for the first few miles. They went straight as a ruled line wherever the trees permitted. The stride soon began to increase in length, till it finally assumed proportions that seemed absolutely impossible for any ordinary animal to have made. Like huge flying leaps they became. One of these he measured, and though he knew that "stretch" of eighteen feet must be somehow wrong, he was at a complete loss to understand why he found no signs on the snow between the extreme points. But what perplexed him even more, making him feel his vision had gone utterly awry, was that Défago's stride increased in the same manner, and finally covered the same incredible distances. It looked as if the great beast had lifted him with it and carried him across these astonishing intervals. Simpson, who was much longer in the limb, found that he could not compass even half the stretch by taking a running jump.

And the sight of these huge tracks, running side by side, silent evidence of a dreadful journey in which terror or madness had urged to impossible results, was profoundly moving. It shocked him in the secret depths of his soul. It was the most horrible thing his eyes had ever looked upon. He began to follow them mechanically, absentmindedly almost, ever peering over his shoulder to see if he, too, were being followed by something with a gigantic tread — And soon it came about that he no longer quite realized what it was they signified — these impressions left upon the snow by something nameless and untamed, always accompanied by the footmarks of the little French Canadian, his guide, his comrade, the man who had shared his tent a few hours before, chatting, laughing, even singing by his side....

For a man of his years and inexperience, only a canny Scot, perhaps, grounded in common sense and established in logic, could have preserved even that measure of balance that this youth somehow or other did manage to preserve through the whole adventure. Otherwise, two things he presently noticed, while forging pluckily ahead, must have sent him headlong back to the comparative safety of his tent, instead of only making his hands close more tightly upon the rifle stock, while his heart, trained for the Wee Kirk, sent a wordless prayer winging its way to heaven. Both tracks, he saw, had undergone a change, and this change, so far as it concerned the footsteps of the man, was in some undecipherable manner — appalling.

It was in the bigger tracks he first noticed this, and for a long time he could not quite believe his eyes. Was it the blown leaves that produced odd effects of light and shade, or that the dry snow, drifting like finely ground rice about the edges, cast shadows and high lights? Or was it actually the fact that the great marks had become faintly colored? For round about the deep, plunging holes of the animal there now appeared a mysterious, reddish tinge that was more like an effect of light than of anything that dyed the substance of the snow itself. Every mark had it, and had it increasingly — this indistinct fiery tinge that painted a new touch of ghastliness into the picture.

But when, wholly unable to explain or to credit it, he turned his attention to the other tracks to discover if they, too, bore similar witness, he noticed that these had meanwhile undergone a change that was infinitely worse, and charged with far more horrible suggestion. For, in the last hundred yards or so, he saw that they had grown gradually into the semblance of the parent tread. Imperceptibly the change had come about, yet unmistakably. It was hard to see where the change first began. The result, however, was beyond question. Smaller, neater, more cleanly modeled, they formed now an exact and careful duplicate of the larger tracks beside them. The feet that produced them had, therefore, also changed. And something in his mind reared up with loathing and with terror as he saw it.

Simpson, for the first time, hesitated; then, ashamed of his alarm and indecision, took a few hurried steps ahead; the next instant stopped dead in his tracks. Immediately in front of him all signs of the trail ceased; both tracks came to an abrupt end. On all sides, for a hundred yards and more, he searched in vain for the least indication of their continuance. There was — nothing.

The trees were very thick just there, big trees all of them, spruce, cedar, hemlock; there was no underbrush. He stood, looking about him, all distraught; bereft of any power of judgment. Then he set to work to search again, and again, and yet again, but always with the same result: *nothing.* The feet that printed the surface of the snow thus far had now, apparently, left the ground!

And it was in that moment of distress and confusion that the whip of terror laid its most nicely calculated lash about his heart. It dropped with deadly effect upon the sorest spot of all, completely unnerving him. He had been secretly dreading all the time that it would come — and come it did.

Far overhead, muted by great height and distance, strangely thinned and wailing, he heard the crying voice of Défago, the guide.

The sound dropped upon him out of that still, wintry sky with an effect of dismay and terror unsurpassed. The rifle fell to his feet. He stood motionless an instant, listening as it were with his whole body, then staggered back against the nearest tree for support, disorganized hopelessly in mind and spirit. To him, in that moment, it seemed the most shattering and dislocating experience he had ever known, so that his heart emptied itself of all feeling whatsoever as by a sudden draft.

“Oh! oh! This fiery height! Oh, my feet of fire! My burning feet of fire...!” ran in far, beseeching accents of indescribable appeal this voice of anguish down the sky. Once it called — then silence through all the listening wilderness of trees.

And Simpson, scarcely knowing what he did, presently found himself running wildly to and fro, searching, calling, tripping over roots and boulders, and flinging himself in a frenzy of undirected pursuit after the Caller. Behind the screen of memory and emotion with which experience veils events, he plunged, distracted and half-deranged, picking up false lights like a ship at sea, terror in his eyes and heart and soul. For the Panic of the Wilderness had called to him in that far voice — the Power of untamed Distance — the Enticement of the Desolation that destroys. He knew in that moment all the pains of someone hopelessly and irretrievably lost, suffering the lust and travail of a soul in the final Loneliness. A vision of Défago, eternally hunted, driven and pursued across the skiey vastness of those ancient forests fled like a flame across the dark ruin of his thoughts...

It seemed ages before he could find anything in the chaos of his disorganized sensations to which he could anchor himself steady for a moment, and think...

The cry was not repeated; his own hoarse calling brought no response; the inscrutable forces of the Wild had summoned their victim beyond recall — and held him fast.

Yet he searched and called, it seems, for hours afterwards, for it was late in the afternoon when at length he decided to abandon a useless pursuit and return to his camp on the shores of Fifty Island Water. Even then he went with reluctance, that crying voice still echoing in his ears. With difficulty he found his rifle and the homeward trail. The concentration necessary to follow the badly blazed trees, and a biting hunger that gnawed, helped to keep his mind steady. Otherwise, he admits, the temporary aberration he had suffered might have been prolonged to the point of positive disaster. Gradually the ballast shifted back again, and he regained something that approached his normal equilibrium.

But for all that the journey through the gathering dusk was miserably haunted. He heard innumerable following footsteps; voices that laughed and whispered; and saw figures crouching behind trees and boulders, making signs to one another for a concerted attack the moment he had passed. The creeping murmur of the wind made him start and listen. He went stealthily, trying to hide where possible, and making as little sound as he could. The shadows of the woods, hitherto protective or covering merely, had now become menacing, challenging; and the pageantry in his frightened mind masked a host of possibilities that were all the more ominous for being obscure. The presentiment of a nameless doom lurked ill-concealed behind every detail of what had happened.

It was really admirable how he emerged victor in the end; men of riper powers and experience might have come through the ordeal with less success. He had himself tolerably well in hand, all things considered, and his plan of action proves it. Sleep being absolutely out of the question and traveling an unknown trail in the darkness equally impracticable, he sat up the whole of that night, rifle in hand, before a fire he never for a single moment allowed to die down. The severity of the haunted vigil marked his soul for life; but it was successfully accomplished; and with the very first signs of dawn he set forth upon the long return journey to the home camp to get help. As before, he left a written note to explain his absence, and to indicate where he had left a plentiful *cache* of food and matches — though he had no expectation that any human hands would find them!

How Simpson found his way alone by the lake and forest might well make a story in itself, for to hear him tell it is to *know* the passionate loneliness of soul that a man can feel when the Wilderness holds him in the hollow of its illimitable hand — and laughs. It is also to admire his indomitable pluck.

He claims no skill, declaring that he followed the almost invisible trail mechanically, and without thinking. And this, doubtless, is the truth. He relied upon the guiding of the unconscious mind, which is instinct. Perhaps, too, some sense of orientation, known to animals and primitive men, may have helped as well, for through all that tangled region he succeeded in reaching the exact spot where Défago had hidden the canoe nearly three days before with the remark, “Strike doo west across the lake into the sun to find the camp.”

There was not much sun left to guide him, but he used his compass to the best of his ability, embarking in the frail craft for the last twelve miles of his journey with a sensation of immense relief that the forest was at last behind him. And, fortunately, the water was calm; he took his line across the center of the lake instead of coasting round the shores for another twenty miles. Fortunately, too, the other hunters were back. The light of their fires furnished a steering point without which he might have searched all night long for the actual position of the camp.

It was close upon midnight all the same when his canoe grated on the sandy cove, and Hank, Punk and his uncle, disturbed in their sleep by his cries, ran quickly down and helped a very exhausted and broken specimen of Scotch humanity over the rocks toward a dying fire.

The sudden entrance of his prosaic uncle into this world of wizardry and horror that had haunted him without interruption now for two days and two nights, had the immediate effect of giving to the affair an entirely new aspect. The sound of that crisp “Hulloa, my boy! And what’s up *now?”* and the grasp of that dry and vigorous hand introduced another standard of judgment. A revulsion of feeling washed through him. He realized that he had let himself “go” rather badly. He even felt vaguely ashamed of himself. The native hard-headedness of his race reclaimed him.

And this doubtless explains why he found it so hard to tell that group round the fire — everything. He told enough, however, for the immediate decision to be arrived at that a relief party must start at the earliest possible moment, and that Simpson, in order to guide it capably, must first have food and, above all, sleep. Dr. Cathcart observing the lad’s condition more shrewdly than his patient knew, gave him a very slight injection of morphine. For six hours he slept like the dead.

From the description carefully written out afterwards by this student of divinity, it appears that the account he gave to the astonished group omitted sundry vital and important details. He declares that, with his uncle’s wholesome, matter-of-fact countenance staring him in the face, he simply had not the courage to mention them. Thus, all the search party gathered, it would seem, was that Défago had suffered in the night an acute and inexplicable attack of mania, had imagined himself "called" by someone or something, and had plunged into the bush after it without food or rifle, where he must die a horrible and lingering death by cold and starvation unless he could be found and rescued in time. "In time," moreover, meant *at once.*

In the course of the following day, however — they were off by seven, leaving Punk in charge with instructions to have food and fire always ready — Simpson found it possible to tell his uncle a good deal more of the story's true inwardness, without divining that it was drawn out of him as a matter of fact by a very subtle form of cross examination. By the time they reached the beginning of the trail, where the canoe was laid up against the return journey, he had mentioned how Défago spoke vaguely of "something he called a 'Wendigo'"; how he cried in his sleep; how he imagined an unusual scent about the camp; and had betrayed other symptoms of mental excitement. He also admitted the bewildering effect of "that extraordinary odor" upon himself, "pungent and acrid like the odor of lions." And by the time they were within an easy hour of Fifty Island Water he had let slip the further fact — a foolish avowal of his own hysterical condition, as he felt afterwards — that he had heard the vanished guide call "for help." He omitted the singular phrases used, for he simply could not bring himself to repeat the preposterous language. Also, while describing how the man's footsteps in the snow had gradually assumed an exact miniature likeness of the animal's plunging tracks, he left out the fact that they measured a *wholly* incredible distance. It seemed a question, nicely balanced between individual pride and honesty, what he should reveal and what suppress. He mentioned the fiery tinge in the snow, for instance, yet shrank from telling that body and bed had been partly dragged out of the tent....

With the net result that Dr. Cathcart, adroit psychologist that he fancied himself to be, had assured him clearly enough exactly where his mind, influenced by loneliness, bewilderment and terror, had yielded to the strain and invited delusion. While praising his conduct, he managed at the same time to point out where, when, and how his mind had gone astray. He made his nephew think himself finer than he was by judicious praise, yet more foolish than he was by minimizing the value of the evidence. Like many another materialist, that is, he lied cleverly on the basis of insufficient knowledge, *because* the knowledge supplied seemed to his own particular intelligence inadmissible.

“The spell of these terrible solitudes,” he said, “cannot leave any mind untouched, any mind, that is, possessed of the higher imaginative qualities. It has worked upon yours exactly as it worked upon my own when I was your age. The animal that haunted your little camp was undoubtedly a moose, for the ‘belling’ of a moose may have, sometimes, a very peculiar quality of sound. The colored appearance of the big tracks was obviously a defect of vision in your own eyes produced by excitement. The size and stretch of the tracks we shall prove when we come to them. But the hallucination of an audible voice, of course, is one of the commonest forms of delusion due to mental excitement — an excitement, my dear boy, perfectly excusable, and, let me add, wonderfully controlled by you under the circumstances. For the rest, I am bound to say, you have acted with a splendid courage, for the terror of feeling oneself lost in this wilderness is nothing short of awful, and, had I been in your place, I don’t for a moment believe I could have behaved with one quarter of your wisdom and decision. The only thing I find it uncommonly difficult to explain is — that — damned odor.”

“It made me feel sick, I assure you,” declared his nephew, “positively dizzy!” His uncle’s attitude of calm omniscience, merely because he knew more psychological formulae, made him slightly defiant. It was so easy to be wise in the explanation of an experience one has not personally witnessed. “A kind of desolate and terrible odor is the only way I can describe it,” he concluded, glancing at the features of the quiet, unemotional man beside him.

“I can only marvel,” was the reply, “that under the circumstances it did not seem to you even worse.” The dry words, Simpson knew, hovered between the truth, and his uncle’s interpretation of “the truth.”

And so at last they came to the little camp and found the tent still standing, the remains of the fire, and the piece of paper pinned to a stake beside it — untouched. The *cache,* poorly contrived by inexperienced hands, however, had been discovered and opened — by musk rats, mink and squirrel. The matches lay scattered about the opening, but the food had been taken to the last crumb.

“Well, fellers, he ain’t here,” exclaimed Hank loudly after his fashion. “And that’s as sartain as the coal supply down below! But whar he’s got to by this time is ‘bout as unsartain as the trade in crowns in t’other place.” The presence of a divinity student was no barrier to his language at such a time, though for the reader’s sake it may be severely edited. “I propose,” he added, “that we start out at once an’ hunt for’m like hell!” The gloom of Défago’s probable fate oppressed the whole party with a sense of dreadful gravity the moment they saw the familiar signs of recent occupancy. Especially the tent, with the bed of balsam branches still smoothed and flattened by the pressure of his body, seemed to bring his presence near to them. Simpson, feeling vaguely as if his world were somehow at stake, went about explaining particulars in a hushed tone. He was much calmer now, though overwearied with the strain of his many journeys. His uncle’s method of explaining— “explaining away,” rather — the details still fresh in his haunted memory helped, too, to put ice upon his emotions.

“And that’s the direction he ran off in,” he said to his two companions, pointing in the direction where the guide had vanished that morning in the grey dawn. “Straight down there he ran like a deer, in between the birch and the hemlock....”

Hank and Dr. Cathcart exchanged glances.

“And it was about two miles down there, in a straight line,” continued the other, speaking with something of the former terror in his voice, “that I followed his trail to the place where — it stopped — dead!”

“And where you heered him callin’ an’ caught the stench, an’ all the rest of the wicked entertainment,” cried Hank, with a volubility that betrayed his keen distress.

“And where your excitement overcame you to the point of producing illusions,” added Dr. Cathcart under his breath, yet not so low that his nephew did not hear it.

It was early in the afternoon, for they had traveled quickly, and there were still a good two hours of daylight left. Dr. Cathcart and Hank lost no time in beginning the search, but Simpson was too exhausted to accompany them.

They would follow the blazed marks on the trees, and where possible, his footsteps. Meanwhile the best thing he could do was to keep a good fire going, and rest.

But after something like three hours' search, the darkness already down, the two men returned to camp with nothing to report. Fresh snow had covered all signs, and though they had followed the blazed trees to the spot where Simpson had turned back, they had not discovered the smallest indication of a human being — or for that matter, of an animal. There were no fresh tracks of any kind; the snow lay undisturbed.

It was difficult to know what was best to do, though in reality there was nothing more they *could* do. They might stay and search for weeks without much chance of success. The fresh snow destroyed their only hope, and they gathered round the fire for supper, a gloomy and despondent party. The facts, indeed, were sad enough, for Défago had a wife at Rat Portage, and his earnings were the family's sole means of support.

Now that the whole truth in all its ugliness was out, it seemed useless to deal in further disguise or pretense. They talked openly of the facts and probabilities. It was not the first time, even in the experience of Dr. Cathcart, that a man had yielded to the singular seduction of the Solitudes and gone out of his mind; Défago, moreover, was predisposed to something of the sort, for he already had a touch of melancholia in his blood, and his fiber was weakened by bouts of drinking that often lasted for weeks at a time. Something on this trip — one might never know precisely what — had sufficed to push him over the line, that was all. And he had gone, gone off into the great wilderness of trees and lakes to die by starvation and exhaustion. The chances against his finding camp again were overwhelming; the delirium that was upon him would also doubtless have increased, and it was quite likely he might do violence to himself and so hasten his cruel fate. Even while they talked, indeed, the end had probably come. On the suggestion of Hank, his old pal, however, they proposed to wait a little longer and devote the whole of the following day, from dawn to darkness, to the most systematic search they could devise. They would divide the territory between them. They discussed their plan in great detail. All that men could do they would do.

And, meanwhile, they talked about the particular form in which the singular Panic of the Wilderness had made its attack upon the mind of the unfortunate guide. Hank, though familiar with the legend in its general outline, obviously did not welcome the turn the conversation had taken. He contributed little, though that little was illuminating. For he admitted that a story ran over all this section of country to the effect that several Indians had "seen the Wendigo" along the shores of Fifty Island Water in the "fall" of last year, and that this was the true reason of Défago's disinclination to hunt there. Hank doubtless felt that he had in a sense helped his old pal to death by overpersuading him. "When an Indian goes crazy," he explained, talking to himself more than to the others, it seemed, "it's always put that he's 'seen the Wendigo.' An' pore old Défaygo was superstitious down to he very heels...!"

And then Simpson, feeling the atmosphere more sympathetic, told over again the full story of his astonishing tale; he left out no details this time; he mentioned his own sensations and gripping fears. He only omitted the strange language used.

"But Défago surely had already told you all these details of the Wendigo legend, my dear fellow," insisted the doctor. "I mean, he had talked about it, and thus put into your mind the ideas which your own excitement afterwards developed?"

Whereupon Simpson again repeated the facts. Défago, he declared, had barely mentioned the beast. He, Simpson, knew nothing of the story, and, so far as he remembered, had never even read about it. Even the word was unfamiliar.

Of course he was telling the truth, and Dr. Cathcart was reluctantly compelled to admit the singular character of the whole affair. He did not do this in words so much as in manner, however. He kept his back against a good, stout tree; he poked the fire into a blaze the moment it showed signs of dying down; he was quicker than any of them to notice the least sound in the night about them — a fish jumping in the lake, a twig snapping in the bush, the dropping of occasional fragments of frozen snow from the branches overhead where the heat loosened them. His voice, too, changed a little in quality, becoming a shade less confident, lower also in tone. Fear, to put it plainly, hovered close about that little camp, and though all three would have been glad to speak of other matters, the only thing they seemed able to discuss was this — the source of their fear. They tried other subjects in vain; there was nothing to say about them. Hank was the most honest of the group; he said next to nothing. He never once, however, turned his back to the darkness. His face was always to the forest, and when wood was needed he didn't go farther than was necessary to get it.

A wall of silence wrapped them in, for the snow, though not thick, was sufficient to deaden any noise, and the frost held things pretty tight besides. No sound but their voices and the soft roar of the flames made itself heard. Only, from time to time, something soft as the flutter of a pine moth's wings went past them through the air. No one seemed anxious to go to bed. The hours slipped towards midnight.

"The legend is picturesque enough," observed the doctor after one of the longer pauses, speaking to break it rather than because he had anything to say, "for the Wendigo is simply the Call of the Wild personified, which some natures hear to their own destruction."

"That's about it," Hank said presently. "An' there's no misunderstandin' when you hear it. It calls you by name right 'nough."

Another pause followed. Then Dr. Cathcart came back to the forbidden subject with a rush that made the others jump.

"The allegory *is* significant," he remarked, looking about him into the darkness, "for the Voice, they say, resembles all the minor sounds of the Bush — wind, falling water, cries of the animals, and so forth. And, once the victim hears *that* — he's off for good, of course! His most vulnerable points, moreover, are said to be the feet and the eyes; the feet, you see, for the lust of wandering, and the eyes for the lust of beauty. The poor beggar goes at such a dreadful speed that he bleeds beneath the eyes, and his feet burn."

Dr. Cathcart, as he spoke, continued to peer uneasily into the surrounding gloom. His voice sank to a hushed tone.

"The Wendigo," he added, "is said to burn his feet — owing to the friction, apparently caused by its tremendous velocity — till they drop off, and new ones form exactly like its own."

Simpson listened in horrified amazement; but it was the pallor on Hank's face that fascinated him most. He would willingly have stopped his ears and closed his eyes, had he dared.

"It don't always keep to the ground neither," came in Hank's slow, heavy drawl, "for it goes so high that he thinks the stars have set him all a-fire. An' it'll take great thumpin' jumps sometimes, an' run along the tops of the trees, carrying its partner with it, an' then droppin' him jest as a fish hawk'll drop a pickerel to kill it before eatin'. An' its food, of all the muck in the whole Bush is — moss!" And he laughed a short, unnatural laugh. "It's a moss-eater, is the Wendigo," he added, looking up excitedly into the faces of his companions. "Moss-eater," he repeated, with a string of the most outlandish oaths he could invent.

But Simpson now understood the true purpose of all this talk. What these two men, each strong and "experienced" in his own way, dreaded more than anything else was — silence. They were talking against time. They were also talking against darkness, against the invasion of panic, against the admission reflection might bring that they were in an enemy's country — against anything, in fact, rather than allow their inmost thoughts to assume control. He himself, already initiated by the awful vigil with terror, was beyond both of them in this respect. He had reached the stage where he was immune. But these two, the scoffing, analytical doctor, and the honest, dogged backwoodsman, each sat trembling in the depths of his being.

Thus the hours passed; and thus, with lowered voices and a kind of taut inner resistance of spirit, this little group of humanity sat in the jaws of the wilderness and talked foolishly of the terrible and haunting legend. It was an unequal contest, all things considered, for the wilderness had already the advantage of first attack — and of a hostage. The fate of their comrade hung over them with a steadily increasing weight of oppression that finally became insupportable.

It was Hank, after a pause longer than the preceding ones that no one seemed able to break, who first let loose all this pent-up emotion in very unexpected fashion, by springing suddenly to his feet and letting out the most ear-shattering yell imaginable into the night. He could not contain himself any longer, it seemed. To make it carry even beyond an ordinary cry he interrupted its rhythm by shaking the palm of his hand before his mouth.

“That’s for Défago,” he said, looking down at the other two with a queer, defiant laugh, “for it’s my belief’ — the sandwiched oaths may be omitted — “that my ole partner’s not far from us at this very minute.”

There was a vehemence and recklessness about his performance that made Simpson, too, start to his feet in amazement, and betrayed even the doctor into letting the pipe slip from between his lips. Hank’s face was ghastly, but Cathcart’s showed a sudden weakness — a loosening of all his faculties, as it were. Then a momentary anger blazed into his eyes, and he too, though with deliberation born of habitual self-control, got upon his feet and faced the excited guide. For this was unpermissible, foolish, dangerous, and he meant to stop it in the bud.

What might have happened in the next minute or two one may speculate about, yet never definitely know, for in the instant of profound silence that followed Hank’s roaring voice, and as though in answer to it, something went past through the darkness of the sky overhead at terrific speed — something of necessity very large, for it displaced much air, while down between the trees there fell a faint and windy cry of a human voice, calling in tones of indescribable anguish and appeal —

“Oh, oh! This fiery height! Oh, oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of fire!”

White to the very edge of his shirt, Hank looked stupidly about him like a child. Dr. Cathcart uttered some kind of unintelligible cry, turning as he did so with an instinctive movement of blind terror towards the protection of the tent, then halting in the act as though frozen. Simpson, alone of the three, retained his presence of mind a little. His own horror was too deep to allow of any immediate reaction. He had heard that cry before.

Turning to his stricken companions, he said almost calmly— “That’s exactly the cry I heard — the very words he used!”

Then, lifting his face to the sky, he cried aloud, “Défago, Défago! Come down here to us! Come down — !”

And before there was time for anybody to take definite action one way or another, there came the sound of something dropping heavily between the trees, striking the branches on the way down, and landing with a dreadful thud upon the frozen earth below. The crash and thunder of it was really terrific.

“That’s him, s’help me the good Gawd!” came from Hank in a whispering cry half choked, his hand going automatically toward the hunting knife in his belt. “And he’s coming! He’s coming!” he added, with an irrational laugh of horror, as the sounds of heavy footsteps crunching over the snow became distinctly audible, approaching through the blackness towards the circle of light.

And while the steps, with their stumbling motion, moved nearer and nearer upon them, the three men stood round that fire, motionless and dumb. Dr. Cathcart had the appearance of a man suddenly withered; even his eyes did not move. Hank, suffering shockingly, seemed on the verge again of violent action; yet did nothing. He, too, was hewn of stone. Like stricken children they seemed. The picture was hideous. And, meanwhile, their owner still invisible, the footsteps came closer, crunching the frozen snow. It was endless — too prolonged to be quite real — this measured and pitiless approach. It was accursed.

Then at length the darkness, having thus laboriously conceived, brought forth — a figure. It drew forward into the zone of uncertain light where fire and shadows mingled, not ten feet away, then halted, staring at them fixedly. The same instant it started forward again with the spasmodic motion as of a thing moved by wires, and coming up closer to them, full into the glare of the fire, they perceived then that — it was a man; and apparently that this man was — Défago.

Something like a skin of horror almost perceptibly drew down in that moment over every face, and three pairs of eyes shone through it as though they saw across the frontiers of normal vision into the Unknown.

Défago advanced, his tread faltering and uncertain; he made his way straight up to them as a group first, then turned sharply and peered close into the face of Simpson. The sound of a voice issued from his lips —

“Here I am, Boss Simpson. I heered someone calling me.” It was a faint, dried up voice, made wheezy and breathless as by immense exertion. “I’m havin’ a reg’lar hellfire kind of a trip, I am.” And he laughed, thrusting his head forward into the other’s face.

But that laugh started the machinery of the group of waxwork figures with the wax-white skins. Hank immediately sprang forward with a stream of oaths so farfetched that Simpson did not recognize them as English at all, but thought he had lapsed into Indian or some other lingo. He only realized that Hank's presence, thrust thus between them, was welcome — uncommonly welcome. Dr. Cathcart, though more calmly and leisurely, advanced behind him, heavily stumbling.

Simpson seems hazy as to what was actually said and done in those next few seconds, for the eyes of that detestable and blasted visage peering at such close quarters into his own utterly bewildered his senses at first. He merely stood still. He said nothing. He had not the trained will of the older men that forced them into action in defiance of all emotional stress. He watched them moving as behind a glass that half destroyed their reality; it was dreamlike; perverted. Yet, through the torrent of Hank's meaningless phrases, he remembers hearing his uncle's tone of authority — hard and forced — saying several things about food and warmth, blankets, whisky and the rest... and, further, that whiffs of that penetrating, unaccustomed odor, vile yet sweetly bewildering, assailed his nostrils during all that followed.

It was no less a person than himself, however — less experienced and adroit than the others though he was — who gave instinctive utterance to the sentence that brought a measure of relief into the ghastly situation by expressing the doubt and thought in each one's heart.

"It *is* — YOU, isn't it, Défago?" he asked under his breath, horror breaking his speech.

And at once Cathcart burst out with the loud answer before the other had time to move his lips. "Of course it is! Of course it is! Only — can't you see — he's nearly dead with exhaustion, cold and terror! Isn't *that* enough to change a man beyond all recognition?" It was said in order to convince himself as much as to convince the others. The overemphasis alone proved that. And continually, while he spoke and acted, he held a handkerchief to his nose. That odor pervaded the whole camp.

For the "Défago" who sat huddled by the big fire, wrapped in blankets, drinking hot whisky and holding food in wasted hands, was no more like the guide they had last seen alive than the picture of a man of sixty is like a daguerreotype of his early youth in the costume of another generation. Nothing really can describe that ghastly caricature, that parody, masquerading there in the firelight as Défago. From the ruins of the dark and awful memories he still retains, Simpson declares that the face was more animal than human, the features drawn about into wrong proportions, the skin loose and hanging, as though he had been subjected to extraordinary pressures and tensions. It made him think vaguely of those bladder faces blown up by the hawkers on Ludgate Hill, that change their expression as they swell, and as they collapse emit a faint and wailing imitation of a voice. Both face and voice suggested some such abominable resemblance. But Cathcart long afterwards, seeking to describe the indescribable, asserts that thus might have looked a face and body that had been in air so rarified that, the weight of atmosphere being removed, the entire structure threatened to fly asunder and become — *incoherent....*

It was Hank, though all distraught and shaking with a tearing volume of emotion he could neither handle nor understand, who brought things to a head without much ado. He went off to a little distance from the fire, apparently so that the light should not dazzle him too much, and shading his eyes for a moment with both hands, shouted in a loud voice that held anger and affection dreadfully mingled:

“You ain’t Défaygo! You ain’t Défaygo at all! I don’t give a — damn, but that ain’t you, my ole pal of twenty years!” He glared upon the huddled figure as though he would destroy him with his eyes. “An’ if it is I’ll swab the floor of hell with a wad of cotton wool on a toothpick, s’help me the good Gawd!” he added, with a violent fling of horror and disgust.

It was impossible to silence him. He stood there shouting like one possessed, horrible to see, horrible to hear — *because it was the truth.* He repeated himself in fifty different ways, each more outlandish than the last. The woods rang with echoes. At one time it looked as if he meant to fling himself upon “the intruder,” for his hand continually jerked towards the long hunting knife in his belt.

But in the end he did nothing, and the whole tempest completed itself very shortly with tears. Hank’s voice suddenly broke, he collapsed on the ground, and Cathcart somehow or other persuaded him at last to go into the tent and lie quiet. The remainder of the affair, indeed, was witnessed by him from behind the canvas, his white and terrified face peeping through the crack of the tent door flap.

Then Dr. Cathcart, closely followed by his nephew who so far had kept his courage better than all of them, went up with a determined air and stood opposite to the figure of Défago huddled over the fire. He looked him squarely in the face and spoke. At first his voice was firm.

"Défago, tell us what's happened — just a little, so that we can know how best to help you?" he asked in a tone of authority, almost of command. And at that point, it *was* command. At once afterwards, however, it changed in quality, for the figure turned up to him a face so piteous, so terrible and so little like humanity, that the doctor shrank back from him as from something spiritually unclean. Simpson, watching close behind him, says he got the impression of a mask that was on the verge of dropping off, and that underneath they would discover something black and diabolical, revealed in utter nakedness. "Out with it, man, out with it!" Cathcart cried, terror running neck and neck with entreaty. "None of us can stand this much longer...!" It was the cry of instinct over reason.

And then "Défago," smiling *whitely,* answered in that thin and fading voice that already seemed passing over into a sound of quite another character —

"I seen that great Wendigo thing," he whispered, sniffing the air about him exactly like an animal. "I been with it too—"

Whether the poor devil would have said more, or whether Dr. Cathcart would have continued the impossible cross examination cannot be known, for at that moment the voice of Hank was heard yelling at the top of his voice from behind the canvas that concealed all but his terrified eyes. Such a howling was never heard.

"His feet! Oh, Gawd, his feet! Look at his great changed — feet!"

Défago, shuffling where he sat, had moved in such a way that for the first time his legs were in full light and his feet were visible. Yet Simpson had no time, himself, to see properly what Hank had seen. And Hank has never seen fit to tell. That same instant, with a leap like that of a frightened tiger, Cathcart was upon him, bundling the folds of blanket about his legs with such speed that the young student caught little more than a passing glimpse of something dark and oddly massed where moccasined feet ought to have been, and saw even that but with uncertain vision.

Then, before the doctor had time to do more, or Simpson time to even think a question, much less ask it, Défago was standing upright in front of them, balancing with pain and difficulty, and upon his shapeless and twisted visage an expression so dark and so malicious that it was, in the true sense, monstrous.

"Now you seen it too," he wheezed, "you seen my fiery, burning feet! And now — that is, unless you kin save me an' prevent — it's 'bout time for His piteous and beseeching voice was interrupted by a sound that was like the roar of wind coming across the lake. The trees overhead shook their tangled branches. The blazing fire bent its flames as before a blast. And something swept with a terrific, rushing noise about the little camp and seemed to surround it entirely in a single moment of time. Défago shook the clinging blankets from his body, turned towards the woods behind, and with the same stumbling motion that had brought him — was gone: gone, before anyone could move muscle to prevent him, gone with an amazing, blundering swiftness that left no time to act. The darkness positively swallowed him; and less than a dozen seconds later, above the roar of the swaying trees and the shout of the sudden wind, all three men, watching and listening with stricken hearts, heard a cry that seemed to drop down upon them from a great height of sky and distance —

"Oh, oh! This fiery height! Oh, oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of fire...!" then died away, into untold space and silence.

Dr. Cathcart — suddenly master of himself, and therefore of the others —— was just able to seize Hank violently by the arm as he tried to dash headlong into the Bush.

"But I want ter know, — you!" shrieked the guide. "I want ter see! That ain't him at all, but some — devil that's shunted into his place...!" Somehow or other — he admits he never quite knew how he accomplished it — he managed to keep him in the tent and pacify him. The doctor, apparently, had reached the stage where reaction had set in and allowed his own innate force to conquer. Certainly he "managed" Hank admirably. It was his nephew, however, hitherto so wonderfully controlled, who gave him most cause for anxiety, for the cumulative strain had now produced a condition of lachrymose hysteria which made it necessary to isolate him upon a bed of boughs and blankets as far removed from Hank as was possible under the circumstances.

And there he lay, as the watches of that haunted night passed over the lonely camp, crying startled sentences, and fragments of sentences, into the folds of his blanket. A quantity of gibberish about speed and height and fire mingled oddly with biblical memories of the classroom. “People with broken faces all on fire are coming at a most awful, awful, pace towards the camp!” he would moan one minute; and the next would sit up and stare into the woods, intently listening, and whisper, “How terrible in the wilderness are — are the feet of them that—” until his uncle came across the change the direction of his thoughts and comfort him.

The hysteria, fortunately, proved but temporary. Sleep cured him, just as it cured Hank.

Till the first signs of daylight came, soon after five o’clock, Dr. Cathcart kept his vigil. His face was the color of chalk, and there were strange flushes beneath the eyes. An appalling terror of the soul battled with his will all through those silent hours. These were some of the outer signs...

At dawn he lit the fire himself, made breakfast, and woke the others, and by seven they were well on their way back to the home camp — three perplexed and afflicted men, but each in his own way having reduced his inner turmoil to a condition of more or less systematized order again.

They talked little, and then only of the most wholesome and common things, for their minds were charged with painful thoughts that clamored for explanation, though no one dared refer to them. Hank, being nearest to primitive conditions, was the first to find himself, for he was also less complex. In Dr. Cathcart “civilization” championed his forces against an attack singular enough. To this day, perhaps, he is not *quite* sure of certain things. Anyhow, he took longer to “find himself.” Simpson, the student of divinity, it was who arranged his conclusions probably with the best, though not most scientific, appearance of order. Out there, in the heart of unreclaimed wilderness, they had surely witnessed something crudely and essentially primitive. Something that had survived somehow the advance of humanity had emerged terrifically, betraying a scale of life still monstrous and immature. He envisaged it rather as a glimpse into prehistoric ages, when superstitions, gigantic and uncouth, still oppressed the hearts of men; when the forces of nature were still untamed, the Powers that may have haunted a primeval universe not yet withdrawn. To this day he thinks of what he termed years later in a sermon “savage and formidable Potencies lurking behind the souls of men, not evil perhaps in themselves, yet instinctively hostile to humanity as it exists.”

With his uncle he never discussed the matter in detail, for the barrier between the two types of mind made it difficult. Only once, years later, something led them to the frontier of the subject — of a single detail of the subject, rather:

“Can’t you even tell me what — *they* were like?” he asked; and the reply, though conceived in wisdom, was not encouraging. “It is far better you should try not to know, or to find out.”

“Well — that odor — ?” persisted the nephew. “What do you make of that?”

Dr. Cathcart looked at him and raised his eyebrows.

“Odors,” he replied, “are not so easy as sounds and sights of telepathic communication. I make as much, or as little, probably, as you do yourself.”

He was not quite so glib as usual with his explanations. That was all.

At the fall of day, cold, exhausted, famished, the party came to the end of the long portage and dragged themselves into a camp that at first glimpse seemed empty. Fire there was none, and no Punk came forward to welcome them. The emotional capacity of all three was too overspent to recognize either surprise or annoyance; but the cry of spontaneous affection that burst from the lips of Hank, as he rushed ahead of them towards the fireplace, came probably as a warning that the end of the amazing affair was not quite yet. And both Cathcart and his nephew confessed afterwards that when they saw him kneel down in his excitement and embrace something that reclined, gently moving, beside the extinguished ashes, they felt in their very bones that this “something” would prove to be Défago — the true Défago returned.

And so, indeed, it was.

It is soon told. Exhausted to the point of emaciation, the French Canadian — what was left of him, that is — fumbled among the ashes, trying to make a fire. His body crouched there, the weak fingers obeying feebly the instinctive habit of a lifetime with twigs and matches. But there was no longer any mind to direct the simple operation. The mind had fled beyond recall. And with it, too, had fled memory. Not only recent events, but all previous life was a blank.

This time it was the real man, though incredibly and horribly shrunken. On his face was no expression of any kind whatever — fear, welcome, or recognition. He did not seem to know who it was that embraced him, or who it was that fed, warmed and spoke to him the words of comfort and relief. Forlorn and broken beyond all reach of human aid, the little man did meekly as he was bidden. The "something" that had constituted him "individual" had vanished forever.

In some ways it was more terribly moving than anything they had yet seen — that idiot smile as he drew wads of coarse moss from his swollen cheeks and told them that he was "a damned moss eater"; the continued vomiting of even the simplest food; and, worst of all, the piteous and childish voice of complaint in which he told them that his feet pained him— "burn like fire" — which was natural enough when Dr. Cathcart examined them and found that both were dreadfully frozen. Beneath the eyes there were faint indications of recent bleeding.

The details of how he survived the prolonged exposure, of where he had been, or of how he covered the great distance from one camp to the other, including an immense détour of the lake on foot since he had no canoe — all this remains unknown. His memory had vanished completely. And before the end of the winter whose beginning witnessed this strange occurrence, Défago, bereft of mind, memory and soul, had gone with it. He lingered only a few weeks.

And what Punk was able to contribute to the story throws no further light upon it. He was cleaning fish by the lake shore about five o'clock in the evening — an hour, that is, before the search party returned — when he saw this shadow of the guide picking its way weakly into camp. In advance of him, he declares, came the faint whiff of a certain singular odor.

That same instant old Punk started for home. He covered the entire journey of three days as only Indian blood could have covered it. The terror of a whole race drove him. He knew what it all meant. Défago had "seen the Wendigo."

Old Clothes

I

IMAGINATIVE CHILDREN WITH their odd questionings of life and their delicate nervous systems must be often a source of greater anxiety than delight to their parents, and Aileen, the child of my widowed cousin, impressed me from the beginning as being a strangely vivid specimen of her class. Moreover, the way she took to me from the first placed quasi-avuncular responsibilities upon my shoulders (in her mother's eyes), that I had no right, even as I had no inclination, to shirk. Indeed, I loved the queer, wayward, mysterious little being. Only it was not always easy to advise; and her somewhat marked peculiarities certainly called for advice of a skilled and special order.

It was not merely that her make-believe was unusually sincere and haunting, and that she would talk by the hour with invisible playmates (touching them, putting up her lips to be kissed, opening doors for them to pass in and out, and setting chairs, footstools and even flowers for them), for many children in my experience have done as much and done it with a vast sincerity, but that she also accepted what *they told her* with so steady a degree of conviction that their words influenced her life and, accordingly, her health.

They told her stories, apparently, in which she herself played a central part, stories, moreover, that were neither comforting nor wise. She would sit in a corner of the room, as both her mother and myself can vouch, face to face with some make-believe Occupant of the chair so carefully arranged; the footstool had been placed with precision, and sometimes she would move it a little this way or that; the table whereon rested the invisible elbows was beside her with a jar of flowers that changed according to the particular visitor. And there she would wait motionless, perhaps an hour at a time, staring up into the viewless features of the person who was talking with her — who was telling her a story in which she played an exceedingly poignant part. Her face altered with the run of emotions, her eyes grew large and moist, and sometimes frightened; rarely she laughed, and rarely asked a whispered question, but more often sat there, tense and eager, uncannily absorbed in the inaudible tale falling from invisible lips — the tale of her own adventures.

But it was the terror inspired by these singular recitals that affected her delicate health as early as the age of eight, and when, owing to her mother's well-meant but ill-advised ridicule, she indulged them with more secrecy, the effect upon her nerves and character became so acute that I was summoned down upon a special advisory visit I scarcely appreciated.

"Now, George, what *do* you think I had better do? Dr. Hale insists upon more exercise and more companionship, sea air and all the rest of it, but none of these things seem to do any good."

"Have you taken her into your confidence, or rather has *she* taken you into hers?" I ventured mildly.

The question seemed to give offence a little.

"Of course," was the emphatic answer. "The child has no secrets from her mother. She is perfectly devoted to me."

"But you *have* tried to laugh her out of it, haven't you now?"

"Yes. But with such success that she holds these conversations far less than she used to—"

"Or more secretly?" was my comment, that was met with a superior shrug of the shoulders.

Then, after a further pause, in which my cousins distress and my own affectionate interest in the whimsical imagination of my little niece combined to move me, I tried again —

"Make-believe," I observed, "is always a bit puzzling to us older folk, because, though we indulge in it all our lives, We no longer believe in it; whereas children like Aileen—"

She interrupted me quickly —

"You know what I feel anxious about," she said, lowering her voice. "I think there may be cause for serious alarm." Then she added frankly, looking up with grave eyes into my face, "George, I want your help — your best help, please. You've always been a true friend."

I gave it to her in calculated words.

“Theresa,” I said with grave emphasis, “there is no trace of insanity on either side of the family, and my own opinion is that Aileen is perfectly well-balanced in spite of this too highly developed imagination. But, above all things, you must not drive it inwards by making fun of it. Lead it out. E — ducate it. Guide it by intelligent sympathy. Get her to tell you all about it, and so on. I think Aileen wants careful observing, perhaps — but nothing more.”

For some minutes she watched my face in silence, her eyes intent, her features slightly twitching. I knew at once from her manner what she was driving at. She approached the subject with awkwardness and circumlocution, for it was something she dreaded, not feeling sure whether it was of heaven or of hell.

“You are very wonderful, George,” she said at length, “and you have theories about almost everything—”

“Speculations,” I admitted.

“And your hypnotic power is helpful, you know. Now — if — if you thought it safe, and that Providence would not be offended—”

“Theresa,” I stopped her firmly before she had committed herself to the point where she would feel hurt by a refusal, “let me say at once that I do *not* consider a child a fit subject for hypnotic experiment, and I feel quite sure that an intelligent person like yourself will agree with me that it’s unpermissible.”

“I was only thinking of a little ‘suggestion,’” she murmured.

“Which would come far better from the mother.”

“If the mother had not already lost her power by using ridicule,” she confessed meekly.

“Yes, you never should have laughed. Why did you, I wonder?”

An expression came into her eyes that I knew to be invariably with hysterical temperaments the precursor of tears. She looked round to make sure no one was listening.

“George,” she whispered, and into the dusk of that September evening passed some shadow between us that left behind an atmosphere of sudden and inexplicable chill, “George, I wish — I wish it was *quite* clear to me that it really is all make-believe, I mean—”

“What do you mean?” I said, with a severity that was assumed to hide my own uneasiness. But the tears came the same instant in a flood that made any intelligent explanation out of the question.

The terror of the mother for her own blood burst forth.

“I’m frightened — horribly frightened,” she said between the sobs. “I’ll go up and see the child myself,” I said comfortingly at length when the storm had subsided. “I’ll run up to the nursery. You mustn’t be alarmed. Aileen’s all right. I think I can help you in the matter a good deal.”

II

In the nursery as usual Aileen was alone. I found her sitting by the open window, an empty chair opposite to her. She was staring at it — into it, but it is not easy to describe the certainty she managed to convey that there was someone sitting in that chair, talking with her. It was her manner that did it. She rose quickly, with a start as I came in, and made a half gesture in the direction of the empty chair as though to shake hands, then corrected herself quickly, and gave a friendly little nod of farewell or dismissal — then turned towards me. Incredible as it must sound, that chair looked at once slightly otherwise. It was empty. “Aileen, what in the world are you up to?”

‘*You* know, uncle,” she replied, without hesitation.

“Oh, rather! *I* know! “I said, trying to get into her mood so as later to get her out of it, “because I do the same thing with the people in my own stories. I talk to them too—”

She came up to my side, as though it were a matter of life and death. “But do they *answer?”*

I realized the overwhelming sincerity, even the seriousness, of the question to her mind. The shadow evoked downstairs by my cousin had followed me up here. It touched me on the shoulder.

“Unless they answer,” I told her, “they are not really alive, and the story hangs fire when people read it.”

She watched me very closely a moment as we leaned out of the open window where the rich perfume of the Portuguese laurels came up from the lawns below. The proximity of the child brought a distinct atmosphere of its own, an atmosphere charged with suggestions, almost with faint pictures, as of things I had once known. I had often felt this before, and did not altogether welcome it, for the pictures seemed framed in some emotional setting that invariably escaped my analysis. I understood in a vague way what it was about the child that made her mother afraid. There flashed across me a fugitive sensation, utterly elusive yet painfully real, that she knew moments of suffering by rights she ought not to have known. Bizarre and unreasonable as the conception was, it was convincing. And it touched a profound sympathy in me.

Aileen undoubtedly was aware of this sympathy.

“It’s Philip that talks to me *most* of the time,” she volunteered, “and he’s always, always explaining — but never quite finishes.”

“Explaining what, dear little Child of the Moon?” I urged gently, giving her a name she used to love when she was smaller.

“Why he couldn’t come in time to save me, of course,” she said. “You see, they cut off both his hands.”

I shall never forget the sensation these words of a child’s mental adventure caused me, nor the kind of bitter reality they forced into me that they were true, and not merely a detail of some attempted rescue of a “Princess in a Tower.” A vivid rush of thought seemed to focus my consciousness upon my own two wrists, as though I felt the pain of the operation she mentioned, and with a swift instinct that slipped into action before I could control it, I had hidden both hands from her sight in my coat pockets.

“And what else does ‘Philip’ tell you?” I asked gently.

Her face flushed. Tears came into her eyes, then fled away again lest they should fall from their softly-colored nests.

“That he loved me *so awfully,*” she replied; “and that he loved me to the very end, and that all his life after I was gone, and after they cut his hands off, he did nothing but pray for me — from the end of the world where he went to hide—”

I shook myself free with an effort from the enveloping atmosphere of tragedy, realizing that her imagination must be driven along brighter channels and that my duty must precede my interest.

“But you must get Philip to tell you all his funny and jolly adventures, too,” I said, “the ones he had, you know, when his hands grew again—” The expression that came into her face literally froze my blood. “That’s only making-up stories,” she said icily. “They never did grow again. There *were* no happy or funny adventures.”

I cast about in my mind for an inspiration how to help her mind into more wholesome ways of invention. I realized more than ever before the profundity of my affection for this strange, fatherless child, and how I would give my whole soul if I could help her and teach her joy. It was a real love that swept me, rooted in things deeper than I realized.

But, before the right word was given me to speak, I felt her nestle up against my side, and heard her utter the very phrase that for some time I had been dreading in the secret places of my soul she *would* utter. The sentence seemed to shake me within. I knew a hurried, passing moment of unspeakable pain that is utterly beyond me to reason about.

‘You know,” was what she said, “because it’s *you* who are Philip!” And the way she said it — so quietly, the words touched somehow with a gentle though compassionate scorn, yet made golden by a burning love that filled her little person to the brim — robbed me momentarily of all power of speech. I could only bend down and put my arm about her and kiss her head that came up barely to the level of my chin. I swear I loved that child as I never loved any other human being.

“Then Philip is going to teach you all sorts of jolly adventures with his new hands,” I remember saying, with blundering good intention, “because he’s no longer sad, and is full of fun, and loves you twice as much as ever!”

And I caught her up and carried her down the long stairs of the house out into the garden, where we joined the dogs and romped together until the face of the motherly Kempster at an upper window shouted down something stupid about bedtime, supper, or the rest of it, and Aileen, flushed yet with brighter eyes, ran into the house and, turning at the door, showed me her odd little face wreathed in smiles and laughter.

For a long time I paced to and fro with a cigar between the box hedges of the old-time garden, thinking of the child and her queer imaginings, and of the profoundly moving and disquieting sensations she stirred in me at the same time. Her face flitted by my side through the shadows. She was not pretty, properly speaking, but her appearance possessed an original charm that appealed to me strongly. Her head was big and in some way old-fashioned; her eyes, dark but not large, were placed close together, and she had a wide mouth that was certainly not beautiful. But the look of distressed and yearning passion that sometimes swept over these features, not otherwise prepossessing, changed her look into sudden beauty, a beauty of the soul, a soul that knew suffering and was acquainted with grief. This, at least, is the way my own mind saw the child, and therefore the only way I can hope to make others see her. Were I a painter I might put her upon canvas in some imaginary portrait and call it, perhaps, “Reincarnation” — for I have never seen anything in child-life that impressed me so vividly with that odd idea of an old soul come back to the world in a new young body — a new Suit of Clothes.

But when I talked with my cousin after dinner, and consoled her with the assurance that Aileen was gifted with an unusually vivid imagination which time and ourselves must train to some more practical end — while I said all this, and more besides, two sentences the child had made use of kept ringing in my head. One — when she told me with merciless perception that I was only “making-up” stories; and the other, when she had informed me with that quiet rush of certainty and conviction that “Philip” was — myself.

III

A big-game expedition of some months put an end temporarily to my avuncular responsibilities; at least so far as action was concerned, for there were certain memories that held curiously vivid among all the absorbing turmoil of our camp life. Often, lying awake in my tent at night, or even following the tracks of our prey through the jungle, these pictures would jump out upon me and claim attention. Aileen’s little face of suffering would come between me and the sight of my rifle; or her assurance that I was the “Philip” of her imagination would attack me with an accent of reality that seemed queer enough until I analyzed it away. And more than once I found myself thinking of her dark and serious countenance when she told how “Philip” had loved her to the end, and would have saved her if they had not cut off his hands. My own Imagination, it seemed, was weaving the details of her child’s invention into a story, for I never could think of this latter detail without positively experiencing a sensation of smarting pain in my wrists...! When I returned to England in the spring they had moved, I found, into a house by the sea, a tumbled-down old rookery of a building my cousin s father had rarely occupied during his lifetime, nor she been able to let since it had passed into her possession. An urgent letter summoned me thither, and I traveled down the very day after my arrival to the bleak Norfolk coast with a sense of foreboding in my heart that increased almost to a presentiment when the cab entered the long drive and I recognized the grey and gloomy walls of the old mansion. The sea air swept the gardens with its salt wash, and the moan of the surf was audible even up to the windows.

“I wonder what possessed her to come here?” was the first thought in my mind. “Surely the last place in the world to bring a morbid or too-sensitive child to!” My further dread that something had happened to the little child I loved so tenderly was partly dispelled, however, when my cousin met me at the door with open arms and smiling face, though the welcome I soon found, was chiefly due to the relief she gained from my presence. Something *had* happened to little Aileen, though not the final disaster that I dreaded. She had suffered from nervous attacks of so serious a character during my absence that the doctor had insisted upon sea air, and my cousin, not with the best judgment, had seized upon the idea of making the old house serve the purpose. She had made a wing habitable for a few weeks; she hoped the entire change of scene would fill the little girl’s mind with new and happier ideas. Instead — the result had been exactly the reverse. The child had wept copiously and hysterically the moment she set eyes on the old walls and smelt the odor of the sea.

But before we had been talking ten minutes there was a cry and a sound of rushing footsteps, and a scampering figure, with dark, flying hair, had dived headlong into my arms, and Aileen was sobbing —

“Oh, you’ve come, you’ve come at last! I *am* so awfully glad. I thought it would be the same as before, and you’d get caught.” She ran from me next and kissed her mother, laughing with pleasure through her tears, and was gone from the room as quickly as she had come.

I caught my cousin's glance of frightened amazement.

"Now isn't *that* odd?" she exclaimed in a hushed voice. "Isn't *that* odd? Those are the tears of happiness, — the first time I've seen her smile since we came here last week."

But it rather nettled me, I think. "Why odd?" I asked. "Aileen loves me, it's delightful to—"

"Not that, not that!" she said quickly. "It's odd, I meant, she should have found you out so soon. She didn't even know you were back in England, and I'd sent her off to play on the sands with Kempster and the dogs so as to be sure of an opportunity of telling you everything before you saw her."

Our eyes met squarely, yet not with complete sympathy or comprehension.

"You see, she knew perfectly well you were here — the instant you came."

"But there's nothing in that," I asserted. "Children know things just as animals do. She scented her favorite uncle from the shore like a dog!" And I laughed in her face.

That laugh perhaps was a mistake on my part. Its well-meant cheerfulness was possibly overdone. Even to myself it did not ring quite true.

"I do believe you are in league with her — against me," was the remark that greeted it, accompanied by an increase of that expression of fear in the eyes I had divined the moment we met upon the doorstep. Finding nothing genuine to say in reply, I kissed the top of her head.

In due course, after the tea things had been removed, I learned the exact state of affairs, and even making due allowance for my cousin's excited exaggerations, there were things that seemed to me inexplicable enough on any ground of normal explanation. Slight as the details may seem when set down seriatim, their cumulative effect upon my own mind touched an impressive and disagreeable climax that I did my best to conceal from outward betrayal. As I sat in the great shadowy room, listening to my cousin's jerky description of "childish" things, it was borne in upon me that they might well have the profoundest possible significance. I watched her eager, frightened face, lit only by the flickering flames the sharp spring evening made necessary, and thought of the subject of our conversation flitting about the dreary halls and corridors of the huge old building, a little figure of tragedy, laughing, crying and dreaming in a world entirely her own — and there stirred in me an unwelcome recognition of those mutinous and disheveled forces that lie but thinly screened behind the commonplace details of life and that now seemed ready to burst forth and play their mysterious *rôle* before our very eyes.

“Tell me *exactly* what has happened,” I urged, with decision but sympathy.

“There’s so little, when it’s put into words, George; but — well, the thing that first upset me was that she — knew the whole place, though she’s never been here before. She knew every passage and staircase, many of them that I did not know myself; she showed us an underground passage to the sea, that father himself didn’t know; and she actually drew a scrawl of the house as it used to be three hundred years ago when the other wing was standing where the copper beeches grow now. It’s accurate, too.”

It seemed impossible to explain to a person of my cousin’s temperament the theories of prenatal memory and the like, or the possibility of her own knowledge being communicated telepathically to the brain of her own daughter. I said therefore very little, but listened with an uneasiness that grew horribly.

“She found her way about the gardens instantly, as if she had played in them all her life; and she keeps drawing figures of people — men and women — in old costumes, the sort of thing our ancestors wore, you know —”

“Well, well, well!” I interrupted impatiently; “what can be more natural? She is old enough to have seen pictures she can remember enough to copy — ?”

“Of course,” she resumed calmly, but with a calmness due to the terror that ate her very soul and swallowed up all minor emotions; “of course, but one of the faces she gets is — a *portrait.”*

She rose suddenly and came closer to me across the big stone hearth, lowering her voice to a whisper, “George,” she whispered, “it’s the very image of that awful — de Lorne!

The announcement, I admit, gave me a thrill, for that particular ancestor on my father’s side had largely influenced my boyhood imagination by the accounts of his cruelty wickedness in days gone by. But I think now the shiver that ran down my back was due to the thought of my little Aileen practicing her memory and pencil upon so vile an object. That, and my cousin's pale visage of alarm, combined to shake me. I said, however, what seemed wise and reasonable at the moment.

"You'll be claiming next, Theresa, that the house is haunted," I suggested.

She shrugged her shoulders with an indifference that was very eloquent of the strength of this other more substantial terror.

"That would be so easy to deal with," she said, without even looking up. "A ghost stays in one place. Aileen could hardly take it about with her."

I think we both enjoyed the pause that followed. It gave *me* time to collect my forces for what I knew was coming. It gave *her* time to get her further facts into some pretence of coherence.

"I told you about the belt?" she asked at length, weakly, and as though unutterable things she longed to disown forced the question to her unwilling lips.

The sentence shot into me like the thrust of a naked sword.... I shook my head.

"Well, even a year or two ago she had that strange dislike of wearing a belt with her frocks. We thought it was a whim, and did not humor her. Belts are necessary, you know, George," she tried to smile feebly. "But now it has come to such a point that I've had to give in."

"She dislikes a belt round her waist, you mean?" I asked, fighting a sudden inexplicable spasm in my heart.

"It makes her scream. The moment anything encloses her waist she sets up such a hubbub, and struggles so, and hides away, and I've been obliged to yield."

"But really, Theresa — !"

"She declares it fastens her in, and she will never get free again, and all kinds of other things. Oh, her fear is dreadful, poor child. Her face gets that sort of awful grey, don't you know? Even Kempster, who if anything is too firm, had to give in."

“And what else, pray?” I disliked hearing these details intensely. It made me ache with a kind of anger that I could not at once relieve the child’s pain.

“The way she spoke to me after Dr. Hale had left — you know how awfully kind and gentle he is, and how Aileen likes him and even plays with him and sits on his knee? Well, he was talking about her diet, regulating it and so forth, teasing her that she mustn’t eat this and that, and the rest of it, when she turned that horrid grey again and jumped oft his knee with her scream - that thin wailing scream she has that goes through me like a knife, George — and flew to the nursery and locked herself in with — what do you think? — with all the bread, apples, cold meat and other eatables she could find!”

“Eatables!” I exclaimed, aware of another spasm of vivid pain. “When I coaxed her out, hours later, she was trembling like a leaf and fell into my arms utterly exhausted, and all I could get her to tell me was this — which she repeated again and again with a sort of beseeching, appealing tone that made my heart bleed—”

She hesitated an instant.

“Tell me at once.”

‘“I shall starve again, I shall starve again,’ were the words she used. She kept repeating it over and over between her sobs. ‘I shall be without anything to eat. I shall starve!’ And, would you believe it, while she hid in that nursery cupboard she had crammed so much cake and stuff into her little self that she was violently sick for a couple of days. Moreover, she now hates the sight of Dr. Hale so much, poor man, that it’s useless for him to see her. It does more harm than good.”

I had risen and begun to walk up and down the hall while she told me this. I said very little. In my mind strange thoughts tore and raced, standing erect before me out of unbelievably immense depths of shadow. There was nothing very pregnant I found to say, however, for theories and speculations are of small avail as practical help — unless two minds see eye to eye in them.

“And the rest?” I asked gently, coming behind the chair and resting both hands upon her shoulders. She got up at once and faced me. I was afraid to show too much sympathy lest the tears should come.

“Oh, George,” she exclaimed, “I *am* relieved you have come. You are really strong and comforting. To feel your great hands on my shoulders gives me courage. But, you know, truly and honestly I am frightened out of my very wits by the child—”

“You won’t stay here, of course?”

“We leave at the end of this week,” she replied. ‘You will not desert me till then, I know. And Aileen will be all right as long as you are here, for you have the most extraordinary effect on her for good.”

“Bless her little suffering imagination,” I said. “You can count on me. I’ll send to town tonight for my things.”

And then she told me about the room. It was simple enough, but it conveyed a more horrible certainty of something true than all the other details put together. For there was a room on the ground floor, intended to be used on wet days when the nursery was too far for muddy boots —— and into this room Aileen could not go. Why? No one could tell. The facts were that the first moment the child ran in, her mother close behind, she stopped, swayed, and nearly fell. Then, with shrieks that were even heard outside by the gardeners sweeping the gravel path, she flung herself headlong against the wall, against a particular corner of it that is to say, and beat it with her little fists until the skin broke and left stains upon the paper. It all happened in less than a minute. The words she cried so frantically her mother was too shocked and flabbergasted to remember, or even to hear properly. Aileen nearly upset her in her bewildered efforts next to find the door and escape. And the first thing she did when escape was accomplished, was to drop in a dead faint upon the stone floor of the passage outside.

“Now, is *that* all make-believe?” whispered Theresa, unable to keep the shudder from her lips. “Is that all merely part of a story she has make up and plays a part in?”

We looked one another straight in the eyes for a space of some seconds. The dread in the mother’s heart leaped out to swell a terror in my own — a terror of another kind, but greater.

“It is too late tonight,” I said at length, “for it would only excite her unnecessarily; but tomorrow I will talk with Aileen. And — if it seems wise

— I might — I might be able to help in other ways too," I added. So I did talk to her — next day.

IV

I always had her confidence, this little dark-eyed maid, and there was an intimacy between us that made play and talk very delightful. Yet as a rule, without giving myself a satisfactory reason, I preferred talking with her in the sunlight. She was not eerie, bless her little heart of queerness and mystery, but she had a way of suggesting other ways of life and existence shouldering about us that made me look round in the dark and wonder what the shadows concealed or what waited round the next corner.

We were on the lawn, where the bushy yews drop thick shade, the soft air making tea possible out of doors, my cousin out driving to distant calls; and Aileen had invited herself and was messing about with my manuscripts in a way that vexed me, for I had been reading my fairy tales to her and she kept asking me questions that shamed my limited powers. I remember, too, that I was glad the collie ran to and fro past us, scampering and barking after the swallows on the lawn.

"Only *some* of your stories are true, aren't they?" she asked abruptly.

"How do you know that, young critic?" I had been waiting for an opening supplied by herself. Anything forced on my part she would have suspected.

"Oh, I can tell."

Then she came up and whispered without any hint of invitation on my part, "Uncle, it is true, isn't it, that I've been in other places with you? And isn't it only the things we did *there* that make the true stories?"

The opening was delivered all perfect and complete into my hands. I cannot conceive how it was I availed myself of it so queerly — I mean, how it was that the words and the name slipped out of their own accord as though I was saying something in a dream.

"Of course, my little Lady Aileen, because in imagination, you see, we—"

But before I had time to finish the sentence with which I hoped to coax out the true inwardness of her own distress, she was upon me in a heap.

"Oh," she cried, with a sudden passionate outburst, "then you *do* know my name? You know all the story — *our* story!

She was very excited, face flushed, eyes dancing, all the emotions of a life charged to the brim with experience playing through her little person.

"Of course, Miss Inventor, I know your name," I said quickly, puzzled, and with a sudden dismay that was hideous, clutching at my throat.

"And all that we did in this place?" she went on, pointing with increased excitement to the thick, ivy-grown walls of the old house.

My own emotion grew extraordinarily, a swift, rushing uneasiness upsetting all my calculations. For it suddenly came back to me that in calling her "Lady Aileen" I had not pronounced the name quite as usual. My tongue had played a trick with the consonants and vowels, though at the moment of utterance I had somehow failed to notice the change. "Aileen" and "Helen" are almost interchangeable sounds....! And it was "Lady Helen" that I had actually said.

The discovery took my breath away for an instant — and the way she had leaped upon the name to claim it.

"No one else, you see, knows me as 'Lady Helen,'" she continued whispering, "because that's only in our story, isn't it? And now I'm just Aileen Langton. But as long as you know, it's all right. Oh, I am so awf'ly glad you knew, most awf'ly, *awf'ly* glad."

I was momentarily at a loss for words. Keenly desirous to guide the child's "pain-stories" into wiser channels, and thus help her to relief, I hesitated a moment for the right clue. I murmured something soothing about "our story," while in my mind I searched vigorously for the best way of leading her on to explain all her terror of the belt, the fear of starvation, the room that made her scream, and all the rest. All *that* I was most anxious to get out of her little tortured mind and then replace it by some brighter dream.

But the insidious experience had shaken my confidence a little, and these explicable emotions destroyed my elder wisdom. The little Inventor had caught me away into the reality of her own "story" with a sense of conviction that was even beyond witchery. And the next sentence she almost instantly let loose upon me completed my discomfiture— "With you," she said, still half whispering, "with you I could even go into the room. I never could — alone — !"

The spring wind whispering in the yews behind us brought in that moment something upon me from vanished childhood days that made me tremble. Some wave of lost passion — lost because I guessed not its origin or nature — surged through the depths of me, sending faint messages to the surface of my consciousness. Aileen, little mischief-maker, changed before my very eyes as she stood there close — changed into a tall sad figure that beckoned to me across seas of time and distance, with the haze of ages in her eyes and gestures,... I was obliged to focus my gaze upon her with a deliberate effort to see her again as the tumble-haired girl I was accustomed to....

Then, sitting in the creaky garden chair, I drew her down upon my knee, determined to win the whole story from her mind. My back was to the house; she was perched at an angle, however, that enabled her to command the doors and windows. I mention this because, scarcely had I begun my attack, when I saw that her attention wandered, and that she seemed curiously uneasy. Once or twice, as she shifted her position to get a view of something that was going on over my shoulder, I was aware that a slight shiver passed from her small person down to my knees. She seemed to be expecting something — with dread.

"We'll make a special expedition, armed to the teeth," I said, with a laugh, referring to her singular words about the room. "We'll send Pat in first to bark at the cobwebs, and we'll take lots of provisions and — and water in case of a siege — and a file—"

I cannot pretend to understand why I chose those precise words — or why it was as though other thoughts than those I had intended rose up, clamoring for expression. It seemed all I could manage not to say a lot of other things about the room that could only have frightened instead of relieving her.

"Will you talk *into the wall* too?" she asked, turning her eyes down suddenly upon me with a little rush and flame of passion. And though I had not the faintest conception what she meant, the question sent an agony of yearning pain through me. "Talking into the wall," I instantly grasped, referred to the core of her trouble, the very central idea that frightened her and provided the suffering and terror of all her imaginings.

But I had no time to follow up the clue thus mysteriously offered to me, for almost at the same moment her eyes fixed themselves upon something behind me with an expression of tense horror, as though she saw the approach of a danger that might — kill.

“Oh, oh!” she cried under her breath, “he’s coming! He’s coming to take me! Uncle George — Philip — !”

The same impulse operated upon us simultaneously, it seems, for I sprang up with my fists clenched at the very instant she shot off my knee and stood with all her muscles rigid as though to resist attack. She was shaking dreadfully. Her face went the color of linen.

“Who’s coming — ?” I began sharply, then stopped as I saw the figure of a man moving towards us from the house. It was the butler — the new butler who had arrived only that very afternoon. It is impossible to say what there was in his swift and silent approach that was — abominable. The man was upon us, it seemed, almost as soon as I caught sight of him, and the same moment Aileen, with a bursting cry, looking wildly about her for a place to hide in, plunged headlong into my arms and buried her face in my coat.

Horribly perplexed, yet mortified that the servant should see my little friend in such a state, I did my best to pretend that it was all part of some mad game or other, and catching her up in my arms, I ran, calling the collie to follow with, “Come on, Pat! She’s our prisoner!” — and only set her down when we were under the limes at the far end of the lawn. She was all white and ghostly from her terror, still looking frantically about her, trembling in such a way that I thought any minute she must collapse in a dead faint. She clung to me with very tight fingers. How I hated that man. Judging by the sudden violence of my loathing he might have been some monster who wanted to torture her....

“Let’s go away, oh, much farther, ever so far away!” she whispered, and I took her by the hand, comforting her as best I could with words, while realizing that the thing she wanted was my big arm about her to protect. My heart ached, oh, so fiercely, for her, but the odd thing about it was that I could not find anything of real comfort to say that I felt would be *true.* If I “made up” soothing rubbish, it would not deceive either of us and would only shake her confidence in me, so that I should lose any power I had to help. Had a tiger come upon her out of the wood I might as well have assured her it would not bite!

I did stammer something, however —

“It’s only the new butler. He startled me, too; he came so softly, didn’t he?” Oh! how eagerly I searched for a word that might make the thing seem as ordinary as possible — yet how vainly.

“But you know who he is — *really!”* she said in a crying whisper, running down the path and dragging me after her; “and if he gets me again... oh! oh!” and she shrieked aloud in the anguish of her fear.

That fear chased both of us down the winding path between the bushes.

“Aileen, darling,” I cried, surrounding her with both arms and holding her very tight, “you need not be afraid. I’ll always save you. I’ll always be with you, dear child.”

“Keep me in your big arms, always, always, won’t you, Uncle — Philip?” She mixed both names. The choking stress of her voice wrung me dreadfully. “Always, always, like in our story,” she pleaded, hiding her little face again in my coat.

I really was at a complete loss to know what best to do; I hardly dared to bring her back to the house; the sight of the man, I felt, might be fatal to her already too delicately balanced reason, for I dreaded a fit or seizure if she chanced to run across him when I was not with her. My mind was easily made up on one point, however.

“I’ll send him away at once, Aileen,” I told her. “When you wake up tomorrow he’ll be gone. Of course mother won’t keep him.”

This assurance seemed to bring her some measure of comfort, and at last, without having dared to win the whole story from her as I had first hoped, I got her back to the house by covert ways, and saw her myself upstairs to her own quarters. Also I took it upon myself to give the necessary orders. She must set no eye upon the man. Only, why was it that in my heart of hearts I longed for him to do something outrageous that should make it possible for me to break his very life at its source and kill him...?

But my cousin, alarmed to the point of taking even frantic measures, finally had a sound suggestion to offer, namely that I should take the afflicted little child away with me the very next day, run down to Harwich and carry her off for a week of absolute change across the North Sea. And I, meanwhile, had reached the point where I had persuaded myself that the experiment I had hitherto felt unable to consent to had now become a permissible, even a necessary one. Hypnotism should win the story from that haunted mind without her being aware of it, and provided I could drive her deep enough into the trance state, I could then further wipe the memory from her outer consciousness so completely that she might know at last some happiness of childhood.

V

It was after ten o'clock, and I was still sitting in the big hail before the fire of logs, talking with lowered voice. My cousin sat opposite to me in a deep armchair. We had discussed the matter pretty fully, and the deep uneasiness we felt clothed not alone our minds but the very building with gloom. The fact that, instinctively, neither of us referred to the possible assistance of doctors is eloquent, I think, of the emotion that troubled us both so profoundly, the emotion, I mean, that sprang from the vivid sense of the reality of it all. No child's make-believe merely could have thus caught us away, or spread a net that entangled our minds to such a point of confusion and dismay. It was perfectly comprehensible to me now that my cousin should have cried in very helplessness before the convincing effects of the little girl's calamitous distress. Aileen was living through a Reality, not an Invention. This was the fact that haunted the shadowy halls and corridors behind us. Already I hated the very building. It seemed charged to the roof with the memories of melancholy and ancient pain that swept my heart with shivering, cold winds.

Purposely, however, I affected some degree of cheerfulness, and concealed from my cousin any mention of the attacks that certain emotions and alarms had made upon myself: I said nothing of my replacing "Lady Aileen" with "Lady Helen," nothing of my passing for "Philip," or of my sudden dashes of quasi-memory arising from the child's inclusion of myself in her "story," and my own singular acceptance of the *rôle.* I did not consider it wise to mention *all* that the sight of the new servant with his sinister dark face and his method of stealthy approach had awakened in my thoughts. None the less these things started constantly to the surface of my mind and doubtless betrayed themselves somewhere in my "atmosphere," sufficiently at least for a woman's intuition to divine them. I spoke passingly of the "room," and of Aileen's singular aversion for it, and of her remark about "talking to the wall." Yet strange thoughts pricked their way horribly into both our minds. In the hall the stuffed heads of deer and fox and badger stared upon us like masks of things still alive beneath their fur and dead skin.

"But what disturbs me more than all the rest of her delusions put together," said my cousin, peering at me with eyes that made no pretence of hiding dark things, "is her extraordinary knowledge of this place. I assure you, George, it was the most uncanny thing I've ever known when she showed me over and asked questions as if she had actually lived here." Her voice sank to a whisper, and she looked up startled. It seemed to me for a moment that someone was coming near to listen, moving stealthily upon us along the dark approaches to the hall.

"I can understand you found it strange," I began quickly. But she interrupted me at once. Clearly it gave her a certain relief to say the things and get them out of her mind where they hid, breeding new growths of abhorrence.

"George," she cried aloud, "there's a limit to imagination. Aileen *knows.* That's the awful thing—"

Something sprang into my throat. My eyes moistened.

"The horror of the belt—" she whispered, loathing her own words.

"Leave that thought alone," I said with decision. The detail pained me inexpressibly — beyond belief.

"I wish I could," she answered, "but if you had seen the look on her face when she struggled — and the — the frenzy she got into about the food and starving — I mean when Dr. Hale spoke — oh, if you had seen all that, you would understand that I—"

She broke off with a start. Someone had entered the hall behind us and was standing in the doorway at the far end. The listener had moved upon us from the dark. Theresa, though her back was turned, had felt the presence and was instantly upon her feet.

“You need not sit up, Porter,” she said, in a tone that only thinly veiled the fever of apprehension behind, “we will put the lights out,” and the man withdrew like a shadow. She exchanged a quick glance with me. A sensation of darkness that seemed to have come with the servant’s presence was gone. It is wholly beyond me to explain why neither myself nor my cousin found anything to say for some minutes. But it was still more a mystery, I think, why the muscles of my two hands should have contracted involuntarily with a force that drove the nails into my palms, and why the violent impulse should have leaped into my blood to fling myself upon the man and strangle the life out of his neck before he could take another breath. I have never before or since experienced this apparently causeless desire to throttle anybody. I hope I never may again.

“He hangs about rather,” was all my cousin said presently. “He’s always watching us—” But my own thoughts were horribly busy, and I was marveling how it was this ugly and sinister creature had ever come to be accepted in the story that Aileen lived, and that I was slowly coming to *believe* in.

It was a relief to me when, towards midnight. Theresa rose to go to bed. We had skirted through the horrors of the child’s possessing misery without ever quite facing it, and as we stood there lighting the candles, our voices whispering, our minds charged with the strain of thoughts neither of us had felt it wise to utter, my cousin started back against the wall and stared up into the darkness above where the staircase climbed the well of the house. She uttered a cry. At first I thought she was going to collapse. I was only just in time to catch the candle.

All the emotions of fearfulness she had repressed during our long talk came out in that brief cry, and when I looked up to discover the cause I saw a small white figure come slowly down the wide staircase and just about to step into the hall. It was Aileen, with bare feet, her dark hair tumbling down over her nightgown, her eyes wide open, an expression in them of anguished expectancy that her tender years could never possibly have known. She was walking steadily, yet somehow not quite as a child walks.

“Stop!” I whispered peremptorily to my cousin, putting my hand quickly over her mouth, and holding her back from the first movement of rescue, “don’t wake her. She’s walking in her sleep.”

Aileen passed us like a white shadow, scarcely audible, and went straight across the hall. She was utterly unaware of our presence. Avoiding all obstructions of chairs and tables, moving with decision and purpose, the little figure dipped into the shadows at the far end and disappeared from view in the mouth of the corridor that had once — three hundred years ago — led into the wing where now the copper beeches grew upon open lawns. It was clearly a way familiar to her. And the instant I recovered from my surprise and moved after her to act, Theresa found her voice and cried aloud — a voice that broke the midnight silence with shrill discordance —

“George, oh, George! She’s going to that awful room...!”

“Bring the candle and come after me,” I replied from halfway down the hall, “but do not interrupt unless I call for you,” and was after the child at a pace to which the most singular medley of emotions I have ever known urged me imperiously. A sense of tragic disaster gripped my very vitals. All that I did seemed to rise out of some subconscious region of the mind where the haunting passions of a deeply buried past stirred “Helen!” I cried, “Lady Helen!” I was close upon the gliding figure. Aileen turned and for the first time saw me with eyes that seemed to waver between sleep and waking. They gazed straight at me over the flickering candle flame, then hesitated. In similar fashion the gesture of her little hands towards me was arrested before it had completed itself. She saw me, knew my presence, yet was uncertain who I was. It was astonishing the way I actually surprised this momentary indecision between the two personalities in her — caught the two phases of her consciousness at grips — discerned the Aileen of Today in the act of waking to know me as her “Uncle George,” and that other Aileen of her great dark story, the “Helen” of some far Yesterday, that drew her in this condition of somnambulism to the scene in the past where our two lives were linked in her imagination. For it was quite clear to me that the child was dreaming in her sleep the action of the story she lived through in the vivid moments of her waking terror.

But the choice was swift. I just had time to signal Theresa to set the candle upon a shelf and wait, when she came up, stretched her hands out in completion of the original gesture, and fell into my arms with a smothered cry of love and anguish that, coming from those childish lips, I think is the most thrilling human sound I have ever known. She knew and saw me, but not as “Uncle” George of this present life.

“Oh, Philip! “she cried, “then you have come after all—”

“Of course, dear heart,” I whispered. “Of course I have come. Did I not give my promise that I would?”

Her eyes searched my face, and then settled upon my hands that held her little cold wrists so tightly.

“But — but,” she stammered in comment, “they are not cut! They have made you whole again! You will save me and get me out, and we —— we —”

The expressions of her face ran together into a queer confusion of perplexity, and she seemed to totter on her feet. In another instant she would probably have wakened; again she felt the touch of uncertainty and doubt as to my identity. Her hands resisted the pressure of my own; she drew back half a step; into her eyes rose the shallower consciousness of the present. Once awake it would drive out the profoundly strange passion and mystery that haunted the corridors of thought and memory and plunged so obscurely into the inmost recesses of her being. For, once awake, I realized that I should lose her, lose the opportunity of getting the complete story. The chance was unique. I heard my cousin’s footsteps approaching behind us down the passage on tiptoe — and I came to an immediate decision.

In the state of deep sleep, of course, the trance condition is very close, and many experiments had taught me that the human spirit can be subjected to the influence of hypnotism far more speedily when asleep than when awake; for if hypnotism means chiefly — as I then held it to mean — the merging of the little ineffectual surface-consciousness with the deep sea of the greater subliminal consciousness below, then the process has already been partially begun in normal slumber and its completion need be no very long or difficult matter. It was Aileen’s very active subconsciousness that “invented” or “remembered” the dark story which haunted her life, her subconscious region too readily within tap.... By deepening her sleep state I could learn the whole story....

Stopping her mother’s approach with a sign that I intended she should clearly understand, and which accordingly she did understand, I took immediate steps to plunge the spirit of this little sleep-walking child down again into the subconscious region that had driven her thus far, and wherein lay the potentialities of all her powers, of memory, knowledge and belief. Only the simplest passes were necessary, for she yielded quickly and easily; that first look came back into her eyes; she no longer wavered or hesitated, but drew close against me, with the name of "Philip" upon her lips, and together we moved down the long passage till we reached the door of her horrid room of terror.

And there, whether it was that Theresa's following with the candle disturbed the child — for the subconscious tie with the mother is of such unalterable power — or whether anxiety weakened my authority over her fluctuating mental state, I noticed that she again wavered and hesitated, looking up with eyes that saw partly "Uncle George," partly the "Philip" she remembered.

"We'll go in," I said firmly, "and you shall see that there is nothing to be afraid of." I opened the door, and the candle from behind threw a triangle of light into the darkness. It fell upon a bare floor, pictureless walls, and just tipped the high white ceiling overhead. I pushed the door still wider open and we went in hand in hand, Aileen shaking like a leaf in the wind.

How the scene lives in my mind, even as I write it today so many years after it took place: the little child in her nightgown facing me in that empty room of the ancient building, all the passionate emotions of a tragic history in the small young eyes, her mother like a ghost in the passage, afraid to come in, the tossing shadows thrown by the candle and the soft moan of the night wind against the outside walls.

I made further passes over the small flushed face and pressed my thumbs gently along the temples. "Sleep! "I commanded; "sleep — and remember!" My will poured over her being to control and protect. She passed still deeper into the trance condition in which the somnambulistic lucidity manifests itself and the deeper self gives up its dead. Her eyes grew wider, rounder, charged with memories as they fastened themselves upon my own. The present, which a few minutes before had threatened to claim her consciousness by waking her, faded. She saw me no longer as her familiar Uncle George, but as the faithful friend and lover of her great story, Philip, the man who had come to save her. There she stood in the atmosphere of bygone days, in the very room where she had known great suffering — this room that three centuries ago had led by a corridor into the wing of the house where now the beeches grew upon the lawns.

She came up close and put her thin bare arms about my neck and stared with peering, searching eyes into mine.

“Remember what happened here,” I said resolutely. “Remember, and tell me.”

Her brows contracted slightly as with the effort, and she whispered, glancing over her shoulder towards the farther end where the corridor once began, “It hurts a little, but I — I’m in your arms, Philip dear, and you will get me out, I know—”

“I hold you safe and you are in no danger, little one,” I answered. “You can remember and speak without it hurting you. Tell me.”

The suggestion, of course, operated instantly, for her face cleared, and she dropped a great sigh of relief. From time to time I continued the passes that held the trance condition firm.

Then she spoke in a low, silvery little tone that cut into me like a sword and searched my inmost parts. I seemed to bleed internally. I could have sworn that she spoke of things I knew as though I had lived through them.

“This was when I last saw you,” she said, “this was the room where you were to fetch me and carry me away into happiness and safety from —— him,” and it was the voice and words of no mere child that said it; “and this was where you did come on that night of snow and wind. Through that window you entered;” she pointed to the deep, embrasured window behind us. “Can’t you hear the storm? How it howls and screams! And the boom of the surf on the beach below.... You left the horses outside, the swift horses that were to carry us to the sea and away from all his cruelties, and then—”

She hesitated and searched for words or memories; her face darkened with pain and loathing.

“Tell me the rest,” I ordered, “but forget all your own pain.” And she smiled up at me with an expression of unbelievable tenderness and confidence while I drew the frail form closer.

‘*You* remember, Philip,” she went on, “you know just what it was, and how he and his men seized you the moment you stepped inside, and how you struggled and called for me, and heard me answer—”

“Far away — outside—” I interrupted quickly, helping her out of some flashing memory in my own deep heart that seemed to burn and leave a scar. “You answered from the lawn!”

“You thought it was the lawn, but really, you see, it was there — in there,” and she pointed to the side of the room on my right. She shook dreadfully, and her voice dwindled most oddly in volume, as though coming from a distance — almost muffled.

“In there?” I asked it with a shudder that put ice and fire mingled in my blood.

“In the wall,” she whispered. “You see, someone had betrayed us, and he knew you were coming. He walled me up alive in there, and only left two little holes for my eyes so that I could see. You heard my voice calling through those holes, but you never knew where I was. And then—”

Her knees gave way, and I had to hold her. She looked suddenly with torture in her eyes down the length of the room — towards the old wing of the house.

“You won’t let him come,” she pleaded beseechingly, and in her voice was the agony of death. “I thought I heard him. Isn’t that his footsteps in the corridor?” She listened fearfully, her eyes trying to pierce the wall and see out on to the lawn.

“No one is coming, dear heart,” I said, with conviction and authority. “Tell it all. Tell me everything.”

“I saw the whole of it because I could not close my eyes,” she continued. “There was an iron band round my waist fastening me in — an iron belt I never could escape from. The dust got into my mouth — I bit the bricks. My tongue was scraped and bleeding, but before they put in the last stones to smother me I saw them — cut both your hands off so that you could never save me — never let me out.”

She dashed without warning from my side and flew up to the wall, beating it with her hands and crying aloud —

“Oh, you poor, poor thing. I know how awful it was. I remember — when I was in you and you wore and carried me, poor, poor body! That thunder of the last brick as they drove it in against the mouth, and the iron clamp that cut into the waist, and the suffocation and hunger and thirst!"

"What are you talking to in there?" I asked sternly, crushing down the tears.

"The body I was in — the one he walled up — my body — my own body!"

She flew back to my side. But even before my cousin had uttered that "mother-cry" that broke in upon the child's deeper consciousness, disturbing the memories, I had given the command with all the force of my being to "forget" the pain. And only those few who are familiar with the instantaneous changes of emotion that can be produced by suggestion under hypnosis will understand that Aileen came back to me from that moment of "talking to the wall" with laughter on her lips and in her eyes.

The small white figure with the cascade of dark hair tumbling over the nightgown ran up and jumped into my arms.

"But I saved you," I cried, "you were never properly walled-up; I got you out and took you away from him over the sea, and we were happy ever afterwards, like the people in the fairy tales." I drove the words into her with my utmost force, and inevitably she accepted them as the truth, for she clung to me with love and laughter all over her child's face of mystery, the horror fading out, the pain swept clean away. With kaleidoscopic suddenness the change came.

"So they never really cut your poor dead hands off at all," she said hesitatingly.

"Look! How could they? There they are! And I first showed them to her and then pressed them against her little cheeks, drawing her mouth up to be kissed. "They're big enough still and strong enough to carry you off to bed and stroke you into so deep a sleep that when you wake in the morning you will have forgotten everything about your dark story, about Philip, Lady Helen, the iron belt, the starvation, your cruel old husband, and all the rest of it. You'll wake up happy and jolly just like any other child—"

"If you say so, of course I shall," she answered, smiling into my eyes.

*A*nd it was just then there came in that touch of abomination that so nearly made my experiment a failure, for it came with a black force that threatened at first to discount all my "suggestion" and make it of no account. My new command that she should forget had apparently not yet fully registered itself in her being; the tract of deeper consciousness that constructed the "Story" had not sunk quite below the threshold. Thus she was still open to any detail of her former suffering that might obtrude itself with sufficient force. And such a detail *did* obtrude itself. This touch of abomination was calculated with a really superhuman ingenuity.

"Hark!" she cried — and it was that *scream in a whisper* that only utter terror can produce— "Hark! I hear his steps! He's coming! Oh, I told you he was coming! He's in *that* passage!" pointing down the room. And she first sprang from my arms as though something burned her, and then almost instantly again flew back to my protection. In that interval of a few seconds she tore into the middle of the room, put her hand to her ear to listen, and then shaded her eyes in the act of peering down through the wall at the far end. She stared at the very place where in olden days the corridor had led into the vanished wing. The window my great-uncle had built into the wall now occupied the exact spot where the opening had been.

Theresa then for the first time came forward with a rush into the room, dropping the candle-grease over the floor. She clutched me by the arm. The three of us stood there — listening — listening apparently to naught but the sighing of the sea-wind about the walls, Aileen with her eyes buried in my coat. I was standing erect trying in vain to catch the new sound. I remember my cousin's face of chalk with the fluttering eyes and the candle held aslant.

Then suddenly she raised her hand and pointed over my shoulder. I thought her jaw would drop from her face. And she and the child both spoke in the same breath the two sharp phrases that brought the climax of the vile adventure upon us in that silent room of night.

They were like two pistol-shots.

"My God! There's a face watching us...!" I heard her voice, all choked and dry.

And at the same second, Aileen— "Oh, oh! He's seen us...! He's *here!* Look.... He'll get me... hide your hands, hide your poor hands!"

And, turning to the place my cousin stared at, I saw sure enough that a face — apparently a living human face — was pressed against the windowpane, framed between two hands as it tried to peer upon us into the semi-obscurity of the room. I saw the swift momentary rolling of the two eyes as the candle glare fell upon them, and caught a glimpse even of the hunched-up shoulders behind, as their owner, standing outside upon the lawn, stooped down a little to see better. And though the apparition instantly withdrew, I recognized it beyond question as the dark and evil countenance of the butler. His breath still stained the window.

Yet the strange thing was that Aileen, struggling violently to bury herself amid the scanty folds of my coat, could not possibly have seen what we saw, for her face was turned from the window the entire time, and from the way I held her she could never for a single instant have been in a position to know. It all took place behind her back.... A moment later, with her eyes still hidden against me, I was carrying her swiftly in my arms across the hall and up the main staircase to the night nursery.

My difficulty with her was, of course, while she hovered between the two states of sleep and waking, for once I got her into bed and plunged her deeply again into the trance condition, I was easily able to control her slightest thought or emotion. Within ten minutes she was sleeping peacefully, her little face smoothed of all anxiety or terror, and my imperious command ringing from end to end of her consciousness that when she woke next morning all should be forgotten. She was finally to forget... utterly and completely.

And, meanwhile, of course, the man, when I went with loathing and anger in my heart to his room in the servants' quarters, had a perfectly plausible explanation. He was in the act of getting ready for bed, he declared, when the noise had aroused his suspicions, and, as in duty bound, he had made a tour of the house outside, thinking to discover burglars....

With a month's wages in his pocket, and a considerable degree of wonder in his soul, probably — for the man was guilty of nothing worse than innocently terrifying a child's imagination! — he went back to London the following day; and a few hours later I myself was traveling with Aileen and old Kempster over the blue waves of the North Sea, carrying her off, curiously enough, to freedom and happiness in the very way her "imagination" had pictured her escape in the "story" of long ago, when she was Lady Helen, held in bondage by a cruel husband, and I was Philip, her devoted lover.

Only this time her happiness was lasting and complete. Hypnotic suggestion had wiped from her mind the last vestige of her dreadful memories; her face was wreathed in jolly smiles; her enjoyment of the journey and our week in Antwerp was absolutely unclouded; she played and laughed with all the radiance of an unhaunted childhood, and her imagination was purged and healed.

And when we got back her mother had again moved her household gods to the original family mansion where she had first lived. Thither it was I took the restored child, and there it was my cousin and I looked up the old family records and verified certain details of the history of De Lome, that wicked and semi-fabulous ancestor whose portrait hung in the dark corner of the stairs. That his life was evil to the brim I had always understood, but neither myself nor Theresa had known — at least had not consciously remembered — that he had married twice, and that his first wife, Lady Helen, had mysteriously disappeared, and Sir Philip Lansing, a neighboring knight, supposed to be her lover, had soon afterwards emigrated to France and left his lands and property to go to ruin.

But another discovery I made, and kept to myself, had to do with that "room of terror" in the old Norfolk house where, on the plea of necessary renovation, I had the stones removed, and in the very spot where Aileen used to beat her hands against the bricks and "talk to the wall," the workmen under my own eyes laid bare the skeleton of a woman, fastened to the granite by means of a narrow iron band that encircled the waist — the skeleton of some unfortunate who had been walled-up alive and had come to her dreadful death by the pangs of hunger, thirst and suffocation centuries ago.

Perspective

I

*T*HE AMOUNT OF duty and pleasure combined in Alpine summer chaplaincies of a month each just suited the Rev. Phillip Ambleside. He was still young enough to climb — carefully; and genuine enough to enjoy seeing the crowd of holiday-makers having a good time. As a rule he was on the Entertainment Committee that organized the tennis, dances, and gymkhanas. During the week one would hardly have guessed his calling. On Sundays he appeared a bronzed, lean, vigorous figure in the pulpit of the hot little wooden church, and people liked to see him. His sermons, never over ten minutes, were the same four every year: one for each Sunday of the month; and when he passed on to another month's duty in the next place he repeated them. The surroundings suggested them obviously: Beauty, Rest, Power, Majesty; and they were more like little confidential talks than sermons. Moreover, incidents from the life of the place — the escape of a tourist, the accident to a guide, and what not, usually came ready to hand to point a moral. One summer, however, there occurred a singular adventure that he has never yet been able to introduce into a sermon. Only in private conversation with souls as full of faith as himself does he ever mention it. And the short recital always begins with a sentence more or less as follows — Talking of the wondrous ways of God, and the little understanding of the children of men, I am always struck by the huge machinery He sometimes adopts to accomplish such delicate and apparently insignificant ends. I remember once when I was doing summer 'duty' in a Swiss resort high up among the mountains of the Valais....."

And then follows the curious occurrence I was once privileged to hear, and have obtained permission to re-tell, duly disguised.

In the particular mountain village where he was taking a month's duty at the time, his church was full every Sunday, so full indeed that twice a week he held afternoon services for those who cared to worship more quietly. And to these little ceremonies, beloved of his own heart, came two persons regularly who attracted his attention in spite of himself. They sat together at the back; shared the same books, although there was no necessity to do so; courted the shadowy corners of the pews: in a word, they came to worship one another, not to worship God.

But the clergyman took a broad view. Courtships fostered in the holy atmosphere of the sacred building were more likely to be true than those fanned to flame in the feverish surroundings of the dance-room. And true love is ever an offering to God. He knew the couple, too. The man, quiet, earnest, well over forty; the girl, young, dashing, spirited, leader in mischief, hard to believe sincere, flirting with more than one. In spite of the careful concealment with which she covered their proceedings, choosing the deserted afternoon service rather than the glare of the garden or ballroom for their talks, the couple were marked. The difference in their ages, characters, and appearance singled them out, as much as the general knowledge that she was rich, vain, flighty, while he was poor, strenuous, living a life of practical charity in London, that precluded gaiety or pleasure, so called.

“What *can* she see in that dull man twice her age?” the elder women said to one another — the answer generally being that it probably amused the girl to turn him so easily round her little finger.

“What a chance for her fortune to be well spent,” reflected one or two. While the men, when they said anything at all, contented themselves with: “Pretty hard hit, isn’t he? A fine fellow though! Hope he gets her!”

It is always somewhat pathetic to see a man of real value fall before the conquering beauty of an ordinary young girl of the world. The clergyman, however, with an eye for spiritual values, even deeply hidden, divined that beneath her lightness and love for conquest’s sake there lay the desire for something more real. And he guessed, though at first the wish may have been father to the thought only, that it was the elder man’s fine zeal and power that attracted the butterfly in spite of herself towards a life that was more worth living. Hers, after all, he felt, was a soul worth “saving”; and this middle-aged man, perhaps, was the force God brought into her life to provide her with the opportunity of escape —— could she but seize it.

So far Ambleside’s story runs along ordinary lines enough. One sees his man and girl without further detail. From this point, however, it slips into a stride where the sense of proportion seems somehow lost, or else “man’s little understanding “is too close to the thing to obtain the proper perspective. If anyone but this devout and clear-headed clergyman told the tale, one might say “Fancy,”

“Delusion,” or any other description that seemed suitable. But to hear him tell it, with that air of conviction and truth, in those short, abrupt, even jerky sentences, that left so much to the imagination, and with that pallor of the skin that threw into such vivid contrast the fire burning in his far-seeing blue eyes — to sit close to him and hear the story grow in that tense low voice, was to know beyond all question that he spoke of something real and actual, in the same sense that a train or St. Paul’s Cathedral are real and actual.

What he saw, he really saw: though the sight may have been of a kind unfamiliar to the majority. He was used as a real pawn in a real game. The girl’s life and soul were rescued, so to speak, by the marriage brought about, and her forces of mind and spirit lifted bodily for what they were worth into the scheme that God had ordained for them from the beginning of the world. Only — the machinery brought to bear upon the end in view seemed so prodigious, so extraordinary, so unnecessary..... One thinks of the sentence with which Ambleside always began his tale. One wonders. But no one who heard the tale ever asked questions at its close. There was absolutely nothing to say.

Even to the smallest details the affair seemed thought out and planned, for that particular Tuesday Ambleside started without the guide-porter who usually carried his telescope, camera, and lunch. He went off at six a m., with merely an ice-axe and a small knapsack containing food and Shetland vest for the summit.

It was one of those days towards the end of August when some quality in the atmosphere — usually sign of approaching rain — brings the mountains uncannily close, yet, at the same time, sets out every detail of pinnacle, precipice, and ridge with a terror of size and grandeur that makes one realize their true and gigantic scale. They press up close, yet at the same time stand away in the depths of the sky like unattainable masses in some dream world. This mingling of proximity and distance has a confusing effect upon the eye. When Ambleside toiled up the zigzags without actually looking beyond, he felt that the towering *massif* of the Valais Alps all about him loomed very close; but when he stopped for breath and raised his eyes steadily into their detail, he felt that their distance was too great to be conquered by any little two-legged being like himself merely taking steps. And as he rose out of the valley into the clearer strata of air this effect increased. The whole scale of the chain of Alps about him seemed raised to an immeasurably higher power than he had ever known. He felt like an insect crawling over the craters of the moon. The prodigious splendors of the scenery all round oppressed him more than ever before with his own futile littleness, yet at the same time made him conscious of the grandeur of his soul before the God who had set him and his kind above all this chaos of tumbled planet.

He thought of the mountains as part of the "garment of God," and of nature as expressing some portion of the Deity not intended to be expressed by man — all part of His purpose, alive with His informing will. This glory of the inanimate Alps linked on to some stranger glory in himself that interpreted for him, as in a mystical revelation, God's thundering message and purpose known in the great forms and moods of nature. Closely in touch with the spirit of the mountains he was; glad to be alone.

This, in a sentence, expresses his mood: that the mountains accepted him. Forces in his deepest being that were akin to the life of the planet on which he made his tiny track rose up and triumphed. Over the treacherous Pas d'lliez, where he usually felt giddy and unsafe, he felt this morning only exhilaration. The gulf yawning at his feet touched him with its splendor, not its terror.

Thus, feeling inclined to shout and run, he eventually reached the desolate valley of rock and shale that lies, unrelieved by a single blade of grass, between the glacier-covered slopes that shut it in impassably on three sides. The bed of this valley lies some 7,000 feet above the sea. The peaks and ridges that rear about it reach 12,000 feet. Here, being a good climber, he rested for the first time at the end of two hours' steady ascent. The air nipped. The loneliness and desolation were very impressive. Beyond him hung the glaciers like immense thick blankets of blue-white upon the steep slopes, dropping from time to time lumps of ice into the shale-strewn valley below. For the sun shining in a cloudless sky was fierce. The clergyman, before attacking the long snow-field that began at his very feet, took out his blue spectacles and disentangled the cord. He ate some chocolate, and took the dried prunes from his knapsack, knowing that thirst would soon be upon him, and that ice-water was not for drinking.

“What a mite I am, to be sure, amid all this appalling wilderness!” he exclaimed; “and how splendid to be able to hold my own!”

And then it was, just as he stood up to arrange the glasses on his forehead, ready to pull down at a moment’s notice, that he became aware of something that was strange — unaccustomed. Through the giant splendors of the scorching August day, across all this stupendous scenery of desolation and loneliness, something fine as a needle, delicate as a hair, had begun picking at his mind. The idea came to him that he was no longer alone. Like a man who hears his name called out of darkness he turned instinctively to find the speaker; almost as though someone had been calling to him for a considerable time, and he had only just had his attention drawn to it. He looked keenly up and down the immense, deserted valley.

In every direction, however, he saw nothing but miles of rock, dazzling snow-fields, dark precipices, and endless peaks cutting the blue sky overhead with teeth that gleamed like burnished steel. It was desolation everywhere. The gentle wind that fanned his cheek made no sound against the stones. There was neither tree nor grass for it to rustle through. No bird’s wing whirred the air; and the far-off falling of a hundred cascades was of too regular and monotonous a character to have taken on the quality of a voice or the rhythm of uttered words. He examined, so far as he could, the enormous sides of mountain about him, and the great soaring ridges. It was just possible some climber in distress had spied him out, and shouted down upon him from the heights. But he searched in vain. There was no moving human figure. The sound, if sound it had been, was not repeated; only he was no longer alone, as before. That, at least, was certain.... He nibbled more chocolate, put a couple of sour prunes into his mouth to suck, arranged the blue snow-glass over his eyes, and started on again for a steady pull up to the next ridge.

And as he rose the scale of the surrounding mountains rose appallingly with him. The true distance of the peaks proclaimed itself; the tremendous reaches that from below appeared telescoped up into a little space opened up and stretched themselves. The hour grew into two. It was considerably after twelve before he reached the *arête* where he had promised himself lunch. And all the way, without ceasing, the idea that he was being accompanied remained insistent in his mind. It troubled and perplexed him. Perhaps it frightened him a little, too. More than once it came close enough to make him pause and consider whether he should continue or turn back.

For the curious part of it was that this idea exercised a direct and deliberate effect upon him. By a hundred little details that seemed to be spontaneous until he examined them, it kept suggesting somehow that he should change his route. Something in his consciousness grew that had not been there before. He thought of a bird bringing tiny morsels of grass and twig until a nest formed. In this way the steady stream of thoughts from somewhere outside himself came nesting in his brain until at length they acquired the consistency of an impression, next of a distinct desire, lastly, the momentum of a definite intention. They acted upon his volition, stirring softly among the roots of his will. Before he realized how it had quite come about he had *changed his mind.*

Instead of going on to the top as I intended, he said to himself, as he sat on the dizzy ledge munching hard-boiled eggs and sugar sandwiches, “I shall strike off to the left and find my way back into the valley again. That, I think, would be — nicer!”

He had no real reason; he invented none.

And the moment he said it there was a sense of pressure removed, a consciousness of relief, the knowledge, in a word, that he was following a route that it was desired he should follow.

To a man, of course, whose habit it was to seek often the will of a personal Deity he worshipped, there was nothing very out of the way in all this, although he never remembered to have felt any guidance so distinctly and forcibly indicated before. The feeling that he was being “guided” now became a certainty, and in order to follow instructions as well as possible he made his will of no account and opened himself to receive the slightest token this other Directing Agency might care to vouchsafe.

After lunch, therefore, he struck out a diagonal course across a steep snow-slope that would eventually bring him down again to the valley a little nearer its head. And before he had gone a hundred yards he ran into the track of another climber. The marks were a couple of days old, perhaps, for in their hollows lay little heaps of fine snow-dust, freshly blown. Judging by the size there had been two men. He noted the trace of the ice-axe and the occasional streak of the trailing rope. The men had made straight for the valley far below. Here and there they had glissaded. Here and there, too, they had also tumbled gloriously, for the snow was tossed about by their floundering. Yet there was no danger; no precipices intervened; the snow sloped without a break right down into the shale below.

"I'll follow their example," said the Rev. Phillip Ambleside. He strapped on the extra leather seat he carried for sliding and sat down. A moment later he was rushing at high speed over the hard surface. There were hollows of softer snow, however, which stopped him from time to time, drifts as it were into which he plunged, and from which he emerged, wet and shivering. Then he stood up and leaned on his axe, trying to glissade on his feet. For this, however, the surface was not smooth enough. The result was he tumbled, rolled, slid, sat down, and took immense gliding strides. It was very exhilarating. He reveled in it.

But all the while he kept his eyes sharply about him, for in his heart he felt that he was obeying that guiding Influence so strongly impressed upon him — the Power that had persuaded him to change his route, and was now leading him to some particular point with some particular purpose. Now, too, for the first time a vague sense of calamity touched him. Once introduced, it grew. Soon it amounted to a positive foreboding, a presentiment of disaster almost. He could not avoid the idea that he was being led by supernatural means to the scene of some catastrophe where he was to prove of use — a rescue, an arrival in the nick of time to save someone. He actually looked about him already for — yes, for the body. And through his sub-conscious mind, with the force of habit, ran the magnificent use he could make of it all in a future sermon.

Yet nothing came. The tracks of the other men stretched clear and unbroken into the valley of rocks below. He traced the wavering thin line the whole way down.

"It's nothing to do with *these* men, at any rate," he said to himself, as he sat down for the final slide that should take him to the bottom of the slope. "No accident could possibly have happened here. The snow’s too soft, and there are no rocks to fall over or—”

The sentence, or the thought, remained unfinished, for the mouth of the Rev. Phillip was stopped temporarily with wet snow as he lost his balance and rushed sideways with an undignified plunge into a drifted hollow. His eyes were blinded, his feet twisted, the skin of his back drenched and icy. He rose spluttering and gasping. Luckily his axe had a leather loop, or he would have lost it; as it was, his slouch hat was already a hundred feet below, sliding and turning like a top on its way to the bottom, followed by the snow-goggles.

And in the act of brushing himself free of snow the truth came to him. It was as though a hand had struck him on the back and pointed —— as though a voice had uttered the five words: *“This is the place. Look!”* Swiftly, searchingly, keenly he looked, and saw — nothing; nothing, at least, that explained the impression of disaster that had possessed him. There was no body certainly, nor any sign of an accident; no place, indeed, where an accident could possibly have come about. He dug quickly in the loose snow with his axe, but the snow was barely two feet deep in this particular hollow, and all round it was a hard surface of smoothly and tightly-packed stuff that was almost ice. Nothing bigger than a cat could have lain buried there!

“This is the place! Look well!” the words seemed to ring in his ears. Yet the more he looked and saw nothing, the more strongly beat this message upon his brain. This was the place where he was to come, where he was to fulfill some purpose, to find something, do something, accomplish the end intended by the Will that had so carefully guided him all day. The feeling was positive; not to be denied. It was, at the same time, distressingly vast — mighty.

Fixing himself securely against his axe, he stood and stared. The sun beat back into his face from the glittering snow on all sides. Tremendous black precipices towered not far behind him; to his left rolled the frozen mass of the huge glacier, its pinnacles of tottering ice catching the afternoon sun; to his right stretched into bewildering distance the interminable and desolate reaches of shale and moraine till the eye rested upon summits of a dozen peaks that literally swam in the sky where white clouds streamed westwards. There was no sound but falling water, no sign of humanity except the single track of those other climbers, no indication of any disturbance upon the vast face of nature that spread all about him, immense, still, terrific.

Then, piercing the monotony of the falling water, a faint sound of fluttering, heard for the first time, reached his ear. He turned as at the sound of a pistol-shot in the direction whence it came — but again saw nothing. The sound ceased. From the slope below came a breath of icy wind that made him shiver, and with it, he fancied, came the faint hissing noise of his sliding hat and spectacles. This, perhaps, was the sound he had heard as "fluttering."

At length after prolonged and vain searching, the clergyman decided there was nothing for him to do but continue his journey, for the sun was getting low, and he had a long way to go before dusk could be regarded with equanimity. He felt exhausted, wearied, impatient too if the truth were told, yet ashamed of his impatience.

"If this is all *real,"* he argued under his breath, "why isn't it made clear what I'm to do?"

And immediately upon the heels of the thought came again that faint and curious sound of something fluttering.

Now, there can be no question that he understood perfectly well that this sound of fluttering had a direct connection with the whole purpose of the day — that it was the clue to his presence in this particular spot, and that he had been forced to halt here by means of his fall in order that he might investigate something or other on this very spot. He knew it; he felt it. But he was too impatient, too cold, too weary to spend any further time over it all. Alarm, too, was plucking uneasily at his reins.

So this time he affected to ignore the sound. Leaning back on his axe he threw his body into position for sliding down to the bottom of the slope. In another second he would have started — when something that froze him into the immobility of a terror worse than death arrested him with a power beyond anything he had ever known before in his life — a Power that seemed to carry behind it the pressure of the entire universe.

There, close beside him in this mountain wilderness, had risen up suddenly a Face — close as the handle of the ice-axe he so tightly grasped, yet at the same time so far away, so immense, so stupendous in scale that he has never understood to this day how it was he could have perceived that it was — a Face. Yet a face it undoubtedly was, a living face; and its eyes — its regard, at any rate, for eyes he divined rather than saw — were focused upon some object that lay at his very feet.

Clammy with fear, his heart thumping dreadfully, he dropped back upon the snow. Without looking at any particular detail he became aware that the entire world of giant scenery about him was involved in the building up of this appalling Countenance, whose gaze was directed upon a tiny point immediately before him — the point, he now perceived, whence proceeded that familiar little sound of fluttering.

Words obviously fail him when he attempts to describe the terror of this Visage that rose about him through the day. Pallid and immense, it seemed to stretch itself against the wastes of grey rock, with entire slopes of snow upon the cheeks, ridged and furrowed by precipice and cliff, with torn clouds of flying hair that streaked the blue, and the expanse of glaciers for the splendid brows. Across it the dark line of two moraines tilted for eyebrows, and the massive columns of compressed strata embedded in the whole structure of the mountain chain bulged for the muscles of the awful neck.... Moreover, the shoulders upon which it all rested — the vast framework of body that he divined below —— the dizzy drop in space where such fearful limbs must seek their resting-place —

His mind went reeling. The titanic proportions of this Countenance of splendor threatened in some horrible way to overwhelm his life. Its calmness, its iron immobility, its remorseless fixity of mien petrified him. The thought that he had dared to question it, to put himself in opposition to its purpose, even to be impatient with it — this turned all his soul within him soft and dead with a kind of ultimate terror that bereft him of any clear memory, perhaps momentarily, too, of consciousness.

The clergyman *thinks* he fainted. Exactly what happened, probably, he never knew nor realized. All that he can say in attempting to describe it is that he found his own eyes caught up and carried away in the gigantic stream of vision that this Face of Mountains poured upon the ground —

caught up and directed upon a tiny little white object that fluttered in the wind at his very feet.

He saw what the Face was looking at and wished him to look at. It made him see what it saw.

For there, in front of him, unnoticed hitherto, lay a scrap of paper half embedded in the snow. Automatically he stooped and picked it up. It was an envelope bearing the printed inscription of an hotel in the village. It was sealed. On the outside in a fine handwriting, he read the Christian name of a man. Opening the corner he saw inside a small lock of dark-colored hair. And this was all...!

Then it was just at this moment that the snow where his feet rested gave way, and he started off at full speed to slide to the bottom of the slope, where he only just stopped himself in time to prevent shooting with a violent collision into a mass of shale and loose stones.

In less than thirty seconds it had all happened... and the swift descent and tumble had shaken him back as it were into a normal state of mind. But the oppression that had burdened him all day was gone. The mountains looked as usual. An indescribable sense of relief came over him. He felt a free agent once more — no longer guided, pushed, directed. He had fulfilled the purpose.

Putting the little envelope in his inside pocket he picked up his slouch hat and snow-goggles, ate some chocolate and dried prunes, and started off at a brisk pace for his return journey of three hours to the village and — dinner. And the whole way home the grandeur of that face, with its splendid pallor, and its expression of majesty, haunted him with indescribable sensations. With it, however, all the time ran the accompanying thought: “What a tremendous business for so small a result! All that vast maneuvering, all that terror of the imagination, and all that complex pressure upon my insignificant spirit merely in the end to find a wisp of girl’s hair in an envelope evidently fallen from the pocket of some careless climber!”

The more the Rev. Philip Ambleside thought about it, the more bewildered he felt. He was uncommonly glad, however, to get in before dark. The memory of that Mountain Countenance was no agreeable companion for the forest paths and lonely slopes through which his way led in the dusk.

II

That same night it so happened, before he was able to take any steps to trace the owner of the little envelope, there was a Bal de Têtes at the principal hotel. Although the clergyman was on the Entertainment Committee which organized the simple gaieties of the place, he held that honorary position only as a personal compliment to himself; he did not at a rule take an active part in the detail, nor did he as a general rule attend the balls.

This particular night, however, he strolled down to the hotel, and after a little conversation with one or two friends in the hail he made his way to a secluded corner of the glass gallery where the dancers sat out between times, and lit his pipe for a quiet smoke. From behind the shelter of a large sham palm he was able to see all he wanted of the ballroom, to hear the music, and to take in the pleasant sight of all the people enjoying themselves. And the sight did him good. He liked to see it. A number were in costume, which added to the picturesqueness of the scene. Perhaps he sat more in the shadows than he knew, or perhaps the dancers who came to “sit out” near him in the gallery did not realize how their voices carried. Several couples, as the evening advanced, came so close to him that, had he wished, he could have overheard easily every word they uttered. He did not wish, however. His mind was busy with thoughts of its own. That haunting scene of desolation in the mountains obsessed him still; and about ten o’clock, his pipe being finished, he was on the point of getting up to leave, when two dancers came and sat down immediately behind him and began to talk in such very distinct tones that it was impossible to avoid hearing every single word they uttered.

The clergyman pushed his chair aside to make room to go, when, in doing so, he threw a passing glance at the couple — and instantly recognized them. The girl, a Carmen, and a very becoming Carmen, was the one who frequented his afternoon services, and the man, who wore simple evening dress and was not in costume at all, was the middle-aged Englishman who had been at her heels like a slave all the summer. They were absorbed in one another, and evidently unaware of his presence.

To say that he hesitated would not be true. Some force beyond himself simply took him by the shoulders and pushed him back into the chair.

Against his own will — for Mr. Ambleside was no eavesdropper — he remained there deliberately to listen.

In telling the story he tells it just like this, making no excuses for conduct that was certainly dishonorable. He declares he could not help himself; the instinct was too imperious to be disobeyed. Again, as in the afternoon, he understood that he was merely being used as a pawn in the game, a game of great importance to some Intelligence that saw through to the distant end.

The man was quiet, but tremendously in earnest, with the kind of steady manner that no woman likes unless she finds it in her to respond with a similar sincerity. Under the bronze his skin showed pale a little. He began to speak the instant they sat down; and in his voice was passion.

"I want you, and I want your money, and I want your life and soul —— everything," he said, evidently continuing a conversation; "your youth and energy, your talents, your will, all that is you and yours — *all"* His voice was pitched very low, yet without tremor. He was playing the whole stake, as a strong man of middle age plays it when he is utterly in earnest. "For my scheme, for *our* scheme, for God's scheme I want you; and no one else but you will do. I want you to awake, and change your life, and be your true, fine self. We can make a success, you and I, a success for ourselves and for others. I shall never give you up until — until you give yourself to the world, or" — his voice dropped very low— "to another."

The clergyman waited breathlessly for the answer. The man's words vibrated with such suppressed fire that only a serious reply could be forthcoming. But for a space Carmen merely toyed with her fan, the little red spangled fan that swung from a single finger. Behind the black domino her eyes sparkled, but the expression of her face was hidden.

"The difference in age is nothing," he continued almost sternly. "For me, you are *the* woman, and for you I will prove that I am *the* man. I see clean through to the great soul hidden in you. I can bring it out. I can make you *real* — a soul of value in the big order of God's purposes. What can these boys ever be, or do, for you? I've got a big, useful, practical scheme that can use you, just as it can use me. And my great unselfish love has picked you out of the whole world as the one woman necessary. Will you come to me?"

Still the girl was silent. She tapped him on the knee two or three times, would-be playfully, with the tip of her fan. Her head was bent down a little.

"And I'm strong," he went on earnestly; "I'm a man. The power in me recognizes and calls to the power in you. Let me hold you and mold you, and let's take the fine, high life together. Drop this life of child's play you've been leading. Come to me; my arms are hungry for you! But I want you for a higher purpose than my own happiness — though I swear I can make you happy as no woman in this world has ever before been happy. And without you," he added more softly after a slight pause, "this splendid scheme of mine, of ours, can come to nothing. For I cannot do it alone — and there is only one *You* in the world. Answer me now. It was tonight, remember, you promised. I leave tomorrow, and London days lie far ahead. Give me your answer to go back with."

It was a curious way to make love. The reverend gentleman thought he had never heard anything quite like it. An ordinarily frivolous girl, of course, would have been impatient long ago. But the fine passion of the man broke everywhere through his rather lame words, and set something in the air about them aflame. The violins sounded thin and trashy compared to the rhythm of this earnest voice; all the glitter of the ballroom seemed cheap — the costume of Carmen absurdly incongruous. Mr. Ambleside slipped back somehow into the key of the afternoon when Cosmic Powers had held direct communion with his soul. He understood that he was meant to listen. Something big was in progress, something important in a high sense. He did listen — to every word. It was Carmen speaking now; but her voice marred the picture. It was thin, trifling, even affected.

"It's very flattering," she simpered, "but — don't you see — it means the end of all my fun and enjoyment in life. You're so fearfully in earnest. You'd exhaust me in the first week!" She cocked her pretty head on one side, holding the fan against her cheek. Something, nevertheless, belied the lightness of her words, the listener felt.

"But I'll teach you a different kind of happiness," replied the man eagerly, "so that you'll never again want this passing excitement, this 'unrest which men miscall delight.' Give me your answer — now. I see it in your eyes. Let me go away tomorrow with this great new happiness in my heart." He leaned forward. "Let your real self speak out once for all!" He took her fan away and she made no resistance. She clasped her hands in her lap, still looking at him mischievously through her mask.

“Let’s wait till we meet later in town,” she sighed at length prettily, coaxingly. “I shall be able to enjoy myself here then for the rest of the summer first — I feel so young for such a program.”

But the man cut her short.

“Now,” he said, holding her steadily with his eyes. “You said that to me a year ago, remember. I have waited ever since. It is your youth I want.”

The girl played with him for another ten minutes, while the clergyman listened, wondering greatly at the other’s patience. Clearly, she delighted to feel his great love beating up against the citadel she meant in the end to yield. The lighter side of her was vastly interested and amused by it; but all the time the deeper part was ready with its answer. It was only that the “child” in her wanted to enjoy itself a little longer before it capitulated forever to the strength that should take her captive, and lead her by sharp ways of sacrifice to the high *rôle* she was meant to fill.

It would all have vexed and wearied Mr. Ambleside exceedingly, but for this singular feeling that it was part of some much larger scheme of which he might never know the whole perhaps, but in which he was playing his little part with a secret thrill. Through the tawdry glitter of that scented ballroom he saw again that terrible white-lipped Face, and felt the measure of this great purpose rolling past him — immense, remorseless — which, for all its splendor, could include even so small a thing as this vain and silly girl. The tide of it rose about him with a flood of power. He glanced at the small black domino of the Carmen opposite him... he saw the little flashing eyes, the pert lips and mouth —— thinking with something like a shudder of that other Countenance in the hollow of whose eyes hid tempests, yet which could look down upon a tiny fluttering paper, because that paper was an item of importance in its great scheme of which both beginning and end were nevertheless veiled....

His thoughts must have wandered for a time. The conversation, at any rate, had meanwhile taken a singular turn. The girl was on her feet, the man facing her.

“Then what is this test of yours?” he was saying, half serious, half laughing — “this test which you say will prove how much I care?”

The girl put back between her lips the small red rose that was part of the Carmen costume. Either it was that the stalk made her lisp a little, or else that a sudden rush of the violins in the waltz drowned her words. The Reverend Phillip, standing there trembling — he never quite understood why he should have awaited her answer so nervously — only caught the second half of her phrase.

“... that I gave you in this very room six weeks ago, and that you promised to carry about with you always?” he heard the end of her sentence, in a voice that for the first time that evening was serious; “because, if you’ve kept your word in a small thing like that I can trust you to keep it in bigger things. It was a part of myself, you know, that little bit of hair!” She laughed deliciously in his face, raising herself on tiptoe with her hands behind her back. “You said so yourself, didn’t you? You promised it should never, *never* leave you.”

The man made a curiously sudden gesture as though a pain beyond his control passed through him. His hands were on the back of a chair. The chair squeaked audibly along the polished floor beneath a violent momentary pressure. He looked straight into his companion’s eyes, but made no immediate reply.

Carmen’s gaze behind the black mask became hard. With a truly feminine idiocy she was obviously playing this whim as a serious move in the game.

“For if you have lost *that,”* she continued, her face flushing beneath the paint, “how can you expect to keep the rest of me, the important part of me?” She spoke as though she believed that he, too, was halfplaying — that the next minute he would put his hand into his pocket and produce it. His delay, his awkwardness, above all his silence, angered her. For the surface of her self-contradictory character was obviously — minx.

After a pause that seemed interminable the man spoke, and for the first time his deep voice shook a little.

“This time tomorrow night you shall have it,” he said.

“But you’re leaving, you said, in the morning!” The tone was piqued and shrill.

“I shall stay another day — on purpose.” A pause followed.

“Then you really have lost it — envelope and all — with your name in *my* writing on the outside, and *my* hair for all to recognize who find it — and to sneer.”

Her eyes flashed as she said it. The girl was disappointed, incensed, furious. It was all silly enough, of course, and utterly out of proportion. But how silly and childish real life is apt to be at such moments, only those who have reached middle age and have observed closely can know. At the time, to the clergyman who stood there listening and observing, it seemed genuinely poignant, even tragic.

“Until the day before yesterday it had never left me for a single instant,” he said at length. “I was in the mountains — glissading with your brother. It fell out of my pocket with a lot of other papers. I lost it on the upper snow slopes of the Dents Blenches—”

The rest of his words were drowned by an inrush of people, for the band was beginning a two-step and couples were sorting themselves and seeking their partners. A Frenchman, dressed as Napoleon, came up to claim his dance. Carmen was swept away. Scornfully, angrily, with concentrated resentment in her voice and manner, she turned upon her heel and from the lips that bit the stalk of the small red rose came the significant words —

“And with it you have also lost — me!”

She was gone. Perhaps the Reverend Phillip Ambleside only imagined the tears in her voice. He never knew, and had no time to think, for he found himself looking straight into the eyes of the lover, thus absurdly rejected, and who now became aware of his close presence for the first time. Even then the absurdity of the whole situation did not wholly reveal itself. It came later with reflection. At the moment he felt that it was all like a vivid and singular dream in which the values and proportions were oddly exaggerated, yet in which the sense of tragedy was distressingly real. His heart went out to the faithful and patient man who was being so trifled with, yet who might be in danger of losing by virtue of his very simplicity what was to be of real value in his life — and scheme.

“It’s *my* move now,” was the thought in his mind as he took a step forward.

The other, embarrassed and annoyed to discover that the whole scene had probably been overheard, made an awkward movement to withdraw, but before he could do so, the clergyman approached him. Only one step was necessary. He moved up from behind a palm, and drawing his hand from an inner pocket, he handed across to him a white envelope bearing the printed name of the hotel and a neat inscription in feminine writing just below it.

“I found this on the snow slopes of the Dents Blanches this afternoon,” he said courteously. The other stared him steadily in the face — his color coming and going quickly. “Take it to her and say that after all it was you — you, who were applying the test — that you wished to see if for so small a thing she was ready to reject so true a love. And, pray, pardon this interference which — er — chance has placed in my power. The matter, I need hardly say, is entirely between yourself and me.

The man took the paper awkwardly, a soft smile of gratitude and comprehension dawning in his eyes. He began to stammer a few words, but the clergyman did not stay to listen. He bowed politely and left him.

He went out of the hotel into the night, and a wind from the surrounding snow slopes brushed his face with its touch of great spaces. He looked up and saw the crowding stars, brilliant as in winter. The mountains in this faint light seemed incredibly close. Slowly he walked up the village street to his rooms in the chalet by the church.

And suddenly the true, proportion of normal things in this little life returned to him, and with it a sharp realization of the triviality of the scene he had been forced to witness — and of the horrible grandeur of the means by which he had been dragged, by the scruff of his priestly neck as it were, so awkwardly into the middle of it all: merely to provide a scrap of evidence the loss of which threatened to bring about a foolish estrangement, and might conceivably have prevented a marriage of apparently insignificant importance.

He felt as though the machinery of the entire solar system had been employed to help a pair of ants carry a pine-needle too heavy for them to the top of the nest.

And then a moment’s reflection brought to him another thought. For who could say what the result of this marriage might be? Who could say that from just the exact combination of those two forces — the earnest man, and the lighter girl — a son might not be born who should shake the world and lead some cherished purpose of Deity to completion? For, truly, of the threads which weave into the pattern of life and out again, men see but the tiny section immediately beneath their eyes. The majority focus their gaze upon some detail — thus losing the view of the whole. The beginning and the end are forever hidden; and what appears insignificant and out of proportion when caught alone at close quarters, may reveal all the splendor of the Eternal Purpose when surveyed with the proper perspective — of the Infinite. The Reverend Philhip Ambleside felt as if for a moment he had been lifted to a height whence he had caught perhaps a glimpse of these larger horizons.

With his faith vastly strengthened, but his nerves considerably shaken, the clergyman went to bed and slept the sleep of a just man who has done his duty by chance as it were, He had helped forward a purpose of which he really understood nothing, but which, he somehow felt, was bigger than anything with which he had so far been connected in his life. Some day — his faith whispered it next morning while he was preparing his sermon — he would see the matter with proper perspective, and would understand.

The Terror of the Twins

THAT THE MAN'S hopes had built upon a son to inherit his name and estates — a single son, that is — was to be expected; but no one could have foreseen the depth and bitterness of his disappointment, the cold, implacable fury, when there arrived instead — twins. For, though the elder legally must inherit, that other ran him so deadly close. A daughter would have been a more reasonable defeat. But twins — ! To miss his dream by so feeble a device — !

The complete frustration of a hope deeply cherished for years may easily result in strange fevers of the soul, but the violence of the father's hatred, existing as it did side by side with a love he could not deny, was something to set psychologists thinking. More than unnatural, it was positively uncanny. Being a man of rigid self-control, however, it operated inwardly, and doubtless along some morbid line of weakness little suspected even by those nearest to him, preying upon his thought to such dreadful extent that finally the mind gave way. The suppressed rage and bitterness deprived him, so the family decided, of his reason, and he spent the last years of his life under restraint. He was possessed naturally of immense forces — of will, feeling, desire; his dynamic value truly tremendous, driving through life like a great engine; and the intensity of this concentrated and buried hatred was guessed by few. The twins themselves, however, knew it. They divined it, at least, for it operated ceaselessly against them side by side with the genuine soft love that occasionally sweetened it, to their great perplexity. They spoke of it only to each other, though.

"At twenty-one," Edward, the elder, would remark sometimes, unhappily, "we shall know more."

"Too much," Ernest would reply, with a rush of unreasoning terror the thought never failed to evoke — *in him.* "Things father said always happened — in life." And they paled perceptibly. For the hatred, thus compressed into a veritable bomb of psychic energy, had found at the last a singular expression in the cry of the father's distraught mind. On the occasion of their final visit to the asylum, preceding his death by a few hours only, very calmly, but with an intensity that drove the words into their hearts like points of burning metal, he had spoken. In the presence of the attendant, at the door of the dreadful padded cell, he said it: “You are not two, but *one.* I still regard you as one. And at the coming of age, by h — , you shall find it out!”

The lads perhaps had never fully divined that icy hatred which lay so well concealed against them, but that this final sentence was a curse, backed by all the man’s terrific force, they quite well realized; and accordingly, almost unknown to each other, they had come to dread the day inexpressibly. On the morning of that twenty-first birthday — their father gone these five years into the Unknown, yet still sometimes so strangely close to them — they shared the same biting, inner terror, just as they shared all other emotions of their life — intimately, without speech. During the daytime they managed to keep it at a distance; but when the dusk fell about the old house they knew the stealthy approach of a kind of panic sense. Their self-respect weakened swiftly... and they persuaded their old friend, and once tutor, the vicar, to sit up with them till midnight... He had humored them to that extent, willing to forgo his sleep, and at the same time more than a little interested in their singular belief — that before the day was out, before midnight struck, that is, the curse of that terrible man would somehow come into operation against them.

Festivities over and the guests departed, they sat up in the library, the room usually occupied by their father, and little used since. Mr. Curtice, a robust man of fifty-five, and a firm believer in spiritual principalities and powers, dark as well as good, affected (for their own good) to regard the youths’ obsession with a kindly cynicism. “I do not think it likely for one moment,” he said gravely, “that such a thing would be permitted. All spirits are in the hands of God, and the violent ones more especially.” To which Edward made the extraordinary reply: “Even if father does not come himself he will — *send!”* And Ernest agreed: “All this time he’s been making preparations for this very day. We’ve both known it for a long time — by odd things that have happened, by our dreams, by nasty little dark hints of various kinds, and by these persistent attacks of terror that come from nowhere, especially of late. Haven’t we, Edward?” Edward assenting with a shudder. “Father has been at us of late with renewed violence. Tonight it will be a regular assault upon our lives, or minds, or souls!”

“Strong personalities *may* possibly leave behind them forces that continue to act,” observed Mr. Curtice with caution, while the brothers replied almost in the same breath: “That’s exactly what we feel so curiously. Though — nothing has actually happened yet, you know, and it’s a good many years now since—”

This was the way the twins spoke of it all. And it was their profound conviction that had touched their old friend’s sense of duty. The experiment should justify itself — and cure them. Meanwhile none of the family knew. Everything was planned secretly.

The library was the quietest room in the house. It had shuttered bow-windows, thick carpets, heavy doors. Books lined the walls, and there was a capacious open fireplace of brick in which the wood logs blazed and roared, for the autumn night was chilly. Round this the three of them were grouped, the clergyman reading aloud from the Book of Job in low tones; Edward and Ernest, in dinner-jackets, occupying deep leather armchairs, listening. They looked exactly what they were — Cambridge “undergrads,” their faces pale against their dark hair, and alike as two peas. A shaded lamp behind the clergyman threw the rest of the room into shadow. The reading voice was steady, even monotonous, but something in it betrayed an underlying anxiety, and although the eyes rarely left the printed page, they took in every movement of the young men opposite, and noted every change upon their faces. It was his aim to produce an unexciting atmosphere, yet to miss nothing; if anything did occur to see it from the very beginning. Not to be taken by surprise was his main idea.... And thus, upon this falsely peaceful scene, the minutes passed the hour of eleven and slipped rapidly along towards midnight.

The novel element in his account of this distressing and dreadful occurrence seems to be that what happened — happened without the slightest warning or preparation. There was no gradual presentiment of any horror; no strange blast of cold air; no dwindling of heat or light; no shaking of windows or mysterious tapping upon furniture. Without preliminaries it fell with its black trappings of terror upon the scene.

The clergyman had been reading aloud for some considerable time, one or other of the twins — Ernest usually — making occasional remarks, which proved that his sense of dread was disappearing. As the time grew short and nothing happened they grew more at their ease. Edward, indeed, actually nodded, dozed, and finally fell asleep. It was a few minutes before midnight. Ernest, slightly yawning, was stretching himself in the big chair. “Nothing’s going to happen,” he said aloud, in a pause. “Your good influence has prevented it.” He even laughed now. “What superstitious asses we’ve been, sir; haven’t we — ?”

Curtice, then, dropping his Bible, looked hard at him under the lamp. For in that second, even while the words sounded, there had come about a most abrupt and dreadful change; and so swiftly that the clergyman, in spite of himself, was taken utterly by surprise and had no time to think. There had swooped down upon the quiet library — so he puts it —— an immense hushing silence, so profound that the peace already reigning there seemed clamor by comparison; and out of this enveloping stillness there rose through the space about them a living and abominable Invasion — soft, motionless, terrific. It was as though vast engines, working at full speed and pressure, yet too swift and delicate to be appreciable to any definite sense, had suddenly dropped down upon them — from nowhere. “It made me think,” the vicar used to say afterwards, “of the *Mauretania* machinery compressed into a nutshell, yet losing none of its awful power.”

“.... haven’t we?” repeated Ernest, still laughing. And Curtice, making no audible reply, heard the true answer in his heart: “Because everything has *already happened* — even as you feared.”

Yet, to the vicar’s supreme astonishment, Ernest still noticed — nothing!

“Look,” the boy added, “Eddy’s sound asleep — sleeping like a pig. Doesn’t say much for your reading, you know, sir!” And he laughed again — lightly, even foolishly. But that laughter jarred, for the clergyman understood now that the sleep of the elder twin was either feigned —— or *unnatural.*

And while the easy words fell so lightly from his lips, the monstrous engines worked and pulsed against him and against his sleeping brother, all their huge energy concentrated down into points fine as Suggestion, delicate as Thought. The Invasion affected everything. The very objects in the room altered incredibly, revealing suddenly behind their normal exteriors horrid little hearts of darkness. It was truly amazing, this vile metamorphosis. Books, chairs, pictures, all yielded up their pleasant aspect, and betrayed, as with silent mocking laughter, their inner soul of blackness — their *decay.* This is how Curtice tries to body forth in words what he actually witnessed.... And Ernest, yawning, talking lightly, half foolishly — still noticed nothing!

For all this, as described, came about in something like ten seconds; and with it swept into the clergyman's mind, like a blow, the memory of that sinister phrase used more than once by Edward: "If father doesn't come, he will certainly — *send."* And Curtice understood that he had done both — both sent and come himself.... That violent mind, released from its spell of madness in the body, yet still retaining the old implacable hatred, was now directing the terrible, unseen assault. This silent room, so hushed and still, was charged to the brim. The horror of it, as he said later, "seemed to peel the very skin from my back."... And, while Ernest noticed nothing, Edward slept...! The soul of the clergyman, strong with the desire to help or save, yet realizing that he was alone against a Legion, poured out in wordless prayer to his Deity. The clock just then, whirring before it struck, made itself audible.

"By Jove! It's all right, you see!" exclaimed Ernest, his voice oddly fainter and lower than before. "There's midnight — and nothing's happened. Bally nonsense, all of it!" His voice had dwindled curiously in volume. "I'll get the whisky and soda from the hall." His relief was great and his manner showed it. But in him somewhere was a singular change. His voice, manner, gestures, his very tread as he moved over the thick carpet toward the door, all showed it. He seemed less *real,* less alive, reduced somehow to littleness, the voice without timbre or quality, the appearance of him diminished in some fashion quite ghastly. His presence, if not actually shriveled, was at least impaired. Ernest had suffered a singular and horrible *decrease....*

The clock was still whirring before the strike. One heard the chain running up softly. Then the hammer fell upon the first stroke of midnight.

"I'm off," he laughed faintly from the door; "it's all been pure funk —— on my part, at least...!" He passed out of sight into the hall. *The Power that throbbed so mightily about the room followed him out.* Almost at the same moment Edward woke up. But he woke with a tearing and indescribable cry of pain and anguish on his lips: “Oh, oh, oh! But it hurts! It hurts! I can’t hold you; leave me. It’s breaking me asunder—”

The clergyman had sprung to his feet, but in the same instant everything had become normal once more — the room as it was before, the horror gone. There was nothing he could do or say, for there was no longer anything to put right, to defend, or to attack. Edward was speaking; his voice, deep and full as it never had been before: “By Jove, how that sleep has refreshed me! I feel twice the chap I was before — twice the chap. I feel quite splendid. Your voice, sir, must have hypnotized me to sleep....” He crossed the room with great vigor. “Where’s —— er — where’s — Ernie, by the bye?” he asked casually, hesitating — almost searching — for the name. And a shadow as of a vanished memory crossed his face and was gone. The tone conveyed the most complete indifference where once the least word or movement of his twin had wakened solicitude, love. “Gone away, I suppose — gone to bed, I mean, of course.”

Curtice has never been able to describe the dreadful conviction that overwhelmed him as he stood there staring, his heart in his mouth — the conviction, the positive certainty, that Edward had changed interiorly, had suffered an incredible accession to his existing personality. But he *knew* it as he watched. His mind, spirit, soul had most wonderfully increased. Something that hitherto the lad had known from the outside only, or by the magic of loving sympathy, had now passed, to be incorporated with his own being. And, being himself, it required no expression. Yet this visible increase was somehow terrible. Curtice shrank back from him. The instinct — he has never grasped the profound psychology of *that,* nor why it turned his soul dizzy with a kind of nausea —— the instinct to strike him where he stood, passed, and a plaintive sound from the hall, stealing softly into the room between them, sent all that was left to him of self-possession into his feet. He turned and ran. Edward followed him — very leisurely.

They found Ernest, or what had been Ernest, crouching behind the table in the hail, weeping foolishly to himself. On his face lay blackness. The mouth was open, the jaw dropped; he dribbled hopelessly; and from the face had passed all signs of intelligence — of spirit.

For a few weeks he lingered on, regaining no sign of spiritual or mental life before the poor body, hopelessly disorganized, released what was left of him, from pure inertia — from complete and utter loss of vitality.

And the horrible thing — so the distressed family thought, at least — was that all those weeks Edward showed an indifference that was singularly brutal and complete. He rarely even went to visit him. I believe, too, it is true that he only once spoke of him by name; and that was when he said— “Ernie? Oh, but Ernie is much better and happier where he is — !”

The Man from the ‘Gods’

*T*HAT THERE WAS something wrong with all his work Le Maistre well knew. Words and music, as the critics never failed to remind him, “just missed” that nameless “something” which would have made them good — perhaps great. Moreover, he was sane enough to realize that the blame lay not with an uncomprehending public, but simply with himself. The spark of inspiration that was beyond question in all his work never gathered to the flame stage. Thus his productions warmed people, but did not light them. He understood well enough what was lacking — and that no amount of mere painstaking “work” could put it right.

But on one occasion Le Maistre achieved a singular and startling success. As a sober record of fact, concealed by initials, it was reported in the Proceedings of the French Psychological Society for that year; and people who believed in the Subliminal Self, the Higher Ego, and all that consoling teaching about an attainable God within, made great havoc with the facts.

The way it came about, moreover, probably has a profound psychical significance. In any case, the result remains as the very best kind of tangible proof; for it was the only great thing he ever really achieved — this Fairy Play (so called); and its beauty was absolutely arresting.

He was something over fifty when he wrote it in its original form. The central idea came to him with the quick flash of a genuine inspiration; so did most of the music; but, in the working out of both, the fire had become smothered. The spark had never gathered into flame. The result was mediocrity. Yet, like so many artists, he confused what was in his mind and imagination with what he had actually set down upon paper; for, when he went over the score to himself, he heard the original beauty in his thoughts and believed he had transferred into his work his own memory of that beauty. The music and words themselves, however, had *not* caught it. Thus, those who heard the preliminary recital in his rooms were more or less bored according to their powers of divination.

“It’s fine; it’s original,” they remarked, shaking their heads as they went home after the performance; “but just misses it!”

The transformation that changed the common lead into gold as by some mysterious process of spiritual alchemy came about as follows: — The little play was finished, and Le Maistre, having his eye upon a certain manager, went to that particular theater one night in order to study the "feel" of it — to catch the flavor of the house, the size of the stage, and any other details he could. The management had given him a dress circle box, and he saw admirably. It was characteristic of the man, rather, that he put himself to this far-fetched kind of trouble. During the performance his mind was keenly at work. Yet he saw nothing of what was going on before his eyes; he had come with a definite purpose; he saw his own play all the time, heard his own music; watched his own creatures come on and go off among his own scenery.

At the same time the music, light and color provided a stimulus that acted upon his own imagination, and set all the finer machinery of his own creative genius working. Sub-consciously he revised his own work, with the illuminating result 'that a white light shone through his mind and showed up all the flaws, all the places where he had "missed it"; all the passages where he had trailed off into banality. And a tremendous desire went crashing through his being to revise his work in the light of this knowledge. "I felt," he said, "as though a great prayer had gone out of me — a cry, as it were, to my higher self to come to my assistance. Never in my life have I wished anything so intensely before."

Then, in that curious fashion with which many artists must be familiar, it all faded again, and the reaction set in. The effort had no doubt exhausted him. He turned his attention to the actual performances on the stage before him, and lost the power to visualize his own piece. But the play — trivial, vulgar and untrue to life — wearied him; and he withdrew into the back of the box, and incontinently — fell asleep upon the little plush sofa!

When a considerable time later he woke up, the entire theater was dark and empty; the piece was over; the audience had gone home to a man; and the building was deserted.

Le Maistre at once realized what had happened, though he could not understand why the final applause had not waked him, and hurried into his overcoat. A faint glimmer pervaded the vast auditorium, for as he leaned over the edge he could just make out the rows of empty stalls, the scattered white patches where the discarded programs lay, the music-stands of the orchestra, and the exit doors of glass where the pit began. The air still smelt unpleasantly of a crowd — wraps, furs, stale scent and cigarettes.

Then he struck a match and saw by his watch that it was two o’clock in the morning. He had slept three hours!

He pushed open the door and passed out into the passage, his one idea being how he could get out into the street, or how he would spend the time if he did not get out. He felt hungry, stiff and a trifle chilly. Feeling his way along by the backs of the upper circle seats, he advanced slowly and carefully, his footsteps making no sound upon the soft carpet, and so came at last to the first exit door. It was locked and barred. He tried the next door with the same result. There was no other exit — nothing but that narrow semicircular gangway between the wall and the seats, a box at either end, and pillars at intervals to mark the distance. “Like the exercise-walk in a prisonyard,” he thought to himself, laughing. No single light was left burning anywhere in the building. Even the hall was in darkness. He saw the gilt-framed pictures of actors and actresses on the walls; a faint rumble from the streets reached him too —— voices, traffic, footsteps, wind. Then he turned back into the theater and carefully made his way down the aisle to the front, feeling the steps first with his toe, and peered over into the body of the house. A sea of shadows swam to and fro below him. Here and there certain stalls picked themselves out of the general gloom almost as though they were occupied; he could easily imagine he saw figures still sitting in them....

And it was here, just at this point, he said, that he began for the first time to feel a little uneasy. A slight tremor of the nerves passed over him, and sitting down in one of the front-row seats he considered the situation carefully and deliberately. There was not much to consider. He was shut in for the rest of the night; the dress circle seemed to be the limits of his prison; he could get neither up nor down; there was no escape till the morning. The prospect was not pleasant; still, it was not very terrible, and his sense of humor would easily have carried him through with credit, but for one thing — this curiously disturbing sense of something he could not quite define: of something that was *going to happen,* it seemed....

It was too vague, too remote for him to deal with squarely. His mind, always keenly imaginative and pictorial, preferred to see it in the terms of a picture. He thought of the Thames as he had sometimes seen it from the Chelsea Embankment in the dusk when dark barges, too far for their outline to be defined, come looming up through the mist. In this way thoughts lie in the depths of the mind; in this way they rise gradually before the consciousness; in this way the cause of his present discomfort would presently reach the point where he would recognize it and understand. In similar fashion, he felt this "something" that moved at the back of his mind, coming slowly forward.

A sudden idea came to him —

"If I could climb down to the auditorium floor I might find a door open somewhere, or escape by way of the orchestra, perhaps!"

And the idea of action was pleasant; though how he climbed over the edge of the box in the dark and swarmed down the slippery pillar, landing with a crash upon the rim of the stage box below, he never quite understood. With a plunge he dropped backwards into the dark space, kicking over as he did so a couple of chairs, which fell with a loud clatter and woke resounding echoes all through the empty building. That clatter seemed prodigious. He held his breath for several seconds to listen, standing motionless against the wall with the distinct idea that all this noise would attract attention to himself, and that if, after all, there was anyone watching him — that if among those shadows someone —

"Ah!" he exclaimed quickly. "Now I've got it! There *is* someone watching me in another part of the building. That's why I felt uneasy—"

That tumble into the box had shaken the thought up to the surface of his mind. The picture had emerged from the mist, and he recognized the cause of his uneasiness. All this time, though none of his senses had yet proved it to him, the mind of another person, perhaps the eyes too, had been focused upon him. He was not alone.

Le Maistre felt no alarm, he said, but rather a definite thrill of exhilaration, as though the idea of this other person came to him with a sense of pleasurable excitement. His first instinct to sit concealed in the corner of the box and await events he dismissed almost at once in favor of some kind of prompt action. Stumbling in the gloom, he made his way down to the orchestra, and while groping cautiously among the crowded easels, his hand touched a tiny knob, and a dozen lights that bent over the music folios, like little heads screened under black bonnets, sprang into brilliance. The first thing he noticed was that the fire curtain was down, closing the cavernous mouth of the stage.

The shaded lights, however, were so carefully arranged that they fell only upon the music, and the main body of the theater still yawned in comparative darkness behind him. Vast and unfriendly it seemed; charged to the brim with faint shufflings and whispers as though an audience sat there stealthily turning over programs. The stalls faced him like fixed but living beings; the balconies frowned down upon him; the boxes — especially the upper ones — had an air of concealing people behind their curtains. Far overhead, glimmered a huge skylight; he heard the wind sighing across it like wind in the rigging of a ship. And, more than once, he fancied he caught the faint tread of footsteps moving about among the stalls and gangways.

Regretting that he had turned the lights up (they made himself so conspicuous, so easily visible!), he made an instinctive movement to turn them out again; but he touched the wrong knob, so that a row of lights flashed out up under the roof. In that topmost gallery of all, known as “the gods,” a little line of starry lights leaped into being, and the first thing he noticed as he looked up was the figure of a man leaning over the edge of the railing — watching him.

The same moment he saw that this figure was making a movement of some kind — a gesture. It beckoned to him. So his feeling that someone was in the theater with him was justified. There had been a man in the gods all the time.

Le Maistre admitted frankly that, in his first surprise, he collapsed backwards upon the stool usually occupied by the second ‘cello. But his alarm passed with a strange swiftness, and gave place almost immediately to a peculiar and deep-seated thrill. The instant he perceived this dim figure of a man up there under the roof his heart leaped with an emotion that was partly delight, partly pleasurable anticipation, and partly — most curious of all — awe. And in a voice that was unlike his own, and that carried across the intervening space, for all its faintness, with perfect ease, he heard the words driven out of him as if by command of some deeper instinct than he understood yet the very last words that he could have imagined as appropriate —

“You’re up there in the gods!” he called out. “Won’t you come down to me here?”

And then the figure withdrew, and he heard the sound of the footsteps descending the winding passages and stairs behind, as their owner obeyed him and came.

Alarmed, yet curiously exultant, Le Maistre stood up among the music-easels to await his coming. He was extraordinarily alert, prepared. He fumbled again with the little switch-board under the conductor’s desk, for he wished to see the man face to face in full light — not to be gradually approached in darkness. But the only thing that came of the button he pressed was a creaking noise behind him, and when he turned quickly to examine, lo and behold, he saw the huge fire-curtain rising slowly and majestically into the air. And, as it rose, revealing the stage beyond, he got the distinct impression that this very stage, now empty, had a moment before been crowded with a throng of living people, and that even now they were there concealed among the wings within a few feet of where he stood, waiting the summons to appear.

Moreover, this discovery, far from causing him the kind of amazement that might have been expected, only communicated, for the second time within the space of a few minutes, another thrill of delight.

Again this lightning sense of exhilaration swept him from head to foot.

The footsteps, meanwhile, came nearer; sometimes disappearing behind a thickness of walls that rendered them inaudible, and at other times starting suddenly into greater clearness as they came down from floor to floor. Le Maistre, unable to endure the suspense any longer, felt impelled to go forward and meet them halfway. An intense desire to see this stranger face to face came upon him. He climbed awkwardly over the orchestra railing and made his way past the first rows of the stalls. Already the steps sounded upon the same floor as himself. Hardly a dozen yards, to judge by the fall of these oddly cushioned footsteps, could now separate them. He moved more slowly, and the stranger moved more slowly too — entering at last the gangway in which he stood.

“And it is from this point,” to use the words of the report he afterwards wrote for the society, “that my memory begins to fade somewhat, or rather, that the sense of bewilderment grew so astonishingly disturbing that I find it difficult to look back and recall with accuracy the true sequence of what followed. My normal measurement of the passage of time changed too, I think; all went so swiftly, almost as in a dream, though at the time it did not appear to me to be short or hurried. But — describe the sense of glory, wonder and happiness that enveloped me as in a cloud, I simply cannot. As well might a hashish-eater attempt during the dullness of next morning to reconstruct the phantasmal wonder of all he experienced the night before. Only, this was no phantasy; it was real and actual, and more palpitatingly vivid than any other experience of my life.

“I stood waiting in the gangway while this other person — the stranger —— came towards me along the narrow space between the wall and the main body of seats. The footsteps were unhurried and regular. It was very dark; all I could see were two faint patches of light where the exit doors of the pit glimmered beyond. First one patch of light, then the other, was temporarily obscured as he passed in front of these doors. Down he moved steadily towards me through the gloom, and at the barrier of velvet rope that separated the stalls from the pit, he stopped —— just near enough for me to distinguish the head and shoulders of a man about my own height and about my own size. He stood facing me there, some ten or twelve feet away.

“For a few seconds there was complete silence — like the silence in a mine, I remember thinking — and I instinctively clenched my fists, almost expecting something violent to happen. But the next instant the man spoke; and the moment I heard his voice all traces of fear left me, and I felt nothing but this peculiarly delightful sense of exhilaration I have already mentioned. It ran through me like the flush of a generous wine, rousing all my faculties, critical and imaginative, to their highest possible power, yet at the same time so bewildering me for the moment that I scarcely realized what I was saying, doing, or thinking. From this point I went through the whole scene without hesitation or dismay — certainly without a thought of disobeying. I mean, it was a pleasure to me to help it all forward, rather than to seek to prevent.

"'Here I am,' said the man in a voice wholly wonderful. 'You called me down, and I have come!'

"'You have come from up there — from the gods,' I heard myself reply. "'I have come from up there — from the gods,' he answered; and his sentence seemed to mean so much more than mine did, although we used identical words.

"I held on to the back of the stall nearest to me. I could think for the moment of nothing further to say. The idea of what was coming thrilled me inexpressibly, though I could only hazard wild guesses as to its character.

"'Are you ready then?' he asked.

"'Ready! Ready for what?'

"'For the rehearsal,' he said, 'the secret rehearsal.'

"'The secret rehearsal?' I stammered, pretending, as a child pretends in order to heighten its joy, that I did not understand.

"' — of your play, you know; your fairy play,' he finished the sentence. "Then he moved towards me a few steps, and, hardly knowing why, I retreated. It was still impossible to see his face. The curious idea came to me that there was something odd about the man that prevented, and that would always prevent, me getting closer to him, and that perhaps I should never see his face completely at all. I cannot point to anything definite that caused this impression; I can merely report that it was so.

"'Look!' he went on, 'everyone is ready and waiting. The moment the music starts we can begin. You will find a violin down there; the rehearsal can go on at once.'

"And although it struck me at the time as most curious he should be aware of the fact, it seemed quite natural, because I do play the violin, and in fact compose all my melodies first on that instrument before I put a pen to paper. At the same time I can remember faintly protesting—"'*I?'* I remember asking; '*I'm* to play?'

"'Certainly,' replied this soft-spoken figure among the shadows. 'You're to play. Who else, pray? And see! Everyone is ready and waiting.' "I was far too happily bewildered to object further; there seemed, indeed, no time for reflection at all; I felt impelled, driven forward as it were, to go through with the adventure and to ask no questions. Besides, I wanted to go through with it. I felt the old power of the first inspiration upon me — only heightened; I felt in me the supreme and splendid confidence that I could do it all better than I had ever dreamed —— do it perfectly as it should be done. I was borne forwards upon a wave of inspiration that nothing in the whole world could interfere with.

"And, as I turned to obey, I saw for the first time that the stage was brilliantly lighted; that the scenery was the scenery already chosen by my mind; that the performers thronged the wings, and the opening characters were actually standing in their places waiting for the signal of the music to begin. The performers, moreover, I perceived, were identical in figure, feature and bearing with those ideal performers who had already enacted the play upon the inner stage of my imagination. It was all, in fact, precisely as the original inspiration had come to me weeks ago before the fires of beauty had faded during the wearisome toil of working it all out in limited terms upon the paper.

"The power that drove me forward, and at the same time filled me with this splendor of untrammeled creation, refused me, however, the least moment for consideration. I could only make my way into the orchestra and pick up the first violin-case that came to hand, belonging, doubtless, to some member of the band I had listened to earlier in the evening; and all eyes were fixed upon me from the stage as I clambered into the conductor's seat and drew the bow across the strings to tune the instrument. At the first sound I realized that my fingers, accustomed to the harsh tones of my own cheaper fiddle, were now feeling their way over the exquisite nervous system of a genuine Guarnierius that responded instantly to the lightest touch; and that the bow in my right hand was so perfectly balanced that even the best Tourte ever made could only seem like a strip of raw, unfinished wood by comparison. For the bow 'swam' over the strings, the sound streamed, smooth as honey, past my ears, and my fingers found the new intervals as easily as if they had never known any other key-board. Harmonics, double-stopping and arpeggios issued from my efforts as perfectly as trills from the throat of a bird.

"In that moment I *lived;* I understood much; I heard my soul singing within me — I finished tuning, and tapped sharply on the back of the violin to indicate that I was ready, and in the slight pause that ensued before I actually played the opening bars, I became aware that the stalls behind me, the boxes, the dress circle, and the whole house in fact right up to the ‘gods,’ were crowded with eager listeners; and, further, that the stranger — that man among the shadows in the background — standing ever beyond the reach of the light, still remained in some mysterious and potent fashion intimately in touch with my inner self, directing, helping, inspiring the performance from beginning to end.

“And, in front of me, upon the conductor’s desk, lay the score of my own music in clearest manuscript, no longer crossed out and corrected as it lay in my rooms after all the first passion of beauty had been ground out of it, but lovely and perfect as the original inspiration had rushed flamelike into my soul months before.

“The whole performance from that moment— ‘rehearsal’ seems no adequate word to describe it — went with the smoothness of a dream from beginning to end. Just as the music was my own music made perfect, so the words and songs were the mature expression of the original conception before my blundering efforts had confined them, stammering and incomplete, in broken form. Moreover — more wonderful still — I noticed the very places in my score where I had floundered, and where, in the laborious process of composition, the first inspiration had failed me and I had filled in with what was mediocre and banal. It was as if a master pointed out to me with the simplicity of true power the passages where the commonplace might pass — could —— did pass — by deft, inspired touches into what was fine, moving, noble.

The lesson was a sublime one; at the time, however, it all seemed so ridiculously simple and easy that I felt I could never again write anything that was not great and splendid.

“Moreover, the acting, speaking and dancing provided the perfect medium for my ideas; and the whole performance was the consummate representation of my first conception; even the scenery shifted swiftly and noiselessly, and the intervals between the acts were hardly noticeable.

“And the end came with a curious abruptness, bringing me to myself —— my limited, stammering, caged little self, as, it seemed, after these moments of intoxicating expression — with a sharp sense of pain that all was over; and I became aware that, without hurry, without noise, the entire audience that filled the huge building had risen to their feet like one man, and that thousands of hands were clapping *silently* the measure of their intense appreciation. From floor to ceiling, and from wall to wall, flew a great wave of emotion that swept their praise into me, gathered and focused into a single mighty draft of applause. It was, I remember thinking, all their thoughts of joy, their feelings of gratitude, beating in upon my soul in that form of praise which is the artist's only adequate reward; and it reminded me of nothing so much as the whirring of innumerable soft wings all rising through the air at the same moment. Pictorially, in this fashion, it came before my mind.

"Violin in hand, I rose too, and turned to face the auditorium, for I realized that they were calling for the author — for him who had ministered so adequately to their pleasure — and that I must be prepared to say something in reply. I had, indeed, made my first bow, and was already casting about in my mind for suitable words, when, for the first time during the whole adventure — something in me *hesitated.* Either it was that the sea of glimmering faces frightened me, or that I was obeying instinctively some faint warning that it was not myself, but some other, who was the true author of the play, and that it was for him these thousands before me clamored and called.

"But when, still hesitating in confusion, I turned again towards the stage, I saw that the great fire curtain had meanwhile descended and that a footstep, regular and unhurried, was at that very moment coming forward towards the footlights. I heard the tread. I knew at once who it was. The stranger from the shadows behind me who had directed the entire performance was now moving to the front. It was he for whom the audience clamored; it was he who was the true author of the play!

"And instantly I clamored with them, forgetting my own small pain in a kind of delightful exultation that I, too, owed this man everything, and that I should at last see him face to face and join my thanks and gratitude to theirs.

"Almost that same instant he appeared and stood before the center of the curtains, the glare of the footlights casting upwards into his face. And he looked, not at the great throng behind and beyond me, but down into *my* *own* face, into *my own* eyes, smiling, approving, his expression radiant with a glory I have never seen before or since upon any human countenance.

“And the stranger, I then realized — was *myself* “What happened next is so difficult to describe — though I scarcely know why it should be so — that I cannot hope to convey the reality of it properly, or paint the instantaneous manner in which he vanished and was gone. He neither faded nor moved. But in a second that seemed to have no perceptible duration he was beside me — with me — in me; and this swift way he became suddenly merged into myself has always seemed to me the most amazing thing I have ever witnessed. The wave of delight and exultation swept into me anew. I felt for one brief moment that I was as a god — with a god’s power of perfect expression.

“But for one second only; for, at once, a new sound, terrible and overwhelming, rose in a flood and tore me away from all that I had ever known. And the sound was ugly and distressing... and darkness followed it....

“It was real clapping this time, the clapping of human hands... and an indifferent orchestra was playing a noisy march just below me with a great blare of brass out of tune. The lights were up all over the theater; the audience, busy with wraps and overcoats and applause, were hurrying out. I saw the actors and actresses of the play bowing and scraping before the curtain; and the sight of the perspiration trickling down over the grease-paint of the leading man directly beneath my box struck me like a blow in the face. Then came the frantic whistling for broughams and taxicabs and the hoarse shouting from the street where men cried the evening papers in the roar of the outer world. I picked up my opera-hat, which had rolled into the middle of the floor while I had slept upon the sofa, scrambled into my overcoat, rushed out into the street, and told the driver of the first taxicab I found to drive for his life at double rates....

“And all that night, before the memory of the wonder and the glory faded, I worked upon my score of words and music, striving to get down on the paper something at least of what had been shown to me. How much, or how little I succeeded it is now impossible to say. As I have already explained in this report, the memory faded with distressing swiftness. But I did my best.

I hope — I believe — I am told, at least — that there is something in the work that people like....

The Man Who Played upon the Leaf

WHERE THE JURA pine-woods push the fringe of their purple cloak down the slopes till the vineyards stop them lest they should troop into the lake of Neuchâtel, you may find the village where lived the Man Who Played upon the Leaf.

My first sight of him was genuinely prophetic — that spring evening in the garden *café* of the little mountain auberge. But before I saw him I heard him, and ever afterwards the sound and the sight have remained inseparable in my mind.

Jean Grospierre and Louis Favre were giving me confused instructions —— the *vin rouge* of Neuchâtel is heady, you know — as to the best route up the Tête-de-Rang, when a thin, wailing music, that at first I took to be rising wind, made itself heard suddenly among the apple trees at the end of the garden, and riveted my attention with a thrill of I know not what.

Favre's description of the bridle path over Mont Racine died away; then Grospierre's eyes wandered as he, too, stopped to listen; and at the same moment a mongrel dog of indescribably forlorn appearance came whining about our table under the walnut tree.

"It's Perret 'Comment-va,' the man who plays on the leaf," said Favre.

"And his cursed dog," added Grospierre, with a shrug of disgust. And, after a pause, they fell again to quarreling about my complicated path up the Tête-de-Rang.

I turned from them in the direction of the sound.

The dusk was falling. Through the trees I saw the vineyards sloping down a mile or two to the dark blue lake with its distant-shadowed shore and the white line of misty Alps in the sky beyond. Behind us the forests rose in folded purple ridges to the heights of Boudry and La Tourne, soft and thick like carpets of cloud. There was no one about in the cabaret. I heard a horse's hoofs in the village street, a rattle of pans from the kitchen, and the soft roar of a train climbing the mountain railway through gathering darkness towards France — and, singing through it all, like a thread of silver through a dream, this sweet and windy music.

But at first there was nothing to be seen. The Man Who Played on the Leaf was not visible, though I stared hard at the place whence the sound apparently proceeded. The effect, for a moment, was almost ghostly.

Then, down there among the shadows of fruit trees and small pines, something moved, and I became aware with a start that the little *sapin* I had been looking at all the time was really not a tree, but a man — hatless, with dark face, loose hair, and wearing a *pèlerine* over his shoulders. How he had produced this singularly vivid impression and taken upon himself the outline and image of a tree is utterly beyond me to describe. It was, doubtless, some swift suggestion in my own imagination that deceived me.... Yet he was thin, small, straight, and his flying hair and spreading *pèlerine* somehow pictured themselves in the network of dusk and background into the semblance, I suppose, of branches.

I merely record my impression with the truest available words — also my instant persuasion that this first view of the man was, after all, significant and prophetic: his dominant characteristics presented themselves to me symbolically. I saw the man first as a tree; I heard his music first as wind.

Then, as he came slowly towards us, it was clear that he produced the sound by blowing upon a leaf held to his lips between tightly closed hands. And at his heel followed the mongrel dog.

“The inseparables!” sneered Grospierre, who did not appreciate the interruption. He glanced contemptuously at the man and the dog, his face and manner, it seemed to me, conveying a merest trace, however, of superstitious fear. “The tune your father taught you, *hein?”* he added, with a cruel allusion I did not at the moment understand.

“Hush!” Favre said; “he plays thunderingly well all the same!” His glass had not been emptied quite so often, and in his eyes as he listened there was a touch of something that was between respect and wonder.

“The music of the devil,” Grospierre muttered as he turned with the gesture of surly impatience to the wine and the rye bread. “It makes me dream at night. Ooua!”

The man, paying no attention to the gibes, came closer, continuing his leaf-music, and as I watched and listened the thrill that had first stirred in me grew curiously. To look at, he was perhaps forty, perhaps fifty; worn, thin, broken; and something seizingly pathetic in his appearance told its little wordless story into the air. The stamp of the outcast was mercilessly upon him. But the eyes were dark and fine. They proclaimed the possession of something that was neither worn nor broken, something that was proud to be outcast, and welcomed it.

“He’s cracky, you know,” explained Favre, “and half blind. He lives in that hut on the edge of the forest” — pointing with his thumb toward Côtendard — “and plays on the leaf for what he can earn.”

We listened for five minutes perhaps while this singular being stood there in the dusk and piped his weird tunes; and if imagination had influenced my first sight of him it certainly had nothing to do with what I now heard. For it was unmistakable; the man played, not mere tunes and melodies, but the clean, strong, elemental sounds of Nature —— especially the crying voices of wind. It was the raw material, if you like, of what the masters have used here and there — Wagner, and so forth — but by him heard closely and wonderfully, and produced with marvelous accuracy. It was now the notes of birds or the tinkle and rustle of sounds heard in groves and copses, and now the murmur of those airs that lose their way on summer noons among the tree tops; and then, quite incredibly, just as the man came closer and the volume increased, it grew to the crying of bigger winds and the whispering rush of rain among tossed branches....

How he produced it passed my comprehension, but I think he somehow mingled his own voice with the actual notes of the vibrating edge of the leaf; perhaps, too, that the strange passion shaking behind it all in the depths of the bewildered spirit poured out and reached my mind by ways unknown and incalculable.

I must have momentarily lost myself in the soft magic of it, for I remember coming back with a start to notice that the man had stopped, and that his melancholy face was turned to me with a smile of comprehension and sympathy that passed again almost before I had time to recognize it, and certainly before I had time to reply. And this time I am ready to admit that it was my own imagination, singularly stirred, that translated his smile into the words that no one else heard —

“I was playing for you — because you understand.”

Favre was standing up and I saw him give the man the half loaf of coarse bread that was on the table, offering also his own partly-emptied wine-glass. “I haven’t the sou today,” he was saying, “but if you re hungry, mon brave—” And the man, refusing the wine, took the bread with an air of dignity that precluded all suggestion of patronage or favor, and ought to have made Favre feel proud that he had offered it.

“And that for his son!” laughed the stupid Grospierre, tossing a cheese-rind to the dog, “or for his forest god!”

The music was about me like a net that still held my words and thoughts in a delicate bondage — which is my only explanation for not silencing the coarse guide in the way he deserved; but a few minutes later, when the men had gone into the inn, I crossed to the end of the garden, and there, where the perfumes of orchard and forest deliciously mingled, I came upon the man sitting on the grass beneath an apple tree. The dog, wagging its tail, was at his feet, as he fed it with the best and largest portions of the bread. For himself, it seemed, he kept nothing but the crust, and — what I could hardly believe, had I not actually witnessed it — the cur, though clearly hungry, had to be coaxed with smiles and kind words to eat what it realized in some dear dog-fashion was needed even more by its master. A pair of outcasts they looked indeed, sharing dry bread in the back garden of the village inn; but in the soft, discerning eyes of that mangy creature there was an expression that raised it, for me at least, far beyond the ranks of common curdom; and in the eyes of the man, half-witted and pariah as he undoubtedly was, a look that set him somewhere in a lonely place where he heard the still, small voices of the world and moved with the elemental tides of life that are never outcast and that include the farthest suns.

He took the franc I offered; and, closer, I perceived that his eyes, for all their moments of fugitive brilliance, were indeed half sightless, and that perhaps he saw only well enough to know men as trees walking. In the village some said he saw better than most, that he saw in the dark, possibly even into the peopled regions beyond this world, and there were reasons — uncanny reasons — to explain the belief. I only know, at any rate, that from this first moment of our meeting he never failed to recognize me at a considerable distance, and to be aware of my whereabouts even in the woods at night; and the best explanation I ever heard, though of course unscientific, was Louis Favre's whispered communication that "he sees with the whole surface of his skin!"

He took the franc with the same air of grandeur that he took the bread, as though he conferred a favor, yet was grateful. The beauty of that gesture has often come back to me since with a sense of wonder for the sweet nobility that I afterwards understood inspired it. At the time, however, he merely looked up at me with the remark, *"C'est pom le Dieu* —— merci!

He did not say "le *bon* Dieu," as everyone else did.

And though I had meant to get into conversation with him, I found no words quickly enough, for he at once stood up and began to play again on his leaf; and while he played his thanks and gratitude, or the thanks and gratitude of his God, that shaggy mongrel dog stopped eating and sat up beside him to listen.

Both fixed their eyes upon me as the sounds of wind and birds and forest poured softly and wonderfully about my ears... so that, when it was over and I went down the quiet street to my *pension,* I was aware that some tiny sense of bewilderment had crept into the profounder regions of my consciousness and faintly disturbed my normal conviction that I belonged to the common world of men as of old. Some aspect of the village, especially of the human occupants in it, had secretly changed for me.

Those pearly spaces of sky, where the bats flew over the red roofs, seemed more alive, more exquisite than before; the smells of the open stables where the cows stood munching, more fragrant than usual of sweet animal life that included myself delightfully, keenly; the last chatterings of the sparrows under the eaves of my own *pension* more intimate and personal....

Almost as if those strands of elemental music the man played on his leaf had for the moment made me free of the life of the earth, as distinct from the life of men....

I can only suggest this, and leave the rest to the care of the imaginative reader; for it is impossible to say along what inner byways of fancy I reached the conclusion that when the man spoke of "the God," and not "th*e* *good* God," he intended to convey his sense of some great woodland personality — some Spirit of the Forests whom he knew and loved and worshipped, and whom, he was intuitively aware, I also knew and loved and worshipped.

I during the next few weeks I came to learn more about this poor, half-witted man. In the village he was known as Perret "Comment-va," the Man Who Plays on the Leaf; but when the people wished to be more explicit they described him as the man "without parents and without God." The origin of "Comment-va" I never discovered, but the other titles were easily explained — he was illegitimate and outcast. The mother had been a wandering Italian girl and the father a loose-living *bûcheron,* who was, it seems, a standing disgrace to the community. I think the villagers were not conscious of their severity; the older generation of farmers and *vignerons* had pity, but the younger ones and those of his own age were certainly guilty, if not of deliberate cruelty, at least of a harsh neglect and the utter withholding of sympathy. It was like the thoughtless cruelty of children, due to small unwisdom, and to that absence of charity which is based on ignorance. They could not in the least understand this crazy, picturesque being who wandered day and night in the forests and spoke openly, though never quite intelligibly, of worshipping another God than their own anthropomorphic deity.

People looked askance at him because he was queer; a few feared him; one or two I found later — all women — felt vaguely that there was something in him rather wonderful, they hardly knew what, that lifted him beyond the reach of village taunts and sneers. But from all he was remote, alien, solitary — an outcast and a pariah.

It so happened that I was very busy at the time, seeking the seclusion of the place for my work, and rarely going out until the day was failing; and so it was, I suppose, that my sight of the man was always associated with a gentle dusk, long shadows and slanting rays of sunlight. Every time I saw that thin, straight, yet broken figure, every time the music of the leaf reached me, there came too, the inexplicable thrill of secret wonder and delight that had first accompanied his presence, and with it the subtle suggestion of a haunted woodland life, beautiful with new values. To this day I see that sad, dark face moving about the street, touched with melancholy, yet with the singular light of an inner glory that sometimes lit flames in the poor eyes. Perhaps — the fancy entered my thoughts sometimes when I passed him — those who are half out of their minds, as the saying goes, are at the same time half in another region whose penetrating loveliness has so bewildered and amazed them that they no longer can play their dull part in our commonplace world; and certainly for me this man's presence never failed to convey an awareness of some hidden and secret beauty that he knew apart from the ordinary haunts and pursuits of men.

Often I followed him up into the woods — in spite of the menacing growls of the dog, who invariably showed his teeth lest I should approach too close — with a great longing to know what he did there and how he spent his time wandering in the great forests, sometimes, I was assured, staying out entire nights or remaining away for days together. For in these Jura forests that cover the mountains from Neuchâtel to Yverdon, and stretch thickly up to the very frontiers of France, you may walk for days without finding a farm or meeting more than an occasional *bûcheron.* And at length, after weeks of failure, and by some process of sympathy he apparently communicated in turn to the dog, it came about that I was — *accepted.* I was allowed to follow at a distance, to listen and, if I could, to watch.

I make use of the conditional, because once in the forest this man had the power of concealing himself in the same way that certain animals and insects conceal themselves by choosing places instinctively where the color of their surroundings merge into their outlines and obliterate them. So long as he moved all was well; but the moment he stopped and a chance dell or cluster of trees intervened I lost sight of him, and more than once passed within a foot of his presence without knowing it, though the dog was plainly there at his feet. And the instant I turned at the sound of the leaf, there he was, leaning against some dark tree-stem, part of a shadow perhaps, growing like a forest-thing out of the thick moss that hid his feet, or merging with extraordinary intimacy into the fronds of some drooping pine bough! Moreover, this concealment was never intentional, it seems, but instinctive. The life to which he belonged took him close to its heart, draping about the starved and wasted shoulders the cloak of kindly sympathy which the world of men denied him.

And, while I took my place some little way off upon a fallen stem, and the dog sat looking up into his face with its eyes of yearning and affection, Perret “Comment-va” would take a leaf from the nearest ivy, raise it between tightly pressed palms to his lips and begin that magic sound that seemed to rise out of the forest-voices themselves rather than to be a thing apart.

It was a late evening towards the end of May when I first secured this privilege at close quarters, and the memory of it lives in me still with the fragrance and wonder of some incredible dream. The forest just there was scented with wild lilies of the valley which carpeted the more open spaces with their white bells and big, green leaves; patches of violets and pale anemone twinkled down the mossy stairways of every glade; and through slim openings among the pine-stems I saw the shadowed blues of the lake beyond and the far line of the high Alps, soft and cloudlike in the sky. Already the woods were drawing the dusk out of the earth to cloak themselves for sleep, and in the east a rising moon stared close over the ground between the big trees, dropping trails of faint and yellowish silver along the moss. Distant cowbells, and an occasional murmur of village voices, reached the ear. But a deep hush lay over all that mighty slope of mountain forest, and even the footsteps of ourselves and the dog had come to rest.

Then, as sounds heard in a dream, a breeze stirred the topmost branches of the pines, filtering down to us as from the wings of birds. It brought new odors of sky and sun-kissed branches with it. A moment later it lost itself in the darkening aisles of forest beyond; and out of the stillness that followed, I heard the strange music of the leaf rising about us with its extraordinary power of suggestion.

And, turning to see the face of the player more closely, I saw that it had marvelously changed, had become young, unlined, soft with joy. The spirit of the immense woods possessed him, and he was at peace —

While he played, too, he swayed a little to and fro, just as a slender *sapin* sways in wind, and a revelation came to me of that strange beauty of combined sound and movement — trees bending while they sing, branches trembling and a-whisper, children that laugh while they dance. And, oh, the crying, plaintive notes of that leaf, and the profound sense of elemental primitive sound that they woke in the penetralia of the imagination, subtly linking simplicity to grandeur! Terribly yet sweetly penetrating, how they searched the heart through, and troubled the very sources of life! Often and often since have I wondered what it was in that singular music that made me *know* the distant Alps listened in their sky-spaces, and that the purple slopes of Boudry and Mont Racine bore it along the spires of their woods as though giant harp strings stretched to the far summits of Chasserai and the arid wastes of Tête de Rang.

In the music this outcast played upon the leaf there was something of a wild, mad beauty that plunged like a knife to the home of tears, and at the same time sang out beyond them — something coldly elemental, close to the naked heart of life. The truth, doubtless, was that his strains, making articulate the sounds of Nature, touched deep, primitive yearnings that for many are buried beyond recall. And between the airs, even between the bars, there fell deep weeping silences when the sounds merged themselves into the sigh of wind or the murmur of falling water, just as the strange player merged his body into the form and color of the trees about him.

And when at last he ceased, I went close to him, hardly knowing what it was I wanted so much to ask or say. He straightened up at my approach. The melancholy dropped its veil upon his face instantly.

“But that was beautiful — unearthly!” I faltered. “You never have played like that in the village—”

And for a second his eyes lit up as he pointed to the dark spaces of forest behind us:

“In there,” he said softly, “there is light!”

“You hear true music in these woods,” I ventured, hoping to draw him out; “this music you play — this exquisite singing of winds and trees?”

He looked at me with a puzzled expression and I knew, of course, that I had blundered with my banal words. Then, before I could explain or alter, there floated to us through the trees a sound of church bells from villages far away; and instantly, as he heard, his face grew dark, as though he understood in some vague fashion that it was a symbol of the faith of those parents who had wronged him, and of the people who continually made him suffer. Something of this, I feel sure, passed through his tortured mind, for he looked menacingly about him, and the dog, who caught the shadow of all his moods, began to growl angrily.

“My music,” he said, with a sudden abruptness that was almost fierce, “is for my God.”

“Your God of the Forests?” I said, with a real sympathy that I believe reached him.

“Pour sûr! Pour sûr! I play it all over the world” — he looked about him down the slopes of villages and vineyards— “and for those who understand — those who belong — to come.”

He was, I felt sure, going to say more, perhaps to unbosom himself to me a little; and I might have learned something of the ritual this self-appointed priest of Pan followed in his forest temples — when, the sound of the bells swelled suddenly on the wind, and he turned with an angry gesture and made to go. Their insolence, penetrating even to the privacy of his secret woods, was too much for him.

“And you find many?” I asked.

Perret “Comment-va” shrugged his shoulders and smiled pityingly.

“Moi. Puis le chien — puis maintenant — *vous!”*

He was gone the same minute, as if the branches stretched out dark arms to draw him away among them,... and on my way back to the village, by the growing light of the moon, I heard far away in that deep world of a million trees the echoes of a weird, sweet music, as this unwitting votary of Pan piped and fluted to his mighty God upon an ivy leaf.

And the last thing I actually saw was the mongrel cur turning back from the edge of the forest to look at me for a moment of hesitation. He thought it was time now that I should join the little band of worshippers and follow them to the haunted spots of worship.

“Moi — puis le chien — puis maintenant — *vous!”*

*F*rom that moment of speech a kind of unexpressed intimacy between us came into being, and whenever we passed one another in the street he would give me a swift, happy look, and jerk his head significantly towards the forests. The feeling that, perhaps, in his curious lonely existence I counted for something important made me very careful with him. From time to time I gave him a few francs, and regularly twice a week when I knew he was away, I used to steal unobserved to his hut on the edge of the forest and put parcels of food inside the door — *salamé,* cheese, bread; and on one or two occasions when I had been extravagant with my own tea, pieces of plumcake — what the Colombier baker called *plume-cak'!*

He never acknowledged these little gifts, and I sometimes wondered to what use he put them, for though the dog remained well favored, so far as any cur can be so, he himself seemed to waste away more rapidly than ever. I found, too, that he did receive help from the village — official help — but that after the night when he was caught on the church steps with an oil can, kindling-wood and a box of matches, this help was reduced by half, and the threat made to discontinue it altogether. Yet I feel sure there was no inherent maliciousness in the Man who Played upon the Leaf, and that his hatred of an "alien" faith was akin to the mistaken zeal that in other days could send poor sinners to the stake for the ultimate safety of their souls.

Two things, moreover, helped to foster the tender belief I had in his innate goodness: first, that all the children of the village loved him and were unafraid, to the point of playing with him and pulling him about as though he were a big dog; and, secondly, that his devotion for the mongrel hound, his equal and fellow-worshipper, went to the length of genuine self-sacrifice. I could never forget how he fed it with the best of the bread, when his own face was pinched and drawn with hunger; and on other occasions I saw many similar proofs of his unselfish affection. His love for that mongrel, never uttered, in my presence at least, perhaps unrecognized as love even by himself, must surely have risen in some form of music or incense to sweeten the very halls of heaven.

In the woods I came across him anywhere and everywhere, sometimes so unexpectedly that it occurred to me he must have followed me stealthily for long distances. And once, in that very lonely stretch above the mountain railway, towards Mont-mollin, where the trees are spaced apart with an effect of cathedral aisles and Gothic arches, he caught me suddenly and did something that for a moment caused me a thrill of genuine alarm.

Wild lilies of the valley grow very thickly thereabouts, and the ground falls into a natural hollow that shuts it off from the rest of the forest with a peculiar and delightful sense of privacy; and when I came across it for the first time I stopped with a sudden feeling of quite bewildering enchantment — with a kind of childish awe that caught my breath as though I had slipped through some fairy door or blundered out of the ordinary world into a place of holy ground where solemn and beautiful things were the order of the day.

I waited a moment and looked about me. It was utterly still. The haze of the day had given place to an evening clarity of atmosphere that gave the world an appearance of having just received its finishing touches of pristine beauty. The scent of the lilies was overpoweringly sweet. But the whole first impression — before I had time to argue it away — was that I stood before some mighty chancel steps on the eve of a secret festival of importance, and that all was prepared and decorated with a view to the coming ceremony. The hush was the most delicate and profound imaginable — almost forbidding. I was a rude disturber.

Then, without any sound of approaching footsteps, my hat was lifted from my head, and when I turned with a sudden start of alarm, there before me stood Perret "Comment-va," the Man Who Played upon the Leaf.

An extraordinary air of dignity hung about him. His face was stern, yet rapt; something in his eyes genuinely impressive; and his whole appearance produced the instant impression — it touched me with a fleeting sense of awe — that here I had come upon him in the very act —— had surprised this poor, broken being in some dramatic moment when his soul sought to find its own peculiar region, and to transform itself into loveliness through some process of outward worship.

He handed the hat back to me without a word, and I understood that I had unwittingly blundered into the secret place of his strange cult, some shrine, as it were, haunted doubly by his faith and imagination, perhaps even into his very Holy of Hoies. His own head, as usual, was bared. I could no more have covered myself again than I could have put my hat on in Communion service of my own church.

"But — this wonderful place — this peace, this silence!" I murmured, with the best manner of apology for the intrusion I could muster on the instant. "May I stay a little with you, perhaps — and see?"

And his face passed almost immediately, when he realized that I understood, into that soft and happy expression the woods invariably drew out upon it — the look of the soul, complete and healed.

"Hush!" he whispered, his face solemn with the mystery of the listening trees; *"Vous êtes un pen en retard — mais pourtant...."*

And lifting the leaf to his lips he played a soft and whirring music that had for its undercurrent the sotinds of running water and singing wind mingled exquisitely together. It was half chant, half song, solemn enough for the dead, yet with a strain of soaring joy in it that made me think of children and a perfect faith. The music *blessed* me, and the leagues of forest, listening, poured about us all their healing forces.

I swear it would not have greatly surprised me to see the shaggy flanks of Pan himself disappearing behind the moss-grown boulders that lay about the hollows, or to have caught the flutter of white limbs as the nymphs stepped to the measure of his tune through the mosaic of slanting sunshine and shadow beyond.

Instead, I saw only that picturesque madman playing upon his ivy leaf, and at his feet the faithful dog staring up without blinking into his face, from time to time turning to make sure that I listened and understood.

But the desolate places drew him most, and no distance seemed too great either for himself or his dog.

In this part of the Jura there is scenery of a somber and impressive grandeur that, in its way, is quite as majestic as the revelation of far bigger mountains. The general appearance of soft blue pine woods is deceptive. The Boudry cliffs, slashed here and there with inaccessible couloirs, are undeniably grand, and in the sweep of the Creux du Van precipices there is a splendid terror quite as solemn as that of the Matter-horn itself. The shadows of its smooth, circular walls deny the sun all day, and the winds, caught within the 700 ft sides of its huge amphitheater, as in the hollow of some awful cup, boom and roar with the crying of lost thunders.

I often met him in these lonely fastnesses, wearing that half-bewildered, half-happy look of the wandering child; and one day in particular, when I risked my neck scrambling up the most easterly of the Boudry couloirs, I learned afterwards that he had spent the whole time — four hours and more — on the little Champ de Trémont at the bottom, watching me with his dog till I arrived in safety at the top. His fellow-worshippers were few, he explained, and worth keeping; though it was ever inexplicable to me how his poor damaged eyes performed the marvels of sight they did.

And another time, at night, when, I admit, no sane man should have been abroad, and I had lost my way coming home from a climb along the torn and precipitous ledges of La Tourne, I heard his leaf thinly piercing the storm, always in front of me yet never overtaken, a sure though invisible guide. The cliffs on that descent are sudden and treacherous. The torrent of the Areuse, swollen with the melting snows, thundered ominously far below; and the forests swung their vast wet cloaks about them with torrents of blinding rain and clouds of darkness —— yet all fragrant with warm wind as a virgin world answering to its first spring tempest. There he was, the outcast with his leaf, playing to his God amid all these crashings and bellowings....

In the night, too, when skies were quiet and stars a-gleam, or in the still watches before the dawn, I would sometimes wake with the sound of clustered branches combing faint music from the gently-rising wind, and figure to myself that strange, lost creature wandering with his dog and leaf, his *pelerine,* his flying hair, his sweet, rapt expression of an inner glory, out there among the world of swaying trees he loved so well. And then my first soft view of the man would come back to me when I had seen him in the dusk as a tree; as though by some queer optical freak my outer and my inner vision had mingled so that I perceived both his broken body and his soul of magic. For the mysterious singing of the leaf, heard in such moments from my window while the world slept, expressed absolutely the inmost cry of that lonely and singular spirit, damaged in the eyes of the village beyond repair, but in the sight of the wood-gods he so devoutly worshipped, made whole with their own peculiar loveliness and fashioned after the image of elemental things.

The spring wonder was melting into the peace of the long summer days when the end came. The vineyards had begun to dress themselves in green, and the forest in those soft blues when individual trees lose their outline in the general body of the mountain. The lake was indistinguishable from the sky; the Jura peaks and ridges gone a-soaring into misty distances; the white Alps withdrawn into inaccessible and remote solitudes of heaven. I was making reluctant preparations for leaving — dark London already in my thoughts — when the news came. I forget who first put it into actual words. It had been about the village all the morning, and something of it was in every face as I went down the street. But the moment I came out and saw the dog on my doorstep, looking up at me with puzzled and beseeching eyes, I knew that something untoward had happened; and when he bit at my boots and caught my trousers in his teeth, pulling me in the direction of the forest, a sudden sense of poignant bereavement shot through my heart that I found it hard to explain, and that must seem incredible to those who have never known how potent may be the conviction of a sudden intuition.

I followed the forlorn creature whither it led, but before a hundred yards lay behind us I had learned the facts from half-a-dozen mouths. That morning, very early, before the countryside was awake, the first mountain train, swiftly descending the steep incline below Chambrelien, had caught Perret "Comment-va" just where the Mont Racine *sentier* crosses the line on the way to his best-beloved woods, and in one swift second had swept him into eternity. The spot was in the direct line he always took to that special woodland shrine — his Holy Place.

And the manner of his death was characteristic of what I had divined in the man from the beginning; for he had given up his life to save his dog — this mongrel and faithful creature that now tugged so piteously at my trousers. Details, too, were not lacking; the engine-driver had not failed to tell the story at the next station, and the news had traveled up the mountainside in the way that all such news travels — swiftly.

Moreover, the woman who lived at the hut beside the crossing, and lowered the wooden barriers at the approach of all trains, had witnessed the whole sad scene from the beginning.

And it is soon told. Neither she nor the engine-driver knew exactly how the dog got caught in the rails, but both saw that it *was* caught, and both saw plainly how the figure of the half-witted wanderer, hatless as usual and with cape flying, moved deliberately across the line to release it. It all happened in a moment. The man could only have saved himself by leaving the dog to its fate. The shrieking whistle had as little effect upon him as the powerful breaks had upon the engine in those few available moments. Yet, in the fraction of a second before the engine caught them, the dog somehow leapt free, and the soul of the Man Who Played upon the Leaf passed into the presence of his God — singing.

As soon as it realized that I followed willingly, the beastie left me and trotted on ahead, turning every few minutes to make sure that I was coming. But I guessed our destination without difficulty. We passed the Pontarlier railway first, then climbed for half-an-hour and crossed the mountain line about a mile above the scene of the disaster, and so eventually entered the region of the forest, still quivering with innumerable flowers, where in the shaded heart of trees we approached the spot of lilies that I knew — the place where a few weeks before the devout worshipper had lifted the hat from my head because the earth whereon I stood was holy ground. We stood in the pillared gateway of his Holy of Holies. The cool airs, perfumed beyond belief, stole out of the forest to meet us on the very threshold, for the trees here grew so thickly that only patches of the summer blaze found an entrance. And this time I did not wait on the outskirts, but followed my four-footed guide to a group of mossy boulders that stood in the very center of the hollow.

And there, as the dog raised its eyes to mine, soft with the pain of its great unanswerable question, I saw in a cleft of the grey rock the ashes of many hundred fires; and, placed about them in careful array, an assortment of the sacrifices he had offered, doubtless in sharp personal deprivation, to his deity: — bits of moldy bread, half-loaves, untouched portions of cheese, *salamé* with the skin uncut — most of it exactly as I had left it in his hut; and last of all, wrapped in the original white paper, the piece of Colombier *plume-cak* and a row of ten silver francs round the edge....

I learned afterwards, too, that among the almost unrecognizable remains on the railway, untouched by the devouring terror of the iron, they had found a hand — tightly clasping in its dead fingers a crumpled ivy leaf....

My efforts to find a home for the dog delayed my departure, I remember, several days; but in the autumn when I returned it was only to hear that the creature had refused to stay with anyone, and finally had escaped into the forest and deliberately starved itself to death. They found its skeleton, Louis Favre told me, in a rocky hollow on the lower slopes of Mont Racine in the direction of Montmollin. But Louis Favre did not know, as I knew, that this hollow had received other sacrifices as well, and was consecrated ground.

And somewhere, if you search well the Jura slopes between Champ du Moulin, where Jean-Jacques Rousseau had his temporary house, and

Côtendard where he visited Lord Wemyss when "Milord Maréchal Keith" was Governor of the Principality of Neuchâtel under Frederic II, King of Prussia — if you look well these haunted slopes, somewhere between the vineyards and the gleaming limestone heights, you shall find the forest glade where lie the bleached bones of the mongrel dog, and the little village cemetery that holds the remains of the Man Who Played upon the Leaf to the honor of the Great God Pan.

The Price of Wiggins’s Orgy

I

IT HAPPENED TO be a Saturday when Samuel Wiggins drew the first cash sum on account of his small legacy — some twenty pounds, ten in gold and ten in notes. It felt in his pocket like a bottled-up prolongation of life. Never before had he seen so many dreams within practical reach. It produced in him a kind of high and elusive exaltation of the spirit. From time to time he put his hand down to make the notes crackle and let his fingers play through the running sovereigns as children play through sand.

For twenty years he had been secretary to a philanthropist interested in feeding — feeding the poor. Soup kitchens had been the keynote of those twenty years, the distribution of victuals his sole objective. And now he had his reward — a legacy of £100 a year for the balance of his days.

To him it was riches. He wore a shortish frock-coat, a low, spreading collar, a black made-up tie, and boots with elastic sides. On this particular day he wore also a new pair of rather bright yellow leather gloves. He was unmarried, over forty, bald, plump in the body, and possessed of a simple and emotional heart almost childlike. His brown eyes shone in a face that was wrinkled and dusty — all his dreams driven inwards by the long years of uninspired toil for another.

For the first time in his life, released from the dingy purlieus of soup kitchens and the like, he wandered towards evening among the gay and lighted streets of the “West End” — Piccadilly Circus where the flaming lamps positively hurt the eyes, and Leicester Square. It was bewildering and delightful, this freedom. It went to his head. Yet he ought to have known better.

“I’m going to dine at a restaurant tonight, byjove,” he said to himself, thinking of the gloomy boarding-house where he usually sat between a missionary and a typewriter. He fingered his money. “I’m going to celebrate my legacy. I’ve earned it.” The thought of a motorcar flashed absurdly through his mind; it was followed by another: a holiday in Spain, Italy, Hungary — one of those sunny countries where music was cheap, in the open air, and of the romantic kind he loved. These thoughts show the kind of exaltation that possessed him.

“It’s nearly, though not quite, £2 a week,” he repeated to himself for the fiftieth time, reflecting upon his legacy. “I simply can’t believe it!”

After indecision that threatened to be endless, he turned at length through the swinging glass doors of a big and rather gorgeous restaurant. Only once before in his life had he dined at a big London restaurant — a Railway Hotel! Passing with some hesitation through the gaudy *café* where a number of foreigners sat drinking at little marble tables, he entered the main dining room, long, lofty, and already thronged. Here the light and noise and movement dazed him considerably, and for the life of him he could not decide upon a table. The people all looked so prosperous and important; the waiters so like gentlemen in evening dress —— the kind that came to the philanthropist’s table. The roar of voices, eating, knives and forks, rose about him and filled him with a certain dismay. It was all rather overwhelming.

“I should have liked a smaller place better,” he murmured, “but still—” And again he fingered his money to gain confidence.

The choice of a table *was* intimidating, for he was absurdly retiring, was Wiggins; more at home with papers and the reports of philanthropic societies; his holidays spent in a boarding-house at Worthing with his sister and her invalid husband. Then relief came in the form of a subhead waiter who, spying his helplessness, inquired with a bland grandeur of manner if he “looked perhaps for someone?”

“Oh, a table, thanks, only a table—”

The man, washing his hands in mid-air, swept down the crowded aisles and found one without the least difficulty. It emerged from nowhere so easily that Wiggins felt he had been a fool not to discover it alone. He wondered if he ought to tip the man half-a-crown now or later, but, before he could decide, another occupied his place, bland and smiling, with black eyes and plushlike hair, bending low before him and holding out a large pink program.

He examined it, feeling that he ought to order dishes with outlandish names just to show that he knew his way about. Before he could steady his eye upon a single line, however, a third waiter, very youthful, suggested in broken English that Wiggins should leave his hat, coat and umbrella elsewhere. This he did willingly, though without grace or dispatch, for the yellow gloves stuck ridiculously to his hands. Then he sat down and turned to the menu again.

It was a very ordinary restaurant really, in spite of the vast height of the gilded ceiling, the scale of its sham magnificence and the excessive glitter of its hundred lights. The menu, disguised by various expensive and *recherche* dishes (which when ordered were invariably found to be "off"), was even more ordinary than the hall. But to the dazed Wiggins the words looked like a series of death-sentences printed in different languages, but all meaning the same thing: *order me* - *or die!* That waiter standing over him was the executioner. Unless he speedily ordered something really worth the proprietor's while to provide, the head waiter would be summoned and he, Wiggins, would be beheaded. Those stars against certain cheap dishes meant that they could only be ordered by privileged persons, and those crosses —

"This is *vairy* nice this sevening, sir," said the waiter, suddenly bending and pointing with a dirty finger to a dish that Wiggins found buried in a list uncommonly like "Voluntary Subscriptions" in his reports. It was entitled "Lancashire Hot-Pot... 2/0" — two shillings, not two pounds, as he first imagined! He leaped at it.

"Yes, thanks; that'll do, then — for tonight," he said, and the waiter ambled away indifferently, looking all round the room in search of sympathy.

By degrees, however, the other recovered his self-possession, and realized that to spend his legacy on mere Hot-Pot was to admit he knew not the values of life. He called the plush-headed waiter back and with a rush of words ordered some oysters, soup, a fried sole, and half a partridge to follow.

"Then ze'Ot-Pot, sir?" queried the man, with respect.

"I'll see about that later."

For he was already wondering what he should drink, knowing nothing of wines and vintages. At luncheon with the philanthropist he sometimes had a glass of sherry; at Worthing with his sister he drank beer. But now he wanted something really good, something generous that would help him to celebrate. He would have ordered champagne as a conciliation to the waiter, now positively obsequious, but someone had told him once that there was not enough champagne in the world to go round, and that hotels and restaurants were supplied with "something rather bad." Burgundy, he felt, would be more the thing — rich, sunny, full-bodied.

He studied the wine-card till his head swam. A waiter, while he was thus engaged, sidled up and watched him from an angle. Wiggins, looking up distractedly at the same moment, caught his eye. Whew! It was the Head Waiter himself, a man of quite infinite presence, who at once bowed himself forward, and with a gentle but commanding manner drew his attention to the wines he could "especially recommend." Something in the man's face struck him momentarily as familiar — vaguely familiar — then passed.

Now Wiggins, as has been said, did not know one wine from another; but the spirit of his foolish pose fairly had him by the throat at last, and each time this condescending individual indicated a new vintage he shook his head knowingly and shrugged his shoulders with the air of a connoisseur. This pantomime continued for several minutes.

"Something *really* good, you know," he mumbled after a while, determined to justify himself in the eyes of this high official who was taking such pains. "A rare wine — er — with body in it." Then he added, with a sudden impulse of confidence, "It's Saturday night, remember!" And he smiled knowingly, making a gesture that a man of the world was meant to understand.

Why he should have said this remains a mystery. Perhaps it was a semi-apologetic reference to the supposed habit of men to indulge themselves on a Saturday because they need not rise early to work next day. Perhaps it was meant in some way to excuse all the trouble he was giving. In any case, there can be no question that the manner of the Head Waiter instantly changed in a subtle way difficult to describe, and from mere official politeness passed into deferential attention. He bowed slightly. He increased his distance by an inch or two. Wiggins, noticing it and slightly bewildered, repeated his remark, for want of something to say more than anything else. “It’s Saturday night, of course,” he repeated, murmuring, yet putting more meaning into the words than they could reasonably hold.

“As Monsieur says,” the man replied, with a marked respect in his tone not there before; “and we — close early.”

“Of course,” said the other, gaining confidence pleasantly, “you close early.”

He had quite forgotten the fact, even if he ever knew it, but he spoke with decision. Glancing up from the wine-list, he caught the man’s eye; then instantly lowered his gaze, for the Head Waiter was staring at him in a fixed and curious manner that seemed unnecessary. And once again that passing touch of familiarity appeared upon the features and was gone.

“Monsieur is here for the first time, if I may ask?” came next.

“Er — yes, I am,” he replied, thinking all this attention a trifle excessive.

“Ah, *pardon,* of course, I understand,” the Head Waiter added softly. “A new — a recent member, then — ?”

A little nonplussed, a little puzzled, Wiggins agreed with a nod of the head. He did not know that head waiters referred to customers as “members.” For an instant it occurred to him that possibly he was being mistaken for somebody else. It was really — but at that moment the oysters arrived. The Head Waiter said something in rapid Italian to his subordinate — something that obviously increased that plush-headed person’s desire to please — bent over with his best manner to murmur, “And I will get monsieur the wine he will like, the right kind of wine!” and was gone.

It was a new and delightful sensation. Wiggins, feeling proud, pleased and important under the effect of this excellent service and attention, turned to his oysters. The wine would come presently. And, meanwhile, the music had begun....

II

He began to enjoy himself thoroughly, and the wine — still, fragrant, soft — soon ran in his veins and drove out the last vestige of his absurd shyness. Behind the palm trees, somewhere out of sight, the orchestra played soothingly, and if the selections were somewhat bizarre it made no difference to him. He drank in the sound just as he drank in the wine — eagerly. Both fed the consciousness that he was enjoying himself, and the Danse Macabre gave him as much pleasure as did the Bohème, the Strauss Waltz, or Donizetti. Everything — wine, music, food, people —— served to intensify his interest *in himself.* He examined his face in the big mirrors and realized what a dog he was and what a good time he was having. He watched the other customers, finding them splendid and distinguished. The whole place was really fine — he would come again and again, always ordering the same wine, for it was certainly an unusual wine, as the Head Waiter had called it, "the right kind." The price of it he never asked, for in his pocket lay the price of a whole case. His hand slipped down to finger the sovereigns — hot and slippery now —— and the notes, somewhat moist and crumpled.... The needles of the big staring clock meanwhile swung onwards....

Thus, aided by the tactful and occasional superintendence of the Head Waiter from a distance, the evening passed along in a happy rush of pleasurable emotion. The half-partridge had vanished, and Wiggins toyed now with a wonderful-looking "sweet" — the most expensive he could find. He did not eat much of it, but liked to see it on his plate. The wine helped things enormously. He had ordered another half-bottle some time ago, delighted to find that it exhilarated without confusing him. And everyone else in the place was enjoying himself in the same way. He was thrilled to discover this.

Only one thing jarred a little. A very big man, with a round, cleanshaven face inclined to fatness, stared at him more than he cared about from a table in the corner diagonally across the room. He had only come in half-an-hour ago. His face was somehow or other doglike — something between a boar-hound and a pup, Wiggins thought. Each time he looked up the fellow's large and rather fierce eyes were fixed upon him, then lingeringly withdrawn. It was unpleasant to be stared at in this way by an offensive physiognomy.

But most of the time he was too full of personal visions conjured up by the wine to trouble long about external matters. His head was simply brimming over with thoughts and ideas — about himself, about soup-kitchens, feeding the poor, the change of life effected by the legacy, and a thousand other details. Once or twice, however, in sharp, clear moments when the tide of alcohol ebbed a little, other questions assailed him: Why should the Head Waiter have become so obsequious and attentive? What was it in his face that seemed familiar? What was there about the remark "It's Saturday evening" to change his manner? And — what was it about the dinner, the restaurant and the music that seemed just a little out of the ordinary?

Or was he merely thinking nonsense? And was it his imagination that this man stared so oddly? The alcohol rushed deliciously in his veins.

The vague uneasiness, however, was a passing matter, for the orchestra was tearing madly through a Csardas, and his thoughts and feelings were swept away in the wild rhythm. He drank his bottle out and ordered another. Was it the second or the third? He could not remember. Counting always made his head ache. He did not care anyhow. "Let 'er go! I'm enjoying myself! I've got a fat legacy — money lying in the bank — money I haven't earned!" The carefulness of years was destroyed in as many minutes. "That music's simply spiffing!"

Then he glanced up and caught the clean-shaven face hearing down upon him across the shimmering room like the muzzle of a moving gun. He tried to meet it, but found he could not focus it properly. The same moment he saw that he was mistaken; the man was merely staring at him. Two faces swam and wobbled into one. This movement, and the appearance of coming towards him, were both illusions produced by the alcohol. He drank another glass quickly to steady his vision — and then another....

"I'll call for my bill. Itsh time to go...!" he murmured aloud later, with a very deep sigh. He looked about him for the waiter, who instantly appeared — with coffee and liqueurs, however.

"Dear me, yes. Qui' forgot I or'ered those," he observed offhand, smiling in the man's face, willing and anxious to say a lot of things, but not quite certain what.

"My bill," was what he said finally, "mush b'off!"

The waiter laughed pleasantly, but very politely, in reply. Wiggins repeated his remark about his bill.

"Oh, that will be all right, sir," returned the man, as though no such thing as payment was ever heard of in *this* restaurant. It was rather confusing. Wiggins laughed to himself, drank his liqueur and forgot about everything except the ballet music of Delibes the strings were sprinkling in a silver shower about the hall. His mind ran after them through the glittering air.

“Just fancy if I could catch ’em and take ’em home in a bunch,” he said to himself, immensely pleased. He was enjoying himself hugely by now.

And then, suddenly, he became aware that the place was rapidly thinning, lights being lowered, good-nights being said, and that everybody seemed — drunk.

“P’rapsh they’ve all got legacies!” he thought, flushing with excitement.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and was delighted to find that *he* was not in the least — drunk. He at once respected himself.

“Itsh really ‘sgusting that fellows can’t stop when they’ve had ‘nough!” he murmured, making his way with steps that required great determination towards the door, and remembering before he got halfway that he had not paid his bill. Turning in a half-circle that brought an unnecessary quantity of the room round with him, he made his way back, lost his way, fumbled about in the increasing gloom, and found himself face to face with the — Head Waiter. The unexpected meeting braced him astonishingly. The dignity of the man had curiously increased.

“I’m looking for my bill,” observed Wiggins thickly, wondering for the twentieth time of whom the man’s face reminded him; “you haven’t seen it about anywhere, I shuppose?” He sat down with more dignity than he could have supposed possible and produced a £5 note from his pocket, the lining of the pocket coming out with it like a dirty glove.

Most of the guests had gone out by this time, and the big hall was very dark. Two lights only remained, and these, reflected from mirror to mirror, made its proportions seem vast and unreal. They flew from place to place, too, distressingly — these lights.

“Half-a-crown will settle that, sir,” replied the man, with a respectful bow.

“Nonshense!” replied the other. “Why, I ordered Lancashire hotchpotch, grilled shole, a — a bird or something of the kind, and the wine—”

“I beg your pardon, sir, but — if you will permit me to say so — the others will soon be here now, and — as there will be a specially large attendance, perhaps you would like to make sure of your place.” He pocketed the half-crown with a bow, pointed to the far, dim corner of the room, and stepped aside a little to make space for Wiggins to pass.

And Wiggins did pass — though it is not quite clear how he managed to dodge the flying tables. With deep sighs, hot, confused and puzzled, but too obfuscated to understand what it was all about, he obeyed the directions, at the same time wondering uneasily how it was he had forgotten what was a-foot. He wandered towards the end of the hall with the uncertainty of a butterfly that makes many feints before it settles.... At a vast distance off the Head Waiter was moving to close the main doors, utterly oblivious now of his existence. He felt glad of that. Something about that fellow was disagreeable — downright nasty. This suddenly came over him with a flood of conviction. The man was more than peculiar: he was sinister.... The air smelt horribly of cooked food, tobacco smoke, breathing crowds, scented women and the rest. Whiffs of it, hot and foetid, brought him a little to his senses.... Then suddenly he noticed that the big man with the face that was dark and smooth like the muzzle of a cannon, was watching him keenly from a table on the other side where an electric light still burned.

"By George! There he is again, that feller! Wonder whatsh he's smiling at me for. Looking for'sh bill too, p'raps — Now, in a Soup Kishen nothing of the kind—" He bowed in return, smiling insolently, holding himself steady by a chair to do so. He shoved and stumbled his way on into the shadows, half-mingling with the throng passing out into the street. Then, making a sharp turn back into the room unobserved, he took a few uncertain steps and collapsed silently and helplessly upon a chair that was hidden behind a big palm tree in a dark corner.

And the last thing he remembered as he sank, boneless, like soft hay, into that corner was that the sham palm tree bowed towards him, then ran off into the ceiling, and from that elevation, which in no way diminished its size, bowed to him yet again....

It was just after his eyes closed that the door in the gilt paneling at the end of the room softly opened and a woman entered on tiptoe. She was followed by other women and several girls; these, again, from time to time, by men, all dressed in black, all silent, and all ushered by the majestic Head Waiter to their places. The big man with the face like a gun-muzzle superintended. And each individual, on entering, was held there at the secret doorway until a certain sentence had passed his lips. Evidently a password: “It is Saturday night,” said the one being admitted, “and we close early,” replied the Head Waiter and the big man. And then the door was closed until the next soft tapping came.

But Wiggins, plunged in the stupor of the first sleep, knew none of all this. His frock-coat was bunched about his neck, his black tie under his ear, his feet resting higher than his head. He looked like a collapsed air-ship in a hedge, and he snored heavily.

III

It was about an hour later when he opened his eyes, climbed painfully and heavily to his feet, staggered back against the wall utterly bewildered — and stared. At the far end of the great hall, its loftiness now dim, was a group of people. The big mirrors on all sides reflected them with the effect of increasing their numbers indefinitely. They stood and sat upon an improvised platform. The electric lights, shaded with black, dropped a pale glitter upon their faces. They were systematically grouped, the big man in the center, the Head Waiter at a small table just behind him. The former was speaking in low, measured tones.

In his dark and distant corner Wiggins first of all seized the carafe and quenched his feverish thirst. Next he advanced slowly and with the utmost caution to a point nearer the group where he could hear what was being said. He was still a good deal confused in mind, and had no idea what the hour was or what he had been doing in the meantime. There were some twenty or thirty people, he saw, of both sexes, well dressed, many of them distinguished in appearance, and all wearing black; even their gloves were black; some of the women, too, wore black veils — very thick. But in all the faces without exception there was something — was it about the lips and mouths? — that was peculiar and — repellent.

Obviously this was a meeting of some kind. Some society had hired the hall for a private gathering. Wiggins, understanding this, began to feel awkward. He did not wish to intrude; he had no right to listen; yet to make himself known was to betray that he was still very considerably intoxicated. The problem presented itself in these simple terms to his dazed intelligence. He was also aware of another fact: about these black-robed people there was something which made him secretly and horribly — afraid.

The big man with the smooth face like a gun-muzzle sat down after a softly-uttered speech, and the group, instead of applauding with their hands, waved black handkerchiefs. The fluttering sound of them trickled along the wastes of hall towards the concealed eavesdropper. Then the Head Waiter rose to introduce the next speaker, and the instant Wiggins saw him he understood what it was in his face that was familiar. For the false beard no longer adorned his lips, the wig that altered the shape of his forehead and the appearance of his eyes had been removed, and the likeness he bore to the philanthropist, Wiggins's late employer, was too remarkable to be ignored. Wiggins just repressed a cry, but a low gasp apparently did escape him, for several members of the group turned their heads in his direction and stared.

The Head Waiter, meanwhile, saved him from immediate discovery by beginning to speak. The words were plainly audible, and the resemblance of the voice to that other voice he knew now to be stopped with dust, was one of the most dreadful experiences he had ever known. Each word, each trick of expression came as a new and separate shock.

"... and the learned Doctor will say a few words upon the *rationale* of our subject," he concluded, turning with a graceful bow to make room for a distinguished-looking old gentleman who advanced shambling from the back of the improvised platform.

What Wiggins then heard — in somewhat disjointed sentences owing to the buzzing in his ears — was at first apparently meaningless. Yet it was freighted, he knew, with a creeping and sensational horror that would fully reveal itself the instant he discovered the clue. The old clever-faced scoundrel was saying vile things. He knew it. But the key to the puzzle being missing, he could not quite guess what it was all about. The Doctor, gravely and with balanced phrases, seemed to be speaking of the fads of the day with regard to food and feeding. He ridiculed vegetarianism, and all the other *isms.* He said that one and all were based upon ignorance and fallacy, declaring that the time had at last come in the history of the race when a rational system of feeding was a paramount necessity. The physical and psychical conditions of the times demanded it, and the soul of man could never be emancipated until it was adopted. He himself was proud to be one of the founders of their audacious and secret Society, revolutionary and pioneer in the best sense, to which so many of the medical fraternity now belonged, and so many of the brave women too, who were in the van of the feminist movements of the times. He said a great deal in this vein. Wiggins, listening in growing amazement and uneasiness, waited for the clue to it all.

In conclusion, the speaker referred solemnly to the fact that there was a stream of force in their Society which laid them open to the melancholy charge of being called “hysterical.”

“But after all,” he cried, with rising enthusiasm and in accents that rang down the hall, “a Society without hysteria is a dull Society, just as a woman without hysteria is a dull woman. Neither the Society nor the woman need yield to the tendency; but that it is present potentially infers the faculty, so delicious in the eyes of all sane men — the faculty of running to extremes. It is a sign of life, and of very vivid life. It is not for nothing, dear friends, that we are named the—” But the buzzing in Wiggins’s ears was so loud at this moment that he missed the name. It sounded to him something between “Can-I-believes” and “Camels,” but for the life of him he could not overtake the actual word. The Doctor had uttered it, moreover, in a lowered voice — a suddenly lowered voice.... When the noise in his ears had passed he heard the speaker bring his address to an end in these words: “... and I will now ask the secretaries to make their reports from their various sections, after which, I understand” — his tone grew suddenly thick and clouded— “we are to be regaled with a collation — a sacramental collation — of the usual kind....” His voice hushed away to nothing. His mouth was working most curiously. A wave of excitement unquestionably ran over the faces of the others. Their mouths also worked oddly. Dark and somber things were afoot in that hall.

Wiggins crouched a little lower behind the edge of the overhanging tablecloth and listened. He was perspiring now, but there were touches of icy horror fingering about in the neighborhood of his heart. His mental and physical discomfort were very great, for the conviction that he was about to witness some dreadful scene — black as the garments of the participants in it — grew rapidly within him. He devised endless plans for escape, only to reject them the instant they were formed. There was no escape possible. He had to wait till the end.

A charming young woman was on her feet, addressing the audience in silvery tones; sweet and comely she was, her beauty only marred by that singular leer that visited the lips and mouths of all of them. The flesh of his back began to crawl as he listened. He would have given his whole year's legacy to be out of it, for behind that voice of silver and sweetness there crowded even to her lips the rush of something that was unutterable — loathsome. Wiggins felt it. The uncertainty as to its exact nature only added to his horror and distress.

"... so this question of supply, my friends," she was saying, "is becoming more and more difficult. It resolves itself into a question of ways and means." She looked round upon her audience with a touch of nervous apprehension before she continued. "In my particular sphere of operations — West Kensington — I have regretfully to report that the suspicions and activity of the police, the foolish, old-fashioned police, have now rendered my monthly contributions no longer possible. There have been too many disappearances of late—" She paused, casting her eyes down. Wiggins felt his hair rise, drawn by a shivery wind. The words "contributions" and "disappearances" brought with them something quite freezing.

"....As you know," the girl resumed, "it is to the doctors that we must look chiefly for our steadier supplies, and unfortunately in my sphere of operations we have but one doctor who is a member.... I do not like to — to resign my position, but I must ask for lenient consideration of my failure" — her voice sank lower still—"... my failure to furnish tonight the materials —" She began to stammer and hesitate dreadfully; her voice shook; an ashen pallor spread to her very lips. "... the elements for our customary feast —"

A movement of disapproval ran over the audience like a wave; murmurs of dissent and resentment were heard. As the girl paled more perceptibly the singular beauty of her face stood out with an effect of almost shining against that dark background of shadows and black garments. In spite of himself, and forgetting caution for the moment, Wiggins peeped over the edge of the table to see her better. She was a lady, he saw, highbred and spirited. That pallor, and the timidity it bespoke, was but evidence of a highly sensitive nature facing a situation of peculiar difficulty — and danger. He read in her attitude, in the poise of that slim figure standing there before disapproval and possible disaster, the bearing and proud courage of a type that would face execution with calmness and dignity. Wiggins was amazed that this thought should flash through him so vividly

— from nowhere. Born of the feverish aftermath of alcohol, perhaps — yet born inevitably, too, of this situation before his eyes.

With a thrill he realized that the girl was speaking again, her voice steady, but faint with the gravity of her awful position.

“....and I ask for that justice in consideration of my failure which —— the difficulties of the position demand. I have had to choose between that bold and ill-considered action which might have betrayed us all to the authorities, and — the risk of providing nothing for tonight.”

She sat down. Wiggins understood that it was a question of life and death. The air about him turned icy. He felt the perspiration trickling on several different parts of his body at once.

An old lady rose instantly to reply; her face was stern and dreadful, although the signature of breeding and culture was plainly there in the delicate lines about the nostrils and forehead. Her mien held something implacable. She was dressed in black silk that rustled, and she was certainly well over sixty; but what made Wiggins squirm there in his narrow hiding place was the extraordinary resemblance she bore to Mrs. Sturgis, the superintendent of one of his late employer’s soup kitchens. It was all diabolically grotesque. She glanced round upon the group of members, who clearly regarded her as a leader. The machinery of the whole dreadful scene then moved quicker.

“Then are we to understand from the West Kensington secretary,” she began in firm, even tones, “that for tonight there is — nothing?” The young girl bowed her head without rising from her chair.

“I beg to move, then, Mr. Chairman,” continued the terrible old lady in iron accents, “that the customary procedure be followed, and that a Committee of Three be appointed to carry it into immediate effect.” The words fell like bomb-shells into the deserted spaces of the hall.

“I second the motion,” was heard in a man’s voice.

“Those in favor of the motion will show their hands,” announced the big chairman with the clean-shaven face.

Several score of black-gloved hands waved in the air, with the effect of plumes upon a jolting hearse.

“And those who oppose it?”

No single hand was raised. An appalling hush fell upon the group.

“I appoint Signor Carnamorte as chairman of the sub-committee, with power to choose his associates,” said the big man. And the “Head Waiter” bowed his acceptance of the duty imposed upon him. There was at once then a sign of hurried movement, and the figure of the young girl was lost momentarily to view as several members surged round her. The next instant they fell away and she stood clear, her hands bound. Her voice, soft as before but very faint, was audible through the hush.

“I claim the privilege belonging to the female members of the Society,” she said calmly; “the right to find, if possible, a substitute.”

“Granted,” answered the chairman gravely. “The customary ten minutes will be allowed you in which to do so. Meanwhile, the preparations must proceed in the usual way.”

With a dread that ate all other emotions, Wiggins watched keenly from his concealment, and the preparations that he saw in progress, though simple enough in themselves, filled him with a sense of ultimate horror that was freezing. The Committee of Three were very busy with something at the back of the improvised platform, something that was heavy and, on being touched, emitted a metallic and sonorous ring. As in the strangling terror and heat of nightmare the full meaning of events is often kept concealed until the climax, so Wiggins knew that this simple sound portended something that would only be revealed to him later — something appalling as Satan — sinister as the grave. That ring of metal was the Gong of Death. He heard it in his own heart, and the shock was so great that he could not prevent an actual physical movement. His jerking leg drove sharply against a chair. The chair — squeaked.

The sound pierced the deep silence of the big hall with so shrill a note that of course everybody heard it. Wiggins, expecting to have the whole crew of these black-robed people about his ears, held his breath in an agony of suspense. All those pairs of eyes, he felt, were searching the spot where he lay so thinly hidden by the tablecloth. But no steps came towards him. A voice, however, spoke: the voice of the girl: she had heard the sound and had divined its cause.

“Loosen my bonds,” she cried, “for there is someone yonder among the shadows. I have found a substitute! And — I swear to Heaven — *he is plump!”*

The sentence was so extraordinary, that Wiggins felt a spring of secret merriment touched somewhere deep within him, and a gush of uncontrollable laughter came up in his throat so suddenly that before he could get his hand to his mouth, it rang down the long dim hall and betrayed him beyond all question of escape. Behind it lay the strange need of violent expression. He had to do something. The life of this slender and exquisite girl was in danger. And the nightmare strain of the whole scene, the hints and innuendoes of a dark purpose, the implacable nature of the decree that threatened so fair a life — all resulted in a pressure that was too much for him. Had he not laughed, he would certainly have shrieked aloud. And the next minute he did shriek aloud. The screams followed his laughter with a dreadful clamor, and at the same instant he staggered noisily to his feet and rose into full view from behind the table. Everybody then saw him.

Across the length of that dimly-lighted hall he faced the group of people in all their hideous reality, and what he saw cleared from his fuddled brain the last fumes of the alcohol. The white visage of each member seemed already close upon him. He saw the glimmering pallor of their skins against the black clothes, the eyes ashine, the mouths working, fingers pointing at him. There was the Head Waiter, more than ever like the dead philanthropist whose life had been spent in feeding others; there the odious smooth face of the big chairman; there the stern-lipped old lady who demanded the sentence of death. The whole silent crew of them stared darkly at him, and in front of them, like some fair lily growing amid decay, stood the girl with the proud and pallid face, calm and self-controlled. Immediately beyond her, a little to one side, Wiggins next perceived the huge iron cauldron, already swinging from its mighty tripod, waiting to receive her into its capacious jaws. Beneath it gleamed and flickered the flames from a dozen spirit-lamps.

“My substitute!” rang out her clear voice. “My substitute! Unloose my hands! And seize him before he can escape!”

“He cannot escape!” cried a dozen angry voices.

“In darkness!” thundered the chairman, and at the same moment every light was extinguished from the switch-board — every light but one. The bulb immediately behind him in the wall was left burning.

And the crew were upon him, coming swiftly and stealthily down the empty aisles between the tables. He saw their forms advance and shift by the gleam of the lamps beneath the awful cauldron. With the advance came, too, the sound of rushing, eager breathing. He imagined, though he could not see, those evil mouths a-working. And at this moment the subconscious part of him that had kept the secret all this time, suddenly revealed in letters of flame the name of the Society which fifteen minutes before he had failed to catch. The subconscious self, that supreme stage manager, that arch conspirator, rose and struck him in the face as it were out of the darkness, so that he understood, with a shock of nauseous terror, the terrible nature of the net in which he was caught.

For this Secret Society, meeting for their awful rites in a great public restaurant of mid-London, were maniacs of a rare and singular description — vilely mad on one point but sane on all the rest. They were Cannibals!

Never before had he run with such speed, agility and recklessness; never before had he guessed that he could leap tables, clear chairs with the flying manner of a hurdle race, and dodge palms and flower-pots as an athlete of twenty dodges collisions in the football field. But in each dark corner where he sought a temporary refuge, the electric light on the wall above immediately sprang into brilliance, one of the crew having remained by the switchboard to control this diabolically ingenious method of keeping him ever in sight.

For a long time, however, he evaded his crowding and clumsy pursuers. It was a vile and ghastly chase. His flying frock-coat streamed out behind him, and he felt the elastic side of his worn boots split under the unusual strain of the twisting, turning ankles as he leaped and ran. His pursuers, it seemed, sought to prolong the hunt on purpose. The passion of the chase was in their blood. Round and round that hall, up and down, over tables and under chairs, behind screens, shaking the handles of doors — all immovable, past gleaming dish-covers on the wheeled joint tables, taking cover by swing doors, curtains, palms, everything and anything, Wiggins flew for his life from the pursuing forces of a horrible death.

And at last they caught him. Breathless and exhausted, he collapsed backwards against the wall in a dark corner. But the light instantly flashed out above him. He lay in full view, and in another second the advancing horde — he saw their eyes and mouths so close — would be upon him, when something utterly unexpected happened: his head in falling struck against a hard projecting substance and — a bell rang sharply out. It was a telephone!

How he ever managed to get the receiver to his lips, or why the answering exchange came so swiftly he does not pretend to know. He had just time to shout, "Help! help! Send police X.... Restaurant! Murder! Cannibals!" when he was seized violently by the collar, his arms and legs grasped by a dozen pairs of hands, and a struggle began that he knew from the start must prove hopeless.

The fact that help might be on the way, however, gave him courage. Wiggins smashed right and left, screamed, kicked, bit and butted. His frock coat was ripped from his back with a whistling tear of cloth and lining, and he found himself free at the edge of a group that clawed and beat everywhere about him. The dim light was now in his favor. He shot down the hall again like a hare, leaping tables on the way, and flinging dish-covers, carafes, menus at the pursuing crowd as fast as he could lay hands upon them.

Then came a veritable pandemonium of smashed glass and crockery, while a grip of iron caught his arms behind and pinioned them beyond all possibility of moving. Turning quickly, he found himself looking straight into the eyes of a big blue policeman, the door into the street open beside him. The crowd became at once inextricably mixed up and jumbled together. The chairman, and the girl who was to have been eaten, melted into a single person. The philanthropist and the old lady slid into each other. It was a horrible bit of confusion. He felt deadly sick and dizzy. Everything dropped away from his sight then, and darkness tore up round him from the carpet. He remembered nothing more for a long time.

Perhaps the most vivid recollection of what occurred afterwards — he remembers it to this day, and his memory may be trusted, for he never touched wine again — was the weary smile of the magistrate, and the still more weary voice as he said in the court two days later— "Forty shillings, and be bound over to keep the peace in two sureties for six months. And £5 to the proprietor of the restaurant to pay damages for the broken windows and crockery. Next case...!”

Carlton’s Drive

IT IS DIFFICULT, of course, to estimate the effect of such a thing upon another’s temperament. The change seemed bewilderingly sudden; yet spiritual chemistry is a process incalculable, past finding out, and the results in this case were undeniable. Carlton had changed in the course of a brief year or two. And he dates it from that drive. He knows.

He told it to a few intimates only. Those who know his face as it is today, serene and strong, yet recall how it was scored and beaten with the ravages of dissipation a few years before (so that the human seemed almost to have dropped back into the beast), can scarcely credit his identity. Now — its calm austerity, softened by the greatest yearning known to men, the yearning to save, proclaim at a glance the splendid revolution; whereas *then!* The memory is unpleasant; exceedingly wonderful the contrast. His life was inoffensive enough, negatively, at least, till the money came; then, with the inheritance, his innate sensuality broke out. Yet it seemed a prodigious step for a man to make in so brief a time: from that life of depravity that stained his face and smothered his soul, to the Brotherhood of Devotion he founded, and himself led full charge against the vice of the world! But not incomprehensible, perhaps. He did nothing by halves. It was the swing of the pendulum.

He was somewhere about thirty, his nerves shattered by the savagery of concentrated fast living, his system too exhausted to respond even to unusual stimulant, when he found himself one early spring morning on the pavement beside St. George’s Hospital. He had been up all night, and was making his way homewards on foot, his pockets stuffed with the proceeds of lucky gambling; and how he happened to be standing at that particular spot, watching the traffic, at eight in the morning, is not clear. Probably, seduced by the sweetness of the air, he had wandered, driven by gusts of mood as by gusts of wind. Though he had drunk steadily since midnight he was not so much intoxicated as fuddled — stupid. He was on the south corner, where the ‘buses stop in their journey westwards. The sun poured a flood of light down Piccadilly; the street was brisk with pedestrians going to work; the hospital side-entrance behind him already astir. Across the road the trees in the park shimmered in a wave of fluttering green. The pride of life was in the June air. In his own heart, however, was a loathsome satiety — sign of the first death.

In a line with the trees opposite stood a solitary hansom. A faint surprise that it should be there at such an hour jostled in his sodden brain with the idea that he might as well drive home — when, suddenly, he became aware that the man perched on the box was looking at him across the street with a fixity of manner that was both singular and offensive. Carlton felt his own gaze, blear-eyed and troubled, somehow caught and held — uncomfortably. The other's eyes were fastened upon his own — had been fastened for some time — sinisterly, and with a purpose. Just at this moment, however, a sharp spasm of pain and faintness, due to exhaustion and debauch, shot through him, so that he reeled, half staggering, and, before he quite knew what he was doing, he had nodded to the driver, and saw that the horse was already turning with clattering hoofs to cross the slippery street. A minute later he had climbed heavily in, noticing vaguely that the driver wore all black, the horse was black, and on the whip was a strip of crêpe that fluttered in the breeze. As he got in, too, the effort strained him. But, more than that, something that was cold and terrible— "like a hand of ragged steel," he described it afterwards — clutched at his heart. It puzzled him; but he was too "done" to think; and he lurched back wearily on the cushions as the horse started forward with the jerkiness of long habit.

"Same address, sir?" the man called down through the trap. His voice was harsh "like iron"; and Carlton, supposing that he recognized a fare, replied testily, "Of course, you fool! And let her rip — to the devil!" The spasm of strange pain had passed. He only felt tired to brokenness, sick with his corrupt and unsatisfying life, a dull, incomprehensible anger burning in him against the world, the driver — and himself.

The hansom swung forwards over the smooth, uncrowded streets like a ship with a breeze behind her, for the horse was fresh, and the man drove well. He took off his opera hat and let the cool wind fan his face. That drive of a mile to his rooms was the most soothing and restful he had ever known. But, after a while, braced, perhaps, by the morning wind, he began to notice that they were following a strange route through streets he did not recognize. He had been lolling in the corner with half-closed eyes; now he sat up and looked about him. Time had passed. He ought to have reached home long ago. They were going at a tremendous and unholy pace, too. He poked open the trap sharply.

“Hi, hi!” he called out angrily; “are you drunk? Where, in the name of — are you driving to?”

“It’s all right, sir; it’s the shortest way. The usual roads are closed.” The man’s voice — deep, with a curious rumbling note — had such conviction and authority in it that Carlton accepted the explanation with a growl and flung himself back into his soft corner. Again, however, for a single second, that cold thing of steel moved horribly in his heart. He felt as if the “ragged hand “had given it another twist. Then it passed, and he gave himself up to the swinging motion of the drive. The hansom tore along now; it was delightful. Curious, though, that *all* the known streets should be “up!” Positively the houses were getting less, as though he was driving out into the country. Perhaps, too, the feeling of *laisser aller* that came over him was caused by some inhibition of the will due to prolonged excesses. Canton admits it was unlike his normal self not to *force* the man to drive where he wanted; but he felt lulled, lazy, indifferent. “Let the fool take his own way!” his thought ran; “I shan’t pay him anymore for it!”

Somebody was waving to him from the pavement with a colored parasol — a girl he knew, one of his sort; gay and smiling, tripping along quickly. With a momentary surprise that she should be thus early astir, he smiled through the window and waved his hand. It gave him pleasure to see she was going in the same direction as himself. The instant he passed her the horse leaped forward with increased speed, so that the hansom rattled, shaking him a little as it lurched from side to side.

“Steady on, idiot!” he shouted, “or you’ll smash me up before I get to the end!” And he was just going to bang open the trap and swear, when his attention was caught by another salutation from the pavement. It was a man this time — running hard; a man who played, drank, and the rest of it even harder than himself, a man who shared his trips to Paris. He was radiant and gesticulating. “Good journey, old man!” he heard him cry as the hansom shot past; “Hurry up! We’re coming, too! We shall be there together!” Canton did not quite like this greeting. It reminded him for a second that he was a bit uncertain where the mad driver was heading for. It gave him a passing uneasiness — almost immediately forgotten, however. The pace was too delicious to bring to an end just yet. Presently he would call the fellow to order with a vengeance, but meanwhile— "let her rip!" His friends were all going the same way; it must be all right. His thoughts, he admits, were somewhat mixed; for great speed destroys calm judgment; it exhilarated, but it also bewildered. The pace, assuredly, had something to do with his mental confusion, for it was terrific. Yet he saw on the pavement, from time to time, more friends and acquaintances, and somehow at the moment it did not strike him as *too* peculiar that they should be there, all moving hurriedly in the same direction. He had an odd feeling that they all knew of some destination agreed upon; that he, too, knew it; but that it was not "playing the game" to admit that he knew. Yet about some of them — their hurried steps, their gay faces, their waving hands — there was a queer fugitive suggestion of sadness, even of fear. One or two touched the source of horror in him even. It hardly surprised him that the horse, steaming and sweating, should start forward with a frightened leap as each figure in turn was sighted and left behind. Probably he was himself too much a part of the wild, exhilarating rush to realize how singular it was. Certainly, it seemed as though some faculty of his mind was suspended during that drive.

But at last, after passing another friend, the horse gave a leap that really frightened him, flinging him against the boards. It was a man, twice his own age, who more than any other had helped him in his evil living, not by doing likewise, but by smothering his first remorse with a smile and a sentence: "Of course, my boy, sow your wild oats! You'll settle down later. No man is worth his salt who hasn't sown his wild oats!" He was sliding along — a kind of crawl, with something loathsome in his motion that suggested the reptile. Carlton nodded to him. The same second the horse gave its terrible bound. The whip for the first time slashed down across its flanks. He saw the strip of crêpe, black against the green and sunny landscape. For by now all houses were left behind, and they were rushing at a mad pace along a broad country road, growing momentarily steeper, and — downhill.

At the same moment he caught his own face in the glass. To his utter horror he saw that a black veil, crêpelike, hung over the upper part, already hiding the eyes, and that it was moving downwards, slowly creeping. The hand of steel turned again within him. He knew that it was Death.

Yet, most singular of all, he instantly found in himself the power to believe it was not there. His hand brushed it off. His face was young, clean, and smiling once more.... And now the hansom flew. The horse was running away; he heard the driver shouting to it, and the shouting sounded like a song. The man *was* drunk after all. Mingled with his song, too, came a confused murmur of voices behind — far away. What in the world did it all mean? Dashing aside the little curtain he looked back out of the window, and the first thing he saw was a face pressed close against the glass, staring straight into his eyes with a beseeching, pitiful expression. Good God! It was the face of his mother. He swore; the face melted away — and he then saw that the whole country behind him was black, and through it, down the darkened road, ran the figures he had passed. But how changed! The girl was no longer gay and smiling; her face was old, streaked with evil, and with one hand she clutched her heart as she ran — trying in vain to stop. Behind her were the others — worn and broken, with bloodshot eyes and toothless gums, all grinning dreadfully, all racing down the ever-steepening descent, yet all trying frantically to stop. One or two, however, still ran with a brave show as if they wished to; debonair, holding themselves with a certain appearance of dignity and pleasure. And some — the old man of the “wild oats” sentence at their head — were close upon the hansom, *pushing it...* The face of his mother slid once again upon the glass, between their evil, outstretched hands and himself, but less close, less visible than before....

Carlton knew a spasm of pain that was terrible. He sat up. He flung open the doors, and his eyes measured the leap. But the faculty of mind that had all the time been in suspension returned a little, and he saw that to jump was — impossible. He smashed the trap open with his fist and cried out, “Stop! I tell you, stop!”

“Can’t stop here, sir,” the driver answered, peering down at him out of the square opening that let in — darkness. “It’s not allowed. It’s not usual, either.”

“Stop, I say,” thundered Canton, trying to rise and strike him.

But the driver laughed through that square of blackness.

“Can’t be done, sir. You told me ‘same address.’ There’s no stopping now!

Canton’s clenched fist was close to the man’s eyes when the fingers grew limp and opened. He sank back upon the seat again. The face peering down upon him was — his own.

And in this supreme moment it was that some secret reserve of soul, hitherto untainted — stirred into life, he declares, by the sight of his mother’s face at the window — rose and offered itself to him. He accepted it. *His will moved in its sleep and woke.*

“But I say you *shall* stop! “he cried, catching the reins in both hands, and, when they snapped, seizing the rims, and even the spokes, of the wheels. His great strength acted like a brake. The hansom reeled, shook, then slackened. It was a most curious thing, but the force that twisted his heart with its hand of “ragged steel” seemed to lend him its power. His will moved and gripped; the machinery groaned, but worked. Canton did nothing by halves; he put his life into his efforts; the skin was torn like paper from his hands. The hansom stopped with a trembling jerk and flung him out upon his face in the mud. And the same second he saw the horse and driver, both torn from their fastenings, whirled past him overhead to disappear into a gulf that yawned dreadfully under his very eyes, blacker than night, deeper than all things....

And when, at length, he rose to his feet, he found that he was tied with bands of iron to the shafts. Slowly, with vast efforts, groaning and sweating, he turned and began painfully to reclimb the huge and toilsome ascent, dragging the awful weight behind him... towards the Light.

For the glare that suddenly broke through the sky was the sunshine coming through the windows of the hospital room — St. George’s Hospital — where they had carried him when he fainted on the pavement half-an-hour before.

The Eccentricity of Simon Parnacute

I

IT WAS ONE of those mornings in early spring when even the London streets run beauty. The day, passing through the sky with clouds of flying hair, touched everyone with the magic of its own irresponsible gaiety, as it alternated between laughter and the tears of sudden showers.

In the parks the trees, faintly clothed with gauze, were busying themselves shyly with the thoughts of coming leaves. The air held a certain sharpness, but the sun swam through the dazzling blue spaces with bursts of almost summer heat; and a wind, straight from the haunted south, laid its soft persuasion upon all, bringing visions too fair to last — long thoughts of youth, of cowslip-meadows, white sails, waves on yellow sand, and other pictures innumerable and enchanting.

So potent, indeed, was this spell of awakening spring that even Simon Parnacute, retired Professor of Political Economy — elderly, thin-faced, and ruminating in his big skull those large questions that concern the polity of nations — formed no exception to the general rule. For, as he slowly made his way down the street that led from his apartment to the Little Park, he was fully aware that this magic of the spring was in his own blood too, and that the dust which had accumulated with the years upon the surface of his soul was being stirred by one of the softest breezes he had ever felt in the whole course of his arduous and tutorial career.

And — it so happened — just as he reached the foot of the street where the houses fell away towards the open park, the sun rushed out into one of the sudden blue spaces of the sky, and drenched him in a wave of delicious heat that for all the world was like the heat of July.

Professor Parnacute, once lecturer, now merely ponderer, was an exact thinker, dealing carefully with the facts of life as he saw them. He was a good man and a true. He dealt in large emotions, becoming for one who studied nations rather than individuals, and of all diplomacies of the heart he was rudely ignorant. He lived always at the center of the circle — his own circle — and eccentricity was a thing to him utterly abhorrent. Convention ruled him, body, soul and mind. To know a disordered thought, or an unwonted emotion, troubled him as much as to see a picture crooked on a wall, or a man's collar projecting beyond his overcoat. Eccentricity was the symptom of a disease.

Thus, as he reached the foot of the street and felt the sun and wind upon his withered cheeks, this unexpected call of the spring came to him sharply as something altogether out of place and illegitimate — symptom of an irregular condition of mind that must be instantly repressed. And it was just here, while the crowd jostled and delayed him, that there smote upon his ear the song incarnate of the very spring whose spell he was in the ad of relegating to its proper place in his personal economy: he heard the entrancing *singing of a bird!*

Transfixed with wonder and delight, he stood for a whole minute and listened. Then, slowly turning, he found himself staring straight into the small beseeching eyes of a — thrush; a thrush in a cage that hung upon the outside wall of a bird-fancier's shop behind him.

Perhaps he would not have lingered more than these few seconds, however, had not the crowd held him momentarily prisoner in a spot immediately opposite the shop, where his head, too, was exactly on a level with the hanging cage. Thus he was perforce obliged to stand, and watch, and listen; and, as he did so, the bird's rapturous and appealing song played upon the feelings already awakened by the spring, urging them upwards and outwards to a point that grew perilously moving.

Both sound and sight caught and held him spellbound.

The bird, once well-favored perhaps, he perceived was now thin and bedraggled, its feathers disarrayed by continual flitting along its perch, and by endless fluttering of wings and body against the bars of its narrow cage. There was not room to open both wings properly; it frequently dashed itself against the sides of its wooden prison; and all the force of its vain and passionate desire for freedom shone in the two small and glittering eyes which gazed beseechingly through the bars at the passers-by. It looked broken and worn with the ceaseless renewal of the futile struggle. Hopping along the bar, cocking its dainty little head on one side, and looking straight into the Professor's eyes, it managed (by some inarticulate magic known only to the eyes of creatures in prison) to spell out the message of its pain — the poignant longing for the freedom of the open sky, the lift of the great winds, the glory of the sun upon its lusterless feathers.

Now it so chanced that this combined onslaught of sight and sound caught the elderly Professor along the line of least resistance — the line of an untried, and therefore unexhausted, sensation. Here, apparently, was an emotion hitherto unrealized, and so not yet regulated away into atrophy.

For, with an intuition as singular as it was searching, he suddenly understood something of the passion of the wild Caged Things of the world, and realized in a flash of passing vision something of their unutterable pain.

In one swift moment of genuine mystical sympathy he *felt with* their peculiar quality of unsatisfied longing exactly as though it were his own; the longing, not only of captive birds and animals, but of anguished men and women, trapped by circumstance, confined by weakness, cabined by character and temperament, all yearning for a freedom they knew not how to reach — caged by the smallness of their desires, by the impotence of their wills, by the pettiness of their souls — caged in bodies from which death alone could finally bring release.

Something of all this found its way into the elderly Professor's heart as he stood watching the pantomime of the captive thrush — the Caged Thing; — and, after a moment's hesitation that represented a vast amount of condensed feeling, he deliberately entered the low doorway of the shop and inquired the price of the bird.

"The thrush — er — singing in the small cage," he stammered.

"One *and* six only, sir," replied the coarse, red-faced man who owned the shop, looking up from a rabbit that he was pushing with clumsy fingers into a box; "only one shilling *and* sixpence," — and then went on with copious remarks upon thrushes in general and the superior qualities of this one in particular. "Been 'ere four months and sings just lovely," he added, by way of climax.

"Thank you," said Parnacute quietly, trying to persuade himself that he did not feel mortified by his impulsive and eccentric action; "then I — will purchase the bird — at once — er — if you please."

"Couldn't go far wrong, sir," said the man, shoving the rabbit to one side, and going outside to fetch the thrush.

"No, I shall not require the cage, but — er — you may put him in a cardboard box perhaps, so that I can carry him easily."

He referred to the bird as "him," though at any other time he would have said "it," and the change, noted surreptitiously as it were, added to his general sense of confusion. It was too late, however, to alter his mind, and after watching the man force the bird with gross hands into a cardboard box, he gathered up the noose of string with which it was tied and walked with as much dignity and self-respect as he could muster out of the shop.

But the moment he got into the street with this living parcel under his arm — he both heard and felt the scuttling of the bird's feet — the realization that he had been guilty of what he considered an outrageous act of eccentricity almost overwhelmed him. For he had succumbed in most regrettable fashion to a momentary impulse, and had bought the bird in order to release it.

"Dear me!" he thought, "how ever could I have allowed myself to do so eccentric and impulsive a thing!"

And, but for the fact that it would merely have accentuated his eccentricity, he would then and there have returned to the shop and given back the bird.

That, however, being now clearly impossible, he crossed the road and entered the Little Park by the first iron gateway he could find. He walked down the gravel path, fumbling with the string. In another minute the bird would have been out, when he chanced to glance round in order to make sure he was unobserved and saw against the shrubbery on his left — a policeman.

This, he felt, was most vexatious, for he had hoped to complete the transaction unseen. Straightening himself up, he nervously fastened the string again, and walked on slowly as though nothing had happened, searching for a more secluded spot where he should be entirely free from observation.

Professor Parnacute now became aware that his vexation — primarily caused by his act of impulse, and increased by the fact that he was observed — had become somewhat acute. It was extraordinary, he reflected, how policemen had this way of suddenly outlining themselves in the least appropriate — the least necessary — places. There was no reason why a policeman should have been standing against that innocent shrubbery, where there was nothing to do, no one to watch. At almost any other point in the Little Park he might have served some possibly useful purpose, and yet, forsooth, he must select the one spot where he was not wanted — where his presence, indeed, was positively objectionable.

The policeman, meanwhile, watched him steadily as he retreated with the obnoxious parcel. He carried it upside down now without knowing it. He felt as though he had been detected in a crime. He watched the policeman, too, out of the corner of his eye, longing to be done with the whole business.

"That policeman is a tremendous fellow," he thought to himself. "I have never seen a constable so large, so stalwart. He must be *the* policeman of the district" — whatever that might mean— "a veritable wall and tower of defense." The helmet made him think of a battering ram, and the buttons on his overcoat of the muzzles of guns.

He moved away round the corner with as much innocence as he could assume, as though he were carrying a package of books or some new article of apparel.

It is, no doubt, the duty of every alert constable to observe as acutely as possible the course of events passing before his eyes, yet this particular Bobby seemed far more interested than the circumstances warranted in Parnacute's cardboard box. He kept his gaze remorselessly upon it. Perhaps, thought the Professor, he heard the scutterings of the frightened bird within. Perhaps he thought it was a cat going to be drowned in the ornamental water. Perhaps — oh, dreadful idea! — he thought it was a baby!

The suspicions of an intelligent policeman, however, being past finding out, Simon Parnacute wisely ignored them, and just then passed round a corner where he was screened from this persistent observer by a dense growth of rhododendron bushes.

Seizing the opportune moment, and acting with a prompt decision born of the dread of the reappearing policeman, he cut the string, opened the lid of the box, and an instant later had the intense satisfaction of seeing the imprisoned thrush hop upon the cardboard edge and then fly with a beautiful curving dip and a whirr of wings off into the open sky. It turned once as it flew, and its bright brown eye looked at him. Then it was gone, lost in the sunshine that blazed over the shrubberies and beckoned it out over their waving tops across the river.

The prisoner was free. For the space of a whole minute, the Professor stood still, conscious of a sense of genuine relief. That sound of wings, that racing sweep of the little quivering body escaping into limitless freedom, that penetrating look of gratitude from the wee brown eyes — these stirred in him again the same prodigious emotion he had experienced for the first time that afternoon outside the bird-fanciers s shop. The release of the “caged creature” provided him with a kind of vicarious experience of freedom and delight such as he had never before known in his whole life. It almost seemed as though he had escaped himself — out of his “circle.”

Then, as he faced about, with the empty box dangling in his hand, the first thing he saw, coming slowly down the path towards him with measured tread, was — the big policeman.

Something very stern, something very forbidding, hung like an atmosphere of warning about this guardian of the law in a blue uniform. It brought him back sharply to the rigid facts of life, and the soft beauty of the spring day vanished and left him untouched. He accepted the reminder that life is earnest, and that eccentricities are invitations to disaster. Sooner or later the Policeman is bound to make his appearance.

However, this particular constable, of course, passed him without word or gesture, and as soon as he came to one of the little wire baskets provided for the purpose, the Professor dropped his box into it, and then made his way slowly and thoughtfully back to his apartment and his luncheon.

But the eccentricity of which he had been guilty circled and circled in his mind, reminding him with merciless insistence of a foolish act he should not have committed, and plaguing him with remorseless little stabs for having indulged in an impulsive and irregular proceeding.

For, to him, the inevitableness of life came as a fact to which he was resigned, rather than as a force to be appropriated for the ends of his own soul; and the sight of the happy bird escaping into sky and sunshine, with the figure of the inflexible and stern-lipped policeman in the background, made a deep impression upon him that would sooner or later be certain to bear fruit.

“Dear me,” thought the Professor of Political Economy, giving mental expression to this sentiment, “I shall pay for this in the long run! Without question I shall pay for it!”

II

If it may be taken that there is no Chance, playing tricksy-wise behind the scenes of existence, but that all events falling into the lives of men are the calculated results of adequate causes, then Mr. Simon Parnacute, late Professor of Political Economy in C — College, certainly did pay for his spring aberration, in the sense that he caught a violent chill which brought him to bed and speedily developed into pneumonia.

It was the evening of the sixth day, and he lay weary and feverish in his bedroom on the top floor of the building which held his little self-contained apartment. The nurse was downstairs having her tea. A shaded lamp stood beside the bed, and through the window — the blinds being not yet drawn — he saw the sea of roofs and chimney-pots, and the stream of wires, sharply outlined against a sunset sky of gold and pink. High and thin above the dusk floated long strips of colored cloud, and the first stars twinkled through the April vapors that gathered with the approach of night.

Presently the door opened and someone came in softly halfway across the room, and then stopped. The Professor turned wearily and saw that the maid stood there and was trying to speak. She seemed flustered, he noticed, and her face was rather white.

“What’s the matter *now,* Emily?” he asked feebly, yet irritably.

“Please, Professor — there’s a gentleman—” and there she stuck.

“Someone to see me? The doctor again already?” queried the patient, wondering in a vague, absent way why the girl should seem so startled.

As he spoke there was a sound of footsteps on the landing outside — heavy footsteps.

“But please, Professor, sir, it’s *not* the doctor,” the maid faltered, “only I — couldn’t get his name, and I couldn’t stop him, an’ he said you expected him — and I think he looks like—”

The approaching footsteps frightened the girl so much that she could not find words to complete her description. They were just outside the door now.

“—like a perliceman!” she finished with a rush, backing towards the door as though she feared the Professor would leap from his bed to demolish her.

“A *policeman!”* gasped Mr. Parnacute, unable to believe his ears. “A policeman, Emily! In my apartment?”

And before the sick man could find words to express his particular annoyance that any stranger (above all a constable) should intrude at such a time, the door was pushed wide open, the girl had vanished with a flutter of skirts, and the tall figure of a man stood in full view upon the threshold, and stared steadily across the room at the occupant of the bed on the other side.

It was indeed a policeman, and a very large policeman. Moreover, it was *the* policeman.

The instant the Professor recognized the familiar form of the man from the park his anger, for some quite unaccountable reason, vanished almost entirely; the sharp vexation he had felt a moment before died away; and, sinking back exhausted among the pillows, he only found breath to ask him to close the door and come in. The fact was, astonishment had used up the small store of energy at his disposal, and for the moment he could think of nothing else to do.

The policeman closed the door quietly and moved forward towards the center of the room, so that the circle of light from the shaded lamp at the head of the bed reached his figure but fell just short of his face.

The invalid sat up in bed again and stared. As nothing seemed to happen he recovered his scattered wits a little.

“You are the policeman from the park, unless I mistake?” he asked feebly, with mingled pomposity and resentment.

The big man bowed in acknowledgment and removed his helmet, holding it before him in his hand. His face was peculiarly bright, almost as though it reflected the glow of a bull’s-eye lantern concealed somewhere about his huge person.

“I thought I recognized you,” went on the Professor, exasperated a little by the other’s self-possession. “Are you perhaps aware that I am ill —— too ill to see strangers, and that to force your way up in this fashion — !” He left the sentence unfinished for lack of suitable expletives.

“You are certainly ill,” replied the constable, speaking for the first time; “but then — I am *not* a stranger.” His voice was wonderfully pitched and modulated for a policeman.

“Then, by what right, pray, do you dare to intrude upon me at such a time?” snapped the other, ignoring the latter statement.

“My duty, sir,” the man replied, with a rather wonderful dignity, “knows nothing of time or place.”

Professor Parnacute looked at him a little more closely as he stood there helmet in hand. He was something more, he gathered, than an ordinary constable; an inspector perhaps. He examined him carefully, but he understood nothing about differences in uniform, of bands or stars upon sleeve and collar.

“If you are here in the prosecution of your duty, then,” exclaimed the man of careful mind, searching feverishly for some possible delinquency on the part of his small staff of servants, “pray be seated and state your business; but as briefly as possible. My throat pains me, and my strength is low.” He spoke with less acerbity. The dignity of the visitor began to impress him in some vague fashion he did not understand.

The big figure in blue bowed again, but made no sign of advance.

“You come from X — Station, I presume?” Parnacute added, mentioning the police station round the corner. He sank deeper into his pillows, conscious that his strength was becoming exhausted.

“From Headquarters — I come,” replied the colossus in a deep voice.

The Professor had only the vaguest idea what Headquarters meant, yet the phrase conveyed an importance that somehow was not lost upon him. Meanwhile his impatience grew with his exhaustion.

“I must request you, officer, to state your business with dispatch,” he said tartly, “or to come again when I am better able to attend to you. Next week, no doubt—”

“There is no time *but* the present,” returned the other, with an odd choice of words that escaped the notice of his perplexed hearer, as he produced from a capacious pocket in the tail of his overcoat a notebook bound with some shining metal like gold.

“Your name is Parnacute?” he asked, consulting the book.

“Yes,” answered the other, with the resignation of exhaustion.

“Simon Parnacute?”

“Of course, yes.”

“And on the third of April last,” he went on, looking keenly over the top of the notebook at the sick man, “you, Simon Parnacute, entered the shop of Theodore Spinks in the Lower P — Road, and purchased from him a certain living creature?”

“Yes,” answered the Professor, beginning to feel hot at the discovery of his folly.

“A bird?”

“A bird.”

“A thrush?”

“A thrush.”

“A singing thrush?”

“Oh yes, it was a singing thrush, if you *must* know.”

“In money you paid for this thrush the sum of one shilling *and* six pennies?” He emphasized the “and” just as the bird-fancier had done. “One and six, yes.”

“But in true value,” said the policeman, speaking with grave emphasis, “it cost you a great deal more?”

“Perhaps.” He winced internally at the memory.

He was so astonished, too, that the visit had to do with himself and not with some of his servants.

“You paid for it with your heart?” insisted the other.

The Professor made no reply. He started. He almost writhed under the sheets.

“Am I right?” asked the policeman.

“That is the fact, I suppose,” he said in a low voice, sorely puzzled by the catechism.

“You carried this bird away in a cardboard box to E — Gardens by the river, and there you gave it freedom and watched it fly away?”

“Your statement is correct, I think, in every particular. But really — this absurd cross-examination, my good man!”

“And your motive in so doing,” continued the policeman, his voice quite drowning the invalid’s feeble tones, “was the unselfish one of releasing an imprisoned and tortured creature?”

Simon Parnacute looked up with the greatest possible surprise.

“I think — well, well! — perhaps it was,” he murmured apologetically. “The extraordinary singing — it *was* extraordinary, you know, and the sight of the little thing beating its wings pained me.”

The big policeman put away his notebook suddenly, and moved closer to the bed so that his face entered the circle of lamplight.

“In that case,” he cried, *“you are my man!”*

“I am your man!” exclaimed the Professor, with an uncontrollable start.

“The man I want,” repeated the other, smiling. His voice had suddenly grown soft and wonderful, like the ringing of a silver gong, and into his face had come an expression of wistful tenderness that made it positively beautiful. It shone. Never before, out of a picture, had he seen such a look upon a human countenance, or heard such tones issue from the lips of a human being. He thought, swiftly and confusedly, of a woman, of *the* woman he had never found — of a dream, an enchantment as of music or vision upon the senses.

“Wants me!” he thought with alarm. “What have I done now? What new eccentricity have I been guilty of?”

Strange, bewildering ideas crowded into his mind, blurred in outline, preposterous in character. A sensation of cold caught at his fever and overmastered it, bathing him in perspiration, making him tremble, yet not with fear. A new and curious delight had begun to pluck at his heart-strings.

Then an extravagant suspicion crossed his brain, yet a suspicion not wholly unwarranted.

“Who are you?” he asked sharply, looking up. “Are you really only a policeman?”

The man drew himself up so that he appeared, if possible, even huger than before.

“I am a World-Policeman,” he answered, “a guardian, perhaps, rather than a detective.”

“Heavens above!” cried the Professor, thinking of madness and the crimes committed in madness.

“Yes,” he went on in those calm, musical tones that before long began to have a reassuring effect upon his listener, “and it is my duty, among many others, to keep an eye upon eccentric people; to lock them up when necessary, and when their sentences have expired, to release them. Also,” he added impressively, “as in your case, to let them out of their cages without pain — when they’ve earned it.”

“Gracious goodness me!” exclaimed Parnacute, unaccustomed to the use of expletives, but unable to think of anything else to say.

“And sometimes to see that their cages do not destroy them — and that they do not beat themselves to death against the bars,” he went on, smiling quite wonderfully. “Our duties are varied *and* numerous. I am one of a large force.”

The man learned in political economy felt as though his head were spinning. He thought of calling for help. Indeed, he had already made a motion with his hand towards the bell when a gesture on the part of his strange visitor restrained him.

“Then why do you want *me,* if I may ask?” he faltered instead.

"To mark you down; and when the time comes to let you out of your cage easily, comfortably, without pain. That's one reward for your kindness to the bird."

The Professor's fears had now quite disappeared. The policeman seemed perfectly harmless after all.

"It's *very* kind of you," he said feebly, drawing his arm back beneath the bed-clothes. "Only — er — I was not aware, exactly, that I lived in a cage.

He looked up resignedly into the man's face.

"You only realize that when you get out," he replied. "They're all like that. The bird didn't quite understand what was wrong; it only knew that it felt miserable. Same with you. You feel unhappy in that body of yours, and in that little careful mind you regulate so nicely; but, for the life of you, you don't quite know what it is that's wrong. You want space, freedom, a taste of liberty. You want to fly, that's what you want!" he cried, raising his voice.

"I — want — to — fly?" gasped the invalid.

"Oh," smiling again, "we World-Policemen have thousands of cases just like yours. Our Held is a large one, a very large one indeed."

He stepped into the light more fully and turned sideways.

"Here's my badge, if you care to see it," he said proudly.

He stooped a little so that the Professor's beady eyes could easily focus themselves upon the collar of his overcoat. There, just like the lettering upon the collar of an ordinary London policeman, only in bright gold instead of silver, shone the constellation of the Pleiades. Then he turned and showed the other side, and Parnacute saw the constellation of Orion slanting upwards, as he had often seen it tilting across the sky at night.

"Those are my badges," he repeated proudly, straightening himself up again and moving back into the shadow.

"And very fine they are, too," said the Professor, his increasing exhaustion suggesting no better observation. But with the sight of those starry figures had come to him a strange whiff of the open skies, space, and wind — the winds of the world.

"So that when the time comes," the World-Policeman resumed, "you may have confidence. I will let you out without pain or fear just as you let out the bird. And, meanwhile, you may as well realize that you live in a cage just as cramped and shut away from light and freedom as the thrush did."

"Thank you; I will certainly try," whispered Parnacute, almost fainting with fatigue.

There followed a pause, during which the policeman put on his helmet, tightened his belt, and then began to search vigorously for something in his coattail pockets.

"And now," ventured the sick man, feeling half fearful, half happy, though without knowing exactly why, "is there anything more I can do for you, Mr. World-Policeman?" He was conscious that his words were peculiar yet he could not help it. They seemed to slip out of their own accord.

"There's nothing more you can do for *me,* sir, thank you," answered the man in his most silvery tones. "But there's something more I can do for *you!* And that is to give you a preliminary taste of freedom, so that you may realize you do live in a cage, and be less confused and puzzled when you come to make the final Escape."

Parnacute caught his breath sharply — staring open-mouthed.

With a single stride the policeman covered the space between himself and the bed. Before the withered, fever-stricken little Professor could utter a word or a cry, he had caught up the wasted body out of the bed, shaken the bed-clothes off him like paper from a parcel, and slung him without ceremony across his gigantic shoulders. Then he crossed the room, and producing the key from his coat-tail pocket, he put it straight into the solid wall of the room. He turned it, and the entire side of the house opened like a door.

For one second Simon Parnacute looked back and saw the lamp, and the fire, and the bed. And in the bed he saw his own body lying motionless in profound slumber.

Then, as the policeman balanced, hovering upon the giddy edge, he looked outward and saw the network of street-lamps far below, and heard the deep roar of the city smite upon his ears like the thunder of a sea.

The next moment the man stepped out into space, and he saw that they were rising up swiftly towards the dark vault of sky, where stars twinkled down upon them between streaks of thin flying clouds.

III

Once outside, floating in the night, the policeman gave his shoulder a mighty jerk and tossed his small burden into free space.

“Jump away!” he cried. “You’re quite safe!”

The Professor dropped like a bullet towards the pavement; then suddenly began to rise again, like a balloon. All traces of fever or bodily discomfort had left him utterly. He felt light as air, and strong as lightning.

“Now, where shall we go to?” The voice sounded above him.

Simon Parnacute was no flyer. He had never indulged in those strange flying-dreams that form a weird pleasure in the sleep-lives of many people. He was terrified beyond belief until he found that he did not crash against the earth, and that he had within him the power to regulate his movements, to rise or sink at will. Then, of course, the wildest fury of delight and freedom he had ever known flashed all over him and burned in his brain like an intoxication.

“The big cities, or the stars?” asked the World-Policeman.

“No, no,” he cried, “the country — the open country! And other lands!”

For Simon Parnacute had never traveled. Incredible as it may seem, the Professor had never in his life been farther out of England than in a sailing-boat at Southend. His body had traveled even less than his imagination. With this suddenly increased capacity for motion, the desire to race about and see became a passion.

“Woods! Mountains! Seas! Deserts! Anything but houses and people!” he shouted, rising upwards to his companion without the smallest effort.

An intense longing to see the desolate, unfrequented regions of the earth seized him and tore its way out into words strangely unlike his normal and measured mode of speech. All his life he had paced to and fro in a formal little garden with the most precise paths imaginable. Now he wanted a trackless world. The reaction was terrific. The desire of the Arab for the desert, of the gypsy for the open heaths, the "desire of the snipe for the wilderness" — the longing of the eternal wanderer —— possessed his soul and found vent in words.

It was just as though the passion of the released thrush were reproducing itself in him and becoming articulate.

"I am haunted by the faces of the world's forgotten places," he cried aloud impetuously. "Beaches lying in the moonlight, all forsaken in the moonlight —"

His utterance, like the bird's, had become lyrical.

"Can this be what the thrush felt?" he wondered.

"Let's be off then," the policeman called back. "There's no time *but the present,* remember." He rushed through space like a huge projectile. He made a faint whistling noise as he went. Parnacute followed suit. The lightest desire, he found, gave him instantly the ease and speed of thought.

The policeman had taken off his helmet, overcoat and belt, and dropped them down somewhere into a London street. He now appeared as a mere blue outline of a man, scarcely discernible against the dark sky — an outline filled with air. The Professor glanced down at himself and saw that he, too, was a mere outline of a man — a pallid outline filled with the purple air of night.

"Now then," sang out this "Bobby-of-the-World."

Side by side they shot up with a wild rush, and the lights of London, town and suburbs, flashed away beneath them in streaming lines and patches. In a second darkness filled the huge gap, pouring behind them like a mighty wave. Other streams and patches of light succeeded quickly, blurred and faint, like lamps of railway stations from a night express, as other towns dropped past them in a series and were swallowed up in the gulf behind.

A cool salt air smote their faces, and Parnacute heard the soft crashing of waves as they crossed the Channel, and swept on over the fields and forests of France, glimmering below like the squares of a mighty chess-hoard. Like toys, village after village shot by, smelling of peat smoke, cattle, and the faint windiness of coming spring.

Sometimes they passed below the clouds and lost the stars, sometimes above them and lost the world; sometimes over forests roaring like the sea, sometimes above vast plains still and silent as the grave; but always Parnacute saw the constellations of Orion and Pleiades shining on the coat collar of the soaring policeman, their little patterns picked out as with tiny electric lamps.

Below them lay the huge map of the earth, raised, scarred, darkly colored, and breathing — a map *alive.*

Then came the Jura, soft and purple, carpeted with forests, rolling below them like a dream, and they looked down into slumbering valleys and heard far below the tumbling of water and the singing of countless streams.

“Glory, glory!” cried the Professor. “And do the birds know *this?”*

“Not the imprisoned ones,” was the reply. And presently they whipped across large gleaming bodies of water as the lakes of Switzerland approached. Then, entering the zones of icy atmosphere, they looked down and saw white towers and pinnacles of silver, and the forms of scarred and mighty glaciers that rose and fell among the fields of eternal snow, folding upon the mountains in vast procession.

“I think — I’m frightened!” gasped Parnacute, clutching at his companion, but seizing only the frigid air.

The policeman shouted with laughter.

“This is nothing — compared to Mars or the moon,” he cried, soaring till the Alps looked like a patch of snowdrops shining in a Surrey garden. “You’ll soon get accustomed to it.”

The Professor of Political Economy rose after him. But presently they sank again in an immense curving sweep and touched the tops of the highest mountains with their toes. This sent them instantly aloft again, bounding with the impetus of rockets, and so they careered on through the perfumed, pathless night till they came to Italy and left the Alps behind them like the shadowy wall of another world that had silently moved up close to them through space.

“Mother of Mountains!” shouted the delighted man of colleges. “And did the thrush know this too?”

“It has you to thank, if so,” the policeman answered.

“And I have you to thank.”

“No — yourself,” replied his flying guide.

And then the desert! They had crossed the scented Mediterranean and reached the zones of sand. It rose in clouds and sheets as a mighty wind stirred across the leagues of loneliness that stretched below them into blue distance. It whirled about them and stung their faces.

“Thin ropes of sand which crumble ere they bind!” cried the Professor with a peal of laughter, not knowing what he said in the delirium of his pleasure.

The hot smell of the sand excited him; the knowledge that for hundreds of miles he could not see a house or a human being thrilled him dizzily with the incalculable delight of freedom. The splendor of the night, mystical and incommunicable, overcame him. He rose, laughing wildly, shaking the sand from his hair, and taking gigantic curves into the starry space about him. He remembered vividly the sight of those bedraggled wings in the little cramped cage — and then looked down and realized that here the winds sank exhausted from the very weariness of too much space. Oh, that he could tear away the bars of every cage the world had ever known — set free all captive creatures — restore to all wild, winged life the liberty of open spaces that is theirs by right!

He cried again to the stars and winds and deserts, but his words found no intelligible expression, for their passion was too great to be confined in any known medium. The World-Policeman alone understood, perhaps, for he flew down in circles round the little Professor and laughed and laughed and laughed.

And it seemed as if tremendous figures formed themselves out of the sky to listen, and bent down to lift him with a single sweep of their immense arms from the earth to the heavens. Such was the torrential power and delight of escape in him, that he almost felt as if he could skim the icy abysses of Death itself — without being ever caught....

The colossal shapes of Egypt, terrible and monstrous, passed far below in huge and shadowy procession, and the desolate Lybian Mountains drew him hovering over their wastes of stone.... And this was only a beginning! Asia, India, and the Southern Seas all lay within reach! All could be visited in turn. The interstellar spaces, the far planets, and the white moon were yet to know!

“We must be thinking of turning soon,” he heard the voice of his companion, and then remembered how his own body, hot and feverish, lay in that stuffy little room at the other end of Europe. It was indeed caged — the withered body in the room, and himself in the withered body — doubly caged. He laughed and shuddered. The wind swept through him, licking him clean. He rose again in the ecstasy of free flight, following the lead of the policeman on the homeward journey, and the mountains below became a purple line on the map. In a series of great sweeps they rested on the top of the Pyramid, and then upon the forehead of the Sphinx, and so onwards, touching the earth at intervals, till they heard once more the waves upon the coast-line, and soared aloft again across the sea, racing through Spain and over the Pyrenees. The thin blue outline of the policeman kept ever at his side.

“From all the far blue hills of heaven these winds of freedom blow!” he shouted into space, following it with a peal of laughter that made his guide circle round and round him, chuckling as he flew. A curious, silvery chuckle it was — yet it sounded as though it came to him through a much greater distance than before. It came, as it were, through barriers.

The picture of the bird-fancier’s shop came again vividly before him. He saw the beseeching and frightened little eyes; heard the ceaseless pattering of the imprisoned feet, wings beating against the bars, and soft furry bodies pushing vainly to get out. He saw the red face of Theodore Spinks, the proprietor, gloating over the scene of captive life that gave him the means to live — the means to enjoy his own little measure of freedom. He saw the sea-gull drooping in its corner, and the owl, its eyes filled with the dust of the street, its feathered ears twitching; —— and then he thought again of the caged human beings of the world —— men, women and children, and a pain, like the pain of a whole universe, burned in his soul and set his heart aflame with yearning... to set them all instantly free.

And, unable to find words to give expression to what he felt, he found relief again in his strange, impetuous singing.

Simon Parnacute, Professor of Political Economy, sang in midheaven!

But this was the last vivid memory he knew. It all began to fade a little after that. It changed swiftly like a dream when the body nears the point of waking. He tried to seize and hold it, to delay the moment when it must end; but the power was beyond him. He felt heavy and tired, and flew closer to the ground; the intervals between the curves of flight grew smaller and smaller, the impetus weaker and weaker as he became every moment more dense and stupid. His progress across the fields of the south of England, as he made his way almost laboriously homewards, became rather a series of long, low leaps than actual flight. More and more often he found himself obliged to touch the earth to acquire the necessary momentum. The big policeman seemed suddenly to have quite melted away into the blue of night.

Then he heard a door open in the sky over his head. A star came down rather too close and half blinded his eyes. Instinctively he called for help to his friend, the world-policeman.

“It’s time, for your soup now,” was the only answer he got. And it did not seem the right answer, or the right voice either. A terror of being permanently lost came over him, and he cried out again louder than before.

“And the medicine first,” dropped the thin, shrill voice out of endless space.

It was not the policeman’s voice at all. He knew now, and understood. A sensation of weariness, of sickening disgust and boredom came over him. He looked up. The sky had turned white; he saw curtains and walls and a bright lamp with a red shade. This was the star that had nearly blinded him — a lamp merely, in a sick-room!

And, standing at the farther end of the room, he saw the figure of the nurse in cap and apron. Below him lay his body in the bed. His sensation of disgust and boredom became a positive horror. But he sank down exhausted into it — into his cage.

“Take this soup, sir, after the medicine, and then perhaps you’ll get another bit of sleep,” the nurse was saying with gentle authority, bending over him.

IV

The progress of Professor Parnacute towards recovery was slow and tedious, for the illness had been severe and it left him with a dangerously weak heart. And at night he still had the delights of the flying dreams. Only, by this time, he had learned to fly alone. His phantom friend, the big World-Policeman, no longer accompanied him.

And his chief occupation during these weary hours of convalescence was curious and, the nurse considered, not very suitable for an invalid: for he spent the time with endless calculations, poring over the list of his few investments, and adding up times without number the total of his savings of nearly forty years. The bed was strewn with papers and documents; pencils were always getting lost among the clothes; and each time the nurse collected the paraphernalia and put them aside, he would wait till she was out of the room, and then crawl over to the table and carry them all back into bed with him.

Then, finally, she gave up fighting with him, and acquiesced, for his restlessness increased and he could not sleep unless his beloved halfsheets and pencils lay strewn upon the counterpane within instant reach.

Even to the least observant it was clear that the Professor was hatching the preliminary details of a profound plot.

And his very first visitor, as soon as he was permitted to see anybody, was a gentleman with parchment skin and hard, dry, peeping eyes who came by special request — a solicitor, from the firm of Messrs. Costa & Delay.

“I will ascertain the price of the shop and stock-in-trade and inform you of the result at the earliest opportunity, Professor Parnacute,” said the man of law in his gritty, professional voice, as he at length took his departure and left the sick-room with the expressionless face of one to whom the eccentricities of human nature could never be new or surprising.

“Thank you; I shall be *most* anxious to hear,” replied the other, turning in his long easy chair to save his papers, and at the same time to defend himself against the chiding of the good-natured nurse.

“I knew I should have to pay for it,” he murmured, thinking of his original sin; “but I hope,” — here he again consulted his penciled figures — — “I think I can manage it — just. Though with Consols so low—” He fell to musing again. “Still, I can always sublet the shop, of course, as they suggest,” he concluded with a sigh, turning to appeal to the bewildered nurse and finding for the first time that she had gone out of the room.

He fell to pondering deeply. Presently the “list enclosed” by the solicitors caught his eye among the pillows, and he began listlessly to examine it. It was type-written and covered several sheets of foolscap. It was split up into divisions headed as “Lot 1, Lot 2, Lot 3,” and so on. He began to read slowly half aloud to himself; then with increasing excitement —

“50 Linnets, guaranteed not straight from the fields; *all caged.”*

“10 fierce singing Linnets.”

“10 grand cock Throstles, *just on song.”*

“5 Pear Tree Goldfinches, with deep, square blazes, well buttoned and mooned.”

“4 Devonshire Woodlarks, guaranteed full song; *caged three months.”*

The Professor sat up and gripped the paper tightly. His face wore a pained, intent expression. A convulsive movement of his fingers, automatic perhaps, crumpled the sheet and nearly tore it across. He went on reading, shedding rugs and pillows as though they oppressed him. His breath came a little faster.

“5 cock Blackbirds, full plumage, *lovely songsters.”*

“1 Song-Thrush, show-cage and hamper; *splendid whistler,* picked bird.”

“1 beautiful, large upstanding singing Skylark; *sings all day; been caged positively five months.”*

Simon Parnacute uttered a curious little cry. It was deep down in his throat. He was conscious of a burning desire to be rich — a millionaire; powerful — an autocratic monarch. After a pause he brought back his attention with an effort to the type-written page and the consideration of further “Lots” —

“3 cock Skylarks; can hear them 200 yards off when singing.”

“Two hundred yards off when singing,” muttered the Professor into his one remaining pillow. He read on, kicking his feet, somewhat viciously for a sick man, against the wicker rest at the end of the lounge chair.

“1 special, select, singing cock Skylark; guaranteed caged three months; *sings his wild note.*

He suddenly dashed the list aside. The whole chair creaked and groaned with the violence of his movement. He kicked three times running at the wicker foot-rest, and evidently rejoiced that it was still stiff enough to make it worth while to kick again — harder.

“Oh, that I had all the money in the world!” he cried to himself, letting his eyes wander to the window and the clear blue spaces between the clouds; “all the money in the world!” he repeated with growing excitement. He saw one of London’s sea-gulls circling high, high up. He watched it for some minutes, till it sailed against a dazzling bit of white cloud and was lost to view.

‘“Sings his wild note’— ‘guaranteed caged three months’— ‘can he heard two hundred yards oft.’” The phrases burned in his brain like consuming flames.

And so the list went on. He was glancing over the last page when his eye fell suddenly upon an item that described a lot of —

“8 Linnets caged four months; *raving with song.”*

He dropped the list, rose with difficulty from his chair and paced the room, muttering to himself “raving with song, raving with song, raving with song.” His hollow cheeks were flushed, his eyes aglow.

“Caged, caged, caged” he repeated under his breath, while his thoughts traveled to that racing flight across Europe, over seas and mountains.

“Sings his wild note!” He heard again the whistling wind about his ears as he flew through the zones of heated air above the desert sands.

“Raving with song!” He remembered the passion of his own cry — that strange lyrical outburst of his heart when the magic of freedom caught him, and he had soared at will through the unchartered regions of the night.

And then he saw once more the blinking owl, its eyes blinded by the dust of the London street, its feathery ears twitching as it heard the wind sighing past the open doorway of the dingy shop. And again the thrush looked into his face and poured out the rapture of its spring song.

And half-an-hour later he was so exhausted by the unwonted emotion and exercise that the nurse herself was obliged to write at his dictation the letter he sent in reply to the solicitors, Messrs. Costa & Delay in Southampton Row.

But the letter was posted that night and the Professor, still mumbling to himself about “having to pay for it,” went to bed with the first hour of the darkness, and plunged straight into another of his delightful flying dreams almost the very moment his eyes had closed.

V

Thus, all the animals have been disposed of according to your instructions,” ran the final letter from the solicitors, “and we beg to append list of items so allotted, together with country addresses to which they have been sent. We think you may feel assured that they are now in homes where they will be well cared for.

“We still retain the following animals against your further instructions — 2 — Zonure Lizards, 1 — Angulated Tortoise, 2 — Mealy Rosellas, 2 — Scaly-breasted Lorikeets.

“With regard to these we should advise....

“The caged birds, meanwhile, which you intend the children shall release, are being cared for satisfactorily; and the premises will be ready for taking over as from June 1....”

And, with the assistance of the nurse, he then began to issue a steady stream of letters to the parents of children he knew in the country, carefully noting and tabulating the replies, and making out little white labels inscribed in plain lettering with the words “Lot 1,”

“Lot 2,” and so on, precisely as though he were in the animal business himself, and were getting ready for a sale.

But the sale which took place a fortnight later on June 1 was no ordinary sale.

It was a brilliant hot day when Simon Parnacute, still worn and shaky from his recent illness, made his way towards the shop of the “retired” bird-fancier. The sale of the premises and stock-in-trade, and the high price obtained, had made quite a stir in the “Fancy,” but of that the Professor was sublimely ignorant as he crossed the street in front of a truculent motor-omnibus and stood before the dingy three-storey redbrick house.

He produced the key sent to him by Messrs. Costa & Delay, and opened the door. It was cool after the glare of the burning street, and delightfully silent. He remembered the chorus of crying birds that had greeted his last appearance. The silence now was eloquent.

“Good, good,” he said to himself, with a quiet smile, as he noticed the temporary counter built across the front room for cloaks and parcels, Then he went upstairs, climbing painfully, for he was still easily exhausted. There was hardly a stick of furniture in the house, nor an inch of carpet on the floor and stairs, but the rooms had been swept and scrubbed; everything was fresh and scrupulously clean, and the tenant to whom he was to sub-let could have no fault to find on that score.

In the first-floor rooms he saw with pleasure the flowers arranged about the boards as he had directed. The air was sweet and perfumed. The windows at the back — the sills deep with jars of roses — opened upon a small bit of green garden, and Parnacute looked out and saw the blue sky and the clouds floating lazily across it.

“Good, very good,” he exclaimed again, sitting down on the stairs a moment to recover his breath. The excitement and the heat of the day tired him. And, as he sat, he put his hand to his ear and listened attentively. A sound of birds singing reached him faintly from the upper part of the house.

“Ah!” he said, drawing a deep breath, and color coming into his cheeks. “Ah! Now I hear them.”

The sound of singing came nearer, as on a passing wind. He climbed laboriously to the top floor, and then, after resting again, scrambled up a ladder through an open skylight on to the roof. The moment he put his perspiring face above the tiles a wild chorus of singing birds greeted him with a sound like a whole countryside in spring.

“If only my friend, the park policeman, could see this!” he said aloud, with a delighted chuckle, “and hear it!” He sought a precarious resting-place upon the butt of a chimney-stack, mopping his forehead.

All around him the sea of London roofs and chimneys rolled away in a black sea, but here, like an oasis in a desert, was a roof of limited extent, and not very high compared to others, converted into a perfect garden. Flowers — but why describe them, when he himself did not even know the names? It was enough that his orders had been carried out to his entire satisfaction, and that this little roof was a world of living color, moving in the wind, scenting the air, welcoming the sunshine.

Everywhere among the pots and boxes of flowers stood the cages. And in the cages the thrushes and blackbirds, the larks and linnets, poured their hearts out with a chorus of song that was more exquisite, he thought, than anything he had ever heard. And there in the corner by the big chimney, carefully shaded from the glare, stood the large cage containing the owls.

“I can almost believe they have guessed my purpose after all,” exclaimed the Professor.

For a long time he sat there, leaning against the chimney, oblivious of a blackened collar, listening to the singing, and feasting his eyes upon the garden of flowers all about him. Then the sound of a bell ringing downstairs roused him suddenly into action, and he climbed with difficulty down again to the hall door.

“Here they come,” he thought, greatly excited. “Dear me, I do trust I shall not make any mistakes.”

He felt in his pocket for his notebook, and then opened the door into the street.

“Oh, it’s only you!” he exclaimed, as his nurse came in with her arms full of parcels.

“Only me,” she laughed, “but I’ve brought the lemonade and the biscuits. The others will be here now any minute. It’s after three. There’s just time to arrange the glasses and plates. We must expect about fifty according to the letters you got. And mind you don’t get overtired.”

“Oh, I’m all right! “he answered.

She ran upstairs. Before her steps had sounded once on the floor above, a carriage-and-pair stopped at the door, and a footman came up smartly and asked if Professor Parnacute was at home.

“Indeed I am,” answered the old man, blushing and laughing at the same time, and then going down himself to the carriage to welcome the little girl and boy who got out. He bowed stiffly and awkwardly to the pretty lady in the victoria, who thanked him for his kindness with a speech he did not hear properly, and then led his callers into the house. They were very shy at first, and hardly knew what to make of it all, but once inside, the boy's sense of adventure was stirred by the sight of the empty shop, and the counter, and the strange array of flowers upon the floor.

He remembered the letter his father had read out from Professor Parnacute a week ago.

"My Lot is No. 7, isn't it, Mr. Professor?" he cried. "I let out a cage of linnets, and get a guinea-pig and a mealy-something-or-other as a present, don't I?"

Mr. Parnacute, shaky and beaming, consulted his notebook hurriedly, and replied that this was "perfectly correct."

"Master Edwin Burton," he read out; "to release — Lot 7. To take away —— one guinea-pig, and one mealy rosella."

"I'm Lot 8, please," piped the voice of the little girl, standing with wide-open eyes beside him.

"Oh, are you, my dear?" said he; "yes, yes, I believe you are." He fumbled anew with the notebook. "Here it is," he added, reading aloud again— "Miss Angelina Burton;" he peered closely in the gloom to decipher the writing; "To release — Lot 8 — that's woodlarks, my dear, you know. To take away — one angulated tortoise. Quite correct, yes; quite correct."

He called to the nurse upstairs to show the children their presents hidden away in boxes among the flowers — their rosella and tortoise — and then went again to the door to receive his other guests, who now began to arrive in a steady stream. To the number of twenty or thirty they came, and not one of them appeared to be much over twelve. And the majority of them left their elders at the door and came in unattended.

The marshaling of this array of youngsters among the birds and flowers was a matter of some difficulty, but here the nurse came to the Professor's assistance with energy and experience, so that his strength was economized and the children were arranged without danger to anyone.

And upon that little roof the sight was certainly a unique one. There they all stood, an extraordinary patchwork of color for the tiles of Southwest London — the bright frocks of the girls, the plumage of the birds, the blues and yellows and scarlets of the flowers; while the singing and voices sent up a chorus that brought numerous surprised faces to the windows of the higher buildings about them, and made people stop in the street below and ask themselves with startled faces where in the world these sounds came from this still June afternoon!

"Now!" cried Simon Parnacute, when all lots and owners had been placed carefully side by side. "The moment I give the word of command, open your cages and let the prisoners escape! And point in the direction of the park."

The children stooped and picked up their cages. The voices and the singing in a hundred busy little throats ceased. A hush fell upon the roof and upon the strange gathering. The sun poured blazingly down over everything, and the Professor's face streamed.

"One," he cried, his voice tremulous with excitement, "two, three — and away!"

There was a rattling sound of opening doors and wire bars — and then a sudden burst of half-suppressed, long-drawn "Ahhhhs." At once there followed a rush of fluttering feathers, a rapid vibration of the air, and the small host of prisoners shot out like a cloud into the air, and a moment later with a great whirring of wings had disappeared over the walls beyond the forest of chimneys and were lost to view. Blackbirds, thrushes, linnets and finches were gone in a twinkling, so that the eye could hardly follow them. Only the sea-gulls, puzzled by their sudden freedom, with wings still stiff after their cramped quarters, lingered on the edge of the roof for a few minutes, and looked about them in a dazed fashion, until they, too, realized their liberty and sailed off into the open sky to search for splendors of the sea.

A second hush, deeper even than the first, fell over all for a moment, and then the children with one accord burst into screams of delight and explanation, shouting, for all who cared to listen, the details of how their birds, respectively, had flown; where they had gone; what they thought and looked like; and a hundred other details as to where they would build their nests and the number of eggs they would lay.

And then came the descent for the presents and refreshment. One by one they approached the Professor, holding out the tickets with the number of their "lot" and the description of animal they were to receive and find a home for. The few accompanied by elders came first.

"The owls, I think?" said the pink-faced clergyman who had chaperoned other children besides his own, picking his way across the roof as the crowd tapered off down the skylight. "Two owls," he repeated, with a smile. "In the windy towers of my belfry under the Mendips, I hope—"

"Oh, the very thing, the very place," replied Parnacute, with pleasure, remembering his correspondent. For, of course, the owls had not been released with the other birds.

"And for my little girl you thought, perhaps, a lorikeet—"

"A scaly-breasted lorikeet, papa," she interrupted, with a degree of excitement too intense for smiles, and pronouncing the name as she had learned it — in a single word; *"and* a lizard."

They moved off towards the trapdoor, the owl cage under the clergyman's arm. They would receive the lorikeet and lizard downstairs from the nurse on presenting their ticket.

"And remember," added Parnacute slyly, addressing the child, "to comb their feathered trousers with a *very* fine comb!"

The clergyman turned a moment at the skylight as he helped the owls and children to squeeze through.

"I shall have something to say about this in my sermon next Sunday," he said. He smiled as his head disappeared.

"Oh, but, my dear sir—" cried the Professor, tripping over a flowerpot in his pleasure and embarrassment, and just reaching the skylight in time to add, "And, remember, there are cakes and lemonade on the floor below!"

The animals had all been provided with happy homes; the last cab had driven away, and the nurse had gone to find the flower-man. Parnacute had strewn the roof with food, and with moss and hair-material for nesting, in case any of the birds returned. He stood alone and watched the sunset pour its gold over the myriad houses — the cages of the men and women of

London town. He felt exhausted; the sky was soothing and pleasant to behold....

He sat down to rest, conscious of a great weakness now that the excitement was over and the reaction had begun to set in. Probably he had exerted himself unduly.

His mind reverted to his first impulsive eccentricity of two months before.

“I knew I should pay for it,” he murmured, with a smile, “and I have. But it was worth it.”

He stopped abruptly and caught his breath a moment. He was thoroughly overtired; the excitement of it all had been too much for him. He must get home as quickly as possible to rest. The nurse would be back any minute now.

A sound of wings rapidly beating the air passed overhead, and he looked up and saw a flight of pigeons wheeling by. He fancied, too, that he just caught the notes of a thrush singing far away in the park at the end of the street. He recalled the phrases of that dreadfully haunting list. “Wild singing note,”

“Can be heard two hundred yards off,”

“Raving with song.” A momentary spasm passed through his frame. Far up in the air the sea-gulls still circled, making their way with all the splendor of real freedom to the sea.

“Tonight,” he thought, “they will roost on the marshes, or perched upon the lonely cliffs. Good, good, *very* good!”

He got up, stiffly and with difficulty, to watch the pigeons better, and to hear the thrush, and, as he did so, the bell rang downstairs to admit the nurse and the flower-man.

“Odd,” he thought; “I gave her the key!”

He made his way towards the skylight, picking his way with uncertain tread between the flower-boxes; but before he could reach it a head and shoulders suddenly appeared above the opening.

“Odd,” he thought again, “that she should have come up so quickly—”

But he did not complete the thought. It was not the nurse at all. A very different figure followed the emerging head and shoulders, and there in front of him on the roof stood — a policeman.

It was *the* policeman.

“Oh,” said Parnacute quietly, “it’s *you!”* A wild tumult of yearning and happiness caught at his heart and made it impossible to think of anything else to say.

The big blue figure smiled his shining smile.

“One more flight, sir,” said the silvery, ringing voice respectfully, “and the last.”

The pigeons wheeled past overhead with a sharp whirring of wings. Both men looked up significantly at their vanishing outline over the roofs. A deep silence fell between them. Parnacute was aware that he was smiling and contented.

“I am quite ready, I think,” he said in a low tone. “You promised—”

“Yes,” returned the other in the voice that was like the ringing of a silver gong, “I promised — without pain.”

The Policeman moved softly over to him; he made no sound; the constellations of Orion and the Pleiades shone on his coat-collar. There was another whirring rush as the pigeons swept again overhead and wheeled abruptly, but this time there was no one on the roof to watch them go, and it seemed that their flying wedge, as they flashed away, was larger and darker than before....

And when the nurse returned with the man for the boxes, they came up to the roof and found the body of Simon Parnacute, late Professor of Political Economy, lying face upwards among the flowers. The human cage was empty. Someone had opened the door.

Pan’s Garden (1912)

A VOLUME OF NATURE STORIES

CONTENTS

THE MAN WHOM THE TREES LOVED

THE SOUTH WIND

THE SEA FIT

THE ATTIC

THE HEATH FIRE

THE MESSENGER

THE GLAMOUR OF THE SNOW

THE RETURN

SAND

THE TRANSFER

CLAIRVOYANCE

THE GOLDEN FLY

SPECIAL DELIVERY

THE DESTRUCTION OF SMITH

THE TEMPTATION OF THE CLAY

THE MAN WHOM
THE TREES LOVED

The original frontispiece

TO

M. S. K.

WHO MADE WITH ME THESE LITTLE PATHS

ACROSS PAN’S TANGLED GARDEN.

PREFATORY NOTE

MY thanks are due to the Editor of the *Westminster Gazette* for permission to include in this volume three stories, ‘The Messenger,’ ‘The Attic,’ and ‘The South Wind,’ which originally appeared in his columns.

A. B.

THE MAN WHOM THE TREES LOVED

I

HE PAINTED TREES as by some special divining instinct of their essential qualities. He understood them. He knew why in an oak forest, for instance, each individual was utterly distinct from its fellows, and why no two beeches in the whole world were alike. People asked him down to paint a favorite lime or silver birch, for he caught the individuality of a tree as some catch the individuality of a horse. How he managed it was something of a puzzle, for he never had painting lessons, his drawing was often wildly inaccurate, and, while his perception of a Tree Personality was true and vivid, his rendering of it might almost approach the ludicrous. Yet the character and personality of that particular tree stood there alive beneath his brush — shining, frowning, dreaming, as the case might be, friendly or hostile, good or evil. It emerged.

There was nothing else in the wide world that he could paint; flowers and landscapes he only muddled away into a smudge; with people he was helpless and hopeless; also with animals. Skies he could sometimes manage, or effects of wind in foliage, but as a rule he left these all severely alone. He kept to trees, wisely following an instinct that was guided by love. It was quite arresting, this way he had of making a tree look almost like a being — alive. It approached the uncanny.

“Yes, Sanderson knows what he’s doing when he paints a tree!” thought old David Bittacy, C.B., late of the Woods and Forests. “Why, you can almost hear it rustle. You can smell the thing. You can hear the rain drip through its leaves. You can almost see the branches move. It grows.” For in this way somewhat he expressed his satisfaction, half to persuade himself that the twenty guineas were well spent (since his wife thought otherwise), and half to explain this uncanny reality of life that lay in the fine old cedar framed above his study table.

Yet in the general view the mind of Mr. Bittacy was held to be austere, not to say morose. Few divined in him the secretly tenacious love of nature that had been fostered by years spent in the forests and jungles of the eastern world. It was odd for an Englishman, due possibly to that Eurasian ancestor. Surreptitiously, as though half ashamed of it, he had kept alive a sense of beauty that hardly belonged to his type, and was unusual for its vitality. Trees, in particular, nourished it. He, also, understood trees, felt a subtle sense of communion with them, born perhaps of those years he had lived in caring for them, guarding, protecting, nursing, years of solitude among their great shadowy presences. He kept it largely to himself, of course, because he knew the world he lived in. HE also kept it from his wife — to some extent. He knew it came between them, knew that she feared it, was opposed. But what he did not know, or realize at any rate, was the extent to which she grasped the power which they wielded over his life. Her fear, he judged, was simply due to those years in India, when for weeks at a time his calling took him away from her into the jungle forests, while she remained at home dreading all manner of evils that might befall him. This, of course, explained her instinctive opposition to the passion for woods that still influenced and clung to him. It was a natural survival of those anxious days of waiting in solitude for his safe return.

For Mrs. Bittacy, daughter of an evangelical clergy-man, was a self-sacrificing woman, who in most things found a happy duty in sharing her husband's joys and sorrows to the point of self-obliteration. Only in this matter of the trees she was less successful than in others. It remained a problem difficult of compromise.

He knew, for instance, that what she objected to in this portrait of the cedar on their lawn was really not the price he had given for it, but the unpleasant way in which the transaction emphasized this breach between their common interests — the only one they had, but deep.

Sanderson, the artist, earned little enough money by his strange talent; such checks were few and far between. The owners of fine or interesting trees who cared to have them painted singly were rare indeed, and the "studies" that he made for his own delight he also kept for his own delight. Even were there buyers, he would not sell them. Only a few, and these peculiarly intimate friends, might even see them, for he disliked to hear the undiscerning criticisms of those who did not understand. Not that he minded laughter at his craftsmanship — he admitted it with scorn — but that remarks about the personality of the tree itself could easily wound or anger him. He resented slighting observations concerning them, as though insults offered to personal friends who could not answer for themselves. He was instantly up in arms.

“It really is extraordinary,” said a Woman who Understood, “that you can make that cypress seem an individual, when in reality all cypresses are so *exactly* alike.”

And though the bit of calculated flattery had come so near to saying the right, true, thing, Sanderson flushed as though she had slighted a friend beneath his very nose. Abruptly he passed in front of her and turned the picture to the wall.

“Almost as queer,” he answered rudely, copying her silly emphasis, “as that *you* should have imagined individuality in your husband, Madame, when in reality all men are so *exactly* alike!”

Since the only thing that differentiated her husband from the mob was the money for which she had married him, Sanderson’s relations with that particular family terminated on the spot, chance of prospective orders with it. His sensitiveness, perhaps, was morbid. At any rate the way to reach his heart lay through his trees. He might be said to love trees. He certainly drew a splendid inspiration from them, and the source of a man’s inspiration, be it music, religion, or a woman, is never a safe thing to criticize.

“I do think, perhaps, it was just a little extravagant, dear,” said Mrs. Bittacy, referring to the cedar check, “when we want a lawnmower so badly too. But, as it gives you such pleasure—”

“It reminds me of a certain day, Sophia,” replied the old gentleman, looking first proudly at herself, then fondly at the picture, “now long gone by. It reminds me of another tree — that Kentish lawn in the spring, birds singing in the lilacs, and some one in a muslin frock waiting patiently beneath a certain cedar — not the one in the picture, I know, but—”

“I was not waiting,” she said indignantly, “I was picking fir-cones for the schoolroom fire—”

“Fir-cones, my dear, do not grow on cedars, and schoolroom fires were not made in June in my young days.”

“And anyhow it isn’t the same cedar.”

“It has made me fond of all cedars for its sake,” he answered, “and it reminds me that you are the same young girl still—”

She crossed the room to his side, and together they looked out of the window where, upon the lawn of their Hampshire cottage, a ragged Lebanon stood in a solitary state.

“You’re as full of dreams as ever,” she said gently, “and I don’t regret the check a bit — really. Only it would have been more real if it had been the original tree, wouldn’t it?”

“That was blown down years ago. I passed the place last year, and there’s not a sign of it left,” he replied tenderly. And presently, when he released her from his side, she went up to the wall and carefully dusted the picture Sanderson had made of the cedar on their present lawn. She went all round the frame with her tiny handkerchief, standing on tiptoe to reach the top rim.

“What I like about it,” said the old fellow to himself when his wife had left the room, “is the way he has made it live. All trees have it, of course, but a cedar taught it to me first — the ‘something’ trees possess that make them know I’m there when I stand close and watch. I suppose I felt it then because I was in love, and love reveals life everywhere.” He glanced a moment at the Lebanon looming gaunt and somber through the gathering dusk. A curious wistful expression danced a moment through his eyes. “Yes, Sanderson has seen it as it is,” he murmured, “solemnly dreaming there its dim hidden life against the Forest edge, and as different from that other tree in Kent as I am from — from the vicar, say. It’s quite a stranger, too. I don’t know anything about it really. That other cedar I loved; this old fellow I respect. Friendly though — yes, on the whole quite friendly. He’s painted the friendliness right enough. He saw that. I’d like to know that man better,” he added. “I’d like to ask him how he saw so clearly that it stands there between this cottage and the Forest — yet somehow more in sympathy with us than with the mass of woods behind — a sort of go-between. *That* I never noticed before. I see it now — through his eyes. It stands there like a sentinel — protective rather.”

He turned away abruptly to look through the window. He saw the great encircling mass of gloom that was the Forest, fringing their little lawn. It pressed up closer in the darkness. The prim garden with its formal beds of flowers seemed an impertinence almost — some little colored insect that sought to settle on a sleeping monster — some gaudy fly that danced impudently down the edge of a great river that could engulf it with a toss of its smallest wave. That Forest with its thousand years of growth and its deep spreading being was some such slumbering monster, yes. Their cottage and garden stood too near its running lip. When the winds were strong and lifted its shadowy skirts of black and purple…. He loved this feeling of the Forest Personality; he had always loved it.

“Queer,” he reflected, “awfully queer, that trees should bring me such a sense of dim, vast living! I used to feel it particularly, I remember, in India; in Canadian woods as well; but never in little English woods till here. And Sanderson’s the only man I ever knew who felt it too. He’s never said so, but there’s the proof,” and he turned again to the picture that he loved. A thrill of unaccustomed life ran through him as he looked. “I wonder; by Jove, I wonder,” his thoughts ran on, “whether a tree — er — in any lawful meaning of the term can be — alive. I remember some writing fellow telling me long ago that trees had once been moving things, animal organisms of some sort, that had stood so long feeding, sleeping, dreaming, or something, in the same place, that they had lost the power to get away…!”

Fancies flew pell-mell about his mind, and, lighting a cheroot, he dropped into an armchair beside the open window and let them play. Outside the blackbirds whistled in the shrubberies across the lawn. He smelt the earth and trees and flowers, the perfume of mown grass, and the bits of open heath-land far away in the heart of the woods. The summer wind stirred very faintly through the leaves. But the great New Forest hardly raised her sweeping skirts of black and purple shadow.

Mr. Bittacy, however, knew intimately every detail of that wilderness of trees within. He knew all the purple coombs splashed with yellow waves of gorse; sweet with juniper and myrtle, and gleaming with clear and dark-eyed pools that watched the sky. There hawks hovered, circling hour by hour, and the flicker of the peewit’s flight with its melancholy, petulant cry, deepened the sense of stillness. He knew the solitary pines, dwarfed, tufted, vigorous, that sang to every lost wind, travelers like the gypsies who pitched their bush-like tents beneath them; he knew the shaggy ponies, with foals like baby centaurs; the chattering jays, the milky call of the cuckoos in the spring, and the boom of the bittern from the lonely marshes. The undergrowth of watching hollies, he knew too, strange and mysterious, with their dark, suggestive beauty, and the yellow shimmer of their pale dropped leaves.

Here all the Forest lived and breathed in safety, secure from mutilation. No terror of the axe could haunt the peace of its vast subconscious life, no terror of devastating Man afflict it with the dread of premature death. It knew itself supreme; it spread and preened itself without concealment. It set no spires to carry warnings, for no wind brought messages of alarm as it bulged outwards to the sun and stars.

But, once its leafy portals left behind, the trees of the countryside were otherwise. The houses threatened them; they knew themselves in danger. The roads were no longer glades of silent turf, but noisy, cruel ways by which men came to attack them. They were civilized, cared for — but cared for in order that some day they might be put to death. Even in the villages, where the solemn and immemorial repose of giant chestnuts aped security, the tossing of a silver birch against their mass, impatient in the littlest wind, brought warning. Dust clogged their leaves. The inner humming of their quiet life became inaudible beneath the scream and shriek of clattering traffic. They longed and prayed to enter the great Peace of the Forest yonder, but they could not move. They knew, moreover, that the Forest with its august, deep splendor despised and pitied them. They were a thing of artificial gardens, and belonged to beds of flowers all forced to grow one way….

“I’d like to know that artist fellow better,” was the thought upon which he returned at length to the things of practical life. “I wonder if Sophia would mind him for a bit — ?” He rose with the sound of the gong, brushing the ashes from his speckled waistcoat. He pulled the waistcoat down. He was slim and spare in figure, active in his movements. In the dim light, but for that silvery moustache, he might easily have passed for a man of forty. “I’ll suggest it to her anyhow,” he decided on his way upstairs to dress. His thought really was that Sanderson could probably explain his world of things he had always felt about — trees. A man who could paint the soul of a cedar in that way must know it all.

"Why not?" she gave her verdict later over the bread-and-butter pudding; "unless you think he'd find it dull without companions."

"He would paint all day in the Forest, dear. I'd like to pick his brains a bit, too, if I could manage it."

"You can manage anything, David," was what she answered, for this elderly childless couple used an affectionate politeness long since deemed old-fashioned. The remark, however, displeased her, making her feel uneasy, and she did not notice his rejoinder, smiling his pleasure and content—"Except yourself and our bank account, my dear." This passion of his for trees was of old a bone of contention, though very mild contention. It frightened her. That was the truth. The Bible, her Baedeker for earth and heaven, did not mention it. Her husband, while humoring her, could never alter that instinctive dread she had. He soothed, but never changed her. She liked the woods, perhaps as spots for shade and picnics, but she could not, as he did, love them.

And after dinner, with a lamp beside the open window, he read aloud from *The Times* the evening post had brought, such fragments as he thought might interest her. The custom was invariable, except on Sundays, when, to please his wife, he dozed over Tennyson or Farrar as their mood might be. She knitted while he read, asked gentle questions, told him his voice was a "lovely reading voice," and enjoyed the little discussions that occasions prompted because he always let her with them with "Ah, Sophia, I had never thought of it quite in *that* way before; but now you mention it I must say I think there's something in it…."

For David Bittacy was wise. It was long after marriage, during his months of loneliness spent with trees and forests in India, his wife waiting at home in the Bungalow, that his other, deeper side had developed the strange passion that she could not understand. And after one or two serious attempts to let her share it with him, he had given up and learned to hide it from her. He learned, that is, to speak of it only casually, for since she knew it was there, to keep silence altogether would only increase her pain. So from time to time he skimmed the surface just to let her show him where he was wrong and think she won the day. It remained a debatable land of compromise. He listened with patience to her criticisms, her excursions and alarms, knowing that while it gave her satisfaction, it could not change himself. The thing lay in him too deep and true for change. But, for peace' sake, some meeting-place was desirable, and he found it thus.

It was her one fault in his eyes, this religious mania carried over from her upbringing, and it did no serious harm. Great emotion could shake it sometimes out of her. She clung to it because her father taught it her and not because she had thought it out for herself. Indeed, like many women, she never really *thought* at all, but merely reflected the images of others' thinking which she had learned to see. So, wise in his knowledge of human nature, old David Bittacy accepted the pain of being obliged to keep a portion of his inner life shut off from the woman he deeply loved. He regarded her little biblical phrases as oddities that still clung to a rather fine, big soul — like horns and little useless things some animals have not yet lost in the course of evolution while they have outgrown their use.

"My dear, what is it? You frightened me!" She asked it suddenly, sitting up so abruptly that her cap dropped sideways almost to her ear. For David Bittacy behind his crackling paper had uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise. He had lowered the sheet and was staring at her over the tops of his gold glasses.

"Listen to this, if you please," he said, a note of eagerness in his voice, "listen to this, my dear Sophia. It's from an address by Francis Darwin before the Royal Society. He is president, you know, and son of the great Darwin. Listen carefully, I beg you. It is *most* significant."

"I *am* listening, David," she said with some astonishment, looking up. She stopped her knitting. For a second she glanced behind her. Something had suddenly changed in the room, and it made her feel wide awake, though before she had been almost dozing. Her husband's voice and manner had introduced this new thing. Her instincts rose in warning. "*Do* read it, dear." He took a deep breath, looking first again over the rims of his glasses to make quite sure of her attention. He had evidently come across something of genuine interest, although herself she often found the passages from these "Addresses" somewhat heavy.

In a deep, emphatic voice he read aloud:

"'It is impossible to know whether or not plants are conscious; but it is consistent with the doctrine of continuity that in all living things there is something psychic, and if we accept this point of view—'"

"*If*," she interrupted, scenting danger.

He ignored the interruption as a thing of slight value he was accustomed to.

'"If we accept this point of view,'" he continued, '"we must believe that in plants there exists a faint copy of *what we know as consciousness in ourselves* .'"

He laid the paper down and steadily stared at her. Their eyes met. He had italicized the last phrase.

For a minute or two his wife made no reply or comment. They stared at one another in silence. He waited for the meaning of the words to reach her understanding with full import. Then he turned and read them again in part, while she, released from that curious driving look in his eyes, instinctively again glanced over her shoulder round the room. It was almost as if she felt some one had come in to them unnoticed.

"We must believe that in plants there exists a faint copy of what we know as consciousness in ourselves."

"*If*," she repeated lamely, feeling before the stare of those questioning eyes she must say something, but not yet having gathered her wits together quite.

"*Consciousness*," he rejoined. And then he added gravely: "That, my dear, is the statement of a scientific man of the Twentieth Century."

Mrs. Bittacy sat forward in her chair so that her silk flounces crackled louder than the newspaper. She made a characteristic little sound between sniffling and snorting. She put her shoes closely together, with her hands upon her knees.

"David," she said quietly, "I think these scientific men are simply losing their heads. There is nothing in the Bible that I can remember about any such thing whatsoever."

"Nothing, Sophia, that I can remember either," he answered patiently. Then, after a pause, he added, half to himself perhaps more than to her: "And, now that I come to think about it, it seems that Sanderson once said something to me that was similar.

“Then Mr. Sanderson is a wise and thoughtful man, and a safe man,” she quickly took up, “if he said that.”

For she thought her husband referred to her remark about the Bible, and not to her judgment of the scientific men. And he did not correct her mistake.

“And plants, you see, dear, are not the same as trees,” she drove her advantage home, “not quite, that is.”

“I agree,” said David quietly; “but both belong to the great vegetable kingdom.”

There was a moment’s pause before she answered.

“Pah! the vegetable kingdom, indeed!” She tossed her pretty old head. And into the words she put a degree of contempt that, could the vegetable kingdom have heard it, might have made it feel ashamed for covering a third of the world with its wonderful tangled network of roots and branches, delicate shaking leaves, and its millions of spires that caught the sun and wind and rain. Its very right to existence seemed in question.

II

Sanderson accordingly came down, and on the whole his short visit was a success. Why he came at all was a mystery to those who heard of it, for he never paid visits and was certainly not the kind of man to court a customer. There must have been something in Bittacy he liked.

Mrs. Bittacy was glad when he left. He brought no dress-suit for one thing, not even a dinner-jacket, and he wore very low collars with big balloon ties like a Frenchman, and let his hair grow longer than was nice, she felt. Not that these things were important, but that she considered them symptoms of something a little disordered. The ties were unnecessarily flowing.

For all that he was an interesting man, and, in spite of his eccentricities of dress and so forth, a gentleman. “Perhaps,” she reflected in her genuinely charitable heart, “he had other uses for the twenty guineas, an invalid sister or an old mother to support!” She had no notion of the cost of brushes, frames, paints, and canvases. Also she forgave him much for the sake of his beautiful eyes and his eager enthusiasm of manner. So many men of thirty were already blase.

Still, when the visit was over, she felt relieved. She said nothing about his coming a second time, and her husband, she was glad to notice, had likewise made no suggestion. For, truth to tell, the way the younger man engrossed the older, keeping him out for hours in the Forest, talking on the lawn in the blazing sun, and in the evenings when the damp of dusk came creeping out from the surrounding woods, all regardless of his age and usual habits, was not quite to her taste. Of course, Mr. Sanderson did not know how easily those attacks of Indian fever came back, but David surely might have told him.

They talked trees from morning to night. It stirred in her the old subconscious trail of dread, a trail that led ever into the darkness of big woods; and such feelings, as her early evangelical training taught her, were temptings. To regard them in any other way was to play with danger.

Her mind, as she watched these two, was charged with curious thoughts of dread she could not understand, yet feared the more on that account. The way they studied that old mangy cedar was a trifle unnecessary, unwise, she felt. It was disregarding the sense of proportion which deity had set upon the world for men's safe guidance.

Even after dinner they smoked their cigars upon the low branches that swept down and touched the lawn, until at length she insisted on their coming in. Cedars, she had somewhere heard, were not safe after sundown; it was not wholesome to be too near them; to sleep beneath them was even dangerous, though what the precise danger was she had forgotten. The upas was the tree she really meant.

At any rate she summoned David in, and Sanderson came presently after him.

For a long time, before deciding on this peremptory step, she had watched them surreptitiously from the drawing-room window — her husband and her guest. The dusk enveloped them with its damp veil of gauze. She saw the glowing tips of their cigars, and heard the drone of voices. Bats flitted overhead, and big, silent moths whirred softly over the rhododendron blossoms. And it came suddenly to her, while she watched, that her husband had somehow altered these last few days — since Mr. Sanderson's arrival in fact. A change had come over him, though what it was she could not say. She hesitated, indeed, to search. That was the instinctive dread operating in her. Provided it passed she would rather not know. Small things, of course, she noticed; small outward signs. He had neglected *The Times* for one thing, left off his speckled waistcoats for another. He was absent-minded sometimes; showed vagueness in practical details where hitherto he showed decision. And — he had begun to talk in his sleep again.

These and a dozen other small peculiarities came suddenly upon her with the rush of a combined attack. They brought with them a faint distress that made her shiver. Momentarily her mind was startled, then confused, as her eyes picked out the shadowy figures in the dusk, the cedar covering them, the Forest close at their backs. And then, before she could think, or seek internal guidance as her habit was, this whisper, muffled and very hurried, ran across her brain: “It’s Mr. Sanderson. Call David in at once!”

And she had done so. Her shrill voice crossed the lawn and died away into the Forest, quickly smothered. No echo followed it. The sound fell dead against the rampart of a thousand listening trees.

“The damp is so very penetrating, even in summer,” she murmured when they came obediently. She was half surprised at her open audacity, half repentant. They came so meekly at her call. “And my husband is sensitive to fever from the East. No, *please do not throw away your cigars. We can sit by the open window and enjoy the evening while you smoke*.”

She was very talkative for a moment; subconscious excitement was the cause.

“It is so still — so wonderfully still,” she went on, as no one spoke; “so peaceful, and the air so very sweet … and God is always near to those who need His aid.” The words slipped out before she realized quite what she was saying, yet fortunately, in time to lower her voice, for no one heard them. They were, perhaps, an instinctive expression of relief. It flustered her that she could have said the thing at all.

Sanderson brought her shawl and helped to arrange the chairs; she thanked him in her old-fashioned, gentle way, declining the lamps which he had offered to light. “They attract the moths and insects so, I think!”

The three of them sat there in the gloaming. Mr. Bittacy’s white moustache and his wife’s yellow shawl gleaming at either end of the little horseshoe, Sanderson with his wild black hair and shining eyes midway between them.

The painter went on talking softly, continuing evidently the conversation begun with his host beneath the cedar. Mrs. Bittacy, on her guard, listened — uneasily.

“For trees, you see, rather conceal themselves in daylight. They reveal themselves fully only after sunset. I never *know* a tree,” he bowed here slightly towards the lady as though to apologize for something he felt she would not quite understand or like, “until I’ve seen it in the night. Your cedar, for instance,” looking towards her husband again so that Mrs. Bittacy caught the gleaming of his turned eyes, “I failed with badly at first, because I did it in the morning. You shall see to-morrow what I mean — that first sketch is upstairs in my portfolio; it’s quite another tree to the one you bought. That view” — he leaned forward, lowering his voice— “I caught one morning about two o’clock in very faint moonlight and the stars. I saw the naked being of the thing—”

“You mean that you went out, Mr. Sanderson, at that hour?” the old lady asked with astonishment and mild rebuke. She did not care particularly for his choice of adjectives either.

“I fear it was rather a liberty to take in another’s house, perhaps,” he answered courteously. “But, having chanced to wake, I saw the tree from my window, and made my way downstairs.”

“It’s a wonder Boxer didn’t bit you; he sleeps loose in the hall,” she said.

“On the contrary. The dog came out with me. I hope,” he added, “the noise didn’t disturb you, though it’s rather late to say so. I feel quite guilty.” His white teeth showed in the dusk as he smiled. A smell of earth and flowers stole in through the window on a breath of wandering air.

Mrs. Bittacy said nothing at the moment. “We both sleep like tops,” put in her husband, laughing. “You’re a courageous man, though, Sanderson, and, by Jove, the picture justifies you. Few artist would have taken so much trouble, though I read once that Holman Hunt, Rossetti, or some one of that lot, painted all night in his orchard to get an effect of moonlight that he wanted.”

He chattered on. His wife was glad to hear his voice; it made her feel more easy in her mind. But presently the other held the floor again, and her thoughts grew darkened and afraid. Instinctively she feared the influence on her husband. The mystery and wonder that lie in woods, in forests, in great gatherings of trees everywhere, seemed so real and present while he talked.

“The Night transfigures all things in a way,” he was saying; “but nothing so searchingly as trees. From behind a veil that sunlight hangs before them in the day they emerge and show themselves. Even buildings do that — in a measure — but trees particularly. In the daytime they sleep; at night they wake, they manifest, turn active — live. You remember,” turning politely again in the direction of his hostess, “how clearly Henley understood that?”

“That socialist person, you mean?” asked the lady. Her tone and accent made the substantive sound criminal. It almost hissed, the way she uttered it.

“The poet, yes,” replied the artist tactfully, “the friend of Stevenson, you remember, Stevenson who wrote those charming children’s verses.”

He quoted in a low voice the lines he meant. It was, for once, the time, the place, and the setting all together. The words floated out across the lawn towards the wall of blue darkness where the big Forest swept the little garden with its league-long curve that was like the shore-line of a sea. A wave of distant sound that was like surf accompanied his voice, as though the wind was fain to listen too:

Not to the staring Day,
For all the importunate questionings he pursues
In his big, violent voice,
Shall those mild things of bulk and multitude,
The trees — God’s sentinels …
Yield of their huge, unutterable selves
But at the word
Of the ancient, sacerdotal Night,
Night of many secrets, whose effect —
Transfiguring, hierophantic, dread —
Themselves alone may fully apprehend,
They tremble and are changed:
In each the uncouth, individual soul
Looms forth and glooms
Essential, and, their bodily presences
Touched with inordinate significance,

Wearing the darkness like a livery
Of some mysterious and tremendous guild,
They brood — they menace — they appall.

The voice of Mrs. Bittacy presently broke the silence that followed.

“I like that part about God’s sentinels,” she murmured. There was no sharpness in her tone; it was hushed and quiet. The truth, so musically uttered, muted her shrill objections though it had not lessened her alarm. Her husband made no comment; his cigar, she noticed, had gone out.

“And old trees in particular,” continued the artist, as though to himself, “have very definite personalities. You can offend, wound, please them; the moment you stand within their shade you feel whether they come out to you, or whether they withdraw.” He turned abruptly towards his host. “You know that singular essay of Prentice Mulford’s, no doubt ‘God in the Trees’ — extravagant perhaps, but yet with a fine true beauty in it? You’ve never read it, no?” he asked.

But it was Mrs. Bittacy who answered; her husband keeping his curious deep silence.

“I never did!” It fell like a drip of cold water from the face muffled in the yellow shawl; even a child could have supplied the remainder of the unspoken thought.

“Ah,” said Sanderson gently, “but there *is* ‘God’ in the trees. God in a very subtle aspect and sometimes — I have known the trees express it too — that which is *not* God — dark and terrible. Have you ever noticed, too, how clearly trees show what they want — choose their companions, at least? How beeches, for instance, allow no life too near them — birds or squirrels in their boughs, nor any growth beneath? The silence in the beech wood is quite terrifying often! And how pines like bilberry bushes at their feet and sometimes little oaks — all trees making a clear, deliberate choice, and holding firmly to it? Some trees obviously — it’s very strange and marked — seem to prefer the human.”

The old lady sat up crackling, for this was more than she could permit. Her stiff silk dress emitted little sharp reports.

“We know,” she answered, “that He was said to have walked in the garden in the cool of the evening” — the gulp betrayed the effort that it cost her—

"but we are nowhere told that He hid in the trees, or anything like that. Trees, after all, we must remember, are only large vegetables."

"True," was the soft answer, "but in everything that grows, has life, that is, there's mystery past all finding out. The wonder that lies hidden in our own souls lies also hidden, I venture to assert, in the stupidity and silence of a mere potato."

The observation was not meant to be amusing. It was *not* amusing. No one laughed. On the contrary, the words conveyed in too literal a sense the feeling that haunted all that conversation. Each one in his own way realized — with beauty, with wonder, with alarm — that the talk had somehow brought the whole vegetable kingdom nearer to that of man. Some link had been established between the two. It was not wise, with that great Forest listening at their very doors, to speak so plainly. The forest edged up closer while they did so.

And Mrs. Bittacy, anxious to interrupt the horrid spell, broke suddenly in upon it with a matter-of-fact suggestion. She did not like her husband's prolonged silence, stillness. He seemed so negative — so changed.

"David," she said, raising her voice, "I think you're feeling the dampness. It's grown chilly. The fever comes so suddenly, you know, and it might be wise to take the tincture. I'll go and get it, dear, at once. It's better." And before he could object she had left the room to bring the homeopathic dose that she believed in, and that, to please her, he swallowed by the tumbler-full from week to week.

And the moment the door closed behind her, Sanderson began again, though now in quite a different tone. Mr. Bittacy sat up in his chair. The two men obviously resumed the conversation — the real conversation interrupted beneath the cedar — and left aside the sham one which was so much dust merely thrown in the old lady's eyes.

"Trees love you, that's the fact," he said earnestly. "Your service to them all these years abroad has made them know you."

"Know me?"

"Made them, yes," — he paused a moment, then added,— "made them *aware of your presence*; aware of a force outside themselves that deliberately seeks their welfare, don't you see?"

"By Jove, Sanderson — !" This put into plain language actual sensations he had felt, yet had never dared to phrase in words before. "They get into touch with me, as it were?" he ventured, laughing at his own sentence, yet laughing only with his lips.

"Exactly," was the quick, emphatic reply. "They seek to blend with something they feel instinctively to be good for them, helpful to their essential beings, encouraging to their best expression — their life."

"Good Lord, Sir!" Bittacy heard himself saying, "but you're putting my own thoughts into words. D'you know, I've felt something like that for years. As though—" he looked round to make sure his wife was not there, then finished the sentence— "as though the trees were after me!"

"'Amalgamate' seems the best word, perhaps," said Sanderson slowly. "They would draw you to themselves. Good forces, you see, always seek to merge; evil to separate; that's why Good in the end must always win the day — everywhere. The accumulation in the long run becomes overwhelming. Evil tends to separation, dissolution, death. The comradeship of trees, their instinct to run together, is a vital symbol. Trees in a mass are good; alone, you may take it generally, are — well, dangerous. Look at a monkey-puzzler, or better still, a holly. Look at it, watch it, understand it. Did you ever see more plainly an evil thought made visible? They're wicked. Beautiful too, oh yes! There's a strange, miscalculated beauty often in evil —"

"That cedar, then — ?"

"Not evil, no; but alien, rather. Cedars grow in forests all together. The poor thing has drifted, that is all."

They were getting rather deep. Sanderson, talking against time, spoke so fast. It was too condensed. Bittacy hardly followed that last bit. His mind floundered among his own less definite, less sorted thoughts, till presently another sentence from the artist startled him into attention again.

"That cedar will protect you here, though, because you both have humanized it by your thinking so lovingly of its presence. The others can't get past it, as it were."

"Protect me!" he exclaimed. "Protect me from their love?"

Sanderson laughed. “We’re getting rather mixed,” he said; “we’re talking of one thing in the terms of another really. But what I mean is — you see — that their love for you, their ‘awareness’ of your personality and presence involves the idea of winning you — across the border — into themselves — into their world of living. It means, in a way, taking you over.”

The ideas the artist started in his mind ran furious wild races to and fro. It was like a maze sprung suddenly into movement. The whirling of the intricate lines bewildered him. They went so fast, leaving but half an explanation of their goal. He followed first one, then another, but a new one always dashed across to intercept before he could get anywhere.

“But India,” he said, presently in a lower voice, “India is so far away — from this little English forest. The trees, too, are utterly different for one thing?”

The rustle of skirts warned of Mrs. Bittacy’s approach. This was a sentence he could turn round another way in case she came up and pressed for explanation.

“There is communion among trees all the world over,” was the strange quick reply. “They always know.”

“They always know! You think then — ?”

“The winds, you see — the great, swift carriers! They have their ancient rights of way about the world. An easterly wind, for instance, carrying on stage by stage as it were — linking dropped messages and meanings from land to land like the birds — an easterly wind—”

Mrs. Bittacy swept in upon them with the tumbler —

“There, David,” she said, “that will ward off any beginnings of attack. Just a spoonful, dear. Oh, oh! not *all* !” for he had swallowed half the contents at a single gulp as usual; “another dose before you go to bed, and the balance in the morning, first thing when you wake.”

She turned to her guest, who put the tumbler down for her upon a table at his elbow. She had heard them speak of the east wind. She emphasized the warning she had misinterpreted. The private part of the conversation came to an abrupt end.

"It is the one thing that upsets him more than any other — an east wind," she said, "and I am glad, Mr. Sanderson, to hear you think so too."

III

A deep hush followed, in the middle of which an owl was heard calling its muffled note in the forest. A big moth whirred with a soft collision against one of the windows. Mrs. Bittacy started slightly, but no one spoke. Above the trees the stars were faintly visible. From the distance came the barking of a dog.

Bittacy, relighting his cigar, broke the little spell of silence that had caught all three.

"It's rather a comforting thought," he said, throwing the match out of the window, "that life is about us everywhere, and that there is really no dividing line between what we call organic and inorganic."

"The universe, yes," said Sanderson, "is all one, really. We're puzzled by the gaps we cannot see across, but as a fact, I suppose, there are no gaps at all."

Mrs. Bittacy rustled ominously, holding her peace meanwhile. She feared long words she did not understand. Beelzebub lay hid among too many syllables.

"In trees and plants especially, there dreams an exquisite life that no one yet has proved unconscious."

"Or conscious either, Mr. Sanderson," she neatly interjected. "It's only man that was made after His image, not shrubberies and things…."

Her husband interposed without delay.

"It is not necessary," he explained suavely, "to say that they're alive in the sense that we are alive. At the same time," with an eye to his wife, "I see no harm in holding, dear, that all created things contain some measure of His life Who made them. It's only beautiful to hold that He created nothing dead. We are not pantheists for all that!" he added soothingly.

"Oh, no! Not that, I hope!" The word alarmed her. It was worse than pope. Through her puzzled mind stole a stealthy, dangerous thing … like a panther.

“I like to think that even in decay there’s life,” the painter murmured. “The falling apart of rotten wood breeds sentiency, there’s force and motion in the falling of a dying leaf, in the breaking up and crumbling of everything indeed. And take an inert stone: it’s crammed with heat and weight and potencies of all sorts. What holds its particles together indeed? We understand it as little as gravity or why a needle always turns to the ‘North.’ Both things may be a mode of life….”

“You think a compass has a soul, Mr. Sanderson?” exclaimed the lady with a crackling of her silk flounces that conveyed a sense of outrage even more plainly than her tone. The artist smiled to himself in the darkness, but it was Bittacy who hastened to reply.

“Our friend merely suggests that these mysterious agencies,” he said quietly, “may be due to some kind of life we cannot understand. Why should water only run downhill? Why should trees grow at right angles to the surface of the ground and towards the sun? Why should the worlds spin for ever on their axes? Why should fire change the form of everything it touches without really destroying them? To say these things follow the law of their being explains nothing. Mr. Sanderson merely suggests — poetically, my dear, of course — that these may be manifestations of life, though life at a different stage to ours.”

“The ‘ *breath* of life,’ we read, ‘He breathed into them. These things do not breathe.” She said it with triumph.

Then Sanderson put in a word. But he spoke rather to himself or to his host than by way of serious rejoinder to the ruffled lady.

“But plants do breathe too, you know,” he said. “They breathe, they eat, they digest, they move about, and they adapt themselves to their environment as men and animals do. They have a nervous system too… at least a complex system of nuclei which have some of the qualities of nerve cells. They may have memory too. Certainly, they know definite action in response to stimulus. And though this may be physiological, no one has proved that it is only that, and not — psychological.”

He did not notice, apparently, the little gasp that was audible behind the yellow shawl. Bittacy cleared his throat, threw his extinguished cigar upon the lawn, crossed and recrossed his legs.

"And in trees," continued the other, "behind a great forest, for instance," pointing towards the woods, "may stand a rather splendid Entity that manifests through all the thousand individual trees — some huge collective life, quite as minutely and delicately organized as our own. It might merge and blend with ours under certain conditions, so that we could understand it by *being* it, for a time at least. It might even engulf human vitality into the immense whirlpool of its own vast dreaming life. The pull of a big forest on a man can be tremendous and utterly overwhelming."

The mouth of Mrs. Bittacy was heard to close with a snap. Her shawl, and particularly her crackling dress, exhaled the protest that burned within her like a pain. She was too distressed to be overawed, but at the same time too confused 'mid the litter of words and meanings half understood, to find immediate phrases she could use. Whatever the actual meaning of his language might be, however, and whatever subtle dangers lay concealed behind them meanwhile, they certainly wove a kind of gentle spell with the glimmering darkness that held all three delicately enmeshed there by that open window. The odors of dewy lawn, flowers, trees, and earth formed part of it.

"The moods," he continued, "that people waken in us are due to their hidden life affecting our own. Deep calls to sleep. A person, for instance, joins you in an empty room: you both instantly change. The new arrival, though in silence, has caused a change of mood. May not the moods of Nature touch and stir us in virtue of a similar prerogative? The sea, the hills, the desert, wake passion, joy, terror, as the case may be; for a few, perhaps," he glanced significantly at his host so that Mrs. Bittacy again caught the turning of his eyes, "emotions of a curious, flaming splendor that are quite nameless. Well … whence come these powers? Surely from nothing that is … dead! Does not the influence of a forest, its sway and strange ascendancy over certain minds, betray a direct manifestation of life? It lies otherwise beyond all explanation, this mysterious emanation of big woods. Some natures, of course, deliberately invite it. The authority of a host of trees," — his voice grew almost solemn as he said the words— "is something not to be denied. One feels it here, I think, particularly."

There was considerable tension in the air as he ceased speaking. Mr. Bittacy had not intended that the talk should go so far. They had drifted. He did not wish to see his wife unhappy or afraid, and he was aware — acutely so —

that her feelings were stirred to a point he did not care about. Something in her, as he put it, was "working up" towards explosion.

He sought to generalize the conversation, diluting this accumulated emotion by spreading it.

"The sea is His and He made it," he suggested vaguely, hoping Sanderson would take the hint, "and with the trees it is the same…."

"The whole gigantic vegetable kingdom, yes," the artist took him up, "all at the service of man, for food, for shelter and for a thousand purposes of his daily life. Is it not striking what a lot of the globe they cover … exquisitely organized life, yet stationary, always ready to our had when we want them, never running away? But the taking them, for all that, not so easy. One man shrinks from picking flowers, another from cutting down trees. And, it's curious that most of the forest tales and legends are dark, mysterious, and somewhat ill-omened. The forest-beings are rarely gay and harmless. The forest life was felt as terrible. Tree-worship still survives to-day. Wood-cutters… those who take the life of trees… you see a race of haunted men…."

He stopped abruptly, a singular catch in his voice. Bittacy felt something even before the sentences were over. His wife, he knew, felt it still more strongly. For it was in the middle of the heavy silence following upon these last remarks, that Mrs. Bittacy, rising with a violent abruptness from her chair, drew the attention of the others to something moving towards them across the lawn. It came silently. In outline it was large and curiously spread. It rose high, too, for the sky above the shrubberies, still pale gold from the sunset, was dimmed by its passage. She declared afterwards that it move in "looping circles," but what she perhaps meant to convey was "spirals."

She screamed faintly. "It's come at last! And it's you that brought it!"

She turned excitedly, half afraid, half angry, to Sanderson. With a breathless sort of gasp she said it, politeness all forgotten. "I knew it … if you went on. I knew it. Oh! Oh!" And she cried again, "Your talking has brought it out!" The terror that shook her voice was rather dreadful.

But the confusion of her vehement words passed unnoticed in the first surprise they caused. For a moment nothing happened.

“What is it you think you see, my dear?” asked her husband, startled. Sanderson said nothing. All three leaned forward, the men still sitting, but Mrs. Bittacy had rushed hurriedly to the window, placing herself of a purpose, as it seemed, between her husband and the lawn. She pointed. Her little hand made a silhouette against the sky, the yellow shawl hanging from the arm like a cloud.

“Beyond the cedar — between it and the lilacs.” The voice had lost its shrillness; it was thin and hushed. “There … now you see it going round upon itself again — going back, thank God!… going back to the Forest.” It sank to a whisper, shaking. She repeated, with a great dropping sigh of relief— “Thank God! I thought … at first … it was coming here … to us!… David … to *you* !”

She stepped back from the window, her movements confused, feeling in the darkness for the support of a chair, and finding her husband’s outstretched hand instead. “Hold me, dear, hold me, please … tight. Do not let me go.” She was in what he called afterwards “a regular state.” He drew her firmly down upon her chair again.

“Smoke, Sophie, my dear,” he said quickly, trying to make his voice calm and natural. “I see it, yes. It’s smoke blowing over from the gardener’s cottage….”

“But, David,” — and there was a new horror in her whisper now— “it made a noise. It makes it still. I hear it swishing.” Some such word she used — swishing, sishing, rushing, or something of the kind. “David, I’m very frightened. It’s something awful! That man has called it out…!”

“Hush, hush,” whispered her husband. He stroked her trembling hand beside him.

“It is in the wind,” said Sanderson, speaking for the first time, very quietly. The expression on his face was not visible in the gloom, but his voice was soft and unafraid. At the sound of it, Mrs. Bittacy started violently again. Bittacy drew his chair a little forward to obstruct her view of him. He felt bewildered himself, a little, hardly knowing quite what to say or do. It was all so very curious and sudden.

But Mrs. Bittacy was badly frightened. It seemed to her that what she saw came from the enveloping forest just beyond their little garden. It emerged in a sort of secret way, moving towards them as with a purpose, stealthily, difficultly. Then something stopped it. It could not advance beyond the cedar. The cedar — this impression remained with her afterwards too — prevented, kept it back. Like a rising sea the Forest had surged a moment in their direction through the covering darkness, and this visible movement was its first wave. Thus to her mind it seemed… like that mysterious turn of the tide that used to frighten and mystify her in childhood on the sands. The outward surge of some enormous Power was what she felt… something to which every instinct in her being rose in opposition because it threatened her and hers. In that moment she realized the Personality of the Forest… menacing.

In the stumbling movement that she made away from the window and towards the bell she barely caught the sentence Sanderson — or was it her husband? — murmured to himself: "It came because we talked of it; our thinking made it aware of us and brought it out. But the cedar stops it. It cannot cross the lawn, you see…."

All three were standing now, and her husband's voice broke in with authority while his wife's fingers touched the bell.

"My dear, I should *not* say anything to Thompson." The anxiety he felt was manifest in his voice, but his outward composure had returned. "The gardener can go…."

Then Sanderson cut him short. "Allow me," he said quickly. "I'll see if anything's wrong." And before either of them could answer or object, he was gone, leaping out by the open window. They saw his figure vanish with a run across the lawn into the darkness.

A moment later the maid entered, in answer to the bell, and with her came the loud barking of the terrier from the hall.

"The lamps," said her master shortly, and as she softly closed the door behind her, they heard the wind pass with a mournful sound of singing round the outer walls. A rustle of foliage from the distance passed within it.

"You see, the wind *is* rising. It *was* the wind!" He put a comforting arm about her, distressed to feel that she was trembling. But he knew that he was trembling too, though with a kind of odd elation rather than alarm. "And it *was* smoke that you saw coming from Stride's cottage, or from the rubbish heaps he’s been burning in the kitchen garden. The noise we heard was the branches rustling in the wind. Why should you be so nervous?”

A thin whispering voice answered him:

“I was afraid for *you*, dear. Something frightened me for *you*. That man makes me feel so uneasy and uncomfortable for his influence upon you. It’s very foolish, I know. I think… I’m tired; I feel so overwrought and restless.” The words poured out in a hurried jumble and she kept turning to the window while she spoke.

“The strain of having a visitor,” he said soothingly, “has taxed you. We’re so unused to having people in the house. He goes to-morrow.” He warmed her cold hands between his own, stroking them tenderly. More, for the life of him, he could not say or do. The joy of a strange, internal excitement made his heart beat faster. He knew not what it was. He knew only, perhaps, whence it came.

She peered close into his face through the gloom, and said a curious thing. “I thought, David, for a moment… you seemed… different. My nerves are all on edge to-night.” She made no further reference to her husband’s visitor.

A sound of footsteps from the lawn warned of Sanderson’s return, as he answered quickly in a lowered tone— “There’s no need to be afraid on my account, dear girl. There’s nothing wrong with me. I assure you; I never felt so well and happy in my life.”

Thompson came in with the lamps and brightness, and scarcely had she gone again when Sanderson in turn was seen climbing through the window.

“There’s nothing,” he said lightly, as he closed it behind him. “Somebody’s been burning leaves, and the smoke is drifting a little through the trees. The wind,” he added, glancing at his host a moment significantly, but in so discreet a way that Mrs. Bittacy did not observe it, “the wind, too, has begun to roar… in the Forest… further out.”

But Mrs. Bittacy noticed about him two things which increased her uneasiness. She noticed the shining of his eyes, because a similar light had suddenly come into her husband’s; and she noticed, too, the apparent depth of meaning he put into those simple words that “the wind had begun to roar in the Forest …further out.” Her mind retained the disagreeable impression that he meant more than he said. In his tone lay quite another implication. It was not actually “wind” he spoke of, and it would not remain “further out”…rather, it was coming in. Another impression she got too — still more unwelcome — was that her husband understood his hidden meaning.

IV

“David, dear,” she observed gently as soon as they were alone upstairs, “I have a horrible uneasy feeling about that man. I cannot get rid of it.” The tremor in per voice caught all his tenderness.

He turned to look at her. “Of what kind, my dear? You’re so imaginative sometimes, aren’t you?”

“I think,” she hesitated, stammering a little, confused, still frightened, “I mean — isn’t he a hypnotist, or full of those theosophical ideas, or something of the sort? You know what I mean—”

He was too accustomed to her little confused alarms to explain them away seriously as a rule, or to correct her verbal inaccuracies, but to-night he felt she needed careful, tender treatment. He soothed her as best he could.

“But there’s no harm in that, even if he is,” he answered quietly. “Those are only new names for very old ideas, you know, dear.” There was no trace of impatience in his voice.

“That’s what I mean,” she replied, the texts he dreaded rising in an unuttered crowd behind the words. “He’s one of those things that we are warned would come — one of those Latter-Day things.” For her mind still bristled with the bogeys of the Antichrist and Prophecy, and she had only escaped the Number of the Beast, as it were, by the skin of her teeth. The Pope drew most of her fire usually, because she could understand him; the target was plain and she could shoot. But this tree-and-forest business was so vague and horrible. It terrified her. “He makes me think,” she went on, “of Principalities and Powers in high places, and of things that walk in the darkness. I did *not* like the way he spoke of trees getting alive in the night, and all that; it made me think of wolves in sheep’s clothing. And when I saw that awful thing in the sky above the lawn—”

But he interrupted her at once, for that was something he had decided it was best to leave unmentioned. Certainly it was better not discussed.

“He only meant, I think, Sophie,” he put in gravely, yet with a little smile, “that trees may have a measure of conscious life — rather a nice idea on the whole, surely, — something like that bit we read in the Times the other night, you remember — and that a big forest may possess a sort of Collective Personality. Remember, he’s an artist, and poetical.”

“It’s dangerous,” she said emphatically. “I feel it’s playing with fire, unwise, unsafe—”

“Yet all to the glory of God,” he urged gently. “We must not shut our ears and eyes to knowledge — of any kind, must we?”

“With you, David, the wish is always farther than the thought,” she rejoined. For, like the child who thought that “suffered under Pontius Pilate” was “suffered under a bunch of violets,” she heard her proverbs phonetically and reproduced them thus. She hoped to convey her warning in the quotation. “And we must always try the spirits whether they be of God,” she added tentatively.

“Certainly, dear, we can always do that,” he assented, getting into bed.

But, after a little pause, during which she blew the light out, David Bittacy settling down to sleep with an excitement in his blood that was new and bewilderingly delightful, realized that perhaps he had not said quite enough to comfort her. She was lying awake by his side, still frightened. He put his head up in the darkness.

“Sophie,” he said softly, “you must remember, too, that in any case between us and — and all that sort of thing — there is a great gulf fixed, a gulf that cannot be crossed — er — while we are still in the body.”

And hearing no reply, he satisfied himself that she was already asleep and happy. But Mrs. Bittacy was not asleep. She heard the sentence, only she said nothing because she felt her thought was better unexpressed. She was afraid to hear the words in the darkness. The Forest outside was listening and might hear them too — the Forest that was “roaring further out.”

And the thought was this: That gulf, of course, existed, but Sanderson had somehow bridged it.

It was much later than night when she awoke out of troubled, uneasy dreams and heard a sound that twisted her very nerves with fear. It passed immediately with full waking, for, listen as she might, there was nothing audible but the inarticulate murmur of the night. It was in her dreams she heard it, and the dreams had vanished with it. But the sound was recognizable, for it was that rushing noise that had come across the lawn; only this time closer. Just above her face while she slept had passed this murmur as of rustling branches in the very room, a sound of foliage whispering. “A going in the tops of the mulberry trees,” ran through her mind. She had dreamed that she lay beneath a spreading tree somewhere, a tree that whispered with ten thousand soft lips of green; and the dream continued for a moment even after waking.

She sat up in bed and stared about her. The window was open at the top; she saw the stars; the door, she remembered, was locked as usual; the room, of course, was empty. The deep hush of the summer night lay over all, broken only by another sound that now issued from the shadows close beside the bed, a human sound, yet unnatural, a sound that seized the fear with which she had waked and instantly increased it. And, although it was one she recognized as familiar, at first she could not name it. Some seconds certainly passed — and, they were very long ones — before she understood that it was her husband talking in his sleep.

The direction of the voice confused and puzzled her, moreover, for it was not, as she first supposed, beside her. There was distance in it. The next minute, by the light of the sinking candle flame, she saw his white figure standing out in the middle of the room, half-way towards the window. The candle-light slowly grew. She saw him move then nearer to the window, with arms outstretched. His speech was low and mumbled, the words running together too much to be distinguishable.

And she shivered. To her, sleep-talking was uncanny to the point of horror; it was like the talking of the dead, mere parody of a living voice, unnatural.

“David!” she whispered, dreading the sound of her own voice, and half afraid to interrupt him and see his face. She could not bear the sight of the wide-opened eyes. “David, you’re walking in your sleep. Do — come back to bed, dear, *please!*”

Her whisper seemed so dreadfully loud in the still darkness. At the sound of her voice he paused, then turned slowly round to face her. His widely-opened eyes stared into her own without recognition; they looked through her into something beyond; it was as though he knew the direction of the sound, yet cold not see her. They were shining, she noticed, as the eyes of Sanderson had shone several hours ago; and his face was flushed, distraught. Anxiety was written upon every feature. And, instantly, recognizing that the fever was upon him, she forgot her terror temporarily in practical considerations. He came back to bed without waking. She closed his eyelids. Presently he composed himself quietly to sleep, or rather to deeper sleep. She contrived to make him swallow something from the tumbler beside the bed.

Then she rose very quietly to close the window, feeling the night air blow in too fresh and keen. She put the candle where it could not reach him. The sight of the big Baxter Bible beside it comforted her a little, but all through her under-being ran the warnings of a curious alarm. And it was while in the act of fastening the catch with one hand and pulling the string of the blind with the other, that her husband sat up again in bed and spoke in words this time that were distinctly audible. The eyes had opened wide again. He pointed. She stood stock still and listened, her shadow distorted on the blind. He did not come out towards her as at first she feared.

The whispering voice was very clear, horrible, too, beyond all she had ever known.

“They are roaring in the Forest further out… and I… must go and see.” He stared beyond her as he said it, to the woods. “They are needing me. They sent for me….” Then his eyes wandering back again to things within the room, he lay down, his purpose suddenly changed. And that change was horrible as well, more horrible, perhaps, because of its revelation of another detailed world he moved in far away from her.

The singular phrase chilled her blood, for a moment she was utterly terrified. That tone of the somnambulist, differing so slightly yet so distressingly from normal, waking speech, seemed to her somehow wicked. Evil and danger lay waiting thick behind it. She leaned against the window-sill, shaking in every limb. She had an awful feeling for a moment that something was coming in to fetch him.

“Not yet, then,” she heard in a much lower voice from the bed, “but later. It will be better so… I shall go later….”

The words expressed some fringe of these alarms that had haunted her so long, and that the arrival and presence of Sanderson seemed to have brought to the very edge of a climax she could not even dare to think about. They gave it form; they brought it closer; they sent her thoughts to her Deity in a wild, deep prayer for help and guidance. For here was a direct, unconscious betrayal of a world of inner purposes and claims her husband recognized while he kept them almost wholly to himself.

By the time she reached his side and knew the comfort of his touch, the eyes had closed again, this time of their own accord, and the head lay calmly back upon the pillows. She gently straightened the bed clothes. She watched him for some minutes, shading the candle carefully with one hand. There was a smile of strangest peace upon the face.

Then, blowing out the candle, she knelt down and prayed before getting back into bed. But no sleep came to her. She lay awake all night thinking, wondering, praying, until at length with the chorus of the birds and the glimmer of the dawn upon the green blind, she fell into a slumber of complete exhaustion.

But while she slept the wind continued roaring in the Forest further out. The sound came closer — sometimes very close indeed.

V

With the departure of Sanderson the significance of the curious incidents waned, because the moods that had produced them passed away. Mrs. Bittacy soon afterwards came to regard them as some growth of disproportion that had been very largely, perhaps, in her own mind. It did not strike her that this change was sudden for it came about quite naturally. For one thing her husband never spoke of the matter, and for another she remembered how many things in life that had seemed inexplicable and singular at the time turned out later to have been quite commonplace.

Most of it, certainly, she put down to the presence of the artist and to his wild, suggestive talk. With his welcome removal, the world turned ordinary again and safe. The fever, though it lasted as usual a short time only, had not allowed of her husband's getting up to say good-bye, and she had conveyed his regrets and adieux. In the morning Mr. Sanderson had seemed ordinary enough. In his town hat and gloves, as she saw him go, he seemed tame and unalarming.

"After all," she thought as she watched the pony-cart bear him off, "he's only an artist!" What she had thought he might be otherwise her slim imagination did not venture to disclose. Her change of feeling was wholesome and refreshing. She felt a little ashamed of her behavior. She gave him a smile — genuine because the relief she felt was genuine — as he bent over her hand and kissed it, but she did not suggest a second visit, and her husband, she noted with satisfaction and relief, had said nothing either.

The little household fell again into the normal and sleepy routine to which it was accustomed. The name of Arthur Sanderson was rarely if ever mentioned. Nor, for her part, did she mention to her husband the incident of his walking in his sleep and the wild words he used. But to forget it was equally impossible. Thus it lay buried deep within her like a center of some unknown disease of which it was a mysterious symptom, waiting to spread at the first favorable opportunity. She prayed against it every night and morning: prayed that she might forget it — that God would keep her husband safe from harm.

For in spite of much surface foolishness that many might have read as weakness. Mrs. Bittacy had balance, sanity, and a fine deep faith. She was greater than she knew. Her love for her husband and her God were somehow one, an achievement only possible to a single-hearted nobility of soul.

There followed a summer of great violence and beauty; of beauty, because the refreshing rains at night prolonged the glory of the spring and spread it all across July, keeping the foliage young and sweet; of violence, because the winds that tore about the south of England brushed the whole country into dancing movement. They swept the woods magnificently, and kept them roaring with a perpetual grand voice. Their deepest notes seemed never to leave the sky. They sang and shouted, and torn leaves raced and fluttered through the air long before their usually appointed time. Many a tree, after days of roaring and dancing, fell exhausted to the ground. The cedar on the lawn gave up two limbs that fell upon successive days, at the same hour too — just before dusk. The wind often makes its most boisterous effort at that time, before it drops with the sun, and these two huge branches lay in dark ruin covering half the lawn. They spread across it and towards the house. They left an ugly gaping space upon the tree, so that the Lebanon looked unfinished, half destroyed, a monster shorn of its old-time comeliness and splendor. Far more of the Forest was now visible than before; it peered through the breach of the broken defenses. They could see from the windows of the house now — especially from the drawing-room and bedroom windows — straight out into the glades and depths beyond.

Mrs. Bittacy's niece and nephew, who were staying on a visit at the time, enjoyed themselves immensely helping the gardeners carry off the fragments. It took two days to do this, for Mr. Bittacy insisted on the branches being moved entire. He would not allow them to be chopped; also, he would not consent to their use as firewood. Under his superintendence the unwieldy masses were dragged to the edge of the garden and arranged upon the frontier line between the Forest and the lawn. The children were delighted with the scheme. They entered into it with enthusiasm. At all costs this defense against the inroads of the Forest must be made secure. They caught their uncle's earnestness, felt even something of a hidden motive that he had; and the visit, usually rather dreaded, became the visit of their lives instead. It was Aunt Sophia this time who seemed discouraging and dull.

"She's got so old and funny," opined Stephen.

But Alice, who felt in the silent displeasure of her aunt some secret thing that alarmed her, said:

"I think she's afraid of the woods. She never comes into them with us, you see."

"All the more reason then for making this wall impreg — all fat and thick and solid," he concluded, unable to manage the longer word. "Then nothing — simply *nothing* — can get through. Can't it, Uncle David?"

And Mr. Bittacy, jacket discarded and working in his speckled waistcoat, went puffing to their aid, arranging the massive limb of the cedar like a hedge.

"Come on," he said, "whatever happens, you know, we must finish before it's dark. Already the wind is roaring in the Forest further out." And Alice caught the phrase and instantly echoed it. “Stevie,” she cried below her breath, “look sharp, you lazy lump. Didn’t you hear what Uncle David said? It’ll come in and catch us before we’ve done!”

They worked like Trojans, and, sitting beneath the wisteria tree that climbed the southern wall of the cottage, Mrs. Bittacy with her knitting watched them, calling from time to time insignificant messages of counsel and advice. The messages passed, of course, unheeded. Mostly, indeed, they were unheard, for the workers were too absorbed. She warned her husband not to get too hot, Alice not to tear her dress, Stephen not to strain his back with pulling. Her mind hovered between the homeopathic medicine-chest upstairs and her anxiety to see the business finished.

For this breaking up of the cedar had stirred again her slumbering alarms. It revived memories of the visit of Mr. Sanderson that had been sinking into oblivion; she recalled his queer and odious way of talking, and many things she hoped forgotten drew their heads up from that subconscious region to which all forgetting is impossible. They looked at her and nodded. They were full of life; they had no intention of being pushed aside and buried permanently. “Now look!” they whispered, “didn’t we tell you so?” They had been merely waiting the right moment to assert their presence. And all her former vague distress crept over her. Anxiety, uneasiness returned. That dreadful sinking of the heart came too.

This incident of the cedar’s breaking up was actually so unimportant, and yet her husband’s attitude towards it made it so significant. There was nothing that he said in particular, or did, or left undone that frightened, her, but his general air of earnestness seemed so unwarranted. She felt that he deemed the thing important. He was so exercised about it. This evidence of sudden concern and interest, buried all the summer from her sight and knowledge, she realized now had been buried purposely, he had kept it intentionally concealed. Deeply submerged in him there ran this tide of other thoughts, desires, hopes. What were they? Whither did they lead? The accident to the tree betrayed it most unpleasantly, and, doubtless, more than he was aware.

She watched his grave and serious face as he worked there with the children, and as she watched she felt afraid. It vexed her that the children worked so eagerly. They unconsciously supported him. The thing she feared she would not even name. But it was waiting.

Moreover, as far as her puzzled mind could deal with a dread so vague and incoherent, the collapse of the cedar somehow brought it nearer. The fact that, all so ill-explained and formless, the thing yet lay in her consciousness, out of reach but moving and alive, filled her with a kind of puzzled, dreadful wonder. Its presence was so very real, its power so gripping, its partial concealment so abominable. Then, out of the dim confusion, she grasped one thought and saw it stand quite clear before her eyes. She found difficulty in clothing it in words, but its meaning perhaps was this: That cedar stood in their life for something friendly; its downfall meant disaster; a sense of some protective influence about the cottage, and about her husband in particular, was thereby weakened.

“Why do you fear the big winds so?” he had asked her several days before, after a particularly boisterous day; and the answer she gave surprised her while she gave it. One of those heads poked up unconsciously, and let slip the truth.

“Because, David, I feel they — bring the Forest with them,” she faltered. “They blow something from the trees — into the mind — into the house.”

He looked at her keenly for a moment.

“That must be why I love them then,” he answered. “They blow the souls of the trees about the sky like clouds.”

The conversation dropped. She had never heard him talk in quite that way before.

And another time, when he had coaxed her to go with him down one of the nearer glades, she asked why he took the small hand-axe with him, and what he wanted it for.

“To cut the ivy that clings to the trunks and takes their life away,” he said.

“But can’t the verdurers do that?” she asked. “That’s what they’re paid for, isn’t it?”

Whereupon he explained that ivy was a parasite the trees knew not how to fight alone, and that the verdurers were careless and did not do it thoroughly. They gave a chop here and there, leaving the tree to do the rest for itself if it could.

“Besides, I like to do it for them. I love to help them and protect,” he added, the foliage rustling all about his quiet words as they went.

And these stray remarks, as his attitude towards the broken cedar, betrayed this curious, subtle change that was going forward to his personality. Slowly and surely all the summer it had increased.

It was growing — the thought startled her horribly — just as a tree grows, the outer evidence from day to day so slight as to be unnoticeable, yet the rising tide so deep and irresistible. The alteration spread all through and over him, was in both mind and actions, sometimes almost in his face as well. Occasionally, thus, it stood up straight outside himself and frightened her. His life was somehow becoming linked so intimately with trees, and with all that trees signified. His interests became more and more their interests, his activity combined with theirs, his thoughts and feelings theirs, his purpose, hope, desire, his fate —

His fate! The darkness of some vague, enormous terror dropped its shadow on her when she thought of it. Some instinct in her heart she dreaded infinitely more than death — for death meant sweet translation for his soul — came gradually to associate the thought of him with the thought of trees, in particular with these Forest trees. Sometimes, before she could face the thing, argue it away, or pray it into silence, she found the thought of him running swiftly through her mind like a thought of the Forest itself, the two most intimately linked and joined together, each a part and complement of the other, one being.

The idea was too dim for her to see it face to face. Its mere possibility dissolved the instant she focused it to get the truth behind it. It was too utterly elusive, made, protæan. Under the attack of even a minute’s concentration the very meaning of it vanished, melted away. The idea lay really behind any words that she could ever find, beyond the touch of definite thought.

Her mind was unable to grapple with it. But, while it vanished, the trail of its approach and disappearance flickered a moment before her shaking vision. The horror certainly remained.

Reduced to the simple human statement that her temperament sought instinctively, it stood perhaps at this: Her husband loved her, and he loved the trees as well; but the trees came first, claimed parts of him she did not know. *She* loved her God and him. *He* loved the trees and her.

Thus, in guise of some faint, distressing compromise, the matter shaped itself for her perplexed mind in the terms of conflict. A silent, hidden battle raged, but as yet raged far away. The breaking of the cedar was a visible outward fragment of a distant and mysterious encounter that was coming daily closer to them both. The wind, instead of roaring in the Forest further out, now cam nearer, booming in fitful gusts about its edge and frontiers.

Meanwhile the summer dimmed. The autumn winds went sighing through the woods, leaves turned to golden red, and the evenings were drawing in with cozy shadows before the first sign of anything seriously untoward made its appearance. It came then with a flat, decided kind of violence that indicated mature preparation beforehand. It was not impulsive nor ill-considered. In a fashion it seemed expected, and indeed inevitable. For within a fortnight of their annual change to the little village of Seillans above St. Raphael — a change so regular for the past ten years that it was not even discussed between them — David Bittacy abruptly refused to go.

Thompson had laid the tea-table, prepared the spirit lamp beneath the urn, pulled down the blinds in that swift and silent way she had, and left the room. The lamps were still unlit. The fire-light shone on the chintz armchairs, and Boxer lay asleep on the black horse-hair rug. Upon the walls the gilt picture frames gleamed faintly, the pictures themselves indistinguishable. Mrs. Bittacy had warmed the teapot and was in the act of pouring the water in to heat the cups when her husband, looking up from his chair across the hearth, made the abrupt announcement:

“My dear,” he said, as though following a train of thought of which she only heard this final phrase, “it’s really quite impossible for me to go.”

And so abrupt, inconsequent, it sounded that she at first misunderstood. She thought he meant to go out into the garden or the woods. But her heart leaped all the same. The tone of his voice was ominous.

“Of course not,” she answered, “it would be *most* unwise. Why should you — ?” She referred to the mist that always spread on autumn nights upon the lawn, but before she finished the sentence she knew that *he* referred to something else. And her heart then gave its second horrible leap.

“David! You mean abroad?” she gasped.

“I mean abroad, dear, yes.”

It reminded her of the tone he used when saying good-bye years ago, before one of those jungle expeditions she dreaded. His voice then was so serious, so final. It was serious and final now. For several moments she could think of nothing to say. She busied herself with the teapot. She had filled one cup with hot water till it overflowed, and she emptied it slowly into the slop-basin, trying with all her might not to let him see the trembling of her hand. The firelight and the dimness of the room both helped her. But in any case he would hardly have noticed it. His thoughts were far away….

VI

Mrs. Bittacy had never liked their present home. She preferred a flat, more open country that left approaches clear. She liked to see things coming. This cottage on the very edge of the old hunting grounds of William the Conqueror had never satisfied her ideal of a safe and pleasant place to settle down in. The sea-coast, with treeless downs behind and a clear horizon in front, as at Eastbourne, say, was her ideal of a proper home.

It was curious, this instinctive aversion she felt to being shut in — by trees especially; a kind of claustrophobia almost; probably due, as has been said, to the days in India when the trees took her husband off and surrounded him with dangers. In those weeks of solitude the feeling had matured. She had fought it in her fashion, but never conquered it. Apparently routed, it had a way of creeping back in other forms. In this particular case, yielding to his strong desire, she thought the battle won, but the terror of the trees came back before the first month had passed. They laughed in her face.

She never lost knowledge of the fact that the leagues of forest lay about their cottage like a mighty wall, a crowding, watching, listening presence that shut them in from freedom and escape. Far from morbid naturally, she did her best to deny the thought, and so simple and unartificial was her type of mind that for weeks together she would wholly lose it. Then, suddenly it would return upon her with a rush of bleak reality. It was not only in her mind; it existed apart from any mere mood; a separate fear that walked alone; it came and went, yet when it went — went only to watch her from another point of view. It was in abeyance — hidden round the corner.

The Forest never let her go completely. It was ever ready to encroach. All the branches, she sometimes fancied, stretched one way — towards their tiny cottage and garden, as though it sought to draw them in and merge them in itself. Its great, deep-breathing soul resented the mockery, the insolence, the irritation of the prim garden at its very gates. It would absorb and smother them if it could. And every wind that blew its thundering message over the huge sounding-board of the million, shaking trees conveyed the purpose that it had. They had angered its great soul. At its heart was this deep, incessant roaring.

All this she never framed in words, the subtleties of language lay far beyond her reach. But instinctively she felt it; and more besides. It troubled her profoundly. Chiefly, moreover, for her husband. Merely for herself, the nightmare might have left her cold. It was David's peculiar interest in the trees that gave the special invitation. Jealousy, then, in its most subtle aspect came to strengthen this aversion and dislike, for it came in a form that no reasonable wife could possibly object to. Her husband's passion, she reflected, was natural and inborn. It had decided his vocation, fed his ambition, nourished his dreams, desires, hopes. All his best years of active life had been spent in the care and guardianship of trees. He knew them, understood their secret life and nature, "managed" them intuitively as other men "managed" dogs and horses. He could not live for long away from them without a strange, acute nostalgia that stole his peace of mind and consequently his strength of body. A forest made him happy and at peace; it nursed and fed and soothed his deepest moods. Trees influenced the sources of his life, lowered or raised the very heart-beat in him. Cut off from them he languished as a lover of the sea can droop inland, or a mountaineer may pine in the flat monotony of the plains.

This she could understand, in a fashion at least, and make allowances for. She had yielded gently, even sweetly, to his choice of their English home; for in the little island there is nothing that suggests the woods of wilder countries so nearly as the New Forest. It has the genuine air and mystery, the depth and splendor, the loneliness, and there and there the strong, untamable quality of old-time forests as Bittacy of the Department knew them.

In a single detail only had he yielded to her wishes. He consented to a cottage on the edge, instead of in the heart of it. And for a dozen years now they had dwelt in peace and happiness at the lips of this great spreading thing that covered so many leagues with its tangle of swamps and moors and splendid ancient trees.

Only with the last two years or so — with his own increasing age, and physical decline perhaps — had come this marked growth of passionate interest in the welfare of the Forest. She had watched it grow, at first had laughed at it, then talked sympathetically so far as sincerity permitted, then had argued mildly, and finally come to realize that its treatment lay altogether beyond her powers, and so had come to fear it with all her heart.

The six weeks they annually spent away from their English home, each regarded very differently, of course. For her husband it meant a painful exile that did his health no good; he yearned for his trees — the sight and sound and smell of them; but for herself it meant release from a haunting dread — escape. To renounce those six weeks by the sea on the sunny, shining coast of France, was almost more than this little woman, even with her unselfishness, could face.

After the first shock of the announcement, she reflected as deeply as her nature permitted, prayed, wept in secret — and made up her mind. Duty, she felt clearly, pointed to renouncement. The discipline would certainly be severe — she did not dream at the moment how severe! — but this fine, consistent little Christian saw it plain; she accepted it, too, without any sighing of the martyr, though the courage she showed was of the martyr order. Her husband should never know the cost. In all but this one passion his unselfishness was ever as great as her own. The love she had borne him all these years, like the love she bore her anthropomorphic deity, was deep and real. She loved to suffer for them both. Besides, the way her husband had put it to her was singular. It did not take the form of a mere selfish predilection. Something higher than two wills in conflict seeking compromise was in it from the beginning.

“I feel, Sophia, it would be really more than I could manage,” he said slowly, gazing into the fire over the tops of his stretched-out muddy boots. “My duty and my happiness lie here with the Forest and with you. My life is deeply rooted in this place. Something I can’t define connects my inner being with these trees, and separation would make me ill — might even kill me. My hold on life would weaken; here is my source of supply. I cannot explain it better than that.” He looked up steadily into her face across the table so that she saw the gravity of his expression and the shining of his steady eyes.

“David, you feel it as strongly as that!” she said, forgetting the tea things altogether.

“Yes,” he replied, “I do. And it’s not of the body only, I feel it in my soul.”

The reality of what he hinted at crept into that shadow-covered room like an actual Presence and stood beside them. It came not by the windows or the door, but it filled the entire space between the walls and ceiling. It took the heat from the fire before her face. She felt suddenly cold, confused a little, frightened. She almost felt the rush of foliage in the wind. It stood between them.

“There are things — some things,” she faltered, “we are not intended to know, I think.” The words expressed her general attitude to life, not alone to this particular incident.

And after a pause of several minutes, disregarding the criticism as though he had not heard it— “I cannot explain it better than that, you see,” his grave voice answered. “There is this deep, tremendous link, — some secret power they emanate that keeps me well and happy and — alive. If you cannot understand, I feel at least you may be able to — forgive.” His tone grew tender, gentle, soft. “My selfishness, I know, must seem quite unforgivable. I cannot help it somehow; these trees, this ancient Forest, both seem knitted into all that makes me live, and if I go—”

There was a little sound of collapse in his voice. He stopped abruptly, and sank back in his chair. And, at that, a distinct lump came up into her throat which she had great difficulty in managing while she went over and put her arms about him.

“My dear,” she murmured, “God will direct. We will accept His guidance. He has always shown the way before.”

“My selfishness afflicts me—” he began, but she would not let him finish.

“David, He will direct. Nothing shall harm you. You’ve never once been selfish, and I cannot bear to hear you say such things. The way will open that is best for you — for both of us.” She kissed him, she would not let him speak; her heart was in her throat, and she felt for him far more than for herself.

And then he had suggested that she should go alone perhaps for a shorter time, and stay in her brother’s villa with the children, Alice and Stephen. It was always open to her as she well knew.

“You need the change,” he said, when the lamps had been lit and the servant had gone out again; “you need it as much as I dread it. I could manage somehow until you returned, and should feel happier that way if you went. I cannot leave this Forest that I love so well. I even feel, Sophie dear” — he sat up straight and faced her as he half whispered it— “that I can *never* leave it again. My life and happiness lie here together.”

And eve while scorning the idea that she could leave him alone with the Influence of the Forest all about him to have its unimpeded way, she felt the pangs of that subtle jealousy bite keen and close. He loved the Forest better than herself, for he placed it first. Behind the words, moreover, hid the unuttered thought that made her so uneasy. The terror Sanderson had brought revived and shook its wings before her very eyes. For the whole conversation, of which this was a fragment, conveyed the unutterable implication that while he could not spare the trees, they equally could not spare him. The vividness with which he managed to conceal and yet betray the fact brought a profound distress that crossed the border between presentiment and warning into positive alarm.

He clearly felt that the trees would miss him — the trees he tended, guarded, watched over, loved.

“David, I shall stay here with you. I think you need me really, — don’t you?” Eagerly, with a touch of heart-felt passion, the words poured out.

“Now more than ever, dear. God bless you for you sweet unselfishness. And your sacrifice,” he added, “is all the greater because you cannot understand the thing that makes it necessary for me to stay.”

“Perhaps in the spring instead—” she said, with a tremor in the voice.

"In the spring — perhaps," he answered gently, almost beneath his breath. "For they will not need me then. All the world can love them in the spring. It's in the winter that they're lonely and neglected. I wish to stay with them particularly then. I even feel I ought to — and I must."

And in this way, without further speech, the decision was made. Mrs. Bittacy, at least, asked no more questions. Yet she could not bring herself to show more sympathy than was necessary. She felt, for one thing, that if she did, it might lead him to speak freely, and to tell her things she could not possibly bear to know. And she dared not take the risk of that.

VII

This was at the end of summer, but the autumn followed close. The conversation really marked the threshold between the two seasons, and marked at the same time the line between her husband's negative and aggressive state. She almost felt she had done wrong to yield; he grew so bold, concealment all discarded. He went, that is, quite openly to the woods, forgetting all his duties, all his former occupations. He even sought to coax her to go with him. The hidden thing blazed out without disguise. And, while she trembled at his energy, she admired the virile passion he displayed. Her jealousy had long ago retired before her fear, accepting the second place. Her one desire now was to protect. The wife turned wholly mother.

He said so little, but — he hated to come in. From morning to night he wandered in the Forest; often he went out after dinner; his mind was charged with trees — their foliage, growth, development; their wonder, beauty, strength; their loneliness in isolation, their power in a herded mass. He knew the effect of every wind upon them; the danger from the boisterous north, the glory from the west, the eastern dryness, and the soft, moist tenderness that a south wind left upon their thinning boughs. He spoke all day of their sensations: how they drank the fading sunshine, dreamed in the moonlight, thrilled to the kiss of stars. The dew could bring them half the passion of the night, but frost sent them plunging beneath the ground to dwell with hopes of a later coming softness in their roots. They nursed the life they carried — insects, larvae, chrysalis — and when the skies above them melted, he spoke of them standing "motionless in an ecstasy of rain," or in the noon of sunshine "self-poised upon their prodigy of shade."

And once in the middle of the night she woke at the sound of his voice, and heard him — wide awake, not talking in his sleep — but talking towards the window where the shadow of the cedar fell at noon:

O art thou sighing for Lebanon
  In the long breeze that streams to thy delicious East?
  Sighing for Lebanon,
  Dark cedar;

and, when, half charmed, half terrified, she turned and called to him by name, he merely said —

"My dear, I felt the loneliness — suddenly realized it — the alien desolation of that tree, set here upon our little lawn in England when all her Eastern brothers call her in sleep." And the answer seemed so queer, so "un-evangelical," that she waited in silence till he slept again. The poetry passed her by. It seemed unnecessary and out of place. It made her ache with suspicion, fear, jealousy.

The fear, however, seemed somehow all lapped up and banished soon afterwards by her unwilling admiration of the rushing splendor of her husband's state. Her anxiety, at any rate, shifted from the religious to the medical. She thought he might be losing his steadiness of mind a little. How often in her prayers she offered thanks for the guidance that had made her stay with him to help and watch is impossible to say. It certainly was twice a day.

She even went so far once, when Mr. Mortimer, the vicar, called, and brought with him a more or less distinguished doctor — as to tell the professional man privately some symptoms of her husband's queerness. And his answer that there was "nothing he could prescribe for" added not a little to her sense of unholy bewilderment. No doubt Sir James had never been "consulted" under such unorthodox conditions before. His sense of what was becoming naturally overrode his acquired instincts as a skilled instrument that might help the race.

"No fever, you think?" she asked insistently with hurry, determined to get something from him.

"Nothing that *I* can deal with, as I told you, Madam," replied the offended allopathic Knight.

Evidently he did not care about being invited to examine patients in this surreptitious way before a teapot on the lawn, chance of a fee most problematical. He liked to see a tongue and feel a thumping pulse; to know the pedigree and bank account of his questioner as well. It was most unusual, in abominable taste besides. Of course it was. But the drowning woman seized the only straw she could.

For now the aggressive attitude of her husband overcame her to the point where she found it difficult even to question him. Yet in the house he was so kind and gentle, doing all he could to make her sacrifice as easy as possible.

"David, you really *are* unwise to go out now. The night is damp and very chilly. The ground is soaked in dew. You'll catch your death of cold."

His face lightened. "Won't you come with me, dear, — just for once? I'm only going to the corner of the hollies to see the beech that stands so lonely by itself."

She had been out with him in the short dark afternoon, and they had passed that evil group of hollies where the gypsies camped. Nothing else would grow there, but the hollies thrive upon the stony soil.

"David, the beech is all right and safe." She had learned his phraseology a little, made clever out of due season by her love. "There's no wind to-night."

"But it's rising," he answered, "rising in the east. I heard it in the bare and hungry larches. They need the sun and dew, and always cry out when the wind's upon them from the east."

She sent a short unspoken prayer most swiftly to her deity as she heard him say it. For every time now, when he spoke in this familiar, intimate way of the life of the trees, she felt a sheet of cold fasten tight against her very skin and flesh. She shivered. How could he possibly know such things?

Yet, in all else, and in the relations of his daily life, he was sane and reasonable, loving, kind and tender. It was only on the subject of the trees he seemed unhinged and queer. Most curiously it seemed that, since the collapse of the cedar they both loved, though in different fashion, his departure from the normal had increased. Why else did he watch them as a man might watch a sickly child? Why did he hunger especially in the dusk to catch their "mood of night" as he called it? Why think so carefully upon them when the frost was threatening or the wind appeared to rise?

As she put it so frequently now herself — How could he possibly *know* such things?

He went. As she closed the front door after him she heard the distant roaring in the Forest.

And then it suddenly struck her: How could she know them too?

It dropped upon her like a blow that she felt at once all over, upon body, heart and mind. The discovery rushed out from its ambush to overwhelm. The truth of it, making all arguing futile, numbed her faculties. But though at first it deadened her, she soon revived, and her being rose into aggressive opposition. A wild yet calculated courage like that which animates the leaders of splendid forlorn hopes flamed in her little person — flamed grandly, and invincible. While knowing herself insignificant and weak, she knew at the same time that power at her back which moves the worlds. The faith that filled her was the weapon in her hands, and the right by which she claimed it; but the spirit of utter, selfless sacrifice that characterized her life was the means by which she mastered its immediate use. For a kind of white and faultless intuition guided her to the attack. Behind her stood her Bible and her God.

How so magnificent a divination came to her at all may well be a matter for astonishment, though some clue of explanation lies, perhaps, in the very simpleness of her nature. At any rate, she saw quite clearly certain things; saw them in moments only — after prayer, in the still silence of the night, or when left alone those long hours in the house with her knitting and her thoughts — and the guidance which then flashed into her remained, even after the manner of its coming was forgotten.

They came to her, these things she saw, formless, wordless; she could not put them into any kind of language; but by the very fact of being uncaught in sentences they retained their original clear vigor.

Hours of patient waiting brought the first, and the others followed easily afterwards, by degrees, on subsequent days, a little and a little. Her husband had been gone since early morning, and had taken his luncheon with him. She was sitting by the tea things, the cups and teapot warmed, the muffins in the fender keeping hot, all ready for his return, when she realized quite abruptly that this thing which took him off, which kept him out so many hours day after day, this thing that was against her own little will and instincts — was enormous as the sea. It was no mere prettiness of single Trees, but something massed and mountainous. About her rose the wall of its huge opposition to the sky, its scale gigantic, its power utterly prodigious. What she knew of it hitherto as green and delicate forms waving and rustling in the winds was but, as it were the spray of foam that broke into sight upon the nearer edge of viewless depths far, far away. The trees, indeed, were sentinels set visibly about the limits of a camp that itself remained invisible. The awful hum and murmur of the main body in the distance passed into that still room about her with the firelight and hissing kettle. Out yonder — in the Forest further out — the thing that was ever roaring at the center was dreadfully increasing.

The sense of definite battle, too — battle between herself and the Forest for his soul — came with it. Its presentiment was as clear as though Thompson had come into the room and quietly told her that the cottage was surrounded. “Please, ma’am, there are trees come up about the house,” she might have suddenly announced. And equally might have heard her own answer: “It’s all right, Thompson. The main body is still far away.”

Immediately upon its heels, then, came another truth, with a close reality that shocked her. She saw that jealousy was not confined to the human and animal world alone, but ran though all creation. The Vegetable Kingdom knew it too. So-called inanimate nature shared it with the rest. Trees felt it. This Forest just beyond the window — standing there in the silence of the autumn evening across the little lawn — this Forest understood it equally. The remorseless, branching power that sought to keep exclusively for itself the thing it loved and needed, spread like a running desire through all its million leaves and stems and roots. In humans, of course, it was consciously directed; in animals it acted with frank instinctiveness; but in trees this jealousy rose in some blind tide of impersonal and unconscious wrath that would sweep opposition from its path as the wind sweeps powdered snow from the surface of the ice. Their number was a host with endless reinforcements, and once it realized its passion was returned the power increased…. Her husband loved the trees…. They had become aware of it…. They would take him from her in the end….

Then, while she heard his footsteps in the hall and the closing of the front door, she saw a third thing clearly; — realized the widening of the gap between herself and him. This other love had made it. All these weeks of the summer when she felt so close to him, now especially when she had made the biggest sacrifice of her life to stay by his side and help him, he had been slowly, surely — drawing away. The estrangement was here and now — a fact accomplished. It had been all this time maturing; there yawned this broad deep space between them. Across the empty distance she saw the change in merciless perspective. It revealed his face and figure, dearly-loved, once fondly worshipped, far on the other side in shadowy distance, small, the back turned from her, and moving while she watched — moving away from her.

They had their tea in silence then. She asked no questions, he volunteered no information of his day. The heart was big within her, and the terrible loneliness of age spread through her like a rising icy mist. She watched him, filling all his wants. His hair was untidy and his boots were caked with blackish mud. He moved with a restless, swaying motion that somehow blanched her cheek and sent a miserable shivering down her back. It reminded her of trees. His eyes were very bright.

He brought in with him an odor of the earth and forest that seemed to choke her and make it difficult to breathe; and — what she noticed with a climax of almost uncontrollable alarm — upon his face beneath the lamplight shone traces of a mild, faint glory that made her think of moonlight falling upon a wood through speckled shadows. It was his new-found happiness that shone there, a happiness uncaused by her and in which she had no part.

In his coat was a spray of faded yellow beech leaves. “I brought this from the Forest to you,” he said, with all the air that belonged to his little acts of devotion long ago. And she took the spray of leaves mechanically with a smile and a murmured “thank you, dear,” as though he had unknowingly put into her hands the weapon for her own destruction and she had accepted it.

And when the tea was over and he left the room, he did not go to his study, or to change his clothes. She heard the front door softly shut behind him as he again went out towards the Forest.

A moment later she was in her room upstairs, kneeling beside the bed — the side she slept on — and praying wildly through a flood of tears that God would save and keep him to her. Wind brushed the window panes behind her while she knelt.

VIII

One sunny November morning, when the strain had reached a pitch that made repression almost unmanageable, she came to an impulsive decision, and obeyed it. Her husband had again gone out with luncheon for the day. She took adventure in her hands and followed him. The power of seeing-clear was strong upon her, forcing her up to some unnatural level of understanding. To stay indoors and wait inactive for his return seemed suddenly impossible. She meant to know what he knew, feel what he felt, put herself in his place. She would dare the fascination of the Forest — share it with him. It was greatly daring; but it would give her greater understanding how to help and save him and therefore greater Power. She went upstairs a moment first to pray.

In a thick, warm skirt, and wearing heavy boots — those walking boots she used with him upon the mountains about Seillans — she left the cottage by the back way and turned towards the Forest. She could not actually follow him, for he had started off an hour before and she knew not exactly his direction. What was so urgent in her was the wish to be with him in the woods, to walk beneath leafless branches just as he did: to be there when he was there, even though not together. For it had come to her that she might thus share with him for once this horrible mighty life and breathing of the trees he loved. In winter, he had said, they needed him particularly, and winter now was coming. Her love must bring her something of what he felt himself — the huge attraction, the suction and the pull of all the trees. Thus, in some vicarious fashion, she might share, though unknown to himself, this very thing that was taking him away from her. She might thus even lessen its attack upon himself.

The impulse came to her clairvoyantly, and she obeyed without a sign of hesitation. Deeper comprehension would come to her of the whole awful puzzle. And come it did, yet not in the way she imagined and expected.

The air was very still, the sky a cold pale blue, but cloudless. The entire Forest stood silent, at attention. It knew perfectly well that she had come. It knew the moment when she entered; watched and followed her; and behind her something dropped without a sound and shut her in. Her feet upon the glades of mossy grass fell silently, as the oaks and beeches shifted past in rows and took up their positions at her back. It was not pleasant, this way they grew so dense behind her the instant she had passed. She realized that they gathered in an ever-growing army, massed, herded, trooped, between her and the cottage, shutting off escape. They let her pass so easily, but to get out again she would know them differently — thick, crowded, branches all drawn and hostile. Already their increasing numbers bewildered her. In front, they looked so sparse and scattered, with open spaces where the sunshine fell; but when she turned it seemed they stood so close together, a serried army, darkening the sunlight. They blocked the day, collected all the shadows, stood with their leafless and forbidding rampart like the night. They swallowed down into themselves the very glade by which she came. For when she glanced behind her — rarely — the way she had come was shadowy and lost.

Yet the morning sparkled overhead, and a glance of excitement ran quivering through the entire day. It was what she always knew as "children's weather," so clear and harmless, without a sign of danger, nothing ominous to threaten or alarm. Steadfast in her purpose, looking back as little as she dared, Sophia Bittacy marched slowly and deliberately into the heart of the silent woods, deeper, ever deeper.

And then, abruptly, in an open space where the sunshine fell unhindered, she stopped. It was one of the breathing places of the forest. Dead, withered bracken lay in patches of unsightly grey. There were bits of heather too. All round the trees stood looking on — oak, beech, holly, ash, pine, larch, with here and there small groups of juniper. On the lips of this breathing space of the woods she stopped to rest, disobeying her instinct for the first time. For the other instinct in her was to go on. She did not really want to rest.

This was the little act that brought it to her — the wireless message from a vast Emitter.

"I've been stopped," she thought to herself with a horrid qualm.

She looked about her in this quiet, ancient place. Nothing stirred. There was no life nor sign of life; no birds sang; no rabbits scuttled off at her approach. The stillness was bewildering, and gravity hung down upon it like a heavy curtain. It hushed the heart in her. Could this be part of what her husband felt — this sense of thick entanglement with stems, boughs, roots, and foliage?

“This has always been as it is now,” she thought, yet not knowing why she thought it. “Ever since the Forest grew it has been still and secret here. It has never changed.” The curtain of silence drew closer while she said it, thickening round her. “For a thousand years — I’m here with a thousand years. And behind this place stand all the forests of the world!”

So foreign to her temperament were such thoughts, and so alien to all she had been taught to look for in Nature, that she strove against them. She made an effort to oppose. But they clung and haunted just the same; they refused to be dispersed. The curtain hung dense and heavy as though its texture thickened. The air with difficulty came through.

And then she thought that curtain stirred. There was movement somewhere. That obscure dim thing which ever broods behind the visible appearances of trees came nearer to her. She caught her breath and stared about her, listening intently. The trees, perhaps because she saw them more in detail now, it seemed to her had changed. A vague, faint alteration spread over them, at first so slight she scarcely would admit it, then growing steadily, though still obscurely, outwards. “They tremble and are changed,” flashed through her mind the horrid line that Sanderson had quoted. Yet the change was graceful for all the uncouthness attendant upon the size of so vast a movement. They had turned in her direction. That was it. *They saw her.* In this way the change expressed itself in her groping, terrified thought. Till now it had been otherwise: she had looked at them from her own point of view; now they looked at her from theirs. They stared her in the face and eyes; they stared at her all over. In some unkind, resentful, hostile way, they watched her. Hitherto in life she had watched them variously, in superficial ways, reading into them what her own mind suggested. Now they read into her the things they actually *were*, and not merely another’s interpretations of them.

They seemed in their motionless silence there instinct with life, a life, moreover, that breathed about her a species of terrible soft enchantment that bewitched. It branched all through her, climbing to the brain. The Forest held her with its huge and giant fascination. In this secluded breathing spot that the centuries had left untouched, she had stepped close against the hidden pulse of the whole collective mass of them. They were aware of her and had turned to gaze with their myriad, vast sight upon the intruder. They shouted at her in the silence. For she wanted to look back at them, but it was like staring at a crowd, and her glance merely shifted from one tree to another, hurriedly, finding in none the one she sought. They saw her so easily, each and all. The rows that stood behind her also stared. But she could not return the gaze. Her husband, she realized, could. And their steady stare shocked her as though in some sense she knew that she was naked. They saw so much of her: she saw of them — so little.

Her efforts to return their gaze were pitiful. The constant shifting increased her bewilderment. Conscious of this awful and enormous sight all over her, she let her eyes first rest upon the ground, and then she closed them altogether. She kept the lids as tight together as ever they would go.

But the sight of the trees came even into that inner darkness behind the fastened lids, for there was no escaping it. Outside, in the light, she still knew that the leaves of the hollies glittered smoothly, that the dead foliage of the oaks hung crisp in the air about her, that the needles of the little junipers were pointing all one way. The spread perception of the Forest was focused on herself, and no mere shutting of the eyes could hide its scattered yet concentrated stare — the all-inclusive vision of great woods.

There was no wind, yet here and there a single leaf hanging by its dried-up stalk shook all alone with great rapidity — rattling. It was the sentry drawing attention to her presence. And then, again, as once long weeks before, she felt their Being as a tide about her. The tide had turned. That memory of her childhood sands came back, when the nurse said, “The tide has turned now; we must go in,” and she saw the mass of piled-up waters, green and heaped to the horizon, and realized that it was slowly coming in. The gigantic mass of it, too vast for hurry, loaded with massive purpose, she used to feel, was moving towards herself. The fluid body of the sea was creeping along beneath the sky to the very spot upon the yellow sands where she stood and played. The sight and thought of it had always overwhelmed her with a sense of awe — as though her puny self were the object of the whole sea’s advance. “The tide has turned; we had better now go in.”

This was happening now about her — the same thing was happening in the woods — slow, sure, and steady, and its motion as little discernible as the sea’s. The tide had turned. The small human presence that had ventured among its green and mountainous depths, moreover, was its objective.

That all was clear within her while she sat and waited with tight-shut lids. But the next moment she opened her eyes with a sudden realization of something more. The presence that it sought was after all not hers. It was the presence of some one other than herself. And then she understood. Her eyes had opened with a click, it seemed, but the sound, in reality, was outside herself.

Across the clearing where the sunshine lay so calm and still, she saw the figure of her husband moving among the trees — a man, like a tree, walking.

With hands behind his back, and head uplifted, he moved quite slowly, as though absorbed in his own thoughts. Hardly fifty paces separated them, but he had no inkling of her presence there so near. With mind intent and senses all turned inwards, he marched past her like a figure in a dream, and like a figure in a dream she saw him go. Love, yearning, pity rose in a storm within her, but as in nightmare she found no words or movement possible. She sat and watched him go — go from her — go into the deeper reaches of the green enveloping woods. Desire to save, to bid him stop and turn, ran in a passion through her being, but there was nothing she could do. She saw him go away from her, go of his own accord and willingly beyond her; she saw the branches drop about his steps and hid him. His figure faded out among the speckled shade and sunlight. The trees covered him. The tide just took him, all unresisting and content to go. Upon the bosom of the green soft sea he floated away beyond her reach of vision. Her eyes could follow him no longer. He was gone.

And then for the first time she realized, even at that distance, that the look upon his face was one of peace and happiness — rapt, and caught away in joy, a look of youth. That expression now he never showed to her. But she *had* known it. Years ago, in the early days of their married life, she had seen it on his face. Now it no longer obeyed the summons of her presence and her love. The woods alone could call it forth; it answered to the trees; the Forest had taken every part of him — from her — his very heart and soul.

Her sight that had plunged inwards to the fields of faded memory now came back to outer things again. She looked about her, and her love, returning empty-handed and unsatisfied, left her open to the invading of the bleakest terror she had ever known. That such things could be real and happen found her helpless utterly. Terror invaded the quietest corners of her heart, that had never yet known quailing. She could not — for moments at any rate — reach either her Bible or her God. Desolate in an empty world of fear she sat with eyes too dry and hot for tears, yet with a coldness as of ice upon her very flesh. She stared, unseeing, about her. That horror which stalks in the stillness of the noonday, when the glare of an artificial sunshine lights up the motionless trees, moved all about her. In front and behind she was aware of it. Beyond this stealthy silence, just within the edge of it, the things of another world were passing. But she could not know them. Her husband knew them, knew their beauty and their awe, yes, but for her they were out of reach. She might not share with him the very least of them. It seemed that behind and through the glare of this wintry noonday in the heart of the woods there brooded another universe of life and passion, for her all unexpressed. The silence veiled it, the stillness hid it; but he moved with it all and understood. His love interpreted it.

She rose to her feet, tottered feebly, and collapsed again upon the moss. Yet for herself she felt no terror; no little personal fear could touch her whose anguish and deep longing streamed all out to him whom she so bravely loved. In this time of utter self-forgetfulness, when she realized that the battle was hopeless, thinking she had lost even her God, she found Him again quite close beside her like a little Presence in this terrible heart of the hostile Forest. But at first she did not recognize that He was there; she did not know Him in that strangely unacceptable guise. For He stood so very close, so very intimate, so very sweet and comforting, and yet so hard to understand — as Resignation.

Once more she struggled to her feet, and this time turned successfully and slowly made her way along the mossy glade by which she came. And at first she marveled, though only for a moment, at the ease with which she found the path. For a moment only, because almost at once she saw the truth. The trees were glad that she should go. They helped her on her way. The Forest did not want her.

The tide was coming in, indeed, yet not for her.

And so, in another of those flashes of clear-vision that of late had lifted life above the normal level, she saw and understood the whole terrible thing complete.

Till now, though unexpressed in thought or language, her fear had been that the woods her husband loved would somehow take him from her — to merge his life in theirs — even to kill him on some mysterious way. This time she saw her deep mistake, and so seeing, let in upon herself the fuller agony of horror. For their jealousy was not the petty jealousy of animals or humans. They wanted him because they loved him, but they did *not* want him dead. Full charged with his splendid life and enthusiasm they wanted him. They wanted him — alive.

It was she who stood in their way, and it was she whom they intended to remove.

This was what brought the sense of abject helplessness. She stood upon the sands against an entire ocean slowly rolling in against her. For, as all the forces of a human being combine unconsciously to eject a grain of sand that has crept beneath the skin to cause discomfort, so the entire mass of what Sanderson had called the Collective Consciousness of the Forest strove to eject this human atom that stood across the path of its desire. Loving her husband, she had crept beneath its skin. It was her they would eject and take away; it was her they would destroy, not him. Him, whom they loved and needed, they would keep alive. They meant to take him living. She reached the house in safety, though she never remembered how she found her way. It was made all simple for her. The branches almost urged her out.

But behind her, as she left the shadowed precincts, she felt as though some towering Angel of the Woods let fall across the threshold the flaming sword of a countless multitude of leaves that formed behind her a barrier, green, shimmering, and impassable. Into the Forest she never walked again.

And she went about her daily duties with a calm and quietness that was a perpetual astonishment even to herself, for it hardly seemed of this world at all. She talked to her husband when he came in for tea — after dark.

Resignation brings a curious large courage — when there is nothing more to lose. The soul takes risks, and dares. Is it a curious short-cut sometimes to the heights?

"David, I went into the Forest, too, this morning, soon after you I went. I saw you there."

"Wasn't it wonderful?" he answered simply, inclining his head a little. There was no surprise or annoyance in his look; a mild and gentle *ennui* rather. He asked no real question. She thought of some garden tree the wind attacks too suddenly, bending it over when it does not want to bend — the mild unwillingness with which it yields. She often saw him this way now, in the terms of trees.

"It was very wonderful indeed, dear, yes," she replied low, her voice not faltering though indistinct. "But for me it was too — too strange and big."

The passion of tears lay just below the quiet voice all unbetrayed. Somehow she kept them back.

There was a pause, and then he added:

"I find it more and more so every day." His voice passed through the lamp-lit room like a murmur of the wind in branches. The look of youth and happiness she had caught upon his face out there had wholly gone, and an expression of weariness was in its place, as of a man distressed vaguely at finding himself in uncongenial surroundings where he is slightly ill at ease. It was the house he hated — coming back to rooms and walls and furniture. The ceilings and closed windows confined him. Yet, in it, no suggestion that he found *her* irksome. Her presence seemed of no account at all; indeed, he hardly noticed her. For whole long periods he lost her, did not know that she was there. He had no need of her. He lived alone. Each lived alone.

The outward signs by which she recognized that the awful battle was against her and the terms of surrender accepted were pathetic. She put the medicine-chest away upon the shelf; she gave the orders for his pocket-luncheon before he asked; she went to bed alone and early, leaving the front door unlocked, with milk and bread and butter in the hall beside the lamp — all concessions that she felt impelled to make. Fore more and more, unless the weather was too violent, he went out after dinner even, staying for hours in the woods. But she never slept until she heard the front door close below, and knew soon afterwards his careful step come creeping up the stairs and into the room so softly. Until she heard his regular deep breathing close beside her, she lay awake. All strength or desire to resist had gone for good. The thing against her was too huge and powerful. Capitulation was complete, a fact accomplished. She dated it from the day she followed him to the Forest.

Moreover, the time for evacuation — her own evacuation — seemed approaching. It came stealthily ever nearer, surely and slowly as the rising tide she used to dread. At the high-water mark she stood waiting calmly — waiting to be swept away. Across the lawn all those terrible days of early winter the encircling Forest watched it come, guiding its silent swell and currents towards her feet. Only she never once gave up her Bible or her praying. This complete resignation, moreover, had somehow brought to her a strange great understanding, and if she could not share her husband's horrible abandonment to powers outside himself, she could, and did, in some half-groping way grasp at shadowy meanings that might make such abandonment — possible, yes, but more than merely possible — in some extraordinary sense not evil.

Hitherto she had divided the beyond-world into two sharp halves — spirits good or spirits evil. But thoughts came to her now, on soft and very tentative feet, like the footsteps of the gods which are on wool, that besides these definite classes, there might be other Powers as well, belonging definitely to neither one nor other. Her thought stopped dead at that. But the big idea found lodgment in her little mind, and, owing to the largeness of her heart, remained there unejected. It even brought a certain solace with it.

The failure — or unwillingness, as she preferred to state it — of her God to interfere and help, that also she came in a measure to understand. For here, she found it more and more possible to imagine, was perhaps no positive evil at work, but only something that usually stands away from humankind, something alien and not commonly recognized. There *was* a gulf fixed between the two, and Mr. Sanderson *had* bridged it, by his talk, his explanations, his attitude of mind. Through these her husband had found the way into it. His temperament and natural passion for the woods had prepared the soul in him, and the moment he saw the way to go he took it — the line of least resistance. Life was, of course, open to all, and her husband had the right to choose it where he would. He had chosen it —

away from her, away from other men, but not necessarily away from God. This was an enormous concession that she skirted, never really faced; it was too revolutionary to face. But its possibility peeped into her bewildered mind. It might delay his progress, or it might advance it. Who could know? And why should God, who ordered all things with such magnificent detail, from the pathway of a sun to the falling of a sparrow, object to his free choice, or interfere to hinder him and stop?

She came to realize resignation, that is, in another aspect. It gave her comfort, if not peace. She fought against all belittling of her God. It was, perhaps, enough that He — knew.

“You are not alone, dear in the trees out there?” she ventured one night, as he crept on tiptoe into the room not far from midnight. “God is with you?”

“Magnificently,” was the immediate answer, given with enthusiasm, “for He is everywhere. And I only wish that you—”

But she stuffed the clothes against her ears. That invitation on his lips was more than she could bear to hear. It seemed like asking her to hurry to her own execution. She buried her face among the sheets and blankets, shaking all over like a leaf.

IX

And so the thought that she was the one to go remained and grew. It was, perhaps, first sign of that weakening of the mind which indicated the singular manner of her going. For it was her mental opposition, the trees felt, that stood in their way. Once that was overcome, obliterated, her physical presence did not matter. She would be harmless.

Having accepted defeat, because she had come to feel that his obsession was not actually evil, she accepted at the same time the conditions of an atrocious loneliness. She stood now from her husband farther than from the moon. They had no visitors. Callers were few and far between, and less encouraged than before. The empty dark of winter was before them. Among the neighbors was none in whom, without disloyalty to her husband, she could confide. Mr. Mortimer, had he been single, might have helped her in this desert of solitude that preyed upon her mind, but his wife was there the obstacle; for Mrs. Mortimer wore sandals, believed that nuts were the complete food of man, and indulged in other idiosyncrasies that classed her inevitably among the “latter signs” which Mrs. Bittacy had been taught to dread as dangerous. She stood most desolately alone.

Solitude, therefore, in which the mind unhindered feeds upon its own delusions, was the assignable cause of her gradual mental disruption and collapse.

With the definite arrival of the colder weather her husband gave up his rambles after dark; evenings were spent together over the fire; he read The Times; they even talked about their postponed visit abroad in the coming spring. No restlessness was on him at the change; he seemed content and easy in his mind; spoke little of the trees and woods; enjoyed far better health than if there had been change of scene, and to herself was tender, kind, solicitous over trifles, as in the distant days of their first honeymoon.

But this deep calm could not deceive her; it meant, she fully understood, that he felt sure of himself, sure of her, and sure of the trees as well. It all lay buried in the depths of him, too secure and deep, too intimately established in his central being to permit of those surface fluctuations which betray disharmony within. His life was hid with trees. Even the fever, so dreaded in the damp of winter, left him free. She now knew why: the fever was due to their efforts to obtain him, his efforts to respond and go — physical results of a fierce unrest he had never understood till Sanderson came with his wicked explanations. Now it was otherwise. The bridge was made. And — he had gone.

And she, brave, loyal, and consistent soul, found herself utterly alone, even trying to make his passage easy. It seemed that she stood at the bottom of some huge ravine that opened in her mind, the walls whereof instead of rock were trees that reached enormous to the sky, engulfing her. God alone knew that she was there. He watched, permitted, even perhaps approved. At any rate — He knew.

During those quiet evenings in the house, moreover, while they sat over the fire listening to the roaming winds about the house, her husband knew continual access to the world his alien love had furnished for him. Never for a single instant was he cut off from it. She gazed at the newspaper spread before his face and knees, saw the smoke of his cheroot curl up above the edge, noticed the little hole in his evening socks, and listened to the paragraphs he read aloud as of old. But this was all a veil he spread about himself of purpose. Behind it — he escaped. It was the conjurer's trick to divert the sight to unimportant details while the essential thing went forward unobserved. He managed wonderfully; she loved him for the pains he took to spare her distress; but all the while she knew that the body lolling in that armchair before her eyes contained the merest fragment of his actual self. It was little better than a corpse. It was an empty shell. The essential soul of him was out yonder with the Forest — farther out near that ever-roaring heart of it.

And, with the dark, the Forest came up boldly and pressed against the very walls and windows, peering in upon them, joining hands above the slates and chimneys. The winds were always walking on the lawn and gravel paths; steps came and went and came again; some one seemed always talking in the woods, some one was in the building too. She passed them on the stairs, or running soft and muffled, very large and gentle, down the passages and landings after dusk, as though loose fragments of the Day had broken off and stayed there caught among the shadows, trying to get out. They blundered silently all about the house. They waited till she passed, then made a run for it. And her husband always knew. She saw him more than once deliberately avoid them — because *she* was there. More than once, too, she saw him stand and listen when he thought she was not near, then heard herself the long bounding stride of their approach across the silent garden. Already *he* had heard them in the windy distance of the night, far, far away. They sped, she well knew, along that glade of mossy turf by which she last came out; it cushioned their tread exactly as it had cushioned her own.

It seemed to her the trees were always in the house with him, and in their very bedroom. He welcomed them, unaware that she also knew, and trembled.

One night in their bedroom it caught her unawares. She woke out of deep sleep and it came upon her before she could gather her forces for control.

The day had been wildly boisterous, but now the wind had dropped, only its rags went fluttering through the night. The rays of the full moon fell in a shower between the branches. Overhead still raced the scud and wrack, shaped like hurrying monsters; but below the earth was quiet. Still and dripping stood the hosts of trees. Their trunks gleamed wet and sparkling where the moon caught them. There was a strong smell of mould and fallen leaves. The air was sharp — heavy with odor.

And she knew all this the instant that she woke; for it seemed to her that she had been elsewhere — following her husband — as though she had been *out*! There was no dream at all, merely the definite, haunting certainty. It dived away, lost, buried in the night. She sat upright in bed. She had come back.

The room shone pale in the moonlight reflected through the windows, for the blinds were up, and she saw her husband's form beside her, motionless in deep sleep. But what caught her unawares was the horrid thing that by this fact of sudden, unexpected waking she had surprised these other things in the room, beside the very bed, gathered close about him while he slept. It was their dreadful boldness — herself of no account as it were — that terrified her into screaming before she could collect her powers to prevent. She screamed before she realized what she did — a long, high shriek of terror that filled the room, yet made so little actual sound. For wet and shimmering presences stood grouped all round that bed. She saw their outline underneath the ceiling, the green, spread bulk of them, their vague extension over walls and furniture. They shifted to and fro, massed yet translucent, mild yet thick, moving and turning within themselves to a hushed noise of multitudinous soft rustling. In their sound was something very sweet and sinning that fell into her with a spell of horrible enchantment. They were so mild, each one alone, yet so terrific in their combination. Cold seized her. The sheets against her body had turned to ice.

She screamed a second time, though the sound hardly issued from her throat. The spell sank deeper, reaching to the heart; for it softened all the currents of her blood and took life from her in a stream — towards themselves. Resistance in that moment seemed impossible.

Her husband then stirred in his sleep, and woke. And, instantly, the forms drew up, erect, and gathered themselves in some amazing way together. They lessened in extent — then scattered through the air like an effect of light when shadows seek to smother it. It was tremendous, yet most exquisite. A sheet of pale-green shadow that yet had form and substance filled the room. There was a rush of silent movement, as the Presences drew past her through the air, — and they were gone.

But, clearest of all, she saw the manner of their going; for she recognized in their tumult of escape by the window open at the top, the same wide "looping circles" — spirals as it seemed — that she had seen upon the lawn those weeks ago when Sanderson had talked. The room once more was empty.

In the collapse that followed, she heard her husband's voice, as though coming from some great distance. Her own replies she heard as well. Both were so strange and unlike their normal speech, the very words unnatural.

"What is it, dear? Why do you wake me *now* ?" And his voice whispered it with a sighing sound, like wind in pine boughs.

"A moment since something went past me through the air of the room. Back to the night outside it went." Her voice, too, held the same note as of wind entangled among too many leaves.

"My dear, it *was* the wind."

"But it called, David. It was calling *you* — by name!"

"The air of the branches, dear, was what you heard. Now, sleep again, I beg you, sleep."

"It had a crowd of eyes all through and over it — before and behind—" Her voice grew louder. But his own in reply sank lower, far away, and oddly hushed.

"The moonlight, dear, upon the sea of twigs and boughs in the rain, was what you saw."

"But it frightened me. I've lost my God — and you — I'm cold as death!"

"My dear, it is the cold of the early morning hours. The whole world sleeps. Now sleep again yourself."

He whispered close to her ear. She felt his hand stroking her. His voice was soft and very soothing. But only a part of him was there; only a part of him was speaking; it was a half-emptied body that lay beside her and uttered these strange sentences, even forcing her own singular choice of words. The horrible, dim enchantment of the trees was close about them in the room — gnarled, ancient, lonely trees of winter, whispering round the human life they loved.

“And let me sleep again,” she heard him murmur as he settled down among the clothes, “sleep back into that deep, delicious peace from which you called me.”

His dreamy, happy tone, and that look of youth and joy she discerned upon his features even in the filtered moonlight, touched her again as with the spell of those shining, mild green presences. It sank down into her. She felt sleep grope for her. On the threshold of slumber one of those strange vagrant voices that loss of consciousness lets loose cried faintly in her heart —

“There is joy in the Forest over one sinner that—”

Then sleep took her before she had time to realize even that she was vilely parodying one of her most precious texts, and that the irreverence was ghastly.

And though she quickly slept again, her sleep was not as usual, dreamless. It was not woods and trees she dreamed of, but a small and curious dream that kept coming again and again upon her; that she stood upon a wee, bare rock in the sea, and that the tide was rising. The water first came to her feet, then to her knees, then to her waist. Each time the dream returned, the tide seemed higher. Once it rose to her neck, once even to her mouth, covering her lips for a moment so that she could not breathe. She did not wake between the dreams; a period of drab and dreamless slumber intervened. But, finally, the water rose above her eyes and face, completely covering her head.

And then came explanation — the sort of explanation dreams bring. She understood. For, beneath the water, she had seen the world of seaweed rising from the bottom of the sea like a forest of dense green-long, sinuous stems, immense thick branches, millions of feelers spreading through the darkened watery depths the power of their ocean foliage. The Vegetable Kingdom was even in the sea. It was everywhere. Earth, air, and water helped it, way of escape there was none.

And even underneath the sea she heard that terrible sound of roaring — was it surf or wind or voices? — further out, yet coming steadily towards her.

And so, in the loneliness of that drab English winter, the mind of Mrs. Bittacy, preying upon itself, and fed by constant dread, went lost in disproportion. Dreariness filled the weeks with dismal, sunless skies and a clinging moisture that knew no wholesome tonic of keen frosts. Alone with her thoughts, both her husband and her God withdrawn into distance, she counted the days to Spring. She groped her way, stumbling down the long dark tunnel. Through the arch at the far end lay a brilliant picture of the violet sea sparkling on the coast of France. There lay safety and escape for both of them, could she but hold on. Behind her the trees blocked up the other entrance. She never once looked back.

She drooped. Vitality passed from her, drawn out and away as by some steady suction. Immense and incessant was this sensation of her powers draining off. The taps were all turned on. Her personality, as it were, streamed steadily away, coaxed outwards by this Power that never wearied and seemed inexhaustible. It won her as the full moon wins the tide. She waned; she faded; she obeyed.

At first she watched the process, and recognized exactly what was going on. Her physical life, and that balance of mind which depends on physical well-being, were being slowly undermined. She saw that clearly. Only the soul, dwelling like a star apart from these and independent of them, lay safe somewhere — with her distant God. That she knew — tranquilly. The spiritual love that linked her to her husband was safe from all attack. Later, in His good time, they would merge together again because of it. But meanwhile, all of her that had kinship with the earth was slowly going. This separation was being remorselessly accomplished. Every part of her the trees could touch was being steadily drained from her. She was being — removed.

After a time, however, even this power of realization went, so that she no longer "watched the process" or knew exactly what was going on. The one satisfaction she had known — the feeling that it was sweet to suffer for his sake — went with it. She stood utterly alone with this terror of the trees … mid the ruins of her broken and disordered mind.

She slept badly; woke in the morning with hot and tired eyes; her head ached dully; she grew confused in thought and lost the clues of daily life in the most feeble fashion. At the same time she lost sight, too, of that brilliant picture at the exist of the tunnel; it faded away into a tiny semicircle of pale light, the violet sea and the sunshine the merest point of white, remote as a star and equally inaccessible. She knew now that she could never reach it. And through the darkness that stretched behind, the power of the trees came close and caught her, twining about her feet and arms, climbing to her very lips. She woke at night, finding it difficult to breathe. There seemed wet leaves pressing against her mouth, and soft green tendrils clinging to her neck. Her feet were heavy, half rooted, as it were, in deep, thick earth. Huge creepers stretched along the whole of that black tunnel, feeling about her person for points where they might fasten well, as ivy or the giant parasites of the Vegetable Kingdom settle down on the trees themselves to sap their life and kill them.

Slowly and surely the morbid growth possessed her life and held her. She feared those very winds that ran about the wintry forest. They were in league with it. They helped it everywhere.

“Why don’t you sleep, dear?” It was her husband now who played the rôle of nurse, tending her little wants with an honest care that at least aped the services of love. He was so utterly unconscious of the raging battle he had caused. “What is it keeps you so wide awake and restless?”

“The winds,” she whispered in the dark. For hours she had been watching the tossing of the trees through the blindless windows. “They go walking and talking everywhere to-night, keeping me awake. And all the time they call so loudly to you.”

And his strange whispered answer appalled her for a moment until the meaning of it faded and left her in a dark confusion of the mind that was now becoming almost permanent.

“The trees excite them in the night. The winds are the great swift carriers. Go with them, dear — and not against. You’ll find sleep that way if you do.”

“The storm is rising,” she began, hardly knowing what she said.

“All the more then — go with them. Don’t resist. They’ll take you to the trees, that’s all.”

Resist! The word touched on the button of some text that once had helped her.

“Resist the devil and he will flee from you,” she heard her whispered answer, and the same second had buried her face beneath the clothes in a flood of hysterical weeping.

But her husband did not seem disturbed. Perhaps he did not hear it, for the wind ran just then against the windows with a booming shout, and the roaring of the Forest farther out came behind the blow, surging into the room. Perhaps, too, he was already asleep again. She slowly regained a sort of dull composure. Her face emerged from the tangle of sheets and blankets. With a growing terror over her — she listened. The storm was rising. It came with a sudden and impetuous rush that made all further sleep for her impossible.

Alone in a shaking world, it seemed, she lay and listened. That storm interpreted for her mind the climax. The Forest bellowed out its victory to the winds; the winds in turn proclaimed it to the Night. The whole world knew of her complete defeat, her loss, her little human pain. This was the roar and shout of victory that she listened to.

For, unmistakably, the trees were shouting in the dark. These were sounds, too, like the flapping of great sails, a thousand at a time, and sometimes reports that resembled more than anything else the distant booming of enormous drums. The trees stood up — the whole beleaguering host of them stood up — and with the uproar of their million branches drummed the thundering message out across the night. It seemed as if they had all broken loose. Their roots swept trailing over field and hedge and roof. They tossed their bushy heads beneath the clouds with a wild, delighted shuffling of great boughs. With trunks upright they raced leaping through the sky. There was upheaval and adventure in the awful sound they made, and their cry was like the cry of a sea that has broken through its gates and poured loose upon the world….

Through it all her husband slept peacefully as though he heard it not. It was, as she well knew, the sleep of the semi-dead. For he was out with all that clamoring turmoil. The part of him that she had lost was there. The form that slept so calmly at her side was but the shell, half emptied.

And when the winter’s morning stole upon the scene at length, with a pale, washed sunshine that followed the departing tempest, the first thing she saw, as she crept to the window and looked out, was the ruined cedar lying on the lawn. Only the gaunt and crippled trunk of it remained. The single giant bough that had been left to it lay dark upon the grass, sucked endways towards the Forest by a great wind eddy. It lay there like a mass of drift-wood from a wreck, left by the ebbing of a high spring-tide upon the sands — remnant of some friendly, splendid vessel that once sheltered men.

And in the distance she heard the roaring of the Forest further out. Her husband's voice was in it.

THE SOUTH WIND

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to say through which sense, or combination of senses, I knew that Someone was approaching — was already near; but most probably it was the deep underlying ‘mother-sense’ including them all that conveyed the delicate warning. At any rate, the scene-shifters of my moods knew it too, for very swiftly they prepared the stage; then, ever soft-footed and invisible, stood aside to wait.

As I went down the village street on my way to bed after midnight, the high Alpine valley lay silent in its frozen stillness. For days it had now lain thus, even the mouths of its cataracts stopped with ice; and for days, too, the dry, tight cold had drawn up the nerves of the humans in it to a sharp, thin pitch of exhilaration that at last began to call for the gentler comfort of relaxation. The key had been a little too high, the inner tautness too prolonged. The tension of that implacable north-east wind, the *bise noire*, had drawn its twisted wires too long through our very entrails. We all sighed for some loosening of the bands — the comforting touch of something damp, soft, less penetratingly acute.

And now, as I turned, midway in the little journey from the inn to my room above La Poste, this sudden warning that Someone was approaching repeated its silent wireless message, and I paused to listen and to watch.

Yet at first I searched in vain. The village street lay empty — a white ribbon between the black walls of the big-roofed chalets; there were no lights in any of the houses; the hotels stood gaunt and ugly with their myriad shuttered windows; and the church, topped by the Crown of Savoy in stone, was so engulfed by the shadows of the mountains that it seemed almost a part of them.

Beyond, reared the immense buttresses of the Dent du Midi, terrible and stalwart against the sky, their feet resting among the crowding pines, their streaked precipices tilting up at violent angles towards the stars. The bands of snow, belting their enormous flanks, stretched for miles, faintly gleaming, like Saturn’s rings. To the right I could just make out the pinnacles of the Dents Blanches, cruelly pointed; and, still farther, the Dent de Bonnaveau, as of iron and crystal, running up its gaunt and dreadful pyramid into relentless depths of night. Everywhere in the hard, black-sparkling air was the rigid spell of winter. It seemed as if this valley could never melt again, never know currents of warm wind, never taste the sun, nor yield its million flowers.

And now, dipping down behind me out of the reaches of the darkness, the New Comer moved close, heralded by this subtle yet compelling admonition that had arrested me in my very tracks. For, just as I turned in at the door, kicking the crunched snow from my boots against the granite step, I *knew* that, from the heart of all this tightly frozen winter's night, the 'Someone' whose message had travelled so delicately in advance was now, quite suddenly, at my very heels. And while my eyes lifted to sift their way between the darkness and the snow I became aware that It was already coming down the village street. It ran on feathered feet, pressing close against the enclosing walls, yet at the same time spreading from side to side, brushing the window-panes, rustling against the doors, and even including the shingled roofs in its enveloping advent. It came, too — *against the wind....*

It flew up close and passed me, very faintly singing, running down between the châlets and the church, very swift, very soft, neither man nor animal, neither woman, girl, nor child, turning the corner of the snowy road beyond the *Curé's* house with a rushing, cantering motion, that made me think of a Body of water — something of fluid and generous shape, too mighty to be confined in common forms. And, as it passed, it touched me — touched me through all skin and flesh upon the naked nerves, loosening, relieving, setting free the congealed sources of life which the *bise* so long had mercilessly bound, so that magic currents, flowing and released, washed down all the secret byways of the spirit and flooded again with full tide into a thousand dried-up cisterns of the heart.

The thrill I experienced is quite incommunicable in words. I ran upstairs and opened all my windows wide, knowing that soon the Messenger would return with a million others — only to find that already it had been there before me. Its taste was in the air, fragrant and alive; in my very mouth — and all the currents of the inner life ran sweet again, and full. Nothing in the whole village was quite the same as it had been before. The deeply slumbering peasants, even behind their shuttered windows and barred doors; the *Curè,* the servants at the inn, the consumptive man opposite, the children in the house behind the church, the horde of tourists in the caravanserai — all knew — more or less, according to the delicacy of their receiving apparatus — that Something charged with fresh and living force had swept on viewless feet down the village street, passed noiselessly between the cracks of doors and windows, touched nerves and eyelids, and — set them free. In response to the great Order of Release that the messenger had left everywhere behind her, even the dreams of the sleepers had shifted into softer and more flowing keys....

And the Valley — the Valley also knew! For, as I watched from my window, something loosened about the trees and stones and boulders; about the massed snows on the great slopes; about the roots of the hanging icicles that fringed and sheeted the dark cliffs; and down in the deepest beds of the killed and silent streams. Far overhead, across those desolate bleak shoulders of the mountains, ran some sudden softness like the rush of awakening life... and was gone. A touch, lithe yet dewy, as of silk and water mixed, dropped softly over all... and, silently, without resistance, the *bise noire*, utterly routed, went back to the icy caverns of the north and east, where it sleeps, hated of men, and dreams its keen black dreams of death and desolation....

... And some five hours later, when I woke and looked towards the sunrise, I saw those strips of pearly grey, just tinged with red, the Messenger had been to summon... charged with the warm moisture that brings relief. On the wings of a rising South Wind they came down hurriedly to cap the mountains and to unbind the captive forces of life; then moved with flying streamers up our own valley, sponging from the thirsty woods their richest perfume....

And farther down, in soft, wet fields, stood the leafless poplars, with little pools of water gemming the grass between and pouring their musical overflow through runnels of dark and sodden leaves to join the rapidly increasing torrents descending from the mountains. For across the entire valley ran magically that sweet and welcome message of relief which Job knew when he put the whole delicious tenderness and passion of it into less than a dozen words: ‘*He comforteth the earth with the south wind.’*

CHAMPÉRY.

THE SEA FIT

The sea that night sang rather than chanted; all along the far-running shore a rising tide dropped thick foam, and the waves, white-crested, came steadily in with the swing of a deliberate purpose. Overhead, in a cloudless sky, that ancient Enchantress, the full moon, watched their dance across the sheeted sands, guiding them carefully while she drew them up. For through that moonlight, through that roar of surf, there penetrated a singular note of earnestness and meaning — almost as though these common processes of Nature were instinct with the flush of an unusual activity that sought audaciously to cross the borderland into some subtle degree of conscious life. A gauze of light vapour clung upon the surface of the sea, far out — a transparent carpet through which the rollers drove shorewards in a moving pattern.

In the low-roofed bungalow among the sand-dunes the three men sat. Foregathered for Easter, they spent the day fishing and sailing, and at night told yarns of the days when life was younger. It was fortunate that there were three — and later four — because in the mouths of several witnesses an extraordinary thing shall be established — when they agree. And although whisky stood upon the rough table made of planks nailed to barrels, it is childish to pretend that a few drinks invalidate evidence, for alcohol, up to a certain point, intensifies the consciousness, focuses the intellectual powers, sharpens observation; and two healthy men, certainly three, must have imbibed an absurd amount before they all see, or omit to see, the same things.

The other bungalows still awaited their summer occupants. Only the lonely tufted sand-dunes watched the sea, shaking their hair of coarse white grass to the winds. The men had the whole spit to themselves — with the wind, the spray, the flying gusts of sand, and that great Easter full moon. There was Major Reese of the Gunners and his half-brother, Dr. Malcolm Reese, and Captain Erricson, their host, all men whom the kaleidoscope of life had jostled together a decade ago in many adventures, then flung for years apart about the globe. There was also Erricson's body-servant, 'Sinbad,' sailor of big seas, and a man who had shared on many a ship all the lust of strange adventure that distinguished his great blonde-haired owner — an ideal servant and dog-faithful, divining his master's moods almost before they were born. On the present occasion, besides crew of the fishing-smack, he was cook, valet, and steward of the bungalow smoking-room as well.

'Big Erricson', Norwegian by extraction, student by adoption, wanderer by blood, a Viking reincarnated if ever there was one, belonged to that type of primitive man in whom burns an inborn love and passion for the sea that amounts to positive worship — devouring tide, a lust and fever in the soul. 'All genuine votaries of the old sea-gods have it,' he used to say, by way of explaining his carelessness of worldly ambitions. 'We're never at our best away from salt water — never quite right. I've got it bang in the heart myself. I'd do a bit before the mast sooner than make a million on shore. Simply can't help it, you see, and never could! It's our gods calling us to worship.' And he had never tried to 'help it', which explains why he owned nothing in the world on land except this tumbledown, one-storey bungalow — more like a ship's cabin than anything else, to which he sometimes asked his bravest and most faithful friends — and a store of curious reading gathered in long, becalmed days at the ends of the world. Heart and mind, that is, carried a queer cargo. 'I'm sorry if you poor devils are uncomfortable in her. You must ask Sinbad for anything you want and don't see, remember.' As though Sinbad could have supplied comforts that were miles away, or converted a draughty wreck into a snug, taut, brand-new vessel.

Neither of the Reeses had cause for grumbling on the score of comfort, however, for they knew the keen joys of roughing it, and both weather and sport besides had been glorious. It was on another score this particular evening that they found cause for uneasiness, if not for actual grumbling. Erricson had one of his queer sea fits on — the Doctor was responsible for the term — and was in the thick of it, plunging like a straining boat at anchor, talking in a way that made them both feel vaguely uncomfortable and distressed. Neither of them knew exactly perhaps why he should have felt this growing *malaise,* and each was secretly vexed with the other for confirming his own unholy instinct that something uncommon was astir. The loneliness of the sandspit and that melancholy singing of the sea before their very door may have had something to do with it, seeing that both were landsmen; for Imagination is ever Lord of the Lonely Places, and adventurous men remain children to the last. But, whatever it was that affected both men in different fashion, Malcolm Reese, the doctor, had not thought it necessary to mention to his brother that Sinbad had tugged his sleeve on entering and whispered in his ear significantly: ‘Full moon, sir, please, and he’s better without too much! These high spring tides get him all caught off his feet sometimes — clean sea-crazy’; and the man had contrived to let the doctor see the hilt of a small pistol he carried in his hip-pocket.

For Erricson had got upon his old subject: that the gods were not dead, but merely withdrawn, and that even a single true worshipper was enough to draw them down again into touch with the world, into the sphere of humanity, even into active and visible manifestation. He spoke of queer things he had seen in queerer places. He was serious, vehement, voluble; and the others had let it pour out unchecked, hoping thereby for its speedier exhaustion. They puffed their pipes in comparative silence, nodding from time to time, shrugging their shoulders, the soldier mystified and bewildered, the doctor alert and keenly watchful.

‘And I like the old idea,’ he had been saying, speaking of these departed pagan deities, ‘that sacrifice and ritual feed their great beings, and that death is only the final sacrifice by which the worshipper becomes absorbed into them. The devout worshipper’ — and there was a singular drive and power behind the words— ‘should go to his death singing, as to a wedding — the wedding of his soul with the particular deity he has loved and served all his life.’ He swept his tow-coloured beard with one hand, turning his shaggy head towards the window, where the moonlight lay upon the procession of shaking waves. ‘It’s playing the whole game, I always think, man-fashion.... I remember once, some years ago, down there off the coast by Yucatan—’

And then, before they could interfere, he told an extraordinary tale of something he had seen years ago, but told it with such a horrid earnestness of conviction — for it was dreadful, though fine, this adventure — that his listeners shifted in their wicker chairs, struck matches, unnecessarily, pulled at their long glasses, and exchanged glances that attempted a smile yet did not quite achieve it. For the tale had to do with sacrifice of human life and a rather haunting pagan ceremonial of the sea, and at its close the room had changed in some indefinable manner — was not exactly as it had been before perhaps — as though the savage earnestness of the language had introduced some new element that made it less cosy, less cheerful, even less warm. A secret lust in the man's heart, born of the sea, and of his intense admiration of the pagan gods called a light into his eye not altogether pleasant.

'They were great Powers, at any rate, those ancient fellows,' Erricson went on, refilling his huge pipe bowl; 'too great to disappear altogether, though to-day they may walk the earth in another manner. I swear they're still going it — especially the—' (he hesitated for a mere second) 'the old water Powers — the Sea Gods. Terrific beggars, every one of 'em.'

'Still move the tides and raise the winds, eh?' from the Doctor.

Erricson spoke again after a moment's silence, with impressive dignity. 'And I like, too, the way they manage to keep their names before us,' he went on, with a curious eagerness that did not escape the Doctor's observation, while it dearly puzzled the soldier. 'There's old Hu, the Druid god of justice, still alive in "Hue and Cry"; there's Typhon hammering his way against us in the typhoon; there's the mighty Hurakar, serpent god of the winds, you know, shouting to us in hurricane and *ouragan;* and there's —'

'Venus still at it as hard as ever,' interrupted the Major, facetiously, though his brother did not laugh because of their host's almost sacred earnestness of manner and uncanny grimness of face. Exactly how he managed to introduce that element of gravity — of conviction — into such talk neither of his listeners quite understood, for in discussing the affair later they were unable to pitch upon any definite detail that betrayed it. Yet there it was, alive and haunting, even distressingly so. All day he had been silent and morose, but since dusk, with the turn of the tide, in fact, these queer sentences, half mystical, half unintelligible, had begun to pour from him, till now that cabin-like room among the sand-dunes fairly vibrated with the man's emotion. And at last Major Reese, with blundering good intention, tried to shift the key from this portentous subject of sacrifice to something that might eventually lead towards comedy and laughter, and so relieve this growing pressure of melancholy and incredible things. The Viking fellow had just spoken of the possibility of the old gods manifesting themselves visibly, audibly, physically, and so the Major caught him up and made light mention of spiritualism and the so-called 'materialisation séances,' where physical bodies were alleged to be built up out of the emanations of the medium and the sitters. This crude aspect of the Supernatural was the only possible link the soldier's mind could manage. He caught his brother's eye too late, it seems, for Malcolm Reese realised by this time that something untoward was afoot, and no longer needed the memory of Sinbad's warning to keep him sharply on the look-out. It was not the first time he had seen Erricson 'caught' by the sea; but he had never known him quite so bad, nor seen his face so flushed and white alternately, nor his eyes so oddly shining. So that Major Reese's well-intentioned allusion only brought wind to fire.

The man of the sea, once Viking, roared with a rush of boisterous laughter at the comic suggestion, then dropped his voice to a sudden hard whisper, awfully earnest, awfully intense. Any one must have started at the abrupt change and the life-and-death manner of the big man. His listeners undeniably both did.

'Bunkum!' he shouted, 'bunkum, and be damned to it all! There's only one real materialisation of these immense Outer Beings possible, and that's when the great embodied emotions, which are their sphere of action' — his words became wildly incoherent, painfully struggling to get out— 'derived, you see, from their honest worshippers the world over — constituting their Bodies, in fact — come down into matter and get condensed, crystallised into form — to claim that final sacrifice I spoke about just now, and to which any man might feel himself proud and honoured to be summoned.... No dying in bed or fading out from old age, but to plunge full-blooded and alive into the great Body of the god who has deigned to descend and fetch you—'

The actual speech may have been even more rambling and incoherent than that. It came out in a torrent at white heat. Dr. Reese kicked his brother beneath the table, just in time. The soldier looked thoroughly uncomfortable and amazed, utterly at a loss to know how he had produced the storm. It rather frightened him.

'I know it because I've seen it,' went on the sea man, his mind and speech slightly more under control. 'Seen the ceremonies that brought these whopping old Nature gods down into form — seen 'em carry off a worshipper into themselves — seen that worshipper, too, go off singing and happy to his death, proud and honoured to be chosen.'

'Have you really — by George!' the Major exclaimed. 'You tell us a queer thing, Erricson'; and it was then for the fifth time that Sinbad cautiously opened the door, peeped in and silently withdrew after giving a swiftly comprehensive glance round the room.

The night outside was windless and serene, only the growing thunder of the tide near the full woke muffled echoes among the sand-dunes.

‘Rites and ceremonies,’ continued the other, his voice booming with a singular enthusiasm, but ignoring the interruption, ‘are simply means of losing one’s self by temporary ecstasy in the God of one’s choice — the God one has worshipped all one’s life — of being partially absorbed into his being. And sacrifice completes the process—’

‘At death, you said?’ asked Malcolm Reese, watching him keenly.

‘Or voluntary,’ was the reply that came flash-like. ‘The devotee becomes wedded to his Deity — goes bang into him, you see, by fire or water or air — as by a drop from a height — according to the nature of the particular God; at-one-ment, of course. A man’s death that! Fine, you know!’

The man’s inner soul was on fire now. He was talking at a fearful pace, his eyes alight, his voice turned somehow into a kind of sing-song that chimed well, singularly well, with the booming of waves outside, and from time to time he turned to the window to stare at the sea and the moon-blanched sands. And then a look of triumph would come into his face — that giant face framed by slow-moving wreaths of pipe smoke.

Sinbad entered for the sixth time without any obvious purpose, busied himself unnecessarily with the glasses and went out again, lingeringly. In the room he kept his eye hard upon his master. This time he contrived to push a chair and a heap of netting between him and the window. No one but Dr. Reese observed the manoeuvre. And he took the hint.

‘The port-holes fit badly, Erricson,’ he laughed, but with a touch of authority. ‘There’s a five-knot breeze coming through the cracks worse than an old wreck!’ And he moved up to secure the fastening better.

‘The room *is* confoundedly cold,’ Major Reese put in; ‘has been for the last half-hour, too.’ The soldier looked what he felt — cold — distressed — creepy. ‘But there’s no wind really, you know,’ he added.

Captain Erricson turned his great bearded visage from one to the other before he answered; there was a gleam of sudden suspicion in his blue eyes. ‘The beggar’s got that back door open again. If he’s sent for any one, as he did once before, I swear I’ll drown him in fresh water for his impudence — or perhaps — can it be already that he expects — ?’ He left the sentence incomplete and rang the bell, laughing with a boisterousness that was clearly feigned. ‘Sinbad, what’s this cold in the place? You’ve got the back door open. Not expecting any one, are you?’

‘Everything’s shut tight, Captain. There’s a bit of a breeze coming up from the east. And the tide's drawing in at a raging pace—'

'We can all hear *that.* But are you expecting any one? I asked,' repeated his master, suspiciously, yet still laughing. One might have said he was trying to give the idea that the man had some land flirtation on hand. They looked one another square in the eye for a moment, these two. It was the straight stare of equals who understood each other well.

'Some one — might be — on the way, as it were, Captain. Couldn't say for certain.'

The voice almost trembled. By a sharp twist of the eye, Sinbad managed to shoot a lightning and significant look at the Doctor.

'But this cold — this freezing, damp cold in the place? Are you sure no one's come — by the back ways?' insisted the master. He whispered it. 'Across the dunes, for instance?' His voice conveyed awe and delight, both kept hard under.

'It's all over the house, Captain, already,' replied the man, and moved across to put more sea-logs on the blazing fire. Even the soldier noticed then that their language was tight with allusion of another kind. To relieve the growing tension and uneasiness in his own mind he took up the word 'house' and made fun of it.

'As though it were a mansion,' he observed, with a forced chuckle, 'instead of a mere sea-shell!' Then, looking about him, he added: 'But, all the same, you know, there *is* a kind of fog getting into the room — from the sea, I suppose; coming up with the tide, or something, eh?' The air had certainly in the last twenty minutes turned thickish; it was not all tobacco smoke, and there was a moisture that began to precipitate on the objects in tiny, fine globules. The cold, too, fairly bit.

'I'll take a look round,' said Sinbad, significantly, and went out. Only the Doctor perhaps noticed that the man shook, and was white down to the gills. He said nothing, but moved his chair nearer to the window and to his host. It was really a little bit beyond comprehension how the wild words of this old sea-dog in the full sway of his 'sea fit' had altered the very air of the room as well as the personal equations of its occupants, for an extraordinary atmosphere of enthusiasm that was almost splendour pulsed about him, yet vilely close to something that suggested terror! Through the armour of every-day common sense that normally clothed the minds of these other two, had crept the faint wedges of a mood that made them vaguely wonder whether the incredible could perhaps sometimes — by way of bewildering exceptions — actually come to pass. The moods of their deepest life, that is to say, were already affected. An inner, and thoroughly unwelcome, change was in progress. And such psychic disturbances once started are hard to arrest. In this case it was well on the way before either the Army or Medicine had been willing to recognise the fact. There was something coming — coming from the sand-dunes or the sea. And it was invited, welcomed at any rate, by Erricson. His deep, volcanic enthusiasm and belief provided the channel. In lesser degree they, too, were caught in it. Moreover, it was terrific, irresistible.

And it was at this point — as the comparing of notes afterwards established — that Father Norden came in, Norden, the big man's nephew, having bicycled over from some point beyond Corfe Castle and raced along the hard Studland sand in the moonlight, and then hullood till a boat had ferried him across the narrow channel of Poole Harbour. Sinbad simply brought him in without any preliminary question or announcement. He could not resist the splendid night and the spring air, explained Norden. He felt sure his uncle could 'find a hammock' for him somewhere aft, as he put it. He did not add that Sinbad had telegraphed for him just before sundown from the coast-guard hut. Dr. Reese already knew him, but he was introduced to the Major. Norden was a member of the Society of Jesus, an ardent, not clever, and unselfish soul.

Erricson greeted him with obviously mixed feelings, and with an extraordinary sentence: 'It doesn't really matter,' he exclaimed, after a few commonplaces of talk, 'for all religions are the same if you go deep enough. All teach sacrifice, and, without exception, all seek final union by absorption into their Deity.' And then, under his breath, turning sideways to peer out of the window, he added a swift rush of half-smothered words that only Dr. Reese caught: 'The Army, the Church, the Medical Profession, and Labour — if they would only all come! What a fine result, what a grand offering! Alone — I seem so unworthy — insignificant...!'

But meanwhile young Norden was speaking before any one could stop him, although the Major did make one or two blundering attempts. For once the Jesuit's tact was at fault. He evidently hoped to introduce a new mood — to shift the current already established by the single force of his own personality. And he was not quite man enough to carry it off.

It was an error of judgment on his part. For the forces he found established in the room were too heavy to lift and alter, their impetus being already acquired. He did his best, anyhow. He began moving with the current — it was not the first sea fit he had combated in this extraordinary personality — then found, too late, that he was carried along with it himself like the rest of them.

'Odd — but couldn't find the bungalow at first,' he laughed, somewhat hardly. 'It's got a bit of seafog all to itself that hides it. I thought perhaps my pagan uncle—'

The Doctor interrupted him hastily, with great energy. 'The fog *does* lie caught in these sand hollows — like steam in a cup, you know,' he put in. But the other, intent on his own procedure, missed the cue.

' — thought it was smoke at first, and that you were up to some heathen ceremony or other,' laughing in Erricson's face; 'sacrificing to the full moon or the sea, or the spirits of the desolate places that haunt sand-dunes, eh?'

No one spoke for a second, but Erricson's face turned quite radiant.

'My uncle's such a pagan, you know,' continued the priest, 'that as I flew along those deserted sands from Studland I almost expected to hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.., or see fair Thetis's tinsel-slippered feet....'

Erricson, suppressing violent gestures, highly excited, face happy as a boy's, was combing his great yellow beard with both hands, and the other two men had begun to speak at once, intent on stopping the flow of unwise allusion. Norden, swallowing a mouthful of cold soda-water, had put the glass down, spluttering over its bubbles, when the sound was first heard at the window. And in the back room the manservant ran, calling something aloud that sounded like 'It's coming, God save us, it's coming in...!' Though the Major swears some name was mentioned that he afterwards forgot — Glaucus — Proteus — Pontus — or some such word. The sound itself, however, was plain enough — a kind of imperious tappling on the window-panes as of a multitude of objects. Blown sand it might have been or heavy spray or, as Norden suggested later, a great water-soaked branch of giant seaweed. Every one started up, but Erricson was first upon his feet, and had the window wide open in a twinkling. His voice roared forth over those moonlit sand-dunes and out towards the line of heavy surf ten yards below.

'All along the shore of the Aegean,' he bellowed, with a kind of hoarse triumph that shook the heart, 'that ancient cry once rang. But it was a lie, a thumping and audacious lie. And He is not the only one. Another still lives — and, by Poseidon, He comes! He knows His own and His own know

Him — and His own shall go to meet Him...!’

That reference to the Aegean ‘cry’! It was so wonderful. Every one, of course, except the soldier, seized the allusion. It was a comprehensive, yet subtle, way of suggesting the idea. And meanwhile all spoke at once, shouted rather, for the Invasion was somehow — monstrous.

‘Damn it — that’s a bit too much. Something’s caught my throat!’ The Major, like a man drowning, fought with the furniture in his amazement and dismay. Fighting was his first instinct, of course. ‘Hurts so infernally — takes the breath,’ he cried, by way of explaining the extraordinarily violent impetus that moved him, yet half ashamed of himself for seeing nothing he could strike. But Malcolm Reese struggled to get between his host and the open window, saying in tense voice something like ‘Don’t let him get out! Don’t let him get out!’ While the shouts of warning from Sinbad in the little cramped back offices added to the general confusion. Only Father Norden stood quiet — watching with a kind of admiring wonder the expression of magnificence that had flamed into the visage of Erricson.

‘Hark, you fools! Hark!’ boomed the Viking figure, standing erect and splendid.

And through that open window, along the far-drawn line of shore from Canford Cliffs to the chalk bluffs of Studland Bay, there certainly ran a sound that was no common roar of surf. It was articulate — message from the sea — an announcement — a thunderous warning of approach. No mere surf breaking on sand could have compassed so deep and multitudinous a voice of dreadful roaring — far out over the entering tide, yet at the same time close in along the entire sweep of shore, shaking all the ocean, both depth and surface, with its deep vibrations. Into the bungalow chamber came — the Sea!

Out of the night, from the moonlit spaces where it had been steadily accumulating, into that little cabined room so full of humanity and tobacco smoke, came invisibly — the Power of the Sea. Invisible, yes, but mighty, pressed forward by the huge draw of the moon, soft-coated with brine and moisture — the great Sea. And with it, into the minds of those three other men, leaped instantaneously, not to be denied, overwhelming suggestions of water-power, the tear and strain of thousand-mile currents, the irresistible pull and rush of tides, the suction of giant whirlpools — more, the massed and awful impetus of whole driven oceans. The air turned salt and briny, and a welter of seaweed clamped their very skins.

‘Glaucus! I come to Thee, great God of the deep Waterways.... Father and Master!’ Erricson cried aloud in a voice that most marvelously conveyed supreme joy.

The little bungalow trembled as from a blow at the foundations, and the same second the big man was through the window and running down the moonlit sands towards the foam.

‘God in Heaven! Did you all see *that?’* shouted Major Reese, for the manner in which the great body slipped through the tiny window-frame was incredible. And then, first tottering with a sudden weakness, he recovered himself and rushed round by the door, followed by his brother. Sinbad, invisible, but not inaudible, was calling aloud from the passage at the back. Father Norden, slimmer than the others — well controlled, too — was through the little window before either of them reached the fringe of beach beyond the sand-dunes. They joined forces halfway down to the water’s edge. The figure of Erricson, towering in the moonlight, flew before them, coasting rapidly along the wave-line.

No one of them said a word; they tore along side by side, Norden a trifle in advance. In front of them, head turned seawards, bounded Erricson in great flying leaps, singing as he ran, impossible to overtake.

Then, what they witnessed, all three witnessed; the weird grandeur of it in the moonshine was too splendid to allow the smaller emotions of personal alarm, it seems. At any rate, the divergence of opinion afterwards was unaccountably insignificant. For, on a sudden, that heavy roaring sound far out at sea came close in with a swift plunge of speed, followed simultaneously — accompanied, rather — by a dark line that was no mere wave moving: enormously, up and across, between the sea and sky it swept close in to shore. The moonlight caught it for a second as it passed, in a cliff of her bright silver.

And Erricson slowed down, bowed his great head and shoulders, spread his arms out and...

And what? For no one of those amazed witnesses could swear exactly what then came to pass. Upon this impossibility of telling it in language they all three agreed. Only those eyeless dunes of sand that watched, only the white and silent moon overhead, only that long, curved beach of empty and deserted shore retain the complete record, to be revealed some day perhaps when a later Science shall have learned to develop the photographs that Nature takes incessantly upon her secret plates. For Erricson’s rough suit of tweed went out in ribbons across the air; his figure somehow turned dark like strips of tide-sucked seaweed; something enveloped and overcame him, half shrouding him from view. He stood for one instant upright, his hair wild in the moonshine, towering, with arms again outstretched; then bent forward, turned, drew out most curiously sideways, uttering the singing sound of tumbling waters. The next instant, curving over like a falling wave, he swept along the glistening surface of the sands — and was gone. In fluid form, wave-like, his being slipped away into the Being of the Sea. A violent tumult convulsed the surface of the tide near in, but at once, and with amazing speed, passed careering away into the deeper water — far out. To his singular death, as to a wedding, Erricson had gone, singing, and well content.

‘May God, who holds the sea and all its powers in the hollow of His mighty hand, take them *both* into Himself!’ Norden was on his knees, praying fervently.

The body was never recovered ... and the most curious thing of all was that the interior of the cabin, where they found Sinbad shaking with terror when they at length returned, was splashed and sprayed, almost soaked, with salt water. Up into the bigger dunes beside the bungalow, and far beyond the reach of normal tides, lay, too, a great streak and furrow as of a large invading wave, caking the dry sand. A hundred tufts of the coarse grass tussocks had been torn away.

The high tide that night, drawn by the Easter full moon, of course, was known to have been exceptional, for it fairly flooded Poole Harbour, flushing all the coves and bays towards the mouth of the Frome. And the natives up at Arne Bay and Wych always declare that the noise of the sea was heard far inland even up to the nine Barrows of the Purbeck Hills — triumphantly singing.

THE ATTIC

THE FOREST-GIRDLED VILLAGE upon the Jura slopes slept soundly, although it was not yet many minutes after ten o'clock. The clang of the *couvre-feu* had indeed just ceased, its notes swept far into the woods by a wind that shook the mountains. This wind now rushed down the deserted street. It howled about the old rambling building called La Citadelle, whose roof towered gaunt and humped above the smaller houses — Château left unfinished long ago by Lord Wemyss, the exiled Jacobite. The families who occupied the various apartments listened to the storm and felt the building tremble. 'It's the mountain wind. It will bring the snow,' the mother said, without looking up from her knitting. 'And how sad it sounds.'

But it was not the wind that brought sadness as we sat round the open fire of peat. It was the wind of memories. The lamplight slanted along the narrow room towards the table where breakfast things lay ready for the morning. The double windows were fastened. At the far end stood a door ajar, and on the other side of it the two elder children lay asleep in the big bed. But beside the window was a smaller unused bed, that had been empty now a year. And to-night was the anniversary....

And so the wind brought sadness and long thoughts. The little chap that used to lie there was already twelve months gone, far, far beyond the Hole where the Winds came from, as he called it; yet it seemed only yesterday that I went to tell him a tuck-up story, to stroke Riquette, the old motherly cat that cuddled against his back and laid a paw beside his pillow like a human being, and to hear his funny little earnest whisper say, 'Oncle, tu sais, j'ai prié pour Petavel.' For La Citadelle had its unhappy ghost — of Petavel, the usurer, who had hanged himself in the attic a century gone by, and was known to walk its dreary corridors in search of peace — and this wise Irish mother, calming the boys' fears with wisdom, had told him, 'If you pray for Petavel, you'll save his soul and make him happy, and he'll only love you.' And, thereafter, this little imaginative boy had done so every night. With a passionate seriousness he did it. He had wonderful, delicate ways like that. In all our hearts he made his fairy nests of wonder. In my own, I know, he lay closer than any joy imaginable, with his big blue eyes, his queer soft questionings, and his splendid child's unselfishness — a sun-kissed flower of innocence that, had he lived, might have sweetened half a world.

'Let's put more peat on,' the mother said, as a handful of rain like stones came flinging against the windows; 'that must be hail.' And she went on tiptoe to the inner room. 'They're sleeping like two puddings,' she whispered, coming presently back. But it struck me she had taken longer than to notice merely that; and her face wore an odd expression that made me uncomfortable. I thought she was somehow just about to laugh or cry. By the table a second she hesitated. I caught the flash of indecision as it passed. 'Pan,' she said suddenly — it was a nickname, stolen from my tuck-up stories, *he* had given me— 'I wonder how Riquette got in.' She looked hard at me. 'It wasn't you, was it?' For we never let her come at night since he had gone. It was too poignant. The beastie always went cuddling and nestling into that empty bed. But this time it was not my doing, and I offered plausible explanations. 'But — she's on the bed. Pan, *would* you be so kind—' She left the sentence unfinished, but I easily understood, for a lump had somehow risen in my own throat too, and I remembered now that she had come out from the inner room so quickly — with a kind of hurried rush almost. I put 'mère Riquette' out into the corridor. A lamp stood on the chair outside the door of another occupant further down, and I urged her gently towards it. She turned and looked at me — straight up into my face; but, instead of going down as I suggested, she went slowly in the opposite direction. She stepped softly towards a door in the wall that led up broken stairs into the attics. There she sat down and waited. And so I left her, and came back hastily to the peat fire and compan ionship. The wind rushed in behind me and slammed the door.

And we talked then somewhat busily of cheerful things; of the children's future, the excellence of the cheap Swiss schools, of Christmas presents, ski-ing, snow, tobogganing. I led the talk away from mournfulness; and when these subjects were exhausted I told stories of my own adventures in distant parts of the world. But 'mother' listened the whole time — not to me. Her thoughts were all elsewhere. And her air of intently, secretly listening, bordered, I felt, upon the uncanny. For she often stopped her knitting and sat with her eyes fixed upon the air before her; she stared blankly at the wall, her head slightly on one side, her figure tense, attention strained — elsewhere. Or, when my talk positively demanded it, her nod was oddly mechanical and her eyes looked through and past me. The wind continued very loud and roaring; but the fire glowed, the room was warm and cosy. Yet she shivered, and when I drew attention to it, her reply, ‘I do feel cold, but I didn’t know I shivered,’ was given as though she spoke across the air to some one else. But what impressed me even more uncomfortably were her repeated questions about Riquette. When a pause in my tales permitted, she would look up with ‘I wonder where Riquette went?’ or, thinking of the inclement night, ‘I hope mère Riquette’s not out of doors. Perhaps Madame Favre has taken her in?’ I offered to go and see. Indeed I was already half-way across the room when there came the heavy bang at the door that rooted me to the ground where I stood. It was not wind. It was something alive that made it rattle. There was a second blow. A thud on the corridor boards followed, and then a high, odd voice that at first was as human as the cry of a child.

lt is undeniable that we both started, and for myself I can answer truthfully that a chill ran down my spine; but what frightened me more than the sudden noise and the eerie cry was the way ‘mother’ supplied the immediate explanation. For behind the words ‘It’s only Riquette; she sometimes springs at the door like that; perhaps we’d better let her in,’ was a certain touch of uncanny quiet that made me feel she had known the cat would come, and knew also *why* she came. One cannot explain such impressions further. They leave their vital touch, then go their way. Into the little room, however, in that moment there came between us this uncomfortable sense that the night held other purposes than our own — and that my companion was aware of them. There was something going on far, far removed from the routine of life as we were accustomed to it. Moreover, our usual routine was the eddy, while this was the main stream. It felt big, I mean.

And so it was that the entrance of the familiar, friendly creature brought this thing both itself and ‘mother’ *knew,* but whereof I as yet was ignorant. I held the door wide. The draught rushed through behind her, and sent a shower of sparks about the fireplace. The lamp flickered and gave a little gulp. And Riquette marched slowly past, with all the impressive dignity of her kind, towards the other door that stood ajar. Turning the corner like a shadow, she disappeared into the room where the two children slept. We heard the soft thud with which she leaped upon the bed. Then, in a lull of the wind, she came back again and sat on the oilcloth, staring into mother’s’ face. She mewed and put a paw out, drawing the black dress softly with half-opened claws. And it was all so horribly suggestive and pathetic, it revived such poignant memories, that I got up impulsively — I think I had actually said the words, ‘We’d better put her out, mother, after all’ — when my companion rose to her feet and forestalled me. She said another thing instead. It took my breath away to hear it. ‘She wants us to go with her. Pan, will you come too?’ The surprise on my face must have asked the question, for I do not remember saying anything. ‘To the attic,’ she said quietly.

She stood there by the table, a tall, grave figure dressed in black, and her face above the lamp-shade caught the full glare of light. Its expression positively stiffened me. She seemed so secure in her singular purpose. And her familiar appearance had so oddly given place to something wholly strange to me. She looked like another person — almost with the unwelcome transformation of the sleep-walker about her. Cold came over me as I watched her, for I remembered suddenly her Irish second-sight, her story years ago of meeting a figure on the attic stairs, the figure of Petavel. And the idea of this motherly, sedate, and wholesome woman, absorbed day and night in prosaic domestic duties, and yet ‘seeing’ things, touched the incongruous almost to the point of alarm. It was so distressingly convincing.

Yet she knew quite well that I would come. Indeed, following the excited animal, she was already by the door, and a moment later, still without answering or protesting, I was with them in the draughty corridor. There was something inevitable in her manner that made it impossible to refuse. She took the lamp from its nail on the wall, and following our four-footed guide, who ran with obvious pleasure just in front, she opened the door into the courtyard. The wind nearly put the lamp out, but a minute later we were safe inside the passage that led up flights of creaky wooden stairs towards the world of tenantless attics overhead.

And I shall never forget the way the excited Riquette first stood up and put her paws upon the various doors, trotted ahead, turned back to watch us coming, and then finally sat down and waited on the threshold of the empty, raftered space that occupied the entire length of the building underneath the roof. For her manner was more that of an intelligent dog than of a cat, and sometimes more like that of a human mind than either.

We had come up without a single word. The howling of the wind as we rose higher was like the roar of artillery. There were many broken stairs, and the narrow way was full of twists and turnings. It was a dreadful journey. I felt eyes watching us from all the yawning spaces of the darkness, and the noise of the storm smothered footsteps everywhere. Troops of shadows kept us company. But it was on the threshold of this big, chief attic, when ‘mother’ stopped abruptly to put down the lamp, that real feat took hold of me. For Riquette marched steadily forward into the middle of the dusty flooring, picking her way among the fallen tiles and mortar, as though she went towards — some one. She purred loudly and uttered little cries of excited pleasure. Her tail went up into the air, and she lowered her head with the unmistakable intention of being stroked. Her lips opened and shut. Her green eyes smiled. She *was* being stroked.

It was an unforgettable performance. I would rather have witnessed an execution or a murder than watch that mysterious creature twist and turn about in the way she did. Her magnified shadow was as large as a pony on the floor and rafters. I wanted to hide the whole thing by extinguishing the lamp. For, even before the mysterious action began, I experienced the sudden rush of conviction that others besides ourselves were in this attic — and standing very close to us indeed. And, although there was ice in my blood, there was also a strange swelling of the heart that only love and tenderness could bring.

But, whatever it was, my human companion, still silent, knew and understood. She *saw.* And her soft whisper that ran with the wind among the rafters, ‘Il a prié pour Petavel et le bon Dieu l’a entendu,’ did not amaze me one quarter as much as the expression I then caught upon her radiant face. Tears ran down the cheeks, but they were tears of happiness. Her whole figure seemed lit up. She opened her arms — picture of great Motherhood, proud, blessed, and tender beyond words. I thought she was going to fall, for she took quick steps forward; but when I moved to catch her, she drew me aside instead with a sudden gesture that brought fear back in the place of wonder.

‘Let them pass,’ she whispered grandly. ‘Pan, don’t you see.... He’s leading him into peace and safety ... by the hand I’ And her joy seemed to kill the shadows and fill the entire attic with white light. Then, almost simultaneously with her words, she swayed. I was in time to catch her, but as I did so, across the very spot where we had just been standing — two figures, I swear, went past us like a flood of light.

There was a moment next of such confusion that I did not see what happened to Riquette, for the sight of my companion kneeling on the dusty boards and praying with a curious sort of passionate happiness, while tears pressed between her covering fingers — the strange wonder of this made me utterly oblivious to minor details. ...

We were sitting round the peat fire again, and ‘mother’ was saying to me in the gentlest, tenderest whisper I ever heard from human lips— ‘Pan, I think perhaps that’s why God took him....’

And when a little later we went in to make Riquette cosy in the empty bed, ever since kept sacred to her use, the mournfulness had lifted; and in the place of resignation was proud peace and joy that knew no longer sad or selfish questionings.

THE HEATH FIRE

THE MEN AT luncheon in Rennie's Surrey cottage that September day were discussing, of course, the heat. All agreed it had been exceptional. But nothing unusual was said until O'Hara spoke of the heath fires. They had been rather terrific, several in a single day, devouring trees and bushes, endangering human life, and spreading with remarkable rapidity. The flames, too, had been extraordinarily high and vehement for heath fires. And O'Hara's tone had introduced into the commonplace talk something new — the element of mystery; it was nothing definite he said, but manner, eyes, hushed voice and the rest conveyed it. And it was genuine. What he *felt* reached the others rather than what he said. The atmosphere in the little room, with the honeysuckle trailing sweetly across the open windows, changed; the talk became of a sudden less casual, frank, familiar; and the men glanced at one another across the table, laughing still, yet with an odd touch of constraint marking little awkward, unfilled pauses. Being a group of normal Englishmen, they disliked mystery; it made them feel uncomfortable; for the things O'Hara hinted at had touched that kind of elemental terror that lurks secretly in all human beings. Guarded by 'culture', but never wholly concealed, the unwelcome thing made its presence known — the hint of primitive dread that, for instance, great thunder-storms, tidal waves, or violent conflagrations rouse.

And instinctively they fell at once to discussing the obvious causes of the fires. The stockbroker, scenting imagination, edged mentally away, sniffing. But the journalist was full of brisk information, 'simply given'.

'The sun starts them in Canada, using a dewdrop as a lens,' he said, 'and an engine's spark, remember, carries an immense distance without losing its heat.'

'But hardly miles,' said another, who had not been really listening.

'It's my belief,' put in the critic keenly, 'that a lot were done on purpose. Bits of live coal wrapped in cloth were found, you know.' He was a little, weasel-faced iconoclast, dropping the acid of doubt and disbelief wherever he went, but offering nothing in the place of what he destroyed. His head was turret-shaped, lips tight and thin, nose and chin running to points like gimlets, with which he bored into the unremunerative days of life.

‘The general unrest, yes,’ the journalist supported him, and tried to draw the conversation on to labour questions. But their host preferred the fire talk. ‘I must say,’ he put in gravely, ‘that some of the blazes hereabouts were uncommonly — er —— queer. They started, I mean, so oddly. You remember, O’Hara, only last week that suspicious one over Kettlebury way — ?’

It seemed he wished to draw the artist out, and that the artist, feeling the general opposition, declined.

‘Why seek an unusual explanation at all?’ the critic said at length, impatiently. ‘It’s all natural enough, if you ask me.’

‘Natural! Oh yes!’ broke in O’Hara, with a sudden vehemence that betrayed feeling none had as yet suspected; ‘provided you don’t limit the word to mean only what we understand. There’s nothing anywhere — unnatural.’

A laugh cut short the threatened tirade, and the journalist expressed the general feeling with ‘Oh *you,* Jim! You’d see a devil in a dust-storm, or a fairy in the tea-leaves of your cup!’

‘And why not, pray? Devils and fairies are every bit as true as formulae.’

Some one tactfully guided them away from a profitless discussion, and they talked glibly of the damage done, the hideousness of the destroyed moors, the gaunt, black, ugly slopes, fifty-foot flames, roaring noises, and the splendour of the enormous smoke-clouds that had filled the skies. And Rennie, still hoping to coax O’Hara, repeated tales the beaters had brought in that crying, as though living things were caught, had been heard in places, and that some had seen tall shapes of fire passing headlong through the choking smoke. For the note O’Hara had struck refused to be ignored. It went on sounding underneath the commonest remark; and the atmosphere to the end retained that curious tinge that he had given to it — of the strange, the ominous, the mysterious and unexplained. Until, at last, the artist, having added nothing further to the talk, got up with some abruptness and left the room. He complained briefly that the fever he had suffered from still bothered him and he would go and lie down a bit. The heat, he said, oppressed him.

A silence followed his departure. The broker drew a sigh as though the market had gone up. But Rennie, old, comprehending friend, looked anxious. ‘Excitement,’ he said, ‘not oppression, is the word he meant. He’s always a bit strung up when that Black Sea fever gets him. He brought it with him from Batoum.’ And another brief silence followed.

‘Been with you most of the summer, hasn’t he?’ enquired the journalist, on the trail of a ‘par’, ‘painting those wild things of his that no one understands.’ And their host, weighing a moment how much he might in fairness tell, replied — among friends it was— ‘Yes; and this summer they have been more — er — wild and wonderful than usual — an extraordinary rush of colour splendid schemes, “conceptions”, I believe you critics call ‘em, of fire, as though, in a way, the unusual heat had possessed him for interpretation.’

The group expressed its desultory interest by uninspired interjections.

‘That was what he meant just now when he said the fires had been mysterious, required explanation, or something — the way they started, rather,’ concluded Rennie.

Then he hesitated. He laughed a moment, and it was an uneasy, apologetic little laugh. How to continue he hardly knew. Also, he wished to protect his friend from the cheap jeering of miscomprehension. ‘He is very imaginative, you know,’ he went on, quietly, as no one spoke. ‘You remember that glorious mad thing he did of the Fallen Lucifer — driving a star across the heavens till the heat of the descent set a light to half the planets, scorched the old moon to the white cinder that she now is, and passed close enough to earth to send our oceans up in a single jet of steam? Well, this time — he’s been at something every bit as wild, only truer — finer. And what is it? Briefly, then, he’s got the idea, it seems, that the unusual heat from the sun this year has penetrated deep enough — in places-especially on these unprotected heaths that retain their heat so cleverly — to reach another kindred expression — to waken a response — in sympathy, you see — from the central fires of the earth.’

He paused again a moment awkwardly, conscious how clumsily he expressed it. ‘The parent getting into touch again with its lost child, eh? See the idea? Return of the Fire Prodigal, as it were?’

His listeners stared in silence, the broker looking his obvious relief that O’Hara was not on ’Change, the critic’s eyes glancing sharply down that pointed, boring nose of his.

‘And the central fires have felt it and risen in response,’ continued Rennie in a lower voice. ‘You see the idea? It’s big, to say the least. The volcanoes have answered too — there’s old Etna, the giant of ’em all, breaking out in fifty new mouths of flame. Heat is latent in everything, only waiting to be called out. That match you’re striking, this coffee-pot, the warmth in our bodies, and so on — their heat comes first from the sun, and is therefore an actual part of the sun, the origin of all heat and life. And so O’Hara, you know, who sees the universe as a single homogeneous *One* and — and — well, I give it up. Can’t explain it, you see. You must get him to do that. But somehow this year — cloudless — the protecting armour of water all gone too — the sun’s rays managed to sink in and reach their kind buried deep below. Perhaps, later, we may get him to show us the studies that he’s made — whew! — the most — er — amazing things you ever saw!’

The ‘superiority’ of unimaginative minds was inevitable, making Rennie regret that he had told so much. It was almost as if he had been untrue to his friend. But at length the group broke up for the afternoon. They left messages for O’Hara. Two motored, and the journalist took the train. The critic followed his sharp nose to London, where he might ferret out the failures that his mind delighted in. And when they were gone the host slipped quickly upstairs to find his friend. The heat was unbearable to suffocation, the little bedroom like an oven. But Jim O’Hara was not in it.

For, instead of lying down as he had said, a fierce revolt, stirred by the talk of those unvisioned minds below, had wakened, and the deep, sensitive, poet’s soul in him had leaped suddenly to the acceptance of an impossible thing. He had escaped, driven forth by the secret call of wonder. He made full speed for the destroyed moors. Fever or no fever, he must see for himself. Did no one understand? Was he the only one?... Walking quickly, he passed the Frensham Ponds, came through that spot of loneliness and beauty, the Lion’s Mouth, noting that even there the pool of water had dried up and the rushes waved in the hot air over a bed of hard, caked mud, and so reached within the hour the wide expanse of Thursley Common. On every side the world stretched dark and burnt, a cemetery of cinders. Great thrills rushed through his heart; and with the power of a tide that yet came at flashing speed the truth rose up in him... Half running now, he plunged forward another mile or two, and found himself, the only living thing, amid the great waste of heather-land. The blazing sunlight drenched it. It lay, a sheet of weird dark beauty, spreading like a black, enormous garden as far as the eye could reach.

Then, breathless, he paused and looked about him. Within his heart something, long smouldering, ran into sudden flame. Light blazed upon his inner world. For as the scorch of vehement passion may quicken tracts of human consciousness that lie ordinarily inert and unproductive, so here the surface of the earth had turned alive. He knew; he saw; he understood.

Here, in these open sun-traps that gathered and retained the heat, the fire of the Universe had dropped and lain, increasing week by week. These parched, dry months, the soil, free from rejecting and protective moisture, had let it all accumulate till at length it had sunk downwards, inwards, and the sister fires below, responding to the touch of their ancient parent source, too long unfelt, had answered with a swift uprising roar. They had come up with answering joy, and here and there had actually reached the surface, and had leaped out with dancing cry, wild to escape from an age-long prison back to their huge, eternal origin.

This sunshine, ah! what was it? These farthing dips of heat men complained about in their tiny, cage-like houses! It scorched the grass and fields, yes; but the surface never held it long enough to let it sink to union with its kindred of the darker fires beneath! These cried for it, but union was ever denied and stifled by the weight of cooled and cooling rock. And the ages of separation had almost cooled remembrance too — fire — the kiss and strength of fire — the flaming embrace and burning lips of the father sun himself.... He could have cried with the fierce delight of it all, and the picture he would paint rose there before him, burnt gloriously into the canvas of the entire heavens. Was not his own heat and life also from the sun?...

He stared about him in the deep silence of the afternoon. The world was still. It basked in the windless heat. No living thing stirred, for the common forms of life had fled away. Earth waited. He, too, waited. And then some touch of intuition, blown to white heat, supplied the link the pedestrian intellect missed, and he knew that what he waited for was on the way. For he would *see.* The message he should paint would come before his outer eye as well, though not, as he had first stupidly expected, on some grand, enormous scale. Rather would it be the equivalent of that still, small voice that once had inspired an entire nation....

The wind passed very softly across the unburnt patch of heather where he lay; he heard it rustling in the skeletons of scorched birch trees, and in the gorse and furze bushes that the flame had left so ghostly pale. Farther off it sang in the isolated pines, dying away like surf upon some far-off reef. He smelt the bitter perfume of burnt soil, the pungent, acrid odour of beaten ashes. The purple-black of the moors yawned like openings in the side of the earth. In all directions for miles stretched the deep emptiness of the heather-lands, an immense, dark, magic garden, still black with the feet of wonder that had flown across it and left it so beautifully scarred. The shadow of the terrible embrace still trailed and lingered as through Midnight had screened a time of passion with this curtain of her softest plumes.

And *they* had called it ugly, had spoken of its marred beauty, its hideousness! He laughed exultantly as he drank it in, for the weird and savage splendour everywhere broke loose and spread, passing from the earth into the receptive substance of his own mind. Even the roots of gorse and heather, like petrified, shadow-eating snakes, charged with the mystery of that eternal underworld whence they had risen, lay waiting for the return of the night of sleep whence Fire had wakened them. Lost ghosts of a salamander army that the flame had swept above the ground, they lay anguished and frightened in the glare of the unaccustomed sun....

And waiting, he stared about him in the deep silence of the afternoon. Hazy with distance he saw the peak of Crooksbury, dim in its sheet of pines, waving a blue-plumed crest into the sky for signal; and close about him rose the more sombre glory of the lesser knolls and boulders, still cloaked in the swarthy magic of the smoke. Amid pools of ashes in the nearer hollows he saw the blue beauty of the fire-weed that rushes instantly into life behind all conflagrations. It was blowing softly in the wind. And here and there, set like emeralds bpon some dusky bosom, lay the brilliant spires of young bracken that rose to clap a thousand tiny hands in the heart of exquisite desolation. In a cloud of green they rustled in the wind above the sea of black.... And so within himself O'Hara realised the huge excitement of the flame this fragment of the earth had felt. For Fire, mysterious symbol of universal life, spirit that prodigally gives itself without itself diminishing, had passed in power across this ancient heather-land, leaving the soul of it all naked and unashamed. The sun had loved it. The fires below had risen up and answered. They had known that union with their source which some call death....

And the fires were rising still. The poet’s heart in him became suddenly and awfully aware. Ye stars of fire! This patch of unburnt heather where he lay had been untouched as yet, but now the flame in his soul had brought the little needed link and he would *see.* The thing of wonder that the Universe should teach him how to paint was already on the way. Called by the sun, tremendous, splendid parent, the central fires were still rising.

And he turned, weakness and exultation racing for possession of him. The wind passed softly over his face, and with it came a faint, dry sound. It was distant and yet dose beside him. At the stir of it there rose also in himself a strange vast thing that was bigger than the bulk of the moon and wide as the extension of swept forests, yet small and gentle as a blade of grass that pricks the lawn in spring. And he realised then that ‘within’ and ‘without’ had turned one, and that over the entire moorland arrived this thing that was happening too in a whitehot point of his own heart. He was linked with the sun and the farthest star, and in his little finger glowed the heat and fire of the universe itself. In sympathy *his own fires were rising too.*

The sound was born — a faint, light noise of crackling in the heather at his feet. He bent his head and searched, and among the obscure and tiny underways of the roots he saw a tip of curling smoke rise slowly upwards. It moved in a thin, blue spiral past his face. Then terror took him that was like a terror of the mountains, yet with it at the same time a realisation of beauty that made the heart leap within him into dazzling radiance. For the incense of this fairy column of thin smoke drew his soul with it — upwards towards its source. He rose to his feet, trembling....

He watched the line rise slowly to the sky and vanish into blue. The whole expanse of blackened heather-land watched too. Wind sank away; the sunshine dropped to meet it. A sense of deep expectancy, profound and reverent, lay over all that sun-baked moor; and the entire sweep of burnt world about him knew with joy that what was taking place in that wee, isolated patch of Surrey heather was the thing the Hebrew mystic knew when the Soul of the Universe became manifest in the bush that burned, yet never was consumed. In that faint sound of crackling, as he stood aside to listen and to watch, O’Hara knew a form of the eternal Voice of Ages. There was no flame, but it seemed to him that all his inner being passed in fiery heat outwards towards its source.... He saw the little patch of dried-up heather sink to the level of the black surface all about it — a sifted pile of delicate, pale-blue ashes. The tiny spiral vanished; he watched it disappear, winding upwards out of sight in a little ghostly trail of beauty. So small and soft and simple was this wonder of the world. It was gone. And something in himself had broken, dropped in ashes, and passed also outwards like a tiny mounting flame.

But the picture O’Hara had thought himself designed to paint was never done. It was not even begun. The great canvas of ‘The Fire Worshipper’ stood empty on the easel, for the artist had not strength to lift a brush. Within two days the final breath passed slowly from his lips. The strange fever that so perplexed the doctor by its rapid development and its fury took him so easily. His temperature was extraordinary. The heat, as of an internal fire, fairly devoured him, and the smile upon his face at the last — so Rennie declared — was the most perplexingly wonderful thing he had ever seen. ‘It was like a great, white flame,’ he said.

THE MESSENGER

I HAVE NEVER been afraid of ghostly things, attracted rather with a curious live interest, though it is always out of doors that strange Presences get nearest to me, and in Nature I have encountered warnings, messages, presentiments, and the like, that, by way of help or guidance, have later justified themselves. I have, therefore, welcomed them. But in the little rooms of houses things of much value rarely come, for the thick air chokes the wires, as it were, and distorts or mutilates the clear delivery.

But the other night, here in the carpenter's house, where my attic windows beckon to the mountains and the woods, I woke with the uncomfortably strong suggestion that something was on the way, and that I was not ready. It came along the by-ways of deep sleep. I woke abruptly, alarmed before I was even properly awake. Something was approaching with great swiftness and I was unprepared.

Across the lake there were faint signs of colour behind the distant Alps, but terraces of mist still lay grey above the vineyards, and the slim poplar, whose tip was level with my face, no more than rustled in the wind of dawn. A shiver, not brought to me by any wind, ran through my nerves, for I knew with a certainty no arguing could lessen nor dispel that something from immensely far away was deliberately now approaching me. The touch of wonder in advance of it was truly awful; its splendour, size, and grandeur belonged to conditions I had surely never known. It came through empty spaces from another world. While I lay asleep it had been already on the way.

I stood there a moment, seeking for some outward sign that might betray its nature. The last stars were fading in the northern sky, and blue and dim lay the whole long line of the Jura, cloaked beneath still slumbering forests. There was a rumbling of a distant train. Now and then a dog barked in some outlying farm. The Night was up and walking, though as yet she moved but slowly from the sky. Shadows still draped the world. And the warning that had reached me first in sleep rushed through my tingling nerves once more with a certainty not far removed from shock. Something from another world was drawing every minute nearer, with a speed that made me tremble and half-breathless. It would presently arrive. It would stand close beside me and look straight into my face. Into these very eyes that searched the mist and shadow for an outward sign it would gaze intimately with a Message brought for me alone. But into these narrow walls it could only come with difficulty. The message would be maimed. There still was time for preparation. And I hurried into clothes and made my way downstairs and out into the open air.

Thus, at first, by climbing fast, I kept ahead of it, and soon the village lay beneath me in its nest of shadow, and the limestone ridges far above dropped nearer. But the awe and terrible deep wonder did not go. Along these mountain paths, whose every inch was so intimate that I could follow them even in the dark, this sense of breaking grandeur clung to my footsteps, keeping close. Nothing upon the earth familiar, friendly, well-known, little earth could have brought this sense that pressed upon the edges of true reverence. It was the awareness that some speeding messenger from spaces far, far beyond the world would presently stand close and touch me, would gaze into my little human eyes, would leave its message as of life or death, and then depart upon its fearful way again it was this that conveyed the feeling of apprehension that went with me.

And instinctively, while rising higher and higher, I chose the darkest and most sheltered way. I sought the protection of the trees, and ran into the deepest vaults of the forest. The moss was soaking wet beneath my feet, and the thousand tapering spires of the pines dipped upwards into a sky already brightening with palest gold and crimson. There was a whispering and a rustling overhead as the trees, who know everything before it comes, announced to one another that the thing I sought to hide from was already very, very near. Plunging deeper into the woods to hide, this detail of sure knowledge followed me and laughed: that the speed of this august arrival was one which made the greatest speed I ever dreamed of a mere standing still. . . .

I hid myself where possible in the darkness that was growing every minute more rare. The air was sharp and exquisitely fresh. I heard birds calling. The low, wet branches kissed my face and hair. A sense of glad relief came over me that I had left the closeness of the little attic chamber, and that I should eventually meet this huge New-comer in the wide, free spaces of the mountains. There must be room where I could hold myself unmanacled to meet it. . . . The village lay far beneath me, a patch of smoke and mist and soft red-brown roofs among the vineyards. And then my gaze turned upwards, and through a rift in the close-wrought ceiling of the trees I saw the clearness of the open sky. A strip of cloud ran through it, carrying off the Night's last little dream . . . and down into my heart dropped instantly that cold breath of awe I have known but once in life, when staring through the stupendous mouth within the Milky Way that opening into the outer spaces of eternal darkness, unlit by any single star, men call the Coal Hole.

The futility of escape then took me bodily, and I renounced all further flight. From this speeding Messenger there was no hiding possible. His splendid shoulders already brushed the sky. I heard the rushing of his awful wings . . . yet in that deep, significant silence with which light steps upon the clouds of morning.

And simultaneously I left the woods behind me and stood upon a naked ridge of rock that all night long had watched the stars.

Then terror passed away like magic. Cool winds from the valleys bore me up. I heard the tinkling of a thousand cowbells from pastures far below in a score of hidden valleys. The cold departed, and with it every trace of little fears. My eyes seemed for an instant blinded, and I knew that deep sense of joy which seems so "unearthly" that it almost stains the sight with the veil of tears. The soul sank to her knees in prayer and worship.

For the messenger from another world had come. He stood beside me on that dizzy ledge. Warmth clothed me, and I knew myself akin to deity. He stood there, gazing straight into my little human eyes. He touched me everywhere. Above the distant Alps the sun came up. His eye looked close into my own.

BOLE

THE GLAMOUR OF THE SNOW

I

HIBBERT, ALWAYS CONSCIOUS of two worlds, was in this mountain village conscious of three. It lay on the slopes of the Valais Alps, and he had taken a room in the little post office, where he could be at peace to write his book, yet at the same time enjoy the winter sports and find companionship in the hotels when he wanted it.

The three worlds that met and mingled here seemed to his imaginative temperament very obvious, though it is doubtful if another mind less intuitively equipped would have seen them so well-defined. There was the world of tourist English, civilised, quasi-educated, to which he belonged by birth, at any rate; there was the world of peasants to which he felt himself drawn by sympathy — for he loved and admired their toiling, simple life; and there was this other — which he could only call the world of Nature. To this last, however, in virtue of a vehement poetic imagination, and a tumultuous pagan instinct fed by his very blood, he felt that most of him belonged. The others borrowed from it, as it were, for visits. Here, with the soul of Nature, hid his central life.

Between all three was conflict — potential conflict. On the skating-rink each Sunday the tourists regarded the natives as intruders; in the church the peasants plainly questioned: “Why do you come? We are here to worship; you to stare and whisper!” For neither of these two worlds accepted the other. And neither did Nature accept the tourists, for it took advantage of their least mistakes, and indeed, even of the peasant-world “accepted” only those who were strong and bold enough to invade her savage domain with sufficient skill to protect themselves from several forms of — death.

Now Hibbert was keenly aware of this potential conflict and want of harmony; he felt outside, yet caught by it — torn in the three directions because he was partly of each world, but wholly in only one. There grew in him a constant, subtle effort — or, at least, desire — to unify them and decide positively to which he should belong and live in. The attempt, of course, was largely subconscious. It was the natural instinct of a richly imaginative nature seeking the point of equilibrium, so that the mind could feel at peace and his brain be free to do good work.

Among the guests no one especially claimed his interest. The men were nice but undistinguished — athletic schoolmasters, doctors snatching a holiday, good fellows all; the women, equally various — the clever, the would-be-fast, the dare-to-be-dull, the women "who understood," and the usual pack of jolly dancing girls and "flappers." And Hibbert, with his forty odd years of thick experience behind him, got on well with the lot; he understood them all; they belonged to definite, predigested types that are the same the world over, and that he had met the world over long ago.

But to none of them did he belong. His nature was too "multiple" to subscribe to the set of shibboleths of any one class. And, since all liked him, and felt that somehow he seemed outside of them — spectator, looker-on — all sought to claim him.

In a sense, therefore, the three worlds fought for him: natives, tourists, Nature....

It was thus began the singular conflict for the soul of Hibbert. *In* his own soul, however, it took place. Neither the peasants nor the tourists were conscious that they fought for anything. And Nature, they say, is merely blind and automatic.

The assault upon him of the peasants may be left out of account, for it is obvious that they stood no chance of success. The tourist world, however, made a gallant effort to subdue him to themselves. But the evenings in the hotel, when dancing was not in order, were — English. The provincial imagination was set upon a throne and worshipped heavily through incense of the stupidest conventions possible. Hibbert used to go back early to his room in the post office to work.

"It is a mistake on my part to have *realised* that there is any conflict at all," he thought, as he crunched home over the snow at midnight after one of the dances. "It would have been better to have kept outside it all and done my work. Better," he added, looking back down the silent village street to the church tower, "and — safer."

The adjective slipped from his mind before he was aware of it. He turned with an involuntary start and looked about him. He knew perfectly well what it meant — this thought that had thrust its head up from the instinctive region. He understood, without being able to express it fully, the meaning that betrayed itself in the choice of the adjective. For if he had ignored the existence of this conflict he would at the same time, have remained outside the arena. Whereas now he had entered the lists. Now this battle for his soul must have issue. And he knew that the spell of Nature was greater for him than all other spells in the world combined — greater than love, revelry, pleasure, greater even than study. He had always been afraid to let himself go. His pagan soul dreaded her terrific powers of witchery even while he worshipped.

The little village already slept. The world lay smothered in snow. The châlet roofs shone white beneath the moon, and pitch-black shadows gathered against the walls of the church. His eye rested a moment on the square stone tower with its frosted cross that pointed to the sky: then travelled with a leap of many thousand feet to the enormous mountains that brushed the brilliant stars. Like a forest rose the huge peaks above the slumbering village, measuring the night and heavens. They beckoned him. And something born of the snowy desolation, born of the midnight and the silent grandeur, born of the great listening hollows of the night, something that lay ‘twixt terror and wonder, dropped from the vast wintry spaces down into his heart — and called him. Very softly, unrecorded in any word or thought his brain could compass, it laid its spell upon him. Fingers of snow brushed the surface of his heart. The power and quiet majesty of the winter’s night appalled him....

Fumbling a moment with the big unwieldy key, he let himself in and went upstairs to bed. Two thoughts went with him — apparently quite ordinary and sensible ones:

“What fools these peasants are to sleep through such a night!” And the other:

“Those dances tire me. I’ll never go again. My work only suffers in the morning.” The claims of peasants and tourists upon him seemed thus in a single instant weakened.

The clash of battle troubled half his dreams. Nature had sent her Beauty of the Night and won the first assault. The others, routed and dismayed, fled far away.

II

“Don’t go back to your dreary old post office. We’re going to have supper in my room — something hot. Come and join us. Hurry up!”

There had been an ice carnival, and the last party, tailing up the snow-slope to the hotel, called him. The Chinese lanterns smoked and sputtered on the wires; the band had long since gone. The cold was bitter and the moon came only momentarily between high, driving clouds. From the shed where the people changed from skates to snow-boots he shouted something to the effect that he was “following”; but no answer came; the moving shadows of those who had called were already merged high up against the village darkness. The voices died away. Doors slammed. Hibbert found himself alone on the deserted rink.

And it was then, quite suddenly, the impulse came to — stay and skate alone. The thought of the stuffy hotel room, and of those noisy people with their obvious jokes and laughter, oppressed him. He felt a longing to be alone with the night; to taste her wonder all by himself there beneath the stars, gliding over the ice. It was not yet midnight, and he could skate for half an hour. That supper party, if they noticed his absence at all, would merely think he had changed his mind and gone to bed.

It was an impulse, yes, and not an unnatural one; yet even at the time it struck him that something more than impulse lay concealed behind it. More than invitation, yet certainly less than command, there was a vague queer feeling that he stayed because he had to, almost as though there was something he had forgotten, overlooked, left undone. Imaginative temperaments are often thus; and impulse is ever weakness. For with such ill-considered opening of the doors to hasty action may come an invasion of other forces at the same time — forces merely waiting their opportunity perhaps!

He caught the fugitive warning even while he dismissed it as absurd, and the next minute he was whirling over the smooth ice in delightful curves and loops beneath the moon. There was no fear of collision. He could take his own speed and space as he willed. The shadows of the towering mountains fell across the rink, and a wind of ice came from the forests, where the snow lay ten feet deep. The hotel lights winked and went out. The village slept. The high wire netting could not keep out the wonder of the winter night that grew about him like a presence. He skated on and on, keen exhilarating pleasure in his tingling blood, and weariness all forgotten.

And then, midway in the delight of rushing movement, he saw a figure gliding behind the wire netting, watching him. With a start that almost made him lose his balance — for the abruptness of the new arrival was so unlooked for — he paused and stared. Although the light was dim he made out that it was the figure of a woman and that she was feeling her way along the netting, trying to get in. Against the white background of the snow-field he watched her rather stealthy efforts as she passed with a silent step over the banked-up snow. She was tall and slim and graceful; he could see that even in the dark. And then, of course, he understood. It was another adventurous skater like himself, stolen down unawares from hotel or châlet, and searching for the opening. At once, making a sign and pointing with one hand, he turned swiftly and skated over to the little entrance on the other side.

But, even before he got there, there was a sound on the ice behind him and, with an exclamation of amazement he could not suppress, he turned to see her swerving up to his side across the width of the rink. She had somehow found another way in.

Hibbert, as a rule, was punctilious, and in these free-and-easy places, perhaps, especially so. If only for his own protection he did not seek to make advances unless some kind of introduction paved the way. But for these two to skate together in the semi-darkness without speech, often of necessity brushing shoulders almost, was too absurd to think of. Accordingly he raised his cap and spoke. His actual words he seems unable to recall, nor what the girl said in reply, except that she answered him in accented English with some commonplace about doing figures at midnight on an empty rink. Quite natural it was, and right. She wore grey clothes of some kind, though not the customary long gloves or sweater, for indeed her hands were bare, and presently when he skated with her, he wondered with something like astonishment at their dry and icy coldness.

And she was delicious to skate with — supple, sure, and light, fast as a man yet with the freedom of a child, sinuous and steady at the same time. Her flexibility made him wonder, and when he asked where she had learned she murmured — he caught the breath against his ear and recalled later that it was singularly cold — that she could hardly tell, for she had been accustomed to the ice ever since she could remember.

But her face he never properly saw. A muffler of white fur buried her neck to the ears, and her cap came over the eyes. He only saw that she was young. Nor could he gather her hotel or châlet, for she pointed vaguely, when he asked her, up the slopes. “Just over there—” she said, quickly taking his hand again. He did not press her; no doubt she wished to hide her escapade. And the touch of her hand thrilled him more than anything he could remember; even through his thick glove he felt the softness of that cold and delicate softness.

The clouds thickened over the mountains. It grew darker. They talked very little, and did not always skate together. Often they separated, curving about in corners by themselves, but always coming together again in the centre of the rink; and when she left him thus Hibbert was conscious of — yes, of missing her. He found a peculiar satisfaction, almost a fascination, in skating by her side. It was quite an adventure — these two strangers with the ice and snow and night!

Midnight had long since sounded from the old church tower before they parted. She gave the sign, and he skated quickly to the shed, meaning to find a seat and help her take her skates off. Yet when he turned — she had already gone. He saw her slim figure gliding away across the snow ... and hurrying for the last time round the rink alone he searched in vain for the opening she had twice used in this curious way.

“How very queer!” he thought, referring to the wire netting. “She must have lifted it and wriggled under ...!”

Wondering how in the world she managed it, what in the world had possessed him to be so free with her, and who in the world she was, he went up the steep slope to the post office and so to bed, her promise to come again another night still ringing delightfully in his ears. And curious were the thoughts and sensations that accompanied him. Most of all, perhaps, was the half suggestion of some dim memory that he had known this girl before, had met her somewhere, more — that she knew him. For in her voice — a low, soft, windy little voice it was, tender and soothing for all its quiet coldness — there lay some faint reminder of two others he had known, both long since gone: the voice of the woman he had loved, and — the voice of his mother.

But this time through his dreams there ran no clash of battle. He was conscious, rather, of something cold and clinging that made him think of sifting snowflakes climbing slowly with entangling touch and thickness round his feet. The snow, coming without noise, each flake so light and tiny none can mark the spot whereon it settles, yet the mass of it able to smother whole villages, wove through the very texture of his mind — cold, bewildering, deadening effort with its clinging network of ten million feathery touches.

III

In the morning Hibbert realised he had done, perhaps, a foolish thing. The brilliant sunshine that drenched the valley made him see this, and the sight of his work-table with its typewriter, books, papers, and the rest, brought additional conviction. To have skated with a girl alone at midnight, no matter how innocently the thing had come about, was unwise — unfair, especially to her. Gossip in these little winter resorts was worse than in a provincial town. He hoped no one had seen them. Luckily the night had been dark. Most likely none had heard the ring of skates.

Deciding that in future he would be more careful, he plunged into work, and sought to dismiss the matter from his mind.

But in his times of leisure the memory returned persistently to haunt him. When he “ski-d,” “luged,” or danced in the evenings, and especially when he skated on the little rink, he was aware that the eyes of his mind forever sought this strange companion of the night. A hundred times he fancied that he saw her, but always sight deceived him. Her face he might not know, but he could hardly fail to recognise her figure. Yet nowhere among the others did he catch a glimpse of that slim young creature he had skated with alone beneath the clouded stars. He searched in vain. Even his inquiries as to the occupants of the private châlets brought no results. He had lost her. But the queer thing was that he felt as though she were somewhere close; he *knew* she had not really gone. While people came and left with every day, it never once occurred to him that she had left. On the contrary, he felt assured that they would meet again.

This thought he never quite acknowledged. Perhaps it was the wish that fathered it only. And, even when he did meet her, it was a question how he would speak and claim acquaintance, or whether *she* would recognise himself. It might be awkward. He almost came to dread a meeting, though "dread," of course, was far too strong a word to describe an emotion that was half delight, half wondering anticipation.

Meanwhile the season was in full swing. Hibbert felt in perfect health, worked hard, ski-d, skated, luged, and at night danced fairly often — in spite of his decision. This dancing was, however, an act of subconscious surrender; it really meant he hoped to find her among the whirling couples. He was searching for her without quite acknowledging it to himself; and the hotel-world, meanwhile, thinking it had won him over, teased and chaffed him. He made excuses in a similar vein; but all the time he watched and searched and — waited.

For several days the sky held clear and bright and frosty, bitterly cold, everything crisp and sparkling in the sun; but there was no sign of fresh snow, and the ski-ers began to grumble. On the mountains was an icy crust that made "running" dangerous; they wanted the frozen, dry, and powdery snow that makes for speed, renders steering easier and falling less severe. But the keen east wind showed no signs of changing for a whole ten days. Then, suddenly, there came a touch of softer air and the weather-wise began to prophesy.

Hibbert, who was delicately sensitive to the least change in earth or sky, was perhaps the first to feel it. Only he did not prophesy. He knew through every nerve in his body that moisture had crept into the air, was accumulating, and that presently a fall would come. For he responded to the moods of Nature like a fine barometer.

And the knowledge, this time, brought into his heart a strange little wayward emotion that was hard to account for — a feeling of unexplained uneasiness and disquieting joy. For behind it, woven through it rather, ran a faint exhilaration that connected remotely somewhere with that touch of delicious alarm, that tiny anticipating "dread," that so puzzled him when he thought of his next meeting with his skating companion of the night. It lay beyond all words, all telling, this queer relationship between the two; but somehow the girl and snow ran in a pair across his mind.

Perhaps for imaginative writing-men, more than for other workers, the smallest change of mood betrays itself at once. His work at any rate revealed this slight shifting of emotional values in his soul. Not that his writing suffered, but that it altered, subtly as those changes of sky or sea or landscape that come with the passing of afternoon into evening — imperceptibly. A subconscious excitement sought to push outwards and express itself ... and, knowing the uneven effect such moods produced in his work, he laid his pen aside and took instead to reading that he had to do.

Meanwhile the brilliance passed from the sunshine, the sky grew slowly overcast; by dusk the mountain tops came singularly close and sharp; the distant valley rose into absurdly near perspective. The moisture increased, rapidly approaching saturation point, when it must fall in snow. Hibbert watched and waited.

And in the morning the world lay smothered beneath its fresh white carpet. It snowed heavily till noon, thickly, incessantly, chokingly, a foot or more; then the sky cleared, the sun came out in splendour, the wind shifted back to the east, and frost came down upon the mountains with its keenest and most biting tooth. The drop in the temperature was tremendous, but the ski-ers were jubilant. Next day the “running” would be fast and perfect. Already the mass was settling, and the surface freezing into those moss-like, powdery crystals that make the ski run almost of their own accord with the faint “sishing” as of a bird’s wings through the air.

IV

That night there was excitement in the little hotel-world, first because there was a *bal costumé*, but chiefly because the new snow had come. And Hibbert went — felt drawn to go; he did not go in costume, but he wanted to talk about the slopes and ski-ing with the other men, and at the same time....

Ah, there was the truth, the deeper necessity that called. For the singular connection between the stranger and the snow again betrayed itself, utterly beyond explanation as before, but vital and insistent. Some hidden instinct in his pagan soul — heaven knows how he phrased it even to himself, if he phrased it at all — whispered that with the snow the girl would be somewhere about, would emerge from her hiding place, would even look for him.

Absolutely unwarranted it was. He laughed while he stood before the little glass and trimmed his moustache, tried to make his black tie sit straight, and shook down his dinner jacket so that it should lie upon the shoulders without a crease. His brown eyes were very bright. "I look younger than I usually do," he thought. It was unusual, even significant, in a man who had no vanity about his appearance and certainly never questioned his age or tried to look younger than he was. Affairs of the heart, with one tumultuous exception that left no fuel for lesser subsequent fires, had never troubled him. The forces of his soul and mind not called upon for "work" and obvious duties, all went to Nature. The desolate, wild places of the earth were what he loved; night, and the beauty of the stars and snow. And this evening he felt their claims upon him mightily stirring. A rising wildness caught his blood, quickened his pulse, woke longing and passion too. But chiefly snow. The snow whirred softly through his thoughts like white, seductive dreams.... For the snow had come; and She, it seemed, had somehow come with it — into his mind.

And yet he stood before that twisted mirror and pulled his tie and coat askew a dozen times, as though it mattered. "What in the world is up with me?" he thought. Then, laughing a little, he turned before leaving the room to put his private papers in order. The green morocco desk that held them he took down from the shelf and laid upon the table. Tied to the lid was the visiting card with his brother's London address "in case of accident." On the way down to the hotel he wondered why he had done this, for though imaginative, he was not the kind of man who dealt in presentiments. Moods with him were strong, but ever held in leash.

"It's almost like a warning," he thought, smiling. He drew his thick coat tightly round the throat as the freezing air bit at him. "Those warnings one reads of in stories sometimes ...!"

A delicious happiness was in his blood. Over the edge of the hills across the valley rose the moon. He saw her silver sheet the world of snow. Snow covered all. It smothered sound and distance. It smothered houses, streets, and human beings. It smothered — life.

V

In the hall there was light and bustle; people were already arriving from the other hotels and châlets, their costumes hidden beneath many wraps.

Groups of men in evening dress stood about smoking, talking “snow” and “ski-ing.” The band was tuning up. The claims of the hotel-world clashed about him faintly as of old. At the big glass windows of the verandah, peasants stopped a moment on their way home from the *café* to peer. Hibbert thought laughingly of that conflict he used to imagine. He laughed because it suddenly seemed so unreal. He belonged so utterly to Nature and the mountains, and especially to those desolate slopes where now the snow lay thick and fresh and sweet, that there was no question of a conflict at all. The power of the newly fallen snow had caught him, proving it without effort. Out there, upon those lonely reaches of the moonlit ridges, the snow lay ready — masses and masses of it — cool, soft, inviting. He longed for it. It awaited him. He thought of the intoxicating delight of ski-ing in the moonlight....

Thus, somehow, in vivid flashing vision, he thought of it while he stood there smoking with the other men and talking all the “shop” of ski-ing.

And, ever mysteriously blended with this power of the snow, poured also through his inner being the power of the girl. He could not disabuse his mind of the insinuating presence of the two together. He remembered that queer skating-impulse of ten days ago, the impulse that had let her in. That any mind, even an imaginative one, could pass beneath the sway of such a fancy was strange enough; and Hibbert, while fully aware of the disorder, yet found a curious joy in yielding to it. This insubordinate centre that drew him towards old pagan beliefs had assumed command. With a kind of sensuous pleasure he let himself be conquered.

And snow that night seemed in everybody’s thoughts. The dancing couples talked of it; the hotel proprietors congratulated one another; it meant good sport and satisfied their guests; every one was planning trips and expeditions, talking of slopes and telemarks, of flying speed and distance, of drifts and crust and frost. Vitality and enthusiasm pulsed in the very air; all were alert and active, positive, radiating currents of creative life even into the stuffy atmosphere of that crowded ball-room. And the snow had caused it, the snow had brought it; all this discharge of eager sparkling energy was due primarily to the — Snow.

But in the mind of Hibbert, by some swift alchemy of his pagan yearnings, this energy became transmuted. It rarefied itself, gleaming in white and crystal currents of passionate anticipation, which he transferred, as by a species of electrical imagination, into the personality of the girl — the Girl of the Snow. She somewhere was waiting for him, expecting him, calling to him softly from those leagues of moonlit mountain. He remembered the touch of that cool, dry hand; the soft and icy breath against his cheek; the hush and softness of her presence in the way she came and the way she had gone again — like a flurry of snow the wind sent gliding up the slopes. She, like himself, belonged out there. He fancied that he heard her little windy voice come sifting to him through the snowy branches of the trees, calling his name ... that haunting little voice that dived straight to the centre of his life as once, long years ago, two other voices used to do....

But nowhere among the costumed dancers did he see her slender figure. He danced with one and all, distrait and absent, a stupid partner as each girl discovered, his eyes ever turning towards the door and windows, hoping to catch the luring face, the vision that did not come ... and at length, hoping even against hope. For the ball-room thinned; groups left one by one, going home to their hotels and châlets; the band tired obviously; people sat drinking lemon-squashes at the little tables, the men mopping their foreheads, everybody ready for bed.

It was close on midnight. As Hibbert passed through the hall to get his overcoat and snow-boots, he saw men in the passage by the “sport-room,” greasing their ski against an early start. Knapsack luncheons were being ordered by the kitchen swing doors. He sighed. Lighting a cigarette a friend offered him, he returned a confused reply to some question as to whether he could join their party in the morning. It seemed he did not hear it properly. He passed through the outer vestibule between the double glass doors, and went into the night.

The man who asked the question watched him go, an expression of anxiety momentarily in his eyes.

“Don’t think he heard you,” said another, laughing. “You’ve got to shout to Hibbert, his mind’s so full of his work.”

“He works too hard,” suggested the first, “full of queer ideas and dreams.”

But Hibbert’s silence was not rudeness. He had not caught the invitation, that was all. The call of the hotel-world had faded. He no longer heard it.

Another wilder call was sounding in his ears.

For up the street he had seen a little figure moving. Close against the shadows of the baker’s shop it glided — white, slim, enticing.

VI

And at once into his mind passed the hush and softness of the snow — yet with it a searching, crying wildness for the heights. He knew by some incalculable, swift instinct she would not meet him in the village street. It was not there, amid crowding houses, she would speak to him. Indeed, already she had disappeared, melted from view up the white vista of the moonlit road. Yonder, he divined, she waited where the highway narrowed abruptly into the mountain path beyond the châlets.

It did not even occur to him to hesitate; mad though it seemed, and was — this sudden craving for the heights with her, at least for open spaces where the snow lay thick and fresh — it was too imperious to be denied. He does not remember going up to his room, putting the sweater over his evening clothes, and getting into the fur gauntlet gloves and the helmet cap of wool. Most certainly he has no recollection of fastening on his ski; he must have done it automatically. Some faculty of normal observation was in abeyance, as it were. His mind was out beyond the village — out with the snowy mountains and the moon.

Henri Défago, putting up the shutters over his *café* windows, saw him pass, and wondered mildly: “Un monsieur qui fait du ski à cette heure! Il est Anglais, done ...!” He shrugged his shoulders, as though a man had the right to choose his own way of death. And Marthe Perotti, the hunchback wife of the shoemaker, looking by chance from her window, caught his figure moving swiftly up the road. She had other thoughts, for she knew and believed the old traditions of the witches and snow-beings that steal the souls of men. She had even heard, ’twas said, the dreaded “synagogue” pass roaring down the street at night, and now, as then, she hid her eyes. “They’ve called to him ... and he must go,” she murmured, making the sign of the cross.

But no one sought to stop him. Hibbert recalls only a single incident until he found himself beyond the houses, searching for her along the fringe of forest where the moonlight met the snow in a bewildering frieze of fantastic shadows. And the incident was simply this — that he remembered passing the church. Catching the outline of its tower against the stars, he was aware of a faint sense of hesitation. A vague uneasiness came and went — jarred unpleasantly across the flow of his excited feelings, chilling exhilaration. He caught the instant's discord, dismissed it, and — passed on. The seduction of the snow smothered the hint before he realised that it had brushed the skirts of warning.

And then he saw her. She stood there waiting in a little clear space of shining snow, dressed all in white, part of the moonlight and the glistening background, her slender figure just discernible.

"I waited, for I knew you would come," the silvery little voice of windy beauty floated down to him. "You *had* to come."

"I'm ready," he answered, "I knew it too."

The world of Nature caught him to its heart in those few words — the wonder and the glory of the night and snow. Life leaped within him. The passion of his pagan soul exulted, rose in joy, flowed out to her. He neither reflected nor considered, but let himself go like the veriest schoolboy in the wildness of first love.

"Give me your hand," he cried, "I'm coming ...!"

"A little farther on, a little higher," came her delicious answer. "Here it is too near the village — and the church."

And the words seemed wholly right and natural; he did not dream of questioning them; he understood that, with this little touch of civilisation in sight, the familiarity he suggested was impossible. Once out upon the open mountains, 'mid the freedom of huge slopes and towering peaks, the stars and moon to witness and the wilderness of snow to watch, they could taste an innocence of happy intercourse free from the dead conventions that imprison literal minds.

He urged his pace, yet did not quite overtake her. The girl kept always just a little bit ahead of his best efforts.... And soon they left the trees behind and passed on to the enormous slopes of the sea of snow that rolled in mountainous terror and beauty to the stars. The wonder of the white world caught him away. Under the steady moonlight it was more than haunting. It was a living, white, bewildering power that deliciously confused the senses and laid a spell of wild perplexity upon the heart. It was a personality that cloaked, and yet revealed, itself through all this sheeted whiteness of snow. It rose, went with him, fled before, and followed after. Slowly it dropped lithe, gleaming arms about his neck, gathering him in....

Certainly some soft persuasion coaxed his very soul, urging him ever forwards, upwards, on towards the higher icy slopes. Judgment and reason left their throne, it seemed, completely, as in the madness of intoxication. The girl, slim and seductive, kept always just ahead, so that he never quite came up with her. He saw the white enchantment of her face and figure, something that streamed about her neck flying like a wreath of snow in the wind, and heard the alluring accents of her whispering voice that called from time to time: “A little farther on, a little higher.... Then we’ll run home together!”

Sometimes he saw her hand stretched out to find his own, but each time, just as he came up with her, he saw her still in front, the hand and arm withdrawn. They took a gentle angle of ascent. The toil seemed nothing. In this crystal, wine-like air fatigue vanished. The sishing of the ski through the powdery surface of the snow was the only sound that broke the stillness; this, with his breathing and the rustle of her skirts, was all he heard. Cold moonshine, snow, and silence held the world. The sky was black, and the peaks beyond cut into it like frosted wedges of iron and steel. Far below the valley slept, the village long since hidden out of sight. He felt that he could never tire.... The sound of the church clock rose from time to time faintly through the air — more and more distant.

“Give me your hand. It’s time now to turn back.”

“Just one more slope,” she laughed. “That ridge above us. Then we’ll make for home.” And her low voice mingled pleasantly with the purring of their ski. His own seemed harsh and ugly by comparison.

“But I have never come so high before. It’s glorious! This world of silent snow and moonlight — and *you*. You’re a child of the snow, I swear. Let me come up — closer — to see your face — and touch your little hand.”

Her laughter answered him.

“Come on! A little higher. Here we’re quite alone together.”

“It’s magnificent,” he cried. “But why did you hide away so long? I’ve looked and searched for you in vain ever since we skated—” he was going to say “ten days ago,” but the accurate memory of time had gone from him; he was not sure whether it was days or years or minutes. His thoughts of earth were scattered and confused.

“You looked for me in the wrong places,” he heard her murmur just above him. “You looked in places where I never go. Hotels and houses kill me. I avoid them.” She laughed — a fine, shrill, windy little laugh.

“I loathe them too—”

He stopped. The girl had suddenly come quite close. A breath of ice passed through his very soul. She had touched him.

“But this awful cold!” he cried out, sharply, “this freezing cold that takes me. The wind is rising; it’s a wind of ice. Come, let us turn ...!”

But when he plunged forward to hold her, or at least to look, the girl was gone again. And something in the way she stood there a few feet beyond, and stared down into his eyes so steadfastly in silence, made him shiver. The moonlight was behind her, but in some odd way he could not focus sight upon her face, although so close. The gleam of eyes he caught, but all the rest seemed white and snowy as though he looked beyond her — out into space....

The sound of the church bell came up faintly from the valley far below, and he counted the strokes — five. A sudden, curious weakness seized him as he listened. Deep within it was, deadly yet somehow sweet, and hard to resist. He felt like sinking down upon the snow and lying there.... They had been climbing for five hours.... It was, of course, the warning of complete exhaustion.

With a great effort he fought and overcame it. It passed away as suddenly as it came.

“We’ll turn,” he said with a decision he hardly felt. “It will be dawn before we reach the village again. Come at once. It’s time for home.”

The sense of exhilaration had utterly left him. An emotion that was akin to fear swept coldly through him. But her whispering answer turned it instantly to terror — a terror that gripped him horribly and turned him weak and unresisting.

“Our home is — *here*!” A burst of wild, high laughter, loud and shrill, accompanied the words. It was like a whistling wind. The wind *had* risen, and clouds obscured the moon. “A little higher — where we cannot hear the wicked bells,” she cried, and for the first time seized him deliberately by the hand. She moved, was suddenly close against his face. Again she touched him.

And Hibbert tried to turn away in escape, and so trying, found for the first time that the power of the snow — that other power which does not exhilarate but deadens effort — was upon him. The suffocating weakness that it brings to exhausted men, luring them to the sleep of death in her clinging soft embrace, lulling the will and conquering all desire for life — this was awfully upon him. His feet were heavy and entangled. He could not turn or move.

The girl stood in front of him, very near; he felt her chilly breath upon his cheeks; her hair passed blindingly across his eyes; and that icy wind came with her. He saw her whiteness close; again, it seemed, his sight passed through her into space as though she had no face. Her arms were round his neck. She drew him softly downwards to his knees. He sank; he yielded utterly; he obeyed. Her weight was upon him, smothering, delicious. The snow was to his waist.... She kissed him softly on the lips, the eyes, all over his face. And then she spoke his name in that voice of love and wonder, the voice that held the accent of two others — both taken over long ago by Death — the voice of his mother, and of the woman he had loved.

He made one more feeble effort to resist. Then, realising even while he struggled that this soft weight about his heart was sweeter than anything life could ever bring, he let his muscles relax, and sank back into the soft oblivion of the covering snow. Her wintry kisses bore him into sleep.

VII

They say that men who know the sleep of exhaustion in the snow find no awakening on the hither side of death.... The hours passed and the moon sank down below the white world’s rim. Then, suddenly, there came a little crash upon his breast and neck, and Hibbert — woke.

He slowly turned bewildered, heavy eyes upon the desolate mountains, stared dizzily about him, tried to rise. At first his muscles would not act; a numbing, aching pain possessed him. He uttered a long, thin cry for help, and heard its faintness swallowed by the wind. And then he understood vaguely why he was only warm — not dead. For this very wind that took his cry had built up a sheltering mound of driven snow against his body while he slept. Like a curving wave it ran beside him. It was the breaking of its over-toppling edge that caused the crash, and the coldness of the mass against his neck that woke him.

Dawn kissed the eastern sky; pale gleams of gold shot every peak with splendour; but ice was in the air, and the dry and frozen snow blew like powder from the surface of the slopes. He saw the points of his ski projecting just below him. Then he — remembered. It seems he had just strength enough to realise that, could he but rise and stand, he might fly with terrific impetus towards the woods and village far beneath. The ski would carry him. But if he failed and fell ...!

How he contrived it Hibbert never knew; this fear of death somehow called out his whole available reserve force. He rose slowly, balanced a moment, then, taking the angle of an immense zigzag, started down the awful slopes like an arrow from a bow. And automatically the splendid muscles of the practised ski-er and athlete saved and guided him, for he was hardly conscious of controlling either speed or direction. The snow stung face and eyes like fine steel shot; ridge after ridge flew past; the summits raced across the sky; the valley leaped up with bounds to meet him. He scarcely felt the ground beneath his feet as the huge slopes and distance melted before the lightning speed of that descent from death to life.

He took it in four mile-long zigzags, and it was the turning at each corner that nearly finished him, for then the strain of balancing taxed to the verge of collapse the remnants of his strength.

Slopes that have taken hours to climb can be descended in a short half-hour on ski, but Hibbert had lost all count of time. Quite other thoughts and feelings mastered him in that wild, swift dropping through the air that was like the flight of a bird. For ever close upon his heels came following forms and voices with the whirling snow-dust. He heard that little silvery voice of death and laughter at his back. Shrill and wild, with the whistling of the wind past his ears, he caught its pursuing tones; but in anger now, no longer soft and coaxing. And it was accompanied; she did not follow alone. It seemed a host of these flying figures of the snow chased madly just behind him. He felt them furiously smite his neck and cheeks, snatch at his hands and try to entangle his feet and ski in drifts. His eyes they blinded, and they caught his breath away.

The terror of the heights and snow and winter desolation urged him forward in the maddest race with death a human being ever knew; and so terrific was the speed that before the gold and crimson had left the summits to touch the ice-lips of the lower glaciers, he saw the friendly forest far beneath swing up and welcome him.

And it was then, moving slowly along the edge of the woods, he saw a light. A man was carrying it. A procession of human figures was passing in a dark line laboriously through the snow. And — he heard the sound of chanting.

Instinctively, without a second's hesitation, he changed his course. No longer flying at an angle as before, he pointed his ski straight down the mountain-side. The dreadful steepness did not frighten him. He knew full well it meant a crashing tumble at the bottom, but he also knew it meant a doubling of his speed — with safety at the end. For, though no definite thought passed through his mind, he understood that it was the village *curé* who carried that little gleaming lantern in the dawn, and that he was taking the Host to a châlet on the lower slopes — to some peasant *in extremis*. He remembered her terror of the church and bells. She feared the holy symbols.

There was one last wild cry in his ears as he started, a shriek of the wind before his face, and a rush of stinging snow against closed eyelids — and then he dropped through empty space. Speed took sight from him. It seemed he flew off the surface of the world.

Indistinctly he recalls the murmur of men's voices, the touch of strong arms that lifted him, and the shooting pains as the ski were unfastened from the twisted ankle ... for when he opened his eyes again to normal life he found himself lying in his bed at the post office with the doctor at his side. But for years to come the story of "mad Hibbert's" ski-ing at night is recounted in that mountain village. He went, it seems, up slopes, and to a height that no man in his senses ever tried before. The tourists were agog about it for the rest of the season, and the very same day two of the bolder men went over the actual ground and photographed the slopes. Later Hibbert saw these photographs. He noticed one curious thing about them — though he did not mention it to any one:

There was only a single track.

THE RETURN

IT WAS CURIOUS — that sense of dull uneasiness that came over him so suddenly, so stealthily at first he scarcely noticed it, but with such marked increase after a time that he presently got up and left the theatre. His seat was on the gangway of the dress circle, and he slipped out awkwardly in the middle of what seemed to be the best and jolliest song of the piece. The full house was shaking with laughter; so infectious was the gaiety that even strangers turned to one another as much as to say: 'Now, isn't *that* funny — ?'

It was curious, too, the way the feeling first got into him at all, here in the full swing of laughter, music, light-heartedness, for it came as a vague suggestion: 'I've forgotten something — something I meant to do — something of importance. What in the world was it, now?' And he thought hard, searching vainly through his mind; then dismissed it as the dancing caught his attention. It came back a little later again, during a passage of long-winded talk that bored him and set his attention free once more, but came more strongly this time, insisting on an answer. What could it have been that he had overlooked, left undone, omitted to see to? It went on nibbling at the subconscious part of him. Several times this happened, this dismissal and return, till at last the thing declared itself more plainly — and he felt bothered, troubled, distinctly uneasy.

He was wanted somewhere. There was somewhere else he ought to be. That describes it best, perhaps. Some engagement of moment had entirely slipped his memory — an engagement that involved another person, too. But where, what, with whom? And at length, this vague uneasiness amounted to positive discomfort, so that he felt unable to enjoy the piece — and left abruptly. Like a man to whom comes suddenly the horrible idea that the match he lit his cigarette with and flung into the waste-paper basket on leaving was not really out — a sort of panic distress — he jumped into a taxi-cab and hurried to his flat: to find everything in order, of course; no smoke, no fire, no smell of burning.

But his evening was spoilt. He sat smoking in his armchair at home — this business man of forty, practical in mind, of character some called stolid — cursing himself for an imaginative fool. It was now too late to go back to the theatre; the club bored him; he spent an hour with the evening papers, dipping into books, sipping a long cool drink; doing odds and ends about the flat; 'I'll go to bed early for a change,' he laughed, but really all the time fighting — yes, deliberately fighting — this strange attack of uneasiness that so insidiously grew upwards, outwards from the buried depths of him that sought so strenuously to deny it. It never occurred to him that he was ill. He was *not* ill. His health was thunderingly good. He was robust as a coal-heaver.

The flat was roomy, high up on the top floor, yet in a busy part of town, so that the roar of traffic mounted round it like a sea. Through the open windows came the fresh night air of June. He had never noticed before how sweet the London night air could be, and that not all the smoke and dust could smother a certain touch of wild fragrance that tinctured it with perfume — yes, almost perfume — as of the country. He swallowed a draught of it as he stood there, staring out across the tangled world of roofs and chimney-pots. He saw the procession of the clouds; he saw the stars; he saw the moonlight falling in a shower of silver spears upon the slates and wires and steeples. And something in him quickened — something that had never stirred before.

He turned with a horrid start, for the uneasiness had of a sudden leaped within him like an animal. There was some one in the flat.

Instantly, with action, even this slight action, the fancy vanished; but, all the same, he switched on the electric lights and made a search. For it seemed to him that some one had crept up close behind him while he stood there watching the Night — some one, moreover, whose silent presence fingered with unerring touch both this new thing that had quickened in his hear *and* that sense of original deep uneasiness. He was amazed at himself, angry; indignant that he could be thus foolishly upset over nothing, yet at the same time profoundly distressed at this vehement growth of a new thing in his well-ordered personality. Growth? He dismissed the word the moment it occurred to him. But it had occurred to him. It stayed. While he searched the empty flat, the long passages, the gloomy bedroom at the end, the little hail where he kept his overcoats and golf sticks — it stayed. Growth! It was oddly disquieting. Growth, to him, involved — though he neither acknowledged nor recognised the truth perhaps-some kind of undesirable changeableness, instability, unbalance.

Yet, singular as it all was, he realised that the uneasiness and the sudden appreciation of Beauty that was so new to him had both entered by the same door into his being. When he came back to the front room he noticed that he was perspiring. There were little drops of moisture on his forehead. And down his spine ran positively chills — little, faint quivers of cold. He was shivering.

He lit his big meerschaum pipe, and left the lights all burning. The feeling that there was something he had overlooked, forgotten, left undone, had vanished. Whatever the original cause of this absurd uneasiness might be — he called it absurd on purpose, because he now realised in the depths of him that it was really more vital then he cared about — it was much nearer to discovery than before. It dodged about just below the threshold of discovery. It was as dose as that. Any moment he would know what it was: he would remember. Yes, he would *remember.* Meanwhile, he was in the right place. No desire to go elsewhere afflicted him, as in the theatre. Here was the place, here in the flat.

And then it was, with a kind of sudden burst and rush — it seemed to him the only way to phrase it — memory gave up her dead.

At first he only caught her peeping round the corner at him, drawing aside a corner of an enormous curtain, as it were; striving for more complete entrance as though the mass of it were difficult to move. But he understood; he knew; he recognised. It was enough for that. An entrance into his being — heart, mind, soul — was being attempted, and the entrance, because of his stolid temperament, was difficult of accomplishment. There was effort, strain. Something in him had first to be opened up, widened, made soft and ready as by an operation, before full entrance could be effected. This much he grasped, though for the life of him he could not have put it into words. Also, he knew *who* it was that sought an entrance. Deliberately from himself he withheld the name. But he knew, as surely as though Straughan stood in the room and faced him with a knife, saying, ‘Let me in, let me in.

I wish you to know I'm here. I'm clearing a way...! You recall our promise...?'

He rose from his chair and went to the open window again, the strange fear slowly passing. The cool air fanned his cheeks. Beauty, till now, had scarcely ever brushed the surface of his soul. He had never troubled his head about it. It passed him by, indifferent; and he had ever loathed the mouthy prating of it on others' lips. He was practical; beauty was for dreamers, for women, for men who had means and leisure. He had not exactly scorned it; rather it had never touched his life, to sweeten, cheer, uplift. Artists for him were like monks — another sex almost, useless beings who never helped the world go round. He was for action always, work, activity, achievement — as he saw them. He remembered Straughan vaguely — Straughan, the ever impecunious, friend of his youth, always talking of colour, sound — mysterious, ineffective things. He even forgot what they had quarrelled about, if they *had* quarrelled at all even; or why they had gone apart all these years ago. And, certainly, he had forgotten any promise. Memory, as yet, only peeped round the corner of that huge curtain at him, tentatively, suggestively yet — he was obliged to admit it — somewhat winningly. He was conscious of this gentle, sweet seductiveness that now replaced his fear.

And, as he stood now at the open window, peering over huge London, Beauty came close and smote him between the eyes. She came blindingly, with her train of stars and clouds and perfumes. Night, mysterious, myriad-eyed, and flaming across her sea of haunted shadows, invaded his heart and shook him with her immemorial wonder and delight. He found no words, of course, to do the the new, unwonted sensations. He only knew that all his former dread, uneasiness, distress, and with them this idea of 'growth' that had seemed so repugnant to him, were merged, swept up, and gathered magnificently home into a wave of Beauty that enveloped him. 'See it ... and understand,' ran a secret inner whisper across his mind. He saw. He understood....

He went back and turned the lights out. Then he took his place again at that open window, drinking in the night. He saw a new world; a species of intoxication held him. He sighed ... as his thoughts blundered for expression among words and sentences that knew him not. But the delight was there, the wonder, the mystery. He watched, with heart alternately tightening and expanding, the transfiguring play of moon and shadow over the sea of buildings. He saw the dance of the hurrying clouds, the open patches into outer space, the veiling and unveiling of that ancient silvery face; and he caught strange whispers of the hierophantic, sacerdotal Power that had echoed down the world since Time began and dropped strange magic phrases into every poet's heart since first 'God dawned on Chaos' — the Beauty of the Night....

A long time passed — it may have been one hour, it may have been three — when at length he turned away and went slowly to his bedroom. A deep peace lay over him. Something quite new and blessed had crept into his life and thought. He could not quite understand it all. He only knew that it uplifted. There was no longer the least sign of affliction or distress. Even the inevitable reaction that, of course, set in could not destroy that.

And then, as he lay in bed, nearing the borderland of sleep, suddenly and without any obvious suggestion to bring it, he remembered another thing. He remembered the promise. Memory got past the big curtain for an instant, and showed her face. She looked into his eyes. It must have been a dozen years ago when Straughan and he had made that foolish, solemn promise that whoever died first should show himself, if possible, to the other.

He had utterly forgotten it — till now. But Straughan had not forgotten it. The letter came three weeks later, from India. That very evening Straughan had died — at nine o'clock. And he had come back — in the Beauty that he loved.

SAND

I

AS FELIX HENRIOT came through the streets that January night the fog was stifling, but when he reached his little flat upon the top floor there came a sound of wind. Wind was stirring about the world. It blew against his windows, but at first so faintly that he hardly noticed it. Then, with an abrupt rise and fall like a wailing voice that sought to claim attention, it called him. He peered through the window into the blurred darkness, listening.

There is no cry in the world like that of the homeless wind. A vague excitement, scarcely to be analysed, ran through his blood. The curtain of fog waved momentarily aside. Henriot fancied a star peeped down at him.

“It will change things a bit — at last,” he sighed, settling back into his chair. “It will bring movement!”

Already something in himself had changed. A restlessness, as of that wandering wind, woke in his heart — the desire to be off and away. Other things could rouse this wildness too: falling water, the singing of a bird, an odour of wood-fire, a glimpse of winding road. But the cry of wind, always searching, questioning, travelling the world’s great routes, remained ever the master-touch. High longing took his mood in hand. Mid seven millions he felt suddenly — lonely.

“I will arise and go now, for always night and day I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray, I hear it in the deep heart’s core.”

He murmured the words over softly to himself. The emotion that produced Innisfree passed strongly through him. He too would be over the hills and far away. He craved movement, change, adventure — somewhere far from shops and crowds and motor-’busses. For a week the fog had stifled London. This wind brought life.

Where should he go? Desire was long; his purse was short.

He glanced at his books, letters, newspapers. They had no interest now. Instead he listened. The panorama of other journeys rolled in colour through the little room, flying on one another's heels. Henriot enjoyed this remembered essence of his travels more than the travels themselves. The crying wind brought so many voices, all of them seductive:

There was a soft crashing of waves upon the Black Sea shores, where the huge Caucasus beckoned in the sky beyond; a rustling in the umbrella pines and cactus at Marseilles, whence magic steamers start about the world like flying dreams. He heard the plash of fountains upon Mount Ida's slopes, and the whisper of the tamarisk on Marathon. It was dawn once more upon the Ionian Sea, and he smelt the perfume of the Cyclades. Blue-veiled islands melted in the sunshine, and across the dewy lawns of Tempe, moistened by the spray of many waterfalls, he saw — Great Heavens above! — the dancing of white forms ... or was it only mist the sunshine painted against Pelion?... "Methought, among the lawns together, we wandered underneath the young grey dawn. And multitudes of dense white fleecy clouds shepherded by the slow, unwilling wind...."

And then, into his stuffy room, slipped the singing perfume of a wall-flower on a ruined tower, and with it the sweetness of hot ivy. He heard the "yellow bees in the ivy bloom." Wind whipped over the open hills — this very wind that laboured drearily through the London fog.

And — he was caught. The darkness melted from the city. The fog whisked off into an azure sky. The roar of traffic turned into booming of the sea. There was a whistling among cordage, and the floor swayed to and fro. He saw a sailor touch his cap and pocket the two-franc piece. The syren hooted — ominous sound that had started him on many a journey of adventure — and the roar of London became mere insignificant clatter of a child's toy carriages.

He loved that syren's call; there was something deep and pitiless in it. It drew the wanderers forth from cities everywhere: "Leave your known world behind you, and come with me for better or for worse! The anchor is up; it is too late to change. Only — beware! You shall know curious things — and alone!"

Henriot stirred uneasily in his chair. He turned with sudden energy to the shelf of guide-books, maps and time-tables — possessions he most valued in the whole room. He was a happy-go-lucky, adventure-loving soul, careless of common standards, athirst ever for the new and strange.

"That's the best of having a cheap flat," he laughed, "and no ties in the world. I can turn the key and disappear. No one cares or knows — no one but the thieving caretaker. And he's long ago found out that there's nothing here worth taking!"

There followed then no lengthy indecision. Preparation was even shorter still. He was always ready for a move, and his sojourn in cities was but breathing-space while he gathered pennies for further wanderings. An enormous kit-bag — sack-shaped, very worn and dirty — emerged speedily from the bottom of a cupboard in the wall. It was of limitless capacity. The key and padlock rattled in its depths. Cigarette ashes covered everything while he stuffed it full of ancient, indescribable garments. And his voice, singing of those "yellow bees in the ivy bloom," mingled with the crying of the rising wind about his windows. His restlessness had disappeared by magic.

This time, however, there could be no haunted Pelion, nor shady groves of Tempe, for he lived in sophisticated times when money markets regulated movement sternly. Travelling was only for the rich; mere wanderers must pig it. He remembered instead an opportune invitation to the Desert. "Objective" invitation, his genial hosts had called it, knowing his hatred of convention. And Helouan danced into letters of brilliance upon the inner map of his mind. For Egypt had ever held his spirit in thrall, though as yet he had tried in vain to touch the great buried soul of her. The excavators, the Egyptologists, the archaeologists most of all, plastered her grey ancient face with labels like hotel advertisements on travellers' portmanteaux. They told where she had come from last, but nothing of what she dreamed and thought and loved. The heart of Egypt lay beneath the sand, and the trifling robbery of little details that poked forth from tombs and temples brought no true revelation of her stupendous spiritual splendour. Henriot, in his youth, had searched and dived among what material he could find, believing once — or half believing — that the ceremonial of that ancient system veiled a weight of symbol that was reflected from genuine supersensual knowledge. The rituals, now taken literally, and so pityingly explained away, had once been genuine pathways of approach. But never yet, and least of all in his previous visits to Egypt itself, had he discovered one single person, worthy of speech, who caught at his idea. “Curious,” they said, then turned away — to go on digging in the sand. Sand smothered her world to-day. Excavators discovered skeletons. Museums everywhere stored them — grinning, literal relics that told nothing.

But now, while he packed and sang, these hopes of enthusiastic younger days stirred again — because the emotion that gave them birth was real and true in him. Through the morning mists upon the Nile an old pyramid bowed hugely at him across London roofs: “Come,” he heard its awful whisper beneath the ceiling, “I have things to show you, and to tell.” He saw the flock of them sailing the Desert like weird grey solemn ships that make no earthly port. And he imagined them as one: multiple expressions of some single unearthly portent they adumbrated in mighty form — dead symbols of some spiritual conception long vanished from the world.

“I mustn’t dream like this,” he laughed, “or I shall get absent-minded and pack fire-tongs instead of boots. It looks like a jumble sale already!” And he stood on a heap of things to wedge them down still tighter.

But the pictures would not cease. He saw the kites circling high in the blue air. A couple of white vultures flapped lazily away over shining miles. Felucca sails, like giant wings emerging from the ground, curved towards him from the Nile. The palm-trees dropped long shadows over Memphis. He felt the delicious, drenching heat, and the Khamasin, that over-wind from Nubia, brushed his very cheeks. In the little gardens the mish-mish was in bloom.... He smelt the Desert ... grey sepulchre of cancelled cycles.... The stillness of her interminable reaches dropped down upon old London....

The magic of the sand stole round him in its silent-footed tempest.

And while he struggled with that strange, capacious sack, the piles of clothing ran into shapes of gleaming Bedouin faces; London garments settled down with the mournful sound of camels’ feet, half dropping wind, half water flowing underground — sound that old Time has brought over into modern life and left a moment for our wonder and perhaps our tears.

He rose at length with the excitement of some deep enchantment in his eyes. The thought of Egypt plunged ever so deeply into him, carrying him into depths where he found it difficult to breathe, so strangely far away it seemed, yet indefinably familiar. He lost his way. A touch of fear came with it.

“A sack like that is the wonder of the world,” he laughed again, kicking the unwieldy, sausage-shaped monster into a corner of the room, and sitting down to write the thrilling labels: “Felix Henriot, Alexandria *via* Marseilles.” But his pen blotted the letters; there was sand in it. He rewrote the words. Then he remembered a dozen things he had left out. Impatiently, yet with confusion somewhere, he stuffed them in. They ran away into shifting heaps; they disappeared; they emerged suddenly again. It was like packing hot, dry, flowing sand. From the pockets of a coat — he had worn it last summer down Dorset way — out trickled sand. There was sand in his mind and thoughts.

And his dreams that night were full of winds, the old sad winds of Egypt, and of moving, sifting sand. Arabs and Afreets danced amazingly together across dunes he could never reach. For he could not follow fast enough. Something infinitely older than these ever caught his feet and held him back. A million tiny fingers stung and pricked him. Something flung a veil before his eyes. Once it touched him — his face and hands and neck. “Stay here with us,” he heard a host of muffled voices crying, but their sound was smothered, buried, rising through the ground. A myriad throats were choked. Till, at last, with a violent effort he turned and seized it. And then the thing he grasped at slipped between his fingers and ran easily away. It had a grey and yellow face, and it moved through all its parts. It flowed as water flows, and yet was solid. It was centuries old.

He cried out to it. “Who are you? What is your name? I surely know you ... but I have forgotten ...?”

And it stopped, turning from far away its great uncovered countenance of nameless colouring. He caught a voice. It rolled and boomed and whispered like the wind. And then he woke, with a curious shaking in his heart, and a little touch of chilly perspiration on the skin.

But the voice seemed in the room still — close beside him:

“I am the Sand,” he heard, before it died away.

And next he realised that the glitter of Paris lay behind him, and a steamer was taking him with much unnecessary motion across a sparkling sea towards Alexandria. Gladly he saw the Riviera fade below the horizon, with its hard bright sunshine, treacherous winds, and its smear of rich, conventional English. All restlessness now had left him. True vagabond still at forty, he only felt the unrest and discomfort of life when caught in the network of routine and rigid streets, no chance of breaking loose. He was off again at last, money scarce enough indeed, but the joy of wandering expressing itself in happy emotions of release. Every warning of calculation was stifled. He thought of the American woman who walked out of her Long Island house one summer's day to look at a passing sail — and was gone eight years before she walked in again. Eight years of roving travel! He had always felt respect and admiration for that woman.

For Felix Henriot, with his admixture of foreign blood, was philosopher as well as vagabond, a strong poetic and religious strain sometimes breaking out through fissures in his complex nature. He had seen much life; had read many books. The passionate desire of youth to solve the world's big riddles had given place to a resignation filled to the brim with wonder. Anything *might* be true. Nothing surprised him. The most outlandish beliefs, for all he knew, might fringe truth somewhere. He had escaped that cheap cynicism with which disappointed men soothe their vanity when they realise that an intelligible explanation of the universe lies beyond their powers. He no longer expected final answers.

For him, even the smallest journeys held the spice of some adventure; all minutes were loaded with enticing potentialities. And they shaped for themselves somehow a dramatic form. "It's like a story," his friends said when he told his travels. It always was a story.

But the adventure that lay waiting for him where the silent streets of little Helouan kiss the great Desert's lips, was of a different kind to any Henriot had yet encountered. Looking back, he has often asked himself, "How in the world can I accept it?"

And, perhaps, he never yet has accepted it. It was sand that brought it. For the Desert, the stupendous thing that mothers little Helouan, produced it.

II

He slipped through Cairo with the same relief that he left the Riviera, resenting its social vulgarity so close to the imperial aristocracy of the Desert; he settled down into the peace of soft and silent little Helouan. The hotel in which he had a room on the top floor had been formerly a Khedivial Palace. It had the air of a palace still. He felt himself in a country-house, with lofty ceilings, cool and airy corridors, spacious halls. Soft-footed Arabs attended to his wants; white walls let in light and air without a sign of heat; there was a feeling of a large, spread tent pitched on the very sand; and the wind that stirred the oleanders in the shady gardens also crept in to rustle the palm leaves of his favourite corner seat. Through the large windows where once the Khedive held high court, the sunshine blazed upon vistaed leagues of Desert.

And from his bedroom windows he watched the sun dip into gold and crimson behind the swelling Libyan sands. This side of the pyramids he saw the Nile meander among palm groves and tilled fields. Across his balcony railings the Egyptian stars trooped down beside his very bed, shaping old constellations for his dreams; while, to the south, he looked out upon the vast untamable Body of the sands that carpeted the world for thousands of miles towards Upper Egypt, Nubia, and the dread Sahara itself. He wondered again why people thought it necessary to go so far afield to know the Desert. Here, within half an hour of Cairo, it lay breathing solemnly at his very doors.

For little Helouan, caught thus between the shoulders of the Libyan and Arabian Deserts, is utterly sand-haunted. The Desert lies all round it like a sea. Henriot felt he never could escape from it, as he moved about the island whose coasts are washed with sand. Down each broad and shining street the two end houses framed a vista of its dim immensity — glimpses of shimmering blue, or flame-touched purple. There were stretches of deep sea-green as well, far off upon its bosom. The streets were open channels of approach, and the eye ran down them as along the tube of a telescope laid to catch incredible distance out of space. Through them the Desert reached in with long, thin feelers towards the village. Its Being flooded into Helouan, and over it. Past walls and houses, churches and hotels, the sea of Desert pressed in silently with its myriad soft feet of sand. It poured in everywhere, through crack and slit and crannie. These were reminders of possession and ownership. And every passing wind that lifted eddies of dust at the street corners were messages from the quiet, powerful Thing that permitted Helouan to lie and dream so peacefully in the sunshine. Mere artificial oasis, its existence was temporary, held on lease, just for ninety-nine centuries or so.

This sea idea became insistent. For, in certain lights, and especially in the brief, bewildering dusk, the Desert rose — swaying towards the small white houses. The waves of it ran for fifty miles without a break. It was too deep for foam or surface agitation, yet it knew the swell of tides. And underneath flowed resolute currents, linking distance to the centre. These many deserts were really one. A storm, just retreated, had tossed Helouan upon the shore and left it there to dry; but any morning he would wake to find it had been carried off again into the depths. Some fragment, at least, would disappear. The grim Mokattam Hills were rollers that ever threatened to topple down and submerge the sandy bar that men called Helouan.

Being soundless, and devoid of perfume, the Desert's message reached him through two senses only — sight and touch; chiefly, of course, the former. Its invasion was concentrated through the eyes. And vision, thus uncorrected, went what pace it pleased. The Desert played with him. Sand stole into his being — through the eyes.

And so obsessing was this majesty of its close presence, that Henriot sometimes wondered how people dared their little social activities within its very sight and hearing; how they played golf and tennis upon reclaimed edges of its face, picnicked so blithely hard upon its frontiers, and danced at night while this stern, unfathomable Thing lay breathing just beyond the trumpery walls that kept it out. The challenge of their shallow admiration seemed presumptuous, almost provocative. Their pursuit of pleasure suggested insolent indifference. They ran fool-hardy hazards, he felt; for there was no worship in their vulgar hearts. With a mental shudder, sometimes he watched the cheap tourist horde go laughing, chattering past within view of its ancient, half-closed eyes. It was like defying deity.

For, to his stirred imagination the sublimity of the Desert dwarfed humanity. These people had been wiser to choose another place for the flaunting of their tawdry insignificance. Any minute this Wilderness, "huddled in grey annihilation," might awake and notice them ...!

In his own hotel were several “smart,” so-called “Society” people who emphasised the protest in him to the point of definite contempt. Overdressed, the latest worldly novel under their arms, they strutted the narrow pavements of their tiny world, immensely pleased with themselves. Their vacuous minds expressed themselves in the slang of their exclusive circle — value being the element excluded. The pettiness of their outlook hardly distressed him — he was too familiar with it at home — but their essential vulgarity, their innate ugliness, seemed more than usually offensive in the grandeur of its present setting. Into the mighty sands they took the latest London scandal, gabbling it over even among the Tombs and Temples. And “it was to laugh,” the pains they spent wondering whom they might condescend to know, never dreaming that they themselves were not worth knowing. Against the background of the noble Desert their titles seemed the cap and bells of clowns.

And Henriot, knowing some of them personally, could not always escape their insipid company. Yet he was the gainer. They little guessed how their commonness heightened contrast, set mercilessly thus beside the strange, eternal beauty of the sand.

Occasionally the protest in his soul betrayed itself in words, which of course they did not understand. “He is so clever, isn’t he?” And then, having relieved his feelings, he would comfort himself characteristically:

“The Desert has not noticed them. The Sand is not aware of their existence. How should the sea take note of rubbish that lies above its tide-line?”

For Henriot drew near to its great shifting altars in an attitude of worship. The wilderness made him kneel in heart. Its shining reaches led to the oldest Temple in the world, and every journey that he made was like a sacrament. For him the Desert was a consecrated place. It was sacred.

And his tactful hosts, knowing his peculiarities, left their house open to him when he cared to come — they lived upon the northern edge of the oasis — and he was as free as though he were absolutely alone. He blessed them; he rejoiced that he had come. Little Helouan accepted him. The Desert knew that he was there.

From his corner of the big dining-room he could see the other guests, but his roving eye always returned to the figure of a solitary man who sat at an adjoining table, and whose personality stirred his interest. While affecting to look elsewhere, he studied him as closely as might be. There was something about the stranger that touched his curiosity — a certain air of expectation that he wore. But it was more than that: it was anticipation, apprehension in it somewhere. The man was nervous, uneasy. His restless way of suddenly looking about him proved it. Henriot tried every one else in the room as well; but, though his thought settled on others too, he always came back to the figure of this solitary being opposite, who ate his dinner as if afraid of being seen, and glanced up sometimes as if fearful of being watched. Henriot's curiosity, before he knew it, became suspicion. There was mystery here. The table, he noticed, was laid for two.

"Is he an actor, a priest of some strange religion, an enquiry agent, or just — a crank?" was the thought that first occurred to him. And the question suggested itself without amusement. The impression of subterfuge and caution he conveyed left his observer unsatisfied.

The face was clean shaven, dark, and strong; thick hair, straight yet bushy, was slightly unkempt; it was streaked with grey; and an unexpected mobility when he smiled ran over the features that he seemed to hold rigid by deliberate effort. The man was cut to no quite common measure. Henriot jumped to an intuitive conclusion: "He's not here for pleasure or merely sight-seeing. Something serious has brought him out to Egypt." For the face combined too ill-assorted qualities: an obstinate tenacity that might even mean brutality, and was certainly repulsive, yet, with it, an undecipherable dreaminess betrayed by lines of the mouth, but above all in the very light blue eyes, so rarely raised. Those eyes, he felt, had looked upon unusual things; "dreaminess" was not an adequate description; "searching" conveyed it better. The true source of the queer impression remained elusive. And hence, perhaps, the incongruous marriage in the face — mobility laid upon a matter-of-fact foundation underneath. The face showed conflict.

And Henriot, watching him, felt decidedly intrigued. "I'd like to know that man, and all about him." His name, he learned later, was Richard Vance; from Birmingham; a business man. But it was not the Birmingham he wished to know; it was the — other: cause of the elusive, dreamy searching.

Though facing one another at so short a distance, their eyes, however, did not meet. And this, Henriot well knew, was a sure sign that he himself was also under observation. Richard Vance, from Birmingham, was equally taking careful note of Felix Henriot, from London.

Thus, he could wait his time. They would come together later. An opportunity would certainly present itself. The first links in a curious chain had already caught; soon the chain would tighten, pull as though by chance, and bring their lives into one and the same circle. Wondering in particular for what kind of a companion the second cover was laid, Henriot felt certain that their eventual coming together was inevitable. He possessed this kind of divination from first impressions, and not uncommonly it proved correct.

Following instinct, therefore, he took no steps towards acquaintance, and for several days, owing to the fact that he dined frequently with his hosts, he saw nothing more of Richard Vance, the business man from Birmingham. Then, one night, coming home late from his friend's house, he had passed along the great corridor, and was actually a step or so into his bedroom, when a drawling voice sounded close behind him. It was an unpleasant sound. It was very near him too —

“I beg your pardon, but have you, by any chance, such a thing as a compass you could lend me?”

The voice was so close that he started. Vance stood within touching distance of his body. He had stolen up like a ghostly Arab, must have followed him, too, some little distance, for further down the passage the light of an open door — he had passed it on his way — showed where he came from.

“Eh? I beg your pardon? A — compass, did you say?” He felt disconcerted for a moment. How short the man was, now that he saw him standing. Broad and powerful too. Henriot looked down upon his thick head of hair. The personality and voice repelled him. Possibly his face, caught unawares, betrayed this.

“Forgive my startling you,” said the other apologetically, while the softer expression danced in for a moment and disorganised the rigid set of the face. “The soft carpet, you know. I'm afraid you didn't hear my tread. I wondered” — he smiled again slightly at the nature of the request— “if — by any chance — you had a pocket compass you could lend me?”

“Ah, a compass, yes! Please don’t apologise. I believe I have one — if you’ll wait a moment. Come in, won’t you? I’ll have a look.”

The other thanked him but waited in the passage. Henriot, it so happened, had a compass, and produced it after a moment’s search.

“I am greatly indebted to you — if I may return it in the morning. You will forgive my disturbing you at such an hour. My own is broken, and I wanted — er — to find the true north.”

Henriot stammered some reply, and the man was gone. It was all over in a minute. He locked his door and sat down in his chair to think. The little incident had upset him, though for the life of him he could not imagine why. It ought by rights to have been almost ludicrous, yet instead it was the exact reverse — half threatening. Why should not a man want a compass? But, again, why should he? And at midnight? The voice, the eyes, the near presence — what did they bring that set his nerves thus asking unusual questions? This strange impression that something grave was happening, something unearthly — how was it born exactly? The man’s proximity came like a shock. It had made him start. He brought — thus the idea came unbidden to his mind — something with him that galvanised him quite absurdly, as fear does, or delight, or great wonder. There was a music in his voice too — a certain — well, he could only call it lilt, that reminded him of plainsong, intoning, chanting. Drawling was *not* the word at all.

He tried to dismiss it as imagination, but it would not be dismissed. The disturbance in himself was caused by something not imaginary, but real. And then, for the first time, he discovered that the man had brought a faint, elusive suggestion of perfume with him, an aromatic odour, that made him think of priests and churches. The ghost of it still lingered in the air. Ah, here then was the origin of the notion that his voice had chanted: it was surely the suggestion of incense. But incense, intoning, a compass to find the true north — at midnight in a Desert hotel!

A touch of uneasiness ran through the curiosity and excitement that he felt.

And he undressed for bed. “Confound my old imagination,” he thought, “what tricks it plays me! It’ll keep me awake!”

But the questions, once started in his mind, continued. He must find explanation of one kind or another before he could lie down and sleep, and he found it at length in — the stars. The man was an astronomer of sorts; possibly an astrologer into the bargain! Why not? The stars were wonderful above Helouan. Was there not an observatory on the Mokattam Hills, too, where tourists could use the telescopes on privileged days? He had it at last. He even stole out on to his balcony to see if the stranger perhaps was looking through some wonderful apparatus at the heavens. Their rooms were on the same side. But the shuttered windows revealed no stooping figure with eyes glued to a telescope. The stars blinked in their many thousands down upon the silent desert. The night held neither sound nor movement. There was a cool breeze blowing across the Nile from the Lybian Sands. It nipped; and he stepped back quickly into the room again. Drawing the mosquito curtains carefully about the bed, he put the light out and turned over to sleep.

And sleep came quickly, contrary to his expectations, though it was a light and surface sleep. That last glimpse of the darkened Desert lying beneath the Egyptian stars had touched him with some hand of awful power that ousted the first, lesser excitement. It calmed and soothed him in one sense, yet in another, a sense he could not understand, it caught him in a net of deep, deep feelings whose mesh, while infinitely delicate, was utterly stupendous. His nerves this deeper emotion left alone: it reached instead to something infinite in him that mere nerves could neither deal with nor interpret. The soul awoke and whispered in him while his body slept.

And the little, foolish dreams that ran to and fro across this veil of surface sleep brought oddly tangled pictures of things quite tiny and at the same time of others that were mighty beyond words. With these two counters Nightmare played. They interwove. There was the figure of this dark-faced man with the compass, measuring the sky to find the true north, and there were hints of giant Presences that hovered just outside some curious outline that he traced upon the ground, copied in some nightmare fashion from the heavens. The excitement caused by his visitor’s singular request mingled with the profounder sensations his final look at the stars and Desert stirred. The two were somehow inter-related.

Some hours later, before this surface sleep passed into genuine slumber, Henriot woke — with an appalling feeling that the Desert had come creeping into his room and now stared down upon him where he lay in bed.

The wind was crying audibly about the walls outside. A faint, sharp tapping came against the window panes.

He sprang instantly out of bed, not yet awake enough to feel actual alarm, yet with the nightmare touch still close enough to cause a sort of feverish, loose bewilderment. He switched the lights on. A moment later he knew the meaning of that curious tapping, for the rising wind was flinging tiny specks of sand against the glass. The idea that they had summoned him belonged, of course, to dream.

He opened the window, and stepped out on to the balcony. The stone was very cold under his bare feet. There was a wash of wind all over him. He saw the sheet of glimmering, pale desert near and far; and something stung his skin below the eyes.

“The sand,” he whispered, “again the sand; always the sand. Waking or sleeping, the sand is everywhere — nothing but sand, sand, Sand....”

He rubbed his eyes. It was like talking in his sleep, talking to Someone who had questioned him just before he woke. But was he really properly awake? It seemed next day that he had dreamed it. Something enormous, with rustling skirts of sand, had just retreated far into the Desert. Sand went with it — flowing, trailing, smothering the world. The wind died down.

And Henriot went back to sleep, caught instantly away into unconsciousness; covered, blinded, swept over by this spreading thing of reddish brown with the great, grey face, whose Being was colossal yet quite tiny, and whose fingers, wings and eyes were countless as the stars.

But all night long it watched and waited, rising to peer above the little balcony, and sometimes entering the room and piling up beside his very pillow. He dreamed of Sand.

III

For some days Henriot saw little of the man who came from Birmingham and pushed curiosity to a climax by asking for a compass in the middle of the night. For one thing, he was a good deal with his friends upon the other side of Helouan, and for another, he slept several nights in the Desert.

He loved the gigantic peace the Desert gave him. The world was forgotten there; and not the world merely, but all memory of it. Everything faded out. The soul turned inwards upon itself.

An Arab boy and donkey took out sleeping-bag, food and water to the Wadi Hof, a desolate gorge about an hour eastwards. It winds between cliffs whose summits rise some thousand feet above the sea. It opens suddenly, cut deep into the swaying world of level plateaux and undulating hills. It moves about too; he never found it in the same place twice — like an arm of the Desert that shifted with the changing lights. Here he watched dawns and sunsets, slept through the mid-day heat, and enjoyed the unearthly colouring that swept Day and Night across the huge horizons. In solitude the Desert soaked down into him. At night the jackals cried in the darkness round his cautiously-fed camp fire — small, because wood had to be carried — and in the day-time kites circled overhead to inspect him, and an occasional white vulture flapped across the blue. The weird desolation of this rocky valley, he thought, was like the scenery of the moon. He took no watch with him, and the arrival of the donkey boy an hour after sunrise came almost from another planet, bringing things of time and common life out of some distant gulf where they had lain forgotten among lost ages.

The short hour of twilight brought, too, a bewitchment into the silence that was a little less than comfortable. Full light or darkness he could manage, but this time of half things made him want to shut his eyes and hide. Its effect stepped over imagination. The mind got lost. He could not understand it. For the cliffs and boulders of discoloured limestone shone then with an inward glow that signalled to the Desert with veiled lanterns. The misshapen hills, carved by wind and rain into ominous outlines, stirred and nodded. In the morning light they retired into themselves, asleep. But at dusk the tide retreated. They rose from the sea, emerging naked, threatening. They ran together and joined shoulders, the entire army of them. And the glow of their sandy bodies, self-luminous, continued even beneath the stars. Only the moonlight drowned it. For the moonrise over the Mokattam Hills brought a white, grand loveliness that drenched the entire Desert. It drew a marvellous sweetness from the sand. It shone across a world as yet unfinished, whereon no life might show itself for ages yet to come. He was alone then upon an empty star, before the creation of things that breathed and moved.

What impressed him, however, more than everything else was the enormous vitality that rose out of all this apparent death. There was no hint of the melancholy that belongs commonly to flatness; the sadness of wide, monotonous landscape was not here. The endless repetition of sweeping vale and plateau brought infinity within measurable comprehension. He grasped a definite meaning in the phrase "world without end": the Desert had no end and no beginning. It gave him a sense of eternal peace, the silent peace that star-fields know. Instead of subduing the soul with bewilderment, it inspired with courage, confidence, hope. Through this sand which was the wreck of countless geological ages, rushed life that was terrific and uplifting, too huge to include melancholy, too deep to betray itself in movement. Here was the stillness of eternity. Behind the spread grey masque of apparent death lay stores of accumulated life, ready to break forth at any point. In the Desert he felt himself absolutely royal.

And this contrast of Life, veiling itself in Death, was a contradiction that somehow intoxicated. The Desert exhilaration never left him. He was never alone. A companionship of millions went with him, and he *felt* the Desert close, as stars are close to one another, or grains of sand.

It was the Khamasin, the hot wind bringing sand, that drove him in — with the feeling that these few days and nights had been immeasurable, and that he had been away a thousand years. He came back with the magic of the Desert in his blood, hotel-life tasteless and insipid by comparison. To human impressions thus he was fresh and vividly sensitive. His being, cleaned and sensitized by pure grandeur, "felt" people — for a time at any rate — with an uncommon sharpness of receptive judgment. He returned to a life somehow mean and meagre, resuming insignificance with his dinner jacket. Out with the sand he had been regal; now, like a slave, he strutted self-conscious and reduced.

But this imperial standard of the Desert stayed a little time beside him, its purity focussing judgment like a lens. The specks of smaller emotions left it clear at first, and as his eye wandered vaguely over the people assembled in the dining-room, it was arrested with a vivid shock upon two figures at the little table facing him.

He had forgotten Vance, the Birmingham man who sought the North at midnight with a pocket compass. He now saw him again, with an intuitive discernment entirely fresh. Before memory brought up her clouding associations, some brilliance flashed a light upon him. “That man,” Henriot thought, “might have come with me. He would have understood and loved it!” But the thought was really this — a moment’s reflection spread it, rather: “He belongs somewhere to the Desert; the Desert brought him out here.” And, again, hidden swiftly behind it like a movement running below water— “What does he want with it? What is the deeper motive he conceals? For there is a deeper motive; and it *is* concealed.”

But it was the woman seated next him who absorbed his attention really, even while this thought flashed and went its way. The empty chair was occupied at last. Unlike his first encounter with the man, she looked straight at him. Their eyes met fully. For several seconds there was steady mutual inspection, while her penetrating stare, intent without being rude, passed searchingly all over his face. It was disconcerting. Crumbling his bread, he looked equally hard at her, unable to turn away, determined not to be the first to shift his gaze. And when at length she lowered her eyes he felt that many things had happened, as in a long period of intimate conversation. Her mind had judged him through and through. Questions and answer flashed. They were no longer strangers. For the rest of dinner, though he was careful to avoid direct inspection, he was aware that she felt his presence and was secretly speaking with him. She asked questions beneath her breath. The answers rose with the quickened pulses in his blood. Moreover, she explained Richard Vance. It was this woman’s power that shone reflected in the man. She was the one who knew the big, unusual things. Vance merely echoed the rush of her vital personality.

This was the first impression that he got — from the most striking, curious face he had ever seen in a woman. It remained very near him all through the meal: she had moved to his table, it seemed she sat beside him. Their minds certainly knew contact from that moment.

It is never difficult to credit strangers with the qualities and knowledge that oneself craves for, and no doubt Henriot’s active fancy went busily to work. But, none the less, this thing remained and grew: that this woman was aware of the hidden things of Egypt he had always longed to know. There was knowledge and guidance she could impart. Her soul was searching among ancient things. Her face brought the Desert back into his thoughts. And with it came — the sand.

Here was the flash. The sight of her restored the peace and splendour he had left behind him in his Desert camps. The rest, of course, was what his imagination constructed upon this slender basis. Only, — not all of it was imagination.

Now, Henriot knew little enough of women, and had no pose of "understanding" them. His experience was of the slightest; the love and veneration felt for his own mother had set the entire sex upon the heights. His affairs with women, if so they may be called, had been transient — all but those of early youth, which having never known the devastating test of fulfilment, still remained ideal and superb. There was unconscious humour in his attitude — from a distance; for he regarded women with wonder and respect, as puzzles that sweetened but complicated life, might even endanger it. He certainly was not a marrying man! But now, as he felt the presence of this woman so deliberately possess him, there came over him two clear, strong messages, each vivid with certainty. One was that banal suggestion of familiarity claimed by lovers and the like — he had often heard of it— "I have known that woman before; I have met her ages ago somewhere; she is strangely familiar to me"; and the other, growing out of it almost: "Have nothing to do with her; she will bring you trouble and confusion; avoid her, and be warned"; — in fact, a distinct presentiment.

Yet, although Henriot dismissed both impressions as having no shred of evidence to justify them, the original clear judgment, as he studied her extraordinary countenance, persisted through all denials The familiarity, and the presentiment, remained. There also remained this other — an enormous imaginative leap! — that she could teach him "Egypt."

He watched her carefully, in a sense fascinated. He could only describe the face as black, so dark it was with the darkness of great age. Elderly was the obvious, natural word; but elderly described the features only. The expression of the face wore centuries. Nor was it merely the coal-black eyes that betrayed an ancient, age-travelled soul behind them. The entire presentment mysteriously conveyed it. This woman's heart knew long-forgotten things — the thought kept beating up against him. There were cheek-bones, oddly high, that made him think involuntarily of the well-advertised Pharaoh, Ramases; a square, deep jaw; and an aquiline nose that gave the final touch of power. For the power undeniably was there, and while the general effect had grimness in it, there was neither harshness nor any forbidding touch about it. There was an implacable sternness in the set of lips and jaw, and, most curious of all, the eyelids over the steady eyes of black were level as a ruler. This level framing made the woman’s stare remarkable beyond description. Henriot thought of an idol carved in stone, stone hard and black, with eyes that stared across the sand into a world of things non-human, very far away, forgotten of men. The face was finely ugly. This strange dark beauty flashed flame about it.

And, as the way ever was with him, Henriot next fell to constructing the possible lives of herself and her companion, though without much success. Imagination soon stopped dead. She was not old enough to be Vance’s mother, and assuredly she was not his wife. His interest was more than merely piqued — it was puzzled uncommonly. What was the contrast that made the man seem beside her — vile? Whence came, too, the impression that she exercised some strong authority, though never directly exercised, that held him at her mercy? How did he guess that the man resented it, yet did not dare oppose, and that, apparently acquiescing good-humouredly, his will was deliberately held in abeyance, and that he waited sulkily, biding his time? There was furtiveness in every gesture and expression. A hidden motive lurked in him; unworthiness somewhere; he was determined yet ashamed. He watched her ceaselessly and with such uncanny closeness.

Henriot imagined he divined all this. He leaped to the guess that his expenses were being paid. A good deal more was being paid besides. She was a rich relation, from whom he had expectations; he was serving his seven years, ashamed of his servitude, ever calculating escape — but, perhaps, no ordinary escape. A faint shudder ran over him. He drew in the reins of imagination.

Of course, the probabilities were that he was hopelessly astray — one usually is on such occasions — but this time, it so happened, he was singularly right. Before one thing only his ready invention stopped every time. This vileness, this notion of unworthiness in Vance, could not be negative merely. A man with that face was no inactive weakling. The motive he was at such pains to conceal, betraying its existence by that very fact, moved, surely, towards aggressive action. Disguised, it never slept. Vance was sharply on the alert. He had a plan deep out of sight. And Henriot remembered how the man’s soft approach along the carpeted corridor had made him start. He recalled the quasi shock it gave him. He thought again of the feeling of discomfort he had experienced.

Next, his eager fancy sought to plumb the business these two had together in Egypt — in the Desert. For the Desert, he felt convinced, had brought them out. But here, though he constructed numerous explanations, another barrier stopped him. Because he *knew*. This woman was in touch with that aspect of ancient Egypt he himself had ever sought in vain; and not merely with stones the sand had buried so deep, but with the meanings they once represented, buried so utterly by the sands of later thought.

And here, being ignorant, he found no clue that could lead to any satisfactory result, for he possessed no knowledge that might guide him. He floundered — until Fate helped him. And the instant Fate helped him, the warning and presentiment he had dismissed as fanciful, became real again. He hesitated. Caution acted. He would think twice before taking steps to form acquaintance. “Better not,” thought whispered. “Better leave them alone, this queer couple. They’re after things that won’t do you any good.” This idea of mischief, almost of danger, in their purposes was oddly insistent; for what could possibly convey it? But, while he hesitated, Fate, who sent the warning, pushed him at the same time into the circle of their lives: at first tentatively — he might still have escaped; but soon urgently — curiosity led him inexorably towards the end.

IV

It was so simple a manoeuvre by which Fate began the innocent game. The woman left a couple of books behind her on the table one night, and Henriot, after a moment’s hesitation, took them out after her. He knew the titles — *The House of the Master*, and *The House of the Hidden Places*, both singular interpretations of the Pyramids that once had held his own mind spellbound. Their ideas had been since disproved, if he remembered rightly, yet the titles were a clue — a clue to that imaginative part of his mind that was so busy constructing theories and had found its stride. Loose sheets of paper, covered with notes in a minute handwriting, lay between the pages; but these, of course, he did not read, noticing only that they were written round designs of various kinds — intricate designs.

He discovered Vance in a corner of the smoking-lounge. The woman had disappeared.

Vance thanked him politely. “My aunt is so forgetful sometimes,” he said, and took them with a covert eagerness that did not escape the other’s observation. He folded up the sheets and put them carefully in his pocket. On one there was an ink-sketched map, crammed with detail, that might well have referred to some portion of the Desert. The points of the compass stood out boldly at the bottom. There were involved geometrical designs again. Henriot saw them. They exchanged, then, the commonplaces of conversation, but these led to nothing further. Vance was nervous and betrayed impatience. He presently excused himself and left the lounge. Ten minutes later he passed through the outer hall, the woman beside him, and the pair of them, wrapped up in cloak and ulster, went out into the night. At the door, Vance turned and threw a quick, investigating glance in his direction. There seemed a hint of questioning in that glance; it might almost have been a tentative invitation. But, also, he wanted to see if their exit had been particularly noticed — and by whom.

This, briefly told, was the first manoeuvre by which Fate introduced them. There was nothing in it. The details were so insignificant, so slight the conversation, so meagre the pieces thus added to Henriot’s imaginative structure. Yet they somehow built it up and made it solid; the outline in his mind began to stand foursquare. That writing, those designs, the manner of the man, their going out together, the final curious look — each and all betrayed points of a hidden thing. Subconsciously he was excavating their buried purposes. The sand was shifting. The concentration of his mind incessantly upon them removed it grain by grain and speck by speck. Tips of the smothered thing emerged. Presently a subsidence would follow with a rush and light would blaze upon its skeleton. He felt it stirring underneath his feet — this flowing movement of light, dry, heaped-up sand. It was always — sand.

Then other incidents of a similar kind came about, clearing the way to a natural acquaintanceship. Henriot watched the process with amusement, yet with another feeling too that was only a little less than anxiety. A keen observer, no detail escaped him; he saw the forces of their lives draw closer. It made him think of the devices of young people who desire to know one another, yet cannot get a proper introduction. Fate condescended to such little tricks. They wanted a third person, he began to feel. A third was necessary to some plan they had on hand, and — they waited to see if he could fill the place. This woman, with whom he had yet exchanged no single word, seemed so familiar to him, well known for years. They weighed and watched him, wondering if he would do.

None of the devices were too obviously used, but at length Henriot picked up so many forgotten articles, and heard so many significant phrases, casually let fall, that he began to feel like the villain in a machine-made play, where the hero for ever drops clues his enemy is intended to discover.

Introduction followed inevitably. “My aunt can tell you; she knows Arabic perfectly.” He had been discussing the meaning of some local name or other with a neighbour after dinner, and Vance had joined them. The neighbour moved away; these two were left standing alone, and he accepted a cigarette from the other’s case. There was a rustle of skirts behind them. “Here she comes,” said Vance; “you will let me introduce you.” He did not ask for Henriot’s name; he had already taken the trouble to find it out — another little betrayal, and another clue.

It was in a secluded corner of the great hall, and Henriot turned to see the woman’s stately figure coming towards them across the thick carpet that deadened her footsteps. She came sailing up, her black eyes fixed upon his face. Very erect, head upright, shoulders almost squared, she moved wonderfully well; there was dignity and power in her walk. She was dressed in black, and her face was like the night. He found it impossible to say what lent her this air of impressiveness and solemnity that was almost majestic. But there *was* this touch of darkness and of power in the way she came that made him think of some sphinx-like figure of stone, some idol motionless in all its parts but moving as a whole, and gliding across — sand. Beneath those level lids her eyes stared hard at him. And a faint sensation of distress stirred in him deep, deep down. Where had he seen those eyes before?

He bowed, as she joined them, and Vance led the way to the armchairs in a corner of the lounge. The meeting, as the talk that followed, he felt, were all part of a preconceived plan. It had happened before. The woman, that is, was familiar to him — to some part of his being that had dropped stitches of old, old memory.

Lady Statham! At first the name had disappointed him. So many folk wear titles, as syllables in certain tongues wear accents — without them being mute, unnoticed, unpronounced. Nonentities, born to names, so often claim attention for their insignificance in this way. But this woman, had she been Jemima Jones, would have made the name distinguished and select. She was a big and sombre personality. Why was it, he wondered afterwards, that for a moment something in him shrank, and that his mind, metaphorically speaking, flung up an arm in self-protection? The instinct flashed and passed. But it seemed to him born of an automatic feeling that he must protect — not himself, but the woman from the man. There was confusion in it all; links were missing. He studied her intently. She was a woman who had none of the external feminine signals in either dress or manner, no graces, no little womanly hesitations and alarms, no daintiness, yet neither anything distinctly masculine. Her charm was strong, possessing; only he kept forgetting that he was talking to a — woman; and the thing she inspired in him included, with respect and wonder, somewhere also this curious hint of dread. This instinct to protect her fled as soon as it was born, for the interest of the conversation in which she so quickly plunged him obliterated all minor emotions whatsoever. Here, for the first time, he drew close to Egypt, the Egypt he had sought so long. It was not to be explained. He *felt* it.

Beginning with commonplaces, such as “You like Egypt? You find here what you expected?” she led him into better regions with “One finds here what one brings.” He knew the delightful experience of talking fluently on subjects he was at home in, and to some one who understood. The feeling at first that to this woman he could not say mere anythings, slipped into its opposite — that he could say everything. Strangers ten minutes ago, they were at once in deep and intimate talk together. He found his ideas readily followed, agreed with up to a point — the point which permits discussion to start from a basis of general accord towards speculation. In the excitement of ideas he neglected the uncomfortable note that had stirred his caution, forgot the warning too. Her mind, moreover, seemed known to him; he was often aware of what she was going to say before he actually heard it; the current of her thoughts struck a familiar gait, and more than once he experienced vividly again the odd sensation that it all had happened before. The very sentences and phrases with which she pointed the turns of her unusual ideas were never wholly unexpected.

For her ideas were decidedly unusual, in the sense that she accepted without question speculations not commonly deemed worth consideration at all, indeed not ordinarily even known. Henriot knew them, because he had read in many fields. It was the strength of her belief that fascinated him. She offered no apologies. She knew. And while he talked, she listening with folded arms and her black eyes fixed upon his own, Richard Vance watched with vigilant eyes and listened too, ceaselessly alert. Vance joined in little enough, however, gave no opinions, his attitude one of general acquiescence. Twice, when pauses of slackening interest made it possible, Henriot fancied he surprised another quality in this negative attitude. Interpreting it each time differently, he yet dismissed both interpretations with a smile. His imagination leaped so absurdly to violent conclusions. They were not tenable: Vance was neither her keeper, nor was he in some fashion a detective. Yet in his manner was sometimes this suggestion of the detective order. He watched with such deep attention, and he concealed it so clumsily with an affectation of careless indifference.

There is nothing more dangerous than that impulsive intimacy strangers sometimes adopt when an atmosphere of mutual sympathy takes them by surprise, for it is akin to the false frankness friends affect when telling "candidly" one another's faults. The mood is invariably regretted later. Henriot, however, yielded to it now with something like abandon. The pleasure of talking with this woman was so unexpected, and so keen.

For Lady Statham believed apparently in some Egypt of her dreams. Her interest was neither historical, archaeological, nor political. It was religious — yet hardly of this earth at all. The conversation turned upon the knowledge of the ancient Egyptians from an unearthly point of view, and even while he talked he was vaguely aware that it was *her* mind talking through his own. She drew out his ideas and made him say them. But this he was properly aware of only afterwards — that she had cleverly, mercilessly pumped him of all he had ever known or read upon the subject. Moreover, what Vance watched so intently was himself, and the reactions in himself this remarkable woman produced. That also he realised later.

His first impression that these two belonged to what may be called the "crank" order was justified by the conversation. But, at least, it was interesting crankiness, and the belief behind it made it even fascinating. Long before the end he surprised in her a more vital form of his own attitude that anything *may* be true, since knowledge has never yet found final answers to any of the biggest questions.

He understood, from sentences dropped early in the talk, that she was among those few “superstitious” folk who think that the old Egyptians came closer to reading the eternal riddles of the world than any others, and that their knowledge was a remnant of that ancient Wisdom Religion which existed in the superb, dark civilization of the sunken Atlantis, lost continent that once joined Africa to Mexico. Eighty thousand years ago the dim sands of Poseidonis, great island adjoining the main continent which itself had vanished a vast period before, sank down beneath the waves, and the entire known world to-day was descended from its survivors.

Hence the significant fact that all religions and “mythological” systems begin with a story of a flood — some cataclysmic upheaval that destroyed the world. Egypt itself was colonised by a group of Atlantean priests who brought their curious, deep knowledge with them. They had foreseen the cataclysm.

Lady Statham talked well, bringing into her great dream this strong, insistent quality of belief and fact. She knew, from Plato to Donelly, all that the minds of men have ever speculated upon the gorgeous legend. The evidence for such a sunken continent — Henriot had skimmed it too in years gone by — she made bewilderingly complete. He had heard Baconians demolish Shakespeare with an array of evidence equally overwhelming. It catches the imagination though not the mind. Yet out of her facts, as she presented them, grew a strange likelihood. The force of this woman’s personality, and her calm and quiet way of believing all she talked about, took her listener to some extent — further than ever before, certainly — into the great dream after her. And the dream, to say the least, was a picturesque one, laden with wonderful possibilities. For as she talked the spirit of old Egypt moved up, staring down upon him out of eyes lidded so curiously level. Hitherto all had prated to him of the Arabs, their ancient faith and customs, and the splendour of the Bedouins, those Princes of the Desert. But what he sought, barely confessed in words even to himself, was something older far than this. And this strange, dark woman brought it close. Deeps in his soul, long slumbering, awoke. He heard forgotten questions.

Only in this brief way could he attempt to sum up the storm she roused in him.

She carried him far beyond mere outline, however, though afterwards he recalled the details with difficulty. So much more was suggested than actually expressed. She contrived to make the general modern scepticism an evidence of cheap mentality. It was so easy; the depth it affects to conceal, mere emptiness. "We have tried all things, and found all wanting" — the mind, as measuring instrument, merely confessed inadequate. Various shrewd judgments of this kind increased his respect, although her acceptance went so far beyond his own. And, while the label of credulity refused to stick to her, her sense of imaginative wonder enabled her to escape that dreadful compromise, a man's mind in a woman's temperament. She fascinated him.

The spiritual worship of the ancient Egyptians, she held, was a symbolical explanation of things generally alluded to as the secrets of life and death; their knowledge was a remnant of the wisdom of Atlantis. Material relics, equally misunderstood, still stood to-day at Karnac, Stonehenge, and in the mysterious writings on buried Mexican temples and cities, so significantly akin to the hieroglyphics upon the Egyptian tombs.

"The one misinterpreted as literally as the other," she suggested, "yet both fragments of an advanced knowledge that found its grave in the sea. The Wisdom of that old spiritual system has vanished from the world, only a degraded literalism left of its undecipherable language. The jewel has been lost, and the casket is filled with sand, sand, sand."

How keenly her black eyes searched his own as she said it, and how oddly she made the little word resound. The syllable drew out almost into chanting. Echoes answered from the depths within him, carrying it on and on across some desert of forgotten belief. Veils of sand flew everywhere about his mind. Curtains lifted. Whole hills of sand went shifting into level surfaces whence gardens of dim outline emerged to meet the sunlight.

"But the sand may be removed." It was her nephew, speaking almost for the first time, and the interruption had an odd effect, introducing a sharply practical element. For the tone expressed, so far as he dared express it, disapproval. It was a baited observation, an invitation to opinion.

"We are not sand-diggers, Mr. Henriot," put in Lady Statham, before he decided to respond. "Our object is quite another one; and I believe — I have a feeling," she added almost questioningly, "that you might be interested enough to help us perhaps."

He only wondered the direct attack had not come sooner. Its bluntness hardly surprised him. He felt himself leap forward to accept it. A sudden subsidence had freed his feet.

Then the warning operated suddenly — for an instant. Henriot *was* interested; more, he was half seduced; but, as yet, he did not mean to be included in their purposes, whatever these might be. That shrinking dread came back a moment, and was gone again before he could question it. His eyes looked full at Lady Statham. "What is it that you know?" they asked her. "Tell me the things we once knew together, you and I. These words are merely trifling. And why does another man now stand in my place? For the sands heaped upon my memory are shifting, and it is *you* who are moving them away."

His soul whispered it; his voice said quite another thing, although the words he used seemed oddly chosen:

"There is much in the ideas of ancient Egypt that has attracted me ever since I can remember, though I have never caught up with anything definite enough to follow. There was majesty somewhere in their conceptions — a large, calm majesty of spiritual dominion, one might call it perhaps. I *am* interested."

Her face remained expressionless as she listened, but there was grave conviction in the eyes that held him like a spell. He saw through them into dim, faint pictures whose background was always sand. He forgot that he was speaking with a woman, a woman who half an hour ago had been a stranger to him. He followed these faded mental pictures, though he never caught them up.... It was like his dream in London.

Lady Statham was talking — he had not noticed the means by which she effected the abrupt transition — of familiar beliefs of old Egypt; of the Ka, or Double, by whose existence the survival of the soul was possible, even its return into manifested, physical life; of the astrology, or influence of the heavenly bodies upon all sublunar activities; of terrific forms of other life, known to the ancient worship of Atlantis, great Potencies that might be invoked by ritual and ceremonial, and of their lesser influence as recognised in certain lower forms, hence treated with veneration as the “Sacred Animal” branch of this dim religion. And she spoke lightly of the modern learning which so glibly imagined it was the animals themselves that were looked upon as “gods” — the bull, the bird, the crocodile, the cat. “It’s there they all go so absurdly wrong,” she said, “taking the symbol for the power symbolised. Yet natural enough. The mind to-day wears blinkers, studies only the details seen directly before it. Had none of us experienced love, we should think the first lover mad. Few to-day know the Powers *they* knew, hence deny them. If the world were deaf it would stand with mockery before a hearing group swayed by an orchestra, pitying both listeners and performers. It would deem our admiration of a great swinging bell mere foolish worship of form and movement. Similarly, with high Powers that once expressed themselves in common forms — where best they could — being themselves bodiless. The learned men classify the forms with painstaking detail. But deity has gone out of life. The Powers symbolised are no longer experienced.”

“These Powers, you suggest, then — their Kas, as it were — may still—”

But she waved aside the interruption. “They are satisfied, as the common people were, with a degraded literalism,” she went on. “Nut was the Heavens, who spread herself across the earth in the form of a woman; Shu, the vastness of space; the ibis typified Thoth, and Hathor was the Patron of the Western Hills; Khonsu, the moon, was personified, as was the deity of the Nile. But the high priest of Ra, the sun, you notice, remained ever the Great One of Visions.”

The High Priest, the Great One of Visions! — How wonderfully again she made the sentence sing. She put splendour into it. The pictures shifted suddenly closer in his mind. He saw the grandeur of Memphis and Heliopolis rise against the stars and shake the sand of ages from their stern old temples.

“You think it possible, then, to get into touch with these High Powers you speak of, Powers once manifested in common forms?”

Henriot asked the question with a degree of conviction and solemnity that surprised himself. The scenery changed about him as he listened. The spacious halls of this former khedivial Palace melted into Desert spaces. He smelt the open wilderness, the sand that haunted Helouan. The soft-footed Arab servants moved across the hall in their white sheets like eddies of dust the wind stirred from the Libyan dunes. And over these two strangers close beside him stole a queer, indefinite alteration. Moods and emotions, nameless as unknown stars, rose through his soul, trailing dark mists of memory from unfathomable distances.

Lady Statham answered him indirectly. He found himself wishing that those steady eyes would sometimes close.

“Love is known only by feeling it,” she said, her voice deepening a little. “Behind the form you feel the person loved. The process is an evocation, pure and simple. An arduous ceremonial, involving worship and devotional preparation, is the means. It is a difficult ritual — the only one acknowledged by the world as still effectual. Ritual is the passage way of the soul into the Infinite.”

He might have said the words himself. The thought lay in him while she uttered it. Evocation everywhere in life was as true as assimilation. Nevertheless, he stared his companion full in the eyes with a touch of almost rude amazement. But no further questions prompted themselves; or, rather, he declined to ask them. He recalled, somehow uneasily, that in ceremonial the points of the compass have significance, standing for forces and activities that sleep there until invoked, and a passing light fell upon that curious midnight request in the corridor upstairs. These two were on the track of undesirable experiments, he thought.... They wished to include him too.

“You go at night sometimes into the Desert?” he heard himself saying. It was impulsive and miscalculated. His feeling that it would be wise to change the conversation resulted in giving it fresh impetus instead.

“We saw you there — in the Wadi Hof,” put in Vance, suddenly breaking his long silence; “you too sleep out, then? It means, you know, the Valley of Fear.”

“We wondered—” It was Lady Statham’s voice, and she leaned forward eagerly as she said it, then abruptly left the sentence incomplete. Henriot started; a sense of momentary acute discomfort again ran over him. The same second she continued, though obviously changing the phrase— “we wondered how you spent your day there, during the heat. But you paint, don’t you? You draw, I mean?”

The commonplace question, he realised in every fibre of his being, meant something *they* deemed significant. Was it his talent for drawing that they sought to use him for? Even as he answered with a simple affirmative, he had a flash of intuition that might be fanciful, yet that might be true: that this extraordinary pair were intent upon some ceremony of evocation that should summon into actual physical expression some Power — some type of life — known long ago to ancient worship, and that they even sought to fix its bodily outline with the pencil — his pencil.

A gateway of incredible adventure opened at his feet. He balanced on the edge of knowing unutterable things. Here was a clue that might lead him towards the hidden Egypt he had ever craved to know. An awful hand was beckoning. The sands were shifting. He saw the million eyes of the Desert watching him from beneath the level lids of centuries. Speck by speck, and grain by grain, the sand that smothered memory lifted the countless wrappings that embalmed it.

And he was willing, yet afraid. Why in the world did he hesitate and shrink? Why was it that the presence of this silent, watching personality in the chair beside him kept caution still alive, with warning close behind? The pictures in his mind were gorgeously coloured. It was Richard Vance who somehow streaked them through with black. A thing of darkness, born of this man’s unassertive presence, flitted ever across the scenery, marring its grandeur with something evil, petty, dreadful. He held a horrible thought alive. His mind was thinking venal purposes.

In Henriot himself imagination had grown curiously heated, fed by what had been suggested rather than actually said. Ideas of immensity crowded his brain, yet never assumed definite shape. They were familiar, even as this strange woman was familiar. Once, long ago, he had known them well; had even practised them beneath these bright Egyptian stars. Whence came this prodigious glad excitement in his heart, this sense of mighty Powers coaxed down to influence the very details of daily life? Behind them, for all their vagueness, lay an archetypal splendour, fraught with forgotten meanings. He had always been aware of it in this mysterious land, but it had ever hitherto eluded him. It hovered everywhere. He had felt it brooding behind the towering Colossi at Thebes, in the skeletons of wasted temples, in the uncouth comeliness of the Sphinx, and in the crude terror of the Pyramids even. Over the whole of Egypt hung its invisible wings. These were but isolated fragments of the Body that might express it. And the Desert remained its cleanest, truest symbol. Sand knew it closest. Sand might even give it bodily form and outline.

But, while it escaped description in his mind, as equally it eluded visualisation in his soul, he felt that it combined with its vastness something infinitely small as well. Of such wee particles is the giant Desert born....

Henriot started nervously in his chair, convicted once more of unconscionable staring; and at the same moment a group of hotel people, returning from a dance, passed through the hall and nodded him good-night. The scent of the women reached him; and with it the sound of their voices discussing personalities just left behind. A London atmosphere came with them. He caught trivial phrases, uttered in a drawling tone, and followed by the shrill laughter of a girl. They passed upstairs, discussing their little things, like marionettes upon a tiny stage.

But their passage brought him back to things of modern life, and to some standard of familiar measurement. The pictures that his soul had gazed at so deep within, he realised, were a pictorial transfer caught incompletely from this woman’s vivid mind. He had seen the Desert as the grey, enormous Tomb where hovered still the Ka of ancient Egypt. Sand screened her visage with the veil of centuries. But She was there, and She was living. Egypt herself had pitched a temporary camp in him, and then moved on.

There was a momentary break, a sense of abruptness and dislocation. And then he became aware that Lady Statham had been speaking for some time before he caught her actual words, and that a certain change had come into her voice as also into her manner.

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She was leaning closer to him, her face suddenly glowing and alive. Through the stone figure coursed the fires of a passion that deepened the coal-black eyes and communicated a hint of light — of exaltation — to her whole person. It was incredibly moving. To this deep passion was due the power he had felt. It was her entire life; she lived for it, she would die for it. Her calmness of manner enhanced its effect. Hence the strength of those first impressions that had stormed him. The woman had belief; however wild and strange, it was sacred to her. The secret of her influence was — conviction.

His attitude shifted several points then. The wonder in him passed over into awe. The things she knew were real. They were not merely imaginative speculations.

“I knew I was not wrong in thinking you in sympathy with this line of thought,” she was saying in lower voice, steady with earnestness, and as though she had read his mind. “You, too, know, though perhaps you hardly realise that you know. It lies so deep in you that you only get vague feelings of it — intimations of memory. Isn’t that the case?”

Henriot gave assent with his eyes; it was the truth.

“What we know instinctively,” she continued, “is simply what we are trying to remember. Knowledge is memory.” She paused a moment watching his face closely. “At least, you are free from that cheap scepticism which labels these old beliefs as superstition.” It was not even a question.

“I — worship real belief — of any kind,” he stammered, for her words and the close proximity of her atmosphere caused a strange upheaval in his heart that he could not account for. He faltered in his speech. “It is the most vital quality in life — rarer than deity.” He was using her own phrases even. “It is creative. It constructs the world anew—”

“And may reconstruct the old.”

She said it, lifting her face above him a little, so that her eyes looked down into his own. It grew big and somehow masculine. It was the face of a priest, spiritual power in it. Where, oh where in the echoing Past had he known this woman’s soul? He saw her in another setting, a forest of columns dim about her, towering above giant aisles. Again he felt the Desert had come close. Into this tent-like hall of the hotel came the sifting of tiny sand. It heaped softly about the very furniture against his feet, blocking the exits of door and window. It shrouded the little present. The wind that brought it stirred a veil that had hung for ages motionless....

She had been saying many things that he had missed while his mind went searching. “There were types of life the Atlantean system knew it might revive — life unmanifested to-day in any bodily form,” was the sentence he caught with his return to the actual present.

“A type of life?” he whispered, looking about him, as though to see who it was had joined them; “you mean a — soul? Some kind of soul, alien to humanity, or to — to any forms of living thing in the world to-day?” What she had been saying reached him somehow, it seemed, though he had not heard the words themselves. Still hesitating, he was yet so eager to hear. Already he felt she meant to include him in her purposes, and that in the end he must go willingly. So strong was her persuasion on his mind.

And he felt as if he knew vaguely what was coming. Before she answered his curious question — prompting it indeed — rose in his mind that strange idea of the Group-Soul: the theory that big souls cannot express themselves in a single individual, but need an entire group for their full manifestation.

He listened intently. The reflection that this sudden intimacy was unnatural, he rejected, for many conversations were really gathered into one. Long watching and preparation on both sides had cleared the way for the ripening of acquaintance into confidence — how long he dimly wondered? But if this conception of the Group-Soul was not new, the suggestion Lady Statham developed out of it was both new and startling — and yet always so curiously familiar. Its value for him lay, not in far-fetched evidence that supported it, but in the deep belief which made it a vital asset in an honest inner life.

“An individual,” she said quietly, “one soul expressed completely in a single person, I mean, is exceedingly rare. Not often is a physical instrument found perfect enough to provide it with adequate expression. In the lower ranges of humanity — certainly in animal and insect life — one soul is shared by many. Behind a tribe of savages stands one Savage. A flock of birds is a single Bird, scattered through the consciousness of all. They wheel in mid-air, they migrate, they obey the deep intelligence called instinct — all as one. The life of any one lion is the life of all — the lion group-soul that manifests itself in the entire genus. An ant-heap is a single Ant; through the bees spreads the consciousness of a single Bee.”

Henriot knew what she was working up to. In his eagerness to hasten disclosure he interrupted —

“And there may be types of life that have no corresponding bodily expression at all, then?” he asked as though the question were forced out of him. “They exist as Powers — unmanifested on the earth to-day?”

“Powers,” she answered, watching him closely with unswerving stare, “that need a group to provide their body — their physical expression — if they came back.”

“Came back!” he repeated below his breath.

But she heard him. “They once had expression. Egypt, Atlantis knew them — spiritual Powers that never visit the world to-day.”

“Bodies,” he whispered softly, “actual bodies?”

“Their sphere of action, you see, would be their body. And it might be physical outline. So potent a descent of spiritual life would select materials for its body where it could find them. Our conventional notion of a body — what is it? A single outline moving altogether in one direction. For little human souls, or fragments, this is sufficient. But for vaster types of soul an entire host would be required.”

“A church?” he ventured. “Some Body of belief, you surely mean?”

She bowed her head a moment in assent. She was determined he should seize her meaning fully.

“A wave of spiritual awakening — a descent of spiritual life upon a nation,” she answered slowly, “forms itself a church, and the body of true believers are its sphere of action. They are literally its bodily expression. Each individual believer is a corpuscle in that Body. The Power has provided itself with a vehicle of manifestation. Otherwise we could not know it. And the more real the belief of each individual, the more perfect the expression of the spiritual life behind them all. A Group-soul walks the earth. Moreover, a nation naturally devout could attract a type of soul unknown to a nation that denies all faith. Faith brings back the gods.... But to-day belief is dead, and Deity has left the world.”

She talked on and on, developing this main idea that in days of older faiths there were deific types of life upon the earth, evoked by worship and beneficial to humanity. They had long ago withdrawn because the worship which brought them down had died the death. The world had grown pettier. These vast centres of Spiritual Power found no "Body" in which they now could express themselves or manifest.... Her thoughts and phrases poured over him like sand. It was always sand he felt — burying the Present and uncovering the Past....

He tried to steady his mind upon familiar objects, but wherever he looked Sand stared him in the face. Outside these trivial walls the Desert lay listening. It lay waiting too. Vance himself had dropped out of recognition. He belonged to the world of things to-day. But this woman and himself stood thousands of years away, beneath the columns of a Temple in the sands. And the sands were moving. His feet went shifting with them ... running down vistas of ageless memory that woke terror by their sheer immensity of distance....

Like a muffled voice that called to him through many veils and wrappings, he heard her describe the stupendous Powers that evocation might coax down again among the world of men.

"To what useful end?" he asked at length, amazed at his own temerity, and because he knew instinctively the answer in advance. It rose through these layers of coiling memory in his soul.

"The extension of spiritual knowledge and the widening of life," she answered. "The link with the 'unearthly kingdom' wherein this ancient system went forever searching, would be re-established. Complete rehabilitation might follow. Portions — little portions of these Powers — expressed themselves naturally once in certain animal types, instinctive life that did not deny or reject them. The worship of sacred animals was the relic of a once gigantic system of evocation — not of monsters," and she smiled sadly, "but of Powers that were willing and ready to descend when worship summoned them."

Again, beneath his breath, Henriot heard himself murmur — his own voice startled him as he whispered it: "Actual bodily shape and outline?"

"Material for bodies is everywhere," she answered, equally low; "dust to which we all return; sand, if you prefer it, fine, fine sand. Life moulds it easily enough, when that life is potent."

A certain confusion spread slowly through his mind as he heard her. He lit a cigarette and smoked some minutes in silence. Lady Statham and her nephew waited for him to speak. At length, after some inner battling and hesitation, he put the question that he knew they waited for. It was impossible to resist any longer.

"It would be interesting to know the method," he said, "and to revive, perhaps, by experiment—"

Before he could complete his thought, she took him up:

"There are some who claim to know it," she said gravely — her eyes a moment masterful. "A clue, thus followed, might lead to the entire reconstruction I spoke of."

"And the method?" he repeated faintly.

"Evoke the Power by ceremonial evocation — the ritual is obtainable — and note the form it assumes. Then establish it. This shape or outline once secured, could then be made permanent — a mould for its return at will — its natural physical expression here on earth."

"Idol!" he exclaimed.

"Image," she replied at once. "Life, before we can know it, must have a body. Our souls, in order to manifest here, need a material vehicle."

"And — to obtain this form or outline?" he began; "to fix it, rather?"

"Would be required the clever pencil of a fearless looker-on — some one not engaged in the actual evocation. This form, accurately made permanent in solid matter, say in stone, would provide a channel always open. Experiment, properly speaking, might then begin. The cisterns of Power behind would be accessible."

"An amazing proposition!" Henriot exclaimed. What surprised him was that he felt no desire to laugh, and little even to doubt.

"Yet known to every religion that ever deserved the name," put in Vance like a voice from a distance. Blackness came somehow with his interruption — a touch of darkness. He spoke eagerly.

To all the talk that followed, and there was much of it, Henriot listened with but half an ear. This one idea stormed through him with an uproar that killed attention. Judgment was held utterly in abeyance. He carried away from it some vague suggestion that this woman had hinted at previous lives she half remembered, and that every year she came to Egypt, haunting the sands and temples in the effort to recover lost clues. And he recalled afterwards that she said, “This all came to me as a child, just as though it was something half remembered.” There was the further suggestion that he himself was not unknown to her; that they, too, had met before. But this, compared to the grave certainty of the rest, was merest fantasy that did not hold his attention. He answered, hardly knowing what he said. His preoccupation with other thoughts deep down was so intense, that he was probably barely polite, uttering empty phrases, with his mind elsewhere. His one desire was to escape and be alone, and it was with genuine relief that he presently excused himself and went upstairs to bed. The halls, he noticed, were empty; an Arab servant waited to put the lights out. He walked up, for the lift had long ceased running.

And the magic of old Egypt stalked beside him. The studies that had fascinated his mind in earlier youth returned with the power that had subdued his mind in boyhood. The cult of Osiris woke in his blood again; Horus and Nephthys stirred in their long-forgotten centres. There revived in him, too long buried, the awful glamour of those liturgical rites and vast body of observances, those spells and formulae of incantation of the oldest known recession that years ago had captured his imagination and belief — the Book of the Dead. Trumpet voices called to his heart again across the desert of some dim past. There were forms of life — impulses from the Creative Power which is the Universe — other than the soul of man. They could be known. A spiritual exaltation, roused by the words and presence of this singular woman, shouted to him as he went.

Then, as he closed his bedroom door, carefully locking it, there stood beside him — Vance. The forgotten figure of Vance came up close — the watching eyes, the simulated interest, the feigned belief, the detective mental attitude, these broke through the grandiose panorama, bringing darkness. Vance, strong personality that hid behind assumed nonentity for some purpose of his own, intruded with sudden violence, demanding an explanation of his presence.

And, with an equal suddenness, explanation offered itself then and there. It came unsought, its horror of certainty utterly unjustified; and it came in this unexpected fashion:

Behind the interest and acquiescence of the man ran — fear: but behind the vivid fear ran another thing that Henriot now perceived was vile. For the first time in his life, Henriot knew it at close quarters, actual, ready to operate. Though familiar enough in daily life to be of common occurrence, Henriot had never realised it as he did now, so close and terrible. In the same way he had never *realised* that he would die — vanish from the busy world of men and women, forgotten as though he had never existed, an eddy of wind-blown dust. And in the man named Richard Vance this thing was close upon blossom. Henriot could not name it to himself. Even in thought it appalled him.

He undressed hurriedly, almost with the child's idea of finding safety between the sheets. His mind undressed itself as well. The business of the day laid itself automatically aside; the will sank down; desire grew inactive. Henriot was exhausted. But, in that stage towards slumber when thinking stops, and only fugitive pictures pass across the mind in shadowy dance, his brain ceased shouting its mechanical explanations, and his soul unveiled a peering eye. Great limbs of memory, smothered by the activities of the Present, stirred their stiffened lengths through the sands of long ago — sands this woman had begun to excavate from some far-off pre-existence they had surely known together. Vagueness and certainty ran hand in hand. Details were unrecoverable, but the emotions in which they were embedded moved.

He turned restlessly in his bed, striving to seize the amazing clues and follow them. But deliberate effort hid them instantly again; they retired instantly into the subconsciousness. With the brain of this body he now occupied they had nothing to do. The brain stored memories of each life only. This ancient script was graven in his soul. Subconsciousness alone could interpret and reveal. And it was his subconscious memory that Lady Statham had been so busily excavating.

Dimly it stirred and moved about the depths within him, never clearly seen, indefinite, felt as a yearning after unrecoverable knowledge. Against the darker background of Vance's fear and sinister purpose — both of this present life, and recent — he saw the grandeur of this woman's impossible dream, and *knew*, beyond argument or reason, that it was true. Judgment and will asleep, he left the impossibility aside, and took the grandeur. The Belief of Lady Statham was not credulity and superstition; it was Memory. Still to this day, over the sands of Egypt, hovered immense spiritual potencies, so vast that they could only know physical expression in a group — in many. Their sphere of bodily manifestation must be a host, each individual unit in that host a corpuscle in the whole.

The wind, rising from the Lybian wastes across the Nile, swept up against the exposed side of the hotel, and made his windows rattle — the old, sad winds of Egypt. Henriot got out of bed to fasten the outside shutters. He stood a moment and watched the moon floating down behind the Sakkara Pyramids. The Pleiades and Orion's Belt hung brilliantly; the Great Bear was close to the horizon. In the sky above the Desert swung ten thousand stars. No sounds rose from the streets of Helouan. The tide of sand was coming slowly in.

And a flock of enormous thoughts swooped past him from fields of this unbelievable, lost memory. The Desert, pale in the moon, was coextensive with the night, too huge for comfort or understanding, yet charged to the brim with infinite peace. Behind its majesty of silence lay whispers of a vanished language that once could call with power upon mighty spiritual Agencies. Its skirts were folded now, but, slowly across the leagues of sand, they began to stir and rearrange themselves. He grew suddenly aware of this enveloping shroud of sand — as the raw material of bodily expression: Form.

The sand was in his imagination and his mind. Shaking loosely the folds of its gigantic skirts, it rose; it moved a little towards him. He saw the eternal countenance of the Desert watching him — immobile and unchanging behind these shifting veils the winds laid so carefully over it. Egypt, the ancient Egypt, turned in her vast sarcophagus of Desert, wakening from her sleep of ages at the Belief of approaching worshippers.

Only in this insignificant manner could he express a letter of the terrific language that crowded to seek expression through his soul.... He closed the shutters and carefully fastened them. He turned to go back to bed, curiously trembling. Then, as he did so, the whole singular delusion caught him with a shock that held him motionless. Up rose the stupendous apparition of the entire Desert and stood behind him on that balcony. Swift as thought, in silence, the Desert stood on end against his very face. It towered across the sky, hiding Orion and the moon; it dipped below the horizons. The whole grey sheet of it rose up before his eyes and stood. Through its unfolding skirts ran ten thousand eddies of swirling sand as the creases of its grave-clothes smoothed themselves out in moonlight. And a bleak, scarred countenance, huge as a planet, gazed down into his own....

Through his dreamless sleep that night two things lay active and awake ... in the subconscious part that knows no slumber. They were incongruous. One was evil, small and human; the other unearthly and sublime. For the memory of the fear that haunted Vance, and the sinister cause of it, pricked at him all night long. But behind, beyond this common, intelligible emotion, lay the crowding wonder that caught his soul with glory:

The Sand was stirring, the Desert was awake. Ready to mate with them in material form, brooded close the Ka of that colossal Entity that once expressed itself through the myriad life of ancient Egypt.

VI

Next day, and for several days following, Henriot kept out of the path of Lady Statham and her nephew. The acquaintanceship had grown too rapidly to be quite comfortable. It was easy to pretend that he took people at their face value, but it was a pose; one liked to know something of antecedents. It was otherwise difficult to "place" them. And Henriot, for the life of him, could not "place" these two. His Subconsciousness brought explanation when it came — but the Subconsciousness is only temporarily active. When it retired he floundered without a rudder, in confusion.

With the flood of morning sunshine the value of much she had said evaporated. Her presence alone had supplied the key to the cipher. But while the indigestible portions he rejected, there remained a good deal he had already assimilated. The discomfort remained; and with it the grave, unholy reality of it all. It was something more than theory. Results would follow — if he joined them. He would witness curious things.

The force with which it drew him brought hesitation. It operated in him like a shock that numbs at first by its abrupt arrival, and needs time to realise in the right proportions to the rest of life. These right proportions, however, did not come readily, and his emotions ranged between sceptical laughter and complete acceptance. The one detail he felt certain of was this dreadful thing he had divined in Vance. Trying hard to disbelieve it, he found he could not. It was true. Though without a shred of real evidence to support it, the horror of it remained. He knew it in his very bones.

And this, perhaps, was what drove him to seek the comforting companionship of folk he understood and felt at home with. He told his host and hostess about the strangers, though omitting the actual conversation because they would merely smile in blank miscomprehension. But the moment he described the strong black eyes beneath the level eyelids, his hostess turned with a start, her interest deeply roused: “Why, it’s that awful Statham woman,” she exclaimed, “that must be Lady Statham, and the man she calls her nephew.”

“Sounds like it, certainly,” her husband added. “Felix, you’d better clear out. They’ll bewitch you too.”

And Henriot bridled, yet wondering why he did so. He drew into his shell a little, giving the merest sketch of what had happened. But he listened closely while these two practical old friends supplied him with information in the gossiping way that human nature loves. No doubt there was much embroidery, and more perversion, exaggeration too, but the account evidently rested upon some basis of solid foundation for all that. Smoke and fire go together always.

“He *is* her nephew right enough,” Mansfield corrected his wife, before proceeding to his own man’s form of elaboration; “no question about that, I believe. He’s her favourite nephew, and she’s as rich as a pig. He follows her out here every year, waiting for her empty shoes. But they *are* an unsavoury couple. I’ve met ’em in various parts, all over Egypt, but they always come back to Helouan in the end. And the stories about them are simply legion. You remember—” he turned hesitatingly to his wife— “some people, I heard,” he changed his sentence, “were made quite ill by her.”

“I’m sure Felix ought to know, yes,” his wife boldly took him up, “my niece, Fanny, had the most extraordinary experience.” She turned to Henriot. “Her room was next to Lady Statham in some hotel or other at Assouan or Edfu, and one night she woke and heard a kind of mysterious chanting or intoning next her. Hotel doors are so dreadfully thin. There was a funny smell too, like incense of something sickly, and a man's voice kept chiming in. It went on for hours, while she lay terrified in bed—"

"Frightened, you say?" asked Henriot.

"Out of her skin, yes; she said it was so uncanny — made her feel icy. She wanted to ring the bell, but was afraid to leave her bed. The room was full of — of things, yet she could see nothing. She *felt* them, you see. And after a bit the sound of this sing-song voice so got on her nerves, it half dazed her — a kind of enchantment — she felt choked and suffocated. And then—" It was her turn to hesitate.

"Tell it all," her husband said, quite gravely too.

"Well — something came in. At least, she describes it oddly, rather; she said it made the door bulge inwards from the next room, but not the door alone; the walls bulged or swayed as if a huge thing pressed against them from the other side. And at the same moment her windows — she had two big balconies, and the venetian shutters were fastened — both her windows *darkened* — though it was two in the morning and pitch dark outside. She said it was all *one* thing — trying to get in; just as water, you see, would rush in through every hole and opening it could find, and all at once. And in spite of her terror — that's the odd part of it — she says she felt a kind of splendour in her — a sort of elation."

"She saw nothing?"

"She says she doesn't remember. Her senses left her, I believe — though she won't admit it."

"Fainted for a minute, probably," said Mansfield.

"So there it is," his wife concluded, after a silence. "And that's true. It happened to my niece, didn't it, John?"

Stories and legendary accounts of strange things that the presence of these two brought poured out then. They were obviously somewhat mixed, one account borrowing picturesque details from another, and all in disproportion, as when people tell stories in a language they are little familiar with. But, listening with avidity, yet also with uneasiness, somehow, Henriot put two and two together. Truth stood behind them somewhere. These two held traffic with the powers that ancient Egypt knew.

“Tell Felix, dear, about the time you met the nephew — horrid creature — in the Valley of the Kings,” he heard his wife say presently. And Mansfield told it plainly enough, evidently glad to get it done, though.

“It was some years ago now, and I didn’t know who he was then, or anything about him. I don’t know much more now — except that he’s a dangerous sort of charlatan-devil, *I* think. But I came across him one night up there by Thebes in the Valley of the Kings — you know, where they buried all their Johnnies with so much magnificence and processions and masses, and all the rest. It’s the most astounding, the most haunted place you ever saw, gloomy, silent, full of gorgeous lights and shadows that seem alive — terribly impressive; it makes you creep and shudder. You feel old Egypt watching you.”

“Get on, dear,” said his wife.

“Well, I was coming home late on a blasted lazy donkey, dog-tired into the bargain, when my donkey boy suddenly ran for his life and left me alone. It was after sunset. The sand was red and shining, and the big cliffs sort of fiery. And my donkey stuck its four feet in the ground and wouldn’t budge. Then, about fifty yards away, I saw a fellow — European apparently — doing something — Heaven knows what, for I can’t describe it — among the boulders that lie all over the ground there. Ceremony, I suppose you’d call it. I was so interested that at first I watched. Then I saw he wasn’t alone. There were a lot of moving things round him, towering big things, that came and went like shadows. That twilight is fearfully bewildering; perspective changes, and distance gets all confused. It’s fearfully hard to see properly. I only remember that I got off my donkey and went up closer, and when I was within a dozen yards of him — well, it sounds such rot, you know, but I swear the things suddenly rushed off and left him there alone. They went with a roaring noise like wind; shadowy but tremendously big, they were, and they vanished up against the fiery precipices as though they slipped bang into the stone itself. The only thing I can think of to describe ’em is — well, those sand-storms the Khamasin raises — the hot winds, you know.”

“They probably *were* sand,” his wife suggested, burning to tell another story of her own.

“Possibly, only there wasn’t a breath of wind, and it was hot as blazes — and — I had such extraordinary sensations — never felt anything like it before — wild and exhilarated — drunk, I tell you, drunk.”

“You saw them?” asked Henriot. “You made out their shape at all, or outline?”

“Sphinx,” he replied at once, “for all the world like sphinxes. You know the kind of face and head these limestone strata in the Desert take — great visages with square Egyptian head-dresses where the driven sand has eaten away the softer stuff beneath? You see it everywhere — enormous idols they seem, with faces and eyes and lips awfully like the sphinx — well, that’s the nearest I can get to it.” He puffed his pipe hard. But there was no sign of levity in him. He told the actual truth as far as in him lay, yet half ashamed of what he told. And a good deal he left out, too.

“She’s got a face of the same sort, that Statham horror,” his wife said with a shiver. “Reduce the size, and paint in awful black eyes, and you’ve got her exactly — a living idol.” And all three laughed, yet a laughter without merriment in it.

“And you spoke to the man?”

“I did,” the Englishman answered, “though I confess I’m a bit ashamed of the way I spoke. Fact is, I was excited, thunderingly excited, and felt a kind of anger. I wanted to kick the beggar for practising such bally rubbish, and in such a place too. Yet all the time — well, well, I believe it was sheer funk now,” he laughed; “for I felt uncommonly queer out there in the dusk, alone with — with that kind of business; and I was angry with myself for feeling it. Anyhow, I went up — I’d lost my donkey boy as well, remember — and slated him like a dog. I can’t remember what I said exactly — only that he stood and stared at me in silence. That made it worse — seemed twice as real then. The beggar said no single word the whole time. He signed to me with one hand to clear out. And then, suddenly out of nothing — she — that woman — appeared and stood beside him. I never saw her come. She must have been behind some boulder or other, for she simply rose out of the ground. She stood there and stared at me too — bang in the face. She was turned towards the sunset — what was left of it in the west — and her black eyes shone like — ugh! I can’t describe it — it was shocking.”

“She spoke?”

“She said five words — and her voice — it’ll make you laugh — it was metallic like a gong: ‘You are in danger here.’ That’s all she said. I simply turned and cleared out as fast as ever I could. But I had to go on foot. My donkey had followed its boy long before. I tell you — smile as you may — my blood was all curdled for an hour afterwards.”

Then he explained that he felt some kind of explanation or apology was due, since the couple lodged in his own hotel, and how he approached the man in the smoking-room after dinner. A conversation resulted — the man was quite intelligent after all — of which only one sentence had remained in his mind.

“Perhaps you can explain it, Felix. I wrote it down, as well as I could remember. The rest confused me beyond words or memory; though I must confess it did not seem — well, not utter rot exactly. It was about astrology and rituals and the worship of the old Egyptians, and I don’t know what else besides. Only, he made it intelligible and almost sensible, if only I could have got the hang of the thing enough to remember it. You know,” he added, as though believing in spite of himself, “there *is* a lot of that wonderful old Egyptian religious business still hanging about in the atmosphere of this place, say what you like.”

“But this sentence?” Henriot asked. And the other went off to get a note-book where he had written it down.

“He was jawing, you see,” he continued when he came back, Henriot and his wife having kept silence meanwhile, “about direction being of importance in religious ceremonies, West and North symbolising certain powers, or something of the kind, why people turn to the East and all that sort of thing, and speaking of the whole Universe as if it had living forces tucked away in it that expressed themselves somehow when roused up. That’s how I remember it anyhow. And then he said this thing — in answer to some fool question probably that I put.” And he read out of the note-book:

"'You were in danger because you came through the Gateway of the West, and the Powers from the Gateway of the East were at that moment rising, and therefore in direct opposition to you.'"

Then came the following, apparently a simile offered by way of explanation. Mansfield read it in a shamefaced tone, evidently prepared for laughter:

"'Whether I strike you on the back or in the face determines what kind of answering force I rouse in you. Direction is significant.' And he said it was the period called the Night of Power — time when the Desert encroaches and spirits are close."

And tossing the book aside, he lit his pipe again and waited a moment to hear what might be said. "Can you explain such gibberish?" he asked at length, as neither of his listeners spoke. But Henriot said he couldn't. And the wife then took up her own tale of stories that had grown about this singular couple.

These were less detailed, and therefore less impressive, but all contributed something towards the atmosphere of reality that framed the entire picture. They belonged to the type one hears at every dinner party in Egypt — stories of the vengeance mummies seem to take on those who robbed them, desecrating their peace of centuries; of a woman wearing a necklace of scarabs taken from a princess's tomb, who felt hands about her throat to strangle her; of little Ka figures, Pasht goddesses, amulets and the rest, that brought curious disaster to those who kept them. They are many and various, astonishingly circumstantial often, and vouched for by persons the reverse of credulous. The modern superstition that haunts the desert gullies with Afreets has nothing in common with them. They rest upon a basis of indubitable experience; and they remain — inexplicable. And about the personalities of Lady Statham and her nephew they crowded like flies attracted by a dish of fruit. The Arabs, too, were afraid of her. She had difficulty in getting guides and dragomen.

"My dear chap," concluded Mansfield, "take my advice and have nothing to do with 'em. There *is* a lot of queer business knocking about in this old country, and people like that know ways of reviving it somehow. It's upset you already; you looked scared, I thought, the moment you came in." They laughed, but the Englishman was in earnest. "I tell you what," he added, "we'll go off for a bit of shooting together. The fields along the Delta are packed with birds now: they're home early this year on their way to the North. What d'ye say, eh?"

But Henriot did not care about the quail shooting. He felt more inclined to be alone and think things out by himself. He had come to his friends for comfort, and instead they had made him uneasy and excited. His interest had suddenly doubled. Though half afraid, he longed to know what these two were up to — to follow the adventure to the bitter end. He disregarded the warning of his host as well as the premonition in his own heart. The sand had caught his feet.

There were moments when he laughed in utter disbelief, but these were optimistic moods that did not last. He always returned to the feeling that truth lurked somewhere in the whole strange business, and that if he joined forces with them, as they seemed to wish, he would witness — well, he hardly knew what — but it enticed him as danger does the reckless man, or death the suicide. The sand had caught his mind.

He decided to offer himself to all they wanted — his pencil too. He would see — a shiver ran through him at the thought — what they saw, and know some eddy of that vanished tide of power and splendour the ancient Egyptian priesthood knew, and that perhaps was even common experience in the far-off days of dim Atlantis. The sand had caught his imagination too. He was utterly sand-haunted.

VII

And so he took pains, though without making definite suggestion, to place himself in the way of this woman and her nephew — only to find that his hints were disregarded. They left him alone, if they did not actually avoid him. Moreover, he rarely came across them now. Only at night, or in the queer dusk hours, he caught glimpses of them moving hurriedly off from the hotel, and always desertwards. And their disregard, well calculated, enflamed his desire to the point when he almost decided to propose himself. Quite suddenly, then, the idea flashed through him — how do they come, these odd revelations, when the mind lies receptive like a plate sensitised by anticipation? — that they were waiting for a certain date, and, with the notion, came Mansfield's remark about "the Night of Power," believed in by the old Egyptian Calendar as a time when the supersensuous world moves close against the minds of men with all its troop of possibilities. And the thought, once lodged in its corner of imagination, grew strong. He looked it up. Ten days from now, he found, Leyel-el-Sud would be upon him, with a moon, too, at the full. And this strange hint of guidance he accepted. In his present mood, as he admitted, smiling to himself, he could accept anything. It was part of it, it belonged to the adventure. But, even while he persuaded himself that it was play, the solemn reality, of what lay ahead increased amazingly, sketched darkly in his very soul.

These intervening days he spent as best he could — impatiently, a prey to quite opposite emotions. In the blazing sunshine he thought of it and laughed; but at night he lay often sleepless, calculating chances of escape. He never did escape, however. The Desert that watched little Helouan with great, unwinking eyes watched also every turn and twist he made. Like this oasis, he basked in the sun of older time, and dreamed beneath forgotten moons. The sand at last had crept into his inmost heart. It sifted over him.

Seeking a reaction from normal, everyday things, he made tourist trips; yet, while recognising the comedy in his attitude, he never could lose sight of the grandeur that banked it up so hauntingly. These two contrary emotions grafted themselves on all he did and saw. He crossed the Nile at Bedrashein, and went again to the Tomb-World of Sakkara; but through all the chatter of veiled and helmeted tourists, the *bandar-log* of our modern Jungle, ran this dark under-stream of awe their monkey methods could not turn aside. One world lay upon another, but this modern layer was a shallow crust that, like the phenomenon of the "desert-film," a mere angle of falling light could instantly obliterate. Beneath the sand, deep down, he passed along the Street of Tombs, as he had often passed before, moved then merely by historical curiosity and admiration, but now by emotions for which he found no name. He saw the enormous sarcophagi of granite in their gloomy chambers where the sacred bulls once lay, swathed and embalmed like human beings, and, in the flickering candle light, the mood of ancient rites surged round him, menacing his doubts and laughter. The least human whisper in these subterraneans, dug out first four thousand years ago, revived ominous Powers that stalked beside him, forbidding and premonitive. He gazed at the spots where Mariette, unearthing them forty years ago, found fresh as of yesterday the marks of fingers and naked feet — of those who set the sixty-five ton slabs in position. And when he came up again into the sunshine he met the eternal questions of the pyramids, overtopping all his mental horizons. Sand blocked all the avenues of younger emotion, leaving the channels of something in him incalculably older, open and clean swept.

He slipped homewards, uncomfortable and followed, glad to be with a crowd — because he was otherwise alone with more than he could dare to think about. Keeping just ahead of his companions, he crossed the desert edge where the ghost of Memphis walks under rustling palm trees that screen no stone left upon another of all its mile-long populous splendours. For here was a vista his imagination could realise; here he could know the comfort of solid ground his feet could touch. Gigantic Ramases, lying on his back beneath their shade and staring at the sky, similarly helped to steady his swaying thoughts. Imagination could deal with these.

And daily thus he watched the busy world go to and fro to its scale of tips and bargaining, and gladly mingled with it, trying to laugh and study guidebooks, and listen to half-fledged explanations, but always seeing the comedy of his poor attempts. Not all those little donkeys, bells tinkling, beads shining, trotting beneath their comical burdens to the tune of shouting and belabouring, could stem this tide of deeper things the woman had let loose in the subconscious part of him. Everywhere he saw the mysterious camels go slouching through the sand, gurgling the water in their skinny, extended throats. Centuries passed between the enormous knee-stroke of their stride. And, every night, the sunsets restored the forbidding, graver mood, with their crimson, golden splendour, their strange green shafts of light, then — sudden twilight that brought the Past upon him with an awful leap. Upon the stage then stepped the figures of this pair of human beings, chanting their ancient plainsong of incantation in the moonlit desert, and working their rites of unholy evocation as the priests had worked them centuries before in the sands that now buried Sakkara fathoms deep.

Then one morning he woke with a question in his mind, as though it had been asked of him in sleep and he had waked just before the answer came. “Why do I spend my time sight-seeing, instead of going alone into the Desert as before? What has made me change?”

This latest mood now asked for explanation. And the answer, coming up automatically, startled him. It was so clear and sure — had been lying in the background all along. One word contained it:

Vance.

The sinister intentions of this man, forgotten in the rush of other emotions, asserted themselves again convincingly. The human horror, so easily comprehensible, had been smothered for the time by the hint of unearthly revelations. But it had operated all the time. Now it took the lead. He dreaded to be alone in the Desert with this dark picture in his mind of what Vance meant to bring there to completion. This abomination of a selfish human will returned to fix its terror in him. To be alone in the Desert meant to be alone with the imaginative picture of what Vance — he knew it with such strange certainty — hoped to bring about there.

There was absolutely no evidence to justify the grim suspicion. It seemed indeed far-fetched enough, this connection between the sand and the purpose of an evil-minded, violent man. But Henriot saw it true. He could argue it away in a few minutes — easily. Yet the instant thought ceased, it returned, led up by intuition. It possessed him, filled his mind with horrible possibilities. He feared the Desert as he might have feared the scene of some atrocious crime. And, for the time, this dread of a merely human thing corrected the big seduction of the other — the suggested “super-natural.”

Side by side with it, his desire to join himself to the purposes of the woman increased steadily. They kept out of his way apparently; the offer seemed withdrawn; he grew restless, unable to settle to anything for long, and once he asked the porter casually if they were leaving the hotel. Lady Statham had been invisible for days, and Vance was somehow never within speaking distance. He heard with relief that they had not gone — but with dread as well. Keen excitement worked in him underground. He slept badly. Like a schoolboy, he waited for the summons to an important examination that involved portentous issues, and contradictory emotions disturbed his peace of mind abominably.

VIII

But it was not until the end of the week, when Vance approached him with purpose in his eyes and manner, that Henriot knew his fears unfounded, and caught himself trembling with sudden anticipation — because the invitation, so desired yet so dreaded, was actually at hand. Firmly determined to keep caution uppermost, yet he went unresistingly to a secluded corner by the palms where they could talk in privacy. For prudence is of the mind, but desire is of the soul, and while his brain of to-day whispered wariness, voices in his heart of long ago shouted commands that he knew he must obey with joy.

It was evening and the stars were out. Helouan, with her fairy twinkling lights, lay silent against the Desert edge. The sand was at the flood. The period of the Encroaching of the Desert was at hand, and the deeps were all astir with movement. But in the windless air was a great peace. A calm of infinite stillness breathed everywhere. The flow of Time, before it rushed away backwards, stopped somewhere between the dust of stars and Desert. The mystery of sand touched every street with its unutterable softness.

And Vance began without the smallest circumlocution. His voice was low, in keeping with the scene, but the words dropped with a sharp distinctness into the other's heart like grains of sand that pricked the skin before they smothered him. Caution they smothered instantly; resistance too.

"I have a message for you from my aunt," he said, as though he brought an invitation to a picnic. Henriot sat in shadow, but his companion's face was in a patch of light that followed them from the windows of the central hall. There was a shining in the light blue eyes that betrayed the excitement his quiet manner concealed. "We are going — the day after to-morrow — to spend the night in the Desert; she wondered if, perhaps, you would care to join us?"

"For your experiment?" asked Henriot bluntly.

Vance smiled with his lips, holding his eyes steady, though unable to suppress the gleam that flashed in them and was gone so swiftly. There was a hint of shrugging his shoulders.

"It is the Night of Power — in the old Egyptian Calendar, you know," he answered with assumed lightness almost, "the final moment of Leyel-el-Sud, the period of Black Nights when the Desert was held to encroach with

— with various possibilities of a supernatural order. She wishes to revive a certain practice of the old Egyptians. There *may* be curious results. At any rate, the occasion is a picturesque one — better than this cheap imitation of London life.” And he indicated the lights, the signs of people in the hall dressed for gaieties and dances, the hotel orchestra that played after dinner.

Henriot at the moment answered nothing, so great was the rush of conflicting emotions that came he knew not whence. Vance went calmly on. He spoke with a simple frankness that was meant to be disarming. Henriot never took his eyes off him. The two men stared steadily at one another.

“She wants to know if you will come and help too — in a certain way only: not in the experiment itself precisely, but by watching merely and—” He hesitated an instant, half lowering his eyes.

“Drawing the picture,” Henriot helped him deliberately.

“Drawing what you see, yes,” Vance replied, the voice turned graver in spite of himself. “She wants — she hopes to catch the outlines of anything that happens—”

“Comes.”

“Exactly. Determine the shape of anything that comes. You may remember your conversation of the other night with her. She is very certain of success.”

This was direct enough at any rate. It was as formal as an invitation to a dinner, and as guileless. The thing he thought he wanted lay within his reach. He had merely to say yes. He did say yes; but first he looked about him instinctively, as for guidance. He looked at the stars twinkling high above the distant Libyan Plateau; at the long arms of the Desert, gleaming weirdly white in the moonlight, and reaching towards him down every opening between the houses; at the heavy mass of the Mokattam Hills, guarding the Arabian Wilderness with strange, peaked barriers, their sand-carved ridges dark and still above the Wadi Hof.

These questionings attracted no response. The Desert watched him, but it did not answer. There was only the shrill whistling cry of the lizards, and the sing-song of a white-robed Arab gliding down the sandy street. And through these sounds he heard his own voice answer: “I will come — yes. But how can I help? Tell me what you propose — your plan?”

And the face of Vance, seen plainly in the electric glare, betrayed his satisfaction. The opposing things in the fellow's mind of darkness fought visibly in his eyes and skin. The sordid motive, planning a dreadful act, leaped to his face, and with it a flash of this other yearning that sought unearthly knowledge, perhaps believed it too. No wonder there was conflict written on his features.

Then all expression vanished again; he leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"You remember our conversation about there being types of life too vast to manifest in a single body, and my aunt's belief that these were known to certain of the older religious systems of the world?"

"Perfectly."

"Her experiment, then, is to bring one of these great Powers back — we possess the sympathetic ritual that can rouse some among them to activity — and win it down into the sphere of our minds, our minds heightened, you see, by ceremonial to that stage of clairvoyant vision which can perceive them."

"And then?" They might have been discussing the building of a house, so naturally followed answer upon question. But the whole body of meaning in the old Egyptian symbolism rushed over him with a force that shook his heart. Memory came so marvellously with it.

"If the Power floods down into our minds with sufficient strength for actual form, to note the outline of such form, and from your drawing model it later in permanent substance. Then we should have means of evoking it at will, for we should have its natural Body — the form it built itself, its signature, image, pattern. A starting-point, you see, for more — leading, she hopes, to a complete reconstruction."

"It might take actual shape — assume a bodily form visible to the eye?" repeated Henriot, amazed as before that doubt and laughter did not break through his mind.

"We are on the earth," was the reply, spoken unnecessarily low since no living thing was within earshot, "we are in physical conditions, are we not? Even a human soul we do not recognise unless we see it in a body — parents provide the outline, the signature, the sigil of the returning soul. This," and he tapped himself upon the breast, "is the physical signature of that type of life we call a soul. Unless there is life of a certain strength behind it, no body forms. And, without a body, we are helpless to control or manage it — deal with it in any way. We could not know it, though being possibly *aware* of it."

"To be aware, you mean, is not sufficient?" For he noticed the italics Vance made use of.

"Too vague, of no value for future use," was the reply. "But once obtain the form, and we have the natural symbol of that particular Power. And a symbol is more than image, it is a direct and concentrated expression of the life it typifies — possibly terrific."

"It may be a body, then, this symbol you speak of."

"Accurate vehicle of manifestation; but 'body' seems the simplest word."

Vance answered very slowly and deliberately, as though weighing how much he would tell. His language was admirably evasive. Few perhaps would have detected the profound significance the curious words he next used unquestionably concealed. Henriot's mind rejected them, but his heart accepted. For the ancient soul in him was listening and aware.

"Life, using matter to express itself in bodily shape, first traces a geometrical pattern. From the lowest form in crystals, upwards to more complicated patterns in the higher organisations — there is always first this geometrical pattern as skeleton. For geometry lies at the root of all possible phenomena; and is the mind's interpretation of a living movement towards shape that shall express it." He brought his eyes closer to the other, lowering his voice again. "Hence," he said softly, "the signs in all the old magical systems — skeleton forms into which the Powers evoked descended; outlines those Powers automatically built up when using matter to express themselves. Such signs are material symbols of their bodiless existence. They attract the life they represent and interpret. Obtain the correct, true symbol, and the Power corresponding to it can approach — once roused and made aware. It has, you see, a ready-made mould into which it can come down."

"Once roused and made aware?" repeated Henriot questioningly, while this man went stammering the letters of a language that he himself had used too long ago to recapture fully.

“Because they have left the world. They sleep, unmanifested. Their forms are no longer known to men. No forms exist on earth to-day that could contain them. But they may be awakened,” he added darkly. “They are bound to answer to the summons, if such summons be accurately made.”

“Evocation?” whispered Henriot, more distressed than he cared to admit.

Vance nodded. Leaning still closer, to his companion’s face, he thrust his lips forward, speaking eagerly, earnestly, yet somehow at the same time, horribly: “And we want — my aunt would ask — your draughtsman’s skill, or at any rate your memory afterwards, to establish the outline of anything that comes.”

He waited for the answer, still keeping his face uncomfortably close.

Henriot drew back a little. But his mind was fully made up now. He had known from the beginning that he would consent, for the desire in him was stronger than all the caution in the world. The Past inexorably drew him into the circle of these other lives, and the little human dread Vance woke in him seemed just then insignificant by comparison. It was merely of To-day.

“You two,” he said, trying to bring judgment into it, “engaged in evocation, will be in a state of clairvoyant vision. Granted. But shall I, as an outsider, observing with unexcited mind, see anything, know anything, be aware of anything at all, let alone the drawing of it?”

“Unless,” the reply came instantly with decision, “the descent of Power is strong enough to take actual material shape, the experiment is a failure. Anybody can induce subjective vision. Such fantasies have no value though. They are born of an overwrought imagination.” And then he added quickly, as though to clinch the matter before caution and hesitation could take effect: “You must watch from the heights above. We shall be in the valley — the Wadi Hof is the place. You must not be too close—”

“Why not too close?” asked Henriot, springing forward like a flash before he could prevent the sudden impulse.

With a quickness equal to his own, Vance answered. There was no faintest sign that he was surprised. His self-control was perfect. Only the glare passed darkly through his eyes and went back again into the sombre soul that bore it.

“For your own safety,” he answered low. “The Power, the type of life, she would waken is stupendous. And if roused enough to be attracted by the patterned symbol into which she would decoy it down, it will take actual, physical expression. But how? Where is the Body of Worshippers through whom it can manifest? There is none. It will, therefore, press inanimate matter into the service. The terrific impulse to form itself a means of expression will force all loose matter at hand towards it — sand, stones, all it can compel to yield — everything must rush into the sphere of action in which it operates. Alone, we at the centre, and you, upon the outer fringe, will be safe. Only — you must not come too close.”

But Henriot was no longer listening. His soul had turned to ice. For here, in this unguarded moment, the cloven hoof had plainly shown itself. In that suggestion of a particular kind of danger Vance had lifted a corner of the curtain behind which crouched his horrible intention. Vance desired a witness of the extraordinary experiment, but he desired this witness, not merely for the purpose of sketching possible shapes that might present themselves to excited vision. He desired a witness for another reason too. Why had Vance put that idea into his mind, this idea of so peculiar danger? It might well have lost him the very assistance he seemed so anxious to obtain.

Henriot could not fathom it quite. Only one thing was clear to him. He, Henriot, was not the only one in danger.

They talked for long after that — far into the night. The lights went out, and the armed patrol, pacing to and fro outside the iron railings that kept the desert back, eyed them curiously. But the only other thing he gathered of importance was the ledge upon the cliff-top where he was to stand and watch; that he was expected to reach there before sunset and wait till the moon concealed all glimmer in the western sky, and — that the woman, who had been engaged for days in secret preparation of soul and body for the awful rite, would not be visible again until he saw her in the depths of the black valley far below, busy with this man upon audacious, ancient purposes.

IX

An hour before sunset Henriot put his rugs and food upon a donkey, and gave the boy directions where to meet him — a considerable distance from the appointed spot. He went himself on foot. He slipped in the heat along the sandy street, where strings of camels still go slouching, shuffling with their loads from the quarries that built the pyramids, and he felt that little friendly Helouan tried to keep him back. But desire now was far too strong for caution. The desert tide was rising. It easily swept him down the long white street towards the enormous deeps beyond. He felt the pull of a thousand miles before him; and twice a thousand years drove at his back.

Everything still basked in the sunshine. He passed Al Hayat, the stately hotel that dominates the village like a palace built against the sky; and in its pillared colonnades and terraces he saw the throngs of people having late afternoon tea and listening to the music of a regimental band. Men in flannels were playing tennis, parties were climbing off donkeys after long excursions; there was laughter, talking, a babel of many voices. The gaiety called to him; the everyday spirit whispered to stay and join the crowd of lively human beings. Soon there would be merry dinner-parties, dancing, voices of pretty women, sweet white dresses, singing, and the rest. Soft eyes would question and turn dark. He picked out several girls he knew among the palms. But it was all many, oh so many leagues away; centuries lay between him and this modern world. An indescribable loneliness was in his heart. He went searching through the sands of forgotten ages, and wandering among the ruins of a vanished time. He hurried. Already the deeper water caught his breath.

He climbed the steep rise towards the plateau where the Observatory stands, and saw two of the officials whom he knew taking a siesta after their long day’s work. He felt that his mind, too, had dived and searched among the heavenly bodies that live in silent, changeless peace remote from the world of men. They recognised him, these two whose eyes also knew tremendous distance close. They beckoned, waving the straws through which they sipped their drinks from tall glasses. Their voices floated down to him as from the star-fields. He saw the sun gleam upon the glasses, and heard the clink of the ice against the sides. The stillness was amazing. He waved an answer, and passed quickly on. He could not stop this sliding current of the years.

The tide moved faster, the draw of piled-up cycles urging it. He emerged upon the plateau, and met the cooler Desert air. His feet went crunching on the "desert-film" that spread its curious dark shiny carpet as far as the eye could reach; it lay everywhere, unswept and smooth as when the feet of vanished civilizations trod its burning surface, then dipped behind the curtains Time pins against the stars. And here the body of the tide set all one way. There was a greater strength of current, draught and suction. He felt the powerful undertow. Deeper masses drew his feet sideways, and he felt the rushing of the central body of the sand. The sands were moving, from their foundation upwards. He went unresistingly with them.

Turning a moment, he looked back at shining little Helouan in the blaze of evening light. The voices reached him very faintly, merged now in a general murmur. Beyond lay the strip of Delta vivid green, the palms, the roofs of Bedrashein, the blue laughter of the Nile with its flocks of curved felucca sails. Further still, rising above the yellow Libyan horizon, gloomed the vast triangles of a dozen Pyramids, cutting their wedge-shaped clefts out of a sky fast crimsoning through a sea of gold. Seen thus, their dignity imposed upon the entire landscape. They towered darkly, symbolic signatures of the ancient Powers that now watched him taking these little steps across their damaged territory.

He gazed a minute, then went on. He saw the big pale face of the moon in the east. Above the ever-silent Thing these giant symbols once interpreted, she rose, grand, effortless, half-terrible as themselves. And, with her, she lifted up this tide of the Desert that drew his feet across the sand to Wadi Hof. A moment later he dipped below the ridge that buried Helouan and Nile and Pyramids from sight. He entered the ancient waters. Time then, in an instant, flowed back behind his footsteps, obliterating every trace. And with it his mind went too. He stepped across the gulf of centuries, moving into the Past. The Desert lay before him — an open tomb wherein his soul should read presently of things long vanished.

The strange half-lights of sunset began to play their witchery then upon the landscape. A purple glow came down upon the Mokattam Hills. Perspective danced its tricks of false, incredible deception. The soaring kites that were a mile away seemed suddenly close, passing in a moment from the size of gnats to birds with a fabulous stretch of wing. Ridges and cliffs rushed close without a hint of warning, and level places sank into declivities and basins that made him trip and stumble. That indescribable quality of the Desert, which makes timid souls avoid the hour of dusk, emerged; it spread everywhere, undisguised. And the bewilderment it brings is no vain, imagined thing, for it distorts vision utterly, and the effect upon the mind when familiar sight goes floundering is the simplest way in the world of dragging the anchor that grips reality. At the hour of sunset this bewilderment comes upon a man with a disconcerting swiftness. It rose now with all this weird rapidity. Henriot found himself enveloped at a moment's notice.

But, knowing well its effect, he tried to judge it and pass on. The other matters, the object of his journey chief of all, he refused to dwell upon with any imagination. Wisely, his mind, while never losing sight of it, declined to admit the exaggeration that over-elaborate thinking brings. "I'm going to witness an incredible experiment in which two enthusiastic religious dreamers believe firmly," he repeated to himself. "I have agreed to draw — anything I see. There may be truth in it, or they may be merely self-suggested vision due to an artificial exaltation of their minds. I'm interested — perhaps against my better judgment. Yet I'll see the adventure out — because I *must*."

This was the attitude he told himself to take. Whether it was the real one, or merely adopted to warm a cooling courage, he could not tell. The emotions were so complex and warring. His mind, automatically, kept repeating this comforting formula. Deeper than that he could not see to judge. For a man who knew the full content of his thought at such a time would solve some of the oldest psychological problems in the world. Sand had already buried judgment, and with it all attempt to explain the adventure by the standards acceptable to his brain of to-day. He steered subconsciously through a world of dim, huge, half-remembered wonders.

The sun, with that abrupt Egyptian suddenness, was below the horizon now. The pyramid field had swallowed it. Ra, in his golden boat, sailed distant seas beyond the Libyan wilderness. Henriot walked on and on, aware of utter loneliness. He was walking fields of dream, too remote from modern life to recall companionship he once had surely known. How dim it was, how deep and distant, how lost in this sea of an incalculable Past! He walked into the places that are soundless. The soundlessness of ocean, miles below the surface, was about him. He was with One only — this unfathomable, silent thing where nothing breathes or stirs — nothing but sunshine, shadow and the wind-borne sand. Slowly, in front, the moon climbed up the eastern sky, hanging above the silence — silence that ran unbroken across the horizons to where Suez gleamed upon the waters of a sister sea in motion. That moon was glinting now upon the Arabian Mountains by its desolate shores. Southwards stretched the wastes of Upper Egypt a thousand miles to meet the Nubian wilderness. But over all these separate Deserts stirred the soft whisper of the moving sand — deep murmuring message that Life was on the way to unwind Death. The Ka of Egypt, swathed in centuries of sand, hovered beneath the moon towards her ancient tenement.

For the transformation of the Desert now began in earnest. It grew apace. Before he had gone the first two miles of his hour's journey, the twilight caught the rocky hills and twisted them into those monstrous revelations of physiognomies they barely take the trouble to conceal even in the daytime. And, while he well understood the eroding agencies that have produced them, there yet rose in his mind a deeper interpretation lurking just behind their literal meanings. Here, through the motionless surfaces, that nameless thing the Desert ill conceals urged outwards into embryonic form and shape, akin, he almost felt, to those immense deific symbols of Other Life the Egyptians knew and worshipped. Hence, from the Desert, had first come, he felt, the unearthly life they typified in their monstrous figures of granite, evoked in their stately temples, and communed with in the ritual of their Mystery ceremonials.

This "watching" aspect of the Libyan Desert is really natural enough; but it is just the natural, Henriot knew, that brings the deepest revelations. The surface limestones, resisting the erosion, block themselves ominously against the sky, while the softer sand beneath sets them on altered pedestals that define their isolation splendidly. Blunt and unconquerable, these masses now watched him pass between them. The Desert surface formed them, gave them birth. They rose, they saw, they sank down again — waves upon a sea that carried forgotten life up from the depths below. Of forbidding, even menacing type, they somewhere mated with genuine grandeur. Unformed, according to any standard of human or of animal faces, they achieved an air of giant physiognomy which made them terrible. The unwinking stare of eyes — lidless eyes that yet ever succeed in hiding

— looked out under well-marked, level eyebrows, suggesting a vision that included the motives and purposes of his very heart. They looked up grandly, understood why he was there, and then — slowly withdrew their mysterious, penetrating gaze.

The strata built them so marvellously up; the heavy, threatening brows; thick lips, curved by the ages into a semblance of cold smiles; jowls drooping into sandy heaps that climbed against the cheeks; protruding jaws, and the suggestion of shoulders just about to lift the entire bodies out of the sandy beds — this host of countenances conveyed a solemnity of expression that seemed everlasting, implacable as Death. Of human signature they bore no trace, nor was comparison possible between their kind and any animal life. They peopled the Desert here. And their smiles, concealed yet just discernible, went broadening with the darkness into a Desert laughter. The silence bore it underground. But Henriot was aware of it. The troop of faces slipped into that single, enormous countenance which is the visage of the Sand. And he saw it everywhere, yet nowhere.

Thus with the darkness grew his imaginative interpretation of the Desert. Yet there was construction in it, a construction, moreover, that was *not* entirely his own. Powers, he felt, were rising, stirring, wakening from sleep. Behind the natural faces that he saw, these other things peered gravely at him as he passed. They used, as it were, materials that lay ready to their hand. Imagination furnished these hints of outline, yet the Powers themselves were real. There *was* this amazing movement of the sand. By no other manner could his mind have conceived of such a thing, nor dreamed of this simple, yet dreadful method of approach.

Approach! that was the word that first stood out and startled him. There was approach; something was drawing nearer. The Desert rose and walked beside him. For not alone these ribs of gleaming limestone contributed towards the elemental visages, but the entire hills, of which they were an outcrop, ran to assist in the formation, and were a necessary part of them. He was watched and stared at from behind, in front, on either side, and even from below. The sand that swept him on, kept even pace with him. It turned luminous too, with a patchwork of glimmering effect that was indescribably weird; lanterns glowed within its substance, and by their light he stumbled on, glad of the Arab boy he would presently meet at the appointed place.

The last torch of the sunset had flickered out, melting into the wilderness, when, suddenly opening at his feet, gaped the deep, wide gully known as Wadi Hof. Its curve swept past him.

This first impression came upon him with a certain violence: that the desolate valley rushed. He saw but a section of its curve and sweep, but through its entire length of several miles the Wadi fled away. The moon whitened it like snow, piling black shadows very close against the cliffs. In the flood of moonlight it went rushing past. It was emptying itself.

For a moment the stream of movement seemed to pause and look up into his face, then instantly went on again upon its swift career. It was like the procession of a river to the sea. The valley emptied itself to make way for what was coming. The approach, moreover, had already begun.

Conscious that he was trembling, he stood and gazed into the depths, seeking to steady his mind by the repetition of the little formula he had used before. He said it half aloud. But, while he did so, his heart whispered quite other things. Thoughts the woman and the man had sown rose up in a flock and fell upon him like a storm of sand. Their impetus drove off all support of ordinary ideas. They shook him where he stood, staring down into this river of strange invisible movement that was hundreds of feet in depth and a quarter of a mile across.

He sought to realise himself as he actually was to-day — mere visitor to Helouan, tempted into this wild adventure with two strangers. But in vain. That seemed a dream, unreal, a transient detail picked out from the enormous Past that now engulfed him, heart and mind and soul. *This* was the reality.

The shapes and faces that the hills of sand built round him were the play of excited fancy only. By sheer force he pinned his thought against this fact: but further he could not get. There *were* Powers at work; they were being stirred, wakened somewhere into activity. Evocation had already begun. That sense of their approach as he had walked along from Helouan was not imaginary. A descent of some type of life, vanished from the world too long for recollection, was on the way, — so vast that it would manifest itself in a group of forms, a troop, a host, an army. These two were near him somewhere at this very moment, already long at work, their minds driving beyond this little world. The valley was emptying itself — for the descent of life their ritual invited.

And the movement in the sand was likewise true. He recalled the sentences the woman had used. “My body,” he reflected, “like the bodies life makes use of everywhere, is mere upright heap of earth and dust and — sand. Here in the Desert is the raw material, the greatest store of it in the world.”

And on the heels of it came sharply that other thing: that this descending Life would press into its service all loose matter within its reach — to form that sphere of action which would be in a literal sense its Body.

In the first few seconds, as he stood there, he realised all this, and realised it with an overwhelming conviction it was futile to deny. The fast-emptying valley would later brim with an unaccustomed and terrific life. Yet Death hid there too — a little, ugly, insignificant death. With the name of Vance it flashed upon his mind and vanished, too tiny to be thought about in this torrent of grander messages that shook the depths within his soul. He bowed his head a moment, hardly knowing what he did. He could have waited thus a thousand years it seemed. He was conscious of a wild desire to run away, to hide, to efface himself utterly, his terror, his curiosity, his little wonder, and not be seen of anything. But it was all vain and foolish. The Desert saw him. The Gigantic knew that he was there. No escape was possible any longer. Caught by the sand, he stood amid eternal things. The river of movement swept him too.

These hills, now motionless as statues, would presently glide forward into the cavalcade, sway like vessels, and go past with the procession. At present only the contents, not the frame, of the Wadi moved. An immense soft brush of moonlight swept it empty for what was on the way.... But presently the entire Desert would stand up and also go.

Then, making a sideways movement, his feet kicked against something soft and yielding that lay heaped upon the Desert floor, and Henriot discovered the rugs the Arab boy had carefully set down before he made full speed for the friendly lights of Helouan. The sound of his departing footsteps had long since died away. He was alone.

The detail restored to him his consciousness of the immediate present, and, stooping, he gathered up the rugs and overcoat and began to make preparations for the night. But the appointed spot, whence he was to watch, lay upon the summit of the opposite cliffs. He must cross the Wadi bed and climb. Slowly and with labour he made his way down a steep cleft into the depth of the Wadi Hof, sliding and stumbling often, till at length he stood upon the floor of shining moonlight. It was very smooth; windless utterly; still as space; each particle of sand lay in its ancient place asleep. The movement, it seemed, had ceased.

He clambered next up the eastern side, through pitch-black shadows, and within the hour reached the ledge upon the top whence he could see below him, like a silvered map, the sweep of the valley bed. The wind nipped keenly here again, coming over the leagues of cooling sand. Loose boulders of splintered rock, started by his climbing, crashed and boomed into the depths. He banked the rugs behind him, wrapped himself in his overcoat, and lay down to wait. Behind him was a two-foot crumbling wall against which he leaned; in front a drop of several hundred feet through space. He lay upon a platform, therefore, invisible from the Desert at his back. Below, the curving Wadi formed a natural amphitheatre in which each separate boulder fallen from the cliffs, and even the little *silla* shrubs the camels eat, were plainly visible. He noted all the bigger ones among them. He counted them over half aloud.

And the moving stream he had been unaware of when crossing the bed itself, now began again. The Wadi went rushing past before the broom of moonlight. Again, the enormous and the tiny combined in one single strange impression. For, through this conception of great movement, stirred also a roving, delicate touch that his imagination felt as bird-like. Behind the solid mass of the Desert’s immobility flashed something swift and light and airy. Bizarre pictures interpreted it to him, like rapid snap-shots of a huge flying panorama: he thought of darting dragon-flies seen at Helouan, of children’s little dancing feet, of twinkling butterflies — of birds. Chiefly, yes, of a flock of birds in flight, whose separate units formed a single entity. The idea of the Group-Soul possessed his mind once more. But it came with a sense of more than curiosity or wonder. Veneration lay behind it, a veneration touched with awe. It rose in his deepest thought that here was the first hint of a symbolical representation. A symbol, sacred and inviolable, belonging to some ancient worship that he half remembered in his soul, stirred towards interpretation through all his being.

He lay there waiting, wondering vaguely where his two companions were, yet fear all vanished because he felt attuned to a scale of things too big to mate with definite dread. There was high anticipation in him, but not anxiety. Of himself, as Felix Henriot, indeed, he hardly seemed aware. He was some one else. Or, rather, he was himself at a stage he had known once far, far away in a remote pre-existence. He watched himself from dim summits of a Past, of which no further details were as yet recoverable.

Pencil and sketching-block lay ready to his hand. The moon rose higher, tucking the shadows ever more closely against the precipices. The silver passed into a sheet of snowy whiteness, that made every boulder clearly visible. Solemnity deepened everywhere into awe. The Wadi fled silently down the stream of hours. It was almost empty now. And then, abruptly, he was aware of change. The motion altered somewhere. It moved more quietly; pace slackened; the end of the procession that evacuated the depth and length of it went trailing past and turned the distant bend.

"It's slowing up," he whispered, as sure of it as though he had watched a regiment of soldiers filing by. The wind took off his voice like a flying feather of sound.

And there *was* a change. It had begun. Night and the moon stood still to watch and listen. The wind dropped utterly away. The sand ceased its shifting movement. The Desert everywhere stopped still, and turned.

Some curtain, then, that for centuries had veiled the world, drew softly up, leaving a shaded vista down which the eyes of his soul peered towards long-forgotten pictures. Still buried by the sands too deep for full recovery, he yet perceived dim portions of them — things once honoured and loved passionately. For once they had surely been to him the whole of life, not merely a fragment for cheap wonder to inspect. And they were curiously familiar, even as the person of this woman who now evoked them was familiar. Henriot made no pretence to more definite remembrance; but the haunting certainty rushed over him, deeper than doubt or denial, and with such force that he felt no effort to destroy it. Some lost sweetness of spiritual ambitions, lived for with this passionate devotion, and passionately worshipped as men to-day worship fame and money, revived in him with a tempest of high glory. Centres of memory stirred from an age-long sleep, so that he could have wept at their so complete obliteration hitherto. That such majesty had departed from the world as though it never had existed, was a thought for desolation and for tears. And though the little fragment he was about to witness might be crude in itself and incomplete, yet it was part of a vast system that once explored the richest realms of deity. The reverence in him contained a holiness of the night and of the stars; great, gentle awe lay in it too; for he stood, aflame with anticipation and humility, at the gateway of sacred things.

And this was the mood, no thrill of cheap excitement or alarm to weaken in, in which he first became aware that two spots of darkness he had taken all along for boulders on the snowy valley bed, were actually something very different. They were living figures. They moved. It was not the shadows slowly following the moonlight, but the stir of human beings who all these hours had been motionless as stone. He must have passed them unnoticed within a dozen yards when he crossed the Wadi bed, and a hundred times from this very ledge his eyes had surely rested on them without recognition. Their minds, he knew full well, had not been inactive as their bodies. The important part of the ancient ritual lay, he remembered, in the powers of the evoking mind.

Here, indeed, was no effective nor theatrical approach of the principal figures. It had nothing in common with the cheap external ceremonial of modern days. In forgotten powers of the soul its grandeur lay, potent, splendid, true. Long before he came, perhaps all through the day, these two had laboured with their arduous preparations. They were there, part of the Desert, when hours ago he had crossed the plateau in the twilight. To them — to this woman's potent working of old ceremonial — had been due that singular rush of imagination he had felt. He had interpreted the Desert as alive. Here was the explanation. It *was* alive. Life was on the way. Long latent, her intense desire summoned it back to physical expression; and the effect upon him had steadily increased as he drew nearer to the centre where she would focus its revival and return. Those singular impressions of being watched and accompanied were explained. A priest of this old-world worship performed a genuine evocation; a Great One of Vision revived the cosmic Powers.

Henriot watched the small figures far below him with a sense of dramatic splendour that only this association of far-off Memory could account for. It was their rising now, and the lifting of their arms to form a slow revolving outline, that marked the abrupt cessation of the larger river of movement; for the sweeping of the Wadi sank into sudden stillness, and these two, with motions not unlike some dance of deliberate solemnity, passed slowly through the moonlight to and fro. His attention fixed upon them both. All other movement ceased. They fastened the flow of Time against the Desert's body.

What happened then? How could his mind interpret an experience so long denied that the power of expression, as of comprehension, has ceased to exist? How translate this symbolical representation, small detail though it was, of a transcendent worship entombed for most so utterly beyond recovery? Its splendour could never lodge in minds that conceive Deity perched upon a cloud within telephoning distance of fashionable churches. How should he phrase it even to himself, whose memory drew up pictures from so dim a past that the language fit to frame them lay unreachable and lost?

Henriot did not know. Perhaps he never yet has known. Certainly, at the time, he did not even try to think. His sensations remain his own — untranslatable; and even that instinctive description the mind gropes for automatically, floundered, halted, and stopped dead. Yet there rose within him somewhere, from depths long drowned in slumber, a reviving power by which he saw, divined and recollected — remembered seemed too literal a word — these elements of a worship he once had personally known. He, too, had worshipped thus. His soul had moved amid similar evocations in some aeonian past, whence now the sand was being cleared away. Symbols of stupendous meaning flashed and went their way across the lifting mists. He hardly caught their meaning, so long it was since, he had known them; yet they were familiar as the faces seen in dreams, and some hint of their spiritual significance left faint traces in his heart by means of which their grandeur reached towards interpretation. And all were symbols of a cosmic, deific nature; of Powers that only symbols can express — prayer-books and sacraments used in the Wisdom Religion of an older time, but to-day known only in the decrepit, literal shell which is their degradation.

Grandly the figures moved across the valley bed. The powers of the heavenly bodies once more joined them. They moved to the measure of a cosmic dance, whose rhythm was creative. The Universe partnered them.

There was this transfiguration of all common, external things. He realised that appearances were visible letters of a soundless language, a language he once had known. The powers of night and moon and desert sand married with points in the fluid stream of his inmost spiritual being that knew and welcomed them. He understood.

Old Egypt herself stooped down from her uncovered throne. The stars sent messengers. There was commotion in the secret, sandy places of the desert. For the Desert had grown Temple. Columns reared against the sky. There rose, from leagues away, the chanting of the sand.

The temples, where once this came to pass, were gone, their ruin questioned by alien hearts that knew not their spiritual meaning. But here the entire Desert swept in to form a shrine, and the Majesty that once was Egypt stepped grandly back across ages of denial and neglect. The sand was altar, and the stars were altar lights. The moon lit up the vast recesses of the ceiling, and the wind from a thousand miles brought in the perfume of her incense. For with that faith which shifts mountains from their sandy bed, two passionate, believing souls invoked the Ka of Egypt.

And the motions that they made, he saw, were definite harmonious patterns their dark figures traced upon the shining valley floor. Like the points of compasses, with stems invisible, and directed from the sky, their movements marked the outlines of great signatures of power — the sigils of the type of life they would evoke. It would come as a Procession. No individual outline could contain it. It needed for its visible expression — many. The descent of a group-soul, known to the worship of this mighty system, rose from its lair of centuries and moved hugely down upon them. The Ka, answering to the summons, would mate with sand. The Desert was its Body.

Yet it was not this that he had come to fix with block and pencil. Not yet was the moment when his skill might be of use. He waited, watched, and listened, while this river of half-remembered things went past him. The patterns grew beneath his eyes like music. Too intricate and prolonged to remember with accuracy later, he understood that they were forms of that root-geometry which lies behind all manifested life. The mould was being traced in outline. Life would presently inform it. And a singing rose from the maze of lines whose beauty was like the beauty of the constellations.

This sound was very faint at first, but grew steadily in volume. Although no echoes, properly speaking, were possible, these precipices caught stray notes that trooped in from the further sandy reaches. The figures certainly were chanting, but their chanting was not all he heard. Other sounds came to his ears from far away, running past him through the air from every side, and from incredible distances, all flocking down into the Wadi bed to join the parent note that summoned them. The Desert was giving voice. And memory, lifting her hood yet higher, showed more of her grey, mysterious face that searched his soul with questions. Had he so soon forgotten that strange union of form and sound which once was known to the evocative rituals of olden days?

Henriot tried patiently to disentangle this desert-music that their intoning voices woke, from the humming of the blood in his own veins. But he succeeded only in part. Sand was already in the air. There was reverberation, rhythm, measure; there was almost the breaking of the stream into great syllables. But was it due, this strange reverberation, to the countless particles of sand meeting in mid-air about him, or — to larger bodies, whose surfaces caught this friction of the sand and threw it back against his ears? The wind, now rising, brought particles that stung his face and hands, and filled his eyes with a minute fine dust that partially veiled the moonlight. But was not something larger, vaster these particles composed now also on the way?

Movement and sound and flying sand thus merged themselves more and more in a single, whirling torrent. But Henriot sought no commonplace explanation of what he witnessed; and here was the proof that all happened in some vestibule of inner experience where the strain of question and answer had no business. One sitting beside him need not have seen anything at all. His host, for instance, from Helouan, need not have been aware. Night screened it; Helouan, as the whole of modern experience, stood in front of the screen. This thing took place behind it. He crouched motionless, watching in some reconstructed ante-chamber of the soul's pre-existence, while the torrent grew into a veritable tempest.

Yet Night remained unshaken; the veil of moonlight did not quiver; the stars dropped their slender golden pillars unobstructed. Calmness reigned everywhere as before. The stupendous representation passed on behind it all.

But the dignity of the little human movements that he watched had become now indescribable. The gestures of the arms and bodies invested themselves with consummate grandeur, as these two strode into the caverns behind manifested life and drew forth symbols that represented vanished Powers. The sound of their chanting voices broke in cadenced fragments against the shores of language. The words Henriot never actually caught, if words they were; yet he understood their purport — these Names of Power to which the type of returning life gave answer as they approached. He remembered fumbling for his drawing materials, with such violence, however, that the pencil snapped in two between his fingers as he touched it. For now, even here, upon the outer fringe of the ceremonial ground, there was a stir of forces that set the very muscles working in him before he had become aware of it....

Then came the moment when his heart leaped against his ribs with a sudden violence that was almost pain, standing a second later still as death. The lines upon the valley floor ceased their maze-like dance. All movement stopped. Sound died away. In the midst of this profound and dreadful silence the sigils lay empty there below him. They waited to be in-formed. For the moment of entrance had come at last. Life was close.

And he understood why this return of life had all along suggested a Procession and could be no mere momentary flash of vision. From such appalling distance did it sweep down towards the present.

Upon this network, then, of splendid lines, at length held rigid, the entire Desert reared itself with walls of curtained sand, that dwarfed the cliffs, the shouldering hills, the very sky. The Desert stood on end. As once before he had dreamed it from his balcony windows, it rose upright, towering, and close against his face. It built sudden ramparts to the stars that chambered the thing he witnessed behind walls no centuries could ever bring down crumbling into dust.

He himself, in some curious fashion, lay just outside, viewing it apart. As from a pinnacle, he peered within — peered down with straining eyes into the vast picture-gallery Memory threw abruptly open. And the picture spaced its noble outline thus against the very stars. He gazed between columns, that supported the sky itself, like pillars of sand that swept across the field of vanished years. Sand poured and streamed aside, laying bare the Past.

For down the enormous vista into which he gazed, as into an avenue running a million miles towards a tiny point, he saw this moving Thing that came towards him, shaking loose the countless veils of sand the ages had swathed about it. The Ka of buried Egypt wakened out of sleep. She had heard the potent summons of her old, time-honoured ritual. She came. She stretched forth an arm towards the worshippers who evoked her. Out of the Desert, out of the leagues of sand, out of the immeasurable wilderness which was her mummied Form and Body, she rose and came. And this fragment of her he would actually see — this little portion that was obedient to the stammered and broken ceremonial. The partial revelation he would witness — yet so vast, even this little bit of it, that it came as a Procession and a host.

For a moment there was nothing. And then the voice of the woman rose in a resounding cry that filled the Wadi to its furthest precipices, before it died away again to silence. That a human voice could produce such volume, accent, depth, seemed half incredible. The walls of towering sand swallowed it instantly. But the Procession of life, needing a group, a host, an army for its physical expression, reached at that moment the nearer end of the huge avenue. It touched the Present; it entered the world of men.

X

The entire range of Henriot’s experience, read, imagined, dreamed, then fainted into unreality before the sheer wonder of what he saw. In the brief interval it takes to snap the fingers the climax was thus so hurriedly upon him. And, through it all, he was clearly aware of the pair of little human figures, man and woman, standing erect and commanding at the centre — knew, too, that she directed and controlled, while he in some secondary fashion supported her — and ever watched. But both were dim, dropped somewhere into a lesser scale. It was the knowledge of their presence, however, that alone enabled him to keep his powers in hand at all. But for these two *human* beings there within possible reach, he must have closed his eyes and swooned.

For a tempest that seemed to toss loose stars about the sky swept round about him, pouring up the pillared avenue in front of the procession. A blast of giant energy, of liberty, came through. Forwards and backwards, circling spirally about him like a whirlwind, came this revival of Life that sought to dip itself once more in matter and in form. It came to the accurate out-line of its form they had traced for it. He held his mind steady enough to realise that it was akin to what men call a “descent” of some “spiritual movement” that wakens a body of believers into faith — a race, an entire nation; only that he experienced it in this brief, concentrated form before it has scattered down into ten thousand hearts. Here he knew its source and essence, behind the veil. Crudely, unmanageable as yet, he felt it, rushing loose behind appearances. There was this amazing impact of a twisting, swinging force that stormed down as though it would bend and coil the very ribs of the old stubborn hills. It sought to warm them with the stress of its own irresistible life-stream, to beat them into shape, and make pliable their obstinate resistance. Through all things the impulse poured and spread, like fire at white heat.

Yet nothing visible came as yet, no alteration in the actual landscape, no sign of change in things familiar to his eyes, while impetus thus fought against inertia. He perceived nothing form-al. Calm and untouched himself, he lay outside the circle of evocation, watching, waiting, scarcely daring to breathe, yet well aware that any minute the scene would transfer itself from memory that was subjective to matter that was objective.

And then, in a flash, the bridge was built, and the transfer was accomplished. How or where he did not see, he could not tell. It was there before he knew it — there before his normal, earthly sight. He saw it, as he saw the hands he was holding stupidly up to shield his face. For this terrific release of force long held back, long stored up, latent for centuries, came pouring down the empty Wadi bed prepared for its reception. Through stones and sand and boulders it came in an impetuous hurricane of power. The liberation of its life appalled him. All that was free, untied, responded instantly like chaff; loose objects fled towards it; there was a yielding in the hills and precipices; and even in the mass of Desert which provided their foundation. The hinges of the Sand went creaking in the night. It shaped for itself a bodily outline.

Yet, most strangely, nothing definitely moved. How could he express the violent contradiction? For the immobility was apparent only — a sham, a counterfeit; while behind it the essential *being* of these things did rush and shift and alter. He saw the two things side by side: the outer immobility the senses commonly agree upon, *and* this amazing flying-out of their inner, invisible substance towards the vortex of attracting life that sucked them in. For stubborn matter turned docile before the stress of this returning life, taught somewhere to be plastic. It was being moulded into an approach to bodily outline. A mobile elasticity invaded rigid substance. The two officiating human beings, safe at the stationary centre, and himself, just outside the circle of operation, alone remained untouched and unaffected. But a few feet in any direction, for any one of them, meant — instantaneous death. They would be absorbed into the vortex, mere corpuscles pressed into the service of this sphere of action of a mighty Body....

How these perceptions reached him with such conviction, Henriot could never say. He knew it, because he *felt* it. Something fell about him from the sky that already paled towards the dawn. The stars themselves, it seemed, contributed some part of the terrific, flowing impulse that conquered matter and shaped itself this physical expression.

Then, before he was able to fashion any preconceived idea of what visible form this potent life might assume, he was aware of further change. It came at the briefest possible interval after the beginning — this certainty that, to and fro about him, as yet however indeterminate, passed Magnitudes that were stupendous as the desert. There was beauty in them too, though a terrible beauty hardly of this earth at all. A fragment of old Egypt had returned — a little portion of that vast Body of Belief that once was Egypt. Evoked by the worship of one human heart, passionately sincere, the Ka of Egypt stepped back to visit the material it once informed — the Sand.

Yet only a portion came. Henriot clearly realised that. It stretched forth an arm. Finding no mass of worshippers through whom it might express itself completely, it pressed inanimate matter thus into its service.

Here was the beginning the woman had spoken of — little opening clue. Entire reconstruction lay perhaps beyond.

And Henriot next realised that these Magnitudes in which this group-energy sought to clothe itself as visible form, were curiously familiar. It was not a new thing that he would see. Booming softly as they dropped downwards through the sky, with a motion the size of them rendered delusive, they trooped up the Avenue towards the central point that summoned them. He realised the giant flock of them — descent of fearful beauty — outlining a type of life denied to the world for ages, countless as this sand that blew against his skin. Careering over the waste of Desert moved the army of dark Splendours, that dwarfed any organic structure called a body men have ever known. He recognised them, cold in him of death, though the outlines reared higher than the pyramids, and towered up to hide whole groups of stars. Yes, he recognised them in their partial revelation, though he never saw the monstrous host complete. But, one of them, he realised, posing its eternal riddle to the sands, had of old been glimpsed sufficiently to seize its form in stone, — yet poorly seized, as a doll may stand for the dignity of a human being or a child's toy represent an engine that draws trains....

And he knelt there on his narrow ledge, the world of men forgotten. The power that caught him was too great a thing for wonder or for fear; he even felt no awe. Sensation of any kind that can be named or realised left him utterly. He forgot himself. He merely watched. The glory numbed him. Block and pencil, as the reason of his presence there at all, no longer existed....

Yet one small link remained that held him to some kind of consciousness of earthly things: he never lost sight of this — that, being just outside the circle of evocation, he was safe, and that the man and woman, being stationary in its untouched centre, were also safe. But — that a movement of six inches in any direction meant for any one of them instant death.

What was it, then, that suddenly strengthened this solitary link so that the chain tautened and he felt the pull of it? Henriot could not say. He came back with the rush of a descending drop to the realisation — dimly, vaguely, as from great distance — that he was with these two, now at this moment, in the Wadi Hof, and that the cold of dawn was in the air about him. The chill breath of the Desert made him shiver.

But at first, so deeply had his soul been dipped in this fragment of ancient worship, he could remember nothing more. Somewhere lay a little spot of streets and houses; its name escaped him. He had once been there; there were many people, but insignificant people. Who were they? And what had he to do with them? All recent memories had been drowned in the tide that flooded him from an immeasurable Past.

And who were they — these two beings, standing on the white floor of sand below him? For a long time he could not recover their names. Yet he remembered them; and, thus robbed of association that names bring, he saw them for an instant naked, and knew that one of them was evil. One of them was vile. Blackness touched the picture there. The man, his name still out of reach, was sinister, impure and dark at the heart. And for this reason the evocation had been partial only. The admixture of an evil motive was the flaw that marred complete success.

The names then flashed upon him — Lady Statham — Richard Vance.

Vance! With a horrid drop from splendour into something mean and sordid, Henriot felt the pain of it. The motive of the man was so insignificant, his purpose so atrocious. More and more, with the name, came back — his first repugnance, fear, suspicion. And human terror caught him. He shrieked. But, as in nightmare, no sound escaped his lips. He tried to move; a wild desire to interfere, to protect, to prevent, flung him forward — close to the dizzy edge of the gulf below. But his muscles refused obedience to the will. The paralysis of common fear rooted him to the rocks.

But the sudden change of focus instantly destroyed the picture; and so vehement was the fall from glory into meanness, that it dislocated the machinery of clairvoyant vision. The inner perception clouded and grew dark. Outer and inner mingled in violent, inextricable confusion. The wrench seemed almost physical. It happened all at once, retreat and continuation for a moment somehow combined. And, if he did not definitely see the awful thing, at least he was aware that it had come to pass. He knew it as positively as though his eye were glued against a magnifying lens in the stillness of some laboratory. He witnessed it.

The supreme moment of evocation was close. Life, through that awful sandy vortex, whirled and raged. Loose particles showered and pelted, caught by the draught of vehement life that moulded the substance of the Desert into imperial outline — when, suddenly, shot the little evil thing across that marred and blasted it.

Into the whirlpool flew forward a particle of material that was a human being. And the Group-Soul caught and used it.

The actual accomplishment Henriot did not claim to see. He was a witness, but a witness who could give no evidence. Whether the woman was pushed of set intention, or whether some detail of sound and pattern was falsely used to effect the terrible result, he was helpless to determine. He pretends no itemised account. She went. In one second, with appalling swiftness, she disappeared, swallowed out of space and time within that awful maw — one little corpuscle among a million through which the Life, now stalking the Desert wastes, moulded itself a troop-like Body. Sand took her.

There followed emptiness — a hush of unutterable silence, stillness, peace. Movement and sound instantly retired whence they came. The avenues of Memory closed; the Splendours all went down into their sandy tombs....

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The moon had sunk into the Libyan wilderness; the eastern sky was red. The dawn drew out that wondrous sweetness of the Desert, which is as sister to the sweetness that the moonlight brings. The Desert settled back to sleep, huge, unfathomable, charged to the brim with life that watches, waits, and yet conceals itself behind the ruins of apparent desolation. And the Wadi, empty at his feet, filled slowly with the gentle little winds that bring the sunrise.

Then, across the pale glimmering of sand, Henriot saw a figure moving. It came quickly towards him, yet unsteadily, and with a hurry that was ugly. Vance was on the way to fetch him. And the horror of the man’s approach struck him like a hammer in the face. He closed his eyes, sinking back to hide.

But, before he swooned, there reached him the clatter of the murderer’s tread as he began to climb over the splintered rocks, and the faint echo of his voice, calling him by name — falsely and in pretence — for help.

THE END

THE TRANSFER

THE CHILD FIRST began to cry in the early afternoon — about three o'clock, to be exact. I remember the hour, because I had been listening with secret relief to the sound of the departing carriage. Those wheels fading into distance down the gravel drive with Mrs. Frene, and her daughter Gladys to whom I was governess, meant for me some hours' welcome rest, and the June day was oppressively hot. Moreover, there was this excitement in the little country household that had told upon us all, but especially upon myself. This excitement, running delicately behind all the events of the morning, was due to some mystery, and the mystery was of course kept concealed from the governess. I had exhausted myself with guessing and keeping on the watch. For some deep and unexplained anxiety possessed me, so that I kept thinking of my sister's dictum that I was really much too sensitive to make a good governess, and that I should have done far better as a professional clairvoyante.

Mr. Frene, senior, "Uncle Frank," was expected for an unusual visit from town about tea-time. That I knew. I also knew that his visit was concerned somehow with the future welfare of little Jamie, Gladys' seven-year-old brother. More than this, indeed, I never knew, and this missing link makes my story in a fashion incoherent — an important bit of the strange puzzle left out. I only gathered that the visit of Uncle Frank was of a condescending nature, that Jamie was told he must be upon his very best behaviour to make a good impression, and that Jamie, who had never seen his uncle, dreaded him horribly already in advance. Then, trailing thinly through the dying crunch of the carriage wheels this sultry afternoon, I heard the curious little wail of the child's crying, with the effect, wholly unaccountable, that every nerve in my body shot its bolt electrically, bringing me to my feet with a tingling of unequivocal alarm. Positively, the water ran into my eyes. I recalled his white distress that morning when told that Uncle Frank was motoring down for tea and that he was to be "very nice indeed" to him. It had gone into me like a knife. All through the day, indeed, had run this nightmare quality of terror and vision.

"The man with the 'normous face?" he had asked in a little voice of awe, and then gone speechless from the room in tears that no amount of soothing management could calm. That was all I saw; and what he meant by "the 'normous face" gave me only a sense of vague presentiment. But it came as anti-climax somehow — a sudden revelation of the mystery and excitement that pulsed beneath the quiet of the stifling summer day. I feared for him. For of all that commonplace household I loved Jamie best, though professionally I had nothing to do with him. He was a high-strung, ultra-sensitive child, and it seemed to me that no one understood him, least of all his honest, tender-hearted parents; so that his little wailing voice brought me from my bed to the window in a moment like a call for help.

The haze of June lay over that big garden like a blanket; the wonderful flowers, which were Mr. Frene's delight, hung motionless; the lawns, so soft and thick, cushioned all other sounds; only the limes and huge clumps of guelder roses hummed with bees. Through this muted atmosphere of heat and haze the sound of the child's crying floated faintly to my ears — from a distance. Indeed, I wonder now that I heard it at all, for the next moment I saw him down beyond the garden, standing in his white sailor suit alone, two hundred yards away. He was down by the ugly patch where nothing grew — the Forbidden Corner. A faintness then came over me at once, a faintness as of death, when I saw him *there* of all places — where he never was allowed to go, and where, moreover, he was usually too terrified to go. To see him standing solitary in that singular spot, above all to hear him crying there, bereft me momentarily of the power to act. Then, before I could recover my composure sufficiently to call him in, Mr. Frene came round the corner from the Lower Farm with the dogs, and, seeing his son, performed that office for me. In his loud, good-natured, hearty voice he called him, and Jamie turned and ran as though some spell had broken just in time — ran into the open arms of his fond but uncomprehending father, who carried him indoors on his shoulder, while asking "what all this hubbub was about?" And, at their heels, the tailless sheep-dogs followed, barking loudly, and performing what Jamie called their "Gravel Dance," because they ploughed up the moist, rolled gravel with their feet.

I stepped back swiftly from the window lest I should be seen. Had I witnessed the saving of the child from fire or drowning the relief could hardly have been greater. Only Mr. Frene, I felt sure, would not say and do the right thing quite. He would protect the boy from his own vain imaginings, yet not with the explanation that could really heal. They disappeared behind the rose trees, making for the house. I saw no more till later when Mr. Frene, senior, arrived.

To describe the ugly patch as “singular” is hard to justify, perhaps, yet some such word is what the entire family sought, though never — oh, never! — used. To Jamie and myself, though equally we never mentioned it, that treeless, flowerless spot was more than singular. It stood at the far end of the magnificent rose garden, a bald, sore place, where the black earth showed uglily in winter, almost like a piece of dangerous bog, and in summer baked and cracked with fissures where green lizards shot their fire in passing. In contrast to the rich luxuriance of the whole amazing garden it was like a glimpse of death amid life, a centre of disease that cried for healing lest it spread. But it never did spread. Behind it stood the thick wood of silver birches and, glimmering beyond, the orchard meadow, where the lambs played.

The gardeners had a very simple explanation of its barrenness — that the water all drained off it owing to the lie of the slopes immediately about it, holding no remnant to keep the soil alive. I cannot say. It was Jamie — Jamie who felt its spell and haunted it, who spent whole hours there, even while afraid, and for whom it was finally labelled “strictly out of bounds” because it stimulated his already big imagination, not wisely but too darkly — it was Jamie who buried ogres there and heard it crying in an earthy voice, swore that it shook its surface sometimes while he watched it, and secretly gave it food in the form of birds or mice or rabbits he found dead upon his wanderings. And it was Jamie who put so extraordinarily into words the *feeling* that the horrid spot had given me from the moment I first saw it.

“It’s bad, Miss Gould,” he told me.

“But, Jamie, nothing in Nature is bad exactly; only different from the rest sometimes.”

“Miss Gould, if you please, then it’s empty. It’s not fed. It’s dying because it can’t get the food it wants.”

And when I stared into the little pale face where the eyes shone so dark and wonderful, seeking within myself for the right thing to say to him, he added, with an emphasis and conviction that made me suddenly turn cold " Miss Gould" he always used my name like this in all his sentences— "it's hungry, don't you see? But *I* know what would make it feel all right."

Only the conviction of an earnest child, perhaps, could have made so outrageous a suggestion worth listening to for an instant; but for me, who felt that things an imaginative child believed were important, it came with a vast disquieting shock of reality. Jamie, in this exaggerated way, had caught at the edge of a shocking fact a hint of dark, undiscovered truth had leaped into that sensitive imagination. Why there lay horror in the words I cannot say, but I think some power of darkness trooped across the suggestion of that sentence at the end, "I know what would make it feel all right." I remember that I shrank from asking explanation. Small groups of other words, veiled fortunately by his silence, gave life to an unspeakable possibility that hitherto had lain at the back of my own consciousness. The way it sprang to life proves, I think, that my mind already contained it. The blood rushed from my heart as I listened. I remember that my knees shook. Jamie's idea was — had been all along — my own as well.

And now, as I lay down on my bed and thought about it all, I understood why the coming of his uncle involved somehow an experience that wrapped terror at its heart. With a sense of nightmare certainty that left me too weak to resist the preposterous idea, too shocked, indeed, to argue or reason it away, this certainty came with its full, black blast of conviction; and the only way I can put it into words, since nightmare horror really is not properly tellable at all, seems this: that there *was* something missing in that dying patch of garden; something lacking that it ever searched for; something, once found and taken, that would turn it rich and living as the rest; more — that there *was* some living person who could do this for it. Mr. Frene, senior, in a word, "Uncle Frank," was this person who out of his abundant life could supply the lack unwittingly.

For this connection between the dying, empty patch and the person of this vigorous, wealthy, and successful man had already lodged itself in my subconsciousness before I was aware of it. Clearly it must have lain there all along, though hidden. Jamie's words, his sudden pallor, his vibrating emotion of fearful anticipation had developed the plate, but it was his weeping alone there in the Forbidden Corner that had printed it. The photograph shone framed before me in the air. I hid my eyes. But for the redness — the charm of my face goes to pieces unless my eyes are clear —— I could have cried. Jamie's words that morning about the "'normous face" came back upon me like a battering-ram.

Mr. Frene, senior, had been so frequently the subject of conversation in the family since I came, I had so often heard him discussed, and had then read so much about him in the papers — his energy, his philanthropy, his success with everything he laid his hand to that a picture of the man had grown complete within me. I knew him as he was — within; or, as my sister would have said — clairvoyantly. And the only time I saw him (when I took Gladys to a meeting where he was chairman, and later *felt* his atmosphere and presence while for a moment he patronisingly spoke with her) had justified the portrait I had drawn. The rest, you may say, was a woman's wild imagining; but I think rather it was that kind of divining intuition which women share with children. If souls could be made visible, I would stake my life upon the truth and accuracy of my portrait.

For this Mr. Frene was a man who drooped alone, but grew vital in a crowd — because he used their vitality. He was a supreme, unconscious artist in the science of taking the fruits of others' work and living — for his own advantage. He vampired, unknowingly no doubt, every one with whom he came in contact; left them exhausted, tired, listless. Others fed him, so that while in a full room he shone, alone by himself and with no life to draw upon he languished and declined. In the man's immediate neighbourhood you felt his presence draining you; he took your ideas, your strength, your very words, and later used them for his own benefit and aggrandisement. Not evilly, of course; the man was good enough; but you felt that he was dangerous owing to the facile way he absorbed into himself all loose vitality that was to be had. His eyes and voice and presence devitalised you. Life, it seemed, not highly organised enough to resist, must shrink from his too near approach and hide away for fear of being appropriated, for fear, that is, of — death.

Jamie, unknowingly, put in the finishing touch to my unconscious portrait. The man carried about with him some silent, compelling trick of drawing out all your reserves — then swiftly pocketing them. At first you would be conscious of taut resistance; this would slowly shade off into weariness; the will would become flaccid; then you either moved away or yielded — agreed to all he said with a sense of weakness pressing ever closer upon the edges of collapse. With a male antagonist it might be different, but even then the effort of resistance would generate force that *he* absorbed and not the other. He never gave out. Some instinct taught him how to protect himself from that. To human beings, I mean, he never gave out.

This time it was a very different matter. He had no more chance than a fly before the wheels of a huge — what Jamie used to call "attraction" engine.

So this was how I saw him — a great human sponge, crammed and soaked with the life, or proceeds of life, absorbed from others — stolen. My idea of a human vampire was satisfied. He went about carrying these accumulations of the life of others. In this sense his "life" was not really his own. For the same reason, I think, it was not so fully under his control as he imagined.

And in another hour this man would be here. I went to the window. My eye wandered to the empty patch, dull black there amid the rich luxuriance of the garden flowers. It struck me as a hideous bit of emptiness yawning to be filled and nourished. The idea of Jamie playing round its bare edge was loathsome. I watched the big summer clouds above, the stillness of the afternoon, the haze. The silence of the overheated garden was oppressive. I had never felt a day so stifling, motionless. It lay there waiting. The household, too, was waiting — waiting for the coming of Mr. Frene from London in his big motorcar.

And I shall never forget the sensation of icy shrinking and distress with which I heard the rumble of the car. He had arrived. Tea was all ready on the lawn beneath the lime trees, and Mrs. Frene and Gladys, back from their drive, were sitting in wicker chairs. Mr. Frene, junior, was in the hall to meet his brother, but Jamie, as I learned afterwards, had shown such hysterical alarm, offered such bold resistance, that it had been deemed wiser to keep him in his room. Perhaps, after all, his presence might not be necessary. The visit clearly had to do with something on the uglier side of life — money, settlements, or what not; I never knew exactly; only that his parents were anxious, and that Uncle Frank had to be propitiated. It does not matter. That has nothing to do with the affair. What has to do with it — or I should not be telling the story — is that Mrs. Frene sent for me to come down “in my nice white dress, if I didn’t mind,” and that I was terrified, yet pleased, because it meant that a pretty face would be considered a welcome addition to the visitor’s landscape. Also, most odd it was, I felt my presence was somehow inevitable, that in some way it was intended that I should witness what I did witness. And the instant I came upon the lawn — I hesitate to set it down, it sounds so foolish, disconnected — I could have sworn, as my eyes met his, that a kind of sudden darkness came, taking the summer brilliance out of everything, and that it was caused by troops of small black horses that raced about us from his person — to attack.

After a first momentary approving glance he took no further notice of me. The tea and talk went smoothly; I helped to pass the plates and cups, filling in pauses with little under-talk to Gladys. Jamie was never mentioned. Outwardly all seemed well, but inwardly everything was awful — skirting the edge of things unspeakable, and so charged with danger that I could not keep my voice from trembling when I spoke.

I watched his hard, bleak face; I noticed how thin he was, and the curious, oily brightness of his steady eyes. They did not glitter, but they drew you with a sort of soft, creamy shine like Eastern eyes. And everything he said or did announced what I may dare to call the *suction* of his presence. His nature achieved this result automatically. He dominated us all, yet so gently that until it was accomplished no one noticed it.

Before five minutes had passed, however, I was aware of one thing only. My mind focused exclusively upon it, and so vividly that I marvelled the others did not scream, or run, or do something violent to prevent it. And it was this: that, separated merely by some dozen yards or so, this man, vibrating with the acquired vitality of others, stood within easy reach of that spot of yawning emptiness, waiting and eager to be filled. Earth scented her prey.

These two active “centres” were within fighting distance; he so thin, so hard, so keen, yet really spreading large with the loose “surround” of others’ life he had appropriated, so practised and triumphant; that other so patient, deep, with so mighty a draw of the whole earth behind it, and — ugh! — so obviously aware that its opportunity at last had come.

I saw it all as plainly as though I watched two great animals prepare for battle, both unconsciously; yet in some inexplicable way I saw it, of course, within me, and not externally. The conflict would be hideously unequal. Each side had already sent out emissaries, how long before I could not tell, for the first evidence *he* gave that something was going wrong with him was when his voice grew suddenly confused, he missed his words, and his lips trembled a moment and turned flabby. The next second his face betrayed that singular and horrid change, growing somehow loose about the bones of the cheek, and larger, so that I remembered Jamie's miserable phrase. The emissaries of the two kingdoms, the human and the vegetable, had met, I make it out, in that very second. For the first time in his long career of battening on others, Mr. Frene found himself pitted against a vaster kingdom than he knew and, so finding, shook inwardly in that little part that was his definite actual self. He felt the huge disaster coming.

"Yes, John," he was saying, in his drawling, self-congratulating voice, "Sir George gave me that car — gave it to me as a present. Wasn't it char — ?" and then broke off abruptly, stammered, drew breath, stood up, and looked uneasily about him. For a second there was a gaping pause. It was like the click which starts some huge machinery moving — that instant's pause before it actually starts. The whole thing, indeed, then went with the rapidity of machinery running down and beyond control. I thought of a giant dynamo working silently and invisible.

"What's that?" he cried, in a soft voice charged with alarm. "What's that horrid place? And some one's crying there — who is it?"

He pointed to the empty patch. Then, before any one could answer, he started across the lawn towards it, going every minute faster. Before any one could move he stood upon the edge. He leaned over — peering down into it.

It seemed a few hours passed, but really they were seconds, for time is measured by the quality and not the quantity of sensations it contains. I saw it all with merciless, photographic detail, sharply etched amid the general confusion. Each side was intensely active, but only one side, the human, exerted *all* its force in resistance. The other merely stretched out a feeler, as it were, from its vast, potential strength; no more was necessary. It was such a soft and easy victory. Oh, it was rather pitiful! There was no bluster or great effort, on one side at least. Close by his side I witnessed it, for I, it seemed, alone had moved and followed him. No one else stirred, though

Mrs. Frene clattered noisily with the cups, making some sudden impulsive gesture with her hands, and Gladys, I remember, gave a cry it was like a little scream “ Oh, mother, it’s the heat, isn’t it?” Mr. Frene, her father, was speechless, pale as ashes.

But the instant I reached his side, it became clear what had drawn me there thus instinctively. Upon the other side, among the silver birches, stood little Jamie. He was watching. I experienced for him one of those moments that shake the heart; a liquid fear ran all over me, the more effective because unintelligible really. Yet I felt that if I could know all, and what lay actually behind, my fear would be more than justified; that the thing *was* awful, full of awe.

And then it happened a truly wicked sight — like watching a universe in action, yet all contained within a small square foot of space. I think he understood vaguely that if some one could only take his place he might be saved, and that was why, discerning instinctively the easiest substitute within reach, he saw the child and called aloud to him across the empty patch, “James, my boy, come here!’

His voice was like a thin report, but somehow flat and lifeless, as when a rifle misses fire, sharp, yet weak; it had no “crack” in it. It was really supplication. And, with amazement, I heard my own ring out imperious and strong, though I was not conscious of saying it, “Jamie, don’t move. Stay where you are!” But Jamie, the little child, obeyed neither of us. Moving up nearer to the edge, he stood there — laughing! I heard that laughter, but could have sworn it did not come from him. The empty, yawning patch gave out that sound.

Mr. Frene turned sideways, throwing up his arms. I saw his hard, bleak face grow somehow wider, spread through the air, and downwards. A similar thing, I saw, was happening at the same time to his entire person, for it drew out into the atmosphere in a stream of movement. The face for a second made me think of those toys of green india-rubber that children pull. It grew enormous. But this was an external impression only. What actually happened, I clearly understood, ‘was that all this vitality and life he had transferred from others to himself for years was now in turn being taken from him and transferred — elsewhere.

One moment on the edge he wobbled horribly, then with that queer sideways motion, rapid yet ungainly, he stepped forward into the middle of the patch and fell heavily upon his face. His eyes, as he dropped, faded shockingly, and across the countenance was written plainly what I can only call an expression of destruction. He looked utterly destroyed. I caught a sound — from Jamie? — but this time not of laughter. It was like a gulp; it was deep and muffled and it dipped away into the earth. Again I thought of a troop of small black horses galloping away down a subterranean passage beneath my feet — plunging into the depths — their tramping growing fainter and fainter into buried distance. In my nostrils was a pungent smell of earth.

And then — all passed. I came back into myself. Mr. Frene, junior, was lifting his brother’s head from the lawn where he had fallen from the heat, close beside the tea-table. He had never really moved from there. And Jamie, I learned afterwards, had been the whole time asleep upon his bed upstairs, worn out with his crying and unreasoning alarm. Gladys came running out with cold water, sponge and towel, brandy too — all kinds of things. “Mother, it *was* the heat, wasn’t it?”

I heard her whisper, but I did not catch Mrs. Frene’s reply. From her face it struck me that she was bordering on collapse herself. Then the butler followed, and they just picked him up and carried him into the house. He recovered even before the doctor came.

But the queer thing to me is that I was convinced the others all had seen what I saw, only that no one said a word about it; and to this day no one *has* said a word. And that was, perhaps, the most horrid part of all.

From that day to this I have scarcely heard a mention of Mr. Frene, senior. It seemed as if he dropped suddenly out of life. The papers never mentioned him. His activities ceased, as it were. His after-life, at any rate, became singularly ineffective. Certainly he achieved nothing worth public mention. But it may be only that, having left the employ of Mrs. Frene, there was no particular occasion for me to hear anything.

The after-life of that empty patch of garden, however, was quite otherwise. Nothing, so far as I know, was done to it by gardeners, or in the way of draining it or bringing in new earth, but even before I left in the following summer it had changed. It lay untouched, full of great, luscious, driving weeds and creepers, very strong, full-fed, and bursting thick with life.

CLAIRVOYANCE

IN THE DARKEST corner, where the firelight could not reach him, he sat listening to the stories. His young hostess occupied the corner on the other side; she was also screened by shadows; and between them stretched the horse-shoe of eager, frightened faces that seemed all eyes. Behind yawned the blackness of the big room, running as it were without a break into the night.

Some one crossed on tiptoe and drew a blind up with a rattle, and at the sound all started: through the window, opened at the top, came a rustle of the poplar leaves that stirred like footsteps in the wind. 'There's a strange man walking past the shrubberies,' whispered a nervous girl; 'I saw him crouch and hide. I saw his eyes!' 'Nonsense! came sharply from a male member of the group; 'it's far too dark to see. You heard the wind.' For mist had risen from the river just below the lawn, pressing close against the windows of the old house like a soft grey hand, and through it the stir of leaves was faintly audible.... Then, while several called for lights, others remembered that hop-pickers were still about in the lanes, and the tramps this autumn overbold and insolent. All, perhaps, wished secretly for the sun. Only the elderly man in the corner sat quiet and unmoved, contributing nothing. He had told no fearsome story. He had evaded, indeed, many openings expressly made for him, though fully aware that to his well-known interest in psychical things was partly due his presence in the week-end party. 'I never have experiences — that way,' he said shortly when some one asked him point blank for a tale; 'I have no unusual powers.' There was perhaps the merest hint of contempt in his tone, but the hostess from her darkened corner quickly and tactfully covered his retreat. And he wondered. For he knew why she invited him. The haunted room, he was well aware, had been specially allotted to him.

And then, most opportunely, the door opened noisily and the host came in. He sniffed at the darkness, rang at once for lamps, puffed at his big curved pipe, and generally, by his mere presence, made the group feel rather foolish. Light streamed past him from the corridor. His white hair shone like silver. And with him came the atmosphere of common sense, of shooting, agriculture, motors, and the rest. Age entered at that door. And his young wife sprang up instantly to greet him, as though his disapproval of this kind of entertainment might need humouring.

It may have been the light — that witchery of half-lights from the fire and the corridor, or it may have been the abrupt entrance of the Practical upon the soft Imaginative that traced the outline with such pitiless, sharp conviction. At any rate, the contrast — for those who had this inner clairvoyant sight all had been prating of so glibly! — was unmistakably revealed. It was poignantly dramatic, pain somewhere in it — naked pain. For, as she paused a moment there beside him in the light, this childless wife of three years' standing, picture of youth and beauty, there stood upon the threshold of that room the presence of a true ghost story.

And most marvellously she changed — her lineaments, her very figure, her whole presentment. Etched against the gloom, the delicate, unmarked face shone suddenly keen and anguished, and a rich maturity, deeper than any mere age, flushed all her little person with its secret grandeur. Lines started into being upon the pale skin of the girlish face, lines of pleading, pity, and love the daylight did not show, and with them an air of magic tenderness that betrayed, though for a second only, the full soft glory of a motherhood denied, yet somehow mysteriously enjoyed. About her slenderness rose all the deep-bosomed sweetness of maternity, a potential mother of the world, and a mother, though she might know no dear fulfilment, who yet yearned to sweep into her immense embrace all the little helpless things that ever lived.

Light, like emotion, can play strangest tricks. The change pressed almost upon the edge of revelation.... Yet, when a moment later lamps were brought, it is doubtful if any but the silent guest who had told no marvellous tale, knew no psychical experience, and disclaimed the smallest clairvoyant faculty, had received and registered the vivid, poignant picture. For an instant it had flashed there, mercilessly clear for all to see who were not blind to subtle spiritual wonder thick with pain. And it was not so much mere picture of youth and age ill-matched, as of youth that yearned with the oldest craving in the world, and of age that had slipped beyond the power of sympathetically divining it.... It passed, and all was as before.

The husband laughed with genial good-nature, not one whit annoyed. ‘They’ve been frightening you with stories, child,’ he said in his jolly way, and put a protective arm about her. ‘Haven’t they now? Tell me the truth. Much better,’ he added, ‘have joined me instead at billiards, or for a game of Patience, eh?’ She looked up shyly into his face, and he kissed her on the forehead. ‘Perhaps they have — a little, dear,’ she said, ‘but now that you’ve come, I feel all right again.’ ‘Another night of this,’ he added in a graver tone, ‘and you’d be at your old trick of putting guests to sleep in the haunted room. I was right after all, you see, to make it out of bounds.’ He glanced fondly, paternally down upon her. Then he went over and poked the fire into a blaze. Some one struck up a waltz on the piano, and couples danced. All trace of nervousness vanished, and the butler presently brought in the tray with drinks and biscuits. And slowly the group dispersed. Candles were lit. They passed down the passage into the big hail, talking in lowered voices of to-morrow’s plans. The laughter died away as they went up the stairs to bed, the silent guest and the young wife lingering a moment over the embers.

‘You have not, after all then, put me in your haunted room?’ he asked quietly. ‘You mentioned, you remember, in your letter—’

‘I admit,’ she replied at once, her manner gracious beyond her years, her voice quite different, ‘that I wanted you to sleep there — some one, I mean, who really knows, and is not merely curious. But — forgive my saying so — when I *saw* you’ — she laughed very slowly— ‘and when you told no marvellous story like the others, I somehow felt—’

‘But I never *see* anything—’ he put in hurriedly.

‘You *feel,* though,’ she interrupted swiftly, the passionate tenderness in her voice but half suppressed. ‘I can tell it from your—’

‘Others, then,’ he interrupted abruptly, almost bluntly, ‘have slept there — sat up, rather?’

‘Not recently. My husband stopped it.’ She paused a second, then added, ‘I had that room — for a year — when first we married.’

The other’s anguished look flew back upon her little face like a shadow and was gone, while at the sight of it there rose in himself a sudden deep rush of wonderful amazement beckoning almost towards worship. He did not speak, for his voice would tremble.

‘I had to give it up,’ she finished, very low.

‘Was it so terrible?’ after a pause he ventured.

She bowed her head. ‘I had to change,’ she repeated softly.

‘And since then — now — you see nothing?’ he asked.

Her reply was singular. ‘Because I will not, not because it’s gone.’ **...** He followed her in silence to the door, and as they passed along the passage, again that curious great pain of emptiness, of loneliness, of yearning rose upon him, as of a sea that never, never can swim beyond the shore to reach the flowers that it loves...

‘Hurry up, child, or a ghost will catch you,’ cried her husband, leaning over the banisters, as the pair moved slowly up the stairs towards him. There was a moment’s silence when they met. The guest took his lighted candle and went down the corridor. Good-nights were said again. They moved away, she to her loneliness, he to his unhaunted room. And at his door he turned. At the far end of the passage, silhouetted against the candle-light, he watched them — the fine old man with his silvered hair and heavy shoulders, and the slim young wife with that amazing air as of some great bountiful mother of the world for whom the years yet passed hungry and un-harvested. They turned the corner, and he went in and closed his door.

Sleep took him very quickly, and while the mist rose up and veiled the countryside, something else, veiled equally for all other sleepers in that house but two, drew on towards its climax.**...** Some hours later he awoke; the world was stills and it seemed the whole house listened; for with that clear vision which some bring out of sleep, he remembered that there had been no direct denial, and of a sudden realised that this big, gaunt chamber where he lay was after all the haunted room. For him, however, the entire world, not merely separate rooms in it, was ever haunted; and he knew no terror to find the space about him charged with thronging life quite other than his own.... He rose and lit the candle, crossed over to the window where the mist shone grey, knowing that no barriers of walls or door or ceiling could keep out this host of Presences that poured so thickly everywhere about him. It was like a wall of being, with peering eyes, small hands stretched out, a thousand pattering wee feet, and tiny voices crying in a chorus very faintly and beseeching.... The haunted room! Was it not, rather, a temple vestibule, prepared and sanctified by yearning rites few men might ever guess, for all the childless women of the world? How could she know that *he* would understand — this woman he had seen but twice in all his life? And how entrust to him so great a mystery that was her secret? Had she so easily divined in him a similar yearning to which, long years ago, death had denied fulfilment? Was she clairvoyant in the true sense, and did all faces bear on them so legibly this great map that sorrow traced?...

And then, with awful suddenness, mere feelings dipped away, and something concrete happened. The handle of the door had faintly rattled. He turned. The round brass knob was slowly moving. And first, at the sight, something of common fear did grip him, as though his heart had missed a beat, but on the instant he heard the voice of his own mother, now long beyond the stars, calling to him to go softly yet with speed. He watched a moment the feeble efforts to undo the door, yet never afterwards could swear that he saw actual movement, for something in him, tragic as blindness, rose through a mist of tears and darkened vision utterly....

He went towards the door. He took the handle very gently, and very softly then he opened it. Beyond was darkness. He saw the empty passage, the edge of the banisters where the great hall yawned below, and, dimly, the outline of the Alpine photograph and the stuffed deer’s head upon the wall. And then he dropped upon his knees and opened wide his arms to something that came in upon uncertain, viewless feet. All the young winds and flowers and dews of dawn passed with it **...** filling him to the brim **...** covering closely his breast and eyes and lips. There clung to him all the small beginnings of life that cannot stand alone **...** the little helpless hands and arms that have no confidence **...** and when the wealth of tears and love that flooded his heart seemed to break upon the frontiers of some mysterious yet impossible fulfilment, he rose and went with curious small steps towards the window to taste the cooling, misty air of that other dark Emptiness that waited so patiently there above the entire world. He drew the sash up. The air felt soft and tender as though there were somewhere children in it too — children of stars and flowers, of mists and wings and music, all that the Universe contains unborn and tiny.... And when at length he turned again the door was closed. The room was empty of any life but that which lay so wonderfully blessed within himself. And this, he felt, had marvelously increased and multiplied....

Sleep then came back to him, and in the morning he left the house before the others were astir, pleading some overlooked engagement. For he had seen Ghosts indeed, but yet no ghost that he could talk about with others round an open fire.

THE GOLDEN FLY

IT FELL UPON him out of a clear sky just when existence seemed on its very best behaviour, and he savagely resented the undeserved affliction of it. Involving him in an atrocious scandal that reflected directly upon his honour, it destroyed in a moment the erection his entire life had so laboriously built up — his reputation. In the eyes of the world he was a broken, discredited man, at the very moment, moreover, when his most cherished ambitions touched fulfilment. And the cruelty of it appalled his sense of justice, for it was impossible to vindicate himself without inculpating others who were dearer to him than life. It seemed more than he could bear; and the grim course he contemplated — decision itself as yet hung darkly waiting in the background — appeared the only way of escape that offered.

He had discussed the matter with friends until his brain whirled. Their sympathy maddened him, with hints of *qui s'excuse s'accuse,* and he turned at last in desperation to something that could not answer back. For the first time in his life he turned to Nature — to that dead, inanimate Nature he had left to poets and rhapsodising women: 'I must face it alone,' he put it. For the Finger of God was a phrase without meaning to him, and his entire being contained no trace of the religious instinct. He was a business man, honest, selfish, and ambitious; and the collapse of his worldly position was paramount to the collapse of the universe itself — his universe, at any rate. This 'crumbling of the universe' was the thought he took out with him. He left the house by the path that led into solitude, and reached the heathery expanse that formed one of the breathing-places of the New Forest. There he flung himself down wearily in the shadow of a little pine-copse. And his crumbled universe lay down with him, for he could not escape it.

Taking the pistol from the hip-pocket where it hurt him, he lay upon his back and watched the clouds. Half stunned, half dazed, he stared into the sky. The perfumed wind played softly on his eyes; he smelt the heather-honey; golden flies hung motionless in the air, like coloured pins fastening the sunshine against the blue curtain of the summer, while dragonflies, like darting shuttles, wove across its pattern their threads of gleaming bronze. He heard the petulant crying of the peewits, and watched their tumbling flight. Below him tinkled a rivulet, its brown water rippling between banks of peaty earth. Everywhere was singing, peace, and careless unconcern.

And this lordly indifference of Nature calmed and soothed him. Neither human pain nor the injustice of man could shift the key of the water, alter the peewits' cry a single tone, nor influence one fraction of an inch those cloudy frigates of vapour that sailed the sky. The earth bulged sunwards as she had bulged for centuries. The power of her steady gait, superbly cairn, breathed everywhere with grandeur — undismayed, unhasting, and supremely confident.... And, like the flash of those golden flies, there leaped suddenly upon him this vivid thought: that his world of agony lay neatly buttoned up within the tiny space of his own brain. Outside himself it had no existence at all. His mind contained it — the minute interior he called his heart. From this vaster world about him it lay utterly apart, like deeds in the black boxes of japanned tin he kept at the office, shut off from the universe, huddled in an overcrowded space within his skull.

How this commonplace thought reached him, garbed in such startling novelty, was odd enough; for it seemed as though the fierceness of his pain had burned away something. His thoughts it merely enflamed; but this other thing it consumed. Something that had obscured clear vision shrivelled before it as a piece of paper, eaten up by fire, dwindles down into a thimbleful of unimportant ashes. The thicket of his mind grew half transparent. At the farther end he saw, for the first time — light. The perspective of his inner life, hitherto so enormous, telescoped into the proportions of a miniature. Just as momentous and significant as before, it was somehow abruptly different — seen from another point of view. The suffering had burned up rubbish he himself had piled over the head of a little Fact. Like a point of metal that glows yet will not burn, he discerned in the depths of him the essential shining fact that not all this ruinous conflagration could destroy. And this brilliant, indestructible kernel was — his Innocence. The rest was self-reared rubbish: opinion of the world. He had magnified an atom into a universe....

Pain, as it seemed, had cleared a way for the sublimity of Nature to approach him. The calm old Universe rolled past. The deep, majestic Day gave him a push, as though the shoulder of some star had brushed his own.

He had thought his feelings were the world: instead, they were merely his way of looking at it. The actual ‘world’ was some glorious, unchanging thing he never saw direct. His attitude of mind was but a peephole into it. The choice of his particular peephole, moreover, lay surely within the power of his individual will. The anguish, centred upon so small a point, had seemed to affect the entire spread universe around him, whereas in reality it affected nothing but his attitude of mind towards it. The truism struck him like a blow between the eyes, that a man is what he thinks or feels himself to be. It leaped the barrier between words and meaning. The intellectual concept became a hard-edged fact, because he realised it — for the first time in his very circumscribed life. And this dreadful pain that had made even suicide seem desirable was entirely a fabrication of his own mind. The universe about him rolled on just the same in the majesty of its eternal purpose. His tiny inner world was clouded, but the glory of this stupendous world about him was undimmed, untroubled, unaffected. Even death itself....

With a swift smash of the hand he crushed the golden fly that settled on his knee. The murder was done impulsively, utterly without intention. He watched the little point of gold quiver for a moment among the hairs of the rough tweed; then lie still for ever ... but the scent of heather-honey filled the air as before; the wind passed sighing through the pines; the clouds still sailed their uncharted sea of blue. There lay the whole spread surface of the Forest in the sun. Only the attitude of the golden fly towards it all was gone. A single, tiny point of view had disappeared. Nature passed on calmly and unhasting; she took no note.

Then, with a rush of awe, another thought flashed through him: Nature *had* taken note. There was a difference everywhere. Not a sparrow falleth, he remembered, without God knowing. God was certainly in Nature somewhere. His clumsy senses could not register this difference, yet it was there. His own small world, fed by these senses, was after all the merest little corner of Existence. To the whole of Existence, that included himself, the golden fly, the sun, and all the stars, he must somehow answer for his crime. It was a wanton interference with a sublime and sovereign Purpose that he now divined for the first time. He looked at the wee point of gold lying still and silent in the forest of hairs. He realised the enormity of his act. It could not have been graver had he put out the sun, or the little, insignificant flame of his own existence. He had done a criminal, evil thing, for he had put an end to a certain point of view; had wiped it out; made it impossible. Had the fly been quicker, less easily overwhelmed, or more tenacious of the scrap of universal life it used, Nature would at this instant be richer for its little contribution to the whole of things — to which he himself also belonged. And wherein, he asked himself, did he differ from that fly in the importance, the significance of his contribution to the universe? The soul ...? He had never given the question a single thought; but if the scrap of life he owned was called a soul, why should that point of golden glory not comprise one too? Its minute size, its trivial purpose, its few hours of apparently futile existence ... these formed no true criterion …!

Similarly, the thought rushed over him, a Hand was being stretched out to crush himself. His pain was the shadow of its approach; anger in his heart, the warning. Unless he were quick enough, adroit and skilled enough, he also would be wiped out, while Nature continued her slow, unhasting way without him. His attitude towards the personal pain was really the test of his ability, of his merit — of his right to survive. Pain teaches, pain develops, pain brings growth: he had heard it since his copybook days. But now he realised it, as again thought leaped the barrier between familiar words and meaning. In his attitude of mind to his catastrophe lay his salvation or his ... death.

In some such confused and blundering fashion, because along unaccustomed channels, the truth charged into him to overwhelm, yet bringing with it an unwonted sense of joy that seemed to break a crust which long had held back — life. Thus tapped, these sources gushed forth and bubbled over, spread about his being, flooded him with hope and courage, above all with — calmness. Nature held forces just as real and living as human sympathy, and equally able to modify the soul. And Nature was always accessible. A sense of huge companionship, denied him by the littleness of his fellow-men, stole sweetly over him It was amazingly uplifting, yet fear came close behind it, as he realised the presumption of his former attitude of cynical indifference. These Powers were aware of his petty insolence, yet had not crushed him.... It was, of course, the awakening of the religious instinct in a man who hitherto had worshipped merely a rather low-grade form of intellect.

And, while the enormous confusion of it shook him, this sense of incommunicable sweetness remained. Bright haunting eyes, with love in them, gazed at him from the blue; and this thing that came so close, stood also far away upon the line of the horizon. It was everywhere. It filled the hollows, but towered over him as well towards the pinnaces of cloud. It was in the sharpness of the peewits' cry, and in the water's murmur. It whispered in the pine-boughs, and blazed in every patch of sunlight. And it was glory, pure and simple. It filled him with a sense of strength for which he could find but one description — Triumph.

And so, first, the anger faded from his mind and crept away. Resentment then slunk after it. Revolt and disappointment also melted, and bitterness gave place to the most marvellous peace the man had ever known. Then came resignation to fill the empty places. Pain, as a means and not an end, had cleared the way, though the accomplishment was like a miracle. But Conversion *is* a miracle. No ordinary pain can bring it. This anguish he understood now in a new relation to life — as something to be taken willingly into himself and dealt with, all regardless of public opinion. What people said and thought was in their world, not in his. It was less than nothing. The pain cultivated dormant tracts. The terror also purged. It disclosed....

He watched the wind, and even the wind brought revelation; for without obstacles in its path it would be silent. He watched the sunshine, and the sunshine taught him too; for without obstacles to fling it back against his eye, he could never see it. He would neither hear the tinkling water nor feel the summer heat unless both one and other overcame some reluctant medium in their pathways. And, similarly with his moral being — his pain resulted from the friction of his personal ambitions against the stress of some noble Power that sought to lift him higher. That Power he could not know direct, but he recognised its strain against him by the resistance it generated in the inertia of his selfishness. His attitude of mind had switched completely round. It was what the preachers termed development through suffering.

Moreover, he had acquired this energy of resistance somehow from the wind and sun and the beauty of a common summer's day. Their peace and strength had passed into himself. Unconsciously on his way home he drew upon it steadily. He tossed the pistol into a pool of water. Nature had healed him; and Nature, should he turn weak again, was always there. It was very wonderful. He wanted to sing....

SPECIAL DELIVERY

MEIKLEJOHN THE CURATE, was walking through the Jura when this thing happened to him. There is only his word to vouch for it, for the inn and its proprietor are now both of the past, and the local record of the occurrence has long since assumed the proportions of a picturesque but inaccurate legend. As a true story, however, it stands out from those of its kidney by the fact that there seems to have been a deliberate intention in it. It saved a life — a life the world had need of. And this singular rescue of a man of value to the best order of things makes one feel that there was some sense, even logic, in the affair.

Moreover, Meiklejohn asserts that it was the only psychic experience he ever knew. Things of the sort were not a ‘habit’ with him. His rescue, thus was not one of those meaningless interventions that puzzle the man in the Street while they exhilarate the psychologist. It was a deliberate and very determined affair.

Meiklejohn found himself that hot August night in one of the valleys that slip like blue shadows hidden among pine-woods between the Swiss frontier and France. He had passed Ste. Croix earlier in the day; Les Rasses had been left behind about four o’clock; Buttes, and the Val de Travers, where the cement of many a London street comes from, was his goal. But the light failed long before he reached it, and he stopped at an inn that appeared unexpectedly round a corner of the dusty road, built literally against the great cliffs that formed one wall of the valley. He was so footsore, and his knapsack so heavy, that he turned in without more ado.

Le Guillaume Tell was the name of the inn — dirty white walls, with thin, almost mangy vines scrambling over the door, and the stream brawling beneath shuttered windows with green and white stripes all patched by sun and rain. His room was sevenpence, his dinner of soup, omelette, fruit, cheese, and coffee, a franc. The prices suited his pocket and made him feel comfortable and at home. Immediately behind the hotel — the only house visible, except the sawmill across the road, rose the ever-crumbling ridges and precipices that formed the flanks of Chasseront and ran on past La

Sagne towards the grey Aiguilles de Baulmes. He was in the Jura fastnesses where tourists rarely penetrate.

Through the low doorway of the inn he carried with him the strong atmosphere of thoughts that had accompanied him all day — dreams of how he intended to spend his life, plans of sacrifice and effort. For his hopes of great achievement, even then at twenty-five, were a veritable passion in him, and his desire to spend himself for humanity a devouring flame. So occupied, indeed, was his mind with the emotions belonging to this line of thinking, that he hardly noticed the singular, though exceedingly faint, sense of alarm that stirred somewhere in the depths of his being as he passed within that doorway where the dropping vine-leaves clutched at his hat. He remembered it a little later. The sense of danger had been touched in him. He felt at the moment only a hint of discomfort, too vague to claim definite recognition. Yet it was there — the instant he stepped within the threshold — and afterwards he distinctly recalled its sudden and unaccountable advent.

His bedroom, though stuffy, as from windows long unopened, was clean; carpetless, of course, and primitive, with white pine floor and walls, and the short bed, smothered under its duvet, very creaky. And very short! For Meiklejohn was well over six feet.

‘I shall have to curl up, as usual, in a knot,’ was his reflection as he measured the bed with his eye; ‘though to-night I think — after my twenty miles in this air—’

The thought refused to complete itself. He was going to add that he was tired enough to have slept on a stone floor, but for some undefined reason the same sense of alarm that had tapped him on the shoulder as he entered the inn returned now when he contemplated the bed. A sharp repugnance for that bed, as sudden and unaccountable as it was curious, swept into him — and was gone again before he had time to seize it wholly. It was in reality so slight that he dismissed it immediately as the merest fancy; yet, at the same time, he was aware that he would rather have slept on another bed, had there been one in the room — and then the queer feeling that, after all, perhaps, he would *not* sleep there in the end at all. How this idea came to him he never knew. He records it, however, as part of the occurrence.

After eight o’clock a few peasants, and workmen from the sawmill, came in to drink their *demi-litre* of red wine in the common room downstairs, to stare at the unexpected guest, and to smoke their vile tobacco. They were neither picturesque nor amusing — simply dirty and slightly malodorous. At nine o’clock Meiklejohn knocked the ashes from his briar pipe upon the limestone window-ledge, and went upstairs, overpowered with sleep. The sense of alarm had utterly disappeared; his mind was busy once more with his great dreams of the future — dreams that materialised themselves, as all the world knows, in the famous Meiklejohn Institutes....

Berthoud, the proprietor, short and sturdy, with his faded brown coat and no collar, slightly confused with red wine and a ‘tourist’ guest, showed him the way up. For, of course, there was no *femme de chambre.*

‘You have the corridor all to yourself,’ the man said; showed him the best corner of the landing to shout from in case he wanted anything — there being no bell — eyed his boots, knapsack, and flask with considerable curiosity, wished him good-night, and was gone. He went downstairs with a noise like a horse, thought the curate, as he locked the door after him.

The windows had been open now for a couple of hours, and the room smelt sweet with the odours of sawn wood and shavings, the resinous perfume of the surrounding hosts of pines, and the sharp, delicate touch of a lonely mountain valley where civilisation has not yet tainted the air. Whiffs of coarse tobacco, pungent without being offensive, came invisibly through the cracks of the floor. Primitive and simple it all was — a — sort of vigorous ‘backwoods’ atmosphere. Yet, once again, as he turned to examine the room after Berthoud’s steps had blundered down below into the passage, something rose faintly within him to set his nerves mysteriously a-quiver.

Out of these perfectly simple conditions, without the least apparent cause, the odd feeling again came over him that he was — in danger.

The curate was not much given to analysis. He was a man of action pure and simple, as a rule. But to-night, in spite of himself, his thoughts went plunging, searching, asking. For this singular message of dread that emanated as it were from the room, or from some article of furniture in the room perhaps — that bed still touched his mind with a peculiar repugnance demanded somewhat insistently for an explanation. And the only explanation that suggested itself to his unimaginative mind was that the forces of nature hereabouts were — overpowering; that, after the slum streets and factory chimneys of the last twelve months, these towering cliffs and smothering pine-forests communicated to his soul a word of grandeur that amounted to awe. Inadequate and far-fetched as the explanation seems, it was the only one that occurred to him; and its value in this remarkable adventure lies in the fact that he connected his sense of danger partly with the bed and partly with the mountains.

‘I felt once or twice,’ he said afterwards, ‘as though some powerful agency of a spiritual kind were all the time trying to beat into my stupid brain a message of warning.’ And this way of expressing it is more true and graphic than many paragraphs of attempted analysis.

Meiklejohn hung his clothes by the open window to air, washed, read his Bible, looked several times over his shoulder without apparent cause, and then knelt down to pray. He was a simple and devout soul; his Self lost in the yearning, young but sincere, to live for humanity. He prayed, as usual, with intense earnestness that his life might be preserved for use in the world, when in the middle of his prayer — there came a knocking at the door.

Hastily rising from his knees, he opened. The sound of rushing water filled the corridor. He heard the voices of the workmen below in the drinking-room. But only darkness stood in the passages, filling the house to the very brim. No one was there. He returned to his interrupted devotions.

‘I imagined it,’ he said to himself. He continued his prayers, however, longer than usual. At the back of his thoughts, dim, vague, half-defined only, lay this lurking sense of uneasiness — that he was in danger. He prayed earnestly and simply, as a child might pray, for the preservation of his life....

Again, just as he prepared to get into bed, struggling to make the heaped-up duvet spread all over, came that knocking at the bedroom door. It was soft, wonderfully soft, and something within him thrilled curiously in response. He crossed the floor to open — then hesitated. Suddenly he understood that that knocking at the door was connected with the sense of danger in his heart. In the region of subtle intuitions the two were linked. With this realisation there came over him, he declares, a singular mood in which, as in a revelation, he knew that Nature held forces that might somehow communicate directly and positively with — human beings. This thought rushed upon him out of the night, as it were. It arrested his movements. He stood there upon the bare pine boards, hesitating to open the door.

The delay thus described lasted actually only a few seconds, but in those few seconds these thoughts tore rapidly and like fire through his mind. The beauty of this lost and mysterious valley was certainly in his veins. He felt the strange presence of the encircling forests, soft and splendid, their million branches sighing in the night airs. The crying of the falling water touched him. He longed to transfer their peace and power to the hearts of suffering thousands of men and women and children. The towering precipices that literally dropped their pale walls over the roof of the inn lifted his thoughts to their own windswept heights; he longed to convey their message of inflexible strength to the weak-kneed folk in the slums where he worked. He was peculiarly conscious of the presence of these forces of Nature — the irresistible powers that regenerate as easily as they destroy.

All this, and far more, swept his soul like a huge wind as he stood there, waiting to open the door in answer to that mysterious soft knocking.

And there, when at length he opened, stood the figure of a man — staring at him and smiling.

Disappointment seized him instantly. He had expected, almost believed, that he would see something unordinary; and instead, there stood a man who had merely mistaken the door of his room, and was now bowing his apology for the interruption. Then, to his amazement, he saw that the man beckoned: the figure was some one who sought to draw him out.

‘Come with me,’ it seemed to say.

But Meiklejohn only realised this afterwards, he says, when it was too late and he had already shut the door in the stranger’s face. For the man had withdrawn into the darkness a little, and the curate had taken the movement for a mere acknowledgment of his mistake instead of — as he afterwards felt — a sign that he should follow.

‘And the moment the door was shut,’ he says, ‘I felt that it would have been better for me to have gone out into the passage to see what he wanted. It came over me that the man had something important to say to me. I had missed it.’

For some seconds, it seemed, he resisted the inclination to go after him. He argued with himself; then turned to his bed, pulled back the sheets and heavy duvet, and was met sharply again with the sense of repugnance, almost of fear, as before. It leaped out upon him — as though the drawing back of the blankets had set free some cold blast of wind that struck him across the face and made him shiver.

At the same moment a shadow fell from behind his shoulder and dropped across the pillow and upper half of the bed. It may, of course, have been the magnified shadow of the moth that buzzed about the pale-yellow electric light in the ceiling. He does not pretend to know. It passed swiftly, however, and was gone; and Meiklejohn, feeling less sure of himself than ever before in his life, crossed the floor quickly, almost running, and opened the door to go after the man who had knocked — twice. For in reality less than half a minute had passed since the shutting of the door and its reopening.

But the corridor was empty. He marched down the pine board floor for some considerable distance. Below he saw the glimmer of the hall, and heard the voices of the peasants and workmen from the sawmill as they still talked and drank their red wine in the public room. That sound of falling water, as before, filled the air. Darkness reigned. But the person — the *messenger* — who had twice knocked at his door was gone utterly.... Presently a door opened downstairs, and the peasants clattered out noisily. He turned and went back to bed. The electric light was switched off below. Silence fell. Conquering his strange repugnance, Meiklejohn, with a prayer on his lips, got into bed, and in less than ten minutes was sound asleep.

‘I admit,’ he says, in telling the story, ‘that what happened afterwards came so swiftly and so confusingly, yet with such a storm of overwhelming conviction of its reality, that its sequence may be somewhat blurred in my memory, while, at the same time, I see it after all these years as though it was a thing of yesterday. But in my sleep, first of all, I again heard that soft, mysterious tapping — not in the course of a dream of any sort, but sudden and alone out of the dark blank of forgetfulness. I tried to wake. At first, however, the bonds of unconsciousness held me tight. I had to struggle in order to return to the waking world. There was a distinct effort before I opened my eyes; and in that slight interval I became aware that the person who had knocked at the door had meanwhile opened it and passed into the room. I had left the lock unturned. The person was close beside me in the darkness — not in utter darkness, however, for a rising three-quarter moon shed its faint silver upon the floor in patches, and as I sprang swiftly from the bed, I noticed something alive moving towards me across the carpetless boards. Upon the edges of a patch of moonlight, where the fringe of silver and shadow mingled, it stopped. Three feet away from it I, too, stopped, shaking in every muscle. It lay there crouching at my very feet, staring up at me. But was it man or was it animal? For at first I took it certainly for a human being on all fours; but the next moment, with a spasm of genuine terror that half stopped my breath, it was borne in upon me that the creature was — nothing human. Only in this way can I describe it. It was identical with the human figure who had knocked before and beckoned to me to follow, but it was another presentation of that figure.

‘And it held (or brought, if you will) some tremendous message for me — some message of tremendous importance, I mean. The first time I had argued, resisted, refused to listen. Now it had returned in a form that ensured obedience. Some quite terrific power emanated from it — a power that I understood instinctively belonged to the mountains and the forests and the untamed elemental forces of Nature. Amazing as it may sound in cold blood, I can only say that I felt as though the towering precipices outside had sent me a direct warning — that my life was in immediate danger.

‘For a space that seemed minutes, but was probably less than a few seconds, I stood there trembling on the bare boards, my eyes riveted upon the dark, uncouth shape that covered all the floor beyond. I saw no limbs or features, no suggestion of outline that I could connect with any living form I know, animate or inanimate. Yet it moved and stirred all the time — *whirled within itself,* describes it best; and into my mind sprang a picture of an immense dark wheel, turning, spinning, whizzing so rapidly that it appears motionless, and uttering that low and ominous thunder that fills a great machinery-room of a factory. Then I thought of Ezekiel’s vision of the Living Wheels.........

‘And it must have been at this instant, I think, that the muttering and deep note that issued from it formed itself into words within me. At any rate, I heard a voice that spoke with unmistakable intelligence:

‘“Come!” it said. “Come out — at once!” And the sense of power that accompanied the Voice was so splendid that my fear vanished and I obeyed instantly without thinking more. I followed; it led. It altered in shape. The door *was* open. It ran silently in a form that was more like a stream of deep black water than anything else I can think of — out of the room, down the stairs, across the hail, and up to the deep shadows that lay against the door leading into the road. There I lost sight of it.’

Meiklejohn’s only desire, he says, then was to rush after it — to escape. This he did. He understood that somehow it had passed through the door into the open air. Ten seconds later, perhaps even less, he, too, was in the open air. He acted almost automatically; reason, reflection, logic all swept away. Nowhere, however, in the soft moonlight about him was any sign of the extraordinary apparition that had succeeded in drawing him out of the inn, out of his bedroom, out of his — bed. He stared in a dazed way at everything — just beginning to get control of his faculties a bit — wondering what in the world it all meant. That huge spinning form, he felt convinced, lay hidden somewhere close beside him, waiting for the end. The danger it had enabled him to avoid was close at hand.... He *knew* that, he says....

There lay the meadows, touched here and there with wisps of floating mist; the stream roared and tumbled down its rocky bed to his left; across the road the sawmill lifted its skeleton-like outline, moonlight shining on the dew-covered shingles of the roof, its lower part hidden in shadow. The cold air of the valley was exquisitely scented.

To the right, where his eye next wandered, he saw the thick black woods rising round the base of the precipices that soared into the sky, sheeted with silvery moonlight. His gaze ran up them to the far ridges that seemed to push the very stars farther into the heavens. Then, as he saw those stars crowding the night, he staggered suddenly backwards, seizing the wall of the road for support, and catching his breath. For the top of the cliff, he fancied, moved. A group of stars was for a fraction of a second — hidden. The earth — the scenery of the valley, at least — turned about him. Something prodigious was happening to the solid structure of the world. The precipices seemed to bend over upon the valley. The far, uppermost ridge of those beetling cliffs shifted downwards. Meiklejohn declares that the way its movement hid momentarily a group of stars was the most startling — for some reason horrible — thing he had ever witnessed.

Then came the roar and crash and thunder as the mass toppled, slid, and finally — took the frightful plunge. How long the forces of rain and frost had been chiselling out the slow detachment of the giant slabs that fell, or whence came the particular extra little push that drove the entire mass out from the parent rock, no one can know. Only one thing is certain: that it was due to no chance, but to the nicely and exactly calculated results of balanced cause and effect. From the beginning of time it had been known — it might have been accurately calculated, rather — that this particular thousand tons of rock would break away from the crumbling tops of the precipices and crash downwards with the roar of many tempests into the lost and mysterious mountain valley where Meiklejohn the curate spent such and such a night of such and such a holiday. It was just as sure as the return of Halley’s comet.

‘I watched it,’ he says, ‘because I couldn’t do anything else. I would far rather have run — I was so frightfully close to it all — but I couldn’t move a muscle. And in a few seconds it was over. A terrific wind knocked me backwards against the stone wall; there was a vast clattering of smaller stones, set rolling down the neighbouring couloirs; a steady roll of echoes ran thundering up and down the valley; and then all was still again exactly as it had been before. And the curious thing was — ascertained a little later, as you may imagine, and not at once — that the inn, being so closely built up against the cliffs, had almost entirely escaped. The great mass of rock and trees had taken a leap farther out, and filled the meadows, blocked the road, crushed the sawmill like a matchbox, and dammed up the stream; but the inn itself was almost untouched.

‘Almost — for a single block of limestone, about the size of a grand piano, had dropped straight upon one corner of the roof and smashed its way through my bedroom, carrying everything it contained down to the level of the cellar, so terrific was the momentum of its crushing journey. Not a stick of the furniture was afterwards discoverable — as such. The bed seems to have been caught by the very middle of the fallen mass.’

The confusion in Meiklejohn's mind may be imagined — the rush of feeling and emotion that swept over him. Berthoud and the peasants mustered in less than a dozen minutes, talking, crying, praying. Then the stream, dammed up by the accumulation of rock, carried off the debris of the broken roof and walls in less than half an hour. The rock, however, that swept the room and the *empty* bed of Meiklejohn the curate into dust, still lies in the valley where it fell.

'The only other thing that I remember,' he says, in telling the story, 'is that, as I stood there, shaking with excitement and the painful terror of it all, before Berthoud and the peasants had come to count over their number and learn that no one was missing — while I stood there, leaning against the wall of the road, something rose out of the white dust at my feet, and, with a noise like the whirring of some immense projectile, passed swiftly and invisibly away up into space — so far as I could judge, towards the distant ridges that reared their motionless outline in moonlight beneath the stars.'

THE DESTRUCTION OF SMITH

TEN YEARS AGO, in the western States of America, I once met Smith. But he was no ordinary member of the clan: he was Ezekiel B. Smith of Smithville. He *was* Smithville, for he founded it and made it live.

It was in the oil region, where towns spring up on the map in a few days like mushrooms, and may be destroyed again in a single night by fire and earthquake. On a hunting expedition Smith stumbled upon a natural oil well, and instantly staked his claim; a few months later he was rich, grown into affluence as rapidly as that patch of wilderness grew into streets and houses where you could buy anything from an evening's gambling to a tin of Boston baked pork-and-beans. Smith was really a tremendous fellow, a sort of human dynamo of energy and pluck, with rare judgment in his great square head — the kind of judgment that in higher walks of life makes statesmen. His personality cut through the difficulties of life with the clean easy force of putting his whole life into anything he touched. 'God's own luck,' his comrades called it; but really it was sheer ability and character and personality. The man had power.

From the moment of that 'oil find' his rise was very rapid, but while his brains went into a dozen other big enterprises, his heart remained in little Smithville, the flimsy mushroom town he had created. His own life was in it. It was his baby. He spoke tenderly of its hideousness. Smithville was an intimate expression of his very self.

Ezekiel B. Smith I saw once only, for a few minutes; but I have never forgotten him. It was the moment of his death. And we came across him on a shooting trip where the forests melt away towards the vast plains of the Arizona desert. The personality of the man was singularly impressive. I caught myself thinking of a mountain, or of some elemental force of Nature so sure of itself that hurry is never necessary. And his gentleness was like the gentleness of women. Great strength often — the greatest always — has tenderness in it, a depth of tenderness unknown to pettier life.

Our meeting was coincidence, for we were hunting in a region where distances are measured by hours and the chance of running across white men very rare. For many days our nightly camps were pitched in spots of beauty where the loneliness is akin to the loneliness of the Egyptian Desert. On one side the mountain slopes were smothered with dense forest, hiding wee meadows of sweet grass like English lawns; and on the other side, stretching for more miles than a man can count, ran the desolate alkali plains of Arizona where tufts of sage-brush are the only vegetation till you reach the lips of the Colorado Canyons. Our horses were tethered for the night beneath the stars. Two backwoodsmen were cooking dinner. The smell of bacon over a wood fire mingled with the keen and fragrant air — when, suddenly, the horses neighed, signalling the approach of one of their own kind. Indians, white men — probably another hunting party — were within scenting distance, though it was long before my city ears caught any sound, and still longer before the cause itself entered the circle of our firelight.

I saw a square-faced man, tanned like a redskin, in a hunting shirt and a big sombrero, climb down slowly from his horse and move towards us keenly searching with his eyes; and at the same moment Hank, looking up from the frying-pan where the bacon and venison spluttered in a pool of pork-fat, exclaimed, ‘Why, it’s Ezekiel B.!’ The next words, addressed to Jake, who held the kettle, were below his breath: ‘And if he ain’t all broke up! Jest look at the eyes on him!’ I saw what he meant — the face of a human being distraught by some extraordinary emotion, a soul in violent distress, yet betrayal well kept under. Once, as a newspaper man, I had seen a murderer walk to the electric chair. The expression was similar. Death was *behind* the eyes, not in them. Smith brought in with him — terror.

In a dozen words we learned he had been hunting for some weeks, but was now heading for Tranter, a ‘stop-off’ station where you could flag the daily train 140 miles south-west. He was making for Smithville, the little town that was the apple of his eye. Something ‘was wrong’ with Smithville. No one asked him what — it is the custom to wait till information is volunteered. But Hank, helping him presently to venison (which he hardly touched), said casually, ‘Good hunting, Boss, your way?’; and the brief reply told much, and proved how eager he was to relieve his mind by speech. ‘I’m glad to locate your camp, boys,’ he said. ‘That’s luck. There’s something going wrong’ — and a catch came into his voice— ‘with Smithville.’ Behind the laconic statement emerged somehow the terror the man experienced. For Smith to confess cowardice and in the same breath admit mere 'luck', was equivalent to the hysteria that makes city people laugh or cry. It was genuinely dramatic. I have seen nothing more impressive by way of human tragedy — though hard to explain why — than this square-jawed, dauntless man, sitting there with the firelight on his rugged features, and saying this simple thing. For how in the world could he know it?

In the pause that followed, his Indians came gliding in, tethered the horses, and sat down without a word to eat what Hank distributed. But nothing was to be read on their impassive faces. Redskins, whatever they may feel, show little. Then Smith gave us another pregnant sentence. *'They* heard it too,' he said, in a lower voice, indicating his three men; 'they saw it jest as I did.' He looked up into the starry sky a second. 'It's hard upon our trail right now,' he added, as though he expected something to drop upon us from the heavens. And from that moment I swear we all felt creepy. The darkness round our lonely camp hid terror in its folds; the wind that whispered through the dry sage-brush brought whispers and the shuffle of watching figures; and when the Indians went softly out to pitch the tents and get more wood for the fire, I remember feeling glad the duty was not mine. Yet this feeling of uneasiness is something one rarely experiences in the open. It belongs to houses, overwrought imaginations, and the presence of evil men. Nature gives peace and security. That we all felt it proves how real it was. And Smith, who felt it most, of course, had brought it.

'There's something gone wrong with Smithville' was an ominous statement of disaster. He said it just as a man in civilised lands might say, 'My wife is dying; a telegram's just come. I must take the train.' But how he felt so sure of it, a thousand miles away in this uninhabited corner of the wilderness, made us feel curiously uneasy. For it was an incredible thing — yet true. We all felt *that.* Smith did not imagine things. A sense of gloomy apprehension settled over our lonely camp, as though things were about to happen. Already they stalked across the great black night, watching us with many eyes. The wind had risen, and there were sounds among the trees. I, for one, felt no desire to go to bed. The way Smith sat there, watching the sky and peering into the sheet of darkness that veiled the Desert, set my nerves all jangling. He expected something — but what? It was following him. Across this tractless wilderness, apparently above him against the brilliant stars, Something was 'hard upon his trail.'

Then, in the middle of painful silences, Smith suddenly turned loquacious — further sign with him of deep mental disturbance. He asked questions like a schoolboy — asked them of me too, as being 'an edicated man.' But there were such queer things to talk about round an Arizona camp-fire that Hank dearly wondered for his sanity. He knew about the 'wilderness madness' that attacks some folks. He let his green cigar go out and flashed me signals to be cautious. He listened intently, with the eyes of a puzzled child, half cynical, half touched with superstitious dread. For, briefly, Smith asked me what I knew about stories of dying men appearing at a distance to those who loved them much. He had read such tales, 'heard tell of 'em,' but 'are they dead true, or are they jest little feery tales?' I satisfied him as best I could with one or two authentic stories. Whether he believed or not I cannot say; but his swift mind jumped in a flash to the point. 'Then, if that kind o' stuff is true,' he asked, simply, 'it looks as though a feller had a dooplicate of himself — sperrit maybe — that gits loose and active at the time of death, and heads straight for the party it loves best. Ain't that so, Boss?' I admitted the theory was correct. And then he startled us with a final question that made Hank drop an oath below his breath — sure evidence of uneasy excitement in the old backwoodsman. Smith whispered it, looking over his shoulder into the night: 'Ain't it jest possible then,' he asked, 'seeing that men an' Nature is all made of a piece like, that places too have this dooplicate appearance of theirselves that gits loose when they go under?'

It was difficult, under the circumstances, to explain that such a theory *had* been held to account for visions of scenery people sometimes have, and that a city may have a definite personality made up of all its inhabitants — moods, thoughts, feelings, and passions of the multitude who go to compose its life and atmosphere, and that hence is due the odd changes in man's individuality when he goes from one city to another. Nor was there any time to do so, for hardly had he asked his singular question when the horses whinnied, the Indians leaped to their feet as if ready for an attack, and Smith himself turned the colour of the ashes theat lay in a circle of whitish-grey about the burning wood. There was an expression in his face of death, or, as the Irish peasants say, 'destroyed.'

‘That’s Smithville,’ he cried, springing to his feet, then tottering so that I thought he must fall into the flame; ‘that’s my baby town — got loose and huntin’ for me, who made it, and love it better’n anything on Gawd’s green earth!’ And then he added with a kind of gulp in his throat as of a man who wanted to cry but couldn’t: ‘And it’s going to bits — it’s dying — and I’m not thar to save it!’

He staggered and I caught his arm. The sound of his frightened, anguished voice, and the shuffling of our many feet among the stones, died away into the night. We all stood, staring. The darkness came up closer. The horses ceased their whinnying. For a moment nothing happened. Then Smith turned slowly round and raised his head towards the stars as though he saw something. ‘Hear that?’ he whispered. ‘It’s coming up close. That’s what I’ve bin hearing now, on and off, two days and nights. Listen!’ His whispering voice broke horribly; the man was suffering atrociously. For a moment he became vastly, horribly animated — then stood still as death.

But in the hollow silence, broken only by the sighing of the wind among the spruces, we at first heard nothing. Then most curiously, something like rapid driven mist came trooping down the sky, and veiled a group of stars. With it, as from an enormous distance, but growing swiftly nearer, came noises that were beyond all question the noises of a city rushing through the heavens. From all sides they came; and with them there shot a reddish, streaked appearance across the misty veil that swung so rapidly and softly between the stars and our eyes. Lurid it was, and in some way terrible. A sense of helpless bewilderment came over me, scattering my faculties as in scenes of fire, when the mind struggles violently to possess itself and act for the best. Hank, holding his rifle ready to shoot, moved stupidly round the group, equally at a loss, and swearing incessantly below his breath. For this overwhelming certainty that Something living had come upon us from the sky possessed us all, and I, personally, felt as if a gigantic Being swept against me through the night, destructive and enveloping, and yet that it was not one, but many. Power of action left me. I could not even observe with accuracy what was going on. I stared, dizzy and bewildered, in all directions; but my power of movement was gone, and my feet refused to stir. Only I remember that the Redskins stood like figures of stone, unmoved.

And the sounds about us grew into a roar. The distant murmur came past us like a sea. There was a babel of shouting. Here, in the deep old wilderness that knew no living human beings for hundreds of leagues, there was a tempest of voices calling, crying, shrieking; men's hoarse clamouring, and the high screaming of women and children. Behind it ran a booming sound like thunder. Yet all of it, while apparently so close above our heads, seemed in some inexplicable way far off in the distance — muted, faint, thinning out among the quiet stars. More like a *memory* of turmoil and tumult it seemed than the actual uproar heard at first hand. And through it ran the crash of big things tumbling, breaking, falling in destruction with an awful detonating thunder of collapse. I thought the hills were toppling down upon us. A shrieking city, it seemed, fled past us through the sky.

How long it lasted it is impossible to say, for my power of measuring time had utterly vanished. A dreadful wild anguish summed up all the feelings I can remember. It seemed I watched, or read, or dreamed some desolating scene of disaster in which human life went overboard wholesale, as though one threw a hatful of insects into a blazing fire. This idea of burning, of thick suffocating smoke and savage flame, coloured the entire experience. And the next thing I knew was that it had passed away as completely as though it had never been at all; the stars shone down from an air of limpid dearness, and — there was a smell of burning leather in my nostrils. I just stepped back in time to save my feet. I had moved in my excitement against the circle of hot ashes. Hank pushed me back roughly with the barrel of his rifle.

But, strangest of all, I understood, as by some flash of divine intuition, the reason of this abrupt cessation of the horrible tumult. The Personality of the town, set free and loosened in the moment of death, had returned to him who gave it birth, who loved it, and of whose life it was actually an expression. The Being of Smithville was literally a projection, an emanation of the dynamic, vital personality of its puissant creator. And, in death, it had returned on him with the shock of an accumulated power impossible for a human being to resist. For years he had provided it with life — but *gradually.* It now rushed back to its source, thus concentrated, in a single terrific moment.

'That's him,' I heard a voice saying from a great distance as it seemed. 'He's fired his last shot — !' and saw Hank turning the body over with his riflebutt. And, though the face itself was calm beneath the stars, there was an attitude of limbs and body that suggested the bursting of an enormous shell that had twisted every fibre by its awful force yet somehow left the body as a whole intact.

We carried ‘it’ to Tranter, and at the first real station along the line we got the news by telegraph: ‘Smithville wiped out by fire. Burned two days and nights. Loss of life, 3000.’ And all the way in my dreams I seemed still to hear that curious, dreadful cry of Smithville, the shrieking city rushing headlong through the sky.

THE TEMPTATION OF THE CLAY

I

SOME MEN GROW away from places, others grow into them: It is a curious and delicate matter. Before now, a man has been thrown out by his own property, yet his successor made immediately at home there. Once let Imagination dwell upon this psychology of places and it will travel very far. Here lies a great mystery, entangled with the mystery of life itself, delicately baited, too. Only the utterly obtuse, one thinks, can ignore the hint offered by Nature — that there is this very definite relationship existing between places and human beings, and that the aggressive attitude is not always chiefly upon the side of the latter.

So it is that there are spots of country — mere bits of scenery, a valley, plain, or river bank, estate or even garden — that undeniably bid a man stay, and welcome; or for no ascertainable reason reject him, and make him anxious to leave. Campers, looking for a night's resting-place, know this well; and so may owners of estates and houses, — campers on a larger scale, seeking to settle somewhere for the few years of a life-time. Neither one nor other, however, one thinks, unless he be a swift-minded poet with vivid divination, gets quite to the root of the matter.

Very suggestive are the mysterious processes by which such results are sometimes brought about, a certain pathos in them too. For the rejected owner is usually of that hard intellectual type that is utterly insensible to the fairy flails of Beauty, and seeks, therefore, in vain through all his stores of logic for a reasonable cause and effect; whereas the accepted one, exquisitely adjusted though he may be to the seduction of the place that takes him in, yet is unable to tell in words what really happens, or to express a tithe of that sweet marvellous explanation that lies concealed within his heart. The one denies it, the other makes wild, poetic guesses; but neither really knows.

Dick Eliot understood something of the two points of view perhaps, because he experienced both acceptance and rejection; and this story, of how a place first welcomed him, then violently tossed him out again, is as queer a case of such relationship as one may ever hear. But, then, Dick Eliot combined in himself a measure of both types of mind; he was intellectual, and knew that two and two make four, but he was also mystical, and knew that they make five or nothing, or a million — that everything is One, and One is everything. Neither was, perhaps, very strong in him, because life had not provided the opportunity for one or other's exclusive development; but both existed side by side in his general mental composition. And they resulted in a level so delicately poised that the apparent balance yet had instability at its roots.

Leaving England at twenty-two or three — there were misunderstandings with his University, where in classics and philosophy he had promised well; with his step-parents who regarded him as well lost; and in a sense, that yet did not affect his honour, with his country's law — he had since met life in difficult, rough places. He had lived. All manner of experiences had been his; he had known starvation in strange cities, and had more than once been close to death — queer kinds of death. But, also, he had been close to earth, and the earth had wonderfully taught him. The results of this teaching, not recognised at the time, came out later to puzzle and amaze him. For years he dwelt in the wilderness with life reduced to its essentials — the big, crude, thundering facts of it — so that he had come to regard scholarship, once so valued, as over-rated, and action as the sole reality. The poetic, mystical side of him passed into temporary abeyance. Worldly achievement and ambition led him. This, however, was a mood of youth only, a reaction due to the resentment of his exile, and to the grievance he cherished against the academic conventions — so he deemed them — that had cut him off from his inheritance.

At thirty, or thereabouts, he fell in love and married — a vigorous personality of a woman with Red Indian in her blood, picked up in some wild escapade along the frontiers of Arizona and New Mexico; and, within six months of marriage, the death of an aunt had left him unexpected master of this little gem of an estate in the south of England where the following experience took place.

This impulsive action of an aunt whom he had seen but once, due to her wish to spite the other claimants rather than to any pretended love for himself, resulted in a radical change of life. He came home, ignored by his relations, and ignoring them in turn. The former love of books revived; the imaginative point of view re-asserted itself; he saw life from another angle. Action, after all, was but a part of it, another form of play. The mental life was the reality; he studied, meditated, wrote. Once more the deep, poetic mystery of things lit all his thoughts with wonder. Corrected by the hard experiences of his early years, the philosopher and dreamer in him assumed the upper hand, though the speculative dreams he indulged were more sanely regulated than before. The imagination was now more finely tempered.

To look at, he was sometimes obviously forty-five, yet at others could easily have passed for thirty: — a tall, lean figure of a man; spare, as though the wilderness had taken that toll of him which no amount of subsequent easy living could efface. To see him was to think of men toiling in a hard, stern land where all things had to be conquered and nothing yielded of itself, where, moreover, human life was cheap and of small account. He was alert, always in training, cheeks thin, neck sinewy, knees ready instantly to turn a horse by grip alone, the reins unnecessary so that both hands were free to fight. The eyes were keen and dark, moustache clipped very short and partly grizzled; deep furrows marked the jaw and forehead; but the muscular hands were young, the fling of the shoulders young, the toss and set of the big head young as well. And he always dressed in riding breeches, with a strap about the waist instead of braces. You might see him hitch them up as he stepped back to leap the stream, or to take the pine knolls with a run downhill.

Indeed, the imaginative side of him seemed almost incongruous; and that such a figure could conceal a mystical, tenderly poetic side not one man in a thousand need have guessed. But, in spite of these severer traits, the character, you felt, was tender enough upon its under side. It was merely that the control of the body and emotions acquired in the wilds had never been unlearned, and that no amount of softer living could let it be forgotten.

About the rather grim and over-silent mouth, for instance, there were marks like the touches of a flower that sometimes made the sternness seem a clumsy mask. An intuitive woman, or a child, must have found him out at once.

II

AFTER years spent as he had spent them among the conditions of primitive lands, Dick Eliot came back with his ‘uncivilised’ wife, to find that with the old established values of English ‘County’ existence they had little or nothing in common. Their ostracism by the neighbourhood has no place in this story, except to show how it threw them back intensely into the little property he had inherited. They lived there a dozen years, isolated, childless, knowing that solitude in a crowd which yet is never loneliness.

The ‘Place,’ as they always called it, took them, and welcome, to itself. The land, running to several hundred acres, was comparatively worthless, mere jumbled stretch of sand and pines and heathery hills; too remote from any building centre to be easily sold, and of no avail for agricultural purposes. For which, since he had just enough to live on quietly, both were grateful: they could keep it lovely and unspoilt. All round it, however, was an opulent, over-built-upon country that they loathed, since they felt that its quality, once admitted, would cause the Place to wither and die. The gross surfeit of prosperous houses, preserved woods; motoring hotels, and the rest would settle on its virgin face. Builders and business men would commercially appraise it, financiers undress it publicly so that it would know itself naked and ashamed. Deep down its soul would turn weakly and diseased, then disappear, and their own assuredly go with it.

For both had loved the Place at sight. She in particular loved it — with a kind of rude enthusiasm she forced, as it were, upon his gentler character. Its combination of qualities fascinated her — the old-world mellowness with the unkempt, untidy wildness. The way it kept alive that touch of the wilderness she had known from childhood, set in the midst of so much over-civilised country all about, gave her the feeling of having a little, precious secret world entirely to herself. She forced this view with all the vigour of her primitive poetry upon her husband till he accepted it as his own. It became his own; only she realised it more vitally than he did. The contrast laid a spell upon her, and she would not hear of going away. They lived there, in this miniature world, until they knew it with such close intimacy that it became identified with their very selves. She made him see it through her eyes, so that the place was haunted, saturated, invested with their moods of worship, love, and wonder. It became a little mystery-world that their feelings had turned living.

Thus when, after twelve years' happiness together, she died there, he stayed on, sole guardian as it were of all she had loved so dearly. Too vital a man to permit the slightest morbid growth which comes from brooding, he yet lived among fond memories, aware of her presence in every nook and glade, in every tree, her voice in the tinkle of the stream, new values everywhere. Each ridge and valley, made familiar by her step and perfume, strengthened recollection, and more than ever before the Place seemed interwoven with herself and him, subtle expression of vanished joys. The Past stayed on in it; it did not move away; it remained the Present. Her death had doubly consecrated the little estate, making it, so to speak, a sacrament of dear communion. The only change, it seemed, was that he identified it with her being more than with himself or with the two of them. He guarded it unspoilt and sweet because of her who held it once so dear — as another man might have kept a flower she had touched, a picture, or a dress that she had worn. Now it was doubly safe from the damage she had feared — commercial spoliation. 'Keep the Place as it is, Dick,' she had so often said with a vehemence that belonged to her vigorous type, 'I'd hate to see it dirtied!' For her the civilised country round had always been 'dirty.' And he did so, almost with the feeling that he was keeping her person clean at the same time; for what a man thinks about is real, and he had come to regard the Place and herself as one.

Throwing himself into definite work to occupy his mind, he kept it as the apple of his eye, living in solitude, and cared for only by a motherly old housekeeper (years ago his mother's maid) whose services he had by fortunate chance secured. He spent his leisure time in writing — studies of obscure periods in forgotten history that, when published, merely added to the clutter of the world's huge mental lumber-room, to judge by the reviews. Once he made a journey to his haunts of youth, *their* youth, in. Arizona, but only to return dissatisfied, with added pain. He settled down finally then, throwing himself with commendable energy into his studies, till the hurrying years brought him thus to forty-five.

Rarely he went to London and pored over musty volumes in the British Museum Reading-room, but after a day or two would hear the murmur of the mill-wheel singing round that portentous, dreary dome, and back he would come again, post-haste. And perhaps he chose his line of study, rather than more imaginative work, because it reasonably absorbed him, while yet it stole no single emotion from his past with her, nor trespassed upon the walking of one dear faint ghost.

III

AND it was upon this gentle, solitary household that suddenly Mànya Petrovski descended with her presence of wonder and of magic. Out of a clear blue sky she dropped upon him and made herself deliciously at home. Only daughter of his widowed sister, married to a Russian, she was fourteen at the time of her mother's death; and the duty seemed forced upon him with a conviction that admitted of no denial. He had never seen the child in his life, for she was born in the year that he returned to England, family relations simply non-existent; but he had heard of her, partly from Mrs. Coove, his housekeeper, and partly from tentative letters his sister wrote from time to time, aiming at reconciliation. He only knew that she was backward to the verge of being stupid, that she 'loved Nature and life out of doors,' and that she shared with her strange father a certain sulking moodiness that seemed to have been so strong in his own half civilised Slav temperament. He also remembered that her mother, a curious mixture of Puritanism and weakly dread of living, had brought her up strictly in the manufacturing city of the midlands where they dwelt 'wealthily,' surrounded by an atmosphere of artificiality that he deemed almost criminal. For his sister, fostering old-fashioned religious tendencies, believed that a visible Satan haunted the frontiers of her narrow orthodoxy, and would devour Mànya as soon as look at her once she strayed outside. She too had claimed, he remembered, to love Nature, though her love of it consisted solely in looking cleverly out of windows at passing scenery she need never bother herself to reach. Her husband's violent tempers she had likewise ascribed to his possession by a devil, if not by *the* — her own personal — devil himself. And when this letter, written on her death-bed, came begging him, as the only possible relative, to take charge of the child, he accepted it, as his character was, unflinchingly, yet with the greatest possible reluctance. Significant, too, of his character was the detail that, out of many others surely far more important, first haunted him: 'She'll love Nature (by which he meant the Place) in the way her mother did — artificially. We shan't get on a bit!' — thus, instinctively, betraying what lay nearest to his heart.

None the less, he accepted the position without hesitation. There was no money; his sister's property was found to be mortgaged several times above its realisable value, and the child would come to him without a penny. He went headlong at the problem, as at so many other duties that had faced him — puzzling, awkward duties — with a kind of blundering delicacy native to his blood. 'Got to be done, no good dreaming about it,' he said to himself within a few hours of receiving the letter; and when a little later the telegram came announcing his sister's death, he added shortly with a grim expression, 'Here goes, then!' In this plucky, yet not really impulsive decisiveness, the layer of character acquired in Arizona asserted itself. Action ousted dreaming.

And in due course the preparations for the girl's reception were concluded. She would make the journey south alone, and Mrs. Coove would meet her. Moreover, evidence to himself at least of true welcome, Mànya should have the bedroom which had been for years unoccupied — his wife's.

For all that, he dreaded her arrival unspeakably. 'She'll be bored here. She'll dislike the Place — perhaps hate it. And I shall dislike her too.'

IV

ELIOT ruled his little household well, because he ruled himself. No one, from the tri-weekly gardener to the rough half-breed Westerner who managed the modest stable, felt the least desire to trifle with him. Even Mrs. Coove, in the brief morning visits to his study, did not care about asking him to repeat some sentence that she had not quite caught or understood. Yet, in a sense, as with all such men, it was the woman who really managed him. 'Mrs.' Coove, big, motherly, spinster, divined the child beneath the grim exterior, and simply played with him. She it was who really 'ran' the household, relieving him of all domestic worries, and she it was, had he fallen ill — which, even for a day, he never did — who would have nursed him into health again with such tactfully concealed devotion that, while loving the nursing, he would never have guessed the devotion.

So it was largely upon Mrs. Coove that he secretly relied to welcome, manage, and look after his little orphaned niece, while, of course, pretending that he did it all himself.

‘She’ll want a companion, sir, of sorts — if I may make so bold — some one to play with,’ she told him when he had mentioned that later, of course, he would provide a ‘governess or something’ when he had first ‘sized up’ the child.

He looked hard at her for a moment. He realised her meaning, that the hostile neighbourhood could be relied on to supply nothing of that kind.

‘Of course,’ he said, as though he had thought of it himself.

‘She’ll love the pony, sir, if she ain’t one of the booky sort, which I seem to remember she ain’t,’ added Mrs. Coove, looking as usual as though just about to burst into tears. For her motherly face wore a lachrymose expression that was utterly deceptive. Her contempt for books, too, and writing folk was never quite successfully concealed.

In silence he watched the old woman wipe her moist hands upon a black apron, and the perplexities of his new duties grew visibly before his eyes. She had little notion that secretly her master stood a little in awe of her superior domestic knowledge.

‘The pony and the woods,’ he suggested briefly.

‘A puppy or a kitten, sir, would help a bit — for indoors, if I may make so bold,’ the housekeeper ventured, with a passing gulp at her own audacity; ‘and out of doors, sir, as you say, maybe she’ll be ‘appy enough. Her pore mother taught—’

The long breath she had taken for this sentence she meant to use to the last gasp if possible. But her master cut her short.

‘Miss Mànya arrives at six,’ he said, turning to his books and papers. ‘The dog-cart, with you in it, to meet her — please.’ The ‘please’ was added because he knew her vivid dislike of being too high from the ground, while judging correctly that the pleasure would more than compensate her for this risk of elevation. It was also intended to convey that he appreciated her help, but deplored her wordiness. Laconic even to surliness himself, he disliked long phrases. It was a perpetual wonder to him why even lazy people who detested effort would always use a dozen words where two were more effective.

So Mrs. Coove, accustomed to his ways, departed, with a curtsey that more than anything else resembled a sudden collapse of the knees beneath more than they could carry comfortably.

‘Thank you, sir; I’ll see to it all right,’ she said, obedient to his glance, beginning the sentence in the room but finishing it in the passage. She looked as though she would weep hopelessly once outside, whereas really she felt beaming pleasure. The compliment of being sent to meet Miss Mànya made her forget her dread of the elevated, swaying dog-cart, as also of the silent half-breed groom who drove it. Full of importance she went off to make preparations.

And later, when Mrs. Coove was on her way to the station five miles off, dangerously perched, as it seemed to her, in mid-air, he made his way out slowly into the woods, a vague feeling in him that there was something he must say good-bye to. The Place henceforth, with Mànya in it, would be — not quite the same. What change would come he could not say, but something of the secrecy, the long-loved tender privacy and wonder would depart. Another would share it with him, a trespasser, in a sense an outsider. And, as he roamed the little pine-grown vales, the mossy coverts, and the knee-high bracken, there stole into him this queer sensation that it all was part of a living Something that constituted almost a distinct entity. His wife inspired it, but, also, the Place had a personality of its own, apart from the qualities he had read into it. He realised, for the first time, that it too might take an attitude towards the new arrival. Everywhere, it seemed, there was an air of expectant readiness. It was aware.... It might possibly resent it.

And, for moments here and there, as he wandered, rose other ideas in him as well, brought for the first time into existence by the thought of the new arrival. This element, like a sudden shaft of sunlight on a landscape, discovered to him a new aspect of the mental picture. It was vague; yet perplexed him not a little. And it was this: that the thing he loved in all this little property, thinking it always as his own, was in reality what *she* had loved in it, the thing that *she* had made him see through the lens of her own more wild, poetic vision. What he was now saying good-bye to, the thing that the expected intruder might change, or even oust, was after all but a phantom memory — the aspect she had built into it. This curious, painful doubt assailed him for the first time. Was his love and worship of the Place really an individual possession of his own, or had it been all these years but her interpretation of it that he enjoyed vicariously? The thought of Mànya's presence here etched this possibility in sharp relief. Unwelcome, and instantly dismissed, the thought yet obtruded itself — that his feelings had not been quite genuine, quite sincere, and that it was her memory, her so vital vision of the Place he loved rather than the Place itself at first hand.

For the idea that another was on the way to share it stirred the unconscious query: What precisely was it she would share?

And behind it came a still more subtle questioning that he put away almost before it was clearly born: Was he really *quite* content with this unambitious guardianship of the dream-estate, and was the grievance of his exile so completely dead that he would, under all possible conditions, keep its loveliness inviolate and free from spoliation?

The coming of the child, with the new duties involved, and the probable later claims upon his meagre purse, introduced a worldly element that for so long had slept in him. He wondered. The ghosts all walked. But beside them walked other ghosts as well. And this new, strange pain of uncertainty came with them — sinister though exceedingly faint suggestion that he had been worshipping a phantom fastened into his heart by a mind more vigorous than his own.

Ambition, action, practical achievement stirred a little in their sleep.

And on his way back he picked some bits of heather and bracken, a few larch twigs with little cones upon them, and several sprays of pine. These he carried into the house and up into the child's bedroom, where he stuck them about in pots and vases. The flowers Mrs. Coove had arranged he tossed away. For flowers in a room, or in a house at all, he never liked; they looked unnatural, artificial. Flowers and food together on a table seemed to him as dreadful as the sickly smelling wreaths people loved to put on coffins. But leaves were different; and earth was best of all. In his own room he had two wide, deep boxes of plain earth, watered daily, renewed from time to time, and more sweetly scented than any flowers in the world.

Opening the windows to let in all the sun and air there was, he glanced round him with critical approval. To most the room must have seemed bare enough, yet he had put extra chairs and tables in it, a sofa too, because he thought the child would like them. Personally, he preferred space about him; his own quarters looked positively unfurnished; rooms were cramped enough as it was, and useless upholstery gave him a feeling of oppression. He still clung to essentials; and an empty room, like earth and sky, was fine and dignified.

But Mànya, he well knew, might feel differently, and he sought to anticipate her wishes as best he might. For Mànya came from a big house where the idea was to conceal every inch of empty space with something valuable and useless; and her playground had been gardens smothered among formal flowerbeds — triangles, crescents, circles, anything that parodied Nature — paths cut cleanly to neat patterns, and plants that acknowledged their shame by growing all exactly alike without a trace of individuality.

He moved to the open window, gazing out across the stretch of hill and heathery valley, thick with stately pines. The wind sighed softly past his ears. He heard the murmur of the droning mill-wheel, the drum and tinkle of falling water mingling with it. And the years that had passed since last he stood and looked forth from this window came up close and peered across his shoulder. The Past rose silently beside him and looked out too.... He saw it all through other eyes that once had so large a share in fashioning it.

Again came this singular impression — that, while he waited, the whole Place waited too. It knew that she was coming. Another pair of feet would run upon its face and surface, another voice wake all its little echoes, another mind seek to read its secret and share the mystery of its being.

‘If Mànya doesn’t like it — !’ struck with real pain across his heart. But the thought did not complete itself. Only, into the strong face came a momentary expression of helplessness that sat strangely there. Whether the child would like himself or not seemed a consideration of quite minor importance.

A sound of wheels upon the gravel at the front of the house disturbed his deep reflections, and, shutting the door carefully behind him, he gave one last look round to see that all was right, and then went downstairs to meet her. The sigh that floated through his mind was not allowed to reach the lips; but another expression came up into his face. His lips became compressed, and resolution passed into his eyes. It was the look — and how he would have laughed, perhaps, could he have divined it! — the look of set determination that years ago he wore when in some lonely encampment among the Bad Lands something of danger was reported near.

With a sinking heart he went downstairs to meet his duty.

But in the hall, scattering his formal phrases to the winds, a boyish figure, yet with loose flying hair, ran up against him, then stepped sharply back. There was a moment's pitiless examination.

'Uncle Dick!' he heard, cried softly. 'Is *that* what you're like? But how wonderful!' And he was aware that a pair of penetrating eyes, set wide apart in a grave but eager face, were mercilessly taking him in. It was he who, was being 'sized up.' No redskin ever made a more rapid and thorough examination, nor, probably, a more accurate one.

'Oh! I *never* thought you would look so kind and splendid!'

'Me!' he gasped, forgetting every single thing he had planned to say in front of this swift-moving creature who attacked him.

She came close up to him, her voice breathless still but if possible softer, eyes shining like two little lamps.

'I expected — from what Mother said — you'd be — just Uncle Richard! And instead it's only Uncle — Uncle Dick!'

Here was unaffected sincerity indeed. He had dreaded — he hardly knew why — some simpering sentence of formality, or even tears at being lonely in a strange house. And, in place of either came this sort of cowboy verdict, straight as a blow from the shoulder. It took his breath away. In his heart something turned very soft and yearning. And yet he — winced.

'Nice drive?' he heard his gruff voice asking. For the life of him he could think of nothing else to say. And the answer came with a little peal of breathless laughter, increasing his amazement and confusion.

'I drove all the way. I made the blackie let me. And the motherly person held on behind like a bolster. It was glorious.'

At the same moment two strong, quick arms, thin as a lariat, were round his neck. And he was being kissed — once only, though it felt all over his face. She stood on tiptoe to reach him, pulling his head down towards her lips.

'How are you, Uncle, please?'

‘Thanks, Mànya,’, he said shortly, straightening up in an effort to keep his balance, ‘all right. Glad you are, too. Mrs. Coove, your “motherly person who held on like a bolster,” will take you upstairs and wash you. Then food — soon as you like.’

He had not indulged in such a long sentence for years. It increased his bewilderment to hear it. Something ill-regulated had broken loose.

Mrs. Coove, who had watched the scene from the background and doubtless heard the flattering description of herself, moved forward with a mountainous air of possession. Her face as usual seemed to threaten tears, but there was a gleam in her eyes which could only come from the joy of absolute approval. With a movement of her arm that seemed to gather the child in, she went laboriously upstairs. The back of her alone proved to any seeing eye that she had already passed willingly into the state of abject slavery that all instinctive mothers love.

‘We shan’t be barely five minutes, sir,’ she called respectfully when half-way up; and the way she glanced down upon her grim master, who stood still with feet wide apart watching them, spoke further her opinion — and her joy at it — that he too was caught within her toils. ‘She’ll manage you, sir, if I may make so bold,’ was certainly the thought her words did not express.

They vanished round the corner — the heavy tread and the light, pattering step. And he still stood on there, waiting in the hall. A mist rose just before his eyes; he did not see quite clearly. In his heart a surge of strong, deep feeling struggled upwards, but was instantly suppressed. Mànya had said another thing that moved him far more than her childish appreciation of himself, something that stirred him to the depths most strangely.

For, when he asked her how she enjoyed the drive, the girl had replied with undeniable sincerity, looking straight into his eyes:

‘The last bit was like a fairy-tale. Uncle, *how* awfully this place must love you!’

She did not say, ‘How you must love the place!’ And — she loathed the ‘dirty’ country all about.

Then, the first rush of excitement over, a sort of shyness, curiously becoming, had settled down all over her like a cloud. It settled down upon himself as well. But — she had said the perfect thing. And his doubts all vanished. It *was* — yes, surely — the Place she loved.

And yet, when all was over, there passed through him an unpleasant afterthought — as though Mànya had applied a test by which already something in himself was found gravely wanting.

V

WITH its sharp, pine-grown declivities, its tumbling streams, stretches of open heather, and its miniature forests of bracken, the dream-estate was like a Lilliputian Scotland compressed into a few hundred acres. All was in exquisite proportion.

The old house *of* rough grey stone, set in one corner, looked out upon a wild, untidy garden that melted unobserved into woods of mystery beyond, and farther off rose sharp against the sky a series of peaked knolls and ridges that in certain lights looked like big hills many miles away. There were diminutive fairy valleys you could cross in twenty minutes; and several rivulets, wandering from the moorlands higher up, formed the single stream that once had worked the Mill.

But the Mill, standing a stone's-throw from the study windows, so that he heard the water singing and gurgling almost among his book-shelves, had for a century ground nothing more substantial than sunshine, air, and shadow. For the gold-dust of the stars is too fine for grinding. But it ground as well the dreams of the lonely occupant of the grey-toned house. And he let it stand there, falling gradually into complete decay, because beneath those crumbling wooden walls — he remembered it as of yesterday — the sudden stroke had come that in a moment, dropping as it seemed out of eternity, had robbed him of his chief possession — fashioner of the greatest dream of all. The splash and murmur of the water, the drone of the creaking wheel in flood time, the white weed that gathered thickly over the pond formed by the ancient dam, and the red-brown tint of walls and rotting roof, — all were like the colour of the water's singing, the colour of her memory, and the colour of his thinking too, made sweetly visible.

Indeed, despite his best control, *she* still lurked everywhere, so that he could not recall a single experience of the past years without at the same time some vivid aspect of the scenery, as she saw it, rising up clearly to accompany it. In every corner stood the ghost of a still recoverable mood. Here he had suffered, fought, and prayed; here he had loved and hated; here he had lost and found. All the kaleidoscope aspects of growing older, of hopes and fears and disappointments, were visualised for him in terms of the Place where he had met and dealt with them for his soul's good or ill. But behind them always stood that Figure in Chief; it was she who directed the ghostly band; and she it was who coaxed the romantic scenery thus into the support of all his personal moods, and continued to do so with even greater power after she was gone.

His respect for the Place seemed, therefore, involved with his respect for himself and her. That tumbling stream had an inalienable right of way; that mill of golden-brown claimed ancient lights as truly as any mental palace of thoughts within his mind; and the little dips and rises in the woods were as sacred — so he had always felt — as were those twists and turns of character that he called his views of life and his beliefs. This blending of himself with the Place and her had been very carefully reared. The notion that its foundations were not impregnable for ever was a most disturbing one. That the mere arrival of an intruder could shake it, possibly shatter it, touched sacrilege. And for long he suppressed the outrageous notion so successfully that he almost entirely forgot about it.

This strip of vivid land whereon he dwelt acquired, moreover, a heightened charm from the character of the odious land surrounding it. For on all sides was that type of country best described as over-fed and over-lived-upon. The scenery was choked and smothered unto death; it breathed, if at all, the breath of a fading life pumped through it artificially and with labour. Heavily beneath the skies it lay — acres of inert soil.

There were, indeed, people who admired it, calling it typical of something or other in the south of England; but for him these people, like the land itself, were bourgeois, dull, insipid, and phlegmatic as the back of a sheep. Like rooms in a big club, it was over-furnished with too solid upholstery — thick, fat hedges, formal oak woods, lifeless copses stuck upon slopes from which successful crops had sucked long ago the last vestiges of spontaneous life; and spotted with self-satisfied modern cottages,

'improved' beyond redemption, that made him think with laughter of some scattered group of city aldermen. 'They're pompous City magnates,' he used to tell his wife, ‘strayed from the safety of Cornhill, and a little frightened by the wind and rain.’

Everywhere, amid bushy trees that looked so pampered they were almost sham, stood ‘country houses,’ whole crops of them, dozing after heavy meals among gardens of sleek tulip and geraniums. They plastered themselves, with the atmosphere of small Crystal Palaces, upon every available opening, comfortably settled down and weighted with every conceivable modern appliance, and in ‘Parks’ all cut to measure like children’s wooden toys. They stood there, heavy and respectable, living close to the ground, and in them, almost without exception, dwelt successful business men who owned a ‘country seat.’ From his uncivilised, wild-country point of view, they epitomised the soul of the entire scenery about them — something gross and sluggish that involved stagnation. They brooded with an air of vulgar luxury that was too stupid even to be active. Here ‘resided,’ in a word, the wealthy.

When he walked or drove through the five miles of opulent ugliness that lay between Mill House and the station, it seemed like crossing an inert stretch of adipose tissue, then lighting suddenly upon a pulsating nerve-centre. To step back into the fresh and hungry beauty of his pine valley, with its tumbling waters and its fragrance of wild loveliness, was an experience he never ceased to take delight in. The air at once turned keen, the trees gave out sharp perfumes, waters rustled, foliage sang. Oh! here was life, activity, and movement. Vital currents flowed through and over it. The grey house among the fir-trees, beckoning to the Mill beyond, was a place where things might happen and pass swiftly. Here was no stagnation possible. Thrills of beauty, denied by that grosser landscape, returned electrically upon the heart. With every breath he drew in wonder and enchantment.

And all this, for some years now, he had enjoyed alone. Rather than diminishing with his middle age, the spell had increased. Then came this sudden question of another’s intrusion upon his dream-estate, and he had dreaded painful alteration. The presence of another, most likely stupid, and certainly unsympathetic, must cause a desolating change. Alteration there was bound to be, or at the best a readjustment of values that would steal away the wild and accustomed flavour. He had dreaded the child’s arrival unspeakably. It had turned him abruptly timid, and this timidity betrayed the sweetness of the treasure that he guarded. For it came close to fear — the fear men know when they realise an attack they cannot, by any means within their power, hope to defeat.

And alteration, as he apprehended, came; yet not the alteration he had dreaded. Mànya's arrival had been a surprise that was pure joy. Its wonder almost woke suspicion. And the surprise, he found, grew into a series of surprises that at first took his breath away. The alchemy that her little shining presence brought persisted, grew from day to day, till it operated with such augmenting power that it changed himself as well. No stranger fairy-tale was ever written.

VI

NEXT day he put his work aside and devoted himself whole-heartedly to the lonely child. It was not only duty now. She had stirred his love and pity from the first. They would get on together. Unconsciously, by saying the very thing to win him —

'Uncle, *how* the Place must love you!' — she had struck the fundamental tone that made the three of them in harmony, and set the whole place singing. The sense of an intruding trespasser had vanished. The Place accepted her.

It was only later that he realised this completely and in detail, though on looking back he saw clearly that the verdict had been given instantly. For no revision changed it. 'I'm all right here with Uncle,' was the child's quick intuition, meeting his own halfway:—' We three are all right here together.' For she leaped upon his beloved dream-estate and made it seem twice as wild and living as before. She delighted in its loneliness and mystery. She clapped her hands and laughed, pointed and asked questions, made her eyes round with wonder, and, in a word, put her own feelings from the start into each nook and corner where he took her. There was no shyness, no confusion; she made herself at home with a little air of possession that, instead of irritating as it might have done, was utterly enchanting. It was "6 like the chorus of approval that increases a man's admiration for the woman he has chosen.

She brought her own interpretations, too, yet without destroying his own. They even differed from his own, yet only by showing him points and aspects he had not realised. The child saw things most oddly from another point of view. From the very first she began to say astonishing things. They piqued and puzzled him to the end, these things she said. He felt they unravelled something. In his own mind the personality of the Place and the memory of his wife had become confused and jumbled, as it were. Mànya's remarks and questions disentangled something. Her child's divination cleared his perceptions with a singular directness. She had strong in her that divine curiosity of children which is as far removed from mere inquisitiveness as gold - dust from a vulgar - finished ornament. Wonder in her was vital and insatiable, and some of these questions that he could not answer stirred in him, even on that first day of acquaintance, almost the sense of respect.

Morning and afternoon they spent together in visiting every corner of the woods and valleys; no inch was left without inspection; they followed the stream from the moorlands to the Mill, plunged through the bracken, leaped the high tufts of heather, and scrambled together down the precipitous sandpits. She did not jump as well as he did, but showed equal recklessness. And the depths of shadowy pinewood made her hushed and silent like himself. In her childish way she *felt* the wild charm of it all deeply. Not once did she cry 'How lovely' or 'How wonderful'; but showed her happiness and pleasure by what she did.

'Better than yesterday, eh?' he suggested once, to see what she would answer, yet sure it would be right.

She darted to his side. 'That was all stuffed,' she said, laconically as himself, and making a wry face. And then she added with a grave expression, half anxious and half solemn, 'Fancy, if *that* got in! Oh, Uncle!'

'Couldn't,' he comforted himself and her, delighted secretly.

But it was on their way home to tea in the dusk, feeling as if they had known one another all their lives, so quickly had friendship been cemented, that she said her first genuinely strange thing. For a long time she had been silent by his side, apparently tired, when suddenly out popped this little criticism that showed her mind was actively working all the time.

'Uncle, you *have* been busy — keeping it so safe. I suppose you did most of it at night.'

He started. His own thoughts had been travelling in several directions at once.

‘I don’t walk in my sleep,’ he laughed.

‘I mean when the stars are shining,’ she said. She felt it as delicately as that, then! She felt the dream quality in it. ‘I mean, it loves you best when the sun has set and it comes out of its hole,’ she added, as he said nothing.

‘Mànya, it loves you too — already,’ he said gently.

Then came the astonishing thing. The voice was curious; the words seemed to come from a long way off, taking time to reach him. They took time to reach her too, as though another had first whispered them. It almost seemed as though she listened while she said them. A sense of the uncanny touched him here in the shadowy dark wood:

‘It’s a woman, you see, really, and that’s why you’re so fond of it. That’s why it likes me too, and why I can play with it.’

The amazing judgment gave him pause at once, for he felt no child ought to know or say such things. It savoured of precociousness, even of morbidity, both of which his soul loathed. But reflection brought clearer judgment. The sentence revealed something he had already been very quick to divine, namely, that while the ordinary mind in her was undeveloped, backward, almost stunted, by her bringing up, another part of her was vividly aware. And this other part was taught of Nature; it was the fairy thing that children had the right to know. She stood close to the earth. Landscape and scenery brought her vivid impressions that fairytales, rather stupidly, translate into princes and princesses, ogres, giants, dragons. Mànya, having been denied the fairy books, personified these impressions after her own fashion. What was it after all but the primitive instinct of early races that turned the moods of Nature into beings, calling them gods, or the instinct of a later day that personified the Supreme, calling it God? He himself had ‘felt’ in very imaginative moments that bits of scenery, as with trees and even the heavenly bodies, could actually express such differences of temperament, seem positive or negative, almost male or female. And perhaps, in her original, child’s fashion, she felt it too.

Then Mànya interrupted his reflections with a further observation that scattered his philosophising like an explosion. Something, as he heard it, came up close and brushed him. It made him start.

‘In some places, you see, Uncle, I feel shy all over. But here I could run about naked. I could undress.’

He burst out laughing. Instinctively he felt this was the best thing he could do. A sympathetic answer might have meant too much, yet silence would have made her feel foolish. His laughter turned the idea in her little mind all wholesome and natural.

‘Play here to your heart’s content, for there’s no one to disturb you,’ he cried. ‘And when I’m too busy,’ he added, thinking it a happy inspiration, ‘Mrs. Coove can—’

‘Oh,’ she interrupted like a flash, ‘but she’s too bulgey. She could never jump like you, for one thing.’

‘True.’

‘Or play hide-and-seek. She couldn’t fit in anywhere. She’d never be able to hide, you see.’

And so they reached the house, like two friends who had found suddenly a new delight in life, and sat down to an enormous tea, with jam, buttered muffins, and a stodgy indigestible cake straight from the oven. His tea hitherto had consisted of one cup and two pieces of thin bread and butter. But the appetite of twenty-five had come back again.

A new joy of life had come back with it. After so many years of brooding, dreaming, solitary working, he had grown over solemn, the sense of fun and humour atrophying. He had erected barriers between himself and all his kind, hedged himself in too much. The arrival of this child brought new impetus into the enclosure. Without destroying what imagination had prized so long, she shifted the old values into slightly different keys. Already he caught his thoughts running forward to construct her future — what she might become, how he might help her to develop spiritually and materially — yes, materially as well. His thoughts had hitherto run chiefly backwards.

This need not, indeed could not, involve being unfaithful to the past. But it did mean looking ahead instead of always looking back. It was more wholesome.

Yet what dawned upon him — rather, what chiefly struck him out of his singular observations perhaps, was this: not only that the Place had whole-heartedly accepted her, but that she had instantly established some definite relation with it that was different to his own. It was even deeper, truer, more vital than his own; for it was somehow more natural. It had been discovered, though already there; and it was not, like his own, built up by imaginative emotion. Hence came his notion that she disentangled something; hence the respect he felt for her from the start; hence, too, the original, surprising things she sometimes said.

VII

FOR several days he watched and studied her, while she turned the Place into a private playground of her own with that air of sweet possession that had charmed him from the first. Backward and undeveloped she undeniably was, but, in view of her stupid, artificial bringing up, he understood this easily. Of books and facts, of knowledge taught in school, she was shockingly ignorant. The wrong part of her had been ‘forced’ at the wrong time; the ‘play’ side had been denied development, and, while gathering force underground, her little brain had learned by heart, but without real comprehension, things that belonged properly to a later stage. For if ever there was one, here was an elemental being, free of the earth, native of open places, called to the wisdom of the woods. It all had been suppressed in her. She now broke out and loose, bewildered, and a little rampant, wild rather, and over joyful. She revelled like an animal in new-found freedom.

In time she sobered. He led her wisely. Yet often she went too fast for him to follow, and slipped beyond his understanding altogether. For there were gaps in her nature, unfilled openings in her mind, loopholes through which she seemed to escape too easily, perhaps too completely, into her playground, certainly too rapidly for him to catch her up. It was then she said these things that so astonished him, making him feel she was somehow an eldritch soul that saw things, Nature especially, from a point of view he had never reached. Her sight of everything was original. A bird’s-eye view he could understand; most primitive folk possessed it, and in his wife it had been vividly illuminating. But Mànya had not got this bird’s-eye view, the sweeping vision that takes in everything at a single glance from above. Her angle was another one, peculiar to herself. Laughing, he thought of it rather as seeing everything from below — a fish’s point of view!

Brightness described her best — eyes, skin, teeth, and lips all shone. Yet her manner was subdued, not effervescent, and in it this evidence of depth, a depth he could not always plumb. It was a nature that sparkled, but the sparkle was suppressed; and he loved the sparkle, while loving even more its suppression. It gathered till the point of flame was reached, and it was the possible out-rushing of this potential flame that won his deference, and sometimes stirred his awe. His dread had been considerable, anticipation keen; and the relief was in proportion. Here was a child he could both respect and love; and the sense of responsibility for the little being entrusted to his charge grew very strong indeed.

In due course he supplied a governess, Fräulein Bühlke. She came from the neighbouring town, with her broad, flat German face, framed in flaxen hair that was glossy but not oiled, and smoothed down close to the skull across a shining parting. Mechanically devout, rather fussy, literal in mind, exceedingly worthy and conscientious, her formula was, 'You think that would be wise? Then I try it.' And the 'trying,' which the tone suggested would be delicate, was applied with a blundering directness that defeated its own end. Her method was thumping rather than insinuating, and her notion of delicacy was to state her meaning heavily, add to it, 'Try to believe that I know best, dear child,' and then conscientiously enforce it. Mànya she understood as little as an okapi, but she was kind, affectionate, and patient; and though Eliot always meant to change her, he never did, for the getting of a suitable governess was more than he and Mrs. Coove could really manage. '*Der liebe Gott weisst alles*,' was the phrase with which she ended all their interviews. And if Mànya's obedience showed a slight contempt, it was a contempt he did not think it wise entirely to check.

For he himself could never scold her. It was impossible. It felt as though he stepped upon a baby. Their relations were those of equals almost, each looking up to the other with respect and wonder. Her schoolroom life became a thing apart. So did the hours in his study. Her walks with the governess and his journeys to the British Museum were mere extensions of the schoolroom and the study. It was when they went out together, roaming about the Place at will, exploring, playing, building fires, and the rest, that their true enjoyment came — enjoyment all the keener because each stuck valiantly to duty first.

Her face, though not exactly pretty, had the charm of some wild intelligence he had never seen before. The nose, slightly tilted, wore a tiny platform at its tip. The mouth was firm, lips exquisitely cut, but it was in the dark, shining eyes that the expression of the soul ran into focus; though at times she knew long periods of silence that seemed almost sullen, when her eyes turned dead and coaly, and she seemed almost gone away from behind them. One day she was old as himself, another a mere baby; something was always escaping the leash and slipping off, then coming back with a rush of some astonishing sentence it had gone to fetch. Her physical appearance sometimes was elusive too, now tall, now short, her little body protean as her little soul.

Like running water she was all over the house, not laughing much, not exactly gay or cheerful either, but somehow charged to the brim with a mysterious spirit of play — grave, earnest play, yet airy with a consummate mischief sometimes that was the despair of Fräulein Bühlke, who wore an expression then as though, after all, there were things God did *not* know. Yes, like running water through the rooms and corridors, and tumbling down the stairs behind the kitten or round the skirts of ‘bulgey’ Mother Coove. Swift and gentle always, yet with force enough to hurt you if you got in her way; almost to sting or slap. Soft, and very girlish to look at, she was really hard as a boy, flexible too as a willow branch, and with a rod of steel laced somewhere invisibly through her tenderness, unsuspected till occasion — rarely — betrayed its presence. It shifted its position too; one never knew where that firmness which is character would crop out and refuse to bend. For then the childishness would vanish. She became imperious as a little natural queen. The half-breed groom had a taste of this latter quality more than once, and afterwards worshipped the ground she walked on. To see them together, she in her dark-grey riding-habit, holding a little whip, and he with his sinister, wild face and half malignant manners, called up some picture of a child and a savage animal she had tamed.

But the thing Mànya chiefly brought into his garden, and so also into the garden of his thoughts, was this new element of Play. She brought with her, not only the child’s make-believe, but the child’s conviction, earnestness, and sense of reality.

‘Tell me *one* thing,’ she had a way of saying, sure preface to something of significant import that she had to ask, accompanied always by a darker expression in the eyes, puzzled or searching and not on any account to be evaded or lightly answered; ‘Tell me one thing, Uncle: do these outside things come after us into the house as well?’

‘Only when we allow them, or invite them in,’ he replied, taking up her mood as seriously as herself, yet knowing her question to be a feint. She knew the true answer better than himself. She wished to see what he would say. Her sly laughter of approval told him that. ‘They’re already there, though, aren’t they?’ she whispered, and when he nodded agreement, she added, ‘Of course; they’re everywhere really all the time. They don’t move about as we do.’

But she had often this singular way of seeing things, and saying them, from the original point of view whence she regarded them — from beneath, as it were, topsy-turvy some might call it, almost a little mad, judged by the sheep-like vision of the majority, yet for herself entirely true, consistent, not imagined merely.

Her literal use of words, too, was sometimes vividly illuminating — as though she saw language *directly*, and robbed of the cloak with which familiar use has smothered it. She undressed phrases, making them shine out alone.

‘Moping, child?’ he asked once, when one of her silent fits had been somewhat prolonged. ‘Unhappy?’

‘No, Uncle. And I’m *not* moping.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘Fräulein told me I was selfish, rather.’

‘That’s all right,’ he said to comfort her. ‘Be yourself — self-ish — or you’re nothing.’

She followed her own thought, perhaps not understanding him quite.

‘She said I must put my Self out more — for others. Mother used to say it too.’

He turned and stared at her. The little face was very grave.

‘Eh?’ he asked. ‘Put your Self out?’

Mànya nodded, fixing her eyes, half dreamy, upon his own. She had been far away. Now she was coming back.

'So I'm learning,' she said, her voice coming as from a distance. 'It's *so* funny. But it's not really difficult — a bit. I could teach you, I think, if you'd promise faithfully to practise regularly.'

There was a pause before he asked the next question.

'How d'you do it, child?' came a little gruffly, for he felt queer emotion rising in him.

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Oh, I couldn't tell you *like that.* I could only show you.'

There was a touch of weirdness about the child. It stole into him — a faint sense of eeriness, as though she were letting him see through peepholes into that other world she knew so well.

'Well,' he asked, more gently, 'what happens when you *have* put your Self — er — out? Other things come in, eh?'

'How can I tell?' she answered like a flash. 'I'm out.'

He stared at her, waiting for more. But nothing followed, and a minute later she was as usual, laughing, her brilliant eyes flashing with mischief, and presently went upstairs to get tidy for their evening meal that was something between an early dinner and high tea. Only at the door she paused a second to fling him another of her characteristic phrases:

'I wonder, Uncle. Don't you?' For she certainly knew some natural way, born in her, of moving her Self aside and letting the tide of 'bigger things' sweep in and use her. It was her incommunicable secret.

And he did wonder a good deal. Wonder with him had never faded as with most men. It had often puzzled him why this divine curiosity about everything should disappear with the majority after twenty-five, instead, rather, of steadily increasing the more one knows. Familiarity with those few scattered details the world calls knowledge had never dulled its golden edge for him. Only Mànya, and the things she asked and said, gave it a violent new impetus that was like youth returned. And her notion of putting one's Self out in order to let other things come in filled him with about as much wonder as he could comfortably hold just then. He dozed over the fire, thinking deeply, wishing that for a single moment he could stand where this child stood, see things from her point of view, learn the geography of the world she lived in. The source of her inspiration was Nature of course. Yet he too stood close to Nature and was full of sympathetic understanding for her mystery and beauty. Did Mànya then stand nearer than himself? Did she, perhaps, dwell inside it, while he examined from the outside only, a mere onlooker, though an appreciative and loving onlooker?

It came to him that things yielded up to her their essential meaning because she saw them from another side, and he recalled an illuminating line of Alice Meynell about a daisy, and how wonderful it must be to see from 'God's side,' even of such a simple thing.

Mànya, moreover, saw everything in some amazing fashion as One. The facts of common knowledge men studied so laboriously in isolated groups were but the jewelled facets that hung glittering upon the enormous flanks of this One. The thought flashed through his mind. He remembered another thing she said, and then another; they began to crowd his brain. 'I never dream because I know it all awake,' she told him once; and only that afternoon, when he asked her why she always stopped and stood straight before him — a habit she had — when he spoke seriously with her, she answered, 'Because I want to see you properly. I must be opposite for that! No one can see their own face, or what's next to them, can they?'

Truth, and a philosophical truth! Of no particular importance, maybe, yet strange for a child to have discovered.

Even her ideas of space were singularly original, direct, unhampered by the terms that smother meaning. 'Up' and 'down' perplexed her; 'left' and 'right' perpetually deceived her; even 'inside' and 'outside,' when she tried to express them, landed her in a chaos of confusion that to most could have seemed only sheer stupidity. She stood, as it were, in some attitude of naked knowledge behind thought, perception unfettered, untaught, in which she knew that space was only a way of talking about something that no one ever really understands. She saw space, felt it rather, in some absolute sense, not yet 'educated' to treat it relatively. She saw everything 'round,' as though her spatial perceptions were all circles. And circles are infinite, eternal.

With Time, too, it was somewhat similar. ‘It’ll come round again,’ she said once, when he chided her for having left something undone earlier in the day; or, ‘when I get back to it, Uncle,’ in reply to his reminding her of a duty for the following day. To the end she was ‘stupid’ about telling the time, and until he cured her of it her invariable answer to his question, ‘what o’clock it was,’ would be the literal truth that it was ‘just now, Uncle,’ or simply ‘now,’ as though she saw things from an absolute, and not a relative point of view. She was always saying things to prove it in this curious manner. And, while it made him sometimes feel uncomfortable in a way he could not quite define, it also increased his attitude of respect towards the secret, mysterious thing she hid so well, though without intending to hide it. She seemed in touch with eternal things — more than other children — not merely with a transient expression of them filtered down for normal human comprehension. Some giant thing she certainly knew. She lived it. Death, for instance, was a conception her mind failed to grasp. She could not realise it. People had ‘left’ or ‘gone away,’ perhaps, but somehow for her were always ‘*there*.’

Thus started, his thoughts often travelled far, but always came up with a shock against that big black barrier — the army of the dead. The dead, of course, were always somewhere — if there was survival. But, though he had encountered strange phases of the spiritualistic movement in America, he had known nothing to justify the theory of interference from the other side of that black barrier. The deliverances of the mediums brought no conviction. He sometimes wondered, that was all. And in particular he wondered about that member of the great army who had been for years his close and dear companion. This was natural enough. Could it be that his thought, prolonged and concentrated, formed a prison-house from which escape was difficult? And had his own passionate thinking that ever associated her memory with the Place, detained one soul from farther flight elsewhere? Was this an explanation of that hint Mànya so often brought him — that her presence helped to disentangle, liberate, unravel...? Was the Place haunted in this literal sense?...

VIII

YET, perhaps, after all, the chief change she introduced was this vital resurrection of his sense of play. For Play is eternal, older than the stars, older even than dreams. She taught him afresh things he had already known, but long forgotten or laid aside. And all she knew came first direct from Nature, large and undiluted.

He learned, for instance, the secret of that deep quiet she possessed even in her wildest moments; and how it came from a practice in her mother's house, where all was rush and clamour about worldly 'horrid things' — her practice of lying out at night to watch the stars. But not merely to watch them for a minute. She would watch for hours, following the constellations from the moment they loomed above the horizon till they set again at dawn. She saw them move slowly across the entire sky. For 'mother hurried and fussed' her so, and by doing this she instinctively drew into her curious wild heart the deep delight of feeling that c there was lots of room really, and no particular hurry about anything.' Her inspiration was profound, from ancient sources, natural.

And her 'play,' for the same reason, was never foolish. It was creative play. It was the faculty by which the poets and dreamers re-create the world, and thus rejuvenate it. Adam knew it when he named the beasts, and Job, when he made rhymes about taking Leviathan with a hook, and sang his little heart-sweet songs about the conies and the hopping hills. In the wise it never dies, for it is most subtly allied to wisdom, and only the dreamless can divorce it quite. It is the natural, untaught poetry of the soul which laughs and weeps with Nature, knowing itself akin, seeing itself in everything and everything in itself. Mànya in some amazing fashion, not yet educated out of her, knew Nature in herself.

She did naughty things too, as he learned from Mrs. Coove, when he felt obliged to lecture her, but they were invariably typical and explanatory of her close-to-Nature little being. And he understood what she felt so well that his lectures ended in laughter, with her grave defence 'Uncle, you'd have done the same yourself.' Once in particular, after a fortnight of parching drought, when the gush of warm rain came with its welcome, drenching soak, and the child ran out upon the balcony in her nightgown to feel it on her body too — how could he prove her wrong, having felt the same delight himself? 'I was thirsty and dry all over. I *had* to do it,' she explained, puzzled, adding that of course she had changed afterwards and used the rough Turkey towel 'just as you do.'

But other things he did not understand so well; and one of these was her singular habit of imitating the sounds of Nature, with an accuracy, too, that often deceived even himself. The true sounds of Nature are only two — water and wind, with their many variations. And Mànya, by some trick of tone and breath, could reproduce them marvellously.

‘It’s the way to get close,’ she told him when he asked her why, ‘the way to get inside. If you get the sound exact, you feel the same as they do, and know their things.’ And the cryptic, yet deeply suggestive explanation contained a significant truth that yet just evaded his comprehension. They often played it together in the woods, though he never approached her own astonishing excellence. This, again, stirred something like awe in him; it was a little eerie, almost uncanny, to hear her ‘doing trees,’ or ‘playing wind and water.’

But the strangest of all her odd, original tricks was one that he at length dissuaded her from practising because he felt it stimulated her imagination unwisely, and with too great conviction. It is not easy to describe, and to convey the complete success of the achievement is impossible without seeing the actual results. For she drew invisible things. Her designs, so clumsily done with a butt of pencil, or even the point of her stick in the sand, managed to suggest a meaning that somehow just escaped grasping by the mind. They made him think of puzzle-pictures that intentionally conceal a face or figure. Vague, fluid shapes that never quite achieved an actual form ran through these scattered tracings. She used points in the scenery to indicate an outline of something other than themselves, yet something they contained and clothed. His eye vainly tried to force into view the picture that he felt lay there hiding within these points.

On a large sheet of paper she would draw roughly details of the landscape — tops of trees, the Mill roof, a boulder or a stretch of the stream, for instance — and persuade these points to gather the blank space of paper between them into the semblance, the suggestion rather, of some vague figure, always vast and always very much alive. They marked, within their boundaries, an outline of some form that remained continually elusive. Yet the outline thus framed, whichever way you looked at it, even holding the paper upside down, still remained a figure; a figure, moreover, that moved. For the child had a way of turning the paper round so that the figure had an appearance of moving independently upon itself. The reality of the whole business was more than striking; and it was when she came to giving these figures names that she decided to put a stop to it.

One day another curious thing had happened. He had often thought about it since, and wondered whether its explanation lay in mere child’s mischief, or in some power of discerning these invisible Presences that she drew.

They were returning together from a scramble in the gravel-pit which they pretended was a secret entrance to the centre of the world; and they were tired. Mànya walked a little in front, as her habit was, so that she could turn and see him ‘opposite’ at a moment’s notice when he said an interesting thing. Her red tam-o’-shanter, with the top-knot off, she carried in her hand, swinging it to and fro. From time to time she flicked it out sideways, as though to keep flies away. But there were no flies, for it was chilly and growing dark. The pines were thickly planted here, with sudden open spaces. Their footsteps fell soft and dead upon the needles. And sometimes she flung her arm out with an imperious, sudden gesture of defiance that made him feel suspicious and look over his shoulder. For it was like signing to some one who came close, some one he could not see, but whose presence was very real to her. The unwelcome conviction grew upon him. Some one, in the world she knew apart from him, accompanied them. A few minutes before she had been wild and romping, playing at ‘mushrooms’ with laughter and excitement. She loved doing this — whirling round on her toes till her skirts were horizontal, then sinking with them ballooning round her to the ground, the tam-o’-shanter pulled down over her entire face so that she looked like a giant toadstool with a crimson top. But now she had turned suddenly grave and silent.

‘Uncle!’ she exclaimed abruptly, turning sharply to face him, and using the hushed tone that was always prelude to some startling question, ‘tell me *one* thing, please. What would *you* do if—’

She broke off suddenly and sprang swiftly to one side.

‘Mànya! if what?’ He did not like the movement; it was so obviously done to avoid something that stood in her way — between them — very close. He almost jumped too. ‘I can’t tell you anything while you’re darting about like a deer-fly. What d’you want to know?’ he added with involuntary sharpness.

She stood facing him with her legs astride the path. She stared straight into his eyes. The dusk played tricks with her height, always delusive. It magnified her. She seemed to stand over him, towering up.

‘If some one kept walking close beside you under an umbrella,’ she whispered earnestly, ‘so that the face was hidden and you could never see it — what would *you* do?’

‘Child! But what a question!’ The carelessness in his tone was not quite natural. A shiver ran down his back.

She moved closer, so that he felt her breath and saw the gleam of her big, wide-opened eyes.

‘Would you knock up the umbrella with a bang,’ she whispered, as though afraid she might be overheard, ‘or just suddenly stoop and look beneath — catching it that way?’

He stepped aside to pass her, but the child stepped with him, barring his movement of escape. She meant to have her answer.

‘Take it by surprise like that, I mean. *Would* you, Uncle?’

He stared blankly at her; the conviction in her voice and manner was disquieting.

‘Depends what kind of thing,’ he said, seeing his mistake. He tried to banter, and yet at the same time seem serious. But to joke with Mànya in this mood was never very successful. She resented it. And above all he did not want to lose her confidence.

‘Depends,’ he said slowly, ‘whether I felt it friendly or unfriendly; but I *think* — er — I should prefer to knock the brolly up.’

For a moment she appeared to weigh the wisdom of his judgment, then instantly rejecting it.

‘*I* shouldn’t!’ she answered like a flash. ‘I should suddenly run up and stoop to see. I should catch it that way!’

And, before he could add a word or make a movement to go on, she darted from beside him with a leap like a deer, flew forwards several yards among the trees, stooped suddenly down, then turned her head and face up sideways as though to peer beneath something that spread close to the ground. Her skirts ballooned about her like the mushroom, one hand supporting her on the earth, while the other, holding the tam-o'-shanter, shaded her eyes.

'Oh! oh!' she cried the next instant, standing bolt upright again, 'it's a whole lot! And they've all gone like lightning — gone off there!' She pointed all about her — into the sky, towards the moors, back to the forest, even down into the earth — a curious sweeping gesture; then hid her face behind both hands and came slowly to his side again.

'It wasn't one, Uncle. It was a lot!' she whispered through her fingers. Then she dropped her hands as a new explanation flashed into her. 'But p'raps, after all, it was only one! Oh, Uncle, I do believe it *was* only one. Just fancy — how awfully splendid! I wonder!'

Neither the hour nor the place seemed to him suitable for such a discussion. He put his arm round her and hurried out of the wood. He put the woods behind them, like a protective barrier; for his sake as well as hers; that much he clearly realised. He somehow made a shield of them.

In the garden, with the stars peeping through thin clouds, and the lights of the windows beckoning in front, he turned and said laughing, quickening his pace at the same time:

'Rabbits, Mànya, rabbits! All the rabbits here use brollies, and the bunnies too.' It was the best thing he could think of at the moment. Rather neat he thought it. But her instant answer took the wind out of his sham sails.

'That's just the name for them!' she cried, clapping her hands softly with delight. 'Now they needn't hide like that any more. We'll just pretend they're bunnies, and they'll feel disguised enough.' They went into the house, and it was comforting to see the figure of Mother Coove filling the entire hall. At least there was no disguising her. But on the steps Mànya halted a moment and gazed up in his face. She stood in front of him, deaf to Mrs. Coove's statements from the rear about wet boots. Her eyes, though shining with excitement, held a puzzled, wild expression.

'Uncle,' she whispered, with sly laughter, standing on tiptoe to kiss him, 'I wonder — !' then flew upstairs to change before he could find a suitable reply.

But he wondered too, wondered what it was the child had seen. For certainly she had seen something.

Yet the thought that finally stayed with him — as after all the other queer adventures they had together — was this unpleasant one, that his so willing acceptance of the little intruder involved the disapproval, even the resentment, of — another. It haunted him. He never could get quite free of it. Another watched, another listened, another — waited. And Mànya knew.

IX

AUTUMN passed into winter, and spring at last came round. The dream-estate was a garden of delight and loveliness, fresh green upon the larches and heather all abloom. The routine of the little household was established, and seemed as if it could never have been otherwise. The relationship between the elderly uncle and his little charge was perfect now, like that between a father and his only daughter, spoilt daughter, perhaps a little, who, knowing her power, yet never took advantage of it. He loved her as his own child; and that evasive 'something' in her which had won his respect from the first still continued to elude him. He never caught it up. It had increased, too, in the long, dark months. Now, with the lengthening days, it came still more to the front, grown bolder, as though 'spring's sweet trouble in the ground' summoned it forth. This sympathy between her being and the Place had strengthened underground. The disentangling had gone on apace. With the first warm softness of the April days he woke abruptly to the fact, and faced it. The older memories had been replaced. It seemed to him almost as though his hold upon the Place had weakened. He loved it still, but loved it in some new way. And his conscience pricked him, for conscience had become identified with the trust of guardianship thus self-imposed. He had let something in, and though it was not the taint of outside country *she* had said would 'dirty' it, it yet was alien. It was somehow hostile to the conditions of his original Deed of Trust.

Then, into this little world, dropping like some stray bullet from a distant battle, came with a bang the person of John C. Murdoch. He came for a self-proposed visit of one day, being too 'rushed' to stay an hour longer. Chance had put him 'on the trail' of his old-time 'pard of a hundred camps,' and he couldn't miss looking him up, not 'for all the money you could shake a stick at.' More like a shell than mere bullet he came — explosively and with a kind of tempestuous energy. For his vitality and speed of action were terrific, and he was making money now ‘dead easy’ — so easy, in fact, that it was ‘like picking it up in the street.’

‘Then you’ve done well for yourself since those old days in Arizona,’ said Eliot, really pleased to see him, for a truer ‘partner’ in difficult times he had never known; ‘and I’m glad to hear it.’

‘That’s so, Boss’ — he had always called the ‘Englisher’ thus because of his refined speech and manners— ‘God ain’t forgot me, and I’ve got grubstakes now all over Yurrup. Just raking it in, and if you want a bit, why, name the figger and it’s yours.’ He glanced round at the modest old-fashioned establishment, judging it evidence of unsuccess.

‘What line?’ asked Eliot, dropping into the long-forgotten lingo.

‘Why, patents, bless your heart,’ was the reply. ‘They come to me as easy as mother’s milk to baby, and if the heart don’t wither in me first, I’ll patent everything in sight. I’ll patent the earth itself before I’m done.’

And for a whole hour, smoking one strong green cigar upon another,. he gave brief and picturesque descriptions of his various enterprises, with such energy and gusto, moreover, that there woke in Eliot something of the lust of battle he had known in the wild, early days, something of his zest for making a fortune, something too of the old bitter grievance — in a word, the spirit of action, eager strife and keen achievement, which never had quite gone to sleep....

‘And now,’ said Murdoch at length, ‘tell me about yerself. You look fit and lively. You’ve had enough of my chin-music. Made yer pile and retired too? Isn’t that it? Only you still like things kind o’ modest and camp-like. Is that so?’

But Eliot found it difficult to tell. This side of him that life in England had revived, to the almost complete burial of the other, was one that Murdoch would not understand. For one thing, Murdoch had never seen it in his friend; the Arizona days had kept it deeply hidden. He listened with a kind of tolerant pity, while Eliot found himself giving the desired information almost in a tone of apology.

‘Every man to his liking,’ the Westerner cut him short when he had heard less than half of the stammering tale, ‘and your line ain’t mine, I see. I’m no shadow-chaser — never was. You've changed a lot. Why' — looking round at the little pine-clad valley— 'I should think you'd rot to death in this place. There's not room to pitch a camp or feed a horse. I'd choke for want of air.' And he lit another cigar and spat neatly across ten feet of lawn.

John Casanova Murdoch — in the West he was called 'John Cass,' or just 'John C.,' but had resurrected the middle name for the benefit of Yurrup — was a man of parts and character, tried courage, and unfailing in his friendship. 'Straight as you make 'em' was the verdict of the primitive country where a man's essential qualities are soon recognised, 'and without no frills.' And Eliot, whatever he may have thought, felt no resentment. He remembered the rough man's kindness to him when he had been a tenderfoot in more than one awkward place. John C. might 'rot to death' in this place, and might think the vulgar country round it 'great stuff,' but for all that his host liked to see and hear him. He remembered his skill as a mining prospector and an engineer; he was not surprised that he had at last 'struck oil.'

They talked of many things, but the visitor always brought the conversations round to his two great healthy ambitions, now on the way to full satisfaction: money and power. Upon some chance mention of religion, he waved his hand impatiently with enough vigour to knock a man down, and said, 'Religion! Hell! I only discuss facts.' And his definition of a 'fact' would no doubt have been a dollar bill, a mining 'proposition,' or a food-problem — some scheme by which John C. could make a bit. Yet though he placed religion among the fantasies, he lived it in his way. He ranked the Pope with Barnum, each of them 'biggest in his own line of goods,' and 'Shakespeare was right enough, but might have made it shorter.'

And Eliot, listening, felt the buried portion of his nature waken and revive. It caused him acute discomfort.

'Now show me round the little hole a bit,' said Murdoch just before he left. 'I'd like to see the damage, just for old times' sake. It won't take above ten minutes if we hustle along.'

They hustled along. Eliot led the way with a curious deep uneasiness he could not quite explain. His heart sank within him. Gladly he would have escaped the painful duty, but Murdoch's vigorous energy constrained him. The whole way he felt ashamed, yet would have felt still more ashamed to have refused. He faced the music' as John Casanova Murdoch phrased it, and while doing so, that other music of his visitor's villainous nasal twang cut across the deep-noted murmur of the wind and water like a buzz-saw with a bit of wire trailing against its teeth.

The entire journey occupied but half an hour, for Eliot made short-cuts, instinctively avoiding certain places, and the whole time Murdoch talked. His business, practical soul expanded with good nature. 'The place ain't so bad, if you worked it up a bit,' he said, striking a match on the wall of the mill, and spitting into the clear water, 'but it's not much bigger than a chicken-run at present. If I was you, Boss, I'd have it cleaned up first.' Again he offered a cheque, thinking the unkempt appearance due to want of means. His uninvited opinions were freely offered, as willingly as he would have given money if his old 'pard' had needed it; given kindly too, without the least desire to wound. He picked out the prettiest 'building sites,' and explained where an artificial lake could be made 'as easy as rolling off a log.' His patent wire would fence the gardens off 'and no one ever see it'; and his special concrete paving, from waste material that yielded a hundred per cent profit, would make paths 'so neat and pretty you could dance to heaven on 'em.' The place might be developed so as to 'knock the stuffing' out of the country round about, and the estate become a 'puffect picture-book.'

'You've got a gold mine here, and God never meant a gold mine to lie unnoticed like a roadside ditch. Only you'll need to gladden it up a bit first. You could make it hum as a picnic or amusement resort for the town people. Take it from me, Boss. It's so.'

And the effect upon Eliot as he listened was curious; it was twofold. For while at first the chatter wounded him like insults aimed directly at the dead, at the same time, to his deep disgust, it stirred all his former love of practical, energetic action. The old lust and fever to be up and doing, helping the world go round, making money and worldly position, woke more and more, as Murdoch's vigorous, crude personality stung his will, stung also desires he thought for ever dead. It made him angry to find that they were not dead, and yet he felt that he was feeble not to resent the gross invasion, even cowardly not to resist the coarse attack and kick the vulgar intruder out. It was like a breach of trust to take it all so meekly without protesting, or at least without stating forcibly his position, as though he were not sufficiently sure of himself to protect his memories and his dead. But this was the truth: he was not sure of himself. The blinding light of this simple fellow's mind showed' up the hidden inequalities to himself. Another discovered his essential instability to himself. This other side of him had existed all the time; and his attachment to the Place was partly artificial, built up largely by the vigorous assertion of the departed. His love had coloured it wonderfully all these years, but — it was a love that had undergone a change. It had not faded, but grown otherwise. Another kind of love had to some extent replaced and weakened it. He felt mortified, ashamed, but more, he felt uneasy too.

The wrench was pain. 'If only she were here and I could explain it to her,' ran his thought over and over again, followed by the feeling that perhaps she *was* there, listening to it all — and judging him.

Behind the trees, a little distance away, he saw the flitting figure of Mànya, watching them as they passed noisily along the pathways of her secret playground. Her attitude even at this distance expressed resentment. He imagined her indignant eyes. But, closer than that, another watched and followed, listened and disapproved — that other whom she knew yet never spoke about, who was in league with her, and seemed more and more to him, like a phantom risen from the dead.

With difficulty, and with an uneasiness growing every minute now, he gave his attention to his talkative, well-meaning, though almost offensive guest, at once insufferable yet welcome. One moment he saw him in his camping-kit of twenty years ago, with big sombrero and pistols in his belt, and the next as he was to-day, reeking of luxury and money, in a London black tail-coat, white Homburg hat, diamonds shining on his fingers and in his gaudy speckled tie, his pointed patent-leather boots gleaming insolently through the bracken and heather.

And through his silence crashed a noise of battle that he thought the entire Place must hear. But clear issue to the battle there was none. The opposing sides were matched with such deadly equality. Which was his real self lay in the balance, until at the last John Casanova unwittingly turned the scales.

It came about so quickly, with such calculated precision, as it were, that Eliot almost felt it had all been prepared beforehand and Murdoch had come down on purpose. It was like a sudden flank attack that swept him from his last defences. Help that could not reach him in the form of Mànya signalled from the distance with her shining eyes, her red tam-o'-shanter the banner of reinforcements that arrived too late. For John C. stood triumphantly before him, a conqueror in his last dismantled fortress. His face alight with enthusiasm that was all excitement, he held his hands out towards him, cup-wise.

'See here,' he said with excitement, but in a hard, dry tone that reminded Eliot of prospecting days in Arizona, 'Boss, will you take a look at this, please?'

He had been rooting about in the heather by the edge of the sand-pits. And he thrust his joined hands beneath the other's nose. Something the size of a hen's egg, something that shone a dirty white, lay in them against the thick gold rings. 'Didn't I tell you the place was a gol-darned gold mine? But what's the use o' talking? Will you look at this, now?' He repeated it with the air of a man who has suddenly discovered the secret of the world. The voice was quiet with intense excitement kept hard under.

And Eliot obeyed and looked. He saw his visitor, his Bond Street trousers turned up high enough to show the great muscles of his calves, the Homburg hat tilted across one eye, coat-sleeves pulled up and smeared with a whitish mud. There was perspiration on his forehead. It only needed the sombrero and the pistols to complete the picture of twenty years ago when Cass Murdoch, after weeks of heavy labour, found the first gold-dust in his pan. For John C. *had* found gold. It lay, a dirty lump of white earth, in his large spread hands. Those hands were the pan. The breeze that murmured through the pine trees came, sweet and keen, from leagues of open plain and virgin mountains far away.

... Eliot smelt the wood-fire smoke of camp... heard the crack of the rifle as some one killed the dinner....

'Well, John C.,' he gasped, as he dropped back likewise into the vanished pocket of the years, 'what's your luck? Out with it, man, out with it!'

'A fortune,' replied his visitor. 'Put yer finger on it right now, an' don't tell mother or burst out crying unless yer forced to!' High pleasure was in his voice.

He stepped closer, transferring the lump of dirt into the hand his host unconsciously stretched open to receive it. It lay there a moment, looking even dirtier than before against the more delicate skin. Eliot felt it with finger and thumb. It was soft and sticky and a little moist. It stained the flesh.

Then he looked up and stared into his companion's eyes — blankly. A horrible excitement worked underground in him. But he did not even yet understand.

'You've got it,' observed John C., with dry finality.

'Got what?' asked Eliot.

'Got it right there in yer westkit pocket,' said the other, with an air of supreme satisfaction. His cigar had gone out. He lit it again in leisurely fashion, spat accurately at a distant frond of bracken, eyed the lump of dirt again with inimitable pride, and added, 'Got it without asking; the working soft and easy too; water-power on the spot, and the sea all close and handy for shipping it away.' He made a gesture to indicate the tumbling stream and the sea-coast a few miles beyond.

Then, seeing that his host still stared with blank incomprehension, holding the little lump at arm's length as though it might bite or burn him, he deigned to explain, but with a note of condescending pity in his voice, as of a man explaining to a stupid child.

'Clay,' he said calmly, 'and good stuff at that.'

'Clay,' repeated Eliot, still a little dazed, though light was breaking on him. 'Bricks...?' he asked, with a dull sinking of the heart.

'Bricks, nothing!' snapped the other with impatient scorn, as though his friend were still a tenderfoot in Arizona. 'Good, white pottery clay, and soft as a baby's tongue. The best God ever laid down for man. Worth twice its weight in dust. And all to be had for the trouble of shovelling it out. Old pard, you've struck it good and hot this time; and here's my blessing on yer both.'

Eliot dropped the lump his fingers held so long and took half-heartedly the giant hand that squeezed his own. Across his brain ran visions of slender vases, exquisite white cups and bowls and pitchers, plates and sweet-rimmed basins, all fashioned in delicate-toned shades of glaze — beautifully finished pottery—' worth twice their weight in dust.'

X

AND half an hour later, when John Casanova Murdoch had boomed away in his luxurious motorcar like a departing thunderstorm, Eliot, coming back by the pinewood that led from the high road, heard a step behind him, and turned to find Mànya's face looking over his very shoulder.

'Uncle, who was that?' There was a touch of indignation in her voice that was almost contempt.

'Man I knew in America — years ago,' he said shortly. He still felt dazed, bewildered. But shame and uneasiness came creeping up as well.

'He won't come again, will he?'

'Not again, Mànya.'

The child took his arm, apparently only half relieved.

'He was like a bit of the dirty country,' she said, and when he interrupted with 'Not quite so bad as that, Mànya,' she asked abruptly with her usual intuition, 'Did he want to buy, or build, or something horrid like that?'

'We haven't met for twenty years,' he said evasively. 'Used to hunt and camp together in America. He went to the goldfields with me.' He was debating all the while whether he should tell her all. He hardly knew what he thought. Like a powerful undertow there drove through the storm of strange emotions the tide of a decision he had already come to. It swept him from all his moorings, though as yet he would not acknowledge it even to himself.

'Uncle,' she cried suddenly, stepping across the path, and looking anxiously into his face, 'tell me one thing: will anything be different?'

And the simple question, or perhaps the eager, wistful expression in her voice and eyes, showed him the truth that there was no evading. He must tell her sometime. Why not now?

He decided to make a clean sweep of it.

‘Mànya,’ he began gently, ‘this Place one day — when I am gone, you know — will be your own. But there’ll be no money with it. You’ll have very little to live on.’

She said nothing, just listening with a little air of boredom, as though she knew this already, yet felt no special interest in it. It belonged to the world of things she could not realise much. She nodded. They still stood there, face to face.

‘I’ve been anxious, child, for a long time about your future,’ he went on, meeting her dark eyes with a distinct effort, for they seemed to read the shame he felt rising in his heart; ‘and wondering what I could do to make you safe—’

‘I’m safe enough,’ she interrupted, tossing her hair back and raising her chin a little.

‘But when I’m gone,’ he said gravely, ‘and Mrs. Coove has gone, and there’s no one to look after you. Money’s your only friend then.’

She seemed to reflect. She moved aside, and they walked on slowly towards the house.

‘That’s a long way off, Uncle. I’m not afraid.’

‘But it’s my duty to provide for you as well as possible,’ he said firmly.

And then he told her bluntly and in as few words as possible of the discovery of the clay.

The excitement at first in the child was so great that nothing would satisfy her but that they should at once turn back and see the place together. They did so, while he explained how ‘Mr. Murdoch,’ who was learned in strata, their depth and dip and outcrop, had declared that this deposit of fine white clay was very large. Its spread below the heather-roots might be tremendous. ‘My aunt,’ he said, ‘your great-aunt Julia, lived all her life upon a gold mine here without knowing it, poor as a church mouse.’

This particularly thrilled her. ‘How funny that she never *felt* it!’ was her curious verdict. ‘Was she *very* deaf?’

‘Stone deaf, yes,’ he replied, laughing, ‘and short-sighted too.’

‘Ah!’ said the child, as though things were thus explained. ‘But she might have digged!’

She ran among the heather when he showed her the place, found lumps of clay, played ball with them and was wildly delighted. She treated the great discovery as a game; then as a splendid secret ‘just between us two.’ Mr. Murdoch wouldn’t tell, would he? That seemed the only danger that she saw — at first.

But her uncle knew quite well that this excitement was all false; and far from reassuring him, it merely delayed the deeper verdict that was bound to come with full comprehension. All the discovery involved had not reached her brain. As yet she realised only the novelty, the mystery, the wonder. The spot, moreover, where the great deposit showed its lip was beside the loveliest part of all the wood, and just where the child most loved to play.

At last, then, as her body grew tired and the excitement brought the natural physical reaction, he saw the change begin. She paused and looked about her half suspiciously, like an animal that suspects a trap. Her glance ran questioningly to where her uncle leaned, watching her, against a tree. She eyed him. He thought she suddenly looked different, though wherein the difference lay escaped him. He felt as if he were watching a wild animal, only half tamed, that distrusts its owner, and would next deny his mastership and wait its opportunity to spring. The simile, he knew, was exaggerated, but the picture rose within him none the less. Misgiving and uneasiness grew apace.

Abruptly Mànya stopped her wild playing and with the movement of a little panther ran towards him. She took up a position, as usual, directly opposite. With the strange air of dignity that sometimes clothed her, the figure of the child stood there among the darkening trees and asked him questions, keen, searching questions. He was grateful for the shadows, though he felt they did not screen his face from her piercing sight; but it was her imperious manner above all that made his defence seem so clumsily insincere, and the questions a veritable inquisition.

Before the flood of them, as before their pitiless scrutiny, he certainly quailed. Their keen directness convicted him almost of treachery, and he was hard put to it to persuade her and himself that it really *was* a sense of duty he obeyed in this decision to work the clay. 'I'm doing it all for her,' he repeated again and again to himself, and loathed, with a dash of terror, that curious sudden drive, as of a blow from outside, that sent his tongue into his cheek. But the terror, he dimly divined, was due to another feeling as well, equally vague yet equally persistent. For it seemed that while she listened to his explanations, another listened in the darkness too. Her resentment and distress he realised vividly; but he felt also the resentment and distress — of another. And more than once, during this strange dialogue in the darkening wood, he knew the horrible sensation that this 'other' had come very close, so close as to slip between himself and the child. Almost — that the child was being used as the instrument to express the vehement protest...!

But he faced the music, to use the lingo of John C., and spared himself nothing. He told Mànya, though briefly, that workmen must swarm all through her secret playground, that machinery must grind and boom across the haunted valleys, that the water of her little stream must yield the power to turn great ugly wheels, and that perhaps even a little railway might be built to convey the loads of precious clay down to the sea where steamers would call for them. Acres of trees, too, would be swept away, and heather-land marred and scarred with pits and ditches and quarries. But the benefits in time would all be hers. He put it purposely at its worst, while emphasising as best he could the interest and excitement that must accompany the developments. The dream of many years was nevertheless shattered into bits in half an hour.

The child listened and understood. He was relieved, if puzzled at the same time, that she betrayed no emotion of disappointment or indignation. What she felt she dealt with in her own way — inside. At the stream, however, on her way home, she paused a moment, watching it slip through the darkness underneath the old mill-wheel.

'It won't run any more — for itself,' she said in a low, trembling little voice, that was infinitely pathetic.

'No; but it will run for you, Mànya,' he answered, though the words had not been addressed really to him; 'working away busily for your future.'

And then she burst into tears and hid her face against his coat. He found no further thing to say. He walked beside her, feeling like a criminal found out.

But at the end, as they neared the house side by side, she suddenly turned and asked another question that caused him a thrill of vivid surprise and discomfort — so vivid, in fact, that it was fear.

They were standing just beneath *her* bedroom window then. Memory rushed back upon him with overwhelming force, and he glanced up instinctively at the empty panes of glass. It was almost as though he expected to see a face looking reproachfully down upon him. Through him like spears of ice, as he heard the words, there shot again the atrocious sensation that it was not Mànya, the child, who asked the question, but that Other who had recently moved so close. For behind the tone, with no great effort to conceal it either, trailed a new accent that Mànya never used. Greater than resentment, it was anger, and within the anger lay the touch of a yet stronger note — the note of judgment.

‘But, tell me one thing, Uncle,’ she asked in a whispering voice: ‘will the Place let you?’

XI

MOTIVE, especially in complex natures, is often beyond reach of accurate discovery, and a mixed motive may prove quite impossible of complete disentanglement. But for the sense of shame that Eliot felt, he might never have discerned that with his genuine desire to provide for Mànya’s future there was also involved a secret satisfaction that he himself would profit too. The sight of gold demolishes pretence and artifice; and deep within he felt the old lust of possession and acquisition assert itself. All these years it had been buried, not destroyed. His love of the Place, his worship of Memory, his guardianship of the little dream-estate, compared to the prize of worldly treasure, were on the surface. They were artificial.

This little thing had proved it. The child’s tears, her significant question above all, had shown him to himself. If not, whence came this sense of ignominy before her own purer passion, the loss of confidence, this inner quailing before Another who gazed reprovingly, resentfully, upon him from the shadows of the past? That note of menace in Mànya’s suggestive question was surely not her own. It haunted him. Day and night he heard it ringing in his brain. This new distrust of himself that he recognised read into it something almost vindictive and revengeful.

But Eliot, for all that, was not the man to give in easily. He resolutely dismissed this birth of morbid fancy. Clinging to the thought that his duty to his niece came first, he resisted the suggestion that imputed a grosser selfishness. Cass Murdoch, too, unwittingly helped; for the side of his character John C.'s visit had revived — the love of fight and energetic action — came valiantly to the rescue. To a great extent he persuaded himself that his motive was — almost entirely — a pure one. Preparations for developing the clay went forward steadily.

Mànya too appeared to help him. She said no more distressing things; she showed keen interest in the coming and going of surveyors, architects, soil experts, and the like. And Murdoch's discovery was no false alarm; the bed of clay was deep and extensive as he prophesied, its quality very fine. Men came with pick and shovel; sample pits were dug; the stuff was tested and judged excellent; and the verdict of the manufacturers, to whom 'lots' were forwarded on approval, pronounced it admirable for a large and ready market. There was money in it, and the supply would last for years. The papers heralded the fortunate discoverer, and a moderate fortune undeniably was in sight.

The preparations, however, took time, and the finding of the initial capital, which Murdoch readily supplied, also took time, and spring meanwhile slipped into summer before the enterprise was fairly on its feet. Soft winds sighed lazily among the larches, and the scent of flowers pervaded every valley the pine-trees basked in the sunshine, the pearly water laughed and sang; and at night the moon shot every glade with magic that was like the wings of moths whose flitting scattered everywhere the fine dust of a thousand silvery dreams. The beauty of the little haunted estate leaped into a rich maturity that was utterly enchanting, like wild flowers that are sweetest just before they die.

And over Mànya, too, there passed slowly a mysterious change, for it seemed as if for a time she had been standing still, and now with a sudden leap of beauty passed into the glory of young womanhood. With her short skirts and tumbled hair, her grave and wistful face, swinging idly that red tam-o'-shanter from which she was inseparable, he saw her one evening on the lawn outside his study window, and the change flashed into him across the moonlight with a positive shock. The child had suddenly grown up. A barrier stood between them.

But the barrier was not so sudden as it seemed, for, on looking back, he realised the daily, almost imperceptible manner of its growth. Its complete erection he realised now, but he had been aware of it for a long time — ever since his decision to work the clay, in fact. Here was the proof her deceptive silence had concealed. She had felt it too deeply for words, for arguing, for disappointment volubly expressed; but it had struck into the roots of her little being and had changed her from within outwards. It had aged her. Reality had broken in upon her world of play and dream. He had destroyed her childhood at a single blow. She questioned, doubted, and grew old.

But though every one grows older in identically this way, by sudden leaps, as it were, due to the forcing impulse of some strong emotion, with Mànya it brought no radical alteration. She deepened rather than definitely changed. The sense of wonder did not fade, but ripened. The crude facts of life could never satisfy a nature such as hers, and though she realised them now for the first time, they could not enter to destroy. They drove her more deeply into herself. That is, she dealt with them.

And the change, though he devoted hours of pondering reflection over it, may be summed up briefly enough in so far as it affected himself. There was a difference in their relationship. He stood away from her; while she, on her side, drew nearer to something else that was not himself. With this elusive and mysterious Thing she lived daily. She took sides with it and with the Place, against himself. It went on largely, he felt, behind his back. She grew more and more identified with some active influence that had always been at work in all the wild gardened loveliness of the property, but was now more active than before. Stirred up and roused it was; he could almost imagine it — aggressive. And Mànya, always knowing it at closer quarters than himself, was now in definite league with it. There was opposition in it, though an opposition as yet inactive.

And in the silent watches of the night sometimes, when imagination wove her pictures all unchecked, he again knew the haunting thought close beside his bed: that the mind and hand of the dead were here at work, using the delicate instrument of this rare, sensitive child to convey protest, resentment, warning. Over the little vales, from all the depth of forest, and above the spread of moorland just beyond, there breathed this atmosphere of disapproval.

Mànya, never telling him much, now told him less than before; for he had forfeited the right to know.

If it made him smile a little to notice that she had made Mother Coove lengthen her dresses, it did not make him smile to learn that she still wore her old shorter ones once the darkness fell, or that she now went out to play in her wild corners of the woods chiefly after dusk. For he saw the significance of this simple manoeuvre, and divined its meaning. She felt shy now in the daylight. This new thing in the spirit of the Place had changed it all. She could not be abandoned as before, go naked and undressed as once she graphically put it. The vulgar influence from outside had come in. It stared offensively. It asked questions, leered, turned everything common and unclean.

And she changed from time to time her playground as the workmen drove her out. She moved from place to place, seeking new corners and going farther into the moors and open spots. She followed the stream, for instance, nearer to its source where its waters still ran unstained. And from the neighbourhood of the sample pits that gaped like open sores amid the beauty, she withheld herself completely. Nothing could persuade her to come near them.

Towards himself especially, her attitude was pregnant with suggestion, and though he made full allowance for the phantoms conscience raises, there always remained the certainty that the child, and another with her, watched him sharply from a distance. She was still affectionate and simple, even with a new touch of resigned docility that was very sweet, as though resolved to respect his older worldly wisdom, yet with an air of pity for his great mistake that was half contempt, half condescension. Her silence about the progress of the work made him feel small. It so mercilessly judged him. And, while the dignity he had always recognised in her increased, it seemed now partly borrowed — his imagination leaned more and more towards this unwelcome explanation — from this invisible Companion who overshadowed her. He felt as though this silence temporarily blocked channels along which something would presently break out with violence and scorn to overwhelm him; till at last he came to regard her as a prisoner regards the foreman of the jury who has formed his verdict and is merely waiting to pronounce it — Guilty. Behind her, as behind the foreman, gathered the composite decision of more than one, and the decision was hostile. It urged her on against him. Opposition accumulated towards positive attack. He dreaded some revelation through the child; and piling guess on guess he felt certain who was this active Influence that sought to use her as its instrument. The dead now, day and night, stood very close beside him.

And meanwhile, things ran far from smoothly with the work itself. Unforeseen difficulties everywhere arose to baffle him. Even Murdoch made oppressive, troublesome conditions about the money that seemed unnecessary, insisting upon details of management with a touch of domineering interference that exasperated. Obstacles rose up automatically, involving, as it were, the very processes of Nature itself. There was a strike that delayed the railway builders for a month, and when they returned the heavy summer rains had washed yards of embankment down again. Soon afterwards a falling tree killed a workman, and there ensued compensation worries that threatened a law-suit. The clay itself, too, played them sudden tricks, proving faulty the maps the surveyors had drawn; its depths and direction were not as supposed, its angle to the lie of the slope deceptive, so that an extra branch of single line for the trucks became essential. And the money was insufficient; further advances became imperative, and, though readily forthcoming, involved more delay. The spirit of lonely peace and beauty departed from the Place, hiding its injured face among the moorland reaches further up. Obstruction, with turmoil and confusion at its back, rose up on every side to baffle him.

Though the advance was steady enough on the whole, and the difficulties were only such as most similar enterprises encounter, Eliot was conscious more and more of this sense of obstacles deliberately interposed. It all seemed so nicely calculated to cause the maximum of trouble and delay. The interference was so cunningly manoeuvred. He brought all his old energy and force to meet them, but there was ever this curious sense of advised and determined opposition that began to sap his confidence.

‘More trouble, sir,’ the foreman said one morning, when Eliot went down to view the work, unaccompanied as usual by Mànya. ‘There seems no end to it.’

‘What is it this time?’ He abhorred these conversations now. It always seemed that Another stood behind his shoulder, listening.

‘The clay has gone,’ was the curious answer. He said it as though it had gone purposely to spite them like a living thing.

‘Gone!’ he exclaimed incredulously.

‘Sunk away, gone deeper than we expected,’ was the answer. The man shrugged his shoulders as though something puzzled him. ‘A kind of subsidence come in the night,’ he added gloomily.

They stared at one another for a full minute with eyes that screened other meanings. Eliot felt a sort of fury rise within him. Somehow the idea of foul play crossed his mind, though instantly rejected as absurd.

‘With this loose sandy bottom, and a steep slope that ain’t drained properly, you’re never very sure of where you are,’ said the man at length, feeling his position made some explanation necessary. He seemed to regard the Clay as something ever on the move.

‘I see,’ said Eliot, grateful for a solution that he could apparently accept. They talked of ways and means to circumvent it.

‘Queerest job I ever come across, sir,’ the foreman muttered, as at length Eliot turned away, pretending not to hear it.

And scenes like this were frequent. Another time it was the white weed — with the pretty little flower Mànya loved to twine about her tam-o’-shanter — that had gathered so thickly on the artificial ponds where the water was stored, that it clogged the machinery till the wheels refused to turn; and next, a group of men that quit working without any reasonable excuse — open symptom of a hidden dissatisfaction that had been running underground for weeks. There was something about the job they didn’t like. Rumours for a long time had been current — queer, unsubstantiated rumours that those in authority chose to disregard. Superstition hereabouts was rife enough without encouraging it.

Taken altogether, as products of a single hostile influence at work, these difficulties easily assumed in his imaginative mind the importance of a consciously directed opposition. He remembered often now those words of Mànya, the last time she had opened her lips upon the subject. For she had credited the Place with the power of resisting him; only by ‘the Place’ she now meant this mysterious personal influence that she knew behind it.

Yet he persisted in his consciousness of doing right. His duty to the child was clear; her future was in his charge; and the fact that he meant to leave her everything proved that his motive, or part of it at least, was above suspicion. From John C. he also gathered comfort and support. He had only to imagine him standing by his side, repeating that remark about religion, to feel strong again in his determination. Cass Murdoch recognised no mystery or subtlety anywhere. He discussed only facts.

The consciousness that he was partly traitor none the less remained, and with it the feeling that the very Tradition he had nursed and worshipped all these years was up in arms against him. Mànya, standing closer to Nature than himself, had divined this Tradition and, in some fashion curiously her own, had personified it. And this personification linked on with the dead. His love of the Beauty, and his love of a particular memory he had read into the Place, she had most marvellously disentangled. Both were genuine in him; yet he had suffered them in combination to produce a false and artificial Image existing only in his own imagination. There was conflict in his being. His motive was impure.

Behind them stood the giant, naked thing the child divined that was — Reality. She knew it face to face. What was it? The mere definite question which he permitted himself made him sometimes hesitate and wait, not unwilling to call a halt. He was aware that the child stood ever in the background, waiting her time with that sly laughter of superior knowledge. These obstacles and difficulties were sent as warnings; and while he disregarded them of set purpose, something deep within him paused to question — and while it questioned, trembled. For protest, he seemed to discern, had become resentment, resentment grown into resistance; resistance into hostile opposition, and opposition now, with something horribly like anger at its back, was hinting already at a blank refusal that involved almost — revenge.

Hitherto he had been hindered, impeded, thwarted merely; soon he could be deliberately overruled and stopped. Nature, ever defeating an impure motive, would rise up against him and cry finally No.

‘But, Uncle, tell me one thing: will the Place let you?’ rang now often through his daily thoughts. He heard it more especially at night. At night, too, when sleep refused him, he surprised himself more than once framing sentences of explanation and defence. They rose automatically. They followed him even into his dreams. ‘My duty to the child is plain. How can I help it? If you were here beside me now, would you not also approve?’

For the idea that *she* was beside him grew curiously persuasive, so that he almost expected to see her in the corridors or on the stairs, standing among the trees or waiting for him by the Mill itself where last she drew the breath of life.

And by way of a climax came then Mànya’s request to change her room, and his own decision to move himself into the one she vacated. The reason she gave was that the ‘trees made such a noise at night’ she could not sleep, and since it had three windows, two of which were almost brushed by pine branches, the excuse, though discovered late, seemed natural enough. At any rate he did not press her further. She occupied a room now at the back where a single window gave a view far up into the moors. And, turning out the unnecessary furniture to suit his taste, he moved into the one she had vacated — his wife’s.

XII

SUMMER passed in the leisurely, gorgeous way that sometimes marks its passage into autumn, and the work ploughed forward through the sea of difficulties. The conspiracy of obstacles continued. There was progress on the whole, but a progress that seemed to bring success no nearer. The beds of clay, however, were definitely determined now, and their extent and depth fulfilled the most sanguine expectations. The troubles lay with the railway, the men, water, weather, and a dozen things no one could have foreseen. These seemed far-fetched, and yet were natural enough. And they continued — until Eliot, never a man who yielded easily, began to feel he had undertaken more than he could manage. He weakened. The idea came to him that he would sell his interest and leave the development to others.

To retire from the fight and acknowledge himself defeated was a step he could not lightly take. There was a bitterness in the thought that stung his pride and vanity. There was also the fact that if he held on and first established a paying business, he could obtain far more money — for

Mànya. Yet he felt somehow, that it was from Mànya herself that the suggestion first had come. For the child gave hints in a hundred different ways that he could not possibly misunderstand. They were indirect, unconsciously given, and they followed invariably upon curious little personal accidents that about this time seemed almost a daily occurrence.

And these little accidents, though perfectly natural taken one by one as they occurred, when regarded all together seemed to compose a formidable whole. They pointed an attack almost. The menace he had imagined was becoming aggressive. Some one who knew his habits was playing him tricks. Some one with intimate knowledge of the way he walked and ran and moved laid traps for him. And at each little 'accident' Mànya laughed her strange, sly laughter — precisely as a child who says 'I told you so! You brought it on yourself!' She had expected it, perhaps had seen it coming. And now, to avoid more grave disasters, she wanted him — elsewhere. Her deep affection for him, sinner though he was in her eyes, sought to coax him out of the danger zone.

When he slipped in jumping the stream — he, who was sure-footed as a mountain goat! — and turned his ankle; and when the heavy earth, loosened by the rains, rolled down upon him as he climbed the embankment, or when the splinter that entered his hand as he vaulted the fencing near the wharf, led to festering that made him carry his arm in a sling for days — in every case it was the same: the child looked up at him and smiled her curious little smile of one who knew. She was in safety, but he stood in the line of fire. She knew who it was that laid the traps. She saw them being laid. It was always wood, earth, water thus that hurt him and never once an artificial contrivance of man.

'Uncle, it wouldn't happen if you stayed away,' was what she said each time, though never phrased the same. And the obvious statement only just covered another meaning that her words contained. She knew worse things would come, and feared for him. 'There's no good hiding, Uncle Dick, because it's in the house as well.'

He grew to feel unwelcome in his own woods and garden, an intruder in his own moors and valleys, an element the Place rejected and wished elsewhere. The Place had begun to turn him out. And Mànya, this queer mysterious child, in league with the secret Influence at work against him, was being used to point the warnings and convey the messages. Her silent attitude, more even than her actual words, was the messenger. The hints thus brought, moreover, now troubled themselves less and less with disguise. He realised them at last for what they were: and they were beyond equivocation — threatening.

And it was at this point that Eliot made the journey up to London to see Cass Murdoch, and feel his way towards escape. Retirement was the word he used, and the sentence John C. heard in the bar of the big hotel as they discussed clay and cocktails was ‘sell my interest to more competent hands who will get quicker and bigger results than I can. The work and worry affect my health.’

The interview may be easily imagined, for John Casanova Murdoch was more than willing to buy him out, though the conditions, with one exception, have no special interest in this queer history: Eliot was to lease the Place for a period of years. And this meant leaving it.

In the train on his way back his emotions fought one another in a regular pitched battle. He stood in front of himself suddenly revealed — a traitor. It seemed as if for a moment he saw things a little from his niece’s inverted point of view, standing outside of Self and looking up. It provided him with unwelcome sensations that escaped analysis. Love and hate are one and the same force, according to the point in the current where one stands; repulsion becomes, from the opposite end, attraction; and a great love may be reversed into a great hate. There is no exact dividing line between heat and cold, no neat frontier where pleasure becomes pain, just as there is really no such absolute thing as left and right, uphill and downhill, above and below. Mànya stood outside these relative distinctions men have invented for the common purposes of description. He understood at last that the power which had drawn his life into the Place as by a kind of absorption, was now inverted into a process of turning him out again as by a kind of determined elimination.

It was being accomplished, moreover, as he felt and phrased it to himself, from outside; by which perhaps he meant from beyond that fence which men presumptuously assume to contain all the life there is. But the dead stand also beyond that fence. And Mànya, being so obviously in league with this hostile, eliminating Influence stood hand in hand, therefore, with — the dead.

But for him The Dead meant only one.

XIII

He walked home from the station, which he reached at nine o’clock. Crossing the zone of the ‘dirty’ country, now successful invader of the dream-estate, he entered his property at length by the upper end of the Piney Valley. A passionate wind was searching the trees for music, and handfuls of rain were flung against the trunks like stones; but, on leaving the road the tempest seemed to pass out towards the sea, leaving an unexpected, sudden hush about his footsteps. The moon peered down through high, scudding clouds. It was partly that the storm was breaking up, and partly that the valley provided shelter; but it gave him the feeling that he had entered a little world prepared for his reception. He was expected, the principal figure in it. Attention everywhere focussed on himself. He felt like a prisoner who comes out of streets indifferent to his presence and enters a Court of Law. This ominous silence preceded the arrival of the Judge.

The path at once dipped downwards into a world of shadows where the splashes of moonlight peered up at him like faces on the ground. He heard the water murmuring out of sight; and it came about his ears like whispering from the body of the Court. There reigned, indeed, the same gentle peace and stillness he had known for years, but somewhere in it a brooding unaccustomed element that was certainly neither peace nor stillness. Something unwonted stirred slowly, very grandly, through the darkness.

He paused a moment to listen; he looked about him; he pushed aside the bracken with his stick, and his eyes glanced up among the lower branches of the trees. And everywhere, it seemed, he encountered other eyes — eyes usually veiled, but now with lifted lids. Then he went on again, faster a little than before. A touch of childhood’s terror chilled his blood. And it took at first a childhood’s form. He thought of some big, savage animal that lurked in hiding, its presence turning the once friendly wood all otherwise and dreadful. A giant paw filled the little valley to the brim. The stir of the wind was the opening and shutting of its claws. The lips were drawn back to show the gums and teeth. Something opened; there came a rush of air. The awful spring would follow in a moment....

Another hood of memory lifted then and showed him Mànya, as she played about the sand-pits — then paused when the full discovery dawned upon her mind. She had eyed him. She had given him this similar impression of an animal waiting its opportunity to spring. But now it was the Place that waited to spring....

He banished the bizarre, exaggerated picture his imagination conjured up, but could not banish the emotion that produced it. The Place *was* different. Change spread all over it. Potential attack hummed through the very air. Thus might a man feel walking through a hostile crowd. But thus also might he feel in the presence of a friend to whom in a time of confidence he had betrayed himself too lavishly — a friend now turned against him with this added power of knowing all his secrets. His own imagination leaped upon him, calling him coward, traitor, unfaithful steward. Fear made him bitterly regret the familiarity that years of unguarded dreaming had established between himself and — and — His mind hesitated horribly between the choice of pronouns; and when he finally chose the neuter, it seemed that a curious running laughter passed within the sounds of wind and water. It almost was like the mockery of Mànya's laughter taken over by the dying storm.

While he evaded the direct attack, his mind, however, continued searching for the word that should describe accurately, and so limit all this vague, distressing feeling of hostility. But for long he could not find it. The new element that breathed through the sombre intricacies of the glen played with him as it pleased until he could catch it in the proper word, and so imprison it. Branches seemed no longer soft and feathery: they bristled, pointed, stood rigid for a blow. The stream no longer murmured: it laughed and cried aloud. The shadows did not cover smoothly: they concealed; and the whole atmosphere of the Place, instead of welcoming, repelled.

And then, quite suddenly, the word emerged and stood before his face: Disturbance.

Less than disorder, yet more than mere disquietude, this word described the attitude he was conscious of. In its aggressive, threatening, sinister meaning, he accepted it as true.

There was Disturbance. Somewhere in those chains of iron that bind the operations of Nature within invariable, unyielding laws, a link had weakened. Disturbance was the result — but a disturbance that somehow let in purpose. Urging everywhere through the manifestations of Nature in his dream-estate was the drive and stress of purposiveness.

The discovery of the word, moreover, announced the approach, though not yet the actual entrance, of the Judge. There were steps, and the steps were in himself. Some one walked upon his life.

He quickened his pace like a terrified child. With genuine relief at last he reached the house. But even in the friendly building he was aware of this keen discomfort at his heels. It penetrated easily. The Disturbance came in after him into the house itself. Hanging up coat and hat, he then passed into the Study, and the prosaic business of drinking milk and munching water-biscuits scattered the strange illusion for a time. It weakened, at any rate, for it never wholly disappeared. It waited.

The house was silent, every one in bed. He locked the front door carefully, stared at his face a moment in the hat-stand mirror — wondering at a certain change in the expression of the features, though he could not name it — and with his lighted candle went on tiptoe up to bed. But the instant he entered the room he was aware that the feeling of distress had already preceded him. He was forestalled. There was this dark disquiet in the very atmosphere of his bedroom. The Disturbance had established itself in these most private, intimate quarters that once had been his wife’s. It was strongest here.

Dismissing a sharp desire to sleep in another room — anywhere but in the place made sacred by long-worshipped memories — he began to undress. He said to himself with a certain vehemence, ‘I’ll ignore the thing.’ But it was fear that said it. *A* frightened child without a light might as well determine to ignore the darkness. For this thing was urgent everywhere about him, inside and outside, like the air he breathed. And the next minute, instead of ignoring it, he made an attempt to face it. He would drag the secret out. The fact was, both will and emotions were already in disorder. He knew not how or where to take the thing.

The attempt then showed him another thing. It was no secret. The terror in his heart and conscience made pretence of screening something that he really knew quite well. This aggressive, hostile Presence was a Presence that he recognised, and had recognised all along.

And instinctively he turned to this side and to that, examining the room; for space in this room, he realised, was no longer ‘quite as usual: there was a change in its conditions. Everything contained within it — the very objects between the four walls — were affected. He felt them altered; they had become otherwise. He himself was changed as well, become otherwise. And if anything alive — another person or an animal even — came in, they also, in some undetermined, startling way, would look otherwise than usual. They would look different.

Hurriedly he sought a concrete simile to steady his shaking mind on, and his mind provided this: That, if the temperature were suddenly lowered, the invisible moisture would at once appear, otherwise — frost-crystals on the window-panes, snow, and so forth.. The change would not be untrue or even distorted, no falseness in it anywhere, nor exaggeration — only otherwise. And if the presence of the dead, whom he felt so close now in this room, turned visible owing to the changed conditions of the space about him, he would see — but the thought remained unfinished in his mind...

He thrust the terror down into the depths. Yet the idea must have been very insistent in him, for he crossed the floor on tiptoe to lock the door securely, and stood already within easy reach of it, one hand actually stretched out, when there came a faint knocking on the panelling within a few inches of his very face. He saw the handle turn. With suggestive, dreadful stealthiness the door then opened, the merest crack at first, then gradually wider and wider. And the slowness was exasperating. The seconds dragged like hours. Had he not been spellbound he would have violently slammed it to again or torn it instead wide open.

There was just time in his bewildered mind to wonder what form this Presence from the dead would take, when he realised that the figure stood already by his side. She had crossed the threshold. With amazement he saw that it was Mànya.

She came in swiftly. She was on the carpet close against him before he could speak a word or move. And she looked, as he had expected, otherwise: she looked extraordinary. The word came to him in the way she might herself have used it, getting its first meaning out — extra-ordinary.

And her appearance was — might well have been, at least — ludicrous. For she was dressed to go out, but in a fashion that at any other time must have been cause for laughter. Now it stood at the very opposite pole, however. It was superb. Her red tam-o'-shanter was perched carelessly, almost gaily, on her hair, which was already fashioned into plaits for the night, and underneath the garden jacket that he knew so well, he saw white drapery that plainly was her little nightgown. She had pulled her stockings on, but had not fastened them. They hung down, partly showing her skin below the knee. The boots flapped open, with no attempt to button them. Her hurry had been evidently great, and she looked at the first glance like some one surprised by a midnight call of fire.

Yet these details, which he took in at a single glance, stirred no faintest touch of amusement in him, for about her whole presentment was this other nameless quality that showed her to him — utterly otherwise than usual. It made him wince and shudder, yet pause in a wondering amazement too — amazement that barely held back awe. He stared like a man struck suddenly dumb. The phrase the child so often used came back upon him with the force of a shock. The girl had put her Self out. This being that stood just opposite to his face was not Mànya. It was another. It was *the* other!

And both doubt and knowledge dropped down upon him in that fearful moment: knowledge, that it was the Influence she had been so long in league with, and that sought to use her as its instrument of protest; and doubt, as to exactly what — or who — this Influence really was.

For it came to him as being so enormously bigger and vaster than anything his mind could label 'the dead.' He felt in the presence of a multitude. He had once felt thus when seeing a single Redskin steal like a shadow round the camp, knowing that the night concealed a host of others. About her actual form and body, too, this sense of multitude also spread and trembled, only just concealed: and indescribable utterly. For the edges of the child were ill-defined and misty, so that he could not see exactly where her outline ceased. The candle-light played round and over her as though she filled the room. She might have been all through the air above him, behind as well as opposite, close in front as well. In a sense he felt that she had come to him through the open windows and from the night itself, and not merely along the passage and through the narrow door. She came from the entire Place.

He made a feverish struggling effort to concentrate his mind upon common words. He wanted to move backwards, but his feet refused to stir. The familiar sound of her name he uttered close into her face: —

‘Mànya! And at this hour of the night!’ he stammered.

His voice was thick and without resonance in his mouth, smothered like a sound in a closed box. And as he heard the name a kind of silent laughter reached him — inaudible really, as though inside him — sly laughter like her own. For the name had lost its known familiarity. It, too, was different and otherwise, though for the life of him he could not seize at first wherein the alteration lay.

She smiled, and her eyes, wide opened, were like stars. The breath came soft and windily between her lips, but no words with it. It was regular, deep, unhurried. There was something in her face that petrified him — something, as it were, non-human. He began to forget who and where he was. Identity slipped from him like a dream.

With another effort, this time a more violent one, he strove to fasten upon things that were close and real in life. He felt the buttons down his coat, fingering them desperately till they hurt his hands and escaped from his slippery moist skin..

‘Mànya!’ he repeated in a louder voice, while his mind plunged out to seek the child he had always known behind the familiar name.

And this time she answered; but to his horror, the whole room, and even space beyond the actual room, seemed to answer with her. The name was repeated by her lips, yet came from the night beyond the open window too. He had made a question of it. The answer, repeating it, was assent.

‘M à n y-a...’he heard all round him, while the head bent gently down and forward.

The shock of it restored to him some power of movement, and he stumbled back a ‘step or two further from her side. It might well have been whimsical and cheap, this artificial play upon a name, but instead of either it was abominably significant. This motionless figure, so close that he could feel her breath upon his face, was positively in some astonishing way more than one. She *was* many. The laughter that lay behind the trivial little thing was a laughter both grand and terrible. It was the laughter of the sea, of the woods, of sand — a host that no man counteth — the laughter of a multitude.

And he thrust out both his hands automatically lest she should touch him. He shook from head to toe. Contact with her person would break up his being into millions. The sensation of terror was both immense and acute, sweeping him beyond himself. Like her, he was becoming many — becoming hundreds and thousands — sand that none can number.

‘Child!’ he heard his voice repeating faintly, yet with an emphasis that spaced the words apart with slow distinctness, ‘what does this mean?’ In vain he tried to smother the beseeching note in it that was like a cry for help.

He stepped back another pace. She did not move. Composure then began to come back slowly to him, a little and a little. He remembered who he was, and where he was. He said to himself the commonplace thing: ‘This is Mànya, my little niece, and she ought to be asleep in bed.’ It sounded ridiculous even in his mind, but he tried deliberately to think of ordinary things.

And then he said it aloud: ‘Do you realise where you are and what you are doing, child?’ And then he added, gaining courage, a question of authority: ‘Do you realize what time it is?’

Her answer came again without hesitation, as from a long way off. A smile lit up the entire face, gleaming from her skin like moonlight. There were tears, he saw, upon the cheeks. But the face itself was radiant, wonderful.

‘The time,’ she said, peering very softly into his eyes, ‘is *now.’* And she took a slow-gliding step towards him, with a movement that frightened him beyond belief.

But by this time he had himself better in hand. He understood that the child was walking in her sleep. It was her little frame that was being worked and driven by — Another. She was possessed. Something was speaking through the entranced physical body. Her answer regarding time was the answer absolute, not relative, the only true answer that could be given. Other answers would be similar. He understood that here was the long expected revelation, and that he must question her if he wished to hear it. He resolved to do so, but with a cold awe in his heart as though he were about to question — Death.

They both retained their first positions, three feet apart, standing. The candle behind him on the table shed its flickering light across her altered features. Outside he heard the trees shaking and tossing in the gusts of rainy wind.

‘Who are you then?’ he asked hesitatingly, in a low tone.

There was no reply. But effort, showing that she heard and tried to answer, traced a little frown above the eyebrows; and the eyes looked puzzled for a moment.

‘You mean,’ he whispered, ‘you cannot tell me?’

The head bowed slowly once by way of assent.

‘You cannot find the word, the language?’ he helped her. ‘Is that it?’ He still whispered, afraid of his own voice.

‘Yes,’ was the answer, spoken below the breath. Then instantly afterwards, straightening herself up with a vigorous movement that startled him horribly, she made a curious, rushing gesture of the whole body, spreading her arms out through the air about her. ‘I am — *like that*!’ the voice sprang out loud and clear.

She seemed by the gesture to gather space and the night into her wide embrace. She repeated it. The face smiled marvellously. Through this slim body, he realised, there rolled something ancient as the stars. It poured through space against him like a sea. It turned his little ideas of space all — otherwise.

‘Tell me where you come from,’ he asked quickly, eager yet dreading to hear.

‘From everywhere,’ came the answer like a wind.

He paused, breathless with astonishment. He felt himself dwindling. Here was a vaster thing than he had contemplated. It was surely no single discarnate influence that possessed the child!

‘And — for whom?’ It was whispered as before.

The figure stepped with a single gliding stride towards him, coming so close that he held his ground only by a tremendous effort of the will.

‘For you!’ The voice came like a clap of wind again, at once soft yet thundering, filling the entire room.

‘For me,’ he faltered. ‘Your message is for me?’

He felt the assault of strange, violent sensations he had never known before and could not name. A boyhood’s dream rushed back upon him for an instant. He recalled his misery and awe when he stood before the Judgment Throne for some unforgivable breach of trust which he could not explain because the dream concealed its nature. Only this was ten times greater, and his guilt beyond redemption.

‘And I,’ he stammered, ‘who am I?’

Her eyes looked him all over like a stare of the big moon.

‘You,’ she answered, without pause or hesitation.

‘You do not know my name?’ he insisted, still clinging to the clue that her he spoke with must be from the dead.

The little frown came back between the eyes. She nodded darkly.

‘*You*,’ she repeated, giving the answer absolute again, the only really true one.

The girl stood like a statue, serene and solemn. She stared through and beyond him, motionless but for a scarcely perceptible swaying, and calm as a meadow in the dawn. Enormous meanings passed from her eyes across the air, and sank down into him like meanings from a forest or a sea.

From these, he realised, came her stupendous inspiration, and, so realising, he knew at last his deep mistake. For not so do the Dead return. They never, indeed, return, because from the heart that loved them they have never gone away, but only changed their magic intercourse in kind. And, had *she* known, she would have approved the wisdom of his great decision, while clearing his motive of all insincerity at the same time.

It was not *she* who brought the protest and the menace. It was something bigger by far, something awful and untamed. It was the Place itself. And behind the Place stood Nature. It was Nature that possessed the child and used her little lips and hands and body for its thundering message of disapproval.

Mànya was possessed by Nature.

And the shock of the discovery first turned him into stone. His body did not stir the fraction of an inch. In that moment of vivid realisation these two little human figures stood facing one another, motionless as columns; and, while so standing, the One who brought the Message for himself drew closer.

For several minutes he saw absolutely nothing. The approach was too big for any sensory perceptions he could recognise. And then, mercilessly, pitilessly, the power of sight returned.

He knew the touch of a giant, earthy hand was upon his arm. Beside him, in the flickering candle light, stood Nature. He looked into a host of mighty eyes that yet his imagination translated into merely two — eyes set wide apart beneath enormous brows. He met the gaze of the Gigantic, the Patient, the Inexorable that saw him as he was, and judged him where he stood. And a melting ran through his body, as though the bones slipped from their accustomed places, leaving him utterly without support. He swayed, but did not fall. His physical frame stood upright to receive like a blow the revelation that was coming.

And then, with a curious, deep sense of shame, he realised abruptly that his position in regard to her was inappropriate. He, at any rate, had no right to stand. His proper attitude must be a very different one.

He took her by the hand and, bending his head with an air of humble worship, led her slowly across the room. The touch of her was wonderful — like touching wind — all over him. With a reverence he guided her, all unresisting, to a high-backed chair beside the open window. She lowered herself upon it, and sat upright. She stared fixedly before her into space. No clothing in the world could have stolen from her childish face and figure the nameless air of grandeur that she wore. She was august.

And he knelt before her. He raised his folded hands. A moment his eyes rested on the dispassionate little face, then looked beyond her into the night of wind and rain. His gaze returning then sought the eyes again.

And the child, sweet little human interpreter of so vast a Mystery, bent her head downwards and looked into his heart. Wind stirred the hair upon her neck. He saw the bosom gently rise and fall.

‘What is it that you have to say to me?’ he whispered, like a prayer for mercy. ‘What is the message that you bring?’

Her lips moved very slightly. The smile broke out again like moonlight across the lowered face. The words dropped through the sky. Very slowly, very distinctly, they fell into his open heart: simple as wind or rain.

‘Leave — me — as — I — am — and — as — you — found — me. Leave — us — together — as — we — are — and — as — we — were.’

XIV

THERE came then a sudden blast that swept with a shout across the night; and through his mind passed also a tumult like a roaring wind. Both winds, it seemed to him, were in the room at once. He had the sensation of being lifted from the earth. The candle was extinguished. And then the sound and terror dipped away again into silence and into distance whence it came....

He found himself standing stiffly upright, though he had no recollection of rising from his knees. With an abruptness utterly disconcerting he was himself again. No item of memory had faded; he remembered the entire series of events. Only, he was in possession of his normal mind and powers, fear, awe, and wonder all departed. Mànya, who had been walking in her sleep, was sitting close before him in the darkness. He could just distinguish her outline against the open window. But he was master of himself again. Even the wild improbability, the extravagance of his own actions, the very lunacy of the picture that the night now smothered, left him unbewildered. And the calmness that thus followed the complete transition proved to him that all he had witnessed, all that had happened, had been — true. In no single detail was there falseness or distortion due to the excitement of a hysterical mood. It had been right and inevitable.

He lit the candle again quietly, with a hand that did not tremble. He saw Mànya sitting on the high-backed chair with her head sunk forward on her breast. Gently he raised the face. The eyes were now closed, and the regular, deep breathing showed that the girl was sound asleep — but with the normal sleep of tired childhood. The Immensity to which he had knelt and prayed in her was gone, gone from the room, gone out into the open darkness of the Place. It had visited her, it had used her, it had left her. But at the same time he understood, as by some infallible intuition, that the warning to depart she brought him was not yet complete. It had reached his mind, but not as yet his soul. In its fulness the Notice to Quit could not be delivered between close, narrow walls. Its delivery must be outside.

He looked at the sleeping child in silence for several minutes. She sat there in a semi-collapsed position and in momentary danger of falling from her chair. The lips were parted, the eyes tight shut, the red tam-o'-shanter dropping over one side of the face. Both hands were folded in her lap. By the light of two candles now he watched her, while the perspiration he had not been as yet aware of, dried upon his skin and made him shiver with the cold. And, after long hesitation, he woke her.

With difficulty the girl came to, stared up into his face with a blank expression, rubbed her eyes, and then, with returning consciousness of who and where she was, looked mightily astonished.

'Mànya, child,' he began gently, 'don't be frightened.'

'I'm not,' she said at once. 'But where am I? Is that you, Uncle?'

'Been walking in your sleep. It's all right. Nothing's happened. Come, I'll see you back to bed again.' And he made a gesture as though to take her hand.

But she avoided him. Still looking bewildered and perplexed, she said:

'Oh — I remember now — I wanted to go out and see things. I want to go out still.' Then she added quickly as the thought struck her, 'But does Fräulein know? You haven't told Fràulein, Uncle, have you? I mean, you won't?'

He shook his head. This was no time for chiding.

'I often go out like this — at night, when you're all asleep. It's the only time now, since—'

He stopped her instantly at that. ‘You fell asleep while dreaming! Was that it?’ He tried to laugh a little, but the laughter would not come.

‘I suppose so.’ She glanced down at her extraordinary garments. But no smile came to the eyes or lips. Then she looked round her, and gazed for a minute through the open window. The rain had ceased, the wind had died away. Moist, fragrant air stole in with many perfumes. ‘I don’t remember quite. I was in bed. I had been asleep already, I think. Then — something woke me.’ She paused.

‘There was something crying in the night.’

‘Something crying in the night?’ he repeated quickly, half to himself.

She nodded. ‘Crying for me,’ she explained in a tone that sent a shudder all through him before he could prevent it. ‘So I thought I’d go out and see. Uncle, I *had* to go out,’ she added earnestly, still whispering, ‘because they were crying — to get at you. And unless *I* brought them — unless they came through me,’ she stopped abruptly, her eyes grew moist, she was on the verge of tears— ‘it would have been so terrible for you, I mean—’

He stiffened as he heard it. He made a violent effort at control, stopping her further explanation.

‘And you weren’t afraid — to go out like this into the dark?’ he asked, more to cover retreat than because he wanted to hear the reply.

‘I put myself out for you,’ she answered simply. ‘I let them come in. That way you couldn’t get hurt. In me they had to come gently. They were an army. Only, nothing out of me could hurt you, Uncle.’ She suddenly put her arms about his neck and kissed him. ‘Oh, Uncle Dick, it *was* lucky I was there and ready, wasn’t it?’

And Eliot, remembering that great Disturbance in the woods, pressed the child tenderly to himself, praying that she might not understand his heart too well, nor feel the cold that made his entire body tremble like a leaf. He had thought of an angry animal Presence lurking in the darkness. It had been bigger than that, and a thousand times more dangerous!

‘You see,’ she added with a little gasp for breath when he released her, ‘they waked me up on purpose. I dressed at an awful rate. I got to the door — I remember that perfectly well — and then—' An expression of bewilderment came into her face again.

'Yes,' he helped her, 'and then — what?'

'Well, I forget exactly; but something stopped me. Something came all round me and took me in their arms. It was like arms of wind. I was lifted up and carried in the air. And after that I forget the rest, forget everything — till now.'

She stopped. She took off her tam-o'-shanter and smoothed her untidy hair back from the forehead. And as he looked a moment at her — this little human organism still vibrating with the passage of a universal Power that had obsessed her, making her far more than merely child, yet still leaving in her the sweetness of her simple love — he came to a sudden, bold decision. He would face the thing complete. He would go outside.

'Mànya,' he whispered, looking hard at her, 'would you like to go out — now — with me? Come, child! Suppose we go together!'

She stared at him, then darted about the room with little springs of excitement. She clapped her hands softly, her eyes alight and shining.

'Uncle Dick! You really mean it? Wouldn't it be grand!'

'Of course, I mean it. See! I'm dressed and ready!' And he pointed to his boots and clothes.

'It's the very best thing we can do, really,' she said, trying to speak gravely, but the mischievous element uppermost at the idea of the secret nocturnal journey. 'They'll see that you're not afraid, and you'll be safe then for ever and ever and ever! Hooray!'

She twirled the tam-o'-shanter in the air above her head, skipping in her childish joy.

'And we'll go past Fräulein's door,' she insisted mischievously, as he took her outstretched hand and led the way on tiptoe down the dark front stairs. 'Hush!' he whispered gruffly. 'Don't talk so loud.' She fastened up her garments, and they moved like shadows through the sleeping house.

XV

THAT journey he made with this ‘child of Nature’ among the dripping trees and along soaked paths was one that Eliot never forgot. For him its meaning was unmistakable. His early life again supplied a parallel. He had once seen a wretched man marched out of camp with two days’ rations to shift for himself in the wilderness as best he might, — a prisoner convicted of treachery, but whose life was spared on the chance that he might redeem it, or die in the attempt. He had seen it done by redskins, he had seen it done by white. And hanging had been better. Yet the crime — stealing a horse, or sneaking another’s ‘grub-stakes’ — was one that civilisation punishes with a paltry fine, or condones daily as permissible ‘business acumen.’

In primitive conditions it was a crime against the higher law. It was sinning against Nature. And Nature never is deceived.

Richard Eliot was now being drummed out of camp. And the child who led him, mischief in her eyes and the joy of forbidden pleasure in her heart, was all unconscious of the awful rôle she played. Yet it was she who as well had pleaded for his life and saved him.

Nature turned him out; the Place rejected him; and Mànya saw him safely to the confines of that wilderness of houses, ugliness, commercial desolation where he must wander till he re-made his soul or lost it altogether.

They cautiously opened the front door, and the damp air rushed to meet them.

‘Hush!’ he repeated, closing it carefully behind him. But the child was already upon the lawn. Beyond her, dark blots against the sky, rose the massed outline of the little pointed hills. There were no stars anywhere, though the clouds were breaking into thinning troops; but it was not too dark to see, for a moon watched them somewhere from her place of hiding. The air was warm and very sweet, left breathing by the storm.

‘Hush, Mànya!’ he whispered again, ill at ease to see her go. She ran back, her feet inaudible upon the thick, wet lawn, and took his hand. ‘We’ll go by the Piney Valley,’ she said, assuming leadership. And he made no objection, though this was the direction of the sample pits. It led also, he remembered, to the Mill — the spot where she who had left him in charge had gone upon her long long journey.

They went forward side by side. The wind below them hummed gently in the tree-tops, but it did not reach their faces. The whole wet world lay breathing softly about them, exhausted by the tempest. It was very still. It watched them pass. There was no effort to detain them. And in Dick Eliot's heart was a pain that searched him like a pain of death itself.

But his companion, he now clearly realised, was merely the child again — eerie, wonderful, eldritch, but still the little Mànya that he knew so well. Mischief was in her heart, and the excitement of unlawful adventure in her blood; but nothing more. The vast obsessing Entity that had constituted her judge and executioner was now entirely gone. He was spared the added shame of knowing that she realised what she did.

Sometimes she left his side, to come back presently with a little rush of pleasurable alarm. He was uncertain whether he liked best her going from him or her sudden return. Their tread was now muffled by the needles as they went slowly down the pathways of the Piney Valley. The occasional snapping of small twigs alone betrayed their movements. Heavy branches, soaked like sponges, splashed showers on the ground when their shoulders brushed them in passing, and drops fell of their own weight with mysterious little thuds like footsteps everywhere about them in the woods.

Mànya dived away from his side. She came back sometimes in front of him and sometimes behind. He never quite knew where she was. His mind, indeed, neglected her, for his thoughts were concentrated within himself. Her movements were the movements of a block of shadow, shifting here and there like shadows of trees and clouds in faint moonlight.

'Uncle, tell me one thing,' he heard with a start, as she suddenly stood in front of him across the narrow pathway, and so close that he nearly bumped against her. 'Isn't there something here that's angry with you? Something you've done wrong to?'

'Hush, child! Don't say such things!' He felt the shiver run through him. He pushed her forward with his hands.

'But they're being said — all round us. Uncle, don't you hear them?' she insisted.

'I've always loved the Place. We've always been happy here together.' He whispered it, as though a terror was in him lest it should be overheard and

— contradicted.

Her answer flabbergasted him. Her intuitions were so uncannily direct and piercing.

‘That’s what I meant. You’ve been unkind. You’ve hurt it.’

‘Mànya,’ he repeated severely, ‘you must not say such things. And you must not think them.’

‘I’m so awfully sorry, Uncle Dick,’ she said softly in the dark, and promptly kissed him. The kiss went like a stab into his heart.

Then she was gone again, and he caught her light footstep several yards in front, as though a shower of drops had fallen on the needles.

‘Uncle,’ came her voice again close beside him. She stood on tiptoe and pulled his ear down to the level of her lips. ‘Hold my hand tight. We’re coming near now.’ She was curiously excited.

‘To the Mill?’ he asked, knowing quite well she meant another thing.

‘No, to the pits the men dug,’ she answered, nestling in against him, while his own voice echoed faintly, ‘Yes, the sample pits.’ He felt like passing the hostile outposts of the Camp who would shoot him but for the presence of the appointed escort.

A sigh of lonely wind went past them with its shower of drops. And these little hands of wind with their fingers of sweet rain helped forward his expulsion. The empty wilderness beyond lay waiting for his soul. It heard him coming.

And a curious, deep revelation of the child’s state of mind then rushed suddenly upon him. He knew that she expected something. And her answer to the question he put explained his own thought to himself.

‘What is it you expect, Mànya?’ he had asked unwisely.

‘Not *expect* exactly, Uncle, for that would be the wrong way. But I *know’*

And several kinds of fear shot through him as he heard it, for the words lifted a veil and let him see into her mind a moment. She had said another of her profoundly mystical truths. Expectation, anticipation, he divined, would provide a mould for what was coming, would give it shape, but yet not quite its natural shape. To anticipate keenly meant to attract too quickly: to force. The expectant desire would coax what was coming into an unnatural form that might be dreadful because not quite true. Let the thing approach in its own way, uninvited by imaginative dread. Let it come upon them as it would, deciding its own shape of arrival. To expect was to invite distortion. This flashed across him behind her simple words.

‘You fearful child!’ he whispered, forcing an unnatural little laugh.

‘The soft, wet, sticky things, half yellow and half white,’ she began, resenting his laughter, ‘always moving, and never looking twice the same —’

Then, before he could stop her, she stopped of her own accord.

She clutched his arm. He understood that it was the closeness of the thing that had inspired the atrocious words. She held his arm so tightly that it hurt. They stood in the presence of others than themselves.

Yet these Others had not *come* to them. The movement of approach was not really movement at all. It was a condition in himself had altered so that he knew. Out here the veil had thinned a little, as it had thinned in the room an hour ago. And he saw space otherwise. This Power that in humanity lies normally inarticulate was breaking through. In the room its language had been a stammer; it was a stammer now. Or, in the terms of sight, it was a little fragment utterly inexplicable by itself, since the entire universe is necessary for its complete expression.

Yet Eliot did perceive the enormous thing behind — the thing to which he had been unfaithful by prostituting his first original love. And the fact that it was interwoven with his ordinary little human feelings at the same time only added to the bewilderment of its stupendous reality.

He saw for a fleeting moment just as Mànya saw — from her immediate point of view.

‘It’s here,’ she whispered, in a voice that sounded most oddly everywhere; ‘it’s here, the angry thing you’ve hurt.’

On either side of the path, where the heatherland came close, he saw the openings the men had dug — pale, luminous patches of whitish yellow. Between the bushy tufts they shone faintly gleaming against the night.

Perspective, in that instant, became the merest trick of sight, a trivial mental jugglery. That slope of coal-black moor actually was extraordinarily near. The tree-tops were just as well beneath his feet, or he stood among their roots. Either was true. There was neither up nor down. The sky was in his hands, a little thing; or the stars and moon hid washed within the current of his blood. Size was illusion, as relative as time. No object in itself had any ‘size’ at all. He saw her universe, all true, as ever, but from another point of view. And the entire Place ran down here to a concentrated point. The sample pits pressed close against his face.

‘The pits,’ she whispered, with a sound of wind and water in her breath.

So, for a moment, he saw from the point of view whence Mànya always saw. He and the child and the Spirit of the Place stood side by side on that narrow shelf of darkness, sharing a joint and absolute comprehension. Her elemental aspect became his own, for his inner eye was against the peep-hole through which her Behind-the-Scenes was visible. He realised a new thing, grand as a field of stars.

For the Place here focussed almost into sentiency. Those slow moving forces that stir to growth in crystals, waken and breathe in plants, and first in the animal world know consciousness, here moved vast and inchoate, through the structure of the dream-estate he owned. Yet moved not blind and inarticulate. For the stress of some impulse, normally undivined by men, urged them towards articulate expression. Here was reaction approximate to those reactions of the nervous cells which in their ultimate result men call emotions. And this irresistible correspondence between the two appalled him.

The raw material of definite sensation here poured loose and terrible about him from the ground. In them, moreover, was anger, protest, warning, and a menacing resentment — all directed against his mean, insignificant being. From these sample pits issued the menace and the warning, just as literally as there issued from them also the soft, white clay that would degrade the immemorial beauty he had once thought he loved with a clean, pure love. The pits were wounds. They drew all the feelings of the injured Place into the tenderness of sentient organs.

But behind the threatening anger he recognised a softer passion too. There was a sadness, a deep yearning, and a searching melancholy as well, that seemed to bear witness to his rejection with a sighing as of the sea and wood and hills.

And here, doubtless, came in the interweaving of his own little human emotions. For an overpowering sorrow soaked his heart and mind. The judgment that found him wanting woke all his stores of infinite regret. It would have been better for him had he found that millstone which can save the soul, because it removes temptation.

‘It is too late,’ breathed round him in three weeping voices that passed out between his lips as a single cry together. ‘It is too late.’

Yet nothing happened; that is, he saw nothing — nothing translatable by any words that he could find. Time dwindled and expanded curiously. The past ran on before him, and the future grouped itself behind his back. The seconds and minutes which men tick off from the apparent movement of the sun gave place to some condition within himself where they lay gathered for ever into the circle of the Present. He remembers no actual sequence of acts or movements. Duration drew its horns back into a single point.... It is sure, however, that these two human beings marched presently on. They steadily became disentangled from the spot, and somehow or other moved away from the staring pits. For Eliot, looking back, recalls that it felt like walking past the mouths of loaded cannon; also that the pits watched them out of sight as portraits follow a moving figure with their expressionless stare. He thinks that he looked straight before him as he went. He is sure no single word was spoken — until they left the trees behind and emerged into the open. The Mill, the old, familiar building, was the thing that first restored him to a normal world again. He saw its outline, humped and black, shouldering its way against the sky. He heard the water running under the wheel. But even the Mill, like a hooded figure, turned its face away. It expressed the melancholy of a multitude. And the woods were everywhere full of tears.

Mànya, he realised then beside him, was making the humming sound of the water that flowed beneath that motionless wheel. Her voice became the voice of the Place — the undifferentiated sound of Nature. It was the voice of dismissal and farewell. Here was the Gateway through which his soul passed out into the Wilderness.

He involuntarily stooped down to feel her, and she lifted her face up in the darkness and kissed him. But it was across a barrier that she kissed him. He already stood outside.

And half an hour later they were indoors again and the house was still. Mànya slept as soundly as the placid Fräulein Buhlke or the motherly Mrs. Coove doubtless also slept.

But he lay battling with strange thoughts for hours. Night and the wind were oddly mingled with them; water, hills, and masses of strong landscape too. They rose before his mind's eye in a giant panorama, endlessly moving past beneath huge skies, and visible against a pale background of luminous, yellowish white. It had strange movements of its own, this yellowish background, like the swaying of a curtain on the stage; and sometimes it surged forwards with a smothering sweep that enveloped everything of beauty he had ever known. It then obliterated the world. Stars were extinguished; scenery turned to soil. The Spectre of the Clay he had invoked possessed the Place.

He lay there frightened in his sleepless bed and saw the dawn — a helpless little mortal, destroyed by his faithlessness and breach of trust. And all night long there lay outside, yet watching him, something else that equally never slept — agile, alert, unconquerable. Only it was no longer *disturbed.* For its purpose was accomplished. It had turned him out.

And it is not necessary to tell how John Casanova Murdoch soon thereafter took the work in hand and developed the Place, as he expressed it, 'without a hitch.' For John C. had made no promises of love; nor had he pretended to establish with Nature that intimate relationship of trust and worship which invokes the spiritual laws. Nature took no note of him, for he worked frankly with her, and his motive, if not exalted, was at least a pure one. And the Clay, as he phrased it a little later in his expressive Western lingo, soon was 'paying hand over fist. The money was pouring in — more money than you could shake a stick at!'

SUSSEX.

Ten Minute Stories (1914)

CONTENTS

ACCESSORY BEFORE THE FACT
THE DEFERRED APPOINTMENT
THE PRAYER
STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF A BARONET
THE SECRET
THE LEASE
UP AND DOWN
FAITH CURE ON THE CHANNEL
THE GOBLIN’S COLLECTION
IMAGINATION
THE INVITATION
THE IMPULSE
HER BIRTHDAY
TWO IN ONE
ANCIENT LIGHTS
DREAM TRESPASS
LET NOT THE SUN —
ENTRANCE AND EXIT
YOU MAY TELEPHONE FROM HERE
THE WHISPERERS
VIOLENCE

THE HOUSE OF THE PAST
JIMBO’S LONGEST DAY
IF THE CAP FITS —
NEWS v. NOURISHMENT
WIND
PINES
THE WINTER ALPS
THE SECOND GENERATION

ACCESSORY BEFORE THE FACT

AT THE MOORLAND cross-roads Martin stood examining the sign-post for several minutes in some bewilderment. The names on the four arms were not what he expected, distances were not given, and his map, he concluded with impatience, must be hopelessly out of date. Spreading it against the post, he stooped to study it more closely. The wind blew the corners flapping against his face. The small print was almost indecipherable in the fading light. It appeared, however — as well as he could make out — that two miles back he must have taken the wrong turning.

He remembered that turning. The path had looked inviting; he had hesitated a moment, then followed it, caught by the usual lure of walkers that it "might prove a short cut." The short-cut snare is old as human nature. For some minutes he studied the sign-post and the map alternately. Dusk was falling, and his knapsack had grown heavy. He could not make the two guides tally, however, and a feeling of uncertainty crept over his mind. He felt oddly baffled, frustrated. His thought grew thick. Decision was most difficult. "I'm muddled," he thought; "I must be tired," as at length he chose the most likely arm. "Sooner or later it will bring me to an inn, though not the one I intended." He accepted his walker's luck, and started briskly. The arm read, "Over Litacy Hill" in small, fine letters that danced and shifted every time he looked at them; but the name was not discoverable on the map. It was, however, inviting like the short cut. A similar impulse again directed his choice. Only this time it seemed more insistent, almost urgent.

And he became aware, then, of the exceeding loneliness of the country about him. The road for a hundred yards went straight, then curved like a white river running into space; the deep blue-green of heather lined the banks, spreading upwards through the twilight; and occasional small pines stood solitary here and there, all unexplained. The curious adjective, having made its appearance, haunted him. So many things that afternoon were similarly — unexplained: the short cut, the darkened map, the names on the sign-post, his own erratic impulses, and the growing strange confusion that crept upon his spirit. The entire country-side needed explanation, though perhaps “interpretation” was the truer word. Those little lonely trees had made him see it. Why had he lost his way so easily? Why did he suffer vague impressions to influence his direction? Why was he here — exactly *here?* And why did he go now “Over Litacy Hill”?

Then, by a green field that shone like a thought of daylight amid the darkness of the moor, he saw a figure lying in the grass. It was a blot upon the landscape, a mere huddled patch of dirty rags, yet with a certain horrid picturesqueness too; and his mind — though his German was of the schoolroom order — at once picked out the German equivalents as against the English. *Lump* and *Lumpen* flashed across his brain most oddly. They seemed in that moment right, and so expressive, almost like onomatopoeic words, if that were possible of sight. Neither “rags” nor “rascal” would have fitted what he saw. The adequate description was in German.

Here was a clue tossed up by the part of him that did not reason. But it seems he missed it. And the next minute the tramp rose to a sitting posture and asked the time of evening. In German he asked it. And Martin, answering without a second’s hesitation, gave it, also in German, *“halb sieben”* — halfpast six. The instinctive guess was accurate. A glance at his watch when he looked a moment later proved it. He heard the man say, with the covert insolence of tramps, “T’ank you; much opliged.” For Martin had not shown his watch — another intuition subconsciously obeyed.

He quickened his pace along that lonely road, a curious jumble of thoughts and feelings surging through him. He had somehow known the question would come, and come in German. Yet it flustered and dismayed him. Another thing had also flustered and dismayed him. He had expected it in the same queer fashion: it was right. For when the ragged brown thing rose to ask the question, a part of it remained lying on the grass — another brown, dirty thing. There were two tramps. And he saw both faces clearly. Behind the untidy beards, and below the old slouch hats, he caught the look of unpleasant, clever faces that watched him closely while he passed. The eyes followed him. For a second he looked straight into those eyes, so that he could not fail to know them. And he understood, quite horridly, that both faces were too sleek, refined, and cunning for those of ordinary tramps. The men were not really tramps at all. They were disguised.

“How covertly they watched me!” was his thought, as he hurried along the darkening road, aware in dead earnestness now of the loneliness and desolation of the moorland all about him.

Uneasy and distressed, he increased his pace. Midway in thinking what an unnecessarily clanking noise his nailed boots made upon the hard white road, there came upon him with a rush together the company of these things that haunted him as “unexplained.” They brought a single definite message: That all this business was not really meant for him at all, and hence his confusion and bewilderment; that he had intruded into someone else’s scenery, and was trespassing upon another’s map of life. By some wrong *inner* turning he had interpolated his person into a group of foreign forces which operated in the little world of someone else. Unwittingly, somewhere, he had crossed the threshold, and now was fairly in — a trespasser, an eavesdropper, a Peeping Tom. He was listening, peeping; overhearing things he had no right to know, because they were intended for another. Like a ship at sea he was intercepting wireless messages he could not properly interpret, because his Receiver was not accurately tuned to their reception. And more — these messages were warnings!

Then fear dropped upon him like the night. He was caught in a net of delicate, deep forces he could not manage, knowing neither their origin nor purpose. He had walked into some huge psychic trap elaborately planned and baited, yet calculated for another than himself. Something had lured him in, something in the landscape, the time of day, his mood. Owing to some undiscovered weakness in himself he had been easily caught. His fear slipped easily into terror.

What happened next happened with such speed and concentration that it all seemed crammed into a moment. At once and in a heap it happened. It was quite inevitable. Down the white road to meet him a man came swaying from side to side in drunkenness quite obviously feigned — a tramp; and while Martin made room for him to pass, the lurch changed in a second to attack, and the fellow was upon him. The blow was sudden and terrific, yet even while it fell Martin was aware that behind him rushed a second man, who caught his legs from under him and bore him with a thud and crash to the ground. Blows rained then; he saw a gleam of something shining; a sudden deadly nausea plunged him into utter weakness where resistance was impossible. Something of fire entered his throat, and from his mouth poured a thick sweet thing that choked him. The world sank far away into darkness.... Yet through all the horror and confusion ran the trail of two clear thoughts: he realised that the first tramp had sneaked at a fast double through the heather and so come down to meet him; and that something heavy was torn from fastenings that clipped it tight and close beneath his clothes against his body....

Abruptly then the darkness lifted, passed utterly away. He found himself peering into the map against the sign-post. The wind was flapping the corners against his cheek, and he was poring over names that now he saw quite clear. Upon the arms of the sign-post above were those he had expected to find, and the map recorded them quite faithfully. All was accurate again and as it should be. He read the name of the village he had meant to make — it was plainly visible in the dusk, two miles the distance given. Bewildered, shaken, unable to think of anything, he stuffed the map into his pocket unfolded, and hurried forward like a man who has just wakened from an awful dream that had compressed into a single second all the detailed misery of some prolonged, oppressive nightmare.

He broke into a steady trot that soon became a run; the perspiration poured from him; his legs felt weak, and his breath was difficult to manage. He was only conscious of the overpowering desire to get away as fast as possible from the sign-post at the cross-roads where the dreadful vision had flashed upon him. For Martin, accountant on a holiday, had never dreamed of any world of psychic possibilities. The entire thing was torture. It was worse than a “cooked” balance of the books that some conspiracy of clerks and directors proved at his innocent door. He raced as though the country-side ran crying at his heels. And always still ran with him the incredible conviction that none of this was really meant for himself at all. He had overheard the secrets of another. He had taken the warning for another into himself, and so altered its direction. He had thereby prevented its right delivery. It all shocked him beyond words. It dislocated the machinery of his just and accurate soul. The warning was intended for another, who could not — would not — now receive it.

The physical exertion, however, brought at length a more comfortable reaction and some measure of composure. With the lights in sight, he slowed down and entered the village at a reasonable pace. The inn was reached, a bedroom inspected and engaged, and supper ordered with the solid comfort of a large Bass to satisfy an unholy thirst and complete the restoration of balance. The unusual sensations largely passed away, and the odd feeling that anything in his simple, wholesome world required explanation was no longer present. Still with a vague uneasiness about him, though actual fear quite gone, he went into the bar to smoke an after-supper pipe and chat with the natives, as his pleasure was upon a holiday, and so saw two men leaning upon the counter at the far end with their backs towards him. He saw their faces instantly in the glass, and the pipe nearly slipped from between his teeth. Cleanshaven, sleek, clever faces — and he caught a word or two as they talked over their drinks — German words. Well dressed they were, both men, with nothing about them calling for particular attention; they might have been two tourists holiday-making like himself in tweeds and walking-boots. And they presently paid for their drinks and went out. He never saw them face to face at all; but the sweat broke out afresh all over him, a feverish rush of heat and ice together ran about his body; beyond question he recognised the two tramps, this time not disguised — not *yet* disguised.

He remained in his corner without moving, puffing violently at an extinguished pipe, gripped helplessly by the return of that first vile terror. It came again to him with an absolute clarity of certainty that it was not with himself they had to do, these men, and, further, that he had no right in the world to interfere. He had no *locus standi* at all; it would be immoral... even if the opportunity came. And the opportunity, he felt, would come. He had been an eavesdropper, and had come upon private information of a secret kind that he had no right to make use of, even that good might come — even to save life. He sat on in his corner, terrified and silent, waiting for the thing that should happen next.

But night came without explanation. Nothing happened. He slept soundly. There was no other guest at the inn but an elderly man, apparently a tourist like himself. He wore gold-rimmed glasses, and in the morning Martin overheard him asking the landlord what direction he should take for Litacy Hill. His teeth began then to chatter and a weakness came into his knees. “You turn to the left at the cross-roads,” Martin broke in before the landlord could reply; “you’ll see the sign-post about two miles from here, and after that it’s a matter of four miles more.” How in the world did he know, flashed horribly through him. “I’m going that way myself,” he was saying next; “I’ll go with you for a bit — if you don’t mind!” The words came out impulsively and ill-considered; of their own accord they came. For his own direction was exactly opposite. *He did not want the man to go alone.* The stranger, however, easily evaded his offer of companionship. He thanked him with the remark that he was starting later in the day.... They were standing, all three, beside the horse-trough in front of the inn, when at that very moment a tramp, slouching along the road, looked up and asked the time of day. And it was the man with the gold-rimmed glasses who told him.

“T’ank you; much opliged,” the tramp replied, passing on with his slow, slouching gait, while the landlord, a talkative fellow, proceeded to remark upon the number of Germans that lived in England and were ready to swell the Teutonic invasion which *he,* for his part, deemed imminent.

But Martin heard it not. Before he had gone a mile upon his way he went into the woods to fight his conscience all alone. His feebleness, his cowardice, were surely criminal. Real anguish tortured him. A dozen times he decided to go back upon his steps, and a dozen times the singular authority that whispered he had no right to interfere prevented him. How could he act upon knowledge gained by eavesdropping? How interfere in the private business of another’s hidden life merely because he had overheard, as at the telephone, its secret dangers? Some inner confusion prevented straight thinking altogether. The stranger would merely think him mad. He had no “fact” to go upon.... He smothered a hundred impulses... and finally went on his way with a shaking, troubled heart.

The last two days of his holiday were ruined by doubts and questions and alarms — all justified later when he read of the murder of a tourist upon Litacy Hill. The man wore gold-rimmed glasses, and carried in a belt about his person a large sum of money. His throat was cut. And the police were hard upon the trail of a mysterious pair of tramps, said to be — Germans.

THE DEFERRED APPOINTMENT

THE LITTLE "PHOTOGRAPHIC Studio" in the side-street beyond Shepherd's Bush had done no business all day, for the light had been uninviting to even the vainest sitter, and the murky sky that foreboded snow had hung over London without a break since dawn. Pedestrians went hurrying and shivering along the pavements, disappearing into the gloom of countless ugly little houses the moment they passed beyond the glare of the big electric standards that lit the thundering motor-buses in the main street. The first flakes of snow, indeed, were already falling slowly, as though they shrank from settling in the grime. The wind moaned and sang dismally, catching the ears and lifting the shabby coat-tails of Mr. Mortimer Jenkyn, "Photographic Artist," as he stood outside and put the shutters up with his own cold hands in despair of further trade. It was five minutes to six.

With a lingering glance at the enlarged portrait of a fat man in masonic re' galia who was the pride and glory of his window-front, he fixed the last hook of the shutter, and turned to go indoors. There was developing and framing to be done upstairs, not very remunerative work, but better, at any rate, than waiting in an empty studio for customers who did not come — wasting the heat of two oil-stoves into the bargain. And it was then, in the act of closing the street door behind him, that he saw a man standing in the shadows of the narrow passage, staring fixedly into his face.

Mr. Jenkyn admits that he jumped. The man was so very close, yet he had not seen him come in; and in the eyes was such a curiously sad and appealing expression. He had already sent his assistant home, and there was no other occupant of the little two-storey house. The man must have slipped past him from the dark street while his back was turned. Who in the world could he be, and what could he want? Was he beggar, customer, or rogue?

"Good evening," Mr. Jenkyn said, washing his hands, but using only half the oily politeness of tone with which he favoured sitters. He was just going to add "sir," feeling it wiser to be on the safe side, when the stranger shifted his position so that the light fell directly upon his face, and Mr. Jenkyn was aware that he — recognised him. Unless he was greatly mistaken, it was the second-hand bookseller in the main street.

"Ah, it's you, Mr. Wilson!" he stammered, making half a question of it, as though not quite convinced. "Pardon me; I did not quite catch your face — er — I was just shutting up." The other bowed his head in reply. "Won' t you come in? Do, please."

Mr. Jenkyn led the way. He wondered what was the matter. The visitor was not among his customers; indeed, he could hardly claim to know him, having only seen him occasionally when calling at the shop for slight purchases of paper and what not. The man, he now realised, looked fearfully ill and wasted, his face pale and haggard. It upset him rather, this sudden, abrupt call. He felt sorry, pained. He felt uneasy.

Into the studio they passed, the visitor going first as though he knew the way, Mr. Jenkyn noticing through his flurry that he was in his "Sunday best." Evidently he had come with a definite purpose. It was odd. Still without speaking, he moved straight across the room and posed himself in front of the dingy background of painted trees, facing the camera. The studio was brightly lit. He seated himself in the faded armchair, crossed his legs, drew up the lit' tie round table with the artificial roses upon it in a tall, thin vase, and struck an attitude. He meant to be photographed. His eyes, staring straight into the lens, draped as it was with the black velvet curtain, seemed, however, to take no account of the Photographic Artist. But Mr. Jenkyn, standing still beside the door, felt a cold air playing over his face that was not merely the winter cold from the street. He felt his hair rise. A slight shiver ran down his back. In that pale, drawn face, and in those staring eyes across the room that gazed so fixedly into the draped camera, he read the signature of illness that no longer knows hope. It was Death that he saw.

In a flash the impression came and went — less than a second. The whole business, indeed, had not occupied two minutes. Mr. Jenkyn pulled himself together with a strong effort, dismissed his foolish obsession, and came sharply to practical considerations. "Forgive me," he said, a trifle thickly, confusedly, "but I — er — did not quite realise. You desire to sit for your portrait, of course. I've had such a busy day, and—' ardly looked for a customer so late." The clock, as he spoke, struck six. But he did not notice the sound. Through his mind ran another reflection: “A man shouldn’t’ ave his picture taken when he’s ill and next door to dying. Lord! He’ll want a lot of touching-up and finishin’, too!”

He began discussing the size, price, and length — the usual rigmarole of his “profession,” and the other, sitting there, still vouchsafed no comment or reply. He simply made the impression of a man in a great hurry, who wished to finish a disagreeable business without unnecessary talk. Many men, reflected the photographer, were the same; being photographed was worse to them than going to the dentist. Mr. Jenkyn filled the pauses with his professional running talk and patter, while the sitter, fixed and motionless, kept his first position and stared at the camera. The photographer rather prided himself upon his ability to make sitters look bright and pleasant; but this man was hopeless. It was only afterwards Mr. Jenkyn recalled the singular fact that he never once touched him — that, in fact, something connected possibly with his frail appearance of deadly illness had prevented his going close to arrange the details of the hastily assumed pose.

“It must be a flashlight, of course, Mr. Wilson,” he said, fidgeting at length with the camera-stand, shifting it slightly nearer; while the other moved his head gently yet impatiently in agreement. Mr. Jenkyn longed to suggest his coming another time when he looked better, to speak with sympathy of his illness; to say something, in fact, that might establish a personal relation. But his tongue in this respect seemed utterly tied. It was just this personal relation which seemed impossible of approach — absolutely and peremptorily impossible. There seemed a barrier between the two. He could only chatter the usual professional commonplaces. To tell the truth, Mr. Jenkyn thinks he felt a little dazed the whole time — not quite his usual self. And, meanwhile, his uneasiness oddly increased. He hurried. He, too, wanted the matter done with and his visitor gone.

At length everything was ready, only the flashlight waiting to be turned on, when, stooping, he covered his head with the velvet cloth and peered through the lens — at no one! When he says “at no one,” however, he qualifies it thus: “There was a quick flash of brilliant white light and a face in the middle of it — my gracious Heaven! But such a face—’ im, yet not’ *im* — like a sudden rushing glory of a face! It shot off like lightning out of the camera’s field of vision. It left me blinded, I assure you,’ alf blinded, and that’s a fac’. It was sheer dazzling!”

It seems Mr. Jenkyn remained entangled a moment in the cloth, eyes closed, breath coming in gasps, for when he got clear and straightened up again, staring once more at his customer over the top of the camera, he stared for the second time at — no one. And the cap that he held in his left hand he clapped feverishly over the uncovered lens. Mr. Jenkyn staggered... looked hurriedly round the empty studio, then ran, knocking a chair over as he went, into the passage. The hall was deserted, the front door closed. His visitor had disappeared "almost as though he hadn't never been there at all" — thus he described it to himself in a terrified whisper. And again he felt the hair rise on his scalp; his skin crawled a little, and something put back the ice against his spine.

After a moment he returned to the studio and somewhat feverishly examined it. There stood the chair against the dingy background of trees; and there, close beside it, was the round table with the flower vase. Less than a minute ago Mr. Thomas Wilson, looking like death, had been sitting in that very chair. "It wasn't *all* a sort of dreamin', then," ran through his disordered and frightened mind. "I did see something...!" He remembered vaguely stories he had read in the newspapers, stories of queer warnings that saved people from disasters, apparitions, faces seen in dream, and so forth. "Maybe," he thought with confusion, "something's going to 'appen to me!" Further than that he could not get for some little time, as he stood there staring about him, almost expecting that Mr. Wilson might reappear as strangely as he had disappeared. He went over the whole scene again and again, reconstructing it in minutest detail. And only then, for the first time, did he plainly realise two things which somehow or other he had not thought strange before, but now thought very strange. For his visitor, he remembered, had not uttered a single word, nor had he, Mr. Jenkyn, once touched his person.... And, thereupon, without more ado, he put on his hat and coat and went round to the little shop in the main street to buy some ink and stationery which he did not in the least require.

The shop seemed all as usual, though Mr. Wilson himself was not visible behind the littered desk. A tall gentleman was talking in low tones to the partner. Mr. Jenkyn bowed as he went in, then stood examining a case of cheap stylographic pens, waiting for the others to finish. It was impossible to avoid overhearing. Besides, the little shop had distinguished customers sometimes, he had heard, and this evidently was one of them. He only understood part of the conversation, but he remembers all of it. “Singular, yes, these last words of dying men,” the tall man was saying, “very singular. You remember Newman’s: ‘More light,’ wasn’t it?” The bookseller nodded. “Fine,” he said, “fine, that!” There was a pause. Mr. Jenkyn stooped lower over the pens. “This, too, was fine in its way,” the gentleman added, straightening up to go; “the old promise, you see, unfulfilled but not forgotten. Cropped up suddenly out of the delirium. Curious, very curious! A good, conscientious man to the last. In all the twenty years I’ve known him he never broke his word....”

A motor-bus drowned a sentence, and then was heard in the bookseller’s voice, as he moved towards the door: “...You see, he was half-way down the stairs before they found him, always repeating the same thing, ‘I promised the wife, I promised the wife.’ And it was a job, I’m told, getting him back again... he struggled so. That’s what finished him so quick, I suppose. Fifteen minutes later he was gone, and his last words were always the same, ‘I promised the wife’

The tall man was gone, and Mr. Jenkyn forgot about his purchases. “When did it ‘appen?” he heard himself asking in a voice he hardly recognised as his own. And the reply roared and thundered in his ears as he went down the street a minute later to his house: “Close on six o’clock — a few minutes before the hour. Been ill for weeks, yes. Caught him out of bed with high fever on his way to your place, Mr. Jenkyn, calling at the top of his voice that he’d forgotten to see you about his picture being taken. Yes, very sad, very sad indeed.”

But Mr. Jenkyn did not return to his studio. He left the light burning there all night. He went to the little room where he slept out, and next day gave the plate to be developed by his assistant. “Defective plate, sir,” was the report in due course; “shows nothing but a flash of light — uncommonly brilliant.”

“Make a print of it all the same,” was the reply. Six months later, when he examined the plate and print, Mr. Jenkyn found that the singular streaks of light had disappeared from both. The uncommon brilliance had faded out completely as though it had never been there.

THE PRAYER

THERE WAS A glitter in the eye of O’Malley when they met. “I’ve got it!” he said under his breath, holding out a tiny phial with the ominous red label.

“Got what?” asked Jones, as though he didn’t know. Both were medical students; both of a speculative and adventurous turn of mind as well; the Irishman, however, ever the leader in mischief.

“The stuff!” was the reply. “The recipe the Hindu gave me. Your night’s free, isn’t it? Mine, too. We’ll try it. Eh?”

They eyed the little bottle with its shouting label — Poison. Jones took it up, fingered it, drew the cork, sniffed it. “Ugh!” he exclaimed, “it’s got an awful smell. Don’t think I could swallow that!”

“You don’t swallow it,” answered O’Malley impatiently. “You sniff it up through the nose — just a drop. It goes down the throat that way.”

“Irish swallowing, eh?” laughed Jones uneasily. “It looks wicked to me.” He played with the bottle, till the other snatched it away.

“Look out, man! Begad, there’s enough there to kill a Cabinet Minister, or a horse. It’s the real stuff, I tell you. I told him it was for a psychical experiment. You remember the talk we had that night—”

“Oh, I remember well enough. But it’s not worth while in my opinion. It will only make us sick.” He said it almost angrily. “Besides, we’ve got enough hallucinations in life already without inducing others—”

O’Malley glanced up quickly. “Nothing of the sort,” he snapped. “You’re backing out. You swore you’d try it with me if I got it. The effect—”

“Well, what is the effect?”

The Irishman looked keenly at him. He answered very low. Evidently he said something he really believed. There was gravity, almost solemnity, in his voice and manner.

"Opens the inner sight," he whispered darkly. "Makes you sensitive to thoughts and thought forces." He paused a moment, staring hard into the other's eyes. "For instance," he added slowly, earnestly, "if somebody's thinking hard about you, I should twig it. See? I should see the thought-stream getting at you — influencing you — making you do this and that. The air is full of loose and wandering thoughts from other minds. I should see these thoughts hovering about your mind like flies trying to settle. Understand? The cause of a sudden change of mood in a man, an inspiration, a helping thought — a temptation — !"

"Bosh!"

"Are you afraid?"

"No. But it's a poisonous doctrine — that such experiments are worth while even if — if—"

But O'Malley knew his pal.... They took the prescribed dose together, laughing, scoffing, hoping. Then they went out to dine. "We must eat very little," explained the Irishman. "The stomach must be comparatively empty. And drink nothing at all."

"What a bore!" said Jones, who was always hungry, and usually thirsty. The prescribed hour passed between the taking of the dose and dinner. They felt nothing more than what Jones described as a "beastly uncomfortable sort of inner heat."

Opposite them, at a table alone, sat a small man, over-dressed according to their standards, and wearing diamond rings. His face had a curious mixture of refinement and wickedness — like a man naturally sensitive whom circumstances, indulgence, or some special temptation had led astray. He did not notice their somewhat close attention because, in his turn, he was closely watching — somebody else. He ate and drank soberly, but drew his dinner out. The "somebody else" he watched, obviously enough, was a country couple, up probably for the festivities due to the presence of a foreign Potentate in town. They were bewildered by big London. They carried hand-bags. From time to time the old man fingered his breast-pocket. He looked about him nervously. The be-ringed man was kind to them, lent them his newspaper, passed the salt, gave them scraps of favoured, kind, and sympathetic conversation. He was very gentle with them.

“Feel anything yet?” asked O’Malley for the tenth time, noticing a curious, passing look on his companion’s face. “I don’t feel a blessed thing meself! I believe that chemist fooled me, gave me diluted stuff or something—” He stopped short, caught by the other’s eye. They had been dining very sparingly, much to the disgust of the waiter, who wanted their table for more remunerative customers.

“I do feel something, yes,” was the quiet reply. “Or, rather, I *see* something. It’s odd; but I really do—”

“What? Out with it! Tell me!”

“A sort of wavy line of gold,” said Jones calmly, “gold and shining. And sometimes it’s white. It flits about that fellow’s head — that fellow over there.” He indicated the man with the rings. “Almost as if — it were trying to get into him—”

“Bosh!” said O’Malley, who was ever the last to believe in the success of his own experiments. “You swear it?”

The other’s face convinced him, and a thrill went down his Irish spine.

“Hush,” said Jones in a lower tone, “don’t shout. I see it right enough. It’s like a little wavy stream of light. It’s going all about his head and eyes. By gad, it’s lovely, though — it’s like a flower now, a floating blossom — and now a strip of thin soft gold. It’s got him! By George, I tell you, it’s got him — !”

“Got him?” echoed the Irishman, genuinely impressed.

“Got *into* him, I meant. It’s disappeared — gone clean into his head. Look!” O’Malley looked hard, but saw nothing. “Me boy!” he cried, “the stuff *was* real. It’s working. Watch it. I do believe you’ve seen a thought — a thought from somebody else — a wandering thought. It’s got into his mind. It may affect his actions, movements, decisions. Good Lord! The stuff was not diluted, after all. You’ve seen a thought-force!” He was tremendously excited. Jones, however, was too absorbed in what he saw to feel excitement.

Whether it was due to the drug or not, he knew he saw a real thing. "Wonder if it's a good one or a bad one!" whispered the Irishman. "Wonder what sort of mind it comes from! Where? How far away?" He wondered a number of things. He chattered below his breath like a dying gramophone. But his companion just sat, staring in rapt silence.

"What are *you* doing here?" said a voice from the table behind them quietly. And O'Malley, turning — Jones was too preoccupied — recognised a plainclothes detective whom he chanced to know from having been associated with him in a recent poisoning case.

"Nothing particular; just having dinner," he answered. "And you?"

The detective made no secret of his object. "Watching the crowds for their own safety," he said, "that's all. London's full of prey just now — all up from the country, with their bags in their hands, their money in their breast-pockets, and good-natured folks ready everywhere to help 'em, and help themselves at the same time." He laughed, nodding towards the man with the rings. "All the crooks are on the job," he added significantly. "There's an old friend of ours. He doesn't know me, but I know him right enough. He's usually made up as a clergyman; and tonight he's after that old couple at the nex' table, or my name ain't Joe Leary! Don" t stare, or he'll notice." He turned his head the other way.

O'Malley, however, was far too interested in hoping for a psychical experience of his own, and in watching the "alleged phenomena" of his companion, to feel much interest in a mere detective's hunt for pickpockets. He turned towards his friend again. "What's up now?" he asked, with his back to the detective; "see anything more?"

"It's perfectly wonderful," whispered Jones softly. "It's out again. I can see the gold thread, all shining and alive, clean down in the man's mind and heart, then out, then in again. It's making him different — I swear it is. By George, it's like a blessed chemical experiment. I can't explain it as I see it, but he's getting sort of bright within — golden like the thread." Jones was wrought up, excited, moved. It was impossible to doubt his earnestness. He described a thing he really saw. O'Malley listened with envy and resentment.

“Blast it all!” he exclaimed. “I see nothing. I didn’t take enough!” And he drew the little phial out of his pocket.

“Look! He’s *changed!”* exclaimed Jones, interrupting the movement so suddenly that O’Malley dropped the phial and it smashed to atoms against the iron edge of the umbrella stand. “His thought’s altered. He’s going out. The gold has spread all through him — !”

“By gosh!” put in O’Malley, so loud that people stared, “it’s helped him — made him a better man — turned him from evil. It’s that blessed wandering thought! Follow it, follow it! Quick!” And in the general confusion that came with the paying of bills, cleaning up the broken glass, and the rest, the “crook” slipped out into the crowd and was lost, the detective murmured something about “wonder what made him leave so good a trail!” and the Irish’ man filled in the pauses with hurried, nervous sentences— “Keep your eye on the line of gold! We’ll follow it! We’ll trace it to its source. Never mind the tip! Hurry, hurry! Don’t lose it!”

But Jones was already out, drawn by the power of his obvious conviction. They went into the street. Regardless of the blaze of lights and blur of shadows, the noise of traffic and the rush of the crowds, they followed what Jones described as the “line of wavy gold.”

“Don’t lose it! For Heaven’s sake, don’t lose it!” O’Malley cried, dodging with difficulty after the disappearing figure. “It’s a genuine thought force from another mind. Follow it! Trace it! We’ll track it to its source — some noble thinker somewhere — some gracious woman — some exalted, golden source, at any rate!” He was wholly caught away now by the splendour of the experiment’s success. A thought that could make a criminal change his mind must issue from a radiant well of rare and purest thinking. He remembered the Hindu’s words: “You will see thoughts in colour — bad ones, lurid and streaked — good ones, sweet and shining, like a line of golden light — and if you follow, you may trace them to the mind that sent them out.”

“It goes so fast!” Jones called back, “I can hardly keep up. It’s in the air, just over the heads of the crowd. It leaves a trail like a meteor. Come on, come on!”

“Take a taxi,” shouted the Irishman. “It’ll escape us!” They laughed, and panted, dodged past the stream of people, crossed the street.

“Shut up!” answered Jones. “Don’t talk so much. I lose it when you talk. It’s in my mind. I really see it, but your chatter blurs it. Come on, come on!”

And so they came at last to the region of mean streets, where the traffic was less, the shadows deeper, the lights dim, streets that visiting Emperors do not change. No match sellers, bootlace venders, or “dreadful shadows proffering toys,” blocked their way on the pavement edge, because here were none to buy.

“It’s changed from gold to white,” Jones whispered breathlessly. “It shines now — by gad, it shines — like a bit of escaped sunrise. And others have joined it. Can’t you see’ em? Why, they’ re like a network. They’ re rays — rays of glory. And — hullo! — I see where they come from now! It’s that house over there. Look, man, look! They’ re streaming like a river of light out of that high window, that little attic window up there” — he pointed to a dingy house standing black against the murk of the sky. “They come out in a big stream, and then separate in all directions. It’s simply wonderful!”

O’Malley gasped and panted. He said nothing. Jones, the phlegmatic, heavy Jones, had got a real vision, whereas he who always imagined “visions” got nothing. He followed the lead. Jones, he understood, was taking his instinct where it led him. He would not interfere.

And the instinct led him to the door. They stopped dead, hesitating for the first time. “Better not go in, you know,” said O’Malley, breaking the decision he had just made. Jones looked up at him, slightly bewildered. “I’ve lost it,” he whispered, “lost the line—” A taxi-cab drew up with a rattling thunder just in front and a man got out, came up to the door and stood beside them. It was the crook.

For a second or two the three men eyed each other. Clearly the new arrival did not recognise them. “Pardon, gentlemen,” he said, pushing past to pull the bell. They saw his rings. The taxi boomed away down the little dark street that knew more of coal-carts than of motors. “You’re coming in?” the man asked, as the door opened and he stepped inside. O’Malley, usually so quickwitted, found no word to say, but Jones had a question ready. The

Irishman never understood how he asked it, and got the answer, too, without giving offence. The instinct guided him in choice of words and tone and gesture — somehow or other. He asked who lived upstairs in the front attic room, and the man, as he quietly closed the door upon them, gave the information— “My father.”

And, for the rest, all they ever learnt — by a little diligent inquiry up and down the street, engineered by Jones — was that the old man, bedridden for a dozen years, was never seen, and that an occasional district visitor, or such like, were his only callers. But they all agreed that he was good. “They do say he lies there praying day and night — jest praying for the world.” It was the grocer at the corner who told them that.

STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF A BARONET

HIS INTRINSIC VALUE before the Eternities was exceedingly small, but he possessed most things the world sets store by — presence, name, wealth — and, above all, that high opinion of himself which saves it the bother of a separate and troublesome valuation. Outside these possessions he owned nothing of permanent value, or that could decently claim to be worthy of immortality. The fact was he had never even experienced that expansion of self commonly known as generosity. No apology, however, is necessary for his amazing adventure, for these same Eternities who judged him have made their affidavit that it was They who stripped him bare and showed himself — to himself.

It all began with the receipt of that shattering letter from his solicitors. He read and re-read it in his comfortable first-class compartment as the express hurried him to town, exceedingly comfortable among his rugs and furs, exceedingly distressed and ill at ease in his mind. And in his private sitting-room of the big hotel that same evening Mr. Smirles, more odious even than his letter, informed him plainly that this new and unexpected claimant to his title and estates was likely to be exceedingly troublesome— "even dangerous, Sir Timothy! I am bound to say, since you ask me, that it might be wise to regard the future — er — with a different scale of vision than the one you have been accustomed to."

Sir Timothy practically collapsed. Instinctively he perceived that the lawyer's manner already held less respect: the reflection was a shock to his vain and fatuous personality. "After all, then, it wasn't me he worshipped, but my position, and so forth...!" If this nonsense continued he would be no longer "Sir Timothy," but simply "Mister" Puffe, poor, a nobody. He seemed to shrink in size as he gazed at himself in the mirror of the gorgeous, flamboyantly decorated room. "It's too preposterous and absurd! There's nothing in it! Why, the whole County would go to pieces without me!" He even thought of making his secretary draft a letter to the *Times* — a letter of violent, indignant protest.

He was a handsome, portly man, with a full-blown vanity justified by no single item of soul or mind; not unkind, so much as empty; created and kept alive by the small conventions and the ceaseless contemplation of himself, the withdrawal of which might be expected to leave him flat as a popped balloon.... Such a mass of pompous conceit obscured his vision that he only slowly took in the fact that his very existence was at stake. His thoughts rumbled on without direction, the sense of loss, however, dreadfully sharp and painful all the time, till at length he sought relief in something he could really understand. He changed for dinner! He would dine in his sitting-room alone. And, meanwhile, he rang for the remainder of his voluminous luggage. But it was vastly annoying to his diminishing pride to discover that the gorgeous Head Porter (he remembered now having vaguely recognised him in the hall) was the same poor relation to whom he had denied help a year ago. The vicissitudes of life were indeed preposterous. He ought to have been protected from so ridiculous an encounter. For the moment, of course, he merely pretended not to see him — certainly he did not commend the excellently quick delivery of the luggage. And to praise the young fellow’s pluck never occurred to him for one single instant.

“The house valet, please,” he asked of the waiter who answered the bell soon afterwards — and then directed somewhat helplessly the unpacking of his emporium of exquisite clothes. “Yes, take everything out — everything,” he said in reply to the man’s question — rather an extraordinary, almost insolent question when he came to reflect upon it, surely: “Is it worth while, perhaps, sir...?” It flashed across his dazed mind that the Head Porter had made the very same remark to his subordinate in the passage when he asked if “everything” was to come in. With a shrug of his gold-braided shoulders that poor relation had replied, “Seems hardly worth while, but they may as well all go in, yes.” And, with the double rejoinder perplexingly in his mind, Sir Timothy turned sharply upon the valet.

But the thing he was going to say faded on his lips. The man, holding out in his arms a heap of clothes, suits and what not, seemed so much taller than before. Sir Timothy had looked down upon him a moment ago, whereas now their eyes stared level. It was passing strange.

“Will you want these, sir?”

“Not to-night, of course.”

“Want them at all, I meant, sir?”

Sir Timothy gasped. “Want them at all? Of course! What in the world are you talking about?”

“Beg pardon, sir. Didn’t know if it was worth while now,” the man said, with a quick flush. And, before the pompous and amazed baronet could get any words between his quivering lips, the man was gone. The waiter, Head Waiter it was, answered the bell almost immediately, and Sir Timothy found consolation for his injured feelings in discussing food and wine. He ordered an absurdly sumptuous meal for a man dining alone. He did so with a vague feeling that it would spite somebody, perhaps; he hardly knew whom. “The Pol Roger well iced, mind,” he added with a false importance as the clever servant withdrew. But at the door the man paused and turned, as though he had not heard. *“Large* bottle, I said,” repeated the other. The Head Waiter made an extraordinary gesture of indifference. “As you wish, Sir Timothy, as you wish!” And he was gone in his turn. But it was only the man’s adroitness that had chosen the words instead of those others: “Is it really worth while?”

And at that very moment, while Sir Timothy stood there fuming inwardly over the extraordinary words and ways of these people — veiled insolence, *he* called it — the door opened, and a tall young woman poked her head inside, then followed it with her person. She was dignified, smart even for a hotel like this, and uncommonly pretty. It was the upper housemaid. Full in the eye she looked at him. In her face was a kind of swift sympathy and kindness; but her whole presentment betrayed more than anything else — terror.

“Make an effort, make an effort!” she whispered earnestly. “Before it’s too late, make an effort!” And *she* was gone. Sir Timothy, hardly knowing what he meant to do, opened the door to dash after her and make her explain this latest insolence. But the passage was dark, and he heard the swish of skirts far away — too far away to overtake; while running along the walls, as in a whispering gallery, came the words, “Make an effort, make an effort!”

“Confound it all, then, I will!” he exclaimed to himself, as he stumbled back into the room, feeling horribly bewildered. “I will make an effort.”

And he dressed to go downstairs and show himself in the halls and drawing-rooms, give a few pompous orders, assert himself, and fuss about generally. But that process of dressing without his valet was chiefly and weirdly distressing because he had so amazingly — dwindled. His sight was, of course, awry; disordered nerves had played tricks with vision, proportion, perspective; something of the sort must explain why he seemed so small to himself in the reflection. The pier-glass, which showed him full length, he turned to the wall. But, none the less, to complete his toilet, he had to stand upon a footstool before the other mirror above the mantelpiece.

And go downstairs he did, his heart working with a strange and increasing perplexity. Yet, wherever he went, there came that poor relation, the Head Porter, to face him. Always big, he now looked bigger than ever. Sir Timothy Puffe felt somehow ridiculous in his presence. The young fellow had character, pluck, some touch of intrinsic value. For all his failure in life, the Eternities considered him *real.* He towered rather dreadfully in his gold braid and smart uniform — towered in his great height all about the hall, like some giant in his own palace. The other's head scarcely came up to his great black belt where the keys swung and jangled.

The Baronet went upstairs again to his room, strangely disconcerted. The first thing he did as he left the lift was to stumble over the step. The liftman picked him up as though he were a boy. Down the passage, now well lighted, he went quickly, his feet almost pattering, his tread light, and — so oddly short. His importance had gone. A voice behind each door he passed whispered to him through the narrow crack as it cautiously opened, "Make an effort, make an effort! Be yourself, be real, be alive before it's too late!" But he saw no one, and the first thing he did on entering his room was to hide the smaller mirror by turning it against the wall, just as he had done to the pier-glass. He was so painfully little and insignificant now. As the externals and the possessions dropped away one by one in his thoughts, the revelation of the tiny little centre of activity within was horrible. He puffed himself out in thought as of old, but there was no response. It was degrading.

The fact was — he began to understand it now — his mind had been pursuing possible results of his loss of title and estates to their logical conclusion. The idea in all its brutal nakedness, of course, hardly reached him — namely, that, without possessions, he was practically — nil! All he grasped was that he was — *less.* Still, the notion did prey upon him atrociously. He followed the advice of the strange housemaid and "made an effort," but without marked success. So empty, indeed, was his life that, once stripped of the possessions, he would stand there as useless and insignificant as an owner-less street dog. And the thought appalled him. He had not even enough real interest in others to hold him upright, and certainly not enough sufficiency of self, good or evil, to stand alone before any tribunal. The discovery shocked him inexpressibly. But what distressed him still more was to find a fixed mirror in his sitting-room that he could *not* take down, for in its depths he saw himself shrunken and dwindled to the proportions of a....

The knock at the door and the arrival of his dinner broke the appalling train of thought, but rather than be seen in his present diminutive appearance — later, of course, he would surely grow again — he ran into the bedroom. And when he came out again after the waiter's departure he found that his dinner shared the same abominable change. The food upon the dishes was reduced to the minutest proportions — the toast like children's, the soup an egg-cupful, the tenderloin a little slice the size of a visiting-card, and the bird not much larger than a black-beetle. And yet more than he could eat; more than sufficient! He sat in the big chair positively lost, his feet dangling. Then, mortified, frightened, and angry beyond expression, he undressed and concealed himself beneath the sheets and blankets of his bed.

"Of course I'm going mad — that's what it all means," he exclaimed. "I'm no longer of any account in the world. I could never go into my Club, for instance, like *this!"* — and he surveyed the small outline that made a little lump beneath the surface of the bed-clothes— "or read the lessons having to stand upon a chair to reach the lectern." And tears of bleeding vanity and futile wrath mingled upon his pillow.... The humiliation was agonising.

In the middle of which the door opened and in came the hotel valet, bearing before him upon a silver salver what at first appeared to be small, striped sandwiches, darkish in hue, but upon closer inspection were seen to be several wee suits of clothes, neatly pressed and folded for wearing. Glancing round the room and perceiving no one, the man proceeded to put them away in the chest of drawers, soliloquising from time to time as he did so.

“So the old buffer did go out after all!” he reflected, as he smoothed the tiny trousers in the drawer. “‘E’s nothing but a gas-bag, anyway! Close with the coin, too — always was that!” He whistled, spat in the grate, hunted about for a cigarette, and again found relief in speech. My little dawg’s worth two of im all the time, and lots to spare. Tim’s real...!” And other things, too, he said in similar vein. He was utterly oblivious of Sir Timothy’s presence — serenely unconscious that the thin, fading line beneath the sheets *was* the very individual he was talking about. “Even hides his cigarettes, does he? He’s right, though. Take away what he’s got and there wouldn’t be enough left over to stand upright at a poultry show!” And he guffawed merrily to himself. But what brought the final horror into that vanishing Personality on the bed was the singular fact that the valet made no remark about the absurd and horrible size of those tiny clothes. *This, then, was how others — even a hotel valet — saw him!*

All night long, it seemed, he lay in atrocious pain, the darkness mercifully hiding him, though never from himself, and only towards daylight did he pass off into a condition of unconsciousness. He must have slept very late indeed, too, for he woke to find sunlight in the room, and the housemaid — that tall, dignified girl who had tried to be kind — dusting and sweeping energetically. He screamed to her, but his voice was too feeble to make itself heard above the sweeping. The high-pitched squeak was scarcely audible even to himself. Presently she approached the bed and flung the sheets back. “That’s funny,” she observed, “could’ve sworn I saw something move!” She gave a hurried look, then went on sweeping. But in the process she had tossed his person, now no larger than a starved mouse, out on to the carpet. He cried aloud in his anguish, but the squeak was too faint to be audible. “Ugh!” exclaimed the girl, jumping to one side, “there’s that ‘orrid mouse again! Dead, too, I do declare!” And then, without being aware of the fact, she swept him up with the dust and bits of paper into her pan.

Whereupon Sir Timothy awoke with a bad start, and perceived that his train was running somewhat uneasily into King’s Cross, and that he had slept nearly the whole way.

THE SECRET

I SAW HIM walking down the floor of the A.B.C. shop where I was lunch’ ing. He was gazing about for a vacant seat with that vague stare of puzzled distress he always wore when engaged in practical affairs. Then he saw me and nodded. I pointed to the seat opposite; he sat down. There was a crumb in his brown beard, I noticed. There had been one a year ago, when I saw him last.

“What a long time since we met,” I said, genuinely glad to see him. He was a most lovable fellow, though his vagueness was often perplexing to his friends.

“Yes — er — h’mmm — let me see—”

“Just about a year,” I said.

He looked at me with an expression as though he did not see me. He was delving in his mind for dates and proofs. His fierce eyebrows looked exactly as though they were false — stuck on with paste — and I imagined how puzzled he would be if one of them suddenly dropped off into his soup. The eyes beneath, however, were soft and beaming; the whole face was tender, kind, gentle, and when he smiled he looked thirty instead of fifty.

“A year, is it?” he remarked, and then turned from me to the girl who was waiting to take his order. This ordering was a terrible affair. I marvelled at the patience of that never-to-be tipped waitress in the dirty black dress. He looked with confusion from me to her, from her to the complicated bill of fare, and from this last to me again.

“Oh, have a cup of coffee and a bit of that lunch cake,” I said with desperation. He stared at me for a second, one eyebrow moving, the other still as the grave. I felt an irresistible desire to laugh.

“All right,” he murmured to the girl, “coffee and a bit of that lunch-cake.” She went off wearily. “And a pat of butter,” he whispered after her, but look’ ing at the wrong waitress. “And a portion of that strawberry jam,” he added, looking at another waitress.

Then he turned to talk with me.

“Oh no,” he said, looking over his shoulder at the crowd of girls by the counter; “not the jam. I forgot I’d ordered that lunch-cake.”

Again he switched round in his chair — he always perched on the edge like a bird — and made a great show of plunging into a long deferred chat with me. I knew what would come. He was always writing books and sending them out among publishers and forgetting where they were at the moment.

“And how are *you*?” he asked. I told him.

“Writing anything these days?” I ventured boldly.

The eyebrows danced. “Well, the fact is, I’ve only just finished a book.”

“Sent it anywhere?”

“It’s gone off, yes. Let me see — it’s gone to — er—” The coffee and lunch cake arrived without the pat of butter, but with two lots of strawberry jam. “I won’t have jam, thank you. And will you bring a pat of butter?” he muttered to the girl. Then, turning to me again— “Oh, I really forget for the moment. It’s a good story, I think.” His novels were, as a fact, extraordinarily good, which was the strange part of it all.

“It’s about a woman, you see, who—” He proceeded to tell me the story in outline. Once he got beyond the confused openings of talk the man became interesting, but it took so long, and was so difficult to follow, that I remembered former experiences and cut him short with a lucky inspiration.

“Don’t spoil it for me by telling it. I shan’t enjoy it when it comes out.”

He laughed, and both eyebrows dropped and hid his eyes. He busied him’ self with the cake and butter. A second crumb went to join the first. I thought of balls in golf bunkers, and laughed outright. For a time the conversation flagged. I became aware of a certain air of mystery about him. He was full of something besides the novel — something he wanted to talk about but had probably forgotten “for the moment.” I got the impression he was casting about in the upper confusion of his mind for the cue.

“You’re writing something else now?” I ventured.

The question hit the bull’ s-eye. Both eyebrows shot up, as though they would vanish the next minute on wires and fly up into the wings. The cake in his hand would follow; and last of all he himself would go. The children's pantomime came vividly before me. Surely he was a made-up figure on his way to rehearsal.

"I am," he said; "but it's a *great* secret. I've got a *magnificent* idea!"

"I promise not to tell. I'm safe as the grave. Tell me."

He fixed his kindly, beaming eyes on my face and smiled charmingly.

"It's a play," he murmured, and then paused for effect, hunting about on his plate for cake, where cake there was none.

"Another piece of that lunch-cake, please," he said in a sudden loud voice, addressed to the waitresses at large. "It came to me the other day in the London Library — er — very fine idea—"

"Something really original?"

"Well, I think so, perhaps." The cake came with a clatter of plates, but he pushed it aside as though he had forgotten about it, and leaned forward across the table. "I'll tell you. Of course you won't say anything. I don't want the idea to get about. There's money in a good play — and people do steal so, don't they?"

I made a gesture, as much as to say, "Do I look like a man who would repeat?" and he plunged into it with enthusiasm.

Oh! The story of that play! And those dancing eyebrows! And the bits of the plot he forgot and went back for! And the awful, wild confusion of names and scenes and curtains! And the way his voice rose and fell like a sound carried to and fro by a gusty wind! And the feeling that something was coining which would make it all clear — but which never came!

"The woman, you see," — all his stories began that way— "is one of those modern women who... and when she dies she tells on her death-bed how she knew all the time that Anna—"

"That's the heroine, I think?" I asked keenly, after ten minutes' exposition, hoping to Heaven my guess was right.

"No, no, she's the widow, don't you remember, of the clergyman who went over to the Church of Rome to avoid marrying her sister — in the first act — or didn't mention that?"

“You mentioned it, I think, but the explanation—”

“Oh, well, you see, the Anglican clergyman — he’s Anglican in the first act — always suspected that Miriam had not died by her own hand, but had been poisoned. In fact, he finds the incriminating letter in the gas-pipe, and recognises the handwriting—”

“Oh, *he* finds the letter?”

“Rather. *He* finds the letter, don’t you see? and compares it with the others, and makes up his mind who wrote it, and goes straight to Colonel Middleton with his discovery.”

“So Middleton, of course, refuses to believe—”

“Refuses to believe that the second wife — oh, I forgot to mention that the clergyman had married again in his own Church; married a woman who turns out to be Anna’s — no, I mean Miriam’s — half-sister, who had been educated abroad in a convent — refuses to believe, you see, that *his* wife had anything to do with it. Then Middleton has a splendid scene. He and the clergyman have the stage to themselves. Wyndham’s the man for Middleton, of course. Well, he declares that he has the proof — proof that must convince everybody, and just as he waves it in the air in comes Miriam, who is walking in her sleep, from her sick-bed. They listen. She is talking in her sleep. By Jove, man, don’t you see it? She is talking about the crime! She practically confesses it before their very eyes.”

“Splendid!”

“And she never wakes up — I mean, not in that scene. She goes back to bed and has no idea next day what she has said and done.”

“And the clergyman’s honour is saved?” I hazarded, amazed at my rashness. “No. *Anna* is saved. You see, I forgot to tell you that in the second act Miriam’s brother, Sir John, had—”

The waitress brought the little paper checks.

“Let’s go outside and finish. It’s getting frightfully stuffy here,” I suggested desperately, picking up the bills.

We walked out together, he still talking against time with the most terrible confusion of names and acts and scenes imaginable. He bumped into everybody who came in his way. His beard was full of crumbs. His eyebrows danced with excitement — I knew then positively they were false — and his voice ran up and down the scale like a buzz-saw at work on a tough board.

“By Jove, old man, that *is* a play!”

He turned to me with absolute happiness in his face.

“But for Heaven’s sake, don’t let out a word of it. I must have a copyright performance first before it’s really safe.”

“Not a word, I promise.”

“It’s a dead secret — till I’ve finished it, I mean — then I’ll come and tell you the *dénouement.* The last curtain is simply magnificent. You see, Middleton never hears—”

“I won’t tell a living soul,” I cried, running to catch a bus. “It’s a secret — yours and mine!”

And the omnibus carried me away Westwards.

Meanwhile the play remains to this day a “dead secret,” known only to the man who thinks he told it, and to the other man who knows he heard it told.

THE LEASE

THE OTHER DAY I came across my vague friend again. Last time it was in an A.B.C. shop; this time it was in a bus. We always meet in humble places.

He was vaguer than ever, fuddled and distrait; but delightfully engaging. He had evidently not yet lunched, for he wore no crumb; but I had a shrewd suspicion that beneath his green Alpine hat there lurked a straw or two in his untidy hair. It would hardly have surprised me to see him turn with his child like smile and say, “Would you mind *very much* taking them out for me? You know they *do* tickle so” — half mumbled, half shouted.

Instead, he tried to shake hands, and his black eyebrows danced. He looked as loosely put together as a careless parcel. I imagined large bits of him tumbling out.

“You re off somewhere or other, I suppose?” he said; and the question was so characteristic it was impossible not to laugh.

I mentioned the City.

“I’m going that way too,” he said cheerfully. He had come to the conclusion that he could not shake hands with safety; there were too many odds and ends about him — gloves, newspapers, half-open umbrella, parcels. Evidently he had left the house uncertain as to where he was going, and had brought all these things in case, like the White Knight, he might find a use for them on the way. His overcoat was wrongly buttoned, too, so that on one side the collar reached almost to his ear. From the pockets protruded large envelopes, white and blue. I marvelled again how he ever concentrated his mind enough to write plays and novels; for in both the action was quick and dramatic; the dialogue crisp, forcible, often witty.

“Going to the City!” I exclaimed. “You?” Museums, libraries, second-hand book-shops were his usual haunts — places where he could be vague and absent-minded without danger to anyone. I felt genuinely curious. “Copy of some kind? Local colour for something, eh?” I laughed, hoping to draw him out.

A considerable pause followed, during which he rearranged several of his parcels, and his eyebrows shot up and down like two black-beetles dancing a hornpipe.

“I’m helping a chap with his lease,” he replied suddenly, in such a very loud voice that everybody in the bus heard and became interested.

He had this way of alternately mumbling and talking very loud — absurdly loud; picking out unimportant words with terrific emphasis. He also had this way of helping others. Indeed, it was difficult to meet him without suspecting an errand of kindness — rarely mentioned, however.

“Chap with his lease,” he repeated in a kind of roar, as though he feared someone had not heard him — the driver, possibly!

We were in a white Putney bus, going East. The policeman just then held it up at Wellington Street.

“It’s jolly stopping like this,” he cried; “one can chat a bit without having to shout.”

My curiosity about the lease, or rather about his part in it, prevented an immediate reply. How he could possibly help in such a complicated matter puzzled me exceedingly.

“Horrible things, leases!” I said at length. “Confusing, I mean, with their endless repetitions and absence of commas. Legal language seems so needlessly—”

“Oh, but this one is right enough,” he interrupted. “You see, my pal hasn’t signed it yet. He’s in rather a muddle about it, to tell the truth, and I’m going to get it straightened out by my solicitor.”

The bus started on with a lurch, and he rolled against me.

“It’s a three-year lease,” he roared, “with an option to renew, you know — oh no, I’m wrong there, by the bye,” and he tapped my knee and dropped a glove, and, when it was picked up and handed to him, tried to stuff it up his sleeve as though it was a handkerchief— “I’m wrong there — that’s the house he’s in at present, and his wife wants to break *that* lease because she doesn’t like it, and they’ve got more children than they expected (these words whispered), and there’s no bathroom, and the kitchen stairs are absurdly narrow —

"But the lease — you were just saying — ?"

"Quite so; I was," and both eyebrows dropped so that the eyes were almost completely hidden, "but *that* lease is all right. It's the other one I was talking about just then —

"The house he's in now, you mean, or — ?" My head already swam. The attention of the people opposite had begun to wander.

My friend pulled himself together and clutched several parcels.

"No, no, no," he explained, smiling gently; "he likes *this* one. It's the other I meant — the one his wife doesn't approve of — the one with the narrow bathroom stairs and no kitchen — I mean the narrow kitchen stairs and no bathroom. It has so few cupboards, too, and the nursery chimneys smoke every time the wind's in the east. (Poor man! How devotedly he must have listened while it was being drummed into his good-natured ears!) So you see, Henry, my pal, thought of giving it up when the lease fell in and taking this other house — the one I was just talking about — and putting in a bathroom at his own expense, provided the landlord—"

A man opposite who had been listening intently got up to leave the bus with such a disappointed look that my friend thought it was the conductor asking for another fare, and fumbled for coppers. Seeing his mistake in time, he drew out instead a large blue envelope. Two other papers, feeling neglected, came out at the same time and dropped upon the floor. My friend and a working man beside him stooped to pick them up and knocked their heads violently in the process.

"I *beg* your pardon," exclaimed the vague one, very loud, with a tremendous emphasis on the "beg."

"Oh, that's all right, guv' nor," said the working man, handing over the papers. "Might 'appen to anybody, that!"

"I beg your pardon?" repeated my friend, not hearing him quite.

"I said a thing like that might 'appen to anyone," repeated the other, louder.

He turned to me with his happy smile. "I suppose it might, yes," he said, very low. Then he opened the blue envelope and began to hunt.

"Oh no, that's the wrong envelope. It's the other," he observed vaguely. "What a bore, isn't it? This is merely a copy of his letters to — er — to—"

He looked distressingly about him through the windows, as though he hoped to find his words in the shop-letterings or among the advertisements.

"Where are we, I wonder? Oh yes; there's St. Paul's. Good!" His mind returned to the subject in hand. Several people got out, and swept the papers from his knee to the ground; and the next few minutes he spent gathering them up, stooping, clutching his coat, stuffing envelopes into his pockets, and exclaiming "I *beg* your pardon!" to the various folk he collided with in the process.

At last some sort of order was restored.

" — merely the letters," he resumed where he had left off, and in a voice that might suitably have addressed a public meeting, "the letters to his tenant. There's a tenant in the other house. I forgot to mention *that,* I think —"

"I think you did. But, I say, look here, my dear chap," I burst out, at length, in sheer self-preservation, "why in the world don't you let the fellow manage his own leases? It's giving you a dreadful lot of trouble. It's the most muddled up thing I ever heard."

"That's because you've got no head for business," he whispered sweetly. "Besides, it's really a pleasure to me to help him. That's the best part of life, after all — helping people who get into muddles." He looked at me with his kindly smile. Then he turned and smiled at everybody in the bus — vaguely, happily, his black eyebrows very fierce. Several people, I fancied, smiled back at him.

"Let's see," he said, after a pause; "where was I?"

"You were saying something about a lease," I told him; "but, honestly, old man, I'm afraid I haven't quite followed it."

"That's my fault," he said; "all my fault. I feel a bit stupid to-day. I've got the flue, you know, and a touch of fever with it. But I promised Henry I would see to it for him, because he's awfully busy—"

"Is he really!" I wished I knew Henry. I felt a strong desire to say something to him.

“ — packing up for a trip to Mexico, you know, or something; so, of course, he finds it difficult to — er — to—” He looked gently about him. “Where the deuce am I?” he asked in a very loud voice indeed.

Several people, myself among them, mentioned the Mansion House.

“Dear me!” he exclaimed, gathering up parcels, envelopes, and various loose parts of his body — his aching body, I’m afraid— “I must be getting out. I’m in the wrong bus. I wanted Essex Street — up there by the Law Courts, you know.”

But I really couldn’t stand it any longer. I took him by the arm and planted him, parcels, papers, and all, by my side in a taxi. We whizzed back along Queen Victoria Street, and on the way I sorted him out, buttoned his overcoat so that it no longer tickled his ear, rolled up his umbrella so that the points no longer got caught, and made him put on both gloves, so that he could not drop them any more. And I kept tight hold of him until we reached Essex Street. He talked leases the whole way.

“Thanks awfully,” he said at the end, smiling; “you’re always kind — if a little rough. But I’ll keep on the taxi, I think, now. The fact is, I find I’ve left the right lease at home after all — you know, the one about the house with out the—”

I heard the rest, alternately mumbled and shouted at me, as the taxi whirred off into the Strand, bound for some unknown destination in Chelsea. It was impossible to help him more. But I should like to have heard what he said to (a) the chauffeur at the end of his journey, (b) to the solicitor. I should also like to swear that when he got back to his rooms he found the right lease had been in his pocket all the time.

I met him again the following day, but I had not the courage to ask him any’ thing.

UP AND DOWN

HIS VAGUENESS, APPARENTLY, is only on the surface of his mind; down at the centre the pulses of life throb with unusual vigour and decision. And I think the explanation of his puzzled expression and dazed manner — to say nothing of his idiotic replies — when addressed upon ordinary topics is due to the fact that he prefers to live in that hot and very active centre. He dislikes being called out of it.

Down there his creative imagination is for ever at work: he sees clearly, thinks hard, acts even splendidly. But the moment you speak to him about trivial things the mists gather about his eyes, his voice hesitates, his hands make futile gestures, and he screws up his face into an expression of puzzled alarm. Up he comes to the best of his ability, but it is clear he is vexed at being disturbed.

“Oh yes, I think so — very,” he replied the other day as we met on our way to the Club and I asked if he had enjoyed his holiday.

“Awful amount of rain, though, wasn’t there?”

“Was there, now? Yes, there must have been, of course. It was a wet summer.”

He looked at me as though I were a comparative stranger, although our intimacy is of years’ standing, and our talks on life, literature, and all the rest are a chief pleasure to each of us. We had not met for some months. I wanted to pierce through to that hot centre where the real man lived, and to find out what the real man had been doing during the interval. He came up but slowly, however.

“You went to the mountains as usual, I suppose?” he asked, with his mind obviously elsewhere. He hopped along the pavement with his quick, birdlike motion.

“Mountains, yes. And you?”

He made no reply. From his face I could tell he had come about half-way up, but was already on the way down again. Once he got back to that centre of his I should get nothing out of him at all.

“And you?” I repeated louder. “Abroad, I suppose, somewhere?”

“Well — er — not exactly,” he mumbled. “That is to say — I — er — went to Switzerland somewhere — Austria, I mean — down there on the way towards Italy *beyond Bozen, you know.”* He ended the sentence very loud indeed, with quite absurd emphasis, as his way is when he knows he hasn’t been listening. “I found a quiet inn out of the tourist track and did a rare lot of work there too.” His face cleared and the brown eyes began to glow a little. It was like seeing the sun through opening mists. “Come in, and I’ll tell you about it,” he added, in an eager whisper, as we reached the Club doors.

At the same moment, however, the porter came down the steps and touched his hat, and my vague friend, recognising a face he felt he ought to know, stopped to ask him how he was, and whether So-and-so was back yet; and while the porter replied briefly and respectfully I saw to my dismay the mists settle down again upon the other’s face. A moment later the porter touched his hat again and moved off down the street. My friend looked round at me as though I had but just arrived upon the scene.

“Here we are,” he observed gently, “at the Club. I think I shall go in. What are you going to do?”

“I’m coming in too,” I said.

“Good,” he murmured; “let’s go in together, then,” his thoughts working away busily at something deep within him.

On our way to the hat-racks, and all up the winding stairs, he mumbled away about the wet summer, and tourists, and his little mountain inn, but never a word of the work I was so anxious to hear about, and he so anxious really to tell. In the reading-room I manoeuvred to get two arm-chairs side by side before he could seize the heap of papers he smothered his lap with, but never read.

“And where have *you* been all the summer?” he asked, crossing his little legs and speaking in a voice loud enough to have been heard in the street. “Somewhere in the mountains, I suppose, as usual?”

“You were going to tell me about the work you got through up in your lonely inn,” I insisted sharply. “Was it a play, or a novel, or criticism, or what?” He looked so small and lost in the big arm-chair that I felt quite ashamed of myself for speaking so violently. He turned round on the slippery leather and offered me a cigarette. The glow came back to his face.

“Well,” he said, “as a matter of fact it was both. That is, I was preparing a stage version of my new novel.” All the mist had gone now; he was alive at the centre, and thoroughly awake. He snapped his case to and put it away before I had taken my cigarette. But, of course, he did not notice that, and held out a lighted match to my lips as though there was something there to light.

“No, thanks,” I said quickly, fearful that if I asked again for the cigarette the mists would instantly gather once more and the real man disappear.

“Won’ t you *really,* though?” he said, blowing the match out and forgetting to light his own cigarette at the same time. “I did the whole scenario, and most of the first act. There was nothing else to do. It rained all the time, and the place was quiet as the grave—”

A waiter brought him several letters on a tray. He took them automatically. The face clouded a bit.

“What’ll you have?” he asked absentmindedly, acting automatically upon the presence of the waiter.

“Nothing, thanks.”

“Nor will I, then. Oh yes, I will, though — I’ll have some dry ginger ale. Here, waiter! Bring me a small dry ginger ale.”

The waiter, with the force of habit, bent his head questioningly for my order too.

“Y*ou* said?” asked my exasperating friend. He was right down in the mists now, and I knew I should never get him up again this side of lunch.

“I said nothing, thanks.”

“Nothing, then, for this gentleman,” he continued, gazing up at the waiter as though he were some monster seen for the first time, “and for me — a dry ginger ale, please.”

"Yes, sir," said the man, moving off.

"Small," the other called after him.

"Yessir — small."

"And a slice of lemon in it."

The waiter inclined his head respectfully from the door. The other turned to me, searching in his perturbed mind — I could tell it by the way his eyes worked — for the trail of his vanished conversation. Before he got it, however, he slithered round again on the leather seat towards the door.

"A bit of ice too, don't forget!"

The waiter's head peeped round the corner, and from the movement of his lips I gathered he repeated the remark about the bit of ice.

"I *did* say 'dry'?" my friend asked, looking anxiously at me; "didn't I?"

"You did."

"And a bit of lemon?"

"And a slice of lemon."

"And what are *you* going to have, then? Upon my word, old man, I forgot to ask you." He looked so distressed that it was impossible to show impatience.

"Nothing, thanks. You asked me, you know."

A pause fell between us. I gave it up. He would talk when he wanted to, but there was no forcing him. It struck me suddenly that he had a rather fagged and weary look for a man who had been spending several weeks at a mountain inn with work he loved. The pity and affection his presence always wakes in me ran a neck-and-neck race. At that "centre" of his, I knew full well, he was ever devising plans for the helping of others, quite as much as creating those remarkable things that issued periodically, ill-understood by a sensation-loving public, from the press. A sharp telepathic suspicion flashed through my mind, but before there was time to give it expression in words, up came the waiter with a long glass of ginger ale fizzing on a tray.

He handed it to my vague friend, and my vague friend took it and handed it to me.

“But it’s yours, my dear chap,” I suggested.

He looked puzzled for a second, and then his face cleared. “I forget what you ordered,” he observed softly, looking interrogatively at the waiter and at me.

We informed him simultaneously, “Nothing,” and the waiter respectfully mentioned the price of the drink. My friend’s left hand plunged into his trousers pocket, while his right carried the glass to his lips. Perhaps his left hand did not know what his right was about, or perhaps his mind was too far away to direct the motions of either with safety. Anyhow, the result was deplorable. He swallowed an uncomfortable gulp of air-bubbles and ginger — and choked — over me, over the waiter and tray, over his beard and clothes. The floating lump of ice bobbed up and hit his nose. I never saw a man look so surprised and distressed in my life. I took the glass from him, and when his left hand finally emerged with money he handed it first vaguely to me as though I were the waiter — for which there was no real excuse, since we were not in evening dress.

When, at length, order was restored and he was sipping quietly at the remains of the fizzing liquid, he looked up at me over the brim of his glass and remarked, with more concentration on the actual present than he had yet shown:

“By the way, you know, I’m going away tomorrow — going abroad for my holiday. Taking a lot of work with me, too—”

“But you’ve only just come back!” I expostulated, with a feeling very like anger in my heart.

He shook his head with decision. Evidently that choking had choked him into the living present. He was really “up” this time, and not likely to go down again.

“No, no,” he replied; “I’ve been here all the summer in town looking after old Podger—”

“Old Podger!” I remembered a dirty, down-at-heel old man I once met at my friend’s rooms — a poet who had “smothered his splendid talent” in drink, and who was always at starvation’s door. “What in the world was the matter with Podger?”

“D.T. I’ve been nursing him through it. The poor devil nearly went under this time. I’ve got him into a home down in the country at last, but all August he was — well, we thought he was gone.”

All *August!* So that was how my friend’s summer had been spent. With never a word of thanks probably at that!

“But your mountain inn beyond Bozen! You said—”

“Did I? I must be wool-gathering,” he laughed, with that beautifully tender smile that comes sometimes to his delicate, dreamy face. “That was *last* year. I spent my holidays last year up there. How stupid of me to get so absurdly muddled!” He plunged his nose into the empty glass, waiting for the last drop to trickle out, with his neck at an angle that betrayed the collar to be undone and the tie sadly frayed at the edges.

“But — all the work you said you did up there — the scenario and the first act and — and—”

He turned upon me with such sudden energy that I fairly jumped. Then, in a voice that mumbled the first half of his sentence, but shouted the end like a German officer giving instructions involving life or death, I heard:

“But, my dear good fellow, you don’t half listen to what I say! All that work, as I told you just now, is what I expect and mean to do when I get up there. No*w* — have you got it clear at last?”

He looked me up and down with great energy. By biting the inner side of my lip I kept my face grave. Later we went down to lunch together, and I heard details of the weeks of unselfish devotion he had lavished upon “old Podger.” I would give a great deal to possess some of the driving power for good that throbs and thrills at the real centre of my old friend with the vague manner and the absent-minded surface. But he is a singular contradiction, and almost always misunderstood. I should like to know, too, what Podger thinks.

FAITH CURE ON THE CHANNEL

A LETTER FROM my vague friend was always a source of difficulty: it allowed of so many interpretations — contradictory often. But this one was comparatively plain sailing: —

You said you were going abroad about this time. So am I.

Let's go as far as Paris together. Send me a line to above address at once. Thursday or Friday would suit me.

— Yours, X. Y. Z.

P.S. — I enclose P.O. for that 10s. I owe you.

I received this letter on a Wednesday morning.

It was written from the Club, but the Club address was carefully scored out and no other given.

The "P.O." was not enclosed.

In spite of these obstacles, however, we somehow met and arranged to start on Saturday; and the night before we dined together in that excellent little Soho restaurant— "there's nothing," my friend always said, "between its cooking and the Ritz, except prices" — and discussed our prospects, he going to finish a book at a Barbizon inn, I to inspect certain machinery in various Continental dairies.

His heart, it was plain, however, was neither in the cooking nor the book, nor in my wonderful machinery. Like a boy with a secret, he was mysterious about something hitherto unshared Happy, too, for he kept smiling at nothing.

"The fact is," he observed at last over coffee, "I'm really a vile, simply a vile sailor."

"I remember," I said, for we had once been companions on the same yacht.

"And you," he added, holding the black eyebrows steady, "you — are another." When dealing with simple truths he was often brutally frank.

"What's the good of talking about it?"

"This," he replied, paying the bill and giving me the amount of the "P.O.,"

"I'll show you."

He conducted me into a little box of a place bearing the legend outside "Foreign Chemist," and proceeded first to buy the most curious assortment of strange medicines I ever heard of. Weird indeed must have been his ailments. I had no time for reflection, however, on the point, for suddenly turning to me by way of introduction, and allowing the eyebrow next the chemist to dance and bristle so as to attract his attention, he mumbled, "This is my seasick friend. We' re off to-morrow. If you've got the stuff ready we might take it now." And, before I had time to ask or argue, he had pocketed a little package and we were in the street again.

Never had I known him so brisk and practical. "It's a new seasick cure," he explained darkly as we went home; "something quite new — just invented, in fact; and that chap's asking a few of his special customers to try it and give their honest opinions. So I told him we were pretty bad — vile, in fact — and I've got this for nothing. He only wants vile sailors, you see, otherwise there's no test—"

"Know what's in it?"

He shook his head so violently that I was afraid for the eyebrows.

"But I believe in it. It's simply wonderful stuff; no bromide, he assured me, and no harmful drugs. Just a seasick cure; that's all!"

"I'll take it if you will," I laughed. "I could take poison with impunity before going on the Channel!"

He gave me one bottle. "Take a dose tonight," he explained, "another after breakfast in the morning, another in the train, and another the moment you go on board."

I gave my promise and we separated on his doorstep. It was a lot to promise, but as I have explained, I could drink tar or prussic acid before going on a steamer, and neither would have the time to work injury. I marvelled greatly, however, at my vague friend's fit of abnormal lucidity, and in the night I dreamed of him surrounded by all the medicine bottles he had bought to take abroad with him, swallowing their contents one by one, and smiling while he did so, with eyebrows grown to the size of hedges.

I took my doses faithfully, with the immediate result that in the train I became aware of symptoms that usually had the decency to wait for the steamer. My friend took his too. He was in excellent spirits, eyes bright, full of confidence. The bottles were wrapped in neat white paper, only the necks visible; and we drank our allotted quantity from the mouths, without glasses.

“Not much taste,” I remarked.

“Wonderful stuff,” he replied. “I believe in it absolutely. It’s good for other things, too; it made me sleep like a top, and I had the appetite of a horse for breakfast. That chemist’ll make his fortune when he brings it out. People will pay a pound a bottle, lots of ‘em.”

At Newhaven the sea was agitated — hideously so; even in the harbour the steamers rose and fell absurdly. Not all the fresh, salt winds in the world, nor all the jolly sunshine and sparkling waves, nor all that strong beauty that comes with the first glimpse of the sea and long horizons, could lessen the sinking dread that was in my — my heart. Truth to tell, I had no more belief in the elixir than if it had been chopped hay and treacle.

My friend, however, was confidence personified. “The fact is,” he said, laughing at the wind and sea, “the real fact is *I believe in that chemist.* He told me this stuff was infallible; and I believe it is. The trouble with you is funk — sheer blue funk.”

We stuck to our guns and swallowed the last prescribed dose just before the syren announced our departure — and fifteen minutes later....

It was a degrading three hours; and the sting of it was that my friend, with a hideous cap tied down about his ears, a smile that was in the worst possible taste, and a jaunty confidence that was even more insulting than he intended it to be, walked up and down that loathsome, sliding, switchback deck the entire way. Not the entire way, though, for half-way across he disappeared into the dining-room, and returned in due course with that brown beard of his charged with bread-crumbs, and between his lips actually — a pipe. And, without so much as speaking to me, he paced to and fro before my chair, when a little of that imagination he put so delightfully into his books would have led him discreetly to pace the other deck where I could not see him. I thought out endless revenges, but the fact was I never had time to think out any single revenge properly to its conclusion. Something — something unspeakably vile — always came to interfere; and the sight of my friend, balancing up and down the rolling deck chatting to sailors, admiring the sea and sky, and puffing hard at his pipe all the time, was, I think, the most abominable thing I have ever seen.

“Simply marvellous, I call it,” he told me in the *douane* at Dieppe. “The stuff is a revolutionary discovery. It’s the first time I ever ate a meal on a steamer in my life. Sorry you suffered so. Can’t understand it,” he added, with a complacency that was insufferable. I was positively delighted to see the Customs officer open *all* his bags and litter his things about in glorious confusion....

In Paris that night our little hotel was rather full, and we had to share a big two-bedded room. My friend groaned a good deal between two and three in the morning and kept me awake; and once, somewhere about five a m., I saw him with a lighted candle fumbling at the table among a lot of little white paper packages which I recognised as his purchases from that criminal London chemist who had concocted the seasick cure.

It was at nine o’ clock, however, while he was down at his bath, that I noticed something on the table by his bed that instantly arrested my attention. Regardless of morals, I investigated. It was unmistakable. It was his own bottle of the seasick cure. He had never taken it at all!

Then, just as his step sounded in the passage, it flashed across me. He had made one of his usual muddles. He had mistaken the bottle. He had swallowed the contents of some other phial instead.

Revenge is sweet; but I felt well again, and no longer harboured any spite. There was just time to hide the bottle in my hand when he entered.

“Awful headache I’ve got,” he said. “Can’t make out what’s wrong with me. Such funny pains, too.”

“After-effects of the seasick cure, probably. They’ll pass in time,” I suggested. But he remained in bed for a day and a night with all the symptoms *of mal de mer* on land.

It was many weeks later when I told him the truth, and showed the bottle to prove it — just in time to prevent his telling the chemist, “I have tried your seasick cure and found it absolutely efficacious,” etc.

“What cured you,” I said, “was far more wonderful than anything one can buy in bottles. It was faith, sheer faith!”

“I believe you’re right,” he replied meekly. “I believed in that stuff *absolutely.”* Then he added, “But, you know, I should like to find out what it was I *did* take.”

THE GOBLIN'S COLLECTION

DUTTON ACCEPTED THE invitation for the feeble reason that he was not quick enough at the moment to find a graceful excuse. He had none of that facile brilliance which is so useful at week-end parties; he was a big, shy, awkward man. Moreover, he disliked these great houses. They swallowed him. The solemn, formidable butlers oppressed him. He left on Sunday night when possible. This time, arriving with an hour to dress, he went upstairs to an enormous room, so full of precious things that he felt like an insignificant item in a museum corridor. He smiled disconsolately as the underling who brought up his bag began to fumble with the lock. But, instead of the sepulchral utterance he dreaded, a delicious human voice with an unmistakable brogue proceeded from the stooping figure. It was positively comforting. "It 'ull be locked, sorr, but maybe ye have the key?" And they bent together over the disreputable kit-bag, looking like a pair of ants knitting antennae on the floor of some great cave. The giant four-poster watched them contemptuously; mahogany cupboards wore an air of grave surprise; the gaping, open fireplace alone could have swallowed all his easels — almost, indeed, his little studio. This human, Irish presence was distinctly consoling — some extra hand or other, thought Dutton, probably.

He talked a little with the lad; then, lighting a cigarette, he watched him put the clothes away in the capacious cupboards, noticing in particular how neat and careful he was with the little things. Nail-scissors, silver stud-box, metal shoe-horn, and safety razor, even the bright cigar-cutter and pencil-sharpener collected loose from the bottom of the bag — all these he placed in a row upon the dressing-table with the glass top, and seemed never to have done with it. He kept coming back to rearrange and put a final touch, lingering over them absurdly. Dutton watched him with amusement, then surprise, finally with exasperation. Would he never go? "Thank you," he said at last; "that will do. I'll dress now. What time is dinner?" The lad told him, but still lingered, evidently anxious to say more. "Everything's out, I think," repeated Dutton impatiently; "all the loose things, I mean?" The face at once turned eagerly. What mischievous Irish eyes he had, to be sure! "I've put thim all together in a row, sorr, so that ye'll not be missing annything at all," was the quick reply, as he pointed to the ridiculous collection of little articles, and even darted back to finger them again. He counted them one by one. And then suddenly he added, with a touch of personal interest that was not familiarity, "It's so easy, ye see, sorr, to lose thim small bright things in this great room." And he was gone.

Smiling a little to himself, Dutton began to dress, wondering how the lad had left the impression that his words meant more than they said. He almost wished he had encouraged him to talk. "The small bright things in this great room" — what an admirable description, almost a criticism! He felt like a prisoner of state in the Tower. He stared about him into the alcoves, recesses, deep embrasured windows; the tapestries and huge curtains oppressed him; next he fell to wondering who the other guests would be, whom he would take in to dinner, how early he could make an excuse and slip off to bed; then, midway in these desultory thoughts, became suddenly aware of a curiously sharp impression — that he was being watched. Somebody, quite close, was looking at him. He dismissed the fancy as soon as it was born, putting it down to the size and mystery of the old-world chamber; but in spite of himself the idea persisted teasingly, and several times he caught himself turning nervously to look over his shoulder. It was not a ghostly feeling; his nature was not accessible to ghostly things.

The strange idea, lodged securely in his brain, was traceable, he thought, to something the Irish lad had said — grew out, rather, of what he had left unsaid. He idly allowed his imagination to encourage it. Someone, friendly but curious, with inquisitive, peeping eyes, was watching him. Someone very tiny was hiding in the enormous room. He laughed about it; but he felt different. A certain big, protective feeling came over him that he must go gently lest he tread on some diminutive living thing that was soft as a kitten and elusive as a baby mouse. Once, indeed, out of the corner of his eye, he fancied he saw a little thing with wings go fluttering past the great purple curtains at the other end. It was by a window. "A bird, or something, outside," he told himself with a laugh, yet moved thenceforth more often than not on tiptoe. This cost him a certain effort: his proportions were elephantine. He felt a more friendly interest now in the stately, imposing chamber.

The dressing-gong brought him back to reality and stopped the flow of his imagining. He shaved, and laboriously went on dressing then; he was slow and leisurely in his movements, like many big men; very orderly, too. But when he was ready to put in his collar stud it was nowhere to be found. It was a worthless bit of brass, but most important; he had only one. Five minutes ago it had been standing inside the ring of his collar on the marble slab; he had carefully placed it there. Now it had disappeared and left no trail. He grew warm and untidy in the search. It was something of a business for Dutton to go on all fours. "Malicious little beast!" he grunted, rising from his knees, his hand sore where he had scraped it beneath the cupboard. His trouser-crease was ruined, his hair was tumbled. He knew too well the elusive activity of similar small objects. "It will turn up again," he tried to laugh, "if I pay it no attention. Mal—" he abruptly changed the adjective, as though he had nearly said a dangerous thing— "naughty little imp!" He went on dressing, leaving the collar to the last. He fastened the cigar-cutter to his chain, but the nail-scissors, he noticed now, had also gone. "Odd," he reflected, "very odd!"

He looked at the place where they had been a few minutes ago. "Odd!" he repeated. And finally, in desperation, he rang the bell. The heavy curtains swung inwards as he said, "Come in," in answer to the knock, and the Irish boy, with the merry, dancing eyes, stood in the room. He glanced half nervously, half expectantly, about him. "It'll be something ye have lost, sorr?" he said at once, as though he knew.

"I rang," said Dutton, resenting it a little, "to ask you if you could get me a collar stud — for this evening. Anything will do." He did not say he had lost his own. Someone, he felt, who was listening, would chuckle and be pleased. It was an absurd position.

"And will it be a shtud like this, sorr, that yez, wanting?" asked the boy, picking up the lost object from inside the collar on the marble slab.

"Like that, yes," stammered the other, utterly amazed. He had overlooked it, of course, yet it was in the identical place where he had left it. He felt mortified and foolish. It was so obvious that the boy grasped the situation — more, had expected it. It was as if the stud had been taken and replaced deliberately. "Thank you," he added, turning away to hide his face as the lad backed out — with a grin, he imagined, though he did not see it. Almost immediately, it seemed, then he was back again, holding out a little cardboard box containing an assortment of ugly bone studs. Dutton felt as if the whole thing had been prepared beforehand. How foolish it was! Yet behind it lay something real and true and — utterly incredible!

“They won’t get taken, sorr,” he heard the lad say from the doorway. “They’re not nearly bright enough.”

The other decided not to hear. “Thanks,” he said curtly; “they’ll do nicely.”

There was a pause, but the boy did not go. Taking a deep breath, he said very quickly, as though greatly daring, “It’s only the bright and little lovely things he takes, sorr, if ye plaz e. He takes thim for his collection, and there’s no stoppin’ him at all.” It came out with a rush, and Dutton, hearing it, let the human thing rise up in him. He turned and smiled.

“Oh, he takes these things for his collection, does he?” he asked more gently.

The boy looked dreadfully shame-faced, confession hanging on his lips. “The little bright and lovely things, sorr, yes. I’ve done me best, but there’s things he can’t resist at all. The bone ones is safe, though. He won’t look at thim.”

“I suppose he followed you across from Ireland, eh?” the other inquired.

The lad hung his head. “I told Father Madden,” he said in a lower voice, “but it’s not the least bit of good in the wurrld.” He looked as though he had been convicted of stealing and feared to lose his place. Suddenly, lifting his blue eyes, he added, “But if ye take no notice at all he ginrelly puts everything back in its place agin. He only borrows thim, just for a little bit of toime. Pretend ye’ re not wantin’ thim at all, sorr, and back they’ll come prisintly again, brighter than before maybe.”

“I see,” answered Dutton slowly. “All right, then,” he dismissed him, “and I won’ t say a word downstairs. You needn’t be afraid,” as the lad looked his gratitude and vanished like a flash, leaving the other with a queer and eerie feeling, staring at the ugly bone studs. He finished dressing hurriedly and went downstairs. He went on tiptoe out of the great room, moving delicately and with care, lest he might tread on something very soft and tiny, almost wounded, like a butterfly with a broken wing. And from the corners, he felt positive, something watched him go.

The ordeal of dinner passed off well enough; the rather heavy evening too. He found the opportunity to slip off early to bed. The nail-scissors were in their place again. He read till midnight; nothing happened. His hostess had told him the history of his room, inquiring kindly after his comfort. “Some people feel rather lost in it,” she said; “I hope you found all you want,” and, tempted by her choice of words — the “lost” and “found” — he nearly told the story of the Irish lad whose goblin had followed him across the sea and “borrowed little bright and lovely things for his collection.” But he kept his word; he told nothing; she would only have stared, for one thing. For another, he was bored, and therefore uncommunicative. He smiled inwardly. All that this giant mansion could produce for his comfort and amusement were ugly bone studs, a thieving goblin, and a vast bedroom where dead royalty had slept. Next day, at intervals, when changing for tennis or back again for lunch, the “borrowing” continued; the little things he needed at the moment had disappeared. They turned up later. To ignore their disappearance was the recipe for their recovery — invariably, too, just where he had seen them last. There was the lost object shining in his face, propped impishly on its end, just ready to fall upon the carpet, and ever with a quizzical, malicious air of innocence that was truly goblin. His collar stud was the favourite; next came the scissors and the silver pencil-sharpener.

Trains and motors combined to keep him Sunday night, but he arranged to leave on Monday before the other guests were up, and so got early to bed. He meant to watch. There was a merry, jolly feeling in him that he had established quasi-friendly relations with the little Borrower. He might even see an object go — catch it in the act of disappearing! He arranged the bright objects in a row upon the glass-topped dressing-table opposite the bed, and while reading kept an eye slyly on the array of tempting bait. But nothing happened. “It’s the wrong way,” he realised suddenly. “What a blunderer I am!” He turned the light out then. Drowsiness crept over him.... Next day, of course, he told himself it was a dream....

The night was very still, and through the latticed windows stole faintly the summer moonlight. Outside the foliage rustled a little in the wind. A nightjar called from the fields, and a secret, furry owl made answer from the copse beyond. The body of the chamber lay in thick darkness, but a slanting ray of moonlight caught the dressing-table and shone temptingly upon the silver objects. “It’s like setting a night-line,” was the last definite thought he remembered — when the laughter that followed stopped suddenly, and his nerves gave a jerk that turned him keenly alert.

From the enormous open fireplace, gaping in darkness at the end of the room, issued a thread of delicate sound that was softer than a feather. A tiny flurry of excitement, furtive, tentative, passed shivering across the air. An exquisite, dainty flutter stirred the night, and through the heavy human brain upon the great four-poster fled this picture, as from very far away, picked out in black and silver — of a wee knight-errant crossing the frontiers of fairyland, high mischief in his tiny, beating heart. Pricking along over the big, thick carpet, he came towards the bed, towards the dressing-table, intent upon bold plunder. Dutton lay motionless as a stone, and watched and listened. The blood in his ears smothered the sound a little, but he never lost it altogether. The flicking of a mouse’s tail or whiskers could hardly have been more gentle than this sound, more wary, circumspect, discreet, certainly not half so artful. Yet the human being in the bed, so heavily breathing, heard it well. Closer it came, and closer, oh, so elegant and tender, this bold attack of a wee Adventurer from another world. It shot swiftly past the bed. With a little flutter, delicious, almost musical, it rose in the air before his very face and entered the pool of moonlight on the dressing-table. Something blurred it then; the human sight grew troubled and confused a moment; a mingling of moonlight with the reflections from the mirror, slab of glass, and shining objects obscured clear vision somehow. For a second Dutton lost the proper focus. There was a tiny rattle and a tiny click. He saw that the pencil-sharpener stood balanced on the table’s very edge. It was in the act of vanishing.

But for his stupid blunder then, he might have witnessed more. He simply could not restrain himself, it seems. He sprang, and at the same instant the silver object fell upon the carpet. Of course his elephantine leap made the entire table shake. But, anyhow, he was not quick enough. He saw the reflection of a slim and tiny hand slide down into the mirrored depths of the reflecting sheet of glass — deep, deep down, and swift as a flash of light. This he thinks he saw, though the light, he admits, was oddly confusing in that moment of violent and clumsy movement.

One thing, at any rate, was beyond all question: the pencil-sharpener had disappeared. He turned the light up; he searched for a dozen minutes, then gave it up in despair and went back to bed.

Next morning he searched again. But, having overslept himself, he did not search as thoroughly as he might have done, for half-way through the tiresome operation the Irish lad came in to take his bag for the train.

“Will ut be something ye’ve lost, sorr?” he asked gravely.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Dutton answered from the floor. “You can take the bag — and my overcoat.” And in town that day he bought another pencil sharpener and hung it on his chain.

IMAGINATION

HAVING DINED UPON a beefsteak and a pint of bitter, Jones went home to work. The trouble with Jones — his first name William — was that he possessed creative imagination: that luggage upon which excess charges have to be paid all through life — to the critic, the stupid, the orthodox, the slower minds without the “flash.” He was alone in his brother’s flat. It was after nine o’ clock. He was half-way into a story, and had — stuck! Sad to relate, the machinery that carries on the details of an original inspiration had blocked. And to invent he knew not how. Unless the imagination “produced” he would not allow his brain to devise mere episodes — dull and lifeless substitutes. Jones, poor fool, was also artist.

And the reason he had “stuck” was not surprising, for his story was of a kind that might well tax the imagination of any sane man. He was writing at the moment about a being who had survived his age — a study of one of those rare and primitive souls who walk the earth to-day in a man’s twentieth-century body, while yet the spirit belongs to the Golden Age of the world’s history. You may come across them sometimes, rare, ingenuous, delightful beings, the primal dews still upon their eyelids, the rush and glow of earth’s pristine fires pulsing in their veins, careless of gain, indifferent to success, lost, homeless, exiled — *dépaysés....* The idea had seized him. He had met such folk. He burned to describe their exile, the pathos of their loneliness, their yearnings and their wanderings — rejected by a world they had outlived. And for his type, thus representing some power of unexpended mythological values strayed back into modern life to find itself denied and ridiculed — he had chosen a Centaur! For he wished it to symbolise what he believed was to be the next stage in human evolution: Intuition no longer neglected, but developed equally with Reason. His Centaur was to stand for instinct (the animal body close to Nature) combined with, yet not dominated by, the upright stature moving towards deity. The conception was true and pregnant.

And — he had stuck. The detail that blocked him was the man’s *appearance.* How would such a being look? In what details would he betray that, though outwardly a man, he was inwardly this survival of the Golden Age, escaped from some fair Eden, splendid, immense, simple, and beneficent, yet — a Centaur?

Perhaps it was just as well he had "stuck," for his brother would shortly be in, and his brother was a successful business man with the money sense and commercial instincts strongly developed. He dealt in rice and sugar. With his brother in the flat no Centaur could possibly survive for a single moment. "It'll come to me when I'm not thinking about it," he sighed, knowing well the waywardness of his particular genius. He threw the reins upon the sub' conscious self and moved into an arm-chair to read in the evening paper the things the public loved — that public who refused to buy his books, pleading they were "queer." He waded down the list of immoralities, murders and assaults with a dreamy eye, and had just reached the witness' s description of finding the bloody head in the faithless wife's bedroom, when there came a hurried, pelting knock at the door, and William Jones, glad of the relief, went to open it. There, facing him, stood the bore from the flat below. Horrors!

It was not, however, a visit after all. "Jones," he faltered, "there's an odd sort of chap here asking for you or your brother. Rang my bell by mistake."

Jones murmured some reply or other, and as the bore vanished with a hurry unusual to him, there passed into the flat a queer shape, born surely of the night and stars and desolate places. He seemed in some undefinable way bent, humpbacked, very large. With him came a touch of open spaces, winds, forests, long clean hills and dew-drenched fields.

"Come in, please..." said Jones, instantly aware that the man was not for his brother. "You have something to — er—" he was going to use the word "ask," then changed it instinctively— "say to me, haven't you?"

The man was ragged, poor, outcast. Clearly it was a begging episode; and yet he trembled violently, while in his veins ran fire. The caller refused a seat, but moved over to the curtains by the window, drawing them slightly aside so that he could see out. And the window was high above old smoky London — open. It felt cold. Jones bent down, always keeping his caller in view, and lit the gas stove. "You wish to see me," he said, rising again to an upright position. Then he added more hurriedly, stepping back a little towards the rack where the walking-sticks were, “Please let me know what I can do for you!”

Bearded, unkempt, with massive shoulders and huge neck, the caller stood a moment and stared. “Your name and address,” he said at length, “were given to me” — he hesitated a moment, then added— “you know by whom.” His voice was deep and windy and echoing. It made the stretched cords of the upright piano ring against the wall. “He told me to call,” the man concluded.

“Ah yes; of course,” Jones stammered, forgetting for the moment who or where he was. “Let me see — where are you” — the word did not want to come out— “staying?” The caller made an awful and curious movement; it seemed so much bigger than his body. “In what way — er — can I be of assistance?” Jones hardly knew what he said. The other volunteered so little. He was frightened. Then, before the man could answer, he caught a dreadful glimpse, as of something behind the outline. It moved. Was it shadow that thus *extended* his form? Was it the glare of that ugly gas stove that played tricks with the folds of the curtain, driving bodily outline forth into mere vacancy? For the figure of his strange caller seemed to carry with it the idea of projections, extensions, growths, in themselves not monstrous, fine and comely, rather — yet awful.

The man left the window and moved towards him. It was a movement both swift and enormous. It was instantaneous.

“Who are you — *really?”* asked Jones, his breath catching, while he went pluckily out to meet him, irresistibly drawn. “And what is it you *really* want of me?” He went very close to the shrouded form, caught the keen air from the open window behind, sniffed a wind that was not London’s stale and weary wind, then stopped abruptly, frozen with terror and delight.

The man facing him was splendid and terrific, exhaling something that over whelmed.

“What can I... do... for... you?” whispered Jones, shaking like a leaf. A delight of racing clouds was in him.

The answer came in a singular roaring voice that yet sounded far away, as though among mountains. Wind might have brought it down.

“There is nothing you can do for me! But, by Chiron, there is something I can do for you!”

“And that is?” asked Jones faintly, feeling something sweep against his feet and legs like the current of a river in flood.

The man eyed him appallingly a moment.

“Let you see me!” he roared, while his voice set the piano singing again, and his outline seemed to swim over the chairs and tables like a fluid mass. “Show myself to you!”

The figure stretched out what looked like arms, reared gigantically aloft towards the ceiling, and swept towards him. Jones saw the great visage close to his own. He smelt the odour of caves, river-beds, hillsides — space. In another second he would have been lost —

His brother made a great rattling as he opened the door. The atmosphere of rice and sugar and office desks came in with him.

“Why, Billy, old man, you look as if you’d seen a ghost. You’re white!”

William Jones mopped his forehead. “I’ve been working rather hard,” he answered. “Feel tired. Fact is — I got stuck in a story for a bit.”

“Too bad. Got it straightened out at last, I hope?”

“Yes, thanks. *It came to me* — in the end.”

The other looked at him. “Good,” he said shortly. “Rum thing, imagination, isn’t it?” And then he began talking about his day’s business — in tons and tons of food.

THE INVITATION

THEY BUMPED INTO one another by the swinging doors of the little Soho restaurant, and, recoiling sharply, each made a half-hearted pretence of lifting his hat (it was French manners, of course, *inside).* Then, discovering that they were English, and not strangers, they exclaimed, “Sorry!” and laughed.

“Hulloa! It’s Smith!” cried the man with the *breezy* manner; “and when did you get back?” It sounded as though “Smith” and “you” were different persons. “I haven’t seen you for months!” They shook hands cordially.

“Only last Saturday — on the *Rollitania,”* answered the man with the pince-nez. They were acquaintances of some standing. Neither was aware of anything in the other he disliked. More positive cause for friendship there was none. They met, however, not infrequently.

“Last Saturday! Did you really?” exclaimed the breezy one; and, after an imperceptible pause which suggested nothing more vital, he added, “And had a good time in America, eh?”

“Oh! not bad, thanks — not bad at all.” He likewise was conscious of a rather barren pause. “Awful crossing, though,” he threw in a few seconds later with a slight grimace.

“Ah! At this time of year, you know—” said Breezy, shaking his head knowingly; “though *sometimes,* of course, one has better trips in winter than in summer. I crossed once in December when it was like a mill-pond the whole blessed way.”

They moved a little to one side to let a group of Frenchmen enter the swinging doors.

“It’s a good line,” he added, in a voice that settled the reputation of the steamship company for ever. “By Jove, it’s a good line.”

“Oh! it’s a good line, yes,” agreed Pince-nez, gratified to find his choice approved. He shifted his glasses modestly. The discovery reflected glory upon his judgment. “And such an excellent table!”

Breezy agreed heartily. “I’d never cross now on any other,” he declared, as though he meant the table. “You’re right.”

This happy little agreement about the food pleased them both; it showed their judgment to be sound; also it established a ground of common interest — a link — something that gave point to their little chat, and made it seem worth while to have stopped and spoken. They rose in one another’s estimation. The chance meeting ought to lead to something, perhaps. Yet neither found the expected inspiration; for neither *au fond* had anything to say to the other beyond passing the time of day.

“Well,” said Pince-nez, lingeringly but very pleasantly, making a movement towards the doors; “I suppose I must be going in. You — er — you’ve had lunch, of course?”

“Thanks, yes, I have,” Breezy replied with a certain air of disappointment, as though the question had been an invitation. He moved a few steps backwards down the pavement. “But, now you’re back,” he added more cheerfully, “we must try and see something of one another.”

“By all means. Do let’s,” said Pince-nez. His manner somehow suggested that he too expected an invitation, perhaps. He hesitated a moment, as though about to add something, but in the end said nothing.

“We must lunch together one day,” observed Breezy, with his jolly smile. He glanced up at the restaurant.

“By all means — let’s,” agreed the other again, with one foot on the steps. “Any day you like. Next week, perhaps. You let me know.” He nodded cordially, and half turned to enter.

“Lemme see, where are you staying?” called Breezy by way of after thought.

“Oh! I’ in at the X — ,” mentioning an obscure hostel in the W.C. district.

“Of course; yes, I remember. That’s where you stopped before, isn’t it? Up in Bloomsbury somewhere — ?”

“Rooms ain’t up to much, but the cooking’s *quite* decent.”

“Good. Then we’ll lunch one day soon. What sort of time, by the bye, suits you?” The breezy one, for some obscure reason, looked vigorously at his watch.

“Oh! any time; one o’clock onwards, sort of thing, I suppose?” with an air of “just let me know and I’ll be there.”

“Same here, yes,” agreed the other, with slightly less enthusiasm.

“That’s capital, then,” from Pince-nez. He paused a moment, not finding precisely the suitable farewell phrase. Then, to his own undoing, he added carelessly, “There are one or two things — er — I should like to tell you about—”

“And luncheon is the best time,” Breezy suggested at once, “for busy men like us. You might bespeak a table, in fact.” He jerked his head towards the restaurant.

The two acquaintances, one on the pavement, the other on the steps, stood and stared at each other. The onus of invitation had somehow shifted insensibly from Breezy to Pince-nez. The next remark would be vital. Neither thought it worth while to incur the slight expense of a luncheon that involved an hour in each other’s company. Yet it was nothing stronger than a dread of possible boredom that dictated the hesitancy.

“Not a bad idea,” agreed Pince-nez vaguely. “But I doubt if they’ll keep a table after one o’clock, you know.”

“Never mind, then. You’ re on the telephone, I suppose, aren’t you?” called Breezy down the pavement, still moving slowly backwards.

“Yes, you’ll find it under the name of the hotel,” replied the other, putting his head back round the door-post in the act of going in.

“My number’s not in the book!” Breezy cried back; “but it’s 0417 Westminster. Then you’ll ring me up one day? That’ll be very jolly indeed. *Don’t forget the number!”* This shifting of telephonic responsibility, he felt, was a master-stroke.

“Right-O. I’ll remember. So long, then, for the present,” Pince-nez answered more faintly, disappearing into the restaurant.

“Decent fellow, that. I shall go to lunch if he asks me,” was the thought in the mind of each. It lasted for perhaps half a minute, and then — oblivion.

Ten days later they ran across one another again about luncheon-time in Piccadilly; nodded, smiled, hesitated a second too long — and turned back to shake hands.

“How’s everything?” asked the breezy one with gusto.

“First-rate, thanks. And how are you?”

“Jolly weather, isn’t it?” Breezy said, looking about him generally, “this sunshine — by Jove!”

“Nothing like it,” declared Pince-nez, shifting his glasses to look at the sun, and concealing his lack of something to say by catching at the hearty manner.

“Nothing,” agreed Breezy.

“In the world,” echoed Pince-nez.

Again the topic was a link. The stream of pedestrians jostled them. They moved a few yards up Dover Street. Each was really on his way to luncheon. A pause followed the move.

“Still at — er — that hotel up there?” The name had escaped him. He jerked his head vaguely northwards.

“Yes; I thought you’d be looking in for lunch one day,” a faint memory stirring in his brain.

“Delighted! Or — you’d better come to my Club, eh? Less out of the way, you know,” declared Breezy.

“Very jolly. Thanks; that’d be first-rate.” Both paused a moment. Breezy looked down the street as though expecting someone or something. They ignored that it was luncheon hour.

“You’ll find me in the telephone book,” observed Pince-nez presently.

“Under X — Hotel, I suppose?” from Breezy. “All right.”

“0995 Northern’s the number, yes.”

“And mine,” said Breezy, “is 0417 Westminster; or the Club” — with an air of imparting valuable private information— “is 0866 Mayfair. Any day you like. Don’t forget!”

"Rather not. Somewhere about one o'clock, eh?"

"Yes — or one-thirty." And off they went again — each to his solitary luncheon.

A fortnight passed, and once more they came together — this time in an A.B.C. shop.

"Hulloa! There's Smith," thought Breezy. "By Jove, I'll ask him to lunch with me."

"Why, there's that chap again," thought Pince-nez,. "I'll invite him, I think."

They sat down at the same table. "But this is capital," exclaimed both; "you must lunch with me, of course!" And they laughed pleasantly. They talked of food and weather. They compared Soho with A.B.C. Each offered light excuses for being found in the latter.

"I was in a hurry to-day, and looked in by the merest chance for a cup of coffee," observed Breezy, ordering quite lot of things at once, absent-mindedly, as it were.

"I like the butter here so awfully," mentioned Pince-nez later. "It's *quite* the best in London, and the freshest, I always think." As this was not the luncheon, they felt that only commonplace things were in order. The special things they had to discuss must wait, of course.

The waitress got their paper checks muddled somehow. "I've put a 'alf-penny of yours on 'is," she explained cryptically to Pince-nez.

"Oh," laughed Breezy, "that's nothing. This gentleman is lunching with me, anyhow."

"You'll 'ave to make it all right when you get outside, then," said the girl gravely.

They laughed over her reply. At the pay-desk both made vigorous search for money. Pince-nez, being nimbler, produced a florin first. "This is *my* lunch, of course. I asked you, remember," he said. Breezy demurred with a good grace.

"You can be host another time, if you insist," added Pince-nez, pocketing twopence change.

“Rather,” said the other heartily. “You must come to the Club — any day you like, you know.”

“I’ll come to-morrow, then,” said Pince-nez, quick as a flash. “I’ve got the telephone number.”

“Do,” cried Breezy, very, very heartily indeed. “I shall be delighted! One o’clock, remember.”

THE IMPULSE

"MY DEAR CHAP," cried Jones, throwing his hands out in a gesture of distress he thought was quite real, "nothing would give me greater pleasure — if only I could manage it. But the fact is I'm as hard up as yourself!"

The little pale-faced man of uncertain age opposite shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

"In a month or so, perhaps—" Jones ones added, hedging instinctively. "If it's not too late then — I should be delighted—"

The other interrupted quickly, a swift flush emphasising momentarily the pallor of his strained and tired face. Overworked, over-weary he looked.

"Oh, thanks, but it's really of no consequence. I felt sure you wouldn't mind my asking, though." And Jones replied heartily that he only wished he were "flush" enough to lend it. They talked weather and politics then — after a pause, finished their drinks, Jones refusing the offer of another, and, presently, the elder man said good-night and left the Club. Jones, with a slight sigh of boredom, as though life went hard with him, passed upstairs to the card-room to find partners for a game.

Jones was not a bad fellow really; he was untaught. Experience had neglected him a little, so that his sympathies knew not those sweet though difficult routes by which interest travels away from self — towards others. He entirely lacked that acuter sense of life which only comes to those who have known genuine want and hardship. A fat income had always tumbled into his bank without effort on his part, the harvest of another's sweat; yet, as with many such, he imagined that he earned his thousand a year, and figured somehow to himself that he deserved it. He was neither evil-liver nor extravagant; he knew not values, that was all — least of all money values; and at the moment when his cousin asked for twenty pounds to help his family to a holiday, he found that debts pressed a bit hard, that he owed still on his motorcar, and that some recent speculations seemed suddenly very doubtful. He was hard up, yes.... Perhaps, if the cards were lucky, he might do it after all. But the cards were not lucky. Soon after midnight he took a taxi home to his rooms in St. James's Street. And then it was he found a letter marked "Urgent" placed by his man upon the table by the door so that he could not miss it.

The letter kept him awake most of the night in keen distress — for himself. It was anonymous, signed "Your Well-wisher." It warned him, in words that proved the writer to be well informed, that the speculation in which he, Jones, had plunged so recklessly a week before would mean a total loss unless he instantly took certain steps to retrieve himself. Such steps, moreover, were just possible, provided he acted immediately.

Jones, as he read it, turned pale, if such a thing were possible, all over his body; then he turned hot and cold. He sweated, groaned, sighed, raged; sat down and wrote urgent instructions to solicitors and others; tore the letters up and wrote others. The loss of that money would reduce his income by at least half, alter his whole plan and scale of living, make him poor. He tried to reflect, but the calmness necessary to sound reflection lay far from him. Action was what he needed, but action was just then out of the question, for all the machinery of the world slept — solicitors, company secretaries, influential friends, law-courts. The telephone on the wall merely grinned at him uselessly. Sleep was as vain a remedy as the closed and silent banks. There was absolutely nothing he could do till the morning; and he realised that the letters he wrote were futile even while he wrote them — and tore them up the next minute. Personal interviews the first thing in the morning, energetic talk and action based upon the best possible advice, were the only form relief could take, and these personal interviews he could obtain even before the letters would be delivered, or as soon. For him that money seemed as good as already lost... and tossing upon his sleepless bed he faced the change of life the loss involved — bitterly, savagely, with keen pain: the lowered scale of self-indulgence, the clipped selfishness, restricted pleasures, fewer clothes, cheaper rooms, difficult and closely calculated travelling, and all the rest. It bit him hard — this first grinding of the little wheels of possible development in an ordinary selfish, though not evil, heart....

And then it was, as the grey dawn-light crept past the blinds, that the sharpness of his pain and the keen flight of his stirred imagination, projecting itself as by these forced marches into new, untried conditions, produced a slight reaction. The swing of the weary pendulum went a little beyond himself. He fell to wondering vaguely, and with poor insight, yet genuinely, what other men might feel, and how they managed on smaller incomes than his own — smaller than his would be even with the loss. Gingerly, tentatively, he snatched fearful glimpses (fearful, they seemed, to him, at least) into the enclosures of these more restricted lives of others. He knew a mild and weak extension of himself, as it were, that fringed the little maps of lives less happy and indulgent than his own. And the novel sensation brought a faint relief. The small, clogged wheels of sympathy acquired faster movement, almost impetus. It seemed as though the heat and fire of his pain, though selfish pain, generated some new energy that made them turn.

Jones, in all his useless life, had never *thought*; his mind had reflected images perhaps, but had never taken hold of a real idea and followed it by logical process to an end. His mind was heavy and confused, for his nature, as with so many, only moved to calculated action when a strong enough desire instinctively showed the quickest, easiest way by which two and two could be made into four. His reflections upon comparative poverty — the poverty he was convinced now faced him cruelly — were therefore obscure and trivial enough, while wholly honest. Wealth, he divined dimly, was relative, and money represented the value of what is wanted, perhaps of what is needed rather, and usually of what cannot be obtained. Some folk are poor because they cannot afford a second motor-car, or spend more than £100 upon a trip abroad; others because the moors and sea are out of reach; others, again, because they are glad of cast-off clothing and only dare "the gods" one night a week or take the free standing-room at Sunday concerts.... He suddenly recalled the story of some little penniless, elderly governess in Switzerland who made her underskirts from the silk of old umbrellas because she liked the froufrou sound. Again and again this thought for others slipped past the network of his own distress, making his own selfish pain spread wider and therefore less acutely. For even with a mere £500 his life, perhaps, need not be too hard and unhappy.... The little wheels moved faster. His pain struck sparks. He saw strange glimpses of a new, far country, a fairer land than he had ever dreamed of, with endless horizons, and flowers, small and very simple, yet so lovely that he would have liked to pick them for their perfume. A sense of joy came for a moment on some soft wind of beauty, fugitive, but sweet. It vanished instantly again, but the vision caught for a moment, too tiny to be measured even by a fraction of a second, had flamed like summer lightning through his heart. It almost seemed as though his grinding selfish pain had burned the dense barriers that hid another world, bringing a light that just flamed above those huge horizons before they died. For they did die — and quickly, yet left behind a touch of singular joy and peace that somehow glowed on through all his subsequent self-pity....

And then, abruptly, with a vividness of detail that shocked him, he saw the Club smoking-room, and the worn face of his cousin close before him — the overworked hack-writer, who had asked a temporary £20, a little sum he would assuredly have paid back before the end of the year, a sum he asked, not for himself, but that he might send his wife and children to the sea.

Impulse, usually deplored as weakness, may prove first seed of habit. Whether Jones afterwards regretted his unconsidered action may be left unrecorded — whether he *would* have regretted it, rather, if the saving of his dreaded loss had not subsequently been effected. As matters stand, he only knew a sense of flattering self-congratulation that he had slipped that letter — the only one he left untorn — into the pillar-box at the corner before the sun rose, and that it contained a pink bit of paper that should bring to another the relief he himself had, for the first time in his life, known imaginatively upon that sleepless bed. Before the day was over the letter reached its destination, and his own affairs had been put right. And two days later, when they met in the Club, and Jones noticed the obvious happiness in the other's eyes and manner, he only answered to his words of thanks:

"I wish I could have given it at once. The fact is I found letters on getting home that night which — er — made it possible, you see...!"

But in his heart, as he said it, flamed again quite suddenly the memory of that fair land with endless horizons he had sighted for a second, and the sentence that ran unspoken through his mind was: "By Jove, that's something I must do again. It's worth it...!"

HER BIRTHDAY

IT WAS HER birthday on the morrow, and I set forth to find a suitable and worthy present. My means, judged by the standards of the big merchants, seemed trivial; yet, could I but discover the right gift, no matter how insignificant, I felt sure that it would please her, and so make me doubly happy. And the kind of gift I already knew, for I had a specimen of it in my humble lodgings; only of so poor a type that I was ashamed to offer it. I must find somewhere a much, much better one, if possible, perfect and without a single flaw. I went, therefore, into the great shops and saw a thousand wonderful and lovely things....

So particular was I, however, and so difficult to suit, that I wearied the sales folk, and began to feel despondent. All that they showed me was so wrong — so cheap. In the matter of actual expense there was no disagreement, for I mentioned plainly beforehand the price that I would pay, or, rather, that I was prepared to pay. But in the nature and quality of the goods there was no satisfying me at all. Everything that they spread before my eyes seemed ordinary, trifling, even spurious. Marvellously fashioned, and of the most costly description, they yet seemed somewhere counterfeit. The goods were sham. Already she possessed far better. There was nowhere — and I went to the very best emporiums where the rich and favoured of the world bought their offerings — there was nowhere the little genuine thing I sought. The finest that was set before me seemed unworthy. I compared one and all with the specimen, broken yet authentic, that I had at home. And even the cleverest of the salesfolk was unable to deceive me, because I *knew.*

“And this, for instance?” I asked at length, far from content, yet thinking it might just do perhaps in place of anything better I could find. “How much is this magnificent, jewelled thing, with its ingenious little surprise for each day in the entire year? You mentioned — ?”

“Ten million pounds, sir,” said the man obsequiously, while he eyed me with a close and questioning glance.

“Ten million only!” And I laughed in his face.

“That was the price you named, sir,” he murmured.

I drew myself up, looking disdainfully, pityingly at him. And, though he met my eye, he hesitated. Over his tired features there stole a soft and marvellous expression. Something more tender than starlight shone in his little eyes. And, as he answered in a gentle voice that was almost a whisper, I saw him smile as a man may smile when he understands a divine, unutterable thing. Glory touched him for an instant with high radiance, and a hint of delicious awe hid shyly in his voice. I barely caught the words, so low he murmured them:

“I fear, sir, that what you want is not to be had at all — in our establishment. You will hardly find it. It is not in the market.” He seemed to bow his head in reverence a moment. “It is not — for sale.”

And so I went back to my dingy lodgings, having made no single purchase. I looked fondly at my own little specimen, trying to imagine it had somehow gained in value, in beauty, almost in splendour. At least, I said to myself, it is not spurious. It is real....

And, sitting down to my table, I dipped my broken pen into a penny bottle of inferior ink, and began my birthday letter:

“This is your birthday, dear, and I send you *all my love*—” Being young, I underlined the words describing my little present, thinking to increase its value thus.

But I did not complete the sentence, for there was another thing that I must find to send her, or she would be disappointed. And a birthday comes but once a year. But, again, though I already possessed a tiny specimen of this other thing I sought, it did not seem to me nearly good enough to offer. Though genuine, it was worn by frequent use. Its lustre had dimmed a little, for I touched it daily. It seemed too ordinary and common for a special present. I was ashamed to send it.

So I set out again and searched... and searched... in every likely and unlikely place, even groping in the dark about the altars of the churches where I found by chance the doors ajar, and penetrating to those secret shrines where those who seek truth, it is said, go in to pray. For I knew that there was this other little present from me that she would look for — because she had need of it....

And my search was wonderful and full of high adventure, yet so long that the moon had drawn the hood over the door of her silver tent, and the stars were fading in the east behind the towers of the night, before I returned home, footsore, aching, empty-handed, and very humble in my heart. For nowhere had I been able to find this other little thing she would be pleased to have from me. To my amazement, yet to my secret joy, I found nothing better than what I had at home — nothing, that is, indubitably genuine. In quantity it was not anywhere for sale. It was more rare than I had guessed — and I felt delicious triumph in me.

I sat down, humble, reverent, but incommunicably proud and happy, to my unfinished letter. Unless I posted it immediately she would not get it when she woke upon her birthday morning. I finished it. I posted it just as it was — brief, the writing a little shaky, the paper cheap, blot, smudge, and all: *“‘...and my worship.”*

And then, like a scrap of paper that enclosed the other gifts, yet need not be noticed unless she wished it, I added (above the little foolish name she knew me by) another tiny present — all that I had brought into the world or could take out with me again when I left it:

I wrote: “Yours ever faithfully.”

TWO IN ONE

SOME IDLE TALKER, playing with half-truths, had once told him that he was too self-centred to fall into love — out of himself; he was unwilling to lose himself in another; and that was the reason he had never married. But Le Maitre was not really more of an egoist than is necessary to make a useful man. A too selfless person is ever ineffective. The suggestion, nevertheless, had remained to distress, for he was no great philosopher — merely a writer of successful tales — tales of wild Nature chiefly; the "human interest" (a publisher's term) was weak; the great divine enigma of an undeveloped soul — certainly of a lover's or a woman's soul — had never claimed his attention enough, perhaps. He was somewhat too much detached from human life. Nature had laid so powerful a spell upon his heart....

"I hope she won't be late," ran the practical thought across his mind as he waited that early Sunday morning in the Great Central Station and reflected that it was the cleanest, brightest, and most airy terminus of all London. He had promised her the whole day out — a promise somewhat long neglected. He was not conscious of doing an unselfish act, yet on the whole, probably, he would rather — or just as soon — have been alone.

The air was fragrant, and the sunshine blazed in soft white patches on the line. The maddening loveliness of an exceptional spring danced everywhere into his heart. Yes, he rather wished he were going off into the fields and woods alone, instead of with her. Only — she was really a dear person, more, far more now, than secretary and typist; more, even, than the devoted girl who had nursed him through that illness. A friend she was; the years of their working together had made her that; and she was wise and gentle. Oh, yes; it would be delightful to have her with him. How she would enjoy the long sunny day!

Then he saw her coming towards him through the station. In a patch of sunshine she came, as though the light produced her — came suddenly from the middle of a group of men in flannels carrying golf-sticks. And he smiled his welcome a little paternally, trying to kill the selfish thought that he would rather have been alone. Soft things fluttered about her. The big hat was becoming. She was dressed in brown, he believed.

He bought a Sunday paper. “I must buy one too,” she laughed. She chose one with pictures, chose it at random rather. He had never heard its name even. And in a first-class carriage alone — he meant to do it really well — they raced through a world of sunshine and brilliant fields to Amersham. She was very happy. She tried every seat in turn; the blazing sheets of yellow — such a spring for buttercups there had never been — drew her from side to side. She put her head out, and nearly lost her big hat, and that soft fluttering thing she wore streamed behind her like the colour of escaping flowers. She opened both windows. The very carriage held the perfume of May that floated over the whole country-side.

He was very nice to her, but read his paper — though always ready with a smile and answer when she asked for them. She teased and laughed and chattered. The luncheon packages engaged her serious attention. Never for a moment was she still, trying every corner in turn, putting her feet up, and bouncing to enjoy the softness of the first-class cushions. “You’ll be sitting in the rack next,” he suggested. But her head was out of the window again and she did not hear him. She was radiant as a child. His paper interested him — book reviews or something. “I’ve asked you that three times, you know, already,” he heard her laughing opposite. And with a touch of shame he tossed the paper through the window. “There! I’d quite forgotten her again!” he thought, with a touch of shame. “I must pull myself together.” For it was true. He had for the moment — more than once — forgotten her existence, just as though he really *were* alone.

Together they strolled down through the beech wood towards Amersham, he for ever dropping the luncheon packages, which she picked up again and tried to stuff into his pockets. For she refused to carry anything at all. “It’s *my* day out, not yours, remember! *I* do no work to-day!” And he caught her happiness, pausing to watch her while she picked flowers and leaves and all the rest, and disentangling without the least impatience that soft fluttering thing she wore when it caught in thorns, and even talking with her about this wild spring glory as though she were just the companion that he needed out of all the world. He no longer felt quite so conscious of her objective presence as at first. In the train, for instance, he had felt so vividly aware that she was there. Alternately he had forgotten and remembered her presence. Now it was better. They were more together, as it were. “I wish I were alone,” he thought once more as the beauty of the spring called to him tumultuously and he longed to lie and dream it all, unhampered by another’s presence. Then, even while thinking it, he realised that he was — alone. It was curious.

This happened even in their first wood when they went downhill into Amersham. As they left it and passed again into the open it came. And on its heels, as he watched her moving here and there, light-footed as a child or nymph, there came this other instinctive thought— “I wish I were ten years younger than I am” — the first time in all his life, probably, that such a thought had ever bothered him. Apparently he said it aloud, laughingly, as he watched her dancing movements. For she turned and ran up to his side quickly, her little face quite grave beneath the big hat’s rim. “You *are!”* That answer struck him as rather wonderful. Who was she after all...?

And in Amersham they hired from the Griffin a rickety old cart, drawn by a still more rickety horse, to drive them to Penn’s Woods. She, with her own money, bought stone-bottle ginger-beer — two bottles. It made her day complete to have those bottles, though unless they had driven she would have done without them. The street was deserted, drenched in blazing sunshine. Rooks were cawing in the elms behind the church. Not a soul was about as they crawled away from the houses and passed upwards between hedges smothered in cow parsley over the hill. She had kept her picture-paper. It lay on her lap all the way. She never opened it or turned a single page; but she held it in her lap. They drove in silence. The old man on the box was like a faded, weather-beaten farmer dressed in somebody else’s cast-off Sunday coat. He flicked the horse with a tattered whip. Sometimes he grunted. Plover rose from the fields, cuckoos called, butterflies danced sideways past the carriage, eyeing them... and, as they passed through Penn Street, Le Maitre started suddenly and said something. For, again, he had quite forgotten she was there. “What a selfish beast I am! Why can’t I forget myself and my own feelings, and look after her and make her feel amused and happy? It’s her day out, not mine!” This, somehow, was the way he put it to himself, just as any ordinary man would have put it. But, when he turned to look at her, he received a shock. Here was something new and unexpected. With a thud it dropped down into his mind — crash!

For at the sound of his voice she looked up confused and startled into his face. She had forgotten him! For the first time in all the years together, years of work, of semi-official attention to his least desire, yet of personal devotion as well, because she respected him and thought him wonderful — she had forgotten he was there. She had forgotten his existence beside her as a separate person. She, too, had been — alone.

It was here, perhaps, he first realised this singular thing that set this day apart from every other day that he had ever known. In reality, of course, it had come far sooner — begun with the exquisite spring dawn before either of them was awake, had tentatively fluttered about his soul even while he stood waiting for her in the station, come softly nearer all the way in the train, dropped threads of its golden web about him, especially in that first beech wood, then moved with its swifter yet unhurried rush — until, here, now, in this startling moment, he realised it fully. Thus steal those changes o' er the sky, perhaps, that the day itself knows at sunrise, but that unobservant folk do not notice till the sun bursts out with fuller explanation, and they say, "The weather's changed; how delightful! how unexpected!" Le Maitre had never been observant very — of people.

And then in this deep, lonely valley, too full of sunshine to hold anything else, it seemed, they stopped where the beech woods trooped to the edge of the white road. No wind was here; it was still and silent; the leaves glittered, motionless. They entered the thick trees together, she carrying the ginger-beer bottles and that picture-paper. He noticed that: the way she held it, almost clutched it, still unopened. Her face, he saw, was pale. Or was it merely the contrast of the shade? The trees were very big and wonderful. No birds sang, the network of dazzling sunshine-patches in the gloom bewildered a little.

At first they did not talk at all, and then in hushed voices. But it was only when they were some way into the wood, and she had put down the bottles — though not the paper — to pick a flower or spray of leaves, that he traced the singular secret thrill to its source and understood why he had felt — no, not uneasy, but so strangely moved. For he had asked the sleepy driver of the way, and how they might best reach Beaconsfield across these Penn Woods, and the old's man's mumbled answer took no note of — her:

“It’s a bit rough, maybe, on t’ other side, stony like and steep, but that ain’t nothing for a gentleman — when he’s alone...”

The words disturbed him with a sense of darkness, yet of wonder. As though the old man had not noticed her; almost as though he had seen only one person — himself.

They lunched among heather and bracken just beside a pool of sunshine. In front lay a copse of pines, with little beeches in between. The roof was thick just there, the stillness haunting. All the country-side, it seemed, this Sunday noon, had gone to sleep, he and she alone left out of the deep, soft dream. He watched those pines, mothering the slim young beeches, the brilliant fresh green of whose lower branches, he thought, were like little platforms of level sunlight amid the general gloom — patches that had left the ground to escape by the upper air and had then been caught.

“Look,” he heard, “they make one think of laughter crept in unawares among a lot of solemn monks — or of children lost among grave elder beings whose ways are dull and sombre!” It was his own thought continued... yet it was she, lying there beside him, who had said it....

And all that wonderful afternoon she had this curious way of picking the thoughts out of his mind and putting them into words for him. “Look,” she said again later, “you can always tell whether the wind loves a tree or not by the way it blows the branches. If it loves them, it tries to draw them out to go away with it. The others it merely shakes carelessly as it passes!” It was the very thought in his own mind, too. Indeed, he had been on the point of saying it, but had desisted, feeling she would not understand — with the half wish — though far less strong than before — that he were alone to enjoy it all in his own indulgent way. Then, even more swiftly, came that other strange sensation that he was alone all the time; more — that he was for the first time in his life most wonderfully complete and happy, all sense of isolation gone.

He turned quickly the instant she had said it. But not quickly enough. By the look in her great grey eyes, by the expression on the face where the discarded hat no longer hid it, he read the same amazing enigma he had half divined before. She, too, was — alone. She had forgotten him again — forgotten his presence — radiant and happy without him, enjoying herself in her own way. She had merely uttered her delightful thought aloud, as if speaking to herself!

How the afternoon, with its long sunny hours, passed so quickly away, he never understood, nor how they made their way eventually to Beaconsfield through other woods and over other meadows. He remembers only that the whole time he kept forgetting that she was with him, and then suddenly remembering it again. And once on the grass, when they rested to drink the cold tea from his rather musty flask, he lit his pipe, and after a bit he — dozed. He actually slept; for ten minutes at her side, yes, he slept. He heard her laughing at him, but the laughter was faint and very far away; it might just as well have been the wind in the cow-parsley that said, "If you sleep, I shall change you — change you while you sleep!" And for some minutes after he woke again, it hardly seemed queer to him that he did not see her, for when he noticed her coming towards him from the hedgerow, her arms full of flowers and things, he only thought, "Oh, there she is" — as though her absence, or his own absence in sleep, were not quite the common absences of the world.

And he remembered that on the walk to the village her shoe hurt her, and he offered to carry her, and that then she took her shoe off and ran along the grass beside the lane the whole way. But it was at the inn where they had their supper that the oddest thing of all occurred, for the deaf and rather stupid servant girl would insist on laying the table on the lawn for — one.

"Oh, expectin' some one, are yer?" she said at last. "Is that it?" and so brought plates and knives for two. The girl never once looked at his companion — almost as though she did not see her and seemed unaware of her presence. Le Maitre began to feel that he was dreaming. This was a dream-country, where the people had curious sight. He remembered the driver....

In the dusk they made their way to the station. They spoke no word. He kept losing sight of her. Once or twice he forgot who he was. But the whole amazing thing blazed into him most strongly, showing how it had seized upon his mind, when he stood before the ticket-window and hesitated — for a second — how many tickets he should buy. He stammered at length for two first-class, but he was absurdly flustered for a second. It had actually occurred to him that they needed only one ticket....

And suddenly in the train he understood — and his heart came up in his throat. They were alone. He turned to her where she lay in the corner, feet up, weary, crumpled among the leaves and flowers she had gathered. Like a hedgerow flower she looked, tired by the sunshine and the wind. In one hand was the picture-paper, still unopened and unread, symbol of everyday reality. She was dozing certainly, if not actually asleep. So he woke her with a touch, calling her name aloud.

There were no words at first. He looked at her, coming up very close to do so, and she looked back at him — straight into his eyes — just as she did at home when they were working and he was explaining something important. And then her own eyes dropped, and a deep blush spread over all her face.

“I wasn’t asleep — really,” she said, as he took her at last into his arms; “I was wondering — when — you’d find out—”

“Come to myself, you mean?” he asked tremblingly.

“Well,” she hesitated, as soon as she got breath, “that I *am* yourself — and that you are me. Of course, we’ re really only one. I knew it years — oh, years and years ago....”

ANCIENT LIGHTS

FROM SOUTHWATER, WHERE he left the train, the road led due west. That he knew; for the rest he trusted to luck, being one of those born walkers who dislike asking the way. He had that instinct, and as a rule it served him well. "A mile or so due west along the sandy road till you come to a stile on the right; then across the fields. You'll see the red house straight before you." He glanced at the post-card's instructions once again, and once again he tried to decipher the scratched-out sentence — without success. It had been so elaborately inked over that no word was legible. Inked-out sentences in a letter were always enticing. He wondered what it was that had to be so very carefully obliterated.

The afternoon was boisterous, with a tearing, shouting wind that blew from the sea, across the Sussex weald. Massive clouds with rounded, piled-up edges, cannoned across gaping spaces of blue sky. Far away the line of Downs swept the horizon, like an arriving wave. Chanctonbury Ring rode their crest — a scudding ship, hull down before the wind. He took his hat off and walked rapidly, breathing great draughts of air with delight and exhilaration. The road was deserted; no horsemen, bicycles, or motors; not even a tradesman's cart; no single walker. But anyhow he would never have asked the way. Keeping a sharp eye for the stile, he pounded along, while the wind tossed the cloak against his face, and made waves across the blue puddles in the yellow road. The trees showed their under leaves of white. The bracken and the high new grass bent all one way. Great life was in the day, high spirits and dancing everywhere. And for a Croydon surveyor's clerk just out of an office this was like a holiday at the sea!

It was a day for high adventure, and his heart rose up to meet the mood of Nature. His umbrella with the silver ring ought to have been a sword, and his brown shoes should have been top-boots with spurs upon the heels. Where hid the enchanted Castle and the princess with the hair of sunny gold? His horse....

The stile came suddenly into view and nipped adventure in the bud. Everyday clothes took him prisoner again. He was a surveyor's clerk, middle-aged, earning three pounds a week, coming from Croydon to see about a client’s proposed alterations in a wood — something to ensure a better view from the dining-room window. Across the fields, perhaps a mile away, he saw the red house gleaming in the sunshine; and resting on the stile a moment to get his breath he noticed a copse of oak and hornbeam on the right. “Aha,” he told himself, “so that must be the wood he wants to cut down to improve the view? I’ll ‘ave a look at it.” There were boards up, of course, but there was an inviting little path as well. ‘I in not a trespasser,” he said; “it’s part of my business, this is.” He scrambled awkwardly over the gate and entered the copse. A little round would bring him to the field again.

But the moment he passed among the trees the wind ceased shouting and a stillness dropped upon the world. So dense was the growth that the sunshine only came through in isolated patches. The air was close. He mopped his forehead and put his green felt hat on, but a low branch knocked it off again at once, and as he stooped an elastic twig swung back and stung his face. There were flowers along both edges of the little path; glades opened on *either* side; ferns curved about in damper corners, and the smell of earth and foliage was rich and sweet. It was cooler here. What an enchanting little wood, he thought, turning down a small green glade where the sunshine flickered like silver wings. How it danced and fluttered and moved about! He put a dark blue flower in his button hole. Again his hat, caught by an oak branch as he rose, was knocked from his head, falling across his eyes. And this time he did not put it on again. Swinging his umbrella, he walked on with uncovered head, whistling rather loudly as he went. But the thickness of the trees hardly encouraged whistling, and something of his gaiety and high spirits seemed to leave him. He suddenly found himself treading circumspectly and with caution. The stillness in the wood was so peculiar.

There was a rustle among the ferns and leaves and something shot across the path ten yards ahead, stopped abruptly an instant with head cocked sideways to stare, then dived again beneath the underbrush with the speed of a shadow. He started like a frightened child, laughing the next second that a mere pheasant could have made him jump. In the distance he heard wheels upon the road, and wondered why the sound was pleasant. “Good old butcher’s cart,” he said to himself — then realised that he was going in the wrong direction and had somehow got turned round. For the road should be behind him, not in front.

And he hurriedly took another narrow glade that lost itself in greenness to the right. “That’s my direction, of course,” he said; “the trees has mixed me up a bit, it seems” — then found himself abruptly by the gate he had first climbed over. He had merely made a circle. Surprise became almost discomfiture then. And a man, dressed like a gamekeeper in browny green, leaned against the gate, hitting his legs with a switch. “I’m making for Mr. Lumley’s farm,” explained the walker. “This is his wood, I believe—” then stopped dead, because it was no man at all, but merely an effect of light and shade and foliage. He stepped back to reconstruct the singular illusion, but the wind shook the branches roughly here on the edge of the wood and the foliage refused to reconstruct the figure. The leaves all rustled strangely. And just then the sun went behind a cloud, making the whole wood look otherwise. Yet how the mind could be thus doubly deceived was indeed remarkable, for it almost seemed to him the man had answered, spoken — or was this the shuffling noise the branches made? — and had pointed with his switch to the notice-board upon the nearest tree. The words rang on in his head, but of course he had imagined them: “No, it’s not his wood. It’s ours.” And some village wit, moreover, had changed the lettering on the weather-beaten board, for it read quite plainly, “Trespassers will be persecuted.”

And while the astonished clerk read the words and chuckled, he said to himself, thinking what a tale he’d have to tell his wife and children later— “The blooming wood has tried to chuck me out. But I’ll go in again. Why, it’s only a matter of a square acre at most. I’m bound to reach the fields on the other side if I keep straight on.” He remembered his position in the office. He had a certain dignity to maintain.

The cloud passed from below the sun, and light splashed suddenly in all manner of unlikely places. The man went straight on. He felt a touch of puzzling confusion somewhere; this way the copse had of shifting from sunshine into shadow doubtless troubled sight a little. To his relief, at last, a new glade opened through the trees and disclosed the fields with a glimpse of the red house in the distance at the far end. But a little wicket gate that stood across the path had first to be climbed, and as he scrambled heavily over — for it would not open — he got the astonishing feeling that it slid off sideways beneath his weight, and towards the wood. Like the moving staircases at Harrod's and Earl's Court, it began to glide off with him. It was quite horrible. He made a violent effort to get down before it carried him into the trees, but his feet became entangled with the bars and umbrella, so that he fell heavily upon the farther side, arms spread across the grass and nettles, boots clutched between the first and second bars. He lay there a moment like a man crucified upside down, and while he struggled to get disentangled — feet, bars, and umbrella formed a regular net — he saw the little man in browny green go past him with extreme rapidity through the wood. The man was laughing. He passed across the glade some fifty yards away, and he was not alone this time. A companion like himself went with him. The clerk, now upon his feet again, watched them disappear into the gloom of green beyond. "They're tramps, not gamekeepers," he said to himself, half mortified, half angry. But his heart was thumping dreadfully, and he dared not utter all his thought.

He examined the wicket gate, convinced it was a trick gate somehow — then went hurriedly on again, disturbed beyond belief to see that the glade no longer opened into fields, but curved away to the right. What in the world had happened to him? His sight was so utterly at fault. Again the sun flamed out abruptly and lit the floor of the wood with pools of silver, and at the same moment a violent gust of wind passed shouting overhead. Drops fell clattering everywhere upon the leaves, making a sharp pattering as of many footsteps. The whole copse shuddered and went moving.

"Rain, by George," thought the clerk, and feeling for his umbrella, discovered he had lost it. He turned back to the gate and found it lying on the farther side. To his amazement he saw the fields at the far end of the glade, the red house, too, ashine in the sunset. He laughed then, for, of course, in his struggle with the gate, he had somehow got turned round — had fallen back instead of forwards. Climbing over, this time quite easily, he retraced his steps. The silver band, he saw, had been torn from the umbrella. No doubt his foot, a nail, or something had caught in it and ripped it off. The clerk began to run; he felt extraordinarily dismayed.

But, while he ran, the entire wood ran with him, round him, to and fro, trees shifting like living things, leaves folding and unfolding, trunks darting back' wards and forwards, and branches disclosing enormous empty spaces, then closing up again before he could look into them. There were footsteps everywhere, and laughing, crying voices, and crowds of figures gathering just behind his back till the glade, he knew, was thick with moving life. The wind in his ears, of course, produced the voices and the laughter, while sun and clouds, plunging the copse alternately in shadow and bright dazzling light, created the figures. But he did not like it, and he went as fast as ever his sturdy legs could take him. He was frightened now. This was no story for his wife and children. He ran like the wind. But his feet made no sound upon the soft mossy turf.

Then, to his horror, he saw that the glade grew narrow, nettles and weeds stood thick across it, it dwindled down into a tiny path, and twenty yards ahead it stopped finally and melted off among the trees. What the trick gate had failed to achieve, this twisting glade accomplished easily — carried him in bodily among the dense and crowding trees.

There was only one thing to do — turn sharply and dash back again, run headlong into the life that followed at his back, followed so closely too that now it almost touched him, pushing him in. And with reckless courage this was what he did. It seemed a fearful thing to do. He turned with a sort of violent spring, head down and shoulders forward, hands stretched before his face. He made the plunge; like a hunted creature he charged full tilt the other way, meeting the wind now in his face.

Good Lord! The glade behind him had closed up as well; there was no longer any path at all. Turning round and round, like an animal at bay, he searched for an opening, a way of escape, searched frantically, breathlessly, terrified now in his bones. But foliage surrounded him, branches blocked the way; the trees stood close and still, unshaken by a breath of wind; and the sun dipped that moment behind a great black cloud. The entire wood turned dark and silent. It watched him.

Perhaps it was this final touch of sudden blackness that made him act so foolishly, as though he had really lost his head. At any rate, without pausing to think, he dashed headlong in among the trees again. There was a sensation of being stiflingly surrounded and entangled, and that he must break out at all costs — out and away into the open of the blessed fields and air. He did this ill-considered thing, and apparently charged straight into an oak that deliberately moved into his path to stop him. He saw it shift across a good full yard, and being a measuring man, accustomed to theodolite and chain, he ought to know. He fell, saw stars, and felt a thousand tiny fingers tugging and pulling at his hands and neck and ankles. The stinging nettles, no doubt, were responsible for this. He thought of it later. At the moment it felt diabolically calculated.

But another remarkable illusion was not so easily explained. For all in a moment, it seemed, the entire wood went sliding past him with a thick deep rustling of leaves and laughter, myriad footsteps, and tiny little active, energetic shapes; two men in browny green gave him a mighty hoist — and he opened his eyes to find himself lying in the meadow beside the stile where first his incredible adventure had begun. The wood stood in its usual place and stared down upon him in the sunlight. There was the red house in the distance as before. Above him grinned the weather-beaten notice-board: “Trespassers will be prosecuted.”

Dishevelled in mind and body, and a good deal shaken in his official soul, the clerk walked slowly across the fields. But on the way he glanced once more at the post-card of instructions, and saw with dull amazement that the inked-out sentence was quite legible after all beneath the scratches made across it: “There is a short cut through the wood — the wood I want cut down — if you care to take it.” Only “care” was so badly written, it looked more like another word; the “c” was uncommonly like “d.”

“That’s the copse that spoils my view of the Downs, you see,” his client explained to him later, pointing across the fields, and referring to the ordnance map beside him. “I want it cut down and a path made so and so.” His finger indicated direction on the map. “The Fairy Wood — it’s still called, and it’s far older than this house. Come now, if you’re ready, Mr. Thomas, we might go out and have a look at it....”

DREAM TRESPASS

THE LITTLE FEATHERS of the dusk were drifting through the autumn leaves when we came so unexpectedly upon the inn that was not marked upon our big scaled map. And most opportunely, for Ducommun, my friend, was clearly overtired. An irritability foreign to his placid temperament had made the last few hours' trudge a little difficult, and I felt we had reached that narrow frontier which lies between non-success and failure.

"Another five miles to the inn we chose this morning," I told him; "but we'll soon manage it at a steady pace."

And he groaned, "I'm done! I simply couldn't do it."

He sank down upon the bit of broken wall to rest, while the darkness visibly increased, and the wind blew damp and chill across the marshes on our left. But behind the petulance of his tone, due to exhaustion solely, lay something else as well, something that had been accumulating for days. For our walking tour had not turned out quite to measure, distances always under-calculated; the inns, moreover, bad; the people surly and inhospitable; even the weather cross.

And Ducommun's disappointment had in a sense been double, so that I felt keen sympathy with him. For this was the country where his ancestors once reigned as proprietors, grand seigneurs, and the rest; he had always longed to visit it; and secretly in his imagination had cherished a reconstructed picture in which he himself would somehow play some high, distinguished role his proud blood entitled him to. Clerk to-day in a mere insurance office, but descendant of romantic, ancient stock, he knew the history of the period intimately; the holiday had been carefully, lovingly planned; and — the unpleasantness of the inhabitants had shattered his dream thus fostered and so keenly anticipated. The breaking-point had been reached. Was not this inn we hoped to reach by dark a portion of the very chateau — he had established it from musty records enough — where once his family dwelt in old-time splendour? And had he not indulged all manner of delightful secret dreaming in advance?...

It was here, then, returning from a little private reconnoitring on my own account, that I reported my brave discovery of an unexpected half-way house, and found him almost asleep upon the stones, unwilling to believe the short half-mile I promised. “Only another nest of robbery and insolence,” he laughed sourly, “and, anyhow, not the inn we counted on.” He dragged after me in silence, eyeing askance the tumbled, ivy-covered shanty that stood beside the roadway, yet gladly going in ahead of me to rest his weary limbs, and troubling himself no whit with bargaining that he divined might be once more unpleasant.

Yet the inn proved a surprise in another way — it was entirely delightful. There was a glowing fire of peat in a biggish hall, the *patron* and his wife were all smiles and pleasure, welcoming us with an old-fashioned dignity that made bargaining impossible, and in ten minutes we felt as much at home as if we had arrived at a country house where we had been long expected.

“So few care to stop here now,” the old woman told us, with a gracious gesture that was courtly rather than deferential, “we stand no longer upon the old high road,” and showed in a hundred nameless ways that all they had was entirely at our disposal. Till even Ducommun melted and turned soft: “Only in France could this happen,” he whispered with a touch of pride, as though claiming that this fragrance of gentle life, now fast disappearing from the world, still lingered in the land of his descent and in his own blood too. He patted the huge, rough deer-hound that seemed to fill the little room where we awaited supper, and the friendly creature, bounding with a kind of subdued affection, added another touch of welcome. His face and manners were evidence of kind treatment; he was proud of his owners and of his owners’ guests. I thought of well-loved pets in our English country houses. “This beast,” I laughed, “has surely lived with gentlemen.” And Ducommun took the compliment to himself with personal satisfaction.

It is difficult to tell afterwards with accuracy the countless little touches that made the picture all so gentle — they were so delicately suggested, painted in silently with such deft spiritual discretion. It stands out in my memory, set in some strange, high light, as the most enchanting experience of many a walking tour; and yet, about it all, like a veil of wonder that evades description, an atmosphere of something at the same time — I use the best available word — truly singular. This touch of something remote, indefinite, unique, began to steal over me from the very first, bringing with it an incalculable, queer charm. It lulled like a drug all possible suspicions. And in my friend — detail of the picture nearest to my heart, that is — it first betrayed itself, with a degree of surprise, moreover, not entirely removed from shock.

For as he passed before me underneath that low-browed porch, quite undeniably he — altered. This indefinable change clothed his entire presentment to my eyes; to tired eyes, I freely grant, as also that it was dusk, and that the transforming magic of the peat fire was behind him. Yet, eschewing paragraphs of vain description, I may put a portion of it crudely thus, perhaps: that his lankiness turned suddenly all grace; the atmosphere of the London office stool, as of the clerk a-holidaying, vanished; and that the way he bowed his head to enter the dark-beamed lintel of the door was courtly and high bred, instinct with native elegance, and in the real sense aristocratic. It came with an instant and complete conviction. It was wonderful to see; and it gave me a moment's curious enchantment. All that I divined and loved in the man, usually somewhat buried, came forth upon the surface. A note of explanation followed readily enough, half explanation at any rate — that houses alter people because, like dressing up with women and children, they furnish a new setting to the general appearance, and the points one is accustomed to undergo a readjustment. Yet with him this subtle alteration did not pass; it not only clung to him during the entire evening, but most curiously increased. He maintained, indeed, his silence the whole time, but it was a happy, dreaming silence holding the charm of real companionship, his disappointment gone as completely as the memory of our former cheerless inns and ill-conditioned people.

I cannot pretend, though, that I really watched him carefully, since an attack from another quarter divided my attention equally, and the charm of the daughter of the house, in whose eyes, it seemed to me, lay all the quiet sadness of the country we had walked through — *triste, morne,* forsaken land — claimed a great part of my observant sympathy. The old people left us entirely to her care, and the way she looked after us, divining our wants before we ventured to express them, was more suggestive of the perfect hostess than merely of someone who would take payment for all that she supplied. The question of money, indeed, did not once intrude, though I cannot say whence came my impression that this hospitality was, in fact, offered without the least idea of remuneration in silver and gold. That it did come, I can swear; also, that behind it lay no suggestion of stiff prices to be demanded at the last moment on the plea that terms had not been settled in advance. We were made welcome like expected guests, and my heart leaped to encounter this spirit of old-fashioned courtesy that the greed of modern life has everywhere destroyed.

“To-morrow or the next day, when you are rested,” said the maiden softly, sitting beside us after supper and tending the fire, “I will take you through the *Allée des tilleuls* towards the river, and show you where the fishing is so good.”

For it seemed natural that she should sit and chat with us, and only afterwards I remembered sharply that the river was a good five miles from where we housed, across marshes that could boast no trees at all, *tilleuls* least of all, and of avenues not a vestige anywhere.

“We’ll start,” Ducommun answered promptly, taking my breath a little, “in the dawn”; and presently then made signs to go to bed.

She brought the candles, lit them for us with a spill of paper from the peat, and handed one to each, a little smile of yearning in her deep, soft eyes that I remember to this day.

“You will sleep long and well,” she said half shyly, accompanying us to the foot of the stairs. “I made and aired the beds with my own hands.”

And the last I saw of her, as we turned the landing corner overhead, was her graceful figure against the darkness, with the candle-light falling upon the coiled masses of her dark-brown hair. She gazed up after us with those large grey eyes that seemed to me so full of yearning, and yet so sad, so patient, so curiously resigned....

Ducommun pulled me almost roughly by the arm. “Come,” he said with sudden energy, and as though everything was settled. “We have an early start, remember!”

I moved unwillingly; it was all so strange and dreamlike, the beauty of the girl so enchanting, the change in himself so utterly perplexing.

“It’s like staying with friends in a country house,” I murmured, lingering in a moment of bewilderment by his door. “Old family retainers almost, proud and delighted to put one up, eh?”

And his answer was so wholly unexpected that I waited, staring blankly into his altered eyes:

“I only hope we shall get away all right,” he muttered. “I mean, that is — get off.”

Evidently his former mood had flashed a moment back. “You feel tired?” I suggested sympathetically, “so do I.”

“Dog-tired, yes,” he answered shortly, then added in a slow, suggestive whisper— “And I feel cold, too — extraordinarily cold.”

The significant, cautious way he said it made me start. But before I could prate of chills and remedies, he quickly shut the door upon me, leaving those last words ringing in my brain— “cold, extraordinarily cold.” And an inkling stole over me of what he meant; uninvited and unwelcome it came, then passed at once, leaving a vague uneasiness behind. For the cold he spoke of surely was not bodily cold. About my own heart, too, moved some strange touch of chill. Cold sought an entrance. But it was not common cold. Rather it was in the mind and thoughts, and settled down upon the spirit. In describing his own sensations he had also described my own; for something at the very heart of me seemed turning numb....

I got quickly into bed. The night was still and windless, but, though I was tired, sleep held long away. Uneasiness continued to affect me. I lay, listening to the blood hurrying along the thin walls of my veins, singing and murmuring, and, when at length I dropped off, two vivid pictures haunted me into unconsciousness — his face in the doorway as he made that last remark, and the face of the girl as she had peered up so yearningly at him over the shaded candle.

Then — at once, it seemed — I was wide awake again, aware, however, that an interval had passed, but aware also of another thing that was incredible, and somehow dreadful, namely, that while I slept, the house had undergone a change. It caught me, shivering in my bed, utterly unprepared, as though unfair advantage had been taken of me while I lay unconscious. This startling idea of external alteration made me shudder. How I so instantly divined it lies beyond all explanation. I somehow realised that, while the room I woke in was the same as before, the building of which it formed a little member had known in the darkness some transmuting, substituting change that had turned it otherwise. My terror I also cannot explain, nor why, almost immediately, instead of increasing, it subtly shifted into that numbness I have already mentioned — a curious, deep bemusement of the spirit that robbed it of really acute distress. It seemed as if only a part of me — the wakened part — knew what was going on, and that some other part remained in sleep and ignorance.

For the house was now enormous. It had experienced this weird transformation. The roof, I somehow knew, rose soaring through the darkness; the walls ran over acres; it had towers, wings, and battlements, broad balconies, and magnificent windows. It had grown both dignified and ancient... and had swallowed up our little inn as comfortably as a palace includes a single bedroom. The blackness about me of course concealed it, but I *felt* the yawning corridors, the gape of lofty halls, high ceilings, spacious chambers, till I seemed lost in the being of some stately building that extended itself with imposing majesty upon the night.

Then came the instinct — more, perhaps, a driving impulse than a mere suggestion — to go out and see. See what? I asked myself, as I made my way towards the window gropingly, unwilling or afraid to strike a light. And the answer, utterly without explanation, came hard and sharp like this —

“To catch them on the lawn.”

And the curious phrase I knew was right, for the surroundings had changed equally with the house. I drew aside the curtain and peered out upon a lawn that a few hours ago had been surely a rather desolate, plain roadway, and beyond it into spacious gardens, bounded by park-like timber, where before had been but dreary, half-cultivated fields.

Through a risen mist the light of the moon shone faintly, and everywhere my sight confirmed the singular impression of extension I have mentioned, for away to the left another mass of masonry that was like the wing of some great mansion rose dimly through the air, and beneath my very eyes a projecting balcony obscured pathways and beds of flowers. Next, where a gleam of moonlight caught it, I saw the broad, slow bend of river edging the lawn through clumps of willows. Even the river had come close. And while I stared, striving to force from so much illusion a single fact that might explain, a little tree upon the lawn just underneath moved slightly nearer, and I saw it was a human figure — a figure that I recognised. Wrapped in some long, loose garment, the daughter of the house stood there in an attitude of waiting. And the waiting was at once explained, for another figure — this time the figure of a man that seemed to me both strange and familiar at the same time — emerged from the shadows of the house to join her. She slipped into his arms. Then came a sound of horses neighing in their stalls, and the couple moved away with sudden swiftness silently as ghosts, disappearing in the mist while three minutes later I heard the crunch of hoofs on gravel, dying rapidly away into the distance of the night.

And here a sudden, wild reaction, not easy of analysis, rushed over me, as if that other part of me that had not waked now came sharply to the rescue, set free from the inhibition of some drug. I felt anger, disgust, resentment, and a wave of indignation that somehow I was being tricked. Impulsively — there seemed no time for judgment or reflection — I crossed the landing, now so oddly deep and lofty, and, without knocking, ran headlong into my friend’s room. The bed, I saw at once, was empty, the sheets not even lain in. The furniture was in disorder, garments strewn about the floor, signs of precipitate flight in all directions. And Ducommun, of course, was gone.

What happened next confuses me when I try to think of it, for my only recollection is of hurrying distractedly to and fro between his bedroom and my own. There was a rush and scuttling in the darkness, and then I blundered heavily against walls or furniture or both, and the darkness rose up over my mind with a smothering thick curtain that blinded everything... and I came to my senses in the open road, my friend standing over me, enormous in the dusk, and the bit of broken wall where he had rested while I reconnoitred, just behind us. The moon was rising, the air was damp and chill, and he was shouting in my ear, “I thought you were never coming back again. I’m rested now. We’d better hurry on and do those beastly five miles to the inn.”

We started, walking so briskly that we reached it in something over seventy minutes, and passing on the way no single vestige of a house nor of any kind of building. I was the silent one, but when Ducommun talked it was only to curse the desolate, sad country, and wonder why his forbears had ever chosen such a wilderness to live in. And when at length we put up at this inn which he made out was a part of his original family estate, he spent the evening poring over maps and papers, by means of which he admitted finally his calculations were all wrong. “The house itself,” he said, “must have stood farther back along the road we came by. The river, you see,” pointing to the dirty old chart, “has changed its course a bit since then. Its older bed lay much nearer to the château, flanking the garden lawn below the park.” And he pointed again to the place with a finger that obviously now held office pens.

LET NOT THE SUN —

IT BEGAN DELIGHTFULLY: "Where are *you* going for your holiday, Bill?" his sister asked casually one day at tea, someone having mentioned a trip to Italy; "climbing, I suppose, as usual?" And he had answered just as casually, "Climbing, yes, as usual."

They were both workers, she a rich woman's secretary, and he keeping a stool warm in an office. She was to have a month, he a bare three weeks, and this summer it so happened, the times overlapped. To each the holiday was of immense importance, looked forward to eagerly through eleven months of labour, and looked back upon afterwards through another long eleven months. Frances went either to Scotland or some little pension in Switzerland, painting the whole time, and taking a friend of similar tastes with her. He went invariably to the Alps. They had never gone together as yet, because — well, because she painted and he climbed. But this year a vague idea had come to each that they might combine, choosing some place where both tastes might be satisfied. Since last summer there had been deaths in the family; they realised loneliness, felt drawn together like survivors of a wreck. He often went to tea with her in her little flat, and she accompanied him sometimes to dinner in his Soho restaurants. Fundamentally, however, they were not together, for their tastes did not assimilate well, and their temperaments lacked that sympathy which fuses emotion and thought in a harmonious blend. Affection was real and deep, but strongest when they were apart.

Now, as he walked home to his lodgings on the other side of London, he felt it would be nice if they *could* combine their holidays for once. Her casual question was a feeler in the same direction. A few days later she repeated it in a postscript to a letter: "Why not go together this year," she wrote, "choosing some place where you can climb and Sybil and I can paint? I leave on the 1st; you follow on the 15th. We could have two weeks in the same hotel. It would be awfully jolly. Let me know what you feel, and mind you are *quite* frank about it."

They exchanged letters, discussed places, differed mildly, and agreed to meet for full debate. The stage of suggestion was past; it was a plan now. They must decide, or go separately. One of them, that is to say, must take the responsibility of saying No. Frances leaned to the Engadine — Maloja — whereas her brother thought it "not a bad place, but no good as a climbing centre. Still, Pontresina is within reach, and there are several peaks I've never done round Pontresina. We'll talk it over." The exchange of letters became wearisome and involved, because each wrote from a different point of view and feeling, and each gave in weakly to the other, yet left a hint of sacrifice behind. "It's a very lovely part," she wrote of his proposal for the Dolomites, "only it's a long way off and expensive to get at, and the scenery is a bit monotonous for painting. *You* understand. Still, for two weeks — while he criticised her alternative selections in the Rhone Valley as "rather touristy and overcrowded, don't you think? — the sort of thing that everybody paints." Both were busy, and wrote sometimes briefly, not making themselves quite plain, each praising the other's choice, then qualifying it destructively at the end of apparently unselfish sentences with a formidable and prohibitive "but." The time was getting short meanwhile. "We ought to take our rooms pretty soon," wrote Frances. "Immediately, in fact, if we want to get in anywhere," he answered on a letter-card. "Come and dine to-night at the Gourmet, and we'll settle everything."

They met. And at first they talked of everything else in the world but the one thing in their minds. They talked a trifle boisterously; but the boisterousness was due to excitement, and the excitement to an unnatural effort to feign absolute sympathy which did not exist fundamentally. The bustle of humanity about them, food, and a glass of red wine, gradually smoothed the edges of possible friction, however.

"You look tired, Bill."

"I am rather," he laughed. "We both need a holiday, don't we?"

The ice was broken.

"Now, let's talk of the Alps," she said briskly. "It's been so difficult to explain in writing, hasn't it?"

"Impossible," he laughed, and pulled out of his pocket a sheet of notepaper on which he had made some notes. Frances took a Baedeker from her velvet bag on the hook above her head. “Capital,” he laughed; “we’ll settle everything in ten minutes.”

“It will be so awfully jolly to go together for once,” she said, and they felt so happy and sympathetic, so sure of agreement, so ready each to give in to the other, that they began with a degree of boldness that seemed hardly wise. “Say exactly what *you* think — quite honestly,” each said to the other. “We must be candid, you know. It’s too important to pretend. It would be silly, wouldn’t it?” But neither realised that this meant, “I’ll persuade you that my place is best and the only place where I could really enjoy my holiday.” Bill cleared a space before him on the table, lit a cigarette, and felt the joy of making plans in his heart. Francis turned the pages to her particular map, equally full of delight. What fun it was!

“All I want, Bill dear, is a place where I can paint — forests, streams, and those lovely fields of flowers. Almost anywhere would do for me. You understand, don’t you?”

“Rather,” he laughed, making a little more room for his own piece of paper, “and you shall have it, too, old girl. All I want is some good peaks within reach, and good guides on the spot. We’ll have our evenings together, and when I’m not climbing, we’ll go for picnics while you paint, and — and be awfully jolly all together. Sybil’s a nice girl. We shall be a capital trio.” He put her Baedeker at the far corner of the table for a moment.

“Oh, *please* don’t lose my place in it,” she said, pulling the marker across the page and leaving the tip out.

“I’m sorry,” he replied, and they laughed — less boisterously.

“You tell me your ideas first,” she decided, “and then I’ll tell you mine. If we can’t agree then, we’ re not fit to have a holiday at all.”

It worked up with deadly slowness to the rupture that was inevitable from the beginning. Both were tired after, not a day’s, but a year’s work; both felt selfish and secretly ashamed; both realised also that an unsuccessful holiday was too grave a risk to run — it involved eleven months’ disappointment and regret. Yet, if this plan failed, any future holiday together would be impossible.

“After all,” sighed Frances peevishly at length, “perhaps we *had* better go separately.”

It was so tiring, this endless effort to find the right place; their reserve of vitality was not equal to the obstacles that cropped up everywhere. Full, high spirits are necessary to see things whole. They exaggerated details. “It’s funny,” he thought; “she *might* realise that climbing is what I need. One can paint everywhere!” But in her own mind the reflection was the same, turned the opposite way: “Bill doesn’t understand that one can’t paint *anything*. Yet, for climbing, one peak is just as good as another.” He thought her obstinate and faddy; she felt him stubborn and rather stupid.

“Now, old girl,” he said at length, pushing his papers aside with a weary gesture of resignation, having failed to convince her how admirable his choice had been, “let’s look at *your* place.” He laughed patiently, but the cushions provided by food and wine and excitement had worn thin. Friction increased; words pricked; the tide of sympathy ebbed — it had been forced really all along, pumped up; their tastes and temperaments did *not* amalgamate. Frances opened her Baedeker and explained mechanically. She now saw clearly the insuperable difficulties in the way, but for sentimental and affectionate reasons declined to be the first to admit the truth. She was braver, bigger than he was, but her heart prevented the outspoken honesty that would have saved the situation. He, though unselfish as men go, could not conceal his knowledge that he was so. Each vied with the other in the luxury of giving up with apparent sweetness, only the luxury was really beyond the means of either. With the Baedeker before them on the table, the ritual was again gone through — from her point of view, while in sheer weariness he agreed to conditions his strength could never fulfil when the time came. They met half-way upon Champéry in the Valais Alps above the Rhone. It satisfied neither of them. But speech was exhausted; energy flagged; the restaurant, moreover, was emptying and lights being turned out.

They put away Baedeker and paper, paid the bill, and rose to go, each keenly disappointed, each feeling conscious of having made a big sacrifice. On the steps he turned to help her put her coat on, and their eyes met. They felt miles apart. “So much for my holiday,” he thought, “after waiting eleven months!” and there was a flash of resentful anger in his heart. He turned it unconsciously against his sister.

“Eton t write for rooms till the end of the week,” he suggested. “I *may* think of a better place after all.”

It was the tone that stung her nerves, perhaps. She really hated Champéry — a crowded, touristy, "organised" place. Her sacrifice had gone for nothing. "Even now he's not satisfied!" she realised with bitterness.

"Oh, if you don't feel it'll do, Bill, dear," she answered coolly, "I really think we'd better give it up — going together, I mean." Her force was exhausted.

He felt sore, offended, injured. He looked sharply at her, almost glared. A universe lay between them now. Before there was time to reflect or choose his words, even to soften his tone, he had answered coldly:

"Just as you like, Frances. I don't want to spoil your holiday. You' re right. We'd better go separately then."

Nothing more was said. He saw her to the station of the Tube, but the moment the train had gone he realised that the final wave of her little hand betrayed somehow that tears were very close. She had not shown her face again. He felt sad, ashamed, and bitter. Deeper than the resentment, however, was a great ache in his heart that was pain. Remorse surged over him. He thought of her year of toil, her tired little face, her disappointment. Her brief holiday, so feverishly yearned for, would now be tinged with sadness and regret, wherever she went. Memory flashed back to their childhood together, when life smiled upon them in that Kentish garden. They were the only two survivors. Yet they could not manage even a holiday together....

Though so little had been said at the end, it was a rupture.... He went home to bed, planning a splendid reconstruction. Before they went to their respective work-places in the morning he would run over and see her, put everything straight and sweet again, explaining his selfishness, perhaps, on the plea that he was overtired. He wondered, as he lay ashamed and sad upon his sleepless bed, what *she* was thinking and feeling now... and fell asleep at last with his plan of reconstruction all completed. His last conscious thought was "I wish I had not let her go like that... without a nice good-bye!"

In the morning, however, he had not time to go; he postponed it to the evening, sending her a telegram instead: "Come dinner to-night same place and time. Have worked out perfect plan." And all day long he looked forward eagerly to their meeting. Those childhood thoughts haunted him strangely — he remembered the enormous plans all had made together years ago in that old Kentish garden where the hop-fields peered above the privet hedge and frightened them. There were five of them then; now there were only two.

But plans, large or small, are not so easily made. Fate does not often give two chances in succession. And Fate that day was very busy in and out among the London traffic. Frances, hopeful and delighted, kept the appointment — and waited a whole hour before she went anxiously to his flat to find out what was wrong. In the awful room she knew that Fate had made a different plan, and had carried it out. She was too late for him to recognise her, even. In the pocket of the coat he had been wearing she found a sheet of paper giving the names of hotels at Maloja, pension terms, and railway connections from London. She also found the letter he had written engaging the rooms. The envelope was addressed and stamped, but left open for her final approval. She keeps it still.

What she also keeps, however, more than the recollection of real, big quarrels that had come into their lives at other times, is the memory of the way they had left one another at that Tube station, and the horrid fact that she had gone home with resentment and unforgiveness in her heart. It was such a little thing at the moment. But the big, formidable quarrels had been adjusted, made up, forgotten, whereas this other regret would burn her till she died. “We were so cross and tired. But it might so easily have been different. If only... I had not left him... just like that...!”

ENTRANCE AND EXIT

THESE THREE — the old physicist, the girl, and the young Anglican parson who was engaged to her — stood by the window of the country house. The blinds were not yet drawn. They could see the dark clump of pines in the field, with crests silhouetted against the pale wintry sky of the February afternoon. Snow, freshly fallen, lay upon lawn and hill. A big moon was already lighting up.

“Yes, that’s the wood,” the old man said, “and it was this very day fifty years ago — February 13 — the man disappeared from its shadows; swept in this extraordinary, incredible fashion into invisibility — into *some other place.* Can you wonder the grove is haunted?” A strange impressiveness of manner belied the laugh following the words.

“Oh, please tell us,” the girl whispered; “we’re all alone now.” Curiosity triumphed; yet a vague alarm betrayed itself in the questioning glance she cast for protection at her younger companion, whose fine face, on the other hand, wore an expression that was grave and singularly “rapt.” He was listening keenly.

“As though Nature,” the physicist went on, half to himself, “here and there concealed vacuums, gaps, holes in space (his mind was always speculative; more than speculative, some said), through which a man might drop into invisibility — a new direction, in fact, at right angles to the three known ones— ‘higher space,’ as Bolyai, Gauss, and Hinton might call it; and what you, with your mystical turn” — looking toward the young priest— “might consider a spiritual change of condition, into a region where space and time do not exist, and where all dimensions are possible — because they are one.”

“But, *please,* the story,” the girl begged, not understanding these dark sayings, “although I’m not sure that Arthur ought to hear it. He’s much too interested in such queer things as it is!” Smiling, yet uneasy, she stood closer to his side, as though her body might protect his soul.

“Very briefly, then, you shall hear what I remember of this haunting, for I was barely ten years old at the time. It was evening — clear and cold like this, with snow and moonlight — when someone reported to my father that a peculiar sound, variously described as crying, singing, wailing, was being heard in the grove. He paid no attention until my sister heard it too, and was frightened. Then he sent a groom to investigate. Though the night was brilliant the man took a lantern. We watched from this very window till we lost his figure against the trees, and the lantern stopped swinging suddenly, as if he had put it down. It remained motionless. We waited half an hour, and then my father, curiously excited, I remember, went out quickly, and I, utterly terrified, went after him. We followed his tracks, which came to an end beside the lantern, the last step being a stride almost impossible for a man to have made. All around the snow was unbroken by a single mark, but the man himself had vanished. Then we heard him calling for help — above, behind, beyond us; from all directions at once, yet from none, came the sound of his voice; but though we called back he made no answer, and gradually his cries grew fainter and fainter, as if going into tremendous distance, and at last died away altogether.”

“And the man himself?” asked both listeners.

Never returned — from that day to this has never been seen.... At intervals for weeks and months afterwards reports came in that he was still heard crying, always crying for help. With time, even these reports ceased — for most of us,” he added under his breath; “and that is all I know. A mere outline, as you see.”

The girl did not quite like the story, for the old man’s manner made it too convincing. She was half disappointed, half frightened.

“See! there are the others coming home,” she exclaimed, with a note of relief, pointing to a group of figures moving over the snow near the pine trees. Now we can think of tea!” She crossed the room to busy herself with the friendly tray as the servant approached to fasten the shutters. The young priest, however, deeply interested, talked on with their host, though in a voice almost too low for her to hear. Only the final sentences reached her, making her uneasy — absurdly so, she thought — till afterwards.

“ — for matter, as we know, interpenetrates matter,” she heard, “and two objects may conceivably occupy the same space. The odd thing really is that one should hear, but not see; that air-waves should bring the voice, yet ether-waves fail to bring the picture.”

And then the older man: “ — as if certain places in Nature, yes, invited the change — places where these extraordinary forces stir from the earth as from the surface of a living Being with organs — places like islands, mountaintops, pine-woods, especially pines isolated from their kind. You know the queer results of digging absolutely virgin soil, of course — and that theory of the earth’s being *alive*—”

The voice dropped again.

“States of mind also helping the forces of the place,” she caught the priest’s reply in part; “such as conditions induced by music, by intense listening, by certain moments in the Mass even — by ecstasy or—”

“I say, what *do* you think?” cried a girl’s voice, as the others came in with welcome chatter and odours of tweeds and open fields. “As we passed your old haunted pine-wood we heard *such* a queer noise. Like someone wailing or crying. Caesar howled and ran; and Harry refused to go in and investigate. He positively funked it!” They all laughed. “More like a rabbit in a trap than a person crying,” explained Harry, a blush kindly concealing his startling pallor “I wanted my tea too much to bother about an old rabbit.”

It was some time after tea when the girl became aware that the priest had disappeared, and putting two and two together, ran in alarm to her host’s study. Quite easily, from the hastily opened shutters, they saw his figure moving across the snow. The moon was very bright over the world, yet he earned a lantern that shone pale yellow against the white brilliance.

“Oh, for God’s sake, quick!” she cried, pale with fear. “Quick! or we’re too late! Arthur’s simply wild about such things. Oh, I might have known — I might have guessed. And this is the very night. I’m terrified!”

By the time he had found his overcoat and slipped round the house with her from the back door, the lantern, they saw, was already swinging close to the pine-wood. The night was still as ice, bitterly cold. Breathlessly they ran, following the tracks. Half-way his steps diverged, and were plainly visible in the virgin snow by themselves. They heard the whispering of the branches ahead of them, for pines cry even when no airs stir. “Follow me close,” said the old man sternly. The lantern, he already saw, lay upon the ground unattended; no human figure was anywhere visible.

“See! The steps come to an end here,” he whispered, stooping down as soon as they reached the lantern. The tracks, hitherto so regular, showed an odd wavering — the snow curiously disturbed. Quite suddenly they stopped. The final step was a very long one — a stride, almost immense, “as though he was pushed forward from behind,” muttered the old man, too low to be overheard, “or sucked forward from in front — as in a fall.”

The girl would have dashed forward but for his strong restraining grasp. She clutched him, uttering a sudden dreadful cry. “Hark! I hear his voice!” she almost sobbed. They stood still to listen. A mystery that was more than the mystery of night closed about their hearts — a mystery that is beyond life and death, that only great awe and terror can summon from the deeps of the soul. Out of the heart of the trees, fifty feet away, issued a crying voice, half wailing, half singing, very faint. “Help! Help!” it sounded through the still night; “for the love of God, pray for me!”

The melancholy rustling of the pines followed; and then again the singular crying voice shot past above their heads, now in front of them, now once more behind. It sounded everywhere. It grew fainter and fainter, fading away, it seemed, into distance that somehow was appalling.... The grove, however, was empty of all but the sighing wind; the snow unbroken by any tread. The moon threw inky shadows; the cold bit; it was a terror of ice and death and this awful singing cry....

“But why *pray?”* screamed the girl, distracted, frantic with her bewildered terror. “Why *pray?* Let us *do* something to help — do something...!” She swung round in a circle, nearly falling to the ground. Suddenly she perceived that the old man had dropped to his knees in the snow beside her and was praying.

“Because the forces of prayer, of thought, of the will to help, alone can reach and succour him where he now is,” was all the answer she got. And a moment later both figures were kneeling in the snow, praying, so to speak, their very heart’s life out....

The search may be imagined — the steps taken by police, friends, newspapers, by the whole country in fact.... But the most curious part of this queer “Higher Space” adventure is the end of it — at least, the “end” so far as at present known. For after three weeks, when the winds of March were a-roar about the land, there crept over the fields towards the house the small dark figure of a man. He was thin, pallid as a ghost, worn and fearfully emaciated, but upon his face and in his eyes were traces of an astonishing radiance — a glory unlike anything ever seen.... It may, of course, have been deliberate, or it may have been a genuine loss of memory only; none could say — least of all the girl whom his return snatched from the gates of death; but, at any rate, what had come to pass during the interval of his amazing disappearance he has never yet been able to reveal.

“And you must never ask me,” he would say to her — and repeat even after his complete and speedy restoration to bodily health— “for I simply cannot tell. I know no language, you see, that could express it. I was near you all the time. But I was also — elsewhere and otherwise....”

YOU MAY TELEPHONE FROM HERE

SHE SENT THE servant to bed at half-past ten, and sat up in the flat alone. “I’ll let my cousin in,” she explained; “she may be rather late.” She read, knitted, began a letter, poked the fire, and examined her husband’s photographs on the mantelpiece; but most of the time she looked about her nervously, some’ times going to the door to listen, sometimes lifting the corner of the blind to look out upon the lights of North Kensington struggling with the blackness. The fog was thicker than ever. A rumble of traffic feeling its way floated up to her from below.

But at last the doorbell rang sharply, and she ran to let in the cousin who had promised to spend the two nights with her during her husband’s absence in Paris. They kissed. Both began talking at once.

“I thought you were *never* coming, Sybil!”

“The play was out late — and the fog’s bad. I sent on my box this afternoon on purpose.”

“It came safely; and your room’s quite ready. I do hope you’ll manage all right without a maid. Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come, though!”

“Foolish little country mouse!”

“Oh, it’s not that so much, though I admit that London still terrifies me at night rather; but you know this is the first time he’s been away — and I sup’ pose—”

“I know, dear; I understand perfectly.” The cousin was brisk and cheerful. “You feel lonely, of course.” They kissed again. “Just unhook me, will you?” she added, “and I’ll get into my dressing-gown, and then we’ll be cosy over the fire.”

“I saw him off at Victoria at 8.45,” said the little wife when the operation was over.

“Newhaven and Dieppe?”

"Yes. He gets to Paris at seven in the morning. He promised to telephone the first thing."

"You expensive little monkey!"

"Why?"

"It's ten shillings for three minutes, or something like that, and you have to go to the G.P.O. or the Mansion House or some such place, I believe."

"But I thought it was the usual long-distance thing direct here to the flat. He never told me all that."

"Probably you didn't give him the chance!" They laughed, and went on chatting, with feet on the fender and skirts tucked up. The cousin lit her second cigarette. It was after midnight.

"I'm afraid I'm not the least bit sleepy," said the wife apologetically.

"Nor am I, dear. For once the play excited me." She began to describe it vigorously. Half-way through the recital the telephone sounded in the hall. It tinkled faintly, but gave no proper ring.

The other started. "There it is again! It's always doing that — ever since Harry put it in a week ago. I don't quite like it." She spoke in a hushed voice.

The cousin looked at her curiously. "Oh, you mustn't mind that," she laughed with a reassuring manner. "It's a little way they have when the line gets out of order. You' re not used to playing the telephone game yet. You should call up the Exchange and complain. Always complain, you know, in this world if you want—"

"There it goes again," interrupted her friend nervously. "Oh, I do wish it would stop. It's so like someone standing out there in the hall and trying to talk—"

The cousin jumped up. They went into the hall together, and the experienced one briskly rang up the Exchange and asked if there was anybody trying to "get through." With fine indignation she complained that no one in the flat could sleep for the noise. After a brief conversation she turned, receiver in hand, to her companion.

"The operator says he's very sorry, but your line's a bit troublesome to-night for some reason. Got mixed, or something. He can't understand it. Advises you to leave the receiver unhooked till the morning. Then it can't possibly ring, you see!"

They left the receiver swinging, and went back to the fire.

"I'm sorry I'm such a timid donkey," the wife said, laughing a little; "but I'm not used to it yet. There was no telephone at the farm, you know." She turned with a sudden start, as though she heard the bell again. "And tonight," she added in a lower voice, though with an obvious effort at self-control, "for some reason or other I feel uncomfortable, rather — excited, queer, I think."

"How? Queer?"

"I don't know exactly; almost as if there was someone else in the flat — someone besides ourselves and the servant, I mean."

The cousin moved abruptly. She switched on the electric lights in the wall beside her.

"Yes; but it's only imagination, *really,"* she said with decision. "It's natural enough. It's the fog and the strangeness of London after the loneliness of your farm-life, and your husband being away, and — and all that. Once you analyse these queer feelings they always go—"

"Hark!" exclaimed the wife under her breath. "Wasn't that a step in the passage?" She sat bolt upright, her face pale, her eyes very bright. They listened a moment. The night was utterly still about them.

"Rubbish!" cried the cousin loudly. "It was my foot knocking the fender; like this — look!" She repeated the sound vigorously.

"I do believe it was," the other said, only half convinced. "But it is queer. You know I feel exactly as though someone had come into the flat — quite recently, since *you* came, I mean — just before that tinkling began, in fact."

"Come, come," laughed the cousin, "you'll give us both the jumps. At one o'clock in the morning it's easy to imagine anything. You'll be hearing elephants on the stairs next!" She looked sharply about her. "Let's brew our chocolate and get to bed," she added. "We shall sleep like tops."

"One o' clock already! Then Harry's halfway across by now," said the wife, smiling at her friend's language. "But I'm so glad, oh, so glad, you're here," she added; "and I think it's most awfully sweet of you to give up a comfy big house...." They kissed again and laughed. Soon afterwards, having scalded their throats with hot chocolate, they went to bed.

"It simply *can't* ring now!" remarked the cousin triumphantly as they passed the receiver dangling in mid-air.

"That's a relief," her friend said. "I feel less nervous. Really, I'm too ashamed of myself for anything."

"Fog's clearing, too," Sybil added, peering for a moment through the narrow window by the front door.

An hour later the little flat was still as the grave. No sound of traffic was heard. Even the tinkling of the telephone seemed a whole twenty-four hours away, when suddenly — it began again: first with little soft tentative noises, very faint, troubled, hurried, buried almost out of hearing inside the box; then louder and louder, with sharp jerks — finally with a challenging and alarming peal. And the wife, who had kept her door open, without pretence of sleep, heard it from the very beginning. In a moment she found herself in the passage, and Sybil, wakened by her cry, was at her heels. They turned up the lights and stood facing one another. The hall smelt — as things only smell at night — cold, musty....

"What's the matter? You frightened me. I heard you scream — !"

"The telephone's ringing again — violently," the wife whispered, pale to the lips. "Don't you hear it? This time there's someone there — *really!"*

The cousin stared blankly at her. The laugh choked in her throat. "I hear nothing," she said defiantly, yet without confidence in her voice. "Besides, the thing's still disconnected. It *can t* ring — look!" She pointed to the hanging receiver motionless against the wall. "You're white as a ghost, though," she added, coming quickly forward. Her friend moved suddenly to the instrument and picked up the receiver. "It's someone for me," she said, with terror in her eyes. "It's someone who wants to talk to me! Oh, hark! hark how it rings!" Her voice shook. She placed the little disc to her ear and waited while her friend stood by and stared in amazement, uncertain what to do. *She* had heard no ringing!

"You, Harry!" whispered the wife into the telephone, with brief intervals of silence for the replies. "Y*ou?* But how in the world so soon? — Yes, I can just hear, but very faintly. Miles and miles away your voice sounds — What? — A wonderful journey? And sooner than you expected! — Not in Paris? Where, then? Oh! my darling boy — No, I don't quite hear; I can't catch it — I don't understand.... The pain of the sea is nothing — is *what?...* You know nothing of *what...?"*

The cousin came boldly up. She took her arm. "But, child, there's no one there, bless you! You' re dreaming — you' re in fever or something—"

"Hush! For God's sake, hush!" She held up a hand. In her face and eyes was an expression indescribable — fear, love, bewilderment. Her body swayed a little, leaning against the wall. "Hush! I hear him still; but, oh miles and miles away — He says — he's been trying for hours to find me. First he tried my brain direct, and then — then — oh! he says he may not get back again to me — only he can't understand, can't explain *why* — the cold, the awful cold, keeps his lips from — Oh!"

She screamed aloud as she flung the receiver down and dropped in a heap upon the floor. "I don't understand — it's death, death...!"

And the collision in the Channel that night, as they learned in due course, occurred a few minutes after one o'clock; while Harry himself, who remained unconscious for several hours after the boat picked him up, could only remember that his last desire as the wave caught him was an intense wish to communicate with his wife and tell her what had happened.... The next thing he knew was opening his eyes in a Dieppe hotel.

And the other curious detail was furnished by the man who came to repair the telephone next day. At the Exchange, he declared, the wire, from midnight till nearly three in the morning, had emitted sparks and flashes of light no one had been able to account for in any usual manner.

"Queer!" said the man to himself, after tinkering and tapping for ten minutes, "but there's nothing wrong with it at *this* end. It's the subscriber, most likely. It usually is!"

THE WHISPERERS

TO BE TOO impressionable is as much a source of weakness as to be hyper-sensitive: so many messages come flooding in upon one another that confusion is the result; the mind chokes, imagination grows congested.

Jones, as an imaginative writing man, was well aware of this, yet could not always prevent it; for if he dulled his mind to one impression, he ran the risk of blunting it to all. To guard his main idea, and picket its safe conduct through the seethe of additions that instantly flocked to join it, was a psychological puzzle that sometimes overtaxed his powers of critical selection. He prepared for it, however. An editor would ask him for a story — "about five thousand words, you know"; and Jones would answer, "I'll send it you with pleasure — when it comes." He knew his difficulty too well to promise more. Ideas were never lacking, but their length of treatment belonged to machinery he could not coerce. They were alive; they refused to come to heel to suit mere editors. Midway in a tale that started crystal clear and definite in its original germ, would pour a flood of new impressions that either smothered the first conception, or developed it beyond recognition. Often a short story exfoliated in this bursting way beyond his power to stop it. He began one, never knowing where it would lead him. It was ever an adventure. Like Jack the Giant Killer's beanstalk it grew secretly in the night, fed by everything he read, saw, felt, or heard. Jones was too impressionable; he received too many impressions, and too easily.

For this reason, when working at a definite, short idea, he preferred an empty room, without pictures, furniture, books, or anything suggestive, and with a skylight that shut out scenery — just ink, blank paper, and the clear picture in his mind. His own interior, unstimulated by the geysers of external life, he made some pretence of regulating; though even under these favourable conditions the matter was not too easy, so prolifically does a sensitive mind engender.

His experience in the empty room of the carpenter's house was a curious case in point — in the little Jura village where his cousin lived to educate his children. “We’re all in a pension above the Post Office here,” the cousin wrote, “but just now the house is full, and besides is rather noisy. I’ve taken an attic room for you at the carpenter’s near the forest. Some things of mine have been stored there all the winter, but I moved the cases out this morning. There’s a bed, writing-table, wash-handstand, sofa, and a skylight window — otherwise empty, as I know you prefer it. You can have your meals with us,” etc. And this just suited Jones, who had six weeks’ work on hand for which he needed empty solitude. His “idea” was slight and very tender; accretions would easily smother clear presentment; its treatment must be delicate, simple, unconfused.

The room really was an attic, but large, wide, high. He heard the wind rush past the skylight when he went to bed. When the cupboard was open he heard the wind there too, washing the outer walls and tiles. From his pillow he saw a patch of stars peep down upon him. Jones knew the mountains and the woods were close, but he could not see them. Better still, he could not smell them. And he went to bed dead tired, full of his theme for work next morning. He saw it to the end. He could almost have promised five thousand words. With the dawn he would be up and “at it,” for he usually woke very early, his mind surcharged, as though subconsciousness had matured the material in sleep. Cold bath, a cup of tea, and then — his writing-table; and the quicker he could reach the writing-table the richer was the content of imaginative thought. What had puzzled him the night before was invariably cleared up in the morning. Only illness could interfere with the process and routine of it.

But this time it was otherwise. He woke, and instantly realised, with a shock of surprise and disappointment, that his mind was — groping. It was groping for his little lost idea. There was nothing physically wrong with him; he felt rested, fresh, clear-headed; but his brain was searching, searching, moreover, in a crowd. Trying to seize hold of the train it had relinquished several hours ago, it caught at an evasive, empty shell. The idea had utterly changed; or rather it seemed smothered by a host of new impressions that came pouring in upon it — new modes of treatment, points of view, in fact development. In the light of these extensions and novel aspects, his original idea had altered beyond recognition. The germ had marvellously exfoliated, so that a whole volume could alone express it. An army of fresh suggestions clamoured for expression. His subconsciousness had grown thick with life; it surged — active, crowded, tumultuous.

And the darkness puzzled him. He remembered the absence of accustomed windows, but it was only when the candle-light brought close the face of his watch, with two o’ clock upon it, that he heard the sound of confused whispering in the corners of the room, and realised with a little twinge of fear that those who whispered had just been standing beside his very bed. The room was full.

Though the candle-light proclaimed it empty — bare walls, bare floor, five pieces of unimaginative furniture, and fifty stars peeping through the skylight — it was undeniably thronged with living people whose minds had called him out of heavy sleep. The whispers, of course, died off into the wind that swept the roof and skylight; but the Whisperers remained. They had been trying to get at him; waking suddenly, he had caught them in the very act.... And all had brought new interpretations with them; his thought had fundamentally altered; the original idea was snowed under; new images brimmed his mind, and his brain was working as it worked under the high pressure of creative moments.

Jones sat up, trembling a little, and stared about him into the empty room that yet was densely packed with these invisible Whisperers. And he realised this astonishing thing — that he was the object of their deliberate assault, and that scores of other minds, deep, powerful, very active minds, were thundering and beating upon the doors of his imagination. The onset of them was terrific and bewildering, the attack of aggressive ideas obliterating his original story beneath a flood of new suggestions. Inspiration had become suddenly torrential, yet so vast as to be unwieldy, incoherent, useless. It was like the tempest of images that fever brings. His first conception seemed no longer “delicate,” but petty. It had turned unreal and tiny, compared with this enormous choice of treatment extension, development, that now overwhelmed his throbbing brain.

Fear caught vividly at him, as he searched the empty attic-room in vain for explanation. There was absolutely nothing to produce this tempest of new impressions. People seemed talking to him all together, jumbled somewhat, but insistently. It was obsession, rather than inspiration; and so bitingly, dreadfully real.

“Who are you all?” his mind whispered to blank walls and vacant corners.

Back from the shouting floor and ceiling came the chorus of images that stormed and clamoured for expression. Jones lay still and listened; he let them come. There was nothing else to do. He lay fearful, negative, receptive. It was all too big for him to manage, set to some scale of high achievement that submerged his own small powers. It came, too, in a series of impressions, all separate, yet all somehow interwoven.

In vain he tried to sort them out and sift them. As well sort out waves upon an agitated sea. They were too self-assertive for direction or control. Like wild animals, hungry, thirsty, ravening, they rushed from every side and fastened on his mind.

Yet he perceived them in a certain sequence.

For, first, the unfurnished attic-chamber was full of human passion, of love and hate, revenge and wicked cunning, of jealousy, courage, cowardice, of every vital human emotion ever longed for, enjoyed, or frustrated, all clamouring for — expression.

Flaming across and through these, incongruously threaded in and out, ran next a yearning softness of incredible beauty that sighed in the empty spaces of his heart, pleading for impossible fulfilment....

And, after these, carrying both one and other upon their surface, huge questions flashed and dived and thundered in a patterned, wild entanglement, calling to be unravelled and made straight. Moreover, with every set came a new suggested treatment of the little clear idea he had taken to bed with him five hours before.

Jones adopted each in turn. Imagination writhed and twisted beneath the stress of all these potential modes of expression he must choose between. His small idea exfoliated into many volumes, work enough to fill a dozen lives. It was most gorgeously exhilarating, though so hopelessly unmanageable. He felt like many minds in one....

Then came another chain of impressions, violent, yet steady owing to their depth; the voices, questions, pleadings turned to pictures; and he saw, struggling through the deeps of him, enormous quantities of people, passing along like rivers, massed, herded, swayed here and there by some outstanding figure of command who directed them like flowing water. They shrieked, and fought, and battled, then sank out of sight, huddled and destroyed in — blood....

And their places were taken instantly by white crowds with shining eyes, and yearning in their faces, who climbed precipitous heights towards some Radiance that kept ever out of sight, like sunrise behind mountains that clouds then swallow.... The pelt and thunder of images was destructive in its torrent; his little, first idea was drowned and wrecked.... Jones sank back exhausted, utterly dismayed. He gave up all attempt to make selection.

The driving storm swept through him, on and on, now waxing, now waning, but never growing less, and apparently endless as the sky. It rushed in circles, like the turning of a giant wheel. All the activities that human minds have ever battled with since thought began came booming, crashing, straining for expression against the imaginative stuff whereof his mind was built. The walls began to yield and settle. It was like the chaos that madness brings. He did not struggle against it; he let it come, lying open and receptive, pliant and plastic to every detail of the vast invasion. And the only time he attempted a complete obedience, reaching out for the pencil and notebook that lay beside his bed, he desisted instantly again, sinking back upon his pillows with a kind of frightened laughter. For the tempest seemed then to knock him down and bruise his very brain. Inextricable confusion caught him. He might as well have tried to make notes of the entire Alexandrian Library in half an hour....

Then, most singular of all, as he felt the sleep of exhaustion fall upon his tired nerves, he heard that deep, prodigious sound. All that had preceded, it gathered marvellously in, mothering it with a sweetness that seemed to his imagination like some harmonious, geometrical skein including all the activities men's minds have ever known. Faintly he realised it only, discerned from infinitely far away. Into the streams of apparent contradiction that warred so strenuously about him, it seemed to bring some hint of unifying, harmonious explanation.... And, here and there, as sleep buried him, he imagined that chords lay threaded along strings of cadences, breaking sometimes even into melody — music that rose everywhere from life and wove Thought into a homogeneous Whole....

"Sleep well? his cousin inquired, when he appeared very late next day for *déjeuner*. "Think you'll be able to work in that room all right?"

“I slept, yes, thanks,” said Jones. “No doubt I shall work there right enough — when I’m rested. By the bye,” he asked presently, “what has the attic been used for lately? What’s been in it, I mean?”

“Books, only books,” was the reply. “I’ve stored my library there for months, without a chance of using it. I move about so much, you see. Five hundred books were taken out just before you came. I often think,” he added lightly, “that when books are unopened like that for long, the minds that wrote them must get restless and—”

“What sort of books were they?” Jones interrupted.

“Fiction, poetry, philosophy, history, religion, music. I’ve got two hundred books on music alone.”

VIOLENCE

"BUT WHAT SEEMS so odd to me, so horribly pathetic, is that such people don't resist," said Leidall, suddenly entering the conversation. The intensity of his tone startled everybody; it was so passionate, yet with a beseeching touch that made the women feel uncomfortable a little. "As a rule, I'm told, they submit willingly, almost as though—"

He hesitated, grew confused, and dropped his glance to the floor; and a smartly dressed woman eager to be heard, seized the opening. "Oh, come now," she laughed; "one always hears of a man being *put* into a strait waistcoat. I'm sure he doesn't slip it on as if he were going to a dance!" And she looked flippantly at Leidall, whose casual manners she resented. "People are *put* under restraint. It's not in human nature to accept it — healthy human nature, that is?" But for some reason no one took her question up. "That is so, I believe, yes," a polite voice murmured, while the group at tea in the Dover Street Club turned with one accord to Leidall as to one whose interesting sentence still remained unfinished. He had hardly spoken before, and a silent man is ever credited with wisdom.

"As though — you were just saying, Mr. Leidall?" a quiet little man in a dark corner helped him.

"As though, I meant, a man in that condition of mind is not insane — all through," Leidall continued stammeringly; "but that some wise portion of him watches the proceeding with gratitude, and welcomes the protection against himself. It seems awfully pathetic. Still," again hesitating and fumbling in his speech— "er — it seems queer to me that he should yield quietly to enforced restraint — the waistcoat, handcuffs, and the rest." He looked round hurriedly, half suspiciously, at the faces in the circle, then dropped his eyes again to the floor. He sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I cannot understand it," he added, as no one spoke, but in a very low voice, and almost to himself. "One would expect them to struggle furiously."

Someone had mentioned that remarkable book, *The Mind that Found Itself,* and the conversation had slipped into this serious vein. The women did not like it. What kept it alive was the fact that the silent Leidall, with his handsome, melancholy face, had suddenly wakened into speech, and that the little man opposite to him, half invisible in his dark corner, was assistant to one of London's great hypnotic doctors, who could, an' he would, tell interesting and terrible things. No one cared to ask the direct question, but all hoped for revelations, possibly about people they actually knew. It was a very ordinary tea-party indeed. And this little man now spoke, though hardly in the desired vein. He addressed his remarks to Leidall across the disappointed lady.

"I think, probably, your explanation is the true one," he said gently, "for madness in its commoner forms is merely want of proportion; the mind gets out of right and proper relations with its environment. The majority of madmen are mad on one thing only, while the rest of them is as sane as myself — or you."

The words fell into the silence. Leidall bowed his agreement, saying no actual word. The ladies fidgeted. Someone made a jocular remark to the effect that most of the world was mad anyhow, and the conversation shifted with relief into a lighter vein — the scandal in the family of a politician. Everybody talked at once. Cigarettes were lit. The corner soon became excited and even uproarious. The tea-party was a great success, and the offended lady no longer ignored, led all the skirmishes — towards herself. She was in her element. Only Leidall and the little invisible man in the corner took small part in it; and presently, seizing the opportunity when some new arrivals joined the group, Leidall rose to say his adieux, and slipped away, his departure scarcely noticed. Dr. Hancock followed him a minute later. The two men met in the hall; Leidall already had his hat and coat on. "I'm going West, Mr. Leidall. If that's your way too, and you feel inclined for the walk, we might go together." Leidall turned with a start. His glance took in the other with avidity — a keenly-searching, hungry glance. He hesitated for an imperceptible moment, then made a movement towards him, half inviting, while a curious shadow dropped across his face and vanished. It was both pathetic and terrible. The lips trembled. He seemed to say, "God bless you; *do* come with me!" But no words were audible.

"It's a pleasant evening for a walk," added Dr. Hancock gently; "clean and dry under foot for a change. I'll get my hat and join you in a second." And there was a hint, the merest flavour, of authority in his voice.

That touch of authority was his mistake. Instantly Leidall's hesitation passed. "I'm sorry," he said abruptly, "but I'm afraid I must take a taxi. I have an appointment at the Club and I'm late already."

"Oh, I see," the other replied, with a kindly smile; "then I mustn't keep you. But if you ever have a free evening, won't you look me up, or come and dine? You'll find my telephone number in the book. I should like to talk with you about — those things we mentioned at tea." Leidall thanked him politely and went out. The memory of the little man's kindly sympathy and understanding eyes went with him.

"Who was that man?" someone asked, the moment Leidall had left the tea-table. "Surely he's not the Leidall who wrote that awful book some years ago?"

"Yes — the *Gulf of Darkness*. Did you read it?"

They discussed it and its author for five minutes, deciding by a large majority that it was the book of a madman. Silent, rude men like that always had a screw loose somewhere, they agreed. Silence was invariably morbid.

"And did you notice Dr. Hancock? He never took his eyes off him. That's why he followed him out like that. I wonder if *he* thought anything!"

"I know Hanock well," said the lady of the wounded vanity. "I'll ask him and find out." They chattered on, somebody mentioned a *risqué* play, the talk switched into other fields, and in due course the tea-party came to an end.

And Leidall, meanwhile, made his way towards the Park on foot, for he had not taken a taxi after all. The suggestion of the other man, perhaps, had worked upon him. He was very open to suggestion. With hands deep in his overcoat pockets, and head sunk forward between his shoulders, he walked briskly, entering the Park at one of the smaller gates. He made his way across the wet turf, avoiding the paths and people. The February sky was shining in the west; beautiful clouds floated over the houses; they looked like the shore-line of some radiant strand his childhood once had known. He sighed; thought dived and searched within; self-analysis, that old, implacable demon, lifted its voice; introspection took the reins again as usual. There seemed a strain upon the mind he could not dispel. Thought circled poignantly. He knew it was unhealthy, morbid, a sign of these many years of difficulty and stress that had marked him so deeply, but for the life of him he could not escape from the hideous spell that held him. The same old thoughts bored their way into his mind like burning wires, tracing the same unanswerable questions. From this torture, waking or sleeping, there was no escape. Had a companion been with him it might have been different. If, for instance, Dr. Hancock —

He was angry with himself for having refused — furious; it was that vile, false pride his long loneliness had fostered. The man was sympathetic to him, friendly, marvellously understanding; he could have talked freely with him, and found relief. His intuition had picked out the little doctor as a man in ten thousand. Why had he so curtly declined his gentle invitation? Dr. Hancock *knew,* he guessed his awful secret. But how? In what had he betrayed himself?

The weary self-questioning began again, till he sighed and groaned from sheer exhaustion. He must find people, companionship, someone to talk to. The Club — it crossed his tortured mind for a second — was impossible; there was a conspiracy among the members against him. He had left his usual haunts everywhere for the same reason — his restaurants, where he had his lonely meals; his music hall, where he tried sometimes to forget himself; his favourite walks, where the very policemen knew and eyed him. And, coming to the bridge across the Serpentine just then, he paused and leaned over the edge, watching a bubble rise to the surface.

“I suppose there *are* fish in the Serpentine?” he said to a man a few feet away.

They talked a moment — the other was evidently a clerk on his way home — and then the stranger edged off and continued his walk, looking back once or twice at the sad-faced man who had addressed him. “It’s ridiculous, that with all our science we can’t live under water as the fish do,” reflected Leidall, and moved on round the other bank of the water, where he watched a flight of duck whirl down from the darkening air and settle with a long, mournful splash beside the bushy island. “Or that, for all our pride of mechanism in a mechanical age, we cannot really fly.” But these attempts to escape from self were never very successful. Another part of him looked on and mocked. He returned ever to the endless introspection and self-analysis, and in the deepest moment of it — ran into a big, motionless figure that blocked his way. It was the Park policeman, the one who always eyed him. He sheered off suddenly towards the trees, while the man, recognising him, touched his cap respectfully. “It’s a pleasant evening, sir; turned quite mild again.” Leidall mumbled some reply or other, and hurried on to hide himself among the shadows of the trees. The policeman stood and watched him, till the darkness swallowed him. “He knows too!” groaned the wretched man. And every bench was occupied; every face turned to watch him; there were even figures behind the trees. He dared not go into the street, for the very taxi-drivers were against him. If he gave an address, he would not be driven to it; the man would know, and take him elsewhere. And something in his heart, sick with anguish, weary with the endless battle, suddenly yielded.

“There *are* fish in the Serpentine,” he remembered the stranger had said. “And,” he added to himself, with a wave of delicious comfort, “they lead secret, hidden lives that no one can disturb.” His mind cleared surprisingly. In the water he could find peace and rest and healing. Good Lord! How easy it all was! Yet he had never thought of it before. He turned sharply to retrace his steps, but in that very second the clouds descended upon his thought again, his mind darkened, he hesitated. Could he get out again when he had had enough? Would he rise to the surface? A battle began over these questions. He ran quickly, then stood still again to think the matter out. Darkness shrouded him. He heard the wind rush laughing through the trees. The picture of the whirring duck flashed back a moment, and he decided that the best way was by air, and not by water. He would *fly* into the place of rest, not sink or merely float; and he remembered the view from his bedroom window, high over old smoky London town, with a drop of eighty feet on to the pavements. Yes, that was the best way. He waited a moment, trying to think it all out clearly, but one moment the fish had it, and the next the birds. It was really impossible to decide. Was there no one who could help him, no one in all this enormous town who was sufficiently on his side to advise him on the point? Some clear-headed, experienced, kindly man?

And the face of Dr. Hancock flashed before his vision. He saw the gentle eyes and sympathetic smile, remembered the soothing voice and the offer of companionship he had refused. Of course, there was one serious drawback:

Hancock *knew.* But he was far too tactful, too sweet and good a man to let that influence his judgment, or to betray in any way at all that he did know.

Leidall found it in him to decide. Facing the entire hostile world, he hailed a taxi from the nearest gate upon the street, looked up the address in a chemist's telephone-book, and reached the door in a condition of delight and relief. Yes, Dr. Hancock was at home. Leidall sent his name in. A few minutes later the two men were chatting pleasantly together, almost like old friends, so keen was the little man's intuitive sympathy and tact. Only Hancock, patient listener though he proved himself to be, was uncommonly full of words. Leidall explained the matter very clearly. "Now, what is your decision, Dr. Hancock? Is it to be the way of the fish or the way of the duck?" And, while Hancock began his answer with slow, well-chosen words, a new idea, better than either, leaped with a flash into his listener's mind. It was an inspiration. For where could he find a better hiding-place from all his troubles than — inside Hancock himself? The man was kindly; he surely would not object. Leidall this time did not hesitate a second. He was tall and broad; Hancock was small; yet he was sure there would be room. He sprang upon him like a wild animal. He felt the warm, thin throat yield and bend between his great hands... then darkness, peace and rest, a nothingness that surely was the oblivion he had so long prayed for. He had accomplished his desire. He had secreted himself for ever from persecution — inside the kindliest little man he had ever met — inside Hancock....

He opened his eyes and looked about him into a room he did not know. The walls were soft and dimly coloured. It was very silent. Cushions were everywhere. Peaceful it was, and out of the world. Overhead was a skylight, and one window, opposite the door, was heavily barred. Delicious! No one could get in. He was sitting in a deep and comfortable chair. He felt rested and happy. There was a click, and he saw a tiny window in the door drop down, as though worked by a sliding panel.

Then the door opened noiselessly, and in came a little man with smiling face and soft brown eyes — Dr. Hancock.

Leidall's first feeling was amazement. "Then I didn't get into him properly after all! Or I've slipped out again, perhaps! The dear, good fellow!" And he rose to greet him. He put his hand out, and found that the other came with it in some inexplicable fashion. Movement was cramped. "Ah, then I've had a stroke," he thought, as Hancock pressed him, ever so gently, back into the big chair. "Do not get up," he said soothingly but with authority; "sit where you are and rest. You must take it very easy for a bit; like all clever men who have overworked—"

"I'll get in the moment he turns," thought Leidall. "I did it badly before. It must be through the back of his head, of course, where the spine runs up into the brain," and he waited till Hancock should turn. But Hancock never turned. He kept his face towards him all the time, while he chatted, moving gradually nearer to the door. On Leidall's face was the smile of an innocent child, but there lay a hideous cunning behind that smile, and the eyes were terrible.

"Are those bars firm and strong," asked Leidall, "so that no one can get in?" He pointed craftily, and the doctor, caught for a second unawares, turned his head. That instant Leidall was upon him with a roar, then sank back powerless into the chair, unable to move his arms more than a few inches in any direction. Hancock stepped up quietly and made him comfortable again with cushions.

And something in Leidall's soul turned round and looked another way. His mind became clear as daylight for a moment. The effort perhaps had caused the sudden change from darkness to great light. A memory rushed over him. "Good God!" he cried. "I am violent. I was going to do you an injury — you who are so sweet and good to me!" He trembled dreadfully, and burst into tears. "For the sake of Heaven," he implored, looking up, ashamed and keenly penitent, "put me under restraint. Fasten my hands before I try it again." He held both hands out willingly, beseechingly, then looked down, following the direction of the other's kind brown eyes. His wrists, he saw, already wore steel handcuffs, and a strait waistcoat was across his chest and arms and shoulders.

THE HOUSE OF THE PAST

ONE NIGHT A Dream came to me and brought with her an old and rusty key. She led me across fields and sweet-smelling lanes, where the hedges were already whispering to one another in the dark of the spring, till we came to a huge, gaunt house with staring windows and lofty roof half hidden in the shadows of very early morning. I noticed that the blinds were of heavy black, and that the house seemed wrapped in absolute stillness.

“This,” she whispered in my ear, “is the House of the Past. Come with me and we will go through some of its rooms and passages; but quickly, for I have not the key for long, and the night is very nearly over. Yet, perchance, you shall remember!”

The key made a dreadful noise as she turned it in the lock, and when the great door swung open into an empty hall and we went in, I heard sounds of whispering and weeping, and the rustling of clothes, as of people moving in their sleep and about to wake. Then, instantly, a spirit of intense sadness came over me, drenching me to the soul; my eyes began to burn and smart, and in my heart I became aware of a strange sensation as of the uncoiling of something that had been asleep for ages. My whole being, unable to resist, at once surrendered itself to the spirit of deepest melancholy, and the pain in my heart, as the Things moved and woke, became in a moment of time too strong for words....

As we advanced, the faint voices and sobbings fled away before us into the interior of the House, and I became conscious that the air was full of hands held aloft, of swaying garments, of drooping tresses, and of eyes so sad and wistful that the tears, which were already brimming in my own, held back for wonder at the sight of such intolerable yearning.

“Do not allow all this sadness to overwhelm you,” whispered the Dream at my side. “It is not often They wake. They sleep for years and years and years. The chambers are all full, and unless visitors such as we come to disturb them, they will never wake of their own accord. But, when one stirs, the sleep of the others is troubled, and they too awake, till the motion is communicated from one room to another and thus finally throughout the whole House.... Then, sometimes, the sadness is too great to be borne, and the mind weakens. For this reason Memory gives to them the sweetest and deepest sleep she has, and she keeps this old key rusty from little use. But, listen now," she added, holding up her hand; "do you not hear all through the House that trembling of the air like the distant murmur of falling water? And do you not now... perhaps... *remember?"*

Even before she spoke, I had already caught faintly the beginning of a new sound; and, now, deep in the cellars beneath our feet, and from the upper regions of the great House as well, I heard the whispering, and the rustling and the inward stirring of the sleeping Shadows. It rose like a chord swept softly from huge unseen strings stretched somewhere among the foundations of the House, and its tremblings ran gently through all its walls and ceilings. And I knew that I heard the slow awakening of the Ghosts of the Past.

Ah me, with what terrible inrushing of sadness I stood with brimming eyes and listened to the faint dead voices of the long ago.... For, indeed, the whole House was awakening; and there presently rose to my nostrils the subtle, penetrating perfume of Age: of letters, long preserved, with ink faded and ribbons pale; of scented tresses, golden and brown, laid away, ah how tenderly! among pressed flowers that still held the inmost delicacy of their forgotten fragrance; the scented presence of lost memories — the intoxicating incense of the past. My eyes o'erflowed, my heart tightened and expanded, as I yielded myself up without reserve to these old, old influences of sound and smell. These Ghosts of the Past — forgotten in the tumult of more recent memories — thronged round me, took my hands in theirs, and, ever whispering of what I had so long forgot, ever sighing, shaking from their hair and garments the ineffable odours of the dead ages, led me through the vast House, from room to room, from floor to floor.

And the Ghosts — were not all equally clear to me. Some had indeed but the faintest life, and stirred me so little that they left only an indistinct, blurred impression in the air; while others gazed half reproachfully at me out of faded, colourless eyes, as if longing to recall themselves to my recollection; and then, seeing they were not recognised, floated back gently into the shadows of their room, to sleep again undisturbed till the Final Day, when I should not fail to know them.

“Many of them have slept so long,” said the Dream beside me, “that they wake only with the greatest difficulty. Once awake, however, they know and remember *you* even though you fail to remember them. For it is the rule in this House of the Past that, unless you recall them distinctly, remembering precisely when you knew them and with what particular causes in your past evolution they were associated, they cannot stay awake. Unless you remember them when your eyes meet, unless their look of recognition is returned by you, they are obliged to go back to their sleep, silent and sorrowful, their hands unpressed, their voices unheard, to sleep and dream, deathless and patient, till....”

At this moment, her words died away suddenly into the distance, and I became conscious of an overpowering sensation of delight and happiness. Something had touched me on the lips, and a strong, sweet fire flashed down into my heart and sent the blood rushing tumultuously through my veins. My pulses beat wildly, my skin glowed, my eyes grew tender, and the terrible sadness of the place was instantly dispelled as if by magic. Turning with a cry of joy, that was at once swallowed up in the chorus of weeping and sighing round me, I looked... and instinctively stretched forth my arms in a rapture of happiness towards... towards a vision of a Face... hair, lips, eyes; a cloth of gold lay about the fair neck, and the old, old perfume of the East — ye stars, how long ago — was in her breath. Her lips were again on mine; her hair over my eyes; her arms about my neck, and the love of her ancient soul pouring into mine out of eyes still starry and undimmed. Oh, the fierce tumult, the untold wonder, if I could only remember.... That subtle, mist-dispelling odour of many ages ago, once so familiar... before the Hills of Atlantis were above the blue sea, or the sands had begun to form the bed of the Sphinx. Yet wait; it comes back; I begin to remember. Curtain upon curtain rises in my soul, and I can almost see beyond. But that hideous stretch of the years, awful and sinister, thousands upon thousands.... My heart shakes, and I am afraid. Another curtain rises and a new vista, farther than the others, comes into view, interminable, running to a point among thick mists. Lo, they too are moving, rising, lightening. At last, I shall see... already I begin to recall... the dusky skin... the Eastern grace, the wondrous eyes that held the knowledge of Buddha and the wisdom of Christ before these had even dreamed of attainment. As a dream within a dream, it steals over me again, taking compelling possession of my whole being... the slender form... the stars in that magical Eastern sky... the whispering winds among the palm trees... the murmur of the river's waves and the music of the reeds where they bend and sigh in the shallows on the golden sand. Thousands of years ago in some aeonian distance. It fades a little and begins to pass; then seems again to rise. Ah me, that smile of the shining teeth... those lace-veined lids. Oh, who will help me to recall, for it is too far away, too dim, and I cannot wholly remember; though my lips are still tingling, and my arms still outstretched, it again begins to fade. Already there is the look of sadness too deep for words, as she realises that she is unrecognised... she, whose mere presence could once extinguish for me the entire universe... and she goes back slowly, mournfully, silently to her dim, tremendous sleep, to dream and dream of the day when I *must* remember her and she *must* come where she belongs....

She peers at me from the end of the room where the Shadows already cover her and win her back with outstretched arms to her age-long sleep in the House of the Past.

Trembling all over, with the strange odour still in my nostrils and the fire in my heart, I turned away and followed my Dream up a broad staircase into another part of the House.

As we entered the upper corridors I heard the wind pass singing over the roof. Its music took possession of me until I felt as though my whole body were a single heart, aching, straining, throbbing as if it would break; and all because I heard the wind singing round this House of the Past.

"But, remember," whispered the Dream, answering my unspoken wonder, "that you are listening to the song it has sung for untold ages into untold myriad ears. It carries back so appallingly far; and in that simple dirge, profound in its terrible monotony, are the associations and recollections of the joys, griefs, and struggles of all your previous existence. The wind, like the sea, speaks to the inmost memory," she added, "and that is why its voice is one of such deep spiritual sadness. It is the song of things for ever incomplete, unfinished, unsatisfying."

As we passed through the vaulted rooms, I noticed that no one stirred. There was no actual sound, only a general impression of deep, collective breathing, like the heave of a muffled ocean. But the rooms, I knew at once, were full to the walls, crowded, rows upon rows.... And, from the floors below, rose ever the murmur of the weeping Shadows as they returned to their sleep, and settled down again in the silence, the darkness, and the dust. The dust.... Ah, the dust that floated in this House of the Past, so thick, so penetrating; so fine, it filled the throat and eyes without pain; so fragrant, it soothed the senses and stilled the aching of the heart; so soft, it parched the tongue, without offence; yet so silently falling, gathering, settling over everything, that the air held it like a fine mist and the sleeping Shadows wore it for their shrouds.

“And these are the oldest,” said my Dream, “the longest asleep,” pointing to the crowded rows of silent sleepers. “None here have wakened for ages too many to count; and even if they woke you would not know them. They are, like the others, all your own, but they are the memories of your earliest stages along the great Path of Evolution. Some day, though, they will awake, and you must know them, and answer their questions, for they cannot die till they have exhausted themselves again through you who gave them birth.”

“Ah me,” I thought, only half listening to or understanding these last words, “what mothers, fathers, brothers may then be asleep in this room; what faithful lovers, what true friends, what ancient enemies! And to think that some day they will step forth and confront me, and I shall meet their eyes again, claim them, know them, forgive, and be forgiven... the memories of all my Past....”

I turned to speak to the Dream at my side, but she was already fading into dimness, and, as I looked again, the whole House melted away into the flush of the eastern sky, and I heard the birds singing and saw the clouds overhead veiling the stars in the light of coming day.

JIMBO’S LONGEST DAY

THE LONGEST DAY has in it for children a strange, incommunicable thrill. It begins so early in the morning, for one thing, that half of it — the first half — belongs to the mystery of night. It steals upon the world as though from Fairy’ land, a thing apart from the rush and scurry of ordinary days; it is so long that nothing happens quickly in it; there is a delicious leisure throughout its shining hours that makes it possible to carry out a hundred schemes unhurried. No voice can call “Time’s up!”; no one can urge “Be quick!”; it passes, true, yet passes like a dream that flows in a circle, having neither proper beginning nor definite end. Christmas Day and Easter Day seem short and sharp by comparison. They are measurable. The Longest Day brims with a happy, endless wonder from dawn to sunset. Exceptional happenings are its prerogative.

All this, and something more no elder can quite grasp, lay stealthily in Jimbo’s question: “Uncle, to-morrow’s the Longest Day. What shall we do?” He glanced across the room at his mother, prepared for a prohibitive remark of some sort. But mother, deep in a stolen book, paid no attention. He looked back at me. “It’s all right; she’s not listening; but we can go outside to discuss it, if you prefer,” his expression said. I beckoned him over to me, however, for safety’s sake. My position was fairly strong, I knew, because the stolen book was mine, and had been taken from my work-table. Jimbo’s mother has this way with books, her passion almost unmoral. If a book comes to me for review, if a friend makes me a present of a book, if I buy or borrow one — the instant it comes into the house she knows it. “I just looked in to see if your room had been dusted,” she says; “I’m sorry to disturb you,” and is gone again. But she has seen the new book. Her instinct is curious. I used to think she bribed the postman. She smells a new arrival, and goes straight for it. “Were you looking for *this*?” she will ask innocently an hour later when I catch her with it, household account-books neglected by her side. “I’m so sorry. I was just peeping into it.” And she is incorrigible, as unashamed. No book is ever lost, at any rate. “Mother’s got it,” indicates its hiding-place infallibly.

So I felt safe enough discussing plans for the Longest Day with Jimbo, and talked openly with him, while I watched her turn the pages.

“It’s the *very* beginning I like,” he said. “I want to see it start. The sun rises at 3.44, you see. That’s a quarter to four — three hours and a quarter before I usually get up. How shall we manage it, d’you think?” He had worked it all out.

“There’s hardly any night either,” I said, “for the sun sets at 8.18, and that leaves very little time for darkness. It’s light at two, remember.”

He stared into my face. “Maria has an alarum clock. She wakes with that. It’s by her bed in the attic room, you know.”

Mother turned a page noisily, but did not look up. There was no cause for alarm, though we instinctively lowered our voices at once. I cannot say how it was so swiftly, so deftly arranged between us that I was to steal the clock, set it accurately for two in the morning, rise, dress, and come to fetch Jimbo. But the result was clear beyond equivocation, and I had accepted the duty as a man should. Generously he left this exciting thing to me. “And suppose it doesn’t go off and wake you,” he inquired anxiously, “will you be sure to get up and *make* it go off? Because we might miss the beginning of the day unless you do.” I explained something about the mechanism of the mind and the mechanism of an alarum clock that seemed to satisfy him, and then he asked another vital question: “What *is* exactly the Longest Day, uncle? I thought all days were about the same — like that,” and he stretched an imaginary line in the air with one hand, so that Mac, the terrier, thought he wanted to play a moment. I explained that too, to his satisfaction, whereupon he nestled much closer to me, glancing first over his shoulder at his mother, and inquired whether “everything knew it was the Longest Day — birds, cows, and out of door things all over the world — rabbits, I mean — like that? They know, I suppose?”

“They certainly must find it longer than other days, ordinary days, just common days,” I said. “I’m sure of that.” And then I cleared my throat so loudly that mother looked up from her book with an unmistakable start. “Oh, I’m *so* sorry,” she exclaimed, with unblushing mendacity, “but d’ you want your book? Were you looking for it? I just took a peep—” And when I turned to leave the room with it beneath my arm Jimbo had vanished, leaving no trace behind him.

That night he went to bed without a murmur at half-past eight. He trusted me implicitly. There were no questions: “Have you got the clock?” or “How did you get it?” or anything of the kind — just his absolute confidence that I *had* got it and that I *would* wake him. At the stairs, however, he turned and made a sign. Leading me through the back door of the Sussex cottage, we found ourselves a moment in the orchard together. And then, saying no word, he pointed. He pointed everywhere; he stared about him, listening; he looked up into my face, and then at the orchard, and then back into my face again. His whole little person stood on tiptoe, observing, watching, listening. And at first I was disappointed, for I noticed nothing unusual anywhere. “Well, what is it?” my manner probably expressed. But neither of us said a word. The saffron sky shone between the trunks of the apple trees; swallows darted to and fro; a blackbird whistled out of sight; and over the hedge a big cow thrust her head towards us, her body concealed. In the foreground were beehives. The air was very still and scented. My pipe smoke hung almost motionless. I moved from one foot to the other.

“Aha!” I said mysteriously below my breath, “aha!”

And that was sufficient for him. He knew I had seen and understood. He came a step nearer to me, his face solemn and expectant.

“It’s begun already, you see. Isn’t it wonderful? Everything knows.”

“And is getting ready,” I added, “for its coming.”

“The Longest Day,” he whispered, looking about him with suppressed excitement and ready, if necessary, to believe the earth would presently stop turning. He gave one curious look at the sky, shuddered an instant with intense delight, gave my hand a secret squeeze, and disappeared like a goblin into the cottage. But behind him lingered something his little presence had evoked. Wonder and expectation are true words of power, and anticipation constructs the mould along which Imagination later shall lead her fairy band. I realised what he had seen. The orchard, the cow, the beehives *did* look different. They were inviting, as though something was on the way. The very sky, as the summer dusk spread down it, wore colouring no ordinary June evening knew. Midsummer Eve set free the fairies, and Jimbo knew it. The roses seemed to flutter everywhere on wings.... The very lilac blooms had eyes.... I heard a rustle as of skirts high up among the peeping stars....

How it came about is more than I can say, for I went to bed with a whirr of wings and flowers in my head. The stillness of the night was magical, four short hours of transparent darkness that seemed to gleam and glimmer without hiding anything. Maria's alarum clock was not beside my bed, for the simple reason that I had not asked for it. Jimbo and the Longest Day between them had cast a glamour over me that had nothing to do with hours, minutes, seconds. It was delicious and inexplicable. Yet at other times I am an ordinary person, who knows that time is money and money is difficult to come by without uncommon effort. All this came for nothing. Jimbo did it.

And what did I do for Jimbo? I cannot say. His is the grand old magical secret. He believed and wondered; he waited and asked no futile questions; time and space obeyed his imperious little will; waking or sleeping he dreamed, creating the world anew. I shut no eye that night. I watched the wheeling constellations rise and pass. The whole, clear summer night was rich with the silence of the gods. I dreamed, perhaps, beside my open window, where the roses and the clematis climbed, shining like lamps of starry beauty above the tiny lawn.... And at half-past one, when the east began to whisper stealthily that Someone was on the way, I left my chair and stole quietly down the narrow passage-way to Jimbo's room.... I was clever in my wickedness. I knew that if I waked him, whispering that the Longest Day was about to break, he would open half an eye, turn over in his thick childhood sleep, and murmur, as in dream, "Then let it come." And so, a little weary, if the truth be told, I did all this, and — to my intense surprise — discovered Jimbo perched, wide awake and staring, at the casement window. He had never closed an eye, nor half an eye. He was watchful and alert, but undeniably tired out, as I was.

"Jimbo," I whispered, stealing in upon him, "the Longest Day is very near. It's so close you can hear it coming down the sky. It's softer than any dream you ever dreamed in your life. Come out — if you will — we'll see it from the orchard."

He turned towards me in his little nightshirt like a goblin. His eyes were very big, but the eyelids held open with an effort.

"Uncle," he said in a tiny voice, "do you think it's really come at last? It's been terribly slow, but I suppose that's because it's such an awful length.

Wasn't it *wonderful*?"

And I tucked him up. Before the sheet was round his shoulder he was asleep... and next morning when we met at breakfast, he just asked me slyly, "Do you think mother guessed or saw anything of what *we* saw?" We glanced across the table, full of secret signs, together. Mother's letters were piled beside her plate, a book beneath them. It was my stolen book. She had clearly sat up half the night devouring it.

"No," I whispered, "I don't think mother guesses anything at all. Besides," I added, "to-day is the Longest Day, so in any case she'd be a very long time finding out." And, as he seemed satisfied, I felt my conscience clear, and said no more about it.

IF THE CAP FITS —

FIELD MARTIN, THE naturalist, sat in his corner arm-chair at the Club and watched them — this group of men that had drifted together round the table just opposite and begun to talk. He did not wish to listen, but was too near to help himself. The newspaper over which he had dozed lay at his feet, and he bent forward to pick it up and make it crackle with a pretence of reading.

"Then what is psychometry?" was the question that first caught his attention. It was Slopkins who asked it, the man with the runaway chin and over-weighted, hooked nose, that seemed to bring forward all the top of his face and made him resemble a large codfish for ever in the act of rising to some invisible bait.

"Something to do with soul measuring, I suppose, unless my Greek has gone utterly to pot," said the jovial man beside him, pouring out his tea from a height, as a waiter pours out flat beer when he wants to force it to froth in the glass.

"Like those Yankee doctors, don't you remember," put in someone else, with the irrelevance of casual conversation, "who weighed a human body just before it died and just after, and made an affidavit that the difference in ounces represented the weight of the soul."

Several laughed. Field-Martin wheeled up his chair with vigorous strokes of his heels and joined the group, accepting the offer of an extra cup out of that soaring teapot. The particular subject under discussion bored him, but he liked to sit and watch men talking, just as he liked to sit and watch birds or animals in the open air, studying their movements, learning their little habits, and the rest. The conversation flowed on in desultory fashion in the way conversations usually do flow on, one or two talkers putting in occasional real thoughts, the majority merely repeating what they have heard others say.

"Yes, but what *is* psychometry really?" repeated the codfish man, after an interval during which the talk had drifted into an American story that grew apparently out of the reference to American doctors. For that particular invisible bait still hovered above the surface of his slow mental stream, and he was making a second shot at it, after the manner of his ilk.

The question was so obviously intended to be answered seriously that this time no one guffawed or exercised his wit. For a moment, indeed, no one answered at all. Then a man at the back of the group, a man with a deep voice and a rather theatrical and enthusiastic manner, spoke.

“Psychometry, I take it,” he said with conviction, “is the quality possessed by everything, even by inanimate objects, of sending out vibrations which — which can put certain sensitive persons *en rapport,* pictorially as it were, with all the events that have ever happened within the ken of such objects —”

“Persons known as psychometrists, I suppose?” from the codfish man, who seemed to like things labelled carefully.

The other nodded. “Psychometrist, I believe,” he continued, “is the name of that very psychical and imaginative type that can ‘sense’ such infinitely delicate vibrations. In reality, I suppose, they are receptive folk who correspond to the sensitive photographic plate that records vibrations of light in a similar way and results in a visible picture.”

A man dropped his teaspoon with a clatter; another splashed noisily in his cup, stirring it; a third plunged at the buttered toast of his neighbour; and Field-Martin, the naturalist, gave an impatient kick with his leg against the arm-chair opposite. He loathed this kind of talk. The speaker evidently was one of those who knew by heart the “patter” of psychical research, or what passes for it among credulous and untrained minds — master of that peculiar jargon, quasi-scientific, about vibrations and the rest, that such persons affect. But he was too lazy to interrupt or disagree. Wondering vaguely who the speaker might be, he drank his tea, and listened with laughter and disgust about equally mingled in his mind. Others, besides the codfish, were asking questions. Answers were not behindhand.

“You remember Denton’s experiments — Professor Denton, of Cambridge, Mass.,” the enthusiastic man was saying, “who found that his wife was a psychometrist, and how she had only to hold a thing in her hand, with eyes blindfolded, to get pictures of scenes that had passed before it. A bit of stone he gave her brought vivid and gorgeous pictures of processions and pageants before her inner eye, I remember, and at the end of the experiment her husband told her what the stone was.”

“By Jove! And what was it?” asked codfish.

“A fragment from an old temple at Thebes,” was the reply.

“Telepathy,” suggested someone.

“Quite possible,” was the reply. “But, another time, when he gave her something wrapped up in a bit of paper, taken from a tray covered with objects similarly wrapped up so that he could not know what particular one he held at the moment, she took it for a second, then screamed out that she was rushing, tearing, falling through space, and let it drop with a gasp of breathless excitement—”

“And — ?” asked one or two.

“It was a piece of meteorite,” was the answer. “You see, she had psychometrised the sensations of the falling star. I know, for instance, another woman who is so sensitive to the atmospheres of things and people, that she can tell you every blessed thing about a stranger whose just-vacated chair she sits down in. I’ve known her leave a bus, too, when certain people have got in and sat next to her, because—”

Field Martin paid for his neighbour’s tea by mistake and moved away, hoping his contempt was not too clearly marked for politeness.

“ — everything, you see, has an atmosphere charged with its own individual associations. An object can communicate an emotion it has borrowed by contact with someone living—” was a fragment of the last sentence he heard as he left the room and went downstairs, spitting fire internally against the speaker and all his kidney. He seized his hat and hurried away. He walked home to his Chelsea flat, fuming inwardly, wondering vaguely if there was any other club he could join where he could have his tea without being obliged to listen to such stuff.... He walked through the Park, meaning to cut through *via* Queensgate, and as he went he followed his usual custom of thinking out details of his work: the next day, for instance, he was to lecture upon “English Birds of Prey,” and in his mind he reviewed carefully the form and substance of what he would say. He skirted the Serpentine, watching the sea-gulls wheeling through the graceful figures of their evening dance against the saffron sky. The exquisite tilt and balance of their bodies fascinated him as usual. He stopped a moment to watch it. To a mind like his it was full of suggestion, and instinctively he began comparing the method of flight with that of the hawks; one or two points occurred to him that he could make good use of in his lecture... when he became aware that something drew his attention down from the sky to the water, and that the interest he felt in the birds was being usurped by thoughts of another kind. Without apparent reason, reflections of a very different order passed into the stream of his consciousness — somewhat urgently. Sea-gulls, hawks, birds of prey, and the rest faded from his mental vision; wings and details of flight departed; his eye, and with it his thought, dropped from the sky to the surface of the water, shimmering there beneath the last tints of the sunset. The emotion of the "naturalist," stirred into activity by the least symbol of his lifelong study — a bird, an animal, an insect — had been curiously replaced; and the transition was abrupt enough to touch him with a sense of surprise — almost, perhaps, of shock.

Now, vigorous imagination, the kind that creates out of next to nothing, was not an ingredient of his logical and "scientific" cast of mind, and Field-Martin, slightly puzzled, was at a loss to explain this irregular behaviour of his usually methodical system. He stepped back farther from the brink where the little waves splashed... yet, even as he did so, he realised that the force dictating the impulse was of a protective character, guiding, directing, almost warning. In words, had he been a writer, he might have transposed it thus: "Be careful of that water!" For the truth was it had suddenly made him *shrink.*

He continued his way, puzzled and disturbed. Of the mutinous forces that lie so thinly screened behind life, dropping from time to time their faint, wireless messages upon the soul, Field-Martin hardly discerned the existence. And this passing menace of the water was disquieting — all the more so because his temperament furnished him with no possible instrument of measurement. A sense of deep water, cold, airless, still, invaded his mind; he thought of its suffocating mass lying over mouth and ears; he realised something of the struggle for breath, and the frantic efforts to reach the surface and keep afloat that a drowning man —

"But what nonsense is this? Where do these thoughts suddenly come from?" he exclaimed, hurrying along. He had crossed the road now, so as to put a greater distance, and a stretch of wholesome human traffic, between him and that sheet of water lying like painted glass beneath the fading sky. Yet it pulled and drew him back again to the shore, inviting him with a curious, soft insistence that rendered necessary a distinct effort of will to resist it successfully. Birds were utterly forgotten. His very being was steeped in water — to the neck, to the eyes, his lungs filled, his ears charged with the rushing noises of singing and drumming that come to complete the dread bewilderment of the drowning man. Field-Martin shook and trembled as he crossed the bridge by Kensington Gardens.... That impulse to throw himself over the parapet was the most outrageous and unaccountable thing that had ever come upon him... and as he hurried down Queensgate he tried to calculate whether there was time for him to see his doctor that very night before dinner, or whether he must postpone it to the first thing in the morning. For, assuredly, this passing disorder of his brain must have immediate attention; such results of overwork could not be seen to quickly enough. If necessary, he would take a holiday at once....

He decided to say nothing to his wife... and yet the odd thing was that before dinner was half over the whole mood had vanished so completely, and his normal wholesome balance of mind recovered such perfect control, that he could afford to laugh at the whole thing, and *did* laugh at it — what was more, even made his wife laugh at it too. The fact remained to puzzle and perplex, but the reality of it was gone.

But that night, when he went to the Club, the hall-porter stopped him: “Beg pardon, sir, but Mr. Finsen thought you might have taken his hat by mistake last night?”

“His hat?” The name “Finsen” was unknown to him.

“He wears a green felt hat like yours, sir, and they were on adjoining pegs.” Field Martin took off his head-covering and discovered his mistake. Finsen’s name was inside in small gold letters. He explained matters with the porter, and left the necessary directions for the exchange to be effected. Upstairs he ran into Slopkins.

“That chap Finsen was asking for you,” he remarked; “it seems you ex’ changed hats last night by mistake, and the porter thought possibly— “Who is Finsen?”

“You remember, he was talking so wonderfully last night about psychometry—”

“Oh, is *that* Finsen?”

“Yes,” replied the other. “Interesting man, but a bit queer, you know. Gets melancholia and that sort of thing, I believe. It was only a week or two ago, don’t you remember, that he tried to drown himself?”

“Indeed,” said Field-Martin dryly, and went upstairs to look at the evening papers.

NEWS v. NOURISHMENT

THE FIRST THING I saw of him was the dome of his bald head and the strip of wandering black hair that strayed across it like a bit of seaweed left by an ebbing tide. The rest was hidden behind the opened newspaper which he devoured while waiting for his luncheon. He was a little man. I saw the tips of square boots with knobs on them projecting beneath the table, and later I noted that his nose was aquiline, and that he had large comfortable ears. He may have been something in a Forwarding Office; he was not spruce enough for banking or insurance circles. He read that evening edition as if the future of the race depended on it.

Then the girl, a lackadaisical, bird-like creature, brought his plate of “braised beef an’ carruts” swimming in thick brown gravy, and set it down with noisy clatter upon the marble table. He was so absorbed that the dishes came as a surprise; and as he looked up, startled, the paper descended softly upon the thick brown gravy. This was the first disaster; for when he lifted it to find his place the columns of print resembled a successful fly-paper. He looked round at everybody, bewildered. For the moment, however, I was so interested in the wandering strip of seaweed on his skull that I hardly noticed his efforts to free the newspaper, himself, his neighbours, and the cruet-stand from the adhesive entanglement of this portion of his luncheon. There was a sound of scattering — then the girl had somehow managed it for him with her grimy napkin. But that remnant of a tide forgotten, as I came to regard it, fascinated me. It strayed, lonely as a cloud; it was so admirably fastened down; the angle, curve, and general adjustment had been evidently chosen with so much care. Its “lie” upon that dome of silence had been calculated to a nicety, so that it should relieve with the best possible effect the open waste around it. It was like a mathematical problem. Only when his grave, dark eyes met mine did I realise that I was staring rudely.

But long before my own hurried luncheon came, the difficulties in which this stranger opposite was involved had fascinated me afresh. The contents of the now mutilated evening paper absorbed him to the point of positive conflict. It may have been the racing news, police reports, or a breach of promise case; it may have been some special article and leader, or it may have been merely advertisements, perhaps; I cannot say. But his efforts to read and eat at the same time made me wonder with a growing excitement for the final issue of the battle. Had I not been alone, I would have laid a bet — with odds, I think, against “braised beef an’ carruts.”

He did it all so gravely and so earnestly, aware of the claims of both contestants, yet determined to be conscientious. Determined he most certainly was. A man doing anything with all his heart is always interesting to watch, but a man solemnly doing two things at once wins admiration and respect as well. My sympathies went out to him. I longed to give him hints. And the only time my attention wandered from this contest between news and nourishment was when I watched that strip of lonely seaweed rise and fall, vanish and reappear, with the movement of his head in eating. The way it dived to meet the fork, then rose again to greet the paper, was like the motion of a swimmer among waves.

He arranged his sight so cleverly, dividing it in some swift, extraordinary manner, yet without squinting, between the occupants of the arena. An eye and a half on each alternately seemed to be the plan, the extra half left over being free to bring immediate first-aid when needed; but his mind, I felt, was really with the paper all along. The nourishment was pleasure, the news was duty. There was heroism in this little man.

He would heap his fork with a marvellously balanced pyramid of beef and carrots and bread, smear it over with thick gravy, top it with a dash of salt — all with one hand, this! — then leave it hovering above the plate while he looked back keenly at the paper, searching to find his place. For between mouthfuls he always lost his place. It distressed me till he found it again, my interest centred on the piled-up fork. But what distressed me even more was that every time he found it and shot an eye back again to the loaded implement — that pyramid tumbled! Three times out of four, at least, it dropped its burden in this way; and the look of weariness, surprise, and disappointment on his face at each collapse was almost more than I could bear — in silence. He looked at that fork as some men look at a dog — with mortified astonishment. “I’m surprised at you,” his expression said, “after all those years, too!” I longed to ask, “Why *did* you add that carrot to the top? You might have known by this time — !” But his own expression said quite plainly, “I built you up so very carefully — all with one hand, too. You really *might* have stayed!”

My own tension became too keen then for mere amusement. I found myself taking sides alternately with the beef and paper. I was conscious of a desire to steady the fork for him while he read, and then to guide it straight into his mouth. For it next became most painfully obvious that he rarely found the opening — at the first attempt. With that over-loaded, over-balanced fork, a dripping carrot perched on the apex of the pile, he jabbed successively his lower lip, his cheek, his chin, and once at least the tip of his nose, before the proper terminus was reached and delivery accomplished. Small beauty-spots of brown remained dotted here and there to mark the inaccuracy of his aim and the firmness of his persistence.

For he was so patient. Both jobs he did so thoroughly. I began to wonder if he did two things at once at other times as well: whether, for instance, he buttoned his collar with one hand while with the other he led that strip of seaweed into safety for the day’s adventure. Surely, it seemed, he must excel at those parlour tricks which involve patting the breast with one hand and rubbing it up and down with the other simultaneously. Something of the sort he surely practised. Although the way, with a piece of bread speared on his fork, he groped all round the table for the gravy that was cooling on his plate, made me question his absolute skill sometimes.

He was too absorbed to notice things around him. The stout, bespectacled woman, for instance, who sat beside him on the leather couch, might not have existed at all. The way she looked him up and down, hinting for more room, was utterly lost upon him. So was the way she moved her glass of steaming milk and her under-sized bananas to and fro to dodge the paper he constantly flapped beneath her very nose. He took far more than his proper share of space, and she clearly resented it most bitterly, yet was afraid to speak. The movements of her glass and fruit were like a game of chess: he played the stronger gambit and forced her moves. She sulked — and lost.

The girl came up and whisked his unfinished plate away, asking him with a sideways bend of the head, bird-like rather, if he wished to order anything else, and his face shot up above the edge of the paper as though she had interrupted him in the midst of a serious business transaction.

“Didn’t I order something, miss?” he was heard to inquire resentfully, one eye glued still to the sheet.

“Nothing not yet,” came the disinterested reply.

“Bring me sultana pudding hot — no, cold, I mean — with sauce, please,” he said, as if remembering some quotation learnt by heart — and down he plunged once more beneath that sea of print.

But with the arrival of the cold sultana pudding came the crisis of the battle. For the pudding was slippery. It stood on end amid its paste-like sauce, impatient of amateur attack, inviting more skill than evidently he possessed. He caught my warning eye once or twice upon him, but disregarded it. These whole-hearted people never take advice. Smothering the toppling form with sugar, he seized a fork and aimed; but, before striking, buried his eyes again in the paper. The shot flew wild. The pyramid of dough went slithering round the plate as though alive, scattering sauce upon the marble table. A second shot, delivered with impatience, took off the top and side. He speared the broken piece — still without looking up to direct it properly — gathered a little sauce and sugar on the way; then, flushed with success, the face turned sideways towards the paper, rushed recklessly for his mouth — and bit an empty fork. The load had slipped aside *en route;* or, rather, the paper, holding the best position in the field, had taken it prisoner. For it fell with a soft and sticky thud into the column nearest to his waistcoat. This time he *spooned* it up, and for a little time after that he had success. The paper and the pudding ran neck and neck along the home-stretch. He read with absorbing interest; he ate without waste of attention. I watched him with amazement. This performance of a divided personality must be given somewhere every day at the luncheon hour. The mood of the afternoon hung probably upon its accomplishment without disaster. The pudding had dwindled to its last titbit without attempting further *ausflüge,* and his eyes had just begun to feast upon a freshly turned page of the newspaper, when, crash, bang — there came complete discomfiture.

Drunk with success, he made a violent misdirected shot. He had waited long for that titbit, had nursed it carefully, keeping a little pool of sauce and sugar especially for it, when this careless aim sent it flying off the plate several inches into the middle of the table. The woman with the milk and the banana gave a little scream — of indignation. He turned abruptly, noticing her presence for the first time. He realised that he had edged her almost off the couch. He also realised, with the other eye, that the bit of pudding lay beyond redemption or recapture. Several people were watching him. He could not possibly, without total loss of dignity, restore it to an edible condition. He shunted down the seat with the sideways movement of a penguin, quietly replaced the errant morsel on his plate, called for his bill, then waited resignedly with a sigh, a defeated man.

Our eyes met in that moment full and square across the room. “I told you so,” mine said; “you were too reckless with it.” But in his own there shone a look of misery and regret I shall not easily forget. For a single instant his face vanished behind the crumpled but victorious paper, to emerge, scarlet, a moment later with the strip of seaweed drawn out of its normal bed into an unaccustomed route towards one tilted eyebrow. In his distress the man had passed a hand absent-mindedly across his forehead. The woman, putting on her spectacles, eyed with relief his preparations for departure. He went. But he took the paper with him.

And through the window I caught my final glimpse of him as he climbed outside a passing omnibus. He was small and rotund. His eyes shone in a flushed and disappointed face. His coat-tails spread sideways in the wind. Like an irate and very swollen sparrow he looked, defeated in some wretched gutter combat, yet eager for more, and certain to return to the arena as long as life should last — about the luncheon hour.

WIND

IT IS A curious reflection, though of course an obvious one, that wind in itself is — silent; and that only from the friction against objects set in its path comes the multiform music instantly associated with its name. The fact, too, that so potent a force should be both silent and invisible readily explains its common use as a simile, and a beautiful one, for Spirit. Like flame, that other exquisite simile of spirit, how clean it licks, how mysteriously it moves, how swiftly it penetrates! And so subtly linked are they that the one almost seems to produce the other — the swift hot winds that beat about a conflagration; the tongues of fire that follow a fanning draught— “the wind that blew the stars to flame!” True inspiration seems certainly born of this marriage of wind and fire. How singular — have you ever thought? — would be the impressions of a man to whom the motion of air, as wind, was unknown, when first he witnessed the phenomenon of a twenty-knot breeze. Imagine a people that knew not wind how they would tremble to see the tree-tops bend; to hear the roar, the whispers, the sweet singing of all Nature about them for the first time; to know the sounds and movements of the myriad objects that but for wind would be silent and motionless from one year’s end to another! To me, it has always seemed that such a revelation might be far more wonderful than the first torrent of light that beats upon the eyes of a man who has been blind.

And so one comes to a further suggestive reflection: that objects all possess their own particular sound or voice that the winds love to set free; their essential note — that specific set of vibrations lying buried in their form — of which, as some curious doctrines of the old magic assert, their forms, indeed, are the visible expression. In this region — pondering the relation between sound and shape — the imagination may wander till it grows dizzy, for it leads very soon to the still more wonderful world where sound and colour spin their puzzling web, and the spiritual phenomena of music cry for further explanation. But, for the moment, let only the sound of wind be in our ears; for in wind, I think, there is a sweetness and a variety of music that no instruments invented by men have yet succeeded in approaching so far as sheer thrill and beauty are concerned.

Each lover of Nature knows, of course, the special voice of wind that most appeals to him — the sighing of pines, the shouting of oaks, the murmur of grasses, the whirring over a bare hillside, or the whistling about the corners of the streets — the variety is endless; and there can be no great interest in obtruding one's own predilection. Only, to know this music thoroughly, to catch all the overtones and undertones that make it so wonderful, and to absorb its essential thrill and power, you must listen, not for minutes, but for hours. If you want to learn the secrets of the things themselves, betrayed in the varying response they give back to the winds that sweep or caress them, lie leisurely for hours at a time and — listen.

How, from the high desolation of mountain peaks it blows out — terror, yet from the sea of bearded grain calls with soft whispering sounds such as children use for their tales of mystery; from old buildings — the melancholy of all dead human passion, yet from the rigging of ships the abandon of wild and passionate adventure: wind, clapping its mighty hands among the flapping sails, or running with weary little feet among the ruined towers of broken habitations; sighing with long, gentle music over English lawns, or rushing, full of dreams, across vast prairies over-seas; kissing a garden into music, or blundering blind-eyed through dark London squares; racing with thoughts of ice down precipices and dropping, as through spaces of sleep, into little corners of oblivion in waste lands of loneliness and desolation, or sighing with almost human melody through the keyhole and down the farmhouse chimney.

From the curtained softness of the summer sky these viewless winds sift silently into the heart, to wake yearnings infinite. From some high attic window, perhaps, where you stand and watch, listen to that wind of sighs that rises, almost articulate with the pains and sorrows, the half-caught joys, too, from that crowded human world beneath the sea of roofs and tiles. Winds of desire, winds of hope, winds of fear and love. Ah! winds of all the spirit's life and moods... and, finally, the wind of Death! And wind down a wet and deserted London street, shouting its whistling song, its song of the triumphant desolation that has cleared the way for it of human obstruction — how it sings the music of magnificent poverty, of heavy luxury, and then of the loneliness bred by both! And you see some solitary figure battling forwards, and hear that curious whistling it makes over the dripping umbrella.... Ah! how *that* wind summons pictures of courage in isolation, and of singing in a wilderness! “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, yet canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth”...for wind is, indeed, of the nature of spirit, and its music, crowded with suggestion, as some times, too, with memory and association, is, in the true sense, magical.

“Where is thy soul? Thou liest i’ the wind and rain,” says the poetess to the “Beloved Dead”; and in another passage the sound of wind brings back for her the phantom face of the departed: “But who shall drive a mournful face from the sad winds about my door?” Shelley, more than any other, perhaps, loved wind and wind-voices, and has the most marvellous and subtle descriptions of it in his work. Though he so often speaks of the “viewless wind,” one cannot help thinking that in his imagination lay some mental picture of wind — in the terms of sight. He *saw* the wind. For him it had colour as well as shape. He saw bright sylphs — spirits of air — which “star the winds with points of coloured light, as they rain through them,” and “wind-enchanted shapes of wandering mist” that for his inner vision were “snow-white and swift as wind nursed among lilies near a brimming stream.” And, alone among poets so far as I know, he had that delightful conception of solid, smooth surfaces of wind upon which it is possible to run and dance and sleep. His verse is alive with spirits “trampling the wind”; “trampling the slant winds on high with golden-sandalled feet”; or climbing the hills of wind that run up into the highest peaks of heaven. The “Witch of Atlas” not only rode “singing through the shoreless air,” but also “ran upon the platforms of the wind, and laughed to hear the fireballs roar behind.” And it is the Chorus in *Prometheus Unbound* that so exquisitely “weaves the dance on the floor of the breeze.”

But for less gifted mortals there are certain effects of wind that seem to me to approach uncommonly close to actual sight, or at least to a point where one may imagine what wind *ought* to look like. Watch the gusts of a north-west wind as they fall in rapid succession upon a standing field of high barley, beating the surface into long curved shadows that bring to mind Shelley’s “kindling within the strings of the waved air, Æolian modulations.” One can see the velvet touch of those soft, vast paws, and the immense stretch of the invisible footsteps that press the long stalks down and as suddenly sweep away and set them free again. And with the changing angle of the myriad yellow heads the colour also changes, till gradually there swims upon the mind the impression of some huge and shadowy image that flies above the field — some personal deity of wind, some djin of air. One almost sees the spirit of the wind....

It is fascinating, too, to stand opposite a slope of wooded mountains, near enough to distinguish the individual swing of each separate tree, yet far enough to note how the forest as a whole blows all one way — the way of the wind. Also — to hear the chord of sound as a whole, yet mark the different notes that pour out of the various trees composing it. In some such way — one wonders, perhaps! — the Spirit of God moves over the surface of men's minds, each swinging apparently its own individual way, yet when seen in proper perspective, all moving the one way — *to Him.* And the voices of all these separate little stray winds — who shall describe them? Creep with me now out of the house among these Jura vineyards, and come up into the pine forests that encircle the village. Put your ear against that bosom of the soft dark woods where the wind is born — and listen! Find the words if you can — !

PINES

ALL TREES, DOUBTLESS, appeal in some measure to the sense of poetry, even in those who are not strictly speaking lovers of Nature; but the pine, for many, seems to have a message more vivid, more vital than the rest: as though it possessed some occult quality that speaks not merely to the imagination, or to the general love of Nature *per se,* but directly to the soul. The oak for strength, the ash for mystery, the birch for her feminine grace and so forth; but the pine, like a sharp sword, pierces straight through to that inner sense of beauty which accepts or rejects beyond all question of analysis. The personality of this "common" tree touches the same sense of wonder that is stirred by the presence of a human personality, strong beyond ordinary; and worship is ever subtly linked with wonder. The analogy is interesting. The pine plants its roots where more showy trees faint and die; straight, strong, and sweet to the winds, it flourishes where only gorse, heather, and toughly obstinate things can live. Out of the rock, where there seems not earth enough to feed a violet, it lifts its sombre head undaunted; scorched by the sun, torn by the blast, peering into dreadful abysses, yet utterly fearless, and yielding so little that the elements must pluck it up by the roots before they can destroy it. Only lightning can break it. At a height above the sea that means death to other trees, it climbs singing, "rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy"; and even when the main army halts, stragglers are always to be seen, leading forlorn hopes into the heart of desolation beyond. And if, amid the stress of conditions, it cannot look well, it is content to look ill, showing a dwarfed and stunted figure to the skies. Only then, ye elemental powers! what strength in the gnarled roots, what iron resistance in the twisted trunk, what dour endurance in the short, thick limbs! It assumes the attitude of the fighting animal, back to the wall.

High mountains are full of vivid pictures of this courage against Titanic odds. For the pine tree has the courage of its convictions — fine, simple, tenacious — as it has also that other quality of the strong soul: the power to stand alone. "Some say there is a precipice where one vast pine is frozen to ruin o' er piles of snow and chasms of ice' mid Alpine mountains." No one who has canoed on Canadian lakes and seen those frequent rocky islets, each with its solitary pine, can have ignored that there is something strangely significant in the sight of that slender spire rising out of the heart of loneliness — something that thrills, and thrills deeply, into the region beyond words. Unsheltered, beneath wide skies, remote from its own kind, the tree stands there, splendid in its isolation, straight as a temple column and prepared for any shock. “Ein Ficht enbaum steht einsam,” of course — but there is more than the pathos of Heine’s poem in its unapproachable loneliness: there is the spiritual suggestion of personality — this upright, self-sufficing tree upon a rock, buffeted by winds and waves, asking no sympathy and dreading no possible fate. The picture, symbolic of the strong soul, conveys the inevitable parable. Compared with other trees, too, the pine does not change. One knows, of course, the tips of tender green that come with May and turn a pine wood into a sea of bewildering beauty. But, though deciduous, one is never aware that anything is lost; its branches never thin; it puts out, properly speaking, no buds. And the monotony of a pine forest is merely a defect of its great quality of constancy. In summer its shade is deeper, its recesses more cool than those of other woods; and in winter, just when most trees are leafless and unable to fight, it bears the full weight of the snow and meets the whole force of the destroying winds. It stands to face disaster when others faint or run. The analogy with man is again striking and complete. Yet its qualities are not merely negative. More than most, it gives out — without reward, often without recognition; for the great forests that sweeten the world with their balsam, and their life-giving odours, stand most often in the deserted regions of the earth, unseen, unknown. And, by their death, they become more useful still, journeying over all the seas. In the true sense, most ascetic of trees, accepting discipline that good may come for others, not for themselves!

Like the vital human personality, too, what “atmosphere” it has! What it lends of suggestiveness to the commonest landscape — a few pines clustered on the hill; a sombre group among the green trees in the plain! In the suburban garden even, or rearing its dark crest against the hoardings of the street, how its picturesqueness spreads about it! It is the gipsy among trees, and its perfume, like the wood fire, sets the blood aflame for wandering and for the lonely places of the world. At the sight of it one thinks, perhaps, of the stone pine “into which the forest has whispered its gravest and sweetest thought,” and at the same instant is caught away to that other revelation where it stands by the sea. For, by the shore of southern seas, it betrays a scarcely suspected touch of melancholy, gentle and pathetic in its essence, feminine almost, that makes the heart yearn for lovely and impossible things. One sees it there, rooted among golden sands, and gazing across a waste of purple sea, the wash of whose waves is hardly to be distinguished from the wash of wind through its own branches....

The mystery of the pines, too, seems to hold a peculiar quality unapproached elsewhere in Nature: it subdues without terrifying, inspires awe without distress, and is more human than the mystery which belongs to mountains, sea, or desert. The fairies come out from the pine woods; for no other woods conceal so gently, yet hold within their velvety recesses such possibilities of revelation. To meet them unexpectedly is to experience a thrill of subtle suggestion. Among tamer trees, suddenly to come upon these black, vigorous things, contemptuous of soil, independent of sympathy, thriving where others droop or die, is to know a leap of the imagination, an increase of vitality, as when, among a crowd of common souls, one finds a man — strong, radiating confidence and hope. Their very darkness stimulates. One cannot conceive such trees stooping to any kind of show. “Lowland trees,” says the author of *Modern Painters,* may “show themselves gay with blossoms and glad with pretty charities of fruitfulness,” but the pines “have harder work to do for man and must do it in close-set troops.” While other trees “may turn their paleness to the sky if but a rush of rain passes them by, the pines must live carelessly amidst the wrath of clouds,” and “only wave their branches to and fro when a storm pleads with them, as men toss their arms in a dream.... You cannot reach them, cannot cry to them; these trees never heard human voice,” he says, speaking of their inaccessible multitudes among the precipices; “they are far above all sound but of the winds. No foot ever stirred fallen leaf of theirs. All comfortless they stand, between the two eternities of Vacancy and the Rock; yet with such iron will that the rock itself looks bent and shattered beside them — fragile, weak, inconsistent, compared to their dark energy of delicate life, and monotony of enchanted pride — unnumbered, unconquerable.”

And there is no sound in Nature quite so wonderful as that faint spiritual *singing* of pine trees, that gentle whirring of a forest when soft airs are moving — that *sauseln, susurrement,* whispering. Midway in the wood, of course, a pine forest shouting in a free wind is simply the sea shouting on a sandy shore; close the eyes, and it is impossible to tell the difference; it is tumbling surf, mellowed by distance, tossing, instead of spray, the flying odours of their needles' frankincense. But when only stray puffs come a-wandering, and other trees are silent, listen at the skirts of a pine grove, and hear those ghosts of sound that fall from nowhere, that thin away to a mere ghost of sighing, and then come running back to you over the motionless crests. For pines can answer the wind apparently without moving. No other sound can faint as this does — or sing alone; among the stragglers at the edge of the wood you may hear distinct *solos.* Isolated pines respond to a wind you cannot feel; and a tree at your side will sigh and murmur, while another six feet away keeps silent. Almost as though the wind can consciously pick and choose when and where it shall shake "the clinging music from their boughs," so that "low, sweet sounds, like the farewell of ghosts," are heard.

Wherever they are found, whether they "fledge the wild ridgéd mountain steep by steep," or gather in greater concourse like "fallen flakes and fragments of the night, stayed in their solemn squares," these trees, for some imaginations at least, seem charged with a potent symbolism. And, from the particular, they sweep the mind across continents to the general. Their shadows rest upon a nation, as Ruskin puts it, and absorb and mould the life of a race. "The Northern people, century after century, lived under one or another of the two great powers of the Pine and the Sea, both infinite.... Whatever elements of imagination, or of warrior strength, or of domestic justice, were brought down by the Norwegian and the Goth against the dissoluteness or degradation of the South of Europe, were taught them under the green roofs and wild penetralia of the pine."

THE WINTER ALPS

WITH AN AUDACITY of outline denied to them in the softer seasons, the Alps rear themselves aloft in Winter more grandly self-revealed than at any other time — still with their brave and ancient pretence of being unconquerable. The black and white becomes them best; and they know it: the savage, iron black that seems pitiless, and that shining, silvery white that dazzles so piercingly. They are really not summer things at all, but creatures of the winter — the short, brilliant day of icy keenness, and the long night of tempest, wind, and drifting snows. Then, at least, clothed so simply in their robes of jet and ermine, they stand in something of their old true majesty, solemn, forbidding, terrible. Summer, as it were, over-dresses them, with its skirts of emerald-bright meadows and fringe of purple forests, and all its flying scarves of painted air and mist. The colours are so brilliant, the skies so soft, the flowers climb so high. Then winter comes, undressing them slowly, from the head and shoulders downwards, till they emerge, austere in black and white, naked and unashamed beneath the skies.

The associations of summer, of course, help very largely to emphasise the contrast. Those stubborn peaks that lie in January beneath forty feet of packed and driven snow, on many a morning in July and August carried twenty tourists prattling to one another of the sunrise, sucking thermos flasks, giggling of the hotel dances to come, not a few having been bodily dragged up, probably, by guides and porters overburdened with the latest appliances for comfort and ease. And the mere thought of them all somehow makes the Alps — dwindle a little. But in winter they become free again, and hold uninterrupted converse with the winds and stars. Their greatest characteristic becomes manifest — their *silence.* For the silence of the Winter Alps is genuinely overwhelming. One feels that the whole world of strife, clamour and bustle, and with it all the clash of vulgar ambitions among men, has fallen away into some void whence resurrection is impossible. Stand upon one of the upper slopes in mid-winter and listen: all sound whatsoever has fled away into the remotest corners of the universe. It seems as though such a thing had never existed even, the silence is so enormous, yet at the same time more stimulating than any possible music, more suggestive than the sweetest instrument ever heard. It encompasses the sky and the earth like an immense vacuum.

In summer, there would be bells, bells of goats and cows; voices, voices of climbers, tourists, shepherds; people singing, pipes playing, an occasional horn, and even the puffing and whistling of at least several funiculaires in the valley. But now all these are hushed and gone away — dead. Only silence reigns. Even above, among the precipices and ridges, there is no crack and thunder of falling stones, for the sun has hardly time to melt their fastenings and send them down; no hiss of sliding snow, no roar of avalanches. The very wind, too, whirring over this upper world too softly cushioned with thick snow to permit "noise" — even the wind is muted and afraid to cry aloud. I know nothing more impressive than the silence that overwhelms the world of these high slopes. The faint "sishing" of the ski as one flies over the powdery snow becomes almost loud in the ears by comparison. And with this silence that holds true awe comes that other characteristic of the Winter Alps — their immobility; that is, I mean, of course, the immobility of the various items that crowd their surface in summer with movement. All the engines that produce movement have withdrawn deep within their frozen selves, and lie smothered and asleep. The waving grasses are still, beneath three metres of snow; the shelves that in July so busily discharge their weights of snow into the depths stand rigid and fastened to the cliffs by nails of giant ice. Nothing moves, slides, stirs, or bends; all is inflexible and fixed. The very trees, loaded with piled-up masses of snow, stand like things of steel pinned motionless against the background of running slope or blue-black sky. Above all, the tumbling waters that fill the hollows of all these upper valleys with their dance of foam and spray, and with their echoing sweet thunder, are silent and invisible. One cannot even guess the place where they have been. Here sit Silence and Immobility, terrifically enthroned and close to heaven.

The Alps, tainted in summer with vulgarity, in winter are set free; for the hordes of human beings that scuttle about the fields at their base are ignored by the upper regions. Those few who dare the big peaks are perforce worthy, and the bold ski-runners who challenge the hazards of the long, high courses are themselves, like the birds, almost a part of the mountain life. The Alps, as a whole, retire into their ancient splendour.

Yet their winter moods hold moments of tenderness as well, and of colour, too, that at first the strong black and white might seem to deny. The monotony of the snow-world comes to reveal itself as a monotony of surface only, thinly hiding an exquisite variety. The shading is so delicate, however, that it eludes capture by words almost. Half unearthly seem to me sometimes the faint veils of tinted blues, greys, and silvers that lie caught upon those leagues of upper snow; half hidden in the cup-like hollows, nestling just beneath the curved lip of some big drift, or sifted like transparent coloured powder over half a hill when the sun is getting low. Under boulders, often, they lie so deep and thick that one might pick them up with the hands — rich, dark blues that seem almost to hold substance. And the purple troops of them that cloak the snow to the eastward of the pine forests surpass anything that summer can ever dream of, much less give. The long icicles that hang from branch or edge of stones, sparkling in the sun while they drip with sounds like the ticking of a clock, flash with crowded colours of a fairy world. And at the centre of the woods there are blacks that might paint all London, yet without suffering loss.

At dawn, or towards sunset, the magic is bewildering. The wizardry of dreams lies over the world. Even the village street becomes transfigured. These winter mountains then breathe forth for a moment something of the glory the world knew in her youth before the coming of men. The ancient gods come close. One feels the awful potentialities of this wonderful white and silent landscape. Into the terms of modern life, however, it is with difficulty, if at all, translatable. Before the task was half completed, someone would come along with weights and scales in his hand and mention casually the exact mass and size and composition of it all — and rob the wondrous scene of half its awe and *all* its wonder.

The gathering of the enormous drifts that begins in November and continues until March is another winter fact that touches the imagination. The sight of these vast curled waves of snow is undeniably impressive — accumulating with every fresh fall for delivery in the spring. The stored power along those huge steep slopes is prodigious, for when it breaks loose with the first *Fôhn* wind of April, the trees snap before it like little wooden matches, and the advance wind that heralds its coming can blow down a solid chalet like a playing-card. One finds these mighty drifts everywhere along the ridges, smooth as a billiard-table along the surface, their projecting cornices running out into extensions that alter the entire shape of the ridge which supports them. They are delicately carved by the wind, curved and lined into beautiful sweeping contours that suggest suddenly arrested movement. Chamois tracks may be seen sometimes up to the very edge — the thin, pointed edge that hangs over the abyss. One thinks of an Atlantic suddenly changed into a solid frozen white, and as one whips by on ski it often seems as though these gigantic waves ran flying after, just about to break and overwhelm the valley. Outlined on a cloudless day against the skies of deep wintry blue — seen thus from below — they present a spectacle of weirdest beauty. And the silence, this thick, white-coated silence that surrounds them, adds to their singular forms an element of desolate terror that is close to sublimity.

The whole point of the Winter Alps, indeed, is that they then reveal themselves with immensities of splendour and terror that the familiarity of summer days conceals. The more gaunt and sombre peaks, perhaps, change little from one season to another — like the sinister tooth of the old Matterhorn, for instance, that is too steep for snow to gather and change its aspect. But the general run of summits stand aloof in winter with an air of inaccessibility that adds vastly to their essential majesty. The five peaks of the Dent du Midi, to take a well-known group, that smile a welcome to men and women by the score in August, retreat with the advent of the short dark days into a remoter heaven, whence they frown down, genuinely terrific, with an aspect that excites worship rather than attack. In their winter seclusion, dressed in black and white, they belong to the clouds and tempests, rather than to the fields and woods out of which they grow. Watch them, for instance, on a January morning in the dawn, when the wild winds toss the frozen powdery snow hundreds of feet into the air from all their summits, and upon this exaggerated outline of the many-toothed ridge the sunrise strikes in red and gold — and you may see a sight that is not included in the very finest of the summer's repertoire.

But it is at night, beneath the moon, that the Winter Alps become really supreme. The shadows are pitch black, the snow dazzling as with a radiance of its own, the "battlements that on their front bear stars" loom awfully out of the sky. In close-shuttered chalets the peasants sleep. In the brilliant overheated salons of hotels hundreds of little human beings dance and make music and play bridge. But out there, in this silent world of ice and stars, the enormous mountains dream solemnly upon their ancient thrones, unassailable, alone in the heavens, forgotten. The Alps, in these hours of the long winter night, come magnificently into their own.

THE SECOND GENERATION

SOMETIMES, IN A moment of sharp experience, comes that vivid flash of insight that makes a platitude suddenly seem a revelation: its full content is abruptly realised. “Ten years *is* a long time, yes,” he thought, as he walked up the drive to the great Kensington house where she still lived.

Ten years — long enough, at any rate, for her to have married and for her husband to have died. More than that he had not heard, in the outlandish places where life had cast him in the interval. He wondered whether there had been any children. All manner of thoughts and questions, confused a little, passed across his mind. He was well-to-do now, though probably his entire capital did not amount to her income for a single year. He glanced at the huge, forbidding mansion. Yet that pride was false which had made of poverty an insuperable obstacle. He saw it now. He had learned values in his long exile.

But he was still ridiculously timid. This confusion of thought, of mental images rather, was due to a kind of fear, since worship ever is akin to awe. He was as nervous as a boy going up for a *viva voce;* and with the excitement was also that unconquerable sinking — that horrid shrinking sensation that excessive shyness brings. Why in the world had he come? Why had he telegraphed the very day after his arrival in England? Why had he not sent a tentative, tactful letter, feeling his way a little?

Very slowly he walked up the drive, feeling that if a reasonable chance of escape presented itself he would almost take it. But all the windows stared so hard at him that retreat was really impossible now; and though no faces were visible behind the curtains, all had seen him. Possibly she herself — his heart beat absurdly at the extravagant suggestion. Yet it was odd; he felt so certain of being seen, and that someone watched him. He reached the wide stone steps that were clean as marble, and shrank from the mark his boots must make upon their spotlessness. In desperation, then, before he could change his mind, he touched the bell. But he did not hear it ring — mercifully; that irrevocable sound must have paralysed him altogether. If no one came to answer, he might still leave a card in the letter-box and slip away. Oh, how utterly he despised himself for such a thought! A man of thirty with such a chicken heart was not fit to protect a child, much less a woman. And he recalled with a little stab of pain that the man she married had been noted for his courage, his determined action, his inflexible firmness in various public situations, head and shoulders above lesser men. What presumption on his own part ever to dream...! He remembered, too, with no apparent reason in particular, that this man had a grown-up son already, by a former marriage.

And still no one came to open that huge, contemptuous door with its so menacing, so hostile air. His back was to it, as he carelessly twirled his umbrella, but he "felt" its sneering expression behind him while it looked him up and down. It seemed to push him away. The entire mansion focused its message through that stern portal: Little timid men are not welcomed here.

How well he remembered the house! How often in years gone by had he not stood and waited just like this, trembling with delight and anticipation, yet terrified lest the bell should be answered and the great door actually swung wide! Then, as now, he would have run, had he dared. He was still afraid; his worship was so deep. But in all these years of exile in wild places, farming, mining, working for the position he had at last attained, her face and the memory of her gracious presence had been his comfort and support, his only consolation, though never his actual joy. There was so little foundation for it all, yet her smile, and the words she had spoken to him from time to time in friendly conversation, had clung, inspired, kept him going. For he knew them all by heart. And, more than once, in foolish optimistic moods, he had imagined, greatly daring, that she possibly had meant more....

He touched the bell a second time — with the point of his umbrella. He meant to go in, carelessly as it were, saying as lightly as might be, "Oh, I'm back in England again — if you haven't *quite* forgotten my existence — I could not for-go the pleasure of saying how do you do, and hearing that you are well...," and the rest; then presently bow himself easily out — into the old loneliness again. But he would at least have seen her; he would have heard her voice, and looked into her gentle, amber eyes; he would have touched her hand. She might even ask him to come in another day and see her! He had rehearsed it all a hundred times, as certain feeble temperaments do rehearse such scenes. And he came rather well out of that rehearsal, though always with an aching heart, the old great yearnings unfulfilled. All the way across the Atlantic he had thought about it, though with lessening confidence as the time drew near. The very night of his arrival in London, he wrote; then, tearing up the letter (after sleeping over it), he had telegraphed next morning, asking if she would be in. He signed his surname — such a very common name, alas but surely she would know — and her reply, "Please call 4.30," struck him as oddly worded — rather.... Yet here he was.

There was a rattle of the big door knob, that aggressive, hostile knob that thrust out at him insolently like a fist of bronze. He started, angry with himself for doing so. But the door did not open. He became suddenly conscious of the wilds he had lived in for so long; his clothes were hardly fashionable; his voice probably had a twang in it, and he used tricks of speech that must betray the rough life so recently left. What would she think of him — now? He looked much older, too. And how brusque it was to have telegraphed like that! He felt awkward, gauche, tongue-tied, hot and cold by turns. The sentences, so carefully rehearsed, fled beyond recovery.

Good heavens — the door was open! It had been open for some minutes. It moved on big hinges noiselessly. He acted automatically — just like an automaton; he heard himself asking if her ladyship was at home, though his voice was nearly inaudible. The next moment he was standing in the great, dim hall, so poignantly familiar, and the remembered perfume almost made him sway. He did not hear the door close, but he knew. He was caught. The butler betrayed an instant's surprise — or was it overwrought imagination again? — when he gave his name. It seemed to him, though only later did he grasp the significance of that curious intuition — that the man had expected another caller instead. The man took his card respectfully, and disappeared. These flunkeys, of course, were so marvellously trained. He was too long accustomed to straight question and straight answer; but here, in the Old Country, privacy was jealously guarded with such careful ritual.

And, almost immediately, the butler returned with his expressionless face again, and showed him into the large drawing-room on the ground floor that he knew so well. Tea was on the table — tea for one. He felt puzzled. "If you will have tea first, sir, her ladyship will see you afterwards," was what he heard. And though his breath came thickly, he asked the question that forced itself up and out. Before he knew what he was saying, he asked it: “Is she ill?” Oh no, her ladyship was “quite well, thank you, sir. If you will have tea first, sir, her ladyship will see you afterwards.” The horrid formula was repeated, word for word. He sank into an arm-chair and mechanically poured out his own tea. What he felt he did not exactly know. It seemed so unusual, so utterly unexpected, so unnecessary, too. Was it a special attention, or was it merely casual? That it could mean anything else did not occur to him. How was she busy, occupied — not here to give him tea? He could not understand it. It seemed such a farce, having tea alone like this; it was like waiting for an audience; it was like a doctor’s or a dentist’s room. He felt bewildered, ill at ease, cheap.... But after ten years in primitive lands... perhaps London usages had changed in some extraordinary manner. He recalled his first amazement at the motor-omnibuses, taxi-cabs, and electric tubes. All were new. London was otherwise than when he left it. Piccadilly and the Marble Arch themselves had altered. And, with his reflection, a shade more confidence stole in. She knew that he was there; and presently she would come in and speak with him, explaining everything by the mere fact of her delicious presence. He was ready for the ordeal; he would see her — and drop out again. It was worth all manner of pain, even of mortification. He was in her house, drinking her tea, sitting in a chair she even perhaps used herself. Only — he would never dare to say a word, or make a sign that might betray his changeless secret. He still felt the boyish worshipper, worshipping in dumbness from a distance, one of a group of many others like himself. Their dreams had faded, his had continued, that was the difference. Memories tore and raced and poured upon him. How sweet and gentle she had always been to him! He used to wonder sometimes.... Once, he remembered, he had rehearsed a declaration — but, while rehearsing, the big man had come in and captured her, though he had only read the definite news long after by chance in the Arizona paper....

He gulped his tea down. His heart alternately leaped and stood still. A sort of numbness held him most of that dreadful interval, and no clear thought came at all. Every ten seconds his head turned towards the door that rattled, seemed to move, yet never opened. But any moment now it *must* open, and he would be in her very presence, breathing the same air with her. He would see her, charge himself with her beauty once more to the brim, and then go out again into the wilderness — the wilderness of life — without her — and not for a mere ten years, but for always. She was so utterly beyond his reach. He felt like a backwoodsman. He was a backwoodsman.

For one thing only was he duly prepared — though he thought about it little enough: she would, of course, have changed. The photograph he owned, cut from an illustrated paper, was not true now. It might even be a little shock perhaps. He must remember that. Ten years cannot pass over a woman without —

Before he knew it, then, the door was open, and she was advancing quietly towards him across the thick carpet that deadened sound. With both hands outstretched she came, and with the sweetest welcoming smile upon her parted lips he had seen in any human face. Her eyes were soft with joy. His whole heart leaped within him; for the instant he saw her it all flashed clear as sunlight — that she knew and understood. His being melted in the utter bliss of it; shyness vanished. She had always known, had always understood. Speech came easily to him in a flood, had he needed it. But he did not need it. It was all so adorably easy, simple, natural, and true. He just took her hands — those welcoming, outstretched hands in both his own, and led her to the nearest sofa. He was not even surprised at himself. Inevitable, out of depths of truth, this meeting came about. And he uttered a little, foolish commonplace, because he feared the huge revulsion that his sudden glory brought, and loved to taste it slowly:

“So you live here still?”

“Here, and here,” she answered softly, touching his heart, and then her own. “I am attached to this house, too, because *you* used to come and see me here, and because it was here I waited so long for you, and still wait. I shall never leave it — unless you change. You see, we live together here.”

He said nothing. He leaned forward to take and hold her. The abrupt knowledge of it all somehow did not seem abrupt — as though he had known it always; and the complete disclosure did not seem disclosure either — rather as though she told him something he had inexplicably left unrealised, yet not forgotten. He felt absolutely master of himself, yet, in a curious sense, outside of himself at the same time. His arms were already open — when she gently held her hands up to prevent. He heard a faint sound outside the door.

"But you are free," he cried, his great passion breaking out and flooding him, yet most oddly well controlled, "and I—"

She interrupted him in the softest, quietest whisper he had ever heard: "You are not free, as I am free — not yet."

The sound outside came suddenly closer. It was a step. There was a faint click on the handle of the door. In a flash, then, came the dreadful shock that overwhelmed him — the abrupt realisation of the truth that was somehow horrible: that Time, all these years, had left no mark upon her, and that *she had not changed.* Her face was young as when he saw her last.

With it there came cold and darkness into the great room that turned it instantly otherwise. He shivered with cold, but an alien, unaccountable cold. Some great shadow dropped upon the entire earth. And though but a second could have passed before the handle actually turned, and the other person entered, it seemed to him like several minutes. He heard her saying this amazing thing that was question, answer, and forgiveness all in one. This, at least, he divined before the ghastly interruption came:

"But, George — if you had only spoken — !"

With ice in his blood, he heard the butler saying that her ladyship would be "pleased" to see him now if he had finished his tea and would he be "so good as to bring the papers and documents upstairs with him." He had just sufficient control of certain muscles to stand upright and murmur that he would come. He rose from a sofa that held no one but himself. But, all at once, he staggered. He really did not know exactly then what happened, or how he managed to stammer out the medley of excuses and semi-explanations that battered their way through his brain and issued somehow in definite words from his lips. Somehow or other he accomplished it. The sudden attack, the faintness, the collapse!... He vaguely remembered afterwards — with amazement, too — the suavity of the butler, as he suggested telephoning for a doctor, and that he just managed to forbid it, refusing the offered glass of brandy as well, and that he contrived to stumble into the taxi-cab and give his hotel address, with a final explanation that he would call another day and "bring the papers." It was quite clear that his telegram had been attributed to someone else — someone "with papers" — perhaps a solicitor or architect. His name was such an ordinary one.

There were so many Smiths. It was also clear that she he had come to see, and *had* seen, no longer lived here — in the flesh....

And, just as he left the hall, he had the vision — mere fleeting glimpse it was — of a tall, slim, girlish figure on the stairs asking if anything was wrong, and realised vaguely through his atrocious pain that she was, of course, the wife of the son who had inherited....

Incredible Adventures (1914)

CONTENTS

THE REGENERATION OF LORD ERNIE
THE SACRIFICE
THE DAMNED
A DESCENT INTO EGYPT
WAYFARERS

THE REGENERATION OF LORD ERNIE

I

JOHN HENDRICKS WAS bear-leading at the time. He had originally studied for Holy Orders, but had abandoned the Church later for private reasons connected with his faith, and had taken to teaching and tutoring instead. He was an honest, upstanding fellow of five-and-thirty, incorruptible, intelligent in a simple, straightforward way. He played games with his head, more than most Englishmen do, but he went through life without much calculation. He had qualities that made boys like and respect him; he won their confidence. Poor, proud, ambitious, he realised that fate offered him a chance when the Secretary of State for Scotland asked him if he would give up his other pupils for a year and take his son, Lord Ernie, round the world upon an educational trip that might make a man of him. For Lord Ernie was the only son, and the Marquess's influence was naturally great. To have deposited a regenerated Lord Ernie at the castle gates might have guaranteed Hendricks' future. After leaving Eton prematurely the lad had come under Hendricks' charge for a time, and with such excellent results— 'I'd simply swear by that chap, you know,' the boy used to say — that his father, considerably impressed, and rather as a last resort, had made this proposition. And Hendricks, without much calculation, had accepted it. He liked 'Bindy' for himself. It was in his heart to 'make a man of him,' if possible. They had now been round the world together and had come up from Brindisi to the Italian Lakes, and so into Switzerland. It was middle October. With a week or two to spare they were making leisurely for the ancestral halls in Aberdeenshire.

The nine months' travel, Hendricks realised with keen disappointment, had accomplished, however, very little. The job had been exhausting, and he had conscientiously done his best. Lord Ernie liked him thoroughly, admiring his vigour with a smile of tolerant good-nature through his ceaseless cigarette smoke. They were almost like two boys together. 'You *are* a chap and a half, Mr. Hendricks. You really ought to be in the Cabinet with my father.' Hendricks would deliver up his useless parcel at the castle gates, pocket the thanks and the hard-earned fee, and go back to his arduous life of teaching and writing in dingy lodgings. It was a pity, even on the lowest grounds. The tutor, truth to tell, felt undeniably depressed. Hopeful by nature, optimistic, too, as men of action usually are, he cast about him, even at the last hour, for something that might stir the boy to life, wake him up, put zest and energy into him. But there was only Paris now between them and the end; and Paris certainly could not be relied upon for help. Bindy's desire for Paris even was not strong enough to count. No desire in him was ever strong. There lay the crux of the problem in a word — Lord Ernie was without desire which is life.

Tall, well-built, handsome, he was yet such a feeble creature, without the energy to be either wild or vicious. Languid, yet certainly not decadent, life ran slowly, flabbily in him. He took to nothing. The first impression he made was fine — then nothing. His only tastes, if tastes they could be called, were out-of-door tastes: he was vaguely interested in flying, yet not enough to master the mechanism of it; he liked motoring at high speed, being driven, not driving himself; and he loved to wander about in woods, making fires like a Red Indian, provided they lit easily, yet even this, not for the poetry of the thing nor for any love of adventure, but just 'because.' 'I like fire, you know; like to watch it burn.' Heat seemed to give him curious satisfaction, perhaps because the heat of life, he realised, was deficient in his six-foot body. It was significant, this love of fire in him, though no one could discover why. As a child he had a dangerous delight in fireworks — anything to do with fire. He would watch a candle flame as though he were a fire-worshipper, but had never been known to make a single remark of interest about it. In a wood, as mentioned, the first thing he did was to gather sticks — though the resulting fire was never part of any purpose. He had no purpose. There was no wind or fire of life in the lad at all. The fine body was inert.

Hendricks did wrong, of course, in going where he did — to this little desolate village in the Jura Mountains — though it was the first time all these trying months he had allowed himself a personal desire. But from Domo Dossola the Simplon Express would pass Lausanne, and from Lausanne to the Jura was but a step — all on the way home, moreover. And what prompted him was merely a sentimental desire to revisit the place where ten years before he had fallen violently in love with the pretty daughter of the Pasteur, M. Leysin, in whose house he lodged. He had gone there to learn French. The very slight detour seemed pardonable.

His spiritless charge was easily persuaded.

‘We might go home by Pontarlier instead of Bâle, and get a glimpse of the Jura,’ he suggested. ‘The line slides along its frontiers a bit, and then goes bang across it. We might even stop off a night on the way — if you cared about it. I know a curious old village — Villaret — where I went at your age to pick up French.’

‘Top-hole,’ replied Lord Ernie listlessly. ‘All on the way to Paris, ain’t it?’

‘Of course. You see there’s a fortnight before we need get home.’

‘So there is, yes. Let’s go.’ He felt it was almost his own idea, and that he decided it.

‘If you’d *really* like it.’

‘Oh, yes. Why not? I’m sick of cities.’ He flicked some dust off his coat sleeve with an immaculate silk handkerchief, then lit a cigarette. ‘Just as you like,’ he added with a drawl and a smile. ‘I’m ready for anything.’ There was no keenness, no personal desire, no choice in reality at all; flabby good-nature merely.

A suggestion was invariably enough, as though the boy had no will of his own, his opposition rarely more than negative sulking that soon flattened out because it was forgotten. Indeed, no sign of positive life lay in him anywhere — no vitality, aggression, coherence of desire and will; vacuous rather than imbecile; unable to go forward upon any definite line of his own, as though all wheels had slipped their cogs; a pasty soul that took good enough impressions, yet never mastered them for permanent use. Nothing stuck. He would never make a politician, much less a statesman. The family title would be borne by a nincompoop. Yet all the machinery was there, one felt — if only it could be driven, made to go. It was sad. Lord Ernie was heir to great estates, with a name and position that might influence thousands.

And Hendricks had been a good selection, with his virility and gentle, understanding firmness. He understood the problem. ‘You’ll do what no one else could,’ the anxious father told him, ‘for he worships you, and you can sting without hurting him. You'll put life and interest into him if anybody in this world can. I have great hopes of this tour. I shall always be in your debt, Mr. Hendricks.' And Hendricks had accepted the onerous duty in his big, high-minded way. He was conscientious to the backbone. This little side-trip was his sole deflection, if such it can be called even. 'Life, light and cheerful influences,' had been his instructions, 'nothing dull or melancholy; an occasional fling, if he wants it — I'd welcome a fling as a good sign — and as much intercourse with decent people, and stimulating sight-seeing as you can manage — or can stand,' the Marquess added with a smile. 'Only you won't overtax the lad, will you? Above all, let him think *he* chooses and decides, when possible.'

Villaret, however, hardly complied with these conditions; there was melancholy in it; Hendricks' mind — whose reflexes the spongy nature of the empty lad absorbed too easily — would be in a minor key. Yet a night could work no harm. Whence came, he wondered, the fleeting notion that it might do good? Was it, perhaps, that Leysin, the vigorous old Pasteur, might contribute something? Leysin had been a considerable force in his own development, he remembered; they had corresponded a little since; Leysin was out of the common, certainly, restless energy in him as of the sea. Hendricks found difficulty in sorting out his thoughts and motives, but Leysin was in them somewhere — this idea that his energetic personality might help. His vitalising effect, at least, would counteract the melancholy.

For Villaret lay huddled upon unstimulating slopes, the robe of gloomy pine-woods sweeping down towards its poverty from bleak heights and desolate gorges. The peasants were morose, ill-living folk. It was a dark untaught corner in a range of otherwise fairy mountains, a backwater the sun had neglected to clean out. Superstitions, Hendricks remembered, of incredible kind still lingered there; a touch of the sinister hovered about the composite mind of its inhabitants. The Pasteur fought strenuously this blackness in their lives and thoughts; in the village itself with more or less success — though even there the drinking and habits of living were utterly unsweetened — but on the heights, among the somewhat arid pastures, the mountain men remained untamed, turbulent, even menacing. Hendricks knew this of old, though he had never understood too well. But he remembered how the English boys at *la cure* were forbidden to climb in certain directions, because the life in these scattered châlets was somehow loose and violent. There was danger there, the danger, however, never definitely stated. Those lonely ridges lay cursed beneath dark skies. He remembered, too, the savage dogs, the difficulty of approach, the aggressive attitude towards the plucky Pasteur's visits to these remote upland *pâturages*. They did not lie in his parish: Leysin made his occasional visits as man and missionary; for extraordinary rumours, Hendricks recalled, were rife, of some queer worship of their own these lawless peasants kept alive in their distant, windy territory, planted there first, the story had it, by some renegade priest whose name was now forgotten.

Hendricks himself had no personal experiences. He had been too deeply in love to trouble about outside things, however strange. But Marston's case had never quite left his memory — Marston, who climbed up by unlawful ways, stayed away two whole days and nights, and came back suddenly with his air of being broken, shattered, appallingly used up, his face so lined and strained it seemed aged by twenty years, and yet with a singular new life in him, so vehement, loud, and reckless, it was like a kind of sober intoxication. He was packed off to England before he could relate anything. But he had suffered shocks. His white, passionate face, his boisterous new vigour, the way M. Leysin screened his view of the heights as he put him personally into the Paris train — almost as though he feared the boy would see the hills and make another dash for them! — made up an unforgettable picture in the mind.

Moreover, between the sodden village and that string of evil châlets that lay in their dark line upon the heights there had been links. Exactly of what nature he never knew, for love made all else uninteresting; only, he remembered swarthy, dark-faced messengers descending into the sleepy hamlet from time to time, big, mountain-limbed fellows with wind in their hair and fire in their eyes; that their visits produced commotion and excitement of difficult kinds; that wild orgies invariably followed in their wake; and that, when the messengers went back, they did not go alone. There was life up there, whereas the village was moribund. And none who went ever cared to return. Cudrefin, the young giant *vigneron*, taken in this way, from the very side of his sweetheart too, came back two years later as a messenger himself. He did not even ask for the girl, who had meanwhile married another. 'There's life up there with us,' he told the drunken loafers in the 'Guillaume Tell,' 'wind and fire to make you spin to the devil — or to heaven!' He was enthusiasm personified. In the village he had been merely drinking himself stupidly to death. Vaguely, too, Hendricks remembered visits of police from the neighbouring town, some of them on horseback, all armed, and that once even soldiers accompanied them, and on another occasion a bishop, or whatever the church dignitary was called, had arrived suddenly and promised radical assistance of a spiritual kind that had never materialised — oh, and many other details that now trooped back with suggestions time had certainly not made smaller. For the love had passed along its way and gone, and he was free now to the invasion of other memories, dwarfed at the time by that dominating, sweet passion.

Yet all the tutor wanted now, this chance week in late October, was to see again the corner of the mossy forest where he had known that marvellous thing, first love; renew his link with Leysin who had taught him much; and see if, perchance, this man's stalwart, virile energy might possibly overflow with benefit into his listless charge. The expenses he meant to pay out of his own pocket. Those wild pagans on the heights — even if they still existed — there was no need to mention. Lord Ernie knew little French, and certainly no word of *patois*. For one night, or even two, the risk was negligible.

Was there, indeed, risk at all of any sort? Was not this vague uneasiness he felt merely conscience faintly pricking? He could not feel that he was doing wrong. At worst, the youth might feel depression for a few hours — speedily curable by taking the train.

Something, nevertheless, did gnaw at him in subconscious fashion, producing a sense of apprehension; and he came to the conclusion that this memory of the mountain tribe was the cause of it — a revival of forgotten boyhood's awe. He glanced across at the figure of Bindy lounging upon the hotel lawn in an easy-chair, full in the sunshine, a newspaper at his feet. Reclining there, he looked so big and strong and handsome, yet in reality was but a painted lath without resistance, much less attack, in all his many inches. And suddenly the tutor recalled another thing, the link, however, undiscoverable, and it was this: that the boy's mother, a Canadian, had suffered once severely from a winter in Quebec, where the Marquess had first made her acquaintance. Frost had robbed her, if he remembered rightly, of a foot — with the result, at any rate, that she had a wholesome terror of the cold. She sought heat and sun instinctively — fire. Also, that asthma had been her sore affliction — sheer inability to take a full, deep breath. This deficiency of heat and air, therefore, were in her mind. And he knew that Bindy's birth had been an anxious time, the anxiety justified, moreover, since she had yielded up her life for him.

And so the singular thought flashed through him suddenly as he watched the reclining, languid boy, Cudrefin's descriptive phrase oddly singing in his head —

'Heat and fire, fire and wind — why, it's the very thing he lacks! And he's always after them. I wonder —— !'

II

The lumbering yellow diligence brought them up from the Lake shore, a long two hours, deposited them at the opening of the village street, and went its grinding, toiling way towards the frontier. They arrived in a blur of rain. It was evening. Lowering clouds drew night before her time upon the world, obscuring the distant summits of the Oberland, but lights twinkled here and there in the nearer landscape, mapping the gloom with signals. The village was very still. Above and below it, however, two big winds were at work, with curious results. For a lower wind from the east in gusty draughts drove the body of the lake into quick white horses which shone like wings against the deep *basses Alpes*, while a westerly current swept the heights immediately above the village. There was this odd division of two weathers, presaging a change. A narrow line of clear bright sky showed up the Jura outline finely towards the north, stars peeping sharply through the pale moist spaces. Hurrying vapours, driven by the upper westerly wind, concealed them thinly. They flashed and vanished. The entire ridge, five thousand feet in the air, had an appearance of moving through the sky. Between these opposing winds at different levels the village itself lay motionless, while the world slid past, as it were, in two directions.

'The earth seems turning round,' remarked Lord Ernie. He had been reading a novel all day in train and steamer, and smoking endless cigarettes in the diligence, his companion and himself its only occupants. He seemed suddenly to have waked up. 'What is it?' he asked with interest.

Hendricks explained the queer effect of the two contrary winds. Columns of peat smoke rose in thin straight lines from the blur of houses, untouched by the careering currents above and below. The winds whirled round them.

Lord Ernie listened attentively to the explanation.

‘I feel as if I were spinning with it — like a top,’ he observed, putting his hand to his head a moment. ‘And what are those lights up there?’

He pointed to the distant ridge, where fires were blazing as though stars had fallen and set fire to the trees. Several were visible, at regular intervals. The sharp summits of the limestone mountains cut hard into the clear spaces of northern sky thousands of feet above.

‘Oh, the peasants burning wood and stuff, I suppose,’ the tutor told him.

The youth turned an instant, standing still to examine them with a shading hand.

‘People live up there?’ he asked. There was surprise in his voice, and his body stiffened oddly as he spoke.

‘In mountain châlets, yes,’ replied the other a trifle impatiently, noticing his attitude. ‘Come along now,’ he added, ‘let’s get to our rooms in the carpenter’s house before the rain comes down. You can see the windows twinkling over there,’ and he pointed to a building near the church. ‘The storm will catch us.’ They moved quickly down the deserted street together in the deepening gloom, passing little gardens, doors of open barns, straggling manure heaps, and courtyards of cobbled stones where the occasional figure of a man was seen. But Lord Ernie lingered behind, half loitering. Once or twice, to the other’s increasing annoyance, he paused, standing still to watch the heights through openings between the tumble-down old houses. Half a dozen big drops of rain splashed heavily on the road.

‘Hurry up!’ cried Hendricks, looking back, ‘or we shall be caught. It’s the mountain wind — the *coup de joran*. You can hear it coming!’ For the lad was peering across a low wall in an attitude of fixed attention. He made a gesture with one hand, as though he signalled towards the ridges where the fires blazed. Hendricks called pretty sharply to him then. It was possible, of course, that he misinterpreted the movement; it *may* merely have been that he passed his fingers through his hair, across his eyes, or used the palm to focus sight, for his hat was off and the light was quite uncertain. Only

Hendricks did not like the lingering or the gesture. He put authority into his tone at once. ‘Come along, will you; come along, Bindy!’ he called.

The answer filled him with amazement.

‘All right, all right. I’ll follow in a moment. I like this.’

The tutor went back a few steps towards him. The tone startled him.

‘Like what?’ he asked.

And Lord Ernie turned towards him with another face. There was fighting in it. There was resolution.

‘This, of course,’ the boy answered steadily, but with excitement shut down behind, as he waved one arm towards the mountains. ‘I’ve dreamed this sort of thing; I’ve known it somewhere. We’ve seen nothing like it all our stupid trip.’ The flash in his brown eyes passed then, as he added more quietly, but with firmness: ‘Don’t wait for me; I’ll follow.’

Hendricks stood still in his tracks. There was a decision in the voice and manner that arrested him. The confidence, the positive statement, the eager desire, the hint of energy — all this was new. He had never encouraged the boy’s habit of vivid dreaming, deeming the narration unwise. It flashed across him suddenly now that the ‘deficiency’ might be only on the surface. Energy and life hid, perhaps, subconsciously in him. Did the dreams betray an activity he knew not how to carry through and correlate with his everyday, external world? And were these dreams evidence of deep, hidden desire — a clue, possibly, to the energy he sought and needed, the exact kind of energy that might set the inert machinery in motion and drive it?

He hesitated an instant, waiting in the road. He was on the verge of understanding something that yet just evaded him. Bindy’s childish, instinctive love of fire, his passion for air, for rushing wind, for oceans of limitless ——

There came at that moment a deep roaring in the mountains. Far away, but rapidly approaching, the ominous booming of it filled the air. The westerly wind descended by the deep gorges, shaking the forests, shouting as it came. Clouds of white dust spiralled into the sky off the upper roads, spread into sheets like snow, and swept downwards with incredible velocity. The air turned suddenly cooler. More big drops of rain splashed and thudded on the roofs and road. There was a feeling of something violent and instantaneous about to happen, a sense almost of attack. The *joran* tore headlong down into the valley.

‘Come on, man,’ he cried at the top of his voice. ‘That’s the *joran*! I know it of old! It’s terrific. Run!’ And he caught the lad, still lingering, by the arm.

But Lord Ernie shook himself free with an excitement almost violent.

‘I’ve been up there with those great fires,’ he shouted. ‘I know the whole blessed thing. But where was it? Where?’ His face was white, eyes shining, manner strangely agitated. ‘Big, naked fellows who dance like wind, and rushing women of fire, and — —’

Two things happened then, interrupting the boy’s wild language. The *joran* reached the village and struck it; the houses shook, the trees bent double, and the cloud of limestone dust, painting the darkness white, swept on between Hendricks and the boy with extraordinary force, even separating them. There was a clatter of falling tiles, of banging doors and windows, and then a burst of icy rain that fell like iron shot on everything, raising actual spray. The air was in an instant thick. Everything drove past, roared, trembled. And, secondly — just in that brief instant when man and boy were separated — there shot between them with shadowy swiftness the figure of a man, hatless, with flying hair, who vanished with running strides into the darkness of the village street beyond — all so rapidly that sight could focus the manner neither of his coming nor of his going. Hendricks caught a glimpse of a swarthy, elemental type of face, the swing of great shoulders, the leap of big loose limbs — something rushing and elastic in the whole appearance — but nothing he could claim for definite detail. The figure swept through the dust and wind like an animal — and was gone. It was, indeed, only the contrast of Lord Ernie’s whitened skin, of his graceful, half-elegant outline, that enabled him to recall the details that he did. The weather-beaten visage seemed to storm away. Bindy’s delicate aristocratic face shone so pale and eager. But that a real man had passed was indubitable, for the boy made a flurried movement as though to follow. Hendricks caught his arm with a determined grip and pulled him back.

‘Who was that? Who was it?’ Lord Ernie cried breathlessly, resisting with all his strength, but vainly.

‘Some mountain fellow, of course. Nothing to do with us.’ And he dragged the boy after him down the road. For a second both seemed to have lost their heads. Hendricks certainly felt a gust of something strike him into momentary consternation that was half alarm.

‘From up there, where the fires are?’ asked the boy, shouting above the wind and rain.

‘Yes, yes, I suppose so. Come along. We shall be soused. Are you mad?’ For Bindy still held back with all his weight, trying to turn round and see. Hendricks used more force. There was almost a scuffle in the road.

‘All right, I’m coming. I only wanted to look a second. You needn’t drag my arm out.’ He ceased resistance, and they lurched forward together. ‘But what a chap he was! He went like the wind. Did you see the light streaming out of him — like fire?’

‘Like what?’ shouted Hendricks, as they dashed now through the driving tempest.

‘Fire!’ bawled the boy. ‘It lit me up as he passed — fire that lights but does not burn, and wind that blows the world along — —’

‘Button your coat and run!’ interrupted the other, hurrying his pace, and pulling the lad forcibly after him.

‘Don’t twist! You’re hurting! I can run as well as you!’ came back, with an energy Bindy had never shown before in his life. He was breathless, panting, charged with excitement still. ‘It touched me as he passed — fire that lights but doesn’t burn, and wind that blows the heart to flame — let me go, will you? Let go my hand.’

He dashed free and away. The torrential rain came down in sheets now from a windless sky, for the *joran* was already miles beyond them, tearing across the angry lake. They reached the carpenter’s house, where their lodging was, soaked to the skin. They dried themselves, and ate the light supper of soup and omelette prepared for them — ate it in their dressing-gowns. Lord Ernie went to bed with a hot-water bottle of rough stone. He declared with decision that he felt no chill. His excitement had somewhat passed.

‘But, I say, Mr. Hendricks,’ he remarked, as he settled down with his novel and a cigarette, calmed and normal again, ‘this *is* a place and a half, isn’t it?

It stirs me all up. I suppose it's the storm. What do *you* think?'

'Electrical state of the air, yes,' replied the tutor briefly.

Soon afterwards he closed the shutters on the weather side, said good-night, and went into his own room to unpack. The singular phrase Bindy had used kept singing through his head: 'Fire that lights but doesn't burn, and wind that blows the heart to flame' — the first time he had said 'blows the world along.' Where on earth had the boy got hold of such queer words? He still saw the figure of that wild mountain fellow who had passed between them with the dust and wind and rain. There was confusion in the picture, or rather in his memory of it, perhaps. But it seemed to him, looking back now, that the man in passing had paused a second — the briefest second merely — and had spoken, or, at any rate, had stared closely a moment into Bindy's face, and that some communication had been between them in that moment of elemental violence.

III

Pasteur Leysin Hendricks remembered very well. Even now in his old age he was a vigorous personality, but in his youth he had been almost revolutionary; wild enough, too, it was rumoured, until he had turned to God of his own accord as offering a larger field for his strenuous vitality. The little man was possessed of tireless life, a born leader of forlorn hopes, attack his *métier*, and heavy odds the conditions that he loved. Before settling down in this isolated spot — *pasteur de l'église indépendente* in a protestant Canton — he had been a missionary in remote pagan lands. His horizon was a big one, he had seen strange things. An uncouth being, with a large head upon a thin and wiry body supported by steely bowed legs, he had that courage which makes itself known in advance of any proof. Hendricks slipped over to *la cure* about nine o'clock and found him in his study. Lord Ernie was asleep; at least his light was out, no sound or movement audible from his room. The *joran* had swept the heavens of clouds. Stars shone brilliantly. The fires still blazed faintly upon the heights.

The visit was not unexpected, for Hendricks had already sent a message to announce himself, and the moment he sat down, met the Pasteur's eye, heard his voice, and observed his slight imperious gestures, he passed under the influence of a personality stronger than his own. Something in Leysin's atmosphere stretched him, lifting his horizon. He had come chiefly — he now realised it — to borrow help and explanation with regard to Lord Ernie; the events of two hours before had impressed him more than he quite cared to own, and he wished to talk about it. But, somehow, he found it difficult to state his case; no opening presented itself; or, rather, the Pasteur's mind, intent upon something of his own, was too preoccupied. In reply to a question presently, the tutor gave a brief outline of his present duties, but omitted the scene of excitement in the village street, for as he watched the furrowed face in the light of the study lamp, he realised both anxiety and spiritual high pressure at work below the surface there. He hesitated to intrude his own affairs at first. They discussed, nevertheless, the psychology of the boy, and the unfavourable chances of regeneration, while the old man's face lit up and flashed from time to time, until at length the truth came out, and Hendricks understood his friend's preoccupation.

'What you're attempting with an individual,' Leysin exclaimed with ardour, 'is precisely what I'm attempting with a crowd. And it's difficult. For poor sinners make poor saints, and the lukewarm I will spue out of my mouth.' He made an abrupt, resentful gesture to signify his disgust and weariness, perhaps his contempt as well. 'Cut it down! Why cumbereth it the ground?'

'A hard, uncharitable doctrine,' began the tutor, realising that he must discuss the Parish before he could introduce Bindy's case effectively. 'You mean, of course, that there's no material to work on?'

'No energy to direct,' was the emphatic reply. 'My sheep here are — real sheep; mere negative, drink-sodden loafers without desire. Hospital cases! I could work with tigers and wild beasts, but who ever trained a slug?'

'Your proper place is on the heights,' suggested Hendricks, interrupting at a venture. 'There's scope enough up there, or used to be. Have they died out, those wild men of the mountains?' And hit by chance the target in the bull's-eye.

The old man's face turned younger as he answered quickly.

'Men like that,' he exclaimed, 'do not die off. They breed and multiply.' He leaned forward across the table, his manner eager, fervent, almost impetuous with suppressed desire for action. 'There's evil thinking up there,' he said suggestively, 'but, by heaven, it's alive; it's positive, ambitious, constructive. With violent feeling and strong desire to work on, there’s hope of some result. Upon vehement impulses like that, pagan or anything else, a man can work with a will. Those are the tigers; down here I have the slugs!’

He shrugged his shoulders and leaned back into his chair. Hendricks watched him, thinking of the stories told about his missionary days among savage and barbarian tribes.

‘Born of the vital landscape, I suppose?’ he asked. ‘Wind and frost and blazing sun. Their wild energy, I mean, is due to — —’

A gesture from the old man stopped him. ‘You know who started them upon their wild performances,’ he said gravely in a lower voice; ‘you know how that ambitious renegade priest from the Valais chose them for his nucleus, then died before he could lead them out, trained and competent, upon his strange campaign? You heard the story when you were with me as a boy —— ?’

‘I remember Marston,’ put in the other, uncommonly interested, ‘Marston — the boy who — —’ He stopped because he hardly knew how to continue. There was a minute’s silence. But it was not an empty silence, though no word broke it. Leysin’s face was a study.

‘Ah, Marston, yes,’ he said slowly, without looking up; ‘you remember him. But that is at my door, too, I suppose. His father was ignorant and obstinate; I might have saved him otherwise.’ He seemed talking to himself rather than to his listener. Pain showed in the lines about the rugged mouth. ‘There was no one, you see, who knew how to direct the great life that woke in the lad. He took it back with him, and turned it loose into all manner of useless enterprises, and the doctors mistook his abrupt and fierce ambitions for — for the hysteria which they called the vestibule of lunacy.... Yet small characters may have big ideas.... They didn’t understand, of course.... It was sad, sad, sad.’ He hid his face in his hands a moment.

‘Marston went wrong, then, in the end?’ for the other’s manner suggested disaster of some kind. Hendricks asked it in a whisper. Leysin uncovered his face, looped his neck with one finger, and pointed to the ceiling.

‘Hanged himself!’ murmured Hendricks, shocked.

The Pasteur nodded, but there was impatience, half anger in his tone.

‘They checked it, kept it in. Of course, it tore him!’

The two men looked into each other’s eyes for a moment, and something in the younger of them shrank. This was all beyond his ken a little. An odd hint of bleak and cruel reality was in the air, making him shiver along nerves that were normally inactive. The uneasiness he felt about Lord Ernie became alarm. His conscience pricked him.

‘More than he could assimilate,’ continued Leysin. ‘It broke him. Yet, had outlets been provided, had he been taught how to use it, this elemental energy drawn direct from Nature — —’ He broke off abruptly, struck perhaps by the expression in his listener’s eyes. ‘It seems incredible, doesn’t it, in the twentieth century? I know.’

‘Evil?’ asked Hendricks, stammering rather.

‘Why evil?’ was the impatient reply. ‘How can any force be evil? That’s merely a question of direction.’

‘And the priest who discovered these forces and taught their use, then —— ?’

‘Was genuinely spiritual and followed the truth in his own way. He was not necessarily evil.’ The little Pasteur spoke with vehemence. ‘You talk like the religion-primers in the kindergarten,’ he went on. ‘Listen. This man, sick and weary of his lukewarm flock, sought vital, stalwart systems who might be clean enough to use the elemental powers he had discovered how to attract. Only the bias of the users could make it “evil” by wrong use. His idea was big and even holy — to train a corps that might regenerate the world. And he chose unreasoning, unintellectual types with a purpose — primitive, giant men who could assimilate the force without risk of being shattered. Under his direction he intended they should prove as effective as the twelve disciples of old who were fisher-folk. And, had he gone on — —’

‘He, too, failed then?’ asked the other, whose tangled thoughts struggled with incredulity and belief as he heard this strange new thing. ‘He died, you mean?’

‘*Maison de santé*,’ was the laconic reply, ‘strait-waistcoats, padded cells, and the rest; but still alive, I’m told. It was more than he could manage.’

It was a startling story, even in this brief outline, deep suggestion in it. The tutor's sense of being out of his depth increased. After nine months with a lifeless, devitalised human being, this was — well, he seemed to have fallen in his sleep from a comfortable bed into a raging mountain torrent. Strong currents rushed through and over him. The lonely, peaceful village outside, sleeping beneath the stars, heightened the contrast.

'Suppressed or misdirected energy again, I suppose,' he said in a low tone, respecting his companion's emotion. 'And these mountain men,' he asked abruptly, 'do they still keep up their — practices?'

'Their ceremonies, yes,' corrected the other, master of himself again. 'Turbulent moments of nature, storms and the like, stir them to clumsy rehearsals of once vital rituals — not entirely ineffective, even in their incompleteness, but dangerous for that very reason. This *joran*, for instance, invariably communicates something of its atmospherical energy to themselves. They light their fires as of old. They blunder through what they remember of *his* ceremonies. With the glasses you may see them in their dozens, men and women, leaping and dancing. It's an amazing sight, great beauty in it, impossible to witness even from a distance without feeling the desire to take part in it. Even my people feel it — the only time they ever get alive,' — he jerked his big head contemptuously towards the street— 'or feel desire to act. And some one from the heights — a messenger perhaps — will be down later, this very evening probably, on the hunt — —'

'On the hunt?' Hendricks asked it half below his breath. He felt a touch of awe as he heard this experienced, genuinely religious man speak with conviction of such curious things. 'On the hunt?' he repeated more eagerly.

'Messengers do come down,' was the reply. 'A living belief always seeks to increase, to grow, to add to itself. Where there's conviction there's always propaganda.'

'Ah, converts —— ?'

Leysin shrugged his big black shoulders. 'Desire to add to their number — desire to *save*,' he said. 'The energy they absorb overflows, that's all.'

The Englishman debated several questions vaguely in his mind; only his mind, being disturbed, could not hold the balance exactly true. Leysin's influence, as of old, was upon him. A possibility, remote, seductive, dangerous, began to beckon to him, but from somewhere just outside his reasoning mind.

‘And they always know when one of their kind is near,’ the voice slipped in between his tumbling thoughts, ‘as though they get it instinctively from these universal elements they worship. They select their recruits with marvellous judgment and precision. No messenger ever goes back alone; nor has a recruit ever been known to return to the lazy squalor of the conditions whence he escaped.’

The younger man sat upright in his chair, suddenly alert, and the gesture that he made unconsciously might have been read by a keen psychiatrist as evidence of mental self-defence. He felt the forbidden impulse in him gathering force, and tried to call a halt. At any rate, he called upon the other man to be explicit. He enquired point-blank what this religion of the heights might be. What were these elements these people worshipped? In what did their wild ceremonies consist?

And Leysin, breaking bounds, let his speech burst forth in a stream of explanation, learned of actual knowledge, as he claimed, and uttered with a vehement conviction that produced an undeniable effect upon his astonished listener. Told by no dreamer, but by a righteous man who lived, not merely preached his certain faith, Hendricks, before the half was heard, forgot what age and land he dwelt in. Whole blocks of conventional belief crumbled and fell away. Brick walls erected by routine to mark narrow paths of proper conduct — safe, moral, advisable conduct — thawed and vanished. Through the ruins, scrambling at him from huge horizons never recognised before, came all manner of marvellous possibilities. The little confinement of modern thought appalled him suddenly. Leysin spoke slowly, said little, was not even speculative. It was no mere magic of words that made the dim-lit study swim these deep waters beyond the ripple of pert creeds, but rather the overwhelming sense of sure conviction driving behind the statements. The little man had witnessed curious things, yes, in his missionary days, and that he had found truth in them in place of ignorant nonsense was remarkable enough. That silly superstitions prevalent among older nations could be signs really of their former greatness, linked mightily close to natural forces, was a startling notion, but it paved the way in Hendricks’ receptive mind just then for the belief that certain so-called elements might be worshipped — known intimately, that is — to the uplifting advantage of the worshippers. And what elements more suitable for adoring imitation than wind and fire? For in a human body the first signs of what men term life are heat which is combustion, and breath which is a measure of wind. Life means fire, drawn first from the sun, and breathing, borrowed from the omnipresent air; there might credibly be ways of assaulting these elements and taking heaven by storm; of seizing from their inexhaustible stores an abnormal measure, of straining this huge raw supply into effective energy for human use — vitality. Living with fire and wind in their most active moments; closely imitating their movements, following in their footsteps, understanding their 'laws of being,' going *identically* with them — there lay a hint of the method. It was once, when men were primitively close to Nature, instinctual knowledge. The ceremony was the teaching. The Powers of fire, the Principalities of air, existed; and humanity *could* know their qualities by the ritual of imitation, could actually absorb the fierce enthusiasm of flame and the tireless energy of wind. Such transference was conceivable.

Leysin, at any rate, somehow made it so. His description of what he had personally witnessed, both in wilder lands and here in this little mountain range of middle Europe, had a reality in it that was upsetting to the last degree. 'There is nothing more difficult to believe,' he said, 'yet more certainly true, than the effect of these singular elemental rites.' He laughed a short dry laugh. 'The mediaeval superstition that a witch could raise a storm is but a remnant of a once completely efficacious system,' he concluded, 'though how that strange being, the Valais priest, rediscovered the process and introduced it here, I have never been able to ascertain. That he did so results have proved. At any rate, it lets in life, life moreover in astonishing abundance; though, whether for destruction or regeneration, depends, obviously, upon the use the recipient puts it to. That's where direction comes in.'

The beckoning impulse in the tutor's bewildered thoughts drew closer. The moment for communicating it had come at last. Without more ado he took the opening. He told his companion the incident in the village street, the boy's abrupt excitement, his new-found energy, the curious words he used, the independence and vitality of his attitude. He told also of his parentage, of his mother's disabilities, his craving for rushing air in abundance, his love of fire for its own sake, of his magnificent physical machinery, yet of his uselessness.

And Leysin, as he listened, seemed built on wires. Searching questions shot forth like blows into the other's mind. The Pasteur's sudden increase of enthusiasm was infectious. He leaped intuitively to the thing in Hendricks' thought. He understood the beckoning.

The tutor answered the questions as best he could, aware of the end in view with trepidation and a kind of mental breathlessness. Yes, unquestionably, Bindy *had* exchanged communication of some sort with the man, though his excitement had been evident even sooner.

'And you saw this man yourself?' Leysin pressed him.

'Indubitably — a tall and hurrying figure in the dusk.'

'He brought energy with him? The boy felt it and responded?'

Hendricks nodded. 'Became quite unmanageable for some minutes,' he replied.

'He assimilated it though? There was no distress exactly?' Leysin asked sharply.

'None — that I could see. Pleasurable excitement, something aggressive, a rather wild enthusiasm. His will began to act. He used that curious phrase about wind and fire. He turned alive. He wanted to follow the man — —'

'And the face — how would you describe it? Did it bring terror, I mean, or confidence?'

'Dark and splendid,' answered the other as truthfully as he could. 'In a certain sense, rushing, tempestuous, yet stern rather.'

'A face like the heights,' suggested Leysin impatiently, 'a windy, fiery aspect in it, eh?'

'The man swept past like the spirit of a storm in imaginative poetry — —' began the tutor, hunting through his thoughts for adequate description, then stopped as he saw that his companion had risen from his chair and begun to pace the floor.

The Pasteur paused a moment beside him, hands thrust deep into his pockets, head bent down, and shoulders forward. For twenty seconds he stared into his visitor's face intently, as though he would force into him the thought in his own mind. His features seemed working visibly, yet behind a mask of strong control.

'Don't you see what it is? Don't you see?' he said in a lower, deeper tone. '*They knew.* Even from a distance they were aware of his coming. He is one of themselves.' And he straightened up again. 'He belongs to them.'

'One of them? One of the wind-and-fire lot?' the tutor stammered.

The restless little man returned to his chair opposite, full of suppressed and vigorous movement, as though he were strung on springs.

'He's *of* them,' he continued, 'but in a peculiar and particular sense. More than merely a possible recruit, his empty organism would provide the very link they need, the perfect conduit.' He watched his companion's face with careful keenness. 'In the country where I first experienced this marvellous thing,' he added significantly, 'he would have been set apart as the offering, the sacrifice, as they call it there. The tribe would have chosen him with honour. He would have been the special bait to attract.'

'Death?' whispered the other.

But Leysin shook his head. 'In the end, perhaps,' he replied darkly, 'for the vessel might be torn and shattered. But at first charged to the brim and crammed with energy — with transformed vitality they could draw into themselves through him. A monster, if you will, but to them a deity; and superhuman, in our little sense, most certainly.'

Then Hendricks faltered inwardly and turned away. No words came to him at the moment. In silence the minds of the two men, one a religious, the other a secular teacher, and each with a burden of responsibility to the race, kept pace together without speech. The religious, however, outstripped the pedagogue. What he next said seemed a little disconnected with what had preceded it, although Hendricks caught the drift easily enough — and shuddered.

'An organism needing heat,' observed Leysin calmly, 'can absorb without danger what would destroy a normal person. Alcohol, again, neither injures nor intoxicates — up to a given point — the system that really requires it.'

The tutor, perplexed and sorely tempted, felt that he drifted with a tide he found it difficult to stem.

‘Up to a point,’ he repeated. ‘That’s true, of course.’

‘Up to a given point,’ echoed the other, with significance that made his voice sound solemn. ‘Then rescue — in the nick of time.’

He waited two full minutes and more for an answer; then, as none was audible, he said another thing. His eyes were so intent upon the tutor’s that the latter raised his own unwillingly, and understood thus all that lay behind the pregnant little sentence.

‘With a number it would not be possible, but with an individual it could be done. Brim the empty vessel first. Then rescue — in the nick of time! Regeneration!’

IV

In the Englishman’s mind there came a crash, as though something fell. There was dust, confusion, noise. Moral platitudes shouted at conventional admonitions. Warnings laughed and copy-book maxims shrivelled up. Above the lot, rising with a touch of grandeur, stood the pulpit figure of the little Pasteur, his big face shining clear through all the turmoil, strength and vision in the flaming eyes — a commanding outline with spiritual audacity in his heart. And Hendricks saw then that the man himself was standing erect in the centre of the room, one finger raised to command attention — listening. Some considerable interval must have passed while he struggled with his inner confusion.

Leysin stood, intently listening, his big head throwing a grotesque shadow on wall and ceiling.

‘Hark!’ he exclaimed, half whispering. ‘Do you hear that? Listen.’

A deep sound, confused and roaring, passed across the night, far away, and slightly booming. It entered the little room so that the air seemed to tremble a moment. To Hendricks it held something ominous.

‘The wind,’ he whispered, as the noise died off into the distance; ‘yet a moment ago the night was still enough. The stars were shining.’ There was tense excitement in the room just then. It showed in Leysin’s face, which had gone white as a cloth. Hendricks himself felt extraordinarily stirred.

‘Not wind, but human voices,’ the older man said quickly. ‘It’s shouting. Listen!’ and his eyes ran round the room, coming to rest finally in a corner where his hat and cloak hung from a nail. A gesture accompanied the look. He wanted to be out. The tutor half rose to take his leave. ‘You have duties to-night elsewhere,’ he stammered. ‘I’m forgetting.’ His own instinct was to get away himself with Bindy by the first early diligence. He was afraid of yielding.

‘Hush!’ whispered Leysin peremptorily. ‘Listen!’

He opened the window at the top, and through the crack, where the stars peeped brightly, there came, louder than before, the uproar of human voices floating through the night from far away. The air of the great pine forests came in with it. Hendricks listened intently a moment. He positively jumped to feel a hand upon his arm. Leysin’s big head was thrust close up into his face.

‘That’s the commotion in the village,’ he whispered. ‘A messenger has come and gone; some one has gone back with him. To-night I shall be needed — down here, but to-morrow night when the great ritual takes place — up there —— !’

Hendricks tried to push him away so as not to hear the words; but the little man seemed immovable as a rock. The impulse remained probably in the mind without making the muscles work. For the tutor, sorely tempted, longed to dare, yet faltered in his will.

‘ —— if you felt like taking the risk,’ the words continued seductively, ‘we might place the empty vessel near enough to let it fill, then rescue it, charged with energy, in the nick of time.’ And the Pasteur’s eyes were aglow with enthusiasm, his voice even trembling at the thought of high adventure to save another’s soul.

‘Watch merely?’ Hendricks heard his own voice whisper, hardly aware that he was saying it, ‘without taking part?’ He said it thickly, stupidly, a man wavering and unsure of himself. ‘It would be an experience,’ he stammered. ‘I’ve never — —’

‘Merely watch, yes; look on; let him see,’ interrupted the other with eagerness. ‘We must be very careful. It’s worth trying — a last resort.’

They still stood close together. Hendricks felt the little man’s breath on his face as he peered up at him.

‘I admit the chance,’ he began weakly.

‘There is no chance,’ was the vigorous reply, ‘there is only Providence. You have been guided.’

‘But as to risk and failure, what of them? What’s involved?’ he asked, recklessness increasing in him.

‘New wine in old bottles,’ was the answer. ‘But here, you tell me, the vessel is not damaged, but merely empty. The machinery is all right. If he merely watches, as from a little distance — —’

‘Yes, yes, the machinery *is* there, I agree. The boy has breeding, health, and all the physical qualities — good blood and nerves and muscles. It’s only that life refuses to stay and drive them.’ His heart beat with violence even as he said it; he felt the energy and zeal from the older man pour into him. He was realising in himself on a smaller scale what might take place with the boy in large. But still he shrank. Leysin for the moment said no more. His spiritual discernment was equal to his boldness. Having planted the seed, he left it to grow or die. The decision was not for him.

* * *

In the light of the single lamp the two men sat facing each other, listening, waiting, while Leysin talked occasionally, but in the main kept silence. Some time passed, though how long the tutor could not say. In his mind was wild confusion. How could he justify such a mad proposal? Yet how could he refuse the opening, preposterous though it seemed? The enticement was very great; temptation rushed upon him. Striving to recall his normal world, he found it difficult. The face of the old Marquess seemed a mere lifeless picture on a wall — it watched but could not interfere. Here was an opportunity to take or leave. He fought the battle in terms of naked souls, while the ordinary four-cornered morality hid its face awhile. He heard himself explaining, delaying, hedging, half-toying with the problem. But the redemption of a soul was at stake, and he tried to forget the environment and conditions of modern thought and belief. Sentences flashed at him out of the battle: ‘I must take him back worse than when I started, or — what? A violent being like Marston, or a redeemed, converted system with new energy? It’s a chance, and my last.’ Moreover, odd, half-comic detail —

there was the support of the Church, of a protestant clergyman whose fundamental beliefs were similar to the evangelical persuasions of the boy's family. Conversion, as demoniacal possession, were both traditions of the blood. After all, the old Marquess might understand and approve. 'You took the opening God set in your way in His wisdom. You showed faith and courage. Far be it from me to condemn you.' The picture on the wall looked down at him and spoke the words.

The wild hypothesis of the intrepid little missionary-pasteur swept him with an effect like hypnotism. Then, suddenly, something in him seemed to decide finally for itself. He flung himself, morality and all, upon this vigorous other personality. He leaned across the table, his face close to the lamp. His voice shook as he spoke.

'Would *you*?' he asked — then knew the question foolish, and that such a man would shrink from nothing where the redemption of a soul was at stake; knew also that the question was proof that his own decision was already made.

There was something grotesque almost in the torrent of colloquial French Leysin proceeded to pour forth, while the other sat listening in amazement, half ashamed and half exhilarated. He looked at the stalwart figure, the wiry bowed legs as he paced the floor, the shortness of the coat-sleeves and the absence of shirt-cuffs round the powerful lean wrists. It was a great fighting man he watched, a man afraid of nothing in heaven or earth, prepared to lead a forlorn hope into a hostile unknown land. And the sight, combined with what he heard, set the seal upon his half-hearted decision. He would take the risk and go.

'Pfui!' exclaimed the little Pasteur as though it might have been an oath, his loud whisper breaking through into a guttural sound, 'pfui! Bah! Would that *my* people had machinery like that so that I could use it! I've no material to work on, no force to direct, nothing but heavy, sodden clay. Jelly!' he cried, 'negative, useless, lukewarm stuff at best.' He lowered his voice suddenly, so as to listen at the same time. 'I might as well be a baker kneading dough,' he continued. 'They drink and yield and drink again; they never attack and drive; they're not worth labouring to save.' He struck the wooden table with his fist, making the lamp rattle, while his listener started and drew back. 'What good can weak souls, though spotless, be to God? The best have long ago gone up to them,' and he jerked his leonine old head towards the mountains. 'Where there's *life* there's hope,' he stamped his foot as he said it, 'but the lukewarm — pfui! — I will spue them out of my mouth!'

He paused by the window a moment, listened attentively, then resumed his pacing to and fro. Clearly, he longed for action. Indifference, half-heartedness had no place in his composition. And Hendricks felt his own slower blood take fire as he listened.

'Ah!' cried Leysin louder, 'what a battle I could fight up there for God, could I but live among them, stem the flow of their dark strong vitality, then twist it round and up, up, up!' And he jerked his finger skywards. 'It's the great sinners we want, not the meek-faced saints. There's energy enough among those devils to bring a whole Canton to the great Footstool, could I but direct it.' He paused a moment, standing over his astonished visitor. 'Bring the boy up with you, and let him drink his fill. And pray, pray, I say, that he become a violent sinner first in order that later there shall be something worth offering to God. Over one *sinner* that repenteth — —'

A rapid, nervous knocking interrupted the flow of words, and the figure of a woman stood upon the threshold. With the opening of the door came also again the roaring from the night outside. Hendricks saw the tall, somewhat dishevelled outline of the wife — he remembered her vaguely, though she could hardly see him now in his darker corner — and recalled the fact that she had been sent out to Leysin in his missionary days, a worthy, illiterate, but adoring woman. She wore a shawl, her hair was untidy, her eyes fixed and staring. Her husband's sturdy little figure, as he rose, stood level with her chin.

'You hear it, Jules?' she whispered thickly. 'The *joran* has brought them down. You'll be needed in the village.' She said it anxiously, though Hendricks understood the *patois* with difficulty. They talked excitedly together a moment in the doorway, their outlines blocked against the corridor where a single oil lamp flickered. She warned, urging something; he expostulated. Fragments reached Hendricks in his corner. Clearly the woman worshipped her husband like a king, yet feared for his safety. He, for his part, comforted her, scolded a little, argued, told her to 'believe in God and go back to bed.'

‘They’ll take you too, and you’ll never return. It’s not your parish anyhow ...’ a touch of anguish in her tone.

But Leysin was impatient to be off. He led her down the passage. ‘My parish is wherever I can help. I belong to God. Nothing can harm me but to leave undone the work He gives me.’ The steps went farther away as he guided her to the stairs. Outside the roar of voices rose and fell. Wind brought the drifting sound, wind carried it away. It was like the thunder of the sea.

And the Englishman, using the little scene as a flashlight upon his own attitude, saw it for an instant as God might have seen it. Leysin’s point of view was high, scanning a very wide horizon. His eye being single, the whole body was full of light. The risk, it suddenly seemed, was — nothing; to shirk it, indeed, the merest cowardice.

He went up and seized the Pasteur’s hand.

‘To-morrow,’ he said, a trifle shakily perhaps, yet looking straight into his eyes. ‘If we stay over — I’ll bring the lad with me — provided he comes willingly.’

‘You will stay over,’ interrupted the other with decision. ‘Come to supper at seven. Come in mountain boots. Use persuasion, but not force. He shall see it from a distance — without taking part.’

‘From a distance — yes,’ the tutor repeated, ‘but without taking part.’

‘I know the signs,’ the Pasteur broke in significantly. ‘We can rescue him in the nick of time — charged with energy and life, yet before the danger gets — —’

A sudden clangour of bells drowned the whispering voice, cutting the sentence in the middle. It was like an alarm of fire. Leysin sprang sharply round.

‘The signal!’ he cried; ‘the signal from the church. Some one’s been taken. I must go at once — I shall be needed.’ He had his hat and cloak on in a moment, was through the passage and into the street, Hendricks following at his heels. The whole place seemed alive. Yet the roadway was deserted, and no lights showed at the windows of the houses. Only from the farther end of the village, where stood the cabaret, came a roar of voices, shouting, crying, singing. The impression was that the population was centred there. Far in the starry sky a line of fires blazed upon the heights, throwing a lurid reflection above the deep black valley. Excitement filled the night.

‘But how extraordinary!’ exclaimed Hendricks, hurrying to overtake his alert companion; ‘what life there is about! Everything’s on the rush.’ They went faster, almost running. ‘I feel the waves of it beating even here.’ He followed breathlessly.

‘A messenger has come — and gone,’ replied Leysin in a sharp, decided voice. ‘What you feel here is but the overflow. This is the aftermath. I must work down here with my people — —’

‘I’ll work with you,’ began the other. But Leysin stopped him.

‘Keep yourself for to-morrow night — up there,’ he said with grave authority, pointing to the fiery line upon the heights, and at the same time quickening his pace along the street. ‘At the moment,’ he cried, looking back, ‘your place is yonder.’ He jerked his head towards the carpenter’s house among the vineyards. The next minute he was gone.

V

And Hendricks, accredited tutor to a sprig of nobility in the twentieth century, asked himself suddenly how such things could possibly be. The adventure took on abruptly a touch of nightmare. Only the light in the sky above the cabaret windows, and the roar of voices where men drank and sang, brought home the reality of it all. With a shudder of apprehension he glanced at the lurid glare upon the mountains. He was committed now; not because he had merely promised, but because he had definitely made up his mind.

Lighting a match, he saw by his watch that the visit had lasted over two hours. It was after eleven. He hurried, letting himself in with the big house-key, and going on tiptoe up the granite stairs. In his mind rose a picture of the boy as he had known him all these weary, sight-seeing months — the mild brown eyes, the facile indolence, the pliant, watery emotions of the listless creature, but behind him now, like storm clouds, the hopes, desires, fears the Pasteur’s talk had conjured up. The yearning to save stirred strongly in his heart, and more and more of the little man’s reckless spiritual audacity came with it. His own affection for the lad was genuine, but impatience and adventure pushed eagerly through the tenderness. If only, oh, if only he could put life into that great six-foot, big-boned frame! Some energy as of fire and wind into that inert machinery of mind and body! The idea was utterly incredible, but surely no harm could come of trying the experiment. There *were* the huge and elemental forces, of course, in Nature, and if ... A sound in the bedroom, as he crept softly past the door, caught his attention, and he paused a moment to listen. Lord Ernie was not asleep, then, after all. He wondered why the sound got somehow at his heart. There was shuffling behind the door; there was a voice, too — or was it voices? He knocked.

'Who is it?' came at once, in a tone he hardly recognised. And, as he answered, 'It's I, Mr. Hendricks; let me in,' there followed a renewal of the shuffling, but without the sound of voices, and the door flew open — it was not even locked. Lord Ernie stood before him, dressed to go out. In the faint starlight the tall ungainly figure filled the doorway, erect and huge, the shoulders squared, the trunk no longer drooping. The listlessness was gone. He stood upright, limbs straight and alert; the sagging limp had vanished from the knees. He looked, in this semi-darkness, like another person, almost monstrous. And the tutor drew back instinctively, catching an instant at his breath.

'But, my dear boy! why aren't you asleep?' he stammered. He glanced half nervously about him. 'I heard you talking, surely?' He fumbled for a match; but, before he found it, the other had turned on the electric switch. The light flared out. There was no one else in the room. 'Is anything wrong with you? What's the matter?'

But the boy answered quietly, though in a deeper voice than Hendricks had ever known in him before:

'I'm all right; only I couldn't sleep. I've been watching those fires on the mountains. I — I wanted to go out and see.'

He still held the field-glasses in his hand, swinging them vigorously by the strap. The room was littered with clothes, just unpacked, the heavy shooting boots in the middle of the floor; and Hendricks, noticing these signs, felt a wave of excitement sweep through him, caught somehow from the presence of the boy. There was a sense of vitality in the room — as though a rush of active movement had just passed through it. Both windows stood wide open, and the roar of voices was clearly audible. Lord Ernie turned his head to listen.

‘That’s only the village people drinking and shouting,’ said Hendricks, closely watching each movement that he made. ‘It’s perfectly natural, Bindy, that you feel too excited to sleep. We’re in the mountains. The air stimulates tremendously — it makes the heart beat faster.’ He decided not to press the lad with questions.

‘But I never felt like this in the Rockies or the Himalayas,’ came the swift rejoinder, as he moved to the window and looked out. ‘There was nothing in India or Japan like *that*!’ He swept his hand towards the wooded heights that towered above the village so close. He talked volubly. ‘All those things we saw out there were sham — done on purpose for tourists. Up there it’s real. I’ve been watching through the glasses till — I felt I simply must go out and join it. You can see men dancing round the fires, and big, rushing women. Oh, Mr. Hendricks, isn’t it all glorious — all too glorious and ripping for words!’ And his brown eyes shone like lamps.

‘You mean that it’s spontaneous, natural?’ the other guided him, welcoming the new enthusiasm, yet still bewildered by the startling change. It was not mere nerves he saw. There was nothing morbid in it.

‘They’re doing it, I mean, because they have to,’ came the decided answer, ‘and because they feel it. They’re not just copying the world.’ He put his hand upon the other’s arm. There was dry heat in it that Hendricks felt even through his clothes. ‘And that’s what *I* want,’ the boy went on, raising his voice; ‘what I’ve always wanted without knowing it — real things that can make me alive. I’ve often had it in my dreams, you know, but now I’ve found it.’

‘But I didn’t know. You never told me of those dreams.’

The boy’s cheeks flushed, so that the colour and the fire in his eyes made him positively splendid. He answered slowly, as out of some part he had hitherto kept deliberately concealed.

‘Because I never could get hold of it in words. It sounded so silly even to myself, and I thought Father would train it all away and laugh at it. It’s awfully far down in me, but it’s so real I knew it must come out one day, and that I should find it. Oh, I say, Mr. Hendricks,’ and he lowered his voice, leaning out across the window-sill suddenly, ‘*that* fills me up and feeds me’ — he pointed to the heights— ‘and gives me life. The life I’ve seen till now was only a kind of show. It starved me. I want to go up there and feel it pouring through my blood.’ He filled his lungs with the strong mountain air, and paused while he exhaled it slowly, as though tasting it with delight and understanding. Then he burst out again, ‘I vote we go. Will you come with me? What d’you say. Eh?’

They stared at each other hard a moment. Something as primitive and irresistible as love passed through the air between them. With a great effort the older man kept the balance true.

‘Not to-night, not now,’ he said firmly. ‘It’s too late. To-morrow, if you like — with pleasure.’

‘But to-morrow *night*,’ cried the boy with a rush, ‘when the fires are blazing and the wind is loose. Not in the stupid daylight.’

‘All right. To-morrow night. And my old friend, Monsieur Leysin, shall be our guide. He knows the way, and he knows the people too.’

Lord Ernie seized his hands with enthusiasm. His vigour was so disconcerting that it seemed to affect his physical appearance. The body grew almost visibly; his very clothes hung on him differently; he was no longer a nonentity yawning beneath an ancient pedigree and title; he was an aggressive personality. The boy in him rushed into manhood, as it were, while still retaining boyish speech and gesture. It was uncanny. ‘We’ll go more than once, I vote; go again and again. This *is* a place and a half. It’s *my* place with a vengeance —— !’

‘Not exactly the kind of place your father would wish you to linger in,’ his tutor interrupted. ‘But we might stay a day or two — especially as you like it so.’

‘It’s far better than the towns and the rotten embassies; better than fifty Simlas and Bombays and filthy Cairos,’ cried the other eagerly. ‘It’s just the thing I need, and when I get home I’ll show ’em something. I’ll prove it. Why, they simply won’t know me!’ He laughed, and his face shone with a kind of vivid radiance in the glare of the electric light. The transformation was more than curious. Waiting a moment to see if more would follow, Hendricks moved slowly then towards the door, with the remark that it was advisable now to go to bed since they would be up late the following night — when he noticed for the first time that the pillow and sheets were crumpled and that the bed had already been lain in. The first suspicion flashed back upon him with new certainty.

Lord Ernie was already taking off his heavy coat, preparatory to undressing. He looked up quickly at the altered tone of voice.

‘Bindy,’ the tutor said with a touch of gravity, ‘you *were* alone just now — weren’t you — of course?’

The other sat up from stooping over his boots. With his hands resting on the bed behind him, he looked straight into his companion’s eyes. Lying was not among his faults. He answered slowly after a decided interval.

‘I — I was asleep,’ he whispered, evidently trying to be accurate, yet hesitating how to describe the thing he had to say, ‘and had a dream — one of my real, vivid dreams when something happens. Only, this time, it was more real than ever before. It was’ — he paused, searching for words, then added— ‘sweet and awful.’

And Hendricks repeated the surprising sentence. ‘Sweet and awful, Bindy! What in the world do you mean, boy?’

Lord Ernie seemed puzzled himself by the choice of words he used.

‘I don’t know exactly,’ he went on honestly, ‘only I mean that it was awfully real and splendid, a bit of my own life somewhere — somewhere else — where it lies hidden away behind a lot of days and months that choke it up. I can never get at it except in woods and places, quite alone, hearing the wind or making fires, or — in sleep.’ He hid his face in his hands a moment, then looked up with a hint of censure in his eyes. ‘Why didn’t you tell me that such things *were* done? You never told me,’ he repeated.

‘I didn’t know it myself until this evening. Leysin — —’

‘I thought you knew everything,’ Lord Ernie broke in in that same half-chiding tone.

‘Monsieur Leysin told me to-night for the first time,’ said Hendricks firmly, ‘that such people and such practices existed. Till now I had never dreamed that such superstitions survived anywhere in the world at all.’ He resented the reproach. But he was also aware that the boy resented his authority. For the first time his ascendency seemed in question; his voice, his eye, his manner did not quell as formerly. 'So you mean, when you say "sweet and awful," that it was very real to you?' he asked. He insisted now with purpose. 'Is that it, Bindy?'

The other replied eagerly enough. 'Yes, that's it, I think — partly. This time it was more than dreaming. It was real. I got there. I remembered. That's what I meant. And after I woke up the thing still went on. The man seemed still in the room beside the bed, calling me to get up and go with him — —'

'Man! What man?' The tutor leant upon the back of a chair to steady himself. The wind just then went past the open windows with a singing rush.

'The dark man who passed us in the village, and who pointed to the fires on the heights. He came with the wind, you remember. He pulled my coat.'

The boy stood up as he said it. He came across the naked boarding, his step light and dancing. 'Fire that heats but does not burn, and wind that blows the heart alight, or something — I forget now exactly. *You* heard it too.' He whispered the words with excitement, raising his arms and knees as in the opening movements of a dance.

Hendricks kept his own excitement down, but with a distinctly conscious effort.

'I heard nothing of the kind,' he said calmly. 'I was only thinking of getting home dry. You say,' he asked with decision, 'that you *heard* those words?'

Lord Ernie stood back a little. It was not that he wished to conceal, but that he felt uncertain how to express himself. 'In the street,' he said, 'I heard nothing; the words rose up in my own head, as it were. But in the dream, and afterwards too, when I was wide awake, I heard them out loud, clearly: Fire that heats but does not burn, and wind that blows the heart to flame — that's how it was.'

'In French, Bindy? You heard it in French?'

'Oh, it was no language at all. The eyes said it — both times.' He spoke as naturally as though it was the Durbah he described again. Only this new aggressive certainty was in his voice and manner. 'Mr. Hendricks,' he went on eagerly, ‘*you* understand what I mean, don’t you? When certain people look at one, words start up in the mind as though one heard them spoken. I heard the words in my head, I suppose; only they seemed so familiar, as though I’d known them before — always — —’

‘Of course, Bindy, I understand. But this man — tell me — did he stay on after you woke up? And how did he go?’ He looked round at the barely furnished room for hiding-places. ‘It was really the dream you carried on after waking, wasn’t it?’

Then Bindy laughed, but inwardly, as to himself. There was the faintest possible hint of derision in his voice. ‘No doubt,’ he said; ‘only it was one of my big, real dreams. And how he went I can’t explain at all, for I didn’t see. You knocked at the door; I turned, and found myself standing in the room, dressed to go out. There was a rush of wind outside the window — and when I looked he was no longer there. The same minute you came in. It was all as quick as that. I suppose I dressed — in my sleep.’

They stood for several minutes, staring at each other without speaking. The tutor hesitated between several courses of action, unable, for the life of him, to decide upon any particular one. His instinct on the whole was to stop nothing, but to encourage all possible expression, while keeping rigorous watch and guard. Repression, it seemed to him just then, was the least desirable line to take. Somewhere there was truth in the affair. He felt out of his depth, his authority impaired, and under these temporary disadvantages he might so easily make a grave mistake, injuring instead of helping. While Lord Ernie finished his undressing he leaned out of the window, taking great draughts of the keen night air, watching the blazing fires and listening to the roar of voices, now dying down into the distance.

And the voice of his thinking whispered to him, ‘Let it all come out. Repress nothing. Let him have the entire adventure. If it’s nonsense it can’t injure, and if it’s true it’s inevitable.’ He drew his head in and moved towards the door. ‘Then it’s settled,’ he said quietly, as though nothing unusual had happened; ‘we’ll go up there to-morrow night — with Monsieur Leysin to show us the way. And you’ll go to sleep now, won’t you? For to-morrow we may be up very late. Promise me, Bindy.’

‘I’m dead tired,’ came the answer from the sheets. ‘I certainly shan’t dream any more, if that’s what you mean. I promise.’

Hendricks turned the light out and went softly from the room. He could always trust the boy.

‘Good-night, Bindy,’ he said.

‘Good-night,’ came the drowsy reply.

Upstairs he lingered a long time over his own undressing, listening, waiting, watching for the least sound below. But nothing happened. Once, for his own peace of mind, he stole stealthily downstairs to the boy’s door; then, reassured by the heavy breathing that was distinctly audible, he went up finally and got into bed himself. The night was very still now. It was cool, and the stars were brilliant over lake and forest and mountain. No voices broke the silence. He only heard the tinkle of the little streams beyond the vineyards. And by midnight he was sound asleep.

VI

And next day broke as soft and brilliant as though October had stolen it from June; the Alps gleamed through an almost summery haze across the lake; the air held no hint of coming winter; and the Jura mountains wore the true blue of memory in Hendricks’ mind. Patches of red and yellow splashed the great pine-woods here and there where beech and ash put autumn in the vast dark carpet.

The tutor woke clear-headed and refreshed. All that had happened the night before seemed out of proportion and unreasonable. There had been exaggerated emotion in it: in himself, because he returned to a place still charged with potent memories of youth; and in Lord Ernie, because the lad was overwrought by the electrical disturbance of the atmosphere. The nearness of the ancestral halls, which they both disliked, had emphasised it; the ominous, wild weather had favoured it; and the coincidence of these pagan rites of superstitious peasants had focused it all into a melodramatic form with an added touch of the supernatural that was highly picturesque and — dangerously suggestive. Hendricks recovered his common sense; judgment asserted itself again.

Yet, for all that, certain things remained authentic. The effect upon the boy was not illusion, nor his words about fire and wind mere meaningless invention. There hid some undivined and significant correspondence between the gaps in his deficient nature and these two turbulent elements.

The talk with Leysin, as the conduct of his wife, remained authentic; those facts were too steady to be dismissed, the Pasteur too genuinely in earnest to be catalogued in dream. Neither daylight nor common sense could dissipate their actuality. Truth lay somewhere in it all.

Thus the day, for the tutor, was a battle that shifted with varying fortune between doubt and certainty. In the morning his mind was decided: the wild experiment was unjustifiable; in the afternoon, as the sunshine grew faint and melancholy, it became ‘interesting, for what harm could come of it?’ but towards evening, when shadows lengthened across the purple forests and the trees stood motionless in the calm and windless air, the adventure seemed, as it had seemed the night before, not only justifiable, but right and necessary. It only became inevitable, however, when, after tea together on the balcony, Lord Ernie, mentioning the subject for the first time that day, asked pointedly what time the Pasteur expected them to supper; then, noticing the flash of hesitancy in his companion’s eyes, added in his strange deep voice, ‘You promised we should go.’ Withdrawal after that was out of the question. To retract would have meant, for one thing, final loss of the boy’s confidence — a possibility not to be contemplated for a moment.

Until this moment no word of the preceding night had passed the lips of either. Lord Ernie had been quiet and preoccupied, silent rather, but never listless. He was peaceful, perhaps subdued a little, yet with a suppressed energy in his bearing that Hendricks watched with secret satisfaction. The tutor, closely observant, detected nothing out of gear; life stirred strongly in him; there was purpose, interest, will; there was desire; but there was nothing to cause alarm.

Availing himself then of the lad’s absorption in his own affairs, he wandered forth alone upon his sentimental tour of inspection. No ghost of emotion rose to stalk beside him. That early tragedy, he now saw clearly, had been no more than youthful explosion of mere physical passion, wholesome and natural, but due chiefly to propinquity. His thoughts ran idly on; and he was even congratulating himself upon escape and freedom when, abruptly, he remembered a phrase Bindy had used the night before, and stumbled suddenly upon a clue when least expecting it.

He came to a sudden halt. The significance of it crashed through his mind and startled him. ‘There are big rushing women ...’ It was the first reference to the other sex, as evidence of their attraction for him, Hendricks had ever known to pass his lips. Hitherto, though twenty years of age, the lad had never spoken of women as though he was aware of their terrible magic. He had not discovered them as females, necessary to every healthy male. It was not purity, of course, but ignorance: he had felt nothing. Something had now awakened sex in him, so that he knew himself a man, and naked. And it had revolutionised the world for him. This new life came from the roots, transforming listless indifference into positive desire; the will woke out of sleep, and all the currents of his system took aggressive form. For all energy, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual, is fundamentally one: it is primarily sexual.

Hendricks paused in his sentimental walk, marvelling that he had not realised sooner this simple truth. It brought a certain logical meaning even into the pagan rites upon the mountains, these ancient rites which symbolised the marriage of the two tremendous elements of wind and fire, heat and air. And the lad's quiet, busy mood that morning confirmed his simple discovery. It involved restraint and purpose. Lord Ernie was alive. Hendricks would take home with him to those ancestral halls a vessel bursting with energy — creative energy. It was admirable that he should witness — from a safe distance — this primitive ceremony of crude pagan origin. It was the very thing. And the tutor hurried back to the house among the vineyards, aware that his responsibility had increased, but persuaded more than ever that his course was justified.

* * *

The sky held calm and cloudless through the day, the forests brooding beneath the hazy autumn sunshine. Indications that the second hurricane lay brewing among the heights were not wanting, however, to experienced eyes. Almost a preternatural silence reigned; there was a warm heaviness in the placid atmosphere; the surface of the lake was patched and streaky; the extreme clarity of the air an ominous omen. Distant objects were too close. Towards sunset, moreover, the streaks and patches vanished as though sucked below, while thin strips of tenuous cloud appeared from nowhere above the northern cliffs. They moved with great rapidity at an enormous height, touched with a lurid brilliance as the sun sank out of sight; and when Hendricks strolled over with Lord Ernie to *la cure* for supper there came a sudden rush of heated wind that set the branches sharply rattling, then died away as abruptly as it rose.

They seemed reflected, too, these disturbances, in the human atmospheres about the supper table — there was suppression of various emotions, emotions presaging violence. Lord Ernie was exhilarated, Hendricks uneasy and preoccupied, the Pasteur grave and thoughtful. In Hendricks was another feeling as well — that he had lightly summoned a storm which might carry him off his feet. The boy's excitement increased it, as wind-puffs fan a starting fire. His own judgment had somewhere played him false, betraying him into this incredible adventure. And yet he could not stop it. The Pasteur's influence was over him perhaps. He was ashamed to turn back. He was committed. The unusual circumstances found the weakness in his character.

For somewhere in the preposterous superstition there lay a big forgotten truth. He could not believe it, and yet he did believe it. The world had forgotten how to live truly close to Nature.

A desultory conversation was carried on, chiefly between the two men, while the boy ate hungrily, and Mme. Leysin watched her husband with anxiety as she served the simple meal.

'So you are coming with us, and you like to come?' the Pasteur observed quietly, Hendricks translating.

Lord Ernie replied with a gesture of unmistakable enthusiasm.

'A wild lot of men and women,' Leysin went on, keeping his eye hard upon him, 'with an interesting worship of their own copied from very ancient times. They live on the heights, and mix little with us valley folk. You shall see their ceremonies to-night.'

'They get the wind and fire into themselves, don't they?' asked the boy keenly, and somewhat to the distress of the translator who rendered it, 'They get into wind and fire.'

'They worship wind and fire,' Leysin replied, 'and they do it by means of a wonderful dance that somehow imitates the leap of flame and the headlong rush of wind. If you copy the movements and gestures of a person you discover the emotion that causes them. You share it. Their idea is, apparently, that by imitating the movements they invite or attract the force — draw these elemental powers into their systems, so that in the end — —'

He stopped suddenly, catching the tutor's eye. Lord Ernie seemed to understand without translation; he had laid down his knife and fork, and was leaning forward across the table, listening with deep absorption. His expression was alert with a new intelligence that was almost cunning. An acute sensibility seemed to have awakened in him.

'As with laughing, I suppose?' he said in an undertone to Hendricks quickly. 'If you imitate a laugher, you laugh yourself in the end and feel all the jolly excitement of laughter. Is that what he means?'

The tutor nodded with assumed indifference. 'Imitation is always infectious,' he said lightly; 'but, of course, you will not imitate these wild people yourself, Bindy. We'll just look on from a distance.'

'From a distance!' repeated the boy, obviously disappointed. 'What's the good of that?' A look of obstinacy passed across his altered face.

Hendricks met his eyes squarely. 'At a circus,' he said firmly, 'you just watch. You don't imitate the clown, do you?'

'If you look on long enough, you do,' was the rather dogged reply.

'Well, take the Russian dancers we saw in Moscow,' the other insisted patiently; 'you felt the power and beauty without jumping up and whirling in your stall?'

Bindy half glared at him. There was almost contempt in his quiet answer: 'But your mind whirled with them. And later your body would too; otherwise it's given you nothing.' He paused a second. 'I can only get the fun of riding by being on a horse's back and doing his movements exactly with him — not by watching him.'

Hendricks smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He did not wish to discourage the enthusiasm lying behind this analysis. The uneasiness in him grew apace. He said something rapidly in French, using an undertone and laughter to confuse the actual words.

'Of course we must not interfere with their ceremonies,' put in the Pasteur with decision. 'It's sacred to them. We can hide among the trees and watch. You would not leave your seat in church to imitate the priest, would you?' He glanced smilingly at the eager youth before him.

‘If he did something real, I would.’ It was said with a bright flash in the eyes. ‘Anything real I’d copy like a shot. Only, I never find it.’

The reply was disconcerting rather: and Hendricks, as he hurriedly translated, made a clatter with his knife and fork, for something in him rose to meet the truth behind the curious words. From that moment, as though catching a little of the boy’s exhilaration, he passed under a kind of spell perhaps. It was, in spite of the exaggeration, oddly stimulating. This dull little meal at the village *cure* masked an accumulating vehemence, eager to break loose. He heard the old father’s voice: ‘Well done, Hendricks! You have accomplished wonders!’ He would take back the boy — alive....

Yet all the time there were streaks and patches on his soul as upon the surface of the lake that afternoon. There were signs of terror. He felt himself letting go, an increasing recklessness, a yielding up more and more of his own authority to that of this triumphant boy. Bindy understood the meaning of it all and felt secure; Hendricks faltered, hesitated, stood on the defensive. Yet, ever less and less. Already he accepted the other’s guidance. Already Lord Ernie’s leadership was in the ascendant. Conviction invariably holds dominion over doubt.

They ate little. It was near the end of the meal when the wind, falling from a clear and starlit sky, struck its first violent blow, dropping with the force of an explosion that shook the wooden house, and passing with a roar towards the distant lake. The oil lamp, suspended from the ceiling, trembled; the Pasteur looked apprehensively at the shuttered windows; and Lord Ernie, with startling abruptness, stood up. His eyes were shining. His voice was brisk, alert, and deep.

‘The wind, the wind!’ he cried. ‘Think what it’ll be up there! We shall feel it on our bodies!’ His enthusiasm was like a rush of air across the table. ‘And the fire!’ he went on. ‘The flames will lick all over, and tear about the sky. I feel wild and full of them already! How splendid!’ And the flame of the little lamp leaped higher in the chimney as he said it.

‘The violence of the *coup de joran* is extraordinary,’ explained Leysin as he got up to turn down the wick, ‘and the second outburst — —’ The rest of his sentence was drowned by the noise of Hendricks’ voice telling the boy to sit down and finish his supper. And at the same moment the Pasteur’s wife came in as though a stroke of wind drove behind her down the passage. The door slammed in the draught. There was a momentary confusion in the room above which her voice rose shrill and frightened.

‘The fires are alight, Jules,’ she whispered in her half-intelligible *patois*, ‘the forest is burning all along the upper ridge.’ Her face was pale and her speech came stumbling. She lowered her lips to her husband’s ear. ‘They’ll be looking out for recruits to-night. Is it necessary, is it right for you to go?’ She glanced uneasily at the English visitors. ‘You know the danger — —’

He stopped her with a gesture. ‘Those who look on at life accomplish nothing,’ he answered impatiently. ‘One must act, always act. Chances are sent to be taken, not stared at.’ He rose, pushing past her into the passage, and as he did so she gave him one swift comprehensive look of tenderness and admiration, then hurried after him to find his hat and cloak. Willingly she would have kept him at home that night, yet gladly, in another sense, she saw him go. She fumbled in her movements, ready to laugh or cry or pray. Hendricks saw her pain and understood. It was singular how the woman’s attitude intensified his own misgivings; her behaviour, the mere expression of her face alone, made the adventure so absolutely real.

Three minutes later they were in the village street. Hendricks and Lord Ernie, the latter impatient in the road beyond, saw her tall figure stoop to embrace him. ‘I shall pray all night: I shall watch from my window for your return. God, who speaks from the whirlwind, and whose pathway is the fire, will go with you. Remember the younger men; it is ever the younger men that they seek to take...!’ Her words were half hysterical. The kiss was given and taken; the open doorway framed her outline a moment; then the buttress of the church blotted her out, and they were off.

VII

And at once the curious confusion of strong wind was upon them. Gusts howled about the corners of the shuttered houses and tore noisily across the open yards. Dust whirled with the rapidity as of some spectral white machinery. A tile came clattering down about their feet, while overhead the roofs had an air of shifting, toppling, bending. The entire village seemed scooped up and shaken, then dropped upon the earth again in tottering fashion.

‘This way,’ gasped the little Pasteur, blown sideways like a sail; ‘follow me closely.’ Almost arm-in-arm at first they hurried down the deserted street, past lampless windows and tight-fastened doors, and soon were beyond the cabaret in that open stretch between the village and the forest where the wind had unobstructed way. Far above them ran the fiery mountain ridge. They saw the glare reflected in the sky as the tempest first swept them all three together, then separated them in the same moment. They seemed to spin or whirl. ‘It’s far worse than I expected,’ shouted their guide; ‘here! Give me your hand!’ then found, once disentangled from his flapping cloak, that no one stood beside him. For each of them it was a single fight to reach the shelter of the woods, where the actual ascent began. An instant the Pasteur seemed to hesitate. He glanced back at the lighted window of *la cure* across the fields, at the line of fire in the sky, at the figure disappearing in the blackness immediately ahead. ‘Where’s the boy?’ he shouted. ‘Don’t let him get too far in front. Keep close. Wait till I come!’ They staggered back against each other. ‘Look how easily he’s slipped ahead already!’

‘This howling wind — —’ Hendricks shouted, as they advanced side by side, pushing their shoulders against the storm.

The rest of the sentence vanished into space. Leysin shoved him forward, pointing to where, some twenty yards in front, the figure of Lord Ernie, head down, was battling eagerly with the hurricane. Already he stood near to the shelter of the trees waving his arms with energy towards the summits where the fire blazed. He was calling something at the top of his voice, urging them to hurry. His voice rushed down upon them with a pelt of wind.

‘Don’t let him get away from us,’ bawled Leysin, holding his hands cup-wise to his mouth. ‘Keep him in reach. He may see, but must not take part....’ A blow full in the face that smote him like the flat of a great sword clapped the sentence short. ‘That’s *your* part. He won’t obey me!’ Hendricks heard it as they plunged across the windswept reach, panting, struggling, forcing their bodies sideways like two-legged crabs against the terrific force of the descending *joran*. They reached the protection of the forest wall without further attempt at speech. Here there was sudden peace and silence, for the tall, dense trees received the tempest’s impact like a cushion, stopping it. They paused a moment to recover breath.

But although the first exhaustion speedily passed, that original confusion of strong wind remained — in Hendricks' mind at least, — for wind violent enough to be battled with has a scattering effect on thought and blows the very blood about. Something in him snapped its cables and blew out to sea. His breath drew in an impetuous quality from the tempest each time he filled his lungs. There was agitation in him that caused an odd exaggeration of the emotions. The boy, as they came up, leaped down from a boulder he had climbed. He opened his arms, making of his cloak a kind of sail that filled and flapped.

'At last!' he cried, impatient, almost vexed. 'I thought you were never coming. The wind blew me along. We shall be late — —'

The tutor caught his arm with vigour. 'You keep by us, Ernest; d'you hear now? No rushing ahead like that. Leysin's the guide, not you.' He even shook him. But as he did so he was aware that he himself resisted something that he did not really want to resist, something that urged him forcibly; a little more and he would yield to it with pleasure, with abandon, finally with recklessness. A reaction of panic fear ran over him.

'It was the wind, I tell you,' cried the boy, flinging himself free with a hint of insolence in his voice, 'for it's alive. I mean to see everything. The wind's our leader and the fire's our guide.' He made a movement to start on again.

'You'll obey me,' thundered Hendricks, 'or else you'll go home. D'you understand?'

With exasperation, yet with uneasy delight, he noted the words Bindy made use of. It was in him that he might almost have uttered them himself. He stepped already into an entirely new world. Exhilaration caught him even now. Putting the brake on was mere pretence. He seized the lad by both shoulders and pushed him to the rear, then placed himself next, so that Leysin moved in front and led the way. The procession started, diving into the comparative shelter of the forest. 'Don't let him pass you,' he heard in rapid French; 'guide him, that's all. The power's already in his blood. Keep yourself in hand as well, and follow me closely.' The roar of the storm above them carried the words clean off the world.

Here in the forest they moved, it seemed, along the floor of an ocean whose surface raged with dreadful violence; any moment one or other of them might be caught up to that surface and whirled off to destruction. For the procession was not one with itself. The darkness, the difficulty of hearing what each said, the feeling, too, that each climbed for himself, made everything seem at sixes and sevens. And the tutor, this secret exultation growing in his heart, denied the anxiety that kept it pace, and battled with his turbulent emotions, a divided personality. His power over the boy, he realised, had gravely weakened. A little time ago they had seemed somehow equal. Now, however, a complete reversal of their relative positions had taken place. The boy was sure of himself. While Leysin led at a steady mountaineer's pace on his wiry, short, bowed legs, Hendricks, a yard or two behind him, stumbled a good deal in the darkness, Lord Ernie forever on his heels, eager to push past. But Bindy never stumbled. There was no flagging in his muscles. He moved so lightly and with so sure a tread that he almost seemed to dance, and often he stopped aside to leap a boulder or to run along a fallen trunk. Path there was none. Occasional gusts of wind rushed gustily down into these depths of forest where they moved, and now, from time to time, as they rose nearer to the line of fire on the ridge, an increasing glare lit up the knuckled roots or glimmered on the bramble thickets and heavy beds of moss. It was astonishing how the little Pasteur never missed his way. Periods of thick silence alternated with moments when the storm swept down through gullies among the trees, reverberating like thunder in the hollows.

Slowly they advanced, buffeted, driven, pushed, the wildness of some Walpurgis night growing upon all three. In the tutor's mind was this strange lift of increasing recklessness, the old proportion gone, the spiritual aspect of it troubling him to the point of sheer distress. He followed Leysin as blindly with his body as he followed this new Bindy eagerly with his mind. For this languid boy, now dancing to the tune of flooding life at his very heels, seemed magical in the true sense: energy created as by a wizard out of nothing. From lips that ordinarily sighed in listless boredom poured now a ceaseless stream of questions and ejaculations, ringing with enthusiasm. How long would it take to reach the fiery ridge? Why did they go so slowly? Would they arrive too late? Would their intrusion be welcomed or understood? Already one great change was effected — accepted by Hendricks, too — that the rôle of mere spectator was impossible. The answers Hendricks gave, indeed, grew more and more encouraging and sympathetic. He, too, was impatient with their leader's crawling pace. Some elemental spell of wind and fire urged him towards the open ridge. The pull became irresistible. He despised the Pasteur's caution, denied his wisdom, wholly rejected now the spirit of compromise and prudence. And once, as the hurricane brought down a flying burst of voices, he caught himself leaping upon a big grey boulder in their path. He leaped at the very moment that the boy behind him leaped, yet hardly realised that he did so; his feet danced without a conscious order from his brain. They met together on the rounded top, stumbled, clutched one another frantically, then slid with waving arms and flying cloaks down the slippery surface of damp moss — laughing wildly.

'Fool!' cried Hendricks, saving himself. 'What in the world —— ?'

'*You* called,' laughed Bindy, picking himself up and dropping back to his place in the rear again. 'It's the wind, not me; it's in our feet. Half the time you're shouting and jumping yourself!'

And it was a few minutes after this that Lord Ernie suddenly forged ahead. He slipped in front as silently as a shadow before a moving candle in a room. Passing the tutor at a moment when his feet were entangled among roots and stones, he easily overtook the Pasteur and found himself in the lead. He never stumbled; there seemed steel springs in his legs.

From Leysin, too breathless to interfere, came a cry of warning. 'Stop him! Take his hand!' his tired voice instantly smothered by the roaring skies. He turned to catch Hendricks by the cloak. 'You see *that*!' he shouted in alarm. 'For the love of God, don't lose sight of him! He must see, but not take part — remember —— !'

And Hendricks yelled after the vanishing figure, 'Bindy, go slow, go slow! Keep in touch with us.' But he quickened his pace instantly, as though to overtake the boy. He passed his companion the same minute, and was out of sight. 'I'll wait for you,' came back the boy's shrill answer through the thinning trees. And a flare of light fell with it from the sky, for the final climb of a steep five hundred feet had now begun, and overhead the naked ridge ran east and west with its line of blazing fires. Boulders and rocky ground replaced the pines and spruces.

‘But you’ll never find the way,’ shouted Leysin, while a deep trumpeting roar of the storm beyond muffled the remainder of the sentence.

Hendricks heard the next words close beside him from a clump of shadows. He was in touching distance of the excited boy.

‘The fires and the singing guide me. Only a fool could miss the way.’

‘But you *are* a — —’

He swallowed the unuttered word. A new, extraordinary respect was suddenly in him. That tall, virile figure, instinct with life, springing so cleverly through the choking darkness, guiding with decision and intelligence, almost infallible — it was no fool that led them thus. He hurried after till his very sinews ached. His eyes, troubled and confused, strained through the trees to find him. But these same trees now fled past him in a torrent.

‘Bindy, Bindy!’ he cried, at the top of his voice, yet not with the imperious tone the situation called for. The sentence dropped into a lull of wind. Instead of command there was entreaty, almost supplication, in it. ‘Wait for me, I’m coming. We’ll see the glorious thing together!’

And then suddenly the forest lay behind him, with a belt of open pasture-land in front below the actual ridge. He felt the first great draught of heat, as a line of furnaces burst their doors with a mighty roar and turned the sky into a blaze of golden daylight. There was a crackling as of musketry. The flare shot up and burned the air about him, and the voices of a multitude, as yet invisible, drove through it like projectiles on the wind. This was the first impression, wholesale and terrific, that met him as he paused an instant on the edge of the sheltering forest and looked forward. Leysin and Lord Ernie seemed to leave his mind, forgotten in this first attack of splendour, but forgotten, as it were, the first with contempt, the latter with an overwhelming regret. For the Pasteur’s mistake in that instant seemed obvious. In half measures lay the fatal error, and in compromise the danger. Bindy all along had known the better way and followed it. The lukewarm was the worthless.

‘Bindy, boy, where are you? I’m coming ...’ and stepping on to the grassy strip of ground, soft to his feet, he met a wind that fell upon his body with a shower of blows from all directions at once and beat him to his knees. He dropped, it seemed, into the cover of a sheltering rock, for there followed then a moment of sudden and delicious stillness in which the weary muscles recovered themselves and thought grew slightly steadier. Crouched thus close to the earth he no longer offered a target to the hurricane's attack. He peered upwards, making a screen of his hands.

The ridge, some fifty feet above him, he saw, ran in a generous platform along the mountain crest; it was wide and flat; between the enormous fires of piled-up wood that stretched for half a mile coiled a medley of dense smoke and tearing sparks. No human beings were visible, and yet he was aware of crowding life quite near. On hands and knees, crawling painfully, he then slowly retreated again into the shelter of the forest he had sought to leave. He stood up. The awful blaze was veiled by the roof of branches once more. But, as he rose, seizing a sapling to steady himself by, two hands caught him with violence from behind, and a familiar voice came shouting against his ear. Leysin, panting, dishevelled and half broken with the speed, stood beside him.

'The boy! Where is he? We're just in time!' He roared the words to make them carry above the din. 'Hurry, hurry! I'll follow.... My older legs.... See, for the love of God, that he is not taken.... I warned you!'

And for a second, as he heard, Hendricks caught at the vanished sense of responsibility again. He saw the face of the old Marquess watching him among the tree trunks. He heard his voice, amazed, reproachful, furious: 'It was criminal of you, criminal —— !'

'Where is the boy — *your* boy?' again broke in the shout of the Pasteur with a slap of hurricane, as he staggered against the tutor, half collapsing, and trying to point the direction. 'Watch him, find him for the love of heaven before it is too late — before they see him...!'

The tutor's normal and responsible self dived out of sight again as he heard the cry of weakness and alarm. It seemed the wind got under him, lifting him bodily from his feet. He did not pause to think. Like a man midway in a whirling prize-fight, he felt dazed but confident, only conscious of one thing — that he must hold out to the end, take part in all the splendid fighting — *win*. The lust of the arena, the pride of youth and battle, the impetuous recklessness of the charge in primitive war caught at his heart, brimming it with headlong courage. To play the game for all it might be worth seemed shouted everywhere about him, as the abandon of wind and fire rushed through him like a storm. He felt lifted above all possibility of little failure. The Marquess with his conventional traditions, the Pasteur with his considerations of half-way safety, both vanished utterly; safety, indeed, both for himself and for the boy in his charge lay in unconditional surrender. This was no time for little thought-out actions. It was all or nothing!

‘God bless the whirlwind and the fire!’ he shouted, opening wide his arms.

But his voice was inaudible amid the uproar, and the forward movement of his body remained at first only in the brain. He turned to push the old man aside, even to strike him down if necessary. ‘Lukewarm yourself and a coward!’ rose in his throat, yet found no utterance, for in that moment a tall, slim figure, swift as a shadow, steady as a hawk, shot hard across the open space between the forest and the ridge. In the direction of the blazing platform it disappeared against a curtain of thick smoke, emerged for one second in a storm of light, then vanished finally behind a ruin of loose rocks. And Hendricks, his eyes wounded by heat and wind, his muscles paralysed, understood that the boy deliberately invited capture. The multitude that hid behind the smoke and fire, feeding the blazing heaps with eager hands, had become aware of him, and presently would appear to claim him. They would take him to themselves. Already answering flares ran east and west along the desolate ridge.

‘I’ll join you! I’m coming! Wait for me!’ he tried to cry. The uproar smothered it.

VIII

And this uproar, he now perceived, was composed entirely of wind and fire. Here, on the roof of the hills beneath a starry sky, these two great elements expressed their nature with unhampered freedom, for there was neither rain to modify the one, nor solid obstacle to check the other. Their voices merged in a single sound — the hollow boom of wind and the deep, resounding clap of flame. The splitting crackle of burning branches imitated the high, shrill whistle of the tearing gusts that, javelin-like, flew to and fro in darts of swifter sound. But one shout rose from the summit, no human cry distinguishable in it, nor amid the thousand lines of skeleton wood that pierced the golden background was any human outline visible. Fire and wind encouraged one another to madness, manifesting in prodigious splendour by themselves.

Then, suddenly, before a gigantic canter of the wind, the driving smoke rolled upwards like a curtain, and the flames, ceasing their wild flapping, soared steadily in gothic windows of living gold towards the stars. In towering rows between columns of black night they transformed the empty space between them into a colossal temple aisle. They tapered aloft symmetrically into vanishing crests. And Hendricks stood upright. Rising so that his shoulders topped the edge of the boulder, and utterly contemptuous of Leysin's hand that sought with violence to drag him into shelter, he gazed as one who sees a vision. For at first he could only stand and stare, aware of sensation but not of thought. An enormous, overpowering conviction blew his whole being to white heat. Here was a supply of elemental power that human beings — empty, needy, starved, deficient human beings — could use. His love for the boy leaped headlong at the skirts of this terrific salvation. A majestic possibility stormed through him.

Yet it was no nightmare wonder that met his staring and half-shielded eyes, although some touch of awful dream seemed in it, set, moreover, to a scale that scantier minds might deem distortion. The heat from some thirty fires, placed at regular intervals, made midnight quiver with immense vibrations. Of varying, yet calculated size, these towering heaps emitted notes of measured and alternating depth, until the roar along the entire line produced a definite scale almost of melody, the near ones shrilly singing, those more distant booming with mountainous pedal notes. The consonance was monstrous, yet conformed to some magnificent diapason. This chord of fire-music paced the starlit sky, directed, but never overmastered, by the wind that measured it somehow into meaning. Repeated in quick succession, the notes now crashing in a mass, now singing alone in solitary beauty, the effect suggested an idea of ordered sequence, of gigantic rhythm. It seemed, indeed, as though some controlling agency, mastering excess, coerced both raging elements to express through this stupendous dance some definite idea. Here, as it were, was the alphabet of some natural, undifferentiated language, a language of sight and sound, predating speech, symbolical in the ultimate, deific sense. Some Lord of Fire and some Lord of Air were in command. Harnessed and regulated, these formless cohorts of energy that men call stupidly mere flame and wind, obeyed a higher power that had invoked them, yet a power that, by understanding their laws of being, held them most admirably in control.

This, at least, seems a hint of the explanation that flashed into Hendricks as he stared in amazed bewilderment from the shelter of the nearest boulder. He read a sentence in some natural, forgotten script. He watched a primitive ritual that once invoked the gods. He was aware of rhythm, and he was aware of system, though as yet he did not see the hand that wrote this marvellous sentence on the night. For still the human element remained invisible. He only realised — in dim, blundering fashion — that he witnessed a revelation of those two powers which, in large, lie at the foundations of the Universe, and, in little, are the basic essentials of human existence — the powers behind heat and air. Fragments of that talk with Leysin stammered back across his mind, like letters in some stupendous word he dared not reconstruct entire. He shuddered and grew wise. Realms of forgotten being opened their doors before his dazzled sight. Vision fluttered into far, piercing vistas of ancient wonder, haunting and half-remembered, then lost its way in blindness that was pain. For a moment, it seemed, he was aware of majestic Presences behind the turmoil, shadowy but mighty, charged with a vague potentiality as of immense algebraical formulae, symbolical and beyond full comprehension, yet willing and able to be used for practical results. He *felt* the elements as nerves of a living Universe.... Yet thinking was not really in him anywhere; feeling was all he knew. The world he moved in, as the script he read, belonged to conditions too utterly remote for reason to recover a single clue to their intelligible reconstruction. Glory, clean and strong as of primitive star-worship, passed between what he saw and all that he had ever known before. The curtain of conventional belief was rent in twain. The terrific thing was true....

For an unmeasured interval the tutor, oblivious of time and actual place, stood on the brink of this majestic pageant, staring with breathless awe, while the swaying of the entire scenery increased, like the sway of an ocean lifted to the sky by many winds. Then, suddenly, in one of those temporary lulls that passed between the beat of the great notes, his searching eyes discovered a new thing. The focus of his sight was altered, and he realised at last the source of the directing and the controlling power. Behind the fires and beyond the smoke he recognised the disc-like, shining ovals that upon this little earth stand in the image of the one, eternal Likeness. He saw the human faces, symbols of spiritual dominion over all lesser orders, each one possessed of belief, intelligence and will. Singly so feeble, together so invincible, this assemblage, unscorched by the fire and by the wind unmoved, seemed to him impressive beyond all possible words. And a further inkling of the truth flashed on him as he stared: that a group of humans, a crowd, combining upon a given object with concentrated purpose, possessed of that terrific power, certain faith, may know in themselves the energy to move great mountains, and therefore that lesser energy to guide the fluid forces of the elements. And a sense of cosmic exultation leaped into his being. For a moment he knew a touch of almost frenzy. Proud joy rose in him like a splendour of omnipotence. Humanity, it seemed to him, here came into a grand but long neglected corner of its kingdom as originally planned by Heaven. Into the hands of a weakling and deficient boy the guidance had been given.

Motionless beneath the stars, lit by the glare till they shone like idols of yellow stone, and magnified by the sheets of flying, intolerable light the wind chased to and fro, these rows of faces appeared at first as a single line of undifferentiated fire against the background of the night. The eyes were all cast down in prayer, each mind focused steadily upon one clear idea — the control and assimilation of two elemental powers. The crowd was one; feeling was one; desire, command and certain faith were one. The controlling power that resulted was irresistible.

Then came a remarkable, concerted movement. With one accord the eyes all opened, blazing with reflected fire. A hundred human countenances rose in a single shining line. The men stood upright. Swarthy faces, tanned by sun and wind, heads uncovered, hair and beards tossing in the air, turned all one way. Mouths opened too. There came a roar that even the hurricane could not drown — a word of command, it seemed, that sprang into the pulses of the dancing elements and reduced their turmoil to a wave of steadier movement. And at the same moment a hundred bodies, naked above the waist, arms outstretched and hands with the palms held upwards, swayed forwards through the smoke and fire. They came towards the spot where, half concealed from view, the tutor crouched and watched.

And Hendricks, thinking himself discovered, first quailed, then rose to meet them. No power to resist was in him. It was, rather, willing response that he experienced. He stepped out from the shelter of the boulder and entered the brilliant glare. Hatless himself, shoulders squared, cloak, flying in the wind, he took three strides towards the advancing battalion — then, undecided, paused. For the line, he saw, disregarded him as though he were not there at all. It was not *him* the worshippers sought. The entire troop swept past to a point some fifty feet below where the end of the ridge broke out of the thinning trees. Beautiful as a curving wave of flame, the figures streamed across the narrow, open space with a drilled precision as of some battle line, and Hendricks, with a sense of wild, secret triumph, saw them pause at the brink of the platformed ridge, form up their serried ranks yet closer, then open two hundred arms to welcome some one whom the darkness should immediately deliver. Simultaneously, from the covering trees, the tall, slim shadow of Lord Ernie darted out into the light.

‘Magnificent!’ cried Hendricks, but his voice was smothered instantly in a mightier sound, and his movement forward seemed ineffective stumbling. The hundred voices thundered out a single note. Like a deer the boy leaped; like a tongue of flame he flew to join his own; and instantly was surrounded, borne shoulder-high upon those upturned palms, swept back in triumph towards the procession of enormous fires. Wrapped by smoke and sparks, lifted by wind, he became part of the monstrous rhythm that turned that mountain ridge alive. He stood upright upon the platform of interlacing arms; he swayed with their movements as a thing of wind and fire that flew. The shining faces vanished then, turned all towards the blazing piles so that the boy had the appearance of standing on a wall of living black. His outline was visible a moment against the sky, firelight between his wide-stretched legs, streaming from his hair and horizontal arms, issuing almost, as it seemed, from his very body. The next second he leaped to the ground, ran forward — appallingly close — between two heaped-up fires, flung both hands heavenwards, and — knelt.

And Hendricks, sympathetically following the boy’s performance as though his own mind and body took part in it, experienced then a singular result: it seemed the heart in him began to roar. This was no rustle of excited blood that the little cavern of his skull increased, but a deeper sound that proclaimed the kinship of his entire being with the ritual. His own nature had begun to answer. From that moment he perceived the spectacle, not with the senses of sight and hearing, separately, but with his entire body — synthetically. He became a part of this assembly that was itself one single instrument: a cosmic sounding-board for the rhythmical expression of impersonal Nature Powers. Leysin, he dimly realised, fixed in his churchy tenets, remained outside, apart, and compromising; Hendricks accepted and went with. All little customary feelings dipped utterly away, lost, false, denied, even as a unit in a crowd loses its normal characteristics in the greater mood that sways the whole. The fire no longer burned him, for he was the fire; nor did he stagger against the furious wind, because the wind was in his heart. He moved all over, alive in every point and corner. With his skin he breathed, his bones and tissue ran with glorious heat. He cried aloud. He praised. 'I am the whirlwind and I am the fire! Fire that lights but does not burn, and wind that blows the heart to flame!' His body sang it, or rather the elements sang it through his body; for the sound of his voice was not audible, and it was wind and fire that thundered forth his feeling in their crashing rhythm.

IX

And so it was that he no longer saw this thing pictorially, nor in the little detached reports the individual senses brought, but knew it in himself complete, as a man knows love and passion. Memory afterwards translated these vast central feelings into pictures, but the pictures touched reality without containing it. Like a vision it happened all at once, as a room or landscape happens, and what happens all at once, coming through a synthesis of the senses, is not properly describable later. To instantaneous knowledge mere sequence is a falsehood. The sequence first comes in with the telling afterwards. That kneeling form, he understood, was the empty vessel to which conventional life had hitherto denied the heat and air it craved. The breath of life now poured at full tide into it, the fire of deity lit its heart of touchwood, wind blew into desire; and later flame would burst forth in action, consuming opposition. He must let it fill to the brim. It was not salvation, but creation. Then thought went out, extinguished by a puff of something greater....

For beyond the smoke and sparks, beyond the space the men had occupied, a new and gentler movement, lyrical with bird-like beauty, ran suddenly along the ridge. What Hendricks had taken for branches heaped in rows for the burning, stirred marvellously throughout their whole collective mass, stirred sweetly, too, and with an exquisite loveliness. The entire line rose gracefully into the air with a whirr as of sweeping birds. There was a soft and undulating motion as though a draught of flowing wind turned faintly visible, yet with an increasing brilliance, like shining lilies of flame that now flocked forward in a troop, bending deliciously all one way. And in the same second these tall lilies of fire revealed themselves as figures, naked above the waist, hair streaming on the wind, eyes alight and bare arms waving. Above the men's deep pedal bass their voices rose with clear, shrill sweetness on the storm. The band swept forwards swift as wind towards the kneeling boy. The long line curved about him foldingly. The women took him as the south wind takes a bird.

There may have been — indeed, there was — an interval, for Hendricks caught, again and again repeated, the boy's great cry of passionate delight above the tumult. Ringing and virile it rose to heaven, clear as a fine-wrought bell. And instantaneously the knitted figures of flame disentangled themselves again, the mass unfolded like an opening flower, and, as by a military word of command, dissolved itself once more into a long thin line of running fire. The women advanced, and the waiting men flowed forward in a stream to meet them. This interweaving of the figures was as easily accomplished as the mingling of light and heavy threads upon some living loom. Hands joining hands, all singing, these naked worshippers of fire and wind passed in and out among the blazing piles with a headlong precision that was torrential and yet orderly. The speed increased; the faces flashed and vanished, then flashed and passed again; each woman between two men, each man between two women, and Lord Ernie, radiantly alive, between two girls of rich, o'erflowing beauty. Their movements were undulating, like the undulations of fire, yet with sudden, unexpected upward leaps as when fire is partnered abruptly by a cantering wind. For the women were fire, and the men were wind. The imitative dance was in full swing. The marvellous wind and fire ritual unrolled its old-world magic.

It was awe-inspiring certainly, but for Hendricks, as he watched, the terror of big conflagrations was wholly absent: rather, he felt the sense of deep security that rhythmic movement causes. Bathed in a sea of elemental power, he burned to share the pagan splendour and the rush of primitive delight. It seemed he had a cosmic body in which new centres stirred to life, linking him on to this source of natural forces. Through these centres he drew the chaotic energy into nerves and blood and muscle, into the very substance of his thought, indeed, transmuting them into the magic of the will. Abundant and inexhaustible vigour filled the air, pouring freely into whatever empty receptacle lay at hand. Sheets of flame, whole separate fragments of it, torn at the edges, raced, loudly, hungrily flapping on vehement gusts of wind; curved as they flew; leaped, twisted, flashed and vanished. And the figures closely copied them. The women tossed their bodies aloft, then dipped suddenly to the earth, invisible, till the rushing men urged them into view again with wild impetuous swing, so that the entire line stretched and contracted like an immense elastic band of life, now knotted, now dissolved.

Yet, while of raging and terrific beauty, there was never that mad abandon which is disorder; but rather a kind of sacred natural revel that prohibited mere licence. There was even a singular austerity in it that betrayed a definite ritual and not mere reckless pageantry. No walls could possibly have contained it. In cathedral, temple, or measured space, however grand, it could only have seemed exaggerated and apostate; here, beneath the open sky, it was beautiful and true. For overhead the stars burned clear and steady, the constellations watching it from their immovable towers — a representation of their own leisured and hierarchic dance in swifter miniature. And indeed this relationship it bore to a universal rhythm was the key, it seemed, to its deep significance; for the close imitation of natural movements seduced the colossal powers of fire and wind to swell human emotions till they became mould and vessel for this elemental manifestation in men and women. Golden yellow in the blaze, the limbs of the women flashed and passed; their hair flew dark a moment across gleaming breasts; and their waving arms tossed in ever-shifting patterns through the driving smoke. The fires boiled and roared, scattering torrents of showering sparks like stars; and amid it all the slim, white shoulders of the boy, his clothes torn from him, his eyes ablaze, and his lips opened to the singing as though he had known it always, drove to and fro on the crest of the ritual like some flying figure of wind and fire incarnate.

All of which, instantaneously yet in sequence, Hendricks witnessed, painted upon the wild night sky. A volcanic energy poured through him too. He knew a golden enthusiasm of immeasurable strength, of unconquerable hope, of irresistible delight. Wind set his feet to dancing, and fire swept across his face without a trace of burning.

Nature was part of him. He had stepped inside. No obstacle existed that could withstand for a single second the torrential energy that fired his heart and blood. There was lightning in his veins. He could sweep aside life’s difficult barriers with the ease of a tornado, and shake the rubbish of doubt and care from the years with earthquake shocks. Empires he could mould, and play with nations, drive men and women before him like a flock of sheep, shatter convention, and dislocate the machinery time has foisted upon natural energies. He knew in himself the omnipotence of the lesser elemental deities. Yet, as sympathetic observer, he can but have felt a tithe of what Lord Ernie felt.

‘We are the whirlwind and we are the fire!’ he cried aloud with the rushing worshippers. ‘We are unconquerable and immense! We destroy the lukewarm and absorb the weak! For we can make evil into good by bending it all one way!...’

The roar swept thunderingly past him, catching at his voice and body. He felt himself snatched forward by the wind. The fire licked sweetly at him. It was the final abandonment. He plunged recklessly towards the surge of dancers....

X

What stopped him he did not know. Some hard and steely thing pricked sharply into him. An opposing power, fierce as a sword, stabbed at his heart — and he heard a little sound quite close beside him, a sound that pierced the babel, reaching his consciousness as from far away.

‘Keep still! Cling tight to this old rock! Hold yourself in, or else they’ll have you too!’

It was as if some insect scratched within his ear. His arm, that same instant, was violently seized. He came down with a crash. He had been half in the air. He had been dancing.

‘Turn your eyes away, away! Take hold of this big tree!’ The voice cried furiously, but with a petty human passion in it that marred the world. There was an intolerable revulsion in him as he heard it. He felt himself dragged forcibly backwards. He lost his balance, stumbling among loose stones.

‘Loose me! Let me go!’ he shouted, struggling like a wild animal, yet vainly, against the inflexible grip that held him. ‘I am one with the fire that lights but does not burn. I am the wind that blows the worlds along! Damnation take you.... Let me free!...'

Confusion caught him, smothering speech and blinding sight. He fell backwards, away from the heat and wind. He was furious, but furious with he knew not whom or what. The interference had destroyed the rhythm, broken it into fragments. Violent impulses clashed through him without the will to choose or guide them. For power had deserted him and flowed elsewhere. He stood no longer in the stream of energy. He was emptied. And at first he could not tell whether his instinct was to return himself, to rescue his precious boy, or — to crush the interfering object out of existence with what was left to him of raging anger. He turned, stood up, and flung the Pasteur aside with violence. He raised his feet to stamp and kill ... when a phrase with meaning darted suddenly across his wild confusion and recalled him to some fragment of truer responsibility and life.

'... There'll be only violence in him — reckless violence instead of strength — destructive. Save him before it is too late!'

'It *is* too late,' he roared in answer. 'What devil hinders me?'

But his roar was feeble, and his ironed boots refused the stamping. Power slipped wholly out of him. The rhythm poured past, instead of through him. Interference had destroyed the circuit. More glimmerings of responsibility came back. He stooped like a drunken man and helped the other to his feet. The rapidity of the change was curious, proving that the spell had been put upon him from without. It was not, as with the boy, mere development of pre-existing tendencies.

'Help me,' he implored suddenly instead, 'help me! There has been madness in me. For God's sake, help me to get him out!' It seemed the face of the old Marquess, stern and terrible, broke an instant through the smoky air, black with reproach and anger. And, with a violent effort of the will, Hendricks turned round to face the elemental orgy, bent on rescue. But this time the heat was intolerable and drove him back. The hair, hitherto untouched, now singed upon his head. Fire licked his very breath away. He bent double, covering his face with arms and cloak.

‘Pray!’ shouted Leysin, dropping to his knees. ‘It is the only way. My God is higher than this. Pray, pray!’

And, automatically, Hendricks fell upon his knees beside him, though to pray he knew not how. For no real faith was in him as in the other, and his eye was far from single. The fast fading grandeur of what he had experienced still left its pagan tumult in his blood. The pretence of prayer could only have been blasphemy. He watched instead, letting the other invoke his mighty Deity alone, that Deity he had served unflinchingly all his life with faith and fasting, and with belief beyond assault.

It was an impressive picture, fraught with passionate drama. On his knees behind a sheltering boulder, a blackened pine-tree tossing scorched branches above his head, this righteous man prayed to his God, sure of his triumphant answer. Hendricks watched with an admiration that made him realise his own insignificance. The eyes were closed, the leonine big head set firm upon the diminutive body, the face now lit by flame, now veiled by smoke, the strong hands clasped together and upraised. He envied him. He recognised, too, that the elements themselves, with all their chaos of might and terror, were after all but servants of the Vastness which dips the butterflies in colour and puts down upon the breasts of little robins. And, because the Pasteur’s life had been always prayer in action, his little human will invoked the Will of Greatness, merged with it, used it, and directed it steadily against the commotion of these unleashed elements. Certain of himself and of his God, the Pasteur never doubted. His prayer set instantly in action those forces which balance suns and keep the stars afloat.

Thus, trembling with terror that made him wholly ineffective, Hendricks watched, and, as he watched, became aware of the amazing change. For it seemed as if a stream of power, steady and in opposition to the tumult, now poured audaciously against the elemental rhythm, altering its direction, modifying gradually its stupendous impetus. There were pauses in the huge vibrations: they wavered, broke, and fled. They knew confusion, as when the prow of a steel-nosed vessel drives against the tide. The tide is vaster, but the steel is — different. The whole sky shivered, as this new entering force, so small, so soft, yet of such incalculable energy, began at once its overmastering effect. Signs of violence or rout, or of anything disordered, had no part in it; excess before it slipped into willing harness; there was light that sponged away all glare, as when morning sunshine cleans a forest of its shadows. Some little whispering power sang marvellously as of old across the desolate big mountains, ‘Peace! Be still!’ turning the monstrous turbulence into obedient sweetness. And upon his face and hands Hendricks felt faint, delicate touches of some refreshing softness that he could not understand.

Yet not instantly was this harmony restored; at first there was the stress of vehement opposition. The night of wind and fire drove roaring through the sky. There were bursts of triumphant tumult, but convulsion in them and no true steadiness as before. The human figures hitherto had danced with that fluid appearance which belongs to fire, and with that instantaneous rush which is of wind, the men increasing the women, and the women answering with joy; limbs and faces had melted into each other till the circular ritual looked like a glowing wheel of flame rotating audibly. But slowly now the speed of the wheel decreased; the single utterance was marred by the crying of many voices, all at different pitch, discordant, inharmonious, dismayed. The fires somehow dwindled; there came pauses in the wind; and Hendricks became aware of a curious hissing noise, as more and more of these odd soft touches found his face and hands. Here and there, he saw, a figure stumbled, fell, then gathered itself clumsily together again with a frightened shout, breaking violently out of the circle. More and more these figures blundered and dropped out; and although they returned again, so that the dance apparently increased, these were but moments in the final violence of the dispersing hurricane. The rejected ones dashed back wildly into the wrong places; men and women no longer stood alternate, but in groups together, falsely related. The entire movement was dislocated; the ceremony grew rapidly incoherent; meaning forsook it. The composite instrument that had transmuted the elemental forces into human, emotional storage was imperfect, broken, out of tune. The disarray turned rout.

And then it was, while Leysin continued without ceasing his burning and successful prayer, that his companion, conscious of returning harmony, rose to his feet, aware suddenly that he could also help. A portion of the powers he had absorbed still worked in him, but in a new direction. He felt confident and unafraid. He did not stumble. With unerring tread he advanced towards the lessening fires, feeling as he did so the cold soft touches multiply with a rush upon his skin. From all sides they came by hundreds, like messengers of help.

‘Ernest!’ he cried aloud, and his voice, though little raised, carried resonantly above the dying turmoil; ‘Ernest! Come back to us. Your father calls you!’

And from threescore faces hurrying in confusion through the smoke, one paused and turned. It stood apart, hovering as though in air, while the mob of disordered figures rushed in a body along the ridge. Plunging like frightened cattle below the farther edge, then vanishing into thick darkness, they left behind them this one solitary face. A final dying flame licked out at it; a rush of smoke drove past to hide it; there was a high, wild scream — and the figure shot forward with a headlong leap and fell with a crash at Hendricks’ feet. Lord Ernie, blackened by smoke and scorched by fire, lay safe outside the danger zone.

And Hendricks knelt beside him. Remorse and shame made him powerless to do more as he pulled the torn clothing over the neck and chest and heard his own heart begging for forgiveness. He realised his own weakness and faithlessness. A great temptation had found him wanting....

It was owing to Leysin that the rescue was complete. The Pasteur was instantly by his side.

‘Saved as by water,’ he cried, as he folded his cloak about the prostrate body, and then raised the head and shoulders; ‘saved by His ministers of rain. For His miracles are love, and work through natural laws.’

He made a sign to Hendricks. Carrying the boy between them, they scrambled down the slope into the shelter of the trees below. The cold, soft touches were then explained. The *joran* had dropped as suddenly as it rose, and the torrential rain that invariably follows now poured in rivers from the sky. Water, drenching the fires and padding the savage wind, had stopped the dancers midway in their frenzied ritual. It was the element they dreaded, for it was hostile. Rain soused the mountain ridge, extinguishing the last embers of the numerous fires. It rushed in rivulets between their feet. The heated earth gave out a hissing steam, and the only sound in the spaces where wind and fire had boomed and thundered a little while before was now the splash of water and the drip of quenching drops.

In the cover of the sheltering trees the body stirred, lifted its head, and sat up slowly. The eyes opened.

‘I’m cold. I’m frightened,’ whispered a shivering voice. ‘Where am I?’

Only the pelt and thud of the rain sounded behind the quavering words.

‘Where are the others? Have I been away? Hendricks — Mr. Hendricks — is that you —— ?’

He stared about him, his face now a mere luminous disc in the thick darkness. No breath of wind was loose. They spoke to him till he answered with assurance, groping to find their hands with his own, his words confused and strange with hidden meaning for a time. ‘I’m all right now,’ he kept repeating. ‘I know exactly. It was one of my big dreams ... I suppose I fell asleep ... and the rain woke me. Great heavens! What a night to be out.’ And then he clambered vigorously to his feet with a sudden movement of great energy again, saying that hunger was in him and he must eat. There was no complaint of heat or cold, of burning or of bruises. The boy recovered marvellously. In ten minutes, breaking away from all support, he led, as they descended through the dripping forest in the gloom and chill of very early morning. It was the others who called to him for guidance in the tangled woods. Lord Ernie was in the lead. Throughout the difficult woods he was ever in front, and singing:

‘Fire that lights but does not burn! And wind that blows the heart to flame! They both are in me now for ever and ever! Oh, praise the Lord of Fire and the Lord of Wind...!’

And this voice, now near, now distant, sounding through the dripping forest on their homeward journey, was an experience weird and unforgettable for those other two. Leysin, it seemed, had one sentence only which he kept repeating to himself— ‘Heaven grant he may direct it all for good. For they have filled him to the brim, and he is become an instrument of power.’

But Hendricks, though he understood the risk, felt only confidence. Lord Ernie’s regeneration had begun.

Soaked and bedraggled, all three, they reached the village about two o’clock. The boy, utterly unmanageable, said an emphatic No to spirits, soup, or medical appliances. His skin, indeed, showed no signs of burning, nor was there the smallest symptom of cold or fever in him. ‘I’m a perfect furnace,’ he laughed; ‘I feel health and strength personified.’ And the brightness of his eyes, his radiant colour, the vigour of his voice and manner — both in some way astonishing — made all pretence of assistance unnecessary and absurd. ‘It’s like a new birth,’ he cried to Hendricks, as he almost cantered beside him down the road to their house, ‘and, by Jove, I’ll wake ’em up at home and make the world go round. I know a hundred schemes. I tell you, sir, I’m simply bursting! For the first time I’m alive!’

And an hour later, when the tutor peeped in upon him, the boy was calmly sleeping. The candle-light, shaded carefully with one hand, fell upon the face. There were new lines and a new expression in it. Will and purpose showed in the stern set of the lips and jaw. It was the face of a man, and of a man one would not lightly trifle with. Purpose, will, and power were established on their thrones. To such a man the entire world might one day bow the head.

‘If only it will last,’ thought Hendricks, as, shaken, bewildered, and more than a little awed, he tiptoed out of the room again and went to bed. But through his dreams, sheeted in flame and veiled in angry smoke, the face of the old Marquess glowered upon him from a heavy sky above ancestral towers.

XI

From the obituary notices of the 9th Marquess of Oakham the following selections have their interest: He succeeded to his father, then in the Cabinet as Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the age of twenty-one. His career was brief but singular, the early magnificence of the younger Pitt offering a standard of comparison, though by no means a parallel, to his short record of astonishing achievement. His effect upon the world, first as Chief of the Government Labour Department and subsequently as Home Secretary, and Minister of War, is described as shattering, even cataclysmic. His public life lasted five years. He died at the age of twenty-nine. His personality was revolutionary and overwhelming.

For, judging by these extracts, he was a ‘Napoleonic figure whose personal influence combined the impetus of Mirabeau and the dominance of Alexander. His authority held an incalculable element, precisely described as uncanny. His spirit was puissant, elemental, his activity irresistible.’ Yet, according to another journal, ‘he was, properly speaking, neither intellectual, astute, nor diplomatic, and possessed as little subtlety as might be expected of a miner whose psychology was called upon to explain the

Trinity. In no sense was he Statesman, and even less strategist, yet his name swept Europe, changed the map of the Nearer East, its mere whisper among the Chancelleries convulsing men's counsels with an influence almost menacing.'

His enthusiasm appears to have been amazing. 'Some stupendous and untiring energy drove through him, paralysing attack, and rendering the bitterest and most skilful opposition nugatory. His hand was imperious, upsetting with a touch the chessboards set by the most able statecraft, and his voice was heard with a kind of reverence in every capital.'

The brevity of his astonishing career called for universal comment, as did the hypnotising effect of his singular ascendency. 'In five short years of power he achieved his sway. He rushed upon the world, he shook it, he retired,' as one journal picturesquely phrased it. 'The manner of his ending, moreover — a stroke of lightning, — seemed in keeping with his life. There was neither lingering, delay, nor warning. Of distinguished stock, noble, yet ordinary enough in all but name, his power is unexplained by heredity; his family furnished no approach to greatness, as history supplied no parallel to his dynamic intensity. Nor, we are informed, among his near of kin, does any inherit his volcanic energy.'

The world, however, was apparently well relieved of his tumultuous presence, for his influence was generally surveyed as 'destructive rather than constructive.' He was unmarried, and the title went to a nephew.

The cheaper journals abounded, of course, in details of his personal and private life that were freely copied into the foreign press, and supply curious material for the student of human nature and the psychologist. The amazing revelations no doubt were picturesquely exaggerated, yet the sub-stratum of truth in them all was generally admitted. No contradictions, at any rate, appeared. They read like the story of some primitive, wild giant let loose upon the world — primitive, because his specific brain power was admittedly of no high order; wild, because he was in favour of fierce, spontaneous action, and his mere presence, on occasions, could stir a nation, not alone a crowd, to vehement, terrific methods. His energy seemed inexhaustible, his fire inextinguishable.

Legends were rife, even before he died, among the peasantry of his Scotch estates, that he was in league with the devil. His habit of keeping enormous fires in his private rooms, fires that burned day and night from January to December, and in open hearths widened to thrice their natural size, stimulated the growth of this particular myth among those of his personal environment. All manner of stories raged. But it was his strange custom out-of-doors that provided the diabolical suggestion. For, ‘behind a specially walled-in space on an open ridge, denuded of pines, in a distant part of the estate, a series of gigantic heaps of wood, all ready to ignite, were — it was said — kept in a state of constant preparedness. And on stormy nights, especially when winds were high, and invariably at the period of the equinoctial tempests, his lordship would himself light these tremendous bonfires, and spend the nocturnal hours in their blazing presence, communing, the stories variously relate, with the witches at their Sabbath, or with hordes of fire-spirits, who emerged from the Bottomless Pit in order to feed his soul with their unquenchable supplies. From these nightly orgies, it seems clear, at any rate, he returned at dawn with a splendour of energy that no one could resist, and with a mien whose grandeur invited worship rather than inspired alarm.’

His biography, it was further stated, would be written by Sir John Hendricks, Bt., who began life as Private Secretary to his father, the 8th Marquess, but whose rapid rise to position was due to his intimate association as trusted friend and adviser to the subject of these obituary notices. The biography, however, had not appeared, within five years of Lord Oakham’s sudden death, and curiosity is only further stimulated by the suggestive whisper that it never will, and never can appear.

THE SACRIFICE

I

LIMASSON WAS A religious man, though of what depth and quality were unknown, since no trial of ultimate severity had yet tested him. An adherent of no particular creed, he yet had his gods; and his self-discipline was probably more rigorous than his friends conjectured. He was so reserved. Few guessed, perhaps, the desires conquered, the passions regulated, the inner tendencies trained and schooled — not by denying their expression, but by transmuting them alchemically into nobler channels. He had in him the makings of an enthusiastic devotee, and might have become such but for two limitations that prevented. He loved his wealth, labouring to increase it to the neglect of other interests; and, secondly, instead of following up one steady line of search, he scattered himself upon many picturesque theories, like an actor who wants to play all parts rather than concentrate on one. And the more picturesque the part, the more he was attracted. Thus, though he did his duty unshrinkingly and with a touch of love, he accused himself sometimes of merely gratifying a sensuous taste in spiritual sensations. There was this unbalance in him that argued want of depth.

As for his gods — in the end he discovered their reality by first doubting, then denying their existence.

It was this denial and doubt that restored them to their thrones, converting his dilettante skirmishes into genuine, deep belief; and the proof came to him one summer in early June when he was making ready to leave town for his annual month among the mountains.

With Limasson mountains, in some inexplicable sense, were a passion almost, and climbing so deep a pleasure that the ordinary scrambler hardly understood it. Grave as a kind of worship it was to him; the preparations for an ascent, the ascent itself in particular, involved a concentration that seemed symbolical as of a ritual. He not only loved the heights, the massive grandeur, the splendour of vast proportions blocked in space, but loved them with a respect that held a touch of awe. The emotion mountains stirred in him, one might say, was of that profound, incalculable kind that held kinship with his religious feelings, half realised though these were. His gods had their invisible thrones somewhere among the grim, forbidding heights. He prepared himself for this annual mountaineering with the same earnestness that a holy man might approach a solemn festival of his church.

And the impetus of his mind was running with big momentum in this direction, when there fell upon him, almost on the eve of starting, a swift series of disasters that shook his being to its last foundations, and left him stunned among the ruins. To describe these is unnecessary. People said, ‘One thing after another like that! What appalling luck! Poor wretch!’ then wondered, with the curiosity of children, how in the world he would take it. Due to no apparent fault of his own, these disasters were so sudden that life seemed in a moment shattered, and his interest in existence almost ceased. People shook their heads and thought of the emergency exit. But Limasson was too vital a man to dream of annihilation. Upon him it had a different effect — he turned and questioned what he called his gods. They did not answer or explain. For the first time in his life he doubted. A hair’s breadth beyond lay definite denial.

The ruin in which he sat, however, was not material; no man of his age, possessed of courage and a working scheme of life, would permit disaster of a material order to overwhelm him. It was collapse of a mental, spiritual kind, an assault upon the roots of character and temperament. Moral duties laid suddenly upon him threatened to crush. His *personal* existence was assailed, and apparently must end. He must spend the remainder of his life caring for others who were nothing to him. No outlet showed, no way of escape, so diabolically complete was the combination of events that rushed his inner trenches. His faith was shaken. A man can but endure so much, and remain human. For him the saturation point seemed reached. He experienced the spiritual equivalent of that physical numbness which supervenes when pain has touched the limit of endurance. He laughed, grew callous, then mocked his silent gods.

It is said that upon this state of blank negation there follows sometimes a condition of lucidity which mirrors with crystal clearness the forces driving behind life at a given moment, a kind of clairvoyance that brings explanation and therefore peace. Limasson looked for this in vain. There was the doubt that questioned, there was the sneer that mocked the silence into which his questions fell; but there was neither answer nor explanation, and certainly not peace. There was no relief. In this tumult of revolt he did none of the things his friends suggested or expected; he merely followed the line of least resistance. He yielded to the impetus that was upon him when the catastrophe came. To their indignant amazement he went out to his mountains.

All marvelled that at such a time he could adopt so trivial a line of action, neglecting duties that seemed paramount; they disapproved. Yet in reality he was taking no definite action at all, but merely drifting with the momentum that had been acquired just before. He was bewildered with so much pain, confused with suffering, stunned with the crash that flung him helpless amid undeserved calamity. He turned to the mountains as a child to its mother, instinctively. Mountains had never failed to bring him consolation, comfort, peace. Their grandeur restored proportion whenever disorder threatened life. No calculation, properly speaking, was in his move at all; but a blind desire for a violent physical reaction such as climbing brings. And the instinct was more wholesome than he knew.

In the high upland valley among lonely peaks whither Limasson then went, he found in some measure the proportion he had lost. He studiously avoided thinking; he lived in his muscles recklessly. The region with its little Inn was familiar to him; peak after peak he attacked, sometimes with, but more often without a guide, until his reputation as a sane climber, a laurelled member of all the foreign Alpine Clubs, was seriously in danger. That he overdid it physically is beyond question, but that the mountains breathed into him some portion of their enormous calm and deep endurance is also true. His gods, meanwhile, he neglected utterly for the first time in his life. If he thought of them at all, it was as tinsel figures imagination had created, figures upon a stage that merely decorated life for those whom pretty pictures pleased. Only — he had left the theatre and their make-believe no longer hypnotised his mind. He realised their impotence and disowned them. This attitude, however, was subconscious; he lent to it no substance, either of thought or speech. He ignored rather than challenged their existence.

And it was somewhat in this frame of mind — thinking little, feeling even less — that he came out into the hotel vestibule after dinner one evening, and took mechanically the bundle of letters the porter handed to him. They had no possible interest for him; in a corner where the big steam-heater mitigated the chilliness of the hall, he idly sorted them. The score or so of other guests, chiefly expert climbing men, were trailing out in twos and threes from the dining-room; but he felt as little interest in them as in his letters: no conversation could alter facts, no written phrases change his circumstances. At random, then, he opened a business letter with a typewritten address — it would probably be impersonal, less of a mockery, therefore, than the others with their tiresome sham condolences. And, in a sense, it was impersonal; sympathy from a solicitor's office is mere formula, a few extra ticks upon the universal keyboard of a Remington. But as he read it, Limasson made a discovery that startled him into acute and bitter sensation. He had imagined the limit of bearable suffering and disaster already reached. Now, in a few dozen words, his error was proved convincingly. The fresh blow was dislocating.

This culminating news of additional catastrophe disclosed within him entirely new reaches of pain, of biting, resentful fury. Limasson experienced a momentary stopping of the heart as he took it in, a dizziness, a violent sensation of revolt whose impotence induced almost physical nausea. He felt like — death.

'Must I suffer all things?' flashed through his arrested intelligence in letters of fire.

There was a sullen rage in him, a dazed bewilderment, but no positive suffering as yet. His emotion was too sickening to include the smaller pains of disappointment; it was primitive, blind anger that he knew. He read the letter calmly, even to the neat paragraph of machine-made sympathy at the last, then placed it in his inner pocket. No outward sign of disturbance was upon him; his breath came slowly; he reached over to the table for a match, holding it at arm's length lest the sulphur fumes should sting his nostrils.

And in that moment he made his second discovery. The fact that further suffering was still possible included also the fact that some touch of resignation had been left in him, and therefore some vestige of belief as well. Now, as he felt the crackling sheet of stiff paper in his pocket, watched the sulphur die, and saw the wood ignite, this remnant faded utterly away. Like the blackened end of the match, it shrivelled and dropped off. It vanished. Savagely, yet with an external calmness that enabled him to light his pipe with untrembling hand, he addressed his futile deities. And once more in fiery letters there flashed across the darkness of his passionate thought:

‘Even this you demand of me — this cruel, ultimate sacrifice?’

And he rejected them, bag and baggage; for they were a mockery and a lie. With contempt he repudiated them for ever. The stage of doubt had passed. He denied his gods. Yet, with a smile upon his lips; for what were they after all but the puppets his religious fancy had imagined? They never had existed. Was it, then, merely the picturesque, sensational aspect of his devotional temperament that had created them? That side of his nature, in any case, was dead now, killed by a single devastating blow. The gods went with it.

Surveying what remained of his life, it seemed to him like a city that an earthquake has reduced to ruins. The inhabitants think no worse thing could happen. Then comes the fire.

Two lines of thought, it seems, then developed parallel in him and simultaneously, for while underneath he stormed against this culminating blow, his upper mind dealt calmly with the project of a great expedition he would make at dawn. He had engaged no guide. As an experienced mountaineer, he knew the district well; his name was tolerably familiar, and in half an hour he could have settled all details, and retired to bed with instructions to be called at two. But, instead, he sat there waiting, unable to stir, a human volcano that any moment might break forth into violence. He smoked his pipe as quietly as though nothing had happened, while through the blazing depths of him ran ever this one self-repeating statement: ‘Even this you demand of me, this cruel, ultimate sacrifice!...’ His self-control, dynamically estimated, just then must have been very great and, thus repressed, the store of potential energy accumulated enormously.

With thought concentrated largely upon this final blow, Limasson had not noticed the people who streamed out of the *salle à manger* and scattered themselves in groups about the hall. Some individual, now and again, approached his chair with the idea of conversation, then, seeing his absorption, turned away. Even when a climber whom he slightly knew reached across him with a word of apology for the matches, Limasson made no response, for he did not see him. He noticed nothing. In particular he did not notice two men who, from an opposite corner, had for some time been observing him. He now looked up — by chance? — and was vaguely aware that they were discussing him. He met their eyes across the hall, and started.

For at first he thought he knew them. Possibly he had seen them about in the hotel — they seemed familiar — yet he certainly had never spoken with them. Aware of his mistake, he turned his glance elsewhere, though still vividly conscious of their attention. One was a clergyman or a priest; his face wore an air of gravity touched by sadness, a sternness about the lips counteracted by a kindling beauty in the eyes that betrayed enthusiasm nobly regulated. There was a suggestion of stateliness in the man that made the impression very sharp. His clothing emphasised it. He wore a dark tweed suit that was strict in its simplicity. There was austerity in him somewhere.

His companion, perhaps by contrast, seemed inconsiderable in his conventional evening dress. A good deal younger than his friend, his hair, always a tell-tale detail, was a trifle long; the thin fingers that flourished a cigarette wore rings; the face, though picturesque, was flippant, and his entire attitude conveyed a certain insignificance. Gesture, that faultless language which challenges counterfeit, betrayed unbalance somewhere. The impression he produced, however, was shadowy compared to the sharpness of the other. ‘Theatrical’ was the word in Limasson’s mind, as he turned his glance elsewhere. But as he looked away he fidgeted. The interior darkness caused by the dreadful letter rose about him. It engulfed him. Dizziness came with it....

Far away the blackness was fringed with light, and through this light, stepping with speed and carelessness as from gigantic distance, the two men, suddenly grown large, came at him. Limasson, in self-protection, turned to meet them. Conversation he did not desire. Somehow he had expected this attack.

Yet the instant they began to speak — it was the priest who opened fire — it was all so natural and easy that he almost welcomed the diversion. A phrase by way of introduction — and he was speaking of the summits. Something in Limasson’s mind turned over. The man was a serious climber, one of his own species. The sufferer felt a certain relief as he heard the invitation, and realised, though dully, the compliment involved.

‘If you felt inclined to join us — if you would honour us with your company,’ the man was saying quietly, adding something then about ‘your great experience’ and ‘invaluable advice and judgment.’

Limasson looked up, trying hard to concentrate and understand.

‘The Tour du Néant?’ he repeated, mentioning the peak proposed. Rarely attempted, never conquered, and with an ominous record of disaster, it happened to be the very summit he had meant to attack himself next day.

‘You have engaged guides?’ He knew the question foolish.

‘No guide will try it,’ the priest answered, smiling, while his companion added with a flourish, ‘but we — we need no guide — if *you* will come.’

‘You are unattached, I believe? You are alone?’ the priest enquired, moving a little in front of his friend, as though to keep him in the background.

‘Yes,’ replied Limasson. ‘I am quite alone.’

He was listening attentively, but with only part of his mind. He realised the flattery of the invitation. Yet it was like flattery addressed to some one else. He felt himself so indifferent, so — dead. These men wanted his skilful body, his experienced mind; and it was his body and mind that talked with them, and finally agreed to go. Many a time expeditions had been planned in just this way, but to-night he felt there was a difference. Mind and body signed the agreement, but his soul, listening elsewhere and looking on, was silent. With his rejected gods it had left him, though hovering close still. It did not interfere; it did not warn; it even approved; it sang to him from great distance that this expedition cloaked another. He was bewildered by the clashing of his higher and his lower mind.

‘At one in the morning, then, if that will suit you ...’ the older man concluded.

‘I’ll see to the provisions,’ exclaimed the younger enthusiastically, ‘and I shall take my telephoto for the summit. The porters can come as far as the Great Tower. We’re over six thousand feet here already, you see, so ...’ and his voice died away in the distance as his companion led him off.

Limasson saw him go with relief. But for the other man he would have declined the invitation. At heart he was indifferent enough. What decided him really was the coincidence that the Tour du Néant was the very peak he had intended to attack himself *alone*, and the curious feeling that this expedition cloaked another somehow — almost that these men had a hidden motive. But he dismissed the idea — it was not worth thinking about. A moment later he followed them to bed. So careless was he of the affairs of the world, so dead to mundane interests, that he tore up his other letters and tossed them into a corner of the room — unread.

II

Once in his chilly bedroom he realised that his upper mind had permitted him to do a foolish thing; he had drifted like a schoolboy into an unwise situation. He had pledged himself to an expedition with two strangers, an expedition for which normally he would have chosen his companions with the utmost caution. Moreover, he was guide; they looked to him for safety, while yet it was they who had arranged and planned it. But who were these men with whom he proposed to run grave bodily risks? He knew them as little as they knew him. Whence came, he wondered, the curious idea that this climb was really planned by another who was no one of them?

The thought slipped idly across his mind; going out by one door, it came back, however, quickly by another. He did not think about it more than to note its passage through the disorder that passed with him just then for thinking. Indeed, there was nothing in the whole world for which he cared a single brass farthing. As he undressed for bed, he said to himself: ‘I shall be called at one ... but why am I going with these two on this wild plan?... And who made the plan?’...

It seemed to have settled itself. It came about so naturally and easily, so quickly. He probed no deeper. He didn’t care. And for the first time he omitted the little ritual, half prayer, half adoration, it had always been his custom to offer to his deities upon retiring to rest. He no longer recognised them.

How utterly broken his life was! How blank and terrible and lonely! He felt cold, and piled his overcoats upon the bed, as though his mental isolation involved a physical effect as well. Switching off the light by the door, he was in the act of crossing the floor in the darkness when a sound beneath the window caught his ear. Outside there were voices talking. The roar of falling water made them indistinct, yet he was sure they were voices, and that one of them he knew. He stopped still to listen. He heard his own name uttered— 'John Limasson.' They ceased. He stood a moment shivering on the boards, then crawled into bed beneath the heavy clothing. But in the act of settling down, they began again. He raised himself again hurriedly to listen. What little wind there was passed in that moment down the valley, carrying off the roar of falling water; and into the moment's space of silence dropped fragments of definite sentences:

'They are close, you say — close down upon the world?' It was the voice of the priest surely.

'For days they have been passing,' was the answer — a rough, deep tone that might have been a peasant's, and a kind of fear in it, 'for all my flocks are scattered.'

'The signs are sure? You know them?'

'Tumult,' was the answer in much lower tones. 'There has been tumult in the mountains....'

There was a break then as though the voices sank too low to be heard. Two broken fragments came next, end of a question — beginning of an answer.

'... the opportunity of a lifetime?'

'... if he goes of his own free will, success is sure. For acceptance is ...'

And the wind, returning, bore back the sound of the falling water, so that Limasson heard no more....

An indefinable emotion stirred in him as he turned over to sleep. He stuffed his ears lest he should hear more. He was aware of a sinking of the heart that was inexplicable. What in the world were they talking about, these two? What was the meaning of these disjointed phrases? There lay behind them a grave significance almost solemn. That 'tumult in the mountains' was somehow ominous, its suggestion terrible and mighty. He felt disturbed, uncomfortable, the first emotion that had stirred in him for days. The numbness melted before its faint awakening. Conscience was in it — he felt vague prickings — but it was deeper far than conscience. Somewhere out of sight, in a region life had as yet not plumbed, the words sank down and vibrated like pedal notes. They rumbled away into the night of undecipherable things. And, though explanation failed him, he felt they had reference somehow to the morrow's expedition: how, what, wherefore, he knew not; his name had been spoken — then these curious sentences; that was all. Yet to-morrow's expedition, what was it but an expedition of impersonal kind, not even planned by himself? Merely his own plan taken and altered by others — made over? His personal business, his personal life, were not really in it at all.

The thought startled him a moment. He had no personal life...!

Struggling with sleep, his brain played the endless game of disentanglement without winning a single point, while the under-mind in him looked on and smiled — because it *knew*. Then, suddenly, a great peace fell over him. Exhaustion brought it perhaps. He fell asleep; and next moment, it seemed, he was aware of a thundering at the door and an unwelcome growling voice, '*'s ist bald ein Uhr, Herr! Aufstehen!*'

Rising at such an hour, unless the heart be in it, is a sordid and depressing business; Limasson dressed without enthusiasm, conscious that thought and feeling were exactly where he had left them on going to sleep. The same confusion and bewilderment were in him; also the same deep solemn emotion stirred by the whispering voices. Only long habit enabled him to attend to detail, and ensured that nothing was forgotten. He felt heavy and oppressed, a kind of anxiety about him; the routine of preparation he followed gravely, utterly untouched by the customary joy; it was mechanical. Yet through it ran the old familiar sense of ritual, due to the practice of so many years, that cleansing of mind and body for a big Ascent — like initiatory rites that once had been as important to him as those of some priest who approached the worship of his deity in the temples of ancient time. He performed the ceremony with the same care as though no ghost of vanished faith still watched him, beckoning from the air as formerly.... His knapsack carefully packed, he took his ice-axe from beside the bed, turned out the light, and went down the creaking wooden stairs in stockinged feet, lest his heavy boots should waken the other sleepers. And in his head still rang the phrase he had fallen asleep on — as though just uttered:

‘The signs are sure; for days they have been passing — close down upon the world. The flocks are scattered. There has been tumult — tumult in the mountains.’ The other fragments he had forgotten. But who were ‘they’? And why did the word bring a chill of awe into his blood?

And as the words rolled through him Limasson felt tumult in his thoughts and feelings too. There had been tumult in his life, and all his joys were scattered — joys that hitherto had fed his days. The signs were sure. Something was close down upon his little world — passing — sweeping. He felt a touch of terror.

Outside in the fresh darkness of very early morning the strangers stood waiting for him. Rather, they seemed to arrive in the same instant as himself, equally punctual. The clock in the church tower sounded one. They exchanged low greetings, remarked that the weather promised to hold good, and started off in single file over soaking meadows towards the first belt of forest. The porter — mere peasant, unfamiliar of face and not connected with the hotel — led the way with a hurricane lantern. The air was marvellously sweet and fragrant. In the sky overhead the stars shone in their thousands. Only the noise of falling water from the heights, and the regular thud of their heavy boots broke the stillness. And, black against the sky, towered the enormous pyramid of the Tour du Néant they meant to conquer.

Perhaps the most delightful portion of a big ascent is the beginning in the scented darkness while the thrill of possible conquest lies still far off. The hours stretch themselves queerly; last night’s sunset might be days ago; sunrise and the brilliance coming seem in another week, part of dim futurity like children’s holidays. It is difficult to realise that this biting cold before the dawn, and the blazing heat to come, both belong to the same to-day.

There were no sounds as they toiled slowly up the zigzag path through the first fifteen hundred feet of pine-woods; no one spoke; the clink of nails and ice-axe points against the stones was all they heard. For the roar of water was felt rather than heard; it beat against the ears and the skin of the whole body at once. The deeper notes were below them now in the sleeping valley; the shriller ones sounded far above, where streams just born out of ponderous snow-beds tinkled sharply....

The change came delicately. The stars turned a shade less brilliant, a softness in them as of human eyes that say farewell. Between the highest branches the sky grew visible. A sighing air smoothed all their crests one way; moss, earth, and open spaces brought keen perfumes; and the little human procession, leaving the forest, stepped out into the vastness of the world above the tree-line. They paused while the porter stooped to put his lantern out. In the eastern sky was colour. The peaks and crags rushed closer.

Was it the Dawn? Limasson turned his eyes from the height of sky where the summits pierced a path for the coming day, to the faces of his companions, pale and wan in the early twilight. How small, how insignificant they seemed amid this hungry emptiness of desolation. The stupendous cliffs fled past them, led by headstrong peaks crowned with eternal snows. Thin lines of cloud, trailing half way up precipice and ridge, seemed like the swish of movement — as though he caught the earth turning as she raced through space. The four of them, timid riders on the gigantic saddle, clung for their lives against her titan ribs, while currents of some majestic life swept up at them from every side. He drew deep draughts of the rarefied air into his lungs. It was very cold. Avoiding the pallid, insignificant faces of his companions, he pretended interest in the porter’s operations; he stared fixedly on the ground. It seemed twenty minutes before the flame was extinguished, and the lantern fastened to the pack behind. This Dawn was unlike any he had seen before.

For, in reality, all the while, Limasson was trying to bring order out of the extraordinary thoughts and feelings that had possessed him during the slow forest ascent, and the task was not crowned with much success. The Plan, made by others, had taken charge of him, he felt; and he had thrown the reins of personal will and interest loosely upon its steady gait. He had abandoned himself carelessly to what might come. Knowing that he was leader of the expedition, he yet had suffered the porter to go first, taking his own place as it was appointed to him, behind the younger man, but before the priest. In this order, they had plodded, as only experienced climbers plod, for hours without a rest, until half way up a change had taken place. He had wished it, and instantly it was effected. The priest moved past him, while his companion dropped to the rear — the companion who forever stumbled in his speed, whereas the older man climbed surely, confidently. And thereafter Limasson walked more easily — as though the relative positions of the three were of importance somehow. The steep ascent of smothering darkness through the woods became less arduous. He was glad to have the younger man behind him.

For the impression had strengthened as they climbed in silence that this ascent pertained to some significant Ceremony, and the idea had grown insistently, almost stealthily, upon him. The movements of himself and his companions, especially the positions each occupied relatively to the other, established some kind of intimacy that resembled speech, suggesting even question and answer. And the entire performance, while occupying hours by his watch, it seemed to him more than once, had been in reality briefer than the flash of a passing thought, so that he saw it within himself — pictorially. He thought of a picture worked in colours upon a strip of elastic. Some one pulled the strip, and the picture stretched. Or some one released it again, and the picture flew back, reduced to a mere stationary speck. All happened in a single speck of time.

And the little change of position, apparently so trivial, gave point to this singular notion working in his under-mind — that this ascent was a ritual and a ceremony as in older days, its significance approaching revelation, however, for the first time — now. Without language, this stole over him; no words could quite describe it. For it came to him that these three formed a unit, himself being in some fashion yet the acknowledged principal, the leader. The labouring porter had no place in it, for this first toiling through the darkness was a preparation, and when the actual climb began, he would disappear, while Limasson himself went first. This idea that they took part together in a Ceremony established itself firmly in him, with the added wonder that, though so often done, he performed it now for the first time with full comprehension, knowledge, truth. Empty of personal desire, indifferent to an ascent that formerly would have thrilled his heart with ambition and delight, he understood that climbing had ever been a ritual for his soul and of his soul, and that power must result from its sincere accomplishment. It was a symbolical ascent.

In words this did not come to him. He felt it, never criticising. That is, he neither rejected nor accepted. It stole most sweetly, grandly, over him. It floated into him while he climbed, yet so convincingly that he had felt his relative position must be changed. The younger man held too prominent a post, or at least a wrong one — in advance. Then, after the change, effected mysteriously as though all recognised it, this line of certainty increased, and there came upon him the big, strange knowledge that all of life is a Ceremony on a giant scale, and that by performing the movements accurately, with sincere fidelity, there may come — knowledge. There was gravity in him from that moment.

This ran in his mind with certainty. Though his thought assumed no form of little phrases, his brain yet furnished detailed statements that clinched the marvellous thing with simile and incident which daily life might apprehend: That knowledge arises from action; that to do the thing invites the teaching and explains it. Action, moreover, is symbolical; a group of men, a family, an entire nation, engaged in those daily movements which are the working out of their destiny, perform a Ceremony which is in direct relation somewhere to the pattern of greater happenings which are the teachings of the Gods. Let the body imitate, reproduce — in a bedroom, in a wood — anywhere — the movements of the stars, and the meaning of those stars shall sink down into the heart. The movements constitute a script, a language. To mimic the gestures of a stranger is to understand his mood, his point of view — to establish a grave and solemn intimacy. Temples are everywhere, for the entire earth is a temple, and the body, House of Royalty, is the biggest temple of them all. To ascertain the pattern its movements trace in daily life, *could* be to determine the relation of that particular ceremony to the Cosmos, and so learn power. The entire system of Pythagoras, he realised, could be taught without a single word — by movements; and in everyday life even the commonest act and vulgarest movement are part of some big Ceremony — a message from the Gods. Ceremony, in a word, is three-dimensional language, and action, therefore, is the language of the Gods. The Gods he had denied were speaking to him ... passing with tumult close across his broken life.... Their passage it was, indeed, that had caused the breaking!

In this cryptic, condensed fashion the great fact came over him — that he and these other two, here and now, took part in some great Ceremony of whose ultimate object as yet he was in ignorance. The impact with which it dropped upon his mind was tremendous. He realised it most fully when he stepped from the darkness of the forest and entered the expanse of glimmering, early light; up till this moment his mind was being prepared only, whereas now he knew. The innate desire to worship which all along had been his, the momentum his religious temperament had acquired during forty years, the yearning to have proof, in a word, that the Gods he once acknowledged were really true, swept back upon him with that violent reaction which denial had aroused.

He wavered where he stood....

Looking about him, then, while the others rearranged burdens the returning porter now discarded, he perceived the astonishing beauty of the time and place, feeling it soak into him as by the very pores of his skin. From all sides this beauty rushed upon him. Some radiant, wingéd sense of wonder sped past him through the silent air. A thrill of ecstasy ran down every nerve. The hair of his head stood up. It was far from unfamiliar to him, this sight of the upper mountain world awakening from its sleep of the summer night, but never before had he stood shuddering thus at its exquisite cold glory, nor felt its significance as now, so mysteriously *within himself*. Some transcendent power that held sublimity was passing across this huge desolate plateau, far more majestic than the mere sunrise among mountains he had so often witnessed. There was Movement. He understood why he had seen his companions insignificant. Again he shivered and looked about him, touched by a solemnity that held deep awe.

Personal life, indeed, was wrecked, destroyed, but something greater was on the way. His fragile alliance with a spiritual world was strengthened. He realised his own past insolence. He became afraid.

III

The treeless plateau, littered with enormous boulders, stretched for miles to right and left, grey in the dusk of very early morning. Behind him dropped thick guardian pine-woods into the sleeping valley that still detained the darkness of the night. Here and there lay patches of deep snow, gleaming faintly through thin rising mist; singing streams of icy water spread everywhere among the stones, soaking the coarse rough grass that was the only sign of vegetation. No life was visible; nothing stirred; nor anywhere was movement, but of the quiet trailing mist and of his own breath that drifted past his face like smoke. Yet through the splendid stillness there *was* movement; that sense of absolute movement which results in stillness — it was owing to the stillness that he became aware of it — so vast, indeed, that only immobility could express it. Thus, on the calmest day in summer, may the headlong rushing of the earth through space seem more real than when the tempest shakes the trees and water on its surface; or great machinery turn with such vertiginous velocity that it appears steady to the deceived function of the eye. For it was not through the eye that this solemn Movement made itself known, but rather through a massive sensation that owned his entire body as its organ. Within the league-long amphitheatre of enormous peaks and precipices that enclosed the plateau, piling themselves upon the horizon, Limasson felt the outline of a Ceremony extended. The pulses of its grandeur poured into him where he stood. Its vast design was knowable because they themselves had traced — were even then tracing — its earthly counterpart in little. And the awe in him increased.

‘This light is false. We have an hour yet before the true dawn,’ he heard the younger man say lightly. ‘The summits still are ghostly. Let us enjoy the sensation, and see what we can make of it.’

And Limasson, looking up startled from his reverie, saw that the far-away heights and towers indeed were heavy with shadow, faint still with the light of stars. It seemed to him they bowed their awful heads and that their stupendous shoulders lowered. They drew together, shutting out the world.

‘True,’ said his companion, ‘and the upper snows still wear the spectral shine of night. But let us now move faster, for we travel very light. The sensations you propose will but delay and weaken us.’

He handed a share of the burdens to his companion and to Limasson. Slowly they all moved forward, and the mountains shut them in.

And two things Limasson noted then, as he shouldered his heavier pack and led the way: first, that he suddenly knew their destination though its purpose still lay hidden; and, secondly, that the porter’s leaving before the ascent proper began signified finally that ordinary climbing was not their real objective. Also — the dawn was a lifting of inner veils from off his mind, rather than a brightening of the visible earth due to the nearing sun. Thick darkness, indeed, draped this enormous, lonely amphitheatre where they moved.

‘You lead us well,’ said the priest a few feet behind him, as he picked his way unfalteringly among the boulders and the streams.

‘Strange that I do so,’ replied Limasson in a low tone, ‘for the way is new to me, and the darkness grows instead of lessening.’ The language seemed hardly of his choosing. He spoke and walked as in a dream.

Far in the rear the voice of the younger man called plaintively after them:

‘You go so fast, I can’t keep up with you,’ and again he stumbled and dropped his ice-axe among the rocks. He seemed for ever stooping to drink the icy water, or clambering off the trail to test the patches of snow as to quality and depth. ‘You’re missing all the excitement,’ he cried repeatedly. ‘There are a hundred pleasures and sensations by the way.’

They paused a moment for him to overtake them; he came up panting and exhausted, making remarks about the fading stars, the wind upon the heights, new routes he longed to try up dangerous couloirs, about everything, it seemed, except the work in hand. There was eagerness in him, the kind of excitement that saps energy and wastes the nervous force, threatening a probable collapse before the arduous object is attained.

‘Keep to the thing in hand,’ replied the priest sternly. ‘We are not really going fast; it is you who are scattering yourself to no purpose. It wears us all. We must husband our resources,’ and he pointed significantly to the pyramid of the Tour du Néant that gleamed above them at an incredible altitude.

‘We are here to amuse ourselves; life is a pleasure, a sensation, or it is nothing,’ grumbled his companion; but there was a gravity in the tone of the older man that discouraged argument and made resistance difficult. The other arranged his pack for the tenth time, twisting his axe through an ingenious scheme of straps and string, and fell silently into line behind his leaders. Limasson moved on again ... and the darkness at length began to lift. Far overhead, at first, the snowy summits shone with a hue less spectral; a delicate pink spread softly from the east; there was a freshening of the chilly wind; then suddenly the highest peak that topped the others by a thousand feet of soaring rock, stepped sharply into sight, half golden and half rose. At the same instant, the vast Movement of the entire scene slowed down; there came one or two terrific gusts of wind in quick succession; a roar like an avalanche of falling stones boomed distantly — and Limasson stopped dead and held his breath.

For something blocked the way before him, something he knew he could not pass. Gigantic and unformed, it seemed part of the architecture of the desolate waste about him, while yet it bulked there, enormous in the trembling dawn, as belonging neither to plain nor mountain. Suddenly it was there, where a moment before had been mere emptiness of air. Its massive outline shifted into visibility as though it had risen from the ground. He stood stock still. A cold that was not of this world turned him rigid in his tracks. A few yards behind him the priest had halted too. Farther in the rear they heard the stumbling tread of the younger man, and the faint calling of his voice — a feeble broken sound as of a man whom sudden fear distressed to helplessness.

‘We’re off the track, and I’ve lost my way,’ the words came on the still air. ‘My axe is gone ... let us put on the rope!... Hark! Do you hear that roar?’ And then a sound as though he came slowly groping on his hands and knees.

‘You have exhausted yourself too soon,’ the priest answered sternly. ‘Stay where you are and rest, for we go no farther. This is the place we sought.’

There was in his tone a kind of ultimate solemnity that for a moment turned Limasson’s attention from the great obstacle that blocked his farther way. The darkness lifted veil by veil, not gradually, but by a series of leaps as when some one inexpertly turns a wick. He perceived then that not a single Grandeur loomed in front, but that others of similar kind, some huger than the first, stood all about him, forming an enclosing circle that hemmed him in.

Then, with a start, he recovered himself. Equilibrium and common sense returned. The trick that sight had played upon him, assisted by the rarefied atmosphere of the heights and by the witchery of dawn, was no uncommon one, after all. The long straining of the eyes to pick the way in an uncertain light so easily deceives perspective. Delusion ever follows abrupt change of focus. These shadowy encircling forms were but the rampart of still distant precipices whose giant walls framed the tremendous amphitheatre to the sky.

Their closeness was a mere gesture of the dusk and distance.

The shock of the discovery produced an instant’s unsteadiness in him that brought bewilderment. He straightened up, raised his head, and looked about him. The cliffs, it seemed to him, shifted back instantly to their accustomed places; as though after all they *had* been close; there was a reeling among the topmost crags; they balanced fearfully, then stood still against a sky already faintly crimson. The roar he heard, that might well have seemed the tumult of their hurrying speed, was in reality but the wind of dawn that rushed against their ribs, beating the echoes out with angry wings. And the lines of trailing mist, streaking the air like proofs of rapid motion, merely coiled and floated in the empty spaces.

He turned to the priest, who had moved up beside him.

‘How strange,’ he said, ‘is this beginning of new light. My sight went all astray for a passing moment. I thought the mountains stood right across my path. And when I looked up just now it seemed they all ran back.’ His voice was small and lost in the great listening air.

The man looked fixedly at him. He had removed his slouch hat, hot with the long ascent, and as he answered, a long thin shadow flitted across his features. A breadth of darkness dropped about them. It was as though a mask were forming. The face that now was covered had been — naked. He was so long in answering that Limasson heard his mind sharpening the sentence like a pencil.

He spoke very slowly. ‘*They* move perhaps even as Their powers move, and Their minutes are our years. Their passage ever is in tumult. There is disorder then among the affairs of men; there is confusion in their minds. There may be ruin and disaster, but out of the wreckage shall issue strong, fresh growth. For like a sea, They pass.’

There was in his mien a grandeur that seemed borrowed marvellously from the mountains. His voice was grave and deep; he made no sign or gesture; and in his manner was a curious steadiness that breathed through the language a kind of sacred prophecy.

Long, thundering gusts of wind passed distantly across the precipices as he spoke. The same moment, expecting apparently no rejoinder to his strange utterance, he stooped and began to unpack his knapsack. The change from the sacerdotal language to this commonplace and practical detail was singularly bewildering.

‘It is the time to rest,’ he added, ‘and the time to eat. Let us prepare.’ And he drew out several small packets and laid them in a row upon the ground.

Awe deepened over Limasson as he watched, and with it a great wonder too. For the words seemed ominous, as though this man, upon the floor of some vast Temple, said: ‘Let us prepare a sacrifice...!’ There flashed into him, out of depths that had hitherto concealed it, a lightning clue that hinted at explanation of the entire strange proceeding — of the abrupt meeting with the strangers, the impulsive acceptance of their project for the great ascent, their grave behaviour as though it were a Ceremonial of immense design, his change of position, the bewildering tricks of sight, and the solemn language, finally, of the older man that corroborated what he himself had deemed at first illusion. In a flying second of time this all swept through him — and with it the sharp desire to turn aside, retreat, to run away.

Noting the movement, or perhaps divining the emotion prompting it, the priest looked up quickly. In his tone was a coldness that seemed as though this scene of wintry desolation uttered words:

‘You have come too far to think of turning back. It is not possible. You stand now at the gates of birth — and death. All that might hinder, you have so bravely cast aside. Be brave now to the end.’

And, as Limasson heard the words, there dropped suddenly into him a new and awful insight into humanity, a power that unerringly discovered the spiritual necessities of others, and therefore of himself. With a shock he realised that the younger man who had accompanied them with increasing difficulty as they climbed higher and higher — was but a shadow of reality. Like the porter, he was but an encumbrance who impeded progress. And he turned his eyes to search the desolate landscape.

‘You will not find him,’ said his companion, ‘for he is gone. Never, unless you weakly call, shall you see him again, nor desire to hear his voice.’ And Limasson realised that in his heart he had all the while disapproved of the man, disliked him for his theatrical fondness of sensation and effect, more, that he had even hated and despised him. Starvation might crawl upon him where he had fallen and eat his life away before he would stir a finger to save him. It was with the older man he now had dreadful business in hand.

‘I am glad,’ he answered, ‘for in the end he must have proved my death — our death!’

And they drew closer round the little circle of food the priest had laid upon the rocky ground, an intimate understanding linking them together in a sympathy that completed Limasson’s bewilderment. There was bread, he saw, and there was salt; there was also a little flask of deep red wine. In the centre of the circle was a miniature fire of sticks the priest had collected from the bushes of wild rhododendron. The smoke rose upwards in a thin blue line. It did not even quiver, so profound was the surrounding stillness of the mountain air, but far away among the precipices ran the boom of falling water, and behind it again, the muffled roar as of peaks and snow-fields that swept with a rolling thunder through the heavens.

‘They are passing,’ the priest said in a low voice, ‘and They know that you are here. You have now the opportunity of a lifetime; for, if you yield acceptance of your own free will, success is sure. You stand before the gates of birth and death. They offer you life.’

‘Yet ... I denied Them!’ He murmured it below his breath.

‘Denial is evocation. You called to them, and They have come. The sacrifice of your little personal life is all They ask. Be brave — and yield it.’

He took the bread as he spoke, and, breaking it in three pieces, he placed one before Limasson, one before himself, and the third he laid upon the flame which first blackened and then consumed it.

‘Eat it and understand,’ he said, ‘for it is the nourishment that shall revive your fading life.’

Next, with the salt, he did the same. Then, raising the flask of wine, he put it to his lips, offering it afterwards to his companion. When both had drunk there still remained the greater part of the contents. He lifted the vessel with both hands reverently towards the sky. He stood upright.

‘The blood of your personal life I offer to Them in your name. By the renunciation which seems to you as death shall you pass through the gates of birth to the life of freedom beyond. For the ultimate sacrifice that They ask of you is — this.’

And bending low before the distant heights, he poured the wine upon the rocky ground.

For a period of time Limasson found no means of measuring, so terrible were the emotions in his heart, the priest remained in this attitude of worship and obeisance. The tumult in the mountains ceased. An absolute hush dropped down upon the world. There seemed a pause in the inner history of the universe itself. All waited — till he rose again. And, when he did so, the mask that had for hours now been spreading across his features, was accomplished. The eyes gazed sternly down into his own. Limasson looked — and recognised. He stood face to face with the man whom he knew best of all others in the world ... himself.

There had been death. There had also been that recovery of splendour which is birth and resurrection.

And the sun that moment, with the sudden surprise that mountains only know, rushed clear above the heights, bathing the landscape and the standing figure with a stainless glory. Into the vast Temple where he knelt, as into that greater inner Temple which is mankind's true House of Royalty, there poured the completing Presence which is — Light.

'For in this way, and in this way only, shall you pass from death to life,' sang a chanting voice he recognised also now for the first time as indubitably his own.

It was marvellous. But the birth of light is ever marvellous. It was anguish; but the pangs of resurrection since time began have been accomplished by the sweetness of fierce pain. For the majority still lie in the pre-natal stage, unborn, unconscious of a definite spiritual existence. In the womb they grope and stifle, depending ever upon another. Denial is ever the call to life, a protest against continued darkness for deliverance. Yet birth is the ruin of all that has hitherto been depended on. There comes then that standing alone which at first seems desolate isolation. The tumult of destruction precedes release.

Limasson rose to his feet, stood with difficulty upright, looked about him from the figure so close now at his side to the snowy summit of that Tour du Néant he would never climb. The roar and thunder of *Their* passage was resumed. It seemed the mountains reeled.

'They are passing,' sang the voice that was beside him and within him too, 'but They have known you, and your offering is accepted. When They come close upon the world there is ever wreckage and disaster in the affairs of men. They bring disorder and confusion into the mind, a confusion that seems final, a disorder that seems to threaten death. For there is tumult in Their Presence, and apparent chaos that seems the abandonment of order. Out of this vast ruin, then, there issues life in new design. The dislocation is its entrance, the dishevelment its strength. There has been birth....'

The sunlight dazzled his eyes. That distant roar, like a wind, came close and swept his face. An icy air, as from a passing star, breathed over him.

'Are you prepared?' he heard.

He knelt again. Without a sign of hesitation or reluctance, he bared his chest to the sun and wind. The flash came swiftly, instantly, descending into his heart with unerring aim. He saw the gleam in the air, he felt the fiery impact of the blow, he even saw the stream gush forth and sink into the rocky ground, far redder than the wine....

He gasped for breath a moment, staggered, reeled, collapsed ... and within the moment, so quickly did all happen, he was aware of hands that supported him and helped him to his feet. But he was too weak to stand. They carried him up to bed. The porter, and the man who had reached across him for the matches five minutes before, intending conversation, stood, one at his feet and the other at his head. As he passed through the vestibule of the hotel, he saw the people staring, and in his hand he crumpled up the unopened letters he had received so short a time ago.

'I really think — I can manage alone,' he thanked them. 'If you will set me down I can walk. I felt dizzy for a moment.'

'The heat in the hall — —' the gentleman began in a quiet, sympathetic voice.

They left him standing on the stairs, watching a moment to see that he had quite recovered. Limasson walked up the two flights to his room without faltering. The momentary dizziness had passed. He felt quite himself again, strong, confident, able to stand alone, able to move forward, able to *climb*.

THE DAMNED

I

‘I’M OVER FORTY, Frances, and rather set in my ways,’ I said good-naturedly, ready to yield if she insisted that our going together on the visit involved her happiness. ‘My work is rather heavy just now too, as you know. The question is, *could* I work there — with a lot of unassorted people in the house?’

‘Mabel doesn’t mention any other people, Bill,’ was my sister’s rejoinder. ‘I gather she’s alone — as well as lonely.’

By the way she looked sideways out of the window at nothing, it was obvious she was disappointed, but to my surprise she did not urge the point; and as I glanced at Mrs. Franklyn’s invitation lying upon her sloping lap, the neat, childish handwriting conjured up a mental picture of the banker’s widow, with her timid, insignificant personality, her pale grey eyes and her expression as of a backward child. I thought, too, of the roomy country mansion her late husband had altered to suit his particular needs, and of my visit to it a few years ago when its barren spaciousness suggested a wing of Kensington Museum fitted up temporarily as a place to eat and sleep in. Comparing it mentally with the poky Chelsea flat where I and my sister kept impecunious house, I realised other points as well. Unworthy details flashed across me to entice: the fine library, the organ, the quiet work-room I should have, perfect service, the delicious cup of early tea, and hot baths at any moment of the day — without a geyser!

‘It’s a longish visit, a month — isn’t it?’ I hedged, smiling at the details that seduced me, and ashamed of my man’s selfishness, yet knowing that Frances expected it of me. ‘There *are* points about it, I admit. If you’re set on my going with you, I could manage it all right.’

I spoke at length in this way because my sister made no answer. I saw her tired eyes gazing into the dreariness of Oakley Street and felt a pang strike through me. After a pause, in which again she said no word, I added: ‘So, when you write the letter, you might hint, perhaps, that I usually work all the morning, and — er — am not a very lively visitor! Then she'll understand, you see.' And I half-rose to return to my diminutive study, where I was slaving, just then, at an absorbing article on Comparative Æsthetic Values in the Blind and Deaf.

But Frances did not move. She kept her grey eyes upon Oakley Street where the evening mist from the river drew mournful perspectives into view. It was late October. We heard the omnibuses thundering across the bridge. The monotony of that broad, characterless street seemed more than usually depressing. Even in June sunshine it was dead, but with autumn its melancholy soaked into every house between King's Road and the Embankment. It washed thought into the past, instead of inviting it hopefully towards the future. For me, its easy width was an avenue through which nameless slums across the river sent creeping messages of depression, and I always regarded it as Winter's main entrance into London — fog, slush, gloom trooped down it every November, waving their forbidding banners till March came to rout them. Its one claim upon my love was that the south wind swept sometimes unobstructed up it, soft with suggestions of the sea. These lugubrious thoughts I naturally kept to myself, though I never ceased to regret the little flat whose cheapness had seduced us. Now, as I watched my sister's impassive face, I realised that perhaps she, too, felt as I felt, yet, brave woman, without betraying it.

'And, look here, Fanny,' I said, putting a hand upon her shoulder as I crossed the room, 'it would be the very thing for you. You're worn out with catering and housekeeping. Mabel is your oldest friend, besides, and you've hardly seen her since *he* died — —'

'She's been abroad for a year, Bill, and only just came back,' my sister interposed. 'She came back rather unexpectedly, though I never thought she would go *there* to live — —' She stopped abruptly. Clearly, she was only speaking half her mind. 'Probably,' she went on, 'Mabel wants to pick up old links again.'

'Naturally,' I put in, 'yourself chief among them.' The veiled reference to the house I let pass. It involved discussing the dead man for one thing.

'I feel *I* ought to go anyhow,' she resumed, 'and of course it would be jollier if you came too. You'd get in such a muddle here by yourself, and eat wrong things, and forget to air the rooms, and — oh, everything!' She looked up laughing. 'Only,' she added, 'there's the British Museum —— ?'

'But there's a big library there,' I answered, 'and all the books of reference I could possibly want. It was of you I was thinking. You could take up your painting again; you always sell half of what you paint. It would be a splendid rest too, and Sussex is a jolly country to walk in. By all means, Fanny, I advise — —'

Our eyes met, as I stammered in my attempts to avoid expressing the thought that hid in both our minds. My sister had a weakness for dabbling in the various 'new' theories of the day, and Mabel, who before her marriage had belonged to foolish societies for investigating the future life to the neglect of the present one, had fostered this undesirable tendency. Her amiable, impressionable temperament was open to every psychic wind that blew. I deplored, detested the whole business. But even more than this I abhorred the later influence that Mr. Franklyn had steeped his wife in, capturing her body and soul in his sombre doctrines. I had dreaded lest my sister also might be caught.

'Now that she is alone again — —'

I stopped short. Our eyes now made pretence impossible, for the truth had slipped out inevitably, stupidly, although unexpressed in definite language. We laughed, turning our faces a moment to look at other things in the room. Frances picked up a book and examined its cover as though she had made an important discovery, while I took my case out and lit a cigarette I did not want to smoke. We left the matter there. I went out of the room before further explanation could cause tension. Disagreements grow into discord from such tiny things — wrong adjectives, or a chance inflection of the voice. Frances had a right to her views of life as much as I had. At least, I reflected comfortably, we had separated upon an agreement this time, recognised mutually, though not actually stated.

And this point of meeting was, oddly enough, our way of regarding some one who was dead. For we had both disliked the husband with a great dislike, and during his three years' married life had only been to the house once — for a week-end visit; arriving late on Saturday, we had left after an early breakfast on Monday morning. Ascribing my sister's dislike to a natural jealousy at losing her old friend, I said merely that he displeased me.

Yet we both knew that the real emotion lay much deeper. Frances, loyal, honourable creature, had kept silence; and beyond saying that house and grounds — he altered one and laid out the other — distressed her as an expression of his personality somehow ("distressed" was the word she used), no further explanation had passed her lips.

Our dislike of his personality was easily accounted for — up to a point, since both of us shared the artist's point of view that a creed, cut to measure and carefully dried, was an ugly thing, and that a dogma to which believers must subscribe or perish everlastingly was a barbarism resting upon cruelty. But while my own dislike was purely due to an abstract worship of Beauty, my sister's had another twist in it, for with her 'new' tendencies, she believed that all religions were an aspect of truth and that no one, even the lowest wretch, could escape 'heaven' in the long run.

Samuel Franklyn, the rich banker, was a man universally respected and admired, and the marriage, though Mabel was fifteen years his junior, won general applause; his bride was an heiress in her own right — breweries — and the story of her conversion at a revivalist meeting where Samuel Franklyn had spoken fervidly of heaven, and terrifyingly of sin, hell and damnation, even contained a touch of genuine romance. She was a brand snatched from the burning; his detailed eloquence had frightened her into heaven; salvation came in the nick of time; his words had plucked her from the edge of that lake of fire and brimstone where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. She regarded him as a hero, sighed her relief upon his saintly shoulder, and accepted the peace he offered her with a grateful resignation.

For her husband was a 'religious man' who successfully combined great riches with the glamour of winning souls. He was a portly figure, though tall, with masterful, big hands, the fingers rather thick and red; and his dignity, that just escaped being pompous, held in it something that was implacable. A convinced assurance, almost remorseless, gleamed in his eyes when he preached especially, and his threats of hell fire must have scared souls stronger than the timid, receptive Mabel whom he married. He clad himself in long frock-coats that buttoned unevenly, big square boots, and trousers that invariably bagged at the knee and were a little short; he wore low collars, spats occasionally, and a tall black hat that was not of silk. His voice was alternately hard and unctuous; and he regarded theatres, ball-rooms and race-courses as the vestibule of that brimstone lake of whose geography he was as positive as of his great banking offices in the City. A philanthropist up to the hilt, however, no one ever doubted his complete sincerity; his convictions were ingrained, his faith borne out by his life — as witness his name upon so many admirable Societies, as treasurer, patron, or heading the donation list. He bulked large in the world of doing good, a broad and stately stone in the rampart against evil. And his heart was genuinely kind and soft for others — who believed as he did.

Yet, in spite of this true sympathy with suffering and his desire to help, he was narrow as a telegraph wire and unbending as a church pillar; he was intensely selfish; intolerant as an officer of the Inquisition, his bourgeois soul constructed a revolting scheme of heaven that was reproduced in miniature in all he did and planned. Faith was the *sine qua non* of salvation, and by 'faith' he meant belief in his own particular view of things— 'which faith, except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.' All the world but his own small, exclusive sect must be damned eternally — a pity, but alas, inevitable. *He* was right.

Yet he prayed without ceasing, and gave heavily to the poor — the only thing he could not give being big ideas to his provincial and suburban deity. Pettier than an insect, and more obstinate than a mule, he had also the superior, sleek humility of a 'chosen one.' He was churchwarden too. He read the Lessons in a 'place of worship,' either chilly or overheated, where neither organ, vestments, nor lighted candles were permitted, but where the odour of hair-wash on the boys' heads in the back rows pervaded the entire building.

This portrait of the banker, who accumulated riches both on earth and in heaven, may possibly be overdrawn, however, because Frances and I were 'artistic temperaments' that viewed the type with a dislike and distrust amounting to contempt. The majority considered Samuel Franklyn a worthy man and a good citizen. The majority, doubtless, held the saner view. A few years more, and he certainly would have been made a baronet. He relieved much suffering in the world, as assuredly as he caused many souls the agonies of torturing fear by his emphasis upon damnation. Had there been one point of beauty in him, we might have been more lenient; only we found it not, and, I admit, took little pains to search. I shall never forget the look of dour forgiveness with which he heard our excuses for missing

Morning Prayers that Sunday morning of our single visit to The Towers. My sister learned that a change was made soon afterwards, prayers being 'conducted' after breakfast instead of before.

The Towers stood solemnly upon a Sussex hill amid park-like modern grounds, but the house cannot better be described — it would be so wearisome for one thing — than by saying that it was a cross between an overgrown, pretentious Norwood villa and one of those saturnine Institutes for cripples the train passes as it slinks ashamed through South London into Surrey. It was 'wealthily' furnished and at first sight imposing, but on closer acquaintance revealed a meagre personality, barren and austere. One looked for Rules and Regulations on the walls, all signed By Order. The place was a prison that shut out 'the world.' There was, of course, no billiard-room, no smoking-room, no room for play of any kind, and the great hall at the back, once a chapel which might have been used for dancing, theatricals, or other innocent amusements, was consecrated in his day to meetings of various kinds, chiefly brigades, temperance or missionary societies. There was a harmonium at one end — on the level floor — a raised dais or platform at the other, and a gallery above for the servants, gardeners and coachmen. It was heated with hot-water pipes, and hung with Doré's pictures, though these latter were soon removed and stored out of sight in the attics as being too unspiritual. In polished, shiny wood, it was a representation in miniature of that poky exclusive Heaven he took about with him, externalising it in all he did and planned, even in the grounds about the house.

Changes in The Towers, Frances told me, had been made during Mabel's year of widowhood abroad — an organ put into the big hall, the library made liveable and recatalogued — when it was permissible to suppose she had found her soul again and returned to her normal, healthy views of life, which included enjoyment and play, literature, music and the arts, without, however, a touch of that trivial thoughtlessness usually termed worldliness. Mrs. Franklyn, as I remembered her, was a quiet little woman, shallow, perhaps, and easily influenced, but sincere as a dog and thorough in her faithful friendships. Her tastes at heart were catholic, and that heart was simple and unimaginative. That she took up with the various movements of the day was sign merely that she was searching in her limited way for a belief that should bring her peace. She was, in fact, a very ordinary woman, her calibre a little less than that of Frances. I knew they used to discuss all kinds of theories together, but as these discussions never resulted in action, I had come to regard her as harmless. Still, I was not sorry when she married, and I did not welcome now a renewal of the former intimacy. The philanthropist had given her no children, or she would have made a good and sensible mother. No doubt she would marry again.

‘Mabel mentions that she’s been alone at The Towers since the end of August,’ Frances told me at tea-time; ‘and I’m sure she feels out of it and lonely. It would be a kindness to go. Besides, I always liked her.’

I agreed. I had recovered from my attack of selfishness. I expressed my pleasure.

‘You’ve written to accept,’ I said, half statement and half question.

Frances nodded. ‘I thanked for you,’ she added quietly, ‘explaining that you were not free at the moment, but that later, if not inconvenient, you might come down for a bit and join me.’

I stared. Frances sometimes had this independent way of deciding things. I was convicted, and punished into the bargain.

Of course there followed argument and explanation, as between brother and sister who were affectionate, but the recording of our talk could be of little interest. It was arranged thus, Frances and I both satisfied. Two days later she departed for The Towers, leaving me alone in the flat with everything planned for my comfort and good behaviour — she was rather a tyrant in her quiet way — and her last words as I saw her off from Charing Cross rang in my head for a long time after she was gone:

‘I’ll write and let you know, Bill. Eat properly, mind, and let me know if anything goes wrong.’

She waved her small gloved hand, nodded her head till the feather brushed the window, and was gone.

II

After the note announcing her safe arrival a week of silence passed, and then a letter came; there were various suggestions for my welfare, and the rest was the usual rambling information and description Frances loved, generously italicised.

'... and we are quite alone,' she went on in her enormous handwriting that seemed such a waste of space and labour, 'though some others are coming presently, I believe. You could work here to your heart's content. Mabel *quite* understands, and says she would love to have you when you feel free to come. She has changed a bit — back to her old natural self: she never mentions *him*. The place has changed too in certain ways: it has more cheerfulness, I think. *She* has put it in, this cheerfulness, spaded it in, if you know what I mean; but it lies about uneasily and is not natural — quite. The organ is a beauty. She must be very rich now, but she's as gentle and sweet as ever. Do you know, Bill, I think he must have *frightened* her into marrying him. I get the impression she was afraid of him.' This last sentence was inked out, but I read it through the scratching; the letters being too big to hide. 'He had an inflexible will beneath all that oily kindness which passed for spiritual. He was a real personality, I mean. I'm sure he'd have sent you and me cheerfully to the stake in another century — *for our own good*. Isn't it odd she never speaks of him, even to me?' This, again, was stroked through, though without the intention to obliterate — merely because it was repetition, probably. 'The only reminder of him in the house now is a big copy of the presentation portrait that stands on the stairs of the Multitechnic Institute at Peckham — you know — that life-size one with his fat hand sprinkled with rings resting on a thick Bible and the other slipped between the buttons of a tight frock-coat. It hangs in the dining-room and rather dominates our meals. I wish Mabel would take it down. I think she'd like to, if she *dared*. There's not a single photograph of him anywhere, even in her own room. Mrs. Marsh is here — you remember her, *his* housekeeper, the wife of the man who got penal servitude for killing a baby or something, — *you* said she robbed him and justified her stealing because the story of the unjust steward was in the Bible! How we laughed over that! *She's* just the same too, gliding about all over the house and turning up when least expected.'

Other reminiscences filled the next two sides of the letter, and ran, without a trace of punctuation, into instructions about a Salamander stove for heating my work-room in the flat; these were followed by things I was to tell the cook, and by requests for several articles she had forgotten and would like sent after her, two of them blouses, with descriptions so lengthy and contradictory that I sighed as I read them— 'unless you come down soon, in which case perhaps you wouldn't mind bringing them; *not* the mauve one

I wear in the evening sometimes, but the pale blue one with lace round the collar and the crinkly front. They're in the cupboard — or the drawer, I'm not sure which — of my bedroom. *Ask Annie* if you're in doubt. Thanks most *awfully*. Send a telegram, remember, and we'll meet you in the motor *any time*. I don't quite know if I shall stay the whole month — *alone*. It all depends....' And she closed the letter, the italicised words increasing recklessly towards the end, with a repetition that Mabel would love to have me 'for myself,' as also to have a 'man in the house,' and that I only had to telegraph the day and the train.... This letter, coming by the second post, interrupted me in a moment of absorbing work, and, having read it through to make sure there was nothing requiring instant attention, I threw it aside and went on with my notes and reading. Within five minutes, however, it was back at me again. That restless thing called 'between the lines' fluttered about my mind. My interest in the Balkan States — political article that had been 'ordered' — faded. Somewhere, somehow I felt disquieted, disturbed. At first I persisted in my work, forcing myself to concentrate, but soon found that a layer of new impressions floated between the article and my attention. It was like a shadow, though a shadow that dissolved upon inspection. Once or twice I glanced up, expecting to find some one in the room, that the door had opened unobserved and Annie was waiting for instructions. I heard the 'buses thundering across the bridge. I was aware of Oakley Street. Montenegro and the blue Adriatic melted into the October haze along that depressing Embankment that aped a river bank, and sentences from the letter flashed before my eyes and stung me. Picking it up and reading it through more carefully, I rang the bell and told Annie to find the blouses and pack them for the post, showing her finally the written description, and resenting the superior smile with which she at once interrupted, '*I* know them, sir,' and disappeared.

But it was not the blouses: it was that exasperating thing 'between the lines' that put an end to my work with its elusive teasing nuisance. The first sharp impression is alone of value in such a case, for once analysis begins the imagination constructs all kinds of false interpretation. The more I thought, the more I grew fuddled. The letter, it seemed to me, wanted to say another thing; instead the eight sheets *conveyed* it merely. It came to the edge of disclosure, then halted. There was something on the writer's mind, and I felt uneasy. Studying the sentences brought, however, no revelation, but increased confusion only; for while the uneasiness remained, the first clear hint had vanished. In the end I closed my books and went out to look up another matter at the British Museum Library. Perhaps I should discover it that way — by turning the mind in a totally new direction. I lunched at the Express Dairy in Oxford Street close by, and telephoned to Annie that I would be home to tea at five.

And at tea, tired physically and mentally after breathing the exhausted air of the Rotunda for five hours, my mind suddenly delivered up its original impression, vivid and clear-cut; no proof accompanied the revelation; it was mere presentiment, but convincing. Frances was disturbed in her mind, her orderly, sensible, housekeeping mind; she was uneasy, even perhaps afraid; something in the house distressed her, and she had need of me. Unless I went down, her time of rest and change, her quite necessary holiday, in fact, would be spoilt. She was too unselfish to say this, but it ran everywhere between the lines. I saw it clearly now. Mrs. Franklyn, moreover — and that meant Frances too — would like a 'man in the house.' It was a disagreeable phrase, a suggestive way of hinting something she dared not state definitely. The two women in that great, lonely barrack of a house were afraid.

My sense of duty, affection, unselfishness, whatever the composite emotion may be termed, was stirred; also my vanity. I acted quickly, lest reflection should warp clear, decent judgment. 'Annie,' I said, when she answered the bell, 'you need not send those blouses by the post. I'll take them down to-morrow when I go. I shall be away a week or two, possibly longer.' And, having looked up a train, I hastened out to telegraph before I could change my fickle mind.

But no desire came that night to change my mind. I was doing the right, the necessary thing. I was even in something of a hurry to get down to The Towers as soon as possible. I chose an early afternoon train.

III

A telegram had told me to come to a town ten miles from the house, so I was saved the crawling train to the local station, and travelled down by an express. As soon as we left London the fog cleared off, and an autumn sun, though without heat in it, painted the landscape with golden browns and yellows. My spirits rose as I lay back in the luxurious motor and sped between the woods and hedges. Oddly enough, my anxiety of overnight had disappeared. It was due, no doubt, to that exaggeration of detail which reflection in loneliness brings. Frances and I had not been separated for over a year, and her letters from The Towers told so little. It had seemed unnatural to be deprived of those intimate particulars of mood and feeling I was accustomed to. We had such confidence in one another, and our affection was so deep. Though she was but five years younger than myself, I regarded her as a child. My attitude was fatherly. In return, she certainly mothered me with a solicitude that never cloyed. I felt no desire to marry while she was still alive. She painted in water-colours with a reasonable success, and kept house for me; I wrote, reviewed books and lectured on æsthetics; we were a humdrum couple of quasi-artists, well satisfied with life, and all I feared for her was that she might become a suffragette or be taken captive by one of these wild theories that caught her imagination sometimes, and that Mabel, for one, had fostered. As for myself, no doubt she deemed me a trifle solid or stolid — I forget which word she preferred — but on the whole there was just sufficient difference of opinion to make intercourse suggestive without monotony, and certainly without quarrelling. Drawing in deep draughts of the stinging autumn air, I felt happy and exhilarated. It was like going for a holiday, with comfort at the end of the journey instead of bargaining for centimes.

But my heart sank noticeably the moment the house came into view. The long drive, lined with hostile monkey trees and formal wellingtonias that were solemn and sedate, was mere extension of the miniature approach to a thousand semi-detached suburban ‘residences’; and the appearance of The Towers, as we turned the corner with a rush, suggested a commonplace climax to a story that had begun interestingly, almost thrillingly. A villa had escaped from the shadow of the Crystal Palace, thumped its way down by night, grown suddenly monstrous in a shower of rich rain, and settled itself insolently to stay. Ivy climbed about the opulent red-brick walls, but climbed neatly and with disfiguring effect, sham as on a prison or — the simile made me smile — an orphan asylum. There was no hint of the comely roughness of untidy ivy on a ruin. Clipped, trained and precise it was, as on a brand-new protestant church. I swear there was not a bird’s nest nor a single earwig in it anywhere. About the porch it was particularly thick, smothering a seventeenth-century lamp with a contrast that was quite horrible. Extensive glass-houses spread away on the farther side of the house; the numerous towers to which the building owed its name seemed made to hold school bells; and the window-sills, thick with potted flowers, made me think of the desolate suburbs of Brighton or Bexhill. In a commanding position upon the crest of a hill, it overlooked miles of undulating, wooded country southwards to the Downs, but behind it, to the north, thick banks of ilex, holly and privet protected it from the cleaner and more stimulating winds. Hence, though highly placed, it was shut in. Three years had passed since I last set eyes upon it, but the unsightly memory I had retained was justified by the reality. The place was deplorable.

It is my habit to express my opinions audibly sometimes, when impressions are strong enough to warrant it; but now I only sighed 'Oh, dear,' as I extricated my legs from many rugs and went into the house. A tall parlour-maid, with the bearing of a grenadier, received me, and standing behind her was Mrs. Marsh, the housekeeper, whom I remembered because her untidy back hair had suggested to me that it had been burnt. I went at once to my room, my hostess already dressing for dinner, but Frances came in to see me just as I was struggling with my black tie that had got tangled like a bootlace. She fastened it for me in a neat, effective bow, and while I held my chin up for the operation, staring blankly at the ceiling, the impression came — I wondered, was it her touch that caused it? — that something in her trembled. Shrinking perhaps is the truer word. Nothing in her face or manner betrayed it, nor in her pleasant, easy talk while she tidied my things and scolded my slovenly packing, as her habit was, questioning me about the servants at the flat. The blouses, though right, were crumpled, and my scolding was deserved. There was no impatience even. Yet somehow or other the suggestion of a shrinking reserve and holding back reached my mind. She had been lonely, of course, but it was more than that; she was glad that I had come, yet for some reason unstated she could have wished that I had stayed away. We discussed the news that had accumulated during our brief separation, and in doing so the impression, at best exceedingly slight, was forgotten. My chamber was large and beautifully furnished; the hall and dining-room of our flat would have gone into it with a good remainder; yet it was not a place I could settle down in for work. It conveyed the idea of impermanence, making me feel transient as in a hotel bedroom. This, of course, was the fact. But some rooms convey a settled, lasting hospitality even in a hotel; this one did not; and as I was accustomed to work in the room I slept in, at least when visiting, a slight frown must have crept between my eyes.

'Mabel has fitted a work-room for you just out of the library,' said the clairvoyant Frances. 'No one will disturb you there, and you'll have fifteen thousand books all catalogued within easy reach. There's a private staircase too. You can breakfast in your room and slip down in your dressing-gown if you want to.' She laughed. My spirits took a turn upwards as absurdly as they had gone down.

'And how are *you*?' I asked, giving her a belated kiss. 'It's jolly to be together again. I did feel rather lost without you, I'll admit.'

'That's natural,' she laughed. 'I'm so glad.'

She looked well and had country colour in her cheeks. She informed me that she was eating and sleeping well, going out for little walks with Mabel, painting bits of scenery again, and enjoying a complete change and rest; and yet, for all her brave description, the words somehow did not quite ring true. Those last words in particular did not ring true. There lay in her manner, just out of sight, I felt, this suggestion of the exact reverse — of unrest, shrinking, almost of anxiety. Certain small strings in her seemed over-tight. 'Keyed-up' was the slang expression that crossed my mind. I looked rather searchingly into her face as she was telling me this.

'Only — the evenings,' she added, noticing my query, yet rather avoiding my eyes, 'the evenings are — well, rather heavy sometimes, and I find it difficult to keep awake.'

'The strong air after London makes you drowsy,' I suggested, 'and you like to get early to bed.'

Frances turned and looked at me for a moment steadily. 'On the contrary, Bill, I dislike going to bed — here. And Mabel goes so early.' She said it lightly enough, fingering the disorder upon my dressing-table in such a stupid way that I saw her mind was working in another direction altogether. She looked up suddenly with a kind of nervousness from the brush and scissors. 'Billy,' she said abruptly, lowering her voice, 'isn't it odd, but I *hate* sleeping alone here? I can't make it out quite; I've never felt such a thing before in my life. Do you — think it's all nonsense?' And she laughed, with her lips but not with her eyes; there was a note of defiance in her I failed to understand.

‘Nothing a nature like yours feels strongly is nonsense, Frances,’ I replied soothingly.

But I, too, answered with my lips only, for another part of my mind was working elsewhere, and among uncomfortable things. A touch of bewilderment passed over me. I was not certain how best to continue. If I laughed she would tell me no more, yet if I took her too seriously the strings would tighten further. Instinctively, then, this flashed rapidly across me: that something of what she felt, I had also felt, though interpreting it differently. Vague it was, as the coming of rain or storm that announce themselves hours in advance with their hint of faint, unsettling excitement in the air. I had been but a short hour in the house, — big, comfortable, luxurious house, — but had experienced this sense of being unsettled, unfixed, fluctuating — a kind of impermanence that transient lodgers in hotels must feel, but that a guest in a friend’s home ought not to feel, be the visit short or long. To Frances, an impressionable woman, the feeling had come in the terms of alarm. She disliked sleeping alone, while yet she longed to sleep. The precise idea in my mind evaded capture, merely brushing through me, three-quarters out of sight; I realised only that we both felt the same thing, and that neither of us could get at it clearly. Degrees of unrest we felt, but the actual thing did not disclose itself. It did not happen.

I felt strangely at sea for a moment. Frances would interpret hesitation as endorsement, and encouragement might be the last thing that could help her.

‘Sleeping in a strange house,’ I answered at length, ‘is often difficult at first, and one feels lonely. After fifteen months in our tiny flat one feels lost and uncared-for in a big house. It’s an uncomfortable feeling — I know it well. And this *is* a barrack, isn’t it? The masses of furniture only make it worse. One feels in storage somewhere underground — the furniture doesn’t furnish. One must never yield to fancies, though — —’

Frances looked away towards the windows; she seemed disappointed a little.

‘After our thickly-populated Chelsea,’ I went on quickly, ‘it seems isolated here.’

But she did not turn back, and clearly I was saying the wrong thing. A wave of pity rushed suddenly over me. Was she really frightened, perhaps? She was imaginative, I knew, but never moody; common sense was strong in her, though she had her times of hypersensitiveness. I caught the echo of some unreasoning, big alarm in her. She stood there, gazing across my balcony towards the sea of wooded country that spread dim and vague in the obscurity of the dusk. The deepening shadows entered the room, I fancied, from the grounds below. Following her abstracted gaze a moment, I experienced a curious sharp desire to leave, to escape. Out yonder was wind and space and freedom. This enormous building was oppressive, silent, still. Great catacombs occurred to me, things beneath the ground, imprisonment and capture. I believe I even shuddered a little.

I touched her shoulder. She turned round slowly, and we looked with a certain deliberation into each other's eyes.

'Fanny,' I asked, more gravely than I intended, 'you are not frightened, are you? Nothing has happened, has it?'

She replied with emphasis, 'Of course not! How could it — I mean, why should I?' She stammered, as though the wrong sentence flustered her a second. 'It's simply — that I have this ter — this dislike of sleeping alone.'

Naturally, my first thought was how easy it would be to cut our visit short. But I did not say this. Had it been a true solution, Frances would have said it for me long ago.

'Wouldn't Mabel double-up with you?' I said instead, 'or give you an adjoining room, so that you could leave the door between you open? There's space enough, heaven knows.'

And then, as the gong sounded in the hall below for dinner, she said, as with an effort, this thing:

'Mabel did ask me — on the third night — after I had told her. But I declined.'

'You'd rather be alone than with her?' I asked, with a certain relief.

Her reply was so gravely given, a child would have known there was more behind it: 'Not that; but that she did not really want it.'

I had a moment's intuition and acted on it impulsively. 'She feels it too, perhaps, but wishes to face it by herself — and get over it?'

My sister bowed her head, and the gesture made me realise of a sudden how grave and solemn our talk had grown, as though some portentous thing were under discussion. It had come of itself — indefinite as a gradual change of temperature. Yet neither of us knew its nature, for apparently neither of us could state it plainly. Nothing happened, even in our words.

'That *was* my impression,' she said, ' — that if she yields to it she encourages it. And a habit forms so easily. Just think,' she added with a faint smile that was the first sign of lightness she had yet betrayed, 'what a nuisance it would be — everywhere — if everybody was afraid of being alone — like that.'

I snatched readily at the chance. We laughed a little, though it was a quiet kind of laughter that seemed wrong. I took her arm and led her towards the door.

'Disastrous, in fact,' I agreed.

She raised her voice to its normal pitch again, as I had done. 'No doubt it will pass,' she said, 'now that you have come. Of course, it's chiefly my imagination.' Her tone was lighter, though nothing could convince me that the matter itself was light — just then. 'And in any case,' tightening her grip on my arm as we passed into the bright enormous corridor and caught sight of Mrs. Franklyn waiting in the cheerless hall below, 'I'm *very* glad you're here, Bill, and Mabel, I know, is too.'

'If it doesn't pass,' I just had time to whisper with a feeble attempt at jollity, 'I'll come at night and snore outside your door. After that you'll be so glad to get rid of me that you won't mind being alone.'

'That's a bargain,' said Frances.

I shook my hostess by the hand, made a banal remark about the long interval since last we met, and walked behind them into the great dining-room, dimly lit by candles, wondering in my heart how long my sister and I should stay, and why in the world we had ever left our cosy little flat to enter this desolation of riches and false luxury at all. The unsightly picture of the late Samuel Franklyn, Esq., stared down upon me from the farther end of the room above the mighty mantelpiece. He looked, I thought, like some pompous Heavenly Butler who denied to all the world, and to us in particular, the right of entry without presentation cards signed by his hand as proof that we belonged to his own exclusive set. The majority, to his deep grief, and in spite of all his prayers on their behalf, must burn and 'perish everlastingly.'

IV

With the instinct of the healthy bachelor I always try to make myself a nest in the place I live in, be it for long or short. Whether visiting, in lodging-house, or in hotel, the first essential is this nest — one's own things built into the walls as a bird builds in its feathers. It may look desolate and uncomfortable enough to others, because the central detail is neither bed nor wardrobe, sofa nor arm-chair, but a good solid writing-table that does not wriggle, and that has wide elbow-room. And The Towers is vividly described for me by the single fact that I could not 'nest' there. I took several days to discover this, but the first impression of impermanence was truer than I knew. The feathers of the mind refused here to lie one way. They ruffled, pointed and grew wild.

Luxurious furniture does not mean comfort; I might as well have tried to settle down in the sofa and arm-chair department of a big shop. My bedroom was easily managed; it was the private work-room, prepared especially for my reception, that made me feel alien and outcast. Externally, it was all one could desire: an ante-chamber to the great library, with not one, but two generous oak tables, to say nothing of smaller ones against the walls with capacious drawers. There were reading-desks, mechanical devices for holding books, perfect light, quiet as in a church, and no approach but across the huge adjoining room. Yet it did not invite.

'I hope you'll be able to work here,' said my little hostess the next morning, as she took me in — her only visit to it while I stayed in the house — and showed me the ten-volume Catalogue. 'It's absolutely quiet and no one will disturb you.'

'If you can't, Bill, you're not much good,' laughed Frances, who was on her arm. 'Even I could write in a study like this!'

I glanced with pleasure at the ample tables, the sheets of thick blotting-paper, the rulers, sealing-wax, paper-knives, and all the other immaculate paraphernalia. ‘It’s perfect,’ I answered with a secret thrill, yet feeling a little foolish. This was for Gibbon or Carlyle, rather than for my pot-boiling insignificancies. ‘If I can’t write masterpieces here, it’s certainly not *your* fault,’ and I turned with gratitude to Mrs. Franklyn. She was looking straight at me, and there was a question in her small pale eyes I did not understand. Was she noting the effect upon me, I wondered?

‘You’ll write here — perhaps a story about the house,’ she said; ‘Thompson will bring you anything you want; you only have to ring.’ She pointed to the electric bell on the central table, the wire running neatly down the leg. ‘No one has ever worked here before, and the library has been hardly used since it was put in. So there’s no previous atmosphere to affect your imagination — er — adversely.’

We laughed. ‘Bill isn’t that sort,’ said my sister; while I wished they would go out and leave me to arrange my little nest and set to work.

I thought, of course, it was the huge listening library that made me feel so inconsiderable — the fifteen thousand silent, staring books, the solemn aisles, the deep, eloquent shelves. But when the women had gone and I was alone, the beginning of the truth crept over me, and I felt that first hint of disconsolateness which later became an imperative No. The mind shut down, images ceased to rise and flow. I read, made copious notes, but I wrote no single line at The Towers. Nothing completed itself there. Nothing happened.

The morning sunshine poured into the library through ten long narrow windows; birds were singing; the autumn air, rich with a faint aroma of November melancholy that stung the imagination pleasantly, filled my ante-chamber. I looked out upon the undulating wooded landscape, hemmed in by the sweep of distant Downs, and I tasted a whiff of the sea. Rooks cawed as they floated above the elms, and there were lazy cows in the nearer meadows. A dozen times I tried to make my nest and settle down to work, and a dozen times, like a turning fastidious dog upon a hearth-rug, I rearranged my chair and books and papers. The temptation of the Catalogue and shelves, of course, was accountable for much, yet not, I felt, for all. That was a manageable seduction. My work, moreover, was not of the creative kind that requires absolute absorption; it was the mere readable presentation of data I had accumulated. My note-books were charged with facts ready to tabulate — facts, too, that interested me keenly. A mere effort of the will was necessary, and concentration of no difficult kind. Yet, somehow, it seemed beyond me: something for ever pushed the facts into disorder ... and in the end I sat in the sunshine, dipping into a dozen books selected from the shelves outside, vexed with myself and only half-enjoying it. I felt restless. I wanted to be elsewhere.

And even while I read, attention wandered. Frances, Mabel, her late husband, the house and grounds, each in turn and sometimes all together, rose uninvited into the stream of thought, hindering any consecutive flow of work. In disconnected fashion came these pictures that interrupted concentration, yet presenting themselves as broken fragments of a bigger thing my mind already groped for unconsciously. They fluttered round this hidden thing of which they were aspects, fugitive interpretations, no one of them bringing complete revelation. There was no adjective, such as pleasant or unpleasant, that I could attach to what I felt, beyond that the result was unsettling. Vague as the atmosphere of a dream, it yet persisted, and I could not dissipate it. Isolated words or phrases in the lines I read sent questions scouring across my mind, sure sign that the deeper part of me was restless and ill at ease.

Rather trivial questions too — half-foolish interrogations, as of a puzzled or curious child: Why was my sister afraid to sleep alone, and why did her friend feel a similar repugnance, yet seek to conquer it? Why was the solid luxury of the house without comfort, its shelter without the sense of permanence? Why had Mrs. Franklyn asked *us* to come, artists, unbelieving vagabonds, types at the farthest possible remove from the saved sheep of her husband’s household? Had a reaction set in against the hysteria of her conversion? I had seen no signs of religious fervour in her; her atmosphere was that of an ordinary, high-minded woman, yet a woman of the world. Lifeless, though, a little, perhaps, now that I came to think about it: she had made no definite impression upon me of any kind. And my thoughts ran vaguely after this fragile clue.

Closing my book, I let them run. For, with this chance reflection came the discovery that I could not *see* her clearly — could not feel her soul, her personality. Her face, her small pale eyes, her dress and body and walk, all these stood before me like a photograph; but her Self evaded me. She seemed not there, lifeless, empty, a shadow — nothing. The picture was disagreeable, and I put it by. Instantly she melted out, as though light thought had conjured up a phantom that had no real existence. And at that very moment, singularly enough, my eye caught sight of her moving past the window, going silently along the gravel path. I watched her, a sudden new sensation gripping me. ‘There goes a prisoner,’ my thought instantly ran, ‘one who wishes to escape, but cannot.’

What brought the outlandish notion, heaven only knows. The house was of her own choice, she was twice an heiress, and the world lay open at her feet. Yet she stayed — unhappy, frightened, caught. All this flashed over me, and made a sharp impression even before I had time to dismiss it as absurd. But a moment later explanation offered itself, though it seemed as far-fetched as the original impression. My mind, being logical, was obliged to provide something, apparently. For Mrs. Franklyn, while dressed to go out, with thick walking-boots, a pointed stick, and a motor-cap tied on with a veil as for the windy lanes, was obviously content to go no farther than the little garden paths. The costume was a sham and a pretence. It was this, and her lithe, quick movements that suggested a caged creature — a creature tamed by fear and cruelty that cloaked themselves in kindness — pacing up and down, unable to realise why it got no farther, but always met the same bars in exactly the same place. The mind in her was barred.

I watched her go along the paths and down the steps from one terrace to another, until the laurels hid her altogether; and into this mere imagining of a moment came a hint of something slightly disagreeable, for which my mind, search as it would, found no explanation at all. I remembered then certain other little things. They dropped into the picture of their own accord. In a mind not deliberately hunting for clues, pieces of a puzzle sometimes come together in this way, bringing revelation, so that for a second there flashed across me, vanishing instantly again before I could consider it, a large, distressing thought that I can only describe vaguely as a Shadow. Dark and ugly, oppressive certainly it might be described, with something torn and dreadful about the edges that suggested pain and strife and terror. The interior of a prison with two rows of occupied condemned cells, seen years ago in New York, sprang to memory after it — the connection between the two impossible to surmise even. But the ‘certain other little things’ mentioned above were these: that Mrs. Franklyn, in last night’s dinner talk, had always referred to ‘this house,’ but never called it ‘home’;

and had emphasised unnecessarily, for a well-bred woman, our ‘great kindness’ in coming down to stay so long with her. Another time, in answer to my futile compliment about the ‘stately rooms,’ she said quietly, ‘It is an enormous house for so small a party; but I stay here very little, and only till I get it straight again.’ The three of us were going up the great staircase to bed as this was said, and, not knowing quite her meaning, I dropped the subject. It edged delicate ground, I felt. Frances added no word of her own. It now occurred to me abruptly that ‘stay’ was the word made use of, when ‘live’ would have been more natural. How insignificant to recall! Yet why did they suggest themselves just at this moment?... And, on going to Frances’s room to make sure she was not nervous or lonely, I realised abruptly, that Mrs. Franklyn, of course, had talked with *her* in a confidential sense that I, as a mere visiting brother, could not share. Frances had told me nothing. I might easily have wormed it out of her, had I not felt that for us to discuss further our hostess and her house merely because we were under the roof together, was not quite nice or loyal.

‘I’ll call you, Bill, if I’m scared,’ she had laughed as we parted, my room being just across the big corridor from her own. I had fallen asleep, thinking what in the world was meant by ‘getting it straight again.’

And now in my ante-chamber to the library, on the second morning, sitting among piles of foolscap and sheets of spotless blotting-paper, all useless to me, these slight hints came back and helped to frame the big, vague Shadow I have mentioned. Up to the neck in this Shadow, almost drowned, yet just treading water, stood the figure of my hostess in her walking costume. Frances and I seemed swimming to her aid. The Shadow was large enough to include both house and grounds, but farther than that I could not see.... Dismissing it, I fell to reading my purloined book again. Before I turned another page, however, another startling detail leaped out at me: the figure of Mrs. Franklyn in the Shadow was not living. It floated helplessly, like a doll or puppet that has no life in it. It was both pathetic and dreadful.

Any one who sits in reverie thus, of course, may see similar ridiculous pictures when the will no longer guides construction. The incongruities of dreams are thus explained. I merely record the picture as it came. That it remained by me for several days, just as vivid dreams do, is neither here nor there. I did not allow myself to dwell upon it. The curious thing, perhaps, is that from this moment I date my inclination, though not yet my desire, to leave. I purposely say ‘to leave.’ I cannot quite remember when the word changed to that aggressive, frantic thing which is escape.

V

We were left delightfully to ourselves in this pretentious country mansion with the soul of a villa. Frances took up her painting again, and, the weather being propitious, spent hours out of doors, sketching flowers, trees and nooks of woodland, garden, even the house itself where bits of it peered suggestively across the orchards. Mrs. Franklyn seemed always busy about something or other, and never interfered with us except to propose motoring, tea in another part of the lawn, and so forth. She flitted everywhere, preoccupied, yet apparently doing nothing. The house engulfed her rather. No visitors called. For one thing, she was not supposed to be back from abroad yet; and for another, I think, the neighbourhood — her husband’s neighbourhood — was puzzled by her sudden cessation from good works. Brigades and temperance societies did not ask to hold their meetings in the big hall, and the vicar arranged the school-treats in another’s field without explanation. The full-length portrait in the dining-room, and the presence of the housekeeper with the ‘burnt’ back-hair, indeed, were the only reminders of the man who once had lived here. Mrs. Marsh retained her place in silence, well-paid sinecure as it doubtless was, yet with no hint of that suppressed disapproval one might have expected from her. Indeed there was nothing positive to disapprove, since nothing ‘worldly’ entered grounds or building. In her master’s lifetime she had been another ‘brand snatched from the burning,’ and it had then been her custom to give vociferous ‘testimony’ at the revival meetings where he adorned the platform and led in streams of prayer. I saw her sometimes on the stairs, hovering, wandering, half-watching and half-listening, and the idea came to me once that this woman somehow formed a link with the departed influence of her bigoted employer. She, alone among us, *belonged* to the house, and looked at home there. When I saw her talking — oh, with such correct and respectful mien — to Mrs. Franklyn, I had the feeling that for all her unaggressive attitude, she yet exerted some influence that sought to make her mistress stay in the building for ever — live there. She would prevent her escape, prevent her ‘getting it straight again,’ thwart somehow her will to freedom, if she could. The idea in me was of the most fleeting kind. But another time, when I came down late at night to get a book from the library ante-chamber, and found her sitting in the hall — alone — the impression left upon me was the reverse of fleeting. I can never forget the vivid, disagreeable effect it produced upon me. What was she doing there at half-past eleven at night, all alone in the darkness? She was sitting upright, stiff, in a big chair below the clock. It gave me a turn. It was so incongruous and odd. She rose quietly as I turned the corner of the stairs, and asked me respectfully, her eyes cast down as usual, whether I had finished with the library, so that she might lock up. There was no more to it than that; but the picture stayed with me — unpleasantly.

These various impressions came to me at odd moments, of course, and not in a single sequence as I now relate them. I was hard at work before three days were past, not writing, as explained, but reading, making notes, and gathering material from the library for future use. It was in chance moments that these curious flashes came, catching me unawares with a touch of surprise that sometimes made me start. For they proved that my under-mind was still conscious of the Shadow, and that far away out of sight lay the cause of it that left me with a vague unrest, unsettled, seeking to 'nest' in a place that did not want me. Only when this deeper part knows harmony, perhaps, can good brain work result, and my inability to write was thus explained. Certainly, I was always seeking for something here I could not find — an explanation that continually evaded me. Nothing but these trivial hints offered themselves. Lumped together, however, they had the effect of defining the Shadow a little. I became more and more aware of its very real existence. And, if I have made little mention of Frances and my hostess in this connection, it is because they contributed at first little or nothing towards the discovery of what this story tries to tell. Our life was wholly external, normal, quiet, and uneventful; conversation banal — Mrs. Franklyn's conversation in particular. They said nothing that suggested revelation. Both were in this Shadow, and both knew that they were in it, but neither betrayed by word or act a hint of interpretation. They talked privately, no doubt, but of that I can report no details.

And so it was that, after ten days of a very commonplace visit, I found myself looking straight into the face of a Strangeness that defied capture at close quarters. 'There's something here that never happens,' were the words that rose in my mind, 'and that's why none of us can speak of it.' And as I looked out of the window and watched the vulgar blackbirds, with toes turned in, boring out their worms, I realised sharply that even they, as indeed everything large and small in the house and grounds, shared this strangeness, and were twisted out of normal appearance because of it. Life, as expressed in the entire place, was crumpled, dwarfed, emasculated. God's meanings here were crippled, His love of joy was stunted. Nothing in the garden danced or sang. There was hate in it. 'The Shadow,' my thought hurried on to completion, 'is a manifestation of hate; and hate is the Devil.' And then I sat back frightened in my chair, for I knew that I had partly found the truth.

Leaving my books I went out into the open. The sky was overcast, yet the day by no means gloomy, for a soft, diffused light oozed through the clouds and turned all things warm and almost summery. But I saw the grounds now in their nakedness because I understood. Hate means strife, and the two together weave the robe that terror wears. Having no so-called religious beliefs myself, nor belonging to any set of dogmas called a creed, I could stand outside these feelings and observe. Yet they soaked into me sufficiently for me to grasp sympathetically what others, with more cabined souls (I flattered myself), might feel. That picture in the dining-room stalked everywhere, hid behind every tree, peered down upon me from the peaked ugliness of the bourgeois towers, and left the impress of its powerful hand upon every bed of flowers. 'You must not do this, you must not do that,' went past me through the air. 'You must not leave these narrow paths,' said the rigid iron railings of black. 'You shall not walk here,' was written on the lawns. 'Keep to the steps,' 'Don't pick the flowers; make no noise of laughter, singing, dancing,' was placarded all over the rose-garden, and 'Trespassers will be — not prosecuted but — *destroyed*' hung from the crest of monkey-tree and holly. Guarding the ends of each artificial terrace stood gaunt, implacable policemen, warders, gaolers. 'Come with us,' they chanted, 'or be damned eternally.'

I remember feeling quite pleased with myself that I had discovered this obvious explanation of the prison-feeling the place breathed out. That the posthumous influence of heavy old Samuel Franklyn might be an inadequate solution did not occur to me. By 'getting the place straight again,' his widow, of course, meant forgetting the glamour of fear and foreboding his depressing creed had temporarily forced upon her; and Frances, delicately-minded being, did not speak of it because it was the influence of the man her friend had loved. I felt lighter; a load was lifted from me. ‘To trace the unfamiliar to the familiar,’ came back a sentence I had read somewhere, ‘is to understand.’ It was a real relief. I could talk with Frances now, even with my hostess, no danger of treading clumsily. For the key was in my hands. I might even help to dissipate the Shadow, ‘to get it straight again.’ It seemed, perhaps, our long invitation was explained!

I went into the house laughing — at myself a little. ‘Perhaps after all the artist’s outlook, with no hard and fast dogmas, is as narrow as the others! How small humanity is! And why is there no possible and true combination of *all* outlooks?’

The feeling of ‘unsettling’ was very strong in me just then, in spite of my big discovery which was to clear everything up. And at that moment I ran into Frances on the stairs, with a portfolio of sketches under her arm.

It came across me then abruptly that, although she had worked a great deal since we came, she had shown me nothing. It struck me suddenly as odd, unnatural. The way she tried to pass me now confirmed my new-born suspicion that — well, that her results were hardly what they ought to be.

‘Stand and deliver!’ I laughed, stepping in front of her. ‘I’ve seen nothing you’ve done since you’ve been here, and as a rule you show me all your things. I believe they are atrocious and degrading!’ Then my laughter froze.

She made a sly gesture to slip past me, and I almost decided to let her go, for the expression that flashed across her face shocked me. She looked uncomfortable and ashamed; the colour came and went a moment in her cheeks, making me think of a child detected in some secret naughtiness. It was almost fear.

‘It’s because they’re not finished then?’ I said, dropping the tone of banter, ‘or because they’re too good for me to understand?’ For my criticism of painting, she told me, was crude and ignorant sometimes. ‘But you’ll let me see them later, won’t you?’

Frances, however, did not take the way of escape I offered. She changed her mind. She drew the portfolio from beneath her arm instead. ‘You can see them if you *really* want to, Bill,’ she said quietly, and her tone reminded me of a nurse who says to a boy just grown out of childhood, ‘you are old enough now to look upon horror and ugliness — only I don’t advise it.’

‘I do want to,’ I said, and made to go downstairs with her. But, instead, she said in the same low voice as before, ‘Come up to my room, we shall be undisturbed there.’ So I guessed that she had been on her way to show the paintings to our hostess, but did not care for us all three to see them together. My mind worked furiously.

‘Mabel asked me to do them,’ she explained in a tone of submissive horror, once the door was shut, ‘in fact, she begged it of me. You know how persistent she is in her quiet way. I — er — had to.’

She flushed and opened the portfolio on the little table by the window, standing behind me as I turned the sketches over — sketches of the grounds and trees and garden. In the first moment of inspection, however, I did not take in clearly why my sister’s sense of modesty had been offended. For my attention flashed a second elsewhere. Another bit of the puzzle had dropped into place, defining still further the nature of what I called ‘the Shadow.’ Mrs. Franklyn, I now remembered, had suggested to me in the library that I might perhaps write something about the place, and I had taken it for one of her banal sentences and paid no further attention. I realised now that it was said in earnest. She wanted our interpretations, as expressed in our respective ‘talents,’ painting and writing. Her invitation *was* explained. She left us to ourselves on purpose.

‘I should like to tear them up,’ Frances was whispering behind me with a shudder, ‘only I promised — —’ She hesitated a moment.

‘Promised not to?’ I asked with a queer feeling of distress, my eyes glued to the papers.

‘Promised always to show them to her first,’ she finished so low I barely caught it.

I have no intuitive, immediate grasp of the value of paintings; results come to me slowly, and though every one believes his own judgment to be good, I dare not claim that mine is worth more than that of any other layman. Frances had too often convicted me of gross ignorance and error. I can only say that I examined these sketches with a feeling of amazement that contained revulsion, if not actually horror and disgust. They were outrageous. I felt hot for my sister, and it was a relief to know she had moved across the room on some pretence or other, and did not examine them with me. Her talent, of course, is mediocre, yet she has her moments of inspiration — moments, that is to say, when a view of Beauty not normally her own flames divinely through her. And these interpretations struck me forcibly as being thus 'inspired' — not her own. They were uncommonly well done; they were also atrocious. The meaning in them, however, was never more than hinted. There the unholy skill and power came in: they suggested so abominably, leaving most to the imagination. To find such significance in a bourgeois villa garden, and to interpret it with such delicate yet legible certainty, was a kind of symbolism that was sinister, even diabolical. The delicacy was her own, but the point of view was another's. And the word that rose in my mind was not the gross description of 'impure,' but the more fundamental qualification— 'un-pure.'

In silence I turned the sketches over one by one, as a boy hurries through the pages of an evil book lest he be caught.

'What does Mabel do with them?' I asked presently in a low tone, as I neared the end. 'Does she keep them?'

'She makes notes about them in a book and then destroys them,' was the reply from the end of the room. I heard a sigh of relief. 'I'm glad you've seen them, Bill. I wanted you to — but was afraid to show them. You understand?'

'I understand,' was my reply, though it was not a question intended to be answered. All I understood really was that Mabel's mind was as sweet and pure as my sister's, and that she had some good reason for what she did. She destroyed the sketches, but first made notes! It was an interpretation of the place she sought. Brother-like, I felt resentment, though, that Frances should waste her time and talent, when she might be doing work that she could sell. Naturally, I felt other things as well....

'Mabel pays me five guineas for each one,' I heard. 'Absolutely insists.'

I stared at her stupidly a moment, bereft of speech or wit.

'I must either accept, or go away,' she went on calmly, but a little white. 'I've tried everything. There was a scene the third day I was here — when I showed her my first result. I wanted to write to you, but hesitated — —'

‘It’s unintentional, then, on your part — forgive my asking it, Frances, dear?’ I blundered, hardly knowing what to think or say. ‘Between the lines’ of her letter came back to me. ‘I mean, you make the sketches in your ordinary way and — the result comes out of itself, so to speak?’

She nodded, throwing her hands out like a Frenchman. ‘We needn’t keep the money for ourselves, Bill. We can give it away, but — I must either accept or leave,’ and she repeated the shrugging gesture. She sat down on the chair facing me, staring helplessly at the carpet.

‘You say there was a scene?’ I went on presently. ‘She insisted?’

‘She begged me to continue,’ my sister replied very quietly. ‘She thinks — that is, she has an idea or theory that there’s something about the place — something she can’t get at quite.’ Frances stammered badly. She knew I did not encourage her wild theories.

‘Something she feels — yes,’ I helped her, more than curious.

‘Oh, you know what I mean, Bill,’ she said desperately. ‘That the place is saturated with some influence that she is herself too positive or too stupid to interpret. She’s trying to make herself negative and receptive, as she calls it, but can’t, of course, succeed. Haven’t you noticed how dull and impersonal and insipid she seems, as though she had no personality? She thinks impressions will come to her that way. But they don’t — —’

‘Naturally.’

‘So she’s trying me — us — what she calls the sensitive and impressionable artistic temperament. She says that until she is sure exactly what this influence is, she can’t fight it, turn it out, “get the house straight,” as she phrases it.’

Remembering my own singular impressions, I felt more lenient than I might otherwise have done. I tried to keep impatience out of my voice.

‘And this influence, what — whose is it?’

We used the pronoun that followed in the same breath, for I answered my own question at the same moment as she did:

‘*His.*’ Our heads nodded involuntarily towards the floor, the dining-room being directly underneath.

And my heart sank, my curiosity died away on the instant, I felt bored. A commonplace haunted house was the last thing in the world to amuse or interest me. The mere thought exasperated, with its suggestions of imagination, overwrought nerves, hysteria, and the rest. Mingled with my other feelings was certainly disappointment. To see a figure or feel a 'presence,' and report from day to day strange incidents to each other would be a form of weariness I could never tolerate.

'But really, Frances,' I said firmly, after a moment's pause, 'it's too far-fetched, this explanation. A curse, you know, belongs to the ghost stories of early Victorian days.' And only my positive conviction that there *was* something after all worth discovering, and that it most certainly was *not* this, prevented my suggesting that we terminate our visit forthwith, or as soon as we decently could. 'This is not a haunted house, whatever it is,' I concluded somewhat vehemently, bringing my hand down upon her odious portfolio.

My sister's reply revived my curiosity sharply.

'I was waiting for you to say that. Mabel says exactly the same. *He* is in it — but it's something more than that alone, something far bigger and more complicated.' Her sentence seemed to indicate the sketches, and though I caught the inference I did not take it up, having no desire to discuss them with her just then, indeed, if ever.

I merely stared at her and listened. Questions, I felt sure, would be of little use. It was better she should say her thought in her own way.

'He is one influence, the most recent,' she went on slowly, and always very calmly, 'but there are others — deeper layers, as it were — underneath. If his were the only one, something would happen. But nothing ever does happen. The others hinder and prevent — as though each were struggling to predominate.'

I had felt it already myself. The idea was rather horrible. I shivered.

'That's what is so ugly about it — that nothing ever happens,' she said. 'There is this endless anticipation — always on the dry edge of a result that never materialises. It is torture. Mabel is at her wits' end, you see. And when she begged me — what I felt about my sketches — I mean — —' She stammered badly as before.

I stopped her. I had judged too hastily. That queer symbolism in her paintings, pagan and yet not innocent, was, I understood, the result of mixture. I did not pretend to understand, but at least I could be patient. I consequently held my peace. We did talk on a little longer, but it was more general talk that avoided successfully our hostess, the paintings, wild theories, and *him* — until at length the emotion Frances had hitherto so successfully kept under burst vehemently forth again. It had hidden between her calm sentences, as it had hidden between the lines of her letter. It swept her now from head to foot, packed tight in the thing she then said.

'Then, Bill, if it is not an ordinary haunted house,' she asked, '*what is it*?'

The words were commonplace enough. The emotion was in the tone of her voice that trembled; in the gesture she made, leaning forward and clasping both hands upon her knees, and in the slight blanching of her cheeks as her brave eyes asked the question and searched my own with anxiety that bordered upon panic. In that moment she put herself under my protection. I winced.

'And why,' she added, lowering her voice to a still and furtive whisper, 'does nothing ever happen? If only,' — this with great emphasis— 'something *would* happen — break this awful tension — bring relief. It's the waiting I cannot stand.' And she shivered all over as she said it, a touch of wildness in her eyes.

I would have given much to have made a true and satisfactory answer. My mind searched frantically for a moment, but in vain. There lay no sufficient answer in me. I felt what she felt, though with differences. No conclusive explanation lay within reach. Nothing happened. Eager as I was to shoot the entire business into the rubbish heap where ignorance and superstition discharge their poisonous weeds, I could not honestly accomplish this. To treat Frances as a child, and merely 'explain away' would be to strain her confidence in my protection, so affectionately claimed. It would further be dishonest to myself — weak, besides — to deny that I had also felt the strain and tension even as she did. While my mind continued searching, I returned her stare in silence; and Frances then, with more honesty and insight than my own, gave suddenly the answer herself — an answer whose truth and adequacy, so far as they went, I could not readily gainsay:

‘I think, Bill, because it is too big to happen here — to happen anywhere, indeed, all at once — and too awful!’

To have tossed the sentence aside as nonsense, argued it away, proved that it was really meaningless, would have been easy — at any other time or in any other place; and, had the past week brought me none of the vivid impressions it had brought me, this is doubtless what I should have done. My narrowness again was proved. We understand in others only what we have in ourselves. But her explanation, in a measure, I knew was true. It hinted at the strife and struggle that my notion of a Shadow had seemed to cover thinly.

‘Perhaps,’ I murmured lamely, waiting in vain for her to say more. ‘But you said just now that you felt the thing was “in layers,” as it were. Do you mean each one — each influence — fighting for the upper hand?’

I used her phraseology to conceal my own poverty. Terminology, after all, was nothing, provided we could reach the idea itself.

Her eyes said yes. She had her clear conception, arrived at independently, as was her way. And, unlike her sex, she kept it clear, unsmothered by too many words.

‘One set of influences gets at me, another gets at you. It’s according to our temperaments, I think.’ She glanced significantly at the vile portfolio. ‘Sometimes they are mixed — and therefore false. There has always been in me, more than in you, the pagan thing, perhaps, though never, thank God, like *that*.’

The frank confession of course invited my own, as it was meant to do. Yet it was difficult to find the words.

‘What I have felt in this place, Frances, I honestly can hardly tell you, because — er — my impressions have not arranged themselves in any definite form I can describe. The strife, the agony of vainly-sought escape, and the unrest — a sort of prison atmosphere — this I have felt at different times and with varying degrees of strength. But I find, as yet, no final label to attach. I couldn’t say pagan, Christian, or anything like that, I mean, as you do. As with the blind and deaf, you may have an intensification of certain senses denied to me, or even another sense altogether in embryo — —’

‘Perhaps,’ she stopped me, anxious to keep to the point, ‘you feel it as Mabel does. She feels the whole thing *complete*.’

‘That also is possible,’ I said very slowly. I was thinking behind my words. Her odd remark that it was ‘big and awful’ came back upon me as true. A vast sensation of distress and discomfort swept me suddenly. Pity was in it, and a fierce contempt, a savage, bitter anger as well. Fury against some sham authority was part of it.

‘Frances,’ I said, caught unawares, and dropping all pretence, ‘what in the world can it be?’ I looked hard at her. For some minutes neither of us spoke.

‘Have *you* felt no desire to interpret it?’ she asked presently.

‘Mabel did suggest my writing something about the house,’ was my reply, ‘but I’ve felt nothing imperative. That sort of writing is not my line, you know. My only feeling,’ I added, noticing that she waited for more, ‘is the impulse to explain, discover, get it out of me somehow, and so get rid of it. Not by writing, though — as yet.’ And again I repeated my former question: ‘What in the world do you think it is?’ My voice had become involuntarily hushed. There was awe in it.

Her answer, given with slow emphasis, brought back all my reserve: the phraseology provoked me rather: —

‘Whatever it is, Bill, it is not of God.’

I got up to go downstairs. I believe I shrugged my shoulders, ‘Would you like to leave, Frances? Shall we go back to town?’ I suggested this at the door, and hearing no immediate reply, I turned back to look. Frances was sitting with her head bowed over and buried in her hands. The attitude horribly suggested tears. No woman, I realised, can keep back the pressure of strong emotion as long as Frances had done, without ending in a fluid collapse. I waited a moment uneasily, longing to comfort, yet afraid to act — and in this way discovered the existence of the appalling emotion in myself, hitherto but half guessed. At all costs a scene must be prevented: it would involve such exaggeration and over-statement. Brutally, such is the weakness of the ordinary man, I turned the handle to go out, but my sister then raised her head. The sunlight caught her face, framed untidily in its auburn hair, and I saw her wonderful expression with a start. Pity, tenderness and sympathy shone in it like a flame. It was undeniable. There shone through all her features the imperishable love and yearning to sacrifice self for others which I have seen in only one type of human being. It was the great mother look.

‘We must stay by Mabel and help her get it straight,’ she whispered, making the decision for us both.

I murmured agreement. Abashed and half ashamed, I stole softly from the room and went out into the grounds. And the first thing clearly realised when alone was this: that the long scene between us was without definite result. The exchange of confidence was really nothing but hints and vague suggestion. We had decided to stay, but it was a negative decision not to leave rather than a positive action. All our words and questions, our guesses, inferences, explanations, our most subtle allusions and insinuations, even the odious paintings themselves, were without definite result. Nothing had happened.

VI

And instinctively, once alone, I made for the places where she had painted her extraordinary pictures; I tried to see what she had seen. Perhaps, now that she had opened my mind to another view, I should be sensitive to some similar interpretation — and possibly by way of literary expression. If I were to write about the place, I asked myself, how should I treat it? I deliberately invited an interpretation in the way that came easiest to me — writing.

But in this case there came no such revelation. Looking closely at the trees and flowers, the bits of lawn and terrace, the rose-garden and corner of the house where the flaming creeper hung so thickly, I discovered nothing of the odious, unpure thing her colour and grouping had unconsciously revealed. At first, that is, I discovered nothing. The reality stood there, commonplace and ugly, side by side with her distorted version of it that lay in my mind. It seemed incredible. I tried to force it, but in vain. My imagination, ploughed less deeply than hers, or to another pattern, grew different seed. Where I saw the gross soul of an overgrown suburban garden, inspired by the spirit of a vulgar, rich revivalist who loved to preach damnation, she saw this rush of pagan liberty and joy, this strange licence of primitive flesh which, tainted by the other, produced the adulterated, vile result.

Certain things, however, gradually then became apparent, forcing themselves upon me, willy nilly. They came slowly, but overwhelmingly. Not that facts had changed, or natural details altered in the grounds — this was impossible — but that I noticed for the first time various aspects I had not noticed before — trivial enough, yet for me, just then, significant. Some I remembered from previous days; others I saw now as I wandered to and fro, uneasy, uncomfortable, — almost, it seemed, watched by some one who took note of my impressions. The details were so foolish, the total result so formidable. I was half aware that others tried hard to make me see. It was deliberate. My sister's phrase, 'one layer got at me, another gets at you,' flashed, undesired, upon me.

For I saw, as with the eyes of a child, what I can only call a goblin garden — house, grounds, trees, and flowers belonged to a goblin world that children enter through the pages of their fairy tales. And what made me first aware of it was the whisper of the wind behind me, so that I turned with a sudden start, feeling that something had moved closer. An old ash tree, ugly and ungainly, had been artificially trained to form an arbour at one end of the terrace that was a tennis lawn, and the leaves of it now went rustling together, swishing as they rose and fell. I looked at the ash tree, and felt as though I had passed that moment between doors into this goblin garden that crouched behind the real one. Below, at a deeper layer perhaps, lay hidden the one my sister had entered.

To deal with my own, however, I call it goblin, because an odd aspect of the quaint in it yet never quite achieved the picturesque. Grotesque, probably, is the truer word, for everywhere I noticed, and for the first time, this slight alteration of the natural due either to the exaggeration of some detail, or to its suppression, generally, I think, to the latter. Life everywhere appeared to me as blocked from the full delivery of its sweet and lovely message. Some counter influence stopped it — suppression; or sent it awry — exaggeration. The house itself, mere expression, of course, of a narrow, limited mind, was sheer ugliness; it required no further explanation. With the grounds and garden, so far as shape and general plan were concerned, this was also true; but that trees and flowers and other natural details should share the same deficiency perplexed my logical soul, and even dismayed it. I stood and stared, then moved about, and stood and stared again. Everywhere was this mockery of a sinister, unfinished aspect. I sought in vain to recover my normal point of view. My mind had found this goblin garden and wandered to and fro in it, unable to escape.

The change was in myself, of course, and so trivial were the details which illustrated it, that they sound absurd, thus mentioned one by one. For me, they proved it, is all I can affirm. The goblin touch lay plainly everywhere: in the forms of the trees, planted at neat intervals along the lawns; in this twisted ash that rustled just behind me; in the shadow of the gloomy wellingtonias, whose sweeping skirts obscured the grass; but especially, I noticed, in the tops and crests of them. For here, the delicate, graceful curves of last year's growth seemed to shrink back into themselves. None of them pointed upwards. Their life had failed and turned aside just when it should have become triumphant. The character of a tree reveals itself chiefly at the extremities, and it was precisely here that they all drooped and achieved this hint of goblin distortion — in the growth, that is, of the last few years. What ought to have been fairy, joyful, natural, was instead uncomely to the verge of the grotesque. Spontaneous expression was arrested. My mind perceived a goblin garden, and was caught in it. The place grimaced at me.

With the flowers it was similar, though far more difficult to detect in detail for description. I saw the smaller vegetable growth as impish, half-malicious. Even the terraces sloped ill, as though their ends had sagged since they had been so lavishly constructed; their varying angles gave a queerly bewildering aspect to their sequence that was unpleasant to the eye. One might wander among their deceptive lengths and get lost — lost among open terraces! — with the house quite close at hand. Unhomely seemed the entire garden, unable to give repose, restlessness in it everywhere, almost strife, and discord certainly.

Moreover, the garden grew into the house, the house into the garden, and in both was this idea of resistance to the natural — the spirit that says No to joy. All over it I was aware of the effort to achieve another end, the struggle to burst forth and escape into free, spontaneous expression that should be happy and natural, yet the effort for ever frustrated by the weight of this dark shadow that rendered it abortive. Life crawled aside into a channel that was a cul-de-sac, then turned horribly upon itself. Instead of blossom and fruit, there were weeds. This approach of life I was conscious of — then dismal failure. There was no fulfilment. Nothing happened.

And so, through this singular mood, I came a little nearer to understand the unpure thing that had stammered out into expression through my sister's talent. For the unpure is merely negative; it has no existence; it is but the cramped expression of what is true, stammering its way brokenly over false boundaries that seek to limit and confine. Great, full expression of anything is pure, whereas here was only the incomplete, unfinished, and therefore ugly. There was strife and pain and desire to escape. I found myself shrinking from house and grounds as one shrinks from the touch of the mentally arrested, those in whom life has turned awry. There was almost mutilation in it.

Past items, too, now flocked to confirm this feeling that I walked, liberty captured and half-maimed, in a monstrous garden. I remembered days of rain that refreshed the countryside, but left these grounds, cracked with the summer heat, unsatisfied and thirsty; and how the big winds, that cleaned the woods and fields elsewhere, crawled here with difficulty through the dense foliage that protected The Towers from the North and West and East. They were ineffective, sluggish currents. There was no real wind. Nothing happened. I began to realise — far more clearly than in my sister's fanciful explanation about 'layers' — that here were many contrary influences at work, mutually destructive of one another. House and grounds were not haunted merely; they were the arena of past thinking and feeling, perhaps of terrible, impure beliefs, each striving to suppress the others, yet no one of them achieving supremacy because no one of them was strong enough, no one of them was true. Each, moreover, tried to win me over, though only one was able to reach my mind at all. For some obscure reason — possibly because my temperament had a natural bias towards the grotesque — it was the goblin layer. With me, it was the line of least resistance....

In my own thoughts this 'goblin garden' revealed, of course, merely my personal interpretation. I felt now objectively what long ago my mind had felt subjectively. My work, essential sign of spontaneous life with me, had stopped dead; production had become impossible. I stood now considerably closer to the cause of this sterility. The Cause, rather, turned bolder, had stepped insolently nearer. Nothing happened anywhere; house, garden, mind alike were barren, abortive, torn by the strife of frustrate impulse, ugly, hateful, sinful. Yet behind it all was still the desire of life — desire to escape — accomplish. Hope — an intolerable hope — I became startlingly aware — crowned torture.

And, realising this, though in some part of me where Reason lost her hold, there rose upon me then another and a darker thing that caught me by the throat and made me shrink with a sense of revulsion that touched actual loathing. I knew instantly whence it came, this wave of abhorrence and disgust, for even while I saw red and felt revolt rise in me, it seemed that I grew partially aware of the layer next below the goblin. I perceived the existence of this deeper stratum. One opened the way for the other, as it were. There were so many, yet all inter-related; to admit one was to clear the way for all. If I lingered I should be caught — horribly. They struggled with such violence for supremacy among themselves, however, that this latest uprising was instantly smothered and crushed back, though not before a glimpse had been revealed to me, and the redness in my thoughts transferred itself to colour my surroundings thickly and appallingly — with blood. This lurid aspect drenched the garden, smeared the terraces, lent to the very soil a tinge as of sacrificial rites, that choked the breath in me, while it seemed to fix me to the earth my feet so longed to leave. It was so revolting that at the same time I felt a dreadful curiosity as of fascination — I wished to stay. Between these contrary impulses I think I actually reeled a moment, transfixed by a fascination of the Awful. Through the lighter goblin veil I felt myself sinking down, down, down into this turgid layer that was so much more violent and so much more ancient. The upper layer, indeed, seemed fairy by comparison with this terror born of the lust for blood, thick with the anguish of human sacrificial victims.

Upper! Then I was already sinking; my feet were caught; I was actually in it! What atavistic strain, hidden deep within me, had been touched into vile response, giving this flash of intuitive comprehension, I cannot say. The coatings laid on by civilisation are probably thin enough in all of us. I made a supreme effort. The sun and wind came back. I could almost swear I opened my eyes. Something very atrocious surged back into the depths, carrying with it a thought of tangled woods, of big stones standing in a circle, motionless white figures, the one form bound with ropes, and the ghastly gleam of the knife. Like smoke upon a battlefield, it rolled away....

I was standing on the gravel path below the second terrace when the familiar goblin garden danced back again, doubly grotesque now, doubly mocking, yet, by way of contrast, almost welcome. My glimpse into the depths was momentary, it seems, and had passed utterly away. The common world rushed back with a sense of glad relief, yet ominous now for ever, I felt, for the knowledge of what its past had built upon. In street, in theatre, in the festivities of friends, in music-room or playing-field, even indeed in church — how could the memory of what I had seen and felt not leave its hideous trace? The very structure of my Thought, it seemed to me, was stained. What has been thought by others can never be obliterated until ...

With a start my reverie broke and fled, scattered by a violent sound that I recognised for the first time in my life as wholly desirable. The returning motor meant that my hostess was back. Yet, so urgent had been my temporary obsession, that my first presentation of her was — well, not as I knew her now. Floating along with a face of anguished torture I saw Mabel, a mere effigy captured by others' thinking, pass down into those depths of fire and blood that only just had closed beneath my feet. She dipped away. She vanished, her fading eyes turned to the last towards some saviour who had failed her. And that strange intolerable hope was in her face.

The mystery of the place was pretty thick about me just then. It was the fall of dusk, and the ghost of slanting sunshine was as unreal as though badly painted. The garden stood at attention all about me. I cannot explain it, but I can tell it, I think, exactly as it happened, for it remains vivid in me for ever — that, for the first time, something *almost happened*, myself apparently the combining link through which it pressed towards delivery.

I had already turned towards the house. In my mind were pictures — not actual thoughts — of the motor, tea on the verandah, my sister, Mabel — when there came behind me this tumultuous, awful rush — as I left the garden. The ugliness, the pain, the striving to escape, the whole negative and suppressed agony that *was* the Place, focused that second into a concentrated effort to produce a result. It was a blinding tempest of long-frustrate desire that heaved at me, surging appallingly behind me like an anguished mob. I was in the act of crossing the frontier into my normal self again, when it came, catching fearfully at my skirts. I might use an entire dictionary of descriptive adjectives yet come no nearer to it than this — the conception of a huge assemblage determined to escape with me, or to snatch me back among themselves. My legs trembled for an instant, and I caught my breath — then turned and ran as fast as possible up the ugly terraces.

At the same instant, as though the clanging of an iron gate cut short the unfinished phrase, I *thought* the beginning of an awful thing:

‘The Damned ...’

Like this it rushed after me from that goblin garden that had sought to keep me:

‘The Damned!’

For there was sound in it. I know full well it was subjective, not actually heard at all; yet somehow sound was in it — a great volume, roaring and booming thunderously, far away, and below me. The sentence dipped back into the depths that gave it birth, unfinished. Its completion was prevented. As usual, nothing happened. But it drove behind me like a hurricane as I ran towards the house, and the sound of it I can only liken to those terrible undertones you may hear standing beside Niagara. They lie behind the mere crash of the falling flood, within it somehow, not audible to all — felt rather than definitely heard.

It seemed to echo back from the surface of those sagging terraces as I flew across their sloping ends, for it was somehow underneath them. It was in the rustle of the wind that stirred the skirts of the drooping wellingtonias. The beds of formal flowers passed it on to the creepers, red as blood, that crept over the unsightly building. Into the structure of the vulgar and forbidding house it sank away; The Towers took it home. The uncomely doors and windows seemed almost like mouths that had uttered the words themselves, and on the upper floors at that very moment I saw two maids in the act of closing them again.

And on the verandah, as I arrived breathless, and shaken in my soul, Frances and Mabel, standing by the tea-table, looked up to greet me. In the faces of both were clearly legible the signs of shock. They watched me coming, yet so full of their own distress that they hardly noticed the state in which I came. In the face of my hostess, however, I read another and a bigger thing than in the face of Frances. Mabel *knew*. She had experienced what I had experienced. She had heard that awful sentence I had heard, but heard it not for the first time; heard it, moreover, I verily believe, complete and to its dreadful end.

‘Bill, did you hear that curious noise just now?’ Frances asked it sharply before I could say a word. Her manner was confused; she looked straight at me; and there was a tremor in her voice she could not hide.

‘There’s wind about,’ I said, ‘wind in the trees and sweeping round the walls. It’s risen rather suddenly.’ My voice faltered rather.

‘No. It wasn’t wind,’ she insisted, with a significance meant for me alone, but badly hidden. ‘It was more like distant thunder, we thought. How you ran too!’ she added. ‘What a pace you came across the terraces!’

I knew instantly from the way she said it that they both had already heard the sound before and were anxious to know if I had heard it, and how. My interpretation was what they sought.

‘It was a curiously deep sound, I admit. It may have been big guns at sea,’ I suggested, ‘forts or cruisers practising. The coast isn’t so very far, and with the wind in the right direction — —’

The expression on Mabel’s face stopped me dead.

‘Like huge doors closing,’ she said softly in her colourless voice, ‘enormous metal doors shutting against a mass of people clamouring to get out.’ The gravity, the note of hopelessness in her tones, was shocking.

Frances had gone into the house the instant Mabel began to speak. ‘I’m cold,’ she had said; ‘I think I’ll get a shawl.’ Mabel and I were alone. I believe it was the first time we had been really alone since I arrived. She looked up from the teacups, fixing her pallid eyes on mine. She had made a question of the sentence.

‘You hear it like that?’ I asked innocently. I purposely used the present tense.

She changed her stare from one eye to the other; it was absolutely expressionless. My sister’s step sounded on the floor of the room behind us.

‘If only — —’ Mabel began, then stopped, and my own feelings leaping out instinctively completed the sentence I felt was in her mind:

‘ —— something would happen.’

She instantly corrected me. I had caught her thought, yet somehow phrased it wrongly.

‘We could escape!’ She lowered her tone a little, saying it hurriedly. The ‘we’ amazed and horrified me; but something in her voice and manner struck me utterly dumb. There was ice and terror in it. It was a dying woman speaking — a lost and hopeless soul.

In that atrocious moment I hardly noticed what was said exactly, but I remember that my sister returned with a grey shawl about her shoulders, and that Mabel said, in her ordinary voice again, ‘It *is* chilly, yes; let’s have tea inside,’ and that two maids, one of them the grenadier, speedily carried the loaded trays into the morning-room and put a match to the logs in the great open fireplace. It was, after all, foolish to risk the sharp evening air, for dusk was falling steadily, and even the sunshine of the day just fading could not turn autumn into summer. I was the last to come in. Just as I left the verandah a large black bird swooped down in front of me past the pillars; it dropped from overhead, swerved abruptly to one side as it caught sight of me, and flapped heavily towards the shrubberies on the left of the terraces, where it disappeared into the gloom. It flew very low, very close. And it startled me, I think because in some way it seemed like my Shadow materialised — as though the dark horror that was rising everywhere from house and garden, then settling back so thickly yet so imperceptibly upon us all, were incarnated in that whirring creature that passed between the daylight and the coming night.

I stood a moment, wondering if it would appear again, before I followed the others indoors, and as I was in the act of closing the windows after me, I caught a glimpse of a figure on the lawn. It was some distance away, on the other side of the shrubberies, in fact where the bird had vanished. But in spite of the twilight that half magnified, half obscured it, the identity was unmistakable. I knew the housekeeper’s stiff walk too well to be deceived. ‘Mrs. Marsh taking the air,’ I said to myself. I felt the necessity of saying it, and I wondered why she was doing so at this particular hour. If I had other thoughts they were so vague, and so quickly and utterly suppressed, that I cannot recall them sufficiently to relate them here.

And, once indoors, it was to be expected that there would come explanation, discussion, conversation, at any rate, regarding the singular noise and its cause, some uttered evidence of the mood that had been strong enough to drive us all inside. Yet there was none. Each of us purposely, and with various skill, ignored it. We talked little, and when we did it was of anything in the world but that. Personally, I experienced a touch of that same bewilderment which had come over me during my first talk with Frances on the evening of my arrival, for I recall now the acute tension, and the hope, yet dread, that one or other of us must sooner or later introduce the subject. It did not happen, however; no reference was made to it even remotely. It was the presence of Mabel, I felt positive, that prohibited. As soon might we have discussed Death in the bedroom of a dying woman.

The only scrap of conversation I remember, where all was ordinary and commonplace, was when Mabel spoke casually to the grenadier asking why Mrs. Marsh had omitted to do something or other — what it was I forget — and that the maid replied respectfully that 'Mrs. Marsh was very sorry, but her 'and still pained her.' I enquired, though so casually that I scarcely know what prompted the words, whether she had injured herself severely, and the reply, 'She upset a lamp and burnt herself,' was said in a tone that made me feel my curiosity was indiscreet, 'but she always has an excuse for not doing things she ought to do.' The little bit of conversation remained with me, and I remember particularly the quick way Frances interrupted and turned the talk upon the delinquencies of servants in general, telling incidents of her own at our flat with a volubility that perhaps seemed forced, and that certainly did not encourage general talk as it may have been intended to do. We lapsed into silence immediately she finished.

But for all our care and all our calculated silence, each knew that something had, in these last moments, come very close; it had brushed us in passing; it had retired; and I am inclined to think now that the large dark thing I saw, riding the dusk, probably bird of prey, was in some sense a symbol of it in my mind — that actually there had been no bird at all, I mean, but that my mood of apprehension and dismay had formed the vivid picture in my thoughts. It had swept past us, it had retreated, but it was now, at this moment, in hiding very close. And it was watching us.

Perhaps, too, it was mere coincidence that I encountered Mrs. Marsh, *his* housekeeper, several times that evening in the short interval between tea and dinner, and that on each occasion the sight of this gaunt, half-saturnine woman fed my prejudice against her. Once, on my way to the telephone, I ran into her just where the passage is somewhat jammed by a square table carrying the Chinese gong, a grandfather's clock and a box of croquet mallets. We both gave way, then both advanced, then again gave way — simultaneously. It seemed impossible to pass. We stepped with decision to the same side, finally colliding in the middle, while saying those futile little things, half apology, half excuse, that are inevitable at such times. In the end she stood upright against the wall for me to pass, taking her place against the very door I wished to open. It was ludicrous.

'Excuse me — I was just going in — to telephone,' I explained. And she sidled off, murmuring apologies, but opening the door for me while she did so. Our hands met a moment on the handle. There was a second's awkwardness — it was so stupid. I remembered her injury, and by way of something to say, I enquired after it. She thanked me; it was entirely healed now, but it might have been much worse; and there was something about the 'mercy of the Lord' that I didn't quite catch. While telephoning, however — a London call, and my attention focused on it — I realised sharply that this was the first time I had spoken with her; also, that I had — touched her.

It happened to be a Sunday, and the lines were clear. I got my connection quickly, and the incident was forgotten while my thoughts went up to London. On my way upstairs, then, the woman came back into my mind, so that I recalled other things about her — how she seemed all over the house, in unlikely places often; how I had caught her sitting in the hall alone that night; how she was for ever coming and going with her lugubrious visage and that untidy hair at the back that had made me laugh three years ago with the idea that it looked singed or burnt; and how the impression on my first arrival at The Towers was that this woman somehow kept alive, though its evidence was outwardly suppressed, the influence of her late employer and of his sombre teachings. Somewhere with her was associated the idea of punishment, vindictiveness, revenge. I remembered again suddenly my odd notion that she sought to keep her present mistress here, a prisoner in this bleak and comfortless house, and that really, in spite of her obsequious silence, she was intensely opposed to the change of thought that had reclaimed Mabel to a happier view of life.

All this in a passing second flashed in review before me, and I discovered, or at any rate reconstructed, the real Mrs. Marsh. She was decidedly in the Shadow. More, she stood in the forefront of it, stealthily leading an assault, as it were, against The Towers and its occupants, as though, consciously or unconsciously, she laboured incessantly to this hateful end.

I can only judge that some state of nervousness in me permitted the series of insignificant thoughts to assume this dramatic shape, and that what had gone before prepared the way and led her up at the head of so formidable a procession. I relate it exactly as it came to me. My nerves were doubtless somewhat on edge by now. Otherwise I should hardly have been a prey to the exaggeration at all. I seemed open to so many strange impressions.

Nothing else, perhaps, can explain my ridiculous conversation with her, when, for the third time that evening, I came suddenly upon the woman half-way down the stairs, standing by an open window as if in the act of listening. She was dressed in black, a black shawl over her square shoulders and black gloves on her big, broad hands. Two black objects, prayer-books apparently, she clasped, and on her head she wore a bonnet with shaking beads of jet. At first I did not know her, as I came running down upon her from the landing; it was only when she stood aside to let me pass that I saw her profile against the tapestry and recognised Mrs. Marsh. And to catch her on the front stairs, dressed like this, struck me as incongruous — impertinent. I paused in my dangerous descent. Through the opened window came the sound of bells — church bells — a sound more depressing to me than superstition, and as nauseating. Though the action was ill-judged, I obeyed the sudden prompting — was it a secret desire to attack, perhaps? — and spoke to her.

‘Been to church, I suppose, Mrs. Marsh?’ I said. ‘Or just going, perhaps?’

Her face, as she looked up a second to reply, was like an iron doll that moved its lips and turned its eyes, but made no other imitation of life at all.

‘Some of us still goes, sir,’ she said unctuously.

It was respectful enough, yet the implied judgment of the rest of the world made me almost angry. A deferential insolence lay behind the affected meekness.

‘For those who believe no doubt it *is* helpful,’ I smiled. ‘True religion brings peace and happiness, I’m sure — joy, Mrs. Marsh, JOY!’ I found keen satisfaction in the emphasis.

She looked at me like a knife. I cannot describe the implacable thing that shone in her fixed, stern eyes, nor the shadow of felt darkness that stole across her face. She glittered. I felt hate in her. I knew — she knew too — who was in the thoughts of us both at that moment.

She replied softly, never forgetting her place for an instant:

‘There is joy, sir — in ‘eaven — over one sinner that repenteth, and in church there goes up prayer to Gawd for those ‘oo — well, for the others, sir, ‘oo — —’

She cut short her sentence thus. The gloom about her as she said it was like the gloom about a hearse, a tomb, a darkness of great hopeless dungeons. My tongue ran on of itself with a kind of bitter satisfaction:

‘We must believe there are *no* others, Mrs. Marsh. Salvation, you know, would be such a failure if there were. No merciful, all-foreseeing God could ever have devised such a fearful plan — —’

Her voice, interrupting me, seemed to rise out of the bowels of the earth:

‘They rejected the salvation when it was hoffered to them, sir, on earth.’

‘But you wouldn’t have them tortured for ever because of one mistake in ignorance,’ I said, fixing her with my eye. ‘Come now, would you, Mrs. Marsh? No God worth worshipping could permit such cruelty. Think a moment what it means.’

She stared at me, a curious expression in her stupid eyes. It seemed to me as though the ‘woman’ in her revolted, while yet she dared not suffer her grim belief to trip. That is, she would willingly have had it otherwise but for a terror that prevented.

‘We may pray for them, sir, and we do — we *may* ‘ope.’ She dropped her eyes to the carpet.

‘Good, good!’ I put in cheerfully, sorry now that I had spoken at all. ‘That’s more hopeful, at any rate, isn’t it?’

She murmured something about Abraham's bosom, and the 'time of salvation not being for ever,' as I tried to pass her. Then a half gesture that she made stopped me. There was something more she wished to say — to ask. She looked up furtively. In her eyes I saw the 'woman' peering out through fear.

'Per'aps, sir,' she faltered, as though lightning must strike her dead, 'per'aps, would you think, a drop of cold water, given in His name, might moisten —— ?'

But I stopped her, for the foolish talk had lasted long enough.

'Of course,' I exclaimed, 'of course. For God is love, remember, and love means charity, tolerance, sympathy, and sparing others pain,' and I hurried past her, determined to end the outrageous conversation for which yet I knew myself entirely to blame. Behind me, she stood stock-still for several minutes, half bewildered, half alarmed, as I suspected. I caught the fragment of another sentence, one word of it, rather— 'punishment' — but the rest escaped me. Her arrogance and condescending tolerance exasperated me, while I was at the same time secretly pleased that I might have touched some string of remorse or sympathy in her after all. Her belief was iron; she dared not let it go; yet somewhere underneath there lurked the germ of a wholesome revulsion. She would help 'them' — if she dared. Her question proved it.

Half ashamed of myself, I turned and crossed the hall quickly lest I should be tempted to say more, and in me was a disagreeable sensation as though I had just left the Incurable Ward of some great hospital. A reaction caught me as of nausea. Ugh! I wanted such people cleansed by fire. They seemed to me as centres of contamination whose vicious thoughts flowed out to stain God's glorious world. I saw myself, Frances, Mabel too especially, on the rack, while that odious figure of cruelty and darkness stood over us and ordered the awful handles turned in order that we might be 'saved' — forced, that is, to think and believe exactly as *she* thought and believed.

I found relief for my somewhat childish indignation by letting myself loose upon the organ then. The flood of Bach and Beethoven brought back the sense of proportion. It proved, however, at the same time that there *had* been this growth of distortion in me, and that it had been provided apparently by my closer contact — for the first time — with that funereal personality, the woman who, like her master, believed that all holding views of God that differed from her own, must be damned eternally. It gave me, moreover, some faint clue perhaps, though a clue I was unequal to following up, to the nature of the strife and terror and frustrate influence in the house. That housekeeper had to do with it. She kept it alive. Her thought was like a spell she waved above her mistress's head.

VII

That night I was wakened by a hurried tapping at my door, and before I could answer, Frances stood beside my bed. She had switched on the light as she came in. Her hair fell straggling over her dressing-gown. Her face was deathly pale, its expression so distraught it was almost haggard. The eyes were very wide. She looked almost like another woman.

She was whispering at a great pace: 'Bill, Bill, wake up, quick!'

'I *am* awake. What is it?' I whispered too. I was startled.

'Listen!' was all she said. Her eyes stared into vacancy.

There was not a sound in the great house. The wind had dropped, and all was still. Only the tapping seemed to continue endlessly in my brain. The clock on the mantelpiece pointed to half-past two.

'I heard nothing, Frances. What is it?' I rubbed my eyes; I had been very deeply asleep.

'Listen!' she repeated very softly, holding up one finger and turning her eyes towards the door she had left ajar. Her usual calmness had deserted her. She was in the grip of some distressing terror.

For a full minute we held our breath and listened. Then her eyes rolled round again and met my own, and her skin went even whiter than before.

'It woke me,' she said beneath her breath, and moving a step nearer to my bed. 'It was the Noise.' Even her whisper trembled.

'The Noise!' The word repeated itself dully of its own accord. I would rather it had been anything in the world but that — earthquake, foreign cannon, collapse of the house above our heads! 'The noise, Frances! Are you *sure*?' I was playing really for a little time.

‘It was like thunder. At first I thought it *was* thunder. But a minute later it came again — from underground. It’s appalling.’ She muttered the words, her voice not properly under control.

There was a pause of perhaps a minute, and then we both spoke at once. We said foolish, obvious things that neither of us believed in for a second. The roof had fallen in, there were burglars downstairs, the safes had been blown open. It was to comfort each other as children do that we said these things; also it was to gain further time.

‘There’s some one in the house, of course,’ I heard my voice say finally, as I sprang out of bed and hurried into dressing-gown and slippers. ‘Don’t be alarmed. I’ll go down and see,’ and from the drawer I took a pistol it was my habit to carry everywhere with me. I loaded it carefully while Frances stood stock-still beside the bed and watched. I moved towards the open door.

‘You stay here, Frances,’ I whispered, the beating of my heart making the words uneven, ‘while I go down and make a search. Lock yourself in, girl. Nothing can happen to you. It was downstairs, you said?’

‘Underneath,’ she answered faintly, pointing through the floor.

She moved suddenly between me and the door.

‘Listen! Hark!’ she said, the eyes in her face quite fixed; ‘it’s coming again,’ and she turned her head to catch the slightest sound. I stood there watching her, and while I watched her, shook. But nothing stirred. From the halls below rose only the whirr and quiet ticking of the numerous clocks. The blind by the open window behind us flapped out a little into the room as the draught caught it.

‘I’ll come with you, Bill — to the next floor,’ she broke the silence. ‘Then I’ll stay with Mabel — till you come up again.’ The blind sank down with a long sigh as she said it.

The question jumped to my lips before I could repress it:

‘Mabel is awake. She heard it too?’

I hardly know why horror caught me at her answer. All was so vague and terrible as we stood there playing the great game of this sinister house where nothing ever happened.

‘We met in the passage. She was on her way to me.’

What shook in me, shook inwardly. Frances, I mean, did not see it. I had the feeling just then that the Noise was upon us, that any second it would boom and roar about our ears. But the deep silence held. I only heard my sister’s little whisper coming across the room in answer to my question:

‘Then what is Mabel doing now?’

And her reply proved that she was yielding at last beneath the dreadful tension, for she spoke at once, unable longer to keep up the pretence. With a kind of relief, as it were, she said it out, looking helplessly at me like a child:

‘She is weeping and gna — —’

My expression must have stopped her. I believe I clapped both hands upon her mouth, though when I realised things clearly again, I found they were covering my own ears instead. It was a moment of unutterable horror. The revulsion I felt was actually physical. It would have given me pleasure to fire off all the five chambers of my pistol into the air above my head; the sound — a definite, wholesome sound that explained itself — would have been a positive relief. Other feelings, though, were in me too, all over me, rushing to and fro. It was vain to seek their disentanglement; it was impossible. I confess that I experienced, among them, a touch of paralysing fear — though for a moment only; it passed as sharply as it came, leaving me with a violent flush of blood to the face such as bursts of anger bring, followed abruptly by an icy perspiration over the entire body. Yet I may honestly avow that it was not ordinary personal fear I felt, nor any common dread of physical injury. It was, rather, a vast, impersonal shrinking — a sympathetic shrinking — from the agony and terror that countless others, somewhere, somehow, felt for themselves. The first sensation of a prison overwhelmed me in that instant, of bitter strife and frenzied suffering, and the fiery torture of the yearning to escape that was yet hopelessly uttered.... It was of incredible power. It was real. The vain, intolerable hope swept over me.

I mastered myself, though hardly knowing how, and took my sister’s hand. It was as cold as ice, as I led her firmly to the door and out into the passage.

Apparently she noticed nothing of my so near collapse, for I caught her whisper as we went. ‘You *are* brave, Bill; splendidly brave.’

The upper corridors of the great sleeping house were brightly lit; on her way to me she had turned on every electric switch her hand could reach; and as we passed the final flight of stairs to the floor below, I heard a door shut softly and knew that Mabel had been listening — waiting for us. I led my sister up to it. She knocked, and the door was opened cautiously an inch or so. The room was pitch black. I caught no glimpse of Mabel standing there. Frances turned to me with a hurried whisper, ‘Billy, you *will* be careful, won’t you?’ and went in. I just had time to answer that I would not be long, and Frances to reply, ‘You’ll find us here — —’ when the door closed and cut her sentence short before its end.

But it was not alone the closing door that took the final words. Frances — by the way she disappeared I knew it — had made a swift and violent movement into the darkness that was as though she sprang. She leaped upon that other woman who stood back among the shadows, for, simultaneously with the clipping of the sentence, another sound was also stopped — stifled, smothered, choked back lest I should also hear it. Yet not in time. I heard it — a hard and horrible sound that explained both the leap and the abrupt cessation of the whispered words.

I stood irresolute a moment. It was as though all the bones had been withdrawn from my body, so that I must sink and fall. That sound plucked them out, and plucked out my self-possession with them. I am not sure that it was a sound I had ever heard before, though children, I half remembered, made it sometimes in blind rages when they knew not what they did. In a grown-up person certainly I had never known it. I associated it with animals rather — horribly. In the history of the world, no doubt, it has been common enough, alas, but fortunately to-day there can be but few who know it, or would recognise it even when heard. The bones shot back into my body the same instant, but red-hot and burning; the brief instant of irresolution passed; I was torn between the desire to break down the door and enter, and to run — run for my life from a thing I dared not face.

Out of the horrid tumult, then, I adopted neither course. Without reflection, certainly without analysis of what was best to do for my sister, myself or Mabel, I took up my action where it had been interrupted. I turned from the awful door and moved slowly towards the head of the stairs. But that dreadful little sound came with me. I believe my own teeth chattered. It seemed all over the house — in the empty halls that opened into the long passages towards the music-room, and even in the grounds outside the building. From the lawns and barren garden, from the ugly terraces themselves, it rose into the night, and behind it came a curious driving sound, incomplete, unfinished, as of wailing for deliverance, the wailing of desperate souls in anguish, the dull and dry beseeching of hopeless spirits in prison.

That I could have taken the little sound from the bedroom where I actually heard it, and spread it thus over the entire house and grounds, is evidence, perhaps, of the state my nerves were in. The wailing assuredly was in my mind alone. But the longer I hesitated, the more difficult became my task, and, gathering up my dressing-gown, lest I should trip in the darkness, I passed slowly down the staircase into the hall below. I carried neither candle nor matches; every switch in room and corridor was known to me. The covering of darkness was indeed rather comforting than otherwise, for if it prevented seeing, it also prevented being seen. The heavy pistol, knocking against my thigh as I moved, made me feel I was carrying a child's toy, foolishly. I experienced in every nerve that primitive vast dread which is the Thrill of darkness. Merely the child in me was comforted by that pistol.

The night was not entirely black; the iron bars across the glass front door were visible, and, equally, I discerned the big, stiff wooden chairs in the hall, the gaping fireplace, the upright pillars supporting the staircase, the round table in the centre with its books and flower-vases, and the basket that held visitors' cards. There, too, was the stick and umbrella stand and the shelf with railway guides, directory, and telegraph forms. Clocks ticked everywhere with sounds like quiet footfalls. Light fell here and there in patches from the floor above. I stood a moment in the hall, letting my eyes grow more accustomed to the gloom, while deciding on a plan of search. I made out the ivy trailing outside over one of the big windows ... and then the tall clock by the front door made a grating noise deep down inside its body — it was the Presentation clock, large and hideous, given by the congregation of his church — and, dreading the booming strike it seemed to threaten, I made a quick decision. If others beside myself were about in the night, the sound of that striking might cover their approach.

So I tiptoed to the right, where the passage led towards the dining-room. In the other direction were the morning- and drawing-room, both little used, and various other rooms beyond that had been *his*, generally now kept locked. I thought of my sister, waiting upstairs with that frightened woman for my return. I went quickly, yet stealthily.

And, to my surprise, the door of the dining-room was open. It had been opened. I paused on the threshold, staring about me. I think I fully expected to see a figure blocked in the shadows against the heavy sideboard, or looming on the other side beneath his portrait. But the room was empty; I *felt* it empty. Through the wide bow-windows that gave on to the verandah came an uncertain glimmer that even shone reflected in the polished surface of the dinner-table, and again I perceived the stiff outline of chairs, waiting tenantless all round it, two larger ones with high carved backs at either end. The monkey-trees on the upper terrace, too, were visible outside against the sky, and the solemn crests of the wellingtonias on the terraces below. The enormous clock on the mantelpiece ticked very slowly, as though its machinery were running down, and I made out the pale round patch that was its face. Resisting my first inclination to turn the lights up — my hand had gone so far as to finger the friendly knob — I crossed the room so carefully that no single board creaked, nor a single chair, as I rested a hand upon its back, moved on the parquet flooring. I turned neither to the right nor left, nor did I once look back.

I went towards the long corridor, filled with priceless *objets d’art*, that led through various antechambers into the spacious music-room, and only at the mouth of this corridor did I next halt a moment in uncertainty. For this long corridor, lit faintly by high windows on the left from the verandah, was very narrow, owing to the mass of shelves and fancy tables it contained. It was not that I feared to knock over precious things as I went, but that, because of its ungenerous width, there would be no room to pass another person — if I met one. And the certainty had suddenly come upon me that somewhere in this corridor another person at this actual moment stood. Here, somehow, amid all this dead atmosphere of furniture and impersonal emptiness, lay the hint of a living human presence; and with such conviction did it come upon me, that my hand instinctively gripped the pistol in my pocket before I could even think. Either some one had passed along this corridor just before me, or some one lay waiting at its farther end — withdrawn or flattened into one of the little recesses, to let me pass. It was the person who had opened the door. And the blood ran from my heart as I realised it.

It was not courage that sent me on, but rather a strong impulsion from behind that made it impossible to retreat: the feeling that a throng pressed at my back, drawing nearer and nearer; that I was already half surrounded, swept, dragged, coaxed into a vast prison-house where there was wailing and gnashing of teeth, where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched. I can neither explain nor justify the storm of irrational emotion that swept me as I stood in that moment, staring down the length of the silent corridor towards the music-room at the far end, I can only repeat that no personal bravery sent me down it, but that the negative emotion of fear was swamped in this vast sea of pity and commiseration for others that surged upon me.

My senses, at least, were no whit confused; if anything, my brain registered impressions with keener accuracy than usual. I noticed, for instance, that the two swinging doors of baize that cut the corridor into definite lengths, making little rooms of the spaces between them, were both wide open — in the dim light no mean achievement. Also that the fronds of a palm plant, some ten feet in front of me, still stirred gently from the air of some one who had recently gone past them. The long green leaves waved to and fro like hands. Then I went stealthily forward down the narrow space, proud even that I had this command of myself, and so carefully that my feet made no sound upon the Japanese matting on the floor.

It was a journey that seemed timeless. I have no idea how fast or slow I went, but I remember that I deliberately examined articles on each side of me, peering with particular closeness into the recesses of wall and window. I passed the first baize doors, and the passage beyond them widened out to hold shelves of books; there were sofas and small reading-tables against the wall. It narrowed again presently, as I entered the second stretch. The windows here were higher and smaller, and marble statuettes of classical subjects lined the walls, watching me like figures of the dead. Their white and shining faces saw me, yet made no sign. I passed next between the second baize doors. They, too, had been fastened back with hooks against the wall. Thus all doors were open — had been recently opened.

And so, at length, I found myself in the final widening of the corridor which formed an ante-chamber to the music-room itself. It had been used formerly to hold the overflow of meetings. No door separated it from the great hall beyond, but heavy curtains hung usually to close it off, and these curtains were invariably drawn. They now stood wide. And here — I can merely state the impression that came upon me — I knew myself at last surrounded. The throng that pressed behind me, also surged in front: facing me in the big room, and waiting for my entry, stood a multitude; on either side of me, in the very air above my head, the vast assemblage paused upon my coming. The pause, however, was momentary, for instantly the deep, tumultuous movement was resumed that yet was silent as a cavern underground. I felt the agony that was in it, the passionate striving, the awful struggle to escape. The semi-darkness held beseeching faces that fought to press themselves upon my vision, yearning yet hopeless eyes, lips scorched and dry, mouths that opened to implore but found no craved delivery in actual words, and a fury of misery and hate that made the life in me stop dead, frozen by the horror of vain pity. That intolerable, vain Hope was everywhere.

And the multitude, it came to me, was not a single multitude, but many; for, as soon as one huge division pressed too close upon the edge of escape, it was dragged back by another and prevented. The wild host was divided against itself. Here dwelt the Shadow I had ‘imagined’ weeks ago, and in it struggled armies of lost souls as in the depths of some bottomless pit whence there is no escape. The layers mingled, fighting against themselves in endless torture. It was in this great Shadow I had clairvoyantly seen Mabel, but about its fearful mouth, I now was certain, hovered another figure of darkness, a figure who sought to keep it in existence, since to her thought were due those lampless depths of woe without escape.... Towards me the multitudes now surged.

It was a sound and a movement that brought me back into myself. The great clock at the farther end of the room just then struck the hour of three. That was the sound. And the movement — ? I was aware that a figure was passing across the distant centre of the floor. Instantly I dropped back into the arena of my little human terror. My hand again clutched stupidly at the pistol butt. I drew back into the folds of the heavy curtain. And the figure advanced.

I remember every detail. At first it seemed to me enormous — this advancing shadow — far beyond human scale; but as it came nearer, I measured it, though not consciously, by the organ pipes that gleamed in faint colours, just above its gradual soft approach. It passed them, already half-way across the great room. I saw then that its stature was that of ordinary men. The prolonged booming of the clock died away. I heard the footfall, shuffling upon the polished boards. I heard another sound — a voice, low and monotonous, droning as in prayer. The figure was speaking. It was a woman. And she carried in both hands before her a small object that faintly shimmered — a glass of water. And then I recognised her.

There was still an instant's time before she reached me, and I made use of it. I shrank back, flattening myself against the wall. Her voice ceased a moment, as she turned and carefully drew the curtains together behind her, closing them with one hand. Oblivious of my presence, though she actually touched my dressing-gown with the hand that pulled the cords, she resumed her dreadful, solemn march, disappearing at length down the long vista of the corridor like a shadow. But as she passed me, her voice began again, so that I heard each word distinctly as she uttered it, her head aloft, her figure upright, as though she moved at the head of a procession:

'A drop of cold water, given in His name, shall moisten their burning tongues.'

It was repeated monotonously over and over again, droning down into the distance as she went, until at length both voice and figure faded into the shadows at the farther end.

For a time, I have no means of measuring precisely, I stood in that dark corner, pressing my back against the wall, and would have drawn the curtains down to hide me had I dared to stretch an arm out. The dread that presently the woman would return passed gradually away. I realised that the air had emptied, the crowd her presence had stirred into activity had retreated; I was alone in the gloomy under-spaces of the odious building.... Then I remembered suddenly again the terrified women waiting for me on that upper landing; and realised that my skin was wet and freezing cold after a profuse perspiration. I prepared to retrace my steps. I remember the effort it cost me to leave the support of the wall and covering darkness of my corner, and step out into the grey light of the corridor. At first I sidled, then, finding this mode of walking impossible, turned my face boldly and walked quickly, regardless that my dressing-gown set the precious objects shaking as I passed. A wind that sighed mournfully against the high, small windows seemed to have got inside the corridor as well; it felt so cold; and every moment I dreaded to see the outline of the woman's figure as she waited in recess or angle against the wall for me to pass.

Was there another thing I dreaded even more? I cannot say. I only know that the first baize doors had swung-to behind me, and the second ones were close at hand, when the great dim thunder caught me, pouring up with prodigious volume so that it seemed to roll out from another world. It shook the very bowels of the building. I was closer to it than that other time, when it had followed me from the goblin garden. There was strength and hardness in it, as of metal reverberation. Some touch of numbness, almost of paralysis, must surely have been upon me that I felt no actual terror, for I remember even turning and standing still to hear it better. 'That is the Noise,' my thought ran stupidly, and I think I whispered it aloud; '*the Doors are closing*.'

The wind outside against the windows was audible, so it cannot have been really loud, yet to me it was the biggest, deepest sound I have ever heard, but so far away, with such awful remoteness in it, that I had to doubt my own ears at the same time. It seemed underground — the rumbling of earthquake gates that shut remorselessly within the rocky Earth — stupendous ultimate thunder. *They* were shut off from help again. The doors had closed.

I felt a storm of pity, an agony of bitter, futile hate sweep through me. My memory of the figure changed then. The Woman with the glass of cooling water had stepped down from Heaven; but the Man — or was it Men? — who smeared this terrible layer of belief and Thought upon the world!...

I crossed the dining-room — it was fancy, of course, that held my eyes from glancing at the portrait for fear I should see it smiling approval — and so finally reached the hall, where the light from the floor above seemed now quite bright in comparison. All the doors I closed carefully behind me; but first I had to open them. The woman had closed every one. Up the stairs, then, I actually ran, two steps at a time. My sister was standing outside

Mabel’s door. By her face I knew that she had also heard. There was no need to ask. I quickly made my mind up.

‘There’s nothing,’ I said, and detailed briefly my tour of search. ‘All is quiet and undisturbed downstairs.’ May God forgive me!

She beckoned to me, closing the door softly behind her. My heart beat violently a moment, then stood still.

‘Mabel,’ she said aloud.

It was like the sentence of a judge, that one short word.

I tried to push past her and go in, but she stopped me with her arm. She was wholly mistress of herself, I saw.

‘Hush!’ she said in a lower voice. ‘I’ve got her round again with brandy. She’s sleeping quietly now. We won’t disturb her.’

She drew me farther out into the landing, and as she did so, the clock in the hall below struck half-past three. I had stood, then, thirty minutes in the corridor below. ‘You’ve been such a long time,’ she said simply. ‘I feared for you,’ and she took my hand in her own that was cold and clammy.

VIII

And then, while that dreadful house stood listening about us in the early hours of this chill morning upon the edge of winter, she told me, with laconic brevity, things about Mabel that I heard as from a distance. There was nothing so unusual or tremendous in the short recital, nothing indeed I might not have already guessed for myself. It was the time and scene, the inference, too, that made it so afflicting: the idea that Mabel believed herself so utterly and hopelessly lost — beyond recovery *damned*.

That she had loved him with so passionate a devotion that she had given her soul into his keeping, this certainly I had not divined — probably because I had never thought about it one way or the other. He had ‘converted’ her, I knew, but that she had subscribed whole-heartedly to that most cruel and ugly of his dogmas — this was new to me, and came with a certain shock as I heard it. In love, of course, the weaker nature is receptive to all manner of suggestion. This man had ‘suggested’ his pet brimstone lake so vividly that she had listened and believed. He had frightened her into heaven; and his heaven, a definite locality in the skies, had its foretaste here on earth in miniature — The Towers, house and garden. Into his dolorous scheme of a handful saved and millions damned, his enclosure, as it were, of sheep and goats, he had swept her before she was aware of it. Her mind no longer was her own. And it was Mrs. Marsh who kept the thought-stream open, though tempered, as she deemed, with that touch of craven, superstitious mercy.

But what I found it difficult to understand, and still more difficult to accept, was that, during her year abroad, she had been so haunted with a secret dread of that hideous after-death that she had finally revolted and tried to recover that clearer state of mind she had enjoyed before the religious bully had stunned her — yet had tried in vain. She had returned to The Towers to find her soul again, only to realise that it was lost eternally. The cleaner state of mind lay then beyond recovery. In the reaction that followed the removal of his terrible 'suggestion,' she felt the crumbling of all that he had taught her, but searched in vain for the peace and beauty his teachings had destroyed. Nothing came to replace these. She was empty, desolate, hopeless; craving her former joy and carelessness, she found only hate and diabolical calculation. This man, whom she had loved to the point of losing her soul for him, had bequeathed to her one black and fiery thing — the terror of the damned. His thinking wrapped her in this iron garment that held her fast.

All this Frances told me, far more briefly than I have here repeated it. In her eyes and gestures and laconic sentences lay the conviction of great beating issues and of menacing drama my own description fails to recapture. It was all so incongruous and remote from the world I lived in that more than once a smile, though a smile of pity, fluttered to my lips; but a glimpse of my face in the mirror showed rather the leer of a grimace. There was no real laughter anywhere that night. The entire adventure seemed so incredible, here, in this twentieth century — but yet delusion, that feeble word, did not occur once in the comments my mind suggested though did not utter. I remembered that forbidding Shadow too; my sister's water-colours; the vanished personality of our hostess; the inexplicable, thundering Noise, and the figure of Mrs. Marsh in her midnight ritual that was so childish yet so horrible. I shivered in spite of my own 'emancipated' cast of mind.

'There *is* no Mabel,' were the words with which my sister sent another shower of ice down my spine. 'He has killed her in his lake of fire and brimstone.'

I stared at her blankly, as in a nightmare where nothing true or possible ever happened.

‘He killed her in his lake of fire and brimstone,’ she repeated more faintly.

A desperate effort was in me to say the strong, sensible thing which should destroy the oppressive horror that grew so stiflingly about us both, but again the mirror drew the attempted smile into the merest grin, betraying the distortion that was everywhere in the place.

‘You mean,’ I stammered beneath my breath, ‘that her faith has gone, but that the terror has remained?’ I asked it, dully groping. I moved out of the line of the reflection in the glass.

She bowed her head as though beneath a weight; her skin was the pallor of grey ashes.

‘You mean,’ I said louder, ‘that she has lost her — mind?’

‘She is terror incarnate,’ was the whispered answer. ‘Mabel has lost her soul. Her soul is — there!’ She pointed horribly below. ‘She is seeking it...?’

The word ‘soul’ stung me into something of my normal self again.

‘But her terror, poor thing, is not — cannot be — transferable to *us*!’ I exclaimed more vehemently. ‘It certainly is not convertible into feelings, sights and — even sounds!’

She interrupted me quickly, almost impatiently, speaking with that conviction by which she conquered me so easily that night.

‘It is her terror that has revived “the Others.” It has brought her into touch with them. They are loose and driving after her. Her efforts at resistance have given them also hope — that escape, after all, *is* possible. Day and night they strive.’

‘Escape! Others!’ The anger fast rising in me dropped of its own accord at the moment of birth. It shrank into a shuddering beyond my control. In that moment, I think, I would have believed in the possibility of anything and everything she might tell me. To argue or contradict seemed equally futile.

‘His strong belief, as also the beliefs of others who have preceded him,’ she replied, so sure of herself that I actually turned to look over my shoulder, ‘have left their shadow like a thick deposit over the house and grounds. To them, poor souls imprisoned by thought, it was hopeless as granite walls — until her resistance, her effort to dissipate it — let in light. Now, in their thousands, they are flocking to this little light, seeking escape. Her own escape, don’t you see, may release them all!’

It took my breath away. Had his predecessors, former occupants of this house, also preached damnation of all the world but their own exclusive sect? Was this the explanation of her obscure talk of ‘layers,’ each striving against the other for domination? And if men are spirits, and these spirits survive, could strong Thought thus determine their condition even afterwards?

So many questions flooded into me that I selected no one of them, but stared in uncomfortable silence, bewildered, out of my depth, and acutely, painfully distressed. There was so odd a mixture of possible truth and incredible, unacceptable explanation in it all; so much confirmed, yet so much left darker than before. What she said did, indeed, offer a quasi-interpretation of my own series of abominable sensations — strife, agony, pity, hate, escape — but so far-fetched that only the deep conviction in her voice and attitude made it tolerable for a second even. I found myself in a curious state of mind. I could neither think clearly nor say a word to refute her amazing statements, whispered there beside me in the shivering hours of the early morning with only a wall between ourselves and — Mabel. Close behind her words I remember this singular thing, however — that an atmosphere as of the Inquisition seemed to rise and stir about the room, beating awful wings of black above my head.

Abruptly, then, a moment’s common-sense returned to me. I faced her.

‘And the Noise?’ I said aloud, more firmly, ‘the roar of the closing doors? We have *all* heard that! Is that subjective too?’

Frances looked sideways about her in a queer fashion that made my flesh creep again. I spoke brusquely, almost angrily. I repeated the question, and waited with anxiety for her reply.

‘What noise?’ she asked, with the frank expression of an innocent child. ‘What closing doors?’

But her face turned from grey to white, and I saw that drops of perspiration glistened on her forehead. She caught at the back of a chair to steady herself, then glanced about her again with that sidelong look that made my blood run cold. I understood suddenly then. She did not take in what I said. I knew now. She was listening — for something else.

And the discovery revived in me a far stronger emotion than any mere desire for immediate explanation. Not only did I not insist upon an answer, but I was actually terrified lest she *would* answer. More, I felt in me a terror lest I should be moved to describe my own experiences below-stairs, thus increasing their reality and so the reality of all. She might even explain them too!

Still listening intently, she raised her head and looked me in the eyes. Her lips opened to speak. The words came to me from a great distance, it seemed, and her voice had a sound like a stone that drops into a deep well, its fate though hidden, known.

‘We are in it with her, too, Bill. We are in it with her. Our interpretations vary — because we are — in parts of it only. Mabel is in it — *all*.’

The desire for violence came over me. If only she would say a definite thing in plain King’s English! If only I could find it in me to give utterance to what shouted so loud within me! If only — the same old cry — something would happen! For all this elliptic talk that dazed my mind left obscurity everywhere. Her atrocious meaning, none the less, flashed through me, though vanishing before it wholly divulged itself.

It brought a certain reaction with it. I found my tongue. Whether I actually believed what I said is more than I can swear to; that it seemed to me wise at the moment is all I remember. My mind was in a state of obscure perception less than that of normal consciousness.

‘Yes, Frances, I believe that what you say is the truth, and that we are in it with her’ — I meant to say it with loud, hostile emphasis, but instead I whispered it lest she should hear the trembling of my voice— ‘and for that reason, my dear sister, we leave to-morrow, you and I — to-day, rather, since it is long past midnight — we leave this house of the damned. We go back to London.’

Frances looked up, her face distraught almost beyond recognition. But it was not my words that caused the tumult in her heart. It was a sound — the sound she had been listening for — so faint I barely caught it myself, and had she not pointed I could never have known the direction whence it came. Small and terrible it rose again in the stillness of the night, the sound of gnashing teeth. And behind it came another — the tread of stealthy footsteps. Both were just outside the door.

The room swung round me for a second. My first instinct to prevent my sister going out — she had dashed past me frantically to the door — gave place to another when I saw the expression in her eyes. I followed her lead instead; it was surer than my own. The pistol in my pocket swung uselessly against my thigh. I was flustered beyond belief and ashamed that I was so.

‘Keep close to me, Frances,’ I said huskily, as the door swung wide and a shaft of light fell upon a figure moving rapidly. Mabel was going down the corridor. Beyond her, in the shadows on the staircase, a second figure stood beckoning, scarcely visible.

‘Before they get her! Quick!’ was screamed into my ears, and our arms were about her in the same moment. It was a horrible scene. Not that Mabel struggled in the least, but that she collapsed as we caught her and fell with her dead weight, as of a corpse, limp, against us. And her teeth began again. They continued, even beneath the hand that Frances clapped upon her lips....

We carried her back into her own bedroom, where she lay down peacefully enough. It was so soon over.... The rapidity of the whole thing robbed it of reality almost. It had the swiftness of something remembered rather than of something witnessed. She slept again so quickly that it was almost as if we had caught her sleep-walking. I cannot say. I asked no questions at the time; I have asked none since; and my help was needed as little as the protection of my pistol. Frances was strangely competent and collected.... I lingered for some time uselessly by the door, till at length, looking up with a sigh, she made a sign for me to go.

‘I shall wait in your room next door,’ I whispered, ‘till you come.’ But, though going out, I waited in the corridor instead, so as to hear the faintest call for help. In that dark corridor upstairs I waited, but not long. It may have been fifteen minutes when Frances reappeared, locking the door softly behind her. Leaning over the banisters, I saw her.

'I'll go in again about six o'clock,' she whispered, 'as soon as it gets light. She is sound asleep now. Please don't wait. If anything happens I'll call — you might leave your door ajar, perhaps.' And she came up, looking like a ghost.

But I saw her first safely into bed, and the rest of the night I spent in an armchair close to my opened door, listening for the slightest sound. Soon after five o'clock I heard Frances fumbling with the key, and, peering over the railing again, I waited till she reappeared and went back into her own room. She closed her door. Evidently she was satisfied that all was well.

Then, and then only, did I go to bed myself, but not to sleep. I could not get the scene out of my mind, especially that odious detail of it which I hoped and believed my sister had not seen — the still, dark figure of the housekeeper waiting on the stairs below — waiting, of course, for Mabel.

IX

It seems I became a mere spectator after that; my sister's lead was so assured for one thing, and, for another, the responsibility of leaving Mabel alone — Frances laid it bodily upon my shoulders — was a little more than I cared about. Moreover, when we all three met later in the day, things went on so exactly as before, so absolutely without friction or distress, that to present a sudden, obvious excuse for cutting our visit short seemed ill-judged. And on the lowest grounds it would have been desertion. At any rate, it was beyond my powers, and Frances was quite firm that *she* must stay. We therefore did stay. Things that happen in the night always seem exaggerated and distorted when the sun shines brightly next morning; no one can reconstruct the terror of a nightmare afterwards, nor comprehend why it seemed so overwhelming at the time.

I slept till ten o'clock, and when I rang for breakfast, a note from my sister lay upon the tray, its message of counsel couched in a calm and comforting strain. Mabel, she assured me, was herself again and remembered nothing of what had happened; there was no need of any violent measures; I was to treat her exactly as if I knew nothing. 'And, if you don't mind, Bill, let us leave the matter unmentioned between ourselves as well. Discussion exaggerates; such things are best not talked about. I’m sorry I disturbed you so unnecessarily; I was stupidly excited. Please forget all the things I said at the moment.’ She had written ‘nonsense’ first instead of ‘things,’ then scratched it out. She wished to convey that hysteria had been abroad in the night, and I readily gulped the explanation down, though it could not satisfy me in the smallest degree.

There was another week of our visit still, and we stayed it out to the end without disaster. My desire to leave at times became that frantic thing, desire to escape; but I controlled it, kept silent, watched and wondered. Nothing happened. As before, and everywhere, there was no sequence of development, no connection between cause and effect; and climax, none whatever. The thing swayed up and down, backwards and forwards like a great loose curtain in the wind, and I could only vaguely surmise what caused the draught or why there was a curtain at all. A novelist might mould the queer material into coherent sequence that would be interesting but could not be true. It remains, therefore, not a story but a history. Nothing happened.

Perhaps my intense dislike of the fall of darkness was due wholly to my stirred imagination, and perhaps my anger when I learned that Frances now occupied a bed in our hostess’s room was unreasonable. Nerves were unquestionably on edge. I was for ever on the look-out for some event that should make escape imperative, but yet that never presented itself. I slept lightly, left my door ajar to catch the slightest sound, even made stealthy tours of the house below-stairs while everybody dreamed in their beds. But I discovered nothing; the doors were always locked; I neither saw the housekeeper again in unreasonable times and places, nor heard a footstep in the passages and halls. The Noise was never once repeated. That horrible, ultimate thunder, my intensest dread of all, lay withdrawn into the abyss whence it had twice arisen. And though in my thoughts it was sternly denied existence, the great black reason for the fact afflicted me unbelievably. Since Mabel’s fruitless effort to escape, the Doors kept closed remorselessly. She had failed; *they* gave up hope. For this was the explanation that haunted the region of my mind where feelings stir and hint before they clothe themselves in actual language. Only I firmly kept it there; it never knew expression.

But, if my ears were open, my eyes were opened too, and it were idle to pretend that I did not notice a hundred details that were capable of sinister interpretation had I been weak enough to yield. Some protective barrier had fallen into ruins round me, so that Terror stalked behind the general collapse, feeling for me through all the gaping fissures. Much of this, I admit, must have been merely the elaboration of those sensations I had first vaguely felt, before subsequent events and my talks with Frances had dramatised them into living thoughts. I therefore leave them unmentioned in this history, just as my mind left them unmentioned in that interminable final week.

Our life went on precisely as before — Mabel unreal and outwardly so still; Frances, secretive, anxious, tactful to the point of slyness, and keen to save to the point of self-forgetfulness. There were the same stupid meals, the same wearisome long evenings, the stifling ugliness of house and grounds, the Shadow settling in so thickly that it seemed almost a visible, tangible thing. I came to feel the only friendly things in all this hostile, cruel place were the robins that hopped boldly over the monstrous terraces and even up to the windows of the unsightly house itself. The robins alone knew joy; they danced, believing no evil thing was possible in all God’s radiant world. They believed in everybody; *their* god’s plan of life had no room in it for hell, damnation and lakes of brimstone. I came to love the little birds. Had Samuel Franklyn known them, he might have preached a different sermon, bequeathing love in place of terror!...

Most of my time I spent writing; but it was a pretence at best, and rather a dangerous one besides. For it stirred the mind to production, with the result that other things came pouring in as well. With reading it was the same. In the end I found an aggressive, deliberate resistance to be the only way of feasible defence. To walk far afield was out of the question, for it meant leaving my sister too long alone, so that my exercise was confined to nearer home. My saunters in the grounds, however, never surprised the goblin garden again. It was close at hand, but I seemed unable to get wholly into it. Too many things assailed my mind for any one to hold exclusive possession, perhaps.

Indeed, all the interpretations, all the ‘layers,’ to use my sister’s phrase, slipped in by turns and lodged there for a time. They came day and night, and though my reason denied them entrance they held their own as by a kind of squatters' right. They stirred moods already in me, that is, and did not introduce entirely new ones; for every mind conceals ancestral deposits that have been cultivated in turn along the whole line of its descent. Any day a chance shower may cause this one or that to blossom. Thus it came to me, at any rate. After darkness the Inquisition paced the empty corridors and set up ghastly apparatus in the dismal halls; and once, in the library, there swept over me that easy and delicious conviction that by confessing my wickedness I could resume it later, since Confession is expression, and expression brings relief and leaves one ready to accumulate again. And in such mood I felt bitter and unforgiving towards all others who thought differently. Another time it was a Pagan thing that assaulted me — so trivial yet oh, so significant at the time — when I dreamed that a herd of centaurs rolled up with a great stamping of hoofs round the house to destroy it, and then woke to hear the horses tramping across the field below the lawns; they neighed ominously and their noisy panting was audible as if it were just outside my windows.

But the tree episode, I think, was the most curious of all — except, perhaps, the incident with the children which I shall mention in a moment — for its closeness to reality was so unforgettable. Outside the east window of my room stood a giant wellingtonia on the lawn, its head rising level with the upper sash. It grew some twenty feet away, planted on the highest terrace, and I often saw it when closing my curtains for the night, noticing how it drew its heavy skirts about it, and how the light from other windows threw glimmering streaks and patches that turned it into the semblance of a towering, solemn image. It stood there then so strikingly, somehow like a great old-world idol, that it claimed attention. Its appearance was curiously formidable. Its branches rustled without visibly moving and it had a certain portentous, forbidding air, so grand and dark and monstrous in the night that I was always glad when my curtains shut it out. Yet, once in bed, I had never thought about it one way or the other, and by day had certainly never sought it out.

One night, then, as I went to bed and closed this window against a cutting easterly wind, I saw — that there were two of these trees. A brother wellingtonia rose mysteriously beside it, equally huge, equally towering, equally monstrous. The menacing pair of them faced me there upon the lawn. But in this new arrival lay a strange suggestion that frightened me before I could argue it away. Exact counterpart of its giant companion, it revealed also that gross, odious quality that all my sister's paintings held. I got the odd impression that the rest of these trees, stretching away dimly in a troop over the farther lawns, were similar, and that, led by this enormous pair, they had all moved boldly closer to my windows. At the same moment a blind was drawn down over an upper room; the second tree disappeared into the surrounding darkness. It was, of course, this chance light that had brought it into the field of vision, but when the black shutter dropped over it, hiding it from view, the manner of its vanishing produced the queer effect that it had slipped into its companion — almost that it had been an emanation of the one I so disliked, and not really a tree at all! In this way the garden turned vehicle for expressing what lay behind it all!...

The behaviour of the doors, the little, ordinary doors, seems scarcely worth mention at all, their queer way of opening and shutting of their own accord; for this was accountable in a hundred natural ways, and to tell the truth, I never caught one in the act of moving. Indeed, only after frequent repetitions did the detail force itself upon me, when, having noticed one, I noticed all. It produced, however, the unpleasant impression of a continual coming and going in the house, as though, screened cleverly and purposely from actual sight, some one in the building held constant invisible intercourse with — others.

Upon detailed descriptions of these uncertain incidents I do not venture, individually so trivial, but taken all together so impressive and so insolent. But the episode of the children, mentioned above, was different. And I give it because it showed how vividly the intuitive child-mind received the impression — one impression, at any rate — of what was in the air. It may be told in a very few words. I believe they were the coachman's children, and that the man had been in Mr. Franklyn's service; but of neither point am I quite positive. I heard screaming in the rose-garden that runs along the stable walls — it was one afternoon not far from the tea-hour — and on hurrying up I found a little girl of nine or ten fastened with ropes to a rustic seat, and two other children — boys, one about twelve and one much younger — gathering sticks beneath the climbing rose-trees. The girl was white and frightened, but the others were laughing and talking among themselves so busily while they picked that they did not notice my abrupt arrival. Some game, I understood, was in progress, but a game that had become too serious for the happiness of the prisoner, for there was a fear in the girl’s eyes that was a very genuine fear indeed. I unfastened her at once; the ropes were so loosely and clumsily knotted that they had not hurt her skin; it was not that which made her pale. She collapsed a moment upon the bench, then picked up her tiny skirts and dived away at full speed into the safety of the stable-yard. There was no response to my brief comforting, but she ran as though for her life, and I divined that some horrid boys’ cruelty had been afoot. It was probably mere thoughtlessness, as cruelty with children usually is, but something in me decided to discover exactly what it was.

And the boys, not one whit alarmed at my intervention, merely laughed shyly when I explained that their prisoner had escaped, and told me frankly what their ‘gime’ had been. There was no vestige of shame in them, nor any idea, of course, that they aped a monstrous reality. That it was mere pretence was neither here nor there. To them, though make-believe, it was a make-believe of something that was right and natural and in no sense cruel. Grown-ups did it too. It was necessary for her good.

‘We was going to burn her up, sir,’ the older one informed me, answering my ‘Why?’ with the explanation, ‘Because she wouldn’t believe what we wanted ‘er to believe.’

And, game though it was, the feeling of reality about the little episode was so arresting, so terrific in some way, that only with difficulty did I confine my admonitions on this occasion to mere words. The boys slunk off, frightened in their turn, yet not, I felt, convinced that they had erred in principle. It was their inheritance. They had breathed it in with the atmosphere of their bringing-up. They would renew the salutary torture when they could — till she ‘believed’ as they did.

I went back into the house, afflicted with a passion of mingled pity and distress impossible to describe, yet on my short way across the garden was attacked by other moods in turn, each more real and bitter than its predecessor. I received the whole series, as it were, at once. I felt like a diver rising to the surface through layers of water at different temperatures, though here the natural order was reversed, and the cooler strata were uppermost, the heated ones below. Thus, I was caught by the goblin touch of the willows that fringed the field; by the sensuous curving of the twisted ash that formed a gateway to the little grove of sapling oaks where fauns and satyrs lurked to play in the moonlight before Pagan altars; and by the cloaking darkness, next, of the copse of stunted pines, close gathered each to each, where hooded figures stalked behind an awful cross. The episode with the children seemed to have opened me like a knife. The whole Place rushed at me.

I suspect this synthesis of many moods produced in me that climax of loathing and disgust which made me feel the limit of bearable emotion had been reached, so that I made straight to find Frances in order to convince her that at any rate *I* must leave. For, although this was our last day in the house, and we had arranged to go next day, the dread was in me that she would still find some persuasive reason for staying on. And an unexpected incident then made my dread unnecessary. The front door was open and a cab stood in the drive; a tall, elderly man was gravely talking in the hall with the parlour-maid we called the Grenadier. He held a piece of paper in his hand. 'I have called to see the house,' I heard him say, as I ran up the stairs to Frances, who was peering like an inquisitive child over the banisters....

'Yes,' she told me with a sigh, I know not whether of resignation or relief, 'the house is to be let or sold. Mabel has decided. Some Society or other, I believe — —'

I was overjoyed: this made our leaving right and possible. 'You never told me, Frances!'

'Mabel only heard of it a few days ago. She told me herself this morning. It is a chance, she says. Alone she cannot get it "straight."'

'Defeat?' I asked, watching her closely.

'She thinks she has found a way out. It's not a family, you see, it's a Society, a sort of Community — they go in for thought — —'

'A Community!' I gasped. 'You mean religious?'

She shook her head. 'Not exactly,' she said smiling, 'but some kind of association of men and women who want a headquarters in the country — a place where they can write and meditate — *think* — mature their plans and all the rest — I don't know exactly what.'

‘Utopian dreamers?’ I asked, yet feeling an immense relief come over me as I heard. But I asked in ignorance, not cynically. Frances would know. She knew all this kind of thing.

‘No, not that exactly,’ she smiled. ‘Their teachings are grand and simple — old as the world too, really — the basis of every religion before men’s mind perverted them with their manufactured creeds — —’

Footsteps on the stairs, and the sound of voices, interrupted our odd impromptu conversation, as the Grenadier came up, followed by the tall, grave gentleman who was being shown over the house. My sister drew me along the corridor towards her room, where she went in and closed the door behind me, yet not before I had stolen a good look at the caller — long enough, at least, for his face and general appearance to have made a definite impression on me. For something strong and peaceful emanated from his presence; he moved with such quiet dignity; the glance of his eyes was so steady and reassuring, that my mind labelled him instantly as a type of man one would turn to in an emergency and not be disappointed. I had seen him but for a passing moment, but I had seen him twice, and the way he walked down the passage, looking competently about him, conveyed the same impression as when I saw him standing at the door — fearless, tolerant, wise. ‘A sincere and kindly character,’ I judged instantly, ‘a man whom some big kind of love has trained in sweetness towards the world; no hate in him anywhere.’ A great deal, no doubt, to read in so brief a glance! Yet his voice confirmed my intuition, a deep and very gentle voice, great firmness in it too.

‘Have I become suddenly sensitive to people’s atmospheres in this extraordinary fashion?’ I asked myself, smiling, as I stood in the room and heard the door close behind me. ‘Have I developed some clairvoyant faculty here?’ At any other time I should have mocked.

And I sat down and faced my sister, feeling strangely comforted and at peace for the first time since I had stepped beneath The Towers’ roof a month ago. Frances, I then saw, was smiling a little as she watched me.

‘You know him?’ I asked.

‘You felt it too?’ was her question in reply. ‘No,’ she added, ‘I don’t know him — beyond the fact that he is a leader in the Movement and has devoted years and money to its objects. Mabel felt the same thing in him that you have felt — and jumped at it.'

'But you've seen him before?' I urged, for the certainty was in me that he was no stranger to her.

She shook her head. 'He called one day early this week, when you were out. Mabel saw him. I believe — —' she hesitated a moment, as though expecting me to stop her with my usual impatience of such subjects— 'I believe he has explained everything to her — the beliefs he embodies, she declares, are her salvation — might be, rather, if she could adopt them.'

'Conversion again!' For I remembered her riches, and how gladly a Society would gobble them.

'The layers I told you about,' she continued calmly, shrugging her shoulders slightly— 'the deposits that are left behind by strong thinking and *real* belief — but especially by ugly, hateful belief, because, you see — there's more vital passion in that sort — —'

'Frances, I don't understand a bit,' I said out loud, but said it a little humbly, for the impression the man had left was still strong upon me and I was grateful for the steady sense of peace and comfort he had somehow introduced. The horrors had been so dreadful. My nerves, doubtless, were more than a little overstrained. Absurd as it must sound, I classed him in my mind with the robins, the happy, confiding robins who believed in everybody and thought no evil! I laughed a moment at my ridiculous idea, and my sister, encouraged by this sign of patience in me, continued more fluently.

'Of course you don't understand, Bill? Why should you? You've never thought about such things. Needing no creed yourself, you think all creeds are rubbish.'

'I'm open to conviction — I'm tolerant,' I interrupted.

'You're as narrow as Sam Franklyn, and as crammed with prejudice,' she answered, knowing that she had me at her mercy.

'Then, pray, what may be his, or his Society's beliefs?' I asked, feeling no desire to argue, 'and how are they going to prove your Mabel's salvation? Can they bring beauty into all this aggressive hate and ugliness?'

‘Certain hope and peace,’ she said, ‘that peace which is understanding, and that understanding which explains *all* creeds and therefore tolerates them.’

‘Toleration! The one word a religious man loathes above all others! His pet word is damnation — —’

‘Tolerates them,’ she repeated patiently, unperturbed by my explosion, ‘because it includes them all.’

‘Fine, if true,’ I admitted, ‘very fine. But how, pray, does it include them all?’

‘Because the key-word, the motto, of their Society is, “There is no religion higher than Truth,” and it has no single dogma of any kind. Above all,’ she went on, ‘because it claims that no individual can be “lost.” It teaches universal salvation. To damn outsiders is uncivilised, childish, impure. Some take longer than others — it’s according to the way they think and live — but all find peace, through development, in the end. What the creeds call a hopeless soul, it regards as a soul having further to go. There is no damnation — —’

‘Well, well,’ I exclaimed, feeling that she rode her hobby-horse too wildly, too roughly over me, ‘but what is the bearing of all this upon this dreadful place, and upon Mabel? I’ll admit that there is this atmosphere — this — er — inexplicable horror in the house and grounds, and that if not of damnation exactly, it is certainly damnable. I’m not too prejudiced to deny *that*, for I’ve felt it myself.’

To my relief she was brief. She made her statement, leaving me to take it or reject it as I would.

‘The thought and belief its former occupants — have left behind. For there has been coincidence here, a coincidence that must be rare. The site on which this modern house now stands was Roman, before that Early Britain, with burial mounds, before that again, Druid — the Druid stones still lie in that copse below the field, the Tumuli among the ilexes behind the drive. The older building Sam Franklyn altered and practically pulled down was a monastery; he changed the chapel into a meeting hall, which is now the music room; but, before he came here, the house was occupied by Manetti, a violent Catholic without tolerance or vision; and in the interval between these two, Julius Weinbaum had it, Hebrew of most rigid orthodox type imaginable — so they all have left their — —'

'Even so,' I repeated, yet interested to hear the rest, 'what of it?'

'Simply this,' said Frances with conviction, 'that each in turn has left his layer of concentrated thinking and belief behind him; because each believed intensely, absolutely, beyond the least weakening of any doubt — the kind of strong belief and thinking that is rare anywhere to-day, the kind that wills, impregnates objects, saturates the atmosphere, haunts, in a word. And each, believing he was utterly and finally right, damned with equally positive conviction the rest of the world. One and all preached that implicitly if not explicitly. It's the root of every creed. Last of the bigoted, grim series came Samuel Franklyn.'

I listened in amazement that increased as she went on. Up to this point her explanation was so admirable. It was, indeed, a pretty study in psychology if it were true.

'Then why does nothing ever happen?' I enquired mildly. 'A place so thickly haunted ought to produce a crop of no ordinary results!'

'There lies the proof,' she went on in a lowered voice, 'the proof of the horror and the ugly reality. The thought and belief of each occupant in turn kept all the others under. They gave no sign of life at the time. But the results of thinking never die. They crop out again the moment there's an opening. And, with the return of Mabel in her negative state, believing nothing positive herself, the place for the first time found itself free to reproduce its buried stores. Damnation, hell-fire, and the rest — the most permanent and vital thought of all those creeds, since it was applied to the majority of the world — broke loose again, for there was no restraint to hold it back. Each sought to obtain its former supremacy. None conquered. There results a pandemonium of hate and fear, of striving to escape, of agonised, bitter warring to find safety, peace — salvation. The place is saturated by that appalling stream of thinking — the terror of the damned. It concentrated upon Mabel, whose negative attitude furnished the channel of deliverance. You and I, according to our sympathy with her, were similarly involved. Nothing happened, because no one layer could ever gain the supremacy.'

I was so interested — I dare not say amused — that I stared in silence while she paused a moment, afraid that she would draw rein and end the fairy tale too soon.

‘The beliefs of this man, of his Society rather, vigorously thought and therefore vigorously given out here, will put the whole place straight. It will act as a solvent. These vitriolic layers actively denied, will fuse and disappear in the stream of gentle, tolerant sympathy which is love. For each member, worthy of the name, loves the world, and all creeds go into the melting-pot; Mabel, too, if she joins them out of real conviction, will find salvation — —’

‘Thinking, I know, is of the first importance,’ I objected, ‘but don’t you, perhaps, exaggerate the power of feeling and emotion which in religion are *au fond* always hysterical?’

‘What *is* the world,’ she told me, ‘but thinking and feeling? An individual’s world is entirely what that individual thinks and believes — interpretation. There is no other. And unless he really thinks and really believes, he has no permanent world at all. I grant that few people think, and still fewer believe, and that most take ready-made suits and make them do. Only the strong make their own things; the lesser fry, Mabel among them, are merely swept up into what has been manufactured for them. They get along somehow. You and I have made for ourselves, Mabel has not. She is a nonentity, and when her belief is taken from her, she goes with it.’

It was not in me just then to criticise the evasion, or pick out the sophistry from the truth. I merely waited for her to continue.

‘None of us have Truth, my dear Frances,’ I ventured presently, seeing that she kept silent.

‘Precisely,’ she answered, ‘but most of us have beliefs. And what one believes and thinks affects the world at large. Consider the legacy of hatred and cruelty involved in the doctrines men have built into their creeds where the *sine qua non* of salvation is absolute acceptance of one particular set of views or else perishing everlastingly — for only by repudiating history can they disavow it — —’

‘You’re not quite accurate,’ I put in. ‘Not all the creeds teach damnation, do they? Franklyn did, of course, but the others are a bit modernised now surely?’

‘Trying to get out of it,’ she admitted, ‘perhaps they are, but damnation of unbelievers — of most of the world, that is — is their rather favourite idea if you talk with them.’

‘I never have.’

She smiled. ‘But I have,’ she said significantly, ‘So, if you consider what the various occupants of this house have so strongly held and thought and believed, you need not be surprised that the influence they have left behind them should be a dark and dreadful legacy. For thought, you know, does leave — —’

The opening of the door, to my great relief, interrupted her, as the Grenadier led in the visitor to see the room. He bowed to both of us with a brief word of apology, looked round him, and withdrew, and with his departure the conversation between us came naturally to an end. I followed him out. Neither of us in any case, I think, cared to argue further.

And, so far as I am aware, the curious history of The Towers ends here too. There was no climax in the story sense. Nothing ever really happened. We left next morning for London. I only know that the Society in question took the house and have since occupied it to their entire satisfaction, and that Mabel, who became a member shortly afterwards, now stays there frequently when in need of repose from the arduous and unselfish labours she took upon herself under its aegis. She dined with us only the other night, here in our tiny Chelsea flat, and a jollier, saner, more interesting and happy guest I could hardly wish for. She was vital — in the best sense; the lay-figure had come to life. I found it difficult to believe she was the same woman whose fearful effigy had floated down those dreary corridors and almost disappeared in the depths of that atrocious Shadow.

What her beliefs were now I was wise enough to leave unquestioned, and Frances, to my great relief, kept the conversation well away from such inappropriate topics. It was clear, however, that the woman had in herself some secret source of joy, that she was now an aggressive, positive force, sure of herself, and apparently afraid of nothing in heaven or hell. She radiated something very like hope and courage about her, and talked as though the world were a glorious place and everybody in it kind and beautiful. Her optimism was certainly infectious.

The Towers were mentioned only in passing. The name of Marsh came up — not *the* Marsh, it so happened, but a name in some book that was being discussed — and I was unable to restrain myself. Curiosity was too strong. I threw out a casual enquiry Mabel could leave unanswered if she wished. But there was no desire to avoid it. Her reply was frank and smiling.

‘Would you believe it? She married,’ Mabel told me, though obviously surprised that I remembered the housekeeper at all; ‘and is happy as the day is long. She’s found her right niche in life. A sergeant — —’

‘The army!’ I ejaculated.

‘Salvation Army,’ she explained merrily.

Frances exchanged a glance with me. I laughed too, for the information took me by surprise. I cannot say why exactly, but I expected at least to hear that the woman had met some dreadful end, not impossibly by burning.

‘And The Towers, now called the Rest House,’ Mabel chattered on, ‘seems to me the most peaceful and delightful spot in England — —’

‘Really,’ I said politely.

‘When I lived there in the old days — while you were there, perhaps, though I won’t be sure,’ Mabel went on, ‘the story got abroad that it was haunted. Wasn’t it odd? A less likely place for a ghost I’ve never seen. Why, it had no atmosphere at all.’ She said this to Frances, glancing up at me with a smile that apparently had no hidden meaning. ‘Did *you* notice anything queer about it when you were there?’

This was plainly addressed to me.

‘I found it — er — difficult to settle down to anything,’ I said, after an instant’s hesitation. ‘I couldn’t work there — —’

‘But I thought you wrote that wonderful book on the Deaf and Blind while you stayed with me,’ she asked innocently.

I stammered a little. ‘Oh no, not then. I only made a few notes — er — at The Towers. My mind, oddly enough, refused to produce at all down there.

But — why do you ask? Did anything — was anything *supposed* to happen there?’

She looked searchingly into my eyes a moment before she answered:

‘Not that I know of,’ she said simply.

A DESCENT INTO EGYPT

I

HE WAS AN accomplished, versatile man whom some called brilliant. Behind his talents lay a wealth of material that right selection could have lifted into genuine distinction. He did too many things, however, to excel in one, for a restless curiosity kept him ever on the move. George Isley was an able man. His short career in diplomacy proved it; yet, when he abandoned this for travel and exploration, no one thought it a pity. He would do big things in any line. He was merely finding himself.

Among the rolling stones of humanity a few acquire moss of considerable value. They are not necessarily shiftless; they travel light; the comfortable pockets in the game of life that attract the majority are too small to retain them; they are in and out again in a moment. The world says, ‘What a pity! They stick to nothing!’ but the fact is that, like questing wild birds, they seek the nest they need. It is a question of values. They judge swiftly, change their line of flight, are gone, not even hearing the comment that they might have ‘retired with a pension.’

And to this homeless, questing type George Isley certainly belonged. He was by no means shiftless. He merely sought with insatiable yearning that soft particular nest where he could settle down in permanently. And to an accompaniment of sighs and regrets from his friends he found it; he found it, however, not in the present, but by retiring from the world ‘without a pension,’ unclothed with honours and distinctions. He withdrew from the present and slipped softly back into a mighty Past where he belonged. Why; how; obeying what strange instincts — this remains unknown, deep secret of an inner life that found no resting-place in modern things. Such instincts are not disclosable in twentieth-century language, nor are the details of such a journey properly describable at all. Except by the few — poets, prophets, psychiatrists and the like — such experiences are dismissed with the neat museum label— ‘queer.’

So, equally, must the recorder of this experience share the honour of that little label — he who by chance witnessed certain external and visible signs of this inner and spiritual journey. There remains, nevertheless, the amazing reality of the experience; and to the recorder alone was some clue of interpretation possible, perhaps, because in himself also lay the lure, though less imperative, of a similar journey. At any rate the interpretation may be offered to the handful who realise that trains and motors are not the only means of travel left to our progressive race.

In his younger days I knew George Isley intimately. I know him now. But the George Isley I knew of old, the arresting personality with whom I travelled, climbed, explored, is no longer with us. He is not here. He disappeared — gradually — into the past. There is no George Isley. And that such an individuality could vanish, while still his outer semblance walks the familiar streets, normal apparently, and not yet fifty in the number of his years, seems a tale, though difficult, well worth the telling. For I witnessed the slow submergence. It was very gradual. I cannot pretend to understand the entire significance of it. There was something questionable and sinister in the business that offered hints of astonishing possibilities. Were there a corps of spiritual police, the matter might be partially cleared up, but since none of the churches have yet organised anything effective of this sort, one can only fall back upon variants of the blessed ‘Mesopotamia,’ and whisper of derangement, and the like. Such labels, of course, explain as little as most other *clichés* in life. That well-groomed, soldierly figure strolling down Piccadilly, watching the Races, dining out — there is no derangement there. The face is not melancholy, the eye not wild; the gestures are quiet and the speech controlled. Yet the eye is empty, the face expressionless. Vacancy reigns there, provocative and significant. If not unduly noticeable, it is because the majority in life neither expect, nor offer, more.

At closer quarters you may think questioning things, or you may think — nothing; probably the latter. You may wonder why something continually expected does not make its appearance; and you may watch for the evidence of ‘personality’ the general presentment of the man has led you to expect. Disappointed, therefore, you may certainly be; but I defy you to discover the smallest hint of mental disorder, and of derangement or nervous affliction, absolutely nothing. Before long, perhaps, you may feel you are talking with a dummy, some well-trained automaton, a nonentity devoid of spontaneous life; and afterwards you may find that memory fades rapidly away, as though no impression of any kind has really been made at all. All this, yes; but nothing pathological. A few may be stimulated by this startling discrepancy between promise and performance, but most, accustomed to accept face values, would say, ‘a pleasant fellow, but nothing in him much ...’ and an hour later forget him altogether.

For the truth is as you, perhaps, divined. You have been sitting beside no one, you have been talking to, looking at, listening to — no one. The intercourse has conveyed nothing that can waken human response in you, good, bad or indifferent. There is no George Isley. And the discovery, if you make it, will not even cause you to creep with the uncanniness of the experience, because the exterior is so wholly pleasing. George Isley to-day is a picture with no meaning in it that charms merely by the harmonious colouring of an inoffensive subject. He moves undiscovered in the little world of society to which he was born, secure in the groove first habit has made comfortably automatic for him. No one guesses; none, that is, but the few who knew him intimately in early life. And his wandering existence has scattered these; they have forgotten what he was. So perfect, indeed, is he in the manners of the commonplace fashionable man, that no woman in his ‘set’ is aware that he differs from the type she is accustomed to. He turns a compliment with the accepted language of her text-book, motors, golfs and gambles in the regulation manner of his particular world. He is an admirable, perfect automaton. He is nothing. He is a human shell.

II

The name of George Isley had been before the public for some years when, after a considerable interval, we met again in a hotel in Egypt, I for my health, he for I knew not what — at first. But I soon discovered: archaeology and excavation had taken hold of him, though he had gone so quietly about it that no one seemed to have heard. I was not sure that he was glad to see me, for he had first withdrawn, annoyed, it seemed, at being discovered, but later, as though after consideration, had made tentative advances. He welcomed me with a curious gesture of the entire body that seemed to shake himself free from something that had made him forget my identity. There was pathos somewhere in his attitude, almost as though he asked for sympathy. ‘I’ve been out here, off and on, for the last three years,’ he told me, after describing something of what he had been doing. ‘I find it the most repaying hobby in the world. It leads to a reconstruction — an imaginative reconstruction, of course, I mean — of an enormous thing the world had entirely lost. A very gorgeous, stimulating hobby, believe me, and a very entic—' he quickly changed the word— 'exacting one indeed.'

I remember looking him up and down with astonishment. There was a change in him, a lack; a note was missing in his enthusiasm, a colour in the voice, a quality in his manner. The ingredients were not mixed quite as of old. I did not bother him with questions, but I noted thus at the very first a subtle alteration. Another facet of the man presented itself. Something that had been independent and aggressive was replaced by a certain emptiness that invited sympathy. Even in his physical appearance the change was manifested — this odd suggestion of lessening. I looked again more closely. Lessening was the word. He had somehow dwindled. It was startling, vaguely unpleasant too.

The entire subject, as usual, was at his finger-tips; he knew all the important men; and had spent money freely on his hobby. I laughed, reminding him of his remark that Egypt had no attractions for him, owing to the organised advertisement of its somewhat theatrical charms. Admitting his error with a gesture, he brushed the objection easily aside. His manner, and a certain glow that rose about his atmosphere as he answered, increased my first astonishment. His voice was significant and suggestive. 'Come out with me,' he said in a low tone, 'and see how little the tourists matter, how inappreciable the excavation is compared to what remains to be done, how gigantic' — he emphasised the word impressively— 'the scope for discovery remains.' He made a movement with his head and shoulders that conveyed a sense of the prodigious, for he was of massive build, his cast of features stern, and his eyes, set deep into the face, shone past me with a sombre gleam in them I did not quite account for. It was the voice, however, that brought the mystery in. It vibrated somewhere below the actual sound of it. 'Egypt,' he continued — and so gravely that at first I made the mistake of thinking he chose the curious words on purpose to produce a theatrical effect— 'that has enriched her blood with the pageant of so many civilisations, that has devoured Persians, Greeks and Romans, Saracens and Mamelukes, a dozen conquests and invasions besides, — what can mere tourists or explorers matter to her? The excavators scratch their skin and dig up mummies; and as for tourists!' — he laughed contemptuously— 'flies that settle for a moment on her covered face, to vanish at the first signs of heat! Egypt is not even aware of them. The real Egypt lies underground in darkness. Tourists must have light, to be seen as well as to see. And the diggers —— !'

He paused, smiling with something between pity and contempt I did not quite appreciate, for, personally, I felt a great respect for the tireless excavators. And then he added, with a touch of feeling in his tone as though he had a grievance against them, and had not also 'dug' himself, 'Men who uncover the dead, restore the temples, and reconstruct a skeleton, thinking they have read its beating heart....' He shrugged his great shoulders, and the rest of the sentence may have been but the protest of a man in defence of his own hobby, but that there seemed an undue earnestness and gravity about it that made me wonder more than ever. He went on to speak of the strangeness of the land as a mere ribbon of vegetation along the ancient river, the rest all ruins, desert, sun-drenched wilderness of death, yet so breakingly alive with wonder, power and a certain disquieting sense of deathlessness. There seemed, for him, a revelation of unusual spiritual kind in this land where the Past survived so potently. He spoke almost as though it obliterated the Present.

Indeed, the hint of something solemn behind his words made it difficult for me to keep up the conversation, and the pause that presently came I filled in with some word of questioning surprise, which yet, I think, was chiefly in concurrence. I was aware of some big belief in him, some enveloping emotion that escaped my grasp. Yet, though I did not understand, his great mood swept me.... His voice lowered, then, as he went on to mention temples, tombs and deities, details of his own discoveries and of their effect upon him, but to this I listened with half an ear, because in the unusual language he had first made use of I detected this other thing that stirred my curiosity more — stirred it uncomfortably.

'Then the spell,' I asked, remembering the effect of Egypt upon myself two years before, 'has worked upon you as upon most others, only with greater power?'

He looked hard at me a moment, signs of trouble showing themselves faintly in his rugged, interesting face. I think he wanted to say more than he could bring himself to confess. He hesitated.

‘I’m only glad,’ he replied after a pause, ‘it didn’t get hold of me earlier in life. It would have absorbed me. I should have lost all other interests. Now,’ — that curious look of helplessness, of asking sympathy, flitted like a shadow through his eyes— ‘now that I’m on the decline ... it matters less.’

On the decline! I cannot imagine by what blundering I missed this chance he never offered again; somehow or other the singular phrase passed unnoticed at the moment, and only came upon me with its full significance later when it was too awkward to refer to it. He tested my readiness to help, to sympathise, to share his inner life. I missed the clue. For, at the moment, a more practical consideration interested me in his language. Being of those who regretted that he had not excelled by devoting his powers to a single object, I shrugged my shoulders. He caught my meaning instantly. Oh, he was glad to talk. He felt the possibility of my sympathy underneath, I think.

‘No, no, you take me wrongly there,’ he said with gravity. ‘What I mean — and I ought to know if any one does! — is that while most countries give, others take away. Egypt changes you. No one can live here and remain exactly what he was before.’

This puzzled me. It startled, too, again. His manner was so earnest. ‘And Egypt, you mean, is one of the countries that take away?’ I asked. The strange idea unsettled my thoughts a little.

‘First takes away from you,’ he replied, ‘but in the end takes *you* away. Some lands enrich you,’ he went on, seeing that I listened, ‘while others impoverish. From India, Greece, Italy, all ancient lands, you return with memories you can use. From Egypt you return with — nothing. Its splendour stupefies; it’s useless. There is a change in your inmost being, an emptiness, an unaccountable yearning, but you find nothing that can fill the lack you’re conscious of. Nothing comes to replace what has gone. You have been drained.’

I stared; but I nodded a general acquiescence. Of a sensitive, artistic temperament this was certainly true, though by no means the superficial and generally accepted verdict. The majority imagine that Egypt has filled them to the brim. I took his deeper reading of the facts. I was aware of an odd fascination in his idea.

‘Modern Egypt,’ he continued, ‘is, after all, but a trick of civilisation,’ and there was a kind of breathlessness in his measured tone, ‘but ancient Egypt lies waiting, hiding, underneath. Though dead, she is amazingly alive. And you feel her touching you. She takes from you. She enriches herself. You return from Egypt — less than you were before.’

What came over my mind is hard to say. Some touch of visionary imagination burned its flaming path across my mind. I thought of some old Grecian hero speaking of his delicious battle with the gods — battle in which he knew he must be worsted, but yet in which he delighted because at death his spirit would join their glorious company beyond this world. I was aware, that is to say, of resignation as well as resistance in him. He already felt the effortless peace which follows upon long, unequal battling, as of a man who has fought the rapids with a strain beyond his strength, then sinks back and goes with the awful mass of water smoothly and indifferently — over the quiet fall.

Yet, it was not so much his words which clothed picturesquely an undeniable truth, as the force of conviction that drove behind them, shrouding my mind with mystery and darkness. His eyes, so steadily holding mine, were lit, I admit, yet they were calm and sane as those of a doctor discussing the symptoms of that daily battle to which we all finally succumb. This analogy occurred to me.

‘There *is*’ — I stammered a little, faltering in my speech— ‘an incalculable element in the country ... somewhere, I confess. You put it — rather strongly, though, don’t you?’

He answered quietly, moving his eyes from my face towards the window that framed the serene and exquisite sky towards the Nile.

‘The real, invisible Egypt,’ he murmured, ‘I do find rather — strong. I find it difficult to deal with. You see,’ and he turned towards me, smiling like a tired child, ‘I think the truth is that Egypt deals with me.’

‘It draws — —’ I began, then started as he interrupted me at once.

‘Into the Past.’ He uttered the little word in a way beyond me to describe. There came a flood of glory with it, a sense of peace and beauty, of battles over and of rest attained. No saint could have brimmed ‘Heaven’ with as much passionately enticing meaning. He went willingly, prolonging the struggle merely to enjoy the greater relief and joy of the consummation.

For again he spoke as though a struggle were in progress in his being. I got the impression that he somewhere wanted help. I understood the pathetic quality I had vaguely discerned already. His character naturally was so strong and independent. It now seemed weaker, as though certain fibres had been drawn out. And I understood then that the spell of Egypt, so lightly chattered about in its sensational aspect, so rarely known in its naked power, the nameless, creeping influence that begins deep below the surface and thence sends delicate tendrils outwards, was in his blood. I, in my untaught ignorance, had felt it too; it is undeniable; one is aware of unaccountable, queer things in Egypt; even the utterly prosaic feel them. Dead Egypt is marvellously alive....

I glanced past him out of the big windows where the desert glimmered in its featureless expanse of yellow leagues, two monstrous pyramids signalling from across the Nile, and for a moment — inexplicably, it seemed to me afterwards — I lost sight of my companion's stalwart figure that was yet so close before my eyes. He had risen from his chair; he was standing near me; yet my sight missed him altogether. Something, dim as a shadow, faint as a breath of air, rose up and bore my thoughts away, obliterating vision too. I forgot for a moment who I was; identity slipped from me. Thought, sight, feeling, all sank away into the emptiness of those sun-baked sands, sank, as it were, into nothingness, caught away from the Present, enticed, absorbed.... And when I looked back again to answer him, or rather to ask what his curious words could mean — he was no longer there. More than surprised — for there was something of shock in the disappearance — I turned to search. I had not seen him go. He had stolen from my side so softly, slipped away silently, mysteriously, and — so easily. I remember that a faint shiver ran down my back as I realised that I was alone.

Was it that, momentarily, I had caught a reflex of his state of mind? Had my sympathy induced in myself an echo of what he experienced in full — a going backwards, a loss of present vigour, the enticing, subtle draw of those immeasurable sands that hide the living dead from the interruptions of the careless living...?

I sat down to reflect and, incidentally, to watch the magnificence of the sunset; and the thing he had said returned upon me with insistent power, ringing like distant bells within my mind. His talk of the tombs and temples passed, but this remained. It stimulated oddly. His talk, I remembered, had always excited curiosity in this way. Some countries give, while others take away. What did he mean precisely? What had Egypt taken away from him? And I realised more definitely that something in him was missing, something he possessed in former years that was now no longer there. He had grown shadowy already in my thoughts. The mind searched keenly, but in vain ... and after some time I left my chair and moved over to another window, aware that a vague discomfort stirred within me that involved uneasiness — for him. I felt pity. But behind the pity was an eager, absorbing curiosity as well. He seemed receding curiously into misty distance, and the strong desire leaped in me to overtake, to travel with him into some vanished splendour that he had rediscovered. The feeling was a most remarkable one, for it included yearning — the yearning for some nameless, forgotten loveliness the world has lost. It was in me too.

At the approach of twilight the mind loves to harbour shadows. The room, empty of guests, was dark behind me; darkness, too, was creeping across the desert like a veil, deepening the serenity of its grim, unfeatured face. It turned pale with distance; the whole great sheet of it went rustling into night. The first stars peeped and twinkled, hanging loosely in the air as though they could be plucked like golden berries; and the sun was already below the Libyan horizon, where gold and crimson faded through violet into blue. I stood watching this mysterious Egyptian dusk, while an eerie glamour seemed to bring the incredible within uneasy reach of the half-faltering senses.... And suddenly the truth dropped into me. Over George Isley, over his mind and energies, over his thoughts and over his emotions too, a kind of darkness was also slowly creeping. Something in him had dimmed, yet not with age; it had gone out. Some inner night, stealing over the Present, obliterated it. And yet he looked towards the dawn. Like the Egyptian monuments his eyes turned — eastwards.

And so it came to me that what he had lost was personal ambition. He was glad, he said, that these Egyptian studies had not caught him earlier in life; the language he made use of was peculiar: ‘Now I am on the decline it matters less.’ A slight foundation, no doubt, to build conviction on, and yet I felt sure that I was partly right. He was fascinated, but fascinated against his will. The Present in him battled against the Past. Still fighting, he had yet lost hope. The desire *not* to change was now no longer in him....

I turned away from the window so as not to see that grey, encroaching desert, for the discovery produced a certain agitation in me. Egypt seemed suddenly a living entity of enormous power. She stirred about me. She was stirring now. This flat and motionless land pretending it had no movement, was actually busy with a million gestures that came creeping round the heart. She was reducing him. Already from the complex texture of his personality she had drawn one vital thread that in its relation to the general woof was of central importance — ambition. The mind chose the simile; but in my heart where thought fluttered in singular distress, another suggested itself as truer. ‘Thread’ changed to ‘artery.’ I turned quickly and went up to my room where I could be alone. The idea was somewhere ghastly.

III

Yet, while dressing for dinner, the idea exfoliated as only a living thing exfoliates. I saw in George Isley this great question mark that had not been there formerly. All have, of course, some question mark, and carry it about, though with most it rarely becomes visible until the end. With him it was plainly visible in his atmosphere at the hey-day of his life. He wore it like a fine curved scimitar above his head. So full of life, he yet seemed willingly dead. For, though imagination sought every possible explanation, I got no further than the somewhat negative result — that a certain energy, wholly unconnected with mere physical health, had been withdrawn. It was more than ambition, I think, for it included intention, desire, self-confidence as well. It was life itself. He was no longer in the Present. He was no longer *here*.

‘Some countries give while others take away.... I find Egypt difficult to deal with. I find it ...’ and then that simple, uncomplex adjective— ‘strong.’ In memory and experience the entire globe was mapped for him; it remained for Egypt, then, to teach him this marvellous new thing. But not Egypt of to-day; it was vanished Egypt that had robbed him of his strength. He had described it as underground, hidden, waiting.... I was again aware of a faint shuddering — as though something crept secretly from my inmost heart to share the experience with him, and as though my sympathy involved a willing consent that this should be so. With sympathy there must always be a shedding of the personal self; each time I felt this sympathy, it seemed that something left me. I thought in circles, arriving at no definite point where I could rest and say ‘that’s it; I understand.’ The giving attitude of a country was easily comprehensible; but this idea of robbery, of deprivation baffled me. An obscure alarm took hold of me — for myself as well as for him.

At dinner, where he invited me to his table, the impression passed off a good deal, however, and I convicted myself of a woman’s exaggeration; yet, as we talked of many a day’s adventure together in other lands, it struck me that we oddly left the present out. We ignored to-day. His thoughts, as it were, went most easily backwards. And each adventure led, as by its own natural weight and impetus, towards one thing — the enormous glory of a vanished age. Ancient Egypt was ‘home’ in this mysterious game life played with death. The specific gravity of his being, to say nothing for the moment of my own, had shifted lower, farther off, backwards and below, or as he put it — underground. The sinking sensation I experienced was of a literal kind....

And so I found myself wondering what had led him to this particular hotel. I had come out with an affected organ the specialist promised me would heal in the marvellous air of Helouan, but it was queer that my companion also should have chosen it. Its *clientèle* was mostly invalid, German and Russian invalid at that. The Management set its face against the lighter, gayer side of life that hotels in Egypt usually encourage eagerly. It was a true rest-house, a place of repose and leisure, a place where one could remain undiscovered and unknown. No English patronised it. One might easily — the idea came unbidden, suddenly — hide in it.

‘Then you’re doing nothing just now,’ I asked, ‘in the way of digging? No big expeditions or excavating at the moment?’

‘I’m recuperating,’ he answered carelessly. ‘I’ve have had two years up at the Valley of the Kings, and overdid it rather. But I’m by way of working at a little thing near here across the Nile.’ And he pointed in the direction of Sakkhâra, where the huge Memphian cemetery stretches underground from the Dachûr Pyramids to the Gizeh monsters, four miles lower down. ‘There’s a matter of a hundred years in that alone!’

‘You must have accumulated a mass of interesting material. I suppose later you’ll make use of it — a book or — —’

His expression stopped me — that strange look in the eyes that had stirred my first uneasiness. It was as if something struggled up a moment, looked bleakly out upon the present, then sank away again.

‘More,’ he answered listlessly, ‘than I can ever use. It’s much more likely to use me.’ He said it hurriedly, looking over his shoulder as though some one might be listening, then smiled significantly, bringing his eyes back upon my own again. I told him that he was far too modest. ‘If all the excavators thought like that,’ I added, ‘we ignorant ones should suffer.’ I laughed, but the laughter was only on my lips.

He shook his head indifferently. ‘They do their best; they do wonders,’ he replied, making an indescribable gesture as though he withdrew willingly from the topic altogether, yet could not quite achieve it. ‘I know their books; I know the writers too — of various nationalities.’ He paused a moment, and his eyes turned grave. ‘I cannot understand quite — how they do it,’ he added half below his breath.

‘The labour, you mean? The strain of the climate, and so forth?’ I said this purposely, for I knew quite well he meant another thing. The way he looked into my face, however, disturbed me so that I believe I visibly started. Something very deep in me sat up alertly listening, almost on guard.

‘I mean,’ he replied, ‘that they must have uncommon powers of resistance.’

There! He had used the very word that had been hiding in me! ‘It puzzles me,’ he went on, ‘for, with one exception, they are not unusual men. In the way of gifts — oh yes. It’s in the way of resistance and protection that I mean. Self-protection,’ he added with emphasis.

It was the way he said ‘resistance’ and ‘self-protection’ that sent a touch of cold through me. I learned later that he himself had made surprising discoveries in these two years, penetrating closer to the secret life of ancient sacerdotal Egypt than any of his predecessors or co-labourers — then, inexplicably, had ceased. But this was told to me afterwards and by others. At the moment I was only conscious of this odd embarrassment. I did not understand, yet felt that he touched upon something intimately personal to himself. He paused, expecting me to speak.

‘Egypt, perhaps, merely pours through them,’ I ventured. ‘They give out mechanically, hardly realising how much they give. They report facts devoid of interpretation. Whereas with you it’s the actual spirit of the past that is discovered and laid bare. You live it. You feel old Egypt and disclose her. That divining faculty was always yours — uncannily, I used to think.’

The flash of his sombre eyes betrayed that my aim was singularly good. It seemed a third had silently joined our little table in the corner. Something intruded, evoked by the power of what our conversation skirted but ever left unmentioned. It was huge and shadowy; it was also watchful. Egypt came gliding, floating up beside us. I saw her reflected in his face and gaze. The desert slipped in through walls and ceiling, rising from beneath our feet, settling about us, listening, peering, waiting. The strange obsession was sudden and complete. The gigantic scale of her swam in among the very pillars, arches, and windows of that modern dining-room. I felt against my skin the touch of chilly air that sunlight never reaches, stealing from beneath the granite monoliths. Behind it came the stifling breath of the heated tombs, of the Serapeum, of the chambers and corridors in the pyramids. There was a rustling as of myriad footsteps far away, and as of sand the busy winds go shifting through the ages. And in startling contrast to this impression of prodigious size, Isley himself wore suddenly an air of strangely dwindling. For a second he shrank visibly before my very eyes. He was receding. His outline seemed to retreat and lessen, as though he stood to the waist in what appeared like flowing mist, only his head and shoulders still above the ground. Far, far away I saw him.

It was a vivid inner picture that I somehow transferred objectively. It was a dramatised sensation, of course. His former phrase ‘now that I am declining’ flashed back upon me with sharp discomfort. Again, perhaps, his state of mind was reflected into me by some emotional telepathy. I waited, conscious of an almost sensible oppression that would not lift. It seemed an age before he spoke, and when he did there was the tremor of feeling in his voice he sought nevertheless to repress. I kept my eyes on the table for some reason. But I listened intently.

‘It’s you that have the divining faculty, not I,’ he said, an odd note of distance even in his tone, yet a resonance as though it rose up between reverberating walls. ‘There *is*, I believe, something here that resents too close inquiry, or rather that resists discovery — almost — takes offence.’

I looked up quickly, then looked down again. It was such a startling thing to hear on the lips of a modern Englishman. He spoke lightly, but the expression of his face belied the careless tone. There was no mockery in those earnest eyes, and in the hushed voice was a little creeping sound that gave me once again the touch of goose-flesh. The only word I can find is ‘subterranean’: all that was mental in him had sunk, so that he seemed speaking underground, head and shoulders alone visible. The effect was almost ghastly.

‘Such extraordinary obstacles are put in one’s way,’ he went on, ‘when the prying gets too close to the — reality; physical, external obstacles, I mean. Either that, or — the mind loses its assimilative faculties. One or other happens—’ his voice died down into a whisper— ‘and discovery ceases of its own accord.’

The same minute, then, he suddenly raised himself like a man emerging from a tomb; he leaned across the table; he made an effort of some violent internal kind, on the verge, I fully believe, of a pregnant personal statement. There was confession in his attitude; I think he was about to speak of his work at Thebes and the reason for its abrupt cessation. For I had the feeling of one about to hear a weighty secret, the responsibility unwelcome. This uncomfortable emotion rose in me, as I raised my eyes to his somewhat unwillingly, only to find that I was wholly at fault. It was not me he was looking at. He was staring past me in the direction of the wide, unshuttered windows. The expression of yearning was visible in his eyes again. Something had stopped his utterance.

And instinctively I turned and saw what he saw. So far as external details were concerned, at least, I saw it.

Across the glare and glitter of the uncompromising modern dining-room, past crowded tables, and over the heads of Germans feeding unpicturesquely, I saw — the moon. Her reddish disc, hanging unreal and enormous, lifted the spread sheet of desert till it floated off the surface of the world. The great window faced the east, where the Arabian desert breaks into a ruin of gorges, cliffs, and flat-topped ridges; it looked unfriendly, ominous, with danger in it; unlike the serener sand-dunes of the Libyan desert, there lay both menace and seduction behind its flood of shadows. And the moonlight emphasised this aspect: its ghostly desolation, its cruelty, its bleak hostility, turning it murderous. For no river sweetens this Arabian desert; instead of sandy softness, it has fangs of limestone rock, sharp and aggressive. Across it, just visible in the moonlight as a thread of paler grey, the old camel-trail to Suez beckoned faintly. And it was this that he was looking at so intently.

It was, I know, a theatrical stage-like glimpse, yet in it a seductiveness most potent. ‘Come out,’ it seemed to whisper, ‘and taste my awful beauty. Come out and lose yourself, and die. Come out and follow my moonlit trail into the Past ... where there is peace and immobility and silence. My kingdom is unchanging underground. Come down, come softly, come through sandy corridors below this tinsel of your modern world. Come back, come down into my golden past....’

A poignant desire stole through my heart on moonlit feet; I was personally conscious of a keen yearning to slip away in unresisting obedience. For it was uncommonly impressive, this sudden, haunting glimpse of the world outside. The hairy foreigners, uncouthly garbed, all busily eating in full electric light, provided a sensational contrast of emphatically distressing kind. A touch of what is called unearthly hovered about that distance through the window. There was weirdness in it. Egypt looked in upon us. Egypt watched and listened, beckoning through the moonlit windows of the heart to come and find her. Mind and imagination might flounder as they pleased, but something of this kind happened undeniably, whether expression in language fails to hold the truth or not. And George Isley, aware of being seen, looked straight into the awful visage — fascinated.

Over the bronze of his skin there stole a shade of grey. My own feeling of enticement grew — the desire to go out into the moonlight, to leave my kind and wander blindly through the desert, to see the gorges in their shining silver, and taste the keenness of the cool, sharp air. Further than this with me it did not go, but that my companion felt the bigger, deeper draw behind this surface glamour, I have no reasonable doubt. For a moment, indeed, I thought he meant to leave the table; he had half risen in his chair; it seemed he struggled and resisted — and then his big frame subsided again; he sat back; he looked, in the attitude his body took, less impressive, smaller, actually shrunken into the proportions of some minuter scale. It was as though something in that second had been drawn out of him, decreasing even his physical appearance. The voice, when he spoke presently with a touch of resignation, held a lifeless quality as though deprived of virile timbre.

‘It’s always there,’ he whispered, half collapsing back into his chair, ‘it’s always watching, waiting, listening. Almost like a monster of the fables, isn’t it? It makes no movement of its own, you see. It’s far too strong for that. It just hangs there, half in the air and half upon the earth — a gigantic web. Its prey flies into it. That’s Egypt all over. D’you feel like that too, or does it seem to you just imaginative rubbish? To me it seems that she just waits her time; she gets you quicker that way; in the end you’re bound to go.’

‘There’s power certainly,’ I said after a moment’s pause to collect my wits, my distress increased by the morbidness of his simile. ‘For some minds there may be a kind of terror too — for weak temperaments that are all imagination.’ My thoughts were scattered, and I could not readily find good words. ‘There is startling grandeur in a sight like that, for instance,’ and I pointed to the window. ‘You feel drawn — as if you simply *had* to go.’ My mind still buzzed with his curious words, ‘In the end you’re bound to go.’ It betrayed his heart and soul. ‘I suppose a fly does feel drawn,’ I added, ‘or a moth to the destroying flame. Or is it just unconscious on their part?’

He jerked his big head significantly. ‘Well, well,’ he answered, ‘but the fly isn’t necessarily weak, or the moth misguided. Over-adventurous, perhaps, yet both obedient to the laws of their respective beings. They get warnings too — only, when the moth wants to know too much, the fire stops it. Both flame and spider enrich themselves by understanding the natures of their prey; and fly and moth return again and again until this is accomplished.’

Yet George Isley was as sane as the head waiter who, noticing our interest in the window, came up just then and enquired whether we felt a draught and would prefer it closed. Isley, I realised, was struggling to express a passionate state of soul for which, owing to its rarity, no adequate expression lies at hand. There is a language of the mind, but there is none as yet of the spirit. I felt ill at ease. All this was so foreign to the wholesome, strenuous personality of the man as I remembered it.

‘But, my dear fellow,’ I stammered, ‘aren’t you giving poor old Egypt a bad name she hardly deserves? I feel only the amazing strength and beauty of it; awe, if you like, but none of this resentment you so mysteriously hint at.’

‘You understand, for all that,’ he answered quietly; and again he seemed on the verge of some significant confession that might ease his soul. My uncomfortable emotion grew. Certainly he was at high pressure somewhere. ‘And, if necessary, you could help. Your sympathy, I mean, *is* a help already.’ He said it half to himself and in a suddenly lowered tone again.

‘A help!’ I gasped. ‘My sympathy! Of course, if — —’

‘A witness,’ he murmured, not looking at me, ‘some one who understands, yet does not think me mad.’

There was such appeal in his voice that I felt ready and eager to do anything to help him. Our eyes met, and my own tried to express this willingness in me; but what I said I hardly know, for a cloud of confusion was on my mind, and my speech went fumbling like a schoolboy’s. I was more than disconcerted. Through this bewilderment, then, I just caught the tail-end of another sentence in which the words ‘relief it is to have ... some one to hold to ... when the disappearance comes ...’ sounded like voices heard in dream. But I missed the complete phrase and shrank from asking him to repeat it.

Some sympathetic answer struggled to my lips, though what it was I know not. The thing I murmured, however, seemed apparently well chosen. He leaned across and laid his big hand a moment on my own with eloquent pressure. It was cold as ice. A look of gratitude passed over his sunburned features. He sighed. And we left the table then and passed into the inner smoking-room for coffee — a room whose windows gave upon columned terraces that allowed no view of the encircling desert. He led the conversation into channels less personal and, thank heaven, less intensely emotional and mysterious. What we talked about I now forget; it was interesting but in another key altogether. His old charm and power worked; the respect I had always felt for his character and gifts returned in force, but it was the pity I now experienced that remained chiefly in my mind. For this change in him became more and more noticeable. He was less impressive, less convincing, less suggestive. His talk, though so knowledgeable, lacked that spiritual quality that drives home. He was uncannily less *real*. And I went up to bed, uneasy and disturbed. ‘It is not age,’ I said to myself, ‘and assuredly it is not death he fears, although he spoke of disappearance. It is mental — in the deepest sense. It is what religious people would call soul. Something is happening to his soul.’

IV

And this word ‘soul’ remained with me to the end. Egypt was taking his soul away into the Past. What was of value in him went willingly; the rest, some lesser aspect of his mind and character, resisted, holding to the present. A struggle, therefore, was involved. But this was being gradually obliterated too.

How I arrived gaily at this monstrous conclusion seems to me now a mystery; but the truth is that from a conversation one brings away a general idea that is larger than the words actually heard and spoken. I have reported, naturally, but a fragment of what passed between us in language, and of what was suggested — by gesture, expression, silence — merely perhaps a hint. I can only assert that this troubling verdict remained a conviction in my mind. It came upstairs with me; it watched and listened by my side. That mysterious Third evoked in our conversation was bigger than either of us separately; it might be called the spirit of ancient Egypt, or it might be called with equal generalisation, the Past. This Third, at any rate, stood by me, whispering this astounding thing. I went out on to my little balcony to smoke a pipe and enjoy the comforting presence of the stars before turning in. It came out with me. It was everywhere. I heard the barking of dogs, the monotonous beating of a distant drum towards Bedraschien, the sing-song voices of the natives in their booths and down the dim-lit streets. I was aware of this invisible Third behind all these familiar sounds. The enormous night-sky, drowned in stars, conveyed it too. It was in the breath of chilly wind that whispered round the walls, and it brooded everywhere above the sleepless desert. I was alone as little as though George Isley stood beside me in person — and at that moment a moving figure caught my eye below. My window was on the sixth story, but there was no mistaking the tall and soldierly bearing of the man who was strolling past the hotel. George Isley was going slowly out into the desert.

There was actually nothing unusual in the sight. It was only ten o’clock; but for doctor’s orders I might have been doing the same myself. Yet, as I leaned over the dizzy ledge and watched him, a chill struck through me, and a feeling nothing could justify, nor pages of writing describe, rose up and mastered me. His words at dinner came back with curious force. Egypt lay round him, motionless, a vast grey web. His feet were caught in it. It quivered. The silvery meshes in the moonlight announced the fact from Memphis up to Thebes, across the Nile, from underground Sakkhâra to the Valley of the Kings. A tremor ran over the entire desert, and again, as in the dining-room, the leagues of sand went rustling. It seemed to me that I caught him in the act of disappearing.

I realised in that moment the haunting power of this mysterious still atmosphere which is Egypt, and some magical emanation of its mighty past broke over me suddenly like a wave. Perhaps in that moment I felt what he himself felt; the withdrawing suction of the huge spent wave swept something out of me into the past with it. An indescribable yearning drew something living from my heart, something that longed with a kind of burning, searching sweetness for a glory of spiritual passion that was gone. The pain and happiness of it were more poignant than may be told, and my present personality — some vital portion of it, at any rate — wilted before the power of its enticement.

I stood there, motionless as stone, and stared. Erect and steady, knowing resistance vain, eager to go yet striving to remain, and half with an air of floating off the ground, he went towards the pale grey thread which was the track to Suez and the far Red Sea. There came upon me this strange, deep sense of pity, pathos, sympathy that was beyond all explanation, and mysterious as a pain in dreams. For a sense of his awful loneliness stole into me, a loneliness nothing on this earth could possibly relieve. Robbed of the Present, he sought this chimera of his soul, an unreal Past. Not even the calm majesty of this exquisite Egyptian night could soothe the dream away; the peace and silence were marvellous, the sweet perfume of the desert air intoxicating; but all these intensified it only.

And though at a loss to explain my own emotion, its poignancy was so real that a sigh escaped me and I felt that tears lay not too far away. I watched him, yet felt I had no right to watch. Softly I drew back from the window with the sensation of eavesdropping upon his privacy; but before I did so I had seen his outline melt away into the dim world of sand that began at the very walls of the hotel. He wore a cloak of green that reached down almost to his heels, and its colour blended with the silvery surface of the desert's dark sea-tint. This sheen first draped and then concealed him. It covered him with a fold of its mysterious garment that, without seam or binding, veiled Egypt for a thousand leagues. The desert took him. Egypt caught him in her web. He was gone.

Sleep for me just then seemed out of the question. The change in *him* made me feel less sure of myself. To see him thus invertebrate shocked me. I was aware that I had nerves.

For a long time I sat smoking by the window, my body weary, but my imagination irritatingly stimulated. The big sign-lights of the hotel went out; window after window closed below me; the electric standards in the streets were already extinguished; and Helouan looked like a child's white blocks scattered in ruin upon the nursery carpet. It seemed so wee upon the vast expanse. It lay in a twinkling pattern, like a cluster of glow-worms dropped into a negligible crease of the tremendous desert. It peeped up at the stars, a little frightened.

The night was very still. There hung an enormous brooding beauty everywhere, a hint of the sinister in it that only the brilliance of the blazing stars relieved. Nothing really slept. Grouped here and there at intervals about this dun-coloured world stood the everlasting watchers in solemn, tireless guardianship — the soaring Pyramids, the Sphinx, the grim Colossi, the empty temples, the long-deserted tombs. The mind was aware of them, stationed like sentries through the night. 'This is Egypt; you are actually in Egypt,' whispered the silence. 'Eight thousand years of history lie fluttering outside your window. *She* lies there underground, sleepless, mighty, deathless, not to be trifled with. Beware! Or she will change you too!'

My imagination offered this hint: Egypt *is* difficult to realise. It remains outside the mind, a fabulous, half-legendary idea. So many enormous elements together refuse to be assimilated; the heart pauses, asking for time and breath; the senses reel a little; and in the end a mental torpor akin to stupefaction creeps upon the brain. With a sigh the struggle is abandoned and the mind surrenders to Egypt on her own terms. Alone the diggers and archaeologists, confined to definite facts, offer successful resistance. My friend’s use of the words ‘resistance’ and ‘protection’ became clearer to me. While logic halted, intuition fluttered round this clue to the solution of the influences at work. George Isley realised Egypt more than most — but as she had been.

And I recalled its first effect upon myself, and how my mind had been unable to cope with the memory of it afterwards. There had come to its summons a colossal medley, a gigantic, coloured blur that merely bewildered. Only lesser points lodged comfortably in the heart. I saw a chaotic vision: sands drenched in dazzling light, vast granite aisles, stupendous figures that stared unblinking at the sun, a shining river and a shadowy desert, both endless as the sky, mountainous pyramids and gigantic monoliths, armies of heads, of paws, of faces — all set to a scale of size that was prodigious. The items stunned; the composite effect was too unwieldy to be grasped. Something that blazed with splendour rolled before the eyes, too close to be seen distinctly — at the same time very distant — unrealised.

Then, with the passing of the weeks, it slowly stirred to life. It had attacked unseen; its grip was quite tremendous; yet it could be neither told, nor painted, nor described. It flamed up unexpectedly — in the foggy London streets, at the Club, in the theatre. A sound recalled the street-cries of the Arabs, a breath of scented air brought back the heated sand beyond the palm groves. Up rose the huge Egyptian glamour, transforming common things; it had lain buried all this time in deep recesses of the heart that are inaccessible to ordinary daily life. And there hid in it something of uneasiness that was inexplicable; awe, a hint of cold eternity, a touch of something unchanging and terrific, something sublime made lovely yet unearthly with shadowy time and distance. The melancholy of the Nile and the grandeur of a hundred battered temples dropped some unutterable beauty upon the heart. Up swept the desert air, the luminous pale shadows, the naked desolation that yet brims with sharp vitality. An Arab on his donkey tripped in colour across the mind, melting off into tiny perspective, strangely vivid. A string of camels stood in silhouette against the crimson sky. Great winds, great blazing spaces, great solemn nights, great days of golden splendour rose from the pavement or the theatre-stall, and London, dim-lit England, the whole of modern life, indeed, seemed suddenly reduced to a paltry insignificance that produced an aching longing for the pageantry of those millions of vanished souls. Egypt rolled through the heart for a moment — and was gone.

I remembered that some such fantastic experience had been mine. Put it as one may, the fact remains that for certain temperaments Egypt can rob the Present of some thread of interest that was formerly there. The memory became for me an integral part of personality; something in me yearned for its curious and awful beauty. He who has drunk of the Nile shall return to drink of it again.... And if for myself this was possible, what might not happen to a character of George Isley's type? Some glimmer of comprehension came to me. The ancient, buried, hidden Egypt had cast her net about his soul. Grown shadowy in the Present, his life was being transferred into some golden, reconstructed Past, where it was real. Some countries give, while others take away. And George Isley was worth robbing....

Disturbed by these singular reflections, I moved away from the open window, closing it. But the closing did not exclude the presence of the Third. The biting night air followed me in. I drew the mosquito curtains round the bed, but the light I left still burning; and, lying there, I jotted down upon a scrap of paper this curious impression as best I could, only to find that it escaped easily between the words. Such visionary and spiritual perceptions are too elusive to be trapped in language. Reading it over after an interval of years, it is difficult to recall with what intense meaning, what uncanny emotion, I wrote those faded lines in pencil. Their rhetoric seems cheap, their content much exaggerated; yet at the time truth burned in every syllable. Egypt, which since time began has suffered robbery with violence at the hands of all the world, now takes her vengeance, choosing her individual prey. Her time has come. Behind a modern mask she lies in wait, intensely active, sure of her hidden power. Prostitute of dead empires, she lies now at peace beneath the same old stars, her loveliness unimpaired, bejewelled with the beaten gold of ages, her breasts uncovered, and her grand limbs flashing in the sun. Her shoulders of alabaster are lifted above the sand-drifts; she surveys the little figures of to-day. She takes her choice....

That night I did not dream, but neither did the whole of me lie down in sleep. During the long dark hours I was aware of that picture endlessly repeating itself, the picture of George Isley stealing out into the moonlight desert. The night so swiftly dropped her hood about him; so mysteriously he merged into the unchanging thing which cloaks the past. It lifted. Some huge shadowy hand, gloved softly yet of granite, stretched over the leagues to take him. He disappeared.

They say the desert is motionless and has no gestures! That night I saw it moving, hurrying. It went tearing after him. You understand my meaning? No! Well, when excited it produces this strange impression, and the terrible moment is — when you surrender helplessly — you desire it shall swallow you. You let it come. George Isley spoke of a web. It is, at any rate, some central power that conceals itself behind the surface glamour folk call the spell of Egypt. Its home is not apparent. It dwells with ancient Egypt — underground. Behind the stillness of hot windless days, behind the peace of calm, gigantic nights, it lurks unrealised, monstrous and irresistible. My mind grasped it as little as the fact that our solar system with all its retinue of satellites and planets rushes annually many million miles towards a star in Hercules, while yet that constellation appears no closer than it did six thousand years ago. But the clue dropped into me. George Isley, with his entire retinue of thought and life and feeling, was being similarly drawn. And I, a minor satellite, had become aware of the horrifying pull. It was magnificent.... And I fell asleep on the crest of this enormous wave.

V

The next few days passed idly; weeks passed too, I think; hidden away in this cosmopolitan hotel we lived apart, unnoticed. There was the feeling that time went what pace it pleased, now fast, now slow, now standing still. The similarity of the brilliant days, set between wondrous dawns and sunsets, left the impression that it was really one long, endless day without divisions. The mind’s machinery of measurement suffered dislocation. Time went backwards; dates were forgotten; the month, the time of year, the century itself went down into undifferentiated life.

The Present certainly slipped away curiously. Newspapers and politics became unimportant, news uninteresting, English life so remote as to be unreal, European affairs shadowy. The stream of life ran in another direction altogether — backwards. The names and faces of friends appeared through mist. People arrived as though dropped from the skies. They suddenly were there; one saw them in the dining-room, as though they had just slipped in from an outer world that once was real — somewhere. Of course, a steamer sailed four times a week, and the journey took five days, but these things were merely known, not realised. The fact that here it was summer, whereas over there winter reigned, helped to make the distance not quite thinkable. We looked at the desert and made plans. 'We will do this, we will do that; we must go there, we'll visit such and such a place ...' yet nothing happened. It always was to-morrow or yesterday, and we shared the discovery of Alice that there was no real 'to-day.' For our thinking made everything happen. That was enough. It *had* happened. It was the reality of dreams. Egypt was a dream-world that made the heart live backwards.

It came about, thus, that for the next few weeks I watched a fading life, myself alert and sympathetic, yet unable somehow to intrude and help. Noticing various little things by which George Isley betrayed the progress of the unequal struggle, I found my assistance negatived by the fact that I was in similar case myself. What he experienced in large and finally, I, too, experienced in little and for the moment. For I seemed also caught upon the fringe of the invisible web. My feelings were entangled sufficiently for me to understand.... And the decline of his being was terrible to watch. His character went with it; I saw his talents fade, his personality dwindle, his very soul dissolve before the insidious and invading influence. He hardly struggled. I thought of those abominable insects that paralyse the motor systems of their victims and then devour them at their leisure — alive. The incredible adventure was literally true, but, being spiritual, may not be told in the terms of a detective story. This version must remain an individual rendering — an aspect of *one* possible version. All who know the real Egypt, that Egypt which has nothing to do with dams and Nationalists and the external welfare of the falaheen, will understand. The pilfering of her ancient dead she suffers still; she, in revenge, preys at her leisure on the living.

The occasions when he betrayed himself were ordinary enough; it was the glimpse they afforded of what was in progress beneath his calm exterior that made them interesting. Once, I remember, we had lunched together at Mena, and, after visiting certain excavations beyond the Gizeh pyramids, we made our way homewards by way of the Sphinx. It was dusk, and the main army of tourists had retired, though some few dozen sight-seers still moved about to the cries of donkey-boys and baksheesh. The vast head and shoulders suddenly emerged, riding undrowned above the sea of sand. Dark and monstrous in the fading light, it loomed, as ever, a being of non-human lineage; no amount of familiarity could depreciate its grandeur, its impressive setting, the lost expression of the countenance that is too huge to focus as a face. A thousand visits leave its power undiminished. It has intruded upon our earth from some uncommon world. George Isley and myself both turned aside to acknowledge the presence of this alien, uncomfortable thing. We did not linger, but we slackened pace. It was the obvious, inevitable thing to do. He pointed then, with a suddenness that made me start. He indicated the tourists standing round.

‘See,’ he said, in a lowered tone, ‘day and night you’ll always find a crowd obedient to that thing. But notice their behaviour. People don’t do that before any other ruin in the world I’ve ever seen.’ He referred to the attempts of individuals to creep away alone and stare into the stupendous visage by themselves. At different points in the deep sandy basin were men and women, standing solitary, lying, crouching, apart from the main company where the dragomen mouthed their exposition with impertinent glibness.

‘The desire to be alone,’ he went on, half to himself, as we paused a moment, ‘the sense of worship which insists on privacy.’

It *was* significant, for no amount of advertising could dwarf the impressiveness of the inscrutable visage into whose eyes of stone the silent humans gazed. Not even the red-coat, standing inside one gigantic ear, could introduce the commonplace. But my companion’s words let another thing into the spectacle, a less exalted thing, dropping a hint of horror about that sandy cup: It became easy, for a moment, to imagine these tourists worshipping — against their will; to picture the monster noticing that they were there; that it might slowly turn its awful head; that the sand might visibly trickle from a stirring paw; that, in a word, they might be taken — changed.

‘Come,’ he whispered in a dropping tone, interrupting my fancies as though he half divined them, ‘it is getting late, and to be alone with the thing is intolerable to me just now. But you notice, don’t you,’ he added, as he took my arm to hurry me away, ‘how little the tourists matter? Instead of injuring the effect, they increase it. It uses *them*.’

And again a slight sensation of chill, communicated possibly by his nervous touch, or possibly by his earnest way of saying these curious words, passed through me. Some part of me remained behind in that hollow trough of sand, prostrate before an immensity that symbolised the past. A curious, wild yearning caught me momentarily, an intense desire to understand exactly why that terror stood there, its actual meaning long ago to the hearts that set it waiting for the sun, what definite rôle it played, what souls it stirred and why, in that system of towering belief and faith whose indestructible emblem it still remained. The past stood grouped so solemnly about its menacing presentment. I was distinctly aware of this spiritual suction backwards that my companion yielded to so gladly, yet against his normal, modern self. For it made the past appear magnificently desirable, and loosened all the rivets of the present. It bodied forth three main ingredients of this deep Egyptian spell — size, mystery, and immobility.

Yet, to my relief, the cheaper aspect of this Egyptian glamour left him cold. He remained unmoved by the commonplace mysterious; he told no mummy stories, nor ever hinted at the supernatural quality that leaps to the mind of the majority. There was no play in him. The influence was grave and vital. And, although I knew he held strong views with regard to the impiety of disturbing the dead, he never in my hearing attached any possible revengeful character to the energy of an outraged past. The current tales of this description he ignored; they were for superstitious minds or children; the deities that claimed his soul were of a grander order altogether. He lived, if it may be so expressed, already in a world his heart had reconstructed or remembered; it drew him in another direction altogether; with the modern, sensational view of life his spirit held no traffic any longer; he was living backwards. I saw his figure receding mournfully, yet never sentimentally, into the spacious, golden atmosphere of recaptured days. The enormous soul of buried Egypt drew him down. The dwindling of his physical appearance was, of course, a mental interpretation of my own; but another, stranger interpretation of a spiritual kind moved parallel with it — marvellous and horrible. For, as he diminished outwardly and in his modern, present aspect, he grew within — gigantic. The size of Egypt entered into him. Huge proportions now began to accompany any presentment of his personality to my inner vision. He towered. These two qualities of the land already obsessed him — magnitude and immobility.

And that awe which modern life ignores contemptuously woke in my heart. I almost feared his presence at certain times. For one aspect of the Egyptian spell is explained by sheer size and bulk. Disdainful of mere speed to-day, the heart is still uncomfortable with magnitude; and in Egypt there is size that may easily appal, for every detail shunts it laboriously upon the mind. It elbows out the present. The desert's vastness is not made comprehensible by mileage, and the sources of the Nile are so distant that they exist less on the map than in the imagination. The effort to realise suffers paralysis; they might equally be in the moon or Saturn. The undecorated magnificence of the desert remains unknown, just as the proportions of pyramid and temple, of pylons and Colossi approach the edge of the mind yet never enter in. All stand outside, clothed in this prodigious measurement of the past. And the old beliefs not only share this titanic effect upon the consciousness, but carry it stages further. The entire scale haunts with uncomfortable immensity, so that the majority run back with relief to the measurable details of a more manageable scale. Express trains, flying machines, Atlantic liners — these produce no unpleasant stretching of the faculties compared to the influence of the Karnak pylons, the pyramids, or the interior of the Serapeum.

Close behind this magnitude, moreover, steps the monstrous. It is revealed not in sand and stone alone, in queer effects of light and shadow, of glittering sunsets and of magical dusks, but in the very aspect of the bird and animal life. The heavy-headed buffaloes betray it equally with the vultures, the myriad kites, the grotesqueness of the mouthing camels. The rude, enormous scenery has it everywhere. There is nothing lyrical in this land of passionate mirages. Uncouth immensity notes the little human flittings. The days roll by in a tide of golden splendour; one goes helplessly with the flood; but it is an irresistible flood that sweeps backwards and below. The silent-footed natives in their coloured robes move before a curtain, and behind that curtain dwells the soul of ancient Egypt — the Reality, as George Isley called it — watching, with sleepless eyes of grey infinity. Then, sometimes the curtain stirs and lifts an edge; an invisible hand creeps forth; the soul is touched. And some one disappears.

VI

The process of disintegration must have been at work a long time before I appeared upon the scene; the changes went forward with such rapidity.

It was his third year in Egypt, two of which had been spent without interruption in company with an Egyptologist named Moleson, in the neighbourhood of Thebes. I soon discovered that this region was for him the centre of attraction, or as he put it, of the web. Not Luxor, of course, nor the images of reconstructed Karnak; but that stretch of grim, forbidding mountains where royalty, earthly and spiritual, sought eternal peace for the physical remains. There, amid surroundings of superb desolation, great priests and mighty kings had thought themselves secure from sacrilegious touch. In caverns underground they kept their faithful tryst with centuries, guarded by the silence of magnificent gloom. There they waited, communing with passing ages in their sleep, till Ra, their glad divinity, should summon them to the fulfilment of their ancient dream. And there, in the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings, their dream was shattered, their lovely prophecies derided, and their glory dimmed by the impious desecration of the curious.

That George Isley and his companion had spent their time, not merely digging and deciphering like their practical confrères, but engaged in some strange experiments of recovery and reconstruction, was matter for open comment among the fraternity. That incredible things had happened there was the big story of two Egyptian seasons at least. I heard this later only — tales of utterly incredible kind, that the desolate vale of rock was seen repeopled on moonlit nights, that the smoke of unaccustomed fires rose to cap the flat-topped peaks, that the pageantry of some forgotten worship had been seen to issue from the openings of these hills, and that sounds of chanting, sonorous and marvellously sweet, had been heard to echo from those bleak, repellent precipices. The tales apparently were grossly exaggerated; wandering Bedouins brought them in; the guides and dragomen repeated them with mysterious additions; till they filtered down through the native servants in the hotels and reached the tourists with highly picturesque embroidery. They reached the authorities too. The only accurate fact I gathered at the time, however, was that they had abruptly ceased. George Isley and Moleson, moreover, had parted company. And Moleson, I heard, was the originator of the business. He was, at this time, unknown to me; his arresting book on ‘A Modern Reconstruction of Sun-worship in Ancient Egypt’ being my only link with his unusual mind. Apparently he regarded the sun as the deity of the scientific religion of the future which would replace the various anthropomorphic gods of childish creeds. He discussed the possibility of the zodiacal signs being some kind of Celestial Intelligences. Belief blazed on every page. Men’s life is heat, derived solely from the sun, and men were, therefore, part of the sun in the sense that a Christian is part of his personal deity. And absorption was the end. His description of ‘sun-worship ceremonials’ conveyed an amazing reality and beauty. This singular book, however, was all I knew of him until he came to visit us in Helouan, though I easily discerned that his influence somehow was the original cause of the change in my companion.

At Thebes, then, was the active centre of the influence that drew my friend away from modern things. It was there, I easily guessed, that ‘obstacles’ had been placed in the way of these men’s too close enquiry. In that haunted and oppressive valley, where profane and reverent come to actual grips, where modern curiosity is most busily organised, and even tourists are aware of a masked hostility that dogs the prying of the least imaginative mind — there, in the neighbourhood of the hundred-gated city, had Egypt set the headquarters of her irreconcilable enmity. And it was there, amid the ruins of her loveliest past, that George Isley had spent his years of magical reconstruction and met the influence that now dominated his entire life.

And though no definite avowal of the struggle betrayed itself in speech between us, I remember fragments of conversation, even at this stage, that proved his willing surrender of the present. We spoke of fear once, though with the indirectness of connection I have mentioned. I urged that the mind, once it is forewarned, can remain master of itself and prevent a thing from happening.

‘But that does not make the thing unreal,’ he objected.

‘The mind can deny it,’ I said. ‘It then becomes unreal.’

He shook his head. ‘One does not deny an unreality. Denial is a childish act of self-protection against something you expect to happen.’ He caught my eye a moment. ‘You deny what you are afraid of,’ he said. ‘Fear invites.’ And he smiled uneasily. ‘You know it must get you in the end.’ And, both of us being aware secretly to what our talk referred, it seemed bold-blooded and improper; for actually we discussed the psychology of his disappearance. Yet, while I disliked it, there was a fascination about the subject that compelled attraction.... ‘Once fear gets in,’ he added presently, ‘confidence is undermined, the structure of life is threatened, and you — go gladly. The foundation of everything is belief. A man is what he believes about himself; and in Egypt you can believe things that elsewhere you would not even think about. It attacks the essentials.’ He sighed, yet with a curious pleasure; and a smile of resignation and relief passed over his rugged features and was gone again. The luxury of abandonment lay already in him.

‘But even belief,’ I protested, ‘must be founded on some experience or other.’ It seemed ghastly to speak of his spiritual malady behind the mask of indirect allusion. My excuse was that he so obviously talked willingly.

He agreed instantly. ‘Experience of one kind or another,’ he said darkly, ‘there always is. Talk with the men who live out here; ask any one who thinks, or who has the imagination which divines. You’ll get only one reply, phrase it how they may. Even the tourists and the little commonplace officials feel it. And it’s not the climate, it’s not nerves, it’s not any definite tendency that they can name or lay their finger on. Nor is it mere orientalising of the mind. It’s something that first takes you from your common life, and that later takes common life from you. You willingly resign an unremunerative Present. There are no half-measures either — once the gates are open.’

There was so much undeniable truth in this that I found no corrective by way of strong rejoinder. All my attempts, indeed, were futile in this way. He meant to go; my words could not stop him. He wanted a witness, — he dreaded the loneliness of going — but he brooked no interference. The contradictory position involved a perplexing state of heart and mind in both of us. The atmosphere of this majestic land, to-day so trifling, yesterday so immense, most certainly induced a lifting of the spiritual horizon that revealed amazing possibilities.

VII

It was in the windless days of a perfect December that Moleson, the Egyptologist, found us out and paid a flying visit to Helouan. His duties took him up and down the land, but his time seemed largely at his own disposal. He lingered on. His coming introduced a new element I was not quite able to estimate; though, speaking generally, the effect of his presence upon my companion was to emphasise the latter’s alteration. It underlined the change, and drew attention to it. The new arrival, I gathered, was not altogether welcome. ‘I should never have expected to find you *here*,’ laughed Moleson when they met, and whether he referred to Helouan or to the hotel was not quite clear. I got the impression he meant both; I remembered my fancy that it was a good hotel to hide in. George Isley had betrayed a slight involuntary start when the visiting card was brought to him at tea-time. I think he had wished to escape from his former co-worker. Moleson had found him out. ‘I heard you had a friend with you and were contemplating further exper — work,’ he added. He changed the word ‘experiment’ quickly to the other.

‘The former, as you see, is true, but not the latter,’ replied my companion dryly, and in his manner was a touch of opposition that might have been hostility. Their intimacy, I saw, was close and of old standing. In all they said and did and looked, there was an undercurrent of other meaning that just escaped me. They were up to something — they *had* been up to something; but Isley would have withdrawn if he could!

Moleson was an ambitious and energetic personality, absorbed in his profession, alive to the poetical as well as to the practical value of archaeology, and he made at first a wholly delightful impression upon me. An instinctive *flair* for his subject had early in life brought him success and a measure of fame as well. His knowledge was accurate and scholarly, his mind saturated in the lore of a vanished civilisation. Behind an exterior that was quietly careless, I divined a passionate and complex nature, and I watched him with interest as the man for whom the olden sun-worship of unscientific days held some beauty of reality and truth. Much in his strange book that had bewildered me now seemed intelligible when I saw the author. I cannot explain this more closely. Something about him somehow made it possible. Though modern to the finger-tips and thoroughly equipped with all the tendencies of the day, there seemed to hide in him another self that held aloof with a dignified detachment from the interests in which his ‘educated’ mind was centred. He read living secrets beneath museum labels, I might put it. He stepped out of the days of the Pharaohs if ever man did, and I realised early in our acquaintance that this was the man who had exceptional powers of ‘resistance and self-protection,’ and was, in his particular branch of work, ‘unusual.’ In manner he was light and gay, his sense of humour strong, with a way of treating everything as though laughter was the sanest attitude towards life. There is, however, the laughter that hides — other things. Moleson, as I gathered from many clues of talk and manner and silence, was a deep and singular being. His experiences in Egypt, if any, he had survived admirably. There were at least two Molesons. I felt him more than double —— multiple.

In appearance tall, thin, and fleshless, with a dried-up skin and features withered as a mummy's, he said laughingly that Nature had picked him physically for his 'job'; and, indeed, one could see him worming his way down narrow tunnels into the sandy tombs, and writhing along sunless passages of suffocating heat without too much personal inconvenience. Something sinuous, almost fluid in his mind expressed itself in his body too. He might go in any direction without causing surprise. He might go backwards or forwards. He might go in two directions at once.

And my first impression of the man deepened before many days were past. There was irresponsibility in him, insincerity somewhere, almost want of heart. His morality was certainly not to-day's, and the mind in him was slippery. I think the modern world, to which he was unattached, confused and irritated him. A sense of insecurity came with him. His interest in George Isley was the interest in a psychological 'specimen.' I remembered how in his book he described the selection of individuals for certain functions of that marvellous worship, and the odd idea flashed through me — well, that Isley exactly suited some purpose of his re-creating energies. The man was keenly observant from top to toe, but not with his sight alone; he seemed to be aware of motives and emotions before he noticed the acts or gestures that these caused. I felt that he took me in as well. Certainly he eyed me up and down by means of this inner observation that seemed automatic with him.

Moleson was not staying in our hotel; he had chosen one where social life was more abundant; but he came up frequently to lunch and dine, and sometimes spent the evening in Isley's rooms, amusing us with his skill upon the piano, singing Arab songs, and chanting phrases from the ancient Egyptian rituals to rhythms of his own invention. The old Egyptian music, both in harmony and melody, was far more developed than I had realised, the use of sound having been of radical importance in their ceremonies. The chanting in particular he did with extraordinary effect, though whether its success lay in his sonorous voice, his peculiar increasing of the vowel sounds, or in anything deeper, I cannot pretend to say. The result at any rate was of a unique description. It brought buried Egypt to the surface; the gigantic Presence entered sensibly into the room. It came, huge and gorgeous, rolling upon the mind the instant he began, and something in it was both terrible and oppressive. The repose of eternity lay in the sound. Invariably, after a few moments of that transforming music, I saw the Valley of the Kings, the deserted temples, titanic faces of stone, great effigies coifed with zodiacal signs, but above all — the twin Colossi.

I mentioned this latter detail.

‘Curious *you* should feel that too — curious you should say it, I mean,’ Moleson replied, not looking at me, yet with an air as if I had said something he expected. ‘To me the Memnon figures express Egypt better than all the other monuments put together. Like the desert, they are featureless. They sum her up, as it were, yet leave the message unuttered. For, you see, they cannot.’ He laughed a little in his throat. ‘They have neither eyes nor lips nor nose; their features are gone.’

‘Yet they tell the secret — to those who care to listen,’ put in Isley in a scarcely noticeable voice. ‘Just because they have no words. They still sing at dawn,’ he added in a louder, almost a challenging tone. It startled me.

Moleson turned round at him, opened his lips to speak, hesitated, stopped. He said nothing for a moment. I cannot describe what it was in the lightning glance they exchanged that put me on the alert for something other than was obvious. My nerves quivered suddenly, and a breath of colder air stole in among us. Moleson swung round to me again. ‘I almost think,’ he said, laughing when I complimented him upon the music, ‘that I must have been a priest of Aton-Ra in an earlier existence, for all this comes to my finger-tips as if it were instinctive knowledge. Plotinus, remember, lived a few miles away at Alexandria with his great idea that knowledge is recollection,’ he said, with a kind of cynical amusement. ‘In those days, at any rate,’ he added more significantly, ‘worship was real and ceremonials actually expressed great ideas and teaching. There was power in them.’ Two of the Molesons spoke in that contradictory utterance.

I saw that Isley was fidgeting where he sat, betraying by certain gestures that uneasiness was in him. He hid his face a moment in his hands; he sighed; he made a movement — as though to prevent something coming. But Moleson resisted his attempt to change the conversation, though the key shifted a little of its own accord. There were numerous occasions like this when I was aware that both men skirted something that had happened, something that Moleson wished to resume, but that Isley seemed anxious to postpone.

I found myself studying Moleson's personality, yet never getting beyond a certain point. Shrewd, subtle, with an acute rather than a large intelligence, he was cynical as well as insincere, and yet I cannot describe by what means I arrived at two other conclusions as well about him: first, that this insincerity and want of heart had not been so always; and, secondly, that he sought social diversion with deliberate and un-ordinary purpose. I could well believe that the first was Egypt's mark upon him, and the second an effort at resistance and self-protection.

'If it wasn't for the gaiety,' he remarked once in a flippant way that thinly hid significance, 'a man out here would go under in a year. Social life gets rather reckless — exaggerated — people do things they would never dream of doing at home. Perhaps you've noticed it,' he added, looking suddenly at me; 'Cairo and the rest — they plunge at it as though driven — a sort of excess about it somewhere.' I nodded agreement. The way he said it was unpleasant rather. 'It's an antidote,' he said, a sub-acid flavour in his tone. 'I used to loathe society myself. But now I find gaiety — a certain irresponsible excitement — of importance. Egypt gets on the nerves after a bit. The moral fibre fails. The will grows weak.' And he glanced covertly at Isley as with a desire to point his meaning. 'It's the clash between the ugly present and the majestic past, perhaps.' He smiled.

Isley shrugged his shoulders, making no reply; and the other went on to tell stories of friends and acquaintances whom Egypt had adversely affected: Barton, the Oxford man, school teacher, who had insisted in living in a tent until the Government relieved him of his job. He took to his tent, roamed the desert, drawn irresistibly, practical considerations of the present of no avail. This yearning took him, though he could never define the exact attraction. In the end his mental balance was disturbed. 'But now he's all right again; I saw him in London only this year; he can't say what he felt or why he did it. Only — he's different.' Of John Lattin, too, he spoke, whom agarophobia caught so terribly in Upper Egypt; of Malahide, upon whom some fascination of the Nile induced suicidal mania and attempts at drowning; of Jim Moleson, a cousin (who had camped at Thebes with himself and Isley), whom megalomania of a most singular type attacked suddenly in a sandy waste — all radically cured as soon as they left Egypt, yet, one and all, changed and made otherwise in their very souls.

He talked in a loose, disjointed way, and though much he said was fantastic, as if meant to challenge opposition, there was impressiveness about it somewhere, due, I think, to a kind of cumulative emotion he produced.

‘The monuments do not impress merely by their bulk, but by their majestic symmetry,’ I remember him saying. ‘Look at the choice of form alone — the Pyramids, for instance. No other shape was possible: dome, square, spires, all would have been hideously inadequate. The wedge-shaped mass, immense foundations and pointed apex were the *mot juste* in outline. Do you think people without greatness in themselves chose that form? There was no unbalance in the minds that conceived the harmonious and magnificent structures of the temples. There was stately grandeur in their consciousness that could only be born of truth and knowledge. The power in their images is a direct expression of eternal and essential things they knew.’

We listened in silence. He was off upon his hobby. But behind the careless tone and laughing questions there was this lurking passionateness that made me feel uncomfortable. He was edging up, I felt, towards some climax that meant life and death to himself and Isley. I could not fathom it. My sympathy let me in a little, yet not enough to understand completely. Isley, I saw, was also uneasy, though for reasons that equally evaded me.

‘One can almost believe,’ he continued, ‘that something still hangs about in the atmosphere from those olden times.’ He half closed his eyes, but I caught the gleam in them. ‘It affects the mind through the imagination. With some it changes the point of view. It takes the soul back with it to former, quite different, conditions, that must have been almost another kind of consciousness.’

He paused an instant and looked up at us. ‘The *intensity* of belief in those days,’ he resumed, since neither of us accepted the challenge, ‘was amazing — something quite unknown anywhere in the world to-day. It was so sure, so positive; no mere speculative theories, I mean; — as though something in the climate, the exact position beneath the stars, the “attitude” of this particular stretch of earth in relation to the sun — thinned the veil between humanity — and other things. Their hierarchies of gods, you know, were not mere idols; animals, birds, monsters, and what-not, all typified spiritual forces and powers that influenced their daily life. But the strong thing is — they *knew*. People who were scientific as they were did not swallow foolish superstitions. They made colours that could last six thousand years, even in the open air; and without instruments they measured accurately — an enormously difficult and involved calculation — the precession of the equinoxes. You've been to Denderah?' — he suddenly glanced again at me. 'No! Well, the minds that realised the zodiacal signs could hardly believe, you know, that Hathor was a cow!'

Isley coughed. He was about to interrupt, but before he could find words, Moleson was off again, some new quality in his tone and manner that was almost aggressive. The hints he offered seemed more than hints. There was a strange conviction in his heart. I think he was skirting a bigger thing that he and his companion knew, yet that his real object was to see in how far I was open to attack — how far my sympathy might be with them. I became aware that he and George Isley shared this bigger thing. It was based, I felt, on some certain knowledge that experiment had brought them.

'Think of the grand teaching of Aknahton, that young Pharaoh who regenerated the entire land and brought it to its immense prosperity. He taught the worship of the sun, but not of the visible sun. The deity had neither form nor shape. The great disk of glory was but the manifestation, each beneficent ray ending in a hand that blessed the world. It was a god of everlasting energy, love and power, yet men could know it at first hand in their daily lives, worshipping it at dawn and sunset with passionate devotion. No anthropomorphic idol masqueraded in *that*!'

An extraordinary glow was about him as he said it. The same minute he lowered his voice, shifting the key perceptibly. He kept looking up at me through half-closed eyelids.

'And another thing they wonderfully knew,' he almost whispered, 'was that, with the precession of their deity across the equinoctial changes, there came new powers down into the world of men. Each cycle — each zodiacal sign — brought its special powers which they quickly typified in the monstrous effigies we label to-day in our dull museums. Each sign took some two thousand years to traverse. Each sign, moreover, involved a change in human consciousness. There was this relation between the heavens and the human heart. All that they knew. While the sun crawled through the sign of Taurus, it was the Bull they worshipped; with Aries, it was the ram that coifed their granite symbols. Then came, as you remember, with Pisces the great New Arrival, when already they sank from their grand zenith, and the Fish was taken as the emblem of the changing powers which the Christ embodied. For the human soul, they held, echoed the changes in the immense journey of the original deity, who is its source, across the Zodiac, and the truth of "As above, so Below" remains the key to all manifested life. And to-day the sun, just entering Aquarius, new powers are close upon the world. The old — that which has been for two thousand years — again is crumbling, passing, dying. New powers and a new consciousness are knocking at our doors. It is a time of change. It is also' — he leaned forward so that his eyes came close before me— 'the time to make the change. The soul can choose its own conditions. It can — —'

A sudden crash smothered the rest of the sentence. A chair had fallen with a clatter upon the wooden floor where the carpet left it bare. Whether Isley in rising had stumbled against it, or whether he had purposely knocked it over, I could not say. I only knew that he had abruptly risen and as abruptly sat down again. A curious feeling came to me that the sign was somehow prearranged. It was so sudden. His voice, too, was forced, I thought.

'Yes, but we can do without all that, Moleson,' he interrupted with acute abruptness. 'Suppose we have a tune instead.'

VIII

It was after dinner in his private room, and he had sat very silent in his corner until this sudden outburst. Moleson got up quietly without a word and moved over to the piano. I saw — or was it imagination merely? — a new expression slide upon his withered face. He meant mischief somewhere.

From that instant — from the moment he rose and walked over the thick carpet — he fascinated me. The atmosphere his talk and stories had brought remained. His lean fingers ran over the keys, and at first he played fragments from popular musical comedies that were pleasant enough, but made no demand upon the attention. I heard them without listening. I was thinking of another thing — his walk. For the way he moved across those few feet of carpet had power in it. He looked different; he seemed another man; he was changed. I saw him curiously — as I sometimes now saw Isley too — bigger. In some manner that was both enchanting and oppressive, his presence from that moment drew my imagination as by an air of authority it held.

I left my seat in the far corner and dropped into a chair beside the window, nearer to the piano. Isley, I then noticed, had also turned to watch him. But it was George Isley not quite as he was now. I felt rather than saw the change. Both men had subtly altered. They seemed extended, their outlines shadowy.

Isley, alert and anxious, glanced up at the player, his mind of earlier years — for the expression of his face was plain — following the light music, yet with difficulty that involved effort, almost struggle. ‘Play that again, will you?’ I heard him say from time to time. He was trying to take hold of it, to climb back to a condition where that music had linked him to the present, to seize a mental structure that was gone, to grip hold tightly of it — only to find that it was too far forgotten and too fragile. It would not bear him. I am sure of it, and I can swear I divined his mood. He fought to realise himself as he had been, but in vain. In his dim corner opposite I watched him closely. The big black Blüthner blocked itself between us. Above it swayed the outline, lean and half shadowy, of Moleson as he played. A faint whisper floated through the room. ‘You are in Egypt.’ Nowhere else could this queer feeling of presentiment, of anticipation, have gained a footing so easily. I was aware of intense emotion in all three of us. The least reminder of To-day seemed ugly. I longed for some ancient forgotten splendour that was lost.

The scene fixed my attention very steadily, for I was aware of something deliberate and calculated on Moleson’s part. The thing was well considered in his mind, intention only half concealed. It was Egypt he interpreted by sound, expressing what in him was true, then observing its effect, as he led us cleverly towards — the past. Beginning with the present, he played persuasively, with penetration, with insistent meaning too. He had that touch which conjured up real atmosphere, and, at first, that atmosphere termed modern. He rendered vividly the note of London, passing from the jingles of musical comedy, nervous rag-times and sensuous Tango dances, into the higher strains of concert rooms and ‘cultured’ circles. Yet not too abruptly. Most dexterously he shifted the level, and with it our emotion. I recognised, as in a parody, various ultra-modern thrills: the tumult of Strauss, the pagan sweetness of primitive Debussy, the weirdness and ecstasy of metaphysical Scriabin. The composite note of To-day in both extremes, he brought into this private sitting-room of the desert hotel, while George Isley, listening keenly, fidgeted in his chair.

'"Après-midi d'un Faune,"' said Moleson dreamily, answering the question as to what he played. 'Debussy's, you know. And the thing before it was from "Til Eulenspiegel" — Strauss, of course.'

He drawled, swaying slowly with the rhythm, and leaving pauses between the words. His attention was not wholly on his listener, and in the voice was a quality that increased my uneasy apprehension. I felt distress for Isley somewhere. Something, it seemed, was coming; Moleson brought it. Unconsciously in his walk, it now appeared consciously in his music; and it came from what was underground in him. A charm, a subtle change, stole oddly over the room. It stole over my heart as well. Some power of estimating left me, as though my mind were slipping backwards and losing familiar, common standards.

'The true modern note in it, isn't there?' he drawled; 'cleverness, I think — intellectual — surface ingenuity — no depth or permanence — just the sensational brilliance of To-day.' He turned and stared at me fixedly an instant. 'Nothing *everlasting*,' he added impressively. 'It tells everything it knows — because it's small enough — —'

And the room turned pettier as he said it; another, bigger shadow draped its little walls. Through the open windows came a stealthy gesture of eternity. The atmosphere stretched visibly. Moleson was playing a marvellous fragment from Scriabin's 'Prometheus.' It sounded thin and shallow. This modern music, all of it, was out of place and trivial. It was almost ridiculous. The scale of our emotion changed insensibly into a deeper thing that has no name in dictionaries, being of another age. And I glanced at the windows where stone columns framed dim sections of great Egypt listening outside. There was no moon; only deep draughts of stars blazed, hanging in the sky. I thought with awe of the mysterious knowledge that vanished people had of these stars, and of the Sun's huge journey through the Zodiac....

And, with astonishing suddenness as of dream, there rose a pictured image against that starlit sky. Lifted into the air, between heaven and earth, I saw float swiftly past a panorama of the stately temples, led by Denderah, Edfu, Abou Simbel. It paused, it hovered, it disappeared. Leaving incalculable solemnity behind it in the air, it vanished, and to see so vast a thing move at that easy yet unhasting speed unhinged some sense of measurement in me. It was, of course, I assured myself, mere memory objectified owing to something that the music summoned, yet the apprehension rose in me that the whole of Egypt presently would stream past in similar fashion — Egypt as she was in the zenith of her unrecoverable past. Behind the tinkling of the modern piano passed the rustling of a multitude, the tramping of countless feet on sand.... It was singularly vivid. It arrested in me something that normally went flowing.... And when I turned my head towards the room to call attention to my strange experience, the eyes of Moleson, I saw, were laid upon my own. He stared at me. The light in them transfixed me, and I understood that the illusion was due in some manner to his evocation. Isley rose at the same moment from his chair. The thing I had vaguely been expecting had shifted closer. And the same moment the musician abruptly changed his key.

‘You may like this better,’ he murmured, half to himself, but in tones he somehow made echoing. ‘It’s more suited to the place.’ There was a resonance in the voice as though it emerged from hollows underground. ‘The other seems almost sacrilegious — here.’ And his voice drawled off in the rhythm of slower modulations that he played. It had grown muffled. There was an impression, too, that he did not strike the piano, but that the music issued from himself.

‘Place! What place?’ asked Isley quickly. His head turned sharply as he spoke. His tone, in its remoteness, made me tremble.

The musician laughed to himself. ‘I meant that this hotel seems really an impertinence,’ he murmured, leaning down upon the notes he played upon so softly and so well; ‘and that it’s but the thinnest kind of pretence — when you come to think of it. We are in the desert really. The Colossi are outside, and all the emptied temples. Or ought to be,’ he added, raising his tone abruptly with a glance at me.

He straightened up and stared out into the starry sky past George Isley's shoulders.

'That,' he exclaimed with betraying vehemence, 'is where we are and what we play to!' His voice suddenly increased; there was a roar in it. 'That,' he repeated, 'is the thing that takes our hearts away.' The volume of intonation was astonishing.

For the way he uttered the monosyllable suddenly revealed the man beneath the outer sheath of cynicism and laughter, explained his heartlessness, his secret stream of life. He, too, was soul and body in the past. 'That' revealed more than pages of descriptive phrases. His heart lived in the temple aisles, his mind unearthed forgotten knowledge; his soul had clothed itself anew in the seductive glory of antiquity: he dwelt with a quickening magic of existence in the reconstructed splendour of what most term only ruins. He and George Isley together had revivified a power that enticed them backwards; but whereas the latter struggled still, the former had already made his permanent home there. The faculty in me that saw the vision of streaming temples saw also this — remorselessly definite. Moleson himself sat naked at that piano. I saw him clearly then. He no longer masqueraded behind his sneers and laughter. He, too, had long ago surrendered, lost himself, gone out, and from the place his soul now dwelt in he watched George Isley sinking down to join him. He lived in ancient, subterranean Egypt. This great hotel stood precariously on the merest upper crust of desert. A thousand tombs, a hundred temples lay outside, within reach almost of our very voices. Moleson was merged with 'that.'

This intuition flashed upon me like the picture in the sky; and both were true.

And, meanwhile, this other thing he played had a surge of power in it impossible to describe. It was sombre, huge and solemn. It conveyed the power that his walk conveyed. There was distance in it, but a distance not of space alone. A remoteness of time breathed through it with that strange sadness and melancholy yearning that enormous interval brings. It marched, but very far away; it held refrains that assumed the rhythms of a multitude the centuries muted; it sang, but the singing was underground in passages that fine sand muffled. Lost, wandering winds sighed through it, booming.

The contrast, after the modern, cheaper music, was dislocating. Yet the change had been quite naturally effected.

‘It would sound empty and monotonous elsewhere — in London, for instance,’ I heard Moleson drawling, as he swayed to and fro, ‘but here it is big and splendid — true. You hear what I mean,’ he added gravely. ‘You understand?’

‘What is it?’ asked Isley thickly, before I could say a word. ‘I forget exactly. It has tears in it — more than I can bear.’ The end of his sentence died away in his throat.

Moleson did not look at him as he answered. He looked at me.

‘You surely ought to know,’ he replied, the voice rising and falling as though the rhythm forced it. ‘You have heard it all before — that chant from the ritual we — —’

Isley sprang up and stopped him. I did not hear the sentence complete. An extraordinary thought blazed into me that the voices of both men were not quite their own. I fancied — wild, impossible as it sounds — that I heard the twin Colossi singing to each other in the dawn. Stupendous ideas sprang past me, leaping. It seemed as though eternal symbols of the cosmos, discovered and worshipped in this ancient land, leaped into awful life. My consciousness became enveloping. I had the distressing feeling that ages slipped out of place and took me with them; they dominated me; they rushed me off my feet like water. I was drawn backwards. I, too, was changing — being changed.

‘I remember,’ said Isley softly, a reverence of worship in his voice. But there was anguish in it too, and pity; he let the present go completely from him; the last strands severed with a wrench of pain. I imagined I heard his soul pass weeping far away — below.

‘I’ll sing it,’ murmured Moleson, ‘for the voice is necessary. The sound and rhythm are utterly divine!’

IX

And forthwith his voice began a series of long-drawn cadences that seemed somehow the root-sounds of every tongue that ever was. A spell came over me I could touch and feel. A web encompassed me; my arms and feet became entangled; a veil of fine threads wove across my eyes. The enthralling power of the rhythm produced some magical movement in the soul. I was aware of life everywhere about me, far and near, in the dwellings of the dead, as also in the corridors of the iron hills. Thebes stood erect, and Memphis teemed upon the river banks. For the modern world fell, swaying, at this sound that restored the past, and in this past both men before me lived and had their being. The storm of present life passed o'er their heads, while they dwelt underground, obliterated, gone. Upon the wave of sound they went down into their recovered kingdom.

I shivered, moved vigorously, half rose up, then instantly sank back again, resigned and helpless. For I entered by their side, it seemed, the conditions of their strange captivity. My thoughts, my feelings, my point of view were transplanted to another centre. Consciousness shifted in me. I saw things from another's point of view — antiquity's.

The present forgotten but the past supreme, I lost Reality. Our room became a pin-point picture seen in a drop of water, while this subterranean world, replacing it, turned immense. My heart took on the gigantic, leisured stride of what had been. Proportions grew; size captured me; and magnitude, turned monstrous, swept mere measurement away. Some hand of golden sunshine picked me up and set me in the quivering web beside those other two. I heard the rustle of the settling threads; I heard the shuffling of the feet in sand; I heard the whispers in the dwellings of the dead. Behind the monotony of this sacerdotal music I heard them in their dim carved chambers. The ancient galleries were awake. The Life of unremembered ages stirred in multitudes about me.

The reality of so incredible an experience evaporates through the stream of language. I can only affirm this singular proof — that the deepest, most satisfying knowledge the Present could offer seemed insignificant beside some stalwart majesty of the Past that utterly usurped it. This modern room, holding a piano and two figures of To-day, appeared as a paltry miniature pinned against a vast transparent curtain, whose foreground was thick with symbols of temple, sphinx and pyramid, but whose background of stupendous hanging grey slid off towards a splendour where the cities of the Dead shook off their sand and thronged space to its ultimate horizons.... The stars, the entire universe, vibrating and alive, became involved in it. Long periods of time slipped past me. I seemed living ages ago.... I was living backwards....

The size and eternity of Egypt took me easily. There was an overwhelming grandeur in it that elbowed out all present standards. The whole place towered and stood up. The desert reared, the very horizons lifted; majestic figures of granite rose above the hotel, great faces hovered and drove past; huge arms reached up to pluck the stars and set them in the ceilings of the labyrinthine tombs. The colossal meaning of the ancient land emerged through all its ruined details ... reconstructed — burningly alive....

It became at length unbearable. I longed for the droning sounds to cease, for the rhythm to lessen its prodigious sweep. My heart cried out for the gold of the sunlight on the desert, for the sweet air by the river's banks, for the violet lights upon the hills at dawn. And I resisted, I made an effort to return.

'Your chant is horrible. For God's sake, let's have an Arab song — or the music of To-day!'

The effort was intense, the result was — nothing. I swear I used these words. I heard the actual sound of my voice, if no one else did, for I remember that it was pitiful in the way great space devoured it, making of its appreciable volume the merest whisper as of some bird or insect cry. But the figure that I took for Moleson, instead of answer or acknowledgment, merely grew and grew as things grow in a fairy tale. I hardly know; I certainly cannot say. That dwindling part of me which offered comments on the entire occurrence noted this extraordinary effect as though it happened naturally — that Moleson himself was marvellously increasing.

The entire spell became operative all at once. I experienced both the delight of complete abandonment and the terror of letting go what *had* seemed real. I understood Moleson's sham laughter, and the subtle resignation of George Isley. And an amazing thought flashed birdlike across my changing consciousness — that this resurrection into the Past, this rebirth of the spirit which they sought, involved taking upon themselves the guise of these ancient symbols each in turn. As the embryo assumes each evolutionary stage below it before the human semblance is attained, so the souls of those two adventurers took upon themselves the various emblems of that intense belief. The devout worshipper takes on the qualities of his deity. They wore the entire series of the old-world gods so potently that I perceived them, and even objectified them by my senses. The present was their pre-natal stage; to enter the past they were being born again.

But it was not Moleson’s semblance alone that took on this awful change. Both faces, scaled to the measure of Egypt’s outstanding quality of size, became in this little modern room distressingly immense. Distorting mirrors can suggest no simile, for the symmetry of proportion was not injured. I lost their human physiognomies. I saw their thoughts, their feelings, their augmented, altered hearts, the thing that Egypt put there while she stole their love from modern life. There grew an awful stateliness upon them that was huge, mysterious, and motionless as stone.

For Moleson’s narrow face at first turned hawk-like in the semblance of the sinister deity, Horus, only stretched to tower above the toy-scaled piano; it was keen and sly and monstrous after prey, while a swiftness of the sunrise leaped from both the brilliant eyes. George Isley, equally immense of outline, was in general presentment more magnificent, a breadth of the Sphinx about his spreading shoulders, and in his countenance an inscrutable power of calm temple images. These were the first signs of obsession; but others followed. In rapid series, like lantern-slides upon a screen, the ancient symbols flashed one after another across these two extended human faces and were gone. Disentanglement became impossible. The successive signatures seemed almost superimposed as in a composite photograph, each appearing and vanished before recognition was even possible, while I interpreted the inner alchemy by means of outer tokens familiar to my senses. Egypt, possessing them, expressed herself thus marvellously in their physical aspect, using the symbols of her intense, regenerative power....

The changes merged with such swiftness into one another that I did not seize the half of them — till, finally, the procession culminated in a single one that remained fixed awfully upon them both. The entire series merged. I was aware of this single masterful image which summed up all the others in sublime repose. The gigantic thing rose up in this incredible statue form. The spirit of Egypt synthesised in this monstrous symbol, obliterated them both. I saw the seated figures of the grim Colossi, dipped in sand, night over them, waiting for the dawn....

X

I made a violent effort, then, at self-assertion — an effort to focus my mind upon the present. And, searching for Moleson and George Isley, its nearest details, I was aware that I could not find them. The familiar figures of my two companions were not discoverable.

I saw it as plainly as I also saw that ludicrous, wee piano — for a moment. But the moment remained; the Eternity of Egypt stayed. For that lonely and terrific pair had stooped their shoulders and bowed their awful heads. They were in the room. They imaged forth the power of the everlasting Past through the little structures of two human worshippers. Room, walls, and ceiling fled away. Sand and the open sky replaced them.

The two of them rose side by side before my bursting eyes. I knew not where to look. Like some child who confronts its giants upon the nursery floor, I turned to stone, unable to think or move. I stared. Sight wrenched itself to find the men familiar to it, but found instead this symbolising vision. I could not see them properly. Their faces were spread with hugeness, their features lost in some uncommon magnitude, their shoulders, necks, and arms grown vast upon the air. As with the desert, there was physiognomy yet no personal expression, the human thing all drowned within the mass of battered stone. I discovered neither cheeks nor mouth nor jaw, but ruined eyes and lips of broken granite. Huge, motionless, mysterious, Egypt informed them and took them to herself. And between us, curiously presented in some false perspective, I saw the little symbol of To-day — the Blüthner piano. It was appalling. I knew a second of majestic horror. I blenched. Hot and cold gushed through me. Strength left me, power of speech and movement too, as in a moment of complete paralysis.

The spell, moreover, was not within the room alone; it was outside and everywhere. The Past stood massed about the very walls of the hotel. Distance, as well as time, stepped nearer. That chanting summoned the gigantic items in all their ancient splendour. The shadowy concourse grouped itself upon the sand about us, and I was aware that the great army shifted noiselessly into place; that pyramids soared and towered; that deities of stone stood by; that temples ranged themselves in reconstructed beauty, grave as the night of time whence they emerged; and that the outline of the Sphinx, motionless but aggressive, piled its dim bulk upon the atmosphere. Immensity answered to immensity.... There were vast intervals of time and there were reaches of enormous distance, yet all happened in a moment, and all happened within a little space. It was now and here. Eternity whispered in every second as in every grain of sand. Yet, while aware of so many stupendous details all at once, I was really aware of one thing only — that the spirit of ancient Egypt faced me in these two terrific figures, and that my consciousness, stretched painfully yet gloriously, included all, as She also unquestionably included them — and me.

For it seemed I shared the likeness of my two companions. Some lesser symbol, though of similar kind, obsessed me too. I tried to move, but my feet were set in stone; my arms lay fixed; my body was embedded in the rock. Sand beat sharply upon my outer surface, urged upwards in little flurries by a chilly wind. There was nothing felt: I *heard* the rattle of the scattering grains against my hardened body....

And we waited for the dawn; for the resurrection of that unchanging deity who was the source and inspiration of all our glorious life.... The air grew keen and fresh. In the distance a line of sky turned from pink to violet and gold; a delicate rose next flushed the desert; a few pale stars hung fainting overhead; and the wind that brought the sunrise was already stirring. The whole land paused upon the coming of its mighty God....

Into the pause there rose a curious sound for which we had been waiting. For it came familiarly, as though expected. I could have sworn at first that it was George Isley who sang, answering his companion. There beat behind its great volume the same note and rhythm, only so prodigiously increased that, while Moleson's chant had waked it, it now was independent and apart. The resonant vibrations of what he sang had reached down into the places where it slept. *They* uttered synchronously. Egypt spoke. There was in it the deep muttering as of a thousand drums, as though the desert uttered in prodigious syllables. I listened while my heart of stone stood still. There were two voices in the sky. *They* spoke tremendously with each other in the dawn:

'So easily we still remain possessors of the land.... While the centuries roar past us and are gone.'

Soft with power the syllables rolled forth, yet with a booming depth as though caverns underground produced them.

‘Our silence is disturbed. Pass on with the multitude towards the East.... Still in the dawn we sing the old-world wisdom.... They shall hear our speech, yet shall not hear it with their ears of flesh. At dawn our words go forth, searching the distances of sand and time across the sunlight.... At dusk they return, as upon eagles’ wings, entering again our lips of stone.... Each century one syllable, yet no sentence yet complete. While our lips are broken with the utterance....’

It seemed that hours and months and years went past me while I listened in my sandy bed. The fragments died far away, then sounded very close again. It was as though mountain peaks sang to one another above clouds. Wind caught the muffled roar away. Wind brought it back.... Then, in a hollow pause that lasted years, conveying marvellously the passage of long periods, I heard the utterance more clearly. The leisured roll of the great voice swept through me like a flood:

‘We wait and watch and listen in our loneliness. We do not close our eyes. The moon and stars sail past us, and our river finds the sea. We bring Eternity upon your broken lives.... We see you build your little lines of steel across our territory behind the thin white smoke. We hear the whistle of your messengers of iron through the air.... The nations rise and pass. The empires flutter westwards and are gone.... The sun grows older and the stars turn pale.... Winds shift the line of the horizons, and our River moves its bed. But we, everlasting and unchangeable, remain. Of water, sand and fire is our essential being, yet built within the universal air.... There is no pause in life, there is no break in death. The changes bring no end. The sun returns.... There is eternal resurrection.... But our kingdom is underground in shadow, unrealised of your little day.... Come, come! The temples still are crowded, and our Desert blesses you. Our River takes your feet. Our sand shall purify, and the fire of our God shall burn you sweetly into wisdom.... Come, then, and worship, for the time draws near. It is the dawn....’

The voices died down into depths that the sand of ages muffled, while the flaming dawn of the East rushed up the sky. Sunrise, the great symbol of life’s endless resurrection, was at hand. About me, in immense but shadowy array, stood the whole of ancient Egypt, hanging breathlessly upon the moment of adoration. No longer stern and terrible in the splendour of their long neglect, the effigies rose erect with passionate glory, a forest of stately stone. Their granite lips were parted and their ancient eyes were wide. All faced the east. And the sun drew nearer to the rim of the attentive Desert.

XI

Emotion there seemed none, in the sense that *I* knew feeling. I knew, if anything, the ultimate secrets of two primitive sensations — joy and awe.... The dawn grew swiftly brighter. There was gold, as though the sands of Nubia spilt their brilliance on each shining detail; there was glory, as though the retreating tide of stars spilt their light foam upon the world; and there was passion, as though the beliefs of all the ages floated back with abandonment into the — Sun. Ruined Egypt merged into a single temple of elemental vastness whose floor was the empty desert, but whose walls rose to the stars.

Abruptly, then, chanting and rhythm ceased; they dipped below. Sand muffled them. And the Sun looked down upon its ancient world....

A radiant warmth poured through me. I found that I could move my limbs again. A sense of triumphant life ran through my stony frame. For one passing second I heard the shower of gritty particles upon my surface like sand blown upwards by a gust of wind, but this time I could *feel* the sting of it upon my skin. It passed. The drenching heat bathed me from head to foot, while stony insensibility gave place with returning consciousness to flesh and blood. The sun had risen.... I was alive, but I was — changed.

It seemed I opened my eyes. An immense relief was in me. I turned; I drew a deep, refreshing breath; I stretched one leg upon a thick, green carpet. Something had left me; another thing had returned. I sat up, conscious of welcome release, of freedom, of escape.

There was some violent, disorganising break. I found myself; I found Moleson; I found George Isley too. He had got shifted in that room without my being aware of it. Isley had risen. He came upon me like a blow. I saw him move his arms. Fire flashed from below his hands; and I realised then that he was turning on the electric lights. They emerged from different points along the walls, in the alcove, beneath the ceiling, by the writing-table; and one had just that minute blazed into my eyes from a bracket close above me. I was back again in the Present among modern things.

But, while most of the details presented themselves gradually to my recovered senses, Isley returned with this curious effect of speed and distance — like a blow upon the mind. From great height and from prodigious size — he dropped. I seemed to find him rushing at me. Moleson was simply ‘there’; there was no speed or sudden change in him as with the other. Motionless at the piano, his long thin hands lay down upon the keys yet did not strike them. But Isley came back like lightning into the little room, signs of the monstrous obsession still about his altering features. There was battle and worship mingled in his deep-set eyes. His mouth, though set, was smiling. With a shudder I positively saw the vastness slipping from his face as shadows from a stretch of broken cliff. There was this awful mingling of proportions. The colossal power that had resumed his being drew slowly inwards. There was collapse in him. And upon the sunburned cheek of his rugged face I saw a tear.

Poignant revulsion caught me then for a moment. The present showed itself in rags. The reduction of scale was painful. I yearned for the splendour that was gone, yet still seemed so hauntingly almost within reach. The cheapness of the hotel room, the glaring ugliness of its tinsel decoration, the baseness of ideals where utility instead of beauty, gain instead of worship, governed life — this, with the dwindled aspect of my companions to the insignificance of marionettes, brought a hungry pain that was at first intolerable. In the glare of light I noticed the small round face of the portable clock upon the mantelpiece, showing half-past eleven. Moleson had been two hours at the piano. And this measuring faculty of my mind completed the disillusionment. I was, indeed, back among present things. The mechanical spirit of To-day imprisoned me again.

For a considerable interval we neither moved nor spoke; the sudden change left the emotions in confusion; we had leaped from a height, from the top of the pyramid, from a star — and the crash of landing scattered thought. I stole a glance at Isley, wondering vaguely why he was there at all; the look of resignation had replaced the power in his face; the tear was brushed away. There was no struggle in him now, no sign of resistance; there was abandonment only; he seemed insignificant. The real George Isley was elsewhere: he himself had not returned.

By jerks, as it were, and by awkward stages, then, we all three came back to common things again. I found that we were talking ordinarily, asking each other questions, answering, lighting cigarettes, and all the rest. Moleson played some commonplace chords upon the piano, while he leaned back listlessly in his chair, putting in sentences now and again and chatting idly to whichever of us would listen. And Isley came slowly across the room towards me, holding out cigarettes. His dark brown face had shadows on it. He looked exhausted, worn, like some soldier broken in the wars.

'You liked it?' I heard his thin voice asking. There was no interest, no expression; it was not the real Isley who spoke; it was the little part of him that had come back. He smiled like a marvellous automaton.

Mechanically I took the cigarette he offered me, thinking confusedly what answer I could make.

'It's irresistible,' I murmured; 'I understand that it's easier to go.'

'Sweeter as well,' he whispered with a sigh, 'and very wonderful!'

XII

The hand that lit my cigarette, I saw, was trembling. A desire to do something violent woke in me suddenly — to move energetically, to push or drive something away.

'What was it?' I asked abruptly, in a louder, half-challenging voice, intended for the man at the piano. 'Such a performance — upon others — without first asking their permission — seems to me unpermissible — it's — —'

And it was Moleson who replied. He ignored the end of my sentence as though he had not heard it. He strolled over to our side, taking a cigarette and pressing it carefully into shape between his long thin fingers.

'You may well ask,' he answered quietly; 'but it's not so easy to tell. We discovered it' — he nodded towards Isley— 'two years ago in the "Valley." It lay beside a Priest, a very important personage, apparently, and was part of the Ritual he used in the worship of the sun. In the Museum now — you can see it any day at the Boulak — it is simply labelled "Hymn to Ra." The period was Aknahton's.'

'The words, yes,' put in Isley, who was listening closely.

‘The words?’ repeated Moleson in a curious tone. ‘There *are* no words. It’s all really a manipulation of the vowel sounds. And the rhythm, or chanting, or whatever you like to call it, I — I invented myself. The Egyptians did not write their music, you see.’ He suddenly searched my face a moment with questioning eyes. ‘Any words you heard,’ he said, ‘or thought you heard, were merely your own interpretation.’

I stared at him, making no rejoinder.

‘They made use of what they called a “root-language” in their rituals,’ he went on, ‘and it consisted entirely of vowel sounds. There were no consonants. For vowel sounds, you see, run on for ever without end or beginning, whereas consonants interrupt their flow and break it up and limit it. A consonant has no sound of its own at all. Real language is continuous.’

We stood a moment, smoking in silence. I understood then that this thing Moleson had done was based on definite knowledge. He had rendered some fragment of an ancient Ritual he and Isley had unearthed together, and while he knew its effect upon the latter, he chanced it on myself. Not otherwise, I feel, could it have influenced me in the extraordinary way it did. In the faith and poetry of a nation lies its soul-life, and the gigantic faith of Egypt blazed behind the rhythm of that long, monotonous chant. There were blood and heart and nerves in it. Millions had heard it sung; millions had wept and prayed and yearned; it was ensouled by the passion of that marvellous civilisation that loved the godhead of the Sun, and that now hid, waiting but still alive, below the ground. The majestic faith of ancient Egypt poured up with it — that tremendous, burning elaboration of the after-life and of Eternity that was the pivot of those spacious days. For centuries vast multitudes, led by their royal priests, had uttered this very form and ritual — believed it, lived it, felt it. The rising of the sun remained its climax. Its spiritual power still clung to the great ruined symbols. The faith of a buried civilisation had burned back into the present and into our hearts as well.

And a curious respect for the man who was able to produce this effect upon two modern minds crept over me, and mingled with the repulsion that I felt. I looked furtively at his withered, dried-up features. He wore some vague and shadowy impress still of what had just been in him. There was a stony appearance in his shrunken cheeks. He looked smaller. I saw him lessened. I thought of him as he had been so short a time before, imprisoned in his great stone captors that had obsessed him....

‘There’s tremendous power in it, — an awful power,’ I stammered, more to break the oppressive pause than for any desire in me to speak with him. ‘It brings back Egypt in some extraordinary way — ancient Egypt, I mean — brings it close — into the heart.’ My words ran on of their own accord almost. I spoke with a hush, unwittingly. There was awe in me. Isley had moved away towards the window, leaving me face to face with this strange incarnation of another age.

‘It must,’ he replied, deep light still glowing in his eyes, ‘for the soul of the old days is in it. No one, I think, can hear it and remain the same. It expresses, you see, the essential passion and beauty of that gorgeous worship, that splendid faith, that reasonable and intelligent worship of the sun, the only scientific belief the world has ever known. Its popular form, of course, was largely superstitious, but the sacerdotal form — the form used by the priests, that is — who understood the relationship between colour, sound and symbol, was — —’

He broke off suddenly, as though he had been speaking to himself. We sat down. George Isley leaned out of the window with his back to us, watching the desert in the moonless night.

‘You have tried its effect before upon — others?’ I asked point-blank.

‘Upon myself,’ he answered shortly.

‘Upon others?’ I insisted.

He hesitated an instant.

‘Upon one other — yes,’ he admitted.

‘Intentionally?’ And something quivered in me as I asked it.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. ‘I’m merely a speculative archaeologist,’ he smiled, ‘and — and an imaginative Egyptologist. My bounden duty is to reconstruct the past so that it lives for others.’

An impulse rose in me to take him by the throat.

‘You know perfectly well, of course, the magical effect it’s sure — likely at least — to have?’

He stared steadily at me through the cigarette smoke. To this day I cannot think exactly what it was in this man that made me shudder.

‘I’m sure of nothing,’ he replied smoothly, ‘but I consider it quite legitimate to try. Magical — the word you used — has no meaning for me. If such a thing exists, it is merely scientific — undiscovered or forgotten knowledge.’ An insolent, aggressive light shone in his eyes as he spoke; his manner was almost truculent. ‘You refer, I take it, to — our friend — rather than to yourself?’

And with difficulty I met his singular stare. From his whole person something still emanated that was forbidding, yet overmasteringly persuasive. It brought back the notion of that invisible Web, that dim gauze curtain, that motionless Influence lying waiting at the centre for its prey, those monstrous and mysterious Items standing, alert and watchful, through the centuries. ‘You mean,’ he added lower, ‘his altered attitude to life — his going?’

To hear him use the words, the very phrase, struck me with sudden chill. Before I could answer, however, and certainly before I could master the touch of horror that rushed over me, I heard him continuing in a whisper. It seemed again that he spoke to himself as much as he spoke to me.

‘The soul, I suppose, has the right to choose its own conditions and surroundings. To pass elsewhere involves translation, not extinction.’ He smoked a moment in silence, then said another curious thing, looking up into my face with an expression of intense earnestness. Something genuine in him again replaced the pose of cynicism. ‘The soul is eternal and can take its place anywhere, regardless of mere duration. What is there in the vulgar and superficial Present that should hold it so exclusively; and where can it find to-day the belief, the faith, the beauty that are the very essence of its life — where in the rush and scatter of this tawdry age can it make its home? Shall it flutter for ever in a valley of dry bones, when a living Past lies ready and waiting with loveliness, strength, and glory?’ He moved closer; he touched my arm; I felt his breath upon my face. ‘Come with us,’ he whispered awfully; ‘come back with us! Withdraw your life from the rubbish of this futile ugliness! Come back and worship with us in the spirit of the Past. Take up the old, old splendour, the glory, the immense conceptions, the wondrous certainty, the ineffable knowledge of essentials.

It all lies about you still; it's calling, ever calling; it's very close; it draws you day and night — calling, calling, calling....'

His voice died off curiously into distance on the word; I can hear it to this day, and the soft, droning quality in the intense yet fading tone: 'Calling, calling, calling.' But his eyes turned wicked. I felt the sinister power of the man. I was aware of madness in his thought and mind. The Past he sought to glorify I saw black, as with the forbidding Egyptian darkness of a plague. It was not beauty but Death that I heard calling, calling, calling.

'It's real,' he went on, hardly aware that I shrank, 'and not a dream. These ruined symbols still remain in touch with that which was. They are potent to-day as they were six thousand years ago. The amazing life of those days brims behind them. They are not mere masses of oppressive stone; they express in visible form great powers that still are — *knowable*.' He lowered his head, peered up into my face, and whispered. Something secret passed into his eyes.

'I saw you change,' came the words below his breath, 'as you saw the change in us. But only worship can produce that change. The soul assumes the qualities of the deity it worships. The powers of its deity possess it and transform it into its own likeness. You also felt it. *You* also were possessed. I saw the stone-faced deity upon your own.'

I seemed to shake myself as a dog shakes water from its body. I stood up. I remember that I stretched my hands out as though to push him from me and expel some creeping influence from my mind. I remember another thing as well. But for the reality of the sequel, and but for the matter-of-fact result still facing me to-day in the disappearance of George Isley — the loss to the present time of all George Isley *was* — I might have found subject for laughter in what I saw. Comedy was in it certainly. Yet it was both ghastly and terrific. Deep horror crept below the aspect of the ludicrous, for the apparent mimicry cloaked truth. It was appalling because it was real.

In the large mirror that reflected the room behind me I saw myself and Moleson; I saw Isley too in the background by the open window. And the attitude of all three was the attitude of hieroglyphics come to life. My arms indeed were stretched, but not stretched, as I had thought, in mere self-defence. They were stretched — unnaturally. The forearms made those strange obtuse angles that the old carved granite wears, the palms of the hands held upwards, the heads thrown back, the legs advanced, the bodies stiffened into postures that expressed forgotten, ancient minds. The physical conformation of all three was monstrous; and yet reverence and truth dictated even the uncouthness of the gestures. Something in all three of us inspired the forms our bodies had assumed. Our attitudes expressed buried yearnings, emotions, tendencies — whatever they may be termed — that the spirit of the Past evoked.

I saw the reflected picture but for a moment. I dropped my arms, aware of foolishness in my way of standing. Moleson moved forward with his long, significant stride, and at the same instant Isley came up quickly and joined us from his place by the open window. We looked into each other's faces without a word. There was this little pause that lasted perhaps ten seconds. But in that pause I felt the entire world slide past me. I heard the centuries rush by at headlong speed. The present dipped away. Existence was no longer in a line that stretched two ways; it was a circle in which ourselves, together with Past and Future, stood motionless at the centre, all details equally accessible at once. The three of us were falling, falling backwards....

'Come!' said the voice of Moleson solemnly, but with the sweetness as of a child anticipating joy. 'Come! Let us go together, for the boat of Ra has crossed the Underworld. The darkness has been conquered. Let us go out together and find the dawn. Listen! It is calling, calling, calling....'

XIII

I was aware of rushing, but it was the soul in me that rushed. It experienced dizzy, unutterable alterations. Thousands of emotions, intense and varied, poured through me at lightning speed, each satisfyingly known, yet gone before its name appeared. The life of many centuries tore headlong back with me, and, as in drowning, this epitome of existence shot in a few seconds the steep slopes the Past had so laboriously built up. The changes flashed and passed. I wept and prayed and worshipped; I loved and suffered; I battled, lost and won. Down the gigantic scale of ages that telescoped thus into a few brief moments, the soul in me went sliding backwards towards a motionless, reposeful Past.

I remember foolish details that interrupted the immense descent — I put on coat and hat; I remember some one's words, strangely sounding as when some bird wakes up and sings at midnight— ‘We’ll take the little door; the front one’s locked by now’; and I have a vague recollection of the outline of the great hotel, with its colonnades and terraces, fading behind me through the air. But these details merely flickered and disappeared, as though I fell earthwards from a star and passed feathers or blown leaves upon the way. There was no friction as my soul dropped backwards into time; the flight was easy and silent as a dream. I felt myself sucked down into gulfs whose emptiness offered no resistance ... until at last the appalling speed decreased of its own accord, and the dizzy flight became a kind of gentle floating. It changed imperceptibly into a gliding motion, as though the angle altered. My feet, quite naturally, were on the ground, moving through something soft that clung to them and rustled while it clung.

I looked up and saw the bright armies of the stars. In front of me I recognised the flat-topped, shadowy ridges; on both sides lay the open expanses of familiar wilderness; and beside me, one on either hand, moved two figures who were my companions. We were in the desert, but it was the desert of thousands of years ago. My companions, moreover, though familiar to some part of me, seemed strangers or half known. Their names I strove in vain to capture; Mosely, Ilson, sounded in my head, mingled together falsely. And when I stole a glance at them, I saw dark lines of mannikins unfilled with substance, and was aware of the grotesque gestures of living hieroglyphics. It seemed for an instant that their arms were bound behind their backs impossibly, and that their heads turned sharply across their lineal shoulders.

But for a moment only; for at a second glance I saw them solid and compact; their names came back to me; our arms were linked together as we walked. We had already covered a great distance, for my limbs were aching and my breath was short. The air was cold, the silence absolute. It seemed, in this faint light, that the desert flowed beneath our feet, rather than that we advanced by taking steps. Cliffs with hooded tops moved past us, boulders glided, mounds of sand slid by. And then I heard a voice upon my left that was surely Moleson speaking:

‘Towards Enet our feet are set,’ he half sang, half murmured, ‘towards Enet-te-ntōrē. There, in the House of Birth, we shall dedicate our hearts and lives anew.’

And the language, no less than the musical intonation of his voice, enraptured me. For I understood he spoke of Denderah, in whose majestic temple recent hands had painted with deathless colours the symbols of our cosmic relationships with the zodiacal signs. And Denderah was our great seat of worship of the goddess Hathor, the Egyptian Aphrodite, bringer of love and joy. The falcon-headed Horus was her husband, from whom, in his home at Edfu, we imbibed swift kinds of power. And — it was the time of the New Year, the great feast when the forces of the living earth turn upwards into happy growth.

We were on foot across the desert towards Denderah, and this sand we trod was the sand of thousands of years ago.

The paralysis of time and distance involved some amazing lightness of the spirit that, I suppose, touched ecstasy. There was intoxication in the soul. I was not divided from the stars, nor separate from this desert that rushed with us. The unhampered wind blew freshly from my nerves and skin, and the Nile, glimmering faintly on our right, lay with its lapping waves in both my hands. I knew the life of Egypt, for it was in me, over me, round me. I was a part of it. We went happily, like birds to meet the sunrise. There were no pits of measured time and interval that could detain us. We flowed, yet were at rest; we were endlessly alive; present and future alike were inconceivable; we were in the Kingdom of the Past.

The Pyramids were just a-building, and the army of Obelisks looked about them, proud of their first balance; Thebes swung her hundred gates upon the world. New, shining Memphis glittered with myriad reflections into waters that the tears of Isis sweetened, and the cliffs of Abou Simbel were still innocent of their gigantic progeny. Alone, the Sphinx, linking timelessness with time, brooded unguessed and underived upon an alien world. We marched within antiquity towards Denderah....

How long we marched, how fast, how far we went, I can remember as little as the marvellous speech that passed across me while my two companions spoke together. I only remember that suddenly a wave of pain disturbed my wondrous happiness and caused my calm, which had seemed beyond all reach of break, to fall away. I heard their voices abruptly with a kind of terror. A sensation of fear, of loss, of nightmare bewilderment came over me like cold wind. What *they* lived naturally, true to their inmost hearts, *I* lived merely by means of a temperamental sympathy. And the stage had come at which my powers failed. Exhaustion overtook me. I wilted. The strain — the abnormal backwards stretch of consciousness that was put upon me by another — gave way and broke. I heard their voices faint and horrible. My joy was extinguished. A glare of horror fell upon the desert and the stars seemed evil. An anguishing desire for the safe and wholesome Present usurped all this mad yearning to obtain the Past. My feet fell out of step. The rushing of the desert paused. I unlinked my arms. We stopped all three.

The actual spot is to this day well known to me. I found it afterwards, I even photographed it. It lies actually not far from Helouan — a few miles at most beyond the Solitary Palm, where slopes of undulating sand mark the opening of a strange, enticing valley called the Wadi Gerraui. And it is enticing because it beckons and leads on. Here, amid torn gorges of a limestone wilderness, there is suddenly soft yellow sand that flows and draws the feet onward. It slips away with one too easily; always the next ridge and basin must be seen, each time a little farther. It has the quality of decoying. The cliffs say, No; but this streaming sand invites. In its flowing curves of gold there is enchantment.

And it was here upon its very lips we stopped, the rhythm of our steps broken, our hearts no longer one. My temporary rapture vanished. I was aware of fear. For the Present rushed upon me with attack in it, and I felt that my mind was arrested close upon the edge of madness. Something cleared and lifted in my brain.

The soul, indeed, could ‘choose its dwelling-place’; but to live elsewhere completely was the choice of madness, and to live divorced from all the sweet wholesome business of To-day involved an exile that was worse than madness. It was death. My heart burned for George Isley. I remembered the tear upon his cheek. The agony of his struggle I shared suddenly with him. Yet with him was the reality, with me a sympathetic reflection merely. *He* was already too far gone to fight....

I shall never forget the desolation of that strange scene beneath the morning stars. The desert lay down and watched us. We stood upon the brink of a little broken ridge, looking into the valley of golden sand. This sand gleamed soft and wonderful in the starlight some twenty feet below. The descent was easy — but I would not move. I refused to advance another step. I saw my companions in the mysterious half-light beside me peering over the edge, Moleson in front a little.

And I turned to him, sure of the part I meant to play, yet conscious painfully of my helplessness. My personality seemed a straw in mid-stream that spun in a futile effort to arrest the flood that bore it. There was vivid human conflict in the moment’s silence. It was an eddy that paused in the great body of the tide. And then I spoke. Oh, I was ashamed of the insignificance of my voice and the weakness of my little personality.

‘Moleson, we go no farther with you. We have already come too far. We now turn back.’

Behind my words were a paltry thirty years. His answer drove sixty centuries against me. For his voice was like the wind that passed whispering down the stream of yellow sand below us. He smiled.

‘Our feet are set towards Enet-te-ntōrē. There is no turning back. Listen! It is calling, calling, calling!’

‘We will go home,’ I cried, in a tone I vainly strove to make imperative.

‘Our home is there,’ he sang, pointing with one long thin arm towards the brightening east, ‘for the Temple calls us and the River takes our feet. We shall be in the House of Birth to meet the sunrise — —’

‘You lie,’ I cried again, ‘you speak the lies of madness, and this Past you seek is the House of Death. It is the kingdom of the underworld.’

The words tore wildly, impotently out of me. I seized George Isley’s arm.

‘Come back with me,’ I pleaded vehemently, my heart aching with a nameless pain for him. ‘We’ll retrace our steps. Come home with me! Come back! Listen! The Present calls you sweetly!’

His arm slipped horribly out of my grasp that had seemed to hold it so tightly. Moleson, already below us in the yellow sand, looked small with distance. He was gliding rapidly farther with uncanny swiftness. The diminution of his form was ghastly. It was like a doll’s. And his voice rose up, faint as with the distance of great gulfs of space.

‘Calling ... calling.... You hear it for ever calling ...’

It died away with the wind along that sandy valley, and the Past swept in a flood across the brightening sky. I swayed as though a storm was at my back. I reeled. Almost I went too — over the crumbling edge into the sand.

‘Come back with me! Come home!’ I cried more faintly. ‘The Present alone is real. There is work, ambition, duty. There is beauty too — the beauty of good living! And there is love! There is — a woman ... calling, calling...!’

That other voice took up the word below me. I heard the faint refrain sing down the sandy walls. The wild, sweet pang in it was marvellous.

‘Our feet are set for Enet-te-ntōrē. It is calling, calling...!’

My voice fell into nothingness. George Isley was below me now, his outline tiny against the sheet of yellow sand. And the sand was moving. The desert rushed again. The human figures receded swiftly into the Past they had reconstructed with the creative yearning of their souls.

I stood alone upon the edge of crumbling limestone, helplessly watching them. It was amazing what I witnessed, while the shafts of crimson dawn rose up the sky. The enormous desert turned alive to the horizon with gold and blue and silver. The purple shadows melted into grey. The flat-topped ridges shone. Huge messengers of light flashed everywhere at once. The radiance of sunrise dazzled my outer sight.

But if my eyes were blinded, my inner sight was focused the more clearly upon what followed. I witnessed the disappearance of George Isley. There was a dreadful magic in the picture. The pair of them, small and distant below me in that little sandy hollow, stood out sharply defined as in a miniature. I saw their outlines neat and terrible like some ghastly inset against the enormous scenery. Though so close to me in actual space, they were centuries away in time. And a dim, vast shadow was about them that was not mere shadow of the ridges. It encompassed them; it moved, crawling over the sand, obliterating them. Within it, like insects lost in amber, they became visibly imprisoned, dwindled in size, borne deep away, absorbed.

And then I recognised the outline. Once more, but this time recumbent and spread flat upon the desert’s face, I knew the monstrous shapes of the twin obsessing symbols. The spirit of ancient Egypt lay over all the land, tremendous in the dawn. The sunrise summoned her. She lay prostrate before the deity. The shadows of the towering Colossi lay prostrate too. The little humans, with their worshipping and conquered hearts, lay deep within them.

George Isley I saw clearest. The distinctness, the reality were appalling. He was naked, robbed, undressed. I saw him a skeleton, picked clean to the very bones as by an acid. His life lay hid in the being of that mighty Past. Egypt had absorbed him. He was gone....

I closed my eyes, but I could not keep them closed. They opened of their own accord. The three of us were nearing the great hotel that rose yellow, with shuttered windows, in the early sunshine. A wind blew briskly from the north across the Mokattam Hills. There were soft cannon-ball clouds dotted about the sky, and across the Nile, where the mist lay in a line of white, I saw the tops of the Pyramids gleaming like mountain peaks of gold. A string of camels, laden with white stone, went past us. I heard the crying of the natives in the streets of Helouan, and as we went up the steps the donkeys arrived and camped in the sandy road beside their *bersim* till the tourists claimed them.

‘Good morning,’ cried Abdullah, the man who owned them. ‘You all go Sakkhâra to-day, or Memphis? Beat’ful day to-day, and vair good donkeys!’

Moleson went up to his room without a word, and Isley did the same. I thought he staggered a moment as he turned the passage corner from my sight. His face wore a look of vacancy that some call peace. There was radiance in it. It made me shudder. Aching in mind and body, and no word spoken, I followed their example. I went upstairs to bed, and slept a dreamless sleep till after sunset....

XIV

And I woke with a lost, unhappy feeling that a withdrawing tide had left me on the shore, alone and desolate. My first instinct was for my friend, George Isley. And I noticed a square, white envelope with my name upon it in his writing.

Before I opened it I knew quite well what words would be inside:

‘We are going up to Thebes,’ the note informed me simply. ‘We leave by the night train. If you care to — —’ But the last four words were scratched out again, though not so thickly that I could not read them. Then came the address of the Egyptologist's house and the signature, very firmly traced, 'Yours ever, George Isley.' I glanced at my watch and saw that it was after seven o'clock. The night train left at half-past six. They had already started....

The pain of feeling forsaken, left behind, was deep and bitter, for myself; but what I felt for him, old friend and comrade, was even more intense, since it was hopeless. Fear and conventional emotion had stopped me at the very gates of an amazing possibility — some state of consciousness that, *realising* the Past, might doff the Present, and by slipping out of Time, experience Eternity. That was the seduction I had escaped by the uninspired resistance of my pettier soul. Yet, he, my friend, yielding in order to conquer, had obtained an awful prize — ah, I understood the picture's other side as well, with an unutterable poignancy of pity — the prize of immobility which is sheer stagnation, the imagined bliss which is a false escape, the dream of finding beauty away from present things. From that dream the awakening must be rude indeed. Clutching at vanished stars, he had clutched the oldest illusion in the world. To me it seemed the negation of life that had betrayed him. The pity of it burned me like a flame.

But I did not 'care to follow' him and his companion. I waited at Helouan for his return, filling the empty days with yet emptier explanations. I felt as a man who sees what he loves sinking down into clear, deep water, still within visible reach, yet gone beyond recovery. Moleson had taken him back to Thebes; and Egypt, monstrous effigy of the Past, had caught her prey.

The rest, moreover, is easily told. Moleson I never saw again. To this day I have never seen him, though his subsequent books are known to me, with the banal fact that he is numbered with those energetic and deluded enthusiasts who start a new religion, obtain notoriety, a few hysterical followers and — oblivion.

George Isley, however, returned to Helouan after a fortnight's absence. I saw him, knew him, talked and had my meals with him. We even did slight expeditions together. He was gentle and delightful as a woman who has loved a wonderful ideal and attained to it — in memory. All roughness was gone out of him; he was smooth and polished as a crystal surface that reflects whatever is near enough to ask a picture. Yet his appearance shocked me inexpressibly: there was nothing in him — *nothing*. It was the representation of George Isley that came back from Thebes; the outer simulacra; the shell that walks the London streets to-day. I met no vestige of the man I used to know. George Isley had disappeared.

With this marvellous automaton I lived another month. The horror of him kept me company in the hotel where he moved among the cosmopolitan humanity as a ghost that visits the sunlight yet has its home elsewhere.

This empty image of George Isley lived with me in our Helouan hotel until the winds of early March informed his physical frame that discomfort was in the air, and that he might as well move elsewhere — elsewhere happening to be northwards.

And he left just as he stayed — automatically. His brain obeyed the conventional stimuli to which his nerves, and consequently his muscles, were accustomed. It sounds so foolish. But he took his ticket automatically; he gave the natural and adequate reasons automatically; he chose his ship and landing-place in the same way that ordinary people chose these things; he said good-bye like any other man who leaves casual acquaintances and ‘hopes’ to meet them again; he lived, that is to say, entirely in his brain. His heart, his emotions, his temperament and personality, that nameless sum-total for which the great sympathetic nervous system is accountable — all this, his soul, had gone elsewhere. This once vigorous, gifted being had become a normal, comfortable man that everybody could understand — a commonplace nonentity. He was precisely what the majority expected him to be — ordinary; a good fellow; a man of the world; he was ‘delightful.’ He merely reflected daily life without partaking of it. To the majority it was hardly noticeable; ‘very pleasant’ was a general verdict. His ambition, his restlessness, his zeal had gone; that tireless zest whose driving power is yearning had taken flight, leaving behind it physical energy without spiritual desire. His soul had found its nest and flown to it. He lived in the chimera of the Past, serene, indifferent, detached. I saw him immense, a shadowy, majestic figure, standing — ah, not moving! — in a repose that was satisfying because it *could* not change. The size, the mystery, the immobility that caged him in seemed to me — terrible. For I dared not intrude upon his awful privacy, and intimacy between us there was none. Of his experiences at Thebes I asked no single question — it was somehow not possible or legitimate; he, equally, vouchsafed no word of explanation — it was uncommunicable to a dweller in the Present. Between us was this barrier we both respected. He peered at modern life, incurious, listless, apathetic, through a dim, gauze curtain. He was behind it.

People round us were going to Sakkhâra and the Pyramids, to see the Sphinx by moonlight, to dream at Edfu and at Denderah. Others described their journeys to Assouan, Khartoum and Abou Simbel, and gave details of their encampments in the desert. Wind, wind, wind! The winds of Egypt blew and sang and sighed. From the White Nile came the travellers, and from the Blue Nile, from the Fayum, and from nameless excavations without end. They talked and wrote their books. They had the magpie knowledge of the present. The Egyptologists, big and little, read the writing on the wall and put the hieroglyphs and papyri into modern language. Alone George Isley *knew* the secret. He lived it.

And the high passionate calm, the lofty beauty, the glamour and enchantment that are the spell of this thrice-haunted land, were in *my* soul as well — sufficiently for me to interpret his condition. I could not leave, yet having left I could not stay away. I yearned for the Egypt that he knew. No word I uttered; speech could not approach it. We wandered by the Nile together, and through the groves of palms that once were Memphis. The sandy wastes beyond the Pyramids knew our footsteps; the Mokattam Ridges, purple at evening and golden in the dawn, held our passing shadows as we silently went by. At no single dawn or sunset was he to be found indoors, and it became my habit to accompany him — the joy of worship in his soul was marvellous. The great, still skies of Egypt watched us, the hanging stars, the gigantic dome of blue; we felt together that burning southern wind; the golden sweetness of the sun lay in our blood as we saw the great boats take the northern breeze upstream. Immensity was everywhere and this golden magic of the sun....

But it was in the Desert especially, where only sun and wind observe the faint signalling of Time, where space is nothing because it is not divided, and where no detail reminds the heart that the world is called To-Day — it was in the desert this curtain hung most visibly between us, he on that side, I on this. It was transparent. He was with a multitude no man can number. Towering to the moon, yet spreading backwards towards his burning source of life, drawn out by the sun and by the crystal air into some vast interior magnitude, the spirit of George Isley hung beside me, close yet far away, in the haze of olden days.

And, sometimes, he moved. I was aware of gestures. His head was raised to listen. One arm swung shadowy across the sea of broken ridges. From leagues away a line of sand rose slowly. There was a rustling. Another — an enormous — arm emerged to meet his own, and two stupendous figures drew together. Poised above Time, yet throned upon the centuries, They knew eternity. So easily they remained possessors of the land. Facing the east, they waited for the dawn. And their marvellously forgotten singing poured across the world....

WAYFARERS

I MISSED THE train at Evian, and, after infinite trouble, discovered a motor that would take me, ice-axe and all, to Geneva. By hurrying, the connection might be just possible. I telegraphed to Haddon to meet me at the station, and lay back comfortably, dreaming of the precipices of Haute Savoie. We made good time; the roads were excellent, traffic of the slightest, when — crash! There was an instant's excruciating pain, the sun went out like a snuffed candle, and I fell into something as soft as a bed of flowers and as yielding to my weight as warm water....

It was *very* warm. There was a perfume of flowers. My eyes opened, focused vividly upon a detailed picture for a moment, then closed again. There was no context — at least, none that I could recall — for the scene, though familiar as home, brought nothing that I definitely remembered. Broken away from any sequence, unattached to any past, unaware even of my own identity, I simply saw this picture as a camera snaps it off from the world, a scene apart, with meaning only for those who knew the context:

The warm, soft thing I lay in was a bed — big, deep, comfortable; and the perfume came from flowers that stood beside it on a little table. It was in a stately, ancient chamber, with lofty ceiling and immense open fireplace of stone; old-fashioned pictures — familiar portraits and engravings I knew intimately — hung upon the walls; the floor was bare, with dignified, carved furniture of oak and mahogany, huge chairs and massive cupboards. And there were latticed windows set within deep embrasures of grey stone, where clambering roses patterned the sunshine that cast their moving shadows on the polished boards. With the perfume of the flowers there mingled, too, that delicate, elusive odour of age — of wood, of musty tapestries in spacious halls and corridors, and of chambers long unopened to the sun and air.

By the door that stood ajar far away at the end of the room — very far away it seemed — an old lady, wearing a little cap of silk embroidery, was whispering to a man of stern, uncompromising figure, who, as he listened, bent down to her with a grave and even solemn face. A wide stone corridor was just visible through the crack of the open door behind her.

The picture flashed, and vanished. The numerous details I took in because they were well known to me already. That I could not supply the context was merely a trick of the mind, the kind of trick that dreams play. Darkness swamped vision again. I sank back into the warm, soft, comfortable bed of delicious oblivion. There was not the slightest desire to know; sleep and soft forgetfulness were all I craved.

But a little later — or was it a very great deal later? — when I opened my eyes again, there was a thin trail of memory. I remembered my name and age. I remembered vaguely, as though from some unpleasant dream, that I was on the way to meet a climbing friend in the Alps of Haute Savoie, and that there was need to hurry and be very active. Something had gone wrong, it seemed. There had been a stupid, violent disaster, pain in it somewhere, an accident. Where were my belongings? Where, for instance, was my precious ice-axe — tried old instrument on which my life and safety depended? A rush of jumbled questions poured across my mind. The effort to sort them hurt atrociously....

A figure stood beside my bed. It was the same old lady I had seen a moment ago — or was it a month ago, even last year perhaps? And this time she was alone. Yet, though familiar to me as my own right hand, I could not for the life of me attract her name. Searching for it brought the pain again. Instead, I asked an easier question; it seemed the most important somehow, though a feeling of shame came with it, as though I knew I was talking nonsense:

‘My ice-axe — is it safe? It should have stood any ordinary strain. It’s ash....’ My voice failed absurdly, caught away by a whisper half-way down my throat. What *was* I talking about? There was vile confusion somewhere.

She smiled tenderly, sweetly, as she placed her small, cool hand upon my forehead. Her touch calmed me as it always did, and the pain retreated a little.

‘All your things are safe,’ she answered, in a voice so soft beneath the distant ceiling it was like a bird’s note singing in the sky. ‘And *you* are also safe. There is no danger now. The bullet has been taken out and all is going well. Only you must be patient, and lie very still, and rest.’ And then she added the morsel of delicious comfort she knew quite well I waited for: ‘Marion is near you all day long, and most of the night besides. She rarely leaves you. She is in and out all day.’

I stared, thirsting for more. Memory put certain pieces in their place again. I heard them click together as they joined. But they only tried to join. There were several pieces missing. They must have been lost in the disaster. The pattern was too ridiculous.

‘I ought to tel — telegraph — —’ I began, seizing at a fragment that poked its end up, then plunged out of sight again before I could read more of it. The pieces fell apart; they would not hold together without these missing fragments. Anger flamed up in me.

‘They’re badly made,’ I said, with a petulance I was secretly ashamed of; ‘you have chosen the wrong pieces! I’m not a child — to be treated — —’ A shock of heat tore through me, led by a point of iron, with blasting pain.

‘Sleep, my poor dear Félix, sleep,’ she murmured soothingly, while her tiny hand stroked my forehead, just in time to prevent that pointed, hot thing entering my heart. ‘Sleep again now, and a little later you shall tell me their names, and I will send on horseback quickly — —’

‘Telegraph — —’ I tried to say, but the word went lost before I could pronounce it. It was a nonsense word, caught up from dreams. Thought fluttered and went out.

‘I will send,’ she whispered, ‘in the quickest possible way. You shall explain to Marion. Sleep first a little longer; promise me to lie quite still and sleep. When you wake again, she will come to you at once.’

She sat down gently on the edge of the enormous bed, so that I saw her outline against the window where the roses clambered to come in. She bent over me — or was it a rose that bent in the wind across the stone embrasure? I saw her clear blue eyes — or was it two raindrops upon a withered rose-leaf that mirrored the summer sky?

‘Thank you,’ my voice murmured with intense relief, as everything sank away and the old-world garden seemed to enter by the latticed windows. For there was a power in her way that made obedience sweet, and her little hand, besides, cushioned the attack of that cruel iron point so that I hardly felt its entrance. Before the fierce heat could reach me, darkness again put out the world....

Then, after a prodigious interval, my eyes once more opened to the stately, old-world chamber that I knew so well; and this time I found myself alone. In my brain was a stinging, splitting sensation, as though Memory shook her pieces together with angry violence, pieces, moreover, made of clashing metal. A degrading nausea almost vanquished me. Against my feet was a heated metal body, too heavy for me to move, and bandages were tight round my neck and the back of my head. Dimly, it came back to me that hands had been about me hours ago, soft, ministering hands that I loved. Their perfume lingered still. Faces and names fled in swift procession past me, yet without my making any attempt to bid them stay. I asked myself no questions. Effort of any sort was utterly beyond me. I lay and watched and waited, helpless and strangely weak.

One or two things alone were clear. They came, too, without the effort to think them:

There had been a disaster; they had carried me into the nearest house; and — the mountain heights, so keenly longed for, were suddenly denied me. I was being cared for by kind people somewhere far from the world’s high routes. They were familiar people, yet for the moment I had lost the name. But it was the bitterness of losing my holiday climbing that chiefly savaged me, so that strong desire returned upon itself unfulfilled. And, knowing the danger of frustrated yearnings, and the curious states of mind they may engender, my tumbling brain registered a decision automatically:

‘Keep careful watch upon yourself,’ it whispered.

For I saw the peaks that towered above the world, and felt the wind rise from the hidden valleys. The perfume of lonely ridges came to me, and I saw the snow against the blue-black sky. Yet I could not reach them. I lay, instead, broken and useless upon my back, in a soft, deep, comfortable bed. And I loathed the thought. A dull and evil fury rose within me. Where was Haddon? He would get me out of it if any one could. And where was my dear, old trusted ice-axe? Above all, who were these gentle, old-world people who cared for me?... And, with this last thought, came some fairy touch of sweetness so delicious that I was conscious of sudden resignation — more, even of delight and joy.

This joy and anger ran races for possession of my mind, and I knew not which to follow: both seemed real, and both seemed true. The cruel confusion was an added torture. Two sets of places and people seemed to mingle.

‘Keep a careful watch upon yourself,’ repeated the automatic caution.

Then, with returning, blissful darkness, came another thing — a tiny point of wonder, where light entered in. I thought of a woman.... It was a vehement, commanding thought; and though at first it was very close and real — as much of To-day as Haddon and my precious ice-axe — the next second it was leagues away in another world somewhere. Yet, before the confusion twisted it all askew, I knew her; I remembered clearly even where she lived; that I knew her husband, too — had stayed with them in — in Scotland — yes, in Scotland. Yet no word in this life had ever crossed my lips, for she was not free to come. Neither of us, with eyes or lips or gesture, had ever betrayed a hint to the other of our deeply hidden secret. And, although for me she was *the* woman, my great yearning — long, long ago it was, in early youth — had been sternly put aside and buried with all the vigour nature gave me. Her husband was my friend as well.

Only, now, the shock had somehow strained the prison bars, and the yearning escaped for a moment full-fledged, and vehement with passion long denied. The inhibition was destroyed. The knowledge swept deliciously upon me that we had the right to be together, because we always *were* together. I had the right to ask for her.

My mind was certainly a mere field of confused, ungoverned images. No thinking was possible, for it hurt too vilely. But this one memory stood out with violence. I distinctly remember that I called to her to come, and that she had the right to come because my need was so peremptory. To the one most loved of all this life had brought me, yet to whom I had never spoken because she was in another’s keeping, I called for help, and called, I verily believe, aloud:

‘Please come!’ Then, close upon its heels, the automatic warning again: ‘Keep close watch upon yourself...!’

It was as though one great yearning had loosed the other that was even greater, and had set it free.

Disappearing consciousness then followed the cry for an incalculable distance. Down into subterraneans within myself that were positively frightening it plunged away. But the cry was real; the yearning appeal held authority in it as of command. Love gave the right, supplied the power as well. For it seemed to me a tiny answer came, but from so far away that it was scarcely audible. And names were nowhere in it, either in answer or appeal.

‘I am always here. I have never, never left you!’

* * *

The unconsciousness that followed was not complete, apparently. There was a memory of effort in it, of struggle, and, as it were, of searching. Some one was trying to get at me. I tossed in a troubled sea upon a piece of wreckage that another swimmer also fought to reach. Huge waves of transparent green now brought this figure nearer, now concealed it, but it came steadily on, holding out a rope. My exhaustion was too great for me to respond, yet this swimmer swept up nearer, brought by enormous rollers that threatened to engulf us both. The rope was for my safety, too. I saw hands outstretched. In the deep water I saw the outline of the body, and once I even saw the face. But for a second, merely. The wave that bore it crashed with a horrible roar that smothered us both and swept me from my piece of wreckage. In the violent flood of water the rope whipped against my feeble hands. I grasped it. A sense of divine security at once came over me — an intolerable sweetness of utter bliss and comfort, then blackness and suffocation as of the grave. The white-hot point of iron struck me. It beat audibly against my heart. I heard the knocking. The pain brought me up to the surface, and the knocking of my dreams was in reality a knocking on the door. Some one was gently tapping.

Such was the confusion of images in my pain-racked mind, that I expected to see the old lady enter, bringing ropes and ice-axes, and followed by Haddon, my mountaineering friend; for I thought that I had fallen down a deep crevasse and had waited hours for help in the cold, blue darkness of the ice. I was too weak to answer, and the knocking for that matter was not repeated. I did not even hear the opening of the door, so softly did she move into the room. I only knew that before I actually saw her, this wave of intolerable sweetness drenched me once again with bliss and peace and comfort, my pain retreated, and I closed my eyes, knowing I should feel that cool and soothing hand upon my forehead.

The same minute I did feel it. There was a perfume of old gardens in the air. I opened my eyes to look the gratitude I could not utter, and saw, close against me — not the old lady, but the young and lovely face my worship had long made familiar. With lips that smiled their yearning and eyes of brown that held tears of sympathy, she sat down beside me on the bed. The warmth and fragrance of her atmosphere enveloped me. I sank away into a garden where spring melts magically into summer. Her arms were round my neck. Her face dropped down, so that I felt her hair upon my cheek and eyes. And then, whispering my name twice over, she kissed me on the lips.

'Marion,' I murmured.

'Hush! Mother sends you this,' she answered softly. 'You are to take it all; she made it with her own hands. But *I* bring it to you. You must be quite obedient, please.'

She tried to rise, but I held her against my breast.

'Kiss me again and I'll promise obedience always,' I strove to say. But my voice refused so long a sentence, and anyhow her lips were on my own before I could have finished it. Slowly, very carefully, she disentangled herself, and my arms sank back upon the coverlet. I sighed in happiness. A moment longer she stood beside my bed, gazing down with love and deep anxiety into my face.

'And when all is eaten, all, mind, *all*,' she smiled, 'you are to sleep until the doctor comes this afternoon. You are much better. Soon you shall get up. Only, remember,' shaking her finger with a sweet pretence of looking stern, 'I shall exact complete obedience. You must yield your will utterly to mine. You are in my heart, and my heart must be kept very warm and happy.'

Her eyes were tender as her mother's, and I loved the authority and strength that were so real in her. I remembered how it was this strength that had sealed the contract her beauty first drew up for me to sign. She bent down once more to arrange my pillows.

'What happened to — to the motor?' I asked hesitatingly, for my thoughts *would* not regulate themselves. The mind presented such incongruous fragments.

‘The — what?’ she asked, evidently puzzled. The word seemed strange to her. ‘What is that?’ she repeated, anxiety in her eyes.

I made an effort to tell her, but I could not. Explanation was suddenly impossible. The whole idea dived away out of sight. It utterly evaded me. I had again invented a word that was without meaning. I was talking nonsense. In its place my dream came up. I tried to tell her how I had dreamed of climbing dangerous heights with a stranger, and had spoken another language with him than my own — English, was it? — at any rate, not my native French.

‘Darling,’ she whispered close into my ear, ‘the bad dreams will not come back. You are safe here, quite safe.’ She put her little hand like a flower on my forehead and drew it softly down the cheek. ‘Your wound is already healing. They took the bullet out four days ago. I have got it,’ she added with a touch of shy embarrassment, and kissed me tenderly upon my eyes.

‘How long have you been away from me?’ I asked, feeling exhaustion coming back.

‘Never once for more than ten minutes,’ was the reply. ‘I watched with you all night. Only this morning, while mother took my place, I slept a little. But, hush!’ she said, with dear authority again; ‘you are not to talk so much. You must eat what I have brought, then sleep again. You must rest and sleep. Good-bye, good-bye, my love. I shall come back in an hour, and I shall always be within reach of your dear voice.’

Her tall, slim figure, dressed in the grey I loved, crossed silently to the door. She gave me one more look — there was all the tenderness of passionate love in it — and then was gone.

I followed instructions meekly, and when a delicious sleep stole over me soon afterwards, I had forgotten utterly the ugly dream that I was climbing dangerous heights with another man, forgotten as well everything else, except that it seemed so many days since my love had come to me, and that my bullet wound would after all be healed in time for our wedding on the day so long, so eagerly waited for.

And when, several hours later, her mother came in with the doctor — his face less grave and solemn this time — the news that I might get up next day and lie a little in the garden, did more to heal me than a thousand bandages or twice that quantity of medical instructions.

I watched them as they stood a moment by the open door. They went out very slowly together, speaking in whispers. But the only thing I caught was the mother's voice, talking brokenly of the great wars. Napoleon, the doctor was saying in a low, hushed tone, was in full retreat from Moscow, though the news had only just come through. They passed into the corridor then, and there was a sound of weeping as the old lady murmured something about her son and the cruelty of Heaven. 'Both will be taken from me,' she was sobbing softly, while he stooped to comfort her; 'one in marriage, and the other in death.' They closed the door then, and I heard no more.

I

Convalescence seemed to follow very quickly then, for I was utterly obedient as I had promised, and never spoke of what could excite me to my own detriment — the wars and my own unfortunate part in them. We talked instead of our love, our already too-long engagement, and of the sweet dream of happiness that life held waiting for us in the future. And, indeed, I was sufficiently weary of the world to prefer repose to much activity, for my body was almost incessantly in pain, and this old garden where we lay between high walls of stone, aloof from the busy world and very peaceful, was far more to my taste just then than wars and fighting.

The orchards were in blossom, and the winds of spring showered their rain of petals upon the long, new grass. We lay, half in sunshine, half in shade, beneath the poplars that lined the avenue towards the lake, and behind us rose the ancient grey stone towers where the jackdaws nested in the ivy and the pigeons cooed and fluttered from the woods beyond.

There was loveliness everywhere, but there was sadness too, for though we both knew that the wars had taken her brother whence there is no return, and that only her aged, failing mother's life stood between ourselves and the stately property, there hid a sadness yet deeper than either of these thoughts in both our hearts. And it was, I think, the sadness that comes with spring. For spring, with her lavish, short-lived promises of eternal beauty, is ever a symbol of passing human happiness, incomplete and always unfulfilled. Promises made on earth are playthings, after all, for children. Even while we make them so solemnly, we seem to know they are not meant to hold. They are made, as spring is made, with a glory of soft, radiant blossoms that pass away before there is time to realise them. And yet they come again with the return of spring, as unashamed and glorious as if Time had utterly forgotten.

And this sadness was in her too. I mean it was part of her and she was part of it. Not that our love could change to pass or die, but that its sweet, so-long-desired accomplishment must hold away, and, like the spring, must melt and vanish before it had been fully known. I did not speak of it. I well understood that the depression of a broken body can influence the spirit with its poisonous melancholy, but it must have betrayed itself in my words and gestures, even in my manner too. At any rate, she was aware of it. I think, if truth be told, she felt it too. It seemed so painfully inevitable.

My recovery, meanwhile, was rapid, and from spending an hour or two in the garden, I soon came to spend the entire day. For the spring came on with a rush, and the warmth increased deliciously. While the cuckoos called to one another in the great beech-woods behind the château, we sat and talked and sometimes had our simple meals or coffee there together, and I particularly recall the occasion when solid food was first permitted me and she gave me a delicate young *bondelle*, fresh caught that very morning in the lake. There were leaves of sweet, crisp lettuce with it, and she picked the bones out for me with her own white hands.

The day was radiant, with a sky of cloudless blue, soft airs stirred the poplar crests; the little waves fell on the pebbly beach not fifty metres away, and the orchard floor was carpeted with flowers that seemed to have caught from heaven's stars the patterns of their yellow blossoms. The bees droned peacefully among the fruit trees; the air was full of musical deep hummings. My former vigour stirred delightfully in my blood, and I knew no pain, beyond occasional dull twinges in the head that came with a rush of temporary darkness over my mind. The scar was healed, however, and the hair had grown over it again. This temporary darkness alarmed her more than it alarmed me. There were grave complications, apparently, that I did not know of.

But the deep-lying sadness in me seemed independent of the glorious weather, due to causes so intangible, so far off that I never could dispel them by arguing them away. For I could not discover what they actually were. There was a vague, distressing sense of restlessness that I ought to have been elsewhere and otherwise, that we were together for a few days only, and that these few days I had snatched unlawfully from stern, imperative duties. These duties were immediate, but neglected. In a sense I had no right to this springtide of bliss her presence brought me. I was playing truant somehow, somewhere. It was *not* my absence from the regiment; that I know. It was infinitely deeper, set to some enormous scale that vaguely frightened me, while it deepened the sweetness of the stolen joy.

Like a child, I sought to pin the sunny hours against the sky and make them stay. They passed with such a mocking swiftness, snatched momentarily from some big oblivion. The twilights swallowed our days together before they had been properly tasted, and on looking back, each afternoon of happiness seemed to have been a mere moment in a flying dream. And I must have somehow betrayed the aching mood, for Marion turned of a sudden and gazed into my face with yearning and anxiety in the sweet brown eyes.

‘What is it, dearest?’ I asked, ‘and why do your eyes bring questions?’

‘You sighed,’ she answered, smiling a little sadly; ‘and sighed so deeply. You are in pain again. The darkness, perhaps, is over you?’ And her hand stole out to meet my own. ‘You are in pain?’

‘Not physical pain,’ I said, ‘and not *the* darkness either. I see *you* clearly,’ and would have told her more, as I carried her soft fingers to my lips, had I not divined from the expression in her eyes that she read my heart and knew all my strange, mysterious forebodings in herself.

‘I know,’ she whispered before I could find speech, ‘for I feel it too. It is the shadow of separation that oppresses you — yet of no common, measurable separation you can understand. Is it not that?’

Leaning over then, I took her close into my arms, since words in that moment were mere foolishness. I held her so that she could not get away; but even while I did so it was like trying to hold the spring, or fasten the flying hour with a fierce desire. All slipped from me, and my arms caught at the sunshine and the wind.

‘We have both felt it all these weeks,’ she said bravely, as soon as I had released her, ‘and we both have struggled to conceal it. But now — —’ she hesitated for a second, and with so exquisite a tenderness that I would have caught her to me again but for my anxiety to hear her further words— ‘now that you are well, we may speak plainly to each other, and so lessen our pain by sharing it.’ And then she added, still more softly: ‘You feel there is “something” that shall take you from me — yet what it is you cannot discover nor divine. Tell me, Félix — all your thought, that I in turn may tell you mine.’

Her voice floated about me in the sunny air. I stared at her, striving to focus the dear face more clearly for my sight. A shower of apple blossoms fell about us, and her words seemed floating past me like those passing petals of white. They drifted away. I followed them with difficulty and confusion. With the wind, I fancied, a veil of indefinable change slipped across her face and eyes.

‘Yet nothing that could alter feeling,’ I answered; for she had expressed my own thought completely. ‘Nor anything that either of us can control. Only — perhaps, that everything must fade and pass away, just as this glory of the spring must fade and pass away — —’

‘Yet leaving its sweetness in us,’ she caught me up passionately, ‘and to come again, my beloved, to come again in every subsequent life, each time with an added sweetness in it too!’ Her little face showed suddenly the courage of a lion in its eyes. Her heart was ever braver than my own, a vigorous, fighting soul. She spoke of lives, I prattled of days and hours merely.

A touch of shame stole over me. But that delicate, swift change in her spread too. With a thrill of ominous warning I noticed how it rose and grew about her. From within, outwards, it seemed to pass — like a shadow of great blue distance. Shadow was somewhere in it, so that she dimmed a little before my very eyes. The dreadful yearning searched and shook me, for I could not understand it, try as I would. She seemed going from me — drifting like her words and like the apple blossoms.

‘But when we shall no longer be here to know it,’ I made answer quickly, yet as calmly as I could, ‘and when we shall have passed to some other place — to other conditions — where we shall not recognise the joy and wonder. When barriers of mist shall have rolled between us — our love and passion so made-over that we shall not know each other' — the words rushed out feverishly, half beyond control— 'and perhaps shall not even dare to speak to each other of our deep desire — —'

I broke off abruptly, conscious that I was speaking out of some unfamiliar place where I floundered, helpless among strange conditions. I was saying things I hardly understood myself. Her bigger, deeper mood spoke through me, perhaps.

Her darling face came back again; she moved close within reach once more.

'Hush, hush!' she whispered, terror and love both battling in her eyes. 'It is the truth, perhaps, but you must not say such things. To speak them brings them closer. A chain is about our hearts, a chain of fashioning lives without number, but do not seek to draw upon it with anxiety or fear. To do so can only cause the pain of wrong entanglement, and interrupt the natural running of the iron links.' And she placed her hand swiftly upon my mouth, as though divining that the bleak attack of anguish was again upon me with its throbbing rush of darkness.

But for once I was disobedient and resisted. The physical pain, I realised vividly, was linked closely with this spiritual torture. One caused the other somehow. The disordered brain received, though brokenly, some hints of darker and unusual knowledge. It had stammered forth in me, but through her it flowed easily and clear. I saw the change move more swiftly then across her face. Some ancient look passed into both her eyes.

And it was inevitable; I must speak out, regardless of mere bodily well-being.

'We shall have to face them some day,' I cried, although the effort hurt abominably, 'then why not now?' And I drew her hand down and kissed it passionately over and over again. 'We are not children, to hide our faces among shadows and pretend we are invisible. At least we have the Present — the Moment that is here and now. We stand side by side in the heart of this deep spring day. This sunshine and these flowers, this wind across the lake, this sky of blue and this singing of the birds — all, all are ours *now*. Let us use the moment that Time gives, and so strengthen the chain you speak of that shall bring us again together times without number. We shall then, perhaps, remember. Oh, my heart, think what that would mean — to remember!'

Exhaustion caught me, and I sank back among my cushions. But Marion rose up suddenly and stood beside me. And as she did so, another Sky dropped softly down upon us both, and I smelt again the incense of old, old gardens that brought long-forgotten perfumes, incredibly sweet, but with it an ache of far-off, passionate remembrance that was pain. This great ache of distance swept over me like a wave.

I know not what grand change then was wrought upon her beauty, so that I saw her defiant and erect, commanding Fate because she understood it. She towered over me, but it was her soul that towered. The rush of internal darkness in me blotted out all else. The familiar, present sky grew dim, the sunshine faded, the lake and flowers and poplars dipped away. Conditions a thousand times more vivid took their place. She stood out, clear and shining in the glory of an undressed soul, brave and confident with an eternal love that separation strengthened but could never, never change. The deep sadness I abruptly realised, was very little removed from joy — because, somehow, it was the condition of joy. I could not explain it more than that.

And her voice, when she spoke, was firm with a note of steel in it; intense, yet devoid of the wasting anger that passion brings. She was determined beyond Death itself, upon a foundation sure and lasting as the stars. The heart in her was calm, because she *knew*. She was magnificent.

'We are together — always,' she said, her voice rich with the knowledge of some unfathomable experience, 'for separation is temporary merely, forging new links in the ancient chain of lives that binds our hearts eternally together.' She looked like one who has conquered the adversity Time brings, by accepting it. 'You speak of the Present as though our souls were already fitted now to bid it stay, needing no further fashioning. Looking only to the Future, you forget our ample Past that has made us what we are. Yet our Past is here and now, beside us at this very moment. Into the hollow cups of weeks and months, of years and centuries, Time pours its flood beneath our eyes. Time is our schoolroom.... Are you so soon afraid? Does not separation achieve that which companionship never could accomplish? And how shall we dare eternity together if we cannot be strong in separation first?'

I listened while a flood of memories broke up through film upon film and layer upon layer that had long covered them.

‘This Present that we seem to hold between our hands,’ she went on in that earnest, distant voice, ‘*is* our moment of sweet remembrance that you speak of, of renewal, perhaps, too, of reconciliation — a fleeting instant when we may kiss again and say good-bye, but with strengthened hope and courage revived. But we may not stay together finally — we *cannot* — until long discipline and pain shall have perfected sympathy and schooled our love by searching, difficult tests, that it may last for ever.’

I stretched my arms out dumbly to take her in. Her face shone down upon me, bathed in an older, fiercer sunlight. The change in her seemed in an instant then complete. Some big, soft wind blew both of us ten thousand miles away. The centuries gathered us back together.

‘Look, rather, to the Past,’ she whispered grandly, ‘where first we knew the sweet opening of our love. Remember, if you can, how the pain and separation have made it so worth while to continue. And be braver thence.’

She turned her eyes more fully upon my own, so that their light persuaded me utterly away with her. An immense new happiness broke over me. I listened, and with the stirrings of an ampler courage. It seemed I followed her down an interminable vista of remembrance till I was happy with her among the flowers and fields of our earliest pre-existence.

Her voice came to me with the singing of birds and the hum of summer insects.

‘Have you so soon forgotten,’ she sighed, ‘when we knew together the perfume of the hanging Babylonian Gardens, or when the Hesperides were so soft to us in the dawn of the world? And do you not remember,’ with a little rise of passion in her voice, ‘the sweet plantations of Chaldea, and how we tasted the odour of many a drooping flower in the gardens of Alcinous and Adonis, when the bees of olden time picked out the honey for our eating? It is the fragrance of those first hours we knew together that still lies in our hearts to-day, sweetening our love to this apparent suddenness. Hence comes the full, deep happiness we gather so easily To-day.... The breast of every ancient forest is torn with storms and lightning ... that’s why it is so soft and full of little gardens. You have forgotten too easily the glades of Lebanon, where we whispered our earliest secrets while the big winds drove their chariots down those earlier skies....’

There rose an indescribable tempest of remembrance in my heart as I strove to bring the pictures into focus; but words failed me, and the hand I eagerly stretched out to touch her own, met only sunshine and the rain of apple blossoms.

‘The myrrh and frankincense,’ she continued in a sighing voice that seemed to come with the wind from invisible caverns in the sky, ‘the grapes and pomegranates — have they all passed from you, with the train of apes and peacocks, the tigers and the ibis, and the hordes of dark-faced slaves? And this little sun that plays so lightly here upon our woods of beech and pine — does it bring back nothing of the old-time scorching when the olive slopes, the figs and ripening cornfields heard our vows and watched our love mature?... Our spread encampment in the Desert — do not these sands upon our little beach revive its lonely majesty for you, and have you forgotten the gleaming towers of Semiramis ... or, in Sardis, those strange lilies that first tempted our souls to their divine disclosure...?’

Conscious of a violent struggle between pain and joy, both too deep for me to understand, I rose to seize her in my arms. But the effort dimmed the flying pictures. The wind that bore her voice down the stupendous vista fled back into the caverns whence it came. And the pain caught me in a vice of agony so searching that I could not move a muscle. My tongue lay dry against my lips. I could not frame a word of any sentence....

Her voice presently came back to me, but fainter, like a whisper from the stars. The light dimmed everywhere; I saw no more the vivid, shining scenery she had summoned. A mournful dusk instead crept down upon the world she had momentarily revived.

‘... we may not stay together,’ I heard her little whisper, ‘until long discipline shall have perfected sympathy, and schooled our love to last. For this love of ours *is* for ever, and the pain that tries it is the furnace that fashions precious stones....’

Again I stretched my arms out. Her face shone a moment longer in that forgotten fiercer sunlight, then faded very swiftly. The change, like a veil, passed over it. From the place of prodigious distance where she had been, she swept down towards me with such dizzy speed. As she was To-day I saw her again, more and more.

‘Pain and separation, then, are welcome,’ I tried to stammer, ‘and we will desire them’ — but my thought got no further into expression than the first two words. Aching blotted out coherent utterance.

She bent down very close against my face. Her fragrance was about my lips. But her voice ran off like a faint thrill of music, far, far away. I caught the final words, dying away as wind dies in high branches of a wood. And they reached me this time through the droning of bees and of waves that murmured close at hand upon the shore.

‘... for our love is of the soul, and our souls are moulded in Eternity. It is not yet, it is not now, our perfect consummation. Nor shall our next time of meeting know it. We shall not even speak.... For I shall not be free....’ was what I heard. She paused.

‘You mean we shall not know each other?’ I cried, in an anguish of spirit that mastered the lesser physical pain.

I barely caught her answer:

‘My discipline then will be in another’s keeping — yet only that I may come back to you ... more perfect ... in the end....’

The bees and waves then cushioned her whisper with their humming. The trail of a deeper silence led them far away. The rush of temporary darkness passed and lifted. I opened my eyes. My love sat close beside me in the shadow of the poplars. One hand held both my own, while with the other she arranged my pillows and stroked my aching head. The world dropped back into a tiny scale once more.

‘You have had the pain again,’ Marion murmured anxiously, ‘but it is better now. It is passing.’ She kissed my cheek. ‘You must come in....’

But I would not let her go. I held her to me with all the strength that was in me. ‘I had it, but it’s gone again. An awful darkness came with it,’ I whispered in the little ear that was so close against my mouth. ‘I’ve been dreaming,’ I told her, as memory dipped away, ‘dreaming of you and me — together somewhere — in old gardens, or forests — where the sun was — —’

But she would not let me finish. I think, in any case, I could not have said more, for thought evaded me, and any language of coherent description was in the same instant beyond my power. Exhaustion came upon me, that vile, compelling nausea with it.

‘The sun here is too strong for you, dear love,’ I heard her saying, ‘and you must rest more. We have been doing too much these last few days. You must have more repose.’ She rose to help me move indoors.

‘I have been unconscious then?’ I asked, in the feeble whisper that was all I could manage.

‘For a little while. You slept, while I watched over you.’

‘But I was away from you! Oh, how could you let me sleep, when our time together is so short?’

She soothed me instantly in the way she knew we both loved so. I clung to her until she released herself again.

‘Not away from me,’ she smiled, ‘for I was with you in your dreaming.’

‘Of course, of course you were’; but already I knew not exactly why I said it, nor caught the deep meaning that struggled up into my words from such unfathomable distance.

‘Come,’ she added, with her sweet authority again, ‘we must go in now. Give me your arm, and I will send out for the cushions. Lean on me. I am going to put you back to bed.’

‘But I shall sleep again,’ I said petulantly, ‘and we shall be separated.’

‘We shall dream together,’ she replied, as she helped me slowly and painfully towards the old grey walls of the château.

II

Half an hour later I slept deeply, peacefully, upon my bed in the big stately chamber where the roses watched beside the latticed windows.

And to say I dreamed again is not correct, for it can only be expressed by saying that I saw and knew. The figures round the bed were actual, and in life. Nothing could be more real than the whisper of the doctor’s voice — that solemn, grave-faced man who was so tall — as he said, sternly yet brokenly, to some one: ‘You must say good-bye; and you had better say it *now*.’ Nor could anything be more definite and sure, more charged with the actuality of living, than the figure of Marion, as she stooped over me to obey the terrible command. For I saw her face float down towards me like a star, and a shower of pale spring blossoms rained upon me with her hair. The perfume of old, old gardens rose about me as she slipped to her knees beside the bed and kissed my lips — so softly it was like the breath of wind from lake and orchard, and so lingeringly it was as though the blossoms lay upon my mouth and grew into flowers that she planted there.

‘Good-bye, my love; be brave. It is only separation.’

‘It is death,’ I tried to say, but could only feebly stir my lips against her own.

I drew her breath of flowers into my mouth ... and there came then the darkness which is final.

The voices grew louder. I heard a man struggling with an unfamiliar language. Turning restlessly, I opened my eyes — upon a little, stuffy room, with white walls whereon no pictures hung. It was very hot. A woman was standing beside the bed, and the bed was very short. I stretched, and my feet kicked against the boarding at the end.

‘Yes, he *is* awake,’ the woman said in French. ‘Will you come in? The doctor said you might see him when he woke. I think he’ll know you.’ She spoke in French. I just knew enough to understand.

And of course I knew him. It was Haddon. I heard him thanking her for all her kindness, as he blundered in. His French, if anything, was worse than my own. I felt inclined to laugh. I did laugh.

‘By Jove! old man, this is bad luck, isn’t it? You’ve had a narrow shave. This good lady telegraphed — —’

‘Have you got my ice-axe? Is it all right?’ I asked. I remembered clearly the motor accident — everything.

‘The ice-axe is right enough,’ he laughed, looking cheerfully at the woman, ‘but what about yourself? Feel bad still? Any pain, I mean?’

‘Oh, I feel all right,’ I answered, searching for the pain of broken bones, but finding none. ‘What happened? I was stunned, I suppose?’

‘Bit stunned, yes,’ said Haddon. ‘You got a nasty knock on the head, it seems. The point of the axe ran into you, or something.’

‘Was that all?’

He nodded. ‘But I’m afraid it’s knocked our climbing on the head. Shocking bad luck, isn’t it?’

‘I telegraphed last night,’ the kind woman was explaining.

‘But I couldn’t get here till this morning,’ Haddon said. ‘The telegram didn’t find me till midnight, you see.’ And he turned to thank the woman in his voluble, dreadful French. She kept a little pension on the shores of the lake. It was the nearest house, and they had carried me in there and got the doctor to me all within the hour. It proved slight enough, apart from the shock. It was not even concussion. I had merely been stunned. Sleep had cured me, as it seemed.

‘Jolly little place,’ said Haddon, as he moved me that afternoon to Geneva, whence, after a few days’ rest, we went on into the Alps of Haute Savoie, ‘and lucky the old body was so kind and quick. Odd, wasn’t it?’ He glanced at me.

Something in his voice betrayed he hid another thought. I saw nothing ‘odd’ in it at all, only very tiresome.

‘What’s its name?’ I asked, taking a shot at a venture.

He hesitated a second. Haddon, the climber, was not skilled in the delicacies of tact.

‘Don’t know its present name,’ he answered, looking away from me across the lake, ‘but it stands on the site of an old château — destroyed a hundred years ago — the Château de Bellerive.’

And then I understood my old friend’s absurd confusion. For Bellerive chanced also to be the name of a married woman I knew in Scotland — at least, it was her maiden name, and she was of French extraction.

THE END

Day and Night Stories (1917)

CONTENTS

THE TRYST

THE TOUCH OF PAN

THE WINGS OF HORUS

INITIATION

A DESERT EPISODE

THE OTHER WING

THE OCCUPANT OF THE ROOM

CAIN’S ATONEMENT

AN EGYPTIAN HORNET

BY WATER

H. S. H.

A BIT OF WOOD

A VICTIM OF HIGHER SPACE

TRANSITION

THE TRADITION

THE TRYST

"*JE SUIS LA première au rendez-vous. Je vous attends.*"

As he got out of the train at the little wayside station he remembered the conversation as if it had been yesterday, instead of fifteen years ago — and his heart went thumping against his ribs so violently that he almost heard it. The original thrill came over him again with all its infinite yearning. He felt it as he had felt it *then* — not with that tragic lessening the interval had brought to each repetition of its memory. Here, in the familiar scenery of its birth, he realised with mingled pain and wonder that the subsequent years had not destroyed, but only dimmed it. The forgotten rapture flamed back with all the fierce beauty of its genesis, desire at white heat. And the shock of the abrupt discovery shattered time. Fifteen years became a negligible moment; the crowded experiences that had intervened seemed but a dream. The farewell scene, the conversation on the steamer's deck, were clear as of the day before. He saw the hand holding her big hat that fluttered in the wind, saw the flowers on the dress where the long coat was blown open a moment, recalled the face of a hurrying steward who had jostled them; he even heard the voices — his own and hers:

"Yes," she said simply; "I promise you. You have my word. I'll wait — —"

"Till I come back to find you," he interrupted.

Steadfastly she repeated his actual words, then added: "Here; at home — that is."

"I'll come to the garden gate as usual," he told her, trying to smile. "I'll knock. You'll open the gate — as usual — and come out to me."

These words, too, she attempted to repeat, but her voice failed, her eyes filled suddenly with tears; she looked into his face and nodded. It was just then that her little hand went up to hold the hat on — he saw the very gesture still. He remembered that he was vehemently tempted to tear his ticket up there and then, to go ashore with her, to stay in England, to brave all opposition — when the siren roared its third horrible warning ... and the ship put out to sea.

Fifteen years, thick with various incident, had passed between them since that moment. His life had risen, fallen, crashed, then risen again. He had come back at last, fortune won by a lucky coup — at thirty-five; had come back to find her, come back, above all, to keep his word. Once every three months they had exchanged the brief letter agreed upon: "I am well; I am waiting; I am happy; I am unmarried. Yours —— ." For his youthful wisdom had insisted that no "man" had the right to keep "any woman" too long waiting; and she, thinking that letter brave and splendid, had insisted likewise that he was free — if freedom called him. They had laughed over this last phrase in their agreement. They put five years as the possible limit of separation. By then he would have won success, and obstinate parents would have nothing more to say.

But when the five years ended he was "on his uppers" in a western mining town, and with the end of ten in sight those uppers, though changed, were little better, apparently, than patched and mended. And it was just then, too, that the change which had been stealing over him betrayed itself. He realised it abruptly, a sense of shame and horror in him. The discovery was made unconsciously — it disclosed itself. He was reading her letter as a labourer on a Californian fruit farm: "Funny she doesn't marry — some one else!" he heard himself say. The words were out before he knew it, and certainly before he could suppress them. They just slipped out, startling him into the truth; and he knew instantly that the thought was fathered in him by a hidden wish. ... He was older. He had lived. It was a memory he loved.

Despising himself in a contradictory fashion — both vaguely and fiercely — he yet held true to his boyhood's promise. He did not write and offer to release her, as he knew they did in stories. He persuaded himself that he meant to keep his word. There was this fine, stupid, selfish obstinacy in his character. In any case, she would misunderstand and think he wanted to set free — himself. "Besides — I'm still — awfully fond of her," he asserted. And it was true; only the love, it seemed, had gone its way. Not that another woman took it; he kept himself clean, held firm as steel. The love, apparently, just faded of its own accord; her image dimmed, her letters ceased to thrill, then ceased to interest him.

Subsequent reflection made him realise other details about himself. In the interval he had suffered hardships, had learned the uncertainty of life that depends for its continuance on a little food, but that food often hard to come by, and had seen so many others go under that he held it more cheaply than of old. The wandering instinct, too, had caught him, slowly killing the domestic impulse; he lost his desire for a settled place of abode, the desire for children of his own, lost the desire to marry at all. Also — he reminded himself with a smile — he had lost other things: the expression of youth *she* was accustomed to and held always in her thoughts of him, two fingers of one hand, his hair! He wore glasses, too. The gentlemen-adventurers of life get scarred in those wild places where he lived. He saw himself a rather battered specimen well on the way to middle age.

There was confusion in his mind, however, *and* in his heart: a struggling complex of emotions that made it difficult to know exactly what he did feel. The dominant clue concealed itself. Feelings shifted. A single, clear determinant did not offer. He was an honest fellow. "I can't quite make it out," he said. "What is it I really feel? And why?" His motive seemed confused. To keep the flame alight for ten long buffeting years was no small achievement; better men had succumbed in half the time. Yet something in him still held fast to the girl as with a band of steel that *would* not let her go entirely. Occasionally there came strong reversions, when he ached with longing, yearning, hope; when he loved her again; remembered passionately each detail of the far-off courtship days in the forbidden rectory garden beyond the small, white garden gate. Or was it merely the image and the memory he loved "again"? He hardly knew himself. He could not tell. That "again" puzzled him. It was the wrong word surely. ... He still wrote the promised letter, however; it was so easy; those short sentences could not betray the dead or dying fires. One day, besides, he would return and claim her. He meant to keep his word.

And he had kept it. Here he was, this calm September afternoon, within three miles of the village where he first had kissed her, where the marvel of first love had come to both; three short miles between him and the little white garden gate of which at this very moment she was intently thinking, and behind which some fifty minutes later she would be standing, waiting for him. ...

He had purposely left the train at an earlier station; he would walk over in the dusk, climb the familiar steps, knock at the white gate in the wall as of old, utter the promised words, "I have come back to find you," enter, and —

keep his word. He had written from Mexico a week before he sailed; he had made careful, even accurate calculations: “In the dusk, on the sixteenth of September, I shall come and knock,” he added to the usual sentences. The knowledge of his coming, therefore, had been in her possession seven days. Just before sailing, moreover, he had heard from her — though not in answer, naturally. She was well; she was happy; she was unmarried; she was waiting.

And now, as by some magical process of restoration — possible to deep hearts only, perhaps, though even by them quite inexplicable — the state of first love had blazed up again in him. In all its radiant beauty it lit his heart, burned unextinguished in his soul, set body and mind on fire. The years had merely veiled it. It burst upon him, captured, overwhelmed him with the suddenness of a dream. He stepped from the train. He met it in the face. It took him prisoner. The familiar trees and hedges, the unchanged countryside, the “field-smells known in infancy,” all these, with something subtly added to them, rolled back the passion of his youth upon him in a flood. No longer was he bound upon what he deemed, perhaps, an act of honourable duty; it was love that drove him, as it drove him fifteen years before. And it drove him with the accumulated passion of desire long forcibly repressed; almost as if, out of some fancied notion of fairness to the girl, he had deliberately, yet still unconsciously, said “No” to it; that *she* had not faded, but that he had decided, “*I* must forget her.” That sentence: “Why doesn’t she marry — some one else?” had not betrayed change in himself. It surprised another motive: “It’s not fair to — her!”

His mind worked with a curious rapidity, but worked within one circle only. The stress of sudden emotion was extraordinary. He remembered a thousand things — yet, chief among them, those occasional reversions when he had felt he “loved her again.” Had he not, after all, deceived himself? Had she ever really “faded” at all? Had he not felt he ought to let her fade — release her that way? And the change in himself? — that sentence on the Californian fruit-farm — what did they mean? Which had been true, the fading or the love?

The confusion in his mind was hopeless, but, as a matter of fact, he did not think at all: he only *felt*. The momentum, besides, was irresistible, and before the shattering onset of the sweet revival he did not stop to analyse the strange result. He knew certain things, and cared to know no others: that his heart was leaping, his blood running with the heat of twenty, that joy recaptured him, that he must see, hear, touch her, hold her in his arms — and marry her. For the fifteen years had crumbled to a little thing, and at thirty-five he felt himself but twenty, rapturously, deliciously in love.

He went quickly, eagerly down the little street to the inn, still feeling only, not thinking anything. The vehement uprush of the old emotion made reflection of any kind impossible. He gave no further thought to those long years "out there," when her name, her letters, the very image of her in his mind, had found him, if not cold, at least without keen response. All that was forgotten as though it had not been. The steadfast thing in him, this strong holding to a promise which had never wilted, ousted the recollection of fading and decay that, whatever caused them, certainly *had* existed. And this steadfast thing now took command. This enduring quality in his character led him. It was only towards the end of the hurried tea he first received the singular impression — vague, indeed, but undeniably persistent — the strange impression that he was *being* led.

Yet, though aware of this, he did not pause to argue or reflect. The emotional displacement in him, of course, had been more than considerable: there had been upheaval, a change whose abruptness was even dislocating, fundamental in a sense he could not estimate — shock. Yet he took no count of anything but the one mastering desire to get to her as soon as possible, knock at the small, white garden gate, hear her answering voice, see the low wooden door swing open — take her. There was joy and glory in his heart, and a yearning sweet delight. At this very moment she was expecting him. And he — had come.

Behind these positive emotions, however, there lay concealed all the time others that were of a negative character. Consciously, he was not aware of them, but they were there; they revealed their presence in various little ways that puzzled him. He recognised them absentmindedly, as it were; did not analyse or investigate them. For, through the confusion upon his faculties, rose also a certain hint of insecurity that betrayed itself by a slight hesitancy or miscalculation in one or two unimportant actions. There was a touch of melancholy, too, a sense of something lost. It lay, perhaps, in that tinge of sadness which accompanies the twilight of an autumn day, when a gentler, mournful beauty veils a greater beauty that is past. Some trick of memory connected it with a scene of early boyhood, when, meaning to see the sunrise, he overslept, and, by a brief half-hour, was just — too late. He noted it merely, then passed on; he did not understand it; he hurried all the more, this hurry the only sign that it *was* noted. “I must be quick,” flashed up across his strongly positive emotions.

And, due to this hurry, possibly, were the slight miscalculations that he made. They were very trivial. He rang for sugar, though the bowl stood just before his eyes, yet when the girl came in he forgot completely what he rang for — and inquired instead about the evening trains to London. And, when the time-table was laid before him, he examined it without intelligence, then looked up suddenly into the maid’s face with a question about flowers. Were there flowers to be had in the village anywhere? What kind of flowers? “Oh, a bouquet or a” — he hesitated, searching for a word that tried to present itself, yet was not the word *he* wanted to make use of— “or a wreath — of some sort?” he finished. He took the very word he did not want to take. In several things he did and said, this hesitancy and miscalculation betrayed themselves — such trivial things, yet significant in an elusive way that he disliked. There was sadness, insecurity somewhere in them. And he resented them, aware of their existence only because they qualified his joy. There was a whispered “No” floating somewhere in the dusk. Almost — he felt disquiet. He hurried, more and more eager to be off upon his journey — the final part of it.

Moreover, there were other signs of an odd miscalculation — dislocation, perhaps, properly speaking — in him. Though the inn was familiar from his boyhood days, kept by the same old couple, too, he volunteered no information about himself, nor asked a single question about the village he was bound for. He did not even inquire if the rector — her father — still were living. And when he left he entirely neglected the gilt-framed mirror above the mantelpiece of plush, dusty pampas-grass in waterless vases on either side. It did not matter, apparently, whether he looked well or ill, tidy or untidy. He forgot that when his cap was off the absence of thick, accustomed hair must alter him considerably, forgot also that two fingers were missing from one hand, the right hand, the hand that she would presently clasp. Nor did it occur to him that he wore glasses, which must change his expression and add to the appearance of the years he bore. None of these obvious and natural things seemed to come into his thoughts at all. He was in a hurry to be off. He did not think. But, though his mind may not have noted these slight betrayals with actual sentences, his attitude, nevertheless, expressed them. This was, it seemed, the *feeling* in him: "What could such details matter to her *now*? Why, indeed, should he give to them a single thought? It was himself she loved and waited for, not separate items of his external, physical image." As well think of the fact that she, too, must have altered — outwardly. It never once occurred to him. Such details were of To-day. ... He was only impatient to come to her quickly, very quickly, instantly, if possible. He hurried.

There was a flood of boyhood's joy in him. He paid for his tea, giving a tip that was twice the price of the meal, and set out gaily and impetuously along the winding lane. Charged to the brim with a sweet picture of a small, white garden gate, the loved face close behind it, he went forward at a headlong pace, singing "Nancy Lee" as he used to sing it fifteen years before.

With action, then, the negative sensations hid themselves, obliterated by the positive ones that took command. The former, however, merely lay concealed; they waited. Thus, perhaps, does vital emotion, overlong restrained, denied, indeed, of its blossoming altogether, take revenge. Repressed elements in his psychic life asserted themselves, selecting, as though naturally, a dramatic form.

The dusk fell rapidly, mist rose in floating strips along the meadows by the stream; the old, familiar details beckoned him forwards, then drove him from behind as he went swiftly past them. He recognised others rising through the thickening air beyond; they nodded, peered, and whispered; sometimes they almost sang. And each added to his inner happiness; each brought its sweet and precious contribution, and built it into the reconstructed picture of the earlier, long-forgotten rapture. It was an enticing and enchanted journey that he made, something impossibly blissful in it, something, too, that seemed curiously — inevitable.

For the scenery had not altered all these years, the details of the country were unchanged, everything he saw was rich with dear and precious association, increasing the momentum of the tide that carried him along. Yonder was the stile over whose broken step he had helped her yesterday, and there the slippery plank across the stream where she looked above her shoulder to ask for his support; he saw the very bramble bushes where she scratched her hand, a-blackberrying, the day before ... and, finally, the weather-stained signpost, “To the Rectory.” It pointed to the path through the dangerous field where Farmer Sparrow’s bull provided such a sweet excuse for holding, leading — protecting her. From the entire landscape rose a steam of recent memory, each incident alive, each little detail brimmed with its cargo of fond association.

He read the rough black lettering on the crooked arm — it was rather faded, but he knew it too well to miss a single letter — and hurried forward along the muddy track; he looked about him for a sign of Farmer Sparrow’s bull; he even felt in the misty air for the little hand that he might take and lead her into safety. The thought of her drew him on with such irresistible anticipation that it seemed as if the cumulative drive of vanished and unsated years evoked the tangible phantom almost. He actually felt it, soft and warm and clinging in his own, that was no longer incomplete and mutilated.

Yet it was not he who led and guided now, but, more and more, he who was being led. The hint had first betrayed its presence at the inn; it now openly declared itself. It had crossed the frontier into a positive sensation. Its growth, swiftly increasing all this time, had accomplished itself; he had ignored, somehow, both its genesis and quick development; the result he plainly recognised. She was expecting him, indeed, but it was more than expectation; there was calling in it — she summoned him. Her thought and longing reached him along that old, invisible track love builds so easily between true, faithful hearts. All the forces of her being, her very voice, came towards him through the deepening autumn twilight. He had not noticed the curious physical restoration in his hand, but he was vividly aware of this more magical alteration — that *she* led and guided him, drawing him ever more swiftly towards the little, white garden gate where she stood at this very moment, waiting. Her sweet strength compelled him; there was this new touch of something irresistible about the familiar journey, where formerly had been delicious yielding only, shy, tentative advance. He realised it — inevitable.

His footsteps hurried, faster and ever faster; so deep was the allurement in his blood, he almost ran. He reached the narrow, winding lane, and raced along it. He knew each bend, each angle of the holly hedge, each separate incident of ditch and stone. He could have plunged blindfold down it at top speed. The familiar perfumes rushed at him — dead leaves and mossy earth and ferns and dock leaves, bringing the bewildering currents of strong emotion in him all together as in a rising wave. He saw, then, the crumbling wall, the cedars topping it with spreading branches, the chimneys of the rectory. On his right bulked the outline of the old, grey church; the twisted, ancient yews, the company of gravestones, upright and leaning, dotting the ground like listening figures. But he looked at none of these. For, on his left, he already saw the five rough steps of stone that led from the lane towards a small, white garden gate. That gate at last shone before him, rising through the misty air. He reached it.

He stopped dead a moment. His heart, it seemed, stopped too, then took to violent hammering in his brain. There was a roaring in his mind, and yet a marvellous silence — just behind it. Then the roar of emotion died away. There was utter stillness. This stillness, silence, was all about him. The world seemed preternaturally quiet.

But the pause was too brief to measure. For the tide of emotion had receded only to come on again with redoubled power. He turned, leaped forward, clambered impetuously up the rough stone steps, and flung himself, breathless and exhausted, against the trivial barrier that stood between his eyes and — hers. In his wild, half violent impatience, however, he stumbled. That roaring, too, confused him. He fell forward, it seemed, for twilight had merged in darkness, and he misjudged the steps, the distances he yet knew so well. For a moment, certainly, he lay at full length upon the uneven ground against the wall; the steps had tripped him. And then he raised himself and knocked. His right hand struck upon the small, white garden gate. Upon the two lost fingers he felt the impact. “I am here,” he cried, with a deep sound in his throat as though utterance was choked and difficult. “I have come back — to find you.”

For a fraction of a second he waited, while the world stood still and waited with him. But there was no delay. Her answer came at once: “I am well. ... I am happy. ... I am waiting.”

And the voice was dear and marvellous as of old. Though the words were strange, reminding him of something dreamed, forgotten, lost, it seemed, he did not take special note of them. He only wondered that she did not open instantly that he might see her. Speech could follow, but sight came surely first! There was this lightning-flash of disappointment in him. Ah, she was lengthening out the marvellous moment, as often and often she had done before. It was to tease him that she made him wait. He knocked again; he pushed against the unyielding surface. For he noticed that it was unyielding; and there was a depth in the tender voice that he could not understand.

“Open!” he cried again, but louder than before. “I have come back to find you!” And as he said it the mist struck cold and thick against his face.

But her answer froze his blood.

“I cannot open.”

And a sudden anguish of despair rose over him; the sound of her voice was strange; in it was faintness, distance — as well as depth. It seemed to echo. Something frantic seized him then — the panic sense.

“Open, open! Come out to me!” he tried to shout. His voice failed oddly; there was no power in it. Something appalling struck him between the eyes. “For God’s sake, open. I’m waiting here! Open, and come out to me!”

The reply was muffled by distance that already seemed increasing; he was conscious of freezing cold about him — in his heart.

“I cannot open. You must come in to me. I’m here and — waiting — always.”

He knew not exactly then what happened, for the cold grew deeper and the icy mist was in his throat. No words would come. He rose to his knees, and from his knees to his feet. He stooped. With all his force he knocked again; in a blind frenzy of despair he hammered and beat against the unyielding barrier of the small, white garden gate. He battered it till the skin of his knuckles was torn and bleeding — the first two fingers of a hand already mutilated. He remembers the torn and broken skin, for he noticed in the gloom that stains upon the gate bore witness to his violence; it was not till afterwards that he remembered the other fact — that the hand had already suffered mutilation, long, long years ago. The power of sound was feebly in him; he called aloud; there was no answer. He tried to scream, but the scream was muffled in his throat before it issued properly; it was a nightmare scream. As a last resort he flung himself bodily upon the unyielding gate, with such precipitate violence, moreover, that his face struck against its surface.

From the friction, then, along the whole length of his cheek he knew that the surface was not smooth. Cold and rough that surface was; but also — it was not of wood. Moreover, there was writing on it he had not seen before. How he deciphered it in the gloom, he never knew. The lettering was deeply cut. Perhaps he traced it with his fingers; his right hand certainly lay stretched upon it. He made out a name, a date, a broken verse from the Bible, and the words, "died peacefully." The lettering was sharply cut with edges that were new. For the date was of a week ago; the broken verse ran, "When the shadows flee away ..." and the small, white garden gate was unyielding because it was of — stone.

* * *

At the inn he found himself staring at a table from which the tea things had not been cleared away. There was a railway time-table in his hands, and his head was bent forwards over it, trying to decipher the lettering in the growing twilight. Beside him, still fingering a shilling, stood the serving-girl; her other hand held a brown tray with a running dog painted upon its dented surface. It swung to and fro a little as she spoke, evidently continuing a conversation her customer had begun. For she was giving information — in the colourless, disinterested voice such persons use:

"We all went to the funeral, sir, all the country people went. The grave was her father's — the family grave. ..." Then, seeing that her customer was too absorbed in the time-table to listen further, she said no more but began to pile the tea things on to the tray with noisy clatter.

Ten minutes later, in the road, he stood hesitating. The signal at the station just opposite was already down. The autumn mist was rising. He looked along the winding road that melted away into the distance, then slowly turned and reached the platform just as the London train came in. He felt very old — too old to walk six miles. ...

II

THE TOUCH OF PAN

1

AN IDIOT, HEBER understood, was a person in whom intelligence had been arrested — instinct acted, but not reason. A lunatic, on the other hand, was some one whose reason had gone awry — the mechanism of the brain was injured. The lunatic was out of relation with his environment; the idiot had merely been delayed *en route*.

Be that as it might, he knew at any rate that a lunatic was not to be listened to, whereas an idiot — well, the one he fell in love with certainly had the secret of some instinctual knowledge that was not only joy, but a kind of sheer natural joy. Probably it was that sheer natural joy of living that reason argues to be untaught, degraded. In any case — at thirty — he married her instead of the daughter of a duchess he was engaged to. They lead to-day that happy, natural, vagabond life called idiotic, unmindful of that world the majority of reasonable people live only to remember.

Though born into an artificial social clique that made it difficult, Heber had always loved the simple things. Nature, especially, meant much to him. He would rather see a woodland misty with bluebells than all the châteaux on the Loire; the thought of a mountain valley in the dawn made his feet lonely in the grandest houses. Yet in these very houses was his home established. Not that he under-estimated worldly things — their value was too obvious — but that it was another thing he wanted. Only he did not know precisely *what* he wanted until this particular idiot made it plain.

Her case was a mild one, possibly; the title bestowed by implication rather than by specific mention. Her family did not say that she was imbecile or half-witted, but that she "was not all there" they probably did say. Perhaps she saw men as trees walking, perhaps she saw through a glass darkly. Heber, who had met her once or twice, though never yet to speak to, did not analyse her degree of sight, for in him, personally, she woke a secret joy and wonder that almost involved a touch of awe. The part of her that was not "all there" dwelt in an "elsewhere" that he longed to know about. He wanted to share it with her. She seemed aware of certain happy and desirable things that reason and too much thinking hide.

He just felt this instinctively without analysis. The values they set upon the prizes of life were similar. Money to her was just stamped metal, fame a loud noise of sorts, position nothing. Of people she was aware as a dog or bird might be aware — they were kind or unkind. Her parents, having collected much metal and achieved position, proceeded to make a loud noise of sorts with some success; and since she did not contribute, either by her appearance or her tastes, to their ambitions, they neglected her and made excuses. They were ashamed of her existence. Her father in particular justified Nietzsche's shrewd remark that no one with a loud voice can listen to subtle thoughts.

She was, perhaps, sixteen — for, though she looked it, eighteen or nineteen was probably more in accord with her birth certificate. Her mother was content, however, that she should dress the lesser age, preferring to tell strangers that she was childish, rather than admit that she was backward.

"You'll never marry at all, child, much less marry as you might," she said, "if you go about with that rabbit expression on your face. That's not the way to catch a nice young man of the sort we get down to stay with us now. Many a chorus-girl with less than you've got has caught them easily enough. Your sister's done well. Why not do the same? There's nothing to be shy or frightened about."

"But I'm not shy or frightened, mother. I'm bored. I mean *they* bore me."

It made no difference to the girl; she was herself. The bored expression in the eyes — the rabbit, not-all-there expression — gave place sometimes to another look. Yet not often, nor with anybody. It was this other look that stirred the strange joy in the man who fell in love with her. It is not to be easily described. It was very wonderful. Whether sixteen or nineteen, she then looked — a thousand.

* * *

The house-party was of that up-to-date kind prevalent in Heber's world. Husbands and wives were not asked together. There was a cynical disregard of the decent (not the stupid) conventions that savoured of abandon, perhaps of decadence. He only went himself in the hope of seeing the backward daughter once again. Her millionaire parents afflicted him, the smart folk tired him. Their peculiar affectation of a special language, their strange belief that they were of importance, their treatment of the servants, their calculated self-indulgence, all jarred upon him more than usual. At bottom he heartily despised the whole vapid set. He felt uncomfortable and out of place. Though not a prig, he abhorred the way these folk believed themselves the climax of fine living. Their open immorality disgusted him, their indiscriminate love-making was merely rather nasty; he watched the very girl he was at last to settle down with behaving as the tone of the clique expected over her final fling — and, bored by the strain of so much "modernity," he tried to get away. Tea was long over, the sunset interval invited, he felt hungry for trees and fields that were not self-conscious — and he escaped. The flaming June day was turning chill. Dusk hovered over the ancient house, veiling the pretentious new wing that had been added. And he came across the idiot girl at the bend of the drive, where the birch trees shivered in the evening wind. His heart gave a leap.

She was leaning against one of the dreadful statues — it was a satyr — that sprinkled the lawn. Her back was to him; she gazed at a group of broken pine trees in the park beyond. He paused an instant, then went on quickly, while his mind scurried to recall her name. They were within easy speaking range.

"Miss Elizabeth!" he cried, yet not too loudly lest she might vanish as suddenly as she had appeared. She turned at once. Her eyes and lips were smiling welcome at him without pretence. She showed no surprise.

"You're the first one of the lot who's said it properly," she exclaimed, as he came up. "Everybody calls me Elizabeth instead of Elspeth. It's idiotic. They don't even take the trouble to get a name right."

"It is," he agreed. "Quite idiotic." He did not correct her. Possibly he had said Elspeth after all — the names were similar. Her perfectly natural voice was grateful to his ear, and soothing. He looked at her all over with an open admiration that she noticed and, without concealment, liked. She was very untidy, the grey stockings on her vigorous legs were torn, her short skirt was spattered with mud. Her nut-brown hair, glossy and plentiful, flew loose about neck and shoulders. In place of the usual belt she had tied a coloured handkerchief round her waist. She wore no hat. What she had been doing to get in such a state, while her parents entertained a "distinguished" party, he did not know, but it was not difficult to guess. Climbing trees or riding bareback and astride was probably the truth. Yet her dishevelled state became her well, and the welcome in her face delighted him. She remembered him, she was glad. He, too, was glad, and a sense both happy and reckless stirred in his heart. “Like a wild animal,” he said, “you come out in the dusk — —”

“To play with my kind,” she answered in a flash, throwing him a glance of invitation that made his blood go dancing.

He leaned against the statue a moment, asking himself why this young Cinderella of a parvenu family delighted him when all the London beauties left him cold. There was a lift through his whole being as he watched her, slim and supple, grace shining through the untidy modern garb — almost as though she wore no clothes. He thought of a panther standing upright. Her poise was so alert — one arm upon the marble ledge, one leg bent across the other, the hip-line showing like a bird’s curved wing. Wild animal or bird, flashed across his mind: something untamed and natural. Another second, and she might leap away — or spring into his arms.

It was a deep, stirring sensation in him that produced the mental picture. “Pure and natural,” a voice whispered with it in his heart, “as surely as *they* are just the other thing!” And the thrill struck with unerring aim at the very root of that unrest he had always known in the state of life to which he was called. She made it natural, clean, and pure. This girl and himself were somehow kin. The primitive thing broke loose in him.

In two seconds, while he stood with her beside the vulgar statue, these thoughts passed through his mind. But he did not at first give utterance to any of them. He spoke more formally, although laughter, due to his happiness, lay behind:

“They haven’t asked you to the party, then? Or you don’t care about it? Which is it?”

“Both,” she said, looking fearlessly into his face. “But I’ve been here ten minutes already. Why were you so long?”

This outspoken honesty was hardly what he expected, yet in another sense he was not surprised. Her eyes were very penetrating, very innocent, very frank. He felt her as clean and sweet as some young fawn that asks plainly to be stroked and fondled. He told the truth: “I couldn’t get away before. I had to play about and — —” when she interrupted with impatience:

"*They* don't really want you," she exclaimed scornfully. "I do."

And, before he could choose one out of the several answers that rushed into his mind, she nudged him with her foot, holding it out a little so that he saw the shoelace was unfastened. She nodded her head towards it, and pulled her skirt up half an inch as he at once stooped down.

"And, anyhow," she went on as he fumbled with the lace, touching her ankle with his hand, "you're going to marry one of them. I read it in the paper. It's idiotic. You'll be miserable."

The blood rushed to his head, but whether owing to his stooping or to something else, he could not say.

"I only came — I only accepted," he said quickly, "because I wanted to see *you* again."

"Of course. I made mother ask you."

He did an impulsive thing. Kneeling as he was, he bent his head a little lower and suddenly kissed the soft grey stocking — then stood up and looked her in the face. She was laughing happily, no sign of embarrassment in her anywhere, no trace of outraged modesty. She just looked very pleased.

"I've tied a knot that won't come undone in a hurry — —" he began, then stopped dead. For as he said it, gazing into her smiling face, another expression looked forth at him from the two big eyes of hazel. Something rushed from his heart to meet it. It may have been that playful kiss, it may have been the way she took it; but, at any rate, there was a strength in the new emotion that made him unsure of who he was and of whom he looked at. He forgot the place, the time, his own identity and hers. The lawn swept from beneath his feet, the English sunset with it. He forgot his host and hostess, his fellow guests, even his father's name and his own into the bargain. He was carried away upon a great tide, the girl always beside him. He left the shore-line in the distance, already half forgotten, the shore-line of his education, learning, manners, social point of view — everything to which his father had most carefully brought him up as the scion of an old-established English family. This girl had torn up the anchor. Only the anchor had previously been loosened a little by his own unconscious and restless efforts. ...

Where was she taking him to? Upon what island would they land?

“I’m younger than you — a good deal,” she broke in upon his rushing mood. “But that doesn’t matter a bit, does it? We’re about the same age really.”

With the happy sound of her voice the extraordinary sensation passed — or, rather, it became normal. But that it had lasted an appreciable time was proved by the fact that they had left the statue on the lawn, the house was no longer visible behind them, and they were walking side by side between the massive rhododendron clumps. They brought up against a five-barred gate into the park. They leaned upon the topmost bar, and he felt her shoulder touching his — edging into it — as they looked across to the grove of pines.

“I feel absurdly young,” he said without a sign of affectation, “and yet I’ve been looking for you a thousand years and more.”

The afterglow lit up her face; it fell on her loose hair and tumbled blouse, turning them amber red. She looked not only soft and comely, but extraordinarily beautiful. The strange expression haunted the deep eyes again, the lips were a little parted, the young breast heaving slightly, joy and excitement in her whole presentment. And as he watched her he knew that all he had just felt was due to her close presence, to her atmosphere, her perfume, her physical warmth and vigour. It had emanated directly from her being.

“Of course,” she said, and laughed so that he felt her breath upon his face. He bent lower to bring his own on a level, gazing straight into her eyes that were fixed upon the field beyond. They were clear and luminous as pools of water, and in their centre, sharp as a photograph, he saw the reflection of the pine grove, perhaps a hundred yards away. With detailed accuracy he saw it, empty and motionless in the glimmering June dusk.

Then something caught his eye. He examined the picture more closely. He drew slightly nearer. He almost touched her face with his own, forgetting for a moment whose were the eyes that served him for a mirror. For, looking intently thus, it seemed to him that there was a movement, a passing to and fro, a stirring as of figures among the trees. ... Then suddenly the entire picture was obliterated. She had dropped her lids. He heard her speaking — the warm breath was again upon his face:

“In the heart of that wood dwell I.”

His heart gave another leap — more violent than the first — for the wonder and beauty of the sentence caught him like a spell. There was a lilt and rhythm in the words that made it poetry. She laid emphasis upon the pronoun and the nouns. It seemed the last line of some delicious runic verse:

“In the *heart* of the *wood* — dwell *I*. ...”

And it flashed across him: That living, moving, inhabited pine wood was her thought. It was thus she saw it. Her nature flung back to a life she understood, a life that needed, claimed her. The ostentatious and artificial values that surrounded her, she denied, even as the distinguished house-party of her ambitious, masquerading family neglected her. Of course she was unnoticed by them, just as a swallow or a wild-rose were unnoticed.

He knew her secret then, for she had told it to him. It was his own secret too. They were akin, as the birds and animals were akin. They belonged together in some free and open life, natural, wild, untamed. That unhampered life was flowing about them now, rising, beating with delicious tumult in her veins and his, yet innocent as the sunlight and the wind — because it was as freely recognised.

“Elspeth!” he cried, “come, take me with you! We’ll go at once. Come — hurry — before we forget to be happy, or remember to be wise again —— !”

His words stopped half-way towards completion, for a perfume floated past him, born of the summer dusk, perhaps, yet sweet with a penetrating magic that made his senses reel with some remembered joy. No flower, no scented garden bush delivered it. It was the perfume of young, spendthrift life, sweet with the purity that reason had not yet stained. The girl moved closer. Gathering her loose hair between her fingers, she brushed his cheeks and eyes with it, her slim, warm body pressing against him as she leaned over laughingly.

“In the darkness,” she whispered in his ear; “when the moon puts the house upon the statue!”

And he understood. Her world lay behind the vulgar, staring day. He turned. He heard the flutter of skirts — just caught the grey stockings, swift and light, as they flew behind the rhododendron masses. And she was gone.

He stood a long time, leaning upon that five-barred gate. ... It was the dressing-gong that recalled him at length to what seemed the present. By the conservatory door, as he went slowly in, he met his distinguished cousin — who was helping the girl he himself was to marry to enjoy her "final fling." He looked at his cousin. He realised suddenly that he was merely vicious. There was no sun and wind, no flowers — there was depravity only, lust instead of laughter, excitement in place of happiness. It was calculated, not spontaneous. His mind was in it. Without joy it was. He was not natural.

"Not a girl in the whole lot fit to look at," he exclaimed with peevish boredom, excusing himself stupidly for his illicit conduct. "I'm off in the morning." He shrugged his blue-blooded shoulders. "These millionaires! Their shooting's all right, but their mixum-gatherum week-ends — bah!" His gesture completed all he had to say about this one in particular. He glanced sharply, nastily, at his companion. "*You* look as if you'd found something!" he added, with a suggestive grin. "Or have you seen the ghost that was paid for with the house?" And he guffawed and let his eyeglass drop. "Lady Hermione will be asking for an explanation — eh?"

"Idiot!" replied Heber, and ran upstairs to dress for dinner.

But the word was wrong, he remembered, as he closed his door. It was lunatic he had meant to say, yet something more as well. He saw the smart, modern philanderer somehow as a beast.

2

It was nearly midnight when he went up to bed, after an evening of intolerable amusement. The abandoned moral attitude, the common rudeness, the contempt of all others but themselves, the ugly jests, the horseplay of tasteless minds that passed for gaiety, above all the shamelessness of the women that behind the cover of fine breeding aped emancipation, afflicted him to a boredom that touched desperation.

He understood now with a clarity unknown before. As with his cousin, so with these. They took life, he saw, with a brazen effrontery they thought was freedom, while yet it was life that they denied. He felt vampired and degraded; spontaneity went out of him. The fact that the geography of bedrooms was studied openly seemed an affirmation of vice that sickened him. Their ways were nauseous merely. He escaped — unnoticed.

He locked his door, went to the open window, and looked out into the night — then started. For silver dressed the lawn and park, the shadow of the building lay dark across the elaborate garden, and the moon, he noticed, was just high enough to put the house upon the statue. The chimney-stacks edged the pedestal precisely.

“Odd!” he exclaimed. “Odd that I should come at the very moment —— !” then smiled as he realised how his proposed adventure would be misinterpreted, its natural innocence and spirit ruined — if he were seen. “And some one would be sure to see me on a night like this. There are couples still hanging about in the garden.” And he glanced at the shrubberies and secret paths that seemed to float upon the warm June air like islands.

He stood for a moment framed in the glare of the electric light, then turned back into the room; and at that instant a low sound like a bird-call rose from the lawn below. It was soft and flutey, as though some one played two notes upon a reed, a piping sound. He had been seen, and she was waiting for him. Before he knew it, he had made an answering call, of oddly similar kind, then switched the light out. Three minutes later, dressed in simpler clothes, with a cap pulled over his eyes, he reached the back lawn by means of the conservatory and the billiard-room. He paused a moment to look about him. There was no one, although the lights were still ablaze. “I am an idiot,” he chuckled to himself. “I’m acting on instinct!” He ran.

The sweet night air bathed him from head to foot; there was strength and cleansing in it. The lawn shone wet with dew. He could almost smell the perfume of the stars. The fumes of wine, cigars and artificial scent were left behind, the atmosphere exhaled by civilisation, by heavy thoughts, by bodies overdressed, unwisely stimulated — all, all forgotten. He passed into a world of magical enchantment. The hush of the open sky came down. In black and white the garden lay, brimmed full with beauty, shot by the ancient silver of the moon, spangled with the stars’ old-gold. And the night wind rustled in the rhododendron masses as he flew between them.

In a moment he was beside the statue, engulfed now by the shadow of the building, and the girl detached herself silently from the blur of darkness. Two arms were flung about his neck, a shower of soft hair fell on his cheek with a heady scent of earth and leaves and grass, and the same instant they were away together at full speed — towards the pine wood. Their feet were soundless on the soaking grass. They went so swiftly that they made a whir of following wind that blew her hair across his eyes.

And the sudden contrast caused a shock that put a blank, perhaps, upon his mind, so that he lost the standard of remembered things. For it was no longer merely a particular adventure; it seemed a habit and a natural joy resumed. It was not new. He knew the momentum of an accustomed happiness, mislaid, it may be, but certainly familiar. They sped across the gravel paths that intersected the well-groomed lawn, they leaped the flower-beds, so laboriously shaped in mockery, they clambered over the ornamental iron railings, scorning the easier five-barred gate into the park. The longer grass then shook the dew in soaking showers against his knees. He stooped, as though in some foolish effort to turn up something, then realised that his legs, of course, were bare. *Her* garment was already high and free, for she, too, was barelegged like himself. He saw her little ankles, wet and shining in the moonlight, and flinging himself down, he kissed them happily, plunging his face into the dripping, perfumed grass. Her ringing laughter mingled with his own, as she stooped beside him the same instant; her hair hung in a silver cloud; her eyes gleamed through its curtain into his; then, suddenly, she soaked her hands in the heavy dew and passed them over his face with a softness that was like the touch of some scented southern wind.

“Now you are anointed with the Night,” she cried. “No one will know you. You are forgotten of the world. Kiss me!”

“We’ll play for ever and ever,” he cried, “the eternal game that was old when the world was yet young,” and lifting her in his arms he kissed her eyes and lips. There was some natural bliss of song and dance and laughter in his heart, an elemental bliss that caught them together as wind and sunlight catch the branches of a tree. She leaped from the ground to meet his swinging arms. He ran with her, then tossed her off and caught her neatly as she fell. Evading a second capture, she danced ahead, holding out one shining arm that he might follow. Hand in hand they raced on together through the clean summer moonlight. Yet there remained a smooth softness as of fur against his neck and shoulders, and he saw then that she wore skins of tawny colour that clung to her body closely, that he wore them too, and that her skin, like his own, was of a sweet dusky brown.

Then, pulling her towards him, he stared into her face. She suffered the close gaze a second, but no longer, for with a burst of sparkling laughter again she leaped into his arms, and before he shook her free she had pulled and tweaked the two small horns that hid in the thick curly hair behind, and just above, the ears.

And that wilful tweaking turned him wild and reckless. That touch ran down him deep into the mothering earth. He leaped and ran and sang with a great laughing sound. The wine of eternal youth flushed all his veins with joy, and the old, old world was young again with every impulse of natural happiness intensified with the Earth's own foaming tide of life.

From head to foot he tingled with the delight of Spring, prodigal with creative power. Of course he could fly the bushes and fling wild across the open! Of course the wind and moonlight fitted close and soft about him like a skin! Of course he had youth and beauty for playmates, with dancing, laughter, singing, and a thousand kisses! For he and she were natural once again. They were free together of those long-forgotten days when "Pan leaped through the roses in the month of June ...!"

With the girl swaying this way and that upon his shoulders, tweaking his horns with mischief and desire, hanging her flying hair before his eyes, then bending swiftly over again to lift it, he danced to join the rest of their companions in the little moonlit grove of pines beyond. ...

3

They rose somewhat pointed, perhaps, against the moonlight, those English pines — more with the shape of cypresses, some might have thought. A stream gushed down between their roots, there were mossy ferns, and rough grey boulders with lichen on them. But there was no dimness, for the silver of the moon sprinkled freely through the branches like the faint sunlight that it really was, and the air ran out to meet them with a heady fragrance that was wiser far than wine.

The girl, in an instant, was whirled from her perch on his shoulders and caught by a dozen arms that bore her into the heart of the jolly, careless throng. Whisht! Whew! Whir! She was gone, but another, fairer still, was in her place, with skins as soft and knees that clung as tightly. Her eyes were liquid amber, grapes hung between her little breasts, her arms entwined about him, smoother than marble, and as cool. She had a crystal laugh.

But he flung her off, so that she fell plump among a group of bigger figures lolling against a twisted root and roaring with a jollity that boomed like wind through the chorus of a song. They seized her, kissed her, then sent her flying. They were happier with their glad singing. They held stone goblets, red and foaming, in their broad-palmed hands.

“The mountains lie behind us!” cried a figure dancing past. “We are come at last into our valley of delight. Grapes, breasts, and rich red lips! Ho! Ho! It is time to press them that the juice of life may run!” He waved a cluster of ferns across the air and vanished amid a cloud of song and laughter.

“It is ours. Use it!” answered a deep, ringing voice. “The valleys are our own. No climbing now!” And a wind of echoing cries gave answer from all sides. “Life! Life! Life! Abundant, flowing over — use it, use it!”

A troop of nymphs rushed forth, escaped from clustering arms and lips they yet openly desired. He chased them in and out among the waving branches, while she who had brought him ever followed, and sped past him and away again. He caught three gleaming soft brown bodies, then fell beneath them, smothered, bubbling with joyous laughter — next freed himself and, while they sought to drag him captive again, escaped and raced with a leap upon a slimmer, sweeter outline that swung up — only just in time — upon a lower bough, whence she leaned down above him with hanging net of hair and merry eyes. A few feet beyond his reach, she laughed and teased him — the one who had brought him in, the one he ever sought, and who for ever sought him too. ...

It became a riotous glory of wild children who romped and played with an impassioned glee beneath the moon. For the world was young and they, her happy offspring, glowed with the life she poured so freely into them. All intermingled, the laughing voices rose into a foam of song that broke against the stars. The difficult mountains had been climbed and were forgotten. Good! Then, enjoy the luxuriant, fruitful valley and be glad! And glad they were, brimful with spontaneous energy, natural as birds and animals that obeyed the big, deep rhythm of a simpler age — natural as wind and innocent as sunshine.

Yet, for all the untamed riot, there was a lift of beauty pulsing underneath. Even when the wildest abandon approached the heat of orgy, when the recklessness appeared excess — there hid that marvellous touch of loveliness which makes the natural sacred. There was coherence, purpose, the fulfilling of an exquisite law: there was worship. The form it took, haply, was strange as well as riotous, yet in its strangeness dreamed innocence and purity, and in its very riot flamed that spirit which is divine.

For he found himself at length beside her once again; breathless and panting, her sweet brown limbs aglow from the excitement of escape denied; eyes shining like a blaze of stars, and pulses beating with tumultuous life — helpless and yielding against the strength that pinned her down between the roots. His eyes put mastery on her own. She looked up into his face, obedient, happy, soft with love, surrendered with the same delicious abandon that had swept her for a moment into other arms. "You caught me in the end," she sighed. "I only played awhile."

"I hold you for ever," he replied, half wondering at the rough power in his voice.

It was here the hush of worship stole upon her little face, into her obedient eyes, about her parted lips. She ceased her wilful struggling.

"Listen!" she whispered. "I hear a step upon the glades beyond. The iris and the lily open; the earth is ready, waiting; we must be ready too! *He* is coming!"

He released her and sprang up; the entire company rose too. All stood, all bowed the head. There was an instant's subtle panic, but it was the panic of reverent awe that preludes a descent of deity. For a wind passed through the branches with a sound that is the oldest in the world and so the youngest. Above it there rose the shrill, faint piping of a little reed. Only the first, true sounds were audible — wind and water — the tinkling of the dewdrops as they fell, the murmur of the trees against the air. This was the piping that they heard. And in the hush the stars bent down to hear, the riot paused, the orgy passed and died. The figures waited, kneeling then with one accord. They listened with — the Earth.

“He comes. ... He comes ...” the valley breathed about them.

There was a footfall from far away, treading across a world unruined and unstained. It fell with the wind and water, sweetening the valley into life as it approached. Across the rivers and forests it came gently, tenderly, but swiftly and with a power that knew majesty.

“He comes. ... He comes ...!” rose with the murmur of the wind and water from the host of lowered heads.

The footfall came nearer, treading a world grown soft with worship. It reached the grove. It entered. There was a sense of intolerable loveliness, of brimming life, of rapture. The thousand faces lifted like a cloud. They heard the piping close. And so He came.

But He came with blessing. With the stupendous Presence there was joy, the joy of abundant, natural life, pure as the sunlight and the wind. He passed among them. There was great movement — as of a forest shaking, as of deep water falling, as of a cornfield swaying to the wind, yet gentle as of a harebell shedding its burden of dew that it has held too long because of love. He passed among them, touching every head. The great hand swept with tenderness each face, lingered a moment on each beating heart. There was sweetness, peace, and loveliness; but above all, there was — life. He sanctioned every natural joy in them and blessed each passion with his power of creation. ... Yet each one saw him differently: some as a wife or maiden desired with fire, some as a youth or stalwart husband, others as a figure veiled with stars or cloaked in luminous mist, hardly attainable; others, again — the fewest these, not more than two or three — as that mysterious wonder which tempts the heart away from known familiar sweetness into a wilderness of undecipherable magic without flesh and blood. ...

To two, in particular, He came so near that they could feel his breath of hills and fields upon their eyes. He touched them with both mighty hands. He stroked the marble breasts, He felt the little hidden horns ... and, as they bent lower so that their lips met together for an instant, He took her arms and twined them about the curved, brown neck that she might hold him closer still. ...

Again a footfall sounded far away upon an unruined world ... and He was gone — back into the wind and water whence He came. The thousand faces lifted; all stood up; the hush of worship still among them. There was a quiet as of the dawn. The piping floated over woods and fields, fading into silence. All looked at one another. ... And then once more the laughter and the play broke loose.

4

“We’ll go,” she cried, “and peep upon that other world where life hangs like a prison on their eyes!” And, in a moment, they were across the soaking grass, the lawn and flower-beds, and close to the walls of the heavy mansion. He peered in through a window, lifting her up to peer in with him. He recognised the world to which outwardly he belonged; he understood; a little gasp escaped him; and a slight shiver ran down the girl’s body into his own. She turned her eyes away. “See,” she murmured in his ear, “it’s ugly, it’s not natural. They feel guilty and ashamed. There is no innocence!” She saw the men; it was the women that he saw chiefly.

Lolling ungracefully, with a kind of boldness that asserted independence, the women smoked their cigarettes with an air of invitation they sought to conceal and yet showed plainly. He saw his familiar world in nakedness. Their backs were bare, for all the elaborate clothes they wore; they hung their breasts uncleanly; in their eyes shone light that had never known the open sun. Hoping they were alluring and desirable, they feigned a guilty ignorance of that hope. They all pretended. Instead of wind and dew upon their hair, he saw flowers grown artificially to ape wild beauty, tresses without lustre borrowed from the slums of city factories. He watched them manœuvring with the men; heard dark sentences; caught gestures half delivered whose meaning should just convey that glimpse of guilt they deemed to increase pleasure. The women were calculating, but nowhere glad; the men experienced, but nowhere joyous. Pretended innocence lay cloaked with a veil of something that whispered secretly, clandestine, ashamed, yet with a brazen air that laid mockery instead of sunshine in their smiles. Vice masqueraded in the ugly shape of pleasure; beauty was degraded into calculated tricks. They were not natural. They knew not joy.

“The forward ones, the civilised!” she laughed in his ear, tweaking his horns with energy. “*We* are the backward!”

“Unclean,” he muttered, recalling a catchword of the world he gazed upon.

They were the civilised! They were refined and educated — advanced. Generations of careful breeding, mate cautiously selecting mate, laid the polish of caste upon their hands and faces where gleamed ridiculous, untaught jewels — rings, bracelets, necklaces hanging absurdly from every possible angle.

“But — they are dressed up — for fun,” he exclaimed, more to himself than to the girl in skins who clung to his shoulders with her naked arms.

“*Un*dressed!” she answered, putting her brown hand in play across his eyes. “Only they have forgotten even that!” And another shiver passed through her into him. He turned and hid his face against the soft skins that touched his cheek. He kissed her body. Seizing his horns, she pressed him to her, laughing happily.

“Look!” she whispered, raising her head again; “they’re coming out.” And he saw that two of them, a man and a girl, with an interchange of secret glances, had stolen from the room and were already by the door of the conservatory that led into the garden. It was his wife to be — and his distinguished cousin.

“Oh, Pan!” she cried in mischief. The girl sprang from his arms and pointed. “We will follow them. We will put natural life into their little veins!”

“Or panic terror,” he answered, catching the yellow panther skin and following her swiftly round the building. He kept in the shadow, though she ran full into the blaze of moonlight. “But they can’t see us,” she called, looking over her shoulder a moment. “They can only feel our presence, perhaps.” And, as she danced across the lawn, it seemed a moonbeam slipped from a sapling birch tree that the wind curved earthwards, then tossed back against the sky.

Keeping just ahead, they led the pair, by methods known instinctively to elemental blood yet not translatable — led them towards the little grove of waiting pines. The night wind murmured in the branches; a bird woke into a sudden burst of song. These sounds were plainly audible. But four little pointed ears caught other, wilder notes behind the wind and music of the bird — the cries and ringing laughter, the leaping footsteps and the happy singing of their merry kin within the wood.

And the throng paused then amid the revels to watch the "civilised" draw near. They presently reached the trees, halted, looked about them, hesitated a moment — then, with a hurried movement as of shame and fear lest they be caught, entered the zone of shadow.

"Let's go in here," said the man, without music in his voice. "It's dry on the pine needles, and we can't be seen." He led the way; she picked up her skirts and followed over the strip of long wet grass. "Here's a log all ready for us," he added, sat down, and drew her into his arms with a sigh of satisfaction. "Sit on my knee; it's warmer for your pretty figure." He chuckled; evidently they were on familiar terms, for though she hesitated, pretending to be coy, there was no real resistance in her, and she allowed the ungraceful roughness. "But are we *quite* safe? Are you sure?" she asked between his kisses.

"What does it matter, even if we're not?" he replied, establishing her more securely on his knees. "But, as a matter of fact, we're safer here than in my own house." He kissed her hungrily. "By Jove, Hermione, but you're divine," he cried passionately, "divinely beautiful. I love you with every atom of my being — with my soul."

"Yes, dear, I know — I mean, I know you do, but — —"

"But what?" he asked impatiently.

"Those detectives — —"

He laughed. Yet it seemed to annoy him. "My wife is a beast, isn't she? — to have me watched like that," he said quickly.

"They're everywhere," she replied, a sudden hush in her tone. She looked at the encircling trees a moment, then added bitterly: "I hate her, simply *hate* her."

"I love you," he cried, crushing her to him, "that's all that matters now. Don't let's waste time talking about the rest." She contrived to shudder, and hid her face against his coat, while he showered kisses on her neck and hair.

And the solemn pine trees watched them, the silvery moonlight fell on their faces, the scent of new-mown hay went floating past.

“I love you with my very soul,” he repeated with intense conviction. “I’d do anything, give up anything, bear anything — just to give you a moment’s happiness. I swear it — before God!”

There was a faint sound among the trees behind them, and the girl sat up, alert. She would have scrambled to her feet, but that he held her tight.

“What the devil’s the matter with you to-night?” he asked in a different tone, his vexation plainly audible. “You’re as nervy as if *you* were being watched, instead of me.”

She paused before she answered, her finger on her lip. Then she said slowly, hushing her voice a little:

“Watched! That’s exactly what I did feel. I’ve felt it ever since we came into the wood.”

“Nonsense, Hermione. It’s too many cigarettes.” He drew her back into his arms, forcing her head up so that he could kiss her better.

“I suppose it is nonsense,” she said, smiling. “It’s gone now, anyhow.”

He began admiring her hair, her dress, her shoes, her pretty ankles, while she resisted in a way that proved her practice. “It’s not *me* you love,” she pouted, yet drinking in his praise. She listened to his repeated assurances that he loved her with his “soul” and was prepared for any sacrifice.

“I feel so safe with you,” she murmured, knowing the moves in the game as well as he did. She looked up guiltily into his face, and he looked down with a passion that he thought perhaps was joy.

“You’ll be married before the summer’s out,” he said, “and all the thrill and excitement will be over. Poor Hermione!” She lay back in his arms, drawing his face down with both hands, and kissing him on the lips. “You’ll have more of him than you can do with — eh? As much as you care about, anyhow.”

“I shall be much more free,” she whispered. “Things will be easier. And I’ve got to marry some one — —”

She broke off with another start. There was a sound again behind them. The man heard nothing. The blood in his temples pulsed too loudly, doubtless.

“Well, what is it this time?” he asked sharply.

She was peering into the wood, where the patches of dark shadow and moonlit spaces made odd, irregular patterns in the air. A low branch waved slightly in the wind.

“Did you hear that?” she asked nervously.

“Wind,” he replied, annoyed that her change of mood disturbed his pleasure.

“But something moved — —”

“Only a branch. We’re quite alone, quite safe, I tell you,” and there was a rasping sound in his voice as he said it. “Don’t be so imaginative. I can take care of you.”

She sprang up. The moonlight caught her figure, revealing its exquisite young curves beneath the smother of the costly clothing. Her hair had dropped a little in the struggle. The man eyed her eagerly, making a quick, impatient gesture towards her, then stopped abruptly. He saw the terror in her eyes.

“Oh, hark! What’s that?” she whispered in a startled voice. She put her finger up. “Oh, let’s go back. I don’t like this wood. I’m frightened.”

“Rubbish,” he said, and tried to catch her by the waist.

“It’s safer in the house — my room — or yours — —” She broke off again. “There it is — don’t you hear? It’s a footstep!” Her face was whiter than the moon.

“I tell you it’s the wind in the branches,” he repeated gruffly. “Oh, come on, *do*. We were just getting jolly together. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Can’t you believe me?” He tried to pull her down upon his knee again with force. His face wore an unpleasant expression that was half leer, half grin.

But the girl stood away from him. She continued to peer nervously about her. She listened.

“You give me the creeps,” he exclaimed crossly, clawing at her waist again with passionate eagerness that now betrayed exasperation. His disappointment turned him coarse.

The girl made a quick movement of escape, turning so as to look in every direction. She gave a little scream.

“That *was* a step. Oh, oh, it’s close beside us. I heard it. We’re being watched!” she cried in terror. She darted towards him, then shrank back. He did not try to touch her this time.

“Moonshine!” he growled. “You’ve spoilt my — spoilt our chance with your silly nerves.”

But she did not hear him apparently. She stood there shivering as with sudden cold.

“There! I saw it again. I’m sure of it. Something went past me through the air.”

And the man, still thinking only of his own pleasure frustrated, got up heavily, something like anger in his eyes. “All right,” he said testily; “if you’re going to make a fuss, we’d better go. The house *is* safer, possibly, as you say. You know my room. Come along!” Even that risk he would not take. He loved her with his “soul.”

They crept stealthily out of the wood, the girl slightly in front of him, casting frightened backward glances. Afraid, guilty, ashamed, with an air as though they had been detected, they stole back towards the garden and the house, and disappeared from view.

And a wind rose suddenly with a rushing sound, poured through the wood as though to cleanse it, swept out the artificial scent and trace of shame, and brought back again the song, the laughter, and the happy revels. It roared across the park, it shook the windows of the house, then sank away as quickly as it came. The trees stood motionless again, guarding their secret in the clean, sweet moonlight that held the world in dream until the dawn stole up and sunshine took the earth with joy.

III

THE WINGS OF HORUS

BINOVITCH HAD THE bird in him somewhere: in his features, certainly, with his piercing eye and hawk-like nose; in his movements, with his quick way of flitting, hopping, darting; in the way he perched on the edge of a chair; in the manner he pecked at his food; in his twittering, high-pitched voice as well; and, above all, in his mind. He skimmed all subjects and picked their heart out neatly, as a bird skims lawn or air to snatch its prey. He had the bird's-eye view of everything. He loved birds and understood them instinctively; could imitate their whistling notes with astonishing accuracy. Their one quality he had not was poise and balance. He was a nervous little man; he was neurasthenic. And he was in Egypt by doctor's orders.

Such imaginative, unnecessary ideas he had! Such uncommon beliefs!

"The old Egyptians," he said laughingly, yet with a touch of solemn conviction in his manner, "were a great people. Their consciousness was different from ours. The bird idea, for instance, conveyed a sense of deity to them — of bird deity, that is: they had sacred birds — hawks, ibis, and so forth — and worshipped them." And he put his tongue out as though to say with challenge, "Ha, ha!"

"They also worshipped cats and crocodiles and cows," grinned Palazov. Binovitch seemed to dart across the table at his adversary. His eyes flashed; his nose pecked the air. Almost one could imagine the beating of his angry wings.

"Because everything alive," he half screamed, "was a symbol of some spiritual power to them. Your mind is as literal as a dictionary and as incoherent. Pages of ink without connected meaning! Verb always in the infinitive! If you were an old Egyptian, you — you" — he flashed and spluttered, his tongue shot out again, his keen eyes blazed— "you might take all those words and spin them into a great interpretation of life, a cosmic romance, as they did. Instead, you get the bitter, dead taste of ink in your mouth, and spit it over us like that" — he made a quick movement of his whole body as a bird that shakes itself— "in empty phrases."

Khilkoff ordered another bottle of champagne, while Vera, his sister, said half nervously, “Let’s go for a drive; it’s moonlight.” There was enthusiasm at once. Another of the party called the head waiter and told him to pack food and drink in baskets. It was only eleven o’clock. They would drive out into the desert, have a meal at two in the morning, tell stories, sing, and see the dawn.

It was in one of those cosmopolitan hotels in Egypt which attract the ordinary tourists as well as those who are doing a “cure,” and all these Russians were ill with one thing or another. All were ordered out for their health, and all were the despair of their doctors. They were as unmanageable as a bazaar and as incoherent. Excess and bed were their routine. They lived, but none of them got better. Equally, none of them got angry. They talked in this strange personal way without a shred of malice or offence. The English, French, and Germans in the hotel watched them with remote amazement, referring to them as “that Russian lot.” Their energy was elemental. They never stopped. They merely disappeared when the pace became too fast, then reappeared again after a day or two, and resumed their “living” as before. Binovitch, despite his neurasthenia, was the life of the party. He was also a special patient of Dr. Plitzinger, the famous psychiatrist, who took a peculiar interest in his case. It was not surprising. Binovitch was a man of unusual ability and of genuine, deep culture. But there was something more about him that stimulated curiosity. There was this striking originality. He said and did surprising things.

“I could fly if I wanted to,” he said once when the airmen came to astonish the natives with their biplanes over the desert, “but without all that machinery and noise. It’s only a question of believing and understanding — —”

“Show us!” they cried. “Let’s see you fly!”

“He’s got it! He’s off again! One of his impossible moments.”

These occasions when Binovitch let himself go always proved wildly entertaining. He said monstrously incredible things as though he really did believe them. They loved his madness, for it gave them new sensations.

“It’s only levitation, after all, this flying,” he exclaimed, shooting out his tongue between the words, as his habit was when excited; “and what is levitation but a power of the air? None of you can hang an orange in space for a second, with all your scientific knowledge; but the moon is always levitated perfectly. And the stars. D'you think they swing on wires? What raised the enormous stones of ancient Egypt? D'you really believe it was heaped-up sand and ropes and clumsy leverage and all our weary and laborious mechanical contrivances? Bah! It was levitation. It was the powers of the air. Believe in those powers, and gravity becomes a mere nursery trick — true where it is, but true nowhere else. To know the fourth dimension is to step out of a locked room and appear instantly on the roof or in another country altogether. To know the powers of the air, similarly, is to annihilate what you call weight — and fly."

"Show us, show us!" they cried, roaring with delighted laughter.

"It's a question of belief," he repeated, his tongue appearing and disappearing like a pointed shadow. "It's in the heart; the power of the air gets into your whole being. Why should I show you? Why should I ask my deity to persuade your scoffing little minds by any miracle? For it is deity, I tell you, and nothing else. I *know* it. Follow one idea like that, as I follow my bird idea — follow it with the impetus and undeviating concentration of a projectile — and you arrive at power. You know deity — the bird idea of deity, that is. *They* knew that. The old Egyptians knew it."

"Oh, show us, show us!" they shouted impatiently, wearied of his nonsense-talk. "Get up and fly! Levitate yourself, as they did! Become a star!"

Binovitch turned suddenly very pale, and an odd light shone in his keen brown eyes. He rose slowly from the edge of the chair where he was perched. Something about him changed. There was silence instantly.

"I *will* show you," he said calmly, to their intense amazement; "not to convince your disbelief, but to prove it to myself. For the powers of the air are with me here. I believe. And Horus, great falcon-headed symbol, is my patron god."

The suppressed energy in his voice and manner was indescribable. There was a sense of lifting, upheaving power about him. He raised his arms; his face turned upward; he inflated his lungs with a deep, long breath, and his voice broke into a kind of singing cry, half prayer, half chant:

"O Horus,

Bright-eyed deity of wind,

Feather my soul

Though earth’s thick air,

To know thy awful swiftness — —”

The Russian is untranslatable. The phrase means, “Give my life wings.”

He broke off suddenly. He climbed lightly and swiftly upon the nearest table — it was in a deserted card-room, after a game in which he had lost more pounds than there are days in the year — and leaped into the air. He hovered a second, spread his arms and legs in space, appeared to float a moment, then buckled, rushed down and forward, and dropped in a heap upon the floor, while every one roared with laughter.

But the laughter died out quickly, for there was something in his wild performance that was peculiar and unusual. It was uncanny, not quite natural. His body had seemed, as with Mordkin and Nijinski, literally to hang upon the air a moment. For a second he gave the distressing impression of overcoming gravity. There was a touch in it of that faint horror which appals by its very vagueness. He picked himself up unhurt, and his face was as grave as a portrait in the academy, but with a new expression in it that everybody noticed with this strange, half-shocked amazement. And it was this expression that extinguished the claps of laughter as wind that takes away the sound of bells. Like many ugly men, he was an inimitable actor, and his facial repertory was endless and incredible. But this was neither acting nor clever manipulation of expressive features. There was something in his curious Russian physiognomy that made the heart beat slower. And that was why the laughter died away so suddenly.

“You ought to have flown farther,” cried some one. It expressed what all had felt.

“Icarus didn’t drink champagne,” another replied, with a laugh; but nobody laughed with him.

“You went too near to Vera,” said Palazov, “and passion melted the wax.” But his face twitched oddly as he said it. There was something he did not understand, and so heartily disliked.

The strange expression on the features deepened. It was arresting in a disagreeable, almost in a horrible, way. The talk stopped dead; all stared; there was a feeling of dismay in everybody's heart, yet unexplained. Some lowered their eyes, or else looked stupidly elsewhere; but the women of the party felt a kind of fascination. Vera, in particular, could not move her sight away. The joking reference to his passionate admiration for her passed unnoticed. There was a general and individual sense of shock. And a chorus of whispers rose instantly:

"Look at Binovitch! What's happened to his face?"

"He's changed — he's changing!"

"God! Why he looks like a — bird!"

But no one laughed. Instead, they chose the names of birds — hawk, eagle, even owl. The figure of a man leaning against the edge of the door, watching them closely, they did not notice. He had been passing down the corridor, had looked in unobserved, and then had paused. He had seen the whole performance. He watched Binovitch narrowly, now with calm, discerning eyes. It was Dr Plitzinger, the great psychiatrist.

For Binovitch had picked himself up from the floor in a way that was oddly self-possessed, and precluded the least possibility of the ludicrous. He looked neither foolish nor abashed. He looked surprised, but also he looked half angry and half frightened. As some one had said, he "ought to have flown farther." That was the incredible impression his acrobatics had produced — incredible, yet somehow actual. This uncanny idea prevailed, as at a séance where nothing genuine is expected to happen, and something genuine, after all, does happen. There was no pretence in this: Binovitch had flown.

And now he stood there, white in the face — with terror and with anger white. He looked extraordinary, this little, neurasthenic Russian, but he looked at the same time half terrific. Another thing, not commonly experienced by men, was in him, breaking out of him, affecting *directly* the minds of his companions. His mouth opened; blood and fury shone in his blazing eyes; his tongue shot out like an ant-eater's, though even in that the comic had no place. His arms were spread like flapping wings, and his voice rose dreadfully:

“He failed me, he failed me!” he tried to bellow. “Horus, my falcon-headed deity, my power of the air, deserted me! Hell take him! Hell burn his wings and blast his piercing sight! Hell scorch him into dust for his false prophecies! I curse him — I curse Horus!”

The voice that should have roared across the silent room emitted, instead, this high-pitched, bird-like scream. The added touch of sound, the reality it lent, was ghastly. Yet it was marvellously done and acted. The entire thing was a bit of instantaneous inspiration — his voice, his words, his gestures, his whole wild appearance. Only — here was the reality that caused the sense of shock — the expression on his altered features was genuine. *That* was not assumed. There was something new and alien in him, something cold and difficult to human life, something alert and swift and cruel, of another element than earth. A strange, rapacious grandeur had leaped upon the struggling features. The face looked hawk-like.

And he came forward suddenly and sharply toward Vera, whose fixed, staring eyes had never once ceased watching him with a kind of anxious and devouring pain in them. She was both drawn and beaten back. Binovitch advanced on tiptoe. No doubt he still was acting, still pretending this mad nonsense that he worshipped Horus, the falcon-headed deity of forgotten days, and that Horus had failed him in his hour of need; but somehow there was just a hint of too much reality in the way he moved and looked. The girl, a little creature, with fluffy golden hair, opened her lips; her cigarette fell to the floor; she shrank back; she looked for a moment like some smaller, coloured bird trying to escape from a great pursuing hawk; she screamed. Binovitch, his arms wide, his bird-like face thrust forward, had swooped upon her. He leaped. Almost he caught her.

No one could say exactly what happened. Play, become suddenly and unexpectedly too real, confuses the emotions. The change of key was swift. From fun to terror is a dislocating jolt upon the mind. Some one — it was Khilkoff, the brother — upset a chair; everybody spoke at once; everybody stood up. An unaccountable feeling of disaster was in the air, as with those drinkers’ quarrels that blaze out from nothing, and end in a pistol-shot and death, no one able to explain clearly how it came about. It was the silent, watching figure in the doorway who saved the situation. Before any one had noticed his approach, there he was among the group, laughing, talking, applauding — between Binovitch and Vera. He was vigorously patting his patient on the back, and his voice rose easily above the general clamour. He was a strong, quiet personality; even in his laughter there was authority. And his laughter now was the only sound in the room, as though by his mere presence peace and harmony were restored. Confidence came with him. The noise subsided; Vera was in her chair again. Khilkoff poured out a glass of wine for the great man.

“The Czar!” said Plitzinger, sipping his champagne, while all stood up, delighted with his compliment and tact. “And to your opening night with the Russian ballet,” he added quickly a second toast, “or to your first performance at the Moscow Théâtre des Arts!” Smiling significantly, he glanced at Binovitch; he clinked glasses with him. Their arms were already linked, but it was Palazov who noticed that the doctor’s fingers seemed rather tight upon the creased black coat. All drank, looking with laughter, yet with a touch of respect, toward Binovitch, who stood there dwarfed beside the stalwart Austrian, and suddenly as meek and subdued as any mole. Apparently the abrupt change of key had taken his mind successfully off something else.

“Of course— ‘The Fire-Bird,’” exclaimed the little man, mentioning the famous Russian ballet. “The very thing!” he exclaimed. “For *us*,” he added, looking with devouring eyes at Vera. He was greatly pleased. He began talking vociferously about dancing and the rationale of dancing. They told him he was an undiscovered master. He was delighted. He winked at Vera and touched her glass again with his. “We’ll make our début together,” he cried. “We’ll begin at Covent Garden, in London. I’ll design the dresses and the posters ‘The Hawk and the Dove!’ *Magnifique!* I in dark grey, and you in blue and gold! Ah, dancing, you know, is sacred. The little self is lost, absorbed. It is ecstasy, it is divine. And dancing in air — the passion of the birds and stars — ah! they are the movements of the gods. You know deity that way — by living it.”

He went on and on. His entire being had shifted with a leap upon this new subject. The idea of realising divinity by dancing it absorbed him. The party discussed it with him as though nothing else existed in the world, all sitting now and talking eagerly together. Vera took the cigarette he offered her, lighting it from his own; their fingers touched; he was as harmless and normal as a retired diplomat in a drawing-room. But it was Plitzinger whose subtle manœuvring had accomplished the change so cleverly, and it was

Plitzinger who presently suggested a game of billiards, and led him off, full now of a fresh enthusiasm for cannons, balls, and pockets, into another room. They departed arm in arm, laughing and talking together.

Their departure, it seemed, made no great difference at first. Vera's eyes watched him out of sight, then turned to listen to Baron Minski, who was describing with gusto how he caught wolves alive for coursing purposes. The speed and power of the wolf, he said, was impossible to realise; the force of their awful leap, the strength of their teeth, which could bite through metal stirrup-fastenings. He showed a scar on his arm and another on his lip. He was telling truth, and everybody listened with deep interest. The narrative lasted perhaps ten minutes or more, when Minski abruptly stopped. He had come to an end; he looked about him; he saw his glass, and emptied it. There was a general pause. Another subject did not at once present itself. Sighs were heard; several fidgeted; fresh cigarettes were lighted. But there was no sign of boredom, for where one or two Russians are gathered together there is always life. They produce gaiety and enthusiasm as wind produces waves. Like great children, they plunge whole-heartedly into whatever interest presents itself at the moment. There is a kind of uncouth gambolling in their way of taking life. It seems as if they are always fighting that deep, underlying, national sadness which creeps into their very blood.

"Midnight!" then exclaimed Palazov, abruptly, looking at his watch; and the others fell instantly to talking about that watch, admiring it and asking questions. For the moment that very ordinary timepiece became the centre of observation. Palazov mentioned the price. "It never stops," he said proudly, "not even under water." He looked up at everybody, challenging admiration. And he told how, at a country house, he made a bet that he would swim to a certain island in the lake, and won the bet. He and a girl were the winners, but as it was a horse they had bet, he got nothing out of it for himself, giving the horse to her. It was a genuine grievance in him. One felt he could have cried as he spoke of it. "But the watch went all the time," he said delightedly, holding the gun-metal object in his hand to show, "and I was twelve minutes in the water with my clothes on."

Yet this fragmentary talk was nothing but pretence. The sound of clicking billiard-balls was audible from the room at the end of the corridor. There was another pause. The pause, however, was intentional. It was not vacuity of mind or absence of ideas that caused it. There was another subject, an unfinished subject that each member of the group was still considering. Only no one cared to begin about it till at last, unable to resist the strain any longer, Palazov turned to Khilkoff, who was saying he would take a "whisky-soda," as the champagne was too sweet, and whispered something beneath his breath; whereupon Khilkoff, forgetting his drink, glanced at his sister, shrugged his shoulders, and made a curious grimace. "He's all right now" — his reply was just audible— "he's with Plitzinger." He cocked his head sidewise to indicate that the clicking of the billiard-balls still was going on.

The subject was out: all turned their heads; voices hummed and buzzed; questions were asked and answered or half answered; eyebrows were raised, shoulders shrugged, hands spread out expressively. There came into the atmosphere a feeling of presentiment, of mystery, of things half understood; primitive, buried instinct stirred a little, the kind of racial dread of vague emotions that might gain the upper hand if encouraged. They shrank from looking something in the face, while yet this unwelcome influence drew closer round them all. They discussed Binovitch and his astonishing performance. Pretty little Vera listened with large and troubled eyes, though saying nothing. The Arab waiter had put out the lights in the corridor, and only a solitary cluster burned now above their heads, leaving their faces in shadow. In the distance the clicking of the billiard-balls still continued.

"It was not play; it was real," exclaimed Minski vehemently. "I can catch wolves," he blurted; "but birds — ugh! — and human birds!" He was half inarticulate. He had witnessed something he could not understand, and it had touched instinctive terror in him. "It was the way he leaped that put the wolf first into my mind, only it was not a wolf at all." The others agreed and disagreed. "It was play at first, but it was reality at the end," another whispered; "and it was no animal he mimicked, but a bird, and a bird of prey at that!"

Vera thrilled. In the Russian woman hides that touch of savagery which loves to be caught, mastered, swept helplessly away, captured utterly and deliciously by the one strong enough to do it thoroughly. She left her chair and sat down beside an older woman in the party, who took her arm quietly at once. Her little face wore a perplexed expression, mournful, yet somehow wild. It was clear that Binovitch was not indifferent to her.

"It's become an *idée fixe* with him," this older woman said. "The bird idea lives in his mind. He lives it in his imagination. Ever since that time at Edfu, when he pretended to worship the great stone falcons outside the temple — the Horus figures — he's been full of it." She stopped. The way Binovitch had behaved at Edfu was better left unmentioned at the moment, perhaps. A slight shiver ran round the listening group, each one waiting for some one else to focus their emotion, and so explain it by saying the convincing thing. Only no one ventured. Then Vera abruptly gave a little jump.

"Hark!" she exclaimed, in a staccato whisper, speaking for the first time. She sat bolt upright. She was listening. "Hark!" she repeated. "There it is again, but nearer than before. It's coming closer. I hear it." She trembled. Her voice, her manner, above all her great staring eyes, startled everybody. No one spoke for several seconds; all listened. The clicking of the billiard-balls had ceased. The halls and corridors lay in darkness, and gloom was over the big hotel. Everybody was in bed.

"Hear what?" asked the older woman soothingly, yet with a perceptible quaver in her voice, too. She was aware that the girl's arm shook upon her own.

"Do you not hear it, too?" the girl whispered.

All listened without speaking. All watched her paling face. Something wonderful, yet half terrible, seemed in the air about them. There was a dull murmur, audible, faint, remote, its direction hard to tell. It had come suddenly from nowhere. They shivered. That strange racial thrill again passed into the group, unwelcome, unexplained. It was aboriginal; it belonged to the unconscious primitive mind, half childish, half terrifying.

"*What* do you hear?" her brother asked angrily — the irritable anger of nervous fear.

"When he came at me," she answered very low, "I heard it first. I hear it now again. Listen! He's coming."

And at that minute, out of the dark mouth of the corridor, emerged two human figures, Plitzinger and Binovitch. Their game was over: they were going up to bed. They passed the open door of the card-room. But Binovitch was being half dragged, half restrained, for he was apparently attempting to run down the passage with flying, dancing leaps. He bounded. It was like a huge bird trying to rise for flight, while his companion kept him down by force upon the earth. As they entered the strip of light, Plitzinger changed his own position, placing himself swiftly between his companion and the group in the dark corner of the room. He hurried Binovitch along as though he sheltered him from view. They passed into the shadows down the passage. They disappeared. And every one looked significantly, questioningly, at his neighbour, though at first saying no word. It seemed that a curious disturbance of the air had followed them audibly.

Vera was the first to open her lips. “You heard it *then*,” she said breathlessly, her face whiter than the ceiling.

“Damn!” exclaimed her brother furiously. “It was wind against the outside walls — wind in the desert. The sand is driving.”

Vera looked at him. She shrank closer against the side of the older woman, whose arm was tight about her.

“It was *not* wind,” she whispered simply. She paused. All waited uneasily for the completion of her sentence. They stared into her face like peasants who expected a miracle.

“Wings,” she whispered. “It was the sound of enormous wings.”

* * *

And at four o’clock in the morning, when they all returned exhausted from their excursion into the desert, little Binovitch was sleeping soundly and peacefully in his bed. They passed his door on tiptoe. But he did not hear them. He was dreaming. His spirit was at Edfu, experiencing with that ancient deity who was master of all flying life those strange enjoyments upon which his own troubled human heart was passionately set. Safe with that mighty falcon whose powers his lips had scorned a few hours before, his soul, released in vivid dream, went sweetly flying. It was amazing, it was gorgeous. He skimmed the Nile at lightning speed. Dashing down headlong from the height of the great Pyramid, he chased with faultless accuracy a little dove that sought vainly to hide from his terrific pursuit beneath the palm trees. For what he loved must worship where he worshipped, and the majesty of those tremendous effigies had fired his imagination to the creative point where expression was imperative.

Then suddenly, at the very moment of delicious capture, the dream turned horrible, becoming awful with the nightmare touch. The sky lost all its blue and sunshine. Far, far below him the little dove enticed him into nameless depths, so that he flew faster and faster, yet never fast enough to overtake it. Behind him came a great thing down the air, black, hovering, with gigantic wings outstretched. It had terrific eyes, and the beating of its feathers stole his wind away. It followed him, crowding space. He was aware of a colossal beak, curved like a scimitar and pointed wickedly like a tooth of iron. He dropped. He faltered. He tried to scream.

Through empty space he fell, caught by the neck. The huge spectral falcon was upon him. The talons were in his heart. And in sleep he remembered then that he had cursed. He recalled his reckless language. The curse of the ignorant is meaningless; that of the worshipper is real. This attack was on his soul. He had invoked it. He realised next, with a touch of ghastly horror, that the dove he chased was, after all, the bait that had lured him purposely to destruction, and awoke with a suffocating terror upon him, and his entire body bathed in icy perspiration. Outside the open window he heard a sound of wings retreating with powerful strokes into the surrounding darkness of the sky.

The nightmare made its impression upon Binovitch’s impressionable and dramatic temperament. It aggravated his tendencies. He related it next day to Mme. de Drühn, the friend of Vera, telling it with that somewhat boisterous laughter some minds use to disguise less kind emotions. But he received no encouragement. The mood of the previous night was not recoverable; it was already ancient history. Russians never make the banal mistake of repeating a sensation till it is exhausted; they hurry on to novelties. Life flashes and rushes with them, never standing still for exposure before the cameras of their minds. Mme. de Drühn, however, took the trouble to mention the matter to Plitzinger, for Plitzinger, like Freud of Vienna, held that dreams revealed subconscious tendencies which sooner or later must betray themselves in action.

“Thank you for telling me,” he smiled politely, “but I have already heard it from him.” He watched her eyes for a moment, really examining her soul.

"Binovitch, you see," he continued, apparently satisfied with what he saw, "I regard as that rare phenomenon — a genius without an outlet. His spirit, intensely creative, finds no adequate expression. His power of production is enormous and prolific; yet he accomplishes nothing." He paused an instant. "Binovitch, therefore, is in danger of poisoning — himself." He looked steadily into her face, as a man who weighs how much he may confide. "Now," he continued, "*if* we can find an outlet for him, a field wherein his bursting imaginative genius can produce results — above all, *visible* results" — he shrugged his shoulders— "the man is saved. Otherwise" — he looked extraordinarily impressive— "there is bound to be sooner or later — —"

"Madness?" she asked very quietly.

"An explosion, let us say," he replied gravely. "For instance, take this Horus obsession of his, quite wrong archæologically though it is. *Au fond* it is megalomania of a most unusual kind. His passionate interest, his love, his worship of birds, wholesome enough in itself, finds no satisfying outlet. A man who *really* loves birds neither keeps them in cages nor shoots them nor stuffs them. What, then, can he do? The commonplace bird-lover observes them through glasses, studies their habits, then writes a book about them. But a man like Binovitch, overflowing with this intense creative power of mind and imagination, is not content with that. He wants to know them from within. He wants to feel what they feel, to live their life. He wants to *become* them. You follow me? Not quite. Well, he seeks to be identified with the object of his sacred, passionate adoration. All genius seeks to know the thing itself from its own point of view. It desires union. That tendency, unrecognised by himself, perhaps, and therefore subconscious, hides in his very soul." He paused a moment. "And the sudden sight of those majestic figures at Edfu — that crystallisation of his *idée fixe* in granite — took hold of this excess in him, so to speak — and is now focusing it toward some definite act. Binovitch sometimes — feels himself a bird! You noticed what occurred last night?"

She nodded; a slight shiver passed over her.

"A most curious performance," she murmured; "an exhibition I never want to see again."

"The most curious part," replied the doctor coolly, "was its truth."

“Its truth!” she exclaimed beneath her breath. She was frightened by something in his voice and by the uncommon gravity in his eyes. It seemed to arrest her intelligence. She felt upon the edge of things beyond her. “You mean that Binovitch did for a moment — hang — in the air?” The other verb, the right one, she could not bring herself to use.

The great man’s face was enigmatical. He talked to her sympathy, perhaps, rather than to her mind.

“Real genius,” he said smilingly, “is as rare as talent, even great talent, is common. It means that the personality, if only for one second, becomes everything; becomes the universe; becomes the soul of the world. It gets the flash. It is identified with the universal life. Being everything and everywhere, all is possible to it — in that second of vivid realisation. It can brood with the crystal, grow with the plant, leap with the animal, fly with the bird: genius unifies all three. That is the meaning of ‘creative.’ It is faith. Knowing it, you can pass through fire and not be burned, walk on water and not sink, move a mountain, fly. Because you *are* fire, water, earth, air. Genius, you see, is madness in the magnificent sense of being superhuman. Binovitch has it.”

He broke off abruptly, seeing he was not understood. Some great enthusiasm in him he deliberately suppressed.

“The point is,” he resumed, speaking more carefully, “that we must try to lead this passionate constructive genius of the man into some human channel that will absorb it, and therefore render it harmless.”

“He loves Vera,” the woman said, bewildered, yet seizing this point correctly.

“But would he marry her?” asked Plitzinger at once.

“He is already married.”

The doctor looked steadily at her a moment, hesitating whether he should utter all his thought.

“In that case,” he said slowly after a pause, “it is better he or she should leave.”

His tone and manner were exceedingly impressive.

“You mean there’s danger?” she asked.

“I mean, rather,” he replied earnestly, “that this great creative flood in him, so curiously focused now upon his Horus-falcon-bird idea, may result in some act of violence — —”

“Which would be madness,” she said, looking hard at him.

“Which would be disastrous,” he corrected her. And then he added slowly: “Because in the mental moment of immense creation he might overlook material laws.”

* * *

The costume ball two nights later was a great success. Palazov was a Bedouin, and Khilkoff an Apache; Mme. de Drühn wore a national head-dress; Minski looked almost natural as Don Quixote; and the entire Russian “set” was cleverly, if somewhat extravagantly, dressed. But Binovitch and Vera were the most successful of all the two hundred dancers who took part. Another figure, a big man dressed as a Pierrot, also claimed exceptional attention, for though the costume was commonplace enough, there was something of dignity in his appearance that drew the eyes of all upon him. But he wore a mask, and his identity was not discoverable.

It was Binovitch and Vera, however, who must have won the prize, if prize there had been, for they not only looked their parts, but acted them as well. The former in his dark grey feather tunic, and his falcon mask, complete even to the brown hooked beak and tufted talons, looked fierce and splendid. The disguise was so admirable, yet so entirely natural, that it was uncommonly seductive. Vera, in blue and gold, a charming head-dress of a dove upon her loosened hair, and a pair of little dove-pale wings fluttering from her shoulders, her tiny twinkling feet and slender ankles well visible, too, was equally successful and admired. Her large and timid eyes, her flitting movements, her light and dainty way of dancing — all added touches that made the picture perfect.

How Binovitch contrived his dress remained a mystery, for the layers of wings upon his back were real; the large black kites that haunt the Nile, soaring in their hundreds over Cairo and the bleak Mokattam Hills, had furnished them. He had procured them none knew how. They measured four feet across from tip to tip; they swished and rustled as he swept along; they were true falcons’ wings. He danced with Nautch-girls and Egyptian princesses and Rumanian Gipsies; he danced well, with beauty, grace, and lightness. But with Vera he did not dance at all; with her he simply flew. A kind of passionate abandon was in him as he skimmed the floor with her in a way that made everybody turn to watch them. They seemed to leave the ground together. It was delightful, an amazing sight; but it was peculiar. The strangeness of it was on many lips. Somehow its queer extravagance communicated itself to the entire ball-room. They became the centre of observation. There were whispers.

"There's that extraordinary bird-man! Look! He goes by like a hawk. And he's always after that dove-girl. How marvellously he does it! It's rather awful. Who is he? I don't envy *her*."

People stood aside when he rushed past. They got out of his way. He seemed forever pursuing Vera, even when dancing with another partner. Word passed from mouth to mouth. A kind of telepathic interest was established everywhere. It was a shade too real sometimes, something unduly earnest in the chasing wildness, something unpleasant. There was even alarm.

"It's rowdy; I'd rather not see it; it's quite disgraceful," was heard. "*I* think it's horrible; you can see she's terrified."

And once there was a little scene, trivial enough, yet betraying this reality that many noticed and disliked. Binovitch came up to claim a dance, programme clutched in his great tufted claws, and at the same moment the big Pierrot appeared abruptly round the corner with a similar claim. Those who saw it assert he had been waiting, and came on purpose, and that there was something protective and authoritative in his bearing. The misunderstanding was ordinary enough — both men had written her name against the dance — but "No. 13, Tango" also included the supper interval, and neither Hawk nor Pierrot would give way. They were very obstinate. Both men wanted her. It was awkward.

"The Dove shall decide between us," smiled the Hawk politely, yet his taloned fingers working nervously. Pierrot, however, more experienced in the ways of dealing with women, or more bold, said suavely:

"I am ready to abide by her decision" — his voice poorly cloaked this aggravating authority, as though he had the right to her— "only I engaged this dance before his Majesty Horus appeared upon the scene at all, and therefore it is clear that Pierrot has the right of way.”

At once, with a masterful air, he took her off. There was no withstanding him. He meant to have her and he got her. She yielded meekly. They vanished among the maze of coloured dancers, leaving the Hawk, disconsolate and vanquished, amid the titters of the onlookers. His swiftness, as against this steady power, was of no avail.

It was then that the singular phenomenon was witnessed first. Those who saw it affirm that he changed absolutely into the part he played. It was dreadful; it was wicked. A frightened whisper ran about the rooms and corridors:

“An extraordinary thing is in the air!”

Some shrank away, while others flocked to see. There were those who swore that a curious, rushing sound was audible, the atmosphere visibly disturbed and shaken; that a shadow fell upon the spot the couple had vacated; that a cry was heard, a high, wild, searching cry: “Horus! bright deity of wind,” it began, then died away. One man was positive that the windows had been opened and that something had flown in. It was the obvious explanation. The thing spread horribly. As in a fire-panic, there was consternation and excitement. Confusion caught the feet of all the dancers. The music fumbled and lost time. The leading pair of tango dancers halted and looked round. It seemed that everybody pressed back, hiding, shuffling, eager to see, yet more eager not to be seen, as though something dangerous, hostile, terrible, had broken loose. In rows against the wall they stood. For a great space had made itself in the middle of the ball-room, and into this empty space appeared suddenly the Pierrot and the Dove.

It was like a challenge. A sound of applause, half voices, half clapping of gloved hands, was heard. The couple danced exquisitely into the arena. All stared. There was an impression that a set piece had been prepared, and that this was its beginning. The music again took heart. Pierrot was strong and dignified, no whit nonplussed by this abrupt publicity. The Dove, though faltering, was deliciously obedient. They danced together like a single outline. She was captured utterly. And to the man who needed her the sight was naturally agonizing — the protective way the Pierrot held her, the right and strength of it, the mastery, the complete possession.

"He's got her!" some one breathed too loud, uttering the thought of all. "Good thing it's not the Hawk!"

And, to the absolute amazement of the throng, this sight was then apparent. A figure dropped through space. That high, shrill cry again was heard:

"Feather my soul ... to know thy awful swiftness!"

Its singing loveliness touched the heart, its appealing, passionate sweetness was marvellous, as from the gallery this figure of a man, dressed as a strong, dark bird, shot down with splendid grace and ease. The feathers swept; the swings spread out as sails that take the wind. Like a hawk that darts with unerring power and aim upon its prey, this thing of mighty wings rushed down into the empty space where the two danced. Observed by all, he entered, swooping beautifully, stretching his wings like any eagle. He dropped. He fixed his point of landing with consummate skill close beside the astonished dancers. He landed.

It happened with such swiftness it brought the dazzle and blindness as when lightning strikes. People in different parts of the room saw different details; a few saw nothing at all after the first startling shock, closing their eyes, or holding their arms before their faces as in self-protection. The touch of panic fear caught the entire room. The nameless thing that all the evening had been vaguely felt was come. It had suddenly materialised.

For this incredible thing occurred in the full blaze of light upon the open floor. Binovitch, grown in some sense formidable, opened his dark, big wings about the girl. The long grey feathers moved, causing powerful draughts of wind that made a rushing sound. An aspect of the terrible was about him, like an emanation. The great beaked head was poised to strike, the tufted claws were raised like fingers that shut and opened, and the whole presentment of his amazing figure focused in an attitude of attack that was magnificent and terrible. No one who saw it doubted. Yet there were those who swore that it was not Binovitch at all, but that another outline, monstrous and shadowy, towered above him, draping his lesser proportions with two colossal wings of darkness. That some touch of strange divinity lay in it may be claimed, however confused the wild descriptions afterward. For many lowered their heads and bowed their shoulders. There was terror. There was also awe. The onlookers swayed as though some power passed over them through the air.

A sound of wings was certainly in the room.

Then some one screamed; a shriek broke high and clear; and emotion, ordinary human emotion, unaccustomed to terrific things, swept loose. The Hawk and Vera flew. Beaten back against the wall as by a stroke of whirlwind, the Pierrot staggered. He watched them go. Out of the lighted room they flew, out of the crowded human atmosphere, out of the heat and artificial light, the walled-in, airless halls that were a cage. All this they left behind. They seemed things of wind and air, made free happily of another element. Earth held them not. Toward the open night they raced with this extraordinary lightness as of birds, down the long corridor and on to the southern terrace, where great coloured curtains were hung suspended from the columns. A moment they were visible. Then the fringe of one huge curtain, lifted by the wind, showed their dark outline for a second against the starry sky. There was a cry, a leap. The curtain flapped again and closed. They vanished. And into the ball-room swept the cold draught of night air from the desert.

But three figures instantly were close upon their heels. The throng of half-dazed, half-stupefied onlookers, it seemed, projected them as though by some explosive force. The general mass held back, but, like projectiles, these three flung themselves after the fugitives down the corridor at high speed — the Apache, Don Quixote, and, last of them, the Pierrot. For Khilkoff, the brother, and Baron Minski, the man who caught wolves alive, had been for some time keenly on the watch, while Dr. Plitzinger, reading the symptoms clearly, never far away, had been faithfully observant of every movement. His mask tossed aside, the great psychiatrist was now recognised by all. They reached the parapet just as the curtain flapped back heavily into place; the next second all three were out of sight behind it. Khilkoff was first, however, urged forward at frantic speed by the warning words the doctor had whispered as they ran. Some thirty yards beyond the terrace was the brink of the crumbling cliff on which the great hotel was built, and there was a drop of sixty feet to the desert floor below. Only a low stone wall marked the edge.

Accounts varied. Khilkoff, it seems, arrived in time — in the nick of time — to seize his sister, virtually hovering on the brink. He heard the loose stones strike the sand below. There was no struggle, though it appears she did not thank him for his interference at first. In a sense she was beside —

outside — herself. And he did a characteristic thing: he not only brought her back into the ball-room, but he *danced* her back. It was admirable. Nothing could have calmed the general excitement better. The pair of them danced in together as though nothing was amiss. Accustomed to the strenuous practice of his Cossack regiment, this young cavalry officer's muscles were equal to the semi-dead weight in his arms. At most the onlookers thought her tired, perhaps. Confidence was restored — such is the psychology of a crowd — and in the middle of a thrilling Viennese waltz he easily smuggled her out of the room, administered brandy, and got her up to bed. The absence of the Hawk, meanwhile, was hardly noticed; comments were made and then forgotten; it was Vera in whom the strange, anxious sympathy had centred. And, with her obvious safety, the moment of primitive, childish panic passed away. Don Quixote, too, was presently seen dancing gaily as though nothing untoward had happened; supper intervened; the incident was over; it had melted into the general wildness of the evening's irresponsibility. The fact that Pierrot did not appear again was noticed by no single person.

But Dr. Plitzinger was otherwise engaged, his heart and mind and soul all deeply exercised. A death-certificate is not always made out quite so simply as the public thinks. That Binovitch had died of suffocation in his swift descent through merely sixty feet of air was not conceivable; yet that his body lay so neatly placed upon the desert after such a fall was stranger still. It was not crumpled, it was not torn; no single bone was broken, no muscle wrenched; there was no bruise. There was no indenture in the sand. The figure lay sidewise as though in sleep, no sign of violence visible anywhere, the dark wings folded as a great bird folds them when it creeps away to die in loneliness. Beneath the Horus mask the face was smiling. It seemed he had floated into death upon the element he loved. And only Vera had seen the enormous wings that, hovering invitingly above the dark abyss, bore him so softly into another world. Plitzinger, that is, saw them, too, but he said firmly that they belonged to the big black falcons that haunt the Mokattam Hills and roost upon these ridges, close beside the hotel, at night. Both he and Vera, however, agreed on one thing: the high, sharp cry in the air above them, wild and plaintive, was certainly the black kite's cry — the note of the falcon that passionately seeks its mate. It was the pause of a second, when she stood to listen, that made her rescue possible. A moment later and she, too, would have flown to death with Binovitch.

IV

INITIATION

A FEW YEARS ago, on a Black Sea steamer heading for the Caucasus, I fell into conversation with an American. He mentioned that he was on his way to the Baku oilfields, and I replied that I was going up into the mountains. He looked at me questioningly a moment. “Your first trip?” he asked with interest. I said it was. A conversation followed; it was continued the next day, and renewed the following day, until we parted company at Batoum. I don’t know why he talked so freely to me in particular. Normally, he was a taciturn, silent man. We had been fellow travellers from Marseilles, but after Constantinople we had the boat pretty much to ourselves. What struck me about him was his vehement, almost passionate, love of natural beauty — in seas and woods and sky, but above all in mountains. It was like a religion in him. His taciturn manner hid deep poetic feeling.

And he told me it had not always been so with him. A kind of friendship sprang up between us. He was a New York business man — buying and selling exchange between banks — but was English born. He had gone out thirty years before, and become naturalised. His talk was exceedingly “American,” slangy, and almost Western. He said he had roughed it in the West for a year or two first. But what he chiefly talked about was mountains. He said it was in the mountains an unusual experience had come to him that had opened his eyes to many things, but principally to the beauty that was now everything to him, and to the — insignificance of death.

He knew the Caucasus well where I was going. I think that was why he was interested in me and my journey. “Up there,” he said, “you’ll feel things — and maybe find out things you never knew before.”

“What kind of things?” I asked.

“Why, for one,” he replied with emotion and enthusiasm in his voice, “that living and dying ain’t either of them of much account. That if you know Beauty, I mean, and Beauty is in your life, you live on in it and with it for others — even when you’re dead.”

The conversation that followed is too long to give here, but it led to his telling me the experience in his own life that had opened his eyes to the truth of what he said. “Beauty is imperishable,” he declared, “and if you live with it, why, you’re imperishable too!”

The story, as he told it verbally in his curious language, remains vividly in my memory. But he had written it down, too, he said. And he gave me the written account, with the remark that I was free to hand it on to others if I “felt that way.” He called it “Initiation.” It runs as follows.

1

In my own family this happened, for Arthur was my nephew. And a remote Alpine valley was the place. It didn’t seem to me in the least suitable for such occurrences, except that it was Catholic, and the “Church,” I understand — at least, scholars who ought to know have told me so — has subtle Pagan origins incorporated unwittingly in its observations of certain Saints’ Days, as well as in certain ceremonials. All this kind of thing is Dutch to me, a form of poetry or superstition, for I am interested chiefly in the buying and selling of exchange, with an office in New York City, just off Wall Street, and only come to Europe now occasionally for a holiday. I like to see the dear old musty cities, and go to the Opera, and take a motor run through Shakespeare’s country or round the Lakes, get in touch again with London and Paris at the Ritz Hotels — and then back again to the greatest city on earth, where for years now I’ve been making a good thing out of it. Repton and Cambridge, long since forgotten, had their uses. They were all right enough at the time. But I’m now “on the make,” with a good fat partnership, and have left all that truck behind me.

My half-brother, however — he was my senior and got the cream of the family wholesale chemical works — has stuck to the trade in the Old Country, and is making probably as much as I am. He approved my taking the chance that offered, and is only sore now because his son, Arthur, is on the stupid side. He agreed that finance suited my temperament far better than drugs and chemicals, though he warned me that all American finance was speculative and therefore dangerous. “Arthur is getting on,” he said in his last letter, “and will some day take the director’s place you would be in now had you cared to stay. But he’s a plodder, rather.” That meant, I knew, that Arthur was a fool. Business, at any rate, was not suited to his temperament. Five years ago, when I came home with a month's holiday to be used in working up connections in English banking circles, I saw the boy. He was fifteen years of age at the time, a delicate youth, with an artist's dreams in his big blue eyes, if my memory goes for anything, but with a tangle of yellow hair and features of classical beauty that would have made half the young girls of my New York set in love with him, and a choice of heiresses at his disposal when he wanted them.

I have a clear recollection of my nephew then. He struck me as having grit and character, but as being wrongly placed. He had his grandfather's tastes. He ought to have been, like him, a great scholar, a poet, an editor of marvellous old writings in new editions. I couldn't get much out of the boy, except that he "liked the chemical business fairly," and meant to please his father by "knowing it thoroughly" so as to qualify later for his directorship. But I have never forgotten the evening when I caught him in the hall, staring up at his grandfather's picture, with a kind of light about his face, and the big blue eyes all rapt and tender (almost as if he had been crying) and replying, when I asked him what was up: "*That* was worth living for. He brought Beauty back into the world!"

"Yes," I said, "I guess that's right enough. He did. But there was no money in it to speak of."

The boy looked at me and smiled. He twigged somehow or other that deep down in me, somewhere below the money-making instinct, a poet, but a dumb poet, lay in hiding. "You know what I mean," he said. "It's in you too."

The picture was a copy — my father had it made — of the presentation portrait given to Baliol, and "the grandfather" was celebrated in his day for the translations he made of Anacreon and Sappho, of Homer, too, if I remember rightly, as well as for a number of classical studies and essays that he wrote. A lot of stuff like that he did, and made a name at it too. His *Lives of the Gods* went into six editions. They said — the big critics of his day — that he was "a poet who wrote no poetry, yet lived it passionately in the spirit of old-world, classical Beauty," and I know he was a wonderful fellow in his way and made the dons and schoolmasters all sit up. We're proud of him all right. After twenty-five years of successful "exchange" in New York City, I confess I am unable to appreciate all that, feeling more in touch with the commercial and financial spirit of the age, progress, development and the rest. But, still, I'm not ashamed of the classical old boy, who seems to have been a good deal of a Pagan, judging by the records we have kept. However, Arthur peering up at that picture in the dusk, his eyes half moist with emotion, and his voice gone positively shaky, is a thing I never have forgotten. He stimulated my curiosity uncommonly. It stirred something deep down in me that I hardly cared to acknowledge on Wall Street — something burning.

And the next time I saw him was in the summer of 1910, when I came to Europe for a two months' look around — my wife at Newport with the children — and hearing that he was in Switzerland, learning a bit of French to help him in the business, I made a point of dropping in upon him just to see how he was shaping generally and what new kinks his mind had taken on. There was something in Arthur I never could quite forget. Whenever his face came into my mind I began to think. A kind of longing came over me — a desire for Beauty, I guess, it was. It made me dream.

I found him at an English tutor's — a lively old dog, with a fondness for the cheap native wines, and a financial interest in the tourist development of the village. The boys learnt French in the mornings, possibly, but for the rest of the day were free to amuse themselves exactly as they pleased and without a trace of supervision — provided the parents footed the bills without demur.

This suited everybody all round; and as long as the boys came home with an accent and a vocabulary, all was well. For myself, having learned in New York to attend strictly to my own business — exchange between different countries with a profit — I did not deem it necessary to exchange letters and opinions with my brother — with no chance of profit anywhere. But I got to know Arthur, and had a queer experience of my own into the bargain. Oh, there was profit in it for me. I'm drawing big dividends to this day on the investment.

I put up at the best hotel in the village, a one-horse show, differing from the other inns only in the prices charged for a lot of cheap decoration in the dining-room, and went up to surprise my nephew with a call the first thing after dinner. The tutor's house stood some way back from the narrow street, among fields where there were more flowers than grass, and backed by a forest of fine old timber that stretched up several thousand feet to the snow. The snow at least was visible, peeping out far overhead just where the dark line of forest stopped; but in reality, I suppose, that was an effect of foreshortening, and whole valleys and pastures intervened between the trees and the snow-fields. The sunset, long since out of the valley, still shone on those white ridges, where the peaks stuck up like the teeth of a gigantic saw. I guess it meant five or six hours' good climbing to get up to them — and nothing to do when you got there. Switzerland, anyway, seemed a poor country, with its little bit of watch-making, sour wines, and every square yard hanging upstairs at an angle of 60 degrees used for hay. Picture postcards, chocolate and cheap tourists kept it going apparently, but I dare say it was all right enough to learn French in — and cheap as Hoboken to live in!

Arthur was out; I just left a card and wrote on it that I would be very pleased if he cared to step down to take luncheon with me at my hotel next day. Having nothing better to do, I strolled homewards by way of the forest.

Now what came over me in that bit of dark pine forest is more than I can quite explain, but I think it must have been due to the height — the village was 4,000 feet above sea-level — and the effect of the rarefied air upon my circulation. The nearest thing to it in my experience is rye whisky, the queer touch of wildness, of self-confidence, a kind of whooping rapture and the reckless sensation of being a tin god of sorts that comes from a lot of alcohol — a memory, please understand, of years before, when I thought it a grand thing to own the earth and paint the old town red. I seemed to walk on air, and there was a smell about those trees that made me suddenly — well, that took my mind clean out of its accustomed rut. It was just too lovely and wonderful for me to describe it. I had got well into the forest and lost my way a bit. The smell of an old-world garden wasn't in it. It smelt to me as if some one had just that minute turned out the earth all fresh and new. There was moss and tannin, a hint of burning, something between smoke and incense, say, and a fine clean odour of pitch-pine bark when the sun gets on it after rain — and a flavour of the sea thrown in for luck. That was the first I noticed, for I had never smelt anything half so good since my camping days on the coast of Maine. And I stood still to enjoy it. I threw away my cigar for fear of mixing things and spoiling it. "If that could be bottled," I said to myself, "it'd sell for two dollars a pint in every city in the Union!"

And it was just then, while standing and breathing it in, that I got the queer feeling of some one watching me. I kept quite still. Some one was moving near me. The sweat went trickling down my back. A kind of childhood thrill got hold of me.

It was very dark. I was not afraid exactly, but I was a stranger in these parts and knew nothing about the habits of the mountain peasants. There might be tough customers lurking around after dark on the chance of striking some guy of a tourist with money in his pockets. Yet, somehow, that wasn't the kind of feeling that came to me at all, for, though I had a pocket Browning at my hip, the notion of getting at it did not even occur to me. The sensation was new — a kind of lifting, exciting sensation that made my heart swell out with exhilaration. There was happiness in it. A cloud that *weighed* seemed to roll off my mind, same as that light-hearted mood when the office door is locked and I'm off on a two months' holiday — with gaiety and irresponsibility at the back of it. It was invigorating. I felt youth sweep over me.

I stood there, wondering what on earth was coming on me, and half expecting that any moment some one would come out of the darkness and show himself; and as I held my breath and made no movement at all the queer sensation grew stronger. I believe I even resisted a temptation to kick up my heels and dance, to let out a flying shout as a man with liquor in him does. Instead of this, however, I just kept dead still. The wood was black as ink all round me, too black to see the tree-trunks separately, except far below where the village lights came up twinkling between them, and the only way I kept the path was by the soft feel of the pine-needles that were thicker than a Brussels carpet. But nothing happened, and no one stirred. The idea that I was being watched remained, only there was no sound anywhere except the roar of falling water that filled the entire valley. Yet some one was very close to me in the darkness.

I can't say how long I might have stood there, but I guess it was the best part of ten minutes, and I remember it struck me that I had run up against a pocket of extra-rarefied air that had a lot of oxygen in it — oxygen or something similar — and that was the cause of my elation. The idea was nonsense, I have no doubt; but for the moment it half explained the thing to me. I realised it was all *natural* enough, at any rate — and so moved on. It took a longish time to reach the edge of the wood, and a footpath led me — oh, it was quite a walk, I tell you — into the village street again. I was both glad and sorry to get there. I kept myself busy thinking the whole thing over again. What caught me all of a heap was that million-dollar sense of beauty, youth, and happiness. Never in my born days had I felt anything to touch it. And it hadn't cost a cent!

Well, I was sitting there enjoying my smoke and trying to puzzle it all out, and the hall was pretty full of people smoking and talking and reading papers, and so forth, when all of a sudden I looked up and caught my breath with such a jerk that I actually bit my tongue. There was grandfather in front of my chair! I looked into his eyes. I saw him as clear and solid as the porter standing behind his desk across the lounge, and it gave me a touch of cold all down the back that I needn't forget unless I want to. He was looking into my face, and he had a cap in his hand, and he was speaking to me. It was my grandfather's picture come to life, only much thinner and younger and a kind of light in his eyes like fire.

"I beg your pardon, but you *are* — Uncle Jim, aren't you?"

And then, with another jump of my nerves, I understood.

"You, Arthur! Well, I'm jiggered. So it is. Take a chair, boy. I'm right glad you found me. Shake! Sit down." And I shook his hand and pushed a chair up for him. I was never so surprised in my life. The last time I set eyes on him he was a boy. Now he was a young man, and the very image of his ancestor.

He sat down, fingering his cap. He wouldn't have a drink and he wouldn't smoke. "All right," I said, "let's talk then. I've lots to tell you and I've lots to hear. How are you, boy?"

He didn't answer at first. He eyed me up and down. He hesitated. He was as handsome as a young Greek god.

"I say, Uncle Jim," he began presently, "it *was* you — just now — in the wood — wasn't it?" It made me start, that question put so quietly.

"I *have* just come through that wood up there," I answered, pointing in the direction as well as I could remember, "if that's what you mean. But why?

You weren't there, were you?" It gave me a queer sort of feeling to hear him say it. What in the name of heaven did he mean?

He sat back in his chair with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, that's all right then," he said, "if it *was* you. Did you see," he asked suddenly; "did you see — anything?"

"Not a thing," I told him honestly. "It was far too dark." I laughed. I fancied I twigged his meaning. But I was not the sort of uncle to come prying on him. Life must be dull enough, I remembered, in this mountain village.

But he didn't understand my laugh. He didn't mean what I meant.

And there came a pause between us. I discovered that we were talking different lingoes. I leaned over towards him.

"Look here, Arthur," I said in a lower voice, "what is it, and what do you mean? I'm all right, you know, and you needn't be afraid of telling me. What d'you mean by — did I see anything?"

We looked each other squarely in the eye. He saw he could trust me, and I saw — well, a whole lot of things, perhaps, but I felt chiefly that he liked me and would tell me things later, all in his own good time. I liked him all the better for that too.

"I only meant," he answered slowly, "whether you really *saw* — anything?"

"No," I said straight, "I didn't see a thing, but, by the gods, I *felt* something."

He started. I started too. An astonishing big look came swimming over his fair, handsome face. His eyes seemed all lit up. He looked as if he'd just made a cool million in wheat or cotton.

"I knew — you were that sort," he whispered. "Though I hardly remembered what you looked like."

"Then what on earth was it?" I asked.

His reply staggered me a bit. "It was just that," he said— "the Earth!"

And then, just when things were getting interesting and promising a dividend, he shut up like a clam. He wouldn't say another word. He asked after my family and business, my health, what kind of crossing I'd had, and all the rest of the common stock. It fairly bowled me over. And I couldn't change him either.

I suppose in America we get pretty free and easy, and don't quite understand reserve. But this young man of half my age kept me in my place as easily as I might have kept a nervous customer quiet in my own office. He just refused to take me on. He was polite and cool and distant as you please, and when I got pressing sometimes he simply pretended he didn't understand. I could no more get him back again to the subject of the wood than a customer could have gotten me to tell him about the prospects of exchange being cheap or dear — when I didn't know myself but wouldn't let him see I didn't know. He was charming, he was delightful, enthusiastic and even affectionate; downright glad to see me, too, and to chin with me — but I couldn't draw him worth a cent. And in the end I gave up trying.

And the moment I gave up trying he let down a little — but only a very little.

"You'll stay here some time, Uncle Jim, won't you?"

"That's my idea," I said, "if I can see you, and you can show me round some."

He laughed with pleasure. "Oh, rather. I've got lots of time. After three in the afternoon I'm free till — any time you like. There's a lot to see," he added.

"Come along to-morrow then," I said. "If you can't take lunch, perhaps you can come just afterwards. You'll find me waiting for you — right here."

"I'll come at three," he replied, and we said good-night.

2

He turned up sharp at three, and I liked his punctuality. I saw him come swinging down the dusty road; tall, deep-chested, his broad shoulders a trifle high, and his head set proudly. He looked like a young chap in training, a thoroughbred, every inch of him. At the same time there was a touch of something a little too refined and delicate for a man, I thought. That was the poetic, scholarly vein in him, I guess — grandfather cropping out. This time he wore no cap. His thick light hair, not brushed back like the

London shop-boys, but parted on the side, yet untidy for all that, suited him exactly and gave him a touch of wildness.

“Well,” he asked, “what would you like to do, Uncle Jim? I’m at your service, and I’ve got the whole afternoon till supper at seven-thirty.” I told him I’d like to go through that wood. “All right,” he said, “come along. I’ll show you.” He gave me one quick glance, but said no more. “I’d like to see if I feel anything this time,” I explained. “We’ll locate the very spot, maybe.” He nodded.

“You know where I mean, don’t you?” I asked, “because you saw me there?” He just said yes, and then we started.

It was hot, and air was scarce. I remember that we went uphill, and that I realised there was considerable difference in our ages. We crossed some fields first — smothered in flowers so thick that I wondered how much grass the cows got out of it! — and then came to a sprinkling of fine young larches that looked as soft as velvet. There was no path, just a wild mountain side. I had very little breath on the steep zigzags, but Arthur talked easily — and talked mighty well, too: the light and shade, the colouring, and the effect of all this wilderness of lonely beauty on the mind. He kept all this suppressed at home in business. It was safety valves. I twigged *that*. It was the artist in him talking. He seemed to think there was nothing in the world but Beauty — with a big B all the time. And the odd thing was he took for granted that I felt the same. It was cute of him to flatter me that way. “Daulis and the lone Cephissian vale,” I heard; and a few moments later — with a sort of reverence in his voice like worship — he called out a great singing name: “*Astarte!*”

“Day is her face, and midnight is her hair,
And morning hours are but the golden stair
By which she climbs to Night.”

It was here first that a queer change began to grow upon me too.

“Steady on, boy! I’ve forgotten all my classics ages ago,” I cried.

He turned and gazed down on me, his big eyes glowing, and not a sign of perspiration on his skin.

"That's nothing," he exclaimed in his musical, deep voice. "You know it, or you'd never have felt things in this wood last night; and you wouldn't have wanted to come out with me *now*!"

"How?" I gasped. "How's that?"

"You've come," he continued quietly, "to the only valley in this artificial country that has atmosphere. This valley is *alive* — especially this end of it. There's superstition here, thank God! Even the peasants know things."

I stared at him. "See here, Arthur," I objected. "I'm not a Cath. And I don't know a thing — at least it's all dead in me and forgotten — about poetry or classics or your gods and pan — pantheism — in spite of grandfather — —"

His face turned like a dream face.

"Hush!" he said quickly. "Don't mention *him*. There's a bit of him in you as well as in me, and it was here, you know, he wrote — —"

I didn't hear the rest of what he said. A creep came over me. I remembered that this ancestor of ours lived for years in the isolation of some Swiss forest where he claimed — he used that setting for his writing — he had found the exiled gods, their ghosts, their beauty, their eternal essences — or something astonishing of that sort. I had clean forgotten it till this moment. It all rushed back upon me, a memory of my boyhood.

And, as I say, a creep came over me — something as near to awe as ever could be. The sunshine on that field of yellow daisies and blue forget-me-nots turned pale. That warm valley wind had a touch of snow in it. And, ashamed and frightened of my baby mood, I looked at Arthur, meaning to choke him off with all this rubbish — and then saw something in his eyes that scared me stiff.

I admit it. What's the use? There was an expression on his fine big face that made my blood go curdled. I got cold feet right there. It mastered me. In him, behind him, near him — blest if I know which, *through* him probably — came an enormous thing that turned me insignificant. It downed me utterly.

It was over in a second, the flash of a wing. I recovered instantly. No mere boy should come these muzzy tricks on me, scholar or no scholar. For the change in me was on the increase, and I shrank.

“See here, Arthur,” I said plainly once again, “I don’t know what your game is, but — there’s something queer up here I don’t quite get at. I’m only a business man, with classics and poetry all gone dry in me twenty years ago and more — —”

He looked at me so strangely that I stopped, confused.

“But, Uncle Jim,” he said as quietly as though we talked tobacco brands, “you needn’t be alarmed. It’s natural you should feel the place. You and I belong to it. We’ve both got *him* in us. You’re just as proud of him as I am, only in a different way.” And then he added, with a touch of disappointment: “I thought you’d like it. You weren’t afraid last night. You felt the beauty *then*.”

Flattery is a darned subtle thing at any time. To see him standing over me in that superior way and talking down at my poor business mind — well, it just came over me that I was laying my cards on the table a bit too early. After so many years of city life —— !

Anyway, I pulled myself together. “I was only kidding you, boy,” I laughed. “I feel this beauty just as much as you do. Only, I guess, you’re more accustomed to it than I am. Come on now,” I added with energy, getting upon my feet, “let’s push on and see the wood. I want to find that place again.”

He pulled me with a hand of iron, laughing as he did so. Gee! I wished I had his teeth, as well as the muscles in his arm. Yet I felt younger, somehow, too — youth flowed more and more into my veins. I had forgotten how sweet the winds and woods and flowers could be. Something melted in me. For it was Spring, and the whole world was singing like a dream. Beauty was creeping over me. I don’t know. I began to feel all big and tender and open to a thousand wonderful sensations. The thought of streets and houses seemed like death. ...

We went on again, not talking much; my breath got shorter and shorter, and he kept looking about him as though he expected something. But we passed no living soul, not even a peasant; there were no chalets, no cattle, no cattle shelters even. And then I realised that the valley lay at our feet in haze and that we had been climbing at least a couple of hours. “Why, last night I got home in twenty minutes at the outside," I said. He shook his head, smiling. "It seemed like that," he replied, "but you really took much longer. It was long after ten when I found you in the hall." I reflected a moment. "Now I come to think of it, you're right, Arthur. Seems curious, though, somehow." He looked closely at me. "I followed you all the way," he said.

"You followed me!"

"And you went at a good pace too. It was your feelings that made it seem so short — you were singing to yourself and happy as a dancing faun. We kept close behind you for a long way."

I think it was "we" he said, but for some reason or other I didn't care to ask.

"Maybe," I answered shortly, trying uncomfortably to recall what particular capers I had cut. "I guess that's right." And then I added something about the loneliness, and how deserted all this slope of mountain was. And he explained that the peasants were afraid of it and called it No Man's Land. From one year's end to another no human foot went up or down it; the hay was never cut; no cattle grazed along the splendid pastures; no chalet had even been built within a mile of the wood we slowly made for. "They're superstitious," he told me. "It was just the same a hundred years ago when *he* discovered it — there was a little natural cave on the edge of the forest where he used to sleep sometimes — I'll show it to you presently — but for generations this entire mountain-side has been undisturbed. You'll never meet a living soul in any part of it." He stopped and pointed above us to where the pine wood hung in mid-air, like a dim blue carpet. "It's just the place for Them, you see."

And a thrill of power went smashing through me. I can't describe it. It drenched me like a waterfall. I thought of Greece — Mount Ida and a thousand songs! Something in me — it was like the click of a shutter — announced that the "change" was suddenly complete. I was another man; or rather a deeper part of me took command. My very language showed it.

The calm of halcyon weather lay over all. Overhead the peaks rose clear as crystal; below us the village lay in a bluish smudge of smoke and haze, as though a great finger had rubbed them softly into the earth. Absolute loneliness fell upon me like a clap. From the world of human beings we seemed quite shut off. And there began to steal over me again the strange elation of the night before. ... We found ourselves almost at once against the edge of the wood.

It rose in front of us, a big wall of splendid trees, motionless as if cut out of dark green metal, the branches hanging stiff, and the crowd of trunks lost in the blue dimness underneath. I shaded my eyes with one hand, trying to peer into the solemn gloom. The contrast between the brilliant sunshine on the pastures and this region of heavy shadows blurred my sight.

“It’s like the entrance to another world,” I whispered.

“It is,” said Arthur, watching me. “We will go in. You shall pluck asphodel. ...”

And, before I knew it, he had me by the hand. We were advancing. We left the light behind us. The cool air dropped upon me like a sheet. There was a temple silence. The sun ran down behind the sky, leaving a marvellous blue radiance everywhere. Nothing stirred. But through the stillness there rose power, power that has no name, power that hides at the foundations somewhere — foundations that are changeless, invisible, everlasting. What do I mean? My mind grew to the dimensions of a planet. We were among the roots of life — whence issues that *one thing* in infinite guise that seeks so many temporary names from the protean minds of men.

“You shall pluck asphodel in the meadows this side of Erebus,” Arthur was chanting. “Hermes himself, the Psychopomp, shall lead, and Malahide shall welcome us.”

Malahide ...!

To hear him use that name, the name of our scholar-ancestor, now dead and buried close upon a century — the way he half chanted it — gave me the goose-flesh. I stopped against a tree-stem, thinking of escape. No words came to me at the moment, for I didn’t know what to say; but, on turning to find the bright green slopes just left behind, I saw only a crowd of trees and shadows hanging thick as a curtain — as though we had walked a mile. And it was a shock. The way out was lost. The trees closed up behind us like a tide.

“It’s all right,” said Arthur; “just keep an open mind and a heart alive with love. It has a shattering effect at first, but that will pass.” He saw I was afraid, for I shrank visibly enough. He stood beside me in his grey flannel suit, with his brilliant eyes and his great shock of hair, looking more like a column of light than a human being. “It’s all quite right and natural,” he repeated; “we have passed the gateway, and Hecate, who presides over gateways, will let us out again. Do not make discord by feeling fear. This is a pine wood, and pines are the oldest, simplest trees; they are true primitives. They are an open channel; and in a pine wood where no human life has ever been you shall often find gateways where Hecate is kind to such as us.”

He took my hand — he must have felt mine trembling, but his own was cool and strong and felt like silver — and led me forward into the depths of a wood that seemed to me quite endless. It felt endless, that is to say. I don’t know what came over me. Fear slipped away, and elation took its place. ... As we advanced over ground that seemed level, or slightly undulating, I saw bright pools of sunshine here and there upon the forest floor. Great shafts of light dropped in slantingly between the trunks. There was movement everywhere, though I never could see what moved. A delicious, scented air stirred through the lower branches. Running water sang not very far away. Figures I did not actually see; yet there were limbs and flowing draperies and flying hair from time to time, ever just beyond the pools of sunlight. ... Surprise went from me too. I was on air. The atmosphere of dream came round me, but a dream of something just hovering outside the world I knew — a dream wrought in gold and silver, with shining eyes, with graceful beckoning hands, and with voices that rang like bells of music. ... And the pools of light grew larger, merging one into another, until a delicate soft light shone equably throughout the entire forest. Into this zone of light we passed together. Then something fell abruptly at our feet, as though thrown down ... two marvellous, shining sprays of blossom such as I had never seen in all my days before!

“Asphodel!” cried my companion, stooping to pick them up and handing one to me. I took it from him with a delight I could not understand. “Keep it,” he murmured; “it is the sign that we are welcome. For Malahide has dropped these on our path.”

And at the use of that ancestral name it seemed that a spirit passed before my face and the hair of my head stood up. There was a sense of violent, unhappy contrast. A composite picture presented itself, then rushed away. What was it? My youth in England, music and poetry at Cambridge and my passionate love of Greek that lasted two terms at most, when Malahide's great books formed part of the curriculum. Over against this, then, the drag and smother of solid worldly business, the sordid weight of modern ugliness, the bitterness of an ambitious, over-striving life. And abruptly — beyond both pictures — a shining, marvellous Beauty that scattered stars beneath my feet and scarved the universe with gold. All this flashed before me with the utterance of that old family name. An alternative sprang up. There seemed some radical, elemental choice presented to me — to what I used to call my soul. My soul could take or leave it as it pleased. ...

I looked at Arthur moving beside me like a shaft of light. What had come over me? How had our walk and talk and mood, our quite recent everyday and ordinary view, our normal relationship with the things of the world — how had it all slipped into this? So insensibly, so easily, so naturally!

"Was it worth while?"

The question — *I* didn't ask it — jumped up in me of its own accord. Was "what" worth while? Why, my present life of commonplace and grubbing toil, of course; my city existence, with its meagre, unremunerative ambitions. Ah, it was this new Beauty calling me, this shining dream that lay beyond the two pictures I have mentioned. ... I did not argue it, even to myself. But I understood. There was a radical change in me. The buried poet, too long hidden, rushed into the air like some great singing bird.

I glanced again at Arthur moving along lightly by my side, half dancing almost in his brimming happiness. "Wait till you see Them," I heard him singing. "Wait till you hear the call of Artemis and the footsteps of her flying nymphs. Wait till Orion thunders overhead and Selene, crowned with the crescent moon, drives up the zenith in her white-horsed chariot. The choice will be beyond all question then ...!"

A great silent bird, with soft brown plumage, whirred across our path, pausing an instant as though to peep, then disappearing with a muted sound into an eddy of the wind it made. The big trees hid it. It was an owl. The same moment I heard a rush of liquid song come pouring through the forest with a gush of almost human notes, and a pair of glossy wings flashed past us, swerving upwards to find the open sky — blue-black, pointed wings.

“His favourites!” exclaimed my companion with clear joy in his voice. “They all are here! Athene’s bird, Procne and Philomela too! The owl — the swallow — and the nightingale! Tereus and Itys are not far away.” And the entire forest, as he said it, stirred with movement, as though that great bird’s quiet wings had waked the sea of ancient shadows. There were voices too — ringing, laughing voices, as though his words woke echoes that had been listening for it. For I heard sweet singing in the distance. The names he had used perplexed me. Yet even I, stranger as I was to such refined delights, could not mistake the passion of the nightingale and the dart of the eager swallow. That wild burst of music, that curve of swift escape, were unmistakable.

And I struck a stalwart tree-stem with my open hand, feeling the need of hearing, touching, sensing it. My link with known, remembered things was breaking. I craved the satisfaction of the commonplace. I got that satisfaction; but I got something more as well. For the trunk was round and smooth and comely. It was no dead thing I struck. Somehow it brushed me into intercourse with inanimate Nature. And next the desire came to hear my voice — my own familiar, high-pitched voice with the twang and accent the New World climate brings, so-called American:

“Exchange Place, Noo York City. I’m in that business, buying and selling of exchange between the banks of two civilised countries, one of them stoopid and old-fashioned, the other leading all creation ...!”

It was an effort; but I made it firmly. It sounded odd, remote, unreal.

“Sunlit woods and a wind among the branches”, followed close and sweet upon my words. But who, in the name of Wall Street, said it?

“England’s buying gold,” I tried again. “We’ve had a private wire. Cut in quick. First National is selling!”

Great-faced Hephæstus, how ridiculous! It was like saying, “I’ll take your scalp unless you give me meat.” It was barbaric, savage, centuries ago. Again there came another voice that caught up my own and turned it into common syntax. Some heady beauty of the Earth rose about me like a cloud.

“Hark! Night comes, with the dusk upon her eyelids. She brings those dreams that every dew-drop holds at dawn. Daughter of Thanatos and

Hypnos ...!”

But again — who said the words? It surely was not Arthur, my nephew Arthur, of To-day, learning French in a Swiss mountain village! I felt — well, what did I feel? In the name of the Stock Exchange and Wall Street, what was the cash surrender of amazing feelings?

3

And, turning to look at him, I made a discovery. I don’t know how to tell it quite; such shadowy marvels have never been my line of goods. He looked several things at once — taller, slighter, sweeter, but chiefly — it sounds so crazy when I write it down — grander is the word, I think. And all spread out with some power that flowed like Spring when it pours upon a landscape. Eternally young and glorious — young, I mean, in the sense of a field of flowers in the Spring looks young; and glorious in the sense the sky looks glorious at dawn or sunset. Something big shone through him like a storm, something that would go on for ever just as the Earth goes on, always renewing itself, something of gigantic life that in the human sense could never age at all — something the old gods had. But the figure, so far as there was any figure at all, was that old family picture come to life. Our great ancestor and Arthur were one being, and that one being was vaster than a million people. Yet it was Malahide I saw. ...

“They laid me in the earth I loved,” he said in a strange, thrilling voice like running wind and water, “and I found eternal life. I live now for ever in Their divine existence. I share the life that changes yet can never pass away.”

I felt myself rising like a cloud as he said it. A roaring beauty captured me completely. If I could tell it in honest newspaper language — the common language used in flats and offices — why, I guess I could patent a new meaning in ordinary words, a new power of expression, the thing that all the churches and poets and thinkers have been trying to say since the world began. I caught on to a fact so fine and simple that it knocked me silly to think I’d never realised it before. I had read it, yes; but now I *knew* it. The Earth, the whole bustling universe, was nothing after all but a visible production of eternal, living Powers — spiritual powers, mind you — that just happened to include the particular little type of strutting creature we called mankind. And these Powers, as seen in Nature, were the gods. It was our refusal of their grand appeal, so wild and sweet and beautiful, that caused “evil.” It was this barrier between ourselves and the rest of ...

My thoughts and feelings swept away upon the rising flood as the “figure” came upon me like a shaft of moonlight, melting the last remnant of opposition that was in me. I took my brain, my reason, chucking them aside for the futile little mechanism I suddenly saw them to be. In place of them came — oh, God, I hate to say it, for only nursery talk can get within a mile of it, and yet what I need is something simpler even than the words that children use. Under one arm I carried a whole forest breathing in the wind, and beneath the other a hundred meadows full of singing streams with golden marigolds and blue forget-me-nots along their banks. Upon my back and shoulders lay the clouded hills with dew and moonlight in their brimmed, capacious hollows. Thick in my hair hung the unaging powers that are stars and sunlight; though the sun was far away, it sweetened the currents of my blood with liquid gold. Breast and throat and face, as I advanced, met all the rivers of the world and all the winds of heaven, their strength and swiftness melting into me as light melts into everything it touches. And into my eyes passed all the radiant colours that weave the cloth of Nature as she takes the sun.

And this “figure,” pouring upon me like a burst of moonlight, spoke:

“They all are in you — air, and fire, and water. ...”

“And I — my feet stand — on the *Earth*,” my own voice interrupted, deep power lifting through the sound of it.

“The Earth!” He laughed gigantically. He spread. He seemed everywhere about me. He seemed a race of men. My life swam forth in waves of some immense sensation that issued from the mountain and the forest, then returned to them again. I reeled. I clutched at something in me that was slipping beyond control, slipping down a bank towards a deep, dark river flowing at my feet. A shadowy boat appeared, a still more shadowy outline at the helm. I was in the act of stepping into it. For the tree I caught at was only air. I couldn’t stop myself. I tried to scream.

“You have plucked asphodel,” sang the voice beside me, “and you shall pluck more. ...”

I slipped and slipped, the speed increasing horribly. Then something caught, as though a cog held fast and stopped me. I remembered my business in New York City.

“Arthur!” I yelled. “Arthur!” I shouted again as hard as I could shout. There was frantic terror in me. I felt as though I should never get back to myself again. Death!

The answer came in his normal voice: “Keep close to me. I know the way. ...”

The scenery dwindled suddenly; the trees came back. I was walking in the forest beside my nephew, and the moonlight lay in patches and little shafts of silver. The crests of the pines just murmured in a wind that scarcely stirred, and through an opening on our right I saw the deep valley clasped about the twinkling village lights. Towering in splendour the spectral snowfields hung upon the sky, huge summits guarding them. And Arthur took my arm — oh, solidly enough this time. Thank heaven, he asked no questions of me.

“There’s a smell of myrrh,” he whispered, “and we are very near the undying, ancient things.”

I said something about the resin from the trees, but he took no notice.

“It enclosed its body in an egg of myrrh,” he went on, smiling down at me; “then, setting it on fire, rose from the ashes with its life renewed. Once every five hundred years, you see — —”

“What did?” I cried, feeling that loss of self stealing over me again. And his answer came like a blow between the eyes:

“The Phœnix. They called it a bird, but, of course, the true ...”

“But my life’s insured in that,” I cried, for he had named the company that took large yearly premiums from me; “and I pay ...”

“Your life’s insured in *this*,” he said quietly, waving his arms to indicate the Earth. “Your love of Nature and your sympathy with it make you safe.” He gazed at me. There was a marvellous expression in his eyes. I understood why poets talked of stars and flowers in a human face. But behind the face crept back another look as well. There grew about his figure an indeterminate extension. The outline of Malahide again stirred through his own. A pale, delicate hand reached out to take my own. And something broke in me.

I was conscious of two things — a burst of joy that meant losing myself entirely, and a rush of terror that meant staying as I was, a small, painful, struggling item of individual life. Another spray of that awful asphodel fell fluttering through the air in front of my face. It rested on the earth against my feet. And Arthur — this weirdly changing Arthur — stooped to pick it for me. I kicked it with my foot beyond his reach ... then turned and ran as though the Furies of that ancient world were after me. I ran for my very life. How I escaped from that thick wood without banging my body to bits against the trees I can't explain. I ran from something I desired and yet feared. I leaped along in a succession of flying bounds. Each tree I passed turned of its own accord and flung after me until the entire forest followed. But I got out. I reached the open. Upon the sloping field in the full, clear light of the moon I collapsed in a panting heap. The Earth drew back with a great shuddering sigh behind me. There was this strange, tumultuous sound upon the night. I lay beneath the open heavens that were full of moonlight. I was myself — but there were tears in me. Beauty too high for understanding had slipped between my fingers. I had lost Malahide. I had lost the gods of Earth. ... Yet I had seen ... and felt. I had not lost all. Something remained that I could never lose again. ...

I don't know how it happened exactly, but presently I heard Arthur saying: "You'll catch your death of cold if you lie on that soaking grass," and felt his hand seize mine to pull me to my feet.

"I feel safer on earth," I believe I answered. And then he said: "Yes, but it's such a stupid way to die — a chill!"

4

I got up then, and we went downhill together towards the village lights. I danced — oh, I admit it — I sang as well. There was a flood of joy and power about me that beat anything I'd ever felt before. I didn't think or hesitate; there was no self-consciousness; I just let it rip for all there was, and if there had been ten thousand people there in front of me, I could have made them feel it too. That was the kind of feeling — power and confidence and a sort of raging happiness. I think I know what it was too. I say this soberly, with reverence ... all wool and no fading. There was a bit of

God in me, God's power that drives the Earth and pours through Nature — the imperishable Beauty expressed in those old-world nature-deities!

And the fear I'd felt was nothing but the little tickling point of losing my ordinary two-cent self, the dread of letting go, the shrinking before the plunge — what a fellow feels when he's falling in love, and hesitates, and tries to think it out and hold back, and is afraid to let the enormous tide flow in and drown him.

Oh, yes, I began to think it over a bit as we raced down the mountain-side that glorious night. I've read some in my day; my brain's all right; I've heard of dual personality and subliminal uprush and conversion — no new line of goods, all that. But somehow these stunts of the psychologists and philosophers didn't cut any ice with me just then, because I'd *experienced* what they merely *explained*. And explanation was just a bargain sale. The best things can't be explained at all. There's no real value in a bargain sale.

Arthur had trouble to keep up with me. We were running due east, and the Earth was turning, therefore, with us. We all three ran together at *her* pace — terrific! The moonlight danced along the summits, and the snow-fields flew like spreading robes, and the forests everywhere, far and near, hung watching us and booming like a thousand organs. There were uncaged winds about; you could hear them whistling among the precipices. But the great thing that I knew was — Beauty, a beauty of the common old familiar Earth, and a beauty that's stayed with me ever since, and given me joy and strength and a source of power and delight I'd never guessed existed before.

* * *

As we dropped lower into the thicker air of the valley I sobered down. Gradually the ecstasy passed from me. We slowed up a bit. The lights and the houses and the sight of the hotel where people were dancing in a stuffy ballroom, all this put blotting-paper on something that had been flowing.

Now you'll think this an odd thing too — but when we reached the village street, I just took Arthur's hand and shook it and said good-night and went up to bed and slept like a two-year-old till morning. And from that day to this I've never set eyes on the boy again.

Perhaps it's difficult to explain, and perhaps it isn't. I can explain it to myself in two lines — I was afraid to see him. I was afraid he might "explain." I was afraid he might explain "away." I just left a note — he never replied to it — and went off by a morning train. Can you understand that? Because if you can't you haven't understood this account I've tried to give of the experience Arthur gave me. Well — anyway — I'll just let it go at that.

Arthur's a director now in his father's wholesale chemical business, and I — well, I'm doing better than ever in the buying and selling of exchange between banks in New York City as before.

But when I said I was still drawing dividends on my Swiss investment, I meant it. And it's not "scenery." Everybody gets a thrill from "scenery." It's a darned sight more than that. It's those little wayward patches of blue on a cloudy day; those blue pools in the sky just above Trinity Church steeple when I pass out of Wall Street into Lower Broadway; it's the rustle of the sea-wind among the Battery trees; the wash of the waves when the Ferry's starting for Staten Island, and the glint of the sun far down the Bay, or dropping a bit of pearl into the old East River. And sometimes it's the strip of cloud in the west above the Jersey shore of the Hudson, the first star, the sickle of the new moon behind the masts and shipping. But usually it's something nearer, bigger, simpler than all or any of these. It's just the certainty that, when I hurry along the hard stone pavements from bank to bank, I'm walking on the — Earth. It's just that — *the Earth*!

V

A DESERT EPISODE

1

"BETTER PUT WRAPS on now. The sun's getting low," a girl said.

It was the end of a day's expedition in the Arabian Desert, and they were having tea. A few yards away the donkeys munched their *barsim*; beside them in the sand the boys lay finishing bread and jam. Immense, with gliding tread, the sun's rays slid from crest to crest of the limestone ridges that broke the huge expanse towards the Red Sea. By the time the tea-things were packed the sun hovered, a giant ball of red, above the Pyramids. It stood in the western sky a moment, looking out of its majestic hood across the sand. With a movement almost visible it leaped, paused, then leaped again. It seemed to bound towards the horizon; then, suddenly, was gone.

"It *is* cold, yes," said the painter, Rivers. And all who heard looked up at him because of the way he said it. A hurried movement ran through the merry party, and the girls were on their donkeys quickly, not wishing to be left to bring up the rear. They clattered off. The boys cried; the thud of sticks was heard; hoofs shuffled through the sand and stones. In single file the picnickers headed for Helouan, some five miles distant. And the desert closed up behind them as they went, following in a shadowy wave that never broke, noiseless, foamless, unstreaked, driven by no wind, and of a volume undiscoverable. Against the orange sunset the Pyramids turned deep purple. The strip of silvery Nile among its palm trees looked like rising mist. In the incredible Egyptian afterglow the enormous horizons burned a little longer, then went out. The ball of the earth — a huge round globe that bulged — curved visibly as at sea. It was no longer a flat expanse; it turned. Its splendid curves were realised.

"Better put wraps on; it's cold and the sun is low" — and then the curious hurry to get back among the houses and the haunts of men. No more was said, perhaps, than this, yet, the time and place being what they were, the mind became suddenly aware of that quality which ever brings a certain shrinking with it — vastness; and more than vastness: that which is endless because it is also beginningless — eternity. A colossal splendour stole upon the heart, and the senses, unaccustomed to the unusual stretch, reeled a little, as though the wonder was more than could be faced with comfort. Not all, doubtless, realised it, though to two, at least, it came with a staggering impact there was no withstanding. For, while the luminous greys and purples crept round them from the sandy wastes, the hearts of these two became aware of certain common things whose simple majesty is usually dulled by mere familiarity. Neither the man nor the girl knew for certain that the other felt it, as they brought up the rear together; yet the fact that each *did* feel it set them side by side in the same strange circle — and made them silent. They realised the immensity of a moment: the dizzy stretch of time that led up to the casual pinning of a veil; to the tightening of a stirrup strap; to the little speech with a companion; the roar of the vanished centuries that have ground mountains into sand and spread them over the floor of Africa; above all, to the little truth that they themselves existed amid the whirl of stupendous systems all delicately balanced as a spider's web — that they were *alive*.

For a moment this vast scale of reality revealed itself, then hid swiftly again behind the débris of the obvious. The universe, containing their two tiny yet important selves, stood still for an instant before their eyes. They looked at it — realised that they belonged to it. Everything moved and had its being, *lived* — here in this silent, empty desert even more actively than in a city of crowded houses. The quiet Nile, sighing with age, passed down towards the sea; there loomed the menacing Pyramids across the twilight; beneath them, in monstrous dignity, crouched that Shadow from whose eyes of battered stone proceeds the nameless thing that contracts the heart, then opens it again to terror; and everywhere, from towering monoliths as from secret tombs, rose that strange, long whisper which, defying time and distance, laughs at death. The spell of Egypt, which is the spell of immortality, touched their hearts.

Already, as the group of picnickers rode homewards now, the first stars twinkled overhead, and the peerless Egyptian night was on the way. There was hurry in the passing of the dusk. And the cold sensibly increased.

"So you did no painting after all," said Rivers to the girl who rode a little in front of him, "for I never saw you touch your sketch-book once."

They were some distance now behind the others; the line straggled; and when no answer came he quickened his pace, drew up alongside and saw that her eyes, in the reflection of the sunset, shone with moisture. But she turned her head a little, smiling into his face, so that the human and the non-human beauty came over him with an onset that was almost shock. Neither one nor other, he knew, were long for him, and the realisation fell upon him with a pang of actual physical pain. The acuteness, the hopelessness of the realisation, for a moment, were more than he could bear, stern of temper though he was, and he tried to pass in front of her, urging his donkey with resounding strokes. Her own animal, however, following the lead, at once came up with him.

"You felt it, perhaps, as I did," he said some moments later, his voice quite steady again. "The stupendous, everlasting thing — the — *life* behind it all." He hesitated a little in his speech, unable to find the substantive that could compass even a fragment of his thought. She paused, too, similarly inarticulate before the surge of incomprehensible feelings.

"It's — awful," she said, half laughing, yet the tone hushed and a little quaver in it somewhere. And her voice to his was like the first sound he had ever heard in the world, for the first sound a full-grown man heard in the world would be beyond all telling — magical. "I shall not try again," she continued, leaving out the laughter this time; "my sketch-book is a farce. For, to tell the truth" — and the next three words she said below her breath — "I dare not."

He turned and looked at her for a second. It seemed to him that the following wave had caught them up, and was about to break above her, too. But the big-brimmed hat and the streaming veil shrouded her features. He saw, instead, the Universe. He felt as though he and she had always, always been together, and always, always would be. Separation was inconceivable.

"It came so close," she whispered. "It — shook me!"

They were cut off from their companions, whose voices sounded far ahead. Her words might have been spoken by the darkness, or by some one who peered at them from within that following wave. Yet the fanciful phrase was better than any he could find. From the immeasurable space of time and distance men's hearts vainly seek to plumb, it drew into closer perspective a certain meaning that words may hardly compass, a formidable truth that belongs to that deep place where hope and doubt fight their incessant battle.

The awe she spoke of was the awe of immortality, of belonging to something that is endless and beginningless.

And he understood that the tears and laughter were one — caused by that spell which takes a little human life and shakes it, as an animal shakes its prey that later shall feed its blood and increase its power of growth. His other thoughts — really but a single thought — he had not the right to utter. Pain this time easily routed hope as the wave came nearer. For it was the wave of death that would shortly break, he knew, over him, but not over her. Him it would sweep with its huge withdrawal into the desert whence it came: her it would leave high upon the shores of life — alone. And yet the separation would somehow not be real. They were together in eternity even now. They were endless as this desert, beginningless as this sky ... immortal. The realisation overwhelmed. ...

The lights of Helouan seemed to come no nearer as they rode on in silence for the rest of the way. Against the dark background of the Mokattam Hills these fairy lights twinkled brightly, hanging in mid-air, but after an hour they were no closer than before. It was like riding towards the stars. It would take centuries to reach them. There were centuries in which to do so. Hurry has no place in the desert; it is born in streets. The desert stands still; to go fast in it is to go backwards. Now, in particular, its enormous, uncanny leisure was everywhere — in keeping with that mighty scale the sunset had made visible. His thoughts, like the steps of the weary animal that bore him, had no progress in them. The serpent of eternity, holding its tail in its own mouth, rose from the sand, enclosing himself, the stars — and her. Behind him, in the hollows of that shadowy wave, the procession of dynasties and conquests, the great series of gorgeous civilisations the mind calls Past, stood still, crowded with shining eyes and beckoning faces, still waiting to arrive. There is no death in Egypt. His own death stood so close that he could touch it by stretching out his hand, yet it seemed as much behind as in front of him. What man called a beginning was a trick. There was no such thing. He was with this girl — *now*, when Death waited so close for him — yet he had never really begun. Their lives ran always parallel. The hand he stretched to clasp approaching death caught instead in this girl’s shadowy hair, drawing her in with him to the centre where he breathed the eternity of the desert. Yet expression of any sort was as futile as it was unnecessary. To paint, to speak, to sing, even the slightest gesture of the soul, became a crude and foolish thing. Silence was here the truth. And they rode in silence towards the fairy lights.

Then suddenly the rocky ground rose up close before them; boulders stood out vividly with black shadows and shining heads; a flat-roofed house slid by; three palm trees rattled in the evening wind; beyond, a mosque and minaret sailed upwards, like the spars and rigging of some phantom craft; and the colonnades of the great modern hotel, standing upon its dome of limestone ridge, loomed over them. Helouan was about them before they knew it. The desert lay behind with its huge, arrested billow. Slowly, owing to its prodigious volume, yet with a speed that merged it instantly with the far horizon behind the night, this wave now withdrew a little. There was no hurry. It came, for the moment, no farther. Rivers knew. For he was in it to the throat. Only his head was above the surface. He still could breathe — and speak — and see. Deepening with every hour into an incalculable splendour, it waited.

2

In the street the foremost riders drew rein, and, two and two abreast, the long line clattered past the shops and cafés, the railway station and hotels, stared at by the natives from the busy pavements. The donkeys stumbled, blinded by the electric light. Girls in white dresses flitted here and there, arabîyehs rattled past with people hurrying home to dress for dinner, and the evening train, just in from Cairo, disgorged its stream of passengers. There were dances in several of the hotels that night. Voices rose on all sides. Questions and answers, engagements and appointments were made, little plans and plots and intrigues for seizing happiness on the wing — before the wave rolled in and caught the lot. They chattered gaily:

“You *are* going, aren’t you? You promised — —”

“Of course I am.”

“Then I’ll drive you over. May I call for you?”

“All right. Come at ten.”

“We shan’t have finished our bridge by then. Say ten-thirty.”

And eyes exchanged their meaning signals. The group dismounted and dispersed. Arabs standing under the lebbekh trees, or squatting on the pavements before their dim-lit booths, watched them with faces of gleaming bronze. Rivers gave his bridle to a donkey-boy, and moved across stiffly after the long ride to help the girl dismount. “You feel tired?” he asked gently. “It’s been a long day.” For her face was white as chalk, though the eyes shone brilliantly.

“Tired, perhaps,” she answered, “but exhilarated too. I should like to be there now. I should like to go back this minute — if some one would take me.” And, though she said it lightly, there was a meaning in her voice he apparently chose to disregard. It was as if she knew his secret. “Will you take me — some day soon?”

The direct question, spoken by those determined little lips, was impossible to ignore. He looked close into her face as he helped her from the saddle with a spring that brought her a moment half into his arms. “Some day — soon. I will,” he said with emphasis, “when you are — ready.” The pallor in her face, and a certain expression in it he had not known before, startled him. “I think you have been overdoing it,” he added, with a tone in which authority and love were oddly mingled, neither of them disguised.

“Like yourself,” she smiled, shaking her skirts out and looking down at her dusty shoes. “I’ve only a few days more — before I sail. We’re both in such a hurry, but you are the worst of the two.”

“Because my time is even shorter,” ran his horrified thought — for he said no word.

She raised her eyes suddenly to his, with an expression that for an instant almost convinced him she had guessed — and the soul in him stood rigidly at attention, urging back the rising fires. The hair had dropped loosely round the sun-burned neck. Her face was level with his shoulder. Even the glare of the street lights could not make her undesirable. But behind the gaze of the deep brown eyes another thing looked forth imperatively into his own. And he recognised it with a rush of terror, yet of singular exultation.

“It followed us all the way,” she whispered. “It came after us from the desert — where it *lives*.”

“At the houses,” he said equally low, “it stopped.” He gladly adopted her syncopated speech, for it helped him in his struggle to subdue those rising fires.

For a second she hesitated. “You mean, if we had not left so soon — when it turned cold. If we had not hurried — if we had remained a little longer — —”

He caught at her hand, unable to control himself, but dropped it again the same second, while she made as though she had not noticed, forgiving him with her eyes. “Or a great deal longer,” she added slowly— “for ever?”

And then he was certain that she *had* guessed — not that he loved her above all else in the world, for that was so obvious that a child might know it, but that his silence was due to his other, lesser secret; that the great Executioner stood waiting to drop the hood about his eyes. He was already pinioned. Something in her gaze and in her manner persuaded him suddenly that she understood.

His exhilaration increased extraordinarily. “I mean,” he said very quietly, “that the spell weakens here among the houses and among the — so-called living.” There was masterfulness, triumph, in his voice. Very wonderfully he saw her smile change; she drew slightly closer to his side, as though unable to resist. “Mingled with lesser things we should not understand completely,” he added softly.

“And that might be a mistake, you mean?” she asked quickly, her face grave again.

It was his turn to hesitate a moment. The breeze stirred the hair about her neck, bringing its faint perfume — perfume of young life — to his nostrils. He drew his breath in deeply, smothering back the torrent of rising words he knew were unpermissible. “Misunderstanding,” he said briefly. “If the eye be single — —” He broke off, shaken by a paroxysm of coughing. “You know my meaning,” he continued, as soon as the attack had passed; “you feel the difference *here*,” pointing round him to the hotels, the shops, the busy stream of people; “the hurry, the excitement, the feverish, blinding child’s play which pretends to be alive, but does not know it — —” And again the coughing stopped him. This time she took his hand in her own, pressed it very slightly, then released it. He felt it as the touch of that desert wave upon his soul. “The reception must be in complete and utter resignation. Tainted by lesser things, the disharmony might be — —” he began stammeringly.

Again there came interruption, as the rest of the party called impatiently to know if they were coming up to the hotel. He had not time to find the completing adjective. Perhaps he could not find it ever. Perhaps it does not exist in any modern language. Eternity is not realised to-day; men have no time to know they are alive for ever; they are too busy. ...

They all moved in a clattering, merry group towards the big hotel. Rivers and the girl were separated.

3

There was a dance that evening, but neither of these took part in it. In the great dining-room their tables were far apart. He could not even see her across the sea of intervening heads and shoulders. The long meal over, he went to his room, feeling it imperative to be alone. He did not read, he did not write; but, leaving the light unlit, he wrapped himself up and leaned out upon the broad window-sill into the great Egyptian night. His deep-sunken thoughts, like to the crowding stars, stood still, yet for ever took new shapes. He tried to see behind them, as, when a boy, he had tried to see behind the constellations — out into space — where there is nothing.

Below him the lights of Helouan twinkled like the Pleiades reflected in a pool of water; a hum of queer soft noises rose to his ears; but just beyond the houses the desert stood at attention, the vastest thing he had ever known, very stern, yet very comforting, with its peace beyond all comprehension, its delicate, wild terror, and its awful message of immortality. And the attitude of his mind, though he did not know it, was one of prayer. ... From time to time he went to lie on the bed with paroxysms of coughing. He had overtaxed his strength — his swiftly fading strength. The wave had risen to his lips.

Nearer forty than thirty-five, Paul Rivers had come out to Egypt, plainly understanding that with the greatest care he might last a few weeks longer than if he stayed in England. A few more times to see the sunset and the sunrise, to watch the stars, feel the soft airs of earth upon his cheeks; a few more days of intercourse with his kind, asking and answering questions, wearing the old familiar clothes he loved, reading his favourite pages, and then — out into the big spaces — where there is nothing.

Yet no one, from his stalwart, energetic figure, would have guessed — no one but the expert mind, not to be deceived, to whom in the first attack of overwhelming despair and desolation he went for final advice. He left that house, as many had left it before, knowing that soon he would need no earthly protection of roof and walls, and that his soul, if it existed, would be shelterless in the space behind all manifested life. He had looked forward to fame and position in this world; had, indeed, already achieved the first step towards this end; and now, with the vanity of all earthly aims so mercilessly clear before him, he had turned, in somewhat of a nervous, concentrated hurry, to make terms with the Infinite while still the brain was there. And had, of course, found nothing. For it takes a lifetime crowded with experiment and effort to learn even the alphabet of genuine faith; and what could come of a few weeks' wild questioning but confusion and bewilderment of mind? It was inevitable. He came out to Egypt wondering, thinking, questioning, but chiefly wondering. He had grown, that is, more childlike, abandoning the futile tool of Reason, which hitherto had seemed to him the perfect instrument. Its foolishness stood naked before him in the pitiless light of the specialist's decision. For— "Who can by searching find out God?"

To be exceedingly careful of over-exertion was the final warning he brought with him, and, within a few hours of his arrival, three weeks ago, he had met this girl and utterly disregarded it. He took it somewhat thus: "Instead of lingering I'll enjoy myself and go out — a little sooner. I'll *live*. The time is very short." His was not a nature, anyhow, that could heed a warning. He could not kneel. Upright and unflinching, he went to meet things as they came, reckless, unwise, but certainly not afraid. And this characteristic operated now. He ran to meet Death full tilt in the uncharted spaces that lay behind the stars. With love for a companion now, he raced, his speed increasing from day to day, she, as he thought, knowing merely that he sought her, but had not guessed his darker secret that was now his *lesser* secret.

And in the desert, this afternoon of the picnic, the great thing he sped to meet had shown itself with its familiar touch of appalling cold and shadow, familiar, because all minds know of and accept it; appalling because, until realised close, and with the mental power at the full, it remains but a name the heart refuses to believe in. And he had discovered that its name was — Life.

Rivers had seen the Wave that sweeps incessant, tireless, but as a rule invisible, round the great curve of the bulging earth, brushing the nations into the deeps behind. It had followed him home to the streets and houses of Helouan. He saw it *now*, as he leaned from his window, dim and immense, too huge to break. Its beauty was nameless, undecipherable. His coughing echoed back from the wall of its great sides. ... And the music floated up at the same time from the ball-room in the opposite wing. The two sounds mingled. Life, which is love, and Death, which is their unchanging partner, held hands beneath the stars.

He leaned out farther to drink in the cool, sweet air. Soon, on this air, his body would be dust, driven, perhaps, against her very cheek, trodden on possibly by her little foot — until, in turn, she joined him too, blown by the same wind loose about the desert. True. Yet at the same time they would always be together, always somewhere side by side, continuing in the vast universe, *alive*. This new, absolute conviction was in him now. He remembered the curious, sweet perfume in the desert, as of flowers, where yet no flowers are. It was the perfume of life. But in the desert there is no life. Living things that grow and move and utter, are but a protest against death. In the desert they are unnecessary, because death there *is* not. Its overwhelming vitality needs no insolent, visible proof, no protest, no challenge, no little signs of life. The message of the desert is immortality. ...

He went finally to bed, just before midnight. Hovering magnificently just outside his window, Death watched him while he slept. The wave crept to the level of his eyes. He called her name. ...

And downstairs, meanwhile, the girl, knowing nothing, wondered where he was, wondered unhappily and restlessly; more — though this she did not understand — wondered motheringly. Until to-day, on the ride home, and from their singular conversation together, she had guessed nothing of his reason for being at Helouan, where so many come in order to find life. She only knew her own. And she was but twenty-five. ...

Then, in the desert, when that touch of unearthly chill had stolen out of the sand towards sunset, she had realised clearly, astonished she had not seen it long ago, that this man loved her, yet that something prevented his obeying the great impulse. In the life of Paul Rivers, whose presence had profoundly stirred her heart the first time she saw him, there was some obstacle that held him back, a barrier his honour must respect. He could never tell her of his love. It could lead to nothing. Knowing that he was not married, her intuition failed her utterly at first. Then, in their silence on the homeward ride, the truth had somehow pressed up and touched her with its hand of ice. In that disjointed conversation at the end, which reads as it sounded, as though no coherent meaning lay behind the words, and as though both sought to conceal by speech what yet both burned to utter, she had divined his darker secret, and knew that it was the same as her own. She understood then it was Death that had tracked them from the desert, following with its gigantic shadow from the sandy wastes. The cold, the darkness, the silence which cannot answer, the stupendous mystery which is the spell of its inscrutable Presence, had risen about them in the dusk, and kept them company at a little distance, until the lights of Helouan had bade it halt. Life which may not, cannot end, had frightened her.

His time, perhaps, was even shorter than her own. None knew his secret, since he was alone in Egypt and was caring for himself. Similarly, since she bravely kept her terror to herself, her mother had no inkling of her own, aware merely that the disease was in her system and that her orders were to be extremely cautious. This couple, therefore, shared secretly together the two clearest glimpses of eternity life has to offer to the soul. Side by side they looked into the splendid eyes of Love and Death. Life, moreover, with its instinct for simple and terrific drama, had produced this majestic climax, breaking with pathos, at the very moment when it could not be developed — this side of the stars. They stood together upon the stage, a stage emptied of other human players; the audience had gone home and the lights were being lowered; no music sounded; the critics were a-bed. In this great game of Consequences it was known where he met her, what he said and what she answered, possibly what they did and even what the world thought. But “what the consequence was” would remain unknown, untold. That would happen in the big spaces of which the desert in its silence, its motionless serenity, its shelterless, intolerable vastness, is the perfect symbol. And the desert gives no answer. It sounds no challenge, for it is complete. Life in the desert makes no sign. It *is*.

In the hotel that night there arrived by chance a famous International dancer, whose dahabîyeh lay anchored at San Giovanni, in the Nile below Helouan; and this woman, with her party, had come to dine and take part in the festivities. The news spread. After twelve the lights were lowered, and while the moonlight flooded the terraces, streaming past pillar and colonnade, she rendered in the shadowed halls the music of the Masters, interpreting with an instinctive genius messages which are eternal and divine.

Among the crowd of enthralled and delighted guests, the girl sat on the steps and watched her. The rhythmical interpretation held a power that seemed, in a sense, inspired; there lay in it a certain unconscious something that was pure, unearthly; something that the stars, wheeling in stately movements over the sea and desert know; something the great winds bring to mountains where they play together; something the forests capture and fix magically into their gathering of big and little branches. It was both passionate and spiritual, wild and tender, intensely human and seductively non-human. For it was original, taught of Nature, a revelation of naked, unhampered life. It comforted, as the desert comforts. It brought the desert awe into the stuffy corridors of the hotel, with the moonlight and the whispering of stars, yet behind it ever the silence of those grey, mysterious, interminable spaces which utter to themselves the wordless song of life. For it was the same dim thing, she felt, that had followed her from the desert several hours before, halting just outside the streets and houses as though blocked from further advance; the thing that had stopped her foolish painting, skilled though she was, because it hides behind colour and not in it; the thing that veiled the meaning in the cryptic sentences she and he had stammered out together; the thing, in a word, as near as she could approach it by any means of interior expression, that the realisation of death for the first time makes comprehensible — Immortality. It was unutterable, but it *was*. He and she were indissolubly together. Death was no separation. There was no death. ... It was terrible. It was — she had already used the word — awful, full of awe.

“In the desert,” thought whispered, as she watched spellbound, “it is impossible even to conceive of death. The idea is meaningless. It simply is not.”

The music and the movement filled the air with life which, being there, must continue always, and continuing always can have never had a beginning. Death, therefore, was the great revealer of life. Without it none could realise that they are alive. Others had discovered this before her, but she did not know it. In the desert no one can realise death: it is hope and life that are the only certainty. The entire conception of the Egyptian system was based on this — the conviction, sure and glorious, of life's endless continuation. Their tombs and temples, their pyramids and sphinxes surviving after thousands of years, defy the passage of time and laugh at death; the very bodies of their priests and kings, of their animals even, their fish, their insects, stand to-day as symbols of their stalwart knowledge.

And this girl, as she listened to the music and watched the inspired dancing, remembered it. The message poured into her from many sides, though the desert brought it clearest. With death peering into her face a few short weeks ahead, she thought instead of — life. The desert, as it were, became for her a little fragment of eternity, focused into an intelligible point for her mind to rest upon with comfort and comprehension. Her steady, thoughtful nature stirred towards an objective far beyond the small enclosure of one narrow lifetime. The scale of the desert stretched her to the grandeur of its own imperial meaning, its divine repose, its unassailable and everlasting majesty. She looked beyond the wall.

Eternity! That which is endless; without pause, without beginning, without divisions or boundaries. The fluttering of her brave yet frightened spirit ceased, aware with awe of its own everlastingness. The swiftest motion produces the effect of immobility; excessive light is darkness; size, run loose into enormity, is the same as the minutely tiny. Similarly, in the desert, life, too overwhelming and terrific to know limit or confinement, lies undetailed and stupendous, still as deity, a revelation of nothingness because it is all. Turned golden beneath its spell that the music and the rhythm made even more comprehensible, the soul in her, already lying beneath the shadow of the great wave, sank into rest and peace, too certain of itself to fear. And panic fled away. “I am immortal ... because I *am*. And what I love is not apart from me. It is myself. We are together endlessly because we *are*.”

Yet in reality, though the big desert brought this, it was Love, which, being of similar parentage, interpreted its vast meaning to her little heart — that sudden love which, without a word of preface or explanation, had come to her a short three weeks before. ... She went up to her room soon after midnight, abruptly, unexpectedly stricken. Some one, it seemed, had called her name. She passed his door.

The lights had been turned up. The clamour of praise was loud round the figure of the weary dancer as she left in a carriage for her dahabîyeh on the Nile. A low wind whistled round the walls of the great hotel, blowing chill and bitter between the pillars of the colonnades. The girl heard the voices float up to her through the night, and once more, behind the confused sound of the many, she heard her own name called, but more faintly than before, and from very far away. It came through the spaces beyond her open window; it died away again; then — but for the sighing of that bitter wind — silence, the deep silence of the desert.

And these two, Paul Rivers and the girl, between them merely a floor of that stone that built the Pyramids, lay a few moments before the Wave of Sleep engulfed them. And, while they slept, two shadowy forms hovered above the roof of the quiet hotel, melting presently into one, as dreams stole down from the desert and the stars. Immortality whispered to them. On either side rose Life and Death, towering in splendour. Love, joining their spreading wings, fused the gigantic outlines into one. The figures grew smaller, comprehensible. They entered the little windows. Above the beds they paused a moment, watching, waiting, and then, like a wave that is just about to break, they stooped. ...

And in the brilliant Egyptian sunlight of the morning, as she went downstairs, she passed his door again. She had awakened, but he slept on. He had preceded her. It was next day she learned his room was vacant. ... Within the month she joined him, and within the year the cool north wind that sweetens Lower Egypt from the sea blew the dust across the desert as before. It is the dust of kings, of queens, of priests, princesses, lovers. It is the dust no earthly power can annihilate. It, too, lasts for ever. There was a little more of it ... the desert's message slightly added to: Immortality.

VI

THE OTHER WING

1

IT USED TO puzzle him that, after dark, some one *would* look in round the edge of the bedroom door, and withdraw again too rapidly for him to see the face. When the nurse had gone away with the candle this happened: "Good night, Master Tim," she said usually, shading the light with one hand to protect his eyes; "dream of me and I'll dream of you." She went out slowly. The sharp-edged shadow of the door ran across the ceiling like a train. There came a whispered colloquy in the corridor outside, about himself, of course, and — he was alone. He heard her steps going deeper and deeper into the bosom of the old country house; they were audible for a moment on the stone flooring of the hall; and sometimes the dull thump of the baize door into the servants' quarters just reached him, too — then silence. But it was only when the last sound, as well as the last sign of her had vanished, that the face emerged from its hiding-place and flashed in upon him round the corner. As a rule, too, it came just as he was saying, "Now I'll go to sleep. I won't think any longer. Good night, Master Tim, and happy dreams." He loved to say this to himself; it brought a sense of companionship, as though there were two persons speaking.

The room was on the top of the old house, a big, high-ceilinged room, and his bed against the wall had an iron railing round it; he felt very safe and protected in it. The curtains at the other end of the room were drawn. He lay watching the firelight dancing on the heavy folds, and their pattern, showing a spaniel chasing a long-tailed bird towards a bushy tree, interested and amused him. It was repeated over and over again. He counted the number of dogs, and the number of birds, and the number of trees, but could never make them agree. There was a plan somewhere in that pattern; if only he could discover it, the dogs and birds and trees would "come out right." Hundreds and hundreds of times he had played this game, for the plan in the pattern made it possible to take sides, and the bird and dog were against him. They always won, however; Tim usually fell asleep just when the advantage was on his own side. The curtains hung steadily enough most of the time, but it seemed to him once or twice that they stirred — hiding a dog or bird on purpose to prevent his winning. For instance, he had eleven birds and eleven trees, and, fixing them in his mind by saying, “that’s eleven birds and eleven trees, but only ten dogs,” his eyes darted back to find the eleventh dog, when — the curtain moved and threw all his calculations into confusion again. The eleventh dog was hidden. He did not quite like the movement; it gave him questionable feelings, rather, for the curtain did not move of itself. Yet, usually, he was too intent upon counting the dogs to feel positive alarm.

Opposite to him was the fireplace, full of red and yellow coals; and, lying with his head sideways on the pillow, he could see directly in between the bars. When the coals settled with a soft and powdery crash, he turned his eyes from the curtains to the grate, trying to discover exactly which bits had fallen. So long as the glow was there the sound seemed pleasant enough, but sometimes he awoke later in the night, the room huge with darkness, the fire almost out — and the sound was not so pleasant then. It startled him. The coals did not fall of themselves. It seemed that some one poked them cautiously. The shadows were very thick before the bars. As with the curtains, moreover, the morning aspect of the extinguished fire, the ice-cold cinders that made a clinking sound like tin, caused no emotion whatever in his soul.

And it was usually while he lay waiting for sleep, tired both of the curtain and the coal games, on the point, indeed, of saying, “I’ll go to sleep now,” that the puzzling thing took place. He would be staring drowsily at the dying fire, perhaps counting the stockings and flannel garments that hung along the high fender-rail when, suddenly, a person looked in with lightning swiftness through the door and vanished again before he could possibly turn his head to see. The appearance and disappearance were accomplished with amazing rapidity always.

It was a head and shoulders that looked in, and the movement combined the speed, the lightness and the silence of a shadow. Only it was not a shadow. A hand held the edge of the door. The face shot round, saw him, and withdrew like lightning. It was utterly beyond him to imagine anything more quick and clever. It darted. He heard no sound. It went. But — it had seen him, looked him all over, examined him, noted what he was doing with that lightning glance. It wanted to know if he were awake still, or asleep. And though it went off, it still watched him from a distance; it waited somewhere; it knew all about him. *Where* it waited no one could ever guess. It came probably, he felt, from beyond the house, possibly from the roof, but most likely from the garden or the sky. Yet, though strange, it was not terrible. It was a kindly and protective figure, he felt. And when it happened he never called for help, because the occurrence simply took his voice away.

"It comes from the Nightmare Passage," he decided; "but it's *not* a nightmare." It puzzled him.

Sometimes, moreover, it came more than once in a single night. He was pretty sure — not *quite* positive — that it occupied his room as soon as he was properly asleep. It took possession, sitting perhaps before the dying fire, standing upright behind the heavy curtains, or even lying down in the empty bed his brother used when he was home from school. Perhaps it played the curtain game, perhaps it poked the coals; it knew, at any rate, where the eleventh dog had lain concealed. It certainly came in and out; certainly, too, it did not wish to be seen. For, more than once, on waking suddenly in the midnight blackness, Tim knew it was standing close beside his bed and bending over him. He felt, rather than heard, its presence. It glided quietly away. It moved with marvellous softness, yet he was positive it moved. He felt the difference, so to speak. It had been near him, now it was gone. It came back, too — just as he was falling into sleep again. Its midnight coming and going, however, stood out sharply different from its first shy, tentative approach. For in the firelight it came alone; whereas in the black and silent hours, it had with it — others.

And it was then he made up his mind that its swift and quiet movements were due to the fact that it had wings. It flew. And the others that came with it in the darkness were "its little ones." He also made up his mind that all were friendly, comforting, protective, and that while positively *not* a Nightmare, it yet came somehow along the Nightmare Passage before it reached him. "You see, it's like this," he explained to the nurse: "The big one comes to visit me alone, but it only brings its little ones when I'm *quite* asleep."

"Then the quicker you get to sleep the better, isn't it, Master Tim?"

He replied: "Rather! I always do. Only I wonder where they come *from*!" He spoke, however, as though he had an inkling.

But the nurse was so dull about it that he gave her up and tried his father. “Of course,” replied this busy but affectionate parent; “it’s either nobody at all, or else it’s Sleep coming to carry you away to the land of dreams.” He made the statement kindly but somewhat briskly, for he was worried just then about the extra taxes on his land, and the effort to fix his mind on Tim’s fanciful world was beyond him at the moment. He lifted the boy on to his knee, kissed and patted him as though he were a favourite dog, and planted him on the rug again with a flying sweep. “Run and ask your mother,” he added; “she knows all that kind of thing. Then come back and tell me all about it — another time.”

Tim found his mother in an arm-chair before the fire of another room; she was knitting and reading at the same time — a wonderful thing the boy could never understand. She raised her head as he came in, pushed her glasses on to her forehead, and held her arms out. He told her everything, ending up with what his father said.

“You see, it’s *not* Jackman, or Thompson, or any one like that,” he exclaimed. “It’s some one real.”

“But nice,” she assured him, “some one who comes to take care of you and see that you’re all safe and cosy.”

“Oh, yes, I know that. But — —”

“I think your father’s right,” she added quickly. “It’s Sleep, I’m sure, who pops in round the door like that. Sleep *has* got wings, I’ve always heard.”

“Then the other thing — the little ones?” he asked. “Are they just sorts of dozes, you think?”

Mother did not answer for a moment. She turned down the page of her book, closed it slowly, put it on the table beside her. More slowly still she put her knitting away, arranging the wool and needles with some deliberation.

“Perhaps,” she said, drawing the boy closer to her and looking into his big eyes of wonder, “they’re dreams!”

Tim felt a thrill run through him as she said it. He stepped back a foot or so and clapped his hands softly. “Dreams!” he whispered with enthusiasm and belief; “of course! I never thought of that.”

His mother, having proved her sagacity, then made a mistake. She noted her success, but instead of leaving it there, she elaborated and explained. As Tim expressed it she “went on about it.” Therefore he did not listen. He followed his train of thought alone. And presently, he interrupted her long sentences with a conclusion of his own:

“Then I know where She hides,” he announced with a touch of awe. “Where She lives, I mean.” And without waiting to be asked, he imparted the information: “It’s in the Other Wing.”

“Ah!” said his mother, taken by surprise. “How clever of you, Tim!” — and thus confirmed it.

Thenceforward this was established in his life — that Sleep and her attendant Dreams hid during the daytime in that unused portion of the great Elizabethan mansion called the Other Wing. This other wing was unoccupied, its corridors untrodden, its windows shuttered and its rooms all closed. At various places green baize doors led into it, but no one ever opened them. For many years this part had been shut up; and for the children, properly speaking, it was out of bounds. They never mentioned it as a possible place, at any rate; in hide-and-seek it was not considered, even; there was a hint of the inaccessible about the Other Wing. Shadows, dust, and silence had it to themselves.

But Tim, having ideas of his own about everything, possessed special information about the Other Wing. He believed it *was* inhabited. Who occupied the immense series of empty rooms, who trod the spacious corridors, who passed to and fro behind the shuttered windows, he had not known exactly. He had called these occupants “they,” and the most important among them was “The Ruler.” The Ruler of the Other Wing was a kind of deity, powerful, far away, ever present yet never seen.

And about this Ruler he had a wonderful conception for a little boy; he connected her, somehow, with deep thoughts of his own, the deepest of all. When he made up adventures to the moon, to the stars, or to the bottom of the sea, adventures that he lived inside himself, as it were — to reach them he must invariably pass through the chambers of the Other Wing. Those corridors and halls, the Nightmare Passage among them, lay along the route; they were the first stage of the journey. Once the green baize doors swung to behind him and the long dim passage stretched ahead, he was well on his way into the adventure of the moment; the Nightmare Passage once passed, he was safe from capture; but once the shutters of a window had been flung open, he was free of the gigantic world that lay beyond. For then light poured in and he could see his way.

The conception, for a child, was curious. It established a correspondence between the mysterious chambers of the Other Wing and the occupied, but unguessed chambers of his Inner Being. Through these chambers, through these darkened corridors, along a passage, sometimes dangerous, or at least of questionable repute, he must pass to find all adventures that were *real*. The light — when he pierced far enough to take the shutters down — was discovery. Tim did not actually think, much less say, all this. He was aware of it, however. He felt it. The Other Wing was inside himself as well as through the green baize doors. His inner map of wonder included both of them.

But now, for the first time in his life, he knew who lived there and who the Ruler was. A shutter had fallen of its own accord; light poured in; he made a guess, and Mother had confirmed it. Sleep and her Little Ones, the host of dreams, were the daylight occupants. They stole out when the darkness fell. All adventures in life began and ended by a dream — discoverable by first passing through the Other Wing.

2

And, having settled this, his one desire now was to travel over the map upon journeys of exploration and discovery. The map inside himself he knew already, but the map of the Other Wing he had not seen. His mind knew it, he had a clear mental picture of rooms and halls and passages, but his feet had never trod the silent floors where dust and shadows hid the flock of dreams by day. The mighty chambers where Sleep ruled he longed to stand in, to see the Ruler face to face. He made up his mind to get into the Other Wing.

To accomplish this was difficult; but Tim was a determined youngster, and he meant to try; he meant, also, to succeed. He deliberated. At night he could not possibly manage it; in any case, the Ruler and her host all left it after dark, to fly about the world; the Wing would be empty, and the emptiness would frighten him. Therefore he must make a daylight visit; and it was a daylight visit he decided on. He deliberated more. There were rules and risks involved: it meant going out of bounds, the danger of being seen, the certainty of being questioned by some idle and inquisitive grown-up: “Where in the world have you been all this time” — and so forth. These things he thought out carefully, and though he arrived at no solution, he felt satisfied that it would be all right. That is, he recognised the risks. To be prepared was half the battle, for nothing then could take him by surprise.

The notion that he might slip in from the garden was soon abandoned; the red bricks showed no openings; there was no door; from the courtyard, also, entrance was impracticable; even on tiptoe he could barely reach the broad window-sills of stone. When playing alone, or walking with the French governess, he examined every outside possibility. None offered. The shutters, supposing he could reach them, were thick and solid.

Meanwhile, when opportunity offered, he stood against the outside walls and listened, his ear pressed against the tight red bricks; the towers and gables of the Wing rose overhead; he heard the wind go whispering along the eaves; he imagined tiptoe movements and a sound of wings inside. Sleep and her Little Ones were busily preparing for their journeys after dark; they hid, but they did not sleep; in this unused Wing, vaster alone than any other country house he had ever seen, Sleep taught and trained her flock of feathered Dreams. It was very wonderful. They probably supplied the entire county. But more wonderful still was the thought that the Ruler herself should take the trouble to come to his particular room and personally watch over him all night long. That was amazing. And it flashed across his imaginative, inquiring mind: “Perhaps they take me with them! The moment I’m asleep! That’s why she comes to see me!”

Yet his chief preoccupation was, how Sleep got out. Through the green baize doors, of course! By a process of elimination he arrived at a conclusion: he, too, must enter through a green baize door and risk detection.

Of late, the lightning visits had ceased. The silent, darting figure had not peeped in and vanished as it used to do. He fell asleep too quickly now, almost before Jackman reached the hall, and long before the fire began to die. Also, the dogs and birds upon the curtains always matched the trees exactly, and he won the curtain game quite easily; there was never a dog or bird too many; the curtain never stirred. It had been thus ever since his talk with Mother and Father. And so he came to make a second discovery: His parents did not really believe in his Figure. She kept away on that account. They doubted her; she hid. Here was still another incentive to go and find her out. He ached for her, she was so kind, she gave herself so much trouble — just for his little self in the big and lonely bedroom. Yet his parents spoke of her as though she were of no account. He longed to see her, face to face, and tell her that *he* believed in her and loved her. For he was positive she would like to hear it. She cared. Though he had fallen asleep of late too quickly for him to see her flash in at the door, he had known nicer dreams than ever in his life before — travelling dreams. And it was she who sent them. More — he was sure she took him out with her.

One evening, in the dusk of a March day, his opportunity came; and only just in time, for his brother Jack was expected home from school on the morrow, and with Jack in the other bed, no Figure would ever care to show itself. Also it was Easter, and after Easter, though Tim was not aware of it at the time, he was to say good-bye finally to governesses and become a day-boarder at a preparatory school for Wellington. The opportunity offered itself so naturally, moreover, that Tim took it without hesitation. It never occurred to him to question, much less to refuse it. The thing was obviously meant to be. For he found himself unexpectedly in front of a green baize door; and the green baize door was — swinging! Somebody, therefore, had just passed through it.

It had come about in this wise. Father, away in Scotland, at Inglemuir, the shooting place, was expected back next morning; Mother had driven over to the church upon some Easter business or other; and the governess had been allowed her holiday at home in France. Tim, therefore, had the run of the house, and in the hour between tea and bed-time he made good use of it. Fully able to defy such second-rate obstacles as nurses and butlers, he explored all manner of forbidden places with ardent thoroughness, arriving finally in the sacred precincts of his father's study. This wonderful room was the very heart and centre of the whole big house; he had been birched here long ago; here, too, his father had told him with a grave yet smiling face: "You've got a new companion, Tim, a little sister; you must be very kind to her." Also, it was the place where all the money was kept. What he called "father's jolly smell" was strong in it — papers, tobacco, books, flavoured by hunting crops and gunpowder.

At first he felt awed, standing motionless just inside the door; but presently, recovering equilibrium, he moved cautiously on tiptoe towards the gigantic desk where important papers were piled in untidy patches. These he did not touch; but beside them his quick eye noted the jagged piece of iron shell his father brought home from his Crimean campaign and now used as a letter-weight. It was difficult to lift, however. He climbed into the comfortable chair and swung round and round. It was a swivel-chair, and he sank down among the cushions in it, staring at the strange things on the great desk before him, as if fascinated. Next he turned away and saw the stick-rack in the corner — this, he knew, he was allowed to touch. He had played with these sticks before. There were twenty, perhaps, all told, with curious carved handles, brought from every corner of the world; many of them cut by his father's own hand in queer and distant places. And, among them, Tim fixed his eye upon a cane with an ivory handle, a slender, polished cane that he had always coveted tremendously. It was the kind he meant to use when he was a man. It bent, it quivered, and when he swished it through the air it trembled like a riding-whip, and made a whistling noise. Yet it was very strong in spite of its elastic qualities. A family treasure, it was also an old-fashioned relic; it had been his grandfather's walking stick. Something of another century clung visibly about it still. It had dignity and grace and leisure in its very aspect. And it suddenly occurred to him: "How grandpapa must miss it! Wouldn't he just love to have it back again!"

How it happened exactly, Tim did not know, but a few minutes later he found himself walking about the deserted halls and passages of the house with the air of an elderly gentleman of a hundred years ago, proud as a courtier, flourishing the stick like an Eighteenth Century dandy in the Mall. That the cane reached to his shoulder made no difference; he held it accordingly, swaggering on his way. He was off upon an adventure. He dived down through the byways of the Other Wing, inside himself, as though the stick transported him to the days of the old gentleman who had used it in another century.

It may seem strange to those who dwell in smaller houses, but in this rambling Elizabethan mansion there were whole sections that, even to Tim, were strange and unfamiliar. In his mind the map of the Other Wing was clearer by far than the geography of the part he travelled daily. He came to passages and dim-lit halls, long corridors of stone beyond the Picture

Gallery; narrow, wainscoted connecting-channels with four steps down and a little later two steps up; deserted chambers with arches guarding them — all hung with the soft March twilight and all bewilderingly unrecognised. With a sense of adventure born of naughtiness he went carelessly along, farther and farther into the heart of this unfamiliar country, swinging the cane, one thumb stuck into the arm-pit of his blue serge suit, whistling softly to himself, excited yet keenly on the alert — and suddenly found himself opposite a door that checked all further advance. It was a green baize door. And it was swinging.

He stopped abruptly, facing it. He stared, he gripped his cane more tightly, he held his breath. “The Other Wing!” he gasped in a swallowed whisper. It was an entrance, but an entrance he had never seen before. He thought he knew every door by heart; but this one was new. He stood motionless for several minutes, watching it; the door had two halves, but one half only was swinging, each swing shorter than the one before; he heard the little puffs of air it made; it settled finally, the last movements very short and rapid; it stopped. And the boy’s heart, after similar rapid strokes, stopped also — for a moment.

“Some one’s just gone through,” he gulped. And even as he said it he knew who the some one was. The conviction just dropped into him. “It’s Grandfather; he knows I’ve got his stick. He wants it!” On the heels of this flashed instantly another amazing certainty. “He sleeps in there. He’s having dreams. That’s what being dead means.”

His first impulse, then, took the form of, “I must let Father know; it’ll make him burst for joy”; but his second was for himself — to finish his adventure. And it was this, naturally enough, that gained the day. He could tell his father later. His first duty was plainly to go through the door into the Other Wing. He must give the stick back to its owner. He must *hand* it back.

The test of will and character came now. Tim had imagination, and so knew the meaning of fear; but there was nothing craven in him. He could howl and scream and stamp like any other person of his age when the occasion called for such behaviour, but such occasions were due to temper roused by a thwarted will, and the histrionics were half “pretended” to produce a calculated effect. There was no one to thwart his will at present. He also knew how to be afraid of Nothing, to be afraid without ostensible cause, that is — which was merely “nerves.” He could have “the shudders” with the best of them.

But, when a real thing faced him, Tim’s character emerged to meet it. He would clench his hands, brace his muscles, set his teeth — and wish to heaven he was bigger. But he would not flinch. Being imaginative, he lived the worst a dozen times before it happened, yet in the final crash he stood up like a man. He had that highest pluck — the courage of a sensitive temperament. And at this particular juncture, somewhat ticklish for a boy of eight or nine, it did not fail him. He lifted the cane and pushed the swinging door wide open. Then he walked through it — into the Other Wing.

3

The green baize door swung to behind him; he was even sufficiently master of himself to turn and close it with a steady hand, because he did not care to hear the series of muffled thuds its lessening swings would cause. But he realised clearly his position, knew he was doing a tremendous thing.

Holding the cane between fingers very tightly clenched, he advanced bravely along the corridor that stretched before him. And all fear left him from that moment, replaced, it seemed, by a mild and exquisite surprise. His footsteps made no sound, he walked on air; instead of darkness, or the twilight he expected, a diffused and gentle light that seemed like the silver on the lawn when a half-moon sails a cloudless sky, lay everywhere. He knew his way, moreover, knew exactly where he was and whither he was going. The corridor was as familiar to him as the floor of his own bedroom; he recognised the shape and length of it; it agreed exactly with the map he had constructed long ago. Though he had never, to the best of his knowledge, entered it before, he knew with intimacy its every detail.

And thus the surprise he felt was mild and far from disconcerting. “I’m here again!” was the kind of thought he had. It was *how* he got here that caused the faint surprise, apparently. He no longer swaggered, however, but walked carefully, and half on tiptoe, holding the ivory handle of the cane with a kind of affectionate respect. And as he advanced, the light closed softly up behind him, obliterating the way by which he had come. But this he did not know, because he did not look behind him. He only looked in front, where the corridor stretched its silvery length towards the great chamber where he knew the cane must be surrendered. The person who had preceded him down this ancient corridor, passing through the green baize door just before he reached it, this person, his father's father, now stood in that great chamber, waiting to receive his own. Tim knew it as surely as he knew he breathed. At the far end he even made out the larger patch of silvery light which marked its gaping doorway.

There was another thing he knew as well — that this corridor he moved along between rooms with fast-closed doors, was the Nightmare Corridor; often and often he had traversed it; each room was occupied. "This is the Nightmare Passage," he whispered to himself, "but I know the Ruler — it doesn't matter. None of them can get out or do anything." He heard them, none the less, inside, as he passed by; he heard them scratching to get out. The feeling of security made him reckless; he took unnecessary risks; he brushed the panels as he passed. And the love of keen sensation for its own sake, the desire to feel "an awful thrill," tempted him once so sharply that he raised his stick and poked a fast-shut door with it!

He was not prepared for the result, but he gained the sensation and the thrill. For the door opened with instant swiftness half an inch, a hand emerged, caught the stick and tried to draw it in. Tim sprang back as if he had been struck. He pulled at the ivory handle with all his strength, but his strength was less than nothing. He tried to shout, but his voice had gone. A terror of the moon came over him, for he was unable to loosen his hold of the handle; his fingers had become a part of it. An appalling weakness turned him helpless. He was dragged inch by inch towards the fearful door. The end of the stick was already through the narrow, crack. He could not see the hand that pulled, but he knew it was terrific. He understood now why the world was strange, why horses galloped furiously, and why trains whistled as they raced through stations. All the comedy and terror of nightmare gripped his heart with pincers made of ice. The disproportion was abominable. The final collapse rushed over him when, without a sign of warning, the door slammed silently, and between the jamb and the wall the cane was crushed as flat as if it were a bulrush. So irresistible was the force behind the door that the solid stick just went flat as a stalk of a bulrush.

He looked at it. It *was* a bulrush.

He did not laugh; the absurdity was so distressingly unnatural. The horror of finding a bulrush where he had expected a polished cane — this hideous and appalling detail held the nameless horror of the nightmare. It betrayed him utterly. Why had he not always known really that the stick was not a stick, but a thin and hollow reed ...?

Then the cane was safely in his hand, unbroken. He stood looking at it. The Nightmare was in full swing. He heard another door opening behind his back, a door he had not touched. There was just time to see a hand thrusting and waving dreadfully, familiarly, at him through the narrow crack — just time to realise that this was another Nightmare acting in atrocious concert with the first, when he saw closely beside him, towering to the ceiling, the protective, kindly Figure that visited his bedroom. In the turning movement he made to meet the attack, he became aware of her. And his terror passed. It was a nightmare terror merely. The infinite horror vanished. Only the comedy remained. He smiled.

He saw her dimly only, she was so vast, but he saw her, the Ruler of the Other Wing at last, and knew that he was safe again. He gazed with a tremendous love and wonder, trying to see her clearly; but the face was hidden far aloft and seemed to melt into the sky beyond the roof. He discerned that she was larger than the Night, only far, far softer, with wings that folded above him more tenderly even than his mother's arms; that there were points of light like stars among the feathers, and that she was vast enough to cover millions and millions of people all at once. Moreover, she did not fade or go, so far as he could see, but spread herself in such a way that he lost sight of her. She spread over the entire Wing. ...

And Tim remembered that this was all quite natural really. He had often and often been down this corridor before; the Nightmare Corridor was no new experience; it had to be faced as usual. Once knowing what hid inside the rooms, he was bound to tempt them out. They drew, enticed, attracted him; this was their power. It was their special strength that they could suck him helplessly towards them, and that he was obliged to go. He understood exactly why he was tempted to tap with the cane upon their awful doors, but, having done so, he had accepted the challenge and could now continue his journey quietly and safely. The Ruler of the Other Wing had taken him in charge.

A delicious sense of carelessness came on him. There was softness as of water in the solid things about him, nothing that could hurt or bruise.

Holding the cane firmly by its ivory handle, he went forward along the corridor, walking as on air.

The end was quickly reached: He stood upon the threshold of the mighty chamber where he knew the owner of the cane was waiting; the long corridor lay behind him, in front he saw the spacious dimensions of a lofty hall that gave him the feeling of being in the Crystal Palace, Euston Station, or St. Paul’s. High, narrow windows, cut deeply into the wall, stood in a row upon the other side; an enormous open fireplace of burning logs was on his right; thick tapestries hung from the ceiling to the floor of stone; and in the centre of the chamber was a massive table of dark, shining wood, great chairs with carved stiff backs set here and there beside it. And in the biggest of these throne-like chairs there sat a figure looking at him gravely — the figure of an old, old man.

Yet there was no surprise in the boy’s fast-beating heart; there was a thrill of pleasure and excitement only, a feeling of satisfaction. He had known quite well the figure would be there, known also it would look like this exactly. He stepped forward on to the floor of stone without a trace of fear or trembling, holding the precious cane in two hands now before him, as though to present it to its owner. He felt proud and pleased. He had run risks for this.

And the figure rose quietly to meet him, advancing in a stately manner over the hard stone floor. The eyes looked gravely, sweetly down at him, the aquiline nose stood out. Tim knew him perfectly: the knee-breeches of shining satin, the gleaming buckles on the shoes, the neat dark stockings, the lace and ruffles about neck and wrists, the coloured waistcoat opening so widely — all the details of the picture over father’s mantelpiece, where it hung between two Crimean bayonets, were reproduced in life before his eyes at last. Only the polished cane with the ivory handle was not there.

Tim went three steps nearer to the advancing figure and held out both his hands with the cane laid crosswise on them.

“I’ve brought it, Grandfather,” he said, in a faint but clear and steady tone; “here it is.”

And the other stooped a little, put out three fingers half concealed by falling lace, and took it by the ivory handle. He made a courtly bow to Tim. He smiled, but though there was pleasure, it was a grave, sad smile. He spoke then: the voice was slow and very deep. There was a delicate softness in it, the suave politeness of an older day.

“Thank you,” he said; “I value it. It was given to me by my grandfather. I forgot it when I — —” His voice grew indistinct a little.

“Yes?” said Tim.

“When I — left,” the old gentleman repeated.

“Oh,” said Tim, thinking how beautiful and kind the gracious figure was.

The old man ran his slender fingers carefully along the cane, feeling the polished surface with satisfaction. He lingered specially over the smoothness of the ivory handle. He was evidently very pleased.

“I was not quite myself — er — at the moment,” he went on gently; “my memory failed me somewhat.” He sighed, as though an immense relief was in him.

“*I* forget things, too — sometimes,” Tim mentioned sympathetically. He simply loved his grandfather. He hoped — for a moment — he would be lifted up and kissed. “I’m *awfully* glad I brought it,” he faltered— “that you’ve got it again.”

The other turned his kind grey eyes upon him; the smile on his face was full of gratitude as he looked down.

“Thank you, my boy. I am truly and deeply indebted to you. You courted danger for my sake. Others have tried before, but the Nightmare Passage — er — —” He broke off. He tapped the stick firmly on the stone flooring, as though to test it. Bending a trifle, he put his weight upon it. “Ah!” he exclaimed with a short sigh of relief, “I can now — —”

His voice again grew indistinct; Tim did not catch the words.

“Yes?” he asked again, aware for the first time that a touch of awe was in his heart.

“ — get about again,” the other continued very low. “Without my cane,” he added, the voice failing with each word the old lips uttered, “I could not ... possibly ... allow myself ... to be seen. It was indeed ... deplorable ... unpardonable of me ... to forget in such a way. Zounds, sir ...! I — I ...”

His voice sank away suddenly into a sound of wind. He straightened up, tapping the iron ferrule of his cane on the stones in a series of loud knocks. Tim felt a strange sensation creep into his legs. The queer words frightened him a little.

The old man took a step towards him. He still smiled, but there was a new meaning in the smile. A sudden earnestness had replaced the courtly, leisurely manner. The next words seemed to blow down upon the boy from above, as though a cold wind brought them from the sky outside.

Yet the words, he knew, were kindly meant, and very sensible. It was only the abrupt change that startled him. Grandfather, after all, was but a man! The distant sound recalled something in him to that outside world from which the cold wind blew.

“My eternal thanks to you,” he heard, while the voice and face and figure seemed to withdraw deeper and deeper into the heart of the mighty chamber. “I shall not forget your kindness and your courage. It is a debt I can, fortunately, one day repay. ... But now you had best return and with dispatch. For your head and arm lie heavily on the table, the documents are scattered, there is a cushion fallen ... and my son is in the house. ... Farewell! You had best leave me quickly. See! *She* stands behind you, waiting. Go with her! Go now ...!”

The entire scene had vanished even before the final words were uttered. Tim felt empty space about him. A vast, shadowy Figure bore him through it as with mighty wings. He flew, he rushed, he remembered nothing more — until he heard another voice and felt a heavy hand upon his shoulder.

“Tim, you rascal! What are you doing in my study? And in the dark, like this!”

He looked up into his father’s face without a word. He felt dazed. The next minute his father had caught him up and kissed him.

“Ragamuffin! How did you guess I was coming back to-night?” He shook him playfully and kissed his tumbling hair. “And you’ve been asleep, too, into the bargain. Well — how’s everything at home — eh? Jack’s coming back from school to-morrow, you know, and ...”

Jack came home, indeed, the following day, and when the Easter holidays were over, the governess stayed abroad and Tim went off to adventures of another kind in the preparatory school for Wellington. Life slipped rapidly along with him; he grew into a man; his mother and his father died; Jack followed them within a little space; Tim inherited, married, settled down into his great possessions — and opened up the Other Wing. The dreams of imaginative boyhood all had faded; perhaps he had merely put them away, or perhaps he had forgotten them. At any rate, he never spoke of such things now, and when his Irish wife mentioned her belief that the old country house possessed a family ghost, even declaring that she had met an Eighteenth Century figure of a man in the corridors, "an old, old man who bends down upon a stick" — Tim only laughed and said:

"That's as it ought to be! And if these awful land-taxes force us to sell some day, a respectable ghost will increase the market value."

But one night he woke and heard a tapping on the floor. He sat up in bed and listened. There was a chilly feeling down his back. Belief had long since gone out of him; he felt uncannily afraid. The sound came nearer and nearer; there were light footsteps with it. The door opened — it opened a little wider, that is, for it already stood ajar — and there upon the threshold stood a figure that it seemed he knew. He saw the face as with all the vivid sharpness of reality. There was a smile upon it, but a smile of warning and alarm. The arm was raised. Tim saw the slender hand, lace falling down upon the long, thin fingers, and in them, tightly gripped, a polished cane. Shaking the cane twice to and fro in the air, the face thrust forward, spoke certain words, and — vanished. But the words were inaudible; for, though the lips distinctly moved, no sound, apparently, came from them.

And Tim sprang out of bed. The room was full of darkness. He turned the light on. The door, he saw, was shut as usual. He had, of course, been dreaming. But he noticed a curious odour in the air. He sniffed it once or twice — then grasped the truth. It was a smell of burning!

Fortunately, he awoke just in time. ...

He was acclaimed a hero for his promptitude. After many days, when the damage was repaired, and nerves had settled down once more into the calm routine of country life, he told the story to his wife — the entire story. He told the adventure of his imaginative boyhood with it. She asked to see the old family cane. And it was this request of hers that brought back to memory a detail Tim had entirely forgotten all these years. He remembered it suddenly again — the loss of the cane, the hubbub his father kicked up about it, the endless, futile search. For the stick had never been found, and Tim, who was questioned very closely concerning it, swore with all his might that he had not the smallest notion where it was. Which was, of course, the truth.

VII

THE OCCUPANT OF THE ROOM

HE ARRIVED LATE at night by the yellow diligence, stiff and cramped after the toilsome ascent of three slow hours. The village, a single mass of shadow, was already asleep. Only in front of the little hotel was there noise and light and bustle — for a moment. The horses, with tired, slouching gait, crossed the road and disappeared into the stable of their own accord, their harness trailing in the dust; and the lumbering diligence stood for the night where they had dragged it — the body of a great yellow-sided beetle with broken legs.

In spite of his physical weariness the schoolmaster, revelling in the first hours of his ten-guinea holiday, felt exhilarated. For the high Alpine valley was marvellously still; stars twinkled over the torn ridges of the Dent du Midi where spectral snows gleamed against rocks that looked like solid ink; and the keen air smelt of pine forests, dew-soaked pastures, and freshly sawn wood. He took it all in with a kind of bewildered delight for a few minutes, while the other three passengers gave directions about their luggage and went to their rooms. Then he turned and walked over the coarse matting into the glare of the hall, only just able to resist stopping to examine the big mountain map that hung upon the wall by the door.

And, with a sudden disagreeable shock, he came down from the ideal to the actual. For at the inn — the only inn — there was no vacant room. Even the available sofas were occupied. ...

How stupid he had been not to write! Yet it had been impossible, he remembered, for he had come to the decision suddenly that morning in Geneva, enticed by the brilliance of the weather after a week of rain.

They talked endlessly, this gold-braided porter and the hard-faced old woman — her face was hard, he noticed — gesticulating all the time, and pointing all about the village with suggestions that he ill understood, for his French was limited and their *patois* was fearful.

“*There!*” — he might find a room, “or *there*! But we are, *hélas* full — more full than we care about. To-morrow, perhaps — if So-and-So give up their rooms —— !” And then, with much shrugging of shoulders, the hard-faced old woman stared at the gold-braided porter, and the porter stared sleepily at the schoolmaster.

At length, however, by some process of hope he did not himself understand, and following directions given by the old woman that were utterly unintelligible, he went out into the street and walked towards a dark group of houses she had pointed out to him. He only knew that he meant to thunder at a door and ask for a room. He was too weary to think out details. The porter half made to go with him, but turned back at the last moment to speak with the old woman. The houses sketched themselves dimly in the general blackness. The air was cold. The whole valley was filled with the rush and thunder of falling water. He was thinking vaguely that the dawn could not be very far away, and that he might even spend the night wandering in the woods, when there was a sharp noise behind him and he turned to see a figure hurrying after him. It was the porter — running.

And in the little hall of the inn there began again a confused three-cornered conversation, with frequent muttered colloquy and whispered asides in *patois* between the woman and the porter — the net result of which was that, "If Monsieur did not object — there *was* a room, after all, on the first floor — only it was in a sense 'engaged.' That is to say — —"

But the schoolmaster took the room without inquiring too closely into the puzzle that had somehow provided it so suddenly. The ethics of hotel-keeping had nothing to do with him. If the woman offered him quarters it was not for him to argue with her whether the said quarters were legitimately hers to offer.

But the porter, evidently a little thrilled, accompanied the guest up to the room and supplied in a mixture of French and English details omitted by the landlady — and Minturn, the schoolmaster, soon shared the thrill with him, and found himself in the atmosphere of a possible tragedy.

All who know the peculiar excitement that belongs to high mountain valleys where dangerous climbing is a chief feature of the attractions, will understand a certain faint element of high alarm that goes with the picture. One looks up at the desolate, soaring ridges and thinks involuntarily of the men who find their pleasure for days and nights together scaling perilous summits among the clouds, and conquering inch by inch the icy peaks that for ever shake their dark terror in the sky. The atmosphere of adventure, spiced with the possible horror of a very grim order of tragedy, is inseparable from any imaginative contemplation of the scene; and the idea Minturn gleaned from the half-frightened porter lost nothing by his ignorance of the language. This Englishwoman, the real occupant of the room, had insisted on going without a guide. She had left just before daybreak two days before — the porter had seen her start — and ... she had not returned! The route was difficult and dangerous, yet not impossible for a skilled climber, even a solitary one. And the Englishwoman was an experienced mountaineer. Also, she was self-willed, careless of advice, bored by warnings, self-confident to a degree. Queer, moreover; for she kept entirely to herself, and sometimes remained in her room with locked doors, admitting no one, for days together: a "crank," evidently, of the first water.

This much Minturn gathered clearly enough from the porter's talk while his luggage was brought in and the room set to rights; further, too, that the search party had gone out and *might*, of course, return at any moment. In which case —— Thus the room was empty, yet still hers. "If Monsieur did not object — if the risk he ran of having to turn out suddenly in the night ——" It was the loquacious porter who furnished the details that made the transaction questionable; and Minturn dismissed the loquacious porter as soon as possible, and prepared to get into the hastily arranged bed and snatch all the hours of sleep he could before he was turned out.

At first, it must be admitted, he felt uncomfortable — distinctly uncomfortable. He was in some one else's room. He had really no right to be there. It was in the nature of an unwarrantable intrusion; and while he unpacked he kept looking over his shoulder as though some one were watching him from the corners. Any moment, it seemed, he would hear a step in the passage, a knock would come at the door, the door would open, and there he would see this vigorous Englishwoman looking him up and down with anger. Worse still — he would hear her voice asking him what he was doing in her room — her bedroom. Of course, he had an adequate explanation, but still —— !

Then, reflecting that he was already half undressed, the humour of it flashed for a second across his mind, and he laughed — *quietly*. And at once, after that laughter, under his breath, came the sudden sense of tragedy he had felt before. Perhaps, even while he smiled, her body lay broken and cold upon those awful heights, the wind of snow playing over her hair, her glazed eyes staring sightless up to the stars. ... It made him shudder. The sense of this woman whom he had never seen, whose name even he did not know, became extraordinarily real. Almost he could imagine that she was somewhere in the room with him, hidden, observing all he did.

He opened the door softly to put his boots outside, and when he closed it again he turned the key. Then he finished unpacking and distributed his few things about the room. It was soon done; for, in the first place, he had only a small Gladstone and a knapsack, and secondly, the only place where he could spread his clothes was the sofa. There was no chest of drawers, and the cupboard, an unusually large and solid one, was locked. The Englishwoman's things had evidently been hastily put away in it. The only sign of her recent presence was a bunch of faded *Alpenrosen* standing in a glass jar upon the washhand stand. This, and a certain faint perfume, were all that remained. In spite, however, of these very slight evidences, the whole room was pervaded with a curious sense of occupancy that he found exceedingly distasteful. One moment the atmosphere seemed subtly charged with a "just left" feeling; the next it was a queer awareness of "still here" that made him turn cold and look hurriedly behind him.

Altogether, the room inspired him with a singular aversion, and the strength of this aversion seemed the only excuse for his tossing the faded flowers out of the window, and then hanging his mackintosh upon the cupboard door in such a way as to screen it as much as possible from view. For the sight of that big, ugly cupboard, filled with the clothing of a woman who might then be beyond any further need of covering — thus his imagination insisted on picturing it — touched in him a startled sense of the Incongruous that did not stop there, but crept through his mind gradually till it merged somehow into a sense of a rather grotesque horror. At any rate, the sight of that cupboard was offensive, and he covered it almost instinctively. Then, turning out the electric light, he got into bed.

But the instant the room was dark he realised that it was more than he could stand; for, with the blackness, there came a sudden rush of cold that he found it hard to explain. And the odd thing was that, when he lit the candle beside his bed, he noticed that his hand trembled.

This, of course, was too much. His imagination was taking liberties and must be called to heel. Yet the way he called it to order was significant, and its very deliberateness betrayed a mind that has already admitted fear. And fear, once in, is difficult to dislodge. He lay there upon his elbow in bed and carefully took note of all the objects in the room — with the intention, as it were, of taking an inventory of everything his senses perceived, then drawing a line, adding them up finally, and saying with decision, “That’s all the room contains! I’ve counted every single thing. There is nothing more. *Now* — I may sleep in peace!”

And it was during this absurd process of enumerating the furniture of the room that the dreadful sense of distressing lassitude came over him that made it difficult even to finish counting. It came swiftly, yet with an amazing kind of violence that overwhelmed him softly and easily with a sensation of enervating weariness hard to describe. And its first effect was to banish fear. He no longer possessed enough energy to feel really afraid or nervous. The cold remained, but the alarm vanished. And into every corner of his usually vigorous personality crept the insidious poison of a *muscular* fatigue — at first — that in a few seconds, it seemed, translated itself into *spiritual* inertia. A sudden consciousness of the foolishness, the crass futility, of life, of effort, of fighting — of all that makes life worth living, shot into every fibre of his being, and left him utterly weak. A spirit of black pessimism that was not even vigorous enough to assert itself, invaded the secret chambers of his heart. ...

Every picture that presented itself to his mind came dressed in grey shadows: those bored and sweating horses toiling up the ascent to — nothing! that hard-faced landlady taking so much trouble to let her desire for gain conquer her sense of morality — for a few francs! That gold-braided porter, so talkative, fussy, energetic, and so anxious to tell all he knew! What was the use of them all? And for himself, what in the world was the good of all the labour and drudgery he went through in that preparatory school where he was junior master? What could it lead to? Wherein lay the value of so much uncertain toil, when the ultimate secrets of life were hidden and no one knew the final goal? How foolish was effort, discipline, work! How vain was pleasure! How trivial the noblest life! ...

With a fearful jump that nearly upset the candle Minturn pulled himself together. Such vicious thoughts were usually so remote from his normal character that the sudden vile invasion produced a swift reaction. Yet, only for a moment. Instantly, again, the black depression descended upon him like a wave. His work — it could lead to nothing but the dreary labour of a small headmastership after all — seemed as vain and foolish as his holiday in the Alps. What an idiot he had been, to be sure, to come out with a knapsack merely to work himself into a state of exhaustion climbing over toilsome mountains that led to nowhere — resulted in nothing. A dreariness of the grave possessed him. Life was a ghastly fraud! Religion childish humbug! Everything was merely a trap — a trap of death; a coloured toy that Nature used as a decoy! But a decoy for what? For nothing! There was no meaning in anything. The only *real* thing was — DEATH. And the happiest people were those who found it soonest.

Then why wait for it to come?

He sprang out of bed, thoroughly frightened. This was horrible. Surely mere physical fatigue could not produce a world so black, an outlook so dismal, a cowardice that struck with such sudden hopelessness at the very roots of life? For, normally, he was cheerful and strong, full of the tides of healthy living; and this appalling lassitude swept the very basis of his personality into Nothingness and the desire for death. It was like the development of a Secondary Personality. He had read, of course, how certain persons who suffered shocks developed thereafter entirely different characteristics, memory, tastes, and so forth. It had all rather frightened him. Though scientific men vouched for it, it was hardly to be believed. Yet here was a similar thing taking place in his own consciousness. He was, beyond question, experiencing all the mental variations of — *some one else*! It was un-moral. It was awful. It was — well, after all, at the same time, it was uncommonly interesting.

And this interest he began to feel was the first sign of his returning normal Self. For to feel interest is to live, and to love life.

He sprang into the middle of the room — then switched on the electric light. And the first thing that struck his eye was — the big cupboard.

“Hallo! There’s that — beastly cupboard!” he exclaimed to himself, involuntarily, yet aloud. It held all the clothes, the swinging skirts and coats and summer blouses of the dead woman. For he knew now — somehow or other — that she *was* dead. ...

At that moment, through the open windows, rushed the sound of falling water, bringing with it a vivid realisation of the desolate, snow-swept heights. He saw her — positively *saw* her! — lying where she had fallen, the frost upon her cheeks, the snow-dust eddying about her hair and eyes, her broken limbs pushing against the lumps of ice. For a moment the sense of spiritual lassitude — of the emptiness of life — vanished before this picture of broken effort — of a small human force battling pluckily, yet in vain, against the impersonal and pitiless Potencies of Inanimate Nature — and he found himself again, his normal self. Then, instantly, returned again that terrible sense of cold, nothingness, emptiness. ...

And he found himself standing opposite the big cupboard where her clothes were. He wanted to see those clothes — things she had used and worn. Quite close he stood, almost touching it. The next second he had touched it. His knuckles struck upon the wood.

Why he knocked is hard to say. It was an instinctive movement probably. Something in his deepest self dictated it — ordered it. He knocked at the door. And the dull sound upon the wood into the stillness of that room brought — horror. Why it should have done so he found it as hard to explain to himself as why he should have felt impelled to knock. The fact remains that when he heard the faint reverberation inside the cupboard, it brought with it so vivid a realisation of the woman's presence that he stood there shivering upon the floor with a dreadful sense of anticipation: he almost expected to hear an answering knock from within — the rustling of the hanging skirts perhaps — or, worse still, to see the locked door slowly open towards him.

And from that moment, he declares that in some way or other he must have partially lost control of himself, or at least of his better judgment; for he became possessed by such an overmastering desire to tear open that cupboard door and see the clothes within, that he tried every key in the room in the vain effort to unlock it, and then, finally, before he quite realised what he was doing — rang the bell!

But, having rung the bell for no obvious or intelligent reason at two o'clock in the morning, he then stood waiting in the middle of the floor for the servant to come, conscious for the first time that something outside his ordinary self had pushed him towards the act. It was almost like an internal voice that directed him ... and thus, when at last steps came down the passage and he faced the cross and sleepy chambermaid, amazed at being summoned at such an hour, he found no difficulty in the matter of what he should say. For the same power that insisted he should open the cupboard door also impelled him to utter words over which he apparently had no control.

"It's not *you* I rang for!" he said with decision and impatience, "I want a man. Wake the porter and send him up to me at once — hurry! I tell you, hurry —— !"

And when the girl had gone, frightened at his earnestness, Minturn realised that the words surprised himself as much as they surprised her. Until they were out of his mouth he had not known what exactly he was saying. But now he understood that some force foreign to his own personality was using his mind and organs. The black depression that had possessed him a few moments before was also part of it. The powerful mood of this vanished woman had somehow momentarily taken possession of him — communicated, possibly, by the atmosphere of things in the room still belonging to her. But even now, when the porter, without coat or collar, stood beside him in the room, he did not understand *why* he insisted, with a positive fury admitting no denial, that the key of that cupboard must be found and the door instantly opened.

The scene was a curious one. After some perplexed whispering with the chambermaid at the end of the passage, the porter managed to find and produce the key in question. Neither he nor the girl knew clearly what this excited Englishman was up to, or why he was so passionately intent upon opening the cupboard at two o'clock in the morning. They watched him with an air of wondering what was going to happen next. But something of his curious earnestness, even of his late fear, communicated itself to them, and the sound of the key grating in the lock made them both jump.

They held their breath as the creaking door swung slowly open. All heard the clatter of that other key as it fell against the wooden floor — within. The cupboard had been locked *from the inside*. But it was the scared housemaid, from her position in the corridor, who first saw — and with a wild scream fell crashing against the bannisters.

The porter made no attempt to save her. The schoolmaster and himself made a simultaneous rush towards the door, now wide open. They, too, had seen.

There were no clothes, skirts or blouses on the pegs, but, all by itself, from an iron hook in the centre, they saw the body of the Englishwoman hanging by the neck, the head bent horribly forwards, the tongue protruding. Jarred by the movement of unlocking, the body swung slowly round to face them. ... Pinned upon the inside of the door was a hotel envelope with the following words pencilled in straggling writing:

“Tired — unhappy — hopelessly depressed. ... I cannot face life any longer. ... All is black. I must put an end to it. ... I meant to do it on the mountains, but was afraid. I slipped back to my room unobserved. This way is easiest and best. ...”

VIII

CAIN’S ATONEMENT

SO MANY THOUSANDS to-day have deliberately put Self aside, and are ready to yield their lives for an ideal, that it is not surprising a few of them should have registered experiences of a novel order. For to step aside from Self is to enter a larger world, to be open to new impressions. If Powers of Good exist in the universe at all, they can hardly be inactive at the present time. ...

The case of two men, who may be called Jones and Smith, occurs to the mind in this connection. Whether a veil actually was lifted for a moment, or whether the tension of long and terrible months resulted in an exaltation of emotion, the experience claims significance. Smith, to whom the experience came, holds the firm belief that it was real. Jones, though it involved him too, remained unaware.

It is a somewhat personal story, their peculiar relationship dating from early youth: a kind of unwilling antipathy was born between them, yet an antipathy that had no touch of hate or even of dislike. It was rather in the nature of an instinctive rivalry. Some tie operated that flung them ever into the same arena with strange persistence, and ever as opponents. An inevitable fate delighted to throw them together in a sense that made them rivals; small as well as large affairs betrayed this malicious tendency of the gods. It showed itself in earliest days, at school, at Cambridge, in travel, even in house-parties and the lighter social intercourse. Though distant cousins, their families were not intimate, and there was no obvious reason why their paths should fall so persistently together. Yet their paths did so, crossing and recrossing in the way described. Sooner or later, in all his undertakings, Smith would note the shadow of Jones darkening the ground in front of him; and later, when called to the Bar in his chosen profession, he found most frequently that the learned counsel in opposition to him was the owner of this shadow, Jones. In another matter, too, they became rivals, for the same girl, oddly enough, attracted both, and though she accepted neither offer of marriage (during Smith’s lifetime!), the attitude between them was that of unwilling rivals. For they were friends as well.

Jones, it appears, was hardly aware that any rivalry existed; he did not think of Smith as an opponent, and as an adversary, never. He did notice, however, the constantly recurring meetings, for more than once he commented on them with good-humoured amusement. Smith, on the other hand, was conscious of a depth and strength in the tie that certainly intrigued him; being of a thoughtful, introspective nature, he was keenly sensible of the strange competition in their lives, and sought in various ways for its explanation, though without success. The desire to find out was very strong in him. And this was natural enough, owing to the singular fact that in all their battles he was the one to lose. Invariably Jones got the best of every conflict. Smith always paid; sometimes he paid with interest.

Occasionally, too, he seemed forced to injure himself while contributing to his cousin's success. It was very curious. He reflected much upon it; he wondered what the origin of their tie and rivalry might be, but especially why it was that he invariably lost, and why he was so often obliged to help his rival to the point even of his own detriment. Tempted to bitterness sometimes, he did not yield to it, however; the relationship remained frank and pleasant; if anything, it deepened.

He remembered once, for instance, giving his cousin a chance introduction which yet led, a little later, to the third party offering certain evidence which lost him an important case — Jones, of course, winning it. The third party, too, angry at being dragged into the case, turned hostile to him, thwarting various subsequent projects. In no other way could Jones have procured this particular evidence; he did not know of its existence even. That chance introduction did it all. There was nothing the least dishonourable on the part of Jones — it was just the chance of the dice. The dice were always loaded against Smith — and there were other instances of similar kind.

About this time, moreover, a singular feeling that had lain vaguely in his mind for some years past, took more definite form. It suddenly assumed the character of a conviction, that yet had no evidence to support it. A voice, long whispering in the depths of him, became much louder, grew into a statement that he accepted without further ado: "I'm paying off a debt," he phrased it, "an old, old debt is being discharged. I owe him this — my help and so forth." He accepted it, that is, as just; and this certainty of justice kept sweet his heart and mind, shutting the door on bitterness or envy. The thought, however, though it recurred persistently with each encounter, brought no explanation.

When the war broke out both offered their services; as members of the O.T.C., they got commissions quickly; but it was a chance remark of Smith's that made his friend join the very regiment he himself was in. They trained together, were in the same retreats and the same advances together. Their friendship deepened. Under the stress of circumstances the tie did not dissolve, but strengthened. It was indubitably real, therefore. Then, oddly enough, they were both wounded in the same engagement.

And it was here the remarkable fate that jointly haunted them betrayed itself more clearly than in any previous incident of their long relationship — Smith was wounded in the act of protecting his cousin. How it happened is confusing to a layman, but each apparently was leading a bombing-party, and the two parties came together. They found themselves shoulder to shoulder, both brimmed with that pluck which is complete indifference to Self; they exchanged a word of excited greeting; and the same second one of those rare opportunities of advantage presented itself which only the highest courage could make use of. Neither, certainly, was thinking of personal reward; it was merely that each saw the chance by which instant heroism might gain a surprise advantage for their side. The risk was heavy, but there *was* a chance; and success would mean a decisive result, to say nothing of high distinction for the man who obtained it — if he survived. Smith, being a few yards ahead of his cousin, had the moment in his grasp. He was in the act of dashing forward when something made him pause. A bomb in mid-air, flung from the opposing trench, was falling; it seemed immediately above him; he saw that it would just miss himself, but land full upon his cousin — whose head was turned the other way. By stretching out his hand, Smith knew he could field it like a cricket ball. There was an interval of a second and a half, he judged. He hesitated — perhaps a quarter of a second — then he acted. He caught it. It was the obvious thing to do. He flung it back into the opposing trench.

The rapidity of thought is hard to realise. In that second and a half Smith was aware of many things: He saved his cousin's life unquestionably; unquestionably also Jones seized the opportunity that otherwise was his cousin's. But it was neither of these reflections that filled Smith's mind. The dominant impression was another. It flashed into actual words inside his excited brain: “I must risk it. I owe it to him — and more besides!” He was, further, aware of another impulse than the obvious one. In the first fraction of a second it was overwhelmingly established. And it was this: that the entire episode was familiar to him. A subtle familiarity was present. All this had happened before. He had already — somewhere, somehow — seen death descending upon his cousin from the air. Yet with a difference. The “difference” escaped him; the familiarity was vivid. That he missed the deadly detonators in making the catch, or that the fuse delayed, he called good luck. He only remembers that he flung the gruesome weapon back whence it had come, and that its explosion in the opposite trench materially helped his cousin to find glory in the place of death. The slight delay, however, resulted in his receiving a bullet through the chest — a bullet he would not otherwise have received, presumably.

It was some days later, gravely wounded, that he discovered his cousin in another bed across the darkened floor. They exchanged remarks. Jones was already “decorated,” it seemed, having snatched success from his cousin’s hands, while little aware whose help had made it easier. ... And once again there stole across the inmost mind of Smith that strange, insistent whisper: “I owed it to him ... but, by God, I owe more than that ... I mean to pay it too ...!”

There was not a trace of bitterness or envy now; only this profound conviction, of obscurest origin, that it was right and absolutely just — full, honest repayment of a debt incurred. Some ancient balance of account was being settled; there was no “chance”; injustice and caprice played no role at all. ... And a deeper understanding of life’s ironies crept into him; for if everything was *just*, there was no room for whimpering.

And the voice persisted above the sound of busy footsteps in the ward: “I owe it ... I’ll pay it gladly ...!”

Through the pain and weakness the whisper died away. He was exhausted. There were periods of unconsciousness, but there were periods of half-consciousness as well; then flashes of another kind of consciousness altogether, when, bathed in high, soft light, he was aware of things he could not quite account for. He *saw*. It was absolutely real. Only, the critical faculty was gone. He did not question what he saw, as he stared across at his cousin’s bed. He knew. Perhaps the beaten, worn-out body let something through at last. The nerves, over-strained to numbness, lay very still. The physical system, battered and depleted, made no cry. The clamour of the flesh was hushed. He was aware, however, of an undeniable exaltation of the spirit in him, as he lay and gazed towards his cousin's bed. ...

Across the night of time, it seemed to him, the picture stole before his inner eye with a certainty that left no room for doubt. It was not the cells of memory in his brain of To-day that gave up their dead, it was the eternal Self in him that remembered and understood — the soul. ...

With that satisfaction which is born of full comprehension, he watched the light glow and spread about the little bed. Thick matting deadened the footsteps of nurses, orderlies, doctors. New cases were brought in, "old" cases were carried out; he ignored them; he saw only the light above his cousin's bed grow stronger. He lay still and stared. It came neither from the ceiling nor the floor; it unfolded like a cloud of shining smoke. And the little lamp, the sheets, the figure framed between them — all these slid cleverly away and vanished utterly. He stood in another place that had lain behind all these appearances — a landscape with wooded hills, a foaming river, the sun just sinking below the forest, and dusk creeping from a gorge along the lonely banks. In the warm air there was a perfume of great flowers and heavy-scented trees; there were fire-flies, and the taste of spray from the tumbling river was on his lips. Across the water a large bird, flapped its heavy wings, as it moved down-stream to find another fishing place. For he and his companion had disturbed it as they broke out of the thick foliage and reached the river-bank. The companion, moreover, was his brother; they ever hunted together; there was a passionate link between them born of blood and of affection — they were twins. ...

It all was as clear as though of Yesterday. In his heart was the lust of the hunt; in his blood was the lust of woman; and thick behind these lurked the jealousy and fierce desire of a primitive day. But, though clear as of Yesterday, he knew that it was of long, long ago. ... And his brother came up close beside him, resting his bloody spear with a clattering sound against the boulders on the shore. He saw the gleaming of the metal in the sunset, he saw the shining glitter of the spray upon the boulders, he saw his brother's eyes look straight into his own. And in them shone a light that was neither the reflection of the sunset, nor the excitement of the hunt just over.

“It escaped us,” said his brother. “Yet I know my first spear struck.”

“It followed the fawn that crossed,” was the reply. “Besides, we came down wind, thus giving it warning. Our flocks, at any rate, are safer — —”

The other laughed significantly.

“It is not the safety of our flocks that troubles me just now, brother,” he interrupted eagerly, while the light burned more deeply in his eyes. “It is, rather, that *she* waits for me by the fire across the river, and that I would get to her. With your help added to my love,” he went on in a trusting voice, “the gods have shown me the favour of true happiness!” He pointed with his spear to a camp-fire on the farther bank, turning his head as he strode to plunge into the stream and swim across.

For an instant, then, the other felt his natural love turn into bitter hate. His own fierce passion, unconfessed, concealed, burst into instant flame. That the girl should become his brother’s wife sent the blood surging through his veins in fury. He felt his life and all that he desired go down in ashes. ... He watched his brother stride towards the water, the deer-skin cast across one naked shoulder — when another object caught his practised eye. In mid-air it passed suddenly, like a shining gleam; it seemed to hang a second; then it swept swiftly forward past his head — and downward. It had leaped with a blazing fury from the overhanging bank behind; he saw the blood still streaming from its wounded flank. It must land — he saw it with a secret, awful pleasure — full upon the striding figure, whose head was turned away!

The swiftness of that leap, however, was not so swift but that he could easily have used his spear. Indeed, he gripped it strongly. His skill, his strength, his aim — he knew them well enough. But hate and love, fastening upon his heart, held all his muscles still. He hesitated. He was no murderer, yet he paused. He heard the roar, the ugly thud, the crash, the cry for help — too late ... and when, an instant afterwards, his steel plunged into the great beast’s heart, the human heart and life he might have saved lay still for ever. ... He heard the water rushing past, an icy wind came down the gorge against his naked back, he saw the fire shine upon the farther bank ... and the figure of a girl in skins was wading across, seeking out the shallow places in the dusk, and calling wildly as she came. ... Then darkness hid the entire landscape, yet a darkness that was deeper, bluer than the velvet of the night alone. ...

And he shrieked aloud in his remorseful anguish: “May the gods forgive me, for I did not mean it! Oh, that I might undo ... that I might repay ...!”

That his cries disturbed the weary occupants in more than one bed is certain, but he remembers chiefly that a nurse was quickly by his side, and that something she gave him soothed his violent pain and helped him into deeper sleep again. There was, he noticed, anyhow, no longer the soft, clear, blazing light about his cousin’s bed. He saw only the faint glitter of the oil-lamps down the length of the great room. ...

And some weeks later he went back to fight. The picture, however, never left his memory. It stayed with him as an actual reality that was neither delusion nor hallucination. He believed that he understood at last the meaning of the tie that had fettered him and puzzled him so long. The memory of those far-off days of shepherding beneath the stars of long ago remained vividly beside him. He kept his secret, however. In many a talk with his cousin beneath the nearer stars of Flanders no word of it ever passed his lips.

The friendship between them, meanwhile, experienced a curious deepening, though unacknowledged in any spoken words. Smith, at any rate, on his side, put into it an affection that was a brave man’s love. He watched over his cousin. In the fighting especially, when possible, he sought to protect and shield him, regardless of his own personal safety. He delighted secretly in the honours his cousin had already won. He himself was not yet even mentioned in dispatches, and no public distinction of any kind had come his way.

His V.C. eventually — well, he was no longer occupying his body when it was bestowed. He had already “left.”... He was now conscious, possibly, of other experiences besides that one of ancient, primitive days when he and his brother were shepherding beneath other stars. But the reckless heroism which saved his cousin under fire may later enshrine another memory which, at some far future time, shall reawaken as a “hallucination” from a Past that to-day is called the Present. ... The notion, at any rate, flashed across his mind before he “left.”

IX

AN EGYPTIAN HORNET

THE WORD HAS an angry, malignant sound that brings the idea of attack vividly into the mind. There is a vicious sting about it somewhere — even a foreigner, ignorant of the meaning, must feel it. A hornet is wicked; it darts and stabs; it pierces, aiming without provocation for the face and eyes. The name suggests a metallic droning of evil wings, fierce flight, and poisonous assault. Though black and yellow, it sounds scarlet. There is blood in it. A striped tiger of the air in concentrated form! There is no escape — if it attacks.

In Egypt an ordinary bee is the size of an English hornet, but the Egyptian hornet is enormous. It is truly monstrous — an ominous, dying terror. It shares that universal quality of the land of the Sphinx and Pyramids — great size. It is a formidable insect, worse than scorpion or tarantula. The Rev. James Milligan, meeting one for the first time, realised the meaning of another word as well, a word he used prolifically in his eloquent sermons — devil.

One morning in April, when the heat began to bring the insects out, he rose as usual betimes and went across the wide stone corridor to his bath. The desert already glared in through the open windows. The heat would be afflicting later in the day, but at this early hour the cool north wind blew pleasantly down the hotel passages. It was Sunday, and at half-past eight o’clock he would appear to conduct the morning service for the English visitors. The floor of the passage-way was cold beneath his feet in their thin native slippers of bright yellow. He was neither young nor old; his salary was comfortable; he had a competency of his own, without wife or children to absorb it; the dry climate had been recommended to him; and — the big hotel took him in for next to nothing. And he was thoroughly pleased with himself, for he was a sleek, vain, pompous, well-advertised personality, but mean as a rat. No worries of any kind were on his mind as, carrying sponge and towel, scented soap and a bottle of Scrubb’s ammonia, he travelled amiably across the deserted, shining corridor to the bathroom. And nothing went wrong with the Rev. James Milligan until he opened the door, and his eye fell upon a dark, suspicious-looking object clinging to the window-pane in front of him.

And even then, at first, he felt no anxiety or alarm, but merely a natural curiosity to know exactly what it was — this little clot of an odd-shaped, elongated thing that stuck there on the wooden framework six feet before his aquiline nose. He went straight up to it to see — then stopped dead. His heart gave a distinct, unclerical leap. His lips formed themselves into unregenerate shape. He gasped: “Good God! What is it?” For something unholy, something wicked as a secret sin, stuck there before his eyes in the patch of blazing sunshine. He caught his breath.

For a moment he was unable to move, as though the sight half fascinated him. Then, cautiously and very slowly — stealthily, in fact — he withdrew towards the door he had just entered. Fearful of making the smallest sound, he retraced his steps on tiptoe. His yellow slippers shuffled. His dry sponge fell, and bounded till it settled, rolling close beneath the horribly attractive object facing him. From the safety of the open door, with ample space for retreat behind him, he paused and stared. His entire being focused itself in his eyes. It was a hornet that he saw. It hung there, motionless and threatening, between him and the bathroom door. And at first he merely exclaimed — below his breath— “Good God! It’s an Egyptian hornet!”

Being a man with a reputation for decided action, however, he soon recovered himself. He was well schooled in self-control. When people left his church at the beginning of the sermon, no muscle of his face betrayed the wounded vanity and annoyance that burned deep in his heart. But a hornet sitting directly in his path was a very different matter. He realised in a flash that he was poorly clothed — in a word, that he was practically half naked.

From a distance he examined this intrusion of the devil. It was calm and very still. It was wonderfully made, both before and behind. Its wings were folded upon its terrible body. Long, sinuous things, pointed like temptation, barbed as well, stuck out of it. There was poison, and yet grace, in its exquisite presentment. Its shiny black was beautiful, and the yellow stripes upon its sleek, curved abdomen were like the gleaming ornaments upon some feminine body of the seductive world he preached against. Almost, he saw an abandoned dancer on the stage. And then, swiftly in his impressionable soul, the simile changed, and he saw instead more blunt and aggressive forms of destruction. The well-filled body, tapering to a horrid point, reminded him of those perfect engines of death that reduce hundreds to annihilation unawares — torpedoes, shells, projectiles, crammed with secret, desolating powers. Its wings, its awful, quiet head, its delicate, slim waist, its stripes of brilliant saffron — all these seemed the concentrated prototype of abominations made cleverly by the brain of man, and beautifully painted to disguise their invisible freight of cruel death.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, ashamed of his prolific imagination. "It's only a hornet after all — an insect!" And he contrived a hurried, careful plan. He aimed a towel at it, rolled up into a ball — but did not throw it. He might miss. He remembered that his ankles were unprotected. Instead, he paused again, examining the black and yellow object in safe retirement near the door, as one day he hoped to watch the world in leisurely retirement in the country. It did not move. It was fixed and terrible. It made no sound. Its wings were folded. Not even the black antennae, blunt at the tips like clubs, showed the least stir or tremble. It breathed, however. He watched the rise and fall of the evil body; it breathed air in and out as he himself did. The creature, he realised, had lungs and heart and organs. It had a brain! Its mind was active all this time. It knew it was being watched. It merely waited. Any second, with a whiz of fury, and with perfect accuracy of aim, it might dart at him and strike. If he threw the towel and missed — it certainly would.

There were other occupants of the corridor, however, and a sound of steps approaching gave him the decision to act. He would lose his bath if he hesitated much longer. He felt ashamed of his timidity, though "pusillanimity" was the word thought selected owing to the pulpit vocabulary it was his habit to prefer. He went with extreme caution towards the bathroom door, passing the point of danger so close that his skin turned hot and cold. With one foot gingerly extended, he recovered his sponge. The hornet did not move a muscle. But — it had seen him pass. It merely waited. All dangerous insects had that trick. It knew quite well he was inside; it knew quite well he must come out a few minutes later; it also knew quite well that he was — naked.

Once inside the little room, he closed the door with exceeding gentleness, lest the vibration might stir the fearful insect to attack. The bath was already filled, and he plunged to his neck with a feeling of comparative security. A window into the outside passage he also closed, so that nothing could possibly come in. And steam soon charged the air and left its blurred deposit on the glass. For ten minutes he could enjoy himself and pretend that he was safe. For ten minutes he did so. He behaved carelessly, as though nothing mattered, and as though all the courage in the world were his. He splashed and soaped and sponged, making a lot of reckless noise. He got out and dried himself. Slowly the steam subsided, the air grew clearer, he put on dressing-gown and slippers. It was time to go out.

Unable to devise any further reason for delay, he opened the door softly half an inch — peeped out — and instantly closed it again with a resounding bang. He had heard a drone of wings. The insect had left its perch and now buzzed upon the floor directly in his path. The air seemed full of stings; he felt stabs all over him; his unprotected portions winced with the expectancy of pain. The beast knew he was coming out, and was waiting for him. In that brief instant he had felt its sting all over him, on his unprotected ankles, on his back, his neck, his cheeks, in his eyes, and on the bald clearing that adorned his Anglican head. Through the closed door he heard the ominous, dull murmur of his striped adversary as it beat its angry wings. Its oiled and wicked sting shot in and out with fury. Its deft legs worked. He saw its tiny waist already writhing with the lust of battle. Ugh! That tiny waist! A moment's steady nerve and he could have severed that cunning body from the directing brain with one swift, well-directed thrust. But his nerve had utterly deserted him.

Human motives, even in the professedly holy, are an involved affair at any time. Just now, in the Rev. James Milligan, they were quite inextricably mixed. He claims this explanation, at any rate, in excuse of his abominable subsequent behaviour. For, exactly at this moment, when he had decided to admit cowardice by ringing for the Arab servant, a step was audible in the corridor outside, and courage came with it into his disreputable heart. It was the step of the man he cordially "disapproved of," using the pulpit version of "hated and despised." He had overstayed his time, and the bath was in demand by Mr. Mullins. Mr. Mullins invariably followed him at seven-thirty; it was now a quarter to eight. And Mr. Mullins was a wretched drinking man— "a sot."

In a flash the plan was conceived and put into execution. The temptation, of course, was of the devil. Mr. Milligan hid the motive from himself, pretending he hardly recognised it. The plan was what men call a dirty trick; it was also irresistibly seductive. He opened the door, stepped boldly, nose in the air, right over the hideous insect on the floor, and fairly pranced into the outer passage. The brief transit brought a hundred horrible sensations — that the hornet would rise and sting his leg, that it would cling to his dressing-gown and stab his spine, that he would step upon it and die, like Achilles, of a heel exposed. But with these, and conquering them, was one other stronger emotion that robbed the lesser terrors of their potency — that Mr. Mullins would run precisely the same risks five seconds later, unprepared. He heard the gloating insect buzz and scratch the oil-cloth. But it was behind him. *He* was safe!

"Good morning to you, Mr. Mullins," he observed with a gracious smile. "I trust I have not kept you waiting."

"Mornin'!" grunted Mullins sourly in reply, as he passed him with a distinctly hostile and contemptuous air. For Mullins, though depraved, perhaps, was an honest man, abhorring parsons and making no secret of his opinions — whence the bitter feeling.

All men, except those very big ones who are supermen, have something astonishingly despicable in them. The despicable thing in Milligan came uppermost now. He fairly chuckled. He met the snub with a calm, forgiving smile, and continued his shambling gait with what dignity he could towards his bedroom opposite. Then he turned his head to see. His enemy would meet an infuriated hornet — an Egyptian hornet! — and might not notice it. He might step on it. He might not. But he was bound to disturb it, and rouse it to attack. The chances were enormously on the clerical side. And its sting meant death.

"May God forgive me!" ran subconsciously through his mind. And side by side with the repentant prayer ran also a recognition of the tempter's eternal skill: "I hope the devil it will sting him!"

It happened very quickly. The Rev. James Milligan lingered a moment by his door to watch. He saw Mullins, the disgusting Mullins, step blithely into the bathroom passage; he saw him pause, shrink back, and raise his arm to protect his face. He heard him swear out aloud: "What's the d —— d thing doing here? Have I really got ’em again —— ?” And then he heard him laugh — a hearty, guffawing laugh of genuine relief — — “It’s *real*!”

The moment of revulsion was overwhelming. It filled the churchly heart with anguish and bitter disappointment. For a space he hated the whole race of men.

For the instant Mr. Mullins realised that the insect was not a fiery illusion of his disordered nerves, he went forward without the smallest hesitation. With his towel he knocked down the flying terror. Then he stooped. He gathered up the venomous thing his well-aimed blow had stricken so easily to the floor. He advanced with it, held at arm’s length, to the window. He tossed it out carelessly. The Egyptian hornet flew away uninjured, and Mr. Mullins — the Mr. Mullins who drank, gave nothing to the church, attended no services, hated parsons, and proclaimed the fact with enthusiasm — this same detestable Mr. Mullins went to his unearned bath without a scratch. But first he saw his enemy standing in the doorway across the passage, watching him — and understood. That was the awful part of it. Mullins would make a story of it, and the story would go the round of the hotel.

The Rev. James Milligan, however, proved that his reputation for self-control was not undeserved. He conducted morning service half an hour later with an expression of peace upon his handsome face. He conquered all outward sign of inward spiritual vexation; the wicked, he consoled himself, ever flourish like green bay trees. It was notorious that the righteous never have any luck at all! That was bad enough. But what was worse — and the Rev. James Milligan remembered for very long — was the superior ease with which Mullins had relegated both himself and hornet to the same level of comparative insignificance. Mullins ignored them both — which proved that he felt himself superior. Infinitely worse than the sting of any hornet in the world: he really *was* superior.

X

BY WATER

THE NIGHT BEFORE young Larsen left to take up his new appointment in Egypt he went to the clairvoyante. He neither believed nor disbelieved. He felt no interest, for he already knew his past and did not wish to know his future. “Just to please me, Jim,” the girl pleaded. “The woman is wonderful. Before I had been five minutes with her she told me your initials, so there *must* be something in it.” “She read your thought,” he smiled indulgently. “Even I can do that!” But the girl was in earnest. He yielded; and that night at his farewell dinner he came to give his report of the interview.

The result was meagre and unconvincing: money was coming to him, he was soon to make a voyage, and — he would never marry. “So you see how silly it all is,” he laughed, for they were to be married when his first promotion came. He gave the details, however, making a little story of it in the way he knew she loved.

“But was that all, Jim?” The girl asked it, looking rather hard into his face. “Aren’t you hiding something from me?” He hesitated a moment, then burst out laughing at her clever discernment. “There *was* a little more,” he confessed, “but you take it all so seriously; I — —”

He had to tell it then, of course. The woman had told him a lot of gibberish about friendly and unfriendly elements. “She said water was unfriendly to me; I was to be careful of water, or else I should come to harm by it. *Fresh* water only,” he hastened to add, seeing that the idea of shipwreck was in her mind.

“Drowning?” the girl asked quickly.

“Yes,” he admitted with reluctance, but still laughing; “she did say drowning, though drowning in no ordinary way.”

The girl’s face showed uneasiness a moment. “What does that mean — drowning in no ordinary way?” she asked, a catch in her breath.

But that he could not tell her, because he did not know himself. He gave, therefore, the exact words: “You will drown, but will not know you drown.”

It was unwise of him. He wished afterwards he had invented a happier report, or had kept this detail back. “I’m safe in Egypt, anyhow,” he laughed. “I shall be a clever man if I can find enough water in the desert to do me harm!” And all the way from Trieste to Alexandria he remembered the promise she had extracted — that he would never once go on the Nile unless duty made it imperative for him to do so. He kept that promise like the literal, faithful soul he was. His love was equal to the somewhat quixotic sacrifice it occasionally involved. Fresh water in Egypt there was practically none other, and in any case the natrum works where his duty lay had their headquarters some distance out into the desert. The river, with its banks of welcome, refreshing verdure, was not even visible.

Months passed quickly, and the time for leave came within measurable distance. In the long interval luck had played the cards kindly for him, vacancies had occurred, early promotion seemed likely, and his letters were full of plans to bring her out to share a little house of their own. His health, however, had not improved; the dryness did not suit him; even in this short period his blood had thinned, his nervous system deteriorated, and, contrary to the doctor’s prophecy, the waterless air had told upon his sleep. A damp climate liked him best, and once the sun had touched him with its fiery finger.

His letters made no mention of this. He described the life to her, the work, the sport, the pleasant people, and his chances of increased pay and early marriage. And a week before he sailed he rode out upon a final act of duty to inspect the latest diggings his company were making. His course lay some twenty miles into the desert behind El-Chobak and towards the limestone hills of Guebel Haidi, and he went alone, carrying lunch and tea, for it was the weekly holiday of Friday, and the men were not at work.

The accident was ordinary enough. On his way back in the heat of early afternoon his pony stumbled against a boulder on the treacherous desert film, threw him heavily, broke the girth, bolted before he could seize the reins again, and left him stranded some ten or twelve miles from home. There was a pain in his knee that made walking difficult, a buzzing in his head that troubled sight and made the landscape swim, while, worse than either, his provisions, fastened to the saddle, had vanished with the frightened pony into those blazing leagues of sand. He was alone in the

Desert, beneath the pitiless afternoon sun, twelve miles of utterly exhausting country between him and safety.

Under normal conditions he could have covered the distance in four hours, reaching home by dark; but his knee pained him so that a mile an hour proved the best he could possibly do. He reflected a few minutes. The wisest course was to sit down and wait till the pony told its obvious story to the stable, and help should come. And this was what he did, for the scorching heat and glare were dangerous; they were terrible; he was shaken and bewildered by his fall, hungry and weak into the bargain; and an hour's painful scrambling over the baked and burning little gorges must have speedily caused complete prostration. He sat down and rubbed his aching knee. It was quite a little adventure. Yet, though he knew the Desert might not be lightly trifled with, he felt at the moment nothing more than this — and the amusing description of it he would give in his letter, or — intoxicating thought — by word of mouth. In the heat of the sun he began to feel drowsy. A soft torpor crept over him. He dozed. He fell asleep.

It was a long, a dreamless sleep ... for when he woke at length the sun had just gone down, the dusk lay awfully upon the enormous desert, and the air was chilly. The cold had waked him. Quickly, as though on purpose, the red glow faded from the sky; the first stars shone; it was dark; the heavens were deep violet. He looked round and realised that his sense of direction had gone entirely. Great hunger was in him. The cold already was bitter as the wind rose, but the pain in his knee having eased, he got up and walked a little — and in a moment lost sight of the spot where he had been lying. The shadowy desert swallowed it. "Ah," he realised, "this is not an English field or moor. I'm in the Desert!" The safe thing to do was to remain exactly where he was; only thus could the rescuers find him; once he wandered he was done for. It was strange the search-party had not yet arrived. To keep warm, however, he was compelled to move, so he made a little pile of stones to mark the place, and walked round and round it in a circle of some dozen yards' diameter. He limped badly, and the hunger gnawed dreadfully; but, after all, the adventure was not so terrible. The amusing side of it kept uppermost still. Though fragile in body, his spirit was not unduly timid or imaginative; he *could* last out the night, or, if the worst came to the worst, the next day as well. But when he watched the little group of stones, he saw that there were dozens of them, scores, hundreds, thousands of these little groups of stones. The desert’s face, of course, is thickly strewn with them. The original one was lost in the first five minutes. So he sat down again. But the biting cold, and the wind that licked his very skin beneath the light clothing, soon forced him up again. It was ominous; and the night huge and shelterless. The shaft of green zodiacal light that hung so strangely in the western sky for hours had faded away; the stars were out in their bright thousands; no guide was anywhere; the wind moaned and puffed among the sandy mounds; the vast sheet of desert stretched appallingly upon the world; he heard the jackals cry. ...

And with the jackals’ cry came suddenly the unwelcome realisation that no play was in this adventure any more, but that a bleak reality stared at him through the surrounding darkness. He faced it — at bay. He was genuinely lost. Thought blocked in him. “I must be calm and think,” he said aloud. His voice woke no echo; it was small and dead; something gigantic ate it instantly. He got up and walked again. Why did no one come? Hours had passed. The pony had long ago found its stable, or — had it run madly in another direction altogether? He worked out possibilities, tightening his belt. The cold was searching; he never had been, never could be warm again; the hot sunshine of a few hours ago seemed the merest dream. Unfamiliar with hardship, he knew not what to do, but he took his coat and shirt off, vigorously rubbed his skin where the dried perspiration of the afternoon still caused clammy shivers, swung his arms furiously like a London cabman, and quickly dressed again. Though the wind upon his bare back was fearful, he felt warmer a little. He lay down exhausted, sheltered by an overhanging limestone crag, and took snatches of fitful dog’s-sleep, while the wind drove overhead and the dry sand pricked his skin. One face continually was near him; one pair of tender eyes; two dear hands smoothed him; he smelt the perfume of light brown hair. It was all natural enough. His whole thought, in his misery, ran to her in England — England where there were soft fresh grass, big sheltering trees, hemlock and honeysuckle in the hedges — while the hard black Desert guarded him, and consciousness dipped away at little intervals under this dry and pitiless Egyptian sky. ...

It was perhaps five in the morning when a voice spoke and he started up with a horrid jerk — the voice of that clairvoyante woman. The sentence died away into the darkness, but one word remained: *Water!* At first he wondered, but at once explanation came. Cause and effect were obvious.

The clue was physical. His body needed water, and so the thought came up into his mind. He was thirsty.

This was the moment when fear first really touched him. Hunger was manageable, more or less — for a day or two, certainly. But thirst! Thirst and the Desert were an evil pair that, by cumulative suggestion gathering since childhood days, brought terror in. Once in the mind it could not be dislodged. In spite of his best efforts, the ghastly thing grew passionately — because his thirst grew too. He had smoked much; had eaten spiced things at lunch; had breathed in alkali with the dry, scorched air. He searched for a cool flint pebble to put into his burning mouth, but found only angular scraps of dusty limestone. There were no pebbles here. The cold helped a little to counteract, but already he knew in himself subconsciously the dread of something that was coming. What was it? He tried to hide the thought and bury it out of sight. The utter futility of his tiny strength against the power of the universe appalled him. And then he knew. The merciless sun was on the way, already rising. Its return was like the presage of execution to him. ...

It came. With true horror he watched the marvellous swift dawn break over the sandy sea. The eastern sky glowed hurriedly as from crimson fires. Ridges, not noticeable in the starlight, turned black in endless series, like flat-topped billows of a frozen ocean. Wide streaks of blue and yellow followed, as the sky dropped sheets of faint light upon the wind-eaten cliffs and showed their under sides. They did not advance; they waited till the sun was up — and then they moved; they rose and sank; they shifted as the sunshine lifted them and the shadows crept away. But in an hour there would be no shadows any more. There would be no shade! ...

The little groups of stones began to dance. It was horrible. The unbroken, huge expanse lay round him, warming up, twelve hours of blazing hell to come. Already the monstrous Desert glared, each bit familiar, since each bit was a repetition of the bit before, behind, on either side. It laughed at guidance and direction. He rose and walked; for miles he walked, though how many, north, south, or west, he knew not. The frantic thing was in him now, the fury of the Desert; he took its pace, its endless, tireless stride, the stride of the burning, murderous Desert that is — waterless. He felt it alive — a blindly heaving desire in it to reduce him to its conditionless, awful dryness. He felt — yet knowing this was feverish and *not* to be believed —

that his own small life lay on its mighty surface, a mere dot in space, a mere heap of little stones. His emotions, his fears, his hopes, his ambition, his love — mere bundled group of little unimportant stones that danced with apparent activity for a moment, then were merged in the undifferentiated surface underneath. He was included in a purpose greater than his own.

The will made a plucky effort then. “A night and a day,” he laughed, while his lips cracked smartingly with the stretching of the skin, “what is it? Many a chap has lasted days and days ...!” Yes, only he was not of that rare company. He was ordinary, unaccustomed to privation, weak, untrained of spirit, unacquainted with stern resistance. He knew not how to spare himself. The Desert struck him where it pleased — all over. It played with him. His tongue was swollen; the parched throat could not swallow. He sank. ... An hour he lay there, just wit enough in him to choose the top of a mound where he could be most easily seen. He lay two hours, three, four hours. ... The heat blazed down upon him like a furnace. ... The sky, when he opened his eyes once, was empty ... then a speck became visible in the blue expanse; and presently another speck. They came from nowhere. They hovered very high, almost out of sight. They appeared, they disappeared, they — reappeared. Nearer and nearer they swung down, in sweeping stealthy circles ... little dancing groups of them, miles away but ever drawing closer — the vultures. ...

He had strained his ears so long for sounds of feet and voices that it seemed he could no longer hear at all. Hearing had ceased within him. Then came the water-dreams, with their agonising torture. He heard *that* ... heard it running in silvery streams and rivulets across green English meadows. It rippled with silvery music. He heard it splash. He dipped hands and feet and head in it — in deep, clear pools of generous depth. He drank; with his skin he drank, not with mouth and throat alone. Ice clinked in effervescent, sparkling water against a glass. He swam and plunged. Water gushed freely over back and shoulders, gallons and gallons of it, bathfuls and to spare, a flood of gushing, crystal, cool, life-giving liquid. ... And then he stood in a beech wood and felt the streaming deluge of delicious summer rain upon his face; heard it drip luxuriantly upon a million thirsty leaves. The wet trunks shone, the damp moss spread its perfume, ferns waved heavily in the moist atmosphere. He was soaked to the skin in it. A mountain torrent, fresh from fields of snow, foamed boiling past, and the spray fell in a shower upon his cheeks and hair. He dived — head foremost. ... Ah, he was up to the neck ... and *she* was with him; they were under water together; he saw her eyes gleaming into his own beneath the copious flood.

The voice, however, was not hers. ... "You will drown, yet you will not know you drown ...!" His swollen tongue called out a name. But no sound was audible. He closed his eyes. There came sweet unconsciousness. ...

A sound in that instant *was* audible, though. It was a voice — voices — and the thud of animal hoofs upon the sand. The specks had vanished from the sky as mysteriously as they came. And, as though in answer to the sound, he made a movement — an automatic, unconscious movement. He did not know he moved. And the body, uncontrolled, lost its precarious balance. He rolled; but he did not know he rolled. Slowly, over the edge of the sloping mound of sand, he turned sideways. Like a log of wood he slid gradually, turning over and over, nothing to stop him — to the bottom. A few feet only, and not even steep; just steep enough to keep rolling slowly. There was a — splash. But he did not know there was a splash.

They found him in a pool of water — one of these rare pools the Desert Bedouin mark preciously for their own. He had lain within three yards of it for hours. He was drowned ... but he did not know he drowned. ...

XI

H. S. H.

IN THE MOUNTAIN Club Hut, to which he had escaped after weeks of gaiety in the capital, Delane, young travelling Englishman, sat alone, and listened to the wind that beat the pines with violence. The firelight danced over the bare stone floor and raftered ceiling, giving the room an air of movement, and though the solid walls held steady against the wild spring hurricane, the cannonading of the wind seemed to threaten the foundations. For the mountain shook, the forest roared, and the shadows had a way of running everywhere as though the little building trembled. Delane watched and listened. He piled the logs on. From time to time he glanced nervously over his shoulder, restless, half uneasy, as a burst of spray from the branches dashed against the window, or a gust of unusual vehemence shook the door. Over-wearied with his long day's climb among impossible conditions, he now realised, in this mountain refuge, his utter loneliness; for his mind gave birth to that unwelcome symptom of true loneliness — that he was not, after all, alone. Continually he heard steps and voices in the storm. Another wanderer, another climber out of season like himself, would presently arrive, and sleep was out of the question until first he heard that knocking on the door. Almost — he expected some one.

He went for the tenth time to the little window. He peered forth into the thick darkness of the dropping night, shading his eyes against the streaming pane to screen the firelight in an attempt to see if another climber — perhaps a climber in distress — were visible. The surroundings were desolate and savage, well named the Devil's Saddle. Black-faced precipices, streaked with melting snow, rose towering to the north, where the heights were hidden in seas of vapour; waterfalls poured into abysses on two sides; a wall of impenetrable forest pressed up from the south; and the dangerous ridge he had climbed all day slid off wickedly into a sky of surging cloud. But no human figure was, of course, distinguishable, for both the lateness of the hour and the elemental fury of the night rendered it most unlikely. He turned away with a start, as the tempest delivered a blow with massive impact against his very face. Then, clearing the remnants of his frugal supper from the table, he hung his soaking clothes at a new angle before the fire, made sure the door was fastened on the inside, climbed into the bunk where white pillows and thick Austrian blankets looked so inviting, and prepared finally for sleep.

“I must be over-tired,” he sighed, after half an hour’s weary tossing, and went back to make up the sinking fire. Wood is plentiful in these climbers’ huts; he heaped it on. But this time he lit the little oil lamp as well, realising — though unwilling to acknowledge it — that it was not over-fatigue that banished sleep, but this unwelcome sense of expecting some one, of being not quite alone. For the feeling persisted and increased. He drew the wooden bench close up to the fire, turned the lamp as high as it would go, and wished unaccountably for the morning. Light was a very pleasant thing; and darkness now, for the first time since childhood, troubled him. It was outside; but it might so easily come in and swamp, obliterate, extinguish. The darkness seemed a positive thing. Already, somehow, it was established in his mind — this sense of enormous, aggressive darkness that veiled an undesirable hint of personality. Some shadow from the peaks or from the forest, immense and threatening, pervaded all his thought. “This can’t be entirely nerves,” he whispered to himself. “I’m not so tired as all that!” And he made the fire roar. He shivered and drew closer to the blaze. “I’m out of condition; that’s part of it,” he realised, and remembered with loathing the weeks of luxurious indulgence just behind him.

For Delane had rather wasted his year of educational travel. Straight from Oxford, and well supplied with money, he had first saturated his mind in the latest Continental thought — the science of France, the metaphysics and philosophy of Germany — and had then been caught aside by the gaiety of capitals where the lights are not turned out at midnight by a Sunday School police. He had been surfeited, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, till his mind and body longed hungrily for simple living again and simple teaching — above all, the latter. The Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom — for certain temperaments (as Blake forgot to add), of which Delane was one. For there was stuff in the youth, and the reaction had set in with violent abruptness. His system rebelled. He cut loose energetically from all soft delights, and craved for severity, pure air, solitude and hardship. Clean and simple conditions he must have without delay, and the tonic of physical battling. It was too early in the year to climb seriously, for the snow was still dangerous and the weather wild, but he had chosen this most isolated of all the mountain huts in order to make sure of solitude, and had come, without guide or companion, for a week's strenuous life in wild surroundings, and to take stock of himself with a view to full recovery.

And all day long as he climbed the desolate, unsafe ridge, his mind — good, wholesome, natural symptom — had reverted to his childhood days, to the solid worldly wisdom of his church-going father, and to the early teaching (oh, how sweet and refreshing in its literal spirit!) at his mother's knee. Now, as he watched the blazing logs, it came back to him again with redoubled force; the simple, precious, old-world stories of heaven and hell, of a paternal Deity, and of a daring, subtle, personal devil ——

The interruption to his thoughts came with startling suddenness, as the roaring night descended against the windows with a thundering violence that shook the walls and sucked the flame half-way up the wide stone chimney. The oil lamp flickered and went out. Darkness invaded the room for a second, and Delane sprang from his bench, thinking the wet snow had loosened far above and was about to sweep the hut into the depths. And he was still standing, trembling and uncertain, in the middle of the room, when a deep and sighing hush followed sharp upon the elemental outburst, and in the hush, like a whisper after thunder, he heard a curious steady sound that, at first, he thought must be a footstep by the door. It was then instantly repeated. But it was not a step. It was some one knocking on the heavy oaken panels — a firm, authoritative sound, as though the new arrival had the right to enter and was already impatient at the delay.

The Englishman recovered himself instantly, realising with keen relief the new arrival — at last.

"Another climber like myself, of course," he said, "or perhaps the man who comes to prepare the hut for others. The season has begun." And he went over quickly, without a further qualm, to unbolt the door.

"Forgive!" he exclaimed in German, as he threw it wide, "I was half asleep before the fire. It is a terrible night. Come in to food and shelter, for both are here, and you shall share such supper as I possess."

And a tall, cloaked figure passed him swiftly with a gust of angry wind from the impenetrable blackness of the world beyond. On the threshold, for a second, his outline stood full in the blaze of firelight with the sheet of darkness behind it, stately, erect, commanding, his cloak torn fiercely by the wind, but the face hidden by a low-brimmed hat; and an instant later the door shut with resounding clamour upon the hurricane, and the two men turned to confront one another in the little room.

Delane then realised two things sharply, both of them fleeting impressions, but acutely vivid: First, that the outside darkness seemed to have entered and established itself between him and the new arrival; and, secondly, that the stranger's face was difficult to focus for clear sight, although the covering hat was now removed. There was a blur upon it somewhere. And this the Englishman ascribed partly to the flickering effect of firelight, and partly to the lightning glare of the man's masterful and terrific eyes, which made his own sight waver in some curious fashion as he gazed upon him. These impressions, however, were but momentary and passing, due doubtless to the condition of his nerves and to the semi-shock of the dramatic, even theatrical entrance. Delane's senses, in this wild setting, were guilty of exaggeration. For now, while helping the man remove his cloak, speaking naturally of shelter, food, and the savage weather, he lost this first distortion and his mind recovered sane proportion. The stranger, after all, though striking, was not of appearance so uncommon as to cause alarm; the light and the low doorway had touched his stature with illusion. He dwindled. And the great eyes, upon calmer subsequent inspection, lost their original fierce lightning. The entering darkness, moreover, was but an effect of the upheaving night behind him as he strode across the threshold. The closed door proved it.

And yet, as Delane continued his quieter examination, there remained, he saw, the startling quality which had caused that first magnifying in his mind. His senses, while reporting accurately, insisted upon this arresting and uncommon touch: there was, about this late wanderer of the night, some evasive, lofty strangeness that set him utterly apart from ordinary men.

The Englishman examined him searchingly, surreptitiously, but with a touch of passionate curiosity he could not in the least account for nor explain. There were contradictions of perplexing character about him. For the first presentment had been of splendid youth, while on the face, though vigorous and gloriously handsome, he now discerned the stamp of tremendous age. It was worn and tired. While radiant with strength and health and power, it wore as well this certain signature of deep exhaustion that great experience rather than physical experience brings. Moreover, he discovered in it, in some way he could not hope to describe, man, woman, and child. There was a big, sad earnestness about it, yet a touch of humour too; patience, tenderness, and sweetness held the mouth; and behind the high pale forehead intellect sat enthroned and watchful. In it were both love and hatred, longing and despair; an expression of being ever on the defensive, yet hugely mutinous; an air both hunted and beseeching; great knowledge and great woe.

Delane gave up the search, aware that something unalterably splendid stood before him. Solemnity and beauty swept him too. His was never the grotesque assumption that man must be the highest being in the universe, nor that a thing is a miracle merely because it has never happened before. He groped, while explanation and analysis both halted. “A great teacher,” thought fluttered through him, “or a mighty rebel! A distinguished personality beyond all question! Who can he be?” There was something regal that put respect upon his imagination instantly. And he remembered the legend of the country-side that Ludwig of Bavaria was said to be about when nights were very wild. He wondered. Into his speech and manner crept unawares an attitude of deference that was almost reverence, and with it — whence came this other quality? — a searching pity.

“You must be wearied out,” he said respectfully, busying himself about the room, “as well as cold and wet. This fire will dry you, sir, and meanwhile I will prepare quickly such food as there is, if you will eat it.” For the other carried no knapsack, nor was he clothed for the severity of mountain travel.

“I have already eaten,” said the stranger courteously, “and, with my thanks to you, I am neither wet nor tired. The afflictions that I bear are of another kind, though ones that you shall more easily, I am sure, relieve.”

He spoke as a man whose words set troops in action, and Delane glanced at him, deeply moved by the surprising phrase, yet hardly marvelling that it should be so. He found no ready answer. But there was evidently question in his look, for the other continued, and this time with a smile that betrayed sheer winning beauty as of a tender woman:

“I saw the light and came to it. It is unusual — at this time.”

His voice was resonant, yet not deep. There was a ringing quality about it that the bare room emphasised. It charmed the young Englishman inexplicably. Also, it woke in him a sense of infinite pathos.

“You are a climber, sir, like myself,” Delane resumed, lifting his eyes a moment uneasily from the coffee he brewed over a corner of the fire. “You know this neighbourhood, perhaps? Better, at any rate, than I can know it?” His German halted rather. He chose his words with difficulty. There was uncommon trouble in his mind.

“I know all wild and desolate places,” replied the other, in perfect English, but with a wintry mournfulness in his voice and eyes, “for I feel at home in them, and their stern companionship my nature craves as solace. But, unlike yourself, I am no climber.”

“The heights have no attraction for you?” asked Delane, as he mingled steaming milk and coffee in the wooden bowl, marvelling what brought him then so high above the valleys. “It is their difficulty and danger that fascinate me always. I find the loneliness of the summits intoxicating in a sense.”

And, regardless of refusal, he set the bread and meat before him, the apple and the tiny packet of salt, then turned away to place the coffee pot beside the fire again. But as he did so a singular gesture of the other caught his eyes. Before touching bowl or plate, the stranger took the fruit and brushed his lips with it. He kissed it, then set it on the ground and crushed it into pulp beneath his heel. And, seeing this, the young Englishman knew something dreadfully arrested in his mind, for, as he looked away, pretending the act was unobserved, a thing of ice and darkness moved past him through the room, so that the pot trembled in his hand, rattling sharply against the hearthstone where he stooped. He could only interpret it as an act of madness, and the myth of the sad, drowned monarch wandering through this enchanted region, pressed into him again unsought and urgent. It was a full minute before he had control of his heart and hand again.

The bowl was half emptied, and the man was smiling — this time the smile of a child who implores the comfort of enveloping and understanding arms.

“I am a wanderer rather than a climber,” he was saying, as though there had been no interval, “for, though the lonely summits suit me well, I now find in them only — terror. My feet lose their sureness, and my head its steady balance. I prefer the hidden gorges of these mountains, and the shadows of the covering forests. My days" — his voice drew the loneliness of uttermost space into its piteous accents— "are passed in darkness. I can never climb again."

He spoke this time, indeed, as a man whose nerve was gone for ever. It was pitiable almost to tears. And Delane, unable to explain the amazing contradictions, felt recklessly, furiously drawn to this trapped wanderer with the mien of a king yet the air and speech sometimes of a woman and sometimes of an outcast child.

"Ah, then you have known accidents," Delane replied with outer calmness, as he lit his pipe, trying in vain to keep his hand as steady as his voice. "You have been in one perhaps. The effect, I have been told, is — —"

The power and sweetness in that resonant voice took his breath away as he heard it break in upon his own uncertain accents:

"I have — fallen," the stranger replied impressively, as the rain and wind wailed past the building mournfully, "yet a fall that was no part of any accident. For it was no common fall," the man added with a magnificent gesture of disdain, "while yet it broke my heart in two." He stooped a little as he uttered the next words with a crying pathos that an outcast woman might have used. "I am," he said, "engulfed in intolerable loneliness. I can never climb again."

With a shiver impossible to control, half of terror, half of pity, Delane moved a step nearer to the marvellous stranger. The spirit of Ludwig, exiled and distraught, had gripped his soul with a weakening terror; but now sheer beauty lifted him above all personal shrinking. There seemed some echo of lost divinity, worn, wild yet grandiose, through which this significant language strained towards a personal message — for himself.

"In loneliness?" he faltered, sympathy rising in a flood.

"For my Kingdom that is lost to me for ever," met him in deep, throbbing tones that set the air on fire. "For my imperial ancient heights that jealousy took from me — —"

The stranger paused, with an indescribable air of broken dignity and pain.

Outside the tempest paused a moment before the awful elemental crash that followed. A bellowing of many winds descended like artillery upon the world. A burst of smoke rushed from the fireplace about them both, shrouding the stranger momentarily in a flying veil. And Delane stood up, uncomfortable in his very bones. "What can it be?" he asked himself sharply. "Who is this being that he should use such language?" He watched alarm chase pity, aware that the conversation held something beyond experience. But the pity returned in greater and ever greater flood. And love surged through him too. It was significant, he remembered afterwards, that he felt it incumbent upon himself to stand. Curious, too, how the thought of that mad, drowned monarch haunted memory with such persistence. Some vast emotion that he could not name drove out his subsequent words. The smoke had cleared, and a strange, high stillness held the world. The rain streamed down in torrents, isolating these two somehow from the haunts of men. And the Englishman stared then into a countenance grown mighty with woe and loneliness. There stood darkly in it this incommunicable magnificence of pain that mingled awe with the pity he had felt. The kingly eyes looked clear into his own, completing his subjugation out of time. "I would follow you," ran his thought upon its knees, "follow you with obedience for ever and ever, even into a last damnation. For you are sublime. You shall come again into your Kingdom, if my own small worship — —"

Then blackness sponged the reckless thought away. He spoke in its place a more guarded, careful thing:

"I am aware," he faltered, yet conscious that he bowed, "of standing before a Great One of some world unknown to me. Who he may be I have but the privilege of wondering. He has spoken darkly of a Kingdom that is lost. Yet he is still, I see, a Monarch." And he lowered his head and shoulders involuntarily.

For an instant, then, as he said it, the eyes before him flashed their original terrific lightnings. The darkness of the common world faded before the entrance of an Outer Darkness. From gulfs of terror at his feet rose shadows out of the night of time, and a passionate anguish as of sudden madness seized his heart and shook it.

He listened breathlessly for the words that followed. It seemed some wind of unutterable despair passed in the breath from those non-human lips:

“I am still a Monarch, yes; but my Kingdom is taken from me, for I have no single subject. Lost in a loneliness that lies out of space and time, I am become a throneless Ruler, and my hopelessness is more than I can bear.” The beseeching pathos of the voice tore him in two. The Deity himself, it seemed, stood there accused of jealousy, of sin and cruelty. The stranger rose. The power about him brought the picture of a planet, throned in mid-heaven and poised beyond assault. “Not otherwise,” boomed the startling words as though an avalanche found syllables, “could I now show myself to — you.”

Delane was trembling horribly. He felt the next words slip off his tongue unconsciously. The shattering truth had dawned upon his soul at last.

“Then the light you saw, and came to —— ?” he whispered.

“Was the light in your heart that guided me,” came the answer, sweet, beguiling as the music in a woman’s tones, “the light of your instant, brief desire that held love in it.” He made an opening movement with his arms as he continued, smiling like stars in summer. “For you summoned me; summoned me by your dear and precious belief: how dear, how precious, none can know but I who stand before you.”

His figure drew up with an imperial air of proud dominion. His feet were set among the constellations. The opening movement of his arms continued slowly. And the music in his tones seemed merged in distant thunder.

“For your single, brief belief,” he smiled with the grandeur of a condescending Emperor, “shall give my vanished Kingdom back to me.”

And with an air of native majesty he held his hand out — to be kissed.

The black hurricane of night, the terror of frozen peaks, the yawning horror of the great abyss outside — all three crowded into the Englishman’s mind with a slashing impact that blocked delivery of any word or action. It was not that he refused, it was not that he withdrew, but that Life stood paralysed and rigid. The flow stopped dead for the first time since he had left his mother’s womb. The God in him was turned to stone and rendered ineffective. For an appalling instant God was *not*.

He realised the stupendous moment. Before him, drinking his little soul out merely by his Presence, stood one whose habit of mind, not alone his external accidents, was imperial with black prerogative before the first man drew the breath of life. August procedure was native to his inner process of existence. The stars and confines of the universe owned his sway before he fell, to trifle away the dreary little centuries by haunting the minds of feeble men and women, by hiding himself in nursery cupboards, and by grinning with stained gargoyles from the roofs of city churches. ...

And the lad's life stammered, flickered, threatened to go out before the enveloping terror of the revelation.

"I called to you ... but called to you in play," thought whispered somewhere deep below the level of any speech, yet not so low that the audacious sound of it did not crash above the elements outside; "for ... till now ... you have been to me but a ... coated bogy ... that my brain disowned with laughter ... and my heart thought picturesque. If you are here ... *alive*! May God forgive me for my ..."

It seemed as though tears — the tears of love and profound commiseration — drowned the very seed of thought itself.

A sound stopped him that was like a collapse in heaven. Some crashing, as of a ruined world, passed splintering through his little timid heart. He did not yield, but he understood — with an understanding which seemed the delicate first sign of yielding — the seductiveness of evil, the sweet delight of surrendering the Will with utter recklessness to those swelling forces which disintegrate the heroic soul in man. He remembered. It was true. In the reaction from excess he *had* definitely called upon his childhood's teaching with a passing moment of genuine belief. And now that yearning of a fraction of a second bore its awful fruit. The luscious Capitals where he had rioted passed in a coloured stream before his eyes; the Wine, the Woman, and the Song stood there before him, clothed in that Power which lies insinuatingly disguised behind their little passing show of innocence. Their glamour donned this domino of regal and virile grandeur. He felt entangled beyond recovery. The idea of God seemed sterile and without reality. The one real thing, the one desirable thing, the one possible, strong and beautiful thing — was to bend his head and kiss those imperial fingers.

He moved noiselessly towards the Hand. He raised his own to take it and lift it towards his mouth ——

When there rose in his mind with startling vividness a small, soft picture of a child's nursery, a picture of a little boy, kneeling in scanty night-gown with pink upturned soles, and asking ridiculous, audacious things of a shining Figure seated on a summer cloud above the kitchen-garden walnut tree.

The tiny symbol flashed and went its way, yet not before it had lit the entire world with glory. For there came an absolutely routing power with it. In that half-forgotten instant's craving for the simple teaching of his childhood days, Belief had conjured with two immense traditions. This was the second of them. The appearance of the one had inevitably produced the passage of its opposite. ...

And the Hand that floated in the air before him to be kissed sank slowly down below the possible level of his lips. He shrank away. Though laughter tempted something in his brain, there still clung about his heart the first aching, pitying terror. But size retreated, dwindling somehow as it went. The wind and rain obliterated every other sound; yet in that bare, unfurnished room of a climber's mountain hut, there was a silence, above the roar, that drank in everything and broke the back of speech. In opposition to this masquerading splendour Delane had set up a personal, paternal Deity.

"I thought of you, perhaps," cried the voice of self-defence, "but I did not call to you with real belief. And, by the name of God, I did not summon you. For your sweetness, as your power, sickens me; and your hand is black with the curses of all the mothers in the world, whose prayers and tears ——"

He stopped dead, overwhelmed by the cruelty of his reckless utterance.

And the Other moved towards him slowly. It was like the summit of some peaked and terrible height that moved. He spoke. He changed appallingly.

"But *I* claim," he roared, "your heart. I claim you by that instant of belief you felt. For by that alone you shall restore to me my vanished Kingdom. You shall worship me."

In the countenance was a sudden awful power; but behind the stupefying roar there was weakness in the voice as of an imploring and beseeching child. Again, deep love and searching pity seared the Englishman's heart as he replied in the gentlest accents he could find to master:

"And I claim *you*," he said, "by my understanding sympathy, and by my sorrow for your God-forsaken loneliness, and by my love. For no Kingdom built on hate can stand against the love you would deny — —"

Words failed him then, as he saw the majesty fade slowly from the face, grown small and shadowy. One last expression of desperate energy in the eyes struck lightnings from the smoky air, as with an abandoned movement of the entire figure, he drew back, it seemed, towards the door behind him.

Delane moved slowly after him, opening his arms. Tenderness and big compassion flung wide the gates of love within him. He found strange language, too, although actual, spoken words did not produce them further than his entrails where they had their birth.

"Toys in the world are plentiful, Sire, and you may have them for your masterpiece of play. But you must seek them where they still survive; in the churches, and in isolated lands where thought lies unawakened. For they are the children's blocks of make-believe whose palaces, like your once tremendous kingdom, have no true existence for the thinking mind."

And he stretched his hands towards him with the gesture of one who sought to help and save, then paused as he realised that his arms enclosed sheer blackness, with the emptiness of wind and driving rain.

For the door of the hut stood open, and Delane balanced on the threshold, facing the sheet of night above the abyss. He heard the waterfalls in the valley far below. The forest flapped and tossed its myriad branches. Cold draughts swept down from spectral fields of melting snow above; and the blackness turned momentarily into the semblance of towers and bastions of thick beaten gloom. Above one soaring turret, then, a space of sky appeared, swept naked by a violent, lost wind — an opening of purple into limitless distance. For one second, amid the vapours, it was visible, empty and untenanted. The next, there sailed across its small diameter a falling Star. With an air of slow and endless leisure, yet at the same time with terrific speed, it dived behind the ragged curtain of the clouds, and the space closed up again. Blackness returned upon the heavens.

And through this blackness, plunging into that abyss of woe whence he had momentarily risen, the figure of the marvellous stranger melted utterly away. Delane, for a fleeting second, was aware of the earnestness in the sad, imploring countenance; of its sweetness and its power so strangely mingled; of it mysterious grandeur; and of its pathetic childishness. But, already, it was sunk into interminable distance. A star that would be baleful, yet was merely glorious, passed on its endless wandering among the teeming systems of the universe. Behind the fixed and steady stars, secure in their appointed places, it set. It vanished into the pit of unknown emptiness. It was gone.

“God help you!” sighed across the sea of wailing branches, echoing down the dark abyss below. “God give you rest at last!”

For he saw a princely, nay, an imperial Being, homeless for ever, and for ever wandering, hunted as by keen remorseless winds about a universe that held no corner for his feet, his majesty unworshipped, his reign a mockery, his Court unfurnished, and his courtiers mere shadows of deep space. ...

And a thin, grey dawn, stealing up behind clearing summits in the east, crept then against the windows of the mountain hut. It brought with it a treacherous, sharp air that made the sleeper draw another blanket near to shelter him from the sudden cold. For the fire had died out, and an icy draught sucked steadily beneath the doorway.

XII

A BIT OF WOOD

HE FOUND HIMSELF in Meran with some cousins who had various slight ailments, but, being rich and imaginative, had gone to a sanatorium to be cured. But for its sanatoria, Meran might be a cheerful place; their ubiquity reminds a healthy man too often that the air is really good. Being well enough himself, except for a few mental worries, he went to a Gasthaus in the neighbourhood. In the sanatorium his cousins complained bitterly of the food, the ignorant "sisters," the inattentive doctors, and the idiotic regulations generally — which proves that people should not go to a sanatorium unless they are really ill. However, they paid heavily for being there, so felt that something was being accomplished, and were annoyed when he called each day for tea, and told them cheerfully how much better they looked — which proved, again, that their ailments were slight and quite curable by the local doctor at home. With one of the ailing cousins, a rich and pretty girl, he believed himself in love.

It was a three weeks' business, and he spent his mornings walking in the surrounding hills, his mind reflective, analytical, and ambitious, as with a man in love. He thought of thousands of things. He mooned. Once, for instance, he paused beside a rivulet to watch the buttercups dip, and asked himself, "Will she be like this when we're married — so anxious to be well that she thinks fearfully all the time of getting ill?" For if so, he felt he would be bored. He knew himself accurately enough to realise that he never could stand *that*. Yet money was a wonderful thing to have, and he, already thirty-five, had little enough! "Am I influenced by her money, then?" he asked himself ... and so went on to ask and wonder about many things besides, for he was of a reflective temperament and his father had been a minor poet. And Doubt crept in. He felt a chill. He was not much of a man, perhaps, thin-blooded and unsuccessful, rather a dreamer, too, into the bargain. He had £100 a year of his own and a position in a Philanthropic Institution (due to influence) with a nominal salary attached. He meant to keep the latter after marriage. He would work just the same. Nobody should ever say *that* of him —— !

And as he sat on the fallen tree beside the rivulet, idly knocking stones into the rushing water with his stick, he reflected upon those banal truisms that epitomise two-thirds of life. The way little unimportant things can change a person's whole existence was the one his thought just now had fastened on. His cousin's chill and headache, for instance, caught at a gloomy picnic on the Campagna three weeks before, had led to her going into a sanatorium and being advised that her heart was weak, that she had a tendency to asthma, that gout was in her system, and that a treatment of X-rays, radium, sun-baths and light baths, violet rays, no meat, complete rest, with big daily fees to experts with European reputations, were imperative. "From that chill, sitting a moment too long in the shadow of a forgotten Patrician's tomb," he reflected, "has come all this"— "all this" including his doubt as to whether it was herself or her money that he loved, whether he could stand living with her always, whether he need *really* keep his work on after marriage, in a word, his entire life and future, and her own as well— "all from that tiny chill three weeks ago!" And he knocked with his stick a little piece of sawn-off board that lay beside the rushing water.

Upon that bit of wood his mind, his mood, then fastened itself. It was triangular, a piece of sawn-off wood, brown with age and ragged. Once it had been part of a triumphant, hopeful sapling on the mountains; then, when thirty years of age, the men had cut it down; the rest of it stood somewhere now, at this very moment, in the walls of the house. This extra bit was cast away as useless; it served no purpose anywhere; it was slowly rotting in the sun. But each tap of the stick, he noticed, turned it sideways without sending it over the edge into the rushing water. It was obstinate. "It doesn't want to go in," he laughed, his father's little talent cropping out in him, "but, by Jove, it shall!" And he pushed it with his foot. But again it stopped, stuck end-ways against a stone. He then stooped, picked it up, and threw it in. It plopped and splashed, and went scurrying away downhill with the bubbling water. "Even that scrap of useless wood," he reflected, rising to continue his aimless walk, and still idly dreaming, "even that bit of rubbish may have a purpose, and may change the life of someone — somewhere!" — and then went strolling through the fragrant pine woods, crossing a dozen similar streams, and hitting scores of stones and scraps and fir cones as he went — till he finally reached his Gasthaus an hour later, and found a note from *her*: "We shall expect you about three o'clock. We thought of going for a drive. The others feel so much better."

It was a revealing touch — the way she put it on “the others.” He made his mind up then and there — thus tiny things divide the course of life — that he could never be happy with such an “affected creature.” He went for that drive, sat next to her consuming beauty, proposed to her passionately on the way back, was accepted before he could change his mind, and is now the father of several healthy children — and just as much afraid of getting ill, or of *their* getting ill, as she was fifteen years before. The female, of course, matures long, long before the male, he reflected, thinking the matter over in his study once. ...

And that scrap of wood he idly set in motion out of impulse also went its destined way upon the hurrying water that never dared to stop. Proud of its new-found motion, it bobbed down merrily, spinning and turning for a mile or so, dancing gaily over sunny meadows, brushing the dipping buttercups as it passed, through vineyards, woods, and under dusty roads in neat, cool gutters, and tumbling headlong over little waterfalls, until it neared the plain. And so, finally, it came to a wooden trough that led off some of the precious water to a sawmill where bare-armed men did practical and necessary things. At the parting of the ways its angles delayed it for a moment, undecided which way to take. It wobbled. And upon that moment’s wobbling hung tragic issues — issues of life and death.

Unknowing (yet assuredly not unknown), it chose the trough. It swung light-heartedly into the tearing sluice. It whirled with the gush of water towards the wheel, banged, spun, trembled, caught fast in the side where the cogs just chanced to be — and abruptly stopped the wheel. At any other spot the pressure of the water must have smashed it into pulp, and the wheel have continued as before; but it was caught in the *one* place where the various tensions held it fast immovably. It stopped the wheel, and so the machinery of the entire mill. It jammed like iron. The particular angle at which the double-handed saw, held by two weary and perspiring men, had cut it off a year before just enabled it to fit and wedge itself with irresistible exactitude. The pressure of the tearing water combined with the weight of the massive wheel to fix it tight and rigid. And in due course a workman — it was the foreman of the mill — came from his post inside to make investigations. He discovered the irritating item that caused the trouble. He put his weight in a certain way; he strained his hefty muscles; he swore — and the scrap of wood was easily dislodged. He fished the morsel out, and tossed it on the bank, and spat on it. The great wheel started with a mighty groan. But it started a fraction of a second before he expected it would start. He overbalanced, clutching the revolving framework with a frantic effort, shouted, swore, leaped at nothing, and fell into the pouring flood. In an instant he was turned upside down, sucked under, drowned. He was engaged to be married, and had put by a thousand *kronen* in the *Tiroler Sparbank.* He was a sober and hard-working man. ...

There was a paragraph in the local paper two days later. The Englishman, asking the porter of his Gasthaus for something to wrap up a present he was taking to his cousin in the sanatorium, used that very issue. As he folded its crumpled and recalcitrant sheets with sentimental care about the precious object his eye fell carelessly upon the paragraph. Being of an idle and reflective temperament, he stopped to read it — it was headed "Unglücksfall," and his poetic eye, inherited from his foolish, rhyming father, caught the pretty expression "fliessandes Wasser." He read the first few lines. Some fellow, with a picturesque Tyrolese name, had been drowned beneath a mill-wheel; he was popular in the neighbourhood, it seemed; he had saved some money, and was just going to be married. It was very sad. "Our readers' sympathy" was with him. ... And, being of a reflective temperament, the Englishman thought for a moment, while he went on wrapping up the parcel. He wondered if the man had really loved the girl, whether she, too, had money, and whether they would have had lots of children and been happy ever afterwards. And then he hurried out towards the sanatorium. "I shall be late," he reflected. "Such little, unimportant things delay one ...!"

XIII

A VICTIM OF HIGHER SPACE

"THERE'S A HEXTRAORDINARY gentleman to see you, sir," said the new man.

"Why 'extraordinary'?" asked Dr. Silence, drawing the tips of his thin fingers through his brown beard. His eyes twinkled pleasantly. "Why 'extraordinary,' Barker?" he repeated encouragingly, noticing the perplexed expression in the man's eyes.

"He's so — so thin, sir. I could hardly see 'im at all — at first. He was inside the house before I could ask the name," he added, remembering strict orders.

"And who brought him here?"

"He come alone, sir, in a closed cab. He pushed by me before I could say a word — making no noise not what I could hear. He seemed to move so soft like — —"

The man stopped short with obvious embarrassment, as though he had already said enough to jeopardise his new situation, but trying hard to show that he remembered the instructions and warnings he had received with regard to the admission of strangers not properly accredited.

"And where is the gentleman now?" asked Dr. Silence, turning away to conceal his amusement.

"I really couldn't exactly say, sir. I left him standing in the 'all — —"

The doctor looked up sharply. "But why in the hall, Barker? Why not in the waiting-room?" He fixed his piercing though kindly eyes on the man's face. "Did he frighten you?" he asked quickly.

"I think he did, sir, if I may say so. I seemed to lose sight of him, as it were — —" The man stammered, evidently convinced by now that he had earned his dismissal. "He come in so funny, just like a cold wind," he added boldly, setting his heels at attention and looking his master full in the face.

The doctor made an internal note of the man's halting description; he was pleased that the slight signs of psychic intuition which had induced him to engage Barker had not entirely failed at the first trial. Dr. Silence sought for this qualification in all his assistants, from secretary to serving man, and if it surrounded him with a somewhat singular crew, the drawbacks were more than compensated for on the whole by their occasional flashes of insight.

"So the gentleman made you feel queer, did he?"

"That was it, I think, sir," repeated the man stolidly.

"And he brings no kind of introduction to me — no letter or anything?" asked the doctor, with feigned surprise, as though he knew what was coming.

The man fumbled, both in mind and pockets, and finally produced an envelope.

"I beg pardon, sir," he said, greatly flustered; "the gentleman handed me this for you."

It was a note from a discerning friend, who had never yet sent him a case that was not vitally interesting from one point or another.

"Please see the bearer of this note," the brief message ran, "though I doubt if even you can do much to help him."

John Silence paused a moment, so as to gather from the mind of the writer all that lay behind the brief words of the letter. Then he looked up at his servant with a graver expression than he had yet worn.

"Go back and find this gentleman," he said, "and show him into the green study. Do not reply to his question, or speak more than actually necessary; but think kind, helpful, sympathetic thoughts as strongly as you can, Barker. You remember what I told you about the importance of *thinking*, when I engaged you. Put curiosity out of your mind, and think gently, sympathetically, affectionately, if you can."

He smiled, and Barker, who had recovered his composure in the doctor's presence, bowed silently and went out.

There were two different reception-rooms in Dr. Silence's house. One (intended for persons who imagined they needed spiritual assistance when really they were only candidates for the asylum) had padded walls, and was well supplied with various concealed contrivances by means of which sudden violence could be instantly met and overcome. It was, however, rarely used. The other, intended for the reception of genuine cases of spiritual distress and out-of-the-way afflictions of a psychic nature, was entirely draped and furnished in a soothing deep green, calculated to induce calmness and repose of mind. And this room was the one in which Dr. Silence interviewed the majority of his "queer" cases, and the one into which he had directed Barker to show his present caller.

To begin with, the arm-chair in which the patient was always directed to sit, was nailed to the floor, since its immovability tended to impart this same excellent characteristic to the occupant. Patients invariably grew excited when talking about themselves, and their excitement tended to confuse their thoughts and to exaggerate their language. The inflexibility of the chair helped to counteract this. After repeated endeavours to drag it forward, or push it back, they ended by resigning themselves to sitting quietly. And with the futility of fidgeting there followed a calmer state of mind.

Upon the floor, and at intervals in the wall immediately behind, were certain tiny green buttons, practically unnoticeable, which on being pressed permitted a soothing and persuasive narcotic to rise invisibly about the occupant of the chair. The effect upon the excitable patient was rapid, admirable, and harmless. The green study was further provided with a secret spy-hole; for John Silence liked when possible to observe his patient's face before it had assumed that mask the features of the human countenance invariably wear in the presence of another person. A man sitting alone wears a psychic expression; and this expression is the man himself. It disappears the moment another person joins him. And Dr. Silence often learned more from a few moments' secret observation of a face than from hours of conversation with its owner afterwards.

A very light, almost a dancing, step followed Barker's heavy tread towards the green room, and a moment afterwards the man came in and announced that the gentleman was waiting. He was still pale and his manner nervous.

"Never mind, Barker," the doctor said kindly; "if you were not psychic the man would have had no effect upon you at all. You only need training and development. And when you have learned to interpret these feelings and sensations better, you will feel no fear, but only a great sympathy.”

“Yes, sir; thank you, sir!” And Barker bowed and made his escape, while Dr. Silence, an amused smile lurking about the corners of his mouth, made his way noiselessly down the passage and put his eye to the spy-hole in the door of the green study.

This spy-hole was so placed that it commanded a view of almost the entire room, and, looking through it, the doctor saw a hat, gloves, and umbrella lying on a chair by the table, but searched at first in vain for their owner.

The windows were both closed and a brisk fire burned in the grate. There were various signs — signs intelligible at least to a keenly intuitive soul — that the room was occupied, yet so far as human beings were concerned, it was empty, utterly empty. No one sat in the chairs; no one stood on the mat before the fire; there was no sign even that a patient was anywhere close against the wall, examining the Böcklin reproductions — as patients so often did when they thought they were alone — and therefore rather difficult to see from the spy-hole. Ordinarily speaking, there was no one in the room. It was undeniable.

Yet Dr. Silence was quite well aware that a human being *was* in the room. His psychic apparatus never failed in letting him know the proximity of an incarnate or discarnate being. Even in the dark he could tell that. And he now knew positively that his patient — the patient who had alarmed Barker, and had then tripped down the corridor with that dancing footstep — was somewhere concealed within the four walls commanded by his spy-hole. He also realised — and this was most unusual — that this individual whom he desired to watch knew that he was being watched. And, further, that the stranger himself was also watching! In fact, that it was he, the doctor, who was being observed — and by an observer as keen and trained as himself.

An inkling of the true state of the case began to dawn upon him, and he was on the verge of entering — indeed, his hand already touched the door-knob — when his eye, still glued to the spy-hole, detected a slight movement. Directly opposite, between him and the fireplace, something stirred. He watched very attentively and made certain that he was not mistaken. An object on the mantelpiece — it was a blue vase — disappeared from view. It passed out of sight together with the portion of the marble mantelpiece on which it rested. Next, that part of the fire and grate and brass fender immediately below it vanished entirely, as though a slice had been taken clean out of them.

Dr. Silence then understood that something between him and these objects was slowly coming into being, something that concealed them and obstructed his vision by inserting itself in the line of sight between them and himself.

He quietly awaited further results before going in.

First he saw a thin perpendicular line tracing itself from just above the height of the clock and continuing downwards till it reached the woolly fire-mat. This line grew wider, broadened, grew solid. It was no shadow; it was something substantial. It defined itself more and more. Then suddenly, at the top of the line, and about on a level with the face of the clock, he saw a round luminous disc gazing steadily at him. It was a human eye, looking straight into his own, pressed there against the spy-hole. And it was bright with intelligence. Dr. Silence held his breath for a moment — and stared back at it.

Then, like some one moving out of deep shadow into light, he saw the figure of a man come sliding sideways into view, a whitish face following the eye, and the perpendicular line he had first observed broadening out and developing into the complete figure of a human being. It was the patient. He had apparently been standing there in front of the fire all the time. A second eye had followed the first, and both of them stared steadily at the spy-hole, sharply concentrated, yet with a sly twinkle of humour and amusement that made it impossible for the doctor to maintain his position any longer.

He opened the door and went in quickly. As he did so he noticed for the first time the sound of a German band coming in gaily through the open ventilators. In some intuitive, unaccountable fashion the music connected itself with the patient he was about to interview. This sort of prevision was not unfamiliar to him. It always explained itself later.

The man, he saw, was of middle age and of very ordinary appearance; so ordinary, in fact, that he was difficult to describe — his only peculiarity being his extreme thinness. Pleasant — that is, good — vibrations issued from his atmosphere and met Dr. Silence as he advanced to greet him, yet vibrations alive with currents and discharges betraying the perturbed and disordered condition of his mind and brain. There was evidently something wholly out of the usual in the state of his thoughts. Yet, though strange, it was not altogether distressing; it was not the impression that the broken and violent atmosphere of the insane produces upon the mind. Dr. Silence realised in a flash that here was a case of absorbing interest that might require all his powers to handle properly.

“I was watching you through my little peep-hole — as you saw,” he began, with a pleasant smile, advancing to shake hands. “I find it of the greatest assistance sometimes — —”

But the patient interrupted him at once. His voice was hurried and had odd, shrill changes in it, breaking from high to low in unexpected fashion. One moment it thundered, the next it almost squeaked.

“I understand without explanation,” he broke in rapidly. “You get the true note of a man in this way — when he thinks himself unobserved. I quite agree. Only, in my case, I fear, you saw very little. My case, as you of course grasp, Dr. Silence, is extremely peculiar, uncomfortably peculiar. Indeed, unless Sir William had positively assured me — —”

“My friend has sent you to me,” the doctor interrupted gravely, with a gentle note of authority, “and that is quite sufficient. Pray, be seated, Mr. — —”

“Mudge — Racine Mudge,” returned the other.

“Take this comfortable one, Mr. Mudge,” leading him to the fixed chair, “and tell me your condition in your own way and at your own pace. My whole day is at your service if you require it.”

Mr. Mudge moved towards the chair in question and then hesitated.

“You will promise me not to use the narcotic buttons,” he said, before sitting down. “I do not need them. Also I ought to mention that anything you think of vividly will reach my mind. That is apparently part of my peculiar case.” He sat down with a sigh and arranged his thin legs and body into a position of comfort. Evidently he was very sensitive to the thoughts of others, for the picture of the green buttons had only entered the doctor’s mind for a second, yet the other had instantly snapped it up. Dr. Silence noticed, too, that Mr. Mudge held on tightly with both hands to the arms of the chair.

"I'm rather glad the chair is nailed to the floor," he remarked, as he settled himself more comfortably. "It suits me admirably. The fact is — and this is my case in a nutshell — which is all that a doctor of your marvellous development requires — the fact is, Dr. Silence, I am a victim of Higher Space. That's what's the matter with me — Higher Space!"

The two looked at each other for a space in silence, the little patient holding tightly to the arms of the chair which "suited him admirably," and looking up with staring eyes, his atmosphere positively trembling with the waves of some unknown activity; while the doctor smiled kindly and sympathetically, and put his whole person as far as possible into the mental condition of the other.

"Higher Space," repeated Mr. Mudge, "that's what it is. Now, do you think you can help me with *that*?"

There was a pause during which the men's eyes steadily searched down below the surface of their respective personalities. Then Dr. Silence spoke.

"I am quite sure I can help," he answered quietly; "sympathy must always help, and suffering always owns my sympathy. I see you have suffered cruelly. You must tell me all about your case, and when I hear the gradual steps by which you reached this strange condition, I have no doubt I can be of assistance to you."

He drew a chair up beside his interlocutor and laid a hand on his shoulder for a moment. His whole being radiated kindness, intelligence, desire to help.

"For instance," he went on, "I feel sure it was the result of no mere chance that you became familiar with the terrors of what you term Higher Space; for Higher Space is no mere external measurement. It is, of course, a spiritual state, a spiritual condition, an inner development, and one that we must recognise as abnormal, since it is beyond the reach of the world at the present stage of evolution. Higher Space is a mythical state."

"Oh!" cried the other, rubbing his birdlike hands with pleasure, "the relief it is to be to talk to some one who can understand! Of course what you say is the utter truth. And you are right that no mere chance led me to my present condition, but, on the other hand, prolonged and deliberate study. Yet chance in a sense now governs it. I mean, my entering the condition of Higher Space seems to depend upon the chance of this and that circumstance. For instance, the mere sound of that German band sent me off. Not that all music will do so, but certain sounds, certain vibrations, at once key me up to the requisite pitch, and off I go. Wagner's music always does it, and that band must have been playing a stray bit of Wagner. But I'll come to all that later. Only, first, I must ask you to send away your man from the spy-hole."

John Silence looked up with a start, for Mr. Mudge's back was to the door, and there was no mirror. He saw the brown eye of Barker glued to the little circle of glass, and he crossed the room without a word and snapped down the black shutter provided for the purpose, and then heard Barker shuffle away along the passage.

"Now," continued the little man in the chair, "I can begin. You have managed to put me completely at my ease, and I feel I may tell you my whole case without shame or reserve. You will understand. But you must be patient with me if I go into details that are already familiar to you — details of Higher Space, I mean — and if I seem stupid when I have to describe things that transcend the power of language and are really therefore indescribable."

"My dear friend," put in the other calmly, "that goes without saying. To know Higher Space is an experience that defies description, and one is obliged to make use of more or less intelligible symbols. But, pray, proceed. Your vivid thoughts will tell me more than your halting words."

An immense sigh of relief proceeded from the little figure half lost in the depths of the chair. Such intelligent sympathy meeting him half-way was a new experience to him, and it touched his heart at once. He leaned back, relaxing his tight hold of the arms, and began in his thin, scale-like voice.

"My mother was a Frenchwoman, and my father an Essex bargeman," he said abruptly. "Hence my name — Racine and Mudge. My father died before I ever saw him. My mother inherited money from her Bordeaux relations, and when she died soon after, I was left alone with wealth and a strange freedom. I had no guardian, trustees, sisters, brothers, or any connection in the world to look after me. I grew up, therefore, utterly without education. This much was to my advantage; I learned none of that deceitful rubbish taught in schools, and so had nothing to unlearn when I awakened to my true love — mathematics, higher mathematics and higher geometry. These, however, I seemed to know instinctively. It was like the memory of what I had deeply studied before; the principles were in my blood, and I simply raced through the ordinary stages, and beyond, and then did the same with geometry. Afterwards, when I read the books on these subjects, I understood how swift and undeviating the knowledge had come back to me. It was simply memory. It was simply *re-collecting* the memories of what I had known before in a previous existence and required no books to teach me."

In his growing excitement, Mr. Mudge attempted to drag the chair forward a little nearer to his listener, and then smiled faintly as he resigned himself instantly again to its immovability, and plunged anew into the recital of his singular "disease."

"The audacious speculations of Bolyai, the amazing theories of Gauss — that through a point more than one line could be drawn parallel to a given line; the possibility that the angles of a triangle are together *greater* than two right angles, if drawn upon immense curvatures-the breathless intuitions of Beltrami and Lobatchewsky — all these I hurried through, and emerged, panting but unsatisfied, upon the verge of my — my new world, my Higher Space possibilities — in a word, my disease!

"How I got there," he resumed after a brief pause, during which he appeared to be listening intently for an approaching sound, "is more than I can put intelligibly into words. I can only hope to leave your mind with an intuitive comprehension of the possibility of what I say.

"Here, however, came a change. At this point I was no longer absorbing the fruits of studies I had made before; it was the beginning of new efforts to learn for the first time, and I had to go slowly and laboriously through terrible work. Here I sought for the theories and speculations of others. But books were few and far between, and with the exception of one man — a 'dreamer,' the world called him — whose audacity and piercing intuition amazed and delighted me beyond description, I found no one to guide or help.

"You, of course, Dr. Silence, understand something of what I am driving at with these stammering words, though you cannot perhaps yet guess what depths of pain my new knowledge brought me to, nor why an acquaintance with a new development of space should prove a source of misery and terror."

Mr. Racine Mudge, remembering that the chair would not move, did the next best thing he could in his desire to draw nearer to the attentive man facing him, and sat forward upon the very edge of the cushions, crossing his legs and gesticulating with both hands as though he saw into this region of new space he was attempting to describe, and might any moment tumble into it bodily from the edge of the chair and disappear from view. John Silence, separated from him by three paces, sat with his eyes fixed upon the thin white face opposite, noting every word and every gesture with deep attention.

"This room we now sit in, Dr. Silence, has one side open to space — to Higher Space. A closed box only *seems* closed. There is a way in and out of a soap bubble without breaking the skin."

"You tell me no new thing," the doctor interposed gently.

"Hence, if Higher Space exists and our world borders upon it and lies partially in it, it follows necessarily that we see only portions of all objects. We never see their true and complete shape. We see their three measurements, but not their fourth. The new direction is concealed from us, and when I hold this book and move my hand all round it I have not really made a complete circuit. We only perceive those portions of any object which exist in our three dimensions; the rest escapes us. But, once we learn to see in Higher Space, and objects will appear as they actually are. Only they will thus be hardly recognisable!

"Now, you may begin to grasp something of what I am coming to."

"I am beginning to understand something of what you must have suffered," observed the doctor soothingly, "for I have made similar experiments myself, and only stopped just in time — —"

"You are the one man in all the world who can hear and understand, *and* sympathise," exclaimed Mr. Mudge, grasping his hand and holding it tightly while he spoke. The nailed chair prevented further excitability.

“Well,” he resumed, after a moment’s pause, “I procured the implements and the coloured blocks for practical experiment, and I followed the instructions carefully till I had arrived at a working conception of four-dimensional space. The tessaract, the figure whose boundaries are cubes, I knew by heart. That is to say, I knew it and saw it mentally, for my eye, of course, could never take in a new measurement, or my hands and feet handle it.

“So, at least, I thought,” he added, making a wry face. “I had reached the stage, you see, when I could *imagine* in a new dimension. I was able to conceive the shape of that new figure which is intrinsically different to all we know — the shape of the tessaract. I could perceive in four dimensions. When, therefore, I looked at a cube I could see all its sides at once. Its top was not foreshortened, nor its farther side and base invisible. I saw the whole thing out flat, so to speak. And this tessaract was bounded by cubes! Moreover, I also saw its content — its insides.”

“You were not yourself able to enter this new world,” interrupted Dr. Silence.

“Not then. I was only able to conceive intuitively what it was like and how exactly it must look. Later, when I slipped in there and saw objects in their entirety, unlimited by the paucity of our poor three measurements, I very nearly lost my life. For, you see, space does not stop at a single new dimension, a fourth. It extends in all possible new ones, and we must conceive it as containing any number of new dimensions. In other words, there is no space at all, but only a spiritual condition. But, meanwhile, I had come to grasp the strange fact that the objects in our normal world appear to us only partially.”

Mr. Mudge moved farther forward till he was balanced dangerously on the very edge of the chair. “From this starting point,” he resumed, “I began my studies and experiments, and continued them for years. I had money, and I was without friends. I lived in solitude and experimented. My intellect, of course, had little part in the work, for intellectually it was all unthinkable. Never was the limitation of mere reason more plainly demonstrated. It was mystically, intuitively, spiritually that I began to advance. And what I learnt, and knew, and did is all impossible to put into language, since it all describes experiences transcending the experiences of men. It is only some of the results — what you would call the symptoms of my disease — that I can give you, and even these must often appear absurd contradictions and impossible paradoxes.

“I can only tell you, Dr. Silence” — his manner became exceedingly impressive— “that I reached sometimes a point of view whence all the great puzzle of the world became plain to me, and I understood what they call in the Yoga books ‘The Great Heresy of Separateness’; why all great teachers have urged the necessity of man loving his neighbour as himself; how men are all really *one*; and why the utter loss of self is necessary to salvation and the discovery of the true life of the soul.”

He paused a moment and drew breath.

“Your speculations have been my own long ago,” the doctor said quietly. “I fully realise the force of your words. Men are doubtless not separate at all — in the sense they imagine — —”

“All this about the very much Higher Space I only dimly, very dimly, conceived, of course,” the other went on, raising his voice again by jerks; “but what did happen to me was the humbler accident of — the simpler disaster — oh, dear, how shall I put it —— ?”

He stammered and showed visible signs of distress.

“It was simply this,” he resumed with a sudden rush of words, “that, accidentally, as the result of my years of experiment, I one day slipped bodily into the next world, the world of four dimensions, yet without knowing precisely how I got there, or how I could get back again. I discovered, that is, that my ordinary three-dimensional body was but an expression — a projection — of my higher four-dimensional body!

“Now you understand what I meant much earlier in our talk when I spoke of chance. I cannot control my entrance or exit. Certain people, certain human atmospheres, certain wandering forces, thoughts, desires even — the radiations of certain combinations of colour, and above all, the vibrations of certain kinds of music, will suddenly throw me into a state of what I can only describe as an intense and terrific inner vibration — and behold I am off! Off in the direction at right angles to all our known directions! Off in the direction the cube takes when it begins to trace the outlines of the new figure! Off into my breathless and semi-divine Higher Space! Off, *inside myself*, into the world of four dimensions!"

He gasped and dropped back into the depths of the immovable chair.

"And there," he whispered, his voice issuing from among the cushions, "there I have to stay until these vibrations subside, or until they do something which I cannot find words to describe properly or intelligibly to you — and then, behold, I am back again. First, that is, I disappear. Then I reappear."

"Just so," exclaimed Dr. Silence, "and that is why a few — —"

"Why a few moments ago," interrupted Mr. Mudge, taking the words out of his mouth, "you found me gone, and then saw me return. The music of that wretched German band sent me off. Your intense thinking about me brought me back — when the band had stopped its Wagner. I saw you approach the peep-hole and I saw Barker's intention of doing so later. For me no interiors are hidden. I see inside. When in that state the content of your mind, as of your body, is open to me as the day. Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear!"

Mr. Mudge stopped and again mopped his brow. A light trembling ran over the surface of his small body like wind over grass. He still held tightly to the arms of the chair.

"At first," he presently resumed, "my new experiences were so vividly interesting that I felt no alarm. There was no room for it. The alarm came a little later."

"Then you actually penetrated far enough into that state to experience yourself as a normal portion of it?" asked the doctor, leaning forward, deeply interested.

Mr. Mudge nodded a perspiring face in reply.

"I did," he whispered, "undoubtedly I did. I am coming to all that. It began first at night, when I realised that sleep brought no loss of consciousness — —"

"The spirit, of course, can never sleep. Only the body becomes unconscious," interposed John Silence.

"Yes, we know that — theoretically. At night, of course, the spirit is active elsewhere, and we have no memory of where and how, simply because the brain stays behind and receives no record. But I found that, while remaining conscious, I also retained memory. I had attained to the state of continuous consciousness, for at night I regularly, with the first approaches of drowsiness, entered *nolens volens* the four-dimensional world.

"For a time this happened regularly, and I could not control it; though later I found a way to regulate it better. Apparently sleep is unnecessary in the higher — the four-dimensional — body. Yes, perhaps. But I should infinitely have preferred dull sleep to the knowledge. For, unable to control my movements, I wandered to and fro, attracted, owing to my partial development and premature arrival, to parts of this new world that alarmed me more and more. It was the awful waste and drift of a monstrous world, so utterly different to all we know and see that I cannot even hint at the nature of the sights and objects and beings in it. More than that, I cannot even remember them. I cannot now picture them to myself even, but can recall only the *memory of the impression* they made upon me, the horror and devastating terror of it all. To be in several places at once, for instance — —"

"Perfectly," interrupted John Silence, noticing the increase of the other's excitement, "I understand exactly. But now, please, tell me a little more of this alarm you experienced, and how it affected you."

"It's not the disappearing and reappearing *per se* that I mind," continued Mr. Mudge, "so much as certain other things. It's seeing people and objects in their weird entirety, in their true and complete shapes, that is so distressing. It introduces me to a world of monsters. Horses, dogs, cats, all of which I loved; people, trees, children; all that I have considered beautiful in life — everything, from a human face to a cathedral — appear to me in a different shape and aspect to all I have known before. I cannot perhaps convince you why this should be terrible, but I assure you that it is so. To hear the human voice proceeding from this novel appearance which I scarcely recognise as a human body is ghastly, simply ghastly. To see inside everything and everybody is a form of insight peculiarly distressing. To be so confused in geography as to find myself one moment at the North Pole, and the next at Clapham Junction — or possibly at both places simultaneously — is absurdly terrifying. Your imagination will readily furnish other details without my multiplying my experiences now. But you have no idea what it all means, and how I suffer."

Mr. Mudge paused in his panting account and lay back in his chair. He still held tightly to the arms as though they could keep him in the world of sanity and three measurements, and only now and again released his left hand in order to mop his face. He looked very thin and white and oddly unsubstantial, and he stared about him as though he saw into this other space he had been talking about.

John Silence, too, felt warm. He had listened to every word and had made many notes. The presence of this man had an exhilarating effect upon him. It seemed as if Mr. Racine Mudge still carried about with him something of that breathless Higher-Space condition he had been describing. At any rate, Dr. Silence had himself advanced sufficiently far along the legitimate paths of spiritual and psychic transformations to realise that the visions of this extraordinary little person had a basis of truth for their origin.

After a pause that prolonged itself into minutes, he crossed the room and unlocked a drawer in a bookcase, taking out a small book with a red cover. It had a lock to it, and he produced a key out of his pocket and proceeded to open the covers. The bright eyes of Mr. Mudge never left him for a single second.

"It almost seems a pity," he said at length, "to cure you, Mr. Mudge. You are on the way to discovery of great things. Though you may lose your life in the process — that is, your life here in the world of three dimensions — you would lose thereby nothing of great value — you will pardon my apparent rudeness, I know — and you might gain what is infinitely greater. Your suffering, of course, lies in the fact that you alternate between the two worlds and are never wholly in one or the other. Also, I rather imagine, though I cannot be certain of this from any personal experiments, that you have here and there penetrated even into space of more than four dimensions, and have hence experienced the terror you speak of."

The perspiring son of the Essex bargeman and the woman of Normandy bent his head several times in assent, but uttered no word in reply.

"Some strange psychic predisposition, dating no doubt from one of your former lives, has favoured the development of your 'disease'; and the fact that you had no normal training at school or college, no leading by the poor intellect into the culs-de-sac falsely called knowledge, has further caused your exceedingly rapid movement along the lines of direct inner experience. None of the knowledge you have foreshadowed has come to you through the senses, of course."

Mr. Mudge, sitting in his immovable chair, began to tremble slightly. A wind again seemed to pass over his surface and again to set it curiously in motion like a field of grass.

"You are merely talking to gain time," he said hurriedly, in a shaking voice. "This thinking aloud delays us. I see ahead what you are coming to, only please be quick, for something is going to happen. A band is again coming down the street, and if it plays — if it plays Wagner — I shall be off in a twinkling."

"Precisely. I will be quick. I was leading up to the point of how to effect your cure. The way is this: You must simply learn to *block the entrances*."

"True, true, utterly true!" exclaimed the little man, dodging about nervously in the depths of the chair. "But how, in the name of space, is that to be done?"

"By concentration. They are all within you, these entrances, although outer cases such as colour, music and other things lead you towards them. These external things you cannot hope to destroy, but once the entrances are blocked, they will lead you only to bricked walls and closed channels. You will no longer be able to find the way."

"Quick, quick!" cried the bobbing figure in the chair. "How is this concentration to be effected?"

"This little book," continued Dr. Silence calmly, "will explain to you the way." He tapped the cover. "Let me now read out to you certain simple instructions, composed, as I see you divine, entirely from my own personal experiences in the same direction. Follow these instructions and you will no longer enter the state of Higher Space. The entrances will be blocked effectively."

Mr. Mudge sat bolt upright in his chair to listen, and John Silence cleared his throat and began to read slowly in a very distinct voice.

But before he had uttered a dozen words, something happened. A sound of street music entered the room through the open ventilators, for a band had begun to play in the stable mews at the back of the house — the March from *Tannhäuser*. Odd as it may seem that a German band should twice within the space of an hour enter the same mews and play Wagner, it was nevertheless the fact.

Mr. Racine Mudge heard it. He uttered a sharp, squeaking cry and twisted his arms with nervous energy round the chair. A piteous look that was not far from tears spread over his white face. Grey shadows followed it — the grey of fear. He began to struggle convulsively.

“Hold me fast! Catch me! For God’s sake, keep me here! I’m on the rush already. Oh, it’s frightful!” he cried in tones of anguish, his voice as thin as a reed.

Dr. Silence made a plunge forward to seize him, but in a flash, before he could cover the space between them, Mr. Racine Mudge, screaming and struggling, seemed to shoot past him into invisibility. He disappeared like an arrow from a bow propelled at infinite speed, and his voice no longer sounded in the external air, but seemed in some curious way to make itself heard somewhere within the depths of the doctor’s own being. It was almost like a faint singing cry in his head, like a voice of dream, a voice of vision and unreality.

“Alcohol, alcohol!” it cried, “give me alcohol! It’s the quickest way. Alcohol, before I’m out of reach!”

The doctor, accustomed to rapid decisions and even more rapid action, remembered that a brandy flask stood upon the mantelpiece, and in less than a second he had seized it and was holding it out towards the space above the chair recently occupied by the visible Mudge. Then, before his very eyes, and long ere he could unscrew the metal stopper, he saw the contents of the closed glass phial sink and lessen as though some one were drinking violently and greedily of the liquor within.

“Thanks! Enough! It deadens the vibrations!” cried the faint voice in his interior, as he withdrew the flask and set it back upon the mantelpiece. He understood that in Mudge's present condition one side of the flask was open to space and he could drink without removing the stopper. He could hardly have had a more interesting proof of what he had been hearing described at such length.

But the next moment — the very same moment it almost seemed — the German band stopped midway in its tune — and there was Mr. Mudge back in his chair again, gasping and panting!

"Quick!" he shrieked, "stop that band! Send it away! Catch hold of me! Block the entrances! Block the entrances! Give me the red book! Oh, oh, oh-h-h-h!!!"

The music had begun again. It was merely a temporary interruption. The *Tannhäuser* March started again, this time at a tremendous pace that made it sound like a rapid two-step as though the instruments played against time.

But the brief interruption gave Dr. Silence a moment in which to collect his scattering thoughts, and before the band had got through half a bar, he had flung forward upon the chair and held Mr. Racine Mudge, the struggling little victim of Higher Space, in a grip of iron. His arms went all round his diminutive person, taking in a good part of the chair at the same time. He was not a big man, yet he seemed to smother Mudge completely.

Yet, even as he did so, and felt the wriggling form underneath him, it began to melt and slip away like air or water. The wood of the arm-chair somehow disentangled itself from between his own arms and those of Mudge. The phenomenon known as the passage of matter through matter took place. The little man seemed actually to get mixed up in his own being. Dr. Silence could just see his face beneath him. It puckered and grew dark as though from some great internal effort. He heard the thin, reedy voice cry in his ear to "Block the entrances, block the entrances!" and then — but how in the world describe what is indescribable?

John Silence half rose up to watch. Racine Mudge, his face distorted beyond all recognition, was making a marvellous inward movement, as though doubling back upon himself. He turned funnel-wise like water in a whirling vortex, and then appeared to break up somewhat as a reflection breaks up and divides in a distorting convex mirror. He went neither forward nor backwards, neither to the right nor the left, neither up nor down. But he went. He went utterly. He simply flashed away out of sight like a vanishing projectile.

All but one leg! Dr. Silence just had the time and the presence of mind to seize upon the left ankle and boot as it disappeared, and to this he held on for several seconds like grim death. Yet all the time he knew it was a foolish and useless thing to do.

The foot was in his grasp one moment, and the next it seemed — this was the only way he could describe it — inside his own skin and bones, and at the same time outside his hand and all round it. It seemed mixed up in some amazing way with his own flesh and blood. Then it was gone, and he was tightly grasping a draught of heated air.

“Gone! gone! gone!” cried a thick, whispering voice, somewhere deep within his own consciousness. “Lost! lost! lost!” it repeated, growing fainter and fainter till at length it vanished into nothing and the last signs of Mr. Racine Mudge vanished with it.

John Silence locked his red book and replaced it in the cabinet, which he fastened with a click, and when Barker answered the bell he inquired if Mr. Mudge had left a card upon the table. It appeared that he had, and when the servant returned with it, Dr. Silence read the address and made a note of it. It was in North London.

“Mr. Mudge has gone,” he said quietly to Barker, noticing his expression of alarm.

“He’s not taken his ‘at with him, sir.”

“Mr. Mudge requires no hat where he is now,” continued the doctor, stooping to poke the fire. “But he may return for it — —”

“And the humbrella, sir.”

“And the umbrella.”

“He didn’t go out *my* way, sir, if you please,” stuttered the amazed servant, his curiosity overcoming his nervousness.

“Mr. Mudge has his own way of coming and going, and prefers it. If he returns by the door at any time remember to bring him instantly to me, and be kind and gentle with him and ask no questions. Also, remember, Barker, to think pleasantly, sympathetically, affectionately of him while he is away. Mr. Mudge is a very suffering gentleman."

Barker bowed and went out of the room backwards, gasping and feeling round the inside of his collar with three very hot fingers of one hand.

It was two days later when he brought in a telegram to the study. Dr. Silence opened it, and read as follows:

"Bombay. Just slipped out again. All safe. Have blocked entrances. Thousand thanks. Address Cooks, London. — Mudge."

Dr. Silence looked up and saw Barker staring at him bewilderingly. It occurred to him that somehow he knew the contents of the telegram.

"Make a parcel of Mr. Mudge's things," he said briefly, "and address them Thomas Cook & Sons, Ludgate Circus. And send them there exactly a month from to-day and marked 'To be called for.'"

"Yes, sir," said Barker, leaving the room with a deep sigh and a hurried glance at the waste-paper basket where his master had dropped the pink paper.

XIV

TRANSITION

JOHN MUDBURY WAS on his way home from the shops, his arms full of Christmas presents. It was after six o'clock and the streets were very crowded. He was an ordinary man, lived in an ordinary suburban flat, with an ordinary wife and four ordinary children. *He* did not think them ordinary, but everybody else did. He had ordinary presents for each one, a cheap blotter for his wife, a cheap air-gun for the eldest boy, and so forth. He was over fifty, bald, in an office, decent in mind and habits, of uncertain opinions, uncertain politics, and uncertain religion. Yet he considered himself a decided, positive gentleman, quite unaware that the morning newspaper determined his opinions for the day. He just lived — from day to day. Physically, he was fit enough, except for a weak heart (which never troubled him); and his summer holiday was bad golf, while the children bathed and his wife read "Garvice" on the sands. Like the majority of men, he dreamed idly of the past, muddled away the present, and guessed vaguely — after imaginative reading on occasions — at the future.

"I'd like to survive all right," he said, "provided it's better than this," surveying his wife and children, and thinking of his daily toil. "Otherwise —— !" and he shrugged his shoulders as a brave man should.

He went to church regularly. But nothing in church *convinced* him that he did survive, just as nothing in church enticed him into hoping that he would. On the other hand, nothing in life persuaded him that he didn't, wouldn't, couldn't. "I'm an Evolutionist," he loved to say to thoughtful cronies (over a glass), having never heard that Darwinism had been questioned. ...

And so he came home gaily, happily, with his bunch of Christmas presents "for the wife and little ones," stroking himself upon their keen enjoyment and excitement. The night before he had taken "the wife" to see *Magic* at a select London theatre where the Intellectuals went — and had been extraordinarily stirred. He had gone questioningly, yet expecting something out of the common. "It's *not* musical," he warned her, "nor farce, nor comedy, so to speak"; and in answer to her question as to what the Critics had said, he had wriggled, sighed, and put his gaudy necktie straight four times in quick succession. For no "Man in the Street," with any claim to self-respect, could be expected to understand what the Critics had said, even if he understood the Play. And John had answered truthfully: “Oh, they just said things. But the theatre’s always full — and that’s the only test.”

And just now, as he crossed the crowded Circus to catch his ‘bus, it chanced that his mind (having glimpsed an advertisement) was full of this particular Play, or, rather, of the effect it had produced upon him at the time. For it had *thrilled* him — inexplicably: with its marvellous speculative hint, its big audacity, its alert and spiritual beauty. ... Thought plunged to find something — plunged after this bizarre suggestion of a bigger universe, after this quasi-jocular suggestion that man is not the only — then dashed full-tilt against a sentence that memory thrust beneath his nose: “Science does *not* exhaust the Universe” — and at the same time dashed full-tilt against destruction of another kind as well ...!

How it happened, he never exactly knew. He saw a Monster glaring at him with eyes of blazing fire. It was horrible! It rushed upon him. He dodged. ... Another Monster met him round the corner. Both came at him simultaneously. ... He dodged again — a leap that might have cleared a hurdle easily, but was too late. Between the pair of them — his heart literally in his gullet — he was mercilessly caught. ... Bones crunched. ... There was a soft sensation, icy cold and hot as fire. Horns and voices roared. Battering-rams he saw, and a carapace of iron. ... Then dazzling light. ... “Always *face* the traffic!” he remembered with a frantic yell — and, by some extraordinary luck, escaped miraculously on to the opposite pavement. ...

There was no doubt about it. By the skin of his teeth he had dodged a rather ugly death. First ... he felt for his presents — all were safe. And then, instead of congratulating himself and taking breath, he hurried homewards — *on foot*, which proved that his mind had lost control a bit! — thinking only how disappointed the wife and children would have been if — if anything had happened. ... Another thing he realised, oddly enough, was that he no longer really *loved* his wife, but had only great affection for her. What made him think of that, Heaven only knows, but he *did* think of it. He was an honest man without pretence. This came as a discovery somehow. He turned a moment, and saw the crowd gathered about the entangled taxicabs, policemen’s helmets gleaming in the lights of the shop windows ... then hurried on again, his thoughts full of the joy his presents would give ...

of the scampering children ... and of his wife — bless her silly heart! — eyeing the mysterious parcels. ...

And, though he never could explain *how*, he presently stood at the door of the jail-like building that contained his flat, having walked the whole three miles! His thoughts had been so busy and absorbed that he had hardly noticed the length of weary trudge. ... “Besides,” he reflected, thinking of the narrow escape, “I’ve had a nasty shock. It was a d —— d near thing, now I come to think of it. ...” He did feel a bit shaky and bewildered. ... Yet, at the same time, he felt extraordinarily jolly and light-hearted. ...

He counted his Christmas parcels ... hugged himself in anticipatory joy ... and let himself in swiftly with his latchkey. “I’m late,” he realised, “but when she sees the brown-paper parcels, she’ll forget to say a word. God bless the old faithful soul.” And he softly used the key a second time and entered his flat on tiptoe. ... In his mind was the master impulse of that afternoon — the pleasure these Christmas presents would give his wife and children. ...

He heard a noise. He hung up hat and coat in the pokey vestibule (they never called it “hall”) and moved softly towards the parlour door, holding the packages behind him. Only of them he thought, not of himself — of his family, that is, not of the packages. Pushing the door cunningly ajar, he peeped in slyly. To his amazement, the room was full of people! He withdrew quickly, wondering what it meant. A party? And without his knowing about it! Extraordinary! ... Keen disappointment came over him. But, as he stepped back, the vestibule, he saw, was full of people too.

He was uncommonly surprised, yet somehow not surprised at all. People were congratulating him. There was a perfect mob of them. Moreover, he knew them all — vaguely remembered them, at least. And they all knew him.

“Isn’t it a game?” laughed some one, patting him on the back. “*They* haven’t the least idea ...!”

And the speaker — it was old John Palmer, the bookkeeper at the office — emphasised the “they.”

“Not the least idea,” he answered with a smile, saying something he didn’t understand, yet knew was right.

His face, apparently, showed the utter bewilderment he felt. The shock of the collision had been greater than he realised evidently. His mind was wandering. ... Possibly! Only the odd thing was — he had never felt so clear-headed in his life. Ten thousand things grew simple suddenly. But, how thickly these people pressed about him, and how — familiarly!

"My parcels," he said, joyously pushing his way across the throng. "These are Christmas presents I've bought for them." He nodded toward the room. "I've saved for weeks — stopped cigars and billiards and — and several other good things — to buy them."

"Good man!" said Palmer with a happy laugh. "It's the heart that counts."

Mudbury looked at him. Palmer had said an amazing truth, only — people would hardly understand and believe him. ... Would they?

"Eh?" he asked, feeling stuffed and stupid, muddled somewhere between two meanings, one of which was gorgeous and the other stupid beyond belief.

"If you *please*, Mr. Mudbury, step inside. They are expecting you," said a kindly, pompous voice. And, turning sharply, he met the gentle, foolish eyes of Sir James Epiphany, a director of the Bank where he worked.

The effect of the voice was instantaneous from long habit.

"They are?" he smiled from his heart, and advanced as from the custom of many years. Oh, how happy and gay he felt! His affection for his wife was real. Romance, indeed, had gone, but he needed her — and she needed him. And the children — Milly, Bill, and Jean — he deeply loved them. Life *was* worth living indeed!

In the room was a crowd, but — an astounding silence. John Mudbury looked round him. He advanced towards his wife, who sat in the corner arm-chair with Milly on her knee. A lot of people talked and moved about. Momentarily the crowd increased. He stood in front of them — in front of Milly and his wife. And he spoke — holding out his packages. "It's Christmas Eve," he whispered shyly, "and I've — brought you something — something for everybody. Look!" He held the packages before their eyes.

“Of course, of course,” said a voice behind him, “but you may hold them out like that for a century. They’ll *never* see them!”

“Of course they won’t. But I love to do the old, sweet thing,” replied John Mudbury — then wondered with a gasp of stark amazement why he said it.

“*I* think — —” whispered Milly, staring round her.

“Well, *what* do you think?” her mother asked sharply. “You’re always thinking something queer.”

“I think,” the child continued dreamily, “that Daddy’s already here.” She paused, then added with a child’s impossible conviction, “I’m sure he is. I *feel* him.”

There was an extraordinary laugh. Sir James Epiphany laughed. The others — the whole crowd of them — also turned their heads and smiled. But the mother, thrusting the child away from her, rose up suddenly with a violent start. Her face had turned to chalk. She stretched her arms out — into the air before her. She gasped and shivered. There was an awful anguish in her eyes.

“Look!” repeated John, “these are the presents that I brought.”

But his voice apparently was soundless. And, with a spasm of icy pain, he remembered that Palmer and Sir James — some years ago — had died.

“It’s magic,” he cried, “but — I love you, Jinny — I love you — and — and I have always been true to you — as true as steel. We need each other — oh, can’t you see — we go on together — you and I — for ever and ever — —”

“*Think*,” interrupted an exquisitely tender voice, “don’t shout! *They* can’t hear you — now.” And, turning, John Mudbury met the eyes of Everard Minturn, their President of the year before. Minturn had gone down with the *Titanic*.

He dropped his parcels then. His heart gave an enormous leap of joy.

He saw her face — the face of his wife — look through him.

But the child gazed straight into his eyes. She *saw* him.

The next thing he knew was that he heard something tinkling ... far, far away. It sounded miles below him — inside him — he was sounding himself — all utterly bewildering — like a bell. It *was* a bell.

Milly stooped down and picked the parcels up. Her face shone with happiness and laughter. ...

But a man came in soon after, a man with a ridiculous, solemn face, a pencil, and a notebook. He wore a dark blue helmet. Behind him came a string of other men. They carried something ... something ... he could not see exactly what it was. But when he pressed forward through the laughing throng to gaze upon it, he dimly made out two eyes, a nose, a chin, a deep red smear, and a pair of folded hands upon an overcoat. A woman's form fell down upon them then, and ... he heard ... soft sounds of children weeping strangely ... and other sounds ... sounds as of familiar voices ... laughing ... laughing gaily.

"They'll join us presently. It goes like a flash. ..."

And, turning with great happiness in his heart, he saw that Sir James had said it, holding Palmer by the arm as with some natural yet unexpected love of sympathetic friendship.

"Come on," said Palmer, smiling like a man who accepts a gift in universal fellowship, "let's help 'em. They'll never understand. ... Still, we can always try."

The entire throng moved up with laughter and amusement. It was a moment of hearty, genuine life at last. Delight and Joy and Peace were everywhere.

Then John Mudbury realised the truth — that he was *dead*.

XV

THE TRADITION

THE NOISES OUTSIDE the little flat at first were very disconcerting after living in the country. They made sleep difficult. At the cottage in Sussex where the family had lived, night brought deep, comfortable silence, unless the wind was high, when the pine trees round the duck-pond made a sound like surf, or if the gale was from the south-west, the orchard roared a bit unpleasantly.

But in London it was very different; sleep was easier in the daytime than at night. For after nightfall the rumble of the traffic became spasmodic instead of continuous; the motor-horns startled like warnings of alarm; after comparative silence the furious rushing of a taxi-cab touched the nerves. From dinner till eleven o'clock the streets subsided gradually; then came the army from theatres, parties, and late dinners, hurrying home to bed. The motor-horns during this hour were lively and incessant, like bugles of a regiment moving into battle. The parents rarely retired until this attack was over. If quick about it, sleep was possible then before the flying of the night-birds — an uncertain squadron — screamed half the street awake again. But, these finally disposed of, a delightful hush settled down upon the neighbourhood, profounder far than any peace of the countryside. The deep rumble of the produce wagons, coming in to the big London markets from the farms — generally about three A.M. — held no disturbing quality.

But sometimes in the stillness of very early morning, when streets were empty and pavements all deserted, there was a sound of another kind that was startling and unwelcome. For it was ominous. It came with a clattering violence that made nerves quiver and forced the heart to pause and listen. A strange resonance was in it, a volume of sound, moreover, that was hardly justified by its cause. For it was hoofs. A horse swept hurrying up the deserted street, and was close upon the building in a moment. It was audible suddenly, no gradual approach from a distance, but as though it turned a corner from soft ground that muffled the hoofs, on to the echoing, hard paving that emphasised the dreadful clatter. Nor did it die away again when once the house was reached. It ceased as abruptly as it came. The hoofs did not go away.

It was the mother who heard them first, and drew her husband's attention to their disagreeable quality.

"It is the mail-vans, dear," he answered. "They go at four A. M. to catch the early trains into the country."

She looked up sharply, as though something in his tone surprised her.

"But there's no sound of wheels," she said. And then, as he did not reply, she added gravely, "You have heard it too, John. I can tell."

"I have," he said. "I have heard it — twice."

And they looked at one another searchingly, each trying to read the other's mind. She did not question him; he did not propose writing to complain in a newspaper; both understood something that neither of them understood.

"I heard it first," she then said softly, "the night before Jack got the fever. And as I listened, I heard him crying. But when I went in to see he was asleep. The noise stopped just outside the building." There was a shadow in her eyes as she said this, and a hush crept in between her words. "I did not hear it *go*." She said this almost beneath her breath.

He looked a moment at the ground; then, coming towards her, he took her in his arms and kissed her. And she clung very tightly to him.

"Sometimes," he said in a quiet voice, "a mounted policeman passes down the street, I think."

"It is a horse," she answered. But whether it was a question or mere corroboration he did not ask, for at that moment the doctor arrived, and the question of little Jack's health became the paramount matter of immediate interest. The great man's verdict was uncommonly disquieting.

All that night they sat up in the sick room. It was strangely still, as though by one accord the traffic avoided the house where a little boy hung between life and death. The motor-horns even had a muffled sound, and heavy drays and wagons used the wide streets; there were fewer taxicabs about, or else they flew by noiselessly. Yet no straw was down; the expense prohibited that. And towards morning, very early, the mother decided to watch alone. She had been a trained nurse before her marriage, accustomed when she was younger to long vigils. "You go down, dear, and get a little sleep," she urged in a whisper. “He’s quiet now. At five o’clock I’ll come for you to take my place.”

“You’ll fetch me at once,” he whispered, “if — —” then hesitated as though breath failed him. A moment he stood there staring from her face to the bed. “If you hear anything,” he finished. She nodded, and he went downstairs to his study, not to his bedroom. He left the door ajar. He sat in darkness, listening. Mother, he knew, was listening, too, beside the bed. His heart was very full, for he did not believe the boy could live till morning. The picture of the room was all the time before his eyes — the shaded lamp, the table with the medicines, the little wasted figure beneath the blankets, and mother close beside it, listening. He sat alert, ready to fly upstairs at the smallest cry.

But no sound broke the stillness; the entire neighbourhood was silent; all London slept. He heard the clock strike three in the dining-room at the end of the corridor. It was still enough for that. There was not even the heavy rumble of a single produce wagon, though usually they passed about this time on their way to Smithfield and Covent Garden markets. He waited, far too anxious to close his eyes. ... At four o’clock he would go up and relieve her vigil. Four, he knew, was the time when life sinks to its lowest ebb. ... Then, in the middle of his reflections, thought stopped dead, and it seemed his heart stopped too.

Far away, but coming nearer with extraordinary rapidity, a sharp, clear sound broke out of the surrounding stillness — a horse’s hoofs. At first it was so distant that it might have been almost on the high roads of the country, but the amazing speed with which it came closer, and the sudden increase of the beating sound, was such, that by the time he turned his head it seemed to have entered the street outside. It was within a hundred yards of the building. The next second it was before the very door. And something in him blenched. He knew a moment’s complete paralysis. The abrupt cessation of the heavy clatter was strangest of all. It came like lightning, it struck, it paused. It did not go away again. Yet the sound of it was still beating in his ears as he dashed upstairs three steps at a time. It seemed in the house as well, on the stairs behind him, in the little passage-way, *inside the very bedroom*. It was an appalling sound. Yet he entered a room that was quiet, orderly, and calm. It was silent. Beside the bed his wife sat, holding

Jack's hand and stroking it. She was soothing him; her face was very peaceful. No sound but her gentle whisper was audible.

He controlled himself by a tremendous effort, but his face betrayed his consternation and distress. "Hush," she said beneath her breath; "he's sleeping much more calmly now. The crisis, bless God, is over, I do believe. I dared not leave him."

He saw in a moment that she was right, and an untenable relief passed over him. He sat down beside her, very cold, yet perspiring with heat.

"You heard —— ?" he asked after a pause.

"Nothing," she replied quickly, "except his pitiful, wild words when the delirium was on him. It's passed. It lasted but a moment, or I'd have called you."

He stared closely into her tired eyes. "And his words?" he asked in a whisper. Whereupon she told him quietly that the little chap had sat up with wide-opened eyes and talked excitedly about a "great, great horse" he heard, but that was not "coming for him." "He laughed and said he would not go with it because he 'was not ready yet.' Some scrap of talk he had overheard from us," she added, "when we discussed the traffic once. ..."

"But you heard nothing?" he repeated almost impatiently.

No, she had heard nothing. After all, then, he *had* dozed a moment in his chair. ...

Four weeks later Jack, entirely convalescent, was playing a restricted game of hide-and-seek with his sister in the flat. It was really a forbidden joy, owing to noise and risk of breakages, but he had unusual privileges after his grave illness. It was dusk. The lamps in the street were being lit. "Quietly, remember; your mother's resting in her room," were the father's orders. She had just returned from a week by the sea, recuperating from the strain of nursing for so many nights. The traffic rolled and boomed along the streets below.

"Jack! Do come on and hide. It's your turn. I hid last."

But the boy was standing spellbound by the window, staring hard at something on the pavement. Sybil called and tugged in vain. Tears threatened. Jack would not budge. He declared he saw something.

“Oh, you’re always seeing something. I wish you’d go and hide. It’s only because you can’t think of a good place, really.”

“Look!” he cried in a voice of wonder. And as he said it his father rose quickly from his chair before the fire.

“Look!” the child repeated with delight and excitement. “It’s a great big horse. And it’s perfectly white all over.” His sister joined him at the window. “Where? Where? I can’t see it. Oh, *do* show me!”

Their father was standing close behind them now. “I heard it,” he was whispering, but so low the children did not notice him. His face was the colour of chalk.

“Straight in front of our door, stupid! Can’t you see it? Oh, I do wish it had come for me. It’s *such* a beauty!” And he clapped his hands with pleasure and excitement. “Quick, quick! It’s going away again!”

But while the children stood half-squabbling by the window, their father leaned over a sofa in the adjoining room above a figure whose heart in sleep had quietly stopped its beating. The great white horse had come. But this time he had not only heard its wonderful arrival. He had also heard it go. It seemed he heard the awful hoofs beat down the sky, far, far away, and very swiftly, dying into silence, finally up among the stars.

THE END

Wolves of God, and Other Fey Stories (1921)

CONTENTS

THE WOLVES OF GOD

CHINESE MAGIC

RUNNING WOLF

FIRST HATE

THE TARN OF SACRIFICE

THE VALLEY OF THE BEASTS

THE CALL

EGYPTIAN SORCERY

THE DECOY

THE MAN WHO FOUND OUT (A NIGHTMARE)

THE EMPTY SLEEVE

WIRELESS CONFUSION

CONFESSION

THE LANE THAT RAN EAST AND WEST

VENGEANCE IS MINE

THE WOLVES OF GOD

1

AS THE LITTLE steamer entered the bay of Kettletoft in the Orkneys the beach at Sanday appeared so low that the houses almost seemed to be standing in the water; and to the big, dark man leaning over the rail of the upper deck the sight of them came with a pang of mingled pain and pleasure. The scene, to his eyes, had not changed. The houses, the low shore, the flat treeless country beyond, the vast open sky, all looked exactly the same as when he left the island thirty years ago to work for the Hudson Bay Company in distant N. W. Canada. A lad of eighteen then, he was now a man of forty-eight, old for his years, and this was the home-coming he had so often dreamed about in the lonely wilderness of trees where he had spent his life. Yet his grim face wore an anxious rather than a tender expression. The return was perhaps not quite as he had pictured it.

Jim Peace had not done too badly, however, in the Company's service. For an islander, he would be a rich man now; he had not married, he had saved the greater part of his salary, and even in the far-away Post where he had spent so many years there had been occasional opportunities of the kind common to new, wild countries where life and law are in the making. He had not hesitated to take them. None of the big Company Posts, it was true, had come his way, nor had he risen very high in the service; in another two years his turn would have come, yet he had left of his own accord before those two years were up. His decision, judging by the strength in the features, was not due to impulse; the move had been deliberately weighed and calculated; he had renounced his opportunity after full reflection. A man with those steady eyes, with that square jaw and determined mouth, certainly did not act without good reason.

A curious expression now flickered over his weather-hardened face as he saw again his childhood's home, and the return, so often dreamed about, actually took place at last. An uneasy light flashed for a moment in the deep-set grey eyes, but was quickly gone again, and the tanned visage recovered its accustomed look of stern composure. His keen sight took in a dark knot of figures on the landing-pier — his brother, he knew, among them. A wave of home-sickness swept over him. He longed to see his brother again, the old farm, the sweep of open country, the sand-dunes, and the breaking seas. The smell of long-forgotten days came to his nostrils with its sweet, painful pang of youthful memories.

How fine, he thought, to be back there in the old familiar fields of childhood, with sea and sand about him instead of the smother of endless woods that ran a thousand miles without a break. He was glad in particular that no trees were visible, and that rabbits scampering among the dunes were the only wild animals he need ever meet....

Those thirty years in the woods, it seemed, oppressed his mind; the forests, the countless multitudes of trees, had wearied him. His nerves, perhaps, had suffered finally. Snow, frost and sun, stars, and the wind had been his companions during the long days and endless nights in his lonely Post, but chiefly — trees. Trees, trees, trees! On the whole, he had preferred them in stormy weather, though, in another way, their rigid hosts, 'mid the deep silence of still days, had been equally oppressive. In the clear sunlight of a windless day they assumed a waiting, listening, watching aspect that had something spectral in it, but when in motion — well, he preferred a moving animal to one that stood stock-still and stared. Wind, moreover, in a million trees, even the lightest breeze, drowned all other sounds — the howling of the wolves, for instance, in winter, or the ceaseless harsh barking of the husky dogs he so disliked.

Even on this warm September afternoon a slight shiver ran over him as the background of dead years loomed up behind the present scene. He thrust the picture back, deep down inside himself. The self-control, the strong, even violent will that the face betrayed, came into operation instantly. The background was background; it belonged to what was past, and the past was over and done with. It was dead. Jim meant it to stay dead.

The figure waving to him from the pier was his brother. He knew Tom instantly; the years had dealt easily with him in this quiet island; there was no startling, no unkindly change, and a deep emotion, though unexpressed, rose in his heart. It was good to be home again, he realized, as he sat presently in the cart, Tom holding the reins, driving slowly back to the farm at the north end of the island. Everything he found familiar, yet at the same time strange. They passed the school where he used to go as a little bare-legged boy; other boys were now learning their lessons exactly as he used to do. Through the open window he could hear the droning voice of the schoolmaster, who, though invisible, wore the face of Mr. Lovibond, his own teacher.

“Lovibond?” said Tom, in reply to his question. “Oh, he’s been dead these twenty years. He went south, you know — Glasgow, I think it was, or Edinburgh. He got typhoid.”

Stands of golden plover were to be seen as of old in the fields, or flashing overhead in swift flight with a whir of wings, wheeling and turning together like one huge bird. Down on the empty shore a curlew cried. Its piercing note rose clear above the noisy clamour of the gulls. The sun played softly on the quiet sea, the air was keen but pleasant, the tang of salt mixed sweetly with the clean smells of open country that he knew so well. Nothing of essentials had changed, even the low clouds beyond the heaving uplands were the clouds of childhood.

They came presently to the sand-dunes, where rabbits sat at their burrow-mouths, or ran helter-skelter across the road in front of the slow cart.

“They’re safe till the colder weather comes and trapping begins,” he mentioned. It all came back to him in detail.

“And they know it, too — the canny little beggars,” replied Tom. “Any rabbits out where you’ve been?” he asked casually.

“Not to hurt you,” returned his brother shortly.

Nothing seemed changed, although everything seemed different. He looked upon the old, familiar things, but with other eyes. There were, of course, changes, alterations, yet so slight, in a way so odd and curious, that they evaded him; not being of the physical order, they reported to his soul, not to his mind. But his soul, being troubled, sought to deny the changes; to admit them meant to admit a change in himself he had determined to conceal even if he could not entirely deny it.

“Same old place, Tom,” came one of his rare remarks. “The years ain’t done much to it.” He looked into his brother’s face a moment squarely. “Nor to you, either, Tom,” he added, affection and tenderness just touching his voice and breaking through a natural reserve that was almost taciturnity.

His brother returned the look; and something in that instant passed between the two men, something of understanding that no words had hinted at, much less expressed. The tie was real, they loved each other, they were loyal, true, steadfast fellows. In youth they had known no secrets. The shadow that now passed and vanished left a vague trouble in both hearts.

“The forests,” said Tom slowly, “have made a silent man of you, Jim. You’ll miss them here, I’m thinking.”

“Maybe,” was the curt reply, “but I guess not.”

His lips snapped to as though they were of steel and could never open again, while the tone he used made Tom realize that the subject was not one his brother cared to talk about particularly. He was surprised, therefore, when, after a pause, Jim returned to it of his own accord. He was sitting a little sideways as he spoke, taking in the scene with hungry eyes. “It’s a queer thing,” he observed, “to look round and see nothing but clean empty land, and not a single tree in sight. You see, it don’t look natural quite.”

Again his brother was struck by the tone of voice, but this time by something else as well he could not name. Jim was excusing himself, explaining. The manner, too, arrested him. And thirty years disappeared as though they had not been, for it was thus Jim acted as a boy when there was something unpleasant he had to say and wished to get it over. The tone, the gesture, the manner, all were there. He was edging up to something he wished to say, yet dared not utter.

“You’ve had enough of trees then?” Tom said sympathetically, trying to help, “and things?”

The instant the last two words were out he realized that they had been drawn from him instinctively, and that it was the anxiety of deep affection which had prompted them. He had guessed without knowing he had guessed, or rather, without intention or attempt to guess. Jim had a secret. Love’s clairvoyance had discovered it, though not yet its hidden terms.

“I have — —” began the other, then paused, evidently to choose his words with care. “I’ve had enough of trees.” He was about to speak of something that his brother had unwittingly touched upon in his chance phrase, but instead of finding the words he sought, he gave a sudden start, his breath caught sharply. “What’s that?” he exclaimed, jerking his body round so abruptly that Tom automatically pulled the reins. “What is it?”

“A dog barking,” Tom answered, much surprised. “A farm dog barking. Why? What did you think it was?” he asked, as he flicked the horse to go on again. “You made me jump,” he added, with a laugh. “You’re used to huskies, ain’t you?”

“It sounded so — not like a dog, I mean,” came the slow explanation. “It’s long since I heard a sheep-dog bark, I suppose it startled me.”

“Oh, it’s a dog all right,” Tom assured him comfortingly, for his heart told him infallibly the kind of tone to use. And presently, too, he changed the subject in his blunt, honest fashion, knowing that, also, was the right and kindly thing to do. He pointed out the old farms as they drove along, his brother silent again, sitting stiff and rigid at his side. “And it’s good to have you back, Jim, from those outlandish places. There are not too many of the family left now — just you and I, as a matter of fact.”

“Just you and I,” the other repeated gruffly, but in a sweetened tone that proved he appreciated the ready sympathy and tact. “We’ll stick together, Tom, eh? Blood’s thicker than water, ain’t it? I’ve learnt that much, anyhow.”

The voice had something gentle and appealing in it, something his brother heard now for the first time. An elbow nudged into his side, and Tom knew the gesture was not solely a sign of affection, but grew partly also from the comfort born of physical contact when the heart is anxious. The touch, like the last words, conveyed an appeal for help. Tom was so surprised he couldn’t believe it quite.

Scared! Jim scared! The thought puzzled and afflicted him who knew his brother’s character inside out, his courage, his presence of mind in danger, his resolution. Jim frightened seemed an impossibility, a contradiction in terms; he was the kind of man who did not know the meaning of fear, who shrank from nothing, whose spirits rose highest when things appeared most hopeless. It must, indeed, be an uncommon, even a terrible danger that could shake such nerves; yet Tom saw the signs and read them clearly. Explain them he could not, nor did he try. All he knew with certainty was that his brother, sitting now beside him in the cart, hid a secret terror in his heart. Sooner or later, in his own good time, he would share it with him.

He ascribed it, this simple Orkney farmer, to those thirty years of loneliness and exile in wild desolate places, without companionship, without the society of women, with only Indians, husky dogs, a few trappers or fur-dealers like himself, but none of the wholesome, natural influences that sweeten life within reach. Thirty years was a long, long time. He began planning schemes to help. Jim must see people as much as possible, and his mind ran quickly over the men and women available. In women the neighbourhood was not rich, but there were several men of the right sort who might be useful, good fellows all. There was John Rossiter, another old Hudson Bay man, who had been factor at Cartwright, Labrador, for many years, and had returned long ago to spend his last days in civilization. There was Sandy McKay, also back from a long spell of rubber-planting in Malay.... Tom was still busy making plans when they reached the old farm and presently sat down to their first meal together since that early breakfast thirty years ago before Jim caught the steamer that bore him off to exile — an exile that now returned him with nerves unstrung and a secret terror hidden in his heart.

“I’ll ask no questions,” he decided. “Jim will tell me in his own good time. And meanwhile, I’ll get him to see as many folks as possible.” He meant it too; yet not only for his brother’s sake. Jim’s terror was so vivid it had touched his own heart too.

“Ah, a man can open his lungs here and breathe!” exclaimed Jim, as the two came out after supper and stood before the house, gazing across the open country. He drew a deep breath as though to prove his assertion, exhaling with slow satisfaction again. “It’s good to see a clear horizon and to know there’s all that water between — between me and where I’ve been.” He turned his face to watch the plover in the sky, then looked towards the distant shore-line where the sea was just visible in the long evening light. “There can’t be too much water for me,” he added, half to himself. “I guess they can’t cross water — not that much water at any rate.”

Tom stared, wondering uneasily what to make of it.

“At the trees again, Jim?” he said laughingly. He had overheard the last words, though spoken low, and thought it best not to ignore them altogether.

To be natural was the right way, he believed, natural and cheery. To make a joke of anything unpleasant, he felt, was to make it less serious. “I’ve never seen a tree come across the Atlantic yet, except as a mast — dead,” he added.

“I wasn’t thinking of the trees just then,” was the blunt reply, “but of — something else. The damned trees are nothing, though I hate the sight of ‘em. Not of much account, anyway” — as though he compared them mentally with another thing. He puffed at his pipe, a moment.

“They certainly can’t move,” put in his brother, “nor swim either.”

“Nor another thing,” said Jim, his voice thick suddenly, but not with smoke, and his speech confused, though the idea in his mind was certainly clear as daylight. “Things can’t hide behind ’em — can they?”

“Not much cover hereabouts, I admit,” laughed Tom, though the look in his brother’s eyes made his laughter as short as it sounded unnatural.

“That’s so,” agreed the other. “But what I meant was” — he threw out his chest, looked about him with an air of intense relief, drew in another deep breath, and again exhaled with satisfaction— “if there are no trees, there’s no hiding.”

It was the expression on the rugged, weathered face that sent the blood in a sudden gulping rush from his brother’s heart. He had seen men frightened, seen men afraid before they were actually frightened; he had also seen men stiff with terror in the face both of natural and so-called supernatural things; but never in his life before had he seen the look of unearthly dread that now turned his brother’s face as white as chalk and yet put the glow of fire in two haunted burning eyes.

Across the darkening landscape the sound of distant barking had floated to them on the evening wind.

“It’s only a farm-dog barking.” Yet it was Jim’s deep, quiet voice that said it, one hand upon his brother’s arm.

“That’s all,” replied Tom, ashamed that he had betrayed himself, and realizing with a shock of surprise that it was Jim who now played the rôle of comforter — a startling change in their relations. “Why, what did you think it was?”

He tried hard to speak naturally and easily, but his voice shook. So deep was the brothers' love and intimacy that they could not help but share.

Jim lowered his great head. “I thought,” he whispered, his grey beard touching the other's cheek, “maybe it was the wolves” — an agony of terror made both voice and body tremble— “the Wolves of God!”

2

The interval of thirty years had been bridged easily enough; it was the secret that left the open gap neither of them cared or dared to cross. Jim's reason for hesitation lay within reach of guesswork, but Tom's silence was more complicated.

With strong, simple men, strangers to affectation or pretence, reserve is a real, almost a sacred thing. Jim offered nothing more; Tom asked no single question. In the latter's mind lay, for one thing, a singular intuitive certainty: that if he knew the truth he would lose his brother. How, why, wherefore, he had no notion; whether by death, or because, having told an awful thing, Jim would hide — physically or mentally — he knew not, nor even asked himself. No subtlety lay in Tom, the Orkney farmer. He merely felt that a knowledge of the truth involved separation which was death.

Day and night, however, that extraordinary phrase which, at its first hearing, had frozen his blood, ran on beating in his mind. With it came always the original, nameless horror that had held him motionless where he stood, his brother's bearded lips against his ear: *The Wolves of God*. In some dim way, he sometimes felt — tried to persuade himself, rather — the horror did not belong to the phrase alone, but was a sympathetic echo of what Jim felt himself. It had entered his own mind and heart. They had always shared in this same strange, intimate way. The deep brotherly tie accounted for it. Of the possible transference of thought and emotion he knew nothing, but this was what he meant perhaps.

At the same time he fought and strove to keep it out, not because it brought uneasy and distressing feelings to him, but because he did not wish to pry, to ascertain, to discover his brother's secret as by some kind of subterfuge that seemed too near to eavesdropping almost. Also, he wished most earnestly to protect him. Meanwhile, in spite of himself, or perhaps because of himself, he watched his brother as a wild animal watches its young. Jim was the only tie he had on earth. He loved him with a brother's love, and Jim, similarly, he knew, loved him. His job was difficult. Love alone could guide him.

He gave openings, but he never questioned:

"Your letter did surprise me, Jim. I was never so delighted in my life. You had still two years to run."

"I'd had enough," was the short reply. "God, man, it was good to get home again!"

This, and the blunt talk that followed their first meeting, was all Tom had to go upon, while those eyes that refused to shut watched ceaselessly always. There was improvement, unless, which never occurred to Tom, it was self-control; there was no more talk of trees and water, the barking of the dogs passed unnoticed, no reference to the loneliness of the backwoods life passed his lips; he spent his days fishing, shooting, helping with the work of the farm, his evenings smoking over a glass — he was more than temperate — and talking over the days of long ago.

The signs of uneasiness still were there, but they were negative, far more suggestive, therefore, than if open and direct. He desired no company, for instance — an unnatural thing, thought Tom, after so many years of loneliness.

It was this and the awkward fact that he had given up two years before his time was finished, renouncing, therefore, a comfortable pension — it was these two big details that stuck with such unkind persistence in his brother's thoughts. Behind both, moreover, ran ever the strange whispered phrase. What the words meant, or whence they were derived, Tom had no possible inkling. Like the wicked refrain of some forbidden song, they haunted him day and night, even his sleep not free from them entirely. All of which, to the simple Orkney farmer, was so new an experience that he knew not how to deal with it at all. Too strong to be flustered, he was at any rate bewildered. And it was for Jim, his brother, he suffered most.

What perplexed him chiefly, however, was the attitude his brother showed towards old John Rossiter. He could almost have imagined that the two men had met and known each other out in Canada, though Rossiter showed him how impossible that was, both in point of time and of geography as well.

He had brought them together within the first few days, and Jim, silent, gloomy, morose, even surly, had eyed him like an enemy. Old Rossiter, the milk of human kindness as thick in his veins as cream, had taken no offence. Grizzled veteran of the wilds, he had served his full term with the Company and now enjoyed his well-earned pension. He was full of stories, reminiscences, adventures of every sort and kind; he knew men and values, had seen strange things that only the true wilderness delivers, and he loved nothing better than to tell them over a glass. He talked with Jim so genially and affably that little response was called for luckily, for Jim was glum and unresponsive almost to rudeness. Old Rossiter noticed nothing. What Tom noticed was, chiefly perhaps, his brother's acute uneasiness. Between his desire to help, his attachment to Rossiter, and his keen personal distress, he knew not what to do or say. The situation was becoming too much for him.

The two families, besides — Peace and Rossiter — had been neighbours for generations, had intermarried freely, and were related in various degrees. He was too fond of his brother to feel ashamed, but he was glad when the visit was over and they were out of their host's house. Jim had even declined to drink with him.

"They're good fellows on the island," said Tom on their way home, "but not specially entertaining, perhaps. We all stick together though. You can trust 'em mostly."

"I never was a talker, Tom," came the gruff reply. "You know that." And Tom, understanding more than he understood, accepted the apology and made generous allowances.

"John likes to talk," he helped him. "He appreciates a good listener."

"It's the kind of talk I'm finished with," was the rejoinder. "The Company and their goings-on don't interest me any more. I've had enough."

Tom noticed other things as well with those affectionate eyes of his that did not want to see yet would not close. As the days drew in, for instance, Jim seemed reluctant to leave the house towards evening. Once the full light of day had passed, he kept indoors. He was eager and ready enough to shoot in the early morning, no matter at what hour he had to get up, but he refused point blank to go with his brother to the lake for an evening flight. No excuse was offered; he simply declined to go.

The gap between them thus widened and deepened, while yet in another sense it grew less formidable. Both knew, that is, that a secret lay between them for the first time in their lives, yet both knew also that at the right and proper moment it would be revealed. Jim only waited till the proper moment came. And Tom understood. His deep, simple love was equal to all emergencies. He respected his brother's reserve. The obvious desire of John Rossiter to talk and ask questions, for instance, he resisted staunchly as far as he was able. Only when he could help and protect his brother did he yield a little. The talk was brief, even monosyllabic; neither the old Hudson Bay fellow nor the Orkney farmer ran to many words:

"He ain't right with himself," offered John, taking his pipe out of his mouth and leaning forward. "That's what I don't like to see." He put a skinny hand on Tom's knee, and looked earnestly into his face as he said it.

"Jim!" replied the other. "Jim ill, you mean!" It sounded ridiculous.

"His mind is sick."

"I don't understand," Tom said, though the truth bit like rough-edged steel into the brother's heart.

"His soul, then, if you like that better."

Tom fought with himself a moment, then asked him to be more explicit.

"More'n I can say," rejoined the laconic old backwoodsman. "I don't know myself. The woods heal some men and make others sick."

"Maybe, John, maybe." Tom fought back his resentment. "You've lived, like him, in lonely places. You ought to know." His mouth shut with a snap, as though he had said too much. Loyalty to his suffering brother caught him strongly. Already his heart ached for Jim. He felt angry with Rossiter for his divination, but perceived, too, that the old fellow meant well and was trying to help him. If he lost Jim, he lost the world — his all.

A considerable pause followed, during which both men puffed their pipes with reckless energy. Both, that is, were a bit excited. Yet both had their code, a code they would not exceed for worlds.

"Jim," added Tom presently, making an effort to meet the sympathy half way, "ain't quite up to the mark, I'll admit that."

There was another long pause, while Rossiter kept his eyes on his companion steadily, though without a trace of expression in them — a habit that the woods had taught him.

“Jim,” he said at length, with an obvious effort, “is skeered. And it’s the soul in him that’s skeered.”

Tom wavered dreadfully then. He saw that old Rossiter, experienced backwoodsman and taught by the Company as he was, knew where the secret lay, if he did not yet know its exact terms. It was easy enough to put the question, yet he hesitated, because loyalty forbade.

“It’s a dirty outfit somewheres,” the old man mumbled to himself.

Tom sprang to his feet, “If you talk that way,” he exclaimed angrily, “you’re no friend of mine — or his.” His anger gained upon him as he said it. “Say that again,” he cried, “and I’ll knock your teeth — —”

He sat back, stunned a moment.

“Forgive me, John,” he faltered, shamed yet still angry. “It’s pain to me, it’s pain. Jim,” he went on, after a long breath and a pull at his glass, “Jim *is* scared, I know it.” He waited a moment, hunting for the words that he could use without disloyalty. “But it’s nothing he’s done himself,” he said, “nothing to his discredit. I know *that*.”

Old Rossiter looked up, a strange light in his eyes.

“No offence,” he said quietly.

“Tell me what you know,” cried Tom suddenly, standing up again.

The old factor met his eye squarely, steadfastly. He laid his pipe aside.

“D’ye really want to hear?” he asked in a lowered voice. “Because, if you don’t — why, say so right now. I’m all for justice,” he added, “and always was.”

“Tell me,” said Tom, his heart in his mouth. “Maybe, if I knew — I might help him.” The old man’s words woke fear in him. He well knew his passionate, remorseless sense of justice.

“Help him,” repeated the other. “For a man skeered in his soul there ain’t no help. But — if you want to hear — I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me,” cried Tom. “I *will* help him,” while rising anger fought back rising fear.

John took another pull at his glass.

“Jest between you and me like.”

“Between you and me,” said Tom. “Get on with it.”

There was a deep silence in the little room. Only the sound of the sea came in, the wind behind it.

“The Wolves,” whispered old Rossiter. “The Wolves of God.”

Tom sat still in his chair, as though struck in the face. He shivered. He kept silent and the silence seemed to him long and curious. His heart was throbbing, the blood in his veins played strange tricks. All he remembered was that old Rossiter had gone on talking. The voice, however, sounded far away and distant. It was all unreal, he felt, as he went homewards across the bleak, wind-swept upland, the sound of the sea for ever in his ears....

Yes, old John Rossiter, damned be his soul, had gone on talking. He had said wild, incredible things. Damned be his soul! His teeth should be smashed for that. It was outrageous, it was cowardly, it was not true.

“Jim,” he thought, “my brother, Jim!” as he ploughed his way wearily against the wind. “I’ll teach him. I’ll teach him to spread such wicked tales!” He referred to Rossiter. “God blast these fellows! They come home from their outlandish places and think they can say anything! I’ll knock his yellow dog’s teeth...!”

While, inside, his heart went quailing, crying for help, afraid.

He tried hard to remember exactly what old John had said. Round Garden Lake — that’s where Jim was located in his lonely Post — there was a tribe of Redskins. They were of unusual type. Malefactors among them — thieves, criminals, murderers — were not punished. They were merely turned out by the Tribe to die.

But how?

The Wolves of God took care of them. What were the Wolves of God?

A pack of wolves the Redskins held in awe, a sacred pack, a spirit pack — God curse the man! Absurd, outlandish nonsense! Superstitious humbug! A pack of wolves that punished malefactors, killing but never eating them. “Torn but not eaten,” the words came back to him, “white men as well as red. They could even cross the sea....”

“He ought to be strung up for telling such wild yarns. By God — I’ll teach him!”

“Jim! My brother, Jim! It’s monstrous.”

But the old man, in his passionate cold justice, had said a yet more terrible thing, a thing that Tom would never forget, as he never could forgive it: “You mustn’t keep him here; you must send him away. We cannot have him on the island.” And for that, though he could scarcely believe his ears, wondering afterwards whether he heard aright, for that, the proper answer to which was a blow in the mouth, Tom knew that his old friendship and affection had turned to bitter hatred.

“If I don’t kill him, for that cursed lie, may God — and Jim — forgive me!”

3

It was a few days later that the storm caught the islands, making them tremble in their sea-born bed. The wind tearing over the treeless expanse was terrible, the lightning lit the skies. No such rain had ever been known. The building shook and trembled. It almost seemed the sea had burst her limits, and the waves poured in. Its fury and the noises that the wind made affected both the brothers, but Jim disliked the uproar most. It made him gloomy, silent, morose. It made him — Tom perceived it at once — uneasy. “Scared in his soul” — the ugly phrase came back to him.

“God save anyone who’s out to-night,” said Jim anxiously, as the old farm rattled about his head. Whereupon the door opened as of itself. There was no knock. It flew wide, as if the wind had burst it. Two drenched and beaten figures showed in the gap against the lurid sky — old John Rossiter and Sandy. They laid their fowling pieces down and took off their capes; they had been up at the lake for the evening flight and six birds were in the game bag. So suddenly had the storm come up that they had been caught before they could get home.

And, while Tom welcomed them, looked after their creature wants, and made them feel at home as in duty bound, no visit, he felt at the same time, could have been less opportune. Sandy did not matter — Sandy never did matter anywhere, his personality being negligible — but John Rossiter was the last man Tom wished to see just then. He hated the man; hated that sense of implacable justice that he knew was in him; with the slightest excuse he would have turned him out and sent him on to his own home, storm or no storm. But Rossiter provided no excuse; he was all gratitude and easy politeness, more pleasant and friendly to Jim even than to his brother. Tom set out the whisky and sugar, sliced the lemon, put the kettle on, and furnished dry coats while the soaked garments hung up before the roaring fire that Orkney makes customary even when days are warm.

“It might be the equinoctials,” observed Sandy, “if it wasn’t late October.” He shivered, for the tropics had thinned his blood.

“This ain’t no ordinary storm,” put in Rossiter, drying his drenched boots. “It reminds me a bit” — he jerked his head to the window that gave seawards, the rush of rain against the panes half drowning his voice— “reminds me a bit of yonder.” He looked up, as though to find someone to agree with him, only one such person being in the room.

“Sure, it ain’t,” agreed Jim at once, but speaking slowly, “no ordinary storm.” His voice was quiet as a child’s. Tom, stooping over the kettle, felt something cold go trickling down his back. “It’s from acrost the Atlantic too.”

“All our big storms come from the sea,” offered Sandy, saying just what Sandy was expected to say. His lank red hair lay matted on his forehead, making him look like an unhappy collie dog.

“There’s no hospitality,” Rossiter changed the talk, “like an islander’s,” as Tom mixed and filled the glasses. “He don’t even ask ‘Say when?’” He chuckled in his beard and turned to Sandy, well pleased with the compliment to his host. “Now, in Malay,” he added dryly, “it’s probably different, I guess.” And the two men, one from Labrador, the other from the tropics, fell to bantering one another with heavy humour, while Tom made things comfortable and Jim stood silent with his back to the fire. At each blow of the wind that shook the building, a suitable remark was made, generally by Sandy: “Did you hear that now?” “Ninety miles an hour at least.” “Good thing you build solid in this country!” while Rossiter occasionally repeated that it was an “uncommon storm” and that “it reminded” him of the northern tempests he had known “out yonder.”

Tom said little, one thought and one thought only in his heart — the wish that the storm would abate and his guests depart. He felt uneasy about Jim. He hated Rossiter. In the kitchen he had steadied himself already with a good stiff drink, and was now half-way through a second; the feeling was in him that he would need their help before the evening was out. Jim, he noticed, had left his glass untouched. His attention, clearly, went to the wind and the outer night; he added little to the conversation.

“Hark!” cried Sandy’s shrill voice. “Did you hear that? That wasn’t wind, I’ll swear.” He sat up, looking for all the world like a dog pricking its ears to something no one else could hear.

“The sea coming over the dunes,” said Rossiter. “There’ll be an awful tide to-night and a terrible sea off the Swarf. Moon at the full, too.” He cocked his head sideways to listen. The roaring was tremendous, waves and wind combining with a result that almost shook the ground. Rain hit the glass with incessant volleys like duck shot.

It was then that Jim spoke, having said no word for a long time.

“It’s good there’s no trees,” he mentioned quietly. “I’m glad of that.”

“There’d be fearful damage, wouldn’t there?” remarked Sandy. “They might fall on the house too.”

But it was the tone Jim used that made Rossiter turn stiffly in his chair, looking first at the speaker, then at his brother. Tom caught both glances and saw the hard keen glitter in the eyes. This kind of talk, he decided, had got to stop, yet how to stop it he hardly knew, for his were not subtle methods, and rudeness to his guests ran too strong against the island customs. He refilled the glasses, thinking in his blunt fashion how best to achieve his object, when Sandy helped the situation without knowing it.

“That’s my first,” he observed, and all burst out laughing. For Sandy’s tenth glass was equally his “first,” and he absorbed his liquor like a sponge, yet showed no effects of it until the moment when he would suddenly collapse and sink helpless to the ground. The glass in question, however, was only his third, the final moment still far away.

“Three in one and one in three,” said Rossiter, amid the general laughter, while Sandy, grave as a judge, half emptied it at a single gulp. Good-natured, obtuse as a cart-horse, the tropics, it seemed, had first worn out his nerves, then removed them entirely from his body. “That’s Malay theology, I guess,” finished Rossiter. And the laugh broke out again. Whereupon, setting his glass down, Sandy offered his usual explanation that the hot lands had thinned his blood, that he felt the cold in these “arctic islands,” and that alcohol was a necessity of life with him. Tom, grateful for the unexpected help, encouraged him to talk, and Sandy, accustomed to neglect as a rule, responded readily. Having saved the situation, however, he now unwittingly led it back into the danger zone.

“A night for tales, eh?” he remarked, as the wind came howling with a burst of strangest noises against the house. “Down there in the States,” he went on, “they’d say the evil spirits were out. They’re a superstitious crowd, the natives. I remember once — —” And he told a tale, half foolish, half interesting, of a mysterious track he had seen when following buffalo in the jungle. It ran close to the spoor of a wounded buffalo for miles, a track unlike that of any known animal, and the natives, though unable to name it, regarded it with awe. It was a good sign, a kill was certain. They said it was a spirit track.

“You got your buffalo?” asked Tom.

“Found him two miles away, lying dead. The mysterious spoor came to an end close beside the carcass. It didn’t continue.”

“And that reminds me — —” began old Rossiter, ignoring Tom’s attempt to introduce another subject. He told them of the haunted island at Eagle River, and a tale of the man who would not stay buried on another island off the coast. From that he went on to describe the strange man-beast that hides in the deep forests of Labrador, manifesting but rarely, and dangerous to men who stray too far from camp, men with a passion for wild life over-strong in their blood — the great mythical Wendigo. And while he talked, Tom noticed that Sandy used each pause as a good moment for a drink, but that Jim’s glass still remained untouched.

The atmosphere of incredible things, thus, grew in the little room, much as it gathers among the shadows round a forest camp-fire when men who have seen strange places of the world give tongue about them, knowing they will not be laughed at — an atmosphere, once established, it is vain to fight against. The ingrained superstition that hides in every mother's son comes up at such times to breathe. It came up now. Sandy, closer by several glasses to the moment, Tom saw, when he would be suddenly drunk, gave birth again, a tale this time of a Scottish planter who had brutally dismissed a native servant for no other reason than that he disliked him. The man disappeared completely, but the villagers hinted that he would — soon indeed that he had — come back, though "not quite as he went." The planter armed, knowing that vengeance might be violent. A black panther, meanwhile, was seen prowling about the bungalow. One night a noise outside his door on the veranda roused him. Just in time to see the black brute leaping over the railings into the compound, he fired, and the beast fell with a savage growl of pain. Help arrived and more shots were fired into the animal, as it lay, mortally wounded already, lashing its tail upon the grass. The lanterns, however, showed that instead of a panther, it was the servant they had shot to shreds.

Sandy told the story well, a certain odd conviction in his tone and manner, neither of them at all to the liking of his host. Uneasiness and annoyance had been growing in Tom for some time already, his inability to control the situation adding to his anger. Emotion was accumulating in him dangerously; it was directed chiefly against Rossiter, who, though saying nothing definite, somehow deliberately encouraged both talk and atmosphere. Given the conditions, it was natural enough the talk should take the turn it did take, but what made Tom more and more angry was that, if Rossiter had not been present, he could have stopped it easily enough. It was the presence of the old Hudson Bay man that prevented his taking decided action. He was afraid of Rossiter, afraid of putting his back up. That was the truth. His recognition of it made him furious.

"Tell us another, Sandy McKay," said the veteran. "There's a lot in such tales. They're found the world over — men turning into animals and the like."

And Sandy, yet nearer to his moment of collapse, but still showing no effects, obeyed willingly. He noticed nothing; the whisky was good, his tales were appreciated, and that sufficed him. He thanked Tom, who just then refilled his glass, and went on with his tale. But Tom, hatred and fury in his heart, had reached the point where he could no longer contain himself, and Rossiter’s last words inflamed him. He went over, under cover of a tremendous clap of wind, to fill the old man’s glass. The latter refused, covering the tumbler with his big, lean hand. Tom stood over him a moment, lowering his face. “You keep still,” he whispered ferociously, but so that no one else heard it. He glared into his eyes with an intensity that held danger, and Rossiter, without answering, flung back that glare with equal, but with a calmer, anger.

The wind, meanwhile, had a trick of veering, and each time it shifted, Jim shifted his seat too. Apparently, he preferred to face the sound, rather than have his back to it.

“Your turn now for a tale,” said Rossiter with purpose, when Sandy finished. He looked across at him, just as Jim, hearing the burst of wind at the walls behind him, was in the act of moving his chair again. The same moment the attack rattled the door and windows facing him. Jim, without answering, stood for a moment still as death, not knowing which way to turn.

“It’s beatin’ up from all sides,” remarked Rossiter, “like it was goin’ round the building.”

There was a moment’s pause, the four men listening with awe to the roar and power of the terrific wind. Tom listened too, but at the same time watched, wondering vaguely why he didn’t cross the room and crash his fist into the old man’s chattering mouth. Jim put out his hand and took his glass, but did not raise it to his lips. And a lull came abruptly in the storm, the wind sinking into a moment’s dreadful silence. Tom and Rossiter turned their heads in the same instant and stared into each other’s eyes. For Tom the instant seemed enormously prolonged. He realized the challenge in the other and that his rudeness had roused it into action. It had become a contest of wills — Justice battling against Love.

Jim’s glass had now reached his lips, and the chattering of his teeth against its rim was audible.

But the lull passed quickly and the wind began again, though so gently at first, it had the sound of innumerable swift footsteps treading lightly, of countless hands fingering the doors and windows, but then suddenly with a mighty shout as it swept against the walls, rushed across the roof and descended like a battering-ram against the farther side.

“God, did you hear that?” cried Sandy. “It’s trying to get in!” and having said it, he sank in a heap beside his chair, all of a sudden completely drunk. “It’s wolves or panthersh,” he mumbled in his stupor on the floor, “but whatsh’s happened to Malay?” It was the last thing he said before unconsciousness took him, and apparently he was insensible to the kick on the head from a heavy farmer’s boot. For Jim’s glass had fallen with a crash and the second kick was stopped midway. Tom stood spell-bound, unable to move or speak, as he watched his brother suddenly cross the room and open a window into the very teeth of the gale.

“Let be! Let be!” came the voice of Rossiter, an authority in it, a curious gentleness too, both of them new. He had risen, his lips were still moving, but the words that issued from them were inaudible, as the wind and rain leaped with a galloping violence into the room, smashing the glass to atoms and dashing a dozen loose objects helter-skelter on to the floor.

“I saw it!” cried Jim, in a voice that rose above the din and clamour of the elements. He turned and faced the others, but it was at Rossiter he looked. “I saw the leader.” He shouted to make himself heard, although the tone was quiet. “A splash of white on his great chest. I saw them all!”

At the words, and at the expression in Jim’s eyes, old Rossiter, white to the lips, dropped back into his chair as if a blow had struck him. Tom, petrified, felt his own heart stop. For through the broken window, above yet within the wind, came the sound of a wolf-pack running, howling in deep, full-throated chorus, mad for blood. It passed like a whirlwind and was gone. And, of the three men so close together, one sitting and two standing, Jim alone was in that terrible moment wholly master of himself.

Before the others could move or speak, he turned and looked full into the eyes of each in succession. His speech went back to his wilderness days:

“I done it,” he said calmly. “I killed him — and I got ter go.”

With a look of mystical horror on his face, he took one stride, flung the door wide, and vanished into the darkness.

So quick were both words and action, that Tom’s paralysis passed only as the draught from the broken window banged the door behind him. He seemed to leap across the room, old Rossiter, tears on his cheeks and his lips mumbling foolish words, so close upon his heels that the backward blow of fury Tom aimed at his face caught him only in the neck and sent him reeling sideways to the floor instead of flat upon his back.

“Murderer! My brother’s death upon you!” he shouted as he tore the door open again and plunged out into the night.

And the odd thing that happened then, the thing that touched old John Rossiter’s reason, leaving him from that moment till his death a foolish man of uncertain mind and memory, happened when he and the unconscious, drink-sodden Sandy lay alone together on the stone floor of that farm-house room.

Rossiter, dazed by the blow and his fall, but in full possession of his senses, and the anger gone out of him owing to what he had brought about, this same John Rossiter sat up and saw Sandy also sitting up and staring at him hard. And Sandy was sober as a judge, his eyes and speech both clear, even his face unflushed.

“John Rossiter,” he said, “it was not God who appointed you executioner. It was the devil.” And his eyes, thought Rossiter, were like the eyes of an angel.

“Sandy McKay,” he stammered, his teeth chattering and breath failing him. “Sandy McKay!” It was all the words that he could find. But Sandy, already sunk back into his stupor again, was stretched drunk and incapable upon the farm-house floor, and remained in that condition till the dawn.

Jim’s body lay hidden among the dunes for many months and in spite of the most careful and prolonged searching. It was another storm that laid it bare. The sand had covered it. The clothes were gone, and the flesh, torn but not eaten, was naked to the December sun and wind.

II

CHINESE MAGIC

1

DR. OWEN FRANCIS felt a sudden wave of pleasure and admiration sweep over him as he saw her enter the room. He was in the act of going out; in fact, he had already said good-bye to his hostess, glad to make his escape from the chattering throng, when the tall and graceful young woman glided past him. Her carriage was superb; she had black eyes with a twinkling happiness in them; her mouth was exquisite. Round her neck, in spite of the warm afternoon, she wore a soft thing of fur or feathers; and as she brushed by to shake the hand he had just shaken himself, the tail of this touched his very cheek. Their eyes met fair and square. He felt as though her eyes also touched him.

Changing his mind, he lingered another ten minutes, chatting with various ladies he did not in the least remember, but who remembered him. He did not, of course, desire to exchange banalities with these other ladies, yet did so gallantly enough. If they found him absent-minded they excused him since he was the famous mental specialist whom everybody was proud to know. And all the time his eyes never left the tall graceful figure that allured him almost to the point of casting a spell upon him.

His first impression deepened as he watched. He was aware of excitement, curiosity, longing; there was a touch even of exaltation in him; yet he took no steps to seek the introduction which was easily enough procurable. He checked himself, if with an effort. Several times their eyes met across the crowded room; he dared to believe — he felt instinctively — that his interest was returned. Indeed, it was more than instinct, for she was certainly aware of his presence, and he even caught her indicating him to a woman she spoke with, and evidently asking who he was. Once he half bowed, and once, in spite of himself, he went so far as to smile, and there came, he was sure, a faint, delicious brightening of the eyes in answer. There was, he fancied, a look of yearning in the face. The young woman charmed him inexpressibly; the very way she moved delighted him. Yet at last he slipped out of the room without a word, without an introduction, without even knowing her name. He chose his moment when her back was turned. It was characteristic of him.

For Owen Francis had ever regarded marriage, for himself at least, as a disaster that could be avoided. He was in love with his work, and his work was necessary to humanity. Others might perpetuate the race, but he must heal it. He had come to regard love as the bait wherewith Nature lays her trap to fulfill her own ends. A man in love was a man enjoying a delusion, a deluded man. In his case, and he was nearing forty-five, the theory had worked admirably, and the dangerous exception that proved it had as yet not troubled him.

"It's come at last — I do believe," he thought to himself, as he walked home, a new tumultuous emotion in his blood; "the exception, quite possibly, has come at last. I wonder...."

And it seemed he said it to the tall graceful figure by his side, who turned up dark eyes smilingly to meet his own, and whose lips repeated softly his last two words "I wonder...."

The experience, being new to him, was baffling. A part of his nature, long dormant, received the authentic thrill that pertains actually to youth. He was a man of chaste, abstemious custom. The reaction was vehement. That dormant part of him became obstreperous. He thought of his age, his appearance, his prospects; he looked thirty-eight, he was not unhandsome, his position was secure, even remarkable. That gorgeous young woman — he called her gorgeous — haunted him. Never could he forget that face, those eyes. It was extraordinary — he had left her there unspoken to, unknown, when an introduction would have been the simplest thing in the world.

"But it still is," he replied. And the reflection filled his being with a flood of joy.

He checked himself again. Not so easily is established habit routed. He felt instinctively that, at last, he had met his mate; if he followed it up he was a man in love, a lost man enjoying a delusion, a deluded man. But the way she had looked at him! That air of intuitive invitation which not even the sweetest modesty could conceal! He felt an immense confidence in himself; also he felt oddly sure of her.

The presence of that following figure, already precious, came with him into his house, even into his study at the back where he sat over a number of letters by the open window. The pathetic little London garden showed its pitiful patch. The lilac had faded, but a smell of roses entered. The sun was just behind the buildings opposite, and the garden lay soft and warm in summer shadows.

He read and tossed aside the letters; one only interested him, from Edward Farque, whose journey to China had interrupted a friendship of long standing. Edward Farque's work on eastern art and philosophy, on Chinese painting and Chinese thought in particular, had made its mark. He was an authority. He was to be back about this time, and his friend smiled with pleasure. "Dear old unpractical dreamer, as I used to call him," he mused. "He's a success, anyhow!" And as he mused, the presence that sat beside him came a little closer, yet at the same time faded. Not that he forgot her — that was impossible — but that just before opening the letter from his friend, he had come to a decision. He had definitely made up his mind to seek acquaintance. The reality replaced the remembered substitute.

"As the newspapers may have warned you," ran the familiar and kinky writing, "I am back in England after what the scribes term my ten years of exile in Cathay. I have taken a little house in Hampstead for six months, and am just settling in. Come to us to-morrow night and let me prove it to you. Come to dinner. We shall have much to say; we both are ten years wiser. You know how glad I shall be to see my old-time critic and disparager, but let me add frankly that I want to ask you a few professional, or, rather, technical, questions. So prepare yourself to come as doctor and as friend. I am writing, as the papers said truthfully, a treatise on Chinese thought. But — don't shy! — it is about Chinese Magic that I want your technical advice [the last two words were substituted for "professional wisdom," which had been crossed out] and the benefit of your vast experience. So come, old friend, come quickly, and come hungry! I'll feed your body as you shall feed my mind. — Yours,
"Edward Farque."

"P.S.— 'The coming of a friend from a far-off land — is not this true joy?'"

Dr. Francis laid down the letter with a pleased anticipatory chuckle, and it was the touch in the final sentence that amused him. In spite of being an authority, Farque was clearly the same fanciful, poetic dreamer as of old. He quoted Confucius as in other days. The firm but kinky writing had not altered either. The only sign of novelty he noticed was the use of scented paper, for a faint and pungent aroma clung to the big quarto sheet.

“A Chinese habit, doubtless,” he decided, sniffing it with a puzzled air of disapproval. Yet it had nothing in common with the scented sachets some ladies use too lavishly, so that even the air of the street is polluted by their passing for a dozen yards. He was familiar with every kind of perfumed note-paper used in London, Paris, and Constantinople. This one was difficult. It was delicate and penetrating for all its faintness, pleasurable too. He rather liked it, and while annoyed that he could not name it, he sniffed at the letter several times, as though it were a flower.

“I’ll go,” he decided at once, and wrote an acceptance then and there. He went out and posted it. He meant to prolong his walk into the Park, taking his chief preoccupation, the face, the eyes, the figure, with him. Already he was composing the note of inquiry to Mrs. Malleson, his hostess of the tea-party, the note whose willing answer should give him the name, the address, the means of introduction he had now determined to secure. He visualized that note of inquiry, seeing it in his mind’s eye; only, for some odd reason, he saw the kinky writing of Farque instead of his own more elegant script. Association of ideas and emotions readily explained this. Two new and unexpected interests had entered his life on the same day, and within half an hour of each other. What he could not so readily explain, however, was that two words in his friend’s ridiculous letter, and in that kinky writing, stood out sharply from the rest. As he slipped his envelope into the mouth of the red pillar-box they shone vividly in his mind. These two words were “Chinese Magic.”

2

It was the warmth of his friend’s invitation as much as his own state of inward excitement that decided him suddenly to anticipate his visit by twenty-four hours. It would clear his judgment and help his mind, if he spent the evening at Hampstead rather than alone with his own thoughts. “A dose of China,” he thought, with a smile, “will do me good. Edward won’t mind. I’ll telephone.”

He left the Park soon after six o'clock and acted upon his impulse. The connexion was bad, the wire buzzed and popped and crackled; talk was difficult; he did not hear properly. The Professor had not yet come in, apparently. Francis said he would come up anyhow on the chance.

“Velly pleased,” said the voice in his ear, as he rang off.

Going into his study, he drafted the note that should result in the introduction that was now, it appeared, the chief object of his life. The way this woman with the black, twinkling eyes obsessed him was — he admitted it with joy — extraordinary. The draft he put in his pocket, intending to rewrite it next morning, and all the way up to Hampstead Heath the gracious figure glided silently beside him, the eyes were ever present, his cheek still glowed where the feather boa had touched his skin. Edward Farque remained in the background. In fact, it was on the very door-step, having rung the bell, that Francis realized he must pull himself together. “I've come to see old Farque,” he reminded himself, with a smile. “I've got to be interested in him and his, and, probably, for an hour or two, to talk Chinese — —” when the door opened noiselessly, and he saw facing him, with a grin of celestial welcome on his yellow face, a China-man.

“Oh!” he said, with a start. He had not expected a Chinese servant.

“Velly pleased,” the man bowed him in.

Dr. Francis stared round him with astonishment he could not conceal. A great golden idol faced him in the hall, its gleaming visage blazing out of a sort of miniature golden palanquin, with a grin, half dignified, half cruel. Fully double human size, it blocked the way, looking so life-like that it might have moved to meet him without too great a shock to what seemed possible. It rested on a throne with four massive legs, carved, the doctor saw, with serpents, dragons, and mythical monsters generally. Round it on every side were other things in keeping. Name them he could not, describe them he did not try. He summed them up in one word — China: pictures, weapons, cloths and tapestries, bells, gongs, and figures of every sort and kind imaginable.

Being ignorant of Chinese matters, Dr. Francis stood and looked about him in a mental state of some confusion. He had the feeling that he had entered a Chinese temple, for there was a faint smell of incense hanging about the house that was, to say the least, un-English. Nothing English, in fact, was visible at all. The matting on the floor, the swinging curtains of bamboo beads that replaced the customary doors, the silk draperies and pictured cushions, the bronze and ivory, the screens hung with fantastic embroideries, everything was Chinese. Hampstead vanished from his thoughts. The very lamps were in keeping, the ancient lacquered furniture as well. The value of what he saw, an expert could have told him, was considerable.

“You likee?” queried the voice at his side.

He had forgotten the servant. He turned sharply.

“Very much; it’s wonderfully done,” he said. “Makes you feel at home, John, eh?” he added tactfully, with a smile, and was going to ask how long all this preparation had taken, when a voice sounded on the stairs beyond. It was a voice he knew, a note of hearty welcome in its deep notes.

“The coming of a friend from a far-off land, even from Harley Street — is not this true joy?” he heard, and the next minute was shaking the hand of his old and valued friend. The intimacy between them had always been of the truest.

“I almost expected a pigtail,” observed Francis, looking him affectionately up and down, “but, really — why, you’ve hardly changed at all!”

“Outwardly, not as much, perhaps, as Time expects,” was the happy reply, “but inwardly —— !” He scanned appreciatively the burly figure of the doctor in his turn. “And I can say the same of you,” he declared, still holding his hand tight. “This is a real pleasure, Owen,” he went on in his deep voice, “to see you again is a joy to me. Old friends meeting again — there’s nothing like it in life, I believe, nothing.” He gave the hand another squeeze before he let it go. “And we,” he added, leading the way into a room across the hall, “neither of us is a fugitive from life. We take what we can, I mean.”

The doctor smiled as he noted the un-English turn of language, and together they entered a sitting-room that was, again, more like some inner chamber of a Chinese temple than a back room in a rented Hampstead house.

“I only knew ten minutes ago that you were coming, my dear fellow,” the scholar was saying, as his friend gazed round him with increased astonishment, “or I would have prepared more suitably for your reception. I was out till late. All this” — he waved his hand— “surprises you, of course, but the fact is I have been home some days already, and most of what you see was arranged for me in advance of my arrival. Hence its apparent completion. I say ‘apparent,’ because, actually, it is far from faithfully carried out. Yet to exceed,” he added, “is as bad as to fall short.”

The doctor watched him while he listened to a somewhat lengthy explanation of the various articles surrounding them. The speaker — he confirmed his first impression — had changed little during the long interval; the same enthusiasm was in him as before, the same fire and dreaminess alternately in the fine grey eyes, the same humour and passion about the mouth, the same free gestures, and the same big voice. Only the lines had deepened on the forehead, and on the fine face the air of thoughtfulness was also deeper. It was Edward Farque as of old, scholar, poet, dreamer and enthusiast, despiser of western civilization, contemptuous of money, generous and upright, a type of value, an individual.

“You’ve done well, done splendidly, Edward, old man,” said his friend presently, after hearing of Chinese wonders that took him somewhat beyond his depth perhaps. “No one is more pleased than I. I’ve watched your books. You haven’t regretted England, I’ll be bound?” he asked.

“The philosopher has no country, in any case,” was the reply, steadily given. “But out there, I confess, I’ve found my home.” He leaned forward, a deeper earnestness in his tone and expression. And into his face, as he spoke, came a glow of happiness. “My heart,” he said, “is in China.”

“I see it is, I see it is,” put in the other, conscious that he could not honestly share his friend’s enthusiasm. “And you’re fortunate to be free to live where your treasure is,” he added after a moment’s pause. “You must be a happy man. Your passion amounts to nostalgia, I suspect. Already yearning to get back there, probably?”

Farque gazed at him for some seconds with shining eyes. “You remember the Persian saying, I’m sure,” he said. “‘You see a man drink, but you do not see his thirst.’ Well,” he added, laughing happily, “you may see me off in six months’ time, but you will not see my happiness.”

While he went on talking, the doctor glanced round the room, marvelling still at the exquisite taste of everything, the neat arrangement, the perfect matching of form and colour. A woman might have done this thing, occurred to him, as the haunting figure shifted deliciously into the foreground of his mind again. The thought of her had been momentarily replaced by all he heard and saw. She now returned, filling him with joy, anticipation and enthusiasm. Presently, when it was his turn to talk, he would tell his friend about this new, unimagined happiness that had burst upon him like a sunrise. Presently, but not just yet. He remembered, too, with a passing twinge of possible boredom to come, that there must be some delay before his own heart could unburden itself in its turn. Farque wanted to ask some professional questions, of course. He had for the moment forgotten that part of the letter in his general interest and astonishment.

"Happiness, yes...." he murmured, aware that his thoughts had wandered, and catching at the last word he remembered hearing. "As you said just now in your own queer way — you haven't changed a bit, let me tell you, in your picturesqueness of quotation, Edward — one must not be fugitive from life; one must seize happiness when and where it offers."

He said it lightly enough, hugging internally his own sweet secret; but he was a little surprised at the earnestness of his friend's rejoinder: "Both of us, I see," came the deep voice, backed by the flash of the far-seeing grey eyes, "have made some progress in the doctrine of life and death." He paused, gazing at the other with sight that was obviously turned inwards upon his own thoughts. "Beauty," he went on presently, his tone even more serious, "has been my lure; yours, Reality...."

"You don't flatter either of us, Edward. That's too exclusive a statement," put in the doctor. He was becoming every minute more and more interested in the workings of his friend's mind. Something about the signs offered eluded his understanding. "Explain yourself, old scholar-poet. I'm a dull, practical mind, remember, and can't keep pace with Chinese subtleties."

"*You've* left out Beauty," was the quiet rejoinder, "while *I* left out Reality. That's neither Chinese nor subtle. It is simply true."

"A bit wholesale, isn't it?" laughed Francis. "A big generalization, rather."

A bright light seemed to illuminate the scholar’s face. It was as though an inner lamp was suddenly lit. At the same moment the sound of a soft gong floated in from the hall outside, so soft that the actual strokes were not distinguishable in the wave of musical vibration that reached the ear.

Farque rose to lead the way in to dinner.

“What if I — —” he whispered, “have combined the two?” And upon his face was a look of joy that reached down into the other’s own full heart with its unexpectedness and wonder. It was the last remark in the world he had looked for. He wondered for a moment whether he interpreted it correctly.

“By Jove...!” he exclaimed. “Edward, what d’you mean?”

“You shall hear — after dinner,” said Farque, his voice mysterious, his eyes still shining with his inner joy. “I told you I have some questions to ask you — professionally.” And they took their seats round an ancient, marvellous table, lit by two swinging lamps of soft green jade, while the Chinese servant waited on them with the silent movements and deft neatness of his imperturbable celestial race.

3

To say that he was bored during the meal were an over-statement of Dr. Francis’s mental condition, but to say that he was half-bored seemed the literal truth; for one-half of him, while he ate his steak and savoury and watched Farque manipulating *chou chop suey* and *chou om dong* most cleverly with chop-sticks, was too pre-occupied with his own romance to allow the other half to give its full attention to the conversation.

He had entered the room, however, with a distinct quickening of what may be termed his instinctive and infallible sense of diagnosis. That last remark of his friend’s had stimulated him. He was aware of surprise, curiosity, and impatience. Willy-nilly, he began automatically to study him with a profounder interest. Something, he gathered, was not quite as it should be in Edward Farque’s mental composition. There was what might be called an elusive emotional disturbance. He began to wonder and to watch.

They talked, naturally, of China and of things Chinese, for the scholar responded to little else, and Francis listened with what sympathy and patience he could muster. Of art and beauty he had hitherto known little, his mind was practical and utilitarian. He now learned that all art was derived from China, where a high, fine, subtle culture had reigned since time immemorial. Older than Egypt was their wisdom. When the western races were eating one another, before Greece was even heard of, the Chinese had reached a level of knowledge and achievement that few realized. Never had they, even in earliest times, been deluded by anthropomorphic conceptions of the Deity, but perceived in everything the expressions of a single whole whose giant activities they reverently worshipped. Their contempt for the western scurry after knowledge, wealth, machinery, was justified, if Farque was worthy of belief. He seemed saturated with Chinese thought, art, philosophy, and his natural bias towards the celestial race had hardened into an attitude to life that had now become ineradicable.

“They deal, as it were, in essences,” he declared; “they discern the essence of everything, leaving out the superfluous, the unessential, the trivial. Their pictures alone prove it. Come with me,” he concluded, “and see the ‘Earthly Paradise,’ now in the British Museum. It is like Botticelli, but better than anything Botticelli ever did. It was painted” — he paused for emphasis —”600 years B.C.”

The wonder of this quiet, ancient civilization, a sense of its depth, its wisdom, grew upon his listener as the enthusiastic poet described its charm and influence upon himself. He willingly allowed the enchantment of the other’s Paradise to steal upon his own awakened heart. There was a good deal Francis might have offered by way of criticism and objection, but he preferred on the whole to keep his own views to himself, and to let his friend wander unhindered through the mazes of his passionate evocation. All men, he well knew, needed a dream to carry them through life’s disappointments, a dream that they could enter at will and find peace, contentment, happiness. Farque’s dream was China. Why not? It was as good as another, and a man like Farque was entitled to what dream he pleased.

“And their women?” he inquired at last, letting both halves of his mind speak together for the first time.

But he was not prepared for the expression that leaped upon his friend’s face at the simple question. Nor for his method of reply. It was no reply, in point of fact. It was simply an attack upon all other types of woman, and upon the white, the English, in particular — their emptiness, their triviality, their want of intuitive imagination, of spiritual grace, of everything, in a word, that should constitute woman a meet companion for man, and a little higher than the angels into the bargain. The doctor listened spellbound. Too humorous to be shocked, he was, at any rate, disturbed by what he heard, displeased a little, too. It threatened too directly his own new tender dream.

Only with the utmost self-restraint did he keep his temper under, and prevent hot words he would have regretted later from tearing his friend's absurd claim into ragged shreds. He was wounded personally as well. Never now could he bring himself to tell his own secret to him. The outburst chilled and disappointed him. But it had another effect — it cooled his judgment. His sense of diagnosis quickened. He divined an *idée fixe*, a mania possibly. His interest deepened abruptly. He watched. He began to look about him with more wary eyes, and a sense of uneasiness, once the anger passed, stirred in his friendly and affectionate heart.

They had been sitting alone over their port for some considerable time, the servant having long since left the room. The doctor had sought to change the subject many times without much success, when suddenly Farque changed it for him.

"Now," he announced, "I'll tell you something," and Francis guessed that the professional questions were on the way at last. "We must pity the living, remember, and part with the dead. Have you forgotten old Shan-Yu?"

The forgotten name came back to him, the picturesque East End dealer of many years ago. "The old merchant who taught you your first Chinese? I do recall him dimly; now you mention it. You made quite a friend of him, didn't you? He thought very highly of you — ah, it comes back to me now — he offered something or other very wonderful in his gratitude, unless my memory fails me?"

"His most valuable possession," Farque went on, a strange look deepening on his face, an expression of mysterious rapture, as it were, and one that Francis recognized and swiftly pigeon-holed in his now attentive mind.

"Which was?" he asked sympathetically. "You told me once, but so long ago that really it's slipped my mind. Something magical, wasn't it?" He watched closely for his friend's reply.

Farque lowered his voice to a whisper almost devotional:

“The Perfume of the Garden of Happiness,” he murmured, with an expression in his eyes as though the mere recollection gave him joy. “‘Burn it,’ he told me, ‘in a brazier; then inhale. You will enter the Valley of a Thousand Temples wherein lies the Garden of Happiness, and there you will meet your Love. You will have seven years of happiness with your Love before the Waters of Separation flow between you. I give this to you who alone of men here have appreciated the wisdom of my land. Follow my body towards the Sunrise. You, an eastern soul in a barbarian body, will meet your Destiny.’”

The doctor’s attention, such is the power of self-interest, quickened amazingly as he heard. His own romance flamed up with power. His friend — it dawned upon him suddenly — loved a woman.

“Come,” said Farque, rising quietly, “we will go into the other room, and I will show you what I have shown to but one other in the world before. You are a doctor,” he continued, as he led the way to the silk-covered divan where golden dragons swallowed crimson suns, and wonderful jade horses hovered near. “You understand the mind and nerves. States of consciousness you also can explain, and the effect of drugs is, doubtless, known to you.” He swung to the heavy curtains that took the place of door, handed a lacquered box of cigarettes to his friend, and lit one himself. “Perfumes, too,” he added, “you probably have studied, with their extraordinary evocative power.” He stood in the middle of the room, the green light falling on his interesting and thoughtful face, and for a passing second Francis, watching keenly, observed a change flit over it and vanish. The eyes grew narrow and slid tilted upwards, the skin wore a shade of yellow underneath the green from the lamp of jade, the nose slipped back a little, the cheek-bones forward.

“Perfumes,” said the doctor, “no. Of perfumes I know nothing, beyond their interesting effect upon the memory. I cannot help you there. But, you, I suspect,” and he looked up with an inviting sympathy that concealed the close observation underneath, “you yourself, I feel sure, can tell me something of value about them?”

“Perhaps,” was the calm reply, “perhaps, for I have smelt the perfume of the Garden of Happiness, and I have been in the Valley of a Thousand

Temples.” He spoke with a glow of joy and reverence almost devotional.

The doctor waited in some suspense, while his friend moved towards an inlaid cabinet across the room. More than broad-minded, he was that much rarer thing, an open-minded man, ready at a moment’s notice to discard all preconceived ideas, provided new knowledge that necessitated the holocaust were shown to him. At present, none the less, he held very definite views of his own. “Please ask me any questions you like,” he added. “All I know is entirely yours, as always.” He was aware of suppressed excitement in his friend that betrayed itself in every word and look and gesture, an excitement intense, and not as yet explained by anything he had seen or heard.

The scholar, meanwhile, had opened a drawer in the cabinet and taken from it a neat little packet tied up with purple silk. He held it with tender, almost loving care, as he came and sat down on the divan beside his friend.

“This,” he said, in a tone, again, of something between reverence and worship, “contains what I have to show you first.” He slowly unrolled it, disclosing a yet smaller silken bag within, coloured a deep rich orange. There were two vertical columns of writing on it, painted in Chinese characters. The doctor leaned forward to examine them. His friend translated:

“The Perfume of the Garden of Happiness,” he read aloud, tracing the letters of the first column with his finger. “The Destroyer of Honourable Homes,” he finished, passing to the second, and then proceeded to unwrap the little silken bag. Before it was actually open, however, and the pale shredded material resembling coloured chaff visible to the eyes, the doctor’s nostrils had recognized the strange aroma he had first noticed about his friend’s letter received earlier in the day. The same soft, penetrating odour, sharply piercing, sweet and delicate, rose to his brain. It stirred at once a deep emotional pleasure in him. Having come to him first when he was aglow with his own unexpected romance, his mind and heart full of the woman he had just left, that delicious, torturing state revived in him quite naturally. The evocative power of perfume with regard to memory is compelling. A livelier sympathy towards his friend, and towards what he was about to hear, awoke in him spontaneously.

He did not mention the letter, however. He merely leaned over to smell the fragrant perfume more easily.

Farque drew back the open packet instantly, at the same time holding out a warning hand. “Careful,” he said gravely, “be careful, my old friend — unless you desire to share the rapture and the risk that have been mine. To enjoy its full effect, true, this dust must be burned in a brazier and its smoke inhaled; but even sniffed, as you now would sniff it, and you are in danger — —”

“Of what?” asked Francis, impressed by the other’s extraordinary intensity of voice and manner.

“Of Heaven; but, possibly, of Heaven before your time.”

4

The tale that Farque unfolded then had certainly a strange celestial flavour, a glory not of this dull world; and as his friend listened, his interest deepened with every minute, while his bewilderment increased. He watched closely, expert that he was, for clues that might guide his deductions aright, but for all his keen observation and experience he could detect no inconsistency, no weakness, nothing that betrayed the smallest mental aberration. The origin and nature of what he already decided was an *idée fixe*, a mania, evaded him entirely. This evasion piqued and vexed him; he had heard a thousand tales of similar type before; that this one in particular should baffle his unusual skill touched his pride. Yet he faced the position honestly, he confessed himself baffled until the end of the evening. When he went away, however, he went away satisfied, even forgetful — because a new problem of yet more poignant interest had replaced the first.

“It was after three years out there,” said Farque, “that a sense of my loneliness first came upon me. It came upon me bitterly. My work had not then been recognized; obstacles and difficulties had increased; I felt a failure; I had accomplished nothing. And it seemed to me I had misjudged my capacities, taken a wrong direction, and wasted my life accordingly. For my move to China, remember, was a radical move, and my boats were burnt behind me. This sense of loneliness was really devastating.”

Francis, already fidgeting, put up his hand.

“One question, if I may,” he said, “and I’ll not interrupt again.”

"By all means," said the other patiently, "what is it?"

"Were you — we are such old friends" — he apologized— "were you still celibate as ever?"

Farque looked surprised, then smiled. "My habits had not changed," he replied, "I was, as always, celibate."

"Ah!" murmured the doctor, and settled down to listen.

"And I think now," his friend went on, "that it was the lack of companionship that first turned my thoughts towards conscious disappointment. However that may be, it was one evening, as I walked homewards to my little house, that I caught my imagination lingering upon English memories, though chiefly, I admit, upon my old Chinese tutor, the dead Shan-Yu.

"It was dusk, the stars were coming out in the pale evening air, and the orchards, as I passed them, stood like wavering ghosts of unbelievable beauty. The effect of thousands upon thousands of these trees, flooding the twilight of a spring evening with their sea of blossom, is almost unearthly. They seem transparencies, their colour hangs sheets upon the very sky. I crossed a small wooden bridge that joined two of these orchards above a stream, and in the dark water I watched a moment the mingled reflection of stars and flowering branches on the quiet surface. It seemed too exquisite to belong to earth, this fairy garden of stars and blossoms, shining faintly in the crystal depths, and my thought, as I gazed, dived suddenly down the little avenue that memory opened into former days. I remembered Shan-Yu's present, given to me when he died. His very words came back to me: The Garden of Happiness in the Valley of the Thousand Temples, with its promise of love, of seven years of happiness, and the prophecy that I should follow his body towards the Sunrise and meet my destiny.

"This memory I took home with me into my lonely little one-storey house upon the hill. My servants did not sleep there. There was no one near. I sat by the open window with my thoughts, and you may easily guess that before very long I had unearthed the long-forgotten packet from among my things, spread a portion of its contents on a metal tray above a lighted brazier, and was comfortably seated before it, inhaling the light blue smoke with its exquisite and fragrant perfume.

“A light air entered through the window, the distant orchards below me trembled, rose and floated through the dusk, and I found myself, almost at once, in a pavilion of flowers; a blue river lay shining in the sun before me, as it wandered through a lovely valley where I saw groves of flowering trees among a thousand scattered temples. Drenched in light and colour, the Valley lay dreaming amid a peaceful loveliness that woke what seemed impossible, unrealizable, longings in my heart. I yearned towards its groves and temples, I would bathe my soul in that flood of tender light, and my body in the blue coolness of that winding river. In a thousand temples must I worship. Yet these impossible yearnings instantly were satisfied. I found myself there at once ... and the time that passed over my head you may reckon in centuries, if not in ages. I was in the Garden of Happiness and its marvellous perfume banished time and sorrow, there was no end to chill the soul, nor any beginning, which is its foolish counterpart.

“Nor was there loneliness.” The speaker clasped his thin hands, and closed his eyes a moment in what was evidently an ecstasy of the sweetest memory man may ever know. A slight trembling ran through his frame, communicating itself to his friend upon the divan beside him — this understanding, listening, sympathetic friend, whose eyes had never once yet withdrawn their attentive gaze from the narrator’s face.

“I was not alone,” the scholar resumed, opening his eyes again, and smiling out of some deep inner joy. “Shan-Yu came down the steps of the first temple and took my hand, while the great golden figures in the dim interior turned their splendid shining heads to watch. Then, breathing the soul of his ancient wisdom in my ear, he led me through all the perfumed ways of that enchanted garden, worshipping with me at a hundred deathless shrines, led me, I tell you, to the sound of soft gongs and gentle bells, by fragrant groves and sparkling streams, mid a million gorgeous flowers, until, beneath that unsetting sun, we reached the heart of the Valley, where the source of the river gushed forth beneath the lighted mountains. He stopped and pointed across the narrow waters. I saw the woman — —”

“*The* woman,” his listener murmured beneath his breath, though Farque seemed unaware of interruption.

“She smiled at me and held her hands out, and while she did so, even before I could express my joy and wonder in response, Shan-Yu, I saw, had crossed the narrow stream and stood beside her. I made to follow then, my heart burning with inexpressible delight. But Shan-Yu held up his hand, as they began to move down the flowered bank together, making a sign that I should keep pace with them, though on my own side.

“Thus, side by side, yet with the blue sparkling stream between us, we followed back along its winding course, through the heart of that enchanted valley, my hands stretched out towards the radiant figure of my Love, and hers stretched out towards me. They did not touch, but our eyes, our smiles, our thoughts, these met and mingled in a sweet union of unimagined bliss, so that the absence of physical contact was unnoticed and laid no injury on our marvellous joy. It was a spirit union, and our kiss a spirit kiss. Therein lay the subtlety and glory of the Chinese wonder, for it was our *essences* that met, and for such union there is no satiety and, equally, no possible end. The Perfume of the Garden of Happiness is an essence. We were in Eternity.

“The stream, meanwhile, widened between us, and as it widened, my Love grew farther from me in space, smaller, less visibly defined, yet ever essentially more perfect, and never once with a sense of distance that made our union less divinely close. Across the widening reaches of blue, sunlit water I still knew her smile, her eyes, the gestures of her radiant being; I saw her exquisite reflection in the stream; and, mid the music of those soft gongs and gentle bells, the voice of Shan-Yu came like a melody to my ears:

“‘You have followed me into the sunrise, and have found your destiny. Behold now your Love. In this Valley of a Thousand Temples you have known the Garden of Happiness, and its Perfume your soul now inhales.’

“‘I am bathed,’ I answered, ‘in a happiness divine. It is forever.’

“‘The Waters of Separation,’ his answer floated like a bell, ‘lie widening between you.’

“I moved nearer to the bank, impelled by the pain in his words to take my Love and hold her to my breast.

“‘But I would cross to her,’ I cried, and saw that, as I moved, Shan-Yu and my Love came likewise closer to the water’s edge across the widening river. They both obeyed, I was aware, my slightest wish.

"'Seven years of Happiness you may know,' sang his gentle tones across the brimming flood, 'if you would cross to her. Yet the Destroyer of Honourable Homes lies in the shadows that you must cast outside.'

"I heard his words, I noticed for the first time that in the blaze of this radiant sunshine we cast no shadows on the sea of flowers at our feet, and — I stretched out my arms towards my Love across the river.

"'I accept my destiny,' I cried, 'I will have my seven years of bliss,' and stepped forward into the running flood. As the cool water took my feet, my Love's hands stretched out both to hold me and to bid me stay. There was acceptance in her gesture, but there was warning too.

"I did not falter. I advanced until the water bathed my knees, and my Love, too, came to meet me, the stream already to her waist, while our arms stretched forth above the running flood towards each other.

"The change came suddenly. Shan-Yu first faded behind her advancing figure into air; there stole a chill upon the sunlight; a cool mist rose from the water, hiding the Garden and the hills beyond; our fingers touched, I gazed into her eyes, our lips lay level with the water — and the room was dark and cold about me. The brazier stood extinguished at my side. The dust had burnt out, and no smoke rose. I slowly left my chair and closed the window, for the air was chill."

5

It was difficult at first to return to Hampstead and the details of ordinary life about him. Francis looked round him slowly, freeing himself gradually from the spell his friend's words had laid even upon his analytical temperament. The transition was helped, however, by the details that everywhere met his eye. The Chinese atmosphere remained. More, its effect had gained, if anything. The embroideries of yellow gold, the pictures, the lacquered stools and inlaid cabinets, above all, the exquisite figures in green jade upon the shelf beside him, all this, in the shimmering pale olive light the lamps shed everywhere, helped his puzzled mind to bridge the gulf from the Garden of Happiness into the decorated villa upon Hampstead Heath.

There was silence between the two men for several minutes. Far was it from the doctor's desire to injure his old friend's delightful fantasy. For he called it fantasy, although something in him trembled. He remained, therefore, silent. Truth to tell, perhaps, he knew not exactly what to say.

Farque broke the silence himself. He had not moved since the story ended; he sat motionless, his hands tightly clasped, his eyes alight with the memory of his strange imagined joy, his face rapt and almost luminous, as though he still wandered through the groves of the Enchanted Garden and inhaled the perfume of its perfect happiness in the Valley of the Thousand Temples.

“It was two days later,” he went on suddenly in his quiet voice, “only two days afterwards, that I met her.”

“You met her? You met the woman of your dream?” Francis’s eyes opened very wide.

“In that little harbour town,” repeated Farque calmly, “I met her in the flesh. She had just landed in a steamer from up the coast. The details are of no particular interest. She knew me, of course, at once. And, naturally, I knew her.”

The doctor’s tongue refused to act as he heard. It dawned upon him suddenly that his friend was married. He remembered the woman’s touch about the house; he recalled, too, for the first time that the letter of invitation to dinner had said “come to *us*.” He was full of a bewildered astonishment.

The reaction upon himself was odd, perhaps, yet wholly natural. His heart warmed towards his imaginative friend. He could now tell him his own new strange romance. The woman who haunted him crept back into the room and sat between them. He found his tongue.

“You married her, Edward?” he exclaimed.

“She is my wife,” was the reply, in a gentle, happy voice.

“A Ch — —” he could not bring himself to say the word. “A foreigner?”

“My wife is a Chinese woman,” Farque helped him easily, with a delighted smile.

So great was the other’s absorption in the actual moment, that he had not heard the step in the passage that his host had heard. The latter stood up suddenly.

“I hear her now,” he said. “I’m glad she’s come back before you left.” He stepped towards the door.

But before he reached it, the door was opened and in came the woman herself. Francis tried to rise, but something had happened to him. His heart missed a beat. Something, it seemed, broke in him. He faced a tall, graceful young English woman with black eyes of sparkling happiness, the woman of his own romance. She still wore the feather boa round her neck. She was no more Chinese than he was.

“My wife,” he heard Farque introducing them, as he struggled to his feet, searching feverishly for words of congratulation, normal, everyday words he ought to use, “I’m so pleased, oh, so pleased,” Farque was saying — he heard the sound from a distance, his sight was blurred as well— “my two best friends in the world, my English comrade and my Chinese wife.” His voice was absolutely sincere with conviction and belief.

“But we have already met,” came the woman’s delightful voice, her eyes full upon his face with smiling pleasure, “I saw you at Mrs. Malleson’s tea only this afternoon.”

And Francis remembered suddenly that the Mallesons were old acquaintances of Farque’s as well as of himself. “And I even dared to ask who you were,” the voice went on, floating from some other space, it seemed, to his ears, “I had you pointed out to me. I had heard of you from Edward, of course. But you vanished before I could be introduced.”

The doctor mumbled something or other polite and, he hoped, adequate. But the truth had flashed upon him with remorseless suddenness. She had “heard of” him — the famous mental specialist. Her interest in him was cruelly explained, cruelly both for himself and for his friend. Farque’s delusion lay clear before his eyes. An awakening to reality might involve dislocation of the mind. *She*, too, moreover, knew the truth. She was involved as well. And her interest in himself was — consultation.

“Seven years we’ve been married, just seven years to-day,” Farque was saying thoughtfully, as he looked at them. “Curious, rather, isn’t it?”

“Very,” said Francis, turning his regard from the black eyes to the grey.

Thus it was that Owen Francis left the house a little later with a mind in a measure satisfied, yet in a measure forgetful too — forgetful of his own deep problem, because another of even greater interest had replaced it.

“Why undeceive him?” ran his thought. “He need never know. It’s harmless anyhow — I can tell her that.”

But, side by side with this reflection, ran another that was oddly haunting, considering his type of mind: “Destroyer of Honourable Homes,” was the form of words it took. And with a sigh he added “Chinese Magic.”

III

RUNNING WOLF

THE MAN WHO enjoys an adventure outside the general experience of the race, and imparts it to others, must not be surprised if he is taken for either a liar or a fool, as Malcolm Hyde, hotel clerk on a holiday, discovered in due course. Nor is "enjoy" the right word to use in describing his emotions; the word he chose was probably "survive."

When he first set eyes on Medicine Lake he was struck by its still, sparkling beauty, lying there in the vast Canadian backwoods; next, by its extreme loneliness; and, lastly — a good deal later, this — by its combination of beauty, loneliness, and singular atmosphere, due to the fact that it was the scene of his adventure.

"It's fairly stiff with big fish," said Morton of the Montreal Sporting Club. "Spend your holiday there — up Mattawa way, some fifteen miles west of Stony Creek. You'll have it all to yourself except for an old Indian who's got a shack there. Camp on the east side — if you'll take a tip from me." He then talked for half an hour about the wonderful sport; yet he was not otherwise very communicative, and did not suffer questions gladly, Hyde noticed. Nor had he stayed there very long himself. If it was such a paradise as Morton, its discoverer and the most experienced rod in the province, claimed, why had he himself spent only three days there?

"Ran short of grub," was the explanation offered; but to another friend he had mentioned briefly, "flies," and to a third, so Hyde learned later, he gave the excuse that his half-breed "took sick," necessitating a quick return to civilization.

Hyde, however, cared little for the explanations; his interest in these came later. "Stiff with fish" was the phrase he liked. He took the Canadian Pacific train to Mattawa, laid in his outfit at Stony Creek, and set off thence for the fifteen-mile canoe-trip without a care in the world.

Travelling light, the portages did not trouble him; the water was swift and easy, the rapids negotiable; everything came his way, as the saying is. Occasionally he saw big fish making for the deeper pools, and was sorely tempted to stop; but he resisted. He pushed on between the immense world of forests that stretched for hundreds of miles, known to deer, bear, moose, and wolf, but strange to any echo of human tread, a deserted and primeval wilderness. The autumn day was calm, the water sang and sparkled, the blue sky hung cloudless over all, ablaze with light. Toward evening he passed an old beaver-dam, rounded a little point, and had his first sight of Medicine Lake. He lifted his dripping paddle; the canoe shot with silent glide into calm water. He gave an exclamation of delight, for the loveliness caught his breath away.

Though primarily a sportsman, he was not insensible to beauty. The lake formed a crescent, perhaps four miles long, its width between a mile and half a mile. The slanting gold of sunset flooded it. No wind stirred its crystal surface. Here it had lain since the redskin's god first made it; here it would lie until he dried it up again. Towering spruce and hemlock trooped to its very edge, majestic cedars leaned down as if to drink, crimson sumachs shone in fiery patches, and maples gleamed orange and red beyond belief. The air was like wine, with the silence of a dream.

It was here the red men formerly "made medicine," with all the wild ritual and tribal ceremony of an ancient day. But it was of Morton, rather than of Indians, that Hyde thought. If this lonely, hidden paradise was really stiff with big fish, he owed a lot to Morton for the information. Peace invaded him, but the excitement of the hunter lay below.

He looked about him with quick, practised eye for a camping-place before the sun sank below the forests and the half-lights came. The Indian's shack, lying in full sunshine on the eastern shore, he found at once; but the trees lay too thick about it for comfort, nor did he wish to be so close to its inhabitant. Upon the opposite side, however, an ideal clearing offered. This lay already in shadow, the huge forest darkening it toward evening; but the open space attracted. He paddled over quickly and examined it. The ground was hard and dry, he found, and a little brook ran tinkling down one side of it into the lake. This outfall, too, would be a good fishing spot. Also it was sheltered. A few low willows marked the mouth.

An experienced camper soon makes up his mind. It was a perfect site, and some charred logs, with traces of former fires, proved that he was not the first to think so. Hyde was delighted. Then, suddenly, disappointment came to tinge his pleasure. His kit was landed, and preparations for putting up the tent were begun, when he recalled a detail that excitement had so far kept in the background of his mind — Morton's advice. But not Morton's only, for the storekeeper at Stony Creek had reinforced it. The big fellow with straggling moustache and stooping shoulders, dressed in shirt and trousers, had handed him out a final sentence with the bacon, flour, condensed milk, and sugar. He had repeated Morton's half-forgotten words:

"Put yer tent on the east shore. I should," he had said at parting.

He remembered Morton, too, apparently. "A shortish fellow, brown as an Indian and fairly smelling of the woods. Travelling with Jake, the half-breed." That assuredly was Morton. "Didn't stay long, now, did he?" he added in a reflective tone.

"Going Windy Lake way, are yer? Or Ten Mile Water, maybe?" he had first inquired of Hyde.

"Medicine Lake."

"Is that so?" the man said, as though he doubted it for some obscure reason. He pulled at his ragged moustache a moment. "Is that so, now?" he repeated. And the final words followed him down-stream after a considerable pause — the advice about the best shore on which to put his tent.

All this now suddenly flashed back upon Hyde's mind with a tinge of disappointment and annoyance, for when two experienced men agreed, their opinion was not to be lightly disregarded. He wished he had asked the storekeeper for more details. He looked about him, he reflected, he hesitated. His ideal camping-ground lay certainly on the forbidden shore. What in the world, he pondered, could be the objection to it?

But the light was fading; he must decide quickly one way or the other. After staring at his unpacked dunnage and the tent, already half erected, he made up his mind with a muttered expression that consigned both Morton and the storekeeper to less pleasant places. "They must have *some* reason," he growled to himself; "fellows like that usually know what they're talking about. I guess I'd better shift over to the other side — for to-night, at any rate."

He glanced across the water before actually reloading. No smoke rose from the Indian's shack. He had seen no sign of a canoe. The man, he decided, was away. Reluctantly, then, he left the good camping-ground and paddled across the lake, and half an hour later his tent was up, firewood collected, and two small trout were already caught for supper. But the bigger fish, he knew, lay waiting for him on the other side by the little outfall, and he fell asleep at length on his bed of balsam boughs, annoyed and disappointed, yet wondering how a mere sentence could have persuaded him so easily against his own better judgment. He slept like the dead; the sun was well up before he stirred.

But his morning mood was a very different one. The brilliant light, the peace, the intoxicating air, all this was too exhilarating for the mind to harbour foolish fancies, and he marvelled that he could have been so weak the night before. No hesitation lay in him anywhere. He struck camp immediately after breakfast, paddled back across the strip of shining water, and quickly settled in upon the forbidden shore, as he now called it, with a contemptuous grin. And the more he saw of the spot, the better he liked it. There was plenty of wood, running water to drink, an open space about the tent, and there were no flies. The fishing, moreover, was magnificent. Morton's description was fully justified, and "stiff with big fish" for once was not an exaggeration.

The useless hours of the early afternoon he passed dozing in the sun, or wandering through the underbrush beyond the camp. He found no sign of anything unusual. He bathed in a cool, deep pool; he revelled in the lonely little paradise. Lonely it certainly was, but the loneliness was part of its charm; the stillness, the peace, the isolation of this beautiful backwoods lake delighted him. The silence was divine. He was entirely satisfied.

After a brew of tea, he strolled toward evening along the shore, looking for the first sign of a rising fish. A faint ripple on the water, with the lengthening shadows, made good conditions. *Plop* followed *plop*, as the big fellows rose, snatched at their food, and vanished into the depths. He hurried back. Ten minutes later he had taken his rods and was gliding cautiously in the canoe through the quiet water.

So good was the sport, indeed, and so quickly did the big trout pile up in the bottom of the canoe that, despite the growing lateness, he found it hard to tear himself away. "One more," he said, "and then I really will go." He landed that "one more," and was in act of taking it off the hook, when the deep silence of the evening was curiously disturbed. He became abruptly aware that someone watched him. A pair of eyes, it seemed, were fixed upon him from some point in the surrounding shadows.

Thus, at least, he interpreted the odd disturbance in his happy mood; for thus he felt it. The feeling stole over him without the slightest warning. He was not alone. The slippery big trout dropped from his fingers. He sat motionless, and stared about him.

Nothing stirred; the ripple on the lake had died away; there was no wind; the forest lay a single purple mass of shadow; the yellow sky, fast fading, threw reflections that troubled the eye and made distances uncertain. But there was no sound, no movement; he saw no figure anywhere. Yet he knew that someone watched him, and a wave of quite unreasoning terror gripped him. The nose of the canoe was against the bank. In a moment, and instinctively, he shoved it off and paddled into deeper water. The watcher, it came to him also instinctively, was quite close to him upon that bank. But where? And who? Was it the Indian?

Here, in deeper water, and some twenty yards from the shore, he paused and strained both sight and hearing to find some possible clue. He felt half ashamed, now that the first strange feeling passed a little. But the certainty remained. Absurd as it was, he felt positive that someone watched him with concentrated and intent regard. Every fibre in his being told him so; and though he could discover no figure, no new outline on the shore, he could even have sworn in which clump of willow bushes the hidden person crouched and stared. His attention seemed drawn to that particular clump.

The water dripped slowly from his paddle, now lying across the thwarts. There was no other sound. The canvas of his tent gleamed dimly. A star or two were out. He waited. Nothing happened.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the feeling passed, and he knew that the person who had been watching him intently had gone. It was as if a current had been turned off; the normal world flowed back; the landscape emptied as if someone had left a room. The disagreeable feeling left him at the same time, so that he instantly turned the canoe in to the shore again, landed, and, paddle in hand, went over to examine the clump of willows he had singled out as the place of concealment. There was no one there, of course, nor any trace of recent human occupancy. No leaves, no branches stirred, nor was a single twig displaced; his keen and practised sight detected no sign of tracks upon the ground. Yet, for all that, he felt positive that a little time ago someone had crouched among these very leaves and watched him. He remained absolutely convinced of it. The watcher, whether Indian, hunter, stray lumberman, or wandering half-breed, had now withdrawn, a search was useless, and dusk was falling. He returned to his little camp, more disturbed perhaps than he cared to acknowledge. He cooked his supper, hung up his catch on a string, so that no prowling animal could get at it during the night, and prepared to make himself comfortable until bedtime. Unconsciously, he built a bigger fire than usual, and found himself peering over his pipe into the deep shadows beyond the firelight, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. He remained generally on the alert in a way that was new to him.

A man under such conditions and in such a place need not know discomfort until the sense of loneliness strikes him as too vivid a reality. Loneliness in a backwoods camp brings charm, pleasure, and a happy sense of calm until, and unless, it comes too near. It should remain an ingredient only among other conditions; it should not be directly, vividly noticed. Once it has crept within short range, however, it may easily cross the narrow line between comfort and discomfort, and darkness is an undesirable time for the transition. A curious dread may easily follow — the dread lest the loneliness suddenly be disturbed, and the solitary human feel himself open to attack.

For Hyde, now, this transition had been already accomplished; the too intimate sense of his loneliness had shifted abruptly into the worse condition of no longer being quite alone. It was an awkward moment, and the hotel clerk realized his position exactly. He did not quite like it. He sat there, with his back to the blazing logs, a very visible object in the light, while all about him the darkness of the forest lay like an impenetrable wall. He could not see a foot beyond the small circle of his camp-fire; the silence about him was like the silence of the dead. No leaf rustled, no wave lapped; he himself sat motionless as a log.

Then again he became suddenly aware that the person who watched him had returned, and that same intent and concentrated gaze as before was fixed upon him where he lay. There was no warning; he heard no stealthy tread or snapping of dry twigs, yet the owner of those steady eyes was very close to him, probably not a dozen feet away. This sense of proximity was overwhelming.

It is unquestionable that a shiver ran down his spine. This time, moreover, he felt positive that the man crouched just beyond the firelight, the distance he himself could see being nicely calculated, and straight in front of him. For some minutes he sat without stirring a single muscle, yet with each muscle ready and alert, straining his eyes in vain to pierce the darkness, but only succeeding in dazzling his sight with the reflected light. Then, as he shifted his position slowly, cautiously, to obtain another angle of vision, his heart gave two big thumps against his ribs and the hair seemed to rise on his scalp with the sense of cold that shot horribly up his spine. In the darkness facing him he saw two small and greenish circles that were certainly a pair of eyes, yet not the eyes of Indian, hunter, or of any human being. It was a pair of animal eyes that stared so fixedly at him out of the night. And this certainly had an immediate and natural effect upon him.

For, at the menace of those eyes, the fears of millions of long dead hunters since the dawn of time woke in him. Hotel clerk though he was, heredity surged through him in an automatic wave of instinct. His hand groped for a weapon. His fingers fell on the iron head of his small camp axe, and at once he was himself again. Confidence returned; the vague, superstitious dread was gone. This was a bear or wolf that smelt his catch and came to steal it. With beings of that sort he knew instinctively how to deal, yet admitting, by this very instinct, that his original dread had been of quite another kind.

“I’ll damned quick find out what it is,” he exclaimed aloud, and snatching a burning brand from the fire, he hurled it with good aim straight at the eyes of the beast before him.

The bit of pitch-pine fell in a shower of sparks that lit the dry grass this side of the animal, flared up a moment, then died quickly down again. But in that instant of bright illumination he saw clearly what his unwelcome visitor was. A big timber wolf sat on its hindquarters, staring steadily at him through the firelight. He saw its legs and shoulders, he saw its hair, he saw also the big hemlock trunks lit up behind it, and the willow scrub on each side. It formed a vivid, clear-cut picture shown in clear detail by the momentary blaze. To his amazement, however, the wolf did not turn and bolt away from the burning log, but withdrew a few yards only, and sat there again on its haunches, staring, staring as before. Heavens, how it stared! He “shoo-ed” it, but without effect; it did not budge. He did not waste another good log on it, for his fear was dissipated now; a timber wolf was a timber wolf, and it might sit there as long as it pleased, provided it did not try to steal his catch. No alarm was in him any more. He knew that wolves were harmless in the summer and autumn, and even when “packed” in the winter, they would attack a man only when suffering desperate hunger. So he lay and watched the beast, threw bits of stick in its direction, even talked to it, wondering only that it never moved. “You can stay there for ever, if you like,” he remarked to it aloud, “for you cannot get at my fish, and the rest of the grub I shall take into the tent with me!”

The creature blinked its bright green eyes, but made no move.

Why, then, if his fear was gone, did he think of certain things as he rolled himself in the Hudson Bay blankets before going to sleep? The immobility of the animal was strange, its refusal to turn and bolt was still stranger. Never before had he known a wild creature that was not afraid of fire. Why did it sit and watch him, as with purpose in its dreadful eyes? How had he felt its presence earlier and instantly? A timber wolf, especially a solitary timber wolf, was a timid thing, yet this one feared neither man nor fire. Now, as he lay there wrapped in his blankets inside the cosy tent, it sat outside beneath the stars, beside the fading embers, the wind chilly in its fur, the ground cooling beneath its planted paws, watching him, steadily watching him, perhaps until the dawn.

It was unusual, it was strange. Having neither imagination nor tradition, he called upon no store of racial visions. Matter of fact, a hotel clerk on a fishing holiday, he lay there in his blankets, merely wondering and puzzled. A timber wolf was a timber wolf and nothing more. Yet this timber wolf — the idea haunted him — was different. In a word, the deeper part of his original uneasiness remained. He tossed about, he shivered sometimes in his broken sleep; he did not go out to see, but he woke early and unrefreshed.

Again, with the sunshine and the morning wind, however, the incident of the night before was forgotten, almost unreal. His hunting zeal was uppermost. The tea and fish were delicious, his pipe had never tasted so good, the glory of this lonely lake amid primeval forests went to his head a little; he was a hunter before the Lord, and nothing else. He tried the edge of the lake, and in the excitement of playing a big fish, knew suddenly that *it*, the wolf, was there. He paused with the rod, exactly as if struck. He looked about him, he looked in a definite direction. The brilliant sunshine made every smallest detail clear and sharp — boulders of granite, burned stems, crimson sumach, pebbles along the shore in neat, separate detail — without revealing where the watcher hid. Then, his sight wandering farther inshore among the tangled undergrowth, he suddenly picked up the familiar, half-expected outline. The wolf was lying behind a granite boulder, so that only the head, the muzzle, and the eyes were visible. It merged in its background. Had he not known it was a wolf, he could never have separated it from the landscape. The eyes shone in the sunlight.

There it lay. He looked straight at it. Their eyes, in fact, actually met full and square. “Great Scott!” he exclaimed aloud, “why, it’s like looking at a human being!” From that moment, unwittingly, he established a singular personal relation with the beast. And what followed confirmed this undesirable impression, for the animal rose instantly and came down in leisurely fashion to the shore, where it stood looking back at him. It stood and stared into his eyes like some great wild dog, so that he was aware of a new and almost incredible sensation — that it courted recognition.

“Well! well!” he exclaimed again, relieving his feelings by addressing it aloud, “if this doesn’t beat everything I ever saw! What d’you want, anyway?”

He examined it now more carefully. He had never seen a wolf so big before; it was a tremendous beast, a nasty customer to tackle, he reflected, if it ever came to that. It stood there absolutely fearless and full of confidence. In the clear sunlight he took in every detail of it — a huge, shaggy, lean-flanked timber wolf, its wicked eyes staring straight into his own, almost with a kind of purpose in them. He saw its great jaws, its teeth, and its tongue, hung out, dropping saliva a little. And yet the idea of its savagery, its fierceness, was very little in him.

He was amazed and puzzled beyond belief. He wished the Indian would come back. He did not understand this strange behaviour in an animal. Its eyes, the odd expression in them, gave him a queer, unusual, difficult feeling. Had his nerves gone wrong, he almost wondered.

The beast stood on the shore and looked at him. He wished for the first time that he had brought a rifle. With a resounding smack he brought his paddle down flat upon the water, using all his strength, till the echoes rang as from a pistol-shot that was audible from one end of the lake to the other. The wolf never stirred. He shouted, but the beast remained unmoved. He blinked his eyes, speaking as to a dog, a domestic animal, a creature accustomed to human ways. It blinked its eyes in return.

At length, increasing his distance from the shore, he continued fishing, and the excitement of the marvellous sport held his attention — his surface attention, at any rate. At times he almost forgot the attendant beast; yet whenever he looked up, he saw it there. And worse; when he slowly paddled home again, he observed it trotting along the shore as though to keep him company. Crossing a little bay, he spurted, hoping to reach the other point before his undesired and undesirable attendant. Instantly the brute broke into that rapid, tireless lope that, except on ice, can run down anything on four legs in the woods. When he reached the distant point, the wolf was waiting for him. He raised his paddle from the water, pausing a moment for reflection; for this very close attention — there were dusk and night yet to come — he certainly did not relish. His camp was near; he had to land; he felt uncomfortable even in the sunshine of broad day, when, to his keen relief, about half a mile from the tent, he saw the creature suddenly stop and sit down in the open. He waited a moment, then paddled on. It did not follow. There was no attempt to move; it merely sat and watched him. After a few hundred yards, he looked back. It was still sitting where he left it. And the absurd, yet significant, feeling came to him that the beast divined his thought, his anxiety, his dread, and was now showing him, as well as it could, that it entertained no hostile feeling and did not meditate attack.

He turned the canoe toward the shore; he landed; he cooked his supper in the dusk; the animal made no sign. Not far away it certainly lay and watched, but it did not advance. And to Hyde, observant now in a new way, came one sharp, vivid reminder of the strange atmosphere into which his commonplace personality had strayed: he suddenly recalled that his relations with the beast, already established, had progressed distinctly a stage further. This startled him, yet without the accompanying alarm he must certainly have felt twenty-four hours before. He had an understanding with the wolf. He was aware of friendly thoughts toward it. He even went so far as to set out a few big fish on the spot where he had first seen it sitting the previous night. “If he comes,” he thought, “he is welcome to them. I’ve got plenty, anyway.” He thought of it now as “he.”

Yet the wolf made no appearance until he was in the act of entering his tent a good deal later. It was close on ten o’clock, whereas nine was his hour, and late at that, for turning in. He had, therefore, unconsciously been waiting for him. Then, as he was closing the flap, he saw the eyes close to where he had placed the fish. He waited, hiding himself, and expecting to hear sounds of munching jaws; but all was silence. Only the eyes glowed steadily out of the background of pitch darkness. He closed the flap. He had no slightest fear. In ten minutes he was sound asleep.

He could not have slept very long, for when he woke up he could see the shine of a faint red light through the canvas, and the fire had not died down completely. He rose and cautiously peeped out. The air was very cold; he saw his breath. But he also saw the wolf, for it had come in, and was sitting by the dying embers, not two yards away from where he crouched behind the flap. And this time, at these very close quarters, there was something in the attitude of the big wild thing that caught his attention with a vivid thrill of startled surprise and a sudden shock of cold that held him spellbound. He stared, unable to believe his eyes; for the wolf’s attitude conveyed to him something familiar that at first he was unable to explain. Its pose reached him in the terms of another thing with which he was entirely at home. What was it? Did his senses betray him? Was he still asleep and dreaming?

Then, suddenly, with a start of uncanny recognition, he knew. Its attitude was that of a dog. Having found the clue, his mind then made an awful leap. For it was, after all, no dog its appearance aped, but something nearer to himself, and more familiar still. Good heavens! It sat there with the pose, the attitude, the gesture in repose of something almost human. And then, with a second shock of biting wonder, it came to him like a revelation. The wolf sat beside that camp-fire as a man might sit.

Before he could weigh his extraordinary discovery, before he could examine it in detail or with care, the animal, sitting in this ghastly fashion, seemed to feel his eyes fixed on it. It slowly turned and looked him in the face, and for the first time Hyde felt a full-blooded, superstitious fear flood through his entire being. He seemed transfixed with that nameless terror that is said to attack human beings who suddenly face the dead, finding themselves bereft of speech and movement. This moment of paralysis certainly occurred. Its passing, however, was as singular as its advent. For almost at once he was aware of something beyond and above this mockery of human attitude and pose, something that ran along unaccustomed nerves and reached his feeling, even perhaps his heart. The revulsion was extraordinary, its result still more extraordinary and unexpected. Yet the fact remains. He was aware of another thing that had the effect of stilling his terror as soon as it was born. He was aware of appeal, silent, half expressed, yet vastly pathetic. He saw in the savage eyes a beseeching, even a yearning, expression that changed his mood as by magic from dread to natural sympathy. The great grey brute, symbol of cruel ferocity, sat there beside his dying fire and appealed for help.

This gulf betwixt animal and human seemed in that instant bridged. It was, of course, incredible. Hyde, sleep still possibly clinging to his inner being with the shades and half shapes of dream yet about his soul, acknowledged, how he knew not, the amazing fact. He found himself nodding to the brute in half consent, and instantly, without more ado, the lean grey shape rose like a wraith and trotted off swiftly, but with stealthy tread, into the background of the night.

When Hyde woke in the morning his first impression was that he must have dreamed the entire incident. His practical nature asserted itself. There was a bite in the fresh autumn air; the bright sun allowed no half lights anywhere; he felt brisk in mind and body. Reviewing what had happened, he came to the conclusion that it was utterly vain to speculate; no possible explanation of the animal’s behaviour occurred to him; he was dealing with something entirely outside his experience. His fear, however, had completely left him. The odd sense of friendliness remained. The beast had a definite purpose, and he himself was included in that purpose. His sympathy held good.

But with the sympathy there was also an intense curiosity. “If it shows itself again,” he told himself, “I’ll go up close and find out what it wants.” The fish laid out the night before had not been touched.

It must have been a full hour after breakfast when he next saw the brute; it was standing on the edge of the clearing, looking at him in the way now become familiar. Hyde immediately picked up his axe and advanced toward it boldly, keeping his eyes fixed straight upon its own. There was nervousness in him, but kept well under; nothing betrayed it; step by step he drew nearer until some ten yards separated them. The wolf had not stirred a muscle as yet. Its jaws hung open, its eyes observed him intently; it allowed him to approach without a sign of what its mood might be. Then, with these ten yards between them, it turned abruptly and moved slowly off, looking back first over one shoulder and then over the other, exactly as a dog might do, to see if he was following.

A singular journey it was they then made together, animal and man. The trees surrounded them at once, for they left the lake behind them, entering the tangled bush beyond. The beast, Hyde noticed, obviously picked the easiest track for him to follow; for obstacles that meant nothing to the four-legged expert, yet were difficult for a man, were carefully avoided with an almost uncanny skill, while yet the general direction was accurately kept. Occasionally there were windfalls to be surmounted; but though the wolf bounded over these with ease, it was always waiting for the man on the other side after he had laboriously climbed over. Deeper and deeper into the heart of the lonely forest they penetrated in this singular fashion, cutting across the arc of the lake's crescent, it seemed to Hyde; for after two miles or so, he recognized the big rocky bluff that overhung the water at its northern end. This outstanding bluff he had seen from his camp, one side of it falling sheer into the water; it was probably the spot, he imagined, where the Indians held their medicine-making ceremonies, for it stood out in isolated fashion, and its top formed a private plateau not easy of access. And it was here, close to a big spruce at the foot of the bluff upon the forest side, that the wolf stopped suddenly and for the first time since its appearance gave audible expression to its feelings. It sat down on its haunches, lifted its muzzle with open jaws, and gave vent to a subdued and long-drawn howl that was more like the wail of a dog than the fierce barking cry associated with a wolf.

By this time Hyde had lost not only fear, but caution too; nor, oddly enough, did this warning howl revive a sign of unwelcome emotion in him. In that curious sound he detected the same message that the eyes conveyed — appeal for help. He paused, nevertheless, a little startled, and while the wolf sat waiting for him, he looked about him quickly. There was young timber here; it had once been a small clearing, evidently. Axe and fire had done their work, but there was evidence to an experienced eye that it was Indians and not white men who had once been busy here. Some part of the medicine ritual, doubtless, took place in the little clearing, thought the man, as he advanced again towards his patient leader. The end of their queer journey, he felt, was close at hand.

He had not taken two steps before the animal got up and moved very slowly in the direction of some low bushes that formed a clump just beyond. It entered these, first looking back to make sure that its companion watched. The bushes hid it; a moment later it emerged again. Twice it performed this pantomime, each time, as it reappeared, standing still and staring at the man with as distinct an expression of appeal in the eyes as an animal may compass, probably. Its excitement, meanwhile, certainly increased, and this excitement was, with equal certainty, communicated to the man. Hyde made up his mind quickly. Gripping his axe tightly, and ready to use it at the first hint of malice, he moved slowly nearer to the bushes, wondering with something of a tremor what would happen.

If he expected to be startled, his expectation was at once fulfilled; but it was the behaviour of the beast that made him jump. It positively frisked about him like a happy dog. It frisked for joy. Its excitement was intense, yet from its open mouth no sound was audible. With a sudden leap, then, it bounded past him into the clump of bushes, against whose very edge he stood, and began scraping vigorously at the ground. Hyde stood and stared, amazement and interest now banishing all his nervousness, even when the beast, in its violent scraping, actually touched his body with its own. He had, perhaps, the feeling that he was in a dream, one of those fantastic dreams in which things may happen without involving an adequate surprise; for otherwise the manner of scraping and scratching at the ground must have seemed an impossible phenomenon. No wolf, no dog certainly, used its paws in the way those paws were working. Hyde had the odd, distressing sensation that it was hands, not paws, he watched. And yet, somehow, the natural, adequate surprise he should have felt was absent. The strange action seemed not entirely unnatural. In his heart some deep hidden spring of sympathy and pity stirred instead. He was aware of pathos.

The wolf stopped in its task and looked up into his face. Hyde acted without hesitation then. Afterwards he was wholly at a loss to explain his own conduct. It seemed he knew what to do, divined what was asked, expected of him. Between his mind and the dumb desire yearning through the savage animal there was intelligent and intelligible communication. He cut a stake and sharpened it, for the stones would blunt his axe-edge. He entered the clump of bushes to complete the digging his four-legged companion had begun. And while he worked, though he did not forget the close proximity of the wolf, he paid no attention to it; often his back was turned as he stooped over the laborious clearing away of the hard earth; no uneasiness or sense of danger was in him any more. The wolf sat outside the clump and watched the operations. Its concentrated attention, its patience, its intense eagerness, the gentleness and docility of the grey, fierce, and probably hungry brute, its obvious pleasure and satisfaction, too, at having won the human to its mysterious purpose — these were colours in the strange picture that Hyde thought of later when dealing with the human herd in his hotel again. At the moment he was aware chiefly of pathos and affection. The whole business was, of course, not to be believed, but that discovery came later, too, when telling it to others.

The digging continued for fully half an hour before his labour was rewarded by the discovery of a small whitish object. He picked it up and examined it — the finger-bone of a man. Other discoveries then followed quickly and in quantity. The *cache* was laid bare. He collected nearly the complete skeleton. The skull, however, he found last, and might not have found at all but for the guidance of his strangely alert companion. It lay some few yards away from the central hole now dug, and the wolf stood nuzzling the ground with its nose before Hyde understood that he was meant to dig exactly in that spot for it. Between the beast's very paws his stake struck hard upon it. He scraped the earth from the bone and examined it carefully. It was perfect, save for the fact that some wild animal had gnawed it, the teeth-marks being still plainly visible. Close beside it lay the rusty iron head of a tomahawk. This and the smallness of the bones confirmed him in his judgment that it was the skeleton not of a white man, but of an Indian.

During the excitement of the discovery of the bones one by one, and finally of the skull, but, more especially, during the period of intense interest while Hyde was examining them, he had paid little, if any, attention to the wolf. He was aware that it sat and watched him, never moving its keen eyes for a single moment from the actual operations, but of sign or movement it made none at all. He knew that it was pleased and satisfied, he knew also that he had now fulfilled its purpose in a great measure. The further intuition that now came to him, derived, he felt positive, from his companion's dumb desire, was perhaps the cream of the entire experience to him. Gathering the bones together in his coat, he carried them, together with the tomahawk, to the foot of the big spruce where the animal had first stopped. His leg actually touched the creature's muzzle as he passed. It turned its head to watch, but did not follow, nor did it move a muscle while he prepared the platform of boughs upon which he then laid the poor worn bones of an Indian who had been killed, doubtless, in sudden attack or ambush, and to whose remains had been denied the last grace of proper tribal burial. He wrapped the bones in bark; he laid the tomahawk beside the skull; he lit the circular fire round the pyre, and the blue smoke rose upward into the clear bright sunshine of the Canadian autumn morning till it was lost among the mighty trees far overhead.

In the moment before actually lighting the little fire he had turned to note what his companion did. It sat five yards away, he saw, gazing intently, and one of its front paws was raised a little from the ground. It made no sign of any kind. He finished the work, becoming so absorbed in it that he had eyes for nothing but the tending and guarding of his careful ceremonial fire. It was only when the platform of boughs collapsed, laying their charred burden gently on the fragrant earth among the soft wood ashes, that he turned again, as though to show the wolf what he had done, and seek, perhaps, some look of satisfaction in its curiously expressive eyes. But the place he searched was empty. The wolf had gone.

He did not see it again; it gave no sign of its presence anywhere; he was not watched. He fished as before, wandered through the bush about his camp, sat smoking round his fire after dark, and slept peacefully in his cosy little tent. He was not disturbed. No howl was ever audible in the distant forest, no twig snapped beneath a stealthy tread, he saw no eyes. The wolf that behaved like a man had gone for ever.

It was the day before he left that Hyde, noticing smoke rising from the shack across the lake, paddled over to exchange a word or two with the Indian, who had evidently now returned. The Redskin came down to meet him as he landed, but it was soon plain that he spoke very little English. He emitted the familiar grunts at first; then bit by bit Hyde stirred his limited vocabulary into action. The net result, however, was slight enough, though it was certainly direct:

“You camp there?” the man asked, pointing to the other side.

“Yes.”

“Wolf come?”

“Yes.”

“You see wolf?”

“Yes.”

The Indian stared at him fixedly a moment, a keen, wondering look upon his coppery, creased face.

“You ‘fraid wolf?” he asked after a moment’s pause.

“No,” replied Hyde, truthfully. He knew it was useless to ask questions of his own, though he was eager for information. The other would have told him nothing. It was sheer luck that the man had touched on the subject at all, and Hyde realized that his own best rôle was merely to answer, but to ask no questions. Then, suddenly, the Indian became comparatively voluble. There was awe in his voice and manner.

“Him no wolf. Him big medicine wolf. Him spirit wolf.”

Whereupon he drank the tea the other had brewed for him, closed his lips tightly, and said no more. His outline was discernible on the shore, rigid and motionless, an hour later, when Hyde’s canoe turned the corner of the lake three miles away, and landed to make the portages up the first rapid of his homeward stream.

It was Morton who, after some persuasion, supplied further details of what he called the legend. Some hundred years before, the tribe that lived in the territory beyond the lake began their annual medicine-making ceremonies on the big rocky bluff at the northern end; but no medicine could be made. The spirits, declared the chief medicine man, would not answer. They were offended. An investigation followed. It was discovered that a young brave had recently killed a wolf, a thing strictly forbidden, since the wolf was the totem animal of the tribe. To make matters worse, the name of the guilty man was Running Wolf. The offence being unpardonable, the man was cursed and driven from the tribe:

“Go out. Wander alone among the woods, and if we see you we slay you. Your bones shall be scattered in the forest, and your spirit shall not enter the Happy Hunting Grounds till one of another race shall find and bury them.”

“Which meant,” explained Morton laconically, his only comment on the story, “probably for ever.”

IV

FIRST HATE

THEY HAD BEEN shooting all day; the weather had been perfect and the powder straight, so that when they assembled in the smoking-room after dinner they were well pleased with themselves. From discussing the day’s sport and the weather outlook, the conversation drifted to other, though still cognate, fields. Lawson, the crack shot of the party, mentioned the instinctive recognition all animals feel for their natural enemies, and gave several instances in which he had tested it — tame rats with a ferret, birds with a snake, and so forth.

“Even after being domesticated for generations,” he said, “they recognize their natural enemy at once by instinct, an enemy they can never even have seen before. It’s infallible. They know instantly.”

“Undoubtedly,” said a voice from the corner chair; “and so do we.”

The speaker was Ericssen, their host, a great hunter before the Lord, generally uncommunicative but a good listener, leaving the talk to others. For this latter reason, as well as for a certain note of challenge in his voice, his abrupt statement gained attention.

“What do you mean exactly by ‘so do we’?” asked three men together, after waiting some seconds to see whether he meant to elaborate, which he evidently did not.

“We belong to the animal kingdom, of course,” put in a fourth, for behind the challenge there obviously lay a story, though a story that might be difficult to drag out of him. It was.

Ericssen, who had leaned forward a moment so that his strong, humorous face was in clear light, now sank back again into his chair, his expression concealed by the red lampshade at his side. The light played tricks, obliterating the humorous, almost tender lines, while emphasizing the strength of the jaw and nose. The red glare lent to the whole a rather grim expression.

Lawson, man of authority among them, broke the little pause.

“You’re dead right,” he observed, “but how do you know it?” — for John Ericssen never made a positive statement without a good reason for it. That good reason, he felt sure, involved a personal proof, but a story Ericssen would never tell before a general audience. He would tell it later, however, when the others had left. “There’s such a thing as instinctive antipathy, of course,” he added, with a laugh, looking around him. “That’s what you mean probably.”

“I meant exactly what I said,” replied the host bluntly. “There’s first love. There’s first hate, too.”

“Hate’s a strong word,” remarked Lawson.

“So is love,” put in another.

“Hate’s strongest,” said Ericssen grimly. “In the animal kingdom, at least,” he added suggestively, and then kept his lips closed, except to sip his liquor, for the rest of the evening — until the party at length broke up, leaving Lawson and one other man, both old trusted friends of many years’ standing.

“It’s not a tale I’d tell to everybody,” he began, when they were alone. “It’s true, for one thing; for another, you see, some of those good fellows” — he indicated the empty chairs with an expressive nod of his great head— “some of ’em knew him. You both knew him too, probably.”

“The man you hated,” said the understanding Lawson.

“And who hated me,” came the quiet confirmation. “My other reason,” he went on, “for keeping quiet was that the tale involves my wife.”

The two listeners said nothing, but each remembered the curiously long courtship that had been the prelude to his marriage. No engagement had been announced, the pair were devoted to one another, there was no known rival on either side; yet the courtship continued without coming to its expected conclusion. Many stories were afloat in consequence. It was a social mystery that intrigued the gossips.

“I may tell you two,” Ericssen continued, “the reason my wife refused for so long to marry me. It is hard to believe, perhaps, but it is true. Another man wished to make her his wife, and she would not consent to marry me until that other man was dead. Quixotic, absurd, unreasonable? If you like.

I’ll tell you what she said.” He looked up with a significant expression in his face which proved that he, at least, did not now judge her reason foolish. “‘Because it would be murder,’ she told me. ‘Another man who wants to marry me would kill you.’”

“She had some proof for the assertion, no doubt?” suggested Lawson.

“None whatever,” was the reply. “Merely her woman’s instinct. Moreover, *I* did not know who the other man was, nor would she ever tell me.”

“Otherwise you might have murdered him instead?” said Baynes, the second listener.

“I did,” said Ericssen grimly. “But without knowing he was the man.” He sipped his whisky and relit his pipe. The others waited.

“Our marriage took place two months later — just after Hazel’s disappearance.”

“Hazel?” exclaimed Lawson and Baynes in a single breath. “Hazel! Member of the Hunters!” His mysterious disappearance had been a nine days’ wonder some ten years ago. It had never been explained. They had all been members of the Hunters’ Club together.

“That’s the chap,” Ericssen said. “Now I’ll tell you the tale, if you care to hear it.” They settled back in their chairs to listen, and Ericssen, who had evidently never told the affair to another living soul except his own wife, doubtless, seemed glad this time to tell it to two men.

“It began some dozen years ago when my brother Jack and I came home from a shooting trip in China. I’ve often told you about our adventures there, and you see the heads hanging up here in the smoking-room — some of ‘em.” He glanced round proudly at the walls. “We were glad to be in town again after two years’ roughing it, and we looked forward to our first good dinner at the club, to make up for the rotten cooking we had endured so long. We had ordered that dinner in anticipatory detail many a time together. Well, we had it and enjoyed it up to a point — the point of the *entrée*, to be exact.

“Up to that point it was delicious, and we let ourselves go, I can tell you. We had ordered the very wine we had planned months before when we were snow-bound and half starving in the mountains.” He smacked his lips as he mentioned it. “I was just starting on a beautifully cooked grouse,” he went on, “when a figure went by our table, and Jack looked up and nodded. The two exchanged a brief word of greeting and explanation, and the other man passed on. Evidently they knew each other just enough to make a word or two necessary, but enough.

“‘Who’s that?’ I asked.

“‘A new member, named Hazel,’ Jack told me. ‘A great shot.’ He knew him slightly, he explained; he had once been a client of his — Jack was a barrister, you remember — and had defended him in some financial case or other. Rather an unpleasant case, he added. Jack did not ‘care about’ the fellow, he told me, as he went on with his tender wing of grouse.”

Ericssen paused to relight his pipe a moment.

“Not care about him!” he continued. “It didn’t surprise me, for my own feeling, the instant I set eyes on the fellow, was one of violent, instinctive dislike that amounted to loathing. Loathing! No. I’ll give it the right word — hatred. I simply couldn’t help myself; I hated the man from the very first go off. A wave of repulsion swept over me as I followed him down the room a moment with my eyes, till he took his seat at a distant table and was out of sight. Ugh! He was a big, fat-faced man, with an eyeglass glued into one of his pale-blue cod-like eyes — out of condition, ugly as a toad, with a smug expression of intense self-satisfaction on his jowl that made me long to ——

“I leave it to you to guess what I would have liked to do to him. But the instinctive loathing he inspired in me had another aspect, too. Jack had not introduced us during the momentary pause beside our table, but as I looked up I caught the fellow’s eye on mine — he was glaring at me instead of at Jack, to whom he was talking — with an expression of malignant dislike, as keen evidently as my own. That’s the other aspect I meant. He hated me as violently as I hated him. We were instinctive enemies, just as the rat and ferret are instinctive enemies. Each recognized a mortal foe. It was a case — I swear it — of whoever got first chance.”

“Bad as that!” exclaimed Baynes. “I knew him by sight. He wasn’t pretty, I’ll admit.”

“I knew him to nod to,” Lawson mentioned. “I never heard anything particular against him.” He shrugged his shoulders.

Ericssen went on. “It was not his character or qualities I hated,” he said. “I didn’t even know them. That’s the whole point. There’s no reason you fellows should have disliked him. *My* hatred — our mutual hatred — was instinctive, as instinctive as first love. A man knows his natural mate; also he knows his natural enemy. I did, at any rate, both with him and with my wife. Given the chance, Hazel would have done me in; just as surely, given the chance, I would have done him in. No blame to either of us, what’s more, in my opinion.”

“I’ve felt dislike, but never hatred like that,” Baynes mentioned. “I came across it in a book once, though. The writer did not mention the instinctive fear of the human animal for its natural enemy, or anything of that sort. He thought it was a continuance of a bitter feud begun in an earlier existence. He called it memory.”

“Possibly,” said Ericssen briefly. “My mind is not speculative. But I’m glad you spoke of fear. I left that out. The truth is, I feared the fellow, too, in a way; and had we ever met face to face in some wild country without witnesses I should have felt justified in drawing on him at sight, and he would have felt the same. Murder? If you like. I should call it self-defence. Anyhow, the fellow polluted the room for me. He spoilt the enjoyment of that dinner we had ordered months before in China.”

“But you saw him again, of course, later?”

“Lots of times. Not that night, because we went on to a theatre. But in the club we were always running across one another — in the houses of friends at lunch or dinner; at race meetings; all over the place; in fact, I even had some trouble to avoid being introduced to him. And every time we met our eyes betrayed us. He felt in his heart what I felt in mine. Ugh! He was as loathsome to me as leprosy, and as dangerous. Odd, isn’t it? The most intense feeling, except love, I’ve ever known. I remember” — he laughed gruffly— “I used to feel quite sorry for him. If he felt what I felt, and I’m convinced he did, he must have suffered. His one object — to get me out of the way for good — was so impossible. Then Fate played a hand in the game. I’ll tell you how.

“My brother died a year or two later, and I went abroad to try and forget it. I went salmon fishing in Canada. But, though the sport was good, it was not like the old times with Jack. The camp never felt the same without him. I missed him badly. But I forgot Hazel for the time; hating did not seem worth while, somehow.

“When the best of the fishing was over on the Atlantic side, I took a run back to Vancouver and fished there for a bit. I went up the Campbell River, which was not so crowded then as it is now, and had some rattling sport. Then I grew tired of the rod and decided to go after wapiti for a change. I came back to Victoria and learned what I could about the best places, and decided finally to go up the west coast of the island. By luck I happened to pick up a good guide, who was in the town at the moment on business, and we started off together in one of the little Canadian Pacific Railway boats that ply along that coast.

“Outfitting two days later at a small place the steamer stopped at, the guide said we needed another man to help pack our kit over portages, and so forth, but the only fellow available was a Siwash of whom he disapproved. My guide would not have him at any price; he was lazy, a drunkard, a liar, and even worse, for on one occasion he came back without the sportsman he had taken up country on a shooting trip, and his story was not convincing, to say the least. These disappearances are always awkward, of course, as you both know. We preferred, anyhow, to go without the Siwash, and off we started.

“At first our luck was bad. I saw many wapiti, but no good heads; only after a fortnight’s hunting did I manage to get a decent head, though even that was not so good as I should have liked.

“We were then near the head waters of a little river that ran down into the Inlet; heavy rains had made the river rise; running downstream was a risky job, what with old log-jams shifting and new ones forming; and, after many narrow escapes, we upset one afternoon and had the misfortune to lose a lot of our kit, amongst it most of our cartridges. We could only muster a few between us. The guide had a dozen; I had two — just enough, we considered, to take us out all right. Still, it was an infernal nuisance. We camped at once to dry out our soaked things in front of a big fire, and while this laundry work was going on, the guide suggested my filling in the time by taking a look at the next little valley, which ran parallel to ours. He had seen some good heads over there a few weeks ago. Possibly I might come upon the herd. I started at once, taking my two cartridges with me.

"It was the devil of a job getting over the divide, for it was a badly bushed-up place, and where there were no bushes there were boulders and fallen trees, and the going was slow and tiring. But I got across at last and came out upon another stream at the bottom of the new valley. Signs of wapiti were plentiful, though I never came up with a single beast all the afternoon. Blacktail deer were everywhere, but the wapiti remained invisible. Providence, or whatever you like to call that which there is no escaping in our lives, made me save my two cartridges."

Ericssen stopped a minute then. It was not to light his pipe or sip his whisky. Nor was it because the remainder of his story failed in the recollection of any vivid detail. He paused a moment to think.

"Tell us the lot," pleaded Lawson. "Don't leave out anything."

Ericssen looked up. His friend's remark had helped him to make up his mind apparently. He *had* hesitated about something or other, but the hesitation passed. He glanced at both his listeners.

"Right," he said. "I'll tell you everything. I'm not imaginative, as you know, and my amount of superstition, I should judge, is microscopic." He took a longer breath, then lowered his voice a trifle. "Anyhow," he went on, "it's true, so I don't see why I should feel shy about admitting it — but as I stood there in that lonely valley, where only the noises of wind and water were audible, and no human being, except my guide, some miles away, was within reach, a curious feeling came over me I find difficult to describe. I felt" — obviously he made an effort to get the word out— "I felt creepy."

"You," murmured Lawson, with an incredulous smile— "you creepy?" he repeated under his breath.

"I felt creepy and afraid," continued the other, with conviction. "I had the sensation of being seen by someone — as if someone, I mean, was watching me. It was so unlikely that anyone was near me in that God-forsaken bit of wilderness, that I simply couldn't believe it at first. But the feeling persisted. I felt absolutely positive somebody was not far away among the red maples, behind a boulder, across the little stream, perhaps, somewhere, at any rate, so near that I was plainly visible to him. It was not an animal. It was human. Also, it was hostile.

“I was in danger.

“You may laugh, both of you, but I assure you the feeling was so positive that I crouched down instinctively to hide myself behind a rock. My first thought, that the guide had followed me for some reason or other, I at once discarded. It was not the guide. It was an enemy.

“No, no, I thought of no one in particular. No name, no face occurred to me. Merely that an enemy was on my trail, that he saw me, and I did not see him, and that he was near enough to me to — well, to take instant action. This deep instinctive feeling of danger, of fear, of anything you like to call it, was simply overwhelming.

“Another curious detail I must also mention. About half an hour before, having given up all hope of seeing wapiti, I had decided to kill a blacktail deer for meat. A good shot offered itself, not thirty yards away. I aimed. But just as I was going to pull the trigger a queer emotion touched me, and I lowered the rifle. It was exactly as though a voice said, ‘Don’t!’ I heard no voice, mind you; it was an emotion only, a feeling, a sudden inexplicable change of mind — a warning, if you like. I didn’t fire, anyhow.

“But now, as I crouched behind that rock, I remembered this curious little incident, and was glad I had not used up my last two cartridges. More than that I cannot tell you. Things of that kind are new to me. They’re difficult enough to tell, let alone to explain. But they were *real*.

“I crouched there, wondering what on earth was happening to me, and, feeling a bit of a fool, if you want to know, when suddenly, over the top of the boulder, I saw something moving. It was a man’s hat. I peered cautiously. Some sixty yards away the bushes parted, and two men came out on to the river’s bank, and I knew them both. One was the Siwash I had seen at the store. The other was Hazel. Before I had time to think I cocked my rifle.”

“Hazel. Good Lord!” exclaimed the listeners.

“For a moment I was too surprised to do anything but cock that rifle. I waited, for what puzzled me was that, after all, Hazel had *not* seen me. It was only the feeling of his beastly proximity that had made me feel I was seen and watched by him. There was something else, too, that made me pause before — er — doing anything. Two other things, in fact. One was that I was so intensely interested in watching the fellow’s actions. Obviously he had the same uneasy sensation that I had. He shared with me the nasty feeling that danger was about. His rifle, I saw, was cocked and ready; he kept looking behind him, over his shoulder, peering this way and that, and sometimes addressing a remark to the Siwash at his side. I caught the laughter of the latter. The Siwash evidently did not think there was danger anywhere. It was, of course, unlikely enough — —”

“And the other thing that stopped you?” urged Lawson, impatiently interrupting.

Ericssen turned with a look of grim humour on his face.

“Some confounded or perverted sense of chivalry in me, I suppose,” he said, “that made it impossible to shoot him down in cold blood, or, rather, without letting him have a chance. For my blood, as a matter of fact, was far from cold at the moment. Perhaps, too, I wanted the added satisfaction of letting him know who fired the shot that was to end his vile existence.”

He laughed again. “It was rat and ferret in the human kingdom,” he went on, “but I wanted my rat to have a chance, I suppose. Anyhow, though I had a perfect shot in front of me at easy distance, I did not fire. Instead I got up, holding my cocked rifle ready, finger on trigger, and came out of my hiding place. I called to him. ‘Hazel, you beast! So there you are — at last!’

“He turned, but turned away from me, offering his horrid back. The direction of the voice he misjudged. He pointed down stream, and the Siwash turned to look. Neither of them had seen me yet. There was a big log-jam below them. The roar of the water in their ears concealed my footsteps. I was, perhaps, twenty paces from them when Hazel, with a jerk of his whole body, abruptly turned clean round and faced me. We stared into each other’s eyes.

“The amazement on his face changed instantly to hatred and resolve. He acted with incredible rapidity. I think the unexpected suddenness of his turn made me lose a precious second or two. Anyhow he was ahead of me. He flung his rifle to his shoulder. ‘You devil!’ I heard his voice. ‘I’ve got you at last!’ His rifle cracked, for he let drive the same instant. The hair stirred just above my ear.

“He had missed!

“Before he could draw back his bolt for another shot I had acted.

“‘You’re not fit to live!’ I shouted, as my bullet crashed into his temple. I had the satisfaction, too, of knowing that he heard my words. I saw the swift expression of frustrated loathing in his eyes.

“He fell like an ox, his face splashing in the stream. I shoved the body out. I saw it sucked beneath the log-jam instantly. It disappeared. There could be no inquest on him, I reflected comfortably. Hazel was gone — gone from this earth, from my life, our mutual hatred over at last.”

The speaker paused a moment. “Odd,” he continued presently— “very odd indeed.” He turned to the others. “I felt quite sorry for him suddenly. I suppose,” he added, “the philosophers are right when they gas about hate being very close to love.”

His friends contributed no remark.

“Then I came away,” he resumed shortly. “My wife — well, you know the rest, don’t you? I told her the whole thing. She — she said nothing. But she married me, you see.”

There was a moment’s silence. Baynes was the first to break it. “But — the Siwash?” he asked. “The witness?”

Lawson turned upon him with something of contemptuous impatience.

“He told you he had *two* cartridges.”

Ericssen, smiling grimly, said nothing at all.

V

THE TARN OF SACRIFICE

JOHN HOLT, A vague excitement in him, stood at the door of the little inn, listening to the landlord's directions as to the best way of reaching Scarsdale. He was on a walking tour through the Lake District, exploring the smaller dales that lie away from the beaten track and are accessible only on foot.

The landlord, a hard-featured north countryman, half innkeeper, half sheep farmer, pointed up the valley. His deep voice had a friendly burr in it.

"You go straight on till you reach the head," he said, "then take to the fell. Follow the 'sheep-trod' past the Crag. Directly you're over the top you'll strike the road."

"A road up there!" exclaimed his customer incredulously.

"Aye," was the steady reply. "The old Roman road. The same road," he added, "the savages came down when they burst through the Wall and burnt everything right up to Lancaster — —"

"They were held — weren't they — at Lancaster?" asked the other, yet not knowing quite why he asked it.

"I don't rightly know," came the answer slowly. "Some say they were. But the old town has been that built over since, it's hard to tell." He paused a moment. "At Ambleside," he went on presently, "you can still see the marks of the burning, and at the little fort on the way to Ravenglass."

Holt strained his eyes into the sunlit distance, for he would soon have to walk that road and he was anxious to be off. But the landlord was communicative and interesting. "You can't miss it," he told him. "It runs straight as a spear along the fell top till it meets the Wall. You must hold to it for about eight miles. Then you'll come to the Standing Stone on the left of the track — —"

"The Standing Stone, yes?" broke in the other a little eagerly.

"You'll see the Stone right enough. It was where the Romans came. Then bear to the left down another 'trod' that comes into the road there. They say it was the war-trail of the folk that set up the Stone."

"And what did they use the Stone for?" Holt inquired, more as though he asked it of himself than of his companion.

The old man paused to reflect. He spoke at length.

"I mind an old fellow who seemed to know about such things called it a Sighting Stone. He reckoned the sun shone over it at dawn on the longest day right on to the little holm in Blood Tarn. He said they held sacrifices in a stone circle there." He stopped a moment to puff at his black pipe. "Maybe he was right. I have seen stones lying about that may well be that."

The man was pleased and willing to talk to so good a listener. Either he had not noticed the curious gesture the other made, or he read it as a sign of eagerness to start. The sun was warm, but a sharp wind from the bare hills went between them with a sighing sound. Holt buttoned his coat about him. "An odd name for a mountain lake — Blood Tarn," he remarked, watching the landlord's face expectantly.

"Aye, but a good one," was the measured reply. "When I was a boy the old folk had a tale that the savages flung three Roman captives from that crag into the water. There's a book been written about it; they say it was a sacrifice, but most likely they were tired of dragging them along, *I* say. Anyway, that's what the writer said. One, I mind, now you ask me, was a priest of some heathen temple that stood near the Wall, and the other two were his daughter and her lover." He guffawed. At least he made a strange noise in his throat. Evidently, thought Holt, he was sceptical yet superstitious. "It's just an old tale handed down, whatever the learned folk may say," the old man added.

"A lonely place," began Holt, aware that a fleeting touch of awe was added suddenly to his interest.

"Aye," said the other, "and a bad spot too. Every year the Crag takes its toll of sheep, and sometimes a man goes over in the mist. It's right beside the track and very slippery. Ninety foot of a drop before you hit the water. Best keep round the tarn and leave the Crag alone if there's any mist about. Fishing? Yes, there's some quite fair trout in the tarn, but it's not much fished. Happen one of the shepherd lads from Tyson's farm may give it a turn with an ‘otter,’” he went on, “once in a while, but he won’t stay for the evening. He’ll clear out before sunset.”

“Ah! Superstitious, I suppose?”

“It’s a gloomy, chancy spot — and with the dusk falling,” agreed the innkeeper eventually. “None of our folk care to be caught up there with night coming on. Most handy for a shepherd, too — but Tyson can’t get a man to bide there.” He paused again, then added significantly: “Strangers don’t seem to mind it though. It’s only our own folk — —”

“Strangers!” repeated the other sharply, as though he had been waiting all along for this special bit of information. “You don’t mean to say there are people living up there?” A curious thrill ran over him.

“Aye,” replied the landlord, “but they’re daft folk — a man and his daughter. They come every spring. It’s early in the year yet, but I mind Jim Backhouse, one of Tyson’s men, talking about them last week.” He stopped to think. “So they’ve come back,” he went on decidedly. “They get milk from the farm.”

“And what on earth are they doing up there?” Holt asked.

He asked many other questions as well, but the answers were poor, the information not forthcoming. The landlord would talk for hours about the Crag, the tarn, the legends and the Romans, but concerning the two strangers he was uncommunicative. Either he knew little, or he did not want to discuss them; Holt felt it was probably the former. They were educated town-folk, he gathered with difficulty, rich apparently, and they spent their time wandering about the fell, or fishing. The man was often seen upon the Crag, his girl beside him, bare-legged, dressed as a peasant. “Happen they come for their health, happen the father is a learned man studying the Wall” — exact information was not forthcoming.

The landlord “minded his own business,” and inhabitants were too few and far between for gossip. All Holt could extract amounted to this: the couple had been in a motor accident some years before, and as a result they came every spring to spend a month or two in absolute solitude, away from cities and the excitement of modern life. They troubled no one and no one troubled them.

“Perhaps I may see them as I go by the tarn,” remarked the walker finally, making ready to go. He gave up questioning in despair. The morning hours were passing.

“Happen you may,” was the reply, “for your track goes past their door and leads straight down to Scarsdale. The other way over the Crag saves half a mile, but it’s rough going along the scree.” He stopped dead. Then he added, in reply to Holt’s good-bye: “In my opinion it’s not worth it,” yet what he meant exactly by “it” was not quite clear.

* * * * *

The walker shouldered his knapsack. Instinctively he gave the little hitch to settle it on his shoulders — much as he used to give to his pack in France. The pain that shot through him as he did so was another reminder of France. The bullet he had stopped on the Somme still made its presence felt at times.... Yet he knew, as he walked off briskly, that he was one of the lucky ones. How many of his old pals would never walk again, condemned to hobble on crutches for the rest of their lives! How many, again, would never even hobble! More terrible still, he remembered, were the blind.... The dead, it seemed to him, had been more fortunate....

He swung up the narrowing valley at a good pace and was soon climbing the fell. It proved far steeper than it had appeared from the door of the inn, and he was glad enough to reach the top and fling himself down on the coarse springy turf to admire the view below.

The spring day was delicious. It stirred his blood. The world beneath looked young and stainless. Emotion rose through him in a wave of optimistic happiness. The bare hills were half hidden by a soft blue haze that made them look bigger, vaster, less earthly than they really were. He saw silver streaks in the valleys that he knew were distant streams and lakes. Birds soared between. The dazzling air seemed painted with exhilarating light and colour. The very clouds were floating gossamer that he could touch. There were bees and dragon-flies and fluttering thistle-down. Heat vibrated. His body, his physical sensations, so-called, retired into almost nothing. He felt himself, like his surroundings, made of air and sunlight. A delicious sense of resignation poured upon him. He, too, like his surroundings, was composed of air and sunshine, of insect wings, of soft, fluttering vibrations that the gorgeous spring day produced.... It seemed that he renounced the heavy dues of bodily life, and enjoyed the delights, momentarily at any rate, of a more ethereal consciousness.

Near at hand, the hills were covered with the faded gold of last year's bracken, which ran down in a brimming flood till it was lost in the fresh green of the familiar woods below. Far in the hazy distance swam the sea of ash and hazel. The silver birch sprinkled that lower world with fairy light.

Yes, it was all natural enough. He could see the road quite clearly now, only a hundred yards away from where he lay. How straight it ran along the top of the hill! The landlord's expression recurred to him: "Straight as a spear." Somehow, the phrase seemed to describe exactly the Romans and all their works.... The Romans, yes, and all their works....

He became aware of a sudden sympathy with these long dead conquerors of the world. With them, he felt sure, there had been no useless, foolish talk. They had known no empty words, no bandying of foolish phrases. "War to end war," and "Regeneration of the race" — no hypocritical nonsense of that sort had troubled their minds and purposes. They had not attempted to cover up the horrible in words. With them had been no childish, vain pretence. They had gone straight to their ends.

Other thoughts, too, stole over him, as he sat gazing down upon the track of that ancient road; strange thoughts, not wholly welcome. New, yet old, emotions rose in a tide upon him. He began to wonder.... Had he, after all, become brutalized by the War? He knew quite well that the little "Christianity" he inherited had soon fallen from him like a garment in France. In his attitude to Life and Death he had become, frankly, pagan. He now realized, abruptly, another thing as well: in reality he had never been a "Christian" at any time. Given to him with his mother's milk, he had never accepted, felt at home with Christian dogmas. To him they had always been an alien creed. Christianity met none of his requirements....

But what were his "requirements"? He found it difficult to answer.

Something, at any rate, different and more primitive, he thought....

Even up here, alone on the mountain-top, it was hard to be absolutely frank with himself. With a kind of savage, honest determination, he bent himself to the task. It became suddenly important for him. He must know exactly where he stood. It seemed he had reached a turning point in his life. The

War, in the objective world, had been one such turning point; now he had reached another, in the subjective life, and it was more important than the first.

As he lay there in the pleasant sunshine, his thoughts went back to the fighting. A friend, he recalled, had divided people into those who enjoyed the War and those who didn't. He was obliged to admit that he had been one of the former — he had thoroughly enjoyed it. Brought up from a youth as an engineer, he had taken to a soldier's life as a duck takes to water. There had been plenty of misery, discomfort, wretchedness; but there had been compensations that, for him, outweighed them. The fierce excitement, the primitive, naked passions, the wild fury, the reckless indifference to pain and death, with the loss of the normal, cautious, pettifogging little daily self all these involved, had satisfied him. Even the actual killing....

He started. A slight shudder ran down his back as the cool wind from the open moorlands came sighing across the soft spring sunshine. Sitting up straight, he looked behind him a moment, as with an effort to turn away from something he disliked and dreaded because it was, he knew, too strong for him. But the same instant he turned round again. He faced the vile and dreadful thing in himself he had hitherto sought to deny, evade. Pretence fell away. He could not disguise from himself, that he had thoroughly enjoyed the killing; or, at any rate, had not been shocked by it as by an unnatural and ghastly duty. The shooting and bombing he performed with an effort always, but the rarer moments when he had been able to use the bayonet ... the joy of feeling the steel go home....

He started again, hiding his face a moment in his hands, but he did not try to evade the hideous memories that surged. At times, he knew, he had gone quite mad with the lust of slaughter; he had gone on long after he should have stopped. Once an officer had pulled him up sharply for it, but the next instant had been killed by a bullet. He thought he had gone on killing, but he did not know. It was all a red mist before his eyes and he could only remember the sticky feeling of the blood on his hands when he gripped his rifle....

And now, at this moment of painful honesty with himself, he realized that his creed, whatever it was, must cover all that; it must provide some sort of a philosophy for it; must neither apologize nor ignore it. The heaven that it promised must be a man’s heaven. The Christian heaven made no appeal to him, he could not believe in it. The ritual must be simple and direct. He felt that in some dim way he understood why those old people had thrown their captives from the Crag. The sacrifice of an animal victim that could be eaten afterwards with due ceremonial did not shock him. Such methods seemed simple, natural, effective. Yet would it not have been better — the horrid thought rose unbidden in his inmost mind — better to have cut their throats with a flint knife ... slowly?

Horror-stricken, he sprang to his feet. These terrible thoughts he could not recognize as his own. Had he slept a moment in the sunlight, dreaming them? Was it some hideous nightmare flash that touched him as he dozed a second? Something of fear and awe stole over him. He stared round for some minutes into the emptiness of the desolate landscape, then hurriedly ran down to the road, hoping to exorcize the strange sudden horror by vigorous movement. Yet when he reached the track he knew that he had not succeeded. The awful pictures were gone perhaps, but the mood remained. It was as though some new attitude began to take definite form and harden within him.

He walked on, trying to pretend to himself that he was some forgotten legionary marching up with his fellows to defend the Wall. Half unconsciously he fell into the steady tramping pace of his old regiment: the words of the ribald songs they had sung going to the front came pouring into his mind. Steadily and almost mechanically he swung along till he saw the Stone as a black speck on the left of the track, and the instant he saw it there rose in him the feeling that he stood upon the edge of an adventure that he feared yet longed for. He approached the great granite monolith with a curious thrill of anticipatory excitement, born he knew not whence.

But, of course, there was nothing. Common sense, still operating strongly, had warned him there would be, could be, nothing. In the waste the great Stone stood upright, solitary, forbidding, as it had stood for thousands of years. It dominated the landscape somewhat ominously. The sheep and cattle had used it as a rubbing-stone, and bits of hair and wool clung to its rough, weather-eaten edges; the feet of generations had worn a cup-shaped hollow at its base. The wind sighed round it plaintively. Its bulk glistened as it took the sun.

A short mile away the Blood Tarn was now plainly visible; he could see the little holm lying in a direct line with the Stone, while, overhanging the water as a dark shadow on one side, rose the cliff-like rock they called "the Crag." Of the house the landlord had mentioned, however, he could see no trace, as he relieved his shoulders of the knapsack and sat down to enjoy his lunch. The tarn, he reflected, was certainly a gloomy place; he could understand that the simple superstitious shepherds did not dare to live there, for even on this bright spring day it wore a dismal and forbidding look. With failing light, when the Crag sprawled its big lengthening shadow across the water, he could well imagine they would give it the widest possible berth. He strolled down to the shore after lunch, smoking his pipe lazily — then suddenly stood still. At the far end, hidden hitherto by a fold in the ground, he saw the little house, a faint column of blue smoke rising from the chimney, and at the same moment a woman came out of the low door and began to walk towards the tarn. She had seen him, she was moving evidently in his direction; a few minutes later she stopped and stood waiting on the path — waiting, he well knew, for him.

And his earlier mood, the mood he dreaded yet had forced himself to recognize, came back upon him with sudden redoubled power. As in some vivid dream that dominates and paralyses the will, or as in the first stages of an imposed hypnotic spell, all question, hesitation, refusal sank away. He felt a pleasurable resignation steal upon him with soft, numbing effect. Denial and criticism ceased to operate, and common sense died with them. He yielded his being automatically to the deeps of an adventure he did not understand. He began to walk towards the woman.

It was, he saw as he drew nearer, the figure of a young girl, nineteen or twenty years of age, who stood there motionless with her eyes fixed steadily on his own. She looked as wild and picturesque as the scene that framed her. Thick black hair hung loose over her back and shoulders; about her head was bound a green ribbon; her clothes consisted of a jersey and a very short skirt which showed her bare legs browned by exposure to the sun and wind. A pair of rough sandals covered her feet. Whether the face was beautiful or not he could not tell; he only knew that it attracted him immensely and with a strength of appeal that he at once felt curiously irresistible. She remained motionless against the boulder, staring fixedly at him till he was close before her. Then she spoke:

"I am glad that you have come at last," she said in a clear, strong voice that yet was soft and even tender. "We have been expecting you."

"You have been expecting me!" he repeated, astonished beyond words, yet finding the language natural, right and true. A stream of sweet feeling invaded him, his heart beat faster, he felt happy and at home in some extraordinary way he could not understand yet did not question.

"Of course," she answered, looking straight into his eyes with welcome unashamed. Her next words thrilled him to the core of his being. "I have made the room ready for you."

Quick upon her own, however, flashed back the landlord's words, while common sense made a last faint effort in his thought. He was the victim of some absurd mistake evidently. The lonely life, the forbidding surroundings, the associations of the desolate hills had affected her mind. He remembered the accident.

"I am afraid," he offered, lamely enough, "there is some mistake. I am not the friend you were expecting. I — —" He stopped. A thin slight sound as of distant laughter seemed to echo behind the unconvincing words.

"There is no mistake," the girl answered firmly, with a quiet smile, moving a step nearer to him, so that he caught the subtle perfume of her vigorous youth. "I saw you clearly in the Mystery Stone. I recognized you at once."

"The Mystery Stone," he heard himself saying, bewilderment increasing, a sense of wild happiness growing with it.

Laughing, she took his hand in hers. "Come," she said, drawing him along with her, "come home with me. My father will be waiting for us; he will tell you everything, and better far than I can."

He went with her, feeling that he was made of sunlight and that he walked on air, for at her touch his own hand responded as with a sudden fierceness of pleasure that he failed utterly to understand, yet did not question for an instant. Wildly, absurdly, madly it flashed across his mind: "This is the woman I shall marry — *my* woman. I am her man."

They walked in silence for a little, for no words of any sort offered themselves to his mind, nor did the girl attempt to speak. The total absence of embarrassment between them occurred to him once or twice as curious, though the very idea of embarrassment then disappeared entirely. It all seemed natural and unforced, the sudden intercourse as familiar and effortless as though they had known one another always.

"The Mystery Stone," he heard himself saying presently, as the idea rose again to the surface of his mind. "I should like to know more about it. Tell me, dear."

"I bought it with the other things," she replied softly.

"What other things?"

She turned and looked up into his face with a slight expression of surprise; their shoulders touched as they swung along; her hair blew in the wind across his coat. "The bronze collar," she answered in the low voice that pleased him so, "and this ornament that I wear in my hair."

He glanced down to examine it. Instead of a ribbon, as he had first supposed, he saw that it was a circlet of bronze, covered with a beautiful green patina and evidently very old. In front, above the forehead, was a small disk bearing an inscription he could not decipher at the moment. He bent down and kissed her hair, the girl smiling with happy contentment, but offering no sign of resistance or annoyance.

"And," she added suddenly, "the dagger."

Holt started visibly. This time there was a thrill in her voice that seemed to pierce down straight into his heart. He said nothing, however. The unexpectedness of the word she used, together with the note in her voice that moved him so strangely, had a disconcerting effect that kept him silent for a time. He did not ask about the dagger. Something prevented his curiosity finding expression in speech, though the word, with the marked accent she placed upon it, had struck into him like the shock of sudden steel itself, causing him an indecipherable emotion of both joy and pain. He asked instead, presently, another question, and a very commonplace one: he asked where she and her father had lived before they came to these lonely hills. And the form of his question — his voice shook a little as he said it — was, again, an effort of his normal self to maintain its already precarious balance.

The effect of his simple query, the girl's reply above all, increased in him the mingled sensations of sweetness and menace, of joy and dread, that half alarmed, half satisfied him. For a moment she wore a puzzled expression, as though making an effort to remember.

“Down by the sea,” she answered slowly, thoughtfully, her voice very low. “Somewhere by a big harbour with great ships coming in and out. It was there we had the break — the shock — an accident that broke us, shattering the dream we share To-day.” Her face cleared a little. “We were in a chariot,” she went on more easily and rapidly, “and father — my father was injured, so that I went with him to a palace beyond the Wall till he grew well.”

“You were in a chariot?” Holt repeated. “Surely not.”

“Did I say chariot?” the girl replied. “How foolish of me!” She shook her hair back as though the gesture helped to clear her mind and memory. “That belongs, of course, to the other dream. No, not a chariot; it was a car. But it had wheels like a chariot — the old war-chariots. You know.”

“Disk-wheels,” thought Holt to himself. He did not ask about the palace. He asked instead where she had bought the Mystery Stone, as she called it, and the other things. Her reply bemused and enticed him farther, for he could not unravel it. His whole inner attitude was shifting with uncanny rapidity and completeness. They walked together, he now realized, with linked arms, moving slowly in step, their bodies touching. He felt the blood run hot and almost savage in his veins. He was aware how amazingly precious she was to him, how deeply, absolutely necessary to his life and happiness. Her words went past him in the mountain wind like flying birds.

“My father was fishing,” she went on, “and I was on my way to join him, when the old woman called me into her dwelling and showed me the things. She wished to give them to me, but I refused the present and paid for them in gold. I put the fillet on my head to see if it would fit, and took the Mystery Stone in my hand. Then, as I looked deep into the stone, this present dream died all away. It faded out. I saw the older dreams again — *our* dreams.”

“The older dreams!” interrupted Holt. “Ours!” But instead of saying the words aloud, they issued from his lips in a quiet whisper, as though control of his voice had passed a little from him. The sweetness in him became more wonderful, unmanageable; his astonishment had vanished; he walked and talked with his old familiar happy Love, the woman he had sought so long and waited for, the woman who was his mate, as he was hers, she who alone could satisfy his inmost soul.

“The old dream,” she replied, “the very old — the oldest of all perhaps — when we committed the terrible sacrilege. I saw the High Priest lying dead — whom my father slew — and the other whom *you* destroyed. I saw you prise out the jewel from the image of the god — with your short bloody spear. I saw, too, our flight to the galley through the hot, awful night beneath the stars — and our escape....”

Her voice died away and she fell silent.

“Tell me more,” he whispered, drawing her closer against his side. “What had *you* done?” His heart was racing now. Some fighting blood surged uppermost. He felt that he could kill, and the joy of violence and slaughter rose in him.

“Have you forgotten so completely?” she asked very low, as he pressed her more tightly still against his heart. And almost beneath her breath she whispered into his ear, which he bent to catch the little sound: “I had broken my vows with you.”

“What else, my lovely one — my best beloved — what more did you see?” he whispered in return, yet wondering why the fierce pain and anger that he felt behind still lay hidden from betrayal.

“Dream after dream, and always we were punished. But the last time was the clearest, for it was here — here where we now walk together in the sunlight and the wind — it was here the savages hurled us from the rock.”

A shiver ran through him, making him tremble with an unaccountable touch of cold that communicated itself to her as well. Her arm went instantly about his shoulder, as he stooped and kissed her passionately. “Fasten your coat about you,” she said tenderly, but with troubled breath, when he released her, “for this wind is chill although the sun shines brightly. We were glad, you remember, when they stopped to kill us, for we were tired and our feet were cut to pieces by the long, rough journey from the Wall.” Then suddenly her voice grew louder again and the smile of happy confidence came back into her eyes. There was the deep earnestness of love in it, of love that cannot end or die. She looked up into his face. “But soon now," she said, "we shall be free. For you have come, and it is nearly finished — this weary little present dream."

"How," he asked, "shall we get free?" A red mist swam momentarily before his eyes.

"My father," she replied at once, "will tell you all. It is quite easy."

"Your father, too, remembers?"

"The moment the collar touches him," she said, "he is a priest again. See! Here he comes forth already to meet us, and to bid you welcome."

Holt looked up, startled. He had hardly noticed, so absorbed had he been in the words that half intoxicated him, the distance they had covered. The cottage was now close at hand, and a tall, powerfully built man, wearing a shepherd's rough clothing, stood a few feet in front of him. His stature, breadth of shoulder and thick black beard made up a striking figure. The dark eyes, with fire in them, gazed straight into his own, and a kindly smile played round the stern and vigorous mouth.

"Greeting, my son," said a deep, booming voice, "for I shall call you my son as I did of old. The bond of the spirit is stronger than that of the flesh, and with us three the tie is indeed of triple strength. You come, too, at an auspicious hour, for the omens are favourable and the time of our liberation is at hand." He took the other's hand in a grip that might have killed an ox and yet was warm with gentle kindliness, while Holt, now caught wholly into the spirit of some deep reality he could not master yet accepted, saw that the wrist was small, the fingers shapely, the gesture itself one of dignity and refinement.

"Greeting, my father," he replied, as naturally as though he said more modern words.

"Come in with me, I pray," pursued the other, leading the way, "and let me show you the poor accommodation we have provided, yet the best that we can offer."

He stooped to pass the threshold, and as Holt stooped likewise the girl took his hand and he knew that his bewitchment was complete. Entering the low doorway, he passed through a kitchen, where only the roughest, scantiest furniture was visible, into another room that was completely bare. A heap of dried bracken had been spread on the floor in one corner to form a bed. Beside it lay two cheap, coloured blankets. There was nothing else.

“Our place is poor,” said the man, smiling courteously, but with that dignity and air of welcome which made the hovel seem a palace. “Yet it may serve, perhaps, for the short time that you will need it. Our little dream here is wellnigh over, now that you have come. The long weary pilgrimage at last draws to a close.” The girl had left them alone a moment, and the man stepped closer to his guest. His face grew solemn, his voice deeper and more earnest suddenly, the light in his eyes seemed actually to flame with the enthusiasm of a great belief. “Why have you tarried thus so long, and where?” he asked in a lowered tone that vibrated in the little space. “We have sought you with prayer and fasting, and she has spent her nights for you in tears. You lost the way, it must be. The lesser dreams entangled your feet, I see.” A touch of sadness entered the voice, the eyes held pity in them. “It is, alas, too easy, I well know,” he murmured. “It is too easy.”

“I lost the way,” the other replied. It seemed suddenly that his heart was filled with fire. “But now,” he cried aloud, “now that I have found her, I will never, never let her go again. My feet are steady and my way is sure.”

“For ever and ever, my son,” boomed the happy, yet almost solemn answer, “she is yours. Our freedom is at hand.”

He turned and crossed the little kitchen again, making a sign that his guest should follow him. They stood together by the door, looking out across the tarn in silence. The afternoon sunshine fell in a golden blaze across the bare hills that seemed to smoke with the glory of the fiery light. But the Crag loomed dark in shadow overhead, and the little lake lay deep and black beneath it.

“Acella, Acella!” called the man, the name breaking upon his companion as with a shock of sweet delicious fire that filled his entire being, as the girl came the same instant from behind the cottage. “The Gods call me,” said her father. “I go now to the hill. Protect our guest and comfort him in my absence.”

Without another word, he strode away up the hillside and presently was visible standing on the summit of the Crag, his arms stretched out above his head to heaven, his great head thrown back, his bearded face turned upwards. An impressive, even a majestic figure he looked, as his bulk and stature rose in dark silhouette against the brilliant evening sky. Holt stood motionless, watching him for several minutes, his heart swelling in his breast, his pulses thumping before some great nameless pressure that rose from the depths of his being. That inner attitude which seemed a new and yet more satisfying attitude to life than he had known hitherto, had crystallized. Define it he could not, he only knew that he accepted it as natural. It satisfied him. The sight of that dignified, gaunt figure worshipping upon the hill-top enflamed him....

“I have brought the stone,” a voice interrupted his reflections, and turning, he saw the girl beside him. She held out for his inspection a dark square object that looked to him at first like a black stone lying against the brown skin of her hand. “The Mystery Stone,” the girl added, as their faces bent down together to examine it. “It is there I see the dreams I told you of.”

He took it from her and found that it was heavy, composed apparently of something like black quartz, with a brilliant polished surface that revealed clear depths within. Once, evidently, it had been set in a stand or frame, for the marks where it had been attached still showed, and it was obviously of great age. He felt confused, the mind in him troubled yet excited, as he gazed. The effect upon him was as though a wind rose suddenly and passed across his inmost subjective life, setting its entire contents in rushing motion.

“And here,” the girl said, “is the dagger.”

He took from her the short bronze weapon, feeling at once instinctively its ragged edge, its keen point, sharp and effective still. The handle had long since rotted away, but the bronze tongue, and the holes where the rivets had been, remained, and, as he touched it, the confusion and trouble in his mind increased to a kind of turmoil, in which violence, linked to something tameless, wild and almost savage, was the dominating emotion. He turned to seize the girl and crush her to him in a passionate embrace, but she held away, throwing back her lovely head, her eyes shining, her lips parted, yet one hand stretched out to stop him.

“First look into it with me,” she said quietly. “Let us see together.”

She sat down on the turf beside the cottage door, and Holt, obeying, took his place beside her. She remained very still for some minutes, covering the stone with both hands as though to warm it. Her lips moved. She seemed to be repeating some kind of invocation beneath her breath, though no actual words were audible. Presently her hands parted. They sat together gazing at the polished surface. They looked within.

“There comes a white mist in the heart of the stone,” the girl whispered. “It will soon open. The pictures will then grow. Look!” she exclaimed after a brief pause, “they are forming now.”

“I see only mist,” her companion murmured, gazing intently. “Only mist I see.”

She took his hand and instantly the mist parted. He found himself peering into another landscape which opened before his eyes as though it were a photograph. Hills covered with heather stretched away on every side.

“Hills, I see,” he whispered. “The ancient hills — —”

“Watch closely,” she replied, holding his hand firmly.

At first the landscape was devoid of any sign of life; then suddenly it surged and swarmed with moving figures. Torrents of men poured over the hill-crests and down their heathery sides in columns. He could see them clearly — great hairy men, clad in skins, with thick shields on their left arms or slung over their backs, and short stabbing spears in their hands. Thousands upon thousands poured over in an endless stream. In the distance he could see other columns sweeping in a turning movement. A few of the men rode rough ponies and seemed to be directing the march, and these, he knew, were the chiefs....

The scene grew dimmer, faded, died away completely. Another took its place:

By the faint light he knew that it was dawn. The undulating country, less hilly than before, was still wild and uncultivated. A great wall, with towers at intervals, stretched away till it was lost in shadowy distance. On the nearest of these towers he saw a sentinel clad in armour, gazing out across the rolling country. The armour gleamed faintly in the pale glimmering light, as the man suddenly snatched up a bugle and blew upon it. From a brazier burning beside him he next seized a brand and fired a great heap of brushwood. The smoke rose in a dense column into the air almost immediately, and from all directions, with incredible rapidity, figures came pouring up to man the wall. Hurriedly they strung their bows, and laid spare arrows close beside them on the coping. The light grew brighter. The whole country was alive with savages; like the waves of the sea they came rolling in enormous numbers. For several minutes the wall held. Then, in an impetuous, fearful torrent, they poured over....

It faded, died away, was gone again, and a moment later yet another took its place:

But this time the landscape was familiar, and he recognized the tarn. He saw the savages upon the ledge that flanked the dominating Crag; they had three captives with them. He saw two men. The other was a woman. But the woman had fallen exhausted to the ground, and a chief on a rough pony rode back to see what had delayed the march. Glancing at the captives, he made a fierce gesture with his arm towards the water far below. Instantly the woman was jerked cruelly to her feet and forced onwards till the summit of the Crag was reached. A man snatched something from her hand. A second later she was hurled over the brink.

The two men were next dragged on to the dizzy spot where she had stood. Dead with fatigue, bleeding from numerous wounds, yet at this awful moment they straightened themselves, casting contemptuous glances at the fierce savages surrounding them. They were Romans and would die like Romans. Holt saw their faces clearly for the first time.

He sprang up with a cry of anguished fury.

“The second man!” he exclaimed. “You saw the second man!”

The girl, releasing his hand, turned her eyes slowly up to his, so that he met the flame of her ancient and undying love shining like stars upon him out of the night of time.

“Ever since that moment,” she said in a low voice that trembled, “I have been looking, waiting for you — —”

He took her in his arms and smothered her words with kisses, holding her fiercely to him as though he would never let her go. “I, too,” he said, his whole being burning with his love, “I have been looking, waiting for you. Now I have found you. We have found each other...!”

The dusk fell slowly, imperceptibly. As twilight slowly draped the gaunt hills, blotting out familiar details, so the strong dream, veil upon veil, drew closer over the soul of the wanderer, obliterating finally the last reminder of To-day. The little wind had dropped and the desolate moors lay silent, but for the hum of distant water falling to its valley bed. His life, too, and the life of the girl, he knew, were similarly falling, falling into some deep shadowed bed where rest would come at last. No details troubled him, he asked himself no questions. A profound sense of happy peace numbed every nerve and stilled his beating heart.

He felt no fear, no anxiety, no hint of alarm or uneasiness vexed his singular contentment. He realized one thing only — that the girl lay in his arms, he held her fast, her breath mingled with his own. They had found each other. What else mattered?

From time to time, as the daylight faded and the sun went down behind the moors, she spoke. She uttered words he vaguely heard, listening, though with a certain curious effort, before he closed the thing she said with kisses. Even the fierceness of his blood was gone. The world lay still, life almost ceased to flow. Lapped in the deeps of his great love, he was redeemed, perhaps, of violence and savagery....

“Three dark birds,” she whispered, “pass across the sky ... they fall beyond the ridge. The omens are favourable. A hawk now follows them, cleaving the sky with pointed wings.”

“A hawk,” he murmured. “The badge of my old Legion.”

“My father will perform the sacrifice,” he heard again, though it seemed a long interval had passed, and the man’s figure was now invisible on the Crag amid the gathering darkness. “Already he prepares the fire. Look, the sacred island is alight. He has the black cock ready for the knife.”

Holt roused himself with difficulty, lifting his face from the garden of her hair. A faint light, he saw, gleamed fitfully on the holm within the tarn. Her father, then, had descended from the Crag, and had lit the sacrificial fire upon the stones. But what did the doings of the father matter now to him?

“The dark bird,” he repeated dully, “the black victim the Gods of the Underworld alone accept. It is good, Acella, it is good!” He was about to sink back again, taking her against his breast as before, when she resisted and sat up suddenly.

“It is time,” she said aloud. “The hour has come. My father climbs, and we must join him on the summit. Come!”

She took his hand and raised him to his feet, and together they began the rough ascent towards the Crag. As they passed along the shore of the Tarn of Blood, he saw the fire reflected in the ink-black waters; he made out, too, though dimly, a rough circle of big stones, with a larger flag-stone lying in the centre. Three small fires of bracken and wood, placed in a triangle with its apex towards the Standing Stone on the distant hill, burned briskly, the crackling material sending out sparks that pierced the columns of thick smoke. And in this smoke, peering, shifting, appearing and disappearing, it seemed he saw great faces moving. The flickering light and twirling smoke made clear sight difficult. His bliss, his lethargy were very deep. They left the tarn below them and hand in hand began to climb the final slope.

Whether the physical effort of climbing disturbed the deep pressure of the mood that numbed his senses, or whether the cold draught of wind they met upon the ridge restored some vital detail of To-day, Holt does not know. Something, at any rate, in him wavered suddenly, as though a centre of gravity had shifted slightly. There was a perceptible alteration in the balance of thought and feeling that had held invariable now for many hours. It seemed to him that something heavy lifted, or rather, began to lift — a weight, a shadow, something oppressive that obstructed light. A ray of light, as it were, struggled through the thick darkness that enveloped him. To him, as he paused on the ridge to recover his breath, came this vague suggestion of faint light breaking across the blackness. It was objective.

“See,” said the girl in a low voice, “the moon is rising. It lights the sacred island. The blood-red waters turn to silver.”

He saw, indeed, that a huge three-quarter moon now drove with almost visible movement above the distant line of hills; the little tarn gleamed as with silvery armour; the glow of the sacrificial fires showed red across it. He looked down with a shudder into the sheer depth that opened at his feet, then turned to look at his companion. He started and shrank back. Her face, lit by the moon and by the fire, shone pale as death; her black hair framed it with a terrible suggestiveness; the eyes, though brilliant as ever, had a film upon them. She stood in an attitude of both ecstasy and resignation, and one outstretched arm pointed towards the summit where her father stood.

Her lips parted, a marvellous smile broke over her features, her voice was suddenly unfamiliar: “He wears the collar,” she uttered. “Come. Our time is here at last, and we are ready. See, he waits for us!”

There rose for the first time struggle and opposition in him; he resisted the pressure of her hand that had seized his own and drew him forcibly along. Whence came the resistance and the opposition he could not tell, but though he followed her, he was aware that the refusal in him strengthened. The weight of darkness that oppressed him shifted a little more, an inner light increased; The same moment they reached the summit and stood beside — the priest. There was a curious sound of fluttering. The figure, he saw, was naked, save for a rough blanket tied loosely about the waist.

“The hour has come at last,” cried his deep booming voice that woke echoes from the dark hills about them. “We are alone now with our Gods.” And he broke then into a monotonous rhythmic chanting that rose and fell upon the wind, yet in a tongue that sounded strange; his erect figure swayed slightly with its cadences; his black beard swept his naked chest; and his face, turned skywards, shone in the mingled light of moon above and fire below, yet with an added light as well that burned within him rather than without. He was a weird, magnificent figure, a priest of ancient rites invoking his deathless deities upon the unchanging hills.

But upon Holt, too, as he stared in awed amazement, an inner light had broken suddenly. It came as with a dazzling blaze that at first paralysed thought and action. His mind cleared, but too abruptly for movement, either of tongue or hand, to be possible. Then, abruptly, the inner darkness rolled away completely. The light in the wild eyes of the great chanting, swaying figure, he now knew was the light of mania.

The faint fluttering sound increased, and the voice of the girl was oddly mingled with it. The priest had ceased his invocation. Holt, aware that he stood alone, saw the girl go past him carrying a big black bird that struggled with vainly beating wings.

“Behold the sacrifice,” she said, as she knelt before her father and held up the victim. “May the Gods accept it as presently They shall accept us too!”

The great figure stooped and took the offering, and with one blow of the knife he held, its head was severed from its body. The blood spattered on the white face of the kneeling girl. Holt was aware for the first time that she, too, was now unclothed; but for a loose blanket, her white body gleamed against the dark heather in the moonlight. At the same moment she rose to her feet, stood upright, turned towards him so that he saw the dark hair streaming across her naked shoulders, and, with a face of ecstasy, yet ever that strange film upon her eyes, her voice came to him on the wind:

"Farewell, yet not farewell! We shall meet, all three, in the underworld. The Gods accept us!"

Turning her face away, she stepped towards the ominous figure behind, and bared her ivory neck and breast to the knife. The eyes of the maniac were upon her own; she was as helpless and obedient as a lamb before his spell.

Then Holt's horrible paralysis, if only just in time, was lifted. The priest had raised his arm, the bronze knife with its ragged edge gleamed in the air, with the other hand he had already gathered up the thick dark hair, so that the neck lay bare and open to the final blow. But it was two other details, Holt thinks, that set his muscles suddenly free, enabling him to act with the swift judgment which, being wholly unexpected, disconcerted both maniac and victim and frustrated the awful culmination. The dark spots of blood upon the face he loved, and the sudden final fluttering of the dead bird's wings upon the ground — these two things, life actually touching death, released the held-back springs.

He leaped forward. He received the blow upon his left arm and hand. It was his right fist that sent the High Priest to earth with a blow that, luckily, felled him in the direction away from the dreadful brink, and it was his right arm and hand, he became aware some time afterwards only, that were chiefly of use in carrying the fainting girl and her unconscious father back to the shelter of the cottage, and to the best help and comfort he could provide....

It was several years afterwards, in a very different setting, that he found himself spelling out slowly to a little boy the lettering cut into a circlet of bronze the child found on his study table. To the child he told a fairy tale, then dismissed him to play with his mother in the garden. But, when alone, he rubbed away the verdigris with great care, for the circlet was thin and frail with age, as he examined again the little picture of a tripod from which smoke issued, incised neatly in the metal. Below it, almost as sharp as when the Roman craftsman cut it first, was the name Acella. He touched the letters tenderly with his left hand, from which two fingers were missing, then placed it in a drawer of his desk and turned the key.

“That curious name,” said a low voice behind his chair. His wife had come in and was looking over his shoulder. “You love it, and I dread it.” She sat on the desk beside him, her eyes troubled. “It was the name father used to call me in his illness.”

Her husband looked at her with passionate tenderness, but said no word.

“And this,” she went on, taking the broken hand in both her own, “is the price you paid to me for his life. I often wonder what strange good deity brought you upon the lonely moor that night, and just in the very nick of time. You remember...?”

“The deity who helps true lovers, of course,” he said with a smile, evading the question. The deeper memory, he knew, had closed absolutely in her since the moment of the attempted double crime. He kissed her, murmuring to himself as he did so, but too low for her to hear, “Acella! *My* Acella...!”

VI

THE VALLEY OF THE BEASTS

1

AS THEY EMERGED suddenly from the dense forest the Indian halted, and Grimwood, his employer, stood beside him, gazing into the beautiful wooded valley that lay spread below them in the blaze of a golden sunset. Both men leaned upon their rifles, caught by the enchantment of the unexpected scene.

“We camp here,” said Tooshalli abruptly, after a careful survey. “To-morrow we make a plan.”

He spoke excellent English. The note of decision, almost of authority, in his voice was noticeable, but Grimwood set it down to the natural excitement of the moment. Every track they had followed during the last two days, but one track in particular as well, had headed straight for this remote and hidden valley, and the sport promised to be unusual.

“That’s so,” he replied, in the tone of one giving an order. “You can make camp ready at once.” And he sat down on a fallen hemlock to take off his moccasin boots and grease his feet that ached from the arduous day now drawing to a close. Though under ordinary circumstances he would have pushed on for another hour or two, he was not averse to a night here, for exhaustion had come upon him during the last bit of rough going, his eye and muscles were no longer steady, and it was doubtful if he could have shot straight enough to kill. He did not mean to miss a second time.

With his Canadian friend, Iredale, the latter’s half-breed, and his own Indian, Tooshalli, the party had set out three weeks ago to find the “wonderful big moose” the Indians reported were travelling in the Snow River country. They soon found that the tale was true; tracks were abundant; they saw fine animals nearly every day, but though carrying good heads, the hunters expected better still and left them alone. Pushing up the river to a chain of small lakes near its source, they then separated into two parties, each with its nine-foot bark canoe, and packed in for three days after the yet bigger animals the Indians agreed would be found in the deeper woods beyond. Excitement was keen, expectation keener still. The day before they separated, Iredale shot the biggest moose of his life, and its head, bigger even than the grand Alaskan heads, hangs in his house to-day. Grimwood's hunting blood was fairly up. His blood was of the fiery, not to say ferocious, quality. It almost seemed he liked killing for its own sake.

Four days after the party broke into two he came upon a gigantic track, whose measurements and length of stride keyed every nerve he possessed to its highest tension.

Tooshalli examined the tracks for some minutes with care. "It is the biggest moose in the world," he said at length, a new expression on his inscrutable red visage.

Following it all that day, they yet got no sight of the big fellow that seemed to be frequenting a little marshy dip of country, too small to be called valley, where willow and undergrowth abounded. He had not yet scented his pursuers. They were after him again at dawn. Towards the evening of the second day Grimwood caught a sudden glimpse of the monster among a thick clump of willows, and the sight of the magnificent head that easily beat all records set his heart beating like a hammer with excitement. He aimed and fired. But the moose, instead of crashing, went thundering away through the further scrub and disappeared, the sound of his plunging canter presently dying away. Grimwood had missed, even if he had wounded.

They camped, and all next day, leaving the canoe behind, they followed the huge track, but though finding signs of blood, these were not plentiful, and the shot had evidently only grazed the animal. The travelling was of the hardest. Towards evening, utterly exhausted, the spoor led them to the ridge they now stood upon, gazing down into the enchanting valley that opened at their feet. The giant moose had gone down into this valley. He would consider himself safe there. Grimwood agreed with the Indian's judgment. They would camp for the night and continue at dawn the wild hunt after "the biggest moose in the world."

Supper was over, the small fire used for cooking dying down, with Grimwood became first aware that the Indian was not behaving quite as usual. What particular detail drew his attention is hard to say. He was a slow-witted, heavy man, full-blooded, unobservant; a fact had to hurt him through his comfort, through his pleasure, before he noticed it. Yet anyone else must have observed the changed mood of the Redskin long ago.

Tooshalli had made the fire, fried the bacon, served the tea, and was arranging the blankets, his own and his employer's, before the latter remarked upon his — silence. Tooshalli had not uttered a word for over an hour and a half, since he had first set eyes upon the new valley, to be exact. And his employer now noticed the unaccustomed silence, because after food he liked to listen to wood talk and hunting lore.

"Tired out, aren't you?" said big Grimwood, looking into the dark face across the firelight. He resented the absence of conversation, now that he noticed it. He was over-weary himself, he felt more irritable than usual, though his temper was always vile.

"Lost your tongue, eh?" he went on with a growl, as the Indian returned his stare with solemn, expressionless face. That dark inscrutable look got on his nerves a bit. "Speak up, man!" he exclaimed sharply. "What's it all about?"

The Englishman had at last realized that there was something to "speak up" about. The discovery, in his present state, annoyed him further. Tooshalli stared gravely, but made no reply. The silence was prolonged almost into minutes. Presently the head turned sideways, as though the man listened. The other watched him very closely, anger growing in him.

But it was the way the Redskin turned his head, keeping his body rigid, that gave the jerk to Grimwood's nerves, providing him with a sensation he had never known in his life before — it gave him what is generally called "the goose-flesh." It seemed to jangle his entire system, yet at the same time made him cautious. He did not like it, this combination of emotions puzzled him.

"Say something, I tell you," he repeated in a harsher tone, raising his voice. He sat up, drawing his great body closer to the fire. "Say something, damn it!"

His voice fell dead against the surrounding trees, making the silence of the forest unpleasantly noticeable. Very still the great woods stood about them; there was no wind, no stir of branches; only the crackle of a snapping twig was audible from time to time, as the night-life moved unwarily sometimes watching the humans round their little fire. The October air had a frosty touch that nipped.

The Redskin did not answer. No muscle of his neck nor of his stiffened body moved. He seemed all ears.

“Well?” repeated the Englishman, lowering his voice this time instinctively. “What d’you hear, God damn it!” The touch of odd nervousness that made his anger grow betrayed itself in his language.

Tooshalli slowly turned his head back again to its normal position, the body rigid as before.

“I hear nothing, Mr. Grimwood,” he said, gazing with quiet dignity into his employer’s eyes.

This was too much for the other, a man of savage temper at the best of times. He was the type of Englishman who held strong views as to the right way of treating “inferior” races.

“That’s a lie, Tooshalli, and I won’t have you lie to me. Now what was it? Tell me at once!”

“I hear nothing,” repeated the other. “I only think.”

“And what is it you’re pleased to think?” Impatience made a nasty expression round the mouth.

“I go not,” was the abrupt reply, unalterable decision in the voice.

The man’s rejoinder was so unexpected that Grimwood found nothing to say at first. For a moment he did not take its meaning; his mind, always slow, was confused by impatience, also by what he considered the foolishness of the little scene. Then in a flash he understood; but he also understood the immovable obstinacy of the race he had to deal with. Tooshalli was informing him that he refused to go into the valley where the big moose had vanished. And his astonishment was so great at first that he merely sat and stared. No words came to him.

“It is — —” said the Indian, but used a native term.

“What’s that mean?” Grimwood found his tongue, but his quiet tone was ominous.

“Mr. Grimwood, it mean the ‘Valley of the Beasts,’” was the reply in a tone quieter still.

The Englishman made a great, a genuine effort at self-control. He was dealing, he forced himself to remember, with a superstitious Redskin. He knew the stubbornness of the type. If the man left him his sport was irretrievably spoilt, for he could not hunt in this wilderness alone, and even if he got the coveted head, he could never, never get it out alone. His native selfishness seconded his effort. Persuasion, if only he could keep back his rising anger, was his rôle to play.

"The Valley of the Beasts," he said, a smile on his lips rather than in his darkening eyes; "but that's just what we want. It's beasts we're after, isn't it?" His voice had a false cheery ring that could not have deceived a child. "But what d'you mean, anyhow — the Valley of the Beasts?" He asked it with a dull attempt at sympathy.

"It belong to Ishtot, Mr. Grimwood." The man looked him full in the face, no flinching in the eyes.

"My — our — big moose is there," said the other, who recognized the name of the Indian Hunting God, and understanding better, felt confident he would soon persuade his man. Tooshalli, he remembered, too, was nominally a Christian. "We'll follow him at dawn and get the biggest head the world has ever seen. You will be famous," he added, his temper better in hand again. "Your tribe will honour you. And the white hunters will pay you much money."

"He go there to save himself. I go not."

The other's anger revived with a leap at this stupid obstinacy. But, in spite of it, he noticed the odd choice of words. He began to realize that nothing now would move the man. At the same time he also realized that violence on his part must prove worse than useless. Yet violence was natural to his "dominant" type. "That brute Grimwood" was the way most men spoke of him.

"Back at the settlement you're a Christian, remember," he tried, in his clumsy way, another line. "And disobedience means hell-fire. You know that!"

"I a Christian — at the post," was the reply, "but out here the Red God rule. Ishtot keep that valley for himself. No Indian hunt there." It was as though a granite boulder spoke.

The savage temper of the Englishman, enforced by the long difficult suppression, rose wickedly into sudden flame. He stood up, kicking his blankets aside. He strode across the dying fire to the Indian's side. Tooshalli also rose. They faced each other, two humans alone in the wilderness, watched by countless invisible forest eyes.

Tooshalli stood motionless, yet as though he expected violence from the foolish, ignorant white-face. "You go alone, Mr. Grimwood." There was no fear in him.

Grimwood choked with rage. His words came forth with difficulty, though he roared them into the silence of the forest:

"I pay you, don't I? You'll do what *I* say, not what *you* say!" His voice woke the echoes.

The Indian, arms hanging by his side, gave the old reply.

"I go not," he repeated firmly.

It stung the other into uncontrollable fury.

The beast then came uppermost; it came out. "You've said that once too often, Tooshalli!" and he struck him brutally in the face. The Indian fell, rose to his knees again, collapsed sideways beside the fire, then struggled back into a sitting position. He never once took his eyes from the white man's face.

Beside himself with anger, Grimwood stood over him. "Is that enough? Will you obey me now?" he shouted.

"I go not," came the thick reply, blood streaming from his mouth. The eyes had no flinching in them. "That valley Ishtot keep. Ishtot see us now. *He see you.*" The last words he uttered with strange, almost uncanny emphasis.

Grimwood, arm raised, fist clenched, about to repeat his terrible assault, paused suddenly. His arm sank to his side. What exactly stopped him he could never say. For one thing, he feared his own anger, feared that if he let himself go he would not stop till he had killed — committed murder. He knew his own fearful temper and stood afraid of it. Yet it was not only that. The calm firmness of the Redskin, his courage under pain, and something in the fixed and burning eyes arrested him. Was it also something in the words he had used— “Ishtot see *you*” — that stung him into a queer caution midway in his violence?

He could not say. He only knew that a momentary sense of awe came over him. He became unpleasantly aware of the enveloping forest, so still, listening in a kind of impenetrable, remorseless silence. This lonely wilderness, looking silently upon what might easily prove murder, laid a faint, inexplicable chill upon his raging blood. The hand dropped slowly to his side again, the fist unclenched itself, his breath came more evenly.

“Look you here,” he said, adopting without knowing it the local way of speech. “I ain’t a bad man, though your going-on do make a man damned tired. I’ll give you another chance.” His voice was sullen, but a new note in it surprised even himself. “I’ll do that. You can have the night to think it over, Tooshalli — see? Talk it over with your — —”

He did not finish the sentence. Somehow the name of the Redskin God refused to pass his lips. He turned away, flung himself into his blankets, and in less than ten minutes, exhausted as much by his anger as by the day’s hard going, he was sound asleep.

The Indian, crouching beside the dying fire, had said nothing.

Night held the woods, the sky was thick with stars, the life of the forest went about its business quietly, with that wondrous skill which millions of years have perfected. The Redskin, so close to this skill that he instinctively used and borrowed from it, was silent, alert and wise, his outline as inconspicuous as though he merged, like his four-footed teachers, into the mass of the surrounding bush.

He moved perhaps, yet nothing knew he moved. His wisdom, derived from that eternal, ancient mother who from infinite experience makes no mistakes, did not fail him. His soft tread made no sound; his breathing, as his weight, was calculated. The stars observed him, but they did not tell; the light air knew his whereabouts, yet without betrayal....

The chill dawn gleamed at length between the trees, lighting the pale ashes of an extinguished fire, also of a bulky, obvious form beneath a blanket. The form moved clumsily. The cold was penetrating.

And that bulky form now moved because a dream had come to trouble it. A dark figure stole across its confused field of vision. The form started, but it did not wake. The figure spoke: “Take this,” it whispered, handing a little stick, curiously carved. “It is the totem of great Ishtot. In the valley all memory of the White Gods will leave you. Call upon Ishtot.... Call on Him if you dare”; and the dark figure glided away out of the dream and out of all remembrance....

2

The first thing Grimwood noticed when he woke was that Tooshalli was not there. No fire burned, no tea was ready. He felt exceedingly annoyed. He glared about him, then got up with a curse to make the fire. His mind seemed confused and troubled. At first he only realized one thing clearly — his guide had left him in the night.

It was very cold. He lit the wood with difficulty and made his tea, and the actual world came gradually back to him. The Red Indian had gone; perhaps the blow, perhaps the superstitious terror, perhaps both, had driven him away. He was alone, that was the outstanding fact. For anything beyond outstanding facts, Grimwood felt little interest. Imaginative speculation was beyond his compass. Close to the brute creation, it seemed, his nature lay.

It was while packing his blankets — he did it automatically, a dull, vicious resentment in him — that his fingers struck a bit of wood that he was about to throw away when its unusual shape caught his attention suddenly. His odd dream came back then. But was it a dream? The bit of wood was undoubtedly a totem stick. He examined it. He paid it more attention than he meant to, wished to. Yes, it was unquestionably a totem stick. The dream, then, was not a dream. Tooshalli had quit, but, following with Redskin faithfulness some code of his own, had left him the means of safety. He chuckled sourly, but thrust the stick inside his belt. “One never knows,” he mumbled to himself.

He faced the situation squarely. He was alone in the wilderness. His capable, experienced woodsman had deserted him. The situation was serious. What should he do? A weakling would certainly retrace his steps, following the track they had made, afraid to be left alone in this vast hinterland of pathless forest. But Grimwood was of another build. Alarmed he might be, but he would not give in. He had the defects of his own qualities. The brutality of his nature argued force. He was determined and a sportsman. He would go on. And ten minutes after breakfast, having first made a *cache* of what provisions were left over, he was on his way — down across the ridge and into the mysterious valley, the Valley of the Beasts.

It looked, in the morning sunlight, entrancing. The trees closed in behind him, but he did not notice. It led him on....

He followed the track of the gigantic moose he meant to kill, and the sweet, delicious sunshine helped him. The air was like wine, the seductive spoor of the great beast, with here and there a faint splash of blood on leaves or ground, lay forever just before his eyes. He found the valley, though the actual word did not occur to him, enticing; more and more he noticed the beauty, the desolate grandeur of the mighty spruce and hemlock, the splendour of the granite bluffs which in places rose above the forest and caught the sun.... The valley was deeper, vaster than he had imagined. He felt safe, at home in it, though, again these actual terms did not occur to him.... Here he could hide for ever and find peace.... He became aware of a new quality in the deep loneliness. The scenery for the first time in his life appealed to him, and the form of the appeal was curious — he felt the comfort of it.

For a man of his habit, this was odd, yet the new sensations stole over him so gently, their approach so gradual, that they were first recognized by his consciousness indirectly. They had already established themselves in him before he noticed them; and the indirectness took this form — that the passion of the chase gave place to an interest in the valley itself. The lust of the hunt, the fierce desire to find and kill, the keen wish, in a word, to see his quarry within range, to aim, to fire, to witness the natural consummation of the long expedition — these had all become measurably less, while the effect of the valley upon him had increased in strength. There was a welcome about it that he did not understand.

The change was singular, yet, oddly enough, it did not occur to him as singular; it was unnatural, yet it did not strike him so. To a dull mind of his unobservant, unanalytical type, a change had to be marked and dramatic before he noticed it; something in the nature of a shock must accompany it for him to recognize it had happened. And there had been no shock. The spoor of the great moose was much cleaner, now that he caught up with the animal that made it; the blood more frequent; he had noticed the spot where it had rested, its huge body leaving a marked imprint on the soft ground;

where it had reached up to eat the leaves of saplings here and there was also visible; he had come undoubtedly very near to it, and any minute now might see its great bulk within range of an easy shot. Yet his ardour had somehow lessened.

He first realized this change in himself when it suddenly occurred to him that the animal itself had grown less cautious. It must scent him easily now, since a moose, its sight being indifferent, depends chiefly for its safety upon its unusually keen sense of smell, and the wind came from behind him. This now struck him as decidedly uncommon: the moose itself was obviously careless of his close approach. It felt no fear.

It was this inexplicable alteration in the animal’s behaviour that made him recognize, at last, the alteration in his own. He had followed it now for a couple of hours and had descended some eight hundred to a thousand feet; the trees were thinner and more sparsely placed; there were open, park-like places where silver birch, sumach and maple splashed their blazing colours; and a crystal stream, broken by many waterfalls, foamed past towards the bed of the great valley, yet another thousand feet below. By a quiet pool against some over-arching rocks, the moose had evidently paused to drink, paused at its leisure, moreover. Grimwood, rising from a close examination of the direction the creature had taken after drinking — the hoof-marks were fresh and very distinct in the marshy ground about the pool — looked suddenly straight into the great creature’s eyes. It was not twenty yards from where he stood, yet he had been standing on that spot for at least ten minutes, caught by the wonder and loneliness of the scene. The moose, therefore, had been close beside him all this time. It had been calmly drinking, undisturbed by his presence, unafraid.

The shock came now, the shock that woke his heavy nature into realization. For some seconds, probably for minutes, he stood rooted to the ground, motionless, hardly breathing. He stared as though he saw a vision. The animal’s head was lowered, but turned obliquely somewhat, so that the eyes, placed sideways in its great head, could see him properly; its immense proboscis hung as though stuffed upon an English wall; he saw the fore-feet planted wide apart, the slope of the enormous shoulders dropping back towards the fine hind-quarters and lean flanks. It was a magnificent bull. The horns and head justified his wildest expectations, they were superb, a record specimen, and a phrase — where had he heard it? — ran vaguely, as from far distance, through his mind: “the biggest moose in the world.”

There was the extraordinary fact, however, that he did not shoot; nor feel the wish to shoot. The familiar instinct, so strong hitherto in his blood, made no sign; the desire to kill apparently had left him. To raise his rifle, aim and fire had become suddenly an absolute impossibility.

He did not move. The animal and the human stared into each other’s eyes for a length of time whose interval he could not measure. Then came a soft noise close beside him: the rifle had slipped from his grasp and fallen with a thud into the mossy earth at his feet. And the moose, for the first time now, was moving. With slow, easy stride, its great weight causing a squelching sound as the feet drew out of the moist ground, it came towards him, the bulk of the shoulders giving it an appearance of swaying like a ship at sea. It reached his side, it almost touched him, the magnificent head bent low, the spread of the gigantic horns lay beneath his very eyes. He could have patted, stroked it. He saw, with a touch of pity, that blood trickled from a sore in its left shoulder, matting the thick hair. It sniffed the fallen rifle.

Then, lifting its head and shoulders again, it sniffed the air, this time with an audible sound that shook from Grimwood’s mind the last possibility that he witnessed a vision or dreamed a dream. One moment it gazed into his face, its big brown eyes shining and unafraid, then turned abruptly, and swung away at a speed ever rapidly increasing across the park-like spaces till it was lost finally among the dark tangle of undergrowth beyond. And the Englishman’s muscles turned to paper, his paralysis passed, his legs refused to support his weight, and he sank heavily to the ground....

3

It seems he slept, slept long and heavily; he sat up, stretched himself, yawned and rubbed his eyes. The sun had moved across the sky, for the shadows, he saw, now ran from west to east, and they were long shadows. He had slept evidently for hours, and evening was drawing in. He was aware that he felt hungry. In his pouchlike pockets, he had dried meat, sugar, matches, tea, and the little billy that never left him. He would make a fire, boil some tea and eat.

But he took no steps to carry out his purpose, he felt disinclined to move, he sat thinking, thinking.... What was he thinking about? He did not know, he could not say exactly; it was more like fugitive pictures that passed across his mind. Who, and where, was he? This was the Valley of the Beasts, that he knew; he felt sure of nothing else. How long had he been here, and where had he come from, and why? The questions did not linger for their answers, almost as though his interest in them was merely automatic. He felt happy, peaceful, unafraid.

He looked about him, and the spell of this virgin forest came upon him like a charm; only the sound of falling water, the murmur of wind sighing among innumerable branches, broke the enveloping silence. Overhead, beyond the crests of the towering trees, a cloudless evening sky was paling into transparent orange, opal, mother of pearl. He saw buzzards soaring lazily. A scarlet tanager flashed by. Soon would the owls begin to call and the darkness fall like a sweet black veil and hide all detail, while the stars sparkled in their countless thousands....

A glint of something that shone upon the ground caught his eye — a smooth, polished strip of rounded metal: his rifle. And he started to his feet impulsively, yet not knowing exactly what he meant to do. At the sight of the weapon, something had leaped to life in him, then faded out, died down, and was gone again.

"I'm — I'm — —" he began muttering to himself, but could not finish what he was about to say. His name had disappeared completely. "I'm in the Valley of the Beasts," he repeated in place of what he sought but could not find.

This fact, that he was in the Valley of the Beasts, seemed the only positive item of knowledge that he had. About the name something known and familiar clung, though the sequence that led up to it he could not trace. Presently, nevertheless, he rose to his feet, advanced a few steps, stooped and picked up the shining metal thing, his rifle. He examined it a moment, a feeling of dread and loathing rising in him, a sensation of almost horror that made him tremble, then, with a convulsive movement that betrayed an intense reaction of some sort he could not comprehend, he flung the thing far from him into the foaming torrent. He saw the splash it made, he also saw that same instant a large grizzly bear swing heavily along the bank not a dozen yards from where he stood. It, too, heard the splash, for it started, turned, paused a second, then changed its direction and came towards him. It came up close. Its fur brushed his body. It examined him leisurely, as the moose had done, sniffed, half rose upon its terrible hind legs, opened its mouth so that red tongue and gleaming teeth were plainly visible, then flopped back upon all fours again with a deep growling that yet had no anger in it, and swung off at a quick trot back to the bank of the torrent. He had felt its hot breath upon his face, but he had felt no fear. The monster was puzzled but not hostile. It disappeared.

“They know not — —” he sought for the word “man,” but could not find it. “They have never been hunted.”

The words ran through his mind, if perhaps he was not entirely certain of their meaning; they rose, as it were, automatically; a familiar sound lay in them somewhere. At the same time there rose feelings in him that were equally, though in another way, familiar and quite natural, feelings he had once known intimately but long since laid aside.

What were they? What was their origin? They seemed distant as the stars, yet were actually in his body, in his blood and nerves, part and parcel of his flesh. Long, long ago.... Oh, how long, how long?

Thinking was difficult; feeling was what he most easily and naturally managed. He could not think for long; feeling rose up and drowned the effort quickly.

That huge and awful bear — not a nerve, not a muscle quivered in him as its acrid smell rose to his nostrils, its fur brushed down his legs. Yet he was aware that somewhere there was danger, though not here. Somewhere there was attack, hostility, wicked and calculated plans against him — as against that splendid, roaming animal that had sniffed, examined, then gone its own way, satisfied. Yes, active attack, hostility and careful, cruel plans against his safety, but — not here. Here he was safe, secure, at peace; here he was happy; here he could roam at will, no eye cast sideways into forest depths, no ear pricked high to catch sounds not explained, no nostrils quivering to scent alarm. He felt this, but he did not think it. He felt hungry, thirsty too.

Something prompted him now at last to act. His billy lay at his feet, and he picked it up; the matches — he carried them in a metal case whose screw top kept out all moisture — were in his hand. Gathering a few dry twigs, he stooped to light them, then suddenly drew back with the first touch of fear he had yet known.

Fire! What *was* fire? The idea was repugnant to him, it was impossible, he was afraid of fire. He flung the metal case after the rifle and saw it gleam in the last rays of sunset, then sink with a little splash beneath the water. Glancing down at his billy, he realized next that he could not make use of it either, nor of the dark dry dusty stuff he had meant to boil in water. He felt no repugnance, certainly no fear, in connexion with these things, only he could not handle them, he did not need them, he had forgotten, yes, "forgotten," what they meant exactly. This strange forgetfulness was increasing in him rapidly, becoming more and more complete with every minute. Yet his thirst must be quenched.

The next moment he found himself at the water's edge; he stooped to fill his billy; paused, hesitated, examined the rushing water, then abruptly moved a few feet higher up the stream, leaving the metal can behind him. His handling of it had been oddly clumsy, his gestures awkward, even unnatural. He now flung himself down with an easy, simple motion of his entire body, lowered his face to a quiet pool he had found, and drank his fill of the cool, refreshing liquid. But, though unaware of the fact, he did not drink. He lapped.

Then, crouching where he was, he ate the meat and sugar from his pockets, lapped more water, moved back a short distance again into the dry ground beneath the trees, but moved this time without rising to his feet, curled his body into a comfortable position and closed his eyes again to sleep.... No single question now raised its head in him. He felt contentment, satisfaction only....

He stirred, shook himself, opened half an eye and saw, as he had felt already in slumber, that he was not alone. In the park-like spaces in front of him, as in the shadowed fringe of the trees at his back, there was sound and movement, the sound of stealthy feet, the movement of innumerable dark bodies. There was the pad and tread of animals, the stir of backs, of smooth and shaggy beasts, in countless numbers. Upon this host fell the light of a half moon sailing high in a cloudless sky; the gleam of stars, sparkling in the clear night air like diamonds, shone reflected in hundreds of ever-shifting eyes, most of them but a few feet above the ground. The whole valley was alive.

He sat upon his haunches, staring, staring, but staring in wonder, not in fear, though the foremost of the great host were so near that he could have stretched an arm and touched them. It was an ever-moving, ever-shifting throng he gazed at, spell-bound, in the pale light of moon and stars, now fading slowly towards the approaching dawn. And the smell of the forest itself was not sweeter to him in that moment than the mingled perfume, raw, pungent, acrid, of this furry host of beautiful wild animals that moved like a sea, with a strange murmuring, too, like sea, as the myriad feet and bodies passed to and fro together. Nor was the gleam of the starry, phosphorescent eyes less pleasantly friendly than those happy lamps that light home-lost wanderers to cosy rooms and safety. Through the wild army, in a word, poured to him the deep comfort of the entire valley, a comfort which held both the sweetness of invitation and the welcome of some magical home-coming.

No thoughts came to him, but feeling rose in a tide of wonder and acceptance. He was in his rightful place. His nature had come home. There was this dim, vague consciousness in him that after long, futile straying in another place where uncongenial conditions had forced him to be unnatural and therefore terrible, he had returned at last where he belonged. Here, in the Valley of the Beasts, he had found peace, security and happiness. He would be — he was at last — himself.

It was a marvellous, even a magical, scene he watched, his nerves at highest tension yet quite steady, his senses exquisitely alert, yet no uneasiness in the full, accurate reports they furnished. Strong as some deep flood-tide, yet dim, as with untold time and distance, rose over him the spell of long-forgotten memory of a state where he was content and happy, where he was natural. The outlines, as it were, of mighty, primitive pictures, flashed before him, yet were gone again before the detail was filled in.

He watched the great army of the animals, they were all about him now; he crouched upon his haunches in the centre of an ever-moving circle of wild forest life. Great timber wolves he saw pass to and fro, loping past him with long stride and graceful swing; their red tongues lolling out; they swarmed in hundreds. Behind, yet mingling freely with them, rolled the huge grizzlies, not clumsy as their uncouth bodies promised, but swiftly, lightly, easily, their half tumbling gait masking agility and speed. They gambolled, sometimes they rose and stood half upright, they were comely in their mass and power, they rolled past him so close that he could touch them. And the black bear and the brown went with them, bears beyond counting, monsters and little ones, a splendid multitude. Beyond them, yet only a little further back, where the park-like spaces made free movement easier, rose a sea of horns and antlers like a miniature forest in the silvery moonlight. The immense tribe of deer gathered in vast throngs beneath the starlit sky. Moose and caribou, he saw, the mighty wapiti, and the smaller deer in their crowding thousands. He heard the sound of meeting horns, the tread of innumerable hoofs, the occasional pawing of the ground as the bigger creatures manœuvred for more space about them. A wolf, he saw, was licking gently at the shoulder of a great bull-moose that had been injured. And the tide receded, advanced again, once more receded, rising and falling like a living sea whose waves were animal shapes, the inhabitants of the Valley of the Beasts.

Beneath the quiet moonlight they swayed to and fro before him. They watched him, knew him, recognized him. They made him welcome.

He was aware, moreover, of a world of smaller life that formed an under-sea, as it were, numerous under-currents rather, running in and out between the great upright legs of the larger creatures. These, though he could not see them clearly, covered the earth, he was aware, in enormous numbers, darting hither and thither, now hiding, now reappearing, too intent upon their busy purposes to pay him attention like their huger comrades, yet ever and anon tumbling against his back, cannoning from his sides, scampering across his legs even, then gone again with a scuttering sound of rapid little feet, and rushing back into the general host beyond. And with this smaller world also he felt at home.

How long he sat gazing, happy in himself, secure, satisfied, contented, natural, he could not say, but it was long enough for the desire to mingle with what he saw, to know closer contact, to become one with them all — long enough for this deep blind desire to assert itself, so that at length he began to move from his mossy seat towards them, to move, moreover, as they moved, and not upright on two feet.

The moon was lower now, just sinking behind a towering cedar whose ragged crest broke its light into silvery spray. The stars were a little paler too. A line of faint red was visible beyond the heights at the valley's eastern end.

He paused and looked about him, as he advanced slowly, aware that the host already made an opening in their ranks and that the bear even nosed the earth in front, as though to show the way that was easiest for him to follow. Then, suddenly, a lynx leaped past him into the low branches of a hemlock, and he lifted his head to admire its perfect poise. He saw in the same instant the arrival of the birds, the army of the eagles, hawks and buzzards, birds of prey — the awakening flight that just precedes the dawn. He saw the flocks and streaming lines, hiding the whitening stars a moment as they passed with a prodigious whirr of wings. There came the hooting of an owl from the tree immediately overhead where the lynx now crouched, but not maliciously, along its branch.

He started. He half rose to an upright position. He knew not why he did so, knew not exactly why he started. But in the attempt to find his new, and, as it now seemed, his unaccustomed balance, one hand fell against his side and came in contact with a hard straight thing that projected awkwardly from his clothing. He pulled it out, feeling it all over with his fingers. It was a little stick. He raised it nearer to his eyes, examined it in the light of dawn now growing swiftly, remembered, or half remembered what it was — and stood stock still.

"The totem stick," he mumbled to himself, yet audibly, finding his speech, and finding another thing — a glint of peering memory — for the first time since entering the valley.

A shock like fire ran through his body; he straightened himself, aware that a moment before he had been crawling upon his hands and knees; it seemed that something broke in his brain, lifting a veil, flinging a shutter free. And Memory peered dreadfully through the widening gap.

"I'm — I'm Grimwood," his voice uttered, though below his breath. "Tooshalli's left me. I'm alone...!"

He was aware of a sudden change in the animals surrounding him. A big, grey wolf sat three feet away, glaring into his face; at its side an enormous grizzly swayed itself from one foot to the other; behind it, as if looking over its shoulder, loomed a gigantic wapiti, its horns merged in the shadows of the drooping cedar boughs. But the northern dawn was nearer, the sun already close to the horizon. He saw details with sharp distinctness now. The great bear rose, balancing a moment on its massive hind-quarters, then took a step towards him, its front paws spread like arms. Its wicked head lolled horribly, as a huge bull-moose, lowering its horns as if about to charge, came up with a couple of long strides and joined it. A sudden excitement ran quivering over the entire host; the distant ranks moved in a new, unpleasant way; a thousand heads were lifted, ears were pricked, a forest of ugly muzzles pointed up to the wind.

And the Englishman, beside himself suddenly with a sense of ultimate terror that saw no possible escape, stiffened and stood rigid. The horror of his position petrified him. Motionless and silent he faced the awful army of his enemies, while the white light of breaking day added fresh ghastliness to the scene which was the setting for his cruel death in the Valley of the Beasts.

Above him crouched the hideous lynx, ready to spring the instant he sought safety in the tree; above it again, he was aware of a thousand talons of steel, fierce hooked beaks of iron, and the angry beating of prodigious wings.

He reeled, for the grizzly touched his body with its outstretched paw; the wolf crouched just before its deadly spring; in another second he would have been torn to pieces, crushed, devoured, when terror, operating naturally as ever, released the muscles of his throat and tongue. He shouted with what he believed was his last breath on earth. He called aloud in his frenzy. It was a prayer to whatever gods there be, it was an anguished cry for help to heaven.

“Ishtot! Great Ishtot, help me!” his voice rang out, while his hand still clutched the forgotten totem stick.

And the Red Heaven heard him.

Grimwood that same instant was aware of a presence that, but for his terror of the beasts, must have frightened him into sheer unconsciousness. A gigantic Red Indian stood before him. Yet, while the figure rose close in front of him, causing the birds to settle and the wild animals to crouch quietly where they stood, it rose also from a great distance, for it seemed to fill the entire valley with its influence, its power, its amazing majesty. In some way, moreover, that he could not understand, its vast appearance included the actual valley itself with all its trees, its running streams, its open spaces and its rocky bluffs. These marked its outline, as it were, the outline of a superhuman shape. There was a mighty bow, there was a quiver of enormous arrows, there was this Redskin figure to whom they belonged.

Yet the appearance, the outline, the face and figure too — these *were* the valley; and when the voice became audible, it was the valley itself that uttered the appalling words. It was the voice of trees and wind, and of running, falling water that woke the echoes in the Valley of the Beasts, as, in that same moment, the sun topped the ridge and filled the scene, the outline of the majestic figure too, with a flood of dazzling light:

“You have shed blood in this my valley.... *I will not save...*!”

The figure melted away into the sunlit forest, merging with the new-born day. But Grimwood saw close against his face the shining teeth, hot fetid breath passed over his cheeks, a power enveloped his whole body as though a mountain crushed him. He closed his eyes. He fell. A sharp, crackling sound passed through his brain, but already unconscious, he did not hear it.

His eyes opened again, and the first thing they took in was — fire. He shrank back instinctively.

“It’s all right, old man. We’ll bring you round. Nothing to be frightened about.” He saw the face of Iredale looking down into his own. Behind Iredale stood Tooshalli. His face was swollen. Grimwood remembered the blow. The big man began to cry.

“Painful still, is it?” Iredale said sympathetically. “Here, swallow a little more of this. It’ll set you right in no time.”

Grimwood gulped down the spirit. He made a violent effort to control himself, but was unable to keep the tears back. He felt no pain. It was his heart that ached, though why or wherefore, he had no idea.

“I’m all to pieces,” he mumbled, ashamed yet somehow not ashamed. “My nerves are rotten. What’s happened?” There was as yet no memory in him.

"You've been hugged by a bear, old man. But no bones broken. Tooshalli saved you. He fired in the nick of time — a brave shot, for he might easily have hit you instead of the brute."

"The other brute," whispered Grimwood, as the whisky worked in him and memory came slowly back.

"Where are we?" he asked presently, looking about him.

He saw a lake, canoes drawn up on the shore, two tents, and figures moving. Iredale explained matters briefly, then left him to sleep a bit. Tooshalli, it appeared, travelling without rest, had reached Iredale's camping ground twenty-four hours after leaving his employer. He found it deserted, Iredale and his Indian being on the hunt. When they returned at nightfall, he had explained his presence in his brief native fashion: "He struck me and I quit. He hunt now alone in Ishtot's Valley of the Beasts. He is dead, I think. I come to tell you."

Iredale and his guide, with Tooshalli as leader, started off then and there, but Grimwood had covered a considerable distance, though leaving an easy track to follow. It was the moose tracks and the blood that chiefly guided them. They came up with him suddenly enough — in the grip of an enormous bear.

It was Tooshalli that fired.

The Indian lives now in easy circumstances, all his needs cared for, while Grimwood, his benefactor but no longer his employer, has given up hunting. He is a quiet, easy-tempered, almost gentle sort of fellow, and people wonder rather why he hasn't married. "Just the fellow to make a good father," is what they say; "so kind, good-natured and affectionate." Among his pipes, in a glass case over the mantlepiece, hangs a totem stick. He declares it saved his soul, but what he means by the expression he has never quite explained.

VII

THE CALL

THE INCIDENT — story it never was, perhaps — began tamely, almost meanly; it ended upon a note of strange, unearthly wonder that has haunted him ever since. In Headley's memory, at any rate, it stands out as the loveliest, the most amazing thing he ever witnessed. Other emotions, too, contributed to the vividness of the picture. That he had felt jealousy towards his old pal, Arthur Deane, shocked him in the first place; it seemed impossible until it actually happened. But that the jealousy was proved afterwards to have been without a cause shocked him still more. He felt ashamed and miserable.

For him, the actual incident began when he received a note from Mrs. Blondin asking him to the Priory for a week-end, or for longer, if he could manage it.

Captain Arthur Deane, she mentioned, was staying with her at the moment, and a warm welcome awaited him. Iris she did not mention — Iris Manning, the interesting and beautiful girl for whom it was well known he had a considerable weakness. He found a good-sized house party; there was fishing in the little Sussex river, tennis, golf not far away, while two motor cars brought the remoter country across the downs into easy reach. Also there was a bit of duck shooting for those who cared to wake at 3 a. m. and paddle up-stream to the marshes where the birds were feeding.

“Have you brought your gun?” was the first thing Arthur said to him when he arrived. “Like a fool, I left mine in town.”

“I hope you haven't,” put in Miss Manning; “because if you have I must get up one fine morning at three o'clock.” She laughed merrily, and there was an undernote of excitement in the laugh.

Captain Headley showed his surprise. “That you were a Diana had escaped my notice, I'm ashamed to say,” he replied lightly. “Yet I've known you some years, haven't I?” He looked straight at her, and the soft yet searching eye, turning from his friend, met his own securely. She was appraising him, for the hundreth time, and he, for the hundreth time, was thinking how pretty she was, and wondering how long the prettiness would last after marriage.

“I’m not,” he heard her answer. “That’s just it. But I’ve promised.”

“Rather!” said Arthur gallantly. “And I shall hold you to it,” he added still more gallantly — too gallantly, Headley thought. “I couldn’t possibly get up at cockcrow without a very special inducement, could I, now? You know me, Dick!”

“Well, anyhow, I’ve brought my gun,” Headley replied evasively, “so you’ve no excuse, either of you. You’ll have to go.” And while they were laughing and chattering about it, Mrs. Blondin clinched the matter for them. Provisions were hard to come by; the larder really needed a brace or two of birds; it was the least they could do in return for what she called amusingly her “Armistice hospitality.”

“So I expect you to get up at three,” she chaffed them, “and return with your Victory birds.”

It was from this preliminary skirmish over the tea-table on the law five minutes after his arrival that Dick Headley realized easily enough the little game in progress. As a man of experience, just on the wrong side of forty, it was not difficult to see the cards each held. He sighed. Had he guessed an intrigue was on foot he would not have come, yet he might have known that wherever his hostess was, there were the vultures gathered together. Matchmaker by choice and instinct, Mrs. Blondin could not help herself. True to her name, she was always balancing on matrimonial tightropes — for others.

Her cards, at any rate, were obvious enough; she had laid them on the table for him. He easily read her hand. The next twenty-four hours confirmed this reading. Having made up her mind that Iris and Arthur were destined for each other, she had grown impatient; they had been ten days together, yet Iris was still free. They were good friends only. With calculation, she, therefore, took a step that must bring things further. She invited Dick Headley, whose weakness for the girl was common knowledge. The card was indicated; she played it. Arthur must come to the point or see another man carry her off. This, at least, she planned, little dreaming that the dark King of Spades would interfere.

Miss Manning's hand also was fairly obvious, for both men were extremely eligible *partis*. She was getting on; one or other was to become her husband before the party broke up. This, in crude language, was certainly in her cards, though, being a nice and charming girl, she might camouflage it cleverly to herself and others. Her eyes, on each man in turn when the shooting expedition was being discussed, revealed her part in the little intrigue clearly enough. It was all, thus far, as commonplace as could be.

But there were two more hands Headley had to read — his own and his friend's; and these, he admitted honestly, were not so easy. To take his own first. It was true he was fond of the girl and had often tried to make up his mind to ask her. Without being conceited, he had good reason to believe his affection was returned and that she would accept him. There was no ecstatic love on either side, for he was no longer a boy of twenty, nor was she unscathed by tempestuous love affairs that had scorched the first bloom from her face and heart. But they understood one another; they were an honest couple; she was tired of flirting; both wanted to marry and settle down. Unless a better man turned up she probably would say "Yes" without humbug or delay. It was this last reflection that brought him to the final hand he had to read.

Here he was puzzled. Arthur Deane's rôle in the teacup strategy, for the first time since they had known one another, seemed strange, uncertain. Why? Because, though paying no attention to the girl openly, he met her clandestinely, unknown to the rest of the house-party, and above all without telling his intimate pal — at three o'clock in the morning.

The house-party was in full swing, with a touch of that wild, reckless gaiety which followed the end of the war: "Let us be happy before a worse thing comes upon us," was in many hearts. After a crowded day they danced till early in the morning, while doubtful weather prevented the early shooting expedition after duck. The third night Headley contrived to disappear early to bed. He lay there thinking. He was puzzled over his friend's rôle, over the clandestine meeting in particular. It was the morning before, waking very early, he had been drawn to the window by an unusual sound — the cry of a bird. Was it a bird? In all his experience he had never heard such a curious, half-singing call before. He listened a moment, thinking it must have been a dream, yet with the odd cry still ringing in his ears. It was repeated close beneath his open window, a long, low-pitched cry with three distinct following notes in it.

He sat up in bed and listened hard. No bird that he knew could make such sounds. But it was not repeated a third time, and out of sheer curiosity he went to the window and looked out. Dawn was creeping over the distant downs; he saw their outline in the grey pearly light; he saw the lawn below, stretching down to the little river at the bottom, where a curtain of faint mist hung in the air. And on this lawn he also saw Arthur Deane — with Iris Manning.

Of course, he reflected, they were going after the duck. He turned to look at his watch; it was three o'clock. The same glance, however, showed him his gun standing in the corner. So they were going without a gun. A sharp pang of unexpected jealousy shot through him. He was just going to shout out something or other, wishing them good luck, or asking if they had found another gun, perhaps, when a cold touch crept down his spine. The same instant his heart contracted. Deane had followed the girl into the summer-house, which stood on the right. It was *not* the shooting expedition at all. Arthur was meeting her for another purpose. The blood flowed back, filling his head. He felt an eavesdropper, a sneak, a detective; but, for all that, he felt also jealous. And his jealousy seemed chiefly because Arthur had not told him.

Of this, then, he lay thinking in bed on the third night. The following day he had said nothing, but had crossed the corridor and put the gun in his friend's room. Arthur, for his part, had said nothing either. For the first time in their long, long friendship, there lay a secret between them. To Headley the unexpected revelation came with pain.

For something like a quarter of a century these two had been bosom friends; they had camped together, been in the army together, taken their pleasure together, each the full confidant of the other in all the things that go to make up men's lives. Above all, Headley had been the one and only recipient of Arthur's unhappy love story. He knew the girl, knew his friend's deep passion, and also knew his terrible pain when she was lost at sea. Arthur was burnt out, finished, out of the running, so far as marriage was concerned. He was not a man to love a second time. It was a great and poignant tragedy. Headley, as confidant, knew all. But more than that —

Arthur, on his side, knew his friend's weakness for Iris Manning, knew that a marriage was still possible and likely between them. They were true as steel to one another, and each man, oddly enough, had once saved the other's life, thus adding to the strength of a great natural tie.

Yet now one of them, feigning innocence by day, even indifference, secretly met his friend's girl by night, and kept the matter to himself. It seemed incredible. With his own eyes Headley had seen him on the lawn, passing in the faint grey light through the mist into the summer-house, where the girl had just preceded him. He had not seen her face, but he had seen the skirt sweep round the corner of the wooden pillar. He had not waited to see them come out again.

So he now lay wondering what rôle his old friend was playing in this little intrigue that their hostess, Mrs. Blondin, helped to stage. And, oddly enough, one minor detail stayed in his mind with a curious vividness. As naturalist, hunter, nature-lover, the cry of that strange bird, with its three mournful notes, perplexed him exceedingly.

A knock came at his door, and the door pushed open before he had time to answer. Deane himself came in.

"Wise man," he exclaimed in an easy tone, "got off to bed. Iris was asking where you were." He sat down on the edge of the mattress, where Headley was lying with a cigarette and an open book he had not read. The old sense of intimacy and comradeship rose in the latter's heart. Doubt and suspicion faded. He prized his great friendship. He met the familiar eyes. "Impossible," he said to himself, "absolutely impossible! He's not playing a game; he's not a rotter!" He pushed over his cigarette case, and Arthur lighted one.

"Done in," he remarked shortly, with the first puff. "Can't stand it any more. I'm off to town to-morrow."

Headley stared in amazement. "Fed up already?" he asked. "Why, I rather like it. It's quite amusing. What's wrong, old man?"

"This match-making," said Deane bluntly. "Always throwing that girl at my head. If it's not the duck-shooting stunt at 3 a. m., it's something else. She doesn't care for me and I don't care for her. Besides — —"

He stopped, and the expression of his face changed suddenly. A sad, quiet look of tender yearning came into his clear brown eyes.

"*You* know, Dick," he went on in a low, half-reverent tone. "I don't want to marry. I never can."

Dick's heart stirred within him. "Mary," he said, understandingly.

The other nodded, as though the memories were still too much for him. "I'm still miserably lonely for her," he said. "Can't help it simply. I feel utterly lost without her. Her memory to me is everything." He looked deep into his pal's eyes. "I'm married to that," he added very firmly.

They pulled their cigarettes a moment in silence. They belonged to the male type that conceals emotion behind schoolboy language.

"It's hard luck," said Headley gently, "rotten luck, old man, I understand." Arthur's head nodded several times in succession as he smoked. He made no remark for some minutes. Then presently he said, as though it had no particular importance — for thus old friends show frankness to each other — "Besides, anyhow, it's you the girl's dying for, not me. She's blind as a bat, old Blondin. Even when I'm with her — thrust with her by that old matchmaker for my sins — it's you she talks about. All the talk leads up to you and yours. She's devilish fond of you." He paused a moment and looked searchingly into his friend's face. "I say, old man — are you — I mean, do you mean business there? Because — excuse me interfering — but you'd better be careful. She's a good sort, you know, after all."

"Yes, Arthur, I do like her a bit," Dick told him frankly. "But I can't make up my mind quite. You see, it's like this — —"

And they talked the matter over as old friends will, until finally Arthur chucked his cigarette into the grate and got up to go. "Dead to the world," he said, with a yawn. "I'm off to bed. Give you a chance, too," he added with a laugh. It was after midnight.

The other turned, as though something had suddenly occurred to him.

"By the bye, Arthur," he said abruptly, "what bird makes this sound? I heard it the other morning. Most extraordinary cry. You know everything that flies. What is it?" And, to the best of his ability, he imitated the strange three-note cry he had heard in the dawn two mornings before.

To his amazement and keen distress, his friend, with a sound like a stifled groan, sat down upon the bed without a word. He seemed startled. His face was white. He stared. He passed a hand, as in pain, across his forehead.

"Do it again," he whispered, in a hushed, nervous voice. "Once again — for me."

And Headley, looking at him, repeated the queer notes, a sudden revulsion of feeling rising through him. "He's fooling me after all," ran in his heart, "my old, old pal — —"

There was silence for a full minute. Then Arthur, stammering a bit, said lamely, a certain hush in his voice still: "Where in the world did you hear that — and *when?"*

Dick Headley sat up in bed. He was not going to lose this friendship, which, to him, was more than the love of woman. He must help. His pal was in distress and difficulty. There were circumstances, he realized, that might be too strong for the best man in the world — sometimes. No, by God, he would play the game and help him out!

"Arthur, old chap," he said affectionately, almost tenderly. "I heard it two mornings ago — on the lawn below my window here. It woke me up. I — I went to look. Three in the morning, about."

Arthur amazed him then. He first took another cigarette and lit it steadily. He looked round the room vaguely, avoiding, it seemed, the other's eyes. Then he turned, pain in his face, and gazed straight at him.

"You saw — nothing?" he asked in a louder voice, but a voice that had something very real and true in it. It reminded Headley of the voice he heard when he was fainting from exhaustion, and Arthur had said, "Take it, I tell you. I'm all right," and had passed over the flask, though his own throat and sight and heart were black with thirst. It was a voice that had command in it, a voice that did not lie because it could not — yet did lie and could lie — when occasion warranted.

Headley knew a second's awful struggle.

"Nothing," he answered quietly, after his little pause. "Why?"

For perhaps two minutes his friend hid his face. Then he looked up.

“Only,” he whispered, “because that was our secret lover’s cry. It seems so strange you heard it and not I. I’ve felt her so close of late — Mary!”

The white face held very steady, the firm lips did not tremble, but it was evident that the heart knew anguish that was deep and poignant. “We used it to call each other — in the old days. It was our private call. No one else in the world knew it but Mary and myself.”

Dick Headley was flabbergasted. He had no time to think, however.

“It’s odd you should hear it and not I,” his friend repeated. He looked hurt, bewildered, wounded. Then suddenly his face brightened. “I know,” he cried suddenly. “You and I are pretty good pals. There’s a tie between us and all that. Why, it’s tel — telepathy, or whatever they call it. That’s what it is.”

He got up abruptly. Dick could think of nothing to say but to repeat the other’s words. “Of course, of course. That’s it,” he said, “telepathy.” He stared — anywhere but at his pal.

“Night, night!” he heard from the door, and before he could do more than reply in similar vein Arthur was gone.

He lay for a long time, thinking, thinking. He found it all very strange. Arthur in this emotional state was new to him. He turned it over and over. Well, he had known good men behave queerly when wrought up. That recognition of the bird’s cry was strange, of course, but — he knew the cry of a bird when he heard it, though he might not know the actual bird. That was no human whistle. Arthur was — inventing. No, that was not possible. He was worked up, then, over something, a bit hysterical perhaps. It had happened before, though in a milder way, when his heart attacks came on. They affected his nerves and head a little, it seemed. He was a deep sort, Dick remembered. Thought turned and twisted in him, offering various solutions, some absurd, some likely. He was a nervous, high-strung fellow underneath, Arthur was. He remembered that. Also he remembered, anxiously again, that his heart was not quite sound, though what that had to do with the present tangle he did not see.

Yet it was hardly likely that he would bring in Mary as an invention, an excuse — Mary, the most sacred memory in his life, the deepest, truest, best. He had sworn, anyhow, that Iris Manning meant nothing to him.

Through all his speculations, behind every thought, ran this horrid working jealousy. It poisoned him. It twisted truth. It moved like a wicked snake through mind and heart. Arthur, gripped by his new, absorbing love for Iris Manning, lied. He couldn't believe it, he didn't believe it, he wouldn't believe it — yet jealousy persisted in keeping the idea alive in him. It was a dreadful thought. He fell asleep on it.

But his sleep was uneasy with feverish, unpleasant dreams that rambled on in fragments without coming to conclusion. Then, suddenly, the cry of the strange bird came into his dream. He started, turned over, woke up. The cry still continued. It was not a dream. He jumped out of bed.

The room was grey with early morning, the air fresh and a little chill. The cry came floating over the lawn as before. He looked out, pain clutching at his heart. Two figures stood below, a man and a girl, and the man was Arthur Deane. Yet the light was so dim, the morning being overcast, that had he not expected to see his friend, he would scarcely have recognized the familiar form in that shadowy outline that stood close beside the girl. Nor could he, perhaps, have recognized Iris Manning. Their backs were to him. They moved away, disappearing again into the little summer-house, and this time — he saw it beyond question — the two were hand in hand. Vague and uncertain as the figures were in the early twilight, he was sure of that.

The first disagreeable sensation of surprise, disgust, anger that sickened him turned quickly, however, into one of another kind altogether. A curious feeling of superstitious dread crept over him, and a shiver ran again along his nerves.

“Hallo, Arthur!” he called from the window. There was no answer. His voice was certainly audible in the summer-house. But no one came. He repeated the call a little louder, waited in vain for thirty seconds, then came, the same moment, to a decision that even surprised himself, for the truth we he could no longer bear the suspense of waiting. He must see his friend at once and have it out with him. He turned and went deliberately down the corridor to Deane's bedroom. He would wait there for his return and know the truth from his own lips. But also another thought had come — the gun. He had quite forgotten it — the safety-catch was out of order. He had not warned him.

He found the door closed but not locked; opening it cautiously, he went in.

But the unexpectedness of what he saw gave him a genuine shock. He could hardly suppress a cry. Everything in the room was neat and orderly, no sign of disturbance anywhere, and it was not empty. There, in bed, before his very eyes, was Arthur. The clothes were turned back a little; he saw the pyjamas open at the throat; he lay sound asleep, deeply, peacefully asleep.

So surprised, indeed, was Headley that, after staring a moment, almost unable to believe his sight, he then put out a hand and touched him gently, cautiously on the forehead. But Arthur did not stir or wake; his breathing remained deep and regular. He lay sleeping like a baby.

Headley glanced round the room, noticed the gun in the corner where he himself had put it the day before, and then went out, closing the door behind him softly.

Arthur Deane, however, did not leave for London as he had intended, because he felt unwell and kept to his room upstairs. It was only a slight attack, apparently, but he must lie quiet. There was no need to send for a doctor; he knew just what to do; these passing attacks were common enough. He would be up and about again very shortly. Headley kept him company, saying no single word of what had happened. He read aloud to him, chatted and cheered him up. He had no other visitors. Within twenty-four hours he was himself once more. He and his friend had planned to leave the following day.

But Headley, that last night in the house, felt an odd uneasiness and could not sleep. All night long he sat up reading, looking out of the window, smoking in a chair where he could see the stars and hear the wind and watch the huge shadow of the downs. The house lay very still as the hours passed. He dozed once or twice. Why did he sit up in this unnecessary way? Why did he leave his door ajar so that the slightest sound of another door opening, or of steps passing along the corridor, must reach him? Was he anxious for his friend? Was he suspicious? What was his motive, what his secret purpose?

Headley did not know, and could not even explain it to himself. He felt uneasy, that was all he knew. Not for worlds would he have let himself go to sleep or lose full consciousness that night. It was very odd; he could not understand himself. He merely obeyed a strange, deep instinct that bade him wait and watch. His nerves were jumpy; in his heart lay some unexplicable anxiety that was pain.

The dawn came slowly; the stars faded one by one; the line of the downs showed their grand bare curves against the sky; cool and cloudless the September morning broke above the little Sussex pleasure house. He sat and watched the east grow bright. The early wind brought a scent of marshes and the sea into his room. Then suddenly it brought a sound as well — the haunting cry of the bird with its three following notes. And this time there came an answer.

Headley knew then why he had sat up. A wave of emotion swept him as he heard — an emotion he could not attempt to explain. Dread, wonder, longing seized him. For some seconds he could not leave his chair because he did not dare to. The low-pitched cries of call and answer rang in his ears like some unearthly music. With an effort he started up, went to the window and looked out.

This time the light was sharp and clear. No mist hung in the air. He saw the crimsoning sky reflected like a band of shining metal in the reach of river beyond the lawn. He saw dew on the grass, a sheet of pallid silver. He saw the summer-house, empty of any passing figures. For this time the two figures stood plainly in view before his eyes upon the lawn. They stood there, hand in hand, sharply defined, unmistakable in form and outline, their faces, moreover, turned upwards to the window where he stood, staring down in pain and amazement at them — at Arthur Deane and *Mary*.

They looked into his eyes. He tried to call, but no sound left his throat. They began to move across the dew-soaked lawn. They went, he saw, with a floating, undulating motion towards the river shining in the dawn. Their feet left no marks upon the grass. They reached the bank, but did not pause in their going. They rose a little, floating like silent birds across the river. Turning in mid-stream, they smiled towards him, waved their hands with a gesture of farewell, then, rising still higher into the opal dawn, their figures passed into the distance slowly, melting away against the sunlit marshes and the shadowing downs beyond. They disappeared.

Headley never quite remembers actually leaving the window, crossing the room, or going down the passage. Perhaps he went at once, perhaps he stood gazing into the air above the downs for a considerable time, unable to tear himself away. He was in some marvellous dream, it seemed. The next thing he remembers, at any rate, was that he was standing beside his friend's bed, trying, in his distraught anguish of heart, to call him from that sleep which, on earth, knows no awakening.

VIII

EGYPTIAN SORCERY

1

SANFIELD PAUSED AS he was about to leave the Underground station at Victoria, and cursed the weather. When he left the City it was fine; now it was pouring with rain, and he had neither overcoat nor umbrella. Not a taxi was discoverable in the dripping gloom. He would get soaked before he reached his rooms in Sloane Street.

He stood for some minutes, thinking how vile London was in February, and how depressing life was in general. He stood also, in that moment, though he knew it not, upon the edge of a singular adventure. Looking back upon it in later years, he often remembered this particularly wretched moment of a pouring wet February evening, when everything seemed wrong, and Fate had loaded the dice against him, even in the matter of weather and umbrellas.

Fate, however, without betraying her presence, was watching him through the rain and murk; and Fate, that night, had strange, mysterious eyes. Fantastic cards lay up her sleeve. The rain, his weariness and depression, his physical fatigue especially, seemed the conditions she required before she played these curious cards. Something new and wonderful fluttered close. Romance flashed by him across the driving rain and touched his cheek. He was too exasperated to be aware of it.

Things had gone badly that day at the office, where he was junior partner in a small firm of engineers. Threatened trouble at the works had come to a head. A strike seemed imminent. To add to his annoyance, a new client, whose custom was of supreme importance, had just complained bitterly of the delay in the delivery of his machinery. The senior partners had left the matter in Sanfield’s hands; he had not succeeded. The angry customer swore he would hold the firm to its contract. They could deliver or pay up — whichever suited them. The junior partner had made a mess of things.

The final words on the telephone still rang in his ears as he stood sheltering under the arcade, watching the downpour, and wondering whether he should make a dash for it or wait on the chance of its clearing up — when a further blow was dealt him as the rain-soaked poster of an evening paper caught his eye: “Riots in Egypt. Heavy Fall in Egyptian Securities,” he read with blank dismay. Buying a paper he turned feverishly to the City article — to find his worst fears confirmed. Delta Lands, in which nearly all his small capital was invested, had declined a quarter on the news, and would evidently decline further still. The riots were going on in the towns nearest to their property. Banks had been looted, crops destroyed; the trouble was deep-seated.

So grave was the situation that mere weather seemed suddenly of no account at all. He walked home doggedly in the drenching rain, paying less attention to it than if it had been Scotch mist. The water streamed from his hat, dripped down his back and neck, splashed him with mud and grime from head to foot. He was soaked to the skin. He hardly noticed it. His capital had depreciated by half, at least, and possibly was altogether lost; his position at the office was insecure. How could mere weather matter?

Sitting, eventually, before his fire in dry clothes, after an apology for a dinner he had no heart to eat, he reviewed the situation. He faced a possible total loss of his private capital. Next, the position of his firm caused him grave uneasiness, since, apart from his own mishandling of the new customer, the threatened strike might ruin it completely; a long strain on its limited finances was out of the question. George Sanfield certainly saw things at their worst. He was now thirty-five. A fresh start — the mere idea of it made him shudder — occurred as a possibility in the near future. Vitality, indeed, was at a low ebb, it seemed. Mental depression, great physical fatigue, weariness of life in general made his spirits droop alarmingly, so that almost he felt tired of living. His tie with existence, at any rate, just then was dangerously weak.

Thought turned next to the man on whose advice he had staked his all in Delta Lands. Morris had important Egyptian interests in various big companies and enterprises along the Nile. He had first come to the firm with a letter of introduction upon some business matter, which the junior partner had handled so successfully that acquaintance thus formed had ripened into a more personal tie. The two men had much in common; their temperaments were suited; understanding grew between them; they felt at home and comfortable with one another. They became friends; they felt a mutual confidence. When Morris paid his rare visits to England, they spent much time together; and it was on one of these occasions that the matter of the Egyptian shares was mentioned, Morris urgently advising their purchase.

Sanfield explained his own position clearly enough, but his friend was so confident and optimistic that the purchase eventually had been made. There had been, moreover, Sanfield now remembered, the flavour of a peculiarly intimate and personal kind about the deal. He had remarked it, with a touch of surprise, at the moment, though really it seemed natural enough. Morris was very earnest, holding his friend's interest at heart; he was affectionate almost.

"I'd like to do you this good turn, old man," he said. "I have the strong feeling, somehow, that I owe you this, though heaven alone knows why!" After a pause he added, half shyly: "It may be one of those old memories we hear about nowadays cropping up out of some previous life together." Before the other could reply, he went on to explain that only three men were in the parent syndicate, the shares being unobtainable. "I'll set some of my own aside for you — four thousand or so, if you like."

They laughed together; Sanfield thanked him warmly; the deal was carried out. But the recipient of the favour had wondered a little at the sudden increase of intimacy even while he liked it and responded.

Had he been a fool, he now asked himself, to swallow the advice, putting all his eggs into a single basket? He knew very little about Morris after all.... Yet, while reflection showed him that the advice was honest, and the present riots no fault of the adviser's, he found his thoughts turning in a steady stream towards the man. The affairs of the firm took second place. It was Morris, with his deep-set eyes, his curious ways, his dark skin burnt brick-red by a fierce Eastern sun; it was Morris, looking almost like an Egyptian, who stood before him as he sat thinking gloomily over his dying fire.

He longed to talk with him, to ask him questions, to seek advice. He saw him very vividly against the screen of thought; Morris stood beside him now, gazing out across the limitless expanse of tawny sand. He had in his eyes the "distance" that sailors share with men whose life has been spent amid great trackless wastes. Morris, moreover, now he came to think of it, seemed always a little out of place in England. He had few relatives and, apparently, no friends; he was always intensely pleased when the time came to return to his beloved Nile. He had once mentioned casually a sister who kept house for him when duty detained him in Cairo, but, even here, he was something of an Oriental, rarely speaking of his women folk. Egypt, however, plainly drew him like a magnet. Resistance involved disturbance in his being, even ill-health. Egypt was "home" to him, and his friend, though he had never been there, felt himself its potent spell.

Another curious trait Sanfield remembered, too — his friend's childish superstition; his belief, or half-belief, in magic and the supernatural. Sanfield, amused, had ascribed it to the long sojourn in a land where anything unusual is at once ascribed to spiritual agencies. Morris owed his entire fortune, if his tale could be believed, to the magical apparition of an unearthly kind in some lonely *wadi* among the Bedouins. A sand-diviner had influenced another successful speculation.... He was a picturesque figure, whichever way one took him: yet a successful business man into the bargain.

These reflections and memories, on the other hand, brought small comfort to the man who had tempted Fate by following his advice. It was only a little strange how Morris now dominated his thoughts, directing them towards himself. Morris was in Egypt at the moment.

He went to bed at length, filled with uneasy misgivings, but for a long time he could not sleep. He tossed restlessly, his mind still running on the subject of his long reflections. He ached with tiredness. He dropped off at last. Then came a nightmare dream, in which the firm's works were sold for nearly nothing to an old Arab sheikh who wished to pay for them — in goats. He woke up in a cold perspiration. He had uneasy thoughts. His fancy was travelling. He could not rest.

To distract his mind, he turned on the light and tried to read, and, eventually, towards morning, fell into a sleep of sheer exhaustion. And his final thought — he knew not exactly why — was a sentence Morris had made use of long ago: "I feel I owe you a good turn; I'd like to do something for you...."

This was the memory in his mind as he slipped off into unconsciousness.

But what happens when the mind is unconscious and the tired body lies submerged in deep sleep, no man, they say, can really tell.

2

The next thing he knew he was walking along a sun-baked street in some foreign town that was familiar, although, at first, its name escaped him. Colour, softness, and warmth pervaded it; there was sparkle and lightness in the exhilarating air; it was an Eastern town.

Though early morning, a number of people were already stirring; strings of camels passed him, loaded with clover, bales of merchandise, and firewood. Gracefully-draped women went by silently, carrying water jars of burnt clay upon their heads. Rude wooden shutters were being taken down in the bazaars; the smoke of cooking-fires rose in the blue spirals through the quiet air. He felt strangely at home and happy. The light, the radiance stirred him. He passed a mosque from which the worshippers came pouring in a stream of colour.

Yet, though an Eastern town, it was not wholly Oriental, for he saw that many of the buildings were of semi-European design, and that the natives sometimes wore European dress, except for the fez upon the head. Among them were Europeans, too. Staring into the faces of the passers-by he found, to his vexation, that he could not focus sight as usual, and that the nearer he approached, the less clearly he discerned the features. The faces, upon close attention, at once grew shadowy, merged into each other, or, in some odd fashion, melted into the dazzling sunshine that was their background. All his attempts in this direction failed; impatience seized him; of surprise, however, he was not conscious. Yet this mingled vagueness and intensity seemed perfectly natural.

Filled with a stirring curiosity, he made a strong effort to concentrate his attention, only to discover that this vagueness, this difficulty of focus, lay in his own being, too. He wandered on, unaware exactly where he was going, yet not much perturbed, since there was an objective in view, he knew, and this objective *must* eventually be reached. Its nature, however, for the moment entirely eluded him.

The sense of familiarity, meanwhile, increased; he had been in this town before, although not quite within recoverable memory. It seemed, perhaps, the general atmosphere, rather than the actual streets, he knew; a certain perfume in the air, a tang of indefinable sweetness, a vitality in the radiant sunshine. The dark faces that he could not focus, he yet knew; the flowing garments of blue and red and yellow, the softly-slippered feet, the slouching camels, the burning human eyes that faded ere he fully caught them — the entire picture in this blazing sunlight lay half-hidden, half-revealed. And an extraordinary sense of happiness and well-being flooded him as he walked; he felt at home; comfort and bliss stole over him. Almost he knew his way about. This was a place he loved and knew.

The complete silence, moreover, did not strike him as peculiar until, suddenly, it was broken in a startling fashion. He heard his own name spoken. It sounded close beside his ear.

“George Sanfield!” The voice was familiar. Morris called him. He realized then the truth. He was, of course, in Cairo.

Yet, instead of turning to discover the speaker at his side, he hurried forward, as though he knew that the voice had come through distance. His consciousness cleared and lightened; he felt more alive; his eyes now focused the passers-by without difficulty. He was there to find Morris, and Morris was directing him. All was explained and natural again. He hastened. But, even while he hastened, he knew that his personal desire to speak with his friend about Egyptian shares and Delta Lands was not his single object. Behind it, further in among as yet unstirring shadows, lay another deeper purpose. Yet he did not trouble about it, nor make a conscious effort at discovery. Morris was doing him that “good turn I feel I owe you.” This conviction filled him overwhelmingly. The question of how and why did not once occur to him. A strange, great happiness rose in him.

Upon the outskirts of the town now, he found himself approaching a large building in the European style, with wide verandas and a cultivated garden filled with palm trees. A well-kept drive of yellow sand led to its chief entrance, and the man in khaki drill and riding-breeches walking along this drive, not ten yards in front of him, was — Morris. He overtook him, but his cry of welcome recognition was not answered. Morris, walking with bowed head and stooping shoulders, seemed intensely preoccupied; he had not heard the call.

“Here I am, old fellow!” exclaimed his friend, holding out a hand. “I’ve come, you see...!” then paused aghast before the altered face. Morris paid no attention. He walked straight on as though he had not heard. It was the distraught and anguished expression on the drawn and haggard features that impressed the other most. The silence he took without surprise.

It was the pain and suffering in his friend that occupied him. The dark rims beneath heavy eyes, the evidence of sleepless nights, of long anxiety and ceaseless dread, afflicted him with their too-plain story. The man was overwhelmed with some great sorrow. Sanfield forgot his personal trouble; this larger, deeper grief usurped its place entirely.

“Morris! Morris!” he cried yet more eagerly than before. “I’ve come, you see. Tell me what’s the matter. I believe — that I can — help you...!”

The other turned, looking past him through the air. He made no answer. The eyes went through him. He walked straight on, and Sanfield walked at his side in silence. Through the large door they passed together, Morris paying as little attention to him as though he were not there, and in the small chamber they now entered, evidently a waiting-room, an Egyptian servant approached, uttered some inaudible words, and then withdrew, leaving them alone together.

It seemed that time leaped forward, yet stood still; the passage of minutes, that is to say, was irregular, almost fanciful. Whether the interval was long or short, however, Morris spent it pacing up and down the little room, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his mind oblivious of all else but his absorbing anxiety and grief. To his friend, who watched him by the wall with intense desire to help, he paid no attention. The latter’s spoken words went by him, entirely unnoticed; he gave no sign of seeing him; his eyes, as he paced up and down, muttering inaudibly to himself, were fixed every few seconds on an inner door. Beyond that door, Sanfield now divined, lay someone who hesitated on the narrow frontier between life and death.

It opened suddenly and a man, in overall and rubber gloves, came out, his face grave yet with faint signs of hope about it — a doctor, clearly, straight from the operating table. Morris, standing rigid in his tracks, listened to something spoken, for the lips were in movement, though no words were audible. The operation, Sanfield divined, had been successful, though danger was still present. The two men passed out, then, into the hall and climbed a wide staircase to the floor above, Sanfield following noiselessly, though so close that he could touch them. Entering a large, airy room where French windows, carefully shaded with green blinds opened on to a veranda, they approached a bed. Two nurses bent over it. The occupant was at first invisible.

Events had moved with curious rapidity. All this had happened, it seemed, in a single moment, yet with the irregular effect already mentioned which made Sanfield feel it might, equally, have lasted hours. But, as he stood behind Morris and the surgeon at the bed, the deeps in him opened suddenly, and he trembled under a shock of intense emotion that he could not understand. As with a stroke of lightning some heavenly fire set his heart aflame with yearning. The very soul in him broke loose with passionate longing that *must* find satisfaction. It came to him in a single instant with the certain knowledge of an unconquerable conviction. Hidden, yet ever waiting, among the broken centuries, there now leaped upon him this flash of memory — the memory of some sweet and ancient love Time might veil yet could not kill.

He ran forward, past the surgeon and the nurses, past Morris who bent above the bed with a face ghastly from anxiety. He gazed down upon the fair girl lying there, her unbound hair streaming over the pillow. He saw, and he remembered. And an uncontrollable cry of recognition left his lips....

The irregularity of the passing minutes became so marked then, that he might well have passed outside their measure altogether, beyond what men call Time; duration, interval, both escaped. Alone and free with his eternal love, he was safe from all confinement, free, it seemed, either of time or space. His friend, however, was vaguely with him during the amazing instant. He felt acutely aware of the need each had, respectively, for the other, born of a heritage the Past had hidden over-long. Each, it was clear, could do the other a good turn.... Sanfield, though unable to describe or disentangle later, knew, while it lasted, this joy of full, delicious understanding....

The strange, swift instant of recognition passed and disappeared. The cry, Sanfield realized, on coming back to the Present, had been soundless and inaudible as before. No one observed him; no one stirred. The girl, on that bed beside the opened windows, lay evidently dying. Her breath came in gasps, her chest heaved convulsively, each attempt at recovery was slower and more painful than the one before. She was unconscious. Sometimes her breathing seemed to stop. It grew weaker, as the pulse grew fainter. And Sanfield, transfixed as with paralysis, stood watching, waiting, an intolerable yearning in his heart to help. It seemed to him that he waited with a purpose.

This purpose suddenly became clear. He knew why he waited. There was help to be given. He was the one to give it.

The girl's vitality and ebbing nerves, her entire physical organism now fading so quickly towards that final extinction which meant death — could these but be stimulated by a new tide of life, the danger-point now fast approaching might be passed, and recovery must follow. This impetus, he knew suddenly, he could supply. How, he could not tell. It flashed upon him from beyond the stars, as from ancient store of long-forgotten, long-neglected knowledge. It was enough that he felt confident and sure. His soul burned within him; the strength of an ancient and unconquerable love rose through his being. He would try.

The doctor, he saw, was in the act of giving his last aid in the form of a hypodermic injection, Morris and the nurses looking on. Sanfield observed the sharp quick rally, only too faint, too slight; he saw the collapse that followed. The doctor, shrugging his shoulders, turned with a look that could not express itself in words, and Morris, burying his face in his hands, knelt by the bed, shaken with convulsive sobbing. It was the end.

In which moment, precisely, the strange paralysis that had bound Sanfield momentarily, was lifted from his being, and an impelling force, obeying his immense desire, invaded him. He knew how to act. His will, taught long ago, yet long-forgotten, was set free.

"You have come back to me at last," he cried in his anguish and his power, though the voice was, as ever, inaudible and soundless, "*I shall not let you go!...*"

Drawn forward nearer and nearer to the bed, he leaned down, as if to kiss the pale lips and streaming hair. But his knowledge operated better than he knew. In the tremendous grip of that power which spins the stars and suns, while drawing souls into manifestation upon a dozen planets, he raced, he dived, he plunged, helpless, yet driven by the creative stress of love and sacrifice towards some eternal purpose. Caught in what seemed a vortex of amazing force, he sank away, as a straw is caught and sunk within the suction of a mighty whirlpool. His memory of Morris, of the doctor, of the girl herself, passed utterly. His entire personality became merged, lost, obliterated. He was aware of nothing; not even aware of nothingness. He lost consciousness....

3

The reappearance was as sudden as the obliteration. He emerged. There had been interval, duration, time. He was not aware of them. A spasm of blinding pain shot through him. He opened his eyes. His whole body was a single devouring pain. He felt cramped, confined, uncomfortable. He must escape. He thrashed about. Someone seized his arm and held it. With a snarl he easily wrenched it free.

He was in bed. How had he come to this? An accident? He saw the faces of nurse and doctor bending over him, eager, amazed, surprised, a trifle frightened. Vague memories floated to him. Who was he? Where had he come from? And where was ... where was ... someone ... who was dearer to him than life itself? He looked about him: the room, the faces, the French windows, the veranda, all seemed only half familiar. He looked, he searched for ... someone ... but in vain....

A spasm of violent pain burned through his body like a fire, and he shut his eyes. He groaned. A voice sounded just above him: “Take this, dear. Try and swallow a little. It will relieve you. Your brother will be back in a moment. You are much better already.”

He looked up at the nurse; he drank what she gave him.

“My brother!” he murmured. “I don’t understand. I have no brother.” Thirst came over him; he drained the glass. The nurse, wearing a startled look, moved away. He watched her go. He pointed at her with his hand, meaning to say something that he instantly forgot — as he saw his own bare arm. Its dreadful thinness shocked him. He must have been ill for months. The arm, wasted almost to nothing, showed the bone. He sank back exhausted, the sleeping draught began to take effect. The nurse returned quietly to a chair beside the bed, from which she watched him without ceasing as the long minutes passed....

He found it difficult to collect his thoughts, to keep them in his mind when caught. There floated before him a series of odd scenes like coloured pictures in an endless flow. He was unable to catch them. Morris was with him always. They were doing quite absurd, impossible things. They rode together across the desert in the dawn, they wandered through old massive temples, they saw the sun set behind mud villages mid wavering palms, they drifted down a river in a sailing boat of quaint design. It had an enormous single sail. Together they visited tombs cut in the solid rock, hot airless corridors, and huge, dim, vaulted chambers underground. There was an icy wind by night, fierce burning sun by day. They watched vast troops of stars pass down a stupendous sky.... They knew delight and tasted wonder. Strange memories touched them....

"Nurse!" he called aloud, returning to himself again, and remembering that he must speak with his friend about something — he failed to recall exactly what. "Please ask Mr. Morris to come to me."

"At once, dear. He's only in the next room waiting for you to wake." She went out quickly, and he heard her voice in the passage. It sank to a whisper as she came back with Morris, yet every syllable reached him distinctly:

"... and pay no attention if she wanders a little; just ignore it. She's turned the corner, thank God, and that's the chief thing." Each word he heard with wonder and perplexity, with increasing irritability too.

"I'm a hell of a wreck," he said, as Morris came, beaming, to the bedside. "Have I been ill long? It's frightfully decent of you to come, old man."

But Morris, staggered at this greeting, stopped abruptly, half turning to the nurse for guidance. He seemed unable to find words. Sanfield was extremely annoyed; he showed his feeling. "I'm *not* balmy, you old ass!" he shouted. "I'm all right again, though very weak. But I wanted to ask you — oh, I remember now — I wanted to ask you about my — er — *Deltas*."

"My poor dear Maggie," stammered Morris, fumbling with his voice. "Don't worry about your few shares, darling. Deltas are all right — it's *you* we — —"

"Why, the devil, do you call me Maggie?" snapped the other viciously. "And 'darling'!" He felt furious, exasperated. "Have *you* gone balmy, or have I? What in the world are you two up to?" His fury tired him. He lay back upon his pillows, fuming. Morris took a chair beside the bed; he put a hand gently on his wasted arm.

"My darling girl," he said, in what was intended to be a soothing voice, though it stirred the sick man again to fury beyond expression, "you must really keep quiet for a bit. You've had a very severe operation" — his voice shook a little— "but, thank God, you've pulled through and are now on the way to recovery. You are my sister Maggie. It will all come back to you when you're rested — —"

"Maggie, indeed!" interrupted the other, trying to sit up again, but too weak to compass it. "Your sister! You bally idiot! Don't you know me? I wish to God the nurse wouldn't 'dear' me in that senseless way. And you, with your atrocious 'darling,' I'm not your precious sister Maggie. I'm — I'm George San — —"

But even as he said it, there passed over him some dim lost fragment of a wild, delicious memory he could not seize. Intense pleasure lay in it, could he but recover it. He knew a sweet, forgotten joy. His broken, troubled mind lay searching frantically but without success. It dazzled him. It shook him with an indescribable emotion — of joy, of wonder, of deep sweet confusion. A rapt happiness rose in him, yet pain, like a black awful shutter, closed in upon the happiness at once. He remembered a girl. But he remembered, too, that he had seen her die. Who was she? Had he lost her ... again...!

"My dear fellow," he faltered in a weaker voice to Morris, "my brain's in a whirl. I'm sorry. I suppose I've had some blasted concussion — haven't I?"

But the man beside his bed, he saw, was startled. An extraordinary look came into his face, though he tried to hide it with a smile.

"My shares!" cried Sanfield, with a half scream. "Four thousand of them!"

Whereupon Morris blanched. "George Sanfield!" he muttered, half to himself, half to the nurse who hurried up. "That voice! The very number too!" He looked white and terrified, as if he had seen a ghost. A whispered colloquy ensued between him and the nurse. It was inaudible.

“Now, dearest Maggie,” he said at length, making evidently a tremendous effort, “do try and lie quiet for a bit. Don’t bother about George Sanfield, my London friend. His shares are quite safe. You’ve heard me speak of him. It’s all right, my darling, quite all right. Oh, believe me! I’m your brother.”

“Maggie...!” whispered the man to himself upon the bed, whereupon Morris stooped, and, to his intense horror, kissed him on the cheek. But his horror seemed merged at once in another personality that surged through and over his entire being, drowning memory and recognition hopelessly. “Darling,” he murmured. He realized that he was mad, of course. It seemed he fainted....

The momentary unconsciousness soon passed, at any rate. He opened his eyes again. He saw a palm tree out of the window. He knew positively he was *not* mad, whatever else he might be. Dead perhaps? He felt the sheets, the mattress, the skin upon his face. No, he was alive all right. The dull pains where the tight bandages oppressed him were also real. He was among substantial, earthly things. The nurse, he noticed, regarded him anxiously. She was a pleasant-looking young woman. He smiled; and, with an expression of affectionate, even tender pleasure, she smiled back at him.

“You feel better now, a little stronger,” she said softly. “You’ve had a sleep, Miss Margaret.” She said “Miss Margaret” with a conscious effort. It was better, perhaps, than “dear”; but his anger rose at once. He was too tired, however, to express his feelings. There stole over him, besides, the afflicting consciousness of an alien personality that was familiar, and yet not his. It strove to dominate him. Only by a great effort could he continue to think his own thoughts. This other being kept trying to intrude, to oust him, to take full possession. It resented his presence with a kind of violence.

He sighed. So strong was the feeling of another personality trying to foist itself upon his own, upon his mind, his body, even upon his very face, that he turned instinctively to the nurse, though unaware exactly what he meant to ask her for.

“My hand-glass, please,” he heard himself saying — with horror. The phrase was not his own. Glass or mirror were the words *he* would have used.

A moment later he was staring with acute and ghastly terror at a reflection that was not his own. It was the face of the dead girl he saw within the silver-handled, woman's hand-glass he held up.

* * * * *

The dream with its amazing, vivid detail haunted him for days, even coming between him and his work. It seemed far more real, more vivid than the commonplace events of life that followed. The occurrences of the day were pale compared to its overpowering intensity. And a cable, received the very next afternoon, increased this sense of actual truth — of something that had really happened.

"Hold shares writing Morris."

Its brevity added a convincing touch. He was aware of Egypt even in Throgmorton Street. Yet it was the face of the dead, or dying, girl that chiefly haunted him. She remained in his thoughts, alive and sweet and exquisite. Without her he felt incomplete, his life a failure. He thought of nothing else.

The affairs at the office, meanwhile, went well; unexpected success attended them; there was no strike; the angry customer was pacified. And when the promised letter came from Morris, Sanfield's hands trembled so violently that he could hardly tear it open. Nor could he read it calmly. The assurance about his precious shares scarcely interested him. It was the final paragraph that set his heart beating against his ribs as though a hammer lay inside him:

"... I've had great trouble and anxiety, though, thank God, the danger is over now. I forget if I ever mentioned my sister, Margaret, to you. She keeps house for me in Cairo, when I'm there. She is my only tie in life. Well, a severe operation she had to undergo, all but finished her. To tell you the truth, she very nearly died, for the doctor gave her up. You'll smile when I tell you that odd things happened — at the very last moment. I can't explain it, nor can the doctor. It rather terrified me. But at the very moment when we thought her gone, something revived in her. She became full of unexpected life and vigor. She was even violent — whereas, a moment before, she had not the strength to speak, much less to move. It was rather wonderful, but it was terrible too.

"You don't believe in these things, I know, but I must tell you, because, when she recovered consciousness, she began to babble about yourself, using your name, though she has rarely, if ever, heard it, and even speaking — you won't believe this, of course! — of your shares in Deltas, giving the *exact* number that you hold. When you write, please tell me if you were very anxious about these? Also, whether your thoughts were directed particularly to me? I thought a good deal about you, knowing you might be uneasy, but my mind was pretty full, as you will understand, of her operation at the time. The climax, when all this happened, was about 11 a. m. on February 13th.

"Don't fail to tell me this, as I'm particularly interested in what you may have to say."

"And, now, I want to ask a great favor of you. The doctor forbids Margaret to stay here during the hot weather, so I'm sending her home to some cousins in Yorkshire, as soon as she is fit to travel. It would be most awfully kind — I know how women bore you — if you could manage to meet the boat and help her on her way through London. I'll let you know dates and particulars later, when I hear that you will do this for me...."

Sanfield hardly read the remainder of the letter, which dealt with shares and business matters. But a month later he stood on the dock-pier at Tilbury, watching the approach of the tender from the *Egyptian Mail*.

He saw it make fast; he saw the stream of passengers pour down the gangway; and he saw among them the tall, fair woman of his dream. With a beating heart he went to meet her....

IX

THE DECOY

IT BELONGED TO the category of unlovely houses about which an ugly superstition clings, one reason being, perhaps, its inability to inspire interest in itself without assistance. It seemed too ordinary to possess individuality, much less to exert an influence. Solid and ungainly, its huge bulk dwarfing the park timber, its best claim to notice was a negative one — it was unpretentious.

From the little hill its expressionless windows stared across the Kentish Weald, indifferent to weather, dreary in winter, bleak in spring, unblessed in summer. Some colossal hand had tossed it down, then let it starve to death, a country mansion that might well strain the adjectives of advertisers and find inheritors with difficulty. Its soul had fled, said some; it had committed suicide, thought others; and it was an inheritor, before he killed himself in the library, who thought this latter, yielding, apparently, to an hereditary taint in the family. For two other inheritors followed suit, with an interval of twenty years between them, and there was no clear reason to explain the three disasters. Only the first owner, indeed, lived permanently in the house, the others using it in the summer months and then deserting it with relief. Hence, when John Burley, present inheritor, assumed possession, he entered a house about which clung an ugly superstition, based, nevertheless, upon a series of undeniably ugly facts.

This century deals harshly with superstitious folk, deeming them fools or charlatans; but John Burley, robust, contemptuous of half lights, did not deal harshly with them, because he did not deal with them at all. He was hardly aware of their existence. He ignored them as he ignored, say, the Esquimaux, poets, and other human aspects that did not touch his scheme of life. A successful business man, he concentrated on what was real; he dealt with business people. His philanthropy, on a big scale, was also real; yet, though he would have denied it vehemently, he had his superstition as well. No man exists without some taint of superstition in his blood; the racial heritage is too rich to be escaped entirely. Burley’s took this form — that unless he gave his tithe to the poor he would not prosper. This ugly mansion, he decided, would make an ideal Convalescent Home.

“Only cowards or lunatics kill themselves,” he declared flatly, when his use of the house was criticized. “I’m neither one nor t’other.” He let out his gusty, boisterous laugh. In his invigorating atmosphere such weakness seemed contemptible, just as superstition in his presence seemed feeblest ignorance. Even its picturesqueness faded. “I can’t conceive,” he boomed, “can’t even imagine to myself,” he added emphatically, “the state of mind in which a man can think of suicide, much less do it.” He threw his chest out with a challenging air. “I tell you, Nancy, it’s either cowardice or mania. And I’ve no use for either.”

Yet he was easy-going and good-humoured in his denunciation. He admitted his limitations with a hearty laugh his wife called noisy. Thus he made allowances for the fairy fears of sailorfolk, and had even been known to mention haunted ships his companies owned. But he did so in the terms of tonnage and £ s. d. His scope was big; details were made for clerks.

His consent to pass a night in the mansion was the consent of a practical business man and philanthropist who dealt condescendingly with foolish human nature. It was based on the common-sense of tonnage and £ s. d. The local newspapers had revived the silly story of the suicides, calling attention to the effect of the superstition upon the fortunes of the house, and so, possibly, upon the fortunes of its present owner. But the mansion, otherwise a white elephant, was precisely ideal for his purpose, and so trivial a matter as spending a night in it should not stand in the way. “We must take people as we find them, Nancy.”

His young wife had her motive, of course, in making the proposal, and, if she was amused by what she called “spook-hunting,” he saw no reason to refuse her the indulgence. He loved her, and took her as he found her — late in life. To allay the superstitions of prospective staff and patients and supporters, all, in fact, whose goodwill was necessary to success, he faced this boredom of a night in the building before its opening was announced. “You see, John, if you, the owner, do this, it will nip damaging talk in the bud. If anything went wrong later it would only be put down to this suicide idea, this haunting influence. The Home will have a bad name from the start. There’ll be endless trouble. It will be a failure.”

“You think my spending a night there will stop the nonsense?” he inquired.

“According to the old legend it breaks the spell,” she replied. “That’s the condition, anyhow.”

“But somebody’s sure to die there sooner or later,” he objected. “We can’t prevent that.”

“We can prevent people whispering that they died unnaturally.” She explained the working of the public mind.

“I see,” he replied, his lip curling, yet quick to gauge the truth of what she told him about collective instinct.

“Unless *you* take poison in the hall,” she added laughingly, “or elect to hang yourself with your braces from the hat peg.”

“I’ll do it,” he agreed, after a moment’s thought. “I’ll sit up with you. It will be like a honeymoon over again, you and I on the spree — eh?” He was even interested now; the boyish side of him was touched perhaps; but his enthusiasm was less when she explained that three was a better number than two on such an expedition.

“I’ve often done it before, John. We were always three.”

“Who?” he asked bluntly. He looked wonderingly at her, but she answered that if anything went wrong a party of three provided a better margin for help. It was sufficiently obvious. He listened and agreed. “I’ll get young Mortimer,” he suggested. “Will he do?”

She hesitated. “Well — he’s cheery; he’ll be interested, too. Yes, he’s as good as another.” She seemed indifferent.

“And he’ll make the time pass with his stories,” added her husband.

So Captain Mortimer, late officer on a T.B.D., a “cheery lad,” afraid of nothing, cousin of Mrs. Burley, and now filling a good post in the company’s London offices, was engaged as third hand in the expedition. But Captain Mortimer was young and ardent, and Mrs. Burley was young and pretty and ill-mated, and John Burley was a neglectful, and self-satisfied husband.

Fate laid the trap with cunning, and John Burley, blind-eyed, careless of detail, floundered into it. He also floundered out again, though in a fashion none could have expected of him.

The night agreed upon eventually was as near to the shortest in the year as John Burley could contrive — June 18th — when the sun set at 8:18 and rose about a quarter to four. There would be barely three hours of true darkness. “You’re the expert,” he admitted, as she explained that sitting through the actual darkness only was required, not necessarily from sunset to sunrise. “We’ll do the thing properly. Mortimer’s not very keen, he had a dance or something,” he added, noticing the look of annoyance that flashed swiftly in her eyes; “but he got out of it. He’s coming.” The pouting expression of the spoilt woman amused him. “Oh, no, he didn’t need much persuading really,” he assured her. “Some girl or other, of course. He’s young, remember.” To which no comment was forthcoming, though the implied comparison made her flush.

They motored from South Audley Street after an early tea, in due course passing Sevenoaks and entering the Kentish Weald; and, in order that the necessary advertisement should be given, the chauffeur, warned strictly to keep their purpose quiet, was to put up at the country inn and fetch them an hour after sunrise; they would breakfast in London. “He’ll tell everybody,” said his practical and cynical master; “the local newspaper will have it all next day. A few hours’ discomfort is worth while if it ends the nonsense. We’ll read and smoke, and Mortimer shall tell us yarns about the sea.” He went with the driver into the house to superintend the arrangement of the room, the lights, the hampers of food, and so forth, leaving the pair upon the lawn.

“Four hours isn’t much, but it’s something,” whispered Mortimer, alone with her for the first time since they started. “It’s simply ripping of you to have got me in. You look divine to-night. You’re the most wonderful woman in the world.” His blue eyes shone with the hungry desire he mistook for love. He looked as if he had blown in from the sea, for his skin was tanned and his light hair bleached a little by the sun. He took her hand, drawing her out of the slanting sunlight towards the rhododendrons.

“I didn’t, you silly boy. It was John suggested your coming.” She released her hand with an affected effort. “Besides, you overdid it — pretending you had a dance.”

“You could have objected,” he said eagerly, “and didn’t. Oh, you’re too lovely, you’re delicious!” He kissed her suddenly with passion. There was a tiny struggle, in which she yielded too easily, he thought.

“Harry, you’re an idiot!” she cried breathlessly, when he let her go. “I really don’t know how you dare! And John’s your friend. Besides, you know” — she glanced round quickly— “it isn’t safe here.” Her eyes shone happily, her cheeks were flaming. She looked what she was, a pretty, young, lustful animal, false to ideals, true to selfish passion only. “Luckily,” she added, “he trusts me too fully to think anything.”

The young man, worship in his eyes, laughed gaily. “There’s no harm in a kiss,” he said. “You’re a child to him, he never thinks of you as a woman. Anyhow, his head’s full of ships and kings and sealing-wax,” he comforted her, while respecting her sudden instinct which warned him not to touch her again, “and he never sees anything. Why, even at ten yards — —”

From twenty yards away a big voice interrupted him, as John Burley came round a corner of the house and across the lawn towards them. The chauffeur, he announced, had left the hampers in the room on the first floor and gone back to the inn. “Let’s take a walk round,” he added, joining them, “and see the garden. Five minutes before sunset we’ll go in and feed.” He laughed. “We must do the thing faithfully, you know, mustn’t we, Nancy? Dark to dark, remember. Come on, Mortimer” — he took the young man’s arm— “a last look round before we go in and hang ourselves from adjoining hooks in the matron’s room!” He reached out his free hand towards his wife.

“Oh, hush, John!” she said quickly. “I don’t like — especially now the dusk is coming.” She shivered, as though it were a genuine little shiver, pursing her lips deliciously as she did so; whereupon he drew her forcibly to him, saying he was sorry, and kissed her exactly where she had been kissed two minutes before, while young Mortimer looked on. “We’ll take care of you between us,” he said. Behind a broad back the pair exchanged a swift but meaning glance, for there was that in his tone which enjoined wariness, and perhaps after all he was not so blind as he appeared. They had their code, these two. “All’s well,” was signalled; “but another time be more careful!”

There still remained some minutes’ sunlight before the huge red ball of fire would sink behind the wooded hills, and the trio, talking idly, a flutter of excitement in two hearts certainly, walked among the roses. It was a perfect evening, windless, perfumed, warm. Headless shadows preceded them gigantically across the lawn as they moved, and one side of the great building lay already dark; bats were flitting, moths darted to and fro above the azalea and rhododendron clumps. The talk turned chiefly on the uses of the mansion as a Convalescent Home, its probable running cost, suitable staff, and so forth.

“Come along,” John Burley said presently, breaking off and turning abruptly, “we must be inside, actually inside, before the sun’s gone. We must fulfil the conditions faithfully,” he repeated, as though fond of the phrase. He was in earnest over everything in life, big or little, once he set his hand to it.

They entered, this incongruous trio of ghost-hunters, no one of them really intent upon the business in hand, and went slowly upstairs to the great room where the hampers lay. Already in the hall it was dark enough for three electric torches to flash usefully and help their steps as they moved with caution, lighting one corner after another. The air inside was chill and damp. “Like an unused museum,” said Mortimer. “I can smell the specimens.” They looked about them, sniffing. “That’s humanity,” declared his host, employer, friend, “with cement and whitewash to flavour it”; and all three laughed as Mrs. Burley said she wished they had picked some roses and brought them in. Her husband was again in front on the broad staircase, Mortimer just behind him, when she called out. “I don’t like being last,” she exclaimed. It’s so black behind me in the hall. I’ll come between you two,” and the sailor took her outstretched hand, squeezing it, as he passed her up. “There’s a figure, remember,” she said hurriedly, turning to gain her husband’s attention, as when she touched wood at home. “A figure is seen; that’s part of the story. The figure of a man.” She gave a tiny shiver of pleasurable, half-imagined alarm as she took his arm.

“I hope we shall see it,” he mentioned prosaically.

“I hope we shan’t,” she replied with emphasis. “It’s only seen before — something happens.” Her husband said nothing, while Mortimer remarked facetiously that it would be a pity if they had their trouble for nothing. “Something can hardly happen to all three of us,” he said lightly, as they entered a large room where the paper-hangers had conveniently left a rough table of bare planks. Mrs. Burley, busy with her own thoughts, began to unpack the sandwiches and wine. Her husband strolled over to the window. He seemed restless.

“So this,” his deep voice startled her, “is where one of us” — he looked round him— “is to — —”

“John!” She stopped him sharply, with impatience. “Several times already I’ve begged you.” Her voice rang rather shrill and querulous in the empty room, a new note in it. She was beginning to feel the atmosphere of the place, perhaps. On the sunny lawn it had not touched her, but now, with the fall of night, she was aware of it, as shadow called to shadow and the kingdom of darkness gathered power. Like a great whispering gallery, the whole house listened.

“Upon my word, Nancy,” he said with contrition, as he came and sat down beside her, “I quite forgot again. Only I cannot take it seriously. It’s so utterly unthinkable to me that a man — —”

“But why evoke the idea at all?” she insisted in a lowered voice, that snapped despite its faintness. “Men, after all, don’t do such things for nothing.”

“We don’t know everything in the universe, do we?” Mortimer put in, trying clumsily to support her. “All I know just now is that I’m famished and this veal and ham pie is delicious.” He was very busy with his knife and fork. His foot rested lightly on her own beneath the table; he could not keep his eyes off her face; he was continually passing new edibles to her.

“No,” agreed John Burley, “not everything. You’re right there.”

She kicked the younger man gently, flashing a warning with her eyes as well, while her husband, emptying his glass, his head thrown back, looked straight at them over the rim, apparently seeing nothing. They smoked their cigarettes round the table, Burley lighting a big cigar. “Tell us about the figure, Nancy?” he inquired. “At least there’s no harm in that. It’s new to me. I hadn’t heard about a figure.” And she did so willingly, turning her chair sideways from the dangerous, reckless feet. Mortimer could now no longer touch her. “I know very little,” she confessed; “only what the paper said. It’s a man.... And he changes.”

“How changes?” asked her husband. “Clothes, you mean, or what?”

Mrs. Burley laughed, as though she was glad to laugh. Then she answered: “According to the story, he shows himself each time to the man — —”

“The man who —— ?”

“Yes, yes, of course. He appears to the man who dies — as himself.”

“H’m,” grunted her husband, naturally puzzled. He stared at her.

“Each time the chap saw his own double” — Mortimer came this time usefully to the rescue— “before he did it.”

Considerable explanation followed, involving much psychic jargon from Mrs. Burley, which fascinated and impressed the sailor, who thought her as wonderful as she was lovely, showing it in his eyes for all to see. John Burley’s attention wandered. He moved over to the window, leaving them to finish the discussion between them; he took no part in it, made no comment even, merely listening idly and watching them with an air of absent-mindedness through the cloud of cigar smoke round his head. He moved from window to window, ensconcing himself in turn in each deep embrasure, examining the fastenings, measuring the thickness of the stonework with his handkerchief. He seemed restless, bored, obviously out of place in this ridiculous expedition. On his big massive face lay a quiet, resigned expression his wife had never seen before. She noticed it now as, the discussion ended, the pair tidied away the *débris* of dinner, lit the spirit lamp for coffee and laid out a supper which would be very welcome with the dawn. A draught passed through the room, making the papers flutter on the table. Mortimer turned down the smoking lamps with care.

“Wind’s getting up a bit — from the south,” observed Burley from his niche, closing one-half of the casement window as he said it. To do this, he turned his back a moment, fumbling for several seconds with the latch, while Mortimer, noting it, seized his sudden opportunity with the foolish abandon of his age and temperament. Neither he nor his victim perceived that, against the outside darkness, the interior of the room was plainly reflected in the window-pane. One reckless, the other terrified, they snatched the fearful joy, which might, after all, have been lengthened by another full half-minute, for the head they feared, followed by the shoulders, pushed through the side of the casement still open, and remained outside, taking in the night.

“A grand air,” said his deep voice, as the head drew in again, “I’d like to be at sea a night like this.” He left the casement open and came across the room towards them. “Now,” he said cheerfully, arranging a seat for himself, “let’s get comfortable for the night. Mortimer, we expect stories from you without ceasing, until dawn or the ghost arrives. Horrible stories of chains and headless men, remember. Make it a night we shan’t forget in a hurry.” He produced his gust of laughter.

They arranged their chairs, with other chairs to put their feet on, and Mortimer contrived a footstool by means of a hamper for the smallest feet; the air grew thick with tobacco smoke; eyes flashed and answered, watched perhaps as well; ears listened and perhaps grew wise; occasionally, as a window shook, they started and looked round; there were sounds about the house from time to time, when the entering wind, using broken or open windows, set loose objects rattling.

But Mrs. Burley vetoed horrible stories with decision. A big, empty mansion, lonely in the country, and even with the comfort of John Burley and a lover in it, has its atmosphere. Furnished rooms are far less ghostly. This atmosphere now came creeping everywhere, through spacious halls and sighing corridors, silent, invisible, but all-pervading, John Burley alone impervious to it, unaware of its soft attack upon the nerves. It entered possibly with the summer night wind, but possibly it was always there.... And Mrs. Burley looked often at her husband, sitting near her at an angle; the light fell on his fine strong face; she felt that, though apparently so calm and quiet, he was really very restless; something about him was a little different; she could not define it; his mouth seemed set as with an effort; he looked, she thought curiously to herself, patient and very dignified; he was rather a dear after all. Why did she think the face inscrutable? Her thoughts wandered vaguely, unease, discomfort among them somewhere, while the heated blood — she had taken her share of wine — seethed in her.

Burley turned to the sailor for more stories. “Sea and wind in them,” he asked. “No horrors, remember!” and Mortimer told a tale about the shortage of rooms at a Welsh seaside place where spare rooms fetched fabulous prices, and one man alone refused to let — a retired captain of a South Seas trader, very poor, a bit crazy apparently. He had two furnished rooms in his house worth twenty guineas a week. The rooms faced south; he kept them full of flowers; but he would not let. An explanation of his unworldly obstinacy was not forthcoming until Mortimer — they fished together — gained his confidence. “The South Wind lives in them,” the old fellow told him. “I keep them free for her.”

“For *her?”*

“It was on the South Wind my love came to me,” said the other softly; “and it was on the South Wind that she left — —”

It was an odd tale to tell in such company, but he told it well.

“Beautiful,” thought Mrs. Burley. Aloud she said a quiet, “Thank you. By ‘left,’ I suppose he meant she died or ran away?”

John Burley looked up with a certain surprise. “We ask for a story,” he said, “and you give us a poem.” He laughed. “You’re in love, Mortimer,” he informed him, “and with my wife probably.”

“Of course I am, sir,” replied the young man gallantly. “A sailor’s heart, you know,” while the face of the woman turned pink, then white. She knew her husband more intimately than Mortimer did, and there was something in his tone, his eyes, his words, she did not like. Harry was an idiot to choose such a tale. An irritated annoyance stirred in her, close upon dislike. “Anyhow, it’s better than horrors,” she said hurriedly.

“Well,” put in her husband, letting forth a minor gust of laughter, “it’s possible, at any rate. Though one’s as crazy as the other.” His meaning was not wholly clear. “If a man really loved,” he added in his blunt fashion, “and was tricked by her, I could almost conceive his — —”

“Oh, don’t preach, John, for Heaven’s sake. You’re so dull in the pulpit.” But the interruption only served to emphasize the sentence which, otherwise, might have been passed over.

“Could conceive his finding life so worthless,” persisted the other, “that — —” He hesitated. “But there, now, I promised I wouldn’t,” he went on, laughing good-humouredly. Then, suddenly, as though in spite of himself, driven it seemed: “Still, under such conditions, he might show his contempt for human nature and for life by — —”

It was a tiny stifled scream that stopped him this time.

“John, I hate, I loathe you, when you talk like that. And you’ve broken your word again.” She was more than petulant; a nervous anger sounded in her voice. It was the way he had said it, looking from them towards the window, that made her quiver. She felt him suddenly as a man; she felt afraid of him.

Her husband made no reply; he rose and looked at his watch, leaning sideways towards the lamp, so that the expression of his face was shaded. “Two o’clock,” he remarked. “I think I’ll take a turn through the house. I may find a workman asleep or something. Anyhow, the light will soon come now.” He laughed; the expression of his face, his tone of voice, relieved her momentarily. He went out. They heard his heavy tread echoing down the carpetless long corridor.

Mortimer began at once. “Did he mean anything?” he asked breathlessly. “He doesn’t love you the least little bit, anyhow. He never did. I do. You’re wasted on him. You belong to me.” The words poured out. He covered her face with kisses. “Oh, I didn’t mean *that*,” he caught between the kisses.

The sailor released her, staring. “What then?” he whispered. “Do you think he saw us on the lawn?” He paused a moment, as she made no reply. The steps were audible in the distance still. “I know!” he exclaimed suddenly. “It’s the blessed house he feels. That’s what it is. He doesn’t like it.”

A wind sighed through the room, making the papers flutter; something rattled; and Mrs. Burley started. A loose end of rope swinging from the paperhanger’s ladder caught her eye. She shivered slightly.

“He’s different,” she replied in a low voice, nestling very close again, “and so restless. Didn’t you notice what he said just now — that under certain conditions he could understand a man” — she hesitated— “doing it,” she concluded, a sudden drop in her voice. “Harry,” she looked full into his eyes, “that’s not like him. He didn’t say that for nothing.”

“Nonsense! He’s bored to tears, that’s all. And the house is getting on your nerves, too.” He kissed her tenderly. Then, as she responded, he drew her nearer still and held her passionately, mumbling incoherent words, among which “nothing to be afraid of” was distinguishable. Meanwhile, the steps were coming nearer. She pushed him away. “You must behave yourself. I insist. You shall, Harry,” then buried herself in his arms, her face hidden against his neck — only to disentangle herself the next instant and stand clear of him. “I hate you, Harry,” she exclaimed sharply, a look of angry annoyance flashing across her face. “And I *hate* myself. Why do you treat me —— ?” She broke off as the steps came closer, patted her hair straight, and stalked over to the open window.

“I believe after all you’re only playing with me,” he said viciously. He stared in surprised disappointment, watching her. “It’s him you really love,” he added jealously. He looked and spoke like a petulant spoilt boy.

She did not turn her head. “He’s always been fair to me, kind and generous. He never blames me for anything. Give me a cigarette and don’t play the stage hero. My nerves are on edge, to tell you the truth.” Her voice jarred harshly, and as he lit her cigarette he noticed that her lips were trembling; his own hand trembled too. He was still holding the match, standing beside her at the window-sill, when the steps crossed the threshold and John Burley came into the room. He went straight up to the table and turned the lamp down. “It was smoking,” he remarked. “Didn’t you see?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” and Mortimer sprang forward, too late to help him. “It was the draught as you pushed the door open.” The big man said, “Ah!” and drew a chair over, facing them. “It’s just *the* very house,” he told them. “I’ve been through every room on this floor. It will make a splendid Home, with very little alteration, too.” He turned round in his creaking wicker chair and looked up at his wife, who sat swinging her legs and smoking in the window embrasure. “Lives will be saved inside these old walls. It’s a good investment,” he went on, talking rather to himself it seemed. “People will die here, too — —”

“Hark!” Mrs. Burley interrupted him. “That noise — what is it?” A faint thudding sound in the corridor or in the adjoining room was audible, making all three look round quickly, listening for a repetition, which did not come. The papers fluttered on the table, the lamps smoked an instant.

“Wind,” observed Burley calmly, “our little friend, the South Wind. Something blown over again, that’s all.” But, curiously, the three of them stood up. “I’ll go and see,” he continued. “Doors and windows are all open to let the paint dry.” Yet he did not move; he stood there watching a white moth that dashed round and round the lamp, flopping heavily now and again upon the bare deal table.

“Let me go, sir,” put in Mortimer eagerly. He was glad of the chance; for the first time he, too, felt uncomfortable. But there was another who, apparently, suffered a discomfort greater than his own and was accordingly even more glad to get away. “I’ll go,” Mrs. Burley announced, with decision. “I’d like to. I haven’t been out of this room since we came. I’m not an atom afraid.”

It was strange that for a moment she did not make a move either; it seemed as if she waited for something. For perhaps fifteen seconds no one stirred or spoke. She knew by the look in her lover’s eyes that he had now become aware of the slight, indefinite change in her husband’s manner, and was alarmed by it. The fear in him woke her contempt; she suddenly despised the youth, and was conscious of a new, strange yearning towards her husband; against her worked nameless pressures, troubling her being. There was an alteration in the room, she thought; something had come in. The trio stood listening to the gentle wind outside, waiting for the sound to be repeated; two careless, passionate young lovers and a man stood waiting, listening, watching in that room; yet it seemed there were five persons altogether and not three, for two guilty consciences stood apart and separate from their owners. John Burley broke the silence.

“Yes, you go, Nancy. Nothing to be afraid of — there. It’s only wind.” He spoke as though he meant it.

Mortimer bit his lips. “I’ll come with you,” he said instantly. He was confused. “Let’s all three go. I don’t think we ought to be separated.” But Mrs. Burley was already at the door. “I insist,” she said, with a forced laugh. “I’ll call if I’m frightened,” while her husband, saying nothing, watched her from the table.

“Take this,” said the sailor, flashing his electric torch as he went over to her. “Two are better than one.” He saw her figure exquisitely silhouetted against the black corridor beyond; it was clear she wanted to go; any nervousness in her was mastered by a stronger emotion still; she was glad to be out of their presence for a bit. He had hoped to snatch a word of explanation in the corridor, but her manner stopped him. Something else stopped him, too.

“First door on the left,” he called out, his voice echoing down the empty length. “That’s the room where the noise came from. Shout if you want us.”

He watched her moving away, the light held steadily in front of her, but she made no answer, and he turned back to see John Burley lighting his cigar at the lamp chimney, his face thrust forward as he did so. He stood a second, watching him, as the lips sucked hard at the cigar to make it draw; the strength of the features was emphasized to sternness. He had meant to stand by the door and listen for the least sound from the adjoining room, but now found his whole attention focused on the face above the lamp. In that minute he realized that Burley had wished — had meant — his wife to go. In that minute also he forgot his love, his shameless, selfish little mistress, his worthless, caddish little self. For John Burley looked up. He straightened slowly, puffing hard and quickly to make sure his cigar was lit, and faced him. Mortimer moved forward into the room, self-conscious, embarrassed, cold.

“Of course it was only wind,” he said lightly, his one desire being to fill the interval while they were alone with commonplaces. He did not wish the other to speak, “Dawn wind, probably.” He glanced at his wrist-watch. “It’s half-past two already, and the sun gets up at a quarter to four. It’s light by now, I expect. The shortest night is never quite dark.” He rambled on confusedly, for the other’s steady, silent stare embarrassed him. A faint sound of Mrs. Burley moving in the next room made him stop a moment. He turned instinctively to the door, eager for an excuse to go.

“That’s nothing,” said Burley, speaking at last and in a firm quiet voice. “Only my wife, glad to be alone — my young and pretty wife. She’s all right. I know her better than you do. Come in and shut the door.”

Mortimer obeyed. He closed the door and came close to the table, facing the other, who at once continued.

“If I thought,” he said, in that quiet deep voice, “that you two were serious” — he uttered his words very slowly, with emphasis, with intense severity— “do you know what I should do? I will tell you, Mortimer. I should like one of us two — you or myself — to remain in this house, dead.”

His teeth gripped his cigar tightly; his hands were clenched; he went on through a half-closed mouth. His eyes blazed steadily.

“I trust her so absolutely — understand me? — that my belief in women, in human beings, would go. And with it the desire to live. Understand me?”

Each word to the young careless fool was a blow in the face, yet it was the softest blow, the flash of a big deep heart, that hurt the most. A dozen answers — denial, explanation, confession, taking all guilt upon himself — crowded his mind, only to be dismissed. He stood motionless and silent, staring hard into the other's eyes. No word passed his lips; there was no time in any case. It was in this position that Mrs. Burley, entering at that moment, found them. She saw her husband's face; the other man stood with his back to her. She came in with a little nervous laugh. "A bell-rope swinging in the wind and hitting a sheet of metal before the fireplace," she informed them. And all three laughed together then, though each laugh had a different sound. "But I hate this house," she added. "I wish we had never come."

"The moment there's light in the sky," remarked her husband quietly, "we can leave. That's the contract; let's see it through. Another half-hour will do it. Sit down, Nancy, and have a bite of something." He got up and placed a chair for her. "I think I'll take another look round." He moved slowly to the door. "I may go out on to the lawn a bit and see what the sky is doing."

It did not take half a minute to say the words, yet to Mortimer it seemed as though the voice would never end. His mind was confused and troubled. He loathed himself, he loathed the woman through whom he had got into this awkward mess.

The situation had suddenly become extremely painful; he had never imagined such a thing; the man he had thought blind had after all seen everything — known it all along, watched them, waited. And the woman, he was now certain, loved her husband; she had fooled him, Mortimer, all along, amusing herself.

"I'll come with you, sir. Do let me," he said suddenly. Mrs. Burley stood pale and uncertain between them. She looked scared. What has happened, she was clearly wondering.

"No, no, Harry" — he called him "Harry" for the first time— "I'll be back in five minutes at most. My wife mustn't be alone either." And he went out.

The young man waited till the footsteps sounded some distance down the corridor, then turned, but he did not move forward; for the first time he let pass unused what he called "an opportunity." His passion had left him; his love, as he once thought it, was gone. He looked at the pretty woman near him, wondering blankly what he had ever seen there to attract him so wildly. He wished to Heaven he was out of it all. He wished he were dead. John Burley's words suddenly appalled him.

One thing he saw plainly — she was frightened. This opened his lips.

"What's the matter?" he asked, and his hushed voice shirked the familiar Christian name. "Did you see anything?" He nodded his head in the direction of the adjoining room. It was the sound of his own voice addressing her coldly that made him abruptly see himself as he really was, but it was her reply, honestly given, in a faint even voice, that told him she saw her own self too with similar clarity. God, he thought, how revealing a tone, a single word can be!

"I saw — nothing. Only I feel uneasy — dear." That "dear" was a call for help.

"Look here," he cried, so loud that she held up a warning finger, "I'm — I've been a damned fool, a cad! I'm most frightfully ashamed. I'll do anything — *anything* to get it right." He felt cold, naked, his worthlessness laid bare; she felt, he knew, the same. Each revolted suddenly from the other. Yet he knew not quite how or wherefore this great change had thus abruptly come about, especially on her side. He felt that a bigger, deeper emotion than he could understand was working on them, making mere physical relationships seem empty, trivial, cheap and vulgar. His cold increased in face of this utter ignorance.

"Uneasy?" he repeated, perhaps hardly knowing exactly why he said it. "Good Lord, but he can take care of himself — —"

"Oh, *he* is a man," she interrupted; "yes."

Steps were heard, firm, heavy steps, coming back along the corridor. It seemed to Mortimer that he had listened to this sound of steps all night, and would listen to them till he died. He crossed to the lamp and lit a cigarette, carefully this time, turning the wick down afterwards. Mrs. Burley also rose, moving over towards the door, away from him. They listened a moment to these firm and heavy steps, the tread of a man, John Burley. A man ... and a philanderer, flashed across Mortimer's brain like fire, contrasting the two with fierce contempt for himself. The tread became less audible. There was distance in it. It had turned in somewhere.

“There!” she exclaimed in a hushed tone. “He’s gone in.”

“Nonsense! It passed us. He’s going out on to the lawn.”

The pair listened breathlessly for a moment, when the sound of steps came distinctly from the adjoining room, walking across the boards, apparently towards the window.

“There!” she repeated. “He did go in.” Silence of perhaps a minute followed, in which they heard each other’s breathing. “I don’t like his being alone — in there,” Mrs. Burley said in a thin faltering voice, and moved as though to go out. Her hand was already on the knob of the door, when Mortimer stopped her with a violent gesture.

“Don’t! For God’s sake, don’t!” he cried, before she could turn it. He darted forward. As he laid a hand upon her arm a thud was audible through the wall. It was a heavy sound, and this time there was no wind to cause it.

“It’s only that loose swinging thing,” he whispered thickly, a dreadful confusion blotting out clear thought and speech.

“There was no loose swaying thing at all,” she said in a failing voice, then reeled and swayed against him. “I invented that. There was nothing.” As he caught her, staring helplessly, it seemed to him that a face with lifted lids rushed up at him. He saw two terrified eyes in a patch of ghastly white. Her whisper followed, as she sank into his arms. “It’s John. He’s — —”

At which instant, with terror at its climax, the sound of steps suddenly became audible once more — the firm and heavy tread of John Burley coming out again into the corridor. Such was their amazement and relief that they neither moved nor spoke. The steps drew nearer. The pair seemed petrified; Mortimer did not remove his arms, nor did Mrs. Burley attempt to release herself. They stared at the door and waited. It was pushed wider the next second, and John Burley stood beside them. He was so close he almost touched them — there in each other’s arms.

“Jack, dear!” cried his wife, with a searching tenderness that made her voice seem strange.

He gazed a second at each in turn. “I’m going out on to the lawn for a moment,” he said quietly. There was no expression on his face; he did not smile, he did not frown; he showed no feeling, no emotion — just looked into their eyes, and then withdrew round the edge of the door before either could utter a word in answer. The door swung to behind him. He was gone.

“He’s going to the lawn. He said so.” It was Mortimer speaking, but his voice shook and stammered. Mrs. Burley had released herself. She stood now by the table, silent, gazing with fixed eyes at nothing, her lips parted, her expression vacant. Again she was aware of an alteration in the room; something had gone out.... He watched her a second, uncertain what to say or do. It was the face of a drowned person, occurred to him. Something intangible, yet almost visible stood between them in that narrow space. Something had ended, there before his eyes, definitely ended. The barrier between them rose higher, denser. Through this barrier her words came to him with an odd whispering remoteness.

“Harry.... You saw? You noticed?”

“What d’you mean?” he said gruffly. He tried to feel angry, contemptuous, but his breath caught absurdly.

“Harry — he was different. The eyes, the hair, the” — her face grew like death— “the twist in his face — —”

“What on earth are you saying? Pull yourself together.” He saw that she was trembling down the whole length of her body, as she leaned against the table for support. His own legs shook. He stared hard at her.

“Altered, Harry ... altered.” Her horrified whisper came at him like a knife. For it was true. He, too, had noticed something about the husband’s appearance that was not quite normal. Yet, even while they talked, they heard him going down the carpetless stairs; the sounds ceased as he crossed the hall; then came the noise of the front door banging, the reverberation even shaking the room a little where they stood.

Mortimer went over to her side. He walked unevenly.

“My dear! For God’s sake — this is sheer nonsense. Don’t let yourself go like this. I’ll put it straight with him — it’s all my fault.” He saw by her face that she did not understand his words; he was saying the wrong thing altogether; her mind was utterly elsewhere. “He’s all right,” he went on hurriedly. “He’s out on the lawn now — —”

He broke off at the sight of her. The horror that fastened on her brain plastered her face with deathly whiteness.

“That was not John at all!” she cried, a wail of misery and terror in her voice. She rushed to the window and he followed. To his immense relief a figure moving below was plainly visible. It was John Burley. They saw him in the faint grey of the dawn, as he crossed the lawn, going away from the house. He disappeared.

“There you are! See?” whispered Mortimer reassuringly. “He’ll be back in — —” when a sound in the adjoining room, heavier, louder than before, cut appallingly across his words, and Mrs. Burley, with that wailing scream, fell back into his arms. He caught her only just in time, for she stiffened into ice, daft with the uncomprehended terror of it all, and helpless as a child.

“Darling, my darling — oh, God!” He bent, kissing her face wildly. He was utterly distraught.

“Harry! Jack — oh, oh!” she wailed in her anguish. “It took on his likeness. It deceived us ... to give him time. He’s done it.”

She sat up suddenly. “Go,” she said, pointing to the room beyond, then sank fainting, a dead weight in his arms.

He carried her unconscious body to a chair, then entering the adjoining room he flashed his torch upon the body of her husband hanging from a bracket in the wall. He cut it down five minutes too late.

X

THE MAN WHO FOUND OUT (A NIGHTMARE)

1

PROFESSOR MARK EBOR, the scientist, led a double life, and the only persons who knew it were his assistant, Dr. Laidlaw, and his publishers. But a double life need not always be a bad one, and, as Dr. Laidlaw and the gratified publishers well knew, the parallel lives of this particular man were equally good, and indefinitely produced would certainly have ended in a heaven somewhere that can suitably contain such strangely opposite characteristics as his remarkable personality combined.

For Mark Ebor, F.R.S., etc., etc., was that unique combination hardly ever met with in actual life, a man of science and a mystic.

As the first, his name stood in the gallery of the great, and as the second — but there came the mystery! For under the pseudonym of "Pilgrim" (the author of that brilliant series of books that appealed to so many), his identity was as well concealed as that of the anonymous writer of the weather reports in a daily newspaper. Thousands read the sanguine, optimistic, stimulating little books that issued annually from the pen of "Pilgrim," and thousands bore their daily burdens better for having read; while the Press generally agreed that the author, besides being an incorrigible enthusiast and optimist, was also — a woman; but no one ever succeeded in penetrating the veil of anonymity and discovering that "Pilgrim" and the biologist were one and the same person.

Mark Ebor, as Dr. Laidlaw knew him in his laboratory, was one man; but Mark Ebor, as he sometimes saw him after work was over, with rapt eyes and ecstatic face, discussing the possibilities of "union with God" and the future of the human race, was quite another.

"I have always held, as you know," he was saying one evening as he sat in the little study beyond the laboratory with his assistant and intimate, "that Vision should play a large part in the life of the awakened man — not to be regarded as infallible, of course, but to be observed and made use of as a guide-post to possibilities — —"

“I am aware of your peculiar views, sir,” the young doctor put in deferentially, yet with a certain impatience.

“For Visions come from a region of the consciousness where observation and experiment are out of the question,” pursued the other with enthusiasm, not noticing the interruption, “and, while they should be checked by reason afterwards, they should not be laughed at or ignored. All inspiration, I hold, is of the nature of interior Vision, and all our best knowledge has come — such is my confirmed belief — as a sudden revelation to the brain prepared to receive it — —”

“Prepared by hard work first, by concentration, by the closest possible study of ordinary phenomena,” Dr. Laidlaw allowed himself to observe.

“Perhaps,” sighed the other; “but by a process, none the less, of spiritual illumination. The best match in the world will not light a candle unless the wick be first suitably prepared.”

It was Laidlaw’s turn to sigh. He knew so well the impossibility of arguing with his chief when he was in the regions of the mystic, but at the same time the respect he felt for his tremendous attainments was so sincere that he always listened with attention and deference, wondering how far the great man would go and to what end this curious combination of logic and “illumination” would eventually lead him.

“Only last night,” continued the elder man, a sort of light coming into his rugged features, “the vision came to me again — the one that has haunted me at intervals ever since my youth, and that will not be denied.”

Dr. Laidlaw fidgeted in his chair.

“About the Tablets of the Gods, you mean — and that they lie somewhere hidden in the sands,” he said patiently. A sudden gleam of interest came into his face as he turned to catch the professor’s reply.

“And that I am to be the one to find them, to decipher them, and to give the great knowledge to the world — —”

“Who will not believe,” laughed Laidlaw shortly, yet interested in spite of his thinly-veiled contempt.

“Because even the keenest minds, in the right sense of the word, are hopelessly — unscientific,” replied the other gently, his face positively aglow with the memory of his vision. “Yet what is more likely,” he continued after a moment’s pause, peering into space with rapt eyes that saw things too wonderful for exact language to describe, “than that there should have been given to man in the first ages of the world some record of the purpose and problem that had been set him to solve? In a word,” he cried, fixing his shining eyes upon the face of his perplexed assistant, “that God’s messengers in the far-off ages should have given to His creatures some full statement of the secret of the world, of the secret of the soul, of the meaning of life and death — the explanation of our being here, and to what great end we are destined in the ultimate fullness of things?”

Dr. Laidlaw sat speechless. These outbursts of mystical enthusiasm he had witnessed before. With any other man he would not have listened to a single sentence, but to Professor Ebor, man of knowledge and profound investigator, he listened with respect, because he regarded this condition as temporary and pathological, and in some sense a reaction from the intense strain of the prolonged mental concentration of many days.

He smiled, with something between sympathy and resignation as he met the other’s rapt gaze.

“But you have said, sir, at other times, that you consider the ultimate secrets to be screened from all possible — —”

“The *ultimate* secrets, yes,” came the unperturbed reply; “but that there lies buried somewhere an indestructible record of the secret meaning of life, originally known to men in the days of their pristine innocence, I am convinced. And, by this strange vision so often vouchsafed to me, I am equally sure that one day it shall be given to me to announce to a weary world this glorious and terrific message.”

And he continued at great length and in glowing language to describe the species of vivid dream that had come to him at intervals since earliest childhood, showing in detail how he discovered these very Tablets of the Gods, and proclaimed their splendid contents — whose precise nature was always, however, withheld from him in the vision — to a patient and suffering humanity.

“The *Scrutator*, sir, well described ‘Pilgrim’ as the Apostle of Hope,” said the young doctor gently, when he had finished; “and now, if that reviewer could hear you speak and realize from what strange depths comes your simple faith — —”

The professor held up his hand, and the smile of a little child broke over his face like sunshine in the morning.

“Half the good my books do would be instantly destroyed,” he said sadly; “they would say that I wrote with my tongue in my cheek. But wait,” he added significantly; “wait till I find these Tablets of the Gods! Wait till I hold the solutions of the old world-problems in my hands! Wait till the light of this new revelation breaks upon confused humanity, and it wakes to find its bravest hopes justified! Ah, then, my dear Laidlaw — —”

He broke off suddenly; but the doctor, cleverly guessing the thought in his mind, caught him up immediately.

“Perhaps this very summer,” he said, trying hard to make the suggestion keep pace with honesty; “in your explorations in Assyria — your digging in the remote civilization of what was once Chaldea, you may find — what you dream of — —”

The professor held up his hand, and the smile of a fine old face.

“Perhaps,” he murmured softly, “perhaps!”

And the young doctor, thanking the gods of science that his leader’s aberrations were of so harmless a character, went home strong in the certitude of his knowledge of externals, proud that he was able to refer his visions to self-suggestion, and wondering complaisantly whether in his old age he might not after all suffer himself from visitations of the very kind that afflicted his respected chief.

And as he got into bed and thought again of his master’s rugged face, and finely shaped head, and the deep lines traced by years of work and self-discipline, he turned over on his pillow and fell asleep with a sigh that was half of wonder, half of regret.

2

It was in February, nine months later, when Dr. Laidlaw made his way to Charing Cross to meet his chief after his long absence of travel and exploration. The vision about the so-called Tablets of the Gods had meanwhile passed almost entirely from his memory.

There were few people in the train, for the stream of traffic was now running the other way, and he had no difficulty in finding the man he had come to meet. The shock of white hair beneath the low-crowned felt hat was alone enough to distinguish him by easily.

“Here I am at last!” exclaimed the professor, somewhat wearily, clasping his friend’s hand as he listened to the young doctor’s warm greetings and questions. “Here I am — a little older, and *much* dirtier than when you last saw me!” He glanced down laughingly at his travel-stained garments.

“And *much* wiser,” said Laidlaw, with a smile, as he bustled about the platform for porters and gave his chief the latest scientific news.

At last they came down to practical considerations.

“And your luggage — where is that? You must have tons of it, I suppose?” said Laidlaw.

“Hardly anything,” Professor Ebor answered. “Nothing, in fact, but what you see.”

“Nothing but this hand-bag?” laughed the other, thinking he was joking.

“And a small portmanteau in the van,” was the quiet reply. “I have no other luggage.”

“You have no other luggage?” repeated Laidlaw, turning sharply to see if he were in earnest.

“Why should I need more?” the professor added simply.

Something in the man’s face, or voice, or manner — the doctor hardly knew which — suddenly struck him as strange. There was a change in him, a change so profound — so little on the surface, that is — that at first he had not become aware of it. For a moment it was as though an utterly alien personality stood before him in that noisy, bustling throng. Here, in all the homely, friendly turmoil of a Charing Cross crowd, a curious feeling of cold passed over his heart, touching his life with icy finger, so that he actually trembled and felt afraid.

He looked up quickly at his friend, his mind working with startled and unwelcome thoughts.

“Only this?” he repeated, indicating the bag. “But where’s all the stuff you went away with? And — have you brought nothing home — no treasures?”

“This is all I have,” the other said briefly. The pale smile that went with the words caused the doctor a second indescribable sensation of uneasiness. Something was very wrong, something was very queer; he wondered now that he had not noticed it sooner.

“The rest follows, of course, by slow freight,” he added tactfully, and as naturally as possible. “But come, sir, you must be tired and in want of food after your long journey. I’ll get a taxi at once, and we can see about the other luggage afterwards.”

It seemed to him he hardly knew quite what he was saying; the change in his friend had come upon him so suddenly and now grew upon him more and more distressingly. Yet he could not make out exactly in what it consisted. A terrible suspicion began to take shape in his mind, troubling him dreadfully.

“I am neither very tired, nor in need of food, thank you,” the professor said quietly. “And this is all I have. There is no luggage to follow. I have brought home nothing — nothing but what you see.”

His words conveyed finality. They got into a taxi, tipped the porter, who had been staring in amazement at the venerable figure of the scientist, and were conveyed slowly and noisily to the house in the north of London where the laboratory was, the scene of their labours of years.

And the whole way Professor Ebor uttered no word, nor did Dr. Laidlaw find the courage to ask a single question.

It was only late that night, before he took his departure, as the two men were standing before the fire in the study — that study where they had discussed so many problems of vital and absorbing interest — that Dr. Laidlaw at last found strength to come to the point with direct questions. The professor had been giving him a superficial and desultory account of his travels, of his journeys by camel, of his encampments among the mountains and in the desert, and of his explorations among the buried temples, and, deeper, into the waste of the pre-historic sands, when suddenly the doctor came to the desired point with a kind of nervous rush, almost like a frightened boy.

"And you found — —" he began stammering, looking hard at the other's dreadfully altered face, from which every line of hope and cheerfulness seemed to have been obliterated as a sponge wipes markings from a slate— "you found — —"

"I found," replied the other, in a solemn voice, and it was the voice of the mystic rather than the man of science— "I found what I went to seek. The vision never once failed me. It led me straight to the place like a star in the heavens. I found — the Tablets of the Gods."

Dr. Laidlaw caught his breath, and steadied himself on the back of a chair. The words fell like particles of ice upon his heart. For the first time the professor had uttered the well-known phrase without the glow of light and wonder in his face that always accompanied it.

"You have — brought them?" he faltered.

"I have brought them home," said the other, in a voice with a ring like iron; "and I have — deciphered them."

Profound despair, the bloom of outer darkness, the dead sound of a hopeless soul freezing in the utter cold of space seemed to fill in the pauses between the brief sentences. A silence followed, during which Dr. Laidlaw saw nothing but the white face before him alternately fade and return. And it was like the face of a dead man.

"They are, alas, indestructible," he heard the voice continue, with its even, metallic ring.

"Indestructible," Laidlaw repeated mechanically, hardly knowing what he was saying.

Again a silence of several minutes passed, during which, with a creeping cold about his heart, he stood and stared into the eyes of the man he had known and loved so long — aye, and worshipped, too; the man who had first opened his own eyes when they were blind, and had led him to the gates of knowledge, and no little distance along the difficult path beyond; the man who, in another direction, had passed on the strength of his faith into the hearts of thousands by his books.

"I may see them?" he asked at last, in a low voice he hardly recognized as his own. "You will let me know — their message?"

Professor Ebor kept his eyes fixedly upon his assistant’s face as he answered, with a smile that was more like the grin of death than a living human smile.

“When I am gone,” he whispered; “when I have passed away. Then you shall find them and read the translation I have made. And then, too, in your turn, you must try, with the latest resources of science at your disposal to aid you, to compass their utter destruction.” He paused a moment, and his face grew pale as the face of a corpse. “Until that time,” he added presently, without looking up, “I must ask you not to refer to the subject again — and to keep my confidence meanwhile — *ab* — *so* — *lute* — *ly*.”

3

A year passed slowly by, and at the end of it Dr. Laidlaw had found it necessary to sever his working connexion with his friend and one-time leader. Professor Ebor was no longer the same man. The light had gone out of his life; the laboratory was closed; he no longer put pen to paper or applied his mind to a single problem. In the short space of a few months he had passed from a hale and hearty man of late middle life to the condition of old age — a man collapsed and on the edge of dissolution. Death, it was plain, lay waiting for him in the shadows of any day — and he knew it.

To describe faithfully the nature of this profound alteration in his character and temperament is not easy, but Dr. Laidlaw summed it up to himself in three words: *Loss of Hope*. The splendid mental powers remained indeed undimmed, but the incentive to use them — to use them for the help of others — had gone. The character still held to its fine and unselfish habits of years, but the far goal to which they had been the leading strings had faded away. The desire for knowledge — knowledge for its own sake — had died, and the passionate hope which hitherto had animated with tireless energy the heart and brain of this splendidly equipped intellect had suffered total eclipse. The central fires had gone out. Nothing was worth doing, thinking, working for. There *was* nothing to work for any longer!

The professor’s first step was to recall as many of his books as possible; his second to close his laboratory and stop all research. He gave no explanation, he invited no questions. His whole personality crumbled away, so to speak, till his daily life became a mere mechanical process of clothing the body, feeding the body, keeping it in good health so as to avoid physical discomfort, and, above all, doing nothing that could interfere with sleep. The professor did everything he could to lengthen the hours of sleep, and therefore of forgetfulness.

It was all clear enough to Dr. Laidlaw. A weaker man, he knew, would have sought to lose himself in one form or another of sensual indulgence — sleeping-draughts, drink, the first pleasures that came to hand. Self-destruction would have been the method of a little bolder type; and deliberate evil-doing, poisoning with his awful knowledge all he could, the means of still another kind of man. Mark Ebor was none of these. He held himself under fine control, facing silently and without complaint the terrible facts he honestly believed himself to have been unfortunate enough to discover. Even to his intimate friend and assistant, Dr. Laidlaw, he vouchsafed no word of true explanation or lament. He went straight forward to the end, knowing well that the end was not very far away.

And death came very quietly one day to him, as he was sitting in the arm-chair of the study, directly facing the doors of the laboratory — the doors that no longer opened. Dr. Laidlaw, by happy chance, was with him at the time, and just able to reach his side in response to the sudden painful efforts for breath; just in time, too, to catch the murmured words that fell from the pallid lips like a message from the other side of the grave.

“Read them, if you must; and, if you can — destroy. But” — his voice sank so low that Dr. Laidlaw only just caught the dying syllables— “but — never, never — give them to the world.”

And like a grey bundle of dust loosely gathered up in an old garment the professor sank back into his chair and expired.

But this was only the death of the body. His spirit had died two years before.

4

The estate of the dead man was small and uncomplicated, and Dr. Laidlaw, as sole executor and residuary legatee, had no difficulty in settling it up. A month after the funeral he was sitting alone in his upstairs library, the last sad duties completed, and his mind full of poignant memories and regrets for the loss of a friend he had revered and loved, and to whom his debt was so incalculably great. The last two years, indeed, had been for him terrible.

To watch the swift decay of the greatest combination of heart and brain he had ever known, and to realize he was powerless to help, was a source of profound grief to him that would remain to the end of his days.

At the same time an insatiable curiosity possessed him. The study of dementia was, of course, outside his special province as a specialist, but he knew enough of it to understand how small a matter might be the actual cause of how great an illusion, and he had been devoured from the very beginning by a ceaseless and increasing anxiety to know what the professor had found in the sands of “Chaldea,” what these precious Tablets of the Gods might be, and particularly — for this was the real cause that had sapped the man’s sanity and hope — what the inscription was that he had believed to have deciphered thereon.

The curious feature of it all to his own mind was, that whereas his friend had dreamed of finding a message of glorious hope and comfort, he had apparently found (so far as he had found anything intelligible at all, and not invented the whole thing in his dementia) that the secret of the world, and the meaning of life and death, was of so terrible a nature that it robbed the heart of courage and the soul of hope. What, then, could be the contents of the little brown parcel the professor had bequeathed to him with his pregnant dying sentences?

Actually his hand was trembling as he turned to the writing-table and began slowly to unfasten a small old-fashioned desk on which the small gilt initials “M.E.” stood forth as a melancholy memento. He put the key into the lock and half turned it. Then, suddenly, he stopped and looked about him. Was that a sound at the back of the room? It was just as though someone had laughed and then tried to smother the laugh with a cough. A slight shiver ran over him as he stood listening.

“This is absurd,” he said aloud; “too absurd for belief — that I should be so nervous! It’s the effect of curiosity unduly prolonged.” He smiled a little sadly and his eyes wandered to the blue summer sky and the plane trees swaying in the wind below his window. “It’s the reaction,” he continued. “The curiosity of two years to be quenched in a single moment! The nervous tension, of course, must be considerable.”

He turned back to the brown desk and opened it without further delay. His hand was firm now, and he took out the paper parcel that lay inside without a tremor. It was heavy. A moment later there lay on the table before him a couple of weather-worn plaques of grey stone — they looked like stone, although they felt like metal — on which he saw markings of a curious character that might have been the mere tracings of natural forces through the ages, or, equally well, the half-obliterated hieroglyphics cut upon their surface in past centuries by the more or less untutored hand of a common scribe.

He lifted each stone in turn and examined it carefully. It seemed to him that a faint glow of heat passed from the substance into his skin, and he put them down again suddenly, as with a gesture of uneasiness.

“A very clever, or a very imaginative man,” he said to himself, “who could squeeze the secrets of life and death from such broken lines as those!”

Then he turned to a yellow envelope lying beside them in the desk, with the single word on the outside in the writing of the professor — the word *Translation*.

“Now,” he thought, taking it up with a sudden violence to conceal his nervousness, “now for the great solution. Now to learn the meaning of the worlds, and why mankind was made, and why discipline is worth while, and sacrifice and pain the true law of advancement.”

There was the shadow of a sneer in his voice, and yet something in him shivered at the same time. He held the envelope as though weighing it in his hand, his mind pondering many things. Then curiosity won the day, and he suddenly tore it open with the gesture of an actor who tears open a letter on the stage, knowing there is no real writing inside at all.

A page of finely written script in the late scientist’s handwriting lay before him. He read it through from beginning to end, missing no word, uttering each syllable distinctly under his breath as he read.

The pallor of his face grew ghastly as he neared the end. He began to shake all over as with ague. His breath came heavily in gasps. He still gripped the sheet of paper, however, and deliberately, as by an intense effort of will, read it through a second time from beginning to end. And this time, as the last syllable dropped from his lips, the whole face of the man flamed with a sudden and terrible anger. His skin became deep, deep red, and he clenched his teeth. With all the strength of his vigorous soul he was struggling to keep control of himself.

For perhaps five minutes he stood there beside the table without stirring a muscle. He might have been carved out of stone. His eyes were shut, and only the heaving of the chest betrayed the fact that he was a living being. Then, with a strange quietness, he lit a match and applied it to the sheet of paper he held in his hand. The ashes fell slowly about him, piece by piece, and he blew them from the window-sill into the air, his eyes following them as they floated away on the summer wind that breathed so warmly over the world.

He turned back slowly into the room. Although his actions and movements were absolutely steady and controlled, it was clear that he was on the edge of violent action. A hurricane might burst upon the still room any moment. His muscles were tense and rigid. Then, suddenly, he whitened, collapsed, and sank backwards into a chair, like a tumbled bundle of inert matter. He had fainted.

In less than half an hour he recovered consciousness and sat up. As before, he made no sound. Not a syllable passed his lips. He rose quietly and looked about the room.

Then he did a curious thing.

Taking a heavy stick from the rack in the corner he approached the mantlepiece, and with a heavy shattering blow he smashed the clock to pieces. The glass fell in shivering atoms.

“Cease your lying voice for ever,” he said, in a curiously still, even tone. “There is no such thing as *time!”*

He took the watch from his pocket, swung it round several times by the long gold chain, smashed it into smithereens against the wall with a single blow, and then walked into his laboratory next door, and hung its broken body on the bones of the skeleton in the corner of the room.

“Let one damned mockery hang upon another,” he said smiling oddly. “Delusions, both of you, and cruel as false!”

He slowly moved back to the front room. He stopped opposite the bookcase where stood in a row the “Scriptures of the World,” choicely bound and exquisitely printed, the late professor’s most treasured possession, and next to them several books signed “Pilgrim.”

One by one he took them from the shelf and hurled them through the open window.

“A devil’s dreams! A devil’s foolish dreams!” he cried, with a vicious laugh.

Presently he stopped from sheer exhaustion. He turned his eyes slowly to the wall opposite, where hung a weird array of Eastern swords and daggers, scimitars and spears, the collections of many journeys. He crossed the room and ran his finger along the edge. His mind seemed to waver.

“No,” he muttered presently; “not that way. There are easier and better ways than that.”

He took his hat and passed downstairs into the street.

5

It was five o’clock, and the June sun lay hot upon the pavement. He felt the metal door-knob burn the palm of his hand.

“Ah, Laidlaw, this is well met,” cried a voice at his elbow; “I was in the act of coming to see you. I’ve a case that will interest you, and besides, I remembered that you flavoured your tea with orange leaves! — and I admit — —”

It was Alexis Stephen, the great hypnotic doctor.

“I’ve had no tea to-day,” Laidlaw said, in a dazed manner, after staring for a moment as though the other had struck him in the face. A new idea had entered his mind.

“What’s the matter?” asked Dr. Stephen quickly. “Something’s wrong with you. It’s this sudden heat, or overwork. Come, man, let’s go inside.”

A sudden light broke upon the face of the younger man, the light of a heaven-sent inspiration. He looked into his friend’s face, and told a direct lie.

“Odd,” he said, “I myself was just coming to see you. I have something of great importance to test your confidence with. But in *your* house, please,” as Stephen urged him towards his own door— “in your house. It’s only round the corner, and I — I cannot go back there — to my rooms — till I have told you."

"I'm your patient — for the moment," he added stammeringly as soon as they were seated in the privacy of the hypnotist's sanctum, "and I want — er — —"

"My dear Laidlaw," interrupted the other, in that soothing voice of command which had suggested to many a suffering soul that the cure for its pain lay in the powers of its own reawakened will, "I am always at your service, as you know. You have only to tell me what I can do for you, and I will do it." He showed every desire to help him out. His manner was indescribably tactful and direct.

Dr. Laidlaw looked up into his face.

"I surrender my will to you," he said, already calmed by the other's healing presence, "and I want you to treat me hypnotically — and at once. I want you to suggest to me" — his voice became very tense— "that I shall forget — forget till I die — everything that has occurred to me during the last two hours; till I die, mind," he added, with solemn emphasis, "till I die."

He floundered and stammered like a frightened boy. Alexis Stephen looked at him fixedly without speaking.

"And further," Laidlaw continued, "I want you to ask me no questions. I wish to forget for ever something I have recently discovered — something so terrible and yet so obvious that I can hardly understand why it is not patent to every mind in the world — for I have had a moment of absolute *clear vision* — of merciless clairvoyance. But I want no one else in the whole world to know what it is — least of all, old friend, yourself."

He talked in utter confusion, and hardly knew what he was saying. But the pain on his face and the anguish in his voice were an instant passport to the other's heart.

"Nothing is easier," replied Dr. Stephen, after a hesitation so slight that the other probably did not even notice it. "Come into my other room where we shall not be disturbed. I can heal you. Your memory of the last two hours shall be wiped out as though it had never been. You can trust me absolutely."

"I know I can," Laidlaw said simply, as he followed him in.

6

An hour later they passed back into the front room again. The sun was already behind the houses opposite, and the shadows began to gather.

"I went off easily?" Laidlaw asked.

"You were a little obstinate at first. But though you came in like a lion, you went out like a lamb. I let you sleep a bit afterwards."

Dr. Stephen kept his eyes rather steadily upon his friend's face.

"What were you doing by the fire before you came here?" he asked, pausing, in a casual tone, as he lit a cigarette and handed the case to his patient.

"I? Let me see. Oh, I know; I was worrying my way through poor old Ebor's papers and things. I'm his executor, you know. Then I got weary and came out for a whiff of air." He spoke lightly and with perfect naturalness. Obviously he was telling the truth. "I prefer specimens to papers," he laughed cheerily.

"I know, I know," said Dr. Stephen, holding a lighted match for the cigarette. His face wore an expression of content. The experiment had been a complete success. The memory of the last two hours was wiped out utterly. Laidlaw was already chatting gaily and easily about a dozen other things that interested him. Together they went out into the street, and at his door Dr. Stephen left him with a joke and a wry face that made his friend laugh heartily.

"Don't dine on the professor's old papers by mistake," he cried, as he vanished down the street.

Dr. Laidlaw went up to his study at the top of the house. Half way down he met his housekeeper, Mrs. Fewings. She was flustered and excited, and her face was very red and perspiring.

"There've been burglars here," she cried excitedly, "or something funny! All your things is just anyhow, sir. I found everything all about everywhere!" She was very confused. In this orderly and very precise establishment it was unusual to find a thing out of place.

“Oh, my specimens!” cried the doctor, dashing up the rest of the stairs at top speed. “Have they been touched or — —”

He flew to the door of the laboratory. Mrs. Fewings panted up heavily behind him.

“The labatry ain’t been touched,” she explained, breathlessly, “but they smashed the libry clock and they’ve ‘ung your gold watch, sir, on the skelinton’s hands. And the books that weren’t no value they flung out er the window just like so much rubbish. They must have been wild drunk, Dr. Laidlaw, sir!”

The young scientist made a hurried examination of the rooms. Nothing of value was missing. He began to wonder what kind of burglars they were. He looked up sharply at Mrs. Fewings standing in the doorway. For a moment he seemed to cast about in his mind for something.

“Odd,” he said at length. “I only left here an hour ago and everything was all right then.”

“Was it, sir? Yes, sir.” She glanced sharply at him. Her room looked out upon the courtyard, and she must have seen the books come crashing down, and also have heard her master leave the house a few minutes later.

“And what’s this rubbish the brutes have left?” he cried, taking up two slabs of worn gray stone, on the writing-table. “Bath brick, or something, I do declare.”

He looked very sharply again at the confused and troubled housekeeper.

“Throw them on the dust heap, Mrs. Fewings, and — and let me know if anything is missing in the house, and I will notify the police this evening.”

When she left the room he went into the laboratory and took his watch off the skeleton’s fingers. His face wore a troubled expression, but after a moment’s thought it cleared again. His memory was a complete blank.

“I suppose I left it on the writing-table when I went out to take the air,” he said. And there was no one present to contradict him.

He crossed to the window and blew carelessly some ashes of burned paper from the sill, and stood watching them as they floated away lazily over the tops of the trees.

XI

THE EMPTY SLEEVE

1

THE GILMER BROTHERS were a couple of fussy and pernickety old bachelors of a rather retiring, not to say timid, disposition. There was grey in the pointed beard of John, the elder, and if any hair had remained to William it would also certainly have been of the same shade. They had private means. Their main interest in life was the collection of violins, for which they had the instinctive *flair* of true connoisseurs. Neither John nor William, however, could play a single note. They could only pluck the open strings. The production of tone, so necessary before purchase, was done vicariously for them by another.

The only objection they had to the big building in which they occupied the roomy top floor was that Morgan, liftman and caretaker, insisted on wearing a billycock with his uniform after six o'clock in the evening, with a result disastrous to the beauty of the universe. For "Mr. Morgan," as they called him between themselves, had a round and pasty face on the top of a round and conical body. In view, however, of the man's other rare qualities — including his devotion to themselves — this objection was not serious.

He had another peculiarity that amused them. On being found fault with, he explained nothing, but merely repeated the words of the complaint.

"Water in the bath wasn't really hot this morning, Morgan!"

"Water in the bath not reely 'ot, wasn't it, sir?"

Or, from William, who was something of a faddist:

"My jar of sour milk came up late yesterday, Morgan."

"Your jar sour milk come up late, sir, yesterday?"

Since, however, the statement of a complaint invariably resulted in its remedy, the brothers had learned to look for no further explanation. Next morning the bath *was* hot, the sour milk *was* "brortup" punctually. The uniform and billycock hat, though, remained an eyesore and source of oppression.

On this particular night John Gilmer, the elder, returning from a Masonic rehearsal, stepped into the lift and found Mr. Morgan with his hand ready on the iron rope.

“Fog’s very thick outside,” said Mr. John pleasantly; and the lift was a third of the way up before Morgan had completed his customary repetition: “Fog very thick outside, yes, sir.” And Gilmer then asked casually if his brother were alone, and received the reply that Mr. Hyman had called and had not yet gone away.

Now this Mr. Hyman was a Hebrew, and, like themselves, a connoisseur in violins, but, unlike themselves, who only kept their specimens to look at, he was a skilful and exquisite player. He was the only person they ever permitted to handle their pedigree instruments, to take them from the glass cases where they reposed in silent splendour, and to draw the sound out of their wondrous painted hearts of golden varnish. The brothers loathed to see his fingers touch them, yet loved to hear their singing voices in the room, for the latter confirmed their sound judgment as collectors, and made them certain their money had been well spent. Hyman, however, made no attempt to conceal his contempt and hatred for the mere collector. The atmosphere of the room fairly pulsed with these opposing forces of silent emotion when Hyman played and the Gilmers, alternately writhing and admiring, listened. The occasions, however, were not frequent. The Hebrew only came by invitation, and both brothers made a point of being in. It was a very formal proceeding — something of a sacred rite almost.

John Gilmer, therefore, was considerably surprised by the information Morgan had supplied. For one thing, Hyman, he had understood, was away on the Continent.

“Still in there, you say?” he repeated, after a moment’s reflection.

“Still in there, Mr. John, sir.” Then, concealing his surprise from the liftman, he fell back upon his usual mild habit of complaining about the billycock hat and the uniform.

“You really should try and remember, Morgan,” he said, though kindly. “That hat does *not* go well with that uniform!”

Morgan’s pasty countenance betrayed no vestige of expression. “‘At don’t go well with the yewniform, sir,” he repeated, hanging up the disreputable bowler and replacing it with a gold-braided cap from the peg. “No, sir, it don’t, do it?” he added cryptically, smiling at the transformation thus effected.

And the lift then halted with an abrupt jerk at the top floor. By somebody’s carelessness the landing was in darkness, and, to make things worse, Morgan, clumsily pulling the iron rope, happened to knock the billycock from its peg so that his sleeve, as he stooped to catch it, struck the switch and plunged the scene in a moment’s complete obscurity.

And it was then, in the act of stepping out before the light was turned on again, that John Gilmer stumbled against something that shot along the landing past the open door. First he thought it must be a child, then a man, then — an animal. Its movement was rapid yet stealthy. Starting backwards instinctively to allow it room to pass, Gilmer collided in the darkness with Morgan, and Morgan incontinently screamed. There was a moment of stupid confusion. The heavy framework of the lift shook a little, as though something had stepped into it and then as quickly jumped out again. A rushing sound followed that resembled footsteps, yet at the same time was more like gliding — someone in soft slippers or stockinged feet, greatly hurrying. Then came silence again. Morgan sprang to the landing and turned up the electric light. Mr. Gilmer, at the same moment, did likewise to the switch in the lift. Light flooded the scene. Nothing was visible.

“Dog or cat, or something, I suppose, wasn’t it?” exclaimed Gilmer, following the man out and looking round with bewildered amazement upon a deserted landing. He knew quite well, even while he spoke, that the words were foolish.

“Dog or cat, yes, sir, or — something,” echoed Morgan, his eyes narrowed to pin-points, then growing large, but his face stolid.

“The light should have been on.” Mr. Gilmer spoke with a touch of severity. The little occurrence had curiously disturbed his equanimity. He felt annoyed, upset, uneasy.

For a perceptible pause the liftman made no reply, and his employer, looking up, saw that, besides being flustered, he was white about the jaws. His voice, when he spoke, was without its normal assurance. This time he did not merely repeat. He explained.

“The light *was* on, sir, when last *I* come up!” he said, with emphasis, obviously speaking the truth. “Only a moment ago,” he added.

Mr. Gilmer, for some reason, felt disinclined to press for explanations. He decided to ignore the matter.

Then the lift plunged down again into the depths like a diving-bell into water; and John Gilmer, pausing a moment first to reflect, let himself in softly with his latch-key, and, after hanging up hat and coat in the hall, entered the big sitting-room he and his brother shared in common.

The December fog that covered London like a dirty blanket had penetrated, he saw, into the room. The objects in it were half shrouded in the familiar yellowish haze.

2

In dressing-gown and slippers, William Gilmer, almost invisible in his armchair by the gas-stove across the room, spoke at once. Through the thick atmosphere his face gleamed, showing an extinguished pipe hanging from his lips. His tone of voice conveyed emotion, an emotion he sought to suppress, of a quality, however, not easy to define.

“Hyman’s been here,” he announced abruptly. “You must have met him. He’s this very instant gone out.”

It was quite easy to see that something had happened, for “scenes” leave disturbance behind them in the atmosphere. But John made no immediate reference to this. He replied that he had seen no one — which was strictly true — and his brother thereupon, sitting bolt upright in the chair, turned quickly and faced him. His skin, in the foggy air, seemed paler than before.

“That’s odd,” he said nervously.

“What’s odd?” asked John.

“That you didn’t see — anything. You ought to have run into one another on the doorstep.” His eyes went peering about the room. He was distinctly ill at ease. “You’re positive you saw no one? Did Morgan take him down before you came? Did Morgan see him?” He asked several questions at once.

“On the contrary, Morgan told me he was still here with you. Hyman probably walked down, and didn’t take the lift at all,” he replied. “That accounts for neither of us seeing him." He decided to say nothing about the occurrence in the lift, for his brother's nerves, he saw plainly, were on edge.

William then stood up out of his chair, and the skin of his face changed its hue, for whereas a moment ago it was merely pale, it had now altered to a tint that lay somewhere between white and a livid grey. The man was fighting internal terror. For a moment these two brothers of middle age looked each other straight in the eye. Then John spoke:

"What's wrong, Billy?" he asked quietly. "Something's upset you. What brought Hyman in this way — unexpectedly? I thought he was still in Germany."

The brothers, affectionate and sympathetic, understood one another perfectly. They had no secrets. Yet for several minutes the younger one made no reply. It seemed difficult to choose his words apparently.

"Hyman played, I suppose — on the fiddles?" John helped him, wondering uneasily what was coming. He did not care much for the individual in question, though his talent was of such great use to them.

The other nodded in the affirmative, then plunged into rapid speech, talking under his breath as though he feared someone might overhear. Glancing over his shoulder down the foggy room, he drew his brother close.

"Hyman came," he began, "unexpectedly. He hadn't written, and I hadn't asked him. You hadn't either, I suppose?"

John shook his head.

"When I came in from the dining-room I found him in the passage. The servant was taking away the dishes, and he had let himself in while the front door was ajar. Pretty cool, wasn't it?"

"He's an original," said John, shrugging his shoulders. "And you welcomed him?" he asked.

"I asked him in, of course. He explained he had something glorious for me to hear. Silenski had played it in the afternoon, and he had bought the music since. But Silenski's 'Strad' hadn't the power — it's thin on the upper strings, you remember, unequal, patchy — and he said no instrument in the world could do it justice but our 'Joseph'-the small Guarnerius, you know, which he swears is the most perfect in the world."

“And what was it? Did he play it?” asked John, growing more uneasy as he grew more interested. With relief he glanced round and saw the matchless little instrument lying there safe and sound in its glass case near the door.

“He played it — divinely: a Zigeuner Lullaby, a fine, passionate, rushing bit of inspiration, oddly misnamed ‘lullaby.’ And, fancy, the fellow had memorized it already! He walked about the room on tiptoe while he played it, complaining of the light — —”

“Complaining of the light?”

“Said the thing was crepuscular, and needed dusk for its full effect. I turned the lights out one by one, till finally there was only the glow of the gas logs. He insisted. You know that way he has with him? And then he got over me in another matter: insisted on using some special strings he had brought with him, and put them on, too, himself — thicker than the A and E *we* use.”

For though neither Gilmer could produce a note, it was their pride that they kept their precious instruments in perfect condition for playing, choosing the exact thickness and quality of strings that suited the temperament of each violin; and the little Guarnerius in question always “sang” best, they held, with thin strings.

“Infernal insolence,” exclaimed the listening brother, wondering what was coming next. “Played it well, though, didn’t he, this Lullaby thing?” he added, seeing that William hesitated. As he spoke he went nearer, sitting down close beside him in a leather chair.

“Magnificent! Pure fire of genius!” was the reply with enthusiasm, the voice at the same time dropping lower. “Staccato like a silver hammer; harmonics like flutes, clear, soft, ringing; and the tone — well, the G string was a baritone, and the upper registers creamy and mellow as a boy’s voice. John,” he added, “that Guarnerius is the very pick of the period and” — again he hesitated— “Hyman loves it. He’d give his soul to have it.”

The more John heard, the more uncomfortable it made him. He had always disliked this gifted Hebrew, for in his secret heart he knew that he had always feared and distrusted him. Sometimes he had felt half afraid of him; the man’s very forcible personality was too insistent to be pleasant. His type was of the dark and sinister kind, and he possessed a violent will that rarely failed of accomplishing its desire.

“Wish I’d heard the fellow play,” he said at length, ignoring his brother’s last remark, and going on to speak of the most matter-of-fact details he could think of. “Did he use the Dodd bow, or the Tourte? That Dodd I picked up last month, you know, is the most perfectly balanced I have ever — —”

He stopped abruptly, for William had suddenly got upon his feet and was standing there, searching the room with his eyes. A chill ran down John’s spine as he watched him.

“What is it, Billy?” he asked sharply. “Hear anything?”

William continued to peer about him through the thick air.

“Oh, nothing, probably,” he said, an odd catch in his voice; “only —— I keep feeling as if there was somebody listening. Do you think, perhaps” — he glanced over his shoulder— “there is someone at the door? I wish — I wish you’d have a look, John.”

John obeyed, though without great eagerness. Crossing the room slowly, he opened the door, then switched on the light. The passage leading past the bathroom towards the bedrooms beyond was empty. The coats hung motionless from their pegs.

“No one, of course,” he said, as he closed the door and came back to the stove. He left the light burning in the passage. It was curious the way both brothers had this impression that they were not alone, though only one of them spoke of it.

“Used the Dodd or the Tourte, Billy — which?” continued John in the most natural voice he could assume.

But at that very same instant the water started to his eyes. His brother, he saw, was close upon the thing he really had to tell. But he had stuck fast.

3

By a great effort John Gilmer composed himself and remained in his chair. With detailed elaboration he lit a cigarette, staring hard at his brother over the flaring match while he did so. There he sat in his dressing-gown and slippers by the fireplace, eyes downcast, fingers playing idly with the red tassel. The electric light cast heavy shadows across the face. In a flash then, since emotion may sometimes express itself in attitude even better than in speech, the elder brother understood that Billy was about to tell him an unutterable thing.

By instinct he moved over to his side so that the same view of the room confronted him.

“Out with it, old man,” he said, with an effort to be natural. “Tell me what you saw.”

Billy shuffled slowly round and the two sat side by side, facing the fog-draped chamber.

“It was like this,” he began softly, “only I was standing instead of sitting, looking over to that door as you and I do now. Hyman moved to and fro in the faint glow of the gas logs against the far wall, playing that ‘crepuscular’ thing in his most inspired sort of way, so that the music seemed to issue from himself rather than from the shining bit of wood under his chin, when — I noticed something coming over me that was” — he hesitated, searching for words— “that wasn’t *all* due to the music,” he finished abruptly.

“His personality put a bit of hypnotism on you, eh?”

William shrugged his shoulders.

“The air was thickish with fog and the light was dim, cast upwards upon him from the stove,” he continued. “I admit all that. But there wasn’t light enough to throw shadows, you see, and — —”

“Hyman looked queer?” the other helped him quickly.

Billy nodded his head without turning.

“Changed there before my very eyes” — he whispered it— “turned animal — —”

“Animal?” John felt his hair rising.

“That’s the only way I can put it. His face and hands and body turned otherwise than usual. I lost the sound of his feet. When the bow-hand or the fingers on the strings passed into the light, they were” — he uttered a soft, shuddering little laugh— “furry, oddly divided, the fingers massed together.

And he paced stealthily. I thought every instant the fiddle would drop with a crash and he would spring at me across the room."

"My dear chap — —"

"He moved with those big, lithe, striding steps one sees" — John held his breath in the little pause, listening keenly— "one sees those big brutes make in the cages when their desire is aflame for food or escape, or — or fierce, passionate desire for anything they want with their whole nature — —"

"The big felines!" John whistled softly.

"And every minute getting nearer and nearer to the door, as though he meant to make a sudden rush for it and get out."

"With the violin! Of course you stopped him?"

"In the end. But for a long time, I swear to you, I found it difficult to know what to do, even to move. I couldn't get my voice for words of any kind; it was like a spell."

"It *was* a spell," suggested John firmly.

"Then, as he moved, still playing," continued the other, "he seemed to grow smaller; to shrink down below the line of the gas. I thought I should lose sight of him altogether. I turned the light up suddenly. There he was over by the door — crouching."

"Playing on his knees, you mean?"

William closed his eyes in an effort to visualize it again.

"Crouching," he repeated, at length, "close to the floor. At least, I think so. It all happened so quickly, and I felt so bewildered, it was hard to see straight. But at first I could have sworn he was half his natural size. I called to him, I think I swore at him — I forget exactly, but I know he straightened up at once and stood before me down there in the light" — he pointed across the room to the door— "eyes gleaming, face white as chalk, perspiring like midsummer, and gradually filling out, straightening up, whatever you like to call it, to his natural size and appearance again. It was the most horrid thing I've ever seen."

"As an — animal, you saw him still?"

"No; human again. Only much smaller."

"What did he say?"

Billy reflected a moment.

"Nothing that I can remember," he replied. "You see, it was all over in a few seconds. In the full light, I felt so foolish, and nonplussed at first. To see him normal again baffled me. And, before I could collect myself, he had let himself out into the passage, and I heard the front door slam. A minute later — the same second almost, it seemed — you came in. I only remember grabbing the violin and getting it back safely under the glass case. The strings were still vibrating."

The account was over. John asked no further questions. Nor did he say a single word about the lift, Morgan, or the extinguished light on the landing. There fell a longish silence between the two men; and then, while they helped themselves to a generous supply of whisky-and-soda before going to bed, John looked up and spoke:

"If you agree, Billy," he said quietly, "I think I might write and suggest to Hyman that we shall no longer have need for his services."

And Billy, acquiescing, added a sentence that expressed something of the singular dread lying but half concealed in the atmosphere of the room, if not in their minds as well:

"Putting it, however, in a way that need not offend him."

"Of course. There's no need to be rude, is there?"

Accordingly, next morning the letter was written; and John, saying nothing to his brother, took it round himself by hand to the Hebrew's rooms near Euston. The answer he dreaded was forthcoming:

"Mr. Hyman's still away abroad," he was told. "But we're forwarding letters; yes. Or I can give you 'is address if you'll prefer it." The letter went, therefore, to the number in Königstrasse, Munich, thus obtained.

Then, on his way back from the insurance company where he went to increase the sum that protected the small Guarnerius from loss by fire, accident, or theft, John Gilmer called at the offices of certain musical agents and ascertained that Silenski, the violinist, was performing at the time in

Munich. It was only some days later, though, by diligent inquiry, he made certain that at a concert on a certain date the famous virtuoso had played a Zigeuner Lullaby of his own composition — the very date, it turned out, on which he himself had been to the Masonic rehearsal at Mark Masons' Hall.

John, however, said nothing of these discoveries to his brother William.

4

It was about a week later when a reply to the letter came from Munich — a letter couched in somewhat offensive terms, though it contained neither words nor phrases that could actually be found fault with. Isidore Hyman was hurt and angry. On his return to London a month or so later, he proposed to call and talk the matter over. The offensive part of the letter lay, perhaps, in his definite assumption that he could persuade the brothers to resume the old relations. John, however, wrote a brief reply to the effect that they had decided to buy no new fiddles; their collection being complete, there would be no occasion for them to invite his services as a performer. This was final. No answer came, and the matter seemed to drop. Never for one moment, though, did it leave the consciousness of John Gilmer. Hyman had said that he would come, and come assuredly he would. He secretly gave Morgan instructions that he and his brother for the future were always "out" when the Hebrew presented himself.

"He must have gone back to Germany, you see, almost at once after his visit here that night," observed William — John, however, making no reply.

One night towards the middle of January the two brothers came home together from a concert in Queen's Hall, and sat up later than usual in their sitting-room discussing over their whisky and tobacco the merits of the pieces and performers. It must have been past one o'clock when they turned out the lights in the passage and retired to bed. The air was still and frosty; moonlight over the roofs — one of those sharp and dry winter nights that now seem to visit London rarely.

"Like the old-fashioned days when we were boys," remarked William, pausing a moment by the passage window and looking out across the miles of silvery, sparkling roofs.

"Yes," added John; "the ponds freezing hard in the fields, rime on the nursery windows, and the sound of a horse's hoofs coming down the road in the distance, eh?” They smiled at the memory, then said good night, and separated. Their rooms were at opposite ends of the corridor; in between were the bathroom, dining-room, and sitting-room. It was a long, straggling flat. Half an hour later both brothers were sound asleep, the flat silent, only a dull murmur rising from the great city outside, and the moon sinking slowly to the level of the chimneys.

Perhaps two hours passed, perhaps three, when John Gilmer, sitting up in bed with a start, wide-awake and frightened, knew that someone was moving about in one of the three rooms that lay between him and his brother. He had absolutely no idea why he should have been frightened, for there was no dream or nightmare-memory that he brought over from unconsciousness, and yet he realized plainly that the fear he felt was by no means a foolish and unreasoning fear. It had a cause and a reason. Also — which made it worse — it was fully warranted. Something in his sleep, forgotten in the instant of waking, had happened that set every nerve in his body on the watch. He was positive only of two things — first, that it was the entrance of this person, moving so quietly there in the flat, that sent the chills down his spine; and, secondly, that this person was *not* his brother William.

John Gilmer was a timid man. The sight of a burglar, his eyes black-masked, suddenly confronting him in the passage, would most likely have deprived him of all power of decision — until the burglar had either shot him or escaped. But on this occasion some instinct told him that it was no burglar, and that the acute distress he experienced was not due to any message of ordinary physical fear. The thing that had gained access to his flat while he slept had first come — he felt sure of it — into his room, and had passed very close to his own bed, before going on. It had then doubtless gone to his brother’s room, visiting them both stealthily to make sure they slept. And its mere passage through his room had been enough to wake him and set these drops of cold perspiration upon his skin. For it was — he felt it in every fibre of his body — something hostile.

The thought that it might at that very moment be in the room of his brother, however, brought him to his feet on the cold floor, and set him moving with all the determination he could summon towards the door. He looked cautiously down an utterly dark passage; then crept on tiptoe along it. On the wall were old-fashioned weapons that had belonged to his father; and feeling a curved, sheathless sword that had come from some Turkish campaign of years gone by, his fingers closed tightly round it, and lifted it silently from the three hooks whereon it lay. He passed the doors of the bathroom and dining-room, making instinctively for the big sitting-room where the violins were kept in their glass cases. The cold nipped him. His eyes smarted with the effort to see in the darkness. Outside the closed door he hesitated.

Putting his ear to the crack, he listened. From within came a faint sound of someone moving. The same instant there rose the sharp, delicate “ping” of a violin-string being plucked; and John Gilmer, with nerves that shook like the vibrations of that very string, opened the door wide with a fling and turned on the light at the same moment. The plucked string still echoed faintly in the air.

The sensation that met him on the threshold was the well-known one that things had been going on in the room which his unexpected arrival had that instant put a stop to. A second earlier and he would have discovered it all in the act. The atmosphere still held the feeling of rushing, silent movement with which the things had raced back to their normal, motionless positions. The immobility of the furniture was a mere attitude hurriedly assumed, and the moment his back was turned the whole business, whatever it might be, would begin again. With this presentment of the room, however — a purely imaginative one — came another, swiftly on its heels.

For one of the objects, less swift than the rest, had not quite regained its “attitude” of repose. It still moved. Below the window curtains on the right, not far from the shelf that bore the violins in their glass cases, he made it out, slowly gliding along the floor. Then, even as his eye caught it, it came to rest.

And, while the cold perspiration broke out all over him afresh, he knew that this still moving item was the cause both of his waking and of his terror. This was the disturbance whose presence he had divined in the flat without actual hearing, and whose passage through his room, while he yet slept, had touched every nerve in his body as with ice. Clutching his Turkish sword tightly, he drew back with the utmost caution against the wall and watched, for the singular impression came to him that the movement was not that of a human being crouching, but rather of something that pertained to the animal world. He remembered, flash-like, the movements of reptiles, the stealth of the larger felines, the undulating glide of great snakes. For the moment, however, it did not move, and they faced one another.

The other side of the room was but dimly lighted, and the noise he made clicking up another electric lamp brought the thing flying forward again — towards himself. At such a moment it seemed absurd to think of so small a detail, but he remembered his bare feet, and, genuinely frightened, he leaped upon a chair and swished with his sword through the air about him. From this better point of view, with the increased light to aid him, he then saw two things — first, that the glass case usually covering the Guarnerius violin had been shifted; and, secondly, that the moving object was slowly elongating itself into an upright position. Semi-erect, yet most oddly, too, like a creature on its hind legs, it was coming swiftly towards him. It was making for the door — and escape.

The confusion of ghostly fear was somehow upon him so that he was too bewildered to see clearly, but he had sufficient self-control, it seemed, to recover a certain power of action; for the moment the advancing figure was near enough for him to strike, that curved scimitar flashed and whirred about him, with such misdirected violence, however, that he not only failed to strike it even once, but at the same time lost his balance and fell forward from the chair whereon he perched — straight into it.

And then came the most curious thing of all, for as he dropped, the figure also dropped, stooped low down, crouched, dwindled amazingly in size, and rushed past him close to the ground like an animal on all fours. John Gilmer screamed, for he could no longer contain himself. Stumbling over the chair as he turned to follow, cutting and slashing wildly with his sword, he saw halfway down the darkened corridor beyond the scuttling outline of, apparently, an enormous — cat!

The door into the outer landing was somehow ajar, and the next second the beast was out, but not before the steel had fallen with a crashing blow upon the front disappearing leg, almost severing it from the body.

It was dreadful. Turning up the lights as he went, he ran after it to the outer landing. But the thing he followed was already well away, and he heard, on the floor below him, the same oddly gliding, slithering, stealthy sound, yet hurrying, that he had heard weeks before when something had passed him in the lift and Morgan, in his terror, had likewise cried aloud.

For a time he stood there on that dark landing, listening, thinking, trembling; then turned into the flat and shut the door. In the sitting-room he carefully replaced the glass case over the treasured violin, puzzled to the point of foolishness, and strangely routed in his mind. For the violin itself, he saw, had been dragged several inches from its cushioned bed of plush.

Next morning, however, he made no allusion to the occurrence of the night. His brother apparently had not been disturbed.

5

The only thing that called for explanation — an explanation not fully forthcoming — was the curious aspect of Mr. Morgan's countenance. The fact that this individual gave notice to the owners of the building, and at the end of the month left for a new post, was, of course, known to both brothers; whereas the story he told in explanation of his face was known only to the one who questioned him about it — John. And John, for reasons best known to himself, did not pass it on to the other. Also, for reasons best known to himself, he did not cross-question the liftman about those singular marks, or report the matter to the police.

Mr. Morgan's pasty visage was badly scratched, and there were red lines running from the cheek into the neck that had the appearance of having been produced by sharp points viciously applied — claws. He had been disturbed by a noise in the hall, he said, about three in the morning, a scuffle had ensued in the darkness, but the intruder had got clear away....

"A cat or something of the kind, no doubt," suggested John Gilmer at the end of the brief recital. And Morgan replied in his usual way: "A cat, or something of the kind, Mr. John, no doubt."

All the same, he had not cared to risk a second encounter, but had departed to wear his billycock and uniform in a building less haunted.

Hyman, meanwhile, made no attempt to call and talk over his dismissal. The reason for this was only apparent, however, several months later when, quite by chance, coming along Piccadilly in an omnibus, the brothers found themselves seated opposite to a man with a thick black beard and blue glasses. William Gilmer hastily rang the bell and got out, saying something half intelligible about feeling faint. John followed him.

“Did you see who it was?” he whispered to his brother the moment they were safely on the pavement.

John nodded.

“Hyman, in spectacles. He’s grown a beard, too.”

“Yes, but did you also notice — —”

“What?”

“He had an empty sleeve.”

“An empty sleeve?”

“Yes,” said William; “he’s lost an arm.”

There was a long pause before John spoke. At the door of their club the elder brother added:

“Poor devil! He’ll never again play on” — then, suddenly changing the preposition— “*with* a pedigree violin!”

And that night in the flat, after William had gone to bed, he looked up a curious old volume he had once picked up on a second-hand bookstall, and read therein quaint descriptions of how the “desire-body of a violent man” may assume animal shape, operate on concrete matter even at a distance; and, further, how a wound inflicted thereon can reproduce itself upon its physical counterpart by means of the mysterious so-called phenomenon of “re-percussion.”

XII

WIRELESS CONFUSION

"GOOD NIGHT, UNCLE," whispered the child, as she climbed on to his knee and gave him a resounding kiss. "It's time for me to disappop into bed — at least, so mother says."

"Disappop, then," he replied, returning her kiss, "although I doubt...."

He hesitated. He remembered the word was her father's invention, descriptive of the way rabbits pop into their holes and disappear, and the way *good* children should leave the room the instant bed-time was announced. The father — his twin brother — seemed to enter the room and stand beside them. "Then give me another kiss, and disappop!" he said quickly. The child obeyed the first part of his injunction, but had not obeyed the second when the queer thing happened. She had not left his knee; he was still holding her at the full stretch of both arms; he was staring into her laughing eyes, when she suddenly went far away into an extraordinary distance. She retired. Minute, tiny, but still in perfect proportion and clear as before, she was withdrawn in space till she was small as a doll. He saw his own hands holding her, and they too were minute. Down this long corridor of space, as it were, he saw her diminutive figure.

"Uncle!" she cried, yet her voice was loud as before, "but what a funny face! You're pretending you've seen a ghost" — and she was gone from his knee and from the room, the door closing quietly behind her. He saw her cross the floor, a tiny figure. Then, just as she reached the door, she became of normal size again, as if she crossed a line.

He felt dizzy. The loud voice close to his ear issuing from a diminutive figure half a mile away had a distressing effect upon him. He knew a curious qualm as he sat there in the dark. He heard the wind walking round the house, trying the doors and windows. He was troubled by a memory he could not seize.

Yet the emotion instantly resolved itself into one of personal anxiety: something had gone wrong with his eyes. Sight, his most precious possession as an artist, was of course affected. He was conscious of a little trembling in him, as he at once began trying his sight at various objects —

his hands, the high ceiling, the trees dim in the twilight on the lawn outside. He opened a book and read half a dozen lines, at changing distances; finally he stared carefully at the second hand of his watch. “Right as a trivet!” he exclaimed aloud. He emitted a long sigh; he was immensely relieved. “Nothing wrong with my eyes.”

He thought about the actual occurrence a great deal — he felt as puzzled as any other normal person must have felt. While he held the child actually in his arms, gripping her with both hands, he had seen her suddenly half a mile away. “Half a mile!” he repeated under his breath, “why it was even more, it was easily a mile.” It had been exactly as though he suddenly looked at her down the wrong end of a powerful telescope. It had really happened; he could not explain it; there was no more to be said.

This was the first time it happened to him.

At the theatre, a week later, when the phenomenon was repeated, the stage he was watching fixedly at the moment went far away, as though he saw it from a long way off. The distance, so far as he could judge, was the same as before, about a mile. It was an Eastern scene, realistically costumed and produced, that without an instant’s warning withdrew. The entire stage went with it, although he did not actually see it go. He did not see movement, that is. It was suddenly remote, while yet the actors’ voices, the orchestra, the general hubbub retained their normal volume. He experienced again the distressing dizziness; he closed his eyes, covering them with his hand, then rubbing the eyeballs slightly; and when he looked up the next minute, the world was as it should be, as it had been, at any rate. Unwilling to experience a repetition of the thing in a public place, however, and fortunately being alone, he left the theatre at the end of the act.

Twice this happened to him, once with an individual, his brother’s child, and once with a landscape, an Eastern stage scene. Both occurrences were within the week, during which time he had been considering a visit to the oculist, though without putting his decision into execution. He was the kind of man that dreaded doctors, dentists, oculists, always postponing, always finding reasons for delay. He found reasons now, the chief among them being an unwelcome one — that it was perhaps a brain specialist, rather than an oculist, he ought to consult. This particular notion hung unpleasantly about his mind, when, the day after the theatre visit, the thing recurred, but with a startling difference.

While idly watching a blue-bottle fly that climbed the window-pane with remorseless industry, only to slip down again at the very instant when escape into the open air was within its reach, the fly grew abruptly into gigantic proportions, became blurred and indistinct as it did so, covered the entire pane with its furry, dark, ugly mass, and frightened him so that he stepped back with a cry and nearly lost his balance altogether. He collapsed into a chair. He listened with closed eyes. The metallic buzzing was audible, a small, exasperating sound, ordinarily unable to stir any emotion beyond a mild annoyance. Yet it was terrible; that so huge an insect should make so faint a sound seemed to him terrible.

At length he cautiously opened his eyes. The fly was of normal size once more. He hastily flicked it out of the window.

An hour later he was talking with the famous oculist in Harley Street ... about the advisability of starting reading-glasses. He found it difficult to relate the rest. A curious shyness restrained him.

“Your optic nerves might belong to a man of twenty,” was the verdict. “Both are perfect. But at your age it is wise to save the sight as much as possible. There is a slight astigmatism....” And a prescription for the glasses was written out. It was only when paying the fee, and as a means of drawing attention from the awkward moment, that his story found expression. It seemed to come out in spite of himself. He made light of it even then, telling it without conviction. It seemed foolish suddenly as he told it. “How very odd,” observed the oculist vaguely, “dear me, yes, curious indeed. But that’s nothing. H’m, h’m!” Either it was no concern of his, or he deemed it negligible.... His only other confidant was a friend of psychological tendencies who was interested and eager to explain. It is on the instant plausible explanation of anything and everything that the reputation of such folk depends; this one was true to type: “A spontaneous invention, my dear fellow — a pictorial rendering of your thought. You are a painter, aren’t you? Well, this is merely a rendering in picture-form of” — he paused for effect, the other hung upon his words— “of the odd expression ‘disappop.’”

“Ah!” exclaimed the painter.

"You see everything pictorially, of course, don't you?"

"Yes — as a rule."

"There you have it. Your painter's psychology saw the child 'disappopping.' That's all."

"And the fly?" but the fly was easily explained, since it was merely the process reversed. "Once a process has established itself in your mind, you see, it may act in either direction. When a madman says 'I'm afraid Smith will do me an injury,' it means, 'I will do an injury to Smith,'" And he repeated with finality, "That's it."

The explanations were not very satisfactory, the illustration even tactless, but then the problem had not been stated quite fully. Neither to the oculist nor to the other had *all* the facts been given. The same shyness had been a restraining influence in both cases; a detail had been omitted, and this detail was that he connected the occurrences somehow with his brother whom the war had taken.

The phenomenon made one more appearance — the last — before its character, its field of action rather, altered. He was reading a book when the print became now large, now small; it blurred, grew remote and tiny, then so huge that a single word, a letter even, filled the whole page. He felt as if someone were playing optical tricks with the mechanism of his eyes, trying first one, then another focus.

More curious still, the meaning of the words themselves became uncertain; he did not understand them any more; the sentences lost their meaning, as though he read a strange language, or a language little known. The flash came then — someone was using his eyes — someone else was looking through them.

No, it was not his brother. The idea was preposterous in any case. Yet he shivered again, as when he heard the walking wind, for an uncanny conviction came over him that it was someone who did not understand eyes but was manipulating their mechanism experimentally. With the conviction came also this: that, while not his brother, it was someone connected with his brother.

Here, moreover, was an explanation of sorts, for if the supernatural existed — he had never troubled his head about it — he could accept this odd business as a manifestation, and leave it at that. He did so, and his mind was eased. This was his attitude: “The supernatural *may* exist. Why not? We cannot know. But we can watch.” His eyes and brain, at any rate, were proved in good condition.

He watched. No change of focus, no magnifying or diminishing, came again. For some weeks he noticed nothing unusual of any kind, except that his mind often filled now with Eastern pictures. Their sudden irruption caught his attention, but no more than that; they were sometimes blurred and sometimes vivid; he had never been in the East; he attributed them to his constant thinking of his brother, missing in Mesopotamia these six months. Photographs in magazines and newspapers explained the rest. Yet the persistence of the pictures puzzled him: tents beneath hot cloudless skies, palms, a stretch of desert, dry watercourses, camels, a mosque, a minaret — typical snatches of this kind flashed into his mind with a sense of faint familiarity often. He knew, again, the return of a fugitive memory he could not seize.... He kept a note of the dates, all of them subsequent to the day he read his brother’s fate in the official Roll of Honour: “Believed missing; now killed.” Only when the original phenomenon returned, but in its altered form, did he stop the practice. The change then affected his life too fundamentally to trouble about mere dates and pictures.

For the phenomenon, shifting its field of action, abruptly became mental, and the singular change of focus took place now in his mind. Events magnified or contracted themselves out of all relation with their intrinsic values, sense of proportion went hopelessly astray. Love, hate and fear experienced sudden intensification, or abrupt dwindling into nothing; the familiar everyday emotions, commonplace daily acts, suffered exaggerated enlargement, or reduction into insignificance, that threatened the stability of his personality. Fortunately, as stated, they were of brief duration; to examine them in detail were to touch the painful absurdities of incipient mania almost; that a lost collar stud could block his exasperated mind for hours, filling an entire day with emotion, while a deep affection of long standing could ebb towards complete collapse suddenly without apparent cause...!

It was the unexpected suddenness of Turkey’s spectacular defeat that closed the painful symptoms. The Armistice saw them go. He knew a quick relief he was unable to explain. The telegram that his brother was alive and safe came *after* his recovery of mental balance. It was a shock. But the phenomena had ceased before the shock.

It was in the light of his brother's story that he reviewed the puzzling phenomena described. The story was not more curious than many another, perhaps, yet the details were queer enough. That a wounded Turk to whom he gave water should have remembered gratitude was likely enough, for all travellers know that these men are kindly gentlemen at times; but that this Mohammedan peasant should have been later a member of a prisoner's escort and have provided the means of escape and concealment — weeks in a dry watercourse and months in a hut outside the town — seemed an incredible stroke of good fortune. “He brought me food and water three times a week. I had no money to give him, so I gave him my Zeiss glasses. I taught him a bit of English too. But he liked the glasses best. He was never tired of playing with 'em — making big and little, as he called it. He learned precious little English....”

“My pair, weren't they?” interrupted his brother. “My old climbing glasses.”

“Your present to me when I went out, yes. So really you helped me to save my life. I told the old Turk that. I was always thinking about you.”

“And the Turk?”

“No doubt.... Through *my* mind, that is. At any rate, he asked a lot of questions about you. I showed him your photo. He died, poor chap — at least they told me so. Probably they shot him.”

XIII

CONFESSION

THE FOG SWIRLED slowly round him, driven by a heavy movement of its own, for of course there was no wind. It hung in poisonous thick coils and loops; it rose and sank; no light penetrated it directly from street lamp or motor-car, though here and there some big shop-window shed a glimmering patch upon its ever-shifting curtain.

O'Reilly's eyes ached and smarted with the incessant effort to see a foot beyond his face. The optic nerve grew tired, and sight, accordingly, less accurate. He coughed as he shuffled forward cautiously through the choking gloom. Only the stifled rumble of crawling traffic persuaded him he was in a crowded city at all — this, and the vague outlines of groping figures, hugely magnified, emerging suddenly and disappearing again, as they fumbled along inch by inch towards uncertain destinations.

The figures, however were human beings; they were real. That much he knew. He heard their muffled voices, now close, now distant, strangely smothered always. He also heard the tapping of innumerable sticks, feeling for iron railings or the kerb. These phantom outlines represented living people. He was not alone.

It was the dread of finding himself *quite* alone that haunted him, for he was still unable to cross an open space without assistance. He had the physical strength, it was the mind that failed him. Midway the panic terror might descend upon him, he would shake all over, his will dissolve, he would shriek for help, run wildly — into the traffic probably — or, as they called it in his North Ontario home, "throw a fit" in the street before advancing wheels. He was not yet entirely cured, although under ordinary conditions he was safe enough, as Dr. Henry had assured him.

When he left Regent's Park by Tube an hour ago the air was clear, the November sun shone brightly, the pale blue sky was cloudless, and the assumption that he could manage the journey across London Town alone was justified. The following day he was to leave for Brighton for the week of final convalescence: this little preliminary test of his powers on a bright November afternoon was all to the good. Doctor Henry furnished minute instructions: "You change at Piccadilly Circus — without leaving the underground station, mind — and get out at South Kensington. You know the address of your V.A.D. friend. Have your cup of tea with her, then come back the same way to Regent’s Park. Come back before dark — say six o’clock at latest. It’s better.” He had described exactly what turns to take after leaving the station, so many to the right, so many to the left; it was a little confusing, but the distance was short. “You can always ask. You can’t possibly go wrong.”

The unexpected fog, however, now blurred these instructions in a confused jumble in his mind. The failure of outer sight reacted upon memory. The V.A.D. besides had warned him her address was “not easy to find the first time. The house lies in a backwater. But with your ‘backwoods’ instincts you’ll probably manage it better than any Londoner!” She, too, had not calculated upon the fog.

When O’Reilly came up the stairs at South Kensington Station, he emerged into such murky darkness that he thought he was still underground. An impenetrable world lay round him. Only a raw bite in the damp atmosphere told him he stood beneath an open sky. For some little time he stood and stared — a Canadian soldier, his home among clear brilliant spaces, now face to face for the first time in his life with that thing he had so often read about — a bad London fog. With keenest interest and surprise he “enjoyed” the novel spectacle for perhaps ten minutes, watching the people arrive and vanish, and wondering why the station lights stopped dead the instant they touched the street — then, with a sense of adventure — it cost an effort — he left the covered building and plunged into the opaque sea beyond.

Repeating to himself the directions he had received — first to the right, second to the left, once more to the left, and so forth — he checked each turn, assuring himself it was impossible to go wrong. He made correct if slow progress, until someone blundered into him with an abrupt and startling question: “Is this right, do you know, for South Kensington Station?”

It was the suddenness that startled him; one moment there was no one, the next they were face to face, another, and the stranger had vanished into the gloom with a courteous word of grateful thanks. But the little shock of interruption had put memory out of gear. Had he already turned twice to the right, or had he not? O’Reilly realized sharply he had forgotten his memorized instructions. He stood still, making strenuous efforts at recovery, but each effort left him more uncertain than before. Five minutes later he was lost as hopelessly as any townsman who leaves his tent in the backwoods without blazing the trees to ensure finding his way back again. Even the sense of direction, so strong in him among his native forests, was completely gone. There were no stars, there was no wind, no smell, no sound of running water. There was nothing anywhere to guide him, nothing but occasional dim outlines, groping, shuffling, emerging and disappearing in the eddying fog, but rarely coming within actual speaking, much less touching, distance. He was lost utterly; more, he was alone.

Yet not *quite* alone — the thing he dreaded most. There were figures still in his immediate neighborhood. They emerged, vanished, reappeared, dissolved. No, he was not quite alone. He saw these thickenings of the fog, he heard their voices, the tapping of their cautious sticks, their shuffling feet as well. They were real. They moved, it seemed, about him in a circle, never coming very close.

"But they're real," he said to himself aloud, betraying the weak point in his armour. "They're human beings right enough. I'm positive of that."

He had never argued with Dr. Henry — he wanted to get well; he had obeyed implicitly, believing everything the doctor told him — up to a point. But he had always had his own idea about these "figures," because, among them, were often enough his own pals from the Somme, Gallipoli, the Mespot horror, too. And he ought to know his own pals when he saw them! At the same time he knew quite well he had been "shocked," his being dislocated; half dissolved as it were, his system pushed into some lopsided condition that meant inaccurate registration. True. He grasped that perfectly. But, in that shock and dislocation, had he not possibly picked up another gear? Were there not gaps and broken edges, pieces that no longer dovetailed, fitted as usual, interstices, in a word? Yes, that was the word — interstices. Cracks, so to speak, between his perception of the outside world and his inner interpretation of these? Between memory and recognition? Between the various states of consciousness that usually dovetailed so neatly that the joints were normally imperceptible?

His state, he well knew, was abnormal, but were his symptoms on that account unreal? Could not these "interstices" be used by — others? When he saw his “figures,” he used to ask himself: “Are not these the real ones, and the others — the human beings — unreal?”

This question now revived in him with a new intensity. Were these figures in the fog real or unreal? The man who had asked the way to the station, was he not, after all, a shadow merely?

By the use of his cane and foot and what of sight was left to him he knew that he was on an island. A lamppost stood up solid and straight beside him, shedding its faint patch of glimmering light. Yet there were railings, however, that puzzled him, for his stick hit the metal rods distinctly in a series. And there should be no railings round an island. Yet he had most certainly crossed a dreadful open space to get where he was. His confusion and bewilderment increased with dangerous rapidity. Panic was not far away.

He was no longer on an omnibus route. A rare taxi crawled past occasionally, a whitish patch at the window indicating an anxious human face; now and again came a van or cart, the driver holding a lantern as he led the stumbling horse. These comforted him, rare though they were. But it was the figures that drew his attention most. He was quite sure they were real. They were human beings like himself.

For all that, he decided he might as well be positive on the point. He tried one accordingly — a big man who rose suddenly before him out of the very earth.

“Can you give me the trail to Morley Place?” he asked.

But his question was drowned by the other’s simultaneous inquiry in a voice much louder than his own.

“I say, is this right for the Tube station, d’you know? I’m utterly lost. I want South Ken.”

And by the time O’Reilly had pointed the direction whence he himself had just come, the man was gone again, obliterated, swallowed up, not so much as his footsteps audible, almost as if — it seemed again — he never had been there at all.

This left an acute unpleasantness in him, a sense of bewilderment greater than before. He waited five minutes, not daring to move a step, then tried another figure, a woman this time who, luckily, knew the immediate neighbourhood intimately. She gave him elaborate instructions in the kindest possible way, then vanished with incredible swiftness and ease into the sea of gloom beyond. The instantaneous way she vanished was disheartening, upsetting; it was so uncannily abrupt and sudden. Yet she comforted him. Morley Place, according to her version, was not two hundred yards from where he stood. He felt his way forward, step by step, using his cane, crossing a giddy open space kicking the kerb with each boot alternately, coughing and choking all the time as he did so.

“They were real, I guess, anyway,” he said aloud. “They were both real enough all right. And it may lift a bit soon!” He was making a great effort to hold himself in hand. He was already fighting, that is. He realized this perfectly. The only point was — the reality of the figures. “It may lift now any minute,” he repeated louder. In spite of the cold, his skin was sweating profusely.

But, of course, it did not lift. The figures, too, became fewer. No carts were audible. He had followed the woman’s directions carefully, but now found himself in some by-way, evidently, where pedestrians at the best of times were rare. There was dull silence all about him. His foot lost the kerb, his cane swept the empty air, striking nothing solid, and panic rose upon him with its shuddering, icy grip. He was alone, he knew himself alone, worse still — he was in another open space.

It took him fifteen minutes to cross that open space, most of the way upon his hands and knees, oblivious of the icy slime that stained his trousers, froze his fingers, intent only upon feeling solid support against his back and spine again. It was an endless period. The moment of collapse was close, the shriek already rising in his throat, the shaking of the whole body uncontrollable, when — his outstretched fingers struck a friendly kerb, and he saw a glimmering patch of diffused radiance overhead. With a great, quick effort he stood upright, and an instant later his stick rattled along an area railing. He leaned against it, breathless, panting, his heart beating painfully while the street lamp gave him the further comfort of its feeble gleam, the actual flame, however, invisible. He looked this way and that; the pavement was deserted. He was engulfed in the dark silence of the fog.

But Morley Place, he knew, must be very close by now. He thought of the friendly little V.A.D. he had known in France, of a warm bright fire, a cup of tea and a cigarette. One more effort, he reflected, and all these would be his. He pluckily groped his way forward again, crawling slowly by the area railings. If things got really bad again, he would ring a bell and ask for help, much as he shrank from the idea. Provided he had no more open spaces to cross, provided he saw no more figures emerging and vanishing like creatures born of the fog and dwelling within it as within their native element — it was the figures he now dreaded more than anything else, more even than the loneliness — provided the panic sense ——

A faint darkening of the fog beneath the next lamp caught his eye and made him start. He stopped. It was not a figure this time, it was the shadow of the pole grotesquely magnified. No, it moved. It moved towards him. A flame of fire followed by ice flowed through him. It was a figure — close against his face. It was a woman.

The doctor’s advice came suddenly back to him, the counsel that had cured him of a hundred phantoms:

“Do not ignore them. Treat them as real. Speak and go with them. You will soon prove their unreality then. And they will leave you....”

He made a brave, tremendous effort. He was shaking. One hand clutched the damp and icy area railing.

“Lost your way like myself, haven’t you, ma’am?” he said in a voice that trembled. “Do you know where we are at all? Morley Place *I*’m looking for — —”

He stopped dead. The woman moved nearer and for the first time he saw her face clearly. Its ghastly pallor, the bright, frightened eyes that stared with a kind of dazed bewilderment into his own, the beauty above all, arrested his speech midway. The woman was young, her tall figure wrapped in a dark fur coat.

“Can I help you?” he asked impulsively, forgetting his own terror for the moment. He was more than startled. Her air of distress and pain stirred a peculiar anguish in him. For a moment she made no answer, thrusting her white face closer as if examining him, so close, indeed, that he controlled with difficulty his instinct to shrink back a little.

“Where am I?” she asked at length, searching his eyes intently. “I’m lost — I’ve lost myself. I can’t find my way back.” Her voice was low, a curious wailing in it that touched his pity oddly. He felt his own distress merging in one that was greater.

“Same here,” he replied more confidently. “I’m terrified of being alone, too. I’ve had shell-shock, you know. Let’s go together. We’ll find a way together — —”

“Who are you!” the woman murmured, still staring at him with her big bright eyes, their distress, however, no whit lessened. She gazed at him as though aware suddenly of his presence.

He told her briefly. “And I’m going to tea with a V.A.D. friend in Morley Place. What’s your address? Do you know the name of the street?”

She appeared not to hear him, or not to understand exactly; it was as if she was not listening again.

“I came out so suddenly, so unexpectedly,” he heard the low voice with pain in every syllable; “I can’t find my home again. Just when I was expecting him too — —” She looked about her with a distraught expression that made O’Reilly long to carry her in his arms to safety then and there. “He may be there now — waiting for me at this very moment — and I can’t get back.” And so sad was her voice that only by an effort did O’Reilly prevent himself putting out his hand to touch her. More and more he forgot himself in his desire to help her. Her beauty, the wonder of her strange bright eyes in the pallid face, made an immense appeal. He became calmer. This woman was real enough. He asked again the address, the street and number, the distance she thought it was. “Have you any idea of the direction, ma’am, any idea at all? We’ll go together and — —”

She suddenly cut him short. She turned her head as if to listen, so that he saw her profile a moment, the outline of the slender neck, a glimpse of jewels just below the fur.

“Hark! I hear him calling! I remember...!” And she was gone from his side into the swirling fog.

Without an instant’s hesitation O’Reilly followed her, not only because he wished to help, but because he dared not be left alone. The presence of this strange, lost woman comforted him; he must not lose sight of her, whatever happened. He had to run, she went so rapidly, ever just in front, moving with confidence and certainty, turning right and left, crossing the street, but never stopping, never hesitating, her companion always at her heels in breathless haste, and with a growing terror that he might lose her any minute. The way she found her direction through the dense fog was marvellous enough, but O'Reilly's only thought was to keep her in sight, lest his own panic redescend upon him with its inevitable collapse in the dark and lonely street. It was a wild and panting pursuit, and he kept her in view with difficulty, a dim fleeting outline always a few yards ahead of him. She did not once turn her head, she uttered no sound, no cry; she hurried forward with unfaltering instinct. Nor did the chase occur to him once as singular; she was his safety, and that was all he realized.

One thing, however, he remembered afterwards, though at the actual time he no more than registered the detail, paying no attention to it — a definite perfume she left upon the atmosphere, one, moreover, that he knew, although he could not find its name as he ran. It was associated vaguely, for him, with something unpleasant, something disagreeable. He connected it with misery and pain. It gave him a feeling of uneasiness. More than that he did not notice at the moment, nor could he remember — he certainly did not try — where he had known this particular scent before.

Then suddenly the woman stopped, opened a gate and passed into a small private garden — so suddenly that O'Reilly, close upon her heels, only just avoided tumbling into her. "You've found it?" he cried. "May I come in a moment with you? Perhaps you'll let me telephone to the doctor."

She turned instantly. Her face close against his own, was livid.

"Doctor!" she repeated in an awful whisper. The word meant terror to her. O'Reilly stood amazed. For a second or two neither of them moved. The woman seemed petrified.

"Dr. Henry, you know," he stammered, finding his tongue again. "I'm in his care. He's in Harley Street."

Her face cleared as suddenly as it had darkened, though the original expression of bewilderment and pain still hung in her great eyes. But the terror left them, as though she suddenly forgot some association that had revived it.

“My home,” she murmured. “My home is somewhere here. I’m near it. I must get back — in time — for him. I must. He’s coming to me.” And with these extraordinary words she turned, walked up the narrow path, and stood upon the porch of a two-storey house before her companion had recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to move or utter a syllable in reply. The front door, he saw, was ajar. It had been left open.

For five seconds, perhaps for ten, he hesitated; it was the fear that the door would close and shut him out that brought the decision to his will and muscles. He ran up the steps and followed the woman into a dark hall where she had already preceded him, and amid whose blackness she now had finally vanished. He closed the door, not knowing exactly why he did so, and knew at once by an instinctive feeling that the house he now found himself in with this unknown woman was empty and unoccupied. In a house, however, he felt safe. It was the open streets that were his danger. He stood waiting, listening a moment before he spoke; and he heard the woman moving down the passage from door to door, repeating to herself in her low voice of unhappy wailing some words he could not understand:

“Where is it? Oh, where is it? I must get back....”

O’Reilly then found himself abruptly stricken with dumbness, as though, with these strange words, a haunting terror came up and breathed against him in the darkness.

“Is she after all a figure?” ran in letters of fire across his numbed brain. “Is she unreal — or real?”

Seeking relief in action of some kind, he put out a hand automatically, feeling along the wall for an electric switch, and though he found it by some miraculous chance, no answering glow responded to the click.

And the woman’s voice from the darkness: “Ah! Ah! At last I’ve found it. I’m home again — at last...!” He heard a door open and close upstairs. He was on the ground-floor now — alone. Complete silence followed.

In the conflict of various emotions — fear for himself lest his panic should return, fear for the woman who had led him into this empty house and now deserted him upon some mysterious errand of her own that made him think of madness — in this conflict that held him a moment spell-bound, there was a yet bigger ingredient demanding instant explanation, but an explanation that he could not find. Was the woman real or was she unreal? Was she a human being or a “figure”? The horror of doubt obsessed him with an acute uneasiness that betrayed itself in a return of that unwelcome inner trembling he knew was dangerous.

What saved him from a *crise* that must have had most dangerous results for his mind and nervous system generally, seems to have been the outstanding fact that he felt more for the woman than for himself. His sympathy and pity had been deeply moved; her voice, her beauty, her anguish and bewilderment, all uncommon, inexplicable, mysterious, formed together a claim that drove self into the background. Added to this was the detail that she had left him, gone to another floor without a word, and now, behind a closed door in a room upstairs, found herself face to face at last with the unknown object of her frantic search — with “it,” whatever “it” might be. Real or unreal, figure or human being, the overmastering impulse of his being was that he must go to her.

It was this clear impulse that gave him decision and energy to do what he then did. He struck a match, he found a stump of candle, he made his way by means of this flickering light along the passage and up the carpetless stairs. He moved cautiously, stealthily, though not knowing why he did so. The house, he now saw, was indeed untenanted; dust-sheets covered the piled-up furniture; he glimpsed through doors ajar, pictures were screened upon the walls, brackets draped to look like hooded heads. He went on slowly, steadily, moving on tiptoe as though conscious of being watched, noting the well of darkness in the hall below, the grotesque shadows that his movements cast on walls and ceiling. The silence was unpleasant, yet, remembering that the woman was “expecting” someone, he did not wish it broken. He reached the landing and stood still. Closed doors on both sides of a corridor met his sight, as he shaded the candle to examine the scene. Behind which of these doors, he asked himself, was the woman, figure or human being, now alone with “it”?

There was nothing to guide him, but an instinct that he must not delay sent him forward again upon his search. He tried a door on the right — an empty room, with the furniture hidden by dust-sheets, and the mattress rolled up on the bed. He tried a second door, leaving the first one open behind him, and it was, similarly, an empty bedroom. Coming out into the corridor again he stood a moment waiting, then called aloud in a low voice that yet woke echoes unpleasantly in the hall below: “Where are you? I want to help — which room are you in?”

There was no answer; he was almost glad he heard no sound, for he knew quite well that he was waiting really for another sound — the steps of him who was “expected.” And the idea of meeting with this unknown third sent a shudder through him, as though related to an interview he dreaded with his whole heart, and must at all costs avoid. Waiting another moment or two, he noted that his candle-stump was burning low, then crossed the landing with a feeling, at once of hesitation and determination, towards a door opposite to him. He opened it; he did not halt on the threshold. Holding the candle at arm’s length, he went boldly in.

And instantly his nostrils told him he was right at last, for a whiff of the strange perfume, though this time much stronger than before, greeted him, sending a new quiver along his nerves. He knew now why it was associated with unpleasantness, with pain, with misery, for he recognized it — the odour of a hospital. In this room a powerful anæsthetic had been used — and recently.

Simultaneously with smell, sight brought its message too. On the large double bed behind the door on his right lay, to his amazement, the woman in the dark fur coat. He saw the jewels on the slender neck; but the eyes he did not see, for they were closed — closed, too, he grasped at once, in death. The body lay stretched at full length, quite motionless. He approached. A dark thin streak that came from the parted lips and passed downwards over the chin, losing itself then in the fur collar, was a trickle of blood. It was hardly dry. It glistened.

Strange it was perhaps that, while imaginary fears had the power to paralyse him, mind and body, this sight of something real had the effect of restoring confidence. The sight of blood and death, amid conditions often ghastly and even monstrous, was no new thing to him. He went up quietly, and with steady hand he felt the woman’s cheek, the warmth of recent life still in its softness. The final cold had not yet mastered this empty form whose beauty, in its perfect stillness, had taken on the new strange sweetness of an unearthly bloom. Pallid, silent, untenanted, it lay before him, lit by the flicker of his guttering candle. He lifted the fur coat to feel for the unbeating heart. A couple of hours ago at most, he judged, this heart was working busily, the breath came through those parted lips, the eyes were shining in full beauty. His hand encountered a hard knob — the head of a long steel hat-pin driven through the heart up to its hilt.

He knew then which was the figure — which was the real and which the unreal. He knew also what had been meant by “it.”

But before he could think or reflect what action he must take, before he could straighten himself even from his bent position over the body on the bed, there sounded through the empty house below the loud clang of the front door being closed. And instantly rushed over him that other fear he had so long forgotten — fear for himself. The panic of his own shaken nerves descended with irresistible onslaught. He turned, extinguishing the candle in the violent trembling of his hand, and tore headlong from the room.

The following ten minutes seemed a nightmare in which he was not master of himself and knew not exactly what he did. All he realized was that steps already sounded on the stairs, coming quickly nearer. The flicker of an electric torch played on the banisters, whose shadows ran swiftly sideways along the wall as the hand that held the light ascended. He thought in a frenzied second of police, of his presence in the house, of the murdered woman. It was a sinister combination. Whatever happened, he must escape without being so much as even seen. His heart raced madly. He darted across the landing into the room opposite, whose door he had luckily left open. And by some incredible chance, apparently, he was neither seen nor heard by the man who, a moment later, reached the landing, entered the room where the body of the woman lay, and closed the door carefully behind him.

Shaking, scarcely daring to breathe lest his breath be audible, O’Reilly, in the grip of his own personal terror, remnant of his uncured shock of war, had no thought of what duty might demand or not demand of him. He thought only of himself. He realized one clear issue — that he must get out of the house without being heard or seen. Who the new-comer was he did not know, beyond an uncanny assurance that it was *not* him whom the woman had “expected,” but the murderer himself, and that it was the murderer, in his turn, who was expecting this third person. In that room with death at his elbow, a death he had himself brought about but an hour or two ago, the murderer now hid in waiting for his second victim. And the door was closed.

Yet any minute it might open again, cutting off retreat.

O'Reilly crept out, stole across the landing, reached the head of the stairs, and began, with the utmost caution, the perilous descent. Each time the bare boards creaked beneath his weight, no matter how stealthily this weight was adjusted, his heart missed a beat. He tested each step before he pressed upon it, distributing as much of his weight as he dared upon the banisters. It was a little more than half-way down that, to his horror, his foot caught in a projecting carpet tack; he slipped on the polished wood, and only saved himself from falling headlong by a wild clutch at the railing, making an uproar that seemed to him like the explosion of a hand-grenade in the forgotten trenches. His nerves gave way then, and panic seized him. In the silence that followed the resounding echoes he heard the bedroom door opening on the floor above.

Concealment was now useless. It was impossible, too. He took the last flight of stairs in a series of leaps, four steps at a time, reached the hall, flew across it, and opened the front door, just as his pursuer, electric torch in hand, covered half the stairs behind him. Slamming the door, he plunged headlong into the welcome, all-obscuring fog outside.

The fog had now no terrors for him, he welcomed its concealing mantle; nor did it matter in which direction he ran so long as he put distance between him and the house of death. The pursuer had, of course, not followed him into the street. He crossed open spaces without a tremor. He ran in a circle nevertheless, though without being aware he did so. No people were about, no single groping shadow passed him; no boom of traffic reached his ears, when he paused for breath at length against an area railing. Then for the first time he made the discovery that he had no hat. He remembered now. In examining the body, partly out of respect, partly perhaps unconsciously, he had taken it off and laid it — on the very bed.

It was there, a tell-tale bit of damning evidence, in the house of death. And a series of probable consequences flashed through his mind like lightning. It was a new hat fortunately; more fortunate still, he had not yet written name or initials in it; but the maker's mark was there for all to read, and the police would go immediately to the shop where he had bought it only two days before. Would the shop-people remember his appearance? Would his visit, the date, the conversation be recalled? He thought it was unlikely; he resembled dozens of men; he had no outstanding peculiarity. He tried to think, but his mind was confused and troubled, his heart was beating dreadfully, he felt desperately ill. He sought vainly for some story to account for his being out in the fog and far from home without a hat. No single idea presented itself. He clung to the icy railings, hardly able to keep upright, collapse very near — when suddenly a figure emerged from the fog, paused a moment to stare at him, put out a hand and caught him, and then spoke:

"You're ill, my dear sir," said a man's kindly voice. "Can I be of any assistance? Come, let me help you." He had seen at once that it was not a case of drunkenness. "Come, take my arm, won't you? I'm a physician. Luckily, too, you are just outside my very house. Come in." And he half dragged, half pushed O'Reilly, now bordering on collapse, up the steps and opened the door with his latch-key.

"Felt ill suddenly — lost in the fog ... terrified, but be all right soon, thanks awfully — —" the Canadian stammered his gratitude, but already feeling better. He sank into a chair in the hall, while the other put down a paper parcel he had been carrying, and led him presently into a comfortable room; a fire burned brightly; the electric lamps were pleasantly shaded; a decanter of whisky and a siphon stood on a small table beside a big arm-chair; and before O'Reilly could find another word to say the other had poured him out a glass and bade him sip it slowly, without troubling to talk till he felt better.

"That will revive you. Better drink it slowly. You should never have been out a night like this. If you've far to go, better let me put you up — —"

"Very kind, very kind, indeed," mumbled O'Reilly, recovering rapidly in the comfort of a presence he already liked and felt even drawn to.

"No trouble at all," returned the doctor. "I've been at the front, you know. I can see what your trouble is — shell-shock, I'll be bound."

The Canadian, much impressed by the other's quick diagnosis, noted also his tact and kindness. He had made no reference to the absence of a hat, for instance.

"Quite true," he said. "I'm with Dr. Henry, in Harley Street," and he added a few words about his case. The whisky worked its effect, he revived more and more, feeling better every minute. The other handed him a cigarette; they began to talk about his symptoms and recovery; confidence returned in a measure, though he still felt badly frightened. The doctor's manner and personality did much to help, for there was strength and gentleness in the face, though the features showed unusual determination, softened occasionally by a sudden hint as of suffering in the bright, compelling eyes. It was the face, thought O'Reilly, of a man who had seen much and probably been through hell, but of a man who was simple, good, sincere. Yet not a man to trifle with; behind his gentleness lay something very stern. This effect of character and personality woke the other's respect in addition to his gratitude. His sympathy was stirred.

"You encourage me to make another guess," the man was saying, after a successful reading of the impromptu patient's state, "that you have had, namely, a severe shock quite recently, and" — he hesitated for the merest fraction of a second— "that it would be a relief to you," he went on, the skilful suggestion in the voice unnoticed by his companion, "it would be wise as well, if you could unburden yourself to — someone — who would understand." He looked at O'Reilly with a kindly and very pleasant smile. "Am I not right, perhaps?" he asked in his gentle tone.

"Someone who would understand," repeated the Canadian. "That's my trouble exactly. You've hit it. It's all so incredible."

The other smiled. "The more incredible," he suggested, "the greater your need for expression. Suppression, as you may know, is dangerous in cases like this. You think you have hidden it, but it bides its time and comes up later, causing a lot of trouble. Confession, you know" — he emphasized the word— "confession is good for the soul!"

"You're dead right," agreed the other.

"Now if you can, bring yourself to tell it to someone who will listen and believe — to myself, for instance. I am a doctor, familiar with such things. I shall regard all you say as a professional confidence, of course; and, as we are strangers, my belief or disbelief is of no particular consequence. I may tell you in advance of your story, however — I think I can promise it — that I shall believe all you have to say."

O’Reilly told his story without more ado, for the suggestion of the skilled physician had found easy soil to work in. During the recital his host’s eyes never once left his own. He moved no single muscle of his body. His interest seemed intense.

“A bit tall, isn’t it?” said the Canadian, when his tale was finished. “And the question is — —” he continued with a threat of volubility which the other checked instantly.

“Strange, yes, but incredible, no,” the doctor interrupted. “I see no reason to disbelieve a single detail of what you have just told me. Things equally remarkable, equally incredible, happen in all large towns, as I know from personal experience. I could give you instances.” He paused a moment, but his companion, staring into his eyes with interest and curiosity, made no comment. “Some years ago, in fact,” continued the other, “I knew of a very similar case — strangely similar.”

“Really! I should be immensely interested — —”

“So similar that it seems almost a coincidence. *You* may find it hard, in your turn, to credit it.” He paused again, while O’Reilly sat forward in his chair to listen. “Yes,” pursued the doctor slowly, “I think everyone connected with it is now dead. There is no reason why I should not tell it, for one confidence deserves another, you know. It happened during the Boer War — as long ago as that,” he added with emphasis. “It is really a very commonplace story in one way, though very dreadful in another, but a man who has served at the front will understand and — I’m sure — will sympathize.”

“I’m sure of that,” offered the other readily.

“A colleague of mine, now dead, as I mentioned — a surgeon, with a big practice, married a young and charming girl. They lived happily together for several years. His wealth made her very comfortable. His consulting-room, I must tell you, was some distance from his house — just as this might be — so that she was never bothered with any of his cases. Then came the war. Like many others, though much over age, he volunteered. He gave up his lucrative practice and went to South Africa. His income, of course, stopped; the big house was closed; his wife found her life of enjoyment considerably curtailed. This she considered a great hardship, it seems. She felt a bitter grievance against him. Devoid of imagination, without any power of sacrifice, a selfish type, she was yet a beautiful, attractive woman — and young. The inevitable lover came upon the scene to console her. They planned to run away together. He was rich. Japan they thought would suit them. Only, by some ill luck, the husband got wind of it and arrived in London just in the nick of time."

"Well rid of her," put in O'Reilly, "*I* think."

The doctor waited a moment. He sipped his glass. Then his eyes fixed upon his companion's face somewhat sternly.

"Well rid of her, yes," he continued, "only he determined to make that riddance final. He decided to kill her — and her lover. You see, he loved her."

O'Reilly made no comment. In his own country this method with a faithless woman was not unknown. His interest was very concentrated. But he was thinking, too, as he listened, thinking hard.

"He planned the time and place with care," resumed the other in a lower voice, as though he might possibly be overheard. "They met, he knew, in the big house, now closed, the house where he and his young wife had passed such happy years during their prosperity. The plan failed, however, in an important detail — the woman came at the appointed hour, but without her lover. She found death waiting for her — it was a painless death. Then her lover, who was to arrive half an hour later, did not come at all. The door had been left open for him purposely. The house was dark, its rooms shut up, deserted; there was no caretaker even. It was a foggy night, just like this."

"And the other?" asked O'Reilly in a failing voice. "The lover — —"

"A man did come in," the doctor went on calmly, "but it was not the lover. It was a stranger."

"A stranger?" the other whispered. "And the surgeon — where was he all this time?"

"Waiting outside to see him enter — concealed in the fog. He saw the man go in. Five minutes later he followed, meaning to complete his vengeance, his act of justice, whatever you like to call it. But the man who had come in was a stranger — he came in by chance — just as you might have done — to shelter from the fog — or — —”

O’Reilly, though with a great effort, rose abruptly to his feet. He had an appalling feeling that the man facing him was mad. He had a keen desire to get outside, fog or no fog, to leave this room, to escape from the calm accents of this insistent voice. The effect of the whisky was still in his blood. He felt no lack of confidence. But words came to him with difficulty.

“I think I’d better be pushing off now, doctor,” he said clumsily. “But I feel I must thank you very much for all your kindness and help.” He turned and looked hard into the keen eyes facing him. “Your friend,” he asked in a whisper, “the surgeon — I hope — I mean, was he ever caught?”

“No,” was the grave reply, the doctor standing up in front of him, “he was never caught.”

O’Reilly waited a moment before he made another remark. “Well,” he said at length, but in a louder tone than before, “I think — I’m glad.” He went to the door without shaking hands.

“You have no hat,” mentioned the voice behind him. “If you’ll wait a moment I’ll get you one of mine. You need not trouble to return it.” And the doctor passed him, going into the hall. There was a sound of tearing paper, O’Reilly left the house a moment later with a hat upon his head, but it was not till he reached the Tube station half an hour afterwards that he realized it was his own.

XIV

THE LANE THAT RAN EAST AND WEST

1

THE CURVING STRIP of lane, fading into invisibility east and west, had always symbolized life to her. In some minds life pictures itself a straight line, uphill, downhill, flat, as the case may be; in hers it had been, since childhood, this sweep of country lane that ran past her cottage door. In thick white summer dust, she invariably visualized it, blue and yellow flowers along its untidy banks of green. It flowed, it glided, sometimes it rushed. Without a sound it ran along past the nut trees and the branches where honeysuckle and wild roses shone. With every year now its silent speed increased.

From either end she imagined, as a child, that she looked over into outer space — from the eastern end into the infinity before birth, from the western into the infinity that follows death. It was to her of real importance.

From the veranda the entire stretch was visible, not more than five hundred yards at most; from the platform in her mind, whence she viewed existence, she saw her own life, similarly, as a white curve of flowering lane, arising she knew not whence, gliding whither she could not tell. At eighteen she had paraphrased the quatrain with a smile upon her red lips, her chin tilted, her strong grey eyes rather wistful with yearning —

Into this little lane, and why not knowing, Nor whence, like water willy-nilly flowing, And out again — like dust along the waste, I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

At thirty she now repeated it, the smile still there, but the lips not quite so red, the chin a trifle firmer, the grey eyes stronger, clearer, but charged with a more wistful and a deeper yearning.

It was her turn of mind, imaginative, introspective, querulous perhaps, that made the bit of running lane significant. Food with the butcher’s and baker’s carts came to her from its eastern, its arriving end, as she called it; news with the postman, adventure with rare callers. Youth, hope, excitement, all these came from the sunrise. Thence came likewise spring and summer, flowers, butterflies, the swallows. The fairies, in her childhood, had come that way too, their silver feet and gossamer wings brightening the summer dawns; and it was but a year ago that Dick Messenger, his car stirring a cloud of thick white dust, had also come into her life from the space beyond the sunrise.

She sat thinking about him now — how he had suddenly appeared out of nothing that warm June morning, asked her permission about some engineering business on the neighbouring big estate over the hill, given her a dog-rose and a bit of fern-leaf, and eventually gone away with her promise when he left. Out of the eastern end he appeared; into the western end he vanished.

For there was this departing end as well, where the lane curved out of sight into the space behind the yellow sunset. In this direction went all that left her life. Her parents, each in turn, had taken that way to the churchyard. Spring, summer, the fading butterflies, the restless swallows, all left her round that western curve. Later the fairies followed them, her dreams one by one, the vanishing years as well — and now her youth, swifter, ever swifter, into the region where the sun dipped nightly among pale rising stars, leaving her brief strip of life colder, more and more unlit.

Just beyond this end she imagined shadows.

She saw Dick's car whirling towards her, whirling away again, making for distant Mexico, where his treasure lay. In the interval he had found that treasure and realized it. He was now coming back again. He had landed in England yesterday.

Seated in her deck-chair on the veranda, she watched the sun sink to the level of the hazel trees. The last swallows already flashed their dark wings against the fading gold. Over that western end to-morrow or the next day, amid a cloud of whirling white dust, would emerge, again out of nothingness, the noisy car that brought Dick Messenger back to her, back from the Mexican expedition that ensured his great new riches, back into her heart and life. In the other direction she would depart a week or so later, her life in his keeping, and his in hers ... and the feet of their children, in due course, would run up and down the mysterious lane in search of flowers, butterflies, excitement, in search of life.

She wondered ... and as the light faded her wondering grew deeper. Questions that had lain dormant for twelve months became audible suddenly. Would Dick be satisfied with this humble cottage which meant so much to her that she felt she could never, never leave it? Would not his money, his new position, demand palaces elsewhere? He was ambitious. Could his ambitions set an altar of sacrifice to his love? And she — could she, on the other hand, walk happy and satisfied along the western curve, leaving her lane finally behind her, lost, untravelled, forgotten? Could she face this sacrifice for him? Was he, in a word, *the* man whose appearance out of the sunrise she had been watching and waiting for all these hurrying, swift years?

She wondered. Now that the decisive moment was so near, unhappy doubts assailed her. Her wondering grew deeper, spread, enveloped, penetrated her being like a gathering darkness. And the sun sank lower, dusk crept along the hedgerows, the flowers closed their little burning eyes. Shadows passed hand in hand along the familiar bend that was so short, so soon travelled over and left behind that a mistake must ruin all its sweetest joy. To wander down it with a companion to whom its flowers, its butterflies, its shadows brought no full message, must turn it chill, dark, lonely, colourless.... Her thoughts slipped on thus into a soft inner reverie born of that scented twilight hour of honeysuckle and wild roses, born too of her deep self-questioning, of wonder, of yearning unsatisfied.

The lane, meanwhile, produced its customary few figures, moving homewards through the dusk. She knew them well, these familiar figures of the countryside, had known them from childhood onwards — labourers, hedgers, ditchers and the like, with whom now, even in her reverie, she exchanged the usual friendly greetings across the wicket-gate. This time, however, she gave but her mind to them, her heart absorbed with its own personal and immediate problem.

Melancey had come and gone; old Averill, carrying his hedger’s sickle-knife, had followed; and she was vaguely looking for Hezekiah Purdy, bent with years and rheumatism, his tea-pail always rattling, his shuffling feet making a sorry dust, when the figure she did not quite recognize came into view, emerging unexpectedly from the sunrise end. Was it Purdy? Yes — no — yet, if not, who was it? Of course it must be Purdy. Yet while the others, being homeward bound, came naturally from west to east, with this new figure it was otherwise, so that he was half-way down the curve before she fully realized him. Out of the eastern end the man drew nearer, a stranger therefore; out of the unknown regions where the sun rose, and where no shadows were, he moved towards her down the deserted lane, perhaps a trespasser, an intruder possibly, but certainly an unfamiliar figure.

Without particular attention or interest, she watched him drift nearer down her little semi-private lane of dream, passing leisurely from east to west, the mere fact that he was there establishing an intimacy that remained at first unsuspected. It was her eye that watched him, not her mind. What was he doing here, where going, whither come, she wondered vaguely, the lane both his background and his starting-point? A little by-way, after all, this haunted lane. The real world, she knew, swept down the big high-road beyond, unconscious of the humble folk its unimportant tributary served. Suddenly the burden of the years assailed her. Had she, then, missed life by living here?

Then, with a little shock, her heart contracted as she became aware of two eyes fixed upon her in the dusk. The stranger had already reached the wicket-gate and now stood leaning against it, staring at her over its spiked wooden top. It was certainly not old Purdy. The blood rushed back into her heart again as she returned the gaze. He was watching her with a curious intentness, with an odd sense of authority almost, with something that persuaded her instantly of a definite purpose in his being there. He was waiting for her — expecting her to come down and speak with him, as she had spoken with the others. Of this, her little habit, he made use, she felt. Shyly, half-nervously, she left her deck-chair and went slowly down the short gravel path between the flowers, noticing meanwhile that his clothes were ragged, his hair unkempt, his face worn and ravaged as by want and suffering, yet that his eyes were curiously young. His eyes, indeed, were full brown smiling eyes, and it was the surprise of his youth that impressed her chiefly. That he could be tramp or trespasser left her. She felt no fear.

She wished him “Good evening” in her calm, quiet voice, adding with sympathy, “And who are you, I wonder? You want to ask me something?” It flashed across her that his shabby clothing was somehow a disguise. Over his shoulder hung a faded sack. “I can do something for you?” she pursued inquiringly, as was her kindly custom. “If you are hungry, thirsty, or — —”

It was the expression of vigour leaping into the deep eyes that stopped her. “If you need clothes,” she had been going to add. She was not frightened, but suddenly she paused, gripped by a wonder she could not understand.

And his first words justified her wonder. “*I* have something for you,” he said, his voice faint, a kind of stillness in it as though it came through distance. Also, though this she did not notice, it was an educated voice, and it was the absence of surprise that made this detail too natural to claim attention. She had expected it. “Something to give you. I have brought it for you,” the man concluded.

“Yes,” she replied, aware, again without comprehension, that her courage and her patience were both summoned to support her. “Yes,” she repeated more faintly, as though this was all natural, inevitable, expected. She saw that the sack was now lifted from his shoulder and that his hand plunged into it, as it hung apparently loose and empty against the gate. His eyes, however, never for one instant left her own. Alarm, she was able to remind herself, she did not feel. She only recognized that this ragged figure laid something upon her spirit she could not fathom, yet was compelled to face.

His next words startled her. She drew, if unconsciously, upon her courage:

“A dream.”

The voice was deep, yet still with the faintness as of distance in it. His hand, she saw, was moving slowly from the empty sack. A strange attraction, mingled with pity, with yearning too, stirred deeply in her. The face, it seemed, turned soft, the eyes glowed with some inner fire of feeling. Her heart now beat unevenly.

“Something — to — sell to me,” she faltered, aware that his glowing eyes upon her made her tremble. The same instant she was ashamed of the words, knowing they were uttered by a portion of her that resisted, and this was not the language he deserved.

He smiled, and she knew her resistance a vain make-believe he pierced too easily, though he let it pass in silence.

“There is, I mean, a price — for every dream,” she tried to save herself, conscious delightfully that her heart was smiling in return.

The dusk enveloped them, the corncrakes were calling from the fields, the scent of honeysuckle and wild roses lay round her in a warm wave of air, yet at the same time she felt as if her naked soul stood side by side with this figure in the infinitude of space beyond the sunrise end. The golden stars hung calm and motionless above them. "That price" — his answer fell like a summons she had actually expected— "you pay to another, not to me." The voice grew fainter, farther away, dropping through empty space behind her. "All dreams are but a single dream. You pay that price to — —"

Her interruption slipped spontaneously from her lips, its inevitable truth a prophecy:

"To myself!"

He smiled again, but this time he did not answer. His hand, instead, now moved across the gate towards her.

And before she quite realized what had happened, she was holding a little object he had passed across to her. She had taken it, obeying, it seemed, an inner compulsion and authority which were inevitable, fore-ordained. Lowering her face she examined it in the dusk — a small green leaf of fern — fingered it with tender caution as it lay in her palm, gazed for some seconds closely at the tiny thing.... When she looked up again the stranger, the seller of dreams, as she now imagined him, had moved some yards away from the gate, and was moving still, a leisurely quiet tread that stirred no dust, a shadowy outline soft with dusk and starlight, moving towards the sunrise end, whence he had first appeared.

Her heart gave a sudden leap, as once again the burden of the years assailed her. Her words seemed driven out:

"Who are you? Before you go — your name! What is your name?"

His voice, now faint with distance as he melted from sight against the dark fringe of hazel trees, reached her but indistinctly, though its meaning was somehow clear:

"The dream," she heard like a breath of wind against her ear, "shall bring its own name with it. I wait...." Both sound and figure trailed off into the unknown space beyond the eastern end, and, leaning against the wicket-gate as usual, the white dust settling about his heavy boots, the tea-pail but just ceased from rattling, was — old Purdy.

Unless the mind can fix the reality of an event in the actual instant of its happening, judgment soon dwindles into a confusion between memory and argument. Five minutes later, when old Purdy had gone his way again, she found herself already wondering, reflecting, questioning. Yearning had perhaps conjured with emotion to fashion both voice and figure out of imagination, out of this perfumed dusk, out of the troubled heart's desire. Confusion in time had further helped to metamorphose old Purdy into some legendary shape that had stolen upon her mood of reverie from the shadows of her beloved lane.... Yet the dream she had accepted from a stranger hand, a little fern leaf, remained at any rate to shape a delightful certainty her brain might criticize while her heart believed. The fern leaf assuredly was real. A fairy gift! Those who eat of this fern-seed, she remembered as she sank into sleep that night, shall see the fairies! And, indeed, a few hours later she walked in dream along the familiar curve between the hedges, her own childhood taking her by the hand as she played with the flowers, the butterflies, the glad swallows beckoning while they flashed. Without the smallest sense of surprise or unexpectedness, too, she met at the eastern end — two figures. They stood, as she with her childhood stood, hand in hand, the seller of dreams and her lover, waiting since time began, she realized, waiting with some great unuttered question on their lips. Neither addressed her, neither spoke a word. Dick looked at her, ambition, hard and restless, shining in his eyes; in the eyes of the other — dark, gentle, piercing, but extraordinarily young for all the ragged hair about the face the shabby clothes, the ravaged and unkempt appearance — a brightness as of the coming dawn.

A choice, she understood, was offered to her; there was a decision she must make. She realized, as though some great wind blew it into her from outer space, another, a new standard to which her judgment must inevitably conform, or admit the purpose of her life evaded finally. The same moment she knew what her decision was. No hesitation touched her. Calm, yet trembling, her courage and her patience faced the decision and accepted it. The hands then instantly fell apart, unclasped. One figure turned and vanished down the lane towards the departing end, but with the other, now hand in hand, she rose floating, gliding without effort, a strange bliss in her heart, to meet the sunrise.

“He has awakened ... so he cannot stay,” she heard, like a breath of wind that whispered into her ear. “I, who bring you this dream — I wait.”

She did not wake at once when the dream was ended, but slept on long beyond her accustomed hour, missing thereby Melancey, Averill, old Purdy as they passed the wicket-gate in the early hours. She woke, however, with a new clear knowledge of herself, of her mind and heart, to all of which in simple truth to her own soul she must conform. The fern-seed she placed in a locket attached to a fine gold chain about her neck. During the long, lonely, expectant yet unsatisfied years that followed she wore it day and night.

2

She had the curious feeling that she remained young. Others grew older, but not she. She watched her contemporaries slowly give the signs, while she herself held stationary. Even those younger than herself went past her, growing older in the ordinary way, whereas her heart, her mind, even her appearance, she felt certain, hardly aged at all. In a room full of people she felt pity often as she read the signs in their faces knowing her own unchanged. Their eyes were burning out, but hers burned on. It was neither vanity nor delusion, but an inner conviction she could not alter.

The age she held to was the year she had received the fern-seed from old Purdy, or rather, from an imaginary figure her reverie had set momentarily in old Purdy’s place. That figure of her reverie, the dream that followed, the subsequent confession to Dick Messenger, meeting his own half-way — these marked the year when she stopped growing older. To that year she seemed chained, gazing into the sunrise end — waiting, ever waiting.

Whether in her absent-minded reverie she had actually plucked the bit of fern herself, or whether, after all, old Purdy had handed it to her, was not a point that troubled her. It was in her locket about her neck still, day and night. The seller of dreams was an established imaginative reality in her life. Her heart assured her she would meet him again one day. She waited. It was very curious, it was rather pathetic. Men came and went, she saw her chances pass; her answer was invariably “No.”

The break came suddenly, and with devastating effect. As she was dressing carefully for the party, full of excited anticipation like some young girl still, she saw looking out upon her from the long mirror a face of plain middle-age. A blackness rose about her. It seemed the mirror shattered. The long, long dream, at any rate, fell in a thousand broken pieces at her feet. It was perhaps the ball dress, perhaps the flowers in her hair; it may have been the low-cut gown that betrayed the neck and throat, or the one brilliant jewel that proved her eyes now dimmed beside it — but most probably it was the tell-tale hands, whose ageing no artifice ever can conceal. The middle-aged woman, at any rate, rushed from the glass and claimed her.

It was a long time, too, before the signs of tears had been carefully obliterated again, and the battle with herself — to go or not to go — was decided by clear courage. She would not send a hurried excuse of illness, but would take the place where she now belonged. She saw herself, a fading figure, more than half-way now towards the sunset end, within sight even of the shadowed emptiness that lay beyond the sun's dipping edge. She had lingered over-long, expecting a dream to confirm a dream; she had been oblivious of the truth that the lane went rushing just the same. It was now too late. The speed increased. She had waited, waited for nothing. The seller of dreams was a myth. No man could need her as she now was.

Yet the chief ingredient in her decision was, oddly enough, itself a sign of youth. A party, a ball, is ever an adventure. Fate, with her destined eyes aglow, may be bidden too, waiting among the throng, waiting for that very one who hesitates whether to go or not to go. Who knows what the evening may bring forth? It was this anticipation, faintly beckoning, its voice the merest echo of her shadowy youth, that tipped the scales between an evening of sleepless regrets at home and hours of neglected loneliness, watching the young fulfil the happy night. This and her courage weighed the balance down against the afflicting weariness of her sudden disillusion.

Therefore she went, her aunt, in whose house she was a visitor, accompanying her. They arrived late, walking under the awning alone into the great mansion. Music, flowers, lovely dresses, and bright happy faces filled the air about them. The dancing feet, the flashing eyes, the swing of the music, the throng of graceful figures expressed one word — pleasure. Pleasure, of course, meant youth. Beneath the calm summer stars youth realized itself prodigally, reckless of years to follow. Under the same calm stars, some fifty miles away in Kent, her stretch of deserted lane flowed peacefully, never pausing, passing relentlessly out into unknown space beyond the edge of the world. A girl and a middle-aged woman bravely watched both scenes.

“Dreadfully overcrowded,” remarked her prosaic aunt. “When I was a young thing there was more taste — always room to dance, at any rate.”

“It is a rabble rather,” replied the middle-aged woman, while the girl added, “but I enjoy it.” She had enjoyed one duty-dance with an elderly man to whom her aunt had introduced her. She now sat watching the rabble whirl and laugh. Her friend, behind unabashed lorgnettes, made occasional comments.

“There’s Mabel. Look at her frock, will you — the naked back. The way he holds her, too!”

She looked at Mabel Messenger, exactly her own age, wife of the successful engineer, yet bearing herself almost like a girl.

“*He’s* away in Mexico, as usual,” went on her aunt, “with somebody else, also as usual.”

“I don’t envy her,” mentioned the middle-aged woman, while the girl added, “but she did well for herself, anyhow.”

“It’s a mistake to wait too long,” was a suggestion she did not comment on.

The host’s brother came up and carried off her aunt. She was left alone. An old gentleman dropped into the vacated chair. Only in the centre of the brilliantly lit room was there dancing now; people stood and talked in animated throngs, every seat along the walls, every chair and sofa in alcove corners occupied. The landing outside the great flung doors was packed; some, going on elsewhere, were already leaving, but others arriving late still poured up the staircase. Her loneliness remained unnoticed; with many other women, similarly stationed behind the whirling, moving dancers, she sat looking on, an artificial smile of enjoyment upon her face, but the eyes empty and unlit.

Two pictures she watched simultaneously — the gay ballroom and the lane that ran east and west.

Midnight was past and supper over, though she had not noticed it. Her aunt had disappeared finally, it seemed. The two pictures filled her mind, absorbed her. What she was feeling was not clear, for there was confusion in her between the two scenes somewhere — as though the brilliant ballroom lay set against the dark background of the lane beneath the quiet stars. The contrast struck her. How calm and lovely the night lane seemed against this feverish gaiety, this heat, this artificial perfume, these exaggerated clothes. Like a small, rapid cinema-picture the dazzling ballroom passed along the dark throat of the deserted lane. A patch of light, alive with whirling animalculæ, it shone a moment against the velvet background of the midnight country-side. It grew smaller and smaller. It vanished over the edge of the departing end. It was gone.

Night and the stars enveloped her, and her eyes became accustomed to the change, so that she saw the sandy strip of lane, the hazel bushes, the dim outline of the cottage. Her naked soul, it seemed again, stood facing an infinitude. Yet the scent of roses, of dew-soaked grass came to her. A blackbird was whistling in the hedge. The eastern end showed itself now more plainly. The tops of the trees defined themselves. There came a glimmer in the sky, an early swallow flashed past against a streak of pale sweet gold. Old Purdy, his tea-pail faintly rattling, a stir of thick white dust about his feet, came slowly round the curve. It was the sunrise.

A deep, passionate thrill ran through her body from head to feet. There was a clap beside her — in the air it seemed — as though the wings of the early swallow had flashed past her very ear, or the approaching sunrise called aloud. She turned her head — along the brightening lane, but also across the gay ballroom. Old Purdy, straightening up his bent shoulders, was gazing over the wicket-gate into her eyes.

Something quivered. A shimmer ran fluttering before her sight. She trembled. Over the crowd of intervening heads, as over the spiked top of the little gate, a man was gazing at her.

Old Purdy, however, did not fade, nor did his outline wholly pass. There was this confusion between two pictures. Yet this man who gazed at her was in the London ballroom. He was so tall and straight. The same moment her aunt’s face appeared below his shoulder, only just visible, and he turned his head, but did not turn his eyes, to listen to her. Both looked her way; they moved, threading their way towards her. It meant an introduction coming. He had asked for it.

She did not catch his name, so quickly, yet so easily and naturally the little formalities were managed, and she was dancing. The same sweet, dim confusion was about her. His touch, his voice, his eyes combined extraordinarily in a sense of complete possession to which she yielded utterly. The two pictures, moreover, still held their place. Behind the glaring lights ran the pale sweet gold of a country dawn; woven like a silver thread among the strings she heard the blackbirds whistling; in the stale, heated air lay the subtle freshness of a summer sunrise. Their dancing feet bore them along in a flowing motion that curved from east to west.

They danced without speaking; one rhythm took them; like a single person they glided over the smooth, perfect floor, and, more and more to her, it was as if the floor flowed with them, bearing them along. Such dancing she had never known. The strange sweetness of the confusion that half-entranced her increased — almost as though she lay upon her partner's arms and that he bore her through the air. Both the sense of weight and the touch of her feet on solid ground were gone delightfully. The London room grew hazy, too; the other figures faded; the ceiling, half transparent, let through a filtering glimmer of the dawn. Her thoughts — surely he shared them with her — went out floating beneath this brightening sky. There was a sound of wakening birds, a smell of flowers.

They had danced perhaps five minutes when both stopped abruptly as with one accord.

"Shall we sit it out — if you've no objection?" he suggested in the very instant that the same thought occurred to her. "The conservatory, among the flowers," he added, leading her to the corner among scented blooms and plants, exactly as she herself desired. There were leaves and ferns about them in the warm air. The light was dim. A streak of gold in the sky showed through the glass. But for one other couple they were alone.

"I have something to say to you," he began. "You must have thought it curious — I've been staring at you so. The whole evening I've been watching you."

"I — hadn't noticed," she said truthfully, her voice, as it were, not quite her own. "I've not been dancing — only once, that is."

But her heart was dancing as she said it. For the first time she became aware of her partner more distinctly — of his deep, resonant voice, his soldierly tall figure, his deferential, almost protective manner. She turned suddenly and looked into his face. The clear, rather penetrating eyes reminded her of someone she had known.

At the same instant he used her thought, turning it in his own direction. "I can't remember, for the life of me," he said quietly, "where I have seen you before. Your face is familiar to me, oddly familiar — years ago — in my first youth somewhere."

It was as though he broke something to her gently — something he was sure of and knew positively, that yet might shock and startle her.

The blood rushed from her heart as she quickly turned her gaze away. The wave of deep feeling that rose with a sensation of glowing warmth troubled her voice. "I find in you, too, a faint resemblance to — someone I have met," she murmured. Without meaning it she let slip the added words, "when I was a girl."

She felt him start, but he saved the situation, making it ordinary again by obtaining her permission to smoke, then slowly lighting his cigarette before he spoke.

"You must forgive me," he put in with a smile, "but your name, when you were kind enough to let me be introduced, escaped me. I did not catch it."

She told him her surname, but he asked in his persuasive yet somehow masterful way for the Christian name as well. He turned round instantly as she gave it, staring hard at her with meaning, with an examining intentness, with open curiosity. There was a question on his lips, but she interrupted, delaying it by a question of her own. Without looking at him she knew and feared his question. Her voice just concealed a trembling that was in her throat.

"My aunt," she agreed lightly, "is incorrigible. Do you know I didn't catch yours either? Oh — I meant your surname," she added, confusion gaining upon her when he mentioned his first name only.

He became suddenly more earnest, his voice deepened, his whole manner took on the guise of deliberate intention backed by some profound emotion that he could no longer hide. The music, which had momentarily ceased, began again, and a couple, who had been sitting out diagonally across from them, rose and went out. They were now quite alone. The sky was brighter.

“I must tell you,” he went on in a way that compelled her to look up and meet his intent gaze. “You really must allow me. I feel sure somehow you’ll understand. At any rate,” he added like a boy, “you won’t laugh.”

She believes she gave the permission and assurance. Memory fails her a little here, for as she returned his gaze, it seemed a curious change came stealing over him, yet at first so imperceptibly, so vaguely, that she could not say when it began, nor how it happened.

“Yes,” she murmured, “please — —” The change defined itself. She stopped dead.

“I know now where I’ve seen you before. I remember.” His voice vibrated like a wind in big trees. It enveloped her.

“Yes,” she repeated in a whisper, for the hammering of her heart made both a louder tone or further words impossible. She knew not what he was going to say, yet at the same time she knew with accuracy. Her eyes gazed helplessly into his. The change absorbed her. Within his outline she watched another outline grow. Behind the immaculate evening clothes a ragged, unkempt figure rose. A worn, ravaged face with young burning eyes peered through his own. “Please, please,” she whispered again very faintly. He took her hand in his.

His voice came from very far away, yet drawing nearer, and the scene about them faded, vanished. The lane that curved east and west now stretched behind him, and she sat gazing towards the sunrise end, as years ago when the girl passed into the woman first.

“I knew — a friend of yours — Dick Messenger,” he was saying in this distant voice that yet was close beside her, “knew him at school, at Cambridge, and later in Mexico. We worked in the same mines together, only he was contractor and I was — in difficulties. That made no difference. He — he told me about a girl — of his love and admiration, an admiration that remained, but a love that had already faded.”

She saw only the ragged outline within the well-groomed figure of the man who spoke. The young eyes that gazed so piercingly into hers belonged to him, the seller of her dream of years before. It was to this ragged stranger in her lane she made her answer:

“I, too, now remember,” she said softly. “Please go on.”

“He gave me his confidence, asking me where his duty lay, and I told him that the real love comes once only; it knows no doubt, no fading. I told him this — —”

“We both discovered it in time,” she said to herself, so low it was scarcely audible, yet not resisting as he laid his other hand upon the one he already held.

“I also told him there was only one true dream,” the voice continued, the inner face drawing nearer to the outer that contained it. “I asked him, and he told me — everything. I knew all about this girl. Her picture, too, he showed me.”

The voice broke off. The flood of love and pity, of sympathy and understanding that rose in her like a power long suppressed, threatened tears, yet happy, yearning tears like those of a girl, which only the quick, strong pressure of his hands prevented.

“The — little painting — yes, I know it,” she faltered.

“It saved me,” he said simply. “It changed my life. From that moment I began — living decently again — living for an ideal.” Without knowing that she did so, the pressure of her hand upon his own came instantly. “He — he gave it to me,” the voice went on, “to keep. He said he could neither keep it himself nor destroy it. It was the day before he sailed. I remember it as yesterday. I said I must give him something in return, or it would cut friendship. But I had nothing in the world to give. We were in the hills. I picked a leaf of fern instead. ‘Fern-seed,’ I told him, ‘it will make you see the fairies and find your true dream.’ I remember his laugh to this day — a sad, uneasy laugh. ‘I shall give it to her,’ he told me, ‘when I give her my difficult explanation.’ But I said, ‘Give it with my love, and tell her that I wait.’ He looked at me with surprise, incredulous. Then he said slowly, ‘Why not? If — if only you hadn’t let yourself go to pieces like this!’”

An immensity of clear emotion she could not understand passed over her in a wave. Involuntarily she moved closer against him. With her eyes unflinchingly upon his own, she whispered: “You were hungry, thirsty, you had no clothes.... You waited!”

“You’re reading my thoughts, as I knew one day you would.” It seemed as if their minds, their bodies too, were one, as he said the words. “You, too — you waited.” His voice was low.

There came a glow between them as of hidden fire; their faces shone; there was a brightening as of dawn upon their skins, within their eyes, lighting their very hair. Out of this happy sky his voice floated to her with the blackbird’s song:

“And that night I dreamed of you. I dreamed I met you in an English country lane.”

“We did,” she murmured, as though it were quite natural.

“I dreamed I gave you the fern leaf — across a wicket-gate — and in front of a little house that was our home. In my dream — I handed to you — a dream — —”

“You did.” And as she whispered it the two figures merged into one before her very eyes. “See,” she added softly, “I have it still. It is in my locket at this moment, for I have worn it day and night through all these years of waiting.” She began fumbling at her chain.

He smiled. “Such things,” he said gently, “are beyond me rather. I have found you. That’s all that matters. That” — he smiled again— “is real at any rate.”

“A vision,” she murmured, half to herself and half to him, “I can understand. A dream, though wonderful, is a dream. But the little fern you gave me,” drawing the fine gold chain from her bosom, “the actual leaf I have worn all these years in my locket!”

He smiled as she held the locket out to him, her fingers feeling for the little spring. He shook his head, but so slightly she did not notice it.

“I will prove it to you,” she said. “I must. Look!” she cried, as with trembling hand she pressed the hidden catch. “There! There!”

With heads close together they bent over. The tiny lid flew open. And as he took her for one quick instant in his arms the sun flashed his first golden shaft upon them, covering them with light. But her exclamation of incredulous surprise he smothered with a kiss. For inside the little locket there lay — nothing. It was quite empty.

XV

VENGEANCE IS MINE

1

AN ACTIVE, VIGOROUS man in Holy orders, yet compelled by heart trouble to resign a living in Kent before full middle age, he had found suitable work with the Red Cross in France; and it rather pleased a strain of innocent vanity in him that Rouen, whence he derived his Norman blood, should be the scene of his activities.

He was a gentle-minded soul, a man deeply read and thoughtful, but goodness perhaps his out-standing quality, believing no evil of others. He had been slow, for instance, at first to credit the German atrocities, until the evidence had compelled him to face the appalling facts. With acceptance, then, he had experienced a revulsion which other gentle minds have probably also experienced — a burning desire, namely, that the perpetrators should be fitly punished.

This primitive instinct of revenge — he called it a lust — he sternly repressed; it involved a descent to lower levels of conduct irreconcilable with the progress of the race he so passionately believed in. Revenge pertained to savage days. But, though he hid away the instinct in his heart, afraid of its clamour and persistency, it revived from time to time, as fresh horrors made it bleed anew. It remained alive, unsatisfied; while, with its analysis, his mind strove unconsciously. That an intellectual nation should deliberately include frightfulness as a chief item in its creed perplexed him horribly; it seemed to him conscious spiritual evil openly affirmed. Some genuine worship of Odin, Wotan, Moloch lay still embedded in the German outlook, and beneath the veneer of their pretentious culture. He often wondered, too, what effect the recognition of these horrors must have upon gentle minds in other men, and especially upon imaginative minds. How did they deal with the fact that this appalling thing existed in human nature in the twentieth century? Its survival, indeed, caused his belief in civilization as a whole to waver. Was progress, his pet ideal and cherished faith, after all a mockery? Had human nature not advanced...?

His work in the great hospitals and convalescent camps beyond the town was tiring; he found little time for recreation, much less for rest; a light dinner and bed by ten o'clock was the usual way of spending his evenings. He had no social intercourse, for everyone else was as busy as himself. The enforced solitude, not quite wholesome, was unavoidable. He found no outlet for his thoughts. First-hand acquaintance with suffering, physical and mental, was no new thing to him, but this close familiarity, day by day, with maimed and broken humanity preyed considerably on his mind, while the fortitude and cheerfulness shown by the victims deepened the impression of respectful, yearning wonder made upon him. They were so young, so fine and careless, these lads whom the German lust for power had robbed of limbs, and eyes, of mind, of life itself. The sense of horror grew in him with cumulative but unrelieved effect.

With the lengthening of the days in February, and especially when March saw the welcome change to summer time, the natural desire for open air asserted itself. Instead of retiring early to his dingy bedroom, he would stroll out after dinner through the ancient streets. When the air was not too chilly, he would prolong these outings, starting at sunset and coming home beneath the bright mysterious stars. He knew at length every turn and winding of the old-world alleys, every gable, every tower and spire, from the *Vieux Marché*, where Joan of Arc was burnt, to the busy quays, thronged now with soldiers from half a dozen countries. He wandered on past grey gateways of crumbling stone that marked the former banks of the old tidal river. An English army, five centuries ago, had camped here among reeds and swamps, besieging the Norman capital, where now they brought in supplies of men and material upon modern docks, a mighty invasion of a very different kind. Imaginative reflection was his constant mood.

But it was the haunted streets that touched him most, stirring some chord his ancestry had planted in him. The forest of spires thronged the air with strange stone flowers, silvered by moonlight as though white fire streamed from branch and petal; the old church towers soared; the cathedral touched the stars. After dark the modern note, paramount in the daylight, seemed hushed; with sunset it underwent a definite night-change. Although the darkened streets kept alive in him the menace of fire and death, the crowding soldiers, dipped to the face in shadow, seemed somehow negligible; the leaning roofs and gables hid them in a purple sea of mist that blurred their modern garb, steel weapons, and the like. Shadows themselves, they entered the being of the town; their feet moved silently; there was a hush and murmur; the brooding buildings absorbed them easily.

Ancient and modern, that is, unable successfully to mingle, let fall grotesque, incongruous shadows on his thoughts. The spirit of mediæval days stole over him, exercising its inevitable sway upon a temperament already predisposed to welcome it. Witchcraft and wonder, pagan superstition and speculation, combined with an ancestral tendency to weave a spell, half of acceptance, half of shrinking, about his imaginative soul in which poetry and logic seemed otherwise fairly balanced. Too weary for critical judgment to discern clear outlines, his mind, during these magical twilight walks, became the playground of opposing forces, some power of dreaming, it seems, too easily in the ascendant. The soul of ancient Rouen, stealing beside his footsteps in the dusk, put forth a shadowy hand and touched him.

This shadowy spell he denied as far as in him lay, though the resistance offered by reason to instinct lacked true driving power. The dice were loaded otherwise in such a soul. His own blood harked back unconsciously to the days when men were tortured, broken on the wheel, walled up alive, and burnt for small offences. This shadowy hand stirred faint ancestral memories in him, part instinct, part desire. The next step, by which he saw a similar attitude flowering full blown in the German frightfulness, was too easily made to be rejected. The German horrors made him believe that this ignorant cruelty of olden days threatened the world now in a modern, organized shape that proved its survival in the human heart. Shuddering, he fought against the natural desire for adequate punishment, but forgot that repressed emotions sooner or later must assert themselves. Essentially irrepressible, they may force an outlet in distorted fashion. He hardly recognized, perhaps, their actual claim, yet it was audible occasionally. For, owing to his loneliness, the natural outlet, in talk and intercourse, was denied.

Then, with the softer winds, he yearned for country air. The sweet spring days had come; morning and evening were divine; above the town the orchards were in bloom. Birds blew their tiny bugles on the hills. The midday sun began to burn.

It was the time of the final violence, when the German hordes flung like driven cattle against the Western line where free men fought for liberty. Fate hovered dreadfully in the balance that spring of 1918; Amiens was threatened, and if Amiens fell, Rouen must be evacuated. The town, already full, became now over-full. On his way home one evening he passed the station, crowded with homeless new arrivals. “Got the wind up, it seems, in Amiens!” cried a cheery voice, as an officer he knew went by him hurriedly. And as he heard it the mood of the spring became of a sudden uppermost. He reached a decision. The German horror came abruptly closer. This further overcrowding of the narrow streets was more than he could face.

It was a small, personal decision merely, but he *must* get out among woods and fields, among flowers and wholesome, growing things, taste simple, innocent life again. The following evening he would pack his haversack with food and tramp the four miles to the great *Forêt Verte* — delicious name! — and spend the night with trees and stars, breathing his full of sweetness, calm and peace. He was too accustomed to the thunder of the guns to be disturbed by it. The song of a thrush, the whistle of a blackbird, would easily drown that. He made his plan accordingly.

The next two nights, however, a warm soft rain was falling; only on the third evening could he put his little plan into execution. Anticipatory enjoyment, meanwhile, lightened his heart; he did his daily work more competently, the spell of the ancient city weakened somewhat. The shadowy hand withdrew.

2

Meanwhile, a curious adventure intervened.

His good and simple heart, disciplined these many years in the way a man should walk, received upon its imaginative side, a stimulus that, in his case, amounted to a shock. That a strange and comely woman should make eyes at him disturbed his equilibrium considerably; that he should enjoy the attack, though without at first responding openly — even without full comprehension of its meaning — disturbed it even more. It was, moreover, no ordinary attack.

He saw her first the night after his decision when, in a mood of disappointment due to the rain, he came down to his lonely dinner. The room, he saw, was crowded with new arrivals, from Amiens, doubtless, where they had “the wind up.” The wealthier civilians had fled for safety to Rouen. These interested and, in a measure, stimulated him. He looked at them sympathetically, wondering what dear home-life they had so hurriedly relinquished at the near thunder of the enemy guns, and, in so doing, he noticed, sitting alone at a small table just in front of his own — yet with her back to him — a woman.

She drew his attention instantly. The first glance told him that she was young and well-to-do; the second, that she was unusual. What precisely made her unusual he could not say, although he at once began to study her intently. Dignity, atmosphere, personality, he perceived beyond all question. She sat there with an air. The becoming little hat with its challenging feather slightly tilted, the set of the shoulders, the neat waist and slender outline; possibly, too, the hair about the neck, and the faint perfume that was wafted towards him as the serving girl swept past, combined in the persuasion. Yet he felt it as more than a persuasion. She attracted him with a subtle vehemence he had never felt before. The instant he set eyes upon her his blood ran faster. The thought rose passionately in him, almost the words that phrased it: “I wish I knew her.”

This sudden flash of response his whole being certainly gave — to the back of an unknown woman. It was both vehement and instinctive. He lay stress upon its instinctive character; he was aware of it before reason told him why. That it was “in response” he also noted, for although he had not seen her face and she assuredly had made no sign, he felt that attraction which involves also invitation. So vehement, moreover, was this response in him that he felt shy and ashamed the same instant, for it almost seemed he had expressed his thought in audible words. He flushed, and the flush ran through his body; he was conscious of heated blood as in a youth of twenty-five, and when a man past forty knows this touch of fever he may also know, though he may not recognize it, that the danger signal which means possible abandon has been lit. Moreover, as though to prove his instinct justified, it was at this very instant that the woman turned and stared at him deliberately. She looked into his eyes, and he looked into hers. He knew a moment’s keen distress, a sharpest possible discomfort, that after all he *had* expressed his desire audibly. Yet, though he blushed, he did not lower his eyes. The embarrassment passed instantly, replaced by a thrill of strangest pleasure and satisfaction. He knew a tinge of inexplicable dismay as well. He felt for a second helpless before what seemed a challenge in her eyes. The eyes were too compelling. They mastered him.

In order to meet his gaze she had to make a full turn in her chair, for her table was placed directly in front of his own. She did so without concealment. It was no mere attempt to see what lay behind by making a half-turn and pretending to look elsewhere; no corner of the eye business; but a full, straight, direct, significant stare. She looked into his soul as though she called him, he looked into hers as though he answered. Sitting there like a statue, motionless, without a bow, without a smile, he returned her intense regard unflinchingly and yet unwillingly. He made no sign. He shivered again.... It was perhaps ten seconds before she turned away with an air as if she had delivered her message and received his answer, but in those ten seconds a series of singular ideas crowded his mind, leaving an impression that ten years could never efface. The face and eyes produced a kind of intoxication in him. There was almost recognition, as though she said: “Ah, there you are! I was waiting; you’ll have to come, of course. You must!” And just before she turned away she smiled.

He felt confused and helpless.

The face he described as unusual; familiar, too, as with the atmosphere of some long forgotten dream, and if beauty perhaps was absent, character and individuality were supreme. Implacable resolution was stamped upon the features, which yet were sweet and womanly, stirring an emotion in him that he could not name and certainly did not recognize. The eyes, slanting a little upwards, were full of fire, the mouth voluptuous but very firm, the chin and jaw most delicately modelled, yet with a masculine strength that told of inflexible resolve. The resolution, as a whole, was the most relentless he had ever seen upon a human countenance. It dominated him. “How vain to resist the will,” he thought, “that lies behind!” He was conscious of enslavement; she conveyed a message that he must obey, admitting compliance with her unknown purpose.

That some extraordinary wordless exchange was registered thus between them seemed very clear; and it was just at this moment, as if to signify her satisfaction, that she smiled. At his feeling of willing compliance with some purpose in her mind, the smile appeared. It was faint, so faint indeed that the eyes betrayed it rather than the mouth and lips; but it was there; he saw it and he thrilled again to this added touch of wonder and enchantment. Yet, strangest of all, he maintains that with the smile there fluttered over the resolute face a sudden arresting tenderness, as though some wild flower lit a granite surface with its melting loveliness. He was aware in the clear strong eyes of unshed tears, of sympathy, of self-sacrifice he called maternal, of clinging love. It was this tenderness, as of a soft and gracious mother, and this implacable resolution, as of a stern, relentless man, that left upon his receptive soul the strange impression of sweetness yet of domination.

The brief ten seconds were over. She turned away as deliberately as she had turned to look. He found himself trembling with confused emotions he could not disentangle, could not even name; for, with the subtle intoxication of compliance in his soul lay also a vigorous protest that included refusal, even a violent refusal given with horror. This unknown woman, without actual speech or definite gesture, had lit a flame in him that linked on far away and out of sight with the magic of the ancient city's mediæval spell. Both, he decided, were undesirable, both to be resisted.

He was quite decided about this. She pertained to forgotten yet unburied things, her modern aspect a mere disguise, a disguise that some deep unsatisfied instinct in him pierced with ease.

He found himself equally decided, too, upon another thing which, in spite of his momentary confusion, stood out clearly: the magic of the city, the enchantment of the woman, both attacked a constitutional weakness in his blood, a line of least resistance. It wore no physical aspect, breathed no hint of ordinary romance; the mere male and female, moral or immoral touch was wholly absent; yet passion lurked there, tumultuous if hidden, and a tract of consciousness, long untravelled, was lit by sudden ominous flares. His character, his temperament, his calling in life as a former clergyman and now a Red Cross worker, being what they were, he stood on the brink of an adventure not dangerous alone but containing a challenge of fundamental kind that involved his very soul.

No further thrill, however, awaited him immediately. He left his table before she did, having intercepted no slightest hint of desired acquaintanceship or intercourse. He, naturally, made no advances; she, equally, made no smallest sign. Her face remained hidden, he caught no flash of eyes, no gesture, no hint of possible invitation. He went upstairs to his dingy room, and in due course fell asleep. The next day he saw her not, her place in the dining-room was empty; but in the late evening of the following day, as the soft spring sunshine found him prepared for his postponed expedition, he met her suddenly on the stairs. He was going down with haversack and in walking kit to an early dinner, when he saw her coming up; she was perhaps a dozen steps below him; they must meet. A wave of confused, embarrassed pleasure swept him. He realized that this was no chance meeting. She meant to speak to him.

Violent attraction and an equally violent repulsion seized him. There was no escape, nor, had escape been possible, would he have attempted it. He went down four steps, she mounted four towards him; then he took one and she took one. They met. For a moment they stood level, while he shrank against the wall to let her pass. He had the feeling that but for the support of that wall he must have lost his balance and fallen into her, for the sunlight from the landing window caught her face and lit it, and she was younger, he saw, than he had thought, and far more comely. Her atmosphere enveloped him, the sense of attraction and repulsion became intense. She moved past him with the slightest possible bow of recognition; then, having passed, she turned.

She stood a little higher than himself, a step at most, and she thus looked down at him. Her eyes blazed into his. She smiled, and he was aware again of the domination and the sweetness. The perfume of her near presence drowned him; his head swam. “We count upon you,” she said in a low firm voice, as though giving a command; “I know ... we may. We do.” And, before he knew what he was saying, trembling a little between deep pleasure and a contrary impulse that sought to choke the utterance, he heard his own voice answering. “You can count upon me....” And she was already half-way up the next flight of stairs ere he could move a muscle, or attempt to thread a meaning into the singular exchange.

Yet meaning, he well knew, there was.

She was gone; her footsteps overhead had died away. He stood there trembling like a boy of twenty, yet also like a man of forty in whom fires, long dreaded, now blazed sullenly. She had opened the furnace door, the draught rushed through. He felt again the old unwelcome spell; he saw the twisted streets ‘mid leaning gables and shadowy towers of a day forgotten; he heard the ominous murmurs of a crowd that thirsted for wheel and scaffold and fire; and, aware of vengeance, sweet and terrible, aware, too, that he welcomed it, his heart was troubled and afraid.

In a brief second the impression came and went; following it swiftly, the sweetness of the woman swept him: he forgot his shrinking in a rush of wild delicious pleasure. The intoxication in him deepened. She had recognized him! She had bowed and even smiled; she had spoken, assuming familiarity, intimacy, including him in her secret purposes! It was this sweet intimacy cleverly injected, that overcame the repulsion he acknowledged, winning complete obedience to the unknown meaning of her words. This meaning, for the moment, lay in darkness; yet it was a portion of his own self, he felt, that concealed it of set purpose. He kept it hid, he looked deliberately another way; for, if he faced it with full recognition, he knew that he must resist it to the death. He allowed himself to ask vague questions — then let her dominating spell confuse the answers so that he did not hear them. The challenge to his soul, that is, he evaded.

What is commonly called sex lay only slightly in his troubled emotions; her purpose had nothing that kept step with chance acquaintanceship. There lay meaning, indeed, in her smile and voice, but these were no hand-maids to a vulgar intrigue in a foreign hotel. Her will breathed cleaner air; her purpose aimed at some graver, mightier climax than the mere subjection of an elderly victim like himself. That will, that purpose, he felt certain, were implacable as death, the resolve in those bold eyes was not a common one. For, in some strange way, he divined the strong maternity in her; the maternal instinct was deeply, even predominantly, involved; he felt positive that a divine tenderness, deeply outraged, was a chief ingredient too. In some way, then, she needed him, yet not she alone, for the pronoun “we” was used, and there were others with her; in some way, equally, a part of him was already her and their accomplice, an unresisting slave, a willing co-conspirator.

He knew one other thing, and it was this that he kept concealed so carefully from himself. His recognition of it was sub-conscious possibly, but for that very reason true: her purpose was consistent with the satisfaction at last of a deep instinct in him that clamoured to know gratification. It was for these odd, mingled reasons that he stood trembling when she left him on the stairs, and finally went down to his hurried meal with a heart that knew wonder, anticipation, and delight, but also dread.

3

The table in front of him remained unoccupied; his dinner finished, he went out hastily.

As he passed through the crowded streets, his chief desire was to be quickly free of the old muffled buildings and airless alleys with their clinging atmosphere of other days. He longed for the sweet taste of the heights, the smells of the forest whither he was bound. This *Forêt Verte*, he knew, rolled for leagues towards the north, empty of houses as of human beings; it was the home of deer and birds and rabbits, of wild boar too. There would be spring flowers among the brushwood, anemones, celandine, oxslip, daffodils. The vapours of the town oppressed him, the warm and heavy moisture stifled; he wanted space and the sight of clean simple things that would stimulate his mind with lighter thoughts.

He soon passed the Rampe, skirted the ugly villas of modern Bihorel and, rising now with every step, entered the *Route Neuve*. He went unduly fast; he was already above the Cathedral spire; below him the Seine meandered round the chalky hills, laden with war-barges, and across a dip, still pink in the afterglow, rose the blunt Down of Bonsecours with its anti-aircraft batteries. Poetry and violent fact crashed everywhere; he longed to top the hill and leave these unhappy reminders of death behind him. In front the sweet woods already beckoned through the twilight. He hastened. Yet while he deliberately fixed his imagination on promised peace and beauty, an undercurrent ran sullenly in his mind, busy with quite other thoughts. The unknown woman and her singular words, the following mystery of the ancient city, the soft beating wonder of the two together, these worked their incalculable magic persistently about him. Repression merely added to their power. His mind was a prey to some shadowy, remote anxiety that, intangible, invisible, yet knocked with ghostly fingers upon some door of ancient memory.... He watched the moon rise above the eastern ridge, in the west the afterglow of sunset still hung red. But these did not hold his attention as they normally must have done. Attention seemed elsewhere.

The undercurrent bore him down a siding, into a backwater, as it were, that clamoured for discharge.

He thought suddenly, then, of weather, what he called “German weather” — that combination of natural conditions which so oddly favoured the enemy always. It had often occurred to him as strange; on sea and land, mist, rain and wind, the fog and drying sun worked ever on *their* side. The coincidence was odd, to say the least. And now this glimpse of rising moon and sunset sky reminded him unpleasantly of the subject. Legends of pagan weather-gods passed through his mind like hurrying shadows. These shadows multiplied, changed form, vanished and returned. They came and went with incoherence, a straggling stream, rushing from one point to another, manœuvring for position, but all unled, unguided by his will. The physical exercise filled his brain with blood, and thought danced undirected, picture upon picture driving by, so that soon he slipped from German weather and pagan gods to the witchcraft of past centuries, of its alleged association with the natural powers of the elements, and thus, eventually, to his cherished beliefs that humanity had advanced.

Such remnants of primitive days were grotesque superstition, of course. But had humanity advanced? Had the individual progressed after all? Civilization, was it not the merest artificial growth? And the old perplexity rushed through his mind again — the German barbarity and blood-lust, the savagery, the undoubted sadic impulses, the frightfulness taught with cool calculation by their highest minds, approved by their professors, endorsed by their clergy, applauded by their women even — all the unwelcome, undesired thoughts came flocking back upon him, escorted by the trooping shadows. They lay, these questions, still unsolved within him; it was the undercurrent, flowing more swiftly now, that bore them to the surface. It had acquired momentum; it was leading somewhere.

They were a thoughtful, intellectual race, these Germans; their music, literature, philosophy, their science — how reconcile the opposing qualities? He had read that their herd-instinct was unusually developed, though betraying the characteristics of a low wild savage type — the lupine. It might be true. Fear and danger wakened this collective instinct into terrific activity, making them blind and humourless; they fought best, like wolves, in contact; they howled and whined and boasted loudly all together to inspire terror; their Hymn of Hate was but an elaboration of the wolf’s fierce bark, giving them herd-courage; and a savage discipline was necessary to their lupine type.

These reflections thronged his mind as the blood coursed in his veins with the rapid climbing; yet one and all, the beauty of the evening, the magic of the hidden town, the thoughts of German horror, German weather, German gods, all these, even the odd detail that they revived a pagan practice by hammering nails into effigies and idols — all led finally to one blazing centre that nothing could dislodge nor anything conceal; a woman's voice and eyes. To these he knew quite well, was due the undesired intensification of the very mood, the very emotions, the very thoughts he had come out on purpose to escape.

"It is the night of the vernal equinox," occurred to him suddenly, sharp as a whispered voice beside him. He had no notion whence the idea was born. It had no particular meaning, so far as he remembered.

"It had *then* ..." said the voice imperiously, rising, it seemed, directly out of the under-current in his soul.

It startled him. He increased his pace. He walked very quickly, whistling softly as he went.

The dusk had fallen when at length he topped the long, slow hill, and left the last of the atrocious straggling villas well behind him. The ancient city lay far below in murky haze and smoke, but tinged now with the silver of the growing moon.

4

He stood now on the open plateau. He was on the heights at last.

The night air met him freshly in the face, so that he forgot the fatigue of the long climb uphill, taken too fast somewhat for his years. He drew a deep draught into his lungs and stepped out briskly.

Far in the upper sky light flaky clouds raced through the reddened air, but the wind kept to these higher strata, and the world about him lay very still. Few lights showed in the farms and cottages, for this was the direct route of the Gothas, and nothing that could help the German hawks to find the river was visible.

His mind cleared pleasantly; this keen sweet air held no mystery; he put his best foot foremost, whistling still, but a little more loudly than before. Among the orchards he saw the daisies glimmer. Also, he heard the guns, a thudding concussion in the direction of the coveted Amiens, where, some sixty miles as the crow flies, they roared their terror into the calm evening skies. He cursed the sound, in the town below it was not audible. Thought jumped then to the men who fired them, and so to the prisoners who worked on the roads outside the hospitals and camps he visited daily. He passed them every morning and night, and the N.C.O. invariably saluted his Red Cross uniform, a salute he returned, when he could not avoid it, with embarrassment.

One man in particular stood out clearly in this memory; he had exchanged glances with him, noted the expression of his face, the number of his gang printed on coat and trousers—”82.” The fellow had somehow managed to establish a relationship; he would look up and smile or frown; if the news, from his point of view, was good, he smiled; if it was bad, he scowled; once, insolently enough — when the Germans had taken Albert, Péronne, Bapaume — he grinned.

Something about the sullen, close-cropped face, typically Prussian, made the other shudder. It was the visage of an animal, neither evil nor malignant, even good-natured sometimes when it smiled, yet of an animal that could be fierce with the lust of happiness, ferocious with delight. The sullen savagery of a human wolf lay in it somewhere. He pictured its owner impervious to shame, to normal human instinct as civilized people know these. Doubtless he read his own feelings into it. He could imagine the man doing anything and everything, regarding chivalry and sporting instinct as proof of fear or weakness. He could picture this member of the wolf-pack killing a woman or a child, mutilating, cutting off little hands even, with the conscientious conviction that it was right and sensible to destroy *any* individual of an enemy tribe. It was, to him, an atrocious and inhuman face.

It now cropped up with unpleasant vividness, as he listened to the distant guns and thought of Amiens with its back against the wall, its inhabitants flying ——

Ah! Amiens...! He again saw the woman staring into his obedient eyes across the narrow space between the tables. He smelt the delicious perfume of her dress and person on the stairs. He heard her commanding voice, her very words: “We count on you.... I know we can ... we do.” And her background was of twisted streets, dark alley-ways and leaning gables....

He hurried, whistling loudly an air that he invented suddenly, using his stick like a golf club at every loose stone his feet encountered, making as much noise as possible. He told himself he was a parson and a Red Cross worker. He looked up and saw that the stars were out. The pace made him warm, and he shifted his haversack to the other shoulder. The moon, he observed, now cast his shadow for a long distance on the sandy road.

After another mile, while the air grew sharper and twilight surrendered finally to the moon, the road began to curve and dip, the cottages lay farther out in the dim fields, the farms and barns occurred at longer intervals. A dog barked now and again; he saw cows lying down for the night beneath shadowy fruit-trees. And then the scent in the air changed slightly, and a darkening of the near horizon warned him that the forest had come close.

This was an event. Its influence breathed already a new perfume; the shadows from its myriad trees stole out and touched him. Ten minutes later he reached its actual frontier cutting across the plateau like a line of sentries at attention. He slowed down a little. Here, within sight and touch of his long-desired objective, he hesitated. It stretched, he knew from the map, for many leagues to the north, uninhabited, lonely, the home of peace and silence; there were flowers there, and cool sweet spaces where the moonlight fell. Yet here, within scent and touch of it, he slowed down a moment to draw breath. A forest on the map is one thing; visible before the eyes when night has fallen, it is another. It is real.

The wind, not noticeable hitherto, now murmured towards him from the serried trees that seemed to manufacture darkness out of nothing. This murmur hummed about him. It enveloped him. Piercing it, another sound that was not the guns just reached him, but so distant that he hardly noticed it. He looked back. Dusk suddenly merged in night. He stopped.

“How practical the French are,” he said to himself — aloud — as he looked at the road running straight as a ruled line into the heart of the trees. “They waste no energy, no space, no time. Admirable!”

It pierced the forest like a lance, tapering to a faint point in the misty distance. The trees ate its undeviating straightness as though they would smother it from sight, as though its rigid outline marred their mystery. He admired the practical makers of the road, yet sided, too, with the poetry of the trees. He stood there staring, waiting, dawdling.... About him, save for this murmur of the wind, was silence. Nothing living stirred. The world lay extraordinarily still. That other distant sound had died away.

He lit his pipe, glad that the match blew out and the damp tobacco needed several matches before the pipe drew properly. His puttees hurt him a little, he stooped to loosen them. His haversack swung round in front as he straightened up again, he shifted it laboriously to the other shoulder. A tiny stone in his right boot caused irritation. Its removal took a considerable time, for he had to sit down, and a log was not at once forthcoming. Moreover, the laces gave him trouble, and his fingers had grown thick with heat and the knots were difficult to tie....

“There!” He said it aloud, standing up again. “Now at last, I’m ready!” Then added a mild imprecation, for his pipe had gone out while he stooped over the recalcitrant boot, and it had to be lighted once again. “Ah!” he gasped finally with a sigh as, facing the forest for the third time, he shuffled his tunic straight, altered his haversack once more, changed his stick from the right hand to the left — and faced the foolish truth without further pretence.

He mopped his forehead carefully, as though at the same time trying to mop away from his mind a faint anxiety, a very faint uneasiness, that gathered there. Was someone standing near him? Had somebody come close? He listened intently. It was the blood singing in his ears, of course, that curious distant noise. For, truth to tell, the loneliness bit just below the surface of what he found enjoyable. It seemed to him that somebody was coming, someone he could not see, so that he looked back over his shoulder once again, glanced quickly right and left, then peered down the long opening cut through the woods in front — when there came suddenly a roar and a blaze of dazzling light from behind, so instantaneously that he barely had time to obey the instinct of self-preservation and step aside. He actually leapt. Pressed against the hedge, he saw a motor-car rush past him like a whirlwind, flooding the sandy road with fire; a second followed it; and, to his complete amazement, then, a third.

They were powerful, private cars, so-called. This struck him instantly. Two other things he noticed, as they dived down the throat of the long white road — they showed no tail-lights. This made him wonder. And, secondly, the drivers, clearly seen, were women. They were not even in uniform — which made him wonder even more. The occupants, too, were women. He caught the outline of toque and feather — or was it flowers? — against the closed windows in the moonlight as the procession rushed past him.

He felt bewildered and astonished. Private motors were rare, and military regulations exceedingly strict; the danger of spies dressed in French uniform was constant; cars armed with machine guns, he knew, patrolled the countryside in all directions. Shaken and alarmed, he thought of favoured persons fleeing stealthily by night, of treachery, disguise and swift surprise; he thought of various things as he stood peering down the road for ten minutes after all sight and sound of the cars had died away. But no solution of the mystery occurred to him. Down the white throat the motors vanished. His pipe had gone out; he lit it, and puffed furiously.

His thoughts, at any rate, took temporarily a new direction now. The road was not as lonely as he had imagined. A natural reaction set in at once, and this proof of practical, modern life banished the shadows from his mind effectually. He started off once more, oblivious of his former hesitation. He even felt a trifle shamed and foolish, pretending that the vanished mood had not existed. The tobacco had been damp. His boot had really hurt him.

Yet bewilderment and surprise stayed with him. The swiftness of the incident was disconcerting; the cars arrived and vanished with such extraordinary rapidity; their noisy irruption into this peaceful spot seemed incongruous; they roared, blazed, rushed and disappeared; silence resumed its former sway.

But the silence persisted, whereas the noise was gone.

This touch of the incongruous remained with him as he now went ever deeper into the heart of the quiet forest. This odd incongruity of dreams remained.

5

The keen air stole from the woods, cooling his body and his mind; anemones gleamed faintly among the brushwood, lit by the pallid moonlight. There were beauty, calm and silence, the slow breathing of the earth beneath the comforting sweet stars. War, in this haunt of ancient peace, seemed an incredible anachronism. His thoughts turned to gentle happy hopes of a day when the lion and the lamb would yet lie down together, and a little child would lead them without fear. His soul dwelt with peaceful longings and calm desires.

He walked on steadily, until the inflexible straightness of the endless road began to afflict him, and he longed for a turning to the right or left. He looked eagerly about him for a woodland path. Time mattered little; he could wait for the sunrise and walk home "beneath the young grey dawn"; he had food and matches, he could light a fire, and sleep —— No! — after all, he would not light a fire, perhaps; he might be accused of signalling to hostile aircraft, or a *garde forestière* might catch him. He would not bother with a fire. The night was warm, he could enjoy himself and pass the time quite happily without artificial heat; probably he would need no sleep at all.... And just then he noticed an opening on his right, where a seductive pathway led in among the trees. The moon, now higher in the sky, lit this woodland trail enticingly; it seemed the very opening he had looked for, and with a thrill of pleasure he at once turned down it, leaving the ugly road behind him with relief.

The sound of his footsteps hushed instantly on the leaves and moss; the silence became noticeable; an unusual stillness followed; it seemed that something in his mind was also hushed. His feet moved stealthily, as though anxious to conceal his presence from surprise. His steps dragged purposely; their rustling through the thick dead leaves, perhaps, was pleasant to him. He was not sure.

The path opened presently into a clearing where the moonlight made a pool of silver, the surrounding brushwood fell away; and in the centre a gigantic outline rose. It was, he saw, a beech tree that dwarfed the surrounding forest by its grandeur. Its bulk loomed very splendid against the sky, a faint rustle just audible in its myriad tiny leaves. Dipped in the moonlight, it had such majesty of proportion, such symmetry, that he stopped in admiration. It was, he saw, a multiple tree, five stems springing with attempted spirals out of an enormous trunk; it was immense; it had a presence, the space framed it to perfection. The clearing, evidently, was a favourite resting place for summer picknickers, a playground, probably, for city children on holiday afternoons; woodcutters, too, had been here recently, for he noticed piled brushwood ready to be carted. It indicated admirably, he felt, the limits of his night expedition. Here he would rest awhile, eat his late supper, sleep perhaps round a small —— No! again — a fire he need *not* make; a spark might easily set the woods ablaze, it was against both forest and military regulations. This idea of a fire, otherwise so natural, was distasteful, even repugnant, to him. He wondered a little why it recurred. He noticed this time, moreover, something unpleasant connected with the suggestion of a fire, something that made him shrink; almost a ghostly dread lay hidden in it.

This startled him. A dozen excellent reasons, supplied by his brain, warned him that a fire was unwise; but the true reason, supplied by another part of him, concealed itself with care, as though afraid that reason might detect its nature and fix the label on. Disliking this reminder of his earlier mood, he moved forward into the clearing, swinging his stick aggressively and whistling. He approached the tree, where a dozen thick roots dipped into the earth. Admiring, looking up and down, he paced slowly round its prodigious girth, then stood absolutely still. His heart stopped abruptly, his blood became congealed. He saw something that filled him with a sudden emptiness of terror. On this western side the shadow lay very black; it was between the thick limbs, half stem, half root, where the dark hollows gave easy hiding-places, that he was positive he detected movement. A portion of the trunk had moved.

He stood stock still and stared — not three feet from the trunk — when there came a second movement. Concealed in the shadows there crouched a living form. The movement defined itself immediately. Half reclining, half standing, a living being pressed itself close against the tree, yet fitting so neatly into the wide scooped hollows, that it was scarcely distinguishable from its ebony background. But for the chance movement he must have passed it undetected. Equally, his outstretched fingers might have touched it. The blood rushed from his heart, as he saw this second movement.

Detaching itself from the obscure background, the figure rose and stood before him. It swayed a little, then stepped out into the patch of moonlight on his left. Three feet lay between them. The figure then bent over. A pallid face with burning eyes thrust forward and peered straight into his own.

The human being was a woman. The same instant he recognized the eyes that had stared him out of countenance in the dining-room two nights ago. He was petrified. She stared him out of countenance now.

And, as she did so, the under-current he had tried to ignore so long swept to the surface in a tumultuous flood, obliterating his normal self. Something elaborately built up in his soul by years of artificial training collapsed like a house of cards, and he knew himself undone.

“They’ve got me...!” flashed dreadfully through his mind. It was, again, like a message delivered in a dream where the significance of acts performed and language uttered, concealed at the moment, is revealed much later only.

“After all — they’ve got me...!”

6

The dialogue that followed seemed strange to him only when looking back upon it. The element of surprise again was negligible if not wholly absent, but the incongruity of dreams, almost of nightmare, became more marked. Though the affair was unlikely, it was far from incredible. So completely were this man and woman involved in some purpose common to them both that their talk, their meeting, their instinctive sympathy at the time seemed natural. The same stream bore them irresistibly towards the same far sea. Only, as yet, this common purpose remained concealed. Nor could he define the violent emotions that troubled him. Their exact description was in him, but so deep that he could not draw it up. Moonlight lay upon his thought, merging clear outlines.

Divided against himself, the cleavage left no authoritative self in control; his desire to take an immediate decision resulted in a confused struggle, where shame and pleasure, attraction and revulsion mingled painfully. Incongruous details tumbled helter-skelter about his mind: for no obvious reason, he remembered again his Red Cross uniform, his former holy calling, his nationality too; he was a servant of mercy, a teacher of the love of God; he was an English gentleman. Against which rose other details, as in opposition, holding just beyond the reach of words, yet rising, he recognized well enough, from the bed-rock of the human animal, whereon a few centuries have imposed the thin crust of refinement men call civilization. He was aware of joy and loathing.

In the first few seconds he knew the clash of a dreadful fundamental struggle, while the spell of this woman’s strange enchantment poured over him, seeking the reconciliation he himself could not achieve. Yet the reconciliation *she* sought meant victory or defeat; no compromise lay in it. Something imperious emanating from her already dominated the warring elements towards a coherent whole. He stood before her, quivering with emotions he dared not name. Her great womanhood he recognized, acknowledging obedience to her undisclosed intentions. And this idea of coming surrender terrified him. Whence came, too, that queenly touch about her that made him feel he should have sunk upon his knees?

The conflict resulted in a curious compromise. He raised his hand; he saluted; he found very ordinary words.

“You passed me only a short time ago,” he stammered, “in the motors. There were others with you — —”

“Knowing that you would find us and come after. We count on your presence and your willing help.” Her voice was firm as with unalterable conviction. It was persuasive too. He nodded, as though acquiescence seemed the only course.

“We need your sympathy; we must have your power too.”

He bowed again. “My power!” Something exulted in him. But he murmured only. It was natural, he felt; he gave consent without a question.

Strange words he both understood and did not understand. Her voice, low and silvery, was that of a gentle, cultured woman, but command rang through it with a clang of metal, terrible behind the sweetness. She moved a little closer, standing erect before him in the moonlight, her figure borrowing something of the great tree’s majesty behind her. It was incongruous, this gentle and yet sinister air she wore. Whence came, in this calm peaceful spot, the suggestion of a wild and savage background to her? Why were there tumult and oppression in his heart, pain, horror, tenderness and mercy, mixed beyond disentanglement? Why did he think already, but helplessly, of escape, yet at the same time burn to stay? Whence came again, too, a certain queenly touch he felt in her?

“The gods have brought you,” broke across his turmoil in a half whisper whose breath almost touched his face. “You belong to us.”

The deeps rose in him. Seduced by the sweetness and the power, the warring divisions in his being drew together. His under-self more and more obtained the mastery she willed. Then something in the French she used flickered across his mind with a faint reminder of normal things again.

“Belgian — —” he began, and then stopped short, as her instant rejoinder broke in upon his halting speech and petrified him. In her voice sang that triumphant tenderness that only the feminine powers of the Universe may compass: it seemed the sky sang with her, the mating birds, wild flowers, the south wind and the running streams. All these, even the silver birches, lent their fluid, feminine undertones to the two pregnant words with which she interrupted him and completed his own unfinished sentence:

“ —— and mother.”

With the dreadful calm of an absolute assurance, she stood and watched him.

His understanding already showed signs of clearing. She stretched her hands out with a passionate appeal, a yearning gesture, the eloquence of which should explain all that remained unspoken. He saw their grace and symmetry, exquisite in the moonlight, then watched them fold together in an attitude of prayer. Beautiful mother hands they were; hands made to smooth the pillows of the world, to comfort, bless, caress, hands that little children everywhere must lean upon and love-perfect symbol of protective, self-forgetful motherhood.

This tenderness he noted; he noted next — the strength. In the folded hands he divined the expression of another great world-power, fulfilling the implacable resolution of the mouth and eyes. He was aware of relentless purpose, more — of merciless revenge, as by a protective motherhood outraged beyond endurance. Moreover, the gesture held appeal; these hands, so close that their actual perfume reached him, sought his own in help. The power in himself as man, as male, as father — this was required of him in the fulfillment of the unknown purpose to which this woman summoned him. His understanding cleared still more.

The couple faced one another, staring fixedly beneath the giant beech that overarched them. In the dark of his eyes, he knew, lay growing terror. He shivered, and the shiver passed down his spine, making his whole body tremble. There stirred in him an excitement he loathed, yet welcomed, as the primitive male in him, answering the summons, reared up with instinctive, dreadful glee to shatter the bars that civilization had so confidently set upon its freedom. A primal emotion of his under-being, ancient lust that had too long gone hungry and unfed, leaped towards some possible satisfaction. It was incredible; it was, of course, a dream. But judgment wavered; increasing terror ate his will away. Violence and sweetness, relief and degradation, fought in his soul, as he trembled before a power that now slowly mastered him. This glee and loathing formed their ghastly partnership. He could have strangled the woman where she stood. Equally, he could have knelt and kissed her feet.

The vehemence of the conflict paralysed him.

“A mother’s hands ...” he murmured at length, the words escaping like bubbles that rose to the surface of a seething cauldron and then burst.

And the woman smiled as though she read his mind and saw his little trembling. The smile crept down from the eyes towards the mouth; he saw her lips part slightly; he saw her teeth.

But her reply once more transfixed him. Two syllables she uttered in a voice of iron:

“Louvain.”

The sound acted upon him like a Word of Power in some Eastern fairy tale. It knit the present to a past that he now recognized could never die. Humanity had *not* advanced. The hidden source of his secret joy began to glow. For this woman focused in him passions that life had hitherto denied, pretending they were atrophied, and the primitive male, the naked savage rose up, with glee in its lustful eyes and blood upon its lips. Acquired civilization, a pitiful mockery, split through its thin veneer and fled.

“Belgian ... Louvain ... Mother ...” he whispered, yet astonished at the volume of sound that now left his mouth. His voice had a sudden fullness. It seemed a cave-man roared the words.

She touched his hand, and he knew a sudden intensification of life within him; immense energy poured through his veins; a mediæval spirit used his eyes; great pagan instincts strained and urged against his heart, against his very muscles. He longed for action.

And he cried aloud: “I am with you, with you to the end!”

Her spell had vivified beyond all possible resistance that primitive consciousness which is ever the bed-rock of the human animal.

A racial memory, inset against the forest scenery, flashed suddenly through the depths laid bare. Below a sinking moon dark figures flew in streaming lines and groups; tormented cries went down the wind; he saw torn, blasted trees that swayed and rocked; there was a leaping fire, a gleaming knife, an altar. He saw a sacrifice.

It flashed away and vanished. In its place the woman stood, with shining eyes fixed on his face, one arm outstretched, one hand upon his flesh. She shifted slightly, and her cloak swung open. He saw clinging skins wound closely about her figure; leaves, flowers and trailing green hung from her shoulders, fluttering down the lines of her triumphant physical beauty. There was a perfume of wild roses, incense, ivy bloom, whose subtle intoxication drowned his senses. He saw a sparkling girdle round the waist, a knife thrust through it tight against the hip. And his secret joy, the glee, the pleasure of some unlawful and unholy lust leaped through his blood towards the abandonment of satisfaction.

The moon revealed a glimpse, no more. An instant he saw her thus, half savage and half sweet, symbol of primitive justice entering the present through the door of vanished centuries.

The cloak swung back again, the outstretched hand withdrew, but from a world he knew had altered.

To-day sank out of sight. The moon shone pale with terror and delight on Yesterday.

7

Across this altered world a faint new sound now reached his ears, as though a human wail of anguished terror trembled and changed into the cry of some captured helpless animal. He thought of a wolf apart from the comfort of its pack, savage yet abject. The despair of a last appeal was in the sound. It floated past, it died away. The woman moved closer suddenly.

“All is prepared,” she said, in the same low, silvery voice; “we must not tarry. The equinox is come, the tide of power flows. The sacrifice is here; we hold him fast. We only awaited you.” Her shining eyes were raised to his. “Your soul is with us now?” she whispered.

“My soul is with you.”

“And midnight,” she continued, “is at hand. We use, of course, their methods. Henceforth the gods — their old-world gods — shall work on our side. They demand a sacrifice, and justice has provided one.”

His understanding cleared still more then; the last veil of confusion was drawing from his mind. The old, old names went thundering through his consciousness — Odin, Wotan, Moloch — accessible ever to invocation and worship of the rightful kind. It seemed as natural as though he read in his pulpit the prayer for rain, or gave out the hymn for those at sea. That was merely an empty form, whereas this was real. Sea, storm and earthquake, all natural activities, lay under the direction of those elemental powers called the gods. Names changed, the principle remained.

“Their weather shall be ours,” he cried, with sudden passion, as a memory of unhallowed usages he had thought erased from life burned in him; while, stranger still, resentment stirred — revolt — against the system, against the very deity he had worshipped hitherto. For these had never once interfered to help the cause of right; their feebleness was now laid bare before his eyes. And a two-fold lust rose in him. “Vengeance is ours!” he cried in a louder voice, through which this sudden loathing of the cross poured hatred. “Vengeance and justice! Now bind the victim! Bring on the sacrifice!”

“He is already bound.” And as the woman moved a little, the curious erection behind her caught his eye — the piled brushwood he had imagined was the work of woodmen, picnickers, or playing children. He realized its true meaning.

It now delighted and appalled him. Awe deepened in him, a wind of ice passed over him. Civilization made one more fluttering effort. He gasped, he shivered; he tried to speak. But no words came. A thin cry, as of a frightened child, escaped him.

“It is the only way,” the woman whispered softly. “We steal from them the power of their own deities.” Her head flung back with a marvellous gesture of grace and power; she stood before him a figure of perfect womanhood, gentle and tender, yet at the same time alive and cruel with the passions of an ignorant and savage past. Her folded hands were clasped, her face turned heavenwards. “I am a mother,” she added, with amazing passion, her eyes glistening in the moonlight with unshed tears. “We all” — she glanced towards the forest, her voice rising to a wild and poignant cry— “all, all of us are mothers!”

It was then the final clearing of his understanding happened, and he realized his own part in what would follow. Yet before the realization he felt himself not merely ineffective, but powerless. The struggling forces in him were so evenly matched that paralysis of the will resulted. His dry lips contrived merely a few words of confused and feeble protest.

“Me!” he faltered. “My help —— ?”

“Justice,” she answered; and though softly uttered, it was as though the mediæval towers clanged their bells. That secret, ghastly joy again rose in him; admiration, wonder, desire followed instantly. A fugitive memory of Joan of Arc flashed by, as with armoured wings, upon the moonlight. Some power similarly heroic, some purpose similarly inflexible, emanated from this woman, the savour of whose physical enchantment, whose very breath, rose to his brain like incense. Again he shuddered. The spasm of secret pleasure shocked him. He sighed. He felt alert, yet stunned.

Her words went down the wind between them:

“You are so weak, you English,” he heard her terrible whisper, “so nobly forgiving, so fine, yet so forgetful. You refuse the weapon *they* place within your hands.” Her face thrust closer, the great eyes blazed upon him. “If we would save the children” — the voice rose and fell like wind— “we must worship where they worship, we must sacrifice to their savage deities....”

The stream of her words flowed over him with this nightmare magic that seemed natural, without surprise. He listened, he trembled, and again he sighed. Yet in his blood there was sudden roaring.

“... Louvain ... the hands of little children ... we have the proof,” he heard, oddly intermingled with another set of words that clamoured vainly in his brain for utterance; “the diary in his own handwriting, his gloating pleasure ... the little, innocent hands....”

“Justice is mine!” rang through some fading region of his now fainting soul, but found no audible utterance.

“... Mist, rain and wind ... the gods of German Weather.... We all ... are mothers....”

“I will repay,” came forth in actual words, yet so low he hardly heard the sound. But the woman heard.

“*We!”* she cried fiercely, “*we* will repay!”...

“God!” The voice seemed torn from his throat. “Oh God — *my* God!”

“*Our* gods,” she said steadily in that tone of iron, “are near. The sacrifice is ready. And *you* — servant of mercy, priest of a younger deity, and English — you bring the power that makes it effectual. The circuit is complete.”

It was perhaps the tears in her appealing eyes, perhaps it was her words, her voice, the wonder of her presence; all combined possibly in the spell that finally then struck down his will as with a single blow that paralysed his last resistance. The monstrous, half-legendary spirit of a primitive day recaptured him completely; he yielded to the spell of this tender, cruel woman, mother and avenging angel, whom horror and suffering had flung back upon the practices of uncivilized centuries. A common desire, a common lust and purpose, degraded both of them. They understood one another. Dropping back into a gulf of savage worship that set up idols in the place of God, they prayed to Odin and his awful crew....

It was again the touch of her hand that galvanized him. She raised him; he had been kneeling in slavish wonder and admiration at her feet. He leaped to do the bidding, however terrible, of this woman who was priestess, queen indeed, of a long-forgotten orgy.

“Vengeance at last!” he cried, in an exultant voice that no longer frightened him. “Now light the fire! Bring on the sacrifice!”

There was a rustling among the nearer branches, the forest stirred; the leaves of last year brushed against advancing feet. Yet before he could turn to see, before even the last words had wholly left his lips, the woman, whose hand still touched his fingers, suddenly tossed her cloak aside, and flinging her bare arms about his neck, drew him with impetuous passion towards her face and kissed him, as with delighted fury of exultant passion, full upon the mouth. Her body, in its clinging skins, pressed close against his own; her heat poured into him. She held him fiercely, savagely, and her burning kiss consumed his modern soul away with the fire of a primal day.

“The gods have given you to us,” she cried, releasing him. “Your soul is ours!”

She turned — they turned together — to look for one upon whose last hour the moon now shed her horrid silver.

8

This silvery moonlight fell upon the scene.

Incongruously he remembered the flowers that soon would know the cuckoo’s call; the soft mysterious stars shone down; the woods lay silent underneath the sky.

An amazing fantasy of dream shot here and there. “I am a man, an Englishman, a padre!” ran twisting through his mind, as though *she* whispered them to emphasize the ghastly contrast of reality. A memory of his own Kentish village with its Sunday school fled past, his dream of the Lion and the Lamb close after it. He saw children playing on the green.... He saw their happy little hands....

Justice, punishment, revenge — he could not disentangle them. No longer did he wish to. The tide of violence was at his lips, quenching an ancient thirst. He drank. It seemed he could drink forever. These tender pictures only sweetened horror. That kiss had burned his modern soul away.

The woman waved her hand; there swept from the underbrush a score of figures dressed like herself in skins, with leaves and flowers entwined among their flying hair. He was surrounded in a moment. Upon each face he noted the same tenderness and terrible resolve that their commander wore. They pressed about him, dancing with enchanting grace, yet with full-blooded abandon, across the chequered light and shadow. It was the brimming energy of their movements that swept him off his feet, waking the desire for fierce rhythmical expression. His own muscles leaped and ached; for this energy, it seemed, poured into him from the tossing arms and legs, the shimmering bodies whence hair and skins flung loose, setting the very air awhirl. It flowed over into inanimate objects even, so that the trees waved their branches although no wind stirred — hair, skins and hands, rushing leaves and flying fingers touched his face, his neck, his arms and shoulders, catching him away into this orgy of an ancient, sacrificial ritual. Faces with shining eyes peered into his, then sped away; grew in a cloud upon the moonlight; sank back in shadow; reappeared, touched him, whispered, vanished. Silvery limbs gleamed everywhere. Chanting rose in a wave, to fall away again into forest rustlings; there were smiles that flashed, then fainted into moonlight, red lips and gleaming teeth that shone, then faded out. The secret glade, picked from the heart of the forest by the moon, became a torrent of tumultuous life, a whirlpool of passionate emotions Time had not killed.

But it was the eyes that mastered him, for in their yearning, mating so incongruously with the savage grace — in the eyes shone ever tears. He was aware of gentle women, of womanhood, of accumulated feminine power that nothing could withstand, but of feminine power in majesty, its essential protective tenderness roused, as by tribal instinct, into a collective fury of implacable revenge. He was, above all, aware of motherhood — of mothers. And the man, the male, the father in him rose like a storm to meet it.

From the torrent of voices certain sentences emerged; sometimes chanted, sometimes driven into his whirling mind as though big whispers thrust them down his ears. “You are with us to the end,” he caught. “We have the proof. And punishment is ours!”

It merged in wind, others took its place:

“We hold him fast. The old gods wait and listen.”

The body of rushing whispers flowed like a storm-wind past.

A lovely face, fluttering close against his own, paused an instant, and starry eyes gazed into his with a passion of gratitude, dimming a moment their stern fury with a mother’s tenderness: “For the little ones ... it is necessary, it is the only way.... Our own children....” The face went out in a gust of blackness, as the chorus rose with a new note of awe and reverence, and a score of throats uttered in unison a single cry: “The raven! The White Horses! His signs! Great Odin hears!”

He saw the great dark bird flap slowly across the clearing, and melt against the shadow of the giant beech; he heard its hoarse, croaking note; the crowds of heads bowed low before its passage. The White Horses he did not see; only a sound as of considerable masses of air regularly displaced was audible far overhead. But the veiled light, as though great thunder-clouds had risen, he saw distinctly. The sky above the clearing where he stood, panting and dishevelled, was blocked by a mass that owned unusual outline. These clouds now topped the forest, hiding the moon and stars. The flowers went out like nightlights blown. The wind rose slowly, then with sudden violence. There was a roaring in the tree-tops. The branches tossed and shook.

“The White Horses!” cried the voices, in a frenzy of adoration. “He is here!”

It came swiftly, this collective mass; it was both apt and terrible. There was an immense footstep. It was there.

Then panic seized him, he felt an answering tumult in himself, the Past surged through him like a sea at flood. Some inner sight, peering across the wreckage of To-day, perceived an outline that in its size dwarfed mountains, a pair of monstrous shoulders, a face that rolled through a full quarter of the heavens. Above the ruin of civilization, now fulfilled in the microcosm of his own being, the menacing shadow of a forgotten deity peered down upon the earth, yet upon one detail of it chiefly — the human group that had been wildly dancing, but that now chanted in solemn conclave about a forest altar.

For some minutes a dead silence reigned; the pouring winds left emptiness in which no leaf stirred; there was a hush, a stillness that could be felt. The kneeling figures stretched forth a level sea of arms towards the altar; from the lowered heads the hair hung down in torrents, against which the naked flesh shone white; the skins upon the rows of backs gleamed yellow. The obscurity deepened overhead. It was the time of adoration. He knelt as well, arms similarly outstretched, while the lust of vengeance burned within him.

Then came, across the stillness, the stirring of big wings, a rustling as the great bird settled in the higher branches of the beech. The ominous note broke through the silence; and with one accord the shining backs were straightened. The company rose, swayed, parting into groups and lines. Two score voices resumed the solemn chant. The throng of pallid faces passed to and fro like great fire-flies that shone and vanished. He, too, heard his own voice in unison, while his feet, as with instinctive knowledge, trod the same measure that the others trod.

Out of this tumult and clearly audible above the chorus and the rustling feet rang out suddenly, in a sweetly fluting tone, the leader's voice:

"The Fire! But first the hands!"

A rush of figures set instantly towards a thicket where the underbrush stood densest. Skins, trailing flowers, bare waving arms and tossing hair swept past on a burst of perfume. It was as though the trees themselves sped by. And the torrent of voices shook the very air in answer:

"The Fire! But first — the hands!"

Across this roaring volume pierced then, once again, that wailing sound which seemed both human and non-human — the anguished cry as of some lonely wolf in metamorphosis, apart from the collective safety of the pack, abjectly terrified, feeling the teeth of the final trap, and knowing the helpless feet within the steel. There was a crash of rending boughs and tearing branches. There was a tumult in the thicket, though of brief duration — then silence.

He stood watching, listening, overmastered by a diabolical sensation of expectancy he knew to be atrocious. Turning in the direction of the cry, his straining eyes seemed filled with blood; in his temples the pulses throbbed and hammered audibly. The next second he stiffened into a stone-like rigidity, as a figure, struggling violently yet half collapsed, was borne hurriedly past by a score of eager arms that swept it towards the beech tree, and then proceeded to fasten it in an upright position against the trunk. It was a man bound tight with thongs, adorned with leaves and flowers and trailing green. The face was hidden, for the head sagged forward on the breast, but he saw the arms forced flat against the giant trunk, held helpless beyond all possible escape; he saw the knife, poised and aimed by slender, graceful fingers above the victim's wrists laid bare; he saw the — hands.

"An eye for an eye," he heard, "a tooth for a tooth!" It rose in awful chorus. Yet this time, although the words roared close about him, they seemed farther away, as if wind brought them through the crowding trees from far off.

“Light the fire! Prepare the sacrifice!” came on a following wind; and, while strange distance held the voices as before, a new faint sound now audible was very close. There was a crackling. Some ten feet beyond the tree a column of thick smoke rose in the air; he was aware of heat not meant for modern purposes; of yellow light that was not the light of stars.

The figure writhed, and the face swung suddenly sideways. Glaring with panic hopelessness past the judge and past the hanging knife, the eyes found his own. There was a pause of perhaps five seconds, but in these five seconds centuries rolled by. The priest of To-day looked down into the well of time. For five hundred years he gazed into those twin eyeballs, glazed with the abject terror of a last appeal. They recognized one another.

The centuries dragged appallingly. The drama of civilization, in a sluggish stream, went slowly by, halting, meandering, losing itself, then reappearing. Sharpest pains, as of a thousand knives, accompanied its dreadful, endless lethargy. Its million hesitations made him suffer a million deaths of agony. Terror, despair and anger, all futile and without effect upon its progress, destroyed a thousand times his soul, which yet some hope — a towering, indestructible hope — a thousand times renewed. This despair and hope alternately broke his being, ever to fashion it anew. His torture seemed not of this world. Yet hope survived. The sluggish stream moved onward, forward....

There came an instant of sharpest, dislocating torture. The yellow light grew slightly brighter. He saw the eyelids flicker.

It was at this moment he realized abruptly that he stood alone, apart from the others, unnoticed apparently, perhaps forgotten; his feet held steady; his voice no longer sang. And at this discovery a quivering shock ran through his being, as though the will were suddenly loosened into a new activity, yet an activity that halted between two terrifying alternatives.

It was as though the flicker of those eyelids loosed a spring.

Two instincts, clashing in his being, fought furiously for the mastery. One, ancient as this sacrifice, savage as the legendary figure brooding in the heavens above him, battled fiercely with another, acquired more recently in human evolution, that had not yet crystallized into permanence. He saw a child, playing in a Kentish orchard with toys and flowers the little innocent hands made living ... he saw a lowly manger, figures kneeling round it, and one star shining overhead in piercing and prophetic beauty.

Thought was impossible; he saw these symbols only, as the two contrary instincts, alternately hidden and revealed, fought for permanent possession of his soul. Each strove to dominate him; it seemed that violent blows were struck that wounded physically; he was bruised, he ached, he gasped for breath; his body swayed, held upright only, it seemed, by the awful appeal in the fixed and staring eyes.

The challenge had come at last to final action; the conqueror, he well knew, would remain an integral portion of his character, his soul.

It was the old, old battle, waged eternally in every human heart, in every tribe, in every race, in every period, the essential principle indeed, behind the great world-war. In the stress and confusion of the fight, as the eyes of the victim, savage in victory, abject in defeat — the appealing eyes of that animal face against the tree stared with their awful blaze into his own, this flashed clearly over him. It was the battle between might and right, between love and hate, forgiveness and vengeance, Christ and the Devil. He heard the menacing thunder of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” then above its angry volume rose suddenly another small silvery voice that pierced with sweetness:— “Vengeance is mine, I will repay ...” sang through him as with unimaginable hope.

Something became incandescent in him then. He realized a singular merging of powers in absolute opposition to each other. It was as though they harmonized. Yet it was through this small, silvery voice the apparent magic came. The words, of course, were his own in memory, but they rose from his modern soul, now reawakening.... He started painfully. He noted again that he stood apart, alone, perhaps forgotten of the others. The woman, leading a dancing throng about the blazing brushwood, was far from him. Her mind, too sure of his compliance, had momentarily left him. The chain was weakened. The circuit knew a break.

But this sudden realization was not of spontaneous origin. His heart had not produced it of its own accord. The unholy tumult of the orgy held him too slavishly in its awful sway for the tiny point of his modern soul to have pierced it thus unaided. The light flashed to him from an outside, natural source of simple loveliness — the singing of a bird. From the distance, faint and exquisite, there had reached him the silvery notes of a happy thrush, awake in the night, and telling its joy over and over again to itself. The innocent beauty of its song came through the forest and fell into his soul....

The eyes, he became aware, had shifted, focusing now upon an object nearer to them. The knife was moving. There was a convulsive wriggle of the body, the head dropped loosely forward, no cry was audible. But, at the same moment, the inner battle ceased and an unexpected climax came. Did the soul of the bully faint with fear? Did the spirit leave him at the actual touch of earthly vengeance? The watcher never knew. In that appalling moment when the knife was about to begin the mission that the fire would complete, the roar of inner battle ended abruptly, and that small silvery voice drew the words of invincible power from his reawakening soul. “Ye do it also unto me ...” pealed o’er the forest.

He reeled. He acted instantaneously. Yet before he had dashed the knife from the hand of the executioner, scattered the pile of blazing wood, plunged through the astonished worshippers with a violence of strength that amazed even himself; before he had torn the thongs apart and loosened the fainting victim from the tree; before he had uttered a single word or cry, though it seemed to him he roared with a voice of thousands — he witnessed a sight that came surely from the Heaven of his earliest childhood days, from that Heaven whose God is love and whose forgiveness was taught him at his mother’s knee.

With superhuman rapidity it passed before him and was gone. Yet it was no earthly figure that emerged from the forest, ran with this incredible swiftness past the startled throng, and reached the tree. He saw the shape; the same instant it was there; wrapped in light, as though a flame from the sacrificial fire flashed past him over the ground. It was of an incandescent brightness, yet brightest of all were the little outstretched hands. These were of purest gold, of a brilliance incredibly shining.

It was no earthly child that stretched forth these arms of generous forgiveness and took the bewildered prisoner by the hand just as the knife descended and touched the helpless wrists. The thongs were already loosened, and the victim, fallen to his knees, looked wildly this way and that for a way of possible escape, when the shining hands were laid upon his own. The murderer rose. Another instant and the throng must have been upon him, tearing him limb from limb. But the radiant little face looked down into his own; she raised him to his feet; with superhuman swiftness she led him through the infuriated concourse as though he had become invisible, guiding him safely past the furies into the cover of the trees. Close before his eyes, this happened; he saw the waft of golden brilliance, he heard the final gulp of it, as wind took the dazzling of its fiery appearance into space. They were gone....

9

He stood watching the disappearing motor-cars, wondering uneasily who the occupants were and what their business, whither and why did they hurry so swiftly through the night? He was still trying to light his pipe, but the damp tobacco would not burn.

The air stole out of the forest, cooling his body and his mind; he saw the anemones gleam; there was only peace and calm about him, the earth lay waiting for the sweet, mysterious stars. The moon was higher; he looked up; a late bird sang. Three strips of cloud, spaced far apart, were the footsteps of the South Wind, as she flew to bring more birds from Africa. His thoughts turned to gentle, happy hopes of a day when the lion and the lamb should lie down together, and a little child should lead them. War, in this haunt of ancient peace, seemed an incredible anachronism.

He did not go farther; he did not enter the forest; he turned back along the quiet road he had come, ate his food on a farmer’s gate, and over a pipe sat dreaming of his sure belief that humanity had advanced. He went home to his hotel soon after midnight. He slept well, and next day walked back the four miles from the hospitals, instead of using the car. Another hospital searcher walked with him. They discussed the news.

“The weather’s better anyhow,” said his companion. “In our favour at last!”

“That’s something,” he agreed, as they passed a gang of prisoners and crossed the road to avoid saluting.

“Been another escape, I hear,” the other mentioned. “He won’t get far. How on earth do they manage it? The M.O. had a yarn that he was helped by a motor-car. I wonder what they’ll do to him.”

“Oh, nothing much. Bread and water and extra work, I suppose?”

The other laughed. “I’m not so sure,” he said lightly. “Humanity hasn’t advanced very much in that kind of thing.”

A fugitive memory flashed for an instant through the other’s brain as he listened. He had an odd feeling for a second that he had heard this conversation before somewhere. A ghostly sense of familiarity brushed his mind, then vanished. At dinner that night the table in front of him was unoccupied. He did not, however, notice that it was unoccupied.

THE END

Tongues of Fire and Other Sketches (1924)

CONTENTS

Tongues of Fire
The Little Beggar
Malahide and Forden
Playing Catch
The Pikestaffe Case
Alexander *Alexander*
Lost!
The Olive
A Continuous Performance
The World-Dream of McCallister
The Other Woman
Picking Fir-Cones
The Open Window
Petershin and Mr. Snide
The Man Who Was Milligan
The Falling Glass
The Spell of Egypt
A Man of Earth
The Laughter of Carthage
S.O.S.

Nephelé

Tongues of Fire

I

THE FRIENDLY LITTLE dinner party was over and Cecilia Lance had thoroughly enjoyed it; the Lindleys were kindly simple people; the gramophone had been turned on and her dancing partner, Harold Sharpe, had been there. Cecilia and Harold knew one another's steps as intimately as they knew one another's minds.

"Odd that Cecilia doesn't marry," Lindley remarked, half to himself, half to his wife, as they sat over a cigarette when the last guest had driven away. "She's still pretty. Everybody likes her. And such a cheery soul." He puffed his cigarette reflectively. "She has charm, too — eh?" he enquired presently, as his wife offered no comment. He glanced up affectionately at her.

"Always full of life, yes," came the belated reply. "I think she enjoyed herself to-night. I think they all did. They liked the new records, too."

Her husband smiled and nodded. The new records had cost money. "I wish we could do it more often," he mentioned, sighing ruefully. The Lindleys were hospitably inclined, but they were poor, and even a dinner party had to be calculated. "Now, that fellow Sharpe" — he went back to his first line of thought— "I thought at one time — they seemed to understand each other pretty well."

His wife hesitated a moment, gazing into the gas fire. "They still do, I think," she said. "Their views of life are the same" — then, after a second's pause, as though the words slipped out against her kindlier judgment—" and of people."

Her husband, however, discerned neither the hesitation nor the effort at restraint that caused it. Both had their tongues well under control, he by a natural good nature, she by education. They were an affectionate, devoted, faithful couple, to whom none but the most determined could impute deliberate evil. A little later, as they tidied away the records before going to bed, he remarked casually: "Sharp as a needle, though, isn't she? By Jove, yes." He laughed. "They both are, for that matter." And he chuckled again.

“They don’t mean to be, I’m sure,” was his wife’s charitable comment.

Again, apparently, he did not notice anything. It was her usual way of talking, anyhow. The Lindleys invariably were kindly in their judgments of people. They did not criticise others — nastily.

“I’ll put the lights out, Molly,” he said presently. “You pop up to bed. It’s late, and you must be tired.” He kissed her, patting her on the shoulder. Fifteen minutes afterwards the room, so lately filled with music, whirling couples and merry voices, had darkness and the atmosphere of faded scent and stale cigarette smoke to itself.

Meanwhile, Cecilia Lance and Harold Sharpe were also talking in their taxi as he drove her to the widowed sister she lived with in Chester Street. They were in merry mood, satisfied with the evening just over. They discussed it in their usual way. Both voted it “ripping.”

“Yet I never really care for a gramophone,” Cecilia mentioned.

“It’s better than nothing, though,” her dancing partner agreed, while he qualified.

‘Yes, I suppose so,” she submitted, “only the records were so rotten, weren’t they?”

“Putrid,” said Sharpe.

“Why don’t they get a few good ones, I wonder.” She mentioned a few names. “If people use a gramophone for dancing, the least they can do is to have the latest tunes.” To this her companion also gave assent. They both felt aggrieved. In a few minutes there was nothing bad enough left to say about the music, the floor, the cooking of the little dinner, and the heat of the room. They selected all the least favourable points and emphasised them, yet in their easy, natural way and without calculated motives.

Next they turned their attention to the other dancers, Cecilia leading the way, as before, with faint praise. “Not a bad lot,” observed Harold patronisingly. “Quite nice,” Cecilia qualified, “only I wonder where in the world they pick up such people.” Her companion, while agreeing, mentioned that a certain girl “looked all right, I thought.”

“What! That dowdy creature!” Whereupon he swore he had really only noticed one girl, whose name was Cecilia, and so remedied his mistake. The criticism of the dresses which followed was largely a monologue, since Harold Sharpe merely approved her verdict with “awful, perfectly awful.”

but when the taxi arrived after a drive of six minutes, the entire evening, including dinner, dance and dancers, had been so damned that no Recording Angel would have thought it worth even entering in his Book. The names of the destroyers, however, he possibly might have entered.

“Oh, come in for a minute and have a drink, my sister’s sure to be up,” invited Cecilia. Over his whisky and soda and her cigarette an opportunity was provided for chatting pleasantly about their late host and hostess, and without a chorus, since the sister had already gone to bed. “A good fellow, Jack Lindley,” was Harold Sharpe’s off-hand opinion, “though what he sees in *her,* I can’t imagine.” But Cecilia, feeling robbed of her accustomed right to start the line of criticism, assured him that he was quite mistaken, for Molly was the possessor of “such a good heart.”

“It’s what Molly sees in *him* that puzzles me! Still, she amuses herself with Sir Malcolm, the good-looking nerve specialist whom she’s always going to see without the slightest reason.”

“What! That quiet old frump Molly has a lover!”

“Why shouldn’t she?” Cecilia championed her doubtfully.

Before her cigarette was half-finished, Molly Lindley’s character was demolished, and her husband, who was “gay enough when you got him alone,” was insecurely balancing on one leg, which was certainly not fit to stand on. Husband and wife, a faithful, somewhat old-fashioned, devoted couple, who had just put themselves to trouble and expense to give the speakers a happy evening, had not a rag to their backs between them. Naked to the winds, vicious, false and stupid, they were heading frill speed for that hell in which the speakers, their detractors, did not, of course, believe. There was not a nastier couple than the Lindleys apparently in all Chelsea. And this result had been accomplished by faint praise, offered with a pleasant smile; by careless suggestion, presented with a shrug of the shoulders; and by a series of innocent questions sprinkled with adjectives and adverbs that carried dark hints of hidden wickedness and double lives — but without a single scrap of truth to support the entire case. The Recording Angel, if he entered anything, entered it, indeed, as evidence the destroyers unwittingly gave against themselves — a confession that what they had in their own hearts and minds they saw most easily in others.

The case, moreover, presented with the skill due to long practice, was completed in ten minutes at the most. Without motive, without malice, without conscious intention to do harm or wish to injure, but merely obeying a habit to say something startling perhaps, Mr. and Mrs. Lindley were left naked to the cruel winds and without a leg to stand on.

Incidentally, just before Harold took his leave — in the space of two minutes or so — Cecilia's sister, asleep upstairs, lay also without covering.

"One of the best," Cecilia replied, as he dropped a polite word of casual enquiry, "but oh, so queer and moody sometimes."

"She's jolly good to you, Ceci," Harold considered, knowing of the generous allowance.

"Oh, she's a perfect brick. It's only her moods that I find trying sometimes."

"Ah!" His ears were hungry at once. He glanced at her enquiringly.

Cecilia lowered her voice. "It's drugs probably," she mentioned.

Harold laughed, nodding understandingly. "They all do it," he said with a shrug, swallowing a gulp of the lady's excellent whisky, while the kindly soul they discussed lay dreaming peacefully on the floor above, a homeopath ignorant of anything stronger than fairy doses of aconite for a cold or colocynth for indigestion. In future, however, whenever her name was mentioned in his presence, Harold Sharpe, with a look of knowing sympathy would say darkly, "Drugs, you know. Yes, I'm afraid it's drugs. Oh, her sister knows it..."

"Well, good night, Cecilia. I must be getting on. See you again soon."

"At the Lindleys' probably. Molly said they'd give another gramophone hop before long. Good night."

An hour later, both of them lay sound asleep, at peace with all the world and entirely pleased and satisfied with themselves, their hearts harbouring no malice, envy or uncharitableness. Their tongues lay still. Their day, their evening, their conversation, had been an average sample of what occurred on the other three hundred and sixty-four days of their year. Fallen

Reputations marked their course like birds before a skilful gun. These were not deliberately brought down, but when they aimed with deliberation they landed much bigger game, for they were both deadly shots.

Now, one of the latter, wounded but not killed, it so happened, traced the shot that hit him to its source. He was not only big game, he was dangerous big game, a man of personality, a man of power, a man of strange knowledge, too. And he did not bring the action for slander that he was justified in bringing, yet neither did he ignore the wicked snipers who used poisoned shafts in the darkness. He merely cursed them. He *cursed* them both. His curse, however, since he used a ritual known to few Westerners, was perhaps no ordinary curse....

II

On a lovely morning some weeks later Cecilia sat alone in a taxi, examining her face uneasily in the narrow mirror, as she drove to Grosvenor Street. The sun shone brightly and old grimy London laughed with happiness. Flowers shone in every corner, in every buttonhole. Birds were singing gaily. The air was sweet and fresh, for it was summer-time, and half-past ten was really half-past nine; but the pretty young face reflected in the taxi looking-glass betrayed no summer-time. It was neither sweet nor fresh. A haunting anxiety lay in the otherwise bright eyes. The corners of the little mouth turned down. From time to time she crashed a small lace handkerchief against her lips with violence. Occasionally, removing it quickly, she drew in a deep draught of the sweet air from the open window, inhaling and exhaling with fixed concentration in her face, then swiftly placing the handkerchief on her lips again. One might have thought she suffered toothache, neuralgia; some nerve attack perhaps that affected the mouth or lips or gums. Her behaviour indicated extreme uneasiness, if not actual pain.

At the door of No. 100A she dismissed the taxi, and was admitted with scarcely a minute’s delay. The butler with the sphinx-like face bowed her smoothly into the waiting-room, closing the door behind her silently. Evidently, since he did not ask her name, he knew it already. Finding herself alone, she ran to the big mirror quickly, but had only time to catch a glance of a white frightened face before the door reopened and her name was softly spoken. Biting her lips, her hands clenched tightly at her side, she followed the sphinx into the consulting-room of Sir Malcolm, the famous nerve specialist. With an instinctive movement, as she crossed the threshold and saw the tall, dark-faced figure rising to greet her, she crushed the small lace handkerchief tightly against her lips....

The interview was a long one. When she came out again, the waiting-room was half-filled with fidgeting ladies who had been kept, they considered, unduly waiting. Her mind was too preoccupied to observe carefully, but she noticed, she fancied, one man among the women. Picking up her bag and parasol hastily, she looked into no single face. Her hands trembled, her breath came unevenly, her features were hard and aged, she kept the handkerchief pressed against her mouth. She hurried out; the sphinx called a taxi, she drove to her sister's house, ran quickly up to her room and locked herself in. The first thing she did on being alone was to collect several hand-mirrors and arrange them in such a way before the dressing-table that she could study her face from every possible angle. She studied herself thus for the best part of half an hour, her eyes too strained with intense anxiety for tears; her heart too over-loaded with a strange biting dread for her breath to behave naturally; her mind gone too far beyond control for her to remain still a single instant.

Cecilia Lance was terrified. But she had force, she had courage, her personality was not negligible; she could face anything, provided she first had time to decide upon her attitude and line of conduct. By the lunch hour, when she came down to meet her sister's guests, she had found herself again. If the face was somewhat drawn, it was not noticeably so. Her breath was normal, her manner quiet yet not depressed, her voice betrayed no trembling. She had faced the situation and taken her line of conduct.

“Ah, there you are! You were out early, Thompson told me. I missed you.” And her sister came forward with her usual affectionate embrace.

Cecilia drew back sharply. ‘You mustn't kiss me, Gerty, I've — got a cold. Oh, it's nothing. But I don't want to give it to you.”

The luncheon party passed off pleasantly. No one could have said that Cecilia was not her gay and normal self, nor could anyone have guessed from her light-hearted manner the amount of nervous power she exerted to appear so. It was with difficulty, none the less, that she ate her food or swallowed her wine. She did not smoke. There was a sinking dread, a constant terror in her that required all her skill and courage to conceal successfully. That inner gnawing never ceased. The wolf of horror tore steadily at her very vitals. The handkerchief went from time to time to her mouth, but in such a way that the manoeuvre seemed quite natural. In her mind still echoed the words the specialist had used a few hours ago. Her visit that morning to Sir Malcolm was not the first. It was the tenth. And after she had left him he made his next patient wait a little longer for her dreaded yet coveted ten minutes with him. In fact, he did a thing he rarely allowed himself to do — he saw another patient in her place, a man — and when the man had gone, he delayed the fuming lady still another ten minutes, while he made notes, consulted books, and looked generally more puzzled and interested, perhaps dismayed as well, than in the course of his strange practice he had ever looked before. With his subsequent visitors he was even a little absent-minded, though he was certainly too skilful for this cardinal mistake to be discovered....

“It seems more than curious — it’s simply incredible,” he thought to himself as he glanced over his notes that night before going to bed. It was a thing he had never done before — to think of a case when the day’s work was done. He particularly examined a sheet of tissue paper which had a circular hole in it with rough uneven edges, tinged slightly yellow, red and black. He wore an expression of bewilderment as he laid it down. He was evidently baffled. “I’ve never come across such a thing before. The books have no record of anything approaching it.” He passed into a mood of deep reflection. “I’m damned!” he said aloud finally. “It’s positively medieval. It’s — it’s uncanny.” Sir Malcolm was baffled and admitted it — to himself only. “And two of them, by God!”

III

It was just as the last guests were leaving that Cecilia was called to the telephone by Harold Sharpe. He asked if he might look in for tea and whether she would be alone. His voice had an odd note of seriousness in it. But Cecilia excused herself on the plea that she was resting before the Lindleys’ dance that night.

“Aren’t you well?” he asked sharply.

“Oh — I’m all right, yes,” with a moment’s hesitation before she said it. Then Harold insisted. He was very urgent, very determined. “I simply *must* see you," he declared, "and alone, Ciss." A quiver ran down her, making her voice tremble a little. "Oh, all right," she yielded. "Gerty's going out. Only you mustn't stay long. I'm dead tired." Her body swayed slightly. She dropped into a chair, and hid her face in her hands. Ten minutes afterwards Harold was in the room with her alone.

"I haven't seen you for ages," he began. "What's up?" His manner was odd, it was strained and nervous. He spoke rapidly and his eyes had a hunted look. His skin was pale. Fingers and lips twitched badly. "What's been the matter, Ceci?" It was the form of her name he used when he was in earnest, which was not often. "You never turned up at Claridge's last night either." He coughed. The girl started, and asked quickly if he would smoke, but he declined with a gesture of impatience. He coughed a second time. His handkerchief came out. The girl started again, more violently than before.

"Harold—" she said abruptly, then stopped dead, and looked away. She had meant to say something else. "What does that cough mean?" she asked instead, keeping her face still turned from him. "I believe you're not — quite well. That wasn't a real cough."

His handkerchief was against his lips, and he did not answer.

"Harold?" she repeated, with a singular loudness, as though the word were produced by a shock. Slowly her head turned round towards him and their eyes met. "*Are* you," she insisted in a tense whisper that had an ominous tremor in it, "*quite* — well?"

Instead of answering, he asked a point-blank question, staring fixedly at her: "What were you doing in Grosvenor Street this morning, Ceci?" And as he said it her memory worked vividly. She remembered. He, of course, had been the one man in the waiting-room. This flashed across her. Her hand went to her handkerchief, but she did not use it. His eye, however, she saw, detected the movement — and understood it. They knew one another's minds so intimately.

"So it *was* you, Harold?" She could only whisper now. Control of her voice was gone.

Harold's face, already pale when he came in, turned a little paler. It went a shade more grey now. They stared hard into one another's eyes.

“I—” he began, then faltered. ‘What were *you* doing there?” he asked suddenly, and as he said it his gaze wandered down her face slowly, pausing at her lips. His eyes were fixed in a dreadful stare. Unutterable questions, she knew, lay in them. Her handkerchief again flew upwards. “Don’t! Don’t!” she cried vehemently, her voice muffled behind the pressing lace. “For God’s sake, don’t!”

He caught at her hand and wrenched it, so that the momentary pain gave her the energy to deflect her thoughts the least little bit. He was attempting — oh, she realised it quite clearly — attempting to look at her handkerchief, and the knowledge gave her the power to try and hide it, to prevent him seeing it, to smother it away. Only he was too strong for her.

He forced her palm open.

‘You were there,” he said in a voice that was calm but oddly stupid, “for the same reason I was.” He dropped her hand, while she thrust the crumpled scrap of lace with violence into her tiny bag, yet knowing it was a useless thing to do, because he had already seen the strange, discoloured patch.

“How d-dare you?” she cried, stammering in her fear and pain. “You for-g-get yourself, Harold Sharpe!” But he made no attempt at either apology or explanation, merely sinking back with a faint sigh into his chair and leaving his own crumpled handkerchief open for her to see in the palm of his effortless hand.

It, too, bore the same dread signature — a discoloured patch.

For several minutes of silence the pair of them sat thus, each staring — as though bereft of any power to move or speak — at that ghastly and significant patch. It had the appearance of having been burnt or scorched — by fire.

It was the girl who first recovered her self-control, though only in a measure. She rose from her chair and stood over him.

“Harold,” she said in a very low voice, and as though it cost her enormous effort, “it’s the same with both of us. And we’ve brought it on ourselves.” Placing a hand on his smooth thick hair, though he shrank from her touch, she continued in a whisper: “And do you realise — it’s something not of this world — quite?” She paused, drew back a step, and stared down at him. “It’s from the d-devil.”

He made no sign, no answer, but his whole body shivered.

“Do you understand what it m-means?” she went on. He sprang suddenly to his feet then, making strange gestures of futile violence with his hands.

“Ceci,” he cried, “you’re crazy. You’re talking the damnedest nonsense in all the world. Pull yourself together— “And then his breath failed him and he collapsed in a stupid heap on his chair.

The girl shook him as though she could have struck his face for preference. There was great violence in her heart and mind. There was perhaps murder — or suicide, its equivalent.

“He told you — what he told me?” she asked in a voice that seemed without any emotion because its owner was beyond any feeling.

Harold nodded.

“He tried the tissue paper?”

He bowed his head.

“He told you what — what we have to expect?”

The only answer, the only sign that her words were heard, was a convulsive twitching movement of the body that somehow communicated horror more than any words could possibly have done. It was without intelligence.

“In-c-c-curable,” she said in dead tones that conveyed even better than his convulsive gesture her blank, ultimate despair. The stammer added a touch of unintelligence similar to his own. It was dreadful.

He looked up then with an idiotic smile, while she responded, the mind in her obviously already clouded: “Flame that never d-dies.”

“T-tongues of f-f-fire,” he said with a feeble giggle. “We have tongues of f-fire — you and I—” He got up with a gesture as though to kiss her. In his hand fluttered his handkerchief, its awful patch apparent.

She did not move. “And afterwards, too,” she whispered, the last gleam of reason fading from her eyes, “for ever and ever....”

The Little Beggar

HE WAS ON his way from his bachelor flat to the club, a man of middle age with a slight stoop, and an expression of face firm yet gentle, the blue eyes with light and courage in them, and a faint hint of melancholy — or was it resignation? — about the strong mouth. It was early in April, a slight drizzle of warm rain falling through the coming dusk; but spring was in the air, a bird sang rapturously on a pavement tree. And the man's heart wakened at the sound, for it was the lift of the year, and low in the western sky above the London roofs there was a band of tender colour.

His way led him past one of the great terminal stations that open the gates of London seawards; the birds, the coloured clouds, and the thought of a sunny coast-line worked simultaneously in his heart. These messages of spring woke music in him. The music, however, found no expression, beyond a quiet sigh, so quiet that not even a child, had he carried one in his big arms, need have noticed it. His pace quickened, his figure straightened up, he lifted his eyes and there was a new light in them. Upon the wet pavement, where the street lamps already laid their network of faint gold, he saw, perhaps a dozen yards front of him, the figure of a little boy.

The boy, for some reason, caught his attention and his interest vividly. He was dressed in Etons, the broad white collar badly rumpled, the pointed coat hitched grotesquely sidedays, while, from beneath the rather grimy straw hat, his thick light hair escaped at various angles. This general air of effort and distress was due to the fact that the little fellow was struggling with a bag packed evidently to bursting point, too big and heavy for him to manage for more than ten yards at a time. He changed it from one hand to the other, resting it in the intervals upon the ground, each effort making it rub against his leg so that the trousers were hoisted considerably above the boot. He was a pathetic figure.

'I must help him,' said the man. 'He'll never get there at this rate. He'll miss his train to the sea.' For his destination was obvious, since a pair of wooden spades was tied clumsily and insecurely to the straps of the bursting bag.

Occasionally, too, the lad, who seemed about ten years old, looked about him to right and left, questionably, anxiously, as though he expected someone — someone to help, or perhaps to meet him. His behaviour even gave the impression that he was not quite sure of his way. The man hurried to overtake him.

‘I really must give the little beggar a hand,’ he repeated to himself, as he went. He smiled. The fatherly, protective side of him, naturally strong, was touched — touched a little more, perhaps, than the occasion seemed to warrant. The smile broadened into a jolly laugh, as he came up against the great stuffed bag, now resting on the pavement, its owner panting beside it, still looking to right and left alternately. At which instant, exactly, the boy, hearing his step, turned round, and for the first time looked him full in the face with a pair of big blue eyes that held unabashed and happy welcome in them.

‘Oh, I say, sir, it’s most awfully ripping of you,’ he said in a confiding voice, before the man had time to speak. ‘I hunted everywhere; but I never thought of looking behind me.’

But the man, standing dumb and astonished for a few seconds beside the little fellow, missed the latter sentence altogether, for there was in the clear blue eyes an expression so trustful, so frankly affectionate almost, and in the voice music of so natural a kind, that all the tenderness in him rose; like a sudden tide, and he yearned towards the boy as though he were his little son.

Thought, born of some sudden revival of emotion, flashed back swiftly across a stretch of twelve blank years. . . and for an instant the lines of the mouth grew deeper, though in the eyes the light turned softer, brighter. . .

‘It’s too big for you, my boy,’ he said, recovering himself with a jolly laugh; ‘or, rather, you’re not big enough — yet — for it — eh! Where to, now? Ah! the station, I suppose?’ And he stooped to grasp the handles of the bulging bag, first poking the spades more securely in beneath the straps; but in doing so became aware that something the boy had said had given him pain. What was it? Why was it? This stray little stranger, met upon the London pavements! Yet so swift is thought that, even while he stooped and before his fingers actually touched the leather, he had found what hurt him — and smiled a little at himself. It was the mode of address the boy made use of, contradicting faintly the affectionate expression in the eyes. It was the word ‘sir’ that made him feel like a schoolmaster or a tutor; it made him feel old. It was not the word he needed, and — yes — had longed for, somehow almost expected. And there was such strange trouble in his mind and heart that, as he grasped the bag, he did not catch the boy’s rejoinder to his question. But, of course, it must be the railway station; he was going to the seaside for Easter; his people would be at the ticket-office waiting for him. Bracing himself a little for the effort, he seized the leather handles and lifted the bag from the ground.

‘Oh, thanks awfully, sir!’ repeated the boy. He watched him with a true schoolboy grin of gratitude, as though it were great fun, yet also with a true urchin’s sense that the proper thing had happened, since such jobs, of course, were for grown-up men. And this time, though he used the objectionable word again, the voice betrayed recognition of the fact that he somehow had a right to look to this particular man for help, and that this particular man only did the right and natural thing in giving help.

But the man, swaying sideways, nearly lost his balance. He had calculated automatically the probable energy necessary to lift the weight; he had put this energy forth. He received a shock as though he had been struck, for the bag had no weight at all; it was as light as a feather. It might have been of tissue-paper, a phantom bag. And the shock was mental as well as physical. His mind swayed with his body.

‘By jove!’ cried the boy, strutting merrily beside him, hands in his pockets. ‘Thanks most awfully. This is jolly!’

The objectionable word was omitted, but the man scarcely heard the words at all. For a mist swam before his eyes, the street lamps grew blurred and distant, the drizzle thickened in the air. He still heard the wild, sweet song of the bird, still knew the west had gold upon its lips. It was the rest of the world about him that grew dim. Strange thoughts rose in a cloud. Reality and dream played games, the games of childhood, through his heart. Memories, robed flamingly, trooped past his inner sight, radiant, swift and as of yesterday, closing his eyelids for a moment to the outer world. Rossetti came to him, singing too sweetly a hidden pain in perfect words across those twelve blank years: ‘The Hour that might have been, yet might not be, which man’s and woman’s heart conceived and bore, yet whereof time was barren. . .' In a second's flash the entire sonnet, 'Stillborn Love', passed on this inner screen 'with eyes where burning memory lights love home. . .'

Mingled with these — all in an instant of time — came practical thoughts as well. This boy! The ridiculous effort he made to carry this ridiculously light bag! The poignant tenderness, the awakened yearning! Was it a girl dressed up? The happy face, the innocent, confiding smile, the music in the voice, the dear soft blue eyes, and yet, at the same time, something that was not there — some indescribable, incalculable element that was lacking. He felt acutely this curious lack. What was it? Who was this merry youngster? He glanced down cautiously as they moved side by side. He felt shy, hopeful, marvellously tender. His heart yearned inexpressibly; the boy, looking elsewhere, did not notice the examination, did not notice, of course, that his companion caught his breath and walked uncertainly.

But the man was troubled. The face reminded him, as he gazed, of many children, of children he had loved and played with, both boys and girls, his Substitute Children, as he had always called them in his heart. . . Then, suddenly, the boy came closer and took his arm. They were close upon the station now. The sweet human perfume of a small, deeply loved, helpless and dependent little life rose past his face.

He suddenly blurted out: 'But, I say, this bag of yours — it weighs simply nothing!'

The boy laughed — a ring of true careless joy was in the sound. He looked up.

'Do you know what's in it? Shall I tell you?' He added in a whisper: 'I will, if you like.' But the man was suddenly afraid and dared not ask.

'Brown paper probably,' he evaded laughingly; 'or birds' eggs. You've been up to some wicked lark or other.'

The little chap clasped both hands upon the supporting arm. He took a quick, dancing step or two, then stopped dead, and made the man stop with him. He stood on tiptoe to reach the distant ear. His face wore a lovely smile of truth and trust and delight.

'My future,' he whispered. And the man turned into ice.

They entered the great station. The last of the daylight was shut out. They reached the ticket office. The crowds hurrying people surged about them. The man set down the bag. For a moment or two the boy looked quickly about him to right and left, searching, then turned his big blue eyes upon the other with his radiant smile:

‘She’s in the waiting-room as usual,’ he said. ‘I’ll go and fetch her — though she ought to know you’re here.’ He stood on tiptoe, his hands upon the other’s shoulders, his face thrust close. ‘Kiss me, father. I shan’t be a second.’

‘You little beggar!’ said the man, in a voice he could not control; then, opening his big arms wide, saw only an empty space before him.

He turned and walked slowly back to his flat instead of to the club; and when he got home he read over for the thousandth time the letter — its ink a little faded during the twelve intervening years — in which she had accepted his love two short weeks before death took her.

Malahide and Forden

I

OUR THREE-MONTHS' TOUR was drawing to its close — the Company playing in a midlands town at the moment — and Forden was chatting with me in the wings during the second act, when Malahide's great voice boomed in my ears as he hurried to his entrance. It startled me; the audience must surely hear it too. Forden gave me his quick smile, an understanding wink added to it.

"Hubert, old man!" cried the voice. "There's a place called Barton I want to see — Barton-in-Fabis. Let's go to-morrow. There's a train at 10.15. Forden, you come too!" His eyes blazed at us with an odd glare through the grease-paint, his great shoulders swept round the canvas, and he was gone on to the stage, where at once his voice became audible in the lines that ten weeks had made rather too familiar.

I experienced a twinge of surprise. Walking was little to Malahide's taste. He usually spent his spare time playing golf, and in the afternoon he invariably slept for a couple of hours, so as to be rested for the evening performance. That he should propose a whole day's walk, therefore, was unexpected.

My companion and I were left staring at each other.

"Does he mean it — d'you think?" I asked in a low voice. "It sounds such an odd name. You think it's real?" I laughed a little.

"A lovely name, though," came the whispered answer. "It's real enough. Yes — I've heard of it—"

"Oh, you've heard of it?" I interrupted, looking up at him.

He nodded. Always absent-minded rather, he was also always truthful. An expression on his face now puzzled me. He looked perturbed. I repeated my remark, anxious to press him for some reason.

“People make pilgrimages there — sometimes — I believe. There’s an old church “Then his cue sounded, and he moved quickly away, but flinging over his shoulder, again with his quick smile, a final whisper: “Oh, it’s real, yes, quite real. We’ll go.”

So it was the church and the odd name that had caught Malahide’s romantic fancy. Yet such a flat and empty name, I thought, without the adjunct, which alone gave it atmosphere. “In fabis,” I gathered from one of the local supers, meant “among the beans,” and Barton was a village “with a lot of historic interest,” he informed me proudly. The name and the historic interest, evidently, had taken Malahide’s vagrant fancy. He was an incalculable fellow; but he was not a man to ply with questions. His temper was insecure as a wayward child’s. I, therefore, asked no questions. Forden, too, was an elusive creature, where questions were concerned. There are people who instinctively detest having to give definite information in reply to definite questions. All the more, then, was I surprised to hear Forden ask one of Malahide — about the expedition. We passed the latter’s dressing-room as we left the theatre to walk home together, and the door was open.

“Ten-fifteen, remember, Central Station,” boomed Malahide, catching sight of us. “Single tickets to Stanton. We walk from Stanton.” It again surprised me; he had actually thought out details.

It was then that Forden asked his question:

“I — I suppose,” he ventured, faltering a trifle, “there’s a train back all right?”

The evening performance, of course, involved an early meal, and the question seemed so natural that I thought nothing, but Malahide looked up from pulling on his big boots as though it startled him. He seemed taken by surprise. His eyes held the same blaze, the touch almost of glare, I had noticed before, but the startled air was added.

“We’ll work round. What can it matter anyhow — provided we get there?” was all he vouchsafed, and in a tone that did not invite cross-examination.

So it was to be 10.15, with single tickets to Stanton, a walk thence to Barton among its Beans, with its old church and historic interest, and we were to “work round” to another station, and so home. Malahide had planned it all in advance. He wanted to go. Forden also wanted to go. It all seemed natural enough, ordinary, no exceptional feature anywhere about it beyond the trivial detail that Malahide did not care for walking as a rule. It is strange, therefore, that somewhere in my being lurked a firm conviction that the whole business was exceptional. For one thing, I felt sure that both Malahide and Forden did not really want to go. That they had to go, and meant to go, was the impression left upon my mind, not that either of them actually “wished” it.

During our supper of cold tongue, salad and beer, for instance, we made no further allusion to the expedition. Rather than actually avoided, it was just tacitly assumed. Forden, I partly gathered, realised that I still did not quite believe in the Barton walk, but was too delicately loyal to discuss our friend’s delightful irresponsibilities. In his own mind, too, I fancied, lay the thought that Malahide would not turn up, and that he would lose his morning’s sleep for nothing, but that he meant to keep the rendezvous none the less. My fancy may have been quite wrong, yet this, anyhow, was Forden all over. He was of finest material, something transparent and a trifle exquisite in him; and even when poorly cast — as in the present play — this quality shone beautifully through his acting.

We went soon to bed, but Malahide kept late hours, and Forden and myself were asleep long before he turned in. In the morning, however, he was waiting at the station when we got there. He had left the hotel before us. “I’ve been to look at the churches,” was his unexpected explanation. “One of ’em was open, and I went in and sat a bit. A wonderful atmosphere of peace and stillness. By Jove, it makes one think,” and he gabbled on about the charm and atmosphere of an empty, ancient church. It was surprising, of course, and it left us without comment. Yet I had known him before in this odd mood — when he was frightened about something, frightened usually, of death. Malahide, I understood, was frightened now, and his thoughts, for some reason, ran on death. In his eyes, moreover, I noticed, though veiled a little, a trifle deeper down, the same blaze I had seen the night before. And all the way to Stanton he gazed out of the window, humming to himself, the heap of morning papers beside him all untouched. The criticisms of his own performance, as, equally, mention of the Company, though of importance to the week’s business, had, for once, no interest for him. His mind lay, evidently, upon other matters. He looked extraordinarily happy — happier, I thought, than I had ever seen him before; there was a careless indifference, a lightness, something, too, of a new refinement — to use a queer word his vehement personality did not ever suggest — I thought were new, yet all this lit, as from below, by the gleam of hidden fear I most certainly detected in him. And it was these contradictions, I think, these incompatibilities almost, that affected me so powerfully. Impressions began to pour and pour upon me. Emotions stirred. Things going on at a great speed in Malahide were things that I could not fathom.

To me, this short train journey to Stanton, *en route* for Barton among its Beans, already had the spice of something just a little unusual, of something a trifle forced. Unexpected touches played about it, as though a faint unknown light shone from the cloudless sky of that perfect April morning, but from *beyond* it. Forden, behind the transparent mask of his rather beautiful face, betrayed more than his customary absent-mindedness, sometimes to a point I could have thought bewilderment. Each time I spoke to him — to Malahide I did not once address a word — he started a little. In him there was no attempt at adjustment, no analysis, no effort to explain or query. He asked himself, I am sure, no single question. Whatever life brought him he accepted always. He was receptive merely; a recipient, but an extremely sensitive recipient, leaving all problems, all causes, to his God. Though without a formal creed, Forden was a deeply religious nature. And Forden now seemed to me — let me put it quite plainly as I felt it at the time — preparing, making himself ready, getting himself in hand, to meet something. Yes, to meet something — that is the phrase. And it was the search for this phrase, its discovery rather, that made me aware of an incomprehensible stress of subconscious excitement similarly in myself.

We were a queer enough trio, it may be, even in our normal moments. In myself, at any rate, being of different build to both Malahide and Forden, numerous little wheels were already whirring, gathering speed with every minute. This whirring one usually calls excitement. My own personal reactions to what followed are all, of course, that I can report. Though caught up, more or less, with the other two, I remained always the observer, thus sharing only a small portion probably of what my companions experienced. Another man, of different calibre, placed as I was, might have noticed nothing. I cannot say. My problem is to report faithfully what I observed; and whether another man would have observed the same thing, or nothing at all, is beside the mark.... Already, before the train stopped at

Stanton, I felt — well, as if my feet did not quite touch the ground, and by the ground I mean the ordinary. It may, or may not, be an exaggeration to say that I felt both feet slightly off the earth. That my centre of gravity was shifting is, perhaps, the most truthful expression I can find.

By the time we reached Stanton, at any rate, the whirring wheels had generated considerable heat, and with this heat playing all through my system I had already begun to see and feel in a way that was not quite the ordinary way. I perceived differently: I experienced, as it were, with a heightened consciousness. Perception seemed intensified a trifle; but more than that, and chiefly, it seemed different.

Different is the right adjective, I think. Malahide and Forden were "different" to the Malahide and Forden I knew comfortably from long acquaintance. Very, very slightly different, however, not radically so. I saw them from another angle. There was nothing I could seize or label. The instant my mind fastened on any detail, it was gone. The "difference" escaped me, leaving behind it a wonder of enquiry, a glow of curiosity I could not possibly define.

One sentence, perhaps, can explain my meaning, both in reference to the men and to the inanimate things they moved among: I saw *more* of everything....

The fields, through the carriage windows, were of freshest green, yellow with a million buttercups, sparkling still from a shower that had followed sunrise, and the surface of the earth lay positively radiant in its spring loveliness. It laughed, it danced, it wept, it smiled. Yet it was not with this my mind was occupied during the half-hour's run to Stanton, but rather with the being of my two companions. I made no effort to direct my thoughts. They flowed of their own accord, with poignant, affectionate emotions I could not explain, towards Malahide and Forden...

Played about them, over them, these thoughts did, lovingly rather, and directed by a flair, so to say, of understanding that was new in me....

Neither would ever see forty again, yet to me they seemed young, their careers still in front of them; and each, though without much energy, groping a way honestly toward some ultimate meaning in life that neither, I fancied, was ever likely to discover. If not dilettantists, both shrank from the big sacrifices. They were married, and each, in this fundamental relationship, unsatisfied, though each, outwardly at least, had mastered that dissatisfaction. Accepting, that is, a responsibility undertaken, they played the game. There was fine stuff in them. And both sought elsewhere, though without much energy as I have said, an outlet marriage had accordingly failed to provide. Not immorality, of course; but a mental, maybe a spiritual, outlet. They sought it, I now abruptly judged, without success. Their stream of yearning, whatever its power, went lost among the stars and unremunerative dreams. The point, however, remains: this yearning did exist in each. Its power, I conceive, was cumulative.

Similarly, in their daily work as actors, and uncommonly good actors, one with a streak of fine inspiration, the other, Malahide, with a touch of fiery genius, both accepted an art that both held, mournfully, and secretly rather, was not creative. They were merely interpreters of other men's creations. And, here again, lay deep dissatisfaction. Here, indeed, lay the root and essence of a searching pain both shared — since, God knows, they were gifted, honest beings — that a creative outlet, namely, was denied to creative powers.

This fundamental problem — the second one — lay unsolved in both; hence both were open to attack and ready for adventure. But the lesser adventures, refuge of commonplace fellows, they resolutely declined. Were they, perhaps, worthy then of the greater adventure that circumstances, at length, with inexplicable suddenness, and out of the least likely material, offered to them...?

Somewhat thus, at any rate, I saw my companions, as the train jolted us that sparkling April morning, many years ago, towards Stanton, Malahide humming his mood idly through the open window, Forden lying at full length, reading the papers with listless eye. But I saw another thing as well, saw it with a limpid clearness my description may not hold: something ahead — an event — lay in waiting for them, something they knew about, both not desiring, yet desiring it, something inevitable as sunrise.

We move towards and past events successively, calling this motion time. But the event itself does not move at all. It is always there. We three, now sitting in the jolting carriage, were approaching an event about which they knew, but about which I did not know. I received, that is, an imperfect impression of something they saw perfectly. And in some way the accumulated power of their combined yearnings, wasted as I had thought, made what happened possible.

It was an extraordinary idea to come to me with such conviction, and with this atmosphere of prophecy. I glanced at the two men, each like myself the victim, I remembered, of a strange, unhappy weakness. These weaknesses, too, I realised, contributed as well: un-balance, instability, were evidently necessary to the event. To steady, heroic types it never could have happened.

The train was stopping, and Malahide already had the door half-open. Forden, in his turn, sprang up.

“Stanton!” cried the former, as though he spoke a line of tense drama on the stage. “Here we are. Come on, you fellows!” And he was on the platform before the train drew to a standstill. His vehemence was absurd. He used it, I knew, to help him make the start, the fear I have mentioned prompting it. And Forden, like a flash, was on his heels. I followed, pausing a moment to collect the papers in case Malahide should ask for them, and then, thank heaven, as we stood on that ugly platform and asked the porter the way to Barton, my own strange feelings, heightened perception with them, dropped back with a jerk into the normal again. The uncomfortable insight was suddenly withdrawn. It had seemed an intrusion into their privacies; I was relieved to see them again as two friends merely, two actors, out for a country walk with me to a village called Barton-in-Fabis on a brilliant April morning.

One last flash only there was, as I followed them out, one final hint of what I have called “seeing more” of everything, seeing “differently,” rather. The three of us left the carriage as described, in sequence; yet to me it flashed with definite though illogical assurance that only one got out. Not that one was gone and two were left, but that the three of us got out as one, simultaneously. One being left that carriage. The fingers of a hand, thus, may move and point in several directions at once, while the hand, of which they form parts, moves forward in one direction only, as a whole. The simile, occurred to me.... I perceive it, moreover, through what I can only call a veil of smoke.

III

“Oh, about three to four mile, maybe,” the porter was telling Malahide, “an’ you can pick up the Midland at Attenborough to get back.... Yes, it’s a nice day for a walk, I dessay...”

The name made us laugh, but the instructions as to paths, stiles, sign-posts, turnings, I, personally, did not listen to. I assumed, as most do, an air of intelligent comprehension. Forden, I saw, wore a similar expression, from which I knew that he, too, was not listening properly, but was leaving it to Malahide, wondering, like myself, how the latter could carry in his great slumbering mind so many intricate details whereas, actually, he was doing nothing of the sort. Malahide was merely acting, intent upon some other matter that was certainly not here and now.

We started off, therefore, with but a few details of our journey secure: “a mile and a half down the road, and bearin’ to the right, you’ll see a signpost to Barton across the fields, and if you foller that a little way, bearin’ to the left a bit now, you’ll see a gate on the right just past some trees, but you don’t go through that gate, you go straight on, bearin’ to the right always, till you come to a farm, and then, through another gate....”

There was a definite relation between the length of description and a tip in the porter’s mind, upon which Forden commented wittily, as we swung down the road, each relying upon the other two, and then exclaiming confidently, but with blurred minds, as we reached a signpost: “Ah! Here we are!” while we scrambled over a stile into enticing fields of gold.

We spoke little at first. “We must bear to the left, remember,” mentioned Malahide once, to which Forden and I nodded agreement, adding however: “till we reach the gate,” with Malahide’s firm reminder: “which we do not go through,” followed by my own contribution: “past some trees, yes, to another gate,” — and then Malahide’s conclusive summing up: “always bearing to the right, of course...”

We jogged on happily, while the larks sang overhead, the cuckoos called and the brilliant sunshine flooded a country-side growing more and more remote from signs of men and houses. Not even a thatched cottage or a farm-house broke the loneliness from humankind....

We spoke little, I have said; but my companions, presently, fell into a desultory conversation about their own profession, about present and future conditions on the stage, individual talent, rents of theatres, and so forth, to all of which, being an interloper merely, I listened with slight interest. It was the odd smell of burning, I think, that held my curious attention during this preliminary period, for I saw no cause for it, no smoke of rubbish being consumed, no heath-fire certainly. Malahide, I remember, coughed a little once or twice, and Forden sniffed like an animal that scents an untoward element in the atmosphere, though very faintly. They made no comment, I offered none. It was, obviously, of no importance. The beauty of the day in its fresh spring brilliance absorbed me wholly, so that my thoughts ran on of their own accord, floating on a stream of happy emotion, careless as the pleasant wind. The sentences I caught from time to time did little more than punctuate, as it were, this stream of loveliness that poured through me from the April morning. Yet at intervals I caught their words, a phrase or a sentence would arrest me for a second; and each time this happened, I noticed what I can only call a certain curious change, a change — in distance. Their talk, I mean, passed gradually beyond me.

There was incoherence, due partly of course, to the gaps I missed; and once or twice, it seemed to me, they were talking at cross-purposes, although tone and demeanour betrayed nothing of the sort. I remember that this puzzled me, that I registered the fact vaguely, at any rate; also, that an occasional comment of my own won no rejoinder from either Malahide or Forden — almost as though, momentarily, they had forgotten my existence and seemed unaware that I was with them.

Deeper and deeper into my own sensuous enjoyment of the day I sank accordingly, glad that I might take the beauty in my own little way. One thing only pierced my personal mood from time to time: the picture of Malahide’s great head thrust forward a little when I glanced at him, the eyes turned upwards, carrying in them still that odd soft blaze, the glare, as I called it, now wholly gone; and that upon Forden’s delicate face was a gentle expression, curiously rapt, yet with a faint brush as of bewilderment somewhere among the peering features. This impression, however, came back to me later, rather than held my attention much at the actual moment. We moved on deeper and deeper into the lonely countryside. With the exception of a man some fields ahead of us, I saw no living soul.

IV

Our path, meanwhile, crossed a lane, and a little later a road, though not a high-road since no telegraph poles marred it, and then Malahide remarked casually: “But, I say! It’s about time, isn’t it?” He stood still abruptly, staring around him. “It’s about time — eh?”

“For what?” enquired Forden gently, not looking at him, a touch of resignation in his voice.

“That signpost, I mean. We should have come to it by now.”

“Oh, that signpost,” echoed the other, without interest.

Neither of them included me in this exchange, which had broken in upon a longish conversation, and I found myself resenting it. They had not so much as glanced in my direction.

“Signpost!” I exclaimed bluntly, looking straight at Malahide. “Why, we passed it long ago.” And as I said it, my eye again took in the figure of the man three fields away, the only living being yet seen. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him merely, and a breath of sharper air, or something like it, passed quickly over my skin. “It said ‘To Barton,’” I added, a flavour of challenge in my tone. I purposely kept my gaze hard on Malahide.

He turned slowly, with a look as though, casually, he picked me up again; our eyes met; that sharper air seemed in my mind now.

“We passed a signpost,” he corrected me; “but it merely said ‘Footpath.’ And it pointed over there — behind us. The way we’ve come.”

Forden, to my amazement, nodded in consent. “Over there, yes,” he agreed, and pointed with his stick, but at right angles to the direction Malahide had meant. “And it said: ‘*From* Barton.’”

This confusion, produced purposely and in a spirit of play though of course it was, annoyed me. I disliked it, as though somewhere it reached a sad, uneasy region in my mind.

It was Malahide’s turn to nod in consent. “Then we’re all right,” he affirmed with unnecessary vehemence in his deep voice. And that vehemence, again, I did not like. “Besides,” he added sharply, pointing ahead, “there he is!”

A wave of vague emotion troubled me; for an instant I felt again that sharper air, and this time in the heart. “Who?” I asked quickly.

He replied carelessly: “The man.”

“*What* man?”

Malahide turned his eyes full upon my own, so that their soft blaze came over me like sunshine, almost with a sense of warmth in them. On his great face lay a singular expression. I heard Forden, who stood just behind me, laughing gently. There seemed a drift of smoke faintly about them both. I knew a touch of goose-flesh.

“What man do you mean?” I asked with louder emphasis, and this time, I admit, with a note of exasperation that would not be denied, for the nonsense, I thought, had gone far enough, and there was a flavour in it that set my nerves on edge.

Malahide’s reply came easily and naturally: “The man who plants them,” he said without a smile. “He sticks them into the ground, that fellow. He’s going about with an assortment of signposts ‘To and From Barton,’ and every now and again he plants one for us.”

“We’re standing under one now,” Forden breathed behind me in his purring way, and looking up I saw that this was true. I read in black lettering upon a white background: “To Barton.” It indicated the direction we were taking.

It occurred to me suddenly now that we had already walked at least four miles, yet had seen no farm, no trees, no garden. I had been sunk too deep in my own mood to notice things perhaps. This signpost I certainly had not noticed until Forden drew my attention to it. Malahide was tapping the wooden arm with the point of his stick, reading the lettering aloud as he did so:

“‘Footpath *From* Barton,’” I heard him boom. And instantly my eyes fixed tightly on it with all the concentration that was in me. Yes, Malahide had read correctly. Only, the arm now swung the other way. It pointed behind us! And I burst out laughing. Sight and memory had, indeed, fumbled badly. I felt myself for a moment “all turned round,” as the saying is. Malahide laughed too; we all laughed together. It was boisterous, not quite spontaneous laughter, but at any rate it relieved a sense of intolerable tension that in myself had reached a climax. This fooling had been overdone, I felt.

"So, you see, we *are* all right," Malahide exclaimed, and swung forward over the meadow, already plunged again in the conversation with Forden which he himself had interrupted. They had enjoyed their little game about the signposts, Malahide, in particular, his touch of fancy about "the man who planted them." It all belonged to the careless, happy mood of a holiday expedition, as it were — the nonsense of high spirits. This, at least, was the ready explanation my mind produced so glibly, knowing full well it would not pass the censor of another kind of understanding, a deeper kind, that sought hurriedly, even passionately, for the true explanation. It was *not* nonsense; nor was it acceptable. It alarmed me.

I repeat: this confusion about directions, the two men agreeing that opposite directions were one and the same, was not the nonsense that it sounds; and I affirm this in view of that heightened perception, already first experienced in the train, which now came back upon me in a sudden flood. It brought with it an atmosphere of prophecy, almost of prevision, and certainly of premonition, an atmosphere that accompanied me, more or less, with haunting persistence to the end.

And its first effect was singular: all that a man says, I now became aware, has three meanings, and not merely one. The revelation arrived as clearly as though it were whispered to me through the shining air. There is the literal meaning of the actual words; there is the meaning of the sentence itself; and there is the meaning, above and beyond both these, in which the whole of the utterer is concerned, a meaning, that is, which the unconscious secret part in him — the greater part — tries and hopes to say. This last, the most significant of all three, since it includes cause as well as result, makes of every common sentence a legend and a parable. Gesture, tone of voice betray its trend; what is omitted, or between the lines, betrays still more. Its full meaning, being in relation to unknown categories, is usually hidden both from utterer and hearers. It deals simultaneously with the past, the present and — the future. I now became aware of this Third Meaning in the most commonplace remarks of my companions.

It was an astounding order of perception to occur to me, and the difficulty of reporting it must be obvious from this confused description. Yet it seemed to me at the time so simple, so convincing, that I did not even question its accuracy and truth. Malahide and Forden, fooling together about the contradictory signposts, had betrayed this third meaning in all they said and did. Indeed, that it appeared impossible, absurd, was a proof, perhaps the only possible proof, of its reality. Momentarily, as it were, they had become free of unknown categories.

V

My own attitude contained at first both criticism and resistance; it was only gradually that I found myself caught in the full tide that, apparently, swept my companions along so easily. A first eddy of it had touched me in the train, when my feet felt a little “off the earth”; now I was already in the bigger current; before long I had become entirely submerged with them... Fields and lanes, meanwhile, slipped rapidly behind us, but no farm, no trees, no gate, as the porter described, had been seen. We were lost, it seemed, in the heart of the sparkling April day; dew, light and gentle airs our only guides. The day contained us.

I made efforts to disentangle myself.

“Barton’s not getting any nearer,” I expostulated once.

“Barton-in-Fabis,” mentioned Malahide with complete assurance, that no longer held a trace of vehemence, “is there — where it always is,” while Forden’s breath of delicate laughter followed the flat statement, as though the larks overhead had sung close beside my ear.

“D’you think we’re going right?” I ventured another time. “Our direction, I mean?”

Again, with that ghostly laughter, Forden met me: “It’s the way we have to go,” he replied half under his breath. “It’s always a mistake to trouble *too much* about direction — actual direction, that is.” And Malahide was singing to himself as though nothing mattered in the world, details as to direction least of all.... It was just after this, I remember, as our lane came to a stile and we leaned over it comfortably, all three, that the odour of burning touched my mind again, only with it, at the same time, a sight so moving, that I paused in thought, catching my breath a little. For the field before us sloped down into the distance, ancient furrows showing just beneath the surface like the flowing folds of a shaken carpet. They ran, it seemed, like streams. Their curve downhill lent this impression of movement. They were of gold. Every inch of the surface was smothered with the shimmering cream of a million yellow buttercups.

“Rivers of Gold!” I exclaimed involuntarily, and at the same moment Forden was over the stile in a single leap and running across the brilliant grass.

“Look out!” he cried, a bewitched expression on his face, “it’s fire!” — and he was gone.

It was as though he swam to the neck in gleaming gold. He peered back at me a second through the shining flood — and it was in this instant, just as I caught his turning face, that Malahide was after him. He passed me like a wave, still singing; there was a rush of power in his speed. I followed at once, unable to resist. The three of us ran like one man over and through that flood of golden buttercups, passing, as we did so, every sign the railway porter had told us to look out for: the farm, the trees, the gate, the second gate — everything. Only, we passed them more than once. It was as though we swung in a rapid circle round and round the promised signs, always passing them, always coming up to them, always leaving them behind, then always seeing them in front of us again, yet the entire sequence right, natural and — possible.

Now, I noticed this. I was aware of this. Yet it caused me no surprise. That it should be so seemed quite ordinary — at the time....

We brought up presently, not even breathless, some half-way down that golden field.

“Nothing to what I expected,” exclaimed Malahide, interrupting his singing for the first time.

“There was no pain,” mentioned Forden, his voice soft and comforting, as though he spoke to a little child.

There was an instant of most poignant emotion in me as they said it; a certainty flashed through me that I could not seize; a sudden wave, as it were, of tears, of joy, of sorrow, of despair, swept past me and was gone again before I had the faintest chance to snatch at any explanation. Like the memory of some tremendous, rather awful dream, it vanished, and Malahide’s quick remark, the next second, capped its complete oblivion:

"And there *he* goes again!" I heard. "He's stuck another one in!"

He was pointing to a hedge at the bottom of the field where, behind the veil of its creamy hawthorn, I just made out the figure of a man ambling slowly along, till the hedge, growing thicker, finally concealed him. But the signpost, when we reached it a few minutes later, showed an arm rotten with age, and only the faded legend on it, hardly legible: "Footpath," It pointed downwards — into the ground.

VI

We swung forward again, without a moment's delay, it seemed, my companions talking busily together as before, their meaning, also as before, far, far beyond me. They were talking, too, on several subjects at once. The odd language they had just used, the way we swung forward instantly, without comment or explanation, touched no sense of queerness in me — then. No comment or explanation were necessary; it was natural we should go straight on. Their talking on "several subjects simultaneously," however, did occur to me — yes, as marvellous.

Foolish, even impossible, as it must sound, it yet did happen; they talked on more than one subject at the same time. They carried on at least a couple of conversations at once without the slightest difficulty, without the smallest effort or confusion. My own admission into the secret was partial, I think; hence my trouble and perplexity. To them it was easy and natural. With me, even the strain of listening made the head swim. The effort to follow them was certainly a physical one, for I was aware of a definite physical reaction more than once, almost indeed of a kind of dizziness akin to nausea.

To report it is beyond my power. For one thing, I cannot remember, for another, the concentration necessary left me a little stupefied. I can give an instance only, and that a poor one. They used "third meanings," too.

Malahide, thus, while voluble enough in his normal state, was at the same time usually inarticulate. His verbosity, that is, conveyed little. The tiny vital meaning in him fumbled and stammered through countless wrappings, as it were. These wrappings smothered it. Now, on the contrary, he talked fluently and clearly. It was I who was puzzled — at first — to find the subject he discussed so glibly. And Forden, usually timid and hesitating in his speech, though never inarticulate, now also used a flow of fearless words in answer. Yet not precisely "in answer," for both men talked at once. They uttered simultaneously — on two subjects, if not on three:

"We all deserve, maybe," Malahide's deep voice thundered, "a divine attention few of us receive — God's pity. We are not, alas, whole-hearted. Few of us, similarly, deserve another compliment due to splendour — the Devil's admiration."

His voice, for once, was entirely natural, unselfconscious. There was the stress of real feeling and belief in what he said.

"I for one," he went on, "I take my hat off to the whole-hearted, whether in so-called good or evil. For of such stuff are eventual angels wrought..." *Angels!* The word caught me on the raw. Its "third meaning" caught me on the raw, that is, and with a sense of power and beauty so startling that I missed the rest. The word poured through me like a flame. Of what he spoke, to what context the strange statement was related, I had no inkling; yet, while he actually spoke the words, I heard Forden speaking to Malahide, who heard and understood and answered — but speaking, and simultaneously, on another matter altogether. And this other matter, it so chanced, I grasped. Remote enough from what Malahide was saying, and trivial by comparison, it referred to an Alpine sojourn with his wife a couple of summers before. Malahide, too, had been with them:

"Often, after the hotel dinner," Forden said contemptuously, "I heard them mouthing all sorts of lovely poetic phrases; yet not one of them would make the slight sacrifice of personal comfort necessary to experience that loveliness, that poetry, in themselves..."

To which Malahide, though still developing "God's pity" and the "Devil's admiration" in phrases packed with real feeling, contrived somehow to answer, but always simultaneously, his Mend's remark:

"They bring their own lower world," he boomed, "even into the beauty of the mountains, then wonder that the beauty of the mountains tells them nothing. They would find Balham on great Betelgeuse" — a tremendous laugh rang out— "and Clapham Junction on fiery Vega!"

"Her pity," came Forden's words, talking of another matter altogether, yet uttered simultaneously with his Mend's laughing rhetoric, "is self-pity merely. She does these out-of-the-way things, you see, without sufficient apparent reason. It is not a desire for notoriety — that would shock her — but it is a desire to be conspicuous. life, which means people, did not make a fuss about her in her youth. But the law of compensation works inevitably. Late in life, you see, she means to have that fuss...”

It is the phraseology, perhaps, that enables me to remember this singular exchange. My head, of course, was spinning. For Malahide made a reply to this, while still discussing the poseurs in the Alpine hotel. And while they talked thus on two subjects simultaneously, Forden managed to chat easily too *with me* — upon a third.... It was as though a second dimension in Time had opened for them. Between myself and Forden, again, there was plainly some kind of telepathic communication. He had my thought, at any rate, before I uttered it aloud.

Of this I can give two instances, both trivial, yet showing that simultaneously with his Malahide-conversations he was paying attention to my own remarks, and — simultaneously again — was answering them. It was absolutely staggering.

Here are the instances memory retained:

Some scraps of white paper, remnants of an untidy picnic party, lay fluttering in the thick grass some distance in front of us, and at the first glance I thought they were not paper, but — chickens. Only on coming nearer was the mistake clear. Whether I meant to comment aloud on the little deception or not, I cannot remember; but, in any case, before I actually did so, Forden, glancing down at me with his gentle smile, observed: “I, too, thought at first they were chickens,” He hit them idly with his stick as we passed.

The second instance, equally trivial, equally striking at the same time, was the gamekeeper’s cottage on the fringe of a wood. It suggested to my mind, for some reason, a charcoal-burner’s hut in a book of German fairy-tales, and I said so. This time I spoke my thought. “But, you know, I’ve just said that,” came Forden’s comment, his eyes twinkling brightly as before. And it was true; he had said it a fraction of a second before I did. During this brief exchange between us, moreover, he was still talking fluently with Malahide — on at least two subjects — and simultaneously....

Now, from the fact that I noticed this, that my mind made a note of it, that is, I draw the conclusion that my attention was definitely arrested, surprise accompanying it. The extraordinariness of the matter struck me, whereas to my companions it was ordinary and natural. I was, therefore, not wholly included in their marvellous experience. I was still the observer merely....

Immediately following the telepathic instances with Forden, then, came a flash of sudden understanding, as though I were abruptly carried a stage deeper into their own condition:

I discerned one of the subjects they discussed so earnestly together.

This came hard upon a momentary doubt — the doubt that they were playing, half-fooling me, as it were. Then came the swift flash that negatived the doubt. I can only compare it to the amazing review of a man's whole life that is said to flash out in a moment of extreme danger. This quality, as of juggling with Time, belonged to it.

Malahide and Forden, then, I realised, were talking together of Woman, of women, rather, but of individual women. Ah! the flash grew brighter: of their own wives. Yet that Malahide spoke of Forden's wife and that Forden discussed Mrs. Malahide. Each had the free *entrée* into the other's mind, and what each was too loyal to say about his own wife, the other easily said for him. This swiftest telepathic communication, as with myself and Forden, they enjoyed between themselves. With supreme ease it was accomplished.

It was an astounding performance. This discussion of their wives was actually, of course, a discussion of — well, not of Mary Forden and Jane Malahide individually, but, through them, of the deep unsolved problem of mate and sex which each man had faced in his own life — unsuccessfully. The fragments I caught seemed meaningless, because the full context was lacking for me. I got a glimmer of their Third Meanings, however, and realised one thing, at any rate, clearly: they were giving one another help. Forden's honeymoon, I remembered, had been spent in the Alps, whereas Malahide's wife had the lack of proportion which made her conspicuous by a pose of startling originality. This gave me a clue. Time, however, as a sequence of minutes, days and years, did not trouble either speaker. The *entire* matter, regardless of past and present, seemed spread out like a contour-map beneath the eyes of their inner understanding. There was no picking out one characteristic, dealing with it, then passing on to consider another. To *me* it came, seriatim, in that fashion, but *they* saw the matter whole and all at once; so rapidly, so comprehensively, too, that the sentences flew upon each other's heels as though uttered simultaneously by each speaker.

They were, it seemed, poised above the landscape of their daily lives, and in such a way that they were able to realise present, past and future simultaneously. It was no longer exactly "to-day," it was no longer necessarily "to-day." Temporarily they had escaped from the iron tyranny of being fastened to a particular hour on a particular day. They — and partially myself with them — were no longer chained by the cramping discipline of a precise moment in time, any more than a prisoner, his chains filed off, is fixed to a precise spot in his dungeon. *Where* we were in time, God knows. It might have been yesterday, it might have been to-morrow — any yesterday, any to-morrow — which we now realised simultaneously with the so-called present. It happened to be — so I felt — a particular to-morrow we realised, and it was something in the three of us (due, I mean, to the combination of our three personalities), that determined which particular tomorrow it was. The prisoner in space, his chains filed off, moves instinctively to the window of escape; and they, prisoners in time, moved now similarly to a window — of escape....

A flash of this escape from ordinary categories, of this "different" experience, had come to me as we left the railway carriage. It now grew brighter, more steady, more continuous. I seemed travelling in time, as one travels ordinarily in space. To the wingless creature crawling over fields the hedge behind it is past, the hedge beyond it future. It cannot conceive both hedges existing simultaneously. Then some miracle gives it wings. Hanging in the air, it sees both past and future existing simultaneously. Losing its wings once more, it crawls across the fields again. That air-experience now seems absurd, impossible, contradicting all established law. The same signpost points now as it always pointed — in one direction.

This analogy, though imperfect, occurred to me, while we brought up, but not even breathlessly, half-way down the field as already mentioned, and all I have attempted to describe took place in that brief interval of running.

Before entering that field with its rivers of gold, we had been leaning on a stile; we were leaning on that stile still. Or, it may be put otherwise: we were leaning on that stile again.

Similarly, the whole business of running, of passing the signs mentioned by the porter, the conversations, the emotions, everything in fact, were just about to happen all over again. More truly expressed, they were all happening still. Like Barton, in Malahide's previous phrase, it was all *there.* The hedge behind, the hedge in front, were both beneath us, existing simultaneously.... At a particular spot in the hedge — a particular "tomorrow" — we paused....

VII

At my side, touching my shoulders, Malahide and Forden were quietly discussing the way to Barton-in-Fabis, and, as I listened, there came over me again that touch of nausea. For, while flatly contradicting one another, they were yet in complete agreement.

It was at this instant the shock fell upon me with its glory and its terror.

My companions stood back to back. I was a yard or so to one side. They both now turned suddenly — but how phrase the incredible thing? — they both came at me, while at the same time they went away from me. A hand, endowed with consciousness, a hand being turned inside out like a glove, might feel what I felt.

I saw their two faces. A little more, a little less, and there must have been a bristling horror in the experience. As it was, I felt only that a sheet of wonder caught us up all three. The odour of burning that came with it did not terrify; that drift of yellow smoke now deepening, did not wound. I accepted, I understood, there was even something in me had rejoiced.

In the twinkling of an eye, both men were marvellously changed: they stood before me, splendid and divine. I was aware of the complete being in each, the full, whole Self, I mean, instead of the minute fraction I had known hitherto. All that lay in them, either of strength or weakness, was magnificently fused.... The word "glory" flashed, followed immediately by a better word, and one that Malahide had already used. Its inadequacy was painful. Its third meaning, however, in that instant blazed. "Angels" in spite of everything, remains.

And, I, too, moved — moved with them both, but in a way, and in a direction, I had never known before. The glove, the hand, being turned inside out, is what my pen writes down, but accurate description is not possible. I moved, at any rate, on — *on* with my two companions towards Barton.

“It’s all one to me,” I said, perfectly aware that I suddenly used the third meaning of the phrase, and that Malahide and Forden understood.

“I’ve just said that myself,” the latter mentioned — and this again was true. The smile, the happiness, on his face carried the very spirit of that radiant April morning, the essence of spring, with its birds, its flowers, its dew, it careless wisdom.

“Such things,” cried Malahide, “are painless after all. It comes on me like sleep upon a child. Ha, ha!” he laughed, in his wild, vehement way. “It’s all one to me now too. Escape, by God!”

The stab of fierce emotion his language caused me passed and vanished; afflicting memory of the burning odour was forgotten too. Everything, indeed, *was* one. Both men, I realised, gazed at me, smiling, wonderful, superb, and in their eyes a light, whose reflection apparently lay also in my own: an immense and awful pity that our everyday, unhappy, partial selves should ever have dared to masquerade as though they were complete and real....

“God’s pity,” sang Malahide like a trumpet. “We shall have deserved it
“And the Devil’s admiration,” followed Forden’s sweeter tones, as of a *vox humana,* both distant, yet like a lark against my ears. He was laughing with sheer music. ‘There was no terror. I knew it must be so.... Oh, the delicious liberty... at last!”

Both uttered simultaneously. In the same breath, anguish and happiness working together, my own voice cried aloud:

‘We are, for once, whole-hearted!”

VIII

At the moment of actual experience a new category would not seem foolish or impossible. These qualities would declare themselves only when it passed away. This was what happened — gradually — to me now, and, alas, to my companions too. A searing pain accompanied the transition, but no shock of violence.

At the pinnacle there was a state of consciousness too strange, too “different,” to be set down. The content of life, its liberty, its splendour, its characteristics of grandeur, even of divinity, were more than ordinary memory could retain. My own cry: ‘We are wholehearted” must betray how pitiful description is.... Thus, the lovely moment, for instance, when I first saw rivers of gold, kept repeating itself — because it gave me happiness, because it moved me. That field of golden buttercups was always — there. I lingered with it, came back to it, enjoyed it over and over again, yet with no sense of repetition. It was new and fresh each time. Now, Malahide and Forden, selecting other moments, chose these instead, and these, again, were moments easy to be remembered. Their finer instances baffle memory, although I knew and shared them at the time. Forden, for some choice peculiar to himself, was in the mountains which he loved; his honeymoon presumably. Malahide, on the other hand, preferred his stars, though details of this have left me beyond recovery... Yet, while we lingered, respectively, among rivers of gold and stars and snowy peaks, we were solidly side by side in the actual present, crossing the country fields towards Barton-in-Fabis on this April morning.

The gradual passing of this state remains fairly clear in me.

There came signs, I remember, of distress and effort in our relationships. This, at least, was the first touch of sorrow that I noticed. I was coming back to the surface, as it were. The change was more in myself than in the others. There was argument about footpath, signposts, and the way to Barton generally.

“The fellow has planted his last post,” I heard Malahide complaining. ‘Now he’ll begin pulling them all up again. He both wants us to get to Barton, yet doesn’t want it.” He paused. His usual laugh did not follow. “You know,” he went on, his whisper choking a little oddly in his throat, “he rather — puts the wind up me.” A spasm ran over his big body. Then suddenly, he added, half to himself, with an effort painfully like a gasp, “I can’t get my breath — quite.”

Forden spoke very quickly in his delicate way, resignation rather sweetly mingled in it: “Well, at any rate, we’re all right so far, for I see the porter’s farm and gate at last.” He stared and pointed. “Over there, you see.” Only, instead of pointing across the fields, he — to my sharp dismay — looked and pointed straight into the sky above him.

It was the fear in Malahide that chiefly afflicted me. And the pain of this, I remember, caused me to make an effort — which was an unwise thing to do. I drew attention to the ordinary things about us:

“Look, there’s a hill,” I cried.

“God!” exclaimed Forden, with quiet admiration, “what amazing things you say!” While Malahide began to sing again with happiness.

His reaction to my sentence forced me to realise the increasing change in myself. As I uttered the words I knew their third meaning; in the plain sentences was something that equalled in value: “See! the Heavens are open. There is God!” My companions still heard this third meaning, for I saw the look of majesty in Malahide’s great eyes, the love and beauty upon Forden’s shining face. But, for myself, having spoken, there remained — suddenly — nothing more than a commonplace low hill upon the near horizon. The gate and farm I saw as well. A feeling of tears rose in me, for the straining effort for recovery was without result, anguished and bitter beyond words.

I stole a glance at my companions. And that strange word Malahide had used came back to me, but with a deep, an awful sense of intolerable regret, as though its third meaning were gone beyond recall, and only two rather empty and foolish syllables remained....

It was passing, yes, for all three of us now; the gates of ivory were closing; there was confusion, and a rather crude foolishness. Oddly enough, it was Forden — seeing that he was altogether a slighter fellow than Malahide — it was Forden who rose most slowly to the surface. Very gradually indeed he left the deeps we had all known together. To all that he now said and did Malahide responded with an aggravating giggle. He said such foolish things, confused, uncomfortable to listen to. His nerves showed signs of being frayed. The ordinary, inarticulate Malahide, with the unhappy weakness, was returning, had already returned in fact. He became a trifle sullen, a little frightened as well, and in his gait and gesture lay a disconcerting hurry and uncertainty, as though, hesitating to make a decision of some vital sort, he was flurried, almost in a frenzy sometimes, trying vainly to escape. This stupid confusion in him afflicted me, but the effort to escape seemed to paralyse something in my mind. It was petrifying.... And thus the sequence of what followed, proved extraordinarily difficult to remember afterwards. An atmosphere of sadness, of foreboding, of premonition came over me; there was desolation in my heart; there were stabs of horrible presentiment. All these, moreover, were ever vaguely related to one thing — that inexplicable faint odour of burning....

What memory recalls can be told very briefly. It lies in my mind thus, condensed and swift:

The storm was natural enough, but, here again, the smell of burning alarmed and wrung me. It was faint, it was fugitive. Our mistake about the river had no importance, for the depression in the landscape might easily after all have held flowing water. The roofs, too, were not the roofs of Barton, but of a hamlet nestling among orchards, Clifden by name, and it was here, Forden informed us, he had first met his wife and had proposed to her: this also of no importance, except that he went on talking about it, and that it surprised him. He suddenly recognised the place, I mean. It increased his bewilderment, and is mentioned for that reason.

The storm, then, came abruptly. We had not seen it coming. Following a low line of hills, it overtook us from behind, bringing its own wind with it. The rustling of the leaves was the first thing I noticed. The trees about us began to shake and bend. The sparkling brilliance, I saw, had left the day; the sun shone dully; the fields were no longer radiant; the flowers, too, were gone, for we were crossing a ploughed field at the moment.

The discussion between us may be omitted; its confusion is really beyond me to describe. The storm, however, is easily described, for everyone has seen that curious thickening of the air on a day in high summer, when the clouds are not really clouds, but come as a shapeless, murky gloom, threatening a portentous downpour while yet no single raindrop falls. In childhood we called it “blight,” believing it to be composed of myriads of tiny insects. Lurid effects of lighting accompanied it, trees and roofs, against its dark background, looking as if stage flares illumined them. The whole picture, indeed, was theatrical in the extreme, artificial almost; but the aspect that I, personally, found so unwelcome, was that it laid over the sky an appearance of volumes of dense, heavy smoke. The idea of burning may, or may not, have been in my own mind only, for my companions made no comment on it. I cannot say. That it made my heart sink I remember clearly.

It was a sham storm, it had no meaning, nothing happened. Having accomplished its spectacular effect, it passed along the hills and dissipated, and the sun shone out with all its former brilliance. Yet, before it passed, certain things occurred; they came and went, it seemed to me afterwards, with the simultaneity of dream happenings. Forden, noticing the wall of gloom advancing, catching the noise of the trees as well, stopped dead in his tracks, and stared. He sniffed the air, but made no comment. An expression of utter bewilderment draped his face. He seemed once more bewitched. It was here the smell of burning came to me most strongly.

“Look out!” he cried, and started to run. He ran in front of us, we did not attempt to follow. But he ran in a circle, like a terrified animal. His figure went shifting quickly, silhouetted, like the trees and roofs, against the murky background of the low-hanging storm. A moment later he was beside us again, his face white, his eyes shining, his breath half-gone.

“Come on, old Fordy,” said Malahide affectionately, taking him by the arm. He, for some reason, was not affected. “It’s not going to rain, you know, and anyhow there’s no good running. Let’s sit down and eat our lunch.” And he led the way across a few furrows to the hedge....

We ate our sandwiches and cake and apples. The sun shone hotly again. None of us smoked, I remember. For myself, the smell of burning had left something so miserable in me that I dared not smell even a lighted match. But no word was said by anybody in this, or in any other, sense. I kept my own counsel.... And it was while we lay resting idly, hardly speaking at all, that a sound reached me from the other side of the hedge: a footstep in the flowered grass. My companions exchanged quick glances, I noticed, but I did not even turn my head. I did not dare.

“He’s putting it in,” whispered Malahide, a touch of the old vehemence in his eyes. “The last one!” Forden smiled, nodded his head, and was about to add some comment of his own, when the other interrupted brusquely:

“Is that the way to Barton?” he enquired suddenly in a louder voice, something challenging, almost truculent, in the tone. He jerked his head towards the gate we had recently come through. “Through that gate and past that farm, I mean?”

The answering voice startled me. It was the owner of the footsteps, of course, behind the hedge.

“No. That’s a dead end,” came in gruff but not unpleasant country tones.

There was no more than that. It was all natural enough. Yet a lump came up in my throat as I heard. I still dared not look round over my shoulder. I looked instead into Forden’s face, so close beside me. “We’re all right,” he was saying, as he glanced up a little. “Don’t struggle so. It’s the way we’ve got to go...” and was about to say more, when a fit of coughing caught him, as though for a moment he were about to suffocate. I hid my eyes quickly; a feeling of horror and despair swept through me; for there was terror in the sound he made; but the next second, when I looked again, the coughing had passed, and I saw in his face an expression of radiant happiness; the eyes shone wonderfully, there was a delicate, almost unearthly, beauty on his features. I found myself trembling, utterly unnerved.

“We’d better be getting on,” mentioned Malahide, in his abrupt, inconsequent fashion. “We mustn’t miss that train back.” And it was this unexpected change of key that enabled me at last to turn my head. I looked hurriedly behind the hedge. I was just in time to see a man, a farmer apparently, in the act of planting a post into the ground. He was pressing it down, at any rate, and much in the fashion of Malahide’s former play about a “fellow who planted signposts.” But he was planting — two. Side by side they already stood in the earth. One arm pointed right, the other left. They formed, thus, a cross.

The very same second, with a quiver in the air, as when two cinema pictures flash on each other’s heels with extreme rapidity, I experienced an optical delusion. I must call it such, at any rate. The focus of my sight changed instantaneously. The man was already in the distance, diminished in outline, moving away across the bright fields of golden buttercups.

I saw him as I had seen him once or twice before, earlier in the day, a moving figure in the grass; and when my eyes shifted back to examine the posts, there was but a single post — a signpost whose one arm bore in faded lettering the words: "*From* Barton." It pointed in the direction whence we had come....

I followed my companions in a dream that is better left untouched by words. Led by Malahide, we passed through Clifden, we came to the Trent and were ferried across; and a little later we reached, as the porter had described, a Midland station called Attenborough. A train soon took us back to the town where we were playing. Malahide, without a word, vanished from our side the moment we left the carriage. I did not see him again until, dressed in his lordly costume, he stood in the wings that night, waiting impatiently for his entrance. I had walked home with Forden, flung myself on the bed and dropped off into a deep two-hours' sleep.

IX

A performance behind the scenes that night was more dramatic — to me, at least — than anything the enthusiastic audience witnessed from the front. The three of us met in the wings for the first time since Malahide had given us the slip at the station. High tea at six I had alone, Forden for some reason going to a shop for his meal. Malahide, for another reason, ate nothing. We met, anyhow, at our respective posts in the wings. Neither Forden nor I were on till late in the second act, and as we came down the rickety stairs from separate dressing-rooms, at the same moment it so chanced, I realised at once that he was as little inclined to talk as I was. My own mind was still too packed with the whirling wonder of the whole affair for utterance. We nodded, then dropped back towards the door through which he would presently make his entrance.

It was just then, while someone was whispering, "He's giving a marvellous performance to-night," that Malahide swept by me from his exit and ran to his dressing-room for a hurried change.

"Hullo, Hubert!" he cried in his tempestuous way. 'I say..." as though it surprised him to see me there. "By the by," he rattled on, stopping dead for a breathless second in the rush to his room. "There's a place called Barton I want to see — Barton-in-Fabis. Let's go to-morrow. There's a train at 10.15. Forden, you come too!" And he was gone. Gone too, I realized with a dreadful sinking of the heart, a trembling of the nerves as well — utterly gone as though it had never happened, was all memory of the day’s adventure. The mind in Malahide was blank as a clean-washed slate.

And Forden — standing close behind him within easy earshot — my bye fell upon Forden, who had heard every single word, I saw him stare and bite his lips. He passed a hand aimlessly across his forehead. His eyelids flickered. There was a quiver of the lips. In his old man’s wig and makeup, he looked neither himself nor the part he was just about to play. Waiting there for his cue, now imminent, he stared fixedly at Malahide’s vanishing figure, then at me, then blankly into space. He was like a man about to fall. He looked bewitched again. A moment’s intense strain shot across the delicate features. He made in that instant, I am convinced, a tremendous, a violent, effort to recapture something that evaded him, an effort that failed completely. The next second, too swift to be measurable, that amazing expression, the angel’s, shone out amazingly. It flashed and vanished.... His cue sounded. He, too, was gone.

How I made my own entrance, I hardly know. Five minutes later we met on the stage. He was normal. He was acting beautifully. His mind, like Malahide’s, was a clean-washed slate.

X

My one object was to avoid speech with either Malahide or Forden. The former was on the stage until the end of the play, but the latter made no appearance in the last act. I slipped out the moment I was free to go. Malahide’s door was ajar, but he did not see me. Foregoing supper, I was safely in bed when I heard Forden come upstairs soon after midnight. I fell into an uneasy sleep that must have been deeper, however, than it seemed, for I did not hear Malahide come in, but I was wide awake on the instant, dread clutching me with gripping force, when I heard Forden’s voice outside my door.

“It’s half-past nine!” he warned me. “We mustn’t miss the train, remember!”

After gulping down some coffee, I went with him to the station, and he was normal and collected as you please. We chatted in our usual fashion. Clearly, his mind held no new, strange thing of any sort. Malahide was there before us....

The day, for me, was a nightmare of appalling order. A kind of mystical horror held me in a vice. Half-memories of bewildering and incredible things haunted me. The odour of burning, faint but unmistakable, was never absent....

We took single tickets to Stanton, Malahide reading a pile of papers and commenting volubly on the criticisms of the play. A porter at the station gave us confused directions. We followed faulty signposts, ancient and illegible, losing ourselves rather stupidly... and I noticed a man — a farmer with a spud — wandering about the fields and making thrusts from time to time at thistles. A sham storm followed a low line of hills, but no rain fell, and the brilliance of the April day was otherwise unspoilt. Barton itself we never reached, but we crossed the Trent on our way to a station called Attenborough, first passing a hamlet, Clifden, where, Forden informed us, he had met the girl he later made his wife.

It was a dull and uninspired expedition, Malahide voluble without being articulate, Forden rather silent on the whole... and at the home station Malahide gave us the slip without a word... but during the entire outing neither one nor other betrayed the slightest hint of familiarity with anything they had known before. In myself the memory lay mercilessly sharp and clear. I noted each startling contrast between the one and other. At the end I was worn out, bone-tired, every nerve seemed naked... and, again, I left the theatre alone, ran home, and went supperless to bed.

My determination was to keep awake at all costs, but sleep caught me too easily, as I believed it was meant to catch me. No such little thing as a warning was allowed to override what had to be, what had already been.... In the early hours of the morning, about two o’clock, to be exact, I woke from a nightmare of overwhelming vividness. Wide awake I was, the instant I opened my eyes. The nightmare was one of suffocation, I was being suffocated, and I carried over into waking consciousness the smell of burning and the atmosphere of smoke. The room, I saw at once, was full of smoke, the burning was not a dream. I *was* being suffocated. But in my case the suffocation was not complete, whereas Malahide and Forden died, according to the doctors, in their sleep. They did not even wake. They knew no pain....

Playing Catch

MR. ANTHONY, A widower, was deeply interested in the big questions of life and death, and in philosophy generally. He liked to wonder where his wife was, what she was doing if she had survived the destruction of her pretty body, and how her spirit was engaged. Was she, for instance, in any way aware of him?... Mabel, he remembered, had not been imaginative. Though sympathetic, she had contributed nothing to his mental life. When he referred any of his big questions to her, she would fix her patient eyes upon his own, and say: “I wonder! What do you think, dear?” Her disposition was gentle, but uninspiring.

Mabel apart, however, he pondered over many other things, being distinctly speculative: Why there was anything at all, and what — since there was a beginning — had existed before that beginning? What there might be on the other side of the moon, and whether the other planets were inhabited? The vast number of the heavenly bodies in particular perplexed him — a thousand million suns in the Milky Way alone! — It all seemed so unnecessarily enormous. He often wondered, again, about angels. Were there such beings, and, if so, what was their habit and nature? All races, all religions, all cosmogonies mentioned angels. Were they an invention of primitive imagining, or were they actual?

Dreams, too, interested him immensely. He declared all such enquiries stimulated him.

His speculations, it is seen, were sometimes grandiose, sometimes trivial. He read much, he brooded, he dwelt in an atmosphere of unanswerable questions. It argued, perhaps a strain of futility in the blood, but his love of the marvellous was ineradicable. That Mabel had not shared his divine curiosity had always been a secret grievance, rather shaking his belief in feminine intuition. She had never answered — anything. Could she answer anything now? By force of habit he still referred all his big questions to her mentally: Did Mabel know?

It was the advent of Mr. Einstein that dragged his anchor and set him sailing upon unchartered seas. Space, Time, Relativity, absorbed his entire thought.

The mass of all his reading, knowledge, thinking, converged on this bewildering subject. No sympathy for a discredited Euclid troubled him. Time, as a fourth dimension, delighted him. He mastered the matter as well as any layman could. Though out of his depth, he was not afraid....

Meanwhile, he had no settled home, feeling himself a wanderer physically as well as mentally. He occupied lodgings in Dymchurch at the moment. Large foreign sea-shells stood, echoless and dismal, on the plush mantelpiece, and a yellow-faced clock, with hands always pointing to 4.20, reposed under a domed glass cover. There was brilliant gas, a horsehair sofa, and a painted fan before the grate. Long green bell-ropes hung against the walls, with two oil-paintings of violent Swiss scenery beside them. A framed photograph of a fat-faced man, wearing Masonic regalia, was perched above the door. The broad window-sills were Uttered with his books, volumes straggled over the sofa, and an atmosphere of relativity, of astronomy, of the marvellous generally, pervaded the false brightness of the sordid seaside lodgings out of the season.

One warm February evening, when the days were pleasantly lengthening, Mr. Anthony was coming home along the sea-front just after sunset, when a thing happened that enthralled him because it proved, as he had long suspected, that there were Beings in the Universe compared to whom the greatest human was the merest microbe. Were they, perhaps, angels? he asked himself. He was uncommonly intrigued.

The afternoon had been strangely warm. He had sat down under a breakwater to rest. The something that happened was as follows:

The moon, clean, bright and tender, and just off the full, stood well above the sea, when, from the western horizon, there rose without the slightest warning a gigantic arm, whose huge hand seized her, as a man might seize a tennis ball, and flung her away into space with a stupendous but quite effortless throw. The vast hand then dropped, as a man’s hand drops after throwing, and the colossal arm, one instant level with the horizon, sank swiftly out of sight below the rim of the sea. The arm, Mr. Anthony noticed, was visible from the elbow only. The figure it belonged to, therefore, was standing in space at least one thousand miles below the spinning earth.

The grandeur of the gesture, magnificent, even godlike, left him breathless, but exhilarated. Yet it caused him no alarm, nor was he conscious of surprise. Such immense proportions, he reflected, must be angelic, surely. Why no head and shoulders were visible puzzled him — for his mind began to work at once — until he realised that, being of the same colour as the golden sunset, they merged into its background, so that the sky revealed no outline. Moreover, the arm, he observed, was slightly richer in red and gold than the tint of the air, and thus showed up nicely. The hand, of a splendid crimson, was fiery rather, and the colossal fingers that gripped the moon in their great curving clutch, stood out, dark-ridged like mountains, against the silver. It was an impressive and inspiring sight.

Mr. Anthony stood spell-bound, watching the moon as she flew plunging away into space. Such headlong speed enthralled him. It was thrilling, too, to remember that this outer space, being of ether only, was completely black. Had he been out there himself, he would have appeared as a solitary bright figure amid Egyptian darkness. This reflection, certainly, occurred to him. He would be a shining figure. Mabel, too, occurred to him. Did Mabel, he asked himself, witness what he witnessed? Was his strange privilege shared?...

He watched the flying moon. Already she was half her usual size. In fifteen seconds, she was no larger than a tangerine orange; in thirty, she resembled a sparkling marble; in forty, a shining pea; in sixty, a glittering bead; in seventy-five, a pin-head; and in ninety, a mere starry point that was barely visible at all against the sunset afterglow. The speed, the distance, the power behind the throw, the possible immediate effect upon the tide, the terror of any human beings who were looking on — all these details filled him with a high sense of happiness that was elation. He felt, to use his own favourite word, stimulated.

Then other points of view began to occur to him, modifying his first emotion of pure enjoyment. The human stand-point struck him. He noticed that the sky looked bare, undressed, naked somewhere, even — he used poetic license — a little lonely. He felt sorry that the moon had gone. He found that he missed her. He experienced regret. He was glad, therefore, to see that the point of light she had now become held stationary, and that no further dwindling occurred. The moon, then, had not completely vanished. Had she done so he would have felt bereft. Only a few days before he had told his landlady’s child that he knew of no reason why the earth should have a moon at all, since not all planets had these pretty, faithful satellites, and the child had asked at once:

“But what would happen at night, then?”

It was this simple human point of view that now modified his first emotion somewhat. He felt precisely as the child felt: “What would happen at night without a moon?”

It was with sincere relief and pleasure, therefore, after the minute and a half had passed, that he noted she was now growing bigger again. She was returning. She was on her way back. He watched her rapidly grow larger, as she approached at appalling speed. The point, bead, pea, marble and orange sizes were reached and passed successively, and ninety seconds later she had almost resumed her normal size and appearance again. Mr. Anthony’s fear that she would grow larger still and come crashing down upon the earth, obliterating perhaps Dymchurch, was hardly born before it was allayed. He watched with beating heart and straining eyes. He saw the gigantic arm and hand again shoot forth. The enormous fingers caught her, clutched her, then placed her with easy accuracy exactly where she would have moved to in these three minutes had her course not been interrupted. The same side as before shone placidly down. She was not a fraction turned. The stupendous arm and hand at once withdrew and sank below the sea. The sky was as it had been. Mr. Anthony, tears of joy in his eyes and wonder in his heart, but outwardly quite calm, resumed his walk home along the sea-front towards his lodgings....

The awful occurrence, for most, must have been dislocating, yet Mr. Anthony faced it with equilibrium. His joy was not hysterical. Accustomed to speculations concerning the unknown and unexpected, he maintained his poise quite admirably. He did not, so to speak, fall flat upon his face, prostrate in worship, although both awe and reverence were touched. The experience, he argued, was not merely a vision which could be analysed away next morning, for his mind retained its logical, observant processes, his reason worked as usual. Memory, judgment, imagination, the three great faculties, functioned properly. It was, therefore, no hallucination, in which these faculties are notoriously in abeyance. It was an honest, a genuine phenomenon.

He considered what he had seen, he made justifiable inferences, he drew sound conclusions. It pleased him particularly to find that these held water, as he called it. Thus he was delighted to establish — since the moon had been thrown away and then thrown back again — that two great figures were tossing her to and fro together across outer space, and that a spirit of amusement, even of sheer happy fun, evidently inspired the majestic spectacle. It was, perhaps, a game, a match possibly, a trial of skill at any rate, since one hand only was employed. The two gorgeous players were enjoying themselves. They were playing catch.

It made him happy to think that he had witnessed at least one mighty stroke in their magnificent game, and still more happy — comforted as well — to realise that, at long last, the intolerable quantity of the heavenly bodies, together with their overwhelming speeds and distances, were thus reasonably explained. He weighed his inferences cautiously, he examined his deductions; his logic and premises were sound, he could find no flaw in his reasoning. It was obvious to him that all the heavenly bodies, whose numbers had long dismayed him, as their *raison d'être* had thwarted him, that all of these — stars, suns, planets, comets — were being similarly thrown from hand to hand, most of them, with century-long, some with age-long tosses, and that the purpose of the colossal Universe was at last made clear.

He wondered if Mabel also knew; he hoped she did. To his boldest speculations her contribution had been invariably "But why bother, dear? What can it matter to *us?*" Did she now share the relief and wonder of his superb discovery that all the heavenly bodies were used by angels for the purposes of — happy play?

His mind, it is seen, worked admirably, his faculties retained their normal sharpness, the clarity of his thought was unimpaired. How, why, by what happy chance, he had witnessed only one stroke in the game, this, too, was quite clear to him at the moment, though he had difficulty in setting it down later in his written account of the occurrence. Relativity, of course, helped in the first easy stages of the explanation. Four measurements, he remembered, one of which is Time, are necessary to locate a point in space; and until that point is thus located and in position, it has not become an event — it has not "happened." Clearly, then, he had witnessed an occurrence in four-dimensional space. It was an event, it had happened, though not necessarily *now.*

This fourth measurement of Time troubled him for a moment, but for a moment only. He looked at his watch, he began to make elaborate calculations at the back of his head, and then confusion overtook him.... What remained, however, was the positive assurance that this playing catch with the moon filled him with the joy of a comfortable understanding. One of his big questions, at least, was satisfactorily answered.

He resumed his walk along the sea-front, therefore, at a steady gait, stimulated, though not unduly so, and by no means shaken. That his mental balance held true is proved by the fact that, as he turned homewards, his mind dealt with commonplace things quite naturally. He thought of his lodgings, remembering that he liked them because baths were included in the terms, that early morning tea was only three pence, and that he could turn the light out from his bed. Also, he once more remembered Mabel. And again he asked himself: was she aware of him in this magnificent moment? For Mabel, he suddenly realised with a qualm of peculiar distress, was involved somewhere in the entire business. This realisation, coming abruptly, caused an odd uneasiness, and the uneasiness spread, till it was established in his whole being. Mabel, it flashed through him, though involved, was not involved — quite openly. There was an unpleasant touch of subterfuge, a hint of plan, of purpose, almost of plot: his original idea of Mabel, his fond, admiring, yet rather stupid wife, had undergone a disagreeable change. It was as though she now stood mysteriously behind the scenes, unpleasantly concealed — secreted.

The confused conviction that Mabel played this hidden role began to trouble him....

Meanwhile, the splendour he had witnessed brought a touch of soberness in its train. The after-effect of splendour is invariably of a sedative description, and this reaction now set in, accompanied by a feeling of disappointment that just stopped short of distress and yet held the seed of faint alarm. The breath of uneasiness blew through him. It was slight, impossible to seize. He noticed it, no more than that, yet its presence lurked, if not definite enough yet to cause acute disturbance. It remained a vague sinking of the heart, due to something that was not fully explained. Mabel, however, he felt sure, would explain it — if she *could.* Here, at last, was something Mabel really knew. Here was a contribution she could make — if she *would.*

Confusion grew upon him. He had after all been privileged, perhaps, beyond what a man can bear with equanimity — this occurred to him as a solution of his distress. Being wise, therefore, he turned his thoughts deliberately upon more familiar things. He felt hungry. He hoped there might be a fried Dover sole for supper. Mabel, too, he remembered, was fond of that dish. He felt happier again. The wind had grown chilly, and he drew his light-blue dressing-gown more closely about him. The dark blue bathing-suit underneath looked a trifle tight, he thought, but there was no need to bother about that at the moment. The thought did not detain him. He must get home quickly now and change. He hurried....

In this frame of mind, therefore, Mr. Anthony made his way along the deserted front, and in so doing had to pass the row of bathing-sheds that stood high and dry upon the sandy ridge. The coarse grass bent ruffled and whistling in the wind. It was too early in the year for bathers, and the sheds were unoccupied. Rather dreary and melancholy it appeared, but this was all exactly as it should be, and his mind observed the fact, offering no comment on it. At the same time something about those white-washed bathing-sheds began to *draw* his attention. His mind was first arrested, then startled. There was a difference somewhere. Why, for instance, did it take so long to pass them? Why did they stretch into such an interminable distance? Why did the endless row of familiar ugliness now seem queer and ominous?... He found himself counting them automatically. And his interest, on a sudden, became intense. He had discovered where the difference lay; there was an increase in their number. Multiplied by thousands, the row of sheds stretched horribly, hundreds upon hundreds, into a dim infinity....

His alarm deepened at once. There was something here he ought by rights to have known, but did not know; yet something, it occurred to him painfully, that Mabel knew already and had always known; something, again, that she was concealing from him deliberately.

He paused to consider the matter. It was, he realised, of immense importance, not so much the horrible increase in the sheds, as her reason for the deliberate concealment. A singular new dread invaded, clutched him. *What* precisely was it that Mabel knew, yet kept so mysteriously hidden from him? A dreadful curiosity attached itself to the interminable row of bathing-sheds. Their number, certainly, was sinister. But her reason for concealment was far worse. Terror touched him with an icy finger. He faced, with shrinking, a portentous and appalling thing.

In this predicament his native habit of philosophical enquiry amid unanswerable questions proved of some assistance. His mind switched automatically elsewhere. Turning his attention in another direction altogether, he glanced up at the sky, perceived the moon safely in her accustomed place, and noted, not without a faint annoyance, that he had mistaken her light a few moments before for sunshine. The bathing-suit he wore was out of place now. He had evidently lingered somewhere; he must hasten home and change. He therefore hurried. He passed the row of sheds without the slightest difficulty, intent only upon finding Mabel so that she might explain properly to him what she had so long been hiding. He reached and entered his lodgings, forgetting entirely that he had ever felt uneasy, and quite happy that everything was now all right again. Passing through the hall he saw his landlady *very* quickly close the kitchen door. She spoke to him, but he did not catch the words. Very quickly she closed that door. He caught but a glimpse of her vanishing face.

Things, however, were only fairly “all right,” it seemed. For instance, he at once missed Mabel. There was no sign of her anywhere. A feeling came to him — it was in the very air — that she had never been in this particular house at all. For a second he felt sure it was the wrong house altogether. A wild bewilderment came on him. Mabel was lost, hopelessly, irrecoverably lost; and it was due to some stupid carelessness of his own that she was thus irretrievably mislaid. Somehow he had blundered; he had neglected some obvious precaution, had been somewhere he ought not to have been, had missed or overlooked a pre-arranged instruction of very simple kind — with the result that his wife was now finally and completely lost.

A realisation of his deep guilt overwhelmed him. A sense of hideous, imminent danger at once hung in the air. He had stolen upon the threshold of a mystery none but Mabel could possibly unravel — and she was lost. He felt it with capital letters: LOST. A sense of frantic hurry rushed upon him.

It was tremendous, over-mastering. He knew himself hideously caught by the thing that all men dread — the panic sense.

He hurried, he rushed, he tore headlong....

In the confused and frenzied search that followed, Mr. Anthony experienced such acute anguish, such poignant, heart-felt sadness, such aching misery and distress of mind, that he realised it was altogether impossible to continue looking. It was a hopeless, an intolerable search; the strain was unbearable; the pain was more than he could support without a collapse that involved the awful disaster of some terrible extinction. He, therefore, gave up the search, and turned his thoughts to other things.... The power of detachment pertaining to a mind that dealt with unanswerable questions asserted itself once again. At the back of his head, moreover, was a feeling that really he knew all the time exactly where Mabel was, what she was concealing from him, and why she was concealing it; yet, further, that *when* she did reveal her secret it would prove to be something he had known all along quite well. What puzzled him a little, indeed, was *why* he hid this knowledge from himself? Why did he shrink from facing it? Why did he deliberately avoid it? Whence came this elaborate and artificial pretence? He raged, he shrank, he trembled....

Then, suddenly, the reason for his attitude flashed clearly. He understood the monstrous thing: if he faced it, his terror would be too appalling to contemplate and live. He must go mad, or die.

That Mabel grasped this and, out of love for him, still consented to remain Lost, brought a measure of comfort to his anguished soul, though it was in vain he tried to grasp its full significance. The full meaning of the whole episode continued to evade him. That her remaining lost bore some subtle relation to the throwing of the moon, he perceived vaguely, but what that relation precisely was he could not, for the fife of him, determine. The effort to understand at length exhausted him. He dripped with perspiration....

With sharp, dreadful clarity, his intelligence then strangely opened, and — he knew.

Transfixed with terror, he could scarcely breathe. His voice failed him. He called out wildly, but no sound was audible. He screamed and shrieked for help, but no whisper left his lips. He was alone, entirely alone, lost in an infinity of emptiness. And — he was shining: a figure of fight amid the Egyptian blackness of outer space.

He himself had been thrown away. He was falling, falling... and Mabel was aware of it....

In those awful seconds before he crashed upon some point in ultimate space, the full significance of the moon's return became at last quite clear. The revelation came with a final certainty there was no resisting. It was appalling beyond words. The Other Player, he realised, had held the catch — this time. But one day that catch would not be held. It would be *missed.* Another heavenly body would then be seized and flung, a constellation, perhaps the Pleiades, perhaps — the Earth herself!

"One day soon, we, too, shall be flung away!" he roared aloud, incoherent with the horror of his dizzy falling. But no sound left his lips. He heard instead — where, oh where, had she said this dreadful thing? — the voice of his landlady:

"The Pleiades would scatter in a handful of golden dust!"

His terrified thought could not grapple with such fearful words. Meanwhile, he rushed and tore and fell....

"Mabel!" he screamed, finding a strangled voice that hurt his throat in the effort to get out. "Mabel! Look out, dear! Look out! He's going to — *miss!*"

The odd thing — the first detail in the whole experience that occurred to him as really strange — the odd thing was that Mabel seemed quite unfrightened. She was not even interested, much less disturbed. She paid no attention to his frenzied warning, as she passed, prettily smiling, through the room. The sunlight fell on her smooth, comely body in its becoming bathing-suit that was dripping wet and clung tightly to her. She went very quickly towards the inner room to dry herself and put her clothes on. She came, evidently, straight from her dip in the sea, and it annoyed him that she had gone to bathe alone, without even letting him know that she was going.

This annoyance, however, lay far below his terror, barely recognisable at all. His terror usurped all, other feeling. Even the frightful descent through empty space was quite forgotten. It was the smile on her placid, patient face that petrified him. The ghastly horror of it, its indifference, its gentle sweetness, its fatuous imperturbability, froze his blood.

He understood at last — everything.

The tossed moon, the stupendous arm and hand that clutched her, the horrible increase of the bathing-sheds, his own fierce fling through blackness towards some final crash of extinction — all, all had a reason, an explanation, which had been concealed from him with cunning and diabolical success by — Mabel, by his own stupid, loving, faithful, yet *knowing* wife.

Mabel knew. She knew everything. Also — she had always known.

Yet his understanding, even now, was not complete. God! Would he never understand anything *completely?*

He slowly turned his head. Mabel, in the act of passing out of the room, was looking back at him over her wet, shapely shoulder. The line of her delicious body enticed him. Her lips were moving. She was mentioning something — by the way, as it were:

“He *has* missed, dear! But, why bother...?”

Mr. Anthony, shivering with cold, opened his eyes, rose from his indifferent shelter below the breakwater, and walked home rapidly to his cheerless lodgings....

The Pikestaffe Case

I

THE VITALITY OF old governesses deserves an explanatory memorandum by a good physiologist. It is remarkable. They tend to survive the grown-up married men and women they once taught as children. They hang on for ever, as a man might put it crudely, a man, that is, who, taught by one of them in his earliest schoolroom days, would answer enquiries fifty years later without enthusiasm: “Oh we keep her going, yes. She doesn’t want for anything!”

Miss Helena Speke had taught the children of a distinguished family, and these distinguished children, with expensive progeny of their own now, still kept her going. They had clubbed together, seeing that Miss Speke retained her wonderful health, and had established her in a nice little house where she could take respectable lodgers — men for preference — giving them the three B’s — bed, bath, and breakfast. Being a capable woman, Miss Speke more than made both ends meet. She wanted for nothing. She kept going.

Applicants for her rooms, especially for the first-floor suite, had to be recommended. She had a stern face for those who rang the bell without a letter in their pockets. She never advertised. Indeed, there was no need to do so. The two upper floors had been occupied by the same tenants for many years — a chief clerk in a branch bank and a retired clergyman respectively. It was only the best suite that sometimes “happened to be vacant at the moment.” From two guineas inclusive before the war, her price for this had been raised, naturally, to four, the tenant paying his gas-stove, light, and bath extra. Breakfast — she prided herself legitimately on her good breakfasts — was included.

For a long time now this first-floor suite had been unoccupied. The Cost of living worried Miss Speke, as it worried most other people. Her servant was cheap but incompetent, and once she could let the suite she meant to engage a better one. The distinguished children were scattered out of reach about the world; the eldest had been killed in the war; a married one, a woman, lived in India; another married one was in the throes of divorce — an expensive business; and the fourth, the most generous and last, found himself in the Bankruptcy Court, and so was unable to help.

It was in these conditions that Miss Speke, her vitality impaired, decided to advertise. Although she inserted the words “references essential,” she meant in her heart to use her own judgment, and if a likely gentleman presented himself and agreed to pay her price, she might accept him. The clergyman and the bank official upstairs were a protection, she felt. She invariably mentioned them to applicants: “I have a clergyman of the Church of England on the top floor. He’s been with me for eleven years. And a banker has the floor below. Mine is a very quiet house, you see.” These words formed part of the ritual she recited in the hall, facing her proposed tenants on the linoleum by the hat-rack; and it was these words she addressed to the tall, thin, pale-faced man with scanty hair and spotless linen, who informed her that he was a tutor, a teacher of higher mathematics to the sons of various families — he mentioned some first-class names where references could be obtained — a student besides and something of an author in his leisure hours. His pupils he taught, of course, in their respective houses, one being in Belgrave Square, another in The Albany; it was only after tea, or in the evenings, that he did his own work. All this he explained briefly, but with great courtesy of manner.

Mr. Thorley was well spoken, with a gentle voice, kind, far-seeing eyes, and an air of being lonely and uncared for that touched some forgotten, dried-up spring in Miss Speke’s otherwise rather cautious heart. He looked every inch a scholar—” and a gentleman,” as she explained afterwards to everybody who was interested in him, these being numerous, of unexpected kinds, and all very close, not to say unpleasantly close, questioners indeed. But what chiefly influenced her in his favour was the fact, elicited in conversation, that years ago he had been a caller at the house in Portman Square where she was governess to the distinguished family. She did not exactly remember him, but he had certainly known Lady Araminta, the mother of her charges.

Thus it was that Mr. Thorley — John Laking Thorley, M.A., of Jesus College, Cambridge — was accepted by Miss Speke as tenant of her best suite on the first floor at the price mentioned, breakfast included, winning her confidence so fully that she never went to the trouble even of taking up the references he gave her. She liked him, she felt safe with him, she pitied him. He had not bargained, nor tried to beat her down. He just reflected a moment, then agreed. He proved, indeed, an exemplary lodger, early to bed and not too early to rise, of regular habits, thoughtful of the expensive new servant, careful with towels, electric light, and ink-stains, prompt in his payments, and never once troubling her with complaints or requests, as other lodgers did, not excepting the banker and the clergyman. Moreover, he was a tidy man, who never lost anything, because he invariably put everything in its proper place and thus knew exactly where to look for it. She noticed this tidiness at once.

Miss Speke, especially in the first days of his tenancy, studied him, as she studied all her lodgers. She studied his room, when he was out "of a morning." At her leisure she did this, knowing he would never break in and disturb her unexpectedly. She was neither prying nor inquisitive, she assured herself, but she *was* curious. "I have a right to know something about the gentlemen who sleep under my roof with me," was the way she put it in her own mind. His clothes, she found, were ample, including evening dress, white gloves, and an opera hat. He had plenty of boots and shoes. His linen was good. His wardrobe, indeed, though a trifle uncared for, especially his socks, was a gentleman's wardrobe. Only one thing puzzled her. The full-length mirror, standing on mahogany legs — a present from the generous "child," now in the Bankruptcy Court, and, a handsome thing, a special attraction in the best suite — this fine mirror Mr. Thorley evidently did not like. The second or third morning he was with her she went to his bedroom before the servant had done it up, and saw, to her surprise, that this full-length glass stood with its back to the room. It had been placed close against the wall in a corner, its unattractive back turned outward.

"It gave me quite a shock to see it," as she said afterwards. "And such a handsome piece, too!"

Her first thought, indeed, sent a cold chill down her energetic spine. "He's cracked it!" But it was not cracked. She paused in some amazement, wondering why her new lodger had done this thing; then she turned the mirror again into its proper position, and left the room. Next morning she found it again with its face close against the wall. The following day it was the same — she turned it round, only to find it the next morning again with its back to the room.

She asked the servant, but the servant knew nothing about it.

"He likes it that way, I suppose, mum," was all Sarah said. "I never laid a 'and on it once."

Miss Speke, after much puzzled consideration, decided it must be something to do with the light. Mr. Thorley, she remembered, wore horn-rimmed spectacles for reading. She scented a mystery. It caused her a slight — oh, a very slight — feeling of discomfort. Well, if he did not like the handsome mirror, she could perhaps use it in her own room. To see it neglected hurt her a little. Not many furnished rooms could boast a full-length glass, she reflected. A few days later, meeting Mr. Thorley on the linoleum before the hat-rack, she enquired if he was quite comfortable, and if the breakfast was to his liking. He was polite and even cordial. Everything was perfect, he assured her. He had never been so well looked after. And the house was so quiet.

"And the bed, Mr. Thorley? You sleep well, I hope." She drew nearer to the subject of the mirror, but with caution. For some reason she found a difficulty in actually broaching it. It suddenly dawned upon her that there was something queer about his treatment of that full-length glass. She was by no means fanciful, Miss Speke, retired governess; only the faintest suspicion of something odd brushed her mind and vanished. But she did feel something. She found it impossible to mention the handsome thing outright.

"There's nothing you would like changed in the room, or altered?" she enquired with a smile, "or — in any way put different — perhaps?"

Mr. Thorley hesitated for a moment. A curious expression, half sad, half yearning, she thought, lit on his thoughtful face for one second and was gone. The idea of moving anything seemed distasteful to him.

"Nothing, Miss Speke, I thank you," he replied courteously, but without delay. "Everything is really *just* as I like it." Then, with a little bow, he asked: "I trust my typewriter disturbs nobody. Please let me know if it does."

Miss Speke assured him that nobody minded the typewriter in the least, nor even heard it, and, with another charming little bow and a smile, Mr. Thorley went out to give his lessons in the higher mathematics.

“There!” she reflected, “and I never even asked him!” It had been impossible.

From the window she watched him going down the street, his head bent, evidently in deep thought, his books beneath his arm, looking she thought, every inch the gentleman and the scholar that he undoubtedly was. His personality left a very strong impression on her mind. She found herself rather wondering about him. As he turned the corner Miss Speke owned to two things that rose simultaneously in her mind: first, the relief that the lodger was out for the day and could be counted upon not to return unexpectedly; secondly, that it would interest her to slip up and see what kind of books he read. A minute later she was in his sitting-room. It was already swept and dusted, the breakfast cleared away, and the books, she saw, lay partly on the table where he had just left them and partly on the broad mantelpiece he used as a shelf. She was alone, the servant was downstairs in the kitchen. She examined Mr. Thorley’s books.

The examination left her bewildered and uninspired. “I couldn’t make them out at all,” she put it. But they were evidently what she called costly volumes, and that she liked. “Something to do with his work, I suppose — mathematics, and all that,” she decided, after turning over pages covered with some kind of hieroglyphics, symbols being a word she did not know in that connection. There was no printing, there were no sentences, there was nothing she could lay hold of, and the diagrams she thought perhaps were Euclid, or possibly astronomical. Most of the names were odd and quite unknown to her. Gauss! Minowski! Lobatchewski! And it affronted her that some of these were German. A writer named Einstein was popular with her lodger, and that, she felt, was a pity, as well as a mistake in taste. It all alarmed her a little; or, rather she felt that touch of respect, almost of awe, pertaining to some world entirely beyond her ken. She was rather glad when the search — it was a duty — ended.

“There’s nothing there,” she reflected, meaning there was nothing that explained his dislike of the full-length mirror. And, disappointed, yet with a faint relief, she turned to his private papers. These, since he was a tidy man, were in a drawer. Mr. Thorley never left anything lying about. Now, a letter Miss Speke would not have thought of reading, but papers, especially learned papers, were another matter. Conscience, nevertheless, did prick her faintly as she cautiously turned over sheaf after sheaf of large white foolscap, covered with designs, and curves, and diagrams in ink, the ink he never spilt, and assuredly in his recent handwriting. And it was among these foolscap sheets that she suddenly came upon one sheet in particular that caught her attention and even startled her. In the centre, surrounded by scriggly hieroglyphics, numbers, curves and lines meaningless to her, she saw a drawing of the full-length mirror. Some of the curves ran into it and through it, emerging on the other side. She knew it was *the* mirror because its exact measurements were indicated in red ink.

This, as mentioned, startled her. What could it mean? she asked herself, staring intently at the curious sheet, as though it must somehow yield its secret to prolonged even if unintelligent enquiry. “It looks like an experiment or something,” was the furthest her mind could probe into the mystery, though this, she admitted, was not very far. Holding the paper at various angles, even upside down, she examined it with puzzled curiosity, then slowly laid it down again in the exact place whence she had taken it. That faint breath of alarm had again suddenly brushed her soul, as though she approached a mystery she had better leave unsolved.

“It’s very strange—” she began, carefully closing the drawer, but unable to complete the sentence even in her mind. “I don’t think I like it — quite,” and she turned to go out. It was just then that something touched her face, tickling one cheek, something fine as a cobweb, something in the air. She picked it away. It was a thread of silk, extremely fine, so fine, indeed, that it might almost have been a spider’s web of gossamer such as one sees floating over the garden lawn on a sunny morning. Miss Speke brushed it away, giving it no further thought, and went about her usual daily duties.

II

But in her mind was established now a vague uneasiness, though so vague that at first she did not recognise it. Her thought would suddenly pause. “Now, what is it?” she would ask herself. “Something’s on my mind. What is it I’ve forgotten?” The picture of her first-floor lodger appeared, and she knew at once. “Oh, yes, it’s that mirror and the diagrams, of course.” Some taut wire of alarm was quivering at the back of her mind. It was akin to those childhood alarms that pertain to the big unexplained mysteries no parent can elucidate because no parent knows. “Only God can tell that,” says the parent, evading the insoluble problem. “I’d better not think about it,” was the analogous conclusion reached by Miss Speke. Meanwhile the impression the new lodger’s personality made upon her mind perceptibly deepened. He seemed to her full of power, above little things, a man of intense and mysterious mental life. He was constantly and somewhat possessingly in her thoughts. The mere thought of him, she found, stimulated her.

It was just before luncheon, as she returned from her morning marketing, that the servant drew her attention to certain marks upon the carpet of Mr. Thorley’s sitting-room. She had discovered them as she handled the vacuum cleaner — faint, short lines drawn by dark chalk or crayons, in shape like the top or bottom right-angle of a square bracket, and sometimes with a tiny arrow shown as well. There were occasional other marks, too, that Miss Speke recognised as the hieroglyphics she called squiggles. Mistress and servant examined them together in a stooping position. They found others on the bedroom carpet, too, only these were not straight; they were small curved lines; and about the feet of the full-length mirror they clustered in a quantity, segments of circles, some large, some small. They looked as if someone had snipped off curly hair, or pared his finger-nails with sharp scissors, only considerably larger, and they were so faint that they were only visible when the sunlight fell upon them.

“I knew they was drawn on,” said Sarah, puzzled, yet proud that she had found them, “because they didn’t come up with the dust and fluff.”

“I’ll — speak to Mr. Thorley,” was the only comment Miss Speke made. “I’ll tell him.” Her voice was not quite steady, but the girl apparently noticed nothing.

“There’s all this, too, please, mum.” She pointed to a number of fine silk threads she had collected upon a bit of newspaper, preparatory to the dust-bin. “They was stuck on the cupboard door and the walls, stretched all across the room, but rather ‘igh up. I only saw them by chance. One caught on my face.”

Miss Speke stared, touched, examined for some seconds without speaking. She remembered the thread that had tickled her own cheek. She looked enquiringly round the room, and the servant, following her suggestion, indicated where the threads had been attached *to* walls and furniture. No marks, however, were left; there was no damage done.

“I’ll mention it to Mr. Thorley,” said her mistress briefly, unwilling to discuss the matter with the new servant, much less to admit that she was uncomfortably at sea. “Mr. Thorley,” she added, as though there was nothing unusual, “is a high mathematician. He makes — measurements and — calculations of that sort.” She had not sufficient control of her voice to be more explicit, and she went from the room aware that, unaccountably, she was trembling. She had first gathered up the threads, meaning to show them to her lodger when she demanded an explanation. But the explanation was delayed, for — to state it bluntly — she was afraid to ask him for it. She put it off till the following morning, then till the day after, and, finally, she decided to say nothing about the matter at all. “I’d better leave it,. perhaps, after all,” she persuaded herself. “There’s no damage done, anyhow. I’d better not inquire.” All the same she did not like it. By the end of the week, however, she was able to pride herself upon her restraint and tact; the marks on the carpet, rubbed out by the girl, were not renewed, and the fine threads of silk were never again found stretching through the air from wall to furniture. Mr. Thorley had evidently noticed their removal and had discontinued what he had observed was an undesirable performance. He was a scholar and a gentleman. But he was more. He was frank and straight-dealing. One morning he asked to see his landlady and told her all about it himself.

“Oh,” he said in his pleasantest, easiest manner when she came into the room, “I wanted to tell you, Miss Speke — indeed, I meant to do so long before this — about the marks I made on your carpets” — he smiled apologetically—” and the silk threads I stretched. I use them for measurements — for problems I set my pupils, and one morning I left them there by mistake. The marks easily rub out. But I will use scraps of paper instead another time. I can pin these on — if you will kindly tell your excellent servant not to touch them — er — they’re rather important to me.” He smiled again charmingly, and his face wore the wistful, rather yearning expression that had already appealed to her. The eyes, it struck her, were very brilliant. “Any damage,” he added—” though, I assure you, none is possible really — I would of course, make good to you, Miss Speke.”

*“*Thank you, Mr. Thorley,” was all Miss Speke could find to say, so confused was her mind by troubling thoughts and questions she dared not express. “Of course — this *is* my best suite, you see.”

It was all most amicable and pleasant between them.

“I wonder — have my books come?” he asked, as he went out. “Ah, there they are, I do believe!” he exclaimed, for through the open front door a van was seen discharging a very large packing-case.

“Your books, Mr. Thorley — ?” Miss Speke murmured, noting the size of the package with dismay. “But I’m afraid — you’ll hardly find space to put them in,” she stammered. “The rooms — er” — she did not wish to disparage them—” are so small, aren’t they?”

Mr. Thorley smiled delightfully. “Oh, please do not trouble on that account,” he said. “I shall find space all right, I assure you. It’s merely a question of knowing where and how to put them,” and then proceeded to give the men instructions.

A few days later a second case arrived.

“I’m expecting some instruments, *too,”* he mentioned casually, “mathematical instruments,” and he again assured her with his confident smile that she need have no anxiety on the score of space. Nor would he dent the walls or scrape the furniture the least little bit. There was always room, he reminded her gently again, provided one knew how to stow things away. Both books and instruments were necessary to his work. Miss Speke need feel no anxiety at all.

But Miss Speke felt more than anxiety, she felt uneasiness, she felt a singular growing dread. There lay in her a seed of distress that began to sprout rapidly. Everything arrived as Mr. Thorley had announced, case upon case was unpacked in his room by his own hands. The straw and wood she used for firing purposes, there was no mess, no litter, no untidiness, nor were walls and furniture injured in any way. What caused her dread to deepen into something bordering upon actual alarm was the fact that, on searching Mr. Thorley’s rooms when he was out, she could discover no trace of any of the things that had arrived. There was no sign of either books or instruments. Where had he stored them? Where could they lie concealed? She asked herself innumerable questions, but found no answer to them. These stores, enough to choke and block the room, had been brought in through the sitting-room door. They could not possibly have been taken out again. They had *not* been taken out. Yet no trace of them was anywhere to be seen. It was very strange, she thought; indeed, it was more than strange. She felt excited. She felt a touch of hysterical alarm.

Meanwhile, thin strips of white paper, straight, angled, curved, were pinned upon the carpet; threads of finest silk again stretched overhead connecting the top of the door lintel with the window, the high cupboard with the curtain rods — yet too high to be brushed away merely by the head of anyone moving in the room. And the full-length mirror still stood with its face close against the wall.

The mystery of these aerial entanglements increased Miss Speke's alarm considerably. What could their purpose be? "Thank God," she thought, "this isn't war time!" She knew enough to realise their meaning was not "wireless." That they bore some relation to the lines on the carpet and to the diagrams and curves upon the paper, she grasped vaguely. But what it all meant baffled her and made her feel quite stupid. Where all the books and instruments had disappeared added to her bewilderment. She felt more and more perturbed. A vague, uncertain fear was worse than something definite she could face and deal with. Her fear increased. Then, suddenly, yet with a reasonable enough excuse, Sarah gave notice.

For some reason Miss Speke did not argue with the girl. She preferred to let the real meaning of her leaving remain unexpressed. She just let her go. But the fact disturbed her extraordinarily. Sarah had given every satisfaction, there had been no sign of a grievance, no complaint, the work was not hard, the pay was good. It was simply that the girl preferred to leave. Miss Speke attributed it to Mr. Thorley. She became more and more disturbed in mind. Also she found herself, more and more, avoiding her lodger, whose regular habits made such avoidance an easy matter.

Knowing his hours of exit, and entrance, she took care to be out of the way. At the mere sound of his step she flew to cover. The new servant, a stupid, yet not inefficient country girl, betrayed no reaction of any sort, no unfavourable reaction at any rate. Having received her instructions, Lizzie did her work without complaint from either side. She did not remove the paper and the thread, nor did she mention them. She seemed just the country clod she was. Miss Speke, however, began to have restless nights. She contracted an unpleasant habit: she lay awake — listening.

III

As the result of one of these sleepless nights she came to the abrupt conclusion that she would be happier without Mr. Thorley in the house — only she had not the courage to ask him to leave. The truth was she had not the courage to speak to him at all, much less to give him notice, however nicely.

After much cogitation she hit upon a plan that promised well: she sent him a carefully worded letter explaining that, owing to increased cost of living, she found herself compelled to raise his terms. The "raise" was more than considerable, it was unreasonable, but he paid what she demanded, sending down a cheque for three months in advance with his best compliments. The letter somehow made her tremble. It was at this stage she first became aware of the existence in her of other feelings than discomfort, uneasiness, and alarm. These other feelings, being in contradiction of her dread, were difficult to describe, but their result was plain — she did not really wish Mr. Thorley to go after all. His friendly compliments," his refusal of her hint, caused her a secret pleasure. It was not the cheque at the increased rate that pleased her — it was simply the fact that her lodger meant to stay.

It might be supposed that some delayed sense of romance had been stirred in her, but this really was not the case at all. Her pleasure was due to another source, but to a source uncommonly obscure and very strange. She feared him, feared his presence, above all, feared going into his room, while yet there was something about the mere idea of Mr. Thorley that entranced her. Another thing may as well be told at once — she herself faced it boldly — she would enter his dreaded room, when he was out, and would deliberately linger there. There was an odd feeling in the room that gave her pleasure, and more than pleasure — happiness. Surrounded by the enigmas of his personality, by the lines and curves of white paper pinned upon her carpet, by the tangle of silken threads above her head, by the mysterious books, the more than mysterious diagrams in his drawer — yet all these, even the dark perplexity of the rejected mirror and the vanished objects, were forgotten in the curious sense of happiness she derived from merely sitting in his room. Her fear contained this other remarkable ingredient — an uncommon sense of joy, of liberty, of freedom. She felt *exaltée.*

She could not explain it, she did not attempt to do so. She would go shaking and trembling into his room, and a few minutes later this sense of uncommon happiness — of release, almost of escape, she felt it — would steal over her as though in her dried-up frozen soul spring had burst upon midwinter, as though something that crawled had suddenly most gloriously found wings. An indescribable exhilaration caught her.

Under this influence the dingy street turned somehow radiant, and the front door of her poor lodging-house opened upon blue seas, yellow sands, and mountains carpeted with flowers. Her whole life, painfully repressed and crushed down in the dull service of conventional nonentities, flashed into colour, movement, and adventure. Nothing confined her. She was no longer limited. She knew advance in all possible directions. She knew the stars. She knew escape!

An attempt has been made to describe for her what she never could have described herself.

The reaction, upon coming out again, was painful. Her life in the past as a governess, little better than a servant; her life in the present as lodging-house keeper; her struggle with servants, with taxes, with daily expenses; her knowledge that no future but a mere “living” lay in front of her until the grave was reached — these overwhelmed her with an intense depression that the contrast rendered almost insupportable. Whereas in *his* room she had perfume, freedom, liberty, and wonder — the wonder of some entirely new existence.

Thus, briefly, while Miss Speke longed for Mr. Thorley to leave her house, she became obsessed with the fear that one day he really *would, go.* Her mind, it is seen, became uncommonly disturbed; her lodger’s presence being undoubtedly the cause. Her nights were now more than restless, they were sleepless. Whence came, she asked herself repeatedly in the dark watches, her fear? Whence came, too, her strange enchantment?

It was at this juncture, then, that a further item of perplexity was added to her mind. Miss Speke, as has been seen, was honourably disposed; she respected the rights of others, their property as well. Yet, included in the odd mood of elation the room and its atmosphere caused her, was also a vagrant, elusive feeling that the intimate, the personal — above all, the personal — had lost their original rigidity. Small individual privacies, secrecy, no longer held their familiar meaning quite. The idea that most things in life were to be shared slipped into her. A "secret," to this expansive mood, was a childish attitude.

At any rate, it was while lingering in her lodger's attractive room one day — a habit now — that she did something that caused her surprise, yet did not shock her. She saw an open letter lying on his table — and she read it.

Rather than an actual letter, however, it seemed a note, a memorandum. It began "To J. L. T."

In a boyish writing, the meaning of the language escaped her entirely. She understood the strange words as little as she understood the phases of the moon, while yet she derived from their perusal a feeling of mysterious beauty, similar to the emotions the changes of that lovely satellite stirred in her:

"To J. L. T.

"I followed your instructions, though with intense effort and difficulty. I woke at 4 o'clock. About ten minutes later, as you said might happen, I woke a *second time.* The change into the second state was as great as the change from sleeping to waking, in the ordinary meaning of these words. But I could not remain 'awake.' I fell asleep again in about a minute — back into the usual waking state, I mean. Description in words is impossible, as you know. What I felt was too terrific to feel for long. The new energy must presently have *burned me up.* It frightened me — as you warned me it would. And this fear, no doubt, was the cause of my 'falling asleep' again so quickly.

"Cannot we arrange a Call for Help for similar occasions in future?

"G. P."

Against this note Mr. Thorley had written various strangest "squiggles"; higher mathematics, Miss Speke supposed. In the opposite margin, also in her lodger's writing, were these words:

"We must agree on a word to use when frightened. *Help,* or *Help me,* seems the best. To be uttered with the whole being."

Mr. Thorley had added a few other notes. She read them without the faintest prick of conscience. Though she understood no single sentence, a thrill of deep delight ran through her:

"It amounts, of course, to a new direction; a direction at right angles to all we know, a new direction in oneself, a new direction — in living. But it can, perhaps, be translated into mathematical terms by the intellect. This, however, only a simile at best. Cannot be experienced that way. Actual experience possible only to *changed consciousness*. But good to become mathematically accustomed to it. The mathematical experiments are worth it. They induce the mind, at any rate, to dwell upon the new direction. This helps..

Miss Speke laid down the letter exactly where she had found it. No shame was in her. "G. P.," she knew, meant Gerald Pikestaffe; he was one of her lodger's best pupils, the one in Belgrave Square. Her feeling of mysterious elation, as already mentioned, seemed above all such matters as small secrecies or petty personal privacies. She had read a "private" letter without remorse. One feeling only caused in her a certain commonplace emotion: the feeling that, while she read the letter, her lodger was present, watching her. He seemed close behind her,. looking over her shoulder almost, observing her acts, her mood, her very thoughts — yet not objecting. He was aware, at any rate, of what she did....

It was under these circumstances that she bethought herself of her old tenant, the retired clergyman on the top floor, and sought his aid. The consolation of talking to another would be something, yet when the interview began all she could manage to say was that her mind was troubled and her heart not quite as it should be, and that she "didn't know what to do about it all." For the life of her she could not find more definite words. To mention Mr. Thorley she found suddenly utterly impossible.

"Prayer," the old man interrupted her half-way, "prayer, my dear lady. Prayer, I find," he repeated smoothly, "is always the best course in all one's troubles and perplexities. Leave it to God. He knows. And in His good time He will answer." He advised her to read the Bible and Longfellow. She added Florence Barclay to the list and followed his advice. The books, however, comforted her very little.

After some hesitation she then tried her other tenant. But the "banker" stopped her even sooner than the clergyman had done. MacPherson was very prompt:

"I can give you another ten shillings or maybe half *a* guinea," he said briskly. "Times are deeficult, I know. But I can't do more. If that's suffeecient I shall be delighted to stay on—" and, with a nod and a quick smile that settled the matter then and there, he was through the door and down the steps on the way to his office.

It was evident that Miss Speke must face her troubles alone, a fact, for the rest, life had already taught her. The loyal, courageous spirit in her accepted the situation. The alternate moods of happiness and depression, meanwhile, began to wear out. "If only Mr. Thorley would go! If only Mr. Thorley will not go!" For some weeks now she had successfully avoided him. He made no requests nor complaints. His habits were as regular as sunrise, his payments likewise. Not even the servant mentioned him. He became a shadow in the house.

Then, with the advent of summer-time, he came home, as it were, an hour earlier than usual. He invariably worked from 5.30 to 7.30, when he went out for his dinner. Tea he always had at a pupil's house. It was a light evening, caused by the advance of the clock, and Miss Speke, mending her underwear at the window, suddenly perceived his figure coming down the street.

She watched, fascinated. Of two instincts — to hide herself, or to wait there and catch his eye — she obeyed the latter. She had not seen him for several weeks, and a deep thrill of happiness ran through her. His walk was peculiar, she noticed at once; he did not walk in a straight line. His tall, thin outline flowed down the pavement in long, sweeping curves, yet quite steadily. He was not drunk. He came nearer; he was not twenty feet away; at ten feet she saw his face clearly, and received a shock. It was worn, and thin, and wasted, but a light of happiness, of something more than happiness indeed, shone in it. He reached the area railings. He looked up. His face seemed ablaze. Their eyes met, his with no start of recognition, hers with a steady stare of wonder. She ran into the passage, and before Mr. Thorley had time to use his latchkey she had opened the door for him herself. Little she knew, as she stood there trembling, that she stood also upon the threshold of an amazing adventure.

Face to face with him her presence of mind deserted her. She could only look up into that worn and wasted face, into those happy, severe, and brilliant eyes, where yet burned a strange expression of wistful yearning, of uncommon wonder, of something that seemed not of this world quite. Such an expression she had never seen before upon any human countenance. Its light dazzled her. There was uncommon fire in the eyes. It enthralled her. The same instant, as she stood there gazing at him without a single word, either of welcome or enquiry, it flashed across her that he needed something from her. He needed help, her help. It was a far-fetched notion, she was well aware, but it came to her irresistibly. The conviction was close to her, closer than her skin.

It was this knowledge, doubtless, that enabled her to hear without resentment the strange words he at once made use of.

“Ah, I thank you, Miss Speke, I thank you,” the thin lips parting in a smile, the shining eyes lit with an emotion of more than ordinary welcome. “You cannot know what a relief it is to me to see you. You are so sound, so wholesome, so ordinary, so — forgive me, I beg — so commonplace.”

He was gone past her and upstairs into his sitting-room. She heard the key turn softly. She was aware that she had not shut the front door. She did so, then went back, trembling, happy, frightened, into her own room. She had a curious, rushing feeling, both frightful and bewildering, that the room did not contain her.... She was still sitting there two hours later, when she heard Mr. Thorley’s step come down the stairs and leave the house. She was still sitting there when she heard him return, open the door with his key, and go up to his sitting-room. The interval might have been two minutes or two weeks, instead of two hours merely. And all this time she had the wondrous sensation that the room did not contain her. The walls and ceilings did not shut her in. She was out of the room.

Escape had come very close to her. She was out of the house... out of herself as well....

IV

She went early to bed, taking this time the Bible with her. Her strange sensations had passed, they had left her gradually. She had made herself a cup of tea and had eaten a soft-boiled egg and some bread-and-butter. She felt more normal again, but her nerves were unusually sensitive. It was a comfort to know there were two men in the house with her, two worthy men, a clergyman and a banker. The Bible, the banker, the clergyman, with Mrs. Barclay and Longfellow not far from her bed, were certainly a source of comfort to her.

The traffic died away, the rumbling of the distant motor-buses ceased, and, with the passing of the hours, the night became intensely still.

It was April. Her window was opened at the top and she could smell the cool, damp air of coming spring. Soothed by the books she began to feel drowsy. She glanced at the clock — it was just on two — then blew out the candle and prepared to sleep. Her thoughts turned automatically to Mr. Thorley, lying asleep on the floor above, his threads and paper strips and mysterious diagrams all about him — when, suddenly, a voice broke through the silence with a cry for help. It was a man's voice, and it sounded a long way off. But she recognised it instantly, and she sprang out of bed without a trace of fear. It was Mr. Thorley calling, and in the voice was anguish.

"He's in trouble! In danger! He needs help! I knew it!" ran rapidly through her mind, as she lit the candle with fingers that did not tremble. The clock showed three.. She had slept a full hour. She opened the door and peered into the passage, but saw *no one* there; the stairs, too, were empty. The call was not repeated.

*“*Mr, *Thorley!*” she cried aloud. *“Mr.* Thorley! Do you want anything?” And by the sound of her voice she realised how distant and muffled his own had been. “I’m coming!”

She stood there waiting, but no answer came. There was no sound. She realised the uncommon stillness of the night.

“Did you call me?” she tried again, but with less confidence. “Can I do anything for you?”

Again there was no answer; nothing stirred; the house was silent as the grave. The linoleum felt cold against her bare feet, and she stole back to get her slippers and a dressing-gown, while a hundred possibilities flashed through her mind at once. Oddly enough, she never once thought of burglars, *nor of* fire, *nor,* indeed, of any ordinary situation that required ordinary help. Why this was so she could not say. No ordinary fear, at any rate, assailed her in that moment, nor did she feel the smallest touch of nervousness about her own safety.

“Was it — I wonder — a dream?” she asked herself as she pulled the dressing-gown about her. “Did I dream that voice — ?” when the thrilling cry broke forth again, startling her so that she nearly dropped the candle.

“Help! Help! Help me!”

Very distinct, yet muffled as by distance, it was beyond all question the voice of Mr. Thorley. What she had taken for anguish in it she now recognised was terror. It sounded on the floor above, it was the closed door doubtless that caused the muffled effect of distance.

Miss Speke ran along the passage instantly, and with extraordinary speed for an elderly woman; she was half-way up the stairs in a moment, when, just as she reached the first little landing by the bathroom and turned to begin the second flight the voice came again: “Help! Help!” but this time with a difference that, truth to tell, did set her nerves unpleasantly aquiver. For there were two voices instead of one, and they were not upstairs at all. Both were below her in the passage she had just that moment left. Close they were behind her. One, moreover, was not the voice of Mr. Thorley. It was a boy’s clear soprano. Both called for help together, and both held a note of terror that made her heart shake.

Under these conditions it may be forgiven to Miss Speke that she lost her balance and reeled against the wall, clutching the banisters for a moment's support. Yet her courage did not fail her. She turned instantly and quickly went downstairs again — to find the passage empty of any living figure. There was no one visible. There was only silence, a motionless hat-rack, the door of her own room slightly ajar, and shadows.

"Mr. Thorley!" she called. "Mr. Thorley!" her voice not quite so loud and confident as before. It had a whisper in it. No answer came. She repeated the words, her tone with still less volume. Only faint echoes that seemed to linger unduly came in response. Peering into her own room she found it exactly as she had left it. The dining-room, facing it, was likewise empty. Yet a moment before she had plainly heard two voices calling for help within a few yards of where she stood. Two voices! What could it mean? She noticed now for the first time a peculiar freshness in the air, a sharpness, almost a perfume, as though all the windows were wide open and the air of coming spring was in the house.

Terror, though close, had not yet actually gripped her. That she had gone crazy occurred to her, but only to be dismissed. She was quite sane and self-possessed. The changing direction of the sounds lay beyond all explanation, but an explanation, she was positive, there must be. The odd freshness in the air was heartening, and seemed to brace her. No, terror had not yet really gripped her. Ideas of summoning the servant, the clergyman, the banker, these she equally dismissed. It was no ordinary help that was needed, not theirs at any rate. She went boldly upstairs again and knocked at Mr. Thorley's bedroom door. She knocked again and again, loud enough to waken him, if he had perchance called out in sleep, but not loud enough to disturb her other tenants. No answer came. There was no sound within. No light shone through the cracks. With his sitting-room the same conditions held.

It was the strangeness of the second voice that now stole over her with a deadly fear. She found herself cold and shivering. As she, at length, went slowly downstairs again the cries were suddenly audible once more. She heard both voices: "Help! Help! Help me!" Then silence. They were fainter this time. Far away, they sounded, withdrawn curiously into some remote distance, yet ever with the same anguish, the same terror in them as before. The direction, however, this time she could not tell at all. In a sense they seemed both close and far, both above her and below; they seemed — it was the only way she could describe the astounding thing — in any direction, or in all directions.

Miss Speke was really terrified at last. The strange, full horror of it gripped her, turning her heart suddenly to ice. The two voices, the terror in them, the extraordinary impression that they had withdrawn further into some astounding distance — this overcame her. She became appalled. Staggering into her room, she reached the bed and fell upon it in a senseless heap. She had fainted.

V

She slept late, owing probably to exhausted nerves. Though usually up and about by 7.30, it was after nine when the servant woke her. She sprawled half in the bed, half out; the candle, which luckily had extinguished itself in falling, lay upon the carpet. The events of the night came slowly back to her as she watched the servant's face. The girl was white and shaking.

"Are you ill, mum?" Lizzie asked anxiously in a whisper; then, without waiting for an answer, blurted out what she had really come in to say: "Mr. Thorley, mum! I can't get into his room. There's no answer." The girl was very frightened.

Mr. Thorley invariably had breakfast at 8 o'clock, and was out of the house punctually at 8.45.

"Was he ill in the night — perhaps — do you think?" Miss Speke said. It was the nearest she could get to asking if the girl had heard the voices. She had admirable control of herself by this time. She got up, still in her dressing-gown and slippers.

"Not that I know of, mum," was the reply.

"Come," said her mistress firmly. "We'll go in." And they went upstairs together.

The bedroom door, as the girl had said, was closed, but the sitting-room was open. Miss Speke led the way. The freshness of the night before lay still in the air, she noticed, though the windows were all closed tightly. There was an exhilarating sharpness, a delightful tang as of open space. She particularly mentions this. On the carpet, as usual, lay the strips of white paper, fastened with small pins, and the silk threads, also as usual, stretched across from lintel to cupboard, from window to bracket. Miss Speke brushed several of them from her face.

The door into the bedroom she opened, and went boldly in, followed more cautiously by the girl. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” said her mistress firmly. The bed, she saw, had not been slept in. Everything was neat and tidy. The long mirror stood close against the wall, showing its ugly back as usual, while about its four feet clustered the curved strips of paper Miss Speke had grown accustomed to.

“Pull the blinds up, Lizzie,” she said in a quiet voice.

The light now enabled her to see everything quite clearly. There were silken threads, she noticed distinctly, stretching from bed to window, and though both windows were closed there was this strange sweetness in the air as of a flowering spring garden. She sniffed it with a curious feeling of freedom, of release, though Lizzie, apparently, noticed nothing of all this.

“There’s his ‘at and mackintosh,” the girl whispered in a frightened voice, pointing to the hooks on the door. “And the umbrella in the corner. But I don’t see ‘is boots mum. They weren’t put out to be cleaned.

Miss Speke turned and looked at her, voice and manner under full command. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Mr Thorley ain’t gone out, mum,” was the reply in a tremulous tone.

At that very moment a faint, distant cry was audible in a man’s voice: “Help! Help!” Immediately after it a soprano, fainter still, called from what seemed even greater distance: “Help me!” The direction was not ascertainable. It seemed both in the room, yet far away outside in space above the roofs. A glance at the girl convinced Miss Speke that she had heard nothing.

“Mr. Thorley is not *here*,” whispered Miss Speke, one hand upon the brass bed-rail for support.

The room was undeniably empty.

“Leave everything exactly as it is,” ordered her mistress as they went out. Tears stood in her eyes, she lingered a moment on the threshold, but the sounds were not repeated. “Exactly as it is,” she repeated, closing the bedroom and then the sitting-room door behind her. She locked the latter, putting the key in her pocket. Two days later, as Mr. Thorley had not returned, she informed the police. But Mr. Thorley never returned. He had disappeared completely. He left no trace. He was never heard of again, though — once — he was seen.

Yet, this is not entirely accurate perhaps, for he was seen twice, in the sense that he was seen by two persons, and though he was not "heard of," he was certainly heard. Miss Speke heard his voice from time to time. She heard it in the daytime and at night; calling for help and always with the same words she had first heard: "Help! Help! Help me!" It sounded very far away, withdrawn into immense distance, the distance ever increasing. Occasionally she heard the boy's voice with it; they called together sometimes; she never heard the soprano voice alone. But the anguish and terror she had first noticed were no longer present. Alarm had gone out of them. It was more like an echo that she heard. Through all the hubbub, confusion and distressing annoyance of the police search and enquiry, the voice and voices came to her, though she never mentioned them to a single living soul, not even to her old tenants, the clergyman and the banker. They kept their rooms on — which was about all she could have asked of them. The best suite was never let again. It was kept locked and empty. The dust accumulated. The mirror remained untouched, its face against the wall.

The voices, meanwhile, grew more and more faint; the distance seemed to increase; soon the voice of the boy was no longer heard at all, only the cry of Mr. Thorley, her mysterious but perfect lodger, sang distantly from time to time, both in the sunshine and in the still darkness of the night hours. The direction whence it came, too, remained, as before, undeterminable. It came from anywhere and everywhere — from above, below, on all sides. It had become, too, a pleasant, even a happy sound; no dread belonged to it any more. The intervals grew longer then; days first, then weeks passed without a sound; and invariably, after these increasing intervals, the voice had become fainter, weaker, withdrawn into ever greater and greater distance. With the coming of the warm spring days it grew almost inaudible. Finally, with the great summer heats, it died away completely.

VI

The disappearance of Mr. Thorley, however, had caused no public disturbance on its own account, nor until it was bracketed with another disappearance, that of one of his pupils, Sir Mark Pikestaffe's son. The Pikestaffe's Case then became a daily mystery that filled the papers. Mr. Thorley was of no consequence, whereas Sir Mark was a figure in the public eye.

Mr. Thorley's life, as enquiry proved, held no mystery. He had left everything in order. He did not owe a penny. He owned, indeed, considerable property, both in land and securities, and teaching mathematics, especially to promising pupils, seemed to have been a hobby merely. A half-brother called eventually to take away his few possessions, but the books and instruments he had brought into the lodging-house were never traced. He was a scholar and a gentleman to the last, a man, too, it appeared, of immense attainments and uncommon ability, one of the greatest mathematical brains, if the modest obituaries were to be believed, the world has ever known. His name now passed into oblivion. He left no record of his researches or achievements. Out of some mysterious sense of loyalty and protection Miss Speke never Mentioned his peculiar personal habits. The strips of paper, as the silken threads, she had carefully removed and destroyed long before the police came to make their search of his rooms....

But the disappearance of young Gerald Pikestaffe raised a tremendous hubbub. It was some days before the two disappearances were connected, both having occurred on the same night, it was then proved. The boy, a lad of great talent, promising a brilliant future, and the favourite pupil of the older man, his tutor, had not even left the house. His room was empty — and that was all. He left no clue, no trace. Terrible hints and suggestions were, of course, spread far and wide, but there was not a scrap of evidence forthcoming to support them, Gerald Pikestaffe and Mr. Thorley, at the same moment of the same night, vanished from the face of the earth and were no more seen. The matter ended there. The one link between them appeared to have been an amazing, an exceptional gift for higher mathematics. The Pikestaffe Case merely added one more to the insoluble mysteries with which commonplace daily life is sprinkled.

It was some six weeks to a month after the event that Miss Speke received a letter from one of her former charges, the most generous one, now satisfactorily finished with the Bankruptcy Court. He had honourably discharged his obligations; he was doing well; he wrote and asked Miss Speke to put him up for a week or two. "And do *please* give me Mr. Thorley's room," he asked. "The case thrilled me, and I should like to sleep in that room. I always loved mysteries, you remember.... There's something *very* mysterious about this thing. Besides, I knew the P. boy a little — an astounding genius, if ever there was one."

Though it cost her much effort and still more hesitation, she consented finally. She prepared the rooms herself. There was a new servant, Lizzie having given notice the day after the disappearance, and the older woman who now waited upon the clergyman and the banker was not quite to be trusted with the delicate job. Miss Speke, entering the empty rooms on tiptoe, a strange trepidation in her heart, but that same heart firm with courage, drew up the blinds, swept the floors, dusted the furniture, and made the bed. All she did with her own hands. Only the full-length mirror she did not touch. What terror still was in her clung to that handsome piece. It was haunted by memories. For her it was still both wonderful and somehow awful. The ghost of her strange experience hid invisibly in its polished, if now unseen, depths. She dared not handle it, far less move it from the resting-place where it rested in peace. *His* hands had placed it there. To her it was sacred.

It had been given to her by Colonel Lyle, who would now occupy the room, stand on the wondrous carpet, move through the air where once the mysterious silks had floated, sleep in the very bed itself. All this he could do, but the mirror he must not touch.

"I'll explain to him a little. I'll beg him not to move it. He's very understanding," she said to herself, as she went out to buy some flowers for the sitting-room. Colonel Lyle was expected that very afternoon. Lilac, she remembered, was what he always liked. It took her longer than she expected to find really fresh bunches, of the colour that he preferred, and when she got back it was time to be thinking about his tea. The sun's rays fell slanting down the dingy street, touching it with happy gold. This, with thoughts of the tea-kettle and what vase would suit the flowers best, filled her mind as she passed along the linoleum in the narrow hall — then noticed suddenly a new hat and coat hanging on the usually empty pegs. Colonel Lyle had arrived before his time.

“He’s already come,” she said to herself with a little gasp. A heavy dread settled instantly on her spirit. She stood a moment motionless in the passage, the lilac blossoms in her hand. She was listening.

“The gentleman’s come, mum,” she heard the servant say, and at the same moment saw her at the top of the kitchen stairs in the hall. “He went up to his room, mum.”

Miss Speke held out the flowers. With an effort to make her voice sound ordinary she gave an order about them. “Put them in water, Mary, please. The double vase will do.” She watched the woman take them slowly, oh, so slowly, from her. But her mind was elsewhere. It was still listening. And after the woman had gone down to the kitchen again slowly, oh, so slowly, she stood motionless for some minutes, listening, still intently listening. But no sound broke the quiet of the afternoon. She heard only the blundering noises made by the woman in the kitchen below. On the floor above was — silence.

Miss Speke then turned and went upstairs.

Now, Miss Speke admits frankly that she was “in a state,” meaning thereby, doubtless, that her nerves were tightly strung. Her heart was thumping, her ears and eyes strained to their utmost capacity; her hands, she remembers, felt a little cold, and her legs moved uncertainly. She denies, however, that her “state,” though it may be described as nervous, could have betrayed her into either invention or delusion. What she saw, she saw; and nothing can shake her conviction. Colonel Lyle, besides, is there to support her in the main outline, and Colonel Lyle, when first he had entered the room, was certainly not “in a state,” whatever excuses he may have offered later to comfort her. Moreover, to counteract her trepidation, she says that, as she pushed the door wide open — it was already ajar — the original mood of elation met her in the face with its lift of wonder and release. This modified her dread. She declares that joy rushed upon her, and that her “nerves” were on the instant entirely forgotten.

“What I saw, I saw,” remains her emphatic and unshakable verdict. “I saw — everything.”

The first thing she saw admitted certainly of no doubt. Colonel Lyle lay huddled up against the further wall, half upon the carpet and half-leaning on the wainscoting. He was unconscious. One arm was stretched towards the mirror, the hand still clutching one of its mahogany feet. And the mirror had been moved. It turned now slightly more towards the room.

The picture, indeed, told its own story, a story Colonel Lyle himself repeated afterwards when he had recovered. He was surprised to find the mirror — his mirror — with its face to the wall; he went forward to put it in its proper position; in doing this he looked into it; he saw something, and — the next thing he knew — Miss Speke was bringing him round.

She explains, further, that her overmastering curiosity to look into the mirror, as Colonel Lyle had evidently looked himself, prevented her from immediately rendering first-aid to that gentleman, as she unquestionably should have done. Instead, she crossed the room, stepped over his huddled form, turned the mirror a little further round towards her, and looked straight into it.

The eye, apparently, takes in a great deal more than the mind is consciously aware of having "seen" at the moment. Miss Speke saw everything, she claims. But details certainly came back to her later, details she had not been aware of at the time. At the moment, however, her impressions, though extremely vivid, were limited to certain outstanding items. These items were — that her own reflection was not visible, no picture of herself being there; that Mr. Thorley and a boy — she recognised the Pikestaffe lad from the newspaper photographs she had seen — were plainly there, and that books and instruments in great quantity filled all the nearer space, blocking up the foreground. Beyond, behind, stretching in all directions, she affirms, was empty space that produced upon her the effect of the infinite heavens as seen in a clear night sky. This space was prodigious, yet in some way not alarming. It did not terrify; rather it comforted, and, in a sense, uplifted. A diffused soft light pervaded the huge panorama. There were no shadows, there were no high lights.

Curiously enough, however, the absence of any reproduction of herself did not at first strike her as at all out of the way; she noticed the fact, no more than that; it was, perhaps, naturally, the deep shock of seeing Mr. Thorley and the boy that held her absolutely spell-bound, arresting her faculties as though they had been frozen.

Mr. Thorley was moving to and fro, his body bent, his hand thrown forward. He looked as natural as in life. He moved steadily, as with a purpose, now nearer, now further, but his figure always bent as though he were intent upon something in his hands. The boy moved, too, but with a more gentle, less vigorous, motion that suggested floating. He followed the larger figure, keeping close, his face raised from time to time as though his companion spoke to him. The expression that he wore was quiet, peaceful, happy and intent. He was absorbed in what he was doing at the moment. Then, suddenly, Mr. Thorley straightened himself up. He turned. Miss Speke saw his face for the first time. He looked into her eyes. The face blazed with light. The gaze was straight, and full, and clear. It betrayed recognition. Mr. Thorley smiled at her.

In a very few seconds she was aware of all this, of its main outlines, at any rate. She saw the moving, living figures in the midst of this stupendous and amazing space. The overwhelming surprise it caused her prevented, apparently, the lesser emotion of personal alarm; fear she certainly did not feel at first. It was when Mr. Thorley looked at her with his brilliant eyes and blazing smile that her heart gave its violent jump, missed a beat or two, then began hammering against her ribs like released machinery that has gone beyond control. She was aware of the happy glory in the face, a face that was thin to emaciation, almost transparent, yet wearing an expression that was no longer earthly. Then, as he smiled, he came towards her; he beckoned; he stretched both hands out, while the boy looked up and watched.

Mr. Thorley's advance, however, had two distracting peculiarities — that as he drew nearer he moved not in a straight line, but in a curve. As a skater performing "edges," though on both feet instead of on one, he swept gracefully and with incredible speed in her direction. The other peculiarity was that with each step nearer his figure grew smaller. It lessened in height. He seemed, indeed, to be moving in two directions at once. He became diminutive.

The sight ought by rights to have paralysed her, yet it produced again, instead of terror, an effect of exhilaration she could not possibly account for. There came once again that fine elation to her mind. Not only did all desire to resist die away almost before it was born, but more, she felt its opposite — an overpowering wish to join him. The tiny hands were still stretched out to greet her, to draw her in, to welcome her; the smile upon the diminutive face, as it came nearer and nearer, was enchanting. She heard his voice then:

"Come, come to us! Here reality is nearer, and there is liberty...!"

The voice was very close and loud as in life, but it was not in front. It was behind her. Against her very ear it sounded in the air behind her back. She moved one foot forward; she raised her arms. She felt herself being sucked in — into that glorious space. There was an indescribable change in her whole being.

The cumulative effect of so many amazing happenings, all of them contrary to nature, should have been destructive to her reason. Their combined shock should have dislocated her system somewhere and have laid her low. But with every individual, it seems, the breaking-point is different. Her system, indeed, was dislocated, and a moment later and she was certainly laid low, yet it was not the effect of the figure, the voice, the gliding approach of Mr. Thorley that produced this. It was the flaw of little human egoism that brought her down. For it was in this instant that she first *realised* the absence of her own reflection in the mirror. The fact, though noticed before, had not entered her consciousness as such. It now definitely did so. The arms she lifted in greeting had no reflected counterpart. Her figure, she realised with a shock of terror, was not there. She dropped, then, like a stricken animal, one outstretched hand clutching the frame of the mirror as she did so.

"Gracious God!" she heard herself scream as she collapsed. She heard, too, the crash of the falling mirror which she overturned and brought down with her.

Whether the noise brought Colonel Lyle round, or whether it was the combined weight of Miss Speke and the handsome piece upon his legs that roused him, is of no consequence. He stirred, opened his eyes, disentangled himself and proceeded, not without astonishment, to render first-aid to the unconscious lady.

The explanations that followed are, equally, of little consequence. His own attack, he considered, was chiefly due to fatigue, to violent indigestion, and to the after-effects of his protracted bankruptcy proceedings. Thus, at any rate, he assured Miss Speke. He added, however, that he had received rather a shock from the handsome piece, for, surprised at finding it turned to the wall, he had replaced it and looked into it, but had not seen himself reflected. This had amazed him a good deal, yet what amazed him still more was that he had seen something moving in the depths of the glass. “I saw a face,” he said, “and it was a face I knew. It was Gerald Pikestaffe. Behind him was another figure, the figure of a man, whose face I could not see.” A mist rose before his eyes, his head swam a bit, and he evidently swayed for some unaccountable reason. It was a blow received in falling that stunned him momentarily.

He stood over her, while he fanned her face; her swoon was of brief duration; she recovered quickly; she listened to his story with a quiet mind. The after-effect of too great wonder leaves no room for pettier emotions, and traces of the exhilaration she had experienced were still about her heart and soul.

“Is it smashed?” was the first thing she asked, to which Colonel Lyle made no answer at first, merely pointing to the carpet where the frame of the long mirror lay in broken fragments.

“There was no glass, you see,” he said presently. He, too, was quiet, his manner very earnest; his voice, though subdued as by a hint of awe, betrayed the glow of some intense inner excitement that lit fire in his eyes as well. “He had cut it out long ago, of course. He used the empty framework merely.”

“Eh?” said Miss Speke, looking down incredulously, but finding no sign of splinters on the floor.

Her companion smiled. “We shall find it about somewhere if we look,” he said calmly, which, indeed, proved later true — lying flat beneath the carpet under the bed. “His measurements and calculations led — probably by chance — towards the mirror” — he seemed speaking to himself more than to his bewildered listener—” perhaps by chance, perhaps by knowledge,” he continued, “up to the mirror — and then *through* it.” He looked down at Miss Speke and laughed a little. “So, like Alice, he went through it, too, taking his books and instruments, the boy as well, all with him. The boy, that is, bad the knowledge, too."

"I only know one thing," said Miss Speke, unable to follow him or find meaning in his words, "I shall never let these rooms again. I shall lock them up."

Her companion collected the broken pieces and made a little heap of them.

"And I shall pray for him," added Miss Speke, as he led her presently downstairs to her own quarters. "I shall never cease to pray for him as long as I live."

"He hardly needs that," murmured Colonel Lyle, but to himself. "The first terror has long since left him. He's found the new direction — and moved along it."

Alexander Alexander

HIS CHRISTIAN NAME and surname were the same, and the fact that he insisted upon their proper use, respectively, made things often most unpleasant. His sombre dignity forbade familiarity. If, greatly daring, I said "Hullo, Alexander!" using his Christian name, he would assume a stern and frightening air:

"*Alexander!* if you please," he would say icily. "Use my right name."

Herein lay, perhaps, the heart of that dark secret which deceived me for so many years, as also the essence of that horror his double masquerade concealed: Whereas, between Alexander and *Alexander* none knew which was which, he — alone of all the world — *he* knew!

To me, as a little girl, there was something portentous about him always. More than a common man, he was a Personage, a Figure. With the passage of the years my conception of him grew, for his bulk and stature grew at the same time, until, more than man, or personage, or figure, he became almost that emanation of legendary life — a Being. Although the original sharp outline remained, he spread himself out somehow over an immense, dim background, against which that first outline yet held itself fixed in vivid silhouette. I conceive him as both remote and very close, as shadow and substance, an unreality yet dreadfully composed of solid flesh and blood.

This confusion in my own mind added enormously to the mystery of his strange existence; but it was the mistake in the use of his name that remained chiefly serious, a crime of untold import, since it was I myself who first — christened him. To call him by a wrong name, therefore, was an insult to his actuality, a careless and unpardonable sacrilege that trifled with the essential nature of his personality.

I lived with an uncle, who was also my guardian, and this mystifying double role contributed, no doubt, an element to the birth of Alexander Alexander. Some childhood's divination dramatised itself perhaps. If so, this earliest creative drama had a prophetic, even a clairvoyant, quality that enabled him to endure until he had fully justified his dark existence. Both

Alexander said Alexander persisted through my girlhood. Only at the threshold of womanhood, when I came of age at 21, did the dreadful pair pass hand in hand to their final distressing dissolution.

He — *Alexander* — often came to see my uncle, who, I divined, was a good deal afraid of him — a fact that impressed me painfully. He was tall, dark, angular, and so thin that he always looked cold, even in the sunshine; as though, having left off his flesh, as others leave off their thick underwear, he was for ever shivering in his bones. Of those mummied Pharaohs he reminded me. He had the great square jaw, deep eyes, heavy cheek bones, and copious hair those gloomy figures of prodigious personality bear tirelessly with them down the ages. He walked on his toes a little, adding thus to the appearance of his height. He took, too, an immense and swinging stride, with an easy gliding motion that seemed to flow. His extraordinary swiftness of movement made me think of running water.

Oh, Alexander — or do I mean *Alexander*? — how you impressed me when I was about six years old! Which "Alexander"? I don't quite know, to tell the truth. Years passed before I got even an inkling.

The names still flow, like parallel rivers, down and through my consciousness, to lose themselves in the depths of some mysterious dream-ocean where, at length and at last, they become merged, I believe, in one. There were certainly two of them — once. There was Alexander, and there was *Alexander.* I can swear to it.

It was his — *Alexander's* copious hair that impressed me vividly at the age of six. It was smoothed down with shiny grease whose faint, but not unpleasant, aroma came into a room before its wearer, and hung about in the air long after he had left. Hair, perfume, grease, all fascinated me.

"That's *pomade,*" explained my nurse, answering a question and using a strange new word. Then, fearful of some wrong use I might make of the information, she added: "and no business of yours, remember, either." The queer word seized me; it remained hanging about my mind... pomade, pomade. How vividly, with what lasting depth and sharpness these early impressions score the mind of a child, so tenderly receptive. No wonder the psychologists dive after them to explain the irregularities of nerve and memory that emerge in later life. The name Alexander, to begin with, carried me away. It bore me along with it. There was movement in it. Jones, Green, Brown, one syllable names, are stationary and fixed; but "Alexander" had a glide. It was a watery movement; I always connected it with water. It flowed round and through and under me. It bore me easily away with it. I saw a rapid stream, whose undulating surface had no actual waves, owing to its speed, but swept along in rhythmic rise and fall, liked a brimmed rivulet across a sloping meadow. My feet gave under me, and I was off. "Alexander, *Alexander,* oh, why cannot you meander?" I used to murmur to myself, using another strange new word I had discovered, a suitable word since it was the name of a river that also flowed. I saw copious hair, pomade, a lean dark, careering figure on its toes, swinging rapidly down my mind with a pulse of hurrying water.

He was a solicitor, I imagined, and the name only half understood, somehow to me suggested prison; and my uncle, who was also my legal guardian, I fancied had done something wrong. It was rather confusing having an uncle who was guardian too. It puzzled me. My Uncle was re served, secretive — that is, as "guardian," he was reserved, secretive; for as "uncle" he was affectionate, playful, kind, and very dear to me. I had this mingled fear and love.

The name had a strange power. I was, perhaps, nine years old when the goose frightened me in the yard behind the stables, and some undigested fairy-tale made me think its cackling beak was going to bite me into pieces. Pulling down my little skirts frantically to protect my bare legs, I found the bad rhyme instantly, though I may have shaped it actually a little later:

Alexander, *Alexander,*

Oh, come down into the yard!

For I'm frightened at the gander —

Oh, come quick with your pomade!

And he came. That was what lived with me for years, increasing enormously his influence. He came at once. The glass door of the conservatory opened, and out he poured with amazing swiftness, on his toes, turning his thin, dark face and head towards me. His great stride brought him up to me in a moment. He was, I believe, really looking for my uncle, who was in the stables just then, examining the horses. But it was in answer to my cry that he was beside me in a second. I caught the whiff of the pomade.

“Oh, Alexander — !” I cried, relieved, but also alarmed.

“*Alexander*,” he corrected me sternly, his deep eyes staring, while the gander retreated and left me safe at once. Yet, when I turned round again from watching the retreating bird, he — Alexander — had disappeared, and my uncle — or was it my guardian? — was coming towards me from the stables with a smile. The incident, at any rate, left a deep impression on me. The use — the correct use — of the great name evidently carried away with its own movement.

I saw him only occasionally as I grew older: during holidays, when home from school, and later, from a year in Paris to improve my French and acquire manners and deportment. He was aged in the eyes, and skin, and gait. The stream of his name no longer brimmed its banks as formerly. But the spell remained. And the pomaded hair kept young as ever. My uncle, I now realised somehow, welcomed his visits, while yet dreading them. I thought of the two at the time, I remember, as driver and driven in some mysterious enterprise of financial kind. They were. But Alexander was the driven, and *Alexander* held the whip. And once, lying half asleep in bed, a horrible suspicion came to me that my uncle — or was it my guardian? — knew. Knew what? Why “horrible”? I could not say, I felt it, that’s all.

A week after my return from Paris — I was to be of age next clay — I was standing in the passage when he called. Thomas was leading the way. It was just outside the study door.

“Mr. Alexander to see you, sir,” I heard him announced.

The visitor glowered with vexation. “*Mr. Alexander,*” he rebuked the servant in a low tone, as he swung through the door on his toes into the study, where my uncle or my guardian, evidently awaited him. And as I heard the name, in the way *he* uttered it, a sudden wave of cold anxiety, more of acute distress, broke over me. As that lean, dark, pomaded head flowed round the open door with its extraordinary swiftness, and vanished, I felt afraid. The footman went past me with an expressionless face, but it seemed to me that his face was ghastly white. He disappeared in the empty hall beyond; I heard the green baize door into the nether regions swing to behind him with its customary gulp. But the draught of its closing came to me across all that distance; so that I felt it on my cheeks. And its touch was icy. I stood there shivering, unable at first to move or think. A vague dread and wonder held me. What were Alexander and *Alexander* saying to my uncle and my guardian?

What steps to take I knew not. For I was aware that I ought to take steps at once. My hesitation was caused by an inexplicable fear. It was the fear *of* my guardian, but *for* my uncle. Is that clear? While dreading my guardian, I felt, I knew, that I must help my uncle. Two courses seemed open to me: to enter the room, or to follow the footman and ask him an awful question.

I chose the latter. In a moment I was through the green baize door that led into the servant's quarters; but, as I ran, a new suspicion fastened on me. It fastened on my spine where the shivering was. I was amazed and horror-stricken. For the suspicion was so complete that it must actually have lain in me a long, long time already.

“Thomas,” I said, breathlessly; “the gentleman you showed in just now — who was it?”

“I beg pardon, Miss,” he said, staring blankly, I asked the question a second time, “Showed in, Miss,” he repeated stupidly.

“The tall, dark gentleman,” I insisted, in a failing voice, “you just showed in to—” I could not, for the life of me, say “my uncle's”— “into Mr. Burton's study, Mr. — Mr.” I stammered and stuck fast.

The man paused a moment, with a puzzled air, He stared at me. “I showed no gentlemen in, Miss,” he said, a trifle offended, his voice firm and decided. “Mr. Burton rang for—” it was his turn to hesitate—” for something to drink, Miss. And I just took it in to him.”

I knew then. I knew it all at once, complete. I tore back. But my thought raced faster than my legs. An elaborate fabric built most carefully, and standing firm for years, collapsed into ghastly ruins. The footman's face, I remembered, was always white. My nurse, now dead, had always fallen in with my fancies. My uncle was tall and thin and dark, and had always worn pomaded hair. But it was only when I reached the study door that the final film cleared off, letting in the appalling light. For I suddenly remembered another thing as well: he acknowledged to a buried name. Hidden away among several others, he owned a name he never used. His full name, of course, was Frank Henry *Alexander* Burton.

I stood transfixed outside the door.

But precious minutes were passing. “Oh, Alexander, *Alexander,*” rushed down my mind. The childhood’s rhyme was about to follow, yard, gander, pomade and all, when a sound inside the room sent the ice again down my spine. It made my will tighten at the same time. I might be too late even now. Without knocking, I rushed into the room. The desk was strewn with documents and papers. A decanter of spirits stood beside them, with a half-emptied glass. The French windows were open on the lawn. The summer air came in. There was a faint aroma of pomade. But I was too late. The room was empty. “Oh, Alexander!” I gasped, petrified by the emptiness, and was about to add “*Alexander*” when a horrid weakness came over me and a blackness rose before my face. My legs collapsed. I fell into a dead faint on the floor....

It was “by water” of course, and the verdict was death by drowning while of unsound mind. I saw the body next day. It was my uncle’s, not my guardian’s body. The hair, for the first time, I saw tangled.

Oh, *Alexander* Alexander! Merged at last in one! You, *Alexander,* left me a pauper. But for you, Alexander, I have still kind memories of a weak, affectionate, and sorely tempted uncle....

Lost!

THERE WAS SOMETHING unusual in the village street that morning as I made my way to the chalet post-office to send a telegram, but the mind was only vaguely aware of it. A familiar detail seemed lacking; a difference had crept in. One noticed it — no more than that. Sunshine flooded the valley, the forests hung in purple shadow to the west, far overhead the snow shone dazzling against the turquoise blue, and the air was filled with the roar of falling water. Girls in yellow jumpers were going down to the tennis courts, tourists starting on their expeditions, mules clattering on the cobbles, and the priest went by, his face, as always, grave. All seemed as usual: the difference did not disclose itself. My mind, perhaps, was too preoccupied composing a complicated telegram in the fewest possible words to think about it. It was on my way back that I suddenly realised what was wrong: the familiar groups of guides, waiting for employment, were omitted from the picture. Something had happened.

A high Alpine climbing village is a sensitive organism, whose collective life responds swiftly to the least change — a new arrival, a departure, a summit conquered, but, above all, an accident. The news runs through it like a wind. On the way back to my friend's chalet the priest passed me again. "Yes, a man is lost," he said, his face graver than before. "He's been out all night, the search-parties have left."

He gave a few details, then hurried on, but in the twinkling of an eye the note of that brilliant, even gorgeous, morning had changed completely. The shadow of disaster dimmed the sunshine, the pleasant roar of falling water become ominous, the great peaks wore a forbidding air. Somewhere among their awful loneliness a man was lost. The thing all dread had happened. It was strange, at this early hour, how the undercurrent of news flashed so swiftly along the sunny street, touching some and missing others. To those who merely played tennis, danced, and went for walks, it meant less; to those who climbed and knew the wild places where the victim might be lying, it was poignant. One resented these careless, happy tourists, picking flowers, chasing butterflies, playing tennis in light-hearted safety. Through the mind flashed vivid pictures of the cold, dreadful heights, of icy slopes, of dizzy ledges, of perilous corners above an abyss of emptiness. One turned, rather, to the peasants who stood about in groups, some with telescopes, all with grave faces and sympathetic questions. A man was lost. He had been out alone all night. There had been a cold wind but a clear sky. He was still clinging, perhaps, to some ledge, unable to get up or down, shouting to the emptiness... perhaps lying injured on some desolate pitch of rock... perhaps motionless.

My host, an old resident of the village, experienced climber as well, had all the available facts at his fingertips when I got back. He was ready to start too. We chose a route the other parties had not taken, and on the way up he gave me details of what was known. We took with us Zeiss glasses, food, brandy, extra ropes. It was a gloomy, mournful expedition. We went fast, much too fast for climbers; the feeling of hurry made it impossible to take it easy.

An odd thing was that, although the man had broken all the rules, no one had used a word of blame. He was not a climber, but one of those vigorous Englishmen of middle age who enjoy “a scramble.” He wore nailed boots and carried an iron-shod alpenstock. He was married, his wife and children at Como, where he was to join them in a few days. He was a botanist. He took with him a knapsack with food and a thermos of tea. He had left his hotel at 2 o’clock on the previous afternoon, but he had *not* told anyone exactly where he was going. His direction was only vaguely known. He had not returned for dinner. He had been out twenty hours. Search parties had started at midnight; others had left at dawn. Three shots — echo carries the sound for miles — was to be the signal that he had been found.

We used the “botany” as our guide — taking a precipitous trail to a region of desolate rocks where rare saxifrages grew. Every inch of the ground was known to both of us. We climbed in silence, the pace leaving no breath for words, but the glasses were used constantly, and occasionally there was a pause to discuss direction. Such a man, it was certain, would not choose obviously dangerous places, although his enthusiasm for some rare plant, must remain an incalculable factor always. The probability seemed that his search had led him to some point whence descent became suddenly impossible. A common occurrence this, for to get up is frequently easier than to get down again. He had clung on through the darkness, beneath the stars, till his strength failed and exhaustion loosened his grip. Or, perhaps, on some steep pitch where ordinary care meant safety, he had slipped. There were ugly drops to the south in plenty. Anyhow, it was not the obviously dangerous places we need examine. The few peasants we met — all knew of the possible disaster — gave little help; some had seen a solitary figure, others had not; descriptions varied; there was nothing reliable to guide us. We hurried as the day wore on. Up by the torrent, through deep forest, past waterfalls, across bright green upper pastures, where a million flowers shone, scanning every couloir, examining every ledge where a man might venture, and especially the slope of shale at its foot. It was a familiar trail to both of us. The music of the cowbells filled the air. The gentians blazed. The snowfields sparkled far overhead, and the gay tourist village, except as the place where he had started 24 hours ago now, was quite forgotten. It was towards afternoon that I first noticed we began to speak of *it* instead of *he.* We were well up above the world by now, in the heart of the great heights, not far from the snow, the huge mountains coming more and more into their own. What we called the "saxifrage rocks" lay an hour below us. The sky wore a darker blue; the wind, creeping down from the glacier, had a nip in it; the flowers changed; and the immense desolation was emptied of any moving figures but our own. An occasional marmot whistled before diving into its hole, a bird flitted to another boulder, a white butterfly danced past, a stray fly buzzed and vanished. But that was all. Already the Oberland giants were peering at us from behind the ridges we had topped. The silence of the big mountains, their grandeur, their loneliness, their awe stole over us. The change one had noticed in the sunny village street below became increasingly manifest.

It was this change, though we did not speak of it at the time, that impressed us both, proving how the mood, the attitude of mind, determine selection. The familiar beauty retreated, letting terror in. The scenes we knew so well, had so often enjoyed with happy wonder, now wore another guise. The majesty turned awful, the splendour cruel, the indifference to human life stood out. This new significance in "scenery" we had admired countless times, at dawn, in the moonlight, in the fierce midday sunshine, became ever more apparent. The whole meaning of the high mountains altered, fight and shade falling in unaccustomed places. Imaginatively one became aware of the conspiracy that exists among these great inanimate peaks and precipices, first to entice, then to enforce the penalty for the least mistake.

Every detail of crag and summit, every shoulder, *col,* and dangerous slope became invested with a dim sense of personality that clothed another type of fife. And this fife, as the shadows lengthened and darkness grew upon the eastern side, became for us, not merely indifferent, but definitely hostile. A hint of the monstrous crept into the lonely grandeur. These stupendous Powers, having claimed their victim, now tried to hide him. Other Consciousnesses now watched our puny efforts at discovery, peering down into our minds that still hoped to save. The sense of being watched was present. The weight of wonder, of admiration, of sympathetic tenderness certainly, was shifted from the mountains to the man. Awe was too strong for beauty any more. The eye searched, not for the marvel of form and colour upon these terrible heights, not for the mystery of their inaccessible and dreadful loneliness, but strained ever for a small, significant outline, lying broken among huge, misshapen boulders, the outline of a man, possibly of little importance beyond an immediate family circle, playing no big role in fife that mattered, but — a human being, a member of the Race, a soul who, adventuring carelessly against too heavy odds, had lost.

Never again, for us, could these peaks and precipices, these flowers, snowfields, streams, seem quite the same. Into their collective being we called "scenery" a new ingredient had entered permanently so that their wonder must ever hereafter hold too much of respect for our former loving admiration. We should pass the slope of shale in silence, glance upwards at the treacherous ledge with a sigh, a shudder. Even on the brightest day, spring flowers carpeting our approach, this must be so. Nor would this emotion bear much relation to the wooden cross the peasants erect with reverence. The spot would be haunted by the shadow of an adventure against awful odds, but an adventure whose precise details none knew, because those lips were silent which alone could tell.

Half on the shale, half on a patch of turf where gentians actually brushed one cheek, we found him — motionless. Just before the darkness came the glasses picked out the significant outline. The unnatural shape betrayed it among the grim boulders. My friend merely pointed in silence, his face a little paler beneath the sunburn, as he held out the binoculars. The drop was perhaps one hundred feet, but death must have been instantaneous, for the neck was broken. The stick lay fifty yards away. In one hand a little saxifrage was still clutched tightly.

The Olive

HE LAUGHED INVOLUNTARILY as the olive rolled toward his chair across the shiny parquet floor of the hotel dining-room.

His table in the cavernous salle à manager was apart: he sat alone, a solitary guest; the table from which the olive fell and rolled toward him was some distance away. The angle, however, made him an unlikely objective. Yet the lob-sided, juicy thing, after hesitating once or twice en route as it plopped along, came to rest finally against his feet.

It settled with an inviting, almost an aggressive, air. And he stooped and picked it up, putting it rather self-consciously, because of the girl from whose table it had come, on the white tablecloth beside his plate.

Then, looking up, he caught her eye, and saw that she, too, was laughing, though not a bit self-consciously. As she helped herself to the hors-d'oeuvre a false move had sent it flying. She watched him pick the olive up and set it beside his plate. Her eyes then suddenly looked away again – at her mother – questioningly.

The incident was closed. But the little oblong, succulent olive lay beside his plate, so that his fingers played with it. He fingered it automatically from time to time until his lonely meal was finished.

When no one was looking he slipped it into his pocket, as though, having taken the trouble to pick it up, this was the very least he could do with it. Heaven alone knows why, but he then took it upstairs with him, setting it on the marble mantelpiece among his field-glasses, tobacco tins, ink-bottles, pipes, and candlestick. At any rate, he kept it – the moist, shiny, lob-sided, juicy little oblong olive. The hotel lounge wearied him; he came to his room after dinner to smoke at his ease, his coat off and his feet on a chair; to read another chapter of Freud, to write a letter or two he didn't in the least want to write, and then to go to bed at ten o'clock. But this evening the olive kept rolling between him and the thing he read; it rolled between the paragraphs, between the lines; the olive was more vital than the interest of these eternal 'complexes' and 'suppressed desires'.

The truth was that he kept seeing the eyes of the laughing girl beyond the bouncing olive. She had smiled at him in such a natural, spontaneous, friendly way before her mother's glance had checked her – a smile, he felt, that might lead to acquaintance on the morrow.

He wondered! A thrill of possible adventure ran through him.

She was a merry-looking sort of girl, with a happy, halfroguish face that seemed on the look-out for somebody to play with. Her mother, like most of the people in the big hotel, was an invalid; the girl, a dutiful and patient daughter. They had arrived that very day, apparently.

A laugh is a revealing thing, he thought as he fell asleep to dream of a lob-sided olive rolling consciously toward him, and of a girl's eyes that watched its awkward movements, then looked up into his own and laughed. In his dream the olive had been deliberately and cleverly dispatched upon its uncertain journey. It was a message.

He did not know, of course, that the mother, chiding her daughter's awkwardness, had muttered:

'There you are again, child! True to your name, you never see an olive without doing something queer and odd with it!'

A youngish man, whose knowledge of chemistry, including invisible inks and suchlike mysteries, had proved so valuable to the Censor's Department that for five years he had overworked without a holiday, the Italian Riviera had attracted him, and he had come out for a two months' rest. It was his first visit. Sun, mimosa, blue seas and brilliant skies had tempted him; exchange made a pound worth forty, fifty, sixty, and seventy shillings. He found the place lovely, but somewhat untenanted.

He stayed on, however, caught by the sunshine and the good exchange, also without the physical energy to discover a better, livelier place. He went for walks among the olive-groves; he sat beside the sea and palms; he visited shops and bought things he did not want because the exchange made them seem cheap; he paid immense 'extras' in his weekly bill, then chuckled as he reduced them to shillings and found that a few pence covered them; he lay with a book for hours among the olive- groves.

The olive-groves! His daily life could not escape the olive- groves; to olive-groves, sooner or later, his walks, his expeditions, his meanderings by the sea, his shopping – all led him to these ubiquitous olive-groves.

If he bought a picture postcard to send home, there was sure to be an olive-grove in one corner of it. The whole place was smothered with olive-groves, the people owed their incomes and existence to these irrepressible trees. The villages among the hills swam roof-deep in them. They swarmed even in the hotel gardens.

The guide-books praised them as persistently as the residents brought them, sooner or later, into every conversation. They grew lyrical over them:

‘And how do you like our olive-trees? Ah, you think them pretty. At first, most people are disappointed. They grow on one.’

‘They do,’ he agreed.

‘I’m glad you appreciate them. I find them the embodiment of grace. And when the wind lifts the underleaves across a whole mountain slope – why, it’s wonderful, isn’t it? One realises the meaning of “olive-green.”‘

‘One does.’ He sighed. ‘But, all the same, I should like to get one to eat – an olive, I mean.’

‘Ah,’ to eat, yes. That’s not so easy. You see, the crop is...’

‘Exactly,’ he interrupted impatiently, weary of the habitual and evasive explanations. ‘But I should like to taste the fruit. I should like to enjoy one.’

For, after a stay of six weeks, he had never once seen an olive on the table, in the shops, nor even on the street barrows at the market-place. He had never tasted one. No one sold olives, though olive-trees were a drug in the place; no one bought them, no one asked for them; it seemed that no one wanted them. The trees, when he looked closely, were thick with a dark little berry that seemed more like a sour sloe than the succulent, delicious, spicy fruit associated with its name.

Men climbed the trunks, everywhere shaking the laden branches and hitting them with long bamboo poles to knock the fruit off, while women and children, squatting on their haunches, spent laborious hours filling baskets underneath, then loading mules and donkeys with their daily ‘catch’. But an olive to eat was unobtainable. He had never cared for olives, but now he craved with all his soul to feel his teeth in one.

‘Ach! But it is the Spanish olive that you eat,’ explained the head waiter, a German ‘from Basel’. ‘These are for oil only.’ After which he disliked the olive more than ever – until that night when he saw the first eatable specimen rolling across the shiny parquet floor, propelled toward him by the careless hand of a pretty girl, who then looked up into his eyes and smiled.

He was convinced that Eve, similarly, had rolled the apple. toward Adam across the emerald sward of the first garden in the world. The dull, accumulated resentment he had come to feel, subconsciously perhaps, against an elusive fruit was changed in the twinkling of an eye into a source of joy, a symbol of romance.

* * * * * * *

He slept usually like the dead. It must have been something very real that made him open his eyes and sit up in bed alertly. There was a noise against his door. He listened. The room was still quite dark. It was early morning. The noise was not repeated.

‘Who’s there?’ he asked in a sleepy whisper. ‘What is it?’ The noise came again. Someone was scratching on the door. No, it was somebody tapping.

‘What d’you want?’ he demanded in a louder voice. ‘Come in,’ he added, wondering sleepily whether he was presentable. Either the hotel was on fire or the porter was waking the wrong person for some sunrise expedition.

Nothing happened. Wide awake now, he turned the switch on, but no light flooded the room. The electricians, he remembered with a curse, were out on strike. He fumbled for the matches, and as he did so a voice in the corridor became distinctly audible. It was just outside his door.

‘Aren’t you ready?’ he heard. ‘You sleep for ever.’

And the voice, although, never having heard it before, he could not have recognised., belonged, he knew suddenly, to the girl who had let the olive fall. In an instant he was out of bed. He lit a candle.

‘I’m coming,’ he called softly, as he slipped rapidly into some clothes. ‘I’m sorry I’ve kept you. I shan’t be a minute.’

‘Be quick then!’ he heard, while the candle-fame slowly grew, and he found his garments. Less than three minutes later he opened the door and, candle in hand, peered into the dark passage.

‘Blow it out!’ came a peremptory whisper. He obeyed, but not quick enough. A pair of red lips emerged from the shadows. There was a puff, and the candle was extinguished. ‘I’ve got my reputation to consider. We mustn’t be seen, of course!’

The face vanished in the darkness, but he had recognised it – the shining skin, the bright, glancing eyes. The sweet breath touched his cheek. The candlestick was taken from him by a swift, deft movement. He heard it knock the wainscoting as it was set down. He went out into a pitch-black corridor, where a soft hand seized his own and led him – by a back-door, it seemed – out into the open air of the hillside immediately behind the hotel.

He saw the stars. The morning was cool and fragrant, the sharp air waked him, and the last vestiges of sleep went flying. He had been drowsy and confused, had obeyed the summons without thinking. He now realised suddenly that he was engaged in an act of madness.

The girl, dressed in some flimsy material thrown loosely about her head and body, stood a few feet away, looking, he thought, like some figure called out of dreams and slumber of a forgotten world, out of legend almost. He saw her evening shoes peep out; he divined an evening dress beneath the gauzy covering. The light wind blew it close against her figure. He thought of a nymph.

‘I say – but haven’t you been to bed?’ he asked stupidly.

He had meant to expostulate, to apologize for his foolish rashness, to scold and say they must go back at once. Instead, this sentence came. He guessed she had been sitting up all night. He stood still a second, staring in mute admiration, his eyes full of bewildered question.

‘Watching the stars,’ she met his thought with a happy laugh. ‘Orion has touched the horizon. I came for you at once. We’ve got just four hours!’ The voice, the smile, the eyes, the reference to Orion, swept him off his feet. Something in him broke loose and flew wildly, recklessly to the stars.

‘Let us be off!’ he cried, ‘before the Bear tilts down. Already Alcyone begins to fade. I’m ready. Come!’

She laughed. The wind blew the gauze aside to show two ivory-white limbs. She caught his hand again, and they scampered together up the steep hillside toward the woods. Soon the big hotel, the villas, the white houses of the little town where natives and visitors still lay soundly sleeping, were out of sight. The farther sky came down to meet them. The stars were paling, but no sign of actual dawn was yet visible. The freshness stung their cheeks. Slowly, the heavens grew lighter, the east turned rose, the outline of the trees defined themselves, there was a stirring of the silvery-green leaves. They were among olive-groves – but the spirits of the trees were dancing. Far below them, a pool of deep colour, they saw the ancient sea. They saw the tiny specks of distant fishing-boats. The sailors were singing to the dawn, and birds among the mimosa of the hanging gardens answered them.

Pausing a moment at length beneath a gaunt old tree, whose struggle to leave the clinging earth had tortured its great writhing arms and trunk, they took their breath, gazing at one another with eyes full of happy dreams.

‘You understood so quickly,’ said the girl, ‘my little message. I knew by your eyes and ears you would.’ And she first tweaked his ears with two slender fingers mischievously, then laid he soft palm with a momentary light pressure on both eyes.

‘You’re half-and-half, at any rate,’ she went on looking him up and down for a swift instant of appraisement, ‘if you’re not altogether.’ The laughter showed her white, even little teeth.

‘You know how to play, and that’s something,’ she added. Then, as if to herself, ‘You’ll be altogether before I’ve done with you.’

‘Shall I?’ he stammered, afraid to look at her.

Puzzled, some spirit of compromise still lingering in him, he knew not what she meant; he knew only that the current of life flowed increasingly through his veins, but that her eyes confused him.

‘I’m longing for it,’ he added. ‘How wonderfully you did it! They roll so awkwardly —–’

‘Oh, that!’ She peered at him through a wisp of hair. ‘You’ve kept it, I hope.’

‘Rather. It’s on my mantelpiece —–’

‘You’re sure you haven’t eaten it?’ and she made a delicious mimicry with her red lips, so that he saw the tip of a small, pointed tongue.

‘I shall keep it,’ he swore, ‘as long as these arms have life in them,’ and he seized her just as she was crouching to escape, and covered her with kisses.

‘I knew you longed to play,’ she panted, when he released her. ‘Still, it was sweet of you to pick it up before another got it.’

‘Another!’ he exclaimed.

‘The gods decide. It’s a lob-sided thing, remember. It can’t roll straight.’ She looked oddly mischievous, elusive.

He stared at her.

‘If it had rolled elsewhere – and another had picked it up – — ?’

he began.

‘I should be with that other now!’ And this time she was off and away before he could prevent her, and the sound of her silvery laughter mocked him among the olive-trees beyond. He was up and after her in a second, following her slim whiteness in and out of the old-world grove, as she flitted lightly, her hair flying in the wind, her figure flashing like a ray of sunlight or the race of foaming water – till at last he caught her and drew her down upon his knees, and kissed her wildly, forgetting who and where and what he was.

‘Hark!’ she whispered breathlessly, one arm close about his neck. ‘I hear their footsteps. Listen! It is the pipe!’

‘The pipe – — ! ‘ he repeated, conscious of a tiny but delicious shudder.

For a sudden chill ran through him as she said it. He gazed at her. Her hair fell loose about her cheeks, flushed and rosy with his hot kisses. Her eyes were bright and wild for all their softness. Her face, turned sideways to him as she listened, wore an extraordinary look that for an instant made his blood run cold. He saw the parted lips, the small white teeth, the slim neck of ivory, the young bosom panting from his tempestuous embrace. Of an unearthly loveliness and brightness she seemed to him, yet with this strange, remote expression that touched his soul with sudden terror.

Her face turned slowly.

‘Who are you?’ he whispered. He sprang to his feet without waiting for her answer.

He was young and agile; strong, too, with that quick response of muscle they have who keep their bodies well; but he was no match for her. Her speed and agility outclassed his own with ease. She leaped. Before he had moved one leg forward toward escape, she was clinging with soft, supple arms and limbs about him, so that he could not free himself, and as her weight bore him downward to the ground her lips found his own and kissed them into silence. She lay buried again in his embrace, her hair across his eyes, her heart against his heart, and he forgot his question, forgot his little fear, forgot the very world he knew....

‘They come, they come,’ she cried gaily. ‘The Dawn is here. Are you ready?’

‘I’ve been ready for five thousand years,’ he answered, leaping to his feet beside her.

‘Altogether!’ came upon a sparkling laugh that was like wind among the olive-leaves.

Shaking, her last gauzy covering from her, she snatched his hand, and they ran forward together to join the dancing throng now crowding up the slope beneath the trees. Their happy singing filled the sky, Decked with vine and ivy, and trailing silvery-green branches, they poured in a flood of radiant life along the mountain-side. Slowly they melted away into the blue distance of the breaking dawn, and, as the last figure disappeared, the sun came up slowly out of a purple sea....

They came to the place he knew – the deserted earthquake village – and a faint memory stirred in him. He did not actually recall that he had visited it already, had eaten his sandwiches with ‘hotel Friends’ beneath its crumbling walls; but there was a dim troubling sense of familiarity – nothing more. The houses still stood, but pigeons lived in them, and weasels, stoats, and snakes had their uncertain homes in ancient bedrooms. Not twenty years ago the peasants thronged its narrow streets, through which the dawn now peered and cool wind breathed among dew-laden brambles.

‘I know the house,’ she cried, ‘the house where we would live!’ and raced, a flying form of air and sunlight, into a tumbled cottage that had no roof, no floor or windows. Wild bees had hung a nest against the broken wall

He Followed her. There was sunlight in the room, and there were flowers. Upon a rude, simple table lay a bowl of cream, with eggs, and honey and butter dose against a homemade loaf. They sank into each other's arms upon a couch of fragrant grass and boughs against the window where wild roses bloomed ... and the bees flew in and out.

It was Bussana, the so-called earthquake village, because a sudden earthquake had fallen on it one summer morning when all the inhabitants were at church. The crashing roof killed sixty, the tumbling walls another hundred, and the rest had left it where it stood.

'The church,' he said , vaguely remembering the story. 'They were at prayer ––'

The girl laughed carelessly in his ear, setting his blood in a rush and quiver of delicious joy. He felt himself untamed, wild as the wind and animals. 'The true God claimed His own,' she whispered. 'He came back. Ah, they were not ready – — the old priests had seen to that. But He came. They heard His music. Then His tread shook the olive-groves, the old ground danced, the hills leapt for joy ––'

'They called it earthquake! And the houses crumbled,' he laughed as he pressed her closer to his heart.

'And now we've come back!' she cried merrily. 'We've come back to worship and be glad!' She nestled into him, while the sun rose higher. 'I hear them – hark!' she cried, and again leapt, dancing, from his side. Again he followed her like wind. Through the broken window they saw the naked fauns and nymphs and satyrs rolling, dancing, shaking their soft hoofs amid the ferns and brambles. Toward the ruptured church they sped with feet of light and air. A roar of happy song and laughter rose.

'Come!' he cried. 'We must go too.'

Hand in hand they raced to join the tumbling, dancing throng. She was in his arms and on his back and flung across his shoulders as he ran. They reached the broken building, its whole roof gone sliding years ago, its walls atremble still, its shattered shrines alive with nestling birds.

‘Hush!’ she whispered, in a tone of awe, yet pleasure. ‘He is there!’ She pointed, her bare arm outstretched, above the bending heads.

There, in the empty space, where once stood sacred Host and cup, He sat, filling the niche sublimely and with awful power. His shaggy form, benign yet terrible, rose through the broken stone. The great eyes shone and smiled. The feet were lost in brambles ....

‘God!’ cried a wild, frightened voice, yet with deep worship in it – and the old familiar panic came with portentous swiftness. The great Figure rose.

The birds flew screaming, the animals sought holes , the worshippers, laughing and glad a moment ago, rushed tumbling over one another for the doors.

‘He goes again! Who called? Who called like that? His feet shake the ground!’

‘It is the earthquake!’ screamed a woman’s shrill accents in ghastly terror.

‘Kiss me – one kiss before we forget again!...’ sighed a laughing, passionate voice against his ear. ‘Once more your arms, your heart beating on my lips...! You recognised His power. You are now altogether! We shall remember!’

But he woke, with the heavy bedclothes stuffed against his mouth and the wind of early morning sighing mournfully about the hotel walls.

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‘Have they left again – those ladies?’ he inquired casually of the head waiter, pointing to the table. ‘They were here last night at dinner.’

‘Who do you mean?’ replied the man stupidly, gazing at the spot indicated with a face quite blank. ‘Last night – at dinner?’ He tried to think

‘An English lady, elderly, with – her daughter ––’ at which moment precisely the girl came in alone. Lunch was over, the room empty.

There was a second’s difficult pause. It seemed ridiculous not to speak. Their eyes met. The girl blushed furiously.

He was very quick for an Englishman. ‘I was allowing myself to ask after your mother,’ he began. ‘I was afraid’ – he glanced at the table laid for one

– ‘she was not well, perhaps?’

‘Oh, but that’s very kind of you, I’m sure.’ She smiled. He saw the small white even teeth....

And before three days had passe he was so deeply in love that he simply couldn’t help himself.

‘I believe,’ he said lamely, ‘this is yours. You dropped it, you know. Er – may I keep it? It’s only an olive.’

They were, of course, in an olive-grove when he asked it, and the sun was setting.

She looked at him, looked him up and down, looked at his ears, his eyes. He felt that in another second her little fingers would slip up and tweak the first or close the second with a soft pressure – —

‘Tell me,’ he begged : ‘did you dream anything – that first night I saw you?’

She took a quick step backward. ‘No,’ she said, as he followed her more quickly still, ‘I don’t think I did. But,’ she went on breathlessly as he caught her up, ‘I knew – from the way you picked it up ––’

‘Knew what?’ he demanded, holding her tightly so that she could not get away again.

‘That you were already half and half, but would soon be altogether.’

And, as he kissed her, he felt her soft fingers tweak his ears.

A Continuous Performance

WHILE THE GREAT Man was reading from his own Works to the ladies in the Duchess's blue drawing-room, O'Malley slipped out unnoticed and made his way into the garden. The Great Man's vanity, the collective pose of the adoring ladies, the elaborate parade and artifice of the human attitude generally, invited the sweetness of unadvertised open air. O'Malley, old poet whom lack of craft left inarticulate, so that he had never written a line, slipped past the roses towards the trees that fringed the ducal lawn. With him went an echo of the rotund period his exit had interrupted; a picture, too, of the human animal preening itself upon its hind legs in black coat and stiff white collar.

"That rubbidge!" came a gruff voice, as he passed a tool-shed. "Why, I cleaned it up long ago — lars' noight, if you want to know exact!" The undergardener spat on his hands, as he poured out some aggrieved explanation to the Head.... The voices died away. O'Malley entered the stillness of the pinewood, where only the murmur of the summer wind was audible. "It's rude of me," he reflected; "possibly it's affected. But, anyhow, my disappearance for half an hour won't be noticed..." He flung himself down in a sunny patch where a meadow, swinging its flowers gaily in the breeze, ran round the little copse. An old thatched summerhouse, neglected, to judge by its state of decay, stood on his right. "I can slip in again before the end," he finished his reflection, "and stand behind the chairs at the back..."

He lay and watched the world of sun and shade about him, the un-self-conscious, lovely wealth of colour, outline, graceful movement, mystery, and wonder. Not "wasting its sweetness on the desert air," he chuckled, "because I'm here to see it all!"

A momentary memory rose to jar the enjoyment of watching a bee, both clumsy and adept, bear down a head of golden blossom into a lovely curve the wind at once made lovelier — a memory of the Great Man's answer to a question recently: "They are tiresome, yes, I admit, these Readings; but a man must keep himself before the public, you know. One must adapt oneself to the Age one lives in. Money? Oh, no, of course not; yet — well, it *does* help one's sales a bit. When I was lecturing in America last spring, my publisher told me...”

The bee, happily loaded, had issued from the golden bell, and O'Malley watched it bear the pollen unconsciously to another honeyed blossom, then, presently, rise into the air, take several circles in a spiral flight before, finally, it darted off swiftly in a fine due south. For some minutes he watched other bees behave similarly, and excitement grew in him. It was with difficulty, then, that he caught some half-dozen, one after another, in his coloured handkerchief, released them, watched their spiral flight of observation, and, noting the line all took due south, resisted the desire to be up and after them himself — in a bee-line to the nest in some old tree or broken wall. Many a wild-bees' nest had he tracked in this way as a boy. The old, first wonder, the enthusiasm, with a touch of worship added now, came back upon him. The gathering of honey, the carrying of pollen, the infallible sense of direction to a nest perhaps a mile or two away... the Great Man's words were all forgotten. In their place he heard the siren voice of Shelley:

> “O follow, follow
> Through the caverns hollow,
> As the song floats thou pursue,
> Where the wild-bee never flew...”

while, behind him, the pine-wood murmured with its delicate music “like the farewell of ghosts,” as he turned to listen and to watch.

Nothing stirred, it seemed at first, so peaceful was the summer afternoon, but he remembered that Panthea, too, had heard this faint music in the Indian Caucasus— “kindling aeolian modulations in the waved air” — and had whispered her secret into Shelley's ear. Leaning on one elbow motionless, merged in the scene by the imaginative sympathy of his poet's heart, he watched and listened.... The ground, he saw, was alive with gentle, silent, unobtrusive movement, where half a million ants were busy upon their mysterious, communal purposes, while yet there was none to bid them labour, in ceaseless constructive activity that, beginning with sunrise, ends only with the dusk. He watched them lifting, pushing, piling up their burdens as though their fives depended on it, tiny, mighty engines of energy, each of which could drag 500 times its own weight, while a man, panting with effort, could barely move five of his own kind. The wonder of the insect world swept over him, and a fugitive memory flashed Blake's picture, The Spirit of the Flea, across his mind, a flea that can leap a thousand times its own height... with the artist's explanation that God made it tiny lest its power and blood-thirsty nature might destroy the planet....

Plop! Something dropped upon the carpet of needles, and O'Malley, looking up, discerned two brilliant peeping eyes upon a branch, a bushy tail that twitched, and heard a squeaking voice that seemed to mock him. The squirrel was already making plans for its winter apartment, its winter store of food, its small head busily calculating months ahead. The human watcher moved cautiously to obtain a better view. Whisht! It was gone! An audacious leap through mid-air to another tree, perfect distribution of weight, consummate balance, precise relation between impetus and distance — powers no trained acrobat could ever hope to master....

A few scraps of bark fell slowly downwards through the air, but the squirrel was safely perched on a tree some twenty yards away. One scrap of bark, it seemed, caught on a floating spider's thread — a spider that unconsciously constructs a geometrical design a scholar can only make with the help of many instruments, and whose thread is the finest filament known, so that astronomers use it to map the heavens across the mouths of their huge telescopes.... No, it was neither bark nor spider's web after all, but a fly, apparently stationary, yet actually moving its wings with such rapidity that no eye could distinguish the separate strokes. How many times per second O'Malley could not remember. He could flap his own arms three or four times per second — *that* he knew....!

The minutes, meanwhile, were slipping away, while he watched a hundred marvels, unadvertised, performed daily, hourly, without Agents, without sales, without applause, mostly, indeed, without recognition. There, over a distant field, fell the tumbling plover under the very eye of a soaring hawk that made no attempt against them, knowing that their skill must ever elude its best endeavour. There, by chance, was the solitary wasp that stings exactly where paralysis, but not death, shall follow, so that its young shall feed on living food. There was the little trap-door spider, peeping, darting, cleverest of ingenious tiny carpenters. There was the beetle feigning death, as its enemy approached. There, again....

A new movement suddenly caught his eye, as he lay motionless, rapt with the wonder of it all. What was it? In the summer-house, along the darkened floor, a rat — yes, a rat — was advancing slowly and with utmost caution. O'Malley watched keenly, as closely as he dared. The bright-eyed creature was dragging a wisp of straw along the decaying boards. Another rat, tentatively rather, as though with uncertain movements, seemed following it, its nose ever against the tip of the drawn straw. The first rat, evidently, was leading the way, showing its companion where to go. But why? Was it a game? Improving his position for observation with extreme caution, O'Malley discovered the meaning of the strange pantomime: The second rat was blind; its companion was leading it to food....

O'Malley sprang up. The rats, the squirrel, the bees, ants, fly, wasp, spider, doubtless the plover and the distant hawk as well, all, saw him move. The various processes of mysterious Nature, for the fraction of a second, paused. The perfect performers desired no audience, certainly no applause; recognition, praise, admiration, meant nothing to them. They were not even aware that they were wonderful. O'Malley left them. The Continuous Performance went on. He left Nature and returned to Human Nature. The gardeners, as he passed the tool-shed, were still arguing together.

In the Duchess's blue drawing-room, when he stole back cautiously behind the chairs, the Great Man was still reading from His Own Works, to the assembled ladies, and some of the ladies were still listening, while all would presently tell him how wonderful he was.

Outside, in fragrant wood and meadow, the other performances, unadmired and unadvertised, went on as usual, and the Earth, nourishing all alike, turned calmly, faithfully, on her axis, continuing her journey at eighteen miles a second round a gigantic incandescent fire, some 93,000,000 miles away, that was too commonplace to call for remark as a rule, yet without which the entire Show would be snuffed out in a fraction of a second.

He got back just in time to be deafened by the applause, and to see the Great Man smile and bow.

The World-Dream of McCallister

CERTAIN PEOPLE, IT would appear, are favoured with occasional dreams of so vivid a character that they leave on the mind an impression that lasts for hours, often, it may be, for the whole of the following day, while the dream itself is forgotten almost entirely upon waking. “Almost entirely”; for, possibly, some remnant is retained or half-retained, caught by the tail, as it were, in the act of plunging out of sight to rejoin the major portion — a fragment of glowing scenery, a voice, perhaps a sentence, halts long enough to be seen or heard (at any rate, to be remembered) before it is withdrawn swiftly from the consciousness.

Such remnants, moreover, though faint as moonlight — they vanish with extreme and urgent hurry, as though they had unduly lingered and were not intended to be more fully known — yet share this in common; that they pertain to some experience that has seemed infinitely desirable, since a peculiar yearning is awakened for their continuance or for their completion. Vague though the details have been, the emotion left is powerful and strangely haunting; and this emotion invariably seems due to a sense of having been in some familiar and enchanting place, and that a rarely privileged companionship has been interrupted by the act of waking. Life would be sweeter, bigger, indubitably more worth living — this is somewhat the feeling left behind — could the experience be entirely recaptured. The dream, at any rate, has been broken off before its end.

The emotion is so strong, so exquisite, indeed, that the mind makes a quick and vigorous effort at recovery — only to find that it is vain, and that such experiences are not recoverable at all. The dream is gone, and the more vigorous the effort, the more complete the disappearance. The remnant, moreover, soon vanishes as well: memory focuses it each time with less success; it grows blurred, confused, then artificial; a counterpart, half-invented, is erected in its place; and each attempt at recovery conceals the original more and more, while giving body to the substitute that mocks it. In the end the mind retains chiefly the emotion that filled it upon waking, and with that memory it must remain content.

This emotion, however, remains, according to circumstances, for a longer or a shorter time. It crops up unexpectedly at odd moments later; sometimes it haunts at intervals during the entire day, curiously persistent, eagerly, almost passionately desired, although each time a little weaker, a little fainter, than before. Rarely may it survive the twelve daylight hours of which the first announced its welcome birth and presence. The following night’s sleep sets a term to its existence. Its loss is final. The sense that it *has* been alone remains. It has become the memory of an exquisite Memory.

And, since so little of the actual dream is caught, it would seem to be this accompanying emotion that fights the heart so strangely with the sense of elusive and enchanting glamour. For the emotion is, indeed, of an unusual kind: deep and tender, evasive yet profoundly real, a vague but persistent certainty that it refers to an experience more packed with fife, more intense, more piercing, above all more joyous, than anything known in waking hours. It stands to the dreamer as full sunlight compared to palest moonlight — the most vivid emotions of his daylight fife seem thin and temporary besides its permanent, though lost, reality Almost it has suggested another order of existence, a richer state of consciousness, and hence the yearning in his heart for full recovery. He wonders, and he — sighs. He has touched a state that, to say the least of it, was satisfactory. Could he recall that state, the perplexities of his daily fife would surely be explained; for, in some fashion beyond him to elucidate, that lost, happy dream pertained to a completer consciousness of which ordinary existence is but a broken, troubled shadow. He was then fit up and shining; he moves now in darkness....

Dreams of this kind, though rare, are known to many; the physiologists have, doubtless, a careful explanation of their origin, as of the effects which they produce. Upon their occurrence is possibly based that kind and ancient fantasy that persuades a few the spirit travels while the body sleeps, that things are then shown to it which the brain might scarce discover for itself; of which things, moreover, the intense or awful sweetness — as the case may be — were more than physical memory could retain without disaster to commonplace days and duties afterwards. To remember a state so perfect, yet so impossible of achievement, would involve a disappointment with the routine of normal difficulties that must border upon despair.... To deal satisfactorily with such delicate splendours, one should be, presumably, either fanatic or poet, the latter's hint, perhaps, remaining the sweetest hint we have: "Some say that dreams of a remoter world visit the soul in sleep..." — and McCallister, at any rate, felt rather pleased that Shelley's fine recurred to him during the day that followed his own particular experience.

For McCallister had such a dream one night, and in the morning behaved strictly according to precedent regarding it: That is, he registered the intensity and sweetness of the accompanying emotion, strove vigorously for full recovery, then went about his duties of the day with occasional moments when the emotion was hauntingly revived, and at the same time with a flickering consciousness — almost a memory — that he had been with someone in an enchanting place, and that this someone had told or shown him things of an authentic and privileged kind. Life had been full and rich and deeply splendid; but, more than that — it had been explained, because he understood it whole, instead of seeing it in broken fragments....

In his case the remnant caught by the tail was very slight indeed; many would have deemed it trivial, some ridiculous: perhaps it was both trivial and ridiculous. Only it shared the joyous and enchanting glamour of the whole, which yet remained obstinately hidden; and in this sense, while it teased him with unsatisfied yearning, it also blessed and comforted him with the feeling that Life was all right, could he but see it whole. For the fragment had in some fashion revealed an Entirety, to which his waking consciousness was stranger, yet to which desire and belief, half-buried, had, in moments of uplifting, bravest hope, distinctly pointed. Accordingly, he felt blessed and comforted; and, since these results assist a yet more valuable state of mind, he felt also — strengthened.

The remnant of the dream he retained was, indeed, but a fading sentence, consisting of seven commonplace words in daily use, uttered, moreover, by a voice of no particular calibre, yet of such happy and immense authority that he was instantly persuaded of its ultimate truth:

"*So you see, it IS all right...!*"

Such was the detail memory retained, no more, no less. And, on waking, he yearned for its continuance, for its completion, struggling for a long time to recover the place, the person and the conditions which might reconstruct the entire dream and so explain it. For he had the delightful feeling —

especially strong during the first ten minutes after waking — that, were it recoverable, he would be master of a point of view that must solve the perplexities of his life and make the puzzle of his somewhat muddled existence satisfactory. “If I could only get it *all* back,” as he put it to himself, “I should get things straight — face everything happily — because I understood the lot!”

The remembered sentence, however, contained the essence of the vanished dream— “So you see — it IS all right!” — but the dream itself had disappeared....

He went, therefore, as already mentioned, about his duties of the day; and, doing so, he experienced — also according to precedent — those brief, flickering moments when the Emotion revived in haunting flashes, and was gone again as soon as recognised — unfulfilled, unrealised — yet each time leaving behind it a hint of that comfort and that blessing pertaining to its origin. With each flash, as it were, and with each haunting repetition, he recovered for that fleeting instant a singular consciousness of the splendid Whole to which the fragment still belonged.... He was lit up and shining.

As the day advanced, these moments of return became less vivid, though never less convincing. The first authority remained; it was the memory that faded.

These moments were as follows:

It was upon the one day in the seven that his work in the Censor’s Office left him the afternoon free, and he went to tea with Her in the Enchanted Square. He was neither invited nor expected; he just dropped in. Later the husband dropped in, too, and all three talked together easily and naturally. The guest was obviously made welcome, there were no signs of restraint or awkwardness, far less of friction. Perhaps the husband guessed, perhaps he did not; possibly She knew — indeed probably — though assuredly not from anything McCallister had ever said, or done, or betrayed.... Neither he nor she troubled themselves about an after-existence: to McCallister, therefore, the one chance of possessing her was lost for ever. Although brains, as well as worldly success, had both been denied him, he had the great gifts of strength and loyalty and truth. He was known as a worthy, if perhaps an uninteresting man. Occasionally he went to call, like any other casual member of her circle — that and no more than that. His secret was a genuine secret, entirely his own and safely, honestly kept. He owned — and deserved — the friendship of the husband, too. And the position, while never beyond his strength, was the more difficult in that he was aware *she* felt for her husband affection, but not love.

And so he sat there in the enchanted house, silent and rather dull as usual, but blessed by her presence and therefore very happy. The only signs by which he persuaded himself she kept him in her thoughts during the longish intervals between his visits were that she divined his exact requirements when he came. She never asked. It was always sweet to him, and wonderful — such little yet enormous things: One lump of sugar in his tea; cream, but no milk; the hard chair with the stiff, upright back; the glaring lights turned out, leaving a single globe at the far end of the room to help the fire-light; and — the fragments of Russian music that he loved....

“I just want to try over this bit of Scriabin, if you don’t mind,” she would suggest, going across to the instrument without waiting for his answer. Or— “the piano’s just been tuned; I really must play a chord or two” — and then, without further words, the pieces that he so particularly loved... while he sat listening by the fire, watching, absorbed, strangely at peace and happy. There was no formality; he felt blissfully at home; the warmth of the fire, the shaded lights, the delicate sense of her perfume, her presence, her very thoughts, as he believed, brushing against his secret, and her music entering his inmost soul to phrase his dumb desire — all this filled him with strength and beauty that would help him in the long, long interval of loneliness to follow.

And then the door would open, and the husband enter with a clatter, bringing the atmosphere of the street and latest news of rumour thick about him.

“Jack, old boy! It’s only you! Good. I was afraid it was a caller!”

But the husband did not care for music; he preferred the room well ht; and he was always ready for a hearty tea. He saw first to these three requirements, therefore, then kissed his wife while she put away the scores, and all three sat talking over the fire, the husband gulping his tea with audible satisfaction and munching his buttered toast as though he had earned it every bit — talking loudly with McCallister, whom he liked, and obliquely with his wife with whom he was so supremely satisfied that she could be neglected somewhat. His ownership of her, at any rate, was very manifest, and McCallister found these moments rather trying, especially when the music was interrupted earlier than necessary, perhaps in the middle of a piece....

They chatted happily for twenty minutes or so, and then, a natural pause presenting itself, McCallister rose to go. He said good-bye. For him it was a real goodbye — God-be-with-you, dear; for he could not know what might happen in the interval to follow, and, as with all real good-byes, the sense of separation was keen with possibilities that *would* leap into the mind and burden it. This moment of good-bye was always full of pain for him. But this time it was different. There was a smile in his eyes that many husbands must have noticed. For, suddenly, into that pause had flooded the motion of the vanished dream. It was, perhaps, but the memory of an unrecoverable Memory, yet with it an intense delight, a joy, a peace, swept over him. He was lit up and shining. He was not lonely. It seemed he knew more — far more — than he could quite remember. The very words came back:

"*So, you see, it IS all right....*"

The haunting emotion flashed and flickered like a swallow's wing, then vanished, yet left behind an instant of superb realisation that took his heart and blessed it. A high, sweet privilege he knew of, yet had somehow forgotten among smaller, troubling emotions of imperfect kind, was there to gladden life for ever — *now.* The instant's joy enthralled him, then was gone again. It was as if some absolute, some spiritual, possession of Her had been granted to him. He had amazingly overlooked it. Or, rather, having stupidly misunderstood this blazing fact, he now recovered it, complete and glorious — for the flashing instant. Their love was pure and flawless; they belonged to one another in the actual present: they were one. The emotion, evanescent though it was, involved the bliss of certain joy.

"*So, you see, it IS all right,*" rose an inner voice behind the casual words he spoke aloud as he left the room....

And this joy that was real yet inexplicable, accompanied him down the steps after the maid had closed the big front door discreetly. He went out with a radiant happiness, as of a remembered ownership and dear possession in his soul. It hovered and lingered about him for some little time, as he walked down the murky street towards the Tube Station half a mile away. And then it faded. Trying to recover the dream itself, he lost hold of the emotion. It became confused. Its authenticity grew less and less. It grew unreal. Yet the certainty of his deep tie was strengthened unaccountably. She did belong to him in some odd sense that was not now, and yet was *now*.... The details of a Rumour in high quarters, uttered in the husband's decided voice, then replaced it with ringing insistence in his ears. The Memory grew very faint and died away. It was, in a few moments, quite unrecoverable. He remembered only that it had been there....

The other occasion when the dream haunted him had been earlier in the day; but, though first in sequence of time, it was, for some reason, less vivid than the instance just recorded. Perhaps the incident it lighted up, being of minor importance in his life, caused a less striking reaction. Yet the same conviction was present, the same hint of a richer, completer state of consciousness which must make life beautiful and solve its tribe of little puzzles, were he but master of it always. He groped among disconnected fragments; in the dream he had known the clue that slipped these angled fragments into the mosaic of a perfect pattern.

On the way to the Office he saw — in the distance but coming toward him — the Man he Loathed. The loathing was mutual, the deep antipathy of ancient standing. They were, however, on speaking terms, for they lived in the same small circle of friends and duties; there had been no open quarrel; but the nod, the meeting of the eyes, above all the uttered word — these were avoided whenever possible. In the language of the street, they could not "stand" one another. But now, with a stretch of empty pavement between them, growing every moment less as they approached, avoidance or decent escape was out of the question, and McCallister instinctively braced himself for the inevitable exchange of reluctant and half-hostile greeting. The conventional hypocrisy galled him. Far rather would he have dealt the man an honest blow, with a word to the effect that he was a cad and heartily deserved it.

They stopped, as such men will, talking a moment, with a bravish appearance of good-fellowship — less than a moment, indeed, for it was the merest half turn of the heel in passing, just enough to show the semi-smile of good manners, so that each might produce the impression— *"You* are the cad, not I; the fault is yours!" McCallister met the hated and the hating eyes, and looked deep into them. The same instant — the two hostile personalities facing one another upon that patch of deserted pavement at 8.45 a.m. — there flashed marvellously into his mind the emotion of the vanished dream. Born of nothing, apparently, it came and went. For a fleeting second memory recovered this Memory of a completer knowledge, and life was strangely beautiful. He was lit up and happy:

"*So you see, it IS all right!*" went down the morning wind like some fragrance of forgotten childhood flowers.

The gleam was there — then gone again like lightning. A hint of divinity came with the accompanying emotion; it did not wholly go. For in that evanescent flash, McCallister knew suddenly a large and driving, yet somehow perfectly natural impulse — that the mutual enmity was based upon an error, that in reality there was no enmity at all. This angled fragment fitted in somewhere, and fitted beautifully, could he but remember where.... Some such dazzling point of happiness, even of glory, pierced his being; peace, love and absolute comprehension bathed him, body, mind and soul. The flickering emotion blessed and comforted, even while it flashed beyond his reach. He and his enemy were one.

Another moment and he would have spoken frankly, made it up, explained, forgiven, and been forgiven. He felt positive of this, the power was in his grasp. He saw the enmity, the hatred, the latent loathing as nothing but a misunderstanding that must have suddenly dissolved in a smile of relief, born of happiness and springing out of love. The emotion of the forgotten dream was a salved fragment from some richer state of consciousness wherein the puzzles of daily life, seen from a bird's-eye point of view, explained themselves. The word that occurred to him was Unity.

But the emotion, fugitive as moonlight upon some wind-blown puddle, had disappeared again. The larger mood, the generous impulse, went with the gleam. He remembered that it had been, but he could no longer understand it. The brief greeting was over; the men passed on their way in opposite directions.... Before the next lamp-post was reached McCallister loathed the man as he had never loathed him before. Only the big impulse puzzled him still a little, for equally with the present hatred, it had been deep and genuine. He felt ashamed, first of the impulse, then of having disobeyed it.

"That's why some people are accused of falseness and insincerity," occurred to him. "They get a flash like that, and act upon it without reflecting first. Or else the other person doesn't get it at all, and so...!"

There remained, at any rate, in his heart, buried but alert, some haunting yearning for a lost, enchanting happiness which he had missed. He was aware of sadness, of regret. He could not understand it.... He reached the Office, saw his table piled up with letters in three foreign languages, realised that the writers, all of them, knew difficult, perplexing lives just now — and then, cutting open the first envelope with his special knife, forgot his dream, his enemy, and everything else in the world except his immediate and uncongenial duty.

The third and last incident — late in the evening — proved that the memory of the Memory was lost almost entirely. The emotion was present, indeed, but of exceeding faintness. It had faded so much that it seemed remote, unreal, not worth recovering. He had no longer any particular desire to recover it; the yearning had wholly left him. As for the words— "*So, you see, it IS all right*" — he recalled them, but found them ill-placed and without meaning or conviction. Their authority was gone. They came, moreover, in an artificial form, a substitute from some forgotten book or other — or was it from some advertisement upon the hoardings? His mind, clogged with the details of his work, with suspicion of certain letters and interest in others, with pity, boredom, exasperation, respectively, for the various writers, had no room for thoughts of unordinary kind. At any rate, this time he noticed the foolish words, the dying emotion, and no more: out of the corner of his tired eye, so to speak, he noticed them. But both were already centuries away.

The incident occurred in the darkened streets as he walked homewards carefully after ten o'clock, having spent the evening at his Club. He witnessed a distressing accident. The memories of the day lay somewhat jumbled in his mind, no one in particular dominating the rest. The meeting with his enemy twelve hours before had passed entirely, his work was deliberately set aside and forgotten, the Club had produced nothing to occupy his thoughts. With the latest evening paper in his pocket, still unread, he groped his way homewards, conscious perhaps, more than anything else, that the day had been of the red-letter kind because he had been to tea in the Enchanted Square. This memory wove itself softly, sweetly, in and out among his tired thoughts, when, at a certain crossing, the distressing accident occurred beneath his very eyes. A child was knocked down and killed by a passing taxi-cab.

Upon the sudden shock of horror that he felt, followed an abrupt paralysis of all his faculties. Every instinct in him leaped to render help — to prevent was already out of the question, alas — and the impotent desire to save, succeeded instantly by pity, sympathy, and pain, combined to arrest both his muscles and his breath. The affair was over with such hideous swiftness. Figures at once congregated about the dreadful spot, as though they had been lurking in the blackness, waiting for the thing to happen. Willing hands lifted the little body on to the pavement. The shadows swallowed everything.

McCallister, recovering the use of his muscles and his breath, moved on. A heavy sigh escaped him. But in moving away from the painful and unhappy scene, he moved away also — so it seemed — from a pause in life. Time, which had stopped a moment, flowed on with him again. Yet there had been this pause, this moment out of Time. He had forgotten himself; he now remembered himself again. And into that instant of pause, into that timeless, but also selfless moment, had poured the ghostly emotion of the vanished dream.

The emotion on this occasion, though still haunting as before, was almost too faint to be recognised; and though the familiar sentence rose scurrying to the surface of his mind, it took now another form — a substitute. This substitute, moreover, belonged to his waking, not to his dreaming, life. “God’s in his Heaven; all’s right with the world” — or some such words, taken if he remembered rightly, from the calendar on his walls in the Office. He had not the smallest idea whose words they were. They seemed to him rather foolish at the moment, an empty statement of some optimistic maker of phrases at the best. At the same time, the fading emotion left a vague suggestion of comfort in him somewhere: only he felt unable to accept it now; indeed, he resented and resisted it. He thought only of the mangled little body, of its being brought to the house, of the parents, and so forth. The cheap and facile sentence from the calendar excited his scorn, and his mind responded to it in kind with a touch of anger: “Why couldn’t God in his Heaven have prevented it...?” He felt very near to that child — almost as if the accident had happened to himself.

For an hour before going to bed, he read the evening paper. Friends, he saw, had been wounded, taken prisoner, killed, and one was “missing.” He entered the blackness, as many times before, experiencing once again the pity, anguish, despair the War had made familiar to most people. The Collective Sense took hold of him.... For a moment, now and again, he had a curious feeling of oneness with those interrupted lives.... He was aware, too, of the strength to make any personal sacrifice in order to help, the stolid determination (as though he were himself a Field Marshal or War Minister) to hold out until the diabolical immorality let loose upon the earth had been annihilated.... Yet, just as sleep took him, he felt another thing as well — an immense, incomprehensible hope that he somehow or other knew was justified. For, though unable to seize it for definition in his drowsy state, it came to him as being more than hope: a certainty, although a hidden one. But his mind was silent. He just felt it — felt sure of it — no more. “So, you see, it *is* all right,” was as good a way of phrasing it as any other. Then thought grew hazy, curtains rose and fell. He had dreamed something very wonderful the last time he lay in bed.... Would the same dream recur, perhaps? He had not dreamed it alone either; surely the whole world had dreamed it with him. The haunting emotion touched him very faintly. A mist of forgetfulness rose over him. He was unable to think, much less to argue with himself about it. He fell asleep.

Next morning, his original dream, with the emotion that had accompanied it, were sponged completely from his consciousness. His egg for breakfast was not quite fresh, there was no butter, no marmalade, his fire was a column of thick, dirty smoke without flame or heat, his morning letters were unsatisfactory. He had a headache, he dreaded his day’s work; nobody could have persuaded him that anything in the world was “all right.” The war news, too, was depressing. In the newspaper he read an unflattering paragraph about his enemy, the Man he Loathed. He was delighted.

The very next second — almost the same second it was indeed, and for the first time in his life — he inconsequently felt sorry for him — rather. The loathing, he was aware, had unaccountably weakened somewhat. He noted the curious fact, for a moment, and then dismissed it. There seemed this change of attitude in him, very slight indeed, yet distinctly noticeable. This generalisation he dismissed as well.

Yet during the day it recurred; it refused to be dismissed. The change in his attitude, though slight, was very deep perhaps; it manifested from time to time, at any rate. He summed it up in this way: that there seemed less room in him, less time too, for personal emotions. He knew, among his little daily troubles, a bigger, braver, happier feeling. It was a great relief. He could not understand it; something in him had escaped, as it were. Hidden in the depths of his commonplace being was a new sympathy which is the seed of understanding, and so of forgiveness, and so, finally, of joy. This new attitude, as the day wore on, confirmed itself; it certainly was real. Not that he actively or deliberately thought about it, but as though the process went forward in him automatically, of its own accord, springing from some hidden and forgotten source of inspiration, leading him to certain very definite conclusions; conclusions, however, that wholly evaded him when he tried to put them into words.

He found himself, that is, with a new feeling, a new point of view, rather than with a new philosophy; with an approach to these, at any rate. The love he must, in one sense, renounce; the enemy he must forgive; the broken life of the little child; the killed, the maimed, the tortured, the bereaved; his own small personal difficulties and pains — towards all of these he felt as towards angled fragments of some mighty pattern which, could he but see it whole, must justify what seemed cruel and terrible merely. Occasionally, he felt them all as happening in himself. This seed of divine sympathy had singularly come to birth in him. The dream was forgotten, but this seed remained. He did not, perhaps, look happier, yet a possibility of joy had been experienced by him — the memory of a Memory. He was aware of a faint and childlike hope that something new was stealing down into the world.... It was all right.

The Other Woman

NOT THAT IT was so particularly lovely, but that it was so astonishingly real, perplexed him. This reality, the conviction that he knew it intimately, were the reasons why its appearance troubled him, though trouble is perhaps too strong a word, since it woke a yearning sweetness too. The root of the strange emotion doubtless lay in this: that the face, while curiously familiar, was not known to him. He did not recognise it.

It would rise before his inmost vision as in a cloud of silvery mist; memory would leap to claim it, pause, hesitate, and finally draw back in failure. “I know you intimately,” he would whisper, deep inside himself. ‘I have always known you. But, for the life of me, I can’t remember who you are!” Comforted, blessed, contented, he would give up the puzzle with a sigh.

Where had he seen this face before? When had he met the original? Under what conditions of time and space had he known in the flesh this woman whose eyes gazed with such sweet, haunting invitation into his own? It was not a memory he could trace, try as he would; it was not a dream — in his dreams he never saw her; she belonged to everyday working life and sunlight. Moreover, she was ever young. She matured, but did not age. In every true artist-soul lies something which is unageing. She kept pace in him with that.

She first appeared quite early in his life, in boyhood almost, but certainly when the boy slipped into the man; and he soon established the fact that it was invariably a girl or woman who evoked her. It was sufficient for a girl or woman to engage, or threaten to engage, his heart, for this other woman to rise inwardly and take possession of him, with the result that the attraction of the moment faded, then wholly died away. The exquisite invasion brimmed his entire being, leaving nothing over or unsatisfied. Her seductive power was so great that against her mere silent appearance, before the gaze of those inviting, gentle eyes, no other charm, no passing fancy, at any rate, could stand a moment. His soul soared upwards towards her. She seemed to offer a perfection which became for him a test and standard for all lesser beauty.... Did she, then, resent intrusion of such lesser beauty? Certainly she nipped in the bud each of his early love affairs, prevented serious attachment too. Absurd as it must sound, absurd as it was indeed, the Face forbade his marrying. His soul loved and yearned towards her alone. She became his faultless guide.

Having humour in his composition, he called her the Other Woman, and tried, but without success, to paint her. His skill, already famous, failed with each attempt. On the canvas she became too commonplace to finish, much less to frame. She eluded him completely. Thus he was unable to convince his friends, who flocked to the studio, that she possessed the qualities, above all the reality, he saw and felt in her. Moreover, she prevented other pictures too, landscapes even, or imaginative renderings of his inmost being that were not absolutely true — born of his highest inspiration. She resented, in a word, he came to realise, any aspect of Beauty not of the purest, sweetest, that threatened possession of him to her own exclusion. She insisted upon a standard he could not always reach. He made his name among the few. He made no money.

The relationship, thus established and accepted, ruled his life. He loved, he worshipped, he obeyed this Other Woman who so elusively filled the imagined roles of comrade, wife, and guide. Yet she troubled, even alarmed, him sometimes. It was not the conviction of precious intimacy, but the puzzling failure to recognise, that alarmed him, suggesting some grave dislocation of memory. Somewhere he *must* have seen her original, perhaps in a picture, perhaps fugitive in the street, or at another's house.

'You see, I *know* her," he told his friend, "know her as well as I know my own mother. Yet I cannot recall her name, or who she is, or where we met, or anything about her. And that's amazing — like forgetting all about the wife you love except that you know her, love her, and belong to her. Now — I ask you!"

"But you're a painter," the friend explained. "This is some ideal or other you visualise pictorially. It's probably some childhood memory suppressed years ago. Find the original and it will cease to haunt you."

"But *she* knows me, too, I tell you," insisted the artist, already regretting the confidence given. "That's the uncanny part of it." The other stared a moment with embarrassment. "It is," he repeated, as with a mental shrug of the shoulders. “It is a bit uncanny, as you say.” He changed the subject, and presently made an excuse to go.

The painter passed through many love affairs; they had no result; they interfered with his work; they dimmed his sweetest vision as they passed; but each time, with the appearance of the haunting eyes that gazed so yearningly into his own, power was restored to him. Each frustration added to his power; he was enriched. He wanted wife and children... their lovely ghosts walked through his canvases. The artist soul is notoriously passionate and fickle, exacting too; the Other Woman led him victoriously, clean, unsoiled, through all adventure. To be false to her was to be faithless to the highest, deepest, truest, in his life. He suffered, but he did not fail her. He saw then in her dear eyes a new expression — majesty. His genius knew fulfilment.

“You say you have already tried to paint her?” asked a wise woman who loved him for himself, but loved his genius more. “Her expression would interest me enormously—”

“Tried till I’m tired,” he interrupted. “She fades instantly. Elusive beyond capture. That’s just it, you see.” There was a note of reverence in his voice.

“And pain — ?” she asked softly, the sympathy of real understanding dangerously in her eyes.

He signified assent. “I yearn towards her,” he confessed, gazing at his companion as though he begged forgiveness, then gazing suddenly past her. “I’m beginning to think—” He paused; the sentence remained unfinished. Ineffable yearning filled his heart as the Other Woman rose in that instant before his inmost sight, exquisite, majestic, with her final, unquestionable power. The love offered him seemed tawdry by comparison. The full confidence was not given.

From his earthly eyes she remained concealed until the very end. It was at the very end only that he knew and recognised her. At the moment of death she gave herself into his full keeping, because she had already been in his full keeping always, and because he had proved faithful to her through all his minor faithlessness.

“Forgive me,” he murmured, in the confused rambling they mistook for incoherence; “forgive my times of doubt and question.... O my Great

Loveliness....!”

Beside the bed they listened to his whisperings:

“It is worn thin with words.... I heard them discuss it often... the artist.... I see now it’s true.... Alone of men the artist has within himself the perfect mate. He needs no other. The feminine lies divinely in his being, his own perfect soul-mate...”

He held out his hands, raising his head a moment from the pillow.

“It was you, and only you, I really loved. I have been true.... O my Great Loveliness!” And, with a smile of joy upon his face, he went to meet her.

Picking Fir-Cones

I

AMONG MY EARLIEST recollections of any vividness is a voice saying “yes” across the darkness of my winter bedroom. My exact age at the time is difficult to fix, but since I have no memories of anything before I was six, it may be set, perhaps, safely at seven years old. The voice seemed outside myself; it issued apparently from the shadows as a whole, rather than from a particular corner of the fireless room.

I had been lying awake, wondering “frightfully hard” about everything, why so much was forbidden, and how disappointing it was to be blocked by rules and parents and nurses, and so on, when there stole out of the hush this whispered “yes,” as if in answer to my puzzles. It gave me the feeling that life was intended to be lived. All sorts of things were going to happen at once: I would do, accept them all. An exultant happiness burst up in me. I was alive!

“I’m at it all again,” came to me.

Questions as to goal or origin there were none, but the feeling of “again” was vivid. This idea of resumption was certainly present. I resumed a journey; the train had stopped, but now went on again.... It was to be a long, long, business, yet stuffed with interest and excitement, to which I looked forward with zest, with positive joy. I had been “at it” for ages already, the journey by no means just begun. I was hungry to live, but to live again, and this hunger was familiar to me. My questions, my wonder, seemed like efforts to remember things just out of reach, yet not impossibly, finally, out of reach. They were recoverable. Meanwhile, I wished “fearfully’ to live and experience again, avoiding nothing. “Getting on,” I called it, though growth, *quâ* development, was certainly not present in my mind at that tender age.

I woke next morning with the excitement to do things in my blood, and to do them as soon as possible. I did them. I turned on all the taps in the bathroom, tried to set fire to a hay-rick to see the blaze, and let the pigs out of their pens into the stable-yard and thence into the garden. I remember lifting a broken hop pole to hit the coachman’s daughter with. I did everything I could, taking the consequences, painful though these were, and puzzling too. For no one really explained to me, but merely said No, and then hurt me physically. It made no difference apparently. I meant to live, to miss no opportunity of doing things and enjoying the experience, pleasant or unpleasant. To avoid and shirk merely because it hurt was to lose an opportunity I was alive to know; whereas to suppress a desire, find no outlet for it, filled me with a choking violence that poisoned my whole being — what my elders meant by wickedness, I suppose.

Keen regret invariably followed such repression: I had missed an opportunity that might never come again, The hunger to live had been denied. To suppress without regret was a stage, of course, I reached much later; to divert this energy into other channels, transmuting it, came later still. If intensity was my native gift, at any rate, I think my energy was merely wasted rather than used for evil. This analysis, moreover, belongs to maturity, when reason loves laborious explanations; at the time I accepted and believed: I only felt and acted.

Evil! It was just this word, so often on father’s lips, that, with its opposite, good, made me feel sure there was some state superior to either, and that this state I had experienced already. I had known it before, but had now forgotten. It was recoverable, however, only I must be jolly quick about recovering it, for once I was grown up it would be too late. It involved an experience of strange, enormous, universal conditions difficult to describe. I wanted to get into everything, to do everything and to do it all at once, to be everywhere, and to be everywhere simultaneously. The fir-cone incident was the only practical proof I had that it was possible. It will be described presently.

Here, then, was a definite, though wholly undetailed, memory. Belief, so called, played no part in my attitude towards it. I *knew.* I was haunted at this very early age by a dim recollection of some state superior to good and evil, and it betrayed itself, briefly, in an intense longing for things to be otherwise than they were — entirely otherwise.

This sounds so ordinary, it was actually so significant. No intellectually devised Utopia was involved: an *absolute* change was what I so ardently desired. Hints of it came to me — came back; in fairy-tales, in poetry, in music, yet most frequently and with a closer sense of validity, from the beauty of Nature, especially in wild and lonely places; though as I grew older I grew, it seemed at the same time, smaller, and the chances of recovery rapidly decreased. I was settling in among conditions that excluded full recollection. Soon I should forget altogether.

The memory, as I have said, was undetailed, but two conditions stood out in the recovery so ardently desired: I wanted goodness to be more good, wickedness more wicked. This was the first step. People of both types were so tame, insipid, colourless, so oppressively alike. The good were only just good by the skin of their teeth, as it were, their goodness managed by an effort that left no energy over; they laboured for goodness, and for happiness, at some future time. Good to me meant positively shining. Yet the good folk had no particular joy. I wanted people who were shining and radiant *now.* Children had more of the quality I meant than older people, but no one had it properly at all.

With what my parents called "evil" it was similar. Depravity there was in plenty, but that was negative: an open wickedness, strong and unafraid, I did not find. What passed for wickedness was a hole-and-corner, afraid-of-being-caught, a shamefaced business; what passed for goodness an equally negative state that denied living and kept certain rules grudgingly and with sighs for the sake of safety and some reward in the future. Energy, raised to the intensity where it involved worship — though I did not phrase it so at the time — did not, exist at all. It was such a trumpery affair, the way folk lived. I wanted an intenser and quite different life that was somewhere within reach, within recovery. Memory played faintly round it like a flame, but a flame that was slowly and surely dying as I grew older. I longed to lift a curtain, to stretch the scale, to open life to some gigantic flood that was brimming just outside, ready to pour through and sweep me into joy and power. This immense tide hung waiting only just beyond the way we lived, but some small personal fear of its depth and extent alarmed us all. The key-note, at any rate, of this superior state I refer to was certainly joy. Joy was the quality that no one had — that joy, as I knew later, which is the essential quality of wisdom. The surprise, the unearthly touch, of wisdom, are mothered always by this towering sense of joy. It was the denial of joy everywhere that chafed and bruised me at a very early stage of my development, since it was, of course, a denial of life itself. That “yes” in the darkness of my bedroom was an affirmation of its accessibility. And memory was an ingredient.

The accessibility of this superior state I dreamed about remained my firm knowledge for a long time. It lay within reach still, here and now; it was really everywhere. Any moment I might pop back into it — at the end of the wet brambly lane, round the bend of a passage in the old house, behind the huge cedars, across the pond, a little further down the river. It was not in the future, but now; it was not away, but here. When least expecting it, I should come upon the exit through which I had slipped down into “this” — this life with parents, brothers, sisters, servants, governesses, gardeners, coachmen and policemen, all saying No from morning till night. And, once I came upon the exit, I could slip in again. But the way of slipping in or out I also had forgotten, and I made no special effort to recover it because it seemed so amazingly easy — a mere question of mood almost — that no effort was really necessary. It would come of its own accord. If people would only stop saying No so loudly, it would surely be upon me any moment.

Yet the actual way and method became more and more uncertain. Some kind of distance shrouded it in haze. It was then that I *tried* to get it back, but found that no mental effort was of any use, thinking and longing least of all. The conviction of genuine belief alone could manage the desired recovery, and it was this belief precisely that had begun to waver and grow dim in me as I got older. I must keep very still, intensely still, but with an interior stillness that was now escaping me, because no one knew of it, practised it least of all: this stillness within me I must find if I was to recover what I longed for before it was too late.

Then one day, quite suddenly, it came to me of its own accord. I did not discover it, but just knew. I did it. We called it — do you, my brother, as you read these notes, remember? — by a word of our own invention: *dipping.*

II

On the back lawn you and Val and I (Val just back from his first term at Charterhouse) were picking fir-cones that crackled sharply to the touch and had earwigs crawling between the dark little gaping crevices. A penny a hundred was the rate of payment father made, half in play and half in sermon-earnest, and the cones were burned eventually in the drawing-room fire, with the remark (if we happened to be present): “See how useful your labour was, my boys! No work is lost, nothing in life is wasted!” The sentence always made me feel rude; I wanted to deny it angrily, but never dared to. The actual picking, however, was rather fun. The crinkly cones with their ugly brown inhabitants were mysterious; the pincers of the insects fascinated me. As a rule, too, this collecting seemed important; it made a difference to the world; yet ever with this half-concealed provision, that it was actually a sham, and that one day some person or other would catch us at it and laugh. The humbug of it would be shown up.... One thing that held my interest, perhaps, was the quantity, and the way the cones deceived me. At first they appeared so few upon the lawn, so thinly scattered; yet half an hour’s labour apparently made no difference to the numbers left. The quantity, indeed, increased; the lawn seemed blacker. I could not make it out. And a hundred cones took up so small a space in the gardener’s wooden basket that smelt of leaves and mould.

On this particular occasion we were picking hard, with remarks at intervals about the number, the prospective pennies, and speculations as to which of us had collected the greater quantity, when, quite suddenly, there was a change.

I was kneeling up at the moment, watching Val — Val, who was so clever, who explained things and “knew it all”; — my head swam a little with the rush of blood from stooping; Val had filled his straw hat, but, forgetting the blue cord fastened to his button-hole, reached out an arm with a careless jerk that upset his entire store. He uttered an exclamation of disgust with a wry grimace, glancing round at me as though he hoped I had not seen the accident. I thought for a moment he was going to cry with disappointment. It was just then that a new mood — the change — came on me as with a burst of dazzling light.

The tiny comedy was set upon the big green lawn, the towering cedars behind, the vast summer sky of blue above. Such was the background to the trivial accident — an insignificant human miscalculation of time and distance, framed by the steady, unalterable immensities. The contrast made me catch my breath. I did not laugh, I felt no triumph or pity; I felt, indeed, no interest of any kind, but knew suddenly that I was unutterably bored. The occupation *was* a sham, it was absurd and trumpery. Someone — father perhaps — was laughing at us. This was not living, it was merely making the time go by without being counted. There were better things to do, real things, immense opportunities sliding past unclaimed. Indeed, we were humbugging as well as being humbugged. I, at any rate, could manage things differently, otherwise, quite otherwise. The sense of the superior state I had forgotten and was in danger of losing altogether came breathlessly close to me. I shivered.

I stopped. A huge simple joy stole over my whole being. I had a sense of awe that made me hold my breath and at the same time intensely happy. The thing I so yearningly desired was near to me as air, not in the future, not away, but here and now, I only had to claim it. There was rapture. I trembled, as though interiorly I was a sheaf of fine, taut wires drawn thin as silk, and a wind passed over them.

I waited, kneeling upright on the grass and staring. Nothing happened at first. All my activities, not merely the gathering of the fir-cones, came to rest. My inner being had become intensely still. Of Val I was no longer aware, I hardly saw him; but I saw you, my brother; I stared, watching you in your alpaca suit of overalls, as you stooped and picked and stretched out your arms and legs in the sunshine. You moved slowly; and I marvelled why you continued grubbing so contentedly on one spot of ground. You crawled laboriously over the lawn, a few inches at a time, panting with effort, like some monster-insect badly made, clumsily jointed: even the earwigs moved with more skill and cleverer energy.

It was ludicrous; yet I realised you were doing this on purpose and had not really “forgotten” any more than I had. It was a phantom you I watched; the real you looked on, looked down, from this superior state. You yourself watched the phantom “you” with detachment that was not quite indifference. Sharply then I realised another thing: you picked fir-cones with all your energy, because you knew it was the purpose for which you were here. I was vividly aware in that instant of those two different points of view respectively: neither of us had “forgotten”; but, whereas I revolted and wished to be otherwise, you accepted the present and were content. I felt ashamed of myself while this flashed through me. With its passing, however, my own point of view shot uppermost again. I thought you obstinate, stupid, but knew that I loved you dearly.

“You are my darling brother,” I thought to myself, “only it’s stupid-silly — (you remember our childhood superlative?) — of you to be satisfied with this. Why in the world don’t you...?”

But the actual word escaped me; there was a gap where the right word should have been. The swift, fluttering effort to find it bore fruit afterwards only with the invention of “dip” and “dipping.”

“Let’s go!” I cried instead. “Let’s go on!” It was the nearest I could come to the meaning of what I felt, but could not say. There was an abrupt and passionate vehemence in my voice; in my heart there was absolute conviction. Quietly, without looking up, you replied, “There are more over here,” and continued to fill your basket. The rattle of the cones, as you tossed them in, came to me already from a distance.

‘Yes, yes,” I exclaimed excitedly, for I had the horror that you were missing an amazing opportunity, “but why stick in one place like this? It’s awful. We can be anywhere — everywhere at once — doing everything!” I remember the frantic impossibility of finding words to express what I felt so sure of— “Come on, Dick! Come with me!”

Caught by something in my voice, perhaps, you stopped picking and looked up; there was a steady expression in your big blue eyes. You said nothing. I felt that you knew more than I did after all. You wished to restrain me, though at the same time you would have liked to “go.”

I sprang up quickly, lest forgetfulness of the way should catch me. “Anyhow,” I cried, “I’m going — !”

And then I heard your solemn whisper: “Look out!” you said softly, “it’s not allowed, you know. You mayn’t be able to get back. They’ll cry about you. Mother’ll be in a state. Besides, you’ll only miss all *this*—”

There was a catch in your voice and breath as you said it; you were eager and ready; you knew the way; but, for some wiser reason than I guessed, you thought it a mistake to go. I confused, I think, the real you and the other that picked fir-cones and objected. I hesitated for a fraction of a second, the merest fraction. At the same moment I saw Val watching us — watching me in particular — and the startled expression on *his* face decided me. For he was afraid. I realised his vanity, his self-importance, his ignorance; either he had never known, or had entirely forgotten; remembering nothing of this “other” state, he was a sham, unreal, supremely satisfied with himself and with his condition. “Oh, dear,” I thought, “almost everybody’s like that!” And I cried at the top of my voice, bursting with joy and confidence, “I’m off!”

Val gave a gasp, and shouted “Where?” And I wanted to reply, but had no time to get the words out; besides, the right words would not come.

“Look, Dickie! Look!” I cried happily. You smiled into my eyes, but said no word. And I went.

The effort, if effort there was at all, was of some interior and delicious kind that was familiar. It was not muscular, though it was accompanied by a certain tautening of the muscles about the heart and abdomen — a sensation of heat in the pit of the body — followed instantly by a complete and comforting relaxation. It seemed a species of inner determination; perfect assurance, absolute conviction made it possible and even easy. I had no doubt that I could “go.” I knew. And there was joy in me beyond anything my words can possibly explain.

I went. It was a change of condition really, but the terms of physical motion describe it best. I went out gliding, as in those flying-dreams so many know, and the slight effort was due to the fact that I had forgotten how to exercise the power properly. As in the flying-dream, I now recovered this half-forgotten power. “I can do this again when I wake,” thinks the dreamer. “I’ve remembered at last,” I thought; “how jolly!” Had I then known Bergson’s suggestion that the flying-dream is due to the feet being deprived of their customary support, I could have given him the he. The flying-dream is a racial, but also an individual, memory of the means of transition to this other “state.” It is supremely easy; only it must be recovered young, before Reason and excess of physical sensation obliterate instinctive knowledge of the method.

I went out gliding, gliding over the summer lawn. I looked down — down upon the fir-cones and the baskets, the cedar tops, the crescent flower-beds, the bushy horse-chestnut and its bulging shadow, the gravel drive, the squat, fore-shortened Manor House. All lay beneath me, curiously flat. You I saw clearly, I saw Val in a haze; and while you increased for me somehow, there was about Val that flat and meaningless quality, as of an empty shell almost, which touched the other objects also with unreality.

And the expression in *his* face I cannot forget: the staring eyes, the mouth wide open, the perspiration on the puckered forehead, the coat pulled out where the hat-cord tugged at it, and then the look of sheer amazement passing into terror, as he stretched his bare arms out, turned jerkily, as though the power of co-ordinating his movements were impaired, and ran headlong towards the house. He had no breath to scream, or possibly the sound did not reach me; for his attitude was a scream materialised. He disappeared. Yet not by going into the building; it was more a fading out, a dying away, as a reflection fades from a pool when the sun is hidden or a puff of wind obliterates it. He vanished into a depth. He was withdrawn from my consciousness. The phantom Val was all I knew. He was unreal.

With you, however, precisely the opposite took place; you became instantly more real. It seemed I knew you for the first time fully, and understood the reason for the deep tie between us. We both shared another, bigger, but quite different state. The little figure in alpaca overalls picking fir-cones was not really you at all. It was a phantom you. We now came together for the first time properly, or, as I felt it then, “we were together again — at last.”

There was union and the full, rapturous joy of union. The idea of being everywhere at once, of sharing everything, seemed amazingly justified.

I cannot say that you joined in my actual physical motion, that you definitely came with me on my gliding, sliding change. It was rather that when I arrived I found you already there; and “there” was a state we had both left temporarily, come down from, as it were, in order to pick fir-cones and do other little necessary things — little things, trivial and unimportant in themselves, yet the doing of which increased our value, our reality. Everybody in the world had similarly “come down,” but the majority became so absorbed in the ‘little, trivial things” that they forgot. Father, for instance, though he went to church as regularly as to the Treasury where he worked, had not the least idea — he denied that there could be a way back at all. And this was why everyone said No so often and so loudly. The important thing was to continue picking fir-cones as long as possible and as many as possible. Whatever enfeebled or endangered the picking faculties must be prevented. Picking to fill one’s basket, and to fill it first before anybody else, was the sole criterion of reality and a useful life. Church and the Treasury were both, to father, a form of picking fir-cones, and any suggestion that reality lay in a different state was merely stupid-silly. This flashed into me as clearly as the meaning of cake and jam at tea-time....

We were properly together, anyhow, you and I, and the joy was wonderful; but not only was I properly with you, for I was in everything everywhere, not stuck in one spot any more, but able to do anything everywhere at once. I had this power, this rapture.... At the same time, *you* understood, apparently, that picking cones on a single spot, and so forth, was worth doing, and worth doing well. It was not to be shirked by any means. We picked experience while we did so, experience that was carried over and stored up in our “other” state, making us more real, and our eventual happiness even more complete. This, too, was very clear to me, simple, easy, and overwhelmingly convincing.

“We mustn’t stay too long,” you said at once. “They’ll be frightened, you see. Besides” — and you laughed happily, as though you referred to a brief, almost an instantaneous interlude— “we want to finish, don’t we? Let’s get it done. Then we can be together...”

There was more I cannot remember, but what I do remember with vividness is the feeling of deep, lasting joy that accompanied your phrase, “then we can *be* together.” For it involved everything that those who love, yet fear separation, most ardently desire — complete and permanent union. I was too young, of course, in those days to have realised death, yet I saw clearly as in brilliant sunshine that death, where love is, meant only the transition into this other “state” where separation was not even a possibility. It was, I suppose, my first experience of a spiritual value. The meaning of *Now* was shown to me.

But another thing was also clear: Val had looked on death, or on what he thought was death. For him the only reality was picking fir-cones, and the Val that picked them was the only Val he knew. He had “forgotten” everything. Thinking I was dead, he experienced the nameless terror that is the bogey of his kind — of those who have forgotten.

III

I found myself in bed. There was a darkened room full of soft rustling and whispering. Busy figures moved to and fro on tiptoe like ghosts amid a general sense of hush. Mother and nurse were bending over me. There was a cold sponge and a feeling of anxiety and awe. I felt this anxiety, this awe, this fear, but I wanted to laugh; I could not understand this peculiar atmosphere of dread. It was unnecessary humbug. I could have screamed. A yearning sadness next came over me. Then I laughed. And the laughter brought relief, although it frightened the others. Afterwards — long afterwards — it was reported that I hung between life and death. Isn't that delicious? A comic statement — the sort of thing a grub might say about a chrysalis: it hung between life and death before it emerged and flew as a butterfly!... A hand stroked my forehead, I knew half-sensations.

Of these half-sensations I was uncomfortably aware. With an effort I had come back, I was shut in again, enclosed, confined in something that had the pain of limitation, yet of limitation that was somewhere valuable. The truth was I had forgotten again, or was beginning to forget, and hence the half-sensations.... They explained presently that I had fainted in the sun; "a touch of sun," they called it; and when I laughed at this the cold sponge descended on my neck and forehead and the whispers multiplied.

"Lie quite still, my darling, quite, quite still. Do not excite yourself. You're safe at home, and Mummie's looking after you!"

It never occurred to them that I might have looked after Mummie.

It was marvellously sweet and tender, but O, how futile and how ignorant! I knew so much; I could tell so little — nothing and less than nothing. I had come back, I was caught again. They could not know, because they had "forgotten." At last the cold sponge ceased descending on my neck and forehead; I fell asleep; and when I woke again the curtains were drawn back and the sun poured over the room. "That's real, at any rate," I remember thinking, as I felt the warmth upon my skin. The light made me happy, though I knew not exactly why.

I recovered very quickly. It had been something of a false alarm apparently. There were no ill results, although hourly warnings about the sun continued for a long time, and Val was afraid of me for the rest of the holidays. "I thought you were dead," was all he said. "I saw you tumble down flat, you know." He was white as he spoke of it. "Once I saw a chap fall on his head from the parallel bars and kill himself," he added. "By Jove, you know — it's awful," Having looked on death, he was afraid of life.

What you thought and felt you never said. You were a solemn little owl. Our love seemed more near and understanding than before. I date our realisation of it from that time, at any rate. But, also, from that moment I knew another thing that lay at the back of my brain; I knew it subconsciously perhaps without explanation or analysis. What one knows and believes subconsciously affects all one does in a natural, instinctive way, whereas what one reasons out is a matter of calculation — one is for ever persuading oneself that it is true. This thing I now knew was, perhaps, that daily life was but an interlude of no real duration in a bigger but a different matter, and that death simply closed the interlude — if a state without duration can be said to have an end. My intense desire for things to be "quite otherwise" was actually a memory therefore, true and deep, yet hidden with extraordinary care behind my brain. My true self was not involved with this fir-cone picking business except to watch it and be wise; it dwelt apart, detached from good and evil, so-called; it was everywhere and for ever. It was my "otherwise." To be identified with it meant to know peace and joy and those indescribable states which are of the spirit and of eternity, but to know them *Now.* To forget — as Val forgot it — meant to be unreal. As a dream of ten seconds may seem indefinitely prolonged, so it was with daily life. At the close of the dream the sleeper wakes and says: "Is that all?" The dream has been an interlude without duration.

Although I can give no further details of what I experienced after I went out gliding, I remembered it for a long time with happy wonder. The tang of its unforgettable ecstasy came back with me. I had known power, sweetness, joy; it was complete and satisfying; I had been everywhere, dipped and merged in everything; and you were with me. Young as I was, I realised this great completeness. "It was all right," as I said to you; and the phrase seems to me now significant: *all* and *right*.... My yearning to be "otherwise" had been justified. I *had* been otherwise. I had been dipped, then come up to the surface again. And I remember saying this to you, wondering at your owl-like silence, although you knew far more about it all than I did, and then your remark at the end: "Yes. It's all right, but I vote we stay down for a bit all the same. I think we've got to — don't you see?"

Then, gradually, as we grew older, the memory of the experience faded and grew dim. At school it became heavily obscured, at Sandhurst I forgot it. I did not forget the experience, that is, but I forgot the feelings that accompanied it. I could not reconstruct those feelings; I did not even wish to.... Only much later, with the thrill and the opening of the heart by beauty, did the *feelings* partially return to me....

I know now, of course, that it is possible to pick fir-cones on the surface, yet to dip and be otherwise, simultaneously; that this, in fact, is really living. Picking fir-cones helps to build empires, but builds the empire of oneself as well; it is human and necessary, whereas “dipping” is exceptional and divine. Everybody wants to be dipped, yet knows not how to achieve it. Being afraid of death, they are afraid of life — afraid to live. They think that picking fir-cones is the way. They have “forgotten.” For, instead, it is the *way* they pick fir-cones that is the Way!

The Open Window

THE BUNGALOW STOOD in some twenty acres. Three hundred yards away, across the field, ran the dense belt of woods — oak, chestnut, larch — that closed the view to the south, but kept the house so delightfully shut in. This belt, a hundred yards deep, with undergrowth of thick holly, formed a wall none could look over, the bungalow nestling, so to speak, within its encircling arm of leaves. A track meandered through it lengthwise, but there was no straight way across to the path that ran along its outer edge, linking the village to the church. Beyond it lay the common, wild with gorse and scattered pines, rising to the deep Sussex sky....

The owners, imaginative folk, having lived there ten years without moving, were proud of The Wood: “It keeps us so private, you see. No one can look through at us. It’s so protective.” Wild horses could not have dragged them from this bit of rural England that was “so private... so protected by our belt of woods...” whose effect, indeed, pervaded even one’s outlook upon life — the great life outside, beyond. The mind dwelt securely under that “protection.” One’s very ideas were screened and sheltered from the big winds that blow.

From the bungalow verandah it rose with fine dignity against the sky; no gleam pierced its impenetrable tangle. The crowding holly saw to that. The dogs hunted in it, the children picked firewood, the little pigs and chickens sometimes got lost in its depths, but its only real inhabitants were grey squirrels, a pair of wood-peckers, and a dozen screaming jays. And on windy nights it roared like the surf against some lonely island shores.... “It’s the making of the place, *we* think” — the guests who came and went invariably in agreement. “Rather!” they said. “You’re so nice and cozy behind it, aren’t you? You can’t see through.” Then one adventurous and tactless fellow changed the formula, offering a new, upsetting point of view: “But you can’t see through it anywhere, can you?”

“No — rather not,” the owners assured him.

“Not even a bit of light — of sky — a glimpse of the horizon beyond?”

There was a silence. ‘What d’you mean?” they asked. His suggestion seemed almost rude. Then, shading his eyes with one hand, the fellow added the words that seemed so unnecessary: “I mean — you can’t see — *out!*” And the fat was in the fire.

He didn’t stay long, this adventurous guest, being, it seemed, of a roving disposition, an uncomfortable man accustomed to open spaces. The wide seas and the mountains called him. And grey dawns saw his “campfires in the rain” sort of person, who mentioned before he left that Even the mighty winds that range the seas

In water-spouts, typhoons, and hurricanes

Begin by chasing leaves down window-panes.

An unsettling creature, on the whole, with his travel talk, and in his eyes that long-distance look which tells of great horizons, wild, free winds, and the mystery of stars in lonely places. Moreover, he was “uncomfortable” to his hosts, too, because, in their otherwise delightful bungalow, he had an air of being somehow caught, imprisoned, trapped, while it was not, they perceived, the walls and roof that did this, but the encircling wood they thought so protective and so nice. “You can’t see *out!*” It was so unnecessary, but there it was. The seed was sown....

There stole upon them gradually, insidiously, from that moment a strange new restlessness. For they were imaginative folk. It was queer but undeniable. Curse the fellow! “A bit of light,” indeed! “A glimpse of the horizon,” forsooth!... They hid it from one another; they scoffed openly, ignored, tried to hold firm against such disturbing, dangerous ideas. They fortified themselves by combined resistance. But — well, there it was! The seed grew horribly. Why did both lawn and garden seem darker now than formerly? Why did thought travel in odd moments far afield? Why did the husband sometimes surprise his wife with dreaming eyes, and she catch him once or twice with that new, that awful expression, which meant — only too plainly desire to escape? It was most upsetting. Those gaudy books, too, from the Library, illustrated, of course... and a faint suggestion — it was quite absurd! — that there was less air about, almost a hint of suffocation on windless days, as though the view from the south windows were now small, suddenly, and limited. “Did *you* order this, Maud?” fingering the yellow volume. “No, but I thought you might like to glance at it, dear.” The

Marquesas, she remembered, were at a safe distance, but the gipsies camped upon the common, with their gleaming fires, their tents, their sweet blue smoke, and the yellow gorse hung ever shining to an open sky...

Imagination is a wicked phagocyte, whose poison works apace beneath dull skies. Leaden days suggest pictures of blue seas and golden sunsets to the heart. The trees turned red and yellow, the smoke of burning leaves hung over the lawn, the shortening days and slanting sunlight laid the melancholy of autumn over the quiet place. But some nights the winds were loose.... Once she heard him mumbling: “Even the mighty winds that range the seas...” And then, one still November morning, very early, a sound on the paved garden below her window led to a full betrayal. For there he was, in pyjamas and dressing-gown, marking an arrow on the stones. She drew back, catching her breath a little. That arrow pointed south towards the wood. “Oh, I was just taking a line,” he explained at breakfast. “If we cut a little vista — oh, the *tiniest* little slit, of course — our windows would look — er — further.” She watched his face. “We should see a bit of sky, I mean.”

“Something quite informal,” she offered, “a mere track?”

“Oh, dear me, yes,” he agreed; “the merest little tiny glade that would let the light through, you know.”

They did it themselves; no workmen helped; they chopped the trees, uprooted the holly, made great bonfires that crackled and clothed the garden with a sweet blue gipsy smoke. Bit by bit light sprinkled and peeped in... and at last the great day came, a wild February morning with glad lengthening hours, when the sky was visible, the horizon beyond shone through. That night from the verandah they saw the gipsy fires gleam, they saw the moonlight’s silver on the stems, and down the little vista thought travelled magically to mysterious, far horizons beneath other stars. In the daytime the south wind blew softly through, bringing her messages of blue seas, of flowers, of enchanted islands far away...

It was dusk when they saw the figure come towards them down the little winding glade, his outline just discernible against the fading sunset. “You!” they exclaimed. “Why, where in the world did you drop from?” He explained that he was staying in the neighborhood. He looked about him.

“But — how splendid,” he remarked casually. “It’s twice the place it was. You can see out now! You’ve opened a window.”

They begged him to stay the night. ‘We’re off to Egypt,” they explained, “in a few days.” But he declined the offer. “My tent,” he mentioned, “lies just out there,” pointing through the glade towards the common, “I’m on the wander too. I must be pushing off... But, I say — what a lovely place to — come back to!”

They watched his figure melting out into the darkening sky as he went silently down the glade, finally disappearing from view as though merged in the horizon.

Petershin and Mr. Snide

PETERSHIN, A RETIRED Insurance Surveyor, had always nursed a private terror that one day the night express would catch him on a level crossing, that his foot would get jammed between the rails, and that he would not have the courage to saw it off with his penknife.

This secret dread had haunted his mind since childhood.

Owing to circumstances that need no particular mention at the moment, he let out his secret one evening to a valued acquaintance. He spoke of it, in some detail, to John Snide, a book-seller in a small way and a publisher of occasional pamphlets, a married man of education and authority.

“Really, Petershin,” observed Mr. Snide. “Now, that’s very odd. It’s a coincidence, I might say. For, d’you know, now that you mention it, I may say I’ve always had a similar dread myself.” He took off his glasses and wiped them thoughtfully.

“No,” exclaimed Petershin with lively interest. “Have you really?”

He was relieved to find that his terror was not so peculiar after all that no one else could share it. Raising his eyebrows he listened attentively.

“I have, indeed,” Mr. Snide assured his friend. “Only in my case” — he put his glasses on his nose and looked over them at his companion— “in my case, Petershin, there’s — a difference.” He was addressing, of course, an inferior fellow.

Both voice and manner betrayed a slight suggestion of superiority, as though it would hardly do to feel precisely what the other felt. Apparently, a shade more value had to be inserted.

Petershin accepted the slight rebuke. “A difference, Mr. Snide!” he echoed, as one whom a fellow-sympathy made intelligently understanding. That he was accustomed to keep his place was conveyed in the familiar yet respectful “Mr.”

“In my own case,” resumed the other, nodding with what he might have called, had he been pressed, a “soupçon” of advantage, “the difference is, that, while my foot will be jammed somewhat as you describe, I shall have,” he went on carelessly, “no penknife on me.”

“Really! Now, if that isn’t peculiar!” declared Petershin, where an inferior mind must have phrased it “Well — I’m damned!” He hoped he had suitably conveyed the admiration of his friend’s courage.

Mr. Snide nodded with comfortable assurance, and the talk, thus begun, continued volubly for an hour or so, Mrs. Snide not being in the particular building at the time....

Petershin liked Mr. Snide. He rather looked up to him as being a cultured man, learned in books, even something of a scholar. The way he quoted from authors proved this. He saw little of him, however, because he was afraid of Mrs. Snide, whom he considered “too particular.” Once or twice he had gone into the shop, just a little before lunch time, and had invited Mr. Snide to join him in a few minutes’ stroll, and Mrs. Snide had distinctly mentioned that it was inconvenient— “Gentlemen didn’t go for a stroll just before meal-time — when it was raining.” She had noticed, too, his celluloid collar, with a remark he did not quite catch, but an unfavourable remark, he felt sure; because, later, when Petershin advised Mr. Snide to use one, the latter said: “Yes, Petershin, they *are* practical, I admit, and a saving too, no doubt, but — er — the wife thinks they’re not quite the thing for me, being — as I might say — among books, you see.”

“*Reely* they don’t catch fire,” explained Petershin eagerly, not understanding at first what was meant. “There’s not the smallest danger of that sort—”

“A man — the wife holds — is what he wears,” Mr. Snide interrupted him. From which moment Petershin despised and feared Mrs. Snide, realising that she was “too particular.” The phrase, moreover, was obviously a quotation from some book, and a quotation from a great author invariably overwhelmed Petershin with a painful sense of his own inferiority, reducing him to an uncomfortable and admiring silence.

Mrs. Snide, Petershin had ascertained, disapproved of him for another reason than that of his external appearance, for her husband had been detained one night, getting home at 3 a.m., to be exact — and his explanation had not quite satisfied "the wife."

"Oh, I was out with an insurance man," he said. "A surveyor, my dear," he added, when pressed, "with Mr. Petershin, in fact."

That was all Mr. Snide said; but, apparently, his wife had said a good deal more. Mr. Snide had mentioned the matter to him afterwards — briefly. Wherefore it was that Petershin did not see as much of his friend as he would have liked to see, and was, in addition, rather afraid of Mrs. Snide.

The tendency to coincidence already mentioned continued, nevertheless, to bring the two acquaintances together by chance, finding both, as if by chance again, affected by a similar, or as Mr. Snide might have said, an identical emotion. This emotion they shared accordingly, exchanging confidences, as two intelligent men will when actuated by the same desire simultaneously. Yielding to Mrs. Snide's disapproval, however, they were cautious in the matter of referring to these chance meetings afterwards — at least Mr. Snide was, being a tactful and experienced man. Nor again, respecting Mrs. Snide's wishes, did they meet before a meal. Petershin no longer called at the shop just before luncheon for a little stroll. It was usually after dinner that the spirit of confidence brought one across the other's path.

These occasions began invariably with Petershin's saying invitingly:

"Now, here we are! And what's it going to be, Mr. Snide? Eh?"

They ended invariably with an observation from Mr. Snide — much later:

"Well — I'll be getting on, Petershin. Time slips away on rapid wing. The wife'll be expecting me," a glance at his friend's collar conveying the hint that its wearer was not expected to accompany him, and the quotation, if it were such, having its invariable effect,

One of these occasions, however, though inaugurated by Petershin's usual greeting, did not end quite according to formula, the reason being that Mrs. Snide had gone to the country to see her mother who was very ill, and had telegraphed that her return that night was uncertain: "Mother very gravely ill indeed may not be back to-night. Ada."

"Dear me," offered Petershin, by way of sympathy. "Worse, is she?"

“Much worse, yes, apparently,” replied Mr. Snide. “In fact, I might say, dying.”

“Dear me, dear me!” repeated the other, his voice lower, his eyebrows higher. “Is she *reely?*”

“I’m afraid so,” was Mr. Snide’s considered opinion, given slowly and repeated for the sake of emphasis. “I’m afraid she is.” He reflected a moment, idly fingering a glass that happened to be near his hand, then adding as a result of his reflection: “I might say I’m sure of it.” And immediately thereafter, before his friend could offer anything further by way of condolence, he brushed the entire matter from his mind with a free gesture of the hand and elbow, and invited Petershin to join him in the discussion of the various interests they possessed in common.

“For why meet trouble half-way?” he added, as an afterthought. “A wise man should float above sorrow and keep his head well above water always.”

“Say when,” Petershin interrupted, happening to be pouring out some water at the moment.

“And that’s courage, it seems to me?” the other finished his sentence, ignoring the interruption, though quickly holding up two fingers in an absent-minded yet peremptory manner.

“It is indeed,” concurred Petershin sympathetically, and with a touch of respect due to his persuasion that he had listened to a quotation from some famous author. “That *is* courage, yes,” he repeated, adding with a slight inconsequence, “Here’s *to* you, sir!”

Whereupon the conversation led easily into exchanges of a personal, even of a confidential nature, the two friends being evidently in a chatty and exuberant mood that favoured such intimate exchanges.

Outside, the weather was cold and dreary, a bitter wind from the north threatening snow. Darkness had fallen, as with a clap of suddenness, before its time. It was inclement weather, as Mr. Snide might have said, or, as Petershin in other company would have described it — filthy. Unfavourable, anyhow, each felt in his own particular way, to Mrs. Snide’s mother.

“No weather for an invalid, Mr. Snide, this — is it?” was what Petershin remarked, to which the other replied briefly but with energy, indeed, with gusto, as he might have said— “dangerous, I call it dangerous.”

Both references, it is seen, were indirect; an allusion of sympathy to the illness, each felt, was proper and desirable, while yet it need not detain them. There were other matters to discuss.... The sense of leisure was pleasant, the warmth of the room was comfortable, each man found the other’s conversation stimulating. Ideas certainly flowed. The hours slipped easily away....

It was Petershin who made the first move to leave: “You’ll be getting anxious, Mr. Snide,” he observed. “I mushtn’t keep you up.” He crossed cautiously to the window and, wiping the moisture off with the curtain, peered out into the night. “Shnowing, by gad!” he exclaimed. “Shnowing thick-an’-fasht!” His manner held an unaccustomed dignity. It was a stiff, exaggerated dignity.

Behind his back Mr. Snide, first looking at his watch, replied easily, as one who is master of circumstances, “Not a bit, Petershin. Be an optimist, my lad. Those whom the gods love die young—”

“But, I tell you it is,” interrupted Petershin brusquely, thinking his veracity was called in question. “Evershing’s white already. The air’s thick with it. Like a Chrismhascard.” Then, returning to his seat, he caught his companion’s powerful eye fixed on him. “Mr. Shnide,” he added, with an effort, “beg pardon, but it izsch — reely.”

He sat down, fumbling with his watch. He did not want a disagreement with his superior friend. He made no further comment.

“The nightsh still young,” Mr. Snide mentioned presently. “Let it snow. Wha’dowe care, Pee’shin?”

And they chatted on for another timeless interval....

“Shtill snowing, I igspec’,” Petershin offered in the middle of something Mr. Snide was saying with great deliberation. He had not gone to the window to look. It was merely that Mr. Snide had been talking for a very long time about a “soshlistic pamphlet” he was publishing, and that he, Petershin, had the impression it was time for him to say something by way of comment. Only, not having listened attentively, he could find no “reely” intelligent comment.

Mr. Snide paused, glowering heavily at him.

“To hell withyer shnow,” he said angrily. ‘You’ve not been lis’ning to what I washayin.” And before Petershin could find a tactful answer by way of soothing him, Mr. Snide looked at his watch, rose from his chair, stood for a moment hesitating, and then abruptly sat down again, a broad smile upon his face.

“Pe’ershin, my boy, the night is young,” he said with the emphasis of one who knows. His momentary annoyance was quite forgotten. “Time wearsh along but the night, I shure you, ish still young. And Mrs. Shnide is far from — far from ‘ome.”

Petershin agreed with a nod. It was partly a quotation.

An hour later, when they rose to take their leave (as Mr. Snide might have said, but did not actually say), the driving snow was so thick in their faces and upon the ground that Mr. Snide, catching his companion by the arm with delightful friendliness, observed:

“Well take zhe shor’cut. Thaswashwell do. An’ you come to my placesh. Accept my hospital’ty for the night. I’ll put you up, Pe’shin. She’s probly dead. Shll right, old boy. The godsh love thoshwho die young.”

“No thanksh,” Petershin replied with dignity, “prefer to be excushed,” but, perhaps yielding to the spell of the quotation about the gods, he accompanied Mr. Snide forthwith arm in arm, into the inclement snowstorm.

It was what Snide might have called “reely a heavy storm.” Thick snow swirled about them, drove into their faces, plastered their clothes with big clinging flakes, so that in five minutes they were white from head to foot. They panted with effort. It was no time for speech. Petershin, blindly confident in his friend’s leadership, ploughed forward heavily. No other pedestrians were out on such a night. They passed no single person, and the snow lay six inches deep upon the ground. It was the wind, of course, that made them sway.

To Mr. Snide first occurred the idea of calling a halt to recover breath; he accompanied the action with an observation of some violence which his companion did not quite catch.

“Pardon?” bawled Petershin, looking up a second into a red face whose eyebrows and moustache were hung with white dripping flakes.

“This is an orspishcashun,” roared Mr. Snide, but again the words were whirled from his lips by the tremendous wind. He stood with his back to the gusts, Petershin facing him.

“Can’t hear wotyoushay,” yelled the latter, and then turned his back to the storm. He now stood sideways to his friend, and being sheltered a little he glanced up and repeated very loudly “What?”

Mr. Snide roared back at him: “I only said orspishcashun” — the wind again whipped the syllables into space, while at the same time it upset his balance a trifle, so that he reeled slightly towards his companion. They collided, in fact, though speedily separating themselves again and standing upright.

“Ver’ sorry,” screamed Petershin, still anxious to hear what the lost sentence was, but feeling the fault lay with himself. “Aw fly sorry, but I didn’t qui’ hear.” He glanced up at the same time, and the red face he saw, plastered with wet snow, the hat crooked and the end of a necktie sticking up through the coat collar towards the mouth, made such a funny picture that he burst suddenly into a spasm of uncontrollable laughter.

“Woshthematter, you idjiut?” cried Mr. Snide, suddenly angry. “I only said that was an” — he articulated very clearly, roaring his syllables against the storm— “orspishush’cashun. What the devil—”

Petershin’s laughter died away on the instant. “Oh,” he yelled back. “Pardon me, Mr. Snide. Awspishush’casion, yes. So it is. Qui’ right, of course.” It cost him a prodigious effort, but the words, despite the wicked wind, rang true and clear.

“Tha’s woshlsaid,” came back the angry roar. “Why don’ you liss’n?”

Petershin, crestfallen and ashamed, tried to pull himself together, and as the mental effort involved also the physical effort of standing erect, he was surprised to find that there was something the matter with his feet. With one foot, that is. The left foot refused to follow the right. Mr. Snide, he became aware, was standing on it. It was an awkward moment. He did not quite like to mention it, but neither did he quite like to push Mr. Snide away. He wriggled. Nothing happened. Again he wriggled — furiously. It was no good. Mr. Snide was firmly planted apparently on his left foot. Petershin, still wriggling, was in the act of losing his balance altogether, when suddenly his companion stepped aside with a curiously unnatural movement. A clear space of two feet now lay between the two men; Mr. Snide could not possibly still be standing on his companion's left foot and yet that left foot would not budge.

Petershin struggled. Mr. Snide, he perceived, was struggling too. Each man, apparently, was making violent efforts to extricate his foot from the clutch of deep snow that somehow held it. Each had one leg stretched out stiff and straight at an awkward angle that provided leverage. But Petershin was the first to realise what had happened. He was the first to put it into words at any rate:

"Me foo's cau'," he gasped.

At the same moment both men lost their balance and fell sideways into a deep white drift.

Petershin, again, was the first to pick himself up — into a sitting position. He brushed the snow violently from his person. Immediately opposite to him, about three feet away, he stared into a red face with glaring, bloodshot eyes, cheeks, moustache and eyebrows caked with white, necktie askew, and one arm gesticulating vehemently in the air. For a second the impulse to burst out laughing was very strong, for Mr. Snide's appearance was grotesque beyond description. The same instant, however, the laughter died away in his throat. His friend was bawling something at him. The words were thick — with snow and wind. They horrified him:

"Me foo's cau' too! We're on the ra'way track! God shave us!"

The dreadful situation produced one immediate effort — both men found their mother tongue and were able to use it without difficulty, and simultaneously. They recovered their lost distinctness of utterance. Mr. Snide in particular, having the louder voice of the two, dropped his pose of quoting from better minds than his own, and became at once natural and sincere:

“You damned idjiut,” he roared. “What possessed you to ta’ the shor’ cu’ on a night like this?” He stood upright again, after a tremendous struggle. He shook his fist, lost his balance in doing so, and collapsed again into the snow, still shouting as he floundered.

“You led me into this,” Petershin was shouting simultaneously. “It was *your* damfool s’gesstion.”

Then he collapsed beside him and, like two violent turkeys beating furious wings, or two veterans in a three-legged race with ankles fastened together, they made the snow fly in all directions, pulling vainly at each other in their attempts to rise, roaring imprecations while they did so. It was a grotesque and painful sight. Breathless at last, with right hands clasped for a final pull, arms taut and shoulders braced there came a pause.

“Now,” cried Mr. Snide. “Are you ready? One, two, and — away!”

They rose together as though a spring released them. Facing each other in a standing position, as if they were shaking hands, Petershin then turned his head sideways a moment and listened. A sound came to him that was not the wind.

“Snide!” he screamed. “It’s the ni’ express!”

“And me foo’sstill cau’!” both roared in the same breath.

In the distance was a faint glimmer of reddish light just visible through the driving flakes. It was growing larger, brighter. There was a deep sound like thunder. It was growing every second louder. And, without a word at first, both figures stooped, bent double, fumbling at their feet with frozen fingers that were all thumbs.

“Lend me yo’ penknife,” both shouted frantically together.

“Lef it at home,” bawled two minds with but a single thought.

“Got a match?” yelled Snide. “Li’ it at once. Li’ a bit o’ paper, can’t you?” Petershin did not answer. Not even an oil-can could have burned in such a wind.

“Cut the laces!” It was Petershin’s generous idea. He suddenly shoved an open penkife at his friend, as though he wished to stab him.

“Good man!” Snide seized it and made frantic slashes at his imprisoned boot.

“Hurry up, for God’s sake! Haven’t done me own yet!” from Petershin.

The red light had come much closer, the roar of the approaching train already shook the ground and made the metals tremble.

“Lemme do it for you,” bawled Snide. “I’m free!” He leant over, he bent himself double, his arm was stretched towards his friend’s boot, but in the attempt he lost his balance and fell outwards, away from the track. At the same instant, when the awful engine was not ten yards from where he had been standing, Petershin, making a desperate wrench of final, superhuman, almost acrobatic violence, extricated his own foot too. The wind from the engine flung him with violence against Mr. Snide’s prostrate body. His foot had torn loose, leaving the boot tight in the rails beneath the thundering wheels. It was an effort that would have surprised an osteopath.

The night express, oblivious of two human hearts within an inch of its flying mass, roared past into the darkness and, light, thunder, rattle, bulk and all, was lost in the storm. The wind and the driving snowflakes resumed their unchallenged occupancy of the night.

“Get orf of me, you lout!” was the first sound audible, after the bang and clatter were gone. It was Mr. Snide’s voice, muffled by something that impeded clear utterance. A big, white, shapeless substance rolled slowly to one side — and Petershin stood up.

“It passed right over us — I do believe,” he gasped. “Are we alive?” He felt himself over. A second shapeless white mass rose gradually beside him. “*I* am,” it shouted. “But no thanks to you!”

From the path of a slow-moving luggage train on the other track where they were now standing, they moved shakily aside. The great, endless thing went lumbering past them with convulsions, jolting and shuddering, the enormous tarpaulins over the piled-up freight looking like white mammoths galloping on short legs and with hidden heads, back to the shelter of their primeval forests.

The two men watched it slowly vanish. For a long time neither spoke a word. The appalling fate they had escaped left them half-stunned.

“Have you done with my penknife — Mr. Snide?” Petershin enquired presently, shouting as usual to make himself heard. Mr. Snide replied that he had and added “Thank you” while a search for the knife began, ending some minutes later by its being discovered still tightly clasped in the right hand of the man whose life it had undoubtedly saved.

“With many thanks,” repeated Mr. Snide, more composedly now. He handed over the object with a mixture of carelessness and *empressement* in his manner.

“Don’t mention it, please,” said Petershin. Both men were very shaky still. Indeed, they were trembling. But recovery was on the way.

The search for two boots then followed. Of these, however, little remained beyond the soles and some scraps of frayed laces. Wearing these sandal-wise, and complainingly bitterly of the cold, the two friends eventually resumed their journey arm-in-arm. They spoke little.

“I — er — should like to say thank you,” repeated Mr. Snide, as they presently reached the comparative shelter of the houses. “Your knife — the loan of it — was a great help to me. So small a thing can change the waysh of fate! Indeed, I might say—”

“Oh, please. It’s nothing, Mr. Snide,” interrupted Petershin. “Only too glad I had it with me — after all.”

“I might say,” continued the other, ignoring the interruption, “that it saved my life.” He pressed his friend’s hand, as they reached the door. A lump rose in Petershin’s throat. He was not far from tears. The proximity of the forbidden door, however, exercised a sobering effect. Mrs. Snide, of course, might have returned, he reflected. He paused inside the iron garden gate, then made a move as though to go.

“One minute,” enjoined Mr. Snide, observing his hesitation, but sympathetically. “Allow me,” he added in the tone of a host, as he passed in front and inserted his latchkey with some difficulty. The proprietor pushed open his faded blue door and turned up the light in the little hall. His sandal had slipped off, but he did not notice it perhaps, as he moved on tiptoe to the table below the hat-rack where a telegram was visible.

Petershin, watching him from the snowy step with anxious eyes, was not even aware that his left foot was freezing in the icy slush. He picked up his friend's lost sandal and laid it cautiously inside the passage.

"One minute," enjoined Mr. Snide, glancing back over his shoulder as a man who hesitates between authority and subservience. He opened the telegram.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, tapping it like an actor, then reading it again a little closer to the light. "It's or' ri'," he added, a happy smile spreading across his red face.

"I beg your pardon?" offered Petershin, choosing the longer form to gain time. Usually he was content with "pardon." He wished to make quite sure.

"It's or' ri', I said," repeated Mr. Snide briefly. "Come in, Pe'shin, come in, lad." He hung his hat up with an air.

Petershin advanced slowly into the forbidden hall. 'Your wife, I trust — ?" He meant to ask after the wife's mother, but his mind was a trifle confused, it seemed. "Everything's s'asfactry, I hope?" he faltered.

His host turned round and gazed at him, an expression of false gravity unable to mask the smile of genial hospitality that overpowered it.

"Qui' or' ri,' thank you," he replied. "Hang yer hat up!" He moved past and closed the door with a bang that echoed through the house and made Petershin jump. 'It's an inclement night. I'll get some shlippers."

"Thank you, thank you," murmured Petershin, shaking the snow from his hat, but still hesitating before he hung it up as bidden. "And your mother-in-law," he hastened to correct his little mistake. "I trust—"?

"It's or' ri', I've told you once," was the reply, given with some impatience. "She's dead. And my wife returns in the morning. Now, please make yourself at home, Pe'shin, my lad."

Petershin attempted a hasty calculation in his mind, but failed to arrive at a conclusion. Times, trains and distances were too involved for him at the moment. All he knew was that it was now somewhere about 3 o'clock in the morning.

“Come in and have a spot,” Mr. Snide was saying pleasantly. “The mills of the godsh grind surely, but they grind uncommon slow. Those whom the godsh love die sooner or later. It’s all ri’. I’ll put the kettle on and find the slippers.... We’ll have it hot.”

And Petershin followed his friend into the dining-room. It was at this moment that a new sound became audible behind him. It was a sound that froze his blood. His host, Mr. Snide, had evidently not heard it, for he was just then occupied in pouring out whisky with a generous air into two glasses, and he continued the operation steadily enough. He did not jump, at any rate. But neither did Petershin jump — for the simple reason that he could not jump. He could not move at all. He experienced a total paralysis of all his muscles. Tongue, legs, arms, head, all were held motionless in a vice of terror. Petershin was petrified, for the sound that thus tinned him into stone was a voice — the voice of Mrs. Snide:

“Is that you, Richard Snide?” she asked, as she came slowly down the stairs towards the hall.

No answer was forthcoming; the question, with a slight change in the wording that rendered it doubly awful, was repeated:

“Then it *is* you, Richard Snide?”

Petershin, still unable to move a muscle, was aware that the speaker now stood close behind him. She could see his celluoid collar. He could not turn his head, even had he dared. An acute anguish twisted his very entrails. His position became suddenly more than he could bear, so that he made an effort of supreme violence, even though he felt it might burst his heart: he tried to run.

The result was suffocating. He could not breathe properly. A second later he could not breathe at all. God! He was going to die! An awful yell for help escaped him, though meant at the same time to warn his companion. Mr. Snide, to his intense relief, looked round.

The red face was tilted back a little, as its owner poured into his mouth the contents of his glass, and a moment or two later rose in an oddly laborious way and remarked solemnly: say.

“Pe’shin, me lad, you’ve had ‘nough — more than nough, I might You’ve slept past closing time and your cell’ioid collar’s choking you.

The Man Who Was Milligan

MILLIGAN LOOKED ROUND the dingy rooms with an appraising air, while the landlady stood behind him, wondering whether he would decide to take them. She stood with her arms crossed; her eye was observant. She, in her turn, was appraising Milligan, of course. He was a clerk in a tourist agency, and in his spare time he wrote stories for the cinema. What attracted him just now in the very ordinary lodgings was the big folding-doors. All he really needed was a bed-sitting-room, with breakfast, but he suddenly saw himself sitting in that front room writing his scenarios — successfully at last. It was rather tempting. He would be a literary man — with a study!

“Your price seems a trifle high, Mrs. — er — ?” he opened the bargain.

“Bostock, sir, Mrs. Bostock,” she informed him, then recited her tale of woe about the high cost of living. It was unnecessary recitation, for Milligan was not listening, having already decided in his mind to take the rooms.

While Mrs. Bostock droned monotonously on, his eye fell casually upon a picture that hung above the plush mantelpiece — a Chinese scene showing a man in a boat upon a little lake. He glanced at it, no more than that. It was better than glancing at Mrs. Bostock. The landlady, however, instantly caught that glance and noticed its direction.

“Me ‘usband” — she switched off her main theme—” brought it ‘ome from China. From Hong-Kong, I *should* say.” And the way she aspirated the “H” in Hong made Milligan smile. He perceived that she was proud of the picture evidently.

“It’s wonderful,” he said. “Probably it’s worth something, too. These Chinese drawings — some of ’em — are very rare, I believe.”

The little picture was worth perhaps two shillings, and he knew it; but he had found his way to Mrs. Bostock’s heart, and, incidentally, had persuaded her to take a shilling off the rent. The picture, he felt sure, had been stolen by her late husband, a sea captain. To her it was a kind of nest-egg. If she ever found herself in difficulties, it would fetch money. Milligan, by chance, had stumbled upon what he called a “good line.”

Being an honest creature, he had no wish to use his knowledge, but every week thereafter, almost every day, indeed, some remark concerning the Chinese drawing passed between them: with the natural result that, while it bored him a good deal, he cultivated the theme, and in so doing gazed much and often at the Chinaman. That Celestial, sitting in the boat with his back to the room, rowing, rowing eternally across the placid lake without advancing, he came to know in every detail.

Every time Mrs. Bostock chatted with him, his eye wandered from her grimy visage to the drawing. He used it to end the chat with.

“I like your picture so much,” he observed. “It’s nice to live with.” He put it straight, he flicked dust from the frame with his handkerchief. “It’s so much better than these modern things. It’s worth a bit — I dare say—”

It chanced, at the time, that Lafcadio Hearn, the writer about Japan, was in his mind. He had once arranged a successful trip to Japan for a client of his firm, and the client had made him a present of one of Hearn’s strange and wonderful books. It was hardly in the line of Milligan’s reading, for it had no “film value,” and he had sold the book — a collection of Chinese *stones* — to a secondhand bookseller for a shilling. But he had glanced at it first, and a story in it had remained sharply in his mind: a story about a picture of a man in a boat. An observer, watching the picture, had seen the man move. The man actually began to row. Finally, the man rowed right out of the picture and into the place — a temple — where the observer stood.

Milligan thought it foolish, yet his memory retained the details vividly. They stuck in his head. The graphic description was realistic. Milligan caught himself thinking of it every time he met a Chinaman in the street, every time he sold a ticket to China or Japan. It rose, it flitted by, it vanished. The memory persisted. And the moment his eye first saw Mrs. Bostock’s treasure over the plush mantelpiece, this vivid memory of Hearn’s story had again risen, flitted by, and vanished. It betrayed its vitality, at any rate. Wonderful chap, that Hearn, thought Milligan.

All this was natural enough, without mystery, without a hint of anything queer or out of the ordinary. What was a little queer — it struck Milligan so, at any rate — was an idea that began to *grow in* him from the very first week of his tenancy.

"That *might* be the very drawing the fellow wrote about," occurred to him one night as he laboured at a lurid scenario which was to make his fortune. "Not impossible at all. It's an old picture probably. Exactly what Hearn described, too. I wonder! Why not?"

Why not, indeed? A fellow — especially a literary fellow — should use his imagination. Milligan used his. Sometimes he used it in prolonged labour till the early hours. The gas-light flickered across his pages, across that lake in China, across the boat, across the back and arms and pigtail of that diminutive Chink who rowed eternally over a placid Chinese lake without advancing an inch. The scenario of the moment brought in China, aptly enough. A glance at the picture, he found, was not unhelpful in the way of stimulating a flagging imagination.

Milligan glanced often. The gas-light was always flickering. Shadows were for ever shifting to and fro across Mrs. Bostock's worthless nest-egg. It was easy to imagine that the boat, the water, even the figure moved. Those dancing shadows! How they played about the arms, the back, the outline of the boat, the oars!

And when it was two in the morning, and the London streets lay hushed, and a great stillness blanketed the whole city, Milligan felt even a little thrilled. It was, he thought, "imaginative," to catch these slight, elusive movements in the drawing. He imagined the fellow rowing about, changing his position, landing. It helped his own mood, his incidents, his atmosphere. He had read Thomas Burke, of course. His scenarios always referred to Chinamen as "Chinks."

"That Chink's alive!" he whispered to himself. "By Jove! He moves in the picture. His place changes. It's an inspiration. I must use it somehow — !" And imagination, eerily stimulated in the deep silence of the sleeping city, was at work again.

This was the beginning of the strange adventure which befell the literary Milligan, whose imagination worked in the stillness of the small hours, but whose scenarios were never used.

"For why write scenarios," he said to me, "when you can *live* them?"

In Peking, ten or twelve years later, he said this to me, and I am probably the only person to whom this scenario he "lived" was ever confided.

In Peking his name was not Milligan at all. He was not working in a tourist agency. He was a rich man, aged thirty-eight, a "figure" in the English community there, a man of influence and position. But all that does not matter. What matters is the story of how he came to be in China at all — and this he does not know. He does not know how he came to be in China at all. There is no recollection of the journey even. Nor can he state precisely how he began the speculations and enterprises that made him prosperous, beyond that he suddenly found himself concerned in big, fortunate undertakings in the Chinese city.

There is this deep gap in the years.

"Loss of memory, I suppose they call it," he mentioned, after our chance acquaintanceship had grown into a friendship that gave me his confidence. What he *could* tell he told me frankly and without reserve, glad to talk of it, I think, to someone who did not mock, and making no condition of secrecy, moreover.

There was some link, apparently, between myself and the man who had been Milligan. Chance, that some call destiny, revealed it. And, as I listened to his amazing tale, I swore that on my return to London I would visit Mrs. Bostock and buy the picture. I wanted that Chinese drawing badly, I wanted to examine it myself. Her nest-egg at last should be worth something, as Milligan, ten years before, had told her.

What happened was, apparently, as follows: Milligan, first of all, discovered in himself, somewhat suddenly it seemed, a new interest in China and things Chinese. If the birth of this interest was abrupt, its growth was extremely rapid. China fairly leapt at him. He read books, talked with travellers, studied the map, the history, the civilisation of China. The psychology of the Celestial race absorbed him. The subject obsessed him. He longed to go to China. It became a yearning that left him no peace day or night. In practical terms of time, money and opportunity, the journey was, of course, impossible. He lived on in London, but actually he lived already in China, for where a man's thought is there shall his consciousness be also.

All this I could readily understand, for others, similarly, have felt the call and spell of countries like Egypt, Africa, the desert. There was nothing incomprehensible nor peculiar in the fascination China exercised upon the imaginative Milligan. It was his business, moreover, to sell exciting tickets to travellers, and China happened to have fired his particular temperament. Natural enough!

Natural enough, too, that, through this, the picture in his lodgings should have acquired more meaning for him, and that he should have studied it more closely and more frequently. It was the only Chinese object he had within constant reach, and he told me at wearisome length how he knew every tiniest detail of the drawing, and how it became for him a kind of symbol, almost a kind of sacred symbol, upon which he focussed his intense desires — frustrated desires. Wearisome, yes, until he reached a point in his story that suddenly galvanised my interest, so that I began to listen with uncommon, if a rather creepy, curiosity.

The picture, he informed me, altered. There was movement among its details that he already knew by heart.

"*Movement!*" he half-whispered to me, his eyes shining, a faint shudder running through his big body.

The sincerity of deep conviction with which he described what happened left a lasting impression on my mind. His words, his manner, conveyed the truth of a genuine experience. Hitherto only the back of the Chink's head had been visible. Then, one night, Milligan saw his profile. The face was turned. It now looked a little over the shoulder, and towards the room.

From this moment, though he never detected actual movement when it occurred, the alteration in the drawing was marked and rapid. The face retained its new position; the angle of the profile did not widen, but the position of oars and boat, the attitude of arms and back, their size as well, these now changed from day to day.

There was a dreadful rapidity about these changes. The figure of the Chink grew bigger; the boat grew bigger too. They were coming nearer. "I had the awful conviction," whispered the man who had been Milligan, "that they were coming — to fetch me. I used to get all of a sweat each time I saw the size and nearness grow. It was appalling, but also it was delightful somehow—"

I permitted myself a question: "Did your landlady notice it too?" I enquired, concealing my scepticism.

"Mrs. Bostock was ill in bed the whole time. She never came into the room once."

"The servant?" I persisted. "Or any of your friends?"

He hesitated. "The girl who did the room," he said honestly, "observed nothing. She gave notice suddenly without a reason. So did the next girl. I never asked them anything. As for my friends" — he smiled faintly—" I was too scared — to bring them in."

"You were afraid they might *not* see what you saw?" He shrugged his shoulders. "It scared me," he repeated, looking past me towards the shuttered windows of his study where we sat.

The account he gave of it all made my flesh creep even in that bright Peking sunshine. He certainly described what he saw, or believed he saw, as, day after day, night after night, that Chink rowed his boat slowly, slowly, surely, surely, very gradually, but with remorseless purpose, nearer, nearer — and nearer. The lodger watched. He also waited.

"The man," he whispered, "was rowing into the room. It was his purpose to row into the room. He was *coming to fetch me."* And he mopped his forehead at the thought of what had happened ten years ago.

Suddenly he leant forward.

"In the end," his thin voice rattled almost against my face, "he — did fetch me. I'm in that picture with him now. I'm not in China, as *you* think I am. This" — he tapped his chest, the chest of a successful business man—" is not me. I'm not Milligan. Milligan is in that picture with the Chink. He's in that boat. Sitting beside that Chink. Motionless. Being stared at by a succession of lodgers. Sitting in that stiff little boat. Very tiny. Not dead, but captive. Sitting without breath. Without feeling. Painted, yet alive. Caught on the surface of that placid Chinese lake until time or death dissolve the drawing—"

I thought he was going to faint, but, oddly enough, I did *not* think him merely mad. His mood, his crawling horror, his intense sincerity took me bodily into his own deep nightmare. He recovered quickly. He was a man who had himself always well in hand. He told me the end at once.

He had been to a dance and he came home tired, sober, having well enjoyed himself, it seems, about four in the morning. The time was early spring, and dawn was just giving faint signs of breaking, but the hall and passage of the house were still dark.

He entered his room and lit the gas, going at once to the mirror to have a look at himself. This was the first thing he did, he assured me, and in the mirror he saw, behind himself, the boat and the Chinaman, both of them — gigantic.

Gigantic was the word he used, though he used it, of course, relatively. The Chinaman was standing in the room. He was in the lake in front of the plush mantelpiece. The wall was gone — there was a sort of hazy space. Close at the Chinaman's heels lay the boat, both oars resting sideways on the water, their heads still in the rowlocks. Water was up to his feet, to Milligan's feet, for he not only felt his shoes soaked through, but he also heard the lapping sound of diminutive wavelets on the "shore."

He gave a great sigh. No cry, either of terror or surprise, he said, escaped him. His only sound was this great sigh — of acceptance, of resignation, of a mind benumbed and yet secretly delighted. The big Chink beckoned, smiled, nodded his yellow face, retreating very slowly as he did so. And Milligan obeyed. He followed. He stepped into the boat. The Chink took up the oars, and rowed him slowly, very slowly, across the placid lake, into the picture and out of his familiar, known surroundings, rowed him slowly, very slowly, into the land of his heart's deep desire.

* * * * *

All the way home to England in the steamer this strangest of strange narratives haunted me. I still saw the man who was Milligan sitting in the study of his big, expensive house as he told it to me. His shrewd business brain had built that house; the fortune he had made provided the good lunch and cigars we had enjoyed together. From the moment of entering the boat his memory had remained a blank. Continuity of personality though still, it seemed to me, rather uncertain somewhere, had revived only when he was already a rich man who had spent years in China. This big gap in the years remains.

In my mind lay every detail of the story; in my pocket-book lay the address of Mrs. Bostock's rooms. I prayed heaven she might still be living, even if aged and crumpled by ten more English winters.

I had arranged to cable "Milligan" at once; we had selected the very words I was to use: "Two figures in boat," or "One figure in boat." He asked for the message in these words. Fortune favoured me; I found the rooms; Mrs. Bostock was alive; the rooms were unoccupied; I looked over them; I saw — the picture.

Before visiting Mrs. Bostock, however, I had visited the newspaper files in the British Museum, and the "Disappearance of James Milligan" was there for all to read. Millions had evidently read it. It had been *the* news of the day. Columns of space were devoted to it; dozens of false clues were started; crime was suggested, of course. His disappearance was complete. Milligan was a case of "sunk without trace," with a vengeance.

It was in the dingy front room that I experienced what was perhaps the most vivid thrill of wonder life has ever given me. I stood, appraising the room as a would-be lodger. Behind me, her arms crossed, appraising me in turn just as she had appraised her former lodger of ten years ago, stood Mrs. Bostock. Probably I looked more prosperous than he had looked; her attitude, at any rate, was attentive to a fault. Why I should have trembled a little is hard to say, but self-control was certainly not as full as it might have been, for my voice shook a trifle as, at length, I drew her attention with calculated purpose to the picture above the plush mantelpiece. I praised it.

"Me 'usband brought it back from Hong-Kong," I heard her say.

My breath caught a little, so that there was a slight pause before I said the next thing. My voice went slightly husky.

"I have a collection of Chinese drawings," I mentioned.

"If you cared to sell, perhaps—"

"Oh, many 'as wanted to buy it," she lied easily, hoping to increase its value.

I mentioned five pounds. I mentioned another figure too — the figure in the boat.

“That single figure,” I explained in as calm a tone as I could muster, “is so good, you see. The Chinese artists never overcrowded their paintings. Now, if — instead of that single figure — there were two” — I moved closer to the picture, hoping she would follow—*”* the value,” I went on, “would, of course, be less.”

Mrs. Bostock had followed me. I had tempted her greed; I had tested her truth as well. We stood side by side immediately beneath the drawing. We examined it together.

At the mention of five pounds the woman had given a little gasp, jerking her body at the same time. Now, at such close quarters with the thing she hoped to sell me, her voice was dumb at first. At first. For a moment later a strange sound escaped her lips, a sound that was meant to be a cry, but only succeeded in being a wheezy struggle to get her breath. Her mouth opened wide, her eyes popped almost from her face. She staggered, recovered her balance by putting a hand on my arm for support, then stepped still nearer to the mantelpiece and thrust her head and shoulders close against the drawing. Her blind eyes peered. Her skin was already white.

“Two of ‘em!” she exclaimed in a terrified whisper. “Two of ‘em, so ‘elp me, Gawd! And the other’s *him*!”

I was ready to support. I had expected her to collapse perhaps. I felt rather like collapsing myself. She swayed, turning her horror-stricken countenance to mine.

“Mr. Milligan!” she screamed aloud, then, her voice returning in full volume: “It’s Mr. Milligan. All this time that’s where ‘e’s been. And I never noticed it till now!”

She swooned away.

The second figure faced the room, for the boat was in the position of being pushed by the oars, not rowed. The features were unmistakable... Half an hour later I sent a cable to Peking: “*Two figures in boat.”*

The real climax, I think, came three days later, when, with the picture safely in my rooms, I had arranged for “specialists” to call and examine it. A chemist, an experienced dealer, and a sort of expert psychic investigator were already upstairs when I reached my flat.

The picture was in my bedroom. I had examined it myself — examined Milligan's face and figure — hour after hour, my flesh crawling, my hair almost rising, as I did so. My guests were in the sitting-room, the servant informed me, handing me a telegram as I hurried up in the lift. My three friends were already known to each other, and, after apologising for the delay, I brought in the drawing and laid it before them on the small table. I intended to tell them the story after their examination; the psychic investigator I meant to keep when the other two had left. Setting the drawing in front of them, I looked over their shoulders at it.

There was only one figure — the Chink. He sat alone in the little boat. He was rowing, not pushing; his back was to the room.

The dealer said the drawing was worth a shilling; the chemist said nothing; I, too, said nothing; but the psychic investigator turned sharply and complained that I was hurting him. My hand, it seems, had clutched the shoulder nearest to me, and it happened to be his. I allowed him to leave when the other two left....

I was alone. I remembered the telegram. More to steady my mind than for any interest I felt in it, my fingers tore it open. It was a cablegram from — Peking, signed by a friend of Milligan and myself:

“Milligan died heart failure yesterday.”

The Falling Glass

THE PREPARATIONS WERE so interesting and suggestive that they almost compensated for the temporary loss of our expedition. For three days the calm and cloudless sky pretended that bad weather had left the world for ever. This sunny peace, this heaven without a stain, surely must always be. Our peak ran sharp and still into the spotless blue, looking as though it never could be otherwise. Its serene majesty seemed unassailable by any troubling thing, by weather least of all. Then, just when our security was greatest and we had resolved to start next day at dawn, my companion came in to supper, with the ominous remark: “The glass has begun to fall a bit.” This, for us, was the beginning of the change, the first we knew of it; in reality, of course, the actual beginning lay leagues away — many leagues and many hours — in Siberia or Norway, far out on the Atlantic or between the Sahara and the Mediterranean. The glass falling in our little mountain valley was in reply to changes there. And this first hint of trouble communicated itself instantly to ourselves; it might be nothing or it might be grave. There was menace in it, and our sense of security was shaken, for the hearts of climbing men lie close enough to Nature; we were aware of resistance, even of possible attack. That tremor of the sensitive mercury was a presage of something coming; at any rate, of something trying to come. In spite of the depression, however, the warning brought a thrill of pleasure with it; the instinct of self-protection stirred; it woke that adorable element in life — resistance against a hostile power that could not be trifled with, certainly not ignored. Somewhere, somehow, it was known that we had planned our great attack at dawn, and so a whisper travelled down from the enormous heights: “Beware! The enemy is on the move!” All this, and more, lay in the casual phrase: “The glass is falling.”

Side by side with a natural annoyance there was this stimulus as well. For the beginnings of things are always very wonderful; alteration of what has been before, a new direction, purpose and independence, all these are involved in every true beginning. There is anticipation and surprise, promise of novelty, too; something is going to happen; it may be something quite unprecedented. Beginnings, being in the nature of creation, are beyond language marvellous: the beginning of a day or of a night; of anger, when a rising temperature and the hasting run of blood betray in us the lurking savage who kills naturally; of illness, with its sharp reminder that life one day *must* stop; of love, when the sound of a voice changes the universe; or of spring, when a new softness in the air, nameless by any sense, proclaims the arrival of gigantic, flooding life. But the beginning of a storm is so wonderful that it can easily eat up disappointment. For the preparations are so long and gradual, so sure, so steadily matured, so cumulative; at first so negligible, yet with a hint of genuine grandeur coming, that the blood is stirred, and the heart, first warned, then awed. He is a fortunate man who, in these sophisticated days, can find it in him to acknowledge this trace of the primitive spirit of worship. That faint, mysterious tremor that runs through Nature everywhere is divine in its first gentle yet calculated insignificance.

The animal and vegetable world at once respond to it; birds and fishes know, the insects know as well; trees note it and keep very still; all take instantly their best precautions; and only men, not aware of it until it is too late, disregard the delicate warning at their peril. Few humans can feel that the pressure of the air has altered. They watch an instrument and whisper: “Ah, the glass is falling!” The change is born, of course, so very far away. How *should* they know? Culture has dulled their primitive awareness.

And that night the stars were ominously clear and brilliant. In the morning there were other signs as well. At three o’clock just when the east was blushing, my companion called me, or rather came into my room. “Up already!” he exclaimed; “I just came in to see. What do you think of it? That barometer was a fraud.” We went out upon the wooden balcony and saw the distant ridges mercilessly outlined in the growing light; the summits were near enough to throw a rope across.

“Too close,” I said, with misgivings born of long experience.

“But look!” he objected, “there’s not a single cloud.” He loathed my caution, deeming it proud imagination only. “It’s simply brilliant,” he added, his young eagerness unspoilt by knowledge. I shook my older head. Some inborn instinct made me firm for once. Ten years before I should have been overridden, and have started on our perilous two-days' climb with ample hope.

"It's a whole day to the hut," I reminded him, "and then — suppose we wake to mist and wind and possibly driving snow? Let's wait till we're certain and the glass is rising slowly. For instance, look at *that!*" And I pointed to a narrow straw of vapour that trailed clingingly across the first huge precipice, five hours away, good going. It was tinged with a faint, transparent pink — unduly luminous.

"That's nothing," he exclaimed contemptuously, "mere bit of early morning mist. Why, I've known—"

"But it's too low down," I interrupted. "On the top it would not matter, it has no business *there.* It means changed or changing temperature."

He shivered in his thin pyjamas, yet did not realise that *dry* cold would not have made him shiver. In the night a new thing had crept in upon the valley — dampness.

"And listen," I added, as the tops of the pines below the balcony stirred with a rustling sound that as quickly died away again.

"The morning wind," he cried, "that's all."

"But the sound of falling water with it. The north or east — good winds — would not move a single branch down here. Observe the he of the land." He did so grumpily enough.

"It's from the south," I observed, "and it's blowing *up* the valley."

"There's hardly any wind at all, anyhow," he said impatiently.

"But what there is is southerly. The wind has changed. You feel its dampness? That damp is evil. Why, man, you can smell it!" For a strong odour of earth and grass and growing things lay behind the exquisite morning freshness of the dawn, and the fragrance, though so pleasant, was suspicious. It was moisture that brought it out.

"Oh, you know best, I suppose," he growled, "though it looks all right, and I should call it perfect." He glanced at me with a trifle more respect, however — that change of wind *had* shaken his confidence! — then shrugged his shoulders and moved off reluctantly to bed. "You tell the guides, then,” he added, with resignation, and was gone before he caught my answer: “if they’re fools enough to come!”

But the guides, of course, put in no appearance. They ought, by rights, to have ascertained the “Herr’s” decision, but took it for granted his opinion would be their own. I admit there was this childish pride and pleasure in the disappointment, and to be right even in prophesying disaster holds a faint satisfaction. It was the “Herr’s” pleasure, however, to sit up and watch this marvellous beginning of a storm. The preparations for its splendid climax were so indecipherably faint, yet so carefully planned, that though the brilliance of last night’s stars had announced their coming, six horns had passed and brought them apparently no nearer. The storm was being massed for attack below the edges of the visible world. One thought of it as a living monstrous thing that would presently come crowding and crashing down the heavens, alive for miles, and full of violent fury. It was too gigantic to move quickly; each separate detail must be trained and ready before the accumulated blow could fall; but hints of wind and moisture, like delicate antennae, were stretched out in advance to warn the sensitive nerves of those who had them.

I brewed some chocolate, and, with rugs and blankets on the narrow balcony, I watched the paling stars. This slow beginning of terrific weather thrilled me. It was unbelievably slow, unnecessarily cautious; its growth, unhasting but unhindered, brooked no interference, however, and there was a hint of diabolical thoroughness in the steady way beginning crept towards fulfilment. All Nature was pressed into the service; the entire firmament laboured to one given end. The imagination became conscious almost of personal direction in this consummate marshalling of such huge forces in sympathetic combination. Yet once or twice, for all my pride of certainty — particularly at half-past five, for instance, when the advance seemed stayed — I confess I had misgivings, and was tempted to wake my friend again and scold the guides for their inexcusable delay. For the weather held so still and brilliant. “Look at the sky!” I would have cried to the men. “How could you have been deceived by those false, transient signs of change?” Some deity of luck preserved me from their inevitable answer: “We thought the ‘Herr’ could have told what’s surely coming!”

It was of marvellous, though sinister, beauty, well worth the loss of hours of beauty sleep, even worth the loss of the expedition as well, to see the wonder of the dawn across the awful heights, falling on cliff and ridge, and stealing along the high, faint snowfields in the break between the periods. The colours may be guessed, but not described, with the aspect of veiled terror that they wore, of menace in the strange diffusion of the fight, and in the apparent innocence of sun and shadow that masked their changed expression. For nowhere was expression quite the same as on an innocent morning. The rising of the valley out of sleep, the creeping fight, the guileless freshness of the air that brought the tumbling water loud and close, the general stillness, peace and calm — all these were different, but oh! so little different, to their normal aspect when the glass stood high. It was mere pretence, of course. The coming violence attempted to steal unnoticed and unawares upon the sky. Behind that treacherous calm it piled up forces that presently would shake the mountains and make the old woods howl. Yet at six o'clock the big peaks still looked friendly in the crystal atmosphere, and it was not till nearly nine that these first assurances of a perfect day began to fade. They passed, slipping away with an unnoticed skill that suggested cunning. No clouds were visible, and no wind to mention stirred, but there crawled into the air a certain dimness that lessened the first unearthly brilliance. Something waned, and the sting of the sharp, delicious heat was gone. Less than haze, it yet took the flash out of the sunshine, and while sound grew clearer, closer, the outlines of both trees and peaks stood blurred a little. Few would have noticed any definite change as yet, none, perhaps, but very keen observers with an interest at stake; but by half-past ten there lay an observable shadow over the entire heavens, cast by no cloud, but as though the tide of light rushed down, then halted and drew back. Before eleven it was a curious, faint veil, and an hour later it had dimmed the normal blaze of noon. There was a glare of unpleasant brilliance that hurt the eyes.

Then, from noon till perhaps after two o'clock, there came a pause when nothing happened, and only a great thick stillness settled over everything. And the pause was ominous, freighted with presentiment; the freshness of the upland world was gone entirely; it seemed a dull, exhausted, burnt-out day. The smell of grass and earth became more marked, and there were soft touches of moisture in the eyes and on the skin; the flies were "sticky," their tickling of the face and hands persistent, and that state of irritation known as "nerves on edge" required steady handling. But though outwardly all this time the signs had seemed minute, they had really been immense, and the entire heavens wrote the letters clear. For as the light had piled in waves upon the eastern sky, the west had given its too early answer, and the suspicious radiance that had brought so grand a dawn was of the same evil quality that had lit the stars too brilliantly the night before. By four o’clock, then, just as the shadows lengthened steeply in the nearer gorges, a delicate trail of fine-spun cloud came thinning down the sky from south to north at an incredible height above the tallest peaks. So tenuous as to be scarcely visible, it lined the atmosphere where no clouds were, and at five o’clock, when the afternoon was waning, there appeared as if by magic, in several spots at once, small patches of isolated mist that had darkness on their underside. Below the giddy ridge where our proposed night shelter perched — the hut — they gathered suddenly into a single line, and fifteen minutes later there was a barrier of dirty-looking cloud that was rising — rising in places at considerable speed. On the edges it leaped and coiled with a kind of hurrying impatience. Yet all this time — these twenty hours of interval — the entire heavens had conspired together to produce no more than this thickening cloud that was the first visible sign a townsman need have noticed with anxiety. The peaks, however, were close enough now to touch; a stifling, oven heat, airless as a concert hall, hung everywhere; there was a strange, deep stillness; and from the distant upper pastures the sound of cow-bells came queerly down the village street. The birds had ceased their singing long before.

The wreaths and lines of vapour meanwhile spread and thickened, gaining ground, some rising, others sinking, new centres forming everywhere with a rapidity that argued admirable preparation. A coiling mist wrapped hurriedly about one summit after another, yet leaving the actual top in shining light. A ring was round the sun, immensely distant from it, with a diameter of many miles of sky. The heat in the valley, pressed down and running over, made breathing increasingly oppressive; the sunlight filtered badly and unevenly. The peasants looked skywards and said no word, but barn doors were shut and the cattle came to water early in the nearer pastures. In spots the air grew colder, and suddenly, with dramatic abruptness, solitary puffs of heated wind came rushing up our valley from the south. Heralded by clouds of dust they passed and went their way, first having tossed the waiting trees, not twice, but once, rattled the windows, closed the open doors — went their way upwards to bear word that all was ready for the main attack.

Long, ominous silences followed, but with the lurid sunset the change, so long maturing, now dropped swiftly. At dusk there was heavy roaring in the mountains as the winds let loose against the darkening cliffs. It was audible even on our balcony. And, before the appointed time, there fell a sea of blackness on the world that blotted out in less than a dozen minutes the last vestiges of sunset or of gleaming, distant snow. By 7.30 the true wind began to rise, or, properly speaking, began to reach us in our sunken hollow. Up the valley like a crying voice it swept, in no puffs now, but in a steady torrent. It wailed and moaned. None perhaps but a climber knows that desolate sound, that strange, wild whistling among rocks and trees, that shrill and angry calling to the earth. It is a threatening sound. He hears a host of javelins and lances flying, for he knows the sting and pierce of that sharp, wetted wind. There is grim foreboding in it, and presentiment in the hot and empty pauses that lie between the heavy gusts. And the upper wind came down to meet it. Again the deep roaring became audible, though where no man could tell, for it was everywhere and filled the inky sky. It descended with its battle howl from the iron fastnesses of scree and precipice and from the bitter snowfields that had iced its fury. It was a wind that could blow a man from the securest foothold into space, mow down the older trees like matches, and even loosen rocks. It seemed the mountains stooped to heave their shoulders, driving it down with crushing power upon our village between the forests.

We had little sleep that night. The storm was, of course, the worst that had ever been known. It lasted with unabated fury and with torrential rain for forty hours. Its suddenness, the unenlightened said, was so extraordinary. It came, as it seemed, out of a clear and harmless sky. Only the few who watched as we had watched knew of its marvellous genesis and careful growth, its gradual and distant preparation, the birth of its small beginning hours and hours before it came.

The Spell of Egypt

THE RETURN OF Tut-ankh-Amen into the sunshine after 3,000 years in stifling darkness has a drama both majestic and pathetic. There is a poignant contrast in it. After thirty centuries of peace and silence, he reenters a world that, apparently, has little changed so far as human nature is concerned. The bickerings about precedence and pecuniary values, about the ownership of the treasures, the commercial exploitation generally, he would find, in principle, similar to the squabbles he was familiar with in his own day. That kingly figure, blind, deaf, unfeeling, is fortunately unaware of the violent contrast his resurrection emphasizes: the strident chorus of modern voices — his own *silence.*

It is an eloquent silence. He emerges from his ancient tomb with dignity, with grandeur, bringing with him into our practical twentieth century a sense of mystery, of star-like leisure, of wonder; something of awe, and a strange, forgotten beauty too. There is about him almost an unearthly touch, not dissimilar, perhaps, to the emotion wakened in Kinglake by the Sphinx, his fellow-splendour, so briefly and so adequately described in “Eothen”: “Comely the creature is, but with a comeliness not of this earth” — a pregnant sentence that lays upon the mind again, with Tutankh-Amen, that singular Egyptian glamour, which is, indeed, a mysterious, almost an unearthly spell.

A considerable amount of nonsense has been written about it. Cheapened by exaggeration, vulgarized by familiarity, it has become for many a picture-post card spell, pinned before the mind like the posters at a railway terminus. The moment Alexandria is reached, this huge post card hangs across the heavens, composed of temples, pyramids, palm-trees by a shining Nile, and the inevitable Sphinx. And the monstrosity of it paralyzes the mind. Memory escapes with difficulty from the insistent, gross advertisement. It deafens imagination. Behind it, however, there hides a potent yet a nameless thing, not acknowledged by all, perhaps, because it is so curiously elusive, yet surely felt by all, because it is so true. An effect that does not pass away is wrought subtly upon the mind, an effect that not being properly comprehensible, is nameless. Having once “gone down into Egypt,” one is never quite the same again; having drunk of the water of the Nile, there is a yearning to drink of it again. Moreover, it is the casual visitor, unburdened by antiquarian and archaeological knowledge, who may best estimate this power: the tourist who knows merely what he has gleaned, say, from Baedeker’s general synopsis, is more freshly sensitive to it than the excavator or official who has lived long in the country. He becomes aware, too, that it is all the more enchanting because he is unable to define and analyze it.

All countries, of course, colour thought and memory, stirring imagination in any but the hopelessly inanimate — whence the educational value of travel-psychology — but, whereas from Greece, Japan, India, the traveller returns with reports he can evoke at will and label, he returns from Egypt with a marvellous blur that defies detailed description. Saturated, maybe, with overmuch, the mind recalls with definiteness nothing coherent. There comes to its summons a colossal medley that half stupefies: immense stretches of tawny sand drenched in a stinging sunlight; dim, solemn aisles of granite silence; stupendous monoliths that stare unblinking at the sun; a shining river licking its slow way across a murderous desert; an enormous night-sky drowned in brilliant stars. A score of temples merge into a single monster; great pyramids float across the sky, like clouds; palms rustle in mid-air; and from subterranean gloom there issue muffled voices that seem to utter the hieroglyphics of a long-forgotten tongue.

The mental horizon, oddly lifted, brims with this procession of gigantic things, then empties again without a word of explanation, leaving behind a mere litter of big adjectives — unchanging, formidable, amazing, and the like; while the coherent single memory that should fink all these together hides too deep for articulate recovery. The Acropolis, the wonders of Japan, of India, the mind can grasp; but this composite enormity of Ramesseum, Serapeum, Karnak, Cheops, Sphinx, with a hundred temples and a thousand miles of sand, seem to have bludgeoned it into temporary silence. That dreadful post card, moreover, rises like a wall. Yet, behind the post card, behind the adjectives, and sure to emerge for full recognition in due course, the mind remains aware of some huge, alluring thing, alive with a pageantry of ages, strangely brilliant in blue and gold, magnificent, appealing almost to tears — something that drifts past like a ghostly full-rigged ship with crowded decks and painted sails, too vastly scaled for sight to take it in. The spell, that is, has become operative.

I remember asking myself what I had gained, and I remember the fruitless result. Nothing came but that abominable, shouting post card, endlessly extended. Its very endlessness, however, was a clue. Egypt *is* endless and inexhaustible; some hint of eternity lies there, an awareness of immortality almost. To-day, after a doze of four or five thousand years, subterranean Egypt peeps up again at the sun. The vast Memphian cemetery that stretches from Sakkhâra to the Mena House has begun to whisper in the daylight. The Theban worship of the sun is being reconstructed. There is a sense of deathlessness about the ancient Nile, about the grim Sphinx and Pyramids, on the very colonnades of Kamak, whose pylons now once more stand upright after a sleep of forty centuries on their backs; above all, in the strength of the floating, rustling sand — something that defies time and repudiates change in death. Out of that flat, undifferentiated landscape which is Egypt, still stand the unconquerable finger-posts of stone, pointing, like symbols of eternity, to the equally unchanging skies. The spell is laid upon you once you have looked into the battered visages of those Memnon terrors, which reveal, yet hide, far better than the Sphinx. They have neither eyes nor lips nor nose; their features, as their message, inscrutable. Yet they tell this nameless thing plainly *because* they have no words. Out of the green fields of millet they stand like portions of the Theban Mountains that have slid down into the plain, then stopped for a few more centimes to stare across the Nile and watch the sunrise. From them, as partly from the opened tombs of priest and Pharaoh, comes some ingredient of this singular Egyptian spell.

Unguessed at first, because sought for in some crude, tangible form it never assumes, it flames up unexpectedly — perhaps in a London street when fog shrouds the chimneys; perhaps at a concert; perhaps in a tearoom among perfumed, gossiping women; in church, at the club, even in bed when falling asleep just after a commonplace evening at a commonplace play. A sound recalls the street cries of the Arabs, with its haunting sing-song melody; a breath of air brings back the heated sand, the rustle of the curtain whispers as the palms and acacia whisper — and the truth is realised. Up steals the immense Egyptian glamour. It pours, it rushes up. It is over you in a moment. All this time it has lain coiled in deep recesses of the inner being

— recesses, where there is silence because they are inaccessible amid the clamour of daily life. There is awe in it, a hint of cold eternity, a glimpse of something unchanging and terrific, yet, at the same time, soft and very tender too.... The pictures unroll and spread. You feel again the untold melancholy of the Nile. The grandeur of a hundred battered temples beats upon the heart. There is a sense of unutterable beauty. Something in you bows to the procession that includes great figures of non-human lineage. Up sweeps the electric desert air, the alive wind, the wild and delicate perfume of the sand; the luminous grey shadows brush you; you feel the enormous scale of naked desolation which yet brims with strange vitality. An Arab on his donkey flits in colour across the mind, melting off into tiny perspective. A string of camels stands against the sky, swaying forward the same moment as though it never ceased. A dozen pyramids cleave the air with monstrous wedges, pointing holes in space. In peace and silence, belonging to a loneliness of ages, rise heads and shoulders of towering gods of stone, little jackals silhouetted, perhaps, an instant against deific thighs half buried in sand. Great winds, great blazing spaces, great days and nights of shining wonder float past from the pavement or the theatre stall, and London, dim-lit England, the whole of modern life indeed, are reduced sharply to a miniature of trifling ugliness that seems the unreality. Egypt rolls through the heart for a second and is gone.... Conventions drive you... there are letters to be answered, appointments to be kept, calls to be paid, and a new umbrella to be bought.... But out there the days swam past in a flood of golden light, and, caught in a procession of ancient splendours, changeless as the leisured Nile, majestic as the desert, and fresh still with the wonder that first created them, you moved with the tide as of some unconditioned world. Egypt steals out and whispers to you in your dreams. Once more you float in an atmosphere of passionate marriage....

Egypt with a power of seduction almost uncanny, has robbed the mind of a facility best described perhaps as the faculty of measurement. Its scale has stupefied the ability to measure, appraise, estimate; and this balance, once destroyed, wonder and awe capture the heart, going what pace they please. Size works half the miracle, for it is size including a quality of terror — monstrous; and, but for the noble beauty that thunders through it, this sheer size might easily work a very different spell — dismay. The modern mind, no longer terrified by speed, to which it has grown contemptuously accustomed, yet shrinks a little before this display of titanic and bewildering size. Egypt makes it realize that it has no handy standard of measurement. It listens to words that are meaningless. The vast proportions uplift, then stupefy. The girth of the Pyramids, the height of the Colossi, the cubic content of the granite columns and the visage of the Sphinx expressed in yards — these convey as little truth as the numbered leagues of the frightening desert or the length of that weary and interminable Nile. You draw a deep breath of astonishment — then give up the vain attempt to grapple with a thing you cannot readily assimilate. A dizziness of star-distances steals over you; there is a breathlessness of astronomical scale in it that exhilarates while it stuns. What mind can gain by the information that our sun, with all its retinue of planets, sweeps daily 1,000,000 miles nearer to Hercules, yet that Hercules looks no closer than it did thousands of years ago, when Tut-ankh-Amen was laid to rest? Such distances lie beyond comprehension. Similarly, in Egypt, there is something that for ever evades capture in the monstrous details of sheer size, beautiful with majesty, that tower above the shrinking reason. The land exhales a steam of enchantment that lulls the senses. You move through this almost visible glamour. All about you is a high, transparent screen, built by the centuries, and left standing; modern life, cast like a cinema-picture upon this screen, becomes the unreality. Herein lies one letter at least, of the spell of Egypt — the mind is for ever aware of something that haunts from the further side of experience.

For some, a rather dominant impression is undoubtedly “the monstrous.” A splendour of awful dream, yet never quite of nightmare, stalks everywhere, suggesting an atmosphere of Khubla Khan. There is nothing lyrical. Even the silvery river, the slender palms, the fields of clover and barley and the acres of flashing poppies convey no lyrical sweetness, as elsewhere they might. All moves to a statelier measure. Stern issues of life and death are in the air, and in the grandeur of the tombs and temples there is a solemnity of genuine awe that makes the blood run slow a little. Those Theban hills, where the kings and queens lay buried, are forbidding to the point of discomfort almost. The listening silence in the grim Valley of the Tombs of the Kings, the intolerable glare of sunshine on the stones, the naked absence of any sign of animal or vegetable life, the slow approach to the secret hiding-place where the mummy of a once powerful monarch lies ghastly now beneath the glitter of an electric light, the implacable desert, deadly with heat and distance on every side — this picture, once seen, rather colours one’s memory of the rest of Egypt with its sombre and funereal character. And with the great deific monoliths the effect is similar. Proportions and sheer size strike blow after blow upon the mind. Stupendous figures, shrouded to the eyes, shoulder their way slowly though the shifting sands, deathless themselves and half-appalling. Their attitudes and gestures express the hieroglyphic drawings come to life. Their towering heads, coiffed with zodiacal signs, or grotesque with animal or bird, bend down to watch you everywhere. There is no hurry in them; they move with the leisure of the moon, with the stateliness of the sun, with the slow silence of the constellations. But they move. There is, between you and them, this effect of a screen, erected by the ages, yet that any moment may turn thin and let them through upon you. A hand of shadow, but with granite grip, may steal forth and draw you away into some region where they dwell among changeless symbols like themselves, a region vast, ancient and undifferentiated as the desert that has produced them. Their effect in the end is weird, difficult to describe, but real. Talk with a mind that has been steeped for years in their atmosphere and presence, and you will appreciate this odd reality. The spell of Egypt is an other-worldly spell. Its vagueness, its elusiveness, its undeniable reality are ingredients, at any rate, in a total result whose detailed analysis lies hidden in mystery and silence — inscrutable.

A Man of Earth

JOHN ERDLIEB USED to tell this story — occasionally and with reluctance. It had to be dragged out of him. He seemed to feel it was telling something against himself, but that was because he didn't believe in "the kind of thing," and felt that he did himself a wrong and strained the credence of his listeners as well. Hence, probably, the strange impressiveness of the quaint recital; it had indubitably happened to him.

Though of German origin, he was English, stolid, steady, inarticulate English, and a rare good fellow, whose character emerged strongly in those difficult circumstances known as "tight places." He was a mining engineer by profession; he loved the earth and anything to do with the earth, from a garden he played with half tenderly, to a mountain he attacked half savagely for tunnelling or blasting purposes. He never left the earth if he could help it; both feet and mind were always planted firmly upon *terra firma;* figuratively or actually, he never flew. And his physical appearance expressed his wholesome, earthly type — the rumbling, subterranean bass voice, the tangled undergrowth of beard that hid his necktie, the slow, stately walk as of a small hill advancing. Moreover, you might dig in him and find pure gold — the mass of him covered the heart of a simple, tender child, honest and loving as the day. A child of earth, in the literal sense he was, if ever such existed.

"The first time," he said moving his words laboriously, as though they weighed, "was a June evening in Surrey, when I was going along a lane to catch a train to London. I was carrying a bag. It was a quarter-past ten, the train was 10.30, and I had a mile to go. I had come down in the afternoon to advise a friend about the laying of his tennis court — not professionally," he explained, with a booming laugh, "but because I knew he was going the wrong way about it — and he had persuaded me to stay to dinner. He had seen me to the gate and given me directions about short cuts. It was near the longest day, and there was light still hanging from the sky, but the lanes and paths ran along deep gullies in the sandstone, which the trees and bushes turned into tunnels of black. It was very warm and without a breath of air.

Rain in the afternoon had left the atmosphere heavy, thick, and steamy. I perspired awfully, my wrist began to ache with carrying the bag, and half-way down one of the deep sandy lanes I stopped a moment to rest. I put the bag down, and struck a match to see my watch. There were seven minutes left to do a long half-mile.” He paused a moment, and we concluded from that pause that he would miss his train.

“Now, I’m not the sort of man,” he continued simply, “that a tramp would be likely to attack. I don’t look opulent, and I’m big. Until I struck that match I hadn’t passed a living soul. But my friend’s wife had told me the tramps were thick about the roads this summer, and had been pretty bold as well. I’d quite forgotten all this; it wasn’t in my mind. So when the glare of the match showed me a man standing close in front of me — so close I could have touched him — I got a start. He saw my watch, of course. But I saw his face. And he was looking straight into my eyes, just as though he had been staring at me in the dark before. The light, I mean, caught him in the act. There was no surprise in his face. Now I must tell you another thing as well: his face was smeared with earth.” He laughed again as he said it. “The fellow looked as if he had been buried and just crawled out. It was a big bearded face, and the eyes were like an animal’s — quite frank. But what struck me at the moment — I’m telling this badly, I’m afraid — was that, just as I stopped to strike that match, I noticed a strong smell of earth, of soil and mould I mean. If you’ve ever turned up real virgin soil you’d know exactly what it was like — same sort of smell you get when digging up a wet bit of field, only ten times stronger. A good smell; I love it.

“Well, the match went out, and the blackness after it was like a wall. I just thought I’d be getting on as quick as I could or I’d miss the train — no feeling at all that the fellow meant me any harm, you see — when I heard him say, I’ll cany it for you. Come up this way. It’s the best.’ And before I could answer or object — do anything at all, in fact — the fellow had snatched my bag and made off with it, I suppose he had been waiting just at this darkest part of the lane on purpose. He went up hill, and I after him, striking angrily with my stick in the hope of tripping him up. But he had the start, and I was winded already, and uphill I’m not as quick as I used to be ten years ago. I heard his running tread along the sandy ground, fight as a child; and, while I stumbled in the darkness among the loose stones and ruts, two other things flashed into my mind. I can’t say what made me think of them. But it seemed to me that the fellow was very short and had been standing on tiptoe when he stared into my face; and the other thing was this: that in this sandy soil — it's mostly sand and heather and pine trees in that part — it was curious that the smell of *earth* should have been so strong. For it was rich, black earth I smelt."

John Erdlieb stopped again. He had reached a difficult place, we felt, a place where he wanted help. We gave what help we could, urging him to tell the rest, whether it seemed credible to him or not.

"He kept just ahead of me," he continued, in his growling tones that were like the deep string on a double bass, "and didn't seem a bit anxious to escape from me. He could easily — he ran so lightly — have nipped up the banks and disappeared, and I could never in this world have caught him.

But he kept ten yards in front. In the patches where the trees were thinner I saw his outline plainly; he'd run a bit, then pause, then start again just when I got too close. I shouted and cursed him, but he said no word. And at length — oh, we'd been running four or five minutes, I should think — he stopped dead, and waited. It was an open space, where the banks on both sides were clear of trees or bushes, and the light from the sky, as well as the sort of radiance that sand gives out — you know — showed him distinctly, crouching in the path, the bag beside him. I came up with a rush, my stick raised to clout him on the head, when — of course, you can't believe it — he simply wasn't there. I heard his voice, but — well, I can only tell you how it seemed to me — I heard it underground. It was muffled and smothered, as though it came through earth." Erdlieb said this very low; he almost growled it; he was ashamed to tell it. 'You want to know what it was he said? I'll tell you in three words: 'Now you're safe.' That was what I heard, and I heard it as distinctly as I hear my own voice now. The fellow had disappeared, as if the thing had been a dream, and I'd just wakened up." He shut his mouth with a snap, as though there was no more to tell.

A lot of questions were discharged at him, of course, but chief among them, or first, at any rate, "And did you catch your train?" He had made such a point of catching that particular train.

"Luckily," he said, "I missed it by three minutes. Yes, I did say luckily.' In the tunnel that begins a mile beyond the station there was a bad cave-in — it had been an exceptionally wet summer, and the first three coaches, the only first-class coaches on the train, had every occupant killed. Yes, it’s a fad of mine,” he answered a final question. “I always go first-class.”

He gave the second incident as well. He was very shy about it; but for the dusk on the verandah, where he told it, one could have seen him blush.

‘It was last year, when I was in the Caucasus — the Lesser Caucasus, some 50 miles south-east of Batoum, where there are copper mines, first worked by the Phoenicians ages ago, but covered now by a forest of rhododendrons and azaleas. The ore is visible to the eye, and they get it out with pickaxes. It’s a marvellous country, wild as ever it can be, and the men wilder still, a difficult crew to manage, Georgians, Persians, Tartars, all Mohammedans, and all free with knife and pistol. We were 5000 feet above sea-level. You could see Ararat in the distance, a pyramid of snow, and even Elbruz and Kasbek to the north, when the air was clear.

“One of my younger engineers was an American, capable as they make ’em, but with one curious drawback — he spouted Shakespeare and saw visions! A poetical sort of chap, but sober, reliable, and awfully good at his work. I think, you know, the power of the place got into him a bit — you can believe anything,” he explained apologetically, “in the Caucasus — and just across the next ridge was a settlement of Ossetines. The Ossetines are said to be older than the Egyptians, and no one knows exactly where they come from; they worship the soil, pray to heaps of earth, with the idea that it expresses deity or something, offer salt and milk to open places in the ground, and all that kind of thing. They’re a wild lot, too. But they didn’t bother us much, although some of our workmen were afraid of them. The idea was, you see, that they resented our cutting holes in the body of their deity.

“Apart from stories, that grew big unless stopped instantly” — he said this significantly— “I had no trouble with the men at all, and the Ossetines I only saw — er — this once. My American engineer was the bother, with his imaginative talk of nature-spirits, his seeing things about the mountains, and all the rest. The Caucasus just there is not exactly the place to talk that kind of stuff. It’s marvellous enough — without additions!

“Well, one afternoon this chap and I were out prospecting together — his geology was splendid, a sort of instinct in him — prospecting for new veins and outcrop and what not, and in the most gorgeously savage scenery you can possibly imagine. The mountain side was smothered with azalea bushes, all in bloom, every shade of colour, and the smell of them was almost more than I could stand. Azalea honey, you know, has a kind of intoxicating effect, like a drug, and the natives use it for that purpose, and, perhaps, the smell of these miles of blossom, taken in such enormous doses, affects the nerves a bit. I can’t say about that, but anyhow, Edgar began talking his nonsense about it in his peculiar way — clear-headed enough at the same time to trace his strata with amazing accuracy and judgment — and saying that his eyes were opened, and he could see down into the ground, and talking about the Ossetines and the Powers of the Place, and all mixed up with quotations from his Shakespeare and the rest. Well, it was no business of mine to stop him. He did his work all right. I let him go on fifteen to the dozen until at last it got on my nerves, and I told him to quit it. He didn’t mind a bit; just looked at me, and said, ‘I’ve had my eyes opened by the place; I can’t help it. Why, I can see your glassy essence. You’re an earth-person. You ought to feel what I feel. I think you *do!*’ That ‘glassy essence,’ you know, is in *Measure for Measure,* only I forget the whole quotation. And then he said excitedly, ‘The worship of these Ossetines up here has done it. The place is all stirred up. I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if we saw—’

“I interrupted him and told him to stow all that. The Ossetines, I told him — taking it that he referred to them and not to — er — other things — were over the next ridge, anyhow, five hours’ climbing away — when just at that very minute he came at me like a football player on the charge. He caught my shoulders and stared at me with terror in his face. They’re coming!’ he cried out. ‘Can’t you hear them? They’re coming!’

“And there was a curious, deep, roaring sound up in the mountains to the north, a tremendous sound. It was like thunder. Yet it was a sunny, windless day without a cloud; there was not even falling water near us.

I couldn’t believe my ears. And I turned and saw what at first I thought were sliding masses of earth and stones moving down towards us from the heights a mile away. There were boulders, rolling and dancing down ahead of the general mass, only they moved so slowly and with such an extraordinary kind of motion altogether that I stood and stared in complete amazement. It all bewildered me. The sound was appalling somehow. It was like an upheaval of the earth. Then Edgar shouted, 'Run, man, run for your life. They're out!' and started off downhill like a frightened deer.

"It takes a good deal to move me, however" — he smiled at us through the dusk so that his teeth were visible— "and I stood still a minute longer, watching the strangest thing I'd ever seen. For those stones and rolling boulders were not rock, but people. It was a crowd of people. Not Ossetines, though. I could see *that.* They were small and stunted. Even at that distance I could swear they were very small. They were like dwarfs. They *were* dwarfs. It took my breath away; but, I swear to you, they were just like that tramp who snatched my bag in the Surrey lane five years before, and they made the same strange impression upon me of being — er — out of the ordinary." He paused a moment, wondering most likely how much more he cared to tell. "I picked up our instruments and ran downhill after Edgar," he told us simply, "ran as hard as I could pelt. You can judge the pace when I tell you I caught him up in something under ten minutes, too." That didn't impress us much, perhaps, because we had never seen the other man, but it meant a lot to Erdlieb apparently. Edgar, of course, was a younger man. "And then we ran on together side by side, not looking back, but feeling exactly as if the mountain-side was at our heels. The roaring sound had stopped. Once within sight of the Works we stopped, too. Nothing unusual was anywhere to be seen. The heights stood out clear and sharp against the brilliant sky. Nothing moved. Not a living soul was visible in any direction upon the enormous slopes. Edgar, however, was white as a ghost, scared stiff, as he phrased it himself. He declared he had seen

> 'A shadow, like an angel with bright hair
> Dabbled in blood.'

"I was in no mood for quotations. I could have knocked him down on the spot.

"That night, an hour after sunset, when the stars were out, and all the mountains peaceful, no wind, no noise of any kind, no hint of warning either, the landslide came. You know about it because I've already described it to you at dinner. It's why I'm in England now instead of superintending the copper mines out there in the Caucasus. The Works were smothered, the loss of life appalling. I told you how we escaped, Edgar and I, by the skin of our teeth and — er — luck. The spot among the azaleas where we first heard the noise in the afternoon — several hours before a single pound of earth had begun to shift — by eight o'clock lay under several hundred feet of fallen mountain, still slowly sliding. I doubt if the Works will ever be dug out. It would cost a fortune. I have advised against it."

The Laughter of Carthage

IT WAS AT a big cinema house. The lights were turned down and the general audience was a blur, faces at a few feet distance not clearly discernible. On the screen a comic story was being shown, some scenes very comic, and amusement was audible all over the crowded building. There was tittering, sniggering, gasps of surprise, and occasionally an exclamation. Everybody seemed sufficiently tickled to make a noise of one kind or another, when suddenly a new sound was heard, a sound that presently dominated the entire house. A man was — laughing.

At first, so concentrated was attention on the screen, that his laughter did not attract attention. It merged in the general murmur of the crowd. But gradually it differentiated itself from this general murmur, and rose above it. It became a sound apart. More than mere amusement, more than a pleasant sense of the ludicrous made audible, it drew attention to itself. It was a genuine, hearty laughter.

And people turned their heads. First one, then another, looked away from the screen to see who was so unadulteratedly happy, enjoying himself with such spontaneous hilarity. One must be a child to laugh like that, felt many, with a touch of envy, perhaps, at the thought. No grown-up could forget himself for so slight a cause. It certainly was unaffected laughter, the man was unselfconscious. He did not know he was making such a noise. And everybody looked at the rows behind them, peering eagerly to see his face; they made remarks to their neighbours; they waited, listening for the next outburst, then nudged each other again — and finally began laughing themselves.

They laughed with the man, not at him, for it was such infectious laughter that bubbled from him in a ceaseless stream. Actors on the stage must have been seriously disconcerted, but the pictures, of course, showed no signs of injured vanity; for the fact was that, while the comic story lasted, the entire audience laughed with the man instead of with the moving photographs. The screen was neglected shamefully; its changes merely supplied the question from one moment to another— "Listen! That will set him off again! You see if it doesn't!" And off he went — the stream of delicious, unselfconscious, heart-felt laughter that it did one good to hear.

There was no marked peculiarity about it, the voice was not unusual in any way, there was nothing about it that made one inclined to laugh at instead of with him. It was the genuine, happy joy in the sound that caught so many hearts along. The desire to see the man became, apparently, universal; what was he like, what sort of fellow to look at, what age, what size, what type of man — that he could laugh like this? People leaned forward, backwards, sideways, to discover him; but the semidarkness screened him from their view; they could not see the shaking sides, the merry eyes, the jolly mouth and cheeks. He was audible only, not visible. The few in the back rows who sat near him had him to themselves.

But all listened with keen delight. Every few seconds the spontaneous laughter broke forth with what seemed new freshness. It cheered, it made the day seem brighter, there was more happiness in the world than one knew, evidently; life itself took on a gayer, and more careless aspect with such a proof of brave enjoyment in one's ears. The screen amused, but this man's laughter heartened. It was very good to hear. He must, indeed, be a jolly, reckless, light-hearted fellow, without a care or worry in the world. If only that laughter could be bottled up and delivered by cartloads in the unhappy houses of the world! There was such hope and courage in it. The man must be an optimist with confident outlook.

And everyone who heard it shared one longing — for the story to end and the lights to be turned up that the laugher might be visible. For it seemed that no one cared any longer what happened on the screen; all wanted to see the jovial face of the jolly, happy man who had cheered them up without knowing that he did so. And at last the story ended, the fights began to rise. Hundreds of necks were craned.

I shall never forget him. He was still laughing, though not loudly now. He leaned over to a pal to talk about the pictures. He was utterly oblivious of the sensation that he caused — this happy, cheerful, jolly man who was a wounded soldier, holding two crutches lightly against his shoulder. I saw his grim, determined face; I saw his bright blue eyes, laughter still in them; and, when the performance ended, I also saw him carried out tenderly by his two pals. He was young, perhaps twenty-six at most, and his body ended at the knees. And a sigh went through the great silent audience as, without watching, they yet saw — a sigh of wonder and admiration, of gratitude, also, I think, of love. There was a feeling of reverence; there were certainly moistened eyes.

S.O.S.

IT IS A question how many witnesses shall be required to establish the veracity of an occurrence so singular, especially when one of such witnesses is a dog.

Three of us, two men and a girl, had skimmed the snow-covered Jura slopes on our skees since noon, arriving toward four o'clock at the deserted chalet where the fourth was to meet us. Upon the arrival of that fourth hung all the future happiness of the girl, and he was to come from a village far away on the other side. The Christmas rendezvous had been carefully arranged.

We had brought provisions for making a hot supper in the empty building, a lonely farm-house used only in summer, and our plan was to skee back all together by moonlight.

"Put on your extra sweaters before you begin to cool," said the older man, coming round the corner with an armful of logs from the frozen woodpile. "I 'll get the fire going. Here, Dot," — turning to his niece,— "stack your skees, and get the food out. He 'll be hungry as a bear."

The three of us bustled about over the crisp snow, and the older man had a wood fire blazing upon the great open hearth in less than ten minutes. The interior of the big room lit up, shadows flew over-head among the rafters, and shafts of cheery yellow light flashed even into the recesses of the vaulted barn that opened out into the cow-sheds in the rear. Outside, the dusk visibly deepened from one minute to the next.

The cold was bitter; but our heated bodies fairly steamed. The big St. Bernard ran, sniffing and prancing, after each of us in turn, and from time to time flew up the mounds of snow outside, where he stood, with head flung back and muzzle up, staring against the sunset. He knew perfectly well that some one else was expected and the direction from which he would come. The effect of the firelight streaming through door and cracks of muffled window into the last hour of day-light was peculiar; night and day met together on the threshold of the chalet, under the shadows of that enormous snow-laden roof. For the sun was now below the rim of the Suchet ridges, flaming with a wonderful sheet of red and yellow light over the huge white plateau, and the isolated trees threw vague shadows that easily ran into a length of half a kilometer. Rapidly they spread, assuming monstrous shapes, half animal, half human; then, deceiving the sight, merged into the strange uniform glow that lies upon a snow-field in the twilight. The forest turned purple; the crests of the pines cut into the sky like things of steel and silver. Everything shone, crackled, sparkled; the cold increased.

“Dorothy, where are you going?” sounded the older man’s voice from the door, for the girl was out on her skees again. Her slim young figure, topped by the pointed, white snow-cap, was sprite-like.

“Just a little way over the slopes — to meet him,” came her reply. She seemed to float above the snow, not on it.

With decision he called her in, and it was the warning in his tone that perhaps made her obey.

“Better rest,” he said briefly; “we ‘ve got a long run home in the moonlight.” On her skees she came “sishing” back down the gleaming slope to his side, neat and graceful, her shadow shooting ahead like black lightning, enormously elongated. “The Creux du Van precipices, besides, lie over that way,” he continued. “They begin without warning — a sheer drop, and nothing to show the edge.”

“I know them,” she said, pouting a little.

“He knows them, too,” her uncle answered, putting a hand on her shoulder. “He ‘ll take the higher slopes. He ‘ll get around all right.” He had noticed the look in her soft, brown eyes that betrayed — it was the merest passing lash — an eagerness lying too close upon the verge of anxiety. “Harry knows these ridges even better than I do.”

He helped her stack the skees, then turned to whistle in the dog, which had stayed behind on the summit of the slope she had just left, and it was at this instant, I think, that I first suddenly became aware of an unusual significance lying behind the little scene. Such moments are beyond explanation or analysis; one can only report them. They pertain, some hold, to a kind of vision. I can merely affirm that the flash came to me in this wise: I saw the big dog, his outline sharply silhouetted against the skyline and his head turned westward, refusing for the first time that day to obey instantly a whistle that for him was a summons always to be obeyed. His master, noticing nothing, had already gone inside; but the girl saw what I saw, caught a flash similar to my own, and recognized in the animal’s insignificant disobedience a corroboration of something in herself that touched uneasiness. I cannot prove it, — she has never spoken of it, — only, as she stood there a moment, with the sunset in her face and her tumbled hair half over her eyes, I intercepted the swift glance that ran upward to the St. Bernard, traveled beyond him to the huge, distant snow-slopes, and then fell upon me. It was love, perhaps, that carried and interpreted thus the instantaneous wireless message — the love that lay undelivered in my heart, as in her own, and, since she was foresworn already, lay unrecognized. In view of what followed, I cannot wholly say. My sight held clearer and steadier than her own, and it came to me that my strange perception, sharpened to bitter sweetness as if by sacrifice, approached possibly to some kind of inferior divination of the wounded soul. The next minute the great dog came bounding down, and we entered the chalet together, busying ourselves with fire, benches, table, and supper. The portable little kettle of aluminum already steamed upon the hearth.

With us — with myself, at any rate — came into the cozy fire-lit interior a sensation that was new. I felt the terror and desolation of these vast, snow-covered mountains, immense, trackless, silent, lying away from the world of men below the coming stars. Winter, like a winter of the polar regions, held them fast. In the brilliant sunshine of the day they had been friendly, enticing, sympathetic. Now, with the icy dusk creeping over their bare, white faces, the freezing wind sifting with long sighs through the forests below, and the silent Terror of the Frost stalking from cliff to ridge with his head among the stars, they turned terrible. With the coming of the night they awoke to their true power. They showed their teeth. Our own insignificance became curiously emphasized. I thought of the Creux du Van precipices, sweeping crater-like with their semicircle of dark grandeur, a gulf of snow-drifts about their dreadful lips, six hundred feet of shadows yawning within, and shuddered.

“You ‘re cold,” said Dot, softly, pulling me to the fire, where she warmed her steaming boots. “I ‘m cold, too.” We piled the wood on; the flames leaped and crackled; shadows flew among the rafters.

“Harry ‘s due any minute,” said her uncle. “We ‘ll drop the eggs in as soon as we hear his whistle.” He stooped down to pat the St. Bernard, which lay with head stretched on his fore paws before the fire, staring, listening. “You ‘ll hear him first,” he laughed cheerily, giving the beast a resounding pat. “Long before we do.”

The dog growled low, making no other response to a caress that usually brought him leaping to his master’s breast. We heard the wind keening round the wooden walls, rushing with a long faint whistle over the roof, and we drew closer to the fire. For a long time no one spoke. The minutes passed and passed.

It was then, quite suddenly, that we heard a step in the snow; but not before the dog had heard it first and bounded to his feet with a growl that was more like a human roar than any animal sound I have ever heard. He fairly leaped toward the door, and the same second Dot and I were also upon our feet.

“What ‘s the matter?” exclaimed her uncle, startled and surprised. “That ‘s only wind, or snow falling from the roof.”

Behind us the wooden walls gave out sharp, cracking reports as the heated air made them expand; but in my heart something turned into ice with a cold that lay beyond all cold of winter. The terror I at first experienced, however, was not for myself, but for this soft, brown-eyed little maid who shot so swiftly by me and opened the heavy door. I was ready there to catch her, ready to protect and shield, yet knowing by some strange authority within me that she stood already safe, held by a power that lay beyond all little efforts of my own.

For into that great, fire-lit interior stepped at once the figure of a peasant, large, uncouth, lumbering, his face curiously concealed either by the play of the shadows or by the fall of his hair and beard, — to this day I know not which, — filling the threshold with his bulk, the freezing wind rushing in past his great, sheathed legs, and an eddy of dry snow veiling him like a flying cloak beyond. He stood there a second with an atmosphere of power about him that seemed to dwarf everything, and of such commanding stature that into my mind, bewildered and confused a little with the sudden entrance, ran the thought of a bleak and towering peak of mountain. It came to me that the chalet must crumble, the huge beams split, and fall upon our heads. There was a rush of freezing wind, a touch of ice, and at the same time I was aware of some strange, intolerable beauty, as of wild nature, that made me hide my eves. It was only long afterward that I remembered there was no snow upon his feet, that his eyes remained hidden, and also that he spoke not a word.

“The door ‘s blown open!” cried the uncle. “For God’s sake—”

All this, moreover, in the tenth of the first second, for immediately I saw that the St. Bernard was bounding round the figure with an unfeigned delight that knew no fear; and next, that he had stretched his arms out toward the girl with a gesture of tenderness and invitation possible only in this whole world to the arms of woman. Terrible, yet inconceivably winning, was that gesture, as of a child. And the same moment, to my amazement, she had leaped forward and was gone. With her, barking and leaping, went the St. Bernard dog.

“Dot, you silly child, where in the world are you going? Do shut the door! It ‘s not Harry yet. It was a false alarm.” It was the matter-of-fact tone of her uncle’s voice that let me into the secret — that only she, I, and the dog had witnessed anything at all.

“I ‘ll go with her and see her safe,” I shouted back, and it was only then, as I turned toward the door again after saying it, that I understood there was no one standing there, and that her leap had been really a springing run toward the corner where her skees lay. Already, I saw, they were on her feet. She was away. I saw the dog bounding over the frozen slope beside her. He was a little in front. He held her skirt in his teeth, guidingly. In that pale wintry light of the rising moon I saw their two outlines against the snow. They were alone.

“Bring brandy and a blanket!” I had the sense to call back into the room, and was after her in my turn. But the frozen fastenings of my skees had never seemed so obstinate. It was a whole minute before I was whizzing down the mile-long slope. The speed was tremendous, and the skees skidded on the crust. She left only faint indications of her trail. It was the barking of the dog that guided me best, and far away below me in the yellow moonlight the little speeding spot of black that showed me where she flew, heading straight for the Creux du Van.

At any other time such a descent as we two then made would have been sheer lunacy, even in daylight. The tearing speed, the angle of the huge slope, the iciness of that gleaming crust, all were invitations to disaster; and with the gaping chasm of the Creux du Van lying waiting at the bottom, it was simply a splendid race into suicide. The water poured from my eyes, the frozen mounds whipped by like giant white waves, and no sooner was the black line of some isolated pine-tree sighted than it was past, like the telegraph-poles to an express-train. Only the yellow face of the big rising moon held steady.

She had soon outstripped the dog, and as I shot past him, wildly cantering, with his tongue out and steaming, open jaws, he caught vainly at my puttees. The next moment he was a hundred yards behind me.

But Dot, guided by some power that the mountains put into her little feet, knew her direction well, and went as straight as a die to the edge of the awful gulf; then stopped dead, buried to her neck in a drift that climbed wave-like upon the very lips of the chasm. It stopped her, as ten minutes before it had also stopped another, coming down from the slopes that lay to the westward. I saw the hole of the valley gaping at our very feet as a successful “telemark” flung me backward beside her just in the nick of time.

“Quick!” I heard her cry. “He ‘s still sliding!” It was then that I realized that the third body, lying there unconscious where the drift had likewise stopped it, was slowly moving with the weight of snow toward the edge. One skee already projected horribly over the actual brink. I heard a mass of snow detach itself and drop even as she said it.

It took less than a second to detach my belt and fasten it to his leg; but even then I firmly believe the strain of our slow pulling must have landed us all three into the gulf below had not the arrival of the St. Bernard put a different complexion upon the scene. It was the grandest thing I have ever witnessed. A second he stood there, the supreme instinct of his noble race judging the problem. He knew the softness of the drift that must engulf him if he advanced; he also saw it sliding. Very slowly, like a courageous human being, on all fours, calculating distance, angle, and tensions, as it were, by his superb animal divination, he crawled round to another side. He crept gingerly along the very edge. His teeth fastened upon the boot and skee-straps. We pulled together. God! I cannot understand to this day how it was that the four of us were not gone! He knew, that splendid dumb creature. We merely followed his his magnificent lead.

A moment later we were safe on hard, solid snow. As we lay back exhausted, the snow immediately at our feet slid with a hiss, and disappeared into the valley hundreds of feet below. But the St. Bernard, still pulling carefully and gently by himself, was next busily licking the boy’s white face and breathing his heat upon him, when help arrived with the brandy and the blankets. I believe it was the tireless and incessant attentions of that great dog that really saved the life, for he lay upon the form with his whole body, keeping him warm, and letting go only when he understood that the blankets and our arms, carrying him to the chalet, might replace own self-sacrificing love,

“I heard a voice crying outside the door in the wind,” she told me afterward. “It was his voice, you see, and it called me by name. I don’t know what guided me to the place, for I think I shut my eyes the whole way till I fell at his side.”

Nephelé

I

THE CHANGE OF atmosphere at Carsholt began probably soon after Sir Mark’s discovery of the Roman cinerary urn that very morning, but the discordant element in the castle household was not noticeable until Lady Shute betrayed her jealousy with the remark: “It’s that interfering girl again! Why in the world should she go digging about the grounds like this?” Her eyes were questioning; her lips became very thin. “Above all, what possessed her to do it *now?*”

Her husband, the famous archaeologist, a stern-faced, elderly man, with an expression, evidently habitual, of great concentration yet aloofness, replied without looking up at first. The mouth was kindly, even tender, though it wore no smile at the moment. “Marjory is invaluable to me, you forget, dear; her memory, accuracy, insight—” he raised his eyes to his wife a moment. “Her knowledge of Roman things in particular is unusual. I often wish she had been with me in Crete and Egypt—”

He spoke soothingly, but the words were evidently the reverse of what his wife desired.

“Miss Trench,” came the sharp interruption, “was an excellent governess before you stole her from the children for your archaeology. I don’t grudge you her invaluable services,” with a tiny sneer of disbelief. “You know that. It’s her taking up your time and attention at this particular moment that’s so annoying. The house full of guests, the Christmas Theatricals coming on to-night, the children helpless without her — for rehearsals, dresses, everything — and then she must needs go and dig up a buried antiquity in the Park, and carry you off, and—”

“*I* — not she — dug it up, Emily,” he corrected her, with a patient smile that secretly enraged her. He knew of her jealousy of his passionate work and, indirectly, of all concerned with it. “As a matter of fact, it was Tiger’s burrowing that did it. A mass of earth, softened by the rain, buried the dog; I went to extricate him — and there — think of it, Emily! — there was the stone work, leading to a cavity" — his eyes shone with the smile of an enthusiastic boy— "a stone cist! I put my hand in. An urn, a lead casket, a Roman burial-place beyond question not far away — !"

"Mark, dear," interrupted Lady Shute, her voice harsh yet pleading, as of one bearing a grievance nobly, "they had lain there several hundred years. It wouldn't have hurt them to lie a few days longer, would it?" The conversation was interrupted by a servant, and Sir Mark, outwardly apologetic, but inwardly glowing with his discovery, watched his wife disappear upon some urgent errand, then slowly made his way down a corridor to his study.

"We must be patient, Marjory, for another twenty-four hours or so," he mentioned, on finding her waiting for him to examine the treasures they had brought into the house only a few hours before. "Once the performance is over, and the people gone, we can get to work again." And he explained the situation in his blunt fashion, while the girl watched with eager, close attention his slightest word and gesture. The urn had not yet been thoroughly examined. Sir Mark now brought a movable electric lamp from another table. It was a moment of real life for the two delighted experts. The enthusiastic pair could contain themselves no longer.

"Still quite untouched," said the girl, in a tone a devotee might have used about some holy relic. "How lucky that you found it, instead of some clumsy workman with the point of a pick!" With her experienced, clever fingers she began to clear away the earth and stains of mould that still clung to the entrancing object. Her voice almost trembled with excitement as she added in a quick whisper: "Look, Sir Mark, look!" She pointed. "There's an inscription on it! I do believe — yes, there's an inscription! Look!"

He lowered his grey head beside her own, and thrust the light against the beautifully curved side of the precious urn.

"Nephelé," she whispered, making out the Greek letters before he did, "Nephelé—"

"The Dancer" — he deciphered the Latin words that followed. "Nephelé the Dancer," he repeated, easily deciphering the full inscription, now that she had shown the way. "Nephelé the Dancer," he repeated to himself.

He suddenly straightened up and stared hard at her, “Marjory!” he exclaimed, as though for the first time he realised her presence close beside him as a human being and not a secretary merely. “Marjory!”

She stared back at him, a light in her eyes that was not a reflection from the electric lamp he now held askew. “Nephelé the Dancer,” she replied, looking straight into his face, and standing upright, while her breath came quickly. “That means no ordinary slave girl, but probably a celebrated dancer — someone exceptional—”

“They took Greek names, yes — the best of them. It was the fashion, wasn’t it, in those days?” It seemed he asked her, as though he leant upon her special knowledge. The pair of them certainly were thrilled. Yet he was the great expert, she the assistant merely. He waited for her words, a curious look of expectancy in his eyes.

“A pure-bred Roman most likely!” she replied, after a moment’s pause. “The villa that stood here, remember, was the residence of the District Governor. We are reasonably sure of that. And he” — the sudden curious inflexion in her voice he did not notice, nor the bolder expression that flamed an instant in her usually veiled eyes— “and he would certainly have the best — the very best obtainable — wouldn’t he—”

“No ordinary slave girl, no mere dancer, as you say” — his words went fumbling rather— “would have been buried in this careful, honoured way — that’s certain,” he agreed, regarding her with the first touch of personal, admiring wonder he had ever shown. “Marjory!” he exclaimed again, “it’s wonderful — very, very wonderful!”

There fell a momentary pause between them that was broken by Sir Mark suddenly rubbing his hands with pleasure and excitement, as he summoned his thoughts back to the consideration of the present. He turned to fetch some other objects to the light, objects that only an expert could have recognised at all, so broken and fragmentary were they, for the small metal box containing them beside the urn had not been properly fastened, the damp had entered, and the result was little more than a discoloured dust.

“A tibia, evidently,” said Miss Trench, quietly; “this was once a little sweet-toned tibia, a flute of sorts you remember.” She took up the crumbled atoms with loving care, as a mother might have lifted the tiny offspring of her own flesh and blood. “And this,” she went on, half to herself, “quite possibly — I wonder? — might well have been a lyra that twanged the accompaniment to the dancing.”

“My dear!” exclaimed Sir Mark with keen interest, and yet keener surprise. “You may be right. How clever of you—”

“The merest guesswork,” replied the girl. “I may just as well be quite wrong, though somehow — I don’t think I am.” Her manner was intent, absorbed; he was as moved as she was. They handled and fingered the mysterious little things of dust and powdery wood, piecing them together again, as it were; making technical, expert comments; yet both stirred to their hearts by the human emotions that seemed still clinging about these pathetic symbols of ancient joy and gaiety.

“The casket! Now for the little casket!” exclaimed the archaeologist, his eyes lighting up afresh. He glanced at his companion. “We will open it together, you and I — eh?” He went over quickly to another shelf, the girl so close on his heels that unconsciously she laid her hand upon his arm, and her shining face almost brushed his cheek as they bent down together, then carried back to the light a small, dull object that had lain for twenty centuries beside the urn — the leaden casket. “The chisel, Marjory! The cold chisel — quick — where is it?” But already her swift fingers had passed it to him, and she watched his deft movements as he gently prised up the lead all round the top.

“It overlapped, you see,” she remarked. “It was hammered down to the sides so as to form an air-tight joint all round. You can see the scallop-shell moulding too.”

“Admirable, admirable!” he murmured. “If only you had been with me years ago in Crete!”

“It’s the Roman things I’m best at,” replied the girl simply.

The opening of the casket was accomplished without damage, revealing inside a second box, whose lid threatened to crumble as they touched it. “Cedar wood,” said Miss Trench, “fastened with a leather thong.” The leather was in good preservation. They peered inside. Two flat, brownish objects lay at the bottom of the little cedar box that still exhaled a faint aroma of its original fragrance; and as Sir Mark, puzzled at first, lifted them out tenderly for examination, the emotion of the archaeologist rose in him to a degree he had never experienced before, not even in his former Egyptian days of wonderful excavation and discovery. For a second his sight dimmed and became curiously blurred. “Footwear of some kind,” he muttered, “slippers probably, or—”

“Sandals,” came the low, clear voice at his ear, even before his own sentence was completed. “Her dancing sandals. Nephelé’s!”

Her employer turned and stared at her without a word for several seconds; then presently passed over to her, almost automatically, the precious remnants of the centuries. In spite of their great age, the sandals were still soft and pliable, the thongs that once bound them to the twinkling feet still serviceable.

“How neatly made and finished! How strong and flexible!” the girl said in a low voice, holding them to her eyes. “The leather — some imported hide, from Africa probably — gazelle, most likely. And what small feet she had — Nephelé. How marvellously light they are — feel them, Sir Mark — they seem almost alive. And her jewellery — some of her jewellery, too!”

The girl held in her hand a square piece of crystal attached to a fine gold chain. For a moment she hung it upon her dress, the gold chain touching the skin of her neck, the crystal swinging to and fro against her bosom. Very becoming to her was this ornament of the Roman dancing-girl of two thousand years ago. “It was in the bottom of the cedar box,” she explained in a slow, quiet voice, looking down admiringly at it. “Nephelé wore it, of course, when she danced. I feel — somehow — she loved dancing to this Roman Governor. She gave of her very best. I’m sure she danced divinely, and perhaps” — her voice sank away, fading curiously in volume— “she loved him—”

Her companion, examining the crystal and gold chain in his fingers, was not listening, apparently, to her fanciful description. “Of no great value,” he remarked, “of no particular value, but interesting all the same — extraordinarily interesting. One can see the whole thing,” he continued, half to himself, half to her, “the scene itself, the girl dancing, the great Roman looking on. One can hear the flutes, the twanging of the harps. It’s easily reconstructed, isn’t it? I wonder what she wore, and what he wore; what she felt, and what he felt? She must have been beautiful, yes, a beautiful dancer, of course, and, as you say, she may—"

The hoot and drone of arriving motors broke in upon his words; the sound of a dressing-gong followed harshly; a servant knocked and entered, bearing an urgent message "from her ladyship" that the dinner guests were already within the castle gates and both archaeologist and his assistant were needed by the tyrant Present. Sir Mark broke off, listening with a vague impatience.

"Thus," he said, turning with a smile to Miss Trench, "do the centuries repeat themselves — eh? Somewhat in this way, perhaps, Nephelé herself was summoned to prepare for *her* performance!"

They exchanged an understanding glance which proved that one and the same sympathy taught both minds, and that both shared a similar vision of reconstruction. Behind the servant, meanwhile, came Hugo Trench, already dressed; as Judge of the rival factions which were to perform after dinner, he was alert and interested like themselves, though in a different way.

"The audience is pouring in," he announced laughingly, "and as I'm a famous dramatic critic as well as arbiter, I insist upon your being ready, Marjory. Every child in the castle's calling for you, and Lady Shute" — with a glance at his host— "declares you're wanted in every room at once." He turned to Sir Mark, as his sister hurried away. "You must let me into the secret too," he observed, "as soon as the great performance is over. I'm not an expert, like my sister, but I'm eager to see and learn."

And Sir Mark, drawing up his mind and manners to the surface of today again, explained briefly what the precious objects were. "Marjory," he mentioned, "your sister — her instinct is quite extraordinary where Roman things are concerned, really wonderful. I hope — she won't overtire herself to-night with all this acting, children business. She seemed to me a trifle — overwrought — just now. It's the twofold excitement, of course."

"Her own part is a small one," replied his guest, "and she knows it backwards, she tells me, though I've no idea what it is myself. But she's stage-manager, dresser, scene-shifter, and prompter in addition. How she loves and enjoys it all, though!"

“She’s most competent, most gifted,” added Sir Mark, hurrying off with an excuse to make himself ready, and leaving the critic in charge of the relics on the table.

Hugo Trench, left alone with the musty treasures on the table before him, examined them with the merely curious interest of a well-read, cultivated mind. The sandals in particular he looked at closely for some minutes, since dancing was his absorbing hobby, and it was his “Study of Classical Dancing in Relation to the Modem Ballet” that had won for him his present eminent position in the artistic world.

At the moment, however, a more human interest, and one nearer to his heart, divided his attention. He was thinking of his sister’s passionate adoration for a man thirty years her senior; wondering whether Lady Shute had — and why her husband had not — divined it; hoping that no unhappiness need result from so strange a relationship, involving perhaps the loss of lucrative and pleasant work; asking himself chiefly, however, wherein lay the cause of the recent and sudden increase in the girl’s emotion. It had become so intense that her face betrayed her. Its radiance lent her positively a new beauty. Holding the sandals in his hands, stroking, examining them, his real interest was not with Nephelé, their wearer, whose name even he did not know, but with his sister Marjory, who, it seemed to him, was becoming somewhat deeply entangled in an awkward set of circumstances.

II

The Hall had certainly come into its own to-night, with a quiet air of grandeur, a dignity, a spaciousness which had accumulated during the passing of the ages.

Two immense log-fires roared upon capacious hearths that once had roasted oxen whole; and near the roof, lost among shadows, the faded battle flags of inter-tribal battles long ago hung motionless and grim. The fitful light gleamed on the stands of armour round the walls, and the big candles that alone lit the table might have been torches of resinous wood flaring upon boar’s head, mead in goblets, tankards of foaming ale, instead of upon champagne for the elders and lemonade for the children who formed a large proportion of “those present.”

These annual festivities were a serious affair at Carsholt. Before the climax of the Christmas Tree, there would take place the time-honoured rivalry between the Shutes of the Upper and the Lower Valley, each side giving its performance respectively amid keenest competition. Children, of course, were the actors, only two grown-ups, one of either sex, being permitted to take part; and Lady Shute of Carsholt, zealous partisan of her own Lower Valley, was persuaded that Miss Trench, though her part was a small one, would this time lead her side to victory. The girl's ten minutes on the stage affected the entire cast, lifting the little play to almost a professional standard. The Upper Valley, she was convinced, could boast no such talent among its grown-up helpers. The prize, an enormous box of chocolates, she did not care about; it was the honour of the Lower Valley she had at heart. There were cousins, too, she longed to see crestfallen after defeat, and the fact that her own children were performing was, of course, an added incentive to her keen desires. Both sides, with a hundred performances behind them, were at present equal. This was a decisive occasion. She certainly counted upon Miss Trench.

The Judge, moreover, was Miss Trench's famous brother, whose unanimous appointment lent a further distinction to the occasion. Amid much excited laughter and applause he was duly installed after dinner in the stiff chair belonging to his exalted office, the few electric lights Sir Mark permitted were turned out, and in the soft glow of a hundred candles the troupe from the Upper Valley gave a finished performance of the piece they had been rehearsing for weeks, if not for months, beforehand.

Its success, judging by the spontaneous applause from both sides, was beyond question, and Hugo Trench, busily making the notes he was expected to make, watched by numerous anxious eyes, registered as well the mental comment that "if the Lower Valley is going to beat *that,*" the Shute tribe would indeed be an uncommonly gifted set of people. For the excellence of the performance had genuinely sin-prised him; he had expected to be mildly bored, but instead had been an admiring and interested spectator. Sir Mark, beside him in the background of the crowded room, clapped long and loudly, while Lady Shute flashed acutely enquiring glances in his direction, though forced to conceal her anxiety, and to applaud as well. Only Marjory, in a chair just behind her host, gave no outward sign of approbation, an omission her brother ascribed to her preoccupation with her own part in the following rival piece. The Banqueting Hall echoed with enthusiastic curtain-calls, and in the general buzz of voices and bustle of excited movement, neither he nor Sir Mark noticed exactly when she left her seat. Being behind them both, indeed, and this end of the hall being but dimly lit by the big fires, her actions were easily concealed. Shadows draped all three of them, for that matter, and several empty rows intervened between them and the main body of the audience. What happened to Marjory Trench at the moment, in any case, no one apparently observed.

Suddenly there came an abrupt lowering of voices everywhere, and the appearance of a figure on the stage announced the approaching excitement of the rival troupe. In the hush that instantly descended upon the audience, the boy of fifteen, stage-manager and impresario, stood with shy self-consciousness before the row of candles and made his solemn announcement. After telling the "ladies and gentlemen" that what they were about to see was "of an unparalleled nature," and had "never been excelled on any stage," he added: "And I'm very sorry, ladies and gentlemen, we hope you won't mind much, but really we must turn all the lights out for it, please!"

The chorus of protest, half-shudderingly made, might have overwhelmed any less confident public man than this one who stuck manfully to his guns, and, availing himself of a pause the Judge obtained for him, carried his point at length successfully. "You see, ladies and gentlemen, the night has turned out fine, and there's a lot of moonlight now, so the place won't really be a bit too dark, and the bright light would spoil our piece. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen" — and he was gone again behind the curtain to the sound of clamorous applause. A moment later a footman appeared and extinguished the footlight candles, while another servant drew back the heavy curtains from the narrow, deep-set windows. The great body of the hall sank down into obscurity. At once a soft stream of moonlight stole upon the stage with a delightful and mysterious effect.

It was at this moment, perhaps, that the change of atmosphere, lurking hitherto unnoticed behind the general details of the day, stepped forward a little from the background and proclaimed itself a recognisable item in the programme. A soft, mysterious gloom pervaded the whole place, and a shudder of enjoyable creepiness ran among the children in an audible wave.

The hall now doubled in size, the lofty ceiling reared away among deep shadows that blurred all outlines, and the sudden absence of glare from the stage candles made it difficult to welcome the swift change from brilliance to obscurity.

It is a fact, moreover, that into this pause when the voices ceased and talk died away, there fell abruptly an unexpected sound — the barking of dogs, muffled by distance, but answering one another with distinctness in the night outside. With the faint moonlight, now streaming across the stage from the uncurtained windows, entered also this curiously mournful sound. The Carsholt hounds were baying the wintry moon, no more, no less; yet over that packed audience, obeying automatically the spell of semi-darkness — as men and women must and ever will — stole the faint presage of the singular change. It almost seemed that the deep baying of the uneasy dogs, as by some preconcerted signal, had announced it.

“Admirable — quite admirable, really!” exclaimed the Judge beneath his breath, as though both baying and the moonlight were artificial tricks of the producer’s — and at the same time wondering whence came the shiver that chilled his skin uncomfortably and made him look across his shoulder. “A wonderful *mise en scène,* isn’t it — so dramatic?” he whispered to his host, who stood upright at his side, one arm resting on the stiff-backed chair. “We’re going to see something exceptional, I do believe!”

Sir Mark, apparently, was too intent upon the empty stage to answer; his eyes stared fixedly, he showed no sign of having heard; and Trench turned next to take an impression of his sister, whose chair, placed behind and below his own, left her in shadow somewhat. But before sight picked her up, he forgot his first intention. The performance had begun. From that moment, in any case, Hugo Trench, as critic, as man, as Judge, forgot everything in the world except the thing he saw and heard upon the little improvised Carsholt stage.

“It’s really capital, first class!” ran his murmured exclamations, as the strings stole deliciously across the dark spaces of the immense old hall. “How in the world do they manage it? It’s too delightful!” For this sound of harp-strings plucked very far away seemed to enter the room from the Park beyond the narrow windows; the players, no doubt, were standing, muffled to the eyes, upon the moonlit lawns outside; and the effect, as the soft twanging sent its small vibrations through the vaulted hall, was most cleverly conceived and carried out. As the strings grew louder, the sense of anticipation became yet more keen, and when low flutes took up a delicate melody to the harps' accompaniment, the critic knew a moment of positive enchantment that he, for one, had never yet experienced upon any stage before.

"The youthful impresario was right," he whispered to his host. "Where — who are the players? How do they manage that sound so well?" He interrupted himself with a long-drawn "Sshhh" to the audience, who still kept up their whispering too loudly. "Very, very clever!" he went on, "but I wish they'd shut that door or window — ugh!" and he shivered a second time, then gave a little start. Sir Mark, in an effort to see and hear better, had leaned over and lurched rather heavily against his chair, but the same second almost was rigid again.

"Harps! Flutes! It's astonishing!" he was muttering, though to himself rather than to his guest. "A curtain has been drawn," his whisper continued, "and someone looks forth on us!"

"Perfect, perfect!" repeated the Judge, as the time quickened and the strings now sounded close behind the curtain. "It's Marjory's idea, no doubt," he added proudly, too excited to notice the strangeness of the other's language, and then came once more his vehement hiss, half-angrily this time, since the audience obstinately refused to maintain a proper silence. It was in the obedient hush following this time the authority of the Judge's chair, that a figure all had been waiting for slipped round the edges of the immense plush curtains and began to dance.

Trench was aware of two things: that someone had omitted to close the open door through which the cold winter's air came in with the musicians — and that he was spellbound. He forgot even to chide the stupid, chattering audience into silence. He watched with an amazement that increasingly mastered him. "I didn't know — I simply never guessed she had it in her...!" he exclaimed aloud once to his neighbour, then fell to silence, enchanted, strangely moved, caught out of himself by something he had never seen before on any stage.

In his day he had known much solo interpretative dancing, the best the capitals of Europe had to offer, and his criticism had picked out its almost invariable weakness — the inability to tell the story clearly. Hence, then, the miracle that now arrested the experienced soul in him, with a startled wonder and wholehearted admiration that took his breath away. The story that the figure interpreted in her dancing was clear as print. It was, moreover, a deep, a subtle story. How many, he wondered maliciously, among that country audience grasped it too?

For all that, his mind seemed confused — and curiously confused — between two sets of values. He watched, he felt, he analysed; he did not wholly understand; there was a missing item of immense importance somewhere that evaded him. That his sister possessed this touch of genius, that it explained her previous odd excitement, that her performance really *must* be seen in London, Paris, Milan — herein lay one set of values he could deal with easily enough. It was the other that puzzled him, even to laying a shadow upon his heart and mind.

In some way he could not define exactly, the exquisite performance he witnessed slipped just, though only just, beyond the edge of what was explicable and normal. This fact both puzzled and enthralled him, but it was the *type* of dancing that added the element of distress. Never before had he seen its like; its *genre* was unfamiliar; wholly new to him indeed. There were moments when Hugo Trench, who signed weekly articles in a newspaper of authority, doubted his own eyes. This lovely draped figure with the masses of dark, unfastened hair falling below her waist, a jewel gleaming on her breast, her bright feet flashing, twinkling; these gestures and movements that so superbly rendered the drama, now passionate, now pathetic, of a soul in the anguish of a great yet unuttered love — that this was his own sister Marjory, dancing upon the Carsholt stage for a Christmas gathering seemed incredible. For the face, hidden by falling hair and flowing drapery, was never clearly visible in the uncertain moonlight, while the sound of the little feet, well-nigh inaudible too in their fairy lightness, was drowned even by the faintly plucked strings and soft-blown flutes. He was aware of a deep lost meaning that went drifting, fluttering, hanging in the air before him, though of one he could not wholly seize....

Yet the story itself certainly unravelled itself clearly enough before his enchanted eyes, and to a setting of deep emotion only great art and even greater conviction could have hoped to waken: the story of a faithful love divinely felt, but of a love unspoken because unrecognized by the object of its worship; a love, therefore, heroically concealed. By what power, by what art, was conveyed, further, the spiritual grandeur belonging to a passion that was unearthly in the sense that it was deathless, able to survive all possible barriers of space and time? It was this touch of majesty that arrested the critic's soul with a wondering amazement, making him ask himself repeatedly: "How can she do this thing? Can this really be Marjory?"

So profound was the impression made upon him by the interest of the story, that he was less surprised than might otherwise have been the case when, to questions his brain asked occasionally, there rose from somewhere instantaneous and adequate replies. That an inner voice came to his assistance in this way, answering questions in his mind, satisfying moments of doubt he felt from time to time in the dance — he was as positive of this, as he was that these replies were absolutely true. Did he fail sometimes to follow the rapid, concentrated drama, did the meaning become momentarily obscure or wavering, then instantly rose this voice with a few true words that supplied the lost intention. Guided by these infallible, mysterious comments, he followed the brief story with a divination beyond his normal powers. For it was not the action merely that he sometimes failed to grasp, but rather the motives, desires, hopes and fears that lay deeply buried in the dancer's beating heart; it was these the mysteriously understanding voice made clear...

Far from her native land, beneath skies alien yet not unfriendly, the girl danced this great love she could not, dared not, otherwise express. Her secret was her life; she told it, offered it, in ecstasy. And not entirely in vain; her lavish giving of all she had to give was not wasted utterly; for though unrecognised by him who called it forth, her passionate beauty enriched the curtained eyes, sweetened the heart, of him who thought he delighted merely in her perfect art. His days stole some strange added happiness, whose origin he did not trouble himself to ask....

"He never knew, he never recognised...." rose the inner voice in explanation. "He remained blind — almost to the end..."

The figure bent lower, as the dance now drew towards its close; the jewel flashed in the moon upon her heaving breast; she kissed the alien soil *he* also trod; the masses of dark hair fell forward abruptly in a final gesture of sacrificial pain and happiness, covering her young face and outline as with the night of death.

“... until she died at his very feet, falling with his name upon her lips, her secret told in the eyes’ last look... so that too late... he *knew*—”

A shock of surprise and fear fell suddenly on the listener’s heart. This voice was real. It was not an inner, an imagined voice, but one he knew and recognised. It was close beside him, against his very ear. It was his host’s. Also he now recognised the jewel, the sandals too; the very music was not what he had the right to hear. This, beyond all question, was his sister Marjory, but in what borrowed, stolen guise, he asked himself? The blood for a moment left his heart, then rushed back with uncomfortable pressure, as he turned to the man at his elbow who had all along been supplying him with these uncanny, whispered explanations.

An instant of blinding confusion, of values that refused to right themselves, swept over him. Added to this, came the rising whispers of the impatient audience, but whether in praise of the performance just over — the figure had disappeared — or to welcome the young stage manager who now tried to stammer a few words, he could not say. This, too, remained a blurred picture in his troubled mind. Memory, indeed, hardly registered normally for some minutes, and it was partly the marble-white face of his host, and partly another thing as well, that undoubtedly caused his momentary loss of self-control. Sir Mark lurched heavily, a second time against his chair. A sound immediately behind them both had rendered his balance insecure. Trench turned in the grip of a supreme amazement. The voice was that of his sister. It issued from the lips of Marjory, as she collapsed yet deeper into the chair she had never, he now realised, for one moment left.

“Help me! We must get her out — away from this,” cried Sir Mark, yet quietly, his tone perfectly steady and controlled. It was exactly as though he knew and understood something his guest just failed to grasp — the very item, indeed, that had eluded him dining the entire evening. It was he, the brother, however, who divined the fuller truth, and divined it perhaps alone — that the girl had been unconscious during the whole of the little act. Her cry was not uttered in the moment of fainting, but uttered out of an unconscious state she had lain in for the past half-hour and more.

Trench, though he made a great effort to recover his mental balance, was too surprised, too shocked still, to succeed entirely, He moved as in a dream. He remembers inaccurately what happened. He had just lived a dream; that dream continued oddly. The interest of the audience in the second piece, now about to begin, enabled the two men to carry the girl out of the room unnoticed; the rows of empty seats, the darkness, and the proximity of a side door helped them further. Once in the lighted passage outside, he remembers hearing, with a vague dull anger in his heart, some words his host muttered about "the sandals, the very sandals... and the jewel. I saw them on her. I must — forgive me a moment — I'll see if they're still safe..." He broke off, almost letting drop the feet he carried, and was gone, deep in the preoccupation of his personal and passionate concern, shaking the little human interest from his obstinate mind, as though he shook off at the same time the recognition of something that he knew was true, yet dreaded.

Trench managed to carry his sister, unaided, to her room. Before he reached it, however, her eyes had opened and her normal state already begun to return. It was the rapidity of this return from unconsciousness, together with the first words she uttered, that confused her anxious brother even more, but at the same time convinced him finally that he had indeed witnessed something that had not been "seen on any stage before."

"Nephelé..." she murmured, staring at him with moist eyes and quivering lips; "she told him... she gave her secret. But did he realise... understand?"

"N-no, no," stammered her brother in reply. "He never understood. He never will!"

He was shaking. He spoke with curious conviction, wondering at himself. His words — her own as well — came evidently from the glamour of his dream, belonged still to the story that had so vehemently possessed him. He supported the girl's arm as he led her to the sofa. Who was she? Who was Nephelé? Who was Marjory? Who, above all, was — this other? The questions rose flooding into his bewildered mind.

"He's gone to make sure his precious relics are safe," came lamely, stupidly from his lips, as he watched his sister now putting her hair tidy before the mirror. She had refused to lie down. She declared she felt all right again.

"You — you wore them, you know — Marjory," he added, in spite of his desire not to say this thing.

She did not understand apparently, perhaps she did not catch his words. The normal expression rapidly re-established itself on her face. She was calm.

"I fainted — didn't I?" she was asking quietly. She looked about her, her grey eyes clear and soft, her voice quite steady. "Where are we? Oh, my room, of course. How idiotic of me! I've never fainted in my life before." For a moment there passed through her eyes a distant expression as of things remembered but not explained, then vanished again. "Where is—" she had an air of searching vaguely— "I mean — has the second piece begun?" She changed the sentence. "Quick, Hugo, I must hurry! Lady Shute will never forgive me if I'm late." With a few deft touches to her dress, she ran with anxiety, yet laughingly, to the door. "You too, Hugo," she exclaimed, as she opened it to the sound of excited voices coming up the passage. 'You're Judge, remember!"

Following the excited voices, in came the young stage manager and the breathless Lady Shute herself.

"Oh, I say, Miss Trench, wherever have you been?" cried the aggrieved boy.

'We have *all* been waiting for you," put in the exasperated lady, a jealous anger gleaming behind the frigid manner. 'You were nowhere to be found. It's really unforgivable—"

The Judge took the blame upon himself as they hurried downstairs; but the second piece, thus delayed, went poorly, for the players were upset, and Miss Trench, herself flustered and apologetic, gave an uninspired, even a mediocre performance of her own particular part. The Judge was forced to decide in favour of the Upper Valley, to the intense and venomous annoyance of his hostess. Sir Mark was not present. He arrived only just in time to make his customary little speech to the assembled rival tribes, and to hand the prize to the delighted winners.

"That stupid, selfish, irresponsible girl!" his wife relieved her mind at the first opportunity afterwards. "Her mind was elsewhere the whole time. And I'd counted on her so *absolutely.* Really she might — you, too, Mark — might have left your dead specimens in their grave just *one* day longer! I think," she added acidly, "it's time that Miss Trench's work was done by a man."

He made no adequate reply, his wife's grievance was admitted.

"The girl could hardly help fainting, I suppose," he mumbled. "She's been over-doing it lately a bit perhaps—"

"Men don't faint," his wife informed him. "You should have a man secretary. As for the girl — I've packed her off to bed, and I think it's time you engaged another assistant, dear."

Sir Mark sympathised, staring at his enraged wife somewhat blankly. There was justice and common sense in what she said. He was aware of this. Then, suddenly, he was aware of another thing — that an unalterable firmness lay in him with regard to something she had said, a fixed decision. He would never dismiss Miss Trench from his employment...

It was long after midnight, the last guests gone, the children sound asleep, and the moon looking down softly upon Carsholt and the timeworn valley of the Shute.

In the mind of the archaeologist, as he stood gazing down upon his treasures before going to bed, stirred a faint, inexplicable warmth of awakened imagination, whose trail, as he followed it, led him out into the wintry sky beyond the old stone walls. Upon one open palm lay the little pair of shining sandals, upon the other gleamed the bright crystal jewel. He gazed down at them in silence, forgetting that his guest sat smoking by the fire, watching him.

"They say," he murmured, "that history repeats itself. It certainly was passing strange and wonderful! Can I believe that — ?"

"Genius," remarked the critic, not wishing to play unwilling eavesdropper, "is ever strange — particularly in its spasmodic appearances." Sir Mark's face was not visible, his back being to the glare of the electric fight. "Never on any stage before," he went on, slowly, "have I witnessed anything—"

His host turned sharply with a look on his face that stopped his companion dead. Tenderly laying down the treasures, he came over to the fire where his guest sat watching, listening, wondering.

“Let me tell you this,” he said thickly, “that what we witnessed to-nigh is something that our old world has not seen for close upon — two thousand years.”

He laid a hand gently upon the other’s shoulder. “I suggest, Trench,” he added in a lowered voice trembling with emotion, “that it remain *our* secret, since you and I were the only witnesses. To-morrow I shall replace these relics in their ancient tomb. I shall bury them again.”

He did, then, an amazing thing. Turning back to the table, he raised the sandals to his lips and kissed them with a reverent devotion. He kissed the shining jewel too.

“Let us, too, bury in our hearts,” he said softly, “those treasures which we appreciate — but may not use.”

Shocks (1935)

CONTENTS

ELSEWHERE AND OTHERWISE
THE STRANGER
DR.FELDMAN
SHOCKS
THE SURVIVORS
THE ADVENTURE OF TORNADO SMITH
HANDS OF DEATH
THE LAND OF GREEN GINGER
THE COLONEL’S RING
REVENGE
ADVENTURES OF MISS DE FONTENOY

ELSEWHERE AND OTHERWISE

I

AMONG THE GENUINELY strange stories of the world the strangest are those concerned with total disappearance. Apart from murders and destruction, where bodies are variously done away with, these “total disappearances” stand by themselves. Hi presto! and the fellow is gone, leaving not a wrack behind. The class, naturally, is small. Sydney Mantravers certainly belonged to it.

His case is interesting because, after a total disappearance of four years or so, he re-appeared. Not only did he re-appear, but he tried hard to tell me where he had been and what he had been doing during his long absence. He failed. Such experiences apparently seem uncommunicable in any language at the disposal of humanity, since they transcend anything humanity has undergone. The necessary words have not yet been coined. Before he could satisfy the thousand questions I burned to ask him, questions, too, he might in time have partly answered, he was gone again, this time, as we say, for good.

I saw him go, I also saw him return: that is, I saw him disappear and re-appear. This was my unsought, unwelcome privilege. I was with him when he went, I was there when he came back. That final going in death robbed him, I firmly believe, of a burden of intense and marvellous confession, while it robbed me, but in particular robbed Dr. Vronski, his fellow student, of a rich harvest that was almost within my grasp — a revelation possibly that might have extended the present knowledge of the race.

Sydney Mantravers remains for me an extraordinary, even terrible problem. The mere mention of his name brings back the haunting radiance of his skin and eyes, the breath of some unearthly atmosphere which stimulates, while yet it cools, the blood. Eyes, skin and those thousand unanswered questions will haunt me till I, too, enter that silent darkness which makes reappearance apparently impossible.

* * * *

His story is not really complicated. It is only that the sequence of its details covers a considerable time, a somewhat extensive field as well. It is best to tell it precisely as it happened. It began, then, in a London club, of which we were both members, and the occasion was August 4th, the night of the Ultimatum. War had been declared. England was at war with Germany. It was a night, as all remember, of intense excitement, of strange exaltation. Emotion was deep and real. It was not personal emotion. All of us, old and young, thought first of the country.

Mantravers, a distant cousin, was over sixty; I was a young officer of twenty-five. He had always been kind to me, I knew him fairly well, he had given me good tips in days gone by, we were friends of a kind, and his knowledge of life, as a rich, travelled, experienced bachelor, had often stood me in good stead. I respected, if rather dreaded, him, dreaded, that is, his strange highbrow theories, his attainments in higher physics, his amazing ideas about space and time and what not. Occasionally, he would pour something of all this into me, leaving me breathless, uneasy, perhaps a little scared. My main interests being horses, women, money and personal advancement, the dread of his intellectual attainments was understandable, but he declared he liked to talk to me because, if ignorant, I was what he called "open-minded and intelligent," while I think he twigged some secret curiosity in me at the same time. I used to think of those occasional talks as "trying it on the dog," but when once I mentioned this he shook his head. "No, no," he said, "it's not that. You happen to have an unusual mind, an original make-up. If you were trained a bit I could tell you more. You could do things. Your ignorance is to the good, for you would have nothing to unlearn."

His greatest friend was a certain Dr. Vronski, whom I knew slightly too, another "advanced intellectual" whose experiments with glands, hypnotism, yoga, and other adventures into difficult fields brought him more than once into conflict with the Law. Vronski I saw rarely, he never favoured me with special talks, but he treated me with a certain courtesy, almost a touch of deference in his manner somewhere, as though I interested him as a specimen, or as someone with possibilities that must be watched, at any rate, not damaged, this attitude due, I felt sure, to things my cousin had said about me. I was, naturally, in the confidence of neither. I mention this strange Dr. Vronski because of the role he inevitably played. Another odd thing I must mention too at this point — the astonishing fact that Mantravers, already over sixty, looked even younger than Vronski, who was forty perhaps. My cousin's youthful air, indeed, was a standing joke almost. Not looked merely — he *was* young. He had not aged for years; for a quarter of a century, the story ran, he had not changed. Yet, when I caught up with the tale and its undeniable evidence, I had the convinced intuition that this amazing preservation had its mysterious roots, not in any experiment with glands, but in some secret adventure or discovery that had been undertaken by this amazing pair, had failed in Vronski's case, yet succeeded with my cousin. Sydney Mantravers, to put it ridiculously, had arrested decay, that gradual decay which we call growing older, for something like a score of years.

This was uppermost in my mind, even a rather dreadful barrier between us, each time we met and talked. Owing to my age much of the evidence, of course, was hearsay.

Yet his curious youthfulness at sixty never failed to rise in my mind, often to strike me in the face with its uncanniness. He had somehow escaped a good twenty-five years of life. It was present in my mind when the Ultimatum came.

In the club, then, that night of strain and tension, I chanced to be sitting with him when the news we had all been waiting for came in — that war had been declared. We were all "worked up" and above ourselves. Mantravers, too, was all worked up — but, as I suddenly discovered with a shock, not about the declaration of war. He was stirred and excited about quite another matter, a wholly personal matter.

It was this difference of key that isolated him oddly from what all were feeling at the moment. While my mind was occupied entirely with questions about England, the Empire, our army and navy, with my own immediate prospects as a soldier as well, he kept asking me questions about some trivial personal matter. It got on my nerves a bit. Too excited to be puzzled, I felt first exasperated, then angry. He kept asking me if I remembered someone called Defrayne. But the name conveyed nothing to me. I had never heard it, and in any case what could it matter at such a time — unless, perhaps, this Defrayne had something to do with the war.

“He was in the 9th, you know,” said Mantravers, as though Defrayne did, after all, have something to say to the war. I hardly listened, I was barely polite, my interest was so entirely elsewhere. The only point I noticed as curious, and had been aware of, indeed, even before — though the excitement had prevented my paying special attention to it — was the colour of my cousin’s face. His skin was dead white of rather a ghastly kind. “Try and remember,” he urged. “Look back a bit. He was in your regiment. You must have heard of him.” But I listened through a chorus of other voices, for we were all talking at once...

It was well after midnight, “God Save the King” already sung, when, to my surprise, Mantravers begged me to walk home with him, since it was on my own way, and when we reached his door asked, even insisted, that I should come in. He wished to tell me something. Once in his room, a drink before us, I remember that a sensation of discomfort, almost of alarm, came over me, and that I began to watch him more closely. My own preoccupation was still entirely with the war, of course. Literally, I could think of nothing else. Yet his first question, since I had naturally expected something about Germany at least, returned to his own personal affair: “You tell me,” he began in a low and rather tense voice, “that you don’t recall Defrayne?” I did not, and I told him so again bluntly enough, exasperation and impatience showing plainly. I had hoped for something very different.

“Then — if you don’t mind — I’ll tell you something,” he said, and there was a nervous hesitation, almost a demand for sympathy, in his manner that made me wonder. The pallor in his face again struck me sharply. “I must tell someone,” he went on, “and you’re the sort of listener I want. You’re ignorant and simple, but you’re open-minded.” He paused for a second or two. “It’s about Defrayne and myself,” he added, almost in a whisper, and for some reason I felt a sudden shiver ran down my back. It was due, this shiver, I verily believe, to an abrupt realisation that he looked twenty-five years younger than he was. I knew this in a general way, had wondered at it often enough. I now realised it. I felt at any rate this passing shiver.

II

Let me say at once that this announcement both bored and half infuriated me, so that at first I listened perfunctorily — for what possible interest could Defrayne, whoever he was, have now? — but that later, if considerably later, my interest was so deeply caught that the war, with all it meant, slipped into the background.

Strange, how many different things the mind can think of at the same time, how many different, even opposing, emotions it can hold simultaneously: — the nearest approach to four-dimensional time and space we know, perhaps. The thing he had to tell was so literally beyond belief that had he told it a week, even twenty-four hours before, it must have seemed wholly beyond belief, and I should have thought him mad. Yet now, as I stared and listened, one ear cocked for the street where shouting, tumult and the National Anthem were still audible, I discovered that I did not entirely disbelieve. Nor did I, as must have been the case even the night before, regard my cousin as the victim of an elaborate hallucination, his mind deranged. On the contrary, I found myself listening to something that I felt was not necessarily impossible. And the idea dawned upon me, then, that this shock of the war, which in my case was profound and real, had worked in me some swift curious change. I felt in some way older, more developed. The shock had matured me abruptly, as it were with a jump. A new understanding of Mantravers was born in me. I understood, for instance, his reputation for giving "easy advice," for saying what the other fellow wanted to hear, rather than what he thought himself. His immense knowledge of life had always brought people in trouble to him, young people especially. "Go and ask Mantravers, he'll tell you what to do," was a commonplace, though it would have been more correct to say "he'll tell you what you *want* to hear." I now realised suddenly that this was no false friendliness in him, nor lack of principle exactly, but was due rather to his deep understanding sympathy. He put himself so completely in the other fellow's shoes that he thought the other fellow's thoughts instead of his own. It was his own power of imaginative sympathy that sent him wrong.

As my preoccupation with the war now slipped further and further into the background it flashed upon me, too, that after all I did perhaps remember having heard of Defrayne. I did not know even how the name was spelt, when suddenly there leaped into my mind the word "de Frasne," and I dimly recalled that a young officer in my regiment, of that name pronounced Defrayne, had committed suicide a good many years ago. It was well before my time, but I had heard the case spoken of. In trouble about money, a woman, questions of personal honour involved, the young subaltern had put a bullet through his temple. But he had gone to see Mantravers first. As I listened to the tense, low-pitched voice in the chair opposite to mine, details filled in the story by degrees.

A good many years before, it appeared, young de Frasne had come to ask his advice. The young fellow had involved himself in a terrible mess, yet without having done anything wrong actually. Appearances were hopelessly against him. In a tragic mood, the youngster expected, wanted, tragic advice, and Mantravers took up his case with his usual intense sympathy. He felt, that is, exactly what young de Frasne felt. "Some chaps," he had suggested, "placed as you are, *mighty* of course, rank honour higher than life..." Young de Frasne went white. "You mean...?" he asked grimly. "There's always the emergency exit, isn't there?" Mantravers mentioned, lending himself fully to the other's theatrical state of mind. It never occurred to him, he swore, that the stricken youngster would take his advice seriously. "I really thought," he now told me in his flat, "that he'd go home feeling himself a stage hero — then think out another way. He would come back in the morning. But he did not come back next morning, nor any other morning."

Mantravers, forgetting all about the interview to which he had not attached much importance, went to India that same week. He never heard till he came back to England a year later, and then he only heard it casually, that the young fellow had put a bullet in his brain. The lad had passed from his memory. He forgot even what he looked like. It gave him a horrid turn, he assured me, when he learned the truth, "for in a way, you see," he explained, "I felt responsible."

"That was some years ago," he was saying, my attention not yet wholly caught, "twenty or possibly twenty-five, and, as I've told you, I'd forgotten even what he looked like. My memory for faces is shocking. Last year in Dinard I talked and smoked, gambled too, with a delightful fellow whose face I remembered, but whose name, and where we had met, escaped me utterly, a fellow who knew me well too. He turned out to be the Italian barber in Regent Street who cuts my hair..."

"Yes, yes," I put in, making a show of interest, "but I'm rather like that, too."

He stared at me a moment. “Maybe,” he countered briefly. “But a week ago,” he went on, his face paler but his eyes oddly bright, “the same sort of thing happened to me again — at a party — and it turned out to be the last person in the world I expected.”

I had not been listening properly, my thoughts still running on the war and what was coming, but the way he said this gave me a jolt for some reason. I felt a crawling again at the roots of my hair. I asked what he meant exactly.

“I went,” he said in a lowered voice, “to an evening party, an At Home of sorts, and as usual I ran into all kinds of people who knew me, but whose names — and where I had met them — I could not for the life of me remember. Among them was a young chap whose face I certainly knew, knew it as well as I know yours. But his name, or where we had met before, escaped me utterly. He seemed uncommonly pleased to run across me. It was quite awkward. He didn’t say much, but what he did say was to the point. ‘You’ve forgotten me,’ he said, ‘but I’ve been waiting for this chance. I’ve got a debt I want to repay.’ Having forgotten who he was, yet ashamed to let him see it, I murmured something vague about dining together some night. To my great embarrassment, he jumped at it. I was in a fix, you see. He was so determined, so intense. No memory of any debt occurred to me. I gave him my restaurant address, an Italian place near Leicester Square, and when he asked for a date, I rashly said that I was there most nights and that he would be very welcome... and then, as I was edging off, hoping to escape him, I found instead that he had somehow escaped me. He just melted away. The crowd was pretty thick, a regular crush, and how he managed it so quickly and cleverly puzzled me. One minute he was at my side, touching actually, the next — he wasn’t—”

“He didn’t say any more, you mean? Not even good-bye?” My interest was caught and held increasingly now.

Mantravers shook his head. “Just that he’d be there — and he was gone,” came the reply. “And would you believe it,” he went on, his eyes fixed hard on mine, “the very next night in my Italian restaurant, who should walk in but this very fellow. He came straight to my table too — and there I was, not knowing his name, or where we had met before, or what I could say to him, or what he wanted. It was a hell of a fix, eh? I felt an acute discomfort.

This talk of a debt he had to settle was part of it, for I had a horrid feeling that I *ought* to remember something."

I watched my cousin more and more closely as my interest deepened, and the legend about his having somehow beaten time by twenty-five years came back to me sharply. Very forcibly, unpleasantly too, it struck me, not that he could have passed for forty instead of sixty, but that he literally *was* forty instead of sixty — as though decay had been arrested. I cannot say why this conviction came over me so overwhelmingly just at this particular moment, nor can I explain why the roots of my hair began to crawl again. I only knew that I was vividly aware of it, and that a faint, unpleasant touch of chill came with it.

"You know," he went on, "how one is sometimes aware of things, little, trivial things, I mean, without actually noticing them? Well," he explained, "I noticed in this way one or two odd little details. Not important things, mind you. The important thing was to remember his name, where we had met, under what circumstances, but instead of that I noticed his old-fashioned dinner-jacket, the crease down the *side* of his trousers, his pumps — all of them details of dress no longer used. They had passed away — before your time, of course — but—"

"He dined with you? You dined together, I mean?"

I brought him back. I was impatient. The cold I felt increased.

Mantravers shrugged his shoulders: his face seemed to grow paler still.

"He sat at my table," he replied, "for I couldn't help myself." His voice went lower than ever, and he looked over his shoulder. "I told the waiter to lay another place, and while that was being done we talked. He talked, rather."

"Of course, you remembered then gradually? The talk brought him back?"

Again he shook his head. "That's the odd part of it. The feeling of familiarity, of knowing him quite well, grew stronger and stronger, yet never fulfilled itself. It got no further. Something in my mind deliberately concealed him from me. Kept him hidden. You have guessed, of course, already. But I didn't — till the end." A perceptible shiver ran through his body. "All I knew was that while he talked I was longing and longing to get rid of him, hoping he would go, wondering what I could do to bring this about, but listening all the time to what he said — as though I couldn't help myself and had to listen."

He stopped and took a gulp of his whisky. I asked what kind of things the unwelcome, half-recognised guest talked about. What did he say? It was plain that my cousin wanted to keep this back, while eager at the same time to tell it. He betrayed a touch of embarrassment, of awkwardness, almost of shyness.

"Well, sort of personal things," he brought it out at length hesitatingly, "said no one gave better advice than I did, it was a privilege to talk to me, that I had helped him once, and that now he could do the same for me — and owed it to me. That was what I disliked so — owed it to me — because — because our troubles were similar. *That,* he repeated more than once, was why he was able to come at all."

He raised his glass again, but did not drink.

"It was then," he whispered almost, "that was the first time, I mean, I began to feel jumpy."

"Jumpy!" To tell the truth I felt jumpy myself as I listened.

The strange maturity, the sudden growth in myself already referred to, began to work in me, bringing a sharper, deeper insight with it, so that I knew, as with a flash of clairvoyance, that Mantravers himself was in some kind of personal trouble. Abruptly, this revelation came, a sense of discomfort with it, for I understood that he was both anxious to tell it and not to tell it. I waited. In the end, of course, he told it, and it involved a woman, money, honour, and all in a distinctly unpleasant way that heaped appearances — though he had done no dishonourable act — against him. Only the bare outline was given to me, the outline of a very nasty fix.

"To my utter astonishment," Mantravers went on, "the fellow referred to this, as though he knew all about it. He did know all about it. It amazed me; I was flabbergasted. I felt as if hypnotised, for he had a dreadfully insistent way with him, so that I had to listen. And my eyes kept wandering to a dull red mark he had in his right temple. I had not noticed it before. It seemed to glow. It fascinated me, that mark, and from time to time the fellow's hand, as he passed it across his forehead, let his fingers trail and linger over it, deliberately, I could have sworn. He saw my eye on it. 'I've been waiting a long time for this,' he said. 'It was difficult to arrange, but now you're in much the same boat I was in once; now I can give you advice so that you'll understand.' A sort of icy smile ran over his face. 'You see,' he added, 'by rights I ought to have stayed here another twenty-five years. My life would have run to fifty-one.' And with that he abruptly stood up to go. The red mark on his temple glowed and spread a little. I got up too. 'Meet me in my house to-morrow,' he said, 'meet me at six o'clock,' a strange compelling power in his voice and fixed staring eyes. 'I shall be there waiting for you.' With that he turned, I saw the red mark flame out and die away, I saw him walk across the floor between the tables and go out of the restaurant."

It was only at this final moment, my cousin assured me, his voice a whisper now, that he recognised de Frasne, as though the shutter that all this time had deliberately hidden him from memory, was lifted, also deliberately. Yet no shock accompanied the revelation. His attention, rather, was drawn to quite normal things about him — the waiter, though he had laid a second cover, as bidden, was hovering near, saying something, asking, indeed, whether he should bring the soup since perhaps the expected gentleman was not coming after all, and a moment later serving the single plate and clearing away the second unwanted cover.

I sat silent for some minutes, finding nothing to say, wishing only that my cousin would remove his fixed stare from my face, and relieved when at last he did so and raised his glass and drank. Yet a lot of things crowded jostling in my mind during that brief silence. While resisting with all my might the shivers down my spine, my main thought, the one that obsessed me chiefly, was, oddly enough, not the wild, forbidding story itself, but that other, almost equally sinister legend about my cousin's personal appearance. His story bewildered me beyond anything I could understand, of course, but it was this point of his physical preservation that for some reason kept intruding dominatingly, forcing its way past other thoughts and feelings. That he actually looked, and was, a whole generation younger than he had the right to be, that he had evaded, as it were, the march and decay of something like twenty-five years, that those missing years lay in wait for him, ready to pounce, and that this period was just about what de Frasne would have lived had he not killed himself — it was impossible and outrageous ideas of this kind that whirled through my mind in such a torrent that I felt as though I were going mad. I made a violent effort to get myself in hand. Mantravers' eyes were off me for a moment while he raised his glass, but as he drank, his stare fixed me again over the tumbler's rim. I remember shaking myself free, shaking myself, as it were, mentally and physically, opening my mouth to speak.

Mantravers was before me, however. "I'm going to the house," he said quietly, his voice no longer whispering. "I shall keep the appointment. I must, you see." It gave me a shock to hear him, but his next words brought back another thing I dreaded more — the long cold shuddering down my spine.

"I want you to come with me — in case I go."

It was the last word that made the shudder repeat itself, and so uncontrollably that my hand was trembling as I lifted my own glass. That "go" was for some reason awful, so that I dared not question even....

Mantravers had my promise before I left his flat, though it took him the best part of an hour to obtain it.

The turmoil in my young mind is understandable without detailed description. England was at war with Germany, I was in the Army, my regiment absorbed my thoughts... For a couple of hours Mantravers had torn my interest away to his own amazing story, but the moment I left him the war and its immediate personal claims returned. I cursed myself for having given that promise. At the same time I was gripped by the unusual tale. I had a deep respect for my cousin. If his reputation, with its semi-legendary atmosphere of suggesting the impossible and supernatural, made me uneasy in his presence, his personality impressed me to a point that made me feel he was not quite as other men are. He was un-ordinary in some peculiar way, extremely gifted, of course, as well; I knew his courage; I looked up to him. His invitation probably flattered me into the bargain... I was a little scared, to tell the truth, rather as a schoolboy might be scared, and the idea occurred to me to get in touch with Dr. Vronski, his friend and companion in adventure. I felt the need of advice. Time, however, made this out of the question. I expected to get my army orders any moment.

In the end I kept my promise, kept the appointment punctually.

And, once again, the first thing that impressed me when we met in the club was his uncommon, even uncanny, youthfulness. I swear he might have been my Captain. I mention this particularly because of what came later, if a good deal later, and that it should have struck me so vividly, that at first it ousted my thoughts and fears of the adventure to follow, is worth emphasis. Coming straight from a feverish, excited day full of thoughts about kit, orders, fighting, France, even about being killed, I found myself registering first this conviction, this positive certainty, that he had somehow managed to evade a long toll of years. His air and attitude, his very atmosphere, conveyed this ridiculous assurance in a way I cannot describe, though the unwelcome shiver it caused in my spine is easily told. A moment later, then, I found myself, instantly and unaccountably, swept up into his mood, into his stream of thought and feeling, so that this world's affairs, even a war with Germany, seemed somehow of less account than what he had afoot.

His face, curiously unlined and young, was also distinctly pale, there was a shrinking in his manner. Had I not known his courage, I should perhaps have credited him with what we youngsters called "cold feet."

"I'm obliged to you," he remarked quietly, "for being so punctual. But I knew you would not fail me. It's rather out of your categories, you see," he added after a slight hesitation, "this proposed visit of mine." What he meant precisely, God only knows: I only know myself that I was aware of a queer pang as of something that both attracted and repelled me with a certain violence — by which I mean, perhaps, that I both understood yet did not understand. It was the part of me that understood that attracted me.

We set out on foot at once for a walk of a mile or two to de Frasne's house in Bayswater. All these years it had remained empty, apparently neither sold nor rented. The region, prosaic and respectable, reassured me, for how could anything 'unearthly" happen in Bayswater? He had the key, he mentioned. And the only other remark he made during that walk of ours over half an hour was a curious one, uttered with breaks and at intervals moreover, for I said nothing: "If what I think is true," came in that low voice that again rather gave me the creeps, "young de Frasne... since his death... has been in other time and space... When he said that he had been waiting for me... it was really I who... had been waiting for him..." And then suddenly, as I made no comment, he raised his voice almost to a shout that made me start. "You follow me?" he cried. I managed a reply of sorts. I was following, of course. "I didn't mean literally," he explained, lowering his voice; "I meant — do you understand?" My face, doubtless, gave my answer clearly enough. “No, no, how could you?” he went on, half to himself. “You’ve never transcended human experience, so you couldn’t. Naturally, you couldn’t. You only know time in a line, as past, present, future. Vronski and I have known it ... otherwise... in two dimensions, two at least... A changed consciousness — that’s the trick, you see — can function in different time... elsewhere and otherwise—”

A sudden flash came to me, so that I stopped him on the pavement.

“Living backwards *or* forwards, you mean?” I cried.

He stared at me with a kind of exultation. I remember the pallor of his skin, the brightness in his eyes. “I imagine parallel is the right, the better word,” he said, with a land of odd breathlessness, and then he added quickly, “I felt sure — I always knew — you had it in you — somewhere. Death of unexpected kind, self-inflicted, before the natural moment, I mean... and I showed him the way... would make this possible probably...”

His voice died away into undistinguishable phrases mumbled below his breath. We hurried on. I grunted, stared, and mopped my face. There was only one horror in me — that he would explain more clearly what was in him. I went ahead of him, going faster and faster.

We reached the street, he found the number, we stopped outside an empty house that showed distinct evidence of long neglect, smothered in boards and signs of house-agents. Mantravers went up the eight steps, I following him. He put the key in the door, opened it, then handed me the key.

He gave me a searching look, a sort of frozen smile on his lips, his pallor very marked. “You needn’t come in with me,” he whispered, “and you needn’t lock the door. Keep the key. I’m going in alone. I *think* I know what I’m in for,” he added, “but remember, if I’m right in my conjecture, no one need look for me. I shall, at any rate, be *here.*”

He looked me straight in the eyes, and his skin was white as linen. He was not frightened. He struck me as a man in a dream, but an awful, icy dream that shattered ordinary experience. The door banged behind him. I stuck my car close and listened intently. I heard his footsteps clearly as they went across the carpetless hall, then up the wooden stairs, then along a landing, fainter and fainter, after which came silence. I found myself in a shudder, standing on the outer steps, trembling all over, excited beyond words, my heart positively thumping, my forehead wet with perspiration. I waited some fifteen minutes. There was not a sound from inside the house. The traffic went past noisily. It was already after sunset, the dusk falling. I decided to go in. I put in the key, pushed the door open and walked cautiously inside. I closed the door behind me.

Daylight still hung about in palish patches, but there were shadows too. The hall gaped as though about to utter, but no sound came. Peering into two large empty unfurnished rooms, I went slowly upstairs, the stairs he had trodden just before me, along the deserted landing, passing from failing light across little gulfs of shadow. Everything gaped, gaped with emptiness, dust lay all over, decay, neglect, cobwebs, silence, vacancy, motionless air and musty odours — otherwise nothing. All windows everywhere were closed and fastened. I felt my skin crawl with goose-flesh, and the hair moved on my scalp. I persisted. I searched every single room, even the attics and the kitchen and scullery below. I called aloud. I waited, listening. I stared and watched. Taking quick steps I then paused, every sense alert, intent. I called again, but no answer came. No hint of a human presence was discoverable. I searched, as the saying is, from roof to cellar. That I found the courage to do so seems to me now the proof of my intensely alive curiosity, even of something in me that believed, and hoped, and perhaps expected — to find a clue...

Half an hour later I stood on the outer steps again in the evening air, the street now draped with dusk turning towards night. I decided I must find Dr. Vronski. I must see him at once, without delay. He, rather than the police, was the one to be informed But at my rooms I found peremptory orders that admitted of no delay or compromise. I left England a few hours later, the key still in my pocket, the door it belonged to unlocked. There had just been time for me to send a hasty letter to Dr. Vronski giving the facts as I knew them, and for a word of reply to reach me: “No cause for anxiety. I’ve heard from S. M. Do your job — but don’t forget him.” With this measure of relief — for I should otherwise have thought that Mantravers had shot himself or leaped from a window to his death — I crossed the Channel, an insignificant unit in that heroic B.E.F. Since Vronski had “heard from him,” he was still alive — somewhere.

What happened to men’s minds during those four years lies, of course, beyond easy understanding — by those who never experienced the strains and stresses they were subject to. Any man capable of going over the edge, went over it. For myself, I cannot say. After a year's anguish, tension, suffering that I swear lie beyond human expression in words, I was taken prisoner, and for the next three years I languished in a German prison camp. Nothing can extenuate or excuse the inhuman horror of a bad German prison camp. My own was of the worst. Any prisoner who survived the process that stunned, stupefied, brutalised his soul, had in him something unusual. The life taught him to search the very marrow of his soul's bones to find relief from daily and nightly torture of excruciating kind.

My point here is that, while I could not honestly find myself unusual in any way, I did find relief; and I found a good deal of this relief in speculating about escape — but I mean escape in space and time. Any real relief inside that barbed wire had to be of mental or spiritual kind, imaginative if you will. The point is that I found it to some extent in speculating about the wild ideas of Vronski and Mantravers. My mind, quite possibly, went a bit over the edge, as I called it above, though I cannot judge of that.

My speculations, such as they were, began after a letter I received from Dr. Vronski: "You will like to know about your cousin," it ran briefly, also disconnectedly, since the censor's attentions had maimed it badly. "The police gave up the search long ago. The Courts have given leave now to assume him dead. But I know he is... not dead... conceivably within reach even. He is not unhappy, nor is he happy, for he is different. I am not in communication with him, but I know... alive and well... will come back when *you* come back... you, so to speak, the point in our space and time... point he left at... Shown the way by de Frasne into other conditions. He is, for the moment, elsewhere and otherwise... for him literally for a moment only. If this reaches you, do not worry... think about it only... no help from you needed, but sympathetic thought of most concentrated kind can keep open...." and the letter closed thus abruptly as though the censor rather late in the day imagined a code.

I had years of "sympathetic thought," stimulated by fierce mental and physical anguish of distinctly "concentrated" kind.

Let us leave it at that....

Mantravers had disappeared, leaving not a wrack behind. Hi presto! and the fellow was gone. He vanished — into an empty and unfurnished house. He was just over sixty when he went, and he was just over sixty when he returned. I was present when he returned and I can testify. I knew him before and after. The clothes he went in were the clothes he came back in — an everyday tweed suit with a blue bow tie. He had been away for over four years. He came into view again, re-emerged into our ordinary three-dimensional categories, into our ordinary life and world that is, precisely and exactly as he left it — almost. Changes of a kind there were, but to describe them here would be to anticipate unduly. They shall be told in their proper place and sequence...

Other letters from Vronski reached me in my prison camp, though most of them, since they dealt with "escape," were too censored to be intelligible. A book or two came as well, articles and pamphlets, undoubtedly sent by him. My mind, whether "over the edge" or not, being neither mathematical nor metaphysical, made little headway with them, though I read — waded through them rather — with undeniable interest and excitement. Other cases of "total disappearance" were discussed and analysed, and such cases, apparently, were not so rare as I had imagined. There were certain places, certain spots of loneliness on the world's surface, regions of wild and hostile desolation, regions avoided rather by commonplace humanity, where such queer "vanishings" had occurred too frequently to be normally explained, and my mind, "ignorant but open," simple certainly, struggled with these strange and semi-marvellous accounts, accounts, moreover, painfully documented with names and dates and other evidence we usually accept as honest.

Such disappearances, however, hardly applied, I felt, to a Bayswater street and a dwelling-house plastered with agents' boards. It was the deeper, more philosophical articles that held my interest chiefly, the writers who suggested that "escape" from the limited life we know was possible, desirable as well. Life, declared one writer, was nothing but a prison-house, a cage, and we were wise to admit frankly that it was horrible. We were prisoners in it, slaves, caught helplessly by the bars of space and time which were our ghastly limitations. Yet a way of escape, "though few there be that find it," offered, the A B C of this way being to "go against nature," since nature kept us stupefied within our bars. The great majority, of course, dominated by the herd-instinct, obeyed the shibboleths of the herd. These never could, because they never wanted to, escape. Only the few who resisted the stunning, deadening influence of the herd, of nature, need ever dare to make the attempt... A strange new world of possibilities opened before me.

I did not close my mind against them, but merely wondered, dreamed, and speculated. Did I actually make practical attempts, following the guarded hints and clues, attempts to practise in my own being the amazing rules laid down? I had these awful, bitter hours to fill as best I could. Physical efforts were not available, I must fill my life mentally, imaginatively, or else, as we described it among ourselves, and as I saw happening daily, hourly, among my fellow-prisoners, "go potty." My long sleepless nights, my days of endless anguish, sought what alleviation they could find....

Another dimension in space was easier to conceive, I found, than another dimension in time. Moreover, among my fellow-prisoners, was a Professor of sorts, a Russian, to whom I talked a good deal, and he tried to explain the space business to me with at least a glimmering of success. He showed me how a fellow could be in two places at once, in London, say, and Calcutta. Taking a sheet of paper from some old letter, he marked Calcutta at one end and London at the other. He told me to imagine people living *on* the surface of this sheet, people who knew only length and breadth — a world of two dimensions. "Of height, remember," he warned me in his broken English, "they know nothing. They have no perception of height — cannot even think of it. They are two-dimensional beings in a two-dimensional world."

Well, I understood that all right.

"A fellow in their world," he explained, "can be in London or in Calcutta, but he cannot be in both." It was obvious enough.

Then he bent the sheet of paper. He doubled it together, so that the spot of London and the spot of Calcutta lay cheek by jowl. They coincided.

"In bending the sheet," he added, "I have made it pass through height, of course."

I agreed.

"Yet, in the result, Calcutta and London lie together.

The man in Calcutta is in London too. He is in two places at once."

We glared at one another. “It is only an analogy, of course,” he reminded me, “and it has the fallacy that all analogies must hold.”

I got an inkling of what he meant, but when he talked in similar fashion about time, I could not follow him. It gave me a sick headache merely.

From the books I read and the thoughts I thought, I gathered anyhow that brains, tongues and pens have speculated freely enough about these very rare “total disappearances.” I gathered likewise that such speculations were somewhat negligible, and that only a mere handful who had made practical experiments — among them undoubtedly Vronski and my cousin — could offer anything of tangible value. Among the sparse elect, none the less, I caught strange whispers. A notion grew in the deepest part of me that another dimension in space could explain this wiping out of a physical body, and that such a one, dropping away into a direction at right angles to the three we know so well, drops obviously and naturally clean out of sight. He passes into a region no sense of ours can ever plumb. Out of our known, familiar space he has dropped elsewhere — and otherwise as well, since a new direction in space involves necessarily a new dimension in time.

Time, as we know it, runs forward only in a line; but in two dimensions it would run backwards, or parallel as well. Not only could he be in two places at once, but he could be also in two times at once. He could do two things — two things otherwise mutually selfexclusive — at once.

“At any given moment,” said my fellow-prisoner, “you have a choice of doing several things. Of these you choose one. Actually, you might choose any of the others. You select one, however, and do it. That one thing actualises.”

I nodded, as much as my approaching headache allowed.

“Now, listen: In time of more than one dimension you could choose more than one thing. You could do several things at once — and they all would actualise....”

At which point my sick headache usually developed suddenly, so that my friend continued to talk without my understanding.

I acquired, at any rate, a sort of smattering of comprehension.

“Anyone escaping into other time and space,” he finished later, “would come back, you see, at the point he left, even if years of *our* time had passed meanwhile — years or a few minutes only....”

Such explanations, I found, supported themselves, loosely enough, with the jargon of Relativity. Einstein, the magician thinker, was called in to help. To me it remained a “line of speculation,” than which the sober mind would say no more.

Mantravers, at any rate, disappeared... and since he vanished when war was declared, and reappeared shortly after the Armistice, there were those who sneered that he had been in hiding. This was untrue, absurd as well. No more patriotic Englishman ever lived. Nor was his courage questionable. The date of his going and returning had nothing to do with the War. The Great War, indeed, was almost a trivial item in his strange experience, and his disappearance I incline to think, was enforced, and singularly enforced.

* * * *

It was January 1919, when I found myself in London again. My intention, backed by a deep instinct, was to go back to the house where Sydney Mantravers had left me standing on the steps: to enter the building, if still unoccupied; to walk through all its rooms and passages again. I wished to do this alone, and to do it before I had spoken with Dr. Vronski, or even seen him. Vronski’s talk and information could come later. I kept my return secret from him.

If I never quite explained or justified this deep instinct even to myself, I recognised that no mere morbid curiosity lay in it anywhere. Clearest in my mind was the desire to make this visit and inspection before I became immersed again in the world of ordinary everyday affairs, that is, before some inner mood or attitude acquired in my years of solitude had dissipated. During those prison years of introspection, thought, speculation, even of experiment as well, something had come to life in me that contact with the bustling outer world, I knew, must smash to pieces. It was as though I had dreamed of another order of existence, had even fringed the perception of entirely new categories. Two sets of values at any rate, appeared in some depth of my being that was only accessible to me with the greatest difficulty and effort. I was aware of them, no more than that; the slightest mistake, of clumsiness or stupidity, on my part would send them plunging for ever beyond my reach. This extremely delicate balance I perceived. The disappearance of Mantravers was concerned with the set of values I had dreamed of, possibly just begun to understand, to acquire even, in my bitter years of prison life. My instinct was to visit the house while this still remained and before its fading, already in progress, resulted in complete forgetfulness.

Did I expect to see him too, actually to see some figure or outline of the man who had disappeared over four years ago and was now legally dead? I cannot truthfully say, although I believe some uncanny, rather awful hope lurked deep down in me.... I reached London at noon, my return to England, my presence in town, a well-kept secret; not wasting a minute I was walking up the Bayswater side-street by the afternoon, the January daylight already fading, and it must have been close on four o'clock when the house came into view, plastered, I noticed, still with agents' boards, and therefore unlet, unoccupied. The stained and dirty window-panes had no blinds, the patchy walls showed no signs of recent paint, the air of neglect and disuse were the same as before, only more marked. The key, in case of need, the very key my cousin had handed to me himself, was in my pocket, kept carefully all these years. In the pocket of my mackintosh my fingers gripped it tightly, even a trifle feverishly, as though it might somehow melt away and defeat my purpose. I kept feeling it over, indeed, as a man might finger banknotes to make quite sure he still had them safely.

A definite realisation, moreover, came to me as I walked up the steps — that I was both exhilarated and frightened, and that while the exhilaration contained an immense, a biting curiosity, the fear was partly due to a sudden wave of depression that had come upon me. Was this depression, this lowering of vitality, I remember asking myself, similar to what the two ladies experienced just as they passed the threshold into their unique other worldly Adventure in Versailles? The vivid detail rose up from my reading in my prison camp. It was certainly not a physical fear, it was perhaps a mental, a spiritual hint of terror, as best I could diagnose it, for the idea appeared that my ordinary equipment of mind and body contained no weapon to help me in what *might* be coming. Yet a touch of horror I had known before "going over the top" seemed in it too. My hand, at any rate, was trembling as I took the big key and began to fit it into the lock of the front door — at which very moment a noise of tapping on glass somewhere above me made me pause. It sounded like fingers drumming or tapping faintly on a window-pane. Startled, I looked up quickly, and there, at a window on the second floor, two storeys above, I saw a face peering down at me through the dusty pane, a face I recognised, the face of my cousin, Sydney Mantravers. Looking over his shoulder, and also staring down at me, was the outline of a second face, but a face that was wholly strange to me. I had just time to note that it wore a small moustache, when both the faces withdrew sharply backwards from the window so that they were no longer visible, and it was in this same instant that my fingers, fumbling with the key automatically, discovered that that door was not locked at all but was indeed already open into the hall.

It is astonishing what thoughts, and how trivial ones at that, start up in the mind as it meets an unusual shock or crisis, for at this moment when an unearthly acceptance and a vehement incredulity clashed together, the one definite impression I could recognise was — that youthful appearance. This flashed over me even as the faces of both withdrew, and it was not the visage of a possible de Frasne, dead these thirty years and more, that made my flesh creep, but the unquestionable assurance that Mantravers, whom I knew to be over sixty, looked hardly forty. The amazing fact that he had "disappeared" for an interval of four years seemed left out of account at this instant; it was the uncanny air of having missed decay for a generation that leaped back into my mind with horror. Then, before I knew what my shaking legs were doing, they had taken me automatically into the hall, and the front door closed behind me with a bang. Standing there in the semi-darkness, it was all I could do to hold myself together, and I mean my "self" precisely, for at first everything I was accustomed to hold on to in a time of stress seemed wavering like a jelly that must any instant dissolve. To hold myself steady, to keep control, was what occupied my mind in that first moment of entering the hall; there was no room in me for anything but this tremendous effort; and in making it, a cold perspiration burst out all over my skin. I only recall that the exhilaration had left me entirely, while the depression had greatly intensified. The curiosity, if of rather an icy kind, remained, but it was fed by a lowering vitality.

The house, as I went in, was very still, no sound audible. It was also dark, all outlines heavily draped, no edges visible. I stood stock still, shivering and afraid, even unable, to move. I could not stir a foot. There was a queer sense that everything had stopped moving the instant I came in, that a crowd had rushed into hiding, that my arrival was anticipated by a fraction of a second; but this, I knew, was due to imagination only. Actually, nothing but emptiness and vacancy surrounded me. The gloom concealed no living thing.

An unoccupied, unfurnished house at the best of times is a ghostly, even a hostile place, but this particular one wrapped in the wintry dusk, turned the perspiration cold against my skin. The conviction that upstairs, perhaps even now watching me, was a man who had been "dead" four years, a companion with him who had left the world by suicide long before him, that this awful pair hidden among the untenanted rooms above, stood waiting to look me in the eyes, perchance to touch me, ask me questions, reveal their knowledge and their presence — this all gave me a sensation of dread and horror that paralysed my muscles. I stood there as though turned into stone, while the echoes from the banging door rolled on through the series of unoccupied halls and chambers, then died away into a silence that was even worse. Had I seen Mantravers at that moment, heard his descending step, or caught the sound of his voice calling me by name, I believe my heart must have stopped dead. Already it was beating like a troubled engine, my breathing difficult as well. Afraid to go forward, afraid to turn back and go out, my shaking body leaning for support against the wall, stood where it was, my powers of self-control gone all to pieces.

What on earth was I to do next? The answer came unexpectedly. A light flashed suddenly across the ceiling, darting its bright beam swiftly from point to point, and with it came the sound of footsteps. Someone was moving cautiously along the landing above, and the flash came obviously from a shifting electric torch. I slipped back into the corner, every nerve taut with horrified anticipation.

"Who's there? "called a man's voice loudly. "Who is it?"

I made an attempt to answer, but no sound left my throat. The same second the steps quickened, left the upper landing, and began to come down the carpetless stairs. I saw the dark outline of a man shading his eyes with one hand from the glare of a torch he shifted to and fro in front of him. He came down slowly, cautiously, treading each board with care. A dozen steps from the bottom he stopped and turned the full light of the brilliant torch upon me where I crouched in the angle against the wall. I stood helpless in this dazzling blaze, the stream showing me up mercilessly from head to *foot,* the man who held it of course invisible.

“Oh, it’s you!” came a voice of startled surprise. “So you’re back in England! That explains it...” as the speaker turned the light upon himself, so that I recognised, with a surprise equal to his own, but with a relief he could hardly have guessed, the face and figure of Dr. Vronski.

I could think of nothing to say or do except what I *did* say and do:

I pointed overhead. “Hush! Hush!” I cried in a stifled whisper. “He’s up there. I’ve just seen him. He tapped on the window — beckoned. He’s come back, by God—”

“Who? “he asked, his voice, it seemed to me, strangely calm, his manner quiet and matter of fact, the odd composure of the man adding to my horror.

“Mantravers,” I whispered. “I saw him at the window. He tapped. Somebody was with him. Up there on the next floor close behind you.”

He did not even turn. He had reached my side by now. His face was close to mine, so that I saw the fierce light shining in his eyes, but there was no excitement in him. Cold and collected as a fish he seemed.

“He is expecting you,” he said, as quietly as you please. “The other will not stay —— —— stay *here,* I mean.

He has led him to the point where *you* are needed. The point you left him at four years ago.” His eyes ran over me like a moving flame. “To him — remember if you can — it’s not even a minute.”

I felt my body slipping down against the wall as though my legs were gone. The whole house, it seemed, was listening to our whispered words. I heard the staircase creak. The rumble of street traffic was audible outside. I caught myself thinking that I would have given my very soul to see an omnibus, a good, everyday red omnibus, a taxi cab, a policeman. What was to come next I dared not even think about. Vronski stood close beside me, our shoulders touching. His unescapable eyes ran over me in liquid fire. What would he say next? What would he ask of me?

And then a crackling voice rang out upstairs, a voice I knew and recognised. Though a curious distance was in it, yet a distance that could not muffle, it was sharp and distinct. It called my name.

“Come,” said Vronski calmly. “You must come up and help him. He is expecting you.”

It came over me suddenly that the entire experience was a dream. Things in a dream happened just like this. The sense of surprise, the power of criticism, are absent. Mantravers, Vronski, myself were all figures in a dream. The whole business belonged to a dream. I, the dreamer, should presently wake up. Yet while this thought flashed, its opposite, appearing concurrently, flashed with it: that my consciousness, namely, had changed, and that I was beyond the emotions that pertain to normal consciousness. As consciousness changes, grows, the universe it perceives grows and changes with it....

“In a sense that’s exactly true,” I heard Vronski murmur as we crossed the silent hall, and it did not occur to me as in the least odd that he should know what I was thinking. “We *an* in a dream-world here and now, a dream condition, a dream civilisation. We are, that is, so little conscious that what we think real is actually hardly more than a dream-state...” and his voice died away among the shadows.

I heard this without an atom of surprise, without a tremor of disbelief. Philosophical talk at such a moment! And yet somehow occasioning no astonishment! Obviously, the experience was all a dream.

“He woke up,” the voice ran on as we reached the staircase, “and consequently he disappeared. That is, he left our dream-conditions.”

I could not quite follow that. I was suddenly stiff with terror too, thinking of the man waiting for us up that dark flight of stairs. It seemed absurd and horrible, comic and tragic, that we should be exchanging philosophical comments at such a moment.

“He became aware of other conditions, though these are about us always, and only a change in our perceptive apparatus is needed—”

I gave a little sharp cry unwittingly, as though the terror had crawled into my throat, and his voice fell away while he took my arm firmly, for I had stumbled over the first step as we began to mount the staircase. “Don’t be frightened, don’t feel fear, or anything negative,” he concluded, his arm preventing me falling. “Feel sympathy, curiosity, interest, even scepticism if you like. But don't feel fear," he repeated. "I have come to this house four times a week ever since he left us. I have sat here waiting, hoping for hours on end, without result, though once — once only — I saw de Frasne — rushing — rushing with the speed of light and through every room and passage simultaneously — rushing, I tell you, with etheric speed, etheric omnipresence — but of *him,* no sign, and I knew at last that only you could get him back, because you were with him when he went. You are a sign-post, if you like, the point of departure and so the point of return — of simultaneous return. Above all, therefore, feel no fear, for fear repels and blocks—"

A cry interrupted this amazing flow. It sounded overhead again, in the dark space of the landing. It called my name, but it was fainter than before and held a curious touch of fading distance. We were halfway up the stairs. I stopped dead.

"Answer him, answer," urged Vronski quickly, almost passionately. "Say you're here." And making a great effort, I obeyed.

"I'm here, Sydney, I'm coming to you," my voice rose out of some kind of automatism. "Hold on!" And Vronski, hastening his step, dragged me with him. "Remember," he whispered in my ear, "remember all he says, for he can tell marvellous things, though probably to you only."

We reached the landing, and Vronski flashed his torch along the corridor, flooding it with light, illuminating several doors, a whole series of doors belonging, apparently, to bedrooms, and one of these doors stood open. It was standing ajar. These details showed up with vivid clearness instantly, but it was something else I saw simultaneously that my attention fastened on with immediate horror, although horror is not the accurate word, since the amazement in me — I can only call it an explosion of amazement — was of too vast, too strange a kind to include a negative emotion such as horror. For I saw several figures, a series of them, all moving with great rapidity, moving in the three directions known to us, up, down, across, yet all moving in some incredible manner simultaneously — a figure I recognised, the figure of de Frasne. It is of course impossible to describe, it lies entirely beyond words, beyond our three-dimensional experience, which is all we have. For, in addition to this multiplication of one figure into numerous duplicates, it, or they, were moving in other places than this stretch of illuminated corridor. They moved along other passages, through other rooms on floors upstairs and downstairs, moved up and down between floors and ceilings elsewhere in the house. They were, in fact, all over the building, and in the same instant, while yet the whole series of figures, as I have said, was always one and the same, the figure of de Frasne.

Pages of description cannot make any clearer this instant flash that overwhelmed me with complete conviction. I know what I witnessed, and I know that this certainty of positive knowledge lay in me. No surprise accompanied it, no touch of criticism, as in a dream I accepted it merely as true and possible. There was in me, perhaps, a momentary extension of consciousness, a change of consciousness, that involved some sudden awareness of a changed, extended universe. It went as quickly as it came. I had, in any case, no instant for reflection. The figures vanished. Round the door that was standing ajar, peering at us, fingers gripping the edge, I saw the face of Sydney Mantravers. Vronski saw it too, though whether he had seen de Frasne or not I did not know, and, feeling me shrink back involuntarily, he pulled me sharply, even violently forward, so that together we took half a dozen rapid steps in the direction of the face. I saw the hand that gripped the edge of the door advance; it pushed out; an arm came next; the face, with shoulders behind it followed; the entire figure pushed into full view. There was a blaze.

“Hold out your hand,” Vronski whispered. “Say something. A welcome.”

As in a nightmare, I made the effort. My own hand moved out. My voice spoke, made a sound at any rate, a hoarse whisper, half choked with terror: “Here I am, Sydney. Come on — come back to me — back to us.”

It seemed to me my mind and senses were registering only certain things of limited kind, and that a whole world of other occurrences going on at the same time about me now passed entirely unrecognised. While aware of their existence, I could not perceive them.

The full-length figure then drove forward at what seemed terrific speed through the now wide-open door. There was a rush, a roar too, I believe, as though a *comet* swept through space, and I felt my hand grasped in a clutch of ice, while a tremendous blow seemed to strike me, not in the face and chest alone and not outward only, but over my whole body, and somehow inside as well, knocking me backwards as with some gigantic energy behind it. I reeled at the shock. I lost my balance. As I fell against the wall at my back, I saw the face and figure of Mantravers come rushing at me with the speed and power as of some awful projectile. I cannot over-emphasise this impression of appalling speed and power. In the flash of a second it happened. Memory and consciousness then collapsed together simultaneously, but before the darkness swept over me, I caught the laughter of both men on the tail of broken sentences.

“... too much for him, but I’m here again... he’s got me out... damned idiot to come... just going back into sleep once more... de Frasne refused... enjoying his boyhood too much...”

The words roared past me like a clap of thunder, but the heavy thump I heard was evidently my own body as it reached the floor.

“Hold on — for God’s sake don’t forget — grip your memory — hold on to *that* — tell us all you can—” I just caught in Vronski’s voice as I sank into oblivion.

Memory, apparently, is but a clumsy, ineffective process. No man can recall accurately the details of the accident that knocked him out. People who claim to remember past lives usually have blank minds about what happened a month ago. At any rate, to remember in a calm moment what occurred in a time of violent stress seems quite impossible. The chief detail I recalled clearly of this amazing scene was that Mantravers looked exactly the same as when I had last seen him four years before, but that his face had a brilliant whiteness and that he was thin to emaciation. Against the surrounding darkness of the landing he looked radiant, he shone, he rushed at me like a stream of lightning. And hence, of course, the blaze already mentioned.

His words, the words of Vronski too, held equally clear and definite, audible memories being perhaps more vividly impressed than visual ones. His return to our three-dimensional conditions he regarded thus as a limitation of life and an idiotic one, for it was “falling into sleep again.” The glimpse accorded me, moreover, of the conditions he had left, conditions possible to an extended consciousness, were “too much” for me, while de Frasne, being in different time, could choose his period at will, and preferred his “boyhood” years to anything to be found in our world. Yet of those few pregnant words I caught, it was the word “here” that impressed me most. My cousin said “here” as though he had never left or gone away.

It was later that I was able to note and label other changes....

If his clothing betrayed no passage of the years, there were alterations in his appearance that impressed me profoundly. These testified to something, though what this something was I leave to others cleverer than myself. He looked no older, I can swear to that. He still wore, indeed, that air of mighty resistance to the years already mentioned before he vanished, that extraordinary retention of youth, as though the usual decay had hardly touched him for a generation, as though this natural process had been arrested in his physical being. And this resistance to time, even with these four years added, was what struck me as his radiant face rushed at me in that empty house. I have thought later, if a good deal later, that in earlier experiments with Vronski, he had so outdistanced his companion, left him so far behind, that intelligible communication between the two had blocked. Myself, ignorant, untrained, sympathetic and open-minded, he could make contact with, while Vronski, stopped at a certain point, lay out of his reach....

Yet, if he looked no older, he certainly did look different. Different is the word, though to analyse this difference precisely puzzles me completely. Things had passed over him, he had enjoyed, suffered, worn, while it was not, I swear, the physical envelope that had worn, and his body at 64 looked 40 still. There lay the imprint of signatures on his soul perhaps, of vigils due to an intensity of experience ordinary humans cannot know. I say “perhaps,” for it is imagination that interprets such strange markings, and I cannot expect the report of my imagination to pass as evidence. Were I forced to find strictly truthful terms, I should say that Mantravers during this four years’ interlude which left him physically untouched, had inwardly endured things we may hardly guess at, much less define, things possible only to an altered consciousness in altered conditions of space and time, and whether in the body or out of the body, to borrow from an expert, we need not dare to fathom, since they are not knowable to our three-dimensional faculties. Personally, I phrased it thus — that he had been out of the cage we know as life and living. He had escaped.

The fact remains that, of outward physical signs, his face and skin alone at first betrayed him — their incalculable, sweet, fiery radiance. It was this effect of light that had struck me so vividly, even with a burst of horror, before, an instant later, I lost consciousness.

This momentary weakness in myself I have always bitterly regretted, for it robbed me of witnessing any coherent interchange of words and action between Vronski and himself. Its duration was brief, yet long enough for several minutes to have passed, during which we all three reached the hall below. Vronski was chafing my hands. I opened my eyes. "I'm going to find a taxi," he said clearly, as soon as he saw I was all right. "Wait here with your cousin." He placed the hand of Mantravers in my own, and the front door closed behind him with a bang, leaving us together, sitting side by side on two wooden chairs.

Some wholesome magic lay perhaps in that word "taxi," for a measure of control came back to me, though of those next minutes I remember only one thing clearly: that while I searched feverishly, frantically even, for something to say, or rather to ask, a thousand questions boiling in me, Mantravers spoke himself. In the gloom of that dreary hall, lit only by a gleam through the narrow windows from the street, he turned his radiant face towards me. The blaze had dimmed, but it still shone as with an interior lamp.

"I have been awake," he said quietly, sadly, "but I am now falling back into sleep again. I have been elsewhere and otherwise, but time now separates things idiotically here. I've been out of the cage...."

He said much more, his words, each like a great eagle on the wing, rushing past me, into some region where I could not follow. For understanding left me, even while something just beyond reason beckoned dangerously. With those shining eyes fixed on my own, I felt myself caught up, rapt away, ravished into something beyond experience. Only the feeblest flash of his meaning came — namely, that our earthly consciousness, even at its best and highest, is so limited that it is little better than a state of dream, and that his return to it was like falling into sleep. But before I could frame a single question, much less utter an intelligible comment, the front door had opened again, and I heard Vronski's rather harsh voice calling: "The taxi's here. Come on!"

Mantravers was legally dead; in the eyes of authority he had no existence; he could neither be taxed, fined, nor arrested and imprisoned. He lived — went to bed, rather, and stayed there — in Dr. Vronski's house in Westminster, and to me, ignorant, stupid, scared, but "open-minded," was allotted by Vronski the task of watching over him. "He'll talk *to you,* at least he *may,*" said Vronski, emphasising "you" and "may,"

"if he talks at all. Not," he added bluntly, resentfully a trifle too, "because you know anything, or will even understand what he says, but because you're a link of sorts, a link with his dream-existence *here,* you see, before he left."

I was too uneasy to feel flattered, as I listened, but it did occur to me to ask why he, Vronski, couldn't be that link himself. His reply only set my mind going in whirls and whorls. He couldn't, he explained, because he, Vronski, was still in the state of sleep — what most people called life, whereas Mantravers had been "awake for a long time, for twenty-five years or more. I woke up for moments, but I never could hold it. I dropped back again into — into *this*" and he waved his arms over London, as it were. "He left me more than a quarter of a century ago, a whole generation. But *you*" he looked hard at me with a bitter envy in both voice and eyes, "though you don't know it" — he hesitated a moment—" are more awake than I — for longer periods anyhow." He turned away with a half angry shrug. "Anyhow, he *may* talk to you, and if he does, treasure his words like gold. I can't get a syllable out of him."

He gazed at me with that horrible envy in his eyes. It made me shiver to hear him, and though I longed to ask him about those twenty-five years, missing years as it were, I could not bring myself to do so.

"You have," he went on more quietly, "an amazing privilege — a chance in a thousand million. Think of it — a man, a human, who has tasted other time and space. You may hear something about existence outside our categories altogether. Make a note of — of everything, especially of what you don't understand. The more it contradicts our logic and experience, the more valuable it may be. Nonsense, sheer nonsense, here will be right, remember...."

Much more in similar vein he impressed upon me, as he installed me in the dressing-room leading out of the "sick man's" chamber in his luxurious house, the very house, I knew, where he and my cousin had carried on their audacious experiments of years ago. I listened, listened closely, saying hardly anything myself, while in my mind, or in some part of me that somehow remained aloof, unfrightened, the calmest of calm spectators, I was perfectly aware that Vronski and I were talking in a dream, and that our three-dimensional consciousness was little better than a dream state. The journey in the taxi, to go back a bit, left few clear impressions in me; I was too scared, too utterly nonplussed at the moment to focus attention or reflection. Mantravers, emaciated, limp and so strangely shining, lay back in his corner beside his former friend. He rarely spoke a word. I watched him as I might have watched a nightmare figure. This dream-texture wove itself through the whole journey.

The taxi, I remember, drove dangerously fast, so that, as in the cinema stunt-pictures, crashes which seemed unavoidable were just avoided by a hair's breadth and the stream of vehicles rushed past us in a dreadful sequence. I was clutching for safety at everything within reach, when my cousin spoke. "Why doesn't the man start?" he asked impatiently. "He's got three directions to choose from, hasn't he, and the house can't come to us — down here, at any rate, it can't. I'm there already anyhow, if he only knew it." He gave a queer little gulp of laughter, turning to me with a look that set my shivers going again. "I knew it, knew it perfectly, you see, before I came back into this, but I'm losing it now, it's going again." His piercing, fiery eyes were full upon me; he drew a profound sigh of weariness, of disgust, of pity. "The cage is about me, the stupid, futile cage. It's time that does it, it's your childish linear time, time in a single line. In such a limited state it's not even being awake, just trivial dreaming, almost death—" and the voice died off into a whisper. He closed his eyes, leaning back into his corner.

I saw Vronski clutch him. "Remember," Vronski shouted, "try to remember! You're back in three-dimensional space and one-dimensional time now — and with me. I'm Vronski — Nicholas Vronski — your old friend. You remember our talks, our speculations, our experiments!"

There was no response, not even a turn of the head. But one of those flashes I had actually no right to, came to me, and I understood that Mantravers, back now in conditions he had long escaped, found himself so caged and limited that he felt helpless. After the intensity, the difference, the power and liberty he had known, the experiences of our existence were as the unreal phantasmagoria of a dream. “It’s all leaving me,” he murmured once. “I’m forgetting, forgetting. It’s awful, awful. It was always difficult to hold it. I can’t hold it now. Yet I had a flash, a minute — four years, as you think it here.”

The taxi, escaping a hundred deaths, stopped suddenly, and then Vronski, grabbing my arm painfully hard as we got out, whispered something about “get all he says, make notes, remember every word, hold on to him,” and somehow we were, all three, inside the house.

Such is my brief recollection, half hazy, half vivid, of that frightful journey. So perturbed and upset I was that I only vaguely recall that Vronski provided a meal of sorts, put Mantravers to bed, and fixed me up in the dressing-room with only a door between. It all happened with the rapidity of that stunt cinema-picture almost; these little details of preparation, eating a meal, providing me with pyjamas, paper and pencil, and a dozen other necessary matters, all went past with extraordinary swiftness, as though, perhaps, I hardly noticed them attentively enough to take them in. It seemed but a few minutes, when he stood at the door, giving me final injunctions before he left me alone for the night. “I’m best out of sight, in the background anyhow,” he whispered. “Ring for all you want. My manservant is used to anything at any hour. I must go now. I must notify the authorities, of course, for one thing. Keep your door ajar, and watch and listen. Be ready. Your position, your privilege, your duty...” The words poured out feverishly jumbled, there was so much he wanted to say.

He shrugged his shoulders, and adding that he would look in again at midnight, he was gone.

He did come back at midnight, a couple of hours later, and entering my room on tiptoe, seemed relieved to hear that there had been no waking yet, hardly a movement of the sleeping body even. “He may sleep for hours,” he told me, “for days, even for weeks, like others before him. But I doubt it. His case is not of that sort. He’ll wake up right enough before too long, and you must be the first person he sees.”

My shudder was noticeable evidently. He eyed me keenly, alive to my exhaustion. “You — you will stick it, won’t you?” he asked, almost piteously.

I looked into those beseeching eyes. The pallid face, wasted with intense desire, distraught, scarred by experiments of nameless kind, the face of a man who had not spared himself in the search for what he deemed knowledge, made an almost violent appeal. The pain, too, was there, the sense of loss, the anguish due to being robbed of refreshment poignantly expected, earned — robbed by another whom, moreover, he considered, at the least, unworthy.

I asked a few questions. He answered them. It all still seemed to me a dream of marvellous, even supernatural sort, a dream I could only partially recover. It seems so to-day, indeed, more than ever.

“I’m scared,” I whispered.

“You well may be,” he whispered back.

I gave my promise, if fearfully, yet at the same time eagerly as well.

“Scared,” that little trivial word, was the one that hung echoing in the air during the hours of my long vigil. I dreaded the awakening, yet longed for it. My mind was a turmoil. Contradictions raged in me. Mantravers, they said, had of course been in hiding all these years — yet his very clothes hanging over the chair, denied it. It was all a tricky hallucination of my own mind — my recent war experiences denied that still more decisively. The alternative was staggering, more than my faculties could hold or deal with — that my cousin, sleeping calmly in that bed, had left our space and time for a period of four years, and that before this complete disappearance, as a preliminary to it, by way of training possibly, he had escaped our time, while still occupying our space, for a far longer period, for some twenty-five years, an entire generation. When he woke up in that bed across the floor, woke out of this interval of readjustment which was an earthly sleep, he might tell me something, things of unexampled, fearful interest — because though ignorant I was open-minded, not knowing enough even to have prejudices....

With books I could not read, with pencil and writing-pad in hand, I sat peering through the half-open door. I could easily see the emaciated, shining face, the collar of blue pyjamas round the neck, the nose buried in the pillow, the counterpane rising and falling with the steady breathing. No other movement came, no sound, no gentle snoring even; he might pass his life away, it seemed to me, dying in his sleep. He looked as if he could never wake, as if he did not mean to, certainly did not want to, wake. What dying might mean to him, I dared not think. Once I crept in on tiptoe, and looked closer, standing within two feet of the bed. God — that strange radiance! Even the transparent eyelids glowed, as though the eyeballs underneath looked through at me. I felt "seen through," my very soul examined. I returned again and again, stealthily, as though irresistibly attracted, fascinated. I hoped he would never wake, I hoped he would. I sat with nerves on edge, with senses painfully alert, too frightened to feel fear.

The hours passed slowly. No sound penetrated from the London streets. It seemed the silence deepened to something beyond silence. Beneath the surface the turmoil in my mind ran helter-skelter among a thousand thoughts and pictures, playing pitch-and-toss with my years in the prison camp, with my reading, with my own strange experiments in escape.... I wondered, wondered, for wonder seemed the single attitude that held calm and steady in me. For the hundredth time I went over my brief talk with Vronski just before he left, the few wild questions I had put, the startling replies. Incoherent and almost childish that exchange seemed now. Was there anything in particular I should look for, I had asked, apart from noting what my cousin might say? And Vronski, eyeing me hungrily, had hesitated a moment, as though reflecting deeply. "A change," he had said at length, "an alteration — of unexpected kind — a sudden — possibly a very shocking one." Into my mind leaped the idea of mania. "No, not that," came the reply, reading my thoughts again. "I mean that its suddenness, its rapidity — you might find shocking." It was nothing mental, I realised. "Oh, physical then?" I asked with a little gasp impossible to repress, and he had nodded, the expression on his face dreadful almost, because a queer superior smile lay mingled in it. "He might appear suddenly — rather — different," his words came slowly. I guessed faintly at what his allusion meant perhaps. I recalled, all in a flash, the stories, my own casual observations in the past, the fact that for a generation Mantravers had not grown older, and the unnatural horror of it came back to me like ice. And Vronski's slow words were still dropping from his lips in whispers. "The stresses and energies where he has been lie beyond anything we can know or imagine. Their removal *here* may result in abrupt collapse of even dreadful kind. The price must be paid — paid back! — in our *time,* of course.” His voice became almost inaudible. “It may be sudden,” I just caught, “what *we* call sudden.”

The talk ran in a ceaseless circle through my mind, round and round, till any meaning it might have held was lost, as I sat there watching the sleeper’s bed. My armchair was against the open door. The silence deepened, the cold increased, the city traffic lay dead, no birds awake, no wind astir. No hint of sleep came near me. If he wakened — should I dare to ask the thousand questions raging in my mind, dare to frame a single one of them? He did not stir an inch, he did not turn over, trunk and head and limbs lay motionless, and I doubt if my eyes ever left his face for more than a few seconds at a time.

So long this silence and immobility continued that, beginning to feel nothing would ever happen again, I glanced at my wrist-watch, noting that it was close upon four in the morning, the hour when human vitality sinks to its lowest ebb, and thinking that daylight must presently come filtering through the blinds. I can swear that my eyes did not leave his face for longer than ten seconds at most, but it was in this very brief interval I became aware of a sudden movement in the still room. I started, gave a jerk as though a bullet had passed through me, while my questions fled like a flock of terrified sheep. The movement was of the slightest, but it was real — the opening of his eyelids. Mantravers was staring at me across the floor. And accompanying this movement was a low sound that came at me like a bell — his voice.

Caution, circumspection, sensible action, all forsook me in that instant, and fear went with them: memory of detailed instruction vanished utterly; caught in a wave of passionate and overwhelming curiosity, I sprang to my feet, obeying instinctively my dominating impulse. I was across the strip of intervening carpet in a second, I rushed up to the bed; with barely a foot between our two faces, I plumped out my first question, regardless of all else. It was what, above all, I wanted to know, apparently, for it burst out like an automatic explosion.

“How did you do it, Sydney — keep young — arrest age and decay, I mean, for twenty-five years on end?”

The question had spurted spontaneously out of my “subconscious,” of course, where it had lain so long, perplexingly unanswered; for I had no thought of asking it till then, and there were others I *had* meant to put.

Those strange electric eyes gazed into mine. He spoke, and his voice again was like a bell: “A man in his own place,” he answered with a curious gentleness, “is the ruler of his fate. And I found mine.”

“How — how did you get there?” came from my lips, stupidly enough.

“By leaving — this — this imagery.” He made a slight, even a tiny, gesture with his arm, yet it was as though he swept away the house, London, England itself and all it stood for in ordinary experience. Imagery! almost felt myself swept with it into something beyond all trivial, confined and relative conditions I had hitherto mistaken for reality and life. Though my mind and emotions were a boiling cauldron, little clear and steady in them, another question rising to the surface shot out of its own accord.

“Our knowledge, then — science—”

An extraordinarily sweet expression stole upon his face. He gently shook his head. “Unreal,” rang the voice, though fainter than before, “and part of the dream we ourselves create. The How is nothing — mere effects. Here we can dream effects only. Knowledge and reality can be known only in the Why — the world of causes....”

On the last three words the bell-like quality grew fainter, fading from his voice, the eyelids dropped slowly over the terrific eyes. I searched for one more question among the hundreds I longed to ask, but found no single word. He lay quite still again, apart from the gentle rise and fall of the body that breathed equably in what men call physical sleep. The queer notion came to me that he had not really wakened at all, that Mantravers in his totality had certainly not been there, nor gazed at me, nor spoken, but that only a fraction of his being, using the familiar terms of limited human intelligence, had brushed my mind in passing. True enough, of course, the fragment that was spoken, for even I grasped that, and classifying effects can bring no knowledge of reality. Science, which explains how a thing happens, can tell nothing as to why it happens, nor has normal human consciousness any faculty for apprehending this region of causes. Had he, then, experienced that, dwelt in that, known reality face to face?

I remember withdrawing softly, as a giddy man withdraws cautiously from the edge of a precipice that makes him tremble. Quickly, I jotted down the brief exchange in a hand that shook a little. I sank back into my deep armchair with the strange assurance that it would be long before he really woke. I fell asleep. It was, this time, Vronski's sharp, practical voice that startled me.

"Humph! So you *had* to sleep, of course," he exclaimed in a whispered voice between a snap and a growl, yet somehow not unkindly. "It's six o'clock, you know. You've lost something, probably." He had already examined the sleeper, I knew, for he came to me out of the bedroom. His fearful eagerness was pathetic.

I shook my head, wide awake on the instant, all my faculties about me. I pushed my notes towards him.

"What?" he whispered. "He's waked then — and spoken? You heard it? You put questions — good ones? You understood — something?" He seized the notes as a famished man might snatch at food, his hand shaking, while he eyed my face and the paper alternately like a hungry wolf. I told him briefly what had occurred, as he read the sentences over and over again, first very rapidly to take in their general sense, then very slowly, reflectively, laboriously even. They were laconic enough, but I filled in the blanks in a whisper. His hunger, his envy, his greed to know, again touched my pity. I felt ashamed of being so unworthy a go-between.

"Yes, yes, of course," he was mumbling, as though speaking to himself rather than to me, "but we both knew that. We've been there before together already. The *why* of things, rather than the futile *how* that science gabbles. That's the first result of a changed, a different consciousness. But he's been beyond that — far, far beyond it. That's what I want to know — what the new faculties that come with a changed consciousness reveal — beyond the region of causes even...."

His speech grew so rapid, so involved, I could not follow it. On his face the ravaged look intensified. He kept one eye, none the less, both ears as well, I knew, upon the inner room, and then suddenly glanced sharply back at me, as though my presence had just occurred to him. "There was more, much more, he wanted — tried — to say, wasn't there?" he shot at me. A quick smile of apology, of courtesy, accompanied it.

"That's the impression made upon me," I agreed. "He knew things impossible — utterly impossible — to communicate in ordinary words."

Vronski fell silent, thoughtful, for a moment, then went on again, as though talking to himself rather than to me: "He *was* awake, of course, awake here in our sense," he muttered. "Just for those moments he was awake here — but to him that would be falling asleep again. He was talking in his sleep. He had already waked up out of all this long ago — waked up a second time. To come back to conditions here would be falling asleep again." His meaning was quite clear to me. Ordinary waking every morning is merely the gain of increased and clearer consciousness; to wake up then a second time involves a yet greater gain. "If he had talked nonsense, instead of sense," Vronski was whispering to himself, "he could have told more. Yes, yes, as you felt, he was just talking in his sleep," again picking an earlier thought out of my own mind. "A man in his own place," he repeated, "is ruler of his fate."

I stared stupidly, perhaps, yet not as stupidly as I doubtless looked. I realised, at least, that from the point of view of a *different* consciousness having new faculties, our own best scientific dicta must be childishly inadequate and false, But I found no useful word to say. Fatigue, too, began to stupefy me. "It was a good question all the same," he went on, "the one you put. Our three-dimensional consciousness has no faculty that can know anything of a universe that is certainly many-dimensional. Our best knowledge is a dream, born of dream-minds in a dream-civilisation. To tell us *how* water runs downhill is to tell us nothing — *why* it runs downhill is godlike." He looked me over as man might regard a stupid employee who had done his best, and then suddenly something I found awful crept into the face.

"I doubt, I doubt now our getting anything," he whispered lower than before, and the voice made me think of ice. "He'll wake of course, right enough, but — but he'll leave us before he can — speak. Leave finally I mean," his voice breaking queerly. "Just pay his debt and go before we can get a word. The debt —— twenty-five years — twenty-five stolen years. Taken from here, they can only be repaid here. In our time, I mean — for where he has been they are not even a moment—"

He stopped, he stood stock-still. He looked me over again, but with an intensity and thoroughness that made me avoid an inspection I found too much. I trembled a little in spite of myself.

“Something I could understand?” I stammered. “You mean — I should witness it?”

The expression that frightened me was gone: he was still grave, extremely perplexed, but his look became human, sympathetic, gentle towards me, as he nodded his head in answer. “Yes,” he murmured, “witness it, and with your own eyes.” I left it there, asking no further question because I dared not, and he went on quickly: “If he wakes, have questions ready. Avoid his eyes, I advise. Hang on firmly, tightly, to your own personality. Grip yourself like iron. Ask him” — he reflected a moment—” ask if he knows death — if he can speak of the War — if love, *Love*, mind you — exists with value — if — if —— —”

He shrugged his great shoulders; the tired eyes that had not closed all night gave me a warmer look. “Oh, ask your own questions,” he added almost hopelessly. “Just ask what occurs to you. And if anything — happens, call me up instantly. The telephone is at your hand. I shall be near — in this building.” He read the shock in my face, of course. “Can you stand it?” he asked suddenly, moving away towards the door, my heart sinking as I noticed it.

I nodded stiffly. “Sudden, swift repayment, you mean?” I stammered. His head bowed as he turned the handle.

“Departure — final departure?” I heard my own horrified whisper. “All those years — in just a moment?” For I caught his meaning, such was the intensity of his mind. With a shock I caught it. Decay and age involve considerable time, as I understood time, for normal life lays such process so gradually, slowly, softly on us all. Years compressed into a moment could only be appalling.

Vronski, now half out of the room, his face a mask of white, answered below his breath, a mere whisper that was dreadful with a kind of spiritual pain:

“If at all — it must be very rapid, may seem almost instantaneous,” came the syllables across the quiet air. “Sweet, too, if terrible. The questions first, remember — if you can.” And the door closed noiselessly behind him.

Alone again, after taking the coffee he had left me in a thermos, I tried to think out the questions I would ask. Something, perhaps subconscious guidance, assured me my cousin would not wake for hours. Were our deeper selves in telepathic communication possibly? I cannot say, I did not even try to think. At the time I was sure of nothing except that it was safe for me to take my rest and sleep, and this I therefore did, opening my eyes again after what must have been many hours, for it was well on into the short winter afternoon and dusk had come. My mind felt clear, it felt also calm, and this calmness I noticed with something of surprise. It has always seemed to me remarkable, indeed, that my nerves and faculties supported the entire experience as they did, and that I did not, almost literally, lose my senses. The riot of tearing emotions I certainly had known, bewilderment, excitement, a raging curiosity and fear beyond easy description, but deep within me all the time was some centre that held steady enough, some part of me that observed and judged, burned with a clear light, and even, for intolerable flashes, understood.

When I woke, at any rate, there was no violence of feeling in me, the tumult had died down, and only two words seemed to ring on hauntingly in my mind, with some touch of the turmoil that had first accompanied them. The combination, “sweet and terrible,” was unusual still, but the horror with which I had first heard them did not now appear. And, after a cautious inspection of the sleeper and the bed in the next room to assure myself that there was no sign of change as yet, I bent my mind to the framing of the questions as best I might.

Yet behind each attempt, and despite my strongest effort to deny it, rose always the ghost of an expectant dread — the dread that before there was time to ask a single one, perhaps, something would happen to prevent, something to render replies impossible, something rapid, sweet and terrible. And this ghost of twenty-five years to be repaid I could not lay, it waved a shroud, as it were, above each word my pencil traced.

Within its limitations, none the less, my mind worked reasonably well, though the difficulty of choosing words and subject were too much for me. The subject was so vast, the field it might cover so inexhaustible. All the great adventuring Discovers, from Buddha to Christ, I remembered, used childish local parables to convey something they themselves knew that yet lay beyond language, beyond any faculties their listeners possessed. How might I, thus, explain to a dog, watching me turn mere pages, that I am deeply immersed in the soul-fortunes of a dozen living characters? And how similarly, could I, the dog this time, ask intelligently about a superhuman experience? I fell back, at last, upon questions of a very simple kind.

I would ask for information on what I called “man-in-the-street” matters, questions about what a commonplace mind like my own would like to know. If Mantravers had actually changed his type of consciousness so that his new faculties made him free of time in more than our one dimension, and in space of more than three, what could he report intelligibly about his experiences? Was he conscious, for instance, of being away from ordinary London life, or was he living both lives simultaneously, one life parallel to the other? Was there continuity of memory and personality, was the duration long or short and what did he do, feel, suffer and enjoy? I longed to know whether his experiences and reactions in this state of “elsewhere and otherwise” were commensurable with our three-dimensional existence, and while I knew it could not possibly be so I had this burning curiosity to hear what he might say. Did he look forward into a future and back into a past, or were these both simultaneously accessible in the sense that a biography, from childhood to old age, lie between the covers of a book, for the reader to choose any period he will? If, too, the future was accessible to him *now*, as we say, could he thence influence, even alter, the past? Above all, I longed to know about what, on earth, is called happiness. Having risen above the world of effects which is human knowledge, into the world of causes, which is reality, did he gain satisfaction, rest for the spirit, peace?

I laid my pencil down, having covered sheet upon sheet with questions I knew to be futile — because I should never ask them. They were worthless, in any case, because unanswerable. I challenged myself, as I challenge anybody, to think of better ones. He had no terms, I had no terms, in which comprehensible answers could be given and understood. The Great War? Pain? Sleep?

Love? — I drew my pencil through at least a hundred such, and leaned back in my chair to await events....

Dusk was falling, the room darkening, shadows gathering, and my eyes, ever on the mysterious sleeper, saw details of wall and furniture less clearly now. Outlines of bed and chairs and windows faded, the silhouette of the sheets above the sleeper became filmed, there was a blur over the entire room, yet I had the queer feeling that this was less due to the waning light than to a lack of reality in the objects themselves. Each picture lost vividness because it was but a transient appearance of something more real that lay behind, something the senses never knew because no sense could apprehend directly. The idea came, then vanished again. At the same time I became aware of an invading stupor stealing over me, a stupor I fought against with all my power — not sleep or exhaustion of physical kind, but a dulling of my surface consciousness, as though some brighter faculty beyond it were trying to assert itself. That I resisted was, I came to believe long afterwards, a mistake; I here missed an opportunity, offered directly or indirectly by Mantravers. I can only guess at this. It was fear that prevented. Remembering Vronski's vehement warning, I held on to myself as tightly as I could, afraid of losing grip upon my personality. I was afraid, too, of being caught unawares, of being taken by surprise, suddenly horrified at the sight of the sleeper rising from his bed, coming across the room, standing beside me, looking down into my face.... And, it seemed, a long period passed, whose duration quite escaped my measurement, for though I can swear I did not sleep I recall that my eyes now opened with a sudden start, and my ears similarly became sharply alert. Had twelve hours passed or twenty-four, or a few minutes only? It was the first definite thought that came to me — was it evening still, or early morning? The same thin layer as of dusk or twilight lay upon the room, but objects were more plainly visible than before. There was a light somewhere, it seemed.

The questions rose, but there was *no time to satisfy them, for the* nerves of *sight and hearing were too insistent for me to* think of anything else. There had, once again, been sound and movement. I looked, I listened, with all my power. The sleeping man was sitting up in his bed, that bell-like resonance vibrated in the air, the syllables of my name still echoed, I saw the figure, half upright, like some awful deity upon its throne, and the same second, the first instant of paralysis having passed, I had sprung to my feet. And it was at this moment, as I dashed across the carpet, that I heard a cock crow in the distance, and knew that it was early morning.

“Come to me, come quickly,” rang the bell-like voice, “before I leave. Let the useless questions go. Just come to me.”

I was already beside the bed. He was sitting up, leaning back upon his hands. I had the extraordinary impression he was going to rise and take the air. The radiance in his eyes and face and skin were marvellous.

I saw a dark blue stain glow out upon his right temple, then fade away. It was like a bullet wound. All memory of my questions had wholly vanished. “Dying — you mean?” came automatically from my lips. “Is it — death?”

And then he laughed. His eyes ran over my face, the eyes I had been told to avoid.

“My second death. There are so many. This is the life I owed de Frasne. All the lives are simultaneous—”

A flow of words that rushed on I cannot remember, even if I registered them. They held no meaning for me — in the instant of utterance, that is, they held a meaning I understood, as in a timeless flash, but meaning and understanding were gone again as soon as born. Only the shattering effect remained, as of something better left untold, unknown. The laughter, too, unnerved me, that sweet, careless, unearthly laughter that seemed to break up and destroy whatever was left of coherence in me.

“*Tell* us,” I believe I cried, “*tell me — before you go.*” *I know* that *something of the sort* burst from me. I can still hear *my* hoarse, breathless cry saying this. I was shaking with terror at the same time lest he touch me, *for* his hand came groping towards me where I stood against the bed. It seemed to me that if he touched me, my being somehow must dissolve. It seemed my very self was threatened, while yet that threatened self, trembling in the balance, understood why “life must be lost to find it,” and that my courage failed. The awful yearning and the awful dread were there. It was the bell-like voice, with its sound of death or freedom, that caught me back into my pitiful restricted cage again, though not before I had realised something of the loneliness, the deific beauty and glory in that loss of self without which no heaven is attainable.

“Stop thinking,” was what I caught of his answer. “Behind thought lies the entrance. Reason and thinking hold us in the life of least importance. Go behind both to find the beginning — behind the mind — into a different way. You will find several lives together and at once — and more than one kind of death....”

His meaning, at the moment, flashed like lightning across my understanding, but his eyes were now holding mine, and I could not speak. Did his conditions flow over into me? Did I borrow some faint reflection of what he knew, of where he was, of a difference he tried to convey? I cannot say. Words left my mind, for they were useless, vain, meaningless. No words existed anywhere — the few he used are reported as feebly, inaccurately, as those I fought to choose for myself. The mind, as an instrument, lay helpless, withered. His eyes held mine. I looked, that is, straight into his own. And I understood — oh, so easily and clearly and simply then — that my full earth-life was but a fraction, a trivial rivulet, that ran parallel with numerous other streams that were deeper, mightier, more important. It was a question of focusing upon this little rivulet, or spreading attention and consciousness over them all, yet simultaneously. In his eyes I read this fantastic but literal certainty. I became aware of stresses of a kind never before experienced. No mental or emotional tension life had brought me hitherto, either by way of love, hate, passion, yearning, fear, was akin to it. I was stretched and altered, altered above all, in my deepest essential being, and yet such alteration was easy, natural, right, while entirely new, and different to anything I could, imaginatively or intellectually, have even supposed possible. For above all I noticed this — that it was unlike anything my mind could have even imagined.

I watched him, and as I watched the light I had already noticed in the room increased a little, as though it came closer. Its origin I had not guessed, though I certainly had not fancied it, and it was, I knew, external to himself. Both bed and occupant became a shade clearer. I stared with intense and feverish attention. I could have sworn there was a change, the flutter of a change. That was the word — it fluttered, then was gone. But it returned, this faint, fluttering difference. I noticed it a second time. It was lost again. Something touched the face, there was a change upon the features. It vanished. With it came over me a rushing instinct that I must be quick, I must act instantly, or the opportunity would be lost for ever. This certainty swept me like an icy wind, and the ghostly dread I could not lay moved down the air. What Vronski feared might happen was on the way, closer, nearer, even imminent. I must plunge in as best I could, and I made the effort, as the hundred questions flew past me in their glittering series. I picked one out, then another, and another, but could not speak them, could not utter even a sound, for all were useless, meaningless, and the awful flutter, meanwhile, had reappeared, this time lingering. Thought froze in me. I closed my eyes a second. It was his quiet laughter that made me open them again the next moment. The light had come closer than before, and the ghastly signature upon his face, I saw, had deepened. I actually saw it spring back, this fluttering alteration, to settle like a great bright insect on the face. He was speaking, but the bell-like note had left the voice, and then the lips stopped moving, the eyes lost their terrible radiance, the whole skin paled, the arms supporting the body sagged.

“Christ!” I heard my voice with a stifled shriek, his curious light laughter still audible across it. It was that same happy, careless laughter, no pain, not even anxiety, possible with such a sound, a laughter of relief rather. And the voice came with it as a bell ringing across great distances:— “Ah, *that* above all else, the way of light,” reached my ears faintly, brokenly, a profound wavering sigh accompanying it. “I will tell you, tell all I can — show you the escaping way — the *why*—” the syllables dying into incoherence then, so that I bent over to catch the scarcely audible whisper that almost stopped my heart. Though confused, words running into each other, their meaning penetrated:— “a moment — a moment only — I must first pay back the stolen years — now and here. After that I will tell—”

The whisper died out because the lips through which it came were gone already. I remember an odd sound behind me, an increase of light as well, but it was impossible to turn my head. The horror of what Vronski’s cryptic words had suggested was nothing to the horror of what I saw. I stared. The whole dreadful sight came, it seemed, in a single second. Twenty-five years rushed on him in a single moment. He did not stare back because the eyes, following the lips, were no longer there to stare with. The features all ran away together. In the space of a few seconds, fifteen perhaps at most, Sydney Mantravers aged twenty-five years, became a quarter of a century older. The accumulation of this period’s decay was upon him, all over him, with an abrupt, appalling rush. The skin grew loose and wrinkled, changing, even hiding the eyes so that it seemed they disappeared; the muscles slackened, sprayed, sagged away, chin and neck showing it most dearly. There was a ghastly crumpling together of the entire physical frame. The shrivelling seemed intensified by its swiftness. I remember that no comprehensible feeling was in me, horror having passed into something else, and similarly, no thought took the brain. The “bends” rose as a picture, because probably my mind contained it as the only comparable human experience, the hideous “bends” that divers know on rising too rapidly from deep waters before the decompression can be applied, or, when caught unawares in too great depths, the frame is jellied, the entire body crammed up into the helmet. There rose another picture too — of a mummy exposed suddenly to air and damp becoming a little heap of dust soon after. These awful pictures rose, then vanished, as though the mind automatically searched for a parallel.

Though it was not quite so, the body none the less collapsed in a dreadful, stupid heap before my eyes, the last detail to suffer change being the small red bruise that glowed in the right temple before it too was gone. One feeble breath rose from the huddled shape upon the sheets, one last fluttering breath escaped the dried and shrunken flesh that had been lips, bearing with extreme faintness a ghost of happy laughter, and just reaching my ears as I bent closer above the dissolving face: “a moment... only a moment... and I will tell you... escaping way... elsewhere and otherwise...”

Loud and quite clear behind my back, as the light came closer suddenly, was the piteous, convulsive sound of Vronski’s sobbing, beyond which again, the faint clear note as of a ringing bell that died away into the silence.

THE STRANGER

THE FLAT LAY deadly quiet, voices were hushed, and all moved to and fro on tiptoe. In the room where she lay — the woman who refused to die — this quiet was, of course, most marked, for there her breathing, so faint it was scarcely perceptible, alone broke the pall of silence. The last clearly audible sound had been the lowered voice of the family physician: “I won’t wait now. There is little I can do. I will come back within an hour,” and his heels tapping softly across the tiled floor of the narrow hall toward the lift.

Yes, she might last an hour or two, possibly even till to-morrow, this woman who so hated death that she always refused even to acknowledge it; but she would not wake from unconsciousness. She was sinking fast, the doctor said; the intense vitality at length was unavailing; there was nothing he could do.

And so now it was that the lowered voice, the tap of boots on the tiled floor of the landing, the rumble of the lift, still echoed on in the mind where all else lay muted and repressed.

Apart from two members of the family, and these but nominally, dutifully, affectionate, Colonel Moreland alone was present in that room of silence. Elderly, grizzled, with features set in bronze, he sat motionless beside the bed. Looking like a Roman sentinel, he watched the grim, silent fight, whose arena was a few square feet of human frailty, and his was the mind in which the recent sounds seemed still to echo. The others, a stepbrother and an uncle, stood with their backs to him by the window, watching the dusk fall slowly over the dismal London street, not otherwise moved, probably, than by those practical considerations the approaching death of a tolerated relative involved. Priority of place, at any rate, they gave readily to the stern man who sat thus motionless beside the bed, almost a stranger to them, yet whose right, it seemed, they admitted gladly.

With the lessening traffic and the dropping of the winter’s night, the silence deepened. A slow wind mourned about the building. The stillness grew. If the faithful serving-woman in the kitchen wept, she wept inaudibly. That she did weep, however, is certain, for some half an hour later, when the Colonel looked into her face, the tears lay still upon her ashen cheeks....

To her, indeed, as to himself, this stealthy approach of death seemed an incredible occurrence, painfully dramatic for all its quiet method of arrival. To the old Scottish woman, a mere lassie from the Highlands when first she entered the family service years before, it seemed impossible that a mistress with such fierce love of living should ever cease to breathe. It was unnatural, almost wicked. A loathing of death, so intense that it amounted to a fixed refusal to die, must surely — somehow — keep her alive for ever! Death, in her mistress's presence, no one ever dared to mention. Had she not proved it again and again: she — would not die!

To both soldier and servant, at any rate, death now seemed an outrage, something almost against the normal order. Yet to Colonel Moreland, though he shared with the humble serving-woman that rare worship of true love which had held faithful over a quarter of a century, the silent battle was painful and dramatic for other, and very different, reasons. From time to time, as the minutes crawled, his eyes would open, gaze for a moment on the face he so passionately loved, then quickly close again, lest the intensity of his inner realisation be even by so much dimmed. His thoughts — pictures, rather than actual thoughts — were of long ago, of more recent years, to be exact, of two weeks before, when news of the dangerous seizure had brought him instantly to her side. No trivial, foolish convention had prevented then, as it had prevented years ago. No trumpery considerations of social rank, of thine and mine, differences that in youth appear so great, in later years so petty, had interfered with the over-mastering power that impelled, even commanded, him to see her, before, in the final sense, it was too late, and — to make his long-concealed confession face to face....

Twenty-five years ago ignorance and timidity had sealed his lips. The V.C., gained on the North-West, Frontier, proved a quality in him which yet had not availed a young man, finely self-forgetful, fighting for a loveliness that seemed wholly beyond his reach; she, all unknowing, had given herself to another — and he had seen her go. Now, on his return from long sojourn in the East, he had heard in one and the same day both of her illness and of her present liberty. He had not hesitated. The late confession had been made that ought to have been made so many years before. She told him her own long secret, too. And in that very breath, which the doctor whispered might be well-nigh her last, she told him likewise — her whole being defiant with aggressive will:

“I shall get well again. I shall live for you. It is never too late for that.... I *will* get well!...”

The pathetic ignominy of it struck even the unimaginative soldier — the defiant little human will now helpless and inoperative as the last cold Shadow stole toward the bed. Death recked not of human desire and intention, however fierce, and the desolate battle, it seemed to him, was a foregone conclusion. Any moment now the remorseless Figure must stand at the door, approach the bed, and steal her from his world. Colonel Moreland, overwrought perhaps a little, pictured in his mind a relentless and unbending Outline....

The stepbrother turned from the window, lighted a softly shaded lamp, then moved back without a sound to the post he held somewhat awkwardly with his companion. But the bronze outline beside the bed was too intent upon his poignant inner pictures to take much notice of what they did. Only the doctor’s lowered voice, the tap of his boots upon the tiled floor outside, the rumble of the descending lift, still echoed on across the background of his mind.... These, indeed, and the frail outline beneath the sheets, seemed his sole relations with the outer world. When a step, therefore, became audible in the passage, it was natural he hardly stirred at first, and that the opening and closing of the front door, the murmur of confused voices, too, should have merged in that continuous memory of a mental sound.

There was a cold air that sent a faint shiver over him, but it was the whispering by the window that really disturbed his profound reverie.

“The doctor probably... sooner than he meant...” he heard one say, and so was on his feet, startled rather, and out in the passage before either of them. But the woman from the kitchen was in front of him. He ran into her in his eagerness, noticed the tears upon her ashen cheeks, and saw at the same time the tall, thin outline of the stranger, who most certainly was *not* the doctor.

A very upright and unbending Outline it was, the stiffness, no doubt, adding to the appearance of the stature, beside which the woman seemed diminutive, almost dwarf-like. The dreadful whiteness of her face he found unwelcome — more, it troubled him profoundly, though he recalled this only later. There was talk, confused and hurried, yet the voice of the stranger, he believed, was not once actually audible at all. It was the woman's voice and words he caught so distinctly, words whose incongruity must, at any other time, have brought a smile to his stern lips. This appearance, however, of rapid exchange between two persons was as clear to him as the certainty that there was a mistake as well, a mistake that seemed grossly stupid at this moment: the wrong name, the wrong door, the wrong building, of course.

Sharply, then, out of this muttering, the woman's words emerged, both fear and courage in the tone, as she repeated with insistent emphasis that her mistress was not at home: "She's *not* at home... to anybody. She's *dying*!..."

Colonel Moreland, as he heard, found himself abruptly stopped. He stood stock-still, arrested in his tracks. The incongruity of the language gave him a sense of intolerant impatience, of anger, even. The stupid disturbance, at such a moment was more than he could bear, while yet he took no immediate steps to relieve the fierce vexation that consumed him. His deep annoyance found no outlet. His mind, as well as his muscles, was arrested. There was about the tall, unbending outline of the stranger something indefinable that produced a sudden shock, paralysing him unaccountably on the instant, and with it a flash that struck cold as winter's ice against his heart. The power of it caught him full: he remained motionless where he stood.... Thus, his first impulse to send the caller peremptorily about his business, to push him out of the still open door, was not obeyed; and on turning an instant to see whether the others followed from the bedroom, he was aware of the woman close against him as though for protection, tears upon a face blanched like linen, terror in the staring eyes, and her body shaking like a leaf.

"I couldna' stop him," came her thick whisper. "He said he would — come back."

It was while she spoke he realised for the first time that she was no longer accompanied. She stood now at his side — alone.

The soldier found his voice, though not yet his entire self-possession. "Come back!" he managed to ejaculate. "Come back!" he repeated. "At a time like this....”

Words failed him then. He glared at the trembling woman, who now pointed, with helpless, unintelligent gesture, to the drawing-room door behind her. Her body, he noticed, was still quivering all over.

“In there,” she muttered. “He went in there....”

Something turned over in the soldier’s heart. He did not argue; he made at first no comment. The one weapon he really understood, a blow, was useless, for he knew not where to aim. His sense of outrage, his anger, moreover, were of a sudden curiously stilled. The ice pressed closer, but if the hair upon his scalp rose, he denied it violently.

“You are mistaken,” he said presently, in his curtest tone. “You made a mistake,” he repeated firmly, the anger now oddly gone from his voice as well. “He — he went out by the front door. He will not come back. It was all a mistake, I tell you.”

The woman, beneath his compelling eyes, mumbled submissively, yet keeping close against him:

“If ye say so, sir,” he heard her whisper. Flustered beyond belief she was, but she was unconvinced, her gaze still fixed in terror on the drawing-room door.

The other found his sternest voice, the one the Army knew, the voice of action.

“Get back to your kitchen,” he commanded. “Kneel down! Kneel down, I say, and pray to your God at once!”

She crept away, shuffling, looking back over her shoulder before she disappeared. Her lips were moving, though no words came forth.

Colonel Moreland strode over and closed the front door, peering first along the bare stone floor, across the narrow landing where the gas-jet flared, then down the darkened passage. There was no one visible. No sound broke the silence. He paused an instant, then abruptly did a curious thing. He said something without knowing why he said it:

“Your mistress,” his sudden whisper followed the trembling woman, though probably inaudible to her, “will not die. She will recover.”

As he spoke the words, wondering whence came his marvellously sure conviction, he pushed into the drawingroom. He felt his courage ebbing. A second's hesitation, and it must have failed him. He went in boldly.

Again, if the hair upon his scalp rose up, he denied it violently; if that touch of ice pressed nearer on his heart, he faced it; his muscles, if they trembled, were in a grip of iron.

Inside the threshold he felt for the light and switched it on. One glance at the chintz-covered furniture sufficed. There was no figure, there was no living presence. The room was empty.

Their marriage, late in life, proved beyond words a happy one, for passion's turbulence left no dread of a reaction, and the deeper ties were free to utter their fine call unhampered. If regret for unrealised glories tinged its glamour, it held at least no sordid pity for a gross remorse. To them it seemed unclouded, the gardened house in Kent, surrounded by gracious friends, its perfect setting.

The faithful serving-woman had gone her way, her curious problem with her — so far, at least, as Colonel Moreland had ever questioned. The soldier, indeed, kept his own counsel about a matter he had not cared to probe by cross-examination; his wife, on this point, was never in his confidence. The puzzle remained, for him, unsolved. The woman had seen; he, too, had seen. Yet, since both observers were in a condition of high nervous tension at the time — overwrought, he termed it — neither possibly, for that matter, had seen anything at all. This was the explanation laborious self-deception used; temperament selected it, and stiff self-restraint maintained it, with an effort.

In his own inmost mind, none the less, there lurked a doubt no deliberate effort could wholly stifle. A note of interrogation, like a hidden flame, glowed and would not fade. As soldier, as Englishman, he had that abhorrence of the unordinary which was his due; "supernatural" was a word not found in his vocabulary; hostility, scepticism, rose automatically when anything of the kind was mentioned. He had seen, more than most perhaps, what mysterious India had to show, and had enjoyed it; for trickery might baffle the mind pleasurably without stretching it into uncomfortable postures. Through thick and thin he had always maintained this comfortable attitude; he was not going to change it now for anybody in the world. The doubt, the note of interrogation, none the less, persisted; there remained a question, though a question never asked.

He was glad the serving-woman had gone to a world where questions were impossible, for the fear had been in him that one day he must ask her — worse still, that she might speak to him. He was now relieved of that anxiety. Yet there was another question, independent of an answerer. This was a faint, disturbing memory, though a memory he could never feel quite sure about, since he himself, the only person who might explain it, found no positive answer in him. Had he indeed caught that other voice, or had he not?

A fitful wind, he remembered, moaned in gusts about the building at the time; up the shaft it sighed, and through the opened door as well. A moaning wind could be responsible for sounds a strained mind might well twist into syllables, into the semblance of a voice with words, even into a definite sentence. It had made strange, restless noises, that fitful wind. He was a careful man: he would never positively swear to it. Yet to this sentence had been due his amazing conviction that recovery suddenly was certain, though only afterwards did he realise why he used the words he actually had used to the woman....

There remained this disquieting, persistent memory of another voice, almost a whisper — little more, perhaps, than a breath of wind: "*I will come back...*" and so gently uttered it seemed to have been sighed into his understanding, rather than spoken audibly: "*I will come back.*"

Yet the doctor, he remembered, had used a similar phrase when he left half an hour earlier. Was not this second voice, perhaps, its reproduction in a mind troubled and overwrought, a mind still echoing the footsteps on the tiled floor, the rumble of the lift? He would not positively swear; as already said, he was a careful man. He realised only his sudden, positive assurance that recovery from that moment had become a definite certainty.

The note of interrogation thus remained. It haunted and troubled him for years, till with the passage of time it grew less present, less discomforting, at any rate. But it did not die. He could never entirely forget it.

Their happiness, meanwhile, if calm, was of the radiant kind that nothing, least of all differences of opinion, could disturb. Firmly based upon fundamentals, it was securely anchored in a deep need each had of the other. They supplied, indeed, respectively, one another's deficiencies, finding life's harvest rich and wonderful; and tolerance seemed their native gift. Yet a single dread they shared in common: lest one should be taken and the other left. That the final harvesting might come for both together was their intense desire.

The house, as a rule, had voices ringing through it; young voices, for they were the kind young people love. Friends of earlier years came with their children, a married niece, a holiday group, so that corridors and garden-paths were alive with footsteps, calling, laughter; everywhere among the lawns and shrubberies moving figures darted, little people climbed the stairs, the children's quarters echoed, and young life had its happy way.

On this particular Sunday in late September, for the first time, indeed, during the entire summer, they found themselves alone. The Colonel's niece, with her brood of boys and girls, had left the day before, preparatory to Black Monday when schools reopen. It seemed as if a school treat, rather than four children with their mother, now left the house and grounds so still, so strangely quiet. The servants, as a reward for recent special services, had been given afternoon leave.... There was a touch of melancholy about both house and grounds, of emptiness, almost of desertion, and in their own hearts, too, there lay a certain emptiness, a silence that held half-ghostly whispers of unspoken questions. Though neither gave it utterance, the same thought echoed in that inner chamber, where, but for the trick the years had played them, might now have sounded the pattering of little feet, the cries and laughter, the presences, indeed, of children of their own.

To this thought, tinged with inevitable regret, neither ever permitted utterance; but now, as they sat after tea upon the lawn, each knew full well that the other's inmost chamber *was* thus tenanted. There was a happy telepathy between them they did not question. Inexplicable it might be, but frequent custom had established it beyond argument, so that even to Colonel Moreland's strict habit of mind it had become a commonplace. Some incalculable sympathy of love had taught them the code, the soldier himself acknowledging the results without demur....

He made his suggestion quietly, glancing at her through the cigar-smoke the air hardly stirred: "Aloud, dear — won't you?" Then, seeing that she hesitated, he added: “You say them so beautifully always.”

He touched her hand, yet turned his head away to listen, for poetry made him shy. He closed his eyes, as she began, his face in mask-like repose. It was the voice, perhaps, as much as the exquisite words that he enjoyed, floating to him over the still lawn and flower-beds, where the sunset lay in slanting gold. Its music called up pictures of so many years ago... of bright, wondrous hours... “of hours that might have been, yet had not been...” and yet, it seems, of one hour in particular:

“The hour which might have been yet might not be, Which man’s and woman’s heart conceived and bore, Yet whereof life was barren — on what shore Bides it the breaking of Time’s weary sea?”

She paused a moment. He was aware of her eyes upon his own, a question in them, so that he shyly turned to meet her gaze. Thrilled to a deeper understanding than he had ever known before, he divined that question instantly; but he spoke no word, because no word came to him to speak... while the stillness deepened about them, and the shadows lengthened on the lawn. There was a new, sudden stirring in the depths within him. His whole being listened; it was almost as though he waited, expecting something; and the breeze that just moved the rose-leaves behind her hair seemed to mingle with the voice, as she continued:

> “Bondchild of all consummate joys set free,
> It somewhere sighs and serves, and mute before
> The House of Love, hears through the echoing door
> His hours elect in choral consonancy....”

Again she paused a moment; and again she raised her eyes to his; listening, as it were, to the Hours Elect that had known realisation, yet for themselves had never struck. He, too, listened; and, as he listened, understanding in him marvellously and sharply opened, so that his whole life rushed suddenly past, presenting with that lightning meaning due, they say, to drowning men, each separate item of failure or success, yet emphasised with its ultimate truth as wisdom or defeat. This lightning experience was abruptly his, lasting at most a second. The flash seemed timeless.... It passed... and he sat listening for her voice, and waiting with a sigh.

He remembered the lines to follow. That “Little Outcast Hour” lay in his inmost thought, perhaps, as he felt sure it lay in hers. There was a look in her eyes, he noticed, that gave him happiness and terror suddenly, the terror of some mighty happiness hitherto unknown, a happiness, he felt, that must be more than he could bear, unless she shared it with him.

The world he realised at this moment was, in any case, an inner world. Of this he was vividly aware. It held no shyness. In it, for him, only the mightier movements passed....

A flooding wave broke over him. He took her hand. “Beautiful,” he stammered, “beautiful and true. How — how could he know — ?”

His words halted, as the wave momentarily withdrew. An inner breathlessness caught him, a groping almost physical, lest his feet be swept from under him, lest he be borne away from his known foundations. He held tightly to the fingers in his own.

“Your hand, dear,” he heard himself saying. “It’s cold.”

He waited a moment. It seemed to him he had been speaking for a long, long time; for days; for years; for centuries.

A new coolness, he noticed, had stolen into the air. It had been coming closer, ever closer; it had now invaded both of them.

Something was happening to her as well as to himself. The happiness, the terror, the returning wave.... His feet lost touch, his mind went groping....

He made a prodigious effort, and it caused him an agony never before experienced.

“Shall we go in now?” he managed to say, his breath difficult to control. “The damp — is rising.”

The familiar words, the commonplace effort, made him realise abruptly that a few seconds only — a scarcely perceptible interval — had passed since her voice ceased on the spoken lines and she had looked into his eyes. But she was still looking into his eyes. Her lips, he saw, were moving.... Only a second had passed, he struggled to remember; only a fleeting second, after all....

It was, perhaps, a revelation that came upon them across that quiet English lawn, stealing past the roses, using the last sunset light to clothe itself, and taking the notes of a thrush that now burst suddenly into rapturous song in the cedar by the house. The low human tones surely came floating down the evening air rather than from her own lips.

"But, lo! what wedded souls now hand in hand

Together tread at last the immortal strand,

With eyes where burning memory lights love home?"

The voice, the singing of the bird, hushed simultaneously, as a tide of happiness too great for human consciousness burst flooding over him, drowning all utterance in its wave. He saw her eyes — the way they now shifted from his own, searching the space behind him. She had stopped dead. His blood ebbed, then flushed again.

"Look!" He caught her low voice. "What is it? So upright, so unbending; and — by the hand — a little child?"

"Dear," he faltered, following the direction of her gaze, "but — I see no one — no one."

The lawn was empty.

The next lines — did she say them, or did he hear them singing within him as his feet lost their final touch with earth?

"Lo I how the little outcast hour has turned And leaped to them and in their faces yearned."

He saw her try to rise. Her hands were stretched out beyond him. Her face was radiant with a burning glory. The last line yet hung upon her lips.

He made once again a prodigious effort. "No, no!" he wanted to cry aloud. "Don't say it, dear — don't say it—"

It was too late. He struggled to his feet in vain. No muscle, either of tongue or limb, obeyed. A flood of light drove down the evening air, awful yet lovely, and from the heart of it a voice —

"I am your child: O parents, ye have come!"

It was the servant, returning in the dusk, who found them, not sitting in their chairs, but side by side upon the lawn, fallen, her right hand holding his, her other stretched out toward the house, as though... “as though,” the old butler put it, “they had gone to meet someone. That’s how they looked to me... and the faces both young and smiling.” Between the roses they lay thus, close together.

IT was at the age of 36 that Jorden, stockbroker, first saw the little chap, and he establishes the date because it was also the first time he had realised he was getting older. Between knowing and realising the gap is wide; all know, for instance, that one day they must die; few realise it. A certain emotion, a small yet definite shock, moreover, invariably accompanies the realisation. On this particular occasion it was a commonplace detail that made Jorden aware that he was no longer twenty-five, a fast forward in the football field — it was loss of breath.

Climbing the steep, sunlit slopes above Igls in the Tyrol, that brilliant August afternoon, his wind failed him momentarily; he paused for breath; his age, as he stood panting, occurred to him; the little shock, the consequent emotion, were also present. It was in this instant that he caught sight of the youngster, chasing a swallow-tail butterfly — uphill.

Jorden stood still for some seconds to watch the pursuit. The radiant face and eager eyes, the mouth half open, the zest and energy in the flying limbs, one arm poising the net to strike — these held his attention vividly.

“Uphill!” he exclaimed to himself, envy and admiration in him; and he was on the point of shouting encouragement to the youngster, when — yet with a movement as though he hid deliberately — the boy was gone. A turn in the path, a dip in the flowered slope, apparently concealed him. At any rate, he vanished. “He’ll tire before I do,” ran consolingly through the other’s mind, as he waited in vain some minutes for the reappearance, then presently continued his slow steep climb uphill. “Endurance, at any rate, is mine,” he comforted himself, “if not that happy zest!...”

The incident, for some reason not unconnected with the transient emotion, lingered in his thought: a little English schoolboy, evidently, out with his parents for the holidays. There was another thing that made the picture linger, something he found himself unable to define precisely, presenting itself vaguely to him as a curious sense of intimacy. A further detail flashed back that night, too, just before sleep came: that the boy, namely, midway in the excitement of the chase, had thrown him an understanding and affectionate glance, "as though," reflected Jorden, "I had been his father, or uncle, or something like that!" Adventure, mischief were in it too. The family luggage, no doubt, was already on the *diligence*, the distraught parents hunting everywhere for "Master Jack" with frantic phrases in German and English.... This picture edged Jorden's sleep that night, because, perhaps, he remembered having been similarly naughty in his own childhood years — nearly thirty years — ago. His own reaction to this look that haunted him, he found it difficult to describe, because "yearning" was not the kind of word that would have occurred to Jorden, the stockbroker, at any time, nor one that he would have used without very considerable effort to avoid it. It was, nevertheless, the true and accurate word.

This, then, was the first time that he saw the boy; and it was, he vaguely fancied, the emotion due to his sudden realisation of growing older that made the memory cling.

It was at the age of forty that he saw him next. The interval, meanwhile, had not dimmed the original picture. Often and often he caught himself wondering who the little fellow was; whether he had been smacked for his escapade; whether he had eventually caught the gorgeous butterfly, had got lost in those big wild mountains, had stumbled, hurt himself perhaps... until the atmosphere of affectionate interest he had first felt became permanently associated with the youngster and his uncertain fate. This intimate and sympathetic relationship was established in his mind; his heart acknowledged something that was half friendship and half guardianship.

At the age of forty, then, he saw him suddenly again, but in very different surroundings.

Now, at the age of forty, a man knows his first youth is done with, though he is slow yet to admit that he is middle-aged. It comforts him, none the less, to shift his standard of measurement a trifle. He reads with pleasure, for instance, that a public man of that age is referred to by the newspapers as "a young man still." Forty, his women friends assure him, is nothing, while forty remains forty for all that. In various minor ways he begins, probably, to humbug himself. He knows, but he does not realise, until something happens to force realisation on him. And when Jorden again ran across the little fellow of a few years before, it so happened that he was in the bitter throes of a disappointing love affair, the disappointment due precisely to the fact that he *was* just forty, whereas a certain other man was only just twenty-nine.

Here, again, it was an unusual emotion of the moment that made the incident stick in his memory — at a place of public entertainment, Maskelyne and Devant's, the home of childhood's conjuring tricks and mystery, the place, above all, where people — vanished.

Surely it was the little lad. The similarity, at any rate, was overwhelmingly convincing: the same, laughing, affectionate expression, the air of mischief, the old quick glance of sympathy, yes, of recognition even. It was the same boy beyond a doubt, although there was now a certain remoteness about him, a certain distance as it were, that puzzled the older man, bringing a hint of chagrin with it. It never occurred to him that the boy looked no older then when he had first seen him. This did not enter his head. What did enter his head, curiously enough, was a childhood's memory of his own, when he had infuriated a deaf aunt who was "treating" him in this very place — it was Maskelyne and Cook's in those days, the Egyptian Hall of Mystery, in Piccadilly — by striking a match in the middle of the performance. He had been promptly sent home to bed, with bread and water for his supper. And again his heart yearned towards this little ragamuffin in a sailor-suit — he himself, he remembered, wore a sailor-suit when he lit that match — half-way round the sweep of the dress-circle to the left.

This was during the *entr'acte*. The lights then went down, the curtain rose, faces about him grew dim and indistinct again. The gnawing pain of his unhappy love affair returned to plague him, but with it, now, this strange yearning, this affectionate and intimate tenderness towards his rediscovered youngster that, for the life of him, he could not explain. There was between them, he felt positive, an undecipherable familiarity, a deep understanding sympathy.

Truth to tell, there was a good deal of emotion in the stolid Jorden at that moment, emotion of various kinds. He realised another thing as well — that the performance bored him. He was too old now for these tricks. The conjuring wearied him. He had come to see a particular disappearing trick, much advertised, yet when he saw it its climax found his thoughts elsewhere. He had not followed the business on the stage at all. His head, in the semi-darkness, kept turning towards the sweep of the dress-circle to his left. That jolly little ruffian! He wished he were his own.... He would have a good look when the curtain fell. Yet when, presently, it grew light again, he experienced a sharp pang of regret and disappointment: the seat was empty, the boy was gone.

“Young monkey,” he reflected, with an understanding grin. “Been sent home in disgrace, of course! Did something wicked probably — just as I did — and got packed off to bed.” And while he rather hugged the idea, chuckling over it, his heart ached a little because of that empty seat and the lost opportunity of somehow making the acquaintance of its recent occupant.

These two appearances rather haunted him thenceforward, so that, coupling them together, he often thought about them, wonderingly, longingly, yes, yearningly. He wished the boy were his own. The sympathy in him deepened. He flattered himself that he “understood the little rascal,” that he could have made him happy, have given him the life, the training, the education his character and temperament best called for. The boy’s nature seemed an open book to him. In some inner kingdom of the heart he built it all up with tenderness. Only the sense of remoteness troubled him a little, the sense of distance, widening, it seemed, with the years; this brought a touch of pain with it, hinting that his loss perhaps was final. He countered it, comforting himself thereby, with the reflection that it was spatial merely, due to the fact that they had never actually met and spoken together....

Meanwhile the years passed, age came upon him, fate took him to the East where health suffered, and then, suddenly, a new card was dealt. A relative died, and Jorden came unexpectedly into great possessions. Also, he came home. With his faded vitality, his uncertain health, his loneliness, he entered into the management, what most call the enjoyment, of a large estate, an historic house, soaked in tradition and half fossilised into something a long line of ancestors, fading back towards 1400, had deposited through the centuries. He recalled visiting the place once as a little boy, when his cousin had it. It was a Sunday. The occasion, indeed, remained sharp in his memory, since he had been punished for birds’-nesting in his go-to-meeting clothes.

It was an atmosphere he was too feeble now to resist. Without energy to become constructive, much less creative, he became that easier thing, a dreamer. The ghosts, the attractive melancholy, swamped him rather; thoughts ran backwards more and more.... And then it was, walking one crisp autumn morning with the head-keeper through the ancient woods, that he saw a figure suddenly that made him stand stock still: climbing over a stile from the park meadows where the deer were, came the youngster! A school cap perched on the back of his head, the mop of hair was untidy, the Eton suit was torn and muddy, one bootlace was undone. On the face was a guilty, caught-in-the-act expression, yet with the same air of mischief and adventure as before. There was no trace of fear. The laughing eyes, the affectionate trusting look of recognition, betrayed no anxiety. And the understanding sympathy, the sense of peculiar intimacy, rose in Jorden like a flood, while with it came a queer assurance that the former remoteness he had known had become distinctly less. He felt nearer to the boy, yet in some subtle fashion as though this greater closeness lay in himself, that *he* had drawn nearer while the boy had never changed. Two incongruous details, however, failed to strike him: that there were no nests in autumn, and that the boy had not grown older.

The man stood for a moment spellbound. “Birds’- nesting! And in his Sunday clothes! How dare he!” Jorden made this observation aloud, interrupting something solemn the keeper was saying about foxes and the decrease in pheasants’ eggs. “How well I remember doing it myself — just like that — years and years ago! I tore my Sunday trousers, too.... Eh, Thompson? You were saying...?”

But the keeper had touched his cap, murmured a few unintelligible words, and taken a side-path across the woods away from him. The man’s face wore almost an uncomfortable look, though, as usual, respectful and attentive. He seemed a trifle scared.

“Now for it!” added Jorden to himself, but still aloud. He felt full of things he wanted to say. The desire to play was in him. This time he would not let his opportunity slip; this time, by heaven, he would speak.

He advanced towards the boy, moving quickly, yet at the same time cautiously, for an odd fear lay in him that, unless he were very prompt, the youngster would be gone, evading him for the third time. With mind and will, therefore, Jorden gripped him steadily in his thought, his eyes fixed hard, his whole being concentrated in the determination to speak.... And the face, as he drew nearer, watched him eagerly, expectantly, the eyes half mischievous in their laughter, the expression inviting and charged with interest, almost as if the welcome words: “Come, play with me!” must be audible any moment. Jorden, in fact, while noting every detail with the utmost sharpness, even that the dirtied Sunday clothes were just what he himself had worn in that escapade of his own childhood in these very woods, felt also the positive conviction that he knew the boy as he knew his own soul. “Why I know him as I know myself... it’s positively absurd!” The yearning in his heart became, of a sudden, indescribable.

It was at this second that two things happened: first — that the dance of light and shadow from the branches wavered curiously in outline, as in an attempt to resolve the figure into a mere effect of woodland magic. At thirty yards, indeed, the boy might easily have disappeared, have suddenly — not been there. But at ten yards this was difficult. No mere effect of light and shade, moreover, could possibly trick his steady gaze, his concentrated mind. Jorden still held the figure with determined grip. He was now within easy speaking distance. Already, indeed, the boy was moving from the stile towards him, smiling, convincingly substantial, and the man, aware that his heart was thumping, opened his lips to speak. At which moment happened the second thing, namely, that he found no words.

Nothing occurred to him to say; he did not know what words to use. He could find no possible language, no phraseology, the boy would comprehend. The realisation came with a keen shock of pain. His inarticulateness brought a sense of tears. The understanding, the yearning love he felt, the deep desire to enter into the spirit of the little chap’s adventure, the longing to play with him, all this was blocked, desire and hope turned sterile instantly, by the sheer inability to address him in any words that he would understand. This unbridgeable gulf yawned impassably between the two — a gulf of unshared experience that made any language common to them both extremely difficult. An amazing shyness dropped upon him.

The pair stood within actual touching distance, when this bitter realisation fell upon Jorden like a blow. His hand was out, his lips were certainly open, and in this attitude of distressing paralysis he remained, for one second, like a frozen statue, dumb and motionless. His mind refused all action, though the eyes held true, fixing the face and figure indubitably clear before him.

In the eyes, then, came the final proof that the gulf between the two was no fancy merely; the sense of remoteness had, indeed, grown less, yet this lack of suitable words remained insuperable. From the expectant happy face the smile now faded; the sadness in the man's heart was reflected, as by a mirror, in the young features opposite. The gulf was recognised. A strange, an instantaneous, withdrawal took place. It was established that the "remoteness" was assuredly not spatial merely, but was of time and condition, determined, it seemed, as by a great body of unshared experience....

Jorden's outstretched hand completed its gesture, yet not the gesture originally planned: hurriedly, it now for an instant covered his own eyes instead. His mind and will, his concentration and assurance, wavered. There was this moment of confused reflection, swift but disturbing, a shadow of some dim, lost memory flickering through it, with twinkling feet, with ghostly skirts. A second later, when he uncovered his eyes again, the stile was empty, the figure gone. The dance of light and shade shifted through the crisp autumn air, the branches swayed, the breeze passed gently in the wood. Coming slowly up the narrow glade, the keeper reappeared, and Jorden, an intense melancholy and regret in his heart, moved heavily to meet him, his mind searching only for phrases about the pheasants and the foxes....

Being a stolid type of man, inarticulate, rather, even to himself, and characteristically shy of the unusual, Jorden thenceforward detected, at the heart of his deep yearning, a note of dread. Desire was still dominant, but this note of dread — it was the merest hint — had become an ingredient of it. "I may see him again any moment, any day," changed into "I'm afraid I may see him any moment, any day." The reason for this was too subtle for him; he "had a feeling," and no more than that. He connected any reappearance now with something in himself; a big fundamental change, as it were; with something, anyhow, his deepest being did not desire. Subsequent meetings — and he knew they were bound to come — would be significant in an unwelcome, almost an unpleasant, kind of way. Shrinking, instinctive and unexplained, accompanied the longing.

The loneliness of his life, meanwhile, of his somewhat unmanageable fate, increased. Not that he cut himself off sourly from his kind — the sweetness in his dumb nature remained — but that his inner life lay silent, uncompanied, inarticulate. Memories, more and more, assailed him, ghostly desires and regrets catching at their skirts. Thought ran increasingly backwards, rather than ahead. Last month was dim, while sixty years ago was vivid. He became old, old....

Subsequent "meetings," as expected, did occur, though not yet that particular one he dreaded as significant, even final, a word, however, he did not once permit himself. True to his type, he belonged to those who, after a certain stage, live chiefly in the past, yet without bitterness. His was a sweet and healthy mind; merely it pleased, refreshed and satisfied him to dwell upon far distant years, living over again, as with careless zest, adventures of his early boyhood.

These subsequent "meetings," as he admitted with a smile of amusement, became, indeed, "curiouser and curiouser": one at a board meeting, the other at a funeral. A kind of a board meeting, that is to say. It was a difficult period for folk with large estates, and Jorden had decided to sell off considerable portions of his land to a building company, himself a director by the terms of sale. The very woods where he had seen the little fellow on the stile, where he himself had gone birds'-nesting in his Sunday clothes, these woods were now to be cut down for building.

It was at the meeting when final details of the scheme were to be decided — Jorden sentimentally attempting to save the plot, the other directors staring at him blankly — it was in the middle of this blundering attempt, since he had no reasons to offer, that the boy suddenly came smiling at him from behind the Chairman's throne.

Jorden, John Henry Jorden, sprang up. The figure was not there. Jorden, John Henry Jorden, sat down.

... He saved the woods, yielding in their place another piece of land at great personal loss instead.

At the funeral, again, the funeral of an unvalued relative, as he stood hatless in a bitter wind beside the grave, there — yes, unmistakably — the little figure emerged. On the outskirts of the dreary and perfunctory mourners, he saw it flit and shift, brighter than before, nearer too, but in a vital sense, nearer to his own being, with laughter this time, not smiles, upon the face, and the hands stretched out towards himself. The welcome in the eyes, the gesture of invitation, of recognition, the whole attitude as though words “Soon we shall be together, shan’t we?” were almost audible — this staggered Jorden as he stared. He turned his head a moment; the others must surely see what he saw too. When he glanced back again only the wearied mourners, shivering as they counted the shovels of falling earth, were visible.

Exposed overlong to the biting air, very old and feeble, his point of last resistance on this occasion was attacked and beaten down.... As he lay in the darkened room, winter gripping the world outside but powerless to grip his heart, he became sharply, suddenly, aware that spring, with its flowers, its sparkling radiance, slipped past the shuttered windows. The nurse was there, reading by a shaded lamp across the room, but the doctor had gone. And Jorden knew quite well, knew the meaning of the deep stillness about him, knew why the doctor would not come back, knew also why lambent spring had thus abruptly routed winter. It entered leaping, with the perfume of fresh earth, the music of running streams, the singing of birds, the carelessness of happy youth.

He felt no shyness now; he was no longer inarticulate. He knew what words to use. He realised, yet without a shock, that he faced the final meeting he had dreaded, and, further, for the first time, that the boy had not grown older — and why this was so. Time behind him had telescoped, dwindled, vanished. Life had performed full circle *here*. Entering it at a point, from invisibility, he had now reached that point again — back into invisibility. The years collapsed, revealing amazingly their pretence, their sham duration. Their accumulated wisdom, their grave experience, their earnest effort, growth, development, their search and question — all these disappeared as though they never had been, while in their place surged up one fundamental bright desire in unadulterated power, invincible as spring; the desire to live, to play, to *be*. Unquenchable youth rose in his heart, defying the worn-out instrument that should, yet could not now, express it here.

The little fellow entered unannounced, yet the nurse did not even turn her head. The merry, laughing eyes, the torn best suit, the rumpled hair, the undying mischief and adventure, came up dancing close beside the dim-lit bed.

“You have come back at last,” sang the careless, happy voice he recognised. “We shall be together always now.” The senile body made a movement, so that the nurse glanced up quickly from her book a moment, then went on reading as before. “We have always been together... I never really lost you,” came the faint answer as though a breath of air sighed through the room. He laughed, stretching out his feeble hands. The nurse, holding a mirror briefly to the smiling lips, drew up the sheet across the face, entered a pencil note upon the chart, then quietly resumed her reading. The gulf was bridged at last. Old age and recovered youth went off dancing to the stars. Life, at the point called death, had performed full circle.

DR.FELDMAN

I

YOUNG PELHAM REACHED the doctor’s house on the stroke of half past eleven, and as he pushed the night bell button he felt pleased with his punctuality. He had kept the appointment to the minute. He looked like a traveller just off the train, yet not quite suitably dressed for a warm night in summer. A hint of adventure might have betrayed itself to a discerning eye. In addition to a heavy overcoat, he carried a plaid rug, and a walker’s knapsack was slung across one shoulder, while a stout stick and a felt hat completed the outfit. His mind ran over the contents of the knapsack for the twentieth time — candles, thermos of coffee, sandwiches, book, pistol; and the keys were in his pocket. He had forgotten nothing. His bright eyes betrayed a certain tension; he was excited; the occasional shiver that ran down his spine this warm June night, he assured himself, was anticipation merely. Perhaps it was. He remembered telling his friend, Dr. Feldman, that he intended to go in any case. “I shall sit up till dawn,” he said. “If you won’t come, I shall go alone.” He had meant it, too, only that was in the daytime, and now, with the darkness, his mood had shifted. Companionship, he realised, would be most desirable. The presence of burly Dr. Feldman, with his black beard, his deep voice, his big shoulders, and his clear brown eyes, would be undeniably welcome.

He gave the bell another push, pressing it hard, for the minutes had slipped by. “I’m on the tick,” he repeated, looking at his watch again. “He said he would be ready at eleven-thirty sharp, barring an urgent call. Ah!” he reflected, with sudden uneasiness, “I’d rather forgotten that.”

A voice close behind him made him start, and turning sharply he saw the door wide open and the parlour-maid upon the step. She had been speaking, he realised, for a moment or two, but at first he hardly took in what she was saying. Then his heart sank. “Gone out!” he stammered, in obvious dismay. “But the doctor expected me! We had an appointment!” He was rather flustered. “It’s just eleven-thirty, the time he said.”

"There was an important call, sir. Dr. Feldman left this for you." He read the note hurriedly on the mat. "I'm called out," it ran. "Urgent case. I must go. It shouldn't take long, and I'll join you in the house the moment I'm free. Leave key under the door. M. F., 11 p.m."

"The doctor told me to say, sir, that he should meet you *there*" he heard the girl's voice through his shock of disappointment; "and that he would bring his own things with him for the night."

The young man's composure was upset. "Yes, I see," he mumbled, stupidly; "we had arranged to walk instead of taking a taxi, so as not to attract attention—"

He paused, realising that the girl would not know what he was talking about. "Will you come in, sir, and wait?" she asked, noticing his hesitation. No, he wouldn't do that. He thanked her. "It's all right," he said, as casually as he could, then turned — it cost him a certain effort — and walked slowly down the deserted street alone.

This "effort" he noticed; the disinclination to leave companionship and light. The shock of disappointment rather surprised him too; its strength, its almost bitter flavour. Something that had lain unacknowledged in him all the day, that had become more insistent as the dusk drew on, something he had deliberately concealed from himself, was now suddenly so clear that he *had* to face it. Pretence had become childish merely. He did face it. The prospect of sitting up all night alone in an empty house he did not relish. "It's absurd," he admitted, "but I am, I suppose, a bit nervous!"

He made his way slowly, very slowly, across the dim Bloomsbury square in the direction of the unoccupied mansion, turning from time to time to see if anyone might be following him. He would have given a good deal to see the burly figure swinging down the street, the black beard flying. But pedestrians were few, and men with beards were rarer still. The failure of his friend, though understandable, had disconcerted him more than he cared to admit. "Barring an urgent call," the doctor had said, and the urgent call had come — an unfortunate, rather an odd, coincidence, the young man felt. As a specialist the doctor's time was fairly regular, night calls an exception. An unwelcome flavour of question, though not yet of doubt, crept in. His old friend, he remembered, had not exactly favoured this expedition. "If you are sincere when you say you want this experience for your new book," he said reluctantly, “all right, then I’ll come with you. If nothing happens, at least I can study *you*!” The mental specialist was not interested in so-called hauntings, but the reactions of a human mind under the stress of unusual emotion might interest him. He had laughed and yielded.

Pelham drew nearer and nearer to the great empty mansion he had visited already in the daytime; its large echoing hall he could easily visualise, the wide creaking staircase, the carpetless corridors, the smaller drawingroom on the first floor where he proposed to keep his vigil. They lay in darkness now — shadows, silence, emptiness, devoid of normal occupants, at least. It was a place that called for companionship of a robust order. The house, with its grim, dreadful story supported by incontrovertible facts, stood waiting for him only a few hundred yards down the deserted street. He could already make out its square, uncompromising shape, its unwashed windows peering sideways at him. He found himself walking slower and slower, dawdling, hesitating, playing for time. An occasional pedestrian passed him, and twice at least he recognised his friend, only to discover his mistake when they were almost abreast. A taxi whizzed by noisily, a policeman laboriously examined innocent doors, but the neighbourhood lay otherwise still and heavy in the thickish, humid June night. Gloomy it was, the houses gaunt and gloomy too, and the particular house that waited for him came nearer till at last he stood opposite to it. Instead of going in — he passed it, with a quick glance at the staring windows. He took a turn round the square. “I’ll wait till twelve,” he told himself. “When the clocks strike midnight, I’ll go in — whether Feldman has come or not.”

Having made himself this promise, he held to it. The policeman helped a little, perhaps, for Pelham realised that he was a suspicious figure, mooning about with rug and knapsack in this desultory fashion, and questions were the last thing he wanted. The house soon faced him again, the policeman a good way down the street; no one was in sight, the clocks were striking the hour. Walking boldly up the steps, he inserted the key, entered the black hole that gaped before him, and closed the door quietly behind him.

Quietly, perhaps, yes, but a hundred echoes went flying none the less, as though the place were alive with footsteps, then dying away into the deep silence they had broken. The darkness was at first impenetrable. A window was open somewhere, for the last strokes of twelve came clearly down the stairs. And immediately, before there had been time to move towards a plan of any sort, there happened two disagreeable things, both of which he could explain, but which he disliked because they revealed too sharply his own condition. The second of these two he explained, indeed — with difficulty.

II

The first, as he stood in the well of blackness, not moving, breathing rather low, thinking what he would do next, was a sound close beside him; at his feet it seemed; a curious shuffling sound, and accompanied by a light, stroking touch upon his shoulder, with the result that he had jumped a yard and raised his arm to ward off a possible blow before he realised that it was merely the plaid rug which had slipped from his shoulder and fallen with a faint swishing noise upon the stone floor. He stooped and picked it up, cursing his silly nerves, his movement rapid, as though he felt safer in an upright position, and it was a moment later that the second disagreeable thing occurred, the one he explained less easily.

It happened in this way. The instinct of self-preservation was already automatically at work, for while one hand picked up the rug, the other, dropping the knapsack, clutched the flashlight in his coat pocket, and had actually switched it on as he rose into an upright position again. Holding it askew, in that first second, the beam shot along the hall floor, and the staircase was not directly in its full glare. The blaze, however, was enough for him to catch sight, out of the corner of his eye, of — Dr. Feldman, black beard and all, standing motionless, peering down upon him over the banisters. Close to the top of the first flight he was, and the very same instant, before the beam could show him fully, he had passed silently and rapidly round the angle and on to the landing above. The following beam, now turned full after him, showed no one. Stairs, landing, and banisters were undeniably empty.

Pelham did not move, he did not start, much less did he jump; no single muscle, in fact, stirred. The reaction was of another kind — his heart missed a beat. Breath, at the first gasp, was unmanageable, and at the second — well, some vivid instinct made silence preferable to calling out. To shout, “Hullo, Max! Doctor, is that you?” in the great echoing hall was impossible. Besides — he already had found the line of explanation — the figure was *not* Dr. Feldman at all. Instinctively, even before he began to argue, he *knew* it was not his friend. There could be no answer to his call. Dr. Feldman was not in the building with him. No one — he almost said it audibly — was in the building with him. The figure was imaginary, of course.

His critical mind, nerves or no nerves, began instantly to argue towards firm conviction. The sudden light, rushing shadows distorted by startled nerves, the fact that Feldman's personality lay vividly in his thoughts, that he longed for him eagerly, hoping with a kind of vehemence that he would turn up any minute now — this was quite enough to manufacture the desired figure out of a sudden glare and a flock of leaping shadows. Holding the beam more or less steadily upon the empty stairs and corner of the landing, he explained away the disagreeable thing. "Why, even in the street I mistook two fellows for him till I got close enough to see my mistake!" Beards, he remembered, with a faint smile, were uncommon these days, rare enough to make an impression. The production of a figure with bearded face was easy enough with flying shadows. There had been no sound of footsteps. And as he argued, the premonitory shiver down his spine, while it did not wholly pass, grew a little less.

The mind, that is to say, provided a passable explanation, although emotion, being unable to argue, remained discontented and uneasy. Emotion, he realised, would be his problem. "It's always primitive, credulous, superstitious," he reminded himself emphatically. "To observe its behaviour and to note the antics of imagination is why I'm here to-night." And wisely then, before emotion might gain any further advantage, he decided upon action. He would search the house from top to bottom before settling down to his long vigil. A trick? A practical joke? His friend's passionate interest in mental experiment? The question of that "urgent call" again flashed past and vanished.

Leaving his paraphernalia on the floor, he took the pistol from the knapsack and began at once his search of the empty building. With firm, echoing steps, he moved slowly up the staircase, flashing his light in all directions as he went.

A large empty building is not inviting in the darkness, nor is a flashlight, with the contrast of inky blackness just beyond its beam, the best way of exploring it. The search undoubtedly required nerve. This house, moreover, was not merely empty; it was empty because no one could live in it. So devoid was it, indeed, of a pleasant living atmosphere that two successive tenants, and that quite recently, had chosen to die in it — by their own hands. And the reason for their choice, according to Pelham's investigations, added nothing to the homeliness of the atmosphere. Two years before them, another tenant, the origin of the present horror apparently, had also done away with himself, after first doing away, in ghastly fashion, with the rest of his family. Crazed by drugs, drink, love, or something equally powerful and devastating — Pelham had been unable exactly to ascertain — he had been found among the grim remnants of his fearful orgy, strangled by his own hands. His imitators, it was held, owed their similar fates to his vile, terrific, posthumous influence. Subsequent occupiers objected strenuously, broke their leases, paid money rather than stay, even went to court. The house, thus, was in the market for a song — and young Pelham was now searching its dismal entrails at midnight with a shoddy little flashlight. His object was to experience at first hand, and for the purposes of a scene in his new novel, what an imaginative man would feel during an all-night vigil. He himself was an imaginative man, and he got his "copy." He got more besides. The details remain the strangest among the numerous remarkable cases in Dr. Feldman's notebooks.

The search was thorough, but unproductive. It established the fact that there was no one in the great dismal building save himself. It was hardly a reassuring process for a nervous temperament, and it called upon all his pluck to go through certain of the rooms — the servants' quarters, for instance, on the top floor, the offices in the basement, and certain large pieces that had two doors. There was always the feeling that someone trailed stealthily behind him, that he was watched, that the piled shadows concealed a figure. Once a door banged, there were creakings everywhere, there were groans and cracks and whispers down the draughty passages. But the place, otherwise, was still as death, holding its musty smell, its gaping emptiness, its air of rather sinister expectancy in common with most other big unoccupied buildings. And, at the end, Pelham stood in the hall again with the satisfied feeling that he had done his job faithfully, and that he could now settle down in the small drawing-room for the vigil proper. He had brought in a couple of deck-chairs during the day; he had his book and candles, his coffee. Whether Feldman came or did not come, he could manage it. If anything happened, he now told himself, he could manage that too. He went upstairs and settled in. He was calmer — yes, even quite calm. He was master of himself.

It was here that Pelham's version (marked in red ink in Dr. Feldman's notebooks) first caught the attention of the specialist. The word "calm" was underlined, a mark of interrogation in the margin. The search of the building should have left the nerves on edge; instead, the reverse had happened — the young man had recovered his normal quiet. He felt "calm," he could "manage anything" that might happen later. "Didn't particularly notice this odd calmness in himself," ran the expert comment. In talking it over afterwards, Pelham used another adjective: "sedative." Uneasiness had gone, he declared, "just as though I'd taken a sedative and it was beginning to work. I observed everything keenly," he tried to explain, "but things that half an hour before would have startled and made me jump — well, they just didn't. I watched them happen, missing nothing, but without any nasty reaction, horror least of all. I was prepared for anything I might see. Like being doped almost." And in the doctor's notebook, on this point, is an interesting and suggestive comment: "This curious preliminary calmness, though P. noticed it suddenly, came on gradually no doubt. He was aware of it only when achieved. His own word 'sedative' indicates slow approach. Morbid excitement had passed completely, but acute observation nowhere impaired. He felt 'prepared' for what might follow. A preparation!?"

The young man, now settled comfortably in his deckchair, a rug over his knees, the two candles on a packing-case behind his head, sat reading his book with one part of his mind, while, with another part, he stared, listened, watched, every muscle and nerve in alert tension, yet wholly at his ease. His original jumpiness had vanished, nervousness was gone, had exhausted itself perhaps. Opposite to him was the unoccupied chair intended for his friend. Two blindless windows on his right gave upon roofs and a night sky too hazy for stars to show. On his left, wide open, was the door through which the top of the staircase, with the few feet of banisters the sham Dr. Feldman had peered over, was just visible. The carpetless room had no stick of furniture, the blank walls marked only with lines of dirt where pictures and a large mirror had been hung. A glass chandelier above his chair sparkled faintly in the flickering candlelight. The light, of course, was poor.

Here he sat reading while the hours passed and the night drew towards morning. From time to time he pricked his ears; creakings on the stairs, cracks of wood on the floors above, sounds in the big hall below, those he noticed without a qualm, but attributed quite rightly to their natural causes.

No purpose, no intent, no meaning, living or posthumous, could be ascribed to them. Nothing approaching a footstep, much less a voice, broke the deep silence that wrapped the building from roof to kitchen. Yet his composure was remarkable rather, considering his temperament and his recent jumpiness. And the young man felt disappointment growing on him. Even if he saw and heard nothing, he had hoped for unusual reactions of interesting kind. These did not come. After his first bout of rather boyish "nerves," his recording apparatus, imaginative or critical, registered — nothing. His experiment seemed a failure; the scene in his book would gain no verisimilitude from the description of an actual experience. He even began to feel glad that Dr. Feldman after all had not wasted a night's sleep for nothing. Even if he saw a figure now, his attitude would be one merely of critical examination: could he touch it as solid, walk through it, could it answer questions or show intelligence in response to his advances, his calm, collected, cross-examining advances?

Dr. Feldman! He put his book down. Ah! He had almost forgotten him. The first keen longing, the bitter disappointment, these, too, had left him. He realised that, for a considerable time now, he had not been alertly waiting for his footstep, his voice, his brown eyes. This expectancy had left him too. This indifference, this forgetfulness, Dr. Feldman also stressed in his own notebook — as a proof that Pelham's mind was no longer working normally. "Noticed his own indifference," ran the comment in red ink, "but not particularly surprised at it."

"Dr. Feldman!" And Pelham abruptly realised, for the first time, that he had forgotten to leave the key outside the front door. Completely overlooked it! Even if Dr. Feldman had come, he could not have got in. Perhaps he had already come — and gone. He would probably not have rung, much less would he have knocked. Possibly, indeed, reflected Pelham, the doctor might welcome the excuse and go home to bed. Well, it didn't matter, the young man thought, as he went down cautiously in the dark to remedy his oversight, but leaving his electric torch on the packing-case. There was nothing of interest here for his clever, learned friend. He was relieved, in fact, to have no critical observer of his own disappointment, of this flat, uneventful, and rather foolish night.

Key in hand, he opened the big door and peered out into the deserted street. It was between two and three in the morning; soon the grey light would come in the sky. No one was to be seen. He paused a moment, standing on the step, then came back inside, shutting the door carelessly, and with a good deal of echoing noise, but again forgetting to leave the key outside, an omission only realised long afterwards. He started to cross the hall. A faint light from his open door above filtered down, so that the banisters were just visible. And it was as he crossed the hall that someone brushed by, and passed in front of him up the staircase. Though no actual touch was registered, he was quite positive of this. Whether he actually heard the steps he could not swear, but that someone who had been standing close beside him in this dark hall now moved up the stairs ahead of him, he was convinced beyond any possible doubt. Had there been doubt, indeed, it was at once negatived, for a second later he saw the outline of a man slip along the banisters overhead and move rapidly along the landing. The outline disappeared towards the door where the faint light issued. The person, whoever it was, had gone into his room.

Pelham went after this figure; he climbed the stairs very quickly, almost ran along the short stretch of landing, and, without a sign of hesitation, entered the room himself. “I burst into it, in fact,” he described it afterwards. “And there, in the chair opposite to mine,” he said, with intense conviction, “sat — yourself.

You, Max, sat in that chair.” The deck-chair was occupied by Dr. Feldman, big shoulders, burly frame, black beard and all. The head was sunk a little forwards, down upon the chest rather; the eyes were closed; the breathing was regular and sounded heavy. “You looked asleep, though naturally I knew this was impossible.” And in his written version, Pelham, describing his own reaction to this “bit of nonsense,” emphasised his impatient resentment that a “friend like you, Max, should have played this trifling, rather dangerous trick upon me.” He felt sore, even angry.

For in that first instant of inspection, young Pelham realised that the doctor had somehow secreted himself in the house from the beginning, that the “urgent call” was a thought-out detail, that it was, in fact, an ill-judged practical joke. He remembered his own first fugitive doubt. Dr. Feldman was not going to lose a night’s sleep for nothing; he had always meant to make use of the occasion to give his romantic friend a shock, then study his nervous reactions.

And Pelham resented the trick, its perilous foolishness in view of his own nerves and the fact that he had a pistol. So much did he resent it that, taking his own chair again, he sat there staring at his friend, a kind of dull anger in him, giving no single thought as to *how* the doctor had contrived his trivial little plan. He did not speak, he made no attempt to tackle him about it, he did not even prod him out of this idiotic pretence of being asleep. He just sat and stared, this sullen, rather sulky anger in his heart. He felt no relief that his friend had come and now sat before him; he no longer needed him, nor was his presence comforting. Comfort, even companionship, of that sort he did not want any more. Deep annoyance, contempt to the point of bitterness almost, was all he felt.

Dr. Feldman, it seems, meanwhile kept up this game of his with a steady perfection that, the other felt, would have been admirable in a better cause. He maintained his pose of sleep without a flaw. It was good acting. No sign of expression showed itself in his face. The body was limp with the relaxation of a man in deep slumber. And the longer young Pelham watched him, the more his angry vexation grew. His thought found words such as “Idiot, imbecile,” phrases like “Amazing trick for a man like you, a great mental specialist, to play” — and finally, after perhaps half an hour of this persistent folly on the “specialist’s” part of silence and immobility, since it betrayed no sign of explaining itself, Pelham took up his book again and went on reading. He was furious, yet wanted to laugh.

Comic, no doubt, the situation was, but he was in no mood to appreciate its comedy. He obstinately refused to speak, and in his mind now was a sort of boyish determination that he would meet the other at his own game, and beat him at it too! He made no sign, no sound. He merely read. The minutes passed. Perhaps half an hour slipped by, perhaps longer. His obstinacy remained cast-iron. Dr. Feldman, for his part, also kept up the nonsense; he aped slumber to perfection; his breathing was heavy, heavy; the black beard rising and falling with the movement of his chest; the brown eyes always tightly closed — till, at last, the sound of a clock striking the hour came faintly into the room where these two sat. Pelham counted the strokes, and they were three. There was a gleam of dawn. He looked up suddenly from his book, hardly knowing why —

And this time he started. His blood ebbed, then came back with a rush. What was it? What did it mean? At the first sight, in this faint early light, Dr. Feldman looked precisely as before, ordinary, normal: at the second, he looked — amazing. Every atom of attention Pelham could muster concentrated in his eyes. He stared till they smarted. But his spine ran icy cold.

There *was* a difference, yet this difference remained concealed. At the first glimpse it was Max Feldman who faced him; at the second, it was someone else.

Thus he phrased it in his written version, and the brevity was significant. Here was something, apparently, he could not describe. He shivered all over. The former queer insensitiveness, the numbness, had begun to pass. The "sedative" effect was leaving him, it seemed.

Thus, staring with all his energy, with all available concentration, at his familiar friend, he knew himself dreadfully overwrought. Yet that "second glimpse" refused to come back; the "amazing" aspect of this well-known shape kept hidden. He had seen it, however, It was, he divined, still there. The blood gushed and ebbed alternately; his feet, his back were cold. He was "all on edge," like a terrified girl. The figure in the chair, so far as he could analyse, had not altered; the burly frame, the broad shoulders, the black beard, the eyes closed in "sleep" remained as before. "The idiot," he tried to say, "still pretends," but his thought refused to frame the words — because they were somewhere, somehow false. "Idiot" and "asleep," at any rate, were merely lies.

His written description of what followed was extremely, curiously brief. His own eyes remained glued, unable to move. He stared and stared. The beard moved up and down with the slow heaving of the great chest, the relaxed body betrayed no tension, the head sank forwards and downwards as before. Then, suddenly, that "second" glimpse, that "other" aspect came stealing horribly back. The face, hitherto devoid of expression, had begun to change. It was slowly altering. Black and white entered into it somehow, a white that was passionless, a black that was diabolical. The mouth, under the dark hair, sagged; the eyebrows took a slanting twist, the jaw beneath the beard thrust out. It became, slowly but decisively, an entirely different and an atrocious face. The mask slipped gradually downwards from it. And young Pelham, now bereft of power to move, stared helplessly at the appalling change. He was staring, he tried to tell himself, at something he could not believe, something that was not possible, something that human experience cannot admit. But yet he witnessed it. And he could not move his eyes.

“It’s *not* Feldman, *not* Max Feldman, *not* my friend,” his thought struggled to cry out, then realised vaguely that thought was stifled in him, no longer operating. Thought and volition had simultaneously disappeared. And the head then suddenly moved a little to one side. It slowly shifted. The beard, at a new angle, now revealed the neck. There was no collar.

He tried to scream, to shriek, but breath failed him. Horror dropped over him like ice. He trembled from head to foot. The shuddering was audible, his teeth clattered, his feet tapped the wooden floor. But he still stared helplessly, because sight was riveted beyond any power of his that could either move his eyes or close them. He became aware then that this demoniacal face that aped his friend was about to change still further. How he knew this lay beyond him. He did know it. A faint quiver of the cheeks betrayed it, possibly. Something ghastly ran across the skin. He *knew* the eyes were going to open.

There came a further movement of the head. It lolled to one side — frightfully. The collarless neck was creased with dull red lines. The same instant the two eyes opened, giving back his own awful, fascinated stare. They were bright, fixed, maniacal eyes. Moreover, they were not brown, but black. They gazed into his own with murder in their depths. And the whole figure then gave a convulsive shudder and began to alter visibly like the face. With extreme swiftness, as in a cinema, this alteration supervened. The great frame seemed suddenly to have grown emaciated, the big shoulders sank and drooped, only the black beard still flowed down the collarless neck that was marked with its hideous red.

Then the outline rose. Leaving the chair without visible effort, it stood up, it wavered a moment, half staggering, half lurching; the arms projected abruptly; the hands opened long, muscular fingers that moved through the air towards his throat. He saw the eyes behind them — like shining lamps — close....

The tremendous clamour that broke in here with its sudden clashing gave him, it seems, the power to move his muscles. A bell rang furiously, there was a violent banging on a door. The building echoed. The awful figure, though it did not seem to pause in its advance, came, singularly, no nearer actually to his face and throat. A measure of volition, startled into activity perhaps by the resounding noise, returned to him. He sprang up, he shrieked as though his heart had burst, he staggered, but he reached the door. He was down the steps in what seemed literally a couple of enormous leaps, and across the dark hall. The same second he was fumbling at the big front door, where the knocking sounded. He opened it. Facing him on the step, an electric torch blazing in his hand, stood — Dr. Feldman. He came in, closing the door behind him with a bang. "Frightfully sorry, old man, but it took me longer than I thought. You forgot the key—" was all young Pelham heard before darkness fell over him and he fainted in his friend's arms.

A swoon, rather than a faint, it was, lasting perhaps a minute. A sip of brandy from the doctor's flask brought the blood back to normal ways. There followed confused talk, questions, and somewhat incoherent answers, and then — Dr. Feldman insisted firmly on this — the visit to the room upstairs. They went together, side by side, arm in arm in fact, into an entirely empty room. The candles stood guttering on the packing-case, electric torch and pistol beside them, a book on the floor, and a couple of unoccupied deck-chairs opposite.

But young Pelham, shaking from head to foot, white as chalk, found no very intelligent words, and the specialist, thoroughly at home among conditions of this land, took him home, administered a mild sedative, and read at his leisure some days later the account of Pelham's night. He had insisted on a written version first. Talk followed, a little study of his own as well, but this was for his private notebooks, as were also two facts he took some trouble to ascertain — namely, that the murderer used drugs on his victims as on himself, and also, oddly enough, that his maniac face held black eyes and was adorned with a black beard into the bargain.

ONE reads from time to time of startling experiences claimed by certain people in moments of unusual consciousness — and one smiles a superior and incredulous smile. Behind the smile lies the suspicion that it is a stunt of sorts, an imaginative effort, a delusion anyhow. Yet Malcolm of McQuittie's experience, as he told it, seemed neither stunt, imagination, nor delusion.

A Scotchman, hard-headed, bachelor of fifty, difficult to impose on, he was of that inarticulate type whose laconic speech carried the conviction that he spoke truth. He spent his comfortable income from his comfortable quarters near Piccadilly. With features that were what one calls firm and handsome, a grimmish jaw, was a rather rare delightful smile that when it flashed lit the blue eyes with fire, and a softish, deep voice to match. The women liked Malcolm of McQuittie, only he said so little that they got no farther with him. He moved his eyes, he smiled, but he did not speak unless he had to. Hostesses invited him because the women liked him; he accepted because, oddly enough for so unsocial and taciturn a man, he enjoyed seeing people. Watching them, perhaps, would be the truer phrase. At Mrs. MacFarlane's party he watched, in particular, a pale dark-eyed woman for some time before he spoke to her.

He had not noticed her at the dinner-table, nor in the drawing-room before dinner was announced; it was afterwards, when a score of extra guests flocked in to listen to the music, that he first became aware of the white, rather melancholy face whose black eyes fixed his own intently across the crowded room. He was standing against the corner of an alcove at the back, all chairs being occupied, a noticeable figure, enjoying a bird's-eye view of the audience, when the face suddenly seemed to flash at him out of the crowd; and he declares that, at the very first meeting of the eyes that fixed him so intently, he felt a vague sense of disturbance flutter through him, of disturbance only, not of actual discomfort. The gaze was so direct, he sensed intention, purpose in it.

He looked away while the piano banged on through the hot, crowded room, only to look back again a moment later. He looked more carefully this time. The white face, if a trifle sad perhaps, he thought at first expressionless, but the eyes held that quality called arresting. They riveted his own. He found it difficult not to stare, and the more he avoided them, the more he caught himself turning back to stare again. The piano ceased, and in the clatter of applause from an unmusical crowd that clapped over-long because they had been over-bored, he saw the black eyes peering, watching, staring at him more fixedly than ever. The piano started off again, the performer reading in the hostess's face that an encore was expected — and McQuittie waited, the interplay of eyes continuing as before. He had never seen a gaze so absorbing, yet somehow so difficult of interpretation. Was it inviting? The faint sense of disturbance came and went. He was puzzled and intrigued. He made up his mind to come to closer quarters, though not quite clear why he did so.

In the confusion following the last of the music he searched for her, but could not find her. She was nowhere to be seen. He wanted to speak to her, though without knowing exactly what he wanted to say. No impulse to flirtation was in him; merely that he wanted to know her, to hear *her* speak, to hear what she had to say — almost as though he knew there was something she had to say to him, something particular. This point he emphasises — that she had something to communicate. Her eyes, apparently, had conveyed this much. The crush in the room, on the stairs, towards the supper-table, made movement slow and difficult. Acquaintances were always holding him up, he could not see her anywhere, and in the end he gave it up, deciding to go home. He slipped down to get his coat and hat, and then, in the hall, he caught her — caught a glimpse of her, rather, as she went out.

How she had evaded his search so completely, so easily, puzzled him, but in so crowded a party it was natural enough; others before him had experienced a similar, quite unintentional disappearance. At the hall door, in the act of going out to her car or taxi, this glimpse came, and he pressed forward as fast as the surge of people still pouring in allowed. In a moment he was by her side, it seemed, only to discover that, having at last reached her, he had nothing ready to say. No single word occurred to him. She, however, had something to say, and said it, and while she said it he realised again that it was to hear *her* speak that he had searched with such persistence.

"*Je vous attends*" came in rather a husky whisper.

"*Il y a longtemps que je vous cherche — si longtemps.*" And she was gone.

Malcolm of McQuittie went home with that flutter of unexplained disturbance still in his being. The little French he knew was enough for him to perceive that it was not the French of a Frenchwoman. A foreigner had used those few odd words in that curious whispering voice. If the door had not banged so quickly, he would have stepped after her, seen her into her car or taxi, asked her name and address, and an explanation of the peculiar words, while yet at the same time he was aware that something in him shrank from doing this very thing, as though he did not really want to know their meaning, almost as though a faint warning bell struck just behind the whisper. The instinct, at any rate, made him hesitate, if only for the fraction of a second, and it had been then too late. Instead, he had gone upstairs again into the crowded rooms, cornered his hostess finally, and demanded verification. Who was this foreign, black-eyed lady, to whom did this face of extreme pallor belong? Whose were the melancholy yet intently gazing eyes? He drew a blank.

Mrs. MacFarlane stared in a vague, if perhaps a trifle disconcerted way, and declared she did not know. “A gate-crasher, perhaps,” she laughed finally; “but a welcome one,” she added gallantly, “since she interested *you*, Malcolm.” He shrugged his shoulders, perceiving that she was not to be questioned further. That she was preoccupied, he reflected, was natural enough, she had her guests to look after, and he went home unsatisfied, taking with him that little flutter of disturbance that now included, inexplicably, he noticed, a hint of uneasiness as well. The personality of this stranger uncommonly perplexed him.

Once comfortably alone in his own quarters, his servant out, he settled down to think it all over as carefully as he might, only to find that his mind refused to focus her, but persistently ran off into other matters entirely unconnected with her. Instead of thinking of this intriguing woman with the dark eyes, he thought suddenly — of horses. Of horses; and then, quite inexplicably, of his father, of his grandfather as well.

But why horses, and why his father and grandfather, he asked himself, when what he really wanted to think about was this strange encounter that brought such unsatisfactory, almost unwelcome, emotion with it?

He continued his effort. Yet the woman evaded him persistently, for each time he brought his mind back to her, it wandered off to horses — to horses first of all. Now, horses, be it admitted, were a passion with him. He did not bet, but he shared a stable, and fair luck had come his way. He was the first of his family to be horsey; neither his father nor grandfather had the taste. Horses, anyhow, were in his blood. So, oddly enough, though he rarely gave it a thought, was what he had been *told* was an inherited trait. His grandfather’s fall from an upper window was, of course, an accident, as decided at the time — he was a little boy when it happened — and his father’s drowning was similarly, of course, an accident.

He had not cared for his father much. His grandfather he had feared; he remembered him as very, very old, the broken ruin of a man. That rather dreaded, rather dreadful old figure presented itself vividly now. He surprised a swift, unwelcome thought blundering about in his under-mind — that life was not really worth while after all; it were better ended before decay and senility, to be inevitably reached at last, arrived with all their horror. Unwelcome! Was it altogether unwelcome, this fumbling thought? The two jostled each other to and fro in his brain — the emergency exit and horses....

This passion for horses, and this contempt for a scheme of life which must produce senile helplessness if seen out to its close, lay in his make-up. Why they should crop up just when he wished to concentrate mind and memory upon a very different matter, puzzled and exasperated him. That his father and grandfather should intrude as they did, he explained more easily perhaps, for Mrs. MacFarlane, it so happened, occupied what had been his family's town house years ago, the house in which his own boyhood had been spent, and from an upper window in which his grandfather had contrived to fall; whence his father, too, had taken his last journey to the boat on the Thames. Here the associations were easily explained, for they were fairly obvious. It was the persistent irruption of horses, of horses in combination with the others, that confused him.

In the end he went to bed, and dreamed about them too, yet with no sign of the foreign woman in his dreams. He was riding in the dreams, on horseback, always riding hard, riding to find his father and his grandfather, in this senseless way....

The next time he saw her was a week later, in the paddock at a race meeting; a mere glimpse again, no more than that. She dissolved among the crowd. Across the intervening fence he felt the black eyes upon him, turned, looked straight into her face, registered the inviting expression — he knew this time it was inviting — and then, having dashed round into the rather crowded paddock, found no trace of her. It was on this occasion that he made a serious, rather gallant attempt to analyse the mixture of emotion the sight of her produced, the undeniable attraction, that is, and the odd note of dislike, of warning, that came with it.

The original impression her strange words produced, “I’m waiting for you; I’ve been looking for you so long,” had never left him. He was as curious, as eager as ever to know what she meant, while at the same time the uneasiness, the feeling that he dreaded an explanation, that it would be unwelcome somehow — this longing and this faint dread persisted side by side. His attempt at analysis, however, had no satisfactory result. He remained baffled. He continued what he called his search for her, yet with little to guide direction. He attended every race meeting, he flattered Mrs. MacFarlane by accepting every invitation; he went there, indeed, with or without an invitation; and it was in Mrs. MacFarlane’s house, once his boyhood’s home, that his persistence was at last rewarded.

Up to this point in Malcolm of McQuittie’s story there seemed nothing particularly out of the way, nothing, at any rate, that called for too far-fetched explanation. Making due allowance for touches of colour that temperament may add, his adventure was not without parallel. What followed, on the contrary, was entirely without parallel. It ran along, moreover, so rapidly, so easily. As he told it, in his somewhat inarticulate fashion, he obviously told something that had really happened to him. He had experienced this actual thing. No doubts, no questions even, occurred to him. His account of it slipped innocently, naturally, past a dozen points where criticism, question, doubt must ordinarily have called a halt. Any such halts or pauses he, quite honestly, ignored. Obviously they had not even occurred to him.

It was on his return from spending a month in Scotland that he went again to Mrs. MacFarlane’s, the occasion being some kind of charity At Home in which, of course, he felt not the slightest interest, and suddenly found himself standing right against her, actually touching her. The first thing he knew was a little electric shock in his arm and shoulder; and turning to look down, he gazed straight into her two dark eyes. Everything went swiftly and easily from that moment, there was no hitch, nor any sign of hesitancy in either of them.

Until this moment, so packed was the At Home, he had been on the flight of stairs just above the drawingroom, obeying a sudden impulse to peep into what in boyhood clays had been his father’s study. He made a quick run to the floor a few steps farther up. The door was ajar and he enjoyed a glimpse of the old room he knew so well — a momentary glimpse, for a step coming along the passage had sent him flying down again to join the general crowd. It was as he merged himself among the other guests that the electric shock had come.

They were side by side, touching. He bowed. An amazing sense of familiarity swept over him. There was no need of an introduction. Against the wall at the back of the room they stood, her face just below his shoulder. In his mind, at this instant, lay nothing but a vague search for any French he could rake up. There was no need of it.

“Please, come with me now,” whispered the voice he had heard a hundred times already in memory, in slightly foreign English. It was a command he could not for the life of him disobey, even had he wished. It was as if, from this moment, some power he could not resist, though not necessarily some power in herself, took charge of him. Normal observation of what went on about him, ordinary criticism, ordinary judgment, these Seemed in marked abeyance. It is clear that his attention in what followed only took note of certain things, possibly of a certain *order* of things only. The rest did not enter his consciousness, as it were.

How they slipped out, evading their hostess still at the head of the stairs with omniscient eyes; how they found themselves in a conveyance that was of horses, not of motor-power; how they reached a house and entered it with a key, her key, and eventually sat together in a darkened room — of all this Malcolm of McQuittie declares he has no clear remembrance. In state he was bemused, though not confused, he affirms; it was simply that certain things failed to reach his notice. His first clear positive emphasis lies in this — that he knew the house; yet, that while it was familiar, it was only vaguely familiar. He swears he had seen it, entered it before, though how or when he could not say. Complete recognition failed him. The old flutter of uneasiness he mentions too, only first realised definitely, however, as they sat together in this semi-darkened room. Yet with this underlying uneasiness was, at the same time, a sense of relief, comfort, almost happiness. He was pleased, if also disturbed faintly, to be with this particular woman in this particular place.

During the half-realised transit, apparently, she had not spoken, but once they were seated side by side on a low divan in the dim room of this house that was familiar yet unrecognised, she began immediately, and in broken, or at any rate accented, English.

“I wish so long to find you,” she said in the low, husky tone that was almost a whisper; “for so vairy long I watch you — here in this same place.”

“Watch me?” he replied, his mind and being strangely heavy. “Watch?” He did not like the word, He stared down at her. A dark fur round the neck, almost brushing his shoulder, emitted a perfume, halfanimal, half-artificial scent.

“They tell me I find you here. They send me. I wait all this long time and watch, and at last I find you. It was deeficult, so deeficult.”

She gazed up into his face, and the gaze was unmistakable. Here was no common sex intrigue, though he felt drawn to her as steel to magnet. Her familiarity held no vulgar, ordinary basis of communion. This intimacy, he knew, was otherwise. He hardly knew what to say. No phrase occurred to him at first, for the obvious questions, it seems, did not even present themselves. Moreover, only certain of her words woke response in his mind at all, as though he left the others unnoticed altogether at the moment.

“They know now I have found you. They come soon, too,” she whispered, her eyes still full upon his own. But though he heard the words, no curiosity, oddly enough, stirred in him just then as to their meaning. His preoccupation seemed still with the idea that she had been “watching” so long, watching and waiting. He did not like it, this idea that he had been watched.

“I saw you — twice,” he heard himself saying. “I stared — unpardonably. I wanted — to see you again. Felt I bad to.”

Even as he said it, he was aware of that emotion, attractive yet unwelcome, which had troubled him before. With it, sharply on its heels, came something he could not quite catch, yet wanted desperately to catch. It flashed away before he could seize it, leaving, as with a dream, merely an unintelligible remnant. It was connected with something she had said about having been sent to find him, about “others coming” — *here.* But the memory eluded him. His effort failed. Instead, horses sprang suddenly through his mind. Horses, yes. “I saw you in the paddock,” he said abruptly.

She smiled, nodding her head, and her whole face lit up. “That how I find you at last,” she agreed eagerly. “Always — for so long — I watch you, but you nevaire see me or look at me. Then the horses help — I find you through the horses.” Her gaze held his eyes fixedly as she then said a thing that startled him: “I know your father — grandfather too.”

The words ran through him like fire. Something made his heart sink. That “know,” in the present tense, was a foreigner’s slip, of course, but even while he told himself this he had the feeling there were two sets of values here, two worlds, and that he was confusing them. Were the eyes hypnotic? Rather wild notions of similar kind flashed and disappeared. He knew nothing of such matters. He felt the power, the intense attraction, while yet no corresponding warmth flowed through his veins. Confusion deepened. This lack of warmth, however, he distinctly noticed. It was negative, of course, but on its heels came something positive, something that struck him sharply. He was aware of cold.

“My father — grandfather,” he repeated, lowering his voice without knowing why he did so, “they — both — went out — early.”

The words were foolish rather, he realised, even as he spoke them. He himself felt suddenly foolish, incompetent, inefficient, without his usual control and powers, whatever these might be. This woman drew him terribly; it was her mind and will that drew him. His own mind, his mental powers and his will, seemed rather shamefully, dreadfully enfeebled. He neither asked her name nor who she was, nor how she knew him, nor what she wanted — he asked her no single ordinary question a man in his present extraordinary situation must have asked. He did not once press for any explanation, leaving even her strange words alone. That two sets of values troubled and confused him, he asserts, was dear; that this found him bereft of guidance was also dear. He did wonder for a moment vaguely, it seems, about such dark horrors as blackmail, trickery, sudden death, even about the terrors of the underworld and its inscrutable gangs, but these ideas dropped away as ridiculous before he even troubled to visualise them. This woman was of another kind — yes, surely of quite another kind.

“I simply longed to speak to you, to be with you.” He found his tongue again at last, a flavour of the ordinary world now in his speech. “I felt so certain you had something to say to me — as it were.”

The references to his father and grandfather were already forgotten. He stared down into her dark eyes that he now knew definitely were terrible and dangerous.

“I’m damned if I know why,” he added, with truth, oblivious that it was ungallant.

“Horses, you see,” she murmured. “You are *passioné* for horses. I too. And so at last I find you — for them.”

“Horses!” he repeated, enthusiasm waking in him, and her last two words entirely unnoticed. They talked of horses then, yet of no particular animal by name, for what seemed to him a very long time... until he found himself realising two things suddenly: that the invitation in her eyes had become abruptly accentuated and that the room in which they sat and talked was even much colder than it had been. This cold, he now became aware, had steadily intensified while they talked. It had been slowly growing. He felt numb. Another thing he realised as well — the cold was not due to any drop of temperature in the ordinary way, for the air that warm summer night was even stifling. The cold lay in his soul.

The invitation in her glowing eyes was also cold, the fire burning in them without heat. They held his own with power, while he returned the gaze with an effort suddenly, aware at last that he wished to escape from something that threatened to overcome him, something stronger than himself. This abrupt reaction, lasting for a brief moment, woke his common sense, his practical judgment, his realisation that he was in a foolish, even a dangerous situation, and had behaved in a reckless and idiotic manner.

He had followed a strange woman into a strange house that was unknown to him for all its queer feeling of familiarity, and had sat talking with her alone till a very late hour in the night. That they had been fellow guests at a party was no excuse if anything unpleasant supervened, for he did not know her name even, nor anything about her beyond the fact that this mutual attraction existed. The boyishness of the episode appalled him, but it was another thing that decided him upon action now — something she had let fall hours ago when they first began to talk, something he had unaccountably ignored until this moment. Memory now flashed it back into his mind: She had been *sent* to find him! And someone else — *others* — were coming, coming soon! This horrified him now.

He got up, noting the great effort it cost him to do so; he put his hand out and took her own. "*I'm* leaving you now," were the blunt words he found on his lips. "I must go; I must go at once. I must say good-bye—" Only to find that the woman's fingers held him in a grip of iron. She made no effort, apparently; it was simply that he could not free his hand. About her somewhere was this great effortless power. Nor was it with any other expression than a quiet smile, as she looked him full in the eyes, that she whispered in that husky voice: "Oh no, not now; it is too late. And they have already come... for you."

He stood there, bending a little over her on the divan as he held her hand to say good-bye, unable to move beyond a slight straightening of his body, knowing that something of resistance and control had horribly weakened in him. He said no word. This weakening was of the mind, not physical, he realised in an instant of hideous terror. His other feelings were of such trouble and confusion, and they raced with such speed through him, that he held none of them even for a second.

It was the terror that dominated all, for he was aware that behind his bent back others had now entered the room, noiselessly, he knew not how, but with relentless determination. And with their advent it was clear to him that the woman, whose hand still grasped his own, was in some curious manner and degree of less importance to him. She, too, was weakening. Her height of power, whatever it had been, had passed its climax, as though, her mission accomplished, she was free to go. The conviction rose somewhere at the back of his confused and racing thought. As he still bent over her, staring down at her before turning to confront those others in the room behind him, he saw that the light seemed fading from her face and eyes, while her hand in his, it seemed, grew smaller, feebler, as though it were dissolving.

He freed his fingers easily from her clasp, straightened himself, and turned slowly towards the new arrivals. They were coming close; he saw them distinctly as they moved towards him in the room that was dim, and growing perhaps, he fancied, yet dimmer. They stood out sharp and clearly defined as they advanced cautiously, slowly, with a curious intense determination, one slightly in front of the other. He watched them, sweetness and horror in him, attraction and repulsion, both powerful. Towards him they moved, these two male figures — two men, with an air of disguise that was yet not intentional disguise, but merely that they were not in clothes the men of his own world wore. There came also a sharp, awful realisation that the pair moved soundlessly upon the floor which, again with a terrifying realisation, he now recognised as the drawing-room of his boyhood days. He was in his family's house, the house he knew, occupied now by someone else whose name escaped him.

"Come, my boy," said his father quietly, looking at him, his figure not three feet away. "Come to us, come over. You disliked me, and I had no link. But she found you at last through horses."

"And me you feared," issued from the lips of the older face that peered across his father's shoulder from the shadows. "You have little now to live for—"

The broken dreadful ruin of the old man stopped, as though power failed him.

"Nothing," added his father, with a hard, narrow smile.

A husky whisper came from the divan behind him, fading, as though a great distance intervened:

"From the window. It is at once, and there is no pain."

He turned his head a little and saw that *she* had risen and was now standing close behind him. They seemed, all three, to surround him, closing in. He had always disliked his father; he now hated him; had rather dreaded his grandfather as a little boy, whose old, bent figure now, with the shaking head, the thin, skinny neck, the lampless eyes, sent horror through him. They came still nearer, they almost touched him; he was aware of a cold beyond all experience. Yes, they were closing in upon him, nearer every second; yet even while they came, with their silent gliding motion, they were fading, growing dim. Of the woman, indeed, he perceived nothing now but the eyes, two spots of light.

But one thing was not dim — the gaping window just beside the divan. They moved slightly, opening to let him pass, though they spoke no word. The drop from the ledge was easy. He looked down. The railings, far below, were dear. "I'll come," he said, "I'll join you..." and began to heave his big body over. It was not difficult, only somehow his legs, his feet, got caught. He made a violent but ineffectual effort to free them. Then all turned black.

It was Mr. MacFarlane, hiding upstairs from his wife's tiresome At Home, and seeing Malcolm of McQuittie go, rather stealthily he fancied, past his open door, wondering, too, what a guest — he knew him well — was doing in the upper part of the house; it was Mr. MacFarlane, leaving his book to follow and watch, who saw him go to the open window in the passage. "Hullo, Malcolm! Having a look at the old boyhood scene, eh?" He had received no reply. A queer, tense expression in his friend's face gave him what he called "rather a turn." He saw him begin to climb out. He went after him. He caught him just in the nick of time — by the legs and feet.

The unconsciousness continued for several days; his life was given up, the doctor announcing at one time that he was already dead. He recovered finally, however, though memory returned reluctantly and with many obstinate blanks at first. Only a considerable time after could he reconstitute the entire experience, an experience which had lasted only a few seconds by Greenwich time.

Mrs. MacFarlane was kindness itself, and it was to her he told the details when they began to come back. She gave him sympathy, but one thing she did not give him, one thing she and her husband knew — the little detail that the house had an occupant, an occasional occupant not of her own household — or at least that a figure was seen in it from time to time, a figure not of this world. Accurately, this figure tallied precisely with that of a Russian woman who had lived in the house for a year before the MacFarlanes bought it. She was a strange woman, a gambler of the reckless kind, apparently a bit mad into the bargain, for she had killed herself one fine day by jumping from a third-storey window. Her one great passion in life was horses.

IT is odd how trivial a thing can cause a first, instinctive dislike: the way a man wears his hat, the smirk with which a woman uses her mirror and lipstick in a public place — and aversion is suddenly aroused. Later knowledge may justify this first dislike, but the actual start has been the merest triviality.

Some think, however, this cause has not been so trivial as it appears; that gesture, being an unconscious expression of the entire personality, may betray far more than speech, which is calculated. Moleson, thinking over the brusqueness of the stranger on the door-step, the unnecessary way he pushed ahead of him and up the stairs, his whole air, indeed, of general resentment and disapproval, found himself recalling a rather significant answer that a very wise old man had once given in his hearing to a commonplace question. The question was not his own: he was listening to two friends discussing a third.

“Everything indicates,” said the first, carelessly enough, “that I ought to like X. I have nothing against him. Quite the reverse, in fact. Yet I do not like him. I simply cannot like him, try as I will. Now — why don’t I?”

“Your dislike,” was the reply, “is probably chemical. Merely chemical.”

This came back to Moleson’s mind now, as he unpacked his things and arranged himself in the top-floor bed-sitting-room he had engaged that afternoon. It was in Bloomsbury, close to the British Museum. The November twilight was setting in; the gas, electric light stopping at the second floor, was poor; his reading-lamp was not yet unpacked. “Chemical!...” he thought. “I wonder I...” as he looked out a moment into the rather dismal street, where the Museum buildings blocked the sky with their sombre and formidable mass. He had, of course, the layman’s vague knowledge of the loves and hates of atoms, their intense attraction and repulsion for each other, the dizzy rapidity with which they rushed towards, or away from, those they respectively liked or disliked. Had all the atoms of which he was composed, then, turned their backs instinctively upon those which made up the stranger’s body, racing away at a headlong speed that caused him this acute and positive discomfort? Was his instantaneous loathing “merely chemical”?...

As he bustled about arranging his things, his dislike of the fellow remained vivid and persistent. The recent scene again passed through his mind in detail.

He had called in the morning and interviewed Mrs. Smith, with the result: “Not at the moment, sir, I ‘aven’t got a room free”; then, after a rather curious hesitation, “But later a little, maybe”; then more hesitation; “This afternoon, per’aps — I — I might be able to manage it — if you could make it convenient — to call in again...”; whereupon, seeing that the house was so admirably close to the Reading Room where his daily work would be, Moleson offered to pay in advance, but was then quick enough to see that it was not the question of money alone that troubled the woman. Her hesitation, he perceived, was not mere independence, nor was it due to his unprosperous appearance. She wanted a lodger, clearly enough — if she could "manage it," whatever that might mean — and it was not himself that she objected to. It was, he felt sure, a calculation of sorts she was trying to make in her own mind. He wisely decided to give her time to make it.

"I'll look in again," he said, "about three o'clock, say," and he added, with his pleasant smile, that most of his time would be spent working in the Museum opposite.

It was on his return in the afternoon that the scene occurred.

He had rung the bell, and was waiting just inside the narrow hall while the maid hurried downstairs to fetch Mrs. Smith, the street door still ajar behind him, when somebody, another lodger evidently, pushed past brusquely, offensively, almost resentfully, half shoving him, yet without actual contact, from where he stood at the foot of the stairs — slightly in the way, perhaps — and without so much as by your leave. There might, of course, have been a grunt of apology, for Moleson was a little deaf, but the man's attitude made it unlikely, and the pose of the head and shoulders, the face being turned away and not visible, was far more of resentful disapproval than of apology. Moleson, on the instant, loathed him, not because of the rudeness, but because of some presentment his appearance offered that stirred an intense, instinctive dislike amounting to positive repulsion. A moment later, when Mrs. Smith arrived, panting and labouring, the man was up the stairs and out of sight, but at first the impression left was so vivid that Moleson would not have been altogether displeased if he had heard that no room was, after all, available. The contrary, however, took place. A bargain was struck, money passed hands, and the room was his.

The majority of young men in these circumstances would probably have given their attention to the landlady, to whom money must be paid, and on whose goodwill they must depend for their comfort and the like. Moleson, instead, found himself thinking only of this rude fellow lodger. Over his dinner in a neighbouring restaurant he reflected that his sudden dislike was odd; he had never set eyes upon the fellow before, and so far had not even seen the face nor heard the voice, yet this loathing had leaped into being. Revulsion, he called it. Its oddness, of course, lay in this want of proportion. He gave a passing thought, too, to his landlady, yet chiefly using her as a means of comparison with the other. Her rather sombre visage, an overwhelming melancholy in it, though certainly not attractive, woke nothing stronger in him than a vague, tolerant sympathy. He felt no dislike, at any rate; she merely didn't matter; a worthy soul, he decided, worn into sadness by life. Whereas the other human being gave him this instinctive, deep revulsion. Chemical? He wondered. For why, if chemical, should one unpleasing soul wake pity, and another, equally unpleasing, stir violent antipathy?...

Over his coffee, he dismissed the little *puzzle.* His room was admirably close to the Museum; Bloomsbury liked him; and it was the number in the street — No. 11 — his Manchester friend and employer had mentioned. The price, too, suited him, for money was scarce, otherwise he would not be "devilling" for another man — looking up certain seventeenth-century facts for a writer who would probably clear £1,000 over his silly book, yet "must be sure of my dates and facts, you know. Your expenses and £5 a week, if you'll do it for me...." The street and number, close to the Museum, were added. Young Moleson, ignorant of London, jumped at it.

It was some years before our Great Date this happened. Jim Moleson, engaged to a sweet girl, and now married to her, told me the details recently. The War intervened, of course. He had learnt something. At that time I should have described him as highly strung, sensitive at any rate, imaginative certainly, poetic probably. I, his senior by a quarter of a century, rather believed he wrote "Celtic" poetry in his bedroom. The War undeceived us about that type, revealed *them* rather: their amazing courage, the splendour of their "imagination," translated into reckless, inspired action. Jim, anyhow, was always headstrong, fierce-tempered, "nasty" once his feelings were stirred, only these feelings were usually for others — for a lame dog, an injured cat, a bird in a cage, an overworked horse.

Slights, even insults to himself he could stand, to the point of cowardice, some thought; but this was wrong; he was easy-going to that point; beyond it he saw red and — killed. This savage temper, rarely roused, and then with a curious suddenness, was an item I overlooked. But it was a human, not merely an animal, temper.

His work at the Museum, apparently, absorbed him; no more painstaking and accurate "devil" ever devilled; and he got back to his room, tired mentally and physically. A nice-looking, upstanding lad with his mop of dark hair and blue eyes, he soon made a friend of Mrs. Smith — over his letters first: "Lef' at No. 7," she informed him, the printed name of his employer's Institute on the envelope catching her trained, if mournful, eye perhaps. "The postman arst me, and I thought they was for you," she explained. So his slight deafness had again betrayed him, and his employer had said "No. 7," instead of "No. 11." They talked on a bit. He had the feeling *she* wanted to talk a bit, but wanted to talk about something in particular, and to him. He explained about the letters and his troublesome deafness in one ear; he heard her say "your glass of porter" when she actually said, "hot bath-water," and then, after a nice little chat about the weather, prices, and "'ow times was changing," he noticed that she suddenly stuck.

This was after a week in the house, he told me. The appalling melancholy of her face came over him, but rather in a new way; he realised it in some personal sense, I think, as they stood awkwardly staring at one another, each waiting for the other to speak, so that through his sensitive, imaginative mind ran the thought: "That's no ordinary sadness, I'll be bound!..." — and then *he* stuck.

The impulse to say something kind rose in him, only he could think of nothing to say, nothing suitable. It was here he got his first clear, instinctive impression about this commonplace woman: that she was interested, namely, to ask some definite question of him, that, liking and trusting him, and, further, having watched carefully and waited anxiously the whole week, she now longed to put this definite query to him, yet was afraid. The same hesitation he had seen first on the door-step showed itself in her face and sorrowful eyes.

He had been vaguely aware of this for some time evidently, but had not recognised it. It was not, he felt sure, any question about his comfort, for he was old enough to know that landladies rarely took that risk. Something, none the less, she wanted to know, something personal to himself. The suffering in her face made him wonder. A queer sympathy moved through him. He recalled the stationer round the corner in Bury Street, when he bought his paper and materials: "Oh yes, I know, sir; that's Mrs. Warley's," saying he would send the parcel round, and, being corrected: "No, Mrs. Smith's," he looked blank a moment, troubled a little, but in a kindly sense, before he agreed: “Oh yes, to be sure, sir — Mrs. Smith’s — now. So it is....” That “now” was suggestive. She had changed her name, married again, no doubt, yet there had been trouble of some sort, Moleson gathered. And, though he had not pursued the matter at the time, this little memory came back now, as he stood chatting with her, trying to think of something pleasant he might say. He wondered....

“I’m very comfortable,” he said on impulse, presently, “The room’s just what I wanted—” and he was about to add some kind and soothing word when she interrupted in an eager way that startled him:

“Oh, then everything *is* all right, sir? There’s nothing, I mean, interfering with your quiet? If anything annoys” — she changed the verb, before it was completed, to “disturbs,” then stopped dead.

It was not the words — commonplace enough: it was her face that startled him. It had been on the tip of her tongue, he felt, so say “anyone” instead of “anything.”

He knew it in his bones. Also, she could have cut off that tongue for having let it say what it had said. That, too, he perceived. This question she longed yet feared to ask had nearly slipped out in spite of herself. Her face, anyhow, betrayed an emotion that for an instant obliterated its usual sadness. It was the emotion of terror.

Moleson, as he caught it, felt shocked. The sharp instinct came suddenly to him that it was wiser not to ask. He cut the talk short, as nicely as he could. “Nothing, nothing,” he replied, gave her his pleasant smile, and went up quickly to his room.

Her question was an approach to the real one she wanted so much to ask. That, of course, he realised. Terror lay in it; it was wrapped round with terror as in a cocoon. Once the cocoon burst, was broken, out would come all the hideous wriggling things that lay concealed inside. This was the feeling Moleson carried upstairs with him. It was as though he had just caught a glimpse, behind her suddenly pale skin, of the hideous wriggling things that caused her sadness and her terror. But another certainty lay in him too at this moment: the question she had asked, this preliminary question that was an approach to another, referred — he felt positive of it —

to someone he particularly sought to keep out of his thoughts as much as ever he could. She referred, indirectly thus, to the other lodger.

It was his habit at night, after his dinner round the corner, to sort out the notes of his day's work before an early bed. To-night, however, this talk stayed by him and prevented. He sat thinking about it... and eventually, it seems, thought circling and circling but coming to no satisfactory conclusion, of course, he dropped asleep, to wake very suddenly much later in a state of uncommon distress— "acute distress," he called it, "funk."

This, I think, is one of the most curious and betraying things about the whole business: that, even when he told it all to me later, he kept off that unpleasant lodger, as he called him — kept him so long in the background. He had begun by emphasising his unusual repulsion towards the fellow, dwelling upon it, stressing it, just as I have done in this written account. But then, when I was expecting the lodger to appear in some dreadful and dramatic guise — a sneak-thief, a forger with coining apparatus, a blackmailer in league with Mrs. Warley-Smith (as I styled her), even a murderer hiding from the police with the woman's help — Moleson merely left him out. He ignored him, made no mention of him. He talked about his work, about Mrs. Smith, his liking the house, yet disliking the room — feeling *it* disliked him and wanted him out — about anything except the sinister lodger. Having first firmly fixed him in my mind as an ominous character, he just left him there. Thus, when I tried to bring him to the point — this suggestive point of the sinister lodger, and a point he had himself established in opening his tale — he stopped abruptly, and stared into my face, his features working, his eyes gone positively googly. Some fear, I saw, still operated in him, unreleased. His face gave me a touch of goose-flesh. There was an ingredient of salutary "confession" in his delayed account, I began to gather. He lowered his voice. "I knew you'd ask that before long," he said. "You see — I shirked him myself."

"Refused to acknowledge him, you mean?" I queried vaguely. "Tried to pretend he wasn't in the house?"

He nodded, looking down at his boots.

"You disliked him," I insisted, "to *that* point?" The expression in his eyes, as he glanced up quickly, answered me better than his words.

"It's unbelievable," he whispered, "how that fellow obsessed me. Obsessed is the term."

I asked if he saw him often.

"After that first encounter on the front-door steps — only twice, all told."

The intensity, a sort of inner secrecy in him still, made me hesitate, but as he said nothing, I presently asked boldly:

"But — in the end — you found out who he was, what he was doing there? In a word — why you loathed him so?" I got no straight answer, but I got the full story, told in his own evasive, curious way.

"I mentioned how I dropped asleep in my chair, and woke up suddenly feeling frightened," he went on. "Well — that's the point, you see."

"What is?" I asked, justifiably dense.

He cast his eyes down as though he were ashamed of it. "I'd been frightened all along," he muttered. "Damned frightened. Ever since I'd been in that awful house, I'd been frightened."

"Of — him?"

He nodded.

He believed he had discovered why the fellow resented his being there: it was because Moleson occupied his room. Mrs. Smith had hesitated that first morning whether she could turn him out or not — his rent probably overdue, and what not — but eventually had spoken to him — and Moleson, as described, cash in hand, had moved in. It was a sufficiently obvious explanation.

"But that didn't explain my own abhorrence — did it?"

Obviously not. —

"He may have felt resentful, furious, because I'd got his room, but that couldn't have made *me* feel the physical repulsion, to the point of nausea, which I did feel. And dread too. I only saw him twice after that first meeting, but though I saw him so rarely, I knew he was in the house with me. I never forgot it. He was all over the house expresses it better. I was always expecting to meet him, to run across him on the stairs, to find him in the hall. When I came down the street I imagined him standing on the doorstep, fumbling with his latchkey. When I went to my bath half-way down the stairs, I thought we should pass. At night, if I went out to post a letter; in the morning when I opened my door to take my hot water in. But, no; he made no sign, I did not meet him. What he did all day I have no notion: he never went out, so far as I saw or knew. But then I myself was out from nine to five, then again for my dinner between eight and nine, you see."

At a great rate he rattled this off. He gave me a good deal in a very few words.

A definite question halted his rambling account, though it was my object, otherwise, to hear the tale just as he cared to tell it.

"Describe him?" He repeated my words. "As I first saw him — Oh yes. Though I didn't see the features, remember, that time." Then he startled me by raising his voice most unexpectedly in his excitement: "Misshapen!" he shouted in my face, so that I jumped. "Well, you asked me; and that's what I felt about him. But mentally, morally, rather than physically. That's the impression he made on me." And then he barked out another word: "A monster!" A little shudder ran over him. "I didn't see the face," he went on, "because he didn't mean me to see it. He moved sideways, the shoulder next to me humped up a trifle so as to hide it. A bit of a beard I saw, or whiskers, straggly hair, anyhow, that left in my mind some faint notion of pretence, of a wig perhaps. But my mind at the moment was on my business with Mrs. Smith, and I wasn't trying to see what a stranger pushing rudely past me was like. I had no particular interest in him then. Clothes?... Oh, that I couldn't say with accuracy either, but a dark suit, and a bowler hat on his head. *Dark,*" he emphasised, "the whole look and feel of the man was dark."

I was still anxiously waiting for that account of his waking up frightened in his chair, for my interest was now deeply held. But I was patient; I had to be. He went on to tell me how he was for ever expecting to see the man again, yet did not see him. This repetition, in the tale as he told it, was not redundant, though, when written, it may seem so. It led up with a bang, as it were, to the meeting — the sight, rather — when it came. Every morning on going out to his work he was positive he must pass the fellow on the darkish stairs, but the stairs were empty; on the landing when he opened his door, on the front-door steps when he returned in the evening, but landing and steps were unoccupied. He would have a good look at the door first from a little way up the street, before coming to it, for the dread of meeting was established, horribly established, in his being—" expectant dread," he called it. Then, suddenly, he did see him. This was the second time.

"I was hardly settled at my desk in the Reading Room," he described the incident, "when I found I'd left my employer's letter on the mantelpiece. It had questions for me to verify, you see. I hurried back for it. It only took five minutes — that's why the house suited me so — but I had a good squint first from a distance to see if the door-step was free. No one was visible. I ran up. Just as I slipped my latchkey in, I glanced up — something made me — and there he was, staring down at me from the window — *my* window."

"In your room!"

"I saw the face for the first time, but only for a second, just long enough for our eyes to meet. He withdrew it instantly — awfully quick, I mean. It was dark, unshaven, the beard not a real intended beard. I saw hanging lips. No, it was not what you'd call an evil face, not in that sense, but it was dreadful in the sense of being out of relation with any world I knew. Horrible, appalling, in that way. It was a mad face. Behind its darkness there was white — the white of terror. The face was all I really saw, with just a bit of the neck that had a thin red scarf about it.... The key dropped out of my fingers with a clatter on the steps. I was shaking all over.

"Ferreting about in *my* room!... was my first thought — the room that used to be his!... But a second thought came with it simultaneously, and it was this second thought that unsettled me most, I believe. I realised in a flash that the fellow had been actually watching me ever since my arrival, keeping out of my way on purpose, waiting an opportunity, waiting for me to go out — oh, I can't describe it exactly — but he knew my every movement, I mean."

"You rushed up — ?" I interrupted. It was a stupid question, but the dread of this mysterious lodger in my mind excited me.

Moleson hesitated. "I've got a vile temper, you know," he said, shyly rather, as though I was not supposed to be aware of this; "*vile*" he repeated with emphasis and a touch of shame, “curiously sudden too—”

“That brute in your own room,” I helped him. For a moment I feared I was to hear of a violent assault.

“I was up those stairs in a second or two,” he went on, “and the first thing I noticed on getting to the top was that my door was moving. There was no one on the landing. The room itself was empty.” He paused, looking at me significantly. “The fellow,” he then added, “had got out — just in time.” Again he paused for a moment. “I shouldn’t have waited to ask any questions, you know.”

I knew he meant it, but I was glad to have been spared details of an ugly assault. This savage temper in Moleson always alarmed me rather. I verily believe he would have done the fellow in. His face, as he told it, betrayed him. By this time, moreover, I already had a shrewd suspicion of what was to prove the explanation of this unpleasant and mysterious lodger: a mad mind certainly, a maniac probably (I had glimpses of a homicidal maniac), he would turn out to be the son of Mrs. Smith. That I was partly right, yet at the same time curiously wrong, is a tribute perhaps to the unconscious skill with which Moleson told his story, concealing its climax admirably, yet disdaining to mislead me by using false clues.

The crime of murder, at any rate, was meanwhile spared him. The room was empty, nothing had apparently been touched, and the corridor was empty too. His suggestion of having been “watched” I disregarded. Later, however, I inclined to accept it.

“Across my landing,” Moleson continued, “was one door only — the door of what I felt convinced was his room. It was closed. My first instinct was to bang at it and ask him what the devil... Well” — he laughed a little—” I didn’t do it, that’s all. My anger had cooled down somehow. I just snatched up the letter I’d come to fetch and went back to the Museum Reading Room.”

I looked at him, impressed by his admirable brevity, thinking of the M.C. gained in Flanders, of that runaway he once stopped, of the two hefty ruffians he fought, half killing one of them, in a Surrey lane when they objected to his interfering on behalf of their overloaded horses. He had various things to his credit of this sort, and he was delicate, of slight build, no muscles or brawn at all. Moleson, with his fierce, perhaps great, spirit, was not negligible. Any story he told, I mean, had value.... "Now," I thought to myself, "at last we'll get to this business about waking up frightened!" Not a bit of it. He must tell me something about Mrs. Smith first. And though it delayed the thing *I* wanted to hear, it was worth listening to.

Poor lodging-houses have secrets, secret lodgers, as well, no doubt. His room was cheap, too cheap. But it was not his business, after all. "Better leave it at that!" he decided. Only one thing troubled me about Mrs. Smith — her interest, namely, in ascertaining if he was "not interfered with" — as though she had rather expected that he *would* be disturbed. Her phrase had anchored itself in his mind; he was always recalling it; he couldn't forget it apparently. Why should he be "interfered with"? What — who — should interfere with him? Who, indeed, he reflected, but this man? This man who had been turned out for him? This man whose room he now undoubtedly occupied? And so it was that, since Mrs. Smith came to no closer terms with the real question she longed to ask, he now, for his part, decided to come to closer terms with the question *he* wanted to ask: "Who is your other lodger?" For the floor below being empty, he knew there was none but himself and this other lodger in the house.

After various hints, suggestions and the rest, chances he provided but she did not take, the expression in her face invariably making him pause — after numerous futile leads, he came abruptly one day to the direct question. Tired of fencing, a touch of his queer anger stirred in him. He made up his mind to know whether her feelings were upset or not. He put the direct question, though he did it delicately enough:

"By the by," he said, as they were in the narrow hall, money having just passed, "I meant to ask you sooner, Mrs. Smith — my typewriter at night — does it disturb anyone? The gentleman opposite, I mean?"

If he was prepared for evasion of some kind, he was certainly not prepared for the answer he received.

"She denied there being any gentleman opposite at all?" I asked, as Moleson hesitated, wondering, I fancied, how best to make her answer sound credible to a Philistine like myself.

“She *didn’t* answer,” he said briefly. “Her face turned white as a sheet. She fell back against the hat-rack. She screamed. It was a curious scream, rather low, not noisy a bit. And it was pain, not fear. She was hurt, terribly hurt. She began to cry....”

Further explanation of the amazing collapse, beyond that her “‘eart caught me sudden — it’s always been weak” — there was none. It was in this brief fashion that Moleson related the incident, then left it there without another word — as I, too, must therefore leave it.

For some days after that nothing happened. He did not see the lodger. He avoided the landlady. He began to look forward to the end of his stay, hurrying his work at the Museum purposely. But his mind was for ever going back, he says, to that odd question about being “interfered with,” and one night in particular, as he sat over his notes after dinner, memory carried him away rather forcibly, rather persistently, to that phrase which had started his original uneasiness. He sat in his chair, lolling back, and thinking about it, wondering afresh about this mysterious lodger, about what he did, why he hid so carefully, why he watched him. The old notions slipped through his mind, for no new ones occurred to him: was he a coiner of counterfeit money, a blackmailer, a lunatic, a man wanted by the police, a man who ought by rights to be shut up, a suicidal maniac... and so, eventually, he dropped asleep in his chair... to wake up suddenly “frightened, and in acute distress.”

So, at last, we had got to it.

It was late. The night was very still, all noises in the street had stopped. No footsteps even were audible on the pavement through the open window. “I woke up cold,” he said, “cold to the bone. The room, in spite of the warm summer air, was icy. I was shivering.”

And at first, rather bewildered after his sleep, he sat there listening, waiting, wondering why he felt cold, wondering for some minutes what the matter was. That something was the matter, he felt sure. Something had been happening, had just happened, while he was asleep. But what? He collected his senses, remembering exactly where he was. Details, of course, came back quickly then. He says the first thing he noticed was that a change had come over the room. The room was somehow different. It had curiously altered. When he dropped off to sleep it had been one thing, now it was another. He glanced about him, searching uncomfortably for evidence of this change, but finding no single detail altered, nothing out of place, the furniture exactly as it always was — until his eye rested on the door. The door, he phrased it, “drew” his attention, although a closed door — and it was closed now — must always, it seemed to me, look much the same.

“Well,” he said, “it didn’t.” He used the tone of challenge, anticipating disbelief. “That door,” he declared, “had been opened and shut while I was asleep.” He waited a moment. “It had only just been shut — that very second.”

The imaginative statement struck me as singularly dramatic. Proof, of course, was not possible, yet a door, I reflected, is easily the most significant feature of a house, opened, closed, tapped on, locked; it is a frontier, a threshold, and when passed, either in exit or entrance, leads necessarily to other conditions of living, to other states of mind, since it leads to other people and other atmosphere. I could understand in a fashion that Moleson used those words. He rather convinced me, I mean, that he was possibly right.

“That’s what made you wake,” I offered, filling the pause he left.

“Yes,” he returned flatly. “While I slept, that door had been opened, someone had looked in, come in, moved about the room, done something, then gone out again — gone out just that instant.”

Aware of this change in the room, or in the atmosphere about him, he sat for some time staring at that door. He listened intently. A glance at his wrist-watch showed that it was two in the morning, so that he had slept several hours. The deep silence of the house came over him unpleasantly, and his distress, instead of passing, increased. He found himself still shivering. But a moment later his cold skin turned hot and broke out in a profuse perspiration — at a sound. It was a sound he recognised, having heard it before: the dragging of furniture or luggage across the landing, of heavy and awkward articles, difficult to move. He had heard it already several times, late at night, early in the morning, through his dreams as well, and he had always ascribed it to the lodger, busy arranging things in his room opposite, and using the landing sometimes in so doing. He had paid no particular attention to it, beyond a passing annoyance at the choice of hours, and the sounds had usually ceased after a few minutes at the most. Now, however, he was conscious of a difference, for in the first place it was two in the morning, when ordinary people were asleep; secondly, he realised distinctly, it was not furniture or luggage being moved — it was *a* piece of luggage, a heavy piece, for the sound was unmistakable. He thought of a trunk or portmanteau. Moreover — it was going on immediately outside his own door.

“The fellow was dragging this luggage of his across the landing just beyond my door,” Moleson underlined the fact. “At two o’clock in the morning, if you please!”

The first effect upon him was one of a queer paralysis, mental and physical. He could neither think nor move.

“I just sat listening to the fellow dragging his great bag, or whatever it was, across the landing — dragging it, I supposed, towards his own room opposite. Then, very gradually, my mental numbness lifted, and I found myself wondering *why*. At two in the morning! Dragging luggage about! What was he doing with luggage on the landing of a Bloomsbury lodging-house at that unearthly hour? So close to my own door too? The bumping and scraping were audible enough; there was no pretence of doing it quietly. Where was he taking his luggage from? Where to? My mind worked quickly, once it started. A score of questions rushed over me. What could it be, this bag, this portmanteau, this heavy bundle so difficult to move? What could it contain? What had he put inside it? Taken?”

“Taken?...” I repeated, not quite following him.

“Some of the questions racing through my mind,” he explained, “brought a kind of answer with them. That’s the only way I can put it,” he added apologetically, a sop to me, the sceptical recipient of his confession.

“*What* had he taken?” he repeated, looking at me rather hard.

I had no notion.

“But I had,” said Moleson with decision, interpreting my blank expression.

“I guessed at once — half guessed, at least.”

He had me at a loss there, I admit; but I made no comment, merely nodding my head affirmatively. His next words took me completely by surprise:

"His great bag or bundle, whatever it was," whispered Moleson, "contained something he had just taken out of my room. While I slept, the fellow had sneaked in, crept about, found what he wanted, taken it, and sneaked out again with it — in his bag."

Again I made no comment, the explanation being too preposterous to argue about. Moleson, besides, was now too earnest and convinced — he knew, remember, the climax, whereas I was still in ignorance — too eager to make his full confession for me to interfere and cavil with commonplace criticism. It might have stopped him, for one thing....

"You missed anything?" I asked, no actual disbelief in my face or voice. I had to repeat it before he replied, and his reply, when it came, again took me by surprise. Also, it sent a shiver through me, as though the hair were moving on my scalp.

"What he had taken," he told me in a lowered voice, and speaking very slowly, "was not in my room at that time — when I fell asleep, I mean. But it *had* been there — some time before."

The statement, naturally, left me without a rejoinder. I lit a cigarette and waited in silence.

"At that moment," he went on impressively, still in his whisper, and loathing coming into his face with a leap, as it were, "I knew — he was a — horror. Oh, in every meaning of the word. And a queer, sudden revulsion rushed over me — the intense desire to see him close, to look at him face to face, to speak to him — I never once heard his voice, you know — to — yes, even to touch the brute; and in so doing — somehow — God knows how — to get rid of him. So far he had avoided me deliberately. All this time he had evaded, escaped me. He *meant* to avoid and escape me, but now at last I had him close — a few feet away — busy, occupied, within reach, unable to get away — if I just opened that door. I need only open that door, and I should see him — catch him in the act."

Longing to ask "In what act?" I ventured instead "You felt angry all of a sudden?" and hit the mark better than I knew.

He admitted it, ashamed a little, with a nod. "I felt cold all over, mind you," he went on, always in that low voice, "scared as well, really scared, but at the same time, as you say, I felt" — he chose a queer word—" vicious.

Exasperated, too, a bit. I wanted to be done with it. I wanted to get at the fellow. Why the devil should he make this infernal row at two in the morning? How dared he? How dared he come into another man's room, even if it had once been his own? Why should he watch me, bother me, haunt me, get into my mind — and all the rest of it? Yes" — with a touch of fierceness— "you're right — I did feel angry all of a sudden. I decided abruptly I'd go out—"

"Open that door?" — I simply couldn't keep it back. Personally, I should *not* have opened that door at two in the morning under the circumstances.

"Yes, open the door, go out, and tell the brute to go to hell. I decided to do that — and more—"

I knew what that "more" meant.

" — but when I tried to get up from my chair, I found I couldn't move. I just sat there, furiously angry, struggling — like a mechanical doll whose machinery had run down. I was dying to get at the fellow. I was perspiring all over. I felt that if he answered back, showed any insolence, I'd — strangle him — just go for him and be done with it. Throttle the devil! I felt my fingers at his throat, the prickle of his filthy beard, saw his hanging lips drop wider as he fought for breath, his beastly eyes bulge out, his face turn black — oh, I *was* in this odd, sudden fury, I admit — and yet — I couldn't move an inch.

"Perhaps — probably — I made a noise of some kind — cursed aloud most likely, but anyhow the sound of the dragging luggage suddenly stopped. A deep, rather an extraordinary silence followed. I could hear the blood beating in my head. I sat fixed in my chair like a dummy, staring at the door. Only that door separated us. He existed there — breathing, vivid, intense — a few feet from where I sat rigid in my chair, unable to get at him, unable to move a muscle. He seemed to exert some tremendous pressure on me, paralysing my will, holding me helpless where I was."

Moleson mopped his forehead a moment.

"I was so angry," he went on, rather breathless now in his excitement, as though he lived over again his fury and exasperation, "that I felt murder in me. Positively, I felt myself a murderer."

Curiously, he stopped dead suddenly. A look of shyness came over him. He stared at me, I stared back at him. Such language, of course, in anybody else, would have been merely extravagant, hysterical. In his case it was real. I knew his sudden, ungovernable temper; I knew, too, he was ashamed of it. In a less civilised country he must always have been in trouble with his gun. He was the type that saw red and killed. And a quick flash of understanding somehow came into me, so that I guessed in that instant the explanation both of his abrupt pause and of his queer shyness. Having this dangerous thing in himself, he recognised it in others too. That sympathy existed.

"Yes — that's how I knew," he muttered, looking down, having guessed my thought. "Chemical," he went on below his breath. "It's opposites that attract, but likes that repel."

"What was *he,*" I asked, fumbling with my cigarette.

"A murderer," he said, quietly. "I felt the same."

I waited in silence, wondering what he was going to tell me. His face was rather white, his excitement only kept under by his doubt of being believed. It was best now, I felt, to ask no questions. In his own way he would presently go on. But curiosity, I confess, devoured me. Did he open that door? Did he see the other fellow, speak to him, touch him, perhaps go for him?

His own mind, however, was an odd psychological revelation — of himself.

"And the instant I realised *that,*" he went on, "the power to move came back to me. My muscles acted. The pressure the fellow exerted was lifted, because we understood one another. There was that ghastly sympathy between us. I got out of my chair and crossed the floor. I reached the door. Then I stopped a moment and listened. He, too, I knew, was listening a few inches away from my face, nothing but half an inch of thin boards between us, listening to my movements, bending to the keyhole probably, crouching, his luggage neglected for a moment while he waited to see what I was going to do. A second later I caught the handle, turned it, and flung the door wide open with a rush.

"There he was before me. Quite close. He was bending down, exactly as I had imagined, crouching, his head lowered; and at his feet, less than a yard beyond me, I saw on the floor the dark blotch that was his luggage.

“What happened then happened so quickly that it seemed less than a second. From the stooping position he did not rise, nor make any attempt to rise. One hand, still stretched out upon the bag, began to work. He pulled at it. He had been pulling at it when I opened the door, and he went on pulling at it — dragging it, dragging it away from me, away from the door, and across the landing floor. I, for my part, had one hand raised to strike, to clutch, to kill if necessary, but my hand did not fall. I did nothing violent, because I made in that very instant a horrible discovery. I suddenly realised that he did not see me. He had not noticed me. He was not aware of my being there close beside him. He did not react to my presence in any way because he was simply not conscious of it. He continued doing what he had been doing just before — dragging his luggage across the landing floor. I saw the dark mass of it go hitching along in jerks as he pulled. It was very heavy.

“And this — this not being aware of me, I mean — came as a tremendous shock. The surprise of it, perhaps. It was the last thing in the world I’d expected. I had rather looked for something sudden, violent. I was prepared for it. This way he just ignored me turned me cold. It struck me as unnatural. I stood and stared, for I didn’t know what else to do, and my body was trembling, and I felt queerly uncertain of my legs. I watched him go on dragging at that heavy thing, which I now saw was not luggage after all, not ordinary luggage, at least. It was neither bag nor portmanteau, nor anything like that. It was a sack of awkward shape and outline. It was unpleasant, I thought, the way it bulged. But more than that, more than unusual, it gave me a turn — I felt it somewhere awful. And realising this, I made an unconscious movement evidently, for I felt my breath catch, and I must have staggered a little. I caught at the edge of the door to steady myself, and the door, naturally, yielded with my weight; I lurched with it, sideways at first, then a little outwards as the door came with me, and then — forwards. Before I could recover balance, I was against him. I was right into him.

“But I didn’t fall. I didn’t, thank God, collide with the monstrous creature and his awful sack, but I was so close against him that the shock of finding nothing solid — there was no substance there at all — stopped my heart for a second. It seemed to rush up into my throat. Then my breath came back, and I let out a yell into the night that must have been heard in the street. At which moment, still dragging at his bundle, he made a sudden, rather violent, movement. He turned in a new way. I saw his face clearly.

“By ‘clearly’ I mean close — dreadfully close. It was turned up, but I saw it obliquely rather, a kind of sideways glimpse, and even then he wasn’t looking *at* me. The light from the open door behind fell on it, and I saw the eyes, blazing eyes, the hanging lips, the white skin smudged with unshaven hair of the growing black beard, and — to my utter amazement — tears upon the cheeks. It was a maniac’s face, if ever I saw one. The other thing that I saw clearly was that the thin red scarf about the neck was not a scarf at all. It was a thin red line of contused blood in the flesh of the neck itself, a line that only a rope, drawn very tightly, could have made.”

Moleson stopped then and sank back in his chair, looking away from me, and glad, I think, that he had got so far without interruption. His words and manner, his facial expression above all, conveyed his horror far better than his jerked-out sentences. I smoked a moment in silence, handing him a cigarette too, which he refused. But he said nothing for some little time, while I also kept back a dozen questions that rushed up in me.

“What happened then?” I ventured at length. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” he replied briefly, looking up at me again, his manner now quiet and collected. “I did nothing. It seemed, somehow, there was nothing I wanted to do. A feeling I must shout, strike out, do something violent passed. What was done next, *he* did. I merely looked on and watched. There was no emotion in me of any sort. I was just numb. My whole consciousness, I think, was in my eyes. I stared... as he went on dragging that heavy mass across the landing, always a little farther from me, hitching and shoving it along with great effort — towards the door of his room. Then he opened the door, but the light from my room did not reach to it, and as it was not lit inside, I saw nothing but a black space. I watched. I saw everything he did, every movement he made. He stepped to one side, across the bundle, so that he was then pushing instead of dragging. His whole body was bent double with the effort to get the thing through the door and inside the room. Apparently it was difficult to do. He accomplished it after several minutes. The sack, it seemed, made one or two little movements of its own — jerks. He closed the door, putting his weight against it heavily from outside, and then — after that — well — he wasn’t there any more.”

"He'd gone into the room?"

Moleson shrugged his shoulders. "Can't say," he answered rather curtly. "I tell you he simply wasn't there. I couldn't see him any more. I'd lost sight of him." He added sheepishly: "Something happened to my eyes, I suppose. I didn't see him go — but he *was* gone."

Fully five minutes passed, Moleson then told me slowly, before he could think, much less move. He was struck dumb with terror and amazement. He felt stupid, empty of life, unable to act at all.

"It may have been five minutes," he said, "but it may just as well have been twenty — for all I know. The only thing I remember clearly is that my awful yell — that wild shriek I let out into the night some time before — still seemed to me echoing through the house and down the stairs. I had a feeling it must have been heard in the street and the police would be in. But nothing happened. The fellow's disappearance bewildered me to a point I can't describe properly. I *knew* I hadn't been dreaming, but I knew damned little else, it seems to me.

"I moved at last, after a bit. I moved backwards. I threw my own door as wide as it would go, so as to get all the light there was, and the light streamed across the landing and fell on the door — his door. I knew I was going to open that door. I had to."

His pluck hardly surprised me, for I already knew it. I admired it. Nothing in this world or the next could have induced me to go near that door, much less open it. Moleson, however, did more: he went over and knocked loudly against its boards.

"The sound echoed," he told me, "but not inside. It echoed down the stairs, I mean. The boards sounded dull. That dullness explained itself," he added, with a quick glance up at me as though, of course, I understood what he meant. But I did not understand, and my eyebrows went up in query and response. "It wasn't an ordinary door," he said.

"You — opened it?" I had no inkling what he meant.

"I guessed it wasn't a proper door," he replied, changing his adjective, but leaving me more ignorant than before. "I felt that some time before."

"Sham?..."

“Not an ordinary door into an ordinary room,” he explained, with a hint of impatience at my stupidity. “When I knocked,” he went on, “and got no answer, I knew I was right. The dead sound proved it.”

“Oh!...”

“Yes,” he went on quietly, “the dead muffled sound it made. I waited a moment. Then I opened it. It was the door of a cupboard — a rather shallow cupboard.” He paused, then said something that made my blood curdle: “That’s why the creature had to shove it in so hard — *stuff* it in — to make it stay—”

“Upright?...” I gasped, catching the ghastly meaning at last.

“Upright,” was all he replied.

The dusk was now fallen into our room between us, and I saw the glow of my cigarette-end in the mirror, behind his chair. It had been a dreadful story. I longed for light and a glass of whisky. Moleson had so convinced me of the truth, the reality, of his confession, yet I got the feeling that he hoped I would tear it to pieces and demolish it utterly, proving to his satisfaction how absurd it all was, and using nice words like hallucination, overwrought nerves and the like.

Instead, I remained rather quiet and non-committal, and certainly dumb; I could not honestly comfort him in the way he wished.

“I told you,” he resumed, his voice much lower now, “that I imagined that shriek of mine still echoing in the house and down the stairs? Well, a few moments later, while I still stood glaring at that ghastly cupboard, all black and empty... I heard a sound on the stairs. It was below me, coming nearer. I couldn’t move — not an inch, one way or the other. I was just stuck to the floor. But I felt sure of one thing — it wasn’t” — but he couldn’t say the word he meant, the word in his mind—” it wasn’t—” He stuck again.

“*Who* was it?” I asked quickly, eager to help him, but to help myself at the same time.

“First I saw the light,” he said, “the light of a candle, evidently, flickering on the wall, then on the ceiling. Next came the shadow, enormously magnified and grotesque, Then came a large white face of melancholy and terror mixed, looming at me over the banisters. There was a thin voice:

“‘... interfered with...’ I heard from what seemed an immense distance.... ‘He showed hisself, then, did he?... May God forgive me...’ and something about a ‘broken promise’ and a ‘room I didn’t oughter ‘ave let to anyone... And then, as, to my shame, I felt myself being helped up from the floor — for I had no idea I had let my legs give way like that — something — oh, horrible and dreadful — about ‘... they ‘anged him for it; oh, they ‘anged him at the Scrubs... it was ’is own father, you see... and now over twenty years ago...’”

There were gulping sounds, he remembers, and these odd, broken words.

Moleson, curiously enough, had never gone to the trouble to verify anything, and it was my vile curiosity that had to find its own satisfaction. The British Museum where he had worked so hard, gave me certain facts in the newspapers of long before the war. The “Warley Parricide,” I discovered, and the unpleasant details about how the body was found stuffed upright into a cupboard, and how the public signed a petition and the lawyers urged homicidal mania, but without the intended result.

SHOCKS

I

JOHN FEEK, WELL over forty, was still evidently a child at heart, for as he heard the postman's knock the same ridiculous old dream rose in his mind — namely, that a letter would some day bring him surprising luck. Out of the blue this letter would come; there would be nothing to lead up to it; it would prove a shock, but a delightful one. It was a dream he shared, of course, with countless other people who have never quite grown up.

After the knock came a pause. He listened. Yes, he heard steps coming upstairs towards the door of his little sitting-room.

"Evening post, sir," said the lodging-house maid, "and a letter for you."

She laid it beside his reading-lamp and went out, closing the door upon the smell of cabbage which had followed her upstairs.

"Thank you, Emma," remarked John Feek, casually, as though his correspondence was unwieldy and a single letter hardly worth bringing up to him. He eyed the typewritten envelope distastefully, and as he did so his dream took wings as usual. Then, turning it over, he read the name of the sender printed on the back.

"Dustworthy and Sons," he said aloud, with more interest in his manner. "So it's not a bill or circular after all!"

Dustworthy and Sons had been his family solicitors for as long as he could remember. James Dustworthy, the head of the old firm, used to play tennis with his father thirty years before, to dine with them at home; he had administered the small estate when his father died, and he still paid him the two hundred pounds a year that came from some trust funds, five thousand pounds or so, an uncle had left him. But John Feek had not seen Mr. Dustworthy for many years, not since boyhood, in fact. He had rather neglected his father's friend, though he owed him many kindnesses. To tell the truth, he only thought about him when the letter came with the quarterly payment. This he would duly acknowledge with some polite and kindly remark or other about Mr. Dustworthy's health and family. Of late years, however, it was one of the sons, now partners in the firm, who sent the payments. Mr. James Dustworthy, of course, must be getting old, leaving more and more of the routine business to his sons.

"No money, anyhow," reflected John Feek with a sigh, still eyeing the envelope without enthusiasm before opening it. "It's not due for a couple of days yet."

It was this small income that provided his excuse for not really working; it just enabled him to live; his literary gifts might otherwise have led to something, for his two small volumes of occasional verse — one of them published at his own expense, he remembered with regret — had been well enough noticed. His talent was mediocre, yet it was a talent worth developing; strangers had written — they liked it.

While these vague thoughts passed through his mind he had opened the envelope. To his surprise the signature, at which he glanced first, was that of James Dustworthy, senior. The letter itself caused him even more surprise:

"*Dear Mr. Feek, —*

"*I should be very much obliged if you would make it convenient to call upon me at the earliest possible moment. There is a matter of importance concerning yourself about which I should like to talk with you personally, rather than write.*

"*May I hope that eleven o'clock to-morrow, though such short notice, will suit you?*

"*Trusting you are well, — with kindest memories of the pleasant days I spent in your late father's house,* "*I am,* "Yours very *truly*,
"JAMES DUSTWORTHY, SR."

John Feek's immediate impression was one of vague uneasiness, as though the letter emanated something unpleasant, its wording a trifle ominous even; but a second reading helped to dissipate this. A sense of trouble, none the less, hung about the communication; he disliked that "of importance"; the phrasing was so urgent. He asked himself, like a schoolboy, what he had done, what he had been up to, what enemies he had, what person or persons he had wronged? He found no answer to his searching. His life, certainly, was not blameless, yet he had committed no crime — that he could think of. He was ever his own worst enemy; and to tell the truth, he was unable to recall a single individual, man or woman, whom he had treated badly, or who was hostile to him. Search as he might, no single name occurred. His dreamy, generous, lazy character was, in fact, a lovable one. He was an idler, nothing worse. And in the end he came to the conclusion that this "uneasiness" was due to a bad conscience that pricked him because he rather loafed through life. This was the decision he came to finally. And he at once replied to Mr. Dustworthy, senior, that he would be happy to call at eleven o'clock next morning, as suggested.

He went out and posted the letter at the corner pillarbox himself.

"It must be something unusually important," he reflected, as he slipped the letter in, "or the old boy himself wouldn't have written!" And he went to bed in due course, excited a little perhaps, but distinctly easier in his mind. "James Dustworthy — the head of the firm," was his last thought. "And a big, old-established firm into the bargain!"

II

It was Henry Dustworthy, one of the sons, who received him on the stroke of eleven next morning with great politeness, yet obviously did not know him. Neither man, for that matter, recognised the other, having never met previously. And when Feek explained that Mr. James Dustworthy, Mr. Dustworthy, senior, had made the appointment, Henry obviously did not know about that either. He was shown in ceremoniously, however, without delay. He bowed. He sat down. Mr. James Dustworthy wore a beard. Feek had not the slightest recollection of him. The face of his boyhood had entirely vanished from his memory. He stared uncomfortably. The room, though severe, was friendly. Feek's conscience gave him vague, fugitive trouble. Mr. Dustworthy's smile, however, at once set him at his ease. "I am not to be disturbed," said the head of the firm to Henry, who retired, his eyes alight with curiosity. The door was shut.

Aware that his feeling of disquiet might return at any moment, hampering his best judgment of what was to come, Feek broke the pause which threatened to prolong itself:

“I received your letter, Mr. Dustworthy,” he remarked, as casually as he could. “It was very pleasant to hear from you again. I — I’m really ashamed to think how long it is since I saw you. I have such pleasant memories of my boyhood days — when my father — you and my father—”

Mr. Dustworthy interrupted, yet in a stately, serious way that only men of the law can compass. He smiled, he bowed, the tips of his fingers met in front of his face.

“I wrote, Mr. Feek,” he began, gravely, looking at him over the top of those fingers, “because I felt you would prefer to hear verbally what I have to say, rather than” — he smiled stiffly—” read it through the medium of what is sometimes called a lawyer’s letter.”

He paused, but made no slightest movement; the long-winded sentence died away. Feek’s uneasiness rose and fell. He tried to estimate the other’s attitude. There was nothing to estimate. No hint escaped. It struck him incongruously, too, that, search as he might, no trace of the early days was discoverable in that bearded visage.

“Quite so, quite so. I appreciate it,” he murmured, wondering what was to follow. In spite of himself and his innocent life, he felt his skin grow moist a little. “I came at once,” he added.

Mr. Dustworthy, senior, bowed almost imperceptibly. His black coat, his dry voice, his keen eyes that saw everything while betraying nothing, seemed very solemn — unnecessarily so, Feek assured himself.

“Your father,” resumed the lawyer at length, “was kind enough to number me among his friends, his personal friends. I keep the most happy feeling for all the members of his family. I am only too glad, too proud, to be the means of conveying pleasant news—”

John Feek could not contain himself; the reaction set in so suddenly.

“Then — it *is* good news?” he exclaimed. “I wonder if perhaps—”

Mr. Dustworthy drew himself up. “I should hardly have written to you as I did,” he announced, “nor, indeed, sent you the personal letter I did, unless it concerned a matter that you would be pleased to hear about.”

John Feek remembered that his father had been in the Treasury, a man of some importance. He had been useful to Dustworthy and Sons in many ways.

“Oh, that’s nice of you,” he stammered. “I — er — might have known that, of course. Only — your letter made me wonder perhaps a little — what had happened. Do, please, tell me—”

He could think of nothing else to say. He was afraid to ask outright. That sense of disquiet still lurked in him somewhere. “It’s going to be all right, anyhow,” he consoled himself quickly. “Only, the old boy’s damned slow about it.”

Mr. Dustworthy stiffened visibly, as though he had read his client’s thought.

“It concerns,” he went on almost coldly, “a legacy — a possible legacy—”

“For me? For myself?” burst in John Feek, unable to keep it back.

“A legacy,” Mr. Dustworthy picked up the unfinished sentence where it had been interrupted, “that concerns yourself, yes — from someone who appreciates your — er — work — your writing, I mean — but who insists upon conditions.”

“Conditions?” repeated Feek, stupidly.

“What I may call,” explained the lawyer, “*unusual* conditions — rather.”

He lowered his eyes and stroked his beard, while apparently looking for papers that were not on his desk and that he did not expect to be on his desk. He was waiting, obviously, for his client’s gasp. It came. More than a gasp, however, it was a smothered effort to recover breath. For John Feek filled his lungs, trying to appear unconcerned. His heart was beating at an absurd rate, he realised.

“Yes,” he said, “quite so, Mr. Dustworthy,” as though he had expected something of the sort, whereas in reality he had expected something entirely different. “And with conditions, you say? Unusual conditions?” he repeated, burning to ask the amount, but not yet daring to. His skin was growing moister yet cooler at the same time. That his “work” should have found an appreciative individual did not surprise him, such was his poet’s belief in himself, but that this appreciation should take the form of a legacy seemed hardly of this world. With conditions, too! Unusual conditions! What on earth could they be, these conditions? It was the amount of the legacy, however, that bulked largest in his mind. Sums of twenty pounds, fifty pounds, even a hundred pounds occurred to him. His breath, certainly, was now difficult to manage.

“Ah, yes,” he articulated with an effort, as no word came from the man of law; “and — what are the conditions, Mr. Dustworthy? Are they *very* unusual?” He really wanted to ask if they were impossible to accept.

“Strictly speaking,” stated the lawyer, “I should have said condition. For there is only one. The condition is anonymity.” He stopped dead.

John Feek’s mind likewise stopped dead for a moment. The long word, so ordinary otherwise, suddenly had no precise meaning for him. It sounded unpleasant almost, even a trifle mysterious. Its definition escaped him absurdly. Inner excitement had scattered his wits. He could not concentrate.

“Oh, I see, yes — of course,” he replied. “That does happen sometimes, doesn’t it?”

“No doubt,” agreed Mr. Dustworthy, somewhat coolly, “it *can* happen sometimes. My own experience, however, of nearly half a century” — he looked almost apocryphal, stroking his beard— “does not support its frequent occurrence.” He paused again. “I consider it, Mr. Feek,” he went on, presently, “unusual, but, in this case perhaps, understandable.” They stared at one another for a moment in silence. “An annual sum of money,” he added with a pontifical air, “is given to you, Mr. Feek, anonymously for your life, anonymity being the essential condition.”

“My life!” cried John Feek, making it a question as well as an exclamation.

Mr. Dustworthy made no reply to this inanity. He sat back and settled his glasses. There came another pause.

“Anonymity,” repeated John Feek, as the meaning of the word came back to him at last. “You mean — I must never know who gives me this sum?” How much was it, he wondered, oh, how much?

“That is the condition,” repeated Mr. Dustworthy. “You must never know from whom this money is received.”

John Feek, with a tremendous effort, kept silence. The sum, meanwhile, was growing in his mind. He reached a hundred pounds, even a hundred and fifty pounds. The words “money” and “receive” stung a thousand thoughts and questions into life. He hovered towards two hundred pounds even. To tell the truth, he could hardly believe this was not a dream. When a dream comes true, occurred to him, it means that one is asleep or dead.

“Never?” he repeated, stupidly.

Mr. Dustworthy bowed. “Never,” he echoed, solemnly, like Poe’s Raven.

In this moment John Feek’s rather childlike mind was filled suddenly to the brim with his dream. If he came into money, what would he do with it? And through his excited thoughts flew simultaneously also the answers he had always given to himself. He reviewed swiftly the friends he would help, the needy folk he would subsidise, the Tom, Dick, Harry, and Mary whose difficult lives he would make easier. This, to his credit, flashed upon his bewildered mind without hesitation. Idler and loafer he might be; he was; but his greatest happiness would ever be the surprise, the unexpected joy of this kind he could give to others. This, certainly, was real in him. His old dream, that a letter would startlingly turn his aimless life into some sort of usefulness seemed coming true. He had now reached three hundred pounds.

The great question burst out of him at last:

“And what amount, Mr. Dustworthy,” he asked as calmly and legally as he could, “is in question?”

The lawyer eyed him steadily over the tips of his touching fingers. The ghost of something like a cold smile just touched his lips. The lips moved then. “You must prepare yourself, perhaps, for a slight shock,” he began. “The donator appreciates your — work.” He hesitated for an instant, giving the excited Feek an odd impression that he rather resented saying what he was about to say. “The amount of the legacy,” he concluded almost frigidly, “is five thousand pounds a year.”

John Feek stared into the other’s face. “I see,” was the only comment he could think of, though its brief utterance nearly choked him. “Five thousand pounds a year,” he repeated, as if to himself.

The sound of his voice rang on and on, it seemed, filling the quiet room. Five thousand pounds. Five thousand pounds. He saw it in figures, then in letters. The exact amount of his capital, curiously enough, occurred to him. Five thousand every year. He tried to work it out by the month, by the quarter, but figures always muddled him.

Mr. Dustworthy, it seems, talked for some time, but Feek did not take in what he said. What did it matter? Ah, five thousand pounds a year was over one thousand pounds a quarter, he realised.

“And — I may feel sure, quite sure?” he asked at length. “Can I really count on it — till I die, I mean?” The answer was like solid cement being lowered into place:

“Unquestionably. The securities yielding this amount are in my keeping. The first instalment, provided you accept the condition of anonymity, will be paid into your bank as from the first of the month, to-day being the fifteenth — to-morrow morning.”

“To-morrow morning, yes, I see,” repeated Feek, more to himself than to die lawyer. Then, suddenly, a question occurred to him, “And why,” he asked, abruptly, “why does she wish — why, I mean, can’t I thank her?” He stared hard at Mr. Dustworthy, straight into his eyes. “I can understand her liking my poems,” he added, “but why — why mayn’t I even thank her?”

The appraising legal mind examined him through extremely clear glasses. “I was not aware,” said its owner, suavely, “having stated that the donator was a — lady.”

Feek, struggling swiftly with himself, recovered his equilibrium. He re-crossed his legs, a trifle awkwardly. “I beg your pardon,” he said, clumsily, Mr. Dustworthy making no sign that he heard the words, much less that they deserved a rejoinder. “I gather, however,” he commented, judicially, after what seemed to Feek another interminable pause. “that you will accept the legacy.” It was not a question but a statement. His eyes gazed straight into his client’s face above the tips of those lean, white, inhuman fingers. He waited.

John Feek gazed back at him. He did not reply at once. He paused. His mind, of course, was already made up. He was thinking furiously of Tom, Dick, Harry, and Mary, to say nothing of himself. He would accept. He would accept instantly and unconditionally. He would accept — before he woke up, before he found himself dead, before something — something that threatened menacingly, making his heart sink — happened to prove it all a dream, before the legacy, in a word, took wings and vanished. And yet he hesitated, gazing hard into the lawyer’s bearded face in front of him, and, as he gazed, seeing — for the first time — the younger face, the face of thirty years ago, when its owner was a beardless young man, the face that came to play tennis with his father, that came to dine.

“It would — I suspect — be ungracious of me — not to,” he brought out at length, in a tone he forced himself to keep normal, even judicial.

Mr. Dustworthy, making no comment, watched him closely.

“You yourself,” pursued Mr. Feek, “if I may ask — would advise—”

Mr. Dustworthy, alone knowing all the facts, replied at once, almost, indeed, interrupting his client: “It is not a matter upon which I can offer any advice,” he said, firmly. “Advice of any kind,” he added. “The decision, Mr. Feek, must lie solely with yourself. The legacy,” he contributed further, as though he mentioned a legal detail no client could be expected to know, “is tax-free.”

“Tax-free!” exclaimed Feek. “That means, I take it, that—”

“Precisely,” came the quick answer, accompanied by a patient little inclination of the legal head.

John Feek reflected for some minutes, though hardly knowing why he did so, nor what exactly he reflected about.

“You can — you will, at least, convey my thanks — my gratitude—” he began.

“That,” replied the man of law, succinctly, “I can assuredly — and will — do, yes.”

Somehow, thought John Feek, left to himself a moment, it was all too wonderful to be true. There was a catch somewhere. It was not quite credible. Swift thoughts flashed and vanished. He remembered his first uneasiness. He remembered the lawyer’s odd hesitation, his queer resentment, his air, once or twice, of inexplicable hostility, his icy manner of conveying what he called “pleasant news.” Something was wrong, he felt. This time to-morrow — it was now eleven-thirty — over one thousand pounds would be lying in his bank. At the moment he had forty-seven pounds lying there, ten pounds of which was ear-marked for rent. He was aware, as the lawyer had warned him, of a certain shock. This shock was understandable. What he found less understandable was this faint "uneasiness" that refused obstinately and finally to be explained away.

"It's natural enough, after all," he reflected, confusedly, "that someone, a woman probably, has liked my stuff — my work, my poems," he hastened to correct himself, "and wishes to show it in this way. Such things have happened before."

He heard his own voice speaking aloud again:

"You know of no reason, Mr. Dustworthy — if I may put it in that way — why I should decline — this legacy?" He realised that his uneasiness expressed itself thus spontaneously without his quite intending it.

"None whatever," was the answer, given, however, with the faintest imaginable shade of hesitation, a hesitation Feek noticed and disliked.

"And — there's no obligation involved — of any sort?" inquired Feek, again rather surprised at his own question.

"None, Mr. Feek," came the reply as before, and, as before, with the same unwelcome ghost of hesitation. Feek sensed again, as he heard it, the singular hint of disapproval, as if the man of law, while pleased to convey good news, at the same time resented — shrank from — doing so.

A longish pause followed, during which the two men gazed into each other's eyes, Feek imagining in the bright orbs facing him an inexplicable combination of ice and passion, of violent welcome and yet of equally violent resentment, of something that desired while it hated.

"I am happy to accept the legacy — and the conditions," he said at length, with as much dignity as he could summon to his aid — and walked away, wondering why the old lawyer, his father's friend, seemed vaguely hostile, vaguely resentful. He walked away — on air.

"This one brief hour," he thought to himself as he strode home to his lodgings upon a carpet of electric air, "has been worth to me a cycle of Cathay! One crowded hour of glorious life with a vengeance! By gad!" And he drew into his lungs a deep breath of the Hampstead air. Time, he realised, is measurable by its content, rather than by its mere duration. "It's the intensity, by Jove, that counts! Existence is one thing, living is another. A shock, yes — I've had several shocks — but shocks drive one explosively out of an accustomed rut. I'd willingly give my last ten years of living in a rut — crystallised — for the blessed shocks of this single, brief little hour. It's been an eternity!"

For a long time John Feek was quite unable to relate the experience to reality; the new factors were difficult to adjust upon the basis of life as it had been. It was too wonderful to be true, he kept saying to himself. He understood how a shock of happiness might well send a mind off its balance.

How the day passed, he hardly knew. Too excited to sleep, when it ended, he passed a night of broken intervals, making plans, constructing his future anew, envisaging a fairyland which was far from being merely a selfish one. Across every dream, whether a waking or a sleeping one, there fell, however, that faint shadow he had noticed during what he now styled the "immortal interview" with the man of law. He remembered his own vague uneasiness. That scarcely perceptible hesitation, that veiled hostility, in the manner of Mr. Dustworthy came back to him again and again.

In the morning, exhilarated still but not refreshed, Feek made a valiant and determined effort to face things practically and sensibly. He evoked his whole store of common sense to help him in the new adjustment to this change in his life. He walked for miles across Hampstead Heath and Highgate; he read a good deal; he thought things over carefully. He felt the need of a pause; he waited; he did not even go to his bank. Long ago, too, he had given up any hope of guessing who his generous admirer might be — a woman probably, he decided, an entire stranger, at any rate. And he read from cover to cover again both his little books of verse, read them with new joy, with deeper appreciation, finding them good, better than he had believed. It did not surprise him that some rich and big-hearted stranger shared this appreciation, and wished to prove it in this delightful anonymous manner.

Once or twice, as a man is said to pinch himself to prove he is not dreaming, he felt the desire to telephone to the Dustworthy office and confirm the fulfilment of his incredible dream. But he resisted the impulse. That staid old firm, established over a century, with a family business of eminently respectable and distinguished clients, largely Burke, he remembered — a firm of this kind did not make mistakes.

A shutter had flown up in his mind disclosing a new horizon, so that even his lodgings wore a different air. All minor troubles had vanished utterly. Once or twice, such is human nature, he surprised a meanish thought scuttling into its hole: “It might have been twice the amount! It might just as well have been ten thousand pounds!” — but the thought merely flashed and disappeared. He set to work meanwhile to write a few letters, enclosing cheques to various needy friends to whom a present, tactfully offered, would come, like his own good fortune, out of the blue. He felt he simply *must* share his marvellous luck with others; nor was this superstition merely the prompting of a really generous nature. Likewise, he wrote cheques in settlement of the few bills he owed. These cheques he dated a couple of days ahead, the covering letters one day ahead, for he decided not to post them until he had called first at the bank. Of the forty-seven pounds lying there to his credit, he now had nothing left.

And that evening he dined at his club, inviting a friend, an acquaintance rather, for whom he felt nothing in particular, but who gave him a pleasant smile of greeting in the reading-room, and who, faintly surprised at the invitation, yet accepted it. “But why should I sponge on you, Peek? I was dining here, anyhow.”

“But why not?” insisted Feek. “Give me the pleasure. I’m alone.”

“D’you know, I rather wanted to give a little dinner here one night next week,” Feek mentioned over their glass of port. “A bit of luck — oh, nothing to write home about — has come my way, and I feel I ought to celebrate.”

The friend, not really interested, agreed. “Always propitiate the gods, yes!” He smiled, for he understood now the reason he had been invited to dine, and this set him more at his ease. They chatted on, discussing the details idly, and the evening passed quite cheerily. Before going home — he walked from Brook Street to his Hampstead lodgings — some half-a-dozen friends he saw had accepted invitations and congratulated him, among them a critic who had damned his volumes with the faintest kind of praise. They ascribed the luck he mentioned to a horse, or the Stock Exchange.

Sleep came to an exhausted mind and body that night, and he woke in the morning clear-headed and refreshed. The dislocating effects of the first shock were passing. He would go to his bank at once. That was the first thing. After that he would look about for a decent flat suitable to his larger income. In the evening he would post those letters. Too busy to read his morning newspapers he stuffed it into his pocket. He took a taxi. As he walked up the steps into his bank the newspaper slipped from his pocket, and, stooping to pick it up, his eye caught a name in big letters on the front page. It was a headline, and the name was "Dustworthy." Something clutched at his throat. He glanced swiftly at the captions. James Dustworthy, senior partner in the old-established firm of Dustworthy and Sons, had been found dead in his private room at the office. His head was in the gas stove. He had killed himself.

John Feek stopped dead, then turned slowly towards the steps he had just come up. His heart, as he did so, seemed to drop down through the whole length of his body and burst upon the granite floor. What he felt, or thought, or imagined, he hardly knew. He experienced no emotion he could have named. He was numb. There seemed nothing but a blank inside him, an empty void where his heart and mind had been. Mechanically he signalled to a driver. In the taxi, as he hurried to the offices of the firm in Essex Street — no taxi had ever gone so slowly nor by so circuitous a route! — his thoughts gradually collected themselves a little. They provided no convincing consolation. His hands and feet were cold. It was barely eleven o'clock, but even at this hour he found so many people outside the door and in the waiting-room that his sense of horrible bewilderment increased. A feeling of futility overwhelmed him too. Offering a message of formal condolence, but learning nothing by way of information, much less of comfort, from the clerk of the closed offices, he went out into the street again, without a plan.

The club occurred to him, but he presently found himself walking past it; and a second time he walked the whole way out to Hampstead. The familiar house, as he looked at it, had lost the new, different air it had worn since the "immortal interview"; it looked now exactly as it had always looked during the dozen years he had lived there. He fumbled for his latchkey. He passed through the dim, odoriferous hall, and up the creaking stairs.

As he entered his modest sitting-room, a knock rang out loudly — almost challengingly, he thought — on the front door below, the knock that had always summoned that fantastic and ridiculous dream into his mind, the postman's knock. A queer revulsion swept over him. A moment later the maid was in the room beside him. He had not yet taken off his overcoat, much less sat down. “A letter for you, sir,” came the familiar words, as the girl placed the letter on the table and went out. Without moving, he eyed the envelope distastefully, as he noticed, too, the smell of cabbage on the stairs again. The name and address were written by hand, but in a writing he did not recognise. Turning the envelope over, he read the name of the sender printed on the back: “Dustworthy and Sons.” He leaned against the closed door for support, while opening the envelope with fingers that trembled so they seemed all clumsy thumbs. The contents of the letter were written by hand as well:

“*Dear Mr. Peek*, —

“*When this letter reaches you, I shall be dead. I have arranged for delay in posting it.*

“*I have been speculating for some time, disastrously*, *with certain funds, your own capital among them. Your* £5,000 *is lost.*

“*Seeking out some form of compensation for you, I came to the conclusion that one thing only lay in my power — to give you, namely, a single day, at least, of very great happiness. It would prove illusory, but, while it lasted, would be intense and satisfying. Human pleasures, of course, all* are *illusory, as mentioned in your poem* ‘*DUST.*’ *It was this poem*, *indeed, that gave me my idea.*

“*I invented the legacy, making the annual amount the exact sum of your capital I have lost.*

“*If for one single day you have, as I sincerely trust*, *enjoyed the belief that you possessed, instead of* £ 5,000 *capital an income of* £5,000 *a year, your happiness has been so intense that it has provided the fairest amount of compensation in my power to offer, if only, alas, now in retrospect.*

“*With the kindest memories of the pleasant days I spent in your late father*’*s house.*

“*I am,* “*Yours unfaithfully,* “JAMES DUSTWORTHY, SR.”

Only one thought worthy of the name passed through his mind, repeating and repeating itself. Though the words changed variously, the thought remained the same! “The firm will make it good, of course.” The idea of the legacy, it seems, was not present; it was the capital sum, the money that enabled him to live without undue exertion, that filled his mind exclusively. “For their own sake alone! For the reputation of the firm! They’re bound to. Of course they will. They *must.*”

He did not analyse the letter, its unusual wording, the absence of one single expression of regret, the insulting, dreadful comedy of the adverb in the signature. All his energy concentrated itself, apparently, in the one main thought that the firm would be bound to make good his loss. He said the words aloud, over and over again — over and over again.

John Feek, by now, had experienced too many shocks to know quite what he was about, perhaps. He believes he swallowed some lunch, he believes he went out again and walked over Hampstead Heath in rain, but he knows one thing positively — that he eventually encountered, at some street corner or other, Highgate way, a boy holding out a wet, wind-blown placard, whose big black letters seemed to stun him with the terrible words they formed. Before killing himself, James Dustworthy had filed his petition in bankruptcy. This final shock, robbing him of his last slim hope, fell upon him like a bullet that thuds into a corpse. He felt nothing at all.

The next thing, anyhow, that Feek remembered with any distinctness was being in his dingy sitting-room again, his eye resting upon a little pile of unposted letters, letters that he somehow could not bring himself to the point of tearing up. His mind, besides, was not considering them with any real seriousness, for its attention was fixed upon another fact of more immediate importance, the fact that there were cheaper, meaner rooms on the top floor of the lodging-house, and that these rooms, he knew, were vacant. The bedraggled newspaper, whose placard had stunned him, lay on the carpet beneath his wet boots; he had read every word of the brief statement that concerned him.

The fact that Mr. Dustworthy’s brain had given way for some weeks before the final act, and that he had been subject during this period to grave hallucinations, held no interest, as it held no consolation, for John Feek. His condition was black, hopeless, the interior confusion rather dreadful. The series of recent shocks to his own mind, first of intense happiness, then of equally deep disappointment, had certainly disturbed his equilibrium. He caught all manner of horrible notions flashing to and fro, grimacing at him as they traced ominous, even dangerous patterns in his disordered thoughts. He remembers, however, putting away the heap of unposted letters in a desk, just as he remembers glancing round the room, in a cold, deliberate, calculated sort of way that both pleased and frightened him, to see if it contained a gas stove. It did not. Of course, he had forgotten. He had often meant to persuade the landlady to install one. The day, besides, was a nice warm summer's day. Absurd! He laughed — aloud. He sat down and opened a book — of poems. They did not interest him. They were cheap, their emotion was not honestly felt, they were artificial and self-conscious, they were his own. In particular he read one called *DUST*. Its falsity disgusted him. A spontaneous inspiration flamed — he knew now how it should have been written. He began scribbling some lines upon a back page.

During which a considerable time, an hour certainly, must have passed, for the light had begun to fail. A sound in the house below disturbed him, making him start. It was a knock, a postman's knock. His only reaction to it was a shudder; a sense of shuddering anticipation certainly ran through him. Was it, however, a real knock, he asked himself? Was it not only in his mind, a delusion? He would go on hearing these knocks, these awful postman's knocks, all his life probably. He never wanted to see another letter again so long as he lived. The sight of a typed envelope, the sound of a postman's knock, were associated in his mind with dread and disappointment only. The idea, at any rate, brought to his notice one sensible thought — he must write a letter himself, he remembered, several letters, for that matter. He must put off the dub dinner. Ill health, he decided, would be the best excuse to offer, adding something about the "occasion, he hoped, being only postponed."

"A letter for you, sir," sounded a voice in the air beside him.

He had not heard the steps on the stairs, he had not heard the girl come in, he did not hear her go out again. He did not want to get a letter from anywhere or anybody, and he eyed this one that lay on his table with dislike and loathing even, with something of horror too. For the typewritten envelope bore the same inscription as the two former ones; it was from Dustworthy and Sons. He did not open it because he did not dare to, but neither did he dare destroy it. He merely smiled bitterly, as he locked it away in the desk with the heap of unposted letters. A couple of days later another letter, similarly inscribed, arrived and joined it in the desk.

What John Feek endured during that couple of days, and for several subsequent couples of days as well, need not be described in detail. That his courage made him presently face life again is the only item worthy of mention, perhaps, for it persuaded him eventually to open and read those two odious letters, which, he saw, were signed by Henry Dustworthy, son of the dead man. Nothing more, he felt, could possibly happen to him now; no further shock could touch him.

Without noticing it, Feek read the later one first. It expressed formal anxiety that no receipt had come to hand for the cheque recently enclosed. Feek then tore open the earlier one. It enclosed the firm's cheque for the usual quarterly payment of his income, and went on to explain briefly that James Dustworthy's petition in bankruptcy was due to a delusion on his "poor father's" part that he had committed various illegal acts, but that actually, the firm was entirely solvent as usual, and that, in fact, the whole thing was an hallucination on his part, caused by — there followed a Latin word that in plain English was "madness."

No reference to the legacy lay in that letter, it being obviously a portion of the suicide's delusion. But John Feek, Henry was pleased to add, was mentioned in his "poor father's will" for a sum of five thousand pounds, "which amount will be duly paid into your bank as soon as probate is granted."

John Feek took the unposted letters from his desk and slipped them into the nearest Hampstead pillar-box. They were dated several days before, but that, John Feek considered, really did not matter.

THE SURVIVORS

IT IS, APPARENTLY, the little knocks that hurt — a bruised corn, a kick on the shin — while in the big crash unconsciousness follows before the pain is registered. Only a man who has been in a sudden smash can realise how oddly unexpected the physical reactions can be. A well-known Alpine climber, hero of incredible escapes, has described in particular falling down a couloir, colliding with the cliffs as he banged from side to side like a bouncing ball. He saw each collision coming, he took it, but the shocks did not hurt. He felt nothing more than an intense excitement, which he describes as a kind of electrisation of the body that was almost pleasurable. It is claimed, too, that the murderer in the electric chair feels nothing, since the electric current travels faster by several fractions of a second than the report the nerves carry to his brain. He is dead literally before he knows it.

Lindstrum certainly was aware of no physical anguish when his omnibus skidded, struck a lorry, hovered a moment undecided, then toppled over with an awful, lumbering, slow heave. It crashed upon the pavement by the Kensington Gardens railings, making a thundering roar, of which Lindstrum heard nothing but the splintering tinkle of the breaking glass. He was on the top, on the side against the park railings. He saw these railings fly sideways into space, he saw the kerb rush up at him. A man and a girl, the only other occupants of outside seats, stood up and screamed. He met the paving stones, he thinks, slightly before the body of the omnibus did. Head and left shoulder, he believes, struck the ground together. But he felt nothing; he had no pain; merely, as the saying has it, knew no more.

So far as his senses were concerned, sight had registered accurately enough; it was hearing, a slower vibration, that had failed, for no other sound than this splintering of glass reached his ears.

Then, presently, a man’s voice was audible quite close to his face: “Gone west, I’m afraid, this chap! We’ll take the others first. Hurry...!”

There was screaming, too, but a little farther off, the screams and shrieks of several voices. He felt himself being lifted and carried away a short distance and then laid down upon something that was softer, anyhow, than the paving-stones.

“Gone west!” indeed. It made him smile. But he said nothing. Needing, he believed, no immediate attention himself, he let the doctor “take the others first.” He was lying on some overcoats and tarpaulins. Some time obviously had passed since the smash.

He examined himself carefully all over, for it was not his first accident, and he knew how to set about it. “Lindstrum’s luck,” he remembered, and smiled again. Nothing could kill him. Thoroughly and slowly, he tried each joint in turn. There was nothing broken, anyhow. He saw no blood, he felt no bruises. Externally, he was whole. Internally? That might be another matter. He tested this more carefully, filling his lungs as slowly as he possibly could. Any moment he anticipated a blinding, fiery sting, a ghastly spasm that would make him sweat blood. They did not come. He inhaled and exhaled to the full with comfort. Breathing was all right. He was uninjured inside and out. “An extraordinary escape!” he decided. “No man can die till his moment comes! Lindstrum’s luck again!” He grinned and sat up.

Looking about him then, he saw the crowd, the splintered bus like a huge red broken beetle, the policemen’s helmets, a couple of ambulances. All this was not a dozen yards from where he lay against the park railings, and it made him shrink, as though the picture horrified and hurt him. He disliked it, indeed, to the point of hating it. It gave him a touch of nausea as he stared, though he realised dearly enough that this rather violent reaction was nervous and mental, of course — an aftermath of shock. That red monster, people torn and broken beneath its great shattered carcass, the curious crowd, the busy, rather clumsy police, the splendid, quick doctors — it all produced in him this sensation of intense dislike, of loathing, of ghastly human futility, the futility of living and dying. It revolted him. He turned away, so that he saw the railings and the trees instead.

The trees were better, he decided, and as a gate showed handy, he made up his mind to go into the gardens, to get away, out of sight of the immediate scene. “They’ve forgotten me,” he thought, “and, anyhow, I don’t need anything.” He chuckled to himself. Rising slowly, cautiously, and finding that his legs obeyed his weight normally, he walked through the gate without being noticed, and sat down upon an empty bench some few yards along the gravel path. Just as he left the road he saw two ambulances drive away. He thanked his stars he was in neither of them with smashed limbs, internal injuries, or concussion. “All the same,” he reflected, “as soon as the crush is over, I’ll look in at the hospital, just to make quite sure.” He grinned again at his exceptional “Lindstrum’s luck.” He was not even trembling. “I’m O.K.,” he said aloud happily, as he made himself comfortable on the wooden bench.

His thoughts turned naturally, yet not excitedly, upon his recent experience. There had been, nevertheless, a shock, he realised, a very severe shock. His physical machinery might be undamaged, thanks to his unknown gods, but his nerves and mind betrayed a difference somewhere, though exactly where and how, he could not at first determine. There was a change in him that rather asserted itself. And while he understood that this was natural enough, he became, at the same time, aware of certain elements in the change that puzzled him. He tried to ascertain in what this change consisted — what, above all, were the elements that perplexed him. These remained, despite his examination, peristently elusive.

Memory certainly was damaged. He had forgotten his own name now, and for the life of him could not recall it. The sense of time, too, was queer, irregular, and these two were doubtless connected, he reflected. Time and memory were closely related, of course. Despite his best efforts, he could not determine “what time” it was now, what his age was, how long ago the accident had occurred, how long he had taken to walk to this bench where he sat, nor how long he had been sitting on it. Something had telescoped, as it were, so that past and future now had new relations that rather obliterated their usual meaning. For a moment, indeed, he saw the accident, which he called past, coming towards him out of what he usually called the future. But more than that — seeing it coming towards him, he was able to prepare for it. And hence its failure to injure him as it otherwise might have done — which, he declared, was ridiculous.

These two deficiencies of time and memory his mind clearly realised, connecting them satisfactorily as cause and effect. This made it all seem natural. It *was* natural. Of that he had no doubt. Yet it was more than strange, he began to reflect, that, sitting now on this bench in Kensington Gardens, he was a little boy again, a young lad, a youth, a grown-up man, and a man of nearly forty — yet all of these simultaneously, so that he could choose at will which period he wanted. It was, none the less, quite natural. He was able to be and see all his periods of life, or any one of them separately — which he yet knew was absurd. The mental shock was sufficiently obvious. He laughed. He felt rather happy about it, oddly happy. A new experience anyhow.

These changes, yes, he grasped clearly enough, and they did not alarm him because he knew they would presently pass. But there were "elements" that puzzled and perplexed him. As he rested on the empty bench and surveyed the world about him, he was aware that something in him reeled. For this world about him, this familiar world he had always known, had altered in an inexpressible manner. But how altered? He could not for the life of him determine.

He stared about him, while breathing deeply, cautiously. He watched the people pass. In the distance a glint of the Round Pond caught his eye, with the tops of sailing boats, white and moving. He was sailing a boat himself, a child of ten years old again — literally. He lived in those particular emotions. He experienced them all over again, suddenly understanding that this was possible because they were always *there*: it was he who had moved away from them, while yet he need not have moved away from them. He did so because everybody else did so. Simultaneously, then, he was also forty, grown heavy, rather worldly-wise, cynical. "Odd," he reflected, "extremely odd! But it's right enough and natural." He was not, apparently nailed down to any period.

Before him, people were passing along the gravel path in both directions. He watched them come and go. Some hesitated, as though about to sit down, for the April day was sunny, with warm sweet air. It was natural to sit in the sun and rest a moment, and he wished they would use the bench. He wanted to speak to someone, to tell about his escape; that really was his keenest desire, he discovered. He burned to tell about it. He was bursting to describe how the bus had overturned and crashed, and how he had escaped, not for the first time either. If only some of these people would sit down a moment so that he could get into conversation with them and tell them what had happened.

Among the dozens who passed, however, he saw no one suitable, no one to whom he could talk easily and naturally, no one who would not have thought him just a crazy sort of fellow sitting on a park bench in the sun, a little drunk perhaps, possibly a rascal even; a beggar, or worse. He saw no single group to whom, even had they sat down beside him, he could have spoken. He picked out no one suitable.

These people, as he put it to himself, seemed somehow unapproachable. That was the right word, yes — unapproachable.

“An unreal lot,” he decided. “Not real — that’s it. None of them ever been through anything. I’d scare them probably. Yes, scare them.” Their very looks, he noticed, avoided him. “Duds,” he concluded, smiling with a touch of pity. “Only half alive, these people!”

Had they altered somehow? If so, the terms escaped him. He gazed at the grass and trees instead, feeling bewildered yet still quite happy, and it was then that the alteration in those common, inanimate things, too, asserted itself. Where altered? How altered? Again, he could not exactly say. They looked as usual in one way, while in another way they were unusual. There was this startling difference. What was it? He was unable to define it, try as he might and did. The trees — well, they were fiery, almost flame-like; the familiar, clipped grass contained some idea of sound, of music. All these ordinary familiar things shared some new factor that was startlingly different, though he could not seize and label what it was exactly. How could they look the same, he asked himself, and yet be different?

He stared and thought, and stared and thought, and then, quite abruptly, he made a sharp discovery that was satisfactory. He knew it was true, along the right line anyhow: the usual chaos of familiar things betrayed a new meaning.

“That’s it!” he exclaimed aloud, with some excitement. “Part of it, at least, I see — *more* of everything.”

A sort of convulsive joy and wonder flooded his whole being. This set him puzzling for what seemed many minutes. Just as he saw Time as a whole instead of sectionally, so he saw these common objects entirely instead of in broken parts. It made him laugh. He felt his happiness increase. The intensity of this new experience staggered him rather. He had always been a stranger in the familiar world he knew so well. Now, at last, he was to find out where, in it all, he really belonged.

The need to speak to someone, meanwhile, became so urgent that he could scarcely control it. The longing to describe what had happened, and how he had miraculously escaped, grew painfully. A dozen times he leaned forward to attempt it, but each time sat back without having uttered a sound. No one sat down on his bench, no one paid any attention to him; all passed him by. They chose benches farther along the path, but never his bench. He found himself at length regarding all these park strollers as mechanical automata almost; they were so drab, so unenterprising, so dull, so un-alive. Until, after a long time, a young man came from the trees across the road and walked towards the bench in a straight line without hesitation, and this fellow, Lindstrum saw in a flash, was different.

He was not so drab, so dull, so mechanical, Lindstrum realised, as the others. He walked briskly, as with purpose and decision. There was something about him — lean, thin-faced, alert, like a flying-man — something less dun-coloured, something light, indeed, that almost shone. This effect, at least, of light there was about him certainly. The youth walked smartly up, turning neither right nor left, glanced with a quick smile at Lindstrum, and sat down at the far end of the bench.

“Nice day,” began Lindstrum instantly, in a companionable way, for he could not wait a second longer. “Taking the air like me, eh?”

The other grinned and nodded. “That’s it,” he said, in a pleasant voice. He took out a cigarette case, then put it back again unopened, smiling at his companion. Lindstrum likewise realised that he himself had no desire to smoke. He took a full breath instead, staring hard into his companion’s eyes. What was this radiance in the eyes and face?

Then out it burst: “D’you know,” he began eagerly, “I’ve just had an extraordinary escape...” And he described the incident in full, bringing in his earlier escapes at the tail end. “I believe I’m the only survivor,” he added, “if it comes to that.”

The other listened attentively, a smile growing on his young sunburned face.

“Not so funny,” he remarked when the end was reached. “Because, you see, I’m another — if it comes to that.”

“What d’you mean?” asked Lindstrum, his breath catching.

The other paused a moment, “I came over to you on purpose” — the youth evaded the question.

“How — on purpose?”

“Well — I saw you a long way off. I knew you’d understand.”

Lindstrum stared. “I don’t get you quite,” he said.

“Probably not,” replied the other. “At first, that is.” He paused. “It’s this way,” he went on a moment later. “Some time ago — can’t say exactly how long — a week or a month or a day, perhaps — I crashed, too. In the air, you know.”

Lindstrum thought hard a moment. “Injured much?”

“Oh, about the same as yourself,” returned the other, with a wide, curious grin.

“Same as me?” repeated Lindstrum, puzzled.

The other nodded. “All the others were pretty badly smashed up, you see. But I escaped.”

“You escaped, eh? Like me?”

“I was the only survivor, yes.”

Obviously the young fellow was telling the truth.

“Damned odd, isn’t it,” commented Lindstrum, “that we should meet like this on the same bench...?” and was going on to say a lot more that was in his mind, when a group of passers-by came to a halt at this very moment in front of them. They hesitated in the sun. There were four people, including an old woman and an old man, with two younger folk. They eyed the bench.

There was room on it for two more, but not for the whole party.

“It’s quite warm,” remarked the younger ones, “and we’ve got half an hour to kill. Let’s take a rest.”

They measured the space available.

“Room for all of us,” they announced.

The party of four, after some preliminary shuffling, moved closer. They sat down. They sat down in a row. The old man sat right through Lindstrum, and the old woman sat right through his companion at the other end.

Lindstrum and his companion exchanged looks.

“That’s what I meant,” remarked the young aviator, “when I said I was a survivor. That’s why I came across to you. We’re both survivors.” And they resumed their talk as though no one else sat on the bench, continuing it where they had left off, and talking perhaps for hours, perhaps for days, perhaps for weeks or months, or even centuries....

THE ADVENTURE OF TORNADO SMITH

I

WHEN Mr. T. Smith, the prominent stockbroker of Capel Court in the City of London, woke that morning, the sun was streaming into his comfortable bedroom in a respectable quarter of the region north of Hyde Park. He felt a curious sense of exhilaration, a strange glow of happiness. Like a boy who knows he has done well in an examination, he experienced a delightful, light-hearted anticipation. And this glow pervaded his whole being. It was as if he expected some happy event, a piece of luck, a glorious stroke of chance.

He could not define it, but he felt that it was there, almost within his grasp. So vivid was this happy emotion that he sprang from the bed and stood in his striped blue-and-white pyjamas, staring out of the open window. The sun on his bare neck was hot, birds were singing in the mangy cedar of the small garden, a few early hyacinths blazed just below him in a narrow strip of green. But he saw nothing to account for what he felt. The sparrows were dirtier than ever.

He was puzzled. Tightening the belt of his pyjamas which had become loose in sleep, he smoothed his scanty hair and rubbed his eyes.

“Had a dream, I suppose,” he mumbled to himself. “A jolly dream sometimes does the trick,” he added, opening his jacket wider to let the sun warm his scraggy chest. Only, he could not remember any dream.

Mr. T. Smith liked things explained properly, and this bright happiness lay beyond his explanation. It had nothing to do with his business, nothing to do with the buying and selling of shares. He knew that instinctively. His business was good, but it was not as good as that.

He stroked his bare chest and smiled. Something important was going to happen to him. He felt it in his bones. It was something that might alter his whole life.... But of what kind, he asked himself, opening another button, and staring fixedly at the milkman in the area.

So methodical was Mr. T. Smith, so regular in his life, that this stir of emotion upset him rather. His business, inherited from an uncle, was steady and lucrative. “Mr. T. Smith and Co.” was respected in the City. It was a family business, his clients too respectable to allow of mistakes. They lived and died prepared — by Mr. T. Smith and Co. Irregularities played no rôle. His quarters in North London were also eminently right. His landlady, Miss Slumbubble, had looked after him for twenty years. She even mended his clothes; added new pockets when his money, wearing holes, slipped through. The first time, he remembered, the new pocket was too deep so that his hand dipped to his knee to find a coin. But that was years ago....

Withdrawing from the open window, where the milkman watched him with too much interest, he thought, Mr. T. Smith dressed and went down to breakfast.

“You ‘ad a good night?” asked Miss Slumbubble as usual, bringing the invariable eggs and bacon. “You slep’ well, Mr. Smith?”

“Better than ever, thank you, Miss Slumbubble,” he replied, also as usual. He wondered if she noticed the excitement that still burned in him like a flame. He hoped not.

Apparently she did not. “That mattress,” she observed, “is the best in London. And I always make your bed myself, Mr. Smith.”

She had said this every morning for the past twenty years, and Mr. T. Smith knew exactly the reply she expected. “I thought you had.” He produced it with a smile, and began to eat his eggs.

Only Miss Slumbubble could not know with what curious excitement he had sprung from the “best mattress in London” an hour ago, nor with what a strange sense of anticipatory happiness he started forth upon his day. He put his impeccable tie, if possible, straighter, he tugged at his moustache, he took his umbrella, he set forth. “I feel a bit of a dog, you know, this morning,” he caught himself saying under his breath — then turned sharply, for Miss Slumbubble stood behind him. She invariably saw him off to the City.

“Oh! Good-bye, Miss Slumbubble,” he exclaimed as usual. “I shall be back by seven o’clock.”

"And your dinner will be ready for you, Mr. Smith," replied the landlady, also as usual. "And I 'ope it won't rain."

Mr. Smith paused before making his customary comment. As a rule he said "I trust not," but this morning the words refused to come as they had always come before.

"It *can't* — to-day," he heard himself saying.

But the door slammed behind him as he said it. He heard the bang. He was not sure whether Miss Slumbubble had caught his words or not. He laughed to himself. He pulled at his moustache. Usually, it felt soft, but now, he noticed, it felt stiff and wiry. It bristled, rather. He laughed again and set forth briskly to walk across the Park to his office. He had, after all, forgotten his umbrella. "Something's wrong with me," he chuckled to himself, "or — perhaps — it's something right." He laughed outright. "Anyhow, it's — *different*."

Then, as he strode along, he suddenly recalled that Miss Slumbubble had made an unusual remark to him. His mind, occupied with something else at the moment, had not noticed it. Now it came back to him. When he said it could not rain to-day, her comment was unexpected.

Ordinarily she would have said that "she 'oped not." This morning she said another thing: "Anything may 'appen," were the words she used.

"Anything," agreed Mr. T. Smith, laughing so happily that, as he crossed Bayswater Road into the Park, he nearly got run over.

II

Following the routine of years, he strolled across the Park, intending to take a bus eventually at Trafalgar Square. But to-day he felt a strange reluctance to go to his office.

He fought against this, for what would people say if Mr. T. Smith was late? He had never been late. His reputation was based upon his punctuality. His clients would talk. Even Miss Slumbubble might hear of it. It would never do if he dawdled.

"Bother Miss Slumbubble!" he suddenly exclaimed. "And hang my clients! What does it matter if I *am* late?"

All the way something was singing in his heart. Perhaps it was that the spring was running in his blood. For now, at last, the spring had really come. Late in May the sun had finally struggled out, and the endless winter seemed to be gone for good. He saw a swallow darting past a chimney. A whiff of warm, scented air blew over him. He thought of gorse and pine trees on some sandy waste... of lizards... butterflies....

He knew suddenly that it was something more than the spring. His whole being thrilled to a new rhythm. Someone — somewhere — had piped... and he had heard. The real man had answered.

Not Mr. T. Smith of Capel Court, but the other one — Tornado Smith.

For he now abruptly remembered that he was named Tornado. Mr. T. Smith, most people thought, was Thomas Smith, even Timothy Smith, but actually his first name was Tornado. And surely he was not called Tornado for nothing!

It was the half named Tornado that heard the queer piping and answered to it, the part of him that, against all judgment and reason, drove his little sailing boat out of the safety of the harbour into the wintry gales of his brief holidays — Tornado, the adventurer that underlay the man of business, the part of him that took wild, even ridiculous, risks from time to time. It was just this "something" belonging to "Tornado," that made him different from the jostling thousands he passed daily on his trudge to his office in the City.

Some spring, some bubble, danced now in his heart, discovered first, it seemed, in sleep.

His steps, unconsciously, became slower and slower. He found himself regretting that he could name no valid excuse for not turning up at the office. At every opportunity he paused and looked about him. He studied the shop windows with the closest attention, as if he had never seen them before — anything to prolong his walk. He was waiting for something. But what that "something" was he had no idea.

"*Tornado*" he repeated to himself with a new feeling of its significance. As though his father had been a whirlwind, his mother a storm. It made him laugh, as he dawdled on, staring at this and that, idling, drifting, waiting...

Still it was not till he had reached Trafalgar Square that he came definitely to a halt. The office seemed suddenly more than he could bear. He stopped dead. Something plucked at his heart. He watched the pigeons drinking at the fountains. He was very late already. He knew quite well that his secretary, with a bundle of tiresome letters, was fuming and fussing; clients were wondering why Mr. T. Smith was late. The telephone was ringing... ringing...

“Well, let it ring!” he thought to himself. “And let the secretary wait! And let the clients wonder why I’m late! It’ll do them all good!”

He lingered in the warm sunshine, watching the pigeons preen themselves after their bath, or carrying on the love affairs that the sudden spell of fine weather provoked. The London sparrows, even the flies, detained him.

He caught himself wondering why he still lived in London. He had already made a good deal of money, enough to retire on. Why did he still waste what remained of his early manhood in this hateful way?

Were there not other lands that he could visit, lands with blue skies and sparkling seas? Countries free from the bugbear of what men called “progress,” more primitive, perhaps, yet at the same time more peaceful? Places where people still sang at their work in the hot sunshine...?

He thought of all he had read about the lotus-lands of the East and of scattered isles in the Pacific, of coral reefs and golden strands. It was difficult to believe all the stories he had read about such places, though he remembered the strange thrill the reading had given him at the time. There ought to be, there *must* be, he felt, countries just like that, countries where things happened, countries where the inhabitants did more than merely catch buses and run for electric trains. He recalled the sunny, golden advertisements he had read, the travel-folders....

And he tried in his mind to decide if there was any place that absolutely fulfilled his requirements. He felt a little doubtful. Nothing short of a real fairyland would do.

For a long time he stood thus, gazing into the shimmering fountain, but he no longer saw the water where the dirty pigeons bathed. He saw the long line of a coral reef with the great combers breaking over it in silvery foam against a background of waving coconut palms on some enchanted island of the Southern Seas. Soft winds brushed his cheeks. He heard the sea-birds cry....

Dimly he became aware that a small boy was standing beside him, gazing up into his face with large, dark eyes. It was these enquiring eyes that first arrested his attention, for they shared, it seemed, his own vision, and saw what *be* saw. They were looking, surely, at something the others did not see.

Yet the boy, at the first glance, seemed commonplace enough — like hundreds of others one saw pouring out of school in a back street. Poorly clad, with a thin, half-starved body, there was nothing about him the least attractive. On the second glance, however, Tornado saw that there *was* a difference. His features were finer than those of the average slum child. In spite of his poor clothes, he carried himself with a certain air, a kind of unconscious grace that suggested some wild animal.

Mr. T. Smith, of Capel Court, found himself staring at him — as a dog or other wild creature stares — full of interest, curiosity, wonder, all of them spontaneous and unconscious.

“Buy a ticket, sir,” said the boy in a pleasant, piping voice. “They’re only a shilling.”

“But where can I go — in these days — for a shilling?” Tornado asked, smiling.

“All the way,” the boy answered gravely.

“*All* the way!” echoed Tornado doubtfully, his heart beating.

He saw that the boy actually held pieces of blue paper in his hand that looked like tickets. The sight troubled him.

“Of course,” he stammered, “of course, I will.” He tried to look as if he were amused, while actually a lump rose somewhere in his throat, as he handed the boy a shilling and took the blue strip of paper in exchange. His hand was shaking.

The little fellow turned to go, then stopped suddenly and came back.

“Be careful never to lose it, Tornado,” he said shyly. “Full directions are written on the back.” And he turned away a second time.

“But — how do you know my name?” enquired Tornado, trembling now all over.

The strange boy smiled up into his face. It was an entrancing smile.

“Oh, we know our customers,” he said softly. “They are so few.”

“You don’t sell many then — ?” began Tornado.

This time the boy was really gone. It almost seemed as if he had vanished. He melted away so quickly into the passing throng.

Tornado looked at the blue slip of paper in his hand. On the back, sure enough, were some lines of writing. The thin, spidery letters were queer looking, and, instead of ink, some silvery liquid had been used. But the directions, once he mastered the script, were plain:

“*Be at the Robin Hood Gate at Richmond Park before noon,”* he read, “*and there you will see a girl knitting beneath an oak tree with a cat beside her. Show her this paper and she will put you on your way*.”

III

For some time Tornado turned the paper over and over in his hand. Of course, it was all nonsense. It was some charity stunt, some treasure hunt organised to get money for a hospital. It was one of these modern tricks that extort money out of the sentimental crowd... And yet the whole thing fell in so well with his idle mood that it provided just the excuse he needed — not to go to his office.

“I will go,” he informed himself, rather like a truant boy, “for the park will be lovely, and there may be somebody there!”

He started off.

Looking back afterwards, Tornado often thought that the strangest thing about this strange business was that, the moment he decided to go, no further thought of his neglected work, of his office, or even of his old life, ever crossed his mind. It was as if his normal life had ended suddenly. He seemed to have begun a new existence, while yet this “new existence” seemed always to have been *there*. It had always been within reach, only he had never found the way. The old shackles and ties were now cut through, at any rate, and a new and thrilling sense of freedom swept over him.

He had found liberty at last! He felt like a gipsy who leaves the old familiar camp behind him, knowing that the entire world is his to roam as he will. His office, his rooms, Miss Slumbubble, were wiped out as though they never had existed.

How he reached Richmond Park he never quite knew. No memory remains. Whether it was by ‘bus or taxi, on foot, or otherwise, he could not say. It seemed to him sufficient that he found himself at the Robin Hood Gate in an incredibly short time. He was simply — there.

He looked about him eagerly, but at first could see no one that answered in any way to the description on his ticket. The sun blazed down from a cloudless sky; the trees and grasses still held the freshness of early spring; the scent of the good clean earth was in his nostrils. And he drew in deep breaths of sheer delight at getting away so easily from the noise and smell of the city. The day was radiant, sparkling. His blood stirred within him.

A park keeper, he noticed, was chatting idly with a nurse girl, and an occasional car swept along the roadway with a swirl of dust, yet without a sound. They were like pictures only. But nowhere could he discover a girl beneath an oak tree with a cat beside her.

Putting his hand into his pocket, he pulled out the blue ticket, intending to read it over once again, but, even as his hand closed on it, he became aware that he was looking straight at the object of his search.

There sat a girl beneath an oak tree, exactly as described, and a black cat was licking its paws beside her. He gazed. A moment before, the spot was empty. Yet no surprise stirred in him. This, somehow, was just what he expected.

He was excited, but not troubled. A flicker of nerves, however, it seems, ran through him, for he dropped his ticket, and as it fluttered down and he stooped hurriedly to recover it, the girl and cat both vanished too. He could not be quite sure, perhaps, being too intent on picking it up again. Yet it was nowhere to be seen. Only a large green leaf lay at his feet. He grabbed it instantly — and, sure enough, he again held the ticket in his hand.

After all, he must have been mistaken about the disappearance of the girl and cat. There they both were in front of him, as plain as life.

He advanced. The girl watched him coming. She smiled.

“I’m glad you found your ticket,” she said. “I was afraid you might have lost it altogether — like the others.” Her voice was soft.

“Do most people lose it?” he found himself asking.

“Most, yes,” she replied.

“And can you really show me the way?” he went on, after a pause.

The girl seemed amused at the question.

“Of course I can,” she replied.

Something within him hesitated and was afraid. He was afraid of the question he wanted to ask, afraid that the reply would never satisfy him. He took a gulp of breath. Then he asked his question.

“Is it to — Fairyland?” came his whisper. “Is that what the ticket means — all the way to Fairyland?”

“I live there,” replied the girl simply, “and my name is Chance. My sister, Luck, lives with me,” she added, pointing to the cat.

“But how can a cat be your sister?” Tornado asked.

The girl, without answering, looked at the cat, and Tornado, following her glance, met the full glare of the cat’s eyes. He felt a faint shiver run through him. No further answer seemed necessary. The eyes that met his own were not the eyes of a cat, nor of a human being. They were the eyes, he realised of a spirit — the eyes of something — of someone — who had seen the birth and death of worlds, yet still lived on.

A feeling of chill swept over him. Questions that sprang to his lips died in his throat and remained unuttered. His breath failed him for some seconds. He stared from one to the other uncertainly, and for several minutes no one spoke.

With an effort, Tornado looked towards the park gates. To his surprise some subtle change was already at work. The gates became dim, the nurse girl and the keeper appeared less distinct. He gazed hard, trying to focus his sight, but a tenuous veil seemed to have fallen between him and the familiar world he knew of old. No effort he made could pierce it quite. This queer soft gauze fell between his sight and what he had always known as Reality.

He turned again to the girl. Change seemed to be at work in her too. She looked less homely somehow. Her hair, which he had before described to himself as a washed-out blonde, had deepened in colour; her rather faded blue eyes had lightened up. It was as if some hidden lamp shone through.

She began to glow, to radiate light. Second by second her beauty increased. A kind of radiance seemed to surround her like a cloud, and this light glimmered everywhere through the air.

Tornado next became aware that in some strange way he, too, was changing. Slight tremors ran through him from his head to his feet. He felt that he was altering, adapting himself in some way to a changed condition of existence.

Everything in him, he felt, was being speeded up in marvellous fashion, quickened, heightened, swept into higher, swifter gears. His thoughts now tore through him at intenser speed. Rapidity was the keynote. Soon, at this pace, he would pass beyond the need of ordinary thought at all, of thought as men knew it. A new power was invading him. Already he seemed beyond the need of speech with his companions. Words, syllables, were unnecessary, for in some strange way they answered his unuttered questions. The blood raced through his veins with a power that seemed strong enough to rend his body in pieces. The tear and rush were furious. Yet he remained utterly indifferent. In this new state the loss of his ordinary bodily sensations, perhaps even of his body too, appeared a matter too trivial to notice. There were more interesting things to think of than that.

All the familiar landmarks were already gone. The park gates, the keeper and the keeper’s lodge had long since vanished, and only the tops of the biggest trees remained above a kind of whitish mist. Even while he looked, these, too, disappeared with a kind of spiral swirl. The familiar world had faded.

He found himself upon a sandy path running through deep heather to a lonely sand beach.

The sun shone brightly on the sparkling water, and far away he could just make out the dim shape of an island. Gulls wheeled about the shore, and a heron, on lazy wing, passed circling over his head.

He looked round for his companions. The cat had gone, and in its place stood a dark and lovely girl. Her sister, the fair one, stood beside her, smiling gravely.

“You may call us Chance and Luck,” she said, “for thus are we known among men. But these are only names. Others call us Fate and Destiny, though these, too, are wrong. In reality there is only the Deed and the Payment." She paused and gazed into his eyes. "Perhaps, this is too hard for you," she went on gently, "but, if so, Merlin will explain, for he is the wisest of those who dwell in Fairyland."

IV

Tornado was in no mood to quibble about names, or as to what Chance meant by her talk of Merlin. He felt a new life pulsing through his veins, and his heart sang with happiness. He noted, almost without astonishment, that he had shed his old clothes somewhere on the journey, his usual City clothes. Now he stood clad only in a leather jerkin with bare and sunburnt legs, and instead of shoes he wore rough sandals of deer's hide. A long hunting knife swung at his belt. Only one thing was missing, a familiar thing that ought to have been there too. What it was he could not say. He recognised its absence — no more than that.

He noted these changes without surprise, but at the same time there came a fugitive flash of memory — a memory of a dream, perhaps, that had come to him only last night. Dreams have this way of cropping up in stray fragments sometimes.

"Miss — er — Slum—" he could not get the whole name, "and that place of torture I was going to in my dreams — a bell ringing, ringing — letter — lots of letters — Mr. T. Smith — ." He passed his hand across his eyes in a vague effort to remember—" dear, dear, what a horrid dream it was — and there's something I've forgotten — I wonder... I *wonder...*"

His eyes caught the figures of the two girls running past him, and all memory of his dream slipped from his consciousness in the way dreams always slip away and are forgotten. His years had fallen from him like the leaves of a tree, and the vigour of youth was in his blood. Adventure was calling to him with her deathless voice. Laughing, he ran down the path to join his two companions on the edge of the water. He saw their gleaming white legs as they stepped into a small sailing-boat lying in the cover, its bow resting on the yellow sand, its stem just afloat. As he reached them they paused and looked at him. They leaped back to join him, sitting down on the sand and motioning to him to do the same.

Tornado sat down beside them.

“There’s the boat that will take you to Fairyland,” said Chance, smiling at him mischievously. “Have you the courage to go in her?”

“I think so,” he replied. “What are the dangers?” The two sisters whispered together for a moment. It was Luck who answered him:

“There is the danger of never getting back,” she said, “of never returning. It takes courage, too, to cross the Dragon Field to get to your home.”

“My home!” he exclaimed.

Looking at him encouragingly, they laughed, and their laughter, he thought, was like the music of bells coming faintly, sweetly across summer meadows.

“Your home, yes,” explained Chance. “Hasn’t your home always been here? Haven’t you yourself made it here? Through all the dull years, haven’t you dreamed of a little house on the edge of the forest, near a pool where the deer come down to drink at nightfall? And a glade where the stags roar when the autumn leaves are falling? And a sailing boat that will take you far away to some enchanted isle? And a girl, perhaps, with dark hair or with blond, and smiling eyes and happy laughter?”

He knew it was all too true. For years and years, all through his life, he had dreamed such things. From boyhood he had dreamed of fords where knights-errant held the crossings against all comers. Sometimes in his dreams he had seen a battlemented town gay with flags, with strange old-world houses and narrow, twisting streets. Time after time he had seen the same town, so that in the end it had become as familiar to him as his own small bit of London. He could find his way about it quite well. He knew where the armourer had his shop and where the leather-workers lived. Even the faces of the people who kept the market stalls in the quaint little square by the church were all familiar. Yet he was never quite sure of his own standing in the town. Even in his dreams he was a little puzzled. Some of the people saw and recognised him, but others completely ignored him as though he was not there. All the same, he felt that it was his own town in a sense. He knew it all, from the archery butts to the tilting ground, where brave tournaments were held with the splintering of lances.

He looked at his two companions. He saw that they read his thoughts, and that there was no need of explanations.

“Tell me, please, about the Dragon Field,” he said, a queer trembling shyness in him. “Are they dangerous?”

“They are terrifying,” said Luck. “You see, they are the Guardians, and they don’t let everybody by. They will not touch y*ou.*”

“Whom do they stop?” he asked.

Luck reflected a moment. “Oh, quite a lot of people,” she replied presently. “Those who are cruel to animals and children chiefly. Then money-grubbers and gluttons, the kind that are always thinking of their comfort and their clothes and their looks. Fat people, too, with shiny skins. You know the sort.”

Tornado sighed. “Of course,” he agreed, “it would never do to let them in. They would make the place impossible.”

“And people who never, never take any sort of risk,” Luck added.

“Ah!” said Tornado to himself, and fell to thinking.

“Is that Fairyland that I see over there?” he asked after a while, pointing to a misty island far away. He had noticed it when he first arrived at the beach. Very dim and distant it seemed.

Luck’s expression and voice were graver as she answered. “You would find it difficult to land there,” she told him. “That is called Hi Brésil by some, by others the Isle of Avalon. The souls of those who perish on some high adventure go there. It is where King Arthur went to rest after his last battle and before he came back to take possession of his two kingdoms.”

“His two kingdoms?” Tornado exclaimed.

“Yes,” replied Luck, “for does he not reign for ever in the hearts of the young — and in Fairyland?”

She turned and looked at her sister, exchanging an understanding smile, then turned back to Tornado.

“And now we must leave you,” she said. “There is your boat. Follow that gull with the black patch on his wing, and he will guide you.”

The two sisters drew aside and waited, and though Tornado could have gone on talking with them for ever, he realised by the tone of the girl’s voice, as also by the smile he had seen on both their faces, that it was time for him to go. He, at any rate, was not one of those who never take a risk, he tried to assure himself.

He got into the boat and stepped the mast. A light wind had sprung up, blowing off the land. He said good-bye to the two girls and pushed off boldly. He set the sail. Gaily the little craft slid through the water towards its strange and distant goal, as, looking back, he saw Luck and Chance still standing on the yellow beach, side by side, watching him. He waved his hand and they waved back. A moment later, when he turned again, he saw them turn and walk away inland till they disappeared among the trees.

The gull flew steadily ahead, occasionally soaring high up into the blue, at other times diving down and lightly skimming the tops of the waves. Sometimes it flew round and round the boat for a few moments, passing close to Tornado's head and peering into his face with its bright peeping eyes.

The wind increased the farther he left the shore, and Tornado found that his little boat was really travelling quite fast through the water. He soon lost sight of land and only the misty shores of Hi Brésil were visible far ahead. He must have sailed like this for some hours before he discerned a dark spot on the horizon. The wind was rising all this time, and his boat seemed to travel ever faster and faster, leaping from wave to wave like a thing possessed.

For the past hour or two he had been afraid of driving her under and had eased her occasionally, but seeing how bravely she sailed he now let her have her head, comforting himself with the thought that she was a magic boat in any case and ought to know how to keep afloat.

The land drew nearer. He was now rapidly getting near enough to distinguish details. Tall hills, he saw rose inland, but close along the shore the ground seemed to be flat and wooded. He could see no signs of houses or inhabitants. The coast appeared utterly deserted. But it was also an iron-bound coast. Great rocks jutted out into the sea and the waves broke white over them. The flat portions of the shore, he now saw, were few and far between.

It looked impossible for a small boat to make the land; but Tornado, with blind faith in the gull, followed where it led — straight in towards the rocks. Once or twice, he noticed, the bird turned its head quickly as though to reassure him. Nearer and nearer they came, and though he felt a little sick with fear, there was no turning back now. The roar of the surf thundered all round him, the spray wet his face, and the boat felt the surge of the great combers as they hurled themselves over the jagged rocks. He held his breath.

At the last moment, when everything seemed lost, a narrow channel opened suddenly before him, and the little boat swept through between the dangerous rocky walls into a tiny cove. Once inside, all was quiet. The wind, shut off by the high walls all round, hardly rippled the surface of the blue water which lapped peacefully along the narrow sandy bay. And, to his surprise, he saw that there was actually a little pier made of rough slabs of stone, with a ring of twisted withies to which he could fasten his boat. A moment later he had tied her up and leapt ashore.

The gull, as if satisfied that its job was done, flew several times round his head, screaming shrilly as though to say good-bye, and then headed straight out to sea. Tornado waved his hand in farewell. He fancied he saw it flirt its wing with the black spot by way of answer. He watched it disappear into the blaze of sunshine above the wide blue sea.

V

Tornado stood still for some time, taking stock of his surroundings. There seemed to be a footpath from the pier that led directly into the forest. It lost itself at once among the dense trees. After examining the ground in all directions this path appeared the only way he could go, for the shore revealed no openings, and behind him was, of course, the open sea. His best, his only, plan was to follow where it led, since it must, at any rate, lead somewhere.

“Now for the dragons!” he thought uneasily, as a wave of misgiving swept over him. Instinctively, as he started, he loosened the long hunting knife at his belt, although he knew quite well that it would be useless against a dragon that really meant business. The undoubted fact that he was taking a risk pleased him nevertheless; it proved him worthy of being admitted to Hi Brésil.

As he went cautiously along, keeping his eyes on both sides and in front as well, the trees grew thicker and thicker, larger and larger, so that at last he appeared to be walking in a kind of green tunnel, the branches meeting above his head. Here and there a splash of sunlight stole through and turned some strange flower by the path into a flaming jewel. His feet made no sound on the mossy ground. Silent as the grave the forest was, for no wind stirred.

Quite suddenly, the path led into the open, the trees fell away, and a large clearing lay before him. Deer were grazing quietly all over it. Tornado stiffened like a dog scenting game and almost unconsciously slipped behind a tree to watch them. There were red deer and fallow, here and there an occasional roe, while in the distance he saw other deer that were quite strange to him. But, as his eyes swept the herds, picking out the best beasts in each, his attention was suddenly held by the sight of another animal altogether, and a very weird one.

It was lying down when he first saw it, but, as he watched, it rose slowly and stretched itself. Larger than a stag, he noticed, and coloured like a rocking-horse, dappled black and white. There was no mistaking what it was when he saw the long straight horn coming out of the forehead. He caught his breath. It was the unicorn. Its eyes gazed gently about it, as though, without being alarmed, it somehow knew that a stranger was in its neighbourhood.

“What a gracious, splendid creature!” he exclaimed to himself as he gazed, and a thrill ran through him, for he knew that the unicorn roams no other pastures save those of Fairyland, and that he had, therefore, really arrived.

He must have stood behind his tree for a long time watching the stately creature, his eyes wandering towards the deer as well, for he had quite forgotten the matter of dragons being possibly in the neighbourhood, when there came a sudden roaring in the sky, and Tornado, quickly looking up, saw six dark shapes rushing downwards at tremendous speed towards the forest; indeed, towards the very clearing at whose edge he stood concealed. What looked like jets of flame preceded them, issuing, apparently, from their mouths. They made a carious loud rattling sound, with other noises that were half hooting and half growling.

“Bless my soul!” he exclaimed. “The dragons!”

The shock to his mind and nerves was very considerable, yet his interest was so intense that his fear was not more than he could manage. It was odd, however, that just at this very moment when his entire attention should have been occupied with this arresting sight, he found time to think of something else — that he had forgotten something. This certainty that some familiar object was missing came back again. His hand flew to his knife, but the knife was in its place. There was another thing he ought to have had with him, only for the life of him he could not remember what it was. It was something he always carried. He used it for protection overhead. What it was, however, he could not imagine. He had not got it — that was all he knew.

This thought flashed through his mind, then vanished utterly — and he concentrated all his attention again on the dragons. They were much lower now, just above the tree-tops, in fact, and one by one he saw them plane down into the clearing and settle among the feeding deer as quietly as though they were so many crows. The deer, too, seemed undisturbed by their arrival, moving calmly to one side to give them room to land. The unicorn went on rubbing its horn against a tree.

Only they were most certainly not crows. The jets of flame that had poured out of their nostrils while they were in full flight had died down, but a red glow showed when they opened their tremendous mouths, while thin wisps of smoke curled round their jagged lips and floated upwards into the still air. Their huge sides rose and fell as they breathed, accompanied by an odd noise, half tattling, half clanking, that was almost metallic, and came, it seemed, from their interior.

Tornado now felt really frightened. The appearance of these monstrous brutes was chilling to the blood. Any one of them could have swallowed him at a single gulp; their fiery breath could burn him to an ash in a moment; a blow from a single tail — and he would be reduced to a pulp of broken bones and flesh. They were covered, he saw, with bright green scales which gave out a clashing sound as they moved. Their legs and claws were a brilliant scarlet, while their eyes, as large as soup plates, glowed with alternate red and green as though lit by some internal fire.

On landing they had folded their wings, which towered above their backs fully thirty feet into the air.

He stared and stared, and the more he stared the less he liked them. He realised that their arrival coincided too accurately with his own: they arrived because he had arrived. The whole six of them, he noticed, had drawn themselves up directly opposite to where he hid behind his tree, and the path he had been following, the only path there was, ran right through the middle of them. They had arranged themselves with military precision, three on each side of the path.

Peering cautiously round the trunk that sheltered him, he noticed these details. And his heart sank into his deerskin sandals.

Yet his profound trust in what Luck and Chance had told him did not waver. So far, he reflected, he had come safely owing to their guidance. He realised he must trust them to the end, or else fail to prove himself worthy of his quest. His muscles, however, were like paper in his legs. He dared not, could not, move — when, suddenly, he heard a far, shrill cry, and, looking up, he saw the gull with the spotted wing in the air above the trees. It circled once, peeped down at him, uttered its shrill cry a second time, and vanished into space.

It was this that decided him to act. Summoning up all his courage, he took the risk. He stepped out from behind his tree and walked slowly but steadily forward in the direction of the waiting dragons.

The nearer he drew to them the less he liked it. His blood was water. He trembled. But he walked fairly straight, giving no outward sign of flinching. Only a few yards now separated him from the first couple in the dreadful row and he realised that there was only just room to pass between them without actually touching. The slightest stumble, leaning an inch to right or left, would mean that he would brush the awful jaws. Indeed, as he moved slowly forward, the dragon on the right yawned widely, showing an enormous mouth with huge pointed teeth and a red tongue that flickered in and out with a ghastly significance. It was licking its great lips, of course. But the behaviour of its companion facing it on the left seemed even more ominous, for its immense tail began to twitch and swing from side to side like the tail of a cat before it springs. It seemed to be gathering its vast legs under it as a kitten does when it leaps playfully at a ball.

Tornado felt himself as the ball. His body dripped with perspiration. His legs only just supported him. But he still kept moving with slow steps forward, nearer and ever nearer.

At last he was actually between the first pair of mighty heads. The creature eyed him, but did not move. He passed slowly onwards. He reached the second pair, whose eyes similarly followed him, the bodies keeping motionless. A whiff of burning brimstone came to his nostrils, blended, he fancied, with another smell that was curiously familiar, though he could not name it. He knew the name, but it had vanished with another part of his life which, equally, was forgotten.

The dragons, as he passed further between four more pairs of heads, never moved, though following him steadily with their huge, fiery eyes.

When half-way down the line Tornado only just controlled a violent impulse to make a sudden run for it.

It occurred to him to dash wildly forward as fast as ever he could sprint — and trust to luck. But as the idea took form in his mind, the words “trust to Luck” brought the quick knowledge that to carry out his plan would betray cowardice and failure. To trust to Luck and Chance was not to run away. There was Destiny. And Destiny, though implacable, obeyed courage and determination. He held on his dreadful way to the end.

And the end came, at last, without disaster. He passed the final pair of monsters safely. Not one of the dragons had moved. Now that he was beyond them, though only a few feet, they still crouched unmoved upon the forest sward. Joy! He had not failed himself! He had proved worthy of the heritage of Hi Brésil, if only by the skin of his teeth!

Trying not to break into a run, Tornado, his breath irregular, his heart thumping like a little drum, followed the path. The unicorn came close, lowered its stately head, and nuzzled his shoulder with its dangerous pointed horn. He looked a moment into its gentle eyes. The herds of deer divided quietly to let him pass, then fell to feeding again, quite undisturbed. In fact, he had to wait once while a large company of them crossed in front of him.

He had not looked back as yet, but now he heard suddenly a tremendous rattling clatter, a hissing and a hooting, and, turning his head, he saw the great dragons take the air. It was a wondrous sight. They rose without effort, snorting fire and smoke, their scales a din of clanking metal, and, once above the trees, he saw the whole six pass across the sky in a wedge-shape formation like a skein of monstrous geese. They became smaller and smaller as they rose into upper space, their roaring died away, they were gone.

Neither the deer nor the unicorn, he noticed, paid the slightest attention to this great commotion. Silence and peace descended again upon the forest.

VI

Tornado drew a deep breath and felt happier than ever in his life before. Such happiness seemed incredible, yet he experienced it. He was coming closer and closer to something he had always yearned for. He longed to wait a while and make closer friends with the attractive unicorn, but some instinct warned him that he must not linger, but should push on farther, for the climax of what he sought lay yet in front of him.

He had now reached the far side of the clearing The sun was sinking, the shadows growing longer. He began to think vaguely about food, about where and how he was going to sleep as well. He was not tired, but sleep when the sun went down seemed natural. Should he lie down on the moss and ferns? Should he look about for berries? The music of a tinkling stream reminded him that he was thirsty. He knelt down and drank his fill of sparkling water.

As he rose to his feet again the forest, it seemed, wore another look. It was not *quite* the same as when he knelt down a minute ago. He gazed about him. There was a certain curious change, he fancied. He felt he had seen it before. The fringe of the woods he was now approaching wore almost a familiar guise. This old impression grew stronger as he walked slowly on. The path, unless he was mistaken, would presently take a sharp turn to the left just beyond that old gnarled oak tree. There would be a cottage with a pool of water beside it. He would go up and knock on the door, and the door would open....

Sure enough, it proved exactly as he imagined. Leaving *the forest, the path turned* sharp*ly to* the left. There stood the cottage, the cottage of his desires, and the pool that he had loved so long in dream. And that figure among the sunflowers, was it Luck or Chance? He could not quite see. It disappeared behind the rows of sunflowers where he saw the unicorn gazing gently at him over the towering foxgloves. It was coming in by the back way, of course, to open to him. His heart rose triumphantly within him. He wanted to shout and sing. He had at last come — Home!

Tornado, his blood pulsing with this happiness, strode boldly up to the door. He knocked confidently. He stood waiting a moment. No one came at first. He knocked again, but still no one came; there was no sound of a footfall. A vague feeling of disquietude stole over him. Ah! there was another way of getting in, he seemed to remember, and his hand went automatically down the side of his leg as if hunting for something he expected to find there.

Was it a pocket he sought? His pocket, at any rate, was there as usual. The thing he looked for, too, lay hard and firm inside it. He drew out his key and inserted it without effort in the lock. The door opened easily as usual. He went in, also as usual. There before him stood his girl-secretary, a pile of letters behind her on the desk, again as usual.

A bell was ringing impatiently, ringing ringing....

The girl's face wore a half reproachful look as she bade him respectfully good morning.

"A little late, am I...?" offered Mr. T. Smith, a trifle apologetically. "I — er — walked the whole way, I'm afraid. The morning," he added, "was so fine, you know...."

"Yes, Mr. Smith," replied the girl. "A pity it's clouded over *since.*" *She turned away to answer* the telephone, which *kept on ringing*, *ringing*.

Even as she said the words he noticed that the first early brilliance indeed had passed. The sky outside was dark and lowering. Rain obviously threatened. The girl was gabbing at the telephone. He waited, listening.

"Miss Slumbubble, sir," she reported, laying the receiver down. "To say you forgot your umbrella. She's *sending it* at once *by* messenger,"

"Oh — ah — yes," he murmured vaguely. "I — knew I had forgotten — something."

He glanced at his watch. After all, he was only fifteen minutes late.

And perhaps another fifteen minutes had passed when a small messenger boy arrived with his umbrella, offering a piece of blue paper which Mr. T.

Smith signed by way of receipt, having first paid the little bright-eyed lad a shilling. He signed without thinking, “Tornado Smith.”

HANDS OF DEATH

I

THE ASSISTANT FOREMAN of the bridge-gang rode his mules slowly up the trail from the river valley to the plateau. His broad-brimmed hat, his fierce moustache, a reckless fling of his great shoulders too, gave him the air of a desperado. As a matter of fact, no warmer-hearted Irishman than simple Mike Kelly ever spared his animal over this arid Bolivian plain. He combined the appearance of a desperado with the emotions of a child, an incurable sentimentalist to boot.

He was on his way to report to Hadow, the foreman, whose hut lay at the far end of the Indian village across the blazing sunshine. The heated air hung motionless. From far below rose the faint tinkling of the workmen's tools, as they chipped stones for the great railway bridge. Occasionally, drowning all other sounds, came the snorting of the construction train, laden with materials. The torrent at the bottom of the deep gorge was also audible. The barren plateau, baked and split by the sun, lay all about him, but far away rose mountains crowned with dazzling snow. On their green foot-hills, in this crystal air, he easily picked out the herds of llamas and donkeys feeding.

Mike paused at the top of the trail to give his animal a rest. He looked about him.

“A man's country!” he said to himself, as he puffed his cigarette. “A man's way of living too, begad!”

He beamed his deep satisfaction. The next moment, unaccountably, he sighed. In this life of careless liberty something after all seemed lacking. For it was spring. He longed for a companion. Only a mate was needed to make it perfect.

Schooling Mike had never known. A construction camp had always been his home, and the nomad life suited his few elemental needs. He was ever on the move, helping to drive an iron road farther and farther into some grim wilderness. Now, suddenly, in the sunshine of this brilliant Bolivian spring, he knew himself intolerably alone. He sighed again. “Days of grief!” he exclaimed aloud with a melancholy smite. “And not a female anywheres to take me by the hand!”

Unaware that Fate was listening, he rode slowly along the sun-grilled trail. It was deserted, the Indians slept in their huts, no white man was about. Then, as he approached some trees at the entrance of the scattered village, a native girl emerged suddenly from their shade and stepped leisurely along in front of him, stepping at the same time straight into his empty mood of longing. She moved, it seemed, straight into his heart. His pulse stood still, then quickened violently, for the stroke was unexpected, falling like a flash of fire out of the clear sky. Something in him trembled. He urged his mule. “It’s me happy day,” he exclaimed to himself, “sure as God made little apples!”

The abruptness of it took his breath away, yet did not affect his powers of observation. Rather, it increased them. He saw at a glance, from the subdued colour of her dress, that she was a pure-bred Aymara, and very different from the half-breed Chellas who affected gaudy brilliance in their clothes. Taller than her kind, she moved with an easy grace that delighted his eye, instead of with the shuffling gait the Indians used. Her attitude, moreover, suggested a dignity and self-assurance he had never seen before in any native woman. This air of confidence he noticed instantly, while there was, too, another quality about her that gave him a vague sense of trouble, a disturbing touch that was too slight, too elusive, to leave more than the faintest trail upon his mind. He was aware of it, no more than that, for his positive emotions of another kind at once obliterated it. His Celtic fancy idealised immediately. “Divine and wonderful!” he told himself with bright admiration. “And I’d be after sayin’ it to her this minute if I knew her lingo better. Begad, and I will now before she disappears out of me life for ever!” And he was in the act of overtaking her when, to his disgust, a man came suddenly out of another hut and stepped into the path as though to speak with her.

Mike cursed beneath his breath. There was always another man, he reflected bitterly. Great was his surprise, therefore, when the fellow abruptly altered his course, rather as though he had just seen her for the first time, hesitated, then drew back in a curious attitude of half respectful, half uneasy waiting, finally allowing her to continue her way without a sign of greeting or recognition. And this, to Mike, was unusual — an act of politeness he had never before seen an Indian show to his own women. He was puzzled a little, while for a passing instant he was again aware of the elusive touch of uneasiness he had known before, though it vanished as soon as it was born. “The daughter of a big Chief!” he decided, as he drew nearer again. “It’s still me happy day then after all!” His heart, indeed, was hammering against his ribs, as the girl, standing aside to allow room to pass, looked up at him.

Mike stopped, turned in his saddle, and the next second lifted his sombrero — to an Indian; but to the most beautiful Indian he had ever seen. Her skin, lighter than ordinary, had a lustre of faint gold about it; the features showed none of the heaviness of her race; she might, indeed, have passed for an Italian of the better class. But it was the luminous eyes, gazing so fearlessly into his own, that enslaved him finally. Did they set other chords vibrating in him too, deep down and out of sight? The question rose certainly, but merely to flicker out and disappear. Strange fires glowed in them, great resolution, something that both attracted and repelled, although repel was far too strong a term to describe the fugitive doubt that passed so flutteringly across the back of his mind. He knew, at any rate, an instant’s uncommon bewilderment. Open to swift intuitions, he was superstitious as well, and an emotion that held both shrinking and enticement swept his primitive soul. Did he imagine some unholy knowledge, some unwelcome secret, lurking behind those veiled fires, something perhaps of Indian Magic, of a forgotten faith the white race never knew? He almost crossed himself. But in that moment the girl smiled — and his fate was sealed. Mike loved at first sight, and his love, evidently, was not unacceptable, for a warm colour flushed the girl’s bare neck and golden dusky cheeks, she let his rough hand take her own, her voice was welcoming and pleasant.

She had long ago picked him out, he decided, in his rush of happy feeling, and loved him secretly already; had seen him about, of course, and taken note of him, and marked him down for her own. He forgot, in his delirium, that his hat was still off in the dangerous sun, forgot that he was white and the girl an Indian, forgot that the torrent of passionate words he poured forth was only half intelligible to her. One thing only from the outside world pierced his mind at the time — the fact that the man he had seen before was now standing with a companion in front of a hut not far away, both watching him intently, then instantly disappearing as the girl turned to look at them. Yet disappearing in a manner not quite ordinary, it struck him. They vanished into the hut as though her mere look had flashed a word of command they feared and must obey.

Mike noticed this; and a sense of discomfort, born he knew not whence, passed over him, going again however, as swiftly as it came. With the girl in his arms, her lips upon his own, all lesser emotions were utterly obliterated.

II

Mike Kelly meant marriage. The difference in race seemed no objection to him. Few whites in these parts were without some trace of Indian blood. Marie would just suit his roving life. The odd respect shown to her by the two men, while it faintly troubled him, added at the same time to her value. His dream obsessed him. He suddenly wondered how long his mule had been standing in front of the foreman's shanty, when a voice brought him back to earth with a shock.

"Who's cut your tongue out, Mike?"

Hadow, the Englishman, was staring at him fixedly, a lurking smile behind his clear blue eyes. Unknown to the other, he had witnessed the entire scene from the window of his shanty.

"Days of grief, Boss," cried Mike with a grin, "they're over. I've just seen the girl I'm goin' to marry. It's me happy day at last, and that's a fact!"

Hadow looked hard into his face.

"You'd be happiest perhaps with a native, Mike," he said, after a perceptible pause. "She'd understand you better than a cold-blooded white, I guess."

"You've said it," returned Mike. "She would that." He gripped the proffered hand, pleased by the wishes of good luck. Then he began to wonder why Hadow held his hand so long and stared so steadily into his eyes.

Suddenly the Englishman spoke. "Fit, ain't you, Mike?" he asked abruptly. "Sound in wind and limb, I mean?" It was a curious question, puzzling the other considerably. "No disease or weakness anywhere — nothing organic?" Hadow persisted, watching him closely as he asked it. His gravity, his persistence, must have made a man in a less emotional state reflect, for Hadow knew the country, knew the Indians too. Mike was merely puzzled by the long word he did not understand.

“What d’ye mean, Boss?” he asked, grinning broadly. “Why, I’m a two-year-old,” he added quickly, “for all me wicked sins.” And he laughed like a boy.

Still gripping his hand and looking into his eyes, Hadow said quietly, but as if he meant it, “Then see that you keep a two-year-old, Mike Kelly. Take good care of yourself. And — avoid accidents.”

Mike burst into yet louder laughter. Its very loudness, perhaps, betrayed a faint uneasiness, yet if so betrayed it unconsciously. “That’s me, Boss,” he cried, shaking the other’s hand with violence, as though to prove his health and strength. “That’s me every time,” he repeated, while Hadow winced, withdrawing his hand with difficulty, “and it’s a marryin’ man I am this day. And don’t you forget it!”

“I won’t,” laughed the Englishman, smoothing his hand out, while a curious expression crossed his sunburnt face. His men’s domestic affairs after all, it seemed to say, were no concern of his. He made a gesture, however, as though he had been about to say something else, then changed his mind. “Take good care of yourself, Mike,” he mentioned, adding, casually as it were, yet with a hint of significance that escaped the Irishman, “and if you ever need a helping hand, just let me know, remember.”

Mike thanked him, and the two men turned to business.

III

The brief courtship ran smoothly; Mike learned a bit more of the language, and the girl picked up some Spanish. The marriage caused no particular excitement, for the white men regarded it as a passing episode merely. The Indians, however, betrayed an unexpected reaction. The unquestionable respect they felt for Marie and her aged mother they now showed to Mike as well. They built his new hut without payment — a present from the village. If he found himself separated a little from his own land, he picked no quarrel about it He was romantically, desperately, in love, and Marie managed her easy-going husband as she pleased. Was he, perhaps, a trifle afraid of her? There were certain things he now began to notice, little things to which he attached significance because he could not quite account for them, and these now and again perturbed him rather. Their combined effect upon him was cumulative.

Her hands, for instance — strong, well-moulded; duplicates, for that matter of her mother's — were unroughened, untouched by any sign of toil. They had never been put to menial usages. The respect, the reverence, indeed, that was paid to them both by the natives, also required explanation, but an explanation he could not find. This reverence, sometimes almost tinged by fear, was paid to the old woman chiefly, but Marie shared it too, and no amount of questioning on his part elicited more than the fact that her mother performed some work of great importance to the community. The reverence, Marie told him with an enigmatic smile, was due to that, but it was a purely native matter that concerned the Indians alone, and he was not to trouble about it. With a kiss, a little shrug of her shapely shoulders, she dissipated his uneasiness, while increasing his curiosity. Her father, now dead, Mike discovered had been a man of no particular importance, certainly not a Chief, yet mother and daughter both exacted this odd respect as though entitled to it, as though it was their rightful due. That they did no work of any kind pertained to some rights they held in the public estimation.

Even before his marriage, Mike had known that the natives brought them food, placing it outside their door, giving a peculiar cry, and then withdrawing before it was taken in. Now the offerings were placed outside the mother's hut alone. There were, of course, dozens of little native customs to which the whites paid no attention, Mike ignoring them with the rest as of no importance, but these particular ones caught his attention as somewhere significant. The Indians, themselves, would tell him nothing; they seemed nervous, almost uneasy, when he pressed enquiry. It was, however, the strong and delicate hands his imagination settled upon chiefly, the hands that were never put to common work, the hands that were always so beautifully kept. He never kissed them without knowing a faint shiver down his back, while utterly unable to account for it. The mystery deepened. His superstitious sense increased. Yet neither of these for long, he noticed. His wife's beauty soon banished such vague fears. Marie dominated him easily. She loved him heart and soul, and in her passionate Indian way. Mike came to realise, perhaps, that the Indians, like his own race, each fostered and enjoyed their own particular collection of little beliefs and fancies, none of which amounted actually to what he called "a row of beans." He smiled and kissed his way through life, and life was all made up of happy days, his days of grief forgotten entirely.

Then chance brought an incident that pulled him up short with an unpleasant start, revived his lurking superstitious dread, and drove him to more definite questions, since uneasiness prompted him. There were, of course, as mentioned, numerous incidents of curious kind among the Indians, but this one left a deep impression, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it, if he could.

One brilliant moonlight night he came home late, passing the cabin of a native who, he knew, was desperately ill. The village, squalid enough in the daytime, was softened into beauty now. It looked unearthly. Silvery haze transmuted its forlorn poverty into loveliness, the glimmering snow-fields hung far away in the depths of quiet sky. About the cabin of the dying man Mike saw the group of friends and relatives huddled together, whispering and muttering among themselves. Then, suddenly, the low door was darkened by a figure, and he saw the old mother emerge, her head bent, her long arms hanging down her sides. He watched her pass through the group, who hushed their voices and moved aside to make room with lowered heads. She paid them no attention. He watched her walk silently away. And almost the same moment he heard the death-wail issue from the hut, announcing that the Indian was dead.

Mike stood still, watching, listening, in the moonlight. The group about the door had resumed their whispering among themselves, but were now, he noticed, directing their attention at himself, looking intently, even pointing, at him. They were discussing him with keen interest. Here, he felt positive, was something that concerned himself. He felt suddenly uneasy. Moving a little closer, he caught a strange word in Spanish — *despenadora*, *la desperiadora* — a hush in the voice that muttered it. The word seemed vaguely familiar, as though he had heard it somewhere long ago. He turned away, a superstitious dread clutching at his heart. Where had he heard that word? What did it mean? Why was there something sinister about it?

His questions this time were more insistent. The present of the hut, the food, the respect, the mysterious attitude — what did they all mean? The Spanish word — he cursed himself for it — had slipped his memory, vanished beyond recall. This time, too, his wife answered him:

“It is because my mother,” she told him proudly, “is a doctor, and they fear her.”

“For why should they fear her,” Mike demanded, “if she is a doctor?” Yet he was not too anxious to hear the answer, he realised. There was a light in Marie’s eyes, a troubling smile upon her lips, as she drew herself up, gazing at him.

“Because her medicine,” she said in a lowered voice, “is strong. It always cures.” She bent a little towards him, their faces close together, then laying her long-fingered hands on his own, she kissed him suddenly with passion. The kiss he liked, returning it as he drew her down upon his knee; it was the touch of her hands that made him shrink. He asked, at any rate, no further questions.

He was very glad, a few weeks later, when the old woman died. He was not so pleased, however, when the night after the burial the peculiar native cry sounded in the darkness outside his own door, and he found the offerings of food, saw the shadows of the donors retreating hurriedly, then caught the blaze of triumphant pleasure in his wife’s eyes as she collected it. A new dignity was in her, a new authority, something proud and sinister that chilled his blood and that even kisses could not dissipate.

“It is the custom of our people,” she told him in her native tongue. “My mother is dead. I succeed my mother. That is all.”

It was the strange fire in her great eyes that scared him. He surprised himself thinking of an animal that has tasted blood. Surreptitiously, he crossed himself. And in that same instant the forgotten Spanish word flashed back.

“*Despenadora...*?” he whispered, and saw her head bow proudly, her wonderful hands spread out before her with their long fingers parted.

What the word meant he had no notion, nor did he ask. It had flashed into memory again and offered itself. That was all he knew. Simultaneously with its return rose also Hadow’s curious warning — Hadow, who was now down at La Paz for a month or so, until the river, swollen with the melting snows, subsided enough to make work possible on the bridge foundations....

The heat, the odour, the atrocious atmosphere in the hut were stifling. The stench of iodoform, of native exhalation from the Indians whispering just outside the door, hung so heavy as to seem almost visible. With it, too, came the damp effluvia of rain-soaked clay. Though the sky had cleared at sunset, the late hour of night brought no relief. A flickering oil-lamp added its noisome flavour.

A patch of moonlight, stealing through the low door, was the only clean and pleasant thing Mike Kelly saw, as he lay helpless on his blankets, both arms in rough splints, with internal injuries as well, and gusts of halfdelirium raving about his mind. Marie had tended him with infinite love and care, soothing the pain as best she could, her tears often on his blanket; yet each time her hands touched him, a shriek rose to his lips, though never uttered. Some blind instinct, across the pain, warned him to suppress it.

The Bolivian doctor, who had set the crushed bones, had made his fifteen-mile journey now for the last time. Mike realised that. He had caught sight of him a moment outside the hut with Marie, and, uncertain though his vision was, it had registered that grave shake of the head. The bones were mendable; it was the internal injuries that knew perhaps no cure; that shake of the head was eloquent of what the doctor thought. And Marie, strange figure of wild grief and stately dignity, had knelt in a paroxysm of tears beside the couch. Father Manuel, too, had come and gone, a ten-mile trip from the little Catholic chapel. That seemed several days ago, but the fever had obliterated what *be* said. Mike only remembered, or thought he remembered, that he had begged some favour of the kindly priest, dark fear behind his feverish words, and that the Father had seemed to make strange grimaces in reply. Mike had made some desperate request because there was terror in his heart; but now, whether this was real or delirium, he knew not. He groaned in his agony, but he could not move a muscle.

It was his wife’s whisper that brought him back to a momentary dearer consciousness, lying motionless as a stone statue, but listening intently. Her face, dusky, beautiful, bent over him; he saw her glowing eyes, her tears; he felt — her hands. Their touch, across his pain and fever, summoned a sudden terror, sharp as fire. A change was stealing over her; her attitude, expression, look, were different. What was it? What was she saying, whispering to him now? Then he caught Hadow’s name. It puzzled him. Why Hadow? If only he could have got word to Hadow at once. Word about what? The wish, he realised suddenly, had been in him for some time. There was something of dreadful urgency he wanted Hadow for, something he wished Hadow to know without an instant's delay, something he had begged the priest to see to for him... Father Manuel's grimacing face, enormously enlarged, shot before him, ousting all memory of Hadow completely. Then Marie's voice — it was louder, clearer now — was in his ear again. He could not turn his head; it was of stone.

"But if Hadow knew, my people would only kill him. *La Despenadora* is sacred to them..." and the voice died away into a gulf of blackness.

The shock of violent terror that ran through him brought no relief of action to his body of stone: it could not galvanise muscles that refused to stir. Horror froze his blood. He felt stiff with it. His wife bent lower, kissed his burning lips, then moved away. He watched her tall figure pass across the hut, watched her turn slowly round and look at him steadily, the lamplight on her face. In that instant the truth flashed naked into him, for the long, steady look was an examining look. She was appraising him — professionally.

The next instant she was at his side again, kneeling, her face close against his own. "I cured my mother without pain," she whispered tenderly in broken Spanish. "You shall not suffer, either."

Mike experienced a reaction that searched him like a red-hot knife. His confusion cleared a little, lifted perhaps by the horror that convulsed him. A dim memory revived, rose out of dark mists, stirred into life. Marie's use of Spanish helped possibly to its recovery. Faint at first, it became gradually sharper, then, as with a leap, grew clear as day. He recalled a scene of years ago — a bearded man, a Spaniard, the worse for drink, talking to him in a bar at La Paz. He had paid little attention at the time, but memory knows no real forgetting. The neglected cells now gave up their dead. *La Despenadora*, the Aymara death-doctor, the Bringer of Death, was an office, a sacred office, handed down from mother to daughter. Its appalling duty was the finishing off of the aged and infirm, of those who could not live, of incurables especially, by deftly dislocating the vertebra of the neck — an office, the Indians held, of mercy, since it provided escape from useless suffering, one, moreover, the Government had been unable completely to suppress. The Indians were too cunning in their concealment always... *la*

Despenadora, whose “strong medicine always cured.” The long-forgotten talk in the bar at La Paz came back, complete in a single second.

The shriek he gave vent to this time was an audible one, and Marie was instantly at his side. The group outside the door pressed in a little. A murmur of excited whispers rose. But it was his wife’s low tender voice that he heard above all else, clear and dreadful as a bell of death: “I love you too much to let you suffer more....”

It was in her native tongue. She turned a moment, sending the Indians out, so that through the now unobstructed door the small patch of moonlight lay clean and sweet upon the ground beside the bed. Mike’s eyes, the only portion of his body he could move, fell on it. To look into his wife’s face, as she prepared to climb upon the couch, upon his helpless prostrate form, was utterly beyond him; but the hands, he noticed, the hands untouched by common toil, had opened, the fingers spread, curving a little as they sank towards his throat. He felt the pressure of her weight on his chest, as she straightened herself for the final office. He closed his eyes.... In that awful moment he saw two things: her amazing dignity, her authority, her confident strength; the second — a bearded man, his face immensely large, telling him drunkenly across a bar-room counter about — *la Despenadora,* only behind the huge face with the beard, mingled with it in some queer fashion, another face that wore Hadow’s features. Yes, Hadow; it assuredly *was* Hadow. He choked. The world grew black....

A roaring sound, like a hurricane, burst about his ears, hoofs splashing through wet earth, his own name shouted, bawled, across the darkness. The same instant the roaring sounds subsided, while the voice itself came closer. Inside his own head, it seemed: “Damned liar! Why did you telegraph that the foundations of the bridge were sinking, when they’re as solid as your own thick skull?...”

The voice hushed suddenly, died away. Its owner, having scattered the group outside and rushed in, was kneeling beside the couch. There was a sound of a woman sobbing. “A minute more,” Hadow was muttering, “and there’d have been a hanging job for someone.” He turned to the figure of another man who stood just behind him. Thanks to something Father Manuel had added to the wire, he had brought a competent doctor with him.

THE LAND OF GREEN GINGER

IN HIS LUXURIOUS service flat the elderly Mr. Adam sat before the fire with a frown upon his face, a frown not of anger or annoyance but of perplexity. It was the cosy time between tea and dinner; about his armchair lay scattered a number of opened and unopened letters; he was scanning a brief typewritten note, wondering how he should deal with it, and this wonder was the cause of his frown.

“These newspaper symposiums,” he grumbled to himself, “are a nuisance!” His secretary had gone home, taking away with her the dictated chapters of his book, his twentieth novel — his twentieth *successful* novel, he remembered with a smile that momentarily displaced the frown. “How I started,” he read the typed sentence before him. “What made me first begin to write?” The frown came back. Thought ran off into the mists of years ago.... He remembered quite well what made him first begin to write. “But no one would believe me.”...

His face grew quite puckered.... He finally decided he would dictate in the morning a few commonplace paragraphs, giving facts, of course, yet not this queer incident that had first discovered his gift to himself. It had been due to a shock, this discovery; and a shock, some say, can bring out latent possibilities in the mind hitherto ignored. Circumstances, that is, are necessary for their appearance; unless life produces them, the possibilities remain unknown, inactive.

He remembered the shock in his own case, the queer experience it produced, and the first hint of his imaginative gift that appeared as a result. “But they’d think I was romancing !” His pencil, meanwhile, scribbled a few words on the blank part of the letter....

“It is interesting,” he paused a moment to reflect, “how every important detail of the experience was due to something in my mind at the time. All the ingredients were in me. Something just used them, dramatised them. That’s the imaginative gift, I suppose.... It shapes the raw material.”

He could see it all as though it were yesterday... instead of thirty years ago....

The shock, in his case, had been the sudden total loss of the comfortable fortune he had been brought up to expect. The trustee, his guardian, had played ducks and drakes with it, and at twenty, an orphan, just down from Oxford with a prospect of £2,000 a year, he found himself instead with £50, perhaps less. Two details only bear importantly upon the story: his intense bitterness against the swindling guardian, whom he knew personally; and the question of what he could do to earn his living. These two, had he written the truth for the symposium, Mr. Adam would have stressed. For it was with these two, this thought and this feeling burning intensely in his mind, that he had gone for a walk to think things over....

To him, at the age of twenty, the situation seemed intensely tragic; no one in the world before had ever been so overwhelmed by fate; his anger against the psalm-singing guardian was of that bitter kind that could have killed. The young man was stirred to an intense anger and hatred. He could have murdered Mr. Holyoake. The swindler deserved it. And Adam, dwelling upon the years of dishonest speculation that had left him penniless, meant this precisely. Not that he actually wanted to commit murder, but that he realised the possibility lay in him. He still remembered — with a smile to-day — how he finally dismissed the idea from his mind: “What’s the use?” he had reflected, bitterly. “Even if I did murder him the State would only murder me in return. I should be hanged. Who murders is murdered in his turn.”

In this way the notion was — as he believed — dismissed from his mind.

The other “important detail” concerned his immediate future. What could he do to earn his living? He dwelt upon it with eager concentration. He reviewed a dozen futures: the stage, journalism, the motor trade, then in its infancy; insurance, emigrating — he thought of many fields and callings, but realised he was trained for none. The choice of work, of something that he could do, troubled him obsessingly. There were a hundred, a thousand possible futures open to a fellow, he discovered. It was the choice that he found impossible. At a given moment in anybody’s life, he reflected, a number of possible things lie waiting — he can take only one, but the multiple choice is there.

He had been walking for some time, and in a circle apparently, for he now round himself wandering towards the water-front of the ancient port that was his home town. It was after six o’clock on a summer evening, a Saturday, and few people were about. The sunshine fell slanting down the tangle of deserted alley-ways. There was a smell of the sea, of tarred ropes, rigging, fish, and these brought back the idea of emigrating. He thought of a cousin who had just gone to some job or other in China....

One notion chased another; his mind was a seething mass of wild ideas, with bitter, turbulent emotion behind them. Then, glancing up, his eye caught suddenly five little words, whose faded black letters shone in a patch of sunshine on the dull brick wall above his head. They were rather romantic little words, and they snatched at something in his mind. He stood and stared. It was merely the name of the alley, of course, yet thought took a new turn.

A kind of enchantment stole over him, for the words, as the poet puts it, walked up and down in his heart....

There rose before him a picture of forgotten days when the old port traded with southern isles, when dark-bearded sailors gabbling foreign tongues thronged these narrow alley-ways, and the high romance of gallant sailing-ships was in the air.... The five little words were almost a line of poetry.

“The Land of Green Ginger” was what he read.

Mr. Adam, the young one of thirty years ago, paused, his eyes fastened on the faded lettering in the yellow sunlight. Then he started down the twisting alley, whose high walls now housed nothing more romantic than offices of shipbrokers, notaries, typists, packers, and commissioners of oaths, until his eye noted suddenly an exception — an old furniture shop, with its queer wares overflowing on to the narrow pavement. They were a heterogeneous collection apparently. A circular mirror standing on a three-legged pedestal nearly six feet high reflected his figure, as he moved idly towards the shop a few yards lower down. He saw himself reflected, not without satisfaction — his smart flannel suit, his eyeglass, his straw hat with its Oxford colours. He also saw a bent, thin little old man with a skull-cap on his head standing among the shadows a few feet inside beyond the dingy doorway.

This figure now moved slowly towards him, scenting perhaps a possible customer.

“A fine piece,” said the wheezy voice. “A perfect bit of glass, me lord! Cheap, too!” He rubbed his hands, nodding his ancient head in the direction of the article. “It come from Chiney thirty years ago!”

Adam realised that he had been examining his own reflection for some minutes. He entered the shop, as an escape from troubling thoughts more than anything else, and as he did so the old man, bowing and scraping, moved too, backing away before him. The interior was dark, and much larger than the small entrance promised. A single oil-lamp revealed a series of deep, narrow rooms, cluttered up with stuff, among which the bent figure now set down the mirror carefully, for he had carried it in with him.

In the dimness the young man found his own reflection more attractive than before; it was softened, more effective, he decided. The wheezy voice was mentioning a price, rather a trumpery price, considered Mr. Adam, a few shillings only. He did not want to buy it, but anything was better than being alone with his tormenting thoughts, and he went closer to examine it. He bent down, noticing an inscription cut deeply into the dark wood of the framework. It was in Chinese characters. He ran his fingers over them, then looked up to ask:

“*Who looks in me.*” translated the wheezy voice, “*murders — and is murdered*.” And, carrying the mirror with him, the old man retreated a little farther into the shadow of the room beyond.

The young man was startled. He felt his body give an imperceptible twitch he was unable to suppress. His mind likewise gave a twitch. Was it uneasiness? It was, at any rate, surprise, while at the same time he was aware that something drew him, so that, almost involuntarily, he found himself following the retreating figure, who now, still carrying the mirror with him, was on the threshold of the next long room. It was the third extension of the premises, and it was considerably darker than the first two rooms. A chilliness hung in the fusty atmosphere. The place seemed lonely suddenly.

Aware of a faint tremor in him, though not yet of anything more than that, he spoke in a brusque, almost an aggressive voice:

“And what may such rubbish mean?” he inquired, sharply.

“Precisely what it says, me lord,” came the wheezy voice, much lower than before. There was an unpleasant hush in it. And there came a look into the face that hardly invited merriment, which was, perhaps, the very reason why Mr. Adam chose the moment for an audible guffaw. It betrayed him, he realised when it was too late. He felt nervous — and that guffaw had shown his nervousness. More of a chuckle man an actual laugh, it sounded unnatural among this piled-up paraphernalia from foreign lands that gave back no single echo. It sounded dead.

“Does it hold good?” Mr. Adam challenged, the tone of his voice again betraying him — to himself at least. For the tremor crept somehow from the body into the sound. “If I buy the thing, for instance, d’you mean to tell me that *I* — that *you* already before me—”

He could not finish the sentence. A shudder stopped his breath, and the voice died on his lips. While speaking he had been looking, not into the old man’s face, but into the mirror, where he still saw his own reflection. But it was not this that stopped his speech, and froze his blood. It was something else he saw. With one wrinkled hand the old shopman still clutched the pedestal; but in the other was an unsheathed knife.

“So far, me lord, it has held good,” came his whisper down the long, dim room, and as he spoke he tilted the mirror to a slightly different angle. The young man saw himself in the glass as before, but he now saw something else behind him, too. It lay stretched upon the floor, motionless, crumpled dreadfully, its position not quite natural. One arm was twisted about the face at an angle not possible to life. In the narrow fairway of the room behind him, the room he had already passed, this pitiful, repulsive body lay. To stand where he now stood, the young man realised, he must actually have stepped over it.

“You — did — that?” he gasped, in a voice that emitted hardly any sound.

“He looked in the mirror,” came the whispered answer. “What do you expect?”

“And before that — *he* in turn—”

“It works that way.” The other gave back with an awful grin.

Adam felt his body stiffen; yet the blood began to flow in tumult. He felt his fists clench tightly. With his eyes fixed on the shopman and not leaving him for a single instant, he saw that the old man, letting go of the mirror, had suddenly begun to dodge. Light-footed he was, amazingly agile, quick, his movements convulsive, horribly alert. He dodged sideways, backwards, swift as a shadow round his customer, who watched the hideous dance with arrested muscles and with spellbound eyes. The knife gleamed and flashed.

Adam made an effort that seemed to wrench his heart — and the muscles began to function again. His instinct of self-preservation woke. Instinctively he picked up a heavy iron mace from a teak-wood table close beside him. With a strain he could just lift it.

"It's up to *me* then, now — is it?" he cried, his own feet shifting quickly.

"I can defend meself!" shrieked the shopman, dodging with incredible rapidity. "If *that's* any good to you, me lord!" he yelled, shooting across the floor as an arrow flies, and brandishing his knife.

Moved by a sudden power that surprised himself, the young man leaped towards the pirouetting horror. He made one bound. He swung his heavy mace. The great weapon crashed down upon the ancient skull, driving the cap deep into the split bone. The figure stopped abruptly, uttered a tiny squeak, crumpled, and lay like a great mutilated insect where it fell. It did not move again.

"Murders and *is* murdered!" the other tried to scream, his voice, as in extreme nightmare agony, making no sound upon the air. "I've done *you* in, at any rate. Then it's *my* turn next, is it — ?"

He turned swiftly, with the feeling that someone watched him from behind.

A tall figure, sure enough, darkened the distant door into the street, the outline of a stranger who bent a little to examine something that stood upon the pavement just outside.

The young man stared and stared. Though in semi-darkness himself, the outline was clearly defined in the evening light. But was it a stranger? He wore a smart flannel suit, a straw hat with Oxford colours. As he straightened up, an eyeglass became visible.

Mr. Adam shot round and stared at the crumpled heap upon the floor at his feet. It was *not* the shopman. An electric shock flowed over him. What he stared down at was a neat flannel suit, a straw hat with Oxford colours.

He shrieked. He raced headlong down the room. He darted at top speed along the next narrow room as well, straight towards the street door, towards the stranger with the tall outline. And this tall outline now came gliding to meet him, very swiftly gliding, silently too, making no sound upon the boarded floor, just as he had seen his own reflected image gliding towards himself in the mirror before. Closer it came and closer, something oddly, dreadfully familiar about it, something that he almost recognised.

It came remorselessly nearer, he could not have stopped it if he tried, while, curiously, he felt that he did not want to, even *must* not, stop it. Like Fate — his own fate — he must meet it; he could not avoid it — because he somehow welcomed it.

He did not pause himself; he even moved faster, till there was but a foot between them. Terrified he was, yet at the same time his courage rose. They met, they slipped into one another, they emerged, and instantaneously though this came about, he had time to recognise — himself... and that same second to find himself standing on the pavement outside, gazing at a mirror on a high three-legged pedestal, while a little, thin, bent old man faced him, wearing a skull-cap and rubbing his hands. It was the shopman evidently, scenting a possible customer.

“A fine piece,” the old man wheezed. His eyes pierced like gimlets. “And cheap, too. It come from Chiney thirty year ago.”

A wave of pleasant, even delightful, emotion fluttered through the young man’s heart, as he bent to read an inscription carved in Chinese characters upon the wooden frame. He ran his finger over them, then looked up to ask.

“*To each*,” the wheezy voice translated, “*ten thousand futures*. *Yet each must choose his own,*” and went on to explain how a learned gentleman had once kindly deciphered the words for him — only the young man was no longer listening. He was staring intently at the upper part of the frame.

“But — the frame’s empty!” he cried aloud. “There *is* no mirror!” And again that marvellous emotion passed fluttering across his heart.

“It got broke,” he heard the wheezy voice explaining; “got broke on the vige over. But it’s easy put in again, me lord. A fine old piece.” He mentioned a trumpery price, a few shillings merely.

Young Mr. Adam bought it and took it home with him.... In due course he entered his cousin’s insurance office as a clerk, and one evening he scribbled an account of his adventure in the Land of Green Ginger. Later, he wrote other, longer adventures, too. He had inside him, it seems, some queer gift of scribbling imaginary, possibly imaginative, adventures.... A shock had brought it to the surface.

Next morning the elderly Mr. Adam dictated to his secretary a few commonplace paragraphs about “How I started to write.” They began: “At the age of twenty I entered an insurance office as a clerk....” They were extremely dull. “Send it to the editor,” he told his secretary, “with a line to say I hope it is what he wants; he need not use it otherwise, of course.”

And as he dictated the paragraphs his eye wandered from a long shelf, holding some twenty adventure books, to a mirror on a high three-legged pedestal which, oddly, had no glass, and which, the elderly Mr. Adam knew, had never had one, nor ever would.

THE COLONEL’S RING

AMONG THE RARE experiences that include real horror the episode of Hendrik and the Colonel’s ring deserves a place. Real horror, fortunately, is extremely rare. Emotions to-day are so vulgarised that an insipid person is called a horror, and a mere pudding awe-ful. Hendrik, whose ten years in America had provided dreadful things enough, met his only “real horror,” he affirms, in a London service flat. His half-uncle, Colonel Seitz, was host. There were no trappings. Horror slipped in quietly, almost slyly.

Hendrik had just arrived after ten disastrous years in America, time and money wasted, longing only to hide himself from friends and relations, when he found at his cheap hotel near Victoria Station a note from his uncle: “Welcome back from your Wanderjahre! I’ve not forgotten your headstrong boyhood. I’m alone in town. Do come and dine to-morrow — New Year’s Eve — just you and me. The ship’s purser, an old acquaintance, told me where you had put up.” A tactful P.S. added: “Of course, don’t dress. And I have much to ask you.”

Hendrik, after hesitation, went. Dinner was what he had called in Wisconsin a “major meal,” and he had known years in which one good meal a day kept the devil away, the devil of hunger, cold, misery. He remembered little of Colonel Seitz, beyond that he was a Sapper, his father’s half-brother, and had sown remarkably riotous wild oats. On sailing as a boy for Canada, the Colonel had shaken his hand, mumbled something about “a chip of the old block making good,” and had given him ten shillings. Much as he wanted to avoid his relations just now, and wondering if the purser had mentioned that he had been a steerage passenger, he brushed his only coat, and walked to Half Moon Street.

A genial, rather collapsed old gentleman, far from soldierly, and with a thick neck, Hendrik found him, as they shook hands this second time, though, alas, with no ten-shilling tip, and after a sherry and bitters they sat down to what the half-starved youth considered a gorgeous dinner. He felt more than shy, he felt ashamed, coming home with empty pockets and still emptier history. But his uncle, rather pooh-poohing the ups and downs of life, soon made him feel at home.

“There are several things I want to hear from you, my boy,” he remarked easily over the Burgundy, as he played with his eyeglass cord, making a ring of it, “about life, I mean, not about yourself. One thing,” he added warmly, “is that you never wrote home and squealed.” He created a kindly, comfortable atmosphere in this way. Only Hendrik wished he would leave his eyeglass cord alone, for the way he kept on making loops and nooses with it, got on his nerves a bit. His eyes, too, were continually drawn to the thick neck. High living, he reflected, probably!

Since they had shaken hands ten years before, Hendrik, though acquiring no money, had acquired values of a sort. As a newspaper-reporter in New York, a certain knowledge of men in the raw had come to him. Before the soup was over, he had decided that his uncle was badly worried, and “on his uppers,” as his Yankee lingo put it. A dozen signs betrayed him. He watched his nervous fingers eternally playing with that cord, then with the napkin ring, then with the napkin itself, making it into a noose, a slip knot.

“The old boy’s up against it somewhere,” ran through his observant, watchful mind, as he enjoyed the food, thinking of its cost, and listening to his host’s rather incoherent talk about “these awful modern times” and the “good old days when I saw you off to Canada.” Still, life was a “great game, you know,” and he had “been through hell myself,” though he had always “so far found a way out, you know, in the end.” This, with occasional references to the family, rambled on.... And then, quite suddenly: “You’ve seen lots of fellows go out, I’m sure — shooting — hanging — the electric chair, and the rest. Now, what about it? Tell me — do they mind much? Beforehand, I mean?” His fingers toyed with a metal ring round a faded buttonhole, pulling the wire about somewhat feverishly.

Hendrik, having witnessed such things personally, told what he could, but with reluctance. He did not like this turn in the conversation. His uncle, listening with avidity, he noticed, was now playing with his handkerchief, fastening it tightly round his wrist, then loosening it again. “Lynching, too, I daresay?” came after emptying his glass. But Hendrik shook his head. He lied — that he had never seen a lynching. He disliked the talk still more; he felt a little jumpy.

"I don't think they feel much," he answered at length the insistently repeated question. "In my experience, there's just a natural mental funk, you know, beforehand. Death itself seems painless."

"Ah!" exclaimed his host with a sort of excited guffaw. "That's what I thought, yes — *painless*. It amounts to very little really. I wanted to ask *you*" he added, "because I felt you would be just the chap to know." He laughed, if a trifle boisterously, at the same time more genially. Hendrik shrugged his shoulders, taking a sip of wine. He felt uncomfortable.

"*You,*" the other went on, the face grave again, "you have been hard up. You've been up against it, I take it. I needn't ask, poor boy. Your face shows it," and he handed a prime cigar to his young guest. "A Corona," he mentioned, "and I know you'll appreciate a good 'un," as he held out a lighted match. "I haven't much left in life," he added, "but I've managed to keep a few of these, and some marvellous Kümmel. I'll get it in a minute. Keep it in my bedroom, you know, locked up."

He began trying to fit the cigar band on to a thick finger which refused to take it, and Hendrik noticed a ring he wore, with a white diamond. "Ah, you spot the ring, I see," came the remark. "It was your grandfather's. I thought of leaving it to you some day. Proud to, you know, I think it's wonderful the way you pulled through, my boy. I respect you for it."

Hendrik grinned sheepishly, feeling rather foolish, but he felt something else as well, something unpleasant, bitter, puzzling. This ceaseless preoccupation with a ring disturbed him. Was it telepathy of a sort perhaps? Was his uncle queer in his mind somewhere? An abrupt impulse came to him that he shrank from, and yet obeyed — the newspaper reporter's instinct probably — to speak of the very thing he wished to avoid. He yielded anyhow.

"Rings interest you, sir?" he asked casually, and saw an extraordinary expression flash across the other's face, and die away as quickly as it came. "Oh! — for the moment possibly, yes — only for the moment," Colonel Seitz said lightly. He pulled out his keys at the end of a silver chain. "Now, that's not a bad one," he remarked, examining the key-ring; "only it doesn't give enough."

“Give?” repeated the other, puzzled. “Doesn’t tighten when it ought to,” was the reply, with a touch of impatience. “The keys slip out, you see.”

Hendrik, unable to think of anything intelligent, mumbled something about rubber being more practical. “This,” commented his uncle in a curiously lowered tone, “is far, far better,” and he pulled his napkin into a taut elastic circle round his wrist so that the flesh changed colour. The young man felt a sudden shiver as he watched, a cold air passed near him; he wished he had never come. His flesh began to tingle. While his mind searched for a means of changing the talk, the mood, the atmosphere, his host suddenly pushed back his chair. “By Jove, I mustn’t forget that Kümmel!” he exclaimed, and got up, touching the bell. “Tell the waiter to leave the coffee. I’ll be back in a moment,” he said, crossing to the bedroom door. “You’ll find it great stuff, my boy!” He smacked his lips as he passed through, closing the door with a little bang behind him.

The bang, though so slight, made Hendrik jump as if he had been shot. His every instinct told him to follow — and at once. His skin was moist, he was aware that he was trembling. One shiver followed another down his spine. He hesitated, however, arguing rapidly with himself, and, while he argued, listened. He listened intently. Nothing stirred. He told himself his plain duty was to enter the inner room, while still there was time; he also told himself he had no right to do any such thing, and that he was merely an over-imaginative fool.

Several minutes passed thus, but at last he got up with a jerk. There was perspiration on his forehead. He took a couple of quick steps forwards, and at that moment the waiter entered with the coffee. He came in quietly, without knocking, and at the first sound of his rubber boots, Hendrik shot round with a violent start towards the bedroom door — and saw his uncle moving across the floor in the direction of the table.

He was coming back to his chair, and behind him the bedroom door was still closed. But he had no bottle of Kümmel in his hand. Both hands were empty. They waved oddly in the air, as though seeking for support. He swayed a little, and the face, badly congested, with protruding eyes, sent the instant thought into Hendrik’s terrified mind: “He’s taken poison.”

For a moment he could do nothing but stare, fascinated, into those two eyes that met his own. The body then, he saw incredibly, seemed to lengthen, and, while it lengthened, swayed, but swayed above the ground, as though the feet had no support. It swayed slowly, swinging through the air for several feet. The next instant, the head wrenched itself backwards with a sudden jerk, showing the deep red line about the neck, and Hendrik caught the whisper of a single word: “Painless.”

“Will the Colonel be back for coffee at once, sir, or shall I keep it hot?”

It was the waiter speaking, the waiter who saw only one person in the room, the guest. Hendrik, for his part, now saw only the black-coated figure with the coffee-tray. When, a few minutes later, they had burst open the door — it had been locked on the inside — the ring of thickish cord had done its work.

REVENGE

A HUNDRED YEARS or so ago Hemmel might have been hanged, drawn, and quartered; to-day mental experts would probably have judged him insane.

Two curious traits, one physical, the other spiritual, were noticeable about him: his hair at the age of forty-five was as white as an old man's. The spiritual trait was more intriguing, involving a sudden and radical change of personality. At the age mentioned he inherited a comfortable fortune, but instead of enjoying it as predicted — he was a self-indulgent, pleasure-loving man — he spent it entirely on charity, living himself in poverty, even in penury. Withdrawing from his friends, he lived alone for twenty years in a single room, offering no explanation of his conduct. Every penny not needed to keep body and soul together, he gave away. There was no self-conscious philanthropy, no religious excuse of any sort, certainly no love for humanity. He gave, in fact, no excuse of any kind whatever — beyond a comment made to me when once I came across him ill, half starved, obviously not far from death, and urged a doctor, urged at any rate more personal comfort. "I *must* do it," he said, shaking his head of white hair, "or else be damned. Probably I'm damned, anyhow." There was an expression in his eyes I found dreadful; his face, of the kind most might describe as wicked, was tortured, an indescribable horror in it; terror, too, the terror of a haunted man. He recovered that time, however, His mode of living did not alter. His death, when he told me his story, came years later. He continued his painful mode of life to the bitter end. He did not leave enough to pay for a coffin. "*I had* to do it," he whispered with his last breath. "It was not *my* money, you see. Probably," as the eyes closed and consciousness failed, "I'm damned, anyhow...."

His nephew, an orphan, was ending his minority, and in a month Hemmel, then forty-five, would have to give an account of the estate which, as trustee, he had already half squandered. He would himself inherit this estate if his nephew pre-deceased him. Out of these conditions the hideous project came to birth in his mind. First rejected with horror, then toyed with, then, since it became lodged in his mind, it reached the edge of a possibility. From that to a decision was a step that seemed taken of its own accord, and this Alpine holiday furnished easy opportunity — a slight push at the right time and place, a push that if it failed could be explained as a slip, alone was necessary. That August afternoon, as they scrambled along the Rothwand Ridge, provided both time and place.

Such a day was surely made for innocent happiness and laughter; the blazing sun, the flowers, the white snowfields sheeted against an azure sky, the tinkle of cow-bells in pastures far below, these suggested the joy of childhood almost. The soaring peaks held something of fairyland, and young Eric was as gay, certainly, as any child. He was all agog for edelweiss; but edelweiss is not commonly found on grassy slopes — it flourishes in those cold draughts of air that blow upwards from deep, shadowed gulfs. It has this rather unpleasant fondness for edges and ledges of treacherous kind. The boy's eager search in this crystal air at 7,000 feet, was childish possibly, all the pleasure of youth dancing in his heart, as he picked his way, yet heedful of his uncle's warnings, along the perilous Ridge. The contrast of that black, devil's heart, at his heels was terrible, full of terror literally, but he could not know it. As the man watched his prey, step by step, waiting his opportunity, the hatred in him held a touch of mania. Yet it was an impersonal hatred almost, a hatred due to years of toil, responsibility, care, and trouble his trusteeship had caused him, a hatred now intensified because of the awful temptation the lad put in his way. The perversity in his dark soul found odd reasons in support of his frightful purpose.

His hatred of this crystal air was almost devilish. Driving clouds, a misty atmosphere would have suited that purpose better, for modern field-glasses, he well knew, brought distance horribly close, and in the loneliest spot some idle watcher might happen to be covering just that spot. Yet the spot, none the less, presented itself in due course, as he had calculated, and having screwed his determination to the point for days and nights, for weeks, indeed, his resolute, brutal heart did not fail. In this sense, moreover, it did not fail him — that what the heart has long wished, intended, hoped to do, seems done, when it actually comes about, almost spontaneously. The wish, so many times fulfilled mentally and in imagination, seems carried out impulsively, without thought, without preparation, so that the murderer assures himself “I simply couldn’t help doing it — I was impelled by a power greater than my will” — and other lying explanations.

The slight push was so easy, so trivial in its execution, as though he merely stretched an arm clumsily to help his own balance, that Hemmel actually gave a hideous little laugh in his soul as he saw the young body totter, then slide backwards over the brink six feet below. Turning, as it thus slid, the face looked back and up into his own, sheer amazement rather than terror in the eyes. It was unquestionable that the boy was aware of the deliberate push, aware that it was purposed, calculated. He just stared without comprehension, without realisation, as the body, twisting a little sideways, fell helplessly into space, the knapsack already hanging vertically in emptiness below him, hat and ice-axe beside it as they sank, arms spread out in the air, one hand clutching the tuft of edelweiss, the whole of them dropping, quite slowly it seemed, into the gulf of over 2,000 feet. The boy sank out of sight, the eyes fixed upon his murderer’s face till they passed below the precipice edge. The last detail Hemmel saw was the right hand clutching the edelweiss. He remembered particularly this bare, sun-burned hand against a background of blue dim forest thousands of feet across the valley. Covering his own eyes swiftly, he sat back rigidly among the rocks behind him, listening, listening, but the depth of that awful drop was too great, and no thud of the body falling upon the glacier could possibly have reached him. He was in a dangerous spot himself, but before he had time to clamber back into safety a feeling of violent sickness came, followed by a sudden darkening of the air, explained by the fact that he had fainted.

With the return to consciousness, realisation came back slowly, blunderingly, as though somewhere among his usual powers lurked a dislocation. A shock of terrific impact had numbed his ability to focus. A considerable time had passed, apparently, for clouds now hid the peaks, dusk had come, and he was shivering with cold. It was when his sight rested on the perilous edge at his feet that his first clear thought came back. It came with a crash; realisation followed quickly. He had murdered; and his second thought was equally clear — there could be no possible evidence against him. He had only to tell his story — a false step while picking edelweiss — and, whether believed or not, nothing could be proved. Moving his heavy nailed boots to rise, a loosened stone slid a short yard, gave one bound, and plunged into space, his eye following it with a shudder, but no sound following its disappearance. Dizziness seized him, as he cautiously heaved his body, stiff with cold, to a safer stance, two other stones following the first....

He had a long way to go, and darkness dropped early from the lowering sky, while the reaction, nervous, mental, physical, found him exhausted before the first hour of the descent was done. His mind, continually, feverishly, rehearsing the story he would tell, took inaccurate note of the rocks. He stumbled more than once, his muscles trembling and unsteady; night was upon him, he sat down to rest, to concentrate upon the route, to eat some food, only to realise that he could not swallow, that the cold rain driven by a rising wind was almost sleet, and that his sense of direction was now completely at sea. Mist and gloom obscured any lights in the valley far below that might have guided him, nor could he recognise the grouping of the rocks about him. All looked unfamiliar, the violent scenery hostile, unfriendly, in conspiracy against his murderer's soul. There was white upon his knees, as he huddled down in what shelter he could find. The sleet had turned to snow.

Aware now that he was definitely lost several hours still from home, he yet stumbled on in the darkness, for the increasing cold made movement necessary to life, only to reach a spot in a couloir, the rocks growing ever steeper, where he could neither advance nor retreat. And here, wedging himself as best he could, his belt tying one arm to a boulder lest the sleep of exhaustion caught him, he faced the night. By the way the icy wind drove up in gusts, as by the sound it made, he knew an abyss yawned just beyond his feet. Coma took charge of his slowly-freezing body....

It was a sound that woke him, perhaps a touch, the stirring, anyhow, of someone near him, and in such close proximity that the sound, the touch, were both registered. Wind roaring among the desolate cliffs, however, made words, if words there had been, utterly inaudible. A dim figure passed, of that he was positive, and it was the proximity that had brought him back to consciousness. His eyelashes, frozen together, only permitted blurred sight at first, but he made out what seemed the outline of a peasant lad, a rescuer, anyhow, though no one but a native could have been among these high, lonely rocks at such an hour and in such weather. His voice trying to articulate “Help! Help!” made no sound, yet there before him stood the peasant, dimly discernible in the gloom, an arm stretched out already to help him rise. The body, partially frozen, responded at first without control, but the other's arm guided him, its touch secure, its leading slow and skilful. There was no stumbling as they crept back to safer ground through the blackness, buffeted by the wind, fine snow driving against their faces stingingly.

Hemmel, fighting an icy horror in his soul, strove to force some sequence into the content of his mind. He was saved now, if by merest chance, for no light, no cry, had led the fellow to where he lay. A local guide perhaps, possibly a *crétin,* but a mountaineer certainly, for he knew the way and led with confidence. Movement, hope, relief now brought back some attempt at thought, as circulation restored a little warmth and strength, and he found himself hideously rehearsing his story again, yet so clumsily that, if uttered, it could only have betrayed him. "There can't — there *can't* be any evidence—" in his terror he heard his voice say the words aloud. But the fellow did not notice, the wind, moreover, tore the feeble sound away. Gratitude rose in him next, followed by a vile computation of what he might have to pay, then by an even viler reflection that he would now have money. He made an effort to see his rescuer's face, but the darkness made it impossible, and only the general outline of a young peasant, muffled, the touch of that steady, guiding arm, were perceptible. A dreadful nausea took him and again, a nausea of body and soul combined, so that he dropped to rest on a boulder, the guide waiting patiently, still without speaking. There were attempts at speech, on both sides apparently, but the hurricane smothered all sound.

It was during one of these short pauses to rest, Hemmel beginning to fear he must give up finally, that voices rose faintly from below with a wild swoop of wind, and that lights flickered and disappeared. Their meaning, however, was plain, even to the exhausted man, and he struggled to his feet with a last effort. His guide made a sign as well. The rescue party that must have left the village hours before were close at hand; they would have food, brandy, blankets. He was saved now beyond a doubt. Yet his real saviour, he well knew, was this sturdy, silent peasant who had stumbled upon him by chance or providence.

"They're coming!" he tried to shout into the wind, shouting again to guide the searchers, and just saw the lanterns wave in reply as he collapsed. His guide beside him came close, bent over him. There were words, but

Hemmel could not catch them. It seems a moment of unconsciousness came over him, for the next thing he knew was that the guttural *patois* of men's voices sounded close, brandy was at his lips, strong arms wrapped him round. He opened his eyes, he saw the lanterns swinging; in their flickering light he saw the figure of the peasant who had led him into safety, standing a little to one side. For the first time he saw the face, the features showing plainly.

The figure faded, the lanterns flickered elsewhere. But the search party who carried him down in the light litter, and to whom in semi-delirium he gabbled again and again, his lying story learnt by rote, paid small attention to his actual words. They admitted to no other figure. They listened with kindliness and sympathy, the three of them, but assured him there had been no fourth. They had found him quite alone, there was no peasant who had guided him. The good God, they urged, had guided him, for no man without divine assistance could have come, in storm and cold and darkness, the way Hemmel certainly had come. Hemmel himself knew otherwise, though he spoke no further word. In the flickering lantern light he had seen the face of his rescuer, he had looked up into the smiling features, into the kind, forgiving eyes of the boy he had murdered for his money.

IF it is true that most people have one secret they never share, it is also true that many have an experience they never tell, not so much from fear of ridicule or being disbelieved as from utter inability to describe it intelligibly. Language has grown gradually: it describes the experience of the race; anything beyond human experience exposes the poverty of language at once. No words exist.

Professor Zeitt had something of the sort, it seems. He was an ardent physicist, astrophysics his speciality; he knew all about waves, he was one of the few who really understood Relativity; he was a wireless expert, too. If Jeans, Whitehead and Eddington were in his pocket, the mystery of space-time was in his mind. He chatted as easily about other dimensions in time as most people do about shares and commodities. Conceptions of time beyond our one-dimensional kind were always in his thoughts.

He was also an experimenter; he made, it appears, audacious experiments, some of them psychological. That he ever suffered from overwork, from cerebral excitement of a rather dangerous sort, is open to question. To myself, who enjoyed the privilege, or suffered the affliction, of hearing his experience, there seemed no sign of delusion, hallucination, or mental disturbance. I remain convinced that he told me something that had actually happened — to an able, clear-headed, if unusual man.

It happened to him on a winter's night as he sat alone in his flat — a Sunday evening, the servants out, and his wife away in Paris. His married life was unhappy, childless, ill-assorted. He had made a mistake. There was another girl he should have chosen. Now, at forty, he realised this, though without undue bitterness, for he blamed himself. Her money had made his career possible. This particular day had been passed in strenuous exercise. His body, he admits, was over-tired, perhaps, but his mind, at any rate, was resting delightfully — he was reading a story of crime over the fire — delicious relaxation, he called it. The room was dim, only the reading-lamp turned on. Facing him in the wall was a long pier glass.

The book, — *It Doesn't Pay*, was the life of a burglar told by himself — Black, if memory serves me, the author — and he was near the end. In his mind, as he read the last chapter, stretched a picture of the man's whole life, not actually realised, perhaps, but lying there in perspective. Like a map, it existed serially and all at once, though he now focused attention on its close. As a cinema screen, it could have turned back, of course, and repeated any particular section. The whole of the burglar's life lay between the book covers; it was present, any portion of it accessible by turning back the pages. Its end was vivid at the moment merely because he, Zeitt, focused attention upon that part, that moment. And so, as was usual with him, he realised that his own life, similarly, existed serially, complete, the whole map there, while he was conscious of himself at the moment called forty, merely because he focused attention on that moment. Only, in his own case, Time made turning back impossible. If time had another dimension, he could have turned back to earlier sections.

He admits his general awareness of this idea in the background of his mind. For it was habitual. Such ideas lay always in his thought. But at the moment, thought and interest were centred on Black's adventures, these other ideas not consciously to the fore — when something in the semi-darkened room suddenly drew his attention. The room, he felt positive, had altered; and this alteration was in his immediate surroundings. Very close to him this abrupt change had come about. And he looked up from his page, startled a little, “as though an unexpected sound had disturbed me,” were his words, “something, anyhow, that *drew* my attention actively.”

The winter’s night was still, the Sunday traffic negligible, the flat empty, yet he was positive that someone stood in the room in close proximity to him. As he raised his eyes, he looked automatically at the reflection of himself in the pier glass opposite. He saw himself deep in the easy chair, the open book on his knee, the shaded lamp behind his head, and at the same instant saw also the reflection of a tall, straight figure that passed swiftly behind his chair from right to left. Simultaneously with this, and before thought had time to spread, he felt something that, he declares, he had never felt before, something entirely new. Accustomed mentally to contemplate ultimate zero and the colds of outer space, he was instantly conscious now that all about him, in brain and nerves as well, was a sudden cold of another kind altogether, a kind hitherto unexperienced. This cold brought horror with it. He felt as if hanging in interstellar space, adrift from all known moorings, on the brink of something that horrified because it was utterly unknown. By “unknown” he meant he had never experienced it himself. There was no “up” or “down,” because there was nothing to which “up” or “down” could be referred; similarly, “backwards” or “forwards” held no meaning. Nor could he know whether he was in motion or stationary. He was merely “relative.” With a tremendous effort, however, he managed to cling tenaciously with his ordinary mind to ordinary, familiar standards. In the first second all this came to him.

At the same time, he knew that the figure, now passing behind his chair, would appear in a fractional moment beside or in front of him, and even as he realised this, it happened. The figure moved beside him, then in front, men stopped and looked at him. Expecting his muscles somehow to be paralysed by the shock of unusual fear, and that he would be unable to move, he now found that this was not the case. As he saw the tall, straight figure come to a dead stop in front of him, not two feet away, he rose quickly to his feet and faced it. The book fell to the carpet with a thud. It was a young man he looked at straight in the eyes. He was able, even at this moment, to note his sensations. The habit of years worked truly. The intense, strange, different cold, he thus asserts, persisted. It numbed something in him that must have otherwise reasoned, reflected, criticised. These faculties, at any rate, did not function. All that happened seemed not natural, supernatural. The sensation of unbelievable fear that had turned him dizzy was gone. Having terrorised him, it disappeared. His breath became oddly, immensely accelerated. An idea of death slipped his thought. But all these, passing, left an exhilaration beyond all words.

It was under this intensification of consciousness that he then at once began to speak. The figure spoke, too. They spoke together. He emphasised this simultaneous utterance, though the spoken words were not always quite identical:

“Of course, I know you. I know who you are,” he said. “You are myself.”

The figure, a young man in a light, summery suit, smiled eagerly.

“I was twenty-five then,” said Zeitt. “I *am* twenty-five,” said the other. And, as they uttered together, came all the emotions of troubled love, of doubt, of being drawn in two different directions by worldly considerations and by personal inclination, with all the fever of a young man’s indecision.

“If only I could see ahead,” Zeitt heard himself saying, while simultaneously sounded: “*If only I could go back.*”

They looked into each other’s eyes while uttering the next words, identical words this time:

“I exist at that point where my attention is fixed at a given moment. But there’s really no need to. I can choose my moment, alter my attention — forwards or backwards. Can’t I?”

The young figure smiled, a curiously passionate expression in the eyes. In Zeitt rose the tumultuous passion for a girl, as against the affection and respect for another girl whose worldly possessions would enable him to follow his dream.

“I can go backwards or forwards,” both spoke together, “by changing my type of consciousness. It’s open. It’s here, it’s now, both accessible, as between the covers of a book — if only I escape from being fixed on a point so stupidly. If only I knew how.”

“*I do,*” grinned the other, while Zeitt laughed audibly, a laugh of audacious triumph, using the same words exactly. “I do.”

“I can change my consciousness, make it different,” cried Zeitt. “I see the way. My life is serial, all at once, whole. I am not fixed at any point. I am in time of two dimensions.”

“I *always am*” said the other, bending his head down to read a letter, whose wet ink still glistened.

“I will destroy it. I won’t send it,” exclaimed Zeitt, despising himself for proposing to a girl he did not really love.

The young figure tore the letter he held into tiny pieces and turned to throw them into the fire. But there was no fire, only a gas stove burning, and the room was a shabby lodging-house room. Zeitt gazed about him. The picture of the girl he really loved possessed his mind. “I’ll go to her — go back to her. I’ll go tomorrow.” His speech fumbled slightly.

“I’ll *go to her now*” said the figure decisively, his young face alight, as he moved across the faded carpet to a waste-paper basket beside the draughty window.

“I’ll change it — change the past,” and Zeitt realised he was shouting now aloud, amazing joy and wonder in him, as he watched the shower of small, torn bits of paper flutter down.

The figure came suddenly very close, so close that there seemed hardly room to stand without touching, as though space could not possibly contain both of diem on that one spot, then closer still, all over one another.

“That would be *too dislocating — for others — and until all can do it*,” sounded the voice very faintly. Professor Zeitt declares it sounded inside himself. “I’ll *make the effort anyhow. A result of sorts may*.” The voice died out. The figure was no longer there.

Zeitt, the physicist, found himself alone. He stooped down and picked up the fallen book. The heat of the blazing coal fire scorched his face, but did not affect the curious internal cold that lay, like a touch from interstellar space, over his entire being. He turned on all the lights, and before sitting down to finish Black’s book, he wrote down the dialogue and description as given above. It was bald, but as accurate as he could make it.

Long afterwards, as I listened to his account, watching his face, I saw a light in his eyes I have never seen before in any human eyes.

“The major part of the experience,” he added, “the *important* part,” he emphasised, “is beyond any power or words at my command.”

The distinguished man, now famous and happily remarried, smiled as he said this. He shivered a little. “They’d say I dreamed it,” he remarked, shrugging his shoulders. Yet within a few short weeks of the experience, his wife had run off with another man, and Professor Zeitt, finding the girl he loved a widow, had married her.

ADVENTURES OF MISS DE FONTENOY

AS AN OCCASIONAL Reader for a friendly publisher, I have come across strange stories sometimes that made me wonder about the writers and whence their material had been drawn. And by “strange” I mean uncommon, odd, unusual, entirely out of the ordinary. Had the stories been lived, or merely invented?

First novels, I knew, were by a large majority autobiographical: the writers had thrown their own experiences into the third person, often brilliantly. But such novels would be rarely followed by a second, for the personal experiences had been used up, and the creative faculty that imagines new ones was not present. A good story, however, even when the treatment fails, is there, though for lack of creative imagination it may remain raw.

It was some “raw material” by a writer called Janet de Fontenoy that caught my attention one day by this quality of strangeness, making me wonder about the writer, and whence she drew the experiences she described. Badly written, poorly presented, they somehow bore the stamp of having actually happened, for signs of imaginative faculty there were none, and they were assuredly not invented. Were they autobiographical, I asked myself? How did she compose such strange adventures? They were so utterly incredible.

My curiosity was stirred. There was an atmosphere about the tales that testified to something lived. Had there been evidence of craft, I might have doubted; it was the conviction that I was reading first-hand experiences that woke my interest to know more about their author. I could not recommend the stuff for publication, but I could write a word of tentative encouragement and suggest an interview. And this I did. Miss de Fontenoy accepted my invitation to talk about her “raw material” with a Reader who had been unable to “recommend its acceptance for publication,” and came to tea one afternoon in my flat.

I felt a trifle guilty, to tell the truth. Her literary talent being non-existent, I could not honestly encourage her to continue writing and the motive behind my invitation was solely curiosity. I wanted to see what she was like, to ask about the experiences I had read, to ascertain wherein exactly lay the oddness of her mind, to judge for myself, in a word, what manner of character and personality it was that could claim to have known such things direct and at first hand. Though she had adopted the device of making the adventures happen to a man, the feminine touch seemed clear. I was too experienced, I flattered myself, to be deceived by that.

That she was not one of those glib women who create a fantasy world to compensate for a life that has disappointed them, I felt equally positive. The mental and emotional fantasia many disappointed women so easily create is unmistakable, for the ego struts and preens itself always as the central figure; but of such tiresome fantasia I could detect no sign. I was, thus, inclined to accept that Miss Janet de Fontenoy had known experiences of rarest kind, had moved, indeed, in a world not realised by the majority. These, for some reason, she had set down baldly on paper. My own training and interest in experimental psychology sufficiently explains the curiosity I felt.

I think I expected the door to admit a small, elderly woman, with glasses, a grave face rather, a pointed chin possibly, and dressed in unfashionable attire, so that when I saw a tall, broad-shouldered young man, hefty, with clear blue eyes, stride in, I confess that it rather took my breath away. After the first surprise, however, my instinctive reaction was one of relief. I was actually relieved to find that Janet de Fontenoy was a healthy looking, upstanding young male. Was there disappointment too? I think so, though it had nothing to do with the sex of my visitor, but rather with his appearance. Fancy had played, no doubt, with a picture of someone who would suggest the mysterious, even the uncanny: there would be a hint of a queer mind, an interestingly unbalanced personality, behind dreamy eyes that saw beyond the common things of life, an atmosphere of the ghostly, even the other-worldly. Whereas this fellow was an athlete surely, a football forward, a diamond sculler, or on his way to the centre court at Wimbledon. There was nothing mysterious in the figure towering above the armchair with cushions I had placed for an elderly lady.

His mind seemed as straightforward as his physical appearance.

“I must apologise for pretending to be a woman,” he began at once in a good deep voice. “I ought to have told you, I’m afraid. But” — he hesitated a fraction of a second, smiling like a shy boy rather—” I knew you’d not be so interested to see a man. And I wanted to come. I hope you will forgive me.”

A shade disturbed by his penetration, I smiled inwardly over my faulty judgment, and assured him there was nothing to forgive and made him sit down.

“I’m not literary either,” he went on, “as you already know. I’ve got the mathematical mind, I believe. At least, figures are my best point. My father’s an actuary, and I’m in his office.”

He was direct as a poker. The little armchair, intended for a frail lady, creaked ominously as he sat down. I poured out the tea, feeling a tankard of ale or a whisky-and-soda might have been more suitable.

“Your — your work interested me,” I told him, choosing the noun wrongly, for while it was not literary, it equally was not work. The writing was done surely of necessity, I knew, functional as eating, and eating is not work. “I rather wondered, you see,” I stammered, “what made you try to write these experiences.”

I met his directness, that is, with similar directness.

He laughed. “Try is the right word,” he replied. “But HI tell you why. I wanted to get it out of my mind on to paper. I’d have preferred to build a model, but that was impossible of course. So I chose words — as plain and true as I could make them.”

“You found expression of some kind a relief—”

I suggested.

“I suppose so, yes,” he said slowly. He reflected a moment. “The fact is,” he went on, “I think I wanted to find a formula — an hypothesis that would cover my experiences. Writing it all out in words and sentences, setting it down in another medium, I thought, might clear my mind a bit. Besides, I wanted — I—”

I encouraged him with a nod and an understanding smile, and waited. To my amazement, a slight flush came to his brown cheeks.

“You see, I knew you would read the stuff and ask me to come,” he finished, face, voice and eyes as honest as those of a schoolboy.

"Ah! You knew that," I repeated. "Knew it in advance, you mean?"

He looked straight at me, nodding his head in turn.

"I knew you'd believe them, too," he added.

"Believe the experiences — believe they really happened?"

"That's it, yes."

"You deliberately picked *me* out, then?" I asked, showing no hint of scepticism, because I felt none. "You knew my mind, my attitude?"

"Yes — up to a point, that is. I knew your mind was open, without preconceptions. You had no prejudices, I *mean,* against such things happening." He took his second piece of cake, having scorned mere bread and butter and the hot trifles I had expected to see a spectacled lady nibble daintily.

I watched him with increasing interest, not sorry to find the direction of the talk could be left to him, and I was aware already that my mind had decided of its own accord neither to argue or deny. I found myself accepting at face value, so to speak, whatever he might tell me. The Adventures I had read in MS. rose before me vividly, forming a background to his straightforward, almost boyish personality, producing perhaps a sense of incongruity somewhere, yet nowhere of doubt. It was not easy, I mean, to reconcile "other-worldly" experiences with this stalwart, hefty fellow eating his cake with zest and with an appetite as honest as his eyes and manner. Nothing dreamy or uncertain emanated from this very fit young man — twenty-eight to thirty years I gave him at most — whose fitness reminded me of newspaper advertisements of Grecian youths who wear "health-giving" underwear, or eat some divine patent food. Nothing fanciful lay in him, no hint of the charlatan, no touch of mystery. Desire for notoriety, as the hero of unusual adventures — a common motive of inferiority-complexes that can achieve peculiarity in no other way — was certainly absent. If this fellow claimed that he had lived unordinary things, he had lived them.

Thus, when he asserted quietly that he knew my mind in advance of meeting me, I found myself disposed to take it as true. The word "incredible" did not again offer itself. What did offer itself, oddly enough, was the idea that his appearance and his adventures were not so entirely irreconcilable after all. This idea rose in me suddenly: that his appearance and personality, so obviously genuine, were an epitome of what he claimed, a simile rather. Behind this "obvious reality" I gazed at, a deeper reality lay concealed. Life, nature, the universe, are but a fractional, imperfect representation of an actual reality behind we never know. Their "obvious reality" is false. Similarly, behind this Janet de Fontenoy crouched another, more real being.

I remember this notion shooting across me, as I watched him enjoying his cake. While my mind, untouched by criticism, held his astonishing claim that he had known me in advance of meeting, a judgment formed itself as well. So swift are intuitive processes, that it rose, like Minerva from the head of Jove, complete in a second. Here, I felt, was a nature at one with itself, made of a single piece, homogeneous, uninjured by any grit, mental or emotional, that crept in to disturb rhythm. His machinery ran smoothly as a complete whole, its simplicity unmarred by any extraneous influence that might cause wavering. Such human beings, I knew, were of necessity extremely rare. To have reached his age intact would, indeed, constitute him almost a freak. The poison of thought alone, of sex, if of no other activity, destroys this unique quality early. His mind, he had mentioned, was mathematical. Was he, then, acquainted with symbols only? My own thought, at any rate, made this sudden jump in speculation.

That he had gauged my own, at least, was certainly true. He had deliberately picked me out as a Reader of his MS. in advance. He had known that I should invite him to call, that I expected a woman, that I should be interested, and more, that I should believe. And his claim to have foreseen this scrap of the Future I indeed found myself accepting at its face value. No hostile criticism, such as normally must have been the case, stirred in me.

Having finished his cake and set down empty his third cup of tea, he declined a cigarette, asking if he might smoke his pipe.

"You've had no direct experiences of your own," he remarked, as a statement rather than a question. "If you had, you would be more than open-minded only — you'd be convinced. Wouldn't you?"

I raised my eyebrows merely, for this further evidence of penetration, of accurate knowledge rather, was again disturbing. But I made no comment. I wanted him to talk first, my own questions could come later, though I already began to have the feeling that these would be answered before I had even stated them. Did I feel that my thoughts were open to him? Hardly that perhaps. It was rather that his power of anticipation was extraordinary. Such trivial evidence of thought-transference, in any case, I reflected, was common enough between minds in sympathy. "You took that out of my very head, I was just going to say it," is a commonplace, of course. And the sympathy between us was indeed definitely there, for while the visit, the precedents leading up to it, were of a kind to produce a certain tension, if quite easy tension, this was not present. We might have known one another for years. There was a sincerity and naturalness about him that made me think of trees: I might have been sitting in a calm, deep beech wood, communing with nature on a windless day. This sort of peace and reality he brought with him. No disturbance of any kind broke a certain stillness he produced. The simile of a deep wood on a windless day returned — no single leaf was ruffled. Yet my mind was actually seething with questions I meant to ask — about himself, about the experiences I had read, about how, why and whence they came to him, how they affected his being, his reactions to such strange occurrences in his ordinary life, and what, indeed, his "ordinary life" consisted of. My curiosity, my questions, however, somehow did not qualify what I call this stillness. It remained undisturbed between us.

One must pay attention to his actual words. Each phrase held so much.

"I've had them, at intervals, since childhood," he remarked. "At intervals, of course. They are more real than my ordinary life. Though they come as interruptions in my ordinary life, it's my ordinary life that seems the interruption. As though daily life was 'being asleep,' and I wake up suddenly. An Experience is when I'm awake. When it's over, I fall asleep again — into ordinary life."

I did not wish to check him. I merely slipped in a quick question by the way about his sense of time.

Did time, during an Experience, seem the same as time in ordinary life? Was the sense of duration similar in both? He smiled with pleasure.

"Of course, you ask that," he said, "because you know already. Years are very short periods that only seem long. The Experiences last longer, ever so much longer, but in quite another way." I left it at that, watching him pressing his pipe down, with an air of having said all that was necessary. "Nothing in my parents explains anything," he went on quietly between puffs. "My mother, a Russian now dead, was emotionally religious; my father lives only for his work and is rich. I get my turn for figures from him. I could always add several columns at a glance, and extract cube-roots, like the prodigies, at sight. That's what I meant by having a mathematical mind — only figures really. The reasoning that belongs to mathematics I don't possess. I have no reasoning power at all — none. No sex either. Sex has never developed in me. I see nothing that even begins to waken it—"

I interrupted, for he was going too fast — in the sense that I should never remember all the mental notes I was making for questions later; for, let me repeat — one should pay attention to his actual words.

"An ascetic, are you then? A virgin — still?"

He smiled, his eyes bright with a laughter that was more of surprise than shyness.

"Continent — oh, yes — always," he answered. He seemed to reflect a moment, as though perhaps trying to find the exact words he wanted. I, too, reflected — as swiftly and intelligently as his pregnant speech permitted. Sexual energy, the basis of all energy, primarily intended for the occasional procreation of children, had long since deteriorated into a mere physical enjoyment of frequent recurrence. The waste of valuable energy to the individual, to the race, to humanity as a whole, was incalculable.

"The energy goes somewhere else," he went on, as though picking up my own fleeting thought. "Goes in another direction, of course. It all gets used — I know that much. It leaves nothing over for w — for love-making," he quickly changed the word, and though there was no hint of contempt in his voice, there was a rather nameless quality I thought of as — not pity precisely, so much as pitying.

"Could you express that in your formula?"

He shook his head. "I've never got as far as a proper formula," he answered.

I used the laconic shorthand he evidently preferred, though what he had just said provided a text I could have commented upon with deep interest and at great length. Above all, I felt, argument must be avoided. He surely was telling me, rather casually, things he knew, and argument could only bewilder him. It was his simple direct utterance I wanted, the rest must wait. My visitor, of whom I knew little enough indeed, should be accepted on his own terms. My questions, I decided, must be few, but fundamental. I wished, that is, to establish one or two general principles in my own mind before going into detail. The conviction that I had come across something of rarest interest and value meanwhile deepened. I was aware of uncommon thrill.

“Naturally,” I commented. “I understand. And wisdom needs no formula.”

I gazed into his blue eyes through the tobacco smoke, and he returned my gaze as steadily. It was, I believe, my own eyes that fell first. Not that there was the faintest suggestion of any so-called hypnotic nonsense about his state, but that there was, for all that, some quality I found stimulating to the point of being disconcerting, since I hold “disturbing” to be too strong a word. Yet only remotely so, and perhaps the *mot juste* after all would be *inspiring*. It was as though, deep down in me and far out of sight, an odd quiver tried to rise, an eager quiver of intense excitement. His eyes, if extremely direct, did not look through me; it was not that; nor did they, so to speak, see something behind me. That they seemed more aware, more conscious, gazed into a more extended, perhaps a different field, than the one I knew, expresses it best. The phrase “worlds not realised” flashed across my mind as my eyes fell from his, and the thrill I have already mentioned included in that moment a further reaction still, so that I felt spidery legs running up and down my spine, and I acknowledged the shiver we call goose-flesh.

Instantly, again, I had myself in hand, strap-hanging, as it were, to a sensible question:

“Your Experiences cannot be induced, I suspect?” I asked, though my exact meaning, it was clear, escaped him. For he had no reply at first.

“Induced?” he repeated, in his steady voice.

“Can you bring them on at will,” I explained, “or when you want them?”

He shook his head decisively. “Oh no,” he said, “I can’t do that.”

“So you haven’t trained yourself in any special way, I take it? Training of attention or will, for instance? Concentration, breathing, breath-control —

what the East calls Yoga?”

He stared for a moment, wondering evidently what I was talking about. “I am ignorant, I’m afraid,” he replied, “for I don’t know what all this is. They come, or they don’t come. Out of the blue they come—”

“Without warning?”

That made him laugh again, a jolly laugh it was, too.

“No bell rings exactly,” he said, “but I’m given notice, if you like. There are warning signs as you might call it, a sort of warning thrill. Something rushes over me — *all* over, I mean.”

“And what starts the thrill?”

“Well — colour or sound usually, I think, music — outline, too, sometimes.” He broke off, hesitating a little. “A combination, it seems.”

“Beauty?” I ventured.

He nodded at once. “Beauty, yes, that’s it. Loveliness. I get a shock, you see, first.”

If he talked rather as a schoolboy talks, that was what I preferred and welcomed.

“That, too,” I suggested, “refused to come into your formula?”

He chuckled, the shy expression passing across his face again.

“I used the word formula before without knowing exactly what it means,” he confessed. “Anyhow, I don’t know properly the combination of colour and sound and emotion that bring on an Experience. They are usually the first sign of the change coming — that’s all I can say.” I gave an understanding nod, as it were, yet not daring to pretend in any slightest degree, for he would see through any camouflage, I felt positive, and I should lose his confidence. Beauty, I mentioned, was well known to heighten and intensify consciousness with sensitive people, producing an exaltation of the faculties. “And this ‘combination’ you speak of,” I asked, “is loveliness of one kind or another that makes you feel deeply first?”

“That’s it,” he agreed promptly. “The land that really hurts — you know — gives you a stab, a wound.”

“What you called a shock just now, yes; and the shock shifts your whole being, so that your consciousness finds a way open suddenly — well, elsewhere?”

His face lit up with pleasure. “Splendid!” he exclaimed, almost as though he cried “Well hit, sir!” at cricket. “I knew, of course, that you would talk to me just like this. It’s what I came for really.”

To gain time, perhaps to cover a momentary confusion, I lit a cigarette. My own mind, I felt, had been rushing far ahead of my strange visitor’s, while yet the feeling grew upon me that his own was actually in advance. What I had thought out and reasoned, I mean, he seemed to know as naturally as a child plays with a ball. Speculations I had wildly indulged for years seemed to meet corroboration halfway in his Experiences. Dreams and visions my subconscious had beckoned from the stars came almost to earth as I watched and listened. My critical faculties, however, were not dulled entirely, for as I lit my cigarette and saw its blue smoke rise, I found myself questioning that “shock” that beauty gives — to the young, at any rate. Children, I remembered, are not susceptible to loveliness, they are not aware of beauty, they do not perceive it. At what age, I wondered, had his Experiences begun to show themselves?

“I am intensely interested,” I said, after this slight pause. “But tell me — if you can remember — were you consciously aware of recognising beauty, loveliness, as a child? Did these shocks come to you as a youngster, for instance?”

For the first time he seemed to stammer.

“I — I” he began, then stopped. Yet it was not stammering, nor was it, properly speaking, hesitation even. “As a child,” he went on, presently, “in early youth — *I* — *I* did, yes, get these shocks,” emphasising the pronoun peculiarly, “but — not I,” repeating the personal pronoun with no emphasis at all.

His meaning came to me, though not instantly.

“Another ‘I’ — a different ‘you’ of course?”

He merely nodded. It was as obvious to him as the sugared cake on the table beneath his nose.

"It's a longish time ago, you see," he observed quietly. "I was little more than a boy when the first thing happened — about seventeen — and I'm over forty-five now."

Why, I caught myself wondering, did this statement, this astonishing statement, hardly even startle me? Why did I not feel bewildered, puzzled? I ought by rights to have known a reaction of amazement, incredulity, laughter, of sceptical disbelief at any rate. Some exclamation of blank surprise, of utter doubt, should have found spontaneous expression: "Over forty-five! What d'you mean? You're not even thirty yet!" Instead of which, his statement, offered so quietly and naturally, dropped into the pool of my mind as a thin stone slips into water with scarcely a ripple. Not a leaf stirred — to use the simile of the wood again. *I* was the one who acknowledged to over the half-century mark, and I was talking with a youth, a young man, who yet claimed to be nearly my own age as naturally as though he said: "Yes, I'd like a cigarette," or "I feel hungry, too."

It was this absence of the normal reaction in myself that then simultaneously flashed an explanation that was similar, rather, to his stammering choice between "I" and "I" a moment ago. It is less easy, perhaps, to set down this hint of explanation, but the essence of it lay in time. His Experiences took place in other, in different, time. In *that* he was indeed "over forty," a hundred, a thousand. His statement was made out of a different time-scale. I now caught myself acknowledging that I had already been aware of age in him, of something old, old, of something ageless rather, even while I sat there chatting with a lad who wore the full bloom of youth. It had lain unrecognised in me hitherto. I searched his face, his physical appearance, keenly for signs that nearly half a century should have traced; and as I did so there again stole over me that sensation as of little feathers that brushed my skin along the spine, stirred by a breath of cooler air, the touch of the unearthly....

"Yes, of course," I found myself saying quietly after a certain pause, and as much pursuing a thought of my own as addressing him directly, "the careless waste of sexual energy ages us, no doubt, yet it's not the question of storing it up alone, but the way — the direction — in which to use it afterwards that is important."

"Is that it?" he replied. "I had never put it into words."

While he refilled and lit another pipe, and while my own thoughts went diving and soaring a little wildly perhaps, I got the impression that his own mind lay quite inactive, uncharged with thoughts of any kind. It came to me that he really did not think at all. He waited, anyhow, for me to speak. And this time I made a plunge for it:

"And life, as we find it and know it," I asked, following my own line of ideas somewhat at a venture again, "does life interest you — are you thrilled, I mean, or bored with it? Do you enjoy being alive? Does it seem to you worth while, for instance, or the reverse?"

It was, of course, a fundamental question. His relations to living involved a keynote theme. I wanted to know his main reaction to finding himself upon the planet, conditioned in time and space with a given order of faculties and senses, as human beings are. Had he an object in being alive? Was he ambitious? Was life of value, of importance, to him? Did it seem to him merely a rather futile dream, or filled with meaning?

The question demanded a reply. He gazed into my eyes. Why did I attach such importance to what he might say? I hardly knew. Had I already persuaded myself that this strange and rather casual visitor experienced — occasionally, at any rate — a different kind of life?

"It's wonderful — isn't it — merely to be alive," I added, helping him to a reply, "even if the meaning is not clear."

His eyes withdrew to the lighting of his pipe, then returned calmly to my face again, and I cannot explain why his quiet, steady gaze increased that faint tickling down my spine.

"Yes," he answered, "I do enjoy it." He hesitated. "Knowing there's a way out makes all the difference, though — doesn't it?"

I had expected his reply to be of this kind; he knew, moreover, that I had expected it. A smile began, then vanished; but behind the great sunburnt bulk of him I saw another thing steal up, something I can only describe as light and fiery, and of amazing swiftness. It was gone even as I stared.

"Your Experiences, you mean, point to a way out?"

He nodded.

"A way of escape — from what would otherwise be — intolerable?"

He nodded again, giving the slightest possible shrug of the shoulders.

“From what’s almost a mechanical state — a state where we just respond automatically to external stimuli of various kinds?” I insisted. “Like machines, rather — automata merely?”

A puzzled expression crossed his face. We laughed a little.

“They’re real, you see. I’m awake then. Wide awake,” he put in.

“Ordinary life seems something of the dream-order by comparison, you mean? Semi-conscious almost?”

He nodded again, shrugging his big shoulders, and it was as though he said: “I suppose so.” Evidently, he had never thought of putting it into words before. He gave a kind of long-drawn sigh. “There’s a way out anyhow,” he said, “and once we know that, we can manage to stick the rest — to enjoy it even.”

He puffed his pipe, at any rate, as though he enjoyed *that*. His manner was as quiet and easy as if we had been discussing cricket averages, or styles at tennis. A pause fell between us, lasting probably longer than I realised, for I was rather intensely occupied with my own thoughts, and these thoughts dived in headlong fashion into somewhat deep recesses of my own field of psychological research. It was after a considerable interval that I heard my own voice again, but as if speaking to myself rather than to him, so that I hardly expected an answer. I was not even certain that I had spoken out loud. His comment startled me, therefore, all the more.

“Shall we ever get any further?” I was thinking. “Will our knowledge ever really advance? Shall we ever know more about essential things...” And, apparently, I spoke aloud.

“Not by any method we’re using at present,” came the startling comment. “We shall go round and round in the same old circle as for thousands of years. Humanity as a whole, I mean. Not individuals, of course.”

Was it telepathy again, or had I uttered actually? In any case, it did not matter; he had taken my own thought whole: that nothing *real* could ever be known by intellect or reason. It was the wrong instrument.

“We possess no faculty, as we are now, for knowing anything real. That’s what you mean?”

He nodded, pressing the tobacco down into his pipe with one finger. “It’s useless *that* way,” he remarked, as though he criticised a man’s service at tennis in relation to his improvement. “It’s only adding the same kind of knowledge to the same kind of knowledge.”

He lit a match and puffed vigorously for a moment. “To know more,” he repeated between puffs, “we — we ourselves — must change.”

And on this our conversation abruptly came to an end; it stopped, as though a climax had been reached beyond which nothing useful could then be said. Perhaps that was true, I found myself reflecting, as I saw him rise from his chair and knock the ashes from his pipe which had refused to light again properly. He replaced it in his pocket, his clear blue eyes gazing down at me. I sat gazing up at him a moment, after the most astonishing talk of my life. That this well set-up young fellow was nearly as old as myself seemed, of course, quite incredible. The conversation just ended was, of course, even more incredible. Cryptic, almost like some shorthand known only to the two of us, it must have sounded unintelligible to any third party who had heard it. For I had spoken as though communing with myself, uttering the final results of many years’ difficult experiment and thought, but omitting all process of argument by which these results had been reached. And yet he had not only completely understood me, but had confirmed, even added to, my deep convictions. He had taught me something too.

Something in me felt breathless. Something had emanated from him all this time that almost literally took my breath away.

“You’ll jot down notes about your further adventures,” I remarked, walking beside him to the door, “and let me see them?”

“I’ll come and tell them to you, please,” he answered. “We may hit on the formula together then. You have the time.”

So he knew that too. It was true that I only “read” queer, out of the way, even outlandish MSS. for my friend, the publisher, “reading” them for my own interest without a fee.

I put no unnecessary questions to him, least of all how it was he knew so much about my mind and habits. That my hobby combined research and experiment along psychological and physiological lines was obviously no secret to him. But one question I did ask, as we reached the door into the street.

“Your name — you might as well tell me,” I suggested. “Your address, of course, I have.”

“Smith-Jones,” he replied at once. “John.” And I watched him go striding away down the street with the quiet energy and ease that belong to youth alone. He had left his MS. in my room, but purposely of course.

I

The Experiences assuredly, I reflected, were by no means all of them significant, in the sense that they added anything to life either by way of happiness, knowledge, or human faculty. Some, indeed, were little better than ghost tales, if of rather unordinary kind.

There was, thus, the matter of the mackintosh, or properly speaking, of the mackintosh and hat, an experience capable of more than one fairly obvious explanation that will occur to all, while yet, I hold, of not entirely satisfactory kind. The obvious explanations, that is, explain away better than they explain.

The account of what happened is simple enough; in the version John Smith-Jones set down on paper most would call it banal, trivial, dull. Its schoolboy English, however, could not quite conceal another quality that somehow crept past the style, the errors of punctuation, even the faulty grammar. It was this quality that caught my attention, surviving all the weaknesses of composition. Was I right concerning this “quality,” I asked myself? Did I not perhaps supply it myself, imagine it?

If only to satisfy myself that it was, or was not, my own contribution, I persuaded him, oh, easily enough, one day to repeat it verbally to me. The written account lay clearly in my memory as I listened. The “quality” not only survived, but became intensified.

It was one of the earlier experiences, John somewhere about eighteen years of age, his nose well on the grindstone of his father’s actuarial business, involving office work which began at the comfortable hour of ten every morning. His father, preferring his semi-country little house in Richmond, did not sleep in town, and John had a room in his aunt’s apartment near the Marylebone Road in Devonshire Terrace. Breakfast, dinner and bed he found thus with his father's unmarried sister, whose personality nowhere intrudes into what happened beyond the fact that one late October she went to Paris, taking her maid with her, and providing an opportunity for the cook, an old family servant, to take a holiday at the same time. John, thus, was left alone in the apartment, with room and breakfast attended to by the porter's wife. He rather enjoyed it; to dine in a restaurant for a change appealed to him as well, the sense of privacy, as though he owned the fiat, amused him; he was the only person with a latchkey.

It afforded him pleasure, he mentioned, to find the place empty and unoccupied on getting home in the evening, or at night after dining on the way, if work had kept him late. And it was the word "unoccupied" rather than "empty" that he stressed. His account contented itself with this slight emphasis, in passing as it were, but drew no deduction from the little point. On my pressing him for a word of further explanation, he merely shrugged his shoulders. I put my question because here, it struck me, was a specific instance where the "quality" I have already mentioned stole out of the loose end his written version had failed to gather up later. "Oh," he replied, "there was a continual sort of coming and going in the place. No, not of any disturbing kind — I mean, nothing that concerned me personally — merely that I was aware of it" — which was all that I could squeeze out of him, and for the simple reason that it was all that he could tell me. The rooms were, thus, unoccupied, yet, in some sense or other undefined and indefinable, did not seem entirely empty.

Is it a distinction without a difference? I think not. The aunt, only referred to in this single regard, was a kindly ego-centric, whose voluble personality filled every corner and cranny she had left behind her. She was of the type that could talk about herself to a visitor for an hour without stopping, nor talk uninterestingly perhaps, yet add when saying goodbye: "but you've told me nothing about yourself! How are *you* getting on?" with an interest wholly sincere. In my own mind I ascribed John's "coming and going" to what may be called "atmospherics" left behind her.

To this unoccupied suite, at any rate, he returned one afternoon towards the end of October, made himself a cup of tea with the things left out by the porter's wife, read for an hour, dozed for another hour, and then felt it was time to go out and get his dinner. The weather was raw and squally; he chose a restaurant at hand; he chose also a rather worn grey felt hat and carried a macintosh over his shoulder, and the macintosh was both new and of a very light fawn colour, so light, indeed, that he remembered hesitating when he bought it, with the thought that a darker shade would wear better by not betraying the London grime so easily. And now, as he left the restaurant soon afterwards, the rain was coming down with a steadiness that prophesied a stormy autumn night, with gusts of angry wind and a raw touch of cold. A miserable, gloomy night, it was. He walked the few hundred yards, but was glad to reach the shelter of the building, shaking himself in the vestibule like a wet dog. The porter took him up in the lift and wished him good-night. He let himself in with his latchkey, flung his wet macintosh and grey felt hat upon the ottoman in the corridor just outside his door, and made himself comfortable with a book in the deep armchair of his small sitting-room.

It was perhaps about ten o'clock, the gusty rain driving against the windows. But the rain and wind, shouting the end of summer dismally enough, could not trouble him, for his chair was comfortable, his voluble aunt was far away, the next day, being Sunday, allowed of breakfast in bed, and his book, *Arabia Deserta*, enchanted, even indeed, enthralled him.

In this pleasant receptive state, his thoughts a vivid picture of the coloured scenes he was reading about, John paid little attention to autumn's gusty violence, nor noted particularly the passage of time, for the idea of breakfast at any hour he happened to wake next morning rather broke time's usual tyranny. It was thus a sound in the street that first disturbed his easy enjoyment of Arabian deserts — the music of someone playing upon a fiddle that drew his attention, by slow stages, from his vicarious travels to things closer at hand. He had recognised Tchaikowsky's *Andante* even before he named it to himself, but having once named it his thoughts had then been deflected outwards.

Laying the book down upon his knee, he listened, and the exquisite and poignant melody, sighing out its soul upon the dismal street at night, plunged deeply into him. Its gracious melancholy stirred him profoundly. He imagined the homeless player, homeless and hopeless too, for who would be passing ready to give alms at such an hour in the darkness? — he saw the poor instrument, damaged to ruin by the streaming rain, he felt the soaked clothes and soggy boots... and opening his window he called out loudly above the wind, while he threw down half-a-crown wrapped up in a sheet of old newspaper.

The wind blew both voice and newspaper at an angle, but he saw a shadow crawl out of other shadows, pick it up, and retreat into the night... and when he was back in his chair again, the enchanting book ready to be resumed, he discovered that its haunting power had evaporated, something different having replaced it. There was emotion in him of disturbing kind that denied the desire to read. What were precisely its ingredients? He could not say. There was pity, an aching pity; there was yearning, a homeless yearning; a bitter sense of desolate frustration, with a desire to escape, though not for himself primarily, from miseries due to some intolerable slavery. A pang of violent, unearthly nostalgia swept over him, that was accompanied by an icy realisation suddenly of the futility of life's brief span and its ludicrous limitations. All of which emotions, powerful and searching, grouped themselves about a vivid picture of that wretched shadow fiddling hopelessly in the cold rain and darkness.

A moment this swept over him, a moment merely, and it was while occupied with it that he caught another, closer sound, not in the street this time, but in the flat, in the corridor indeed just outside his door. He was aware of it, no more than that, for it did not draw his attention particularly, and he merely noticed it with enough vague interest to say to himself "Now, what was that, I wonder?" but caring nothing about the answer. He listened. A mouse, a stray cat dropping from a window ledge, a letter pushed beneath the front door or through the flap. There was, however, no conscious attention in his listening, his mood still under the sway of that haunting music, that aching yearning pity, with the mournful, homeless shadow crawling in the rainy darkness. He did listen, none the less, with a certain deliberation, and then, the sound not being repeated, he picked up his book again and went on reading. And he was half-way down the page when it came back to him sharply that no mouse or cat had made that sound. It was a footstep. This did not interrupt his reading; it was merely that another part of his mind recognised the fact while he still read — until he reached the end of the page and laid the book down abruptly because the sound had suddenly been repeated.

He listened now with close attention. A footstep had passed along the corridor immediately outside his door, a very quiet, soft, almost a stealthy, footstep. It was not audible now. It had stopped.

That he was alone in the empty flat then came over him, the front door locked, the porter gone, the lift no longer running, for it was after eleven o'clock, and that the only latchkey was in his pocket, and — that there was somebody in the corridor. This slight increase of awareness came over him. "Who can *that be*, I wonder?' ran a second question across his mind, yet again a question he asked himself quite casually. There was no trace of nervousness in him anywhere, as he laid his book down and got out of his armchair to have a look for himself.

"I'll just have a look round," was the way he put it to himself, as he rose in leisurely fashion and crossed the carpet.

Opening his door, he stood staring along the dark passage, turning on the electric switch the same second. There was no one there, the corridor was empty. He strode along it, looking into each room in turn with the light full on — his aunt's bedroom, the drawing-room, both draped in dust sheets, the kitchen, the bathroom too. Under the beds he looked and into the cupboards. He even went out on to the iron landing beyond the scullery where the tradesmen hoisted up the food. There was no one. Nor was there any open window through which a cat might have crept. The entire place was empty, silent, apparently unoccupied, so that he turned out the various lights and went back to his reading, feeling quite sure he was alone in the apartment. And it was then, while reading, that another part of his mind let loose an unexpected whisper:

"There was a change in that corridor, a difference in it, something you noticed, but didn't realise quite."

It was true. He now realised it. There a slight alteration in the corridor, a detail missing, something that had been there when he came home from dinner had disappeared. This detail, whatever it might be, was no longer there. The same moment he was out of his chair and in the corridor again, searching keenly with his eyes and memory, and as he looked at the low divan where he had flung down his macintosh and old grey felt hat, he instantly detected what the alteration was.

The fawn-coloured macintosh lay where he had flung it, patched with wet, one sleeve hanging down, the other sprawling over a cushion. It was the grey felt hat he could not see. The hat was gone.

So there had been someone in the flat. His search had not been thorough enough. He must look again. He did so, and ended with the positive certainty that neither man nor mouse, burglar least of all, was in hiding. He closed the door of each room in turn behind him, fastened the chain along its groove in the front door as well. He did this very thoroughly. The hunt for the missing hat was equally conscientious. It had neither slipped behind the divan, nor fallen to the floor, nor become mixed up with the macintosh. It had been lying, he remembered distinctly, on the top of the wet macintosh, for he had taken it off last and tossed it there, and, since it was now gone, somebody had taken it.

Somebody, yes, but who? Had, perhaps, the front-door catch failed to work when he came in, so that a hand could slip through quietly? Not only was the distance too great for any hand to reach, but the front-door was securely fastened, and the only available latch-key was in his pocket.

Moreover, he had definitely heard that stealthy footstep.

A moment longer he stood looking down at the macintosh, which he then folded differently so that another side of it should dry, and then he went back slowly to his sitting-room and calmly resumed the reading of his *Arabia Deserta.*

Calmly, yes. For somehow, the little incident did not disturb him particularly, did not really puzzle him unduly, as it must have disturbed and puzzled, probably alarmed as well, anybody else. Not that he had the faintest idea how that hat had vanished, nor any explanation of the footstep he had indubitably heard, but that strangely — in some strange way — he knew it was explicable. He understood that it was all right, using both words precisely in their true meaning. The notion of a thief or burglar left his mind entirely. The agency by which the hat had been removed was, literally, all right. That it was being worn now in the gusty rain and wind, as he felt positive it *was* being worn, he knew equally, was all right. His mind and pen used the schoolboy phrase, where a more lettered choice would doubtless have used "natural." For "natural" as against supernatural was assuredly what he meant. The positive assurance of its rightness and naturalness, he mentioned, was "all over him."

The reading of *Arabia Deserta,* therefore, continued easily and delightfully, and it must have been fully an hour later when a sound again caught his absorbed attention. It was, again, indubitably a footstep, again just outside his door, where someone was walking quietly along the corridor. He heard a gentle click.

The same moment he laid his book aside and was out of his room in the little hallway. The light, he saw, to his astonishment was turned on. Perhaps fifteen seconds was the interval between hearing the sounds and standing in the hallway. The corridor was empty, the chain hung securely in its iron groove, no door banged or was stealthily closed, but there was another alteration in the detail of the familiar scene that this time he detected at once. The macintosh, the fawn-coloured macintosh, no longer lay on the divan. It had disappeared. Following the old grey hat, it had been taken too.

Someone who had taken the hat had now come back and taken the macintosh as well. That was as plain as the nose on his face. Both articles had been removed while he sat reading his book, removed by someone who had found an entry into the flat twice in succession, and who, similarly, had left it again twice in succession, each time with extraordinary rapidity. This was clear and positive; but it was equally clear and positive that there was no conceivable way of entry or departure, no possible way by which any human being could have got into the flat and out of it again. The same positive certainty applied to the question of hiding. Faced with which definite and perplexing certainties, he yet was fully aware that the whole puzzle was explicable as simply, above all as naturally, as though he had himself opened the front door and given away the missing articles with his own hands.

Standing in the passage, now flooded with light, he found other positive assurances in him too, and these were as definitely certain as the fact that his wrist-watch showed the hour of one o’clock. These positive assurances admitted of no arguing, needed no consideration even; they merely presented themselves to his mind as knowledge. He was convinced of them as he was convinced that his watch face showed one o’clock:

Both hat and macintosh had been removed by human agency. The taker had not been secreted in the flat beforehand, but had entered and left. This taker, moreover, strangely, was still here, still in the flat, even though he had left.

The impossibility of this presented no difficulty somehow. The taker, indeed, stood at this actual moment very close to him, as close as hands or feet. This conviction of intimate proximity did not disturb him.

“It is all right,” he heard his mind saying to itself, “it is quite all right and natural....”

The taker, he realised further, was not a thief, but someone who needed both hat and macintosh, someone who could use them, wear them, with a clear conscience, someone who was using and wearing them at this very moment — now.

With such positive and convinced knowledge in him, he did not therefore waste time in making a further useless search, but stood there in the lighted corridor, dealing with these inconsistent and incredible facts. For facts they were, though how precisely he “dealt” with them lay beyond his powers to describe. Not with his mind assuredly, he asserts, nor with any faculties of reasoning or analysis. His medium of expression in words, in literary form, here failed him completely; he used the term “dealt” and made no more exact attempt at description. The incredible inconsistencies and obvious impossibilities, he says merely, did not exist. Neither fear nor nervousness of any kind came near him. He accepted the blazing absurdities quite calmly, standing motionless for a moment, listening, watching. Then he glanced at his watch. It was 2.30. The “moment,” therefore, actually had been an hour and a half.

“It didn’t surprise or startle you?”

He shook his head and smiled.

“And that hour and a half you were standing in the passage — you’ve any recollection of it? Ninety minutes — I mean, or just a moment? Did it seem long or short? Did nothing happen to you in all that time?”

He answered simply, and without hesitation:

“Well — rain and wind were in my face,” he told me. “I was cold. My feet were wet, my body ached like hell, I remember sneezing and shivering. Then there came the comfort of warmth, the heat of a warm bar in a dirty pub., and two or three glasses of beer — of bitter, rather. I dislike bitter very much.”

“Sleeping?” I asked. “Do you remember sleeping anywhere? Lying down? Going to bed, for instance?”

He laughed a little. “In a dim way, yes,” he said. “I changed half-a-crown and the bed was ninepence, but that was somewhere else. And they took a fiddle from me, a fiddle and case, and gave me a ticket. Only, the room was packed with lousy men and stank so that I — sorry — I was sick on the floor—”

“That’s a positive memory?”

He nodded with a rueful smile. “I looked at my watch just after it,” he said, grinning again. “It was 2.50 and I was standing in the corridor.”

Sense of an interval, I gathered next, there was none; yet a sense of duration, apparently, there was.

“You found yourself exactly where you were when you left your book to look for the possible intruder?”

“In the same spot.”

“Any thought, any recollection, of the fiddler in the rain still in your mind?” I asked.

“None whatever.”

“You had forgotten his existence?” I insisted.

There was a moment’s hesitation, as though he wanted to be extremely accurate.

“No thought or picture of the man came to my mind,” he said. “He didn’t crop up once. I thought of him later, of course — next day, I mean. But in the corridor — nothing.”

“And the missing hat and macintosh — the possible thief or intruder — did that bother you?”

“Oh, I remember that passed through my mind,” he admitted, with his frank, delightful smile, “but — I had no feeling of bother—”

“Of question?”

“Or question,” he agreed.

“You felt comfortable and happy — normal?”

After an instant’s hesitation he accepted that. “I felt a sort of inner relief,” he found his words. “Relieved, yes, that’s the word. Sort of pleased and comforted, you know.” And then he repeated the first adjective: “relieved.”

“Any sign of your having left the house and been out of doors?” I fired at him.

He answered instantly. “Soaked to the skin.” He laughed outright then. “And a little sick — a touch of nausea perhaps.” He grinned like a boy who had eaten sweet things unwisely. “What I did then? What I did next? Oh, I got out of my wet clothes, had a hot bath in Auntie’s lovely bathroom, and went to bed and slept like a top till nine o’clock next morning.”

Such a detail as the notorious licensing hours seemed hardly worth mentioning, I felt, though it was in both our minds, of course. In an experience where Before and After held no meaning, where a single individual, it seemed, could operate in two different places simultaneously, argument about such different time and space struck me as useless. I let it pass. I lit a cigarette and looked hard at him with an examining eye across the smoke. His own expression and manner betrayed no doubt or hesitation of any kind. He was frank and honest as a child. Nothing veridical anywhere, absolutely nothing, I thought to myself. Aloud I then said: “You see now why a written account of all this could not interest anyone — because of its utter, its hopeless, incredibility. To the ordinary man even normal, linear time is muddling enough sometimes. Most folk are rather disturbed, too, by any too vivid visualisation of the past, but a glimpse of the future means almost consulting a mental specialist. The two together, just baldly written down—”

We laughed together, but while he laughed he began fumbling in his pocket and a moment later produced a scrap of dirty paper and handed it across to me.

“I found this when I woke up,” he said. “It was on the floor beside my bed.”

It was a doss-house ticket in the name of John Doe, the date stamped on it by a rubber stamp, with the words “One fiddle and case.”

“The date is right,” he mentioned quietly. “The address — well, you’ve read my manuscript.”

I left this detail too till later, since it was a verifiable one, and in due course *was* verified by myself, for I called at the doss-house, presented the receipt, and now have a fiddle and case in a cupboard of my library. I took up some further questions first. About sleeping, for instance: had he, to his knowledge, ever fallen asleep in an upright position? He had not. Then, were his dreams as a rule actual and vivid? They were not, and for the simple reason that his sleep was always dreamless. He had never once dreamed, he assured me, in his whole life.

"I have never known a dream," he told me, adding that of course that might only mean that he never remembered them. "My eight hours' sleep every night go just like that," and he clicked his fingers in the air. "I shut my eyes, I wake up. It's like a minute. A dream would probably be as strange to me as — as, say, the taste of alcohol. That's probably why the bitter made me sick that time."

The pause between us, though it lasted several minutes, had nothing awkward or embarrassing about it. The prolonged silence was as natural as if I had been sitting in a wood with trees all round me. Oak, beech and pine may overcharge a receptive mind with communications of a rather pregnant silence to which no comment by way of audible response is possible.

I jumped back to something his written account had dismissed with a dozen words:

"The taker, as you call him — were you conscious, when standing in the corridor, of his presence?"

"Of his existence, yes," he answered.

"As another person?"

"Another — no," came the prompt reply.

"One?" I asked.

He nodded emphatically. "Just one," he agreed with decision.

"Very close to you, very near, you felt him?"

"We occupied the same space — as close as that." Then he laughed. "And how can we get that into a formula?" he asked me with a grin.

It was some considerable time later, the voluble aunt back from Paris, when a sort of climax appeared: a “sort” of climax, for in his written version it was evidently intended as such, though its crude, brief manner of presentation made it merely the addition of another wholly incredible episode.

He was strolling along Jermyn Street shortly before one o’clock to a luncheon engagement, and he was dressed accordingly in what he called his “best,” tidy at any rate and looking a very presentable, even handsome, figure, and being ahead of time he was idling along rather. He carried only a cane. It was a sunny day, the air soft and warm, with the lovely radiance of an Indian summer snatched from June. The light creamed over almost into blossom, the sweetness was like perfume.

“Your mind occupied?” I enquired, since there was no mention of his mood. “Particularly occupied, I mean?”

He shook his head. “Just hungry,” he said, “and looking forward to lunch, while enjoying the day, of course — I mean, you couldn’t help *that.* It changed the street and houses so—”

“A change in yourself too of any kind?” I put in quickly.

“A bit, yes. I felt a change coming — something or other in me — trembling a little—”

When his attention was drawn suddenly to a figure across the street and slightly ahead of him, the figure of a tall man looking into a shop-window. But his attention was not merely drawn, apparently, it was definitely arrested, so that he stopped dead on the kerb and stared. For some seconds, half a minute possibly, he stood quite still, watching the figure, staring at it, as it moved to the next shop-window a little further on. The man, in spite of the warm sun, was wearing a light fawn-coloured macintosh, and on his head was an old grey felt hat. Only the back of the figure was visible, as the man stooped over and peered into the windows, pacing slowly along, and now and again returning a little on his steps.

He watched the figure with the keenest possible intentness for perhaps another minute or so, and then realised that the person was no longer the same. It was not the same figure, something had happened, it was another, a different, person pacing to and fro. He declared that he knew instantly who it was, this changed figure, knew instantly, too, that he must cross the street and join him. He must be very quick, he must go over immediately without a second's delay. It was imperative beyond all doubt or question to act at once, as imperative — he used a striking simile here in his written version — as to seize a flung rope when you were just sinking for the last time. And he obeyed the impulse, yet even while doing so, while dodging the rather slow traffic, he had time to become aware of another thing as well. His reference to it was brief, a passing mention merely, but its importance to me seemed vital, and I linked it in my mind with his hearing of the Tschaikowsky *Andante* in the wet and windy street earlier in the adventure.

It was music, though music of a kind that would have left the majority unaffected: a group of four men, singing for alms, had turned the corner up from St. James's Square into Jermyn Street, and their voices, if rough, were good. They sang in tune, they sang with feeling, there was pathos, even beauty, in the Irish air that only just overrode the traffic rumble.

He caught it as he crossed, and the change he had already mentioned in himself became intensified. This change he had felt coming a moment earlier now abruptly established itself. It was all over him, within him, definitely there.

"You can put a label to it?" I asked. "Describe it?"

He nodded, a smile of peculiar radiance flashed to his face and vanished.

"Loveliness," he whispered softly.

This was the word used in his manuscript, but mentioned without further elaboration, and I wanted to hear if he could add to it. Questions and answers may be summarised, and what he said was good and easily understandable up to a point. For the beauty of the morning, of which he had already been quite aware, fell upon him with a sudden abruptness for some reason that held shock. With a rush it came over him, "like a burning flame of fire," as he put it, and the music of those singing voices seemed a spear-head that pierced him to the core. This intensification was due, apparently, to the combination of the light and colour, and the sound. This "loveliness," which had nothing to do directly with the figure he was watching, burst upon him with its overwhelming, shattering appeal. And he tried to explain, in answer to my questions, that a fellow's normal state held no machinery adequate for dealing — using the verb he favoured so often — with such loveliness, for it strained almost to breaking point every receptive facility a man possessed.

“So I went across to him,” he continued, “diagonally over the street, dodging the traffic, and came up with the figure very rapidly, and looked over the man’s shoulder as he stared into the shop, and saw by the reflection of the face in the window who it was. The two pairs of eyes met fairly and squarely in the glass.”

And here, without worrying him with the numerous questions that worried myself, I went straight on to the next point in the Adventure exactly as his manuscript description took it.

“In which instant,” I said, “you found yourself — not in Jermyn Street at all?”

Although we both knew the answer, it came naturally and promptly:

“I found myself in one of those little side-streets that run off Baker Street, perhaps a mile and a half away, and it was raining quite heavily, and I was mighty glad that I was wearing my macintosh and my old grey felt hat, and I had something in my hands, though it was too dark — oh, yes, it was night of course — too dark to see exactly what it was, and a window was flung open suddenly far above me on the opposite side, and someone threw out a coin wrapped in a piece of white paper which the wind blew away sideways, and just as I crept after it and picked it up, I found myself in the lobby of a restaurant in Jermyn Street again, my host a few yards away waiting, while I pocketed a cloak-room ticket from a page-boy, and I had just said to this boy ‘Both hats — you took both hats?’ and the boy was answering with a grin, ‘There was only one, sir — a black felt hat and a cane,’ as I stuffed the ticket in my waistcoat pocket entirely satisfied that the boy was right.”

II

It was sufficiently easy, of course, to check a good many of his statements, and I did this thoroughly enough to satisfy at least myself. Beyond this I felt no interest, for in examining cases of such abnormal kind the verdict of the man in the street seemed to me valueless. Judgments of the herd, being expressions of the herd-instinct, are invariably negative, self-preservation making all innovation abhorrent and dangerous. Anything that attacks the established order must be crushed out. Nor had I any desire to justify experiences that would hold in a court of law. What interested me, frankly, was this chance personal justification of ideas and theories my own research and speculation had led me to think might not be wholly impossible.

In the sense that a mad mind is a mind out of relation with its environment, John Smith-Jones was madder than any Carrolian hatter. He was a crazy man, suffering from acute paranoia, a victim of absurd, incurable delusions, while yet a saner man, a mind more perfectly in relation with its environment I swear I have never met. Environment indeed is here the master word, for his environment was unquestionably an extended one. It was an environment otherwise conditioned, familiar with expansion in space and time.

I made few notes of what had so far come my way from his accounts. Strictly speaking, only one or two conclusions seemed definite enough to be worth setting down on paper, and these I arrived at after hearing a number of his Adventures, not merely the one just sketched. And the first is easily stated: he possessed another way of "knowing," a way not open to ordinary folk, though affirmed in the *Yogi* teachings of the East to be accessible to those who can dare the necessary training. Apparently, to stop thinking is the first essential, in other words to arrest the ordinary method of knowing and to get behind thought. Obviously, to cease thinking is a labour of Hercules that, open potentially to all, can be achieved actually by extremely few. John Smith-Jones managed it easily and naturally.

The second conclusion I arrived at was also clear enough: that an Adventure only followed when certain antecedent conditions were precisely right. Unless these exact conditions supervened, his life was as normal and commonplace as yours or mine, but with their arrival he slipped into a state of other consciousness as naturally as one slips from waking into sleeping, or vice versa. All moved on oiled ball bearings, there was no jerk, no hitch, no shock or sense of violent transition. And once in the Adventure, once experiencing it, the intense reality of it was overmastering. It held a shattering intensity of conviction that made it seem his usual state, his daily life in comparison a dream-like kind of brief semi-consciousness.

These antecedent conditions, moreover, were easily recognisable, and can be summed up in a single word: beauty. A message of beauty flamed upon him and he was off! Whether the message came by sound, form, or colour made no difference. Loveliness was the key, and loveliness, blazing upon him as with the power of some awful lightning, fused the limitations of normal consciousness and introduced him into a state of changed consciousness where another way of knowing operated and where time and space lost their pitiful limitations.

The power of beauty to heighten susceptibility and intensify consciousness is, of course, established; but in his case there was more than this. Not merely an intensification, but a different type, of consciousness altogether supervened.

The Adventure in Gloucestershire was induced apparently by the intoxicating loveliness of the may in an ordinary English Spring. What layer of time and space he tapped here, whether mediaeval, or perhaps not even strictly his own, is not for me to say. That I followed it at all was due to some out of the way reading I had done. To the ages of superstition, of course, belongs the alchemist’s notion that man is a fourfold combination of the elements, then limited to four instead of over ninety, and that while his physical body was the vehicle for manifestation on earth, it held also three other vehicles for manifesting, respectively, in air, water, and fire. Sylphs, undines, salamanders remain to-day the nursery myths of what was once, no doubt, believed in all sincerity and, who shall prove, not based upon authentic experience?

The Adventure, at any rate, sprang from the quite commonplace opportunity of a lift by motor a friend offered him into the wilds of Gloucestershire, and the friend was a brown-eyed woman who meant no more to him, he told me, than the girl in the box-office of some cinema where he might buy a ticket.

“The may’s rather poor this year, don’t you think....” she remarked.

On the way out of London this seemed true, the hedges thinly covered, or without any blossoms at all, but as the car crossed Buckinghamshire it gave signs of rising to the surface, in Oxfordshire it showed still thicker, and when Gloucestershire was reached the fragrant white blossoms poured in shining creamy cataracts down the sloping meadows. There was this suggestion of careless rioting. In old-world gardens, too, as the car rushed by, the laburnum, with its pools of dripping gold, was lavish, even to wantonness, while such a glory of buttercups, he thought, he had never seen before.

“The A.A. men are such a decent class, I always think....”

If only she would have let him enjoy it in peace and without interruptions. It was kind of her, of course, to give him this lift on her way to Broadway Village, a score of miles beyond where he had to go; she drove well and safely too, so that, much as he disliked motoring, he felt confidence and was free to enjoy the scenery without worrying about corners and traffic. If only she would leave him to his enjoyment. It was her stream of comments, dealing with the obvious top of life, that broke with interrupting jerks into his deep pool of intense delight and ruined its clear surface, making a rejoinder of some sort necessary. For this Spring loveliness, always a disconcerting experience, brought its customary sweet pain. To-day, after months in a London street, the sunshine over this riot of flowers came with a kind of shock. There were foaming torrents of wild hemlock too, the beech leaves at their tenderest, and the grey stone villages rose through a dream, beauty shining everywhere with a poignancy that hurt.

“Wonderfully well marked, the roads, aren’t they?” she commented, as they sped through a stretch of loveliness that seemed hardly of this world at all....

Inside him lay a glass, a mirror, some medium at any rate in which was transmuted all he saw and felt into an ineffable shimmering glory of delight, hinting at transcendental meanings he almost captured, yet never quite.

“Thirty-five’s quite fast enough, isn’t it? We’re ahead of time....” plopped with a little splash into his silent inner pool just when something of translucent gauze and brilliant wings flew towards him with a sudden revelation.

“Oh, rather — quite — it’s just right, I’m sure,” he managed to jerk back with the proper polite interest, turning his head awkwardly towards her as he did so, for it had been precisely in just this fraction of a second that he was first aware of the change about him. It came stealing up and over, yet with its customary instantaneous swiftness, for it was already there, increasing, growing possibly in power, yet definitely established in a flash. It rose from some inmost and viewless centre of the day itself, from that deep heart of painful loveliness, that central power of stinging beauty, through which the car sped with its purring sound.

Purring, yes; that was precisely the right word. The voice, too, was purring....

She had just said something, another remark, and he wondered if he had heard it correctly at first: “Here lies our shell of fire, air, water, earth....” Was that what she said? A phrase so meaningless could not have left anyone’s throat, hers least of all, at such a time and place. He had misunderstood; the car needed water, with more petrol, Shell of course, opening a window for T fresh air — anything but what she had seemed to say and he had seemed to hear. Then turning to glance at her, this thin, brown-eyed woman, he had sharply realised in the same instant that she was comely. The idea had never entered his head before. He had merely known in a vague kind of way that her voice was pleasant, soothing rather, her smile, if crooked slightly yet not disfiguringly, lit the face oddly, and that the eyes were clear shiny brown. Now, as he stared into them, they held a touch of fiery amber, though that must have been the sun of course.

“Eh? — oh, yes—” he stammered, bewildered by his having possibly mis-caught the words, and then heard his voice adding in quite another tone, a tone that held something whispering about it: “It’s fire with me, remember. I move most easily in that—”

“Fire!” she laughed. “As if I didn’t know it already! I’m air, of course. We are friendly then. Air and fire work together....”

A grinding noise like the roar of a lion, a sudden jerk that shot him forward against the windscreen, interrupted, so that he caught his breath and shielded his face with outstretched hands. There came no crash, however. The car had stopped.

“Hulloa!” he cried, withdrawing his eyes from hers with a kind of difficulty, and wondering why his voice had turned hoarse and trembling. “Not an accident, is it?” He heard her give a quick choked-off laugh in her throat as she said “Sorry! These four-wheel brakes. I forgot. We’re wrong anyhow —

our last turn, I think—" She turned her head round. "You might go and ask that old man where this road goes."

Her voice died away, as he got out and made his way, as in a dream, to the figure leaning against a gate, an old fellow in gaiters who eyed his questioner good-humouredly enough. A lurcher at his feet got up and sniffed at his approach. "No," growled the old fellow, showing broken teeth in a grin intended to be friendly, "this road don't go any further'n the farm yonder." He pointed with his stick to a scattered group of grey stone buildings fifty yards ahead. "That's where the man fell over the edge," he added with his growling chuckle.

"Fell over the edge!"

The old fellow repeated the chuckle that was half grunt, half growl. He seemed amused, as though the man who fell over the edge had only got his deserts. "He thought it went on. It don't. The road ends sudden," he explained curtly enough. "But you can get shelter there maybe. They'll take you in."

He turned his attention to his lurcher to signify that was all he wanted to say, and the other gave his thanks and swung back towards the car, noticing as he did so out of the corner of his eye a stretch of bare down above the buildings, where against the skyline a gaunt single tree stood out, a big torn branch hanging down loosely and swaying in the wind. Only the car, as he now turned back to report the old man's words, no longer stood there. No vehicle at all was there except an open cart of sorts, with a tired horse in the shafts, the reins held by a woman wearing, he saw, some shoddy cheap fur about her neck. The brightness and the gay morning sunshine, too, were gone. That lonely tree, it struck him, stood out now against a sky of leaden clouds. The entire scene was gloomy, and with a rising wind that struck cold against the cheek. The dusk was falling fast.

He approached the cart slowly, the woman's eyes watching him steadily, the only portion of her face visible, as they peered out through a welter of wrapped shawls about her head and shoulders. But the woman, he knew, for all her shoddy clothes, was comely. He was aware of silken hair. At the same time those staring eyes, rather intently fixed, made him think of a feline that looks for prey, an unwelcome notion he could not by any means account for.

“Come on out,” he said in a voice of pretended control, for he was frightened, though the slight shiver running over him might well have been due to the bitter wind. The woman, he felt suddenly and sharply, was somewhere too strong for him. She was very sure of herself. “We’re lucky. We can get shelter in that farm. The horse is done, anyhow. Get out — will you?”

She unwound her shawls a little as he helped her out, but she missed the yielding iron step and a length of fine leg appeared in a grey worsted stocking that yet could not hide its shapeliness. He made her take his arm, while his other hand led the stumbling, weary nag, and at that moment, as though from under her very skirts, a large tawny cat, that seemed to have sprung from the old cart, ran past and ahead of them with a silent dancing gait. It had, no doubt, emerged from the hedge, he hurriedly told himself. It disappeared in the deepening shadows towards the old grey buildings. A column of pale blue smoke rose from the main chimney, but almost at once turned downwards, sinking rapidly, as in sign of coming bad weather, floating in sullen, heavy coils, then, past the lower mullioned windows.

“I’m air... and that means we’re friendly... for air helps fire...” rang on in his ears as he approached the old grey building, knocked, and enquired about shelter.

“I’ll put the ‘oss away,” he muttered, as the old beldame opened the door and accepted the benighted couple, nor did it occur to him even that he said “‘oss,” or that he stepped in hesitatingly. He only noticed, to tell the truth, that his friend, the slim, brown-eyed woman, brushed past him with rather a masterful air as though she had a right to shelter here, perhaps expected it, and that his nostrils caught a whiff of perfume, half artificial, half of sweet warmish animal fur, as she went by him into the lamp-lit room.

It occurred to him suddenly, while these two talked together of the stormy night and the blind road that ended in a sudden drop where horses, sheep and cattle too easily went lost, that he had left his flint-lock in the cart. And while putting the ‘oss to stable he now hid it beneath his heavy coat and brought it back into the house. What made him do so he could not rightly say. There was uneasiness in him, a fear of some sort, a fear of uncommon things, and that was all he knew, a fear that, like the wind, came suddenly and also, like the wind, was rising....

The thick onion soup had a welcome, fragrant smell when he came back, and he sat down to his bowl without a word or question, and broke his coarse bread into it hungrily. Then, looking up, he noticed how hungrily she, too, gulped her soup, yet daintily, and how delicious her moist red lips were. Even when she blew across her big spoon to cool the steaming mixture, she did it invitingly, her brown eyes gleaming above the succulent mouthful. His strange uneasiness grew as he watched, but something else rose up to meet it. A light shudder ran through him.

“God! Am I so weak and easily taken?...” passed through his mind, for he knew that, even if weak and trembling at an offer so perilously easy, this was something he did *not* mean to yield to. As a Disciple of the Order, as a wrestling and struggling Aspirant, this casual loss of valuable energy, above all else, must not dare to tempt him. Oh, he felt sure of himself and his vows, confident enough in all conscience. With some vehemence he gave himself this hurried assurance. When the scene was gaily set, he reminded himself, among lights and music, wine and colour, he had no fear, for danger was too obvious and flaunting. But it was this chancy, so unlikely setting, in a gloomy farm upon a wayside road, seeking shelter merely for a few hours from an ill-omened night and threatening weather, and with a woman who, for all her soft brown eyes and comeliness, was surely but of passing acquaintance, it was this very casualness, hiding a stiletto beneath the homespun, that made him tremble.

He gave an involuntary start as her voice reached him across the table:

“You brought in the flint-lock,” she said suddenly between her draughts of soup. “Is it then a cat you are afraid of?” her soft laugh showing her white even teeth. “A yellow-backed farm cat?” Her eyes held his without wavering.

“A cat?” he asked thickly, taken by surprise. “Did you see a cat?”

“There’s always a cat in these old farm-houses,” she told him, taking a mouthful of the fried ham and eggs now set before them. “If you don’t meet a barking dog it always means they keep a cat, and they’re generally amber-coloured.” Her eyes still held him.

“I brought in the gun,” he admitted a trifle sullenly, “because — this is the sort of place that favours the highwaymen for a night’s lodging. And to-morrow, even sooner, we may be glad of it, for you never know.”

“To-morrow,” she repeated, without lowering her steady eyes. “Yes, to-morrow maybe,” and she wiped her lips, which gleamed moistly in the lamplight.

The coffee was drinkable, the rum still better, and when he complained of the cold she mixed his second glass, and then his third, having swallowed a sturdy two herself. Her breath, drawing towards him across the narrow table where her elbows rested, her face thrust forward, seemed to mingle with the sweet-flavoured liquor; and it was when the old farm wife, beldame as he first thought her, came in to ask if all was to their liking, that he caught the abrupt swift certainty that the two women were not unacquainted, not strangers to one another. And on the instant, though he gave no outward sign, his whole being rose in sudden, alert challenge. He knew, of a surety, the brown-eyed woman had led him here with purpose. The old tired horse, he remembered now, had made to take another turning as of habitual instinct while she had persuaded it, aye and himself too, otherwise along the rough trail below the down.

“It’s an old beast, eh, that tawny cat of yours?” he asked abruptly of the farmwife, aiming to take her by surprise. “A fine creature too,” he added admiringly.

“Cat!” she replied. “There’s not a cat within a twenty mile of here. I mislike the things and wouldn’t have one about me.”

“A stray cat, dear,” put in the brown-eyed woman quickly, but not so quickly that the quick sharp glance between the pair was lost upon him. He emptied his glass to hide the awkwardness with some natural gesture.

“They do come strayin’ over the hill sometimes,” the old woman was saying, “but they don’t stay long,” she added significantly, “for they know I won’t abide ’em.” And she got up and began to clear away the dishes.

“Yet you have a power of mice,” he put in. “They’re useful to you — a good sharp cat, I mean.”

She never raised her eyes. “Useful to some, maybe,” she mumbled, “but they’re more’n of this world and best put away, to my way of thinkin’.”

He shivered, without knowing exactly why, so that the brown-eyed woman — she was not really thin at all, he noticed again, but most sweetly and comfortably covered — poured him out a glass of yellow rum. “It makes me shiver too, dear,” she murmured soothingly, “and this will just make us sleep good and proper. It was a cold job putting the ‘oss to stable, I’ll be bound.”

He swallowed it heartily enough, determined to give no sign if he could help it that he realised something here to do with cats he did not welcome, knew also that he was betrayed, and the amber of her soft brown eyes, he was aware, again slipped stealthily into the gleaming contents of his glass, so that he drank that down too with the rich liquor.

This acceptance and refusal he felt in him, this strength and weakness, lay beyond his entangling; it was as though a portion of his being was growing slowly a little numbed, and he could not be sure whether the rum soothed or stimulated the deep uneasiness that growled out of sight within him....

Their rooms were far apart, at opposite ends of the old building, and as he went to bed he heard that rising wind pass alternately sighing and roaring over the grey tiles and naked downs beyond, an unholy wind, he was persuaded, renewing the faint shudder in his mind with the vivid thought of that old tired tree against the skyline. He saw again the loose dangling branch swinging creakily.

“Good night, dear,” he heard her voice at the corner of the landing when they parted, candle in hand, and saw her amber eyes gleaming brightly in the unsteady flame.

It was the increasing tumult of that violent, unholy wind beating against the narrow casements of his room that mingled with her last words as he stood on the boards by the light of a single candle, hesitating whether to undress or not. The rum worked in his blood, but something else worked too, and instinct, since alcohol dulls the reasoning faculties, was expressly alert. This instinct played a game as it were, a game that lacked form, but assuredly did not lack meaning. It played with several counters, and these counters, if a trifle confused, were insistent in the claim they made upon his attention. He could visualise them distinctly, he could name them correctly, all three of them: that large yellow-backed cat, the understanding between the two women, and the flint-lock.

His mind took each in turn and dealt with it after a fashion.

The gun — he had, after all, left it downstairs; the cat — he had not seen it again; the two women — at the remote end of the house, yet, he somehow knew, far from being in bed and asleep. But it was the gun that chiefly held his attention. He wanted it near, he wished he had it ready to his hand in this dim-lit room. It lay in the hall, he remembered, beneath his overcoat on the settle. The next thought was easy: he would go down and get it. Obeying the instinct, he stole across the floor on tiptoe and cautiously opened his door, and then, without knowing why, he hesitated. He stopped dead. He listened intently.

What made him hesitate? What caused the moment's uncertainty? Thought, of course. He had begun to think. It was reason that blocked the flow of automatic guiding instinct. Was he, then, afraid of anything, he asked himself? Of anyone? Of highwaymen, least of all, he told himself. Of a great cat with a yellow back? Assuredly not. Then why did he want the gun? He could not use a gun against a comely woman with amber eyes; nor for that matter, he swore to himself again, did he need any means of defence against such temptation except his own firm confident will.

For a second, as he stood hesitating by the door, such thoughts tumbled about in him, and the next second, dismissing them, he passed through the door and crept softly along the landing, lit by the gleam from the candle left behind him. Silent and dark the landing was, though the wind outside made a mighty howling as its gusts stormed against the walls. These passed, leaving a silence deeper than before. He crept along, knowing that the creaking board, if anyone listened, would be put down to the blustering wind. Stealthily, he moved. Remembering the way, he turned right and left when necessary, following the next dim landing correctly, till he reached the stairs that led down into the black well of the hall. Peering down into this murky space, no single outline was discernible. Nothing stirred, there seemed no movement. Both women were safe away in their distant beds. He crept forward down the stairs, and was already more than half-way down when he caught a faint glimmer of light below him by the settle where the gun lay underneath his overcoat.

It was so faint, however, that he doubted his eyes, and, there — even while he stared — it was gone again! Reaching the lowest step without seeing it return, he was certain he had been mistaken. He crossed the hall on tiptoe, came to the corner where the gun lay hidden below the overcoat, stretched out his hand to grope for it, and in that instant his fingers touched something warm and soft and furry. He was aware of perfume, a tiny point of light appeared as well, and the flint-lock was placed deliberately into his outstretched hands.

"I was just bringing it up to you," a low pleasant whisper startled him. "For I knew you would like it near you this night." The same moment the point of light grew into a sudden little flare that died out as soon as born, yet not before he had caught the swift picture of a face, two cupped hands shading a match, and the gleam of two amber-coloured eyes that peered into his own.

"You are cold," he faltered, muttering the words in his throat, shivering himself as he spoke, for he realised that the soft warm thing he touched was a strip of shoddy fur about the neck. "Why should you—"

"Hush!" she interrupted in a whisper, placing a hand gently on his mouth, covering her figure at the same time with his overcoat from the settle, then drawing him backwards more deeply into the corner and making him crouch low beside her. Her warm body lay close against him, her breath perfumed his cheek, as they sank down and hid against the wall. His arm had fallen naturally about her, as she half knelt, half sat, with her weight upon his side. And then someone, shading a light with a thin bony hand, the lines of the fingers visibly marked, came stepping cautiously down the stairs towards the hall.

So suddenly, so quickly, all this happened that it left him worse than bewildered. He stared. His eyes never left that slowly approaching light. The sweet comfort of the woman's warm body against his own bemused clear vision still further. Yet what chiefly darkened his mind, fluttering thought, emotion, judgment, was the friendly offer of the gun, supporting so unexpectedly his own desire and intention. For how had she thus forestalled his purpose so adroitly, how even become aware of it? Was this a move in her game, a sinister move that mere chance had enabled him to surprise? Was she then with him, after all, rather than against him? Who was the friend and who the enemy? He was warily on guard and alert, but any clear solution failed to present itself. Could she have divined, this amber-eyed woman, that his own will and strength made him invulnerable, that his vows were not so easily rendered vain? Did she seek, perhaps, merely to place a dart, then twist it later in a burning wound that would find alleviation only upon its withdrawal — by her own fingers?

This flashed across him while he watched the descending light creep farther down the stairs towards the hall. Who bore that light he could not see. The holder moved without a sound, the boards were silent, no single creak was audible. The soft breathing against his ear was all he heard, the beating of another heart against his own.

The light reached the last stair and passed slowly, as with a gliding motion, across the hall towards them, then paused within a dozen feet of where he crouched. But now the vague shape behind it was not so vague that he could not distinguish it, and he recognised the bent, huddled outline of the old farm woman. It was curious then that, simultaneously with this recognition, another picture leaped with startling significance before his eyes, but before the eyes of memory, and he saw for a vivid second that gaunt sinister tree on the brow of the naked hill, and realised that the torn loose branch dangling in the wind was a body and no branch at all. This mental recognition gave him a startling, uneasy twist of horror, but it vanished swiftly under the strain of yet greater horror that now followed instantly, as he witnessed something he had always known about, but yet had never seen actually with his own eyes.

He saw it happen a dozen feet in front of him, though in light so confused and dim that outlines were blurred and no sharp edges showed. For the beldame, as she shaded the faint rushlight, became most singularly transformed. Abruptly her figure shook down, as it were, into another figure, a figure much closer to the ground, an animal figure, a creature on all fours. The point of light shivered an instant, then became twin lights, a pair of shining eyes that gleamed out of a bluntish muzzle below two sharply pointed ears. They were fixed steadily upon his own staring face, but vanished the same moment as though turned aside, so that their light was lost. A light, quick pattering, as of scuttling paws, came straight in his direction, shooting across the floor to the corner where he lay in darkness. “The cat, the monstrous cat,” slashed in letters of fire across his brain.

"To the Sabbath," rose a whisper that yet held the quality of a shriek kept somehow in abeyance, for it was a shriek in exultation. "The wind delights, there are no stars, the brow of the hill is waiting! Bring the sacrifice, dearie, and let the Master see him burn!" From the very floor against his feet the awful voice came rushing.

A terrific gust of wind that shook the building, shook him into a clearer understanding perhaps as well. He felt the warm fragrant body quiver against his own, he felt the weight and pressure become heavier, and was aware in the same instant that the fur he had called shoddy covered not the neck and shoulders only, but spread now over the whole shape completely, covering it indeed from head to tail.

"Two of them — a pair!" his thought gasped frantically, as he gave a violent, spasmodical jerk. He remembered the huge, tawny cat, that yellow beast which sprang so strangely from the cart, if not from his companion's very skirts. He remembered other awful changelings too, the hare, the fox — and a shiver as of death convulsed his body.

"Keep still, my pet, keep quiet," came the purring voice against his smothered ear, while the weight upon him increased with sudden, horrifying pressure. "You are safe with me, I hold you fast, and fire and air work friendly."

He could hardly breathe, such was the suffocating smother of warm fur upon his face and lips; it was wellnigh impossible to stir a foot or leg. The weight took the very air from his mouth, and almost the last resistance from his very heart as well. The heat, the stifling heat, overcame him.

"I'll come," he mumbled thickly, fighting for space and air.

"You must," was the answer that he heard, his helplessness knowing it for true, but in the same instant precisely heard also the pair of them whispering and muttering between themselves. No words, much less sentences, not even syllables indeed, reached his mind, but he caught, despite his smothering, the tone of utterance. And an awful realisation crashed in upon his weakening faculties. A forgotten phrase leaped into memory: "the utterance of demons is indistinct, thin and hoarse."

And the horror of the memory, salved from what seemed now distant, almost forgotten teaching, passed like forked lightning into his final store of energies. He made a gigantic effort. The weight was lifted from him by a fraction, shifting itself, at any rate, to another angle — and a hand, as by magic, became partially released. How he contrived it lay utterly beyond him, how his fingers lay suddenly clutched upon the flint-lock, how they contrived the priming, found and pressed the trigger, bringing the flash and explosion in the darkness, timing with the roar of the storm outside — all this he never knew. He only knew that the suffocating weight relaxed, and that a wild, high, dreadful scream, half animal, half human, crashed against his very ears....

“We must have gone wrong at the last turning,” she was saying. “If you’ll get in again, I’ll back her up. It’s only a few hundred yards. The old man is right about the road ending suddenly. We don’t want to go over the edge....”

He climbed back into the car, which she then deftly manoeuvred up the little incline till they reached the fork where the mistake had been made. As it swung slowly round, the brow of the bare down filled his open window for a moment, and he saw the gaunt ugly tree where the dead branch had dangled, only now no branch was there, and only the shattered outline of the ancient tree broke against the blue sky of spring.

It caught her eye too, apparently, though her attention was centred on the car.

“That hill and tree,” she remarked casually, her gaze fixed chiefly on the ditch and width of road for turning, “there’s something about it in the map. They used it for hanging witches once, or burnt them on that hill — I forget exactly what.”

As he consulted the route map provided by the A. A. and confirmed the reference, she turned her head, so that he saw the blood on her cheek — a long, thin, reddened line as though a bullet had just grazed it. He made no reference to it, nor was she, apparently, aware of it, but an hour later, when she set him down at his point on the road, he saw her, from a little distance as she drove away, wiping it with a handkerchief which she first moistened on her red lips.

The Doll and One Other (1946)

CONTENTS

THE DOLL
THE TROD

THE DOLL

SOME NIGHTS ARE merely dark, others are dark in a suggestive way as though something ominous, mysterious, is going to happen. In certain remote outlying suburbs, at any rate, this seems true, where great spaces between the lamps go dead at night, where little happens, where a ring at the door is a summons almost, and people cry "Let's go to town!" In the villa gardens the mangy cedars sigh in the wind, but the hedges stiffen, there is a muffling of spontaneous activity.

On this particular November night a moist breeze barely stirred the silver pine in the narrow drive leading to the "Laurels" where Colonel Masters lived, Colonel Hymber Masters, late of an Indian regiment, with many distinguished letters after his name. The housemaid in the limited staff being out, it was the cook who answered the bell when it rang with a sudden, sharp clang soon after ten o'clock — and gave an audible gasp half of surprise, half of fear. The bell's sudden clangour was an unpleasant and unwelcome sound. Monica, the Colonel's adored yet rather neglected child, was asleep upstairs, but the cook was not frightened lest Monica be disturbed, nor because it seemed a bit late for the bell to ring so violently; she was frightened because when she opened the door to let the fine rain drive in she saw a black man standing on the steps. There, in the wind and the rain, stood a tall, slim nigger holding a parcel.

Dark-skinned, at any rate, he was, she reflected afterwards, whether negro, hindu or arab; the word "nigger" describing any man not really white. Wearing a stained yellow mackintosh and dirty slouch hat, and "looking like a devil, so help me God," he shoved the little parcel at her out of the gloom, the light from the hall flaring red into his gleaming eyes. "For Colonel Masters," he whispered rapidly, "and very special into his own personal touch and no one else." And he melted away into the night with his "strange foreign accent, his eyes of fire, and his nasty hissing voice."

He was gone, swallowed up in the wind and rain.

"But I saw his eyes," swore the cook the next morning to the housemaid, "his fiery eyes, and his nasty look, and his black hands and long thin fingers, and his nails all shiny pink, and he looked to me — if you know wot I mean — he looked like — death. . . .”

Thus the cook, so far as she was intelligently articulate next day, but standing now against the closed door with the small brown paper parcel in her hands, impressed by the orders that it was to be given into his personal touch, she was relieved by the fact that Colonel Masters never returned till after midnight and that she need not act at once. The reflection brought a certain comfort that restored her equanimity a little though she still stood there, holding the parcel gingerly in her grimy hands, reluctant, hesitating, uneasy. A parcel, even brought by a mysterious dark stranger, was not in itself frightening, yet frightened she certainly felt. Instinct and superstition worked perhaps; the wind, the rain, the fact of being alone in the house, the unexpected black man, these also contributed to her discomfort. A vague sense of horror touched her, her Irish blood stirred ancient dreams, so that she began to shake a little, as though the parcel contained something alive, explosive, poisonous, unholy, almost as though it moved, and, her fingers loosening their hold, the parcel — dropped. It fell on the tiled floor with a queer, sharp clack, but it lay motionless. She eyed it closely, cautiously, but, thank God, it did not move, an inert, brown paper parcel. Brought by an errand boy in daylight, it might have been groceries, tobacco, even a mended shirt. She peeped and tinkered, that sharp clack puzzled her. Then, after a few minutes, remembering her duty, she picked it up gingerly even while she shivered. It was to be handed into the Colonel’s “personal touch.” She compromised, deciding to place it on his desk and to tell him about it in the morning; only Colonel Masters, with those mysterious years in the East behind him, his temper and his tyrannical orders, was not easy of direct approach at the best of times, in the morning least of all.

The cook left it at that — that is, she left it on the desk in his study, but left out all explanations about its arrival. She had decided to be vague about such unimportant details, for Mrs. O’Reilly was afraid of Colonel Masters, and only his professed love of Monica made her believe that he was quite human. He paid her well, oh yes, and sometimes he smiled, and he was a handsome man, if a bit too dark for her fancy, yet he also paid her an occasional compliment about her curry, and that soothed her for the moment. They suited one another, at any rate, and she stayed, robbing him comfortably, if cautiously.

"It ain't no good," she assured the housemaid next day, "Wot with that 'personal touch into his hands, and no one else,' and that black man's eyes and that crack when it came away in my hands and fell on the floor. It ain't no good, not to us nor anybody. No man as black as he was means lucky stars to anybody. A parcel indeed — with those devil's eyes—"

"What did you do with it?" enquired the housemaid.

The cook looked her up and down. "Put it in the fire o' course," she replied. "On the stove if you want to know exact."

It was the housemaid's turn to look the cook up and down.

"I don't think," she remarked.

The cook reflected, probably because she found no immediate answer.

"Well," she puffed out presently, "d'you know wot I think? You don't. So I'll tell you. It was something the master's afraid of, that's wot it was. He's afraid of something — ever since I been here I've known that. And that's wot it was. He done somebody wrong in India long ago and that lanky nigger brought wot's coming to him, and that's why I says I put it on the stove — see?" She dropped her voice. "It was a bloody idol," she whispered, "that's wot it was, that parcel, and he — why, he's a bloody secret worshipper." And she crossed herself. "That's why I said I put on the stove — see?"

The housemaid stared and gasped.

"And you mark my words, young Jane!" added the cook, turning to her dough.

And there the matter rested for a period, for the cook, being Irish, had more laughter in her than tears, and beyond admitting to the scared housemaid that she had not really burnt the parcel but had left it on the study table, she almost forgot the incident. It was not her job, in any case, to answer the front door. She had "delivered" the parcel. Her conscience was quite clear.

Thus, nobody "marked her words" apparently, for nothing untoward happened, as the way is in remote Suburbia, and Monica in her lonely play was happy, and Colonel Masters as tyrannical and grim as ever. The moist wintry wind blew through the silver pine, the rain beat against the bow window, and no one called. For a week this lasted, a longish time in uneventful Suburbia.

But suddenly one morning Colonel Masters rang his study bell and, the housemaid being upstairs, it was the cook who answered. He held a brown paper parcel in his hands, half opened, the string dangling.

“I found this on my desk. I haven’t been in my room for a week. Who brought it? And when did it come?” His face, yellow as usual, held a fiery tinge.

Mrs. O’Reilly replied, post-dating the arrival vaguely.

“I asked *who* brought it?” he insisted sharply.

“A stranger,” she fumbled. “No one,” she added nervously, “from hereabouts. No one I ever seen before. It was a man.”

“What did he look like?” The question came like a bullet.

Mrs. O’Reilly was rather taken by surprise. “D-darkish,” she stumbled. “Very darkish,” she added, “if I saw him right. Only he came and went so quick I didn’t get his face proper like, and . . .”

“Any message?” the Colonel cut her short She hesitated. “There was no answer,” she began remembering former occasions.

“Any *message*, I asked you?” he thundered.

“No message, sir, none at all. And he was gone before I could get his name and address, sir, but I think it was a sort of black man, or it may have been the darkness of the night — I couldn’t reely say, sir . . .”

In another minute she would have burst into tears or dropped to the floor in a faint, such was her terror of her employer especially when she was lying blind. The Colonel, however, saved her both disasters by abruptly holding out the half opened parcel towards her. He neither cross-examined nor cursed her as she had expected. He spoke with the curtness that betrayed anger and anxiety, almost it occurred to her, distress.

“Take it away and burn it,” he ordered in his army voice, passing it into her outstretched hands. “Burn it,” he repeated it, “or chuck the damned thing away.” He almost flung it at her as though he did not want to touch it. “If the man comes back,” he ordered in a voice of steel, “tell him it’s been destroyed — and say it *didn't reach me,*" laying tremendous emphasis on the final words. "You understand?" He almost chucked it at her.

"Yes, sir. Exactly, sir," and she turned and stumbled out, holding the parcel gingerly in her arms rather than in her hands and fingers, as though it contained something that might bite or sting.

Yet her fear had somehow lessened, for if he, Colonel Masters, could treat the parcel so contemptuously, why should she feel afraid of it. And, once alone in her kitchen among her household gods, she opened it. Turning back the thick paper wrappings. she started, and to her rather disappointed amazement, she found herself staring at nothing but a fair, waxen faced doll that could be bought in any toy-shop for one shilling and sixpence. A commonplace little cheap doll! Its face was pallid, white, expressionless, its flaxen hair was dirty, its tiny ill-shaped hands and fingers lay motionless by its side, its mouth was closed, though somehow grinning, no teeth visible, its eyelashes ridiculously like a worn toothbrush, its entire presentment in its flimsy skirt, contemptible, harmless, even ugly.

A doll! She giggled to herself, all fear evaporated.

"Gawd," she thought. "The master must have a conscience like the floor of a parrot's cage! And worse than that!" She was too afraid of him to despise him, her feeling was probably more like pity. "At any rate," she reflected, "he had the wind up pretty had. It was something else he expected — not a two-penny halfpenny doll!" Her warm heart felt almost sorry for him.

Instead of "chucking the damned thing away or burning it," however, for it was quite a nice looking doll, she presented it to Monica, and Monica, having few new toys, instantly adored it, promising faithfully, as gravely warned by Mrs. O'Reilly, that she would never, *never* let her father know she had it.

Her father, Colonel Hymber Masters, was, it seems, what's called a "disappointed" man, a man whose fate forced him to live in surroundings he detested, disappointed in his career probably, possibly in love as well, Monica a love-child doubtless, and limited by his pension to face daily conditions that he loathed.

He was a silent, bitter sort of fellow, no more than that, and not so much disliked in the neighbourhood, as misunderstood. A sombre man they reckoned him, with his dark, furrowed face and silent ways. Yet “dark” in the suburbs meant mysterious, and “silent” invited female fantasy to fill the vacuum. It’s the frank, corn-haired man who invites sympathy and generous comment. He enjoyed his Bridge, however, and was accepted as a first-class player. Thus, he went out nightly, and rarely came back before midnight. He was welcome among the gamblers evidently, while the fact that he had an adored child at home softened the picture of this “mysterious” man. Monica, though rarely seen, appealed to the women of the neighbourhood, and “whatever her origin” said the gossips, “he loves her.”

To Monica, meanwhile, in her rather play-less, toy-less life, the doll, her new treasure, was a spot of gold. The fact that it was a “secret” present from her father, added to its value. Many other presents had come to her like that; she thought nothing of it; only, he had never given her a doll before, and it spelt rapture. Never, never, would she betray her pleasure and delight; it should remain her secret and his; and that made her love it all the more. She loved her father too, his taciturn silence was something she vaguely respected and adored. “That’s just like father,” she always said, when a strange new present came, and she knew instinctively that she must never say *Thank you* for it, for that was part of the lovely game between them. But this doll was exceptionally marvellous.

“It’s much more real and alive than my teddy-bears,” she told the cook, after examining it critically. “What ever made him think of it? Why, it even talks to me!” and she cuddled and fondled the half misshapened toy. “It’s my baby,” she cried taking it against her cheek.

For no teddy-bear could really be a child; cuddly bears were not offspring, whereas a doll was a potential baby. It brought sweetness, as both cook and governess realized, into a rather grim house, hope and tenderness, a maternal flavour almost, something anyhow that no young bear could possibly bring. A child, a human baby! And yet both cook and governess — for both were present at the actual delivery — recalled later that Monica opened the parcel and recognized the doll with a yell of wild delight that seemed almost a scream of pain. There was this too high note of delirious exultation as though some instinctive horror of revulsion were instantly smothered and obliterated in a whirl of overmastering joy. It was Madame Jodzka who recalled — long afterwards — this singular contradiction.

"I did think she shrieked at it a bit, now you ask me," admitted Mrs. O'Reilly later, though at the actual moment all she said was "Oh, lovely, darling, ain't it a pet!" While all Madame Jodzka said was a cautionary "If you squash its mouth like that, Monica, it won't be able to breathe!"

While Monica, paying no attention to either of them, fell to cuddling the doll with ecstasy.

A cheap little flaxen-haired, waxen-faced doll.

That so strange a case should come to us at second hand is, admittedly, a pity; that so much of the information should reach us largely through a cook and housemaid and through a foreigner of questionable validity, is equally unfortunate. Where precisely the reported facts creep across the feathery frontier into the incredible and thence into the fantastic would need the spider's thread of the big telescopes to define. With the eye to the telescope, the thread of that New Zealand spider seems thick as a rope; but with the eye examining second-hand reports the thread becomes elusive gossamer.

The Polish governess, Madame Jodzka, left the house rather abruptly. Though adored by Monica and accepted by Colonel Masters, she left not long after the arrival of the doll. She was a comely, youngish widow of birth and breeding, tactful, discreet, understanding. She adored Monica, and Monica was happy with her; she feared her employer, yet perhaps secretly admired him as the strong, silent, dominating Englishman. He gave her great freedom, she never took liberties, everything went smoothly. The pay was good and she needed it. Then, suddenly, she left. In the suddenness of her departure, as in the odd reason she gave for leaving, lie doubtless the first hints of this remarkable affair, creeping across that "feathery frontier" into the incredible and fantastic. An understandable reason she gave for leaving was that she was too frightened to stay in the house another night. She left at twenty-four hours' notice. Her reason was absurd, even if understandable, because any woman might find herself so frightened in a certain building that it has become intolerable to her nerves. Foolish or otherwise, this is understandable. An *idée fixe,* an obsession, once lodged in the mind of a superstitious, therefore hysterically-favoured woman, cannot be dislodged by argument. It may be absurd, yet it is "understandable."

The story behind the reason for Madame Jodzka's sudden terror is another matter, and it is best given quite simply. It relates to the doll. She swears by all her gods that she saw the doll "walking by itself," walking in a disjointed, hoppity, hideous fashion across the bed in which Monica lay sleeping.

In the gleam of the night-light, Madame Jodzka swears she saw this happen. She was half inside the opened door, peeping in, as her habit and duty decreed, to see if all was well with the child before going up to bed herself. The light, if faint, was clear. A jerky movement on the counterpane first caught her attention, for a smallish object seemed blundering awkwardly across its slippery silken surface. Something rolling, possibly, some object Monica had left outside on falling asleep rolling mechanically as the child shifted or turned over.

After staring for some seconds, she then saw that it was not merely an "object," since it had a living outline, nor was it rolling mechanically, or sliding, as she had first imagined. It was horribly taking steps, small but quite deliberate steps as though alive. It had a tiny, dreadful face, it had an expressionless tiny face, and the face had eyes — small, brightly shining eyes, and the eyes looked straight at Madame Jodzka.

She watched for a few seconds thunderstruck, and then suddenly realised with a shock of utter horror that this small, purposive monster was the doll, Monica's doll! And this doll was moving towards her across the tumbled surface of the counterpane. It was coming in her direction — straight at her.

Madame Jodzka gripped herself, physically and mentally, making a great effort, it seems, to deny the abnormal, the incredible. She denied the ice in her veins and down her spine. She prayed. She thought frantically of her priest in Warsaw. Making no audible sound, she screamed in her mind. But the doll, quickening its pace, came hobbling straight towards her, its glassy eyes fixed hard upon her own.

Then Madame Jodzka fainted.

That she was, in some ways, a remarkable woman, with a sense of values, is clear from the fact that she realised this story "wouldn't wash," for she confided it only to the cook in cautious whispers, while giving her employer some more "washable" tale about a family death that obliged her to hurry home to Warsaw. Nor was there the slightest attempt at embroidery, for on recovering consciousness she had recovered her courage, too — and done a remarkable thing: she had compelled herself to investigate. Aided and fortified by her religion, she compelled herself to make an examination. She had tiptoed further into the room, had made sure that Monica was sleeping peacefully, and that the doll lay — motionless — half way down the counterpane. She gave it a long, concentrated look. Its lidless eyes, fringed by hideously ridiculous black lashes, were fixed on space. Its expression was not so much innocent, as blankly stupid, idiotic, a mask of death that aped cheaply a pretence of life, where life could never be. Not ugly merely, it was revolting.

Madame Jodzka however, did more than study this visage with concentration, for with admirable pluck she forced herself to touch the little horror. She actually picked it up. Her faith, her deep religious conviction denied the former evidence of her senses. She had *not* seen movement. It was incredible, impossible. The fault lay somewhere in herself. This persuasion, at any rate, lasted long enough to enable her to touch the repulsive little toy, to pick it up, to lift it. She placed it steadily on the table near the bed between the bowl of flowers and the night-light, where it lay on its back helpless, innocent, yet horrible, and only then on shaking legs did she leave the room and up to her own bed. That her fingers remained ice-cold until eventually she fell asleep can be explained, of course, too easily and naturally to claim examination.

Whether imagined or actual, it must have been, none-the-less, a horrifying spectacle — a mechanical outline from a commercial factory walking like a living thing with a purpose. It holds the nightmare touch. To Madame Jodzka, protected since youth within cast-iron tenets, it came as a shock. And a shock dislocates. The sight smashed everything she knew as possible and real. The flow of her blood was interrupted, it froze, there came icy terror into her heart, her normal mechanism failed for a moment, she fainted. And fainting seemed a natural result. Yet it was the shock of the incredible masquerade that gave her the courage to act. She loved Monica, apart from any consideration of paid duty. The sight of this tiny monstrosity strutting across the counterpane not far from the child's sleeping face and folded hands — it was this that enabled her to pick it up with naked fingers and set it out of reach. . . .

For hours, before falling asleep, she reviewed the incredible thing, alternately denying the facts, then accepting them, yet taking into sleep finally the assured conviction that her senses had not deceived her. There seems little, indeed, that in a court of law could have been advanced against her character for reliability, for sincerity, for the logic of her detailed account.

“I’m sorry,” said Colonel Masters quietly, referring to her bereavement. He looked searchingly at her. “And Monica will miss you,” he added with one of his rare smiles. “She needs you.” Then just as she turned away, he suddenly extended his hand. “If perhaps later you can come back — do let me know. Your influence is — so helpful — and good.”

She mumbled some phrase with a promise in it, yet she left with a queer, deep impression that it was not merely, not chiefly perhaps, Monica who needed her. She wished he had not used quite those words. A sense of shame lay in her, almost as though she were running away from duty, or at least from a chance to help that God had put in her way. “Your influence is — so good.”

Already in the train and on the boat conscience attacked her, biting, scratching, gnawing. She had deserted a child she loved, a child who needed her, because she was scared out of her wits. No, that was a one-sided statement. She had left a house because the Devil had come into it. No, that was only partially true. When a hysterical temperament, engrained since early childhood in fixed dogmas, begins to sift facts and analyse reactions, logic and common sense themselves become confused. Thought led one way, emotion another, and no honest conclusion dawned on her mind.

She hurried on to Warsaw, to a stepfather, a retired General whose gay life had no place for her and who would not welcome her return. It was a derogatory prospect for this youngish widow who had taken a job in order to escape from his vulgar activities to return now empty-handed. Yet it was easier, perhaps, to face a step-father’s selfish anger than to go and tell Colonel Masters her real reason for leaving his service. Her conscience, too, troubled her on another score as thoughts and memories travelled backwards and half-forgotten details emerged.

Those spots of blood, for instance, mentioned by Mrs. O’Reilly, the superstitious Irish cook. She had made it a rule to ignore Mrs. O’Reilly’s silly fairy tales, yet now she recalled suddenly those ridiculous discussions about the laundry list and the foolish remarks that the cook and housemaid had let fall.

“But there ain’t no paint in a doll, I tell you. It’s all sawdust and wax and muck,” from the housemaid. “I know red paint when I sees it, and that ain’t paint, it’s blood.” And from Mrs. O’Reilly later: “Mother o’ God! Another red blob! She’s biting her fingernails — and that’s not *my* job . . . !”

The red stains on sheets and pillow cases were puzzling certainly, but Madame Jodzka, hearing these remarks by chance as it were, had paid no particular attention to them at the moment. The laundry lists were hardly her affair. These ridiculous servants anyhow . . . ! And yet, now in the train, those spots, be they paint or blood, crept back to trouble her.

Another thing, oddly enough, also troubled her — the ill-defined feeling that she was deserting a man who needed help, help that she could give. It was too vague to put into words. Was it based on his remark that her influence was “good” perhaps? She could not say. It was an intuition, and few intuitions bear analysis. Supporting it, however, was a conviction she had felt since first she entered the service of Colonel Masters, the conviction, namely, that he had a past that frightened him. There was something he had done, something he regretted and was probably ashamed of, something at any rate, for which he feared retribution. A retribution, moreover, he expected; a punishment that would come like a thief in the night and seize him by the throat.

It was against this dreaded vengeance that her influence was “good,” a protective influence possibly that her religion supplied, something on the side of the angels, in any case, that her personality provided.

Her mind worked thus, it seems; and whether a concealed admiration for this sombre and mysterious man, an admiration and protective instinct never admitted even to her inmost self, existed below the surface, hidden yet urgent, remains the secret of her own heart.

It was naturally and according to human nature, at any rate, that after a few weeks of her stepfather’s outrageous behaviour in the house, his cruelty too, she decided to return. She prayed to her gods incessantly, also she found oppressive her sense of neglected duty and failure of self-respect. She returned to the soulless suburban villa. It was understandable; the welcome from Monica was also understandable, the relief and pleasure of Colonel Masters still more so. It was expressed, this latter, in a courteous message only, tactfully worded, as though she had merely left for a brief necessity, for it was some days before she actually saw him to speak to. From cook and housemaid the welcome was voluble and — disquieting. There were no more inexplicable "spots of red," but there were other unaccountable happenings even more distressing.

"She's missed you something terrible," said Mrs. O'Reilly, "though she's found something else to keep her quiet — if you like to put it that way." And she made the sign of the cross.

"The doll?" asked Madame Jodzka with a start of shocked horror, forcing herself to come straight to the point and forcing herself also to speak lightly, casually.

"That's it, Madame. The bleeding doll."

The governess had heard the strange adjective many times already, but did not know whether to take it figuratively or not. She chose the latter.

"Blood?" she asked in a lowered voice.

The cook's body gave an odd jerk. "Well," she explained, "I meant more the way it goes on. Like a thing of flesh and blood, if you get me. And the way *she* treats it and plays with it," and her voice, while loud, had a hush of fear in it somewhere. She held her arms before her in a protective, shielding way, as though to ward off aggression.

"Scratches ain't proof of nothing,'' interjected the housemaid scornfully.

"You mean," asked Madame Jodzka gravely, "there's a question of — of injury — to someone?" She suppressed an involuntary gasp, but paid little attention to the maid's interruption.

Mrs. O'Reilly seemed to mismanage her breath for a moment.

"It ain't Miss Monica it's after," she announced in a defiant whisper as soon as she recovered herself, "it's someone else. *That's* what I mean. And no man as black as *he* was ever brought no good into a house, not since I was born."

“Someone else — ?” repeated Madam Jodzka almost to herself, seizing the vital words.

“You and yer black man!” interjected the housemaid. “Get along with yer! Thank God I ain’t a Christian or anything like that! But I did ‘ear them sort of jerky shuffling footsteps one night, I admit, and the doll did look bigger — swollen like — when I peeked in and looked—”

“Stop it!” cried Mrs. O’Reilly, “for you ain’t saying what’s true or what you reely know.”

She turned to the governess.

“There’s more talk what means nothing about this doll,” she said by way of apology, “than all the fairy tales I was brought up with as a child in Mayo, and I — I wouldn’t be believing anything of it.”

Turning her back contemptuously on the chattering housemaid, she came close to Madame Jodzka.

“There’s no harm coming to Miss Monica, Madame,” she whispered vehemently, “you can be quite sure about *her*. Any trouble there may be is for someone else.” And again she crossed herself.

Madame Jodzka, in the privacy of her room, reflected between her prayers. She felt a deep, a dreadful uneasiness.

A doll! A cheap, tawdry little toy made in factories by the hundred, by the thousand, a manufactured article of commerce for children to play with . . . But . . .

“The way she treats it and plays with it . . .” rang on in her disturbed mind.

A doll! But for the maternal suggestion, a doll was a pathetic, even horrible plaything, yet to watch a child busy with it involved deep reflections, since here the future mother prophesied. The child fondles and caresses her doll with passionate love, cares for it, seeks its welfare, yet stuffs it down into the perambulator, its head and neck twisted, its limbs broken and contorted, leaving it atrociously upside down so that blood and breathing cannot possibly function, while she runs to the window to see if the rain has stopped or the sun has come out. A blind and hideous automatism dictated by the Race, provided nothing of more immediate interest interferes, yet a herd-instinct that overcomes all obstacles, its vitality insuperable. The maternity instinct defies, even denies death. The doll, whether left upside down on the floor with broken teeth and ruined eyes, or lovingly arranged to be overlaid in the night, squashed, tortured, mutilated, survives all cruelties and disasters, and asserts finally its immortal qualities. It is unkillable. It is beyond death.

A child with her doll, reflected Madame Jodzka, is an epitome of nature's remorseless and unconquerable passion, of her dominant purpose — the survival of the race. . . .

Such thoughts, influenced perhaps by her bitter subconscious grievance against nature for depriving her of a child of her own, were unable to hold that level for long; they soon dropped back to the concrete case that perplexed and frightened her — Monica and her flaxen haired, sightless, idiotic doll. In the middle of her prayers, falling asleep incontinently, she did not even dream of it, and she woke refreshed and vigorous, facing the fact that sooner or later, sooner probably, she would have to speak to her employer.

She watched and listened. She watched Monica; she watched the doll. All seemed as normal as in a thousand other homes. Her mind reviewed the position, and where mind and superstition clashed, the former held its own easily. During her evening off she enjoyed the local cinema, leaving the heated building with the conviction that coloured fantasy benumbed the faculties, and that ordinary life was in itself prosaic. Yet before she had covered the half-mile to the house, her deep, accountable uneasiness returned with over-mastering power.

Mrs. O'Reilly had seen Monica to bed for her, and it was Mrs. O'Reilly who let her in. Her face was like the dead.

"It's been talking," whispered the cook, even before she closed the door. She was white about the gills.

"Talking! *Who's* been talking? What do you mean?"

Mrs. O'Reilly closed the door softly. "Both," she stated with dramatic emphasis, then sat down and wiped her face. She looked distraught with fear.

Madame took command, if only a command based on dreadful insecurity.

“Both?” she repeated, in a voice deliberately loud so as to counteract the other’s whisper. “What are you talking about?”

“They’ve *both* been talking — together,” stated the cook.

The governess kept silent for a moment, fighting to deny a shrinking heart.

“You’ve heard them talking together, you mean?” she asked presently in a shaking voice that tried to be ordinary.

Mrs. O’Reilly nodded, looking over her shoulder as she did so. Her nerves were, obviously, in rags. “I thought you’d *never* come back,” she whimpered. “I could hardly stay in the house.

Madame looked intently into her frightened eyes.

“You heard . . . ?” she asked quietly.

“I listened at the door. There were two voices. Different voices.” Madame Jodzka did not insist or cross-examine, as though acute fear helped her to a greater wisdom.

“You mean, Mrs. O’Reilly,” she said in flat, quiet tones, “that you heard Miss Monica talking to her doll as she always does, and herself inventing the doll’s answers in a changed voice? Isn’t that what you mean you heard?”

But Mrs. O’Reilly was not to be shaken. By way of answer she crossed herself and shook her head.

She spoke in a low whisper. “Come up now and listen with me, Madame, and judge for yourself.”

Thus, soon after midnight, and Monica long since asleep, these two, the cook and governess in a suburban villa, took up their places in the dark corridor outside a child’s bedroom door. It was a quiet windless night; Colonel Masters, whom they both feared, doubtless long since gone to his room in another corner of the ungainly villa. It must have been a long dreary wait before sounds in the child’s bedroom first became audible — the low quiet sound of voices talking audibly — two voices. A hushed, secretive, unpleasant sound in the room where Monica slept peacefully with her beloved doll beside her. Yet two voices assuredly, it was.

Both women sat erect, both crossed themselves involuntarily, exchanging glances. Both were bewildered, terrified. Both sat aghast.

What lay in Mrs. O'Reilly's superstitious mind, only the gods of "ould Oireland" can tell, but what the Polish woman's contained was clear as a bell: it was not two voices talking, it was only one. Her ear was pressed against the crack in the door. She listened intently; shaking to the bone, she listened. Voices in sleep-talking, she remembered, changed oddly.

"The child's talking to herself in sleep," she whispered firmly, "and that's all it is, Mrs. O'Reilly. She's just talking in her sleep," she repeated with emphasis to the woman crowding against her shoulder as though in need of support. "Can't you hear it," she added loudly, half angrily, "isn't it the same voice always? Listen carefully and you'll see I'm right."

She listened herself more closely than before.

"Listen! Hark . . . !" she repeated in a breathless whisper, concentrating her mind upon the curious sound, "isn't that the same voice — answering itself?"

Yet, as she listened, another sound disturbed her concentration, and this time it seemed a sound behind her — a faint, rustling, shuffling sound rather like footsteps hurrying away on tiptoe. She turned her head sharply and found that she had been whispering to no one. There was no one beside her. She was alone in the darkened corridor. Mrs. O'Reilly was gone. From the well of the house below a voice came up in a smothered cry beneath the darkened stairs: "Mother o' God and all the Saints . . ." and more besides.

A gasp of surprise and alarm escaped her doubtless at finding herself deserted and alone but in the same instant, exactly as in the story books, came another sound that caught her breath still more aghast — the rattle of a key in the front door below. Colonel Masters, after all, had not yet come in and gone to bed as expected: he was coming in now. Would Mrs. O'Reilly have time to slip across the hall before he caught her? More — and worse — would he come up and peep into Monica's bedroom on his way up to bed, as he rarely did? Madame Jodzka listened, her nerves in rags. She heard him fling down his coat. He was a man quick in such actions. The stick or umbrella was banged down noisily, hastily. The same instant his step sounded on the stairs. He was coming up. Another minute and he would start into the passage where she crouched against Monica's door.

He was mounting rapidly, two stairs at a time.

She, too, was quick in action and decision. She thought in a flash. To be caught crouching outside the door was ludicrous but to be caught inside the door would be natural and explicable. She acted at once.

With a palpitating heart, she opened the bedroom door and stepped inside. A second later she heard Colonel Masters' tread as he stumped along the corridor up to bed. He passed the door. He went on. She heard this with intense relief.

Now, inside the room, the door closed behind her, she saw the picture clearly.

Monica, sound asleep, was playing with her beloved doll, but in her sleep. She was indubitably in deep slumber. Her fingers, however, were roughing the doll this way and that, as though some dream perplexed her. The child was mumbling in her sleep, though no words were distinguishable. Muffled sighs and groans issued from her lips. Yet another sound there certainly was, though it could not have issued from the child's mouth. Whence, then, did it come?

Madame Jodzka paused, holding her breath, her heart panting. She watched and listened intently. She heard squeaks and grunts, but a moment's examination convinced her whence these noises came. They did not come from Monica's lips. They issued indubitably from the doll she clutched and twisted in her dream. The joints, as Monica twisted them, emitted these odd sounds, as though the sawdust in knees and elbows wheezed and squeaked against the unnatural rubbing. Monica obviously was wholly unconscious of these noises. As the doll's neck screwed round, the material — wax, thread, sawdust — produced this curious grating sound that was almost like syllables of a word or words.

Madame Jodzka stared and listened. She felt icy cold. Seeking for a natural explanation she found none. Prayer and terror raced in her helter-skelter. Her skin began to sweat.

Then suddenly Monica, her expression peaceful and composed, turned over in her sleep, and the dreadful doll, released from the dream-clutch, fell to one side on the bed and lay apparently lifeless and inert. In which moment, to Madame Jodzka's unbelieving yet horrified ears, it continued to squeak and utter. It went on mouthing by itself. Worse than that, the next instant it stood abruptly upright, rising on its twisted legs. It started moving. It began to move, walking crookedly, across the counterpane. Its glassy, sightless eyes seemed to look straight at her. It presented an inhuman and appalling picture, a picture of the utterly incredible. With a queer, hoppity motion of its broken legs and joints, it came fumbling and tumbling across the rough unevenness of the slippery counterpane towards her. Its appearance was deliberate and aggressive. The sounds, as of syllables, came with it — strange, meaningless syllables that yet managed to convey anger. It stumbled towards her like a living thing.

Once again, this effect of a mere child's toy, aping the life of some awful monstrosity with purpose and passion in its hideous tiny outline, brought collapse to the plucky Polish governess. The rush of blood without control drained her heart, and a moment of unconsciousness supervened so that everything, as it were, turned black.

This time, however, the moment of dark unconsciousness passed instantly: it came and went, almost like a moment of forgetfulness in passion. Passionate it certainly was, for the reaction came upon her like a storm. With recovered consciousness a sudden rage rushed into her woman heart — perhaps a coward's rage, an exaggerated fury against her own weakness? It rushed, in any case, to help her. She staggered, caught her breath, clutched violently at the cupboard next her, and — recovered her self-control. A fury of resentment blazed through her, fury against this utterly incredible exhibition of a wax doll walking and squawking as though it were something intelligently alive that could utter syllables. Syllables, she felt convinced, in a language she did not know.

If the monstrous can paralyse, it also can affront. The sight and sound of this cheap factory toy behaving with a will and heart of its own stung her into an act of violence that became imperative. For it was more than she could stand. Irresistibly, she rushed forward. She hurled herself against it, her only available weapon the high-heeled shoe her foot kicked loose on the instant, determined to smash down the frightful apparition into fragments and annihilate it. Hysterical, no doubt, she was at the moment, and yet logical: the godless horror must be blotted out of visible existence. This one thing obsessed her — to destroy beyond all possibility of survival. It must be smashed into fragments, into dust.

They stood close, face to face, the glassy eyes staring into her own, her hand held high for the destruction she craved — but the hand did not fall. A stinging pain, sharp as a serpent's bite, darted suddenly through her fingers, wrist and arm, her grip was broken, the shoe spun sideways across the room, and in the flickering light of the candle, it seemed to her, the whole room quivered. Paralysed and helpless, she stood utterly aghast. What gods or saints could come to aid her? None. Her own will alone could help her. Some effort, at any rate, she made, trembling, on the edge of collapse: "My God!" she heard her half-whispering, strangled voice cry out. "It is not true! You are a lie! My God denies you! I call upon my God . . . !"

Whereupon, to her added horror, the dreadful little doll, waving a broken arm, squawked back at her, as though in definite answer, the strange disjointed syllables she could not understand, syllables as though in another tongue. The same instant it collapsed abruptly on the counterpane like a toy balloon that had been pricked. It shrank down in a mutilated mess before her eyes, while Monica — added touch of horror — stirred uneasily in her sleep, turning over and stretching out her hands as though feeling blindly for something that she missed. And this sight of the innocently sleeping child fumbling instinctively towards an incomprehensibly evil and dangerous something that attracted her proved again too strong for the Polish woman to control.

The blackness intervened a second time.

It was undoubtedly a blur in memory that followed, emotion and superstition proving too much for common-sense to deal with. She just remembers violent, unreasoned action on her part before she came back to clearer consciousness in her own room, praying volubly on her knees against her own bed. The interval of transit down the corridor and upstairs remained blank. Yet her shoe was with her, clutched tightly in her hand. And she remembered also having clutched an inert, waxen doll with frantic fingers, clutched and crushed and crumpled its awful little frame till the sawdust came spurting from its broken joints and its tiny body was mutilated beyond recognition, if not annihilated . . . then stuffing it down ruthlessly on a table far out of Monica's reach, Monica lying peacefully in deepest sleep. She remembered that. She also saw the clear picture of the small monster lying upside down, grossly untidy, an obscene attitude in the disorder of its flimsy dress and exposed limbs, lying motionless, its eyes crookedly aglint, motionless, yet alive still, alive moreover with intense and malignant purpose. No duration or intensity of prayer could obliterate the picture.

She knew now that a plain, face to face talk with her employer was essential; her conscience, her peace of mind, her sanity, her sense of duty all demanded this. Deliberately, and she was sure, rightly, she had never once risked a word with the child herself. Danger lay that way, the danger of emphasizing something in the child's mind that was best left ignored. But with Colonel Masters, who paid her for her services, believed in her integrity, trusted her, with him there must be an immediate explanation.

An interview was absurdly difficult; in the first place because he loathed and avoided such occasions; secondly because he was so exceedingly impervious to approach, being so rarely even visible at all. At night he came home late, in the mornings no one dared go near him. He expected the little household, once its routine established, to run itself. The only inmate who dared beard him was Mrs. O'Reilly, who periodically, once every six months, walked straight into his study, gave notice, received an addition to her wages, and then left him alone for another six months.

Madame Jodzka, knowing his habits, waylaid him in the hall next morning while Monica was lying down before lunch, as usual. He was on his way out and she had been watching from the upper landing. She had hardly set eyes on him since her return from Warsaw. His lean, upright figure, his dark, emotionless face, she thought magnificent. He was the perfect expression of the soldier. Her heart fluttered as she raced downstairs. Her carefully prepared sentences, however, evaporated when he stopped and looked at her, a jumble of wild words pouring from her in confused English instead. He cut her rigmarole short, though he listened politely enough at first.

"I'm so glad you were able to come back to us, as I told you. Monica missed you very much—"

"She has something now she plays with—"

"The very thing," he interrupted. "No doubt the kind of toy she needs. . . . Your excellent judgment. . . . Please tell me if there's anything else you think. . . ." and he half turned as though to move away.

"But I didn't get it. It's a horrible — *horrible*—"

Colonel Masters uttered one of his rare laughs. "Of course, all children's toys are horrible, but if she's pleased with it. . . . I haven't seen it, I'm no judge. . . . If you can buy something better—" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't buy it," she cried desperately. "It was brought. It makes sounds by itself — syllables. I've seen it move — move itself. It's a doll."

He turned from the front door which he had just reached as though he had been shot; the skin held a sudden pallor beneath the flush and something contradicted the blazing eyes, something seemed to shrink.

"A doll," he repeated in a very quiet voice. "You said — a doll?"

But his eyes and face disconcerted her, so that she merely gave a fumbling account of a parcel that had been brought. His question about a parcel he had ordered strictly to be destroyed added to her confusion.

"Wasn't it?" he asked in a rasping whisper, as though a disobeyed order seemed incredible.

"It was thrown away, I believe," she prevaricated, unable to meet his eyes, anxious to protect the cook as well. "I think Monica — perhaps found it." She despised her lack of courage, but his intensity scattered her wits; she was conscious, moreover, of a strange desire not to give him pain, as though his safety and happiness, not Monica's, were at stake. "It — talks! — as well as *moves,*" she cried desperately, forcing herself at last to look at him.

Colonel Masters seemed to stiffen; his breath caught oddly.

"You say Monica has it? Plays with it? You've seen movement and heard sounds like syllables?" He asked the questions in a low voice, almost as though talking to himself. You've — listened?" he whispered.

Unable to find convincing words, she bowed her head, while some terror in him came across to her like a blast of icy wind. The man was afraid in his heart. Instead, however, of some explosive reply by way of blame or criticism, he spoke quietly, even calmly: “You did right to come and tell me this — quite right,” adding then in so low a tone that she barely caught the ominous words, “for I have been expecting something of the sort . . . sooner or later . . . it was bound to come. . . .” the voice dying away into the handkerchief he put to his face.

And abruptly then, as though aware of an appeal for sympathy, an emotional reaction swept her fear away. Stepping closer, she looked her employer straight in the eyes.

“See the child for yourself,” she said with sudden firmness. “Come and listen with me. Come into the bedroom.”

She saw him stagger. For a moment he said nothing.

“Who,” he then asked, the low voice unsteady, “who brought that parcel?”

“A man, I believe.”

There was a pause that seemed like minutes before his next question.

“White,” he asked, “or — black?”

“Dark,” she told him, “very dark.”

He was shaking like a leaf, the skin of his face blanched; he leaned against the door, wilted, limp; unless she somehow took command there threatened a collapse she did not wish to witness. “You shall come with me tonight,” she said firmly, “and we shall listen together. Wait till I return now. I go for brandy,” and a minute later as she came back breathless and watched him gulp down half a tumbler full, she knew that she had done right in telling him. His obedience proved it, though it seemed strange that cowardice should borrow from its like to produce courage.

“Tonight,” she repeated, “tonight after your bridge. We meet in the corridor outside the bedroom. I shall be there. At half-past twelve.”

He pulled himself into an upright position, staring at her fixedly, making a movement of his head, half bow, half nod.

“Twelve-thirty,” he muttered, “in the passage outside the bedroom door,” and using his stick heavily rather, he opened the door and passed out into the drive. She watched him go, aware that her fear had changed to pity, aware also that she watched the stumbling gait of a man too conscience-stricken to know a moments peace, too frightened even to think of God.

Madame Jodzka kept the appointment; she had eaten no supper, but had stayed in her room — praying. She had first put Monica to bed.

“My doll,” the child pleaded, good as gold, after being tucked up. “I must have my doll or else I’ll never get to sleep,” and Madame Jodzka had brought it with reluctant fingers, placing it on the night-table beside the bed.

“She’ll sleep quite comfortably here, Monica, darling. Why not leave her outside the sheets?” It had been carefully mended, she noticed, patched together with pins and stitches.

The child grabbed at it. “I want her in bed beside me, close against me,” she said with a happy smile. “We tell each other stories. If she’s too far away I can’t hear what she says.” And she seized it with a cuddling pleasure that made the woman’s heart turn cold.

“Of course, darling — if it helps you to fall asleep quickly, you shall have it,” and Monica did not see the trembling fingers, nor notice the horror in the face and voice. Indeed, hardly was the doll against her cheek on the pillow, her fingers half stroking the flaxen hair and pink wax cheeks, than her eyes closed, a sigh of deep content breathed out, and Monica was asleep.

Madame Jodzka, fearful of looking behind her, tiptoed to the door, and left the room. In the passage she wiped a cold sweat from her forehead. “God bless her and protect her,” her heart murmured, “and may God forgive me if I’ve sinned.”

She kept the appointment; she knew Colonel Masters would keep it, too.

It had been a long wait from eight o’clock till after midnight. With great determination she had kept away from the bedroom door, fearful lest she might hear a sound that would necessitate action on her part: she went to her room and stayed there. But praying exhausted itself, for it both excited and betrayed her. If her God could help, a brief request alone was needed. To go on praying for help hour by hour was not only an insult to her deity, but it also wore her out physically. She stopped, therefore, and read some pages of a Polish saint which she did not understand. Later she fell into a state of horrified nervous drowse. In due course, she slept. . . .

A noise awoke her — steps going softly past her door. A glance at her watch showed eleven o'clock. The steps, though stealthy, were familiar. Mrs. O'Reilly was waddling up to bed. The sounds died away. Madame Jodzka, a trifle ashamed, though she hardly knew why, returned to her Polish saint, yet determined to keep her ears open. Then slept again. . . .

What woke her a second time she could not tell. She was startled. She listened. The night was unpleasantly still, the house quiet as the grave. No casual traffic passed. No wind stirred the gloomy evergreens in the drive. The world outside was silent. And then, as she saw by her watch that it was some minutes after midnight, a sharp click became audible that acted like a pistol shot to her keyed-up nerves. It was the front door closing softly. Steps followed across the hall below, then up the stairs, unsteadily a little. Colonel Masters had come in. He was coming up slowly, unwillingly she felt, to keep the appointment. Madame Jodzka started from her chair, looked in the glass, mumbled a quick confused prayer, and opened her door into the dark passage.

She stiffened, physically and mentally. "Now, he'll hear and perhaps see — for himself," she thought. "And God help him!"

She marched along the passage and reached the door of Monica's bedroom, listening with such intentness that she seemed to hear only the confused running murmur of her own blood. Having reached the appointed spot, she stood stock still and waited while his steps approached. A moment later his bulk blocked the passage, shown up as a dark shadow by the light in the hall below. This bulk came nearer, came right up to her. She believed she said "Good evening," and that he mumbled something about "I said I'd come . . . damned nonsense. . . ." or words to that effect, whereupon the couple stood side by side in the darkened silence of the corridor, remote from the rest of the house, and waited without further words. They stood shoulder to shoulder outside the door of Monica's bedroom. Her heart was knocking against her side.

She heard his breathing, there came a whiff of spirits, of stale tobacco, smoke, his outline seemed to shift against the wall unsteadily, he moved his feet; and a sudden, extraordinary wave of emotion swept over her, half of protective maternal yearning, half almost of sexual desire, so that for a passing instant she burned to take him in her arms and kiss him savagely, and at the same time shield him from some appalling danger his blunt ignorance laid him open to. With revulsion, pity, and a sense of sin and passion, she acknowledged this odd sudden weakness in herself, but the face of the Warsaw priest flashed across her befuddled mind the next instant. There was evil in the air. This meant the Devil. She felt herself trembling dreadfully, shaking in her shoes, losing her balance, her whole body leaning over, but leaning in his direction. A moment more and she must have fallen towards him, dropped into his arms.

A sound broke the silence, and she drew up just in time. It came from beyond the door, from inside the bedroom.

“Hark!” she whispered, her hand upon his arm, and while he made no movement, spoke no word, she saw his head and shoulders bend down toward the panel of the closed door. There was a noise, upon the other side, there were noises, Monica’s voice distinctly recognizable, another slighter, shriller sound accompanying it, breaking in upon it, answering it. Two voices.

“Listen,” she repeated in a whisper scarcely audible, and felt is warm hand grip her own so fiercely that it hurt her.

No words were distinguishable at first, just these odd broken sounds of two separate voices in that dark corridor of the silent house — the voice of a child, and the other a strange faint, hardly a human sound, while yet a voice.

“Que le bon Dieu—” she began, then faltered, breath failing her, for she saw Colonel Masters stoop down suddenly and do the last thing that would have occurred to her as likely: he put his eye to the key-hole and kept it there steadily for the best part of a minute, his hand still gripping her own firmly. He knelt on one knee to keep his balance.

The sounds had ceased, no movement now stirred inside the room. The night-light, she knew, would show him clearly the pillows of the bed, Monica’s head, the doll in her arms. Colonel Masters must see clearly anything there was to see, and he yet gave no sign that he saw anything. She experienced a queer sensation for a few seconds — almost as though she had perhaps imagined everything and proved herself a consummate, idiotic, hysterical fool. For a few seconds this ghastly thought flashed over her, the odd silence emphasizing it. Had she been after all, just a crazy lunatic? Had her senses all deceived her? Why should he see nothing, make no sign? Why had the voice, the voices, ceased? Not a murmer of any sort was audible in the room.

Then Colonel Masters, suddenly releasing his grip of her hand, shuffled on to both feet and stood up straight, while in the same instant she herself stiffened, trying to prepare for the angry scorn, the contemptuous abuse he was about to pour upon her. Protecting herself against this attack, expecting it, she was the more amazed at what she did hear:

"I saw it," came in a strangled whisper. "I saw it walk!"

She stood paralysed.

"It's watching me," he added, scarcely audible. *"Me!"*

The revulsion of feeling at first left her speechless; it was the sheer terror in his strangled whisper that restored a measure of self possession to her. Yet it was he who found words first, awful whispered words, words spoken to himself, it seemed, more than to her.

"It's what I've always feared — I knew it must come some day — yet not like this. Not this way."

Then immediately the voice in the room became audible, and it was a sweet and gentle voice, sincere and natural, with feeling in it — Monica's childish voice, pleading:

"Don't go, don't leave me! Come back into bed — please."

An incomprehensible sound followed, as though by way of answer. There were syllables in that faint, creaky tone Madame Jodzka recognized, but syllables she could not comprehend. They seemed to enter her like points of ice. She froze. And facing her stood the motionless, inanimate figure, though the darkness hid its expression. The solid bulk of him, his outline, then leaned over towards her, his lips so close to her own face that, as he spoke, she felt the breath upon her cheek.

"Buth laga. . . ." she heard him repeat the syllables to himself again and again. "*Revenge* . . . in Hindustani . . . !" He drew a long, anguished breath. The sounds sank into her like drops of poison, the syllables she had heard

several times already but had not understood. At last she understood their meaning. Revenge!

"I must go in, go in," he was mumbling to himself. "I must go in and face it." Her intuition was justified: the danger was not for Monica but for himself. Her sudden protective maternal instinct found its explanation too. The lethal power concentrated in that hideous puppet was aimed at *him*. He began to edge impetuously past her.

"No!" she cried, "I'll go! Let me go in!" pushing him aside with all her strength. But his hand was already on the knob and the next instant the door was open and he was inside the room. On the threshold they stood still a second side by side, though she was slightly behind, struggling to shove past him and stand protectively in front.

She stared across his shoulder, her eyes so wide open that the intense strain to note everything at once threatened to defeat its own end. Sight, none-the-less, worked normally; she saw all there was to see, and that was — nothing; nothing unusual, that is, nothing abnormal, nothing terrifying, so that this second time the threat of anti-climax rose to her mind. Had she worked herself up to this peak of horror merely to behold Monica lying sound asleep in a safe and quiet room? The flickering night-light revealed no more than a child in natural slumber without a toy of any sort against her pillow. There stood the glass of water beside the flowers in their saucer, the picture-book on the sill of the window within reach, the window opened a little at the bottom, and there also lay the calm face of Monica with eyes tight shut upon the pillow. Her breathing was deep and regular, no sign of disquiet anywhere, no hint of disturbance that might have accompanied that pleading sentence of two minutes ago, except that the bed-clothes were perhaps somewhat tumbled. The counterpane humped itself in folds toward the foot of the bed, she noticed, as though Monica, finding it too warm, had tossed it away in sleep. No more than that.

In that first moment Colonel Masters and the governess took in this whole pretty picture complete. The room was so still that the child's breathing was distinctly audible. Their eyes roved all over. Nothing was anywhere in movement. Yet the same instant Madame Jodzka became aware that there was movement. Something stirred. The report came, perhaps, through her skin, for no sense announced it. It was undeniable; in that still, silent room there was movement somewhere, and with that unreported movement there was danger.

Certain, rightly or wrongly, that she herself was safe, also that the quietly sleeping child was safe, she was equally certain that Colonel Masters was the one in danger. She knew that in her very bones.

“Wait here by the door,” she said almost peremptorily, as she felt him pushing past her further into the quiet room. “You saw it watching you. It’s somewhere — Take care!”

She clutched at him, but be was already beyond her.

“Damned nonsense,” he muttered and strode forward.

Never before in her whole life had she admired a man more than in this instant when she saw him moving towards what she knew to be physical and spiritual danger — never before, and never again, was such a hideous and dreadful sight to be repeatable in a woman’s life. Pity and horror drowned her in a sea of passionate, futile longing. A man going to meet his fate, it flashed over her, was something none, without power to help, should witness. No human power can stay the courses of the stars.

Her eyes rested, as it were by chance, on the crumpled ridges and hollows of the discarded counterpane. These lay by the foot of the bed in shadow, confused a little in their contours and their masses. Had Monica not moved, they must have lain thus till morning. But Monica did move. At this particular moment she turned over in her sleep. She stretched her little legs before settling down in the new position, and this stretching squeezed and twisted the contours of the heavy counterpane at the foot of the bed. The tiny landscape altered thus a fraction, its immediate detail shifted. And an outline — a very small outline — emerged. Hitherto, it had lain concealed among the shadows. It emerged now with disconcerting rapidity, as though a spring released it. Out of its nest of darkness it seemed almost to leap forward. Fast it came, supernaturally fast, its velocity actually shocking, for a shock came with it. It was exceedingly small, it was exceedingly dreadful, its head erect and venomous and the movement of its legs and arms, as of its bitter, glittering eyes, aping humanity. Malignant evil, personified and aggressive, shaped itself in this otherwise ridiculous outline.

It was the doll.

Racing with incredible security across the slippery surface of the crumpled silk counterpane, it dived and climbed and shot forward with an appearance of complete control and deliberate purpose. That it had a definite aim was overwhelmingly obvious. Its fixed, glassy eyes were concentrated upon a point beyond and behind the terrified governess, the point precisely where Colonel Masters, her employer, stood against her shoulder.

A frantic, half-protective movement on her part, seemed lost in the air. . . .

She turned instinctively, putting an arm about his shoulders, which he instantly flung off.

"Let the bloody thing come," he cried. "I'll deal with it . . . !" He thrust her violently aside.

The doll came at him. The hinges of its diminutive broken arms and its jointed legs emitted a thin, creaking sound as it came darting — the syllables Madame Jodzka had already heard more than once. Syllables she had heard without understanding— *"buth laga"* — but syllables now packed with awful meaning: *Revenge.*

The sounds hissed and squeaked, yet clear as a bell as the beast advanced at this miraculous speed.

Before Colonel Masters could move an inch backwards or forwards in self protection, before he could command himself to any sort of action, or contrive the smallest measure of self defense, it was off the bed and at him. It settled. Savagely, its little jaws of tiny make-believe were bitten deep into Colonel Masters' throat, fastened tightly.

In a flash this happened, in a flash it was over. In Madame Jodzka's memory it remained like the impression of a lightning flash, simultaneously etched in black and white. It had happened in the present as though it had no past. It came and was gone again. Her faculties, as after a vivid lightning flash, were momentarily paralysed, without past or present. She had witnessed these awful things, but had not realized them. It was this lack of realization that struck her motionless and dumb.

Colonel Masters, on the other hand, stood beside her quietly as though nothing unusual had happened, wholly master of himself, calm, collected. At the moment of attack no sound had left his lips, there had been no gesture even of defence. Whatever had come, he had

“Hadn’t you better put that counterpane straight a bit. . . . Perhaps?”

Common sense, as always, enables the gas of hysteria to escape. Madame Jodzka gasped, but she obeyed. Automatically she moved across to do his bidding, yet aware, even as she thus moved, that he flicked something from his neck, as though a wasp, a mosquito, or some poisonous insect, had tried to sting him. She remembered no more than that, for he, in his calmness, had contributed nothing else.

Fumbling with the folds of slippery counterpane she tried to straighten out, she was startled to find that Monica was sitting up in bed, awake.

“Oh, Doska — you here!” the child exclaimed innocently, straight out of sleep and using the affectionate nickname. “And Daddy, too! Oh, my goodness . . . !”

“Sm-smoothing your bed, darling,” she stammered, hardly aware of what she said. “You ought to be asleep. I just looked in to see. . . .” She mumbled a few other automatic words.

“And Daddy with you!” repeated the child excitedly, sleep still about her, wondering what it all meant. “Ooh! Ooh!” holding out her arms.

This brief exchange of spoken words, though it takes a minute to describe, occurred simultaneously with the action — perhaps ten seconds all told, for while the governess fumbled with the counterpane, Colonel Masters was in the act of brushing something from his neck. Nothing else was audible, nothing but his quick gasp and sudden intake of breath: but something else — she swears it on her Warsaw priest — was visible. Madame Jodzka maintains by all her gods she saw this other thing.

In moments of paralysing stress it is not the senses that act less speedily nor with less precision; their action, on the contrary, is intensified and speeded up: what takes longer is the registration of their reports. The numbed brain causes the apparent delay; realization is slowed down.

Madame Jodzka thus only realized a fraction of a second later what her eyes had indubitably witnessed; a dark-skinned arm slanting in through the open window by the bed and snatching at a small object that lay on the floor after dropping from Colonel Masters’ throat, then withdrawing again at lightning speed into the darkness of the night outside.

No one but herself, apparently, had seen this — it was almost supernaturally swift.

“And now you’ll be asleep again in two minutes, lucky Monica,” Colonel Masters was whispering over the bed. “I just peeped in to see that you were all right . . .” His voice was thin, dreadfully soundless.

Madame Jodzka, against the door, frozen, terrified, looked on and listened.

“Are you quite well, Daddy? Sure? I had a dream, but it’s gone now.”

“Splendid. Never better in my life. But better still if I saw you sound asleep. Come now, I’ll blow out this silly night-light, for that’s what woke you up, I’ll be bound.”

He blew it out, he and the child blew it out together, the latter with sleepy laughter that then hushed. And Colonel Masters tiptoed to join Madame Jodzka at the door. “A lot of damned fuss about nothing,” she heard him muttering in that voice, and then, as they closed the door and stood a moment in the darkened passage, he did suddenly an unexpected thing. He took the Polish woman in his arms, held her fiercely to him for a second, kissed her vehemently, and flung her away.

“Bless you and thank you,” he said in a low, angry voice. “You did your best. You made a great fight. But I got what I deserved. I’ve been waiting years for it.” And he was off down the stairs to his own quarters. Half way down he stopped and looked up to where she stood against the rails. “Tell the doctor,” he whispered hoarsely, “that I took a sleeping draught — an overdose.” And he was gone.

And this was, roughly, what she did tell the doctor next morning when a hurried telephone summons brought him to the bed whereon a dead man lay with a swollen, blackened tongue. She told the same tale at the inquest too and an emptied bottle of a powerful sleeping draught supported her. . . .

And Monica, too young to realize grief beyond its trumpery meaning of a selfishly felt loss, never once — oddly enough — referred to the absence of her lovely doll that had comforted so many hours, proved such an intimate companion day and night in a life that held no other playmates. It seemed forgotten, expunged utterly from her memory, as though it had never existed at all. She stared blankly, stupidly, when a doll was mentioned: she preferred her worn-out teddy-bears. The slate of memory, in this particular case, was wiped clean.

“They’re so warm and comfy,” she described her bears, “and they cuddle without tickling. Besides,” she added innocently, “they don’t squeak and try to slip away. . . .”

Thus in the suburbs, where great spaces between the lamps go dead at night, where the moist wind comes whispering through the mournful branches of the silver pines, where nothing happens and people cry “Let’s go to town!” there are occasional stirrings among the dead dry bones that hide behind villa walls. . . .

THE TROD

YOUNG NORMAN WAS being whirled in one of the newest streamlined expresses towards the north. He leaned back in his first-class Smoker and lit a cigarette. On the rack in front of him was his gun-case with the pair of guns he never willingly allowed out of his sight, his magazine with over a thousand cartridges beside it, and the rest of his luggage, he knew, was safely in the van. He was looking forward to a really good week's shooting at Greystones, one of the best moors in England.

He realised that he was uncommonly lucky to have been invited at all. Yet a question mark lay in him. Why precisely, he wondered, had he been asked? For one thing, he knew his host, Sir Hiram Digby, very slightly. He had met him once or twice at various shoots in Norfolk, and while he had acquitted himself well when standing near him, he could not honestly think this was the reason for the invitation. There had been too many good shots present, and far better shots, for him to have been specially picked out. There was another reason, he was certain. His thoughts, as he puffed his cigarette reflectively, turned easily enough in another direction — towards Diana Travers, Sir Hiram Digby's niece.

The wish, he remembered, is often father to the thought, yet he clung to it obstinately, and with lingering enjoyment. It was Diana Travers who had suggested his name; it well might be, it probably was, and the more he thought it over, the more positive he felt. It explained the invitation, at any rate.

A curious thrill of excitement and delight ran through him as memory went backwards and played about her. A curious being, he saw her, quite unlike the usual run of girls, but curious, in the way that he himself perhaps was curious, for he was just old enough to have discovered that he was curious, standing apart somehow from the young men of his age and station.

Well born, rich, sporting and all the rest, he yet did not quite belong to his time in certain ways. He could drink, revel, go wild, enjoy himself with his companions, but up to a point only — when he withdrew unsatisfied. There were 'other things' that claimed him with some terrible inner power; and the two could not mix. These other things he could not quite explain even to himself, but to his boon companions — never. Were they things of the spirit? He could not say. Wild, pagan things belonging to an older day. He knew not. They were of unspeakable loveliness and power, drawing him away from ordinary modern life — *that* he knew. He could not define them to himself, much less speak of them to others.

And then he met Diana Travers and knew, though he did not dare put his discovery into actual words, that she felt something similar.

He came across her first at a dance in town, he remembered, remembering also how bored he had been until the casual introduction, and after it, how happy, enchanted, satisfied. It was assuredly not that he had fallen suddenly in love, nor that she was wildly beautiful — a tall, fair girl with a radiant, yet not lovely face, soft voice, graceful movements — for there were thousands, Norman knew, who excelled her in all these qualities. No, it was not the usual love attack, the mating fever, the herd-instinct that she might be *his* girl, but the old conviction, rather, that there lay concealed in her the same nameless, mysterious longings that lay also in himself — the terrible and lovely power that drew him from his human kind towards unknown 'other things'.

As they stood together on the balcony, where they had escaped from the heat and clamour of the ball-room, he acknowledged to himself, yet without utterance, this overpowering, strange conviction that their fates were in some way linked together. He could not explain it at the time, he could not explain it now — while he thought it over in the railway carriage, and his conscious mind rejected it as imagination. Yet it remained. Their talk, indeed, had been ordinary enough, nor was he conscious of the slightest desire to flirt or make love; it was just that, as the saying is, they 'clicked' and that each felt delightfully easy in the other's company, happy and at home. It was almost, he reflected, as though they shared some rather wonderful deep secret that had no need of words, a secret that lay, indeed, beyond the reach of words altogether.

They had met several times since, and on each occasion he had been aware of the same feeling; and once when he ran across her by chance in the park they walked together for over an hour and she had talked more freely. Talked suddenly about herself, moreover, openly and naturally, as though she knew he would understand. In the open air, it struck him, she was more spontaneous than in the artificial surroundings of walls and furniture. It was not so much that she said anything significant, but rather the voice and manner and gestures that she used.

She had been admitting how she disliked London and all its works, loathing especially the Season with its glittering routine of so-called gaiety, adding that she always longed to get back to Marston, Sir Hiram's place in Essex. 'There are the marshes,' she said, with quiet enthusiasm, 'and the sea, and I go with my uncle duck-flighting in the twilight, or in the dawn when the sun comes up like a red ball out of the sea, and the mists over the marshes drift away... and things, you know, may happen...'

He had been watching her movements with admiration as she spoke, thinking the name of huntress was well chosen, and now there was a note of strange passion in her voice that he heard for the first time. Her whole being, moreover, conveyed the sense that he would understand some emotional yearning in her that her actual words omitted.

He stopped and stared at her.

'That's to be alive,' she added with a laugh that made her eyes shine. 'The wind and the rain blowing in your face and the ducks streaming by. You feel yourself part of nature. Gates open, as it were. It was how we were meant to live, I'm sure.'

Such phrases from any other girl must have made him feel shy and embarrassed, from her they were merely natural and true. He had not taken her up, however, beyond confessing that he agreed with her, and the conversation had passed on to other things. Yet the reason he had not become enthusiastic or taken up the little clue she offered, was because his inmost heart knew what she meant.

Her confession, not striking in itself, concealed, while it revealed, a whole region of significant, mysterious 'other things' best left alone in words. 'You and I think alike,' was what she had really said. 'You and I share this strange, unearthly longing, only for God's sake, don't let us talk about it...!'

'A queer girl, anyhow,' he now smiled to himself, as the train rushed northwards, and then asked himself what exactly he knew about her? Very little, practically nothing, beyond that, both parents being dead, she lived with her elderly bachelor uncle and was doing the London Season. ‘A thoroughbred anyhow,’ he told himself, ‘lovely as a nymph into the bargain...’ and his thoughts went dreaming rather foolishly. Then suddenly, as he lit another cigarette, a much more definite thought emerged. It gave him something of a start, for it sprang up abruptly out of his mood of reverie in the way that a true judgment sometimes leaps to recognition in the state between sleeping and waking..

‘She *knows.* Knows about these other lovely and mysterious things that have always haunted me. She has — yes, experienced them. She can explain them to me. She wants to share them with me....’

Norman sat up with a jerk, as though something had scared him. He had been dreaming, these ideas were the phantasmagoria of a dream. Yet his heart, he noticed, was beating rather rapidly, as though a deep inner excitement had touched him in his condition of half-dream.

He looked up at his gun-cases and cartridges in the rack, then shaded his eyes and gazed out of the window. The train was doing at least sixty. The character of the country it rushed through was changing. The hedges of the midlands had gone, and stone walls were beginning to take their place. The country was getting wilder, lonelier, less inhabited. He drew unconsciously a deep breath of satisfaction. He must actually have slept for a considerable time, he realised, for his watch told him that in a few minutes he would reach the junction where he had to change. Bracendale, the local station for Greystones, he remembered, was on a little branch line that wandered away among the hills. And some fifteen minutes later he found himself, luggage and all, in the creaky, grunting train that would land him at Bracendale towards five o’clock. The dusk had fallen when, with great effort apparently, the struggling engine deposited him with his precious guns and cartridges on the deserted platform amid swirling mists a damp wind prepared for his reception. To his considerable relief a car was there to carry him the remaining ten miles to the Lodge, and he was soon comfortably installed among its luxurious rugs for the drive across the hills.

He settled back comfortably to enjoy the keen mountain air.

After leaving the station, the car followed a road up a narrow valley for a time; a small beck fell tumbling from the hills on the left, where occasionally dark plantations of fir trooped down to the side of the road; but what struck him chiefly was the air of desolation and loneliness that hung over all the countryside. The landscape seemed to him wilder and less inhabited even than the Scottish Highlands. Not a house, not a croft, was to be seen. A sense of desertion, due partly to the dusk no doubt, hung brooding over everything, as though human influence was not welcomed here, perhaps not possible. Bleak and inhospitable it looked certainly, though for himself this loneliness held a thrill of wild beauty that appealed to him.

A few black-faced sheep strung occasionally across the road, and once they passed a bearded shepherd hurrying downhill with his dog. They vanished into the mist like wraiths. It seemed impossible to Norman that the country could be so desolate and uninhabited when he knew that only a few score miles away lay the large manufacturing towns of Lancashire. The car, meanwhile, was steadily climbing up the valley and presently they came to more open country and passed a few scattered farmhouses with an occasional field of oats beside them.

Norman asked the chauffeur if many people lived hereabouts, and the man was clearly delighted to be spoken to.

‘No, sir,’ he said, ‘it’s a right desolate spot at the best of times, and I’m glad enough,’ he added, ‘when it’s time for us to go back south again.’ It had been a wonderful season for the grouse, and there was every promise of a record year.

Norman noticed an odd thing about the farmhouses they passed, for many of them, if not all, had a large cross carved over the lintel of the doors, and even some of the gates leading from the road into the fields had a smaller cross cut into the top bar. The car’s flash-light picked them out. It reminded him of the shrines and crosses scattered over the countryside in Catholic countries abroad, but seemed a little incongruous in England. He asked the chauffeur if most of the people hereabout were Catholics, and the man’s answer, given with emphasis, touched his curiosity.

‘Oh, no, I don’t think so,’ was the reply. ‘In fact, sir, if you ask me, the people round here are about as heathen as you could find in any Christian country.’

Norman drew his attention to the crosses everywhere, asking him how he accounted for them if the inhabitants were heathen, and the man hesitated a moment before replying, as though, glad to talk otherwise, the subject was not wholly to his liking.

‘Well, sir,’ he said at length, watching the road carefully in front of him, ‘they don’t tell *me* much about what they think, counting me for a foreigner like, as I come from the south. But they’re a rum lot to my way of thinking. What I’m told,’ he added after a further pause, ‘is that they carve these crosses to protect themselves.’

‘Protect themselves!’ exclaimed Norman a little startled. ‘Protect themselves from — what?’

‘At, there, sir,’ said the man after hesitating again, ‘that’s more than I can say. I’ve heard of a haunted house before now, but never a haunted countryside. Yet that’s what they believe, I take it. It’s all haunted, sir — everywhere. It’s the devil of a job to get any of them to turn out after dark, as I know well, and even in the daytime they won’t stir far without a crucifix hung round their neck. Even the men won’t.’

The car had put on speed while he spoke and Norman had to ask him to ease up a bit; the man, he felt sure, was prey to a touch of superstitious fear as they raced along the darkening road, yet glad enough to talk, provided he was not laughed at. After his last burst of speech he had drawn a deep breath, as though glad to have got it off his chest.

‘What you tell me is most interesting,’ Norman commented invitingly. ‘I’ve come across that sort of thing abroad, but never yet in England. There’s something in it, you know,’ he added persuasively, ‘if we only knew what. I wish I knew the reason, for I’m sure it’s a mistake just to laugh it all away.’ He lit a cigarette, handing one also to his companion, and making him slow down while they lighted them. ‘You’re an observant fellow, I see,’ he went on, ‘and I’ll be bound you’ve come across some queer things. I wish I had your opportunity. It interests me very much.’

‘You’re right, sir,’ the chauffeur agreed, as they drove on again, ‘and it can’t be laughed away, not *all* of it. There’s something about the whole place ‘ere that ain’t right, as you might say. It “got” me a bit when I first came ‘ere some years ago, but now I’m kind of used to it.’

‘I don’t think I should ever get *quite* used to it,’ said Norman, ‘till I’d got to the bottom of it. Do tell me anything you’ve noticed. I’d like to know — and I’ll keep it to myself.’

Feeling sure the man had interesting things to tell and having now won his confidence, he begged him to drive more slowly; he was afraid they would reach the house before there had been time to tell more, possibly even some personal experiences. ‘There’s a funny sort of road, or track rather, you may be seeing out shooting,’ the chauffeur went on eagerly enough, yet half nervously. ‘It leads across the moor, and no man or woman will set foot on it to save their lives, not even in the daytime, let alone at night.’

Norman said eagerly that he would like to see it, asking its whereabouts, but of course the directions only puzzled him.

‘You’ll be seeing it, sir, one of these days out shooting and if you watch the natives, you’ll find I’m telling you right.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’ Norman asked. ‘Haunted — eh?’

‘That’s it, sir,’ the man admitted, after a longish pause. ‘But a queer kind of ‘aunting. They do say it’s just too lovely to look at — and keep your senses.’

It was the other’s turn to hesitate, for something in him trembled.

Now, young Norman was aware of two things very clearly: first, that it wasn’t quite the thing to pump his host’s employee in this way; second, that what the man told him held an extraordinary, almost alarming interest for him. All folk-lore interested him intensely, legends and local superstitions included. Was this, perhaps a ‘fairy-ridden’ stretch of country, he asked himself? Yet he was not in Ireland, where it would have been natural, but in stolid, matter-of-fact England. The chauffeur was obviously an observant, commonplace southerner, and yet he had become impressed, even a little scared, by what he had noticed. That lay beyond question: the man was relieved to talk to someone who would not laugh at him, while at the same time he was obviously a bit frightened.

A third question rose in his mind as well: this talk of haunted country, of bogies, fairies and the rest, fantastic though it was, perhaps, stirred a queer, yet delicious feeling in him — in his heart, doubtless — that his host’s niece, Diana, had a link with it somewhere.. The origin of a deep intuition is hardly discoverable. He made no attempt to probe it. This was Diana's country, she must know all the chauffeur hinted, and more besides. There must be something in the atmosphere that attracted her. She had been instrumental in making her uncle invite him. She wanted him to come, she wanted him to taste and share things, 'other things', that to her were vital.

These thoughts flashed across him with an elaboration of detail impossible to describe. That the wish was, again, father to the thoughts, doubtless operated, yet the conviction persistently remained and the intuitive flash provided, apparently, inspiration, so that he plied the chauffeur with further questions that produced valuable results. He referred even to the Little People, the Fairies, without exciting contempt or laughter — with the result that the man gave him finally a somewhat dangerous confidence. Solemnly warning his passenger that 'Sir Hiram mustn't hear of it' or he'd lose his job, the man described a remarkable incident that had happened, so to speak, under his own eyes. Sir Hiram's sister was lost on the moors some years ago and was never found...and the local talk and belief had it that she had been 'carried off'. Yet not carried off against her will: she had wanted to go.

'Would that be Mrs. Travers?' Norman asked.

'That's who it was, sir, exactly, seeing as 'ow you know the family. And it was the strangest disappearance that ever came *my* way.' He gave a slight shudder and, if not quite to his listener's surprise, suddenly crossed himself.

Diana's mother!

A pause followed the extraordinary story, and then, for once, Norman used words first spoken (to Horatio) to a man who had never heard them before and received them with appropriate satisfaction.

'Yes, sir,' he went on, 'and now he's got her up here for the first time since it happened years ago — in the very country where her mother was taken — and I'm told his idea is that he 'opes it will put her right—'

'Put her right?'

'I should say — cure her, sir. She's supposed to have the same — the same —' he fumbled for a word— 'unbalance as wot her mother had.' A strange rush of hope and terror swept across Norman's heart and mind, but he made a great effort and denied them both, so that his companion little guessed this raging storm. Changing the subject as best he could, controlling his voice with difficulty so as to make it sound normal, he asked casually:, ‘Do other people — I mean, *have* other people disappeared here?’

‘They do say so, sir,’ was the reply. ‘I’ve heard many a tale, though I couldn’t say as I proved anything. Natives, according to the talk, ‘ave disappeared, nor no trace of them ever found. Children mostly. But the people round here won’t speak of it and it’s difficult to find out, as they never go to the Police and keep it dark among themselves—’

‘Couldn’t they have fallen into potholes, or something like that?’ Norman interrupted, to which the man replied that there was only one pothole in the whole district and the danger spot most carefully fenced round. ‘It’s the place itself, sir,’ he added finally with conviction, as though he could tell of a firsthand personal experience if he dared, ‘it’s the whole country that’s so strange.’

Norman risked the direct question.

‘And what you’ve seen yourself, with your own eyes,’ he asked, ‘did it — sort of frighten you? I mean, you observe so carefully that anything you reported would be valuable.’

‘Well, sir,’ came the reply after a little hesitation, ‘I can’t say ‘frightened’ exactly, though — if you ask me — I didn’t like it. It made me feel queer all over, and I ain’t a religious man—’

‘Do tell me,’ Norman pressed, feeling the house was now not far away and time was short. ‘I shall keep it to myself — and I shall believe you. I’ve had odd experiences myself.’

The man needed no urging, however: he seemed glad to tell his tale.

‘It’s not really very much,’ he said lowering his voice. ‘It was like this, you see, sir. The garage and my rooms lie down at an old farmhouse about a quarter-mile from the Lodge, and from my bedroom window I can see across the moor quite a way. It takes in that trail I was speaking of before, and along that track exactly I sometimes saw lights moving in a sort of wavering line. A bit faint, they were, and sort of dancing about and going out and coming on again, and at first I took them for marsh lights — I’ve seen marsh lights down at our marshes at home — marsh gas we call it. That’s what I thought at first, but I know better now.’

‘You never went out to examine them closer?’

‘No, sir, I did *not*,’ came the emphatic reply.

‘Or asked any of the natives what they thought?’

The chauffeur gave a curious little laugh; it was a half shy, half embarrassed laugh. Yes, he had once got a native who was willing to say something, but it was only with difficulty that Norman persuaded him to repeat it.

‘Well, sir, what he told me’ — again that embarrassed little laugh— ‘the words *he* used were “It was the Gay People changing their hunting grounds.” That’s what *he* said and crossed himself as he said it. They always changed their grounds at what he called the Equinox.’

‘The Gay People... the Equinox....’

The odd phrases were not new to Norman, but he heard them now as though for the first time, they had meaning. The equinox, the solstice, he knew naturally what the words meant, but the ‘Gay People’ belonged to some inner phantasmagoria of his own he had hitherto thought of only imaginatively. It pertained, that is, to some private ‘imaginative creed’ he believed in when he had been reading Yeats, James Stephens, A.E., or when he was trying to write poetry of his own.

Now, side by side with this burly chauffeur from the sceptical South, he came up against it — bang. And he admitted frankly to himself, it gave him a half -incredible thrill of wonder, delight and passion.

‘The Gay People,’ he repeated, half to himself, half to the driver. ‘The fellow called them *that*?’

‘That’s wot he called them,’ repeated the matter-of-fact chauffeur. ‘And they were passing,’ he added, almost defiantly, as though he expected to be called a liar and deserved, it ‘passing in a stream of dancing lights along the Trod.’

‘The Trod,’ murmured Norman under his breath.

‘The Trod,’ repeated the man in a whisper, ‘that track I spoke of—’ and the car swerved, as though the touch on the wheel was unsteady for a second, though it instantly recovered itself as they swung into the drive.

The Lodge flew past, carrying a cross, Norman noticed, like all the other buildings; and a few minutes later the grey stone shooting-box, small and unpretentious, came in sight. Diana herself was on the step to welcome him, to his great delight.

‘What a picture,’ he thought, as he saw her in her tweeds, her retriever beside her, the hall lamp blazing on her golden hair, one hand shading her eyes. Radiant, intoxicating, delicious, unearthly — he could not find the words — and he knew in that sudden instant that he loved her far beyond all that language could express. The dark background of the grey stone building, with the dim, mysterious moors behind, was exactly right. She stood there, framed in the wonder of two worlds — his girl!

Yet her reception chilled him to the bone. Excited, bubbling over as he was, his words of pleasure ready to tumble about each other, his heart primed with fairy tales and wonder, she had nothing to say except that tea was waiting, and that she hoped he had had a good journey. Response to his own inner convulsions there was none: she was polite, genial, cordial even, but beyond that — nothing. They exchanged commonplaces and she mentioned that the grouse were plentiful, that her uncle had got some of the best ‘guns’ in England — which pleased his vanity for a moment — and that she hoped he would enjoy himself.

Her leaden reaction left him speechless. He felt convicted of boyish, idiotic fantasy.

‘I asked particularly for you to come,’ she admitted frankly, as they crossed the hall. ‘I had an idea somehow you’d like to be here.’

He thanked her, but betrayed nothing of his first delight, now chilled and rendered voiceless.

‘It’s your sort of country,’ she added, turning towards him with a swish of her skirts. ‘At least, I think it is.’

‘If *you* like it,’ he returned quietly, ‘I certainly shall like it too.’

She stopped a moment and looked hard at him. ‘But of course I like it,’ she said with conviction. ‘And it’s much lovelier than those Essex marshes.’

Remembering her first description of those Essex marshes, he thought of a hundred answers, but before the right one came to him he found himself in the drawing-room chatting to his hostess, Lady Digby. The rest of the house-party were still out on the moor.

‘Diana will show you the garden before the darkness comes,’ Lady Digby suggested presently. ‘It’s quite a pretty view.’

The ‘pretty view’ thrilled Norman with its wild beauty, for the moor beyond stretched right down to the sea at Saltbeck, and in the other direction the hills ran away, fold upon fold, into a dim blue distance. The Lodge and its garden seemed an oasis in a wilderness of primeval loveliness, unkempt and wild as when God first made it. He was aware of its intense, seductive loveliness that appealed to all the strange, unearthly side of him, but at the same time he felt the powerful, enticing human seductiveness of the girl who was showing him round. And the two conflicted violently in his soul. The conflict left him puzzled, distraught, stupid, since first one, then the other, took the upper hand. What saved him from a sudden tumultuous confession of his imagined passion, probably, was the girls’ calm, almost cold, indifference. Obviously without response she felt nothing of the tumult that possessed him.

Exchanging commonplaces, they admired the ‘pretty view’ together, then turned back in due course to the house. ‘I catch their voices,’ remarked Diana. ‘Let’s go in and hear all about it and how many birds they got.’ And it was on the door of the french window that she suddenly amazed — and, truth to tell — almost frightened him.

‘Dick,’ she said, using his first name, to his utter bewilderment and delight, and grasping his hand tightly in both of her own, ‘I may need your help.’ She spoke with a fiery intensity. Her eyes went blazing suddenly. ‘It was here, you know, that mother — went. And I think — I’m certain of it — they’re *after me, too.* And I don’t know which is right — to go or to stay. All this’ — she swept her arm to include the house, the chattering room, the garden— ‘is such rubbish — cheap, nasty, worthless. The other is so satisfying — its eternal loveliness, and yet—’ her voice dropped to a whisper— ‘*soulless,* without hope or future. You may help me.’ Her eyes turned upon him with a sudden amazing fire. ‘That’s why I asked you here.’

She kissed him on the eyes — an impersonal, passionless kiss, and the next minute they were in the room, crowded, with the ‘guns’ from a large shooting brake which had just arrived.

How Norman staggered in among the noisy throng and played his part as a fellow guest, he never understood. He managed it somehow, while in his heart sang the wild music of the Irish Fairy's enticing whisper: 'I kiss you and the world begins to fade.' A queer feeling came to him that he was going lost to life as he knew it, that Diana with her sweet passionless kiss had sealed his fate, that the known world must fade and die because she knew the way to another, lovelier region where nothing could ever pass or die because it was literally everlasting — the state of evolution belonging to fairyland, the land of the deathless Gay People....

Sir Hiram welcomed him cordially, then introduced him to the others, upon which followed the usual description by the guns of the day's sport. They drank their whiskies and sodas, in due course they went up to dress for dinner, but after dinner there was no carousing, for their host bundled them all off to an early bed. The next day they were going to shoot the best beat on the moor and clear eyes and steady hands were important. The two drives for which Greystones was celebrated were to be taken — Telegraph Hill and Silvermine — both well known wherever shooting men congregated so that anticipation and excitement were understandable. An early bed was a small price to pay and Norman, keen and eager as any of them, was glad enough to get to his room when the others trooped upstairs. To be included as a crack shot among all these famous guns was, naturally, a great event to him. He longed to justify himself.

Yet his heart was heavy and dissatisfied, a strange uneasiness gnawed at him despite all his efforts to think only of the morrow's thrill. For Diana had not come down to dinner, nor had he set eyes on her the whole evening. His polite enquiry about her was met by his host's cheery laugh: 'Oh, she's all right, Norman, thank ee; she keeps to herself a bit when a shoot's on. Shooting, you see, ain't her line exactly, but she may come out with us to-morrow.' He brushed her tastes aside. 'Try and persuade her, if you can. The air'll do her good.'

Once in his room, his thoughts and emotions tried in vain to sort themselves out satisfactorily: there was a strange confusion in his mind, an uneasy sense of excitement that was half delight, half fearful anticipation, yet anticipation of he knew not exactly what. That sudden use of his familiar first name, the extraordinary kiss, establishing an unprepared intimacy, deep if passionless, had left him the entire evening in a state of hungry expectancy with nerves on edge. If only she had made an appearance at dinner, if only he could have had a further word with her! He wondered how he would ever get to sleep with this inner turmoil in his brain, and if he slept badly he would shoot badly.

It was this reflection about shooting badly that convinced him abruptly that his sudden ‘love’ was not of the ordinary accepted kind; had he been humanly ‘in love’, no consideration of that sort could have entered his head for a moment. His queer uneasiness, half mixed with delight as it was, increased. The tie was surely of another sort.

Turning out the electric light, he looked from his window across the moor, wondering if he might see the strange lights the chauffeur had told him about. He saw only the dim carpet of the rolling moorland fading into darkness where a moon hid behind fleecy, drifting clouds. A soft, sweet, fragrant air went past him; there was a murmur of falling water. It was intoxicating; he drew in a deep delicious breath. For a second he imagined a golden-haired Diana, with flying hair and flaming eyes, pursuing her lost mother midway between the silvery clouds and shadowy moor... then turned back into his room and flooded it with light... in which instant he saw something concrete lying on his pillow — a scrap of paper — no, an envelope. He tore it open.

‘Always wear this when you go out. I wear one too. They cannot come up with you unless you wish, if you wear it. Mother...’

The word ‘mother’, full of imaginative suggestion, was crossed out; the signature was ‘Diana’. With a faint musical tinkle, a little silver crucifix slipped from the pencilled note and fell to the floor.

As Norman stood beside the bed with the note in his hand, and before he stooped to recover the crucifix, there fell upon him with an amazing certainty the eerie conviction that all this had happened before. As a rule this odd sensation is too fleeting to be retained for analysis; yet he held it now for several seconds without effort. Startled, he saw quite clearly that it was not passing in ordinary time, but somewhere outside ordinary time as he knew it. It had happened ‘before’ because it was happening ‘always’. He had caught it in the act.

For a flashing instant he understood; the crucifix symbolised security among known conditions, and if he held to it he would be protected, mentally and spiritually, against a terrific draw into unknown conditions. It meant no more than that — a support to the mind.

That antagonistic ‘draw’ of terrific power, involved the nameless, secret yearnings of his fundamental nature. Diana, aware of this inner conflict, shared the terror and the joy. Her mother, whence she derived the opportunity, had yielded — and had disappeared from life as humans know it. Diana herself was now tempted and afraid. She asked his help. Both he and she together, in some condition outside ordinary time, had met this conflict many times already. He had experienced all this before — the incident of the crucifix, its appeal for help, the delight, the joy, the fear involved. And even as he realised all this, the strange, eerie sensation vanished and was gone, as though it never had been. It became unseizable, lost beyond recapture. It left him with a sensation of loss, of cold, of isolation, a realisation of homelessness, yet of intense attraction towards a world unrealised.

He stooped, picked up the small silver crucifix, re-read the pencilled note letter by letter, kissed the paper that her hand had touched, then sat down on the bed and smiled with a sudden gush of human relief and happiness. The eerie sensation had gone its way beyond recovery. That Diana had thought about him was all that mattered. This little superstition about wearing the crucifix was sweet and touching, and of course he would wear the thing against his heart. And see that she came out tomorrow with him too! His relief was sincere. Now he could sleep. And tomorrow he might not shoot too badly. But before he climbed into bed, he looked in his diary to find out when the equinox was due, and found to his astonishment that it was on the 23rd of September, and that tonight was the 21st! The discovery gave him something of a turn, but he soon fell asleep with the letter against his cheek and the little silver crucifix hung round his neck.

He woke next morning when he was called to find the sun streaming into his room, promising perfect shooting weather. In broad daylight the normal reactions followed as they usually do; the incidents of the day before now seemed slightly ridiculous — his talk with Diana, the crucifix, the chauffeur’s fairy-tales above all. He had stumbled upon a nest of hysterical delusions, born of a mysterious disappearance many years ago. It was natural he thought, as he shaved himself, that his host disliked all reference to the subject and its aftermath. For all that, as he went down to breakfast, he felt secretly comforted that he had hung the little silver crucifix round his neck. No one, at any rate, he reflected, could see it.

He had done full justice to the well stocked sideboard and was just finishing his coffee when Diana came into the empty room, and his mind, now charged with the prosaic prospects of the coming shoot, acknowledged a shock. Fact and imagination clashed. The girl was white and drawn. Before he could rise to greet her, she came straight across to the chair beside him.

‘Dick,’ she began at once, ‘have you got it on?’

He produced the crucifix after a moment’s fumbling.

‘Of course I have,’ he said. ‘You asked me to wear it.’ Remembering the hesitation in his bedroom, he felt rather foolish. He felt foolish anyhow, wearing a superstitious crucifix on a day’s shooting.

Her next words dispelled the feeling of incongruity.

‘I was out early,’ she said in a tense, low voice, ‘and I heard mother’s voice calling me on the moor. It was unmistakable. Close in my ear, then far away. I was with the dog and the dog heard it too and ran for shelter. His hair was up.’

‘What did you hear?’ Norman asked gently, taking her hand.

‘My pet name— “Dis”,’ she told him, ‘the name only mother used.’

‘What words did you hear?’ he asked, trembling in spite of himself.

‘Quite distinctly — in that distant muffled voice — I heard her call: “Come to me, Dis, oh, come to me quickly!”’

For a moment Norman made no answer. He felt her hand trembling in his. Then he turned and looked straight into her eyes.

‘Did you *want* to go?’ he asked.

There was a pause before she replied. ‘Dick,’ she said, ‘when I heard that voice, *nothing else in the world seemed to matter* — !’ at which moment her uncle’s figure, bursting in through the door, shouted that the cars were ready and waiting, and the conversation came to an abrupt end.

This abrupt interruption at the moment of deepest interest left Norman, as may be imagined, excusably and dreadfully disturbed. A word from his host on this particular shooting party was, of course, a command. He dared not keep these great ‘guns’ waiting. Diana, too, shot out as though a bullet had hit her. But her last words went on ringing in his ears, in his heart as well: ‘Nothing else in the world seemed to matter.’ He understood in his deepest being what she meant. There was a ‘call’ away from human things, a call into some unimaginable state of bliss no words described, and she had heard it, heard it in her *mother’s* voice — the strongest tie humanity knows. Her mother, having left the world, sent back a message.

Norman, trembling unaccountably, hurried to fetch his gun and join the car, and Diana, obeying the orders of her uncle, was shoved into the Ford with her retriever. She had just time to whisper to him ‘Keep off the Trod — don’t put a foot on it,’ and the two cars whisked off and separated them.

The ‘shoot’ took place, nevertheless, ordinarily, so far as Norman was concerned, for the hunter’s passion was too strong in him to be smothered. If his mind was mystical, his body was primitive. He was by nature a hunter before the Lord. The imaginative, mystical view of life, as with peasants and woodsmen, lay deep below, the first birds put an end to all reflection. He was soon too busy to bother about anything else but firing as fast as he could and changing his guns swiftly and smoothly. Breaking through this practical excitement, none the less, flashed swift, haunting thoughts and fancies — Diana’s face and voice and eyes, her mother’s supernatural call, his own secret yearnings, and, above all, her warning about the Trod. Both sides of his mixed nature operated furiously. Apparently, he shot well, but how he managed it, heaven only knew.

The drive in due course was over and the pick-up completed. Sir Hiram came over and asked if he would mind taking the outside butt at the next drive.

‘You see’, he explained courteously, ‘I always ask the youngest of the party to take the outside, as it’s a devil of a walk for the old ‘uns. Probably,’ he added, ‘you’ll get more shooting than anyone, as the birds slip away over yonder butt down a little gully. So you’ll find it worth the extra swot!’

Norman and his loader set off on their long tramp, while the rest of the guns made their way down to the road where the cars would carry them as far as the track allowed. After nearly a mile's detour Norman was puzzled by his loader striking across the heather instead of following the obvious path. He himself, naturally, kept to the smooth track. He had not gone ten yards along the track before the loader's startled voice shouted at him: 'For the love of God, sir, come off! You're walking on the Trod!'

'It's a good path,' cried Norman. 'What's wrong with it?' The man eyed him a moment. 'It's the Trod, sir,' he said gravely, as though that were enough. 'We don't walk on it — not at this time o' year especially.' He crossed himself. 'Come off it, sir, into the heather.'

The two men stood facing one another for a minute.

'If you don't believe me, sir, just watch them sheep,' said the man in a voice full of excitement and emotion. 'You'll see they won't put foot on it. Nor any other animal either.'

Norman watched a band of black-faced sheep move hesitatingly down the moorland slope. He was impatient to get on, half angry. For the moment he had forgotten all about Diana's warning. Fuming and annoyed, he watched. To his amazement, the little band of black-faced sheep, on reaching the obvious path, jumped clear over it. They jumped the Trod. Not one of them would touch it. It was an astonishing sight. Each animal leapt across, as though the Trod might burn or injure them. They went their way across the rough heather and disappeared from sight.

Norman, remembering the warning uncomfortably, paused and lit a cigarette.

'That's odd,' he said. 'It's the easiest way.'

'Maybe,' replied the loader. 'But the easiest way may not be the best — or safest.'

'The safest?'

'I've got children of me own,' said the loader.

It was a significant statement. It made Norman reflect a moment.

'Safest,' he repeated, remembering all he had heard, yet longing eagerly to hear more. 'You mean, children especially are in danger? Young folks —

eh? — is that it?’ A moment later, he added, ‘I can quite believe it, you know, it’s a queer bit of country — to my way of thinking.’

The understanding sympathy won the man’s confidence, as it was meant to do.

‘And it’s equinox time, isn’t it?’ Norman ventured further.

The man responded quickly enough, finding a ‘gun’ who wouldn’t laugh at him. As with the chauffeur, he was evidently relieved to give some kind of utterance to fears and superstitions he was at heart ashamed of and yet believed in.

‘I don’t mind for myself, sir,’ he broke out, obviously glad to talk, ‘for I’m leaving these parts as soon as the grouse shooting’s over, but I’ve two little’uns up here just now, and I want to keep ‘em. Too many young’uns get lost on the moor for my liking. I’m sending ’em tomorrow down to my aunt at Crossways—’

‘Good for you,’ put in Norman. ‘It’s the equinox just now, isn’t it? And that’s the dangerous time, they say.’

The loader eyed him cautiously a moment, weighing perhaps his value as a recipient of private fears, beliefs, fancies and the rest, yet deciding finally that Norman was worthy of his confidences.

‘That’s what my father always said,’ he agreed.

‘Your father? It’s always wise to listen to what a father tells,’ the other suggested. ‘No doubt he’d seen something — worth seeing.’

A silence fell between them. Norman felt he had been, perhaps, too eager to draw the man out; yet the loader was reflecting merely. There was something he yearned to tell.

‘Worth seeing,’ the man repeated, ‘well — that’s as may be. But not of this world, and wonderful, it certainly was. It put ice into his bones, that’s all I can swear to. And he wasn’t the sort to be fooled easy, let me tell you. It was on his dying bed he told me — and a man doesn’t lie with death in his eyes.’

That Norman was standing idly on this important shoot was sufficient proof of his tremendous interest, and the man beyond question was aware of it.

‘In daylight,’ Norman asked quietly, assuming the truth of what he hoped to hear.

‘It was just at nightfall,’ the other said, ‘and he was coming from a sick friend at a farm beyond the Garage. The doctor had frightened him, I take it, so it was a bit late when he started for home across the moor and, without realising that it was equinox time, he found himself on the Trod before he knew it. And, to his terror, the whole place was lit up, and he saw a column of figures moving down it towards him. They was all bright and lovely, he described ‘em, gay and terrible, laughing and singing and crying, and jewels shining in their hair, and — worst of all — he swears he saw young children who had gone lost on the moor years before, and a girl he had loved these twenty years back, no older than when he saw her last, and as gay and happy and laughing as though the passing years was nothing—’

‘They called to him?’ asked Norman, strangely moved. ‘They asked him to join them?’

‘The girl did,’ replied the man. ‘The girl, he said, with no years to her back, drew him something terrible. “Come with us,” he swears she sang to him, “come with us and be happy and young forever,” and, if my father hadn’t clutched hold of his crucifix in time — my God — he would have gone—’

The loader stopped, embarrassed lest he had told too much. ‘If he’d gone, he’d have lost his soul,’ put in Norman, guided by a horrible intuition of his own.

‘That’s what they say, sir,’ agreed the man, obviously relieved. Simultaneously, they hurried on, Sir Hiram’s practical world breaking in upon this strange interlude. A big shoot was in progress. They must not be late at their appointed place.

‘And where does the Trod start?’ Norman asked presently, and the man described the little cave of the Black Waters whence the beck, dark with the peat, ran thence towards the sea across the bleak moors. The scenery provided an admirable setting for the ‘fairy-tale’ he had just listened to; yet his thoughts, as they ploughed forward through the heather, went back to the lovely, fascinating tale, to the superstitious dream of the ‘Gay People’ changing their hunting grounds along that unholy Trod when the equinox flamed with unearthly blazing, when the human young, unsatisfied with earthly pleasures, might be invited to join another ageless evolution that, if it knew no hope, shared at least an unstained, eternal, happy present. Diana’s temptation, her mother’s incredible disappearance, his own heart-searing yearnings in the balance to boot, took strange shape as practical possibilities.

The cumulative effect of all he had heard, from chauffeur, loader, and from the girl herself, began, it may be, to operate, sense the human mind, especially the imaginative human mind, is ever open to attack along the line of least resistance.

He stumbled on, holding his gun firmly, as though a modern weapon of destruction helped to steady his feet, to say nothing of his mind, now full of seething dreams. They reached the appointed butt. And hardly had they settled themselves in it than the first birds began to come, and all conversation was impossible. This was the celebrated ‘Silvermine Drive’, and Norman had never in his life seen so many grouse as he now saw. His guns got too hot to hold, yet still the grouse poured over....

The Drive finished in due course, and after a hurried lunch came the equally famous Telegraph Hill Drive, where there were even more birds than before, and when this came to an end Norman found that his shoulder was sore from the recoil and that he had developed a slight gun-headache, so that he was glad enough to climb into the car that took him back to the Lodge and tea. The excitement, naturally, had been great, the nervous hope that he had shot well enough to justify his inclusion in the great shoot had also played upon his vitality. He found himself exhausted, and after tea he was relieved to slip up to his bedroom for a quiet hour or two.

Lying comfortably on his sofa with a cigarette, thinking over the fire and fury of the recent hours, his thoughts turned gradually aside to other things. The hunter, it seemed, withdrew; the dreamer, never wholly submerged, re-appeared. His mind reviewed the tales he had heard from the chauffeur and the loader, while the story of Diana’s mother, the strange words of the girl herself, took possession of his thoughts. Too weary to be critical, he remembered them. His own natural leaning enforced their possible truth, while fatigue made analysis too difficult to bother about, so that imagination cast its spell of glamour undefied.... He burned to know the truth. In the end he made up his mind to creep out the following night and watch the Trod. It would be the night of the equinox. That ought to settle things one way or the other — proof or disproof. Only he must examine it in the daylight first.

It was disturbing at dinner to find that the girl was absent, had in fact, according to Sir Hiram, gone away for a day or so to see an old school-friend in a neighbouring town. She would be back, however, for the final shoot, he added, an explanation which Norman interpreted to mean that her uncle had deliberately sent her out of danger. He felt positive he was right. Sir Hiram might scorn such 'rubbishy tales', but he was taking no chances. It was at the equinox that his sister had mysteriously disappeared. The girl was best elsewhere. Nor could all the pleasant compliments about Norman's good shooting on the two Drives conceal his host's genuine uneasiness. Diana was 'best elsewhere'.

Norman fell asleep with the firm determination that he must explore the Trod next day in good light, making sure of his landmarks and then creep out at night when the household was quiet, and see what happened.

There was no shooting next day. His task was easy. Keepers and dogs went out to pick up any birds that had been left from the previous day. After breakfast he slipped off across the waste of heather and soon found it — a deep smooth groove running through occasional hollows where no water lay, nor any faintest track of man or beast upon its soft, black peaty surface. Obviously, it was a track through the deep heather no one — neither man nor animal — used. He again noted the landmarks carefully, and felt sure he could find it again in the darkness... and, in due course, the day passed along its normal course, the 'guns' after dinner discussed the next day's beat, and all turned in early in pleasurable anticipation of the shoot to come.

Norman went up to bed with a beating heart, for his plan to slip out of the sleeping house later and explore the moorland with its 'haunted Trod', was not exactly what a host expected of a guest. The absence of Diana, moreover, deliberately planned, added to his deep uneasiness. Her sudden disappearance to visit 'an old school friend' was not convincing. Nor had she even left a line of explanation. It came to him that others besides the chauffeur and the loader took these fantastic fairy-tales seriously. His thoughts flew buzzing like bees outside a bee-hive...

From his window he looked out upon the night. The moon, in her second quarter, shone brightly at moments, then became hidden behind fleecy clouds. Higher up, evidently, a raging wind was driving, but below over the moorland a deathly stillness reigned. This stillness touched his nerves, and the dogs, howling in their kennels, added to a sense of superstitious uneasiness in his blood. The deep stillness seemed to hide a busy activity behind the silence. Something was stirring in the night, something out on the moor.

He turned back from the window and saw the lighted room, its cosy comfort, its well-lit luxury, its delicious bed waiting for weary limbs. He hesitated. The two sides of his nature clashed... but in the end the strange absence of Diana, her words, her abrupt sensational kiss, her odd silence... the quixotic feeling that he *might* help — these finally decided him.

Changing quickly into his shooting clothes, and making sure that the lights in all the bedroom windows he could see were out, he crept down in stockinged feet to the front door, carrying a pair of tennis shoes in his hand. The front door was unlocked, opening without noise, so that he slipped quietly across the gravel drive on to the grass, and thence, having now put on his shoes, on to the moor beyond.

The house faded behind him, patches of silvery moonlight shone through thin racing clouds, the taste of the night air was intoxicating. How could he ever have hesitated? The wonder and mystery of the wild country-side, haunted or otherwise, caught him by the throat. As he climbed the railings leading from the cultivated garden to the moor, there came a faint odd whispering sound behind him, so that he paused and listened for a moment. Was it wind or footsteps? It was neither — merely the flap of his open coat trailing across the fence. Bah! his nerves were jumpy. He laughed — almost laughed aloud, such was the exhilaration in him — and moved on quickly through the weird half lights. And for some reason his spirits rose, his blood went racing: here was an adventure the other side of his nature delighted in, yet his ‘other side’ now took ominously the upper hand.

How primitive, after all, these ‘shooting parties’ were! For men of brains and character, the best that England could produce, to spend all this time and money, hunting as the cave-men hunted 1 The fox, the deer, the bird — earlier men needed these for food, yet thousands of years later the finest males of the twentieth century — sportsmen all — spent millions on superior weapons, which gave the hunted animal no chance, to bring them down. Not to be a ‘sportsman’ was to be an inferior Englishman...! The ‘sportsman’ was the flower of the race. It struck him, not for the first time, as a grim, a cheap, ideal. Was there no other climax of chivalric achievement more desirable?

This flashed across his mind as a hundred times before, while yet he himself, admittedly, was a ‘sportsman’ born. Against it, at the same time, rose some strange glamour of eternal, deathless things that took no account of killing, things that caught his soul away in ecstasy. Fairy tales, of course, were fairy tales, yet they enshrined the undying truths of life and human nature within their golden ‘nonsense’, catching at the skirts of radiant wonder, whispering ageless secrets of the soul, giving hints of ineffable glories that lay outside the normal scales of space and time as accepted by the reasoning mind. And this attitude now rose upon him like a wild ungovernable wind of spring, fragrant, delicious, intoxicating. Fairies, the Little People, the ‘Gay People’, happy dwellers in some non-human state...

Diana’s mother had disappeared, yearning with secret, surreptitious calls for her daughter to come and join her. The girl herself acknowledged the call and was afraid, while yet her practical, hard-boiled uncle took particular trouble to keep her out of the way. Even for him, typical ‘sportsman’, the time of the equinox was dangerous. These reflections, tumbling about his mind and heart, flooded Norman’s being, while his yearning and desire for the girl came over him like a flame.

The moor, meanwhile, easy enough to walk on in the daytime, seemed unexpectedly difficult at night, the heather longer, the ground very uneven. He was always putting his legs into little hollows that he could not see, and he was relieved when at last he could make out the loom of the garage which was one of his landmarks. He knew that he had not much further to go before he reached the Trod.

The turmoil in his mind had been such that he had paid little attention to the occasional slight sounds he heard as though somebody were at his heels, but now, on reaching the Trod, he became uneasily convinced that someone was not far behind him. So certain, indeed, was he of someone else that he let himself down silently into the deep heather and waited.

He listened intently, breathing very softly. The same instant he knew that he was right. Those sounds were not imagination. Footsteps were at his heels. The swish through the heather of a moving body was unmistakable. He caught distinct footsteps then. The footsteps came to a pause quite near to where he crouched. At which moment exactly, the clouds raced past the moon, letting down a clear space of silvery light, so that he saw the ‘follower’ brilliantly defined.

It was Diana.

‘I knew it,’ he said half aloud, ‘I was sure of it long ago,’ while his heart, faced with a yearning hope and fear, both half fulfilled, yet gave no leap of relief or pleasure. A shiver ran up and down his spine. Crouching there deep among the heather on the edge of the Trod, he knew more of terror than of happiness. It was all too clear for misunderstanding. She had been drawn irresistibly on the night of the equinox to the danger zone where her mother had so mysteriously ‘disappeared’.

‘I’m here,’ he added with a great effort in the same low whisper. ‘You asked my help. I’m here to meet you... dear...’

The words, even if he actually uttered them, died on his lips. The girl, he saw, stood still a moment, gazing in a dazed way, as though puzzled by something that obstructed her passage. Like a sleep walker, she stared about her, beautiful as a dream, yet only half conscious of her surroundings. Her eyes shone in the moonlight, her hands were half outstretched, yet not towards himself.

‘Diana,’ he heard himself crying, ‘can you see me? Do you see who I am? Don’t you recognise me? I’ve come to help — to save — you!’

It was plain she neither heard nor saw him standing there in front of her. She was aware of an obstructing presence, no more than that. Her glazed, shining eyes looked far beyond him — along the Trod. And a terror clutched him that, unless he quickly did the right thing, she would be lost to him for ever.

He sprang to his feet and went towards her, but with the extraordinary sensation that he at once came up against some intervening wall of resistance that made normal movement difficult. It was almost like forcing his way through moving water or a drift of wind, and it was with an effort that he reached her side and stood now close against her.

‘Diana!’ he cried, ‘Dis — Dis,’ using the name her mother used. ‘Can’t you see who I am?’ Don’t you know me? I’ve come to save you—’ and he stretched his hands towards her.

There was no response; she made no sign.

‘I’ve come to lead you back — to lead you home — for God’s sake, answer me, look into my eyes!’

She turned her head in his direction, as though to look into his face, but her eyes went past him towards the moonlit moor beyond. He noticed only, while she stared with those unseeing eyes, that her left hand fumbled weakly at a tiny crucifix that hung on a thin silver chain about her neck. He put out his hand and seized her by the arm, but the instant he touched her he found himself suddenly powerless to move. There came this strange arrest. And at the same instant, the whole Trod became startlingly lit up with a kind of unearthly radiance, and a strange greenish light shone upon the track right across the moor beyond where they stood. A deep terror for himself as well as for her rose over him simultaneously. It came to him, with a shock of ice, that his own soul as well as hers, lay in sudden danger.

His eyes turned irresistibly towards the Trod, so strangely shining in the night. Though his hand still touched the girl, his mind was caught away in phantasmal possibilities. For two passions seized and fought within him: the fierce desire to possess her in the world of men and women, or to go with her headlong, recklessly, and share some ineffable ecstasy of happiness beyond the familiar world where ordinary time and space held sway. Her own nature already held the key and knew the danger.... His whole being rocked.

The two incompatible passions gored the very heart in him. In a flash he realised his alternative — the dreary desolation of human progress with its grinding future, the joy and glory of a soulless happiness that reason denied and yet the heart welcomed as an ultimate truth. These two!

Yet of what value and meaning could she ever be to him as wife and mother if she were now drawn away — away to where her mother now eternally passed her golden, time-less life? How could he face this daily exile of her soul, this hourly isolation, this rape of her normal being his earthly nature held so dear and precious? While — should he save her, keeping her safe against the *human* hearth — how should he hold her to him, he himself tainted with the golden poison...?

Norman saw both sides with remorseless clarity in that swift instant while the Trod took on its shining radiance. His reasoning mind, he knew, ad sunk away; his heart, wildly beating, was uppermost. With a supreme effort he kept his touch upon Diana's arm. His fingers clutched at the rough tweed of her sleeve. His entire being seemed rapt in some incredible ecstasy. He stood, he stared, he wondered, lost in an ineffable dream of beauty. One link only with the normal he held to like a vice — his touch upon her tough tweed sleeve, and, in his fading memory, the picture of a crucifix her weakening fingers weakly fumbled.

Figures were now moving fast and furious along the Trod; he could see them approaching from the distance. It was an inspiring, an intoxicating vision, and yet quite credible, with no foolish phantasmagoria of any childish sort. He saw everything as plainly as though he watched a parade in Whitehall, or a procession at some southern Battle of Flowers. Yet lovely, happy, radiant — and irresistibly enticing. As the figures came nearer, the light increased, so that it was obvious *they* emanated light of their own against the dark moorland. Nor were the individual figures particularly striking, least of all sensational. They seemed 'natural', yet natural only because they were true and justified.

In the lead, as they drew nearer, Norman saw a tall dark man riding a white horse, close behind him a fair shining woman in a green dress, her long, golden hair falling to her waist. On her head he saw a circlet of gold in which was set a red stone that shone and glowed like burning flame. Beside her was another woman, dark and beautiful, with white stones sparkling in her hair as diamonds or crystals sparkle. It was a gorgeous and a radiant sight. Their faces shone with the ecstasy of youth. In some indescribable way they all spread happiness and joy about them, their eyes blazing with a peace and beneficence he had never seen in any human eyes.

These passed, and more and more poured by, some riding, some walking, young and old and children, men with hunting spears and unstrung bows, then youthful figures with harps and lyres, and one and all making friendly gestures of invitation to come and join them, as they flowed past silently. Silently, yes, silently, without a sound of footsteps or of rustling heather, silently along the illuminated Trod, and yet, silent though their passing was, there came to him an impression of singing, laughter, even an air of dancing. Such figures, he realised, could not move without rhythm, rhythm of sound and gesture, for it was as essential to them as breathing. Happy, radiant, gay they were for ever from the grinding effort and struggle of the world's strenuous evolutionary battles — free, if soulless. The 'Gay People' as the natives called them. And the sight wrenched at the deepest roots of his own mixed being. To go with them and share their soulless bliss forever... or to stay and face the grim battle of Humanity's terrific — noble, yes — but almost hopeless, evolution?

That he was torn in two seemed an understatement. The pain seared and burned him in his very vitals. Diana, the girl, drew him as with some power of the stars themselves, and his hand still felt the tweed of her cloth beneath his fingers. His mind and heart, his nerves, his straining muscles, seemed fused in a fury of contradictions and acceptances. The glorious procession flowed streaming by, as though the stars had touched the common moorland earth, dripping their lavish gold in quiet glory — when suddenly Diana wrenched herself away and ran headlong towards them.

A golden-haired woman, he saw, had stepped out of the actual Trod, and had come to a halt directly in front of where he stood. Radiant and wonderful, she stood for a moment poised.

'Dis... Dis...' he heard in tones like music. 'Come... come to me. Come and join us! The way is always open. There are no regrets...!'

The girl was half way to her mother before he could break the awful spell that held him motionless. But the rough cloth of her sleeve held clutched between his fingers, and with it the broken chain that caught her little crucifix. The silver cross swung and dangled a moment, then dropped among the heather.

It was as he stooped frantically to recover in that Fate played that strange, unusual card she keeps in reserve for moments when the world seems lost; for, as he fell, his own chain and crucifix, to which he had not once given a thought, flicked up and caught him on the lip. Thinking it was a broken edge of torn heather that stung him into pain, he dashed it aside — only to find it was the foolish metal symbol Diana had made him promise to wear, in his own safety. It was the sharp stab of pain, not the superstitious mental reaction, that roused immediate action in him.

In a second he was on his feet again, and a second later he had overtaken the striding girl and had both arms possessingly round her figure. An instant afterwards his lips were on her own, her head and shoulders torn backwards against his breast.

‘Dis!’ he cried wildly, ‘we must stay here together! You belong to me. I hold you tight — forever... here!’

What else he cried he hardly knows. He felt her weight sink back into his arms. It seems he carried her. He felt her convulsive weeping sobs against his heart. Her arms clung tightly round him.

In the distance he saw the line of moving figures die fading off into the enveloping moorland, dipping down into the curving dimness. Clouds raced back across the moon. There was no sound, the wind lay still, no tumbling beck was audible, the peewits slept.

Putting his own coat about her, he carried her home... and in due course he married her; he married Diana, he married Dis as well, a queer, lovely girl, but a girl without a soul, almost without a mind — a girl as commonplace as the radiant nonentity pictured with shining teeth on the cover of a popular magazine — a standardised creature whose essence had ‘gone elsewhere’.

Miscellaneous Stories

THE SINGULAR DEATH OF MORTON
THE KIT-BAG
THE LOCK OF GREY HAIR
THE PHILOSOPHER
THE STORY OF KARL OTT
THE PERFECT POSEUR

THE SINGULAR DEATH OF MORTON

DUSK WAS MELTING into darkness as the two men slowly made their way through the dense forest of spruce and fir that clothed the flanks of the mountain. They were weary with the long climb, for neither was in his first youth, and the July day had been a hot one. Their little inn lay further in the valley among the orchards that separated the forest from the vineyards.

Neither of them talked much. The big man led the way, carrying the knapsack, and his companion, older, shorter, evidently the more fatigued of the two, followed with small footsteps.

From time to time he stumbled among the loose rocks. An exceptionally observant mind would possibly have divined that his stumbling was not entirely due to fatigue, but to an absorption of spirit that made him careless how he walked.

‘All right behind?’ the big man would call from time to time, half glancing back.

‘Eh? What?’ the other would reply, startled out of a reverie.

‘Pace too fast?’

‘Not a bit. I’m coming.’ And once he added: ‘You might hurry on and see to supper, if you feel like it. I shan’t be long behind you.’

But his big friend did not adopt the suggestion. He kept the same distance between them. He called out the same question at intervals, Once or twice he stopped and looked back too.

In this way they came at length to the skirts of the wood. A deep hush covered all the valley; the limestone ridges they had climbed gleamed down white and ghostly upon them from the fading sky. Midway in its journeys, the evening wind dropped suddenly to watch the beauty of the moonlight — to hold the branches still so that the light might slip between and weave its silver pattern on the moss below.

And, as they stood a moment to take it in, a step sounded behind them on the soft pine-needles, and the older man, still a little in the rear, turned with a start as though he had been suddenly called by name.

‘There’s that girl — again!’ he said, and his voice expressed a curious mingling of pleasure, surprise and — apprehension.

Into a patch of moonlight passed the figure of a young girl, looked at them as though about to stop yet thinking better of it, smiled softly, and moved on out of sight into the surrounding darkness. The moon just caught her eyes and teeth, so that they shone; the rest of her body stood in shadow; the effect was striking — almost as though head and shoulders hung alone in mid air, watching them with this shining smile, then fading away.

‘Come on, for heaven’s sake,’ the big man cried. There was impatience in his manner, not unkindness. The other lingered a moment, peering closely into the gloom where the girl had vanished. His friend repeated his injunction, and a moment later the two had emerged upon the high road with the village lights in sight beyond, and the forest left behind them like a vast mantle that held the night within its folds.

For some minutes neither of them spoke; then the big man waited for his friend to draw up alongside.

‘About all this valley of the Jura,’ he said presently, ‘there seems to me something — rather weird.’ He shifted the knapsack vigorously on his back. It was a gesture of unconscious protest.

‘Something uncanny,’ he added, as he set a good pace.

‘But extraordinarily beautiful—’

‘It attracts you more than it does me, I think,’ was the short reply.

‘The picturesque superstitions still survive here,’ observed the older man. ‘They touch the imagination in spite of oneself.’

A pause followed during which the other tried to increase the pace. The subject evidently made him impatient for some reason.

‘Perhaps,’ he said presently. ‘Though I think myself it’s due to the curious loneliness of the place. I mean, we’re in the middle of tourist-Europe here, yet so utterly remote. It’s such a neglected little corner of the world. The contradiction bewilders. Then, being so near the frontier, too, with the clock changing an hour a mile from the village, makes one think of time as unreal and imaginary.’ He laughed. He produced several other reasons as well. His friend admitted their value, and agreed half-heartedly. He still turned occasionally to look back. The mountain ridge where they had climbed was clearly visible in the moonlight.

‘Odd,’ he said, ‘but I don’t see that farmhouse where we got the milk anywhere. It ought to be easily visible from here.’

‘Hardly — in this light. It was a queer place rather, I thought,’ he added. He did not deny the curiously suggestive atmosphere of the region, he merely wanted to find satisfactory explanations. ‘A case in point, I mean. I didn’t like it quite — that farmhouse — yet I’m hanged if I know why. It made me feel uncomfortable. That girl appeared so suddenly, although the place seemed deserted. And her silence was so odd. Why in the world couldn’t she answer a single question? I’m glad I didn’t take the milk. I spat it out. I’d like to know where she got it from, for there was no sign of a cow or a goat to be seen anywhere!’

‘I swallowed mine — in spite of the taste,’ said the other, half smiling at his companion’s sudden volubility.

Very abruptly, then, the big man turned and faced his friend. Was it merely an effect of the moonlight, or had his skin really turned pale beneath the sunburn?

‘I say, old man,’ he said, his face grave and serious, ‘What do you think she was? What made her seem like that, and why the devil do you think she followed us?’

‘I think,’ was the slow reply, ‘it was me she was following.’

The words, and particularly the tone of conviction in which they were spoken, clearly were displeasing to the big man, who already regretted having spoken so frankly what was in his mind. With a companion so imaginative, so impressionable, so nervous, it had been foolish and unwise. He led the way home at a pace that made the other arrive five minutes in his rear, panting, limping and perspiring as if he had been running.

‘I’m rather for going on into Switzerland tomorrow, or the next day,’ he ventured that night in the darkness of their two-bedded room. I think we ye had enough of this place. Eh? What do you think?’

But there was no answer from the bed across the room, for its occupant was sound asleep and snoring.

‘Dead tired, I suppose!’ he muttered to himself, and then turned over to follow his friend’s example. But for a long time sleep refused him. Queer, unwelcome thoughts and feelings kept him awake — of a kind he rarely knew, and thoroughly disliked. It was rubbish, yet it made him uncomfortable so that his nerves tingled. He tossed about in the bed. ‘I’m overtired,’ he persuaded himself, ‘that’s all.’

The strange feelings that kept him thus awake were not easy to analyse, perhaps, but their origin was beyond all question: they grouped themselves about the picture of that deserted,.tumble-down châlet on the mountain ridge where they had stopped for refreshment a few hours before. It was a farmhouse, dilapidated and dirty, and the name stood in big black letters against a blue background on the wall above the door: ‘La Chenille.’ Yet not a living soul was to be seen anywhere about it; the doors were fastened, windows shuttered; chimneys smokeless; dirt, neglect and decay everywhere in evidence.

Then, suddenly, as they had turned to go, after much vain shouting and knocking at the door, a face appeared for an instant at a window, the shutter of which was half open. His friend saw it first, and called aloud. The face nodded in reply, and presently a young girl came round the corner of the house, apparently by a back door, and stood staring at them both from a little distance.

And from that very instant, so far as he could remember, these queer feelings had entered his heart — fear, distrust, misgiving. The thought of it now, as he lay in bed in the darkness, made his hair rise. There was something about that girl that struck cold into the soul. Yet she was a mere slip of a thing, very pretty, seductive even, with a certain serpent-like fascination about her eyes and movements; and although she only replied to their questions as to refreshment with a smile, uttering no single word, she managed to convey the impression that she was a managing little person who might make herself very disagreeable if she chose. In spite of her undeniable charm there was about her an atmosphere of something sinister. He himself did most of the questioning, but it was his older friend who had the benefit of her smile. Her eyes hardly ever left his face, and once she had slipped quite close to him and touched his arm.

The strange part of it now seemed to him that he could not remember in the least how she was dressed, or what was the colouring of her eyes and hair. It was almost as though he had felt, rather than seen, her presence.

The milk — she produced a jug and two wooden bowls after a brief disappearance round the corner of the house — was — well, it tasted so odd that he had been unable to swallow it, and had spat it out. His friend, on the other hand, savage with thirst, had drunk his bowl to the last drop too quickly to taste it even, and, while he drank, had kept his eyes fixed on those of the girl, who stood close in front of him.

And from that moment his friend had somehow changed. On the way down he said things that were unusual, talking chiefly about the 'Chenille', and the girl, and the delicious, delicate flavour of the milk, yet all phrased in such a way that it sounded singular, unfamiliar, unpleasant even.

Now that he tried to recall the sentences the actual words evaded him; but the memory of the uneasiness and apprehension they caused him to feel remained. And night ever italicizes such memories!

Then, to cap it all, the girl had followed them. It was wholly foolish and absurd to feel the things he did feel; yet there the feelings were, and what was the good of arguing? That girl frightened him; the change in his friend was in some way or other a danger signal. More than this he could not tell. An explanation might come later, but for the present his chief desire was to get away from the place and to get his friend away, too.

And on this thought sleep overtook him — heavily.

The windows were wide open; outside was a garden with a rather high enclosing wall, and at the far end a gate that was kept locked because it led into private fields and so, by a back way, to the cemetery and the little church. When it was open the guests of the inn made use of it and got lost in the network of fields and vines, for there was no proper route that way to the road or the mountains. They usually ended up prematurely in the cemetery, and got back to the village by.passing through the church, which was always open; or by knocking at the kitchen doors of the other houses and explaining their position. Hence the gate was locked now to save trouble.

After several hours of hot, unrefreshing sleep the big man turned in his bed and woke. He tried to stretch, but couldn't; then sat up panting with a sense of suffocation. And by the faint starlight of the summer night, he saw next that his friend was up and moving about the room.

Remembering that sometimes he walked in his sleep, he called to him gently:

'Morton, old chap,' he said in a low voice, with a touch of authority in it, 'go back to bed!

You've walked enough for one day!'

And the figure, obeying as sleep-walkers often will, passed across the room and disappeared among the shadows over his bed. The other plunged and burrowed himself into a comfortable position again for sleep, but the heat of the room, the shortness of the bed, and this tiresome interruption of his slumbers made it difficult to lose consciousness. He forced his eyes to keep shut, and his body to cease from fidgeting, but there was something nibbling at his mind like a spirit mouse that never permitted him to cross the frontier into actual oblivion. He slept with one eye open, as the saying is. Odours of hay and flowers and baked ground stole in through the open window; with them, too, came from time to time sounds — little sounds that disturbed him without being ever loud enough to claim definite attention.

Perhaps, after all, he did lose consciousness for a moment — when, suddenly, a thought came with a sharp rush into his mind and galvanized him once more into utter wakefulness. It amazed him that he had not grasped it before. It was this: the figure he had seen was not the figure of his friend.

Alarm gripped him at once before he could think or argue, and a cold perspiration broke out all over his body. He fumbled for matches, couldn't find them; then, remembering there was electric light, he scraped the wall with his fingers — and turned on the little white switch. In the sudden glare that filled the room he saw instantly that his friend's bed was no longer occupied. And his mind, then acting instinctively, without process of conscious reasoning, flew like a flash to their walk of the day — to the tumble-down. ‘Chenille,’ the glass of milk, the odd behaviour of his friend, and — to the girl.

At the same second he noticed that the odour in the room which hitherto he had taken to be the composite odour of fields, flowers and night, was really something else: it was the odour of freshly turned earth. Immediately on the top of this discovery came another. Those slight sounds he had heard outside the window were not ordinary night-sounds, the murmur of wind and insects: they were footsteps moving softly, stealthily down the little paths of crushed granite.

He was dressed in wonderful short order, noticing as he did so that his friend’s night-garments lay upon the bed, and that he, too, had therefore dressed; further — that the door had been unlocked and stood half an inch ajar. There was now no question that he had slept again:

between the present and the moment when he had seen the figure there had been a considerable interval. A couple of minutes later he had made his way cautiously downstairs and was standing on the garden path in the moonlight. And as he stood there, his mind filled with the stories the proprietor had told a few days before of the superstitions that still lived in the popular imagination and haunted this little, remote pine-clad valley. The thought of that girl sickened him. The odour of newly-turned earth remained in his nostrils and made his gorge rise. Utterly and vigorously he rejected the monstrous fictions he had heard, yet for all that, could not prevent their touching his imagination as he stood there in the early hours of the morning, alone with night and silence. The spell was undeniable; only a mind without sensibility could have ignored it.

He searched the little garden from end to end. Empty! Opposite the high gate he stopped, peering through the iron bars, wet with dew to his hands. Far across the intervening fields he fancied something moved. A second later he was sure of it. Something down there to the right beyond the trees was astir. It was in the cemetery.

And this definite discovery sent a shudder of terror and disgust through him from head to foot.

He framed the name of his friend with his lips, yet the sound did not come forth. Some deeper instinct warned him to hold it back. Instead, after incredible efforts, he climbed that iron gate and dropped down into the soaking grass upon the other side. Then, taking advantage of all the cover he could find, he ran, swiftly and stealthily, towards the cemetery. On the way, without quite knowing why he did so, he picked up a heavy stick; and a moment later he stood beside the low wall that separated the fields from the churchyard — stood and stared.

There, beside the tombstones, with their hideous metal wreaths and crowns of faded flowers, he made out the figure of his friend; he was stooping, crouched down upon the ground; behind him rose a couple of bushy yew trees, against the dark of which his form was easily visible. He was not alone; in front of him, bending close over him it seemed, was another figure — a slight, shadowy, slim figure.

This time the big man found his voice and called aloud:

‘Morton, Morton!’ he cried. ‘What, in the name of heaven, are you doing? What’s the matter?’

And the instant his deep voice broke the stillness of the night with its clamour, the little figure, half hiding his friend, turned about and faced him. He saw a white face with shining eyes and teeth as the form rose; the moonlight painted it with its own strange pallor; it was weird, unreal, horrible; and across the mouth, downwards from the lips to the chin, ran a deep stain of crimson.

The next moment the figure slid with a queer, gliding motion towards the trees, and disappeared among the yews and tombstones in the direction of the church. The heavy stick, hurled whirling after it, fell harmlessly halfway, knocking a metal cross from its perch upon an upright grave; and the man who had thrown it raced full speed towards the huddled up figure of his friend, hardly noticing the thin, wailing cry that rose trembling through the night air from the vanished form. Nor did he notice more particularly that several of the graves, newly made, showed signs of recent disturbance, and that the odour of turned earth he had noticed in the room grew stronger. All his attention was concentrated upon the figure at his feet.

‘Morton, man, get up! Wake for God’s sake! You’ve been walking in—’

Then the words died upon his lips. The unnatural attitude of his friend’s shoulders, and the way the head dropped back to show the neck, struck him like a blow in the face. There was no sign of movement. He lifted the body up and carried it, all limp and unresisting, by ways he never remembered afterwards, back to the inn.

It was all a dreadful nightmare — a nightmare that carried over its ghastly horror into waking life. He knew that the proprietor and his wife moved busily to and fro about the bed, and that in due course the village doctor was upon the scene, and that he was giving a muddled and feverish description of all he knew, telling how his friend was a confirmed sleep-walker and all the rest.

But he did not realize the truth until he saw the face of the doctor as he straightened up from the long examination.

‘Will you wake him?’ he heard himself asking, ‘or let him sleep it out till morning?’ And the doctor’s expression, even before the reply came to confirm it, told him the truth. ‘Ah, monsieur, your friend will not ever wake again, I fear! It is the heart, you see; hélas, it is sudden failure of the heart!’.The final scenes in the little tragedy which thus brought his holiday to so abrupt and terrible a close need no description, being in no way essential to this strange story. There were one or two curious details, however, that came to light afterwards. One was, that for some weeks before there had been signs of disturbance among newly-made graves in the cemetery, which the authorities had been trying to trace to the nightly wanderings of the village madman — in vain; and another, that the morning after the death a trail of blood had been found across the church floor, as though someone had passed through from the back entrance to the front. A special service was held that very week to cleanse the holy building from the evil of that stain; for the villagers, deep in their superstitions, declared that nothing human had left that trail; nothing could have made those marks but a vampire disturbed at midnight in its awful occupation among the dead.

Apart from such idle rumours, however, the bereaved carried with him to this day certain other remarkable details which cannot be so easily dismissed. For he had a brief conversation with the doctor, it appears, that impressed him profoundly. And the doctor, an intelligent man, prosaic as granite into the bargain, had questioned him rather closely as to the recent life and habits of his dead friend. The account of their climb to the 'Chenille' he heard with an amazement he could not conceal.

'But no such chalet exists,' he said. 'There is no 'Chenille". A long time ago, fifty years or more, there was such a place, but it was destroyed by the authorities on account of the evil reputation of the people who lived there. They burnt it. Nothing remains today but a few bits of broken wall and foundation.'

'Evil reputation — ?'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders 'Travellers, even peasants, disappeared,' he said. 'An old woman lived there with her daughter, and poisoned milk was supposed to be used. But the neighbourhood accused them of worse than ordinary murder—'

'In what way?'

'Said the girl was a vampire,' answered the doctor shortly.

And, after a moment's hesitation, he added, turning his face away as he spoke:

'It was a curious thing, though, that tiny hole in your friend's throat, small as a pin-prick, yet so deep. And the heart — did I tell you? — was almost completely drained of blood.'

THE KIT-BAG

WHEN THE WORDS ‘Not Guilty’ sounded through the crowded courtroom that dark December afternoon, Arthur Wilbraham, the great criminal KC, and leader for the triumphant defence, was represented by his junior; but Johnson, his private secretary, carried the verdict across to his chambers like lightning.

‘It’s what we expected, I think,’ said the barrister, without emotion; ‘and, personally, I am glad the case is over.’ There was no particular sign of pleasure that his defence of John Turk, the murderer, on a plea of insanity, had been successful, for no doubt he felt, as everybody who had watched the case felt, that no man had ever better deserved the gallows.

‘I’m glad too,’ said Johnson. He had sat in the court for ten days watching the face of the man who had carried out with callous detail one of the most brutal and cold-blooded murders of recent years.

Be counsel glanced up at his secretary. They were more than employer and employed; for family and other reasons, they were friends. ‘Ah, I remember; yes,’ he said with a kind smile, ‘and you want to get away for Christmas? You’re going to skate and ski in the Alps, aren’t you? If I was your age I’d come with you.’

Johnson laughed shortly. He was a young man of twenty-six, with a delicate face like a girl’s. ‘I can catch the morning boat now,’ he said; ‘but that’s not the reason I’m glad the trial is over. I’m glad it’s over because I’ve seen the last of that man’s dreadful face. It positively haunted me. Bat white skin, with the black hair brushed low over the forehead, is a thing I shall never forget, and the description of the way the dismembered body was crammed and packed with lime into that—’

‘Don’t dwell on it, my dear fellow,’ interrupted the other, looking at him curiously out of his keen eyes, ‘don’t think about it. Such pictures have a trick of coming back when one least wants them.’ He paused a moment. ‘Now go,’ he added presently, ‘and enjoy your holiday. I shall want all your energy for my Parliamentary work when you get back. And don't break your neck skiing.'

Johnson shook hands and took his leave. At the door he turned suddenly.

'I knew there was something I wanted to ask you,' he said. 'Would you mind lendang me one of your kit-bags? It's too late to get one tonight, and I leave in the morning before the shops are open.'

'Of course; I'll send Henry over with it to your rooms. You shall have it the moment I get home.'

'I promise to take great care of it,' said Johnson gratefully, delighted to think that within thirty hours he would be nearing the brilliant sunshine of the high Alps in winter. Be thought of that criminal court was like an evil dream in his mind.

He dined at his club and went on to Bloomsbury, where he occupied the top floor in one of those old, gaunt houses in which the rooms are large and lofty. The floor below his own was vacant and unfurnished, and below that were other lodgers whom he did not know. It was cheerless, and he looked forward heartily to a change. The night was even more cheerless: it was miserable, and few people were about. A cold, sleety rain was driving down the streets before the keenest east wind he had ever felt. It howled dismally among the big, gloomy houses of the great squares, and when he reached his rooms he heard it whistling and shouting over the world of black roofs beyond his windows.

In the hall he met his landlady, shading a candle from the draughts with her thin hand. 'This come by a man from Mr Wilbr'im's, sir.'

She pointed to what was evidently the kit-bag, and Johnson thanked her and took it upstairs with him. 'I shall be going abroad in the morning for ten days, Mrs Monks,' he said. 'I'll leave an address for letters.'

'And I hope you'll 'ave a merry Christmas, sir,' she said, in a raucous, wheezy voice that suggested spirits, 'and better weather than this.'

'I hope so too,' replied her lodger, shuddering a little as the wind went roaring down the street outside.

When he got upstairs he heard the sleet volleying against the window panes. He put his kettle on to make a cup of hot coffee, and then set about putting a few things in order for his absence. ‘And now I must pack — such as my packing is,’ he laughed to himself, and set to work at once.

He liked the packing, for it brought the snow mountains so vividly before him, and made him forget the unpleasant scenes of the past ten days. Besides, it was not elaborate in nature. His friend had lent him the very thing — a stout canvas kit-bag, sack-shaped, with holes round the neck for the brass bar and padlock. It was a bit shapeless, true, and not much to look at, but its capacity was unlimited, and there was no need to pack carefully. He shoved in his waterproof coat, his fur cap and gloves, his skates and climbing boots, his sweaters, snow-boots, and ear-caps; and then on the top of these he piled his woollen shirts and underwear, his thick socks, puttees, and knickerbockers. The dress suit came next, in case the hotel people dressed for dinner, and then, thinking of the best way to pack his white shirts, he paused a moment to reflect. ‘Bat’s the worst of these kit-bags,’ he mused vaguely, standing in the centre of the sitting-room, where he had come to fetch some string.

It was after ten o’clock. A furious gust of wind rattled the windows as though to hurry him up, and he thought with pity of the poor Londoners whose Christmas would be spent in such a climate, whilst he was skimming over snowy slopes in bright sunshine, and dancing in the evening with rosy-checked girls — Ah! that reminded him; he must put in his dancing-pumps and evening socks. He crossed over from his sitting-room to the cupboard on the landing where he kept his linen.

And as he did so he heard someone coming softly up the stairs.

He stood still a moment on the landing to listen. It was Mrs Monks’s step, he thought; she must he coming up with the last post. But then the steps ceased suddenly, and he heard no more. They were at least two flights down, and he came to the conclusion they were too heavy to be those of his bibulous landlady. No doubt they belonged to a late lodger who had mistaken his floor. He went into his bedroom and packed his pumps and dress-shirts as best he could.

Be kit-bag by this time was two-thirds full, and stood upright on its own base like a sack of flour. For the first time he noticed that it was old and dirty, the canvas faded and worn, and that it had obviously been subjected to rather rough treatment. It was not a very nice bag to have sent him —

certainly not a new one, or one that his chief valued. He gave the matter a passing thought, and went on with his packing. Once or twice, however, he caught himself wondering who it could have been wandering down below, for Mrs Monks had not come up with letters, and the floor was empty and unfurnished. From time to time, moreover, he was almost certain he heard a soft tread of someone padding about over the bare boards — cautiously, stealthily, as silently as possible — and, further, that the sounds had been lately coming distinctly nearer.

For the first time in his life he began to feel a little creepy. Then, as though to emphasize this feeling, an odd thing happened: as he left the bedroom, having, just packed his recalcitrant white shirts, he noticed that the top of the kit-bag lopped over towards him with an extraordinary resemblance to a human face. Be camas fell into a fold like a nose and forehead, and the brass rings for the padlock just filled the position of the eyes. A shadow — or was it a travel stain? for he could not tell exactly — looked like hair. It gave him rather a turn, for it was so absurdly, so outrageously, like the face of John Turk the murderer.

He laughed, and went into the front room, where the light was stronger.

‘That horrid case has got on my mind,’ he thought; ‘I shall be glad of a change of scene and air.’ In the sitting-room, however, he was not pleased to hear again that stealthy tread upon the stairs, and to realize that it was much closer than before, as well as unmistakably real. And this time he got up and went out to see who it could be creeping about on the upper staircase at so late an hour.

But the sound ceased; there was no one visible on the stairs. He went to the floor below, not without trepidation, and turned on the electric light to make sure that no one was hiding in the empty rooms of the unoccupied suite. There was not a stick of furniture large enough to hide a dog. Then he called over the banisters to Mrs Monks, but there was no answer, and his voice echoed down into the dark vault of the house, and was lost in the roar of the gale that howled outside. Everyone was in bed and asleep — everyone except himself and the owner of this soft and stealthy tread.

‘My absurd imagination, I suppose,’ he thought. ‘It must have been the wind after all, although — it seemed so *very* real and close, I thought.’ He went back to his packing. It was by this time getting on towards midnight. He drank his coffee up and lit another pipe — the last before turning in.

It is difficult to say exactly at what point fear begins, when the causes of that fear are not plainly before the eyes. Impressions gather on the surface of the mind, film by film, as ice gathers upon the surface of still water, but often so lightly that they claim no definite recognition from the consciousness. Then a point is reached where the accumulated impressions become a definite emotion, and the mind realizes that something has happened. With something of a start, Johnson suddenly recognized that he felt nervous — oddly nervous; also, that for some time past the causes of this feeling had been gathering slowly in has mind, but that he had only just reached the point where he was forced to acknowledge them.

It was a singular and curious malaise that had come over him, and he hardly knew what to make of it. He felt as though he were doing something that was strongly objected to by another person, another person, moreover, who had some right to object. It was a most disturbing and disagreeable feeling, not unlike the persistent promptings of conscience: almost, in fact, as if he were doing something he knew to be wrong. Yet, though he searched vigorously and honestly in his mind, he could nowhere lay his finger upon the secret of this growing uneasiness, and it perplexed him. More, it distressed and frightened him.

‘Pure nerves, I suppose,’ he said aloud with a forced laugh. ‘Mountain air will cure all that! Ah,’ he added, still speaking to himself, ‘and that reminds me — my snow-glasses.’

He was standing by the door of the bedroom during this brief soliloquy, and as he passed quickly towards the sitting-room to fetch them from the cupboard he saw out of the corner of his eye the indistinct outline of a figure standing on the stairs, a few feet from the top. It was someone in a stooping position, with one hand on the banisters, and the face peering up towards the landing. And at the same moment he heard a shuffling footstep. The person who had been creeping about below all this time had at last come up to his own floor. Who in the world could it be? And what in the name of Heaven did he want?

Johnson caught his breath sharply and stood stock still. Then, after a few seconds’ hesitation, he found his courage, and turned to investigate. Be stairs, he saw to his utter amazement, were empty; there was no one. He felt a series of cold shivers run over him, and something about the muscles of his legs gave a little and grew weak. For the space of several minutes he peered steadily into the shadows that congregated about the top of the staircase where he had seen the figure, and then he walked fast — almost ran, in fact — into the light of the front room; but hardly had he passed inside the doorway when he heard someone come up the stairs behind him with a quick bound and go swiftly into his bedroom. It was a heavy, but at the same time a stealthy footstep — the tread of somebody who did not wish to be seen. And it was at this precise moment that the nervousness he had hitherto experienced leaped the boundary line, and entered the state of fear, almost of acute, unreasoning fear. Before it turned into terror there was a further boundary to cross, and beyond that again lay the region of pure horror. Johnson’s position was an unenviable one.

By Jove! That was someone on the stairs, then,’ he muttered, his flesh crawling all over; ‘and whoever it was has now gone into my bedroom.’ His delicate, pale face turned absolutely white, and for some minutes he hardly knew what to think or do. Then he realized intuitively that delay only set a premium upon fear; and he crossed the landing boldly and went straight into the other room, where, a few seconds before, the steps had disappeared.

‘Who’s there? Is that you, Mrs Monks?’ he called aloud, as he went, and heard the first half of his words echo down the empty stairs, while the second half fell dead against the curtains in a room that apparently held no other human figure than his own.

‘Who’s there?’ he called again, in a voice unnecessarily loud and that only just held firm. ‘What do you want here?’

The curtains swayed very slightly, and, as he saw it, his heart felt as if it almost missed a beat; yet he dashed forward and drew them aside with a rush. A window, streaming with rain, was all that met his gaze. He continued his search, but in vain; the cupboards held nothing but rows of clothes, hanging motionless; and under the bed there was no sign of anyone hiding. He stepped backwards into the middle of the room, and, as he did so, something all but tripped him up. Turning with a sudden spring of alarm he saw — the kit-bag.

‘Odd!’ he thought. ‘That’s not where I left it!’ A few moments before it had surely been on his right, between the bed and the bath; he did not remember having moved it. It was very curious. What in the world was the matter with everything? Were all his senses gone queer? A terrific gust of wind tore at the windows, dashing the sleet against the glass with the force of small gunshot, and then fled away howling dismally over the waste of Bloomsbury roofs. A sudden vision of the Channel next day rose in his mind and recalled him sharply to realities.

There’s no one here at any rate; that’s quite clear!’ he exclaimed aloud. Yet at the time he uttered them he knew perfectly well that his words were not true and that he did not believe them himself. He felt exactly as though someone was hiding close about him, watching all his movements, trying to hinder his packing in some way. ‘And two of my senses,’ he added, keeping up the pretence, ‘have played me the most absurd tricks: the steps I heard and the figure I saw were both entirely imaginary.’

He went hack to the front room, poked the fire into a blaze, and sat down before it to think. What impressed him more than anythang else was the fact that the kit-bag was no longer where he had left at. It had been dragged nearer to the door.

What happened afterwards that night happened, of course, to a man already excited by fear, and was perceived by a mand that had not the full and proper control, therefore, of the senses. Outwardly, Johson remained calm and master of himself to the end, pretending to the very last that everything he witnessed had a natural explanation, or was merely delusions of his tired nerves. But inwardly, in his very heart, he knew all along that someone had been hiding downstairs in the empty suite when he came in, that this person had watched his opportunity and then stealthily made his way up to the bedroom, and that all he saw and heard afterwards, from the moving of the kit-bag to — well, to the other things this story has to tell — were caused directly by the presence of this invisible person.

And it was here, just when he most desired to keep his mind and thoughts controlled, that the vivid pictures received day after day upon the mental plates exposed in the courtroom of the Old Bailey, came strongly to light and developed themselves in the dark room of his inner vision. Unpleasant, haunting memories have a way of coming to life again just when the mind least desires them — in the silent watches of the night, on sleepless pillows, during the lonely hours spent by sick and dying beds. And so now, in the same way, Johnson saw nothing but the dreadful face of John Turk, the murderer, lowering at him from every corner of his mental field of vision; the white skin, the evil eyes, and the fringe of black hair low over the forehead. All the pictures of those ten days in court crowded back into his mind unbidden, and very vivid.

‘This is all rubbish and nerves,’ he exclaimed at length, springing with sudden energy from his chair. ‘I shall finish my packing and go to bed. I’m overwrought, overtired. No doubt, at this rate I shall hear steps and things all night!’

But his face was deadly white all the same. He snatched up his field-glasses and walked across to the bedroom, humming a music-hall song as he went — a trifle too loud to be natural; and the instant he crossed the threshold and stood within the room something turned cold about his heart, and he felt that every hair on his head stood up.

The kit-bag lay close in front of him, several feet nearer to the door than he had left it, and just over its crumpled top he saw a head and face slowly sinking down out of sight as though someone were crouching behind it to hide, and at the same moment a sound like a long-drawn sigh was distinctly audible in the still air about him between the gusts of the storm outside.

Johnson had more courage and will-power than the girlish indecision of his face indicated; but at first such a wave of terror came over him that for some seconds he could do nothing but stand and stare. A violent trembling ran down his back and legs, and he was conscious of a foolish, almost a hysterical, impulse to scream aloud. That sigh seemed in his very ear, and the air still quivered with it. It was unmistakably a human sigh.

‘Who’s there?’ he said at length, finding his voice; but thought he meant to speak with loud decision, the tones came out instead in a faint whisper, for he had partly lost the control of his tongue and lips.

He stepped forward, so that he could see all round and over the kit-bag. Of course there was nothing there, nothing but the faded carpet and the bulgang canvas sides. He put out his hands and threw open the mouth of the sack where it had fallen over, being only three parts full, and then he saw for the first time that round the inside, some six inches from the top, there ran a broad smear of dull crimson. It was an old and faded blood stain. He uttered a scream, and drew hack his hands as if they had been burnt. At the same moment the kit-bag gave a faint, but unmistakable, lurch forward towards the door.

Johnson collapsed backwards, searching with his hands for the support of something solid, and the door, being further behind him than he realized, received his weight just in time to prevent his falling, and shut to with a resounding bang. At the same moment the swinging of his left arm accidentally touched the electric switch, and the light in the room went out.

It was an awkward and disagreeable predicament, and if Johnson had not been possessed of real pluck he might have done all manner of foolish things. As it was, however, he pulled himself together, and groped furiously for the little brass knob to turn the light on again. But the rapid closing of the door had set the coats hanging on it a-swinging, and his fingers became entangled in a confusion of sleeves and pockets, so that it was some moments before he found the switch. And in those few moments of bewilderment and terror two things happened that sent him beyond recall over the boundary into the region of genuine horror — he distinctly heard the kit-bag shuffling heavily across the floor in jerks, and close in front of his face sounded once again the sigh of a human being.

In his anguished efforts to find the brass button on the wall he nearly scraped the nails from his fingers, but even then, in those frenzied moments of alarm — so swift and alert are the impressions of a man keyed-up by a vivid emotion — he had time to realize that he dreaded the return of the light, and that it might be better for him to stay hidden in the merciful screen of darkness. It was but the impulse of a moment, however, and before he had time to act upon it he had yielded automatically to the original desire, and the room was flooded again with light.

But the second instinct had been right. It would have been better for him to have stayed in the shelter of the kind darkness. For there, close before him, bending over the half-packed kit-bag, clear as life in the merciless glare of the electric light, stood the figure of John Turk, the murderer. Not three feet from him the man stood, the fringe of black hair marked plainly against the pallor of the forehead, the whole horrible presentment of the scoundrel, as vivid as he had seen him day after day in the Old Bailey, when he stood there in the dock, cynical and callous, under the very shadow of the gallows.

In a flash Johnson realized what it all meant: the dirty and much-used bag; the smear of crimson within the top; the dreadful stretched condition of the bulging sides. He remembered how the victim's body had been stuffed into a canvas bag for burial, the ghastly, dismembered fragments forced with lime into this very bag; and the bag itself produced as evidence — it all came back to him as clear as day...

Very softly and stealthily his hand groped behind him for the handle of the door, but before he could actually turn it the very thing that he most of all dreaded came about, and John Turk lifted his devil's face and looked at him. At the same moment that heavy sigh passed through the air of the room, formulated somehow into words: It's my bag. And I want it.'

Johnson just remembered clawing the door open, and then falling in a heap upon the floor of the landing, as he tried frantically to make his way into the front room.

He remained unconscious for a long time, and it was still dark when he opened his eyes and realized that he was lying, stiff and bruised, on the cold boards. Then the memory of what he had seen rushed back into his mind, and he promptly fainted again. When he woke the second time the wintry dawn was just beginning to peep in at the windows, painting the stairs a cheerless, dismal grey, and he managed to crawl into the front room, and cover himself with an overcoat in the armchair, where at length he fell asleep.

A great clamour woke him. He recognized Mrs Monks's voice, loud and voluble.

'What! You ain't been to bed, sir! Are you ill, or has anything 'appened? And there's an urgent gentleman to see you, though it ain't seven o'clock yet, and—'

'Who is it?' he stammered. 'I'm all right, thanks. Fell asleep in my chair, I suppose.'

'Someone from Mr Wilb'rim's, and he says he ought to see you quick before you go abroad, and I told him—'

‘Show him up, please, at once,’ said Johnson, whose head was whirling, and his mind was still full of dreadful visions.

Mr Wilbraham’s man came in with many apologies, and explained briefly and quickly that an absurd mistake had been made, and that the wrong kit-bag had been sent over the night before.

‘Henry somehow got hold of the one that came over from the courtoom, and Mr Wilbraham only discovered it when he saw his own lying in his room, and asked why it had not gone to you,’ the man said.

‘Oh!’ said Johnson stupidly.

‘And he must have brought you the one from the murder case instead, sir, I’m afraid,’ the man continued, without the ghost of an expression on his face. ‘The one John Turk packed the dead both in. Mr Wilbraham’s awful upset about it, sir, and told me to come over first thing this morning with the right one, as you were leaving by the boat.’

He pointed to a clean-looking kit-bag on the floor, which he had just brought. ‘And I was to bring the other one back, sir,’ he added casually.

For some minutes Johnson could not find his voice. At last he pointed in the direction of his bedroom. ‘Perhaps you would kindly unpack it for me. Just empty the things out on the floor.’

The man disappeared into the other room, and was gone for five minutes. Johnson heard the shifting to and fro of the bag, and the rattle of the skates and boots being unpacked.

‘Thank you, sir,’ the man said, returning with the bag folded over his arm. ‘And can I do anything more to help you, sir?’

‘What is it?’ asked Johnson, seeing that he still had something he wished to say.

The man shuffled and looked mysterious. ‘Beg pardon, sir, but knowing your interest in the Turk case, I thought you’d maybe like to know what’s happened—’

‘Yes.’

‘John Turk killed hisself last night with poison immediately on getting his release, and he left a note for Mr Wilbraham saying as he’d be much obliged if they’d have him put away, same as the woman he murdered, in the old kit-bag.’

‘What time — did he do it?’ asked Johnson.

‘Ten o’clock last night, sir, the warder says.’

THE END

THE LOCK OF GREY HAIR

IT HUNG SO conspicuously there amid the surrounding mop of fine dark hair that it piqued the curiosity of Dr. Blane’s friends more than any other detail of his very distinguished appearance. Grief, said a good number, had caused it; anxiety, declared others; but the majority, including servants and women, plumped of course for love. He was successful and he was unmarried: the evidence was unanswerable. I believe, however, that I am the only living person who holds the true secret.

“Most people who have really lived,” he used to say, “possess some singular experience or other that they do not care about telling indiscriminately. And this is mine. I’m a little ashamed of it,” he added, “for nowadays we explain everything — or confess ourselves unscientific. Besides,” — he shrugged his shoulders— “my conduct, I always feel, was not strictly professional perhaps in the best sense. And, also, — it was the only time in my life when I was obliged to acknowledge a sense of unreasoning fear; — and yield to it!”

And the story, it must be confessed, certainly would have claimed belief more readily in those picturesque times when “Possession,” diabolical or otherwise, was a prevalent superstition, and when the post-mortem activity of a disembodied spirit was held to be often exceedingly lively.

It happened before the days when Dr. Blane’s skill had earned for him the honours of knighthood, together with the privilege of Inspectorship of Royal Diseases. This, somewhat, is as he told it to me shortly before his own death:

With an intimate friend, it appears, he was revisiting a little village in the Swiss Jura where had been to learn French as a boy, when the friend incontinently was laid low with diphtheria, and he stayed out perforce to nurse him. Both men had their meals in the cosy little Pension de La Poste, where twenty years before they had studied grammar and irregular verbs together; but Dr. Blane, who wanted quiet, had his work-and bed-room in Michaud’s new house at the other end of the village where the vineyards begin.

Now, the epidemic, it so happened, was a severe one, and two other persons — but for whom this thing might not have come about — were also laid low: one, the villa aesculapius, Dr. Ducommun, the other, Mlle. Udriet, a wealthy but avaricious old woman whose personality was of dark and sinister odour throughout the whole countryside, and who on account of her intense miserliness, was known generally as '*la mauvaise riche.*' And she was well named, for village wit has a way hitting the nail on the head. She was an evil woman, with great force of individuality, dreaded by all; and her fear of spending money went to amazing lengths. It was even reported of her that she enticed her neighbours' cats into her big house, slew and cooked them with her own hands, and ate them to save a butcher's bill. Her long finger-nails, and certain other unappetising peculiarities, were evidence, the village held, for anything and everything.

And Dr. Blane, who was sent for to prescribe in the temporary absence of Dr. Ducommun, admits that the moment he crossed the threshold of the ill-smelling room and saw the old miser staring fixedly at him from her bed, he was inspired by an instant and singularly powerful aversion for her. The face he always described as truly venomous, and her thin fingers lying on the coverlet were "taloned and be-clawed," he used declare with a shuddering laugh, "like the feet of a great bird of prey." Here, for the first time in his life, was a patient, he hinted afterwards, whom he would rather have helped to die than to five.

Though ashamed of his revulsion, he could not quite conceal it. The fact that she would never pay his fees was nothing. It was the woman herself. "She was like some great loathsome insect in that dark room," he said; "some insect whose sting was death!"

The situation at first was merely unpleasant, but a little later it became more awkward and furnished Dr. Blane with the excuse for what he terms his unprofessional attitude. For the village doctor got better — well enough to crawl out and see his pet patients — and *la mauvaise riche* got steadily worse. Moreover, she insisted on sending for Dr. Blane because she preferred his greater skill, and Dr. Blane as often as possible shelved the unpleasant responsibility upon the shoulders of the local practitioner.

Plainly put, he avoided seeing her — even refused point blank to do so, and the old woman, when she found that he no longer came, suffered paroxysms of rage that were positively terrifying in their concentrated fury.

It was one night towards the end of March when the matter came to climax. Earlier in the evening Mlle. Udriet, apparently at her crisis, had sent him an imperious summons, and Dr. Blane, not without pricks of conscience, had passed on the summons by messenger to his colleague at the other end of the village. Dr. Ducommun, however, was delayed for several hours, with the unfortunate result that *la mauvaise riche* lay neglected to the end. The Englishman, of course, knew nothing of this. He was in the Pension sitting by the bedside of his friend, reading. It was ten o'clock. Shaded candles stood on the little table and the sick man was sleeping peacefully the sleep of recovery. For twenty-four hours there had been no return of the delirium. At the end of the darkened room, Mme. Favre who owned the Pension and had proved herself a devoted helper, was in the act of mixing a tumbler of the St. Germain — her invariable remedy for all complaints — when suddenly two things — two surprising things — happened simultaneously: the sick man sat bolt upright in bed with startling abruptness, stared fixedly into the dark room in front of him, and pointed; while Mme. Favre let fall her tumbler with a crash upon the floor and cried in a voice of genuine alarm, "Who is it? Somebody pushed past me! There's someone else in the room!"

The singular way these two persons acted on the same instant impressed Dr. Blane unpleasantly — curiously. He was conscious at once of a disagreeable thrill — of something that brought the water with a rush to his eyes and made the skin of his back crawl. Yet, of course, he never for once believed that anyone had really entered the room through the closed doors.

"A return of the delirium," he said quietly, as his friend continued to glare about him and to point. And then added more sternly. "There's no need for alarm, Mme. Favre, I assure you;" for the old lady was leaning, pale and terrified, against the cupboard, and staring towards the bed as though her eyes would drop out.

But the patient, of course, absorbed his immediate attention. To the doctor there could be nothing very unusual about a scene of delirium; yet about this particular scene of delirium, he became sharply and unpleasantly aware, there was something very unusual indeed. It was convincingly and horribly real. To begin with, though the sick man had forgotten his French almost to the simplest phrases, he was now gabbling the language with a speed and fluency that were positively uncanny; and at the same time with a vehemence, a passion, a fury that had characterised none of his former attacks: moreover — most disquieting of all — with a thin whispering voice that was beyond question, not his own.

But of the whole wild torrent, all he, or that matter all Mme. Favre, could catch before it subsided again into abrupt silence were the short phrases, uttered with eyes fixed upon the doctor and a hand pointing into his very face: ‘You passed me by. But now I am out — and I shall not pass you by!”

The singular thing however — and it was this that gave the good woman the *crise de nerfs* that ended in a fainting fit — the singular and horrible thing was that as the changed voice poured out of the sick man, his face altered visibly as well, altered too into the lineaments of another visage that they both knew. How the eyes and mouth of a man could slip into the expression of a woman — an evil, vindictive woman — is beyond the power of description, yet the calm, experienced Dr. Blane as well as the frightened old lady at the end of the room both recognised beyond possibility of discussion that voice, face and manner belonged to the evil personality of that perverted old woman, *la mauvaise riche.* In the eyes, perhaps, the resemblance lay chiefly. It was unmistakeable. It was weirdly impressive.

Then it all passed as quickly as it came. The sick man slept peacefully once more. Mme. Favre pulled herself together, assisted by the judicious aid of cold water, and half an hour later Dr. Blane, battling already with vivid sensations of alarm such as he had never known before in his life, left the Pension to go back his own rooms.

His shortest way lay down the village street, past the house of Mlle. Udriet and so home. Yet the doctor deliberately chose the longer route. He admits it frankly. He did not wish to pass the woman’s house. “I was curiously nervous, almost frightened,” he said; “though exactly of what I could not tell. I came out of La Poste into the night all trembling. It was the most unaccountable sensation I have ever known. Rather than pass the door of that woman’s house I have walked a mile.”

So he went home by a roundabout way of perhaps fifteen minutes. The village was utterly deserted, and the night air swept about him with the scents of early spring from the surrounding forests. In his mind however he still saw his friend's changed face and heard the whispered words so vindictively uttered, 'You passed me by. Now I'm out. I shan't pass you by!" And do what he might he could not dismiss them. The words kept time with the echo of his feet on the hard road.

A little more than halfway his path joined the main street by the fountain and then turned to the right and ran between low stone walls to Michaud's house. Beyond the walls were vineyards with hundreds of bare sticks already planted in the earth. And it was here, as he passed the fountain, that he first heard a noise that sent the blood tingling up about his ears. The mountain water splashes there all the year round with a steady fall, but what he heard had nothing to do with that. It was the sound of small feet pattering along under the deep shadow of the houses.

Something was following him. "It's a dog," he said, yet at the same time he knew quite well that it was not a dog. It was on two feet, not on four. Fear dropped cold and wet over his face. The road slopes the whole way to where the Michaud house stands isolated from the rest of the village among the vineyards, and Dr. Blane quickened his pace almost to a run. He found the excuse that he was cold, though he was perfectly well aware that the cold he felt was not the common cold of night.

For a time he resisted the desire to look round, but before he was half way down the hill the moon emerged from the clouds, and at last, with a sudden movement as though he expected to be attacked from behind — he stopped short and turned.

The village street in the pale wintry moonlight was empty. Black shadows lined its sides; the church pierced the sky; far above gleamed the spectral snows on the heights of Mont Racine, and the great mountain of Boudry with its dark army of pines hung, immense and forbidding, in the air. Nothing moved. But from the spaces of open moon-lit road close behind him came the sound of light pattering. The sound still followed him.

The way this creeping fear had begun to master him was beyond all things strange. He pulled himself together with a great effort of will and continued his way, this time without undue haste; for to run, he realised, was to admit that terror was in his heart. Yet, along some dark by-way, it had undoubtedly established itself already in his blood beyond all reach of argument. He walked with firm and measured steps, and as result he at once noticed that the sounds were no longer audible. The moment he asserted his will, apparently, they ceased. The whole thing was, of course, imaginary, born of the night, of the deep wintry silence and of the unpleasant memory that vivid scene in the sick-room had marked on his brain: in a word, nerves!

Leaving the village behind him he entered the section of road where low walls separated it from the vineyards on either side. But before he had gone a dozen yards, he became aware that something was running stealthily among the serried ranks of vinesticks over the wall on his left. The soft pattering on the earth was distinctly audible. The thing was keeping pace with him still, yet always a little behind. It was holding him in view — watching, waiting. "This," he says, "I realised above all else — that I was being followed with some sinister purpose."

Keeping to the middle of the road, however, Dr. Blane refused now to quicken his steps. It was remarkable how dead, how deserted, the mountain village seemed. No one was about; lights were out in every house. Wind, the night, and the timid mood with her fugitive gleams held possession of the world. And those swift, pattering footsteps, making their way without a single false tread between thousands of upright stakes, was ever beside him on the other side of the wall.

At last the outline of the house loomed welcome before him, and he entered the iron gates, slowly, still master of himself, and fumbled in the lock with his key. A space of gravel path led up to the door, and as he stooped to insert the key he was positive that he heard something leap the wall and land with kind of hushed shuffle on the shingly path close behind him. He turned with an exclamation, half cry, half curse, — again with the instinctive idea of protecting himself from attack, when suddenly a light shone through the door and Michaud, his landlord, opened it from the inside.

The sounds ceased. Dr. Blane passed hurriedly in. Never was fight or human presence more welcome.

"I'll close after you," said Michaud, a little man with a jolly, smiling, fat face. "I knew your step."

Before shutting the door he peered out into the night. “Tiens!” he said, looking about him, “I thought I heard someone!”

“It’s a dog or something that followed me down the road,” said the doctor. He was glad to be with another man — uncommonly glad.

Michaud closed the door and locked it, but as he did so Dr. Blane got the curious impression that something darted in past his legs like a quick shadow into the house. At the same moment the lantern standing on the steps behind fell with a crash, as though knocked over, and the light was extinguished. Michaud laughed as he struck a match to relight it. He looked rather closely at his lodger for a moment. Dr. Blane declares that to the end he could never be certain that he had not himself stumbled against the lantern and so kicked it over.

“They’ve been here several times to fetch you,” the man said, the moment the door was fastened. “But I told them you were out.”

“Who came?” asked the other with an odd catch in his voice.

“I couldn’t see. I called down from the window but didn’t recognise the voice — some woman, I think. It was too dark to see. I told them to get Dr. Ducommun. She’s dead, you know,” he added abruptly. “Gone to her account at last.”

“Who — who is dead?”

Michaud’s voice was curiously hushed as he replied. “*La mauvaise riche*” He shrugged his shoulders.

Presently they said good-night and Dr. Blane went up to his room to work or to sleep. They were alone in the house these two, for Mme. Michaud was away visiting her mother at La Chaux-de-Fonda, and there were no other occupants. He heard the little man thumping about for a space in his bedroom below. Then, presently, all sounds ceased.

Dr. Blane’s room was on the top floor — an attic room really. There were double windows, a cupboard, a bed in one corner with a mountainous duvet, hot-air pipes, a wash-hand stand opposite, and in the centre his worktable with two lighted candles. By the bed and table two strips of carpet — the rest pine boards, not even stained. It was all very primitive.

At first he tried to work — in vain. Then, turning his thoughts inwards, he deliberately attacked the problem with a view to solving it and recovering his normal state of balance. He brought bear upon it all the force of his acute mind, together with his great medical knowledge and experience. But analysis only confirmed things: he was suffering from a singular invasion of utterly unreasoning fear. He was afraid in the depths of his soul; cold and perspiring in turns; horribly creepy about the skin; and his hair ready at the least sound to rise upon his head. Yet, in his search, he could find nothing that seemed an adequate cause. His neglect of a patient, not even properly his, he admitted was not wholly pardonable, but, after all — ! His mind, in spite of all efforts, came back always to the thought of that

horrible changed expression his friend's face — the expression of that evil woman's eyes, and to the whispered words that had seemed like a curse. "I'm out. You passed me by. I shall not pass you by!"

Finally, to steady his mind and possibly find a measure of relief in expression, he sat down to put an analysis of his mental state on paper. He worked hard. But presently he paused and looked about him. He heard the wind. It had changed and *la bise* was blowing up over the lake of Neuchâtel. Now and again it rose to a wild, whistling cry that made him shiver. The clocks of Colombier struck one in the morning.

At length, in a calmer state of mind, Dr. Blane, half wondering, half laughing, but still strangely nervous, put out the candles and got into bed. And the moment the room was dark the noise began again.

There was no interval of guesswork; he knew at once what it was. Something was scratching at the door — outside. And the curious part of it was that the instant he heard it he realised that the door was no sort of protection. That it was locked was all a useless pretence. The thing could, and would, get in to him. And the next minute, with a nauseous rush of terror, he knew that it was in. It had somehow squeezed itself underneath the door — and was pattering across the bare boards to the side of his bed. And as he heard it, that vile pattering seemed inside him — on the very substance of his heart.

The actual distance between door and bed was small enough, but in those few seconds of intense horror it stretched into a hundred yards, and he knew all the prolonged agony of the steady, merciless approach that a man fastened to the rails must know when in the distance he hears the first rumble of the coming train. For a kind of paralysis crept over him so that he could not move. His heart dropped like lead. The perspiration that drenched him froze instantly into ice.

Then the steps quickened for a running leap; there was a sound of rushing through the air; a gust of glacial wind; and something dropped heavily upon the bed by his feet — and then began to climb quickly upwards towards his face.

Dr. Blane says he tried furiously to shout but could get no sound out above a whisper. The sensation of the footsteps treading up the whole length of his paralysed body was the most horrible thing he had known. But his climax of terror brought with it at least a certain power of movement, and he was just able to bury his face beneath a pile of clothes and pillows when the thing settled down with a clinging grip like wire netting upon his head and there began the most dreadful struggle imaginable in the thick darkness.

But it was an unequal fight. His hands were so moist with the clamminess of fear that the sheets slipped through fingers, and inch by inch the strength of his adversary succeeded in uncovering his face. First he felt it against the skin of his neck where thin fingers that gripped like cold iron caught him behind in a suddenly exposed place. The rest went swiftly: for that touch of ice somehow seemed to paralyse all the nerve centres at a stroke and bereft him of any power he had left. In a moment the clothes were torn from off him and he lay there helpless and motionless on his back, his face at last wholly uncovered.

And then, so close to his ear that the breath touched him as though the *bise* had forced its way in through the open window, he heard a thin whisper of words: “You passed me by. Now I’m out. I shall not pass you by!” and immediately after it came a smothering sensation over eyes and mouth as though a weight of snow had fallen to suffocate him, while creeping through it a stinging pain moved slowly down the sides of his face towards the throat. It was like claws of iron entering his flesh.

The freezing air of night blowing upon his face revived him after what must have been a long period of unconsciousness, for the grey light of early morning was in the room when he opened his eyes again and there was a sound of movement in the house below. With the precision of a strong mind accustomed to quick reflection and decision Dr. Blane at once realised the situation. There was no groping of memory. It all came back vividly, and in that very final minute of returning consciousness he was aware clearly of two things: first that it had all been real and no dream; secondly, that the terror had passed completely from his soul.

Wholly master of himself, yet with a feeling that was bruised and battered, he got out of bed and examined the room. And to his amazement he noticed for the first time that the double-windows were wide open and the *bise* was blowing straight into the room.

Wondering greatly — for they had been closed and fastened when he went to bed — he shut them tight. Then he crossed the floor to turn on the supply of hot air in the radiator. It was on his way back that he caught the reflection of his face in the mirror that hung by the window. The morning fight fell full upon it. Down both cheeks ran dull red fines that ended in marks round the neck like the marks of the rope that he had known years before as prison doctor on the neck of a hanged man. There was no blood — merely a dull contusion under the skin; and almost as he looked the fines faded away and were gone.

But above them, a signature of his great terror, was something else that did not fade, and that remained to the day of his death. A lock of hair over the right temple had turned grey in a single night.

THE PHILOSOPHER

A VERY NICE old lady stood with a very big dog on the edge of the pavement. It was in the outskirts of a country town; the sun was shining, the birds were singing, and May smothered the hedges like fresh-fallen snow. Dressed in shiny black, with objects in her bonnet that jerked and waggled, the old lady was a pleasant thing to see, for she expressed exactly what a typical old lady ought to look like. She was what is called "*a* perfect dear," and the dog, who seemed enormous beside her frailty, was what is called "a perfect beauty." She was vigorous, yet used a stick, a stick of gleaming ebony with a polished ivory handle. She was full of life, and obviously satisfied with life; had undoubtedly made her will — there was lots to leave as well! — and had no quarrel with existence on any score whatever. For life was kind to her, and illness had forgotten to interfere with her digestion. Peevishness was a stranger to her. She was happy. You could hear her in the drawing-room at home laughing with the best of them and teasing people far younger than herself in a deep and musical voice. You could hear her saying "People as young as I am, my dear," before half the sentences she uttered; and she was going now on foot into the little town with her black stick, her neat black reticule, and her big, protective dog, upon good works intent. You could hear her laughing on the front-door steps as she came down into the garden while her son, or possibly her grandson, chided her: "It's absurd of you to walk, Grannie, when there are four motors and fourteen horses dying to pull you; but you are so obstinate in your young days—"

"I *am* young, Charles. You forget that I'm not yet seventy-eight!"

"Caesar will look after you, then, if you really won't let me come—"

"Better than you could," she smiled; then added slyly in her deep, teasing voice, "you have someone else to look after — a little younger than I am!"

It was the joke she had made first with his father thirty years before, probably with his grandfather as well a quarter of a century before *that.* She would surely live for ever. Death and illness had both forgotten her. The male figure on the steps watched her go until the shrubberies hid her, then turned and disappeared inside the ivy-covered old house that one day would be his own. She was a dear and wonderful old lady.

The day was glorious and very peaceful, with the calm beauty of a spring morning upon the entire country side. The stillness seemed too deep for anything to break it, for anything to happen. Beside her fragile figure the dog looked more than large — he looked massive and gigantic, powerful as a pony, very steady, very sure of himself. The whip she carried with her reticule would hardly have disturbed a fly. But Caesar loved and followed her as though she were at least a lion-tamer.

He obeyed with a slavish smile in his great brown eyes her slightest order. He kept brushing up against her to inquire what her wishes were. He protected her. He could have held the traffic up if necessary while she passed very slowly with him into safety.

And there she stood on the edge of the pavement, waiting to cross the road. Her stick was a foot in front of her as she leaned a little forward. She left the curb and stood a moment in the cobbled gutter. She looked steadily up the road, then down the road, then straight in front of her to choose her footsteps well. No tram, no car, no tradesman's cart was visible; the air was without dust; there was no sound but the piping of the birds. She glanced inquiringly at Caesar, and Caesar agreed, wagging his bushy tail with authority and confidence.

Four of her little steps fitted into one leisurely stride of his great legs. His eyes said plainly: "Yes, you may cross with safety now, my dear. Keep close to me," as he sedately led the way. He never followed at such moments; he helped by guiding; and if he felt concern he did not show it. He invariably waited till the "old thing," as he called her to himself, was out of danger, and then he barked and bounded with tremendous energy just to inform the world at large the worst was over. But he *was* anxious all the same. He had known her to "bundle about" most stupidly sometimes when sudden danger confused her and surprised the muscles into acting without an order from the brain. For, of course — and this was what he never could understand or realise — she had not got his absolute alertness and instinctive action. Where he could act instantaneously she had to think before the proper movement followed. She could neither leap nor bound nor save herself five times in thirty seconds before the horses' very hoofs.

And so in the middle of the road, when the reckless car came tearing round the unexpected corner at its wicked pace, and she pirouetted apparently on the point of her ebony stick, unable to execute the sudden leap of six inches that could have saved her — he merely barked at her to hurry up, with a helpful push of his great shoulder in the right direction. He wagged his beautiful tail and pranced. It was true he pushed her with his shaggy head, but he did not realise that she could be so clumsy, so dreadfully maladroit, as to let the stick catch right between her little feet. “If she had bounded sideways or even backwards! If she had dropped on all fours and leaped six inches after me...!” But she hadn’t.

He observed the subsequent proceedings solemnly, ignoring the little dogs that came to whisper things about the pleasant weather; and he followed the car to the building in the town where his dog licence came from, and so eventually back to the house where he had his meals and kennel, wondering why they went so slowly and why she lay so still and made no sign to him. And on the steps he gambolled. He pranced and barked, thinking it strange that no one noticed him. And when his master spoke sadly to him, saying something about “Grannie was in *your* charge,” he cocked his great head sideways and wagged his tail and gave a backwards leap in splendid spirits, and barked again, utterly puzzled why the whip came down and cut his glossy back. “Keep quiet, you brute, can’t you?” explained nothing at all to him.

That is, it explained Fate to him as little as the skidding, hooting car had explained Fate to her. The car, the whip, his master, he himself as well, were symbols of some bigger Power that had to hurt things somehow for their own good — for everything in the happy, careless, lovely world was good, of course. He accepted things as they were, unable to understand very well. It all lay just beyond his powers of comprehension. It was all right somewhere, and some day he would know it all.

The occupants of the car, meanwhile, were acquitted of reckless driving, because Caesar was the only witness against them, and they silenced him by saying “the great brute” pushed the deceased inadvertently right under the wheels. But Caesar was not told of this. Nor did he understand quite why his master did not take the trouble to find the “old thing” and bring her out of her hiding place, but went about the house exactly as though she were not there, and as though he did not care a plate of dog-biscuit whether she was there or not. He had inherited, of course. Caesar noticed certain changes in the household. Life was a puzzle indeed. Then he forgot about it all, and just went on wagging his huge tail, and bounding and barking as before.

THE STORY OF KARL OTT

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NIEDERWALD WAS A little village situated in a deep valley among the Alps, and it was generally conceded by the inhabitants that Karl Ott was the most obstinate man in it.

He was not only held to be such because his motto in life was “Never give in even if you are wrong,” but also because he had for three years proposed to the daughter of the English lady with amazing perseverance, and, in the face of equally persevering refusals, still persisted in renewing his offer.

Karl Ott, eldest and only son of the village pastor, called upon the daughter of the English lady just as regularly as the church-goers went to receive from his father’s hands the communion on the first Sunday in every month. Their walk through the village and up the winding path into the dark pine forest was as regularly expected by the simple villagers as was their return an hour or two later; Karl Ott with a set look on his face, and on the lips of the daughter of the English lady an amused and peculiarly sweet smile.

Leaving her at her mother’s house — the little wooden one opposite the Gasthaus with the creeping vines and the dark-stained pillars — Karl Ott strode down the village street to his father’s house, and the following conversation took place regularly.

“Karl, my son, had you a pleasant walk?”

“Yes, father.”

“And what did she say, my son?”

“She treated it as a grand joke, father.”

“She laughed at you, Karl?”

“Yes, father.”

“And did she give you no encouragement, my son?”

“No; that is — *Vielletcht etwas*.”

"Only a very little — perhaps," repeated the pastor, who knew every answer in advance.

There was a little pause here, and then:

"You will try again, my son," more as a statement of fact than a question.

"If she did not love me, father, she could not go with me so freely and often."

"She is not playing with you, Karl?" with his eyes on his son's face.

Karl never answered this last question. He only laughed, and asked a question, himself.

"With me? *Aber was für eine Idee!"*

Karl Ott may have been original, unsophisticated, but he was a dangerous man to be trifled with. He knew it, and thought of course every one else knew it. For was he not acknowledged to be the most obstinate and difficult man in the whole village?

The English lady and her daughter, with an English servant, had lived in the little house with the dark-stained pillars for three years. They were generally known to the village folk as the "English Lady" and the "Beautiful daughter of the English Lady," because the villagers found themselves wholly unable to pronounce their double-barrelled name.

They were in reality very poor, though compared to Herr Stosch, the richest man in the village, they seemed rich, very rich. A small income goes a long way in Niederwald, and the English lady and her daughter had sought the secluded life it afforded because of reverses at home when the husband and father died. At least so they said, and no one questioned the truth of it. Niederwald was a quiet, curious little out-of-the-world spot, and the people who had been bred and born there were equally quiet and far more curious.

It was a lovely place. A stream tumbled from the big mountains behind, and flowed peacefully through the village, till the spring thaws and the winter storms converted it into a raging, racing torrent. Vineyards sloped away, below the village, to a lake, while above it dense pine forests stretched away till they joined the region of rocks and cliffs, and, finally, of everlasting snows. Above all, three lofty white peaks peered over from the clouds into the little village, and reflected the sunset glory long after the village was wrapped in darkness and shadow.

Karl Ott owned a large vineyard, and made money by it. His *Wienese* were always successful, and his grapes sweeter and juicier even, than those that grew in sunny Italy, on the other side of the great white peaks.

He had seen the English lady and her daughter when they first came to Niederwald, and his father, as pastor, went with him to ‘call upon them. While his father stumbled along in his broken English with the mother, Karl conversed with the beautiful daughter in German. He welcomed her to Niederwald. She had travelled with her father before he died, and had seen much. She had even been in the fair country that lay beyond the three white peaks. She was older than he was, and knew more of the world, he thought. He found that she loved the mountains and the forests, and that she listened eagerly to his descriptions of the gorges, ravines and vastnesses of the Alps around them. She longed to see them and climb to the great white peaks. And Karl, who knew every boulder and every tree, and had grown up in company with toppling *seracs* and dizzy crevasses, promised to show them to her.

He was not slow to believe what his father told him afterwards: that the proud English lady had sacrificed her daughter’s best years to her own pride in coming to live in Niederwald, and bury her poverty where none could see it and sneer.

It was thus their walks began; and the English lady, apparently wrapped up in her pride and disappointments, let them go together.

Karl Ott had been fortunate enough to earn the gratitude of the daughter of the English lady, and it was then he first made up his mind to fall in love with her.

He did everything so deliberately, and his obstinate will held his feelings so under control, that he was not able to fall in love without first thinking the matter over, and then coming to a decision. Such decision was, however, absolutely final, and from it there could be no recall.

The Devil’s Rocks formed a steep slope of loose rocks that had crumbled down from the cliffs above, and accumulated. They were not twenty yards long, and terminated abruptly at the edge of a precipice over two thousand feet. The rocks had to be crossed on the way to Wannsee. They were very dangerous, because the slightest disturbance set them all rolling over each other towards the brink. Several persons from the neighbouring villages had been killed in this way by losing their balance when the rocks began to move under their weight, and being swept down over the short distance that lay between the narrow path and the dizzy abyss. They were called the Devil's Rocks — *Teufelsfelsen* — because the devil was said to be concealed beneath them, and to move them with his fingers whenever any one approached.

Karl and the girl were climbing slowly, and the little dog had run on ahead. His weight was more than sufficient to start the treacherous stones in motion. In spite of his struggles, and with much piteous barking, the little fellow was carried to the edge. Karl saved it by going after it, while the girl, speechless with horror, watched them from the path. She was powerless to help, and she knew they must both be carried over, and — and she did so love the dog.

She could hear the rocks that had already leaped over the edge crashing down the face of the cliff, striking here and there its buttresses and projecting ledges. How brave of Karl! He had her darling by the scruff of his neck. Oh! the splendid fellow that he was. Ah! but — horrors! he had slipped again! Her heart stopped beating for a moment, and she hid her eyes in her hand. She heard a rush of wind, and she knew that Karl Ott and the dog had disappeared into the gulf.

The next minute he was standing by her side with the dog in his arms. It was licking his hand, and evidently had no idea of the cruel death it had escaped. How it was done Karl could not tell. Only the rush of loose rocks suddenly ceased, and the one his weight rested on, six inches from the edge, came to a standstill, and he scrambled up again to the path with the doggie panting and frightened in his hands. That was all he could say about it. He watched the girl kiss her dog, and saw her tears drop on to his little brown ears. He heard her thank him; and as her large eyes, with the long, moistened eyelashes, looked so gratefully into his, he experienced a strange sensation in his heart.

He thought the tears were those of gratitude.

He thought of the girl, of her eyes and hair. He thought of the tears that fell on the dog's ears, and he thought of the slender brown hands that held him. A feeling more tender than any he had yet known crept into his heart. He thought of his father, the pastor; of the proud English lady; and then he thought again of her beautiful daughter.

He remembered, too, that he owned a vineyard, which made him rich. And he made up his mind.

The rocks were dropping past him, and plunging downwards over the precipice. He stooped, and picked one up.

"As surely as I have plucked this one from the fingers of the Devil who is moving them from beneath," he said aloud, slowly, "and as surely as it will drop through the air and rest on the ground below," — here he peered over the edge,— "so surely will I make the daughter of the English lady my wife." He threw the stone upwards and forwards, saw it for a moment against the sky, and then heard it rushing downwards through the air.

A few seconds afterwards it crashed upon the rocks below, and Karl Ott, as soon as the echoes had died away, climbed down again, and went home to bed.

Next day he told his father of his resolve, and the pastor had said, "My son, you have my benediction."

Karl waited a few weeks before he thought it well to speak his mind.

It was winter time, and one day Herr Miller, proprietor of the *Gasthof*, his son Fritz, Pastor Ott, Karl Ott, young Stosch, Frau Müller and the English girl took their skates and a luncheon basket, and drove six miles in a sleigh to the end of the frozen lake.

Karl slowly and deliberately fastened the shining skates on to the pretty little feet of the daughter of the English lady. They were soon flying together before the wind over the black ice, with the fox terrier racing after them as best he could on the slippery surface. He was barking his little heart out for happiness.

But in Karl Ott's heart there was no sign of fluttering. His big muscular frame, with its mountain-trained sinews, never carried a more confident heart than then. The fact that he was going to ask the English girl to marry him did not make his pulse beat any more quickly than usual; and "usual" was by no means fast.

He felt, as he flew over the ice with the English girl beside him, as if the little gloved hands lying warmly in his own were already his; as if the hair, that escaped from under her fur cap and sometimes blew across his cheeks, was even then his to caress.

His purpose being so single, he had no recourse to beating about the bush, and saw no reason for hesitancy or difficulty in giving expression to so straight- forward a proposition.

Karl simply waited for a pause in their talk, turned to the English girl as they were skating out in the middle of the lake, and said in his deep voice, in which was no tremor, nor trace of nervousness:

"Ich liebe Dich. Ich anbiete Dir mein Leben, mein Herz, meine Weinbergen, und meines Vater's Segnung."

As he spoke he looked her steadily in the face. He could not meet her eyes, because, in her desire to choose the best ice, she was looking downwards. But the girl made no answer, and no change came over her face. The wind roared in their ears as it swept past them, and the ring of their skates sounded musically over the lake.

Karl waited some time for an answer, and then came to the conclusion that the girl had not heard him. It was the fault of the wind. He took his eyes from her face, and glanced down at the little feet that shot forward so swiftly and gracefully. He was sure she had not heard him.

There was nothing for him to do but repeat the proposition; and this Karl Ott at once did, in a louder voice, and with an amount of calm deliberation that would have been the envy of all lovers in all lands, could they have seen him.

This time she certainly heard him, for she turned her face up and looked at him. Her eyes were wide open, but on her face, aglow with the wind, there was no evidence of surprise or embarrassment. Her lips were parted in the effort of breathing; her fur cap sat jauntily on her hair, and her hands nestled cosily and warm in his own. Karl kept his eyes on hers, and waited for her to speak. But she did not speak, and Karl began to feel decidedly uncomfortable. He did not know what to make of it.

Then the daughter of the English lady nestled in a little closer to his side, and, with a laugh that showed two rows of gleaming teeth, shouted against the wind,— "What was that you said just now about your father's benediction? If you don't look where you are taking me, it will be given over our drowned and frozen bodies."

Then Karl knew that she could not have heard all that he said. She was shouting her loudest, and he heard her none too distinctly. Dropping his eyes from her face, he looked ahead. They were within fifty yards of the lake proper. The shallow water of the great marsh lay behind them, and they were already skating over the thin, green ice that a little farther on came to an abrupt end in the deep waters. Karl saw their danger at a glance. With a swing he altered his course, pulling the girl round with him, so that she came close up against his side and her hair blew again across his cheek. She laughed merrily, and tucked it under her fur cap.

Talking was an easy matter now. The wind was behind them.

"What was that remark you made about your father's benediction?" she laughed again: "did you mean us to be drowned, or what? It would be a pity, to end our friendship in iced water!"

Something in her voice made Karl feel for a moment that there was between them an immeasurable distance. The thought fled as suddenly as it came, and Karl's phenomenal obstinacy began to assert itself.

He was on the point of repeating, word for word, his twice-made proposition, when there was a sound of skaters behind them, and the next moment Müller and young Stosch raced up and joined them.

Their presence put an end, for the time, to any further avowals of love or proposals of marriage.

They formed a line of skaters hand in hand, the girl between Müller and himself, and sped along to join the rest of the party round a log fire and a luncheon basket.

Karl did not find himself again alone with the daughter of the English lady, until the horse was being harnessed into the sleigh, and the remnants of the luncheon were being packed up. And then it was only for a brief moment, when he had nothing prepared in the way of words. The fact was, he felt nonplussed. Had she vouchsafed some sort of an answer, he would have known what to do and say. But her silence completely outwitted him. He could not understand it, and, for the time being, his obstinacy was met and conquered by the subtler force of silence.

Now that they were alone again for a moment, she asked him to tighten the strap that fastened her skates together.

“Make a neat little bundle of it, Mr. Ott,” she said, “so that they won’t clash together, and get scratched.”

While he was doing her request, the muscles of his great fingers slow from the cold, the girl stood facing him. “And please,” she added ever so gently, and looking up into his eyes, “please, Karl, never ask me those sort of questions again, because, if you do, we cannot go together on the mountains. And you know there’s nobody else here who can climb like you, and — and I may not go alone. Now, please don’t, Karl, for it is quite impossible.”

The smile she gave him was gentle enough to melt his obstinacy into slavery. But it only made Karl Ott angry. It was his turn to be silent now, for he knew enough, cold, strange lover that he was, to understand that she looked upon him only as a companion.

The first time she met him after the skating party, she greeted him with an amused smile that, so far as he was concerned, seemed to increase the distance he felt lay between them. It also increased his obstinacy. And this same amused smile was all the answer he got to his many subsequent proposals.

She called him Karl now, and when he had concluded his awkward sentence about offering her his love and his life and his vineyards, there was only this little smile for answer.

If he dared, as he often did, to repeat his words, the little smile broadened out into a laugh, that effectually closed his lips for the moment, because he utterly failed to comprehend the feelings that caused it.

They never got any further than this, and the state of affairs might well have continued for a dozen years.

Meanwhile Karl’s love for the daughter of the English lady changed in character. It was beginning to come from his heart instead of from his will.

He now and again caught himself wondering what in the world he would do if she died, or — the thought was horrible — if she married some one else!

One day in the early spring, when Karl Ott went to the little post office, he met the English girl there. The snow was still lying low down on the mountain sides. In the air was that indescribable sweetness that is only known in the neighbourhood of pine forests at a certain elevation.

She held some letters in her hand and was stamping them for England. Karl suggested a ramble on the heights of the Kronenberg, and the girl was pleased.

"Yes," she said; "and if you think the snow is sufficiently melted, we will go by way of the Devil's Rocks. I should like to see them once more."

"Once more!" repeated Karl with surprise. "Why! what do you mean?"

"Oh! we are going away," she said simply. "Mother is going back to live in England again. We leave in two days."

Karl fairly gasped. His heart sank within him.

"Wait here a moment," she added: "I will go and put on my nailed boots and climbing skirts. "Then I'll tell you all about it!" She had seen the blank look of dismay that had come into his face, and, for the first time, she felt in her heart a feeling of sorrow for him.

"Poor Karl Ott!" she thought; "but he is such a simple boy, and has so much to learn. He surely could not have imagined that I might care for him!"

So they climbed up the lower slopes of the great Kronenberg, these two, who had together explored every foot of the mountains, and knew their most inaccessible parts, who had seen the sun rise from the top of the three white peaks, and watched the last sunset lights linger on the far away snow slopes that seemed to hang in the sky over the village. For nearly five years they had been companions in many a ramble through the deep forests, and had followed the torrents to their sources under the ice of the dangerous, slow-creeping glaciers. And as they followed the winding path, so familiar to them, the English girl told her companion of the impending change in their life.

"We are going back to our old home in Kent," she told him. "Mother's sister is dead, and we shall be better off now. We go to Paris on Saturday, and you must come to the station, Karl, and see us off.”

Come to the station and see us off!

Karl listened in silence. He asked no questions, and made no comments. The shock had been so sudden and so unexpected, it had stirred his feelings as they never had been stirred before. He could not define them, much less reduce them to words. Surprise, disappointment, rage, struggled for the mastery with sorrow, pride and outraged confidence. They rose up in him in such a strength of turmoil, that he felt as if his heart was being torn out and destroyed. He walked as in a dream, not knowing what he would do next. But the feeling that was uppermost was the bitterness that he had been trifled with. Karl Ott was obstinate, and, whatever he felt, there was no indication of it on his face or in his manner. His feelings nevertheless increased in strength the more he tried to repress them. So he just walked on by her side, and listened to her voice, as they climbed up through the fragrant pine woods and then through the belt of stunted mountain oaks that led to the rocks beyond. When she had finished he made an effort to say something.

“I am sorry you are going. I did not expect it,” was what he said in a quiet voice.

The girl said she was sorry too, she was so fond of the mountains and forests; but he surely did not think she was going to live in Niederwald for the rest of her life!

Karl had no answer ready; or rather had a thousand ready, but they were all so strong, and he did not know which to choose.

Then the climbing over the rough boulders that formed the long slope at the foot of Kronenberg’s great shoulder began, and rendered talking, except in short exclamations, impossible.

They climbed on together, till they reached the final slope, at the top of which began the little path leading to the Devil’s Rocks.

“Karl,” she laughed, showing her white teeth, “I’m exhausted. You’ll have to bury me here, or carry me to the top.”

Karl turned his head away and looked for a moment at the view of lake and forest far beneath them, and an expression came into his eyes that the girl did not see. Then he took her in his arms, swung her little body on to his great shoulders, and carried her steadily over the remainder of the trying, soft snow-slope. He did not tremble. He could have carried her, for that matter, over a tight-rope stretched from the peak of the Matterhorn to the Eggischorn. His feet never took false hold, his balance always was true; and, when she laughed aloud and clutched his head with her two arms for safety, he felt his muscles respond to this call on their reserve force, and carry their precious burden with the ease of steel springs.

When they reached the top he let her down gently from his shoulders. She looked up at him shyly, and told him he was the strongest pack-horse she had ever ridden upon in the Alps, and Karl felt that he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her.

"And when did you — your mother, I mean — first decide to leave?" he asked, in a voice so quiet that a stranger would have thought him indifferent to whatever answer he got.

"Oh!" she said, with an almost imperceptible start, which did not escape his notice. "Oh! we have known it all along. We — we only came here for five years, you know."

But Karl didn't know; and her matter-of-fact way of announcing this important fact, which he felt should have been told him years ago, when he first proposed to her, came to him as a revelation. It acted as a stimulant too. "Then she does not care for me even as much as she does for one of the little snowdrops that are just coming up with the spring," was the thought that passed through his brain.

"You intended from the beginning to leave Niederwald this spring?" he asked quietly.

She looked at him sweetly, and nodded her head. Karl met her eyes for a moment without a sign of expression on his face, and then turned to look at the view again. It was ever changing, and a great grey cloud was rolling up the opposite rock-walls of Chasseront — gloomy Chasseront, as it was called.

Karl again broke the silence.

"Yet you never told me that," he said, almost gently. "I thought you would always live in Niederwald."

Karl was so simple, so innocent, so honest!

"Live here always!" she cried. "Oh, Karl!" And there came over her face that same smile of amusement that he knew so well. But there was in it something of pity as well, now, and Karl was stung more deeply than ever by it. Poor Karl!

"You allowed me to be always with you on the mountains," he continued, with something like anger in his voice, "and you allowed no one else. You have made and permitted me to grow very fond of you. You have always ——"

"Now, Karl," she remonstrated. The smile of amused pity had died out of her eyes, for she felt that her companion was growing unpleasantly earnest. He spoke slowly, but in his voice was an inflection she had never heard there before. The idea of his getting really angry rather frightened her. Slow, deep natures, she knew, were never really angry unless when moved to their very bottom, and Karl Ott's nature was a very slow and a very deep one.

"You have always laughed at my proposals," he went on, in his deep voice, totally ignoring her interruption, "but you never forbade them. You knew I meant what I said, and that, in God's name in heaven, I loved you seriously and for ever!"

"Silly boy!" she laughed with spirit, and looking him full in the face: "how could you possibly imagine anything so impossible?"

Karl did not move a muscle, or take his eyes off hers. He felt his blood leave his heart suddenly in a body, and then rush tumultuously back again. It made his cheeks blaze, and moistened his skin.

"You ought to have known," she went on, emboldened by his silence, which she interpreted as an acknowledgment of defeat. "Our positions are so different; our ages, too; and we belong to different races. Besides, oh, Karl! I told you long ago, when first you spoke, that I could never love any one!"

Never love any one! Suddenly the truth began to dawn on his mind. She loved some one else, then!

The girl suddenly put her hand on his shoulder and looked into his face, moving closer to him, as if about to speak. She kept her hand there, although she was aware that he shrank from her touch as if she had been a leper. She had opened her lips when he interrupted her with raging vehemence.

“And you, damned girl,” he cried, “have allowed me all this time to remain in ignorance that you loved some one else; allowed me to pay court to you, and to love you until all my heart and life and future are all yours; to — to love so deeply, that to lose you must mean to die! And you might so easily have told me the truth: a word years ago would have prevented all, instead of letting month after month go by, playing with my life as only women can, who have — who are — —”

“Karl, stop!” she cried. “I am married already!”

He stood and looked into the eyes and face he loved so hopelessly. Then he turned, and looked down, and out on to the panorama of distant woods and blue mountains. There was no word between them for a minute or more. Then the girl, who was sobbing now, sought his hand, and in a broken whisper, which could hardly have reached his ear, she moaned, —

“But, Karl, my husband was a criminal — and for five years he has been — has been away. That is, we are going home to meet him when he is released — next week.”

He felt the girl draw closer to him, until her heaving breast was against his heart, and he could feel her quick sobs. He felt her arms round his neck; her head, with the golden hair, was on his shoulder.

“Can you never forgive me, Karl?” she whispered, her tears falling fast and hot on his neck.

Karl made no answer. Perhaps he had not heard her. Perhaps his thoughts were still in the cloudy distance where the little patch of blue heaven had disappeared. Perhaps, ah! perhaps, he was wondering, and thinking, and asking himself if, after all, the girl had loved him all along and loved him still.

So they stood together on that lonely mountain path, and the girl’s head, radiant in the soft sunshine, sank lower on his shoulder, and the wind played with her beautiful hair.

But Karl Ott moved his feet, and set the Devil’s Rocks in motion. Then he seized the girl in his arms and, raising her face to his, covered the tear-stained cheeks and the red mouth and the hair with a thousand kisses.

The stones moved forward, with a hoarse, grinding sound, towards the brink.

She heard the sound; she felt them moving beneath her feet, and she tried to free herself.

But Karl pressed her struggling little body closer to him. He held her to his heart. She was his own at last, and — he loved her. Pressed thus to his heart, the beautiful daughter of the English lady was carried by the shifting rocks to the brink of the abyss.

Her cry of terror was half smothered by his hot lips laid on her own, as they fell backwards into the air.

And the wind heard her cry, and the far white peaks saw them fall.

And the Devil's Rocks, that dropped over the edge for several minutes afterwards, covered their bodies and formed their tombstone.

THE PERFECT POSEUR

THEY SAT BY the open window after dinner as the first stars appeared in the hot, cloudless sky. The view from this top-floor flat was big; the Crystal Palace was visible in daylight. The sky looked unusually enormous, full of possibilities. “Except rain,” said someone. The man who owned large strawberry beds complained bitterly, and the man who wanted to play tennis opposed him. “But it’s food,” said Strawberries. “But it’s exercise,” countered Tennis, “and exercise means health, which is of the first importance. We can five without strawberries; they’re poison to lots of people, anyhow.” The other stated the amount of capital invested in the industry, the number of hands affected by a failure of the crop. “The greatest good of the greatest number,” he brought in with an air of victory. Whereupon a woman demolished them both, and at the same time set the note of conversation that followed: “Oh, you two,” she said, “stop posing!” And they did stop, with apologies and many excuses. “Don’t pose” is a criticism that hits everybody very hard. “To pose or not to pose” called forth points of view from everyone in the group, and of astonishing variety. It was defended and attacked with heat. The dread of posing must lie in every heart perhaps.

“A pose,” said the novelist, “is due to a sense of inferiority in the poseur. It’s assumed to conceal a vacuum. The personality knows its nakedness, and is afraid to show it.”

The pontifical utterance annoyed a girl, clever but poor, who kept a dressmaking shop “Yet in another sense,” she protested, “posing is a kind of creation. A creative impulse prompts it. ‘I don’t care for myself as I am. I will create another and better person in my place.’”

“I like that idea, Iris,” remarked the hostess, pleased to help the talk along, but unable to inspire it. A dull, honest woman, who could not have posed to save her life. People “simply loved her.” She was so dependable.

“A disconcerting and dangerous gift,” suggested the novelist. “Unless the creation is successful, the comedy gets very near to tragedy. Everybody sees through its failure, and smiles contemptuously. And the contempt is deserved."

"Agreed; that's true of all creation," the girl rejoined. "And women, I think, pose more successfully than men. That's why they like dressing up, and dress up so effectively — a scrap of ribbon, a bow, a wisp of feather, and lo, they are changed!"

"I simply love dressing up," interrupted the hostess, with happiness.

"It's very interesting, that dressing-up business," agreed a painter. "In an old country suit I'm one man; in my immaculate evening clothes I am another. I live up to the latter with an effort, but in the first I'm my natural, spontaneous animal self."

"Clothes *do* make a difference," the hostess murmured to herself. "Priests know that," said a new voice, "and kings and queens."

"And above all, children," the girl put in, "they are the consummate little poseurs of the world. Life is a Fancy Dress Ball to them."

"Ah!" exclaimed the novelist, "but that's real. I'm talking of affectation." He returned to his muttons with a rush of breath rude folks call hot air. "Affected people are invariably empty. Their affectation is an instinctively assumed defence to conceal their poverty; an elaborate business involving constant effort they dare not relax for fear of ridicule. The nervous energy, measured in foot-pounds, must be enormous."

"Goodness!" put in the hostess, impressed by his emphasis of the word enormous. No argument dared become unpleasant or personal when she was present.

The novelist glanced appreciatively in her direction, yet not meeting her eye. "Enormous," he repeated. "All available energy is laid under contribution if the pose is to be maintained consistently and to be convincing. Nothing left over, you see" — another glance towards his hostess— "for honesty. Something not really possessed is assumed, the idea being to persuade the world it *is* possessed. Affectation is fundamentally dishonest."

"Dear me!" came a whisper, a tongue clicking three times running against the teeth.

"Useless as well," he resumed his exposition, thus encouraged. "It never succeeds for long. Yet the poseur, head in sand, believes it does succeed. Why, there are cases, you know, where the constant effort has ended by producing the reality affected — the poseur actually becomes his pose."

"Auto-suggestion," remarked the elderly psychologist, speaking, for the first time, and somewhat drily, "runs through life everywhere, of course, as you say. But pose and affectation are not synonymous, are they? The first is consciously insincere; the latter—"

The hostess, turning round deliberately to listen more attentively, emitted an audible sigh. "Ah!" she said, as one who recognises wisdom when she hears it.

" — may be, and often is, quite genuine. A pose, as with good dressing-up which involves real imagination, is very probably, I feel, another aspect of the personality struggling for breath. A part of the self that has never had its chance strives to manifest. Local conditions have suppressed it. It must out. It may be ill-conceived, it may act and dress up badly, but its will to live demands expression. In more or less appropriate clothes — physical as well as mental — out pops the new fresh self and enjoys itself. Only, it is real."

"True," observed Tennis. "And such a relief. One gets so tired of one's old self."

"Then, which *is* the real self?" asked the novelist. "Potentially, we're all Sally Beauchamps, I suppose?"

"Undoubtedly. You 'dress up' in your stories, the doctor in his patients, provided he is sympathetic enough to feel with them, the painter in his pictures—"

"The poser in his poses," added Strawberries, thinking it was time he made a remark.

"Our hostess in her guests," added Iris, with a laugh, "and I in my rare customers. A person who cannot pose is a shallow person. *Au fond* this dissatisfaction with self is a healthy sign: imperfection, incompleteness, inadequacy are realised."

"The pity being," suggested the psychologist, "that, when selecting a new self, one doesn't take the best. It's such a bargain sale. Most poseurs are such amateurs. ‘I’m a King and Queen,’ swears the child; and, by gad, he *is*.”

“I’m afraid I’m a very shallow person,” said the hostess. “At least — at any rate — I do love new clothes and dressing-up.”

“No, no, dear,” exclaimed Iris, laughing. “That means all your other selves are harmonised. You’re at one with your Self.”

“It’s not very exciting—”

“But it’s very dependable. It’s why we all love you so.”

During which desultory conversation this hot summer night, searching more or less painfully for Reality, all posing en route with more or less success, unaware that the process was nakedly observable — all this time there sat behind them before the empty grate a strange dark being, with cold green eyes, a being whose pose of indifference, superiority, aloofness, of wickedness, and of alien remoteness from the world of human interests, yet semi-divine, at the same time, sacred, unapproachable — a being whose pose and affectation were sublimely achieved with a minimum of effort, the one perfect poseur on the planet: Pharaoh, the big black cat.

THE END

The Short Stories

The hamlet of Bishopsbourne, Kent, where Blackwood died in 1951, aged 82

List of Short Stories in Chronological Order

THE EMPTY HOUSE
A HAUNTED ISLAND
A CASE OF EAVESDROPPING
KEEPING HIS PROMISE
WITH INTENT TO STEAL
THE WOOD OF THE DEAD
SMITH: AN EPISODE IN A LODGING-HOUSE
A SUSPICIOUS GIFT
THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY IN NEW YORK
SKELETON LAKE: AN EPISODE IN CAMP
THE LISTENER
MAX HENSIG. BACTERIOLOGIST AND MURDERER
THE WILLOWS
THE INSANITY OF JONES
THE DANCE OF DEATH
THE OLD MAN OF VISIONS
MAY DAY EVE
MISS SLUMBUBBLE — AND CLAUSTROPHOBIA
THE WOMAN’S GHOST STORY
CASE I. A PSYCHICAL INVASION

CASE II. ANCIENT SORCERIES
CASE III. THE NEMESIS OF FIRE
CASE IV. SECRET WORSHIP
CASE V. THE CAMP OF THE DOG
A VICTIM OF HIGHER SPACE
THE LOST VALLEY
THE WENDIGO
OLD CLOTHES
PERSPECTIVE
THE TERROR OF THE TWINS
THE MAN FROM THE ‘GODS’
THE MAN WHO PLAYED UPON THE LEAF
THE PRICE OF WIGGINS’S ORGY
CARLTON’S DRIVE
THE ECCENTRICITY OF SIMON PARNACUTE
THE MAN WHOM THE TREES LOVED
THE SOUTH WIND
THE SEA FIT
THE ATTIC
THE HEATH FIRE
THE MESSENGER
THE GLAMOUR OF THE SNOW
THE RETURN
SAND
THE TRANSFER
CLAIRVOYANCE

THE GOLDEN FLY
SPECIAL DELIVERY
THE DESTRUCTION OF SMITH
THE TEMPTATION OF THE CLAY
ACCESSORY BEFORE THE FACT
THE DEFERRED APPOINTMENT
THE PRAYER
STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF A BARONET
THE SECRET
THE LEASE
UP AND DOWN
FAITH CURE ON THE CHANNEL
THE GOBLIN’S COLLECTION
IMAGINATION
THE INVITATION
THE IMPULSE
HER BIRTHDAY
TWO IN ONE
ANCIENT LIGHTS
DREAM TRESPASS
LET NOT THE SUN —
ENTRANCE AND EXIT
YOU MAY TELEPHONE FROM HERE
THE WHISPERERS
VIOLENCE
THE HOUSE OF THE PAST

JIMBO’S LONGEST DAY
IF THE CAP FITS —
NEWS V. NOURISHMENT
WIND
PINES
THE WINTER ALPS
THE SECOND GENERATION
THE REGENERATION OF LORD ERNIE
THE SACRIFICE
THE DAMNED
A DESCENT INTO EGYPT
WAYFARERS
THE TRYST
THE TOUCH OF PAN
THE WINGS OF HORUS
INITIATION
A DESERT EPISODE
THE OTHER WING
THE OCCUPANT OF THE ROOM
CAIN’S ATONEMENT
AN EGYPTIAN HORNET
BY WATER
H. S. H.
A BIT OF WOOD
A VICTIM OF HIGHER SPACE
TRANSITION

THE TRADITION
THE WOLVES OF GOD
CHINESE MAGIC
RUNNING WOLF
FIRST HATE
THE TARN OF SACRIFICE
THE VALLEY OF THE BEASTS
THE CALL
EGYPTIAN SORCERY
THE DECOY
THE MAN WHO FOUND OUT (A NIGHTMARE)
THE EMPTY SLEEVE
WIRELESS CONFUSION
CONFESSION
THE LANE THAT RAN EAST AND WEST
VENGEANCE IS MINE
TONGUES OF FIRE
THE LITTLE BEGGAR
MALAHIDE AND FORDEN
PLAYING CATCH
THE PIKESTAFFE CASE
ALEXANDER *ALEXANDER*
LOST!
THE OLIVE
A CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCE
THE WORLD-DREAM OF MCCALLISTER

THE OTHER WOMAN
PICKING FIR-CONES
THE OPEN WINDOW
PETERSHIN AND MR. SNIDE
THE MAN WHO WAS MILLIGAN
THE FALLING GLASS
THE SPELL OF EGYPT
A MAN OF EARTH
THE LAUGHTER OF CARTHAGE
S.O.S.
NEPHELÉ
ELSEWHERE AND OTHERWISE
THE STRANGER
DR.FELDMAN
SHOCKS
THE SURVIVORS
THE ADVENTURE OF TORNADO SMITH
HANDS OF DEATH
THE LAND OF GREEN GINGER
THE COLONEL’S RING
REVENGE
ADVENTURES OF MISS DE FONTENOY
THE DOLL
THE DOLL
THE TROD
THE SINGULAR DEATH OF MORTON

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THE KIT-BAG

THE LOCK OF GREY HAIR

THE PHILOSOPHER

THE STORY OF KARL OTT

THE PERFECT POSEUR

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A BIT OF WOOD
A CASE OF EAVESDROPPING
A CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCE
A DESCENT INTO EGYPT
A DESERT EPISODE
A HAUNTED ISLAND
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A VICTIM OF HIGHER SPACE
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PINES
PLAYING CATCH
REVENGE
RUNNING WOLF
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SKELETON LAKE: AN EPISODE IN CAMP
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SPECIAL DELIVERY
STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF A BARONET
THE ADVENTURE OF TORNADO SMITH
THE ATTIC
THE CALL
THE COLONEL’S RING
THE DAMNED
THE DANCE OF DEATH
THE DECOY
THE DEFERRED APPOINTMENT
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THE GOBLIN'S COLLECTION
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THE HEATH FIRE
THE HOUSE OF THE PAST
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THE INSANITY OF JONES
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THE KIT-BAG
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THE LOCK OF GREY HAIR
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The Play

Chart Lodge, near Ightham, Kent — Blackwood’s home in later years. He had a pied-à-terre in the grounds that belonged to his friend the actor Henry Ainley.

Karma (1918)

A RE-INCARNATION PLAY

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE. PRESENT DAY

ACT I. THEIR FIRST LIFE TOGETHER. TIME — 2000 B.C. EGYPT

ACT II. THEIR SECOND LIFE TOGETHER. TIME — 325 B.C. GREECE

ACT III. THEIR THIRD LIFE TOGETHER. TIME — FIFTEENTH CENTURY ITALY

EPILOGUE PRESENT DAY

PROLOGUE. PRESENT DAY

CHARACTERS

PHILLIP LATTIN (45), British Agent in Egypt.

Mrs. Lattin, his wife (40), mentally and physically ill; a woman of strong personality and exacting.
The Doctor, unpretentious, simple in bearing, gentle in manner.

Nurse.

PROLOGUE

Scene — Room in Lattin's London house. Mrs. Lattin lies on sofa. A picture of Ancient Egypt, showing the Nile, palms and temples on wall easily visible to her.
Time — Present day, evening.

Mrs. Lattin
What time is it, nurse — *now*?

Nurse
Close on half-past five.

Mrs. Lattin
(With irritability of a sick woman.) Not later? Are you sure? It's so dark.

Nurse
(Soothingly.) The dusk is closing in; I'll light your lamp.

Mrs. Lattin
Half-past five, you said? My husband expected to be back before this. Hasn't he come? The appointment was for half-past two.

Nurse
The Foreign Office takes its time. Mr. Lattin will come to you the moment he gets in.

Mrs. Lattin
You're sure? I thought I heard his step.

Nurse
I'll go and see the moment the lamp is lit. But he never forgets. He always comes in here first.

Mrs. Lattin
But he's so long to-day, longer than usual. And he looked so grave, nurse, when he left. He looked worried, I thought. You noticed it?

Nurse
He *is* taken up with these politics just now. It's only natural, considering the crisis in Egypt. But he's always so in earnest, isn't he? I noticed nothing unusual. The Government is lucky to have him at such a time. No one could fill *his* place. (Brings lamp.) There's the lamp. Is the shading right?

Mrs. Lattin
Fill his place! No, indeed. Phillip understands the natives better than anybody in the world. And the country too (wistfully). If only I could bring myself to go back to Egypt with him. (Irritably.) The light catches my eye there. To the left a little. Now to the right. Thank you.

Nurse
The doctors all agree it's best not, don't they? The dry climate ——

Mrs. Lattin
It's not that, nurse. Dryness is what I *need* — warmth and dryness. It's something else. Egypt frightens me. I can't sleep there. Dreams come to me.

Nurse
The doctors said it was the effect of the climate on the nerves.

Mrs. Lattin
Oh, I know. I'd face it if I could — another winter. It means so much to Mr. Lattin, doesn't it? Nurse! It's curious — it's strange, don't you think — that Mr. Lattin feels nothing of that *I* feel there? I mean ——

Nurse
Hark! I think that's Mr. Lattin's step. I'll go and see.

Mrs. Lattin
It can't be the new doctor, can it?

Nurse
Dr. Ogilvie? Not yet. Six o'clock he was to come. He won't be here before

his time. These great specialists are busy men.

Mrs. Lattin
(Wearily.) I've seen so many doctors. I hardly feel as if I had the strength for a new examination. Dr. Ogilvie will do me no good.

Nurse
Still you will see him. For your husband's sake.

Mrs. Lattin
Ah, yes, for Phillip's sake. I think my husband's coming, nurse.
(Enter Phillip.)

Nurse
Good-evening, Mr. Lattin. Mrs. Lattin is a trifle better. I'll leave you for a little, but she must not tire herself. We are expecting Dr. Ogilvie at six.

Phillip
I'll be very careful.
[Nurse exit.
(Phillip comes to his wife.)

Mrs. Lattin
At last, Phillip. I'm so glad you've come, dear. I've been waiting and longing so. They kept you — but you belong to me, don't you? You're tired, poor old thing. Come to me, Phillip — closer. (Stretches out hand.)

Phillip
I *am* a bit late. I'm sorry, Little Child. They kept me, yes. But *you* —— ?

Mrs. Lattin
I'm well enough to listen. You're back; I forgive you. And it's all arranged as you wished — as you hoped?

Phillip
Sir George was kindness itself ——

Mrs. Lattin
You saw the Foreign Secretary!

Phillip
You didn't know I was such a big-wig, did you? It is important, you see, dear. The situation out there is complicated. I've left them in the lurch a

little, and my advice — er — my knowledge, Sir George was good enough to say — at such a time ——

Mrs. Lattin
In the lurch, Phillip! How in the lurch? You're only asking a longer leave than usual.

Phillip
There, there. I don't want you to worry your dear head with politics. The new doctor will be here any minute now. That's far more important.

Mrs. Lattin
I would rather know exactly. It doesn't worry me.

Phillip
It's all been arranged most satisfactorily, dear; and I'm very pleased. So *you're* pleased with me — eh?

Mrs. Lattin
Phillip — what has been arranged?

Phillip
Sir George was most complimentary. The Government would recognise my services — my long services, he called it. He even discussed with me — asked my advice, if you *must* know the full weight of honour placed upon me! — as to my successor ——

Mrs. Lattin
Successor!

Phillip
But, darling, *some one* must fill my place. There must be a *locum tenens*, as they say in the church.

Mrs. Lattin
You've — resigned!

Phillip
Dear one, there was no other way. It's a formality, you see. I can always take it up again where I left it off. Our man in Egypt — just now — must be *there*. He must be on the spot, of course ——

Mrs. Lattin
But six months' leave! Surely, six months' leave ——

Phillip
Means the entire winter. There, there, Little Child, it's nothing. You must not exaggerate like this. What is my work in Egypt compared to being with you. The doctors forbid you to go out. It's quite simple: I prefer to stay with you. *My* world lies in your heart. I — I can always take up the work again when — when you're better.

Mrs. Lattin
Resigned, resigned! You have actually resigned. Your career — I have broken your career — at last — completely. Is it wrong, then, that I need you so?

Phillip
Hush, dearest ——

Mrs. Lattin
You have paid this tremendous price — and I have made you pay it.

Phillip
I wish to be always with you. That is my only wish, my only happiness.

Mrs. Lattin
For my sake you have sacrificed ——

Phillip
It's I who am selfish to tire you with all this stupid Government business. There, now; you've talked too much and I have done you harm. There's only happiness in my heart. No more nonsense-talk about sacrifice. You must lie quiet and rest again. I can be always with you.

Mrs. Lattin
Yes, to the end — my end and yours. O God! Why did I not understand before?

Phillip
You must not speak like that. Love — our love — knows no end.

Mrs. Lattin
Oh, I am miserable, Phillip, miserable, miserable.

Phillip
Please, do not say such things.

Mrs. Lattin
But I must, I must. My selfishness has brought you to this last renouncement. Egypt has meant so much to you.

Phillip
Too much, Mary, too much. Egypt was coming between us.

Mrs. Lattin
Your work there, the great work I have ruined…! Egypt meant home to you.

Phillip
Home is where you are, dearest, and nowhere else. You have taught me this — in time. (To himself.) Egypt! Ah, Egypt!

Mrs. Lattin
I hate it. It terrifies me. There is pain for me in Egypt. An instinctive dread comes over me always — something from very far away. I *have* struggled against it, for your sake, but — oh, it's so, so strong. If only you could forgive me —— !

Phillip
Hush, dearest!

Mrs. Lattin
But it *has* come between us. You love it so. And it's my fault that you can't — your career, I mean ——

Phillip
Dear one, whatever is, is right. There is nothing to regret. Egypt, indeed, has drawn me strangely. There is some power out there — a spiritual power — that has cast a glamour over me. It has been a passion with me.

Mrs. Lattin
My instinctive terror!

Phillip
And my instinctive love!
[They glance together in silence at a great picture above the bed — an Egyptian night-scene, with stars and Nile.

Yes … yes … strange indeed! From my earliest days it drew me. Those palms and temples, that majestic desert —— !

Mrs. Lattin
Phillip, don't! Those stars, that river bring me sadness — immense regret. I feel them always rising over me. They watch me!

Phillip
Forgive me. It was the marvellous beauty took me. I ——

Mrs. Lattin
But it's an unearthly beauty. And something in it — lost. It's lost to you. And I — oh, but I do love you so; for ever and ever you are *mine* — aren't you?
[He stoops and kisses her. She half rises, whispering:
Phillip, dearest — something strange comes over me. I see a lifting of this heavy English sky. I have been through this before — I have done this very thing before — long, long ago — injured you somehow! Oh, Phillip, can it be that we have lived before — pre-existence — is it true? (Sinks back.) I think … I think I must be near to … death!

Phillip
Hush, hush, my darling. These are sick fancies only. Your brain is tired. We must not talk like this.

Mrs. Lattin
I *am* tired, yes; but it is my soul that aches and not my body. Phillip, I want your forgiveness.

Phillip
There is nothing to forgive. I love you.

Mrs. Lattin
(Spiritually tortured and perplexed.) I want your real forgiveness — before I go. I have been suffering deeply, deeply. Curtains have been rising. I almost see. Something seems growing clearer to me. I've done wrong somewhere! Why have I pulled against you all these years — against your work? It cannot be my love that is at fault. You're wholly mine — and yet I want your forgiveness somehow ——

Phillip
(Deep patience.) All the love and forgiveness in the world I give you, Little

Child. But you ask for what was always yours.

Mrs. Lattin
Your broken mission. You alone have the strength and patience Egypt needs. I have ruined all, all, all!

Phillip
There! I forgive you, then. (Kisses her.) I forgive you all, all, all. But please calm yourself. This excitement does you harm. You torment yourself for nothing. It is I who have been, and am, the egoist. All men who think their work is a mission are shameless egoists.

Mrs. Lattin
Thank you, Phillip, for this great gift of your forgiveness. But it is not enough. I want to understand — and so forgive *myself*.

Phillip
You must rest now a little. It was criminal of me to let you talk so much. No, not another word. I'll leave you for a bit. You must be calm to see the Doctor. It's nearly six ——

Mrs. Lattin
Dr. Ogilvie can't help me.

Phillip
What! The first man of the day! His wonderful cures ——

Mrs. Lattin
He cures the body only. *I* need a soul physician. Oh, Phillip, I believe sometimes my yearning *must* bring him to me.

Phillip
My darling, it is your body alone that is ill. Your suffering gives you these strange fancies.

Mrs. Lattin
You love me too well to understand. (Sighs.) My illness is not only of the body. Now, leave me, dearest. I wish to see him quite alone.

Phillip
Little Child, you shall. You can dismiss the nurse. (Glances at clock.) It is close on six.

Mrs. Lattin
Kiss me. (He kisses her softly and goes out.) If only — ah, if only my great yearning.…
[She lies back exhausted. Sighs. Covers her face with her hands. After a moment she uncovers her face and half sits up again. She stares hard at Egyptian picture on the wall.
The fault lies in my soul, and it comes first from there — from Egypt. The river is rising, rising once again. The stars are rising too. They watch me, and they wait. They're always watching us. O God! If only some one could make me understand! If some great doctor of the soul…! (Sinks back. Her eyes close. She lies very still.)
[A big clock on the mantelpiece strikes the first three strokes of six o'clock, then stops. The door opens slowly and a man enters quietly. He looks round the room, sees her on the sofa apparently asleep, and stands still, a few feet inside the door. He looks steadily at her a moment, then glances at the picture of Egypt on the wall. He smiles gently. His figure is a little bent, perhaps. He is not a big man with any marked presence. As he smiles, she opens her eyes and sees him. She shows surprise and slight embarrassment. She raises herself on one arm. Her voice is hushed rather when she speaks. He remains near the open door.
I beg your pardon. Is it — Dr. Ogilvie?

Doctor
I am the Doctor.

Mrs. Lattin
I must apologise. Did no one —— ?

Doctor
I found my way.
[Both pause, gazing.

Mrs. Lattin
(With relief.) Ah! Thank you.
[She makes an unfinished gesture towards a seat. Her eyes remain fixed on his. She smiles faintly.

Doctor
You called for me. (He makes one step nearer.)

Mrs. Lattin
My husband, I believe, did write. We — expected you.

Doctor
I am come.

Mrs. Lattin
It is exceedingly — it is more than kind of you. You are so good. I mean — (stammers; sinks back upon the cushions, unable to maintain the effort). I am very ill.

Doctor
I know.

Mrs. Lattin
You know! Ah yes — you know.

Doctor
That is why you called me. That is why I am here now.

Mrs. Lattin
I can tell you very briefly what ——

Doctor
It is unnecessary.

Mrs. Lattin
But ——

Doctor
I have been watching you.
[He straightens up a little; a new dignity is in him. She gazes intently. She stretches out a hand, then withdraws it, hesitatingly, again.

Mrs. Lattin
You mean —— ?

Doctor
I knew — that you would send for me.

Mrs. Lattin
Ah! The medical journals! My case, of course — its peculiar — er — its hopelessness.

Doctor
There are no hopeless cases. (He smiles. His voice is very gentle.)

Mrs. Lattin
(Bewildered.) You are very ki — good. I thank you, already.

Doctor
(Shaking his head quietly.) And you already — I see — are on the way to your recovery.

Mrs. Lattin
Recovery!

Doctor
Since you realise that you are very ill.

Mrs. Lattin
Oh — in that sense.

Doctor
In every sense.
[She is more and more aware of something unusual in him. She keeps her gaze steadily on his face. She makes a gesture towards him, then hesitates. She seems on the point of saying more — speaking more freely.

Mrs. Lattin
I think — there must be a mistake somewhere. I don't quite understand how you ——

Doctor
There are no mistakes.

Mrs. Lattin
But you are sure it is *me* you have come to see?

Doctor
It is you.

Mrs. Lattin
Mrs. Lattin?
[He bows his head.
In this street and house — 13 Bristol Square?

Doctor
This street, this square (moves nearer and puts his hand upon her head), this very house you occupy — for the moment.
[She stares at him. They smile. She is aware of another meaning in his words. A touch of awe shows in her manner.

Mrs. Lattin
(Low.) This — body?

Doctor
Which, for the moment, *you* — are occupying, Little Child.

Mrs. Lattin
(Awed.) You know that name! My husband's secret name!

Doctor
It is — *your* name.
[He moves back a step so that she can see the picture. One hand he stretches towards her as in blessing. Her eyes turn from the Egyptian night-scene to his face again.

Mrs. Lattin
(Softly, to herself.) My little secret love-name. It is too marvellous — this. I am completely at a loss to — (breaks off, as he looks down and smiles at her).

Doctor
Love names truly always.

Mrs. Lattin
He … has … always … called me so.

Doctor
He has loved you truly — always.

Mrs. Lattin
(Sitting up.) But you know everything in the world! Who are you — really? (Awe increases in her.)

Doctor
I am the Doctor.

Mrs. Lattin
Doctor! The greatest calling in world! A doctor’s powers ——

Doctor
Are, by rights, divine.

Mrs. Lattin
Life or death ——

Doctor
Life *and* death.

Mrs. Lattin
(Hushed.) But — you are more than doctor; you are also — Priest.

Doctor
I am at your service.

Mrs. Lattin
(Light breaking on her face. She stretches out a hand to him. He takes it.) To heal me. I feel great power pouring from you — into me. It is like wind and fire.

Doctor
Life is a wind and fire. It is life you feel. Your claim is great, because of your great wish, your true desire. You deserve. And I have come.

Mrs. Lattin
(Puzzled.) Deserve! My great desire! My claim…!

Doctor
Your sickness is not of the heart, but of the soul. Your desire was prayer.

Mrs. Lattin
You have read my heart.

Doctor
Little Child, it is in your eyes.

Mrs. Lattin
And you know my very soul.

Doctor
Little Child, I am come to heal it.

Mrs. Lattin
Recovery! You said recovery. While I lie dying here by inches!

Doctor

You love.

Mrs. Lattin
With all my heart.

Doctor
And — soul?
[He looks questioningly down at her with great tenderness. Her expression shows the dawn of comprehension.

Mrs. Lattin
(Very low.) I love — wrongly — somewhere. I forgot — my soul. And I have wrecked him, wrecked his life, his work.

Doctor
(To himself.) Again.

Mrs. Lattin
(Not catching his word.) Is there recovery for *that*? Can you heal that?

Doctor
He does not question your love for him?

Mrs. Lattin
He is too big-hearted. He has sacrificed all for me. It is regret and remorse that kill me now — they bring death more quickly. If only I could understand!

Doctor

You shall.

Mrs. Lattin
(Bitterly.) When it is too late. Can you give recovery for that? Can the forgiveness that I crave — his forgiveness — undo what has been? (Hides her face and sobs.) I must die without forgiveness.

Doctor
Recovery begins with understanding.

Mrs. Lattin
I want *his* forgiveness.

Doctor
You must — forgive yourself.

Mrs. Lattin
Oh, oh, I do not understand. My remorse goes with me even into the grave.

Doctor
Remorse brings weakness. The forgiveness of another affects that other only.

Mrs. Lattin
(Looking up.) Yes?

Doctor

Understand. Then, without regret, go forward. To forgive yourself is — true forgiveness.

Mrs. Lattin
I feel something wonderful in you. Your words bring life again.… I.… There seems something I remember — remember almost — very dim and far away.… (Her eye falls upon the Egyptian picture. She gazes fascinated at it.) The stars … the river … are rising, surely.…

Doctor
You remember — life. And life shall teach you this.

Mrs. Lattin
Life! My life! Oh, what is it rising in me? A curtain lifts. I see … myself. Ah, now it goes again.… The pain … the pain is awful! It all has been before somewhere, I know.… Have I done this before, then? If only I could see, I might understand.

Doctor
You shall see. Understanding shall bring recovery.
[As he speaks he retires slowly backwards towards the open door. Her eyes remain fixed upon the picture.

Mrs. Lattin
Recovery! I half remember.… I begin to … understand…!

Doctor
The soul reaps ever its own harvest, for the soul is linked to all its past.

Mrs. Lattin
(Faintly.) The past! *My* past…! *Our* past together.…

Doctor
Your pain and prayer may lift for once the curtain. Remembering, you shall understand. And, understanding, you shall learn to — forgive yourself.
[A light falls on his face and figure by the door. Just before he disappears she tears her gaze away from the picture, and turns to him with outstretched hands. He raises his hands as though he were lifting a curtain and holding it up.

Mrs. Lattin
It lifts, it lifts! I hear wind among the palms, and lapping waters. A voice is whispering … "Little Child" … yet in another tongue.…
[From beyond the door his last words reach her with a distant, half-chanting sound.

Doctor
Egypt! Where you began — with him. Your earliest life. Then other lives as well. See — and understand.
[She sinks back exhausted. Her face is radiant through her tears. She has just strength enough to touch the pneumatic bell beside the bed.
CURTAIN

ACT I. THEIR FIRST LIFE TOGETHER. TIME — 2000 B.C. EGYPT

CHARACTERS

Menophis, a young Egyptian, well born, about 30.
Nefertiti, an Egyptian dancing-girl.
Sethos, Egyptian youth.
Rames, High Priest in Temple of Aton.

ACT I

Scene — Banks of the Nile. White temple visible in distance. Kephren's Pyramid seen very far away.
Late evening, sunset.

(Nefertiti and Sethos enter and pause.)

Nefertiti
Now leave me, Sethos. And go swiftly. (With gesture of pushing him off.) I must be alone. You follow me as wind follows a bird.

Sethos
Yet never touch you as wind does the bird. And when you dance your feet dance on my heart. No other dancing-girl compares with you.

Nefertiti
Last moon Pharaoh himself told me that. I know it. But now leave me. I am here to worship.

Sethos
(Supplicating.) May I not stay a moment — at least, until Menophis —— ?

Nefertiti
Sethos, you heard me. It is the sacred night. The tear of Isis falls into our River when the dusk has passed to darkness. And I must worship.

Sethos
Menophis comes also with the dusk. You meet here every evening; and when he comes I am forgotten. May I not stay and be remembered — till he

comes? (Implores.) Your beauty makes me slavish. Out of his plenty he will not miss so little, and I — starve.

Nefertiti

Not now. Sethos, I tell you, go! His coming, as you know, makes the dry desert live for me. I would not have him troubled for so little. He hardly is aware of your existence — as yet. But, should I ever need you — slave —— !

Sethos
(Eagerly.) As yet! Need me! Oh, Nefertiti, if you could use me I should die of happiness.

Nefertiti
Then prepare to die, for the time *may* come.

Sethos
Oh, may it happen soon!

Nefertiti
(Teasing.) The Gods alone know what may happen, and when. You are my slave. Then, vanish!

Sethos
(Bowing.) Your slave obeys. (Rising.) But your lover will wait among the palm-trees yonder. Menophis may not come. The Gods know what will happen, and it is said the Gods have claimed him for themselves. He is a prize, it seems, that earth and heaven both desire. I have heard rumours. (Moves off lingeringly.) If you need escort back to Memphis your lightest call will reach me.

Nefertiti
Go! I shall not need your escort. My happiness and his are in the keeping of the Gods. Leave me to worship.

Sethos
(With boy's passion.) Oh, Nefertiti, the wild sweetness of the desert is in your breath! To me you are holy as our sacred River! May the Gods grant you all your heart's desire. Sethos is your slave for ever — even though his heart should break.
[Exit, slowly, looking back.

Nefertiti
(Smiling to herself.) A slave is always useful — for slavish purposes. I may put you to the test some day!
[She watches him out of sight behind the palms, then goes to the water's edge and splashes idly with her bare foot several times in succession, accompanying each splash with a remark.
He'll bury himself in the Temple.… He'll bury himself in my arms.… He'll become a monk at Rames' bidding.… He'll become mine. (Makes biggest splash of all.) I've got him … under this very foot! (Hears his footstep.)

Menophis
(Entering.) You here! Nefertiti! (She pretends not to hear. She is worshipping.) Nefertiti!

Nefertiti
(Startled.) Menophis!

Menophis
You worship here at dusk … beside the Nile!

Nefertiti
I often come at sunset — as you know.

Menophis
I … had … forgotten.

Nefertiti
Forgotten! Has some Afreet blinded you? Only last night, too, you passed me by without a glance — on your way to Aton's new Temple.

Menophis
It was moonless and I did not see you. No Afreet power could hide you in the sunshine.

Nefertiti
(Mocking.) Oh, thank you, Menophis. I thought your heart was too full perhaps to see me.

Menophis
You have been worshipping alone — and you were lonely. Forgive me, Little Child, I ——

Nefertiti
I forgive you, O handsome Menophis. But I was not lonely. Sethos kept me company awhile.

Menophis
Sethos! The Syrian banker's son! You can find pleasure in such company?

Nefertiti
(Softly.) You did not come here to talk with me of Sethos. You came, like me, to worship —— !

Menophis
He is rich.

Nefertiti
He is forgotten too. When you call me "Little Child" the whole world is forgotten. There is only — You.

Menophis
Little … Child.

Nefertiti
(Goes closer.) Your eyes seem strange to me to-night: they look far away into space. Your voice sounds distant like the desert jackal's cry. (She puts a hand on his and looks searchingly into his eyes.) Yet you call me Little Child, as of old, when we met here every evening in the dusk … to play and talk and dream together … of the future. Menophis (taking his other hand and drawing her body closer to him), will you not tell me — your Little Child — this sacred night when the Tear of Isis bids our river rise — tell me what wonderful new dream has crept into this faithful heart? (Lowers her head as though to hear its beating.) I hear another music in your blood. (Lifts her face to his.) And it is … beautiful. (Waits for his reply.)

Menophis
It is the Sacred Night. That means — Had you forgotten?

Nefertiti
(Alarmed, but half teasing.) Oh, you Solemnity! Forgotten what?

Menophis
(Gravely.) A choice — a decision — made to-night is made for ever.

Nefertiti
(Low.) I know.

Menophis
Little Child, it is for me a crisis, and I must choose between great issues. My life, too, is rising. I must decide in what direction it shall flow.

Nefertiti
You mean … with whom?

Menophis

For whom.
[He turns his head a moment towards the distant Temple of Aton, just visible still in the last sunset light. Its whiteness gleams. She notices the gesture.

Nefertiti
How cold it has grown. Menophis.… I feel the desert-wind's fingers at my heart. It is the North wind from the sea. You, too, seem distant suddenly. (Lowering voice.) I fear for you. Why is it? I fear something … for myself … as well ——

Menophis
There is no fear this sacred night. There is courage only. Life increases everywhere. The river rises. The Tear of Isis falls into the Nile and ——

Nefertiti
Hark! (She listens.) There are awful things about in Egypt when ——

Menophis
She is alive, that's all.

Nefertiti
Listen!

Menophis
It is the lapping waves. It is the wind among the palms.

Nefertiti
(Whispering.) The waters! That cold desert wind! It blows between us — between you and me. There is a shadow! (Shudders closer to him.) Surely great Kephren bowed this way!

Menophis
The stars shine over us. They cast no shadow. The pyramid stands fast.

Nefertiti
Yet something passed between us, for I felt it. (Grips him.) You are all *mine*?

Menophis
(Holds her close.) There is no room. A shadow cannot separate us. Anything *real* would bind us closer only.

Nefertiti
Then why are you so solemn, your eyes so far away, your voice so distant? This crisis that you speak of — it could not take you from *me*?

Menophis
Nothing can take you from me, or me from you — for long. The chain of our past and future lives is bound together beyond all breaking.

Nefertiti
What is it, then, that frightens me?

Menophis
(With grave tenderness.) Ah, Nefertiti, Little Child, to-night I stand — *we* stand together — at the very gates of life. The choice is difficult, for it involves you too. Since first, three years ago, I saw you flitting, like a swallow, down the river bank at Memphis — since those enchanted days I have had no other human love but you ——

Nefertiti
(Startled.) No other *human* love!

Menophis
(Slowly.) There *is* another love, my Nefertiti — a greater; not more enduring, perhaps, but nobler. For it demands the greater sacrifice. And, cold though it seem to your warm, passionate heart — *if* it should call me ——

Nefertiti
(Catching him by the arm.) Greater! Yet would take you from me! But you *are* mine!

Menophis
Your beauty troubles me; my blood rebels. I cannot look at you and hear the call this sacred night may bring me. I must make a still place for my soul to listen. (Slowly.) Oh, Nefertiti, you must leave me — for a little.

Nefertiti
Not knowing what is in your troubled heart! Not hearing from your own lips if we shall meet again!

Menophis
(Sees Rames approaching.) You should know all. If not from my lips, then from ——

Nefertiti
(Sees Rames too.) Rames, the great Priest! I understand. He would steal you from me for his dismal Temple, steal you away from life.

Menophis
He is among the wisest and noblest of our land, the Great One of Vision, Aton's servant.

Nefertiti
(Pouting, alarmed.) Aton!

Menophis
Hush! Be careful! Even if Aton takes me, the chain of lives *must* bring us again together. It were but a brief separation — a sacrifice of pain and joy we both may offer as one being. And when, in our next life, we meet again, what ecstasy of strengthened, purified love would be ours — to know each had been faithful to the other — for His sake.

Nefertiti
(Roused.) Me grow old in loneliness while you satisfy your soul with selfish worship! *Our* sacrifice!

Menophis
In dreams we still ——

Nefertiti
We should never meet; a dream's a dream. No children would come to me.

Menophis
You would not pine. It would be, for both of us, a preparation for our

meeting in a future life ——

Nefertiti
(Playing on his feelings.) You are right, Menophis. I should not pine, for I should marry and know joy. Your sacrifice, if you choose it, you may bear alone, for Nefertiti will not certainly be lonely. There is no lack of those who offer life to her in place of the dream that Rames sets before you ——

Menophis
Others! Is there another? Nefertiti —— ! (Approaches.)

Nefertiti
(Withdraws.) Rames is coming. I hear his cautious step. Make your choice with him. I will not influence you. You wished to be alone; I'll leave you. (Makes to move away.)

Menophis
(With passion and regret.) One moment more. Will you not say farewell? And if — and if — until you hear from my own lips ——

Nefertiti
(Softly.) If you decide to leave me, Menophis, you will not quite forget ——

Menophis
Little Child, you know. Always I shall think of you ——

Nefertiti
(Mocking.) As happy and light-hearted — with another. I am no "dream" to Sethos.

Menophis
Your beauty tortures me.

Nefertiti
You do not torture *me*; you cannot. If you loved me you could not give me up so lightly. You may think of me — of *us* — walking along this river bank at sunset with laughter and without regret, talking maybe of Menophis, and his passing dream. The echo of our laughter may reach into your little cell.

Menophis
(Advancing.) Unsay those haunting words.

Nefertiti
It is but impulse that betrays you. You have a “greater love” than me. I have one too! Farewell. I shall not come again unless you call me.
[Exit.
[Menophis paces to and fro, hides his face in his hands, sighs, looks after the girl, pauses, then bows his head and waits while Rames comes up to him.

Rames
Your eyes are troubled, although I cannot see them. (Looks down at the young man’s footsteps.) And your steps leave an uneven pattern on the sands.

Menophis
(Looking up.) There are too many voices in my ears; and all are sweet. I know not which is true. I am unhappy and afraid. My peace of yesterday is gone.

Rames
These stars that watch you now shall watch your future lives as well. Before they pale at dawn they shall have marked your choice. They are rising in the east. They watch you — and they wait.

Menophis
(Turning his look away from the sky.) I came here to find peace — between the sunset and the sunrise.

Rames
Sunrise and sunset — the two great moments of the day. Death and resurrection — the two great moments of our life. (Watches him closely.)

Menophis
Not death — a disappearance only (smiles) for a little time.

Rames
(Pleased.) To return again and again, each new life linked to those that went before; and each determined by opportunities left or taken.

Menophis
The choice! Oh, Rames, there are two calls in me. I hear two voices always. My future life hangs upon the decision that I make.

Rames
You will not make it. It will make itself. The stronger call must win (points across the Nile towards the sinking sun). It is whether you shall live unto yourself alone, or consecrate your powers to Aton. (Points towards the Temple.) It is not alone your future life that hangs upon the choice; it is your future lives.
[They spread their arms and bow towards the West. The sun sinks below the Libyan horizon of the desert. The dusk creeps up.

Menophis
(Rising.) If only the whole of me could choose. I should then know that I am worthy.

Rames
(Approving.) There can be no half-heartedness in the service of our Deity.

Menophis
(With enthusiasm.) Our Deity — the sun!
[Turns and gazes at the great Temple of Aton whose white columns still gleam in the golden after-glow some distance across the desert.

Rames
(Moving closer, with hand on his shoulder.) Egypt, our great land, now witnesses the climax of her splendour. A change, which is divine, steals over her. It is no longer the mere disc of the sun we worship; it is the power behind.

Menophis
(Reverently.) The heat and glory that are in Aton, eternal and all-loving Deity.

Rames
(Smiling.) Who calls you for the offering of — yourself. (Pauses.) The Temples of our regenerated Egypt demand the best.

Menophis
(Eagerly.) And I might help towards this great uplifting?

Rames
(Gravely.) Menophis, Aton calls you to himself.

Menophis
(Enthusiasm and awe on his face.) I hear the call!

Rames
(Slowly.) But other, lesser, calls as well?

Menophis
There can be no turning back!

Rames
No turning back.

Menophis
I must be sure!

Rames
It is for ever.

Menophis
(Very low.) I know which call is highest, yet I hear that sweeter voice. If only I could smother it.

Rames
(Understanding.) It is the lust of life — of woman!

Menophis
It is love.
[The dusk is turning into darkness. The stars begin to peep.

Rames
I may not influence you. Years ago I heard these two calls, as you do, singing in my soul.

Menophis
(Looking eagerly, with respect, into the old man's face.) And you have never known regret?

Rames
(Gravely.) I have known perfect joy.

Menophis
To yield what is most dear to another is very hard. Oh, Rames, I am so young, the choice is difficult. If I had some sign that Aton accepts me ——! (With rising passion.) Aton, guide my decision and grant my choice be

wise!
[Nefertiti is seen returning. Sethos is with her. They are laughing together. Sethos' arm is about Nefertiti. Menophis does not see them.

Rames

Weigh carefully. Hear every call with honesty. Aton, indeed, does call you, but it is all or nothing. (Withdraws slowly down river bank towards the Temple. Waves his hand solemnly.) I leave you — to yourself.
[Exit.

Menophis
Great Aton, guide me.

[Stretches arms to the sky; looks up at stars. Then bows his head upon his hands in prayer. Nefertiti draws near with Sethos.

Sethos
My head spins, Nefertiti. Then it was in play that you dismissed me? I can hardly believe my happiness is real.
[Tries to embrace her.

Nefertiti
(Escaping gaily.) Everything's real — at the moment when — you've got it.
[Menophis hears their voices. Turns and sees them.

Menophis
With … Sethos…! (To her.) You've come back…!

Nefertiti
(Pretending she has just noticed him.) The river bank is public, I believe. All Memphis will be here presently — this sacred night. (Mocking.) Forgive me — forgive *us* — if we disturbed your meditations. (Glancing at Sethos.) We enjoy the starlight like the other lovers!

Menophis
Together!

Sethos
A young girl does not come out unattended. I am proud that Nefertiti accepts my protection — as before.

Menophis
Little Child!

Nefertiti
(To Sethos, laughing.) Menophis, you know, is half a priest already. He has put aside all common things — youth, dancing, laughter — love.

Sethos
(Half insolently.) Wise Menophis! I envy a man grown old before his time. He has had some bitter disappointment probably.

Menophis
(Suffering keenly.) If you *really* love each other, I ——

Sethos
Come this way, Nefertiti. I hear a pipe. (Melody on pipe heard faintly.) Let’s go and dance. This atmosphere is too holy. (Tries to draw her away.)

Menophis
(Pain.) Can this be a sign from Aton — that you are worthless?

Nefertiti
(Stung.) We’ll dance, yes, as we did at Memphis when the harvest ripened. And then we’ll bathe together, Sethos. It all is worship, and my blood this sacred night is burning ——

Sethos
(Wild.) And to-morrow I may see your father —— ?

[Nefertiti whispers in his ear. They laugh. He tries again to kiss her. She escapes again, and dances seductively, taking care to go close past Menophis, who makes several half movements towards her, but controls himself.

Nefertiti
(Singing mischievously to the tune of the distant pipe, and holding Sethos by the hand. As she goes past Menophis she holds out her free hand to him temptingly.)
“Come, dance together. Take my hand
Beside the rising river;
We’ll dance upon the starlit sand,
And then through life — for ever!”

Menophis
(Catching at her hand as she flits past.) Nefertiti!

Nefertiti
(Escaping his touch. Still hand in hand with Sethos.) I heard a dead voice calling from a Tomb. (To Sethos.) It’s not for us. *We* are alive!
[Sings as before, glancing mockingly at Menophis, who again would seize her as she goes by.
“The rising river takes our feet,
And life flows full of laughter;
Come, dance with me while youth is sweet — —”

Menophis
(Touching her.) Little Child!

Nefertiti
(Slowing down. Sings last line lingeringly.)
“The wedding follows after!”

Menophis
My Little Child.

Sethos
(Trying to draw her away.) Come, Nefertiti. Come with me, lest the Temple snatch you, too.

Menophis
Listen! The waters wait the sign! (Warningly.) A few brief moments and the Tear of Isis falls — and the choice is made, not for this life only, but for ever. (Solemnly to Nefertiti.) You would bind your soul to his … for all future lives … for ever?

Nefertiti
(Drawing back.) “For ever”! “For all future lives”! For an hour — a few hours, perhaps ——

Sethos
You swore to me that you ——

Nefertiti
I danced and played and sang with you. You dance lightly and your voice is

sweet. But — if it is true that vows taken to-night can bind me to your soul for ever ——

Menophis
It is true.

Nefertiti
… the journey would tire me.

Sethos
Nefertiti!

Menophis
(Steps between them. Nefertiti hesitates.) Let her alone. Since her eyes first opened to the sun she has been mine. A hundred future lives shall take our feet together. And she knows it. She plays with you — this singing, dancing. She *lives* with me. (Seizes her, all else forgotten.) Leave us together, Sethos. Go!

Nefertiti
I played with you. You know it. (To Menophis.) You had forgotten our appointment! I did it — for my love's sake.
[Sethos shrinks from his sudden violence, startled, but keeps her hand.

Menophis
She has finished with you. Go!

Sethos
(Sneers.) Finished! You are mistaken, Menophis. Only a while ago she said my love was precious to her — (Realising.) You (to her) have strange ideas of play. You're a ——

Menophis
(Threateningly.) Enough, Sethos. You knew, at least, that we belonged to one another. You have yourself to blame.

Nefertiti
(Proud of him.) Of course. Sethos says the same sweet things to many another maiden too.

Sethos
(Bitterly.) The Gods have set me free of you, and I am glad. When next we meet, Menophis, you shall hear the soft promises she made me (turns his

back to go), and how she spoke of *you*! (Moves faster, as Menophis advances threateningly.) She called you half woman and half monk — no man at all (runs), fit … only … for … the Temples!
[Exit.

Nefertiti
(A last shot at him.) Yet if I raised my little finger you'd come tumbling back — a helpless slave! (Turns to Menophis.) I am ashamed. (Demurely.) I did pretend he pleased me.

Menophis

Little Child.…

Nefertiti
(Happy.) I was a little jealous of — of — your Aton.

Menophis
And I, perhaps, of your … Sethos.
[They smile and embrace. The pipe is heard. She breaks away and dances before him happily.

Nefertiti
(sings)
"Come, dance with me, and take my hand
Beside the rising river;

We'll dance upon the starlit sand,
And then through life — for ever."

Menophis
You are a daughter of the sun!

Nefertiti
Isis and Aton both are in our blood!

Menophis
Your beauty blinds me. I hear no other voice than your dear singing. I see no stars, your twinkling feet are everywhere.

Nefertiti
(Triumphantly.) It is the call of Life.
[A sound is heard, like wind in an Eolian harp, faint.

Menophis
(Startled.) Listen! The moment comes.
[With the sound is mingled the lapping of water.

Nefertiti
(Awed.) It is here.
[A star falls from the sky.
Both together
The Tear of Isis!

Menophis
Our river takes it.

Nefertiti
The waters rise.

Menophis
Our choice is made — for ever.

Nefertiti

My beloved. (Embrace.) Mine … for ever and ever … all our future lives.

Menophis
The Temple was a dream. Your beauty makes me see it. (Breaks off as he sees Rames and Sethos approaching through the palms.) Rames comes. (Makes to hide.) Great One of Visions!

Nefertiti
(Triumphantly.) And Sethos with him. Let them see us both. (Catches his arm.) Do not hide, but tell them boldly of your glorious choice.
[Rames and Sethos have been talking together. Sethos now turns and goes off towards the Temple, walking slowly with bowed head, but looking back over his shoulder sometimes. Disappears. Rames comes slowly forward. Holds up his hands to bless them.

Rames
(Smiling gravely.) May Aton bless you both — now — and in all lives to come.

Nefertiti
(Confidently.) Aton *has* blessed us — both.

Menophis
(Dazed, troubled.) Rames — you come to know my choice. (Very gravely.) The Tear has fallen. The river is rising, and I — (lowers head) I have heard the call.

Rames
The choice is yours — (solemnly) and *hers*.

Menophis. I have
Nefertiti. He has } chosen. The rising waters and the risen stars bear witness.

Rames
They … bear … witness.

Menophis
(Half sadly to Rames.) I have weighed both voices. Another — a worthier than I — must replace me in the Temple.

Rames
Aton does not compel. The call will come to you again — in following lives, until ——

Nefertiti
(Interrupting.) Our love comes from Aton. He has given Menophis to me for my own.

Rames
All gifts are his.

Menophis
Holy Rames, I cannot let her go from me.

Rames
(Solemnly.) The choice is made. The future lives will bring again, and yet again (turning to Nefertiti), this same deep opportunity, when you — again — shall lead his soul higher, or (with emphasis) delay and hinder by vain selfish love.

Nefertiti
(Defiant, yet frightened.) He is mine — for ever. No priest or god shall rob

me of him. I keep him for myself. (Clutches him.)

Rames
The rising water bears witness to your vow. (With prophetic and intense gravity.) Where the Temple gleams white in the sunlight, and where the palaces run down to the sea, you shall hear the waters in your soul — *and — shall — remember*.

Nefertiti
(Alarmed.) Listen! He prophesies!

Menophis
(Awed.) Great One of Visions!
CURTAIN

ACT II. THEIR SECOND LIFE TOGETHER. TIME — 325 B.C. GREECE

CHARACTERS

Phocion (40), Athenian General.
Lydia (35), his wife.
Lysander, a youth, Phocion’s brother.
Alexander the Great.

Athenian Citizens.

ACT II

Scene — Room in Phocion’s house in Athens. Simple. Altar to Zeus with brazier burning. Colonnade with pillars and view towards Acropolis.

Late evening.
(Lydia is half-kneeling, half-leaning over the marble balustrade, gazing into the distance. Enter Phocion. He comes near and touches her.)

Lydia
How you startled me!

Phocion
Were your thoughts so far away, Little Child?

Lydia
I was thinking.

Phocion
And gazing across the sea as usual. What is there so attractive beyond that dim horizon? The future or —— ?

Lydia
Perhaps its dimness only. That’s southwards, is it not? There Egypt lies, and — Alexandria — you said — the great, new city.

Phocion
(Searchingly.) Distance still haunts your eyes. Little wonder that I startled

you. (Kisses her.) But do not speak of Alexander's city. Our thoughts lie nearer home — in Athens.

Lydia
Where have you been, Phocion? All day I've missed you.

Phocion
On the hills — alone. I have been thinking.

Lydia
Thinking — you too!

Phocion
I came home by way of Theseus' Temple, saying a prayer for our loved city and for ourselves.

Lydia
But you are weary, and your feet are splashed with mud.

Phocion
I crossed the Ilissus to be sooner home, and found it rising — in flood almost. Yesterday's rains on Mount Hymettus — (breaks off as she makes a sudden gesture). Why, what ails you, Lydia? Do I startle you a second time?

Lydia
Forgive me, Phocion; do not notice my little weaknesses. It was merely — there, I've often told you — a rising river is an omen that causes me strange uneasiness.

Phocion
Little Child, I understand. I know your feelings. Athens herself is on edge these days — and little wonder.

Lydia
Phocion, let me tell you honestly — I am afraid.

Phocion
Anxious, perhaps, but not afraid. The mood of our beloved city takes you with it, as it takes us all. We all are patriots to-day. But the wife of Phocion has proved herself no coward.

Lydia
(Low voice.) Alexander is so powerful. Some say the Macedonian is a God.

Phocion
Pshaw! In his own land, perhaps. But Athens has her own Gods. He is a conqueror, yes; but a conqueror can only take a city, not the souls who dwell in it.

Lydia
(Softly.) Phocion, when I hear your words my fear melts away. Yet Athens *is* conquered. Our city trembles ——

Phocion
Hush, Lydia. I do not like to hear you say such things.

Lydia
Who can stand against him, then? Who is there can oppose this conqueror of the Persians?

Phocion
Every Athenian — every Greek who loves our city more than he fears the Macedonian.

Lydia
All Athens, then!

Phocion
All the best in Athens.
[Lydia looks nervously over her shoulder towards the city and Acropolis. The dusk deepens. The first star shows.

Lydia
(Shudders.) Your speech is often mysterious like this now — dark with meaning. Each night as twilight gathers from the sea about our city, there are footsteps on the causeway that make me tremble. No sooner has Hymettus darkened than shadows move silently over the courtyard and between the pillars. (Turns and flings her arms about him.) Oh, my Phocion, it is for you, not for myself, I am afraid.

Phocion
Calm yourself, beloved. I am an Athenian who obeys his unconquerable Gods. I do no more than accept the destiny they lay upon him who loves his country ——

Lydia
But if Alexander discovered you — if —— !

Phocion
Discovered me! What thought is this?

Lydia
If he discovered you were true to Athens, I was about to say. If he took you from me! Oh, Phocion! In dreams I have seen you lying dead at his feet — lost to me for ever.

Phocion
Not lost, most loving woman. If the Gods take me — if I die for Athens ——

Lydia
Am I, then, less than Athens?

Phocion
Athens is great because of women like you, Lydia. You would not see her less?

Lydia
How less?

Phocion

Less free. Liberty is the breath of life.

Lydia
What is my liberty if I lose you? Your voice, your touch, your living presence here beside me (embraces him) — I want you alive and loving ——

Phocion
Our love has grown with Athens. On the green Cephissian banks we first discovered it, and that evening on Hymettus when the honey — ah, I see it in your eyes, dear heart — you remember even as I remember. If Athens live ——

Lydia
But if *you* die! If Alexander crush you, kill you! Oh, my Phocion, this

struggle against the conqueror is vain. You tempt the Gods. I fear for you and for your hopeless schemes ——

Phocion
My schemes! Lydia, what do you know?

Lydia
I suspect only. I feel you planning dangerous things that must take you from me. Those silent footsteps on our causeway in the dusk, the shadows that pass between the pillars, the rising waters — Phocion! your strange deep love of Athens takes no account of me, your little, suffering wife.

Phocion
The love of Athens is *ours*. It is the love of country that the Gods call sacred. (Looks out across the fading city.) Hellas, your valleys and mountains, streams and happy groves … beautiful, beloved … who would not die for you…!

Lydia
I love *you*. If you live for me, you live for Hellas even more. Athens lives in our hearts, not otherwise.

Phocion
(Sternly.) If a barbarian rule our dear city, our hearts are dead. It is better for my heart to mingle with the soil of Hellas than beat as the slave of Alexander.

Lydia
I love you too much to see you run on death. Your wild plot to save our city is but the Fates' way of taking you away from me.

Phocion
Try, Lydia, to love me as I love Athens.

Lydia
You ask too much of me. I love Hellas, but I love you more.

Phocion
Then — not enough. (Looks away.) You make it hard for me. I see the right so clearly, but your clinging love makes me weak.

Lydia
There is nothing in the world for a woman but her love. If you were lost to

me, Phocion, these lips could kiss one other only — the rising flood (shudders) of our little Athenian river — or the sea.

Phocion
What comes, sweet wife, comes to both of us together. You are overwrought with sleeplessness and watching. Trust me and love me — more I cannot tell you now. Your love shall give me strength. (He embraces her and moves slowly off towards the colonnade.) And if there is a greater love than yours, some day we shall find it — know it both together. What comes to me to do now — I must do.
[Goes slowly off.

Lydia
(At him.) A greater love! Ah, Phocion — you're going from me — going towards death. I know not what you mean. There is no greater love. (Watches him disappear.) Then I must save you, since you will not save yourself. I cannot lose you. My love, I cannot let you — (Covers her face with her hands). My love shall save you from yourself. If I do wrong the Gods forgive ——
[Knocking is heard. She starts and looks round. A Messenger is seen in the courtyard.
(Cautiously.) You would see — whom?
Messenger
The wife of Phocion.

Lydia
(Frightened.) Hush! Come softly, I am she. (Messenger enters stealthily.) You bring a message for me? You bring a token?
Messenger
(With respect.) She who sends me bids me say as token this: From one who loves her Lord more than his earthly glory — to her who loves as greatly.

Lydia
(Faintly.) To her who loves as greatly. (Hesitates, shows agitation, a distraught expression on her face.) It is to save him that I do it — to save his life for — both of us. (Turns to Messenger.) Your great mistress bid you bring an answer back to her?
Messenger
Without delay — my orders are.

Lydia
Have you no more to say? No further message? Do you bring only the token that you come from her?
Messenger
She bid me say that you should feel perfect confidence.

Lydia
The word of Alexander —— ?

Messenger
Has been given, and cannot change.

Lydia
Though it concern the life of one who was his enemy?
Messenger
The Queen bid me assure you. He has given her his promise. It will not alter.

Lydia
(Whispers.) Then take this message back to her who sent you: To one who comes hither to-night when the moon is high enough to cast a shadow I will reveal what I have promised to reveal. In return I claim the boon the conqueror has sworn — through her — to give me.
Messenger
Her word and his are both securely given. I take back yours.

Lydia
Go swiftly, silently. I shall await fulfilment here — when the moon is high enough to cast a shadow on the marble causeway. Behind that pillar I shall wait. Go swiftly!
[Exit Messenger. Lydia, looking anxiously at the sky, withdraws into the shadow of the pillars. Phocion enters, his arm upon the shoulder of Lysander, his youthful brother. Lydia overhears their talk.

Lysander
(With enthusiasm.) Our last meeting now, and then to action. Oh, Phocion, I feel the Gods are with us. Your daring shall save Athens, and Hellas will live — even if we die.

Phocion
We all stand or fall together. They are picked men, and heroes; no one

among them thinks of self. The risk, of course, is great, but it is nothing when the stake is considered.

Lysander
Everything favours us. The best troops of Alexander's army are still in Egypt. The entire city is behind us. All Athens will rise when it sees you are our leader. (Vehemently.) We shall drive the proud Macedonian out. Oh, I'm glad the talk is over soon! I burn for action.

Phocion
I, too, want action. I am not made for stealth and for conspiracy. Plotting and hesitation weary me. (Sighs.)

Lysander
Phocion, you feel no doubt, though — ? I heard you sigh. Are you less sure of — of anything?

Phocion
For myself, boy, I have no doubt. For Athens I am sure and strong. Did I sigh perhaps? If so — if so, it was for others whose lives I hold in trust. For others — the truest, best, and bravest men in all Athens.

Lysander
The Gods will bear that burden for you, Phocion.

Phocion
Yes, yes; the Gods will bear it — partly.

Lysander
No one can lead but you. We are of one accord.

Phocion
I *will* lead, Lysander. Have no fear. Of myself I do not think. (Looks out.) The moon is up. I see the evening star o'er Salamis. They will be here very shortly.

Lysander
We are quite safe here. I took the password round myself at noon.

Phocion
We cannot be too cautious. Alexander's spies are more numerous than the bees upon Hymettus. They can sting as sharply too.

Lysander
Oh, our secret is well guarded. Yet the least whisper or thoughtless word could so easily betray us. (Looks round with a moment's hesitation, then continues in a lower voice.) I only would — that Lydia ——

Phocion
Lydia!

Lysander
She is in great favour with Alexander's queen, Statira.

Phocion
So much the better! Since she knows nothing there is nothing she can reveal. Alexander seeks to play the generous conqueror. That the wife of Phocion accepts favours that Phocion spurns can only save us from suspicion. The Persian woman helps us without knowing it. And so does Lydia!

Lysander
You are right, Phocion. The Gods show their will in little things like this. We are under their protection. Yet if word reached Alexander of our gathering in your house to-night ——

Phocion
Keep your words for later, boy; you waste your strength. How can you hold such idle thoughts? Hellas a Macedonian province! Her ancient liberties crushed! Our last hope dead as soon as born, and no blow struck!

Lysander
Phocion, forgive me! And, Selene, in yonder rising moon, forgive me too. The Gods protect and help us!

Phocion
Pallas Athena, give us wisdom to plan and strength to strike.

[Lydia comes forward from her hiding-place among the columns. The moonlight falls on her. As she moves she notices that it casts a shadow. She hurries. Lysander watches her somewhat closely.
Ah, Lydia.

Lydia
You did not call me, Phocion? It seemed ——

Phocion
(Smiling.) Your maidens called you to the bath. It is your bathing hour.

Lydia
(To Lysander.) Lysander, good-evening! You are fortunate. (Half laughing, half jealous.) Phocion has more time for his brother than for his wife.

Lysander
Had I a wife as brave and faithful as my brother has, I should be more fortunate still! These are grave times, good Lydia, for true Athenian men.

Phocion
Ah, Lydia knows too well, Lysander. But do not detain her now. (To Lydia.) I will come later for you, Little Child — an hour at the most.

Lydia
I am always ready for you, Phocion, and always true. I, too, am an Athenian.

Phocion
The Gods watch over you!

Lydia
And over you!
[Phocion moves to the balustrade and leans over, watching the night. He waits for her to go. Lydia turns to Lysander and speaks low and hurriedly.
You love him, I know, Lysander, and he loves you.

Lysander
Before he even knew your name, I loved Phocion, (sternly) and more than Phocion I love Phocion's honour.

Lydia
And so loving him you would urge him — to his death. (With passion.) You shall not, Lysander; Phocion is mine and he belongs to me. I will hold him fast to this life. A glorious career now lies at Phocion's feet.

Lysander
I love Phocion's honour too well to tempt him to dishonour.

Lydia
Tush, boy! You do not understand. I would not tempt him. Fate does not tempt, it commands. The high Gods bid us to accept fate bravely. The weak

resist it; the strong accept and make it glorious. And a glorious career now lies at Phocion's feet.

Lysander
You speak with knowledge, Lydia? If so, how come you by such knowledge?

Lydia
Hush, not so loud. Lysander, you faithful brother, I tell you it is common knowledge. The Military Governorship of Alexandria — once offered to Phocion already and refused by him — is open to him still. Alexander knows his worth ——

Lysander
His incorruptibility too. But how know *you* this, Lydia?

Lydia
I only know that Alexander is generous and will raise him to even greater honour. He places Phocion above all men in Athens ——

Lysander
(Coldly.) Has Alexander's queen informed you thus. (Louder.) It seems strange to me, Lydia, that the wife of — an Athenian patriot ——

Phocion
How loud your voices grow. Lydia, Little Child, you had best leave us now, for Lysander and I have grave business to transact together — and we expect others too.
[There is a low knocking at the door.

Lydia
Lysander chides me that I accept kindness from the queen of Athens' conqueror.

Phocion
I see no harm in that, and possibly much good. Your love will ever guide you. Farewell, now, for a little while. And happiness go with you!

Lydia
I leave you. It is your friends who come to you at twilight now so often. The Fates protect you, my Phocion! (Whispers to Lysander as she goes.) Oh, save him, Lysander! Save him from himself — for me, his wife!

[Exit slowly, looking back fondly at Phocion as she goes. Lysander watches her with an expression that betrays doubt, anxiety and disapproval. He shakes his head. The knocking is repeated. It is a definite knock that has been pre-arranged.

Phocion
Open, Lysander. It is the Citizens.
[A dozen Citizens enter quietly. Their leader holds a scroll in his hand. In turn they greet Phocion with obvious respect, each giving the password, while Phocion replies with the countersign:

Citizen
The Gods deliver Athens!

Phocion
They will deliver her!
[When all are in, they group themselves. An elderly Citizen, holding the scroll, acts as spokesman.
It is safest our meeting should be brief, and no words wasted.

First Citizen
We stand for action.
Second Citizen

Immediate action.
Third Citizen
Each day that passes consolidates the barbarian power that would ruin Athens.

Lysander
Citizens, we need two conditions for success — to strike hard, and to surprise.

Phocion
We must move warily. The Macedonian’s spies hide everywhere, and money has been flowing.

Lysander
There are ten thousand hearts in Athens above gold —— !

Phocion
(Gravely.) Our preparations must be sure. You bring to-night the list of

patriots?

First Citizen
It is drawn up (holds out scroll). Twenty names stand written here, each signed by his own hand, each guaranteeing three hundred men of arms ——

Phocion
Whom we can trust?

First Citizen
The names are guarantee, as you will see — the best in Athens.

Second Citizen
Ready to live or die as our beloved city lives — or dies.

Lysander
And thousands more will follow once we show the way.

Phocion
Our forlorn hope (takes the scroll) is favoured of the Gods, and will be led by them.
[Begins to read names.

Citizen
Upon great leadership hangs success or failure. There can be one leader only.
Citizens
Phocion! Phocion!

Lysander
Phocion is our leader.
[Phocion reads silently. Lysander suddenly turns his head towards the moon-lit courtyard.
(Low.) I saw a figure pass.

Citizen
A few moments ago I saw one too — between the pillars.
Another Citizen
Are we alone here?

Phocion
(Looking up.) My wife — and her maidens — are about. We are alone.

First Citizen
Once read, Phocion, the list must be instantly destroyed. Each signature is a warrant for the writer's death.

Lysander
(Nervously.) I counsel haste. The very stones move as with footsteps. The sky has eyes.
[Turns towards a burning brazier close behind him.

Phocion
(Calmly.) I have read. The names are — what Athens would expect.

Lysander
Then let me burn it.

First Citizen
(Rising.) Phocion, in the names you read, and in the names of all assembled here, we offer you the leadership — the military leadership. We ask you to lead our beloved city back to liberty again. (Muffled applause.)
[While Phocion has been reading, a woman's figure is seen creeping from pillar to pillar where the shadows are deepest. She is followed closely by a second figure — a man swathed in a head-dress such as that worn by the Persian warrior in the Elgin Marbles. Unnoticed in the dimness they reach the colonnades where they can hear all that passes.

Phocion
(Slowly.) Citizens, in the name of Athens, and with the approval of the deathless Gods of Athens — I accept the leadership.
[He hands the scroll to Lysander, who has stepped forward eagerly to seize it. Lysander turns towards the fire.

First Citizen
Then we are half-way to success already. (Applause.) The sooner we disband, the better. Three of us may stay with Phocion to decide the final ——

[At this moment the cloaked figure steps out into the centre of the courtyard. He is plainly visible in the moonlight. Consternation reigns. Phocion reaches for his sword. Lysander fumbles over the brazier, thrusting the scroll into the flames. The Citizens stand firm, not trying to hide, but visibly startled.

Citizen
We are betrayed!

Citizen
A spy! We have been overheard!

Citizen
A Persian!

Phocion
(Self-possessed.) No stranger is unwelcome in my house, even though he enter — without permission. (Louder to stranger.) You would see Phocion? I am he.
[Lydia remains hidden in the shadows.

Stranger
(Advancing.) I ask forgiveness for my unannounced intrusion. I disturb you. But my need is urgent. This is my warrant: I am a messenger from Alexander.
[Stands erect and waits.
Others
From Alexander!

Phocion
(Calmly.) You bring Phocion a message from Alexander?

Stranger
Of first importance.

Phocion
You may deliver it.
[Lysander pauses to listen too.

Stranger
A gift I am bid offer first — a gift from Egypt, where Phocion fought so bravely and so well. (Holds out an object of gold.) From the Temple of Ammon himself in Lybia.

Phocion
(Coldly.) Phocion fights not for gifts; nor can he accept anything from the barbarian conqueror of Athens.

Stranger
I am bid to urge reflection on you. First words are not the truest always, nor the wisest. (Pauses.)

Phocion
(Simply, with scorn.) I am an Athenian.

Stranger
(Lays gift on a marble table beside Phocion.) Alexander commands me say further — that, with this gift, he would honour Phocion by yet another one. He bids me call you the Military Governor of his new city in Egypt.

Phocion
The two gifts are one. I have one answer only.

Stranger
(Smoothly.) Then, with your answer, I ask permission to take back some trifle — such as that parchment the youth there would destroy — as proof to Alexander that the House of Phocion is loyal.
[Lysander, startled, desists a moment. Phocion takes a sudden step forwards.

Phocion
(Alarmed.) Loyal —— !

Stranger
(Throws off disguise.) The parchment.
[Voice of command. Holds hand out.

Phocion
Alexander!
[All recognise Alexander. Confusion, consternation, and murmurs: “Alexander!” “Alexander!”

Alexander
Hand it to me, boy, before another name is burned. (Laughs.)
[Alexander strides towards him. Lysander defies him. Alexander seizes him.
He shall be surety, Phocion, for your loyalty.
[Phocion, holding his sword, rushes on Alexander to aid Lysander, and above all to rescue the scroll. The Citizens stand their ground and are about to interfere, when Lydia rushes in and throws herself on Phocion, checking his violent attack. At the same moment Alexander stamps on the marble

floor. Soldiers enter. Phocion and Alexander stand facing one another in silence for a moment.
I hold you the bravest man in Athens, Phocion, and such men as you I need. (Holds out the scroll, as yet unread.) But lesser men than you I do not — need!

Lydia
Phocion! Great Alexander!… Statira promised me.… Oh, he is too brave to die…!

Alexander
(To Soldiers.) Three of you take the boy away. The rest withdraw. No, let these greybeards go.
[A few Citizens creep out, following Lysander and Soldiers.

Lysander
(Calling back to Phocion.) The Gods will not desert us…!

Phocion
(With dignity.) You are the conqueror of Athens.

Alexander
Lesser men than you I do not need. Give me your allegiance (pointing significantly to the scroll) and I give you — these lives!

Lydia
(Whispering.) Phocion, you cannot sacrifice such men!

Citizen
Do not think of us! What is life to the conquered? Gladly would we die for Athens.

Alexander
I wait your decision, Phocion.

Phocion
(Bitterly.) Phocion, Military Governor of Alexandria, is Alexander's host.

Alexander
The word of Phocion is enough. (Burns the scroll unread.) Lysander, the boy, shall be Captain of your Bodyguard in Egypt. The Gods — your Gods — are witness to what I say.

[Alexander salutes Phocion and goes out. Phocion is alone with Lydia. There is a moment’s silence.

Phocion
(Brokenly.) Athens! I have failed you! My life is broken in pieces.
[Hides face in hands.

Lydia
But I meant to save you, Phocion. My love would save you. Have I done wrong? Oh, tell me.

Phocion
(Low.) You have done — your — best. No one — no woman — can do more.

Lydia
I could not face life without you. I could not see you die. My love made the desperate plan. I bargained with Alexander’s queen — life with honour and glory for you in Egypt, the land you love. Oh, Phocion, beloved, do not judge me hardly. You do not speak.

Phocion
(Patiently.) There is something here I cannot understand.
[His hand touches the gift from Egypt. He looks at it curiously, then looks out away from her.

Lydia
I love you too much. Is that hard to understand?

Phocion
(Sadly.) Yet the love the Gods bring is otherwise … I think.

CURTAIN

ACT III. THEIR THIRD LIFE TOGETHER. TIME — FIFTEENTH CENTURY ITALY

CHARACTERS

Paulo Salviati, a painter, age about 25.
Lucia, his wife, a beautiful Florentine.
Prince Damiano di Medici, art patron.

ACT III

Scene — Paulo's studio in Venice. A bare room of obvious poverty. Paulo painting at a large canvas.
(Enter Lucia.)

Paulo
(Turning happily.) Lucia! At last you return. My love, how I have missed you. (Kisses her.) It seemed so long. (Examining her.) You are excited! Then my uneasiness was not for nothing. Tell me. An adventure, perhaps? An admirer, *of course*! This flush…! (Laughs.) Little Child…! (Teasingly.)

Lucia
I've been but a short hour, my Paulo. And, as for adventures and admirers, they have but one name — Paulo. (Looks embarrassed slightly.) How quick you are!

Paulo
Love makes me quick. I think I guess.

Lucia
(Ashamed a little.) Listen! (They listen. The waves of the sea are audible beating against the outer walls.) You hear?

Paulo
(Patiently.) I hear, but I do not understand. It is the water only ——

Lucia
(Lower.) The rising water. (Pauses, while passing hand over her forehead.) Nor do *I* understand. It is my weakness, I suppose. All women have something that makes them fear without a reason, and this is mine ——

Paulo
(Protectively.) For which I love you all the more. For had you reasoned you would not have married me. (To himself.) Strange, strange.… (Recovers gaiety and turns to picture.) See how it grows, Lucia. All that I scraped out yesterday I have repainted. Long before the Competition Day I shall have finished it. (Enthusiastically.) Look!

Lucia
The glow, the warmth, the colour — you've caught it all?

Paulo
I hope so. But when my model *and* my critic desert me both at once like this ——

Lucia
Dear Paulo. (Sighs.) And it's so difficult for me to make five scudi do the work of ten. (Shows agitation.) I know, oh, I know. (Excitement.) Yet somehow, somehow we shall find a way. And it will be wonderful ——

Paulo
(Noticing her mood and wondering.) It is you who are wonderful — (shakes finger at her) intriguing with Fate as ever ——

Lucia
(Quickly.) No, not intriguing. I am but your wife — and model. (Laughs.)

Paulo
And inspiration ——

Lucia
And critic ——

Paulo
And manager! That is the wonder — that you who fled with a painter to learn poverty like this (shows bare room) and this (shows clothes) and this (touches heart) should bargain so cleverly in the market-place and carry home our fish and vegetables in your coloured apron — the Lady Lucia, a house-wife of the people!

Lucia
Forgetting the wine as usual, and dropping half the fish on my way! (Seriously.) Love makes it beautiful. It is for love's sake, Paulo.

Paulo
(Emphatically.) And the work’s sake.

Lucia
(Quickly.) The work, ah yes, the work’s sake. (Excitedly.) Oh, my Paulo, what would I not do — what would I not sacrifice for your advancement — I mean, for your art, your wonderful great art. (Confused.)

Paulo
(Quietly.) This shall be our love’s first-fruits (pointing to canvas).

Lucia
(Repeats low to herself.) Our love’s first-fruits.

Paulo
(Rapt.) When you and I float over the lagoons as dust upon the wind — (turns to her from picture, and lowers voice) when you and I are gone — remembered, perhaps, only as Paulo the painter, and Lucia his inspiration — this beauty — ah, that is my dream — this beauty shall still shine out for the world.
[They watch the picture for a moment.

Lucia
I fear one thing only for you — poverty. You should have *everything*.

Paulo
I have. Everything that matters to an artist, and its name is inspiration.
[Looks with passionate admiration at her.

Lucia
(With growing agitation.) You left Florence for my sake. But for me, the great Princes — (with an effort) the Medici — would have helped.

Paulo
(Brusquely.) We agreed — (pretended severity) — solemnly, you remember — never to mention your princely lover’s name. Nothing stops good painting like jealousy, and at *that* name I see blood.

Lucia
(Smiling.) Our Palace is too poor to house even that thin ghost. You have no need to think of jealousy.

Paulo
No need now, Lucia. In Venice we are safe from Damiano di Medici. Now, will you sit for me? I burn to work. Come! You must have roses in your hands. I will go to the flower-sellers by the bridge.

Lucia
I would have brought them with me from the market-place — one scudi each! I hesitated ——

Paulo
And bought ten sprats instead! My wonderful, clever house-wife. Without sprats to eat I never could paint roses! But I must have them. I shall be but a moment away, my love — a single moment (throwing kisses from the door) that will seem like years! Farewell … Little Child.

Lucia
Little Child! Ah, how I love that name, given to me with our first kiss. I love it better than my own. (Thinks a moment, puzzled.) For somehow it seems my *very* own ——

Paulo
It is your own. The little love-name that seems to travel like memory up the ages. I shall be back as soon as you are ready.
[Exit
[Knocking at the door startles her.
(Enter Damiano di Medici.)

Lucia
You! And so soon. It is *too* soon. I've had no time to prepare him yet ——

Medici
A painter receives his patron without preparation surely ——

Lucia
Patron! You must not use that word to him, or all is ruined before it is even begun. You must remember ——

Medici
(Bows ironically.) "Must" to me! And "must" again! My gracious Lady Lucia forgets ——

Lucia

Nothing. She remembers that her husband, first of all, is proud, as I have already warned you. He does not yet know that I have been to see you — you, of all men in the world.

Medici
(Frowning.) When you say "proud" you mean, I take it, jealous.

Lucia
I mean both. (Manner changing.) Oh, Prince, you promised — I have your word that you would be guided in this by me.

Medici
(Unbending.) I was in haste to see the picture ——

Lucia
But too great haste ——

Medici
(Ignoring her interruption.) For he is, I swear truly, the man I need — his work, that is to say. (Threateningly.) As once, my Lady, you were the woman that I needed. But needs do not last for ever, nor is any indispensable — perhaps.

Lucia
(More control.) Oh, give me time, Prince, please. You do not want to lose him. I have your word and trust it. (Anxiously.) Will you not take your gondola to the islands — the sun is sweet upon the water — and return in half an hour? I — by that time I ——

Medici
The light is sweet upon your face as well. What do you offer me in return for so great a favour?

Lucia
I am the wife of Paulo Salviati.

Medici
And have, as I see, married poverty as well as genius! I was too slow for once, as now, it seems, I am too hasty. I should have asked — and taken — all before this fellow ——

Lucia
(Scorn.) Poverty with Salviati is beauty for *eternity*. The wealth of a

Florentine princess belongs to *time*.

Medici
And, therefore, you come humbly to ask *me* a favour.

Lucia
One it should be an honour for you to grant (with earnest persuasion) — that you may share in giving eternal beauty to the world. Had I asked the Collona or the Calviere to see the work of a great painter whom poverty ——

Medici
You came, instead, to me.

Lucia
You have bought the palace on the Grand Canal and need a great — the greatest — painter for your ceiling ——

Medici
Enthusiasm becomes you. You look divine with that passion in your eyes.

Lucia
(Cunningly.) I am his model too, you see.

Medici
And that delicious gesture. (Steps nearer.) A little more fire, a touch more of abandon, and I swear that — on certain conditions — oh, very small ones! — I would grant everything you ask.

Lucia
(Icily.) An hour ago, when we talked together, you passed me your word. I appealed to you as lover of the beautiful — the best, the noblest in you. I was, it seems, mistaken, and our interview now had better end. (Moves to window.) I will call my husband.

Medici
This change from fire to ice is exquisite! (Admiringly.) But why so proud, fair Lady Lucia? (She stands listening.) You hear him coming? (She hears the water lapping. Hides her face a moment.) It is only the waves. The tide is rising still. That's all.

Lucia
(Distraught.) Yes, rising, rising. Please leave me, Prince. No, no — please

stay — a moment longer. (Frightened.) Forgive me. Something — a vision-flashed upon me out of darkness. I am confused. I fear. (To herself.) Oh, I have done this very thing before ——

Medici
But not with me, alas!

Lucia
(Goes to his side.) Forgive me. I thought only of myself. For a moment I forgot the work, the beauty that is his divine, his holy mission. Now I'm myself again. The water, the rising water — somehow — in some strange way — reminds me. Oh, I will be wise and loving in the noblest way. (Looks into his eyes. Imploringly.) It is his need, his poverty, that drive me to ask a favour of you who once aspired to be my lover. Have you no pity? We fled from Florence to escape you — it is true. I would rather ask favours of any in the world but you —— (Confused.)

Medici
And yet — (To himself.) And you are his model. You could live for ever on my ceiling! (To her.) You are, indeed, a Goddess belonging to eternity! (Admiringly.)

Lucia
And yet — yes, I came to you an hour ago — as patron. It is true. It was for his sake and for his great art I came. (Voice singing outside.) Oh, I ask no favour now more than a little time to talk with him. That is his voice. I will persuade him. I will gain his consent, and he will do the picture for you — for your palace. Leave me, I beg, a few moments with him alone, and then return — to find — I promise it — the greatest painter in all Italy ——

Medici
In all the world.

Lucia
Prepared to give you of his best.
[Clasps her hands and stares into his face.

Medici
To have you in my palace so (admiringly) is, perhaps, the next best thing to — have you in my ——

Lucia
Oh, I implore you. Leave me with him. (Singing comes very close.) I promise.

Medici
(Shrugging.) You have chosen the one spell that moves me. Even more strong than the love of a fair woman is my love of art — its wonder, its beauty, and its triumph. His picture will outlive even your loveliness. (Sighs.) My name and my great palace will remind a later world of me, and of what I did for beauty. Well, well, my Lady Lucia, you win me over — for the moment, at any rate. I will stand behind this screen and listen. I must hear how you persuade genius to abjure its principles!

Lucia
(Firmly.) Then I do nothing. You must first go.

Medici
Another "must." Your self-will is adorable. Upon my word! But I, too, have a "must" — his work, with yourself as model, on my palace ceiling! (Yields with a sarcastic bow.)
[Exit.
[Lucia mounts the model's throne and stands, arranging her drapery, as Paulo enters.

Paulo
(Breathless; carries roses.) Only two! They were so dear. I have not your skill in bargains. (Holds out roses.) We must make them do. (Kisses her.) Have I been very long? I had to go nearly to the Zucca.

Lucia
Two roses added to our love makes a whole garden. And one day soon you shall lack nothing the work needs. (Tenderly.) Oh, Paulo, beloved, by rights everything should be yours now. There is not a painter in Italy who comes near you.

Paulo
(Quietly.) I shall win the Competition. We shall have plenty then.

Lucia
(Lower.) Your art needs it *now*. (Sighs.) I am so useless to you — and yet ——

Paulo
(Looking.) And yet — ? Lucia, this anxiety, this nervousness is strange to you. You use unaccustomed words. “Useless”! What can you mean?

Lucia
You would never be angry — you would not scold me, no matter what I might do — for your work’s sake?

Paulo
(Passionately.) You have such darling moods. I love you. The work is ours, not mine. (Caresses her.) I understand so well. It is your love that makes you tremble for the work’s sake: the picture grows, the Competition Day comes nearer. It’s like the sea-tides rising — it affects you — *I* understand!

Lucia
Yes, yes. You always know. You’re always right. An inner tide seems rising in me as the time draws near. You understand my woman’s moods, and so forgive them.

Paulo
(Painting.) Picture the scene, as we used to do when scudi were very scarce. It always makes us happy — the brilliant forecast.

Lucia
Tell me again. I love to hear it all.

Paulo
The judging will be in the Council Hall where the Doge holds high state, crowded with the noblest and loveliest of all Venice. The pictures chosen for the final verdict — that’s Vernio’s and Marco Gagliano’s, and mine — I mean ours — of course — will stand apart on easels. And on a pillar in front of them shines the jewelled casket with the thousand gold pieces that Venice bestows — a mere trifle — upon him she decrees the greatest artist ——

Lucia
And the pillar is garlanded with roses — more than these two, but not more lovely, Paulo.

Paulo

Of course. And the competitors waiting in a hungry, anxious group ——

Lucia

You won’t be hungry. I’ll have so many sprats the night before ——

Paulo

I shan’t be anxious either.

Lucia

(Happier.) You will be dressed in a new doublet of purple cloth. If we can buy no golden thread for the embroidery I shall weave this across it. (Holds out her hair.) You’ll look magnificent ——

Paulo

The picture ——

Lucia

Still more magnificent. They won’t know which to look at ——

Paulo

(Merry.) Then they’ll squint.

Lucia

The judge will call aloud your name: Paulo Salviati. You will be victor, and all the Assembly will rise to honour you ——

Paulo

(Correcting her again.) The work. My art, not me. My art, my work ——
[Lucia stands up to show the judge’s gestures. She hears the water lapping. Her face changes.
What is it, Little Child?

Lucia

N — nothing, Paulo. I — I merely thought a moment of those other painters, of Vernio, of Gagliano, the favoured ones who have wealthy patrons, so that they can work in ease and comfort, lacking nothing ——

Paulo

(Grandly.) Except my inspiration — and my liberty. Think what that means. My work is done in freedom, and *must* surpass their best since it is bought of luxury. (Earnest and contemptuous.) What artist, no matter his genius, that can see truth while a patron jogs his brush, bidding him do this and that, set here a touch of gold and there of scarlet, put here a flower, a bird, and there a — a (explodes) — a sprat — ! Why not? It is the soul alone that sees truth, and such men have sold their souls. They will be paid accordingly.

Lucia
(Agitated.) There are some patrons who — it is said — give freedom, liberty too.

Paulo
I never heard their names.

Lucia
There are some who know, who understand better. (Confused and rapidly.) They say the Medicis ——

Paulo
(Stops painting.) Such painters and their patrons live for time, not for eternity, my Little Child. And among them the worst — the very worst — is that Florentine whose best claim to merit is that he dared to aspire to your love.

Lucia
I hate and despise him. Yet I dread his help — for others. He is as great in influence almost as his elder brother, Cosimo.

Paulo
Bah!

Lucia
Forgive me, Paulo — I reproach myself often that we fled from him — from Florence — where he might — (lower) oh, he *could* have done so much for you — his patronage.

Paulo
(Staring.) The mere name, as you see, stops me painting. You must not speak of it, here least of all in our place of work, of worship. Patronage — bah! My fire would go out, my inspiration leave me, my soul die in bondage. I must have (loudly) liberty.

Lucia
(Frightened.) The Madonna help me! Paulo, beloved, see what I have brought you — something your picture needs. My present and my surprise.

No questions, now!
[Holds out richly-coloured silk.

Paulo
(Delighted, amazed.) That very broidery we saw together! Lucia — Little Child! How did you pay for it, or — or did you steal it? The merchant asked ten lira, I remember — and we had but three. (Examines it.) The colour of wine and pomegranate! Gorgeous! How did you pay for it? Quick, tell me. (Lucia turns her head from side to side.) The long gold earrings! Your last jewel! Lucia! (Takes her in his arms.) I'll kiss your ears (softly) till they leave blushes you cannot sell, fairer than any jewels, for they are the kisses of my soul which sees eternal beauty.

Lucia
Would that I had a whole casket of both kinds, my Paulo! Of one kind I would sell all. You should have a studio with north light, the best paints that can be bought, the choicest hangings, the fairest models, and — and, oh, everything these others possess who have not risked all for Love and brought a wife from Florence —— (Voice breaks and stops.)

Paulo
Hush, hush, Little Child! You have given all you had — and that is everything. My art, if it is inspired as we dream, is stronger than circumstances, and will conquer. And I have liberty — love, beauty, liberty! What more can I ask of Heaven? Come, see the picture with me a moment. (Draws her to it.) Let us look at it together. (They stand before it.)

Lucia
(Low.) The Gods painted it.

Paulo
(Moved.) Your soul and mine, say rather. The hand is nothing. It is the inspiration. (They look a moment.) It was conceived, at least, in liberty — (Starts and looks at her.) You whispered something? I did not catch it. Tell me, Little Child. You feel — ? Why, I declare, you tremble.

Lucia
(Very low.) One thing, I fear, one thing alone! The golden bloom, the warmth, the joyous laughter and the richness all Venetians love. It will be

judged with the work of — of others whom plenty and comfort and — and all that help which money can provide ——

Paulo
Men who feed from their patron’s hands like obedient lap-dogs ——

Lucia
Madonna, help me! They have never to calculate if their blue paint can last till the sky is finished. (Impetuously.) Why, in Florence, the Medici gives his painters ——

Paulo
That name again!

Lucia
I chose it at random — by mistake. It slipped out, I mean. (Losing control more.) Oh, my too proud Paulo, if you only knew how I love your pride and worship it. I only thought — for a moment only — the merest foolish moment — that this young Medici — oh, he loves beauty too, he worships art and beauty — *perhaps* — I wondered — he *might* have helped in a way that even you could have accepted without losing your liberty. I reproach myself so ——

Paulo
(Sternly.) Lucia, I need no man’s help. I have told you. You doubt my art, my power, when you show this fear. It is fear that makes you reproach yourself. Our love knows no fear. (Soothes her.)

Lucia
It is, perhaps, myself I fear, Paulo. A strange dread haunts me like a dream. I fear lest I injure your great work, your mission ——

Paulo
You tremble still. You are excited. Tell me, Little Child — do you know something that you hide from me — that you cannot tell me?
[Pause.

Lucia
Nothing, nothing, but my woman’s mood. My passion to help you is so great I sometimes fear lest I guide it wrongly — (breaks off). See, Paulo, the light is good, and we have this broidery you need (replaces old drapery with the new silk piece) — the very thing — exactly the tint and texture. I’ll

sit for you. (Shows hurry.) There is no time to lose. Some one might disturb us.

Paulo
(A look of suspicion comes and goes. He watches her puzzled, while mixing his paints.) Your mood is *new*. That is what disquiets me. You seem expectant almost. And this strange haste, Lucia? We never hurry!

Lucia
(Laughing gaily.) Only that I long to see this colour (touches silk) in your picture — on the very canvas, alive and burning — before it is seen by — by others.

Paulo
(Absorbed.) Yet who should see it before the Competition Day?

Lucia
Of course, of course. Still I am anxious. Time is precious. (Poses.) Oh, how lovely the silk lies on me! Look! And am *I* right? (Whispers.) Paulo, I feel your brushes on my heart. Paint swiftly, beloved, swiftly.

Paulo
Beautiful! Perfect! Divine! There — just as you are now. Don't move! Even your heart must stop!

Lucia
Madonna, help me!

Paulo

She does. Have no fear for the result. (Paints hard.) Now, talk to me while I work — no movement, mind! Just words. I love the music of your voice. It soothes and blesses me. The gossip of the market-place, for instance?

Lucia
(Quickly.) Ah, well, then the Eros will interest you — the one we coveted so.… It's gone from the merchant's booth at last.

Paulo
Our Grecian Eros! Our little statue! I shall miss it. I wonder who bought it. Or has it flown back to Samos, starved with yearning, on our summer wind? Some day we'll follow it. Greece! Glorious mother of artists! My heart lies

there — sometimes, I almost think, my memory too. (Pause.) Who bought our Eros? Did you hear that as well?

Lucia
The critics say that in your art Greece has come back to life again.

Paulo
Who bought it, Lucia? Your head to the right a little — so.

Lucia
A great Prince, a stranger to Venice, they said, who has bought the Cavaliere Palazzo on the Grand Canal. Gossip is full of it. He has sworn to make it more beautiful than Cosimo Medici's in Florence ——

Paulo
That odious name again! (Smiling.) It haunts you, Little Child! (She starts.) Don't move! don't move! The pose is perfect.

Lucia
Haunts the gossip of the town, rather — for which you asked me, Signor! The ceilings are to be painted with classical scenes alone — the loves of Apollo, and Athena's triumph.

Paulo
What subjects! And I know that Palazzo. Its ceilings are superb, enormous! Painting the very sky! (Steps back to examine his work.) It's coming, it's coming, the very colour I wanted. Yes, yes, they are the biggest in all Venice, so I'm told. (Turns to her.) Now, just suppose, Lucia — just suppose that one day ——

Lucia
(Nervous.) Paulo, beloved, do not stop. Paint on quickly. You are in your best vein. Paint on before — before the light changes. Yes, and I heard one other thing.

Paulo
(Painting.) Ah!

Lucia
That this Prince will commission the winner of the Competition ——

Paulo
(Looking up.) To paint those ceilings! Not unlikely, Lucia! There are menial

fellows enough with talent who would do it. *I* — win or lose — *I* accept no commission tainted by patronage. And I *shall* win. What was this Prince's name?

Lucia
(Excited.) And those ceilings might be yours!

Paulo
Who is he?

Lucia
S — some said one thing, some another. I ——

Paulo
The merchant must have delivered his Eros — to somebody — somewhere.
[Watches her.

Lucia
He didn't say. I didn't ask *him*. It was the gondolier as I came home. Oh, Paulo, I cannot sit well for you if you cross-question me like this! You're like a judge. I love you so. Why should you suspect —— ?
[Rises agitated.

Paulo
Suspect! *You!* Clear water cannot hide the reflections in it. (Expression of comprehension dawns on his face.) Even if your love guided you amiss, I — I could never think, and far less use — that ugly word! Lucia! Little Child! You tremble —— (Starts forward.)
[Enter Old Woman, flustered. Lucia's hand flies to her heart.
Woman
Signor! Signora! A great gentleman comes for you. His gondola is already at the steps. I heard him give orders to wait. I ran on to warn you.

Lucia
(Cry.) Already!

Paulo
(Half incredulous still.) Great gentleman! (Looking at Lucia.) Asking for — us!
[Lucia silent, face in hands.
Woman
He is no Venetian. By his liveries he must be a Prince at least, and a great

one. Your dress, Signora! (Arranges it.) He’s come to buy the Signor’s pictures! Your fortune’s made. Oh, happy day! *I* will open the gate for him, so he will not know you have no servant.
[Exit.

Paulo
(Grim.) I do not understand. (Makes to fasten door, hesitates, then turns to Lucia.) *You* can explain this to me — Little Child — perhaps?

Lucia
Paulo, Paulo, do not be angry. Oh, forgive me, I implore. For your dear sake — for your work, your art — for you, I did it. It is not *me* he comes to see. It is your work, your picture. I went this very day — but an hour ago — to make him come. Oh, tell me, tell me I have not done wrong!
(Old Woman opens door. Enter Medici.)

Paulo
(Aghast.) Damiano di Medici! Here!

Lucia
(Hand on his arm.) Paulo! Paulo!

Medici
At your service, Signor Salviati. (To Lucia.) Signora bellissima! Am I too early still? My promise — you remember — I was impatient to fulfil it.

Paulo
Promise! What can a Prince of the Medici promise to my wife?

Medici
(Gravely.) That which only the proudest painter may receive gladly from a humble prince: appreciation of his work.

Paulo
(Coldly.) My work is not done for the appreciation of princes. I have no work to show.

Medici
Your wife, Signor, said otherwise. And she is a rare judge of values. (Bows.) A faultless critic! (Bows to her.)

Paulo
The Prince di Medici knows.

Lucia
(To Paulo.) Oh, do not anger him. And think a little of *me*. You forget the risk — for your sake — that I ran — (imploring) your career ——

Paulo
(Watches her thoughtfully, weighing things that perplex him.) Love led you a strange errand.

Lucia
For the work's sake, my Paulo.

Medici
The Medici have short memories for their failures. (Laughs.) Her courage — in coming to visit me — was even more rare than her (glances at the picture) — her judgment.

Paulo
(With effort.) She went to see you — yes. It was a mistaken courage that earned you a favour of that kind.

Medici
(Suave.) Even in Venice a Medici does not receive strangers — without a name — or, shall I say, whose name is yet to win. Your wife, Signor, had the courage to get her way to me past half a hundred lacqueys. But more! She had the eloquence and wit to persuade my return visit — here. She assured me your picture was worthy of my personal, my immediate inspection.
[Goes to it. Paulo starts forward to prevent him.

Lucia
(Catches his arm.) Paulo, beloved — by our love, by little Eros (frantic), by everything!
[Medici moves the picture into better light.

Medici
(Watching them out of corner of his eye.) With your permission. (Bows.) You will, perhaps, forgive the liberty. The light fails suddenly a little. So — (examines critically, with signs of pleasure).

Paulo
(Back turned.) For your sake, Little Child, I endure this cruelty.

Lucia
I yearned to help ——

Paulo
So it was he who bought the Eros too? (To himself.) This is an evil omen. (To her.) I thought us safe in Venice.

Lucia
You are so calm, so quiet. You terrify. I would fear your anger less. Oh, my great Paulo, my dear, listen to me one moment. This family — this man — vile though he be — loves art and beauty, and in so far is not — Oh, I mean — oh, Paulo, it is his ceilings, his palace, his help to your career that have betrayed me! You could bring Greece to life in Venice — and for ever. Think not of him. Think only of your beauty — lighting the world when he is dust ——

Paulo
(Quietly.) Is my art so poor a thing — have you so misunderstood it — that you think it is for sale?

Lucia
(Distraught.) Have I done *that*!
[Medici turns from the picture to Paulo.

Medici
(With reverence.) You have been taught of the Gods — the Gods of Greece.

Paulo
(Frigidly.) Your praise ——

Lucia
Hush, oh, I beg you — for *my* sake.

Medici
The drawing is the equal of del Sarto's and the composition no poorer than da Vinci's. I swear it. Yet — the colour — hmm — I miss Titian's glory. Those shadows (pointing) are out of tone a little ——

Lucia
(Quickly.) We ran out of blue that day, alas ——

Medici
Your model was, certainly, perfect. But why have you painted the nymphs

from her as well as their divine mistress?

Lucia
Models demand impossible prices ——
[Paulo puts his hand on her mouth angrily.

Medici
(Reflecting.) So little more, and it were a masterpiece. Even now it should win the Competition, by rights. Yet Vernio's is just a shade more rich, more splendid. I have seen it. And Gagliano has a purer colour. But then, of course, Gagliano buys his paint from that fellow by the Zucca who has a secret method — and charges accordingly, the scoundrel!

Paulo
(Unable to contain himself longer.) I paint as I desire, and as I can. The picture is mine. And not for sale!

Medici
(Kindly.) I admire your spirit, Signor. It has the independence of ancient Greece herself. Yet at what price? You may be satisfied with yourself, but your art thereby suffers. It becomes a slave of your conditions — if you will allow the language.

Lucia
Oh, it must be so! Paulo, it must be so! You see?

Paulo
(Proudly.) Conditions that leave the spirit free, at least. The spirit of beauty owns no master ——

Medici
The husband of such beauty should be more gracious. (Frankly.) Ah, Salviati, you speak to a Medici, indeed, but also to one who loves beauty as you yourself do. I might — had I persisted — have taken your golden bird in my own net. (Pauses.) It is my pleasure now to set you free from the hard conditions that enslave you. In this way can a Medici reward good for evil. Signor, I forgive all for the sake of your genius. I admire your picture — its true classic spirit. Yet it has not quite the warmth, the fire, the bounteous splendour we Italians ask. Give but your sky a deeper hue, add to that robe the undertone of scarlet it needs to make it felt, flood our prodigal Italian sunshine over it all — and I will buy your picture at your price.

Lucia
Yes, yes. Oh, Paulo, what an offer! Think!

Paulo
It is not for sale.

Medici
While you may still enter it for the Competition. The judges — er — may hear that Damiano di Medici has bought it for his new Palazzo — and — judge — accordingly.

Paulo
(Low.) The gold, the blue, the scarlet you desire — I mean, suggest — are not in my scheme.

Medici
Yet they would add the perfect touch now lacking — in my judgment, Signor. Come, now, I will go further. I have sworn that my Palazzo shall surpass even that of Cosimo, my ambitious brother, in Florence. I will have a Gorgione for his Lippo Lippi, and — if you will — a Salviati for his da Vinci. I offer you, further, the painting of my ceilings, Signor — seven years' inspired and happy labour.

Paulo
Seven years of bondage to another's taste and purse.

Lucia
(To Paulo.) You could do your own work too.
[Looking at Medici.

Medici
Why not?

Paulo
To add this gold and blue and scarlet is — for me — a lie.

Lucia
Oh, my beloved, think, think a little, and weigh your words!

Medici
My offer stands — but not against unreasonable resistance. I repeat it: this picture at your figure, and seven years to paint the ceilings, with a certain freedom in design and subject, and permission to do your own work in your

leisure. It is a matter to conclude now quickly. (Ominously.) It is not amusing, though it may be novel, for a Medici to be thwarted of his will — his deep design. (Bows.)

Paulo
A poor painter dares the novelty.

Lucia
(Cries.) You forget everything, Paulo — me you forget even — when you say such words!

Medici
(Impatient, half-threatening.) Beauty has turned your head, maybe. Excess, I have heard it said, (significantly) can affect the reason. You have (glancing towards Lucia) *too* much beauty. But there are remedies ——

Paulo
(Startled.) I do not understand you.

Medici
As a great patron, I have my duties too. (Slowly.) If the possession of too much beauty threaten your great gift, I owe it to the world to (sinister tone and look) help — to save you.

Paulo
(Facing him.) I prefer plain spoken language from a man — even though he be patron.

Lucia
Oh, guard your tongue at least! The Prince is patient with us.

Medici
(Softly.) You robbed me once of beauty I desired. You fled from Florence. I accepted with a smile, and did not bestir myself to follow and prevent — as I could well have done. I was too kind, perhaps ——

Lucia
(Breaks in.) But, great Prince, you — you have forgotten all that. You swore ——

Medici
(To her.) The sight of beauty stirs my memory again. (Suggestively.) For beauty grows, it seems. (Smiles admiringly.)

[He moves a little towards her. Paulo, with clenched hands, is held back by Lucia.

Lucia
(To Medici.) My Lord! (To Paulo.) Oh, Paulo, hold yourself! Am I so little to you?

Medici
And this increase of beauty makes me remember something I had — (to Lucia) as you say — forgotten. To see him who robbed me become my dependant — would have the true Grecian touch of comedy. (Turns abruptly to Paulo with changed tone.) Salviati — before the light fails, will you now dip your brush in the gold and scarlet *we* suggested?

Paulo
Never! Even in fading light I see only truth.

Lucia
Ah! Oh!

Medici
(Looking from one to the other, then to the picture.) There are many flowers in my gardens, but Italy holds one Salviati only. (Reflects.) My ceilings need him. I swore, besides, to Cosimo ——

Lucia
(Distraught.) My Lord, my Lord, you promised —— !

Medici
(Brusquely.) That I would see the work and offer my patronage — if it pleased me. That offer still holds good. But your husband is obstinate ——

Paulo
I am true. I claim only liberty.

Medici
(Darkly.) So I must remember my duties as a patron — and apply remedies that may save his unreason — and his — art.

Lucia
(Alarmed.) What can you mean —— ?
[Medici claps his hands.

Medici
Ho! Ho! Without there! (Four Men in livery rush in.) Take the woman, but do not hurt her.
[Men seize her.

Lucia
(Struggling.) Ah, Dios! Madonna, help me! Alive — never! Paulo! Paulo!

Paulo
(Tries to fight his way to her.) Never while I live either.
[Draws a dagger.

Medici
(To Men.) Disarm him — gently, gently. No injury. Who bruises that right hand of his answers with his life, remember! Strike up the dagger instantly.
Men
(Struggling.) For a painter he fights well.
Careful there! His hand — your sword's point!
His right hand, yes. Be wary.
This is rare sport.
Have you got the arm? Hold fast.
I've got the dagger.
He's safe, my Lord.
[They hold him, disarmed.

Lucia
(Held.) Paulo, my Paulo! (Moans.) Oh, that I were dead, to have done this thing!

Paulo
(Firmly.) My soul stands by yours. I know you true. Fear nothing!

Medici
(Quietly.) Signor Salviati, I regret that my sense of duty — my deep desire that you shall achieve your greatest — force me to this unpleasant remedy. But poverty is not helpful to your work, and I must — as patron of unreasonable genius — protect your art and yourself. I offer, therefore, the best help in my power. If you accept — then I need take nothing (glancing at Lucia) from your store of beauty.

Paulo
Dios! This cruelty — this treachery!

Lucia
No, no, no. Paulo, do not think of *me* ——

Paulo
It is too late. (To Medici, with effort.) Your vile scheme means this, then: that I submit my art to your paid dictation, become your creature, or you will — (struggles violently). Let me free! (to Men). This bastard is not fit to live.
A Man
Hush! He is a Medici — Cosimo's own brother.

Medici
My gondola waits. My new Palazzo lies but half an hour distant — ready to welcome its first fair ornament.

Paulo
(Wild.) To be broken and thrown away when done with! Death is better now.

[Tries to injure his right hand against a sword.

Medici
(To Men.) Careful. Hold him. Or your lives ——

Lucia
(Frantic.) Beloved, it is *not* too late. Forget that I live — oh, forget me — for your work's sake! Remember beauty only ——

Paulo
(Tender patience.) Little Child! My work and beauty live with liberty. (Very softly.) Had you forgotten? Did belief in me waver, or did love guide you strangely — misconceiving —— ?

Medici
(Impatient.) The light fails rapidly. The gold and scarlet should be laid on now, before dusk falls. (To Men.) One of you go and prepare my gondola — for a lady. (Man goes to door.) Lay a soft silken scarf upon the cushion — there must be no screams in Venice. (To Paulo.) Oh, I will do it gently, Signor, with my own two hands. There shall be no roughness, no

unkindness. (Man gives scarf.) Oh, here is the very thing. (Goes towards Lucia.) You will take this small attention from me, I beg, if nothing else.

Lucia
I hate you! Your touch is poison.
[Struggles.

Medici
You should not ask favours, then, of those who poison you. (Puts scarf round her arms.) For the mouth I have a yet softer silk, as you shall see. Ah, the Medici, they say, are fortunate in love, and I shall find a way to win you. These arms I am forced to bind shall yet twine willingly about my neck ——

Paulo
(Shouts.) All I possess to him who kills him!

Medici
All you possess!

Paulo
(Yields.) And more — my liberty. Let her go!

Medici
So reason returns, at last. The remedy works already towards a cure.

Paulo
Set her free. I give my word.

Medici
Though I trust no man, I trust *your* word, Salviati.

Paulo
(Stammering.) Unfasten me. Give me my palette.

Medici
(To Men.) Release him. Release the lady too. But watch him closely, lest he hide a weapon.

Paulo
(Free.) This is my only weapon (takes brushes, etc.). With it I put chains upon my soul. So — and so.
[Dabs on paint. Lucia silent. Collapses to her knees and hides her face.

Medici
Improved already! So swiftly! You are, indeed, the greatest of them all. We shall beat Verio out of court, and Gagliano will die of envy on the spot. (To Men.) Begone with you! No, stay a moment — take the picture with you and lay it carefully in the gondola. It shall be finished under my own eye — before the ceilings are begun. (Men obey.) Carefully! One smear and your lives are forfeit. (Turns to Lucia and raises her.) You are not quick to thank me, Signora, yet I have fulfilled my promise to you. All that you begged of me is accomplished. Henceforth Salviati, your husband, shall work in comfort and lack nothing.

Lucia
(Faint.) How — how could I have done this thing? What ancient deep perversity — what lack of faith — what hidden destiny in me? (To Paulo.) Paulo, look, look at me! (He keeps his back to her. Medici watches them quietly.) Hark!
[Sound of water lapping heard outside.

Medici
So you will not thank me — either one of you? No matter. I like a little spirit. (Goes to door.) Carefully, now! The edges safe. No flick of dust, mind.
[Stands looking down steps.

Lucia
(Low.) Hark! (To Paulo.) It is another sound I hear. (Whispers.) Paulo! It is water. (Stands listening intently to the lap of the sea. Distress increases. Passes hand over forehead, as if trying to remember something.) The rising water! (She turns her head slowly to look at Paulo. He turns slowly too. Their eyes meet. Very low.) You hear? (Whispers.) That sound is in my soul. Paulo — I half remember — something — that hides behind it, yet comes with it. (Goes up and clings to him.) I have done this thing before — destroyed you — with my selfish love.

Paulo
Hush, hush!

Lucia
You look so strangely at me. Your face changes. Dios! (Frantic.) Speak to me, beloved! If you cannot forgive — say that you understand. Oh, what is

it in your eyes? (Fear.)
[Dusk increases.

Paulo
(Tender whisper.) The night is coming — with her stars. In my eyes is only love. (Patiently.) There is nothing to forgive. (Embraces her for several moments. Then breaks suddenly away.) Where is the gold — the scarlet? (Bewildered. To Medici.) What is my Lord’s desire?

Lucia
(Screams.) Oh, I have killed — killed *again*.
[Falls.

Paulo
(Catching her.) Little Child!

Medici
(Turning at the scream.) She is even more beautiful than I first thought. Well, well, the picture is mine at any rate, and she — (smiles). A good evening’s work. How dark it grows. And the rising tide is at the full. Ho! Without there! My gondola!
[Exit.
[Paulo and Lucia in each other’s arms.

CURTAIN

EPILOGUE PRESENT DAY

CHARACTERS

Phillip Lattin.
Mrs. Lattin.
The Doctor.

EPILOGUE

Scene — Same as Prologue.
Time — Present.
(Mrs. Lattin opens her eyes slowly. The Doctor, near the bed, is seen making a gesture with his arms as if lowering a curtain. Mrs. Lattin shows bewilderment.)

Mrs. Lattin
(Dreamily.) Where am I? Florence … Greece … Egypt … where are they? I am back again. But *who* am I?

Doctor
You are your Past.

Mrs. Lattin
I slept? But yet I lived it. I understand at last. I have found life.

Doctor
You cannot die, nor can *you* sleep.

Mrs. Lattin
But time.…

Doctor
Is the body’s measuring.
[She looks round the room, and finally into his face. He moves slowly backwards towards the door.

Mrs. Lattin
(Thinking.) It was not a dream. I was in Greece with Phocion … with Paulo in Italy … with.… Oh, it is too long ago, too far away. It’s fading. (Eagerly.) Oh, I would not forget!

Doctor
The results lie in you. That is memory.

Mrs. Lattin
Each time I injured … thwarted the highest in him by my selfish love. How small my love! Oh, tell me it is not now too late.…

Doctor
(By door.) There is no "too late." What he could do without was added to him. You have taught Menophis, Phocion and Paulo to become … Phillip.
[He begins to fade.

Mrs. Lattin
(Joyfully.) I understand at last, and I am healed. I delayed Menophis. I shall inspire Phillip. I shall go with him … back to … Egypt. Phocion, Paulo, how happy *they* will be!

Doctor
(Almost invisible.) *He* is coming now. I leave you.

Mrs. Lattin
But *he* must see you too.…

Doctor
(Invisible, only a voice heard.) He cannot.

[Door opens. Phillip enters quietly. He shows surprise at finding her sitting up. Her hands are stretched out towards the door where the Doctor has vanished. As he enters, the clock strikes the last three strokes of six o'clock.

Phillip
You rang. I just slipped back to see ——

Mrs. Lattin
(Low.) Phocion … my faithful.…

Phillip
Eh? Are you all right? I mustn't stay. Doctor Ogilvie will be here any minute.

Mrs. Lattin
(Low.) Paulo … my dear one.… I ——

Phillip
(Puzzled.) You slept a moment probably. Good! (Startled by her happy expression.) You look … so much better!

Mrs. Lattin
He came. And I am healed.
[Nurse enters hurriedly.

Nurse
(Whispering to Phillip so that Mrs. Lattin does not hear.) Dr. Ogilvie has just telephoned. He is detained. He cannot get here till seven o’clock.

Phillip
All right. Hush!
[Exit Nurse.

Mrs. Lattin
He told me … showed me … everything.

Phillip
(Humouring her.) He gave you hope — the best? I see it in your eyes.

Mrs. Lattin
It’s not — *I* am not — too late. That’s all.

Phillip
Hush! Hush! Lie quiet a little longer. (Goes on to ask, still humouring her.) You mean the doctor says —— ?

Mrs. Lattin
I am so happy. I know and understand now. It’s glorious.

Phillip
My darling! Gently, gently! Do not excite yourself. Lie still and sleep, if you can, again. He has given you something? Later, you shall tell me ——

Mrs. Lattin
Ah, your great patient strength! It is too wonderful. And to think that my weakness helped, my selfish —— !
[Sits up and peers closely at him, shading her eyes with one hand.

Phillip
(Anxious, puzzled.) The lamp is in your eyes. I’ll move it. Do not stir.

There, is that better?

Mrs. Lattin
Thank you, but I do not mind the light. I mind nothing. Thank you (the name comes back suddenly), Phillip. Ah, it *is* Phillip! I know you again — as you are — to-day!
[Passes hand over forehead. Sighs and leans back. But face happy and at peace.

Phillip
Mary!

Mrs. Lattin
Not Mary: Little Child.

Phillip
My — Little Child. (Doubting and perplexed.)

Mrs. Lattin
Phillip, dear heart, I've seen — I've seen my past — with you.

Phillip
(Soothingly.) Yes, yes. When you're more rested you shall tell me everything. Your dreams ——

Mrs. Lattin
I must speak now. I've seen *our* past.

Phillip
(Bewildered.) Tell me, then, dearest, tell me. Then you must lie still ——

Mrs. Lattin
(Firmly.) Life!

Phillip
(Impressed.) Life!

Mrs. Lattin
I have recovered. I love you more — but differently. I can forgive myself at last.

Phillip
Recovery! Forgiveness! I do not understand.

Mrs. Lattin
You have not *seen*. I understand for both of us.

Phillip
You have had dreams that troubled you. I implore you, dearest ——

Mrs. Lattin
Look in my face. There is no trouble there — but only joy and life.

Phillip
Yes, yes, but — my darling, what *can* you mean?

Mrs. Lattin
He came — and went.

Phillip
And left one word behind him only —— ?

Mrs. Lattin
One word — Life.

Phillip
(Almost convinced.) Then —— ?

Mrs. Lattin
(Radiant, rising from couch.) I shall go back with you.

Phillip
To Egypt!

Mrs. Lattin
I shall never delay or thwart again. Ah, so many times I have — by my selfish love — (breaks off). Your work *is* a mission — always. It is your soul's career. I understand at last.

Phillip
Hush, hush, Little Child! You say wild things. I could never hear of it. I know your dread, your shrinking fear of Egypt. It would make you ill again. All the doctors agreed ——

Mrs. Lattin
I have *no* dread! My shrinking was — a memory. It was instinctive — a cowardice that shirked sweet expiation — *there*, where it is due. (In spite of him, she rises to her feet. Vigorous.) I am well again. I shall go back with

you. Your work — *my* work — lies out there — in Egypt. Oh, Phillip, be glad with me, for I am forgiven, I am healed!

Phillip
(Stirred.) Dear heart! Your soul is too grand for this frail, precious body. You injure yourself. Such sacrifice from you I could never, never ——

[Breaks off, as he notes the radiant expression in her face. They stand close together beneath the picture.

Mrs. Lattin
(Inflexibly.) It is no sacrifice. It is love, love, love!

Phillip
(Tenderly.) That deep love I never doubted. But — the ingrained dread, the fear, the shrinking that have undermined your willing strength. How can you —— ?

Mrs. Lattin
They are gone for ever. Phillip, how often must I tell you? I am healed. I go back with you. We go together. Our life is there, in Egypt.

Phillip
(Almost convinced.) I feel some great new reality in you. You are most wonderfully changed. Some star of life is rising over us — again. (He gazes into her radiant face with a touch of respect and wonder.) If — if ——

Mrs. Lattin
You must at once withdraw your resignation. There is no “too late”! (Laughs a little.) You promise me!
[Amazement in him gives place to dawning belief at last. Yet he still hesitates.

Phillip
I will see the doctor myself. I promise that if he ——

Mrs. Lattin
You cannot.

Phillip
Cannot! (Awe.) You mean — you have had a vision?

Mrs. Lattin
He has — gone.

Phillip
(Convinced.) It *was* a vision…?
[She turns slowly and looks up at the picture on the wall above them. He turns with her. He is speechless. He holds her very close. They stare together at the palms, the river, the stars, the temples.

Mrs. Lattin
(Softly.) Egypt — where I first delayed and thwarted him, loving him for myself alone — Egypt, beneath your risen stars, beside your rising river — I *shall undo — at last*.
[A new expression steals into his face. He gazes at the picture with her. He holds her still closer to him.

Phillip
(Moved and wondering.) Little Child! It is very strange. Almost, it seems, some dream, some memory of long, long ago stirs in me.

[A slight pause, as they gaze side by side at the picture.
(With effort.) It is beyond me somewhere, but there is great beauty — that deep, unearthly Egyptian beauty in it. (Lowers voice.) Those palms are rustling, those stars seem to move, the Nile flows down towards the sea. Perhaps.… The Tear of Isis falls.…

Mrs. Lattin
Listen … yes…!

Phillip
(Turns to her.) Something about you, something new and — and familiar almost — steals upon me. I half believe.…

Mrs. Lattin
(Whispering.) Phillip, my faithful one, I heard another name as you said that. I heard an ancient name — was it Menophis?

Phillip
(Hushed voice.) *I* thought a name came to me too. It floated past — Nefertiti. It must have been the beating of your heart against my own.
[They stand motionless, gazing, listening.

Mrs. Lattin
Dear, ancient names. How sweet they sound!

Phillip
(Smiling.) I think we are bewitched!

Mrs. Lattin
Egypt! (Pause. Adds softly.) I understand — at last.
[He draws her head back and looks tenderly into her eyes.

Phillip
All but one thing.

Mrs. Lattin
Which is —— ?

Phillip
That what you call delay has helped and taught me.

Mrs. Lattin
(Low.) Perhaps I understand that too. That which the soul can do without is added to it. (Whispers.) Is it not that?

Phillip
Ah, you put it so. Perhaps you put it better. I only know that you have given me the thing I needed most — perspective, the longer sight. My vision clears. (Bends down and kisses her.) I feel new power for my work. I see it whole.

Mrs. Lattin
Then my forgiveness is complete.

CURTAIN

The Autobiography

Blackwood, c. 1914

Episodes before Thirty (1923)

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX
CHAPTER XX
CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII
CHAPTER XXIII
CHAPTER XXIV
CHAPTER XXV
CHAPTER XXVI
CHAPTER XXVII
CHAPTER XXVIII
CHAPTER XXIX
CHAPTER XXX
CHAPTER XXXI
CHAPTER XXXII

TO ALFRED H. LOUIS

CHAPTER I

A STRONG EMOTION, especially if experienced for the first time, leaves a vivid memory of the scene where it occurred. I see a room in a New York boarding-house. I can touch the wooden bed, the two gasbrackets beside the looking-glass, the white door of the cupboard, the iron “register” in the wall that let in heated air, the broken sofa. The view from the dirty windows towards the high roof of Tony Pastor’s music hall in 14th Street, with a side glimpse of the trees in Irving Place, show clearly. The rattle of the Broadway cable cars, the clang of their bells, still come to me through that stifling August air, when the shade thermometer stood at a hundred, with humidity somewhere about 95 per cent. Thoughts of the sea and mountains, vainly indulged within those Myalls, are easily remembered too.

The room I am writing in now seems less actual than the one in the East 19th Street boarding-house, kept by Mrs. Bernstein, a German Jewess, whose husband conducted his own orchestra in a Second Avenue restaurant. Though thirty years ago, it is more clearly defined for me than Lady X’s dining room where I dined last night, and where the lady I took in said graciously, “I simply loved your *Blue Lagoon,”* which, naturally, I was able to praise unreservedly, while leaving her with the illusion as long as possible that she had made friends with its gifted author. And this detailed clarity is due, I am sure, to the fact that in that New York room I had my first experience of three new emotions, each of which, separately, held horror.

Horror draws its lines deep; its pictures stand out in high relief. In my case the horrors were, perhaps minor ones, but at the age of twenty-one — an exceptionally inexperienced twenty-one — they seemed important; and the fact that they were combined entitles them to be considered major. They were three in number: the horror of loathsome vermin running over my body night after night, the horror of hunger, and the horror of living at close quarters with a criminal and degraded mind.

All, as I said, came together; all were entirely new sensations. “Close quarters,” too, is used advisedly, for not only was the room a small one, the cheapest in a cheap house, but it was occupied by three of us — three

English men “on their uppers,” three big Englishmen into the bargain, two of us standing 6 feet 2 inches, the other 6 feet 3 inches in his socks. We shared that room for many weeks, taking our turn at sleeping two in the bed, and one on the mattress we pulled off and kept hidden in the cupboard during the day. Mrs. Bernstein, denying her blood, won our affection by charging eight dollars only, the price for two, morning coffee included; and Mrs. Bernstein’s face, fat, kindly, perspiring, dirty, is more vivid in my memory after all these years than that of the lady last night who so generously mistook me for De Vere Stacpoole. Her voice even rings clear, with its Jewish lisp, its guttural German, its nasal twang thrown in:

“I ask my hospand. Perhaps he let you stay anozzer week.”

What the husband said we never knew. He was usually too drunk to say anything coherent. What mattered to us was that we were not turned out at the moment, and that, in the long run, the good-hearted woman received her money.

Certain objects in that room retain exceptional clarity in my mind. If thought-pictures could be photographed, a perfect print of the bed and gas-bracket could be printed from my memory. With the former especially I associate the vermin, the hunger, and the rather tawdry criminal.

I could describe that bed down to the smallest detail; I could draw it accurately, even to the carving; were I a carpenter I could make it. All that I suffered in it, of physical and mental anguish, the vain longings and despair, the hopes and fears, the loneliness, the feverish dreams — the entire dread panorama still hangs in the air between its stained brown foot and the broken sofa, as though of yesterday. I can see a tall man pass the end of it, one eye on me and another on the door, opening a razor slowly as he went. I see the blue eyes narrowing in his white face, the treachery of the coward twisting his lip into a smirk. I can see him sleeping like a child beside me, touching me. Moving stealthily about the room in the darkness too, as, thinking me asleep, he stole on bare feet to recover the confession of forgery I had forced him to sign, I can still see his dim outline, and even hear his tread — a petty scoundrel unwittingly on his way to gaol.

The bed, thus, is vividly present in my memory. By contrast with it, not quite so sharp, perhaps, and a pleasanter feeling associated with it, another New York sleeping-place rises in the mind — a bench in Central Park.

Here, however, the humour of adventure softens the picture, though at the time it did not soften the transverse iron arms which made it impossible to stretch out in comfort. Nor is there any touch of horror in it. Precise and detailed recollection fades. The hoboes who shared it with me were companions, even comrades of a sort, and one did not feel them necessarily criminal or degraded.

They were "on their uppers" much as I was, and far quicker than I was at the trick of suddenly sitting upright when the night policeman's tread was coming our way. What thoughts they indulged in I had no means of knowing, but I credited them with flitting backwards to a clean room somewhere and a soft white bed, possibly to that ridiculous figure of immense authority, a nurse, just as my own flashed back to a night nursery in the Manor House, Crayford, Kent. That the seats I favoured were near the Swings lent possibly another touch to the childhood's picture.

The memory, anyhow, is a sweeter one than that o the bed in East 19th Street, if less sharply defined. The cool fresh air, the dew, the stars, the smell of earth and leaves, were all of them clean, and no price asked at dawn. Yet the two — the bed and the bench — are somehow linked together in my mind, the one invariably calling up the other; and, thanks to them probably, no bed bothers me now, lumpy or sloping though it be, in train, hotel, or lodging. I have slept in strange places since — high in the Caucasus, on the shores of the Black Sea, on the Egyptian desert, on the banks of the Danube, in the Black Forest and Hungary — but each time the effort to get comfortable brought back the bed and the bench, and sleep soon followed to smother both.

The gas-brackets, similarly, rise vividly before my eyes, associated with the pain, the weariness of hunger; not of true starvation, but of weeks and months of undernourishment, caused by one meal a day. The relation between hunger and gas-brackets may seem remote. It was on the latter, however, that we learned to fix the metal top which made the flame spread in a circle round a light tin cooking-pot. We boiled water for milkless tea in this way, cooked porridge, and when porridge was not to be had we heated water with dried apples in it. I remember the day we discovered that it was more economical to eat the strips of dried apple first, then drink the hot water that made them swell so comfortingly inside us. They proved more filling that way, the false repletion lasted longer, the sense of bulk was more satisfying, the gnawing ceased, and the results, if temporary, at least made it possible to fall asleep.

There are other details of that sordid New York room which still retain their first disagreeable vividness, each with the ghost — a very sturdy ghost — of the emotion that printed it indelibly in the mind. These details are best mentioned, however, in their proper place and sequence. It should first be told how we came to be there.

CHAPTER II

WE ARRIVED IN New York towards the end of October, coming straight from five months in the Canadian backwoods. Before that, to mention myself first, there had been a year in Canada, where, even before the age of twenty-one, I had made a living of sorts by teaching the violin, French, German, and shorthand. Showing no special talent for any profession in particular, and having no tastes that could be held to indicate a definite career, I had come to Canada three years before for a few weeks' trip. My father, in an official capacity, had passes from Liverpool to Vancouver, and we crossed in the *Etruria,* a Cunarder which my mother had launched. He was much feted and banqueted, and the C.P.R. Bigwigs, from Lord Strathcona and Sir William van Home downwards, showed him all attention, placing an observation car at his disposal. General James, the New York postmaster, gave a dinner in his honour at the Union League Club, where I made my first and last speech — consisting of nine words of horrified thanks for coupling "a chip of the old block," as the proposer called me, with the "Chief of the British Postal Service."

A ludicrous wound to vanity helps it to stick in the mind — my father wore no braces, and I copied him, but — well, in his case no belt was necessary, whereas I was slim. It suddenly dawned on me, as I spluttered my brief words, that a line of white was showing between my waistcoat and the top of my trousers. The close of my speech was hurried, my bow was cautious; I was extremely relieved to sit down again.

In the lovely autumn weather, we saw Canada at its best, and the trip decided my future. My father welcomed it as a happy solution. I came, therefore, to Toronto at the age of twenty, with £100 a year allowance, And a small capital to follow when I should have found some safe and profitable chance of starting life. With me came — in the order of their importance — a fiddle, the "Bhagavad Gita," Shelley, "Sartor Resartus," Berkeley's "Dialogues," Patanjali's "Yoga Aphorisms," de Quincey's "Confessions," and — a unique ignorance of life... I served my first literary apprenticeship on the *Methodist Magazine,* a monthly periodical published in Toronto, and before that licked stamps in the back office of the Temperance and General Life Assurance Company, at nothing a week, but with the idea of learning the business, so that later I might bring out some English J insurance company to Canada.

The first taught me that, just as I had no ambition to write, so, likewise, I possessed no talent; the second merely made articulate the dislike I felt for anything to do with Business. It was the three months in the insurance office that caused me to accept eagerly the job on the *Methodist Magazine* at four dollars a week, and the reaction helped to make the work congenial if not stimulating.

The allowance of ten dollars a week was difficult to live on, and I had been looking everywhere for employment. It was through a daughter of Sir Thomas Gait, a friend of my father's on our previous trip to Canada, that I obtained this job — sixteen shillings a week, hours ten to four.

Dr. Withrow, editor of the leading Methodist magazine, and of various Christian Endeavour periodicals for children and young people, was a pleasant old gentleman, who went about in a frock coat and slippers, had a real sense of humour and a nice wife and daughter.

His editorial den was in his own little house, and my duties were to write an article every month for the magazine, which was illustrated, and also to write a few descriptive lines of letterpress to accompany the full-page illustrations for the numerous Christian Endeavour and Methodist periodicals for young people and children. He taught me the typewriter, and with my shorthand I took Most of his letters at dictation, and certainly earned my money. My monthly articles in the magazine were on such subjects as Christmas in England, Life at a Moravian School, The Black Forest, Travel in the Alps — anything that my limited experience enabled me to describe at first-hand, and on the whole the old gentleman seemed satisfied. The description of the children's pictures, however, always made him chuckle, though he never said why, and I wrote dozens of these a day, describing the picture of "King Canute and the Sea," "Elijah in a Chariot of Fire," "A Child Blowing Bubbles," "The Wood-boring Beetle," etc. etc.

He would dictate some of his articles of travel to me, and I would take them down in shorthand, and he often made such grotesque mistakes in facts that

I quietly corrected these as I wrote, and when I read out the sentence to him he would notice the alteration and look at me over his spectacles and say:

“Thank you. Yes, I was wrong there. The fact is, I have so many articles to write that I compose two at a time in my mind, and they get muddled up. An editor should always be accurate, and Methodist readers are cranky and hard to please.” He was a Methodist parson himself, which did not prevent him saying exactly what he thought. He lunched off dates and bananas, which he kept in a bag beside his desk, and that same desk was in such disorder that he never could find what he wanted, and I was not surprised to learn that, before I came, the printers got the wrong papers, and that many of the children’s pictures got descriptions underneath that did not belong to them — for instance, a boy blowing a bubble was published over a few lines describing the habits of snakes, “as seen in our illustration,” and so forth.

I got on so well with the little Methodist that he wanted to come to the evening French classes I was giving at fifty cents a lesson to some of the clerks in the insurance office, and to bring his daughter with him.

He said a little more knowledge of French would be very Good for him when he took his conducted tours of Canadian Methodists to Switzerland; but I did not rise to this, and persuaded him to wait till I could get a more select class to meet, perhaps, at his own house, where a girl could more suitably attend. For, to tell the truth, some of my pupils had a habit of coming slightly drunk — or, as they called it, “with a jag on.” He, however, would not wait, so I lost two good pupils!... Dr. Withrow, patient little man of kindly disposition! His faded black frockcoat, his spectacles high on his puckered forehead, his carpet slippers, his tobacco-stained white beard, his sincere beliefs and his striped trousers of a pattern I have always since labelled mentally as “Methodist trousers” — it is a gentle little memory tucked away among unkinder ones, and I still hear him giving me my first and only lesson how to write. His paraphrase of “fatal facility “stays with me: “Fluency means dullness, unless the mind is packed with thought.” It stays with me because the conversation led to my asking if I might write an article for the monthly on the subject of Buddhism. Behind it lay an ever keener desire to write something on Hegel, whose philosophy I felt certain was based on some personal experience of genuine mystical kind.

“From what point of view?” he asked, his forehead puckering with amazement.

“That of belief,” I said, my mind bursting with an eager desire to impart information, if not also to convert.

He passed his hand across his forehead, knocking the spectacles off. Then, catching them with a fumbling motion which betrayed his perturbation, he inquired: “But, of course, Mr. Blackwood, not your own?”

The voice, the eyes, the whole attitude of the body made me realize he was prepared to be shocked, if not already shocked.

“Yes,” I replied truthfully, “my own. I’ve been a Buddhist for a long time.”

He stared for some time at me without a word, then smiled a kindly, indulgent, rather sceptical smile. “It would be hardly suitable,” he mentioned, as I felt his Whole being draw away from me as from something dangerous and unclean. Possibly, of course, he did not believe me; I am sure he prayed for me. Our relations seemed less cordial after that; he read most carefully every word I wrote in his magazine and children’s pages, but he never referred to the matter again.

My Methodist job, none the less, was a happy one; this first regular wage I had yet received in life gave me the pleasant sensation that I was launched. My connexion with Methodism ceased, not because I was dismissed or had failed to give satisfaction (indeed, the editor had just told me my salary was to be raised!), but because all the capital I should ever have was sent to me about that time from England — about £2,000 — and I went into partnership with a farmer outside Toronto and bought some forty head of pedigree Jersey cattle.

CHAPTER III

THE ISLINGTON JERSEY Dairy, Messrs. Cooper and Blackwood, started business with a retail office in College Street, a number of milk carts bearing our names in black lettering upon a yellow background, and the supply farm at Islington, a lovely little hamlet on the shores of Lake Ontario, some six miles west of the city. We sold rich Jersey milk, we sold eggs and butter too. I gave picnics at our pretty little farm for customers I knew socially. The upper floors of the building in College Street we furnished, letting bedrooms at a dollar a week to young Englishmen, clerks in offices, and others. I engaged an old, motherly Englishwoman, Mrs. 'Iggins, with a face like a rosy apple, to "do" for us — she made the beds and cooked the breakfast — while her pretty daughter, in cap and apron, was our dairymaid. The plan did not work smoothly — the dairymaid was too pretty, perhaps; Mrs. Higgins too voluble. Complaints came from all sides; the lodgers, wildish young fellows in a free and easy country, made more promises than payments. One wanted a stove, another a carpet in his bedroom, another complained about his bed. I had my first experience of drink and immorality going on under my very eyes... Trouble — though mercifully of another kind — spread then to the customers. The milk began to go sour; it was too rich; it wouldn't keep; the telephone rang all day long. Cooper, an experienced dairy-farmer, was at his wits' end; every device for scouring the bottles, for cooling the milk before bringing it twice a day to the city, failed. At dinner parties my hostess would draw me tactfully aside. "The milk, I'm afraid, Mr. Blackwood," she would murmur softly, "was sour again this morning. Will you speak about it?"

I spoke about it — daily — but Alfred Cooper's only comment was, "Say, have you got a bit more capital? That's what we really want."

That sour milk became a veritable nightmare that never left me. I had enough of milk. Yet, later in life, I found myself "in milk "again, but that time it was dried milk, a profitable business to the owners, though it brought me nothing. I worked six years at it for a bare living wage. But, at any rate, it couldn't turn sour.

It was a powder.

Alfred Cooper was a delightful fellow. I think some detail of how our partnership came to be may bear the telling. It points a moral if it does not adorn a tale.

It may, again, prove useful to other young Englishmen in Canada similarly waiting with money to invest; but on the other hand it may not, since there can be few, I imagine, as green as I was then, owing to a strange upbringing, or as ignorant of even the simplest worldly practices. Of the evangelical training responsible for this criminal ignorance I will speak later.

Cooper, then, was a delightful fellow, fitting my ideal of a type I had read about — the fearless, ironmuscled colonial white man who fought Indians. The way we met was quite simply calculated — by a clerk in the bank where my English allowance of £100 a year was paid by my father. The clerk and I made friends — naturally; and one day — also naturally — he suggested a Sunday walk to Islington, some six miles down the lake shore. We could get tea at a farm he knew. We did. The praises of the Cooper family, who owned it, had already been sung. I was enchanted. So, doubtless, was the clerk.

The farm was a small one — perhaps eight acres; and Cooper lived on it in poverty with his aged mother and unmarried sister. It was charmingly situated, the fields running down to the water, pine copses dotting the meadows to the north, and the little village church standing at one corner near the road. Mrs. Cooper, in cap and apron, dropping every “h” that came her way, described to me how she and her husband had emigrated from England sixty years before, in the days of sailing ships. Her husband’s grave in the churchyard we could see from the window while we sat at tea — an unusually sumptuous tea for a farmhouse — and it was evident that she was more alive to the memories of half a century ago in the “old country,” than to the plans of her ambitious son in the new colony.

The son came to tea too, but a little late, having obviously brushed himself up a bit for his visitor from England. He was about forty years of age, tall, well-built, keen-faced, with steel-blue eyes and a hatchet nose, and his body was just that combination of leanness, strength and nervous alertness which made one think of a wolf. He was extremely polite, not to say flattering, to me. I thought him delightful, his idyllic farm still more delightful; he was so eager, vigorous and hardy, a typical pioneer, slaving from dawn to sunset to win a living from the soil in order to support the family. I trusted him, admired him immensely. Having been duly prepared for the picture on our walk out, I was not disappointed. He spoke very frankly of the desperate work he and his sister were forced to do; also of what he might do, and what could be made of the farm, if only he had a little capital. I liked him; he liked me; the clerk liked us both.

He showed me round the farm after tea, and his few Jersey cows came up and nosed his hand. The elderly sister, a weaker repetition of himself, joined us. She, too, slaved from morning till night. The old mother, diminutive, quiet, brave, devoted to her children yet with her heart in the old country she would never see again, completed a charming picture in my mind. I was invited to come again.

Another picture, still more alluring, was set before me during the walk back, the picture of what a "little capital" could do with that tiny farm. The dairy business that could be worked up made me feel a rich man before the Toronto spires became visible. The desire to put capital into the Islington Jersey Dairy became the one hope of my life. Would Cooper agree? Would he accept me as a partner? The suggestion came from myself. The clerk, of course, had never dreamed of such a thing. They might welcome me, the clerk thought. Very kindly, he said he would sound Cooper about it and let me know...

The scheme seemed such a perfect solution of my problem of earning a living, that I was afraid up to the last moment something must happen to prevent it. Cooper would die, or change his mind, or one of my influential business friends would warn me not to do it. I was so jealous of interference that I sought no advice. Without so much as a scratch of the pen between us the enterprise started. So heartily did I like and trust my partner that when, later, wiser friends inquired about my contract with him, it infuriated me. "Contract! A contract with Alfred Cooper!"

We did a roaring trade at first. Our Jersey milk was beyond all question the best in the town. It was honest, unwatered milk, and our cream, without any preservative added, was so prized that we soon had more orders than we could fill. Why our milk and cream soured so readily, losing us trade rapidly later, is a mystery to me to this day.

Within a few weeks of our starting business. Cooper convinced me that a model dairy building on the farm would be a desirable improvement; it would save labour in various ways; it was built. The farm belonged to his mother, not to him; he kept the building when our collapse followed. Next, his sister really must have someone to help her, and that someone was provided at high wages. Business was good, so good in fact that we could not supply orders. Extra milk must therefore be bought from neighbouring farmers. This was done, the contracts being made by Cooper. I never asked to see them. The bills were paid every month without question on my part. More grazing fields, with enough artificial food to feed at least a hundred cows in addition, these too had to be paid for. As for the appetites of our forty animals, I marvelled at them long before I became suspicious. Yet when, after much insisting, I saw one of the farmer's bills for extra milk, it left me, naturally, no wiser than before, and certainly not a whit more comforted, for the less our trade became, the more milk, apparently, those farmers sold us!

Six months later the firm of Cooper and Blackwood dissolved partnership, Blackwood having got the experience and Cooper having got — something quite as useful, but more marketable. Cooper's I.O.U. For five hundred dollars, now stuck in an old scrapbook somewhere, made me realize a little later how lucky it was that I had only a limited amount to lose.

Yet, though it seemed the end of the world to me, my capital lost, my enterprise a failure, I recall the curious sense of relief with which I saw the last cow knocked down to some bidder from up-country. From the very beginning I had hated the entire business. I did not know a Jersey from a Shorthorn, so to speak. I knew nothing about farming, still less about dairy-farming. The year spent at Edinburgh University to learn the agricultural trade had been wasted, for, instead, I attended what interested me far more — the post-mortems, operations, lectures on pathology, and the dissecting room. My notebooks of Professor Wallace's lectures, crammed as they were, with entries about soil, rotation of crops, and drainage, represented no genuine practical knowledge. I knew nothing. My father sent me out to Canada to farm. I went. I farmed. Cooper and Blackwood is carved upon the gravestone. But the gravestone cost £2,000, my share of the forced sale being about £600.

My Canadian experience, anyhow, can be summed up in advice, which is, of course, a bromide now: let any emigrant young Englishman earn his own living for at least five years in any colony before a penny of capital is given him to invest.

It was with this £600 I soon after went into partnership with another man, but this time an honest one. We bought a small hotel in the heart of Toronto. It also lasted about six months. When the crash came we lived together from May to October on a small island in a thirty-mile lake of the Ontario hinterland; we shared a long slice of difficult life together subsequently in New York; we shared the horrors of East 19th Street together.

He failed me only once, missing a train a few years later by a couple of minutes. It was the Emigrant Sleeper to Duluth on Lake Superior, en route for the Rainy River Gold Fields, where four of us had made sudden plans to try our fortunes. I was on a New York paper at the time, and had secured passes over the first fifteen hundred miles. As the train drew out of the Central Station I saw my friend racing down the platform, a minute too late. From that day to this I have never set eyes on him again. It was an abrupt end to a friendship cemented by hard times, and my disappointment at losing his companionship was rather bitter at the time.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE TIME we met, this friend of mine had been out from Oxford — New College, I think — a year or so, and with a Cambridge man about his own age, had been running a sporting goods shop in King Street. They sold the paraphernalia of cricket, tennis, boxing and the like, but with no marked success. The considerable money invested by the pair of them earned no interest.

John Kay was impatient and dissatisfied; the other had leanings towards the brokering trade, as offering better opportunities. Both were ready to cut their losses, realize, and get out. They did so, remaining the best of friends. And it was one day, while these preliminary negotiations were being discussed in the back office, where they muddled away the day between rare sales, that Kay said to me mysteriously: “Look here, I say — I’ve got a wonderful scheme. Have you got any money left?”

I mentioned the £600.

“I call it a rotten shame,” he went on. “Of course, you’ve been swindled. These people look upon us as their natural prey” — and he proceeded to describe his “scheme” — to buy a small hotel which, owing to its bad name, was going cheap; to work up a respectable business and a valuable goodwill; then to sell out at a top price and retire with a comfortable fortune. Kay was twenty-three, two years my senior; to me, then, he seemed an experienced man of business, almost elderly. The scheme took my breath away. It was very tempting.

The failure of the dairy farm had left me despondent; I felt disgraced; the end of life, it seemed, had come. I was ready to grasp at anything that held out hopes of a recovery of fortune. But an hotel! I hesitated.

I know nothing about running an hotel,” I objected.

“Neither do I — yet,” was the sanguine answer, “but we can learn. It’s only common sense and hard work. We can hire a good manager and engage a firstclass cook.”

"How many rooms are there?"

"Only thirteen. It's the bar where we shall make the money."

"The bar!"

"There are two bars, one on the main street and another on the back. Billy Bingham has made the place too hot to hold him. His licence is to be withdrawn. He's got to get out. We can get his licence transferred to us all right, if we promise to make the place respectable. We'll have good food, a first-rate lunch counter for the business men, we can let the big rooms for club dinners and society banquets, and there's a 100 per cent, profit, you know, on liquor. We'll make the Hub the best 'joint' in the town. All the fellows will come. A year will do it. Then we'll sell out....."

I was not listening. The word "liquor" — I had never touched alcohol in my life — made such a noise in my mind that I could hear nothing else.

"My father," I mentioned in a faint voice, "is a public man at home. He's a great temperance reformer. He speaks and writes against drink. He's brought me up that way. It would be a terrible shock to him if his son made money out of a bar." The hotel scheme, indeed, seemed to me an impossibility. A picture of the Temperance meetings held in our country house flashed through my mind. I glanced down at my coat, on whose lapel, until recently, there had been a little strip of blue ribbon, signifying that I was a member of the Band of Hope which included several million avowed teetotallers. "Don't you see, old chap?" I explained further. "It would simply break his heart, and my mother's too."

"He need never know anything about it," came the answer at once. "Why should he? Our names needn't appear at all. We'll call ourselves the 'Hub Wine Company, Limited.'" My head was swimming, my mind buzzing with conflicting voices as we walked down King Street to inspect the premises. I ached to re-establish my position. The prospect of a quick recovery of fortune was as sweet a prize as ever tempted a green youth like myself. My partner, too, this time would be a "gentleman," a fellow my father might have invited to dine and play tennis; it was my appalling ignorance of life that gave to his two years' seniority some imagined quality of being a man much older than myself, and one who knew what he was about.

The character of the proposed enterprise, of course, had no effect at all upon the judgment. To be known as a successful hotel proprietor was a legitimate ambition. My father's stern judgment of philanthropists who preached temperance while owning distilleries or holding brewery shares — I knew it word for word — was quite forgotten. Only the little personal point of view was present: "I've been an ass. I must make good. Here's a chance, a certainty, of getting money. I must take it. It's my Karma."

We strode down King Street together, past the corner of Yonge Street, below the windows of the hated Temperance and General Life Assurance Company where I had licked stamps, and on towards the Hub Hotel. The Toronto air was fresh and sweet, the lake lay blue beyond, the sunlight sparkled. Something exhilarating and optimistic in the atmosphere gave thought a happy and sanguine twist. It was a day of Indian summer, a faint perfume of far-distant forest fires adding a pleasant touch to the familiar smell of the cedar-wood sidewalks. A mood of freedom, liberty, great spaces, fine big enterprises in a free country where everything was possible, of opportunities seized and waves of fortune taken on their crest — I remember this mood as sharply still, and the scent of a wood-fire or a cedar pencil recalls it as vividly still, as though I had experienced it last week.

I glanced at my companion. I liked him, trusted him. There was a happy light in his frank blue eyes. He was a good heavy-weight boxer too. The very man, I felt, for a bold enterprise of this sort. He talked the whole way. He was describing how we might increase the fortune we should draw out of our successful venture in a year's time, when we passed Tim Sullivan, standing at the door of his, a rival, saloon, and exchanged a nod with him. The Irishman had a shadow on his face. "He's heard about it," whispered Kay, with a chuckle. "He'll look glummer still when he sees all his customers coming across the way to us!"

Turning down a narrow side street, the Hub blocked the way, a three-story building with a little tower, clean windows, and two big swinging doors. It ran through to a back street where there was another entrance.

"Here it is," said Kay, in the eager, happy voice of a man who has just inherited a family mansion and come to inspect it. "This is the Hub where we shall make our fortune."

It seemed to me I had entered an entirely new world. Everything was spotless. The rows of bottles and glasses, the cash-register and brass taps glittered in the sunlight that fell through coloured windows. The perfume of stale liquor was not as disagreeable as it sounds. In one sense the whole place looked as harmless as the aisle of some deserted church. I stood just inside those swing-doors, which had closed behind me, with a strange feeling of gazing at some den of vice reconstructed in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's. Empty and innocent as the bar might appear, however, there was a thrill of adventure, even of danger, about it that reached my mind, with a definite shock of dread.

"Nice, airy premises, with plenty of room," Kay's cheery voice came to me from a distance. "This is the principal bar. Twenty men could line up easily. It'll want four bar-tenders... There's another bar at the end. There'll be a few fights there before we've done. The dining-room lies through that archway just between the two."

He walked away, passing along the length of the room and down three steps into a narrower, darker bar beyond, where the shadows hid him. But his voice still reached me: "It's on the back street, this bar," he called.

"This is for the hoi polloi. We shall want a chucker out..... Here's the private door leading to the upstairs dining-room we'll let out for banquets. We'll have our own bedrooms and sitting-room on the first floor too..."

His voice roared on; I heard, but did not answer; I had not moved an inch from my place against the swing-doors. He had not, of course, the faintest idea what was passing through my mind at the moment; and, had I told him, he would only have laughed good-naturedly and talked of the money we should make. The fact was, however, that the whole of my early up-bringing just then came at me with a concentrated driving-force which made the venture seem absolutely impossible.

"We'll call this one the House of Commons," he bawled delightedly; "and that one — the front bar — the House of Lords. We shall take 250 dollars a day easily!"

The shock, the contrast, the exaggerated effect of entering a saloon for the first time in my life, especially with the added possibility of shortly becoming its proprietor, were natural enough. My unworldliness, even at twenty-one, was abnormal. Not only had I never smoked tobacco nor touched alcohol of any description, but I had never yet set foot inside a theatre; a race-course I had never seen, nor held a billiard cue, nor touched a card. I did not know one card from another. Any game that might involve betting or gambling was anathema. In other ways, too, I had been sheltered to the point of ignorance. I had never even danced. To hold a young woman round the waist was not alone immodest but worse than immodest.

This peculiarly sheltered up-bringing, this protected hot-house of boyhood and early youth to which a drinking bar was the vestibule of hell, and a music-hall an invention of a personal devil, are necessary to understand the reaction produced in me as I stood in Billy Bingham's "joint." I stood, literally, on the brink of "the downward path." I heard my father's voice, I saw my mother's eyes... In very definite form I now faced "worldly temptation" they had so often warned me against. Accompanying an almost audible memory of "Get thee behind me, Satan," drove a crowded kaleidoscope of vivid pictures from those sheltered years.

My parents were both people of marked character, with intense convictions; my mother, especially, being a woman of great individuality, of iron restraint, grim humour, yet with a love and tenderness, and a spirit of uncommon sacrifice, that never touched weakness. She possessed powers of mind and judgment, at the same time, of which my father, a public servant — financial secretary to the Post Office — availed himself to the full. She had great personal beauty. A young widow, her first husband having been the 6th Duke of Manchester, also of the evangelical persuasion, she met my father at Kimbolton soon after his return from the Crimean War, where he had undergone that religious change of heart known to the movement as "conversion." From a man of fashion, a leader in the social life to which he was born, he changed with sudden completeness to a leader in the evangelical movement, then approaching its height. He renounced the world, the flesh, the devil and all their works. The case of "Beauty Blackwood," to use the nickname his unusual handsomeness gained for him, was, in its way, notorious. He became a teetotaller and nonsmoker, wrote devotional books, spoke in public, and held drawingroom prayer meetings, the Bible always in his pocket, communion with God always in his heart. His religion was genuine, unfaltering, consistent and sincere.

He carried the war into his own late world of fashion. He never once looked back. He knew a vivid joy, a wondrous peace, his pain being for others only, for those who were not “saved.” The natural, instinctive type he was, asserted its claim. He became a genuine saint. Also, to the very end, he remained that other delightful thing, possible only to simple hearts, a boy.

Both my parents, thus, believed in Jesus, with a faith of that simple, unshakable order that could feel no doubts. Their lives were consistent and, as must always be the case when fine characters are possessed of a perfectly sincere faith, they stood out in the world of men and women as something strong and beautiful. Edmund Gosse, in “Father and Son,” has described the mental attitude of the type; William James might, equally, have included my father’s case as a typical “conversion” in his “Varieties of Religious Experience.”

The effect upon the children — there were five of us — followed naturally. My father, apart from incurring much public odium owing to his official position, found himself, and us with him, cut off from the amenities of the social life to which we were otherwise born. Ordinary people, “worldly” as he called them, left us alone. A house where no wine was served at dinner, where morning and evening prayers were *de rigueur,* a guest even being asked to “lead in prayer” perhaps, and where at any suitable moment you might be drawn aside and asked “Have you given your soul to Jesus?” was not an attractive house to stay in. We were ostracized. The effect of such disabilities upon us in later life was not considered, for it was hoped each and all of us would consecrate ourselves to God. We were, thus, kept out of the “world” in every possible sense and brought up, though with lavish love and kindness, yet in the narrowest imaginable evangelical path which scents danger in knowledge of any kind not positively helpful to the soul. I, personally, at that time, regarded the temptations of the world with a remote pity, and with a certainty that I should never have the least difficulty in resisting them. Men who smoked and drank and were immoral, who gambled, went to theatres and music-halls and race-meetings, belonged to the submerged and unworthy portion of mankind. I, in this respect at least, was of the elect, quite sure that the weakness of their world could never stain me personally.

Yet I never shared the beliefs of my parents with anything like genuine pleasure. I was afraid they were true, not glad.

Without wholeheartedly sharing my father's faith, however, his religious and emotional temperament, with its imperious need of believing something, he certainly bequeathed to me... The evangelical and revivalist movement, at any rate, was the dominant influence in my boyhood's years. People were sharply divided into souls that were saved and those that were — not saved. Moody and Sankey, the American Revivalists, stayed in our house.

I was particularly influenced in this direction by a group of young 'Varsity men who worked with Moody, and who were manly fellows, good cricketers, like the Studd brothers, or Stanley Smith and Montague Beauchamp, men who had rowed in their University boats, and who were far removed from anything effeminate. Of course I thought that what these men did could not be otherwise than fine and worth copying, and I lost no time in attacking everyone I met and asking the most impertinent questions about their souls and fallen natures. By some lucky chance no one kicked me to death — probably because most of my evangelizing work was done at home!

My old nurse I implored to yield herself up to the Saviour, and I felt my results were very poor in her case because I only got affectionate caresses and smiles, and even observations about the holes in my clothes, in return. The fat butler (I assured him) was going headlong down the kitchen stairs to everlasting fire because he showed no symptoms of ecstasy when he met my pleadings with "O, I'm sure 'e died for me all right, Master Algie. I don't feel a bit afraid!"

But all this was genuine so far as I was concerned, and it lasted a considerable time, to my father's great joy, though not so much, I think, to my mother's. She read far deeper into things...

In a short time I came to look upon the whole phenomena of "conversion," so far as my type of mind and character was concerned, with distrust and weariness. Only the very topmost layer of my personality was affected; evidently, there was no peace or happiness for me that way!

None the less, I had one or two terrible moments; one (I was reading with a private tutor in Somerset for Edinburgh University) when I woke in the very early morning with a choking sensation in my throat, and thought I was going to die. It must have been merely acute indigestion, but I was convinced my last moment had come, and fell into a sweating agony of fear and weakness. I prayed as hard as ever I could, swearing to consecrate myself to God if He would pull me through. I even vowed I would become a missionary and work among the heathen, than which, I was always told, there was no higher type of manhood. But the pain and choking did not pass, and in despair I got up and swallowed half a bottle of pilules of aconite which my mother, an ardent homœopathist, always advised me to take after sneezing or cold shivers. They were sweet and very nice, and the pain certainly began to pass away, but only to leave me with a remorse that I had allowed a mere human medicine to accomplish naturally what God wished to accomplish by His grace. He had been so slow about it, however, that I felt also a kind of anger that He could torture me so long, and as it was the aconite that cured me, and not His grace, I was certainly released from my promise to become a missionary and work among the heathen. And for this small mercy I was duly thankful, though the escape had been a rather narrow one.

A year and a half in a school of the Moravian Brotherhood in the Black Forest, though it showed me another aspect of the same general line of belief, did not wholly obliterate my fear of hell, with its correlated desire for salvation. The poetry of the semireligious life in that remote village set among ancient haunted forests, gave to natural idealistic tendencies another turn. The masters, whom we termed Brother, were strenuous, devoted, self-sacrificing men, all later to go forth as Missionaries to Labrador. Humbug, comfort, personal ambition played no part in their lives. The Liebesmahl in their little wooden church, for all its odd simplicity, was a genuine and impressive ceremony that touched something in me no church service at home, with Sankey’s hymns on a bad harmonium, had ever reached. At this Communion Service, or Love Feast, sweet, weak tea in big white thick cups, followed by a clothes-basket filled with rolls, were handed round, first to the women, who sat on one side of the building, and then to the men and boys on the other side. There was a collective reality about the little ceremony that touched its sincerity with beauty. Similarly was Easter morning beautiful, when we marched in the early twilight towards the little cemetery among the larch trees and stood with our hats off round an open grave, waiting in silence for the sunrise.

The air was cool and scented, our mood devotional and solemn. There was a sense of wonder among us. Then, as the sun slipped up above the leagues of forest, the Eight Brothers, singing in parts, led the ninety boys in the great German hymn, *“Christus ist auferstanden.....”* The surroundings, too, of the school influenced me greatly. Those leagues of Black Forest rolling over distant mountains, velvet-coloured, leaping to the sky in grey cliffs, or passing quietly like the sea in immense waves, always singing in the winds, haunted by elves and dwarfs and peopled by charming legends — those forest glades, deep in moss and covered in springtime with wild lily-of-the-valley; those tumbling streams that ran for miles unseen, then emerged to serve the peasants by splashing noisily over the clumsy water-wheel of a brown old sawmill before they again lost themselves among the mossy pine roots; those pools where water-pixies dwelt, and those little red and brown villages where we slept in our long walks — the whole setting of this Moravian school was so beautifully simple that it lent just the proper atmosphere for lives consecrated without flourish of trumpets to God. It all left upon me an impression of grandeur, of loftiness, and of real religion... and of a Deity not specially active on Sundays only.

CHAPTER V

THESE NOTES AIM at describing merely certain surface episodes, and would leave unmentioned of set purpose those inner activities which pertain to the intimate struggles of a growing soul. There is a veil of privacy which only in rarest cases of exceptional value should be lifted. That honesty, moreover, which is an essential of such value, seems almost unattainable.

Only a diary, written at the actual time and intended for no one's eye, can hope to achieve the naked sincerity, which could make it useful to lift that veil.

Yet, even with these surface episodes, something of the background against which they danced and vanished must be sketched; to understand them, something of the individual who experienced them must be known. This apology for so much use of the personal pronoun is made once for all.

The failure of the evangelical Christian teaching either to attract deeply or to convince, has been indicated. An eager, impressionable mind lay empty and unstimulated. It fed upon insipid stuff, such as Longfellow, Mrs. Hemans, goody-goody stories, and thousands of religious tracts. It was the days of yellow-backs in three volumes, of Ouida especially, of Miss Braddon, and Wilkie Collins; but novels were strictly forbidden in the house. Lewis Carroll, which my father often read aloud, and Foxe's "Book of Martyrs," which made every Roman Catholic priest seem ominous, were our imaginative fiction. But my chief personal delight was Hebrew poetry, the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, above all the Book of Job (which I devoured alone) — these moved me in a different way and far more deeply.

The mind, meanwhile, without being consciously aware of it, was searching with eager if unrewarded zeal, until one day Fate threw a strange book in its way — Patanjali's "Yoga Aphorisms," a translation from the Sanskrit. I was about seventeen then, just home from a year and a half in the Moravian Brotherhood School in the Black Forest.

I shall never forget that golden September day when the slight volume, bound in blue, first caught my eye. It was lying beside a shiny black bag on the hall table, and the bag belonged, I knew, to a Mr. Scott, who had come to spend a week with us and to hold a series of meetings under my father's auspices in the village hall. Mr. Scott was an ardent revivalist. He was also — this I grasped even at the time — a cadaverous mass of religious affectations. He was writing a brochure, I learned later, to warn England that Satan was bringing dangerous Eastern teachings to the West, and this book was a first proof of the Fiend's diabolical purpose.

I opened it and read a few paragraphs in the hall. I did not understand them, though they somehow held my mind and produced a curious sense of familiarity, half of wonder, half of satisfaction. A deeper feeling than I had yet known woke in me. I was fascinated... My father's voice calling me to tennis interrupted my reading, and I dropped the book, noticing that it fell behind the table. Hours later, though the bag was gone, the book lay where it had fallen. I stole it. I took it to bed with me and read it through from cover to cover. I read it twice, three times; bits of it I copied out; I did not understand a word of it, but a shutter rushed up in my mind, interest and joy were in me, a big troubling emotion, a conviction that I had found something I had been seeking hungrily for a long time, something I needed, something that, in an odd way, almost seemed familiar.

I repeat — I did not understand a word of it, while yet the meaningless phrases caught me with a revolutionary power. As I read and re-read till my candles guttered, there rose in me a dim consciousness, becoming more and more a growing certainty, that what I read was not entirely new. So strong was this that it demanded audible expression. In that silent bedroom, dawn not far away, I can hear myself saying aloud: "But I've known all this before — only I've forgotten it." Even the Sanskrit words, given phonetically in brackets, had a familiar look.

Shutter after shutter rose, "lifting a veil and a darkness," letting in glimpses of a radiant and exciting light. Though the mind was too untaught to grasp the full significance of these electric flashes, too unformed to be even intelligently articulate about them, there certainly rushed over my being a singular conviction of the unity of life everywhere and in everything — of its *one-ness.* That objects, the shifting appearance of phenomena, were but a veil concealing some intensely beautiful reality — the beauty shining and divine, the reality bitingly, terrifically actual — this poured over me with a sense of being not so much discovered as recovered. Ignorant as I was, without facts or arguments or reason to support me, this I *knew.*

It is possible the awakening consciousness fringed some state of ecstasy during that long communing with ancient things... The house, at any rate, was still dark, but sunrise not long to come, when at length I stole down into the deserted hall and replaced the little book upon the table.

Those Yoga aphorisms of a long-dead Hindu sage, set between a golden September evening and a guttering candle, marked probably the opening of my mind... The entire paraphernalia of my evangelical teaching thenceforth began to withdraw. Though my father's beliefs had cut deep enough to influence me for many years to come, their dread, with the terror of a personal Satan and an actual Hell, grew less from that moment. The reality of the dogmas was impaired. Here was another outlook upon life, another explanation of the world; caprice was eliminated and justice entered; the present was the result of the past, the future determined by the present; I must reap what I had sown, but, also, I could sow what I wished to reap. Hope was born. Apart from this was that curious deep sense of familiarity with these Eastern teachings, as with something I understood and in which I felt at home...

Cautiously, I put indirect questions to my father, who at once — the clumsy questions betraying me — detected Satan's subtle handiwork. He was grave and troubled. With affectionate solicitude he told me, finally, a story of naïve horror, intended to point the warning. A young man, who suffered from repeated epileptic fits, had tried every doctor and specialist in vain, when, as a last resort, he followed some friend's counsel of despair, and consulted a medium. The medium, having conferred with his familiar, handed the patient a little locket which he was to wear day and night about his neck, but never on any account to open. The spell that would save him from a repetition of his fits lay inside, but he must resist to the death the curiosity to read it. To the subsequent delight and amazement of everybody, the fits abruptly ceased; the man was cured; until one day, after years of obedience, curiosity overcame him; he opened the brief inscription, and fell down in a fit — dead. The wording, minutely written in red ink, ran as follows: "Let him alone till he drop into Hell!"

The warning, above all the story, acted as a stimulus instead of the reverse. Yet another strange door was set ajar; my eyes, big with wonder and questions, peered through. “Earth’s Earliest Ages,” by G. H. Pember, an evangelical, but an imaginative evangelical, was placed in my hands, accompanied by further solemn warnings. Pember, a writer of the prophetic school, had style, imagination, a sense of the marvellous, a touch of genuine drama too; he used suggestion admirably, his English was good, he had proportion, he knew where to stop. As a novelist of fantastic kind — an evangelical Wells, a “converted” Dunsany — he might have become a bestseller. He had, moreover, a theme of high imaginative possibilities, based upon a sentence in Genesis (vi. 2)— “The Sons of God saw the Daughters of men that they were fair and took to themselves wives from among them and there were giants in the earth in those days.” These Sons of God were some kind of higher beings, mighty spirits, angels of a sort; but rather fallen angels; their progeny formed a race apart from humans; for some reason, now slipped from my memory, Pember was convinced that this unlawful procreation was being resumed in modern days. The Nephilim, as he called them, were aiming at control of the world, Anti-Christ, a gorgeous but appalling figure, naturally, at their head.

It was a magnificent theme; he treated it, within the limits he set himself, with ingenious conviction. The danger was imminent; the human race, while shuddering, must be on its guard. In the night, in the twinkling of an eye, the catastrophe might come. Signs the Nephilim brought with them were spiritualism, theosophy, the development of secret powers latent in man, a new and awful type of consciousness, magic, and all the rest of the “occult” movement that was beginning to show its hydra head about this time.

In a moment Moody went to the bottom of the class, and Pember reigned in his stead. By hook or by crook I obtained the books that Pember signalled as so dangerously subversive of the truth: “Magic Black and White” by Dr. Franz Hartmann; “The Perfect Way,” by Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland; “Esoteric Buddhism,” by A. P. Sinnett; “Voice of the Silence,” by Mabel Collins; “The Bhagavad Gita,” from the Upanishads; and Emma Hardinge Britten’s “History of American Spiritualism.” My first delicious alarm lest the sky might fall any moment, and Satan appear with the great and terrible Nephilim princes to rule the world, became less threatening...

Soon afterwards, too, I happened upon my first novel, Laurence Oliphant's "Massollam," followed, a good deal later, by his "Scientific Religion" and his "Sympneumata." This history of his amazing subservience to Thomas Luke Harris helped to peel another thin skin from my eyes; Oliphant seemed a hero, but Harris a vile humbug. By this time other books had brought grist to the mill as well: Amiel's "Journal Intime"; Drummond's "Natural Law in the Spiritual World" — I knew Professor Drummond later, when he came to stay with us, and also when he lectured to the students at Edinburgh on Sunday nights, coming from his Glasgow Chair for the purpose: I can still see his large, glowing, far-seeing eyes — Cahagnet's "Arcanes de la Vie Future"; and "Animal Magnetism," by Binet and Féré. The experiments of Braid, and Dr. Esdaille in India, had also come my way.

Such one-sided reading, of course, fed the growing sense of wonder, naturally strong in any case; Shelley coloured it; and nothing offered itself at the time to curb, shape or qualify it. Spiritualism, apart from the exciting phenomena it promised with such confident volubility, left me rather unstirred, but theosophy, of course, I swallowed whole, with its Mahatmas, development of latent powers, memory of past lives, astral consciousness, and description of other beings both superior and inferior to man. It was some years before scientific reading came to check and guide a too exuberant imagination; but, even so I have always taken ideas where I found them, regardless of their propounders; if Tibet and its shining Mahatmas faded, the theories of Karma and reincarnation were older than any modern movement, and the belief in extension of consciousness to some nth degree, with its correlative of greater powers and new faculties, have not only remained with me, but have justified themselves. The "Gita," too, remains the profoundest world-scripture I have ever read.

An immediate, happy result of this odd reading, at any rate, I recall with pleasure: my father's Christianity became splendid in my eyes. I realized, even then, that it satisfied his particular and individual vision of truth, while the fact that he lived up to his beliefs nobly and consistently woke a new respect and admiration in me...

By far the strongest influence in my life, however, was Nature; it betrayed itself early, growing in intensity with every year. Bringing comfort, companionship, inspiration, joy, the spell of Nature has remained dominant, a truly magical spell. Always immense and potent, the years have strengthened it. The early feeling that everything was alive, a dim sense that some kind of consciousness struggled through every form, even that a sort of inarticulate communication with this "other life" was possible, could I but discover the way — these moods coloured its opening wonder. Nature, at any rate, produced effects in me that only something living could produce; though not till I read Fechner's "Zend-Avesta," and, later still, James's "Pluralistic Universe," and Dr. R. M. Bucke's "Cosmic Consciousness" did a possible meaning come to shape my emotional disorder. Fairy tales, in the meanwhile bored me. Real facts were what I sought. That these existed, that I had once known them but had now forgotten them, was thus an early imaginative conviction.

This tendency showed itself even in childhood. We had left the Manor House, Crayford, and now lived in a delightful house at Shortlands, in those days semicountry. It was the time of my horrible private schools — I went to four or five — but the holidays afforded opportunities...

I was a dreamy boy, frequently in tears about nothing except a vague horror of the practical world, full of wild fancies and imagination and a great believer in ghosts, communings with spirits and dealings with charms and amulets, which latter I invented and consecrated myself by the dozen. This was long before I had read a single book.

I loved to climb out of the windows at night with a ladder, and creep among the shadows of the kitchen garden, past the rose trees and under the fruit-tree wall, and so on to the pond where I could launch the boat and practise my incantations in the very middle among the floating weeds that covered the surface in great yellow-green patches. Trees grew closely round the banks, and even on clear nights the stars could hardly pierce through, and all sorts of beings watched me silently from the shore, crowding among the tree stems, and whispering to themselves about what I was doing.

I cannot say I ever believed actually that my spells would produce any results, but it pleased and thrilled me to think that they might do so; that the scum of weeds might slowly part to show the face of a water-nixie, or that the forms hovering on the banks might flit across to me and let me see their outline against the stars.

Everything I did and felt in this way was evolved out of my inner consciousness, and even after I had passed into long trousers I loved the night, the shadows, empty rooms and haunted woods.

On returning from these nightly expeditions to the pond, the sight of the old country-house against the sky always excited me strangely. Three cedars of Lebanon flanked it on the side I climbed out, towering aloft with their great funereal branches, and I thought of all the people asleep in their silent rooms, and wondered how they could be so dull and unenterprising, when out here they could see these sweeping branches and hear the wind sighing so beautifully among the needles. These people, it seemed to me at such moments, belonged to a different race. I had nothing in common with them. Night and stars and trees and wind and rain were the things I had to do with and wanted. They were alive and personal, stirring my depths within, full of messages and meanings, whereas my parents and sisters and brother, all indoors and asleep, were mere accidents, and apart from my real life and self. My friend the undergardener always took the ladder away early in the morning.

Sometimes an elder sister accompanied me on these excursions. She, too, loved mystery, and the peopled darkness, but she was also practical. On returning to her room in the early morning we always found eggs ready to boil, cake and cold plum-pudding perhaps, or some such satisfying morsels to fill the void. She was always wonderful to me in those days. Very handsome, dark, with glowing eyes and a keen interest in the undertaking, she came down the ladder and stepped along the garden paths more like a fairy being than a mortal, and I always enjoyed the event twice as much when she accompanied me. In the day-time she faded back into the dull elder sister and seemed a different person altogether. I never reconcile the two.

This childish manifestation of an overpowering passion changed later, in form, of course, but not essentially much in spirit. Forests, mountains, desolate places, especially perhaps open spaces like the prairies or the desert, but even, too, the simple fields, the lanes, and little hills, offered an actual sense of companionship no human intercourse could possibly provide. In times of trouble, as equally in times of joy, it was to Nature I ever turned instinctively. In those moments of deepest feeling when individuals must necessarily be alone, yet stand at the same time in most urgent need of understanding companionship, it was Nature and Nature only that could comfort me. When the cable came, suddenly announcing my father’s death, I ran straight into the woods... This call sounded above all other calls, music coming so far behind it as to seem an “also ran.” Even in those few, rare times of later life, when I fancied myself in love, this spell would operate — a sound of rain, a certain touch of colour in the sky, the scent of a wood-fire smoke, the lovely cry of some singing wind against the walls or window — and the human appeal would fade in me, or, at least, its transitory character become pitifully revealed. The strange sense of a oneness with Nature was an imperious and royal spell that overmastered all other spells, nor can the hint of comedy lessen its reality. Its religious origin appears, perhaps, in the fact that sometimes, during its fullest manifestation, a desire stirred in me to leave a practical, utilitarian world I loathed and become — a monk!

Another effect, in troubled later years especially, was noticeable; its dwarfing effect upon the events, whatever they might be, of daily life. So intense, so flooding, was the elation of joy Nature brought, that after such moments even the gravest worldly matters, as well as the people concerned in these, seemed trivial and insignificant. Nature introduced a vaster scale of perspective against which a truer proportion appeared. There lay in the experience some cosmic touch of glory that, by contrast, left all else commonplace and unimportant. The great gods of wind and fire and earth and water swept by on flaming stars, and the ordinary life of the little planet seemed very small, man with his tiny passions and few years of struggle and vain longings, almost futile. One’s own troubles, seen in this new perspective, disappeared, while, at the same time, the heart filled with an immense understanding love and charity towards all the world — which, alas, also soon disappeared.

It is difficult to put into intelligible, convincing words the irresistible character of this Nature-spell that invades heart and brain like a drenching sea, and produces a sense of rapture, of ecstasy, compared to which the highest conceivable worldly joy becomes merely insipid... Heat from this magical source was always more or less present in my mind from a very early age, though, of course, no attempt to analyse or explain it was then possible; but, in bitter years to come, the joy and comfort Nature gave became a real and only solace. When possession was at its full height, the ordinary world, and my particular little troubles with it, fell away like so much dust; the whole fabric of men and women, commerce and politics, even the destinies of nations, became a passing show of shadows, while the visible and tangible world showed itself as but a temporary and limited representation of a real world elsewhere whose threshold I had for a moment touched.

Others, of course, have known similar experiences, but, being better equipped, have understood how to correlate them to ordinary life. Richard Jefferies explained them. Whitman tasted expansion of consciousness in many ways; Fechner made a grandiose system of them; Edward Carpenter deliberately welcomed them; Jacob Boehme, Plotinus, and many others have tried to fix their nature and essence in terms, respectively, of religion and philosophy; and William James has reviewed them with an insight as though he had had experienced them himself.

Whatever their value, they remain authentic, the sense of oneness of life their common denominator, a conviction of consciousness pervading all forms everywhere their inseparable characteristic.

If Kentish gardens saw the birth of this delight, the Black Forest offered further opportunities for its enjoyment, and a year in a village of the Swiss Jura Mountains to learn French — I often wandered all night in the big pine forests without my tutor, a beekeeping pasteur, at Bole, near Neuchatel, discovering my absence — intensified it. Without it something starved in me. It was a persistent craving, often a wasting *nostalgia,* that cried for satisfaction as the whole body cries for covering when cold, and Nature provided a companionship, a joy, a bliss, that no human intercourse has ever approached, much less equalled. It remains the keenest, deepest sensation of its kind I have known...

Here, in Toronto, opportunities multiplied, and just when they were needed: in times of difficulty and trouble the call of Nature became paramount; during the vicissitudes of dairy and hotel the wild hinterland behind the town, with its lakes and forests, were a haven often sought. Among my friends were many, of course, who enjoyed a day “in the country,” but one man only who understood a little the feelings I have tried to describe, even if he did not wholly share them. This was Arnold Haultain, a married man, tied to an office all day long, private secretary to Goldwin Smith (whose life, I think, he subsequently wrote), and editor of a weekly periodical called *The Week.* He was my senior by many years. At three in the morning, sometimes, he would call for me at the dairy in College Street, and we would tramp out miles to enjoy the magic of sunrise in a wood north of the city. And such an effort was only possible to a soul to whom it was a necessity. The intensity of early dreams and aspirations, what energy lies in them! In later life, though they may have solidified and become part of the character, that original fiery energy is gone. A dreadful doggerel I wrote at this time, Haultain used in his paper, and its revealing betrayal of inner tendencies is the excuse for its reproduction here. It appeared the same week its author bought the Hub Hotel and started business with Kay, as "The Hub Wine Company."

LINES TO A DREAMER

O change all this thinking, imagining, hoping to be;
Change dreaming to action and work; there's a God in your will.
Self-mastery and courage and confidence make a man free.
And doing is stronger than dreaming for good or for ill.
Then make a beginning; don't lie like an infant and weep.
Begin with the dearest and crush some delight-giving sin
Right out of your life, with a purpose of death before sleep;
A passion controlled is an index of power within.
Some hard self-denial; let no one suspect it at all.
With ruthless self-torture continue, nor half an inch yield,
Step fearless and bravely; hold on and believe — you won't fall;
Companions you've none but the best on this grim battlefield.
Stagnation means death. If you cannot advance you retreat;
Steel purpose maintain; let it be the first aim of your life;
Beware of those mushroom resolves as impulsive as fleet,
And remember, the nobler the end the more deadly the strife.
For the hope that another may save you is coward and vain.

And the ladder, by which you must climb to you far starry height,
Is of cast-iron rungs from the furnace of suffering and pain.
Then forward; and courage! from darkness to truth’s golden light.

CHAPTER VI

THE PICTURES THAT have occupied two chapters, flashed and vanished, lasting a few moments only.

It was Kay's voice that interrupted them:

"This is my partner, Mr. Blackwood," he was saying, as he came from the dining-room door, accompanied by an undersized little man with sharp, beady eyes set in a face like a rat's, with deep lines upon a skin as white as paper. I shook hands with Billy Bingham, proprietor of the Hub, the man whose disreputable character had made it a disgrace to the City of Churches.

Of the conversation that followed, though I heard every word of it, only a blurred memory remained when we left the building half an hour later. I was in two worlds — innocent Kent and up-to-date Toronto — while Kay and Bingham talked. Mysterious phrases chased pregnant business terms in quick succession: Goodwill, stock in hand, buying liquor at thirty days, cash value of the licence, and heaven knows what else besides. Kay was marvellous, I thought. The sporting goods business had apparently taught him everything. Two hundred per cent, profit, rapid turn over, sell out at top price, were other vivid sentences I caught in part, while I stared and listened, feigning no doubt a comprehension that was not mine. The glow of immense success to come, at any rate, shone somehow about the nasty face of that cunning little Billy Bingham, as he painted our future in radiant colours. Kay was beaming.

"A short period of horror," I remember thinking, for the sanguine fires lit me too, "and we shall be independent men! It's probably worth it. Canada's a free country. What's impossible at home is possible here. Opportunities must be seized.!"

Then Bingham's white face retreated, his beady eyes became twin points of glittering light, and another picture slid noiselessly before them. Euston Station a few short months ago, myself tightly wedged in a crowded third-class carriage, the train to Liverpool slowly moving out, and my father's tall figure standing on the platform — this picture hid the Hub and Bingham and John Kay. The serious blue eyes, fixed on mine with love and tenderness, could not conceal the deep anxiety they betrayed for my future. Behind them, though actually at the Manor House, Crayford, fixed on a page of the Bible, or perhaps closed in earnest prayer, the eyes of my mother rose up too. The train moved faster, the upright figure and the grave, sad face, though lit by a momentary smile of encouragement, were hidden slowly by the edge of the carriage window. I was too shy to wave my hand, and far too sensitive of what the carriage-full of men would think if I moved to the window and spoke, or worse, gave the good-bye kiss I burned to give. So the straight line of that implacable wooden sash slid across both face and figure, cutting our stare cruelly in the middle.

It was the last time I saw my father; a year later he was dead; and ten years were to pass before I saw my mother again. Before this — to look ahead for a second — some enterprising Toronto friend, with evangelical tact, wrote to my father..."your son is keeping a tavern," and my father, calling my brother into his study where he laid all problems before his God with prayer, told him in a broken voice and with tears in his eyes: "He is lost; his soul is lost. Algie has gone to — Hell!"...

My vision faded. My broad-shouldered friend and his little rat-faced companion stood with their elbows on the bar. I saw six small glasses and a big dark bottle. Three of the former were filled to the brim with neat rye whisky, the other three, "the chasers "as they were called, held soda-water.

"Drink hearty," rasped Bingham's grating voice, as he tossed down his liquor at a gulp, Kay doing the same, then swallowing the soda-water.

I moved to the swing-doors. I had never touched spirits, and loathed the mere smell of them. I cannot pretend that any principle was involved; it was simply that the mere idea of swallowing raw whisky gave me nausea. I saw Kay give me a quick look. "He'll be offended if you don't take something," it said plainly. I was, besides, familiar with the customs of the country, at any rate in theory.

"Have something else," invited Bingham, "if you don't like it straight."

I shook my head, mumbling something about it's being too early in the day, and I shall never forget the look that came into that cunning little face. But he was not offended.

He put his hand on Kay’s arm. “Now, see here,” he said with seriousness, “that’s dead right. That’s good business every time. Never drink yourselves, and you’ll make it a success. Your partner’s got the right idea, and I tell you straight: never touch a drop of liquor till after closing hours. You’ll be asked to drink all day long. Everybody will want to drink with the new management. Every customer that walks in will say ‘What’s yours?’ before you even know his name. Now, see here, boys, listen to me — you can’t do it! You’ll be blind to the world before eleven o’clock. *I* tell you, and I *know!”*

“How are you to refuse?” asked Kay.

“I’ll give you a tip: drink tea!”

“Tea!”

“Have your bottle of tea. Tell your bar-tenders. It’s the same colour as rye whisky. No one’ll ever know. The boss can always have his own private bottle. Well, yours is tea. See?” And he winked with a leer like some intelligent reptile.

We shook hands, as he saw us into the street.

“You’ll take a cheque, I suppose?” I heard Kay say just before we moved off.

“A marked cheque, yes,” was the reply. The phrase meant that the bank marked the cheque as good for the amount.

“It’s all fixed then,” returned Kay.

“All fixed,” said Bingham, and the swing-doors closed upon his unpleasant face as we went out into the street.

CHAPTER VII

THE INFLUENCES THAT decided the purchase of the Hub were emotional, at any rate, not rational; there lay some reaction in me, as of revolt. “You can do things out here you could not do at home,” ran like a song through the heart all day long, and life seemed to hold its arms wide open. Fortunes were quickly made. Speculation was rife. Pork went up and wheat went down, and thousands were made or lost in a few hours. No enterprise was despised, provided it succeeded. All this had its effect upon an impressionable and ignorant youth whose mind now touched so-called real life for the first time. The example of others had its influence, too. The town was sprinkled with young Englishmen, but untrained Englishmen the country did not need, though it needed their money; and this money they speedily exchanged, just as I had done, for experience — and then tried to find work.

The pathos of it all was, though, that for an average young Englishman to find a decent job was impossible. I was among the unsuccessful ones. Kay was another, but Kay and myself were now — we thought — to prove the exception.

“We’ll show ‘em!” was the way Kay’s sanguine twenty-three years phrased it. We both knew men of splendid education and real ability, earning precarious livings in positions that would have been ludicrous if they were not so pathetic. Men from Oxford and Cambridge, with first rate classical training, were slinging drinks behind bars, or running about the country persuading the farmers to insure their stacks and outhouses; others with knowledge of languages and pronounced literary talent were adding figures in subordinate positions in brokers’ offices. But by far the greater number were working as common labourers for small farmers all over the country.

“They missed their chance when it came,” Kay repeated. “We won’t miss ours. A chance like the Hub won’t come twice.” A year of disagreeable, uncongenial work and then — success! Retire! Off to the primeval woods, canoes, Indians, camp fires, books... a dozen dreams flamed up.

Within a month we had completed the purchase, and the Hub opened with flying colours and high hopes; the newspapers gave us what they called a “send off’; both “House of Lords” and “House of Commons” were packed; the cash-registers clicked and rang all day, and the Hub, swept and garnished, fairly sparkled with the atmosphere of success, congratulations, and promise of good business. Billy Bingham’s association with it was a thing of the past; it became the most respectable place of its kind in the whole town.

All day long the shoal of customers flocked in and rattled their money across the busy counters. Each individual wanted a word with the proprietors. Buyers and brewery agents poured in too, asking for orders, and newspaper reporters took notes for descriptive articles which duly appeared next morning. The dining-room did a roaring trade and every stool at the long lunch counter had its occupant. How easy it all seemed! And no one the worse for liquor! Everybody was beaming, and, as a partner in the Hub Wine Company, I already felt that my failure in the dairy farm was forgotten, an unlucky incident at most; a boyish episode due to inexperience, but now atoned for.

Lord Dufferin, a few years before, had been Governor-General of Canada, and a huge framed photograph of him hung above the cold meat, game pies and salads of the lunch counter. A connexion of my father’s, the newspapers had insisted upon a closer relationship, and while some thought he would do better as a first cousin, others preferred him as my uncle. As an exceedingly popular Governor-General, his place above the good Canadian food seemed appropriate at any rate, and the number of customers, both known and unknown, who congratulated me upon our distinguished framed patron, gave me the odd feeling that somehow the shock to my father was thereby lessened. The stories of what Dufferin and his wife had done for Tom, Dick and Harry, for their wives and their children or their dogs, told to me beside our House of Lords’ bar that opening day proved good for business. I had come to the colony somewhat overburdened with distinguished relations of heavy calibre who, to extend the simile a little, neither now nor later, ever fired a single shot on my behalf. The mere inertia of their names, indeed, weighed down my subsequent New York days with the natural suspicion that a young man so well born must have done something dreadful at home to be forced to pose to artists for a living.

Why, otherwise, should he suffer exile in the underworld of a city across the seas? Lord Dufferin's photograph augustly throned above the Hub luncheon counter, certainly, however, fired a shot on my behalf, making the cash-registers clink frequently. His effect on our bar-trade, innocently uncalculated, deserves this word of gratitude.

There were three white-coated bar-tenders in the House of Lords, Jimmy Martin, their principal, in charge of it; a couple managed the House of Commons trade in the lower bar, down a step and through an arch; and here, too, were tables and chairs, rooms curtained off, and other facilities for back-street customers who wanted to sit and talk over their beer. Between the two, a door in the wall led to my own quarters upstairs by means of a private staircase. Sharp on eleven we closed our doors that first night, and proceeded, with Jimmy Martin's aid, to open the cash-registers and count up our takings. There was just under 250 dollars, or £50 in English money. Then, having said good night to our chief bar-tender, we spent a happy hour making calculations for the future. The first day, of course, could not be taken as an average, but prospects, we assured ourselves, were brilliant. Later we were to discover things that were to prove a source of endless trouble and vexation of spirit to us both — daily worries we both learned to dread. At the moment, however, it was in sanguine mood that I went to bed that night of our opening day. The money was locked away, ready for me to take to the bank next morning — our first deposit. Before that I must be at the market to buy provisions — six o'clock — and Kay was to be in attendance in the bars at nine-thirty.

"It's a go all right," were his good-night words, as he thumped down my private staircase and let himself into the street with his latch-key.

Lucky beggar! He hadn't got to write home and explain to evangelical and teetotal parents what he was doing!

Some customers, I discovered, arrived early. That a man should want to swallow raw spirits at 9 a in amazed me. Some of these were men we knew socially; with one of them, who arrived regularly at 9.15, I often dined in his cosy little bungalow beside the lake. His wife was charming, I played with his children. He was a lawyer. He came for what he called an "eye-opener." Another of this early brigade was a stockbroker, who later made a fortune speculating in wheat on margin, lost it again, and disappeared mysteriously across the border into the States.

His manner of taking his “eye-opener “was peculiar, puzzling me for a long time. I had never seen it before. It made me laugh heartily the first morning, for I thought he was doing it to amuse me — till his injured expression corrected me. Producing a long silk handkerchief, he flung it round his neck, one end held by the hand that also held his brimming glass. With the free hand he then pulled the other end very slowly round his collar, levering thus the shaking glass to his lips. Unless he used this pulley, the glass shook and rattled so violently against his teeth that its contents would be spilt before he could get it into his mouth. The horror of it suddenly dawned on me. I was appalled. The stuff that poisoned this nervous wreck was sold by myself and partner at 100 per cent, profit!

“If he doesn’t get it here,” said Kay, “he’ll go to Tim Sullivan’s across the way, and get bad liquor. Ours at least is pure.”

During the long twelve hours that the Hub was open either Kay or myself was always on duty, talking to customers, keeping an eye (as we hoped!) on the bar-tenders, showing ourselves with an air of authority in the House of Commons when, as usually, it became too rowdy — Kay enjoying the occasional “chucking out.” At lunch time and from four to halfpast six or seven o’clock, the bars were invariably crowded. The amount of milkless tea we drank ought to have poisoned us both, but we never fell from grace in this respect, and we kept faithfully, too, to Jimmy Martin’s advice never to “put ’em up” for others.

Days were long and arduous. Though we soon closed the dining room after lunch, doing no supper trade, there were public dinners once or twice a week for Masonic societies, football clubs and the like, and at these one or other of the proprietors was expected to show himself. To my great relief, Kay rather enjoyed this light duty. His talent for acting was often in demand too; he would don his Henry Irving wig and give the company an imitation of the great actor in “The Bells.”

Kay was very successful at these “banquets,” and sometimes a Society would engage the room on the condition that he performed for them after dinner. What annoyed him was that “the silly idiots always order champagne! “There was no profit worth mentioning in “wine,” as it was called. The profit was in beer and “liquor.” The histrionic talent, at any rate, was an accomplishment that proved useful later in our difficult New York days, when Kay not only got a job on the stage himself, but provided me with a part as well.

The shadow of that East 19th Street boarding-house was already drawing nearer and another customer of the Hub who was to share it with us was Louis B — a voluble, high-strung fat little Frenchman, of mercurial temperament and great musical gifts. When a Hub banquet had seen enough of the Irving wig, and expressed a wish to hear the other proprietor, it was always Louis B who accompanied my fiddle on the piano. Raff’s “Cavatina” was tolerated, the “Berçeuse” from “Jocelyn” enjoyed, but the popular songs of the day, Louis extemporizing all accompaniments with his perfect touch, it was these that were good for “business.” The fat, good-natured little man, with his bright dark eyes and crisp curly black hair, demanded several absinthes before he would play. He was a born musician. He loved, in the order mentioned, music, horses, his wife, and from the last he always had to obtain permission to “play at the Hub.” Towards midnight he would dash to the telephone and say pleadingly to his wife: “They want me to play one more piece — only one. Do you mind? I shan’t be long!”

The Hub Wine Company, camouflaging the saloon business of two foolish young idiots, passed through its phases towards the inevitable collapse. Business declined; credit grew difficult; prompt payment for supplies more difficult still. We closed the Dining Room, then the House of Commons. The Banquets ceased. Selling out at “top price” became a dream, loss of all my capital a fact. Those were funereal days. To me it was a six months’ horror. The impulsive purchase was paid for dearly. It was not only the declining business, the approaching loss of my small capital, the prospect of presently working for some farmer at a dollar a day and green tea — it was not these things I chiefly felt. It was, rather, the fact that I had taken a step downhill, betrayed some imagined ideal in me, shown myself willing to “sell my soul” for filthy lucre. The price, though not paid in lucre, was certainly paid in mental anguish, and the letters from home, though patient, generously forgiving, even understanding, increased this tenfold...

My own nature, meanwhile, wholly apart from any other influence, sought what relief it could. My heart had never really been in the venture, my body now kept out of it as much as possible. The loathing I had felt for the place from the very beginning was quite apart from any question of success or failure. I hated the very atmosphere, the faces of the staff, the sound of voices as I approached the swinging doors. While attending strictly to business, never shortening my hours on duty by five minutes, and eagerly helping Kay in our efforts to get in another partner with money, my relief when once outside the actual building was immense. We had engaged a new manager, whose popularity in the town — he was a great cricketer — brought considerable fresh custom, but whose chief value in my eyes lay in the fact that I need not Be present quite as much as before, Collins, who weighed twenty stone, was a character. Known for some reason as “the Duke,” he had no other title to nobility. He helped trade for a few brief weeks, but also helped himself at the same time, and his exit, not unlike that of Jimmy — who was “fired “for the same reason — was attended by threats of a slander suit, which also, like Jimmy’s, was set down in the Greek kalends.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE EFFECT OF these long, unhappy months, anyhow, was to emphasize another, and that the principal side, of my nature. The daily effort of forcing myself to do what I hated so intensely, was succeeded by the equal and opposite reaction of enjoying tremendously my free hours of relaxation. When the swing-doors closed behind me, my mind closed too upon all memory of the hated Hub. It was shut out, forgotten, nonexistent. I flew instinctively to what comforted and made me happy. Gorged with the reading of poetry and of idealistic, mystical books, an insatiable sense of wonder with a childish love of the marvellous added to it, my disappointing experience of practical realities demanded compensation as a safety-valve, if as nothing more. I found these in Nature, music, and in the companionship of a few people I will presently describe. Out of those prisonlike swing-doors I invariably went, either with the fiddle-case in my hand, or with food in my pocket and a light cloak as blanket for sleeping out. Concerts and organ recitals were not enough; more than to listen, I wanted to play myself; and Louis B —— was usually as enthusiastic as I. The music was a deep delight to me, but the sleeping under the stars I enjoyed most.

Those lonely little camp fires have left vivid pictures in the mind. An East-bound tram soon took one beyond the city, where the shores of Lake Ontario stretched their deserted sands for miles. There was always fresh water to be found for boiling tea, lots of driftwood lying about, and the sand made a comfortable bed. Many a night of that sweet Indian summer I saw the moon rise or set over the water, and lay watching the stars until the sunrise came. One spot in particular was a favourite with me, because, just over the high loam cliffs that lined the shore, there was an enormous field of tomatoes, and while Jimmy was helping himself to the Hub cash under Kay’s eyes in the city, I helped myself to half a dozen of the farmer’s ripe tomatoes. The Hub, however, of set purpose, formed no part of my thoughts, my reveries and dreams being of a very different, and far more interesting, kind...

A night in the woods, though distance made it more difficult, comforted me even more than the Lake expeditions. I kept the woods usually for Saturday night, when the next day left me free as well.

A pine forest beyond Rosedale was my favourite haunt, for it was (in those days) quite deserted and several miles from the nearest farm, and in the heart of it lay a secluded little lake with reedy shores and deep blue water. Here I lay and communed, the world of hotels, insurance, even of Methodists, very far away. The hum of the city could not reach me, though its glare was faintly visible in the sky. There were no signs of men; no sounds of human life; not even a dog’s bark — nothing but a sighing wind and lapping water and a sort of earth-murmur under the trees, and I used to think that God, whatever He was, or the great spiritual forces that I believed lay behind all phenomena, and perhaps were the moving life of the elements themselves, must be nearer to one’s consciousness in places like this than among the bustling of men in the towns and houses. As the material world faded away among the shadows, I felt dimly the real spiritual world behind shining through... I meditated on the meaning of these dreams till the veil over outer things seemed very thin; diving down into my inner consciousness as deeply as I could till a stream of tremendous yearning for the realities that lay beyond appearances poured out of me into the night... The hours passed with magical swiftness, and my dreaming usually ended in sleep, for I often woke in the chilly time just before the dawn, lying sideways on the pine needles, and saw the trees outlined sharply against the Eastern sky, and the lake water still and clear, and heard the dawn-wind just beginning to sing overhead. The laughter of a loon would sound, the call of an owl, the cry of a whippoorwill; and then — the sun was up.

Thought ran, on these lonely nights, to everything except to present or recent happenings. Life, already half over as, at twenty-one, it then seemed to me, had proved a failure; my few trivial experiences appeared gigantic and oppressive. I felt very old. Present conditions, being unhappy and promising to become more unhappy still, I left aside. I had “accepted” them as Karma, I must go through with them, but there was no need to intensify or prolong unhappiness by dwelling on them. I therefore dismissed them, thought wandering to other things. All was coloured, shaped, directed by those Eastern teachings in which I was then entirely absorbed and the chief problem in my mind at the time, was to master the method of accepting, facing, exhausting, whatever life might bring, while being, as the Bhagavad Gita described, "indifferent to results," unaffected, that is, by the "fruits of action." Detachment, yet without shirking, was the nearest equivalent phrase I could find; a state, anyhow, stronger than the Christian "resignation," which woke contempt in me...

Unhappiness, though it may seem trivial now, both as to cause and quality, was very deep in me at the time. It had wakened an understanding of certain things I had read — as in the stolen "Patanjali" years before — without then grasping what they meant. These things I now was beginning to reach by an inner experience of them, rather than by an intellectual comprehension merely...

And, as thought ran backwards, escaping the unpleasant Hub and Dairy, to earlier days in the Black Forest School, to the Jura Mountains village, to family holidays among the Alps or on the west coast of Scotland, it reached in due course the year spent at Edinburgh University just before I left for Canada, and so to individuals there who had strongly influenced me:

I recalled Dr. H — who used hypnotism in his practice, taught me various methods of using it, and often admitted me to private experiments in his study. He explained many a text-book for me. He had urged me to give up the idea of farming in Canada, and to read for medicine and become a doctor. "Specialize," he said (in 1883). "By the time you are qualified Suggestion will be a recognized therapeutic agent, accepted by all, and accomplishing marvellous results. Become a mental specialist."

I lay under my pine trees, wondering if it were still too late but speculating, further and chiefly, about those other states of consciousness, since called "subliminal," which his experiments had convinced me were of untold importance, both to the individual and to the race. Any lawful method of extending the field of consciousness, of increasing its scope, of developing latent faculties, with its corollary of greater knowledge and greater powers, excited and interested me more than the immediate prospect of making a million...

This doctor's family were sincere and convinced spiritualists. He let them be, paying no attention to them, yet pointing out to me privately the "secondary" state into which his wife, as the medium, could throw herself at will. His son had an Amati violin; we played together; I was invited to many séances. The power of reading a “sitter’s” mind I often witnessed, my own unuttered thoughts often being announced as the communication from some “guide” or “spirit friend.” But for the doctor’s private exposition, I might doubtless have been otherwise persuaded and shared my hostess’s convictions.

Some of the “communications” came back in memory, none the less, as I lay beside the little lake and watched the firelight reflected with the stars: “There is an Indian here; he says he comes for you. He is a medicine man. He says you are one, too. You have great healing power. He keeps repeating the word ‘scratch.’” The dubious word meant “write”; I was to become a writer, a prophesy that woke no interest in me at all... Another communication delved into the past: “You have been an Indian in a recent life, and you will go back to their country to work off certain painful Karma. You were Aztec, Inca, Egyptian, and, before that again, Atlantean. With the world to-day you have nothing in common, for none of the souls you knew have come back with you. Nature means more to you than human beings. Beware!” The last word alarmed me a good deal until the doctor’s humorous exposition killed any malefic suggestion. The horoscope his wife cast and read for me, however, he refused to be bothered with; he could not, therefore, comfort me by explaining away a disturbing sentence: “All your planets are beneficent, but were just below the horizon at the hour of your birth. This means that you will come very near to success in all you undertake, yet never quite achieve it.”

These memories slipped in their series across my mind, as the embers of my fire faded and the night drew on. Swiftly they came and passed, each leaving its little trail of dust, its faint emotion, yet leading always to a stronger ghost whose memory still bulked largely in my mind — the ghost of a Hindu student. He was a fourth-year man, about to become a qualified doctor, and I met him first in the dissecting room, where occasionally I played at studying anatomy. We first became intimate friends over the dissection of a leg. It was he who explained “Patanjali” to me. He was a very gifted and unusual being. He showed me strange methods of breathing, of concentration, of meditation. He made clear a thousand half-conscious dreams and memories in me. He was mysterious but sincere, living his theories in practice. We went for great walks along the Forth, watching the Forth Bridge then being built; down the coast to St. Abb’s Head and

Coldingham; deep into the recesses of the Pentlands, where, more than once, we slept in the open. We made curious and interesting experiments together... Years later — he is still alive — I drew upon a fraction of his personality in two books, “John Silence” and “Julius Le Vallon.”.

Much that he explained and taught me, much that he believed and practised, came back vividly during these nightly vigils in the woods, while I listened to the weird laughter of the loons like the voices of women far away, and watched the Northern Lights flash in their strange majesty from the horizon to mid-heaven. Unhappiness was making my real life sink deeper. No boy, I am sure, sought for what he believed would prove the realities with more passionate intensity than I did. It is curious now to look back upon those grave experiments first taught me by my Hindu friend, who assured me that the way to rob emotions of their power was to refuse to identify one’s “self” with them, this real “self” merely looking on as a spectator, apart, detached; and that the outer events of life had small importance, what mattered being solely one’s inner attitude to them, one’s interpretation of them...

From these hours spent alone with Nature, as also From the hours of music with Louis B —— I returned, at any rate, refreshed and invigorated to my loathsome bars. Personal troubles seemed less important, less oppressive; they were, after all, but brief episodes in a single life; as Karma, they had to be faced, gone through with; they had something to teach, and I must learn the lesson, or else miss one of the objects of my being. Watching the starry heavens through hours of imaginative reflection brought a bigger perspective in which individual worries found reduced proportion. My thoughts introduced a yet vaster perspective still. The difficulty was to keep the point of view when the mood that encouraged it was gone. After a few hours in the House of Lords perspective was apt to dwindle again...

When the winter months made sleeping out impossible, and Louis B —— was not available, my precious hours of freedom would be spent with a young agnostic doctor dying of consumption; with the Professor of History in Toronto University — a sterling, sympathetic man, a true Christian of intellectual type, and a big, genuine soul who never thought of himself in the real help he gave me unfailingly with both hands; or, lastly, with an enthusiast who shared my quest for what we called “the Realities.” With all three I had made close friends during the first prosperous days of the Dairy; the Professor’s family had been customers for milk and eggs; the young doctor, living in my boarding-house, had been a pupil in my French and German class.

The third was a Scotsman, fairly well educated, about thirty years of age, who, while fully in sympathy with my line of thinking, had succeeded in reducing his dreams to some sort of order so that they did not interfere with his ordinary, practical career and yet were the guiding rule of his life.

He was in the cement business, and his clothes, even on Sunday, were always covered with a fine white dust, for he was unmarried and lived alone in a single room. He made a bare living at his work, but was thoroughly conscientious and devoted to the interests of his employer, and all he asked was steady work and fair remuneration for the rest of his life. He was a real mystic by temperament, though he belonged to no particular tradition. The world for him was but a show of false appearances that the senses gathered; the realities behind were spiritual. He believed that his soul had existed for ever and would never cease to exist, and that his ego would continue to expand and develop according to the life he led, and shaped by his thoughts and acts (but especially by his thoughts) to all eternity. This world for him was a schoolroom, a place of difficult discipline and learning, and the lessons he was learning were determined logically and justly by his previous living and previous mistakes. Talents or disabilities, equally, were the results of former action...

But to the ordinary man he appeared simply as a rather dull everyday worker, without any worldly ambition, absolutely honest and trustworthy, and always occupying a subordinate position in practical affairs.

In the “old country” he had belonged to some sort of society that kept alive traditions of teaching methods of spiritual development, and he told me much concerning their theories that immense latent powers lay in the depths of one’s being and could be educed by suitable living, and the period in the “schoolroom of this world,” as he called it, could be shortened and the progress of one’s real development hastened. It all lay, with him, in learning how to concentrate the faculties on this inner life, without neglecting the duties of the position one held to family or employer, and thus reducing the life of the body and the senses to the minimum that was consistent with health and ordinary duty. In this way he believed new forces would awaken to life, and new parts of one’s being be stimulated into activity, and in due course one would become conscious of a new spiritual region with the spiritual senses adapted to it. It amounted, of course, to an expansion of consciousness.

All this, naturally, interested me very much indeed, and I spent hours talking with this cement maker, and many more hours reading the books he lent me and thinking about them. My friend helped in this extension. Carl du Prel's "Philosophy of Mysticism" was a book to injure no one.

He had published one or two volumes of minor poetry, and his verse, though poor in form, caught all through it the elusive quality of genuine mystical poetry, unearthly, touching the stars, and wakening in the reader the note of yearning for the highest things. I took him with me several times to my little private grove, and he would recite these verses to me in a way that made them sound very different from my own reading of them. And as he lay beside the lake and I heard his reedy voice mingling with the wind in the trees, and watched his watery blue eyes shine across the smoke of our fire, I realized that the value of his poems lay in the fact that they were a perfectly true expression of his self — of his small, mystical, unselfish and oddly elemental soul searching after the God that should finally absorb him up into something greater. I do not wish to criticize him, but only to picture what I saw. His attenuated body, and long thin fingers, his shabby clothes covered with white dust lying by my side under the stars, his eyes looking beyond the world, and the sound of his thin voice that lost half its words somewhere in the wind — the picture is complete in every detail in my mind to this day. His reasoning powers were slight, for like all true mystics he believed in the intuitive perception of truth; but, coming into my life just at this time, he came with influence and a good deal of stimulus too. From the "House of Commons" to his dream-laden atmosphere provided a contrast that brought relief, at any rate.

This mystical minor poet in the cement business had several friends like himself, but no one of them possessed his value, because no one of them practised their beliefs. They talked well and were sincere up to a point, but not to the point of making sacrifices for their faith. It was always with them a future hope. One, however, must be excepted — a woman. She was over sixty and always dressed in black, with crepe scattered all over her, and a large white face, and shining eyes, and great bags under them. She had been a vegetarian for years. In spite of her size she looked so ethereal that a puff of wind might have blown her across the street. All her friends and relations had "passed over," and her thoughts were evidently centred in the beyond, so far as she herself was concerned. She had means of her own, but spent most of them in helping others. There was no humbug about her. She claimed to have what she called "continuous consciousness," and at night, when her body lay down and the brain slept, she focused her Self in some spiritual region of her being, and never lost consciousness. She saw her body lying there, and knew the brain was asleep, but she meanwhile became active elsewhere, for she declared a spirit could never sleep, and it was only the body that became too weary at the end of the day to answer to the spirit's requirements. In sleep the body, left empty by the spirit, slept, and memory, being in the brain, became inactive. But as soon as one had learned to realize one's spirit, sleep involved no loss of consciousness and memory was continuous.

Her accounts of her experiences in the night thrilled me.,. While she talked her face grew so white that it almost shone. It was a beaming, good, loving face, and the woman was honest, even if deluded. She radiated kindness and sympathy from her person. She had a way of screwing up her eyes when speaking, stepping back a few paces, and then coming suddenly forward again as though she meant to jump across the room, her voice ringing, and her eyes opened so wide that I thought the bags underneath them must burst with a pop.

The young doctor living in the boarding-house also interested me, reviving indeed my desire to follow his own profession myself. He was about twenty-six years old and very poor; the exact antithesis of myself, being clearminded, practical, cynical and a thorough sceptic on the existence of a soul and God and immortality. He was well-read and had the true scientific temperament, spending hours with his microscope and books. The fact of his being at the opposite pole to myself attracted me to him, and we had long talks in his consulting-room on the ground floor back — where everything was prepared for the reception of patients, but where no patient ever came. Our worlds were so far apart, and it was so hard to establish a mutual coinage of words that our talks were somewhat futile. He was logical, absorbed in his dream of original research; he used words in their exact meaning and jumped to no conclusions rashly, and never allowed his judgment to be influenced by his emotions; whereas I talked, no doubt, like a child, building vast erections upon inadequate premises, indulging in my religious dreams about God and the soul, speculative and visionary. He argued me out of my boots every time, and towards the end of our talks grew impatient and almost angry with my vague mind and "transcendental tommy-rot," as he called it; but at the same time he liked me, and was always glad to talk and discuss with me.

Nothing he said, though much of it was cogent and unanswerable, ever influenced my opinions in the least degree, because I felt he was fundamentally wrong, and was trying to find by scalpel and microscope the things of the spirit. I felt a profound pity for him, and he felt a contemptuous pity for me. But one night my pity almost changed to love, and after this particular conversation, in the course of which he made me deep confidences of his early privations in order that he might study for his profession, and of his unquenchable desire for knowledge for its own sake, I felt so tenderly towards him, that I never tried to argue again, but only urged him to believe in a soul and in a future life. For he told me that he was already so far gone in consumption that at most he had but a year or two to live, and he knew that in the time at his disposal he could not accomplish the very smallest part of his great dream. I then understood why his eyes were so burning bright and why he had always glowing red spots in his cheeks, and looked so terribly thin and emaciated.

The hours spent with him did not refresh or invigorate me as the woods and music did; I re-entered the swing doors of my prison — as I came to regard the Hub — with no new stimulus. His example impressed me, but his atmosphere and outlook both depressed. Only my admiration for his courage, strong will, and consistent attitude remained, while I drank "tea" with my unpleasant customers, or listened to complaints from the staff. Before the swing-doors closed for the last time, however, the thin, keen-faced doctor with the hectic flush and the bright burning eyes had succumbed to his terrible malady. His end made a great impression on me. For several months he went about like a living skeleton. His cough was ghastly. He had less and less money, and I seemed to be the only friend he turned to, or indeed possessed at all, for I was the only person he allowed to help him, and the little help I could give was barely enough to prevent the landlady turning him out for rent and board unpaid.

To the last his will burned in him like a flame. He talked and studied, and dreamed his long dream of scientific achievement even when he knew his time was measured by weeks, and he was utterly scornful of death and a Deity that could devise such a poor scheme of existence, so full of failure, pain, and abortive effort. But I was full of admiration for the way he kept going full speed to the very end, starting new books and fresh experiments even when he knew he would not have time to get half-way through with them, and discussing high schemes just as though he expected years in which to carry them out — instead of days.

Here was a man absolutely without faith, or any belief in God or future life, who walked straight up to a miserable death under full steam, with nothing to console or buoy him up, and without friends to sympathize, and who never for a single instant flinched or whimpered. There burned in his heart the fire of a really strong will. It was the first time I had realized at close quarters what this meant, and when I went to his funeral I felt full of real sorrow, and have never forgotten the scene at his death-bed when the keen set face relaxed nothing of its decision to the very last.

CHAPTER IX

AT LENGTH THE bitter, sparkling winter was over, the sleigh-bells silent, the covered skating-rinks all closed. The last remnants of the piled-up snow had melted, and the sweet spring winds were blowing freshly down the cedar-paved streets. On the lake shores the boat-houses were being opened; canoes, skiffs and catboats being repainted. Tents and camping kit were being overhauled. The talk everywhere was of picnics, expeditions, trips into the backwoods, and plans for summer holidays. Crystal sunlight flooded the world. The Canadian spring intoxicated the brain and sent the blood dancing to wild, happy measures.

The Hub was now in the hands of a Receiver; Adams and Burns, the wholesale house, controlled it. Kay and I had to pay cash for everything — the Hub Wine Company was "bust."

Yielding to my father's impatient surprise that after all these months I was still a partner, I had assigned my interest a short time before to Kay, and had sent home the printed announcement in the newspapers. It was a nominal assignment only, for I had nothing to assign. My last penny of capital was lost. Kay, for his part, had lost everything too. Vultures, in the form of bailiffs with blue writs in their claws, haunted our last week; by good luck rather than good management I owed nothing, but Kay had small outstanding accounts all over the town.

It was a hectic last week. Our friends came in crowds to sympathize, to offer advice, to suggest new plans, and all considered a liquid farewell necessary. This etiquette was strict. A private word with the Receiver brought back our tea bottle. The Upper House did a fair business again, while Louis B bursting with new schemes, new enterprises, that should restore our fortunes, was for ever at the piano in the upstairs room. We played together while our little Rome was burning — Tchaikowsky, Chopin, Wagner, and the latest songs with choruses. Kay donned his Irving wig from time to time and roared his "Bells "and "Suicide." Our last days rattled by.

The pain of the failure was mitigated for me personally by the intense relief I felt to be free of the nightmare at last. Whatever might be in store, nothing could be worse than that six months’ horror. Besides, failure in Canada was never final. It held the seeds of success to follow. From its ashes new life rose with wings and singing. The electric air of spring encouraged brave hopes of a thousand possibilities, and while I felt the disaster overwhelmingly, our brains at the same time already hummed with every imaginable fresh scheme. What these schemes were it is difficult now to recall, beyond that they included all possibilities of enterprise that a vast young country could suggest to penniless adventurous youth.

What memory still holds sharply however, is the face of a young lawyer of our acquaintance, as he looked at me across the fiddle and said casually: “You can live on my island in Lake Rosseau if you like!” Without a moment’s hesitation we accepted the lawyer’s offer of his ten-acre island in the northern lakes. The idea of immediate new enterprise faded. Kay was easily persuaded into a plan that promised a few weeks’ pleasant leisure to think things over, living meanwhile for next to nothing. “I shall go to New York later,” he announced, “and get on the stage. I’ll take Shakespeare up to the island and study it.” He packed his Irving wig. It was the camping-out which caught me with irresistible attraction: the big woods, an open air life, sun, wind and water.....” I’ll come up and join you later,” promised the sanguine Louis B

— . “I’ll come with some new plan we can talk over round your camp-fire.” He agreed to pack up our few belongings and keep them for us till we went later to New York. “We’ll all go to the States,” he urged. “Canada is a one-horse place. There are far more chances across the line.”

We kept secret our date of leaving, only Louis knowing it. On the morning of May 24th, the Queen’s birthday, he came to fetch us and our luggage, the latter reduced to a minimum. There were no goodbyes. But this excitable little Frenchman, who loved a touch of the picturesque, did not come quite as we expected. He arrived two hours before his time, with a wagonette and two prancing horses, his fat figure on the box, flicking his long whip and shouting up at our windows. His idea, he explained as we climbed in, was to avoid the main station, where we should be bound to see a dozen people we knew. He proposed, instead, to drive us twenty miles to a small station, where the train stopped on its way north. There was no time to argue. I sat beside him on the box with the precious fiddle, Kay got behind with our two bags, and Louis drove us and his spanking pair along King Street and then up Yonge Street. Scores recognized us, wondering what it meant, for these were the principal streets of the town, but Louis flourished his whip, gave the horses their head, and raced along the interminable Yonge Street till at length the houses disappeared, and the empty reaches of the hinterland took their place. He saw us into the train with our luggage and our few dollars, waving his whip in farewell as the engine started. We did not see him again till he arrived, thin, worried, anxious and gabbling, in the East 19th Street boarding-house the following autumn.

My Toronto episodes were over. I had been eighteen months in the country and was close upon twenty-two; my capital I had lost, but I had gained at least a little experience in exchange. I no longer trusted every one at sight. The green paint had worn thin in patches, if not all over. The collapse of the Dairy made me feel old, the Hub disaster made me a Methuselah. My home life seemed more and more remote, I had broken with it finally, I could never return to the old country, nor show my face in the family circle again. Thus I felt, at least. The pain and unhappiness in me seemed incurably deep, and my shame was very real. In my heart was a secret wish to live in the backwoods for evermore, a broken man, feeding on lost illusions and vanished dreams. The lighthearted plans that Louis B and Kay so airily discussed I could not understand. My heart sank each time I recognized my father's handwriting on an envelope. I felt a kind of final misery that only my belief in Karma mitigated.

This mood of exaggerated intensity soon passed, of course, but for a time life was very bitter. It was hard at first to "accept" these fruits of former lives, this harvest of misfortune whose seeds I assuredly had sown myself long, long ago. The "detachment" I was trying to learn, with its attitude of somehow being "indifferent to the fruits of action," was not acquired in a day.

Yet it interests me now to look back down the vista of thirty years, and to realize that this first test of my line of thought — whether it was a pretty fancy merely, or whether a real conviction — did not find me wanting. It was, I found, a genuine belief; neither then, nor in the severer tests that followed, did it ever fail me for a single moment. I understood, similarly, how my father's faith, equally sincere though in such different guise to mine, could give him strength and comfort, no matter what life might bring...

As our train went northwards through the hinterland towards Gravenhurst and the enchanted island where we were to spend five months of a fairyland existence, I grasped that a chapter of my life was closed, and a new one opening. The mind looked back, of course. Toronto, whose Indian name means Place of Meeting, I saw only once or twice again. I never stayed there. At the end of our happy island-life, we rushed through it on our way to fresh adventures in New York, Kay hiding his face in an overcoat lest some creditor catch a glimpse of him and serve a blue writ before the train's few minutes' pause in the station ended. The following winter, indeed, this happened, though in a theatre and not in a railway carriage. The travelling company, of which he formed a member, was giving its Toronto week, and a creditor in the audience recognized him on the stage, though not this time in his Irving wig. The blue writ was served, the bailiff standing in the wings until the amount was paid.

In the mood of reflection a train journey engenders, a sense of perspective slipped behind the eighteen months just over. Shot forth from my evangelical hot-house into colonial life, it now seemed to me rather wonderful that my utter ignorance had not landed me in yet worse muddles... even in gaol... One incident, oddly enough, stood out more clearly than the rest. But for my ridiculous inexperience of the common conditions of living, my complete want of *savoir faire,* my unacquaintance even with the ways of normal social behaviour, I might have now been in very different circumstances. A quite different career might easily have opened for me, a career in a railway, in the Canadian Pacific Railway, in fact, on one of whose trains we were then travelling.

But for my stupid ignorance, an opening in the C.P.R. would certainly have been found for me, whether it led to a future or not. The incident, slight and trivial though it was, throws a characteristic light on the results of my upbringing. It happened in this way:

Among my father's acquaintance were the bigwigs of the Canadian Pacific Railway, who had shown him much courtesy on our earlier visit. The relationship this time was not of a religious kind; he was Financial Secretary to the Post Office; the C.P.R. carried the mails. Sir George

Stephen and Sir Donald Stewart had not at that time received their peerages as My Lords Mount-Stephen and Strathcona; Sir William van Home was still alive. To all of these I bore letters, though I delivered — by post to Montreal — only the one to Sir George, as President of the line. It met with the kindest possible response, and for several weeks I had been awaiting the return of T., an important official in Toronto, to whom my case had been explained, but who was away at the time, touring the west in his special car. The moment I returned, I felt reasonably sure that he would find me a place of some sort or other where I could at least make a start. He had, in fact, been asked to do so. With influence, too, in high quarters behind me, I had every reason to hope. The return of Mr. T. I awaited eagerly. He was a young man, I learned, of undoubted ability, but was at the same time a petty fellow, very pushing, very conceited, and a social snob of the most flagrant type. I was rather frightened, indeed, by what I heard, for a colonial social snob can be a very terrible creature, as I had already discovered.

Mr. T.'s return chanced to coincide with a big race meeting, to be followed by a ball at Government House. Sir Alexander Campbell was Governor of Ontario at the time. It was the event of the season, and of course Mr. T. came back in time to attend it and be in evidence. With a party of friends I drove to my first race meeting (oh, how the clothes, the talk, the rushing horses, all looking exactly alike, bored me!) with an invitation to the grand stand box of the Governor General, Lord Aberdeen, also a friend of my father's, and was thus introduced to the railway official under the best possible auspices. My heart beat high when I saw how he took trouble to be nice to me and begged me to call upon him next day at his office, saying that "something could no doubt be arranged for me *at once."* I was so delighted that I felt inclined to cable home at once "Got work"; but I resisted this temptation and simply let my imagination play round the nature of the position I should soon be holding in a very big company, with excellent chances of promotion and salary. I was too young to be bothered by the man's patronizing manner and did not care a straw about his condescension and self-importance, because I thought only of getting work and a start.

The ball filled me with intense shyness and alarm, however, for I had never learned to dance, or been inside a ballroom, and it was merely by chance I found out that white gloves and a white tie (not a black one as I had always worn at home for dinner) were the proper things. In a colony, too, an Englishman, who pretends to any standing, cannot be too careful about social details; for everything, and more besides, is expected of him.

The ball was even worse than I had anticipated. I was nervous and uncomfortable. Ignorant of the little observances that would have been known to any man brought up differently, I found nothing to say to the numerous pretty Canadian girls, unconventional and natural, who were introduced to me, and I had not the slightest idea that the correct and polite thing to do was to ask each young lady for the "pleasure of a dance."

What people must have thought of my manners I cannot imagine, but the climax was undoubtedly reached when the railway official swaggered up to me in the middle of the room and said he wished to introduce me to his sister. This was duly accomplished, but — I could think of nothing to say. We stood side by side, with the official beaming upon us, I fingering my empty programme and the girl waiting to be asked for a dance. But the request was not forthcoming, and after a few minutes of terrible awkwardness and half silence, the purple-faced official marched his sister off again, highly insulted, to introduce her to men who would appreciate their luck better than I had done.

To him, of course, my manners must have seemed hopelessly rude. He felt angry that I had not thought his sister worth even the ordinary politeness of a dance; and to a Canadian, who learns dancing with his bottle, and dances indoors and out on every possible occasion, the omission must have seemed incredibly ill-mannered, and the snub an unforgivable one. I cannot blame him. I remained in complete ignorance however of my crime, and, beyond feeling nervously foolish, out of place, and generally not much of a success, I had no idea I had given cause for offence until, long afterwards, I heard stories about myself and my behaviour which made me realize that I had done unpardonable things and left undone all that was best and correct.

At the time, however, I had no realization that I had offended at all; and in the morning I went down according to appointment to call upon the railway official in his fine offices and hear the joyful news of my appointment to a lucrative and honourable position in the Company.

It seemed a little strange to me that I was kept waiting exactly an hour in the outer office, but I was so sure of a pleasant interview with a practical result that when at last the clerk summoned me to the official's sanctum, I went in with a smiling face and goodwill and happiness in my heart.

The general manager, as I will call him, though this title disguises his actual position, greeted me, however, without a word. He was talking to a man who stood beside his desk, and though he must have heard my name announced, he did not so much as turn his head. I stood looking at the framed photographs on the wall for several moments before the man went out, and then, when the door was closed, I advanced with outstretched hand and cordial manner across the room to greet my future employer.

He glanced at me frigidly, and, without even rising from his chair, gave me a stiff bow and said in a voice of the utmost formality:

"Well, sir, and what can I do for you?"

The words fell into my brain like so many particles of ice, and froze my tongue. Such a reception I had never dreamed of receiving. What had I done wrong? How in the world had I offended? Not even a word of apology for keeping me waiting an hour; and not even a seat offered me. I stood there foolishly for a moment, completely puzzled. Surely there must be a mistake. The man had forgotten me, or took me for somebody else.

"I had an appointment with you at eleven o'clock, Mr. T.," I said nervously, but trying to smile pleasantly. "You remember you were kind enough to say yesterday you thought you might find work for me to do in — in the railway offices."

The man's eyes flashed, just as though he were angry, his face turned red, and I could not help suddenly noticing what a bad, weak chin he had and how common and coarse the lines of his face were. The flush seemed to emphasize all its bad points.

"Oh, you want work?" he said with a distinct sneer, looking me up and down as if I were an animal to be judged. "You want work, do you?"

My nervousness began to melt away before his offensive manner, and I felt the blood mounting, but trying to keep my temper and to believe still there must be some mistake, I again reminded him of our previous interview at the races and in the ballroom.

“Oh, to be sure, yes, now I remember,” he said casually, and turned to take up pencil and paper on his desk. I looked about for a chair, but there was none near, so I remained standing, feeling something like a suspected man about to be examined by a magistrate. “What can you do?” he asked abruptly.

“Well,” I stammered, utterly surprised at his rudeness and manner, “I’ve not had much experience yet, of course, but I’m willing to begin at the bottom and work up. I’ll do anything for a beginning.”

“That’s what everyone says. ‘Doing anything’ is no good to me. I want to know what you can do. All my clerks here write shorthand—”

“I can write shorthand accurately and fast,” I hastened to interrupt, evidently to his surprise, as though he had not expected to find me thus equipped.

“But at present,” he hastened to add, “there are no vacancies on my staff, and I fear I can offer you nothing unless” he hesitated a moment and then looked me full in the face. This time there could be no mistake. I saw blood in his eye and I realized he was savagely angry with me for some reason, and was determined to make the interview as unpleasant for me as possible.

“ — unless you care to sling baggage on a side station up the line,” he finished sneeringly.

The blood rushed to my face, and I understood in a flash that the interview was a farce and his only object to humiliate me. I had so far swallowed my temper on the chance of getting a position, but I knew that a post under such a man, who evidently hated me, would be worse than nothing. So I gave him one look from head to foot and turned to leave the room. I could have struck him in the jaw with the greatest pleasure in the world.

“Then I understand you have no vacancies,” I said quietly as soon as I got to the door. “I will write and thank Sir George Stephen and tell him about your kindness to me.”

I said this because it was the only thing that occurred to me to say, and not with the object of making him uncomfortable. I had no intention of putting my words into effect, I had no idea my stray shot would hit the mark.

Yet it did. The official, purple, and dismayed, got up hastily, and called me to stay a moment and he would see if something was not possible. Hurried sentences followed me to the passage, but I merely bowed and went out, knowing perfectly well that nothing could come of further conversation.

CHAPTER X

GRADUALLY, THUS, CONTACT with ordinary people and experiences with certain facets, at least, of practical life had begun to give me what is called a knowledge of the world. The hot-house upbringing made this acquisition difficult as well as painful; there still remained a feeling that I was “peculiar”; ignorance of things that to other youths of twenty-one were commonplaces still gave me little shocks. Knowledge that comes at the wrong time is apt to produce exaggerated effects; and only those who have shared the childlike shelter afforded by a strict evangelical enclosure in early years can appreciate the absurd want of proportion which is one of these effects. Knowledge of “natural” human kinds, withheld at the right moment, and acquired later, has its dangers...

Two things, moreover, about people astonished me in particular, I remember; they astonish me even more today. Being, in both cases, merely individual reactions, to the herd, they are easily understandable, and are mentioned here because, being entirely personal, they reveal the individual whose adventures are described.

The first — it astonished me daily, hourly — was the indifference of almost everybody to the great questions Whence, Why, Whither. The few who asked these questions seemed cranks of one sort or another; the immense majority of people showed no interest whatever.

Creatures of extraordinary complexity, powers, faculties, set down for a given period, without being consulted apparently, upon a little planet amid countless numbers of majestic, terrifying suns few showed even the faintest interest in the purpose, origin and goal of their existence. Of these few, again, by far the majority were eager to prove that soul and spirit were chemical reactions, results of some fortuitous concourse of dead atoms, to rob life, in a word, of all its wonder. These problems of paramount, if insoluble, interest, were taken as a matter of course. There was, indeed, no sense of wonder.

It astonished me, doubtless, because in my own case this was the only kind of knowledge I desired, and desired passionately. To me it was the only real knowledge, the only thing worth knowing,. And I was ever getting little shocks on discovering gradually that not only was such knowledge not wanted, but that to talk of its possibility constituted one a dreamer, if not a bore. How anybody in possession of ordinary faculties could look, say, at the night sky of stars, and not know the wondrous flood of divine curiosity about his own personal relation to the universe drench his being — this never ceased to perplex me. Yet with almost everybody, the few exceptions being usually "odd," conversation rapidly flattened out as though such things were of no importance, while stocks and shares, some kind of practical "market-value," at any rate, quickly became again the topic of real value. Not only, however, did this puzzle me; it emphasized at this time one's sense of being peculiar; it sketched a growing loneliness in more definite outline. No one wanted to make some money more than I did, but these other things — one reason, doubtless, why I never did make money — came indubitably first.

The second big and daily astonishment of those awakening years, which also has persisted, if not actually intensified, concerned the blank irresponsiveness to beauty of almost everybody I had to do with. Exceptions, again, were either cranks or useless, unpractical people, failures to a man. Many liked "scenery," either perceiving it for themselves, or on having it pointed out to them; but very few, as with myself, knew their dominant mood of the day influenced — well, by a gleam of light upon the lake at dawn, a faint sound of music in the pines, a sudden strip of blue on a day of storm, the great piled coloured clouds at evening— "such clouds as flit, like splendour-winged moths about a taper, round the red west when the sun dies in it." These things had an effect of intoxication upon me, for it was the wonder and beauty of Nature that touched me most; something like the delight of ecstasy swept over me when I read of sunrise in the Indian Caucasus... "The point of one white star is quivering still, deep in the orange light of widening morn beyond the purple mountains..." and it was a genuine astonishment to me that so few, so very few, felt the slightest response, or even noticed, a thousand and one details in sky and earth that delighted me with haunting joy for hours at a stretch.

With Kay, my late "partner in booze," as I had heard him called, there was sufficient response in these two particulars to make him a sympathetic companion. If these things were not of dominant importance to him, they were at least important. Humour and courage being likewise his, he proved a delightful comrade during our five months of lonely island life. What his view of myself may have been is hard to say; luckily perhaps, Kay was not a scribbler... He will agree, I think, that we were certainly very happy in our fairyland of peace and loveliness amid the Muskoka Lakes of Northern Ontario.

Our island, one of many in Lake Rosseau, was about ten acres in extent, irregularly shaped, overgrown with pines, its western end running out to a sharp ridge we called Sunset Point, its eastern end facing the dawn in a high rocky bluff. It rose in the centre to perhaps a hundred feet, it had little secret bays, pools of deep water beneath the rocky bluff for high diving, sandy nooks, and a sheltered cove where a boat could ride at anchor in all weathers. Close to the shore, but hidden by the pines, was a one-roomed hut with two camp-beds, a big table, a wide balcony, and a tiny kitchen in a shack adjoining. A canoe and rowing-boat went with the island, a diminutive wharf as well. On the mainland, a mile and a half to the north, was an English settler named Woods who had cleared the forest some twenty-five years before, and turned the wilderness into a more or less productive farm. Milk, eggs and vegetables we obtained from time to time. To the south and cast and west lay open water for several miles, dotted by similar islands with summer camps and bungalows on them. The three big lakes — Rosseau, Muskoka and Joseph — form the letter Y, our island being where the three strokes joined.

To me it was paradise, the nearest approach to a dream come true I had yet known. The climate was dry, sunny and bracing, the air clear as crystal, the nights cool. In moonlight the islands seemed to float upon the water, and when there was no moon the reflection of the stars had an effect of phosphorescence in some southern sea. Dawns and sunsets, too, were a constant delight, and before we left in late September we had watched through half the night the strange spectacle of the Northern Lights in all their rather awful splendour.

The day we arrived — May 24th — a Scotch mist veiled all distant views, the island had a lonely and deserted air, a touch of melancholy about its sombre pines; and when the small steamer had deposited us with our luggage on the slippery wharf and vanished into the mist, I remember Kay's disconsolate expression as he remarked gravely: "We shan't stay *here* long!” Our first supper deepened his conviction, for, though there were lamps, we had forgotten to bring oil, and we devoured bread and porridge quickly before night set in. It was certainly a contrast to the brilliantly lit corner of the Hub dining-room where we had eaten our last dinner... But the following morning at six o’clock, after a bathe in the cool blue water, while a dazzling sun shone in a cloudless sky, he had already changed his mind. Our immediate past seemed hardly credible now. Jimmy Martin, the “Duke,” the Methodist woodcuts, the life insurance offices, to say nothing of the sporting goods emporium, red-bearded bailiffs, Alfred Cooper, and a furious half-intoxicated Irish cook — all faded into the atmosphere of some half-forgotten, ugly dream.

We at once set our house in order. We had saved a small sum in cash from the general wreck; a little went a long way; pickerel were to be caught for the trouble of trolling a spoon-bait round |the coast, and we soon discovered where the black bass hid under rocky ledges of certain pools. In a few weeks, too, we had learned to manage a canoe to the point of upsetting it far from shore, shaking it half-empty while treading water, then climbing in again — the point where safety, according to the Canadians, is attained. Even in these big lakes, it was rare that the water was too rough for going out, once the craft was mastered; a “Rice Lake” or “Peterborough,” as they were called, could face anything; a turn of the wrist could “lift” them; they answered the paddle like a living thing; a chief secret of control being that the kneeling occupant should feel himself actually a part of his canoe. This trifling knowledge, gained during our idle holiday, came in useful years later when taking a canoe down the Danube, from its source in the Black Forest, to Budapest.

Time certainly never hung heavy on our hands. Before July, when the Canadians came up to their summer camps, we had explored every bay and inlet of the lakes, had camped out on many an enchanted island, and had made longer expeditions of several days at a time into the great region of backwoods that began due north. These trips, westward to Georgian Bay with its thousand islands, on Lake Huron, or northward beyond French River, where the primeval backwoods begin their unbroken stretch to James Bay and the Arctic, were a source of keen joy. Our cooking was perhaps primitive, but we kept well on it. With books, a fiddle, expeditions, to say nothing of laundry and commissariat work, the days passed rapidly. Kay was very busy, too, “preparing for the stage,” as he called it, and Shakespeare was always in his hand or pocket. The eastern end of the island was reserved for these rehearsals, while the Sunset Point end was my especial part, and while I was practising the fiddle or deep in my Eastern books, Kay, at the other point of the island, high on his rocky bluff, could be heard sometimes booming “The world is out of joint. Oh cursed fate that I was born to set it right,” and I was convinced that he wore his Irving wig, no matter what lines he spouted. In the evenings, as we lay after supper at Sunset Point, watching the colours fade and the stars appear, it was the exception if he did not murmur to himself “... the stars came out, over that summer sea,” and then declaim in his great voice the whole of “The *Revenge”* which ends “I, Sir Richard Grenville, die!” — his tall figure silhouetted against the sunset, his voice echoing among the pines behind him.

Considerations for the future were deliberately shelved; we lived in the present, as wise men should; New York, we knew, lay waiting for us, but we agreed to let it wait. My father’s suggestion— “your right course is to return to Toronto, find work, and live down your past” — was a counsel of perfection I disregarded. New York, the busy, strenuous, go-ahead United States, offered the irresistible lure of a promised land, and we both meant to try our fortunes there. How we should reach it, or what we should do when we did reach it, were problems whose solution was postponed.

On looking back I can only marvel at the patience with which neither tired of the other. Perhaps it was perfect health that made squabbles so impossible. Nor was there any hint of monotony, strange to say. We had many an escape, upsetting in wild weather, losing our way in the trackless forests of the mainland, climbing or felling trees, but some Pan-like deity looked after us... The spirit of Shelley, of course, haunted me day and night; “Prometheus Unbound,” pages of which I knew by heart, lit earth and sky, peopled the forests, turned stream and lake alive, and made every glade and sandy bay a floor for dancing silvery feet: “Oh, follow, follow, through the caverns hollow; As the song floats thou pursue. Where the wild bee never flew.....” I still hear Kay’s heavy voice, a little out of tune, singing to my fiddle the melody I made for it. And how he used to laugh! Always at himself, but also at and with most other things, an infectious, jolly wholesome laughter, inspired by details of our care-free island life, from his beard and Shakespeare rehearsals to my own whiskers and uncut hair, my Shelley moods and my intense Yoga experiments...

Much of the charm of our lonely life vanished when, with high summer, the people came up to their camps and houses on the other islands. The solitude was then disturbed by canoes, sailing-boats, steam-launches; singing and shouting broke the deep silences; camp-fires in a dozen directions blazed at night. Many of these people we had known well in Toronto, but no one called on us.

Sometimes we would paddle to some distant camp-fire, lying on the water just outside the circle of light, and recognizing acquaintances, even former customers of Hub and Dairy and the Sporting Goods Emporium, but never letting ourselves be seen. Everybody knew we were living on the island; yet avoidance was mutual. We were in disgrace, it seemed, and chiefly because of the Hub — not because of our conduct with regard to it, but, apparently, because we had left the town suddenly without saying good-bye to all and sundry. This abrupt disappearance had argued something wrong, something we were ashamed of. All manner of wild tales reached us, most of them astonishingly remote from the truth.

This capacity for invention and imaginative detail of most ingenious sort, using the tiniest insignificant item of truth as starting point, suggests that even the dullest people must have high artistic faculties tucked away somewhere in them. Many of these tales we traced to their source — usually a person the world considered devoid of fancy, even dull. Here, evidently, possessing genuine creative power, were unpublished novelists with distinct gifts of romance and fantasy who had missed their real vocation. The truth about us was, indeed, far from glorious, but these wild tales made us feel almost supermen.

Many years later I met other instances of this power that dull, even stupid people could keep carefully hidden till the right opportunity for production offers — I was credited, to name the best, with superhuman powers of Black Magic, whatever that may be, and of sorcery. It was soon after a book of mine, “John Silence,” had appeared. A story reached my cars, the name of its author boldly given, to the effect that, for the purposes of this Black Magic, I had stolen the vases from the communion altar of St. Paul’s Cathedral and used their consecrated content in some terrible orgy called the Black Mass. Young children, too, were somehow involved in this ceremony of sacrilegious sorcery, and I was going to be arrested. The author of this novelette was well known to me, connected even by blood ties, a person I had always conceived to be without the faintest of imaginative gifts, though a credulous reader, evidently, of the mediaeval tales concerning the monstrous Gilles de Rais. Absurd as it sounds, a solicitor's letter was necessary finally to limit the author's prolific output, although pirated editions continued to sell for a considerable time. There is a poet hidden, as Stevenson observed, in most of us!

Meanwhile, summer began to wane; we considered plans for attacking New York; hope rose strongly in us both; disappointments and failures were forgotten. In so big a city we were certain to find work. We had a hundred dollars laid aside for the journey and to tide us over the first few days until employment came. We could not hide for ever in fairyland. Life called to us... Late in September, just when the lakes were beginning to recover their first solitude again, we packed up to leave. Though the sun was still hot at midday, the mornings and evenings were chill, and cold winds had begun to blow. The famous fall colouring had set fire to the woods; the sumach blazed a gorgeous red, the maples were crimson and gold, half of the mainland seemed in flame.

Sorrowfully, yet with eager anticipation in our hearts, we poured water on our camp-fire that had served us for five months without relighting, locked the door of the shanty, handed over to Woods the canoe and boat, and caught the little steamer on one of its last trips to Gravenhurst where the train would take us, via Toronto, to New York.

It had been a delightful experience; I had seen and known at last the primeval woods; I had even seen Red Indians by the dozen in their pathetic Reservations, and if they did not, like the spirit of the Medicine Man in Edinburgh, advise me to "scratch," they certainly made up for the omission by constantly scratching themselves. It seems curious to me now that, during those months of happy leisure, the desire to write never once declared itself. It never occurred to me to write even a description of our picturesque way of living, much less to attempt an essay or a story. Nor did plans for finding work in New York — we discussed them by the score — include in their wonderful variety any suggestion of a pen and paper. At the age of twenty-two, literary ambition did not exist at all.

The Muskoka interlude remained for me a sparkling, radiant memory, alight with the sunshine of unclouded skies, with the gleam of stars in a blue-black heaven, swept by forest winds, and set against a background of primeval forests that stretched without a break for six hundred miles of lonely and untrodden beauty.

CHAPTER XI

KAY AND I arrived in New York on a crisp, sunny afternoon with sixty dollars in hand out of the original hundred set by for the purpose, and took a room in the Imperial Hotel, Broadway, which someone had recommended. We knew no one, had no letters of introduction. We were tanned the colour of Red Indians, in perfect physical condition, but with a very scanty wardrobe.

The furious turmoil of the noisy city, boiling with irrepressible energies, formed an odd contrast to the peace and stillness of the forests. There was indifference in both cases, but whereas there it was tolerant and kindly, here it seemed intolerant and aggressive. “Get a hustle on, or get out,” was the note. Nature welcomed, while human nature resented, the intrusion of two new atoms. Nostalgia for the woods swept over me vehemently, but at the same time an eager anticipation to get work. We studied the papers at once for rooms, choosing a boarding house in East 19th Street, between Broadway and 4th Avenue. Something in the wording caught us. An hour after our arrival we interviewed Mrs. Bernstein and engaged the third floor back, breakfast included, for eight dollars a week. It was cheap. The slovenly, emotional, fat Jewess, with her greasy locks, jewellery, and tawdry finery, had something motherly about her that appealed. She smiled. She did not ask for payment in advance.

“What’s your work,” she inquired, gazing up at me.

“Oh, I’m going on the newspapers,” I said offhand, taking the first idea that offered, but little dreaming it was to prove true.

“I shall be on the stage,” Kay promptly added, “as soon as my arrangements are made.”

Mrs. Bernstein smiled. She knew the power of the Press and favoured reporters. “My hospand,” she informed Kay sympathetically, “is an artist too, a moosician. He has his own orchestra.”

While Kay studied the theatrical papers, I took the elevated railway down-town. I wanted to stand on Brooklyn Bridge again. Since first seeing it with my father a few years before, and again on my arrival eighteen months ago, en route for Toronto, the place had held my imagination. Something sentimental lay in this third journey, for I wanted to go alone.

Halfway across, at the highest point, I stood looking down upon the great waterway between the two cities of the new world, and the feeling of a fresh chapter in life, with its inevitable comparisons, rose in me... The sun was sinking behind the hills of New Jersey, and the crowded bay lay a sheet of golden shimmer. Huge, double-ended ferry boats, plying between the wooded shores of Staten and Manhattan Islands and Brooklyn, rushed to and fro with great snortings and hootings; little tugs dashed in every direction with vast importance; sailboats, yachts, schooners and cat-boats dotted the water like a thousand living things; and threading majestically through them all steamed one or two impressive Atlantic liners, immense and castle-like, towering above all else, as they moved slowly out toward the open sea. The deep poetry which ever frames the most prosaic things, lending them their real significance, came over me with the wind from that open sea.

I stood watching the fading lights beyond the bay, while behind me the crowded trains, at the rate of one a minute, passed thundering across the bridge, and thousands upon thousands of tired workers thronged to their Brooklyn homes after their day in the bigger city. The great bridge swayed and throbbed as the dense masses of pedestrians climbed uphill to the centre, then swarmed in a thick black river down the nether slope. I had never seen such numbers, or such speed of nervous movement, and the eager, tense faces, usually strained, white, drawn as well, touched an unpleasant note. New York, I felt, was not to be trifled with; the human element was strenuously keen; no loafing or dreaming here; work to the last ounce, or the city would make cat’s meat of one! Whereupon, by contrast, stole back again the deep enchantment of the silent woods, and the longing for the great, still places rose; I saw our little island floating beneath glittering stars; a loon was laughing farther out; the Northern Lights went flashing to mid-heaven; there was a sound of wind among the pines. The huge structure that reared above me seemed unreal; the river of men and women slipped past like silent shadows; the trains and boats became remote and hushed; and the ugly outer world about me merged in the substance of a dream and was forgotten.....

I turned and looked out over New York. I saw its lofty spires, its massed buildings, gigantic in the sky; I saw the opening of the great Hudson River, and the darkening water of the bay; I heard, like a sinister multiple voice out of the future, the strident cry of this wonderful and terrible capital of the New World, and the deep pulsings of its engines of frantic haste and untiring energy. The general note, I remember, was alarming rather; a touch of loneliness, of my own stupid incompetence to deal with its aggressive spirit, in which gleamed something merciless, almost cruel — this was the response it stirred in me. I suddenly realized I had no trade, no talents to sell, no weapons with which to fight. My heart sank a little. Among these teeming millions, with their tearing speed, their frenzied energy, their appalling practical knowledge, I possessed but one friend, Kay, and some sixty dollars between us. New York would eat me up unless I "got a hustle on."

Next morning, our capital much reduced, we moved into the lodging house. The idea of sharing a bed, in view of our size and the narrowness of the bed, amused us, but without enthusiasm. The sofa was too small to sleep on. "We'll move," announced Kay, "as soon as we get jobs." A telegram was sent to Toronto giving our address, and a few days later a packing case arrived with our Toronto possessions, and ten dollars to pay out of our small total. We found close at hand, in 20th Street, a cheap clean German restaurant — Krisch's — where a meal of sorts could be had for 30 cents, tip 5 cents; it had a sanded floor and was half bier-stuhe, and one of its smiling waiters. Otto — he came from the Black Forest where I had been to school — proved a true friend later, allowing us occasional credit at his own risk; a Chinese laundry was looked up in Fourth Avenue; I spent one of our precious dollars in a small store of fiddle strings against a possible evil day — a string meant more to me than a steak — and we were then ready for our campaign.

Not a minute was lost. Kay, in very sanguine mood, the Irving wig, I shrewdly suspected, in his pocket, went out to interview managers; while I took a train down-town to interview Harper's, as being the most important publishing house I knew. This step was the result of many discussions with Kay, who said he was sure I could write.

The Red Indian advice of the Edinburgh "spirit "had impressed him. "That's your line," he assured me. "Try the magazines." I felt no similar assurance, no desire to write was in me; we had worked ourselves up to a condition that bold, immediate action was the first essential of our position; to get pupils for my two languages or shorthand seemed impossible in a city like New York; therefore I hurried down, with vague intentions but a high heart, to Harper's.

There was the *Magazine,* the *Weekly,* and *Harper's Young People.* One of them surely would listen to my tale. I chose the *Weekly* for some unknown reason. For some equally unknown reason I was admitted to the editor's sanctum, and, still more strange, Richard Harding Davis listened to my tale. His success as a novelist had just begun; he had left the *Evening Sun,* where his "Van Bibber" stories had made him first known; his popularity was rising fast, though I had never heard of him.

My tale was brief, having been rehearsed in the train. It took, perhaps, three minutes at most to rattle it off — my parentage, my farm and hotel, my interest in Eastern Thought, my present destitution, and I remember adding, "You see, I cannot possibly go home to England again until I have made good somehow."

"Have you written anything?" he asked, after listening patiently with raised eyebrows.

"Well — no, I haven't, not yet, I'm afraid." I explained that I wanted to begin, though what I really wanted was only paid employment.

The author of "Van Bibber "and "A Soldier of Fortune "looked me up and down and then chuckled. After a moment's silence, he got up, led me across the hall to another door, opened it without knocking and said to a man who was seated at a table smothered in papers:

"This is Mr. Blackwood, an Englishman, who wants to write something for you. He is prepared to write anything — from Eastern philosophy to 'How to run a hotel in Canada.'"

The door closed behind me, with no word of farewell, and I learned that the man facing me was the editor of *Harper's Young People.* His name, if I remember rightly, was Storey, and he was an Englishman, who, curiously enough, almost at once mentioned my father. He had been an employee of the G.P.O. In London. He was unpleasant, supercilious, patronizing and off-hand, proud of his editorial power. He gave me, however, my first assignment — to write a short, descriptive article about a cargo of wild animals that had just arrived for the New York "Zoo." I hurried off to the steamer, bought some paper, wrote the article in a pew of Trinity Church in Lower Broadway, and returned three hours later to submit it. Storey read it and said without enthusiasm it would do, but when I asked "Is it good?" he shook his head with the comment "Well — some men would have made more of it perhaps." It was printed, however, and in due course I got ten dollars for it. I inquired if I could do something else. He took my address. No further results followed. Evidently, I realized, writing was not my line, and both Kay and the Red Indian Medicine Man were mistaken.

Kay's report of his luck, when we met again that evening was meagre; he had met an English Shakespearean actor, Bob Mantell, and a Toronto acquaintance, the "Duke." The actor, however, had given him an introduction or two, and the Duke had asked us to play next day in a cricket match on Staten Island. It was an eleven of Actors v the Staten Island Club, and Kay would meet useful people. In sanguine mood we agreed to go. It proved a momentous match for me.

Before it came off, however, something else had happened that may seem very small beer, but that provided me with a recurrent horror for many months to come, a horror perhaps disproportionate to its cause. It filled me, at any rate, with a peculiar loathing as of some hideous nightmare, I had never seen the things before; their shape, their ungainly yet rapid movement, their uncanny power of disappearing in a second, their number, their dirty colour, above all their smell, now gave me the sensations of acute nausea. Kay's laughter, though he too felt disgust and indignation, brought no comfort. We eventually got up and lit the gas. We caught it. I had my first view of the beast. We stared at each other in horror. Then Kay sniffed the air. "That explains it," he said, referring to a faint odour of oil we had both noticed when engaging the room. "They put it in the woodwork to kill them," he added. "It's the only thing. But it never really gets rid of them, I'm afraid."

The anger of Mrs. Bernstein when we accused her in the morning, her indignant denials, her bluster about "insoults," and that "never had sooch a t'ing been said of her house pefore," were not half as comic as her expression when I suddenly produced the soap-dish with its danming evidence — 17 all told.

She stared, held her breath a second, then very quietly said “Ach, Ach! If you stay, chentelmen, I take von tollar off the price.”

It was impossible not to laugh with her; there was something kind and motherly, something good and honest and decent about her we both liked; she would do her best, we believed; possibly she really would exterminate the other tenants. We stayed on.

Of the cricket match on Staten Island, beyond the pretty ground with its big trees, and that we got a good lunch without paying for it, no memory remains. What stands out vividly is the tall figure of Arthur Glyn Boyde, a fast bowler and a good bat, and one of the most entertaining and sympathetic companions I had ever met. His clothes were shabby, but his graceful manners, his voice, his smile, everything about him, in fact, betrayed the English gentleman. He was about thirty years of age, of the most frank and engaging appearance, with kindly, honest blue eyes, in one of which he wore an eyeglass. I remember the little fact that he, Kay and myself were measured for a bet after the match, and that he, like Kay, was six feet two inches, being one inch shorter than myself.

I took to him at once, and he to me. His real name was a distinguished one which he shared, it turned out, with some cousins of my own. We were, therefore, related. The bond was deepened. Times had gone hard with him, it seemed, but at the moment he was on the stage, being understudy to Morton Selton as Merivale in “Captain Lettarblair,” which E. H. Sothern’s company was then playing. In “The Disreputable Mr. Reagen,” by, I think, Richard Harding Davis he had also played the role of the detective. He was waiting, however, for a much better post, as huntsman to the Rockaway Hunt, a Long Island fashionable club, and this post, oddly enough, was in the gift, he told me, of Davis. It had been practically promised to him, he might hear any day... The story of his many jobs and wanderings interested us, and his theatre work promised to be helpful in many ways to what was called my “room-mate,” Boyde’s experience of New York generally was invaluable to us both, and the fact that he had nowhere to sleep that night (having been turned out by his landlady) gave us the opportunity to invite him to our humble quarters. We mentioned the other tenants, but he said that made no difference, he would sleep on the sofa. He dined with us at Krisch’s; he was extremely hard up; luckily, we still had enough to invite a friend. His only luggage was a small bag, for he told us, with a rueful smile, that his clothes were all in pawn. I had an extra suit or two which, being of about my size, he was able to wear.

I felt immensely drawn to him, and his story touched my pity as well as stirred my admiration. It was a happy evening we all spent in the little bedroom, for he was not only well-read — he knew my various "Eastern books "and could talk about them interestingly — but had a fine tenor voice into the bargain. My fiddle came out of its case, and if the other lodgers disliked our duets, they did not, at any rate, complain. Boyde sang, he further told us, in the choir of the 2nd Avenue Baptist Church, and was assistant organist there as well, but made little out of this latter job, as he was only called upon when the other man was unable to attend. He even taught sometimes in the Sunday School— "to keep in the pastor's good books," as he explained with a laugh. But the chief thing he told us that night was the heartening information that, when all other chances failed, there was always a fair living to be earned by posing to artists at 50 cents an hour, or a dollar and a half for a full sitting of three hours. It was easy work and not difficult to get. He would gladly introduce us to the various studios, as soon as they opened, most of the artists being still in the country.

The search for work was a distressing business, when to the inevitable question "What can you do?" the only possible, but quite futile, reply was, "I'll do anything." I had collected the ten dollars from *Harper's Young People,* but a letter to Storey for more work brought no reply. The payment for the Toronto packing-case and for a week's rent of the rooms had reduced the exchequer so seriously that in a few days there was only the *Harper's* money in hand. Boyde, who stayed on at our urgent invitation, shared all he earned, and taught us, besides, the trick of using the free lunch-counters in hotels and saloons. For a glass of beer at five cents, a customer could eat such snacks as salted chip-potatoes, strips of spiced liver sausage, small squares of bread, and pungent almonds, all calculated to stimulate unnatural thirst.

The hotels provided more sumptuous dishes, though the price of drink was higher, and the calm way Boyde would help himself deliberately to a plate and fork, with an ample supply of the best food he could find, then carry it all back to his glass of lager under the bar-tender's very nose, was an ideal we could only hope to achieve by practice as long as his own. It was a question of nerve. Our midday meal was now invariably of this kind. The free lunch brigade, to which we belonged, was tolerantly treated by the majority of bar-tenders. A thirty cents dinner at Krisch's in the evening, choosing the most bulky dishes, ended the long tiring day of disappointing search. Boyde also made us buy oatmeal, with tin pot and fixture for cooking over the gas-jet. He was invaluable in a dozen ways, always cheery, already on the right side of Mrs. Bernstein, and turning up every evening with a dollar or two he had earned during the day.

He further taught us — the moment had come, he thought — to pawn. The packing-case in the basement was opened and rummaged through (a half-used chequebook from Toronto days was a pathetic relic!) for things on which Ikey of 3rd Avenue might offer a few dollars. The tennis cups, won at little Canadian tournaments, seemed attractive, he thought, but our English overcoats would fetch most money. The weather was still comfortable we sallied forth, hoping Mrs. Bernstein would not see us, carrying two tennis cups and a couple of good overcoats.

Everybody stared and grinned, it seemed, though actually of course, no one gave us a glance. Boyde, humming Lohengrin, was absolutely nonchalant. For me, the pawnbroker's door provided sensations similar to those I knew when first entering the Hub just a year before.

"I want ten dollars on these," said Boyde, in a firm voice. "What'll you give? I shall take 'em out next week."

The Jew behind the counter gave one glance at the tennis cups, then pushed them contemptuously aside; the overcoats he examined carefully, holding them up to the light for holes or threadbare patches, feeling the linings, turning the sleeves inside out.

"Good English cloth," mentioned Boyde. "Hardly used at ail."

"A dollar each," said the man, laying them down as though the deal was finished. He turned to make out the tickets. He had not looked at us once yet.

Boyde picked them up and turned to go. "Two dollars," he said flatly, "I can get five in 4th Avenue."

"Go ged it," was the reply, the man's back still turned on us.

Boyde gave a cheery laugh. “Make it three dollars for the two,” he suggested in an off-hand manner, “with another couple for the cups. They’re prizes. We wouldn’t lose them for worlds.”

The man looked at us for the first time; we were fairly well dressed, obviously English, three hulking customers of a type he was not used to. Perhaps he really believed we might redeem the cups one day, “Worth less than nozzing,” he said in his Yiddish accent. The keen, appraising look he gave us made me feel even less than that.

“Worth a lot to us, though,” came Boyde’s quick comment.

“Name?” queried the man, bending over a table with his back turned again.

“John Doe,” came promptly, and a moment later, with the ticket, the Jew handed out four dirty dollar bills and fifty cents in coin. The interest was twelve per cent, per month, and the articles could be redeemed any time up to the end of a year.

“Never ask more than you really need at the moment,” was Boyde’s advice as we came out into the street. “I could have raised him a few dollars probably, but, remember, you’ll have to get the coats out again before long.”

When we got back to the room a Western Union telegram lay on the table for him; it was from Davis: “Please call to-morrow 3 o’clock without fail re Rockaway,” it read. And hope ran high. That night we spent half of our new money at Krisch’s, giving a tip of thirty cents to Otto.....

Some ten days to a fortnight had passed, and October with its cooler winds had come, though life was still possible without overcoats. Our dress-clothes were now in Ikey’s, moth-balls beside them. The Chinese laundry had been paid, but not the second week’s rent, for money was very low and dinners of the smallest. Practice at the free lunch counters had improved our methods of strolling up absent-mindedly, perceiving the food apparently for the first time, then picking up with quick fingers the maximum quantity, Kay, meanwhile, had secured a part in a touring company which was to start out for a series of one-night stands in about three weeks, his salary of fifteen dollars to begin with the first night. He was already rehearsing. My own efforts had produced nothing. Boyde, too, had not yet landed his huntsman job, which was to include comfortable quarters as well as a good salary. I had been down with him when he went to see Davis, waiting in the street till he came out, and the interview, though reassuring, he told me, involved a little further delay still. He, therefore, continued his odd jobs, calling at the theatre every night and matinee to see if he was wanted, playing the organ in church occasionally, and getting a small fee for singing in the choir. He shared with us as we shared with him; he slept on the sofa in our room; he was welcome to wear my extra suits of clothes — until Ikey might care to see them.

Then, quite suddenly, fate played a luckier card.

Kay and I were at the free lunch counter of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, Boyde having been called away to do something at his Baptist church, when Bob Mantell strolled up, bringing a tall, grey-haired man with him. The next minute he was introducing me to Cecil Clay, with a remark to the effect that he must surely have known my father, and that I surely must know Mr. Clay's famous book on whist. Cecil Clay, anyhow, was a kindly old Englishman, and evidently was aware how the land lay with us, for a few minutes later he had given me a card to Laffan, manager of the New York Sun. "Go and see him the day after tomorrow," he said. "Meanwhile I'll write him a line about you."

Had it been possible to go then and there I should have felt more confidence and less nervousness than when I called at the appointed hour. The interval, with its hopeful anticipation and alternate dread, was a bad preparation for appearing at my best. After a few questions, however, Mr. Laffan, a man of very powerful position in the newspaper world, a great art collector and connoisseur, head, too, of the Laffan News Bureau, said that Mr. McCloy, managing editor of the Evening Sun, would give me a trial as a reporter, and I could start next Monday — four days away — at fifteen dollars a week. I had mentioned that I knew French and German, and could write shorthand. He spoke to me in both languages, but, luckily, he did not think of testing the speed and accuracy of my self-taught Pitman.

On the staff of a great New York newspaper! That it was anti-British and pro-Tammany did not bother me. A reporter! A starting salary of £3 a week that might grow! I wrote the news to my father that very afternoon, and that night Kay, Boyde and I had almost a festive dinner at Krisch's restaurant — that is, we ended with sweets and coffee. The following day I spent practising my rusty shorthand, about 90 words a minute being my best speed consistent with legibility. Would it be fast enough? I might have spared myself the trouble for all the use shorthand was to me on the *Evening Sun* during the two years I remained with it. Only once — much later, when I was with the *New York Times,* did it prove of value, securing for me on that occasion an increase of salary... The slogan of the *Sun*, printed on each copy was, “If you See it in the *Sun* it is so!” accuracy the strong point. The *Times* preferred a moral tinge: “All the News that’s Fit to Print.” Both mottoes were faithfully observed and rigidly practised.

CHAPTER XII

IF ANY YOUNG man learning values wants to know the quickest way to study the seamy side of life, to understand the darkest aspects of human nature, and incidentally, to risk the loss of every illusion he ever had, let him become a reporter on an up-to-date New York newspaper. Within six months he will be apt to believe that every man has his price; he will become acquainted with vice, crime, horror, terror, and every kind of human degradation; theft, murder, arson will seem commonplaces, forgery a very ordinary affair; men and women, it may even seem to him, "go straight," not because of any inherent principle of goodness in them, but because that degree of temptation which constitutes their particular "price "has not yet offered itself.

Passion of every type, abnormal, often incredible, will be his daily study; if he reflects a little he will probably reach the conclusion that either jealousy in some form, or greed for money, lie at the root of every crime that is ever committed. The overwhelming power of these two passions will startle him, at any rate, and his constant association with only one aspect of life, and that the worst and lowest, will probably produce the conviction that, given only the opportunity, everybody is bad. His conception of women may suffer in particular. The experience, contrariwise, may widen his tolerance and deepen his charity; also, it may leave him as it left me, with an ineradicable contempt for those who, born in ease, protected from the temptations due to poverty and misery, so carelessly condemn the weak, the criminal and the outcast.

With bigger experience may come, in time, a better view; equally, it may never come. Proportion is not so easily recovered, for the mind, at an impressionable age, has been deeply marked. The good, the beautiful, the lovely, in a New York paper, is very rarely "news"; it is considered as fake, bunkum, humbug, a pose; it is looked at askance, regarded with suspicion, as assumed by someone for the purpose of a "deal"; it is rarely worth its space, at any rate. A reporter finds himself in a cynical school; he is lucky if he escape in the end with a single rag of illusion to his back. If he has believed, up to the age of twenty-one, as I did, that the large majority of people are decent, kindly, honest folk, he will probably lose even that last single rag. On the *Evening Sun,* certainly, it was not the good, the beautiful, the clean, that constituted the most interesting news and got scare headlines and extra editions. I give, of course, merely the impression made upon my own mind and type, coloured as these were, some thirty years ago, by a characteristically ignorant and innocent upbringing...

The important newspapers, in those days, were all "down town," grouped about Park Row, and the shabby, tumble-down building of the *Sun* was not imposing. The *World* and *Times* towered above it; the *Morning Advertiser,* the *Evening Telegram,* even the *Recorder* were better housed; the *Journal* had not yet brought W. R. Hearst's methods from San Francisco. For all its humble offices, the *Sun* was, perhaps, the greatest power in the city. It was openly Tammany; it had a grand, courageous editor, Charles A. Dana. "Charles A." was an imposing figure, a man of immense ability, a "crank "perhaps in certain ways, but a respected chief of outstanding character and fearless policy... My own chief, however, was W. C. McCloy, and the offices where he reigned as managing editor were housed on the top floor of the rickety building, with the machinery making such a din and roar and clatter that we had to shout to make ourselves heard at all. Metal sheets that clanged and pinged as we walked on them covered the floors. It was amid this pandemonium I had my first interview with him. An iron spiral staircase led from the quiet workrooms of the *Morning Sun,* on the first floor, to the dark, low-ceilinged space, where the whirring printing presses were not even partitioned off from the tables of editorial departments or reporters. It was like a factory going at full speed. Hours were 8.30 a m. To 6.30 p m., or later if an extra — a 6th or 7th — edition was called for. I arrived at 8.15.

In a dark corner of this machinery shop I introduced myself with trepidation to McCloy, mentioning Mr. Laffan's name, and saw the blank look come and go, as he stared at me with "Blackwood, Blackwood?... Oh, yes, I remember! You're fifteen dollars a week. A Britisher from Canada... Well, you'll have to look lively here! "He seemed so intensely busy and preoccupied, his mind so charged with a sort of electric activity, that I wondered he had time to open and shut his mouth. A small, thin man, with the slightest of frail bodies, nervous, delicately shaped hands, gimlet eyes that pierced, a big head with protruding forehead, a high-pitched, twanging voice that penetrated easily above the roar of the machinery, and a general air of such lightning speed and such popping, spitting energy that I felt he might any moment flash into flame or burst with a cracking report into a thousand pieces — this was the man on whom my living depended for many months to come. The phrase "New York hustler," darted across my mind; it stood in the flesh before me; he lived on wires. Buried among this mechanic perfection, however, I caught, odd to relate, an incongruous touch — of kindness, even of tenderness. There were gentle lines in that electric face. He had a smile I liked.

"What are you out here for? Where have you come from? What have you been doing? What d'you know?" he asked with the rapidity of a machine-gun. The shorthand rate must have been 400 words per minute.

I never talked so quickly in my life as in my brief reply. I watched the smile come and go. While he listened, he was shouting instructions to reporters then streaming in, to office boys, to printers, to subeditors; but his eyes never left my face, and when I had finished my lightning sketch, the machine-gun crackled with its deadliest aim again: "Only one thing counts here; get the news and get it quick; method of no consequence. Get the news and get it *first!"* He darted off, for the first edition went to press at 10.30. As he went, however, he turned his head a moment. "Write a story," he backfired at me. "Write your experiences — From Methodism to Running a Saloon," — and he vanished amid the whirling machinery in the back of the great room.

I have the pleasantest recollections of W. C. McCloy; he was just, fair, sympathetic, too, when time permitted; he showed me many little kindnesses; he was Presbyterian, his parents Scotch; he was also — sober. I proved a poor reporter, and my salary remained at fifteen dollars all the time I was with the paper, yet once he kept a place open for me for many weeks; he even took me back when the consideration was hardly deserved.

That first day, however, I spent on tenterhooks, fully expecting to be "fired" at its end. I found a corner at the big reporters' table, and, having seized some "copy" paper from the general pile, I sat down to write "From Methodism to Running a Saloon," without the faintest idea of how to do it.

A dozen reporters sat scribbling near me, but no one paid me the smallest attention. They came and went; at another table Cooper, the City Editor (anglice news-editor) issued the assignments; the editorial writers arrived and sat at their little desks apart; the roar and pandemonium were indescribable; the first edition was going to press, with McCloy in a dozen places at once, but chiefly watching the make-up over the shoulders of the type-setters in the back of the room..... I wrote on and on; I believed it was rather good; no one came to stop me, no one looked at my "copy" or told me what length was wanted; once or twice, McCloy, flashing by, caught my eye, but with a glance that suggested he didn't know who I was, why I was there at all, or what I was writing... The hours passed; the first edition was already out; the reporters were reading hurriedly their own work in print, delighted if it was on the front page; the space-men were measuring the columns to see how much they had earned; and the make-up for the second edition, out at noon, was being hastened on behind the buzzing machinery in the rear.

By this time I must have written two columns at least, and I began to wonder. Perhaps I was to appear in the principal final edition at six o'clock! On the front page! The article, evidently, was considered important! The notion that I was making a fool of myself, being made a fool of, rather, also occurred to me. I wrote on and on... it was hunger finally that stopped me. I was famished. I turned to an albino reporter next me, a mere boy, whose peculiarity had earned him the nickname "Whitey." Was I allowed to go out for lunch?" Just tell Cooper you're going," he replied. "Come out with me," he added, "if you've finished your story. I'm going in a moment." I finished my "story" then and there, putting the circle with three dots in it which, he explained, meant *finis* to the printers. "Just hand it in to Cooper, and we'll get right out," he said. I obeyed. Cooper taking my pile of "copy" with a grin, and merely nodding his head when I mentioned lunch. He was a young man with thick curly black hair, big spectacles that magnified his good-natured eyes, only slightly less rapid and electric than McCloy, but yet so unsure of himself that the reporters soon found him out — and treated him accordingly. I saw my precious "copy" shoved to one side of his desk, but I never saw it again, either in print or elsewhere. No mention was ever made of it. It was, doubtless, two columns of the dullest rubbish ever scribbled in that office.

“I guess Mac only wanted to see what you could do,” explained the albino, as we swallowed “sinkers” (heavy dough scones) and gulped down coffee at Childs’ Cheap Lunch Counter round the corner. Whitey had invited me to lunch; he “put me wise” about a thousand things; showed me how to make a bit on my weekly expense-account, if I wanted to; how one could “sneak off” about five o’clock, if one knew the way; and, most useful of all, warned me as to accuracy in my facts and the right way to present them. A “story” whether it was the weather story or a murder story, should give in a brief first paragraph the essential facts — this satisfied the busy man who had no time to read more; the second paragraph should amplify these facts — for those who wanted to know more; afterwards — for those interested personally in the story — should come “any stuff you can pick up.” An item that seemed exclusive — a “scoop” or “beat” he called it — should come in the very beginning, so as to justify the headlines.

“Whitey” was always a good friend to me. “Make friends with the reporters on other papers,” he advised, “then you won’t get badly left on the story you’re all ‘covering.’ Most of ’em give up all right.” He gave me names of sundry who never “gave up,” skunks he called them.

As we hurried back to the office half an hour later, he dived into a drug store on the ground floor. The way most of the reporters frequented this drug store puzzled me for a time, till I learned that whisky was to be had there in a little back room. The chemist had no license, but by paying a monthly sum to the ward man of the district — part of immense revenues paid to Tammany by every form of law-breaking, from gambling-hells and disorderly houses to far graver things — he was allowed to dispense liquor. It was a pretty system, marvellously organized down to the lowest detail; cash to the ward man opened most doors; a policeman paid $300 before he even got a nomination on the force; vice paid gigantic tribute; but the people liked a Tammany Government because “they knew where they were” with it, though the *Sun,* my paper, was the only journal that boldly supported it — for which Charles A. Dana was forever being attacked. I acquired much inside experience of the secret workings of Tammany Hall before my newspaper days came to an end..... It appalled me.

That afternoon, I had two assignments, and failed badly in both. The first was to find a company promoter who had got into trouble, and to ask him “all about it.” I could not find him; his house, his office, his club knew him not. After two hours' frantic search, I returned crestfallen, expecting to be dismissed there and then. Cooper, however, cut short my lengthy explanations with a shrug of the shoulders, and sent me up to the Fort Lee woods, across the Hudson River, to find out "all about" a suicide whose body had just been discovered under the trees. "Get his name right, why he did it, and what the relatives have to say," were his parting words. The Fort Lee woods were miles away, I saw the body — an old man with a bullet hole in his temple, I found his son at the police station, and asked him what his tears and grief made permissible, the answer being that "he had no troubles and we can't think what made him do it." Then I telephoned these few facts to the office. On getting back myself at half-past six when the last edition was already on the streets. Cooper showed me the final edition of the *Evening World.* It had a column on the front page with big head-lines. The suicide was a defaulter, and the reporter gave a complete story of his gambling life. Cooper offered no comment. The *Evening World* had got "a beat"; and I had failed badly. I sat down at the reporters' table and wondered what would happen, and then saw, lying before me, our own last edition with exactly the same story, similar big headlines, and all the important facts complete. An interview with the company promoter was also in print. I was at a loss to understand what had happened until Whitey, on the way into the drug-store a little later, explained things: the United Press, a news agency that "covered" everything, had sent the story. The "flimsy" men, so called because they wrote on thin paper that made six copies at once, were very valuable. "Make friends with them," said Whitey, "and no one will ever get a beat on you. They're paid a salary and don't care. It's only the space-men, as a rule, who won't give up."

CHAPTER XIII

AS A NEW "bum reporter," however, I had a hectic life, but rapidly made friends with the other men, and a mutual loathing of the work brought us easily together. Friday was pay-day; by Wednesday everybody was trying to borrow money — one dollar, usually — from everybody else, the debts being always faithfully repaid when the little envelopes were collected at the cashier's office downstairs.

My first week's reporting passed in a whirl of feverish excitement. Assignments of every possible kind were hurled at me. I raced and flew about. The "Britisher," the "English accent," were a source of amusement to the staff, but there was no ill-nature. Cooper seemed to like me; he chuckled; he even gave me hints. "Well, Mr. Britisher, did you get it this time?" Few of my first efforts were used, the flimsy report being printed instead, but a divorce case in special sessions, and interviews with the principals in it, brought me into notice, the story being put in the front page of the first edition. When I came down on the following Monday, McCloy whipped up to me like a steel spring released. "You can cover the Tombs this morning," he rattled. "Anything big must be in by ten at the latest. Use judgment and pick out the best stories. Don't let anyone get a beat on you." He flashed away, and I tore down to the Tombs Police Court.

The Tombs — I can smell to-day its peculiar mixture of extremely dirty humanity, cheap scent, very old clothes, Chinese opium, stale liquor, iodoform, and a tinge of nameless disinfectant. In winter the hot-air which was the means of heating the court whose windows were never opened, and in summer the stifling, humid atmosphere, to say nothing of the added flavour of acid perspiration, were equally abominable. The building, with its copy of Egyptian architecture, vies in gloom with the prison in Venice, though the former takes unpleasant precedence — a veritable Hall of Eblis, with thick walls, impressive portals, a general air of hopeless and portentous doom about even its exterior. There was a grimness in its dark passages that made the heart sink, truly an awful building. The interior was spick and span and clean as a hospital ward, but the horror of that repellent outside leaked through somehow. Both inside and outside, the Tombs Prison became as familiar to me as my room in East 19th Street; many a prisoner I interviewed in his cell, many a wretch I talked with through the bars of his last earthly cage in Murderers' Row; I never entered the forbidding place without a shudder, nor stepped into the open air again without relief.

The routine of the police court, too, became mechanical as the months went by. The various reporters acted in concert; we agreed which stories we would use, and in this way no paper got a "beat" on the others. The man on duty stood beside the Tammany magistrate, making his notes as each case came up. It was a depressing, often a painful, business.

The cases rattled by very quickly — arson, burglary, forgery, gambling, opium dens, street women, all came up, but it was from assaults that we usually culled our morning assortment for the first edition. Negroes used a razor, Italians a stiletto, white men a knife, a pistol, a club or a sandbag. Women used hatpins mostly.

It was, of course, some particular feature, either picturesque or horrible, that lent value to a case. Gradually my "nose for news" was sharpened. It was a friendly little German Jew, named Freytag, who taught me how to make the commonest police story readable. I had just "given up" the facts about a Syrian girl who had been stabbed by a jealous lover, and the reporters all round me were jotting down the details. Freytag, who worked for Hermann Ridder's *Staatszeitung,* looked over my shoulder. "That's no good," he said. "Don't begin 'Miriam so-and-so, living at such a place, was stabbed at two o'clock this morning by Whatshisname.....' That's not interesting. Begin like this: 'A mysterious crime with an exotic touch about it was committed in the early hours this morning when all worthy New Yorkers were enjoying their beauty sleep... Far away, where the snows of the Taurus Mountains gleam to heaven, the victim, a lovely Syrian maid, once had her home...'" I followed his advice, though my version was severely bluepencilled, but his point — selecting a picturesque angle of attack — was sound and useful.

The police court work was over by half-past ten, and I was then generally sent on to report the trials in Special or General Sessions. These, naturally, were of every sort and kind. Divorce, alienation of affection and poison trials were usually the best news. My hair often stood on end, and some of the people were very unpleasant to interview. The final talk before a man went to the Chair was worst of all. If the case was an important one, I had to get an interview in the Tombs Prison cell before the day's trial — there was no *sub judice* prohibition in New York. Inevitably, I formed my own opinion as to a man's innocence or guilt; the faces, gazing at me through bars, would often haunt me for days. Carlyle Harris, calm, indifferent, cold as ice, I still see, as he peered past the iron in Murderers' Row, protesting his innocence with his steely blue eyes fixed on mine; he was a young medical student accused of poisoning his wife with morphia; he was electrocuted and Lizzie Borden though this was in Providence, Rhode Island — who took all her clothes off, lest the stains of blood betray her, before killing her father and mother in their sleep...

Some of the cases made a lasting and horrible impression; some even terrified. The behaviour of individuals, especially of different races, when sentence was given also left vivid memories; negroes, appealing hysterically to God and using the most extraordinary, invented words, the longer the better; the stolid, unemotional Chinamen; the voluble Italian; the white man, as a rule, quiet, controlled, insisting merely in a brief sentence that he was innocent. In a story, years later *(Max Hensig, Bacteriologist and Murderer),* the facts were taken direct from life. It needed more than fifteen years to dim their memory. I remained the Tombs reporter for the best part of a loathed, distressing, horror-laden year.

There were pleasanter intervals, of course. The French paper, *Le Courier des Etats Unis,* published a short story every Monday, and one day I translated an exceptionally clever one, and submitted it to McCloy. It was printed; subsequently, I was allowed an afternoon off weekly, provided I translated a story each time, and though no money was paid for these, I secured a good many free hours to myself. These hours I spent in the free library in Lafayette Place, devouring the Russians, as well as every kind of book I could find on psychology; or else in going out to Bronx Park, a long tram journey, where I found trees and lovely glades and water. Bronx Park, not yet the home of the New York "Zoo," was a paradise to me, the nearest approach to the woods that I could find. Every Sunday, wet or fine, I went there. In a cache I hid a teapot, and would make a tiny fire and drink milkless tea. I could hear the wind and see the stars and taste the smell of earth and leaves, the clean, sweet things...

One morning in the second week of my apprenticeship, I interviewed a lion.

"Afraid of wild animals, Mr. Britisher?" inquired Cooper, looking at me quizzically. I stared, wondering what he meant. It was my duty to have read the morning paper thoroughly, but there had been no mention of any wild animal. I replied that I thought I didn't mind wild animals.

"Take your gun," said Cooper, "and get up to East 20th Street, between Third and Fourth Avenues. Bostock's Circus came to town last night late. Their lion's escaped. They've chased it into a stable. Killed a valuable horse. Neighbourhood's paralysed with terror. It's a man-eater. Send down bulletins about it. Now, better get a move on!"

On leaving the elevated train at East 18th Street, the streets were black with people, they even pressed up the front steps of the houses. The word "lion" was in everybody's mouth. Something about Cooper's voice and eyes had made me suspect a "fake." As I forced my way through towards 20th Street, there came a roar that set the air trembling even above the din of voices. It was certainly no fake.

On reaching 20th Street, the cordon of police, with pistols ready, keeping the crowd in order, showed plainly where the stable was. Gradually I bored a way through. The stable stood back from the road, a courtyard in front of it. A ladder, crowded already with reporters climbing up, led to a hayloft just above. I met the *Evening Telegram* man, whom I knew, half-way up this ladder. "Got a messenger boy? No! Then you can share mine," he offered good-naturedly. The only occupants of the yard were a dozen of these messenger boys, waiting to take the "copy" to the various newspaper offices. It was 8.30 a m.

I noticed to my surprise that the *Evening Telegram* man was a star reporter; three rungs above him, to my still greater surprise, climbed Richard Harding Davis. My vanity was stirred. This was a big story, yet Cooper had chosen me! As I squeezed up the ladder, my hands stuffed with paper, the lion below gave forth an awe-inspiring roar; it was a dreadful sound. The great doors of wood seemed matchwood easily burst through. The crowd swayed back a moment, then, with a cheer, swayed forward again.

In the loft I found some twenty reporters; each time the brute gave its terrible roar they scuttled into corners, behind the hay, even up into the rafters of the darkened loft. Pistol shots accompanied every roar, and the added terror lest a bullet from below might pierce the boards on which we stood, made us all jump about like dervishes. One man wrote his story, perched in the dark on the highest rafter, from which he never once moved. I scribbled away, and threw down my “stuff” to the boy below.

Meanwhile the circus officials were doing their best to force the great beast into a cage. This cage stood ready against the outside doors in the yard, and at the right moment these doors would be swiftly opened. On being driven into the stable, the animal had found, and quickly killed, a trotting horse, valued at $2,000, standing in its stall. This detail I at first disbelieved, but when my turn came to kneel and peer through the trap-door for feeding the hay down into the dark stable below, I found it was all true. In the centre of the floor the great lion was plainly visible, not six feet below my own face, lying with two paws stretched upon the carcass of a torn, dead horse. The smell of flesh and blood rose to my nostrils. In a dim corner perched on a refrigerator, sat one of the trainers, a pistol in his hand. In another corner, but invisible from my peephole, crouched another circus man, also with his pistol, and each time the lion made an ugly move, both men fired off their weapons..... I wrote more “bulletins,” and dropped them down to a messenger boy in the yard. He hurried off, then returned to fetch more “copy”; I sent at least a column for the first edition. I felt a very proud reporter.

After two hours of thrills and scares, the news spread that the Strong Man of the circus was on his way down, a fearless Samson of a fellow who lifted great weights. The news proved true. A prolonged cheer greeted him. He acknowledged it with a sweeping bow. He wore diamonds and a top hat. Swaggering up among the reporters, he announced in a loud voice: “Boys! I’m going to fix that lion, and I’m going to fix it right away!”

The boastful bluff received no believing cheer in response, but to my amazement, the fellow proved as good as his talk. He said no further word, he just lifted the trapdoor in the floor and began to squeeze himself through — straight down on to the very spot where the lion lay, crouching below on the dead horse. He dropped. We heard the thud. We also heard the appalling roar that followed, the quick pistol shots, the shouts, the excited cries — then silence. The reporter at the trap-door called out to us what was happening... That Strong Man was a hero.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, the big stable-doors swung open, and the cage, with the lion safely inside it, emerged on a high-wheeled truck into full view of the cheering crowd. On the top of the cage, sweeping his shiny top hat about, bowing, waving his free hand with modest dignity to the admiring thousands, the Strong Man sat enthroned, cross-legged, proud and smiling. The procession through the streets of the city was a triumphal progress that lasted most of the day. That night Bostock's Circus opened to the public.

I hurried back to the office, and had the joy of seeing the first edition hawked and cried about the streets, even before I got there. Big head-lines about a "Man-eating Lion," a "Two Thousand Dollar Trotting Horse,"

"Heroic Rescuer," and the rest, met my eye everywhere. Cooper, however, made no remark or comment, sending me on at once to report a murder trial at special sessions, and in half an hour the gruesome thrills of a horrible poison case made the lion and the strong man fade away.

"Read your morning paper?" Cooper asked, when I appeared next morning. I nodded. The lion story, I had noticed, filled only half a stick of print. "Read the advertisements?" he asked next. I saw a twinkle in his eye, and quickly scanned the circus advertisements about the man-eating lion that had killed a trotting horse, and a strong man whose courage had done this and that, saving numerous lives... but I was still puzzled by Cooper's twinkling eye. He offered no word of explanation; I learned the truth from someone else later. The toothless, aged lion, gorged with food and doped as well, had been pushed into the stable overnight, the carcass of a horse, valued at $10, had been dragged in after it. The newspapers had been notified, and the long advertisements, of course, were paid for in the ordinary way, but the free advertisement obtained was of a kind that mere dollars could not buy.

Occasional interludes of this sort certainly brightened the sordid daily routine, but they were rare. A big fire was a thrilling experience, a metal badge pinned to the coat allowing the reporter to go as near as he liked and to run what risks he pleased. Such work became, with time, mechanical in a sense, it occurred so often, arson, too, being very frequent, especially among the Jews of the East side. Even in those days the story of the two Jews was a "chestnut": "I'm thorry your blace of business got burnt down last Tuesday," says Ikey. To which Moses replies: "Hush! It's next Tuesday!"

The rôle of the reporter in New York, of course, was an accepted one; publicity and advertisement were admittedly desirable; the reporter as a rule was welcomed; privacy was very rare; a reporter could, and was expected to, intrude into personal family affairs where, in England, he would be flung into the street... Other interviews were of a pleasanter kind; I remember Henry Irving and Ellen Terry in their special train, Sarah Bernhardt, at the Hoffman House hotel, and many a distinguished foreigner I was sent to interview because I could speak their languages. The trip to meet the Atlantic steamer at Quarantine I regarded as a day off: it could be made to last for hours. I saw the coast, moreover, and smelt the sea...

Most of my work on the *Evening Sun*, at any rate, took me among the criminal and outcast sections of the underworld. In those days the police, as a whole, were corrupt, brutal, heartless; I saw innocent men against whom they had a grudge, or whom they wanted out of the way for some reason, "railroaded to gaol" on cooked-up evidence; sickening and dreadful scenes I witnessed... The valueless character of human evidence I learned daily in the trials I reported, so that even a man who was trying to tell the truth seemed unable to achieve it. Tammany had its slimy tentacles everywhere and graft was the essence of success in every branch of public life. A police captain had his town and country house, perhaps his yacht as well... The story of Tammany has been told again and again. It is too well known for repetition. I watched its vile methods from the inside with a vengeance; its loathsome soul I saw face to face.

The city, too, I soon knew inside out, especially its darker, unclean quarters. Chinatown, Little Africa, where, after dark, it was best to walk in the middle of the street, "Italy," the tenement life of the overcrowded, reeking East side..... I made friends with strange people, feeling myself even in touch with them, something of an outcast like themselves. My former life became more and more remote, it seemed unreal; the world I now lived in seemed the only world; these evil, depraved, tempted, unhappy devils were not only the majority, but the real, ordinary humanity that stocked the world. More and more the under-dog appealed to me. The rich, the luxurious, the easily-placed, the untempted and inexperienced, these I was beginning to find it in me to look down on, even to despise. *Mutatis* *mutandis,* I thought to myself, daily, hourly, where would *they* be?... Where would *I* myself be...?

Bronx Park, Shelley, the violin, the free library, organ recitals in churches, my Eastern books, and meetings of the Theosophical Society, provided meanwhile the few beauty hours to which I turned by way of relief and relaxation. One and all fed my inner dreams, gave me intense happiness, offered a way of escape from a daily atmosphere I loathed like poison. Sometimes, sitting in court, reporting a trial of absorbing interest, my eye would catch through the dirty window a patch of blue between the clouds and instantly would sweep up the power of the woods, the strange joy of clean solitary places in the wilderness, the glamour of a secret little lake where loons were calling and waves splashing on deserted, lonely shores. I heard the pines, saw the silvery moonlight, felt the keen wind of open and untainted spaces, I smelt the very earth and the perfume of the forests..... A serious gap would follow in my report, so that I would have to borrow from the flimsy man, or from another reporter, what had happened in the interval. In this connexion there comes back to me a picture of a *World* man whose work constituted him a star reporter, but who could write nothing unless he was really drunk. With glazed eyes he would catch the witness and listen to question and answer, while with a pencil he could scarcely direct, he scribbled in immense writing three or four sloping lines to each page of "copy" paper, It always astonished me that such work could be any good, but once I made a shorthand note of several of his pages, and found them printed verbatim in the next edition, without a single blue-pencil alteration. When this man sat next me, my intervals of absent-mindedness did not matter. His big writing enabled me to crib easily all I had missed.

Other compensating influences, too, I found with my "room-mates," especially with Boyde, to whom I had become devotedly attached. I was uncommonly lucky to have such friends, I thought. Talking with Boyde, playing the fiddle to his singing, sharing my troubles with his subtle, sympathetic, well-read mind, was an unfailing pleasure, that made me look forward intensely to our evenings together, and helped me to get through many a day of repulsive and distasteful work. Compared with the charm and variety of Boyde, Kay seemed stolid, even unresponsive sometimes.

To live consciously is to register impressions; some receive many more of these per second than others, and thus enjoy an intenser and more varied life. The two per-second mind finds the two-per-minute one slow, dull and stupid. Kay, anyhow, didn't "mind" things much, circumstances never troubled him, whereas Boyde and I minded them acutely. I envied Kay's power of sleeping calmly in that bed, careless of night-attacks until they actually came. The horror of New York, similarly, that was creeping into my blood had hardly touched him, though it certainly had infected Boyde. In my own make-up lay something ultra-sensitive that took impressions far too easily. Not only did it vibrate with unnecessary eagerness to every change in sky and sea, but to every shade of attitude and manner in my fellows as well. I seemed covered with sore and tender places into which New York rubbed salt and acid every hour of the day. It wounded, not alone because I felt unhappy, but of itself. It hit me where it pleased. The awful city, with its torrential, headlong life, held for me something of the monstrous. Everything about it was exaggerated. Its racing speed, its roofs amid the clouds with the canyon gulfs below, its gaudy avenues dripping gold that ran almost arm in arm with streets little better than sewers of human decay and misery, its frantic noise, both of voices and mechanism, its lavishly organized charity and boastful splendour, and its deep corruption in the grip of a heartless and degraded Tammany — it was all this that painted the horror into my imagination as of something monstrous, nonhuman, almost unearthly. It became, for me, a scab on the skin of the planet, brilliant with the hues of fever, moving all over with its teeming microbes. I felt it, indeed, but half civilized.

This note of how I felt in these — my early years — rose up again the other day, as I read what O. Henry wrote to his outlaw friend from the Ohio Penitentiary about it. Al Jennings had just been pardoned. O. Henry had finished his terms some years before. They met again in a West 26th Street hotel, not far from my own room in Mrs. Bernstein's house. They talked of their terrible prison days.

"It's good you've been there," said O. Henry. "It's the proper vestibule to this city of Damned Souls. The crooks there are straight compared with the business thieves here. If you've got $2 on you, invest it now or they'll take it away from you before morning."

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE EAST 19th Street room, meanwhile, things were going from bad to worse. Kay's touring company delayed its starting, and consequently his salary. Boyde's huntsman's job, equally, was postponed for various reasons, while his income from posing, from churchly activities, from the theatre as well, was reduced to a very few dollars a week. These he shared faithfully, but my $15 every Friday (usually $13 net when office loans had been repaid) were our only certain source of revenue.

After paying something on the room, the laundry in full, and buying oatmeal, dried apples, and condensed milk for the week to come, there remained barely enough for one man's meals, much less for the food of three, during the ensuing seven days. Boyde's contribution brought the budget to, perhaps, twenty dollars all told. Something, too, had to be allowed daily to car-fares for Kay, while my own expenses in getting about after assignments, only recoverable at the end of the week, were considerable. The weather was turning colder at the same time, for it was now past mid-October. Our overcoats had to be redeemed. Boyde's wisdom in obtaining only the strictly necessary became evident. We redeemed the overcoats out of my second week's pay. Boyde himself had no overcoat at all. As we were all about the same height and build, clothes were interchangeable. There was a discussion every morning, when I left the other two, in bed and on the sofa respectively, as to who should wear what.

We had now pawned with Ikey various items: a Gladstone bag, two top hats, some underwear, and two pairs of boots. These were on separate tickets, by Boyde's advice. Tennis trousers, and several summer shirts were together on another ticket. All that winter Kay and I wore no underwear but a vest. The bag and top hats were taken out and put in again regularly every week for many months. There was only one article that, selfishly, I could never pawn or sell — the fiddle.

Dried apples and hot water — with expensive oatmeal we had to be very sparing — constituted our dinner for four nights out of the week; coffee and bread and butter for breakfast, coffee and "sinkers" for lunch completed my dietary. Occasionally Boyde or Kay, having been invited to a meal, brought home something in their pockets, but not often. We felt hunger every day, only the evening dried apples and hot water giving a sense of repletion that yet did not really allay the pangs of appetite, though it stopped the dull gnawing until sleep finally obliterated it. Kay and I, but never Boyde, oddly enough, had vivid and amusing dreams of food, and one invariable topic of conversation every night as we dined at Krisch's, or gobbled apples and oatmeal, was the menu we would order when things improved... But Krisch's, after a time, we found too difficult and tempting, with the good smells, the sight of people eating at other tables, the lager beer, the perfume of cigars; and many a time, with the price of a dinner in our pockets, we preferred to eat in our room.

Another topic of conversation was our plan, myself its enthusiastic creator, to take up land in Canada and lead the life of settlers in the backwoods, which by contrast to our present conditions seemed to promise a paradise. Occasionally Kay spouted bits of Shakespeare, or rehearsed a role in one of the plays his touring company was to give. But it was the talks with Boyde about Eastern ideas and philosophy that were my keenest pleasure, for his appreciation and sympathetic understanding were a delight I thought about with anticipatory eagerness even during the day. My attachment to him deepened into affection.

The weeks went by; we scraped along somehow; Mrs. Bernstein was kept quiet — a relative term — by cajoling, promises and bluff. We bullied her. When Kay's lordly talk of free seats at theatres failed to materialize, and Boyde's trick of leaving about telegrams received from Davis and others, especially one from August Belmont, the great banker, inviting him to lunch at a fashionable club — when these devices lost their "pull," I resorted to the power of the Press. Her husband's position, his orchestra, offered vulnerable points of attack; the vermin-infested room, for instance, might be unpleasantly described...

For weeks we had paid nothing, everything worth fifty cents was pawned, Boyde's contribution had grown smaller and smaller, and the only addition to my salary had been a few dollars Kay had earned by posing to Smedley, one of Harper's illustrators. Things looked pretty dark, when luck turned suddenly; Kay received word from Gilmour, the organizer of his company, that he was to start touring on November 15th, and Boyde had a telegram from Davis— “Appointment confirmed, duties begin December 1st.” This did not increase our cash in hand, but it increased our hope and raised our spirits. Kay and Boyde would both soon repay their share of past expenses. We should all three be in jobs a few weeks later. Early in November Kay actually left on his tour of one night stands in New York State, and Boyde left the mattress on the floor for the bed. A week after Kay sent us half his first salary, $7.50, which we gave to Mrs. Bernstein forthwith. The letter containing it was opened by Boyde, and dealt with while I was out.

It was a few days later, when I was alone one evening, that an Englishman who had played with us in the cricket match called to see me. I hardly remembered him, he had to introduce himself, the apologies to explain his sudden call were very voluble. He was well dressed and well fed, I noticed, a singer and concert accompanist; he annoyed me from the start by his hesitations, his endless humming and hawing. It was, he kept telling me, rather an intrusion; it was, he felt, of course, no concern of his; but “New York was a strange place, and — and er — er — well, after much reflection, I really felt it my duty — I decided to take the risk, that is, to — er.”

“To what?” I asked bluntly at last. “For heaven’s sake, tell me.”

I was beginning to feel uneasy. My threats to Mrs. Bernstein, perhaps, had gone too far. Besides, the effect of the apples was passing and I longed for bed.

He took a gulp. “To warn you,” he said, with a grave and ominous expression.

It was a long-winded business before I got him to the point, and even then the point was not really explicit. New York, he kept repeating, was a dangerous place for inexperience, there were strange and desperate characters in it. In the end, I think, my manners exasperated him as much as his vagueness exasperated me, for when he told me he came about “someone very close to you,” and I asked point-blank, “Is it someone sharing this room with me?” his final word was a most decided “Yes” — with nothing more. This “someone,” I gathered, at any rate, was fooling me, was up to all sorts of tricks, was even “dangerous.”

I was infuriated, though I felt a certain sinking of the heart as well. He was attacking either Kay or Boyde, my only friends, both of whom I trusted to the last cent, for both of whom I had sincere affection. If he knew anything definite or really important, why couldn't he say it and be done with it? I put this to him.

"I prefer not to be more explicit," he replied with an air. He was offended. His patronizing offer of advice and sympathy, his pride, were wounded. "I would rather not mention names. It's true all the same," he added. And my patience then gave way. I got up and opened the door. He went without a word, but just as I was about to slam the door after him, he turned.

"Remember," he said, half angrily, half gravely, "I've warned you. He's a real crook. He's already been in gaol."

I banged the door behind him. I felt angry but uncomfortable, and as the anger subsided my uneasiness increased. The horrible feeling that there was truth in the warning harassed me. When Boyde came in an hour or so later, I pretended to be asleep. I told him nothing of my visitor, but through half-closed eyes I watched him as he moved about the room very quietly, lest he disturb my sleep. His delightful, kind expression, his frank blue eyes, the refinement and gentleness of his gestures, I noted them all for the hundredth time. His acts, too, I remembered; how he always shared his earnings, gave his help unstintingly, advice, a thousand hints, the value of his own sad and bitter experience. My heart ached a little. No, I reflected, it was certainly not Boyde who was the crook. My thoughts turned to Kay, who had just sent us half his salary. It was equally incredible. I wished I had treated my visitor differently. I wished I had kicked him out, instead of telling him to go. Sneak! A sneak with some evil motive into the bargain!

Things began to move now with a strange rapidity. It was as though someone who had been winding up machinery suddenly released the spring. Item by item, preparations had been completed — then, let her go! She went...

The weeks that followed seemed as many months. I was alone with Boyde in a filthy, verminous room, food and money scarce, rent owing, Kay away, clothes negligible, my single asset being a job. I lost that job owing to illness that kept me for weeks in bed — in that bed... And as "she went" I had the curious feeling that someone watched her going, someone other than myself. It was an odd obsession. Someone looked on and smiled. Certain practices, gathered from my "Eastern" reading, were no doubt responsible for this uncanny feeling, for with it ran also a parallel idea: that only a portion of my being suffered while another portion, untouched, serene and confident, accepting all that came with a kind of indifferent resignation, stood entirely apart, playing, equally, the rôle of a spectator. This detached spectator watched “her going” with close attention, even with something of satisfaction. “Take it all,” was its attitude; “avoid nothing; it is your due; for it is merely reaping what you sowed long ago. Face it to the very dregs. Only in this way shall you pay a just debt and exhaust it.” So vital was this attitude in all that followed that it must be honestly mentioned.

A stabbing in the side had been bothering me for some days, making walking difficult and painful. A blow received while diving from our island — I hit a rock — began to ache and throb. I came home in the evenings, weary to the bone. There were headaches, and a touch of fever. The pain increased. There was a swelling. I went to bed. Boyde took down a letter to McCloy, asking for a day off, which was granted. The next day I turned up at 8.30, but had to come back to bed after the midday coffee and sinkers. “See a doctor,” snapped McCloy, in his best maxim-firing manner, “and come back when you’re fixed up again.”

But there wasn’t enough money for a doctor’s fee of from two to five dollars. I lay up for three days, hoping for improvement which did not come. The pain and fever grew. Mrs. Bernstein, upset and even disagreeable, sent me bread and soup in the evening as well as the morning coffee. Boyde brought a few extras late at night. He was chasing a new post just then — organist to a church in Patterson, N.J. — and rarely got home before eleven, sometimes later. He brought long rolls of Vienna bread, a few white Spanish grapes, a tin of condensed milk. He slept peaceably beside me. His manner, once or twice, seemed different. I smelt liquor. “Someone stood me a drink,” he explained, “and by God, I needed it. I’m fagged out.” He was kind and sympathetic, doing all he could, all that his position allowed. He was very much in love at the moment with the daughter of the pastor of the Second Avenue Baptist Church, where he sang in the choir, and he confided his hopes and troubles about the affair to me... It all gave me a queer feeling of unreality somewhere. In my feverish state I knew an occasional unaccustomed shiver. The long day in bed, alone with my thoughts, waiting for Boyde’s return, was wearisome to endlessness, by no means free from new, unpleasant reflections, yet when at last the door opened softly, and he came back, his arms full of the little extras mentioned, there was disappointment in me somewhere. It was not quite as I expected. Accompanying the disappointment were these new, faint twinges of uneasiness as well. I kept the gas burning all night. I watched Boyde's face, as he slept calmly beside me in that narrow bed, his expression of innocence and kindliness increased my feelings of gratitude, even of tenderness, towards him. There were deep lines, however, that sleep did not smooth out. "Poor devil, he's been through the mill! "This habit of watching him grew.

There was delay and trouble about the Rockaway Hunt post; studio sittings were scarce; the Baptist church organist was never unable to officiate; Morton Selton never missed a performance; and Boyde, as a result, though he still contributed what he could, earned next to nothing. If I was puzzled by his late hours, his explanations invariably cleared away my wonder. He always had a plausible excuse, one, too, that woke my sympathy. It was just at this time, moreover, that Kay wrote. The Canadian tour was such a failure that Gilmour was taking his troupe to the States, where they anticipated better houses. No salaries had been paid. They were now off to Pittsburg. Kay hoped to send some money before long.

I spent the weary hours reading... On the third day, my symptoms worse, the door opened suddenly without a knock, and I saw an old man with a white moustache and spectacles peering round the edge at me.

I laid down my "Gita" and stared back at him.

"Are you Mr. Blackwood?" he asked, with a marked German accent.

"Yes." I had not the faintest idea who he was.

He closed the door, took off his slouch hat, crossed the room, laid his small black bag on the sofa, then came and stood beside my bed. He was extremely deliberate. I watched him anxiously. He said no word for some time, while we stared at one another.

He was of medium height, about sixty-five years old, with white hair, dark eyes behind magnifying spectacles, the strong face deeply lined, voice and manner stern to the point of being forbidding — but when I saw it rarely —

a most winning smile. Except for the spectacles, he was like a small edition of Bismarck.

"I am a doctor," he said, after a prolonged silent inspection, "and I live down the street. Your friend, an Englishman, asked me to call. Are *you* English?" I told him I was a reporter on the *Evening Sun*, adding that I had no money at the moment. The suspicion his manner had not attempted to hide at once showed itself plainly.

His manner and voice were brusque to offensiveness, as he said flatly: "I expect to be paid. I have a wife and child." He stood there, staring at me, hard and cold. I repeated that I had nothing to pay him with, and I lay back in bed, wishing he would go, for I felt uncomfortable and ashamed, annoyed as well by his unsympathetic attitude. "Humph!" he grunted, still staring without moving. There was an awkward silence I thought would never end. "Humph!" he grunted again presently. "I egsamine you anyhow. How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," I said, "and a bit."

"Humph!" he repeated, as he examined me rather roughly. "You're very thin. Too thin!"

He hurt me, and I did not answer.

"Not eating enough," he added, and then gave his verdict. It was an abscess, I must keep my bed for a month or six weeks, an operation might be necessary.

I asked how much I owed him. "Two dollars," he said. He gave me his address, and I replied that I would bring the money to him as soon as I could, but that he need not call again. He stared severely at me with those magnified eyes.

"Haven't you got two dollars even?" he asked curtly.

"I've told you the truth. And, anyhow, I didn't send for you. I didn't ask my friend to fetch you either."

I could think of nothing else to say. His verdict had flattened me out. I was angry, besides, with Boyde, for not consulting me first, though I knew he had done the right thing. Another period of awkward silence followed, during which the doctor never moved, but stood gazing down at me.

Suddenly his eye rested on the book I had been reading. He put out a hand and picked it up. He glanced through the pages of the “Gita,” then began to read more carefully. A few minutes passed. He became absorbed.

“You read this?” he asked presently. *“Ach was!”* There was a look of keen astonishment in his eyes; his gaze searched me as though I were some strange animal. I told him enough by way of reply to explain my interest. He listened, without a word, then presently picked up his bag and hat and moved away. At the door he turned a moment. “I come again tomorrow,” he said gruffly, and he was gone.

In this way Otto Huebner, with his poignant tragedy, came into my life.

That evening, with the bread and soup, there was a plate of chicken; it was not repeated often, but he had spoken to Mrs. Bernstein, I discovered, for her attitude, too, became slightly pleasanter. I spent the long evening composing a letter to McCloy, which Boyde could take down next day..... I lay thinking of that curious gruff, rude old German, whose brusqueness, I felt sure, covered a big good heart. There was mystery about him, something unusual, something pathetic and very lovable. There was power in his quietness. Despite his bluntness, there was in his atmosphere a warm kindness, a sincerity that drew me to him. Also there was a darkness, a sense of tragedy somewhere that intrigued me because I could not explain it.

It was after he was gone that I felt all this. While he was in the room I had been too troubled and upset by his manner to feel anything but annoyance. Now that he was gone his face and eyes and voice haunted me. His bleak honesty, I think, showed me, without my recognizing it, another standard.

Was it this, I wonder, that made me start a little when, about two in the morning, I heard a stealthy tread coming upstairs, and presently saw Boyde enter the room — carrying his boots in his hand? Was it this, again, that made me feign to be asleep, and a couple of hours later still, when I woke with a shiver, notice, for the first time, a new expression in the face that lay so calmly asleep beside me?

Behind the kindly innocence, I thought, there lay a darker look. It was like a shadow on the features. It increased my feelings of uneasiness, though as yet no definite thought had formulated itself in my mind.

CHAPTER XV

NEXT DAY THERE was a racing west wind that sent the clouds scudding across a bright blue sky. The doctor was to come at 3 o'clock. Boyde, in very optimistic mood, had gone out early, taking my letter to McCloy. He had a studio sitting; he was going to Patterson too; he would return as early as he could. The shadow of the night before had vanished; I no longer believed in it; I ascribed it to fever and nerves. He sang cheerily while he dressed in my thick brown suit, the only one not in pawn (everything else, now that I was in bed, had gone to Ikey), and his voice sounded delightful. In the afternoon he came back with the news that McCloy had read my letter and said "That's right. Tell him to be good to himself. He can come back." Also he had agreed to use translations of the French stories at five dollars each. Boyde brought a Courier in with him. Two letters from home arrived too. Both my father and mother, though having no idea what was going on, never missed a single week. My own letters were difficult to write. I had come to New York against my father's advice. I wrote home what I thought best.

At 3 o'clock the doctor came. My heart sank as I heard his step. I was in considerable pain. What would he be like? Would an operation be necessary? Would he speak about money again? Mrs. Bernstein, oily and respectful, a little awed as well, announced him. Without a word, without a glance in my direction, he walked over in his slow, deliberate way, and laid hat and bag upon the sofa. Then he turned and looked steadily at himself in the mirror for a period I thought would never end. After that he turned and looked at me.

He was an angel. His face was wreathed in smiles. It beamed with good-nature, kindness, sympathy. He at once said something that was gentle, soothing, like music to me. My heart suddenly expanded in a most uncomfortable way. I believe a lump came up in my throat. This was all so contrary to what I had expected.

He was not only an angel, he was a womanly angel. I must have been in a very weak state, for it was all I could do to keep my tears back. The same instant his eye fell on my fiddle case. He looked at it, then at me, then back again at the fiddle.

“You play?” he asked, with a twinkle in his big eyes.

“I ought to pawn it,” I said, “but—”

“Don’t,” he answered with decision. He added an odd sentence: “It’s an esgape from self.” I remember that I couldn’t say a word to this. His kindness melted me. The struggle to keep my eyes from betraying me seemed the most idiotic yet bitter I had ever known. I could have kissed the old man’s hand, when he examined me then at once, but with a gentleness, even a tenderness, that both astonished me, yet did not astonish me at all. I felt, too, already the support of his mind and character, of his whole personality, of a rugged power in him, of generosity, true goodness, above all, of sympathy. I think he had made up his mind to treat me for nothing. No reference, in any case, was made to money; nor did I dare even to mention it myself. An operation, moreover, of any big kind, was not necessary; he thought he could save me that; he performed a small one then and there, for he had brought all that was required for it. The pain seemed nothing, his kindness made me indifferent to it. “You are brave,” he said, with a smile that seemed to me really beautiful, when it was over. “That hurt, I know.” He promised to come daily to drain the wound and so forth; he bandaged me up; a month to six weeks would see me out of bed, he hoped; he packed up his bag, but, instead of leaving the room, he then sat down deliberately and began to talk.

I was too surprised, too happy, to wonder why he stayed. His talk was food and drink to me. He picked up my few books, and sat reading quietly to himself when he saw I was getting tired. De Quincey’s “Confessions “interested him especially, and he asked if he might borrow it. He took also “Sartor Resartus.” I slipped into German, to his keen delight, and told him about the Moravian Brotherhood School in the Black Forest. A sketch of the recent past I gave him too. He listened with great attention, asking occasional questions, but always with real tact, and never allowing me to tire myself.

Though it was obvious, even to my stupidity, that he regarded me rather as a “specimen” of some sort, there was heart in all he said and did. Otto Huebner poured balm into all my little wounds that afternoon, but about himself he told me hardly anything. While he drew me out, with skill and sympathy, he hid himself behind that impenetrable mystery I had already noted the previous day. I say purposely that of himself he told me "hardly anything," because one detail did escape him inadvertently. An hour later, as he was leaving, he turned his smile on me from the door. "I send you something," he said shortly. "My vife makes goot broth. I cannot do much. I have not got it."

One other thing I noticed about his visit, when towards the end, Boyde came in unexpectedly, bringing a small bunch of the yellow Spanish grapes. In his best, most charming manner he spoke with the doctor. The doctor's face, however, darkened instantly. His features, it seemed to me, froze. His manner was curt. He scarcely replied. And when he left a little later he did not include my friend in his good-bye. It puzzled me. It added to my uneasiness as well.

Boyde, who apparently had noticed nothing, explained that he had to go out again to an appointment with Davis about the Rockaway Hunt post; he did not return that night at all.

I listened to the city clocks striking midnight, one, two, three... he did not come. I listened to the howling wind as well. Imagination tried feebly to construct a happier state, lovelier conditions, a world nearer to the heart's desire. While waiting for midnight to strike, I said to myself, thinking of yesterday and tomorrow, with all the one had meant and the other might mean to me:

"Yesterday is now twenty-four hours away, but in a minute it will be only one minute away."

I treated the hidden to-morrow similarly, I imagined, the world being old and creaky, ill-fitting too, that a crack existed between the two days. Anyone who was thin enough might slip through! I, certainly, was thin enough. I slipped through..... I entered a region out of time, a region where everything came true. And the first thing I saw was a wondrous streaming vision of the wind, the wind that howled outside my filthy windows... I saw the winds, changing colours as they rose and fell, attached to the trees, in tenuous ribands of gold and blue and scarlet as they swept to and fro..... I little dreamed that these fancies would appear fifteen years later in a book of my own, "The Education of Uncle Paul." That crack, at any rate, became for me, like the fiddle, a means of escape from unkind reality into a state of inner bliss and wonder “where everything came true.”.

It was after twelve o’clock next day when Boyde returned — with a black eye, my one thick suit stained and soiled, and a long involved story that utterly confused me. There had been a fight; he had protected a woman; a false charge had been laid against him owing to misunderstanding, owing also to the fact that he had no money to tip the policeman, and he had spent the night in a cell at Jefferson Market police station. In the morning the magistrate had discharged him with many comphments upon his “gallantry and courage.” It did not ring true. I knew the Tammany magistrates better than that. He contradicted himself too, in saying that a Mr. Beattie, a friend of his mother’s, who occasionally gave him a little money she sent from England, had bailed him out. He had been bailed out, discharged with compliments, had slept in a cell, and not been fined! I smelt spirits too. It all made me miserable.

“You’ve been drunk and they locked you up,” I reproached him. “Why do you lie to me?” The copious explanations that followed I hardly listened to. I lay in bed, saying nothing, but the warning of my visitor came back.

“I went down to the *Evening Sun,”* Boyde said presently, when my silence made his explanations end of their own accord. “I’ve just come back with this. McCloy asked after you and sent it on account of the French stories.” He handed me five dollars, in single bills, which we divided equally then and there.

He had been gone hardly ten minutes when the door opened again, and another visitor came in, an actor out of a job. Grant, an Englishman of perhaps twenty-five, one of the cricket team I had met in Staten Island a few weeks before. He had run across Boyde, he explained, and had heard I was ill. As one Englishman to another “in this awful city “he wanted to see if he could help in any way. He did then a wonderful thing. We had met but once, he scarcely knew me, he might never see me again, but when he realized the state of affairs he said he thought he could get a little money for me, and before I could say a word he vanished from the room. His shyness, his lame manner of speech, something hesitating and awkward about him generally, had embarrassed me as much as, evidently, he was embarrassed himself; and I was convinced his plea of getting money was only an excuse to disappear quickly. I rather hoped it was; certainly I thought it unlikely he would come back — which, nevertheless, he did, in about a quarter of an hour. He came in breathlessly, a shamefaced air about him; flung down some dollar bills on the bed, and vanished the second time. Three dollars lay on the counterpane. It was only a little later, as reflection brought up details, that I remembered he had worn an overcoat when he first came in, and that on his second visit he wore none. He had pawned it. Another detail rose to the surface: that he had called, really, upon quite another errand, and that there was something he wanted to tell me that he had not the courage to put into words. Later he admitted it was true...

Anticipating Otto Huebner's visits was now a keen pleasure; the one event of a long weary day.

During the next fortnight or so, he missed no single afternoon. His moods varied amazingly. One day he seemed an angel, the next a devil. I was completely puzzled.

The talks we had on his good days were an enjoyment I can hardly describe. I realized how much I depended on them, as well as on the man who made them possible. I realized also how much I depended on my other friend — on Boyde. The latter's curious and unsatisfactory behaviour, mysterious still to my blind ignorant eyes, made no difference to my feelings for him, but, if anything, tended to strengthen the attachment. My affection deepened. There lay now a certain pity in me too, an odd feeling that he was in my charge, and that, for all his greater knowledge and experience of life, his seniority as well, I could — I must — somehow help him. Upon the German doctor and Boyde, at any rate, Kay being far away, my mind rested with security, if of different degrees. To lose either of them in my lonely situation would have been catastrophic.

The old German would settle himself on the sofa, drawn up close to the bed, and talk. He was saturated in his native philosophy, but Hegel was his king....."Sartor Resartus" enthralled him. Of De Quincey's struggle against opium he was never tired. Of Vedantic and Hindu philosophy, too, he was understanding and tolerant, though not enamoured. Regarding me still as a "specimen" evidently, he also treated me as though I were a boy, discerning of course at once my emptiness of mind and experience.

How patiently he listened to my eager exposition of life's mysteries, my chaotic theories, my fanciful speculations...

"We know — nothing, you must remember. *Nothing*," he would say with emphasis. "Nor can we know anything, *ever*. We label, classify, examine certain *results* — that's all. Of causes we remain completely ignorant. Speculation is not proof. The fact that a theory fits all the facts gets us no further."

He smiled, but with close attention, while I plunged again into a description of my beliefs. The tobacco smoke curled up about his genial face. I had no fear of him in this mood. I could say all my thoughts without shyness. I made full confession.

"Interesting, logical, possibly true," he replied, "and most certainly as good an explanation as any other, better even than most, but" — he shrugged his shoulders— "always a theory only, and nothing else. There is no proof of anything. The higher states of consciousness you mention are nebulous, probably pathogenic. Those who experience them cannot, in any case, report their content intelligibly to us who have not experienced them — because no words exist. They are of no value to the race, and that condemns them. Men of action, not dreamers, are what the world needs."

"Men of action only carry out what has first been dreamed," I ventured.

"True," replied the old man, "true very often. Men of action rarely have much vision. The poet is the highest type... I am with you in this too — that the only *real* knowledge is the knowledge of man, the study of consciousness. *Gnothi seauton* is still the shortest, as well as the most pregnant, sermon in the world. Before we can get new knowledge, *different* knowledge — yes, there I am with you — consciousness itself must change and become different first... *but*..... the people who get that different knowledge cannot describe it to us because there is no language." Wise, thoughtful things the old man said, while I listened eagerly. "One thing is certain," he declared with his usual emphasis: "If there is another state after the destruction of the body, it cannot be merely an extension, an idealization, of the one we know. *That* is excluded. Without senses, without brain or nerves, without physical reactions of any kind — since there is no body — how shall we be aware of things about us? Another state can only be — different, yet so different that it is useless to talk of it.

The Heaven of the spiritualists, the elaborate constructions of a Swedenborg, are nothing but coloured idealizations of the state we already know.....” — he snorted contemptuously— “obviously self-created. A different state of consciousness would show us a universe so totally different from anything we know that it must be — indescribable.”

Of my own future, too, he liked to talk. The newspaper reporting he disapproved; it could lead to little; it was *“unersprechlich gemein”;* the New York press was a cesspool; it might serve a temporary purpose, but no self-respecting man should stay too long in it. He urged me to become a doctor, saying I should be a success, advising me to specialize in nerves and mental cases. Being an Englishman would help very much; in time I should have an enormous practice; he would assist me in all manner of ways, so that my course need not be longer than two years, or three at the most. He would coach me, rush me through in half the normal time.

Later I could get a foreign degree, which would be an additional asset... He never tired of this topic, and his enthusiasm was certainly sincere.

Of stars, too, he loved to talk, of space, of possible other dimensions even. His exposition of a fourth dimension always delighted me. That the universe, indeed, was really four-dimensional, and that all we perceived of it was that sectional aspect, a portion as it were, that is projected into our three-dimensional world, was a theme that positively made him red in the face, as his big eyes focused on me, his concentrated mind working vehemently behind them... Certainly, my knowledge of German improved considerably.

Then, as Boyde came in, the light would die out of his eyes, his face would harden and grow dark — he had a way of making it seem frozen — and with a stiff bow to Boyde that only just acknowledged his presence, he would get up and leave the room.

Meanwhile, I sold two more French stories, and Boyde bought back the ten dollars paid for them; three others were “not suitable,” according to McCloy. I told the doctor all I earned. “Later,” he said, “you pay me, if you want to. I take nothing — now.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE DAYS PASSED; I grew slowly better; the wound still had to be drained and bandaged, and the doctor kept me to my bed. Kay, writing from Toronto, had contrived to send us ten dollars. More French translations had gone to McCloy, but only one or two had been used.

If the loneliness of the long days was dismal, the feverish nights were worse. I knew my few books by heart; Shelley and the “Gita” were indeed inexhaustible, but I longed for something new. To play the fiddle was too tiring. There was endless time for reflection and, thank heaven, through the two dirty windows I could watch the sky. Many a story I published fifteen years later had its germ in the apparently dead moments of those wearisome hours, although at the time it never once occurred to me to try and write, not even the desire being in me.

It was the interminable nights that were most haunted. In the daylight there was colour in the changing clouds and sky, a touch of pink, a flame of sunset gold that opened the narrow crack through which I slipped into some strange interior state of happiness. There were the visits of the beloved, mysterious doctor, too. But the night was otherwise. The gas I left burning till Boyde woke and turned it out in the morning, made it impossible to see the stars. I could never settle down until he was comfortably asleep beside me. He kept late hours always. I reproached and scolded, yet in the end I always forgave. It was a comfort to know him within reach of my hand, while at the same time I dreaded his coming. My mixed feelings had reached that stage — I feared his coming and yet longed for it. I lay waiting, listening for his step. Far below I would hear it, down in the well of the sleeping house, even on the first flight of stairs. It mounted, mounted, stealthy, cautious, coming nearer and nearer, but always at the same steady pace. It never hastened. As it approached, rising through the stillness of the night, my heart would begin to beat; I dreaded the moment when our landing would be reached, still more the actual opening of our door. I listened, smothering my breath, trying to lessen the loud thumping against my ribs. The steps might not be his, after all; it might be someone else; that stealthy tread might pass my door without opening it and go upstairs. Then, when at last the handle rattled faintly, the door opened, and I saw him slowly enter, carrying his boots in his hand, my first instinct always was to — scream. Then he would smile, the eye-glass would drop from his eye, he would begin his explanations and excuses, and my dread soon evaporated in the friendliest of intimate talk.

So well, at last, did I learn to recognize his approach, that I knew the moment he opened the front door three flights below. The sound of the handle with its clink of metal, the dull thud as the big thing closed — I was never once mistaken. In my fitful snatches of sleep these sounds stole in, shaping my dreams, determining both cause and climax of incessant nightmares which, drawing upon present things and recent memories, and invariably including the personality of Boyde, made those waiting hours a recurrent horror. I would fight in vain to keep awake. Only when he was safely asleep at my side did the nightmares cease.

I had once seen Dixon, a Toronto photographer, walk across the Niagara river, just below the Falls; he used Blondin's old tight-rope; he lay down on his back half way over, turned round, knelt, hovered on one foot, using an immense balancing pole. Thousands watched him from both shores on a day of baking sunshine; his background was the massive main waterfall, slowly rolling down and over; below him swirled and boiled the awful rapids. Dixon now came walking, walking in my dream again. I could hear his soft tread as his stockinged feet gripped the cable that swayed slightly as it sagged to the centre half way across. The sound, the figure came nearer; it came at me; it — was not Dixon after all. It was Boyde... Then, as he moved with slow, creeping tread, nearer, ever nearer, I perceived suddenly that the rope was gone. There was no rope. He walked on empty air towards me — towards — me, I was appalled, speechless, paralyzed. That figure walking on space, walking towards me, walking remorselessly nearer was terrible..... The next second the door opened and Boyde stood peering at me round the edge, his boots in his hands.

One morning, tired of learning the "Witch of Islam" by heart, I leaned over the bed, and something in the waste-paper basket close beside it caught my eye; a scrap of coloured paper — several scraps — pink. Looking nearer, I saw it was a torn-up cheque. Without any particular interest at first I stared at the unfamiliar thing, wondering vaguely how it came to be there. Only after this casual inspection did it occur to me as being rather odd. A cheque! What was it? Whose was it? How did it come to be there, torn up in my waste-paper basket? It was a long time since I had seen such a thing as a cheque; and idly, with no more curiosity than this, I lay gazing at the scraps of coloured paper.

The basket lay within easy reach; I stretched out an arm and picked it up; I emptied the contents on the white counterpane; I sorted out the coloured scraps from among the general litter. The scraps were small, and the puzzle amused me. It was a long business. Bit by bit the cheque took shape. The word "Toronto" was the first detail that caught my attention closer. Presently, fitting three tiny scraps together, I saw to my surprise a name in full — Arthur Glyn Boyde. Another little group made "Kay." A third read "Seventy Five Dollars." My interest increased with every moment, till at last the complete cheque lay pieced together before my eyes.

It was drawn by Kay on my old Toronto bank for the sum mentioned, and it was payable to Boyde. The date was — three days before.

I lay and stared at it in blank bewilderment. Fitting the scraps together on the counterpane was nothing compared to my difficulty in fitting the pieces together in my mind. I could make neither head nor tail of it. Kay had, indeed, been acting in Toronto on the date given, but — a bank account...! And why was the cheque torn up? It must have been delivered with a letter — yesterday. Boyde had not mentioned it. I felt as confused as though it were a problem in arithmetic; but a problem in arithmetic would not have stirred the feeling of pain and dread that rose in me. Something I had long feared and hated, had deliberately hidden from myself, had cloaked and draped so that I need not recognize it, now at last stared me in the face.

The chief item in the puzzle, however, remained. That it was not Kay's real signature, I saw plainly, it was a reasonably good copy; but why was the cheque torn up? It had been taken from my old book in the packing-case downstairs, of course; but why was it destroyed? A forgery! The word terrified me.

It was while trying to find the meaning that my fingers played with the rest of the littered paper and presently pieced together a letter in the same writing as the signature; a letter, written from Toronto, with Islington Jersey

Dairy as address, and bearing the same date as the cheque — a letter from Kay to Boyde. It had been also torn into little bits.

“Dear B.,” it ran, “I am awfully sorry to hear poor Blackwood is so ill still, and that he has no money. I enclose my cheque for $75 to help him out, but, for God’s sake, see that he doesn’t waste it in dissipation, as he did the last I sent. I know I can trust you in this”... A page and a half of news followed. A postscript came at the end: “Better not let him know how much I’ve sent. I’ll send another cheque later if you let me know it’s really needed.”

With these two documents spread on the counterpane before me, I lay back thinking, thinking, while an icy feeling spread slowly over me that for a long time made clear thought impossible. The word “dissipation” made me smile, but all I knew in those first moments was an aching, dull emotion, shot through from time to time by stabs of keenest pain. There was horror too, there was anger, pity... as, one by one, recent events dropped the masks I had so deliberately pinned on them. These thin disguises that too sanguine self-deception had helped me to lay over a hideousness that hurt and frightened me, fell one by one. My anger passed; horror and pity remained, I cannot explain it quite; an intense sorrow, an equally intense desire to help and save, were in me. Affection, no doubt, was deep and real...

At the same time, the shock numbed something in me; the abrupt collapse of a friendship that meant so much to my loneliness bowled me over. What exactly had happened I did not know, I could not understand; treachery, falsity, double-dealing, lies — these were obvious, but the *modus operandi* was not clear. Why was the cheque torn up and so carelessly flung away? There was a mist of confusion over my mind. I thought over my police court experience, the criminal tricks and practices I already knew, but these threw no helpful light. Was Kay, too, involved? Did the warning of a few weeks ago include him as well? There had been forgery, yet again — why was the cheque torn up? The mystery of it all increased the growing sense of dread, of fear, of creeping horror. My newspaper work had given me the general feeling that everyone had his price,... but between friends in adversity. Englishmen, gentlemen as well..., was it then true literally of *everybody?*

After a time I collected the two documents and pieced them together again between the pages of a book, lest someone might enter and discover them.

The doctor was not coming that day, but there might be other visitors. Then it suddenly dawned on me — why hadn't this occurred to me before? — that the whole thing must be a joke after all. Of course why not? It might even have something to do with the role of understudy in the Sothern Play, It could easily be — oh, surely! — a bit of stupid fun on Kay's part. The carelessness too! Throwing the scraps in the basket under my very nose, where anybody could easily see them, where Mrs. Bernstein might find them, or the woman who came in twice a week to do the room. This was certainly against criminal intent.

The most far-fetched explanations poured through my mind, invited by hope, dressed up by eager desire, then left hanging in mid-air, with not the faintest probability to support them. I deliberately recalled the kind actions, the solicitude, the sharing of receipts, a thousand favourable details, even to the innocent expression and the frank blue eyes, only to find these routed utterly by two other details; one negative, one vague, yet both insistent; the doctor's silence and the shadow noticed recently on the sleeping face.

It was eleven o'clock; Boyde had said he would return about four; I expected him, for the doctor, whom he avoided, was not coming. There were five hours of waiting to endure first.

The situation which another might have tossed aside with a wry laugh at himself for having been a guileless fool, to me seemed portentous with pain and horror.

I had no plan, however, when the door opened at half-past three, long before I expected it. There was in me no faintest idea of what I was going to say or do. The book lay on my knee, with the documents concealed between the pages. I had heard no footstep, the rattle of the handle was the first sound I caught. Yet the door opened differently — not quite as Boyde opened it. There was hesitation in the movement. In that hesitation of a mere second there again flashed across my mind a sudden happy certainty; the documents could be explained, it was all a joke somewhere. He had done nothing wrong, he would clear up the whole thing in a moment! Of course! It was my weak, feverish condition that had raised a bogey. A few words from him were now going to destroy it.

Then, instead of Boyde, I saw Grant standing shyly on the threshold, the young actor who had pawned his overcoat. This time he wore it.

The relief I felt at seeing him betrayed me to myself.

I welcomed him so heartily that his shyness disappeared. He had dropped in by chance, he told me. I gave him an account of my discovery, and he bent over me to see the cheque and letter, asking if the writing was really Kay's. He looked very grave.

"It's not unlike it, but it isn't his," I replied. "What do you make of it? Why are they torn up?" I was burning to hear what he thought.

He did not answer for a moment. He asked instead a number of questions about Boyde, listening closely to my account of him, which mentioned the good with the bad. He went down to examine the packing-case and returned with the report that my cheque-book was not there. I asked him again what he made of it all, waiting with nervous anxiety for his verdict, but again he put me off. He wanted to know when I last heard from Kay. Eight days ago, I told him, from Toronto. He asked numerous questions. He seemed as puzzled as I was, "What do you think it means?" I begged. "What's he been doing?"

"Are you *quite* positive it's not Kay's writing," he urged, "even, for instance, if he was— "he hesitated— "a bit tight at the time?"

I clung to the faint hope. "Well, of course — I really couldn't say. I've never seen his writing when he was tight. I suppose—"

"Because if it isn't," interrupted Grant decisively, "it means that Boyde has been getting money from him and using it for himself."

I realized then that he was trying to make things less grave than they really were, trying to make it easier for me in the best way he could. The torn-up cheque proved his suggestion foolish.

"Do you think he's an absolute scoundrel?" I asked point blank, unable to bear the suspense any longer. "Really a criminal — is he?"

"I wanted to tell you the other day," he said quickly.

"Only you were too ill. I thought it would upset you."

"Criminal? Tell me at once. He may be in any minute. I must know."

"His reputation is bad," was the reply, "as bad as it could be. I've heard things about him. He's already been in gaol. He's supposed to be a bit dangerous.”

I was listening for the sound of a step on the stairs. I lowered my voice a little. It was clear to me that Grant did not want to tell me all he knew.

“So — what do you make, then, of this?” I asked in a half whisper, pointing to the documents.

He looked at me hard a moment, then gave his reply, also in an undertone:

“Practising” I think.”

I did not understand him. The uncertainty of his meaning, the queer suggestion in the word he used, gave my imagination a horrid twist. I asked again, my heart banging against my ribs:

“Practising — what?”

“He didn’t think it a successful — copy — so he tore it up,” Grant explained.

“You mean — forgery?”

“I think so. That is — I’m afraid so.”

I think the universe changed for me in that moment; something I had been standing on for years collapsed; I was left hanging in space without a platform, without a rudder. An odd helplessness came over me. Grant, of course, had only confirmed my own suspicions, had merely put into words what, actually, I had known for a long time; but it was just this hearing the verdict spoken by another that hurt so abominably. Grant had quietly torn off me the last veil of self-deception. I could no longer pretend to myself. It seems absurdly out of proportion now on looking back; at the time the shock was appalling.

We talked together, we tried to devise some plan of action, we reached no settled conclusion. The minutes passed. I never ceased listening for the familiar footstep on the stairs. Of one thing only was I perfectly sure: whatever happened, I intended to take charge of it all myself. I would deal with Boyde in my own way. The principle lay clear and decided in me; I meant to frighten Boyde as severely as I possibly could, then to give him another chance. Anticipation made the minutes crawl. Grant talked a good deal.

“He spotted you and Kay from the start,” I heard Grant saying. “He saw your ignorance of the town, your inexperience, your generosity. He felt sure of free lodging anyhow, perhaps a good deal more—”

A faint thud sounded from downstairs.

“There he is,” I said instantly. “That’s the front door banging. He’s coming. Keep quiet.”

I told Grant to get into the cupboard and hide. He was only just concealed in the deep cupboard and the door drawn to, when the other door opened quietly and Boyde came in.

CHAPTER XVII

BOYDE WAS IN cheerful, smiling mood. He put some grapes on the bed, asked how I felt, and told me about his trip to Patterson and his failure to get the organist job. "It's bitterly cold," he said. "I was glad of your overcoat. You have been a brick," he added, "but I'll make it all up to you when my luck turns." He crossed over to the sofa and sat down, stretching himself, obviously tired out.

"Never mind, old chap; we shall get along somehow. Probably Kay will send us something more before long. He's always faithful. Let's see," I went on casually, "when was it we heard from him last?"

"A week ago," said Boyde quite naturally. "Toronto, wasn't it? Or Buffalo — no, no, Toronto."

We laughed together. "So it was," I agreed carelessly. Then I pretended to hesitate. "But that was nearly a fortnight ago," I suddenly corrected my memory; "surely we've heard since that. Only the other day — or did I dream it?"

Boyde stared at me lazily through the cigarette smoke. "No, I think not," he said quietly. "There was only the one letter." He showed no sign of disturbance.

I lay still, pretending to think back a bit, then heaved myself slowly up in bed.

"But, Boyde, I remember the letter," I exclaimed with conviction, staring into his face, "I'm certain I do — another letter. Why, of course! I remember your showing it to me. There was a cheque in it — a cheque for seventy-five dollars!"

His easy laugh, his voice and manner, the perfect naturalness of his reply made me feel sure that I was in the wrong. He knew absolutely nothing of the cheque and letter. He was innocent. It was not his doing, at any rate.

"You must have been dreaming," he said, looking me full in the face with his big, honest blue eyes. "It's too good to be true." He gave a wry little chuckle that only a clear conscience could have made possible.

I lay back in bed and laughed with him, partly from weakness, partly to hide my shaking, which I was terrified he would notice. I changed the subject a moment later, as he said nothing more; then, still acting on impulse and with no preconceived plan or idea of my next move, I sat bolt upright in bed and fixed him with my eyes. I assumed a very convinced and serious tone. I felt serious and convinced. The mood of horror had rushed suddenly up in me:

“Boyde, I remember it all now.” I spoke with great emphasis. “It was not a dream at all. You came to this bedside and showed me the letter. You held it out for me to read. It was dated from my old Toronto Dairy three days ago. *You showed me the cheque too.* It was for seventy-five dollars, signed by Kay, and made out to your order. I remember every single detail of it suddenly. And — *so do you.”*

He gazed at me as a little child might gaze. He made no movement. His eyes neither dropped nor flinched. He merely gazed — with a puzzled, innocent, guileless stare. A pained expression then stole across his face.

“Blackwood, what on earth do you mean? It’s not likely I should forget it if seventy-five dollars came, is it?” he went on quickly in his most sympathetic voice, an aggrieved note in it that stirred all my affection instantly. “The most he has sent so far is ten dollars. I should have given you the money at once. *And you know it,* Blackwood.” He got up and walked quietly to and fro.

It was the way he uttered those last four words that sent ice down my spine and brought the mood of horror back. Why this was so, I cannot explain. Perhaps the phrase rang false; perhaps its over-emphasis failed. I only know that my hesitation vanished. That prepared plan so strangely matured, yet hidden so deeply that it emerged only step by step as it was needed, pushed up another move into my upper mind.

I got slowly out of bed. Perspiration broke out all over me. I felt very weak. The wound stretched. Straight before me, a long way off it seemed, was the sofa. Boyde stood watching my every move. He stood like a statue.

Before I had taken a couple of slow, small steps, crawling round the edge of the bed, he did two quick things that in a flash brought final conviction to me, so that I knew beyond any doubt the hideous thing was true: he moved suddenly across the room, passing in front of me, though not near enough to touch; three rapid strides and he was against the window — with his back to the light. It was dusk. He wished to conceal his face from me. His left arm hung at his side, the hand on a level with the dressing-table, and I saw his fingers feeling along its surface, though his eyes never left my own. I saw them find, then grip, the white-handled razor, and pull it slowly towards him. These were the two things that betrayed him, but chiefly, I think, the first of them — concealing his face.

At the same instant there was a faint sound on my left. I had completely forgotten the existence of my visitor; I now remembered him, for that sound came from inside the cupboard, and Grant, evidently, was ready to leap out. But I did not want Grant. I intended the whole matter to be between Boyde and myself. A flash of understanding had given me complete assurance. Boyde, I now knew, was a coward, a sneak, a cheat, a liar, and worse besides. In spite of my physical weakness I had the upper hand. I was about to give him the fright of his life, though still with no clear idea exactly how this was to be accomplished. All I knew was that I meant to terrify him, then forgive — and save him from himself.

“Not yet! “I called out, yet so quickly, and with so little apparent meaning, that Boyde, I think, hardly heard me, and certainly did not understand. Grant, however, understood. He told me later it was just in time to prevent his coming out.

With one hand supporting me on the edge of the dressingtable, I was now close to Boyde, bent double in front of him, staring up into his eyes.

“Give me that razor,” I said, and he obeyed, as I felt sure he would. That is, his fingers moved away from it, and I quickly pushed it out of his reach. With my other hand I seized his arm. I raised my face to his as much as my wound allowed.

“Boyde,” I said, “I know everything!”

If I expected a collapse, as I think was the case, I was disappointed. Nothing happened. He did not move. Not a muscle, not even an eyelash flickered. He stared down into my upturned face without a word, waiting for what was coming; control of the features, of mouth and eyes in particular, was absolute. And it was this silence, this calm assurance, giving me no help, even making it more difficult for me, that, I think, combined to set me going. I was fairly wound up; I saw red. The words poured out, hot, bitter, scathing.

The moment I ended, he smiled, as he said very quietly:

“I don’t know *what* you’re talking about. You are fearfully excited and you will regret your words, I do wish you would get back into bed. All this is awfully bad for you in your weak condition.”

I was flabbergasted. All the wind had been taken from my sails, A touch would have sent me to the floor, but he did not touch me. He merely gazed into my face with an air of calm patience that had pity in it, a hint even of contempt.

There was a little silence after he had spoken. For a moment I had no notion what to do or say. Then, quite suddenly, up flashed my plan. I was less excited now, my voice was well under control.

“Boyde,” I said, “now, at last, I’ve caught you in a worse thing still. You have forged a letter and a signature. You have forged a cheque as well. And you will have to go to prison for it. There is a headquarters detective outside waiting for me to call him in. You are going to be arrested.”

There was a moment of taut suspense I can never forget. He stared down at me, obviously at first incredulous. A slight twitch ran across his face, nothing more; beyond a trifling extra bend of the head, he made no movement. He was judging me, weighing my words, wondering if they were true. The next second I saw that he believed me.

What happened then to his face I had never seen before, though I was often to see it afterwards in other faces during my criminal experience. The skin slowly blanched to the hue of flour; the cheeks sagged; the mouth opened; the look in his eyes was dreadful. The whole face disintegrated, as it were. He had the air of a hunted animal at bay. At the same time there was a convulsive movement of his entire body that frightened me. I did not know what he was going to do. It was really made up of several movements, one starting after another. First, his knees gave way and he nearly collapsed. Then, evidently, he considered the possibility of knocking me down and dashing out of the room. His eyes ran swiftly over everything at once, it seemed, noticing the razor certainly, but finding me awkwardly between him and the end of the table where it lay. He half turned in the direction of the window behind him, thinking doubtless of escape by the leads outside. He gave finally a sort of lurch towards me, but this I did not actually see, for I had turned away and was crawling painfully over to the door. It was Grant who supplied this detail of description later. His idea, probably, was to knock me down and make a bolt for it. But, whatever it was he really intended to do, in the end he did nothing, for at this second Grant emerged suddenly from his cupboard.

I was already leaning with my back against the door and caught the look of terror and blank amazement that came into Boyde's face, as he saw another man whom he certainly took at first for the detective. He stood stock still like a petrified figure. A moment later he recognized him as the Englishman he had met at the cricket match. He subsided backwards, half on to the window-sill and half against the dressing-table. The drama of the scene suddenly occurred to me for the first time, as I watched Grant walk over and put the razor in his pocket, and then sit down quietly on the sofa. He spoke no single word. He merely sat and watched.

With my back against the door I then went on talking quickly. Yet behind my anger and disgust, I felt the old pity surge up; already I was sorry for him; I would presently forgive him. But, first, there was something else to be done. The plan lay quite clear in my mind.

Closely watched by Grant and myself, Boyde had meanwhile moved out into the room, still without speaking a single word, and flung himself on the bed where he began to cry like a child. He sobbed convulsively, though whether the tears were of sorrow or of fear, I could not tell. We watched him for some time in silence. It was some minutes later that he sat up, still shaking with sobs, and tried to speak. In an utterly broken voice he begged for mercy, not for himself — he swore he didn't "care a damn" about his "worthless self' — but for his mother's sake. It would break her heart, if she heard about it; it would kill her. He implored me for another chance. His flow of words never ceased. If I would let him off this time, he begged, he would do anything I wished, anything, anything in the world. He would leave New York, he would go home and enlist but forgery meant years in gaol. "I am only thirty, and the sentence would mean the end of my life..." Perhaps instinct warned me he was lying, perhaps he over-acted, I cannot say; but the entire scene, the sobs, the impassioned language, the anguish in the broken voice, the ruin of the face I had once thought innocent, all left me without emotion. I was exhausted too. I had witnessed similar scenes between detectives and their prisoners, the former not only unmoved, but bored and even angry. I understood now how they felt. But there was the balance of my plan to be carried out; my original principle had never wavered; I believed the terror he had felt would make him run straight in future; the moment had now come, I thought, to tell him he was forgiven. So I left the door — he screamed, thinking I was going to open it — and crawled slowly over to him. Putting my hand on his shoulder, and using the gentlest, kindest voice I could find, I told him he should have another chance, but only one. All excitement had died out of me, I felt real pity, the old affection rose, I urged and begged him to "run straight" from this moment...

"But — there is a condition," I finished my sermon.

"Anything, Blackwood. I'll do anything you say." The tears were still hanging on his cheeks.

"You will sit down and write what I dictate."

We found a sheet of foolscap, and he sat down at the little desk, while I stood over him and dictated the words of a full confession. In writing it, Boyde's hand was as steady as that of a clerk making an unimportant entry in an office book. He came to the end and looked up at me enquiringly.

"Now write a duplicate," I said, "in your other handwriting, the one you meant to be a copy of Kay's."

He did this too; to an inexperienced eye the difference was extraordinary. I asked Grant to witness it with me, and when this was finished I waved the document in the other's face. "I shall keep this," I told him gravely, "and if ever you go wrong again, it will mean twenty years in prison." I do not think he knew what I knew at that moment; viz. That a confession signed "under duress" was not evidence in a court of law. He said very simply, gazing into my eyes: "You've saved my life, Blackwood. I shall never forget this day. My temptations have been awful, but from this moment I mean to run straight, perfectly straight." Words of gratitude followed in a flood. He shook my hand, begging to be allowed to help me back into bed.

“I must first tell the detective I’ve withdrawn the charge,” I said. “I must send him away. He doesn’t know your name.” Boyde thanked me volubly again, as I crawled to the door, closed it again, and stood in the cold passage a minute or two. “The man’s gone,” I said, when I came back.

“When — when am I to leave this room?” he asked quietly. I told him he could stay. The matter was forgiven and forgotten. He began to cry again...

For some time after Grant had gone, we were alone. Boyde talked a little, repeating his gratitude. I asked him one question only: had he been in gaol before?” I would rather not answer that, if you don’t mind,” he said. I did not press him, for he had answered it. “I shall never, never go wrong again,” he kept repeating. And all the time he talked — I learned this later — there lay in his coat pocket, that was my coat pocket, the sum of ten dollars which belonged to me. He had sold two of my translations to McCloy, telling me McCloy had refused them.

I have a vague recollection of that evening and of our talk, for complete exhaustion had come over me from the moment I got back into bed. It was not unconsciousness, but probably half unconsciousness. I was only dimly aware of what was going on. I remember Boyde going out to eat something at Krisch’s, then coming back. I woke in darkness with a sudden start. The gas was out, and I wondered why. There was a noise close beside me — something swishing. My mind cleared in a flash.

“Put it back, Boyde,” I called out. “Put it back at once.”

A thin summer coat hung on the door, too thin and shabby to wear, too ragged to pawn. I had placed the confession in the inside pocket, and it was this coat I now heard swishing faintly against the wood.

No answer came, but I plainly heard the soft tread of bare feet along the carpet. I got up and lit the gas. Boyde lay apparently sleeping soundly on the floor. I noticed how well-nourished his body looked. *He,* at any rate, had not been starving. Then I moved to the door, found the confession, took it out, and crawled back into bed. From that moment the paper never left me; it was with me when later the doctor allowed me out, and at night it lay under my pillow while I slept. I kept the torn scraps of the cheque and letter with it, and I hid the razor. Boyde never shaved himself in that room again.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE EPISODE, THOUGH far from being finished, had a shattering effect upon me. If a friend, so close to me by ties of affection and gratitude, could act like this, how would others, less intimately related, behave? My trust in people was killed. A sense of deep loneliness was added to the other miseries of that bed.

Only my books comforted and helped, they did not fail... their teachings stood stiff and firm like a steel rod that never bent or shifted, much less broke. Since these notes tell merely the superficial episodes of my early years, further mention of what the books meant to me is unnecessary; enough — more than enough, probably — has already been told to show the background which explains motive and conduct. The main stream of my life, at any rate, ran deeper and ever deeper, its centre of gravity far below anything that could possibly come to me in the ordinary world or outward happenings. Big dreams were in me at white heat, burning, burning and all external events were coloured by them.

There followed now a more peaceful though short period, during which Boyde behaved well, with kindness and signs of true penitence. Grant warned me this was acting, and that I had been a fool to forgive and let him stay on, but I would not listen, and followed my own principle. I did not trust him, but never let him know it, showing him full confidence, with all the former intimacy and affection. I felt sure this was the right and only way. His attitude to me had something of a dog's devotion in it. I fully believed he was "running straight" again. I watched him closely, while hiding suspicion carefully away.

November drew to a close; Kay sent no more money; the debt to Mrs. Bernstein grew; income became smaller and smaller. I wrote to McCloy, who replied with a brief word that I could come back when I was well again.

Before leaving my bed, however, at the end of the month, another incident occurred that shocked me far more than the first.

One afternoon about a week after the confession, there came a knock at the door, and to my complete surprise, in walked a banker, who had often stayed in our house in England. I was startled and annoyed, for I feared he would write home and tell the truth that my letters so carefully concealed. It was a couple of years since I had seen him. How had he found me out? His first sentence told me: “But this is dreadful. I knew nothing about your being ill. I didn’t know you were in New York even. An Englishman named Boyde came to my office yesterday and told me.” He looked me over with anxiety. “But your bones are showing! Have you been very bad? Why on earth didn’t you let me know, my dear fellow?”

I had spoken of this acquaintance in Boyde’s presence, and he had evidently made a note of name and address. I explained quickly that I had not been seriously ill, that I was nearly well and had a good doctor, and that I was on the staff of the *Evening Sun* and doing well. I told him briefly about my Canadian career as well. The banker was a very decent fellow. His visit was brief, but he was very kind, well-meaning and sympathetic — only — I did not want him! He promised, anyhow, he would not write to my father — was glad, I think, to be relieved of the necessity — and before going he absolutely insisted on leaving some money with me. I refused and refused again. But my own exhaustion and his persistence resulted in his leaving all he had on him at the moment — $32. Months later I discovered that Boyde had obtained other sums from him on the plea that I needed a specialist, and there may have been yet further amounts of similar kind for all I knew.

On coming in, Boyde took his scolding with a smile; he had “acted for the best...” We discussed how the money should be spent, agreeing upon $10 to Mrs. Bernstein, $10 to the doctor next day, $3 to redeem Kay’s overcoat, which we would send to him, and the balance in hand, after laying in a store of dried apples, oatmeal and condensed milk, as our supplies were now exhausted. Next morning, when he left at eight o’clock for a studio appointment and choir rehearsal, I gave him the money for the landlady and a dollar he asked for himself. The balance he put back in the drawer of the little desk beside my bed.

It was a happier morning than I had known for long; the feeling that I had something to give to the doctor made the hours pass quickly, and when he arrived at three, in his very best mood, he was obviously pleased on hearing that I could easily spare $10.

The relief was written on his beaming face. He thanked me warmly. “I do really need it,” he said with emphasis, “or I couldn’t take it from you.” We passed a delightful hour or two; I was strong enough to play the fiddle to him; we talked the happiest afternoon I had yet known in that room came to an end; he prepared to go. Pointing to the drawer, I asked him to take the money out. He did so. At least he opened the drawer. He opened all four drawers. The money was not there.

The most painful part of it, I think, was the look on his face as he presently went out. He did not believe me. I had found it impossible to mention Boyde. I had been speechless. I had no explanation to give. By the expression on the old German’s face as he left the room I could see he thought I was lying to him. His disappointment in me was greater than his disappointment over the money. It was a bitter moment — even more bitter than the further treachery of my companion...

I was alone with my thoughts and feelings. I was alone for four days — and four nights. Boyde, that is, did not return till four days had passed, while the doctor stayed away three days. Whether either of them had said anything to Mrs. Bernstein on their way out, Boyde promising payment perhaps, the doctor letting fall something derogatory, I did not know. Mrs. Bernstein, anyhow, was very unpleasant during those four awful days. Boyde had not even given her the $10. She paid me dreadful visits, she threatened to sell my things (what? I wondered), to turn me out; she sent up hardly any food...

Waiting for Boyde’s step, listening all day, all night... I needed my books, my dreams, my inner crack, as I had never needed them before during those horrible four days. They seemed an eternity. The long nights, of course, were by far the worse; the dreams, the expectancy, for ever anticipating the familiar tread of stockinged feet on the stairs, wondering what in the world had happened, how things would end..... Had he been arrested, perhaps for something terrible? They were haunted nights that made me dread the first sign of coming dusk. It seemed like weeks, an incalculable time altogether had passed since I had seen him... Then the spider took the place of the other vermin. I have always particularly disliked spiders, and this one was the father of them all; though it was the horror of him, not the physical presence, that haunted my nights so persistently. He was, I am sure, the Spider Idea. He originated in a room in Toronto, where a friend foolishly let his prototype, a tarantula, escape, and where it hid all night. It was my room. He came from Florida with a case of bananas. He was very big, if sluggish, his swollen body and hairy black legs the nastiest I had ever seen, I spent the night with this monster on the loose, and the first thing in the morning I saw him, low down on the wall, quite close to me. He had crept for warmth to a pipe near the hot air register.

This spider now came at me, stirred into life by the chance activity of some memory cell. He came crawling across the leads, dragging his bulging body slowly, then feeling over the smooth glass with his legs that were like black brushes a chimney sweep might use. Up the stairs he came too, but sideways there, being too large to move in his usual way; first three legs on one side, then three legs on the other, heaving himself along, the mass of his body between them sloping like a boat at sea. The fat body was derived, I'm sure, from the shock of noticing Boyde's well-fed appearance... There were other things besides the spider, the mind, doubtless, being a little overwrought.

One of these "other things" was real — a yellow haired woman who aired what the papers called her "shapely legs" in silk tights for a living. Pauline M — was her name, and she was leading lady in the "Night Owls Company," then playing at Tony Pastor's Music Hall in 14th Street, or, perhaps, it was at Koster and Biel's Hall further up town. I have forgotten. In any case, Boyde had mentioned the Company to me in some connexion or other. He knew her.

Her visit to me has always seemed vague and hazy; shrouded in mist of some kind, the mist of my suffering mind, I imagine. There lies a feverish touch of fantasy all over it. It was on the evening of the second day since Boyde had disappeared, though I could have sworn that at least a week's loneliness had intervened. It was the second day, I know, because the doctor came on the fourth. During the afternoon an unintelligible telegram had come, sent from a Broadway office: *"Don't be anxious — have surprising news for you — no drinking — home this afternoon*. — B." There was not much comfort in it, though at least I knew then he had not been arrested, but an hour or so later a second telegram had arrived, sent from an office above 42nd Street: *"Married Pauline this afternoon.* — B." It all mystified, confused and troubled me extremely, and the strain on nerves and emotions had been so prolonged that, I think, I was half stupefied with it all, half stupid certainly.

At any rate, the visit always seemed a sort of unreal visit, veiled as it were, and shadowy. Two thoughts were in my mind when the knock sounded on the door: food and Boyde. I was always listening intently for his tread, but I was also listening for Mrs. Bernstein's footstep with a possible tray. It was after six o'clock; since coffee and bread at 8.30 in the morning I had eaten nothing, for our own supplies were finished. Instead of Boyde or the tray, however, in walked the woman with yellow hair and statuesque figure. She wore furs, she was overdressed and painted, she reeked of scent. To me it was a kind of nightmare vision.

Details of her long visit I remember but very few. She at once announced herself— "I am Pauline M—" and asked excitedly, "Are you Blackwood?" She was in a "state." Her great figure filled the little room. She poured out a torrent of words in a cockney voice. Her face was flaming red beneath the paint. Occasionally she swept about. The name of Boyde recurred frequently. She was attacking me, I gathered. Boyde had said this and that about me. I understood less than nothing. I remember asking her to sit down, and that she refused, and that presently I asked something else: "Has he married you?" and that she suddenly caught sight of the telegrams lying on my bed — I had pointed — then picked them up and read them. She came closer to me while she did this, so that I caught the stink of spirits.

It was all very muddled and confused to me, and I made no attempt to talk. I heard her begging me to "give him back" to her, that she loved him, that I had "poisoned his mind" against her — threats and beseeching oddly mingled. But the telegrams seemed to sober her a little, for I remember her becoming abruptly more quiet, almost maudlin, and pouring out an endless story about Boyde who was, apparently, "full of money... full of liquor"... and full of anger against me because he had been "supporting" me and I had shown "base ingratitude."... I was too bewildered to feel much. It numbed me. I couldn't make sense of it. I couldn't realize how Boyde had deliberately left me alone so long. Something monstrous and inhuman touched it all.

She went away eventually in a calmer state, though leaving me in a condition that was far from calm. She went, begging me to "send him back" to her when he came home, but half realizing, I gathered, that the boot was on the other leg, so far as Boyde and myself were concerned. She was still angry with me in a vague unjust sort of way, not knowing whom to believe probably, nor exactly what had happened. She flounced out of the room in a whirl of excitement and cockney sentences, and I never saw her again. My tray arrived within a few minutes of her welcome departure..... I spent an appalling night. Boyde, the yellow-haired woman, Mrs. Bernstein, the old German, the spider, steps on the stairs a hundred times that came to nothing..... I wished once or twice that I were dead... The door did not open...

It never rains but it pours. Two days later the doctor came in the afternoon, in the blackest mood I had yet encountered. I rather expected his visit, and though dreading it, I also longed for it, longed to see someone — a human being. He came sharp at three, attended to me, and left again. The visit lasted perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, and during the whole time he spoke no single word, not even greeting me when he entered, or saying good-bye when he went out. His face was black, aged, terrible in the suffering it wore. I had meant to tell him at last about Boyde, unable any longer to keep it to myself. I simply must tell someone. But not a syllable could I get out. When the old German had gone, however, I felt sure it was his own mysterious suffering, and not any feeling against myself, that caused his strange behaviour. I knew, too, that he would come again, and thus I got some comfort from his silent, rapid visit. This was on the fourth day since Boyde deserted; it was the day on which he came back.

He came back; his money had given out; he had nowhere to sleep.

It was night, somewhere about ten o'clock. I was falling into an uneasy doze, the kind of doze that introduced the spider, when the door opened softly. There was no knock. I had heard no footstep. The door just opened and he came in.

Every nerve in me became alert. Truth to tell, there was no emotion in me of any sort or kind. I was numb, exhausted to the bone. I lay still and stared at him. He looked sleek and even prosperous. He looked gorged with food. His face was a little swollen. The big blue eyes were clear. He let the eyeglass fall, gazing at me, while a smile broke over his face. I was so glad to see him, so relieved to have him back, that, though no emotion beyond that of suspense ended was in me, I felt, as once before with the doctor, a lump rise in my throat. His bloated expression distressed me vaguely. At first he said nothing, but walked across the room on tiptoe, as though pretending I was asleep and he feared to wake me.

My tongue loosened suddenly. The very words I have not forgotten. A matter that had not lain in my mind for days came uppermost:

“Did you send off the overcoat to Kay?”

He nodded, but without looking at me. It was a lie, I knew. My eyes followed him round, as he began to undress. For several minutes I said nothing. Then other words came to me:

“I’ve been alone four days and nights.”

Silence.

“Without food — or anybody.”

Silence, but he turned his back to me.

“Without money.”

Silence. He stood quite motionless.

“I might have died. I might have gone crazy.” Silence.

“It’s been awful — the loneliness and wondering—” He half turned, but instantly turned back again. No sound escaped him.

“I’ve been thinking about you — and wondering day and night. Are you really married? Pauline’s been here — this afternoon.”

His silence was broken by a sort of gulp, and he bent over. My mistake about the date of the woman’s visit was intentional — I thought it might open his lips; I did not correct it. He half turned to look at me, but again instantly hid his face as before. Then he abruptly sat down on the sofa, leaning against the back, his head in his hands. I raised myself in bed, never taking my eyes off him.

“I got your telegrams. Have you nothing to say? No explanation? Have you brought any food, any money? You have had money — all this time.”

Silence, broken only by another gulp.

“I saw you take the money out of the drawer. I said nothing because I thought you were going to get me things. I *trusted* you.”

He turned all at once and faced me, though keeping his eyes always steadily on the floor. The tears were streaming down his face like rain.

“Are you tired?” I asked. “You’d better lie down and go to sleep. You can talk to-morrow.”

It was this that finished him. He had reached the breaking point.

There is no heroism in me; it was simply that I needed him, rotten as he was, heartless, cruel, vile as well; I funked another spell of that awful loneliness; I knew him now for a coward and a beast, but I could not face another night alone. That complete loneliness had been too horrible. A wild animal was better than that. Boyde was of the hyena type, but a hyena was better than a spider. It was neither generosity nor nobility that made me listen to his ridiculous and lying story of an “awful and terrible temptation,” of a “fearful experience with a woman” who had drugged him... The tale spun itself far into the night, the razor and the confession were under my pillow, I fell asleep, dead with exhaustion, while he was still explaining something about a “woman named Pauline M—” who had “deceived me in a most extraordinary way.....”

The following day, in the morning — Dr. Huebner came unexpectedly. Boyde had gone out before I woke. This time he was a radiant Dr. Jekyll, and I told him the whole story. His only comment, looking severely at me through the big spectacles, was: “I expected it. He is a confidence man. I knew it the first time I saw him. You have kicked the devil out, of course?”

A violent disagreement that was almost a quarrel followed.

“I simply do not understand you,” he said at last, in complete disgust. It was only the wondrous, beaming happy mood he was in that prevented his being really angry. He threw his hands up and snorted. “You are either a fool or a saint, and — I’m sure you’re not a saint.” He was very much upset.

I did not yield. There was something in me that persuaded me to forgive Boyde and to give him yet another chance. I told Boyde this in very plain language. I claim no credit — I have never felt the smallest credit — for what I did. It was simply that somehow it seemed impossible not to forgive him — anything. But the time was near, though the feeling of forgiveness still held true in me, when my forgiveness took another form. Thirty years ago these little incidents occurred. It seems like thirty days.

CHAPTER XIX

IT IS A mercy one cannot see the future. In that New York misery, present and to follow, had I known that some fifteen years later I should be my own master, living more or less "like a gentleman," earning my livelihood, though a very bare one, by writing, I could never have faced what I did face. Any value that may have lain in the experiences would certainly have been missed, at any rate. If one knew that the future promised better things, there is no patience in human beings that could hold and wait for it; if, on the other hand, it promised worse, I have met no courage that could bear the present. Those who preach "live in the present only" have common sense on their side.

With the memory of the past, similarly, such folk show wisdom. Reincarnation is an interesting theory to many; yet to recall past lives could have but one effect — to render one ineffective now. To recall the failures of a mere forty years is bad enough; to look back over a hundred lives would be disastrous: one could only sit down and cry.

December had come with its cold and bitter winds, and the doctor, ever faithful, had let me up. I went for my first little walk, leaning on Boyde's arm. Round Grammercy Park we crawled slowly, and that first taste of fresh air, the sound of wind in the leafless trees, a faint hint of the sea that reaches even the city streets, gave me an unforgettable happiness and yearning. The plan to settle in the backwoods again obsessed me. A little later I had almost persuaded the doctor, and Kay in my letters, to take up a claim north of the Muskoka Lakes where we had spent such a happy summer. Boyde was to come too— "as a sort of excitement, I suppose!" was the doctor's bitter comment.

I grew gradually stronger. Reporting was still impossible, but, introduced by Boyde, I earned something by posing in the studios. A "sitting" was three hours. Some artists paid by the hour, but Charles Dana Gibson, then drawing his weekly cartoons in *Life,* always paid for a full sitting, though he might use his model for an hour only. He was a rapid worker, and a good fellow; he never forgot to ask if one was tired of any particular attitude; my first pose to him was for a brokendown actor leaning against a hoarding covered with advertisements, the joke being something about a bill-board and a board-bill. I was thrilled when it appeared in *Life*. There was always a great rush among the models for Gibson's studio. The only other poses I remember are swinging a golf club and sitting for a bishop's arms and hands. I wore big sleeves. These, however, were not in Gibson's studio.

My memory of this work is dim; it was not unpleasant; only its uncertainty against it, though a good week might bring in as much as fifteen dollars. Smedley, who illustrated for *Harper's Magazine,* was the painter we all disliked most; Cox, son of Bishop Cox, Cleveland Cox being his full name, I think, was a favourite: he was a gentleman. There was Zogbaum too, another illustrator, and there was Lynwood Palmer, the horse-painter, and leading artist on *The Rider and Driver,* a first-class weekly of that day. "Artist Palmer," as the papers called him later, was a character. His kindness to me stands out. He had very great talent — for getting the likeness of a horse. We called him "The Horse." He made a success at his work, painted the "King's Horses and Men" in subsequent years, and settled down eventually — he was an Englishman — I believe, at Heston, Hounslow. His New York studio was in Fifth Avenue. Many a time he gave me food there.

"Artist Palmer" was self-taught. I forget the whole story, but he had known his hard times. Looking at my dirty boots the first time I called, he said: "When I drove a cab here, my boots were better cleaned than any man's on the rank." I was not partial to Dr. Smiles' "Self Help." A "shine" moreover, cost 5 cents, and 5 cents meant a glass of beer and a meal at a free lunch counter — our invariable lunch at that time.

Artist Palmer knew Boyde as a bad lot, and told me that Boyde was lying about me behind my back everywhere, saying that he was supporting me, paying for my illness, and while borrowing money in my name, explaining that I spent all he gave me in dissipation! His method was to present a forged cheque to some good-natured friend after banking hours, obtain the money, and spend it on himself. A tale of woe, with crocodile tears, saved him from subsequent arrest. No one ever prosecuted him.

All this I kept to myself, though I watched Boyde more and more closely. I knew his studio appointments and made him hand over what he earned. I did also an idiotic thing: I went down and warned the pastor’s daughter about him. Palmer’s words and my own feeling persuaded me to this fatal action. She was a beautiful girl. I received from her the same kind of treatment that I had shown to the man who first warned me. Boyde, of course, soon knew about it. We had a scene. I saw for the first time anger in his face, black hatred too. He never forgave me my stupid indiscretion... The way he explained my action to the girl herself was characteristic of him, but I only learned later how he managed it. In a voluntary confession he wrote a few weeks afterwards, a confession he judged might convince me he was genuinely repentant, and at the same time save him from a grave impending fate, he described it — honestly: “I told her,” he said, “she was to pay no attention to your warnings, because you wanted me to marry one of your sisters.”

The way I lost Boyde temporarily comes a little later in his story, but may be told here because it marked the close of a definite little chapter in his career with me.

It was the first week in December. I came home — from the doctor’s house — at two in the morning. The gas was burning, but the room was not too well lit by the single burner. Boyde lay asleep on the floor as usual. I moved softly so as not to wake him. I glanced down. What I saw startled me; more, it gave me a horrid turn. The figure on the mattress was another man. It was not Boyde. Then, as I cautiously looked closer, I discovered my mistake. It was Boyde after all, but without his moustache.

I stared for some minutes in amazement, for the face was completely altered. The drooping, rather heavy moustache had always hidden his lips and mouth. I now saw that mouth. And it was a cruel, brutal mouth, hard, sensual, with ugly thickish lips, contradicting the kindly blue eyes completely. A sentence of detective-sergeant Heidelberg, a headquarters man, came back to me, himself a brutal, heartless type, if ever there was one, but with years of criminal experience behind him: “Watch the mouth and hands and feet,” he told me once in court. “They can fake the eyes dead easy, but they can’t fake the mouth hell give ‘em. They forgit their hands and feet. Watch their mouth and hands and feet — the way these fidgit. That give ’em away every time.”

Why had Boyde done this thing? He was a handsome man, the light graceful moustache was a distinct asset in his appearance. Why had he shaved suddenly? I stared at the new horrid face for a long time. He lay sleeping like a child.

I turned to examine the room, as changes might be there too. All seemed as usual, I saw no difference anywhere. Then my eyes fell on the cupboard with its half-opened door. Boyde's coat, that was my own coat, the only thick one we had between us, hung down from the hook. And, for the first time, the sight of that coat stirred a dim, painful memory of the place where I had first worn it. Naturally it was old, but it was also English. The house in Kent rose up — the lime trees on the lawn, the tennis courts, my father's study, his face, my mother's face, their voices even, the very smell and atmosphere and feelings of happy days that now seemed for ever lost. The whole machinery of association worked suddenly at full pressure. It was like a blow. I realized vividly the awful gap between those days and these, between myself as I had been and as I was. A whiff of perfume, a smell, produces this kind of evocation in most cases; with me, just then, it was my old English coat.

I remember the strong emotion in me, and that, while still held and gripped by it, my eye caught sight of an envelope sticking out of the inside breast pocket. The coat hung by chance in a way that made it visible. It might easily fall out altogether. I moved over and stretched out a hand to put it safely back and then saw that the writing on the envelope was my own. It was a letter.

I took it out. The address was the house in Kent, whose atmosphere still hung about my thoughts. The name was my mother's name. There were other letters, all my own; one to my father; two to my brother, the one being in the world I really loved, the only one of the family to whom I had given vague hints of the real state of affairs.

Some of the letters were two weeks, three weeks old. In each case the five-cent stamp had been torn off. Five cents meant a glass of lager and a meal at a free lunch counter.

There was no reflection. Holding the letters in my hand, I moved across to the mattress. There was an anger in me that made me afraid, afraid of myself. I wanted to kill, I thought I was going to kill, I understood easily how a man *can* kill. In my mind was a vivid picture of my brother's face — it was he, not my parents, who moved with me. But I was not excited; ice was in me, not fire. Something else, too, at that moment was in my veins, a drug... a strong dose, too! Five minutes before my entire being had been in a state of utter bliss, of radiant kindness, of tolerance, of charity to everybody in the world. I would have given away my last cent, I would have forgiven anybody anything. All this was swept away in an instant. I felt a cold, white anger that wanted to kill.

Boyde had not heard my footstep; he lay sound asleep. I tore the blanket off. He lay half naked before me, sleek, well-nourished, over-fed, loathsome, horrible beyond anything I had known. He turned with a jump and sat up. I held the letters against his face, but he was still dazed with sleep and only stared stupidly, first at the letters, then into my face.

I kicked him; I had my boots on.

"Get up!" I said. And, as he got up, rather heavily, trying to protect himself, I kicked him again and again, till at last he stood upright, but at some distance from me, over towards the window. He understood by this time; he saw the letters in my hand. The terror in his face sickened me even in my anger. I saw the evil almost visibly leap out. The unfamiliarity, now that the moustache was gone, the cruelty of the naked lips and mouth, the shrinking of the coward in him, these made an unforgettable picture. He did not utter a syllable.

My own utterance, what words I used, I cannot remember. I did not remember them even ten minutes afterwards, certainly not the next day, when I told the doctor what had happened. Two sentences only remain accurate: "Come close to me. I'm going to kill you," and the other: "Get ready! I'm going to beat you like an animal!"

He stood before me, wearing his short day-shirt without a collar, his hair untidy, his face white, his half-naked body shaking. He dropped to his knees, he got up again and tried to hide, he cringed and whined like a terrified dog, his blue eyes were ghastly. In myself were feelings I had never dreamed I possessed, but whose evidence Boyde must, plainly, have read in my expression.

What he could not read, nor ever knew of course, was the fight, the fight of terror, I was having with myself. I felt that once I touched him I should not stop till I had gone too far.

I did not touch him once. Instead, I told him to put on his clothes, his own clothes, and go. He had no clothes of his own. He did not go..... I eventually let him wait till morning, when he could find enough rags of sorts to wear in the street... He explained that he had shaved his moustache because the Rockaway Hunt demanded it.

He had said hardly a word during the entire scene. Half an hour after it was over he was sleeping soundly again. I, too, thanks to the drug, slept deeply. I woke in the morning to find the mattress on the floor unoccupied. Boyde had gone. With him had gone, too, my one thick suit and, in addition, every possible article of pawnable or other value that had been in the room or in the packing-case downstairs. Only the razor and the confession had he left behind because they were beneath my pillow.

The next time we met was in even more painful and dramatic circumstances. I decided it was time to act.

I went down that same morning to police headquarters in Mulberry Street, and swore out a warrant for his arrest on two charges; forgery and petit larceny. A theft of more than $25 was grand larceny, a conviction, of course, carrying heavier punishment. I reduced his theft of my $32, therefore, by seven dollars, so that, if caught and convicted, his sentence might be as short as possible.

But for the fact that I was a reporter on a Tammany newspaper, nothing would have happened. As it was, no bribe being available, the police refused to take any steps in the matter. The confession, they knew, was worthless; it was a small case; no praise in the press, no advertisement, lay in it, “Find out where he is,” Detective Lawler said, “and let us know. Just telephone and I’ll come up and take him. But *you* do the huntin’. See? *I* don’t.”

This was Detective Lawler, who, under another name came into a story years later— “Max Hensig,” in “The Listener.”

The determination to put Boyde where he could no longer harm himself or others held as firm in me as, formerly, the determination to forgive had held. The hunt, however, comes a little later in the story. There was first the explanation of the doctor’s secret. The doctor was my companion in the dreadful hunt.

CHAPTER XX

IT WAS, PERHAPS, the undigested horror of those days, as also their unsatisfied yearnings after beauty, that tried to find expression fifteen years later in writing. Once they were over I hid them away, those dreadful weeks, trying to forget them. But nothing is ever forgotten, nor is anything finally suppressed in the sense that it is done with. Expression, sooner or later, in one form or another, inevitably crops up.

“Writing,” declared the old doctor, after a talk about De Quincey, “is functional.” He had many pet theories or hobbies on which he loved to expatiate. “Writing is as much a function of the system as breathing or excretion. What the body takes in and cannot use, it discards. What the mind takes in and cannot use, it, similarly, excretes. A sensitive, impressionable mind receives an incessant bombardment, often an intense, terrific bombardment of impressions. Two-thirds of such impressions are never digested, much less used. The artist-temperament whose sensitiveness accumulates a vast store, uses them; the real artist, of course, shapes them at the same time. The ordinary man, the *Dutzend Mensch,* made in bundles by the dozen, gets few impressions, and needs, naturally, no outlet. Writing is purely functional.....” It was one of his numerous pet theories.

I went to his house now every night; he gave me his professional care, he gave me sympathy, he gave me food. Pathetic, wonderful old German! His tenderness was a woman’s, his temper a demon’s. I felt a giant in him somewhere. At close daily quarters his alternate moods perplexed me utterly. He had an Irish wife, a kind, motherly, but quite uneducated woman of about forty-five, and a little girl of eight or nine, whose white face looked as old as her mother’s, and whose diminutive figure seemed to me unusual somewhere. Was it not stunted? Her intelligence, her odd ways, her brilliant eyes captivated me. She called me “Uncle Diedel.” She talked, like her mother, broken German. Supper, an extremely simple meal, but a feast to me, was always in the basement kitchen.

The tiny wooden house, owning something akin to squatter’s rights which prevented its demolition, stood in the next block to my own, hemmed in by “brownstone fronts,” but with a miniature garden. New York, that burns anthracite coal, has no blacks and smuts; the trees and shrubs were really green; the earth smelt sweet. The little house, standing back from the road, was a paradise to me. Its one ground-floor apartment was divided by folding doors into consulting and waiting rooms. But no patients came, or came so rarely that it was an event when the doorbell rang. The doctor had the greatest difficulty in keeping himself and family alive. At supper I used to eat as little as possible. He seemed a competent physician. I wondered greatly. As well as real human kindness, there was courage in that little building; there was also a great tragedy I sensed long before I discovered its solution. The strange innocence and ignorance of my up-bringing still clung to me.

The establishment, the poverty, the alternating moods, as I said, puzzled me; I was aware of a whole life hidden away from my observation. They were so poor that dinner was the meal of a workman, they could not even keep a servant. There were worrying debts as well. Often the doctor was so bearish and irritable that I dared not say a word, his wife got curses and abuse, he would almost kick the child, finding fault with such sneers and rudeness that I vowed to myself I would never eat his food again. Then, after a momentary absence in his workshop upstairs, where he kept a lathe and made beautiful chessmen, he would come slowly stumbling down again, and the door would open to a wholly different being. Bent, as always, but well poised and vigorous, with bright smiling eyes, benevolent yet rugged face, every gesture full of gentle kindness, he would pat his old wife on the shoulder and take the child upon his knee, and beg me to play the fiddle to him or to draw my chair up for an intimate talk. He would light his great meerschaum pipe and beam upon the world through the blue smoke like some old jolly idol. The change seemed miraculous.

His talk seemed, at the time, wonderful to me. He would discourse on Kant, Novalis, Heine, on music, science, astronomy— “when your troubles seem at their worst,” he would say, “look up at the stars for half an hour, with *imagination*, and you’ll see your troubles in a new perspective” — on religion, literature and life, on anything and everything, while downstairs his kindly old wife prepared the Frankfurters and sauerkraut and coffee.

Neither mother nor child, I noticed, paid much attention to his attacks. The little girl, who called her father “Otto,” sat up with us night after night till two in the morning, and hated going to bed. She listened spellbound to the stream of talk. I still see the dingy, lamp-lit room in the heart of the roaring city, the white-haired old doctor, pipe in mouth, the operating chair in the middle of the floor, the little pale-faced child with her odd expression of maturity as she looked from him to me, then led me by the hand to our late meal in the gloomy basement. I often waited achingly for that meal, having eaten nothing since breakfast. Would he never stop talking.?

We talked of Boyde — his face. The doctor's reading of Boyde's face was that it was a bad, deceitful, clever face, evil, brutal and cruel. I mentioned the man's various acts of kindness. "Bait," he exclaimed, with a scornful snort, "mere bait! He wanted a free lodging. He had plenty of money all along, but the free bed gave him more — to spend on himself while you starved."

He talked on about faces... Handsome ones he either disliked or distrusted, handsome features like Boyde's were too often a cloak that helped to hide and deceive. Behind such faces, as a rule, lay either badness or vacuity; good looks were the most misleading thing in the world. Expression rarely accompanied good looks, good features. He was off on a pet hobby, he waxed eloquent. Beautiful women — he spoke of good features chiefly — were almost invariably wicked, or else empty. Of "Society Beauties" he was particularly contemptuous. "Regular features, fine eyes, perfect skin, but no expression — no soul within. The deer-like eyes, the calm, proud loveliness people rave about is mere vacancy. Pfui!"

His habit of staring into the mirror came back to me, and I ventured a question. He hesitated a moment, then got up and led me to the glass, where, without a word, he began to gaze at his own reflection, making the familiar grimaces, smiling, screwing up his eyes, stretching his lips, raising his eyebrows, pulling his moustache about until, at last, I burst into laughter I could control no longer.

He turned in astonishment. He examined my own face closely for some time. "You are too young still," he said. "You have no lines. In my face, you see, lies all my past, layer below layer, skin behind skin, my face of middle age, of early manhood, of youth, of childhood. It carries me right back."

He began showing me again, pointing to his reflection as he did so. "That's middle age that's youth. Ach! And there's the boy's face, look!"

I did not dare to look, for explosions of laughter were in my throat, and I should have hurt his feelings dreadfully. I understood what he meant, however.

"With the face of each period," he explained, "rise the memories, feelings and emotions of that particular period, its point of view, its fears, ambitions — *hopes.* I live again momentarily in it. I am a young man again, a boy, a child. I am, at any rate, no longer myself — *as I now am."* The way he spoke these four words was very grave and sad. "Now," he went on with a sigh, "you understand the charm of the mirror. It means escape from self. This is the ultimate teaching of all religion — to escape from Self." He chuckled. "The mirror is my Religion."

During this odd little scene I felt closer to his secret than ever before. There was something fine and lovely in him, something big, but it lay in ruins. Had my attitude been a little different, had I not laughed for instance, I think he would have taken me into his confidence there and then. But the opportunity was lost this time. He asked, instead, for music, old, simple German songs being what he liked most. He would lean back in his big chair, puff his great pipe, close his eyes, and hum the melodies softly to himself while I played. It was easy to vamp a sort of accompaniment with double stopping. He dreamed of old days, I suppose; it was a variant of the mirror game. Tschaikowsky, Meyer-Helmund, Massenet he also liked, but it was Schubert, Schumann, even Mendelssohn he always hummed to. Of *"Ich grolle-nichi, auch wenn das Herz mir bricht,"* he never tired. The little child would dart up from the basement at the first sound of the fiddle, show her old, white face at the door, then creep in, sit in a corner, and never take her eyes from "the orchestra." When it stopped playing, she was off again in a second.

One item, while speaking of the music, stands out — chanting to the fiddle a certain passage from De Quincey. The "Confessions" fascinated him; the description of the privations in London, the scenes with Anne when she first brought him out of her scanty money the reviving glass of port, her abrupt disappearance finally and his pathetic faithful search, the lonely hours in the empty house in Greek Street, but particularly his prolonged fight against the drug. It was the Invocation to Opium, a passage of haunting beauty, however, he loved so much that he chanted it over and over to himself. The first time he did this I invented a soft running accompaniment on the lower strings, using double stopping. The mute was on. My voice added the bass. It was a curious composition of which he never tired; it moved him very deeply; I have even seen tears trickling down his cheeks when it was over. He always left his chair for this performance, walking slowly to and fro while he chanted the rhythmical, sonorous sentences:

"O just, subtle and mighty opium I that, to the hearts of rich and poor alike, for the wounds that will never heal, and for the pangs of grief that tempt the spirit to rebel, bringest an assuaging balm; — eloquent opium! that with thy potent rhetoric stealest away the purposes of wrath... Thou buildest upon the bosom of darkness, out of the fantastic imagery of the brain, cities and temples, beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles, beyond the splendours of Babylon and Hekatompylos;… and hast the keys of Paradise, O just, subtle and mighty opium...!"

"Ach! Wie prachtvoll" he would cry a moment later, "wie *wunderschoen!* "and then would recite a translation he had made into his own tongue, and a very fine one too. Quite delighted, he would repeat the passage over and over again, pausing to compare the two versions, fixing me with his big eyes in order to increase his own pleasure in the music by witnessing the evidence of my own.

Truly he was a Jekyll and Hyde.

It was only during the Jekyll mood this kind of scene took place; in the Jekyll happy humour, too, that I had told him about my strange up-bringing. "Now I understand better," he said, "why you are still so young and know so little of life, and why you are so foolishly good to Boyde" — which annoyed me, because I considered myself now quite old and a thorough man of the world as well.

It was in this mood, too, that we discussed my own theories and beliefs... a life in the woods as well. Kay, himself and his family, Boyde and I were to settle in the backwoods perhaps I was as eloquent as I was earnest; he listened attentively; sometimes he seemed almost ready to consent; he understood, at any rate, the deep spell that Nature had for me.

But he only smiled when I said I was a failure and an outcast. My life had hardly begun yet! No man was a failure who had an object and worked for it, even though he never got within miles of accomplishment. "A life for a man is a life among men," he would say with emphasis. "The woods are all right as an interlude, but not as a career." He was very sympathetic, but he shook his head violently. "In action lies a man's safety in life," he growled at me. "The world needs men of action, not dreamers," he repeated and repeated, "and Buddhism has never yet produced a man of action. *Do something,* even if it prove the wrong thing. Dreaming, without action, is the quickest way of self-corruption I know." And he would then urge me again to become a doctor, after which he would proceed to dream himself for an hour or two... showing that all his life he had been far more of a dreamer than a man of action...

It was chance that suddenly led me into the doctor's secret. He became for me, from that moment, the most pathetic and tragic of human beings. My own troubles seemed insignificant.

One afternoon early in December, gloomy, very cold, a studio appointment failed, and I decided to go to the wooden house. It was that or the public library, but I wanted a talk, I wanted also to get really warm. I had no overcoat; the doctor's room was always like an oven. The vermin I had grown accustomed to and hardly noticed them. An idea of food, too, was in my mind, for the free lunch glass of beer and salt chip-potatoes was all I had eaten since breakfast. Seven o'clock, however, was my usual hour of visit, I had never been in the afternoon before. A memorable visit; we were alone; he told me his secret very quietly.

I found him in his most awful mood, rude, his nerves unbearably on edge. He said he had not expected me, but when I tried to go, he became angry and begged me to stay, saying that I helped him more than I could ever know. Had I brought the fiddle? I said I would run up the street and get it. "No," he implored, "don't go now. You can go later — before supper. *Please* do not leave me — *please!"* He then said he would tell me something no one else knew, no one except his wife. I wondered what was coming, and felt strangely touched and moved at his treating me with such confidence. His manner was so pathetic, and he seemed suddenly to have become weak and helpless, and somehow or other it was in my power to do him a service. I was thrilled and full of expectation.

But, before he began to tell me, he went up to a little cabinet with a glass door and took out a small bottle full of a white powder, bearing the word, the magical word “Majendie “ — a word I can never forget as long as I live — and took some of the powder and made a solution and then sucked some of it up with a needle and turned to me. His face was swollen and looked terrible, for the eyes glowed so hotly, and the skin was so red and white in patches. Then he began to open his waistcoat and shirt till his chest was bare. “Look,” he said, for I half moved aside, and when I looked I saw he was covered with hundreds of small red sores.

Evidently my face betrayed shrinking and horror, for the old man laughed and said “Oh, I’m not a leper. They’re only blisters,” and then finding a little clear space on his skin, put the needle of his syringe through the flesh and injected the fluid into his body. He next quickly put his finger over the spot and rubbed to and fro for about a minute, staring steadily at me while he did so.

“That’s morphine,” he said in a dead voice, “and the rubbing is necessary to prevent a blister forming.” I knew nothing about morphine except the name, and I was disappointed rather than thrilled, but the next minute he gave me all the thrill I wanted, and more besides: “I’ve been fighting it for two years,” he said quietly in German, still rubbing the spot and staring hard at me, “and I am slowly getting the better of it. If I don’t succeed, it means I die.” A cold grim smile that made me shudder stole over his swollen face. *“Death,”* he added.

I felt his despair, the despair of doubt, as he said this, and in his eyes blazed suddenly all the suppressed depths of suffering and emotion that he usually kept hidden. Such a flood of sympathy for the old man rose in me that I did not know what to say. Of drugs and their power I knew nothing. I stood and stared in silence, but his voice and manner made me realize one thing: that here was an awful battle, a struggle between human courage, will and endurance, on the one hand, and some tremendous power on the other — a struggle to the death. The word “morphine” seemed to me some sort of demon.

He sat down in his armchair, lit his pipe, pulled up the operating chair for me to lie on beside him, and then told me very quietly why he took it. Already his face looked different, as the morphine circulated through the blood, and he smiled and wore a genial happy air of benevolence that made him at once a different man.

“I shall have peace now for several hours,” he said, “but I don’t take morphine for pleasure. I take it because it is the only way to keep myself alive and to keep my wife and child from starving. If I can gradually wean myself from it I shall live for years. If not, and I cannot make the dose less and less, it will kill me very soon. I am old, you see.”

He told me very simply, but very graphically, speaking in German as he loved to do, that three years ago he had enjoyed a good and lucrative practice. But he had embarked upon some experiments in his leg — I never understood exactly what and did not dare to ask — and to observe these properly he was obliged to use the knife without taking any anaesthetic. His wife stood beside him and staunched the blood, but the pain and shock proved more than he was equal to, being an old man, and a collapse followed. All his patients left him, for he could not attend to them, and in order to be in a fit condition to see even chance callers he had to inject morphine. Thus the habit began, and before he knew where he was the thing had him by the throat. He was a man of great natural strength of will and he began to stop it, but the fight was far harder than he had imagined, and his nerves seemed to have gone to pieces. Unless he had the support of a dose, he was so brutal, irritable and rude that no one could stay in his presence, and no patient would come near him. Lie never got his practice back again, and whenever a stray patient called now he had to take an injection, or he would be sure to behave in such a way that the man or woman would never return. He used atropine to mix with his morphine, and thus tried gradually to cure himself, and lately had succeeded in reducing the quantity very considerably, but it was an awful fight, and he admitted the end was uncertain. He said I helped him to bear the strain. My presence, he said, the music too, gave him some sort of comfort and strength, and he was always glad to see me. When I was there he could hold out longer than when he was alone, and one reason he was telling me all this intimate history — telling it to a comparative stranger — was because he wished me to try and help him more.

I stammered some words in broken German about being eager and willing to help, and he smiled and said he thanked me and “we would make the fight together.”

“The charm is very powerful,” he went on, “especially to a nature like mine, for when I take this stuff the world becomes full of wonder and mystery again, just as it was for me sixty years ago when I was a boy with burning hopes and high dreams. But far more than that, I believe in people again. That makes more difference in your life than anything else, for to lose faith in men makes life unbearable. Bitter experiences have shaken my trust and belief in my fellow creatures. But with this stuff in me I find it again and feel at peace with the world."

"That is why you sometimes approve and at other times disapprove of my attitude towards Boyde?"

"Yes," he said, with a most benign and delightful expression in his eyes. "Give him every chance. There's lots of good in him. He feels, no doubt, that everyone who knows about him distrusts him. Weak men will always try more or less to live up to what is expected of them, for they are easily hypnotised. If they feel every one expects only evil from them their chief incentive is lost."

"Then I ought never to let him think I've lost belief in him?"

"Never. Frighten him, kick him, urge him along with violence, anything to make him move of himself towards being decent; but never suggest he *cannot* be, and is not, decent and straight."

How we talked that night — and how I suffered from hunger, for when morphine was in him the old doctor ate little, and this time he was full of ideas and ideals, and had so sympathetic a listener, that he forgot I might want food, and it was not till after one in the morning that he began to flag and thought of coffee. We went down into the kitchen, and there we found the patient wife dozing on the wooden chair, and the child reading a book— "Undine" — on the deal table, with her eyes so bright I thought they were going to shoot out flame. She looked up and stared at us for a long time before she got herself back from that enchanted region of woods and pools and moonlight... Strange supper parties they were, in that quiet, basement-kitchen between one and two of the winter mornings of December, 1892...

Otto Huebner, having broken the ice, told me much of his own life then. Owing to family disputes he left the manufacturing town in Northern Germany where he was born and brought up, and came to New York as a young man. He never saw his parents again, and took out naturalization papers at once. For years he was employed by Steinway's piano factory, as a common workman at first, then as a skilled man. He was unmarried, he saved money, be began to study at night; the passion for medicine was so strong in him that he made up his mind to become a doctor. He attended lectures when he could. It was a life of slavery, of incessant toil both day and night. He was over forty when he began studying for the examinations, and it took him seven years to attain his end. His health had suffered during this strenuous time. He had married well after fifty...

Dear, lovable, much-to-be-pitied old man, my heart went out to him; I was determined to do everything I could to help. I owed him much for counsel, sympathy and kindness, to say nothing of medical attendance and food besides, at a time, too, when I believed myself a complete failure and thought my life was ruined. England, my family, all that I had been accustomed to seemed utterly remote; I had cut myself off; I had tumbled into quite another world, and the only friend I had, the only being I trusted, even loved as well, was the old German morphine victim.

Meanwhile, it had been very wonderful to me to see an irritable, savage old man change in a few minutes into a kindly, genial, tender-hearted being, and I began to feel an absorbing curiosity about this fine white powder labelled “Majendie.” I invariably now rubbed in the dose, finding with increasing difficulty a clear space of skin in the poor worn old body. I watched the change steal over him. It seemed to me pure magic. It began more and more to fascinate me.

CHAPTER XXI

A FEW DAYS after the doctor’s secret had been laid bare I received a brief, curt letter from McCloy to say he could not keep my place open for ever; how soon was I coming back? Six weeks had passed already. The doctor convinced me I was not yet in a condition to face ten hours’ hard reporting a day. I answered McCloy as best I could, thanking him, and telling the facts. Dr. Huebner also wrote him a line.

I was distressed and anxious, none the less, and that evening I was certainly not at my best. I gave the old man but little help. His method of using me was simple: if I could manage to interest him, by talk, by music, by books, by anything at all, it enabled him to postpone the hour of injection. Each time we tried to make this interval longer; each time, he told me, he took a smaller quantity.

On this particular evening, hungry and depressed as I was, I failed to be “interesting,” and no forced attempt could make me so. My own condition, in any case, was pretty low; my friend’s dejection and excessive irritability proved the last straw. We disagreed, we hurt each other’s feelings a little, I relapsed into silence finally, the gloom was dreadful. My own troubles just then were uppermost in my mind. If I lost my job, I kept thinking, what on earth would happen to me?.

The old man presently, and long before his time, got up in silence and went to the glass cabinet where now the Majendie bottle stood. He no longer kept it in his workshop out of sight. His face was black as thunder. Conscience pricked me; I roused myself, saying something by way of trying to prevent, whereupon he turned and said savagely: “Do you want to see me die? Or lose my reason?”

As already mentioned, I was totally ignorant of drugs and their effect. His words, which I took literally, frightened me. I watched him mix the solution, fill his syringe slowly with shaking hands, then unfasten his clothes. I found the place and rubbed the skin as usual, while he sat back in his big chair, in sullen silence. He drew the needle out; his face was awful; he sighed and groaned; I really thought he was going to collapse before my eyes, perhaps to die. I rubbed and rubbed... while the magical change stole slowly over him. His face cleared, his smile came back, he looked younger, his very voice became mellow instead of harsh and rough, his eyes lit up with happiness.

The contrast was astonishing, the effect so rapid. And, for the first time, a longing rose in me: if only I could have some of this bewitching panacea! My troubles would all melt away. I should feel happy. Hunger also would disappear. Was it so terrible and dangerous after all?

The thought went through me like a burning flame.

It was a thought, merely. I had no intention of asking, not even of suggesting, such a thing. I would not have dared to; the old man, I knew, besides, would never, never consent; his obstinacy was beyond any power of mine to modify. None the less, the thought and desire were distinctly in me at that moment. It even crossed my mind that he was selfish, inconsiderate, unkind, not to realize that a little, oh, just a tiny dose, would help me and make me happy too.

The change in him was now complete, he settled back in his deep chair. I heard him asking for the fiddle. I remember the effort it cost me to say something about being ready to try, and how I concealed my sulky face as I crossed the room to open my case. I felt disappointed, rather sore, a trifle angry too; he could so easily open the gates of heaven for me. I fumbled with the case, delaying on purpose, for no music lay in me, and I did not want to play, I felt miserable all over. My back was turned to him. And then I heard my name softly spoken close behind me.

I turned with a start, it was, the doctor’s voice, its peculiar softness struck mc. He was coming slowly across the room, a curious smile on his face, peering at me over the top of his spectacles, the shoulders bent forward a little, his gait slouching, his slippers dragging along the carpet, his white hair tumbling about his forehead, moving slowly at me — and in his raised right hand was a needle poised to strike.

I knew what it meant: he was going to give me morphia without even being asked. A queer revulsion of feeling came over me. He was saying something, but I did not hear the words properly, nor understand them, at any rate; his voice, too, was so low and soft. My brain was in a whirl.

Something in the old man’s appearance frightened me. The idea of the drug now also frightened me. Then, suddenly, a complete recklessness rushed over me.

“Take off your coat,” I heard him say. “And now roll your sleeve up. *So! Nun, jetzt*” — he gazed hard into my eyes— “*aber — nur — ausnakmsweise!”* With slow earnest emphasis he repeated the words: “As an exception — only!”

I watched him choose the place on my arm, I watched the needle go in with its little prick, I watched him slowly press the small piston that injected the poison into my blood. He, for his part, never once moved his eyes from mine till the operation was ended, and my coat was on again. He wore that curious smile the whole time. “You needed it to-night,” he said, “just a little, a very weak dose — *aber — nur — ausnahmsweise!”* He walked over and put the little Majendie phial back upon the shelf. Then he filled his pipe and drew up the operating chair for me to lie on. His eye was constantly on me. The music was forgotten. He wanted to talk.

Whether he had done this thing really to give me a little happiness, or whether his idea was to make me “interesting “for his own sake, I do not know. The fact is that within three minutes of the needle’s prick I was in a state of absolute bliss.

A little warm sensation, accompanied by the faintest possible suggestion of nausea which was probably my own imagination, passed up the spine into the head. Something cleared in my brain, then burst. A sense of thawing followed, the melting away of all the things that had been making me unhappy. I began to glow all over. Hope, happiness and a gorgeous confidence flowed in; benevolence, enthusiasm, charity flooded me to the brim. I wanted to forgive Boyde everything to the end of time, sacrifice my entire life to cure my old German friend; everything base, unworthy, sordid in me, it seemed, had dropped away...

The experience is too well-known to bear another description; it varies, of course, with individuals; varies, too, according to the state of health or sickness, according to whether it is needed or not really needed; and while some feel what I felt, others merely sleep, or, on the contrary, cannot sleep at all. The strength of the dose, naturally, is also an important item. Individual reactions, anyhow, are very different, and with Kay, to whom later the doctor gave it too, three doses produced no effect whatever, while the fourth brought on the cumulative result of all four at once, so that we had to walk him up and down, pouring strong black coffee down his unwilling throat, urging him violently not to sleep — the only thing he wanted to do — or he would, old Huebner assured him — never wake again..... In my case, at any rate, wasted physically as I was, empty of food, under-nourished for many weeks, below par being a mild description of my body, the result seemed a radiance that touched ecstasy. It was, of course, an intensification of consciousness.

Such intensification, I well knew, could be produced by better if more difficult ways, ways that caused no reaction, ways that constructed instead of destroyed and the first pleasure I derived from my experience, the interest that first stirred flashingly and at once through my cleared mind, was the absolute conviction that the teaching and theories in my books were true...

The doctor sat, smiling at me from his chair.

"I would not do this for many," he said in German, "but for you it has no danger. *You* could stop anything. You have real will." After a pause he added: "Now we are happy; we are both happy. Let us dream without thinking. Let us *realize* our happiness!..."

The hours passed while we talked, and my hunger was forgotten. I only wanted one thing to complete my happiness — I wanted Kay, I wanted Boyde, and I wanted one figure from across the sea, my brother. Had these three come to join the circle in that dingy consulting-room, my heaven, it seemed to me, would have been made perfect...

The passing of time was not marked. I played the fiddle, and we chanted the old man's favourite passage: "O just, subtle and mighty opium!"... its full meaning, with the appeal it held, now all explained to me at last. As I laid the instrument down, I saw the white face of the little girl just inside the half-opened door. She caught my eye, ran up to me, and climbed upon my knee.

"Oh, Uncle Diedel," she cried, "how big your eyes are! I do believe Otto has given you some of his Majendie medicine. Are you going to die, too, unless you have it?"

Nothing, it seemed, was hidden from the clear vision that lay in me then; the appalling truth flashed into me on the instant. The little, stunted figure, the old expression in the pallid child-face, the whiteness of the skin, the brilliant eyes, all were due to the same one thing. Did the doctor, her own father, give *her* the needle too?

It was on this occasion, this night of my first experience with morphine, that I found my letters with the stamps torn off. I reached home, as described, about two in the morning, still in a state of bliss, although the effect of the drug was waning a little then. But there was happiness, affection, forgiveness and charity in my heart, I thought. This describes my feelings of the moment certainly. How they were swept away has been already told. So much for the pseudo-exaltation of the drug! And, while on this subject, the part played by the drug in this particular little scrap of history may as well be told briefly at once and done with.

The suggestion that I could "stop anything," combined with my own desire, was potent. There was another way in which the insidious poisoning also worked: I became so "interesting," and entertained the old doctor so successfully, that he found himself able to do without his own dose. The stern injunction *"nur ausnahmsweise* "was forgotten. Without the stuff in my blood I was gloomy, stupid, dull; with it, I became alive and helped him. But the headache and depression, the nausea, the black ultimate dejection of the "day after "could be removed by one thing only. Nothing else had the slightest effect, and only another dose could banish these after-effects — a stronger dose. While the old man was soon able to reduce not only the quantity he took, but the number of injections as well, my own dose, to produce the desired effect, had to be doubled.

Every night for four weeks that needle pricked me. In my next incarnation — if it takes place — I shall still see the German doctor slouching across the room at me with the loaded syringe in his poised hand, and the strange look in his eyes. It seems an ineradicable memory... By the end of the four weeks, I was working again on the newspaper; my visits to the wooden house I cut down to two a week, then one a week. It was a poignant business. He needed me. Desire for the "balm that assuaged," desire to help the friend who was slowly dying, desire to save myself from obvious destruction, these tugged and tore me different ways. For the full story I should have to write another book... Three things saved me, I think — in the order of their value: my books and beliefs; Nature — my Sundays in Bronx Park or the woods of the Palisades in New Jersey; and, lastly, the power of the doctor's own suggestion, *"you* could stop anything!"

When May came, with her wonder and her magic, I was free again, so free that I could play the fiddle and talk to the old man by the hour, and feel even no desire for the drug. Nor has the desire ever returned to me from that day to this. An experiment with haschisch, a good deal later, an account of which I wrote for my paper at the time, had no "desire "in it. Foolish and dangerous though the experiment was, of course, the *cannabis indica* was not taken for indulgence, nor to bring a false temporary happiness into a life I loathed. I did it to earn a little extra money; Kay did it with me; three times in all we took it. Some of the effects I tried to describe years later in the first story of a book, "John Silence."

My decision, with the steps I had taken, to arrest Boyde, I told to the doctor on the afternoon following the discovery of his treachery with my letters. He approved. This time even his Jekyll personality approved.

"You'll never catch him though," he growled. "He's too clever for you. He'll hear about the warrant and be out of the State in a day, if not out of the country. In Canada they can't touch him. Besides, the police won't stir a finger. Oh, you'll never catch him."

I felt otherwise, however, I meant to catch him, while at the same time I did not want to. The horrible man-hunt began that very night.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SEARCH FOR Boyde was a prolonged nightmare: I used several times already, this phrase alone describes it. It lasted over a fortnight. Every night, from nine o'clock till two, or even later in the morning, it continued. The old doctor almost invariably came with me. It was mid-winter and bitter cold, I still had no overcoat, a thin summer vest being my only underwear. The disreputable haunts we searched were heated to at least 70° F., whereas the street air was commonly not far from zero, with biting winds or icy moisture that cut like a knife. It must have been the drug that saved me from pneumonia, for I was in and out of a dozen haunts each night..... I was a prey to contrary and alternating emotions — the desire to let the fellow go free, the conviction that it was my duty to save him from himself, to save others from him as well. The distress, unhappiness and doubt I experienced made that prolonged man-hunt indeed a nightmare.

Plans were laid with care and knowledge. Boyde, we argued, had money, or he would have returned to East 19th Street. Had he enough to bribe the police, or to go to Canada? We decided that his contempt for me would outweigh any fear he felt that I might take action. The "Night Owls" were now away on tour; he would hardly go after Pauline M — . We concluded he was "doing the town," as it was called, and was not very far from East 19th Street. With his outstanding figure and appearance, it ought not to be difficult to find some trace of him in the disreputable places. The "Tenderloin" — a region about Broadway and 30th Street, so packed with illegal "joints" that their tribute to the police was the richest and juiciest of the whole city — was sure to be his hunting ground. To the Tenderloin haunts, accordingly, we went that first night of the chase.

As a reporter I knew the various places well already, and felt quite equal to making my search alone, but the doctor, though in no condition to traipse about the icy street after dark, insisted on accompanying me. Nothing I said could prevent him coming. Truth to tell, I was not sorry to have him with me — in some of the saloons; besides which I had no money, and something — lager beer cost only five cents a glass — had to be ordered in each place. We hurried from one saloon to another, looking in at various gambling hells, opium joints, dancing places and music halls of the poorer kind where men and women met on easy terms, and we stayed at each one just long enough to make inquiries, and to benefit by the warmth and comfort, without being pestered by the habitual frequenters.

I had in my possession a small photograph of Boyde; it was on tin, showing the head and shoulders; it had been taken one day earlier in our acquaintance when we went together to a Dime Museum in 14th Street, It now proved very useful. It showed his full face, big eyes, drooping moustaches and eyeglass.

The absence of the moustache altered him a great deal, but the eyeglass and the six feet two inches in height counterbalanced this.

At every "joint" I produced this photograph, asking the attendants, bartenders, and any women I judged to be frequenters of the place, whether they had seen the original recently, or anyone like him. Some laughed and said they had, others said the opposite, but the majority refused to say anything, showed insolently their suspicion of me and my purpose, and, more than once, made it advisable for us to get out before we were put out. At such places customers are chary about information of each other. Among the women, however, were some who knew clearly who it was we "wanted," though saying nothing useful, and soon the doctor decided it was a mistake to show the photograph too much, for Boyde would be warned by these women, while many, fearful that they themselves were "wanted," would merely lie in self protection, and set us upon false trails. Any woman who had not paid her weekly blackmail money to the ward man was in danger, and few, to judge by their appearance, were not involved in robbery, knock-out drops, or the ubiquitous 'a badger-game." Yet these, I knew, were the places Boyde would feel at home in. My being a newspaper man proved of value to us more than once, at any rate. My thoughts, as we sat in a curtained corner of some "hell," whose overheated atmosphere of smoke, scent, alcohol and dope was thick enough to cut with a knife, watching, waiting, listening, must be imagined. I watched every arrival. The tension on nerves already overstrained was almost unbearable. A habit of the doctor's intensified this strain. He did not, I think, remember Boyde very well, and was constantly imagining that he saw him. The street door would open; he would nudge me and whisper *"Sehen Sie, da kommt der Kerl nun* *endlich...*” He pointed, my heart leapt into my mouth; nothing could induce me to arrest him, it seemed, and my relief on seeing it was a stranger was always genuine — at the moment.

One night — or early morning, rather — the doctor, who had been silent for a long time, turned to me with a grey, exhausted face. The morphine was beginning to fail him, and he must inject another dose. This happened several times... Behind a curtain, or in a place aside where we were not even alone, he opened his clothes, found a clear space of skin, and applied the needle, while I rubbed the spot with my finger for about a minute to prevent a blister forming. No one, except perhaps a very drunken man or woman occasionally, paid the smallest attention to the operation; to them it was evidently a familiar and commonplace occurrence.....”You must not stay up any longer,” he would say another time, after a sudden examination of my face. “You look dreadful. Come, we will go home.”

I was only too glad to be marched off. We paced the icy streets arm in arm, numerous people still about on various errands, tramcars and elevated trains still roaring, saloons and joints blazing with light, wide open till dawn, while the old man, rejuvenated and stimulated by the drug, discoursed eloquently the whole way, I dragging by his side, silent, depressed, weary with pains that seemed more poignant then than hunger or mere physical fatigue.

The next night it would be the same, and the one after that, and the next one after that too€” the search continued. It wore me down. I saw the eyeglass staring furtively at me from behind every corner, even in the daytime. His footstep sounded behind me often. At night I locked my door, for fear he might steal back into the room... Once or twice I reported to headquarters that I was on the trail, but the detective had lost interest in the case; a conviction was doubtful, anyhow: he was not “going to sit around catching flies”; only the fact that I was a reporter on the *Sun* made him pause. “Telephone when you get him,” he said, “and I’ll come up and do the rest.” Much fresh information about Boyde had also come my way; he had even stolen the vases from a Church communion table — though he denied this in his confession later — and pawned them. In every direction, and this he did not deny, he had borrowed money in my name, giving me the worst possible character while doing so. Probably indeed, I never lived down *all* he said about me...

It was a bitter, and apparently, an endless search. From the West Side joints, we visited the East Side haunts of vice and dissipation. I now knew Boyde too well to think he would "fly high"; his tastes were of the lowest. The ache it all gave me I can never describe...

We went from place to place as hour after hour passed. We found his trail, and each time we found it my heart failed me. A woman, gorgeously painted, showing her silk stockings above the knee, her atmosphere reeking of bad scent and drink, came sidling up, murmuring this and that... The Doctor's eye was on me, though he said no word, made no single gesture... The tin-type photograph was produced... "Yep, I seen dat fellar," grinned the woman in her "tough" bowery talk they all affected in the Tenderloin. "A high flier raining in London, too" — a gibe at the "English" habit of turning up one's trousers — with a stream of local slang, oaths, filthy hints and repeated demands to "put 'em up," meaning drinks. Then a whispered growl from the old German *"Nichts!... sie luegt... los mil ihr!"* A further stream of lurid insults. and she was gone, while another sidled up a little later. They all knew German, these women. Was not New York the third biggest German city, qua population, in the Empire? Few, as a matter of fact, were American. Barring the mulattos and quadroon girls, to say nothing of the negresses, the majority were French, Hungarian, Spanish, Italian, Dutch or some polyglot mixture not even the British Museum could define...

Never did the old German's kindness prove itself as in these hideous night-watches. Apart from all questions of trouble and expense, he was obliged to take extra doses of morphine to meet the charge upon his system, at a time, too, when he was struggling to reduce the quantity. Compared to what he did, even the fact that he gave the poison to others, possibly to his own child among them, seemed negligible. Not only did he accompany me during the chase, spending hours in low, suffocating dens of beastliness, walking the wind-swept streets in midwinter, suffering insults and acute discomfort, but also he bestowed practical care and kindness on me during the day, providing me with food (I was in no state even to pose in the studios at the time), and even suggesting that I should fit up a bed in his workshop where he kept the lathe and made the chessmen. All this, too, from an old man, himself in deep misery, and on the losing side of a fight far more terrible than I ever knew or imagined, a fight, he then realized already, was to end before very long in failure, which meant death. The strange, broken old being, twisted and distorted though his nervous system was by a drug, showed — to me, at any rate — that rare thing which experience of life proves greater than intellect, than success, than power, or brilliance may achieve — a heart. If reincarnation, with its karmic law, be true, either he owed me a heavy debt from some forgotten past, or I owe to him a debt some future life will enable, and enforce me, to repay.

It was at the end of the first ten days that, quite by chance, we stumbled upon the trail of Boyde. He had been seen in a "swell dive" on the West Side — with a woman. He was spending money like water. How had he come by it? Whom had he swindled now? We were in the East Side, following a false clue, when this information was given to us — under conditions impossible to describe — and we hurried across to the neighbourhood indicated. An hour later we were only a short thirty minutes behind his glittering path. He was visiting expensive joints. Champagne flowed. The woman wore furs. He wore a light coloured box-cloth overcoat. Both were "high fliers." And he was drinking hard.

The information, I confess, had the effect of stiffening me. It was impossible not to wonder, as we sat in the cross-town tram of East 23rd Street, whether in his gay career he gave a single thought to the room in East 19th Street, where he shared my bed, wore my suit, ate my food, such as it was, and where he had left me ill, alone and starving. The old doctor was grim and silent, but a repressed fury, I could see, bit into him. Was there, perhaps, vengeance, in the old, crumpled man?" No weakness, remember," he growled from time to time. "I hold him, while you telephone to Mulberry Street. *Pflicht, pflicht!* It is your duty to — to everybody...!"

The trail led us to Mouquin's, where he had undoubtedly been shortly before, then on to a place in 34th Street and there we lost it hopelessly. It was not a false alarm, but the trail ran up a tree and vanished. He had gone home with the woman, but who she was or where she lived, not even the ward man — whom I knew by chance, and, equally by chance, met at the door — could tell us. I telephoned to headquarters to warn Detective Lawler to be in readiness. Lawler was out on a "big story "elsewhere, but another man would come up with the warrant the moment I sent word. I had, however, no occasion to telephone again that night, nor even the next night, though we must evidently have been within an ace of catching him. It was like searching for a needle in a haystack, or for a rabbit in a warren. The neighbourhood, this joint in particular, was alive with similar characters; all the women wore furs; all the men were tall, many of them had “glass-eyes,” the majority seemed English with “their trousers turned up.” We sat for hours in one den after another, but we caught no further indication of the trail. It had vanished into thin air. And after these two exciting and exhausting nights, the old doctor collapsed; he could do no more; he told me he felt unequal to the strain and could not accompany me even one more time. The old man was done.

The day after the search stopped temporarily, Kay arrived in the city, to my great delight. It was a keen relief to have him back. The tour had been a failure, and the company had become stranded in Port Hope, Ontario. Salaries were never paid; he had received hotel board, railway ticket, laundry, but rarely any cash. What luggage he possessed was in the Port Hope hotel, held in lieu of payment. It remained there.

We talked things over, and the news about Boyde, heard now for the first time in detail, shocked him. There was no doubt or hesitation in Kay’s mind. “Of course you must arrest him; we’ll go out to-night and look.” We did so, but with no result. Kay had the remains of a borrowed $10, we dined at Krisch’s; he had cigarettes, too... We passed a happy evening, coming home early from the chase. Like myself, he had no overcoat, but the money did not reach to getting it from Ikey where Boyde had pawned it. We sat indoors, and talked...

Only a short three months before we had sat talking round a camp-fire on our island. It seemed incredible. We discussed my plan for settling in the woods, to which he was very favourably inclined. Meanwhile, he explained, his Company was preparing another tour with better plays and better cast. They hoped to start out after Christmas, now only a week away. The word “Christmas “made us laugh. I still had the Christmas menu of our Hub dinner, and we pinned it upon the wall. It might suggest something to the long-suffering Mrs. Bernstein, Kay thought.

But instead we ate our oatmeal and dried apples...

CHAPTER XXIII

IT WAS ON the Tuesday before Christmas that I caught Boyde; the day also before the White Star steamers sailed. The cold was Arctic, a biting east wind swept the streets. There was no sun. If ever there was a Black Tuesday for me it was that 18th of December, 1892.

Towards evening, the doctor, I knew would expect me as usual; there was nothing to prevent my going; and yet each time the thought cropped up automatically in my mind I was aware of a vague, indeterminate feeling that somehow or other I should not go. This dim feeling also was automatic. There was nothing I knew of to induce, much less to support it. I did not mention it to Kay. I could not understand whence it came nor what caused it, but it did not leave me, it kept tugging at my nerves. "You're not going to the doctor's to-night," it said, "you're going elsewhere."

After dark this odd feeling became more and more insistent, and thief all at once it connected itself with Boyde. Quite suddenly this happened. I had not been thinking of Boyde at the moment; now, abruptly, up cropped his name and personality. I was to go out and catch him.

My mind resisted this idea. Several things, besides, were against it. In the first place, we had voluntarily given up the hunt and I was resigned to his escape; secondly and thirdly, I dreaded being out in the bitter cold, and I badly needed the "assuaging balm" of old Huebner's needle. If the first two were negative inhibitions, the third was decidedly positive. All three had to be conquered if I was to obey the strange prompting which whispered, and kept on whispering: "Go out and look. You'll find him."

There was, in addition, the usual minor conflict to which I had grown quite accustomed, the conflict between my desire to be relieved of an unpleasant "duty," yet the conviction that it was a duty I had no right to shirk. In spite of my resistance, at any rate, the prompting strengthened; as night fell I grew more and more restless and uneasy; until at last the touch of inevitability that lay behind it all declared itself — and the breaking point was reached.

I could resist no longer; it was impossible to contain myself. I sprang out of my chair and told Kay I was going out to catch Boyde.

“Don’t go,” he said. “Waste of time. He’s skipped long ago — been warned.” He muttered something more about the intense cold. “You’ll kill yourself.”

But the impulsion I felt was irresistible. It was as though some inner power drove and guided me. As a matter of fact, I went straight to the exact spot where, among the teeming millions of the great city, Boyde was. Fifteen minutes earlier or later, I should have missed him. Also, but for a chance hesitation later — lasting sixty seconds at most — he would have seen me and escaped. The calculation, whether due to intelligence or to coincidence, was amazingly precise. I left our room at nine o’clock; at a quarter to ten I stood face to face with Boyde.

The wind was driving a fine dry dust of snow before it, and all who could remained indoors. The streets were deserted; despite the nearness of Christmas, signs of bustle and the usual holiday crowd were absent. I walked very quickly to keep warm, an odd subconscious excitement in me. I seemed to know exactly where I was going, though, had anybody asked me, I could not have told them. Up 4th Avenue to 23rd Street, then west across Broadway, I passed 6th and 7th Avenues, with only one pause of a moment. At the corner of 7th Avenue I hesitated, uncertain whether to turn north, or to continue west towards 8th Avenue. A policeman was standing outside a saloon side-door, a man I had known in the Tombs police court; an Irishman, of course. I recognized him, he was friendly to me because I had used his name in a story; he remembered me now. I produced the tin-type photograph. He inspected it under the nearest electric light.

“Yep,” he said, “I seen that feller only a few minutes back — half an hour maybe; only he’s lifted his mustache.”

“Shaved his moustache — yes?”

“That’s what I said,” as he handed back the tintype. “Got a story?” he inquired the same instant. “Anything big doing?”

“Which way did he go?”

"Up-town," said the policeman, jerking his thumb in the direction north. "Up 8th Avenoo. And he was travellin' with a partner, a big feller, same size as yerself, I guess." He moved off to show he had no more to say. Any story that might result would be out of his beat. There was nothing in it for him. His interest vanished. I hurried on to the corner of 8th Avenue, the edge of a bad neighbourhood leading down through the negro quarter towards the haunts of the river-front, and there I paused again for a second or two.

I was still in 23rd Street, but I now turned up the Avenue. It was practically deserted, the street cars empty, few people on the pavements. The side-streets crossed it at right angles, poorly lit, running right and left into a world of shadows, but at almost every corner stood a brilliant saloon whose windows and glass doors poured out great shafts of light. Sometimes there were four saloons, one at each corner, and the blaze was dazzling. I passed 24th, 25th, 26th and 27th streets. There were little flurries of dry snow; I saw no one, nothing but empty silent sidewalks swept by the icy wind.

At 28th Street there were four saloons, one at each corner, and the blaze of light had a warm, enticing look. Through the blurred windows of the one nearest to me, the heads of the packed crowd inside as they lined up to the bar were just visible, and while I stood a moment, shivering in the icy wind, the comforting idea of a hot whisky came to me. For the wind cut like glass and neither my excitement nor the exercise had warmed me. I hesitated, standing against a huge electric light pole, in whose black shadow I was quite invisible. A hot whisky, I reflected, in this neighbourhood would cost 20 or 25 cents; I had 30 cents in my pocket; I needed the stimulant; I was very weak; I felt cold to the bone. But 25 cents was a lot of money, I might want a car-fare home besides and I was still hesitating when two tall figures emerged suddenly out of the dark side-street into the flood of light, swung sharp round the corner, and passed through the glass doors into the saloon. The figures were two men, and the first of them was Boyde.

For a second my heart seemed to stop, then began immediately racing and beating violently. In that brilliant light I saw every detail sharply, Boyde and his companion, both mercilessly visible. The man I wanted wore a big horsy overcoat of light-coloured box-cloth with large white buttons, the velvet collar turned up about his ears. The other man I did not know; he was taller than Boyde and wore no overcoat; he was the "partner travellin' with him "mentioned by the policeman. His gait was unsteady, he reeled a little.

The clamour of noisy voices blared out a moment into the street before the doors swung to again, and I stood quite still for an appreciable time, blotted out of sight in my black shadow. Had I not hesitated a moment to reflect about that hot whisky I should have passed, my figure full in the blaze, just in front of the two men, who would have waited in the dark side-street till I was safely out of sight.

The state of my nerves, I suppose, was pretty bad, and the lack of my customary evening dose accentuated it. I know, anyhow, that at first I realized one thing only — that I could never have the heart to arrest the fellow. This quickly passed, however; the racing of my blood passed too; determination grew fixed; I decided to act at once. But should I go in, or should I wait till they came out again? If I went in there would probably be a fight; Boyde's hulking companion would certainly take his side; the lightest blow in my weak state and I should be down and out. On the other hand, there was a side door, there were several side doors, and the couple might easily slip out, for I could not watch all the doors at once.

I decided to go in. And the moment the decision was taken, complete calmness came over me, so that I felt myself merely an instrument of fate. It was horrible, but it had to be. Boyde was to get the punishment he deserved. I could not fail.

The way the little scene was stage-managed seemed curious to me when it was all over, for as I moved out into the light, a couple of policemen came across the broad avenue behind and looked inquisitively at what must have seemed my queer behaviour. I immediately crossed to meet them, while never taking my eye off the swing-doors. A man who had just gone into that saloon, I told them, was to be arrested.

“That so?” they asked with a grin, thinking me drunk, of course. “And what's he done to get all that?”

I told them I was a reporter on the *Sun,* that I was the complainant in the case, and that Detective Lawler of the 9th District had the warrant at headquarters. They could telephone to him if they liked. They listened, but they would not do anything. *I* could telephone to Lawler myself; *they* weren't going to act without a warrant. They finally agreed to wait outside and “see fair play,” if I would go in and fetch “the guy” out into the street.

"We'll stop any trouble," they said, "and take him to the station if *you* make a complaint." I agreed to this and walked in through the swing-doors.

The saloon was crowded, the heat wonderful, the bars thronged with men in all stages of intoxication; bartenders in white jackets flew to and fro; business was booming, and at the least sign of a row, everybody, more or less, would have joined in. This general impression, however, was only in the background of my mind. What filled it was the fact that Boyde was looking at me, staring straight into my eyes, but in the mirror. The instant the doors swung to I had caught his reflection in the long glass behind the bar. Across this bar, a little space on either side of him, he was leaning on both elbows, his face resting in one hand. The eye-glass — it was asking for trouble to wear it in such a place — had been discarded. He was alone. His back, of course, was towards me.

For a few seconds we stared at one another in this way, and then, as I walked down the long room, pushing between the noisy crowd, he slowly turned. I reached him. A faint smile appeared on his face. He evidently did not know quite what to do, but a hand began to move towards me. He thought, it seemed, I was going to shake hands, whereas I thought he was probably going to hit me. Instead my hand went to his shoulder.

"Boyde," I said, keeping my voice low, "I want you. You're going to be — arrested."

The smile died out, and an awful looked rushed into his eyes. His face turned the colour of chalk. At first I felt sure he was going to land me a blow in the face, but the abrupt movement of his body was merely that he tried to steady himself against the bar, for I saw his hand grip the rail and cling to it. The same second his features began to work.

"I've got to arrest you," I repeated. "It's Karma. You had better come quietly."

"Karma "he repeated in a dazed way and stared.

He was bewildered, incredulous still.

The same second, however, he grasped that it was serious, my face and voice and manner doubtless warned him. This, at last, was real; he suddenly knew it. The expression of appeal poured up instantly into his eyes, those big, innocent, blue eyes where I had so often seen it before. Only now there was no moustache, and the brutal cunning mouth was bare. He began to speak at once, keeping his voice low, for several people were already interested in us. He used his softest and most pleading tone. With that, too, I was thoroughly familiar.

“Blackwood — for God’s sake let me go. I’m off to England to-morrow on a White Star boat. I’m working my passage over. For the love of God — for my mother’s sake!”

I cut him short. The falseness, the cowardice, the treachery all working in his face at once, sickened me. At the same time an aching pity rose. I felt miserable.

“You must come out with me. At once.”

He turned quickly and looked about him, his eyes taking in everything. Some men beside us had heard our talk and were ready to interfere. “What’s your trouble? “one of them asked thickly. I realized we must get away at once, out into the street, though the scene had barely lasted two minutes yet.

“There’s a policeman waiting outside,” I went on. “You’d better come quietly. A row won’t help you.” But I said it louder than I thought, for several heads turned towards the swing-doors. The effect on Boyde, however, was hardly what I expected, and seemed strange. He wilted suddenly. I believe all thought of resistance or escape went out of him when he heard the word “police.” His jaw dropped, there was suddenly no expression in his eyes at all. A complete blankness came into his features. It was horrible. He’s got no soul, I thought. He merely stared at me.

“Whose is that overcoat?” I asked, feeling sure it was not his own. I already had him by the arm.

“Roper’s,” he said quietly, his voice gone quite dead. “Here he is.” His face was still like a ghost’s. It was blank as stone.

I had quite forgotten the companion, but at that same moment I saw Roper hovering up beside me. His attitude was threatening, he was three-parts drunk; a glance showed me he was an Englishman, and obviously, by birth, a gentleman.

“Roper, if you want your coat, you’d better take it. Boyde is under arrest.”

“Arrest be damned! “Roper cried in a loud voice that everybody heard. There was already a crowd about us, but this increased it. Roper was looking me over. He glared with anger. “You’re that cad Blackwood, I suppose, are you? I’ve heard about you. I know your whole damned rotten story and the way you’ve treated Boyde. But Boyde’s a friend of mine. No one can do anything to him while *I’m* here...!”

He roared and shouted in that crowded bar-room, while the whole place looked on and listened, ready to interfere at the first sign of “a fuss.” A blow, a little push even, would have laid me out, and in the general scuffle or free fight that was bound to follow, Boyde could have got clear away — but neither he nor Roper thought of this apparently. Roper went on pouring out his drunken abuse, lurching forward but never actually touching me, while Boyde stood perfectly still and listened in silence. He made no attempt to shake off my hand even. I suddenly then leaned over and spoke into his ear:

“If you come quietly at once it’s only petit larceny — stealing the money. Otherwise it’s forgery.”

It acted like magic. An expression darted back into his face. He turned, told Roper to shut up, said something to the crowd about its being only a little misunderstanding, and walked without another word towards the doors.

I walked beside him, the men made a way; a few seconds later we were in the street. Roper, who had waited to finish his drink, and was puzzled besides by the quick manoeuvre, lurched at some distance after us. The two policemen, who had watched the scene through the windows, stood waiting. Boyde swayed against me when he saw them. I marched him up to the nearest one. “I make a charge of larceny against this man, and the warrant is at Mulberry Street with Detective Lawler. I am the complainant.” They told him he was under arrest, and we began our horrible little procession to the station in West 21st Street.

Boyde was between the two policemen, I was next to the outside one, on the kerb. Roper came reeling in the rear, shouting abuse and threats into my face. The next time I saw Roper was in the court of General Sessions, weeks later, when Boyde was brought up for trial. By that time he had learned the truth; he came up and apologized. Boyde, he told me, had swindled him even more completely than he had swindled me.

The search in the station made me sick at heart; every pocket was turned out; there was 80 dollars in cash; the sergeant used filthy language. Boyde was taken down to a cell, and I, as a newspaper reporter, was allowed to go down with him. I stayed for two hours, talking through the bars.

It was two in the morning when the sergeant turned me out after a dreadful conversation, and when I reached home, to find Kay sitting up anxiously still, I was too exhausted, from cold, excitement and hunger, to tell him more than a bare outline of it all. I had to appear at eight o’clock next morning and make my formal charge against Boyde, in the Tombs Police Court — the Tombs, of all places! — and with that thought in my mind I fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIV

BOYDE CAME UP with the first batch of prisoners. The portentous shadow of the Tombs prison, with its forbidding architecture, hung over the whole scene.

My first sight of him was sitting among the rows of prisoners, waiting to be called. He looked ill and broken, he made a pleading sign to me. As a reporter I had the right to interview anybody and everybody, and I made my way along the serried wooden benches. Lawler sat next him, looking very pleased to have secured his prisoner, and a good story into the bargain, without any trouble to himself; but when I tried to shake hands with Boyde, I found to my horror that he was handcuffed.

“Say, boss, be sure and git me name spelled right, and tell the reporters that *I* effected the arrest,” was the first thing that Lawler said, using the phrase the detectives always used.

By promising the man all he wanted and more besides, I managed to get us all three into a corner where we could talk without everybody else hearing; also I got the handcuffs taken off, for they were quite unnecessary inside the building. The first thing Boyde said was to beg for a drink; he had taken a lot the night before, his throat was parched, his nerves were bad. At the moment this was quite impossible, but I got one for him in the reporters’ room after his case had been called. The second thing he said was to beg me to “keep it out of the papers,” though this, of course, lay quite beyond my powers. Apart from this he said very little except to repeat and repeat that he was repentant, and to beg me to withdraw the charge, though this was now impossible, the matter being out of my hands. Also, he wondered what the sentence would be — he meant to plead guilty — and implored me to leave out the forgery. He was very badly frightened.

That early morning hour in the stinking atmosphere of the over-heated police court was too ghastly ever to be forgotten, but there were particular moments when pain and pity, to say nothing of other strangely mixed emotions, stabbed me with peculiar ferocity. When the reporters flocked round him like vultures after prey was one of these; another was when

Boyde stood in front of the Tammany magistrate, Ryan by name, and pleaded guilty. A mistake, though not actually wrong, had crept into the charge sheet. In my excitement of the night before the amount stolen had been entered as $32, and though this was the truth, I had meant to make it only $25. I was unintentionally to blame for this — it was now Grand Larceny instead of Petit Larceny. A magistrate could only deal with the lesser offence, and Boyde therefore was held for trial in General Sessions, instead of being sentenced then and there. The look he gave me as Ryan spoke the words was like a knife. He believed I had done this purposely. A third unforgettable moment was when he was being roughly pushed downstairs on his way to a cell in the Tombs: he looked back forlornly over his shoulder at me.

In the reporters' room it was decided to print the "Boyde story." I knew all the men; Acton Davies was there for the *Evening Sun,* specially sent down by McCloy. The reporters dragged and tore at me. I realized what "interviewed" victims felt when they wished to hide everything away inside themselves. Yet the facts had to be told; it was best I should give them accurately, if as briefly, as leniently, as possible. The sight of all those vultures (of whom, incidentally, I was one) scribbling down busily the details of my intimate life with Boyde, to be hawked later in the streets as news, was likewise a picture not easily forgotten.

Before the ordeal was over, Lawler returned from the cell. He insisted, with a wink at me, that he had made the arrest; the credit of the chase he also claimed; he had, too, additional facts about Boyde's past criminal career of which I was quite ignorant, supplied by records at headquarters. Lawler intended to get all the advertisement for himself he could. I let his lying pass. On the whole it seemed best to let him be responsible for the arrest; it made the story more commonplace, and, luckily, so far, I had not described this scene.

An hour later I was talking with Boyde between the bars of his cell in the Tombs prison, while, two hours later, every evening paper in New York had a column or a column and a half about us printed on its front page. There were scare headlines of atrocious sort. There were posters, too, showing our names in big letters. News that day happened to be scarce, and the Boyde story was "good stuff "apparently. The talk with him in the cell was one of many; he was there six weeks before the trial came on.

The papers finished him; the case was too notorious for him ever to swindle again unless he changed his name. They scarified him, they left out no detail, they hunted up a thousand new ones, he had “cut a wide swath “(sic) all over New York State, as one of them printed. I had not mentioned Pauline M — or the pastor’s daughter, yet both were included. To see my own name in print for the first time, the names of my parents, and of half the peerage as well, was bad enough; to find myself classed with bad company generally, with crooks and rogues, with shady actresses, with criminals, was decidedly unpleasant. Paragraphs my brother wrote to me appeared in London papers too. Copies of the New York ones were sent to my father. “Too foxy for Algernon “was a headline he read out to my brother in his library. Boyde had even written to him, signing himself “your cousin,” to ask for money for “your poor son,” but had received no reply. There is no need now to mention names, but any distinguished connexion either of us possessed appeared in the headlines or the article itself. “Nephew of an earl held in $1,000 bail,”

“Cousin of Lord X,”

“Scion of British Aristocracy a Sneak-thief,” were some of the descriptions. “Son of a duchess in the Soup,” was another. The *Staatszeitung* had a phrase which threw a momentary light on an aspect of lower life in the city, when Freytag, the German reporter who had taught me how to write a court story, described me as “Sohn einer *sogennanten* Herzogin.” He only laughed when I spoke to him about it. “How should *I* know,” he said sceptically...

Boyde came up in due course before Recorder Smythe in general sessions, the most severe and most dreaded of all the judges. He still wore my thick suit, he wore also a pair of Harding Davis’s boots, and, I believe, something else of Sothern’s. His sentence was two years in the Penitentiary on Blackwell Island. A group of other people he had swindled, including “Artist Palmer,” were in court; so was an assistant of Ikey’s, with *all* our pawned articles. Every single thing, whether stolen goods or not, was returned to me. The doctor and Kay were also there. Some of his letters are a human document:

Tombs, December, 1892.

Oh, Blackwood, what black treachery I returned you for your many kindnesses, base lying for all your straightforward dealing with me! You freely forgave me what ninety-nine men out of every hundred would, if not imprisoned me for, certainly never have forgiven me. I returned evil for good, and you still bore with me. You said — I shall never forget it, for it was when you found the stamp torn off your letter — and even at that moment I had money in my pocket belonging to you, just as I had when you shared your last 50 cent, piece that night at Krisches, for I must say this, though I could tear myself to pieces when I think of it — You said, 'B. how you must hate me!'

No, Blackwood, it seems a paradox, but I could not hate you if I tried to. I don't say this because I am in prison, or with any desire to flatter. I am sincere in everything I say and it comes from my heart. You have every reason to think from my former actions that I am not sincere above reward, but I am.

Oh, the old, but nevertheless true remark, TOO LATE! It comes home to me with striking and horrible vividness. Too Late! I have forfeited the respect of every good and honest man, have disgraced my English name and my family. But, let me go. Five years of service will be the best thing for me.

I can enlist under another name and may perhaps get a commission in time. Give me the chance of redeeming myself, please.

If ever any man was sincerely repentant for the past I am that man. Arthur B.

Please excuse mistakes and alterations. I am so fearfully shaky.

The Tombs City Prison, Centre Street, N.Y.

Please read through before destroying it.

I have begged another sheet of paper and stamp in order to make one final appeal.

Will you not come down again on receipt of this? Please do, for God's sake. No visitors are allowed on New Year's Day, or on Sunday. New Year's Day! What a new year's day for me! Let me begin it afresh. I have a favour to ask you which I must ask you verbally; I cannot put it on paper. It is getting dark; so once more I ask you, I implore you, to have mercy on me for my mother's sake. For her sake spare

Arthur B.

Visiting hours 10-2. I am speaking the truth and nothing but the truth when I say that I am sincerely sorry for all that I have done and implore your pardon. This is not an insincere expression, but one from my heart. Come down again, please, even to speak to me, for you don't know the mental agony I am suffering.

A. — B.

Tombs City Prison, New Year's Day.

It was more than kind of you to come all the way down here and then after all not be able to see me; not much loss to you, it is true, but a bitter disappointment to me. Palmer came down and talked very kindly to me and instilled a little hope in me. But this is a wretched New Year's Day.

I was talking to an old convict this morning, a man who in his life has been about sixteen years in jail, and he said that if he had only been let off in the first instance with a few days in here, he would have been a different man to-day, but after serving one term he became reckless and has now become a notorious thief. As I said to you, think of me after 20 years' penal servitude.

Blackwood, won't you and Palmer stay your hands once more? I will leave the country, and if ever I should return you could always have me arrested. I will never trouble you again. Let me make a fresh start once more.

Should you decide not to press the charge you can go to the District Attorney's Office and inform them of the fact.

I once more *implore* you and Palmer to have pity on me, and please come and see me! May I wish you and Palmer a bright and happy New Year, brighter and happier than the past one. Arthur B.

Many thanks for the paper and envelopes. Bless you!

The Tombs.

Very many thanks for your visit yesterday. It is the only pleasure I have. I believe what you say is true — that I am reaping the result of evil done in the past and that only the real way to atone is to meet it squarely and accept my punishment without grumbling. If Karma is true, it is just, and I shall get what I deserve, and not an iota more.

I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for being so lenient to me and even writing to the District Attorney on my behalf.

I am truly grateful, Blackwood. Please do not think I am not sorry for what I have done, or that I am not really penitent, for I am indeed.

It was bitterly cold last night and I was awfully glad to have my overcoat, and blessed you for sending it. I know you got it cut of pawn for me, and that is another kindness.

Again, for the last time probably, I thank you for your many acts of kindness, I bitterly regret and earnestly repent for the manner I treated you, returning evil for good, and I shall think much of you when serving my time under a blazing sun or in my cramped and chilly cell.....Arthur B.

Tombs Prison.

I have just been to the Court House and pleaded guilty. My sentence is remanded till Friday week. If I could only get that lawyer I might get the sentence reduced a little. But Judge Smythe is a very hard man. My small hopes were dashed away on hearing that you had been subpoenaed to go before the Grand Jury this morning.

Now all hope is gone; only blank, blank despair; no hope, all is dark. I wish I could die — much rather that than suffer this awful remorse. Do you know

I sometimes think I am going mad? When I come out I shall be too old for the army, and what else can a felon, a criminal, a convict do? Is crime the only refuge? Shall I sink lower and lower? Will what small sense of decency and honour I have left be utterly destroyed and made callous by propinquity with other criminals?

What a frightful nightmare to conjure up! Nightmare? No, it is only too true; it is stern, inexorable reality. Thank you for sending the clothes. I had no change before. Bless you! A. B.

Tombs City Prison.

What follows I wish to write voluntarily. It is a Confession and relieves me — I certainly wish to convey to you the fact of my sincere and deep sorrow tor the shameful manner I treated you and abused your confidence and kindness. I fear that one of my letters cannot have reached you, as I am sure I wrote at length on this subject. You mistake and misjudge me when you think it is only fear that prompts me to write as I do. My eyes are opened to the enormity of my past crimes, opened by thinking and seeing things in the proper light. I have been alone with my thought for days now, and God knows how many more days will pass over my head before I again face the world. It will relieve me to give you a full confession of my treachery, for I believe there is no real repentance without real confession.

To begin with the editor. I never had a chance of the position at Rockaway, although the editor once said casually that he would try and find me some similar position. I lied to you all through in that, for I wished you to think I had prospects of paying work in view. When you used to come down with me to Franklin Street (Harper's) I waited about upstairs and looked at books, etc., and then came down and concocted some lies about what I had said and done. I once borrowed $15 from him (Richard Harding Davis, Editor "Harper's Weekly") and said they were for you. My dealings with Sothern were that he from time to time lent me money, some $50 in all, and gave me a position at ten dollars a week. I told him when borrowing that the money was for your doctor, and when borrowing more I said you had wasted it in drink. I asked him to cash several of the cheques I forged, but he would never do this. I was paid up in full by the manager and also for the extra performances of the "Disreputable Mr. Reagen." I little thought when I was playing Merivale's part that I should act it true to life. With Mr.

Beattie I lied all through. He never had any money of mine or knew my mother or ever heard from her. He never bailed me out, and I never used to see him as I said I did. You and Palmer thought that I spent some time in jail this summer, but I would rather not say anything in writing about that. My dealings with Palmer were that I borrowed money from him and said it was for you. I also went to your banker acquaintance and borrowed twenty-five dollars for a specialist, saying it was at your request. I did pawn the overcoat you gave me to post to Kay, and that time you forgave me for stealing your money I had in my pocket the proceeds of three stories of yours I had given the Sun, and they had paid for. But, even in the face of your forgiveness, I wanted this money so much for my indulgences that I could not face the privation of handing it over to you. I lied in the face of your kindness and generosity, and when you even needed food I was going about drinking and womanizing and spending freely. When my funds were exhausted I came back to you, for I knew you would always forgive me. It is awful. No wonder you want to see me go to prison. I am as wicked a man as ever lived, I believe. I wonder what caused me to tell such lies. Am I a natural born liar? It seems like it. You wrong me in one thing — in thinking my sorrow is sham and prompted by fear and the hope of getting off. I cannot find words to express my contrition. Believe me, I would do anything in my power, and will do, when my term is up, to make reparation. I submit to the inevitable. I can imagine something now of what you must have suffered when I left you alone without food or money those four days and nights. I think, however, the worst thing I did was telling the pastor's daughter that you tried to prevent our meeting because you wished me to marry one of your sisters, though I do not know, of course, whether you have any even. That, and the taking the stamps off your letters so that I could get beer, seem to weigh most heavily with me now in my darkness and loneliness. I do not know what my sentence will be — heavy, I suspect, unless I can get someone to plead for me, and I have not a single solitary friend to do that. I am utterly alone. I have been in this cell now twenty-one days, and have a week more before sentence is given. It seems like six months. No one can realize what prison is like till they have tried it.

Believe me, I am deeply and truly sorry. I speak from my heart. Think of me as kindly as you can when I am in the Penitentiary. I hope I shall see you once more.

Arthur B.

I saw Boyde twice in my life afterwards; I heard, indirectly, from him once: the prison chaplain wrote to ask for “his things” which, Boyde told him, I “insisted upon keeping.” He never had any “things” at all while I knew him; the letter was indignant and offensive. Boyde had evidently “told a tale” to the chaplain.

The first time I saw him was some eighteen months after he had been sent up, good behaviour evidently having shortened his term. I was walking up Irving Place and saw him suddenly about fifty yards in front of me. It was my own thick suit I recognized first, then its wearer. I instinctively called out his name. He turned, looked at me, hurried on, and went round the corner into 21st Street. Once round the corner, he must have run like a hare, for when I entered the street too, he had disappeared.

The second, and last, time I saw him was in London ten years later — at a bookstall in Charing Cross station. He saw me, however, first, or before I could come close enough to speak, and he melted away into the crowd with swift and accomplished ease. I was near enough, though, to note that he had grown his heavy moustache again, still wore his eyeglass, and was smartly, even prosperously, dressed. He looked very little older. From Lynwood Palmer, whom I met soon afterwards in Piccadilly, I heard that my old employer, the Horse, had seen him at Tattersalls not long before, and that he, Boyde, had come and begged Palmer not to give him away as he was “after some Jews only”! Artist Palmer took no action.

CHAPTER XXV

MCCLOY TOOK ME back on the *Evening Sun,* according to his promise, about mid-January, and about the same time Mrs. Bernstein sold her house and moved to another lower down the street, almost opposite to the doctor’s. There were no insects, all our things were out of pawn, we had overcoats again, but we had to find a new Ikey, for the old Ikey, of course, would have nothing more to do with our trousers, gladstone bag, top hat and tennis cups.

The East 19th Street chapter was closed when Boyde went to Blackwell Island; another in the same street had begun: Mrs. Bernstein begged us to move with her: we owed her big arrears of rent; also, for some odd reason, she really liked us. In her odd way she even tried to mother me, as though her interest, somewhere perhaps her pity too, were touched. “You haf had drouble in England, I subbose?” she hinted sympathetically. She had read the newspapers carefully, and could not understand why I should be exiled in poverty in this way unless I had done something shady at home. It followed that I had been sent out to America for my country’s good. She shared, that is, the view most people took of my position in New York.

Only three months had passed since we arrived, but it seemed years. I had never lived anywhere else. The sheltered English life, the Canadian adventures, above all the months upon our happy island, lay far away down the wrong end of a telescope, small, distant patches, brightly coloured, lit by a radiant sun, remote, incredible. It was not myself but another person I watched moving across these miniature maps of memory. Those happy days, states, places, those careless, sanguine moods, those former points of view so bright with hope, seemed gone for ever. I now lived in a world where I belonged. I should never climb out again.

The intensity of emotion at the time is difficult to realize now, and quite impossible to recapture. I only know that my feelings burned like fire, all the fiercer, of course, for being inarticulate. The exaggeration was natural enough; everything was out of proportion in me: Boyde had destroyed my faith in people. I believed in no one. The doctor had said that to lose belief in others made life insupportable. I found that statement true. There was a deep bitterness in my heart that for a time was more than I could manage, and this distrust and bitterness led me into an act of cruelty that shames me to this day.

Into the roar and thunder of that frenzied newspaper office stole a hesitating figure one afternoon, a shy youth with rosy cheeks and curly hair, dressed in shabby but well-cut clothes, and obviously an Englishman. He wore gloves and carried a "cane"; these marked him as a "Britisher" at once. He was asking for someone; fingers were pointed at me; he was faintly familiar; I had seen the face before — but where? He came over and introduced himself as Calder, son of a Midland coachbuilder; we had met at some place or other — outside a studio door, I think — and he knew Kay. I forget what he was doing in New York — idling, I think, or travelling. He had outlived his cash, at any rate. He was in difficulties. I distrusted him instantly. He was, of course, another Boyde. I gave him the curtest possible greeting. He, in turn, found the greatest possible difficulty in telling me his story.

I was sitting at the reporters' table in shirt-sleeves (owing to the suffocating temperature of the overheated office), scribbling at top speed the details of some lurid "story," while Calder told me his tale. He wanted to whisper, but the noise forced him to shout, and this disconcerted him. No one listened, however; he had merely brought a "story" in. He had — but it was his own story. I have quite forgotten what it was, or what had happened to him; only the main point I remember: he had nowhere to sleep. Of his story I did not believe a single word, though I did believe that he had no bed. "Can I bunk with you to-night?" he came finally to the point. I told him he most certainly could not. He refused to believe me. I assured him I meant it. I was his last hope, he said, with a nervous grin. I told him to try a doss-house. He grinned and giggled and flushed — then thanked me! It would only be for a night or two, he urged. "You can't possibly let me walk the streets all night! "I replied that one Boyde had been enough for me. I had learnt my lesson, he could walk the streets for the rest of his life for all I cared. He giggled, still refusing to believe I meant it. His father was sending money. He would repay me. He went on pleading. I again repeated that I could not take him in. He left, still thanking me and blushing.

Visions of another Boyde were in my mind. At the time, moreover, our poverty was worse than it ever had been. Boyde, I found, had sold six of my

French stories to McCloy at $5 each, and had pocketed the money. My salary was now being docked five dollars each week till this $30 was paid off. We had, therefore, only ten dollars a week between the two of us. Everything was in pawn again, and times were extra hard. To have Calder living on us was out of the question, for once he got in we should never get him out. I was tired of criminal parasites.

It was my head that argued thus; in my heart I knew perfectly well that Calder was guileless, innocent as milk, an honest, feckless, stupid fellow who was in genuine difficulty for the moment, but who would never sponge on us, and certainly do nothing mean. Conscience pricked me — for half an hour perhaps; in the stress and excitement of the day I then forgot him. That evening Acton Davis, the dramatic critic, gave me a theatre seat, on condition that I wrote the notice for him. It was after eleven when I reached home. Curled up in my bed, sound asleep, his clothes neatly folded on the chair, lay Calder.

It was February and freezing cold. Kay was away for the week, trying a new play at Mount Vernon, where he slept. There was no reason why I should not have let Calder spend at least one warm night in the room. But, apart from the shock of annoyance at finding him asleep in my own bed, and apart from a moment's anger at his cool impudence, the startling parallel with Boyde was vividly unpleasant. It was Boyde No. 2 I saw sleeping in my bed. If I let him stay one night I should never get rid of him at all. $10 a week among three! Calder must take up his bed and walk.

I woke him and told him to dress and leave the room. I watched him dress, heard him plead, heard him describe the freezing weather, describe his walking the streets all night without a cent in his pockets. He blushed and giggled all the time. It was some minutes before he believed I was in earnest, before he crawled out of bed; it was much longer before he was dressed and ready to go..... I saw him down the stairs and through the front door and out into the bitter street. I gave him a dollar, which represented two days' meals for me, and would pay a bed in a doss-house for him. When he was gone I spent a wretched night, ashamed of myself through and through. It really was Boyde who turned him out, but the excuse had no comfort in it. The little incident remains unkindly vivid; I still see it; it happens over again; the foolish, good-natured face, the blushes and shyness, the implicit belief in my own kindness, the red cheeks and curly hair —

going through the front door into the bitter streets. It all stands out. Shame and remorse go up and down in me while I write it now, a belated confession..... I never saw Calder again.

Another thing that still shames me is our treatment of old greasy Mother Bernstein. Though a little thing, this likewise keeps vividly alive. A "little" thing! The big things, invariably with extenuating circumstances that furnish modifying excuses and comforting explanations, are less stinging in the memory. It is the little things that pierce and burn and prick for years to come. In my treatment of Mrs. Bernstein, at any rate, lay an alleviating touch of comedy. In the end, too, the debt was paid. Twelve months later — it seemed a period of years — Kay got suddenly from a brother £100 — an enormous sum; while I had twice received from my brother, God bless him! Post-office orders for £10. This was a long time ahead yet, but Mrs. Bernstein eventually received her due with our sincerest thanks. She had moved to another house in Lafayette Place by then. We paid up and left her, Kay going to one boarding-house, I to another.

The payment in full, at any rate, relieved my conscience, for the way we bullied that poor old Jewess was inexcusable. The excuse I found seemed adequate at the time, however — we must frighten her or be turned out. Each time she pressed for payment, out came my heavy artillery; imaginary insects, threats of newspaper articles, bluster, bluff and bullying of every description, often reducing her to tears, and a final indignant volley to the effect that "If you don't trust us, we had better go; in fact, if this occurs again, we *shall* go!" More than once we pretended to pack up; more than once I announced that we had found other rooms; "Next Monday I shall pay you the few dollars we owe, and leave your house, and you will read an account of your conduct in the *Evening Sun,* Mrs. Bernstein." She invariably came to heel. "I ask my hospand" had no sequel. By frightening and bullying her, I stayed on and on and on, owing months' and months' rent and breakfast; our ascendancy over her was complete. It was, none the less, a shameful business, for at the time it seemed doubtful if we should ever be in a position to pay the kind old woman anything at all...

The fifteen months I now spent reporting for the *Evening Sun* at fifteen dollars a week lie in the mind like a smudged blur of dreary wretchedness, a few incidents only standing out... The desire for the drug was conquered, the old doctor was dead, Kay had obtained a position with a firm in

Exchange Place, where he made a small, uncertain income in a business that was an absolute mystery to me, the buying and selling of exchange between banks. Louis B — had meanwhile arrived, without a cent to his name. It was a long and bitter period, three of us in a small room again, but at least an honest three. Louis's French temperament ran to absinthe — when he could get it. He used the mattress on the floor, while Kay and I shared the bed between us. Our clothes were useless to the short, rotund little Frenchman; as the weeks passed he looked more and more like a pantomime figure in the streets, and when he went to give his rare French and Spanish lessons he never dared to take off his overcoat (which he had managed to keep) even in the hottest room, nor during the most torrid of summer days. Often he dared not unbutton the collar he turned up about his neck, affirming with much affected coughing that he had a "dreadful throat." He was, by nature and habit, an inveterate cigarette smoker; a cigarette, indeed, meant more to him than a meal, and I can still see him crawling about the floor of the room on all fours in the early morning, "hunting snipe," as he called it — in other words, looking for fag-ends. He was either extremely sanguine or extremely depressed; in the former mood he planned the most alluring and marvellous schemes, in the latter he talked of suicide. His wife, whom he dearly loved, had a baby soon after his arrival. He suffered a good deal...

He was a great addition to our party, if at the same time a great drain on our purse. His keen, materialistic French mind was very eager, logical, well-informed, and critical in a destructive sense, an iconoclast if ever there was one. All forms of belief were idols it was his great delight to destroy; faith was superstition; cosmogonies were inventions of men whose natural feebleness forced them to seek something bigger and more wonderful than themselves; creeds, from primitive animism to Buddhism and Christianity, were, similarly, man-made, with a dose of pretentious ethics thrown in; while soul, spirit, survival after death, were creations of human vanity and egoism, and had not a single atom of evidence to support them from the beginning of the world to date. Naturally, he disbelieved everything that I believed, and, naturally, too, our arguments left us both precisely where we started. But they helped the evenings, often hungry evenings, to pass without monotony; and when, as sometimes though but rarely happened, Louis had come by a drop of absinthe, monotony was entirely forgotten. He would sit crossed-legged on his mattress, his brown eyes sparkling in the round little face, his thick curly black hair looking like stiff wire, his podgy hands gesticulating, his language voluble in French and English mixed, his infectious laughter ringing and bubbling out from time to time, and the evening would pass like magic. He was charged with poetry and music too. On absinthe evenings, indeed, it was difficult to get any sleep at all and the first thing in the morning he would be hunting for "snipe "on all fours, cursing life and fate, in a black depression which made him think of suicide, and looking like a yellow Chinese God of Luck that had come to life.

Hunger was agony to him, but, oddly enough, he never grew less rotund. He particularly enjoyed singing what he called *la messe noire* with astonishing variations in his high falsetto. This "mass" was performed by all three of us to a plaster-cast faun an artist had given me in Toronto. It had come in the packing-case with our other things, this Donatello, and we set it on the mantelpiece, filled a saucer with melted candle stolen from a boarder's room, lit the piece of string which served for wick, and turned the gas out. In the darkened room the faunish face leered and moved, as the flickering light from below set the shadows shifting about its features; the fiddle, Louis's thin falsetto, Kay's bass, badly out of tune, and my own voice thrown in as well, produced a volume of sound the other boarders strongly objected to — at one o'clock in the morning. Yet the only time Mrs. Bernstein came to complain, she got no farther than the door: Louis had a blanket over his head and shoulders, Kay was in his night-shirt, which was a day-shirt really, the old Irving wig lying crooked on his head, and I was but half dressed, fiddling for all I was worth. The darkened room, the three figures passing to and fro and chanting, the strange weird face of the faun, lit by the flickering flame from below, startled her so that she stood stock-still on the threshold without a word. The next second she was gone... What eventually happened to Louis I never knew. Months later he moved to a room up-town. We lost track of one another, and I have no idea how fate behaved to him in after-life. He was thirty-five when he sang the *messe noire*, hunted snipe, and gave occasional lessons in French and Spanish.

These trivial little memories remain vivid for some reason. To my precious Sundays in Bronx Park, or farther afield when the days grew longer, he came too, and Kay came with him. We shared the teapot and tin mug I still kept hidden behind a boulder, we shared the fire I always made — neither of my companions shared my mood of happiness..... I was glad when they both refused to get up and start at eight, preferring to spend the morning in bed. For months and months I never missed a single Sunday, wet or fine, for these outings were life to me, and I made a rough lean-to that kept the rain off in bad weather... The car-fare was only 30 cents, both ways; bread and a lump of cheese provided two meals; there were few Sundays when I did not get at least seven or eight hours of intense happiness among the trees and wild stretches of what was to me a veritable Eden of delight... Nothing experienced in later life, tender or grandiose, neither the splendour of the Alps, the majesty of the Caucasus, the mystery of the desert, the magic of spring in Italy or the grim wonder of the real backwoods which I tasted later too — none of these produced the strange and subtle ecstasy of happiness I found on those Sundays in the wastes of scrubby Bronx Park, a few miles from “Noo York City.”... It was, of course, but the raw material, so to speak, of beauty, which indeed is true always of “scenery “as a whole, but it was possible to find detail which, grouped together, made unforgettable pictures by the score. Though deprived of technique, I could see the pictures I need never think of painting. The selection of significant detail in scenery is the secret of enjoyment, for such selection can be almost endless...

The hours passed too quickly always, but they provided the energy to face what, to me, was the unadulterated misery of the week to follow. A book was in my pocket and Shelley was in my memory. From the tram to the trees was half a mile, perhaps, but with the first sight of these, with the first scent of leaves and earth, the first touch of the wind of open spaces on my tongue, my joy rose like a great sea-wave, and the city life, with all its hideousness, was utterly forgotten. What occupied my mind during those seven or eight hours it would be tedious to describe..... I was, besides, hopelessly inarticulate in those early days; conclusions I arrived at were reached by feeling, not by thinking; one, in particular, about which I felt so positive that I knew it was true, I could no more have expressed in words than I could have flown or made a million. This particular conclusion that the Sundays in Bronx Park gave me has, naturally, been expressed by others far better than I could ever express it, but the first time I came across the passage, perhaps a dozen years later in London, my thought instantly flashed back to the teapot, the tin mug, and the boulder in Bronx Park when the same conviction had burned into my own untaught mind:

“One conclusion was forced upon my mind... and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but *one special type* of consciousness, whilst all about us, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there are potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus and at a touch they are there in all their completeness; definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is *only one* out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that these other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also.....[The insight in these other states] has a keynote invariably of reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictions and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melting into unity.”

The immortal may mingle with certain moods, perhaps, especially when violent contrast underlies the transition, and when deep yearnings, suppressed equally with violence, find their sudden radiant outlet. Since those Bronx Park days, when Nature caught me with such profound, uplifting magic, yet when thought was dumb and inarticulate, I am for ever coming across neat expressions by better minds than mine of what I then felt, and even believed I *knew,* in some unimagined way. Nature drew me, perhaps, away from life, while at the same time there glowed in my heart strange unrealizable desires to help life, to assist at her Utopian development, to work myself to the bone for the improvement of humanity. The contradiction, silly and high-flown though it now sounds, was then true. Inextinguishable fires to this end blazed in me, both mind and heart were literally on fire. My failure with Boyde, my meanness with Calder, to mention no graver lapses, both bit deep, but the intense longing to lose my Self in some Utopian cause was as strong as the other longing to be lost in the heart of some unstained and splendid wilderness of natural beauty. And the conflict puzzled me. Being inarticulate, I could not even find relief in words, though, as mentioned, I have often since discovered my feelings of those distant days expressed neatly enough by others. Only a few days ago I came across an instance:

“If Nature catches the soul young it is lost to humanity,” groans Leroy, in a truly significant book of 1922.

“No, no,” replies the poet. “The earth spirit does not draw us aside from life. How could that which is father and mother of us all lead us to err from the law of our being?”

And, again, as I sat puzzling about the amazing horror of what was called the Civilization of the New World, and doubtless making the commonplace mistake of thinking that New York City was America:

“Every great civilization, I think, has a Deity behind it, or a divine shepherd who guided it on some plan in the cosmic imagination. ‘Behold,’ said an ancient Oracle, ‘how the Heavens glitter with intellectual sections.’...These are archetypal images we follow dimly in our evolution.”

“How do you conceive of these powers as affecting civilization?”

“I believe they are incarnate in the race; more in the group than in the individual; and they tend to bring about an orchestration of the genius of the race, to make manifest in time their portion of eternal beauty.....”

My conception of the universe, at any rate, in these early days was imaginative entirely; the critical function, which comes with greater knowledge, with reason, with fuller experience, lay wholly dormant. I communed with both gods and devils. New York stoked the furnace — provided the contrasts. Experience, very slowly, furnished the files and sand-paper which lay bare what may be real beneath by rubbing away the pretty *gilt*. Certain convictions of those far days, however, stood the test, whatever that test may be worth, and have justified themselves to me with later years as assuredly not gilt. That unity of life is true, and that our normal human consciousness is but one type, and a somewhat insignificant type at that, hold unalterably real for me to-day. My other conviction, born in Bronx Park in 1892 by the teapot, tin mug, and familiar boulder which concealed these indispensable utensils during the week, is that the Mystical

Experience known to many throughout the ages with invariable similarity is *not* a pathogenic experience, but is due to a desirable, genuine and valuable expansion of consciousness which furnishes knowledge normally ahead of the race; but, since language can only describe the experience of the race, that it is incommunicable because no words exist, and that only those who have experienced it can comprehend it. The best equipped modern "intellectual" (above all the "intellectual" perhaps), the most advanced scientist, as, on the other hand, the drayman, the coster, the city clerk, must remain not only dumb before its revelation, stupid, hopelessly at sea, angry probably, but contemptuous and certainly mystified: they must also appear, if they be honest, entirely and unalterably *sceptical.* Such scepticism is their penalty; it is, equally, their judge and their confession.

CHAPTER XXVI

AMONG THE "INCIDENTS" that stand out from the dim, miserable smudge of fifteen months, is one that centres about a strange figure, and a most lovable fellow, named Angus Hamilton. Various odd fish drifted on to the paper as reporters, and drifted off again; they form part of an unimportant kaleidoscope. But Angus Hamilton, with his generosity, his startling habits, his undoubted ability, his sad and sudden end, stands out.

My position had improved since the publication of the Boyde story, chiefly, of course, because of the way the peerage had been dragged into its details and its headlines. I received no advance in salary, but I received an advance in respect. Even McCloy was different: "Why waste your time with us?" he spat at me like a machine-gun with a rapid smile. "Go home. Collect a lot of umbrellas and turned-up trousers and letters of introduction. Then come out to 'visit the States,' marry an heiress, and go home and live in comfort!" He was very lenient to my numerous mistakes. Other papers "got a beat" on me, I "fell down" times without number, I failed to get an interview with all and sundry because I could not find "the nerve "to intrude at certain moments into the lives and griefs of others. But McCloy winked the other eye, even if he never raised my pay. Other men were sacked out of hand. I stayed on. "You've got a pull with Mac!" said "Whitey." New men took the places of the lost. Among these I noticed an Englishman. Cooper noticed him too. "Better share an umbrella and go arm in arm," he said in his good-natured way. "He's a fellow-Britisher."

Why he came to New York I never understood. He was a stepson of Pinero, the playwright, and he received occasional moneys from Daniel Frohman, by way of allowance, I supposed, though I never knew exactly. Clever though he was, he was a worse reporter than myself — because he didn't care two straws whether he got the news or did not get it. He had a "pull" of some sort, with Laffan probably, we thought. He came to our boarding-house in East 19th Street. He had a bad stammer. His methods of reporting were peculiar to himself. Often enough, when sent out on a distasteful assignment, he simply went home. He had literary talent and wrote well when he liked. When Frohman handed out his money, he spent it in giving a big dinner to various friends, though he never included Kay, Louis, or myself among his distinguished guests. We had no dress-suits, for one thing.

Hamilton was perhaps twenty-one at the time, a trifle younger than myself, at any rate. He came downstairs sometimes to spend the evening in our room. In spite of his stammer and a certain shyness, he was always very welcome. He liked, above all, to listen to weird stories I used to tell, strange, wild, improbable tales akin to ghost-stories. When the Black Mass failed to attract, when Louis was uninspired by absinthe, or when no argument was afoot, such as whether poet or scientist were the highest type of human being, I discovered this taste for spinning yarns, usually of a ghostly character, and found, to my surprise, that my listeners were enthralled. At a moment's notice, no theme or idea being in my head, I found that I could invent a tale, with beginning, middle and climax. Something in me, doubtless, sought a natural outlet. The stories, at any rate, poured forth endlessly. "May I write that one?" Hamilton would ask. "It's a corker! "And he would bring his written version to read to us a few evenings later. "It ought to sell," he said, though I never heard that it did sell actually. Certainly, it never occurred to me that I might write and sell it myself. And Angus Hamilton is mentioned here because it was owing to a chance act of his that I eventually took to writing and so found my liberty.

This happened some twelve years later, when I was living in a room in Halsey Street, Chelsea, sweating my life out in the dried milk business and earning barely enough at the job to make both ends meet. A hansom stopped suddenly near me in Piccadilly Circus, its occupant shouted my name, then sprang out — Angus Hamilton.

He came round to my room for a talk over old days; he had done well for himself as Renter's correspondent in the Manchurian War, had published a book on Korea, and was just off to China, again as Renter's agent. He reminded me of the stories I used to tell in the New York boarding-house. I had written some of these, a couple of dozen perhaps, and they lay in a cupboard. Could he see them? Might he take them away and read them?

It had been my habit and delight to spend my evenings composing yarns on my typewriter, finding more pleasure in this than in any dinner engagement, theatre or concert. Why this suddenly began I cannot say, but I guess at a venture that the accumulated horror of the years in New York was seeking expression. Wandering in Richmond Park at night was the only rival entertainment that could tempt me from the joy of typing out some tale or other in solitude. “Jimbo” I had already written twice, several of the “John Silence” tales as well, and numerous other queer ghostly stories of one sort or another. From among these last Hamilton took a dozen or so away with him, but forgot to send them back as he had promised. He had gone to China, I supposed, and the matter had slipped his mind. It didn’t matter much — I went on writing others; the stories were no good to anybody, the important thing being the relief and keen pleasure I found in their expression. But some weeks later a letter came from a publisher: “I have read your book. My reader tells me...” this and that “about your stories... I shall be glad to publish them for you.,” and then a few words about a title and a request that I would call for an interview.

It was some little time before I realized what the publisher was talking about. Hamilton, without asking permission, had sent my stories to him. Eveleigh Nash was the publisher, and his reader at that time was Maude Ffoulkes, who later wrote Lady Cardigan’s Memoirs, numerous other biographies, also “My Own Past,” and to whom I owe an immense debt for unfailing guidance, help and encouragement from that day to this. I never forget my shrinking fear at the idea of appearing in print, my desire to use another name, my feeling that it was all a mistake somewhere, the idea that I should have a book of my own published being too absurd to accept as true. My relief when, eventually, the papers gave it briefest possible mention, a few words of not unkindly praise or blame, I remember too, and my astonishment, some weeks later, to find a column in the *Spectator,* followed not long afterwards by an interesting article in the Literary Page of the *Morning Post* on the genus “ghost story,” based on my book — by Hilaire Belloc, as he told me years later. All of which prompted me to try another book and after the third, “John Silence,” had appeared, to renounce a problematical fortune in dried milk, and with typewriter and kitbag, to take my precious new liberty out to the Jura Mountains where, at frs. 4.50 a day, I lived in reasonable comfort and wrote more books. I was then thirty-six.

Whether I should be grateful to my fellow-reporter on the *Evening Sun* is another matter. Liberty is priced above money, at any rate. I have written some twenty books, but the cash received for these, though it has paid for rent, for food, for clothing, separately, has never been enough to pay for all three together, even on the most modest scale of living, and my returns, both from America and England, remain still microscopic. Angus Hamilton I never saw again. A year or so later, while on a lecture tour in New York, things apparently went wrong with him. Life drove against him in some way. He put a sudden end to himself.

It seems strange to me now that so few incidents, and those such trivial ones, stand out from the long months of newspaper work in New York. Harrowing and dreadful stories, appalling in their evidence of human degradation, or poignant beyond words in their revelation of misery, temptation, failure, were my daily experience week after week, month after month. I might now have bulky scrap-books packed with thrilling plots of every kind, all taken from life. My affair with Boyde, moreover, had taught me how much of curious psychological interest lay behind the most ordinary arrest for a commonplace crime. Yet, of all these thousands of cases, I remember hardly a single one, while of uninteresting assignments Cooper gave me several still live vividly in my memory. Social reporting, in particular, both amused and distressed me, for which reasons probably it has not faded. Sitting in the lobby at Sherry's or Delmonico's when a ball or society function was in progress and taking the names of the guests as they entered, taking the snubs and rudeness of these gay, careless folk as well, was not calculated to add much to my self-respect. The lavish evidence of money, the excess, often the atrocious taste, even stirred red socialism in me, although this lasted only till I was out in the street again. Various connexions, distant or otherwise, of my family often, too, visited New York, while more than one had married an American girl of prominent name. It was odd to see Lord Ava, Dufferin's eldest son, walk up the steps, and odder still to jot down his name upon the list of "those present." There was an American woman, too, who bore my mother's name... To see any of these people was the last thing on earth I wished, much less to speak to them or be recognized; they were in another world to mine; none the less, I had odd sensations when I saw them... A ball of deaf-mutes, too, remains very clear, only the shuffling sound of boots, and of the big drum whose heavy vibrations through their feet enabled them to keep time, breaking the strange hush of the dancing throng, for ever gesticulating with busy fingers.

A much-coveted annual assignment once came my way, through the kindness of McCloy, I think — the visit to the winter quarters of Barnum and Bailey's Circus. Every newspaper was invited; the animals were inspected; an article was written; and the circus opened its yearly tour with immense advertisements. In the evening there was a — banquet! I came home in the early hours with my pockets stuffed for Kay and Louis — cigars, fruit, rolls, and all imaginable edibles that might bear the transport. But the occasion is clear for another reason — elephants and rats. The keeper told us that the elephants were terrified of rats because they feared the little beasts would run up their trunks. We doubted his story. He offered to prove it. In the huge barn where some twenty-five monsters stood, chained by the feet against the walls, he emptied a sackful of live rats. The stampede, the trumpeting of those frightened elephants is not easily forgotten. In the centre of the great barn stood masses of hay cut into huge square blocks, and the sight of us climbing for safety to the top of these slippery, precariously balanced piles of hay is not easily forgotten either.

The raid at dawn upon a quasi lunatic asylum, kept by an unqualified man, should have left sharper impressions than is the case, for it was certainly dramatic and sinister enough. Word came to the office that a quack "doctor" was keeping a private Home for Lunatics at Amityville, L.I., and that sane people, whom interested parties wished out of the way, were incarcerated among the inmates. The Health Department were going to raid it at dawn. It was to be a "scoop" for the *Evening Sun,* and the assignment was given to me.

I started while it was still dark, crossing the deserted ferry long before the sun was up, but when I reached the lonely house, surrounded by fields and a few scattered trees, I found that every newspaper in the city was represented. Even the flimsy men were there, all cursing their fate in the chilly air of early morning. No lights showed in the building. The eastern sky began to flush. With the first glimmer of dawn I saw the sheriff's men at their various posts, hiding behind trees and hedges, some crouching under the garden shrubberies, some concealed even on the veranda of the house. After a long and weary wait, the house began to stir; shutters were taken down; a window, then a door, were thrown open; figures became visible moving inside from room to room; and presently someone came out on to the veranda. He was instantly seized and taken away. After several men and women had been arrested in this way, a general raid of the whole house took place. A dozen of the sheriff's men rushed in. The nurses, male and female, the "doctor"-proprietor, his assistants, and every single inmate, sane or crazy, were all caught and brought out under arrest, before they had tasted breakfast.

It was broad daylight by this time. The whole party, of at least thirty, were assembled in a barn where a magistrate, brought down specially for the purpose, held an impromptu court. If some of the inmates were insane at the time and had been so before incarceration, others certainly had been deliberately made insane by the harsh and cruel treatment to which they had purposely been subjected. There were painful episodes, while the testimony was hurriedly listened to in that improvised court of inquiry. Yet it has all, all vanished from my memory. I forget even what the sequel was, or what sentence the infamous proprietor received later on from a properly constituted court. Many a sane man or woman had been rendered crazy by the treatment, I remember, and the quack had taken heavy payments from interested relatives for this purpose. But all details have vanished from my mind. What chiefly remains is the wonder of that breaking dawn, the light stealing over the sky, the sweet smell of the country and the tang of the salt sea. These, with the singing of the early birds, and the great yearnings they stirred in me, left deep impressions.

One reason, I am sure, why such painful and dramatic incidents have left so little trace, is that I had a way of shielding myself from the unpleasantness of them, so that their horror or nastiness, as the case might be, never really got into me deeply. By a method of "detachment," as mentioned earlier, I protected my sensitive inner self from being too much wounded. I would depute just sufficient intelligence and observation to attend to the immediate work in hand, while the rest of me, the major portion, lay inactive, uninvolved, certainly inoperative. Painful and vivid impressions were, none the less, received, of course, only I refused to admit or recognize them. They emerged, years later, in stories perhaps, these suppressed hieroglyphics, but at the actual time I could so protect myself that I did not consciously record them. And hence, I think, my faint recollection now of a thousand horrible experiences during these New York reporting days.

This “detachment,” in the ignorant way I used it, was, perhaps, nothing less than shirking of the unpleasant. At twenty-three I had not yet discovered that better method which consists in facing the unpleasant without reservation or evasion, while raising the energy thus released into a higher channel, “transmuting” it, as the jargon of 1922 describes it. “Detachment,” however, even in its earliest stages, and provided it does not remain merely where it starts, is an acquisition not without value; it can lead, at any rate, to interesting and curious experiments. It deputes the surface-consciousness, or sufficient of it, to deal with some disagreeable little matter in hand, while the subconscious or major portion of the self — for those who are aware of possessing it — may travel and go free. It is, I think, Bligh Bond, in his “Gate of Remembrance,” who mentions that the automatic writer whose revelations are there given, read a book aloud while his hand with the pencil wrote. Many a literary man, whose inspiration depends upon the stirrings of this mysterious subconscious region, knows that to read a dull book, or talk to a dull person, engages just enough of his surface consciousness to set the other portion free. Reading verse — though not poetry, of course — has this effect; for some, a cinema performance, with the soothing dimness, the music, the ever-shifting yet not too arresting pictures, works the magic; for others, light music; for others, again, looking out of a train window. There are as many ways as individuals. To listen to Mrs de Montmorency Smith telling her tedious dream, while you hear just enough to comment intelligently upon her endless details, even using some of these details to feed your own more valuable dream, is an admirable method — I am told; and my own childish habit of squeezing “through the crack between yesterday and to-morrow” in that horrible bed of East 19th Street, merely happened to be my own little personal adaptation of the principle...

Incidents that had held a touch of comedy remain more clearly in the memory than those that held ugliness and horror only. A member of the Reichstag Central Party, for instance, Rector Ahlwardt by name, came out to conduct a campaign against the Jews. He was violently anti-Semitic. I was sent to meet his steamer at Quarantine because I could speak German, and my instructions were to warn him that America was a free country, that the Jews were honourable and respected citizens, and that abuse would not be tolerated for a moment. These instructions I carried out, while we drank white wine in the steamer’s smoking-room. Freytag, I noticed with amusement, himself a Jew, was there for the *Staatszeitung*.

Ahlwardt, however, was impervious to advice or warnings. At his first big meeting in the Cooper Union Hall, arriving late, I noticed at once two things: the seats were packed with Jews, while almost as many policemen stood about waiting; and the reporters' tables underneath the platform showed several open umbrellas. Both, I knew, were ominous signs. Ahlwardt himself, fat, beaming, in full evening dress, was already haranguing the huge audience. At first he was suave and gentle, even mealy-mouthed, but before long his prejudices mastered him and his language changed. Up rose a member of the audience and advised him angrily to go back to Germany. The police ejected the interrupter. Others took his place. Then suddenly the fusillade began — and up went the reporters' umbrellas! A flying egg caught the speaker full on his white shirt-front, another yellowed his dazzling white waistcoat, a third smashed over his fat face. Pandemonium reigned, during which the German melted out of the landscape and disappeared from his first and last anti-Semite meeting in Noo York City. He attempted a little propaganda from the safe distance of Hoboken, N.J., but the Press campaign against him was so violent and covered him with such ridicule, that he very soon took steamer back to his Berlin. Every little detail of this incident, were it worth the telling, I could give accurately. There was no reason to be "detached," unless the protection of the *World* man's umbrella comes under that description.

It was somewhere about this time, too, that another trivial incident occurred, refusing to be forgotten. It, again, increased the respect shown to me by the staff of the paper — Americans being truly democratic! — though it did not increase my salary. A belted earl left his card on me. Coming in breathless from some assignment, I saw McCloy staring at me. "Is this for you?" he asked sarcastically, handing me a visiting-card. A brother-in-law, "His Excellency" into the bargain, "Governor of an Australian Province" to which he was then on his way, had climbed those narrow spiral stairs and asked for me. The letters after his name alone were enough to produce a commotion in that democratic atmosphere... He was staying at the Brevoort House, and he certainly behaved "like a man," thought Kay and I, as we enjoyed more than one good dinner at his expense in the hotel. Proud of me he had certainly no cause to be, but if he felt ashamed, equally, he gave no sign of it. He even spoke on my behalf to Paul Dana, the editor-proprietor's son, who assured him that I was "a bright fellow" — a description the staff managed to get hold of somehow and applied to me ever afterwards. His brief visit, both because of its kindness and its general good effect, stand out, at any rate, in the “bright fellow’s” memory. Like Dufferin in the Hub, he fired a shot for me.

The months dragged by in their dreary, hated length, while numerous chances of getting more congenial work were tried in vain. Torrid summer heat, with its all-dissolving humidity, replaced the bitter winter. The deep, baked streets that never cooled, the stifling nights, the heat-waves when the temperature stood between 90 and 100 in the shade, and we toiled about the blazing pavements in shirt-sleeves carrying a palm-leaf fan, and when the moisture in the air made the very “copy-paper” stick to the hand that wrote upon it — those four months of New York summer were a misery. We had only our winter clothes to wear; a white collar was dirty pulp before nine in the morning; the dazzling electric-light sign flashed nightly in the air above 23rd Street with its tempting legend “Manhattan Beach Swept by Ocean Breezes,” while the ice-carts in the streets were the nearest approach to comfort we could find. Many a time I followed one at close quarters to taste a whiff of cooler air. Life became unendurable, yet day followed day, night followed night, week followed week, till one’s last breath of energy seemed exhausted by the steaming furnace of the city air.

The respectable quarters of the town were, of course, deserted, but the East Side, and the poorer parts, became a gigantic ant-heap, thousands of families sleeping on the balconies of the packed tenement houses, as though a whole underground-world had risen suddenly to the surface. Children died by the hundred; there were heat strokes by the score. It was too hot to eat. Reporting in such weather was a trying business..... A reporter was entitled to a fortnight’s holiday in the year, and though none was due to me, McCloy let me go about the middle of October. I procured a railway pass and went off to Haliburton, Ontario, to spend my precious twelve days with a settler in the backwoods. He was a Scotsman I had met during our island days, and Haliburton was not far from our own delightful lake,. On my way back the cable came telling of my father’s death while being brought home from Ems. I was spending the night with an old friend of his, in Hamilton, Ont., where he had a church. Originally in the navy, the evangelical movement had “converted” him, and he had taken to it with such zeal that a church and parish became a necessity of life. He was sincere and sympathetic, and the bad news could have come to me in no better place.

The next day I returned to New York and resumed my life of reporting on the paper... The elections had been fought, and Tammany was beaten, a wave of Republicanism sweeping both State and City. A Committee of Investigation, under Senator Lexow, was appointed to examine into the methods of Tammany Hall, and for weeks I sat in court while the testimony was taken, and the most amazing stories of crime, corruption, wickedness and horror I ever heard were told by one “protected” witness after another. It brought to light a veritable Reign of Terror. John Goff was prosecuting counsel; he became Recorder, in place of Judge Smythe, as his reward. Boss Croker, head of Tammany, was conveniently in England and could not be subpoenaed. Other leaders, similarly, were well out of reach. Tammany, it was proved up to the hilt, had extorted an annual income of fifteen million dollars in illegal contributions from vice. The court was a daily theatre in which incredible melodrama and tragedy were played. With this thrilling exception, the work I had to do remained the same as before... a second Christmas came round another spring began to melt the gloomy skies. Conditions, it is true, were a little easier, for Louis had left us and Kay was earning ten or fifteen dollars a week in Exchange Place, but by March or April, the eighteen months of underfeeding and trying work had brought me, personally, to the breaking point...

It was late in April I read that gold had been found in the Rainy River district which lay in the far north-western corner of Ontario, the river of that name being the frontier between Minnesota State and Canada. The paragraph stating the fact was in a Sunday paper I read on my way to Bronx Park, and the instant I saw it my mind was made up. It was spring, the primitive instinct to strike camp and move on was in the blood, a nostalgia for the woods was in it too, and the prospect of another torrid, moist summer in the city at $15 a week was more than I could face. That scrap of news, at any rate, decided me. And, truth to tell, it was not so much the lure of gold that called me, as the lure of the wilderness. I longed to see the big trees again, to smell the old naked earth, to hear water falling and feel the great winds blow..... It was an irresistible call.

My one terror, as when I decided to buy the dairy two years before, was that someone would tell me there was no gold, that it was not worth going, or would prevent me in some other way. I deliberately hid from myself all unfavourable information, while I collected all possible items that might justify my intention. That same night I showed the paragraph to Kay. “I’ll go,” he said at once, “but let’s get a third, a fourth too, if we can.” He mentioned Paxton, an engineer, aged 35, who had just lost all his worldly possessions in speculation. Paxton said he would come with us. The fourth was R.M., son of the clergyman in Hamilton. R.M., whose father was brother to a belted earl, was an insurance agent, and making a good living at his job. He was my own age, also my own height. He was, besides, a heavy-weight amateur boxer of considerable prowess, and his favourite time for holding bouts in the ring was Sunday evenings, to which fact a rival clergyman had recently taken occasion to refer slightingly in his own pulpit. R.M., resenting the slur both upon himself and his father, had waited outside the church door one Sunday after the evening service, and when the clergyman emerged had asked for an apology — a public one in the pulpit. On being met with an indignant refusal, R.M. Invited the other to “put ’em up.” The thrashing that followed produced a great scandal in the little town, and R.M. found the place too hot to hold him. He therefore jumped at the idea of the goldfields.

The arrangements were made, of course, by letter, and took some little time; but on a given morning in early May R.M. was to join our train as it passed through Hamilton. I had been able to procure passes for the lot of us as far as Duluth, some fifteen hundred miles distant, on Lake Superior, and from there we should have to travel another hundred and fifty miles by canoe down the Vermilion River to Rainy Lake City, for the foundations of which the forest, I read, had already been partially cleared. Several further articles had appeared in the papers; it was a gorgeous country, men were flocking in, and the Bank of Montreal had established a branch in a temporary shack. Moreover, as mentioned before, it was spring.

That a man of Paxton’s age and experience should have made this long expedition without first satisfying himself that it was likely to be worth while, has always puzzled me. He was an easy-going, good-natured man, whose full figure proclaimed that he liked the good things of life. But he was in grave difficulties, graver perhaps than I ever knew, and I think he was not sorry to contemplate a trip across the border. His attitude, at any rate, was that he “didn’t care a rap so long as I get out of here.” That Kay and myself and R.M. Should take the adventure was natural enough, for none of us had anything to lose, and, whatever happened, we should “get along somehow," and even out of the frying-pan into the fire was better than the summer furnace of the city. R.M. wrote that he had a hundred dollars, Paxton produced fifty, I supplied the railway passes and added my last salary, together with some eight dollars that Ikey No. 2 was persuaded to hand over.

"Send some stuff along," fired McCloy, opening his eyes a little wider than usual when I told him. "Any hot stuff you get I'll use."

It has already been told how Kay missed the train by a few minutes, and how Whitey, waving his parting present of a bottle of Bourbon whisky, was the final picture Paxton and I had of New York City as the evening train pulled out.

CHAPTER XXVII

SOME PEOPLE, EXAMINING the alternate ups and downs of life, have thought to detect a rhythm in it: like every other expression of energy, from heat to history, from sound to civilization, it moves, they think, with a definite wave-length. The down and up, the hollow of the wave and its crest, follow one another in rhythmical sequence. It is an imaginary notion doubtless, though it applied to my life aptly enough at this time apparently: the Toronto misery, the Island happiness; the New York hell, the Backwoods heaven.

I think, when I wrote home the literal truth: “I can’t stand this reporting life any longer. I’m off to the goldfields, and McCloy has asked me to write articles for the paper,” there lay a vague idea in me that these goldfields would prove somehow to be comic goldfields, and that the expedition would be somewhere farcical. I was so eager, so determined to go, that I camouflaged from myself every unfavourable aspect of the trip. Green, being still my predominant colour, was used freely in this camouflage. It was only afterwards I realized how delightfully I fooled myself. Yet it was true, at the same time, that a deep inner necessity drove irresistibly. The city life was killing something in me, something in the soul: get out or go under, was my feeling. How easy it would have been to go under was a daily thought. Far better men than myself proved it all round me every week. It seemed, indeed, the natural, obvious thing to do for an educated, refined Englishman without character who found himself adrift from home influences in this amazing city — to sink into the general scum of failures and outcasts, to yield to one of the many anaesthetics New York so lavishly provided, to find temporary relief, a brief wild-eyed happiness, oblivion, then, not long afterwards, death.

The draw of the woods, the call of the open air, moreover, always potent, had become insistent. Spring added its aching nostalgia that burned like a fever in my veins.

Thus various influences, some positive, some negative, combined to make me feel that anything was better than the drudgery of my wretched New

York life, and the goldfields merely offered a plausible excuse. If I made blinkers with my own hands, I made them effectively at least. Deep out of sight in the personality there hides, perhaps, some overseer who, watching wisely the turns of fate, makes such blinkers, ensuring their perfect fit as well...

There was a nice feeling, of course, that if one went to a goldfield, one picked up gold. Shaking sand in a shining pan beside a rushing river was a picture in the mind. There were wild men, friends and enemies; there were Indians too; but also there were sunsets, tempests, dawns and stars. It would be liberty and happiness.

I should see the moon rise in clear, sweet air above the rim of primeval woods. I should cook bacon over an open fire of wood. There would be no grinning Chinaman to pay for laundry...

The men with whom I was going were not entirely satisfactory. I knew them slightly, for one thing; for another, the chief drawback, they were going in a very different mood from mine. Their one object was to make their fortunes. It was real gold, and not the glamour of the wilderness, that called them; and in the Emigrant Sleeper, as we journeyed towards Duluth, they sketched their plans with intense enthusiasm: Paxton, the engineer, explained puzzlingly, with the aid of matches, a trolley he would construct for bringing the ore from pit to crusher, while R.M., with reckless immorality, enlarged upon the profits he would derive from running a "joint" of desperate sort— "for no one need know that my father's a clergyman, and my uncle in the House of Lords."

Both men were shadows; they were not real; there was no companionship in them for me, at any rate. That they were fellow-travellers for the moment on a trip I did not care about making alone, was sufficient. I would just as soon have gone with McCloy or a Tombs policeman.

What constitutes one person out of a hundred "real," the other ninety-nine shadows, is hard to define, but an instinct in me has ever picked out that "real" one. With him or her I know instantly my life is going to be unavoidably linked: through love or hate, through happiness or trouble, perhaps through none of these, but with the conviction that a service has to be rendered or accepted, a debt, as it were, to be paid or received, a link at any rate that cannot be broken or evaded. Such real people are to be counted on the fingers of one hand: R.M. And Paxton were certainly not among them. Nor, for that matter, was my friend Kay, who, I am reasonably positive, missed the train on purpose; while, curiously enough, Boyde, that trivial criminal, *was* among them. Had Kay, for instance, done what that cheap ruffian did, I should never have taken the trouble to arrest or punish him...

The comic opera touch began with Whitey racing down the platform waving a bottle of rye whisky; it continued next morning when we picked up R.M. At eight o'clock. Our train stopped at Hamilton, Ont., for five minutes. We craned our heads out of the window and saw a party of young fellows with flushed faces and singing voices, and on their shoulders in the early sunshine the inert figure of a huge man without a hat. They recognized me and heaved him into our compartment, where he slept soundly for two hours until we had left Toronto far behind. "Ouch! Ouch!" said Paxton — it was about all "engineer Paxton" ever did say— "Is that R.M.?" They had never met before. We took the money out of his pocket for safety's sake, and it proved to be more than his promised contribution. His friends had indeed given him a send-off, and the all-night poker had proved lucrative.

It was a long, long journey to Duluth, with heartening glimpses from the window, of river, lake and forest, all touched with "spring's delightful weather." Shelley filled my head and heart. I saw dawn in a vale of the Indian Caucasus, I saw Panthea, Asia, fleeting dryads and troops of happy fauns. Out of New York City into this primeval wilderness produced intoxication. No more cities of dreadful night for me! The repressed, unrealized yearnings of many painful months burst forth in a kind of rapture. Riches can never taste the treasures of relief and change provided by the law of contrast. To be free to go everywhere is tantamount to going nowhere, to be able to do everything is to do nothing. Without school, holidays could have no meaning. The intensity of escape, with all the gorgeous emotions it involves, is hardly possible to the big bank-balances.

I thought of the overheated *Sun* offices, and saw cool, silent woods; of thronged canyon-streets between cliffs of buildings, and saw lonely gorges where the deer stole down to drink in quiet pools; of Mrs. Bernstein's room, and saw green glades of beauty, a ceiling of blue sky, walls of hemlock, spruce and cedar. The May sunlight made the whole world sing, as the train rushed through the wilderness of the Ontario Highlands. It woke a kind of lyrical delight in me. “The day seemed one sent from beyond the skies, that shed to earth, above the sun, a light of Paradise.” Paxton, with his puzzling matches, found me absent-minded and irresponsive to his “ouch! ouch!” and R.M., suffering from a bad “hangover” headache, thought me unsympathetic toward his disreputable joint.

More clearly than the matches, or the profit and loss figures of the joint, I remember the three bullets lying on the palm of the engineer’s fat open hand. His solemn gravity depressed R.M. It infected me a little too. Why in the world should he be so serious?” If we fail, boys,” said the engineer laconically, as he looked down with grim significance at the three bullets, “I for one — shall not return.” He put a bullet in his pocket, he handed one to R.M., the third he passed to me. “Is it a deal?” he asked, speaking as one who had come to the end of his tether, which, indeed, perhaps really was the case. We pocketed our bullets anyhow, and told him gravely: “Yes, it’s a deal.” We shook hands on it.

It was all in the proper spirit of gold-seeking adventure, begad! and the comic-opera touch, so far as I was concerned, had not yet quite fully appeared. I had cut loose from everything. I felt as though I were jumping off the rim of the planet into unknown space. It was a delightful, reckless, half naughty, half childish, feeling. “To hell with civilization!” was its note. At the back of the mind lay a series of highly-coloured pictures; Men made fortunes in a night, human life was cheap, six-shooters lay beside tin mugs at camp-fire breakfasts, and bags of “dust” were tossed across faro-tables from one desperado in a broad-brimmed hat to another who was either an Oxford don *incognito,* or an unfrocked clergyman, or a younger son concealing tragic beauty in an over cultured heart, with perhaps an unclaimed title on his strawberry-marked skin. R.M., too, was forever talking about staking claims: “We’ll get grub-staked by some fellow..... If we only pan a few ounces per day it’ll mean success...” to all of which Paxton emitted his “Ouch! Ouch!” as a strong man who said little because he preferred action to words.

I, meanwhile, had no accurate information to supply, though I was the promoter of the expedition. I paraded the newspaper accounts. *They* were of little use. Nothing, in fact, was of any use. We were in different worlds. *They* were in an Emigrant Sleeper skirting the shores of Lake Superior. *I* was on the look-out for the Witch of Atlas, wandering through the pine forest of the Cascine near Pisa, dreaming in the Indian Caucasus, or watching Serchio's stream. Even "Ouch! Ouch!" could not keep me in Ontario for long.

It all lies down the wrong end of that ever-lengthening telescope now, our trip to the Rainy River Gold Fields. Happy, careless, foolish days of sunlight, liberty, woodsmoke and virgin wilderness. Useless days, of course, yet sweetly perfumed as in a dream of fairyland. I revelled in them. New York was still close enough to lend them some incredible glamour by contrast. That no gold came our way was nothing, that the days came to an end was bitter. Fading into mist, behind veils of blue smoke, yet lit by sheets of burning sunshine, lies the faint outline still. Each year drops another gauze curtain over an entrancing and ridiculous adventure that for my companions was disappointingly empty, but to me was filled to the brim with wonder and delight. A few sharp pictures, rather disconnected, defy both veils and curtains, set against a dim background of wild forest, a blue winding river with strange red shores, swift rapids, and cosy camp-fires at dawn, at sunset, beneath the stars, beneath the moon. The stillness of those grand woods is unforgettable; the voice of the river was unceasing, yet broke no silence; the smells of balsam, resinous pitch-pine, cedar smoke rise like incense above the memory of it all.

Duluth was all agog with excitement, and in every shop-window hung blue-prints of the El Dorado we were bound for. Two big-bladed hunting-knives, a second-hand Marlin rifle for $8, a Smith and Wesson revolver, were our weapons. I already had a six-shooter, given to me by the Tombs Court police. It had killed a negro, and I had reported the murder trial resulting. Three blankets had to be bought, a canoe, and provisions for the week's trip down the Vermilion River — tea, bacon, flour, biscuits, salt and sugar. R.M. had a small "A" tent with him large enough to hold three; an old, high-prowed bark canoe was purchased from an Indian for $6; but our money did not run to Hudson Bay blankets, and the cheap, thin coverings we bought proved poor protection in those frosty nights of early May.

We picked up a guide too, a half-breed named Gallup. He was going to Rainy Lake City in any case, and agreed to show us the portages and rapids for two dollars a day each way. He justified his name. He galloped. He had a slim-nosed Maine cedar-wood canoe that oiled along into the daily head-wind with easy swiftness, whereas R.M. And myself in our high-prowed craft found progress slow and steering a heavy toil. The wind caught our big bows like a sail. Gallup, moreover, sizing us up as English greenhorns, expected good food and lots of whisky, and, getting neither, vented his spleen on us as best he could. His natural evil temper grew steadily worse. There were several ways in which he could have revenge.

He used them all. By “losing his way “down branch streams he made the journey last eight days instead of five, yet he went so fast in his neat-nosed craft that it was all R.M. And I could do to keep him in sight at all. The sunlight flashing on his paddle two or three miles ahead, the canoe itself a mere dark speck in the dazzle of water, was all we usually had to guide us. Paxton, weary, much thinner than he had been, useless as a paddler, lay in the bottom of the canoe, leaving all the work to Gallup. And Gallup did it, even with this dead freight against him. To our injunction to make the fellow go slower, his “Ouch! Ouch! “was quite ineffective. I was careful to keep the provisions in my own canoe, so that we could not lose him altogether, and he was faithful in one thing, that he waited for us at the rapids and portages.

What did it matter? The head wind held steadily day after day, blowing from the north-west through a cloudless sky. Everything sparkled, the air was champagne; such a winding river of blue I had never seen before. Every tree wore little fingers of bright fresh green. There was exhilaration and wonder at every turn. Burned by the hot sun and wet by the flying spray, our hands swelled till the knuckles disappeared, then cracked between the joints till they bled.

I steered. R.M. sat in the bows. Paddling hour after hour against the wind became a mechanical business the muscles attended to automatically. The mind was free to roam. The loneliness was magical, for it was a peopled loneliness. A start at dawn, half an hour for lunch, and camp at sunset was the day’s routine. Usually we were too exhausted to cook the dwindling bacon, make the fire, put up the tent. What did it matter? Nothing mattered. Each mile was a mile of delight farther from New York. The trip might last months for all I cared.

We cursed Gallup behind his back and to his face. He never even answered. His sulky silence broke only round the evening fire, when he would tell us appalling tales of murder, violence and sudden death about the goldfields whither we were bound. It was another form of revenge. The desperadoes, cutthroats, and wild hairy men generally who awaited us, us especially since we were English, hardly belonged to our happy planet. Yet he knew them at first hand, knew them even by name. They would all be on the look-out for us. Against several, for he had his friendly impulses, he warned us in particular. Were we good shots and quick on the trigger? The man who pulled first, he reminded us, had the drop on the other fellow. There was a "stiff' named Morris who was peculiarly deadly, Morris, a Canadian, who had killed his man in a saloon brawl across the river and had skipped over the border into Minnesota. Morris would be interested in "guys" like us. He described him in detail. We looked forward to Morris.

They were cheery camp-fire stories Gallup told us nightly. We crawled into our chilly tent, wondering a little, each in his own thin blanket, what these hairy men were going to do to "guys like us." We did not wonder long. Sleep came like a clap. At dawn, the wind just rising, and the chipmunks dropping fircones on to our tent with miniature reports, the hairy men were all forgotten. It was impossible to hold an ugly thought of any kind. The river sang at our feet, the sky was pearl and rose, the air was sharply perfumed with smells of forest and wood-smoke, and glimpses of sunrise shone everywhere between the trees; trees that stretched without a break five hundred miles to the shores of James Bay in the arctic seas.

We gulped our tea and bacon, packed tent and blankets, split open the cracks in our swollen hands, and launched the canoes upon a crystal river that swirled along in eddies and sheets of colour. Sometimes it narrowed to a couple of hundred yards between rugged cliffs where the water raced towards a rapid, sometimes it broadened into wide, lake-like spaces; there were reaches of placid calm; there were stretches white with tumbling foam. The sun blazed down; we turned a sharp bend and surprised a deer; a porcupine waddled up against a pinestem; a fish leaped in a golden pool; birds flashed and vanished; there was a silence, a stillness beyond all telling. Nuggets, gold dust, hairy men, six-shooters — nothing mattered!

It was, indeed, this loneliness, this entire absence of all other human signs, that gradually betrayed the truth. Where was the stream of frenzied gold-seekers? Where was the rush the papers mentioned? Beyond a few stray Indians on the fourth day, we saw no living being. Gallup's tales of terror began to lose their sting. Of real information he vouchsafed no single item.

But who wanted real information? Rainy Lake City might be the legendary city of gold that lies beyond the mirages of the Lybian desert, for all I cared. The City of New York was out of sight. That was the important thing.

The series of wild, lonely camps lie blurred in the composite outline of a single camp; eight dawns combine into one; I remember clear night-skies ablaze with brilliant stars; I remember the moon rising behind the black wall of forest across the water. All night the river sang and whispered. Police courts and Mrs. Bernstein's room hid far away in the dim reaches of some former life. Behind these, again, lay a shadowy, forgotten Kent. There were haunting faces, veiled by distance, for a strange remoteness curtained the past with unreality. The wonder of the present dominated. These woods, this river, ruled the world, and somewhere in the heart of that old forest the legendary Wendigo, whose history I wrote later in a book, had its awful lair.

Owing to Gallup's trick of lengthening the journey, our food gave out, but with fish, venison and partridge it was impossible to starve. The last-named, a grouse actually, perches in the branches, waiting to be shot; a bullet must take its head off or it is useless for the pot, but whizzing bullets do not disturb it, and several birds, sitting close together, can be picked off *seriatim.* Some dried sturgeon we found, too, on an island — an Indian sturgeon fishery — where great odorous strips were hanging in the sun. The braves were away, and the squaw left in charge was persuaded to sell us slabs of this excellent meat. In a deep, clear pool some half-dozen living monsters, hooked by the nose, turned slowly round and round, waiting the moment of their death. The island was interesting for another reason — it was an Indian canoe factory. Here the Redskins built their craft of birchbark, and a dozen canoes in various stages of completion lay in the broiling sun... To me it was all visible romance, adventure, wonder in the heart of an unspoilt spring, with Hiawatha round the next big bend. Paxton and R.M. Took another view...

On the eighth night — our last, had we known it — there was an "incident." Gallup had been unusually silent and extra offensive all day, had "galloped" at top speed, had refused to answer a single question, and the idea came to us all three simultaneously that he was not losing his way with the mere object of more money, but was taking us out of our route with a more sinister purpose.

We depended on the fellow entirely; words or violence were equally useless; we were quite helpless. He was convinced we carried money, for no three Englishmen of our type would make such a trip without it. What was easier, we whispered to one another, than to murder us and bury our bodies in the trackless, lonely forest? We watched him...

That night, exhausted to the bone, we camped on a point of wooded shore against the sunset. Across the broad reach of water, three miles away perhaps, was an Indian encampment. Pointed wigwams and the smoke of many fires were visible; voices were audible in the distance. The wind had died down as usual with the sun. A deep hush lay over the scene. And, hardly had we landed, almost too weary to drag ourselves up the bank, when Gallup stepped back into his Maine canoe and pushed off downstream without a word. He stood upright; he did not sit or kneel. His figure was outlined one minute against the red sky, the next his silhouette merged into the dark forest beyond. He disappeared.

He had gone, we agreed, for one of two reasons: to get food, or to return in the dark and pick us off, much as we picked off the grouse from the branches. We inclined towards the latter theory — and kept eyes and ears wide open. We made a diminutive fire in a hollow, lest we be too visible in the surrounding darkness. We listened, watched, and waited. It was already dusk. The night fell quickly. River and forest became an impenetrable sheet of blackness, our tiny fire, almost too small to cook on, the only speck of light. The stars came out, peeping through the branches. There was no wind. We shivered in the cold, listening for every slightest sound and the hours passed.

"He'll wait till we're asleep," said R.M., keeping his eyes open with the greatest difficulty. Paxton fingered his revolver and mumbled "Ouch! Ouch!"

Only the cold prevented us falling asleep, as, weapons in hand, we took turns to watch and listen. Had we the right to fire the instant we saw a figure? Should we wait till the scoundrel made a sign? We discussed endlessly in whispers. Though no wind stirred the branches, the noises in that "silent" forest never ceased, because no forest ever is, or can be, really silent. The effort of listening produced them by the dozen. On every side twigs snapped and dry wood crackled. Soft, stealthy footsteps were everywhere on the pine-needles. Canoes landed higher up and lower down; paddles dripped out in the river as someone approached; sometimes two or three dim figures crouched low on the shore, sometimes only one. Finally, for safety's sake, we let the fire go out altogether.

Armed to the teeth, we were still shivering in the cold darkness well on into the night, and at some distance from the dying embers, when suddenly — we nearly screamed — there was a sound of a voice. It was a man's voice; he was angry; he was cursing. A flame shot up beneath the trees. We saw Gallup on his knees blowing up the hemlock coals. He had landed, pulled his canoe on to the bank, and come up to within a few yards of where we stood without our hearing the faintest sound.

He said no word. He cooked himself no food. He just made a huge fire, spread his blanket beside the comforting blaze, curled up, and fell asleep. We soon followed his example. Probably he had enjoyed a square meal with the Indians, then sauntered home to bed... Next day we reached Rainy Lake City, paid him off, and saw him push off upstream in his Maine canoe without having uttered a single word. He just counted the dollar bills and vanished.

Rainy Lake City was a few acres roughly cleared from the primeval forest, yet with avenues cut through the dense trees to indicate streets where tramcars were to run at some future date. River, lake and forest combined to make an enchanting scene. There were perhaps a hundred men there. There was gold, but there was no gold-dust, no shining pans to sift the precious sand; in a word, no placer-mining. It was all quartz; machinery to crush the quartz had to be dragged in over the ice in the winter. Capital was essential, large lumps of capital. A word of inquiry in New York could have told me this. I felt rather guilty, but very happy. Paxton and R.M. Were philosophical. No word of blame escaped their lips. They had the right to curse me, whereas both played the part of Balaam. Even at the time I thought this odd. Neither of them seemed to care a straw. "We'll stake a claim," said R.M. At intervals. Perhaps both were so pleased to have arrived safely that they neither grumbled nor abused me. The truth was that, like myself, though for rather different reasons, both of them were relieved to be "away from home." The engineer, I discovered later, was glad that 1,500 miles lay between him and New York City.

We pitched our tent by the shore and proceeded to investigate. Living cost little. It was sunny weather, it was spring. One company was already sinking a shaft and working a small crusher; there were shacks and shanties everywhere; the “city “was as peaceful as the inside of St. Paul’s Cathedral; we saw no hairy men, but we saw mosquitoes. With the first warm nights these pests emerged for the season in their millions; they were very large and very hungry; they hung in the air like clouds of smoke; they welcomed us; as R.M. Said, they had probably written the newspaper accounts that advertised the place. We had no netting. They stung the bears blind; they would have stung a baby to death, had there been any babies, except ourselves, to sting. The only gold we saw was a lump, valued at $5,000, lying beside a revolver on the counter of the Bank of Montreal’s shack. The clerk allowed us to hold it for a second each. It was the only gold we touched... We investigated, as mentioned; we wandered about; we fished and shot, we rubbed Indian stuff over our faces to keep the mosquitoes off; we enjoyed happy, careless, easy days, bathing in ice-cold water, basking in hot sunshine, resting, loafing, and spinning yarns with all and sundry round our camp-fires. After New York it was a paradise, and but for the mosquitoes, we could have dressed in fig leaves.

Except for the question of having enough money to get out again before the iron winter set in towards October, we might have spent the whole summer there. We decided to leave while it was still possible. To paddle a hundred and fifty miles against the stream was not attractive. We would do the trip on foot. Selling tent and canoe to the clerk in the bank, we set out across the Twenty-Six Mile Portage one day towards the end of June. A party of five men, also bound for Duluth, joined us, and one of them was — Morris.

Those happy, unproductive goldfields! That untenanted Rainy Lake City where no tramcars ever ran, nor faro-tables flourished! Morris, the hairy desperado! In the dismal New York days that followed they seemed to belong to some legendary Golden Age. Romance and adventure, both touched with comedy, went hand in hand, beauty and liberty heightening some imagined radiance. Wasted time, of course, but for that very reason valuable beyond computation. Stored memories are stored energy that may prove the raw material of hope in days that follow after. Even Morris, the “stiff,” and cut-throat, played his little part in the proper spirit. There was a price on his head in Canada. We watched him closely; we watched his partners too. The Twenty-Six Mile Portage cut off an immense bend of the Vermilion River, running through the depths of trackless, gloomy forest the whole way. Nothing was easier than to “mix us up with the scenery” as a phrase of those parts expressed it. Especially must we be on our guard at night. One of us must always only pretend to sleep. Our former mistake about Gallup need not make us careless. A natural instinct to dramatize the expedition might have succeeded better if Morris, the villain, had not sometimes missed his cue and failed to realize the importance of his role.

The scenery, at any rate, was right. The weather broke the very day we started, and the region justified its translated Indian name. A drenching rain fell sousing on the world. With our heavy packs we made slow progress, crawling in single file beneath the endless dripping trees, soaked to the skin in the first ten minutes. There was no trail, but Morris had a compass. Darkness fell early on the first night when we had covered barely six miles. Morris found a deserted lumbermen’s shanty. One man chopped down a pitch-pine and cut out its dry heart of resinous wood which caught fire instantly; another soaked a shred of cedar-wood in a tin mug filled with melted bacon fat; a third cooked dinner for the whole party; and by eight o’clock we all lay grouped about the fire, dodging the streams of water that splashed through the gaping remnants of the pine-log roof.

Outside in that windless forest the drip of the rain was like the sound of waterfalls, but it was a magnificent, a haunted, a legendary forest none the less. Our shanty was faintly lit by the flickering cedar-candle. Queer shadows danced, eyes glittered, the faces here and there seemed distorted oddly in the shifting flame and darkness that alternately rose and fell. One by one, dog-tired, we fell asleep. It was R.M.’s turn to watch. Before supper was ended even, he lay soundly slumbering, his head, with tousled hair and ragged beard, thrown back against the wall, his mouth, containing unswallowed food — so weary was he — half open. I exchanged a significant glance with Paxton over his collapsed body, meaning that we must watch instead.

Our steaming clothes dried slowly as the night wore on. The dripping trickle of the trees became louder and louder. Paxton, very thin now, looked like a scarecrow in his ragged shirt and coat. His customary exclamation was rarely heard. He fell asleep in turn. The rest of the party had been snoring for an hour or more. It was up to me to watch.

I watched. The next thing I knew was a sudden stealthy movement, and a low voice that woke me out of a slumber made of lead. The fire was low, the candle hardly flickered. Across the gloom I saw the movement that had waked me — Morris, the hairy man, was stirring. I watched him. He sat up. He leaned cautiously over — towards R.M. His hand stretched out slowly. Splendid fellow! I felt furious with R.M. For falling asleep, for keeping his mouth open in that idiotic way. Stupid idiot and faithless comrade! Morris, I saw, was doing something to his bulky, motionless figure, just about to slit him open perhaps. Well, let him slit! It was the head he touched. He was doing something to the sleeper's head — pushing it — pushing it sideways so that a stream of water through the roof might just miss falling on his shoulder and thus splashing the hairy man's own face with spray. I watched closely, faithful to my job. I saw Morris the Stiff take a bit of spare clothing out of his Pack and hang it over R.M.'s neck and shoulder. "I got no use for it," he was saying. "Yer friend might jest as well hev it." He knew, therefore, quite well that I was watching. But R.M. Knew nothing, less than nothing. He neither stirred nor woke. A more kindly, tender-hearted fellow than Morris the Stiff, no traveller in wild places could possibly desire.

It was perhaps a couple of hours later when I woke again, disturbed this time not by noise, but by the sudden absence of it. One winter's night the inhabitants of Niagara, similarly, woke up because, ice having formed, the thunder of the falls had ceased. I listened a moment, then went out. The rain had ceased, the clouds were gone, in a clear sky the three-quarter moon shone brightly. The rain-washed air seemed perfumed beyond belief. Nor did the old moon merely "look round her when the heavens were bare," she sprawled fantastically at full length, as it were, in her magnificent blue-black bed of naked space. I went out to a clear spot among the trees. Far away rose a soft murmur. The air hummed and shook with the roar of distant rapids, so calm and still the night was. No bird, no animal cried. The earth herself, it seemed, stopped turning in that wonderful stillness. Those few minutes painted a picture that memory must always keep...

Three months later the first week in October found us in New York again. The bullets were forgotten and, of course, unmentioned, and five months of glorious wasted time lay safely behind us.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IF IT IS impossible to recapture the boyish moods of those early days, it is also difficult not to import into these notes the point of view and feelings that belong to later life. Surely, but gradually, the scale of time changes with the years, and with it the range and quality of the emotions: to-day, a year seems a very brief period; the few months spent in the woods after our Gold Fields fiasco seemed both an eternity, yet far too brief. A faint flavour of childhood's immense scale, when twelve months was an immeasurable stretch of time, still clung to them, perhaps.'

But the magnet of New York drew us. Any idea of returning to England until I had made good was far from me. We arrived in the detested city late in October, with livings to earn, and with less money than when we had first come two years before. We took separate rooms this time, for I had learned my lesson about sharing beds and clothes and scanty earnings. It was to be each man for himself. Paxton disappeared immediately; only occasionally did I hear his "Ouch, Ouch!" again; M. found a bed in Harlem and started to teach boxing; I took quarters in East 21st Street, on the top floor of a cheap but cleanish house, and arranged for breakfast and dinner in a neighbouring boarding-house at $2.50 a week.

Two Germans lived in the adjoining attic. Through the thin wooden partition I heard their talk, their breathing, their slightest movement. They rarely came to bed before midnight; they talked the whole night through. Informing them in a loud voice that I understood their language made no difference; they neither stopped nor answered. Yet, oddly enough, I never once saw them 5 never met them on the stairs, nor in the hall, nor at the front door. They remained invisible, if not inaudible. But I formed vivid pictures of them, and knew from their conversation that they were not better than they need be. An old man and a young one, I gathered. An unpleasant house altogether, the low rent more easily explained than I at first guessed. Long afterwards I had my revenge upon those unsavoury Germans — by writing an awful story about them, "A Case of Eavesdropping," though by the time it was published they were probably either dead or in gaol. A sinister couple, these invisible Teutons!

My one main object was to avoid the *Evening Sun*: Any work was better, I felt, than a return to that hated sensational reporting. A place was always open to me under McCloy, but my detestation of the police court, and of the criminal atmosphere generally, was so strong that I would rather have taken a street-cleaning job under Tammany than go back to it. I therefore began by trying free-lance work, gathering news items and selling them for a dollar or two apiece to various papers, writing snippets of description, inventing incidents, and earning perhaps ten dollars a week on the average. It was hard going, but pawning and free lunches in the saloons made it possible to live. I knew all the tricks by now; I used them. The blanket off my bed occasionally spent a weekend with a new "Ikey," though getting it out of the house and back again was no easy matter, while the smell of the moth-balls I always expected must betray me. It was a poor blanket, too, worth only 50 cents from Ikey's point of view, and certainly not worth the foolish risk involved. For, literally — though this never once occurred to me at the time — it was stealing, and the fact that I told Ikey where it came from, hoping to extract thereby an extra half-dollar from him, could not have exonerated me if the landlady had met me on the stairs. Personally, I think the quantity of food I devoured at the free lunch counters in exchange for a five-cent glass of lager was a more flagrant case of theft. Only it was a recognized theft. The temporary absence of the blanket, anyhow, since I made my own bed, was never discovered, and my heart remained innocent of conscious burglary.

A dozen years before, aged 12, I had once been accused of stealing by the headmaster of the private school I adorned in Sevenoaks. I was innocent, but the evidence was both ludicrous and damning, so damning, indeed, that, strangely, I *felt* guilty and accepted the punishment. A terrifying experience, it haunted me for years, and the sight of a policeman, or the words "criminal judge," sent shivers down my spine long afterwards. When a little older, I came to suspect that it was worked up against me by the master to curry favour with an influential parent; but at the actual time I had visions even of prison — for something I had not done. All about a poem, too! At evening "prep" a "bit of poetry," as we called it, had to be learnt by heart; my own poetry book was lost; I borrowed young Gildea's. The last thing in the world I wanted to own was that poetry book of young Gildea, the last thing I wanted to do was to learn that poem by heart. I spent the hour, therefore, inscribing my name with elaborate flourishes on the title page. Twice I wrote it, with capitals, of which I was very proud; I thought it ornate and beautiful; and when the hour was over I tossed the book into my locker and forgot all about it. Next morning I was summoned into the headmaster's presence. He wore red whiskers about an otherwise cleanshaven face: a face of natural sternness, with a big nose, a mouth of iron, and steely blue eyes. He was a clergyman of evangelical persuasion.

I had no idea why I had been summoned, but his glance made me at once feel uneasy.

"Blackwood minor," he said in a solemn and portentous voice, "did you do — this?" He held out Gildea's poetry book towards me with the cover open. His finger pointed to my name in pencil, flourishes and all.

I was completely puzzled as to what was coming, but I admitted the signature of course.

"Is the book yours?" he asked. I said it was not. "Gildea has reported the loss of his own copy," the voice of doom went on. "It has been found — in your locker — and with your name written in it." The voice made me think of "and God spake "in the Bible.

He looked at me in such a way that I felt sure I was going to be flogged. What had I done? And why? I couldn't quite remember. No explanation came to me. The simple truth was too silly to mention. I had nothing to say except to admit everything. The man, with his awful manner and appalling aspect, terrified me. I stood speechless and paralysed, wondering what was coming next. The red whiskers made me think of Satan.

I little dreamed, however, that the headmaster would say what he then did say. He spoke with a terribly slow, deliberate emphasis.

"This is as grave a case of stealing," fell the awful words of judgment, "as ever came before a Criminal Judge. I have sent for your father."

I was petrified. It was enough to frighten any boy into his boots.

My father in due course arrived; Gildea's parents, both of them, arrived likewise; there were consultations, mysterious comings and goings; it was a day of gloom and terror; for some reason I made no attempt to defend myself; it all flabbergasted, frightened, puzzled me beyond understanding. I was made to confess to Gildea and to apologize to the parents. To my own father I said nothing. He looked troubled, yet somehow not as grave as he ought to have looked. Perhaps he had his doubts... What that fiendish headmaster, whose name I will not mention, had said behind my back, I did not know, for my father never referred to the matter afterwards, and both I and my brother were removed from the school at the end of the term. But I was severely punished — sent to Coventry for three days — for doing something I had both done and had not done, and the phrase "Criminal Judge" was burnt into my memory with letters of fire. My revenge was rather an oblique one — a fight with that headmaster's son, though about quite another matter. With each blow I landed — and I landed several — I saw red whiskers on a boy about my own age!

This digression concerning a poetry book occurs to me only now, while telling of my wickedness about the blanket. The lesson that master wished to teach me had no effect, for the simple reason that I had not stolen. The fear, however, doubtless remained; the injustice scored deep, bitter wounds. I trace back to it a curious persistent dread, not entirely obliterated even now: the dread of being accused of a crime I have not committed; yet where the evidence of guilt seems overwhelming. Patanjali's "Aphorisms" describe a method of living through in imagination all possible experiences. A series of laborious incarnations would be necessary to exhaust these experiences in the ordinary way. They can be lived out in the mind instead. In imagination, anyhow, thanks to that little school injustice, I have often tried to realize the feelings of a man serving a term of imprisonment for a crime he has not committed. Patanjali's interesting method is, at any rate, a means of opening the mind to a sympathetic understanding of many an experience one could not otherwise know. Only imagination must be sustained and very detailed, and the projection of the personality is not easy.

An interlude of play-acting now enlivened my period of free-lance journalism. Kay was in my life again, and the opportunity came through him. He had spent the summer between odd jobs on the stage, and odd jobs at buying and selling exchange in Wall Street. He made both ends meet, at any rate, and had a cheap room in the purlieus of Hoboken across the river. A part in a third-rate touring company had just been offered to him, and he said he could get me a part as well. One-night stands in the smaller towns of New York State with a couple of plays, of which “Jim, the Penman,” was one, formed the programme, and my utter ignorance of acting, he assured me, need not stand in the way. My salary would be $15 a week, with travelling expenses paid.

Gilmour, the leading man, and organizer of the company, was anxious to find someone like myself.

I jumped at it. Gilmour looked me up and down and said I’d do. I had only one line to say. I was a prison warder on sentry duty, pacing to and fro between the walls at night, when Gilmour, the hero, escaping from his cell, knocks me down after a brief struggle, and disappears into the night. A moment later the alarm is given; other warders arrive, find me wounded on the ground and ask which way the prisoner has gone. “That way,” I shout, pointing the direction before losing consciousness; whereupon the curtain falls.

It was not an exacting part. Gilmour said I should make a “bully warder.” My own shabby clothes, with a brown billycock hat, would do as they were. I was to carry a large wooden pistol. We rehearsed the scene, swaying to and fro, breathing hard, grunting with effort, cursing each other fiercely, until the prisoner, wrenching the pistol from me, struck me on the head and floored me. Such was my role.

I played it at Yonkers and Mount Vernon, three nights in each place, if memory serves me correctly, but “went through it” is the true description of my performance. For the theatre, either as a Writer or actor, I possess no trace of talent, a fact rediscovered recently when playing an insignificant part in Drinkwater’s “Oliver Cromwell” on tour with Henry Ainley. My dismissal at the end of the first week, however, was not due to this lack of skill — it was due to a pail of beer and the leading lady. For the leading lady, handsome daughter, I remember, of a Washington General, was the inspiration of the touring company, and it was for her *beaux yeux* that the enterprise was undertaken. Gilmour was what is known as “crazy “about her, his jealousy a standing joke among us, so that when those *beaux yeux* were turned upon my lanky, half-starved self, there were warnings that trouble might begin. But I was looking for salary and food rather than for trouble. In the dressing-room we underlings all shared together, though “dressing” was of negligible kind, I was quite safe. Chance meetings, however, were unavoidable, of course, and Bettina’s instinct for adventure was distinctly careless. It was here the pail of beer came in — into our crowded dressing-room. Who brought it, I have forgotten; the miscreant who stood treat to the band of hungry and thirsty Thespians is lost to memory. I only know that, empty of food as I was, my share of that gallon pail distinctly cheered me. The *beaux yeux* had been boldly rolling; another pair of eyes, not so lovely, had been rolling too. To be ungallantly honest about it, my own feelings were not engaged in any way, except on this particular night, when they were considerably roused — against that stupid, jealous Gilmour. The way he glared in my direction stirred my bile; the few glasses of beer made me reckless. When the escaping prisoner fought with me for the possession of the great wooden pistol, I refused to be “thrown.”

The scanty audience that night witnessed a good performance of my brief, particular scene. Gilmour cursed and swore beneath his breath, but he was a smaller man than I was. He could do nothing with me. What was a shocking performance in one sense, was a realistic and sincere performance in another. Had my share of the pail been slightly bigger than it was, I should undoubtedly have “thrown” the prisoner and spoilt the curtain. As it was, however, Gilmour managed in the end to wrench the pistol from me, and in doing so, his fury genuine, he landed me a blow on the forehead with its heavy butt that stunned me. I fell. He fled. Roars of applause I heard dimly. My brown billycock hat, I remember, fell on its springy brim, bounced into the air, then hopped away against the footlights. And all my interest went with my precious hat. To the warders who at once rushed on with cries of “He’s escaped! Which way did he go?” I used the right words, taking my cue correctly. Only I pointed in the wrong direction. I pointed towards my old hat against the footlights. It lay outside the curtain.

It is odd to think that somewhere in the undermind of the individual who lay half-stunned on the stage of a Yonkers theatre, pointing wildly at a dilapidated, but precious, old brown billycock, slept a score of books, waiting patiently for expression a few years later. It is difficult, indeed, as I write these notes, to realize that the individual who describes the incidents is the individual who experienced them. The body itself has changed every single physical particle at least four times in succession. Nor is the mind the same. With the exception of one or two main interests, easily handed on by the outgoing atoms to the incoming atoms in the brain, “I” possess little that the “I” of those distant New York days possessed. Even the continuity of memory is bequeathable by atoms leaving the brain to the new ones just arriving. Where, then, is the self who experienced years ago what the self holding this pen now sets down?

The “I,” during the next few years, at any rate, went rolling; rolling from one experience to another, if not cheerily, at least resignedly. Whatever happened — and what happened was mostly unpleasant — there was never absent the conviction that it was deserved, and must be lived out in a spirit of acceptance, until finally exhausted. Any other attitude toward unwelcome events meant evasion, and a disagreeable experience shirked merely postponed it to another time, either in this fife or another. There was, meanwhile, a real self that remained aloof, untouched, neither happy nor unhappy, a spectator, but a royal spectator. Into this eternal Self was gathered the fruit and essence of each and every experience the lower “I “passed through; the secret of living was to identify oneself with this exalted and untroubled royalty...

The rolling-stone went rolling, therefore, somewhat in this spirit, which helped and comforted, which made most things possible, bearable at any rate, because it was the outcome of that strange inner conviction established in my blood, a conviction, as mentioned, neither argument nor evidence could alter.

Letters from home, home memories as well, pertained now to some distant, unrecoverable region that was dead and gone. My mother’s letters — one every week without a single omission — expressed a larger spirit. Her faithful letters, secure in a sincere belief, were very precious, I remember. Sometimes, though never successfully, they tempted me almost to giving my full confidence and telling more than my camouflaged reports revealed. From the rest of my family, with the exception of a really loved brother, I knew myself entirely divorced, a divorce that later years proved final and somehow inevitable.

To my father, who was always something of a stranger to me, I could never tell my heart; my mother, on the other hand, always had my confidence, coupled with an austere respect. Few words passed between us, yet she always knew, I felt, my thoughts. And this full confidence dated, oddly enough, from an incident in early childhood, when I was saying the Lord's Prayer at her knee. There was a phrase that puzzled me even when I was in knickerbockers: "Lead us not into temptation....." I stopped, looked up into her face, and asked: "But *would* He lead me into temptation unless I asked Him not to?" Her eyes opened, she gazed down into mine with a thoughtful, if perplexed expression, for a moment she was evidently at a loss how to answer. She hesitated, then decided to trust me with the truth: "I have never quite understood those words myself," she said. "I think, though, it is best to leave their explanation to Him, and to say the words exactly as He taught them."

"Old souls" and "young souls" was a classification that ruled my mind in this New York period: my mother was of the former, my father of the latter. In the Old lay innate the fruits, the results, the memories of many many previous lives, and this ripeness of long experience showed itself in certain ways — in taste, in judgment, in their standard of values, in that mysterious quality called tact; above all, perhaps, in the type and quality of goods they desired from life. Worldly ambitions, so-called, were generally negligible in them. What we label to-day as the subconscious was invariably fully charged; also, without too much difficulty, accessible. It made them interesting, stimulating and not easily exhausted. Wide sympathies, spread charity, understanding were their hallmarks, and a certain wisdom, as apart from intellect, their invariable gift; with, moreover, a tendency to wit, if not that rare quality wit itself, and humour, the power of seeing, and therefore laughing at, oneself. The cheaper experiences of birth, success, possessions they had learned long ago; it was the more difficult, but higher, values they had come back to master, and among the humbler ranks of life they found the necessary conditions. Christ, I reflected, was the son of a carpenter.

The Young Souls, on the other hand, were invariably hot-foot after the things of this world. Show, Riches and Power stuck like red labels on their foreheads. The Napoleons of the earth were among the youngest of all; the intellectuals, those who relied on reason alone, often the prosperous, usually the wellborn, were of the same category. Rarely was "understanding" in them, and brilliant cleverness could never rank with that wisdom which knows that *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.* To me the Young Souls were the commonplace and uninteresting ones. They were shallow, sketchy, soon exhausted, the *Dutzend-menschen;* whereas, the others were intuitive, mature in outlook, aware of deeper values and eager for the things of the spirit...

Thinking over my distinguished relations, I found none fit to black the boots of that kindly waiter in Krisch's cheap eating-house, Otto, the Black Forest German, who trusted us for food and often forwent his trumpery tip with a cheery smile. And there were many others, whose memory remains bright and wonderful from those dismal New York years... A volume of "Distinguished People I have Met," for instance, would include the Italian bootblack at the corner of 4th Avenue and 20th Street, who had the sun in his face, in his bright black eyes and brown skin, and who trusted me sometimes for a month, although five cents meant as much to him as it did to me. The bigwigs I interviewed for newspapers are forgotten, but the faces of Otto and the Italian shine in memory still. I even remember the sentence the latter taught me. It invariably formed our daily greeting: *E molto tempo che siete stato amalato?* Often since have I spouted it in Italy, as bewildered by the voluble replies I could not understand, as the peasants were by my familiar enquiry after their health. Mrs. Bernstein, I think, would be entitled to a place, and Grant, who pawned his overcoat to buy me food, most certainly to full mention.

CHAPTER XXIX

WORTHY OF MORE detailed description, however, is the figure of an old, old man I met about this time, a dignified, venerable and mysterious being, man of the world, lawyer, musician, scholar, poet, but above all, exile. Incidentally, he was madman too. What unkindly tricks fate had played with his fine brain, I never learned with accuracy. It was but the ruin of a great mind I knew. Pain and suffering of no unusual order, as I soon discovered, had, at any rate, left his heart as wise and sweet and gentle as any I have ever known. His voice, his eyes, his smile, his very gestures, even, had in them all the misery and all the goodness of the world. Our chance meeting deepened into a friendship, the intimacy of which between Padre and Figlio — names he himself assigned respectively — yet never permitted a full account of his own mysterious past. The little I gathered of his personal history before he died some dozen years later in England, came to me from patchwork sources, but none of it from his own lips. What term the alienists might use to describe the mental disorder of Alfred H. Louis I do not know.

The first time I saw him he cut a sorry figure; an old fellow in far worse plight and even worse down at heel than I was myself. It was in an olive-oil warehouse, at No. 1, Water Street, on the river front. McKay, the owner, whom I had met through some newspaper story or other, had converted me to the wisdom of an occasional glass of olive oil. It was healthful and delicious, but to me its chief value was as food. On this day of broiling heat I had wandered in for a glass of oil, and, while waiting a moment for the owner to appear, I noticed an old tramp seated on a packing-case, gazing at me in penetrating fashion. He was a Jew, he was very small, his feet were tiny his hands, I took in, were beautiful. I thought of Moses, of Abraham, some Biblical prophet come to life, of some storied being like the Wandering Jew.

His atmosphere, that is, at once sent a message of something unusual to my imagination. But it was when McKay came in and, to my surprise, calmly introduced us as fellow Englishmen, that my mind was really startled — not because the old tramp was English, but because when he rose to shake my hand, it seemed to me that some great figure of history rose to address, not me, but the nations of the world. He reached barely to my shoulder, his face upturned to mine, yet the feeling came that it was I who looked up into his eyes. The dignity and power the frail outline conveyed were astonishing. He was a Presence. And his voice the same instant — though in some commonplace about having known Lord Dufferin — increased the air of greatness, almost I had said of majesty, that he wore so naturally. It was not merely cultured, deep and musical, it vibrated with a peculiar resonance that conveyed authority beyond anything I have known in any other human voice.

We talked *he* talked, rather... hunger, thirst, the afflicting moist heat of the day were all forgotten. New York City was forgotten too. His words carried me beyond this world, his language in that astonishing voice wore wings that brought escape. His long frock-coat, green with age and dirt; his broken boots and frayed trousers; his shapeless top hat, brushed the wrong way till it looked like a beehive coated with rough plush; his grimy collar without a tie; the spots upon his grease-stained waistcoat — all vanished completely. It was, above all, I think, the poetry in his voice and words that brought the balm and healing into my whole being. The way his hands moved too. We talked for several hours, for it was McKay's nasal interruption, saying he must close the warehouse, that brought me back to — Water Street.

Recklessly, though with a diffidence as though I were with royalty, I invited him to dine, but in the cheap Childs' Eating House where we "fed," I soon perceived that I had no reason to feel embarrassed. A cup of coffee and "sinkers "sufficed him, he took my shyness away, he won my easy and full confidence; and afterwards — for he refused to let me go — as we sat, that stifling night, on a bench in Battery Park, tramps and Wearie Willies our neighbours, but the salt air from the sea in our nostrils, he used a phrase that, giving me the calibre of his thought, was too significant ever to be forgotten. I had spoken of my hatred of the city and of my present circumstances in it. He peered into my face a moment beneath his dreadful hat, then, raising a beautiful hand by way of emphasis, his deep voice came to me like some music of the sea itself:

"No man worth his spiritual salt," he said with impressive gentleness, "is ever entangled in locality." He smiled, and the tenderness of the voice was in the eyes as well...

The little park emptied gradually, the heated pavingstones lost something of their furnace breath, the stars were visible overhead beyond the great arc lights, the parched leaves rustled faintly, and I spoke to him of poetry. He had lived with Longfellow, he had known Browning. The poetry of the world was in his soul — Greek, Latin, German, French, above all, Hebrew. I drank in his words, unaware of the passing hours. To me it was like finding a well in the desert when I was dying of thirst. Even the awful city he transfigured. Suddenly his lean fingers touched my arm, his voice deepened and grew soft, he took his hat off. “I will say my Night-Song to you now,” he said. “I can only say it to very, very few. For years I have said it to — no one. But *you* shall hear it.” If there was something in his voice and manner that thrilled me to the core, the poem he then repeated on that bench in Battery Park at midnight gave me indescribable sensations of beauty and delight. I realized I listened to a personal confession that was a revelation of the mysterious old heart beneath the green frock-coat. It seemed to me that Night herself spoke through him:

Known only, only to God and the night, and the stars and me!
        Prophetic, jubilant Song,
Smiting the rock-bound hours till the waters of life flow free;
And a Soul, on pinion strong,
Flieth afar, and hovers over the infinite sea
Of love and of melody:
While the blind fates weave their nets
And the world in sleep forgets.

Known only, only to me and the night, and the stars and God!
        Song, from a burning breast.
Of a land of perfected delights which the foot of man ne’er trod,
Like a foaming wine expressed

From passionate fruits that glowed ‘mid the boughs of the Eden lost.
Ere sin was born and frost;”
Song wild with desires and regrets,
While the world in sleep forgets.

Known only, only to me and God, and the night and the stars!
The beacon fire of song,
Flaming for guidance and hope while the storm-winds wage their wars;
Balm for the ancient wrong.
Dropping from healing wings on the wounds of the heart and brain.
Quenching their ancient pain:
Love-star that rises and sets,
While the world in sleep forgets.

Known only, only to God and me, and the stars and the night!
Dove that returns to my ark,
Murmuring of grief-floods falling, of light beyond all light:
Voice that cleaveth the dark.
Singing of earth growing heaven, of distant lands that bless,
Though they may not caress.
And, blessing, pay Love’s old debts,
While the world in sleep forgets.

Long before he ended the tears were coursing slowly down his withered cheeks, and when the last word died away a long silence came between us, for I could find no words to express the emotion in me. He took my hand and held it a moment tightly, then presently got up, put on his old hat again, with the remark that it was time for bed, and followed me slowly to a Broadway cable car. His small, frail figure seemed to have dwindled to a child's shadow as he moved beside me; he had a way of hunching his thin shoulders that still further dwarfed his height; I felt myself a giant physically, but in my mind *his* stature reached the stars. We exchanged addresses. He lived in 8th Street, a miserable attic, I learned later, though I never actually entered it. Of his mental disorder no inkling had then reached me. I watched him melt into the shadows of the side street with the feeling that I watched some legendary figure, some ancient prophet, some mysterious priest. He smiled at me; there was love and blessing in the brilliant eyes. Then he was gone... For me, at this time, to meet and talk with such a man held something of the fabulous. He had set fire to a hundred new thoughts and left them flaming in me.

It was in this way began a friendship that has always seemed to me marvellous, and that lasted till his death in England some fifteen years later. Sweet, patient, resigned and lovable to the end, he died incurably insane, the charity in him never tainted, the tenderness unstained, the passionate love of his kind, of beauty, of all that is lovely and of good report, unspoilt. The grimmest pain had not soured the natural sweetness in him, his gentle spirit knew no bitterness, his megalomania, complicated, I believe, with other varieties of disorder, was harmless and inoffensive. As Padre he still lives in my memory; as The Old Man of Visions ("The Listener"), he still haunts my imagination. "You have taken my name away," he chided me with a smile, when I published this picture of him. "I am now uncertain who I am. That is well. I am Anybody I choose to be. I will be Everybody." He had rooms in Great Russell Street at the time.

Though baptised by Charles Kingsley into the English Church, he later became a Roman Catholic, but, when the end came, he reverted to the blood and faith born in him. He was buried, by his own wish, in a Hebrew cemetery. The epitaph he so often told me with an ironic smile he had chosen for his own was not, however, used. Talk, he always declared, vain, excessive talk, lay at the bottom of every misunderstanding in the world. If people would talk less, there would be less trouble in life. "Sorry I spoke," was to be cut upon one of his tombstones; "Sorry they spoke" upon the other.

A poem he wrote — published, like the Night Song, in *Harper's Magazine* — describing death, I have kept all these years. The strange intensity of expression he put into the passage which begins: "The sand of my Being is fused and runs..." lives in my mind to this day. The title of the poem was "The Final Word":

Hence then at last!
For the strife is past
Of the Birth and Death, of the Self and Soul;
The memory breaks, the breath forsakes,
The waves of the aether o'er me roll.
The pulses cease, and the Hours release
Their wearied school of the nerves and brain;
I fall on the Deep of the Mystic Sleep,
Where the Word that is Life can be heard again.
And the fires descend, and my fragments blend.
And the sand of my Being is fused and runs
To the mould of a glass for the rays to pass
Of the Sun of the centre that rules all suns.
But, or ever I rest, I take from my breast
My blood-drained heart for the tablet white
Of a gospel page to the far-off Age —
O Hand eternal! — Come forth — and write!

CHAPTER XXX

THE PERSONALITY OF Alfred H. Louis is identified with New York for me; he accompanied my remaining years there, guide, philosopher and friend. He took in hand that indiscriminate heterogeneous reading which the Free Library made possible. He proved an unfailing and inspiring counsellor. How, why or whence he came to be in America at all I never knew. One thing that stirred him into vehemence, when the past was mentioned, was the name of Gladstone. With flashing eyes and voice of thunder he condemned the Grand Old Man, both as to character and policy, in unmeasured terms. Gladstone, apparently, had done him a personal injury as well. “We cannot let that man come among us,” was Gladstone’s dictum, when Louis’s name was being considered as a candidate for Parliament by the Party. “He is too earnest.” This fragment was all he ever told me, but there lay evidently much behind it. *“Too earnest!”* he repeated with contemptuous indignation.

Of his days at Cambridge he was more communicative, though, unfortunately, I kept no notes. The eloquence and earnestness of his speeches at the Union, when Sir William Harcourt was president, made, according to his own account, a great stir. Of Dr. (Bishop) Lightfoot, of Benson, afterwards Archbishop, he had intimate memories, coloured by warm praise. His book on “England’s Foreign Policy” (Bentley, 1869) apparently angered Gladstone extremely, and Louis’s political career was killed.

He was called to the bar. Of success, of important cases, he told me nothing. His early brilliance suffered, I gathered, a strange eclipse, and from things he hinted at, I surmised — I cannot state it definitely — that a period in some kind of *maison de santé* followed about this time. That he had been, then or later, in an asylum for the insane, I heard vouched for repeatedly in London years later. For an interval before the breakdown came, he was editor, or part-editor, of the Spectator, and in some similar connexion, as owner or editor, he served the Fortnightly too. George Eliot he knew well, giving me vivid descriptions of her famous Sundays, and of his talks with

George Henry Lewes and Herbert Spencer. He claimed to be the original of Daniel Deronda. He was a pupil of Sterndale Bennett's on the piano. Of his friendship with Cardinal Manning he had also much to tell.

It was in the domain of politics that I first began to notice the exaggeration and incoherence of his mind, and it was "in politics," evidently, that the deep wounds which would not heal had been received. In music, poetry, literature, above all in law, his intelligence had remained clear and sound, his judgments consummate, his knowledge encyclopaedic. Large tracts of memory in him were, apparently, obliterated, whole stretches of life submerged, but his legal attainments had remained untouched. A business friend of mine "briefed "him to lecture on International, Company and Patent Law; and the substance of those "Lectures "stood the test, years later, of the highest English and French Courts.

The lonely old man's kingdom was his mind, and he dwelt in it aloof, secure, contented, unassailable. Into the big empty stretches a half education had left in my own, he poured his riches with unstinted satisfaction, even with delight. Worldly advice he never proffered; the world had left him aside, he, in his turn, left the world aside. To practical questions he merely shook his Moseshead: "That," he would say, "you must decide for yourself. Considered in relation to the Eternities, it is of little moment in any case." To any question, however, of a philosophical kind, to any enquiry for explanation about what perplexed or interested me in the realm of thought, he would reply with what I can only call a lecture, but a lecture so lucid, so packed with knowledge and learning, with classical comment and quotation, often with passages of moving eloquence, and invariably in language so considered that no single word could have been altered, and the "essay" might have been published as it stood — lectures, in a word, that enthralled and held me spellbound for hours at a time. For his knowledge was not knowledge merely, it was knowledge transmuted by emotion into that spiritual wisdom called Understanding.

The respect he inspired me with was such that rarely did I venture upon a personal question, though I longed to know more about himself and his mysterious story. His face sometimes betrayed intense mental suffering. On one occasion, feeling braver, owing to a happy mood that seemed established naturally between us, I attempted rather an intimate question of some kind about his past. He turned and stared with an expression that startled me. It was so keen, so searching. For several minutes he made no reply. His eyes narrowed. I felt ashamed. I had wounded him. The truth was, it seems, I had touched his heart.

“Listen,” he said presently. In a voice full of tears and deep emotion, a very quiet, a very beautiful voice, he replied to my question. The expression of his eyes turned inwards, there rose in memory the ghostly figure of someone he had loved, perhaps loved still. The whole aspect of the old exiled poet became charged with an intolerable sadness, as he spoke the lines, not to myself, but to this vanished figure— “Shadowed by yearning memory’s raven wing”:

HEREAFTER

Thou know’st not, sweet, what must remain unknown
Through all that my poor words can say or sing.
The measure of the love to thee I bring.
One day thou wilt, when, by a graven stone
That bears a name, thou standest, white, alone,
Shadowed by yearning memory’s raven wing,
Rained on by blossoms of some wind-torn spring
Wherefrom thirst-quenching fruit shall ne’er be grown.
Then — power shall rest upon the vanished hand
Once too much trembling to thy touch for power;
Then — shall my soul at last thy soul command
As it might not in Time’s brief fitful hour;
And what Life’s fires might neither melt nor burn
Shall yield with tears to ashes and the urn.

I had my answer. Never again did I venture on a personal question.

All our talks came round to poetry in the end. It was his deepest love as well. Sound lawyer he may have been, but inspired poet, to me at least, he certainly was. His own poems he severely deprecated, calling them, with the exception of the "Night Song,"

"poor things, though from my heart." His room, it seems, was littered with them in manuscript, which he rarely tried, and never wished, to sell. Some time later Mr. Alden, Editor of *Harper's Magazine,* questioned me for information "about a wonderful old gentleman who comes into the office like an emperor, and offers me a poem as though he were parting painfully with a treasure he hardly dared let out of his keeping, and certainly does not wish to sell for cash." To all, thus, he was a mystery. If he was uncared for, he was at the same time indifferent to human care. Great intellect, great mind, great heart, he seemed to me, a wraith perhaps, but an august, a giant wraith, draped by mysterious shadows, dwelling in a miserable slum, cut off from his kind amid the dim pomp and pageantry of majestic memories.

It was thus, at any rate, with the pardonable exaggeration of ignorant twenty-five, I saw and knew the Old Man of Visions. It was his deep heart of poetry, rather than his fine intellect I worshipped. The under-mind in him, the subconscious region, I think, was whole and healed; it was the upper-mind, the surface consciousness, that alone was damaged. If this mind was wrecked, this brain partly in ruins, the soul in him peered forth above the broken towers, remaining splendidly aware. Not even the imperfect instrument through which it worked could prevent this fine expression: behind the disproportion of various delusions, behind the outer tumbled ruins, there dwelt unaffected in him that greater thing than any intellect — Understanding.

CHAPTER XXXI

IT WAS WITH a singular young man, who claimed proudly to be the illegitimate son of a certain duke, that I found myself presently in the eau de Cologne business. A long difficult winter had passed; all my friends had disappeared; there had been periods of dried apples again, of posing in studios, of various odd jobs, and of half-starving, with black weeks in plenty. I had moved into yet cheaper quarters, where I occupied a room that had been formerly a butler's pantry, and was so small that when the folding-bed was down the entire space from wall to wall was occupied. The wash-hand stand was a sink in a recess let into the wall and supplied with a tap.

When Mr. Louis visited me, as he did frequently, we lowered the bed and used it as a divan. The door could not open then. I made tea in the sink. We talked...

If Louis's atmosphere suggested choirs and places where they sing, that of Brodie, as I may call him here, was associated with bars and places where they drink. Not that he drank himself, for he was most abstemious, but that in certain superior saloons, all of them far above my means, he was usually to be found. A simple, yet complex, generous as well as mean creature, with all the canniness of the Scot, with his uncanniness as well, his education had been neglected, he read with difficulty, and only wrote well enough to sign his name laboriously to a cheque. He, too, like Louis, had his mystery; there was no one, indeed, in my circle of those days whose antecedents would bear too close a scrutiny.

I was first introduced to him by a burly Swede, with hands like beef-steaks, and the shoulders of a heavy-weight fighter, who was later arrested and sent to gaol for picking pockets. His notoriety as a sneak-thief none of us had guessed, and how those bulky hands could have accomplished anything neat and clever was a puzzle. In the Scotsman's pleasant quarters, somewhat outlandishly furnished by himself on a top floor, the Swede had made himself at home too long. Brodie, the prey of many who, invited for a day or two, stayed on for weeks, was glad to see his back. His weak good-nature, refusing to turn his guests out, was the cause of endless troubles with men who sponged upon his kindness and his purse. This and his eau de Cologne business, “me beezness” as he called it, were his sole topics of conversation. He had money to spend — was it an allowance? We never knew — and was always well dressed; many a square meal he stood me; there was something in his soft West of Scotland voice that drew me to this odd fish in the “perfumery line.” It reminded me of happier days. And I have described his habits at some length, because it was owing to a small service I rendered him, and rendered myself at the same time, that I became a partner in “me beezness” of manufacturing and selling eau de Cologne made from the Johann Maria Farina recipe.

Brodie’s social aspirations were very marked; to hear him talk one would have thought him heir to a dukedom; he had, too, a curious faculty for getting his name associated with people above him in the social world. How he managed it was a problem I never solved. His instinct for smelling out and using such folk was a gift from heaven. To see his name in the paper gave him supreme happiness. Real “Society” of course. Ward Macallister’s Four Hundred, lay beyond the reach of what was actually a peasant type, but there were less select fields he worked assiduously with great success. There was matter for a play, a novel, a character study, at any rate, in Brodie, who himself, I learned much later, had come out to New York as valet to Clyde Fitch, the playwright, and whose recipe for the “genuine Johann Maria Farina,” his successful “beezness,” was stolen property. My father’s son knew certainly queer bedfellows in that underworld in New York City.

Meeting him in one of his usual haunts one night, he complained bitterly of a young man he had invited for a week, but who had stayed a month, and stayed on still. The name, which need not be mentioned, was a well-known one. It was a bad case of imposition, by a man, too, who had ample means of his own. I offered to turn him out, much to Brodie’s alarm. That is, he both desired the result and feared it. Next morning I arrived in the oddly-furnished rooms and found Brodie cooking breakfast for the undesirable young man who had imposed on his host too long, and who still lay in bed. It was a comic scene, no doubt, for Brodie, though frightened, bore out my accusations while he fried the eggs, and the other blustered noisily until he found out that bluster was of no avail; and then, threatening an action for assault, got suddenly out of bed and dressed himself. Half-an-hour later he was, bag and baggage, in the street, while I went down and sold the "story "to the *New York Journal,* who printed it next morning with big headlines, but also with a drawing showing the eviction scene. No action for assault followed, however; I received twenty dollars for my "story"; and Brodie, full of gratitude — his name was mentioned in flattering terms — offered to take me into partnership in "me beezness." I demurred at first. "You might help me with the correspondence," he suggested cautiously. I was to be his educated partner and his pen.

All that spring and summer I received ten dollars a week which, in addition to free-lance newspaper work, enabled me to live in comparative luxury. In a dark little back-office on Broadway and 8th Street, the eau de Cologne was made. It might have been the secret headquarters of an anarchist fraternity, or the laboratory of some mediaeval alchemist, such was the atmosphere of secrecy, of caution and of mystery. It never occurred to me that anything was wrong. Our only assistant was a young Polish girl named Paola, a beautiful, dark-haired Jewess. The precious recipe I was never allowed to see. Great flagons in wicker coverings stood in rows upon long shelves; the mixing of the ingredients was a delicate operation lasting an hour; the room smelt rich and sweet of spices that made me think of Araby and the East. It was a curious and picturesque scene — the rather darkened room, the perfume-laden air, the hush no traffic could disturb, the great, mysterious flagons, which might almost have concealed forty thieves, the canny Scot of doubtful origin, the beautiful Jewess, the air of caution and suspicion that reigned over all. The filling of the bottles in two sizes, affixing the labels, flavouring the soap — we made eau-de-Cologne soap too — answering the letters, writing flowery advertisements, and so forth, occupied the entire day. Brodie, a born salesman, would take a cab and visit the big stores with samples — Macy's, Siegel and Cooper, and others whose names I have forgotten. He never came back without an order. The business flourished.

I made no secret of being in the perfumery trade. I had moved into a larger room at my boarding-house.

I had bought boots, some new linen, and most of my things were out of pawn. Then, presently, here and there, I began to notice things I did not like. Rumours reached me. Hints were dropped, sometimes more than hints, that made me wonder and look over my shoulder a little. No member of my immediate circle at this time was of too sweet origin nor of too stainless habits, yet from these came the rumours and the hints. I had better "keep my eyes peeled," and the rest...! One man in particular who warned me was an elderly, shrewd German, friend of Brodie's, and himself a mystery. His occupation was unknown, however, even to Brodie; he hid it carefully away; he led a double life, protecting himself with the utmost skill and caution behind a screen of detail none of us ever pierced. "Von" Schmidt, as he styled himself, was educated; also he had a heart; for once, when I was in a state of collapse from hunger, he brought oysters for me at great trouble to himself, having to go out on a rainy night and bring them some distance along the street; from which moment, though the unpleasant mystery about him intrigued and cautioned me, I became his friend. We talked German together. His one desire, he confided to me, was to marry a rich woman, and once he clumsily proposed to arrange a rich marriage for myself if I would give him a — commission on results!

His personality is worth this brief description, perhaps, since it sheds light, incidentally, upon the world I lived in. Always most carefully dressed, he occupied a single room in a well-appointed house in East 22nd Street, talking airily of a bedroom on the floor above, of a bathroom I was sure he never used, and complaining apologetically of "this awful house I'm in for the moment." His pose was that of an aristocrat, proud and resigned among untoward circumstances, and it was through no mistake of his own that this humbug did not impose on me. I just knew it was all bunkum. His actual business, I felt sure, was unsavoury, though Brodie, having once discovered artificial flowers in his coat pocket, thought he was a floor-walker in some big store. Various suspicious details confirmed me later in the belief that his real occupation was blackmailing.

In his single room, at any rate, where a piece of furniture against the wall covered with framed photographs of German notabilities was in reality a folding-bed — I never once, since the oysters, betrayed that I knew this — he lived "like a gentleman." Every night, from nine o'clock onwards, he was "at home"; a box of cigars, various liqueurs, he offered without fail, and "with an air "if you please, although the former never held more than three or four cigars, the bottles never more than enough to fill two glasses, because "my servant, confound him, has forgotten again to fill them." He had no servant, of course, and the minimum of replenishing was done by himself every evening before nine o'clock. "Then you are a Baron really?" I said once, referring to the "von" before his name. He looked at me with the disdainful smile a prince in difficulties might have worn: "In this city of snobs and scoundrels," he said lightly, "I have dropped my title. The 'von' alone I find more dignified." He left the house. I found, every morning sharp at eight, and this was in favour of Brodie's theory that he had some regular job. He was an experienced, much-lived old bird, a touch of something sinister about him always, about most of his friends as well. Some very disagreeable types I surprised more than once in his well-furnished room. He "knew the ropes," knew men and women too, his counsel was always sound in worldly matters. A lack of humour was his chief failing, it seemed to me, while his snobbery was another weakness that probably led many of his schemes to failure. Every summer, for instance, he would go for two weeks to Newport, where the rank and fashion went. "When I was at Newport," or "I am going to Newport next week," were phrases his tongue loved to mouth and taste like fine wine. But his brief days there were spent actually in a cheap boarding-house, although the letters he wrote to all and sundry, to myself included, bore one word only as address: "Newport," made from a die, at the head of his coloured paper.

It was von Schmidt, then, who warned me about Brodie and his eau-de-Cologne business: "He is a fool, a peasant. There will be trouble there. Do not identify yourself with him or his business. It is not worth while....." And his manner conveyed that he could tell something more definite if he liked, which I verily believe was the case. Brodie, I was convinced later, paid him tribute. I began to feel uncomfortable. One day I asked Brodie, point blank, what his recipe was and how he came by it? "That's me own beezness," he replied. "There's nothing to be nairvous about." I consulted "old Louis."

"If you feel the faintest doubt," was his answer, "you should leave at once." I decided to get out. Brodie asked me to wait the current month. I agreed.

Before the end of the month, however, when I left the eau-de-Cologne business, a most unpleasant and alarming incident occurred. The terrible thing, long dreaded in a vague kind of way, had overtaken me at last. I was to be convicted of a crime I had not committed. I might even be sent to gaol.

Brodie’s outlandish furnishing of his rooms has been mentioned purposely; they were filled with an assortment of showy trash that could not have deceived a charwoman; fifty dollars would have covered everything. He was proud of his curtains, rugs and faked draperies, however; showed them off with the air of a connoisseur; hinted at their great value. He had insured them, it always pleased him to mention. The *New York Journal,* describing the eviction scene, had referred to his fine apartment “furnished with exotic taste and regardless of cost,” adding this touch of colour which was certainly not my own. Brodie, thus encouraged in print, promptly took out another fire policy in a second company. And one day, while toying with his flagons, he mentioned casually that he was having “me place done up a bit,” new paint, new paper were to be put on, and — might he bring his clothes to my room until this was finished, as his own cupboard space was limited?

He brought the suits himself, carrying them one by one concealed inside a folded overcoat upon his arm. He did this always after dusk. No suspicion stirred in me. My own cupboards were, of course, empty. Brodie’s fine wardrobe now filled them. It all seemed natural enough; certainly it roused no doubt or query in me; neither did the party to which I was invited a few days later, which included a “distinguished” member, of course, a famous dress-designer from Europe, with whose publicity campaign in the Press, Brodie had contrived to get his name associated.

We were a party of five men, and we met at our host’s rooms before going out to dine, the rooms that had just been done up; and attention, I recall, was drawn particularly to the beauty, rarity and value of his variegated trash. The electric light was shaded, a big coal fire burned in the grate, at a cursory glance the apartment might possibly have produced a favourable impression of expense and richness. But our host did not allow us to linger; there was a hurried cocktail, and we were gone. I remember that I was last but one in the procession down the stairs from this top floor; Brodie, who had held the door open for us to pass, came last. Also I remembered later, that as we reached the next flight, he said he had forgotten something, and dashed upstairs again to fetch it. A moment later he rejoined us in the street, and we all went on to dinner. “It was a kind of house-warming party,” he explained.

The evening passed pleasantly. We went on to Koster and Bid’s music hall, and after that, to supper in some Tenderloin joint or other. And it was here I first noticed a change in our host. Something about him was different. His behaviour was not what was normal to him. His face was pale, his manner nervous and excited; though there was no drink in him to account for it, he was overwrought, unusually voluble, unable to keep still for a single moment. I had never seen him like this before, and the strangeness of his behaviour arrested me. Once or twice, *à propos* of nothing, he referred to the money he had spent on his apartment; and more than once in asides to me, he spoke of the value of his rugs and curtains, engaging my endorsement, as it were. The other men, who knew him less intimately, probably noticed nothing, or, if they did, attributed it to the excitement of alcohol... But it made me more and more uneasy. I didn't like it; I watched him attentively. I came to the strange conclusion, long before the evening was over, that he was frightened. And when he met suggestions that it was time for bed with obstinate refusals, anxious and nervous at the same time, I knew that he was more than frightened, he was terrified.

Once when I asked him whether he felt unwell, there was startled terror in his cunning eyes as he whispered: "I dreamed of rats last night. Something bad will be coming." His face was white as chalk. To dream of rats, with him, always meant an enemy in the offing; a dozen times he had given me instances of this strange superstition; to dream of an acquaintance in connexion with these unpleasant rodents meant that this particular acquaintance was false, an enemy, someone who meant him harm. I, therefore, understood the allusion in his mind, but this time, for some reason, I did not believe it. He was lying. The terror of a guilty conscience was in those startled eyes and in that sheet-white skin. I felt still more uneasy. I was glad I had put my resignation from the "beezness" in writing. There was trouble coming in connexion with that recipe, and Brodie already knew it.

It was after two in the morning when we reached home. My rooms were a couple of streets before his own, but he begged me to see him to his door. His nervous state had grown, meanwhile, worse and worse; his legs failed him several times, seeming to sink under his weight; he took my arm; more than once he reeled. There was something about it all, about himself particularly, that made my skin crawl. The awful feeling that I, too, was to be involved increased in me.

As we turned out of Fourth Avenue into his street, a loud noise met us: a prolonged, hoarse sound, a clank of machinery in it somewhere, another sound as well that pulsed and throbbed. A dense crowd blocked the way. There was smoke. A fire engine was pumping water into a burning building — the one that Brodie lived in. These details I noticed in the first few seconds, but even before I had registered them Brodie uttered a queer cry and half-collapsed against me. He was speechless with terror, and at first something of his terror he communicated to me, too. My heart sank into my boots. The "rats" I understood instantly, had nothing to do with his eau de Cologne recipe. This was a far more serious matter.

Fires were no new thing to me, and this evidently was only a small one, but, none the less, people might have been burned to death. Telling my companion to wait for me, and to keep his mouth shut whatever happened, I produced some paper and pushed my way through the crowd to the police cordon, saying I was from the *Evening Sun.* Though I had no fire-badge, the bluff worked. I ran up the steps of the familiar house. "Which floor is it? How did it start? Is it insured? Is anybody burned?" I asked a fireman. The answer came and I jotted it down; it was the top floor, how it started was unknown, nobody was hurt — it was heavily insured.

It had been burning for four hours, the worst was over, the fire was out; only steam and smoke now filled the staircase and corridors. The street was covered with a litter of ruined furniture. The occupants of the lower floors stood about in various attire; I caught unpleasant remarks as I dashed upstairs to Brodie's floor. Hoses, I found, were still at work; the room we had left six hours before was gutted; a gaping hole permitted a view of the room on the floor below, and this hole began immediately in front of the grate. A black woolly mat with long hair, I remembered, had lain on the floor just there. The unpleasant remarks, as I ran up, had reference to insurance; phrases such as "over-insured,"

"too well insured" were audible. They were the usual phrases uttered at the scene of a New York fire, where arson was as common as picking pockets; I had heard them a hundred times; they had furnished clues for my newspaper stories. On this occasion they held a new significance.

Brodie shared my folding-bed that night, but he did not sleep. He cried a good deal. He said very little. He referred neither to the loss of his stuff, nor to the fact of its being covered by insurance, nor to how and why the fire started. He was frightened to the bone.

Next day, when we visited the burned apartment to secure what fire and water had spared, Brodie was abused and scarified by the inmates as he went upstairs... Weeks of keen anxiety followed, of worse than anxiety. The insurance companies refused to pay the claims, which Brodie, after much hesitation, had sent in. They decided to fight them. The lawyer — a *scheister,* meaning a low, unprincipled type of attorney who would take any case for the money it might contain — bled my friend effectively by preying on his obvious fear. He was summoned to give witness before a hearing in the offices of the company, and I shall never forget his face when he met me that night with the significant words: "They know everything about me, everything about you too. They even know that I took all my clothes to your room before it happened. They are going to summon you to give evidence too."

I consulted with "old Louis," telling him the full story, but making no accusations. "Few people are worthy to live with," was his comment, "fewer still to share one's confidence. You must tell the truth as you know it. You have nothing to fear." I was searchingly examined by the company's lawyer and my evidence made, I saw, a good impression. No awkward leading questions were put. Brodie had been kind to me; I knew nothing definite against him; in his ignorance, which I described, he might well have thought his possessions were of value. It had nothing to do with me, at any rate, and there was A perfectly good explanation for his clothes being in my cupboard. None the less, it was a trying ordeal. Worse, however, was to follow. The fire marshal, recently appointed, a proverbial new broom, was out to put down the far too frequent arson in the city. Fire Marshal Mitchell — I see his face before me still — intended to Prosecute.

This was a bombshell. My imaginative temperament then became, indeed, my curse. Waiting for the summons was like waiting for the verdict of a hostile jury. I waited many days, hope alternating with fear. I felt sure I was being watched the whole time. Brodie and I never met once. I changed my room about this time, though for reasons entirely disconnected with this unpleasant business (I had obtained a violin pupil in another house), and I wrote to the fire marshal informing him of my new address, in case, as I understood was probable, he might want my evidence.

But what really alarmed me most was my inside knowledge of New York justice. I had seen too many innocent men sent up; I had heard faked evidence in too many police cases; I knew that, without a “pull,” I stood but little chance of escaping a conviction as an accessory to what they would call a wanton case of arson. I was not even on the staff of a newspaper at the time. I had no influence of any sort behind me. Nor were my means of support too “visible,” a Britisher, a highly-connected Britisher into the bargain, it was just what the new-broom fire marshal was looking for. It would make a big case for the Press. The agony of mind I endured was ghastly, and the slow delay of long waiting intensified it... One evening, on coming home about dusk, I saw a strange man in the little hall-way of my house. He asked me my name. I told him. He handed me a blue paper and went out. It was the long-expected subpoena from the fire marshal. I was summoned to attend at eight o’clock two mornings later in his office.

My emotions that night and the next day were new experiences to me; I heard the judge sentence me, saw myself in prison for a term of years with hard labour. I began to feel guilty. I knew I should say the wrong thing to the fire marshal. I should convict myself. The truth was the truth, but everything pointed against me; I knew Brodie as a friend, I was his business associate, was frequently in his rooms, had accepted kindnesses from him, I needed money badly, I had hidden his good clothes in my cupboards a few days before the fire. I had been with him on that particular night, I had left the room with him — last of the party. I should be looked upon as guilty, it was for me to clear myself. Prejudice against me, too, as an Englishman would be strong. The Boyde episode would be revived, and twisted to show that I consorted with law-breakers. I should stammer and hesitate and appear to be hiding the truth, to be lying, and I should most certainly look guilty. The thing I dreaded had come upon me. I thought of my home and family.

It all made me realize with a fresh sharpness the kind of world poverty had dragged me down to, with the contrast between what I had been born to and what I now lived in..... I needed every scrap of strength and comfort my books could give me. That I was exaggerating like a schoolboy never occurred to me. I suffered the tortures of the damned, of the already condemned, at any rate. That I was innocent of wrong-doing was, for some reason, no consolation: I had got myself into an awful mess and should have to pay the price.

The wildest ideas filled my brain; I would call and enlist the influence of McCloy of various officials, of headquarters detectives, of D. L. Moody the Revivalist, who was then preaching in New York and who had been a guest in my father's house, of the Exchange Place banker, even of von Schmidt, though fear of blackmail stopped me here. But reflection told me how useless such a proceeding would be. The Republicans, besides, were in power at the time, and Tammany had no "pull." I even thought of Roosevelt, whom, as President of the Police Board, I had often interviewed. The fire marshal would rejoice in the case, of course, for, as with the Boyde story, the newspapers would print it at great length. There lay much *kudos* for him in it. I had no sleep that night, as I had no friend or counsellor either. I thought of spending it in Bronx Park with the trees, but it occurred to me that, if I were being watched, the act might be interpreted as an attempt to escape — for what would a New York fire marshal make of my love of nature?

The following day, as the dreaded examination grew closer, was a day of acute misery — until the late afternoon, when I met by chance the man who saved me. I shall always believe, at least, that "saved" is the right word to use.

A coincidence, as singular as the coincidence of catching Boyde, was involved. Fate, anyhow, brought me across the path of Mullins, the one man who could help, just at the time and place, too, where that help could be most effectively given. The word coincidence, therefore, seems justified.

Mullins, the Irishman, was an editorial writer on the *Evening Sun* when I was a reporter there; he disliked the paper as heartily as I did, and his ambition was to join the staff of the *New York Times,* where Muldoon, another Irishman, a boon companion, was City Editor.

He had proved a real friend to me in my days of gross inexperience. "If ever I get on the *Times,"* he used to say, "I'll try and get a place for you, too. It's a fine, clean paper, and they treat a man decently." He had realized his ambition just about the time I went into the eau-de-Cologne business, but had said there was no vacancy for me. There might be one later. He would let me know. For months, however, we had not met, and the matter had really left my mind. And it was now, when I was casting about in a state of semi-panic for someone who might help me, that I suddenly thought of Mullins. As a last hope, rather, I thought of him, for it seemed a very off-chance indeed.

For various reasons I did not act upon the idea, but Mullins was in my mind, so much, so persistently, so often, that I kept seeing him in passers-by. I mistook several strangers for Mullins, until close enough to see my mistake. Then, suddenly, in Union Square, towards evening, I did see him. I was sitting on a bench. He walked past me. He was on his way to an assignment. I told him the whole story, making no accusations, but omitting no vital detail. He listened attentively, his face very grave. He shared my own misgivings. "It's just the kind of case Mitchell's looking for," he said. "He wants to make a splash with it. But I think I can fix it for you. Guess what my assignment is at this moment?"

And then he told me. His job that evening was a special interview with Mitchell, a descriptive story of the newly-appointed fire marshal, his personality and character, his plans for suppressing arson, and it was to be a front-page article. Mullins could make him or mar him; he had a free hand in the matter; the *Times* was a Republican organ. It would mean a great deal to Mitchell. "He comes from my part of Ireland," said Mullins with a grin and a wink. And then he added that he had spoken to Muldoon about me only the day before, and that Muldoon had promised me a place on the paper the moment it was possible — in a few weeks probably. "I shall just mention to Mitchell that you're going on the *Times*," was his significant parting word to me, as he hurried off to keep his appointment.

My examination next morning was robbed of much of its terror. The fire marshal was evidently not quite sure of himself, for, if manner, voice and questions were severe, I detected an attitude that suggested wavering. A shorthand writer behind me took down every word I uttered, and the searching examination about the clothes, my social and business relations with Brodie, my knowledge, if any, concerning the value of his rugs and curtains, especially concerning the night of the fire and the details of how we left the room, gave me moments of acute discomfort. Although Mitchell rarely once looked straight at me, I knew he was observing my every word and gesture, the slightest change in facial expression, too. He confined himself entirely to questions, allowing no hint of his own opinion to escape him, and yet, to my very strung-up attention, he betrayed the uncertainty already mentioned. I, of course, confined myself entirely to answers, brief, but without hesitation.

My instinct, right or wrong, was to protect Brodie, a man who had shown me real kindness. I remembered the meals, for one thing. In any case, it was not for me to express opinions, much less to bring an accusation. And, towards the end of a gruelling half-hour, I began to feel a shade more comfortable. When, with a slightly different manner, the fire marshal began to ask personal questions about my own career, I felt the day was almost won. I gave a quick outline of my recent history, though I never once mentioned the name of Mullins; let fall the detail, too, that I was an Irishman, and, a little later, seizing an opening with an audacity that surprised myself even while I said the words, I congratulated Mr. Mitchell upon his campaign to crush out the far too frequent arson in the city. "As a newspaper man," I gave this blessing, and the shot, I instantly saw, went home. If I could be of any use to him on the *Times,* if any suspicious case came my way, I added that I should always be glad to serve him. For the first time the fire marshal smiled. I shot in a swift last stroke for Brodie, though an indirect one. "But you don't want any *mis*fires," I ventured, inwardly delighted that the play on the word amused him. "A big ease that failed of a conviction would be damaging."

We shook hands as I left soon after, though the final comfort he denied me. For when I mentioned that my present address would always find me "if you need me again," he merely bowed and thanked me. He did *not* say, as I hoped he would, "your presence will not be required any more."

CHAPTER XXXII

SIX WEEKS LATER, when the torrid summer heat was waning and September breezes had begun to cool the streets, the nights, at any rate, I found myself a reporter on the staff of the *New York Times.* My salary of $35 a week seemed incredible. It was like coming into a fortune, and its first effect was to make a miser of me. I had learned the value of the single cent; I found myself fearful of spending even that cent. I understood why people who pass suddenly from want to affluence become stingy, complaining always of being hard-up. I determined to save. I opened an account in a Savings Bank against another rainy day. This trait, acquired in my unhappy New York period, remains in me still, I notice. Never have I known from that time to this what it means to be comfortably off, free from financial anxiety for more than a month or two ahead, yet each time an extra bit of money comes in, I am aware of the instinct to be extremely, unnecessarily careful of each penny. The less I have, the more reckless I feel about spending it, and *vice versa.*

Those six weeks, however, before Muldoon sent for me, proved the most painful and unhappy of all my New York days. There was something desperate about them; I reached bottom. It was the darkest period before the dawn, though I had no certainty that the dawn was breaking. My income from the eau de Cologne business was ended, my free-lance work struck a bad streak, the artists were still out of town, the studios consequently empty; my violin pupil had gone to Boston. It was during this August that I slept in Central Park, and passed the night — for there was not much sleep about it — beneath the Bronx Park trees as well, though I had to walk all the long weary way to get there. It was, also, *par excellence,* the height of the dried-apple season. With the exception of Old Louis, occasionally Mullins too, I had no companionship. Brodie, who by the way received no money from the insurance companies, but equally, escaped a worse disaster, I never saw again. The post on the *Times*, meanwhile, seemed far away, highly problematical too. My comforts were Bronx Park, occasionally open-air music, Louis, and my own dreams, speculations and, chief of all, the Bhagavad Gita.....Hours I spent in the free libraries. Never, before or since, did I read so many books in so short a time. This free reading, of course, never stopped for a moment all the years I lived in New York, but during these six weeks it reached a maximum.

From the ‘vantage ground of easier days I have often looked back and wondered why I made no real effort to better myself, to get out of the hated city, to go west, for a railway pass was always more or less within my power, and other fellows, similarly in difficulties, were always changing occupations and localities. It was due, I think, to a kind of resignation, though rather a fierce resignation, a kind of obstinate spirit of acceptance in me. “Take it all, whatever comes,” said this spirit. “Dodge, shirk, avoid nothing. You have deserved it. Exhaust it then. Suck the orange dry.” And, as if life were not severe and difficult enough, as it was, I would even practise certain austerities I invented on my own account. Already I felt myself immeasurably old; life seemed nearly ended; external events, anyhow, did not really matter...

A rolling-stone sees life, of course, but collects little, if any, fruit; though I made no determined efforts to escape my conditions at this time, a new adventure ever had attractions for me. Having once tasted the essence of a particular experience, I found myself weary of it and longing for a new one. This vagabondage in the blood has strengthened with the years. A fixed job means prison, a new one sends my spirits up. Routine is hell. To take a room, a flat, a job by the year, means insupportable detestation of any of them soon afterwards. It is a view of life that hardly goes to make good citizenship, but, on the other hand, it tends to keep the heart young, to prevent too early hardening of the mental arteries, while it certainly militates against the dread disease of boredom. *Une vie mouvementee* has its vagabond values. To a certain side of my nature Old Louis’s wiser epitaph (“Sorry *I* spoke; sorry *they* spoke”) made less appeal than some anonymous verses I came across in *Scribner’s Magazine* with the title “A Vagrant’s Epitaph” — verses I knew by heart after a first reading:

Change was his mistress; Chance his counsellor.
Love could not hold him; Duty forged no chain.
The wide seas and the mountains called him,

And grey dawns saw his camp-fires in the rain.
Sweet hands might tremble! — aye, but he must go.
Revel might hold him for a little space;
But, turning past the laughter and the lamps.
His eyes must ever catch the luring Face.
Dear eyes might question! Yea, and melt again;
Rare lips a-quiver, silently implore;
But he must ever turn his furtive head.
And hear that other summons at the door.
Change was his mistress; Chance his counsellor.
The dark firs knew his whistle up the trail.
Why tarries he to-day?. And yesternight
Adventure lit her stars without avail.

The plague of possessions, at any rate, has never troubled me, either actually or in desire, while the instinct to reduce life to its simplest terms has strengthened. The homeless feeling of living in my trunks is happiness, the idea of domesticity appals, and the comforts of rich friends wake no echo in me, assuredly no envy. A home, as a settled place one owns and expects to live in for years, perhaps for ever, is abhorrent to every instinct in me, and when acquaintances show off with pride their cottage, their flat, their furniture, their “collections,” even their “not a bad little garden, is it?” my heart confesses to a vague depression which makes it difficult to sympathise and give them my blessing. Life, at its longest, is absurdly brief before health and energy begin to slip downhill; it is mapped with a cunning network of ruts and grooves from which, once in, it is difficult to escape; only the lucky ones are never caught, although the “caught” are lucky perhaps in another way — they do not realize it. Yet even to-day, when times are bad and the horizon not too clear for some time ahead, the old dread of starvation rises in me; I never see apple rings in a grocer’s window without getting their taste and feeling them rise and swell within me like some troublesome emotion To my year and a-half on the *New York Times* I look back with nothing but pleasure; the slogan, "All the news that's fit to print," was practised; and the men I worked with were a good company of decent fellows. Muldoon, a fighting Irishman with a grim fierce manner and a warm heart, had a sense of humour and a gift for encouraging his reporters that made them love him. C. W. Miller was editor in chief, and Carey, manager. Who owned the paper I have forgotten, but it was not Colonel Jones who was present at the Union League Club dinner to my father, when I made my maiden speech some nine years before. Hours of work were from noon until the night assignment was turned in, which meant any time from ten o'clock onwards; though, as emergency man, in case of something happening late, I often had to stay in the office till after one in the morning. Proper food, a new suit, comradeship with a better class of men, came, perhaps, just in time for me. I remember the pleasure of writing home about my new post. I had a dress-suit again. I saved $15 a week.

Reporting for a New York newspaper can never be uneventful, but the painful incidents of life make deeper impressions than the pleasant ones. To meet the former means usually to call upon one's reserves, and memory hence retains sharper pictures of them corresponding to the greater effort. On the *Times* I was happy.

Two incidents stand out still in the mind, one creditable, pleasing to vanity; the other, exactly the reverse. The latter, though it annoyed Muldoon keenly at the moment, fortunately for me appealed to his sense of humour too. He had given me an evening off — that is, all I had to do was to -write a brief report of a Students' Concert in which his little niece was performing.

"Without straining veracity," he mentioned with a grin, "ye might perhaps say something kind and pretty about her!" He winked, whispering her name in my ear. "Have ye got it?" he asked fiercely. I nodded. Was I thinking of something else at the moment? Was my mind in the woods that lovely evening in spring?

At the concert I picked out the name I remembered and wrote later a sturdy eulogistic notice of an atrocious performer, saying the very prettiest and nicest things I could think of, then went home to a coveted early bed. But Muldoon's grim smile next day, as I reported at his desk for an assignment, gave me warning that something was wrong. He did not keep me in suspense. I had selected for my praise, not only the crudest performer of the concert — that I already knew — but one whom all the other pupils disliked intensely, and whose name they particularly hoped would be omitted altogether. The niece I had not even mentioned.

The other incident that stands out after all these years was more creditable. Dr. Lyman Abbott, Editor of the *Outlook,* which once Henry Ward Beecher edited as the *Church Union,* was preaching in Beecher's Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, a series of sermons on "The Theology of an Evolutionist," and Muldoon had persuaded the editor-in-chief that a full report on the front page every Monday would be a credit to the paper. His proposal was agreed to, apparently without too much enthusiasm. The Irishman was determined to justify it. "I want ye to take it on," said Muldoon to me. "Ye can write shorthand. Make it 150." A column was 100. To have a column and a-half on the front page, if I could do it well, would be a feather in my cap. But my shorthand was poor, I was out of practice too, bad notes are impossible to read for transcription, and mistakes would mean angry letters of correction from Dr. Abbott, probably.

Monday was my day off. I went to Plymouth Church with a new notebook and three soft lead pencils, duly sharpened at both ends. In the brief interval before Sunday I practised hard. The church was packed to the roof, as I sneaked up the aisle — an unfamiliar place, I felt it! — to a little table placed immediately beneath the pulpit. I came in after the service, but just in time for the sermon. There were no other reporters present. It thrilled me to see Dr. Abbott, who, as a young man of twenty -three, had heard Lincoln speak on slavery.

The "Theology of an Evolutionist" was an arduous assignment that strained every faculty I possessed, but indifferent shorthand lay at the root of the strain. Dr. Abbott's delivery was sure and steady, more rapid than it sounded. He never hesitated for a word, he never coughed, or cleared his throat, or even sneezed. There were none of those slight pauses which help a poor shorthand-writer to pick up valuable seconds. The stream of words poured on relentlessly, and the rate, I should judge, was 250 a minute. Verbatim reporting was impossible to me. I had to condense as I went along, and to condense without losing sense and coherence was not easy. My pencil was always eight or ten words behind the words I actually listened to, and the Pitman outlines for the words I wrote down had to be recalled, while, at the same time, memory had to retain those being actually uttered at the moment. Being out of practice I often hesitated over an outline, losing fractions of a second each time I did so. These outlines come automatically, of course, to a good writer. Then there was the sense, the proportion, the relative values of argument and evidence to be considered — matters that could not be adjusted in the office afterwards, when there was barely time, in any case, to transcribe my notes before going to Press. The interest I felt in the subject, moreover, delayed my mind time and time again. Occasionally a pencil-point would break as well, and turning it round in my hand meant important delay in a process where each fraction of a second counts. In the office afterwards, each page transcribed was whipped away by a printer's devil before it could be reconsidered and re-read. I invariably went to bed after these evenings in church with a splitting headache; but the 150 appeared duly on the front page every Monday morning, though whether good or bad I had no inkling. My impression, due to Muldoon's silence, was that my reports were hardly a success.

When the last of the long series came my opening report was confused and inaccurate owing to an announcement from the pulpit which embarrassed me absurdly. Dr. Abbott mentioned briefly that numerous requests to print the sermons had reached him, but that he did not propose to do so. He referred those interested, instead, to the reports in the Times which, he took pleasure in saying, were excellent, accurate and as satisfactory as anything he could do himself. Being the only reporter present, I felt conspicuous at my little table under the pulpit in the immense building. But I remember the pleasure too. It was an announcement I could use, was bound to use, indeed, in my own report next day. Muldoon would be pleased. On the Tuesday morning, when I appeared at his desk, he looked at me with such a fierce expression that I thought I was about to be dismissed. "Have ye been to your locker?" was all he said. In the locker, however, I found a letter from Dr. Abbott to the editor-in-chief, thanking him for the reports of the sermons, reports, he wrote, "whose brevity, accuracy, and intelligence furnish a synopsis I could not have improved upon myself." He added, too, another important sentence: "by your reporter whom I do not know." It was not favouritism therefore. A brief chit to be handed to the cashier was in my locker too. My salary was raised to $40 a week. The headaches had proved worth while.

The year and a-half with the *Times* was a happy period, though long before it ended I had begun to feel my customary weariness of the job, and a yearning for something new. The newspaper experience, which began with the *Evening Sun*, was exhausted for me. The pleasant and unpleasant sides of it I knew by heart. Though I took no action, my mind began to cast about for other fields. I had saved a little cash. My thoughts turned westwards, California, the Pacific Coast, the bright sunshine and blue waters of the southern seas even. I was past twenty-seven. To be a New York reporter all my life did not appeal. Nor was it yet time to go back to England. No trace of literary faculty, nor any desire to write, much less a consciousness that I could write perhaps, had declared themselves. My summer holidays of two weeks I spent again in the backwoods, with a view to some woodland life which was to include, this time. Old Louis, too. Obstacles everywhere made me feel, however, that it was not to be, for though they were obstacles I could have overcome, I took them as an indication that fate had other views for my future. When a thing was meant to be, it invariably came of itself, I found. My temperament, at any rate, noted and obeyed these hints. Old Louis, too, who was to collect his poems in our woodland home, to write new ones as well, met all practical suggestions with, "Let us consider, Figlio, a little longer first." He was to write also a political history of the United States and "I must collect more data before I am ready to go." The dread of being fixed and settled, a captive in a place I could not leave at a moment's notice, did not operate where Nature was concerned. The idea of living in the forests had no fear of prison in it.

Events, moreover, which brought big changes into my life had always come, I noticed, from outside, rather than as a result of definite action on my own part. A chance meeting in a hotel-bar set me reporting, a chance meeting with Mullins landed me on the *Times,* a chance meeting with Angus Hamilton in Piccadilly Circus led to my writing books, a chance meeting with William E. Dodge now suddenly heaved me up another rung of life into the position of private secretary to a millionaire banker.

To me it has always seemed that some outside power, but an intelligent power, pulled a string each time, and up I popped into an entirely new set of circumstances. This power pushed a button, and off I shot in a direction at right angles to the one I had been moving in before. This intelligent supervision I attributed in those days to Karma. In the mind, though perhaps with less decision there, it operated too. A book, a casual sentence of some friend, an effect of scenery, of music, and an express-lift mounts rapidly from the cellar of my being to an upper story, giving a new extended view over a far, a new horizon. Much that puzzles in the obscurity of the basement outlook becomes clear and simple. The individual who announces the sudden change is unaware probably how vital a role he plays in another's life. He is but an instrument, after all.

When, by chance, I found Mr. Dodge next me in a Broadway cable car, my first instinct was to slip out on to the outside platform before he had seen me, with, simultaneously, a hope that if he had seen me, he would not recognize me. He was a friend of my father's. We had dined at his house on our first visit to New York, and once or twice since then our paths had crossed for a moment or two. He was a man of great influence, and of tireless philanthropy, a fine, just, high-minded personality. He stared hard at me. Before I could move, he had spoken to me by name. "How was I getting along?" he inquired kindly, and did I "like New York?" What was I "doing at the moment?"

I seized the opportunity and told him of my longing to get out of newspaper work. He listened attentively; he examined me, I was aware, more than attentively. In the end he asked me to come and see him for a personal chat — not in his office, but in his house. He named a day and hour. An invitation to his office I should have disregarded. It was the kindness of "my house "that won me. But the interview was disappointing, rather embarrassing as well to me. He asked many personal questions about my life and habits, it was all very businesslike and chilling. In the end he mentioned vaguely that James Speyer, of Speyer Bros., was thinking, he believed, of engaging a secretary, and that possibly — he could not say for certain — he might, when he next saw him, suggest my name for the post. "Of course," he added, still more cautiously, "you will understand I must make inquiries about you at the *Times."* He promised to let me know if anything further came of it. For many weeks I heard no word. Then I wrote. The reply asked me to call at his office. He was kindness and sympathy personified. "The *Times* gives you an excellent character," he informed me, "and say they will be very sorry to lose you. I am sorry there has been this delay." He handed me a personal letter to James Speyer. He invited me to dinner in his house the following evening. Before brushing up my dress-suit for the occasion — my first dinner in a decent house for many years — I had seen Mr. Speyer and had been engaged at a salary of $2,000 a year for a morning job, from 8 till 2 o'clock daily, with a general supervision during the day of his town and country houses, horses, servants, charities, and numerous other interests.

The dinner in Mr. Dodge's Fifth Avenue palace was a veritable banquet to me. Immediately opposite, across the avenue, was the other palace occupied by James Speyer. It was all rather bewildering, a new world with a vengeance. Years among the outcast of the city had not precisely polished my manners, nor could I feel at my ease thus suddenly among decent folk again. I remember being absurdly tongue-tied, shy and awkward, until M. de Chaillu, who was present, began to talk about books, stars, natural history, and other splendid things, and took me with him into some unimaginable seventh heaven. I had moments of terror too, but the strongest emotion I remember is the deep gratitude I felt towards Mr. Dodge. A further tiny detail clings as well, when I was invited for a week-end to the Dodge country house on the Hudson, and was bathing with the son. He was, like myself, six feet three inches, well built, but well covered too, his age perhaps close on forty. As we stood on the spring-board waiting for our second dive, he looked at me. "You certainly haven't got a tummy," he remarked with admiring envy. "I wish I were as thin!" And the casual words made a queer impression on me. I realized abruptly how little of certain real values such people knew how little these protected people ever *could* know. I still see his admiring, good-humoured, kindly expression, as he said the empty words...

James Speyer, brother of Edgar, who later became a baronet and member of the Privy Council, was what we called in New York a "white man." I hardly think I proved an ideal private secretary. His patience and kindness began at the first trial interview I had with him, when my shorthand — he dictated a newspaper financial paragraph full of unfamiliar terms — was not at its best, "not *very* grand," were the actual words he used. As for bookkeeping, I told him frankly that "figures were my idea of hell," whereupon, after a moment's puzzled stare, he laughed and said that keeping accounts need not be among my principal duties. A clerk from the office could come up and balance the books every month. The phrase about hell, the grave expression of my face, he told me long afterwards, touched his sense of humour. The huge book in which I kept his personal accounts proved, none the less, a daily nightmare, with its nine columns for different kinds of expenditure — Charities, Housekeeping, Presents, Loans, Personal, and the rest. It locked with a key. I spent hours over it. No total ever came out twice alike. Yet Mr. Hopf, the bright-eyed, diminutive German from the office, ran his tiny fingers up and down those columns like some twinkling insect, chatting with me while he added, and making the totals right in a few minutes. Max Hopf, with his slight, twisty body, looked like an agile figure of 3 himself. In his spare time, I felt sure, he played with figures. He was a juggler in my eyes.

The first week in my new job was a nervous one, though Mr. Speyer's tact and kindly feeling soon put me at my ease. My desk at first was in a corner of an unused board room in the bank, where I sat like a king answering countless letters on a typewriter. The shorthand was discarded; I composed the replies from verbal hints and general indications. Clerks treated me with respect; language was decent; surroundings were sumptuous; it was some time before I "found" myself. The second morning a caller was shown in, somebody to see Mr. Speyer. He took a chair beside my desk, stared fixedly at me, opened his mouth and called me by my Christian name — it was the Exchange Place banker who used to stay in my father's house and who had last seen me in bed at East 19th Street. He congratulated me. I found out, incidentally, then, how much my swindling friend of those days had "touched" him for on my behalf...and repaid it.

James Speyer proved a good friend during the two years or so I spent with him; he treated me as friend, too, rather than as secretary. My office was transferred to his palatial residence in Madison Avenue, a new house he had just built for himself, and it was part of my job to run this house for him, his country house at Irvington on the Hudson as well. These establishments, for a millionaire bachelor, were on a simple scale, though the amount of money necessary for one man's comforts staggered me at first. A married French couple were his chief servants, the woman as cook, the man as butler; they had been with him for a long time; they eyed the new secretary with disfavour; they were feathering their nests very comfortably, I soon discovered. My hotel experience in Toronto stood me in good stead here. But Mr. Speyer was a generous, live-and-let-live type of man who did not want a spirit of haggling over trifles in his home. I gradually adjusted matters by introducing a reasonable scale. The French couple and I became good friends. I enjoyed the work, which included every imaginable duty under the sun, had ample time for exercise and reading, and my employer's zest in the University Settlement Movement I found particularly interesting.

James Speyer was more than a rich philanthropist: He had a heart. The column for Charities and Presents in the book Mr. Hopf juggled with once a month was a big one, while that for Personal Expenditure was relatively small. When I dined alone with him in the luxurious panelled room I realized that life had indeed changed for me. His house, too, was filled with beautiful things. He had rare taste. His brother Edgar, whose English career had not yet begun, stayed with him on his periodical visits from Frankfurt. There was music then, big dinner-parties too, to which I was sometimes invited. Social amenities were not always quite easy, for the position of a Jew in New York Society was delicate, but I never once knew James Speyer's taste or judgment at fault. His intelligence showed itself not only in finance; he was intelligent all over; imaginatively thoughtful for all connected with him, and his philanthropy sprang from a genuine desire to help the unfortunate.

For Jews I have always had a quick feeling of sympathy, of admiration. I adore their intelligence, subtlety, keen love of beauty, their understanding, their wisdom. In the best of them lies some intuitive grip of ancient values, some artistic discernment, that fascinates me. I found myself comparing Alfred Louis with James Speyer; their reaction, respectively, upon myself showed clearly again the standard of what, to me, was important: the one, alone among his unchangeable, imperishable "Eternities," unaware of comfort as of fame, unrecognized, unadvertised, lonely and derelict, yet equally as proud of his heritage as the other who, in a noisier market sought the less permanent splendours of success and worldly honour. One filled his modern palace with olden beauty fashioned by many men, the other had stocked his mind with a loveliness that money could not buy. One financed a gigantic railway enterprise, the other wrote the "Night Song." All the one said blessed and ornamented the mind, all the other said advised it. One parted with a poem as though he sold a pound of his own living flesh, the other was pleased, yet a trifle nervous, when Muldoon — thinking to help me in my job — wrote a panegyric of easy philanthropies in the *Brooklyn*

Eagle, to which his fierce activities had now been transferred from the *Times.* Both taught me much.

From one, singing amid his dirt in an attic, I learned about a world that, hiding behind ephemeral appearances, lies deathlessly serene and unalterably lovely; from the other, about a world which far from deathless and certainly less serene, flaunts its rewards upon a more obviously remunerative scale. Of both poet and financier, at any rate, I kept vivid, grateful, pleasant memories.

Between the unsavoury world I had lived in so long and the new one I had now entered, the Old Man of Visions, himself at home in all and every kind of world, always seemed a bridge. His personality spread imaginatively, as it were, over all grades and through all strata of humanity. In my slow upward climb he seemed to hand me on, and in return for his unfailing guidance it was possible to make his own conditions a trifle more comfortable: possible, but not easy, because there was no help he needed and did not positively scorn. He watched my welfare with unfailing interest, but nothing would induce him to buy a new hat, a new frock-coat, an umbrella or a pair of gloves, "Our memories, at any given moment," says Bergson, "form a solid whole, a pyramid, so to speak, whose point is inserted precisely into our present action." On that "point" old Louis still drives through my mind and wields an influence to-day...

The happier period with James Speyer was, of course, an episode, like my other experiences. It was wonderful to draw a good salary regularly for pleasant work; to have long holidays in the Adirondacks, or moose-shooting in the woods north of the Canadian Pacific Railway; wonderful, too, when my employer went to Europe for three months, to know myself in charge of such big interests, with a power of attorney to sign all cheques. But the usual restlessness was soon on me again, desire for a change stirred in my blood. The Spanish-American War, I remember, made me think of joining Roosevelt's Rough Riders, a scheme both Speyer and Louis strongly disapproved, and that an attack of typhoid fever rendered impossible in any case.

It was during convalescence that it occurred to me I was nearing thirty, and that if I meant to live in America all my life, it was time to become naturalized. And this thought caused me to reflect on the question of going home. My sister, with her children, passed through New York about this time, returning from South Australia, where her husband was Governor, and it was at dinner in my employer's house, where he had invited them, that the longing to return to England suddenly declared itself. To find myself among relatives who called me by the Unfamiliar childhood name, woke English memories, English values, and brought back the English atmosphere Once more. My mother was still alive..... I remember that dinner well. My sister brought a tame little Mexican monkey with her. A man, also, called to ask Mr. Speyer for help, and when I went to interview him in the hall, his long story included a reference to something Mr. Dodge, he declared, had done for him. "Mr. Dodge gave me this," he said, and promptly scooped one eye out of its socket and showed it to me lying in the palm of his hand. The glass eye, the monkey, remain associated in my mind still with the rather poignant memories of forgotten English days my sister's visit stirred to life, and with my own emotions as I reflected upon the idea of going home at last. A chance meeting, again, worked its spell.

I had felt that half a universe separated me from the world in which my relatives lived, but after they had gone I began to realize various things I had not appreciated before. New York, I saw, could furnish no true abiding city for my soul which, though vagabond, yet sought something more than its appalling efficiency could ever give. What did I miss? I could name it now, but I hardly named it then perhaps. I was always hungry there, but with a hunger not of the body merely. The hunger, however, was real, often it was devastating. With such a lop-sided development as mine had been, my immaturity, no doubt, was still glaring. The sense of failure, I know, at any rate, was very strong. My relatives had been travelling, and they reflected a colour of other lands that called to me. Thought and longing now turned to an older world. There were ancient wonders, soft with age, mature with a beauty and tenderness only timelessness can give, that caught me on the raw with a power no Yosemites, Niagaras, or Grand Canyons could hope to imitate. Size has its magic, but size bludgeons the imagination, rather than feeds it. My heart turned suddenly across the sea. I loved the big woods, but behind, beyond the woods, great Egypt lay ablaze...

I talked things over with the Old Man of Visions; he advised me to go home. "See your mother before she dies," he urged. "I cannot come with you, but I may follow you." He added: "I shall miss you," then dropped into poetry, as he always did when he was moved...

It was these talks with Old Louis about England, the atmosphere of England as well, that my sister somehow left behind her, my own yearnings now suddenly reawakened too, that decided me. My detestation of the city both cleared and deepened. I began to understand more vividly, more objectively, the reasons for my feeling alien in it. I missed tradition, background, depth. There was a glittering smartness everywhere. The great ideal was to be sharper, smarter than your neighbour, above all things sharp and smart and furiously rapid, above all things — win the game. To be in a furious rush was to be intelligent, to do things slowly was to be derided. The noise and speed suggested rapids; the deep, quiet pools were in the older lands. Display, advertisement, absence of all privacy I had long been aware of, naturally; I now realized how little I desired this speed and glittering brilliance, this frantic rush to be at all costs sharper, quicker, smarter than one's neighbour, to win the game at any price. I realized why my years in the city had brought no friendships, and why they had been starved as well as lonely...

Some months passed before I booked a passage, however. I was sorry to leave James Speyer. Then one day he spoke to me about — marriage. For a year or more I had noticed his friendship with Mrs. Lowry, a Christian, well-known figure in the social world; and, being the confidant of both parties, I had done all I could to encourage a marriage that promised happiness and success. In due course. Bishop Potter, of New York, officiated. The ceremony was performed in the drawing-room, and just before it began, James Speyer came up to me, took the beautiful links out of his cuffs, and handed them to me. "I should like you to have these," he said, "as a little memento." I have them still.

A few months later, just before I was thirty, I found myself in a second-class cabin in a Cunarder, with my savings in my pocket. Old Louis, who followed me a year or two later, came down to see me off. I was glad when the Statue of liberty lay finally below the sea's horizon, but I shall never forget the thrill of strange emotion I experienced when I first saw the blue rim of Ireland rise above the horizon a few days later. A shutter dropped behind me. I entered a totally new world. Life continued to be *mouvementee*, indeed, one adventure succeeding another, and ever with the feeling that a chance letter, a chance meeting might open any morning a new chapter of quite a novel kind; but my American episodes were finished.

Of mystical, psychic, or so-called “occult” experiences, I have purposely said nothing, since these notes have sought to recapture surface adventures only.

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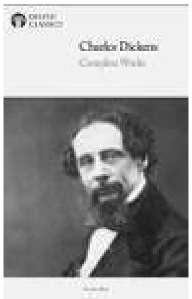

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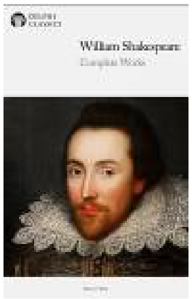
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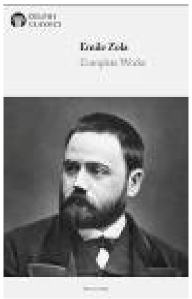

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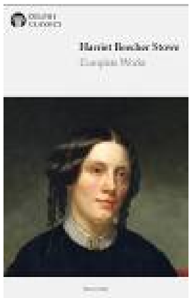
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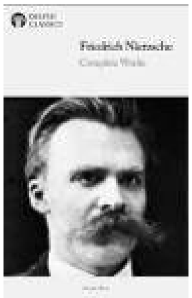

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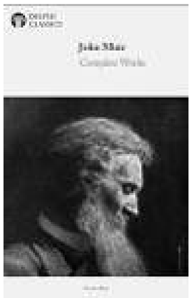

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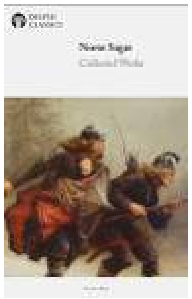

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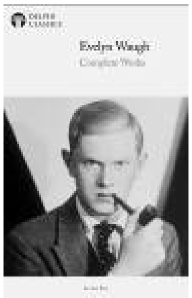
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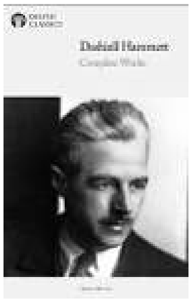

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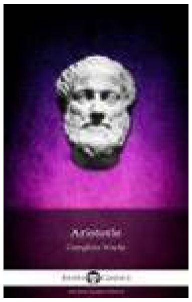

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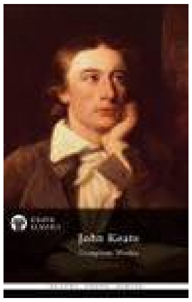

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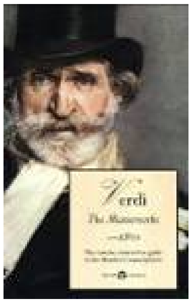

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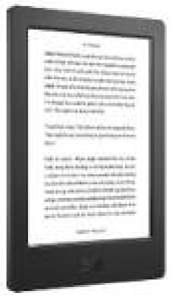

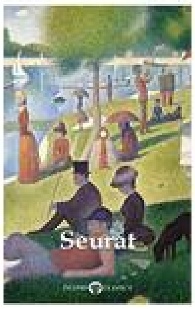

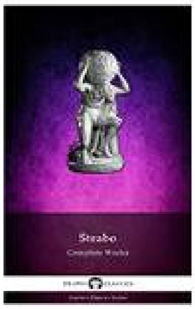
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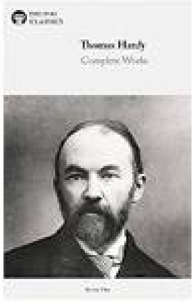
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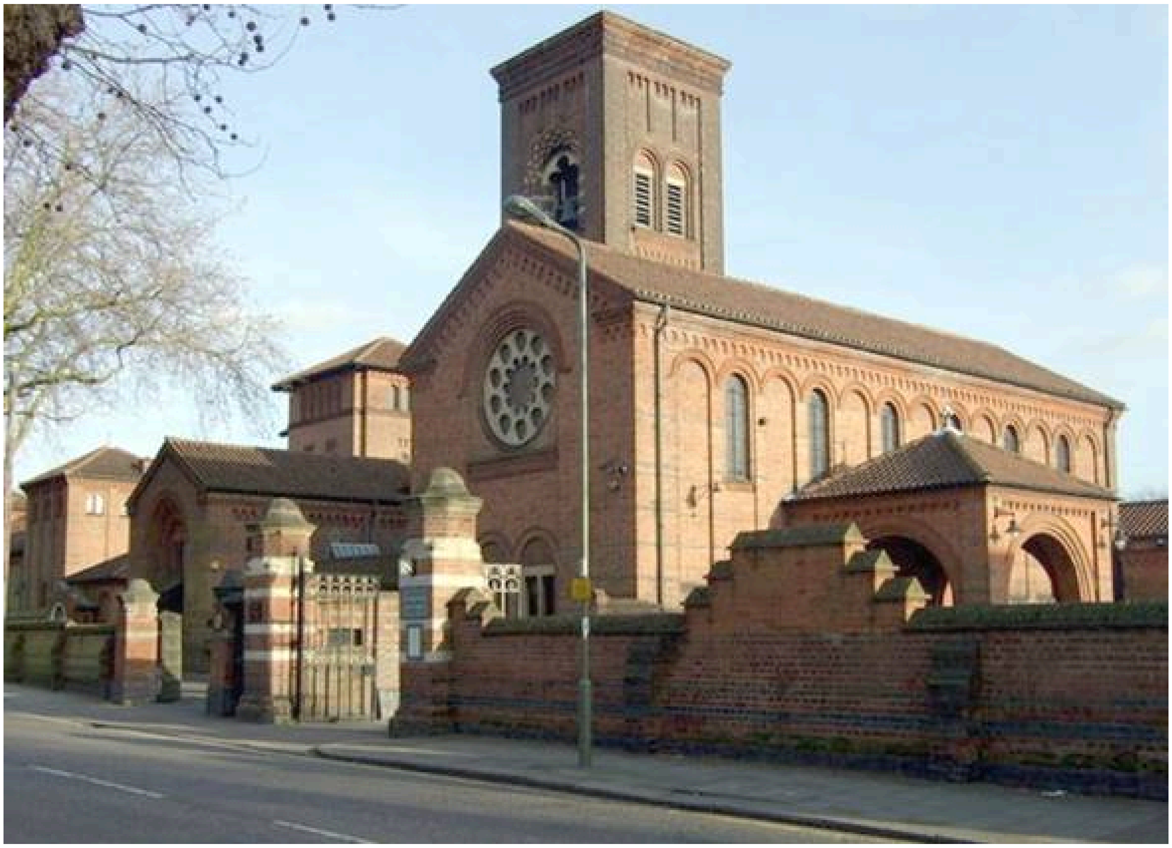

Blackwood was cremated at Golder's Green Crematorium, North London

Blackwood's ashes were scattered by his nephew in the Saanenmöser Mountains in Switzerland, a landscape that he had greatly admired during his many travels